

city in the river, city in the forest

MELANIE WESTERBERG

[extract from Chapter 1]

THE BOAT SLID INTO THE RIVER. MARY WADED AFTER it and climbed inside before the water could fill her tall rubber boots. The boat tilted and rocked, but she steadied it with a muscular negotiation between her shoulders and legs. Water splashed in as she rowed upriver. She paused near the confluence with a second tributary, closed her eyes, and breathed in the heavy air, rocking with the lapping water. In the trees, a pair of birds honked an argument that finished abruptly.

It was Tuesday of her seventh week in the country. She had chosen it for its landscapes and lax visa-extension policies, and because it was a place she'd always wanted to see despite the



length of its undeclared civil war and the relative frequency of attempted coups. She had come to work as a guide for English-speaking tourists, who were relieved by her accentless diction after the rushed, rounded Spanish spoken there. A week before she had told Caridad, who ran the lodge she worked for, that she was not ready to go home. She'd said she wanted to stay and work indefinitely, and Caridad had looked pleased.

Near the bank the pink arc of a river dolphin's back surfaced. As the animal threaded closer, Mary's boat tilted to the left and she felt something scrape past it. Her chest constricted and she cringed at the sound of heavy flesh against metal. Gripping the gunwales, she lurched to steady the craft. The water snagged the shapes of the approaching dolphins. One grazed her from the side and the boat's joints brayed as another swam beneath. Pulse racing, she snapped an oar from the oarlock and held it across her lap. The boat wobbled.

She counted five dolphins: three pale pink, one darker, and one white, clicking and snorting, their forehead lumps slivered above the surface. Dolphins shouldn't be menacing, she thought, but they had her surrounded and were nosing her boat and rasping their flanks against it, trying to capsize her. She raised the oar.

She had been told it was bad luck to kill *bufeos*. Kill one and the others from its pod would come for you at night, disguised as men or women—you'd fall in love with one and then he or she would leave you. Or the dolphin's body would transform into

the lifeless body of your lover, or an unreachable stash of gold, or whatever it was you most desired, taken from you.

They might hoard her on the river bottom somewhere, she thought, but Héctor would come after her.

A large bird landed in a tree, lacing leaves across the water. She replaced the oar and folded her hands in her lap. She sat so still the dolphins appeared to forget her. They moved towards the confluence and played or hunted there, their bodies quick candy arcs. She liked the scale of them: seven, eight feet long and thick-bodied. She wondered what their skin felt like and about the mechanics of their broad, winglike flippers—boned, she knew, like human hands.

The big white *bufeo* so deliberately traversed the line of her gaze that she felt a chill against the humid air. Keeping the ridge of its back above the water, it swam to a spot about six feet from her boat. She touched the butt of the oar, felt the wood's ridges against her fingers.

The muscles along the animal's back ruffled as it hoisted its tail and dropped it against the river. Mary started at the sound, which caromed through the woods. The *bufeo* slapped the water three more times. At the confluence, the others floated still and observant.

When she noticed that one of the pink dolphins had begun to drift towards her, Mary swiped the oars to propel herself backwards. The white dolphin slapped the water again. With her eyes on its tail and on the little pink one, who appeared to

be following her, she plunged the oars as deep as she could and strained away from them.

Her hands slid all over the oars as she paddled towards the lodge, and her shoulders ached. When she turned the boat and felt the oar smack something heavy under the water, she whispered that she was sorry. Moments later, she heard the pink *bufeo* empty its spout and felt relieved that she hadn't unintentionally killed it, like the people in the stories she'd been told.

MARY AND PILAR had stayed up talking almost every night during Mary's first few weeks in the Amazon. They spoke in Spanish and sometimes in English. Pilar was noisy and arch, almost egregiously friendly; she wore printed cotton tops with her dirty hiking pants and coiled her hair fancifully around her head.

On Mary's fourth night at the lodge, Pilar grilled her on the American university system, and on what it was like to work in an air-conditioned office and slide your shoes on and off beneath your desk. 'You wear sweaters even in the summer because the building is always cold,' Mary replied. 'And you drink a lot of weak coffee.'

Pilar told her that she wanted to take the university entrance exams. Tourism programs were the most popular and

yielded the highest job-placement rate, but she confessed to Mary that she wanted to study history most of all. The history of the war, she clarified, of the villages that had disappeared, the history of the sort of government that sold its country. Eyebrows laddering up her forehead, her voice becoming louder as she grew excited, she explained that she would be ruthless against the old government, the foreign oil and pharmaceutical companies, the mineral interests, and the land speculators. Mary had to ask her to speak more slowly.

'People want to forget the war. It's painful. A few journalists are trying to investigate and record what happened. Some groups in the city.'

'I think the guy who was working on the roof is doing the same thing. Printmakers who were assassinated,' Mary said, blushing. When she had introduced herself to him that first day, he had mentioned Los Papelitos Invisibles.

'Héctor?'

Mary nodded and looked at the table. 'Tell me more about your project,' she murmured.

'I have it all mapped out in my head, if I could get access to the university library and computers for research. A lot of documents have been declassified. I could travel around and transcribe oral histories from local farmers and miners and rubber tappers. But I wouldn't have any power without the university. Nobody would listen to me.'

'Why don't you take the exams?'

'Reynaldo would have to come to the city with me if I go and he's not ready. He wants to get married, or maybe only Caridad wants that. We know we love each other and that should be all that matters.'

'He should go with you then.'

'My family's there but he doesn't have anyone besides Caridad and Paco. He'd have to work at a hotel with strangers instead of here with his family. Could you do that to someone?'

'Have you asked him?'

'Not yet. And I'm not weak or afraid or anything else. I just want him to be happy.'

'I'm sure that's all he wants for you.'

Pilar snorted. 'We're *tontos*. We deserve each other.'

A week later, during the lull of the hottest part of the afternoon, Mary had asked Pilar about the pink dolphins she'd been seeing in the river. In the old stories, Pilar told her, they weren't *bufeos* at all, but *encantados*—enchanted creatures who shuttled between land and water. They lived as dolphins and *barba amarilla* snakes in the Encante, a beautiful city at the bottom of the river with houses and markets like the human cities of the forest, and glass buildings and wide golden streets, and they envied human freedom. They came to the villages disguised as attractive men or women; they took human lovers and then led them to the underwater city.

'It happened to my sister,' Caridad said as she passed through the dining room. Pilar squared her shoulders and

folded her hands. Mary watched Caridad as she placed three cups on the bar, laid a teabag in each one, and filled them with hot water.

'She lives alone now because an *encantada* took her husband and *nene* to the Encante,' Caridad continued, setting a cup in front of each of them and sitting down beside Pilar.

'How did she find out what happened?' Mary asked.

Pilar lifted an eyebrow and pressed her lips together.

'It used to happen a lot. When her husband and baby first disappeared, she dreamed about them every night. She saw her husband dancing with a *barba amarilla* while the *nene* rested in a cradle made of a seashell.' Caridad lowered her voice. 'In her dreams, the baby had no eyes.' A chill prickled the back of Mary's neck. She reached under the table and scratched a mosquito bite on her calf.

'Whenever she dreamed about him, my sister demanded he give back their child, and eventually he promised to meet her at the river bank at midnight. She went the next night and saw the lights of the city under the water. She walked right up to the river and saw her baby down below, the way she'd seen him in the dreams, in the seashell cradle, with no eyes. Her husband didn't even meet her there,' Caridad said tightly. 'He'd become part of the Encante, and the *nene* too.'

Mary stared at the red oval Caridad's lipstick had left on her teacup. She felt Pilar's tension coiled across the table.

'Used to be everyone had an *encantado* story. Old people and

young people. Your friends in the city too—right, Pilar?’

Pilar nodded and looked into her lap.

‘Even during the war. But not so much now,’ said Caridad. ‘The whole idea sounds a little silly now. So much has happened. The *encantados* are disappearing, I think, like the other animals.’

Mary remembered reading one morning at her old job that China had declared its rare, white *baiji* river dolphins ‘functionally extinct’. She’d refolded the newspaper and poured another cup of coffee, imagining herself at the same fake wood table in the same library break room year after year, reading about the end of the polar bear, the rhinoceros, the right whale.

Caridad disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a broom. Mary listened to it hiss across the floor as she and Pilar drank their tea.

Pilar frowned. ‘What Caridad told you was just a story,’ she said in careful English. ‘Her sister believes that’s why she’s alone. It’s the only explanation she can accept of why her husband would disappear.’ She shook her head. ‘I don’t know what he could’ve done with the kid, though. How terrible.’

‘It seems even more tragic knowing it’s made up than if it were true.’

‘Claro. My family’s from the mountains so we didn’t grow up hearing about *encantados*. Reynaldo says he doesn’t believe in them but I can tell that he does. He was the first one to tell me that story you just heard.’

Caridad returned to their table to pick up her teacup

and sipped from it as she walked back to the kitchen, trailing the broom behind her. Pilar smiled irritably and went back to Spanish once Caridad had left the room.

‘I think half the people in the *mata de monte* would go to an underwater city if they could, just to get away from their lives. There’s a light in the river sometimes from phosphorescent plants or something. Reynaldo’s friends have tried to swim down there but they’ve never seen anything. The light just goes on and on.’

‘Have you ever tried it?’

Pilar laughed. ‘No. I believe those stories just enough to know to stay away.’