

The River

Robyn Holly Taylor-Neu

The children crouched in the shallows. They had removed their shoes and the water lapped around their ankles. The river was slow-moving, icy, grey-green. Behind them, crags of alluvium resolved into tufts of oat grass, sloping up towards the highway. The bigger boy picked a flat stone from the water. He drew his arm back, then snapped it sideways in a motion like the cracking of a whip. The stone skipped across the surface. It rebounded one, two, three times.

Four. He turned with a widening grin, back to face his brother. Four. The smaller boy squinted at the blazing water. His hair was pale and fine. At the back it brushed his dark, burnt neck. He glanced sideways at his brother.

The bigger boy sucked air through a tooth gap, issuing a thin whistle. Anyhow, you havnt got more'n two. He hitched his shorts and waded deeper, scanning the pebbled riverbed. The first stone that he pulled from the water was dark and shiny wet, ringed with pale strata. He weighed it in his palm. It was too large, too heavy for his purpose. After a moment, he made to drop it back, but pocketed it instead.

His smaller brother had been squatting by the shore. He exclaimed, and pounced at the water, and rose triumphant with a sleek, flat stone. Beautiful.

The older boy moved towards his brother. Give it here. Come on.

It's mine. His grip tightened, fingers paling. The grime at his nail beds matched the stone's hue.

It's wasted on you. Come on. I'll trade you. Come on. He sprang at his brother, seizing a bony wrist. The child squealed and tried to wrench his arm away. Come on, the bigger boy repeated as he peeled back the other's fingers one by one. At once, he palmed the pebble and released his grip, sending his brother sprawling in the shallows. The small boy's face was tear stained, and a lucent bubble bloomed from one nostril. He sobbed quietly and cradled his wrist. The older boy turned to the light of the dying sun to examine his prize. He turned it over. He tossed it into the air. Beautiful. He drew up one knee and coiled his arm in a pantomime of a pitcher's windup. The pressure to deliver a worthy throw weighed upon him. It was

almost too perfect to part with. He gazed at it, a perfect moon in the middle of his palm.

Hey, the smaller boy had risen, still sniffing. I'll trade you. He hefted a large, dark stone, ringed with pale strata. His brother laughed in delight, recognizing the twin of his pocketed pebble. It's too big, he said turning away.

The smaller boy glowered. His fingers whitened around the rock. It served his purpose. Perfectly.

Ribbons

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"Let us go now, you and I" The remainder of the line disappeared beneath the soft, pale flesh of Attila's belly. Jacob sighed and prodded him gently with the tip of his pencil. After a lazy blink, a mere flicker of translucent eyelid, and a measured twist of the head, Attila continued his slow pilgrimage across the page. His toe nails made whispery, scrabbling sounds on the yellowed parchment. Behind him, in a languid whorl, trailed the train and silky ribbons of Barbie's wedding dress.

"Ja-cob! Have you set the table?"

He squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Open. Shut. Open. He admired the way that the dusk rose of the dress offset the milky sheen of Attila's skin. "It looks much better on you than it does on her. She doesn't have the figure."

"Jacob."

. . .

"I asked you to do something."

"Did she?" Eyes wide. Innocent. Jacob rested his cheek on the desk, nose brushing Attila's. He blinked. Jacob placed a forefinger on the page, looped it through the loose ribbons.

"Jacob. For Christ's sake. Now." (Jacob. Jesus. Now.)

"Let us go now, you and I?" But as Jacob wrapped his fingers beneath Attila's ribs, he began to pedal his legs spasmodically. He twitched his tail in agitation, the gesture amplified by the billow of his skirts. Wordlessly, Jacob placed him back on