



# With My Knife

Andrew Lansdown

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# I The Knife

Colyn was digging potatoes with his father when he found the knife. It was buried quite deep and a large potato had grown around the blade, as if someone had stabbed the knife right through it.

He ran to his father, who was digging several rows nearer the river. 'Look!' he shouted. 'Look what I've found!'

His father took the knife. 'Well, I'll be,' he said, holding it by the blade to test its balance. 'Do you know what, son? This was my knife once.'

'Yours!' cried Colyn, surprised and disappointed.

'Yep. When I was a boy ... How old are you now?'

'You know, Dad! It's my birthday tomorrow.'

'That's right.' His father was remembering. 'It was the day before my tenth birthday, too. I found it wedged in some rocks on the other side of the river. My father let me keep it. But on my birthday, I chopped the edge of the kitchen table while I was waiting for Mum to put tea out. So Dad took it off me. He never gave it back.'

'How do you know this is the one?' Colyn asked. But he knew the answer. The handle was wood, richly brown, like jarrah, and had a circle etched on one side and a tapering triangle on the other. The blade was long, thin and slightly crescent-shaped. No one could forget a knife like that.

'See how the blade looks like stone?' said his father.

The blade was almost black and had a dull sheen. There was not a spot of rust on it. And the handle was clean and smooth, as if it had been polished by constant use rather than lying lost in the soil for years.

'I s'pose *you'll* keep it now,' said Colyn.

'Well, I'm not going to chuck it away,' his father said, putting the knife into one of the deep pockets of his overalls.

Although he did not know it until that moment, Colyn had been wanting a knife of his own for a long time.

'What will you do with it?' he asked, trying not to sound sooky or mean.

His father had begun digging again. He glanced up at Colyn and suddenly he realised what his son was feeling. He thrust the shovel into the dark loam and propped his right foot on it.

'The trouble with a bloke rearing a son on his own,' he said, 'is he forgets that a boy is only little, and sort of tender. Now your mother, she was tender. And she would've kept an eye on me, to make sure I didn't forget.'

Colyn could not remember his mother. She had died when he was barely three. He would be ten tomorrow, and he could not remember. Sometimes when his father spoke about her, his eyes would go distant and

glassy, as if he were not behind them any more. But this time he blinked a bit and smiled at Colyn. He took the knife from his pocket and flicked the blade with his thumb.

‘Finders keepers,’ he said.

Colyn’s eyes widened. ‘I can keep it?’

‘Provided you don’t do anything silly like chopping the table.’

‘Oh, I promise!’

His father laughed and slapped him on the back. ‘Here you are then,’ he said. ‘Mind you,’ he added, ‘it doesn’t mean you can have a bludge. Still plenty of spuds in the ground.’

That night, as he sat in the lounge room by the fire with his father, Colyn began to carve a piece of wood. He had no idea what he wanted to make. He just started whittling. The knife was sharp and shaved the wood easily.

‘You’re making a mess,’ his father growled.

Colyn did not look up. ‘I’ll sweep it after,’ he said.

Before long, he realised that the wood had begun to take on a shape. But what? He stared at it intently, turning it around in his hands. It looked a bit like a dog. ‘Just what I’ve always wanted,’ he murmured. And he began to try, with all his might, to carve a dog. But the harder he tried, the less like a dog the piece of wood became.

‘Blow!’

His father looked up from the book he was reading. ‘What’s the matter?’

Colyn passed him the carving. ‘I want to make a dog,’ he said. ‘But it keeps going wrong.’

‘It’s not easy to carve something.’ His father looked at the work carefully. ‘You have to be patient. Practice and patience, that’s how most things are learnt.’ He handed it back. ‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘it’s time for bed now, so you’ll have to put it away.’

‘No,’ said Colyn. ‘I’ll start a new one tomorrow.’

He threw the carving into the fire. As it landed on the coals, he thought he heard a dog bark way off in the distance.

When Colyn woke, it was his birthday. But the first thing he thought of was his knife. He reached under his pillow and there it was, just as he had left it last night, just as he had dreamt.

His father came into his room with two presents and sat on his bed. ‘Be careful with that knife. It’s sharp.’

‘It’s not sharp for me,’ said Colyn, ‘only everything else.’

‘Well, why don’t you put it down for a minute and have a look at what I’ve got you?’

Colyn unwrapped his presents. One was a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle; the other a leather football.

‘One for your brain and one for your body,’ his father said with a laugh.

Because it was his birthday, Colyn did not have to work. After breakfast he kicked his football along the gravel road in front of the potato paddock. But he had no one to kick it back to him so he soon

grew tired of it. He thought of his friends at school and wished, briefly, that the term holidays were ending rather than beginning. He left the ball by the road and wandered across the paddock. The loam was dry and soft, and little puffs of dust burst from beneath his boots as he walked.

There was a place along the river where a tree had fallen into the water. It was Colyn's special place. He climbed onto the trunk and walked out to where it sank beneath the surface. He sat down and stared at the water eddying past. In the backwater of the log a swarm of water beetles swirled crazily about each other. A blue dragonfly hovered over them.

Colyn jabbed his knife into the trunk absentmindedly, prised off a lump of bark, and flicked it into the water. While watching the bark bob away on the current, he decided to carve his name.

He spent nearly an hour carving his name carefully and deeply. He felt so pleased with it when he had finished that he thought to carve his father's name too. But after finishing the first letter he said out loud, as if talking to someone, 'It's not working. He should have carved his own name when he owned it. But it's my knife now.'

After a while he felt lonely, so he wandered over to see his father.

'How's it going, son?'

Colyn shrugged. 'Nothing to do,' he said.

'Plenty of spuds to dig and bag.'

'But it's my birthday,' Colyn protested, sitting down beside the sack his father was filling with newly-dug potatoes.

He took a small potato from the sack and began to peel it. He had never peeled one with a knife before and he was surprised at how well he could do it. The potato seemed to shed its skin as the knife touched it. As the last patch of skin fell off, leaving it perfectly white, the potato seemed to change. He weighed it in his hand. It felt heavier. He bit it. It was hard, like a stone!

'Look at this potato, Dad.'

His father took the stone from him. 'Yes,' he said, 'it does look like a potato, a peeled one.'

'It *is* a potato,' said Colyn. 'I peeled it with my knife and it turned into a stone.'

'Go on, you scallywag!' his father laughed, ruffling his hair.

'But it's true!' Colyn insisted. 'I'll show you.'

He took another potato and began to peel it while his father looked on. But this time the peel did not come away easily. When he had finished, he held it in his open palm, staring at it, but it did not change into a stone.

'I suppose you'll be telling me that you can turn stones into potatoes next,' smiled his father. 'Think of all the stones in the riverbed. All we'd have to do is wait till summer when the river dries and then pick them up!'

His father unearthed several large potatoes. Colyn took one and walked back towards the river.

He sat on the fallen tree beside his carved name and set to work with his knife. As the last bit of peel fell away, the potato became heavy

and hard in his hand. He bit it and it hurt his teeth. He banged the log and it bruised the wood.

‘See, I wasn’t imagining!’ he said.