

Pigeon Story

It was up in the Top End. They call it that because it is as far as you can go, sort of the end of the road. After that the sea, and who knows what. The Top End has lots of birds; eagles, geese and cockatoos, and lots of animals; bullockies, kangaroos, crocs and dingoes. This is a story about a pigeon from the Top End – not the plump meaty type but a scrawny one with lots of feathers missing. His mates used to call him Scrawny but that was a long time ago – for he hasn't had mates for ages now. Not since he lost his way. Yes, he lost his way. Pigeons, as you know, always find their way home, but not this one. He doesn't even know which way is up. Knows a lot about which way is down – so far down he had lost all hope. He was as far as he could go, sort of the end of the road.

If he wasn't so far down he might be able to explain how he lost his way. He would talk about being a young pigeon when things were better. Then about how he let the wild birds make him a wild bird too. About fights, drinking too much, being shot at, being in cages with openings shut so tight there was no way out. A hard life that left him scrawny, skinny, and missing feathers. Especially the ones that would help him fly. And of course, he lost his way home.

He mightn't be able to say how he got there, but he could say what he was going to do. He had a plan. In fact he couldn't think about anything else. So lost and so far down that he was going to end it all. Fly as fast as he could into a big tree. He even knew which tree, because if you think about nothing else for a long time, even the little things become big. Yes, a big old gum at the end of the billabong. Easy to aim for and nothing in the way.

Well, something got in the way. Nobody can be sure how this happened, but it did – we can be sure about that. Around the billabongs in the Top End live lots of magpie geese – not the smartest bird in the sky, but at least they stick together. They were flying slow over the billabong and it made the scrawny pigeon

furious. They were in the way of his plan to end it all. Then he saw why they were flying slowly. One goose was having a hard time keeping up, one wing looked ok but the other one was sort of flapping like an old blanket in the wind. It was a wonder he could fly at all. Scrawny was curious, which was rather strange because he hadn't thought about anyone but himself and hadn't been curious about anything for a long time. He flew closer to the struggling goose, close enough to see his big shiny eyes, close enough to talk.

"Hello fellow traveler" said the goose, a happy greeting that Scrawny didn't expect. "We are moving camp, been down south but going back up where things are better" said the goose.

"Will you make it?" asked scrawny.

"Of course, not on my own though. I need my mates to encourage me, they fly ahead and it doesn't seem so far."

"What happened to your wing?" Scrawny had to ask. Flying alongside the goose it looked worse than ever. Flapping more than flying. "Long story," said the goose. "Years ago, a woman threw a stick at me and I didn't see it coming. Broke my wing in two places, I couldn't fly at all, couldn't keep up with the mob, couldn't go any where, just stuck in the one place." Scrawny knew what that was like, couldn't get along with the mob, nowhere to go. Then the goose said something that took Scrawny's breath away.

"I was going to end it all. I had it all worked out, thought about it for days. I was going to walk up to the top of a big cliff by the river and jump off. Get it all over with. I didn't care about anything or anyone. I couldn't see any other way out. So that's what I did, well almost.

Because, you see, it took me a while to struggle to the top of the cliff, with my head down and seeing nothing. I was really knackered, but then I saw the view from up there – amazing. Instead of down looking down I was up looking up, completely different. Things I had never seen before. Instead of just stuff around me, I could look further – it was like looking into the future. I started to get excited instead of depressed, even kind of hopeful instead of hopeless.

Then something amazing happened. I wondered if I could fly. I realised I had never tried, not even once. What if my broken wing worked just a bit – yeah, what if. While looking at the view - the trees, rocks, waterfalls - I remembered an old owl looking at me one night. His big eyes looking right into my soul: “Don’t ever let the darkness hide the bright future” he said. So I turned around on that rock and looked down the way I had struggled up, and decided to fly. Off I went, not real steady at first, nearly crashed once or twice but I got better, that old wet blanket of a wing got loosened out and for the first time for a long time I started to do what I was meant to do – fly.

When I flew the mob gathered around me. They were so pleased for me. They used to tell me they couldn’t help me fly if I wasn’t going to try, but now they said they would never go off without me and they would always fly with me.

And they have, and here I am heading north with them after the wet. The Top End storms are finished, the dark clouds have gone, and the future is looking bright, as that wise old owl said it would.”

Scrawny the pigeon couldn’t believe what he had heard. What a story. He was well past the big old gum tree by now, so wrapped up in the story of the goose with a broken wing that he didn’t even see it. So he just flew on with the magpie geese, starting to see what they saw, and thinking like the goose alongside him. That old blanket flapping away but getting there, keeping up with his mates who weren’t going to leave him behind, ever.

You can hardly believe it but Scrawny remembered his mates, not the wild birds but the ones who would stick alongside him and not leave him behind. And then, amazingly, he remembered where home was, where he grew up, where his mob were, where he belonged. Now you know pigeons, they know which way is home, and even Scrawny, missing some feathers and almost gone, once he turned around there was no stopping him, he was headed for home and it felt so good.