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From the award-winning author of *Song of the Crocodile* comes a lyrical, magical novel that shows us we are all connected from before we began

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*For ngaannguwaabala ngurrambaa*

‘Some of the greatest poetry is revealing to the reader the beauty in something that was so simple you had taken it for granted.’

Neil deGrasse Tyson

## 8.

### Wormbow Serpent

A worm, glistening and thin, had somehow snuggled into a trough of absent putty in Ginny's kitchen window. It stretched snug against the glass, the pristine wrinkles of its tapered head sometimes extending against the pane, mimicking the final, frantic descents of dribbling droplets of rain on the glass outside. She had only noticed it after flicking on the kettle, seeking a break from a concentrated stint of editing. Muscles stiff and eyes stale, Ginny had risen from the couch and unwound herself from her nest of favourite throw and familiar, lumpy cushions to make herself a well-earned sachet cappuccino. Waiting for the water to boil, she spotted it and immediately began piecing together the worm's most probable route. It could only have come from the unloved spider plant plonked a third of the way up her outdoor, concrete stairs. The pot plant belonged to the tenant beneath her – a short, dark-haired girl who Ginny rarely, if ever, saw.

Ginny fancied the excessive rain had flooded the worm from the safety of its dry potting mix, forcing it over the edge and onto the step. From there it must have wriggled up the rest of the flight of stairs, slid under her door and foisted itself onto her sink and then the windowsill. Either that or it fell from the mouth of a bird. It couldn't have come from inside her flat. The only plant she had was in the bathroom. And that was plastic – a dusty, gammon dollar gum she had liberated from the alleyway behind her block months ago. So, stairs or beak it must have been. As the kettle boiled, molecules of steam curled towards the worm. Ginny flicked the kettle's latch then moved it away from the window. She ripped the sachet open with her teeth and dumped the shimmering granules into her waiting mug. 'I'd offer you one but, y'know, that'd just make me a murderer. Scalded to death by whatever this is,' she said, flapping the empty packet and tossing it on the bench. 'That's not a fitting way to go after what you've been through. Mighty worm. Wormbow serpent,' she added, laughing hard into the dull chrome taps. Ginny picked up a spoon and stirred the hot sludge, then blew into its growing foam. She leaned in and inspected the creature. Rather than a coating of slime, the worm's skin shone translucent orange-pink. It contracted, a ripple surging along its slender length. 'You're a bit of a stunner,' she said. The worm lifted its front end

and stretched into the air. Ginny took a shallow sip of her steaming concoction. The heat hitting her lips made her scrunch her face. 'Not sure if a windowsill's a good long-term plan, though. Rarely is, for anyone.' She tried another sip, this time copping a heap of sugary powder at the back of her throat. She coughed. 'Tell you what,' she continued, wiping her eyes, 'if you're still here after I knock off these last few pages, we'll go for a walk.' Ginny turned from the sink. 'Just me and my new best friend.' She began walking back to the couch. 'A spineless dirtbag. No offence,' she yelled over her shoulder. 'Seems I have a type.'

An hour later, Ginny placed the final full stop at the end of the passage and shoved the biro into her pigtail bun. She wiped the tears from her cheek and ran her nose along the wrist of her grey jumper. She blew a sigh into the middle of the lounge room, then rubbed the back of her neck, stretching the muscles as she kneaded them. Unfurling herself from the throw and the lounge, Ginny stood. Crushed balls of paper fell from her lap and onto the rug. She looked at them and sniffled. 'And to think I almost didn't live at all.'

She kicked the paper balls out of the way as she slid into the bedroom, her woolly bed socks scuffing against the cold tiles. It was still raining. She slid her feet into a pair of soiled, green rainboots that were plonked at the



foot of the bedroom door. Their feel lifted her spirits. Ginny always enjoyed the adventures she had in them. She reached for the raincoat slung over a chest of drawers, wiggled her thick, jumpered arms into it and clasped the zipper. Returning to the couch she took up her notebook and placed it in the inside pocket of the raincoat. Ginny pulled the magenta zip all the way up as she walked into the kitchen, continuing the motion even as she swiped an empty, unopened envelope from the table. 'Your chariot awaits, little worm, if you're still with us.' She examined the windowsill. The worm remained, still stretched along the glass. It was motionless. Ginny blew a soft stream of air onto the body of the creature. It didn't move. Moving closer still, Ginny pulled the biro from her hair, removed its lid and slid its tip under the centre of the worm's body. Its head lifted, then its body contracted, sending a quiver down its entire length. 'Yes!' she said, scooping it carefully onto the tip of the pen and shaking it into the envelope. 'Let's get going. The rain will bring us back to ourselves,' she said, folding the top of the broken envelope and sliding it into her pant pocket. Ginny descended the stairs with the worm tucked away safely. On her way down, she checked out the spider plant. The small pile of dirt in the bottom of the pot was soggy. 'Don't blame you,' Ginny said, continuing down and into the street. She smiled as the rain popped

on the hood of her raincoat. She smiled even harder as she danced around drippings of people – impatient scurriers – tiptoeing over puddles, skirting around trickling drains and dodging gushing bus tyres as they whirred past. For Ginny, rain brought a concentrated energy to the world. It made things close. And meaningful. She walked towards the library, listening to the sound of her feet on the pavement, the huff of her breath in her collar. Approaching the last street before the building’s high awning, Ginny heard her blood pulsing and felt its hum in her ears. Slowing near the library’s sprawling, and deserted, outdoor café, she felt beads of sweat tingle on her top lip. A drizzle descended from a pool that had formed in the small of her back. Ginny giggled. She didn’t mind. She loved sweating in the rain. She didn’t know why but she reckoned her sweat and falling rain were relatives. Cousins, most probably. ‘It’s always wins, Worm,’ Ginny said, clumping over the slate tiling and towards the elaborate top garden that framed the library’s opening. ‘In the battle between rain and human, water takes it out every time.’ She reached into her pocket and with great care removed the envelope. Water splattered on the back of her hand. ‘You know better than most, there’ll always be a crack to wriggle into.’

Ginny peeked into the envelope’s fold. The worm stretched towards the gush of fresh air. She winked then, looking

around, walked down the rampway towards a second garden bed. It was filled with clumps of elegant grasses, droplets of water hanging suspended from bowed stems. A vibrant Kangaroo Paw burst furry, red flowerheads into the grey surrounds. Ginny made her way towards it, then kneeled on the concrete lip of its bed. Bending close, she opened the envelope and shook the worm into the dirt at the plant's base. After a complete rotation, the worm stilled beside the fanning green base. Ginny watched. The worm stayed limp, still. 'This'll be a perfect home for you,' she said. 'Better than my hovel. And if you miss me, I'm only a bus ride away. I know how independent you are.' As if on cue, a thick, blue vehicle – its windows fogged and precipitating – squirted dirty, city gutter water over the footpath behind them. 'See, the bus stop's just there.' Ginny came closer. The worm stayed still. 'Are you angry with me?' she said, bowing down further, her nose almost in the dirt with it. Ginny placed the envelope on the soil beside them. 'I'll come and visit. Promise. I'm at the library a lot.' This seemed to rouse the worm. It began contracting its sleek body, moving slightly towards the bright white paper. 'There you go,' she added. 'The coffee's okay, but stay away from the ham and cheese croissants. Too greasy.' The worm, slinking steadily now, lodged its front half back on the envelope. 'Unfortunately,' Ginny said, 'I'm not cleared for pets.'

The worm arched its back and inched along the envelope. The rain and larger drops from the tips of the grass smacked into the paper. Ginny watched as the worm separated a soggy scrap from the paper's fold then speared it into the soil, covering it completely. When it finished, the worm extended its body as high as it could towards Ginny's face. She stared at the worm. She felt dribbles of rain hit her ankle and ooze under her sock. The worm stretched out again. 'What? This?' Ginny unzipped the top of her raincoat and pulled out her notebook.

The worm started bobbing.

'But this was just for me. To make sense of.'

The worm went crazy, zigzagging up and down then sideways.

'But it's not good enough,' Ginny said, opening the notebook. 'I wasn't ... enough.' Ginny stared at the neat letters and uniform spacing of her latest entry. A droplet hit the centre of the paper. Blue ink began to run. With one eye on the worm, Ginny's fingers moved to the top of the page and pulled. Worm wiggled from the edge of the envelope and followed Ginny's hand as she placed the paper in the dirt. Coming to its edge, the worm extended its whole body into the air, waving its head and neck coils in a circle before spearing into the ground. As it landed, an army of worms burrowed up to the surface and engulfed

the page. Worm and water and soil dissolved Ginny's finely crafted words, making short work of the paper, reducing it to insignificant specks of white in a sea of soil.

Ginny stood, her writing and the worm gone. From the rampway there was nothing to say anything at all had happened – no slime trail, no disturbed dirt, no scrap of paper, or word of a poem to bear witness. Ginny raised her face to the sky wondering if she too might be broken down and dissolved and disappeared. She invited the water to pool in her eye sockets. She then opened and blinked the falling water in. The sting of cold made her own eyes water warm salt. Streams ran down her face then onto her skin under the neck of her jumper. Electrified with impermanence, and now armed with newfound worm wisdom, Ginny knew exactly what it was she must do.