

The Things the River Keeps

2496 words

By the time Marney Bell found the container, the river had already done its first bit of damage for the season.

It wasn't a proper flood—not one of those brown, biblical rises that took fences and lambs and left a thick, muddy silence in its wake. It was just winter rain, coming down hard over the Victorian ranges and making its way, as everything in this part of the country eventually did, into the Murray. The river was a greedy gut; it took the runoff of three states and turned it into a cold, muscular current that could pull the breath right out of a person's lungs.

She was walking below Noreuil Park because the doctor had told her to walk, and because walking sounded better than sitting at home listening to the fridge come on and off in a house that felt three sizes too big. The doctor called it "lifestyle adjustment" for a woman of fifty-eight who had recently lost her anchor. Marney called it "trying not to vanish."

The river was high enough to lap at the lower trunks of the gums. It carried mats of leaves, pale sticks smoothed by the upstream rocks, one punctured soccer ball, and a dead carp turning slowly in an eddy like it was still considering its options. The air smelled of wet mud, cold metal, and the sharp tang of woodsmoke drifting over from South Albury.

Marney had lived in Albury all her life and still thought of Wodonga, just across the water, as somewhere slightly separate. Her father had called it "over there" until the day he died. *Over there* had different rates, different football loyalties, different police when it suited people. The river divided nothing properly, but it gave everyone permission to pretend that a border meant a fresh start.

The container was wedged in the roots of a river red gum, half-buried in silt. At first, she thought it was a discarded bait box. Then she saw the faded, cracked sticker on the lid.

GEOCACHE. PLEASE RETURN.

Marney laughed, though no one was there to hear it. She had always found geocaching faintly ridiculous—grown adults hiding Tupperware for other adults to find via satellite, as though childhood needed an app to make it legal.

She nearly left it. Then she thought of her son, Liam. When he was little, he had lived for things like this. Secret places. Codes. Maps drawn badly on envelopes. That was before he grew up and moved to Melbourne and started saying "Albury-Wodonga" as one word, like it was a single clinical entity he had survived and moved past.

The lid was stiff, sealed by river grit. She had to kneel in the mud and work at the clips with her thumbnail until one snapped open with a sharp *crack*, then the other. Inside was not what she expected. No pencil, no

soggy notebook. No plastic dinosaur. There was only a sandwich bag, cloudy with age, folded around a single SD card.

For a moment, she simply stared at it. The river moved beside her, busy with its own business. Marney was a council library assistant; she knew that objects did not appear without reason. Or rather, they did, but reason came along afterwards and made a nest. She put the card in her coat pocket. Her fingers felt cold against the plastic.

At home, she placed the card on the kitchen table and made a pot of tea. The house had been too quiet since her father's funeral. Doug Bell's slippers were still under the chair; moving them felt melodramatic, and not moving them felt worse. His tobacco tin sat by the back door, now used only for screws. The whole place held its breath around what remained of him.

Marney had grown up in this house in East Albury. Her father had raised her mostly alone after her mother left for Bendigo with a man who sold irrigation pumps. That was the family version, anyway. In Albury, the "family version" was usually like a coat of house paint—enough to hide the rot in the timber if you didn't look too closely.

She found an old card reader in Liam's old bedroom. The computer took a while to recognize the card, the fan whirring like a labored breath. For one stupid second, she hoped it would fail. Then a folder opened. There were four files: One photograph. Two video clips. One text document.

The photograph loaded slowly. Four men stood beside the river at night, lit harshly by car headlights. They were younger than old men but older than boys. One was smoking. One wore a police uniform jacket over civilian clothes. The fourth man was her father.

Marney leaned back. She did not recognize him at first. Not because his face was different, but because his expression was. He looked afraid. Doug Bell had never looked afraid in any photograph Marney had seen. In the photograph, he was holding someone. A young woman's arm hung down from the bundle in his arms, thin and pale, the fingers loose.

Marney stood up so quickly the chair tipped back and hit the floor. The sound cracked through the silent house like a gunshot. She stood at the kitchen sink, her heart doing that strange, hard knocking it had done since the day the hospital called. Grief, she had learned, was not soft. People spoke of waves, but mostly it was a fist.

Eventually, she picked up the chair and opened the text document.

If you are reading this, then I either lost my nerve or I am dead. Her name was Iris Rourke. She was eighteen. Everybody said she ran away in 1988. She did not. Ask what happened behind the old stock route near Mungabareena after the Deb Ball. Ask why the police never searched the river bend. Ask Doug Bell. Ask Frank Hennessy. Ask Vince O'Dea. Ask Peter Marr. I saw the blood on her dress. I am sorry. — R.

Marney read it three times. The name *Iris Rourke* opened a memory—not an image, but a "weather." A shift in the town's atmosphere. Her father turning off the radio when the local news came on. The missing posters near the milk bar, rain-crinkled, showing Iris smiling in a white dress.

Marney had been twenty then. Old enough to know, but young enough to be told nothing. "Iris ran off," the town had decided. Iris was "wild." The town had fed on her for a season and then swallowed the remains.

Marney clicked the first video. It showed the same night. The camera shook. There were car doors slamming, men's voices, and the black shine of the Murray. A girl lay on the ground in a pale dress. One shoe was missing.

Marney heard her father's voice: "Jesus Christ, Frank. What did you do?" "Shut up and help," Frank replied. "She's breathing," Doug said. "She won't be for long if this gets out."

The video ended. Marney's hand went to her mouth. She felt a violent urge to vomit. She sat in the kitchen until the light changed from afternoon gold to a bruised purple. By six o'clock, she had decided to delete everything. By seven, she had put the SD card in a jam jar hidden behind a bag of flour.

At eight, the phone rang. It was her father's oldest friend. "Marney," said Frank Hennessy, his voice as cheerful as a sharpened knife. "You home, love?"

She looked toward the pantry. "How are you, Frank?" "Can't complain. Funny thing," Frank said. "Heard from Benny Alsop this arvo. Says someone was poking around down by the river. Found one of those little treasure boxes."

Marney said nothing. Her pulse was a drum. "Kids' thing, apparently. Doug used to hate that rubbish. He always said if you wanted to hide something, you buried it deep."

Her mouth had gone dry. "Did he?" "Reckon he did. Best not fiddle with river rubbish. I can come round and take it off your hands."

Marney looked at her father's slippers. "No need." "Marney," Frank said kindly. "Your dad was a good man. A loyal man. He'd want you to remember that."

After he hung up, Marney locked the doors. At three in the morning, she watched the second video. It was worse because it was quieter. Iris was alive. She moved once—a small convulsion of the shoulder.

Her father knelt beside her. "We take her to hospital. We say she fell." Frank's voice cut in: "And when she wakes? She's a liability." "She's a kid, Frank." Vince O'Dea's voice rose, shaky. "Doug, think of your girl. Think of Marney."

The camera caught her father's face. He looked at the girl, then he looked at Frank. Frank said, "Help me lift her." "No." "Doug. Help me." "No."

There was a scuffle. Swearing. A hard sound—a fist into meat. Her father dropped out of the frame. Then there was only the sound of the river.

Marney paused the video. All her life she had believed her father was hard because life had made him so. Now she wondered if hardness was simply what happened when softness failed and could not bear its own reflection.

At seven-thirty, she rang in sick. At eight, she rang Liam. “Mum? Everything okay?” She almost told him. But he had a baby due in October. He had escaped. “I just wanted to hear your voice,” she said. “I found something of Pop’s. Just... things the river kept.” “Do you want me to come up?” “Not yet, love.”

She drove to Wodonga. She could not take the card to Albury police—not with Frank’s framed photograph still in the lobby. She parked near the water tower and sat with the engine idling. The world had a terrible habit of continuing while the foundations were rotting.

She drove to the Wodonga cemetery. Iris Rourke had no grave, but Marney needed to stand among the dead. Her phone rang. Frank. She let it ring. A text came through: *Don’t make Doug carry this now. Let him rest.*

As if the dead still needed protection from what they had done.

Marney searched the library database for Iris’s family. Margaret Rourke lived in a unit near the golf club. Marney drove there, the card heavy in her pocket. An old woman answered. Her hair was a wispy cloud, her eyes sharp.

“My name is Marney Bell. Doug Bell’s daughter.” The old woman’s face closed. “Doug dead?” “In March.” “Good,” Margaret Rourke said.

Inside, the unit smelled of talcum powder. Iris’s photo was in the center of a wall of pictures. Forever eighteen. “I found something,” Marney said. “Proof. That she didn’t run away.” Margaret did not touch the card. “I don’t need plastic to tell me that. I knew she wouldn’t leave her little brother.” “I’m so sorry.”

Margaret laughed harshly. “The whole town was drowning in ‘sorry.’ Not one useful person among them.” “My father was there that night,” Marney said. “I know. He came here two weeks after she vanished. Cried like a child. But he wouldn’t say a word. Just kept saying he was sorry. I told him to get out.”

Marney tried to defend him. “He tried to stop them. There’s video.” Margaret’s eyes sharpened. “And did he succeed? Did he call an ambulance?” Marney could not answer. “That’s the measure, isn’t it?” Margaret said. “Trying is just a way of feeling better about failing.”

Frank Hennessy was waiting when Marney got home. His car was parked crookedly in her driveway. He stood on the veranda in his good jacket.

Marney stayed in the car, her hands white on the wheel. She got out. “Go home.” “We need to talk, Marney. For Doug’s sake.” “No.”

The anger came then—clean and hot. “Don’t use God. Not after what you did.” Frank’s mask slipped. “It was an accident. We were trying to protect the town. To protect our families.” “You killed her.” “She was already gone.” “She was breathing, Frank! My father said she was breathing!”

Frank went pale. “Doug should’ve got rid of that. He promised he did.” “Dad had it? All this time?”

The truth hit her. The geocache wasn’t an anonymous witness. It was her father. He had kept the evidence as a shrine to his own cowardice.

“Who was R?” she asked. Frank looked exhausted. “Ruth Alsop. She’d hidden in the ute after the dance. She saw everything. Doug scared her into giving him the card. He told her he’d keep it safe.” “Why didn’t he go to the police?” Frank smiled hollowly. “Marney... *I* was the police.”

The simplicity of the evil winded her. Frank stepped closer. “Peter’s dead. Vince is in a nursing home. Doug’s gone. I’m eighty-two. What do you think happens if you come forward? You want Liam to know his grandfather was a murderer?”

“For her,” Marney said. “She’s dead.” “Because of you.”

Marney slapped him. It shocked them both. “You always had your mother in you,” he whispered. “Good.” “I have lived with this every day,” he said. “No,” Marney said. “You lived *after* it. Iris didn’t get to do that.”

She went inside and locked the door. That night, she copied the files. She uploaded them to a cloud site. She sent the link to Liam, to a journalist, and—by a mistake of autofill—to the “Write Around the Murray” festival address.

Stories wanted. Well, here was one.

At eight in the morning, she walked into the Wodonga police station. She placed the SD card on the counter. “I need to report a murder,” she said.

The weeks that followed were a blur. Detectives. Forensic searches near Mungabareena. They didn’t find much—just a few fragments of lace—but the river finally gave up its hold.

Frank Hennessy died of a heart attack in the hospital before the handcuffs could be put on him. Margaret Rourke stood in front of cameras and said, “My daughter did not run away. The river always brings things home.”

Liam drove up. He found his mother in the backyard, pulling weeds. He pulled her into a hug. “Don’t be sorry for the truth, Mum. We were living in a ghost story. I think I always knew.”

Marney thought of the Murray. All those years, it had carried secrets without caring whose they were. Men believed that burying a thing meant ending it. They forgot that the river has its own grammar. It lifts roots. It returns what does not belong to it.

Across the road, traffic moved toward the causeway. People were going home. Marney looked toward the water. It was still rushing, still busy. But it felt lighter. She began to walk toward the park—not because she was afraid, but because she wanted to see the river for exactly what it was.

Just a river. And nothing else.