

## THE HERON

The boy walks carefully down to the water's edge, arms outstretched for balance. A grey heron, statuesque and silent, turns its head in brief acknowledgement. The river chatters on, its language ancient as the stones it washes.

Callum's head is full of the stories he had heard from his Grandfather, tales of nymphs, of the sirens' call, of fairy lights twinkling on the water. He wonders if these stories are true, and how much it would matter if they weren't.

He sits on a flat stone, slightly damp but temptingly adventurous. Across the stream a duck calls, does a headstand in the water, and shakes itself. It looks as pleased as a duck could possibly look, and repeats the move. The river chatters on.

One of the stories.

One day many years ago Grandpa rode his bike along this path and skidded into the water, cutting a deep groove into the soft bank and squashing a world of life, of creatures great and small. Grandpa says that when Great Grandma heard about this her first words were "is the bike all right?" Callum supposes this must be true, but as nobody used Facebook in those days it's impossible to know.

The heron is still there, occasionally moving its feet and looking into the water for something tasty. There's a wagtail of some sort, always busy. It doesn't worry about the heron, who has bigger fish to fry. It must be very strange to share a space with something so large.

Another story.

There is a golden ring buried deep somewhere along this riverbed. Every now and again it calls out to be rescued. Grandma says that only the heron would be able hear it, but it doesn't understand the words of the song, or chooses not to. She says that whoever does find the ring will be able to rule the world, but Grandma doesn't want this to happen. She hopes it will stay hidden forever.

Callum gets up from the stone and brushes off bits of mud and grass from his trousers. A cow bellows somewhere across the water, reminding the boy of all the different languages used in this small space next to this little river. He wonders how anybody could rule the world if they couldn't know what was being said, even in such a tiny part of it. He learns the wisdom of the heron's silence.

Something rustles in the undergrowth and scuttles away. The heron, like an icon in some holy retreat, stands waiting. It occurs to Callum that if the heron is guarding the golden ring it will have to stand there forever, and that perhaps it has always been there. Even when nobody was looking. He climbs up to the path – where Grandpa took a tumble! – walks towards a little tumbledown bridge, and crosses it.

A secret glance upstream tells him that the heron is still there. He must tell Grandma when he gets home - she'll be very happy to hear it.