

The Dispossessed

It had been a terrible day at work and when I got home the kids were bickering and bellowing. I was on the edge of violence.

‘Let’s go to the park for tea,’ I said.

Janice was pleased. The day hadn’t been a picnic for her, either. She got the kids ready.

Nathan wore the Indian headdress that Janice had made for him from parrot feathers and elastic. He strode off ahead of us manfully. I held Rebecca’s hand. She was running, trying to catch up to Nathan, and when she tripped, as she did every few yards, she hung from my arm like a plumb-bob.

I was feeling better.

There were some kids playing in the second street we turned into. They gawked at Nathan’s feathers and the littlest one exclaimed, ‘Look, an Indian!’

Their father was standing nearby, watering the lawn on the verge. I nodded to him. He smiled. He was a Pakistani, and pretty dark, so his smile was a dazzler.

‘Chinese apples!’ Nathan cried, pointing to a lily-pilly tree across the road.

‘Hold up,’ I called. ‘Hold Mum’s hand before you cross.’

Of course, with the Pakistani kids looking on, he felt humiliated, but he did what he was told.

The tree was laden with fruit. Beneath its branches, the pavement was splotted purple and red. I reached up, grabbed a handful and passed them, spilling through my fingers, to Nathan. I picked another cluster for myself. I broke one in half, extracting the small, ball-bearing-like stone, and offered the halves to Rebecca.

‘Nope!’ she said, shaking her head.

‘Don’t the apples grow big in Chinese?’ Nathan asked.

‘They don’t actually come from China,’ Janice said. ‘We just call them “Chinese apples”.’

‘Well, where do they come from?’

‘They’re indigenous,’ Janice replied.

‘I think they come from Queensland,’ I said, hoping that might be more helpful than “indigenous”.

There was an old woman curled up beneath a box tree in the park. I spotted her from the footpath and kept my eye on her. She wasn’t moving and I had to caution myself against thinking she was dead.

Nathan saw her as he reached the slide. 'I'll have to be quiet, won't I?' he said. He wasn't at all surprised by her—merely burdened by a felt obligation not to wake her.

I wondered if I should do anything about her, but put off a decision until after tea.

I left Janice and the kids in the park and crossed the highway to a delicatessen. A small Chinese boy came into the shop while my hamburgers were cooking. Quite irrationally, I found myself wondering if they were his apples we'd been eating.

The woman behind the counter didn't like him. 'Yes?' she demanded.

He was only little, so maybe he didn't notice. I guess kids get used to adults speaking to them like that. He spoke quietly and she kept snapping at him, 'What? What?' He pointed at things. Rolling her eyes at me, she left off serving him to prepare my hamburgers.

'What?' I heard her snap as I stepped out of the shop.

The kids must have been hungry because they came running at the sight of me. Janice spread a blanket for us to sit on. The old lady was still curled up on the lawn. She hadn't moved an inch.

'There's a Ab'rigine man,' Nathan said through a mouthful of sausage roll.

I twisted my head to see where he was pointing. An old Aboriginal man was walking down the grassed embankment of the park from the footpath by the highway. He was wearing a shabby, grey suit and he held a bottle of wine to his chest.

Perhaps he heard Nathan, or saw me glance at him—I don't know, but he changed direction towards us.

'Scuse me, brother,' he said.

I got up to speak to him.

'See that ol' gal?' he said.

I nodded.

'She bin there all day. Poor ol' gal,' he said. 'It's ridiculous, an ol' gal like that. I think I better phone Native Welfare—come pick her up.'

'Yes,' I said. 'That's a good idea.'

'It's ridiculous, an ol' gal like that.'

'Do you know the Welfare number?' I asked. I thought that perhaps he wanted me to phone for him.

'I'll get it,' he said.

'Perhaps the people at the Home down the road know her,' I suggested.

There's an old age home on the highway a block or so down from the park. Aboriginal Autumn Home, it's called. How's that for euphemism and alliteration?

'I'll phone from there,' he said.

‘They might know who she is.’

‘That’s where we’re staying,’ he said. ‘She’s my gal, poor ol’ thing. It’s ridiculous.’

He was looking at me intently, as if he wanted me to say something wise or sympathetic. But I didn’t know what to say. And I didn’t want to look at him too closely because his nose was running, and I knew I was going to think of it while eating my hamburger after he’d gone.

‘She’s blind, you know.’

‘Is she?’

‘Yes. She’s blind.’

‘Do you want me to phone Welfare?’ There’s a telephone box at one corner of the park and I had the right change.

‘No.’ He gestured in the direction of the Home. ‘I got a phone. I’ll do it.’

He was still looking at me intently. His eyes were bloodshot and watery. There wasn’t any light in them.

‘I’ve got good eyes, so I gotta help. You gotta help, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘You just gotta do it,’ he repeated, shaking his head.

I didn’t know what to say. I was dried up for responses, so I said, ‘Yes,’ again.

‘Well, thank you, brother,’ he said, as if I’d actually done something. ‘You better eat your tea.’

‘You’ll call Welfare?’

‘Yes.’ He stood looking at his feet for a moment. ‘It’s ridiculous, an ol’ gal like that,’ he mumbled as he shuffled off towards her.

‘What you do, Daddy?’ chirped Rebecca as I sat down.

‘I talked to a man,’ I said.

The woman propped herself up on one elbow when the old man sat down beside her. I felt relieved.

When Nathan had finished his sausage roll he ran to the slide. He climbed the ladder and slid down. Although I heard nothing from where I sat, the man must have called him. Nathan ran to him and then came running over to us.

‘Look what the Ab’rigrine man gave me!’ He held a bright fifty-cent coin in his hand.

At first I was going to make him give it back but then I thought the old man might be offended.

‘Did you say thank you?’

‘Yep. And when I get home I’m going to put this money in my moneybox. Will you look after it for me, Mum?’ He dropped the coin into Janice’s hand and ran back to the slide.

It was getting dark and neither the old man nor the old woman had moved from beneath the tree. I knew he was too weak and too drunk to help her. I felt—I don’t know—I didn’t feel good, watching them. The dispossessed, I thought.

‘I think I’d better see if I can help,’ I said to Janice. ‘I’ll probably be a while. You take the kids home.’

I wandered over and squatted down beside the old man.

‘Thanks for giving my boy that money,’ I said. ‘It was very kind.’

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of coins. ‘For the children,’ he said.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Thanks anyway but they don’t need it.’

‘For the children,’ he said again.

I suddenly realised what he meant. He was worried that Rebecca, who was having a swing, hadn’t been given anything.

‘She’s too little,’ I said. ‘She’ll only lose it. You keep it. You might need it tomorrow.’

‘Thank you, brother,’ he said, as if I’d given him something. He put the coins back in his pocket.

‘Can I help you get her to the Home?’

‘You hear that, Sweets?’ He addressed the woman in a loud voice. ‘This fine gentleman has come to help.’

“Sweets” mumbled something but I didn’t catch it.

‘It’s ridiculous,’ he said to me quietly. Then talking loudly again he said, ‘Come on, Sweets, you can’t stay here, an ol’ gal like you.’

‘I don’t care,’ she muttered.

‘You gotta care,’ he said. ‘You gotta. You don’t want the police to pick you up, do you? They’ll put you in prison.’

‘Don’t care,’ she groaned.

He turned to me and said less loudly, ‘She won’t leave me. She’s a good gal. She bin with me only little while but she won’t leave me.’

He turned back to the woman. ‘You just gotta care.’

‘Let me help you home,’ I said to the woman. I followed the old man’s example and spoke loudly.

‘Harry!’ she cried. Perhaps she had been unaware of my presence. ‘Harry!’

‘It’s all right, Sweets,’ he said, patting her leg. ‘This fine gentleman has come to help.’

She mumbled something again.

‘Come on, Sweets,’ he said, making no effort to move himself. ‘Can’t stay here. You don’t want the police to come.’

As he said this, a man turned off the footpath by the highway and made his way towards us. Harry saw him.

‘Here’s a policeman now,’ he said.

He was not a policeman. He was an elderly Aboriginal man. He’d come from the direction of the Autumn Home.

‘This where you bin, Mrs Bulgarie?’ he said. ‘You best come home. It’s no good you layin’ here.’

‘Come on, Sweets,’ Harry coaxed, not stirring a finger.

‘You shut up, you!’ the newcomer snapped. ‘You bin s’posed to take her to doctor but bin give her plonk instead!’

He pulled at Mrs Bulgarie. She moaned but made no effort to get up. He looked at me.

‘You help me?’ he asked.

I stood up and took hold of Mrs Bulgarie by the other arm.

‘Harry!’ she croaked, as we pulled her to her feet.

‘It’s all right, Sweets. I’m here, Sweets.’

Her dress was sopping wet. It flicked against my leg as she stood up. She did not smell pleasant.

‘You just stand a minute,’ said the newcomer.

We brushed the grass and leaves from her jumper. Then we started across the park. Her arms and legs were skinny but she was very heavy.

‘You gotta help yourself,’ the newcomer said. ‘You gotta help or we can’t do it.’

We juddered along. She was moaning as if we were hurting her.

The old man and I nearly gave up on the slope of the embankment. It was like lugging a corpse. She wasn’t helping a bit.

‘You gotta help.’

‘Not far now,’ I encouraged.

‘Harry!’ she cried. ‘Harry!’ And in her distress the name burst out as a monosyllable and sounded like the squawk of a chook that’s been caught for the chopping.

Harry sat exhausted by the footpath at the top of the embankment. The headlights of the cars whizzing by on the highway lifted him out of darkness.

‘Come on, Sweets,’ he encouraged, but not so loudly, not so confidently as before. ‘You’re worth two. Come on, darling.’

The Dispossessed
Andrew Lansdown
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The Bowgada Birds

Reg Wallace had been robbing nests for four years. But it was not a hobby. Once when a mate asked for a bird gratis, Wallace laughed. 'I only ever gave two things away—a boomerang and a homing pigeon,' he said. 'And I got both them back.' Until five weeks ago he had not even given his son a bird.

He was employed by the railway as a pumper, but he was best known along the Wongan-Mullewa line for his bird trade. He had made a name for himself. On the rare occasions he looked in on the pub at Perenjori, someone standing cockatoo for the flock of drinkers would cry, 'Here's a galah!' And the patrons would down their drinks, crook their arms, and flap and squawk. Then someone would shout him a drink, hoping for a free bird, only to be disappointed.

Talking birds—cockatoos, cockatiels, corellas, galahs, parrots—were in great demand. In the city, too, people wanted talking birds to keep them company or to amuse their children. And while many railway men had begun to cash in on the trade, Wallace was still the man most likely to have what you wanted or to be able to get it.

It was October, the middle of the breeding season. So on his days off, Wallace was flat strap collecting fledglings. The birds had to be taken young, otherwise it was difficult to teach them to talk.

Five Sundays back, arriving home at dusk, he said to his son, 'Got a mob for ya this time, lad.'

The boy reached up to take the sacks.

'Aren't ya gonna ask if I got ya a bird?' he asked as he lifted the sacks over the horse's rump.

The boy, hardened by past disappointments, shrugged.

Wallace felt irritated. He dropped the sacks into his son's hands and spurred his horse towards the holding paddock.

The boy carted the sacks to the back veranda. He tipped the birds out and began to settle them into the fruit cases that were to be their new homes. As he put them out, he felt his heart rising to them. They were so pathetic, so lovely. But the joy that he had in them was ruined by the knowledge that they all would soon be gone. Not one of them was his to keep. They were hungry now, and squawking, their heads back, eyeing him urgently. He covered the crates with Hessian sacks, which quietened them slightly.

He was grinding some wheat through an old cast-iron mincer when his father came. His mother opened the flywire door from the kitchen.

'How did it go?' she asked.

‘Good,’ Wallace said. ‘Six galahs, five cockatiels, five smokers, nine twenty-eights, and a Bowgada bird.’

‘A Bowgada!’

The long-billed corellas, or Bowgada birds as they were known in the area, were scarce. That, coupled with the fact that they were the best talkers, made them the most valuable.

‘Yeah,’ he said. He unbuttoned his shirt and withdrew the little bird. ‘Trouble is, it’s got a broken wing. Cryin’ shame. Could’ve got a guinea for it, too. I was gonna clobber it, but then I thought Johnny might like it. For a pet.’

The boy had heard. ‘Oh, Dad!’ He ran to his father and took the bird. ‘For me! To keep?’

‘Sure,’ his father said. ‘But mind his wing.’

‘I’ll find an old sock,’ his mother said, turning back into the house.

‘Oh, Dad, thank you!’ The boy’s heart had hatched and was chirping. ‘Thank you!’

‘Yeah well, first up, feed them others,’ Wallace said, accepting a hug. ‘They’re worth dough.’

With uncharacteristic enthusiasm, the boy ran to the kitchen to get hot water to mix with the grist. He carried the Bowgada bird with him.

His mother cut the end off a sock and pulled it over the fledgling. ‘That’ll hold its wing in place,’ she said.

The boy kept the bird on his lap during dinner. And because he wanted to keep it in his room overnight, his mother found an empty tin—a square tea tin with a round opening—for it to sleep in.

Long after the child should have been asleep his parents heard him droning, ‘Johnny’s bird, Johnny’s bird.’

‘I hope he doesn’t neglect them others,’ said Wallace.

‘He won’t,’ his wife said. ‘He’ll be more careful now than ever.’ And warmed by his kindness to their son, she was warm to him that night.

The boy woke them in distress early the next morning. ‘I can’t get him out!’ he cried.

Wallace’s first impulse was to bellow at the boy for waking them so early. When he appraised the problem, however, he laughed. The bird had struggled free of the sock and had spread its wings so that it could not be extricated from the tin.

‘Know what you’ve got there, son?’ he said. ‘Tinned cockatoo!’ He laughed uproariously. ‘What a turn up! Tinned cockatoo!’

But his father’s humour impressed the boy as cruelty. He ran from the room, crying.

Wallace became angry. ‘The kid’s a sook!’ he said, and he forbade his wife to go and comfort him. He kissed her, remembering last night, but she would not respond. ‘Go on then,’ he said—not bitterly, but not with regret either.

She found the boy on the back veranda, holding two of his father’s parrots—one in each hand—in a bucket full of water. He was in shock. The parrots had bitten into his fingers as they drowned. Blood wafted up through the water like brown smoke. The tinned cockatoo struggled beside him.

After she had tended the boy’s wounds and buried the parrots, she cut the Bowgada bird free with a pair of tin-snips. She prepared breakfast in a flurry, trying to invent a story for her husband. He might not notice the missing birds for a few days, but eventually an explanation would be required. His mind was like a ledger book.

Over the following weeks, when he was not pumping water from the railway dam for the steam engines, Wallace collected more nestlings. He found three Major Mitchell cockatoos, which were almost as valuable as the big corellas. The “almost” annoyed rather than pleased him. By the end of the fourth week, of the original batch, all the birds had been sold except the boy’s pet.

The Bowgada bird was in full plume. Except for its forehead and lores, which were turning red, it was intensely white. Only once did the boy allow it to grub in the garden. Its wing had set well, and it spoke fluently. ‘Johnny’s bird,’ ‘Stone the crows,’ ‘G’day mate,’ and ‘Goodbye Mum,’ was its repertoire in the Queen’s own. The boy had done a fine job with it.

But Wallace coveted the bird. He looked at it and saw a pound note. His son’s obvious delight in the pet merely enhanced its desirability. And his greed was exacerbated by the fact that, in all his expeditions over the intervening weeks, he had not found another Bowgada bird. So, when in the fifth week he learnt of a stationmaster at Wongan Hills who wanted a trained corella, he made arrangements to send the pet down on the Saturday evening freight train.

When the boy woke on Sunday morning to find his bird missing, when he learnt from his mother of its sale, he became hysterical. He rushed into the yard to find his father’s horse laden with sacks, climbing ropes, axe and waterbag.

His father stepped from the outhouse, buttoning his fly.

‘I hate you!’ the boy screamed. ‘I hate you and I hope you die! I hope a snake bites you like Charlie’s dog! I hope you fall out of a tree! I hope Blackie throws you like old man Wilkins!’

Although badly shaken by the child’s outburst, Wallace remained outwardly unmoved. He mounted his horse.

‘I’m sorry, son,’ he said. And he was. He spurred his horse and it strode away.

In the bush, as usual, he picked up a sandalwood cutters’ trail and began to follow it. The sandalwooders’ tracks were like watercourses, following the path of least resistance, meandering and criss-crossing through the bush.

Wallace normally rode wherever a track led, taking care only to avoid the areas he had covered previously. When he found a nest he would either climb the

tree or chop it down. Today, however, unsettled by his son's wrath, he decided to head for the country out back of Bowgada siding, twelve miles away. The big corellas were most plentiful in that area.

It was mid-morning before he reached the corella country. He had spotted a number of galahs' and parrots' nests on the way, but had stopped at none. He was after Bowgada birds. Perhaps he would give one to his son. But he did not allow himself to say this—and if he had, there were no witnesses. Nonetheless, his mind was troubled by a vague intention. The boy's vehemence had shaken and shamed him. As he meandered towards the big timber country through the hakea and melaleuca scrub and the low woodlands of mallee, the lust to make money faltered before the urge to make amends.

About midday he saw in the distance a small flock of corellas lift like white ash and waft away in the heat-haze. Arriving at the site, he noticed a hole in a salmon gum where a branch had snapped flush with the trunk. He stopped to investigate.

The hole was about seven feet from the ground. Standing on tiptoe, he could latch his fingers into the opening, but he could not crook his arm down into the hollow. He banged the trunk: a startled squawking emanated from the wood.

The trunk was on a lean, and the hole was on the lower side, so it was quite impossible to rob the nest by climbing the tree. And as the trunk was thick, he was reluctant to chop the tree down. So he decided to try for the nest from the back of his horse.

He stationed the animal beside the tree, stepped into the stirrup and onto the saddle. The cavity was deep, almost the full length of his arm.

He had barely touched the nestlings—two, he felt—when his horse shifted. He lost his footing. His arm snagged in the hollow as he fell, and the humerus snapped with the sudden shock of his weight. He blacked out.

He hung limply, as a rag doll hangs from a child's hand, head drooping, free limbs dangling.

Returning to consciousness, he was ambushed by pain. It clubbed and stabbed him. He vomited, his stretched stomach muscles tearing as they convulsed.

Flies multiplied about him. The heat intensified.

He began to wheeze, like a man with asthma. 'Hanging on the cross,' he remembered a pastor saying one Easter long ago, 'Christ would have found it hard to breathe.'

'Oh Jesus!' he cried, and then forgot.

His attention wandered towards a periodic sound, a tearing noise amplified by the midday stillness. He turned his head to find his horse grazing nearby, cropping the tough native grasses.

He called to it, coaxing. It took no notice. He yelled at it, cursing. It wandered away.

A Bowgada bird alighted on a branch slightly above and before him. He looked up, squinting against the sun. Another bird alighted. They raised their crests and bobbed their heads, screeching.

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