



**LIVING TO BE**

**100**

*STORIES BY*

**ROBERT BOSWELL**

a u t h o r o f M Y S T E R Y R I D E

# LIVING TO BE A HUNDRED

STORIES BY  
*Robert Boswell* 江苏工业学院图书馆  
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*For Toni*  
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*Noah*

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*Also by Robert Boswell*

MYSTERY RIDE  
THE GEOGRAPHY OF DESIRE  
CROOKED HEARTS  
DANCING IN THE MOVIES

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## *Rain*

The missing boy—age twelve, gone now forty hours—left the gate open in the low fence separating back yard from forest. It swings wide with the wind, rapping against old fence boards and then the opposing post, striking its latch but not catching, time and again, audible to the nearest searchers. The flat clack of wood, the hollow clank of metal are desolate sounds that make them fear the worst.

Karen Stupka and her friend Orla Figes search together—the sheriff insisted on pairs—hooded in identical yellow slickers issued by the fire department, carrying flashlights from home, rain streaking down their coats, trickling across their faces.

“They said to be systematic,” Karen calls to Orla, taking her by the slicker’s rubber sleeve, yelling into her friend’s hood. They stop before a wall of kudzu, raindrops dribbling off the leaves. The rain’s relentless fall through the dense vines makes a sound like the rush of surf. “I don’t see how we can be systematic,” Karen says. The forest—black, dense, and ancient—covers a thousand Georgia acres.

“Up and back,” Orla suggests. “We stick together, right? Up and back as long as we can take it.” Orla has a Slavic seriousness to her face and thick, dark brows that converge when she is speaking earnestly.

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The forest smells of rain, rotting wood, and something else—fear, Karen decides. She says, “We can duck under the vines through there.” She shines her light on an opening in the long fall of kudzu, threads of water sparkling in the beam. She leads, Orla follows. They live across the street from each other, two blocks from the tragic home, the swinging gate. It has rained five of the past six days, the only exception the afternoon the boy disappeared—a kid interested in mushrooms. His mother speculates that he entered the woods to add to his collection, and there is the fear that he may have eaten a poisonous toadstool and is now lying among sodden leaves, clutching his stomach, rain pelting his face.

Karen and Orla penetrate the forest a mile away from the boy’s house, an unlikely area assigned to them by the sheriff, who organized the volunteers according to his sense of their value. The likeliest areas he gave to off-duty policemen and firemen, teaming them with family members, in whom he had no confidence. Lawrence, Karen’s husband, is one of the men at the heart of the search. He is not a fireman, policeman, or relative, but he is a big man, young and imposing. His partner is the sixteen-year-old brother of the missing boy.

The sheriff was dismissing Karen and Orla by sending them so far away. Karen understands this but has said nothing about it, even to Orla, forgiving him out of compassion and a sense of the larger issue of the missing boy, and, too, out of relief, as the assignment was a partial release from the awful responsibility.

Karen and Orla sweep their lights in unison—rough bark, green leaves shimmering with moisture, the yellow and brown of decay, plots of moss, families of mushrooms, a graying branch sticking out of the earth like a cross. (Wind flashes through the high limbs, treetops bow, leaves fall like rain, rain falls like darkness, and darkness falls like snow, covering everything.)

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“The rain should keep the spiders down,” Karen says. She and Orla share a fear of spiders, which Orla claims is as endemic to women as the fear of snakes is to men.

“I hadn’t even thought of spiders,” Orla says. “How far should we go before turning back?”

“Farther,” Karen says. She is thirty-four, a year younger than Orla and six years older than her husband. She did not marry Lawrence for love, but in the two years they have been together she has come to love him. He is a kind man, not particularly bright, not remarkably foolish—“limited” is how Orla describes him. Now he and Karen are hoping to have children. Orla, twice divorced, has told Karen she will likely spend the remainder of her life alone.

They come to a ravine. The sides are steep and grassy, and at the bottom a shallow stream of water flows slowly through brambles and around large stones. The curtain of rain obscures the opposite bank, sending their beams of light back at them.

“We could turn around here,” Karen says, “but this is the sort of place a boy might go.”

“You think he could be trapped in this ditch?” Orla steps closer, directing her light at the muddy water. “Down, then?”

Karen shrugs. They hold hands and tentatively step sideways down the bank, their feet sliding in the black mud. Finally, they tumble together into the stream. Orla lands face first but quickly rises, spitting. “I’m not hurt,” she announces.

Karen says, “I’ve lost my shoe.”

They stand up together, holding hands again. The water comes to just below the knees of their jeans and pushes them forward, and they go along slowly, casting their lights about. Karen limps slightly, one foot bare. Her light falters, but she twists the plastic lid and the beam is again steady.

The water deepens, and when Orla suggests that they turn

back, Karen agrees, pointing again with the light to the opposite bank. Orla nods—they will cover the other side on their way back.

Their first attempt to scale the bank tells them it is impossible—too steep, too slick. They fall forward and slide back into the bottom water.

“Maybe it won’t be so steep later on,” Karen suggests. Neither wants to retrace their steps: a child is missing.

The ravine grows narrower, the stream deeper, the rain does not slacken. A cold wind punishes the overhanging limbs, pushing against their faces drops of water that sting like pebbles. Orla says something Karen cannot make out. They turn their backs to the wind momentarily, and Orla’s warm breath enters Karen’s hood. “If the boy’s been in this ditch all this time . . .” She shakes her head sadly, her dark hair falling in wet slashes across her forehead and cheeks.

The water has risen now above their knees. Twice Karen falls to a crouch, stumbling over hidden rocks, bruising her bare foot. Orla grabs her elbow each time. The wind rises again—a wall, halting them, making them raise their arms, turn their heads. They hold to each other until it passes.

Orla says, “I’ve peed my pants.” She is laughing, her big mouth opened to the rain. “I didn’t see any reason to hold it.”

Karen laughs, too. “We may not get out of here until we can swim out.”

This doubles Orla over with laughter, wet strands of hair falling free of the hood and lashing the water. “You do it,” she says, rising, taking Karen’s raincoat by the shoulder. “Pee.”

Karen shakes her head. “Impossible.”

They stumble forward a few more yards. A gray, leafless tree trails down the bank. It does not give when Karen yanks at the limbs. “You first,” she yells to Orla, who obeys. She clutches at

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the branches and pulls herself from the stream and then up the bank, where Karen soon joins her, weary, muddy, and relieved.

On their knees they rest on the mucky ground. The sky goes white and thunder quickly follows. Karen looks down into the ravine's flow. "We could have been electrocuted," she says. "We could have died down there."

Orla smiles, revealing her long teeth and pink gums. "We could die up here, too." Her chin trembles to restrain laughter.

Karen also feels the urge to laugh, but the flashlight she grips fiercely reminds her of why they are in the forest. "The boy," she says, and Orla nods, somber again. They get up slowly and begin to work their way back through the forest.

Later that night, wrapped in towels on Karen's living-room floor, they drink brandy and wait for Lawrence to return. Orla's towel is purple and emphasizes her paleness, as her bare shoulders emphasize the length of her arms. A gawky woman, she looks all the more so clothed only in a towel. One of her large, bony hands rakes her hair, which, dripping wet, looks better, Karen believes, than when it is dry and styled. Orla wears her hair in a manner Karen finds aggressively unattractive—an old-fashioned puff and curl that belongs on a country-and-Western singer. Wet, her hair at least looks as if it has potential, which makes Karen think of her husband, how he looks best unshaven but without a beard—that in-between stage that raises possibilities.

Orla says, "We should have been terrified in that ravine. Why were we so brave?"

Karen shakes her head to express her wonder.

"Did you find any ticks?" Orla asks, fingering her skull. "I was expecting to find ticks in my hair."

"No ticks, no spiders," Karen says.

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To which Orla adds sadly, "No boy."

When Lawrence finally returns, exhausted, his face smeared with mud, he tells them the boy has been found—alive—his leg broken from a fall. He had climbed a tree hoping to see over the forest and determine the way home. The fall could have killed him, but he survived it.

Lawrence removes his shirt as he finishes the story, and it occurs to Karen that they could all three go to bed. Rather than send Orla across the street to her empty house, they could go into the next room and climb into the wide bed. She knows this will not happen. Lawrence sits on the floor to take off his boots. He reminds them that he has been searching with the missing boy's sixteen-year-old brother. "He kept talking the whole time about the trouble the kid would be in once we found him. What a jerk."

Orla adjusts her towel, willing to think of modesty now that she knows the boy is all right. She says, "Some people express their fears that way. Don't be too harsh."

Lawrence peels off his filthy socks. "I suppose you're right. I think I wanted to dislike him." He tosses the socks on top of his shirt. "I know it's unfair—anybody's boy could get lost in the woods. But I kept thinking they must be a screwed-up family, you know? I kept wanting to blame them." He shook his head once, as if to knock the idea out of himself. "How was it down where you were?"

"Rough," Orla says.

"We wound up in a ravine and couldn't get out for a long while," Karen tells him. "I remember thinking we were going to find the boy down there and we'd all be stuck together." This isn't true, she realizes as she says it. It is something like the truth, but not quite.

"I'm going to shower," Lawrence says. "Wait up for me. I'm tired but not sleepy. I want to talk."



## Rain

When he is gone, Orla asks to borrow clothes, then retracts the request. "If I can hike through that forest, I can certainly run across the street in a towel. Come with me."

"More adventure," Karen says.

They share an umbrella, as the rain has not let up, and walk across the asphalt and through the brown water bordering the sidewalk. Inside, they rub their bare feet on Orla's throw rug, which makes them laugh again.

"We're acting like hysterics," Orla says.

Karen waits in the living room while Orla steps into her bedroom to dress. Through the front window, she sees the matching window in her house, lit, the curtains open. It is the dead of night, but identical windows all along the street are lit; the searchers are unable to sleep.

"Why do you think we were so brave?" Orla calls from the bedroom.

Karen shakes her head, as if Orla could see. Lawrence has just appeared in the window across the way, a white towel around his waist. He is probably disappointed that Orla is gone, Karen thinks. Lawrence does not find Orla attractive, but he likes her to appreciate him. He steps to the window and looks out for several seconds before he spots Karen looking back at him.

Karen parts her towel for an instant. He applauds, and when she gestures for it, he opens his towel, too.

"Why do you think we were so brave?" Orla calls again, entering the room. She wears brown shorts and a sleeveless muslin blouse.

It could happen, Karen thinks. The three of them in one bed. Orla would go for it, she believes, and Lawrence certainly wouldn't object. She understands that it is her decision, and she decides against it. "We had to be brave," she tells Orla. "We didn't have a choice."

"Yes, we did," Orla insists. "We could have sat on our bot-