

THE BIRDTHING

We were oystering when we first saw it. It is the strangest sight I have ever seen. I pointed at the thing near the horizon. “Whaddayareckon that is?” I asked Garloo. He looked up briefly, his mouth slippery with juice, “I dunno,” he said, returning to shucking shells with his stick. Garloo could always be relied upon to put his stomach first.

I couldn't take my eyes off the thing. It was big, with a brown body and white wings. “It's got to be a bird, a giant duck?” Garloo looked up again, “Biggest duck ever,” he muttered. Garloo's expression changed from mild interest to consternation. He shielded his eyes from the morning sun, “that can't be a bird, it's too big and its feathers are all over the place,” Garloo wiped his chin with his palm, “moving fast isn't it?” The birdthing had his full attention now.

We watched the thing moving north, past Stingray Island, and then slowly turn toward us. “I think it's coming this way Uncle,” Garloo's voice dropped a tone, “do you think it's coming to eat us?” The bird was getting larger and closer. Garloo shuddered, “I don't like the look of it, whatever it is.”

“I don't know what it is either, but I'm getting off the rocks,” I stood up, retrieved my bags and spear and headed for the dunes. Garloo, grabbing his gear, scrambled ahead of me, his bare body blending into the shadows as he moved with surprising speed. The only other times I'd seen him move as fast were when he was chasing lunch!

We topped the dune and turned back to see the thing, larger and closer, but still a fair way off. “Let's hide in those bushes and see what it does, I'd say it will take at least an hour for it to get to the shore.”

“If it can fly, it will be on top of us in a flash, please, can we go, Uncle?” Garloo always

addressed me formally, even though I was only a year older. “We’d better tell the elders.” I could see the fear on his face and while I would have stayed and watched, there was no way I would wait for hours, by myself, with that bird getting closer.

We walked back up the estuary to the camp, quickly and quietly. When we came through the trees to the camp, we could see that there was a major commotion going on. The adults were all standing, huddled closely together. Garloo and I moved closer so we could hear what they were saying.

Billamun, my favourite uncle from down south, was doing most of the talking. “It was as big as a blue whale, I tell you, maybe bigger! I saw it from Goanna Point and I could see pale ant demons running all over it. It was like a gigantic canoe with trees with big white leaves growing out of it. Leaves as big as this camp site!” I heard a snort of disbelief.

“It stopped in the bay, folded its leaves and started to drop things into the water, even another, smaller canoe. Some of the ant demons swarmed over the small canoe and started to paddle it to the beach. The ant demons were barking and grunting and the biggest ant was hitting the others with a vine. In all my long life I have never seen anything like it!” Billamun sat down, now that he had everyone’s attention, and I knew that he was expecting something to eat.

Granny Bee went to her fire and brought back a toasted fish. Billamun munched on the fish, ignoring the questions, until he was nearly finished. Then, with mouth half full, he turned to me and asked, “What are you and Garloo doing here Jellewa?” Billamun knew that usually we would fish until sunset.

“We saw it too, Uncle, heading toward us, so we came to tell the others about it,” I replied. “We thought it was a giant bird on the water,” said Garloo, “I thought it was coming to eat us!” I could tell by the silence that the others were also entertaining the possibility of being eaten, now that they knew that we had also seen it, and so near to camp.

“Well, I don’t think it would eat you, Jellewa, you’re all skin and bones,” he said to me, winking, “but Garloo here would be more tempting!” Billamun chuckled as his joke

failed to raise a smile from any but me. “No boys, it’s not a bird, it’s a big canoe with ant demons and little canoes inside it.”

“What did the ant demons look like?” asked Granny Bee. Billamun warmed to having our undivided attention, “Well, they are about the size of people, and have two legs and arms like us. Their skin is the colour of a kangaroo’s belly and they have smooth fur which they can take off and on! They leave the strangest tracks you have ever seen, like they have flat river rocks on their feet.”

“They carried hollow rounds of wood that they filled with water from the creek. Two ants are needed to carry each one and the big ant was grunting and hitting them with his vine. Some of them had red marks on their backs where he was hitting them, so they might have blood like normal creatures.”

“There is not much more to add,” Billamun continued, “the ant demons paddled back to the big canoe and stayed on the water overnight. The next morning they set off north. I ran for three days to warn you, but Jellewa and Garloo have seen the thing already, this morning,” we were both nodding emphatically, “you say it is heading this way, boys?”

And, indeed, it was!

The End

Author’s Note:

In 1770, Lieutenant James Cook noted in his Journal, “in reality the natives are far more happier than we Europeans, being wholly unacquainted not only with the Superfluous, but with the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe; they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquility which is not disturbed by the Inequality of Condition. The earth and Sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for Life.”

Lieutenant Cook navigated and mapped the east coast of ‘New Holland’, now known as Australia, in HM Bark ‘The Endeavour’. He claimed the land, on behalf of King George III of England, as ‘Terra Nullius’ – unoccupied land.