

Some make it, some don't

By Ruth Ostrow

"YOU got a live animal, then you got a dead animal," says my friend who has come over to help me bury another bird that's flown into a window and broken its neck. "It's the way of the bush. If you have a live horse then you're gonna have a dead horse, if you have live cattle then you're gonna have dead cattle," she says.

She was one of several children in a farming family. Her job was to behead the chooks for dinner. As a child she was the one holding open their wings with her feet and standing over the bodies with an axe.

Me, I'm still trembling at the sight of a shattered little bird body, unable to sweep up the carcass. Certainly not able to deal with the blood. It's a throwback from childhood. My first encounter with death was when my cat Julie brought a suffering, shuddering bird between its teeth and laid it at my feet. I fed the bird water and bread, stroked it, sung to it, and watched it die in front of my eyes. Mum carried it out to our garden and we dug a hole. But I cried for hours, horrified at what had happened. And still to this day feel unable to digest the unpalatable reality.

"I'm a coward," I sigh, as my friend picks up the bird. She smiles. "No. You're just a city girl. When you grow up on a farm you understand the cycles of nature much better.

"Death doesn't seem so tragic. You eat the animals you rear, you watch your livestock going through drought and having to be put down.

"You know some make it and some just don't," she says as we look over at the flowers on a tree, some in bloom, some in decay, some blown off prematurely by the wind. "It's just the natural cycles of things, nothing personal."

She shrugs, picking a flower and putting it on the tiny mound of the bird's grave, for my sake.

With her words ringing in my head, I fly home to Melbourne for a few days. I haven't been home since my beloved cousin died of cancer almost a year ago. Touching down, I know it's going to be hard to deal with memories evoked, the look on my aunt's face. The death of the young is so hard to understand.

At night I watch old home movies with my family. The reels, filmed in the 1960s, blinker and spit as our childhood unravels. There she is on the screen, my cousin, a little girl with chubby cheeks, holding my hand. She was a couple of years older than me and cradles me in her arms like an older sister would. I stifle my tears.

But there they all are, a parade of ghosts: my cousin, my nana, my other grandma, my papa, my dad, a childhood girlfriend. All dead.

I sob and shake quietly in the dark, overwhelmed by grief.

Flickering images. Flickering heart. "Gone ... he's gone ... she's gone," I hear my sisters murmuring in strange disbelief.

It's always hard coming home. Every street holds a story. One has my nana's house, another my childhood home, another the home of a boy I loved, dead in a car crash at 20. Why?

But I know the answer. "You got a live animal, then you got a dead animal." We are all just growing things. Some of us have genes that will make it to 90. Others, such as farm animals, will be eaten - by cancer, by infection. Some, like the bird on my veranda, will fly into things they can't see and break their necks.

It's our separation from the natural world that distorts reality. We live in a society that immunises us against the truth. Glossy magazines promising happy-ever-after deny ageing, deny fallibility. We get an exaggerated view of our own precious importance from the top of tall buildings. Safely bricked in, we believe it will never happen to us. Without trees, insects and nature to teach us about the sacred cycle of life and death, we are lost in the fantasy of immortality.

"It was just her time," I tell my aunt, having spent a quiet hour in my mum's garden. "Nothing personal." But she can't hear it. What mother could?

Back on my country property, something ironic happens. While lying on the grass, depleted from tears, a dead-weight with outstretched arms, looking up at the sky, an eagle who lives in the Byron hills comes into view. We watch it often, but it's usually much higher up. Today it is flying low, straining to make out what I'm doing, as I watch in awe.

And suddenly I know what it's thinking. "You got a live animal, then you got a dead animal. This one just moved, so I'm flying off."

And there it is again. The lesson. Brutal. Liberating. I am flesh. I am dust. One day I'll be dinner. Perhaps when we can understand and accept the perspective of our lives from an eagle's eye, we can finally free ourselves from suffering.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 15 JUN 2002