

Dam Busting

The view from my attic window has always been pretty fantastic. Our lumpy, bumping lawn tumbles down to our very own corner of river; a flowing arc of water that appears from a tangle of overhung willows and tapers off into the thicket which marks the boundary of Maggie Turpin's land. At least that's what I'm supposed to see when I wake up of a morning. Only recently, something terrible happened to the river. It vanished. Completely disappeared. Or, as Dad insists, our river was stolen away.

"Stolen! Your river? Don't be insane Eddie Driscoll, rivers can't be stolen," Bernard hurled his jag of a boulder and groaned as it dropped into the soap-grey foam that scummed the surface a whopping ten foot clear of the weir. We'd been trying to bust Wilton Weir for months, ever since we watched *The Dam Busters* with Bernard's granddad, but we'd struggled even to reach the knotty wooden struts that beckoned to us from beneath the cascade. "Anyway, this is your river too," Bernard lent forward and drew his fingers through the water, "the Wilton doesn't just stop at the bottom of your garden."

"But it *has* gone. Honest Injun. Dad's obsessed. He can't talk about anything else. You should hear him. He yelled at me last night when I dropped my marbles. All over the kitchen slates ... lost my Steely," I kicked at the silt underfoot, remembering the explosive clatter and the deep silence following after.

Bernard grinned, punching my arm gently, "Bet they sounded immense though."

"Dad never shouts. Never. And he's forgetting stuff. The pigs were screaming by the time I fed them." The weir's rumble quietened as if waiting to hear my thoughts. "I've got to do something Bern. I've got to fetch our river back."

To get to the back of all this you've got to go historical; to the moment four hundred years ago when the last beaver was killed on the British Isles. I imagine him in darkness, cornered and quaking to the slap of his tail on the water as the hunters crash through the shallows toward him. Does he know that there are no beavers left to hear his paddle-tail warning of danger; warning of the spear, winking moonlight on its savage blade as it thrusts to kill? There's not been a wild beaver in Britain since. Not until now.

Of course Bernard didn't take it seriously when I tried explaining it to him. "Your beaver probably had a white flag," said Bernard, "but I don't s'pose the huntsmen could see it in the dark. I bet he waved that flag with all the power in his furry little arms, *but he fairly lost heart, and outgrabe in despair* when they didn't recognise his surrender." Bern circled his neck with both hands, choking noisily, before tripping into the great reedmace surrounding the pontoon. A paddling of shelducks exploded from the reeds, surging upstream in raucous protest.

“Don’t talk nonsense Bern...and he’s not *my* beaver. If Dad heard that he’d pulverise me for breakfast.” Overly loud, my voice drifted out to join the damselflies dancing in the morning sun. I must admit I’ve got a thing for beavers, along with their platypus cousins in Australia. Their scaly rudders are incredible, prehistoric virtually, and those beavers are some engineers; they can alter entire landscapes with their nocturnal building projects. But I’ve had to shut-up about them since this business with Maggie Turpin. Dad assumes I’m on his side; that we share the same enemies.

Gazing out at the barren ditch where our river used to be, I miss seeing Dad’s figure, hunched in silhouette over his rod, waiting patiently on the tench, gudgeon or bream. That’s why we moved here just after my sixth birthday. After Mum died. Dad’s river dream. The house had hooked him anyway, nestled at the end of a farm track with its crumbling plaster and a warren of crooked rooms, leading finally to the crouching attic. My attic. And it was here that first Dad spied the river.

“Eddie, where have you lost yourself? Come look, just look...look at this.” I scrambled up the stairs, following his warm, excited voice. He breathed evenly and reached to pull me to him, to gather me into the view.

“It’s enough Eddie. I think we could be here. Together.” His hand pressed heavy on my shoulder. In the dusk-drained sky and I could only make out a sweeping line of trees, right there at the bottom. Then, as my eyes adjusted to the

half-light the river revealed itself. A smoky mist rose off the water, a roost of pied wagtails darted and dipped amongst the tree-tops, teasing a grey heron that fished motionless on the bank. Dad's fingers touched the window pane and traced the river's curve. It was the river caught my dad and reeled him in. That's why Dad can't allow his river to be gone. That's why I have to help him.

The DEFRA men first came three years ago. Two government bores in waders up to their armpits, they looked like mutants from some Sci-Fi odyssey as they materialized from the coppicing on the far bank. A pheasant fired a cannon of startled cries as it tried to escape their path, almost tumbling into the water before crashing into the undergrowth. My heart jolted too, their clumsy entrance interrupting a hazy calm settling over the afternoon. I'd been swiping at stickles with my net, belly down in the grassy overhang, my long fringe sweeping the river-surface when the men appeared.

"Hey," Dad's voice carried down the lawn, though he'd called quietly. He spoke precisely as if else he might spill something, "What's going on here?" Dad was running now, I could hear it in his voice before I craned to see him. "This is my land. You have no right to be here." His face was blotched and his eyes guarded.

"We have permission Sir, from Miss Turpin and," the stocky, smiling man waved an identity card at Dad to cut short his objection, "we won't be needing to cross your boundaries."

The second man, nostril hair protruding, stepped forward, pushing his colleague aside. "We just wanted a word Sir, about fish stocks. Wondered whether you'd noticed any changes over the last few years? We have concerns, you see, about the water quality." He droned on in the sun, his voice blending with the hum of mayfly and bumbles. Dad relaxed, inviting them through the river to join him, and I waited for the sediment to settle after they'd splashed their way past me before returning to my stickles.

The DEFRA's seemed to be everywhere after that. With their tubes and gadgets, wading around in local tributaries. Bernard and I spotted them down at the weir quite a bit too. Gabbing with the lock-keeper most often. They sort of blended into the landscape after a while and we stopped noticing them. Until they popped up on a local radio programme with Maggie Turpin that is, eagerly announcing the scheme that would undo my Dad and our river to boot.

Dad grabbed for the radio, making to smash it. But he stopped mid swing, catching it in a cradle swoop and placed it back on the shelf. He slammed on the tap instead and water came gushing, but it couldn't drown his rage. "Some neighbour she turned out, Maggie Turpin and her 'environmental conscience.' Every day she drives those milken cows past our gate and not a word. Not one."

I spooned my soup carefully. I'd never seem him so mad.

“A controlled area of the River Wilton indeed. How do you control an area? Or a beaver. Once they’ve been released that’s it. Our land might as well be Maggie Turpin’s. It’ll be stripped. Completely devastated. And the flooding. Beavers can create floodplains in months. We’ll be living in a treeless bog.”

I pushed back my bowl and followed the grain of the oak table, not looking at Dad, “About the water though. They said the beavers would purify it. Might be better for fishing in the end.”

Silence. Dad stamped outside and I clattered my plate, rinsing at the sink. He appeared at the window, open to let in the summer. “It’s our land Eddie. Our bit of woodland. Our river. It’s not right.” He walloped his fist on the sill and vanished into the barns until well after supper.

So, all this rumpus is down to that genius architect of the animal kingdom, the beaver; the European Beaver (*Castor Fiber*) to be exact. “Beavers are the enemy,” I tell myself as I go to sleep each night, but I’m really not listening. How can I? After all these hundreds of years, real live beavers in Britain. And not just anywhere in Britain. They were released in Wilton. In the woodland by our river. On Maggie Turpin’s land. So close that as I burrow under my duvet at night, I can detect changes in the wild-wood soundtrack I’ve lived with half my life.

“Almost overnight it vanished.” Gazing at its strange patches of glassy stillness encircled by flurrying eddies, the fullness of the Wilton seemed to challenge my words. I snatched my foot from the water, a passing pike-shadow startling me.

Bernard lay shoeless and flat-backed on the pontoon, waiting for his socks to dry. I moved up onto the bank, heels digging in dirt to prevent sliding. Bernard grunted, “Bound to be a global warning. Or maybe your beavers found the plug and pulled it.”

I aimed a bulrush at his head, “Stop thinking dunce-features, you might damage something. The gulls told us something was up. Loads of black-headed scavengers screeching and scrapping like we’d never seen before.” I turned to look down at Bernard. “Dead, filthy stinking fish - revolting!”

“So how are we gonna get it back then?”

“We’re going hunting,” I replied, finally certain of what I needed to do. I wasn’t so sure that it was the right thing to do though, and I couldn’t quite look at the river in case of reproach.

Mud spattered and sweating, Bernard arrived in our back-yard with a clatter. “It’s filthy out there. That rain was mental last night.” I shrugged, aiming at nonchalance. The rain had actually kept me sleepless all night, as it had several times recently. Bern chased off down our mole-infested lawn and, before following, I glanced back at the house, anxious that Dad might have returned; he was

unpredictable at the moment. Starlings tittered overhead and I tried to catch their mood, “the birds think we’re crazy Bern. Probably right.”

Bernard peered into the ditch, “It’s true then. Just mud. You can’t really call that gloopy mess a river.” Bernard leapt across, one trainer disappearing into the ooze, the other firm on the opposite bank. He clutched at a clump of alder stumps and pulled himself up in a clean, breathless movement. He lent forward, hands on knees, “Blimey, Eddie, there’s a toad, right there in my footprint. Must’ve nearly squashed him.”

I jumped down, wellies sinking, and inspected the gulping creature. I stroked its dry, warty back with the side of my thumb. “*Bufo Bufo*, common toad. Not so common now though. Haven’t seen one in a while.” I poked at the toad, trying to get him moving, “Go home Mr Toad, or our heron will spear you for lunch. She hasn’t caught any fish here in a while so you’ll make her day.”

I joined Bernard and inhaled the forest’s dank, earthy odour. “Enemy territory this.” I’d not been through this way for ages. There was plenty of woodland to explore without touching on the Turpin estates and, though Dad had never said, I knew he didn’t want me poking around Maggie’s land. Anyway, she’s nailed up trespass signs since the beaver business; “giving them a chance” she calls it. What Dad calls it is not worth repeating.

I moved off through the bracken. "Let's head inland. Quickly. We don't want to be seen. Once we're safe we can have a scout about." I knew we'd never find the beavers during daylight, but that didn't matter. We were tracking. That's all. Just looking for clues. I hoped I'd know what to do with the evidence when I found it. If I found it. As we crept deeper into the forest the canopy weighed down on us, closing in and dappling our steps with steely shade. Hoverflies, bees and mosquitoes worried us in the humidity of this enclosed place, while spider webs, ivies and spindly branches teased our cheeks and pulled at our hair. Bernard bashed at them red faced, "this is pointless Ed. I swear those stinking insects have bitten through my underpants."

I dumped my rucksack and rummaged for the water-bottle, handing it to Bernard. "I reckon we've come far enough anyway. We'll be on the Wilton tributaries soon. The forest's riddled with them and then we'll start looking out for signs. If the beavers really are here it should be fairly obvious." I sat down in a bowl of deadwood, a natural armchair shaped by the roots of a fallen oak. Bernard slumped next to me. A lacewing landed on my wrist and I blew at it gently until it flew off into the undergrowth.

"Something's been scratching there, look at the scars on that tree. Grizzly bears I should think."

“Don’t be daft Bern,” I scrambled up, rubbing softly at the woody wounds of the beech. “Might be badgers though. I know there’s a sett in here somewhere. I wonder what old Brock will make of all...” I paused, as a cracking splinter of sound raised gooseflesh on my bare arms. There again--regular, confident and unguarded--human footsteps I was certain. I dropped to the forest floor and motioned for Bernard to move. We slunk round the upended tree and crouching, caged in the darkness of oak-roots, we waited, unbreathing.

Dwindling at first, I thought the steps were falling away, but then they turned sharply and there she was with a burst of woodish noise. Almost upon us. Maggie Turpin. Crag-faced and solid, Maggie paused at the centre of the clearing, resting her hand on the beech I’d so recently examined.

“She’s got a gun,” hissed Bernard.

I pinched him, hoping he might dry up. Maggie trudged over to a mound on the far side of the clearing and tugged at pendant brambles. She swore loudly and the sound echoed, before being gobbled by the canopy.

“What’s she doing? I can’t see.” Bernard strained next to me like a puppy on a leash.

“She’s leaving.” Whispering, I pulled at Bernard’s shirt, “come on quickly, let’s follow.”

Bernard stopped. Abruptly. "No way. Have you lost it? Did you see that gun? She's got a gun Eddie, a real gun." His voice came in snatches of sibilance like the air escaping from tires on my bike.

I yanked him over to the brambles she'd cleared. A yawning oval jeered up at us, cut deep into the embankment. "It's the mouth of a sett I reckon. A badger sett. She's checking on things Bern, that's all. Taking care of her manor. And I bet she's on her way to check the beavers. I bet you anything."

I hurried off after Maggie, Bernard grumbling and stumbling behind me. "What about the gun though you lunatic? You know what Maggie Turpin says about trespassers. She's says she'll shoot them on sight. Thinks she's fighting a war. She's a maniac."

"Maggie's a farmer Bern. Farmers have guns. To keep down rabbits and foxes. You know they do. And you shouldn't listen to village gossip." But I stopped, waiting for him to catch up. He arrived panting and I reached for his shoulder, steadying him, "You don't have to do this you know Bern. I don't mind if you turn round."

Bernard winked and pushed past me, "That river was mine too you know. Whatever your Dad thinks. So come on slowcoach, she'll be well away by now!"

We'd lost Maggie Turpin of course, but stalking her was quite straightforward after the soaking rains of the past few weeks. The forest floor

yielded to the ungentle weight of human steps and left a trail that the most hopeless of hunters could trace. A mottled fallow deer, probably disturbed by Maggie, dived past us and bolted into soothing ferns. We could hear the river before we reached it and soon we were dropping out of the woodland foliage into the bank-land of one of the Wilton's most powerful tributaries. Two mallard drakes were battling, charging and snapping at each other while a duck watched on peaceably from the shelter of arching water speedwell and forget-me-not. And then I saw them.

Unmistakable. My scalp crawled with the ghost of a thousand British beavers, speared for their glands, for their pelt, for their healing powers. Beaver tracks, bold and clear as the river before us in the wet, claggy mud. "Blimey Bern, just look at the size of this," I laid my hand by the webbed print of its hind-leg. It was bigger than the spread of my hand.

"Are you sure it's a beaver we're following here?" Bern laughed, loud and coarse, "I feel like Davy Crockett, pioneer of the wild Wilton. Hunting down the mysterious, giant beaver-beast."

We followed the tracks up the path, some of them obscured by tail-drag. Over the rise, the narrow trail opened out into a wide, swept bank of mud. "It's a beaver slide Bern, look here, this is where they've collected wood and dragged it to the water." We were so absorbed in our discoveries that we didn't notice the shadow fall across the slide, the crackle of reeds trodden down by human feet.

Maggie Turpin. Pointing a gun. At us.

She spoke softly, with her head to one side. "You've seen the notices boys. This is no place for you," she gestured back into the forest with her rifle, "now go, back the way you came Eddie Driscoll. I've had enough of you Driscolls on my land for one day. Keep to your own property and I'll see this rifle behaves." Herding us with the gun, she forced us back, away from the slide. Away from the beavers.

I spoke before I knew what my voice was doing, "Please Miss Turpin! Can't we see them just once? Can't we wait until dark, only a bit longer."

But Maggie Turpin was not listening. Not to me and not to Bernard who was busily protesting about my brilliant store of beaver facts, "He knows it all Miss Turpin, about slides and lodges and dams and canals. You should hear him, I bet he could..."

"Be quiet Bernard Jones. You are not going to see any beavers tonight. Nor will you ever. On my land they live in peace and I will ensure that they have it. Always. Now, be gone. Both of you." And Maggie Turpin stood, lips firm, feet planted solid on the river-bank until we were swallowed into the woods once more.

We skulked along the pathway the two of us. Angry. Shamed.

"What did she mean about Dad d'you think? I thought he was up to something this morning. He's right though. Our river has been stolen and it's all

wrong. Maggie Turpin's not doing this for anyone but herself. It's not about the environment, or ecological balance. It's about Maggie Turpin's power to do just as she pleases."

Bernard halted. Sat down with a thud on a mossy stump. "We're not going home Eddie. We're going to see the beavers and we're going to fetch back your river; our river. We're going dam busting."

So, together we waited, shivering in a snarled copse until night gave us the cover we needed to return. Until nocturnal creepings brought the forest into heaving life. When the full-moon rose into a cloudless sky, we followed that same beaver-trail up the river and on past the slide. I think I stopped breathing in that moment, half scared of what I might see.

And there it was. A beautiful, darkened mass of natural engineering. The beavers' lodge. Perched on the brow of the river, water backed up behind it. Together we lay, Bern and I, in a bed of bulrushes, anticipating an event we could barely imagine. First came a water vole. Twitching, agitated at the mouth of the lodge. I nudged Bernard, "Over there, a water vole; little ratty creature. You rarely see them these days. Must've taken shelter with the beavers."

"He's the warm up act I expect," Bernard smiled into the moonshine at his own joke.

The beavers came then. Two of them together. Magnificent, musky beasts; fast and powerful, cutting through the still water with a silken glide toward us. On the bank

they lumbered, massive and comical. Sitting up on their tails, grooming thick, chocolate fur with dextrous hands they seemed close to human. And then the gnawing began. Balanced by those great rudder-tails, they targeted a crop of alders near the river's edge. Such teeth. Such patience. Such craft. A modest tree, with a shaving and ripping and splintering of timber, it was soon felled by those fierce incisors and dragged, clumpty-bumpty to the water. Back in their aquatic element, those marvellous beavers floated gracefully upstream, pulling their lumber behind.

As sleep-walkers, Bern and I followed the beavers to the dam we had not yet seen. The dam that they had worked nightly to erect. The dam we had sworn to obliterate. For my father. For revenge. For our very own curve of river.

We let them go, beavers one and two, paddling downstream to the smooth beat of rudders beneath the surface. Then it began. The tearing and splitting and twisting of a glorious dam, which in our cruel hands became branches and kindling. We destroyed in half an hour what the beavers had created in all those months of patient toil. Brackish bile rose to my lips. Bernard's cheeks flamed and his eyes brimmed in the milky-light by which we worked.

I don't recall much of the journey home. We didn't speak. We hardly understood what we had done. Or why. So when we reached the edge of Maggie's territory we nearly didn't notice the change. I was drenched from the dam so I couldn't feel the lapping of water at my knees as I waded the ditch. It was Bernard stopped me. Grabbed at my rucksack, "It's back Eddie. It's really back!"

The river. Our river, sloshing round my stupid legs. "But how is it possible? Surely it couldn't happen this quickly?"

Amazed and dazed with exhaustion we staggered up the lawn towards the kitchen light, shaping my father in silhouette.

Dad came out to meet us, as if expecting to see us there, at that moment, that night. He reached for me. For us both. Encompassing us in his firm, strong arms. "Our river's back," he said.

I looked at Bernard. Bernard looked at me.

"I was wrong," Dad explained. "It wasn't the beavers at all. It was an oak. A creaking old oak, brought down in the storms last month. It fell across our stream, cutting it off entirely from the rest of the river. Got Jack Brisley and his boys to haul it for me today." Dad ruffled my hair, "I still say the beavers are bad news though. Bound to cause strife in the end."

That night I listened to the changed landscape of the river, of the wild-woodland I had known half my life. I listened to the shaving and gnawing and splintering of timber and wondered how long it would take those mighty beavers to re-build their dam.

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