

WHEN
THE DAY OF
EVIL
COMES

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

MELANIE
WELLS

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WHEN THE DAY OF EVIL COMES
published by Multnomah Publishers, Inc.

© 2005 by Melanie Wells
International Standard Book Number: 1-59052-426-8

Cover image by M. Neugebauer/Masterfile
Author photo by Hillsman Jackson

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information:
MULTNOMAH PUBLISHERS, INC.
POST OFFICE BOX 1720
SISTERS, OREGON 97759

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wells, Melanie.
When the day of evil comes : a novel / Melanie Wells.
p. cm.
ISBN 1-59052-426-8
I. Title.
PS3623.E476W47 2005
813'.6—dc22

2004029822

05 06 07 08 09 10—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0



SOMEONE SAID TO ME THAT DAY, “It’s hotter than the eyes of hell out here.” I can’t remember who. Looking back, I wonder if it meant something, that phrase. Something more than a weather report. But as it was, I let the remark pass without giving it a thought. It was hot. Hotter than the eyes of hell. That was true enough.

If I’d known enough to be afraid, I would have been. But I was a thousand years younger then, it seems, and I didn’t know what was out there. To me, it seemed like an ordinary day.

I was making a rare appearance at a faculty event. I hate faculty events. Generally, truth be told, I hate any sort of event. Anything that involves pretending, in a preordained way, to like a bunch of people with whom I have something perfunctory in common. Faculty events fall into this category.

This particular faculty event was a picnic at Barton Springs in Austin. The picnic was the final fling of a faculty retreat—my definition of hell on earth, speaking of hell. They’d all spent the weekend at a retreat center in the hill country of Texas, getting to know each other. Or bonding, as we say in the industry.

Imagine the scene. A dozen puffed-up psychologists (I include myself only in the latter part of this description, for I do

admit I'm a psychologist), wallowing in all the clichés. Bonding exercises. Trust falls. Processing groups. Sharing. I could imagine few things more horrific.

I'd begged off the retreat, citing a speaking engagement in San Antonio. A speaking engagement, might I add, that had been carefully calendared a year before, timed precisely to oppose the dreaded faculty retreat.

So I'd spent the weekend in the hill country too. But my gig involved talking to entering master's-degree students about surviving graduate school. A topic on which I considered myself an expert, since I'd done more time in graduate school than 99 percent of the population of this grand country of ours. Hard time, in fact. I'd won my release a few years before by earning my PhD and promising myself I'd never breach the last frontier—the suck-you-in quagmire known as “post-graduate education.”

Over the weekend, I'd let those entering students in on my secret—higher education is all about perseverance. It has nothing to do with smarts or creativity or anything else.

It's about cultivating the willingness and stamina for hoop-jumping.

Jump through the hoops, I'd said. Do it well. Do it relentlessly. And in a few years, you can join the elite of the American education system, secure in the knowledge that you too can endure with the best of them.

After sharing this little tidbit, I'd decided to take my own advice and jump through a hoop myself. The aforementioned faculty picnic at Barton Springs.

Barton Springs is a natural spring-fed pool in the heart of Austin, which is in the heart of Texas. And since it was the heart of summer, the water would be sixty-eight degrees of heaven on a hundred-degree day.

I like picnics, generally. And anything that involves water is a good thing in my eyes. I'd started swimming competitively once I figured out that swimming is like graduate school. Perseverance is the thing. And I'm pretty good at that.

So I drove to the picnic that day with a fairly good attitude, for me, considering this was a herd event for professional hoop-jumpers.

I parked my truck in the shade, saying a quick prayer of thanks for the shady spot. I don't know why I do things like that, pray over a parking spot, as though the Lord Himself is concerned about which parking space I get. Surely He has more important things on His mind. But I said the prayer anyway, parked my truck, grabbed my swim bag, and set out to find my colleagues.

They were bunched up in a good spot: near a group of picnic tables, under a live oak tree, and next to one of my favorite things in life. A rope swing. What could be more fun, I ask you? Rope swings are childhood for grown-ups.

I said my hellos and settled in at one of the tables next to my department head, Helene Levine. I liked the name. It had a swifty, rhymie sort of rhythm to it. One of the matriarchs, as she liked to describe herself, referring to her Jewish heritage.

Helene is indeed matriarchal. She's an imposing woman, with a big battle-axe bosom and a manner that is simultaneously threatening and nurturing. I don't know how she pulls that off, but I love her. And she loves me. For some reason, as different as we are, we hit it off from the beginning. I signed up as daughter to her nurturing side.

This day, she was in threatening mode, at least with everyone else. Foul-tempered in the heat, I guess. And probably sick of babysitting her faculty charges. In any case, she brightened when she saw me, handed me a plate of fried

chicken and potato salad, and poured me a cold soda. I settled in to eat.

The food was good. Few things in the world sing to my heart like picnic food. Especially good fried chicken, and I knew Helene had fried this chicken herself. I ate a breast and a wing, two helpings of potato salad, and a huge fudge brownie, all washed down with the national drink of Texas, Dr. Pepper. A meal of champions.

Then the rope swing beckoned.

Since most PhD'd folks spend lots and lots of time bent over books or lecturing halls full of students, they don't get outside much. Hence, they tend to be white and lumpy. They are also not very much fun.

I am not terribly lumpy by nature and try to grasp at any fun that is to be had, being determined as I am not to sacrifice my life on the altar of academe. So while everyone else stayed safely dressed and sheltered on the shore, I availed myself of the dressing room, changed into my bikini, and jumped in the pool.

For a while, I was self-conscious, with all those psychologists watching me frolic by myself. Surely there was something Freudian in my behavior that would get me duly diagnosed and labeled. I kept at it, though, and eventually they lost interest in me and returned to their conversations.

After some diligent practice with the rope swing, I discovered that if I timed it just right, letting go at the very zenith of the arc as I swung out over the spring, I could hit a deep well in the pool, falling into cool, dark water that seemed to take me somewhere safe and almost otherworldly. I did that over and over, sloughing off my stress from the weekend (I had been working, after all) and leaving it on the cold smooth slabs of limestone at the bottom of the pool.

After several minutes of this, I climbed onto the shore, ready for another go, and discovered that someone was competing for my toy. A man stood there, holding the swing tentatively. I found everything about him unsettling.

His skin was chalk-white and he was hairless as a cue ball. He looked like a cancer victim. Not a survivor, which conjures up sinewy visions of strength and triumph, but a victim. Someone weak and bony and sickly, just this side of death. Next to me, with my against-dermatologist's-advice summer tan, he looked like death itself.

I'm not shy, so I walked up next to him. "You want a turn?" I asked.

"What do you do?" His voice was strong and deep, incongruous against his appearance.

I wasn't sure if he was asking what I did for a living or what you do with a rope swing. Since I don't like to tell people what I do for a living, I opted for the rope swing question. "You just grab on and swing out," I said. "And then let go as far out as you can. I'll show you."

I took the rope from him and walked backward to the rock I'd been jumping off of, then made a run for it, landing again in my favorite spot.

When I came up for air, he was in the water right next to me. I suddenly felt uncomfortable.

I fell back on a lame old line.

"Come here often?" I asked.

"Never," he said. "I'm not from Austin."

"Where are you from?"

"I live in Houston now."

Which made sense, since that's where the big cancer center is. Maybe he was just there for treatment or something. I felt sorry for him, but something about him wasn't sitting right with

me. I have pretty good instincts about people. I decided to listen to myself and end the encounter.

"The cold water's starting to get to me," I said. "I think I'm going to get out. Nice meeting you."

"We didn't actually meet," he said. "I'm Peter Terry."

I gave him a little nod and said, "nice meeting you" again. "I'm Dylan," I said, and immediately regretted it.

"Nice meeting you," he said.

Okay. Done meeting this guy. I swam for the shore and climbed out onto the bank, making a point to look back at him and wave after I got on solid ground.

I felt my stomach clench as he turned to swim away. His back had a big gash in it, red and unspeakably violent against all that pasty white skin.

I strained to see it clearly. The wound was jagged and severe, brutal enough to be fatal, it looked like to me, in my quick view of it. It ran horizontally, between his shoulders, blade to blade. It was red and ugly, shredded, pulpy flesh pulled back from a scarlet strip of bleeding muscle.

My mind started casting about for a better explanation, needing to make some sense of what I was seeing. Surely it wasn't a real gash. No one with a wound like that would be walking around.

I finally decided it could be a tattoo. In fact, it must be a tattoo. That was the only logical conclusion. Which just confirmed my impression that something was off with this guy. Anyone with a tattoo like that had some issues, in my professional opinion. Good riddance.

I towed off and walked back to my group, glad to be with the lumpy whities. Suddenly they looked pretty good to me. I sat down next to Helene and reached into my swim bag.

I found a surprise. A box, ribboned and wrapped.

I held it up. "Hey, what's this?"

Helene looked over. "I have no idea. I got one too. I thought it was from you."

The others started looking into purses and bags. Eventually, each person came up with a box, all identically wrapped.

We opened them together, accusing one another of being the thoughtful culprit behind such a fun surprise. No one copped to it, though.

Each box contained something different, but they were all personal gifts. Expensive personal gifts. No one at that picnic could afford such extravagance on faculty salaries. Even those of us who were in private practice wouldn't have spent that kind of money. We didn't like each other that much.

Someone must have a secret, I assumed. Someone who was equally wealthy and codependent. And slightly manipulative.

I didn't really care. I like presents.

My gift was a black leather cord necklace with one big, rough black stone trimmed in silver. It was beautiful and very funky. Perfect for me, since I'm sort of a hippie and like strange jewelry. Whoever picked it out knew me pretty well.

We accused each other for a while longer, until it became obvious that no one was going to confess. Finally, we packed up our stuff and called it a weekend, the faculty retreat officially over. I suspected everyone would show up Monday morning wearing or using their gifts. John would mark his appointments in his new leather Day-timer. Helene would be using her fountain pen. And you bet I'd be wearing that nifty necklace.

I said my good-byes and walked to my old, worn-out pickup truck—a '72 Ford I'd purchased for seven hundred dollars—yanking the door open and promising myself once again I was going to buy a can of WD-40. That door was stubborn as a donkey and twice as loud.

I threw my bag in and started to scoot onto the seat when something caught my eye.

It was another package, wrapped just like the necklace had been. Identically.

I picked it up, examining this one more closely. The paper was expensive. Not the kind of wrapping paper you get at the drugstore. The kind you buy from specialty stores that sell handmade journals and twenty-dollar soap. The ribbon was fresh, unwrinkled satin. Off-white paper, off-white ribbon. Lovely and tasteful.

Warily I pulled one end of the ribbon and eased the paper away from the box. The box was generic, as the others had been. Thick pressed white cardboard, expensively made. But no store logo on it. Nothing that would identify where it came from.

I tilted open the lid, took a peek, and dropped the box. Inside was an engagement ring. It was platinum, an antique setting, with a beautiful 1.2-carat diamond set among a few dainty smaller stones.

The reason I knew the weight of the diamond is that I knew the ring. Intimately. It was my mother's ring. And it was supposed to be on her finger, six feet under at the cemetery outside her hometown.

I'd decided to bury her with it instead of keeping it for myself. I'd seen it on her finger before they closed the lid. That was two years ago last March.

I fished my new necklace out of my purse, opening that box carefully, suspiciously. The necklace was still there, funky and chunky. I took it out of the box and closed my fingers around it in a fist.

I got out of the truck, slammed that noisy door, and marched back to the water's edge. I stood on my launching rock and wound up, throwing that necklace as far as I could into the

spring. It was a good, long throw, reminiscent of years of childhood lessons from my brother. The necklace hit with barely a plop and sank to the bottom.

I sat down on the rock for a minute. Queasy and green with emotion.

I waited there until my head stopped spinning, then walked out to the parking lot and got in my truck. It started with its usual rumble, reminding me that I needed a new muffler too. But it got me home, which is where I wanted to be.

I pulled up in my driveway in Dallas four hours later, relieved at the impending comfort of my house and looking forward to a warm, soapy bath. I unloaded my gear, tucking the box with the ring in it carefully into my swim bag, and hauled all my stuff to the front door.

And there, hanging on my front doorknob, was that necklace, still dripping with the cold water of Barton Springs.

