

The old man and the river

Robert Walker August 2012 (NSW)

If you decide you can't do something, your mind fixes firm like the corner post of a fence. Dave was like that with reading. He had had no time to learn when he was a kid and set his mind that he didn't need it when he got older. But just as a corner post will shift from the movement of the earth so did Dave shift from the movement of the river.

It started the night of the third flood. Dave and the dog had eaten and a cold southerly came through and the rain beat against the front door. Dave went to check the window in the study. He wouldn't admit to it, but the room with its shelves lined with his sister's books, unnerved him. He was pleased that the window was already closed and he could go back to the living room and settle in his chair.

'Best of nights to be inside, right Dog?'

The dog, hearing his name, whined and left his rug in front of the fire and put his head on the old man's knee.

The next morning began fine and clear and they set off after breakfast, the dog carrying the newspaper in his mouth and Dave using his stick for his dodgy knee. They trudged along the road that led away from the house to the south then left it for a track that led to the crest of the hill.

Halfway they came to the deep gulley where lantana bushes crowded across the path. The dog paused, sniffing the morning air for rabbits. Wallabies had passed earlier, heading back into the state forest that lay across the road on the southern boundary. The dog sniffed the air again and caught the smell of a stranger. The dog stared down into the wet blackness of the gulley, then shook the dew from his fur and followed the old man.

The top of the hill overlooked all of the property. To the north the river flowed towards the house and then swept away in a gentle arc. Across the river was an alluvial flood plain where black and white cattle dotted green paddocks. To the east was the bridge that you had to take to get into the town. And away to the south dark clouds were building.

'Another storm coming.' Dave squinted at the sky then knelt down and placed the newspaper against the black granite boulder that marked the grave.

'Morning sister, I brought the paper.'



He eased himself onto the flattened stump of a tree and rubbed his knee. 'I miss you reading out the gossipy bits, who's lost their licence for drink driving, whose kid's in trouble for drugs, who thumped who in the football, all of that.'

To the south a peal of thunder rolled across the valley.

'Heavy rain last night. Get more today and the bridge will go under again.' His voice trailed off into another roll of thunder.

The rain set in not long after they got back to the house. Light showers at first then by the afternoon hard driving rain that masked the sound of a car coming up the track. The dog heard it only when it stopped near the porch and barked extra loudly to cover his failure.

'Alright Dog, it's only the cops.'

Dave opened the door while the local sergeant and a fresh young constable stamped their feet and took off their coats and hung them on pegs in the dry of the porch.

'Phones on this side of the river are out Dave,' the sergeant said. 'Good excuse to show Frank here some of the country. Couldn't have him getting lost. Brought your newspaper in as well.'

Dave set to making a pot of tea and put the kettle to hiss on the stove. Then they moved out to the veranda and watched the rain sheeting across the valley.

'Bruce Abbot's been stabbed.' The sergeant rested his mug on the table. 'Died on the way to the hospital.'

Dave pursed his lips and shook his head in a slow mechanical way as he pondered a world going crazy. 'Didn't know Bruce all that well but he seemed harmless enough. Who'd do something like that?'

The young constable cleared his throat and sat forward on his chair. 'We haven't worked out if anything's been taken. Could be someone drifting through; he could still be in the area. That's why we're warning everybody to be on the lookout and ring us if they see anything suspicious.'

There was a moment's silence.

'When the phones get working again,' the sergeant said gently.

'Oh yeah,' the constable said.

'That Dave, he doesn't say much,' the constable said on their way back to town.

The sergeant studied the river. 'Mary, his sister, died last year. She taught at the local school and was much respected, whole town turned out for her funeral. She moved out here to look after Dave when her husband died.'

The constable grunted, concentrating on keeping the car from sliding on the muddy road.

'Dave used to do odd jobs about the town, fencing, clearing, that sort of thing. Bloody good footballer, helped us win a premiership. But before Mary moved in he was drinking too much and getting into fights, probably would've ended in gaol. Slow down a



bit.' The sergeant peered through the windscreen, moving his head to get a sighting between the sweeps of the wipers.

'Yeah, bridge is okay for the moment.' He stared out at the brown water almost up to the boards. 'Another hour she'll go under.'

After the police left Dave stood on the veranda and stared out at the light fading amongst the showers and felt strangely unsettled. The dog stretched, hoping Dave would light the fire early to take the chill from the air.

'Let's go check the river Dog. See where she's at.'

The river was running strongly, a brown mess of tree branches and rafts of water weeds, rushing towards the sea. Dave edged his way along a narrow finger of rock that jutted out into the water, steadying himself by hanging onto a banksia branch.

The dog whined and stayed on the solid bank.

'Don't be a sook Dog,' Dave said without turning round. 'I just want to see if that wallaby carcase been washed away yet. All right I'm coming.'

He turned sharply and his knee locked in place and his foot slipped on the slimy wetness of the rock. For a moment he swayed, one hand grasping the branch, the other clawing wildly at the air.

The dog barked when Dave toppled into the river.

'Strewth,' Dave yelled, swallowing cold, brown water. He'd be okay, swum this river lots of times, just had to get himself back to the surface.

But the rushing water caught him and rolled him over, tossing him against an uprooted tree. He pushed away and the current dragged him down and he tasted the muddiness of the water and gagged. A moment later he came to the surface, glimpsed the dog running along the bank, barking. Then he went down again, his hands thrashing against the chilling cold.

The river was a part of his life, he thought; first thing each morning looking out over the water, seeing what the ducks were doing, whether there were swans about, and watching for the resident sea eagles to come floating past. And now he was about to die, the river a part of his death and he slid into darkness.

Then he was lying on his side retching, dirty water pouring from his mouth. The dog was licking him and a face, young, brown, came into view.

'You alright mate?'

The boy helped him sit up. Dave saw the boy was soaked, black hair sticking to his face. 'You pulled me out?'

The boy looked away. 'Heard the dog barking, couldn't see anything then saw your hand break the surface.'

He helped Dave back to the house. Dave dried himself and changed his clothes and got a towel and fresh clothes for the boy. It was dark now and Dave lit the fire and the dog went to his rug but couldn't settle, recognising the boy from the smell in the gulley.

'You live round here?' Dave asked but knew he didn't.



The boy rubbed the back of his neck. 'Passing through.'

Dave straightened. What had the cops said? About Bruce's killer being a drifter? The hairs on the back of his neck stirred. The boy had pulled him out of the river but maybe that was to get into the house, find out if there was money hidden.

He licked his lips and clenched his hands into fists. He had to keep his wits about him, keep the boy occupied till the river dropped and the cops could get over the bridge.

He picked up the paper from the table where the sergeant had left it. 'Broke me glasses the other day, haven't caught up on the local news. Can you read some of it for me?' That might occupy an hour or so.

The boy held the paper away from him as if it were a poisonous snake. He shook his head, looking down at the floor. 'Never learnt to read.'

Dave grunted. This day and age, he thought every youngster could read. He saw the boy looking at his glasses, untouched sitting on the top of the television.

'Yeah, me neither.' He'd never told anyone that. Only person knew was Mary. He felt a rush of indignation.

'No crime in not being able to read, only a crime if you don't try to learn, a crime against yourself.' Stewth that was what Mary had said to him and he'd turned on his heel and gone up into the bush and spent the rest of the day taking out his anger on the lantana.

He'd come home late, sweaty and with small bloody scratches from the clearing but with his anger gone. After dinner Mary had read aloud from one of the many books she'd bought with her when she came to stay.

Dave heard the rain easing on the roof. The river would be down by the morning. He just had to survive the night but thinking of Mary had given him an idea.

He went to the study and brought out two books and gave one of the books to the boy.

'It's the same book, only mine's in large print.' He put on his glasses.

'A kid's book,' the boy said, feeling it thin and slight in his hands.

'No, it's for adults.'

Mary had made tapes to go with some of the books. She had made them before the cancer took hold and the morphine clouded her brain. The tapes were meant for Dave so he could listen to them as if she was reading to him.

He found the tape that went with the book and put it in the player and turned it on.

'Follow the words with your finger,' he said just as Mary had told him he could do.

The boy stared at him without expression.

Dave had never played the tape before and when he heard her voice it was as if his sister was in the room with them. The dog sat up and pricked its ears and whined. She read slowly, carefully pronouncing each word clearly.

The Darkening by Rob Walker

They started searching for the old man not long after his daughter sounded the alarm that he was missing.



Dave stopped the tape and frowned. He hadn't realised until now how much he missed those nights in front of the fire, him in his chair with his eyes closed, Mary taking him into another world. He saw the boy watching him, his eyes quizzical.

'I'll read now then you,' Dave said harshly.

He read the words with a savage bitterness that made the boy's eyes widened.

'They started searching for the old man ...'

When he finished he nodded to the boy.

The boy fidgeted, looked about to refuse but felt Dave's anger and bent to the book in his hands.

'They started searching ...' the boy read, stumbling over "daughter".

The second sentence was better, the pain less, as if she was really here encouraging him, pleased with what he was doing.

Clancy was sure the old man had got himself lost in one of the gullies on the far side of the property and they would find him before the dark.

Dave read it then nodded to the boy who read, this time with more assurance.

There had been rain the previous night and in one of the gullies Clancy found tracks that he at first thought were of a big dingo but when he put his hand beside them he was shocked to see how really big the prints were.

And so it went on into the night and Dave found himself becoming lost in the book as he had when Mary first read it to him. The boy also, now waiting impatiently for his turn.

Dave stopped the reading just as the search party came across the old man's body lodged high up in the bloodwood tree on the slope of a hill, even though the boy was eager to continue.

'Do you want coffee?'

The boy nodded and Dave gestured for him to put more wood on the fire.

'My mom died when I young. My dad was a farm hand and we were always moving, chasing work like Dog here chases his tail: fruit picking, fencing, shed building, whatever was going.'

Dave didn't mention how when he got older he and Mary had run away. That was the night his father came home drunk and started beating him and he'd knocked his father down and thought he'd killed him.

'I ended up in the valley, working at whatever was offered.' That was to help Mary go to university, follow her dream to become a teacher. Then she in turn helped him to buy the farm, abandoned then, overrun with lantana and fireweed, house almost falling down.

'Some days were worse than others.'

Those were the days when his suspicions that people knew he couldn't read and were laughing at him behind his back, pricked him into fights after too many beers.

The boy pushed at the fire then sipped at his coffee. He coughed, would have liked some sugar but didn't feel he could ask.



'I never knew either of my parents,' the boy said. 'Got fostered out, moved from family to family, some good, some not good.' His face betrayed nothing of what might have happened but Dave had heard stories about the bad foster homes.

'I went from school to school. Every time I had to fight so they'd leave me alone. The teachers branded me a trouble maker and said I didn't try but I did try. The lessons went too fast for me and I got left behind.'

Dave nodded; Mary had told him about the holes in the system that let kids fall through into the void.

'They all reckoned I was hopeless, that I couldn't learn nothing,' the boy said.

Dave frowned, wanted to say it's never too late but thought of his own refusal to learn to read and pressed the start button on the player.

It seemed to Clancy as if time had stopped while the search party stood and looked up at the body high in the tree, their mouths open, all thinking the same terrifying thought.

The boy gained in confidence with each sentence, recognising more words, Dave as well. Mary's voice was pulling them along like the engine of a two carriage train while the dog, asleep in front of the fire, feet twitching, dreamt of chasing rabbits.

They finished the book just as the sun came up and went out onto the veranda to watch it rise, bright and clear across the valley.

'River's down, bridge'll be open,' Dave said. He stretched; surprised that he didn't feel more tired after staying up all night. But he'd enjoyed wrestling with the words, nailing each one down, making each pattern of letters mean something.

Inside the house the phone rang and he flinched, remembering the cops from yesterday. He glanced at the boy, wanting to tell him to run, to give himself another chance and felt his eyes on him as he picked up the receiver.

'Yep?'

It was the sergeant. They talked for a while then Dave put down the phone.

'There was a bloke killed,' he said to the boy. 'His neighbour just confessed, said Bruce was having an affair with his wife.' He felt a wave of relief mixed with tiredness and wagged his finger at the dog. 'Never mess with the wife of a jealous man.'

The boy frowned then smiled then frowned again and patted the dog. 'I'd best get going.'

Dave nodded then coughed. 'Stay for breakfast if you want. I just have to chop some wood to get the stove going.'

The boy looked at the wood heap protected under an iron sheet. 'I can do that I reckon.'

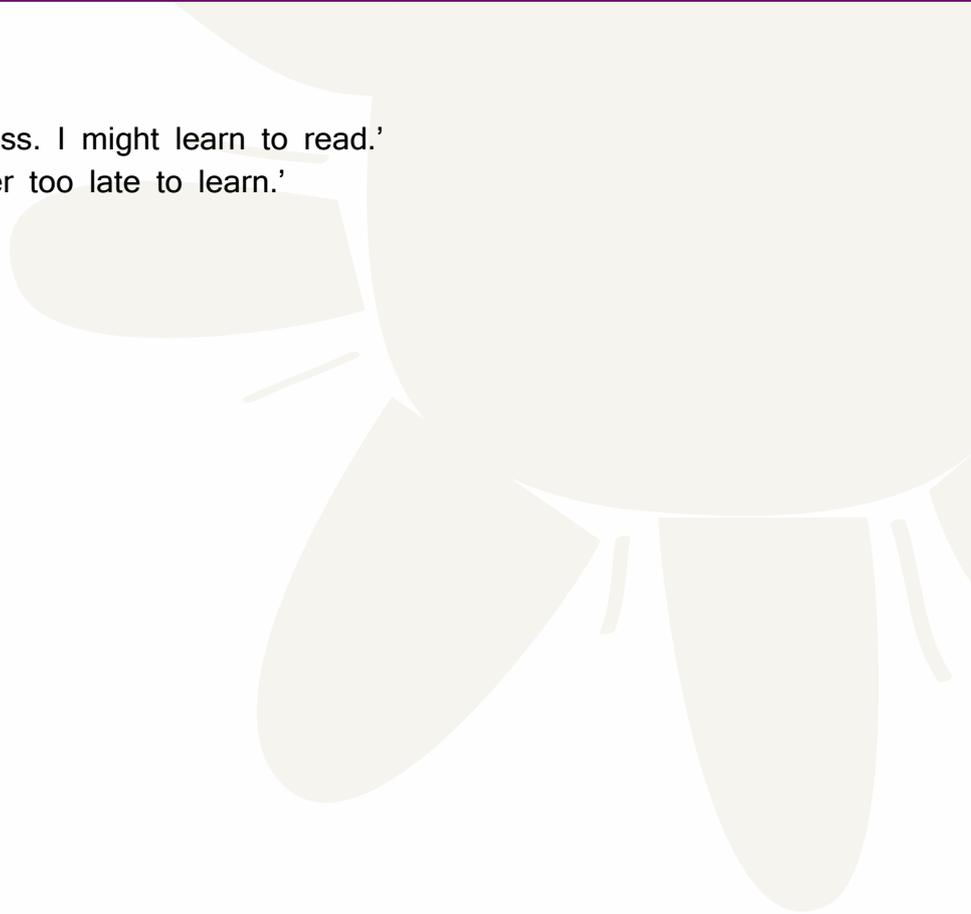
Over breakfast Dave said, 'the next book I want to read is *Call of the Wild*, its Dog's favourite.'

The dog barked and Dave looked out at the river. 'You can stay if you want; spare bed's made up.'

From across the river came the quacking of ducks nestling in a bend, waiting for the flow to subside. A sea eagle drifted across the tops of the trees. The boy looked down at his hands.



'Yeah, that'd be good I guess. I might learn to read.'
'Course you could, it's never too late to learn.'



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