

The Midnight Chooks.

Don't ask me why it happened. All I can tell you is that they didn't seem to bother him at first. He came from Sydney, where he reckoned the nearest thing to peace and quiet was when the traffic noise died down a bit outside his window in the early hours of the morning, so a few chooks going off at night weren't about to worry him.

It was the only conversation we had for a while - a quick word over the fence while the removalists were bringing in his furniture. He started work next day and got home late, and that was pretty much the pattern after that. We thought at first he was just trying to get a handle on the job – the first student counselor the high school had ever had – but it turned out to be more of a habit with him. We'd hear the latch click on his gate when he came and went, but we hardly saw him. So we didn't get to talk much.

He'd told us his name when we met, but it was one of those foreign-sounding names, and neither Betty nor I could remember afterwards what it was. We were too embarrassed to ask again, so it made it hard to get to know him on a personal basis. Betty did manage to catch him at the gate once, before the trouble started, and asked him about his wife. He said she'd be coming out later, which Betty reckoned wasn't a good sign.

Not only did he get home late; he stayed up late, too. I can vouch for that because he didn't have any blinds on his windows when he first moved in and the light from his bedroom shone straight into ours. He had a lot of late nights,

rummaging through boxes, moving furniture around and so on. From what we could gather, he was trying to get the place into some kind of order. It annoyed us a bit, but we put up with it - out of neighborliness, you know. I guess with all the bumping around he didn't really *hear* the chooks, not then.

Things settled down after a week or two; he started turning in at a more reasonable hour and we started getting a bit more sleep. Then, a couple of weeks after that, we noticed his light come on when the chooks started up. On the first occasion it only stayed for a minute or so, but each night after that it stayed on a little longer, until within the fortnight it was still burning an hour after the chorus. Betty reckoned this was a sign of trouble too. "They've started to get to him," she said. "He'll crack for sure."

We tried drawing the bedroom curtains to get some sleep, but it made the room too stuffy, so I went over to see him about it. I must admit I got a bit of a shock when he opened the door: he had a kind of haunted look, big rings under his eyes and so on, and he didn't seem to be really hearing what I was saying, as if his mind was somewhere else.

I guessed it was the chooks, so I asked him whether they were bothering him. He said no, but he was a bit cagey, couldn't quite meet my eye.

When I told Betty, she wasn't surprised. "He's on his way out," she said, "just like the others." I knew what she meant: the other teachers we'd had in the house next door. They hadn't managed to adapt once the chooks arrived, and they'd all resigned, one after the other, after a couple of terms.

The blinds went up a couple of days later. They were the cheap kind of roller-type that shuts out everything visual. Betty finally got his name from someone on the P & C – Marik; but she'd wasn't sure whether it was his first or last name, so we still didn't know what to call him face-to-face. Like I say, he'd been an elusive sort of bloke from day one, but after the blinds went up we saw even less of him.

Anyway, the blinds didn't help much when his alarm clock started going off at five to twelve every night. Betty and I had put up with the light going on, but we weren't going to put up with that bloody clock! We let it go on for a few nights, but then it really started getting on our nerves. Betty said I'd better go and see him again.

It was the same story as before, only much worse. When Marik opened the door, I was so taken aback by the way he looked that I couldn't say anything for a minute or so; I just stood there staring at him. He looked like a full-on crazy - hair all over the place, unshaven, weird eyes, that sort of thing.

He wouldn't let me into the house – tried to block me from even looking inside, in fact - but from what I could see it was a mess: a lot of funny-looking equipment, papers and books and stuff spread all over the place.

When I got around to complaining about the alarm he apologized. He reckoned he was doing some 'experiments'. When I asked him what kind of experiments, he asked me straight off if I knew what set the chooks off.

I knew, alright, but I wasn't going to talk to just anyone about it, especially someone who seemed to be as off their head as Marik. Fred Dawson, a few doors

down, had got the chooks as a special deal for fellow members of the Lions Club, and he didn't want anybody outside the club to get wind of it, so I kept my mouth shut.

Marik took my silence as an invitation to give me an earful about what he'd been doing. He told me what I already knew: that the chooks always started up exactly at midnight, that the time never varied. He said something about 'conditioning' - something he'd learned at university, apparently. He reckoned chooks wouldn't crow unless something set them off – a 'stimulus', I think he called it. His 'experiments' were designed to find out what it was.

He rattled off a list of things he'd already ruled out, like a passing train or the phase of the moon or a light coming on somewhere. None of them had checked out, he said. He got pretty excited when he told me about his current idea, something to do with astral alignments of some kind. That's why he needed the alarm clock, he said, so he could set up his 'instruments' to make his nightly calculations. I was pretty adamant about the clock, but he begged me to give him one more night. If I could give him that, reckoned he'd have enough information to confirm his theory.

I realize now I should have disillusioned him on the spot, told him the truth, and maybe I could have stopped the whole thing right there; but at the time it seemed like a bit of a lark, something to tell people down at the club, so I didn't see any harm in letting it go on for another day. When I told Betty I'd given Marik the extra night she wasn't impressed. "He's right on the edge," she said. "Hope you know what you're doing."

Don't ask me why, but that night I actually stayed awake waiting for the chorus to start. I mean, I knew what to expect; I'd heard it a thousand times – one coop'd start up, then another then another, until every coop in town'd be going full tilt. It'd go on for five minutes or so then just peter out. The din was pretty incredible, but once you got used to it – which admittedly might take a while – you didn't even hear it. But this night, for some reason, I really *listened*.

And that's the funny thing: the alarm went off next door as usual at about five to twelve, but when the clock clicked over to midnight nothing happened. I waited for ten minutes or so, until I was sure the time had passed, but there wasn't a peep out of the chooks. I lay there for a while trying to figure it out, but I couldn't come up with anything and in the end I dozed off.

When I woke up it was a bit after one- thirty by the bedside clock, and all hell was breaking loose. The phone was ringing, and Freddy Dawson was on the line. He seemed pretty agitated, almost hysterical. "Have you checked your chooks?" was all he wanted to know. When I asked him why, he just said: "Check 'em!" and hung up.

Like I say, I don't know exactly what happened that night, or why. I don't know if anybody does, although Betty reckons she saw it coming from the start. The carnage seemed to have started in our backyard, then went down the road and around the block, then over to the next block and the next, until just about every coop in town had been chopped to pieces, along with most of the chooks inside them.

The police finally tracked Marik down about two-thirty, standing in the wreckage of one of the coops downtown with a bloodstained hatchet in his hand, babbling some kind of gibberish about astral conspiracy. He couldn't explain what he was doing there, and after a while the cops gave up trying to get any sense out of him.

It was the most sensational thing to have happened in town for years, and long after they took Marik away, people were still talking about it down at the Club. It was a pretty sensitive subject for a while, although nowadays it usually only comes up in discussion once a year. I guess that's because of its anniversary: these days, the 'Daylight Saving Massacre' is part of the town's folklore.

Once Betty and I got over the shock, we built a new coop - cement floor, galvanized steel frame and heavy-duty mesh, like most of the others around town these days. And we bought more chooks to fill it - but not from the local battery-farm operation this time, just in case.

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