

# Southern Oscillation

by Brenda Proudfoot

The busted door was something he could do without. Gary opened the ute's passenger door and slid across the seat. He didn't give it a second thought.

His mind was drowning in figures. How many days until his dam was empty? How long 'til the overdraft ran out? It had taken him years to build up a quality herd. His milkers were still giving good yields even during the driest year in a century.

But now, the creek was parched. Troughs sucked dry. Cloven hooves had churned the pasture to dust. Even gumtrees were dying. For months, Gary had watched for a fluctuation in the southern oscillation index, a softening from **EI Niño** to **La Niña**. He'd bought hay and feed, but farming depends on economies of scale; he had hundreds of mouths to feed. He'd clung on for months but had to admit defeat. He sent his girls to slaughter. The clang of truck gates hard on the heels of his herd, rang like the final bell.

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Gary had spent the last month oscillating between rage and despair. Finally, there was a chance of some decent rain, though the weather bureau had warned there'd be heavy downpours in some areas, while others would get none. If there is a God, he has a cruel sense of humour. The number of ml caught in his rain gauge would determine whether Gary would stay or sell.

At dawn, he woke to the sound of rain drumming on the tin roof. Gary decided to head to Johnson's Ford in the hope of watching a gully raker. He'd only seen one once before when he was a kid. Gary's father had lifted him onto his shoulders as the brown surge of water snaked around the bend, driving a mass of



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tangled sticks, leaves, dirt and debris over dry stones. Faster flowing water backed up behind it then spread rapidly across the creek bed, flooding the banks within minutes.

It was hard to see through the driving rain especially with one dud headlight. As the ute headed onto the concrete causeway, Gary lost his bearings. The ute slewed sideways then toppled onto its side. As he beat his fists against the jammed window and the rising water, a rainbow beckoned in a shaft of light.



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