

MY NAME IS RIVER

Emma Rea lives in London and spends as much time as she can in Wales. After graduating from St Andrews with a degree in Russian, she worked as a magazine editor, as a trader in newsprint, and in publishing.

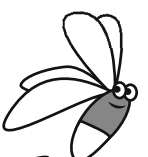
She brought her children up in Powys, inspired by childhood memories of Pembrokeshire and her grandmother's stories of growing up in Mumbles.

Emma is the author of middle-grade novel, *Top Dog* (Gomer) which was shortlisted for the North Somerset Teachers' Book Award.

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For Dougal



ONE

'A treehouse. Big enough to sleep in,' Dylan said, stabbing a fishfinger. He dropped a bit of it down to Megs when no one was looking.

'You'll need planks,' his dad said.

Dylan had thought of that.

'Can we have those ones in your workshop, leaning up against the back wall?'

'Guess you'll be wanting to use all my tools as well,' Dad said with a sigh, but he was smiling.

'Can I sleep in it?' Tommo asked, burying a pea in his mashed potato. Tommo always said you could swallow almost anything if it was buried in mash.

'Won't you be scared?' Dylan's mum asked, keeping a close eye on the peas. 'I wouldn't want you to change your mind and start wandering about at midnight.'

Tommo nodded. 'Yes, but if Dyl and the others are there, I'll be OK.'

'It could be ready by half-term. We can…'

Dylan's dad's phone rang.

Everyone looked at each other.

'Is it him?' Mum asked.

'It is,' Dad said, standing up so suddenly his chair fell over backwards. He pressed answer. 'Hello?' He reached out and placed a hand on Dylan's mum's shoulder.

Dylan felt a grin spread over his face. Mum was gazing at Dad, one hand over her mouth. Tommo's eyebrows had shot up and his mouth was open. Dad's eyes shone like they did after he'd helped a ewe through a difficult birth and a perfect lamb emerged, and struggled to its feet. Dylan stared at his dad, waiting. It couldn't take Owen long to say it.

Except something seemed to be wrong.

His dad was frowning.

'What do you mean?' his dad said, leaving the kitchen.

'Eat up, boys,' Mum said, still smiling. 'There's probably more paperwork to be done. These things take ages.'

So Dylan and Tommo finished up while Dad strode around the garden, phone clamped to his ear.

The strange thing was, Dad looked confused. Then angry. He started waving his arms around. Seeing that he was being watched from the kitchen window, he moved away to the back of the house.

Dylan exchanged a glance with his mum and he knew

they both thought it might be more than just extra paperwork. The phone call went on while Tommo had his bath. It was still going on when Tommo lined his cars up by his pillow. And now Dylan was eyeing his dad from the bathroom window, mouth full of toothpaste, with a heavy feeling in his stomach. A call that took this long couldn't be good.

He spat the toothpaste out and rinsed his toothbrush. He replaced it slowly in the rack, keeping his eyes on his dad, striding around the back garden in the dusk.

He was just wiping his mouth with his towel when his dad dropped his phone on the grass.

In slow motion, his dad raised both hands and locked them together on the back of his head. He leant back, as if to call out to someone in the sky. Then his chest expanded and even through the bathroom window Dylan could hear his roar. It went on and on, until it petered out into what you could only call a howl.

Dylan swallowed. His whole body went cold.

And then, like a folding chair, his dad collapsed down onto his haunches. He stayed like that, hands over his head, rocking. It was as if his whole body was flooded with oil and he'd stalled, just like an engine.

Dylan didn't know what to do.

He couldn't just go to bed.

He stood very still, and listened. When he was sure his dad was back inside, he crept out of the bathroom to hide behind the kitchen door.

'What on earth's happened, love?' his mum was asking.

When his dad spoke, his voice was dead. All the anger had gone. He might have been telling Mum he'd just put the bins out.

'The farm's been sold to someone else.'

'What? That's impossible. Bill said…' Mum sounded as confused as Dylan felt. What was Dad talking about? Today was the day Dad was to buy the farm his family had worked on for generations.

'Yeah. Bill promised to sell it to us. But now he's gone, it's up to the executors. Turns out he was in debt. They needed a better price.' He sighed a sigh that came all the way from his boots. 'Some cruddy global healthcare company made them an offer they couldn't refuse.'

'What do they –'

'Moss. They want to grow moss. What does it matter? It's all over, love.'

'Moss? But why our farm? Why ours?' His mother's voice broke and collapsed into a strangled cry.

'Apparently BlueBird buys up parcels of land all over the world to develop new products. It's ridiculous. There's any number of farms in Wales for sale – Evans has been trying to sell his for a year. Owen's written emails and made phonecalls all day long but thousands of people work for BlueBird and it's not easy to get through to the see-ee-oh. Anyway, it's done.'

'But we have rights. They can't just...'

'That's the worst of it, love. Apparently I signed away

the rights when we took on that extra field.' He gave a bitter laugh.

'This house, the garden, the fields, your polytunnels, the river, it all belongs to BlueBird now. We will never own it, and we can't even rent it any more. They don't want tenant farmers on it.'

Dylan didn't understand. Why wasn't Dad saying anything about how to get it back?

'All those years…' his mum's voice trembled. 'All our saving. Your efforts, your grandfather's, your father's…'

There was a long silence. Dylan strained to listen, but his parents seemed to have turned to stone.

'I can't face telling the boys yet,' Dad said, eventually. 'Tommo's too young to understand, but Dylan…'

'Dylan will…' His mum, his cheerful, sensible, no-nonsense mum actually began to cry.

'I know. He loves every blade of grass on this farm. Let's just say there's been a delay until we know what we're doing.' His dad groaned a long, horrible groan. 'We've got until Christmas.'

Dylan tiptoed away, his brain boiling over.

Very quietly, he let himself out through the front door and padded off barefoot, with Megs at his heels, towards the riverbank. Slivers of dark blue rested on the horizon, and a full moon followed him all the way to the fallen tree that bridged the water. A robin hopped in the shadows, along a branch. Here, on the bank, Megs sat down, too afraid to go further.

Placing his feet carefully, he walked halfway across the fallen tree and sat down on its smooth trunk. His legs dangled over metallic waters, which churned and shone beneath him.

Until a few minutes ago, his whole life had been mapped out before him. Nothing stood in his way, apart from a few pointless years at school. He was going to work the farm like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather before him. He would spend all his time sheep-dipping, herding, shearing, mending fences, fixing engines. Looking after the land and driving the tractor and digger and quad bike in all weathers. Megs, only a puppy now, would become a highly trained sheepdog, zipping this way and that, to keep the sheep in line. And he would breed from her and her pups until he was as old as Gramp.

But now, none of that was going to happen. Mum would lose her jam business, Tommo wouldn't grow up on the farm and Dad and Gramp would have to leave the place they'd lived in all their lives. And Dylan could forget about building a treehouse with his friends. The map had been wiped clean.



Dylan pressed his newly sharpened pencil into the bottom of the poster until it made a neat hole. He leaned

against the wall, his right hand hidden by his left arm, so the teacher couldn't see what he was doing.

It was a stupid poster anyway. Arrows showed evaporation from lakes and streams forming clouds which blew over oceans and continents to hilltops and then dropped the rain back into mountain streams again. As if anyone needed to go to school to be taught that – you could see it with your own eyes, if you weren't stuck in a smelly classroom.

If you just got off your backside, as Gramp would say, and followed the river upstream, through the woods, past the boggy uplands, on and on and up to the top of the hill at the farm's northern boundary, you'd see exactly what the clouds were doing. Sometimes, when he had too much energy boiling around inside him, Dylan went up there on his own to feel the wind on his neck and nothing but the sky above him.

The smell in the Geography classroom was a mixture of armpits, socks and sharp chemical cleaning liquids. Mrs Hughes' voice droned, bee-like, in his brain, urging them to study hard now that they had started secondary school.

'Young man! Are you listening?'

Dylan jolted in his seat. Mrs Hughes was talking to him.

'After the school trip to Harlech over half-term you will be expected to hand in your Geography project. It is a chance to expand your mind.'

He glared at her and made another hole with his pencil.

She had one pair of glasses in the normal place, on her

nose, and another pair on her head, just visible in her hair. It was springy, blonde hair, like coils of wool. Like sheep's wool, in fact, just before shearing, with long shaggy bits dangling below her ears. A pen poked out from behind one ear. There were probably several more pens and pencils hiding in that hair. Dylan wouldn't be surprised if there was a ruler and a few rubbers in there as well. She probably didn't even need a handbag.

Last night, when everyone was asleep, he had googled BlueBird to find out what dad meant by the see-ee-oh. Dylan clicked on 'Our People'. At the top it said Mustafa Shadid, Chief Executive Officer. Oh, thought Dylan, CEO.

A picture of a man with dark skin and short dark curly hair filled the screen. He had a wide smile and looked like the kind of man you could talk to. If Dylan could just find him – where? Dylan clicked on the contacts page and found offices all over world except the UK. That was the end of that, then.

Dylan flicked down the rest of the photos in 'Our People'. They all looked perfectly nice. Did he really think he would find a cartoon baddie among them, with rotting teeth, a grey face and evil red eyes? Then Dylan got a shock. Way down at the bottom of the list, a face he knew glared out at him. Floyd's face.

It wasn't Floyd of course. It was much older for a start, with a wild, staring expression, whereas Floyd always looked cold and serious. He checked the name. Mac Adams, it said. Floyd's dad. Floyd had said he worked

abroad, and here he was, working for the same company that had just bought their farm. The job description said Consultant Conservationist, whatever that meant. One of his jobs had been in Scotland, where he had surveyed aquatic plants and mosses in rivers and lochs. It also said he had sampled and identified earthworms. Sampled? Didn't that mean he ate them? Mum sent samples of jam to people. If he ate worms, he might not be the sort of dad who would be much help.

Here he was, caged, listening to his teacher waffling on with Floyd sitting in another classroom only a few feet away. If she thought he was going to waste any time on her project, she had another think coming.

'The project title is Human Impact on the Environment. You can choose anything that human beings have done, past or present. Assess whether it is a good or bad impact, or a mixture of both.'

Dylan almost growled. She looked like one of those people who spent all their free time reading instead of going outside and doing any of the things in her books. Like actually going up a tree. Or making a huge bike track with jumps, or building a treehouse you could sleep in. Or trudging off in the rain through gorse and bracken and over mossy mounds to the far edges of the farm with a dog to rescue a sheep some tourist had said was stuck in a fence.

Dylan hadn't slept much. He had spent every waking second wracking his brains to work out how they could

get the farm back. He wasn't any good at schoolwork and he had never got the hang of being polite, but – and it wasn't boasting if you only said it to yourself – he was pretty good at making things happen.

He had plenty of ideas. Some were too big: computer hacking to change the sale, kidnapping the CEO, tying himself to the rope swing and refusing to leave. And some were too soft: taking all the road signs to his village away, using the digger like a tank to stop BlueBird from entering the village, setting up a petition. But he hadn't come up with anything you could call a real plan. And how was he supposed to think with his teacher droning on and on?'

'I'd like to see the human element,' she continued, 'talk to people involved if you can. Sometimes the essays that win are the ones that show how passionate the writer is. So look for something you really care about.'

Dylan sighed. She was smiling now and he could tell immediately that she had something granny-ish – like elderflower – running in her veins. To be fair, she probably had no idea how much she was torturing him.

Deep inside, a nasty dark thought hunkered down, waiting for the right moment. That thought was: it was impossible. Global companies didn't sell farms back because some kid wanted them to. Dylan shoved the thought roughly aside.

He had to go and see Floyd after school and get his dad's email address. Gramp would call it clutching at straws. But it was better than doing nothing.