

# GOODBYE CROCODILE

by  
**Conor Patrick**

From the house I can see the path that leads to the valley. That is where I will go this morning when the sun rises but now it is dark and outside is silent and still and I cannot see the path until the sun rises so I will sit here at the window until then. This morning I will surely go although I said the same to myself yesterday and the day before but today is Sunday and surely this morning I will go. When the sun rises I will be able to see the path beyond the fence but now it is dark and the houses around are dark too and there is no sound, furtive or otherwise. Earlier I saw the shape

of a deer come over the fence in the back and bend to eat where in spring I planted the aubergines we ate in late summer. The deer ate for a while and then I went to the bathroom to wash my face with cold water and when I returned the deer had gone back over the fence.

I sit for a long time. By the door is the bag I have packed. I fall asleep in my chair for a while and dream I am watching television. When I wake it is sudden from the feeling of falling. Outside it is black still and then it happens a second time and I think it was only a moment but there out the window the dawn has come and already I am tired.

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The morning runs cold. The clouds are low on the mountainside. The mountain comes down to us, we drink at its feet. High on the slope the dark trees. Higher there will be snow already but the clouds are low on the mountainside and the trees there can't be seen. There is no way through the back but over the fence like the deer and the bag is too heavy for this and I am too tired for climbing. Instead I take the garden path out the front gate and follow our street. When we moved to this place as boys the street was called Red

Indian Street but now it is called Lilac Street. The houses are mostly dark. A few kitchens lit. Boil the water for the coffee. Rise and behold the dawn. Garden saplings are cottoned and tied in cord but the elders are bare. They have endured winters before and they know its cruelties.

At the end of the road at the last house a girl stands in her doorway smoking barelegged. Her hair is long to her waist and her arms are thin. I take the path through the horse gate where the road ends. The path goes back around the houses and away. This is where the horses summer, their tracks still printed in the frozen mud. In the open the wind cuts down off the mountain. On the edge of the field stands a barn and I can smell the horses there and hear them calling for their breakfast and on another path there walks toward them the thin farmer carrying buckets and I can hear the horses stamping because this is something they know. Beyond is the farmhouse and beyond that are the pig pens and the butchery from which sometimes in the heat of summer the smell of blood carries into town. For now the pigs stay in the barn with the horses. Soon they will give birth to suckling young. I have met the farmer and eaten with him sometimes and on one occasion he told me that the sows sometimes will devour their young

alive. He said that the screaming of the young is very hard to bear, but this is something that I choose not to believe.

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From the path I can see the back of my house. I have left a light on upstairs and the single light gives the house a coldness but I look for a long time. I wish I had turned the light off and consider going back to turn it off but I know that if I go back I will instead turn on all the lights and sit at the window and watch the path and decide that maybe in the morning I will go to the valley instead of now. But in my heart I know that it is better to go to the valley now and to leave the light on and that when I return it is possible that perhaps the light will have lost some of its coldness.

The path leads a long time through the forest. I have been walking a long time and now the clouds are thinner. I am hungry and I wish I had brought something to eat but of course I hadn't thought that I would get hungry or want something to eat. The trees here are thin and tall, their needles pale and autumn-yellowed, ringed on the floor of the forest. The tops of the trees sway and I can hear the hearts of the trees

moaning. The wind rushes like water through them. The wind cannot find me, I am too small, but the trees bend under the weight of the wind and in the woods around far-off I can hear the branches breaking.

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I walk for a long time. The forest thickens and the trees are older and the woods are quiet. The path is narrower and crossed by thick roots. Here begin the aspen groves. Away from the path the white thin aspens grow together, white islands, the wet earth smell of them, their leaves golden and still falling. The groves are holy places the trees pilgrims drawn to a place preordained. Here they are white among the black pines, rooted and veined to the silent heart of the forest.

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Soon the path ends and loops back and comes at last to the other edge of the town but I do not wish to return to town. I am going to the valley. It is threatening snow but the cold is too dry and I know it will not snow. I leave the path. I am among the trees. The earth is

uneven and soft and padded with needles. Ahead there is a grove and when I reach it I remove the pack and rest on a log. The log is hard and cold but it is good to have removed the pack for a while and now my hunger has passed. The forest is thicker and it is not so cold. I rest for a long time. Briefly the clouds break and the sun comes through and the aspens are gold. The wind rises and their leaves rattle and many fall spiralling to the forest floor. In a while the sky closes again. It is maybe mid-day.

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The going is slower away from the path. I have not been this way in a long time. I have not been this way since my boyhood and now I cannot be sure if I know the way still. I have never walked this way alone. It is possible that it will be dark before I reach home and it is possible I will become lost. The nights are cold and the snow could come down off the mountain. The trees grow close together, their branches mingling high up, mottling the light. I cross many streams that I do not remember. Perhaps there used to be a bridge but now there is no bridge. Each stream however is flowing toward the valley and so I cannot be lost. I do not

remember the way but I do remember that the streams come together in the valley into a small nameless river and it is to this river I am walking. I cannot be lost.

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The forest is larger and deeper than I remember. I move among the trees. In this place it would seem no one has ever walked only I know I have walked here before and not alone. Before when I was not alone I would bring Crocodile with me. Of course his name was not Crocodile but I can no longer bear to speak his name nor think of his face or I am reduced and I will sit on the ground and I will not stand up again for a long time. If this happens in this place I know I will turn and go home but I do not want to go home. In my bag is the tin toy crocodile for which I have named Crocodile since he carried this toy with him often as a boy and because I found it among the things he left. He left this crocodile out as if for me to find. It is tin and has a key. It has a motor and the legs can move if one turns the key in the belly but I cannot turn the key because I do not know for sure what the toy will do or if it moves or if it speaks and I am afraid of what it will do if I turn the key. I did not call him crocodile before. Only now. The

forest is much deeper than I remember. Perhaps if I turn the key the mouth will move. I remember him turning the key as a boy and I remember the mouth moving but that was during my boyhood and there is much I cannot remember from that time. I do not want the mouth to move. I cannot find the edge of the forest. There are boulders in this place huge such that they cast their own shadows and many are broken. When water seeps into a crack in stone and freezes the stone in time will break. Many of these boulders are broken and they lay in cut halves on the forest floor. They are in halves clean cut as by God. The afternoon is getting on. The ground is wet and the sky has lowered. Everywhere is the smell of water.

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I have come at last to the edge of the forest. It has taken much longer than I remember. At the edge of the forest the valley begins. The valley slopes down in steep pale hills which are green and flowered in summer. This is something I remember clearly. Here is where water has cut into the Earth and it is deep and it is beautiful. This is the place water comes. Water comes down from the mountain and through the wood when it rains.

There is a great meadow and the creeks come together down the slope. At the bottom is the little river. I sit down and take the toy crocodile from my bag and hold it. I meant to only sit for a moment but now it has been many hours. The wind rushes cold in the grass. Now it is late and I must take crocodile down to the water.

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In the dusk light the river ribbons silver. I put down the pack and open it and take from within the black box. The box is heavier than a newborn. This is the first time I have opened the lid and I am not expecting that the ashes will be in a plastic bag and zip-tied. The ashes are in a plastic bag and zip-tied like a loaf of bread and this is something I was not expecting but I twist it and it opens and now there isn't anything between me and the ashes. Among the ashes are fragments of pale bone. It is the first I have seen Crocodile in many years and I tell him I am sorry many times and many times again. The mountains are darkening. I am afraid that when I tip the box the ashes will lift on the wind and I will breathe them in and I will taste them and so I stand holding my breath and turn the box above the river and the white rushes out quick and heavy as sand. The

water takes it and carries it downstream, a white band in the black water, and I smell the ash but it isn't a smell of badness, only the woodsmoke smell of my boyhood. I watch the ash in the water but already it is gone. The river speaks the same as before. The clouds have gone and the air is wintering. The last paleness of the sky is waning. I put crocodile on a stone on the waterside and face him so he can see the yellow moon rising over the mountain. I sit with him until it is dark and the sky is open and huge and choked with stars.

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When I am walking again through the forest in the dark I am promising I will not return but I know this is a promise I will break. Someday water will seep into the stone in my heart and I will come back to this place. Tomorrow or in a week's time or in a month. To see if crocodile is still there. I will come down in winter to brush the snow from him and clear the ice from his mouth. I know that by spring this or the next or maybe sooner I will come and crocodile will be gone. Swept in the flooded reeds or overgrown with thistle or swallowed by the earth. I wonder, will I dig for him in the mud. Will I turn the iron key when I find him again.

By then perhaps I will be able to turn it but of course  
by then the key will have rusted. The key will not turn.  
By then perhaps I will be ready to watch the red mouth  
open and the legs move but of course by then the key  
will not turn because the water will be in it. And water  
ruins all things.

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Conor Patrick was born in the south-western United States in 1983. He gained an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Portsmouth in 2011. Someday, he would like to own a telescope. His writing has appeared in various publications throughout the US and UK.