**SE** Magazine

**HD** **Life’s a beech; Germaine Greer’s passion for nature sent her on a relentless quest for a patch of Australia to call her own. Yet she never imagined she’d be seduced by 60 hectares of devastated rainforest. This is her story; Cave Creek today**

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**LP**

This is the story of an extraordinary stroke of luck. You could call it “life-changing", if only every woman’s life were not an inexorable series of changes to which she has to adapt as well as she can. What happened at Cave Creek, Queensland, in December 2001 is that life grabbed me by the scruff of the neck. I went there as a lamb to the slaughter, without the faintest inkling that my life was about to be taken over by a forest.

Some of my friends tell me now that they saw it coming. Had I not quit London in 1984 and removed to rural Essex? Was not the first thing I did there to plant a wood? Was I not prouder of my English wood than anything else I had ever done? They may not have been surprised when I bought land at Cave Creek, but I was.

**TD**

Great strokes of luck are usually disastrous. People who win **millions** on the lottery tell us that their lives have been ruined: their friends have turned into spongers; their families are dissatisfied; tradesmen, lawyers, bankers and accountants have swindled them, and too much of the money was frittered away before they could secure their future. I was 62 when the forest became my responsibility, with no idea of how long I might be able to go on earning a living by my pen and my tongue. Our culture is not sympathetic to old women, and I was definitely an old woman, with a creaky knee and shockingly arthritic feet. Everyone else my age was buying a unit on the Sunshine Coast. What did I think I was doing buying 60 hectares of steep rocky country, most of it impenetrable scrub?

I followed signs and portents to find myself in a realm that was vast and ancient

As will become evident, I didn’t think. I followed a series of signs and portents that led beyond thought, to find myself in a realm that was vast and ancient. My horizons flew away, my notion of time expanded and deepened, and my self disappeared. I hadn’t been the centre of my world since menopause shook me free of vanity and self-consciousness; once I became the servant of the forest I was just one more organism in its biomass, the sister of its mosses and fungi, its mites and worms. I would be its interface with the world of humans, arguing its case for as long as I could, doing my best to protect it from exploitation and desecration.

For 10 years I could call it “my" forest, because I had bought the freehold, but that was only for convenience. To be sure, the signs I put all along the unfenced boundary said any person found removing anything whatsoever from the property would be prosecuted, but that was not because I would consider myself to have been robbed, but because the forest would have been plundered. I never thought of the forest as mine. I would walk down the creek, gazing at the Bangalow palms and rose apples that soared into the sky, and say to myself over and over: “Who could own this?" The azure kingfisher perched on a trembling frond to scan the creek for fish had more right to it than I. The long-finned eel nosing under the rocks, the white-browed scrubwren washing itself in a rock pool, the bladder cicada living its one glorious day of airborne life, all were co-owners with me.

How did I know on that bright December day in 2001 that the forest at Cave Creek could be rehabilitated? I thought I knew the answer to that question until I tried to answer it. On my first visit I couldn’t even guess at the rainforest on the upper slopes. What I could see was acres of exotic pasture grass with cattle dribbling into it and as many acres of soft weed.

Maybe it was the entrance to the national park, with its macadamias carrying strings of unripe nuts, black beans dangling their giant pea pods and watervines hanging in huge swags over the road, that told me louder than words what I should have found in the perched valley beneath. I didn't know then how much of that exuberant vegetation was exotic weed species. I do now.

That day I saw a pasture bounded not by forest but by impenetrable curtains of tangled Lantana canes. I had no idea how to remove them, but I knew they could be removed. The other thing I knew was that it was my responsibility to remove them. Why? Because I could. I had money, enough to get started at least. Once I got started I wouldn't have money for anything else, but that didn't scare me. I didn't need anything nearly as much as I needed to heal some part of the fabulous country where I was born.

Everywhere I had ever travelled across its vast expanse I had seen devastation, denuded hills, eroded slopes, weeds from all over the world, feral animals, open-cut mines as big as cities, salt rivers, salt earth, abandoned townships, whole beaches made of beer cans. Give me just a chance to clean something up, sort something out, make it right, I thought, and I will take it. I wasn't doing it out of altruism; I didn't think I was saving the world.

Not so long ago, I was as insensitive to the beauty of Australian native vegetation as anyone else. As a child I had longed for the flowers that starred the Alpine meadows where Heidi grew up, for edelweiss and gentians and daisies. In coastal Victoria the only daisies I had to make chains with were not silver-white with golden centres, but dull yellow with dirty grey disc florets; they were capeweed, Arctotheca calendula, from South Africa.

I studied European wildflowers for years before I paid attention to the wildflowers of the great south land. If I look for a eureka moment it seems to be a TV programme on Australian flora presented by David Bellamy.

Nobody had ever explained to me why Australian flowers were the way they were, and how fascinating their difference was. What Bellamy projected as he explained the structure of all kinds of Australian flowers, from the spectacular to the insignificant, was his wonder and intellectual excitement. By the time the credits rolled I had stopped wishing Australian blooms were like flowers in manuscript illumination and Dutch painting, and I was ready to give them my full attention. I didn't fall in love with native Australian vegetation until I was middle-aged, and then I fell hard, as middle-aged women do.

If I know anything at all about botany it's because my younger sister taught me. For years we went together on botanising holidays. She taught me how to key plants out, something I'm still not very good at, partly because I tend to rely on my photographic memory and leap to an identification without going through the steps, from family, to genus, to species.

"No," she would say, "go back to the beginning. Is it rutaceous or myrtaceous?"

"It's a Kunzea," I'd say, "so it must be myrtaceous."

"Wrong way round," she'd say. "What are the distinguishing characteristics of the Myrtaceae again?"

She pronounced it "mertacey", which is a sign that she is a properly trained Australian botanist. A non-botanising academic like me should pronounce it "mertaycee-ee", but now I say "mertacey" too.

Jane taught me to use a loupe to look for oil dots and to search for tiny variations in flower form, so that I could be quite sure of my identification. This is the really nerdy part of botanising, but pernickety drudgery is an essential part of any scientific discipline. At the end of a day's rambling, after we had picked the ticks off each other, Jane and I would sit with a pile of specimens spread out on a tabletop and she would take me through them one by one.

Jane went to work when she left school, and didn't get to university until she had raised her two sons. Then she was treated as mere ballast in the class, until they belatedly recognised how serious and how gifted she was. She could have gone on to do an honours year, but she had no interest in academic research. She went to work again, as a practical botanist, to do what she could to preserve what was left of the biodiversity of the Mornington Peninsula, where she lives. Now she has a busy practice, carrying out vegetation surveys for clients private and public, identifying plant communities that need to be protected and designing planting schemes that are consistent with the indigenous vegetation.

I'm never frightened in the desert. Not even when I'm well and truly lost

It was Jane who taught me about the perils of Australia's steadily rising water table, which is bringing to the surface the salts deposited over millennia by the buffeting ocean winds, and carrying the spores of the cinnamon fungus that is destroying the vascular system of woody plants all over the island continent.

 

Together we have examined the changes in vegetation that signal increased salinity, and gazed in despair at the glittering expanses that are the ulcers caused by salt.

It is because of my sister that I have been looking for a piece of land in Australia, something we could work together to manage, to protect or restore; a project we would have in common. What I really wanted was desert. For 20 years I had been roving back and forth over central Australia, hunting for my own patch of ground. Whether stony, rocky or sandy, pink, vermilion or blood red, whether bald, furred with native grasses, or diapered with saltbush and spinifex, I wanted it.

This falling in love began when I first drove the Birdsville track from Bourke to Alice Springs in 1970 and camped in the deep warm pink sand of the dry Todd River. I had never had an Aborigine's-eye view of my country before, and what I saw I loved, until the police raided the beer garden of the Alice Springs Hotel and took most of my fellow campers to jail. After my new friends, who had committed no offence, were given custodial sentences, some as long as six months, there was no time to venture out of the town and discover the inland for myself. I flew back to Sydney and eventually back to England, but the feel of that warm sand in the dappled shade of the river gums under the cobalt sky never left me.

Whenever I found myself in Australia, I took every opportunity to escape from the endless sprawl of suburbia into the vast blue yonder. I am never frightened in the desert, not even when I'**m** well and truly lost.

I take a delight in following the example of my forebears who went bush during the Great Depression, with nothing but the clothes they stood up in and a bicycle. If Aboriginal people can get around the bush without four-wheel drives and spare fuel and water tanks and air conditioning and roo bars, then so can I.

I have never felt that the country was harsh or unforgiving. Whitefellas have always seemed to me the most dangerous animals in it. It's not that I trust the desert not to kill me; it's more that I don't mind if it does. Better a swift agony in the desert than my mother's long twilight in a seaside nursing home.

It was inevitable that I would give in to my deepest longings, and fly to Alice Springs, but try as I might, I couldn't find a place in the desert that felt like home. Jane and I walked the base of the great monolith of Uluru, which the first time I saw it was known as Ayers Rock. It has always struck me as one of the holiest places in the world. As I walked along in the lee of the rock I prayed through clenched teeth to the tutelary spirits for country of my own, but I knew even as I did it that there is no country in Australia that I could ever really call my own. I was knocking on the wrong door.

Back at our hotel I complained to Jane. "I think I'**m** just going to have to give up. We've been hunting for some land for me for years, and there just isn't any."

Logan City lies 25km or 30 minutes south of Brisbane, in Queensland. Described as "young, dynamic and booming with growth", it has friendship agreements with cities in **China**, Japan and Taiwan. Many immigrants disembarking for the first time on the shores of the lucky country **wind** up there.

They bring with them all the baggage of the uprooted: disorientation, grief, confusion, anxiety, exhaustion. Deracination is felt most keenly by women who are too often housebound and bereft of female kindred, entirely dependent upon the whims of their husbands as their mothers were not. In 1992 feminist activists in Logan set up a women's health centre to be run by women for women. In 2000, desperate for cash, the organisers contacted me, asking what I would charge for a lecture that they could run as a fundraiser. "Nothing," I wrote back. "Hire a hall, sell tickets and pocket the profits."

When the desert project fell over, it was time for me to make my way to Logan, to fulfil my part of the bargain.

It was a great night, as we say. As we were chatting afterwards, I told the organisers how I had been searching for a house. Many of them had worked with Aboriginal groups and they promised to send a message on the bush telegraph asking if anyone out there could help. Then someone said: "What about Ken's place?"

"You mean Ken's mother's place."

"Yeah. Ken's really keen to sell that. It might be what you're looking for."

"Where is it?"

"About an hour away, mebbe a bit more."

I had to see the forest when it was coming alive, when the indigo mists well up from the gullies

 

Ken is Ken Piaggio, a psychotherapist who worked at the women's health centre. Next morning he turned up at my hotel, to take me to see the property. I hadn't asked where it was. I hoped it was out to the west, but we were driving south, down the Pacific Highway towards the **Gold** Coast. My heart sank. As the road crossed the river and followed its left bank high into the hills, I began to notice that, though the canopy trees in the native woodland were the usual, the grassy understorey had been replaced by wattles and geebungs. As the road wound higher the forest changed again. Dark green saplings had begun to colonise the forest floor. The emergents changed; I was now looking at big specimens of brush box, flooded gum, tallowwood and turpentine. Along the river I could see different river she-oaks and red Callistemons.

We passed an almost full-grown lilly pilly, and then I understood. The eucalypts I was looking at were not virgin forest but regrowth. Before white settlement, this part of the valley must have been clothed in rainforest. Ever since it was cleared, it has been colonised by pioneer myrtaceous species that grow much faster than the original vegetation, which was and is still, struggling to reclaim its territory.

What I was seeing was a practical demonstration of how it was that the rainforest that once clothed Australia was corralled and driven back by the collaboration of eucalypts and fire, until it was no more than a chain of remnants down the east coast of the continent. There was not much to like about the regrowth forest; in the cleared areas the cattle looked hot and cross and the horses on the hobby farms were wearing masks and capes to protect them from the stinging flies. The road wound higher. The spectacular views of the scarps to our left and right were closed out as the valley narrowed. The road climbed out of the river valley, crossing a rocky creek making its way to the Nerang. The name on the sign was Cave Creek.

We turned left into the entrance of the Natural Arch section of the Springbrook National Park and everything changed. Massive watervines curtained the road. Cordylines and Lomandras bordered the tarmac. Huge pea pods and strings of nuts hung in the trees. Tree ferns and palms patterned the understorey. A black brush-turkey, with bald red head, chrome-yellow cravat and a tail attached vertically instead of horizontally, fled at our approach.

The narrow road divided, then turned into a car park, which was full of people, most of them in swimwear. A sign said: "Thieves are active in this car park. Do not leave valuables in the car." The scatter of glass fragments on the tarmac told its own story. Most of the people I saw were carrying nothing but beach towels and water bottles.

"What's going on here?"

"They've come to see the Natural Arch."

"A rock formation," I scoffed. "Australians are the only people in the world who will drive for hundreds of Ks just to see a funny-looking rock."

Twenty-four-hour tourism. So much for tranquillity. And that's without the accidents. For years the Natural Arch was the place where surf lifesavers came to celebrate the completion of their training by jumping through the hole in the cave roof. Others did not even have their excuse, having merely downed one stubby too many. In 2005 a British tourist dived into the pool and didn't surface. The downward force of the waterfall had pushed him under a rock shelf. It was not until the next day that rescuers succeeded in recovering his body.

Now signs warn visitors that swimming in the creek will incur a heavy fine. As the park has too few staff even to keep an eye on the parked vehicles, the signs are ignored. We drove to the end of the car park, past the toilets and the information kiosk, and bore left, where a sign said "Pedestrian access only". We kept driving, athwart a steep slope, between rainforest on the upper side and a dense stand of hoop pines on the lower, through an open gate, and several acres of Lantana. "This is it," said Ken, as we crossed a concrete causeway over a creek full of mist weed and busy lizzie. I could see bird's nest ferns and staghorns hanging in the trees. We kept going under the trees, past a single-storey house sagging on slanting piles to a gate and open fields.

Once out of the car I could see that the property nestled within a half-hoop of bare weathered scarps cropping out above the forest that foamed up in deep-green waves from the cleared area where we found ourselves. Even though it was the middle of the day and the sun stood directly overhead, bleaching out colour and turning shadows black, the effect was spectacular. We walked past the house and on, past muster yards and a milking parlour and a hay shed, past blackwoods and silky oaks and trees whose names I didn't know. Ken pointed out the course of the creek below us, and the tributaries coming down from above. I felt blank. Bewildered. Rainforest. I had never thought of rainforest. It was hot, but not dry-hot like the desert, sticky hot.

 

“A hundred and fifty acres," Ken was saying. “We bought it for my mother, so she’d have something for her retirement. She’s worked all her life in the public-health service, so she’s not got much to retire on. We were hoping we could make money from this place, you know, give her some extra income, but in the end we’ve just got to get the capital back out of it. She needs the cash. It’s been on the market for a while, but there’s been no interest whatsoever."

Dusk in these latitudes is momentary. The pinkness of the sky above the purple scarps had drained to a phosphorescent green

“How much d’you want for it?"

“I won’t bullshit you," he said. “We’d settle for half a **million**. Mum’s not too well. I feel as if we’re running out of time." Ken fished in his windcheater and brought out a newspaper clipping. The **sale** advertisement for the property, dated two years before. The asking price was a **million**. “We’d have taken less, but we never even got an offer. Not a single one."

On the ride back to Logan I didn’t say anything about the property. I felt nothing beyond a twinge of embarrassment. We talked about other things. I said I’d be in touch. I was rehearsing how to tell these two good people that, after all their trouble, I wasn’t interested either.

On impulse, as I was passing the car-hire desk in the hotel lobby, I decided to drive to Sydney instead of flying. Then I rang a resort I had noticed on the way up to Cave Creek and booked accommodation. I checked out of the hotel, wheeled the car out onto the highway and raced back the way I had come. If I had calculated correctly, I would be back at Natural Arch before sunset. In the hot middle of the day the Australian bush is silent; to understand the place I had to see it when it was coming alive, when the indigo mists well up from the gullies. I parked the car under the jacarandas, turned off the track, struggled over rocks hidden by the long grass towards the creek. From the forest on the slopes above me came a noise like fighting tomcats. Possums, I thought. (Catbirds, actually.)

Tiny jewelled birds were bouncing about in the Lantana. Big brown pigeons were gorging on the fruits of wild tobacco. I perched on one of the biggest of the rocks and contemplated the forest edge. Half a **million** dollars for a run-down **dairy** farm. I didn’t think so.

Out from the clumps of native raspberry at the forest edge stepped a bird, a sort-of crow in fancy dress. He was clad in a tabard of a yellow so intense it seemed to burn, and a cap of the same yellow with a frosting of red on the crown. He walked up to within a few feet of me, fixed me with his round yellow eye and began to move his black rump back and forth. There was no doubt about it. He was dancing. Up and down bobbed his gaudy head, in and out went his hips, and all the time he kept a golden eye fixed on my face.

“What do you want with me, birdie?"

More dancing, a little faster if anything.

Dusk in these latitudes is momentary. The pinkness of the sky above the purple scarps had drained to a phosphorescent green.

“Birdie, I have to go, or I’ll be caught here in the dark."

More dancing. I stood up.

“Bye bye, birdie."

The heraldic bird made a little bow and disappeared among the raspberries. It had thrown down the gauntlet. Was I game to take on the challenge? Could I rebuild the forest?

As I came in sight of the house, a man was leaning on the veranda rail. I said: “Hi." What I thought was: “Sorry, mate, I’**m** gunna **buy** your house."



Germaine Greer is giving a talk about The Rainforest Years at Kings Place, London on Monday 27th January. For more information visit: kingsplace.co.uk

The white beech my book is named after is Gmelina leichhardtii. This is a stupendous tree, growing to 40m in height, just asking to be cut down, slabbed up and shipped off, which is what had already happened to most white beeches by the beginning of the 20th century. Cave Creek is one of the very few places where they survived. Rebuilding a forest, though, proved much harder than I anticipated. And much more expensive. In England, at a formal dinner at my college, a woman said: “You need to set up a charity and give your forest to the charity. Then we can all help." The thought of giving up the forest made my heart hurt, but then I’d have to give it up one day, wouldn’t I? The project has been run by Friends of Gondwana Rainforest (gondwanarainforest.org) since 2011 and is now being managed by an Australian not-for-profit **company**.

Am I bereft? No. If I have not learnt in my 74 years that to love and care for something you don’t need to own it, then I have learnt nothing.

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