

Where The Gorge Sings

Dulcie Kirby

As she crossed the bridge that spanned the Breede River at the bottom of Michell's Pass, she felt a pang of memory born of grief. Halfway up the pass she turned right and parked.

Carrying a backpack, and her flyfishing rod encased in its aluminium rod holder, she made her way on a crisp, blue-bright November day, downwards, crossed the Breede, and stood at a spot she liked to think of as nature's gateway to the fynbos-clad gorge that embraced the Witels River.

She paused. Looking up, her eyes followed the vertical course of the river to the Waaihoek where it birthed at the top of the Skurweberg mountain.

Though she had been here many times with her husband, this trip was different. It was *in memoriam*, and to scatter his ashes in a place that had been especially special to them.

Drawn to seating herself on a protruding rock in the middle of the river, sculpted by its waters over years into a smooth, white boulder, she listened to the gentle rippling of the stream. Her everyday state of life retreated, to be replaced by a serene calmness, and she felt herself persuaded to follow the path of a favoured memory long past.

The month and the date of her present trip - November 6th - had been chosen because they were tied to the same month and date of a singular time for both her and her husband on this river forty-two years ago.

They had planned that November trip to coincide with their first wedding anniversary. It was to be a three-week-long, camping and fishing holiday. And it was to be the time when, after hours of starting to learn the art of flyfishing, she would begin to put her rudimentary skills into practice under his guidance.

But it was such that what was meant to be, wasn't to be.

On the first day, they fished from late-afternoon into evening. Tired and hungry, they began the trudge back to Sandy camp, there to build a fire on which they would pan-fry the two browns they'd caught, added to

which would be some Smash (only tolerated on camping trips) and a salad.

A small rain-shower announced itself, but it was brief and the sky cleared of the last clouds.

As they sat down to enjoy the fruit of their afternoon's labour, the temperature fell dramatically. They ate, and then spent some time close to the warming embers of the fire until late into the night. It was then they heard the gorge begin to sing: a stunning, an eerie sound touched by a sense of a mystic calling. Though there is a scientific explanation for this phenomenon, to lay it bare would be to eradicate the mystery and magic of its exquisite loveliness. It was a song would always be for her an enduring memory, often sounding its calling self through the years at those odd times when remembrance smiles.

After listening aghast and in wonderment to its brief strain, they settled onto their bedrolls on the sandy beach near the water's edge, sleeping bags pulled up around their ears.

A few hours later, she was shaken awake by her husband. It had begun to rain. Heavily. The river had risen rapidly and water was lapping at their feet. Not without a sense of panic, they hastily packed up camp, and stumbled and fumbled their way upwards in the pitch-blackness, guided only by the light of their head-torches to what was a medium-sized cave (known to some as The Baboon Cave) some metres above them, and which would offer the shelter needed to wait out the storm. Little did they know then it would continue to rain for a few days, the gentle stream transforming into a raging torrent.

The wind was howling. It was freezing. The river continued to rise exponentially, fed not only by the rain but also by a melting snowline in its upper reaches.

They dumped everything in the cave, then reluctantly ventured out to collect wood for a fire before it became too rain-soaked and impossible to burn. Returning sodden from the sheeting rain, they plugged the gaps in the cave with plates, pans and clothing. A quick change of clothing and, shivering, they turned in for the rest of the night.

The following morning their situation was bleak. Civet cats, identified by their droppings, had found their way into the cave and had made a hearty meal of the food in backpacks they'd failed to close. Concern set in as rationing became a necessity.

Two days later it was still raining. They were trapped on the wrong side of the tumbling, rock-grinding river. Two shivering excuses for human beings. Their only hope of crossing to the other side would have been if they had a long rope. And they didn't. Or if Moses had been present. Which he wasn't. Their only option out of this predicament would be to climb upwards, to get to the top of the gorge and then plan how to proceed from there. They decided to put the plan into effect when it stopped raining. They endured yet another wet, cold, miserable day.

The following morning, they woke very early to what was to be a clear day of warm sunshine. The vegetation seemed to be all shades of iridescent green, water beads glittered on leaves and there was the steady drip of droplets sliding off leaves from the higher branches of small trees. Nature clean and polished. And a world hushed.

After filling water bottles and having a quick bite, they struck camp and began the walk upwards. The climb was gruelling as they patiently plodded and slipped and slipped and plodded as they inched their way upwards. Upwards. There were many rest moments to gaze around with squinting eyes to plot the way forward.

As soon as they thought they had reached the summit it was only to find it wasn't. Perspective from below had tricked the eye. The summit appeared even further away. Disappointed, they continued upward, as did this mountain pattern, for an exhausting eight hours. Their knees wobbled from the strain of it all, but their deliberate trudging and their patience rewarded them. Finally, they reached the top of the endless top, and they were able to see the river below.

They plotted a course downward to where they thought they might be able to cross the Breede without a rope. They continued to practise patience knowing that now that home was in sight the most dangerous thing would be too hurry.

Extreme care was taken.

Two hours of slipping and sliding, of gripping, of helping each other with outreached hands, of pushing and pulling, and they found themselves on the edge of the Breede. Here, although the broad river was running at speed, they could see the rocky, sandy bottom of it. They decided to attempt a crossing, made tempting by the fact they could see the bonnet of their car through the trees on the other side.

They nodded to each other, took a deep breath and walked tentatively into the icy waters. He used the aluminium rod holder (the same one she was using today) to form a tripod with his feet, leaning into the rushing, tumbling water. Their feet blindly felt their way until they were halfway across. Then a heart-stopping, pulse-racing moment as she lost her footing. Seconds from being swept away, thinking in a flash that all she needed to do was roll onto her back and allow the river to take her, she felt him grab her wrist. Still using the rod-holder with one hand to find purchase on the bed of the river, his other holding tightly to the wrist of her body helplessly bobbing on the surface of the turbulent waters, he slowly and cautiously dragged them to safety on the other side. They collapsed onto the sandy bank breathing heavily, amazed they had made it.

She shrugged herself back to the present. That encounter with nature's fickleness had been an anniversary of a different kind. Now was the anniversary of another kind.

Knowing these waters were home to the sunset-yellow, elusive, red-spotted brown trout, and the longfin eels spawned in the breeding grounds of the Indian Ocean, she spent time reading the waters, looking for signs of insect life and imagining where the fish might be lying and on what they might be feeding.

She decided to fish for a brown or two, taking her time to stalk them as she boulder-hopped a path to Boulder Pool, the place from where she would complete the ritual she had come to perform.

Satisfied with her course of action, she extracted her rod from its holder and assembled it. From the pocket of her fishing jacket, she removed the reel with a medium-sinking line. She attached the reel to the rod and led the line through the rod guides to its tip where she joined a tapered leader to the end of the line, followed by a Hare's Ear fly she would fish below the surface.

She took her time. On reaching Boulder Pool, and with a pan-sized brownie for her evening meal, she hid her backpack in the brush at the edge of the river, leaving a pair of *stokies* in sight, a booking ticket to any who might have a similar idea of camping at this spot for the night. She continued fishing onwards and upwards and back for the rest of the day.

Back at her camping spot, she performed the same ritual as that of their first anniversary. And late into the evening as the gorge began to sing its

requiem, she emptied his ashes into the gentle flow of the river and watched as they floated away to become a small part of the memory of waters.