

**Praise for *Mr Wigg*, also by Inga Simpson**

‘a tender story’

*Country Style*

‘beautiful and absorbing’

*Sydney Morning Herald*

‘a contemplative story that will touch your heart’

*Marie Claire UK*

‘resonantly powerful at every bite . . . Just beautiful.’

*The Australian Women’s Weekly*

‘Beautifully crafted and brimming with warmth.’

*Who Weekly*

‘*Mr Wigg* captivates to the end.’

*Good Reading*

‘A sense of what is right and good about the world  
overwhelmed me on closing this book.’

*Books+Publishing*

‘Inga Simpson gives readers a character so realistic . . . that it’s  
hard to believe he’s a work of fiction.’

*Herald Sun*

‘captures the pleasures of a simple country life’

*Vogue Australia*

*Mr Wigg* was shortlisted for the Indie Awards 2014

INGA SIMPSON

**Nest**



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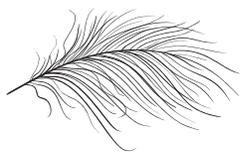
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*For Nike*

*The character study of the bird is beyond the mazes of classification, beyond the counting of bones, out of the reach of the scalpel and the literature of the microscope.*

Mabel Osgood Wright, *The Friendship of Nature*

**Wing**



# Yellow

She was trying to capture the wild. The secret to what made it unique and other. She had been trying her whole life.

Today it was the eastern yellow robins bathing. Of all the birds, they were the most ridiculous, pitching chest-first into the water and shaking themselves into fluffy rounds until their eyes and legs disappeared. Even with the softest pencil, she couldn't achieve the same effect on the page.

The more brazen yellow of Singapore daisy – on the run at the edge of the lawn – occupied her peripheral vision, reminding her of all the things she should be doing now the weather had cooled.

She had forgotten, during the years she had been away, how much work a property was in this climate. There was always something needing her attention, which was fine with her most days; it wasn't as if there was anyone else to give it to.

'We get our hundred inches a year,' the agent had said, not realising she knew the majority of it came down over one or two months in summer, which, while keeping everything green and lush outside, also turned every formerly living thing

inside – wood, leather, cane – green with mould. The sheer volume of water washed away driveways and vegetable beds, submerging roads and train lines. All the same, there was something satisfying about living in a place where you could still be cut off from the world. And autumn, winter and spring were close to perfect.

The trees gathered round, their trunks a steady grey-brown. Sometimes she suspected they shuffled closer during the night, just an inch or so, rearranging their roots around rocks and soil. In the morning sun, shafting down from the ridge, their new leaves were luminous, as if emitting a green light of their own. The robins made the most of it, their chests and rumps flashing a complementary yellow as they darted for insects.

Her tea had gone cold. Life's pace had slowed, living among trees again, and she had been happy to let it.

# Missing

She heard the spray of gravel at the top of the driveway and the car door. Three-fifteen already. She left the pile of weeds where they lay, washed her hands under the garden tap, and made it inside in time to hear the thud of Henry's bag at the front door before he removed his shoes.

'Hey.' Red-rimmed eyes suggested he hadn't had a very good day.

'Hey,' she said. 'I've set us up out the back.' She put the kettle on and sliced two pieces of banana cake, sniffed at the neck of the milk carton. She didn't drink it herself and it never seemed to last long.

The boy's visit cut a notch in the week. Without it, without Henry, time tended to stretch to the point that she was no longer part of its passing. He anchored her to the world outside.

She carried out the tea and cake in two trips. 'You right to keep going with the movement piece?'

He shrugged. Set out his sketchbook and pencils.

'How was school?'

'Haven't you heard?'

‘Heard what?’

He shook his head. ‘You don’t even listen to the radio?’

Sometime during her first year, she had stopped playing her steel-stringed rock albums and dropped back to folk and indie. By her second winter, she found that only classical music, which she had not often gone to the effort of playing before, didn’t seem out of place. The birds moved in sympathy with cello and violin, and the trees dipped their leaves in time to piano. When she tired of all her CDs, she just left the radio on Classic FM, which included news at regular intervals, and interviews with artists and musicians that were sometimes interesting. But then the voices of the announcers, and the inevitable opera sessions, began to grate – and frightened off the birds. Now, into her fourth year, she preferred silence. Or, rather, the forest orchestra of bird, frog and cicada.

It was a hazard, though; nothing attracted greater scorn from children than not being up with things. You could lose all credibility in a moment. ‘What’s happened?’

‘Caitlin Jones is missing,’ he said. ‘She walked home from school the day before yesterday but didn’t make it.’

‘Where does she live?’

‘Annie Lane.’

‘That’s a bit far to walk.’

‘She normally gets picked up. Her father had car trouble,’ he said. ‘Someone saw her near Tallowood Drive but nothing after that.’

Jen blew steam off the dark surface of her tea. ‘This was all on the news?’

‘It is now. They told us at school this morning. The police were there when Mum dropped us off, keeping the reporters away. And they got a counsellor in.’

Jen held her cup against her chest. A treecreeper's claws scritchd on a bloodwood, securing its hopping, vertical ascent.

'She's in your class?'

'Yeah.'

'That's awful,' she said. There were no longer any tallows on Tallowwood Drive; council had made sure of that. Last summer, someone had taken the corner too fast and run their car into one of those old trees. The whole lot had been removed, thirty lives in exchange for one. It wasn't far from Slaughter Yard Road, which she had thought appropriate at the time. Now it didn't give her a good feeling. If the counsellor had been brought in, the police probably didn't have a good feeling about it either. 'Any other brothers or sisters?'

'A sister,' he said. 'In grade four. Briony.'

'I'm sorry.' What were you supposed to say? What was she supposed to say, the non-parent adult, the non-teacher? 'I hope they get to the bottom of it soon.'

The boy opened his sketchbook.

'C'mon,' she said. 'That cake's still warm from the oven. See if you can do it some justice.' She adjusted the wooden mannequin till it was sprinting, knees high, arms pumping. It was an antique she had picked up in a store down south, run by a mad Frenchman who felt obliged to comment on customers' poor taste and general ignorance if they were silly enough to ask for something he didn't have.

Henry lifted the wedge of cake to his mouth, disappearing almost half of it in one bite.

'Remember we're just going for impressions, getting that sense of movement.'

He took a gulp of his tea and selected a 2B pencil. Swallowed.

The afternoon light caught all the cobwebs she should remove from the deck railings. Snagged on leaves or floating free on the breeze, they were gossamer silver, part of the forest's magic. In the house, they were a damn pain. They appeared overnight, linking beams, rafters and lights. If you sat still long enough in autumn, you'd find yourself the corner post for a spider's lair. It drove her crazy if she looked too hard.

The boy's lines were good: no hesitation, not too much confidence. His technique was self-sown, with a few little habits that needed undoing. But he had a style of his own, and was interested. That's all that mattered at this point. He didn't look up, just drew and chewed.

He seemed all right, but you never knew what was going on beneath. She had been teaching him for three months and still didn't feel as if she had any sense of his hopes and dreams.

'That's good,' she said. 'Get some life in those legs.'

Henry wasn't quite nailing it. Her first teacher had always claimed he could judge her mood from her work. Perhaps there was something in that – and who could blame the boy today? 'What's the biggest muscle in the human body?'

His pencil paused. 'Thighs?'

'Well, there are two muscles there, the quadriceps and hamstrings. And together they are very powerful, and essential for running. But it's our buttocks, gluteus maximus, that are the biggest. That's where your runner's power is coming from – you need to think about the force of the movement, as well as the direction, to get your line of action.'

He didn't laugh, as grade seven boys mostly did at the mention of backsides, but looked again at the figure. She rifled through her folder, extracted a coloured sheet. 'Here, this shows every muscle in the human body – you can have that.' It had

always unnerved her to see the human form represented by the red meat under the skin, but it was necessary to understand the biology of the body in order to draw it.

Henry leaned over, running his finger down the names. 'This is cool.' He clenched his fist and watched the flex of his forearm. 'Huh.' He returned to his running man with a little more enthusiasm.

'Maybe a softer pencil now, too. Strengthen some of those lines.'

'Why don't you draw people?'

'What do you mean?'

'All those drawings in there. There aren't any people. Just trees and birds.'

She smiled. 'Well, that says a lot about me, doesn't it? But I had to learn to draw people first. Spent years on the human figure,' she said. It had allowed her to see differently, develop an eye for shape and movement. Detail. 'Wait until you do life drawing.'

He pulled a face, probably aware that the classes featured naked adults and sitting for long periods of time.

She counted eight chirruping white-eyes on the branch shading the birdbaths, each smaller than a baby's fist, before they were sent packing by a family of Lewin's honeyeaters with their rattling machine-gun notes. The pecking order – or drinking order – played out right in front of her every day. From now until sunset it would be nonstop action. It just went to show, all you had to do was put out water and the birds would come. Sometimes, it reminded her of the classroom.

Maybe she should have kept Henry talking about the girl, but he would dwell on it enough in coming weeks. The whole town would be talking about nothing but poor Caitlin Jones.

‘That’s good,’ she said. ‘I can feel his athleticism.’

Henry leaned back to get a better look at his drawing.

‘Is he you when you’re grown-up?’

‘I’m not much good at running,’ he said.

‘Who then?’

‘An Olympian. Australian.’

‘Short distance? Long?’

‘Middle. Four hundred metres.’

‘He has the right build,’ she said. ‘I can see him running the last leg of the relay.’

Henry looked up. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘He needs to be holding that thing.’

‘The baton?’

‘Yeah.’ He worked on the hands now, choosing to put the baton in the Olympian’s rear hand rather than out in front.

Jen closed her eyes to listen to the birds’ chatter. The splashing of water behind her. The afternoon breeze lifting. Things you just couldn’t draw.

She tilted her head. A car had pulled up in the drive.

Henry packed his pencils back in their case, shut his sketchbook. ‘Mum’s going to pick me up from now on,’ he said. ‘Everyone’s going ape.’

Henry lived less than a kilometre away and, until today, had walked home unless it was raining, and sometimes even if it was.

‘I’m not surprised.’

‘It’s stupid.’

‘Things will calm down.’

‘You think?’

‘I’m sure they’ll find her.’ The empty platitudes of adults. She followed him inside, sat the cups in the sink, picked up the

envelope on the bench. ‘This month’s bill for your mum. And some homework for you.’

‘Thanks.’ He slouched his way to the door. Knelt to put on his shoes.

‘Take it easy, Henry.’

She watched him walk up the steps to the driveway and waved at his mother, Kay, whose face she could not see for the late afternoon sun glinting on the windscreen. She should go up and say hello, have the expected discussion about what had happened. Kay would be worried, not so much about Henry as his little sister, Montana. The communal hysteria would have begun, all the parents working themselves up, not knowing what had happened to the girl or who was behind it, a nameless, faceless threat hanging over the town.

With it would come a renewed suspicion of outsiders or newcomers, although it was far more likely someone living among them the whole time would turn out to be the stranger.

She bent to pick up a narrow leaf on the path, from a spotted gum, still tree frog green. It had curled back on itself, forming a circle. There was some sort of reaching back happening out there, too. To a time she thought she had long left behind. She knew what else they would be saying – that it was happening all over again.

There was more than one hazard in returning to the town where you grew up.