

MARK O'FLYNN

*The Eagle*

We're in the car driving out through the western district towards the Grampians where Stuart used to love to come. For someone raised in the suburbs it's hard to credit how Stuart formed such an affection for the Grampians. For the country. Stuart liked birds. John Gould Club and all that. And we've sure seen plenty of those scattered along the sides of the road, dead feathers wafting in the breeze. Hugh, my brother, is driving. He won't let me behind the wheel because it's a company car and the insurance wouldn't cover him letting anyone else drive. Being the elder Hugh likes to control things. He is in real estate and so does a lot of driving, although I don't know how much of that he does in the country. He doesn't like dirt roads. I don't think Stuart has been in a company car before. I don't mind. I don't want to drive. I'm too raw, split open like a bag of rice. Hugh is driving and I am the passenger and Stuart is in a box on my lap. I would not let Hugh put him in the boot. He's quite heavy. At least the remains of him are. His ashes. I've come to think of this burden as almost comforting. To nurse him. It is the last thing I am able to do. Our brother. Well, second last. Scattering the ashes will be the last thing.

Stuart used to come to the Grampians to bush-walk and watch birds. He may well have brought women up here, but it would have been a brave sort of girl to come all this way to watch birds, and none have been forthcoming about that. Mt. Arapiles, he told us to general tedium, is a great sanctuary for all sorts of raptors and members of the parrot family, Rosellas, Lorikeets and so on. His final wish, against that of our elderly parents, was to have his ashes scattered off Signal Rock, which rises up like an ice-cream cone dropped on the ground, or the weird eye of a chameleon. Our father wants the ashes to remain in the family home, on the mantelpiece where Mum can be reminded of them – of *him*, of *him*. An idea for which Hugh has a great deal of sympathy. However, this is Stuart's wish, so instead we take out a spoonful, blue-grey they are, and put them in a little bottle that Mum can keep in her pocket and beside her bed. The remainder of his possessions Stuart didn't care what we did with.

Once, when we were eight, ten and thirteen years old with me the youngest and Stuart in the middle, we were playing cricket in the front driveway. Rather than risk whacking the ball onto the road we bowl from the southern end, namely the house. The house serves as a useful midfielder. It's out if you belt it over the roof, or onto the roof. And there'll be repercussions if you hit it into the fuchsias. Stuart is whacking them regularly into Mum's

windows. It is only a tennis ball so they don't break, just make a loud, glassy thump as if they'd like to. The noise inside must sound ominous. Eventually Mum comes out and says:

"Is that you hitting the ball into the windows Stuart? Or is it a bird?"

After a while Stuart replies, "It's a bird."

"What sort of a bird?" asks Mum. "I hope it's not that little blue wren. It'll break its neck."

"No," says Stuart, and I have to say I respect him for this. "It was an eagle. A wedge-tailed eagle."

And Mum almost falls for it.

The trees and fences slide by. I can imagine the updraughts and thermals swirling high above the yellow paddocks of the western plains. Hugh wants to turn on the radio, but I'd rather not. His comfort zone is left behind at the bitumen. Looking at his profile I am touched by his readiness to humour me with this last request of Stuart's.

Stuart was kind of like a schoolboy hero for me and a nightmare for our mother. He was a great outdoorsman, unlike Hugh or I who have pursued other interests. Camping by himself for days on end in the most inhospitable places. The rougher the better; the rougher the purer. I suspect he was the sort of ratbag survivalist who ate road kill, or at least endorsed the idea of it: another story he used to tell us before he got sick he didn't care if we believed or not. His capacity for self-conviction was so strong that when the anecdote was retold at the funeral it's like the yarn itself was daring someone to call out *bullshit*.

He's out camping one summer in the forest near Rose creek. He wants to find a Powerful Owl. It's way past midnight when the roar of a bushfire approaching wakes him. It has dropped off the escarpment and is travelling fast. Smoke and embers everywhere. He only has time to put on one shoe before the flames are on him, so he jumps into a water hole in the creek. As he sits there, up to his neck, the flames leaping over him, a kangaroo suddenly splashes into the water beside him. Then a snake, a red-bellied black snake, slides in too. The light of the flames allows him to identify the species. It's only a small water hole and the three of them try to keep their distance from each other, especially the snake. After the fire passes the focus comes back to the occupants of the water hole. They look at each other. Then, almost with a polite nod, the snake slithers out into the glowing darkness. The kangaroo also struggles out of the water, then hops off tentatively through the smoke, while Stuart continues to sit there feeling pretty pleased with himself. He always said he admires the way different creatures can harmonise in the face of adversity, that cooperation is a greater force for survival than aggression and fear. Hugh says he is a left-over hippie and ought to think about investment.

This story, or one like it, is going through my mind as we park the car adjacent to a dry and dusty paddock near the Boronia Trail. We get out to stretch our legs before the ascent. There is a daylight moon in the sky.

“What’s that?” Hugh asks.

I follow his pointing finger. A little way beyond the fence something is thrashing on the ground, like a pudding cloth boiling in a copper. I think at first it is two animals fighting, but as we look it becomes apparent that it is one animal fighting with itself. A bird. We go to the fence and the mystery is resolved. It is a wedge-tailed eagle, caught in a trap of some sort.

“Shit,” says Hugh, rather amazed, and I see again the young boy picking his toenails in front of the television.

The tan feathers of the breast and wings are ruffled as the great bird rolls in the dust flapping frantically, struggling to take off. However, the trap – it’s a rabbit trap – is firmly chained to the ground. We climb through the fence and approach it cautiously. The eagle stands up and watches us. It spreads its wings which are two metres wide at least. Its long legs we see are firmly caught in the teeth of the trap.

“Jesus,” says Hugh, “will you look at that?”

“Amazing,” I say.

“What’ll we do?”

“We can’t just leave it there.”

“Darren, I think actually we can,” says Hugh. “Don’t the farmers hate those things?”

“Bugger the farmers. It’ll die if we leave it there. Stuart thought they were majestic.”

“Stuart isn’t here.”

I turn and look back at the car. I hear my older brother expostulating as he used to, daring anyone to contradict him. (“Hugh it’s your turn to wash the dishes.” “No it’s not.”)

“Stuart would want us to help it,” I say. I am not above seeing the symbolism of this.

“Are you crazy? You open that trap and it’ll tear your face off. Those talons are like razor blades. I know,” he has an epiphany. “Let’s ring the wildlife rescue people.”

Hugh likes taking charge of situations. He used to like to take charge of me, bribing me to make him snacks and so on. He flips open his phone, prods a few numbers, listens, prods a few more, holds it to his ear again. The bird watches every move.

“No signal.”

“That’s technology for you.”

“Try your phone.”

“I didn’t bring it,” I say.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want Julie to ring me.”

“Why not? She’s your wife, isn’t she?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Now you tell me.”

“No. I don’t want to tell you. It’s none of your business. We’re here for Stuart.”

“Shit.”

Hugh has never expressed any interest in Julie before and I’m not about to satisfy his lack of curiosity. We stare at the bird and the bird stares at us. It is as tall as an angry adolescent. I’m reminded of that Dianne Arbus picture of the incensed boy holding a hand grenade.

Hugh says, “I think we should belt it with a shovel.”

“No way. It’s beautiful.”

“Put it out of its misery.”

“It doesn’t look too miserable to me,” I say. “It looks downright cranky.”

“It’s the easiest solution.”

“Did you bring a shovel? Do real-estate agents drive around with shovels in their cars?”

“Point taken. What about a stick?”

“No.”

“A branch.”

“Hugh, what would Stuart think of you?”

“Well what do you suggest? I wanted to leave him home on the mantelpiece where Mum could have a good weep over him... Darren, you’re my brother, I love you, but you’re a bloody idiot.”

I do not respond to this. I know he’s baiting me in what I recognise is a kind of maddened grief. I have it too. If one of his toys ever broke when he was young he would destroy it further, reject any fondness he may have had for it. It’s a coping mechanism.

“Let’s leave the trap on,” I say. “Chuck a blanket over it. Take it back to Hall’s Gap. There’s bound to be a wildlife rescue place there. Or even a vet. At a pinch we leave it with the cops. Hugh, this is meant to be.”

“We haven’t got a blanket.”

“Yes we have. There’s one in the back seat.”

“No there isn’t.”

“Yes there is.”

“Do you want me to prove it to you?”

“I’d love you to prove it to me.”

“Look, I don’t think it’s going to sit calmly in the back seat.”

Hugh is running out of options. I’ve painted him into a corner again, upping the price of the bribe.

“I’ll hold it,” I say. “Stuart would have had it out of there by now. Come on. As long as its feet are secure, they’re the dangerous bit.”

“You’re crazy.”

Unconvinced, Hugh returns to the car, climbing between the strands of fencing wire. I look at the eagle and want to talk to it, but I don’t know what to say. Only Stuart could have got away with that. Bloody Stuart, look what he’s done. Hugh soon comes back with the picnic blanket, tartan, which suddenly looks extremely feeble.

“There you go David Attenborough.”

He also has a big heavy stick. More grief.

“What’s that for?”

“Just in case.”

“Great.”

“You all right?”

“No.”

I circle the tethered eagle, but it turns with me, rattling the chain in the dust, eye to eye.

“Try to sneak up on it.” Hugh’s always been great at offering advice from a distance.

“I am trying.”

I take my jumper off and hold it like a gladiator holding a mesh net – an *iaculum*, I know that much, but that’s merely an occupational hazard of mine. An academic one that probably won’t be of much use here.

“What’s that for?”

“The feet.”

Hugh waves his arms and the eagle turns and glares, sensing the Judas in him. In that moment I take a step forward and, gently as a magician, waft the blanket over the eagle’s head. It immediately stands stock still and I am able to wrap my big bear’s arms about it thereby holding its wings to its sides.

“The feet, the feet,” I squawk.

Hugh quickly throws my jumper over the lethal looking talons and the trap. He pulls free the peg anchoring the chain to the ground and wraps it, Houdini style, around the trap, the legs and my jumper in a neat little parcel. Well done, I think. I pick up the bundle and lurch to my feet. Together with the trap it must weigh six kilos or more.

Negotiating the fence is awkward, but luckily it is old and rusty. Hugh is able to stretch apart the two bottom strands, which enables me to combine a sort of rolling action with an infant elbow crawl, and I squeeze through. The bird gives an affronted cough at this undignified treatment. I hope I haven’t squashed it, but it seems okay. Hugh holds the car door open and I slide into the back seat. At the sound of the door slamming the hooded bird sits up straight and still and one may as well say proud, even though it is under a blanket. It seems suddenly much larger here in the confined space of the car. Hugh jumps

like a rally driver into the front seat and guns the engine. He has always secretly liked a bit of drama. He turns back down the road and accelerates. He must be worried about the insurance because he yells out:

“Don’t let it shit.”

I don’t bother to answer. I’ve got, as the saying goes, my hands full. Beneath the blanket the eagle seems agitated at the motion of the car. It wriggles its head and neck back and forth as I pin its wings to its sides. I wish Stuart was here to let us know whether it is male or female, what sort of whistle will calm it down. Then I remember he is.

We come up behind a car which appears ahead and Hugh indicates he is going to overtake.

“Careful Hugh, I haven’t got a seat belt on.”

He immediately slows down. At that moment the eagle finds a gap in the tartan blanket and out pops its head. It looks like it is wearing a Scottish poncho. I study the tawny feathers at the neck, fulvous I think they’re called. Slowly the eagle turns its head, owl-like, a full hundred and eighty degrees and looks me straight in the eye. I freeze. Its beak, which is a creamy colour, is huge and pointy, like something an Elizabethan dentist might use, and here I was worried about the talons at the other end. It is barely six inches from my face. It could take my eye, my nose, Jesus it could take out my tongue if it wanted, but it doesn’t. It just glares at me. I am acutely aware of one of the eagle’s talons slowly squeezing and releasing my thigh through the cushion of my jumper.

It revolves its head again and looks at the back of Hugh’s skull. It could have his ear in a flash. Suddenly Hugh slams on the brakes as the car in front makes an unanticipated right hand turn. This causes several things to happen in quick succession.

Hugh shouts: “Prick!”

Hugh has always had a keen sense of injustice, especially if it has been directed at him.

The eagle’s head hits the seat in front of it; my head gives the bird a sound thump on the back of the neck. I can smell the dust in its feathers. And the box containing Stuart’s ashes rolls off the front seat on to the passenger-side floor. I cannot tell if the ashes have spilled because I am watching the eagle rip great gobbets of vinyl out of the back of Hugh’s head-rest. The bird suddenly flexes its wings and stretches them out beneath the blanket hitting both windows at the same time. The blanket slides off its shoulders like a magician’s cloak and I hold it up now, not to contain the eagle, but to protect myself, to hide behind. I am so glad my big brother is here to take control of things.

“That bastard didn’t indicate,” curses Hugh. Then, “What the hell is going on back there?”

“Drive Hugh,” I call, not wanting him to turn around at that moment. “Just drive.”