

Young Writers Award 2010 winner

The Road to the River

by Sarah Boothroyd

As the wave pushed me up, I glimpsed the hunter's tail curving towards me. He seemed sharper—deeper—than the rest of the dream. Smooth strength, I could almost touch. His skin merged into the cloudy grey-green of the river. I inhaled. The metallic tang of fresh rain filled my nose, my head, begging to be tasted. I sank lower so the cool water touched my lips. Behind me, the water churned, swishing past my back. He was near. As he circled back towards me, I emptied my lungs, sinking into the river's silent depths. He missed me, just. I watched him pass above me, muscles rippling in accord.

The crocodile was in his element. He was beautiful.

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I pedalled down the long, straight road that led from my house to the river. Sweat trickled down my face; the salt burned the cracks in my lips. At the distant end of the road, the reservoir was a grey smudge rising odd and straight out of the flat earth. It winked in the heat.

I wasn't supposed to go swimming by myself. It was a rule my parents made a big deal about, especially since we had moved so close to the reservoir at the edge of town. But I knew this was the right thing to do. That morning I'd burst out of sleep into the humid air, like a fish gasping and flipping for cool water. I could barely remember the dream I'd been having. But I'd woken with purpose—the river. I had to get to the river.

And I was almost thirteen, after all—I'd been swimming since I was two. I often rode my bike to the reservoir park, and I knew there was a swimming spot at the start of the river there. My parents would never have to know.

I started to feel light-headed. The sun always shines hotter the day after a rain. It was only ten o'clock, and already the bitumen was sticky with the morning heat. It sucked at my bike tyres, and my thighs burned with the effort of pedalling. I tried to keep my eyes down, away from beacon of the reservoir against the flat landscape. Instead, I stared into the low scrub that bordered the road. The grass skipped and clicked with grasshoppers; they slapped against my legs, as if attracted by the organic squeak of the pedals. The grasshoppers were tiny, translucent. There must have been a hatching.

When I began to feel the hum of the town wafting around me—hot wheels against bitumen, TVs buzzing—I looked up. The reservoir filled my view, quivering with life. Its walls were usually

covered in long brown grass, crackling for moisture. But today, the grass had transformed into a soft grey-green. It swished back and forth in unison, dancing with a breeze I couldn't seem to catch. I pushed harder for the last few hundred metres.

Soon I was crossing the wide road, dodging potholes in the reservoir carpark. I didn't bother chaining up my bike. I could see a family sitting at the picnic tables right on the other side of the park, but I guessed my bike was safe from them. They didn't even notice me ride in. I jogged to the public toilets to change into the bikini I'd brought. My own bathers had been tight lately, and that morning I hadn't been able to pull them over my chest at all. I'd had to nick one of Mum's bikinis off the clothesline as I left the yard. I fiddled with the strings, re-tying them twice. Finally I got it right. I slipped my t-shirt over the top and skipped back outside. The grass was freshly mowed, and I kicked the soft clippings in the air. They fluttered against my ankles, settling in between my toes, as if I were walking barefoot.

A few eucalypts managed to thrive this close to the river, and their leafy arms whispered above me. I paused for a moment with my eyes shut. The breeze filtered down through the leaves, pungent and freshly brewed in the sun. Threads of last night's dream drifted at the edges of my consciousness, pulling me towards the river. I stretched my arms out into the expanse; here, the thick air felt buoyant.

"It's a bit cooler under the trees isn't it?"

I jumped at the man's voice. I turned around. He had a long beard and was wearing a park ranger's uniform.

"Oh sorry little lady, I thought you would have heard my car." A council ute was parked behind him. "I was saying I've been trying to get them to let me plant some trees up there."

I blinked. The man was pointing to the dusty ridge that ran along the reservoir walls.

"Oh," I replied.

"You think we'd get some more people down here if there were some trees along the reservoir? I want to make it a nice place to sit and look out at the water, maybe get some benches as well." I shuffled my feet, and glanced toward the river. I could just smile politely and leave. But—the man seemed to want my opinion.

"Oh. Sure." I said. "It's much nicer under the trees in summer."

"Do you come here a lot?" he said. "With your family?"

"Sometimes I come with them. Mostly I just ride down here." I nodded towards the bike.

"By yourself?"

"Yeah. It's quiet. I like to read my book down here."

"That's good," he said. "Really good." He stared at me for a minute. Then he smiled.

I smiled back. I guess he was just doing his job, finding out what the locals wanted for the park, but I couldn't think of anything else to say. I grabbed my towel and turned towards the river.

"Well—"

“—oh you’re not gonna go swimming are you?” he asked. I looked at him. Was he going to have a go at me for swimming alone? He might tell my parents.

“Well. Sort of. Just stick my feet in.” I pretended to scratch my neck, tucking the bikini strap under my collar.

“It’s flooded is all. The river’s flooded. I don’t think anyone’ll be swimming in there for at least a week.”

I slid my eyes past the man. Between the trees and bushes, the river was indistinct. Just a blur of grey-green. I remembered...but laughter drifted over from the picnicking family, disturbing my thoughts. The man smiled again.

“Come with me, I’ll show you,” he said, starting toward the river. I had to follow him.

The man led me to a clearing on the river bank. From where we were standing I could see the weir. The water was gushing over the top, smashing into the river below. How could I not have heard it? I turned to look downstream, grabbing a branch and leaning out over the river. As far as I could see, the trees on the bank were half-submerged. The water ripped chunks of bark from their trunks as it rushed by. I leaned back against the branch. The crashing of the water seemed to grow louder and louder until all I could hear was sound.

“No chance of swimming,” he said. His words floated into my head, carried on the haze of the water. “Isn’t it a sight though? Do you wanna see it from the top? It’s even better.” I realised the bikini strap was cutting into my neck. I tugged at it.

“Have you ever seen any crocodiles up here?” I clapped my hand to my mouth, confused.

“Huh?” he answered. “I was going up there to do my rounds anyway, you should come up and see it. You’ll like it.”

“I—” I tried to swallow. My throat was swollen. “—Sorry...I—I—have to get home,” I said. I turned and ran towards the carpark. I ran like they taught us in athletics, using my whole body. A branch scratched my arm as I swung past, and the sting forced the tears down my face. Thank god I hadn’t chained my bike up. I pushed off, but the bike was still in top gear. It took ages to get moving. I skidded through a puddle as I left the carpark. The ground was sodden—of course! I had watched it rain all week long. I rode faster and faster. There’s no time to think when you’re going that fast. And I couldn’t remember the dream anyway. The wind dried my cheeks.

There was no point trying to avoid Mum when I arrived home. She was sitting on the front verandah, book propped open on her knees. She called me over. I wheeled the bike to the back of the house and parked it in the garage. Then I walked back to the front yard, circling the house the long way. Mum patted the seat beside her, glancing up from her book.

“Where’d you ride to, love? I didn’t hear you leave.”

“The park,” I said, sitting on the edge of the seat. Before she could notice my bathers, I continued, “The ranger was there. He said they’re gonna plant some more trees up near the reservoir.”

“The ranger? He said that to you himself?” Mum laid her book across her stomach.

“Yeah. It’ll be good having some shade up there. Don’t you think?”

“Well, yes—but why was he talking to you about it?”

“I don’t know...I was just there. He wanted my opinion.” Mum frowned at me, but I avoided her gaze. Why did she have always want to know everything?

“Was anyone else there? At the park?” She squinted over the top of her reading glasses, the worry lines between her eyebrows deepening.

“Mu-um, I—” I started to whine. Then I thought back to the ranger, and the almost empty park. My stomach started to do little flips. “Yeah...Yes. Of course there were other people.” Mum opened her mouth, but I lifted my eyes to hers and continued. “There were heaps of people down there. They were all playing football though. But then afterwards I heard him tell one of the mums the same thing.” Mum’s frown relaxed a little. I went on. “I was gonna ask him how long it would take—to get the trees in. But he was pretty busy.” I paused, trying to quash the strange feeling that was blooming in my stomach, pushing its way outwards through my arms and legs. “It’ll be nicer up there when it’s done, hey Mum? We can have picnics.”

“Mmm,” Mum said. “That would be nice.” She pushed her glasses back onto her nose and picked her book up again.

I dropped my eyes. I wasn’t sure what had just happened. My insides felt scooped out. Hollow. I listened as Mum flipped to the next page in her book. Then the next. I pushed myself off the chair and walked to the house. When I got to my bedroom, I locked the door behind me.

In the room, the sun was blasting through the edges of the curtains, soaking the walls with light. Those walls seemed so flimsy, like they could barely keep the outside from coming in. I shut my eyes against the glare, but the usual soft gloom behind my eyelids stretched into dizzy blackness. I leaned my forehead against the cool metal post of the bedhead. The whole morning seemed so absurd now. Yet, it didn’t feel like it was over. I was still cycling down that open road by myself. A tiny speck of nothing in all that space.

I opened my eyes, looked around. The sheets were strewn across the bed, my old bathers were crumpled on the floor—everything seemed the same as when I’d left it. I reached out, picked up the creased sheet. Then I lifted it up and floated it over the bed. When it settled out smooth, I tucked the corners in with the neat fold Mum had taught me. I picked my bathers up off the floor and put them away in a box of old clothes. I looked around the room to see if there was anything else to fix. It was all fine.

I dragged the curtains open. I would go outside—sunbathe, I decided. Make the most of the sun before the rain came again.

Outside, I took off my shirt and lay on my towel on the front lawn. The sun helped a little. I was warm to the touch, like the earth.

“Hey—” Mum called from the verandah, “that’s my bikini.” I’d forgotten about it.

“Mine’s getting too small,” I said.

“Well. That one fits you all right. We’ll have to get you your own.” I shut my eyes. The sun made me drowsy, and I started to drift into dreams.

“Okay.” I said. “I’d like that.”