

## Candlebark Creek - Bruno, Year 8, ACT

The cityscape faded out of view. Today was the day I left behind the grinding gears of inner Sydney for a quiet life in the country. Picture perfect, right? Well I wasn't exactly a country guy. I mean, it was in my blood. But country folk weren't exactly fond of young city fellas like me.

Uncle's ute jostled across the Arbiters River. This was it. Sunsets overlooking the harbour were nothing but a dream. It was real out here.

"Excited, mate?" Uncle's eyes found mine in the rearview mirror.

"Sort of," I shrugged.

"Oh you'll love it out there, lots of them birds."

That was the only thing my uncle knew about me. Birds. I mean, there was more to me than birds. Part of me was excited to explore the country out at Candlebark Creek, but refusing to forget the city centre was a no-go. I spent two thirds of my life living in it.

The benevolent sun sat high in the sky as the afternoon drew on. Outside my window the eucalypts were replaced by Mulga, the landscape turning a dramatic earthy red. Uncle tapped his hand gently on his door, the window streaming in hot desert air.

"Another hour or so mate," he muttered.

Uncle was a tall fella. Big black beard. Broad nose and always in an akubra that he was never seen without. His hat was what my notepad was to me. It never left my side. It wasn't even a conscious thing, it would just appear in my pocket sometimes. Its pages were filled with copious amounts of my sketches. Bird sketches. There were robins, gerygones, honeyeaters and all the Aussie birds under the sun, even those Magnificent Riflebirds.

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Later that evening, as the mountain ranges were painted a deep red with the setting sun, uncle pulled into the driveway of Candlebark Creek. His huge palms handed me my bags and he ushered me inside, to the delight of my auntie, who leaped up at the sight of me.

"My little Benny's all grown up!" she screeched, wrapping me in a warm embrace. "How are you darling?"

"Good, Auntie," I muttered, fumbling my bags.

“Oh, let me give you a hand with those!” She insisted on carrying my bags into the end room of the house. The room was just like I had imagined, and more. Everything fitted my personality so well. The Banksia bed spread, numerous bird guides stacked in the dozens, frames of Albert Namatjira paintings.

“This is your room now buddy,” Auntie said, leaning in the doorway, watching in admiration as I turned around to ask a question. I smiled.

“Was this Dad’s room?” I uttered quietly.

A strange silence followed my sentence. Like the very mention of my father was attached to a festering emptiness.

“He loved this spot. Young fella spent his days reading here.” She had figured out how to speak without directly mentioning him. It showed her etiquette.

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That night I slipped into my pyjamas and yanked back the bed cover. I hopped in, reluctant to break the room's tranquil and orderly feel. I looked around, soaking up each little quirk until something caught my eye. There, sat upon the cupboard surrounded by piled newspapers and old frames was a photo. Dad. His face hadn’t changed one bit. Still the same crooked smile and glinting eyes. In the frame he sat beside his sister, Auntie, and held a fish proudly in his right hand.

At that moment a faint knock came from the door and in peeped Auntie.

“Brought ya a hot water bottle, love. Gets chilly after sundown, doesn’t it?”

“Thanks for letting me stay Auntie.”

“Oh, don’t sweat it hun. Of course. We’ll love having some young company around. Uncle can show you the creek tomorrow,” she said, tucking the hot water bottle into the crook of my arm. “Have a good rest sweetheart.”

With that she left, edging the door shut. The room was now only illuminated by the little brown lamp beside me. Tomorrow marked the day little city boy Benny became a country kid.

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I woke up that morning feeling more refreshed than ever before. The rattling of pans and cups echoed down the hall from the kitchen. It would’ve been nice to stay there forever, in a daze of sleep, light bleeding in from the gauzy curtains. But there were things to do out here.

I got up and readied myself for the day, ensuring I had binoculars packed and my notebook was in my pocket. Out in the kitchen Uncle sat reading the paper, his akubra already perched on his head of curls.

“Here he is. How’s the little fella?”

“He’s 14,” Auntie interjected.

“Big fella,” Uncle corrected.

“Come eat love, so you can head off and explore.”

I only dabbled in some toast and bacon before Uncle ushered me out of the house.

“Hop in,” he said, urging his two kelpies Rusty and Diesel into the tray of the ute. The cabin smelt slightly musty, probably attributed to the rusty corrugated iron sheets on the back seats.

By the time we reached what I assumed was the creek, the sun was beating down on us. Panting, Rusty and Diesel leapt into the water.

“Go take a wander. I’ll catch you up in a bit,” Uncle said, pointing towards an area of Mallee and Spinifex.

The parched ground was hard against the soles of my feet. A little ways from where Uncle had parked an array of Mallee Eucalypts and woolly butts marked the beginning of an extensive Mallee and Mulga habitat, which I knew was a prime location for the summer nomads. Honeyeaters.

Adjusting my binoculars revealed all sorts of different birds in this pocket of forest. A pair of Blue Bonnets sat quietly in the canopy of a eucalypt, while Pied and Scarlet Honeyeaters peeped from the tops of flowering Mulgas. These birds were only fantasies in my world. Sydney wasn’t exactly a birding location. Apart from some pigeons, the city was filled with car horns and engines, nothing like this peaceful array of bird calls.

When Uncle finally found me I had recorded 37 species of birds from confiding little Thornbills to soaring Black Breasted Buzzards.

“It’s so birdy here, Uncle,” I said eagerly.

“Ya dad bloody loved this spot you know Benny. ”

It felt like a little switch in my algorithm. Living the life Dad did before he took the big leap to start anew in a labyrinth of skyscrapers. I was walking in his steps.

Next, Uncle drove me out to an extensive wetland. An ephemeral expanse of water surrounded by clay pans and clusters of triodia (spinifex grass). I sat myself on a slope leading to the waters edge admiring the playful nature of Red Kneed Dotterels on the flats as both Banded and Masked Lapwings flew in on stiff brown wings.

Far out towards the ends of the flats sat a sandy yellow bird. Could it be? Long stilt like legs, tern like wings and a short red bill. There in the heat of the day was an Australian Pratincole. Conspicuous, it's like he wanted me to watch him. Behind him a mirage of Shovelers and Hardhead Ducks filtered through the water while a flock of cockatiels made their way in for a drink.

In those few brief moments I knew I was home.

Eventually a Swamp Harrier on upswept wings scared off the majority of birds on the wetland. But the privilege to have seen a Pratincole. Hard to beat that. As the afternoon drew to a close uncle and I wandered across the claypan to where the ute was parked.

“I see why they call it the sunburnt country,” I remarked, my eyes scanning the parched ground.

“Wasn’t always sunburnt mate.” Uncle's voice was more solemn now. “Plentiful greenery used to cover this spot.”

I decided not to encourage the conversation. It sounded like a touchy subject. We eventually walked over a salthill, covered in Lignum and Triodia, a favoured habitat of Grasswrens. A few little birds peeped among the entanglements but one caught my eye. Long erected swaying tail. Pale face. I rattled my Uncle's arm.

“It's a grey grasswren!” I whispered, his head turning to the direction mine was plastered to. In the sunset light a grey grasswren hopped around the long swaying stems of the triodia.

“Nyirnyirr,” Uncle uttered. I recognised the word for Grasswren in his dialect. Kunwinjku.

As we approached the car, a pair of small yet beautiful inland dotterels wandered on quick feet away from our direction. When they saw us a flash of sandstone orange took a low flight across the pan.

“I’m gonna like it here Uncle.”

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I still recall that first day out at Uncle and Auntie’s property. I visit every once in a while pondering the beauty. The beauty through Dad’s eyes.