

# The Birdwatcher

That summer the boys skirted round us, like wee birds which flitted into the grevilleas while our terrier slept beneath. There was no real danger, but they were instinctively wary. Their games took place in huddled corners, away from us, and instead of their raging sibling skirmishes, they completed chores unasked and agreed on which programs to watch. The whole family exuded an unfamiliar tolerance and calm; each day had taken on the surreal feel of a silent movie.

A Butcherbird broke into symphonic complexities of song. I waited for the partner bird to call in unison. Such precision. Such intricate notes. They'd disappear for months, then magically reappear, heralding visits with their virtuoso performances.

I stared at the back of my husband's head and saw that Rick, too, was watching the Butcherbird. We were hungry for the slightest distraction.

Tension hung like fog in a swamp, invading as surely as the odours from the nearby dairy. But it wasn't the organic, substantial stuff of smells making our children uncomfortable; it was the unremitting stalemate of their parents.

When two people tire of logically explaining their position, when they have pleaded, cajoled, demanded of the other, and failed to reach a consensus, no conclusion can possibly satisfy both parties. There is no closure, no finale, no wrapping up of loose ends with generous concessions, no satisfaction, no winner, no loser, no moving on, no humour, no light. Just simmering grey courtesy.

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"Do you want coffee now or later?" Rick asked. "How was work?" "Shall I call in for milk when I pick up the paper?" I simmered. Why did he consult me on such simple matters when my strongest desire was dismissed?

Truth is I understood too well. The exaggerated care and attention were meant to make me feel unreasonable. My needs were considerately provided for. We had so much: wonderful children, wonderful home, gainful employment. I was a lucky woman. A transparent strategy. Win the battles, lose the war.

Sometimes it felt like war.

I walked into the kitchen and stared through the windows past the lush garden and paddocks into the distant hills and blue ranges. They really were blue, and he was right. It was beautiful. And tranquil. A rewarding place to live. The neighbours were close enough for comfort yet distant enough for privacy, and we were truly surrounded by friends and the gifts of nature. The seasons delivered ever-changing colours and an endless variety of life.

But that was exactly it. The very naturalness of it all, the ruralness, was driving me mad. The peace, the lush greenness, the isolation, the conservatism, the lack of opportunities for our children, the closed banks, the boring shops.

Multitudes of vividly coloured, large and tiny, raucous, melodic and silent birds soared and fluttered within sight every day. Honeyeaters sipped delicately upside down while Noisy Miners and Wattlebirds, also eager for nectar, clasped onto slender stems and

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poked their large beaks into the blooms. Their weights plunged and whipped the branches wildly, but they persisted, almost comically, in their endeavours.

If we moved, I *would* miss the birds. That I conceded.

In its own way the bird life mirrored our family: our struggles and squabbles and territorial battles, the constant battle to survive. The struggles to fly grounded me, reminding me my teenagers would be inexorably lured from my nest. And then what?

Did forest trees and penguins survive in a desert? Without water, seaweed shrivelled. Would this green, grassy countryside, with its postcard scenery and glorious birdlife ever feel like home to a city-girl? To survive was not necessarily to thrive.

There were days when I dreamt of escape from drudgery and country tranquillity. I was scared to visit my sister at her inner suburban flat in case I couldn't return home. The traffic snarls, the crowded paths, the ethnic faces at the pedestrian crossings, and the queues attracted me like filings to a magnet.

But was it my survival mechanism or a self indulgent whim? Write it down, they said. List the pros and the cons. See how it stacks up. But how can you measure an instinctive urge? How did my children's security and safety stack up against knowledge and diversity? They couldn't catch a tram or even read a bus timetable, but here the whole community kept an eye on them. How did you compare growing up in a cultural abyss against an earthy awareness of ethnic gangs and public toilets and beggars? How could you measure concerts and theatre and galleries, lattes on crowded footpaths, against the smell of fresh rain in the bush? It was not a

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mathematical equation; nothing balanced. Sometimes I felt my children were being raised in a cotton wool vortex, safe, but naively unprepared to take their place in the rat-race, the rat-race my husband delighted in escaping.

I retreated and sat inside overlooking our above-ground swimming pool. I flipped through theatre catalogues, wondering how I could manage a trip to the city. There was an exhibition at the Museum-

A black, fluttery blur. A watery splash. The corner of one eye caught movement in the garden, and, to my utter astonishment, a very large bird was flapping in the round blue pool.

Before I could panic or consider helping, the bird flapped and dragged itself with ungainly splashes to the side of the pool, reached up and over the side of the pool and hauled itself out onto the rim. I was surprised and relieved. I watched it flap the water off, then bask in the sunshine. It flew into the trees but within minutes repeated the splash into the middle of the pool. Amazing. It was diving and swimming in our pool. Lisa Currawong!

I froze in my seat, hesitated to call to the others in case I frightened the bird away. Basically it swooped in, landed with wings spread, then flapped and splashed its way to the edge where it hooked its beak over the rim of the pool, and clumsily hauled itself out with its wings.

I spotted a smaller companion bird, perhaps a mate, sitting in a nearby tree, and realised the bigger bird was calling to it between each dive. The second bird seemed

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timid, unwilling, but the bigger bird beckoned as if to say, "It's easy, you can do it. Come on in, the water's fine." Eventually the second bird, as if overcoming fear, plunged in tentatively. After sunning themselves, they flew off together.

I was speechless. A guilty, voyeuristic pleasure seeped through me. I had witnessed something private and very special. Slowly, ever so slowly, the unhappiness which had fixed itself into the creases of my face and the roundness of my shoulders, lifted, and I smiled. In fact, I beamed for the first time in weeks, and walked round the house chuckling with the wonder and the ludicrous joy of it all.

Hot, blustery days passed. I was working in the kitchen one afternoon when Rick shambled in and crumpled at the table. He was pale and rested his head on one hand. He shook his head slowly and rubbed his forehead.

"What's wrong?" I was instantly alert. "The boys?"

"They're fine," Rick said, "but I saw something on the bottom of the pool, and for one dreadful moment I thought it was a little kiddie. It was just a big black bird, but my knees buckled under me, Sal. I felt sick. Thank God it was just a bird."

I rushed outside seeking a dark shadow beneath the cloud-reflecting surface, but Rick had removed it. It had been hot for days and the pool water level had dropped significantly. The unsuspecting bird had dived into the pool and been unable to lift itself back over the rim. I imagined the futile flapping and frantic splashing of wings; tears flooded down my cheeks, and I sobbed and sobbed.

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For days, I scanned the trees for a lonely black and white bird. I wondered whether it was the big bold leader who drowned, or the smaller bird, overcoming its hesitation. The dead and the mourner. The bold and the timid, the leader and the follower, the active and the passive. Country life.

How I hated the place.

It began with a drift of dark haze about the distant ranges. Day after day the harsh sunlight parched the land until it was little more than brittle sticks and stalks which powdered underfoot. That summer the creek no longer flowed; it was reduced to a series of shallow, murky waterholes. Adult eyes lifted to the horizon.

Cautiously we moved our small herd closer to the house, clung to radios which buzzed on about public transport malfunctions and power failures. The unrelenting heat bore down, melting our resolve, weakening our routines. We rose before dawn, hovered most of the day in the air-conditioned lounge, then dashed out to do chores at the last minute. Even our differences seemed to have dissolved. We were there. It was too hot to think straight. That was that.

The hazy horizon became a direct concern with an unpredictable hot wind launching licks of fire in many directions. Our place was in its path, they warned, if the wind pushed it across a distant highway. The phone rang and rang bringing updates and warnings from neighbours. "Put your fire plan into action," advised the CFA hotline. As if Rick would ever leave his animals- they were as dear to him as our children, bred with carefully-considered genetic scrutiny, fed with nutritionally-balanced ingredients, which is more than I can say for our boys.

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Our plan was basically to stay and fight, and we were reasonably well prepared having a generator and water pumps as part of basic farm equipment. We set out the hoses, checked the pump, collected woollen blankets and dumped them into water, and then went about our routine. The boys cycled into town to the pool, Rick headed off on his ag-bike to check the view from our hill. I slumped inside, intermittently listening to the radio.

By the time Rick roared back on his bike, yelling and sounding the horn as if he had Satan on his tail, it was too late to leave. Two wallabies bounded alongside the dogs, and flocks of birds reeled away from us. The air had darkened with smoke, and wind-whipped blackened leaves and embers and glowing sticks began to rain down. The fire had hurtled itself over fifteen kilometres and was flaring on two sides of us. Rick and I took one look at each other and began shouting instructions.

The boys! The herd! The hay shed! The cars! The gutters! Hose the house! Move the herd *then* stay with the house! The dogs! The horse! The boys! Embers! Ring the CFA!

And we were sprinting in opposite directions, making calls on our phones as we dressed and shoed ourselves, gathered wet blankets, organised hoses, ran back inside to pack a few valuables: files and photo albums, the hard disc drives, the kids' baby teeth in the pewter pill box. Between breathless scurryings in heavy wet clothes, packing and moving cars, and pointing the hose at the creepers on the pergola, I managed to contact the boys.

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"Are you all there? All of you together, go to your uncle's Sam's place NOW! Stay there! Don't ride home under any circumstances, we'll come and get you. It's urgent, Jason, an emergency. Get your brothers! Just DO IT! Call me from your uncle's."

And I faced the inferno. The paddocks were ablaze; a wall of flames was shooting into the air to the west of me; billowing, incandescent clouds of flame surged from the hay shed; trees and bushes exploded into enormous orange starbursts. I turned the hose onto the house, cursing the vine-covered pergola and leafy trees.

With one hand I rang Rick's number and listened vainly to the dial tone. Somewhere I could hear the ag-bike, and a pump, but I couldn't see a thing. And then a roar, a deafening, heart-stopping roar, chilled me through and through even as I sweltered in the blazing heat. The phone at my ear rang out. I pressed redial and turned the hose on myself then on the walls. Thinking of what would happen if the power failed, bewildered by the intensity of smoke and fumes and heat, I panicked and dropped the hose, and ran to the end of the house, then round the next corner, then cursed and ran back for the hose, because bushes at the rear of the house were already alight. The phone rang out again. I slipped it into a pocket and directed the hose onto the flames, then began madly hosing the lawn where spot fires erupted randomly, as if some wicked magician were playing with me. I ran round and round, back and forth with the hose until my heart threatened to explode.

Slumped, panting and gasping, I felt rather than saw a fireman grab my hand and drag me toward the driveway. He tapped my arm and pointed up, and within seconds water deluged around us, over the house and dairy. Steam and dust and ash ballooned around us. I coughed and coughed, was thrust aside as the firefighter

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ducked into the cabin of the truck to the radio. The helicopter could refill at the back dam, he advised, then grinned at me and again pointed, this time to a figure emerging from the haze around the dairy. Several yellow-clad figures gathered suddenly, yelled a few instructions to each other and leapt into the fire truck.

"Gilmore's house," they yelled. The truck took off, hesitated as it passed Rick, but he waved them on. We ran to each other, clung together for a while, then, hands shaking, I dialled the mobile phone.

"Tell the boys we're OK," I said. "We're OK?" I looked at Rick who nodded, smiled grimly, and together we looked vaguely round the buildings miraculously standing in a charred, smouldering landscape.

Within days, flocks of rosellas, scatterings of wrens, wattlebirds and cockatoos abandoned the seared hills and took refuge on the farm where green shoots began to appear. Hungry Rosellas and King Parrots filled the air with breathtaking sweeps of colour and scoured the emerging grasses and tree shoots for nutrition. Newly-appreciative eyes welcomed them; each bird was family.

I walked the boundaries of the property with Rick, grateful for each and every plant and tree that had been spared, mourning the charcoal remains of others. Each cow was special, a survivor, like us.

We bonded and banded together with neighbours to console each other, to begin the work of rebuilding and refencing. The boys proved dextrous teamworkers on the

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endless tasks we faced. Together we began the mending. There was no talk of leaving from anyone.

The morning I again heard the melodic chortle of the Butcher-bird, I sobbed like a baby.