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Further to fly

*There may come a time
When you'll be tired
As tired as a dream that wants to die*

— Paul Simon, “Further to Fly”

This isn't a story about what happened to him at the office. There are stories he could tell you about that: the way he stumbles from one urgent demand to another; the lumpen dread he feels when confronted with a furious fluster of emails. This is not the story of the loneliness that comes upon him halfway through another pointless meeting. He'll save those stories for another time.

This is a story about what happened on the way home.

He was driving fast, trying not to think about work and listening to a Paul Simon CD, loud. The music probably wasn't meant to be played loud—it was soulful, mournful—but he was comforted by the halo of noise around him. It was the end of a long week. The car was a station wagon, Bunnings-green, with silver trimmings. A Subaru Outback. He'd laughed with his wife that the closest they got to the outback was the Marsden Park Ikea. But it was useful for carting around all the kids' stuff on the weekends, and it did have a bit of grunt when he needed it.

He was following the usual line home. The highway ran parallel to the railway tracks: dual lanes mainly, and flyovers that bypassed traffic lights and local shops. There was a segment, though, where the road narrowed and passed a school. On bad days, you could be stuck here forever. Cars crushed up against each other and the air would thicken with exhaust fumes and frustration. Today was a bad day. Fortunately, he had an escape route. Just before the lanes merged, he indicated left and took a sneaky backstreet. Even though he'd taken this road before, he always thought of it as uncharted territory. It was houses for a few blocks—weatherboard and brick veneer—then the road plunged through a nature reserve. Quite literally plunged: a steep drop into a tight gully, thick with eucalypts. A diversion of green and grey between suburbs. He never needed to put his foot down here. He'd let the car teeter over the edge and slide down the strip of asphalt. He enjoyed the sensation of leaving his stomach behind at the top of the hill.

The station wagon bounced as it hit the bottom of the hill. Paul Simon sang on, unperturbed, yearning for a river and a lost lover. It was dark in the valley, but he

autopiloted the sudden swerve to the right. The tar crumbled at the edges of the road; he kept close to the centre line. He didn't take his foot off the accelerator. A cloud of dust rasped behind him. The trees hung low and dense, with an occasional break in the canopy to let in sharp strips of sunlight. Not quite the outback, he thought, but almost. On days when he didn't feel like hooning, he'd sometimes imagine stopping in the gully: getting out of the car and resting his palm on the cool bark of a eucalypt, listening to the call-and-response of the whip-birds. Not today. The road took a series of long bends up and out of the valley. He skidded around a crumbly corner, letting the bands of light flow over the windshield. One more turn to reach the crest of the hill. As it came over the crest, the car—and driver—looked directly into the setting sun.

He blinked. He was momentarily mesmerised by the flecks of dust in the air. They were hovering, illuminated. Out-of-focus creatures from another world. He wanted to reach through the windshield and cup them in his hands. And then he was aware of the real creatures in the air, swooping too low and coming directly towards the windshield. He couldn't work out what they were: their wings were flapping too fast, they were a dazzle of red and blue. He only had a microsecond to snatch at the steering wheel and listen to the shrieking whir as the car spun to the side of the road. And he heard something else, too, even over the hissing wheels and Paul Simon's sorrowful tone. Or maybe he just felt it. A sudden thump against the front of the car, like a lump of lead slamming into the bumper.

The wheels had stopped whirring. Paul Simon had been cut off mid-lyric. He sat in the driver's seat, dazed. He rubbed the side of his neck where the seatbelt had slapped his skin. The haze of dust settled around the car.

He wondered what that thump had been.

He had a fairly good idea what the thump had been.

He knew he had to get out of the car and inspect the damage. His red-raw neck hummed painfully.

The car door made a scratchy noise as he opened it, as if a piece of gravel had got caught in the hinges. He edged his way to the front of the vehicle.

There, crumpled into the grille, was a clump of broken bones and feathers. It was amazing how deep it had penetrated, how much it was enmeshed with the body of the car. Globes of dark blood smeared the edges of the impact hole and dripped off the jagged silvery plastic. He thought he should probably crouch down in front of it, investigate more closely. He kept his distance. And, as he stayed still, the bloody lump began to twitch. The smallest, slowest movement, but movement nonetheless. He wasn't sure if it was a wing or a talony foot, but something scratched against the plastic. A whiff of red and blue fluff detached itself from the lump and wafted away. The wing—or whatever it was—flexed a little more. It rested. It flapped, slowly, sadly. The body twisted. The wing was snagged by the broken edge of the grille. The bird—and he knew now that it was a rosella, a red-and-blue parrot native to coastal Australia, a species of bird that often flew past his office window or pecked about in puddles in the park where he took the kids—the bird tried to twist the other way, but couldn't untangle itself from

the plastic. When he was a boy, he used to go camping with his parents at a place at Jervis Bay. The rosellas were tame there. His mother would break off a hunk of day-old bread and he'd hold it at arm's length. The rosellas would hop over, individually or in pairs, and then as a whole flock. They'd flap up to the bread and perch on his forearm, his shoulder, the top of his fluffy head. Their claws would tickle his skin.

The rosella continued to twist against the grille.

He stayed where he was.

The sunlight dwindled and the shadow of the Outback stretched away from them.

The bird stopped twisting, exhausted, and waited for what was going to happen.

This is what didn't happen:

He didn't come closer to the grille, kneel down in the dust and look into the bird's cloudy eyes. He didn't reach his hand past the sharp plastic and, gently, scoop out the broken body. He didn't take the bird and wrap it in a towel he kept in the glove compartment and he didn't take the bird to the vet in the next suburb. The vet didn't place the red and blue bird on the metal table and, tenderly, fold the wing back into position. The vet didn't tell him that he'd done the right thing and that if he'd left the bird alone any longer, it certainly would not have recovered. The bird didn't recover, not even partially, not even with a limp wing or a missing talon. It didn't become the family pet and live on the back patio of their brick-veneer home and it never splashed about in puddles when he and the kids took it to the park.

He didn't remember what his dad had taught him back on the farm when he was a boy: what to do when you find an injured animal in the bush—a rabbit, a dog, a bird—and it's too far gone. He didn't peel the bird away from the car and hold it in the palm of his left hand. With his right hand, he didn't feel about in the blood-matted feathers for the rosella's neck, and, mercifully, twist it sharply and firmly. He didn't help the bird in this way. He couldn't, even if he'd wanted to. He'd never lived on a farm or in the bush and his dad had never taught him this kindness. He'd only seen men on television talk about the best thing for creatures in pain, the most humane act you could perform. He didn't perform this act.

He didn't feel a strange energy run through his veins. Filled with this energy, humming and tickling his skin, he didn't reach into the plastic chasm and touch the bird's rib cage. The golden flecks of dust in the sunlight didn't swirl around the bird and, miracle of miracles, the bird did not suddenly stretch out its wings. The crimson and blue feathers didn't glisten in the light and the bird didn't fly off, fully healed, into the bush.

He didn't scoop his hand into the chasm. He didn't even hold the feathery matted mess in his hand and keep the bird warm and safe until it died.

This is what happened:

He got into his car and drove home. He parked in the garage and pulled the roller door shut. The next morning, a crisp and cheery Saturday, he took his car to the detailing place attached to the local shopping centre. When he came back from the supermarket, the car was gleaming wet and clean.

When he drove to work on Monday, he stayed on the highway, following clear lines of sight.