

# Andrew Lansdown

## WITH MY KNIFE

Collyn was digging potatoes with his father when he found the knife. It was buried quite deep, and a large potato had grown around the blade. It looked as if someone had stabbed the knife right through the potato.

Collyn ran to his father, who was digging several rows nearer the river. "Look!" he shouted. "Look what I've found!"

His father took the knife. "Well I'll be!" he said.

He pulled the knife free and dropped the potato at his feet. Collyn picked it up. There was a narrow, V-shaped hole right through its centre when the knife-blade had been. He put his eye to it and looked at his father.

"You know," his father said, holding the knife by its blade and tapping the handle in his free hand, "this was my knife once."

"Yours!" cried Collyn, surprised and disappointed. He dropped the potato without giving it a second thought.

"Yep. When I was a nipper . . . How old are you?"

"You know dad. It's my birthday tomorrow."

"That's right." His father was remembering. "It was the day before my eighth birthday, too. I found it wedged in some rocks in the bush on the other side of the river." He looked out across the river. "It was all bush over that side when I was a boy." He stared back at the knife in his dirty hand. "Anyway," he said, "I found it and my father let me keep it. But on my birthday, I chopped the edge of the kitchen table while I was waiting for mum to put tea out. So my father took it off me. I don't know what he did with it, but he never gave it back."

"How do you know this is the one?" Collyn asked. But he knew the answer. The handle was wood, richly brown, like jarrah, and had a circle etched on one side, and a tapering triangle on the other. The blade was long, thin and slightly crescent shaped. No-one could forget a knife like that.

"See how the blade looks like stone?" said his father.

The blade was almost black, and had a dull sheen. There was not a spot of rust on it.

"Do you think it is stone?" Collyn touched the blade reverently.

"I shouldn't imagine," said his father. Then he added, "I wonder why the handle hasn't rotted away?"

"I s'pose *you'll* keep it now," said Collyn.

"Of course," his father said, putting the knife in one of the deep pockets of his overalls.

Although he did not realise it until the moment he found the strange knife, Collyn had been wanting a knife of his own for a long time. His father had plenty of knives — in the packing shed and in the kitchen.

“What will you do with it?” he asked, trying not to sound sookey or mean.

His father had begun digging again. He glanced up at Collyn; and suddenly he realised what his son was feeling. He thrust the shovel into the dark loam and propped his right foot on it.

“The trouble with a bloke rearing a son on his lonesome,” he said, “is he forgets that a boy is only little, and sort of tender. Now your mother, she was tender. And she would’ve kept an eye on me, to make sure I didn’t forget.”

Collyn could not remember his mother. She had died when he was barely three. He would be eight tomorrow, and he could not remember. Sometimes when his father spoke about her, his eyes would go distant and glassy, like he was not behind them anymore. But this time, he blinked a bit and smiled at Collyn. He took the knife from his pocket and flicked the blade with his thumb.

“Finders keepers,” he said.

Collyn’s eyes widened. “I can keep it?”

“Provided you don’t do anything silly like chopping the table.”

“Oh I promise!”

His father laughed and ruffled Collyn’s hair. “Here you are then,” he said. “Mind you,” he added, “it doesn’t mean you can stop work. Still plenty of spuds in the ground.”

And although Collyn worked extra hard the rest of the afternoon, his father noticed him stop every now and again to chop a potato-plant stem before digging it up.

That night, as he sat by the fire with his father, Collyn began to carve a piece of wood. He had no idea what he wanted to make; he just started whittling.

“You’re making a mess,” said his father, scowling at the wood shavings on the floor.

Collyn did not look up. “I’ll sweep it after,” he said.

Before long, Collyn realised that the wood had begun to take on a shape. But what? He stared at it intently, turning it around in his hands. It looked a bit like a dog, he thought. “Just what I’ve always wanted,” Collyn murmured; and he began to try, with all his might, to carve a dog. In fact, he worked with the rapt concentration of a boy trying to choose the best pup out of a large litter. But the harder he tried, the less like a dog the piece of wood became.

“Blow!”

His father looked up from the book he was reading. “What’s the

matter?"

Collyn passed him the carving. "I wanted to make a dog," he said. "But it keeps going wrong."

"It's not easy to carve something." His father looked at the carving carefully, then handed it back. "You have to be patient. Practice and patience, that's how most things are learned."

"Anyway," he said, "it's time for bed now, so you'll have to put it away until tomorrow."

"No," said Collyn. "I'll start a new one tomorrow." He threw the carving into the fire; and as it landed on the coals, he thought he heard a dog bark way off in the distance.

When Collyn woke, it was his birthday. But the first thing he thought of was his knife. He reached under his pillow, and there it was, just as he had left it last night, just as he had dreamed.

His father came into his room with two presents and sat on his bed. "Be careful with that knife. It's sharp."

"It's not sharp for me," said Collyn, "only everything else."

"Well why don't you put it down for a minute and have a look at what I've got you."

Collyn unwrapped his presents. One was a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle; the other, a leather football.

"One for your brain and one for your body," his father laughed.

Although he was pleased with his presents, Collyn could not stop thinking of his knife. "And dad, I don't have to work today, do I?" he asked.

"No, not on your birthday. What will you do with yourself? Play with your football, I suppose."

After breakfast, Collyn kicked his football along the gravel road in front of the potato paddock. But he had no-one to kick it back to him; so he soon grew tired of it. He left the ball by the road and wandered across the paddock towards his father. The loam was dry and soft, and squirted up between his toes in little puffs of dust as he walked.

There was a place along the river where a tree had fallen into the water. It was Collyn's special place. He climbed onto the trunk and walked out to where it sunk under the water. He sat down and stared at the water eddying past him. He jabbed his knife into the trunk absent-mindedly, prized off a few lumps of bark, and then began to carve his name.

He spent nearly an hour on his name, carving it carefully and deeply. He felt so pleased with it when he had finished, that he thought to carve his father's name also. But after finishing the first letter, he said out loud, as if talking to some-one, "It's not working. He should have carved his own name when he owned it. But it's my knife now."

After a while, he felt a little lonely, so he wandered back to see his father.

"I thought you wouldn't be back until lunch time," said his father, still digging.

"Nothing to do."

"Plenty of potatoes to dig and bag."

"But it's my birthday," he said, sitting down beside the sack his father was filling with newly-dug potatoes.

He took a small potato from the sack and began to peel it. He had never peeled a potato with a knife before — he had always used a peeler — and he was surprised at how well he could do it. The potato seemed to shed its skin as the knife touched it. And as the last patch of skin fell off, leaving it perfectly white, the potato seemed to change. Collyn weighed it in his hand. It felt heavier. He bit it. It was hard, like a stone!

"Look at this potato, dad."

His father took the stone from him.

"Yes, it does look like a potato, a peeled one."

"It is a potato," said Collyn. "I peeled it, and it turned into a stone."

"Go on, you scally-wag!" laughed his father, ruffling his hair.

"But it's true!" Collyn insisted. "I'll show you."

He took another potato and began to peel it. But this time the peel did not come away easily. When he had finished, he held it in his open palm, staring at it, but it did not change into a stone.

"I suppose you'll be telling me that you can turn stones into potatoes next," smiled his father. "Think of all the stones in the river bed. All we'd have to do is wait 'til summer when the river dries and then pick 'em up. No more planting or digging!"

His father began to dig up another plant. He unearthed several large potatoes, which stood out as a grubby-white against the rich brown loam. Collyn took one and walked back towards the river.

When he reached the tree trunk, he noticed something strange about his name. Each of the letters he had carved was full of moss. His name was written in moss! He studied it carefully, running his finger over each letter. He read his name out loud, "Collyn Ephraim Merrit", then sat down beside it to peel the potato he had brought with him. The peel sank the moment it hit the water; and as the last piece fell away, Collyn felt the potato become heavy and hard. He bit it, and it hurt his teeth. He banged the log with it, and it bruised the wood.

"See, I wasn't imagining!" he said.

That night, Collyn tried to carve another dog. But he had no success. The harder he tried, the less like a dog the piece of wood



became.

"Why don't you try the jigsaw puzzle?" suggested his father when he saw how upset Collyn was getting. "I'll help you."

"I can't yet," said Collyn, almost crying. "I have to make a dog."

At bedtime, he threw the carving into the fire. It burned without a sound.

The following day, Collyn helped his father dig the potatoes. He wore the knife in his belt, but did not use it all day.

After tea, he began to wash the dishes. It was dark outside, and he could not see anything as he stared out the window over the kitchen sink.

"I know!" he exclaimed excitedly.

The dishes were only half done; but he quite forgot about that as he searched in the cupboard for the biggest potato he could find. He washed it in the sink, then cut it in half with his knife. The flesh was firm and white. He cut a slice from one half. It was about a centimetre thick, and nearly as round as a coaster.

"Come and I'll show you something, dad."

His father had just settled himself by the fire.

"Can't it wait, son?"

"Aw come on dad! You'll really like it!"

His father looked up and saw Collyn holding his knife and the slice of potato.

"Come on, dad," he said. "I'll show you how it works."

His father was curious now; he got up from his chair without any further badgering and followed Collyn outside.

The stars were intensely bright; but there was no moon.

"Now watch this," he said. And he flung the slice of potato high into the air. It fell to the ground about 5 metres away. They could just see it, faintly reflecting the sparse starlight.

"It didn't work!" Collyn said angrily.

"What did you expect it to do?" asked his father.

"I don't know."

The next day was Sunday, so neither father nor son went into the potato paddock to work. Collyn sat on the front verandah, idly whittling a piece of wood. His hands seemed to work by themselves as his thoughts wandered back over last night's failure with the slice of potato. What had he expected to happen? And why didn't it happen? How could he show his father now? He carved absent-mindedly as he pondered these questions over and again.

"Strike me if that isn't the best carving I've seen in my life!" exclaimed his father with genuine admiration.

Collyn shook off his thoughts and looked at the piece of wood in his hands. He gasped. It had been transformed into the most exquisite

carving of a kelpie dog.

Its legs were finely tufted with fur; and its tail, long and flowing. Its head was cocked to one side. One ear stood up and the other flopped down. Its mouth was slightly open, as if it were panting, revealing its teeth and tongue; and it seemed to be actually *looking* at them from its tiny, perfect eyes.

That evening, as soon as it was dark, Collyn repeated the experiment of the night before. He cut a slice of potato and ran out into the night by himself. He hurled the white disc into the air. It flew up and up until it became a moon shining brightly in the sky.

Collyn stared at it in amazement for several moments before running in to tell his father.

“Quick dad, come and look!”

He ran outside, then darted back to make sure his father was following.

He pointed at the moon. “Look!” he said.

His father looked up. “What? The moon?”

“Yes,” said Collyn. “I made it.”

“Oh Collyn! What’s got into you lately?”

“I did! I *did* make it! I cut the potato like last night and I threw it up and it became the moon!”

His father shook his head.

“Well remember last night there was no moon at all?” Collyn protested.

His father thought for a moment. “That’s true enough,” he mused.

“So how can there be a full moon tonight?”

His father shrugged. “You’d better come in now,” he said. “It’s cold.”

As his father turned to go inside, a dog ran out from beneath the house and barked at him.

“Strike me! Where’d you come from, mut?”

The dog ran past him and stopped before Collyn, wagging its tail. Collyn knelt down and pat it.

“I think I made him,” he said. “With my knife.”