

The Empty River

The shape remains. A dark winding ribbon tracing mountains and valleys. Ox-bow lakes form hollow shadows cradling the empty river. Now the wells have run dry and we are leaving. We will go to the sea where the desalination plants create water that can be drunk – at a price. We must work hard there and we will not survive for long. Then others will take our place.

As the villagers gather with their belongings in small bundles, my father picks up a short stick and snaps it into two pieces. He gives one to me and one to my sister and then, his arms on our shoulders, he guides us to the brow of the old stone bridge. My sister's real name is Sara, but we call her Mole after her favourite animal in our story book. Dad looks over the side to the dry grey river bed below, then turns to face us and says, "When I was a boy, my mother would bring me and my brother here to play Pooh Sticks." We look at his face, uncomprehending. "It's a game," he explains, "We each had a stick which we dropped into the water from this side of the bridge. Then, we ran to the other side of the bridge and the winner was the one whose stick emerged from under the bridge first." "How did they get to the other side of the bridge?" asked my sister. "It floated on the water and the water flowed down into the valley bottom" I said, proud of my knowledge of something I had never seen in all of my thirteen years. We had been taught about the old days in school; that is, until the school closed. My sister only had one year at school before it shut, but at least she learned to read. Of course there are not so many books left for anyone to read. People began to burn them to heat their houses when the electricity and gas stopped. That was before I was born. The government eventually had to make a law to stop people burning books and the books were moved from homes and libraries into the police stations. We could still borrow books of course, but some were never available – already loaned out they said. We suspected the police had burned them

themselves. Dad said he thought they just didn't want us to remember how things had been before. He kept a few books in secret, including Mole's story book, which he would read to us on the river bank where no-one could over-hear.

"I'd like you both to drop your sticks off the bridge" says Dad, "But what's the point?" I ask, "There's no water, the sticks will just stay where they drop". "It's important," says Dad gently, "one day the water may come back and you will want to return to the village," My sister shouts, "Yes, to see which stick won the race!" Dad lifts her up by the waist so that she can reach out over the side of the bridge. "Wait until I say go" says Dad. We both hold out our sticks and Dad says, "One, two, three, GO!" The sticks fall and land flat in the dusty river bed, mine slightly further away from the bridge than Mole's. "Look, mine is winning already!" she says happily. "Time to go," Dad tries to sound happy too, but his voice sounds weird.

We set off walking down the river itself. The roads are not safe because the Ferreters use them and they have trucks and guns. Some of the village men have guns too; Dad won't carry one though and he won't let me either. My friend Gemma has a spear that she made with her Mum. We run ahead down the river, taking turns to throw it as far as we can, pretending we are fighting off some Ferreters. In some places, the river bed is made of smooth flat rocks. In other stretches it is sandy with small stones. After a while we sit on the river bank, waiting for the others to catch us up. We draw scary leafless trees with sticks in the sand, then compete at skimming flat stones over the river bed. The group approaches slowly, like a shoal of ghostly fish. There are only seventeen of us now. There were twenty-six families in our village. Gemma and I wait for the others to pass and we join the end of the procession. Mole occasionally picks up stones that she thinks are pretty and she gives them to Dad to carry. I watch him discretely drop some of the larger ones back to the river when she is not watching. Still, his jacket pockets are weighted down and his shoulders, already burdened with our belongings in two bundles tied

at either end of a broom handle, sag even further. I walk over to him and say, "How about letting a younger man carry that for a bit?" and I lift the bundles up and over my own shoulders. I think that Gemma may be impressed, but she has re-joined her mother ahead of us.

When it is noon, we stop walking and rest. There are no trees to shade us of course, but the men erect a sort of canopy with sheets and bamboo canes and we take shelter from the fierce mid-day sun. We eat biltong – dried meat. Not sure what type of meat any more. Rat, most likely. We have a ration of water each, then suck on stones to keep our mouths tricked into contentment. Mole pretends her stone is magic and has different flavours – first strawberry, then chocolate, then candy-floss. She doesn't know what those flavours really taste like of course, but she remembers Mum telling us about how lovely such things were when she was a little girl. Gemma's Mum is crying. She cries a lot. Gemma is cuddling her, rocking her gently backwards and forwards, humming quietly.

After two hours it is time to pack up the canopy and start walking again. Dad carries the bundles and I give Mole a ride on my shoulders because she is still sleepy. "Pretend we are in a rowing boat and you are the captain" I say to her, "You need to say, "Row faster! Land ahoy!" She plays along and I weave in and out of the rest of the group shouting "Watch out! Row boat coming through!" Mole is laughing a lot, but then says she feels sick. "That's river-sick you know," says Dad who helps to lift her off my shoulders, "Imagine that, a river-sick Mole!". Thankfully she isn't actually sick and after a little sit down she is ready to start walking again and re-commences her stone collecting.

"Dad" I ask, "will we be able to stay together in the camp?" He does not look at me and he keeps on walking. "Why do you ask that?" "Gemma told me that when her uncle's family

went that her aunty and the twins had to go in a separate camp from him". Gemma's uncle had come back by himself. All he said at first was that the others had died, but over time Gemma had learned more about the camps from him. It was she that told me about how the work was very hard – digging the tunnels under the sea bed to make the sea-waterfalls that made the power for the desalination plants. "We'll know when we get there," is all that Dad says. "But will I count as a man or a child?" I ask. If I'm a man, then who will look after Mole? "If we need to, we will ask Gemma to watch her. Let's not talk about it anymore. Don't say anything to Mole."

We come to an old waterfall. The rocks have become a steep uneven staircase traversing a steep sided ravine and we must work together to pass down small children and the bundles of belongings. Mole is frightened and does not want to be lowered down by her arms from my father to me waiting below. My father makes a twisted rope from a sheet and ties it round her waist. He and another man hold it and Mole sort of abseils down the short distance into my arms. "Watch out Cap'n – don't rock the boat!" I say, trying to cheer her up, but she does not appear to understand the joke and I stand her next to Gemma while I go back to help Dad.

There are deep cracks now between the rocks and we must tread carefully. What excitement! Gemma has found a sort of cave a little further ahead around the bend. Dusk is approaching and Dad says we should set up camp for the night. Gemma's uncle tells us to wait on the river while he and Dad check out the cave. Maybe someone else is there; maybe there is a wild animal. There are still a few about. They were let loose from the zoos by people who felt sorry for them abandoned and starving in their cages. The elephants, penguins and hippos were soon killed for meat, but the big cats, the lions, tigers and pumas succeeded in the wild. They ate many sheep and cows and it is rumoured that they even ate small children. Dad returns and tells us the cave is safe. Gemma is very proud of having discovered it, but when we reach it I

am disappointed. It is no more than a large recess in the side of the ravine. But it is a comfort that we are sheltered from behind and above. We are not used to sleeping outside and it feels like an adventure. It would be wonderful if we could have a campfire, but of course there is no fuel to burn. There are a few old sticks, but most trees are long since gone for firewood. Dad suggests that we tell what he calls camp-fire tales despite the fact we have no fire, "because we still have the moonlight."

Gemma's Mum says, "I have a tale to tell". No one expected her to speak and she has our full attention. The smaller children move closer to her so they can hear. "Once upon a time", she starts, *"a long, long time ago, there was a princess with golden hair. The princess lived in a beautiful country that was very, very special. This country was so special that everyone who lived there was also either a princess or a prince. All day long the princesses and princes would play by the river, read beautiful books, listen to music and sing and dance until they were tired and ready to fall into their soft feather beds. They had no servants (remember, everyone was a princess or a prince), but what work there was to be done (making beds and cooking food and such) was done not by themselves, but by mechanical workers. The workers had been built many years before by the great-great-great-great grandparents of the princes and princesses. The workers required only a daily feed of oil to keep them happy and hard at work. The oil was delivered through pipes that were so long that no-one knew where they started. Each day, the golden-haired princess would skip through flower-filled meadows down to the river and as she skipped, she would sing a song that went, "I am happy, you are happy, we are happy, life is fun. I love the sky, I love the sun, I love the way the rivers run." At the river she would sit on a big flat stone and let her bare feet dangle in the water. Little golden fish would swim up and nibble her toes, but they did not hurt one little bit!*

Every day seemed brighter and sunnier than the last. Truth be told, each day was brighter and sunnier than the last. The reason was that these princes and princesses had become discontent with their flower-filled meadows, with their beautiful books, with the sparkling river. They had started to want to go further afield to see if life could be even more special in other special countries. So they had the workers build lots of gleaming cars and shiny jets to take them on long journeys to distant lands where the sun was even sunnier and where the food was even finer. The golden-haired princess did not travel to the far distant places, she was happy to remain by the river, reading her books. She did like to see the shiny jets flying over the hills though and she did like to wave at the other princes and princesses who tooted their car horns in a cheery way as they drove past in their gleaming cars. The workers never spoke of course. But if they could speak, they would have said, we are very hot and very bothered doing all this work, all this driving and all this flying. It makes us so thirsty, we have to drink lots and lots of oil and we are all getting boiling hot! And the hotter we are, the hotter everything seems to be, but we don't know why!"

Mole, who is enthralled by the story, imagining herself as a golden-haired princess, says, "Why? Why is everything getting so hot?" Gemma's Mum smiles at her and continues, "*I'll tell you why the special country became so hot. Every morning the workers would drink the oil that came from the pipes that began so far, far away. As they worked, they would become warmer and warmer and the heat would rise from their metal skin and go up to the sun. On the way to the sun, the heat would pass through an invisible umbrella. Now that umbrella had many special purposes; it was there to stop the little princes and princesses from becoming burned by the mid-day sun; it was there to give the trees just the right amount of sunlight so that they could grow; it was there to stop the rivers from evaporating while still letting enough sunshine reach them to make them sparkle like diamonds. The golden-haired princess had read about the invisible umbrella in one of her beautiful books. She began to understand that the more the*

workers worked, the more oil they consumed and the more heat would rise and pass through the umbrella. And she knew that the umbrella was becoming thinner and thinner because of all that heat and that was letting more heat from the sun reach the special country. The golden-haired princess started to tell the other princes and princesses about the invisible umbrella, but they did not want to listen. Because no one could see the invisible umbrella, the princes and princesses liked to pretend that the umbrella was not getting thinner and thinner. They continued to enjoy the many delights that the workers gave them. They continued to race their cars, to fly their planes, to eat more and more delicious food. In time they ate so much that they could no longer skip through the fields or dance to music. Instead the princes and princesses spent even more time in their cars and planes.

Then one day there were some very loud POP! POP! POP! noises” Each time she says the word “POP!”, Gemma’s Mum claps her hands together loudly. Mole starts and moves back closer to Dad who lifts her onto his lap. “That popping sound was the sound of the hot air making big holes in the umbrella, like when bubbles burst. When the princes and princesses heard the popping sound they became very frightened and ran back to their special palaces (did I tell you that they all lived in palaces made of gold and silver?). In the palaces, the workers became busier than ever because they were making lots of new worker machines that were going to help make the special country cooler, now that the bubbles had burst. The new workers needed lots of oil every morning. Some mornings the workers would have to queue for hours at the pipes to get their drink of oil. At the palaces, the princes and princesses would grow hot and bothered while they waited for the workers to come back and start to cool the air. The princes and princesses stopped going outside because, with those big holes in the umbrella, the sun beat down without mercy and it was no fun racing hot cars or flying in planes to somewhere even hotter. Even the golden-haired princess stopped going to the river to read her books because the flowers in the meadows had withered and dried in the hot sun. Instead she read

her books in the palace library which, although it was hot and stuffy, was at least peaceful because there were no workers in there.

One particularly hot morning, the workers found that there was no oil in the pipes. Oh what a calamity! The workers did not know what to do or where to turn. Some of the clever workers took oil out of the tanks of the planes and cars which were parked, unused, outside the palaces. But soon even that oil was gone. When the workers finally ran completely out of oil, they could no longer work and they also sat outside, idle in the baking sun. It was then that the fat, and I must say rather spoilt, princes and princesses knew that they themselves would have to do the work that the workers used to do for them. They soon realized that they did not need to fly or to race around, but that they did need to eat and to drink. The golden-haired princess suggested that they went together down to the river to get some water. She told the other princes and princesses to carry pots and pans with them to carry the water, but the pots and pans were very heavy because, of course, they were made of gold and silver. So they all huffed and puffed and moaned and groaned their way through the parched meadows down to the river. By the time they reached it, the sun had set and the moon had risen, but they could not see much because it was a new moon. So, the golden-haired princess carefully felt her way to the edge of the river bank and leaned over carefully, holding her golden saucepan by its long handle so that she could scoop up the water. She could feel the pan dragging along and scooping up until it was full and very heavy. But oh! when she drew the pan back up and raised it to her lips to drink (for she was very thirsty by then), what poured into her mouth was not cool clear water, but hot, dry sand!" "That's just like our river," says Mole, sadly. "Yes," says Dad. "But don't worry Mole, there is a happy ending to this story, I know there is – isn't there?" Dad is looking at Gemma's Mum who appears lost in thought. "Is there?" she says to Dad. Then, I don't know why, but suddenly I say, "Yes – I know the end of that story – I can tell it to you." Then,

looking at Gemma's Mum I say, "Is it okay for me to tell the end of the story?" She just nods. Mole gets off Dad's lap and comes to sit close to my side.

I take a deep breath, then say, "*When the golden-haired princess spat out the sand, the other princess and princesses realized that the water in the river had all dried up and they began to cry. At first they cried in little sobs, but then they really started to wail and tears fell in big dollops into their pans. Soon, the pans were overflowing with water – just like they had wanted.*" "But tear water is salty and can't be drunk – everyone, even me, knows that" says Mole, disappointed in my supposed happy ending. "*That is true,*" I say, "*But the golden-haired princess who had spent her days reading books by the river and in her hot and stuffy library knew a secret. She knew the secret of how to turn salty water into drinking water!*" "De-sal—in-a-tion!" says Mole, happy to show her knowledge is equal to that of the golden-haired princess. "*Yes, that's right! So then the golden-haired princess told all the princess and princesses to carry their tear-filled pots and pans back to her palace where they would sleep and then next morning they would set about building a desalination plant. And that is exactly what they did. There was no oil of course, so the plant was powered by the falling tears of the princes, which turned a wheel, which turned a turbine which powered the desalination plant. The princesses let their tears fall into the gold and silver pots and pans which were then poured into the big desalination tank for processing. And so, the princes and princesses had enough water to drink and for a while they were happy. But when they were happy they did not cry and then there could be no tears to make the drinking water. So, they became unhappy once more and their tears flowed once again. Of course there was not as much water as there had been before the bubbles burst, and there was no oil, and there were no workers. Still, whenever they became very, very unhappy, they would cry even more tears and then, for a little while at least they would have enough water, not only to drink, but even to have occasional baths in it (for they were all pretty smelly by then don't you think?)*" "They bathed in water?" asks Mole, unbelieving.

“Oh yes, that’s what princes and princesses used to do in the olden days.” “Well, they need the golden-haired princess to show them how to bathe in sand like we do to keep clean!” says Mole, indignantly. “They certainly do” says Dad, then “And I think that must be where the story ends. It is late and we must all sleep now.” I am grateful he has ended the tale – it is not such a happy ending after all.

It is morning; everyone else is still asleep. I move quietly out of the cave and start to walk down the river bed a little. It feels colder than usual, given that the sun is rising. I look up into the sky and see grey clouds. It is many years since there have been clouds. I rub my eyes – maybe I am still asleep and dreaming. No, they are still there. I start to scramble back towards the cave. I am shouting, “Dad, Mole, there are clouds, there are clouds!” The others are waking up and coming out onto the river and looking up at the sky. “Clouds, clouds!” shouts Mole. Dad has stretched his arms out his hands facing palm upwards, waiting for something. I look back up at the sky, then plop! A drop of water hits me on the forehead. “Dad, it’s raining – isn’t it?” Dad has put his hands together, forming a little cup. He is gathering the rain. Gemma is holding hands with her Mum and they are dancing in circles, laughing. Mole is licking her face with her tongue and she shouts to me, “It’s like tears, but with no salt!”

Dad is talking to the other grown-ups, then he turns to address us all “We had best set-off before this river starts to flow again”, he says. “Not on to the sea though, let’s go back upstream, let’s go home!” Mole comes and takes my hand, “We can see who won Pooh Sticks!” and I laugh as tears and rain run together down my cheeks and fall into the river.