

HOW TO DEAL WITH STINGING TREES

AFTER THREE MONTHS OF WANDERING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GLOBE, I arrived home one October morning to find that my front door had been kicked in by a large bird. This was my neighbour, who was standing in shattered glass on my doorstep, looking at me in a troubled way with his head on one side. Alfred stood almost eye-to-eye with me, but not quite – because at one hundred and sixty centimetres he was on the short side for a southern cassowary.

Although I had learned a little about him through Jack, my friend and the former occupant of my cabin, we had become acquainted only in recent years. Nor was I responsible for his unlikely name. And yet, while you might say that a bird is a bird, I knew him by this name, as much as others knew me as Thomas, but not, I hope, in the mode of people who patronise their pets with grandiose human names. Alfred was his own person, and no one's pet.

As he turned away from me to the hole in the door, and then back to me, apparently unable to make his next move, I realised he was in shock. I think we were both in shock. Nothing like this had happened to me before, and I would assume that was the case for Alfred.

The metal-framed door, for the record, had two panels of five-millimetre tempered safety glass, the lower panel now having fallen out in small, harmless pieces like Roman tesserae, the way a shattered windscreen does – a slight consolation. But it was bad enough. This was not a feat that I personally would care to attempt without hobnail boots. His toes must still have been a little sore. I wasn't going to try shoving past Alfred to get into the house. Cassowaries have huge feet, with a bayonet-like middle toe that has been known to unzip a man's torso in a trice, although this is not standard behaviour. In reality my friend was a gentle giant.

Since our first meeting, time had shown that Alfred had nothing against me, and his destructive approach to my front door was not what it seemed. As a member of one of the largest

bird species in the world, and the biggest animal in our forest, he had no need to throw his weight around. He must have seen his reflection in the glass, becoming confused and enraged by the very idea of an interloping male cassowary on his territory, and uncharacteristically lashed out with his massive foot before giving it sufficient thought. Alfred was no fool, but I had noted that he generally took life slowly, avoiding sudden movements, though he was capable of astonishing speed on occasion. A fruitarian, he was rarely faced with the need for a quick response. However, another cassowary on his turf would have been annoying, and he'd momentarily forgotten his own often-observed reflection in my kitchen window.

Most of us occasionally leap before we look, and conversely we can waver too long. A cassowary will tend towards the latter behaviour. As Psycho Dobson, my dairy-farmer neighbour, once observed about Alfred, "He's built like a brick shithouse, and he's a bit of a drongo, so I wouldn't confuse him with any sudden moves. I came across him on the track once, when I was in the Land Cruiser, and he stood there like a Pommy in the shower; he didn't know what to do next." Actually I didn't believe the farmer, because Alfred always sloped off into the scrub when he saw or heard a vehicle, so I suspect this was largely a dig at my Pommy roots.

I concentrated on putting the truck in the carport, getting out my bags and circumventing the front entry to use the French doors at the back. As I moved about inside, Alfred must have departed quietly to lick his wounds, and I was able to clear up the shattered fragments and tape a square of cardboard over the hole in the door.

Having returned to my home country a less abstemious man, in wine and other indulgences, than the one who set out, I uncorked my first bottle of Australian cabernet sauvignon, this one labeled *The Barking Magpie*, and claiming to be "handcrafted where the vineyards meet the Southern Ocean." With a large picture of the magpie perched on a telegraph line, there was a description comparing this vintage with "one of the great competitors of the bush." This seemed an unnecessarily aggressive way to represent the virtues of one of our homegrown beverages, especially a *vin ordinaire*.

Perhaps the magpie was a bird that might appeal to sport-loving Aussies, it occurred to me, for its brash and intimidating

style - where others might appreciate the manners of the cassowary, which, although capable of using its great weight and strength in self-defence (even against its own reflection when confused), is actually a mild fruitarian and not a predator. On the other hand, for persons who liked a loud bird, there was a noise that Alfred sometimes made which could be matched by nothing smaller than an elephant.

On my first experience of this remarkable sound at six a.m. many years ago, I awoke in alarm and sprang from my bed, at first thinking that someone must be dynamiting in the vicinity. Once properly awake and aware that I was the only human in a large area of montane rainforest, I ran around inside the cabin, looking out of all the windows until I beheld my magnificent visitor through the kitchen window louvres. He was barely a metre beyond the glass, the closest I had ever seen him, looking directly at me, as it seemed, although I came to believe that on these occasions he was unable to see beyond his reflection.

As I gazed in amazement, he swung his head down between his legs and delivered a powerful encore. There are few people who have heard the cassowary boom. So deep that it is close to an infrasound, or subsonic wave, the vibration is felt as much as heard. The nearest thing to this that I had ever come across was the sound of the lowest, foot-pedalled notes on the organ in my old school chapel. So profoundly deep were those bottom notes that there was a notice opposite the organist's seat forbidding certain combinations of the foot-keys - lest mortared joints in the sandstone walls should turn to powder and stained glass saints rattle right out of their gothic window frames.

During the long tedium of my final flights, I had relished the thought of my imminent re-entry into familiar routines. I had also ruminated for some weeks on what I might find, once back in my sequestered acres. Would there be another tree down across the entrance track? Would another possum have fallen through the flue into the kitchen range, and would the water tank have been drained dry because a white-tailed forest rat had nibbled a hole in the delivery line? The tall, traumatised bird standing in a pile of broken glass was one thing I hadn't envisaged.

The final leg of the journey had been exhilarating. It was a bit over an hour's drive from Cairns to Cassowary Hill. Having picked up my four-wheel-drive from its long-term park-and-shuttle facility, I fled the city on the Bruce Highway, stopping briefly at the last of the suburban shopping strips and picked up some groceries, torch batteries, and a few bottles of The Barking Magpie.

At a thousand metres of elevation, as I passed Lake Barrine on the Atherton Tableland, the morning air was like a hangover tonic. Taking the small road to Malanda, past little acreages and dairy farms, but branching off short of the town onto an even smaller road, my recently cabin-pressurised brain cleared. Near Lamin's Lookout I turned onto the pot-holed lane that served Dobson Farm, that of my Pommy-bashing neighbour, Psycho, and a few hundred metres further on plunged into the rainforest again, becoming the Cassowary Hill Nature Refuge entrance track - which I assumed had not been disturbed by a vehicle in three and a half months.

The track ascended further, winding around the side of a lesser mountain to the northwest of Mt Bartle Frere. Until my friend Jack Tryvet purchased these 72 hectares of near-pristine tropical forest in the mid-seventies, it was unnamed. Even the old-timers of the Djyribil tribe said they had no name for it. The terrain was too difficult and inaccessible for nineteenth-century pioneer farmers, and it seemed only to have been lightly logged seventy or eighty years before Jack got there, so that just a small percentage of the forest giants - some of the massive silky oak, tamarind, Queensland maple and kauri trees - had been felled and hauled out at that time. Besides, forest recovery in the wet tropics is rapid, so the only evidence of this former plunder was the relative dearth of trees with a diameter greater than two metres.

At first I found the condition of the narrow track unchanged since the day I'd driven out. It was scored by erosion in places and rocky in others, and the very architecture of the forest so grand, tall, and close-packed, the green lacework of the canopy filtering the sunlight overhead, that it commanded respectful negotiation. At the third or fourth steep bend there were indeed fallen branches blocking my progress. I'd been away too long for that not to be so, but none were thicker than a large man's thigh and they were quickly carved up with the chainsaw kept

ready in my vehicle for that contingency. The attached greenery was already rotting into leaf mould, showing that the logs had been down for weeks. Plainly, there had been no recent human visitors.

After five minutes, cresting a final rise on the track, I arrived in the grassy, sunny glade at the top. This was the single hectare that had been partially cleared and contained unexpected palms, flowering ginger shrubs, a lawn – too profusely overgrown on that day to be called such – and a hand-built, half-timbered cabin that we called the studio. Built by Jack thirty years earlier, it was now my hideaway. The property as a whole was not only my current refuge, but also a legally designated conservation zone.

It was a relief to be in the scrub again, back in my rainforest home. And yet there had been times when I worried that I'd been living in the sticks for too long. As one who had taken himself into exile at 22, far from my English home and from the very particular conventions of my Pryce-Bowyer relations, to roam and loiter in obscure and disparate places for almost a decade, and then, for twenty years, to make an agreeable home of Queensland's rural tropics, I might have become more adapted, not to say troppo, than I'd realised.

Setting out for North America a few months before, the open-ended plan had been to combine business with pleasure. I'd hoped to find a new perspective on both the wider world and the inner Thomas, having left behind the mother of Annie (our only child, now grown up), and believing that Paulette and I had met our marital Waterloo.

My current bolthole of a home, tucked away in a mountain, had been my writing studio for several years. I used to stay there a few days at a time. It was the ideal hideout, but I also used to wonder if people were right when they said that humans just weren't meant to live in rainforests. No person who has holed up in one for a whole monsoon season can doubt that, they would say. But I did come to doubt it, and still do. Over the previous few months, as I lugged my swag on the other side of the world, it had become clear to me that the studio would henceforth be my full time address. I would drink with the flies, as they say, though I would never really be alone in