A distant victory

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July 1st 1983 .... I wake before dawn having, it seemed, spent all night dreaming about the High Court ruling due to be delivered this morning. Twice I dreamt it had all gone horribly wrong, the judges had backed the Tasmanian government and the Premier would have little to stop him from forging ahead with the destructive and unnecessary dam. I woke feeling utterly miserable and then relieved to realise I had only been dreaming

Once I dreamt that all had turned out as we hoped – and woke elated, only to relapse into worry, knowing there were still hours to go until any announcement would be made. Last night on the TV news we had watched Bob Brown and friends snowballing in Tasmania. I wondered if any of them had got any sleep.

I get up, trying not to wake the others. It is school holidays and our family are spending a week on Magnetic Island. No snowballs here, just perfect north Queensland winter weather. The moon is high as I walk the long silver curve of beach, a gleaming horseshoe. My aim is to reach the far end before sun-up. A few early morning fishermen are appearing. On the horizon are the lights of the first of the returning prawn fishers.

I walk quickly, humming Shane Howard's *Let the Franklin flow* (a very good walking song) and trying to get my mind prepared for whatever the outcome might be.

The sky is rapidly lightening. A gap in the fringing casuarinas attracts my attention and I climb up to see what lies behind the dunes. A small brackish lagoon with a solitary lady jabiru. Delighted, I duck down behind the dunes and creep closer. I watch as she moves in stately fashion looking for breakfast. She is aware of me but doesn't seem to mind my presence; after a while she lifts off and flies lazily to a group of paperbarks. I return to the beach, realising that I had managed to forget about the High Court for at least ten minutes.

Full daylight now, though the sun is still not quite over the hilltop behind me. I race it – running along the firm sand to the piles of boulders at the end of the beach and clamber up them as the sun bursts into the sky. Only three hours now until the venerable judges deliver their verdict.

Seagulls and terns start their morning beach patrols. Pied currawongs are making their jubilant calls from the hoop pines behind me. I look for the familiar shape of the sea-eagle but he doesn't appear this morning and I feel a little cheated.

I start the long walk back along the beach, knowing the kids will be up and hungry. I don't want to hear any news this morning; the radio stays off. At 8 o'clock Mike says "So, two hours to go?" but I can't reply, can't talk about it at all, the moment of truth is just too close.

It's a beautiful, sun-sparkling day. We throw some towels and munchies into a back-pack and set out along the track to Balding Bay, the next Bay to where we are staying. Our only radio is the one belonging to our rented unit and runs off the mains. Even if we had one to take with us, I don't think I would. I'm beginning to fear the worst and simply don't want to know.

The walk is steep in parts and very pretty – it's only when I trip over a tree root that I realise I am walking with four pairs of fingers crossed. At 10'clock we are nearly at the bay. I am standing under a beautiful Moreton Bay ash which, unseasonally, is in flower. Clouds of butterflies are flocking around it and the whole tree hums with bees. I seem to be rooted to the spot, standing there with those bright wings and flowers above my head and fallen wattle blossom at my feet, thinking of a river that I have never seen, so very far away.

In my head I recite those beautiful lines of Gerard Manly Hopkins:

> *What would the world be, once bereft*
> *Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left*
> *Oh let them be left, wildness and wet*
> *Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.*

Hmm, well, maybe not the weeds.

Reaching the bay, the girls are already in the water – it's cold, they tell me. This place is so beautiful, the hills tumble down to the sand and the sparkling waters. Casuarinas, eucalyptus, acacias and hoop pines spring out of every rocky crevice on the headlands. On top of a huge upright boulder is an osprey's nest; it's been there for years. I am delighted to see one of the birds at the nest, its mate flying in and out at intervals. Monarchs of all they survey! I climb over rocks to get as close as I can without worrying the birds. Mother (or father) looks at me with, it seems, curiosity rather than apprehension. I look back in awe – and retreat.

The children call to me, wanting me to swim. It *is* cold – not used to that in the tropics! But the water is so clear and the temperature exhilarating. Alison and I sing *Let the Franklin flow* somewhat breathlessly as we swim. A man on the beach smiles – encouragingly? indulgently? We race up and down the beach to get warm and draw a NO DAMS triangle in the sand, like some ancient charm to ward off evil.

It's hard to believe that the decision must be known by now – that it's either all over or all just beginning again. There are campers on the beach, do they have radios? Do they know the decision? Do they care? I can't bear to ask – and doubt that I would trust their answers anyway. I need to hear the words in the measured, reliable tones of the ABC and realise I cannot possibly wait till evening. I must get back for the 1.30 news. I tell the others I am starting back.

It's a long steep walk up from the beach to the ridge where it joins the main track, and there is no breeze. I am getting breathless, going too fast. I slow up, standing aside to allow a small group to pass me on their way down. One couple glance at the "NO DAMS" badge attached to the strap of my binoculars, but say nothing – why not? Surely, they must know! To beat the paranoia I start running along and then steeply down the track back into Horseshoe Bay, afraid I will miss the news. In fact I am 10 minutes early.....

The family walk in just as the news comes on. There is that cool, dispassionate ABC voice "In today's headlines, the High Court rules against the building of the Gordon below Franklin dam. In a split decision...." I don't hear any more. I thought I would be laughing and leaping around with joy, but that comes later. First come the unexpected and unstoppable tears, the relief indescribable. Lucy, hugging me and laughing, says "But Mum, it's just a river..." "No", I sniff and sob, feeling so ridiculously happy and foolish, "it's not just a river". We are all hugging each other now and I can't stop smiling, a huge silly grin. What a day! What a feeling!

The rest of the day passes in a haze of bliss. In the early evening I walk to the huge freshwater lagoon which is a feature of this part of the island. It is fringed with giant *Melaleucas*, their leaves shining green and gold in the evening sunlight. Man-made sounds do not intrude, just the persistent, primeval sounds of the swamp – moorhen and grebe, black duck and cormorant, frogs, the whine of mosquitoes. For once, I am not intent on bird-watching. Today, this gloriously special day, I am content to sit very quiet and absorb the peace.

I think of Bob Brown and of all those campaigners whose names I don't even know. I think of the thousands of blockaders including the elderly, defiant Ruth Rowe, undeterred by arrest or

the prospect of Risdon prison. How wonderful they must be feeling now. I wish I could hug them all and shower them in champagne. I send out thought waves of love down Tassie way.

I think of Olegas Truchanas who witnessed the loss of Lake Pedder and ultimately lost his life in his efforts to save the Franklin . . . I think of Peter Dombrovskis who, following in Truchanas' footsteps, captured the famous image of Rock Island Bend that swayed a nation to "vote for the Franklin". Above all I think of the ancient forests, the mysterious spirit of the caves and of a river flowing free . . . . .