

## Man of the Earth – Clare Douglas

...This is a story about a butterfly. A butterfly that flew through vivid green grass frantically foraging for an orangeblack flower to rest on a while. He was an arch winged butterfly – a butterfly in search of a flower that looked quite like him. While searching and searching, something captured the corner of his little black eye. Not an orangeblack flower but the corner of the delicate wing of another orangeblack butterfly lying lifeless upon the vivid green grass. Now, he had never encountered this butterfly before – yet he was of the same species himself. They both looked quite the same, yes, but their markings were different. He was so ashamed that he had never taken the opportunity to meet this little butterfly (who looked like he had been a very interesting little butterfly), that he wondered if he had a family to whom he could return the body. So with his dainty black feet, he grasped the edge of each wing, and began to slowly rise into the air...

This was the story that kept rewriting itself inside the lids of India's eyes, as she walked back through the darkness. Her mother had read it to her when she was only 4, if that. She had loved it, though. Now, it only made her scared for Peter, as she knew he lay lifeless in the mystery of the ocean's secrets. She did not meet eyes with Benjamin, scared for what they would say. For what they would not say. He is good at screaming silence – it bounces off the sand dunes, the razored cliff edges. It was his idea – this 'excursion', as he put it. Peter only came because he did not have a mother to teach him independence; that is how it had always been. Benjamin the Leader, Peter the Follower, and me somewhere in between. It is not always just black and white.

Peter had looked so peaceful this afternoon, as the sun set on the deep blue dream. He was calm, then. His face was a serene white – whiter than both mine and Benjamin's. Our skin was brown from a childhood spent under the ever watchful white eye of the sun. The sun was witness to our young adventures, treading carelessly upon the river stones. I first met Benjamin when I could only dance upon the river's edge. We were both but 6 years old, and he taught me the art of swimming that day. That was a Magical Day, for I had admired him with the adoration of a sister has for an older brother.

Benjamin was an orphan – he lived with his slowly fading grandmother in a hut under the river trees. We explored the universe through each other's minds, amidst the river stones. He did not mind not having a mother or father, because he had me, he said. The days were warm and sweet and perfect, like sucking on a toffee in the sunshine.

Peter discovered us under the river trees some rains and droughts later. He was shorter, younger, chubbier. His eyes were the colour of river mud: an oozing assortment of earth and stones and water and weeds. Man of the Earth shall return to the Earth.

His tiny, squinting face was always eager and curious. His mother had returned to ashes also, so I naively thought that he and Benjamin would

unearth, in each other, mutual consolation. But Benjamin did not have a father to teach him patience, and Peter did not have a mother to teach him independence.

This afternoon, as darkness settled upon the deep blue dream, shadows flitted across Benjamin's gaunt face, his eyes the colour of grey steel. Scheming eyes – I knew them too well. The last time I saw them, we had spent our dreams in the little shack above the trees – Benjamin had woken, ushered me outside, and then locked Peter inside. Jealously, I think it was. *I was his*, not Peter's. There was no me or him, only *us*, we: Benjamin and me. Peter was the silent breath that tickled the back of your neck when you thought no-one was there. He was silence, or something like it.

This evening, when the darkness became cold, Benjamin asked us to follow him.

Politely? No. Adamantly.

I, caught in the web of his steel grey eyes, did not protest. For the 11 years I had known him, I had never questioned him. Peter had mumbled a silent protest; of the dark, of the cold, of his embarrassment in knowing that his squat legs could not walk far. But he followed as always and Benjamin waited, slowly feigning patience, as if a nasty word was poised on his tongue, a serpent trying to restrain.

The walk along the rocks was long, arduous – it was not our typical wander through the forest trail. Benjamin led through the stones and the sea and the salt and the shells. He found a sharp steel grey rock amidst the deep blue dream – the tallest one, and beckoned for us to climb it – to appreciate the mystery of the ocean's secrets, he had said convincingly. Peter went first, and then I – he lifted out his strong, pulsating arm for me to grasp. Peter's face was red and swollen. As I climbed up, Benjamin stumbled a little – a little too much – and Peter fell into the deep blue dream. Fell against the stones and the sea and the salt and the shells.

In silence he left us.

Benjamin said it was not my fault – it was no-ones fault. I was numb; I closed my eyelids to the orangeblack butterfly.

*'Accident rules every corner of the universe except for the chambers of the human heart.'*

Peter. Belonging to the mystery of the ocean's secrets. Man of the Earth shall return to the Earth.