



# Night of the Emu

JENNIFER VIVEKANAND'S neighbor gives her the bird

*Frozen in fear, my breath came in short gasps as an apparition slowly rose over the fence line.*

The moon shone full overhead. It was very late one crisp, fall night — that deadly, quiet time when even the crickets are still. I had come home for the weekend from college, and as I walked up the driveway to the side door of my parents' house, the sound of leaves and gravel crunching under my feet seemed very loud.

As I placed my hand on the railing of the porch, I heard a noise. I paused at the mat by the steps. Looking around, I saw nothing.

"Must have been a raccoon," I thought, and quietly walked up the steps to the door.

Shuffle. I definitely heard that. My eyes strained in the darkness, but saw nothing.

Fumbling now at the lock, my heart started pounding and I dropped my keys. Scrambling to pick them up, I suddenly had an intense feeling of being watched.

Scraaaatch. Shuffle. Uh-oh. Something was out there.

Slowly, like a predictable scene from a slasher flick, I turned my head. Behind me loomed the five-foot, wooden privacy fence that separated my parents' yard from that of the renters next door. Frozen in fear, my breath came in short gasps as an apparition slowly rose over the fence line. Staring directly at me was a fuzzy head with enormous brown eyes on a long skinny neck. Before my mind could register what I was looking at, it opened its beak and emitted a throaty squawk. I screamed, and fell back, tearing a hole through the screen door. Instantly, the apparition's unseen companions joined in, and in the ensuing ruckus of squawks and frenzied barking from neighborhood dogs, I stared in sick fascination as what seemed like hundreds of alien heads began bobbing up and down over the fence.

The porch light flew on, and my father jerked open the door to the kitchen. I turned to face him questioningly, opened-

mouthed. My parents' German Shepherd, Deanna, named after a character from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, was barking madly. Sticking her head through the hole in the screen door, she struggled madly to get out. "Great!" hissed my dad. "Did you have to wake up the whole damn neighborhood?"

"Sorry!" I said, as we walked into the kitchen. "But I wasn't expecting a bunch of ostriches to pop out at me!"

"Emus," said Dad. "Those are emus."

"Emus?" I asked in disbelief. "But isn't this a residential neighborhood?"

"Go talk to City Council," my father replied grimly. "According to those sons of bitches, this area is zoned for farmland. That asswipe next door could breed zebras and I can't do anything about it!"

I became unpleasantly aware of a pungent odor as it wafted through the kitchen window.

"What is that smell?" I asked, grimacing.

"Nice, hmmm?" said my father. "Come August, this place is going to reek. What the hell is wrong with people?" He slammed his fist on the table.

I tried to suppress a smile. The hilarity of the situation was starting to hit me. My parents had four feet of yard and a fence separating them from the Discovery Channel. I have nothing against emus, mind you. They are kind of cute. I just didn't expect to have a close encounter at 2:00 a.m.

Awakened by all the noise, my younger brother, Jeff, came into the room. "Hey," he said, "I see you discovered Swiss Family Robinson next door." I laughed out loud, and got a stony glare from Dad. I tried to suppress further urges to laugh, but when Jeff made a crack from recent TV commercials promoting pork, I lost it.

"Emu," he said. "The *Other Other White Meat*."

The neighborhood had been



ELIZABETH GALECKE photography

(919) 785-0620 · raleigh

[www.elizabethgalecke.com](http://www.elizabethgalecke.com)

Modern and Timeless Fine Art Photography

db sutton & co  
hair salon

406 west franklin street  
chapel hill, north carolina 27516

919 968-HAIR

complaining about the guy next door long before the emus arrived. His front porch was bursting at the seams with green plastic tarps duct-taped over mysterious bulges and broken chairs. If it was rusty and lying by the side of the road, he brought it home and proudly displayed it. My brother swears that, late one night, he saw the guy rifling through our garbage. He had decided to beautify his front yard with an old toilet by making it into a planter for flowers. Discarded parts of past entrepreneurial failures littered the back yard. He was a proud, independent man, and nobody was going to tell him to conform.

Things came to a head a few days later. The phone rang, and a neighbor informed us that we might like to take a look out of our front window. Like a scene from *Jurassic Park*, we watched a six-foot, 140-pound emu lope down the road past our house — with a local patrol car (one of only

two in our town) in hot pursuit. It looked like an angry veloceraptor, as it squawked at the young deputy gingerly trying to lasso it from the car window. Our neighbor was chasing behind shouting, “Watch his feet! That’s a valuable animal!” It oddly resembled the cartoon Road Runner; I half expected a “Beep! Beep!” to come out, followed by the inevitable dust storm as it sped off down the street.

This emu was not going down without a fight. It streaked through yards and terrified the unsuspecting elderly weeding their gardens. Since it can’t fly,

an emu has a built-in way of escape. It will point one of its short wings to the sky, the other to the ground. This enables it to swivel almost 180 degrees and keep running, top speed, in another direction. Patrol cars, like natural predators, cannot corner so quickly.

Animal Control in that area did not know how much tranquilizer to use on an exotic bird of this size. “Where in the hell do you aim when trying to capture an emu?” a bewildered officer shouted into his radio. Volunteers showed up who had been listening to the debacle on their scanners, and soon the local police force had an unwanted, makeshift posse of emu hunters on its hands, ready to take down Big Bird.

Within half an hour the local news crews were out, and my dad had the honor of being interviewed for the nightly broadcast. He thumbed in the direction of the neighbor’s house. “Sanford and Son over there is bringing the whole neighborhood down!” he complained. “It’s Night of the Emu around here!”

Later, watching the news, the rest of the city saw the full extent of the landfill that our neighbor’s back yard had become. He was eager to defend his “farm-to-fork” emu scheme, and complained bitterly to the cameraman about being oppressed by the city and hostile neighbors. The cameraman had taken panoramic views of the whole backyard. There seemed to be about a hundred emus, all crowded into shelter sheds. The lawn was strewn with piles of collected junk, old signs, mattresses, and wooden crates. Leaning against the fence (“That’s my fence!” my father loudly proclaimed) were an electric-blue toilet seat, various hubcaps, and some wicked-sharp metal scraps. It looked like a place to get a raging case of tetanus.

“Oh ... my ... God,” my mother had remarked, eyes wide with horror, “We will never sell this house!”

---

*“Where in the hell do you aim when trying to capture an emu?” a bewildered officer shouted into his radio.*

---

[www.urbanhiker.net](http://www.urbanhiker.net)

We are now posting the complete contents of each issue of the **Urban Hiker** on our website. Check it all out at:

[www.urbanhiker.net](http://www.urbanhiker.net)

After the segment aired, the city finally took action. Our neighbor was cited for having too many animals on his property, for using the property illegally as a scrapyard, and for possessing large barrels of something that was leaking into the ground.

“Oh, for cripes sake!” my father exploded. “We’ll probably be glowing next month from all that contaminated crap.” My brothers and I made endless jokes comparing the “barrel situation,” as the neighbors called it, to an old movie named *C.H.U.D.* — Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dwellers — in which, due to toxic leaks, ordinary people turned into sci-fi monsters. We kept asking each other if we felt ourselves “changing” after a glass of water. My father was not amused.

There were several more escapes that year before my parents sold their house. Each time was an event not to be missed by the neighborhood. It became commonplace to see giant birds

streaking by the living room window. A large neighborhood cat, normally a fearsome hunter who would periodically leave headless offerings on unsuspecting porches, was oddly MIA. We liked to speculate that a “raptor” got her. This theory was disproved some months later when she reappeared, minus the lower portion of her tail. Clearly, the raptor had only gotten part of her. That, or the folks had turned C.H.U.D. in the area.

Even now, years later, when I am out late and hear a noise, the image that comes to my mind is that from the *Night of the Emu* — a head with big brown eyes slowly rising above the fence to stare at me like a prehistoric beast. •

---

*“Oh, for cripes sake!” my father exploded. “We’ll probably be glowing next month from all that contaminated crap.”*

---



*Durham resident Jennifer Vivekanand is an illustrator, author, and graphic designer. Her story “Has Anyone Seen My I.D.?” was in the October 2003 Urban Hiker.*



## **Rigsbee & Cotter, Attorneys at Law**

Practicing law in Durham for over 20 years in the areas of family law, criminal and traffic representations, and personal injury.

*2003 Chapel Hill Road, Durham, North Carolina*

**(919) 489-0339 • [www.lawyers.com/rigsbee&cotter](http://www.lawyers.com/rigsbee&cotter)**