

My Name is River

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1

‘A treehouse. Big enough to sleep in,’ Dylan said, stabbing a fishfinger. He dropped a bit of it down to Megs when no one was looking.

‘You’ll need planks,’ his dad said.

Dylan had thought of that.

‘Can we have those ones in your workshop, leaning up against the back wall?’

‘Guess you’ll be wanting to use all my tools as well,’ Dad said with a sigh, but he was smiling.

‘Can I sleep in it?’ Tommo asked, burying a pea in his mashed potato. Tommo always said you could swallow almost anything if it was buried in mash.

‘Won’t you be scared?’ Dylan’s mum asked, keeping a close eye on the peas. ‘I wouldn’t want you to change your mind and start wandering about at midnight.’

Tommo nodded. ‘Yes, but if Dyl and the others are there, I’ll be OK.’

‘It could be ready by half-term. We can...’

Dylan’s dad’s phone rang.

Everyone looked at each other.

‘Is it him?’ Mum asked.

‘It is,’ Dad said, standing up so suddenly his chair fell over backwards. He pressed answer. ‘Hello?’ He reached out and placed a hand on Dylan’s mum’s shoulder.

Dylan felt a grin spread over his face. Mum was gazing

at Dad, one hand over her mouth. Tommo's eyebrows had shot up and his mouth was open. Dad's eyes shone like they did after he'd helped a ewe through a difficult birth and a perfect lamb emerged, and struggled to its feet. Dylan stared at his dad, waiting. It couldn't take Owen long to say it.

Except something seemed to be wrong.

His dad was frowning.

'What do you mean?' his dad said, leaving the kitchen.

'Eat up, boys,' Mum said, still smiling. 'There's probably more paperwork to be done. These things take ages.'

So Dylan and Tommo finished up while Dad strode around the garden, phone clamped to his ear.

The strange thing was, Dad looked confused. Then angry. He started waving his arms around. Seeing that he was being watched from the kitchen window, he moved away to the back of the house.

Dylan exchanged a glance with his mum and he knew they both thought it might be more than just extra paperwork. The phone call went on while Tommo had his bath. It was still going on when Tommo lined his cars up by his pillow. And now Dylan was eyeing his dad from the bathroom window, mouth full of toothpaste, with a heavy feeling in his stomach. A call that took this long couldn't be good.

He spat the toothpaste out and rinsed his toothbrush. He replaced it slowly in the rack, keeping his eyes on his dad, striding around the back garden in the dusk.

He was just wiping his mouth with his towel when his dad dropped his phone on the grass.

In slow motion, his dad raised both hands and locked them together on the back of his head. He leant back, as if to call out to someone in the sky. Then his chest expanded and even through the bathroom window Dylan could hear his roar. It went on and on, until it petered out into what you could only call a howl.

Dylan swallowed. His whole body went cold.

And then, like a folding chair, his dad collapsed down onto his haunches. He stayed like that, hands over his head, rocking. It was as if his whole body was flooded with oil and he'd stalled, just like an engine.

Dylan didn't know what to do.

He couldn't just go to bed.

He stood very still, and listened. When he was sure his dad was back inside, he crept out of the bathroom to hide behind the kitchen door.

'What on earth's happened, love?' his mum was asking.

When his dad spoke, his voice was dead. All the anger had gone. He might have been telling Mum he'd just put the bins out.

'The farm's been sold to someone else.'

'What? That's impossible. Bill said...'

Mum sounded as confused as Dylan felt. What was Dad talking about? Today was the day Dad was to buy the farm his family had worked on for generations.

'Yeah. Bill promised to sell it to us. But now he's gone,

it's up to the executors. Turns out he was in debt. They needed a better price.' He sighed a sigh that came all the way from his boots. 'Some cruddy global healthcare company made them an offer they couldn't refuse.'

'What do they –'

'Moss. They want to grow moss. What does it matter? It's all over, love.'

'Moss? But why our farm? Why ours?' His mother's voice broke and collapsed into a strangled cry.

'Apparently BlueBird buys up parcels of land all over the world to develop new products. It's ridiculous. There's any number of farms in Wales for sale – Evans has been trying to sell his for a year. Owen's written emails and made phonecalls all day long but thousands of people work for BlueBird and it's not easy to get through to the see-ee-oh. Anyway, it's done.'

'But we have rights. They can't just...'

'That's the worst of it, love. Apparently I signed away the rights when we took on that extra field.' He gave a bitter laugh.

'This house, the garden, the fields, your polytunnels, the river, it all belongs to BlueBird now. We will never own it, and we can't even rent it any more. They don't want tenant farmers on it.'

Dylan didn't understand. Why wasn't Dad saying anything about how to get it back?

'All those years...' his mum's voice trembled. 'All our saving. Your efforts, your grandfather's, your father's...'

There was a long silence. Dylan strained to listen, but his parents seemed to have turned to stone.

‘I can’t face telling the boys yet,’ Dad said, eventually. ‘Tommo’s too young to understand, but Dylan...’

‘Dylan will...’ His mum, his cheerful, sensible, no-nonsense mum actually began to cry.

‘I know. He loves every blade of grass on this farm. Let’s just say there’s been a delay until we know what we’re doing.’ His dad groaned a long, horrible groan. ‘We’ve got until Christmas.’

Dylan tiptoed away, his brain boiling over.

Very quietly, he let himself out through the front door and padded off barefoot, with Megs at his heels, towards the riverbank. Slivers of dark blue rested on the horizon, and a full moon followed him all the way to the fallen tree that bridged the water. A robin hopped in the shadows, along a branch. Here, on the bank, Megs sat down, too afraid to go further.

Placing his feet carefully, he walked halfway across the fallen tree and sat down on its smooth trunk. His legs dangled over metallic waters, which churned and shone beneath him.

Until a few minutes ago, his whole life had been mapped out before him. Nothing stood in his way, apart from a few pointless years at school. He was going to work the farm like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather before him. He would spend all his time sheep-dipping, herding, shearing, mending fences, fixing

engines. Looking after the land and driving the tractor and digger and quad bike in all weathers. Megs, only a puppy now, would become a highly trained sheepdog, zipping this way and that, to keep the sheep in line. And he would breed from her and her pups until he was as old as Gramp.

But now, none of that was going to happen. Mum would lose her jam business, Tommo wouldn't grow up on the farm and Dad and Gramp would have to leave the place they'd lived in all their lives. And Dylan could forget about building a treehouse with his friends. The map had been wiped clean.

Dylan pressed his newly sharpened pencil into the bottom of the poster until it made a neat hole. He leaned against the wall, his right hand hidden by his left arm, so the teacher couldn't see what he was doing.

It was a stupid poster anyway. Arrows showed evaporation from lakes and streams forming clouds which blew over oceans and continents to hilltops and then dropped the rain back into mountain streams again. As if anyone needed to go to school to be taught that – you could see it with your own eyes, if you weren't stuck in a smelly classroom.

If you just got off your backside, as Gramp would say, and followed the river upstream, through the woods, past

the boggy uplands, on and on and up to the top of the hill at the farm's northern boundary, you'd see exactly what the clouds were doing. Sometimes, when he had too much energy boiling around inside him, Dylan went up there on his own to feel the wind on his neck and nothing but the sky above him.

The smell in the Geography classroom was a mixture of armpits, socks and sharp chemical cleaning liquids. Mrs Hughes' voice droned, bee-like, in his brain, urging them to study hard now that they had started secondary school.

'Young man! Are you listening?'

Dylan jolted in his seat. Mrs Hughes was talking to him.

'After the school trip to Harlech over half-term you will be expected to hand in your Geography project. It is a chance to expand your mind.'

He glared at her and made another hole with his pencil.

She had one pair of glasses in the normal place, on her nose, and another pair on her head, just visible in her hair. It was springy, blonde hair, like coils of wool. Like sheep's wool, in fact, just before shearing, with long shaggy bits dangling below her ears. A pen poked out from behind one ear. There were probably several more pens and pencils hiding in that hair. Dylan wouldn't be surprised if there was a ruler and a few rubbers in there as well. She probably didn't even need a handbag.

Last night, when everyone was asleep, he had googled

BlueBird to find out what dad meant by the see-ee-oh. Dylan clicked on 'Our People'. At the top it said Mustafa Shadid, Chief Executive Officer. Oh, thought Dylan, CEO.

A picture of a man with dark skin and short dark curly hair filled the screen. He had a wide smile and looked like the kind of man you could talk to. If Dylan could just find him – where? Dylan clicked on the contacts page and found offices all over world except the UK. That was the end of that, then.

Dylan flicked down the rest of the photos in 'Our People'. They all looked perfectly nice. Did he really think he would find a cartoon baddie among them, with rotting teeth, a grey face and evil red eyes? Then Dylan got a shock. Way down at the bottom of the list, a face he knew glared out at him. Floyd's face.

It wasn't Floyd of course. It was much older for a start, with a wild, staring expression, whereas Floyd always looked cold and serious. He checked the name. Mac Adams, it said. Floyd's dad. Floyd had said he worked abroad, and here he was, working for the same company that had just bought their farm. The job description said Consultant Conservationist, whatever that meant. One of his jobs had been in Scotland, where he had surveyed aquatic plants and mosses in rivers and lochs. It also said he had sampled and identified earthworms. Sampled? Didn't that mean he ate them? Mum sent samples of jam to people. If he ate worms, he might not be the sort of dad who would be much help.

Here he was, caged, listening to his teacher waffling on with Floyd sitting in another classroom only a few feet away. If she thought he was going to waste any time on her project, she had another think coming.

‘The project title is Human Impact on the Environment. You can choose anything that human beings have done, past or present. Assess whether it is a good or bad impact, or a mixture of both.’

Dylan almost growled. She looked like one of those people who spent all their free time reading instead of going outside and doing any of the things in her books. Like actually going up a tree. Or making a huge bike track with jumps, or building a treehouse you could sleep in. Or trudging off in the rain through gorse and bracken and over mossy mounds to the far edges of the farm with a dog to rescue a sheep some tourist had said was stuck in a fence.

Dylan hadn’t slept much. He had spent every waking second wracking his brains to work out how they could get the farm back. He wasn’t any good at schoolwork and he had never got the hang of being polite, but – and it wasn’t boasting if you only said it to yourself – he was pretty good at making things happen.

He had plenty of ideas. Some were too big: computer hacking to change the sale, kidnapping the CEO, tying himself to the rope swing and refusing to leave. And some were too soft: taking all the road signs to his village away, using the digger like a tank to stop BlueBird from entering

the village, setting up a petition. But he hadn't come up with anything you could call a real plan. And how was he supposed to think with his teacher droning on and on?

'I'd like to see the human element,' she continued, 'talk to people involved if you can. Sometimes the essays that win are the ones that show how passionate the writer is. So look for something you really care about.'

Dylan sighed. She was smiling now and he could tell immediately that she had something granny-ish – like elderflower – running in her veins. To be fair, she probably had no idea how much she was torturing him.

Deep inside, a nasty dark thought hunkered down, waiting for the right moment. That thought was: it was impossible. Global companies didn't sell farms back because some kid wanted them to. Dylan shoved the thought roughly aside.

He had to go and see Floyd after school and get his dad's email address. Gramp would call it clutching at straws. But it was better than doing nothing.

2

That evening after tea, Dylan picked Megs up and pressed his face into the soft fur on the back of her neck so Tommo couldn't see his expression. Matt and the twins, Aled and Rob, would be waiting for them, sitting on the fallen tree.

'Go to the river without me,' he told Tommo. 'I'm not coming.'

'What about the treehouse?' Tommo asked. 'I thought we were gonna...'

'I said, go!' Dylan snapped.

Tommo gave him a funny look and opened his mouth, but Dylan scowled and left the kitchen. He could just about hide his feelings from Tommo, but not from Matt. Matt would demand to know what was wrong and Dylan knew he couldn't make something up.

When Dylan was four, he'd been digging a tunnel in the sandpit in the village playground when, deep underground, his fingers had met more fingers. He had looked up to see an astonished freckled face. They had both burst out laughing and been best friends ever since. The thought of seeing Matt this evening, knowing that he, Dylan, might have to leave the village forever, was unbearable.

Megs trotted happily beside Dylan on the way to Floyd's house. Closing the garden gate behind him, he

walked straight past the front door and onto the grass. He threw a small pebble up so it tapped on Floyd's bedroom window. No response. He tried again. On the third try, a head popped out of the window.

'Come down, will you?' Dylan hissed. 'I need to ask you something.'

'It's too late. I'll see you tomorrow.' The head popped back in again.

'It's about your dad.'

Floyd's head came out again, glowering, and then disappeared. Footsteps pounded down the stairs. A moment later the front door opened.

'Shut up about my dad. It'll upset my mum.' Floyd marched off towards the garden shed, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, the ice in his veins as cold and hard as when he first came to the village.

Being able to see what flowed in people's veins wasn't something Dylan had ever mentioned to anyone. Whenever he tried to put it into words, it sounded silly. But for as long as he could remember, he had been able to see right inside people. Not what they wanted you to see, but what made them who they really were. And not see it, exactly, but feel it deep in his bones.

Mum, for instance, had pure strawberry juice running in her veins. Everyone should be able to see that. That's why she was so round and huggable and quite red in the face. Dad usually had exactly the right amount of engine oil running through him – he must have absorbed it

through his fingers, that's why he was so good at fixing things. Matt had marmite – sensible, everyday marmite – in his veins, which made sense because he was great if he liked you, awful if he didn't. The twins had grown so tall, so fast, that it was hard to be sure – something like the spangly, soapy water for blowing bubbles in Rob, and something denser, almost like floppy spaghetti, in Aled. And Tommo – Tommo was a jelly bean, everyone liked him and old ladies always said he was sweet.

Dylan's own blood usually surged in bursts, boiling and popping, which was why it was so hard to sit in a classroom doing nothing instead of getting on with stuff.

But he had never met anyone like Floyd. At the beginning of the summer, Dylan had seen something straight off about Floyd. Something so cold it would take the skin off your fingers if you touched it. Hard, sharp. Icicles, needles, splinters of glass. Whatever was in his veins had frozen over. By the end of the summer, when Floyd told Dylan about his brother, they made their peace and Dylan had seen Floyd's veins begin to creak and move with a pale blue liquid. Now, just a few days later, they had frosted again.

Floyd flung the shed door open and Dylan followed. Inside, it was practically empty. Dylan's dad's workshop was crammed with tools: saws, hammers, garden spades, rakes, crusty gardening gloves, chisels and plenty of shapes you couldn't name. This garden shed had nothing but a lawnmower and two bikes, one covered in mud and

a smaller one as clean as if it had come out of the shop two minutes before. Joe's bike.

What none of the others knew was that Floyd had a younger brother, Joe, who he hadn't seen for six months. After Floyd's dad took a job in Brazil, he had asked Floyd's mum if he could take Joe with him for the Easter holidays. Trouble was, they didn't come back. Floyd and his mum didn't tell anyone when they came to live in the village, and even Dylan wasn't supposed to know.

Floyd waited for Dylan to close the door. He glared at Dylan.

'What do you want?' he demanded, as if he thought Dylan had come to pick a fight.

As Dylan looked at Floyd's angry, tight face, it occurred to him that he didn't really have any idea of who Floyd would be if his brother wasn't away in another country. But that didn't make it any easier to be with him.

'Your dad still works for that stupid face-cream company, BlueBird, right?' He hadn't meant to be rude, it just came out that way.

'It's not a stupid face-cream company. It's a top pharmaceutical company.'

'Farmer-suit-ical? That's a joke.'

'No, P-H. Like pharmacy. A chemists. You know, they make medicines. Or drugs, my dad calls them. That's the American word, anyway. Dad says BlueBird is the best drugs company in the world, discovering amazing new

medicines from natural sources. His job is making sure it's eco-friendly and...'

'Bluebird's just bought our farm, Floyd, so you can cut the big sell.'

'Bought – your farm?' Floyd's cold eyes met Dylan's.

'Yeah. Just when we were about to.'

Floyd played with Megs' ear. 'Does that mean ... you'll have to leave? The village?'

Dylan swallowed.

'Not if I can fix things,' he said. It sounded ridiculous. He stood a little straighter. 'I need to talk to your dad. Can you give me his email? I just need to explain something and everything will go back to normal.'

Floyd's face paled and his whole body stiffened.

'No.'

'No? Wha...?'

'You can't talk to him. I can't talk to him. We've lost touch with them. The last time I heard from Joe was nine days ago. He sounded scared.'

'Scared of your dad?'

Floyd's jaw clenched and he breathed in deeply. 'I wouldn't have said anyone could be scared of my dad, but yes.' He looked up at the ceiling. 'If you must know, Joe said Dad had started drawing on the walls, sticking bits of paper all over them. Shouting down the phone at strangers. Ranting about a second project. I mean, he always talked to himself, but it sounds like he's got worse. Then Joe went silent. No emails, no Skype calls, not even a text.'

For the first moment in twenty-four hours Dylan stopped thinking about the farm.

‘What did your mum say?’

‘I didn’t tell her. It would make her...’ Floyd stopped and gazed out of the window. ‘She says her whole body aches, she misses Joe so much. I can hear her crying at night.’

‘And the judge? Wasn’t a judge going to do something about it?’

‘Dad hasn’t answered his letter. It might take months.’ Whatever was holding Floyd up like a plank, collapsed. He slid down to the wooden floor and studied it.

‘If I could just talk to Dad, I could get him to send Joe home.’

Dylan also slid down and pulled a splinter out of the floorboards.

‘Yeah, right. Like if I could just talk to the CEO – or anyone – at BlueBird. You know, go to one of the offices or wherever he...’

‘There’s a big office in Salvador, Brazil, where my dad is.’

Dylan stuck his splinter into a small hole and dug some sawdust out.

‘So if we could just nip over to Brazil...’

‘Yeah, if we could ... teleport over there.’

‘Yup,’ Dylan said. ‘Like just hop over all that sea.’

‘Five thousand five hundred and sixty eight miles.’

‘You actually know that?’

‘I know a lot about Brazil,’ Floyd said. ‘But it doesn’t do

any good. It's impossible to get there. We're stuck in this tiny village, miles from anywhere. We couldn't even get to Machynlleth, let alone an airport.'

Five thousand, five hundred and sixty-eight miles between Dylan and a big office with loads of people who worked at BlueBird. And someone who had the power to say, 'Oh, OK, we didn't know you wanted to buy your farm. That's fine, we'll buy the one in the next village, then. You can have yours back. Done deal.' And Floyd's dad lived there.

Dylan traced around a knot of wood in the floor with the splinter. The knot was like a boulder in the river, a large lump that all the lines had to swerve around. It made him think of the swirls and eddies and white spray when the water hit a rock. Nothing stopped the river. He knew that from trying to dam it. If there was something in the way, the river just swirled round it, or leaked under it, or built up so much pressure behind the obstacle that eventually it poured over it. The river always found a way.

Floyd was wrong about one thing, though. Getting to Machynlleth would be easy. Dylan pictured the route to town. Up to the main road, turn left, go past the kennels and cattery, round the roundabout. On and on. You could easily cycle it.

'You could get to Machynlleth,' he said. 'It'd take about an hour on a bike. And you could get to an airport from there by train. Birmingham, for instance.'

Floyd grunted.

‘But you couldn’t go without a passport, of course,’ Dylan said. He had one, they’d all got them to go to France by ferry last year and he was very proud of it. But Floyd might not have one.

‘Oh, I’ve got a passport,’ Floyd said, as if it was nothing.

‘But it would cost zillions to fly to Brazil.’

Floyd dug his splinter into the crack between floorboards and flipped out a spray of sawdust.

‘My grandpa gives me a cheque every Christmas and it just goes into my bank account. I don’t care about the money, I just want Joe back.’

‘You have a bank account?’

‘Yeah. You can get one when you’re eleven. Mum opened it for me.’

‘With a card ’n’ all? The sort you can buy things online with?’

Floyd nodded.

‘I’ve got some money left over from the summer,’ Dylan said. ‘And I could earn more.’

Dylan dropped his splinter and looked straight at Floyd. His chest and brain were getting hot. But Floyd was shaking his head.

‘It’s not possible,’ Floyd said.

Dylan’s chest churned with life. It wouldn’t only be possible – it would be easy. He sprang to his feet, suddenly desperate for action.

‘What’s stopping us? We’ve got money and passports.’

Why don't we just buy the tickets?' It was all so clear. They would stay at Floyd's dad's place and he, Dylan, could go to BlueBird's office the next day and explain to someone what had happened and tell them about the Evans' farm. He might not find the CEO, but he would find someone. They would definitely listen to a kid who had travelled all the way from Wales. Grown-ups were soft like that.

'Let's go online – right now – let's just see how much it is, how long it takes, all that,' he said. How could Floyd just sit there? 'Where is BlueBird and Salvador exactly, anyway?' Was Dylan imagining it, or was the ice in Floyd's veins beginning to creak and move?

'On the coast. South of the equator,' Floyd said slowly. He wasn't smiling, he wasn't excited yet, like Dylan was.

The only things Dylan knew about Brazil were that it was the size of Europe and they played football the whole time. And now, that it was five thousand, five hundred and sixty eight miles away.

'Other side of the world, then,' breathed Dylan.

The boys crept past Floyd's mum as she watched a survival programme on TV about eating caterpillars in the jungle. On the kitchen computer they googled flights. At first they got El Salvador instead, a country south of Mexico. Then they realised their mistake and the right flights, for Salvador, a city in Brazil, came up. The flight took sixteen hours, with a stop in Lisbon. They put in their ages to see

what the price would be. Adults: 0, Young Adults: 2. A red sign flashed up: young adults between the ages of 11 and 15 travelling alone must have a signed letter of authorisation from a family member, it said.

‘See. I told you it was impossible,’ Floyd said, sitting back in the chair, defeated.

‘You can’t just give up,’ Dylan said. ‘We have to work out how to get round it, that’s all. We could forge a signature?’

‘I tried copying mum’s once on a sick note,’ Floyd said. ‘You can tell it’s not a grown-up’s writing. Maybe you could get your dad to sign it.’

‘He doesn’t know I know. And I heard him say he can’t even talk about it yet. Maybe we could find an adult who was busy, who wouldn’t really look at it.’

‘Yeah, right. Have to be a seriously irresponsible adult,’ said Floyd.

A seriously irresponsible adult.

‘The sort that doesn’t pay his bills,’ Dylan said, slowly. ‘The sort that has vices. Like gambling. The sort that leaves his plates and beer cans by the TV until he runs out and has to wash up because he hasn’t any left.’

‘Yeah, that’s exactly the sort of adult,’ said Floyd, dully, as if there was no hope of finding one like that.

As if there wasn’t one who fitted that description in their very village.

First published in 2020
by Firefly Press
25 Gabalfa Road, Llandaff North, Cardiff, CF14 2JJ
www.fireflypress.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781913102142

*This book has been published with the support of
the Welsh Books Council.*

Typeset by Elaine Sharples

Printed and bound by: