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The Revised Standard Version

by Rachel Chalmers

1. People are all 'What the—?'

Lucy Carter, sixteen years old, Christian and in love, drives her father's car from Sydney to the Anglican Youth Camps in the Royal National Park.

"You will hear of wars and rumors of wars," she says to herself. "See that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet." Her heart rattles its cage. She had never driven to the camps before. Her hands are slick on the wheel.

The road winds up out of Audley Weir, a strange Victorian pleasure-ground in the eucalyptus forest, to the heath and scrub on the ridge. It's fiercely hot. The bush reeks of aromatic oils, and the sound of cicadas presses on her ears. White painted letters on a chocolate board direct her to Deer Park and Chaldercot. She indicates dutifully and makes the turn off the sealed road onto the red dirt track.

These landmarks are familiar as prayers. The car park for Winifred Falls. The fork in the road that leads to Telford and Rathane. Banksia trees on Trig Hill. "Please God," she says to herself. She changes down a gear and eases her father's Corolla through the last switchback. The orange roof of Chaldercot dawns through the trees. In the courtyard, Number Thirteen, the tame deer begs for scraps. The swimming pool shines artificially blue.

His red station wagon is parked at the top of the stairs that lead down to the water. She leaves her father's car next to his. Her breaths are shallow. The grass is thinly shaved, with deer droppings strewn all through it. She hears water slapping at the pontoon and tastes the brackish spray before she sees him. He's messing about with the little yellow dinghy, a Laser with deep-blue sails.

"Bill," she says, and he turns, his crow's feet crinkling. His skin is tan against the whiteness of his hair and the swimming-pool color of his eyes. He doesn't look his age. "How's my girl?" he asks, and holds out his arms. Lucy runs, the boards springing under her feet. Their bodies collide. His

belly presses into the hollow beneath her breasts.

The window above the big kitchen sink over-looks the pontoon. Bill's wife Mary is up to her elbows in hot water and detergent foam. She's washing up after making lasagne for eighty people. The cheese has baked hard onto the broad steel trays. Orange oil floats on the surface of the washing-up water. She watches Bill scoop Lucy off the ground and hold her tight. "A capable wife who can find," she says. She is trying to learn the last chapter of Proverbs by heart.

"Mary?" says a voice.

"Chris," she says warmly, turning. He's eighteen now, almost a man. There's a red-haired girl with him.

"We're here early. We thought you might need help," says Chris. He picks up an apple from a bowl and takes a bite. He picks up another apple and tries to juggle the two. Both fall. The girl picks them up off the floor, replaces the unbitten one in the bowl and hands the other back to Chris.

"Thank you," he says. "This is Shantih, my next-door neighbor. Shantih, Bill's wife, Mary."

"Chris has told me a lot about you," says Mary. She pulls off her yellow rubber gloves and takes one of Shantih's hands in her own. "We're so glad you could come along."

The girl is no more than thirteen. Her hand is cool in Mary's warm, wrinkled ones. Her red-gold hair hangs straight to her cheekbones. She has clear skin and grey eyes. There are freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose. Her parents have gone to Europe for a second honeymoon. Shantih has been despatched to camp in Chris's care.

"Mary does all the cooking," says Chris. "Eight days, eighty people. She never stops working. She never sleeps."

"That's not true. I have two assistant cooks, and everybody takes a turn as an orderly," says Mary. "But I do have a job for you if you'd like."





Photo courtesy of deerparkview.com.au

She shows them four bags of oranges on a stainless steel worktop. “They need to be cut in half and juiced. But keep the halves. We’ll fill them with orange jelly.”

“Oh, excellent,” says Chris. “What she does then is cut the halves in half, so you’re left with orange jelly quarters. And if they’ve never seen how it’s done, people are all ‘What the—?’”

Shantih picks up the knife and touches the blade.

“Here,” says Mary. “I’ll set you up with the juicer.”

“Jesus, of course, would have fed us all on loaves and fishes,” says Chris as the knife sinks into the first orange. “But this year he sent Mary in his place, and I’m glad. I don’t like fish.”

The kitchen is fragrant with juice. Mary pulls her rubber gloves back on and plunges her hands into the cooling washing-up water. Bill and Lucy have disappeared. The pontoon, empty, bobs on the tide.

Far out across Port Hacking, Mary can see the ferry laboring toward her with its cargo of souls to be saved.

2. Practicing the fingering

There are fifteen cabins scattered among the trees. There are four bunk beds—beds for eight people—in each cabin. The cabins are built of the same chocolate-treated wood as the sign on the main road. Their roofs are of corrugated iron. Their concrete floors are painted green. It’s so hot that few people can sleep in their sleeping bags.

Most are lying on top in pajamas. Only a few were foresightful enough to bring sheets.

Bill and Mary have a room of their own, with a double bed. He is asleep, snoring. She drifts between restless dozing and anxious prayer. Let no one be hurt. Please, let this weather break. Don’t let Bill....

Chris is cabin leader for seven boys, aged thirteen to fifteen. It’s an hour past lights out. He is leading them in a farting competition. There is much muffled giggling, and the cabin air has a sulfurous smell.

Lucy is cabin leader for six girls, including Shantih. Five are asleep. One snores, another drools on her pillow. Shantih is awake, silently practicing the fingering of Bach’s Cello Suite No. 1.

There is a mosquito coil burning at the door. Its sweetness almost overcomes the sweaty smell of the girls’ dirty laundry, their wet towels and swimming suits.

Lucy is pretending to be asleep. She is remembering, in rich and indulgent detail, the first time. She would wait for him in the empty church, tingling with anticipation.

St. Mark’s was low Anglican, and intolerant of beauty. The pews were teak, the carpet mustard, and the stained glass—yellow and olive squares and rectangles—was hidden over the door where no one would be offended by it. The Bibles were the Revised Standard Version, as the King James was considered scripturally unsound. Even the flowers, arranged by retired women with ill-concealed crushes on Bill, were lurid and smelled of funerals.

He would be out on the porch, seeing everyone off, genial as always. When the congregation had drifted away in twos and threes, he would come into the unlit church on his way to the vestry. Her heart would lift the moment she saw him.

Lucy at thirteen had sallow skin and straight, rather greasy hair. Her colorless eyes were huge, and beneath them her face dwindled to a sharp point. She loved the things she loved—music, Jesus, Bill—with single-minded concentration. She



had no sense of humor at all. She didn't understand, for example, why people dismissed certain kinds of behavior as attention-seeking. To her, attention was the most important thing in the world.

Bill gave her his full attention. It was one of his talents, to be with a person, if only for a little while. He listened carefully to her halting account of her week, her walk with God, her quiet times, how Jesus gave her the strength to rise above persecution. He hugged her when she wept, and at the end of each night, he kissed her. On the cheek. On the mouth. On the breast.

Just kissing. Any more would be a sin.

It's been three years. She knows he will leave Mary for her. She just turned sixteen. She can marry. She can drive a car. She has written him a song. She smiles into her pillow, and moves her thighs together, just to feel the skin sliding over bare skin. Sleep moves over her like a warm front.

3. *This really wise thing*

The glass wall behind them shares Mary's opulent view of Port Hacking, but the kids sit with their backs to it. Chris, Lucy, and Bill are behind microphones. The men wear khaki shorts and chambray shirts. Lucy wears a Laura Ashley dress. She sits on a stool and nurses a twelve-string guitar.

Chris is saying: "You're welcome to use the trampoline, as long as you have a spotter to tell you when you're getting too close to the edge. We have a safety rule about the waterfront, too. You have to wear shoes. You'll see if you go down there that Port Hacking has lots of oyster beds. Well, let me tell you, those oysters are razor sharp. And if you fall and cut yourself, I don't want to be the one picking bits of oyster shell out of your cuts."

Bill, up next, listens happily. As long as everyone keeps these simple rules in mind, no one will get hurt. He toys with this as an idea for a sermon. Then he remembers that he may be in violation of the Seventh Commandment, at least if you count desire as adultery, which Jesus clearly

did. He sighs.

"Thank you, Chris," he says. "And now on to my favorite part of our daily worship. God loves it when we make music and sing. Music is an important part of our lives, and the words to songs are as important as the tunes. Don't you hate it when there's a song you love, but the words are just not right? I do. And that's why I'm especially grateful to Lucy, who has written new words for some of the songs we all love. I'm sure you'll recognize this next one...."

Lucy bares her teeth in a frightened way and launches into the theme song from M*A*S*H, originally titled "Suicide is Painless."

"Through early morning fog I see / visions of the things to be, / the joys that are in store for me / I realize and I can see / That Jesus is our savior, / He changes our behavior / and we can have such love and joy and peace!"

On the second sing-through, seventy-six ill-trained voices take up the refrain. The resulting noise causes Shantih, slumped at the back, actual pain.

After the song, Chris returns to his microphone.

"When Bill told me we were going to spend this week studying Paul's Letter to the Romans, I have to tell you, I was like, 'Hey, that's some heavy stuff, big guy.' I was like, 'Man, some of them are new at this, you know?' Anyway, so Bill said this really wise thing. He said, 'Look, if they get Romans, they get it all.' And that's really true, guys. It's all here.

"So this reading is from Romans, chapter three."

A flock of sulfur-crested cockatoos mobs a tree near the verandah. Shantih listens to the birds' raucous squabbling, wishing she could be outside, watching them bicker and play. By the time she tunes back in, Chris is finishing the reading.

"Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."



Watching Chris read, Bill reminds himself not to talk over the kids' heads. They are good kids. Most of them are regulars at church and Fellowship. Many come from faithful families. These kids need the meat of Scripture. But some are completely new to all this. He thinks of them as drowning swimmers. He must throw them the lifeline that is God's love. Bill's eye rests on Shantih, who looks rather glum. He is suddenly, horribly afraid that his sin will sabotage his efforts to save these kids.

Lord, he prays, speak through me to these innocents who don't know You. Forgive me my sins, and use me to do Your will. Lord, I know these children are suffering. Let me bring them into Your light. Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil. In the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

4. *Everybody's worried*

"I'm not going," says Shantih.

"Everyone goes," says Chris patiently.

"I don't paddle canoes. I'll get callouses. I won't be able to play."

"You can go in the power boat," offers Bill.

"I can't swim."

"You liar! I've seen you swim!" says Chris.

Shantih looks him dead in the eye.

"I've got my period," she says.

Mary comes into the dining room with a hamper of food. "You three, are you busy?" she asks. "I need to carry this down to the power boat."

"Shantih isn't coming," says Bill. He knows she lied about her period, and he knows there's no way he can call her on it. He's furious. He won't look at any of them. His face is bright red.

"Oh, I don't mind helping carry," says Shantih amiably.

She carries the hamper down the stairs to the waterfront. Only twenty or so of the campers will depart from the pontoon. The rest are being loaded, two or three at a time, into canoes at the Chaldercot boatshed. Some have already paddled out as far as the sandbank in the middle of the harbor. An

impromptu game of football is in progress on the shoals.

"Ah-hah! It's true," thinks Shantih. "They really can walk on water!"

Mary and her assistant cooks are taking the aluminum powerboat. It wallows on the end of its rope-line, fat with plastic tubs of meat and salad and vats of lemon cordial. Bill's taking his beloved speedboat, the Sting Ray, a wicked-looking fiberglass wedge with a giant outboard motor. He has the first aid equipment. Chris and Lucy are sailing the dinghy. When the wind dies in the narrow inlet past Maianbar, Bill will throw them a line and tow them to the falls.

Mary casts off and putters out toward the football players on the sand. Bill in the Sting Ray roars around and past her. Chris and Lucy turn the little dinghy into the wind, waiting for its blue sails to fill with the breeze.

"Goodbye," says Chris. "Don't get into any trouble."

"I won't," says Shantih.

The dinghy catches a breath of air and lifts itself with grace, its yellow hull slicing the greenish chop. Shantih watches them go, her chin on her hands, smiling. The bell-birds are calling and the Sting Ray's wake slaps the pontoon. The empty afternoon stretches before her.

Later, she takes her cello up to a clearing in the bushes, sits on a fallen tree and practices the Bach suite. Her body leans into the music. Bach, she thinks, knew more about tenderness and urgency, sorrow and delight, than any of these people with their supposed hotline to God. She is glad that they are gone. She waves cheerfully to Chris. He waves back.

"I wish Bill wouldn't let himself get so angry," says Chris, at the tiller, to Lucy, who is fiddling with the jib.

"He's worried," says Lucy.

"So am I worried," says Chris. "Everyone's worried. No excuse."

"Judge not," says Lucy, "lest you be judged."





Photo courtesy of www.freeadelaide.netfirms.com

“Ooh,” says Chris. “Was that a rebuke?”

Lucy ignores him, and fastens the jib sheet into its blocks.

“You remember that guy at Teen Ranch, who jumped in the river after the kid who was drowning, and they both drowned?” asked Chris. “I totally identified. I’d have done the exact same thing. That’s what it means, to be *in loco parentis*. That’s what love is.”

“What?” asks Lucy absently.

“Sacrifice. See, what Jesus did was perfect love, right? And it was perfect sacrifice. So to be Christ-like, we have to give up our lives, everything we care about, for the glory of God. Right?”

“Right,” says Lucy.

“But there’s no point getting angry about it, like Bill does,” says Chris. “I mean, it’s just what you have to do. Give it to God. It’s the same as how you can’t be a Christian and a smoker, too. Which do you want more, the cigarette or God? Whatever it is you want most, you have to give it to God.”

“Is that a pelican?” asks Lucy.

“No, it’s just some kind of seagull,” says Chris.

5. *Southerly buster*

“Hey, check this out,” says Chris. It is night. They’re on their way home, bellies stuffed with Mary’s burgers. The dinghy is bringing up the rear of the long water-borne caravan. Bill has cast them off, but there’s hardly enough wind for the dinghy to make headway. Chris is trailing his hand in the water.

“What is that?” says Lucy. She dips her hand in. Like his, it’s quickly covered in bubbles that glow palest blue.

“Some kind of phosphorescence, I guess. I’ve never seen it before, heard of it even.”

“I bet there’s a poem about it.”

Chris snorts. “Yeah, and I bet it’s terrible.”

“Chris,” says Lucy.

“Mmm?”



“Is that a shark’s fin?”

It glides toward them on the current. They’ve been teasing one another about sharks, and it seems impossible that this could really happen. It feels like a dream. The moon lights the surface of the water, and the banks slope steeply on either hand, and here they are, in their little dinghy, with a fin moving their way. Could a grey nurse overturn the little boat? Would it?

Lucy can’t believe her life could end like this. She loves Bill. Love this strong, love that has overcome all these obstacles, well, it has to mean something. It has to go somewhere. It can’t just stop. Surely even God wouldn’t demand that.

Chris lets out a sharp breath. “It’s poly-STY-rene,” he says, and flicks a rope at it. The piece of packaging falls on its side, and the shark-fin illusion is gone.

Cold air breathes across them and changes the texture of the water from pond-like smoothness to ruffles. The indigo sails belly and fill, and the flat-bottomed boat lifts its bow a little. A veil of cloud obscures the moon.

“Here we go,” says Lucy.

The wind picks up and keeps picking up. The stiff ruffles spill over themselves, and the dinghy blunts its bow on the chop.

“Hope the kids have rounded Maianbar,” says Chris as he rakes in the sail.

Most have. Some have not. Bill is rounding up the stragglers when the wind comes on to blow.

“Throw me your ropes!” he roars, and gathers six canoes to the Sting Ray like lost sheep. Once they’re secured, he has to tow them slowly or risk swamping them. That means he watches helplessly as the southerly buster sweeps the canoes ahead of him right across Port Hacking. “My God, my God,” he prays. “Look after these children, if not for my sake, for the sake of Your dear Son.” The rain falls in bucketfuls, warm as blood. It’s hard to tell where the air ends and the water begins.

Mary, who led the caravan, is first back to camp. She ties off the aluminum boat and runs, taking

the stairs two at a time, through the rain to the kitchen, to call the Coast Guard. As the assistant cooks empty the boat, Mary and Shantih fill deep pans with many bottles of milk. Mary shovels cocoa powder in with a tablespoon, as if the richness of the chocolate will determine the outcome of the night for good or evil.

The first of the campers arrive, wet to the skin and overtired, their bright spray jackets clinging. Some are thrilled by the adventure, others are chilled to the bone by the wind and fear. Mary, washing up with unprecedented vigor, looks out the window to see the Sting Ray drawing up to the pontoon with its precious cargo of canoes.

“Down to the waterfront, all of you!” she calls. “Take towels!”

6. *Walk with us*

“They should be in bed,” says Mary. Her face is drawn and lined. She has taken the storm very much to heart. If one kid had been lost or hurt... Their poor mothers. Her own impotence in the face of disaster. She even forgot to pray.

Bill, however, is euphoric. “It won’t take long,” he says. “Not even one injury. Mare, God was looking out for us.”

Chris, as cocky and justified as Bill, herds the sleepy campers into the hall. Lucy is tuning her guitar. Shantih is nursing a cup of cocoa. The back of her hand conceals a yawn.

Bill takes the microphone.

“We have been very, very fortunate tonight,” he says. “And I’m not talking about what some might call our lucky escape from injury. Luck had nothing to do with it! Jesus was watching over us. He heard our prayers. He delivered us.

“I’d like to thank Him now. Let’s pray. Dear Jesus, we’re safe and warm tonight, and we know it’s thanks to You. We know that You have power over the wind and the waves, and we know You spared us from harm tonight. We know that You can care for us the same way in our ordinary lives, and see us safely through the storms of tempta-



tion and persecution. Lord, we ask that You walk with us as You sailed with us tonight, now and all the days of our lives. In the name of Christ, our saviour. Amen.

“Now let’s lift our voices in a song of praise!”

It’s Lucy’s cue, and she hits it.

“Love is but a song we sing and fear’s the way we die / You can make the mountains ring or make the angels cry / Though the bird is on the wing and you may not know why / Come on people now, smile on your brother / Everybody get together, try to love one another right now!”

“Off to bed now,” says Mary when the singing has died.

“What about that?” says Chris to Shantih, bouncing on his heels. “Wasn’t that something?”

“Are all Anglicans this crazy?” asks Shantih.

“Oh no, we’re special,” says Chris. “Sydney’s the most evangelical diocese on earth.”

“Hunh?” says Shantih. After a minute she asks: “If Jesus didn’t want us to get hurt, why’d He send the storm at all?”

“To show us that He was watching out for us.”

“He had to scare everybody to do that? Seems a bit mean.”

“Jesus can’t be mean,” says Chris patiently. “He loves you, Shantih, He really does.”

Shantih shrugs and smiles and looks away, embarrassed.

“Come on,” says Lucy, finding her. “Time for bed. I have an umbrella.”

They run up the hill together. The storm has turned the dirt road into stream beds. Lucy and Shantih stop outside the cabin, in the shelter of its overhanging roof, to catch their breath. The soil smells richly of eucalyptus and loam and earthworms. The lights in the hall below them go out. It’s raining too hard to see the waterfront.

“I feel I haven’t got to know you very well this week,” says Lucy to Shantih.

Shantih takes a breath and starts playing the Prelude in her head.

“I don’t even know,” says Lucy, “do you have a boyfriend?”

“Do you?” asks Shantih.

“Yes,” says Lucy, after a moment.

“Who?”

“We like to keep it private,” says Lucy.

“Well, me too,” says Shantih.

“You love music, don’t you? I saw you brought your viola.”

“Cello.”

“Are you having lessons?”

“Yes.”

“I love music. I write songs. For guitar.”

“I know,” says Shantih.

“Course you do,” says Lucy. “I’m sorry. Let’s go to bed.”

Shantih follows her into the cabin, feeling ashamed of herself. Lucy changes into her pajamas without speaking, and climbs into bed. Shantih does the same. She’s very tired, but the wind and the rain keep her awake. She lies on top of her sleeping bag and thinks about the Bach.

Sometimes she wants to play it harshly, with every note mathematically precise and contrasting cleanly with the next, all stacked against one another like brightly colored pieces of glass. Other times she wants to let the notes flow against one another like waves on the shore, like wind in the trees, all soft and graceful and organic in shades of green and blue. The music moves through Shantih’s body and pulses in her blood.

7. I promise you

Breakfast is finished, and the washing-up water comes out in its plastic tubs. Everyone is high this morning after the storm. The sun has come out, it’s clear and cold, and the raindrops glitter on leaves and spider webs. Lucy has walked out onto the veranda for a breath of air. Chris, who is carrying a tub, trips over his own feet. A great slop of water and detergent hits the linoleum floor.

Shantih has collected the glass milk bottles from her table and is trotting to the recycling bin.



“Watch out for the—” says Chris, but he’s too late. Shantih’s foot slips in the soapy mess, and she falls fast and hard. The milk bottle breaks underneath her left hand. When she lifts it, blood spurts from a great gash in pulses.

Chris catches her wrist and they stare at each other. His terror and grief is like a blow to the chest, and he thinks, stupidly, that he has never understood before exactly what it means to have another person in his care.

What Lucy, on the veranda, hears is Bill’s voice raised in terror, calling: “Mary! MARY!” She pushes herself away from the railing and heads inside, more floating than running, to see Mary striding from the kitchen, lifting a tea-towel from Shantih’s hand, replacing it at once and saying with perfect authority: “Straight to hospital.”

The emergency plan swings into action. Chris and Bill help Shantih down the stairs and into the Sting Ray. Chris’s family car is parked at the boat ramp in Yowie Bay, a short drive from Sutherland Hospital. Chris casts off and Bill revs the boat’s engine.

Mary and Lucy stand side by side on the veranda, watching them go. Lucy is numb. In his hour of greatest need, Bill didn’t call on God or on his

lover. He called upon his wife. He would never have left Mary. How could she have imagined that he would? Lucy sees very clearly now that she has been a stupid and naive little girl.

Mary thinks only of Shantih, of the tendons and bones that lay exposed in her hand.

Chris holds Shantih, who is trembling with the pain and shock. “You’ll be okay,” he says, tears running down his face. “I promise you, the doctors will make it better. It’ll be just as good as new.”

Bill pushes the Sting Ray as hard as she will go. The boat leaps beneath him, smacking off the tops of the waves. The wind streams through his thinning white hair. The shadow has been lifted from his heart. He knows for certain, now, that he will be forgiven, that Shantih will be healed. He knows that he loves Mary and that he will be able to let Lucy go. He knows Lucy’s heart will break, but it is the will of God. Best of all, he knows that he has enough strength and love to nurture and sustain them all.

