



## How the Climate Changed Me

Eve Kelly | October 21, 2020



The last throes of winter are dimming the sky to a grey whirling gloom. The heavens are pelting cold rain against the window; it hasn't let up since last night and pools of freezing water are forming near the back door. I have a baby magpie in a hospital box in the spare bedroom. She is untouched by the crisp air in her warm capsule, under a heat-lamp set to 32 degrees. Perched on a rolled-up towel shaped like a doughnut to mimic a nest, she awaits her next baby mouse deposited, in halves, into her pleading beak. On cold Spring days like this, it is hard to conceive that our planet is warming to temperatures uninhabitable for living creatures. The warming that creates drought, heatwaves and summer temperatures so high they take your breath away. But the planet has warmed, I've experienced its wrath and must brace myself for oncoming summers.

I was moved into action on Black Saturday; an event a Victorian Royal Commission found was due to climate change and was likely to happen again. That was Saturday the 7th of February 2009, a day that according to the Bureau of Meteorology, smashed record high temperatures across Victoria. Our nearest weather station at Essendon Airport recorded a high of 47.3

degrees Celsius. Weather extremes are forecast to create firestorms so ferocious and profuse that at times it will seem our whole country is on fire. We knew the day was coming. I watched leaves curl up into taco-like crisps and drop off their branches. On days like this, bats rain down from the trees onto the ground, and hundreds of possums flee into the sea; perhaps a more desirable death than boiling on the land. Ravens pant like dogs and become tame to humans who bear water. I carried large plastic containers of water to my local park with the gale-force wind off the tarred road burning my calves. I could hear my heart beating loud and fast in my ears, I felt I might pass out. Before I ventured out, I drenched my dress and hat in a cold shower, but after only a few minutes, they were parched dry again. There was no way to prepare enough to endure this intense heat. I was panicking for the animals. I felt the visceral effects on *my* body, and so could imagine what it was doing to theirs. Since Black Saturday, matters have only gotten worse. The globe has warmed further, and our leaders fail to act to stop it.

The magpie flicks baby mice onto me, it gets messy, but I'm too tired to be disgusted. I wake after a few hours of sleep to hear her pecking the sides of her capsule. I drag myself up to feed her, as her mother would; continuously. She warbled for the first time today. The distinctive sound came from a raspy place deep in her throat, barely audible. It reminded me of the magpie song I sometimes hear on a moonlit night; distant and melancholy. In an ancient story, re-told by Aboriginal elder Uncle David Tournier, magpies used long sticks, to lift the sky so high that it split open to reveal the first sunrise. So happy were the magpies to see the beautiful light and bask in the warmth of the sun, they broke into song. I will leave her box cover off tonight, and the blinds open so she can welcome the sunrise and strengthen her warble.

Black Saturday woke me up. I cried anguished tears of grief for the trees and animals. I housed feelings of guilt and shame at what we humans have done to nature. I felt compelled to do something, anything, to help. I became a wildlife shelter and cared for wombats, wallabies, possums and birds. And I've passed on what I have learned to many in the hope we can lessen the suffering of sick, injured and orphaned native animals. And do a tiny bit to reduce the losses due to climate change. But of course, I wish I didn't have to do any of those things. I dream of having a rest, a long rest. To read a book on the beach with my family, without worrying about discarded fishing line or balloons that endanger sea birds.

In October 2019, my teenage nephew Jojo, flew down from the Blue Mountains as a refugee escaping bushfires that spread from the Queensland border to Sydney. Hundreds of smaller fires, ignited by lightning strikes to the tinder-dry bush, converged into a mega-inferno that was

surrounding his house in Bulla Burra. With relief, he joined us to relax near the beach in Victoria. On a warm, blue-sky day, our local waters look tropical and crystal clear. Usually, we can see Melbourne's reflective buildings glimmering across the bay to the right and the long peninsula's tip of Point Nepean to the left. But this summer, we couldn't see past the craggy cliffs embracing our beach. The sky was blanketed in smoke for weeks. The sun, filtered through a hazy curtain, turned everything dull, rusty and ominous. I couldn't unwind pondering how the smoke, coming from as far away as East Gippsland and NSW, was filled with the ash of majestic forests and the bones and souls, of millions of animals. I felt sorry for the animals and for Jojo, as he tried his best to bob in the sea and build sandcastles in the smoke.

Every animal I rescue changes me in some way. This magpie has taught me about determination and patience. When she first came in, she didn't know how to feed from a human. I used my bare hands to shove food into her beak. Now, she cries and gapes for food when she is hungry. I know she is full when she takes the food and shakes her head to fling it out and away. The rejected food hits the walls, or me. Otherwise, it falls to the bottom of her box, and she steps on it, and it attaches to her foot. The magpie has turned me into a cold-blooded killer. In the garden today, I spied a caterpillar on the fence. Instead of my usual marvelling at its movement, I imagined it dropping into the magpie's gaping beak—and that it did. Every day she has little breakthroughs. I placed a metal bowl of water in her box, hoping she would find the reflective surface interesting enough to drink. She now drinks by herself. An insurance policy for her, after her release in summer, when days are dangerously hot, she may find water from a dog's bowl. We are all in this together.

The relentless cycle of cleaning bowls, syringes, towels and pouches and the insatiable need for food and warmth is tiring. At times I resent even the microwave, beeping, wanting something from me, to retrieve yet another warmed heat pad. But I find the emotional burden the most taxing. I nurse the animals carefully back to health to release them into the wild, never knowing whether they survived their first night. Then, when the heatwaves, drought and bushfires return, I think of them out in it, with no hope of escape. When I see the devastation on the ABC news, I remember the little ones I've known intimately and worry and mourn for them all.

The magpie is much stronger today. She is sitting up proudly and vocalises when I enter the room. I *am* proud of her strength and for her trust to allow me to help. Hopefully, she will live into her teens, in the coastal village where she was found on the ground, immobile and injured. She will soon fly above the sea and bother gardeners for worms from their vegetable patches.

And perhaps, if I am lucky, I will hear her respond to a male magpie singing her love song on a moonlit night. And in the morning, she will bask in the warm morning sun of the split open sky and be free once again.

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