



A SHORT
WALK
THROUGH
A WIDE
WORLD

a novel

DOUGLAS WESTERBEKE

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To Amy Dawson, for giving me the best advice ever

To the Cleveland Public Library, without which this book would never have been

“Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wide World,” said the Rat. “And that’s something that doesn’t matter, either to you or me. I’ve never been there, and I’m never going, nor you either, if you’ve got any sense at all. Don’t ever refer to it again, please.”

—KENNETH GRAHAME, *THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS*

A Marketplace

The paper is clean and white—she hasn't drawn her first line—so when the drop of blood falls and makes its little red mark on the page, she freezes. Her pencil hovers in her hand. Her heart, like it always does, gives her chest an extra kick. She drops the pencil. Hand, like a reflex, goes to her nose. She feels the wetness creeping through her sinuses, tastes the brine in the back of her throat. It's a trickle now, no more than a nosebleed, but in moments it will be much worse—and here, of all places, just as she'd sat down.

It's too soon. It's bad luck. She'd hoped to sleep in a real bed tonight, not hammocks or hard ground, and in the morning have a bath, a proper bath in warm water, with soap. She'd hoped to add more entries to her book, like *tinder* or *flint* or *paper*—but how to draw a piece of paper on a piece of paper so that others will look at it and say, “Oh, I see. A piece of paper.”

She'd hoped to try the food. Look at this market—taro preserves, steamed crab claws, curried prawns wrapped in sheets of bean curd. No, this will have to wait, too, for another time and another market. The list of things she won't do is even longer than that—what list isn't?—but there's no time to dwell. The bath can wait. She'll find a bed somewhere else. The list is gone. Now is the time to get the hell out.

But the marketplace is alive, the people friendly, and the river right there, a shiny tearstain through the green, clogged with colorful skiffs and fishing boats that can whisk her away, no effort at all. This is Siam, a watery part of the world, all jungle, seasons measured by rainfall. She knew as soon as she set foot here that rivers would be her mode of escape.

That old man, selling fish—such a kindly face, weather-beaten, but a glint in his eye still. He will help. Quickly, she slings her bag over her shoulder and cradles her book in the crook of her arm. She picks up her walking stick, as tall as she is, and moves through blue hairs of incense smoke and burning charcoal. She moves past fishmongers and cloth merchants and tables made of bamboo. The old man smokes a long, thin opium pipe, surrounded by racks of dried fish, dried squid, and dried octopus—anything that was once wet now hangs dry, the old man perched among the racks like a caged bird. She doesn't know the local language, but the French have colonies to the north and the British have influence to the south.

“Please,” she asks in her accented English, “a boat? Do you know where I might find a boat? I need a boat.”

The old man doesn't understand. He hadn't noticed her before, just looks up and there she is, the tallest person in the market, with dirty blonde hair and blue eyes, looming over him. The walking stick in her hand, long and straight, makes her look regal, like a venerable Buddhist nun or an emperor's daughter. Nothing about her suggests the West—no corsets, no bows, no high lace collars, only local fabrics and a laborer's straw hat—but she will never blend in here, not in this market, not in this country, where she's at least a head taller than everyone else.

She sees the baffled expression on the old man's face. She smiles so that he might lower his guard. She rarely blends in anywhere. It's more rare that she tries. Her appearance invites curious looks and lots of questions. It's the best method she has of meeting people, but it's not working on this old man.

He begins chattering in a language she can't understand. There's a shift in his demeanor. It happens all the time. He's mistaken her for a rich foreigner instead of a poor one, instead of someone who has slept in the tops of the jungle canopy and bathed in hidden rivers for the past three weeks. He tries to sell her a stick of dried pomfret. The way he's gesticulating he might be trying to sell her his whole stand. She raises a single alarmed eyebrow. She's wrong about this man. Her instinct has failed her. It rarely happens, but when it does it's downright unnerving. It's her instinct, her ability to size up a stranger with a glance or two, that's kept her alive until now.

And then the pain strikes—a terrible, venomous pain—a weeping pain, like an ice pick through a rotten tooth. It drives straight down her spine, from the base of her skull to the small of her back. She shudders as if electrified, then stiffens up, crushing all the slack out of her body. The old man stops his chattering, watches her face turn cold and pale, watches her lips form soundless words. He’s afraid she might topple over in front of him. But she doesn’t topple. She doesn’t even cry out. She clenches her jaw, her body, and shuffles toward the next stall, a jagged limp in her step.

“A boat!” she calls out to anyone. Many turn to hear. None understand. “A boat, a boat, a boat…” She chants the words as she limps past vendors and their stands, as if tossing lifelines from a sinking ship to those onshore. Another stab of pain and the first sparks of panic fly through her brain.

She approaches a woman by a firepit, stirring a yellow curry in an iron wok. She opens her book to the page newly decorated with a drop of blood. Not easy, with all her muscles twitching.

The pages are full of little drawings, hundreds of them, a collection of useful things—bananas, beds, parasols, horses and carriages, needles and thread, locomotives, clockfaces, and candlesticks. She flips through pages with rattled hands until, finally, she finds the little pencil sketch of a boat, of several different kinds of boats—sailboats, steamboats, luxury liners, and canoes, so there can be no mistake.

“A boat? *Bateau?*”

No response from the woman. Do they know Cantonese here? China is not so far. She’d been in China only a month ago, or so it seemed, cutting through the jungle with a worn-down machete. Now she’s here, south, begging for her life on a riverbank.

“*Syún?*”

Still the woman doesn’t respond, only stares. Does she know the local word? She’d picked up a few. She’d thought that much ahead. *Touk?* Was that it?

“*Touk?*”

But instead of answering her, instead of engaging in some kind of pantomimed conversation as people usually do, the woman drops her big wooden spoon into the curry and silently backs away.

And now she knows she must look very bad. She looks at the handkerchief in her hand. It's entirely red. The noises of the market have, bit by bit, gone mute, as if she's underwater, which could only mean that she's bleeding from the ears, too, and, of course, her mouth is full of blood. She can taste it. She licks her teeth and it pools over her lips and then, to her shame, she knows it's been dripping down her chin the whole time. She must be a terror to behold.

The pain advances; her entire head is an exposed nerve, a jagged blade scraping the inside of her skull. A terrible pressure builds up against her eyeballs and the ice pick that skewers down the small of her back drives straight into her left leg. She stifles a scream. When she walks, her leg drags behind her like a dead animal.

She wipes her face with her sleeve. It only smears blood across her cheeks. She scans the market for fishermen, ferrymen, anyone who might take her away. She holds out the picture of the boat for all to see.

“Boat! *Bateau!* *Syún!*”

No one comes to her aid, but they do stare, fascinated and afraid. She looks rabid, crazed. She looks like someone who can't be saved. Why would a diseased woman want a boat? To die in? A floating coffin in which to lay her dead body? Would they ever get their boat back? And she can't explain because this is one language too many. She's learned plenty by now—Arabic, Spanish, Mandarin, and Cantonese, even more, even a little Circassian, for God's sake—but she can't learn them all.

Then she hears—yes, it is—English behind her, somewhere in the crowd, a small clear voice.

“Mama, that lady needs help!”

She turns and sees the child, a little golden-haired girl above the crowd, above a sea of black hair and conical hats, as if suspended there in her white sunny blouse and pinafore dress—but no, actually sitting on someone's shoulders, near enough to see, but too far to help. British? American? They will understand her. She holds out her red-stained hand, as if to wave, but in another moment the girl is swallowed up in the marketplace.

A new pain, a vulture in her womb digging itself out. She doubles over and falls to her knees. In one terrible cough, she sprays so much blood on the ground that the crowds swarming around her gasp in unison and back away.

Her hat falls off and her walking stick clatters to the ground. She tries to control her breathing—carefully, because even the smallest breath tempts the gag in her throat. She picks up her walking stick, hugging it close to her chest. She leaves the hat. The hat is not important. She can get a new hat. She climbs to her feet, wipes her mouth, approaches the men in the boats by the shore, unloading fish, selling melons and plantains. They see her coming, see the blood, the stagger. They'd flee but they're trapped against a logjam of boats.

“Je dois avoir un bateau, s'il vous plait...” she says.

Some of the fishermen point. Some shoo her away. It's not like anything they've seen before, this sickness. She stumbles along the shore and the crowd parts before her.

“Someone... please...”

She trembles, her own little earthquake. People scramble up the riverbank to get out of her way. Some choose to flee into the river, up to their knees in mud, up to their thighs in water. Now there are no more people in front of her and she's standing on a dock that extends past the boats and into the river.

A ferryboat full of people has just cast off, chugging upstream, clouds of thick black smoke from its funnel. Over the noise of the engine is that same voice, the shout of a little girl.

“Come here! This way!”

She looks and sees two blond-haired children in white—in white of all things, a perfect lambswool white—waving to her from the stern of the boat.

“Here!” they shout. “We'll help you!”

She tucks the book into her sash, wobbles, and almost falls over again, but she focuses and fights her pain and untaps the last of her strength. She runs the length of the dock, clutching her walking stick in her hands. She runs and when she reaches the end, she doesn't stop or slow down, but leaps into the muddy river. She leaps and swims with all the power she has left to catch that ferry with the powerful steam engine. And everyone in the marketplace rushes to the shore to watch.

The crowd holds their breath and the children egg her on. She swims and swims and she manages to catch up to that ferry before it can find its speed, all the while her walking stick in one hand, her bag dragging behind her. The people on

the ferry, amazed by this feat, reach down and lift her up by the arms and pull her into their boat.

Then she is sprawled on the deck, sopping wet, in a puddle of river water and diluted blood. She clutches her walking stick tight to her body, the way monks clutch their prayer beads. She looks up at her rescuers, her fellow travelers. Panting, she asks them, “Oh, *mon dieu*... Are we moving? Are we underway?”

The two children, a boy and a girl, stare down at her, and their father, too, a big vault of a man with a New Zealand accent, kneeling beside her. He says, “Yes, yes. We’re moving.”

Relief. Reprieve. No more blood, not from her nose, her lips, or her ears. The pain has already faded away. She can breathe again.

“*Dieu merci*,” she tells them and smiles. “I am aweigh.”

A Riverboat in Siam

The Holcombes have seen many things in their travels—lakes of acid, scarifications, whole fermented swallows at the bottom of their soup bowls—but this diseased woman is at the very top of their list of stories to tell when they get back home. No more than thirty, but a seasoned traveler by the look of her, she'd been stumbling through a marketplace covered in blood, but then jumped into a river fully clothed, only to emerge cured, any sickness she might have been carrying simply washed away.

Now she's leaning over the side of the boat, dragging her clothes in the water, scrubbing out the blood before hanging them on the railing to dry. Magically, the clothes in her backpack are perfectly dry. She tells them it's a trick she picked up, the careful way she twists the sealskin pack shut. But they are thinking, that's no trick one picks up in Indochina. Where does anybody find sealskin in Siam?

Her book is soaked through. It was retrieved from the river but the pages are sodden and beyond repair. Sad, as it is full of precious little pictures she's taken a long time to draw, little sketches of scissors and mail and shoes and eggs. The children are concerned, but she sighs and shrugs it off. It has happened before, she says. She's often getting wet, it seems. She says she will start a new book as soon as she has the paper.

“Are you New Zealanders?” she asks Emily Holcombe, the children's mother. Her husband and two children have gone to fetch drinks from the tea vendor in the cabin. “I love New Zealand. There's a country I wish I never had to leave.”

Emily is young for a mother of two, much younger than her husband. Her clothes—long dress, long sleeves, raised collar—are unsuited for the weather but

eminently fashionable. She's a product of Western high society, yet here she is, on a common ferryboat, sharing space with the locals, trekking through the jungles.

"What brings you to Siam?" the woman asks Emily in her accented English.

Emily sits and stares, hard-pressed to answer.

"I... My husband is on business. Textiles..."

"Is this a good place for it?" she asks as if nothing has happened.

"You were covered in blood."

"I was."

"I... We all thought you were going to die, right there in the market."

"I did not die."

"But you could have."

"I could have, yes, I suppose. It comes and goes. I must have been a fright."

"Watching someone bleed to death in front of you is a bit of a fright, yes."

"But now I am on a boat traveling down the river and all is well."

"Is it?"

"It is."

And then Emily remembers the articles. Because, like all ex-patriots, she reads her native language at any opportunity she gets—newspapers from home, the *London Times*, a train schedule, anything she can get her hands on—she recognizes the woman and can't help but gasp a little.

"You... you are that... you are that French lady... Audrey..."

"Aubry Tourvel."

Aubry holds out her hand and when Emily Holcombe shakes it, she feels a little thrill, the thrill of shaking hands with someone who has been talked about in the *London Times* and the *New Zealand Herald*. She can't wait to tell her children or, even more so, her husband, who might better appreciate it.

But just as Emily is about say something else, their conversation is abruptly ended. Her husband and two children return carrying cups of tea and plates of scallion pancakes.

The children are named Sophie and Somerset. Aubry has thanked everyone onboard for plucking her out of the river. She's made sure to pay the captain her full fare. But there's no question that it's these two children who have truly saved her life. They're lovely children—polite, soft-hearted, obedient to their parents—

but not so much that they didn't shout and wave their arms to her. Aubry doesn't think they're twins but she can't tell which of them is older—neither can be more than eight or nine. They come at her, beaming.

“Here you are! We have things for you!” says Somerset.

“Are you well? You seem well! You seem better than before!” says Sophie.

The children are so carried away they look ready to climb onto her lap. Their father shouts, “Back! I said back! You're too close! Everyone take five steps back!”

“But Vaughan,” says Emily, “this is the French lady, the one in the papers.”

“Who?”

“The lady we read about. In the papers.”

This only flusters him. His head pivots back and forth, as if he doesn't know which offender to turn to. “Just... everybody keep back!”

Vaughan Holcombe is a big man with broad swimmer's shoulders and close-cropped graying hair. Very handsome, Aubry thinks, in his slightly worn tweed suit. She can't possibly dislike such a handsome man who has raised his children so well. He puts down a cup of tea and a plate of scallion pancakes on the bench beside her and she thinks it's a kind gesture, but when she looks up at his face, all she sees, all she feels, is the blunt force of his glare.

“Now they may be admirers of yours but I don't know you from dirt,” he says. “What was that back there? TB?”

“No.”

“Malaria? Diphtheria? Typhus?”

“Nothing like that.”

She can hear the patience draining from his voice. “Then what exactly was it like?”

Aubry doesn't mean to try his patience. She only means to answer him honestly, so she says, “It was like a great hand coming down and squeezing the life from me,” which is accurate, but stupid. It's not what he wants to hear. She knows it as soon as she says it.

For several moments, he stares at her, very still. She wonders what they do with madwomen in Siam.

“I told you, Vaughan,” says Emily. “The French lady from the papers. You've been traveling the world since you were a young girl, isn't that right?”

“Yes.”

“Around the world...” Emily urges her on.

“Yes.”

“Around the whole world?” asks Sophie.

“Several times.”

“Alone?” asks Somerset.

“No, not alone. Not always. I am traveling right this moment with you.”

Mr. Holcombe shakes his head. He’s unsure what to make of all this. Worse, his outrage has been sidelined by chitchat.

Emily presses on. “I am Emily Holcombe and this is my husband, Vaughan, and my children, Sophie and Somerset.”

“All right, stop! Everybody stop!” says Vaughan with a voice like grinding gears. He’s trying hard not to cause a scene. “There’s a cholera epidemic three villages away and you’re all chattering like schoolchildren on a powder keg. What is this... this thing you have?”

Suddenly, she’s ashamed. Aubry looks down at the floorboards. She’s been singled out and chastised, like she’s a little schoolgirl again, and others are staring now, too. But worse, it’s her own nonchalance that’s brought it on.

“I don’t know,” she tells him.

“You don’t know?” he says, eyes widening.

“No one does.”

“Then you damn well shouldn’t be walking around in public with it, should you?”

“It’s mine,” she says quietly, her head bowed. “It’s only mine. I haven’t given it to anyone and no one’s given it to me.”

That—that explanation, that submission, whatever it might be—drains the hostility from Vaughan’s voice. A silence descends. There’s still the chug of the engine, the chatter of the locals, the froth and rumble of the propeller below—but among this little court in an aft corner of the boat, silence. Emily and her children want to take Aubry’s hand and console her. Even Vaughan’s broad shoulders have slackened. But Aubry doesn’t dare look at their faces.

“Oh, Vaughan,” says Emily. “Now look what you’ve done.”

Sophie leans forward, so low Aubry can't miss her there by her elbow, peeking up like a little garden fairy. "Have you been to Tahiti?"

She lightens Aubry's mood, this little girl who doesn't care who's angry at who, just wants to know. Aubry's so glad to have been rescued by children this bright.

"Yes."

"Have you climbed any mountains?" asks Somerset.

"I have climbed many mountains."

"Have you crossed a desert?"

"And prairies and oceans and swamps and jungles."

"Extraordinary," says Emily Holcombe.

"But isn't it exceedingly dangerous?" asks Sophie.

"Oh yes. Exceedingly."

"Then why do you do it?"

She gives Mr. Holcombe a cautious peek, not wanting to stir his anger again, but he stands there like a marble statue, arms crossed, as if waiting for her explanation. If he wants an explanation, thinks Aubry, he certainly deserves one. But the children deserve one even more.

"Well, I'd tell you, but I can tell you're not interested."

The children protest, "No, no! We're interested! We're interested!" in such a wall of sound she can't tell one voice from another.

"But you're not *really* interested," she says again and feigns disappointment.

"Yes, yes! We are! We are!"

"Well, you did pull me from the river, I suppose. Perhaps after a sip of my tea."

The children lean forward in their seats. Aubry reaches for the cup of tea and takes a long, exaggerated sip.

"That was good," she says. "Maybe another."

She takes another, much longer sip this time. She spends most of her life alone, following a thin and lonely trail across uninhabited prairies, or coastlines, or mountaintops. But once in a while she is lucky enough to spend some time with a family, a collection of kin who reminds her of home. They wait breathlessly, these children, eyes pleading with her. Even Vaughan takes a seat on the bench beside his wife, to hear her out.

When she finishes her long playful sip, she looks around slyly and says, “I left home forever when I was nine.”

Which she did, holding her mother’s hand, her whole family with her, heads low, all of them walking her to a hotel because she could never stay another night at home again.

“Where’s home?” asks Somerset.

“Paris.”

“Is that where you got it?” asks Vaughan.

“From a well.”

“A well?”

“I think. I can’t know for certain, but I think it was a well.”

“Contaminated water,” says Vaughan.

“You shouldn’t drink dirty water,” says Somerset, shaking his head.

“Oh, I didn’t drink it,” she tells them.

They look at her, confused. “Then, what did you do?” Sophie asks.
So she tells them.

Home

The well was a strange one, made of smooth gray stone, not a random collection of rocks that had been gathered and stacked like a country well, but a few large stones, chiseled as smooth as a river bottom, squeezed so tightly together a sewing needle couldn't fit between them. They were not only carved to fit, but, from above, the lip of the well had been shaped into a face—two white eyes chiseled in one end, a tiny beard in the other, the circular rim forming the mouth, complete with lips and teeth. The mouth was a perfect *O*—a scream? A cry for help? A beast lunging up from the depths to swallow little children whole? The effect was garish if not freakish and perhaps even a little satanic—but the three sisters loved it.

Each of them had a precious gift in their hands. Pauline, the oldest sister, had a gold chain, borrowed from Mother when she was eight. Like everything else she borrowed from her mother, it had gradually become hers. She wore it to a fancy party their parents threw one evening, again to church the following week, and again to her cousin's wedding. She fancied herself a darling of Belle Époque fashion. It probably wasn't true gold—unlikely her mother would've trusted her with anything more expensive than a good hat—but Pauline had grown attached to it, and now she was holding it for the last time.

"This is so the socialists will stop planting bombs in public buildings," Pauline said and held out her hand. She took a last look at her chain glinting in the sunlight and let go.

The chain fell, into the mouth, past the lips and teeth, dropping silently down the long black throat. They listened carefully. The splash could barely be heard.

Was there a splash at all? Even at that moment, they couldn't be sure.

Sylvie was next, the middle sister, with her tattered cloth doll limp in her hands. She had other dolls she played with more, liked more, but this was her first doll. It was so old she couldn't remember where it came from. Like her parents, or her bedroom, or the toes at the end of her feet, it had always been there. But she was ten years old now. The doll had been collecting dust on her bedroom shelf for a long, long time. She would miss it, but she also knew it would make a meaningful sacrifice.

"This is so Dr. Homais may finally discover his cure for syphilis," said Sylvie. She held out her hand but couldn't let her doll go. It was staring back at her. She felt the tears welling up. But she would not let Dr. Homais down. More important, she would not be outdone by her sisters.

She closed her eyes and turned her head. Her hands unclenched and the doll fell softly as snow. They listened. This time there was a sound, but not what they expected—not a sound like water but like a bundle of feathers against a large metal gong. What was at the bottom of this well, anyway? And why was it here, hidden in a courtyard between empty apartment buildings in Paris? It was sheer chance they had found it at all coming home from school one day and Sylvie's doll had paid the price.

Finally, there was Aubry, the youngest of them. She held her gift tight to her chest, stood still, and stared down the gullet of the well. She didn't say a thing.

"Hello?" Sylvie urged.

She didn't move.

"What are you wishing for?" asked Pauline.

"That Mrs. Von Bingham's baby doesn't die of her sickness," Aubry told them.

"Ooooh. That's a good one," said Sylvie.

"But I don't want to throw away my puzzle ball."

She'd discovered it only a week earlier, lying on a dead man's front walk. She was coming home from school and saw the horse-drawn cart parked outside what she'd always presumed to be an abandoned home. But it was not abandoned—two men were carrying out a body on a stretcher, hidden under a white sheet. A

group of children from her school were gathered across the street and Aubry joined them.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“My mom says it was an old man who never left his house,” answered a classmate. “She said he couldn’t speak French so he never came out.”

“He was from Africa,” said another.

“Where in Africa?”

“I don’t know. Africa.”

“You muttonhead,” said one of the older girls. “He was from America.”

“That’s not what I heard,” said the oldest, a boy not known for saying much at all.

“What did you hear?”

“Somewhere else.”

One of the youngest ones shrugged and said, “He’s dead now.”

They stood there and watched until the cart rode off with the body.

The next day, while walking the same route home, she noticed the house again, locked up, all the shades drawn, as empty of life as a gutted fish.

Then she saw the ball. It sat silently on the front walk at the foot of the steps, as if it had rolled out the door all on its own. She had heard of those wooden clogs the Dutch wore and thought, Who would want such an uncomfortable contraption? Now here she was, staring at a wooden ball, wondering why anyone would want a ball made of wood.

There was wind that day, gusts that scattered sunlight through the trees. It swept across the street and must have caught the ball in its breath because it rolled toward her, just an inch or two. Aubry stood there and watched, a little amazed.

The air inhaled, then blew again. The wooden ball rolled a few more inches, then a few more. Soon it was halfway across the yard, angling straight toward her feet. She did not know what to think. It seemed wrong to take the ball. It felt like stealing, even if its owner—whoever he had been, whatever part of the world he had come from—was no more. But the ball was rolling toward her, all on its own. This was an invitation if there ever was one. She looked up and down the street, made sure no one was looking, and snatched the ball away.