

Magpies Over the Parramatta

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Introduction

There are rivers that effortlessly forget, their currents so rapid and shallow that they scour their own histories clean, rushing toward the ocean with a kind of bright, thoughtless amnesia. And then there are rivers that remember. The Parramatta is one of the remembering kind.

It is a heavy, sluggish artery of water, and it carries the dark, dense silt of older names. If you stand on its banks when the tide is low and the thick, humid air is perfectly still, you can smell the deep,

anaerobic memory of the mud. It is a scent composed of crushed mangrove leaves, ancient salt, and the quiet, stubborn persistence of paperbarks whose pale, peeling skins have shed into the water for millennia. It is the long, brown memory of a place that was a vital, thriving gathering ground—a lifeline of eels and oysters for the Burramattagal people—long before the sharp, geometric lines of a modern city violently imposed themselves upon its curves. And above this water, in every possible season, regardless of the heat that bakes the concrete or the sudden, violent storms that churn the surface, the magpies sing.

Their warble is absolutely not decoration. It is not the fragile, nervous tweeting of smaller, more delicate birds. It is continuity made audible. It is a complex, cascading, liquid music that possesses the rich, resonant depth of a wooden flute played inside a cathedral. It drops from the high canopy of the casuarinas in fluted, echoing phrases that seem to physically vibrate in the chest of anyone standing below. It is a song that audaciously invents the golden light of the morning, whether anyone is awake to listen to it or not.

Jack Thornton heard that specific, resonant music again on the very first dawn of his return, and the sound of it nearly broke him in half.

Twenty years had dissolved into the slipstream of foreign time since he had last stood on this sun-baked soil, breathing in the astringent, medicinal scent of eucalyptus. He had left at eighteen, a boy vibrating with the restless, electric certainty of youth, clutching a one-way ticket and possessing the arrogant belief that the larger, brighter, more consequential world waited strictly elsewhere. He had chased the sharp, horizontal sleet and the towering steel canyons of the American Northeast. Now, he came back at thirty-eight, and he came back hollowed out.

He arrived with almost nothing to his name: a single, battered suitcase that felt humiliatingly light, the bitterly closed doors of a digital immigration system that an automated algorithm refused to reopen, and the agonizing, final goodbyes spoken into the freezing wind to a life that could no longer be visited, touched, or lived. He stepped out of the sterile, air-conditioned terminal at Kingsford Smith Airport into a wall of oppressive, shimmering heat, tasting the distinct flavor of ozone and aviation fuel on his tongue. He arrived as a legal citizen who felt exactly like an alien, a bewildered exile wandering through the brightly lit corridors of the very country that had issued his navy-blue passport.

What he found, as he dragged his meager belongings toward a rented room above a bakery that smelled perpetually of proving yeast and burnt sugar, was a river that had been asked to carry far too much of the city's frantic, toxic discarding. The Parramatta River he remembered had been suffocated. It was choked with the neon flashes of degraded plastics, swirling with the iridescent, rainbow-slicked sheen of oil runoff, and heavy with the sour, chemical stench of a metropolis that moved too fast to look down. And what he also found, huddled in the deep, blue-green shade of the surviving casuarinas along those ruined banks, were people. People who had slipped entirely through the cracks of the city's gleaming economic facade, living in tents of salvaged plastic that crinkled loudly in the wind, smelling of damp wool, stale sweat, and the sharp bite of woodsmoke.

But what he also found—unexpected, staggering, and almost embarrassing in its profound, breathtaking simplicity—was the exact same birdsong that had marked the bright, unblemished mornings of his childhood. The magpies had not left. They had not surrendered the canopy to the roar of the diesel engines on James

Ruse Drive. Their striking black-and-white feathers still caught the first bruised-purple light of the dawn. They still claimed the suffocating air above the brown water with the identical, fluted phrases they had used twenty years ago, singing as if no absence had ever occurred, as if the river was still completely whole.

This is the story of what happened when a man who arrived with completely empty hands, his chest heavy with the phantom weight of a severed American life, decided to simply stop and listen to that liquid music, and then bent down to put those empty hands to grueling, blister-inducing work.

It is the story of a sick, choked stretch of an ancient river violently and lovingly cleaned. It is the story of muddy banks slowly restored to a quieter, vibrant, breathing green; of soil packed tight around the pale roots of lomandra and native violets; of the rich smell of healthy earth returning to replace the stench of rot. It is the story of the people who had made that deep shade their absolute last-resort address, and how they were not treated as tragic scenery or bureaucratic obstacles to be cleared away, but as the fundamental architects of the repair.

It is, above all else, the story of a homecoming that did not arrive all at once in a cinematic rush of emotion. Instead, it accumulated the exact same way that dark silt does after a violent flood—slowly, painfully, grain by grain in the muddy water, and then with sudden, breathtaking coherence. It accumulated until the returning man, his knuckles scarred and his boots caked in dried earth, finally understood that belonging is not a physical place you can simply step off an airplane and reclaim. It is a living, breathing place that you must actively help repair. And he learned the greatest, most terrifying secret of all: that in the act of repairing the damaged earth, the earth slowly, miraculously, begins to repair you.

The magpies were singing, bright and loud, when he arrived.

They were still singing when the hardest part of the work was finally done.

Everything else—every drop of sweat, every turned key, every green shoot—grew outward from that single, unbroken, liquid thread of sound.

Chapter One

The aircraft banked slowly over the western approaches to Sydney, and the Parramatta River revealed itself below like a long, patient memory that had waited two decades for his return. Jack Thornton pressed his forehead to the cool, vibrating oval of the acrylic window and watched the landscape uncoil. From this altitude, the water was a ribbon of bruised copper and olive green, twisting sluggishly between the sharp, geometric glint of newer glass towers and the softer, darker canopy of older trees. He was thirty-eight years old, and the last time he had seen this river from the air, he had been a boy of eighteen with a one-way ticket to New Jersey, propelled by the restless, electric certainty that the world elsewhere would be larger, brighter, and infinitely more forgiving of his own internal noise.

Twenty years had dissolved into the slipstream. Those years had been spent navigating the dense, complicated weather of the American Northeast—years of biting, horizontal sleet, of autumns that burned magnificent orange before decaying into gray slush, of temporary work visas that became something approaching permanence until, with a sudden, bloodless click of digital