

RARE BIRDS

Approximately 1,750 words

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If there's one thing worse than learning that you're going to die, it's hearing it from the cheery bastard that once cheated on you.

With your best friend. Former best friend.

Alex is a fine, if lazy, doctor, a middling birder, and the boyfriend equivalent of the feral cat. He breaks the news because suffocating proximity is how country towns work.

Everyone doubles up on everything.

His local three-person medical practice advertises two permanent vacancies each week in the *Hills Hoist*, publisher of my monthly nature column, Icarus.

I curse his name out loud as his surgery number flashes up. So typical of Alex to call just as I'm mixing breadcrumbs with homegrown herbs to coat a chook for dinner. Egg all over my fingers.

As he tells me how many of my days are numbered, I bite my lower lip and stare out the window. His voice sneaks around my brain.

- Not gonna bullshit you, Susana.
- And yet, that approach comes so naturally to you.
- We're looking at a year, tops.

This is my cue to respond, before he tells me how sorry he is.

- You could at least have the decency to spin me some yarn. You know, something you're good at.

Even now, I'm distracted by fluttering above the water tank, where a pair of swallows zoom in circles like coked-up pre-schoolers. Mental note to check the shed later for blacksnakes.

- Not gonna lie.
- Well, there's a first time for everything.

- Truth is, treatment's not much of an improvement on the disease itself. Likely buy you a couple of extra months, tops. Sorry. Loved your piece on the Crimson versus the Adelaide Rosella, by the way. Really beautiful. Moving, even.
- Fuck off, Alex. Fuck off and die.

This just makes him cheerier. Never could stop himself.

- That's the way. Fighting spirit won't do no harm. Best medicine, positive outlook. Along with actual medicine, of course. I'll get my secretary to send you the paperwork.

This used to be our in-joke. Until the afternoon I walked in on the pair of them.

As the swallows swoop around again, I figure Alex's flippancy is his clumsy way of signalling how serious this call is. Or maybe he's just stuck, forever emotionally stalled at fifteen. Never was much good at working on what goes on inside his cranium, or indeed any male homo sapiens.

Birds above blokes, every time.

None of which helps me figure out my new, overturned, priorities. Twelve months. Eleven more Icarus. Three-and-a-bit seasons, one more circuit around the sun. Not a lot. Not nearly enough. Need to concentrate my energy on what really matters. Lucky I been through all that angst once, when I found out about Alex. And her. Always an upside.

Swallows flit double speed and vanish. The chook slides into the oven. Drying my hands, I head upstairs, wondering how much longer I'll have the heft to pull myself up this smooth, reassuring handrail. The oak cost a fortune, but always been glad I didn't settle for poplar. Always figured it would outlast me. Now, I'm sure.

The spare bedroom wardrobe throws up index cards secured by a perished rubber band, from my days teaching writing for publication. I decide on two piles. What doesn't matter, and what does.

First pile takes a good hour. As ever, I'm methodical, determined not to miss something as the waves shuttle through my brain. Shock clarifies and blurs, just like love.

No kids, thank the Lord. No pets since Rusty passed with the summer heat. Folks are long gone, the little sister's a Barossa-based bovine who doesn't return my calls. Travel's been an insurance minefield since the first shadow showed up, a couple of years back. The rest, formerly crucial items like superannuation and eldercare living, now don't matter, any more than the outrageous quotes to fix the ruts those heavy autumn rain carved in my driveway.

The sister can deal with the local sharks next year. That almost makes me smile.

Second pile's easy, a solitary index card.

Count native birds. Smash the seasonal record.

On the fridge, there's the list of local species with my annotation, the list of known species state-wide, and the list of rare sightings.

The announcement writes itself, the focus of my eleventh-last *Hills Hoist*. I'm tempted to call it Permanently Vacant, in homage to Alex's practice, but settle for Icarus's Summer Natives Challenge. To maximise eyeballs, I chuck in my herby chook recipe.

I tell no-one about my diagnosis, everyone about the competition.

Waiting a month for publication is a pain, but there are no physical signs to make me feel more like a walking corpse. The announcement's a roaring success, with over seventy entries. Ambos, farmers, wine makers, cops, and, for all I know, robbers. A woman called Judith tells me she's using my competition to interest her granddaughter in something, anything, that doesn't have a screen. The people of the Vale who make birding such a wide and welcoming church of obsessives. All spoiled by one name.

Like I say, Alex just can't stop himself.

When the Monday comes around, I'm out of bed as the sun flames over the tops of the eastern red gums. A pair of Adelaide Rosellas jumpstart my heart, then remind me briefly of Alex. I'm soon distracted by the trootle of Maggie the cheeky magpie, who shadows me as I step over Farmer Duncan's gate and down the firebreak of short grass.

By mid-morning, I've picked off all the usual suspects with my camera and fancy German notebook. The brand Alex always lampooned when he mocked my efforts to preserve the only known habited planet in our universe.

- How does buying a European notebook save the world?
- The paper is acid-free. And I didn't buy it, it was a gift from my-
- You do realise that notebook came here from Europe. By plane. And that air miles are responsible for not only air pollution, but the destruction of-
- If you were in any way bothered by German-inspired human destruction, you wouldn't drive a BMW.
- Patients expect a doctor to drive a trusted, European brand.
- You imagine dying people are grateful you drive a Beamer.
- Can't rock up to cure the household breadwinner in a beaten-up Camry.
- I drive a Camry. As you well know.

His silence always did drive me mad.

Just after lunch, I score a Diamond Firetail, quickly followed by a Fan-tailed Cuckoo. Not many will spot one, never mind both. I bounce home with extra vigour.

Which is what I blame when I sleep for the best part of eleven hours.

Up until menopause I was always a solid six to seven, no matter when my head hit the hay. Those reddening, maddening years sent my sleep into chaos, but in the last decade I've reverted to the mean. If anything, I've slept less. Even the doctor's dalliances never disturbed me. Now I wish something had.

There's none of the rejuvenation I'd expect from a record sleep. Instead, I drench my foggy head under the shower, pick up my notebook and steer the Camry towards the coast, where I'll cover off the common, but often ignored, seabirds that fall within our catchment area.

Of course, he won't forget.

Day three, I circle around Hahndorf, days four and five birds from the high country. Long days I blame when I sleep a full twelve hours, wakening to the kind of hangover I haven't felt since I canned the booze around the time my marriage splintered. I overcompensate on day six, pushing myself hard to reach three figures of species, sweeping through the outer suburbs of the city that fall within the parameters.

I'm particularly delighted with a Horsfield's bronze cuckoo and Jacky Winter. Both rare birds, for these parts.

All set for day seven, the final day of the competition. The first day I can't get out of bed.

I lay picturing readers trekking through paddocks and forests, spotting Orange-bellied parrots and Southern emu-wrens, echoing my completed species, filling in my blanks. A fever dream of fear and jealousy, as the amateur and faceless lay waste to the final crown I've come to regard as my birth – or rather the opposite – right.

Worse than that, it hardly matters to me, as pain splinters my bones. I sip last night's tepid water wishing it was cold. By the time my bladder forces me to rise, the sun has gone, and, I imagine, my chance to bow out with a birding record.

I tap out an official close on the *Hills Hoist* website. Just as I'm about to shut my laptop, there's the ping of a note from the lovely Judith, thanking me for the competition. She's never seen as much of our beautiful peninsula as she has in the past week. Or her rejuvenated granddaughter Lilly, who helped and hindered her search for shy birds. She tells me I'm an inspiration and a role model.

I wake with my screen still on my knees.

The next few days, I'm in and out of bed. I finally get around to heating and eating the chook pie. Either it's seriously under seasoned, or, as I suspect, my tastebuds are going the way of my energy levels.

Results roll in quicker than I can keep up, my spreadsheet capturing entries from Waikerie to Victor Harbor, well beyond the normal circulation reach of the *Hills Hoist*. I disallow no-one, even Alex.

Who of course beats me. By one bird.

I compose a neutral note of congratulations and print it off. As I'm holding it over the fire, my laptop pings again. Another note from Judith.

After more profuse thanks for the competition, she tells me how much she loves my herby chook recipe. She wants to know if I have any more secrets to share about our feathered friends. If I can spare the time, she'd love to catch up for a coffee. She'd like to get to know me better.

Lilly wants to be me.

She closes with a request for the most important thing a beginner should know about birding.

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I tell her chickens are the commonest birds in the world. That most of them have terrible, short lives. But they are delicious, and I hope my recipes will bring her and her family nothing but joy.

And I'd love to catch up. Never too late to make a lifelong friend.