On The Swamp For Joao Guimaraes Rosa

Michael Meehan
On The Swamp For Joao Guimaraes Rosa

Abstract

Our dad was an ordinary bloke who didn't ever talk a lot, even before he went out on the swamp. After he went, I tried to talk about it to some of his old mates at the shanty, but they mostly just shuffled about and looked at the floor and didn't say much either, though I almost think they were a bit proud of what our dad had done. I even wondered if some of them might have liked to go off, one by one, and do the same. For the moment, they just seemed to like the idea that one of them at least had done it, and they weren't going to let him down and head the whole thing back to a world where there had to be reasons for what people did.
Our dad was an ordinary bloke who didn’t ever talk a lot, even before he went out on the swamp. After he went, I tried to talk about it to some of his old mates at the shanty, but they mostly just shuffled about and looked at the floor and didn’t say much either, though I almost think they were a bit proud of what our dad had done. I even wondered if some of them might have liked to go off, one by one, and do the same. For the moment, they just seemed to like the idea that one of them at least had done it, and they weren’t going to let him down and head the whole thing back to a world where there had to be reasons for what people did.

We enjoyed the part where he was building the boat – none of us had ever even seen a boat before, except in pictures – and we all imagined that we would be using it to net redfin, or to get up closer to the ducks, which always flew off ahead of us and out of range as we waded through the waters of the swamp. The boat was the only bit of fun any of us had had for quite a time, with the long dry spell and the stock gone and the whole earth raised up and singing around our ears. Dad stripped the corrugated iron for the sides of the boat from an old tank that had rusted out, and he picked up some thin sheet metal from a shop over at Nyarrin, and some tar for fixing the pieces together and caulking all the leaks. The boat only took a day or so to put together, with the help of a neighbour’s welder and a lot of fetching and passing by us kids, who scrambled around and got in the way and ended up coated in tar, which we tried to scrape off when we took the boat down to test it for leaks in what was left of the dam. The boat was long and shallow, with a frame of wooden planks to protect the bottom, and we soon found out just how easy it was to tip over. We knew, though, that in a dry season you could just about walk right across the swamp, as long as you minded out for cruising tigersnakes and the odd deep hole, and that we didn’t have to worry about getting drowned.

Our mother didn’t come out to watch the building of the boat. She kept to the house that day, and when any of us ran up to tell her about it, she would just turn away or change the subject, and we thought that perhaps she was just worried that someone might get drowned. Our mother can get pretty cranky, and there were times when even the weather seemed to be somehow our fault and when just about
everything any of us did turned out to be the kind of thing that just had to come on top of everything else. When the boat was first mentioned, she had begun to scold, but had then gone silent and sulked about in the darkness of the house, with the two of them, Dad and our mother, gone cold and dark and unspeaking across the table, and our questions gradually fading from our lips, right down to the littlest who harped about the boat for a bit longer than the rest of us, and then seemed to pick up the mood around the table and went silent too.

It started as a great day for us when the time came to take the boat down to the swamp, as we all thought we would be going out in it with him. When the time came, though, and our dad took up his sugar bag with some sandwiches and other things in it, he mumbled that I was the only one who was going to come out with him to the edge of the swamp, and that the others should stay home with our mother. There was a bit of a row over this and some talk of ears getting boxed, with the little ones whimpering and our mother refusing to get into the argument, though she did talk about people with yet more ‘tom-fool ideas’, and demanded to know why there were no better things to do. And as we got set to go, with Old Kitchener harnessed and the boat loaded on the wagon, she came out onto the verandah and watched us leave, except that she didn’t seem to be looking at us, but at some point way ahead, some point far out there in the distance. I might not have noticed it at the time, if I hadn’t expected her to make some sort of fuss about Dad and I taking half the day off to wander up to the swamp, and so I watched her, turning my head around again and again as we lumbered away from the house, expecting the squall to break; but instead she just stood there, ignoring us, and ignoring the little one who was still tugging at her skirt and whimpering about the boat, just biting her underlip and peering out, in that glazed sort of way, over the dead stubble and out into the scrub.

We arrived at the swamp and we unloaded the boat together, sliding it out across the soft mud and into the water, so that it bobbed and finally floated free.

Then I said to him, ‘Can I get in?’

He just looked at me in a funny sort of way, for such a long time that I began to fidget about and wish that he would just get on with doing something in the way that he usually did. Then he told me, in a strained sort of voice that I hadn’t heard before, to get on back home with the others, and to ‘keep a bit of an eye on things’. Our dad wasn’t someone you tried to talk out of something once he’d made up his mind about it, so I did as I was told and took hold of Old Kitchener’s reins and walked back along the track a little, as though I was heading for home; but as soon as I was out of sight I crept back through the scrub to see what he was doing. I saw him clamber into the boat, which rocked and wobbled and then steadied itself in the slimy waters at the edge of the swamp, and then, as he thrust into the soft mud with his paddle, the boat slid quietly through the rim of rotting leaves and fallen bark and pale green
On The Swamp

And we never got him to come back again. Late that afternoon we all went down to the swamp to see how the boat was doing, and for a long time all we could see were the usual dead-white gums and peeling grey sheets of bark and strutting waterbirds and nothing more than that. Eventually, my little brother spotted him, floating around between the gums, sitting upright on the wooden slat that ran across the rear, his face dark and hidden under his hat, the boat drifting slowly from tree to tree, aided along by the occasional thrusts he gave with his paddle. And we waited until it was almost dark, expecting him to come back at any moment, but he just pushed around, out there towards the middle of the swamp, from tree to stump to tree, never coming closer to the shore, and never approaching the other side. Occasionally he would be lost to view behind a bank of timber or a cluster of fallen trunks, and then one of us would spot him again, drifting along a little further out. And after a time we sat down in the mud by the edge of the waters and slapped away the insects and fooled around with sticks and climbed the trees and threw rocks at the jays and waited and began, as it grew darker and the shadows crept out across the water, to think about what it might be like if he never came back.

Things back at home were very strange, but only for a time. Our mother was always one for keeping up appearances and for a while we all acted as through everything was the same as before. We went to school as usual, and even to church, with our mother giving out various excuses about Dad, and people, after the second or third week, eventually not asking questions, which was when we knew that they had begun to know. And when we went out to the swamp sometimes in the evenings to see if we could spot our dad, sometimes we would find others there, with gigs and kids and picnic hampers and people with field glasses and even once a telescope sinking up to their ankles in the slime at the edge of the shrinking water, competing with each other in the game of trying to spot our dad. And every now and then they would catch sight of him far out in the swamp, passing between two trees, sitting bolt upright in the boat, his only movement the occasional thrust of the paddle; and never would he even as much as glance across to the shore where we stood. And when the watchers saw us, they would generally stop laughing and pointing, and steal away, leaving our family to its shame.

After a while, word got around that our dad never set foot on land by day or by night, and that he had sworn some sort of promise to live out the rest of his life in that boat, and never again to set foot on the ground that had let him down. People at church started looking at us with sad faces and passing little bundles of things over to my mother who somehow managed to receive them like a debt she was owed rather than just charity, and we could tell from the ways in which even the kids suddenly stopped teasing us at school that the stories were getting

glass, and out onto the silver waters of the swamp.
wilder. Some thought that he had decided to wait out on the swamp for the rains, and that he would stay there, with the swampwaters shrinking all around him, until the rain came, and then he would drift back to shore and simply take up farming again where he left off. Others thought that my mother had driven him to it, and soon people all over the district were using her as a kind of curse that husbands laid upon their scolding wives. Most people felt, though, that it was just one of those summer breakdowns of a kind that was best left to mend itself, out there upon the peace of the waters, and that when he became too hungry, or when the weather turned cold, or when the swamp finally dried up, he would drift back home again.

Truth is, no-one quite knew how he lived out there. There were thousands of yabbies in the swamp, and maybe he had some rabbit traps with him, which he crept into shore at nights to set: I never saw any in the boat, when he pushed it out, and our mother said there were none missing from the house. Maybe he had it all organised – fishing lines, traps, perhaps even a rifle – long before he even built the boat. Once or twice, as the months drew on, I went out to the swamp with sugar and salt and fishhooks and things like that, and I waded out into the water and shouted and whistled and made sure he knew that I was there; but when I came back later the ants were in the sugar and everything else was untouched. And one evening when I was out at the swamp and the light was beginning to fade and I was watching the red of the sky catch the gums, I could see our dad, slipping out from behind a nearby tree. The boat was turned towards me, and he was just sitting there watching me from under the deep shade of his hat, watching me, as I imagined, as he had that last day when he had looked at me in that funny way and I had turned away, to the scrub.

For a moment I thought that he was paddling towards me and I waited and then whistled and hollered and jumped up and down and waved my shirt on a long stick; but then as he began to come closer and the dark figure began to take on the shades of a shirt, a waistcoat, as the shadow under the hat began to show a jaw, a mouth, a neck and wisps of long hair and whiskers, I became nervous and stopped shouting and waving and started to move back through the mud and the waste: I moved more quickly as he came towards me and I backed against a submerged log and fell and came up gasping and scrambling and choking and making for dry land, and then I saw him turn and slip off back out to the cover of the gums.

The months passed, and our mother managed to keep things going on the farm, in so far as there was anything that could be done. We kept on going to school as we had before, though as word got around the local area that our dad wouldn’t come in off the swamp, even more people – even, we were told, some people from up town who had heard about the man on the swamp – starting bringing their picnics over on Sundays and sitting around the edge of the swamp with umbrellas and deck chairs,
On The Swamp

and watching him out there, dark and silent beneath his hat, still sitting up straight in the boat and drifting silently through the shining spaces on the swamp. In time they got used to the sight of his wife and his children peering out through the screen of gums, and no one left in embarrassment anymore, or smothered their cries and laughter. His neighbours of old would call to him and one day some bloke from over near Manangatang even came over with his army three-o-three and fired a few shots out across the water, but after the boom had rung out and come back to us through the trees, things went on just as they had before.

It was when the Debt Adjuster came around that our mother finally decided she’d had enough, and just bundled all of us into the Debt Adjuster’s car and directed him out to the swamp, though without telling him how long our dad had now been out there, gliding backwards and forwards across the water. The Adjuster didn’t ask too many questions, as what could be more reasonable than for a bloke on his uppers with so many mouths to feed to be out chasing yabbies or duck or redfin? And so he took us out, cheerfully enough, to the swamp, which was already much smaller than it had been when we first pushed the boat in, and we drove his car through the trees and along the mudpans and deep into what had once been covered with water. Yet even then it was some time before we were able to spot our dad, drifting around behind some stumps towards the far side of the swamp. Then we shouted, and tooted the Debt Adjuster’s horn, and he even fired a couple of shots from a real revolver he produced from out of a suitcase – a big six-shooter, it was, with a spinning chamber and all – but our dad just drifted about out there as though there was no-one in the world but himself.

For a time the Debt Adjuster was amused and paddled about with the rest of us, shouting and tooting and showing off his revolver. Then, as it got hotter and our dad ignored all the noise we made, he started to get angry and began to throw a few questions at the little ones who let out too much of the truth for my mother to be able to step in with her stories about yabbies and redfin; and soon the Debt Adjuster and I had half our clothes off and were wading out after him, across the drying slime, clambering onto banks which looked like safe islands of dry land but turned out to be just huge drifts of rotting vegetation and black mud. And as we waded deeper into the swamp in pursuit of our dad, the Debt Adjuster became wetter and redder and crankier and ended up carrying most of his sodden clothing on his head. And I occasionally slipped out of my depth and started sinking into the soft mud on the bottom, and the Debt Adjuster had to rescue me more than once and got a spike in his foot, and I told him not to worry as it was probably just a tigersnake, because I wanted to go back and did not want to see my father’s look again. All the while as we slipped and struggled through the mud from stump to bank to fallen trunk, with the waterbirds winging on ahead and cutting long straight trails through the water in front of us as they came
back to rest, our dad would just slip silently from tree to tree, filtering backwards and forwards across the spaces between the great white gums, always a little further away from us than the distance we had just travelled.

There was silence in the car on the way back to the farm, with the Debt Adjuster driving with bare feet clad in dried black mud which came off in great chunks, his clothes wet through and his face streaked with slime. There was silence in the car because the Debt Adjuster was a great believer in respect and in families, but later I could hear him arguing with our mother out on the verandah as he washed his feet in a bucket. He told my mother that he would be back as soon as he heard that the swamp was dry, and that he would bring others with him. And he told my mother that she had a duty to tell him if ever he came in off the swamp, and that he would be informing the police of what was going on, and that this was a pretty small return for all that he had tried to do for her and for her family. And I heard our mother say some scathing things about our not needing his charity and that he could look after his own family thank you very much, which was pretty outrageous when you think about it because charity was just about all we had, by that time, to keep us fed — the odd sheep that had died which the neighbors would allow us to pick over, and things like that, the bits of clothing that people would pass on to us at church, and the bags of stock feed that we found, some mornings, unloaded at the gate.

Since then, as the years have passed, we’ve just had to get used to the idea of our dad, out there on the swamp, moving silently in and out of the trees, blown from side to side by whatever breeze filters down through the gums, with new generations of town kids sometimes going out there on their bikes to see if they can creep up on him, and taking their shanghais with them and pitching rocks and sticks and even bits of old dried horseshit in his direction, but with no-one ever getting closer to him that I did that day when I took him the sugar and the salt; with even the policeman up from Sealake, sent up long ago by a new Debt Adjuster to sniff around a bit, just standing in the murk on the edge and shaking his head and maybe half wondering if he shouldn’t be out there, himself, because it all seemed to make about as much sense as anything else happening around these parts. We’ve had to get used to waiting, because all we do now is keep the place going with help from our mother’s brothers, and the bit we kids have been able to do as we’ve gotten older, and wait for the waters to dry away and for our dad to get stranded on a bank. By now, just about everyone has stopped talking about him. The little ones have just about forgotten about him, so they can act like other kids, with dads that are just dead, or gone away. Even my mother seems to have forgotten, and often justs sits around in silence, with the blinds all drawn against the light. In some ways that’s the worst thing of all. I’ve gotten used to the idea that, when we lie in bed at night listening to the mopokes calling to each other, that our dad
is somewhere out there with them, in his boat or maybe curled up somewhere beside the swamp, in a place of his own where none of us can find him. Sometimes I think that the mopokes we hear are really just our dad calling to us, cupping his hands together and blowing those sounds that used to draw real mopokes from miles away.

I still go out there now and then, and each time I can walk further and further out through the mud, and now and then I seem to get a little bit closer to him as he slips between the trees and makes for the other side of the swamp. I even saw him, one day, stepping out of the boat and hauling it across a mud bank – the first time that anyone had seen anything other than him just sitting there, thrusting in short jabs with the paddle. So, I wade out into the mud and the slime and the rotting bark just as far as I feel is safe, and sometimes I talk to him even though he probably can’t and doesn’t want to hear me, and I still sometimes leave bits of things on the edge of the water, though I’ve never seen footprints the next day, and nothing has ever been touched. I still like to think that if ever he wanted to talk to anybody ever again, it would be me that he would want to talk to, and that maybe he even started off with some notion that he was going to explain it all to me, back all those years ago when we first slipped the boat into the water, but he just couldn’t find the words. So I find myself a stump, some way out into the swamp where I can get a decent view of things for a quarter of a mile or so and I sit there and I imagine the kinds of things that he might have been wanting to say to me.

So I still go out to the swamp to try to catch glimpses of this father who is dead as he moves silently across the waters in a boat that should have sunk long ago, on a swamp that should have dried up long ago, in a body that should have starved itself apart long ago, in a silence that should have broken long ago, in a grief or a rage that might have spent itself out on those peaceful waters years before if I’d not backed away. I still go out to the swamp, especially in the evenings, for all that the singing insects can do to make my life a misery, and I sit amid the snakes and rabbits and the screeching jays and peer out through the gums and dream of the thousand ways in which maybe we all let him down, and wonder about that time when he might have come in off the swamp, and I wade in the thick black waters and wonder what kind of peace he might be finding as he shrinks back from the earth and what kind of peace I can ever hope to find while he still slips back and forth, out there amid the trees, ever a little further away, wondering always if he might yet again turn the boat around and turn it towards me and just take me off in it, and we might then spend the last part of the day netting redfin and hauling in yabbies, and then we would draw the boat out and hump it onto the wagon and he would come home with me and Old Kitchener and no kind of word ever, ever needing to be said.