

## "I am the resurrection and the life" A short story by Bob Forster

**I**T HAD RAINED for days on end. Well, perhaps not days, but Sharni always exaggerated. She was good at it. 'Born out of adversity,' the social worker used to say. And it was true that it was always misfortune which was exaggerated. Heavy rain was simply another misfortune; it was also a way out.

Yet life had started so well. There were eight years when her only memories were good ones. Her mother, quiet and unflustered, a pillar of reliability. Always there. Tall, even willowy, with hands wrinkled by work but outstretched in welcome. Then there was her dad - 'Da' she called him when she was small, brown hair always untidy, shirt often untucked and jeans suspended a little precariously below his expanding waistline. He had a smile the warmth of a summer's day and bright, sparkly eyes edged by a myriad of crinkles.

"They're my smile lines, little Sharni," he teased her as she snuggled up to his chest and gently touched the corner of his eyes. Her dearest wish was that she would grow up with those smile lines for herself so that she too could bring such joy into the world.

When Da was at home, they were inseparable. There were warm afternoons spent down on the banks of the Evenlode, chasing and tagging, hiding and seeking or simply lying flat on their backs listening to the hum of insects and watching the slow swirling of the water through the tall reeds.

Whenever she wanted to attract his attention she would creep up behind his prone figure, call out "Dear father" in a rich accent she'd copied from Emily at school, before rushing away from his flailing arms. Then, reunited, panting and

laughing, he'd tell of days fishing with his grandfather on that same stretch of river before they wandered home, hand in hand or, if she was tired, carried high on those broad shoulders with her fingers twisted in his curls.

Bedtimes were wonderful. No matter how hard he had to work, he was always there in time for her bedtime story. Wrapped together he'd read to her about dark-eyed giants, about princesses in the flush of youth, about wild adventures in faraway lands and about people who made their world such a special place.

Then one night the car was late. The engine sounded all wrong. Two doors banged not one. Following a knock and a muttered conversation in the hallway, all went quiet behind the lounge door. That was until Sharni heard the sobs. Her mother never cried. Sharni half ran, half stumbled down the stairs and threw herself into her mother's arms.

A policewoman sat next to her colleague on the edge of the settee, fingering her cap, and, bit by bit, the story came out. Black ice. Lost control. Through a fence. Stopped by a tree. No chance. No suffering.

No future.

From that night's total emptiness and loss until the night in the rain was five years of almost uninterrupted misery. Life without Da was no life. Mum tried but the gap was too big. Friends remained close but eventually Sharni's unprovoked mood swings proved too much for even the hardiest. Her bedroom became her haven, her bolt-hole, her refuge and, effectively, her prison.

After three years, mum's friendship with Jack turned to

marriage and, bedecked in a long dark green satin dress, Sharni took her place as bridesmaid, trying so hard to reflect her mother's mood. The dress went away in her wardrobe and within eighteen months, Tom was born. Sharni's isolation was now almost complete.

Secondary school didn't help. Her quietness was taken for aloofness and bullying started almost from the beginning. Quietness, moodiness and her waif-like figure all became objects of fun. "Pancake" they called her, not aloud, of course, but around every hidden corner, behind every cupped hand, or "Flapper" for her ungainly attempts at swimming. Without Da it was all too much.

And the rain had fallen for days, it really had. Water lapped up to the hotel at Kingham, the meadows became a brown mirror and the road disappeared, only to swoop up again like a marooned whale as it rose over the old railway line to Chipping Norton.

It was February and it was time. That night, Shami closed the diary she had kept for these past five years and, in her best writing, put "Dear Father" on the front cover, then tucked it under her pillow. Fingering the green satin she slipped into her dress, mind made up. Clearly she could picture the scene in the Millais painting which she had gazed at in the art room, Ophelia it was called, with the serene and finely clad lady floating through the weed which covered the river, eyes closed in life's final acceptance. Now she, Sharni, would show the world how special her Da was. She wouldn't be there to appreciate the pathos but what the eye couldn't see, she could surely grieve over; it would be perfect.

Down the stairs and out of the back door she didn't glance back. No regrets. Splashing down the road she

clambered over the fence, waded across the ever deepening meadow until, imperceptibly, her balance went and she sank back into the swirling water as it carried her downstream. Her inability to swim was now her ally. She had the last laugh.

The sky cleared and the moon lit up the landscape downstream at Bruern. Two days ago, the road had gone. The river channels had long since disappeared beneath a lake of darkly shining water which stretched up towards the edge of the woods. And it was from those woods that a creature emerged, a creature not seen in this part of the woods for many years.

It was a magnificent stag, antlers framed against the moon. His nose scented the air and then with slow, unhurried yet purposeful steps, he walked down the low slope, into the lake and up to his belly beside the main stream. Water swirled around his flanks while that great head searched upstream.

Then the moment was right. He lowered his head into the flood and, with the care of a young mother, threaded his antlers below the limp and lifeless arms. Sharni was lifted out. With a slow twist, the stag settled her legs over his broad shoulders and her arms around his throat. Broad shoulders? What memories. Her soul stirred within her and for the first time in many a long year a smile touched her eyes. With supreme gentleness, the stag lifted his burden, turned away from the line of the river, climbed the slope and merged into the darkened fringe of the wood.

He was never seen again. But in a dark world, a light had shone, and the darkness would never overcome it.

Dear Father.