

The Journey

Kayleigh ran from the bunk house in rage. She was sick of people telling her to chill, to calm down, and to take time out and she was sick of being told to manage her behaviour. There was nothing wrong with her behaviour -it was the other kids, not her! She had begun to allow herself to hope that this place might just make a difference to her boring existence but no - once again people crowded in with rules and stress and she just had to hit out and run!

She could hear them running after her, calling her name but she ran on, ducking under branches, slipping on the muddy path along the river bank , until each breath tugged at her lungs and her heart pounded. She came up short as the wooden bulk of the boat house seemed to leap up in front of her. She leant against the wall, feeling the coarse wood against her face but there was no time to stop. She could hear Jed, the youth worker, calling her. She felt her way along the wall in the dark until she found the boat house door, opened it and slipped inside.

With no light it was difficult to find her way about so she moved along the side of the boat house slowly, with her hands outstretched but after a while she could see enough to make out the wooden rowing boats that were tied up, floating in the inky black water.

She liked these boats with their varnished wood and the planks that overlapped like steps, tapered and twisted to make the flared bows, the curvy shape of the boat. She liked the guy who had been teaching them to row yesterday and, she thought bitterly, she had been OK. She could have got into that if they hadn't made it all wrong in the bunk house.

She stepped into the boat nearest the open entrance of the boat house. *Teal* lurched violently as Kayleigh put all her weight onto the foot she had placed on the thwart but she hurriedly followed with the other foot, squatted down low as she had been shown, slid her way to the middle of the boat and sat there panting as the little boat rocked from side to side.

She could still hear Jed calling for her but she could tell that he had taken a different path and gone further into the woods. She felt about her and found the oars that were shipped tidily inside the boat, the blades sticking up from the rowlocks like ears. She ran her hand up the smooth shafts, remembering the dip and swing, the swirl left in the water, and the drip of water from the blades when the guy had rowed them strongly up the river, and she had rowed back. She could do it – it was something she could do.

She sat in the dark for a while, feeling the gentle movement of the boat settling, snubbing against the mooring ropes and realised that she was starting to shiver now that she had cooled down from the anger and the running. She suddenly thought that she could use her mobile as a torch and flicked it on. With the pale blue light she looked around the inside of the boat to see if there was anything that would keep her warm. There wasn't anything so she ventured out of the boat again and worked her way around the boat house. She found a water proof coat, damp and smelly with mildew, hanging on a hook which she rejected because only a complete loser would wear such a thing and finding nothing else went back to the boat, clambered in, settled her self on the bottom boards and plugged herself into her iPod.

Flax and Rush had left the colony and were messing around in the river, diving from over hanging branches competing with the number of back flips and twists they could fit in before slicing smoothly into the dark water, silver bubbles streaming from their hair and bodies as they rolled and tumbled under the water like otters. After his dive, Rush lay on the bottom of the river, his brown body and his sandy green hair invisible amongst the stones and weed that waved in the rivers currents, waiting for Flax to dive in search of him. He grabbed her foot as she rippled past him and laughing and bubbling they wrestled and fought and finally broke the surface of the river. They let the flow take them down stream holding on to each other and before soon they were in sight of the boat house.

“Let’s go to the boats?” Suggested Rush

“OK” Fax answered – she and Rush were intrigued by the human colony that lived here, where young ones came and went and older ones stayed. They could never work out why there were never any very young or very old humans there. In their colony you stayed there for your whole life, were born there and died there, apart from when you left for your Journey and even then you came back again. They had wondered whether humans were actually born or died but they didn’t know of any species that wasn’t born or laid in an egg or that didn’t die or get eaten.

They dipped under the water and swam together, breathing through their gills, surfacing in the dark boathouse alongside *Teal*. Flax linked hands into a step for Rush and hoisted him up through the water. He reached out a long arm and grabbed the gunnel of the boat. He kicked his legs, splashing Flax as he struggled to pull himself up so that he lay across the gunnel on his

stomach, swung his body into boat and then hung over the side to catch Flax's hand as she reached a sinewy arm out of the water and hauled her up after him.

They stood and shook themselves so that the water sprayed from their long hair and clinging clothes and in the half light Rush saw Flax's face stiffen. Her eyes widen as she looked up and past him at something behind him. He turned slowly to see what she could see and took in the still, large form of Kayleigh, frozen on the centre thwart of the boat.

Flax and Rush had the advantage because they could see in the dark, and they had seen humans before. They took in the trainers, the jeans, the hoodie and the wires seemingly coming from her ears to the slim box that she held in her hand and apart from Rush's brown hand reaching for Flax's, neither moved a muscle.

Kayleigh had seen something slither over the side of the boat, reach down and pull another creature out of the river. She had seen them shaking water from themselves, spraying her jeans and she had drawn her feet away from them in horror. She slid her hand slowly to her pocket, eased her phone out and switched it on so that she could see what was waiting there in the dark. The blue light from the screen made the two river children seem very strange. They were slender and willowy, both with long hair that hung in wet rats tails around their pointed faces, down to their waists. They looked about her age and were dressed in flimsy fabric that clung to their bodies and they gazed up at her unflinchingly as she leant forwards, moving the light from one to the other like a blue spotlight on a stage. She pulled her headphones out of her ears by the wires and saw them flinch and their eyes widen as they picked up the sounds of the tinny music coming from the iPod. She switched it off – she didn't want to frighten them but she didn't wasn't ready to switch the phone off and sit there in the dark with these strange creatures.

Flax and Rush could have stood still and silently for hours, coming from a world where pike, otters or herons could make a meal of you, and where camouflage might save you but they had never heard of anyone being eaten by a human and had wondered so many times how this group of animals functioned. Here was one here for the asking and neither Rush nor Flax were cowards so after a few minutes of silent contemplation Flax said in a voice that sounded like bird song.

“How are you making that light?” Kayleigh turned the blue light onto her own face – she wasn’t at all sure how to explain the phone, batteries, charging up to this creature from river.

“Err – have you heard of electricity?” Flax and Rush shook their heads

“Well – it sort of power – in a battery and that makes it shine”. Rush felt as if Flax had outdone him by speaking first so he stepped forward.

“What are you doing here in the night – humans settle in the sheds at night?”

“They’re not sheds – they’re bunk houses and they are full of humans that I hate so I’ve run away – and I’m not going back” she finished aggressively.

Rush gazed at her impassively

“We don’t want you to go back” he said “You don’t have to get angry with us”

Kayleigh felt ashamed, “Sorry – I’m a bit stressed – what are you doing out here in the night – shouldn’t you be with your parents or something?”

Rush looked at puzzled

“What is ‘stressed’ what is ‘parents’” he asked.

“Stressed is when people make you angry and parents – well they make you get born and they are supposed to look after you, make sure you are safe and stuff”

“So you do get born” Rush exclaimed excitedly “We’ve often wondered. We get born too but the colony looks after us and keeps us safe”

Flax was calmer than Rush and wanted to impress this human child. “We are on our Journey!” she said grandly. “When river children reach the end of childhood they must go on a Journey down the river to the sea and there they must bring back a shell that has the taste of salt upon it and then they can join the elders”

“How far is it to the sea – how will you get there?”

Rush leapt in again “ Well to be honest we should have set off two days ago – we are supposed to swim – but we were playing in the river and we’ve got no idea how far it is because we’ve never been there – where are you running away to?”

“The sea” Kayleigh said firmly.

And so it was that a plan was hatched. The river children had longed to travel by boat and Kayleigh longed to row away from her troubles. Flax and Rush could feed themselves from the river but Kayleigh needed food so crept back to the refectory and packed crisps, bread, jam, cheese and water. She also reluctantly lifted the smelly coat from its hook after a debate with Rush about the risks of returning to the bunk house to get clothes.

She hurried back to *Teal*, stowed the carrier bags in the locker under the stern thwart and put on the stiff, cold jacket. Rush and Flax untied *Teal's* mooring ropes and Kayleigh leant awkwardly over the side of the boat to push them out of the boat house and onto the river, leaving the remaining boats gently nudging together, bobbing up and down in the dark like a clutch of flustered ducklings. She shipped the oars, her back to the bows of the boat and with Flax and Rush sitting in the prow of the boat, begun to pull for the sea.

Yesterday the rowing had seemed easy and to start with Kayleigh did well as Flax or Rush guided her with strange fluting voices when she pulled too strongly with one arm or the other and *Teal* swung towards the bank but a few times she didn't dip the oars in deep enough, and nearly fell backwards from the thwart as the blade skipped across the surface but Flax and Rush were impressed with her ability to power the little boat through the water. They didn't laugh when things went wrong and she gained confidence with every minute. Kayleigh had found it surprisingly easy to talk to these strange little creatures and as she rowed she found herself telling them about her life, about being in care, the foster placements that hadn't worked out, how no-one wanted her because she wasn't any good at anything except making trouble and finally to the fight that had sent her running into the night and they listened sympathetically because some of the elders in the colony thought that they weren't much good at anything except making trouble either.

After a several hours of rowing down the moonlit river her hands hurt and her palms tingled with the promise of blisters so they decided to stop and they rowed to the bank and into the shadows of overhanging trees.

“Will the humans be hunting for you?” asked Rush.

Kayleigh didn't much like the idea of being hunted but she agreed that they would.

“Then we should hide the boat better” Rush advised – “We'll need to sleep and they'll notice that *Teal* has gone”

It was a good point, so they pulled *Teal* further into the shadows and broke small branches from bushes along the bank to camouflage the boat then made themselves as comfortable as they could in the bottom of the boat and slept fitfully.

When Kayleigh up woke the river children were not in the boat but when she knelt up she saw Rush sitting on a slender branch watching Flax diving for food. She came up with a small fish, passed it to Rush who killed it quickly and begun to eat.

The evening sun shone through the branches and a dappled light lit their hiding place. The water sparkled and she watched, fascinated as Flax, who was in the middle of the river now, diving and surfacing with something from the river bottom in her hands, then float on her back to eat.

Suddenly there was an urgent whistle from Rush on his branch and Flax dropped her food, twisted round and begun to swim towards them in panic, her legs kicking frantically, her arms powering her along. Behind her, under the water, something swam, a strong tail causing a swirl on the surface of the water, a mouth with needle sharp teeth open, ready for a fatal bite. Rush scrambled further up his branch in fear and agitation and Kayleigh heard him gasp “Pike”

Kayleigh had no idea what ‘pike’ meant but Rush’s fear and Flax’s frantic efforts left her in no doubt that Flax was swimming for her life. Kayleigh couldn’t swim but before she knew what she was doing she had scrambled over the side of the boat and into the water. She barely noticed the cold as she splashed into the river, and holding the branches of the tree, waded as fast as she could towards Flax. When the water reached her chest she stretched her arm out to Flax who grabbed a finger and it was an easy job to pull her, grab her and hoist her out of the water high above Kayleigh’s head. Kayleigh felt the flick of a tail through the water, and saw the dark shape of a huge fish slide past her in search of the prey that she held aloft.

She carefully waded back, holding Flax gently, understanding the fear Flax would feel being carried by a human. When she could back to *Teal* she lowered her gently onto the thwart and into the arms of Rush.

She clambered, shivering and muddy onto the bank and then back into the boat and squatted down before the trembling figures on the thwart

“Th-Thank you” stuttered Flax – her breath catching and suddenly she began to laugh.

Kayleigh’s mouth was dry but laughter is infectious and soon all three were laughing so hard that their eyes streamed, and they could barely get their breath.

When at last they stopped and could breathe again the river children fell silent as the enormity of what had nearly happened began to sink in. Kayleigh took action. She poured water into the lid of a bottle and sorted out cheese, bread and crisps. The others tucked in with enthusiasm and while they were eating she scrolled through her iPod for her favourite film and with the iPod propped up against her wet trainer, one ear phone between Flax and Rush and the other in her

ear, they settled for the evening and in the river children's amazement and fascination at the tiny figures on the screen, the horrors of the early evening slipped from their minds.

When the film had finished and it was properly dark, they set off again in high spirits. They made good progress through the night and as the dawn began to lighten the sky in the east they could tell that the river was changing. The trees and shrubs that had lined the banks further up stream had given way to reeds that whispered and rustled as they passed.

On this night she heard how the river people lived, not in families, but as a colony so no-one really knew or cared who their parents were. She heard how much trouble these two were and how it was decided that they should start their Journey in the hopes that would teach them responsibility but even in this they had messed about when they should have been swimming earnestly towards the sea. For the first time, Kayleigh felt at ease. They understood her and liked her.

In the early morning at half light they rounded a wide bend in the river and found their way blocked by several large, orange drums strung from bank to bank. They left *Teal* buried in the reeds and hurried along the bank to see what lay beyond and stood in dismay when they came to the foaming, rushing weir.

Back on Teal they had another meal and tried to think of a way that they could get over the weir but they all knew that the water was too fast and the weir was too steep for the little boat to go over. The only way was to pull the boat around by land.

They found a sandy place to beach the boat and with Flax and Rush pushing from the stern and Kayleigh pulling the bows they managed to haul *Teal* onto the bank. Kayleigh was anxious not to damage the bottom of the boat and insisted that they moved every stone on the boat's path. Flax and Rush, with more experience of predators, were anxious to get the boat back into the water and into hiding, so it was a cross, sweaty group that tugged, heaved *Teal* over the dewy grass, past the weir and back into the water as the sun began to inch into the sky and the gurgling trill of a curlew rang across the reeds.

They settled the boat deep into the reed bed, and with the first twittering of the buntings and warblers around them they settled gratefully to sleep.

Things seemed different to Kayleigh the other side of the weir. To start with the river had shrunk while they slept and Kayleigh had to roll her jeans up and push the boat through wet mud to get afloat and Rush noticed that the water tasted salty. The rowing seemed harder and Kayleigh noticed after a time that the water seemed to be passing the boat at the same rate as it had done before, but they didn't seem to be passing the bank as quickly.

Flax and Rush felt a difference too. They felt drawn to the water and at first, so as not to leave Kayleigh alone, took it in turns to leap from the bows into the salty river but as they got nearer

the sea they spent less and less time in the boat and more tumbling around in the deepening river, feeling the salty water running through their mouths and out through their gills. They swam to the bottom, feeling the tug of the incoming tide and it was with a wrench that they surfaced and hoisted themselves back on board to check on Kayleigh.

Kayleigh wanted to stop the clock and hold this moonlit moment for ever. She could feel that the river was coming between them and that the children wanted to finish their Journey by themselves. They all knew that they would part soon. No-one had said what would happen when they reached the sea.

“We have to go soon Kayleigh – the salt water is calling us – we will stay as long as we can but when we have to – we must go”. Flax stood sadly before her and Kayleigh could not speak. She nodded, holding back the tears. She pulled the oars fiercely and *Teal* leapt forward

The sun begun to rise and they saw that the river widened and she could see glistening mud flats on either side. The rowing was easy now and before long the banks flew by. Kayleigh begun to feel frightened at the speed the boat was travelling and she could barely see the banks at all. The *Teal* was bouncing over little waves and Kayleigh felt slightly sick. She kept rowing – she didn't know what else she could do. Both Flax and Rush were back in the boat clinging to each other, balancing on the back thwart. They felt the wind rising and with the boat pitching and tossing on the waves they realised that they was out at sea.

Bob, the guy who had shown Kayleigh to row so many days before, had been up early searching for the missing girl. He had come down to the coast on a hunch, thinking that if he had run away he would make for the sea. He was sitting on the banks of the estuary, drinking from a flask of tea when he saw the tiny boat tossed on the tide. He stood up and shading his eyes, followed her progress. He watched in horror as the boat surged past him and out to sea. His first thought was to run for the life boat, but he stopped as he saw the boat turn and head to shore and saw the small figure put her back into rowing against the tide, and as he watched he knew that she would bring the boat safely home.

Kayleigh was more frightened than she had ever been. The waves rocked the boat wildly and when she turned a wave caught her sideways and nearly pitched her into the sea, but she pulled strongly on one oar, holding the other under the water and brought *Teal* round. She dug the oars in and pulled. This was hard but she gritted her teeth and pulled again and again. The wind whipped her hair across her face, the boat pitched and she thought it would never end but she was rowing for her life. She pulled again, again and as *Teal* slid down the side of a wave she saw the bodies of Rush and Flax dive over the stern for the last time and into the surf. She pulled harder and moments later the boat stopped with a crunch. Strong arms lifted the bows and pulled *Teal* into the beach. She looked over her shoulder and saw Bob pulling the boat to safety. She started to cry, for herself, for Flax and for Rush and Bob was helping her and holding her tight.

“You’re safe now love – you did that real good you did – you did that real good!”

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