

The River Boy by Tim Pratt

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There once was a woman who wanted more than anything to have a child. She was old, and had outlived her own sons and daughters, and their sons and daughters, too, and since her grandchildren had all been excessively taken with modern ideas and upstart temperance religions, there were no great-grandchildren. Her family name — which was very beautiful and meant "those who dwell on the banks of the great river" in an old forgotten language — was withered and almost gone, and she could not bear to be the last of her line. She knew many secrets and mysteries — that was how she'd achieved such long life, a life that had seemed a boon when she was young, but was more and more now a misery — and so she made a plan.

A few months before the snows were due, she left her cottage on the cliffside, with its medicinal garden and curmudgeonly half-wild goats, and hiked two slow days through the woods. She fended off wolves with her walking stick and highwaymen with her glares, and by shaming them with the names of their mothers — one of her many powers was to know the name of everyone's mother, even yours, little one.

Finally she reached the bank of the river where her ancestors had been born, a mighty water so vast and long that for most of its length it had no need for a name other than "The River" or sometimes "Big River." She had, in her youth, traveled the river, from source (a bubbling crack between two rocks in the mountains) to mouth (a fishing village that had grown into a vast port during the decades of her middle age). But this modest spot, a bend in the river with bare trees and browning long grass, was the particular place where *she* came from, so she made camp, and dipped her toes in the muddy placid reedy water's edge, scaring frogs and prompting the slow process of alarm that passes for startlement in turtles.

"Oh river," she said, "You are all the family I have left. Your waters flow in my blood, and I'm sure the blood of my many relations runs diluted in you. I am too old to bear more children of my own, and stealing away bright children from unfit parents can have troublesome consequences. Please, great river, if it be in your power, give me another child, and I will devote myself to him forever." She knelt on knees creaking from her long journey and drank the silty cold water of the river until her belly was cold and hard as a stone. Then she rolled over, wrapped herself in a cloak by the fire, and slept.

When she woke, it was no longer autumn, or even winter, but spring, and the sun shone down on her grassy bed surrounded by purple wildflowers, and a tiny baby boy dozed placidly on her chest. She sat up, ravenous, but pulled the baby to her chest with old instincts, baring her breasts. The baby nuzzled, clutched, and latched, sucking. The old woman was amazed she could produce milk at all, though she supposed that was no more miraculous than the fact of the babe himself. But when he dropped his head down, sated, she saw a trickle not of colostrum or milk but of clear cold water from her breast. She shivered, rose unsteadily to her feet, and looked at the wide empty channel of cracked earth where the river had been. She looked down at her baby, and he opened his eyes. They were the rich deep brown of river mud.

"Drought," she said firmly, scowling at the riverbed. "A little rain will put it right, I'm sure." She looked at the baby, her expression softening, and whispered "You're mine." She began the long hike back to her cottage, baby clutched close.

The old woman named her son River, and he grew quick as marsh reeds. His eyes were changeable, brown to blue and back again, and he loved it when she sang him all the songs of her youth, and the songs learned in her many travels from delta to tributaries to alluvial plains. She sang him the songs boatmen sang, and the songs dock loaders sang, and fisherman songs, frog gigger songs, washer-woman songs. He drank the water from her breasts until he was old enough for goat's milk, and later honey from her hives and vegetables from her

garden, and he sang, too, almost even before he could speak. The old woman felt dry places inside her blossom, felt fissures in her spirit heal, every time the boy called her "mother."

And she never, ever thought about the land beyond her mountain cleft, and she never, ever ventured over the hills to the river valley beyond.

When River was ten years old, he began to have nightmares. He would wake, shouting, and the old woman would rush from her pallet to his hammock, where he would twist and gasp like a fish in a net. At first, he was simply inconsolable, but after three nights he began to tell her about his dreams. "I see boats tilted on dry sand," he said. "I see women with cracked lips. I see strong men sitting idle on heaps of crates. I see lines and hooks twisted in tree limbs, and an empty city, and a dozen dead villages, and more, and more, and more."

The old woman closed her eyes. It was possible, she knew, to grow as old as she had grown and yet still not become wise. But she *was* wise, even if she had let her knowledge guide her to troubling places. "Tomorrow," she said, "We'll take a journey, and see what we see."

River was excited, as boys will be, at the prospect of a trip. It was spring, so there were no hungry wolves, only songbirds and butterflies, and River whistled at the one and chased the other, all nightmares forgotten. After two days they reached the spot where River had been born, or gifted, and the flowers were dead, the trees dying, the bare riverbed a stretch of misplaced desert.

"Ten year drought," she said, and River yawned mightily.

"I'm so *sleepy*," he said.

"It was a long journey. Come, lay down here in this dry place." She led him to the center of the riverbed, and he followed, trusting as always. She returned the bank and watched him settle to the ground, expecting a miracle in reverse. But he just slept, and she thought perhaps her own power was too strong, that she'd doomed the land of her ancestors with her own one life's need. She wept then, and the tears rolled in clear fresh rivulets down her cheeks, breaking into waves when they struck the dry earth, and in moments the riverbed was filled bank to bank with a welter of mother's tears, and her boy sank without a ripple.

"My son is drowned," she thought, and sat unmoving as night fell, seeing no need to rise from that spot ever again, knowing even her own long life would end in time if she did not eat or drink.

The water lapped the bank in a long slow rhythm, and frogs — already frogs! — began a counterpointed croaking, and with a slow dawning kind of awe she realized the river and the frogs were, in a way, singing; an old song of consolation for men and women whose loved ones had died and been sent floating down the river; a song she had taught her son just that winter, one cold and windy night.

When she wept again, the tears were salty human tears of relief.

Years passed, and people came back to the river, and fished, and gilled frogs, and sailed boats, and washed clothes. Some of those people were so grateful for their new lives that they took a new name to go along with them, a name that means "those who dwell on the banks of the great river" in a fine old language. That's what our name means, and where it comes from, little one.

Some say that old woman made a raft and sailed up and down the length of her son the river, singing to him and hearing songs in return, as proud of him as any mother could ever be of her son, as proud as I will be of you someday, I think. Some say that old woman still sails to this day, and when the water birds and frogs make music, it is the river, singing his mother a lullaby he learned long ago at her breast.

Close your eyes, little one. Listen to the river. Listen to him sing.

—For my son

