

## Julienne van Loon

An excerpt from the story 'Instructions for a Steep Decline'

It is peak hour in the City of Light. A woman cycles backwards up a steep incline. The woman might be travelling home or to work. Other commuters flash past her on the crowded city cycle path. There are black swans on the river. A train passes on a nearby bridge.

Wilhelmina Blomme is forty-one years old. She wears knee-length black cycle pants, a bright pink jersey. Her body is lithe, her legs long. She has the physique of a serious cyclist. Wilhelmina – those who know her call her Wil – is humming something under her breath. There are beads of sweat on her forehead.

Wil commutes to work in the CBD four days a week. She prefers the shared cycle paths along the Swell to road cycling. The river, with its black swans and cormorants, an occasional dolphin, soothes her. There is something about its broad expanse, its gentle currents, that keeps her pedalling, despite everything.

Look again at the woman on the bicycle: Wilhelmina Blomme. She is not cycling backwards. How could you? Perception is only ever partial, tentative. Perception is a game. Wil is moving forwards at considerable speed. And it's a steep descent.

Only weeks ago, she was sitting beside her old friend, Siri. They were studying a day-long course on Buddhist approaches to hospice care. It was a field in which they both volunteered, if irregularly. The two friends had enjoyed a long lunch and it was almost time to go back into the seminar room. They had caught up on the usual gossip when Wil made the admission.

"I have a major problem at work."

"What is it?"

"A man."

"What?"

"I'm trying to see it for what it is. I don't want to act on it, but it's difficult. It's such a strong pull. Physical. Intellectual. Emotional."

"Is he in a relationship?"

"I have no idea. I haven't dared ask. I am, though. The point is: I am."

Something about saying it out loud made it almost seem real.

"Everywhere I look, there he is," she told Siri. "The image of him, but more than the image, a kind of sensory shadow, his body, a corporeal ghost. I turn left: he's there. Right: he's there. Like, he's right there close." She places a hand up at her own face. "It's like I carry him with me."

"Is it a mutual thing?" her friend wanted to know. "I mean, usually, when this has happened to me, you can sense it's a mutual thing, because you're both sending out some kind of signal."

"That's it. I think so."

"Do you work closely with him."

"Sometimes."

But not usually, she thought, and didn't say. Most of their communication was electronic. Twice, perhaps three times a day. Which is what made it all the more difficult to get a handle on what was going on. It seemed there was something between them, but she couldn't be sure. Was it mutual or not? There was something between them, yes, and yet, there was also nothing.

At home, of late, she had watched the boys playing war games with jets and fighter planes made from Lego and felt strangely distanced from them. In some ways, she had already left them. She watched her husband draining the pasta, steam rising in the kitchen, witnessed the shrill tap-tap of the strainer as the last of water drizzled into the sink. She loved these three, their shared home overlooking the forest, the nest they'd made. In times of late, she had taken to looking at

them as a mourner might, as only someone who is about to instil damage into the hearts of her loved ones can.

She would get up from the chair she always flopped into after the hug and kisses of the home-time greeting and turn down the hall towards the bedroom she shared with Frane. She would take off her cycling gear and throw it into the laundry basket and as she was searching for the comfortable linen pants she usually wore around the house, she would sense the stranger. He was there in the shadows. She liked to shut her eyes and breathe in him and call him to life, close.

"Mum! Tell Robin to put the fighter plane down. He shouldn't touch my things. He's a baby."

The little ones storm in, breaking the dream, as if they have an extra sense for when their mother's attention strays too far. They grab at her trouser seams, climb onto her bed. They are territorial, all knowing. On a bad day, she despises them. And yet, so many of the observations she has made of them of late seem all the more precious and beautiful under the premise that this could all be about to end.

How bad could it get? The tarot card reader Siri had recommended had given a spectacularly dramatic reading. Wil could still see the card the woman placed before her: the hanged man. A fantasy artist had taken great pleasure in giving form to a doomed character: suspension, change, abandonment, reversal, sacrifice. The card was all blues and silvers. The hanged man was suspended by one ankle, the other leg crossed behind the knee, his hands behind his back. Around the man's head was a golden halo.

Wil was not, ordinarily, a suspicious person. But these were not ordinary days. She already knew that the woman's reading was to serve as a warning. She needed to slow down, the tarot reader told her, to reconsider. But Wil also knew, she would not. She could not.

Her bicycle frame is white and gleaming. The tyres are black, the accessories polished silver. In the sunshine, the whole thing sparkles. She had bought the thing second-hand on Gumtree. It used to belong to a man named Alan, a lawyer. He had kept it meticulously maintained for ten years, and then he had upgraded to a more expensive model. Sometimes Wil wondered about the journeys the bike went on with Alan before she came to own it. Did it know the river? Did it know this hill? Had it ever been dropped before? How fast had it gone, between the legs of the lawyer? What did he teach it in the way of grace?

Lately, while commuting, Wil has been listening to an audiobook via iPod. It's a book about wisdom. Initially she pondered what might qualify the author, an American journalist, to write about such a topic. At the same time, she was interested in what he was saying, which was that wisdom was not just intelligence, it had to include emotional even-handedness, and a degree of optimism. The journalist gave a list of wise people stretching back through history. They were mostly men. Mother Teresa was the only woman. It was the old whore or saint thing again, Wil supposed. She pondered this. Weren't women, especially mothers, often perfect examples of emotional intelligence? Why the hell weren't there more of them on the journalist's list? Oh, but you had to be grand scale about it, of course. You had to be grand scale to be notable. In the private sphere, women had no meaning. And in the public sphere, women who were leaders were always accused of moodiness, or being flighty, or of not having the required degree of emotional distance. Or, of the opposite: being cold.

Wil had, just quietly, a bit of a handle on wisdom, or so she thought. It was something about turning forty, perhaps. Small conflicts got to her less often, especially at work. She knew something of how things changed, and how quickly. She found she could solve problems with little effort, a sense of detachment, a kind of efficiency.

But the journalist was irritating. "The thing about wisdom is," he said, in his twangy north-American accent: "just because you have it, doesn't mean you get to keep it."

They had a meeting: she and the Deputy CFO and another colleague involved in a joint project. Wil could barely look at him. It was a game. She knew that. The whole of adult life was a game.

Strategy, chance, winners, losers, profits, losses. Good sportsmanship, or lack of it. She had to pretend to be efficient, scholarly, able to map her way through a dark problem. She could do that. She had been doing that for years. This is how a game becomes real: you play it until it is convincing.

"If this gets into the newspapers," said the Deputy, whom she had taken to calling the hanged man, and she looked at him and nodded, "I can just see it," he said. "They would have a field day with this."

"Yes," they agreed, and they came up with a strategy. Corp C would be saved, narrowly once more, from a tattered reputation. You had to be careful, these days. Social media, and so on. And the minor issue was no longer. And she went back to her office. But she did not go back.

During the meeting the hanged man had said, "Perfect." He had said it in relation to something she had read out loud from a document. He had said it and she had paused and she had tried hard not to look up from the page, but then she did look up, too late. Their colleague in risk management had already started to speak about prevention of a similar future event and the hanged man was looking at the colleague and so Wil also turned to look, and the moment was lost.

But as she walked back to her office, the word was there again: perfect. And she thought: "Come here and say that. Come here."

She could not remember which happened first: the loss or the gain. In her memory they had welded together: joint missiles.

Reality. Delusion. Gain. Loss.

She lived with delusion, of course. Didn't everybody? She lived with Frane. And Toby. And little Robin. She would go on living with herself.

Wil had worked at Corp C for fifteen years. During this time, the operation had grown three-fold. She had worked her way up. She had seen some good colleagues take early retirement or resign in frustration. She had seen others take stress leave. The place had its bullies. Wil had managed, mostly, to steer clear of the bullies, or to placate them, and so to keep the corporate narrative in perspective – to let go of it on weekends, to keep it, mostly, out of her dreams at night. She dwelled in it deeply at times, but felt, on the cycle path home, that she had the power to loosen its threads. She was a survivor.

One Sunday, around the time she realised she had fallen for the hanged man, she had ridden in along riverbanks crowded with family picnics, swiped her ID card to access the building, taken the shaky lift to level four and then stood outside of her locked office door, key in hand. The corridor had that quiet, deathly hum known to tall buildings whose windows are not designed to open and whose inhabitants have fled or disappeared. The office door bore her name in silver lettering and she looked at that name as if for the first time and wondered: what if Marcus was right? Whose reality am I propping up here, arriving at the office on a Sunday? Marcus was her nephew, a kind of Godson. He had come and gone from she and Frane's house many times over the years, kicked out by his parents, or his latest round of flatmates. He was addicted to heroin. Wil pictured Marcus slumped at her dining table, his face resting dangerously close to the surface of the hot pumpkin soup she'd placed before him. Lately, his presence horrified her all the more for the display it offered her own sons. But that Sunday, for the first time she thought: perhaps Marcus is right. Perhaps drugs are the only true form of resistance. If you want to change the world, first change your own mind. So, it was she who had been duped. Yes? She slid the key into her office door and turned the handle and sat down in front of her computer to work on the latest document.

She wrote. She wrote speeches and reports and opinion pieces for the Deputy CFO. She knew how to uncover obscure material. She knew how to get the most out of an interview. She knew how to spin. In writing, Wil Blomme could turn an argument inside out and give it back to you threaded with gold. This was perhaps why the company valued her so much.

Corp C was a force of energy. Corp C was a labyrinth. Corp C was a means to support her family, it was a narrative of means. It was a mean narrative.

Corp C was a mess, and she was always relieved to cycle away from it at the end of the working day. Only it would never be too long, of course, before she would have to cycle right back in.

Loss and gain and loss and gain and loss.

Motherhood changed you, there was no doubt. After Toby, she went back to work two days, then three, then shifted up to four. Then she fell pregnant with Robin. Something happened to her, at home with the second boy. Time went black. She resurfaced, apparently looking very much the same, twelve months later. People commented on how well she looked. But something crucial in her had shifted.

Work could be a reprieve. Perhaps this was why the hanged man arrived in her mind the way he did. It wasn't as if he hadn't been there, in the building, all along. It's just that, after Robin, especially, she saw things differently. There was so little sleep. The raw energy of the boys climbing into her bed far too early in the morning. Their raucous games while she played with them or while she checked her email at home or whenever she tried to think. Then at night time, tears and shouts and tantrums. Their feeble 2 a.m murmurs. After dark, only mummy would do.

She and her husband had no time alone together. She sometimes felt him watching her from across the room, as she did him sometimes, mid-task, mid-childish-emergency. They were like hired help, there to serve the children. They just happened to be sharing a house together, eating at the same table. It seemed they no longer had anything else in common.

Then there was the hanged man: did he really not have the slightest clue?

On the Thursday before the accident, Wil had lingered at the edge of the kindergarten car park with Artemis, the mother of Toby's best friend. Artemis revealed that her husband was having an affair. "I've asked him to leave," she said, "but he won't. He wants the best of both worlds." Their conversation stopped and started and stopped again, as the children moved in and out of earshot. Mostly, the boys were examining rocks in a ditch some metres away, but sometimes they grabbed hold of one another's backpacks and looped and chased and squealed, coming close to the two women for protection, then lurching away again. The fact of the affair was marked heavily on Artemis's face.

"I've caught him red-handed, and yet he won't admit it," she complained. "They say DENIAL stands for Don't Even Know I Am Lying."

The acronym wasn't quite right, but it didn't seem the right time to point that out. Wil knew Artemis's husband. He was a handsome, intelligent man, a pilot for a charter flight company that did well out of the mining industry, he was often away for days at a time. When he was home he was the picture of a devoted father. He put the children to bed at night. He helped Artemis with the cleaning. He tended the garden. Wil wasn't surprised that someone else should find him attractive. She felt terrible for her friend, Artemis, and understood her sense of her betrayal. But at the same time, she couldn't stop thinking about the cheating husband. She recognised his illicit desire, so completely overwhelming. She understood the mad pain of it. She thought about this even as Artemis confided in her. Wil's identification with the traitor shocked her.

Her son bowled into her with force then plonked to the ground with laughter.

"Bleugh," he said, pulling a silly face, then: "Dong!"

The boy was performing for his friends. She took his hand in hers and helped to pull him up. She moved towards her car and nodded and smiled her goodbyes at Artemis, for whom she felt truly awful, and for whom it seemed nothing at all could be done. The boy was complaining. As she helped him into the car she found herself gripping him with the strongest hold.

"Stop it, Mum!" he said. "Let go!"

The hanged man lived alone. She knew which suburb. She knew precisely which street. She pictured him opening his front door to greet her. She is standing there on the threshold. It is

raining. She has her car with her. It is night. But she cannot read the hanged man's face as he looks at her. She cannot read: is it mutual recognition or horror? Has she gone too far?

Wilhelmina Blomme was mid-descent. No, she was caught somewhere. She wasn't even moving.

Outside the vortex of the accident, she suspected that continuity still reigned. Her husband would be sitting in the study at home, making slow progress on a working drawing for a yet-to-be-built dream-home. For as long as they had lived in the City of Light, her husband had seemed incapable of doing anything with speed. He earned less than half her income, running his own business at home. But what could be said against him? He picked up the children from school and day-care four afternoons a week. He cooked four nights out of seven. He fell asleep, nightly, in front of the television, and didn't answer her when she called for him to come to bed. It was a relationship in which she had been feeling, for some years, a terrible sense of loneliness.

At work, the progress meeting on the North-West Project would soon be underway without her. She would not be able to deliver her background work on the Iraqi sub-contractor. It occurred to her, apropos of nothing, that she may never set foot in the board room at Corp C again. A part of her felt good about this. The narrative would continue without her. She would miss the painting on the boardroom wall: the bold grey storm front by David Giles. There was, amidst the grey cloudscape, a beautiful yellow light. It was the sun, she supposed, refracted. It hadn't occurred to her before just how important that painting had been to her. She always sat on the left-hand side of the Chair, so as to face it. Giles was painting about people, she realised, even though the human form, in a figurative sense, was completely absent from his work. He was painting about perception, she thought, and how it shifts. His storm painting granted time, in a funny way. It granted time to contemplate that shift.

The hanged man's secretary would probably be phoning her mobile about now. There would be some mystification about her absence, some impatience. They would postpone the meeting, once, then twice, until it became apparent she was not capable of returning to work. Or they would continue, today, with what they had in front of them. One always imagines oneself more indispensable than is actually the case.

She was mid descent. No, she was airborne.

Blindness, too, comes in unexpected ways. We cannot know the blindness, only its effects. We cannot always be conscious of how blind we've become. We do not know what we're missing.

In her dream, he swam back to her, beneath the surface of the water, and took her hand, pulling her in his direction. They were diving towards some kind of wreckage. Something metal glistened on the bottom of the river. Was it her bike? She remembered, so many years ago, before the children were born, in the early years of her marriage, how she had stood in a broad wide riverbed up north with an indigenous woman and talked about the unexpected. The local woman told her how water could descend from a rainstorm so many hundreds of kilometres away, in the desert, then come barrelling down the dry river bed, taking everything in its wake. They spoke of how it could do this, even on a hot, still day. "A day like today," she said. You just never knew. And so the advice was not to stand in the riverbed, which is what they were doing, of course, even as the woman relayed her sensible advice.

In the dream, the same one, her department was restructured. She dove beneath the surface again, but the hanged man, whom she had taken to calling by his real name, Leigh, was nowhere in sight. The treasure had dislodged. A dolphin was playing in her slipstream. Wil was carrying knowledge, but it was not buoyant, and she found that despite her fitness, despite the placid current of the tired river, despite everything, she could no longer swim.

"I know you," she reassured the river. "You can help me."

But the river was silent, and the two of them dwelled, one body in another, and the sun looked down and the breeze ruffled the leaves of the peppermint trees, and the day went on with no regard for Wilhelmina Blomme at all.

Emergency sirens call. The sudden shot of loss. Sometimes it seems the sirens are in the distance and receding, at other times they are so close they hurt her ears. She remembered studying a poem by Philip Larkin at high school. It was about an ambulance siren. She could not remember the lines, exactly, only the sentiment. Was the poet disturbed by the siren, but quietly happy that it did not call for him? Yes, she thought, sirens are always calling for somebody else. You listen, as you grow older, then the noise goes away. Until, one day, it doesn't go away. One day it deafens. And you can no longer hear anything at all.

I am here, she told the children. Mummy's here. Can't you see me?

The boys could hear her, she was sure, but somehow they could not reach her. They needed her and she had lost them. She had lost them on the descent.

Only last week, flying to the north of the state on business, and looking down at the arid interior, she had noticed how it was water that shaped the country. Everywhere retained the mark of its aggressive flow, its relentless pursuit of the lowest point. It had shaped and shifted every grain of sand, every plant, hill and gully.

"I love your work," he'd said to her at the end of a particularly difficult meeting one afternoon and the smile she gave back was a kind of grimace because the line was so stupid, so facile. He was not living up to her expectations.

On Wednesday, climbing the stairs to the lobby, she saw him a little way ahead of her. He was wearing grey suit pants and a pink collared shirt and she watched the way he walked and desire sparked in her so fast and so quick it was almost painful to keep walking, knowing what she knew, and what he seemed to fail to acknowledge: how she needed him. Then she climbed the stairs to the top level and as she was discussing something with his PA, the hanged man came out of his office. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. So, it could not have been him on the stairs.

"How are you?" he said.

Was she really so ill?

"I'm okay," she replied, "under the circumstances."

And he nodded and smiled and gave the PA some instruction and left again, and Wilhelmina breathed out.

Never do that. I just don't recommend falling away at such speed. Whole planets pass you by, galaxies, aeons, the trip itself a kind of hallucination. But in free falling, look how the sun dapples on the surface of the river, almost as if life itself was born of its reflection. If one wore skirts, they would be billowing now. There is a rushing of blood through arteries, a honey-warmth, and you feel like a child who can see rainbows where nobody else can.

Look at the beauty of the river, here, where the boats pass. It only takes one pleasure boat to destroy the stillness, just one. People who pass nod at us and assume us a couple, the sun on our backs, my tongue in your mouth.

And the river says nothing, only moving her bulk to accommodate boats, birds, small marine mammals. There is nothing to say. It is true that it had seemed impossible, because for so long he was not real. The apparition, a symptom of stress, perhaps, her head not right, the aching tug of desire leaching away reason, and the Buddhist monk at the temple tells her not to cling. Nothing, he says, is worth clinging to. Nothing.

Except for this.

Remember how that single morning expanded and spilled into the night, though perhaps he had left again by then, just like that, as if a great bird had dived to earth and lifted him away, and the city was without him. And so was she.

But you remember, don't you, that morning, and how it changed things? The city knew them and nodded as they passed. They were without papers. Their phones buzzed and vibrated in their pockets and they watched a child (was it Toby?) stop to kick a ball on the wet green grass of the winter parkland.

"I didn't know this city until now," he said

"Nor me."

"I wasn't born here."

"Me either."

"I've never felt at home."

"No."

Never do that. Never do that. Not hope, and investment, and the dreaming and trading on futures. If only we had not fallen this way. If only the river hadn't kept us guessing like that. If there hadn't been so many corners to turn.

"No."

There is nothing to fear from love.

It's different on a deliberate descent. You have already changed down gears. You have leant forward, low. You have pedalled hard, eyes on the road. Leaning. Correcting. Leaning, again.

At one point she resurfaces in the kindergarten classroom. Toby and his friends are there. The teacher and her assistant are hurling a large circle of fabric in the air and the children are rushing underneath it, singing, "Shake, shake the apple tree. Some for you and some for me." The room smells like freshly baked bread and there are vases of flowers all along the little desks in rows. Her first-born seems angelic in this setting, like a doll, like a child in a storybook. All his aggression, dissolved.

This is change. Your bearings lost. You are fumbling now. Stability has turned into a cage, the space too small to turn in. Your wings couldn't unfold. As if in a dream when you wake up but for some reason cannot open your eyes, you have to step out the open door, but you are fumbling. Knowledge is nothing now, if it ever was something useful. Can you see yet? Have you perspective?

Watch out for larger birds, creatures of prey. Flying machines. Refine your senses. Sometimes I fear you are not a bird at all, just a fresh feather of cotton floating away along the edge of a quiet country road, escaping harvest. There are air currents here. You cannot have known about that before. No matter. Drift.

The narrative is yet to arrive in hell. It's fallen sideways into heaven. At first it didn't know how to progress. It kept looping, back, forward, back, endless circles. And because she was cycling up a steep incline backwards and that was never possible for long, if it was possible at all, something had to change. In heaven, she found she could perform acrobatics. The body grew flexible. There was the idea of a child in her womb but in the middle of the second trimester it changed its mind and flew away. She didn't mind. She was lighter without it. She cycled upside down. She grew wings on her back. There was some kind of tightrope stretched taut across the river, beneath the railway bridge. As she cycled across it, a train went by, and the people on the carriages turned to face her and grew white, and she smiled at them as they went by, lifting one hand to wave.

One day, to her surprise, the hanged man gave her his address. So she found herself there on the threshold. It was not night. It was mid afternoon. Nor was it raining. A removal van was parked on the verge outside, its back door open. Inside, a man in an orange high-visibility vest was shifting boxes. She could hear the traffic from the expressway several blocks away and the garrulous calling of a crow as she stood there at the door. It was not morning. It was mid afternoon. The hanged man was talking into his mobile phone, but he was also expecting her, and so before she could knock, the door was already opening, and she ducked under his arm and through into the small townhouse and stood in his kitchen. When the phonecall was finished, he kissed her. And when the kiss was finished, it was no longer mid afternoon. And the hanged man was no longer the Deputy CFO at Corp C.

The place was different without him. Its account of itself faltered.

"He was ambitious," people said.

"He was single-minded."

"You are my people, and you have loved me well," said the river, and Wilhelmina Blomme thought it finally and completely deluded.

The speeches she wrote for the new Deputy were nonsense, but they were also considered an asset and the company continued to pay her salary.

It's possible that all of the staff knew, and that they knew even before she knew, and it's also possible that they could not and would not ever know, and that all of these things could be simultaneously true.

When she had cause to meet with others in the Board Room she found herself turning her back on the David Giles painting. It was as if she could no longer afford to look at it.

At the bottom of the river, she has her tongue deep inside the mouth of her lover. When she has finished searching there, she litters his chest with tiny kisses, and finds her way down his torso to between his legs. How soft the smooth skin, the gentle mushroom of the tip, the length of him, everything. How sensuous, the desiring mouth.

When the timespace of the dream suddenly shifts, it is daytime, and she has the boys in tow. The children are sullen, playing gingerly at the shallow end of the pool, perhaps sensing they have been excluded from something. Then they are gone again, apparitions, neither here nor there.

Still resting a hand against her thigh after making love, the hanged man tells her, "I feel safe with you."

"You are safe," she says.

Super-massive black holes exist. Each has its own event horizon, the point of no return, beyond which no light can pass.

"Why," she asks him, "is a black hole called a black hole? Why not something a little more positive, like a great emptiness, a profound nothing?"

"It's a descriptive title. They are black. They are holes."

"They are super-massive."

"Hence, super-massive black holes."

Sex is forgetting. Setting down the thread of the narrative, unravelling time. There are two bodies, a wide bed. There is his tongue between her legs. If there ever were a border between them, it is gone now, dissolved.

If there were such things as days, nights, they would be passing right here, without note. If there were such as thing as the outside world, it would be smaller now than ever, like a fleck of dust in the sunlight, both here and not here, something to wonder at only briefly.

Passing. Into the body of the hanged man, her own fragility, her future, all of the hours and weeks and years she has spent ghostlike, uninhabited. Here in the great wide bed of the river, she is herself with him, his tongue at her edges until she floods, buoyant, and he carries her. He carries her, and she is everything. No. Border.

When they are tangled, when they are lost in one another's limbs, when the light falls this way and she opens her eyes and sees only his skin, the beautiful surface of him, they are the whole world. When she plays with him like that until he moans and shudders, when everything firm turns to liquid in her mouth, when she is drunk on him, there is no universe but this.

It is peak hour in the City of Light. A woman cycles slowly up a steep incline. Whole minutes are swallowed by the languorous rhythm of her pedals.

Don't look at her. The river will take what she needs, when she needs it. She will swell or contract. She will swallow or reveal. She can reshape herself.

I am here, a voice tells the children. I am here. Can't you see me?

[...]