

## UP THE RIVER

By Claire Blatchford

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The first time I visited my grandfather I was ten. When he took me to the river behind his house in the north woods, I stood looking at the water and listening. This is what I heard:

*Come along  
Over sand and stone  
Come along—  
On and on  
Leaving troubles  
Follow bubbles  
Roaming on  
And ever on.*

Then there was only the sound of water gurgling by. I wondered if I had really heard the song.

“Take your sneakers off,” Grandfather said. “You won’t be needing them in the water.”

I took them off and waded in. The water was icy cold, and the rocks were sharp and uneven underfoot. I tottered a bit as the river rushed and pulled at me.

“Is it always this cold?” I asked. It was the middle of July. I’d been swimming in a pool in my hometown, and that water was like bathwater compared to this.

“Yup, and colder. But once you get used to it, it never bothers you again. Not even in March.”

I stared at him. “You go swimming in March?”

“Sure.” His brown eyes were laughing, but his mouth stayed straight. I didn’t tell him my feet were already nearly numb.

I knew from my mother that Grandfather hadn't finished school, but she said he was very wise. He grew his own vegetables, tracked deer, and could read the weather from the way the trees moved. My mother was proud of him; after all, she had Indian blood, too. But my father always frowned when Grandfather's name was mentioned. Maybe that frown explained why I hadn't been to the north woods before now.

Grandfather gave a chuckle. "Cold, huh?"

It was as though he could read me, too. I climbed out on the bank and asked if there were any fish in the river.

"Yup."

"Can I go fishing?" I'd never gone fishing.

"Sure." He seemed pleased.

"I haven't got a rod."

"Neither do I."

Again I stared at him. "What do you fish with?"

He put his hands out. They were broad, brown, knobby hands with close-cut nails. Rivers of purple veins ran down from his wrists to his fingers.

"You catch them with your hands?" I couldn't believe it. I had a grandfather who caught fish with his hands!

"I catch them with my eyes first, then with my hands. You have to be pretty quick."

"Where do you find the fish?" I wanted to see them for myself.

"You look for them. You look where you'd like to be if you were a fish, maybe in pools behind rocks or in eddies." He leaned forward. "And sometimes they look for *you!*"

Something about his words made me shiver. I wanted to ask him more questions, but he had turned and was striding back to the house as though enough had been said. I had to run to keep up with him.

I woke early the next morning. The sun was peeping through the trees, making ribbons of light over the field behind the house. I got into my shorts and a T-shirt and went into the hall. The door to Grandfather's room was closed. I was surprised to find the back door open—Dad locked all the doors at home every night. I tiptoed

onto the porch, down the steps, and across the field. The grass was wet, and my feet were soaked by the time I reached the river.

I was standing there, looking at it, watching the way the water quivered and twisted and turned back on itself. I thought I heard the river sing again, and it made me want to go somewhere, though I didn't know where. Then I began wandering upstream, hopping from one dry rock to another.

I went around a bunch of yellow flowers and came to a bend. From there I could see a fallen tree farther on. Half of the tree was in the water, and the rest of it was on the shore. There was an odd shape on the middle of it that looked like a turtle with its head sticking out. My mother had told me about snappers in the backwoods. The only turtles I'd ever seen were the little ones in pet shops.

I looked back quickly. Grandfather's house was no longer in sight. I hesitated, and it was then that I heard the river for the third time:

*Come along,  
Come along,  
Ever on—  
So smooth and slow  
Where fishes swim  
And turtles go.*

I had to see that turtle. I went on, but when I reached the tree, the turtle shape had disappeared.

I climbed up on the brown back of the tree and inched my way out over the water and looked down. The river was deeper, darker, somehow different from the river down by Grandfather's place. Where had the turtle gone?

I leaned forward to see better and discovered I was looking into an eye. I nearly fell over backwards. The eye was black, calm, still. It was about the size of a nickel and it never blinked. Then I saw the outline of a head and the gentle movement of a fin and I knew I was looking at a fish. Or rather, the fish was looking at me. Had it been waiting for me?

Slowly, so as not to slip and frighten the fish away, I crouched down. The eye never left my face. I don't know how long we looked at each other—it could have been a very short time or a very long time. I was hardly aware of the river; it had grown quiet and was like a thin piece of glass between the fish and me.

I put my hand out and the next instant I lost my balance.

I heard my own splash as I fell into the river. Down, down I went, wiggling and squirming as the water tugged at my shirt and pulled at my hair. I opened my eyes, saw nothing but whiteness, and shut them quickly. Panic pressed down on my chest with a great, cold hand. Was I going to drown?

Then a thought came to me from close by: *Let the river carry you.*

I think the fish was talking to me, although I heard no words the way I'd heard them when the river sang.

I stopped thrashing, and the river carried me. A small flick of my arms held me steady in the current, while my legs flowed out behind. I went into a pool behind a rock, feeling I could go on and on. But something caught at me from above, by the back of my shirt. I couldn't see what it was and wriggled to get loose.

"I've got you," a voice said.

"Let me go!" I yelled, kicking out. Then I recognized Grandfather's brown hands around my waist.

I was angry, though. Really angry. "I can swim," I told him as he put me on my feet.

"Cold?" he asked as though he hadn't heard me.

Cold? I hadn't thought about it. No, I wasn't cold. I shook my head. "I was swimming like a fish."

"I saw that."

"And you messed it up."

"I think you've had enough for now," he said. "There are some waterfalls around here that you don't know anything about."

I stared at him while the dripping water made a puddle about my feet.

"So you heard the river?" he asked.

I nodded. And as I looked in his eyes, I saw they were black and still and about the size of a nickel.

