

## A Matter of Life and Death

Almost every weekend we go to the bush. We have built a house on the side of a mountain near Tallarook. It sits right out on an escarpment facing the sunset and behind it, on the uphill side, the road runs past beyond a thick buffer of blue gums and blackwoods. You cannot see the road, but if you are outdoors you can usually hear the cars passing. Their tyres hiss on the gravel and I'm aware of an irony of the current age: cars now are quieter, motorbikes noisier *-as long as we're bikers, we might as well make a scene of it.*

One cool evening around ten I walk outside into the night and I hear a car approaching, catch a glimpse of its headlights through the trees. Then the car brakes suddenly, skids in the loose stone, and there is an unmistakable thud. Like a cricket ball dropped on carpet, it is the sound of an unhappy contact; you know instinctively that absolutely no good can come of it. I had been sitting quietly inside when I decided to go out into the dark to piss. I stand there, legs astride and fancy I'm colluding with other warm-blooded mammals. It is a moment to absorb the peace – a rare and mighty thing in itself. Standing there for just a minute in the moonless black, far from the city's mad tear, you'd expect nothing out of the ordinary. But who can explain coincidence? On this night, during that brief airing of my private parts, something happens, something that takes me back to a time I'd rather forget.

I strain my ear to listen. The ear: such a malformed second-class organ if ever there was one – we've been sleeping on it too long. Faintly through the forest I can hear people getting out of the car. Suddenly there is a woman's voice, "Oh no!" she cries. Then the car doors slam and the vehicle drives slowly away. I take the torch down from the shelf and head up the slope, navigating between the trees, tripping in the drought-stressed grass, seeing nothing beyond the feathered glare of the light. I already know what to expect. Emerging from the trees, I start along the road, sweeping the torch across the ground. It is strange peering at the world this way; there is no peripheral vision, no landmarks for orientation. The light offers proof of nothing beyond the oval patch just one stride ahead and the detail is eerily picked up and presented in an odd, uncharacteristic way. Suddenly some shards of amber glass and skid marks appear at my feet.

Just off to the side of the road an Eastern Grey Kangaroo appears in the bright beam. A female, she lies on her side and the head lifts toward me as I approach. The eye is full of fear and pain. The chest is heaving, one of the hind legs is smashed appallingly, jagged bone juts at right-angles from the bloody flesh. If the animal had been killed, perhaps the unfortunate incident would have been forgotten like the

other animals that we see lying dead by the side of our road. But the kangaroo is alive and I am implicated.

“Try Wildlife Emergency.” “What about Wildlife Rescue?” Back at the house I dial the Operator for help. Finally I locate a voice that gives me the number of someone who lives at the nearest town some 20 kilometres away. The number rings and rings, it is very late after all. I imagine a farmhouse outside of town, a dog barking at the insistent ringing and a light coming on as someone rises from the horizontal. Finally a woman answers. “It will have to be put down,” she tells me calmly. She suggests I phone the police and they will attend to it.

I decide to return to the site before alarming anyone else. Outside now the night is still and the air, thick with peace, has folded back over the incident. Again I sweep the beam and it is just as difficult to locate the site as it was earlier. Now the kangaroo lies motionless, the head is down, eyes glassed over, the heart is still. I crouch down and put my hand onto her, the fur rising fine through my fingers. She is young; a truly beautiful animal. Like a warm current, a wave of sentimentality passes through me and I can see nothing for the limpid fluid welling in my eyes. “I’m sorry,” I say stupidly. “I’m sorry”.

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John Howard would be aghast. But I was sorry. Sorry for fences and farms and everything that has been *introduced* to the country. I was sorry for cars and headlights and haste and for holding the spotlight so adeptly for my father in the back of the truck near Anglesea. For holding those eyes so perfectly in the beam while he squeezed off one blood-quickenning round that split the night and set my ears ringing, sending that nob of lead whining to the kangaroo’s unwitting chest. Dog’s meat. My father carves it up in the scrub, the blood spilling in the grass, the steam rising while Blommy and I stand dutifully by. But that was before my father met Rhoda and they left for the Northern Territory.

When I was twenty-one and living in Coburg he came back and we had a chance to get to know each other much better. I planned our reunion in Victoria carefully. I could think of nothing that might suit him more than to go rabbit-shooting in the country. We could stride man-to-man, side-by-side up a ravine through the long tussocks just like we did when we lived on the farm in Gippsland. And so we did and I carried the old single-barrel shotgun that he’d given me as a teenager; a *Harrington Richardson*. It still had the kick-absorber mounted on the butt to spare my youthful shoulder.

“She may be plain,” he once told me, “but never a gun had a tighter choke than that one!” And not a pit in the barrel. I slipped a shiny red cartridge into the breach and carefully snapped it shut the

way I'd been shown, the way we did it on the farm when I was ten. I held the slick instrument out to him. And this is the moment my life took a sharp and unexpected turn. I held out the well-oiled gun my father had given me, offering him the honour of the occasion, and my father said, "No".

"No," my father said, "you shoot if you want, I'd just as soon leave them to run around." My life turned. How could this tower of bush knowledge, this man who had attuned me from birth to the ways of the hunter, who had established for me watertight principles for why we kill, why the hunter and the hunted complete a natural and honourable part of life's scheme, suddenly, and without discussion, announce that he'd *rather see the rabbit run free?*

I thought we loved hunting. As a twenty-year-old I *did* love hunting. I loved nature and the ways of the bush and I loved hunting. They were basic elements of country life; as grit is to the gardener, so hunting seemed to infiltrate the pores of my body. Now I was faced with a new potential – an *alternative*. And so in those first years of my twenties I gradually began to unpick the snarled mess of the hunter mentality, sort out the mindlessness of it all, and with no pattern to go on, to respin a new *modus vivendi* that left out the taking of life. Perhaps a little over-zealously, now I cannot even justify swatting marsh flies and I have difficulty stepping on the bushland ground-cover. *I'm getting soft in my old age*, a phrase made famous by my very own father who used it often to cope with his own growing concern for things living.

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Tonight I am here by the side of the road with a dead kangaroo, my face awash with stupidity, squeegeeing away tears with the back of my hand. Then through the watery smear I notice the movement. The kangaroo's pouch is flexing with the unmistakable thrust of offspring. The joey is tiny, no larger than a rat. It is hairless, its eyes are covered with a pink membrane and I decide there is nothing to be done but to let it die quietly in its mother's cooling pouch.

Life is precious – the whole of society says so. But when I look into the eye of the kangaroo, I wonder where this idea really comes from. My long lineage of country forebears seemed to feel that life and death were just two opposing forces, each pitted against the other and if something had to die for food or shelter or to clear it out of the way, then so it was. And my mother's frayed Bible, its pages discoloured from handling, had only one thing to say about killing: *thou shalt not*. But the commandment is designed for human life, and yet even then it is ignored when conflicting doctrines meet.

Now there are a growing number of people who believe we must have concern for the world in a much broader context. They say we must protect the world's *bio-diversity*, a term that sprang into existence a decade ago after a meeting of over one hundred world leaders at the *Earth Summit* in Brazil. *Maintain bio-diversity* - it seems to be the project for the modern age. In one sense, perhaps it is our way of perpetuating Darwin's Evolution Theory. He tells us that life is just one great cone of variation with its tiny point in the dark annals of pre-history, that life started from a few witless blips in the past and expanded into the complexity we see today. But just like my forebears, there still seems to be plenty who read Darwin's theory backwards. They seem to believe that it is natural for species diversity to be *decreasing* as the most well-adapted spread out and usurp the weak. Life is precious, they seem to say, unless we want to eat it, or it is in the road of what we want to do.

To let be or not to let be, that is the question, and it seems that it's entirely up to us. A human being, according to Mary and John Gribbin in *Being Human*, "is programmed not to fulfil a specific role but to be able to learn new roles as the need arises." They say we don't maintain one ecological niche like other animals but modify ourselves to make the most of new situations as they arise. If John and Mary are right, we have self-determination, we don't have to follow the patterns of the past, we can pick a new course away from what our genes and our society has planned for us. It's an interesting concept - a future world where we all choose not to destroy things.

A week after the kangaroo's death we return to Tallarook. It is October and we are enjoying the sunny spell, a *phenomenon* at this time of year. Jill sits in a deckchair, the view to the west rising above the top margins of a novel, and I roam aimlessly about peering up eucalypts or into wombat holes. Overhead, in the lofty bluegums, cockatoos accost me with their raucous alarm calls. I am offended – as if I would do anything to harm them. This week there is a putrescent whiff in the air as the corpse by the side of the road begins the slow process of decomposition. Is this the end of the story? Well as we know, in the real world stories never end, or even begin for that matter.

Months later I am out planting tubestock, replacing the trees that some diligent farmer has ploughed away, when I come across a creamy artefact lodged in the grass. It is a lower mandible, molars neatly stacked and picked clean like a new denture. I take it back to the house and stand it on the window-sill.

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Robert Hollingworth is a writer and artist. This is an extract from his forthcoming memoir about art and environment - *Nature Boy*.