

An Unexpected Occurrence at the Crossing Over the Creek

1048 words

The concrete in the crossing over the creek was always cracked with parts being washed away in subsequent floods. It's not always at the forefront of minds, sitting just a little way from the centre of the small town that many people have made their regular stop when heading south. The centre of the town has clean toilets, cafes, playgrounds, and space to stretch your legs. There's a quaint historic feel about the town, but it changes just enough to provide passing people the pleasure of proclaiming, "geez, that wasn't here last time, was it babe?". Yet, most people who visit the town use the main bridge downstream, so they may not know about the crossing over the creek.

Dad knew about the crossing over the creek because it's the most direct route from his house to the other centre of town - the showground. His young kids often asked for the chance to play on the ageing playground there. Sometimes they wanted to kick a ball on the patch of grass that always seemed to be either green and soggy or yellow and crisp, but never in between. Other times it was Dad himself who needed to blow off steam circling the main arena that also serves as the footy oval. However, no matter what compelled Dad and his kids to take that route over the years, it didn't seem to bother anyone that concrete in the crossing over the creek was cracked, unless there'd been some heavy rain.

On the last day of a particular autumn, the kids begged Dad for the opportunity to pop down to the playground. Dad asked the kids to put on gumboots because there'd been some heavy (and well overdue) rain that week. You see, given the concrete in the crossing over the creek was cracked, some neighbour or another always kindly laid out a mixed entrée of rocks and bricks across the creek - just far enough apart for adults to navigate, but unfortunately not fit for little legs. This often resulted in Dad carrying screaming and/or laughing children on his back and/or splayed across arms while hopping precariously from rock to brick. But this day Dad decided it was a little cold to risk anyone getting wet, plus his back hadn't been great that week.

At the top of the lane leading down to the crossing over the creek, Dad reminded everyone to stop just shy of the water. This request seemed to be code for an unspoken race to the bottom, as they began legging it down the hill in competition. The kids knew the old dirt road well, jumping the bigger rocks and avoiding the potholes also caused by subsequent floods. Meanwhile, dad followed anxiously. He was nearer and nearer to a heart attack each time one of them stumbled or lost their footing, even though there were seldom any serious casualties. The kids only slowed right near the end, giving themselves just enough space to dutifully distance themselves from the creek's edge.

Looking for the best path, Dad decided the water was shallow enough for the kids to wade their way across the crossing over the creek. He gave the kids a few simple instructions, along the lines of, "don't run through, your socks'll get wet," and, "don't splash the others - it's too cold". Dad then began to navigate the rocks and bricks, as he had always preferred walking shoes to gumboots. But, as things go with children, it was never going to take more than a minute until...

...splash, splosh, splash....

None of the kids had ever thought to jump in the creek before. This was possibly because Dad always took them for a swim at the town's pool, or maybe because everyone knows that snakes live down at the crossing over the creek. But that day - the last day of autumn when it was thankfully too cold for snakes - Number Two Son decided to start splashing right through the water.

Dad was ready to read the riot act, until something in him urged calm. He turned away and continued across the rocks and bricks, strolling up the bank to a soft piece of grass in the sun, and plonking down. Seeing no consequences had been awarded to Number Two Son for his actions, the other kids instantly began frolicking about as if it was the middle of summer and they were down the coast instead of the crossing over the creek.

The kids laughed, and played, and romped through the water, leaving no doubt that every sock and undergarment amongst them was wet through. All the while Dad watched patiently, even allowing himself a grin at times, as he fought back his own protests that it was too cold or that a car might come down the road. Instead, he kept watch and let them play. At different intervals, each of the kids would run up the hill to Dad to tell him how wet they were or how much fun they were having. With each additional recount of exactly what he could see with his own eyes, a piece of Dad's heart melted as he watched the kids play at the crossing over the creek.

As Dad's heart liquefied, he thought about all the times he'd bought the kids to the crossing over the creek, solemnly and gruffly directing them across as if he was witnessing the signing of a mortgage document. He also reflected on other things he had done with the kids over the past few months without finding time for the fun they were craving. Dad reasoned that there were many critical reasons why he had sucked the fun out of some activities with the kids; it was his job to keep them safe and get them where they needed to go while keeping their moods regulated. At times, he was the only one that knew all of the priorities and it was on him to ensure everything happened the way it was meant to. But, testing these thoughts over and over, he began to reckon there were plenty of journeys with the kids that could be about more than the destination.

Above the squeals and splashes that made the kids smiles grow wider and wider, Dad sat back a little more comfortably in the grass and let himself feel the sun on his face. He smiled and basked in that satisfied feeling you get when you know you've made the right decision as a parent. He'd allowed himself to consider something from a new angle and, as people of all ages often do, wished he'd realised it sooner. And just for that moment, it was as if the crossing over the creek had been built anew, with shining white concrete that sparkled in the sun without broken bits caused by subsequent floods.