

Taking off

Steve and his children are at a spot immediately to the north of an airport. Ainsley, the older child, is puzzled to know why they are in what appears to him to be the wrong place.

Ainsley Why're we here? The airport's back there.
Steve If we wait here, we'll see Mum's plane coming in to land, then we'll go back to meet her.
Zanny Has mummy got our presents on the plane?
Steve I guess so. Look!
Ainsley Is this Mum's plane?
Steve No. It's too high and too fast. We'll know Mum's plane when it comes.
Zanny How'll we know?
Steve International flights come in low, and heavy. They just about deafen you. (A plane comes in. The children are amazed, a little frightened, and fascinated. Steve is enjoying himself.) It's great, isn't it?
Zanny I want to be at the airport, dad, in case we miss Mum.
Steve (pointing) I think this is her plane!
Zanny Mum's plane?
Steve What's the time? Yes! Spot on!
Zanny Mum!
Ainsley Eeeeeeeehhh ...

A huge plane comes in, low and heavy, with majesty and a mighty roar. As it passes them, Steve calls.

Steve Off to the airport now!

They rush off. No sooner do they disappear than another car pulls in and two people get out.

Larissa Down by the creek?

John In among the trees.

Larissa I've got the air mattress, you bring the pump.

John I thought we'd blow it up ourselves.

Larissa I'm saving my breath for other things.

John Good thinking! (He starts to pump an air mattress, while she looks into the bushes.) Found something?

Larissa I think it's a nest.

John Could be. (He keeps pumping.) There! That'll keep us off the rocks!

Larissa Right beside the airport.

John What?

Larissa It's only a little bird. Might be a jenny wren.

John The blue ones, they're the male, aren't they?

Larissa (scoffing) The male birds are big bright and colourful, and the females are grey, small, wretched looking things ...

John Not like humans! Where do you want to be?

Larissa Under this bush. I want to see the birds if I look up.

John We shouldn't scare them away, darling. Let's go over here.

He puts the air mattress down under some cover, and they lie on it.

Larissa I never thought we'd get to this.

John I told myself I had to be patient.

Larissa I've been wanting you so much.

John It's not you and I that's been the problem, it's been time. Finding a bit of privacy.

Larissa Come on top of me love.

John Do you want to come on top of me?

Larissa I want this to go on for years.

John We've got a couple of hours. Let's sink inside each other ...

Larissa My love ...

We hear the sound of an aeroplane coming in to land. The sound gets louder and louder, then the plane itself appears, bringing the sky pressing down on the lovers.

Larissa Do you think they can see us?

John They'll be looking out sideways.

Larissa It's like making love in the middle of the main street. Or someone else's lounge.

John They sound good places to me.

Larissa Take me on a bit further, John. I feel we're being watched, lying here.

She points at the sky. They get up, putting the air mattress back in the car, and drive off. A moment later, the car we saw first, that of

Steve and his family, reappears. Steve gets out, followed by his wife Nita, and the two children we saw earlier, Ainsley and Zanny.

Ainsley This is where we saw your plane, Mum. You flew straight over us.

Zanny And you didn't even know!

Nita No darlings, if I'd known, I'd have been looking.

Steve And you wouldn't have seen us because we'd have been directly under you.

Nita What's that noise?

She looks around, and we begin to hear the sounds of thousands of birds gathering in the trees along the road (sugar gums). The four of them move this way and that, calling to each other at times, as they come to terms with the fact that they are beneath the preparations for an enormous migration of birds.

Ainsley Why're they here? Why aren't they all making nests somewhere?

Steve That's exactly what they're getting ready to do, but they'll do it on the other side of the world.

Zanny Where, daddy, where?

Steve Not sure. China maybe, Russia, Mongolia.

Nita Really? As far away as that?

Steve It's quite a migration ...

Ainsley This tree's the noisiest!

Steve Well, that lot will probably be first to go. Yes!

A huge mob of birds takes off, swarming around each other for a few moments, then spiralling into the sky.

Zanny They're so dense you can't see through them.
 Nita They'll stay together so they don't lose each other.
 Ainsley Will they stop and eat, somewhere?
 Steve I'm really not sure. I think they'll probably keep going till they arrive.
 Nita Except, how do they know they've arrived?
 Ainsley Have they got little signs in bird language?
 Steve Inside their brains, they have.
 Nita (scoffing) That doesn't help!
 Steve Well, what do you say?
 Nita It's a miracle, that's what I say!
 Zanny (cocking her ears to the sounds) Next tree's getting ready to go.
 Steve They are too. First mob's out of sight by now.
 Nita Do they fly by night? They must.
 Ainsley So how do they know where to go if they can't see?
 Steve I don't think we know that.
 Zanny They might follow the aeroplanes?
 Steve Except they've been doing it for long before there were any planes to follow.
 Nita I'd follow a bird before an aeroplane any day.
 Zanny Why do you say that?
 Nita I've got an idea they don't make many mistakes, and humans do.
 Ainsley Your plane got here, Mum. Spot on time, dad said.
 Steve It was, actually. Right on the minute.
 Nita We must have learned something from the birds.

Steve Home now. They'll all be the same from now on.
 Zanny One more tree, daddy. They're ready to go!

The family stays a few moments longer as the birds in the next tree take off, mill around for a few moments, rise noisily into the air, and fly away. Then, with Steve indicating the car, they get in and drive away, after which, as earlier in the opera, another car brings John and Larissa to their trysting place. Larissa looks at once for the bush containing a wren's nest which she saw on the earlier visit, while John, after surveying the scene, bursts into heroic song.

John Celeste Aida, forma divina ...
 (Heavenly Aida, form divine)

Larissa John!
 John Mistico serto di luce e fior ...
 (Mystical garland of light and flowers)

Larissa What brought this on?
 John Del mio pensiero tu sei regina
 Tu di mia vita sei lo splendor.
 (Of my thoughts you are the queen
 You are the light of my life.)

Larissa There have been birds in this nest, John. Since we were here last.

John Il tuo bel cielo vorrei ridarti
 Le dolci brezze del patrio suol
 Un regal serto sul crin posarti
 Ergerti un trono vicino al sol!
 (I would return you your lovely sky
 The gentle breezes of your native land

A royal crown on your brow I would set
Build you a throne next the sun!

She gives up trying to resist. Instead, she simply looks about as if, if she can make him do the same, he will see the foolishness, the irrelevance, of what he's offering her.

John That's how a man sings to the woman he loves!
Larissa We have to be very careful ...
John Careful? When we're in love?
Larissa That's when we have to be most careful.
John Love, my darling Larissa, sweeps everything away.
 We're locked in, we can't seem to do anything, then
 we fall in love and everything's changed. Nothing's
 the same any more. The impossible's at our feet,
 begging to be made to happen.
Larissa I wish these birds would flutter in now, chirruping.
 Then I'd feel secure.
John Mister and Mrs Jenny Wren?
Larissa Mister and Mrs Jenny Wren.
John They're known by the woman's name, I observe.
Larissa That's something in their favour.
John Larissa darling, are we quarrelling? If so, what
 about?
Larissa We're differing, and it's about ...
John It's about?
Larissa It's about ...
John Well, it's got to be about something, so what is it?
Larissa (looking up) Oh hang on a minute.

Another huge aeroplane comes in low to land, as majestic and as noisy as the plane that brought Nita to her family. It passes over, and lands.

John You were saying ...
Larissa I forget what I was saying. Let's go away.
John From one of the few places where we can actually be
 on our own?
Larissa That's why we should go away. We're not liking
 what we see.
John But Larissa, good heavens ...
Larissa (at the bush with the nest) The birds have been back.
 We can do the same, if we want to.
John If we leave now, I will never know why we left.
Larissa (getting in the car's driving seat) We left because you
 sang and I didn't want you to sing.
John (getting in) We left because you insisted and I didn't
 know why!

Their car drives away. A third car drives in, and out gets Zanny, now a woman in her twenties. She has with her a slightly older man called Lars. He looks around.

Zanny This is it.
Lars Next to the aerodrome, as you say.
Zanny The place where the birds took off. I've never
 forgotten.
Lars You'd say they have no chance of getting there, but
 they do.

Zanny And they get back again.
 Lars From somewhere in China, you think?
 Zanny Somewhere I've never been.
 Lars Each time they take off, there are birds that have done the trip before, and others that are new. They have to follow the leaders.
 Zanny All of them have to follow something. What are they following?
 Lars Something connects them. If they lose the flock they're flying with, they get lost, and die.
 Zanny It's frightening, isn't it.
 Lars The thought of getting lost?
 Zanny The thought of losing connection.
 Lars Is this where they land, when they come back?
 Zanny I don't know. I've never asked myself.
 Lars You'd think so. It'd be a routine. (He looks up, catching the sound of an approaching plane.) Something coming in.
 Zanny Mum came in all those years ago. I'm ashamed to say all I wanted was to open her case and see what she'd brought me. I hope she's forgiven me.
 Lars Have you forgiven yourself?
 Zanny (with good humour) I suppose so. Kids are greedy, after all.

Another huge plane comes in not very far above them.

Lars It's going to trim the hair off our heads!

Zanny Aaaaaaaaahhh ... I'm not afraid. But I feel it's going to frighten the birds away.
 Lars Well, if they took off from here, they're not frightened of planes.
 Zanny They don't know what planes are, so they're not frightened.
 Lars They get swallowed up by jet engines. If there's enough of them, the plane has to land, or crash.
 Zanny (ending the visit) That's it, Lars. Where would you like to go now?
 Lars China. Going to show me the way?
 Zanny I wish I could. Odd how useless we are, when you get down to it.

They drive away. John walks on. He goes to the bush where the wrens had their nest.

John She said if I couldn't learn then she wouldn't marry me. So I married someone else. What a disaster! (He reflects for a moment, then comes out with *Aida* again.) *Celeste Aida, forma divina* ... That's what got me into trouble. (He looks for the bush where the wrens had their nest.) Things are different. Jenny Wren's not there. It's not the same bush. (He listens.) Plane coming in. Low and heavy, international flight. We're good at controlling everything, but time's got us by the scruff of the neck! (Once again a huge, heavy plane, flying low and slowly, approaches landing.) Noisy lot, aren't you! (yelling at the plane)

You've come round the world and you've timed it to the second. Very clever! Well done! I'm not going to marry again. I made a mess of it last time. So why am I here? Because I wish I hadn't done things wrong. (looking around) There's a memorial up here somewhere. I wish I could write my name on that!

He wanders off. We notice yet another car moving around, stopping, then starting again, as if someone's looking for something. Finally it stops. Ainsley, now a young man in his twenties, and Nita, in her early fifties, get out.

Nita Doesn't seem right to me. We're close, but this isn't it.

Ainsley I thought I was under the flight path of the planes, but I got it wrong somewhere.

Nita That makes it easy. We watch the next plane that comes in, and we go where it goes.

Ainsley Let's have a look around. Listen to the parrots! (He and his mother attend to the sounds made by a mob of lorikeets.) Feeding over there somewhere. Galahs! They're heading in to the city!

Nita They follow the creeks to the river. They've got several paths into town.

Ainsley They meet at the golf course near my place. They chatter so much you'd think they'd just done a hole in one. I wonder why they bother to come in?

Nita They've decided they won't let us put them off.

Ainsley It must mean something to them that it doesn't mean to us.

Nita I wonder what that could be?

Ainsley I don't think we'll ever know.

Nita We'd know if we knew how to use our imaginations properly.

Ainsley That's what we can't do. Apparently. It seems.

Nita What's the answer to the problem?

Ainsley I suppose there is an answer.

Nita There's always an answer. If you can frame a question, there's an answer to it, somewhere.

Ainsley Well, mother dear, frame the question.

Nita What?

Ainsley You put it well. What's the answer to your question?

Nita What question?

Ainsley The question is, what's the question?

Nita Don't ask me, darling boy. Answer for yourself.

Ainsley Answer what for myself?

Nita We're getting tangled. Ah!

Ainsley A plane!

Nita As I thought. We must be one road too far to the east. Into the car!

Ainsley Hang on! Look!

Nita What is it?

Ainsley Jenny Wren. And her mate. What a lovely blue!

Nita Where?

Ainsley (pointing) There. See.
 Nita Ah!
 Ainsley Aaaaaaaaahhh ...
 Nita Mmmmmmmmm ...
 Ainsley This is where they belong!
 Nita Don't move. Don't frighten them.
 Ainsley We don't need to go anywhere else. This is what I came for.
 Nita Did you see them when you were waiting for me that time?
 Ainsley I didn't see them. We found a nest.
 Nita (pointing) It'll be just in there somewhere.
 Ainsley It's the centre of the world for them.
 Nita Here!
 Ainsley We shouldn't stay long. It doesn't belong to us ...
 Nita ... but it's nice to know it's there.
 Ainsley Here!
 Nita Whatever. The male's so bright, he attracts all the attention. She's too smart to draw attention to herself. That's the art of survival. Stay out of sight. Don't let the big, high-flying birds drop down and grab you.
 Ainsley As they do.
 Nita Flying high, and looking down with those wondrous eyes ...
 Ainsley There's always a food chain, isn't there.

Nita Too right there is, and we like to think we're at the top of it.
 Ainsley Falcons, hawks ...
 Nita It's the big birds that move about, and the little ones that hide.
 Ainsley It's the little ones we love.
 Nita I like the big ones too.
 Ainsley Yes, but ...
 Nita But?
 Ainsley It's the ones that are least like ourselves that we like best.
 Nita Guess what? It's the ones that are least like ourselves that are most like ourselves.
 Ainsley Paradox, mother. What do you mean?
 Nita (pointing to another aeroplane coming in, some distance beyond the two of them) What are you? An aeroplane, or a jenny wren?
 Ainsley I'm neither. I can't be either even if I wanted to.
 Nita But you don't want to be either, or you do?
 Ainsley If that was the choice, I suppose I'd be the jenny wren. And I'd spend most of my life being scared ...
 Nita ... instead of which ...
 Ainsley ... I spend most of my life being scared. Of something. Some bloody silly, improbable, man-made thing!
 Nita Welcome to the world of being a mother!