

A short story by Nigel Coates

Call of the Crow

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13,250 words

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He had never listed his goals or thought to change his routine. He lived each day through habit and unquestioned intellect.

But something happened to the man which opened an opportunity for a difference.



Chapter Two

At a barbecue on a Saturday night, his group of friends decided to scrap the day at the beach they had planned for the following day. Someone had a sick child, someone needed to finish an assignment for University, and someone else was doing something else. Reasons aside, the man now had a spare day at short notice.

It was later in the evening, as someone told a story of his white-water rafting adventures on the Tully River, that he had the brilliant idea of going for a bush walk to find a river of his own. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone for a walk in nature. It was either with his ex-girlfriend when they took a holiday down south, or when he took his nephews up Mount Warning a few years back. He wondered why it had been so long. He loved nature – or so he told himself. He loved the fresh air, the sights, and especially rivers and waterfalls...

He sympathetically rubbed his elbow in memory of slipping on some rocks one time. The water was freezing, and he shivered uncontrollably while posing for a photo. "Just a little further in," encouraged his girlfriend. "Just a little bit more..." Slip, crash, photo. He chuckled at good times gone by.

Thinking of nature sparked his memory, and he recalled forgotten feelings. He remembered the consistent physical exertion of a bush walk filling him with drive, and the pride and feeling of self-worth that came with completing a journey. He knew he was always refreshed and energised after time in the bush, and now that he thought of it – he had been running a little flat.

"Why has it been so long?" He shook his head.

The man had fallen behind in the group's conversation, so he went to the kitchen to get another beer. He couldn't help but admire all the photos on the walls – everyone smiling and happy. He knew he should look through his photo albums more often. It would remind him of things he enjoyed and hadn't done for ages, like bush walking.

He had taken many photos of nature, but they never came out as brilliant as he hoped for. They didn't do justice to the majesty or scale of the forest. But still, they did rekindle feelings of being free, and he thought they would look good on his wall. He realised the pity of placing all of his photos straight into an album, and then onto the shelf – forgotten about until the next time he moved house. It was only as he packed his albums into a box that he'd give them a quick flick and tell himself he needed to take the time to have a better look. He never did.

The barbecued started wrapping up; he said his goodbyes and got a lift home from a sober friend. He didn't realise how many drinks he'd had until he fumbled with the keys in the door. It made him smirk. He thought he was happy.

He walked past the open bathroom door but couldn't hear the little voice. He was too exhausted to brush. He ripped off his clothes, and they fell to the floor. He crashed onto his bed and reached across to set his alarm clock. He was excited about the bush walk. "An early morning on the weekend will be a good change," were his last thoughts before sleep.



Chapter Three

The man jumped in fright when the alarm burst to life. "What the hell is going on?" He rubbed his eyes and tried to make sense of the situation. "Why's my alarm going off? It's Sunday! Oh God it's only 5:00 A.M. Oh that's right – bushwalk! What was I thinking? How drunk was I?"

He killed the alarm and collapsed back to bed. He wondered what on earth had possessed him to set it for five. He must have been mad! But as he lay flat, his mind started to tick over. The blaring alarm was the usual signal for his brain and body to switch on. It was the trigger response he needed to turn up to work each day. He tried to fight being awake for nearly 15 minutes before he gave in and staggered to the shower.

With the water running over him, it didn't take long for pleasant thoughts of waterfalls to enter his mind. He finally found a smile and started to fill with excitement. He quickly made a sandwich, filled a bottle of water, grabbed a few snacks and jumped into the car.

"Lights on!" He chuckled to himself. He was out and about before the sun on the weekend, and he laughed. "I am mad!"

His logical thoughts were trying to guess how long the walk would take him. The sign at the start had suggested five to six hours, but he wanted to do it more quickly as a challenge.

But only twenty minutes into the walk he felt terrible. He was sweating profusely, only just thinking to remove his jumper. He had let himself over-heat. He wasn't being at all observant of himself or the forest. As he jammed the jumper in his backpack, he took the opportunity to gulp water. He looked at the declining path before him and was concerned only with the placement of his feet. On he marched.

Just off the edge of the path was a blue-tongue lizard. He flinched and swore on catching sight of it, for he thought it was a snake. It, too, got a fright and quickly disappeared under a decaying log. "Lucky me."

He gulped more water as he checked his progress on the map, which was placed at the fork in the path where the long track separated from the short. He checked his watch and tried unsuccessfully to do the math on his progress. He figured it best if he just kept walking fast.

The path continued to zigzag back and forth, and the man rolled along with downhill momentum.



Chapter Five

After an hour or so he came to the stream that cut the valley down the middle. He was to cross over, walk for several kilometres on the other side, then cross back to head up the mountain. He figured it was a logical place to take a break, and he paused only for the amount of time it took to hurriedly eat a packet of chips. They were chicken flavoured, but it didn't really matter. He threw them down his throat and gulped water.

This stream wasn't as big as others he'd seen. The water didn't flow as fast. It wasn't as pretty. "No point wasting time ..." And he was back on his way. His eyes darted between various objects now that his legs were physically conditioned. Tree, plant, bird, stone, path, tree, path, rock, mushroom, tree, path. His mind was filled only with his vision. His awareness was superficial. The thoughts that tried to surface in his mind were paid no attention. Each idea was returned to the whirlpool in his head. Random thoughts about work, friends, food shopping, and washing the bloody car, were all suppressed internally, only to swirl and merge

and continue to trip over themselves. His mind had no clear voice. It was full of clutter. He was confused without knowing it.

He did not even think to question whether he was actually enjoying himself or not. For the man it was all about getting to the end. He wanted the accomplished feeling of returning to the car and to be able to say that he'd done it.

"What did you do on the weekend?"

"Went for this huge bushwalk, it was so great!"

He gulped more water without slowing down ...



Chapter Six

The next river crossing was on him before he knew it. He recalled the map to his mind and knew he was well past half way. He looked at his watch. "I am going to do it easily," he thought with a smug grin. If he kept going as he had been, he would be finished in less than four hours. He felt he had the luxury to sit and *really* connect with nature.

He cupped his hands and splashed the cool water on his face. He did it again, and did not mind it spilling down the front of his shirt. He sat on a rock in the middle of the stream and took a deep breath. The exhale was a release. Not just the release of the air, but also of stress and frustrated energy. With just a few conscious breaths his anxiety lowered. His muscles lost tension. He closed his eyes and listened to the running water. He felt the sound flow through him. He thought it wonderful how connected to nature he was. "It was really worth the effort, coming all this way."

But his mind was still in gear. He was continually conscious of time. He wanted to be finished with the walk – to bask in his achievement. He opened his eyes as he was consumed by the urgency to progress. His desired escape from his reality lasted only a minute. His miraculous connection with nature may as well have been imagined.

He cleaned his sunglasses on the side of his shirt and drank more water. The bottle was now under half full, and he considered filling it back up with water from the stream. But he recalled to be wary of drinking water that wasn't from a tap or bottle, as it may contain bacteria of some sort. He grabbed his pack and set off at pace to tackle the mountain. He was the dominant force.



Chapter Seven

It did not take long for his shirt to dry, and he realised the heat of the day. The sweat from his forehead occasionally ran into his eye, the salt making him blink harder to ease the sting. "Sweating is so annoying," he thought, as he had to remove his sunglasses to again wipe his face dry.

He thought of what he could do for the rest of the day. He could sleep as a reward for his effort, or if it was too hot he could always sit in an air-conditioned cinema. Right, left, right, left – he was set on automatic. He thought of the drive home. He felt like a having a hamburger with 'the lot' and wondered where he could pick one up. His awareness wandered through his mind without direction, and he was oblivious to his surrounds.

And then the man was struck by lightning.



Part Two

It was not a bolt from the sky – it was a cloudless day. His right foot landed, as it had already done a thousand times on the walk, but this time he trod fairly on a snake that lay across the path. In pain and panic the snake twisted and struck. The man looked down to see its mouth attached to the lower part of his right calf. He jumped into the air and yelped like an injured dog. He crashed awkwardly and clambered backwards in fright as he saw the tail of snake disappear into the undergrowth.

He looked at his calf and sighted two dots of red blood. He could not believe it! He was struck by fear. His heart pounded as hard and fast as it could. He wanted to run. He wanted to quickly get help. Adrenaline surged through his body. He paced back and forth.

"What to do!? What to do!?" He swore in anger at the forest.

He first thought of running to the car, so he could quickly drive himself to a hospital. But he knew that was wrong. "If you're bitten by a snake, you stay still." He realised he'd been stomping around the small clearing he was in, trying to make sense of his thoughts. He forced himself to sit on a rock by the path. His leg twitched nervously. His calf started to burn. He could feel his whole leg tingle. He imagined the poison making its way to his heart, and he wondered how long it would be until it killed him.

"Oh, my God, I am going to die!" That was the second bolt of lightning. Reality was unbelievable. He shook his head and panted as tears swelled in his eyes. Again he swore at the forest. His pounding heart and shallow breathing made his head feel light. He became dizzy and thought it was the poison taking hold. He knew he was going to die!

Half thoughts raced through his mind. He started to cry in sporadic bursts. He gulped for air as he looked down at his aching leg.

"I do not want to die!" he thought.

"I do not want to die!" he yelled with as much conviction as he could muster.

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Chapter Nine

The sun now burned his skin. It stung his eyes. He was sweating from head to toe. He covered his eyes with his hands and screwed his face in agony. He did not want to die! He could not believe it. He cried in desperation. He never cried. He was strong, not weak. He was filled with grief. He was disoriented. His leg burned from the inside, and his panicked thoughts bordered on madness.

And then a black crow flew in from nowhere and landed gracefully on a rock only a few metres from his.

"Aaaark, Aaaark," it called as it looked the man over. Although it twitched its head from side to side, the crow kept constant eye contact. The man knew it was abnormal. "A crow would never come so close!" He was dumbfounded, but the crow gave direction to his thoughts.

"What on Earth?" He stared back at the crow, trying to figure it out. He could not help but look deep into its eyes. They were black and yellow, but the yellow was so brilliant it seemed to hold the fire of the sun, and the pupil was such a deep and rich black, he felt as though he were looking into another world. While he looked into the eyes of the crow he was taken from his unreal situation. It fell to nothing.

"Aaaark, Aaaark," it called again, and the man realised that clarity had returned to his mind. He knew he needed to make sense of his situation. Half thoughts were of no benefit. He knew he had to look within himself to find the reason of his true self. And for some time his mind was blank.

And then, countless images and thoughts flickered in an instant. He felt like an observer. He knew he was searching for who he was. But his identity had never been defined. His true self was hard to find, hidden beneath so many toxic layers of doubt and lethargy. His conscious mind kicked back in.

"Was that burst of energy my life flashing before my eyes? Does that mean I'm about to die?" He was scared.

"A crow ... So black ... Mysterious ..." He gasped as negative thoughts swamped his consciousness.

"What if it's here to guide me to my death? That's what they do isn't it?" His mind sought confirmation by reaching into his memory seeking folk tales and fables. It was useless though. His thoughts were in panic. His heart pounded. He'd never even thought about his death, so anything was possible. "Or what if it's waiting for me to die so it can peck out my eyes and feast on my flesh!" The man felt sick.

"GO!" He yelled. "GET AWAY!" But the crow stood defiant. It looked back at him, and the man sensed disappointment. He again thought he was going mad.

"How could a crow be disappointed?" He blamed the poison that coursed through his veins – the poison that would soon kill him. What torture would he first have to endure? What insanity would first flush his mind? He again started to panic.

"Aaaark, Aaaark." The call of the crow quickly brought him back.

"Be calm. Be calm. Be calm," he muttered incessantly. "Rational thoughts. Think clearly." He looked around his small clearing and then up the trail. He could not see farther than twenty meters. The path climbed up some rocks, bent to the right, and then ... was consumed by the forest.

"The reason you don't run for help is to slow the spread of the poison. If you are bitten by a snake, you stay relaxed and calm." He had to speak aloud to find the sense of his mind.

He could not form a full sentence of thoughts internally before they were trampled by the next.

"Ok, relaxed and calm." He put his hand on his chest and could feel his heart pounding. For the first time he thought of his breathing, and took one slow solid breath.

"You won't take me!" he said as a challenge to the crow.

"Aaaark," was the reply. The man could not help but feel the crow was pleased. "Oh, the madness! What has become of reality?"

The man closed his eyes to escape. He knew he wanted to live, more than anything. Death would be horrific! It scared him senseless. He wanted to fight to live.

His leg burned, but he was determined to keep control. He pulled his jumper from his bag and wrapped it tightly around his leg as he had seen on television. Images from a children's TV show flickered in his mind. The reporter was talking to the camera as he calmly applied the bandage to a child's arm. They both smiled and laughed as though wrapping a bandage on a snake bite was fun.

He recalled old western movies. When someone was bitten by a rattlesnake, he would cut the bite to bleed the poison, or suck it with his mouth and spit. But he didn't have a knife and he couldn't reach his calf with his mouth – and he knew both methods were fruitless anyway.

What he knew for a fact was that he should stay still, stay calm, and keep pressure on his leg. He cursed himself that he had fallen into such a panic. "What extra damage have I done? How much quicker will I die?" No matter. All he had to do was stay calm; Just one thing.

The crow jumped down from the rock to the ground. It hopped across the clearing towards the larger trees. Then it stopped, turned, and again stared at the man.

He felt a bug crawl on his neck, and he wiped it off. Then another. He rolled the third bug in his fingers and opened his eyes to see. It was an ant. "What is the point? They will soon eat me to the bone – and I will not feel a thing."

He flicked it away in anger.

The real world was so bright. The deep blue sky above had grown white. The fire of the sun burned his eyes.

Was this the end? He was consumed by the terror of death and curled into a ball. He covered his eyes with his hands and rolled a little farther down the hill into a deeper shade. It was cooler, but the forest did not swallow him whole as he wished it would. He would have to bear witness to his own agonising demise.

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Chapter Eleven

He pictured each of his family and friends. He tried to imagine their reactions as they were told the news. They all burst into tears.

"Why? Why?" they pleaded, "He had so much to give!" He scoffed at the cliché.

He wished he really had the chance to say goodbye to everyone. He wanted to tell the people he loved that he loved them. To really share his mind. To converse one last time at a deeper level. He wished he could talk to them before he died – and then he remembered his mobile phone in his backpack.

The spark of hope jolted through his body. There was a chance! One chance in the world he would not die. One call for help that would save him.

"Why did I not think of it right away!?" But his self-anger was shadowed by his excitement. He laughed in a craze as he crawled from the scrub towards the rock. He could not wipe his pained smile. He knew he should keep calm, but he couldn't help it. He didn't care. For this moment his crippled body did not scream in the pain it had. His crippled mind broke through its confined hell.

He ripped open the zipper and searched. As the familiar shape was in his grasp he felt a weight lift from his shoulders. But as he flipped open the handset his heart stopped beating.

"Kids!" He cursed. "They might only be doing the short walk. Well, both groups might! But it was early ... Other cars would arrive throughout the day, and surely some of those groups would do the long walk. Surely!" He was hopeful, but guessed the very earliest that anyone would arrive would be at least two hours. Then they could run and get help ... if he was still alive.



Chapter Thirteen

He looked at his watch. He stared at it. He counted along with each second as it passed. One to sixty, and then over again. He counted every second of five minutes. He could not believe how long five minutes took to pass. His back tingled with pain, and his legs burnt like fire. He counted every second of the next five minutes and tears ran freely down his cheeks. He was in hell.

But the call of the crow diverted his attention. It came from somewhere above. It called again as it took flight from a branch, and the man watched it fly right towards him. Even from the distance he could feel its gaze. It landed on the rock where he had first sat. It looked him over carefully, called once, and flew off again to the branch above. The man knew it was watching him, or, waiting for him. It had a definite interest.

But the man shook his head. "How could that be? It's just a crow!" And then it called again from above.

"Is it trying to tell me something?" he wondered. He listened for it to call again. He wanted it to call. He listened carefully. He closed his eyes and gave his full attention to the sounds he could hear.

He could hear a kookaburra laughing from afar. The breeze gently rustled the leaves all around him. It sounded like it travelled through the forest in waves. To his left he heard the rubbing of one tree on another. Then a pair of whip-birds, a flock of finches, the distant screech of a galah. An old branch, finally giving up its grasp on the trunk and falling to the ground with a crash. Faintly he could hear the engines of a jumbo jet crossing the bright sky. Some berries fell from above, and he heard each one come to a cushioned rest on the bed of decaying leaves.

He picked up a short stick and stabbed it into the earth beside his leg. He flicked away the fallen leaves, small pieces of broken bark and tiny pieces of decayed wood. The grey earth was bare. He stabbed it repeatedly with the stick, each thrust digging a little deeper. The solid earth started to crumble. It turned into loose dust and started to build in a circle around the hole. In frustration and anger he repeatedly stabbed at the heart of the Earth. His clenched grasp of the stick pained his hand with each blow, but it did not compare to the pain in his legs, or the pain in his heart.

A flock of finches swarmed around the man from behind. The flutter of wings and sharp calls gave him a fright. Each finch scattered to a different branch on the tree right before him. He guessed there were twenty or more. They moved with such energy as they jumped from branch to branch, looking this way and that, hoping for a small insect to panic and break its cover. Their chirping was so excited. They sounded so happy. They lived with such energy.

They swarmed on another tree. Some of them came across bugs and others not, but they all called in delight. They flew to another tree, and then farther again, their sound thereafter fading away. He knew that is how they would spend their day – flitting from tree to tree.

For that brief moment he forgot all of his pain. He did not think of death. But now the birds were gone; again he was all alone. He flicked the stick into the forest and looked down at the mess he had created. It gave him no joy. He scraped the loose dirt back into the centre and patted it flat. He reached around himself for leaves and decay, sprinkling them over the top. It was no longer apparent there had ever been a wound. He wiped his hand clean on the jumper wrapped around his leg and thought of his wound.

He unwrapped his makeshift bandage and looked closely at his calf. The blood spots from the fangs had soaked into the jumper, and he could not locate the exact bite. Now there was a raised red swelling wrapped around the back of his calf where the snake's jaw had locked – and his skin had broken out in a rash of speckled red dots.

He thought of the poison slowly making its way through his body. He wondered how long it would be until he died. What more torture would he have to endure?

He reapplied his bandage, this time taking more care than his panicked first attempt.



Chapter Eighteen

His emotional roller coaster during the hours that had passed had left him drained. His hopes had bounced from high to low. He had walked the first half of the hike at such pace, his body was physically tired. He had been awake since five.

The heat of the sun had taken its toll. His spirit weighed heavy with regret. Fighting the pain had been arduous. He laid his head back against a tree and rested. His imagination drifted through places he would rather be, before he slipped into the dream world, every part of him needing rest and respite.



Chapter Nineteen

He awoke with a start to the cry of the crow. He snapped back to the anguish of his reality. He could not feel his legs! His heart nearly exploded.

"Is this Death?" he feared. The pain had gone – but so had all feeling. The crow eyed him over carefully from its perch on the rock.

"HELP!" yelled the man. "HELP!" He tried to focus on his watch through his watery eyes. 3.44 P.M. Hours had passed. Nothing made sense. He called in desperation. "HELP!" The crow took flight. The man banged his fists on his legs. They were dead.

He wriggled his hips, trying to figure what parts of him were alive, and he felt a rush of blood. Instantly the pain returned to both legs. But it was a different pain – severe pins and needles. He continued to wriggle on the spot even though it intensified the pain.

"Is the poison taking its final hold? Did I wake up just in time to catch Death on approach? Or has sitting upright just cut the circulation?" The man fought confusion and panic.

The pain consumed him with more intensity than before – but it progressed and then eased over ten long minutes, returning to the first pain with which he had grown more familiar. Compared to that quick explosion, it was now relatively bearable. His sense returned. He was now sitting in the sun as the shadows had moved. It had burnt his skin. He was hot, and his mouth dry.

"Nearly 4:00 P.M. The other groups should have passed – if they walked the long track. Other walkers, late arrivals ... Surely someone else should have passed by now!"

But then he thought of what he would do if he saw someone asleep against a tree in a clearing off to the side of the path. He would probably tiptoe by and leave them be. "How would they know I am fighting death? So, what if people have come and walked right by?" He sighed in defeat. He was angry at himself. He may have missed his only chance of survival.

He looked for footprints on the path, but he could not be certain. Some marks looked like footprints, but they may have been there before him.

"HELP!" he yelled to the world in a final plea.



Chapter Twenty

The sun had now lost its intensity. It was nearing the other side of the sky from where he had caught the first sliver – back when the world was different. Back when all of his days were laid plainly before him. Now he feared that there may be no rescue party. There was only an hour or two at most of light remaining, and that is how far he guessed he was from the car park. "Would anyone leave on their walk so late?" And he feared the reality of the worst-case scenario.

Awkwardly he rose to his feet, his legs clumsy and pained beneath him. His head was light, his skin hot and red. His mouth and throat were parched. He took a tiny sip of water – how pleasant the sensation! How little water he needed to feel refreshed! He was upset he had been such a glutton previously. He was mad he had not filled the bottle at the stream.

He took tentative steps towards the rock. Feeling continued to return to his legs, but his muscles were tight. They were sore from the exercise, but he knew the poison would also be killing the nerves endings.

He could not think exactly when trying to imagine how far to the car park. Maybe four or five kilometres, uphill. He knew he couldn't walk quickly because of the poison, and if he walked slowly he would run out of daylight.

He ate the apple before it was dark, as he hated tasting the bruised bits. All that was left was a muesli bar, which he figured he should save for breakfast. He had one sip of water. There were only two good mouthfuls left in the bottle.

He leant against the tree and watched the sun fall behind the mountains. Although the sun moved fast, twilight took forever. He removed his watch and put it in his bag to stop his paranoid glances. His hopes faded with the light. He was scared. He was sad he had not lived better. He realised he may never again see the light of day.



Chapter Twenty - Two

The man drifted in and out of sleep. He jumped out of his nightmares only to realise he was living one. The stars glistened brightly overhead, but he paid them no mind. The moon cast a strong light. The gentle breeze swayed the trees, and the shadows taunted the forest floor.

The man had guessed the forest would sleep at night, but he was wrong. At night it came alive. Crickets and cicadas rang continuously in a breathless tease. Frogs called sporadically looking for a mate. Insects buzzed around his ears, sounding large and dangerous. Dark shadows flicked the corners of his vision, but when he looked directly all was clear. He could hear animals scratching the earth, but he could not see them. The gentle gusts of air which had made the leaves sound so pleasant in the day, now sounded like an angry roar. He feared what would appear before him. It sounded like he was surrounded by death. It was just waiting to strike.

Each time he drifted off, a sound would bring him back. He slapped at insects when he felt them land on his skin. He lay uncomfortably on the earth, his aching body a constant reminder of the snake and the poison. He feared staying awake would lead him through the insanity of irrational fear. He feared sleep would bring Death. It was all the snake's fault. He hated the snake as he had never hated anything before.

He felt true sadness as he thought of the dawn. He longed to see the light of another day. He had never so desired a tomorrow. He waited and waited, wishing for time to pass quickly. He could resist no longer and rummaged in his pack for the watch. It was only 9:22 P.M. He would have guessed it was after four in the morning. He was being tortured. He was drowning in the depths of hell.

"GOD!" He yelled deep into the night sky. "How dare you do this to me! I am a good person!" The man heard no reply. He wondered why he was being punished. What had he done wrong? Was there even a lesson to learn?



Chapter Twenty - Three

It was not usual for the man to feel connected with his dreams. He wouldn't mind when friends recounted their dreams in absolute detail, drawing profound and worldly wisdom into their hidden meaning. But he didn't give his own dreams much credit. He would sometimes wake in the night and realise his head was filled with a story, but he would rather fall back to sleep than take a few minutes to write it down. The messages in his dreams would always dissipate with the screech of his alarm, his rushed morning routine, and his habitual mind.

But as he lay on the cold earth, emotionally and physically battered, he finally fell into a deep sleep and dreamed with more clarity than ever before.

Ironically, his dream started with the sound of his alarm. He hovered above his bed and looked down on himself. He noticed his face looked pained as he staggered clumsily to the shower. Every moment was clear, every action seemingly real. He realised he was to be an observer of his average day. He already knew that nothing out of the ordinary would happen. It was just going to be *another* of his days on Earth.

He soaped himself in the shower and scrubbed without care. He realised he did not honour the act of cleansing. As he watched himself dress and get ready, he realised he took no pride in his appearance. As he ate breakfast, he realised it was without concern for nourishment; His commute to work, without courtesy; His greetings to colleagues without real care.

He knew his own mind and saw how easily he cast judgments on others, and how often he criticized his own way. Each negative idea would depress his mood further, and then dissipate to nothingness. The thoughts would never be recalled. They were pointless. From his lowered position he would continue his life. Over and over without question. One step at a time, down the ladder of happiness. He never thought to break his habit of suppression of self.

Even though he smiled, it was without feeling real joy. Even though he laughed, he did not feel real happiness. Even though he worked, he did not care for the result. The man did not know passion.

He felt warm, comfortable and contented. His aches and pains were now on a different level. They were no bother. He felt connected to the stars above, their power and majesty unmeasurable. He did not lie uncomfortably on the earth, but seemed to meld with it, become a part of it. The energy continued to flow in an out and around him. It was continually refreshed and giving.

He felt he bridged the energy between the Heavens and the Earth. He was them. Everything was one. He felt only love and connection.

His rational mind stepped in and suggested that it may well be the euphoria just before death. It may be the magic of an angel coming to take him, or his brain instructing his glands to release chemicals to ease the pain of passing ... but it didn't matter, he didn't care. If death felt so nice, there was no reason to fight it. If it was his time to go, then so be it. He no longer feared death. His mind returned to silent marvel.

A shooting star crossed the Universe above.



Chapter Twenty - Six

The hoot of an owl sounded close. It diverted his attention, but his thoughts did not jump. He sat up and focused his eyes. The round white face of a barn owl looked back at him from a branch on the other side of the path. "Who, Who," it called again. He smiled at the owl and wished it well.

He wondered if it were indeed as *wise* as they say. He looked into its big round eyes and knew they would not miss a thing. He knew the owl was a master of stealth and a hunter of the night. He knew that the owl would be able to see the truth in total darkness – indeed making him wise.

"From the Owl I draw the strength of knowing. To see what many may miss. To see the truth and beauty behind appearances. Thank you." And the owl took flight without sound. Its soft feathers cushioned the air, so it could see without being seen.

Between two branches above, a sparkle caught the man's eye. It was the shimmer of the moon on a spider's web. One strand stretched between two trees. And like magic, another appeared to cross it. A few minutes passed, and then another crossed those two. The spider was laying his foundations.

The man heard a rustle in the leaves on the path. He looked up to see a small mouse foraging for grubs. He chuckled. "What could a mouse teach me?" But the mouse, seemingly unaware of his presence, continued to forage meticulously. It would take one small hop forward, and then sniff in every direction. It would turn over every leaf, check along each twig.

The man compared the size of the mouse with the forest. It was such a big place! But instead of trying to run all over, the mouse took just one purposeful step at a time.

He thought of himself in the real world and realised it, too, was a big place. "Hello, Mouse. From you I draw the strength of scrutiny. I will not overlook the obvious – the details within my reach. I know I too can learn from each step on my path. So thank you." The mouse continued to hop and scratch, learning more of his world with each step.

Then the man lay back to look at the spider. The radial spokes stretched into darkness, a tight spiral just starting to form from the centre. The web glistened in the moonlight, swaying gently with the motion of the trees. For some time he watched the web taking shape.

The leaves rustled slightly higher to the right, and a set of eyes caught the moonlight. They flashed emerald green. Then several more sets. A large possum was followed by three much smaller. She reached for the freshest berries right at the ends of the branches. The man wondered if the branches would break – then noticed the possums using their tails to secure themselves to stronger limbs.

The mother was teaching the youngsters to find food. She shared the best berries, which they sniffed cautiously before eating. The man knew possums to be territorial. He knew they lived in colonies, working as a team to function with the best success.

"From the Possum I draw the strength of family – be they blood, friends, or colleagues. I shall trust, as I am trustworthy. With the strength of the group combined greater than the individuals, I shall share and I shall learn. I will nurture and be thankful for all of my connections." And they continued their exploration of the treetops and slowly circled from sight.

The spider had progressed considerably. The man watched in a silent trance as the web continued taking shape. The spiral now reached its limits, and the spider continued working from the outside to the centre, this fresh spiral of web glistening even brighter than the first.

Then the man felt vibrations through the earth before he heard the sound. Something was coming towards him. He did not know what, but felt no fear. He was simply amazed the forest was so alive. How had he not noticed before? Or, now he felt connected to both the forest and the universe, so maybe the animals could sense it and did not stay clear of the difference...

His thoughts were side-tracked as the sound grew closer and closer, and then its source came into sight.

It was a wombat making her way along the path. She stopped to take in the man who was sitting at the far edge of the small clearing. It sniffed the air. The wombat walked closer and nudged his foot. It was curious. He sensed she was light-hearted and playful. The man guessed she walked this path each night and knew he would not be a usual find.

The man thought of the life of the wombat. He knew they were primarily nocturnal, spending many hours in their burrow. He knew the burrows could be extensive, with several entrances planned with considerations of security and drainage.

"From the Wombat I draw the strength of dwelling. My house must be a comfortable and functional environment. I strive to be surrounded by positive influence. I feel welcomed and proud. Thank you." The wombat stayed at the edge of the clearing to nibble on fresh shoots of grass.

A bird sounded an urgent alarm call and took flight. Several others took flight from the surrounding trees. When the man looked down the wombat had disappeared into the darkness. He could definitely sense a different energy close by. He knew it was a danger, but not to himself.

He saw a quick shadow make its way along an overhead branch, but could not name the animal. He caught a glimpse of eyes looking in his direction and he knew he'd been seen. Then they purposefully vanished with a blink. A moment's silence, and then there was the scratching of bark from another tree. More birds took flight and sounded alarmed.

This animal moved with stealth. It was a hunter.

'But what would hunt in these trees?' And as if his question was answered, he sensed it was a feral cat. His first thought was despair. He thought of the bird's nests it would destroy, of the possums it would claw, and of the mice it would terrorise.

"But it's not the cat's fault it wants to survive," and he felt ease.

"From the Forest Cat I draw the strength of focus and attack. May I know how and when to use force to achieve my goals. May I sense opportunity and live with conviction. Thank you."

He heard the cat's claws climbing several other limbs of the tree before it climbed higher and disappeared into the night.

The energy of the night returned to peace with time, and the forest slowly returned to life. He knew his old energy would have been sensed in the same way, and was glad to now be accepted by his surrounds.

When he again looked up to the universe he was amazed at the progress of the spider. A full and beautiful web stretched across the night sky. "What a wonderful craftsman. What a magician. To be able to create such an intricate web from nothing!" And he smiled in delight. Then the man thought, "As the spider weaves its web, man too weaves his own reality. The direction of our journeys, the people we meet, the paths we cross, the patterns of our existence..."

"From the Spider I draw the knowing that my reality is my creation. So thank you."



Chapter Twenty - Seven

Then, for unmeasured time, the man lay at peace. He thought of his developments through the night. He thought of his life. He knew his eyes had only just been opened to a better world, but he was yet to take a step.

"Difference of thought is nothing without action." And he wondered if he would get the opportunity to prove to himself and the world that he could live better. "Will God give me the chance of a new day?"

"Aaaark," called the crow. The man was shocked. He just realised the crow had never been far. And as he searched the branches above for those mystical yellow eyes he noticed, ever so slightly, the dark night sky had welcomed its first shade of grey. He had reached the dawn!

"Aaaark," called the crow.

"Aaaark," called the man in his best imitation. And then he beamed his smile, in both body and spirit.



Part Four

Over the next period the man remained free of thought. He was a silent witness to a magical dawn. In a way, it was his first. He watched the colours of the sky change with each breath. He was conscious of each breath, and he was continually thankful.

The calls of the forest birds quickly built from the scattered first calls to a symphony. The fragrance of blossoms opening to greet the light caught the breeze. The gentle dew that had settled on the leaves began to glisten. Everything was new. He realised each day was a rebirth of life, and each day started fresh.

And the man wanted to live. He wanted to *really* live.

He sat up and looked at the clearing in the soft light. He smiled with affection. He felt just one tingle on his calf and looked down to see a green ant. And then it bit him. He gasped and laughed.

"Why little ant," he proclaimed, "On your way!" And he blew the ant from his leg.

It was then that reality clicked. That fresh bite gave him pain. The exact same pain he had felt the previous day. The agonising pain he now realised had dissipated into nothing as he'd approached the dawn.

"Did I just lie in an ants' nest yesterday?!" he wondered with a frightful expression. "Surely not! But..." He stood and shook his legs. His muscles held only slight stiffness, as much as he would expect from walking as far and fast as he had. "Was I just sore from the exercise?" He looked around his space as if expecting an answer.

A butterfly of golden orange caught his eye as it flicked its wings. It was sitting peacefully on the rock where he first sat and had shed many tears. Then it took flight and circled around him. He had always thought the butterfly's flight was erratic, but now he saw an energetic dance with the world. The butterfly was a celebration. It flew up, and up, and disappeared into the leaves above.

The man, too, felt weightless. He, too, wanted to dance. With his hands over his head he spun around and around in gratitude and praise. Just to have the chance for one more day was enough reason to rejoice. His open, heartfelt laughter joined in with the brilliant chorus of the birds.

He stood on his rock and looked down at his small clearing. He joined his hands in prayer and bowed his head to give thanks to *his* cocoon. He looked up to the sky and saw the crow looking back down at him. They again looked into each other's eyes. He sensed the crow was pleased, and was smiling in spirit. Even if it was imagined, he didn't care. He gave thanks to the crow – which he now knew had been his ever-present guardian.

And with a beaming smile, the man gathered his things, and continued his walk up the path.



Chapter Twenty - Nine

He walked differently than he had the day before. Time was of no consequence – his watch left behind without regrets. He knew the *journey* was the reward, not the destination. He enlivened all of his senses. He enlivened his awareness. He took note of his breath, and of the workings of his body. He was conscious of the thoughts that passed through his mind, thinking with purpose, clarity and reason. The mindless chatter was released, free and clear.

He felt connected to the things he passed, be they rocks, trees and even open space. He intuitively knew where to look for life. His gaze diverted to so many things that he would have previously missed. Insects, birds, flowers, lizards, an echidna, a goanna and a paddymelon, its joey stretching its neck from its mother's pouch to nibble the grass. He took a few moments to stop and marvel at each new wonder. Sometimes on his hands and knees searching for detail, other times, arms stretched and head tilted back to soak in the full might of the tall trees and forest sounds. He knew there were things to learn and strengths to gain from all wild animals.

A ranger was leading a small group of tourists towards him. He followed the man's gaze and saw the snake. "Just a carpet python," the ranger told his group as they nervously gathered behind him to see. "It's not poisonous, so there is no need to worry," he reassured them with a laugh. On cue the snake slithered into the scrub. The man stood to one side of the path so the group could continue on their way. But the ranger realised it was too early for the man to be returning from a walk.

"Everything all right?" he asked. The man thought a second on the question.

"I've never been better!" He smiled with total assurance.



Chapter Thirty - One

He sat in his car and turned the ignition. The digital clock came to life. It was only twenty minutes after six. "Some much life to experience when you are up early!" he chuckled under his breath. As he took off his shoes, he figured he would be home around seven, and could easily prepare for his day at work.

He knew that if he wanted, he could keep the details of his epiphany to himself. But he also knew people would definitely wonder about his drastic change of attitude. He decided he would tell those who asked.

He pictured himself back at work – in the routine of an average day. He vowed with all the strength of his spirit never to fall back into his old habits. He wanted to *really* feel the joy of triumph, the self-worth of accomplishment, the rush of love, and even the sorrow of defeat. He wanted to *live* each and every breath. He wanted his connections to be meaningful and real. He wanted to draw on the strengths of those he encountered. And then he thought of his crow.

He stepped out of his car and called to the crow without reservation. "Aaaark! Aaaark!" It was of no consequence that others in the car park stared.

The crow flew into sight with its wings spread true. It returned the man's call and circled above.

Then the man noticed an eagle circling even higher. "The Eagle flies higher than any other bird," he thought. "It brushes its wings against heaven, but still has the ability to focus on a detail the size of a mouse. I too desire those strengths."

And the man was sure he would live a better life. For each day was a fresh beginning.

The crow called one last time before diving gracefully into the valley below.

And the man got back into his car, and made his way.

The End