

The Girl and the Riverweed

The girl dragged the old canoe down to the water. Its red belly bounced its way along the bank, snagging on sticks and tree roots, flicking nettles around like little whips. Grasshoppers slingshot themselves out of the way in great, wide arches. The platypus, if it was still there, stayed hidden. She'd only seen it once. Years ago. She'd been splashing around, big yellow floaties on, chasing the water spiders along the surface when it flumped down out of the rocks, its sleek hairy body wriggling away, a bundle of wire grass wrapped up tightly in its tail. If it weren't for the bill, she'd have sworn it was a carp with legs, or a bird without them. But anyway, those rocks were halfway up the bank now. The river was sinking deeper and deeper into the ground, sucked back into the earth like it'd had enough. So now nobody ever saw the platypus, or even the big spotted cod they used to get, and she had to drag the damn canoe even further down the slope.

At the bottom, she dumped it by the river's edge and scrambled back up to the storage tree. Cicada shells dotted the opening; protector warriors. She picked one up, careful not to crunch its tiny barbed legs, and stuck it to her left shoulder. Then she did the same on the right. Nature's freaky Velcro, her dad would say, and she reckoned she looked like her dad, too, with his navy shoulder pads, two white arrows pointing off somewhere.

What're they for, she'd asked him once.

To show my rank, he said.

What rank am I?

He laughed. You don't have a rank. You're a kid.

So were you, she'd said.

Sure. But I'm not any more.

Who says? The shoulder pads?

They're called epaulettes.

And what do the arrows on the paulettes mean?

They mean I'm a senior constable.

Yeah, but why are they arrows?

Dunno. Doesn't mean anything.

Everything means something.

The girl paused, then snatched an extra two cicadas and added them to her sleeves. The storage tree was a big fat river red gum with a hollow in its trunk, just big enough for a skinny girl to fit. It was carved out a million months ago, probably to make a much better canoe than hers, or maybe a giant coolamon to carry fish or bush tucker or a baby on a bed of paperbark, its little legs kicking up a fuss. She grabbed the shovel and the oar from the hollow, then ditched her shoes and hung them on a branch too high up for the ants.

The dirt fell away under her feet as she clambered back down through the grasses, around the bare roots and clay deposits and the broken water pump that still clugged when it felt like it. She left a trail like a goanna's – two feet and the tip of an oar. Reaching the canoe, she chucked her things inside and waded in, pushing it out of the shallows by the stern. The water was murky and cool and her feet searched instinctually for crawbobs. When the river was up to her knees, she scooped herself up and out in a cascade of drips, bracing her arms tight on the canoe's edges until the swaying slowed, slowed, and finally stopped. She slid the oar out from underneath her and paddled quickly. Above, the sea eagle's nest hung empty, and a pair of kookaburras watched.

She could see it already. The river split in half around the island like a brown snake with two long, wet tails. It grew closer. The canoe gave a deadly lurch as she steered it over a submerged tree and through the hanging willows. She let them tickle her arms. Her island. Rowing right onto the muddy bank's edge, she jumped out, tugged the canoe up onto the flat

and flipped it upside-down. The dirty water sloshed out and dribbled slowly back into the river.

It wasn't windy, so she left the canoe sitting on the bank and stuck the oar upright in the dirt. The tip was red, which she knew could mean stop, or angry, or one half of a police siren, but this red meant welcome, like the red of a fireplace when someone's home and already lit the ironbark. Not that they'd needed fires recently, or been allowed to light them. But anyway, she needed to dig a moat before the sun switched sides, so she grabbed the shovel and went over to the fort.

The walls were still standing, which was good. A couple of gaps and broken branches, but nothing major. The door, a rusty old piece of tin from an oil barrel, lay sideways in the dirt, covered in a drying glob of riverweed. It stank. The girl pinched her nose and walked over to grab it and fling it back into the water. It squealed.

Yeowwww!

Jesus! She shouted, jumping back.

She stared at the glob, wide-eyed and incredulous. Then she tightened her grip on the shovel.

Woah, woah, it said. Easy there. I'm not gonna hurt ya. Plus I'm already dead.

With a strange wriggle like a tree dropping its leaves, the mound of riverweed shivered itself upright. Two black, beady eyes popped open in a round face. Stunted limb-shapes glugged out of its body and roped along the ground. There were sticks and fish scales stuck to its back, and a broken lure protruded from the side of its head. It was small and ugly and only as tall as her knees.

Wha...what the hell are you?

Now, or then? Or after?

She blinked. Uh, the whole time.

Well, that's hard to say, 'cus I've not done the after part yet, but I'd like to.

What are you now, then?

Now, or then?

Just now!

Just now? Now's the most important time of them all, I reckon, 'cus that's where we are, and you've gotta –

Look, the girl snapped. If you don't tell me right now what you are, I'll smash your stinky little head in.

Now, now, little lady. There's no need for violence. Plus, I told ya, I'm already dead!

What do you mean you're already dead?

The glob seemed to grin.

Well there's a good question. I mean I fell into the river, and I got so choked up under there, all those fish swimmin' round, foul water too, couldn't breathe for the life of me, so I had to crawl right on out to this island.

My island, said the girl.

Sure, said the glob, if that's what you wanna call it.

So you're a ghost?

The glob frowned.

I don't think so, it replied.

A spirit?

Nah, though I could do with one.

A bunyip?

Its eyes widened.

God, no, didn't I tell ya I'm dead?

So you were a man, and now you're – she hesitated – this.

Right, it winked. I'm this. That good enough for ya?

How did you die?

Fell into the river, now, didn't I?

Now, or then?

A sound like a belch escaped from its round body. It was laughing.

Ha! Clever girl. You'll be a great help, that's for sure.

The girl took a step back.

I don't want to help you, she said. Besides, you're on my island, and I've got to dig a moat before it gets too hot.

Go on then, it said. I'm not stopping ya.

Then the creature appeared to sink back onto its haunches and shut its eyes. It said nothing.

The girl watched it for a moment and then, hesitantly, began to draw a wide circle in the dirt around the fort with the tip of her shovel. She looked up every few seconds to check the thing wasn't moving. It sat there, squat and ugly like a toad, fat and ugly and stinking. It smelt so bad, she could hardly bear it. She grabbed some tea tree leaves and shoved them up her nose.

Ya know, the riverweed said, flicking one of its eyes open. You wouldn't need to do all that if you could just gimme a hand.

She leaned against the shovel.

If I help you, you're going to stop stinking?

It laugh-belched again.

Yep, it said. Eventually.

Eventually? Well, I don't have that long. Like I said, I've got to finish this moat before –

And who the bloody hell made that rule up? What if I told ya that this time tomorrow, there'll be cloud cover til just before sunset, and you wouldn't needta rush? What if I told ya that this time next week, there's gonna be a ripper of a storm come through the flats, and the whole fort's bound to wash right on down the river anyway?

How do you know all that?

The creature shifted its weight and a worm wriggled out from beneath its haunches. The worm pulled its body along the dirt once, twice, three times, and then a thin black tongue flicked out and snatched it up. The riverweed licked its lips.

When ya dead, thinkin' doesn't get in the way so much. You're all exposed like a roo with its belly ripped open. Anyone can see in, and you can see wide out, too.

I don't know what you're talking about.

Course not. But ya feel it. Why else would you be diggin' a moat? There's rules so big, your eyes can't even see 'em, kid, and if they did, they'd pop outta ya skull.

The girl pulled the leaves out of her nose and threw them on the ground.

Just tell me what you want me to do!

Alright, I'll tell it simple, said the glob. My body's up the river, snagged in a bunch of tree roots. I need ya to go and fetch it for me.

She dropped the shovel.

Fetch it for you? A body? I – she stammered – you're telling me there's a real dead body in the river?

My dead body, it corrected.

Jesus. God. I've got to go tell my dad. He's a policeman. I've got to –

She started running.

Wait! It shouted. Blimey, no cops! Wait!

She shrieked as something wet and ropy wrapped around her ankle, tugging her back to the fort. The tendril squelched when it retracted and left a dark green stain on her skin.

Sorry, it mumbled. Didn't wanna have to do that.

She glowered at the creature.

I think you were bad, she said. I think you were a bad, bad man who lived a life so bad and awful that now you stink, and you're stuck here because you deserve it.

It seemed to shrink as she spoke, drawing its body in towards a dark centre.

I, uh, well I wasn't a saint, that's for sure. Done some bad things. Some good things, too. But good and bad feels different once ya dead. There's just things ya did 'cos you hadta, and things ya probably didn't needta do, but did anyway. And kid, I really need ya to do this thing for me.

I need to find my dad, she said, pulling herself up. He'll do what's right.

Oh, and what's that? Make 'em dive for me? Slice me open with a big 'ol knife just to say yep, this bloke's drowned, yep, he was a drunk, yep, he had it comin', then shove me in the ground next to a bunch of other dead people, all while the livin' part of me is stuck out here on your island eatin' worms and shakin' yabbies off me back for the rest of forever?

My island, the girl spoke softly.

That's what I said. So here's the thing: if ya bring my body back here to your island, all by yaself, with no dads or cops or search crews, then I can die for good. I can just get right onta decomposing and you can build ya moat and get ya fort sorted before the storm comes.

She swallowed. But...but I don't want to touch a dead body.

You already got four dead bodies on ya shoulders, kid.

She turned her head. The cicadas stared out at her through their empty eye sockets. She shook them off with a shiver.

Fine. I'll do it.

The riverweed mound swelled and jellied.

Course you will. Now c'mon, I'll show ya where it is.

Together they headed back towards the canoe. The girl moved quickly, tripping over her feet, not wanting the creature to touch her. It rolled and galumphed at her heels, making awful

squelching sounds and leaving muck in its wake. A group of cockatoos flung themselves out of the willow as they passed. Soon the oar came into view, with the canoe resting patiently beside it.

Red! Exclaimed the glob. For welcome!

It skip-hopped up onto the canoe's bow and landed in a squat. A wave of nausea passed through the girl as she caught its stench downwind. A small fish bubbled to the surface of the water beside them, belly-up. She tried to ignore the churning in her stomach as she grabbed the oar and slid into the seat behind the stinking heap. The willow branches parted for them as they paddled through into open water.

Right, said the creature. Go left here.

Right? Or left?

Left. Then follow the right-hand bank for a bit. Good. Watch that rock. You know it fell from way up there two hundred 'n fifty years back? Up between those gum trees? Musta knew a goanna would wanna lay there someday and sun himself. Look, here comes the lucky bastard now!

Over on the bank, a goanna skittered down a white eucalyptus trunk and landed in the river with a plonk. Its tongue darted in and out as it zig-zagged through the water, head held aloft. Then it climbed up onto the rock, flattened itself, and closed its eyes.

Aw, only a little fella. Right on time.

How much further?

There was a pale, eggy dampness to the girl's face.

Not far at all. See that tangle of tea tree roots over there, past the yabbie trap? Yep, that one, pull in just up here. Christ almighty, watch me head with that oar! Alright. We're here.

They bobbed lightly on the river's edge. The girl peered down into the dark water and jumped when her own reflection rippled back at her.

It's just ya face, said the glob. Least it doesn't look like mine.

Now what?

Now you fetch it.

She stared into its fishlike eyes.

I can't touch the water, it said apologetically. Can't go in the same way I came out. That's just the rules. But if you pass me a leg, I can pull it the whole way back.

The girl let out a deep breath. She tucked the oar back into the canoe and slowly dipped her toes into the river. It was cold. She grit her teeth and clambered out, lowering herself an inch at a time, feeling out and down into the water with her feet. She couldn't find the bottom.

It's deep here, said the riverweed. You're gonna have ta swim.

A small sob fell out of her mouth. She closed her eyes and imagined she was her dad, her brave dad with his blue uniform and white arrows, white arrows pointing somewhere. With an inhale that filled her whole lungs, she dropped beneath the surface.

It was nearly impossible to see. Sediment hung in the water; gnarled branches stuck this way and that. It was a blurry maze of roots and dirt and dark stretching out everywhere, then the quick dart of an eel towards...a boot! She reached forwards, even as the rest of her body wanted to turn away, wanted nothing more than to swim away as fast as she could, away from the river and the island, away from the glob and the goanna and never look back.

Her hands wrapped around an ankle. With an almighty tug, she loosened the body from its snare. It seemed to float for a moment, suspended, and then it began to sink. It pulled her down, down into the tangle of roots, down towards the unseen riverbed. It was heavy; heavier than the heaviest rock she'd ever lifted. She held on, trying with all her might to pull it up

towards the canoe, but she wasn't strong enough. She was just going down, sinking down, down towards the bottom.

Suddenly, something grabbed her by the waist and yanked her up through the water. She burst through the surface, heaving and spluttering.

Yeooowww! Jesus! That bloody stings!

The glob retracted its slimy tendril and shook the water off fitfully.

Ouch, ouch! I'm not meant ta do that, ya know.

Droplets rained down onto the shaking girl. She gripped the canoe with her left hand, and in her right, she held the leather boot. The long shadow of the body floated beside her.

Back on the island, it took an hour of heaving and shoving to drag the body into the fort. It was messy business; the skin was loose, and it smelt even worse than the riverweed. Together, they rolled it through the gap where the rusty old tin door had been, laying it flat on its back. Its black boots stuck out of the doorway and pointed towards the falling sun.

There we are. We've done it! You've done it! Ha!

The creature prickled with delight and rolled in a big, wide circle around the fort.

The girl looked up as the cockatoos returned, screeching wildly. They flapped and fought and found their places amongst the towering gums. When she turned back, the fort was empty. Everything seemed perfectly still. Then out from underneath the tin door crawled a platypus, snuffling his shiny bill about. He looked up at her, blinked, and then waddled his easy way down to the bank, slipping his damp body back into the water like a ghost.

Word count: 2998