

The Man with the Voice like a River

Under the careful watch of the station hand, I groomed my mare. I could see him observing, carefully judging every move, as if he believed that I couldn't care for her myself. He was new around here and probably sceptical of people like me. However, I ignored him, and mechanically brushed her down. Stroke after stroke, I carefully cleaned her and gently laid the saddle on her back.

"The boss wants you," grumbled the man. I nodded, and swung my leg over her back. All at once, I felt at home, on the back of my animal and somehow free of my prison of dirt. The gentle, loping gait took me to the front of the boss's house. He stood there, comforting a distressed lady whom I vaguely recognised. The boss was a tall white man, with thick, surly brows and weather-lined skin. When he looked at me, I was reminded of the reason he was Boss. His eyes were full of strength and demand, *telling* you that he knew how to feel pain, and he knew how to cause it. He'd ruled this station for twenty years with those stern eyes alone.

"Boy, this woman's little girl has been missing for a day and night. The other trackers can't even get a trace." His voice was gruff, as he held back pleading. If he showed too much emotion or reliance on the likes of me, he'd lose his strong façade. I spoke in my quiet, non-descript voice.

"How old, lady?"

The woman looked up from under her bonnet and I studied her tear-strewn face. Hair the colour of coffee spilt from her braid and framed her face, darker than a white girl's skin, but lighter than a black girl's. I'd seen her in the kitchens, labouring over enormous pots of stew and kneading dampers late into the night. Her eyes stayed pointedly at the ground, so I couldn't get a full view. Although her demeanour was aged, she couldn't have been older than eighteen. She held her breath politely, to ease her sobbing so she could speak.

"Four. Going on five next month."

I nodded my head and clicked my mare on.

“You don’t say very much boy,” the boss called after me. I took off my hat and waved it to him. As the bush enveloped me in a euphony of peaceful rustling and tinkling bird calls, I thought to myself – *that, I don’t.*

I’d been following her small, light footprints and miniscule disturbances through the day, and the night began to tumble to earth. I came across several hollows where the girl must have decided to rest or been too tired to carry on. I’d come across her soon, and sure enough I spied her through the gums. My mare skittered about a little, preparing to spook at the girl who was resting behind a tree up ahead. I laid my leg on her encouragingly, and knowing to trust me, she walked towards the small figure. I braced myself, little bodies can only take so much heat and fatigue. I gently jumped down, and crackled some dry leaves. The girl nearly scared me off my feet, jumping up and brandishing a stick in front of her. She was small and thin, with curly, dark hair and a warrior’s face. She shouted, and tearing the reins from my hands, my mare bolted back through the scrub, her chestnut coat flickering in what little daylight was left as she took off home. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, containing my quiet frustration.

“Sorry,” the little girl whispered.

When I opened them, she had dropped her stick, and was kicking the dust with her grubby big toe. I put my hand on her head gently. After a moment, I realised we had no water or food, and this little girl was exhausted. She looked up, tears close to spilling from her blue eyes. They were surprisingly familiar. I took her hand and began to follow the land.

“You taking me home?” she asked cautiously. Her voice was croaky from being parched. I nodded and continued on. I’d crossed a stream a few miles behind, but I knew, from the slope, that it curled around and was no more than a mile to the east. Light began to desert us and the night creatures began to rustle and call. After a little while the girl tugged a little harder on my hand as she began to lag. I lifted her up and carried her the rest of the way.

The creek sang, and soon enough, so did the tinder of my campfire. The girl drank fiercely from the creek and now sat close to the flames.

“My name is Iris. Do you have a name?” she asked. I told her. She stared at me for a while, and I looked back at her.

“Your voice is the same sound as the river,” she noted quietly.

Moments passed. Children have such beautiful views on the world. My voice was hardly used, and never valued. I tracked, mustered and rode. I did not talk beautifully. But now, like a river, my words flowed, into the girl’s mind and I told her about my travels. I told her things she’d never remember, and perhaps things she might never forget. She listened intently, her eyes growing sleepy. I wrapped her in my tattered coat and she fell soundly asleep. I reflected on the stories I was told around a campfire when I too was young. Stories are so important to my people. Now I do not talk at all.

It was mid-morning when Iris’ famine and exhaustion caused her collapse. I lifted her, like a slight little angel, and walked briskly, long into the day. I must have been a curious sight - if anyone were lost enough to have seen - a small girl, carried in the arms of a tall, gruff native man. I had to lift my neck high to prevent my beard scratching her face and waking her. When the station came into sight, I spoke softly to wake her.

“Iris. You gotta walk now. Can’t be seen with me.”

She rubbed her eyes and stumbled along beside me. Footstep after footstep, she meandered, until she saw the back of the kitchens and her mother sitting on the steps, waiting.

The sound of the reunion of mother and child cannot be deadened by anything, and is an assault to unguarded ears. In a blur, Iris’ mother was holding her closely and my work was decidedly done. Could you imagine your daughter lost for two dark nights and two hellish days, with hardly a hope of finding her? The epitome of her accomplishments on this earth had vanished, her reason to love anything had disappeared. And now I’d brought them back together. I walked over to them, and the mother looked up, her eyes glassy. Her big, blue eyes, the same colour as the boss’. The boss’ daughter. Now I understood the underlying desperate tone in his voice when he called upon me.

I quickly hid the realisation in my eyes, nodded to them both and began to return to the stables. My thoughts wandered to the idea that I might earn a raise in rations for my work, bringing the boss’ granddaughter home. I suppose it wasn’t a very appropriate thought but it was a practical thought. In another life, I would know that you could put no price on a life or love. But this was my life, and my life was hardened, my life was practical. I had no time to be telling tales to little girls around campfires. I had no time to watch the joy in the mother and daughter’s eyes as they held each other again.

I had to find my mare. Through the heat haze and dust, I saw she had bolted home. The new station hand had stabled her and the boss was leaning up against the rails. He saw me and shouted.

“Is the girl safe?”

I nodded. He strode off, rushing to get to the kitchen. He tipped his head slightly as he walked past.

In the days that followed, Iris recovered. I returned to my work. But something I told her must have stuck, because she found me again.

My mare let out a startled whinny as I was whittling away some time in the late afternoon. Iris’ big blue eyes peered up at me again.

“What’re you doing?” she whispered.

“What’re *you* doing?” I whispered back. I was very cautious that no-one could see her talking to me. Although her mother must have had Aboriginal blood, Iris looked white enough to be forbidden to talk to me, the tracker, the Aborigine, the ‘*inferior*’. But to her, I must just be the old man with the voice like the river.

She would smile and watch me for a while. Some days I even told her stories, quietly, away from the boss’ ears. Then she would scurry back to her mother who cooed for her. I remember those afternoons. They were long and pleasant and I could tell her things that I could tell no-one else here, white or black. I told her stories of my people, stories of my life and stories I’d invent just for her. One afternoon, after she and her mother witnessed some cattle work, she asked me, “Why does Boss call you Boy? You’ve got a beard like an old man, surely he could tell.” I laughed for a while, and told her it was because that’s what every white man had called me, for as long as I remember.

For four years, I remember, she grew taller and skinnier. She grew more responsible because her mother had two more babies. Boss grew older and greyer. And with all those afternoons that I spent, talking to innocent little Iris, I grew less and less lonely, and my life grew more and more rich. But I knew that one day this strange companionship would have to end.

The air was thick and soupy and I was painting landscapes with my words, when the Boss noticed his granddaughter sitting amongst the dusty saddles. His eyes flew from me to her, and without a word, the Boss pulled her out of the stables and sat her down in the dust. In

three effortless strides, he'd hit me and was staring daggers up at me. I stood still. He spat some obscene words at me and told me never to even look at Iris again. It was a sorry sight, a little girl, tears mingling with the red dirt. He stormed over to her and I could just hear him as he told her lie upon lie about the 'Man with the Voice like the River'. This story finishes similarly to how it began. The station hand and I watching closely as a thin stick rained down on the little girl, stoke after stroke.