

# Swallowed

By Imogen Grbin

Out here, deep in the ghost-quiet, the trees hum with the onset of summer. Down past the clusters of saltbush, the groups of gentle bluebells, along the rows of houses in stifling red-brick suburbia, around the bend and through the trees. You follow her because she always knows where she's going. Muddy brown hair, soft and delicate, sweeping down her back. Your pockets stuffed with fruit. Apples with crunchy skin and soft plums with blood juice that dribbles down your chin.

Running into the trees, you lose track of time. The blood plums stain your clothes. She eats the apple right to the core, burying the seeds in a patch of dirt, hoping one day they might grow into a shady tree. The wind is soft, a gentle touch on your cheeks. It blows into your face and you push it out of your eyes while she laughs. She collects fallen leaves, palms full, while you lie eagle-spread in the grass as she sprinkles them over your hair. You find a tree. It smiles in the sun, limbs dainty and long.

Pulling off your shoes, you climb up the trunk, spider-like. Perched in the branches, you can see for miles. She watches the clouds move across the sky; a vast expanse of blue that seems ready to swallow you both up. You study her, noting her faint freckles, the mole on her collarbone, the tiny plum stain on her collar, her lips; red, pointed, rosy. Your eyes follow the river, dark and ribbon-like. Gazing over the windy bends and rocky edges. Out here, it feels like the universe is just for you. Everything here is yours.

Four years later you have your first kiss under a shady gum tree. There's an awkward moment where your teeth bump his, but you decide you like the feeling of a boy's mouth on yours. The sky is still as blue as ever. That

same deep, silent expanse that feels so close but so far. After, you trail back to suburbia, past the takeaway pizza shop and the hairdressers and the parked cars and crooked letterboxes and tiled roofs. And you sit cross-legged on her back porch, licking chip flavouring off your fingers as you tell her everything, blood rushing into your crimson cheeks. The leaves dance and the birds sing and she giggles while the big expanse of sky still looms.

She's there when you run away from home the first time. When your parents had that fight in the kitchen, over the empty wine bottle on the sink and the blue bathroom tiles and the broken washing machine and all the other tiny things you thought didn't matter that much until then. She's there when you sit side by side under a gum tree, imagining camping by the river forever and ever. Never having to go back home and simply spending the rest of your days together. You talk about how you'd watch the stars each night, go for morning swims as the sun emerges and hide in foliage to watch the birds.

You graduate high school together. Pose with your certificates and wide smiles while parents snap photos they'll frame on the living room wall. After the ceremony, you run past the houses until they are no more and there is simply sky and water and trees that stand together in varying shades of green and brown. You both strip down to your underwear and leave your clothes on a rock. Laughing, she jumps in first, splashing around the edges, before diving deeper.

"C'mon!" She calls, pushing wet hair from her face.

You teeter on the edge for a bit longer, scared of that first icy plunge.

Even though it's nearly summer, the air is still crisp, the ground hard and wet. From up here on the rocks, the river is murky. A beast twisting and turning. Eventually, she gives up waiting for you to jump in and simply grabs your hand with a yank. As always, the first plunge is unpleasant. You scream, mouth filling with water. Hands outstretched and dripping, they latch around her shoulders. You push her under and hold her until she starts to thrash. Her head bobs up to the surface, furious. Grinning, you push away from the bank and swim until she's too far to catch you.

After a while, you both lie on the river bank and talk about school and university and friends and love and making your parents happy and

travelling. You talk until the sun dries your arms and legs, before jumping back in just to feel that icy chill. She dives right down to the bottom while you practice handstands underwater. The river, vast and deep, feels just like the sky. Ready to swallow you up. A trailing current that continues on and on and on until it can't any more.

She picks history at uni. You decide on business. You stare at the sky each morning, dark and moody, still in its beginnings of waking up. You drive past the trees and the river and the neat little houses. You drive into the city where there are tall buildings and aggressive drivers and lots of lukewarm coffee. You sit in two-hour classes and take notes without really listening.

You don't see her as much. You wonder if she's liking her course. If she's gotten a job anywhere. If she's travelling to Europe over the break like everyone else. You ask if she wants to catch up for lunch or coffee or hang out like old times, but she always cancels last minute. Too many assignments due. An appointment. A shift at work. In the end, you stop asking because it's easier that way.

Summer break eventually comes, as do the soft mornings and mosquito bites and angry sunburn. You lie in your childhood bedroom each morning, sleeping in until the morning is nearly over. You have dinner at the small table with your parents each night, watching the news. You hear about wars and mass shootings and fires happening miles and miles away, and for once, feel grateful about where you live. Even if it is deep in the ghost-quiet, stuck somewhere on the fringes of civilised suburbia and the embrace of the natural world.

And then one morning, while you're reading, legs outstretched on the front veranda, you see her headed towards the river. You follow her because she always knows where she's going. Still that muddy brown hair, soft and delicate, just a bit shorter now. She goes the same way now as she did then. Down past the clusters of saltbush, the groups of gentle blue bells, along the rows of houses in stifling red-brick suburbia, around the bend and through the trees. Into the clearing where the rocks litter the river bank and the water churns. Something feels different this time. Maybe it's because you're both older. You've grown up. So has she. Neither of you are children anymore, dizzy with the excitement of

swimming and playing and first kisses and long summers that stretch out in front of you like the open sky.

You stay back because she doesn't know you're here. You watch her stand on the rocky edge, toes curling over the bank for a few moments. She seems to be studying the water. Looking down, deep into its murky darkness. Down to the bottom where she used to dive. Where one summer you dropped coins to see who could find them first. She looks into it. Hands curled into fists at her side. Hair tangled from the wind.

And she jumps in. So suddenly, and without any warning that for a second you swear you imagined it. But the water ripples and you see a slight movement near the surface. Then, her head bobs up. Like always, she pushes the wet hair from her face. Two droplets of water trickle down her cheeks. From the distance, they almost resemble tears. She looks to the sky, trailing her eyes over the trees and the rocky ledge. Looks over them once more, as if memorising the detail, and then dives back under. The gentle plop of her body meeting the water is the only sound in the world.

You watch, listening to the gentle hum of birds and wind. Feeling the trees breathing around you. The thrum of nature, a gentle heartbeat that never seems to stop. Listen to the flow of water, bobbing and splashing. You wait for her to come back up. And you decide when she resurfaces, you'll go over and talk to her, like normal. You'll strip down to your underwear and dive right in. Pretend you're both stupid teenagers again where nothing matters except boys and gossip and arguing with your parents.

The seconds pass. Fluttering away and out of reach as time moves on. Something is different this time. Your breath catches. The water is still ebbing and flowing, but there is no movement from her.

You walk closer, right to the edge. Until you stand exactly where she was minutes ago. Toes curled over the edge, hands at your side, peering down. Down, down. You see a faint outline of a face, a person, a girl. You breathe out until the horrible realisation hits. Your reflection. Not her. The water ripples over your image, distorting your face. Still nothing. Nothing. And it's only when you stand there for a long, long while, that you realise she's not coming back up. That she wanted the water to swallow her. It did.

No! Your mouth opens, but there is only silence. Air, tight in your throat, cold rock under your feet, the haunting chirp of birds, fists tight,

tight at your sides, air, air, air, air. Gulping, the panic lurches, slowing enough for you to inhale sharply, before it moves up, up, the terror filling your head with noise. *Too loud* you want to scream. You take a step away from the edge, just in case the river decides to swallow you too.

Now you know she came to the river intending to dive to the dark bottom and stay there. You look up at the sky. At the vast expanse of blue that goes on and on and on. That seems ready to swallow everything up. You look down at the river. At the churning beast that hurries down the stream like there is no time left at all. There isn't. She ended it when she went in. She ended it when she went under and let the water take her.

The summer ends. Once a feeling of seemingly never-ending hot days, now made up of cold water, noisy panic and the image of her pushing wet hair out of her face. Oh god. That one image over and over. You see it when you're buttering toast and lying awake in bed and opening your blinds.

Over and over.

You hear the running river when you turn the tap on. You feel the warmth of the sun when you flick the bedroom light on. You smell the damp muddiness of the river when fishing around in the pantry. You taste the icy river water as if you dived down to the bottom with her in the shower. You see her playful smile when the wind caresses your skin on the veranda.

Over and over.

You wish you had spoken to her. Had talked to her, kept trying to catch up, walked over to her when she jumped into the river the first time before she went under forever. It's this guilt that keeps you awake at night, motionless and heavy, the drive of panic that cycles round and round your brain. A consistent pulse of madness.

You begin your second year of university soon enough. You stop looking up at the sky each morning, instead, just drive. You watch the trees and the birds and the falling leaves as one season melts into another from your bedroom window. Seeing it and being in it are two different things. She is nature and to get away from nature you have to stay inside.

Another summer rolls around. You have short hair now, cropped at your chin. You don't like it much, but it will grow. Longer legs as well, because apparently, you haven't stopped maturing. Your parents are getting older. The red brick houses are fading, weathered by the drum of the hot sun. The trees stretch higher towards that blue expanse. Now, you're used to being here without her. Now, you can walk under the trees and look at the sky until you feel ant-sized and not feel the noisy panic. You still see her image sometimes – the one where she brushes wet hair from her face, right before the river swallowed her – but you don't mention it to anyone. It feels like the last part of her. The last thing you can cling onto, hollowly, before the regret rises once again.

And one morning, when the guilt in your chest is heavy and that same old sense of panic is heightened, you walk outside. You stand in the silence of the trees and the breeze and the faraway hum of birds and the urge to *do something* and *feel something* has never been stronger.

The river. That consistent pulse, the beating heart at the centre of this landscape. You track through the trees, past the grassy slope where you told each other secrets, over the rocky outcrop, the patch of dirt where that apple tree never grew, down to the river. A sense of quiet solitude lurks beneath its glassy surface.

You slip your clothes off your body, folding them, paper-like onto a rock. Stand on the river bank, toes curled over the edge. Allow your mind to focus on the ripple of your reflection. Let it wander back to her, back to summer nights, back to youthful ignorance. Hands pinching chubby cheeks, dripping hair, small brown eyes, blood plum stains. The folding of napkins, pressed sheets, a knife and fork scraping over an empty plate. Dirty dishes on the sink, wilting flowers, bluebells in spring, summer air, sticky sunscreen. Dirtied knees and scabbed shins, the cooling sensation of water pooling around your ankles. Muddy brown hair, green foliage, scratchy grass, feet searching for cool patches in the sheets.

Exhaling, you watch your reflection shift again, before pushing off the edge, letting your toes meet the river first. A small splash as body meets water. Your eyes flood. The corners sting and you struggle to keep them open. The cold settles on you, blanket-like. An icy embrace that shouldn't feel comforting, but does. And down you go, just as she did. Like that summer when you raced to see who could touch the bottom

first, or like last summer when she reached the bottom alone and you watched her vanish.

You are deep within it.

So deep.

Swallowed and engulfed, down, down. You are here. You are the water now.