

*Karen Adler*

## YABBIE MAGIC

It was Saturday at last. School was over for the week and the Great Yabbie Expedition was about to begin. The kitchen was in its usual early morning mess with the familiar smell of burnt toast hanging in the air.

"Just the way I like it," Dad always said even though he scraped the burnt bits into the sink every morning.

"It'll make your teeth white," he told us but we didn't really believe that eating something black and charcoaly would make our teeth whiter.

This morning though, we weren't concerned with black toast or white teeth. We had Things-To-Do and Places-To-Go. Ahh! The Great Yabbie Expedition — long awaited and carefully planned. Little Brother — he hated me calling him that — was looking for the string.

"I can't find it. It's not here," he wailed for the third time.

"It is there. Just open your eyes and look," I told him. That was what Mum always said and she was pretty right most of the time.

I went back to chopping up chunks of meat. Soft 'n squelchy. It felt good so I took my time with it.

"Found it," yelled Little Brother behind me and thrust the ball of string in front of me.

"OK, no need to shove it up my nose," I muttered and glared at him. "Here, help me put the meat in the bucket."

Equipment and supplies organised, we set off. Mr Davis had ploughed the paddock last week. Big chunks of dirt and wheat stubble stuck up everywhere.

"Come on! I'll race you to the dam," I called out and started running. I looked behind and sure enough, there was Little Brother stumbling along behind. He was carrying the bucket but I only had the ball of string. I slowed down to let him catch up.

"Not fair. You're a cheat!" he yelled at me as soon as he got close. He threw the bucket on the ground. Bits of meat flew everywhere. Angrily, he kicked the

bucket and then swung his leg out to kick me. He was only ten and still a scrawny little kid, but he was a good kicker. I jumped back, Ninja-style, but fell over the bucket. Straight down onto the mud I went. Squelch!

I looked up at him — skinny little legs, snowy white hair sticking up everywhere, blue eyes just about ready to cry.

"Poor little kid," I thought. OK, just this once I'd let him get away with it. Anyway, it was too hot to fight.

"Alright, alright. It wasn't a serious race. We'll swap, OK? You take the string and I'll take the bucket."

He looked at me uncertainly, expecting a trick. But seeing me sitting there, bits of dusty meat oozing up between my fingers, he started to laugh.

"Ha! Got you a good one, I did." Then we both started to laugh.

"Come on, let's move it. The yabbies're waiting." We picked up the bits of meat and threw them into the bucket. Grass, dirt and ants went in as well, but we figured that the yabbies wouldn't be too fussy.

The water was brown and muddy, and it was cold, too. We looked around us at the flat dry wheat fields. The only movement was a cack of black crows settling noisily on a dead tree. We both looked over at the crows and then back down at the dam at our feet. Slowly, we sank our feet further into the mud. Cool and squashy, sucking at our toes.

"Dad said we weren't to go in the water," Little Brother told me — again.

"Well, we're not in the water, are we? We're just in the mud." Little brothers could sometimes be a pain in the neck. I gave him my best "you-are-just-a-little-kid" look.

"Come on, let's get organised," I said, "and remember, you have to pull the string really, really slowly. Otherwise, the yabbies figure out what's going on and let go of the meat."

Little Brother nodded. He could remember the last Yabbie Expedition when he'd got all excited as soon as there was a nibble on the string. We ended up with lots of pieces of string and soggy bits of meat, but no yabbies. This time we'd do better.



We sat down on the edge of the dam. The sun was higher in the sky now and flies were starting to buzz lazily around the edge of the bucket. I picked up a piece of string and some meat. You had to be careful tying the meat to the end of the string. If you tied it too tightly, the meat fell to pieces. If it was too loose, the meat just fell off. Either way, the yabbies won. Not this time, Brother Yabbie, I thought to myself.

"OK, Little Brother, time for our Yabbie-catching Magic."

Little Brother and I had spent the time since the last Great Yabbie Expedition working out the Grand Plan. Carefully, we laid the pieces of string and meat between us on the mud. Kneeling down, we scooped up some mud and spread it all over our faces, arms and legs.

"Oh, Great Brother Yabbie, we are here so that you can give yourself to us," we chanted slowly. "We are brown and cool and muddy like yourself, and wish for you to come to us."

There had been a lot of discussion between Little Brother and myself as to the words of the Yabbie-catching Magic. Finally, we decided that words that showed Brother Yabbie the proper respect couldn't possibly fail.

"Remember, Little Brother, we are now honorary Yabbies. To catch a yabbie, you have to think like a yabbie. Brown and cool and muddy."

Eyes sparkling eagerly, he nodded that he understood. He picked up the meat and string and walked to the edge of the beer-bottle brown water. White hair and blue eyes above a muddy face full of concentration.

"Ooh, Brother Yabbie. Come to me, Brother Yabbie," he sang to himself as he slowly and softly threw the string into the water.

All was still as I watched Little Brother. The turgid air seemed to inhale and exhale, to breathe in unison with us. The crows looked down upon the two great Yabbie Hunters, giving silent support to creatures they perhaps saw as kindred spirits, fellow hunters. The scene was almost monochromatic: the dust-brown air frozen around us, particles of dull light suspended in the shimmering heat haze of the near-noon day. The dull stultifying sky blended into the sun-parched wheat field, the glistening blackness of the crows providing the only counterpoint of colour in this sea of brownness.

We blended, Little Brother and I, into this landscape parched and burned by the sun. We were still, silent, the silence echoing our intensity of purpose.

Slowly, taking great care not to disturb the string in his hand, Little Brother turned his head towards me. His blue eyes were serious.

"Can you hear them?" he whispered. "Can you hear them talking? They know we're here."

I nodded.

"I told you they'd remember us," I answered softly.

Little Brother turned back to the water, becoming still, blending once more with the silence. Suddenly, there was a tug on the string. He turned to me, a look of pure delight on his face. Except for that one action, he moved not a muscle. He was waiting for the yabbie to get a good, solid grip on the meat.

"He remembers!" I thought happily. Pictures of the last Great Yabbie Expedition sprang into my mind. Wild yelps of delight and loud brown splashes had accompanied each tug on the string. We'd danced and whooped and splashed about in the water for hours, creating a small, reverberating circle of sound in the flat, endless bush. We hadn't caught any yabbies, of course, but the memories of that joyful noise and movement now seemed more important than the wet string and empty buckets we'd gone home with.

I watched Little Brother as he sat, every muscle tensed, at the edge of the dam. The mud on his body had dried and cracks, like thin white rivers spreading over a flood plain, were beginning to appear.

"Ooh, Brother Yabbie. Come to me, Brother Yabbie," he sang softly. The string tautened, the magic dancing along its length, passing from Little Brother to the yabbie. A shiny brown shell slipped to the surface of the water.

"It's the *King* of the Yabbies," Little Brother whispered excitedly. "Look how big he is."

I edged nearer, sliding down the muddy bank, my own piece of string forgotten. Little Brother's blue eyes were focussed on the shiny brown shell of the Yabbie King gliding towards him. His tiny hands clutched the string tightly, his mouth moving as he chanted almost inaudibly. The words of the incantation had changed, I noted with surprise. Little Brother was making up his own magic.

"You are mine, King Yabbie. You are mine," he crooned as he slowly pulled the string. His blue eyes sparkled, gleaming with an intensity that seemed too powerful for such a little boy.

For a moment I was caught in the magical web of words which seemed to draw me towards him. It was as if I, too, were to become his prey. The wheat field and the muddy brown dam had ceased to exist. Little Brother had also ceased to exist. In his place sat a small, mud-caked being so intent on domination that all the joy of past yabbie expeditions was lost to him.

Suddenly, a different voice spoke, startling Little Brother's chant into silence.

"Stop! You have no right," it said softly. The voice was low, powerful and seemed to bubble up darkly from the muddy depths of the dam.

Little Brother and I stared at each other, too stunned to move. He was the first to look away, his eyes searching frantically over the dust-covered landscape for the source of the voice. His tiny hand still clutched the string, his body shook, loosening small bits of mud which fell noiselessly into the brown water and disappeared instantly.

The crows had taken flight, leaving the dead tree a bleached skeleton looming over the wheat field. A lone crow swooped over the surface of the water, flying so low that Little Brother and I were forced to look into its black eyes.

"You have no right, you have no right," it seemed to whisper harshly as it passed overhead.

I stared, transfixed, at Little Brother's face. The blue eyes were wide, staring at the brown shell sliding inexorably closer. His mud-caked lips were still moving but no sound emerged. I knew though what the words were. "You are mine, King Yabbie, you are mine," seemed to impound themselves in my brain, twitching and turning and hurtling around my mind.

Little Brother's tense body quivered with an effort of will that seemed to come from the very depths of his small being. Chunks of dry mud exploded in small brown showers from his taut back and flexed arms. The thin white rivers had broadened, deepened until they seemed to cut into his flesh. His face contorted, the lips twisting into a sneer that didn't belong on the face of my little brother.

"STOP! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT!" the voice roared with a ferocity that slammed me onto my back against the muddy bank. My head hit the ground hard. For a brief second I lay stunned, my eyes shut tight against the maddening surge of noise and movement around me.

I struggled upright. The dried mud on the bank was wet and slippery from the wild splashes of the dam which seemed to have erupted in a volcanic

outpouring of putrid slush. A great shadow had descended heavily over the dam, pulling a thick dark curtain over my senses.

Frantically I reached out my hand to where I thought Little Brother was. Nothing — empty air. My mouth opened in a scream but gagged violently as a gob of evil-smelling mud heaved into my face.

Using all my strength, I managed to stand. My feet slipped in the oozing, boiling mud, I slid down the bank into the water. My stomach heaved as I felt the touch of slime come alive and brush against my skin.

The sound of a flock of crows echoed harshly above. Involuntarily, I turned skywards. A soft hail of rotting meat and pieces of string spat from their black beaks onto my upturned face.

I sensed a low steady chant somewhere in front of me. Without the sense of sight, my hearing had sharpened so that above the turmoil surrounding me I was able to make out the two voices.

“You are mine ... You have no right ... You are mine ... You have no right ...”

One voice harsh, powerful. The other — I wasn't sure. It had to be Little Brother's but it was distorted, unknown to me. Both voices were low, resonating brownly like liquid mud above the now almost still surface of the dam. The shadow had dissipated, leaving the brown air to circulate thickly as before. My eyes were caked shut from the mud and putrid refuse which had fallen from the sky. Realising that I was waist deep in the dam, I splashed water onto my face, urging myself to hurry, for godsake *hurry*.

The sight which met my eyes was haloed in a shaft of yellow sunlight reflecting off the parched wheat field. Almost within my reach, Little Brother stood immersed in water up to his shoulders. His dry lips still moved, no sound emerging but his eyes were wide with a terror that vibrated the arm's distance between us. He was being pulled slowly, inch by certain inch, into the middle of the dam where the water still bubbled threateningly.

I lunged, grabbing Little Brother, pulling both of us backwards under the water. He fought against me and struggled to the surface, still clutching the string ferociously.

“He's *mine!*” he hissed into my face, baring his teeth viciously. For a brief second I watched in horrified silence as he turned to face the water once more.

"No!" I screamed and lunged for the string which connected him to a force I knew was too strong, too powerful for him. Using all my strength, I yanked it from his hands and threw it I cared not where.

All became still, silent as the bubbling in the centre of the dam abruptly ceased. A sudden look of pain and loss appeared on Little Brother's small face as he beheld his empty hands. Slowly, he looked at me, desolation and an unknowable sadness on his face. His blue eyes had grown old, their sparkle diminished. I reached out my hand to him. A small hand touched mine. We turned and waded out of the water to the muddy bank of the dam.

Behind us, the voice spoke once more. It, too, was tinged with a sadness I did not then understand.

"Begone from this place and do not return," the voice said. "The magic was not yours to use. Come again only in friendship."

Little Brother and I did not turn as we trudged, hands tightly clasped, over the sun-parched wheat stubble. Warily, we walked towards the figure of our father approaching in the distance.

We never again spoke of that day and we never returned to the dam. Through the years, though, I would occasionally catch a glint of that same loss and sadness in Little Brother's eyes and I would try to comfort him.

As I grow older and the days of the Great Yabbie Expedition recede further behind me, I am tempted to do as the Yabbie King commanded. I am tempted to return in friendship. Perhaps now it is finally time.