

Eagle Eyes (The Park)

I look out the window at the uniformly grey sky, portending to release stored moisture any moment. I'll chance it and walk out the door, fortified with raincoat and umbrella. Our local Newport Lakes Park is only five minutes away; some twenty years ago it was a rubbish-dump, following a period of quarrying for bluestone, a basalt rock, used as ballast that was in great demand during the 19th and early 20th centuries for the return journey of empty vessels. Bluestone was also a favoured material for many public buildings, such as the Old Melbourne Goal, Saint Patrick's Cathedral and the Time-ball Tower in Williamstown. Now the park is a delightfully landscaped recreation area, thanks to the skills of Maarten Hulzebosch, a Dutch garden architect. The main features are twin lakes, separated by a causeway, built of large, local bluestone boulders with their feet in water at present, but high and dry during periods of drought, that divides the waters of the lakes.

A choice of meandering pathways encourage me to stroll in different directions, stretching out the exercise to nearly one hour, and I hope the rain will hold off long enough. The air smells freshly cleansed and birds aplenty enjoy the leafy, green canopy above my head, delighting me with their song – I hear the sweet tunes of blackbirds and New Holland Honeyeaters and the raucous, bossy cry of wattlebirds. On the utterly still lake surface I spy swamp hens, Eurasian Coots, domestic and native ducks, including a family of three ducklings with their watchful mother. A single, lonely, black swan floats around aimlessly – he probably lost his mate after troubled breeding seasons. I remember five fluffy cygnets last winter and, as the days passed, there were four, then three, two and only one survived to become a teenager.

After a delightful period of solitude, interrupted only by the odd 'G'day', forgetting runners who are too puffed to answer, I decide to move to higher ground and join the dog walkers along the 'off the lead' area. If I feel lonely, I can change my mood instantly by cooing admiringly at a baby or starting a conversation with a friendly dog – the humans follow invariably with an exchange of pleasantries. I pat a six-month-old Staffordshire terrier that won't let the ball out of his mouth – he was too lazy to fetch it all the time, his proud, young owner tells me. A friendly Labrador approaches, of course I stroke her, only to hear her embarrassed owner

trying to stop me – doggy has just rolled ‘in something’. Well, I’m old enough for the consequences of making friends with every passing mutt!

I turn homewards, ambling along and retracing my steps next to the shoreline, scanning the bushes and reeds that line the water’s edge with eagle eyes to spot more feathered friends. I catch a movement in the water with the corner of my right eye and barely stop myself from crying out loud with sheer joy. The ‘lonely’ swan has joined his family, mum and five fluffy, off-white cygnets, floating around the shrubbery. I look closer at the clutch that can only be a few days old; they are hard to count as they flitter around – I finally make out six babies. As I move on, I am followed by a flotilla of two graceful black swans and six fluff-balls in a row, little legs paddling furiously to keep up. How wonderful, this has really made my day! I hardly notice the rain that is starting again as I walk home, filled with a warm glow of having witnessed new life on my lovely lake.

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