

NOT THE BOSS, BUT STILL A MAN

Elizabeth Smyth

Once a croc clamps onto you, nothing will get it off. It rolls you over and over, thrashing and splashing, until you drown. Barry Starke knows this. He wades through the turbid water wicking up towards his armpits. In one hand he grips a red fuel drum; in the other, an open pocketknife. He could be pulled into a death roll any second. Because all it takes for a croc to kill is hunger and awareness of prey.

Barry tries not to make a splash. Crossing the Uncanny River is crazy, he knows, but he has to get home to call the bank. He couldn't go back the way he had come because the lead to the spark plug broke when he crashed. The bike won't run. At first he was angry. He should have been looking where he was going, instead of gazing into the distance, searching for a missing bull. But worse than that, he'd left his toolbox and phone in the shed. So he did what he could: kicked the ground, wiped his grazed arm with a dirty hand, and set off for the river.

The water stings and cleans like cattle wash. He wades further in, a lone beast making a foolish move. Barry Starke was once a man people listened to, but now the bank is the boss. He has to do as he is told. And he will, if he survives this river. He will sell the underweight steers.

After the death roll, a croc tears off an arm or a leg. They come off easily enough. A croc's jaws are strong. They have the bite force of a T-Rex, so the young blokes at the pub say. Meaty bones are swallowed in one gulp. The bulge of a limb (Barry's limb) will soon show on the pale skin of a leathery throat. But who would see? No one.

The croc won't eat all of him, he thinks. Not that it makes any difference once you are dead. But it might interest whoever finds the bike. They say crocs are different to sharks because they don't gorge. A croc's stomach is the size of a basketball. And Barry Starke, the Big

Man, as he's often called, won't fit. He's destined to become a lifeless torso, stashed under a submerged log.

He scans the riverbank for reptile killers resting in the sun. Or, worse, a scrape on the mud that means a croc is already in the water. A month ago, at Flying Fish Point, a dog disappeared. It swam out to fetch a ball, gave a yelp and was gone. A croc took him for sure. What else?

Barry imagines his bloated torso swirling in muddy floodwater. He can almost smell the awful stink of something dead. And who would find him? Only the sharks at sea most likely. He looks at his watch. It's expensive. Waterproof. It will remain in the croc's gut, long after his flesh is digested, ticking away until the battery runs out.

The wet crotch of his shorts rubs against his inside leg. He might as well die, he decides. When he fronts the saleyard with underweight steers, everyone will know he's strapped for cash. He folds the blade of his pocketknife, and shoves it in the top pocket of his shirt. The fuel drum is hard and uncomfortable under his left arm. He paddles with his other hand, leaving his boots to trail low, inches or metres (who knows?) above the riverbed.

On the tourist trail there are signs in red and yellow.

WARNING

ACHTUNG

Crocodiles inhabit this area.

Attacks may cause injury or death.

Do not enter the water.

But without a sign, the water doesn't look so bad. He is close to the other side now. He might even make it! If only he hadn't skipped swimming lessons at school to go fishing. His legs dangle from the red drum like live bait with no hook.

The mouth of the river, a kilometre away, fans over a beach, ankle deep. He would rather be there. Or maybe he should have stayed with his bike. But it's too late now. A shot of adrenaline floods through his

NOT THE BOSS, BUT STILL A MAN

veins. Something hit his right foot. He holds his breath. Nothing more happens. Was it the riverbed? He pushes his feet forward, feeling for solid ground. Yes. That's it. He's on the other side!

His shallow breathing and rapid heart rate makes him panic even more. He calls on the strength of his thighs to save his neck. The Big Man surges out of the river, splashing and making a sound like an injured calf. He is all movement and noise; pure prey. He pushes on for another ten or twenty metres well beyond the edge of dry land, then drops the fuel drum and turns. The Uncanny River is less a croc's home and more a snake at rest. A bee-eater swoops and skims the skin.

Barry Starke catches his breath. He wrings his hands together near his chest. He is drenched, but strong. The bank manager in her clean shirt and shiny boots may be the boss, for sure. But Barry Starke, thank Christ, is still a man.