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Introduction: The Coming of the Martians

If you don't really know Sydney, it may come as a surprise to find the extent to which the young city is divided. The luminous body of the harbour, with its crinkling tendrils spreading out in all directions, exacerbates other separations of class and cultural tribe. Our little family, consisting of my then heavily pregnant spouse Frances and our four-year-old daughter J., moved to Sydney in August 2012. Thanks mostly to Frances's ticking-clock determination, we quickly rented a cosy two-bedroom house in a small cul-de-sac in that bit of the city known as 'the Inner West'. Although petite by Australian standards, our new abode felt spacious after emerging from five years of pocket-sized London flats. There were high ceilings and wooden floors, distinct cracks in the hundred-year-old walls, and the whole premises sloped discernibly to the south. This was the first home of our second daughter, R., born just a few weeks after our arrival to tender care in the local public hospital.

Pretty much every large late capitalist municipality has areas like the Inner West – that, once poor, are now well down the road to full gentrification and are caught somewhere between avant-garde

and the trappings of bourgeois respectability. The coffee is, of course, excellent and there is a choice of independent bookshops. A bakery not ten minutes walk from where we moved in sells what is apparently the most Instagrammed cake on the planet, while another local establishment, a small theatre, promised year-round burlesque. In the Inner West, radical political posters share lamppost space with elaborate notices about lost pet cats.

The yards in our new street are tiny, but tall trees tower over the cosy houses, linking up branches to create a generous canopy. Virtually every house has a small porch. Fairy irises have spread along the ground, the ubiquity of their grass-like blades binding the base of the street together like thatch. On the day we moved in, our new neighbours gave us a friendly welcome. Having been thrilled yet nauseated by the anonymising churn and flurry of the financialised metropolis of London, our new home was an immense contrast. We soon found that here adults who lived near each other actually *talked – in person – on a daily basis*, while their children regularly played in and out of each other's living rooms and gardens. Swapping greetings over the back fence was an actual thing, as was an impromptu drink on someone's landing on a Friday night. There were shared expeditions, dinners and picnics.

Our street's mix of ages, ethnicities and varieties of love had risen like the best bread to create a nourishing micro-community that the residents were committed to maintaining. People's jobs were a rich blend, though for the most part resting comfortably within the new economy. Some engineers, writers and journalists, a secretary, a graphic designer and one fellow who used to work at what has become the Carriageworks multi-arts centre and performance space, back when it was still the Eveleigh Rail Yards. Now a historian and a bloke who worked for Greenpeace had gratefully joined them. We reflected back on the blocks where we'd lived in the UK, in which all too often tenants in high-turnover, short-stay flats, driven by insecurities in life and work, had come and gone without names or traces.

Although only about a twenty-minute walk from the skyscrapers, our new home seemed alive with animals. Spiders weaved their way through the branches and the wooden fences, or cast webs of astonishing ambition, behind which the silhouettes of flying foxes

could be fleetingly spotted, looping across the twilight sky. There seemed to be a particularly dense population of huntsman spiders: harmless, but disconcerting because of their size and speed across the wall as well as the ability to appear, suddenly, where you don't expect to see them. I quite like spiders, but to find an adult huntsman in your kitchen sink before breakfast – not unreasonably annoyed at being stranded near the plughole – is a heart-starter every bit as emphatic as a double espresso. Dozens of skinks lived in the fallen gum leaves and the fences. One reptile in particular, dubbed 'Lily' by our kids – a child's contraction of 'little lizard', made a habit of climbing the insect screen on our kitchen door, occasionally making it inside to forage for morsels under the fridge. Possums frequented our roof and the trees around, enchanting creatures when eating under the moonlight, but considerably less charming when their urine trickled down the wall, and downright unnerving when having sex in the roof with as much noise and abandon as the fabled flatmate from hell.

There were daily reminders of the munificence of our dead-end alley. Arriving home from my new job one balmy Friday afternoon, I found Frances and the kids ensconced on the landing of one of the other families on the street. Some of the children were playing together and the adults were in lively conversation. Errol, the thirty-something father of the family who lived opposite, gestured towards me as I approached, and grinned. 'Come on David, what better way to start the weekend than a drink with your neighbours?' Snacks appeared. Ten minutes walk away, the local shopping complex offered more or less everything. An unimaginably grand entrepôt of goods and services rendered mundane by the common expectations of twenty-first century life in the developed world. Tonight, the bazaar had furnished olives, crispbreads, chips, organic something on something. Plenty. When the mosquitoes finally seized the street from us with bloody violence and the sky dimmed a burnt orange, the gathering drifted apart. Errol's wife, Kate, smiled beatifically at me as we left. Hallowed by porch light, she echoed the sentiment of her husband: 'What could be better?'

I laboured under the discordance of moments like these. The mission of Greenpeace is to secure an earth capable of nurturing life in all its magnificent diversity. In the ordinary course of my work

I was immersed in the scientific warnings of the dire consequences of global warming, the extinction of species and the destruction of the natural world with grim implications for human society. This is, of course, not hidden knowledge, but relatively commonplace in the news. Still, not everyone is required to confront this reality as the core of their daily vocation.

Choosing but one warning from the multitude, in 2009 for example, the Stockholm Resilience Institute made headlines worldwide by proposing that in order to ‘avoid catastrophic environmental change humanity must stay within defined “planetary boundaries” for a range of essential Earth-system processes’, three of which had already been overstepped, including through global warming and mass species extinction.¹ At around the same time, Professor James Hansen described coal as ‘the single greatest threat to civilization and all life on our planet’ because of its uniquely damaging contribution to climate change and massive loss of biodiversity. The eminent NASA scientist didn’t mince his words: ‘The trains carrying coal to power plants are death trains. Coal-fired power plants are factories of death.’²

Australia has been the world’s largest exporter of this poisonous commodity in most years of the twenty-first century.³ Given what we now know of the threat from global warming, common sense, surely, is as plain as day: the world must make a rapid transition to clean energy. Australia, surely, has to get out of the coal extraction business as fast as reasonably possible?

Yet, instead of purposeful consensus and positive leadership, immense political and economic forces have lined up to thwart the changes that are necessary to ensure our common future. In events that are described in the next chapter, just before I moved back to Sydney, shocking research had revealed extraordinary plans for up to nine new coal mega-mines in the previously unexploited Galilee Basin in Central Queensland. If these mines proceed as then planned, they could produce up to 330 million tonnes per year of coal for export, releasing an estimated 705 million tonnes of carbon dioxide per year (more than Australia’s total annual domestic greenhouse gas emissions) that would contribute to a catastrophic global warming trajectory of up to 6 degrees Celsius.⁴ Putting this figure in bleak perspective, projections indicate that even a rise of 4 degrees is ‘incompatible with

an organized global community, is likely to be beyond “adaptation”, is devastating to the majority of ecosystems, and has a high probability of not being stable’.⁵

In October 2012, there was another dark revelation, this time concerning arguably the country’s best known natural icon. Following the world’s largest ever monitoring project of its kind, the Australian Institute of Marine Science revealed that, notwithstanding World Heritage status, our Great Barrier Reef had lost more than half its coral cover in the preceding twenty-seven years.⁶ The figure was astonishing. Then federal Minister for the Environment Tony Burke said that he thought the ‘report would have sent shockwaves through a whole lot of households’.⁷

None of this is the easiest conversation to have with your friends and neighbours, immersed in their own work and lives and who don’t focus on climate change as their day job. The Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh has described how long-form fiction is particularly unsuited to engaging with global warming. The form of the novel relies on some social predictability, but ‘in the era of global warming, nothing is far away; there is no place where the orderly expectations of life hold unchallenged sway’.⁸ Nobody likes to be reminded of this. How, with respect for social moments and generosity to relationships, do you say that, for society at large, things cannot go on as they are? That the dance is glorious only for so long as we don’t speak of the iceberg?

Part of my role, I reflected self-consciously at the time, required me to know what to answer, what to say, in any given place, at any time, to make the compelling commonsense case for the urgent transition to a flourishing Australia that no longer exported coal pollution. I was finding, though, that while engaging with journalists, politicians, academics or business executives might be one thing, talking with the good people of our street in the summer of 2012 made for the hardest interrogation of all. Although I hope it was not the case, I might have come across to my kindly new neighbours as shy, or even stand-offish. I’m sorry if that was so.

It wasn’t just that virtually everyone has an opinion on Greenpeace (in an earlier life I had been a lawyer advocating for Indigenous land rights, so I was pretty used to hearing a rich array of comments on my choice of calling) but that in private social settings, I instinctively

balked at the idea of outing myself as someone who not only accepted the reality of the repercussions of global warming, but was therefore working actively to reorient our entire society on a new foundation in order to overcome the threat. This was especially so when in the presence of those who had jobs or lifestyles that might to some extent be premised on the continuation of the status quo. This is not a plea for sympathy; my experience was hardly in the same league as the unpleasantness and outright discrimination that some people have to put up with every day because of who they are or how they look, dress or sound. There are also plenty of people who have awkward social encounters because of the insights associated with their occupation, like the emergency room medical worker who finds it somehow difficult to just laugh along at an anecdote about the drunken antics of some booze hound that could have ended badly.

On discovering what I did for a job, or after asking what I was ‘working on at the moment’, there were (and are) a range of common responses. Often, a person who has seen or read enough to know the dangers we face expresses straightforward gratitude that *someone* is doing the work of environmentalism, particularly in the face of political inaction. At other times the response is very specific, conveying with real enthusiasm, for example, a household commitment to recycling or the recent installation of rooftop solar at home. The anxiety of judgement often hovers close to the surface as, mid-mouthful, a new acquaintance worries that the fish on their fork might be unsustainable, or remembers the size of their petrol-powered car.

There is no sense of being ‘off duty’, but you want to respect relationships, hospitality and social conventions. People are busy with immediate obligations and preoccupied by the genuine tensions and anxieties of their own lives. In any event, if you go in too hard then the risk is that you’ll get blanked, confirm stereotypes or cause offence, none of which is conducive to garnering support – and one of the ultimate tests of integrity is effectiveness. Plus, I’m a member of this society, culture and economic system, too. As George Orwell’s antihero Gordon Comstock finds out the hard way in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, you cannot change the economic system that you are in simply by being angry at it and trying to opt out.⁹ So the uncertainty lingers about when and how, if at all, to go there in conversation,

and where the exchange might take you; like the confession of deep fears, guilt over a gilded life, or even the nihilist solipsism of professed hopelessness. Worse, you may end up nowhere at all, the potential end of civilisation becoming submerged into the ordinary, just another topic among anecdotes about monster spiders in the sink or marsupials shagging in the ceiling, or simply lost in the busyness of twenty-first century life. How to avoid the best of intentions rendering you solicitously complicit in the dance of everyday denial? Every new conversation becomes a journey.

When I was a kid, I loved H. G. Wells's science-fiction tale *The War of the Worlds*. I found a frayed 1930s Penguin softback edition in a rarely opened (and structurally unsound) book cabinet and lost myself in the tiny print and fragile pages. One of the first popular novels about interplanetary invasion, *The War of the Worlds* was written in the last years of the nineteenth century, structured around the first-person experience of a narrator describing a cataclysmic attack on Earth by the Martians. The action begins when, in the early pages of the book, flashes of reddish-tinged gas are spied coming from the red planet. Respectable Edwardian chaps speculate on what the strange lights in the firmament might mean, but don't get overly troubled. Some days later, the first spaceship crash-lands on Horsell Common (it is axiomatic that the Martians will land in London first) and the invaders make initial contact. Bizarre things are happening. It is the eve of the war. And yet, as the story-teller describes, the weirdest aspect to the coming of the Martians is that, at the outset, ordinary life just seems to go on as before:

The most extraordinary thing to my mind, of all the strange and wonderful things that happened upon that Friday, was the dovetailing of the commonplace habits of our social order with the first beginnings of the series of events that was to topple that social order headlong...

All over the district people were dining and supping; working men were gardening after the labours of the day, children were being put to bed, young people were wandering through the lanes love-making, students sat over their books.¹⁰

I've thought a lot about those passages from *The War of the Worlds*. The truth is, in our real world, the warnings of scientists and others have been coming for years. And yet, for the most part, unless we are directly prevented from doing so by, for instance, storms or other impacts associated with climate change, we've just gone on with our lives.

In her 2011 book, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Everyday Life*, sociologist Kari Norgaard describes life in a rural community in Norway during 'an unusual winter' in the early 2000s.¹¹ The snow is late and the weather is oddly temperate. The ice where people usually fish at that time of year is too unstable to be safe. The residents are not in denial of the scientific truth of global warming but, in Norgaard's account, they also 'don't really want to know and in some sense don't know *how* to know'.

[C]ommunity members collectively hold information about global warming at arm's length by participating in cultural norms of attention, emotion, and conversation and by using a series of cultural narratives to deflect disturbing information and normalize a particular version of reality in which 'everything is fine'. As such, public nonresponse to global warming is produced through cultural practices of everyday life.¹²

As the Australian summer began to deepen in 2012–13, it became clear that we were in for our own 'unusual' season. Unprecedented heatwaves brought infernal conditions, including the hottest day ever recorded on the continent. Affable weather presenters described the rising Celsius in cheerful tones, with each record broken treated as a novelty, or like a swimmer claiming an Olympic medal for the nation in personal best time. Temperatures around the country went above 48 degrees, with the highest recorded maximum at Moomba in South Australia falling just short of the 50 mark. The forecasts were so unprecedented that Australia's Bureau of Meteorology added a vivid purple as a new colour at the top of its scale to indicate the areas of most extreme heat.¹³ In our own newly adopted city of Sydney, a longstanding record for high temperature was broken when the mercury hit 45.8 degrees at Observatory Hill on 18 January. Aptly dubbed 'The Angry Summer', 123 Australian weather records were broken in a ninety-day period.¹⁴ The punishing maxima were the kind

of things climate scientists had been warning us about for years: the coming of global warming, the arrival of the days of consequences. The truth was there in the sweat on our bodies that the Martians had set up shop on Horsell Common.

As that uncanny season deepened, I reflected more and more on what was not being said. On our street we talked about the heat, of course, how could you not? Paddling pools were the delight of toddlers; fans or airconditioners were turned on in every house; sunscreen, icypoles and cold drinks were shared around with typical generosity. We talked as neighbours about the extremity of it all but, as with Norgaard's Norwegians, our conversation struggled with cause and effect: that it was the burning of fossil fuels like coal causing the global warming that was driving the murderous heatwave, and that our country was actively intending to dig up a lot more of the stuff. Our lives bulged with commitment and habit. Children who needed breakfast (and hats, water and lots of sunscreen); social media pulling at the brain; deliberations about what to do on the weekend; tough personal decisions to be made about life, work and love.

And behind it all, the incongruous social reality that, whatever warnings we might hear about our world on the precipice, for so many of us in Australia, *life was pretty good*. As *The Angry Summer* began, the national economy was in the midst of a third consecutive decade of expansion and on the way to becoming the longest stretch of growth of any nation in modern history. The boom that had begun in the early nineties was now so long that it had been rendered ordinary, just a background hum of assumed prosperity. The global financial crisis had simply bounced off the windscreen. Although the wealth generated had not been distributed evenly or equitably, with homelessness and inequality on the rise, there was no doubting that for many Australians these were days of material plenty.

Meanwhile, up on the hill, our politicians managed to completely mess up the prospects of any effective policy response to global warming. Although worse was to come, by late 2012 things were already in a parlous state. The Howard government had done little domestically and been obstructive in global climate change negotiations. Kevin Rudd's preferred climate policy framework had collapsed and he'd been dumped as prime minister. Malcolm Turnbull

had lost the opposition leadership in part over his stated commitment to support action on global warming. Although Julia Gillard's government had succeeded in introducing a price on carbon and other significant policy infrastructure, then opposition leader Tony Abbott made what he described as a 'pledge in blood' to repeal the legislation if he won the next federal election and this had become the leitmotif of his aggressive campaigning.¹⁵ This unedifying rolling spectacle of ineffective governance left the country frustrated and worked to reinforce the feeling that there was no choice other than to go on with the often pleasing habits of our social order.

Significantly, too, the brutal party politics of climate change that emerged in Canberra was largely confined to the question of how and at what speed to reduce our domestic carbon emissions; that is, the greenhouse gas pollution we were putting into the atmosphere because of our activities in Australia. What this left out was our far greater contribution to the problem of global warming, namely from Australian fossil fuels being burned in power stations overseas. Neither then nor now does Australia even keep an official count of the carbon pollution that we actively export through our coal and gas industries. No doubt this is in part because the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change focuses on nations reducing the emissions that occur within their own jurisdictions. The consequence is that, if interpreted with destructive literalism, the international scheme creates a perverse economic incentive for a developed country with big fossil fuel reserves to continue to dig up, sell off and ship the stuff out, as quickly as possible. Despite the savage political disagreements over reducing domestic emissions, among the major parties in 2012 there was effectively bipartisan consensus about the coal export industry: it was set to expand, big time.

In late November 2012 I spent a few days working in Melbourne and one early evening caught up with Robert Manne at a pub in Carlton to talk things over. Rob had been among the most significant public intellectual opponents of the destructive agenda of the Howard government across a range of social and economic issues. Now he found himself increasingly drawn to thinking and writing about global

warming with an attitude of deeply troubled puzzlement about the lack of a response proportionate to the scale of the threat. I'd known Rob for a while (we'd met a decade or so earlier at a conference about genocide – surely an inauspicious beginning to any friendship) and I had been influenced and inspired by the moral seriousness and forensic detail of his work. Later, Rob would write that the planet's rising temperature was 'a crisis of civilisation of equivalent depth but of an altogether different kind' to the 'general moral collapse that had taken place on European soil following the outbreak of great power conflict in August 1914 – Hitler and Stalin, the Holocaust and the Gulag, the concentration camps and genocide, the tens of millions of deaths that had occurred in two unprecedentedly barbarous wars'.¹⁶

It had been another fiendishly hot day, with the temperature reaching 39 degrees in Melbourne. The icy cold lager went down particularly well. On this afternoon Rob was in the mode of curious inquiry, wanting to know in detail what Greenpeace was working on. I told him we were campaigning for an end to the expansion of the coal industry. In characteristically precise language, Rob observed that such a position was deeply anomalous in Australian public life because, despite what we knew about the dangers of global warming, almost nobody in the mainstream public realm was openly challenging coal. Then he paused and posed the matter as a question of popular will: 'Political acceptance is so unhesitating, do you believe that it is conceivable that the future of the coal mining industry will be seriously called into question in Australia?' Change, he reflected, was unlikely to be easy. Sometime later, in the course of a longer email exchange, Rob wrote to me: 'I can't think of a social movement that advanced without truth-telling and a willingness to fight and to confront directly attitudes and vested interests.'

Both the challenge and the chance lay in the actual divide between the decency and dreams of the Australian people on the one hand and the vested interests of the fossil fuel industry on the other. In truth, the coal industry was menacing the future prospects of that welcoming little street my family and I now called home, and all the kids that lived there and, indeed, all their peers in Australia and around the world. We all want decent homes, good neighbourhoods, a fair go at a fully realised life, and a world that is in fit shape to be handed onto

the next generation. We share the cherished ambition of today's kids and tomorrow's kids having fresh air, clean beaches and green spaces in which to play and explore. Love for the street and for the ideal of the good, shared life – all this, then and now, is jeopardised by the business plans of the coal industry being fostered by our national political leadership. Paradoxically, it is the very depth of the gulf that has given rise to an upwelling of hope and popular resolve. And once we are roused, don't doubt the power and determination of the Australian people.