

The first of the lorikeets lands on the railing and voices a peremptory demand. I hurry to get their dinner, but Mum bustles past me to soak the bread and mutter about making herself useful. I don't know how such a skinny little woman takes up so much space. I cede the kitchen to her, and leave her to exclaim over the greedy, clamorous antics of the birds as they eat. I retreat to my study to check tomorrow's forecast; flicking between the details I obsess over my electronic almanac. A glance out of the window at the streaky clouds lit with fire by the sunset makes me smile – red sky at night.

The birds lift and depart as one, shrieking for their evening roosts, an avian hive-mind cued by some secret prompt from the darkening gums. She steps in, off the veranda, plucking a stray feather from her skirt and I'm already sorting the tackle box. She tries the silent treatment, but she's not got the patience for it anymore. When I was young, she would set her lips into a disapproving line, fold her arms and not speak for days. Raised to think it wasn't a woman's place to criticise or complain, she made her protests grim, silent battles, punctuated only by the artillery rattle of crockery and cooking implements being slapped onto hard wooden surfaces.

"Mum's got the sullens," Dad would whisper to me from behind a book, or over one of his endless students' papers. "The old chook's feeling too cooped up." We both knew why. She grew up out west, the land dry and flat, the homestead a shimmering promise of shade that floated above the fatal illusion of water. Dad served his time in the country schools, his breath crushed out of him by the weight of the sky, choking on the endless red dust. He dreamed of the sound of rain on corrugated iron roofs, the frogs singing, and the scent of frangipani and fermenting mangoes heavy on the air.

Dreamed of houses, precarious on their leaning stumps, scrambling up and down the hilly streets.

He brought her back from Birdsville, via Biloela, with both my big brothers already infused with the dry red dust and the wide blue sky. I was born in Brisbane, the late-in-life, unlooked-for child, and it is hills, and trees, and moist green tree frogs that sing in my blood.

Our old spaniel, Jet, noses against her hand and she caresses his head, knuckling the hollow behind his ears with the crippled joints of her hand, confiding my shortcomings. “Why you’d bother, I don’t know,” she says. “Terrible at fishing, always was, Len always said. Couldn’t stop talking, scared the fish away. No patience for it.” I check the rod and the reel, setting it moving to hear the tacketa-tacketa as it spins. “What’s the point?” she asks him. “If there’s never any fish for your dinner, what’s the point?” His plumed tail beats a solid counterpoint to the reel’s ratcheting as she goes on. “I remember Len told me about catching a mud crab in the river. Cried to put it back! Who’d cry over a crab?” she marvels, ingenuously exposing the gulf of understanding that has always stood between us. “And what are we supposed to do all morning, hey?”

I stand up, the chair leg squealing as it scrapes on the tiles, and I remind myself to get some of the little felt discs that will silence it. “I’ll be back before eight,” I tell her, lifting the gear. “Unless you want me to stop in at the library and pick up that new large print Cathy Kelly you’ve got on hold.” I head for the garage, to put everything in the car, ready for the morning, and as I pass the kitchen bench I flick on the kettle.

“Cup of tea, Mum?” I ask, not expecting an answer, but knowing, on both counts, where my duty lies.

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It’s still dark when I leave and my headlights sweep across the trees and dart ahead as I take the corners, alert to the possibility of wallabies, possums, or domesticated creatures who share the natives’ blithe disregard for road safety. The air is cold, but I leave my windows open, drawing in great lungfuls of it, as if I could store them up against the coming months, when the hot, heavy days will drag, and I will wait for the cool pleasure of a sea breeze to come dancing up the valley.

In only ten minutes I’m down in the still-sleeping suburbs, flitting beneath the streetlights, heading east. Another ten minutes and I pull into the beachside car park, the big Norfolk Pines standing sentinel over the vehicles of other early risers. I get out of the car and open the back, slip off my shoes and put them next to the fishing gear. Then I close the hatch gently and head for the sand.

Dad taught me a lot about fishing and tides. Neither of my brothers liked fishing, and I didn’t enjoy it much either, but I liked spending that time with Dad. There was a little jetty in St Lucia we used to go to, and watch the river run past us. When he retired, after seventeen years at Rainworth School, my parents talked about what they wanted. Dad wanted to fish. Mum wanted no more hills.

They bought a duplex in Palm Beach with canal frontage and three tall palms in the backyard, like a giant’s abandoned cricket stumps. I used to drive down from

Brisbane and sit on a desiccated lawn chair watching Dad's fishing line anchored in the murky waters of the canal. Mum would talk about bull sharks. She never liked fishing, but it's something that Dad loved, so it carries a certain weight that she is loathe to set herself against.

I watch the light growing in the eastern sky, a commonplace miracle of incandescent colour, reflected in the vast expanse of the Pacific. My toes dig into the wet sand, and I feel the splash and suck as the waves throw their frothing sea foam at my ankles, and try to undermine my footing. There's plenty of life on the pre-dawn beach – fishermen, surfers, dog walkers and joggers. We nod to each other, stately monarchs of our own small pieces of paradise, brought together to bear witness to the glory of a coastal sunrise. We are courtly conspirators who know that all those slumbering citizens currently abed are missing out on this great illusion of the sun rising over the ocean.

I tell myself that the earth is turning, that the sun is stationary, but my eyes are full of the nascent sun, trembling, newly-born at the horizon. It leaps into the sky from the ledge of the ocean, its light splashing across the sky and the water, washing over me with wonder. I've never really thought of myself as a beach person. When Dad was diagnosed, three years ago, I packed up my online business, sold my place in Taringa, and bought a long-legged house up in the back of Bonogin, to be closer. "It's not like you've got a real job," my brothers told me. "You've got the time to help look after them." Time to drive Dad to endless appointments. Time to sit silent with Mum in bleak waiting rooms. Time to wheel Dad down to the beach when he could no longer

walk, or hold a rod. “That’s the beauty of the water,” he told me. “Always something different to see. Fish or no fish.”

I can’t tell her that I come to the beach to watch the sunrise. “What’s the point of that?” she would ask. “It rises here, too, you know.” When Mum fell and dislocated her hip four months ago, my brothers told me I’d have to look out for her. She’s still angry with me. Angry at living in the hills again. Angry at time, at weakness, and at age, at having to face it without Dad, after almost fifty years together. She wouldn’t understand about the light, and the way the wet sand crumbling beneath my feet makes me feel small and mortal, a seemly balance to my dawn delusions of majesty.

On the walk back to my car, I stop and speak to one of the Fisher Kings, drawn by the sight of slick, silvery forms in his clear plastic bucket, its fitted lid foiling the best endeavours of his entourage of strident seagulls. The sand shifts and squeaks beneath my bare feet. There’s time for breakfast, across the park, before the library opens and, later, I can stop at the hardware for those felt discs. Then I’ll pay a visit to the seafood market on the way home. My sources tell me that the bream are biting, and Mum might like a bit of fish for her dinner.