

# **THE PIGEON - *an Australian Tale***

A Story by David Edwards

## **Introduction:**

*As late as 1960 there were still groups of Australian Aborigines, colloquially called Myalls, living in the traditional life style of nomadic hunter-gatherers through the interior of Australia. Some of their children had never seen a European and were unaware that a different world existed beyond the confines of their own existence.*

*This is a story of one such child who, early in 1943, was traumatically introduced to this other world. He went on, despite the trauma and the prejudices, to carve out his place in that world. This is the story of Jacky Wonga.*

## **PROLOGUE**

The funeral was depressing. Most funerals are. Reverend John Miles, now a sprightly eighty-six year old, robust and healthy, was standing next to Jacky and had placed a comforting arm around him with a firm hand gripping Jacky's shoulder. The Reverend Miles was retired now, of course. He had finally left his beloved Sydney for a more relaxed life on Queensland's Gold Coast and arrived in Cairns on an early morning flight to be there for the funeral. He felt honoured to be there. Jacky, though, wanted to be somewhere else. He didn't really know where exactly, but certainly not there. He didn't want to be standing in the afternoon sun in Cairns with perspiration running down his back, soaking his shirt under the jacket of a sombre suit. He didn't want to be standing here with so many solemn people. He was surprised at the attendance for the service at the small church. He was surprised at the number of cars that lined the street outside the church. He was surprised when he looked back and saw the long procession of vehicles in his wake as they made their way for the few blocks to the cemetery. And he was surprised at the number of people standing here in the oppressive heat for this final act of ritual. He didn't want to be there, but he stayed because of them. They needed to say their goodbyes also. They needed to be seen here offering their respects. Jacky had said his goodbye several months earlier when it became clear that his wife, Mary,

wasn't going to survive the cancer overwhelming her organs. He cried when she was home and he cried when she was, finally, back in hospital for the end. He cried for her pain. He cried for the injustice that took her before him. He cried for himself. He cried for their children and he cried for Mary who loved life and that it was to be taken from her. There was nothing left to cry for now and he simply wanted to be somewhere else that day of her funeral.

A month and some weeks after the funeral, Jacky was packing camping gear into the back of the Toyota utility. The children had stayed for less than a week after their mother was buried. The daughter lived near Boulder, Colorado. She was married to an American and combined her notable career with raising a family. The son, younger than her by five and a half years, was living on the Welsh border in Shropshire, England and seemed to be perennially involved in postgraduate studies. They came home, paid their respects, grieved, made promises to their father and, after some half-hearted and futile attempts to lure him into going back with them, departed.

The early-morning soft-grey cloud to the east was turning silver in the brightening sky. White cloud that was dragged down by the cooler green hills to the west made them appear snow capped. A few noisy birds were trying out their voice. Everything was quiet other than the birds, apparently relieved to have made it through the night. Craig Anderson, from his front window across the street, wearing only shorts and a T-shirt that failed to cover his ample stomach, was watching Jacky load the utility. He wanted to go and see what his neighbour was doing so early in the morning. Jacky, to his mind, didn't seem to be coping well since the funeral and Craig was growing concerned. He had watched his own father simply wither and die soon after the death of Craig's mother, and he recognised the symptoms in Jacky. He smelled the coffee that was brewing in the kitchen and this would give him a pretext. Craig padded pensively to the kitchen to pour coffee into two large mugs. He spooned some sugar into his own, adding some milk from the fridge and stirred both cups absently, still lost in thought. The spoon clinked musically against the sides of the mugs as he stirred. His wife, Irene, who had just stepped out of the shower and heard the different tones of the two mugs being stirred, thought for a moment that Craig was preparing one for her and waited in anticipation of this rare gesture. Craig, a cup in each hand, strode barefoot across the road to Jacky's house. He proffered a mug to Jacky, by way of greeting.

"What's up, mate? Watch it, it's hot".

"Ta, mate".

Jacky took it, turned it in his hand to grasp it by the handle and leant against the tray of the ute.

“What’s up”?

Craig surveyed the gear that Jacky was throwing in the back of the utility and pointed at it with a jerk of his head.

“You goin’ somewhere”?

“Yeah, thought I might go camping. Do a little fishing before the wet starts”.

Jacky lied, trying to avoid the need for either discussion or explanation. The two friends stood there in contemplative silence sipping the coffee and making only occasional small talk. The birdcalls became persistent. The sky hosted a vee of Sacred Ibis making for the mudflats at Trinity Bay from their night roosts inland. The leaves on bushes, as still as a photograph only moments before, now began to stir in the warming air. The day had officially begun. Craig was enjoying standing here with Jacky. Many years earlier in the suburb of Whitfield, they had become neighbours and friends. It was Craig and Irene who entreated Mary and Jacky to move to this new suburb nestled in the foothills of the western range. It was once all sugar cane, but the large residential allotments now boasted mature trees and solid permanent looking homes that afforded magnificent views out over Trinity Bay and to the hills to the south of Cairns. Craig tried another tack when both the coffee and the small talk ran out.

“Want some company”?

“Yeah, mate, if Irene can spare you for a few weeks come along. I know some good fishing spots”.

Jacky lied brazenly, safe in the knowledge that Craig’s wife would never let him go for such a long time.

“What are you really up to, you old black bastard”?

Jacky handed the empty mug back. He grinned at Craig and patted him on the shoulder.

“Good coffee, mate. Irene must have made it, eh”?

“Get stuffed. Do you want to give me the keys to the house”?

“Thanks, Ando. I’ll toss them in your mailbox before I go”.

Craig “Ando” Anderson sucked his teeth for a few moments trying to think of something to say that fitted the moment. He gave up. Then, deliberately setting both cups on the bonnet of the utility, he thrust a stubby-fingered hand out to Jacky.

“Okay, mate. I guess I’ll see you when I see you”.

He pumped Jacky’s arm briefly, grabbing his bony wrist with his other hand. He scooped up both cups with one hand. They clinked together noisily and Craig raised them in a mock salute before heading back to his own house. Irene and Craig Anderson watched together from the window as Jacky deposited the house keys into their mailbox, gave a wave to no one in particular, and drove off down the street. They stood there long after the utility was out of sight. Finally they turned their heads and looked questioningly at each other for a moment.

“Well—” said Irene, her voice trailing off. Craig shook his head as if he had nothing to say either, and then went out to retrieve the keys.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### ***Walkabout***

Jacky Wonga hunkered close to the small billy-fire to suck up its warmth. His scarred and gnarled black hands wrapped around a pannikin of steaming tea. If you have ever spent some time in Australia, then you will know that there is an outback legend that tea boiled in a billy on an open fire and stirred with a eucalyptus twig is imbued with heavenly aroma and taste. It is a myth. This is especially so with the vile brew that Jacky Wonga called tea. It was hot and fortifying however, and he grew comfortably accustomed to it over the years. Others being obliged to drink it with him usually found a discreet way to water it down or added copious amounts of sugar and milk as an antidote. Some simply drank it in silence, politely refusing a second cup. It was still dark. Jacky spent the night curled up in his swag in the back of the Toyota utility. He began by laying out the swag next to a paperbark tree but stones and tree roots kept him from sleeping. Finally, muttering to himself about getting old and infirm, he climbed onto the tray of the ute where a thin foam-pad that served as a mattress cushioned his bones from the cold, unforgiving metal. Waking in the false dawn, stiff and chilled, he was eager to coax the ashes of his evening cooking-fire back into life. His leather boots were also cold and unyielding as he dragged them on to his feet, and the denim jeans he wore were still stiff and strangely heavy with newness. Although born and bred in the Australian

bush, he felt like an intruder, a stranger, clumsy and awkward and, oddly, particularly noisy. That feeling would soon pass. Jacky Wonga was going home. Yet, there was no such person as Jacky Wonga. He was an invention and a compromise. Home to him was but a few powerful memories of an untroubled nomadic life as a child that ended abruptly in the most secret of secret rituals of an Australian Aborigine. He was born with an extended family that included several mothers, fathers and uncles as was customary for his people. His was a complex society of ritual and obligation, myth and strict law. He was required and expected to learn and acknowledge all of this in less than a dozen years. Then he could complete the ceremony that would take him from an indulged child to manhood. It would see him responsible for and obligated to every other member of his extended family to some greater or lesser degree, depending on the relationship. All of this was an unhurried and natural progression through time however, and the rites of passage would not be granted until his uncles and other elders of the tribe deemed him ready. Their infallibility would be tested and proved by the gods and spirits and totems that ruled their existence. This, though, was the crux of the problem for Jacky Wonga. He never completed the ritual passage into manhood and he did not know whether it was the will of the gods or the sorcery of man.

A young boy with the tribal name of Buluhlmang drifted into a sickened sleep and woke in an alien world of trauma so frightening and confusing that the two worlds could never really become one and the granulated tissue covering the scar of the rift would be forever sore and tender. He held on to his sanity by trying never to probe this schism. He lived either in the persona of Jacky Wonga or by dredging up memories from an entirely different life to view as one views a movie. He never tried to stand with a leg in either camp and, it is to be supposed, it was this signal ability that kept him sane. Unresolved issues however, tend not to remain unresolved and herein lay the danger. But Jacky learned through time never to dwell on memory and would quickly shake himself back to the reality of his present life whenever an otherwise unoccupied mind drifted into the danger area. Having lost his beloved Mary, he now stood at a point in his life where nothing held either meaning or promise. He could not bring himself to go forward anymore so the only direction left to him was, therefore, back.

The snapping of an ember in the fire brought him out of his reverie. He emptied the cooled dregs of his tea back into the billy and poured himself a fresh mug. Dragging out the foil-wrapped remains of a damper that was baked on the coals of his evening fire, he dunked chunks of the floury cake into the pannikin of tea and transferred them to his mouth deftly, almost an art form, before they could fall apart and sink like mud to the bottom of the cup. The sudden metallic call of a friarbird

incessantly claiming his nearby territory slightly startled him and announced the dawn chorus. It would soon be the turn of the kookaburras and their raucous laughter would ring through the scrub. Jacky stood, feeling the tightness in his knees and the recurring twinge of pain in his right shoulder that of late became a foreteller of the onset of winter rains. As he moved and stretched, he made grunting and wheezing noises normally only heard in the presence of steam engines. They were largely unnecessary but became something of a habit with age. He gazed at the edge of horizon that he could now see to the east as he flexed his muscles, trying to get them comfortable. A pewter blush tinged by a rim of red and orange heralded the fast approaching dawn, even though stars were still visible in the sky. He was also able now to see shapes and colours that were previously hidden by the dark. Jacky breathed deeply, taking the essence of the morning bush deep into his lungs, and nodded his head as if agreeing with an unseen conversationalist. Animated now, he broke camp quickly, and seemingly without effort, extinguishing the fire by the simple expedient of scuffing soil over the coals. The perfumed smoke turned acrid and stung his eyes in protest before its death. He made certain the fire was out and not simply banked below the sand like an oven before turning and making his way over to the utility. His new bedroll was stretched out over the tailgate for airing. He dragged it off the back of the ute and on to the ground, preparatory to rolling it up as tightly as he could. He had also bought a new commercial swag, multi-compartmented, multi-pocketed in the form of a backpack. It was a long way from the days when his swag consisted of a rolled up blanket containing packets of greaseproof paper that held slabs of meat and a calico bag of onions and potatoes. It had all been held together by a leather belt, to which was tied a blackened billy tin, skillet and pannikin. He transferred several items from the cab of the Toyota into the pockets of the swag backpack. Then he removed everything from the tray of the ute and locked them into the cab. Everything he would be taking with him was packed, stuffed into a pocket, attached or to be carried by hand. He stood for a moment as he surveyed the scene. He had purposefully parked the utility the night before in a line of trees that would hide it from casual eyes, having seen that the rocks and stones, falsely, gave the impression that this was an unlikely campsite. Satisfied, he nodded again and moved uphill to a higher vantage.

He stumbled once on the climb, hurting his wrist, and swore softly as the toe of a boot slipped on yellow scree. The thought crossed his mind that he would be better off to rid himself of the boots. Fortunately, age gave him slightly more wisdom as he recalled the prickly bindii and sharp stones that he would encounter over the almost hundred-kilometre trek to the caves. Nonetheless, practical or not, he thought he could hear derisive laughter on the breeze that brought him the distant cackle of

kookaburras and the jeering of galahs. The smell of the Australian bush is as distinctive and heady as the smell of a northern hemisphere pine forest. It is a smell of age. A perfume rather than a fragrance, it assails the nostrils and lays down in memory, never to be forgotten. It is not pervasive. There is no aroma and then, suddenly, there is. It reaches you on a puff of breeze or in a hot waft of air from a rock face. It is seldom delicate and often overpowering as if some heavily and expensively perfumed matron has just passed you in the street. It is a combination of volatile oils from leaves and bark and perfumes from whatever tree is in flower, and there always seems to be some tree in flower, combined with the acidic and acrid smell of the rocks and clays. It is a haunting and evocative smell, welcomed and pungent and even tangible to the tongue. It always has a familiarity to it, even for first time visitors to the bush. It is a smell from the past. Jacky Wonga breathed it in and began to feel comfortable for the first time since he made camp at this spot.

He gained the top of the hill and stood amid the sweet grasses growing in the yellow soil while he caught his breath. Small and simple blue flowers hidden here and there amongst the grass lifted their face to the morning sun and fine-stemmed yellow blossoms played host to an equally yellow butterfly. Jacky focused on the horizon now, picking out landmarks to define a trail while he stood on the uppermost edge of the outcrop as he recovered from his exertions. A warm drift of air was already moving up the hillside gathering scent and wafting it across the top of the hill like a watercolour wash. It pushed small pockets of cooler air ahead of it and brushed his body with alternate caresses of cool and warm breath. He stood for a long while and allowed the scene before him to seep into memory, picturing how it would look from one of his chosen landmarks backward to this vantage and then forward to the next. Old skills were being used once again. He carefully plotted his route in a line from mark to mark assessing the time it would take from each to the other. He looked for an indication of dry-rills or grasses that might hinder his movement or obstruct a path and adjusted his timescale accordingly. A dark smudge, very low on the horizon to the right of his path, indicated a growth of trees and logically, accessible water. He was able to pick out this oasis even though the smudge could not have been better defined even with binoculars. He would have been hard pressed to explain why this particular smudge was not another outcrop of rock or a hill. He simply knew it to be trees. It may have been that the smudge was not the purple of distant hills or the crimson and pink of canyon rock but it didn't matter. He knew what it was and determined to make a day camp there in the late afternoon. A vee-shaped notch, barely noticeable behind the smudge of trees, indicated hills and he wondered if he could make it that far before nightfall. He wouldn't. The hills that were his destination were not visible, of course, as they were far below the horizon. Still, the

vee-shaped notch gave him a sense of homecoming and he stared at it far longer than needed.

Early morning is the best time to assess and plan such a route. The low, bright sun puts the landscape into relief and makes it easier to see the furthest. The high afternoon sun flattens the landscape and the heat causes shimmering of distant objects making them hard to identify. Climb a hill in the very early morning and watch the rising sun take out its box of pastels to colour the landscape if you ever want to try to understand why a bushman loves the outback and calls it God's country. You will become a believer. He memorised the path he would take, tugging his hat lower over his eyes to shut out some of the glare from the morning sky. The Akubra he wore was as new as his denim jeans and still sat heavily on his head. It was the style he liked but the marketing gurus, for reasons of their own, saw fit to change the hatband. He didn't like it and surreptitiously swapped the band from a different hat-style to replace it while the clerk wasn't watching. The clerk either had not noticed the switch or chose not to argue the point and simply completed the transaction without comment. Jacky wore an Akubra hat for almost all of his adult life and changed styles only when his preferred style was discontinued. The first hat he ever wore, a gift, was an Akubra and he just never saw a reason to change. Someone once told him that Akubra was an aboriginal word meaning head covering. It was not part of his tribe's language and he just never gave it much thought or credence. The hat still felt new, though comfortable and familiar, and he unconsciously bent the wide brim down. When he was almost satisfied with the map he was building in his head, he looked behind him at the morning sky. It was a soft powder blue with high wispy cloud indicating a possible weather change. He searched for a breeze with the side of his face. He felt nothing except the movement of air from the warming rock. Still, it was possible that some rain may appear tomorrow or the day after. He would need to keep a weather eye open.

He built himself a cigarette, sticking the leaf of paper to his lower lip as he rolled the tobacco into a thin strip in the calloused palm of his bony hand. The end product was a sorry excuse for a cigarette. Thin, loosely wrapped and the ends twisted to keep the tobacco in place, it threatened to burn its own length before finally resolving to a red ember. The first drag made Jacky break into a hacking cough as it always did but which he never noticed. He moved it to the corner of his mouth where it would stay as he smoked it down to a lip-scorching stub. The ash could grow remarkably long. Onlookers would watch spellbound waiting for it to fall into his mug of tea as he hunkered around a fire or perched on a horse-paddock fence. It never did and for those who knew Jacky Wonga, it became a sort of trademark to be trotted out after his death by old friends getting together to remember their youth. The butt would be



ritually pinched out and the remainder tucked back into the tobacco tin to be incorporated into another cigarette at another time. Jacky could probably have driven his Toyota to within a few kilometres of his final destination. But it would have negated the whole purpose of this visit. This was to be a pilgrimage. It was to be a restoration of soul. It was to be a cleansing of ghosts and an act of atonement. It was to be a healing of spirit, an act of contrition and a return to the fold. It was, of course, none of those. A grieving Jacky Wonga lost his wife of forty plus years of partnership to cancer and he just did not know how to continue living without her. It was simply a selfish act of running from the pain of his loss. Others confronted a similar fate. They continued on with their lives. They got up in the morning and made breakfast and the bed. They tidied the house and groomed the garden and then went shopping. They visited friends and entertained friends and they laughed and they endured and they persevered. They took vacations by themselves or with groups of other people. They adopted new interests or new hobbies and new friends and partners. Whether these people were of great courage or perhaps just little imagination didn't matter. Jacky admired them their endurance and their perseverance, their bravery. Jacky Wonga was, by this definition, a coward and could neither endure nor persevere in the face of this bewildering hurt. He could only try to run and leave the pain behind him. The spirit of Mary Wonga now lived out there in the sacred places, in rills and waterfalls, lagoons and billabongs, in the hills and in the canyons together with the spirits of his and her ancestors of more than forty thousand years. Jacky Wonga was hoping to find her. Jacky Wonga was going walkabout.

Another hour passed before Jacky was satisfied with his map. He was in no hurry. There was no timetable. There was no urgency to begin. He was enjoying the solitude and was content to let the fast climbing sun drive off the night's chill from his bones. He would later regret not starting off earlier. He wasn't about to admit to himself that he wasn't the man he once was. Few of us do. Finally, he clambered back down the hill, slipping and sliding on the loose gravelly surface. Reaching the utility, he retrieved swag, billy and other items from the tray before setting out on the first leg of his journey. He tightly tied a tonneau cover over the tray, placed his keys under one of the wheels, and rolled the ute on top of them. He opened the bonnet and worked a cable off one of the battery terminals, closed it again and locked the doors. He then casually disguised the vehicle without making it look as if someone tried to hide it. He walked away a short distance and examined the scene. Pleased with his efforts he picked up his swag and turned his attention to the journey. He sized up the terrain against the linear route-map in his head and navigated his way to an intermediate mark leading off in the direction of his first major landmark. He chose a group of three pandanus palms about a two-hour walk away with the sun over his left

shoulder. This would give him a reference point of time and distance that would allow him to refine and recalculate the map in his head, if necessary. It was unlikely he had miscalculated by much but he would need to climb another vantage and remap his trail and time estimates if he had erred. He could then refine both as he reached each mark. A novice to the bush would not likely consider a triad of trees to be a major landmark. Any feature in a featureless landscape however, is major, even monumental. A small group of trees can act as a pivot point for a directional change and afford a clear sight line back to an earlier mark. A prominent hill or rock outcropping can obscure the line of sight. Most people get bushed because they never turn around and see where they came from. So, the journey back is new to them and they don't know which path or turning to take. All of this was second nature to Jacky as he plotted his route and he scarcely gave it a thought. His learning was from observation and by listening to others who knew. His skills were honed by many years of tumbling through the bush on horseback and on foot. Although it is something that can be learned by practical experience, the harsh outback isn't forgiving of mistakes and one incorrect or ill-informed decision probably would have fatal consequence.

He walked many days as a young boy in the company of his mothers and aunts. He listened to their banter and remembered what they said as they pointed out the insignificant things of great significance along the way. He acquired the skills of finding yams, and trees with edible fruit or fat grubs within. He learned the harvest of the seasons. The greasy smell of spinifex smoke would always lurk in his memory from the continual firing of clumps of this tough desert-plant. The grass was fired as they moved along the trail to flush game, mark their passing and to control the growth of the spinifex along the pathways. Soft new shoots of grass appeared within days of the fire to attract small and large animals back to the area to feed. This fire regimen occurred for millennia, eventually shaping the landscape and dictating the flora and fauna of outback Australia. The practice is sometimes referred to as firestick farming to indicate that it was a deliberate ploy of cultivation. That may not be fair comment. According to some of the more thoughtful Aboriginal elders, when their views were sought, the result was a consequence of their activities, not the other way around.

Buluhlmang learned the etiquette of entering sacred places and a different tribe's territory, and of cleaning out the inevitable debris from the capped holes in the rocks where water always stayed cool. He was shown how to look for and find the signposts that told where these holes of stored water were to be found. Having been shown, it was now an easy matter to instantly spot an artificial cairn or grouping of stones that said water was here amidst the normal tumble of rocky debris. He also acquired the social skills of corroboree. As a young boy he must at times

sit with the women. At other times, he must sit with the men and he must quickly learn the difference of the ritual. As a child, he could not touch hunting weapons, but as a male child, he could watch their use and practice with sticks and stones. He learned which ochres and designs he could use to paint his body, and when and when not to. There were songs he must learn to sing and many songs he must not sing, at least until his initiation into manhood. Jacky's earliest memories were of following a male elder away from the camp and the prying eyes of the women to be shown with a group of other children how to recognise the footprints and tracks of many food-animals. The elder hunter, an uncle by role though not by descent, remarkably recreated these footprints and tracks by drawing and pressing his own fingers into the dust. Women were not supposed to be privy to these men's things but both his mother and his aunts were able to track small animals quite skilfully and also able to recreate the tracks by using their fingers, which they often showed him both to his delight and sense of the mischievous. One memory was etched deeply into his mind. His family was on the move for several days, stopping only to rest in the heat of the afternoons or to catch and prepare food. The men spotted a large goanna exploring a nesting hole for nestlings or eggs in a tree, and were able to bring it down with their throwing sticks. The goanna hit the ground running and took off through the light scrub with the men in excited pursuit. The huge monitor lizard was powerful, fast, and capable of inflicting a serious bite and ripping fragile skin with its sharp claws but its fate, in this instance, was inevitable. Young Buluhlmang joined the pursuit but was quickly left behind. He stopped and leant against a termite mound and watched the chase from a distance. He noticed a cloud of small, black, flying insects hovering around a rough barked hakea tree. His curiosity was pricked and he moved over to examine the tree more closely. He saw a damp spot surrounding a tiny hole in the trunk where the insects were coming and going in a steady stream. He was investigating the hole, completely absorbed, when one of the returning hunters noticed him and went over to see what caught his attention. A short time later, the men, using spears of grass, determined which way the entrance worked to the native-bee brood chamber. They enlarged the opening, and with stones as wedges and digging-sticks as levers, split open the hive to reveal dark, resinous, viscid globules of honey, the sugarbag of the outback. It was not an old hive and so did not contain any abundance of the treacle. What there was got portioned out and everyone given a share. Sickeningly sweet, redolent and tasting of grasstree nectar and tree sap, it was a rare and welcome treat. Even splinters of wood surrounding the brood chamber were stripped and chewed.

The day after feasting on goanna and several other animals that fell prey to the party, the women were digging for yams. Buluhlmang was helping but something was prodding his memory. Something he had seen was

out of place. He watched his aunts exchanging furtive looks and grins and decided definitely that something was amiss. He stood to look around searching for a clue as to what was in the air. He had seen the bilby tracks earlier but dismissed those. Some inner disquiet however, caused him to re-examine and look more closely at the tracks. At first, he didn't quite understand what he was looking at. He studied them intently and then realised that every third set showed a fifth leg. He stood there, puzzling out the spoor. Definitely, there was an extra paw-print on every third set. He began to trail through the sand and spinifex clumps. The footprints of his own party broke and confused the track at several points but he was still able to trace the desert animal to its hiding place under a dune protected by spinifex. Puzzled by the anomaly of the occasional extra foot, his curiosity was more than aroused. Buluhlmang got down on his belly and crawled to the dune, parting the spinifex as he did so in order to find the burrow. He located it more or less where he expected and shifted some of the sand from the entrance so that he could peer into the hole. There was something blocking the entrance a little way into the hole. He reached in to remove the obstacle, cautiously aware that other animals more dangerous than a bilby could be in the burrow. He was even more puzzled at the parcel of bark tied with stripped vine that he extracted. He sat up and turned the parcel around and over and around again. Then the realisation that he had been tricked dawned on him. He looked back at his aunts, innocently digging into the earth, fully aware now that they were rocking with mirth and that he was the butt of their merriment. He opened the bark parcel to find a leaf wrapped around a honey-soaked cube of goanna flesh. The meat, having been cooked the evening before was now dry and chewy. It made the delicious taste of honey last longer. It was a fitting reward for his tracking skills, his finding of the honey-tree and the love of his aunts.

Most of the knowledge Buluhlmang acquired was of a social nature. Theirs was an extremely complex political society with very strict rules and very stiff penalties for defaulters. This was contrary to the belief of the early European settlers of Australia, who, for the most part, believed Aborigines to have no morals or societal pattern. Ritual and protocol was an important part of life and needed to be learned at a very early age. Without the rule of ritual, anarchy would prevail and possibly lead to a territorial war. A large tribal war could weaken the clans but worse, it could cut each clan off from trade. This would be catastrophic, as trade in shell, ochre, flints, tool rocks and cultural developments such as stories and dances were vital to existence, and trade routes were significant avenues of culture through the heart of Australia. Trade and cultural exchange also occurred along the northern edges of the continent. Arab, Dutch, Indonesian, Melanesian and perhaps others occasionally made landfall. Landing parties would come ashore to process catches of shellfish and trepang, turtle, giant clam and other

delicacies while they rewatered, repaired and reprovisioned their boats. Limited trade with the native population was negotiated more to keep the peace rather than for commerce, it would seem. The Australians owned nothing of much value to interest the voyagers and fishers. It was far more practical to offer the occasional knife or tomahawk however, than to be constantly harassed by these skinny men with their excellent spear chucking skills. The folly of chasing these people into the scrub in reprisal for the occasional theft of tools was all too clear to the foreigners. Any attempt to create a more permanent settlement would not likely have been tolerated by the natives. The tribes were used to and suffered other tribes entering their territory and then moving on. They accepted the short-term nature of such encroachments and simply kept a watchful eye on the interlopers. They often joined up with them to keep a closer watch and to ensure that they really intended to depart before their welcome ran out. There is no reason to doubt that this custom would not be extended to include these other strange peoples. Furthermore, a little display of aggression now and then would likely result in some useful peace offerings being made. Aborigines were opportunists by nature and by necessity. Items of value simply sitting there were like ripened fruit on a tree and whoever picked it, owned it. It was obviously beneficial to get close to these strange, bad-smelling foreigners with so many interesting tools and devices, in order to be there when the fruit ripened. There was a down side. Men, long at sea, found their sexual appetites whetted by the proximity of naked and unashamed females. The presence of a handful of young bucks with bundles of long spears was perhaps not that much of a deterrent. Young women and girls not able to be coerced into sexual union were often taken by force. Thus trade was not limited to culture and artefact, it included genetic material as well.

The consequence was profound. The more willing of the females would often end up being banished from the clan or simply killed outright. Any fruit of these liaisons would generally be killed at birth. Tribal law worked in many strange ways however—mostly as determined on the spot by a group of elders, and if the elders determined that the woman was too highly ranked or if a man spoke up in her defence, which usually meant marrying her, then the whole issue was overlooked. The morphology of the people of the top end of Australia began to change along with hair and eye colouring. Such distinctions led to a greater dichotomy between tribes and increases in clan pride. The words meant the same, people, or our people, but tribes increasingly became Koorie, Murrie, Bama and a host of other tribal identities rather than the more limited clan totem. It was possibly this that saved the Australian aborigine from extinction. Not only did outsiders pass on genetic material, so too were many diseases not known for thousands of years, if ever. The Aboriginal population plummeted after the incursion and

settlement by Europeans. It was only distance and consequent brief encounters and very strict ritual that allowed some clans to maintain a viable breeding-base while waiting for immunity to restore, somewhat, their number and strength. Some clans, too weakened and decimated to defend the usurpation of their lands by white settlers, simply departed their traditional occupation of those areas and melded themselves with other tribes of greater strengths. The rest simply faded into the landscape as a darkening sunset. Ritual sometimes worked perversely. It was necessary for a man to gain a wife. No woman was allowed to marry a man from a different tribe except under the most complicated and almost impossible ritual. So, men stole willing women from another tribe, which usually resulted in a death penalty being placed on the man by the woman's tribe. Then, to complicate things even more, the woman was often banished from the man's tribe so that trade conditions between the two tribes could carry on amicably. The new couple would then be obliged to go off on their own, which may well be a death sentence, or attempt to join a third clan that would have sympathy for them. It was all very complicated but since everyone knew the rules of ritual and protocol, it worked very well for many millennia. Each law was told through story and song. Many were danced and sung at corroboree and when repeated later at tribal festivals, were changed to reflect local conditions. The local versions were then sung and danced at other corroboree and the story and its moral were thus passed on to a new generation.

Buluhlmang was a fast learner and well liked by his tribe. He was a peaceful and contemplative boy just as eager to listen, as he was eager to learn. Though his family produced females in disproportionate numbers, their position in the clan was highly ranked. The women were clever, intelligent and tended to display a disconcerting and, it was felt, altogether misplaced contempt for the men of the tribe. These harridans greeted many a decision, made with appropriate pomp and deliberation by the male elders, with derision and a scolding tongue. These women were, it was agreed, all too forthright and quick to point out some hapless male's shortcomings and at an inappropriate time. It was secretly hoped by most of the elders that his coming of age would end the sharp-tongued tyranny of his aunts but this was not to happen. Buluhlmang almost died as a result of his initiation to manhood. A ritual cutting of tribal marks on his body brought about sepsis. Two of his aunts went looking for him and found him close to death in a secret place they were not supposed to know about and definitely not allowed to enter. They spirited him well away from the camp. Their medications slowed down the course of the toxin slightly but could not alter the shock his body was succumbing to. They did the only thing left to them and carried him for three days to a mission station where a white doctor was

in attendance. They were fully aware of the consequences of their actions but filled with love for their sister's child.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### ***Legend***

Jacky finally arrived at the pandanus palms and turned to look back along the way he came. The hill he climbed earlier gleamed white in the distance and seemed disconcertingly closer than expected for the aching of his body but he was on track and on time. He had forgotten how annoying the unrelenting and sticky-footed bush flies could be as they sought out places of moisture in the corners of his eyes and nostrils. His breathing was slightly ragged. He was obliged to stop and drink a gulping mouthful from the now cold, bitter brew in his billy. He smiled ruefully and thought about his age. A pendulous pandanus fruit looking like a misplaced pineapple was fully ripened on one of the trees. A flying fox attacked it the night before, sending many seeds to the ground. They were fleshy and fruity-smelling. Jacky brushed off the ants that were exploring the fruit and popped the seed into his mouth. The astringent acid instantly dried his mouth like an unripened persimmon before causing a burst of saliva from his glands. The wooliness of his mouth from his laboured and open-mouthed breathing disappeared and he removed the large, woody seed and tried to rid his tongue of the rather unpleasant aftertaste of varnish. He gathered as many of the seeds as he could find. Although difficult to open, the seeds were rewarding of the effort. He would find time to do this after he reached his destination. He opened the lid of the billy and sloshed the remaining contents around in a swirling, oily-looking vortex. There wasn't much left and there was a long way to go. He decided to put off drinking until he reached what he reckoned to be the halfway point to his first camp. He clapped the lid back on the billy and secured it to his swag before changing direction and striding off to his next marker. He ignored his hunger and thirst and the pain of his feet as they began to swell from the chafing of the boots. It was many years since he last walked such a distance. The pain in his right shoulder was gratefully eased with the exercise but was replaced by a pain in his left shoulder from the weight of the swag. He began to concentrate on sign and to look for trails that would make his walking easier. He disturbed a few kangaroos that had taken to rest in the available shade and bounded off to a safer place. If they were taking their ease so early in the day, he reasoned, then food and water must be plentiful, always a good sign.

He reached the grove of trees very late in the afternoon. Too late for a day camp and his plan of camping at the foot of the hills he had seen behind the trees was abandoned as well. He would need to add at least

an extra day to his journey. He needed to arrive at the lakes before dark. The spirit guardians of the sacred places did not take too kindly to visitors arriving after nightfall and he might not be welcomed. The shadows now were already long though the air was still uncomfortably warm. He felt slightly ill at ease here as if he were being watched. Still, he had little choice and decided to ease his thirst and then move on a few more kilometres before settling for the night. A small sink was the source of water that Jacky anticipated he would find here and he filled the billy, although its extra weight was now going to be an added discomfort. He moved back from the mossy edge and into the cover of a large melaleuca where he could watch the waterhole without being seen by the animals that he knew would be living there. He removed his sunglasses and perched them on the crown of his hat. They slid off only moments later. He didn't notice it and would later convince himself that the loss was by theft by whatever unsettling presence he felt at the sink that afternoon. Billabongs and waterholes like these seem to be traditionally haunted places though no one has yet offered any satisfactory explanation as to why this is. Several minutes passed and he began to see the bubbles of turtles, the wunguru, disturbing the flat surface that was quilted with patches of blue and the green of reflected trees. Small snorkel-like noses soon began to appear here and there around the pond and something large broke the surface with a splash next to a waterlily. It was a pretty place except for the feeling of being watched. Smiling, he moved further back from the water and fished around in his swag to finally withdraw a convenience-store plastic-wrapped packet of jerked beef. He allowed himself another fifteen minutes of rest to slake his thirst and appease his hunger while he tugged and chewed on the sticks of dried meat. Then, with some reluctance for he was tired almost to the point of exhaustion, pushed on. He crossed a jibber-filled plain, which made walking difficult and slow, and then a wide sandy flood plain before he felt the uncomfortable presence of being watched fade. The hot afternoon-sun and the clouds of flies rapidly took their toll. He simply collapsed where he was, spent and wracked with pains, on reaching a small grove of melaleucas on a spit of sand that hosted an array of grasses and spindly shrubs. Jacky, when he was recovered enough to sit cross-legged to examine his surrounds was almost surprised to discover that he still recognised the small hill a relative short distance off to his right. It was bathed in the gold of the late-afternoon sun and marked the beginning of three similar but increasingly larger hills that pointed the way to the jumble of rocks leading directly to the escarpment that was his goal.

He recalled the story of Wangianna as it was told to him every time his people came to this area. The Rainbow Serpent created the lakes for the people in the Dreamtime. He invited the fish and the birds to live in the lakes if they promised to feed the people and ordered the crocodile to



remind the fish and the birds of their promise. The Rainbow Serpent told the people that the crocodile was to be their totem and they must not eat it. The Rainbow Serpent told the crocodile it could not eat the people, like its brother who lived in salt water, and that it must eat only fish and turtles and birds. The people lived contentedly in the caves and on the rock-ledges of the escarpment and ate the food provided by the Rainbow Serpent. They painted pictures of the animals on the walls and overhangs of the escarpment where they lived. The paintings showed the innards of the animals to indicate what parts could be eaten and where to make a spear thrust so as not to damage the organs thereby tainting the flesh. The crocodile was painted in outline only however, the same as people, to show that it was a totem of the people and was not to be hunted. There were other people living in the north and the Rainbow Serpent was punishing them. He caused fires to chase away all of the animals and then very strong winds that tore all the blossoms and fruits off the food trees. Then he sent the clouds away so that it did not rain and there were no seeds to eat. The people were forced to leave in search of other food so that they would not starve. They left in the night so that the Cockatoo would not see them and tell the Rainbow Serpent. One day an elder, Wangianna, and his family left the escarpment to search for red ochre. They had not gone far when they caught sight of the people from the north. Wangianna and his family hid, not having their hunting spears with them. But the other people had seen them too and they gathered around their hiding spots and called out to them. The Rainbow Serpent taught these other people to speak in a different language. This at first frightened Wangianna but he was more afraid that they would come after him if he did not show himself and so he stood so he could be seen and his family did the same. The other people were clearly pleased to see him and they indicated that they had no food and that their water was scarce. Wangianna, before setting out on his quest earlier in the day, painted himself with red ochre so that the spirits of the earth would know what he was looking for and show it to him. He told the people that he was looking for ochre in the land to the east by pointing to the colour on his body. The people talked excitedly among themselves when they finally understood what he was telling them and two of the people opened string bags to bring out several chunks of ochre clay in various colours. One large piece of clay was bright yellow, the same colour as new wattle flowers. They made it clear that they would trade for food. Wangianna spoke with his family and they agreed to lead the people back to the escarpment.

Cockatoo followed the people in their trek south, taunting them and screeching at them from the branches of trees, and now flew back to tell the Rainbow Serpent. The Rainbow Serpent felt the people were punished enough and was pleased they found their way to the lakes and could find food again. He told Cockatoo to go to the lakes and tell the

people from the north that they could stay there and eat and regain their strength until he brought back the food to their own land. He told Cockatoo to tell them they must respect the totem of the people of the lakes and must not try to eat the crocodile. Cockatoo was as mean-spirited and untrustworthy then as it is today. It was annoyed with the people from the north for trying to sneak away in the night and so it did not tell them about the totem. It told them the Rainbow Serpent forgave them and they were to stay and eat anything they wished until the night when the brolgas would dance in their own land. The people of the north camped alongside the lake and slept in the shelter of the rocks that were there or made gunyahs from bark, palm fronds and waterweeds. They were grateful to the people of the lakes for letting them stay there and catch food. They did not want to intrude on the families that lived on the ledges and in the caves. They would have seen the crocodile totem painted on the walls and known it was not to be hunted had they been less polite. They did not know that Cockatoo, because it was angry with them, had deceived them.

Time passed and it was soon time for the brolgas to dance in the north. They made gifts of the coloured clays they brought with them to the people of the lakes. They stencilled the handprints of each elder of their clan onto the rocks by the lake to acknowledge the generosity of the people of the lakes. Then they painted male and female figures to represent all of the people of their tribe. Each group whose arms were touching showed a complete family and the ranking of that family by the size of the cartoon. The clan totem, a freshwater turtle, was carved in relief next to the hands stencilled with white clay. This would show that the Turtle clan were allowed to hunt and fish in the land of the people of the lakes. A traditional festival is held when two tribes part. The people of the north gathered food for the feast. They did not know about the crocodile and they hunted and killed it as well. The people of the north and the people of the lakes painted their bodies and made costumes to wear for the dances and the male elders practiced their speeches. It was a night of the big fire. Gathering wood for fires was usually the work of the children although the men who came back empty-handed from a hunting foray often carried in large pieces of wood as a face-saving gesture. Thus it was usual for family campfires to be small. But on a night of feasting, dancing and singing, at least one huge fire was built and it would light up the stage for the dancing and strutting and speech making that would follow. All of the food was to be eaten. It would have been wasteful and impolite not to do so and be seen as a rebuke. The fish and animals and reptiles were thrown on the cooking-coals early in the day or were buried in holes under the fire. Some were covered with leaves, waterweed and moss to steam for several hours. Then it was all torn into strips and skewered on green twigs for the feast. Thus, the people of the lakes unknowingly ate the crocodile.

Cockatoo hurried to tell the Rainbow Serpent who became angry. He stormed over the lakes and banished the people from the north and no member of the Turtle clan has been there since for it is now a sacred and frightening place for them. He also banished the people of the lakes, told them they no longer had a home, and must forever be on the move to hunt the animals and to find the fruits along their way. He relented at the last moment for he was aware that Cockatoo lied and the people of the lakes did not intentionally eat the crocodile. And so he turned Wangianna and his family into four hills, standing to point the way back to the lakes so the people would always find the way. The red ochre with which Wangianna painted himself is still found in the largest of the four hills. Then the Rainbow Serpent turned his anger on Cockatoo and took the bright yellow ochre that the people of the north brought with them and painted Cockatoo's head with it. This was to remind Cockatoo of its deceit and to let everyone know that Cockatoo was belligerent and angry and could not be trusted. He then painted Cockatoo with the black of the ashes and the red of the fire. He painted it again with the grey ash and the pink of the smouldering embers. All Cockatoos are now painted in one of these ways.

Jacky, weary and distressed that it would take an extra day to reach the entrance to the escarpment before it was too dark to venture in, simply lay down next to his swag and fell into a dreamless, exhausted sleep. He awoke in the morning unable to move. His body was stiff and aching and bruised. So was his spirit. Another hour passed and only the need to urinate was able to make him get up off the ground, his head aching and his legs unsteady. He moved, staggering as if drunk, several feet from his swag and fumbled with his clothing. Even that simple task seemed beyond his capability. Finally, he freed himself and urinated, the sound of the stream of water echoing dully on the parched earth. A cool breeze, unwelcome in the already chilly morning, pushed past him. He looked to the sky and realised that rain was coming. He turned to look at his swag and with a resolve he didn't feel, walked back to it, grabbed it up and looked for a place to shelter. There wasn't much, but two large rocks several-hundred metres to his left offered a small hope of crouching beneath them and avoiding the worst of the weather. He dragged himself over the distance while trying to ignore his pains. There was nothing he could do about that and pushed his swag as far as he could up under the rock and squeezed himself in alongside it. He heard the rain before he saw it and smelled it before he heard it. It rained too hard for him to fumble around in the swag for more jerky. He simply crouched there and waited as miserable as a wet cat. The rain wetted the rocks and began to drip onto him but the swag was too far in and stayed dry. He felt a breeze swirl around the rock and it sprayed him with a cold mist before the patter of the rain became a roar that lasted for perhaps five minutes.

Then it stopped. He waited for another few minutes and then crawled out and looked around. Nothing seemed to have changed other than a grey sky and a darkening of the colours of the trees. Except Jacky now felt better. He breathed deeply and the air was fresh and sweet. The raindrops released the volatile oils of the trees and shrubs and washed the dust down. His headache was gone and the rocks around him were nearly dry again by the time Jacky recovered his swag. The rain-washed air showed that he was closer to the first of the hills than he thought the night before. So, grabbing another packet of jerky from his pack he set off to reach it before the heat of the day returned. That wasn't long in coming. The grey sky turned blue and a merciless sun soaked up whatever moisture it could find, turning the air into a steamy sauna before an hour passed. Jacky simply plodded along. He was grateful the way from the first hill to the next was simply a straight line and he need not climb the vantage to map a route. He soon passed the first hill and could see the next in the distance.

The afternoon passed quickly enough but his pain and discomfort didn't. The agony of his distress was no longer physical but a mental challenge. The sun sapped his strength. The heat rising in waves from the ground tortured him as he walked, but he plodded along forcing each step he took. He played mind games. He told himself he would stop and rest at the next marker in the shimmering distant haze but would then choose a further, distant marker. He pretended he was not walking but riding a horse and that all he had to do was to sit there while the horse made its way over the stony ground. He sang songs to himself with the words of the song punctuated by another step. Another hill, finally, was passing behind him. He continued with his mind-games until a third hill loomed alongside and more and more trees, shrubs and bushes began to appear along his path and his sight line. The countryside began changing subtly. Jacky was now walking the same path, more or less, his family followed for many generations and he was almost able to recognise it. This realisation spurred him along and eased his physical punishment ever so slightly. Jacky tried to recall what the condition of the entrance site was like for camping. He seemed to remember that it was about an hour's walk from the largest hill to the entrance and gave in to his weariness and decided to make camp far short of his destination. He applauded his own decision when he noticed the clouds of flying foxes departing their camps in search of blossom and fruit. Night would quickly follow in a tide of dark. He unrolled his bedroll on the rocky ground and lit a small comfort-fire with a few sticks he hurriedly gathered before the light faded. Their perfume wafted like sandalwood incense in the light smoke, evoking memories of many such camps. It was too late to consider moulding a damper and so he would go to bed hungry. He rummaged in his swag to find a packet of tea with which to concoct his vile brew. His muscles and bones ached and the unusual

exertion left him feeling queasy. The salt from his perspiration felt coarse and gritty and he was moved to bathe his face with a dampened navy blue and red handkerchief. The large piece of cloth was freshly laundered and he held it to his face to smell the perfume of the detergent. It was a smell that always reminded him of his Mary and he never let her swap brands because of it. He breathed in deeply and thought about his wife, knowing that it would only cause him greater grief throughout the night. The handkerchief was a non-occasion gift from Mary. She took the trouble to wrap it in bright paper and dress-ribbon and put it into the plastic container along with a sandwich and a smaller container of curry leftover from the previous night's supper. His workmates watched first his surprise and consternation then his wonderment as he slowly and deliberately unwrapped the present. He turned it over and over in his hands looking for a note or a card or a clue as to the why of it without success. He stared at the knot in the ribbon as if it might contain an answer before carefully untying it. The rest of the table, caught up in the tableau, was mesmerised and the tension of anticipation and suspense was almost audible. No one spoke and even chewing was reduced to a rhythmic bovine-like activity throughout the entire performance. He removed the ribbon, folding it carefully. Then ceremoniously he removed the paper, folded and ironed it with his fist against the table and then held up the handkerchief for inspection.

"It's a handkerchief".

"What, is it your birthday, Jacky"?

"Nah. It's not my birthday".

"Didja forget your anniversary or sumthin, Jacky"?

"Nah. It's not my anniversary".

Jacky shook his head and, quite unnecessarily, made a pronouncement.

"It's a bloody handkerchief. Bloody missus".

And with that utterance, the performance was over, the spell broken. He would have realised the purpose and practicality of the gift had he bothered to examine the tattered remnant of rag he was already using as a handkerchief. He was at a loss to explain the why of it since he had not bothered to do so but he was quick to note the love that prompted the gift and, as he loved his Mary in the same way, he easily accepted it. No mention of the gift was made except for a longer kiss on the cheek and a little longer cuddle when he returned home. This was more powerful than a stammered thankyou would have been to Mary and she

glowed with the warmth of it. Mary would remove the old handkerchief from circulation at the next opportunity and it would never be seen again. She learned early in their relationship that this proud and determined man could not be bossed about. So she simply went about outsmarting him every time she wanted her own way and thus became an integral element of his existence. Jacky, for his part, tended to use the handkerchief sparingly as one does of a great treasure.

He gratefully removed his boots as he came out of his reverie with a snort of finality. The garishly striped football-socks he wore looked oddly out of place in the context of his environment. He wondered if he would regret taking off his boots come the morning. Jacky rubbed his sore and complaining feet and watched the shadows of the fire flitting across the rock-face like small bats at dusk. He hung the wetted handkerchief on a stick next to the fire, pinning it in position with another short stick then busied himself with tending the fire and making a nest for his swag. He was concerned about his boots and finally assuaged that concern by propping them upside down on sticks also driven into the ground.

There was a morning almost a lifetime earlier on cattle muster when he crawled out of his swag for a bushman's breakfast; a pee and a look around, and reached for his boots. He knocked the heels on a rock, out of habit, turned them over and vigorously smacked the soles to dislodge unwelcome visitors. He had chosen the day before to ride the ridgeline amongst the scrub gums searching for strays. He spotted four cows and two poddies late in the afternoon, which he hazed and dusted to the lower trails. He made his way back up the ridge to scour the track in a final sweep, knowing that the animals would continue on and be sighted by the other ringers, before descending to a camp he had used before. He planned to let any spooked cattle that went into hiding on the first sweep to congregate near the watering holes overnight and to chase them out in the morning. He was saddle-weary and looking forward to cutting up some cooked beef he carried in greaseproof paper, along with some onions and carrots into a billy of water. The contents of his tucker-bag would make a quick and nourishing stew for the only meal he would eat since an early breakfast of tea and damper. The panoply of stars protected him from the spirits and ghosts of the night and he fell into a dreamless sleep of exhaustion until morning light, heralded by the infectious laughter of the kookaburras. He decided his need to relieve himself would take precedence over a desire to chase off the night chill with a morning fire and grabbed for his boots. He slipped the ankle-high boots on over his bare feet, having performed the ritual of smacking leather on rock, before realising that something was still in the toe of the second one. He hadn't time to react before the scorpion stung him. He let out a yelp of fear and dismay as he yanked off the boot and flung it some distance from him and proceeded to dance about on one foot. That

too was a mistake. The high heel of his one riding boot put him off balance and he crashed heavily to the ground, twisting his ankle and smashing his elbow then his head against a rock with a sickening and brutally painful force. It also winded him and he lay there, face pushed against the harsh gravel of the grey dirt, and tried to regain some composure and relief from the assault of so many pains. It took several minutes to recover from the blinding agony of his head wound. He was unable to rub it because of the pain it caused to his elbow when he hunched his shoulders and the fire from the scorpion's tail was snaking up his foot all the while. He tried to picture his situation as viewed by someone watching him and as he did, he began to laugh at the exhibition but even that small exertion hurt too much. Besides, he was alone. He often camped alone on muster. He owned a healthy fear of the spirits and the ghosts of the night. He also enjoyed the banter and camaraderie of the other stockmen and station hands. Yet, sometimes he just simply felt the need to wrap himself in the blanket of the earth-spirit and dream that he was still with his mother and his aunts, to drive away the loneliness and the ache in his heart. He was finally obliged to sit up and take stock of the situation despite the pain and an uncharacteristic fear of his predicament. He hobbled his horse the night before but it was still probably some distance from the camp and was presently out of sight. The blood from the gash on his head was beginning to trickle and ooze again with the effort of sitting up. His twisted ankle sent waves of pain with every movement and his elbow felt like a thousand bull-ants had attacked it. Worse, his bladder reminded him that he hadn't accomplished his original mission.

He was afraid to look at his toe, the site of the scorpion sting. He carefully and painfully worked the other boot off his foot. He tried to stand with his weight on the heel of his left foot to hold his toes in the air and on the ball of his right foot to ease the pain of his ankle. But this was awkward and threatened to send him off balance again with dire results. He did manage a rather theatrical hobble to a tree to which he was able to cling for balance. His head erupted into a pounding ache in time with his heartbeat and he suddenly believed he was about to become violently ill. He would become so, but not until later when the scorpion venom began its work. Some minutes passed before his head cleared enough to assure him that he could not actually see the world spinning. He rubbed his elbow and the pain of it resolved to a low, bearable ache. He was finally able to open his pants and thereby gain some additional relief. He could already feel flies exploring the wound on his head and he was concerned that it would attract blowflies that would leave their quickly born maggots to infest his flesh. Images of flyblown sores on animals came readily enough to mind sufficient to cause him to shudder involuntarily. The gash on his scalp was very superficial however, though it did tend to bleed a lot before drying over to form a

protective scab. He carried the boot he just removed and went in a tentative limp to find the other. The stockmen amused themselves the year before with a boot-throwing contest wagering tobacco, beer and money on their ability to throw a boot the farthest distance. "Crikey!" exclaimed Jacky to no one in particular, "I would have won the lot with this toss". This time the laughter did not hurt quite so much. His irrational but understandable fear of pulling on his boots again, not knowing the fate of the scorpion, didn't matter. His left foot was now so swollen from the poison and his right ankle from the twisting injury that wearing his boots was an academic exercise only. He hobbled back to his swag and rolled the boots up in it. When he tried to lift his saddle and blanket however, he realised he would not be able to saddle his horse even if he could walk it down burdened with the tack. He was not thinking too clearly anymore as he entered the first stages of shock and the venom began to exact its toll. Everybody loves a hero and wants to be able to say they once knew one. This is how many a legend told and retold has made some people bigger than life despite their protestations and assertions that the event didn't happen quite like that. Fate and a good bit of yarn spinning were about to make a legend out of Jacky Wonga.

Jacky's head began to throb again and his breathing was shallower than before. His vision was becoming blurry and his worry over these symptoms added to his sense of distress. He knew he needed to get some help. The fastest way would be to find his horse and ride him bareback to the mustering point. He set out with determination to do just that. His blurred vision and unsteady, painful gait allowed him to walk into a tree, opening the wound on his head to start the bleeding again. It also caused him to lose his balance, trip over a woody shrub that tore his shirt, roll down a small embankment and smear much of the skin of his shoulder and upper arm along the gravel on his way to the bottom. But there was some good news. He found his horse. The commotion caused the stockhorse to become skittish but the hobble restricted its movements. Jacky simply lay there, fearing to move should some other disaster befall him. His mount, over its initial fright, became curious about the man lying there unmoving. It slowly walked towards Jacky and stopped several feet short of Jacky's legs. Nothing seemed to pose a threat so it moved far enough forward to drop its nose against Jacky's legs to make a blowing, snuffling sound. Jacky heard the familiar sound at the same moment his nose registered the smell of horse. He opened his eyes and tried desperately to focus them and tried also to make some soothing sounds to the uncertain animal. He failed at both. The stockhorse, no longer concerned that it might be in danger from this predator, resumed grazing. Jacky gradually sat up, uttering several loud and satisfying groans, despite the pain that seemed to come from every part of his body. He made some tongue-clicking noises that



ultimately persuaded the animal that he just might have some food in his hands that a horse would be silly to pass up. The stallion approached cautiously for it had been fooled before. Jacky was able to place his hands on the horse and the horse reconciled itself to just stand there. Jacky felt he was going to be all right for almost the first time since the scorpion sting. He reached down and removed the hobbles from the horse and tried to make his mushy brain devise a plan to get him over the horse's back. Whatever plan he hoped for was not the one he eventually put into action. He attempted to stand but then stumbled into the horse, which took fright and decided, that since it was no longer fettered, it might as well go and find the rest of the plant. It took off at a gallop. Jacky succumbed to the frustration, the exertion, the dizziness, the toll on his body and the venom of the scorpion and was violently ill. He retched until nothing but bile came up. And he retched after that. He lay totally sapped of energy and even resolve for almost half an hour. During that time the blood from his head-wound covered the entire side of his face and down his neck and onto his shoulder. It dried to look like black tar, giving him a frightful appearance. His gravel rash bled at several points as well. It sent rivulets of blood down his arm and out of the cuff of his sleeve that smeared it all over his wrist and hand. His left leg was aflame from toe to pelvis and his groin was swollen and hurting. He knew though, that if he gave up now he would die out here and he believed his spirit would never rest. Jacky stood and, lurching blindly, determined to keep moving as long as he was alive.

The stallion scented the other horses of the plant and galloped on to join up with the herd. The Arab bloodline that was in the animal showed with its head held high, its neck arched and its tail a broom. Choco, riding flank on the cattle, spotted the animal and was certain that it was part of Jacky's plant. He called out to Billy, riding the other flank, who was wielding his whip in a huge cracking circle to keep the beasts on the move. Billy Thornton nodded an acknowledgement and angled over to come alongside Choco.

"Say, Billy. That horse there sure looks to me like the one Jacky was riding the other day".

Billy followed his black, pointing finger then reined in his horse and turned in the saddle to study the country behind him. He held the pose for several minutes, searching for movement in the distance, and then galloped off to a rider on a bay gelding further ahead. The other rider heard him coming and reined-up waiting for Billy to catch him.

"It looks like Jacky's horse has come in without him. Choco and I will hang back and wait for him a bit, and if he don't turn up within an hour we'll go and look for him. Can you handle it without us for a few hours"?

The other rider nodded, "She'll be sweet, Billy", and rode off. Choco and Billy stayed mounted but waited in the shade of some trees for half an hour resting their horses. Billy looked at a pocket watch he pulled from a pouch on his belt.

"What do you reckon, Choco, think we'd better go and look for him"?

They rode for twenty minutes and reached a trail leading to the top of the ridge. Their cooe calls rang through the bush without reply. Billy was about to suggest a search strategy when Choco's horse spooked. They saw him at the same moment lurching out of the scrub and into the sunlight. He appeared like a zombie from a Saturday movie matinee, hatless, bootless, one arm hanging useless by his side and dragging his foot. Choco reacted first as his horse was already moving and he leaped forward to close the gap between him and Jacky. Both riders dismounted, rushing to catch Jacky before he fell, exhausted, to the ground. They were appalled by the amount of caked blood covering him and the obviously swollen limb led them both to believe that Jacky was snake bitten and near death. Billy ordered Choco to stay with Jacky while he rode back to get one of the station vehicles to return for him. Billy was considering Jacky's condition as he rode at a gallop to the homestead for help. The only other person he had seen covered in so much blood was a ringer knocked off his mount by a tree branch while chasing steers through the scrub. The ringer lost his seat but a calf-high, tooled-leather boot hung in the stirrup and he was dragged for almost a quarter-mile by the frightened horse. The boot, mercifully, pulled free of his broken foot releasing him from the punishing ordeal. He died of his injuries several hours later without regaining consciousness. Billy was certain in his own mind that Jacky was a goner. It was going to be too late even if the Flying Doctor Service was notified by the station radio and they were able to fly a doctor in to meet up with the vehicle carrying Jacky. Snakebite was something that few men or animals were able to survive. The whole scenario became clear to him by the time Billy reached the first of the outriders. Jacky was mustering animals hiding in the scrub. A snake must have spooked the horse. Jacky wasn't expecting it and was thrown when the horse buckjumped. Then, you wouldn't read about it, he fell next to the snake, which bit him. The horse then took off through the scrub but Jacky was hung up in the stirrup and only got free when he managed to get his boot off. There he was, bravely making his way back to the homestead on foot, banged-up and snake-bit when Choco and Billy sighted him.

None of this even remotely fitted the facts, of course, but it neatly explained, in Billy's mind, what he witnessed. Jacky had no hat and no boots. He was covered in blood and his clothes were torn and his leg was

swollen. It still all made sense despite Jacky's mount arriving unsaddled and unbridled, or at least to Billy it did. And when he delivered the sketchy gist of this scenario in staccato bursts to riders galloping alongside of him, they filled in the gaps themselves with their own version of what must have happened and passed it on to everyone else. When Choco found Jacky's camp the next day and retrieved his swag with the boots inside, and the saddle, blanket and tack and even Jacky's hat, it still didn't alter the story one iota. The story became a tale, over time, fully detailed and with witnesses. The snake was a Taipan, Death Adder, or King Brown depending on who was telling the tale and what reptile they thought was the most venomous. Jacky suffered a broken leg from being caught in the stirrup or his arm was smashed from the dragging or maybe both. And they always knew someone who was there at the time and saw the whole bloody thing. Many nodded, agreeing that it was just the kind of thing that only Abos were capable of and added it to their lore along with the other superstitions and mystique about Australia's indigenous people. Jacky related the truth on more than one occasion but this was put down to the natural modesty of the Australian bushman. Everyone enjoys a good story, and everyone loves a hero; especially if you happen to know him or know someone else who does. Thus the local legend was born. Jacky recovered fully a few days later and was back at work, which only added strength to the legend. Even the most venomous snake in the world gave this hero nothing more than a bad headache. A much older Jacky Wonga, nursing an unbearable pain in his heart and bewildered by the sudden emptiness of his life, had just enough time to momentarily stare into the embers of his small fire before falling into a deep and exhausted sleep.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### ***The Door***

A pair of flying foxes squabbling over nectar-filled blossoms woke Jacky. He was deeply asleep and came awake confused and fought to locate himself. Slowly, he recalled where he was and then wondered what time it was. The time, of course, mattered little here. Time measured in hours and minutes and seconds was something from a different world. Time in the world he was now in was measured by waterholes and by seasons. Nonetheless, he struggled to see the hands of his Seiko wristwatch but it was still too dark even with the illuminator and he rolled over and closed his eyes again. He stretched inside his swag to find a more comfortable position. He didn't wake again until berated by some noisy honeyeaters alarmed to find this strange creature so close to their nest site. He was paying the price for his forced march. He ached far more than he expected and he was certain the uneven ground bruised his body as he slept. The morning air was still cool and his swag felt

damp to the touch. He crawled out and checked the remains of the fire from the night before. It had burned completely, leaving only a cold white ash to mark the sticks he had fed into the flames. Grunting with stiffness, he stood and walked away from the campsite to relieve himself before gathering some more sticks, bark, grass and dried leaves to rekindle the fire. When the fire, fanned into sustained existence by his hat, began to consume the larger pieces of wood, Jacky produced a small flitch of dry, double-smoked bacon wrapped in muslin from his tucker-bag. He sliced two thick rashers from the flitch and dropped them into an iron skillet balanced on two flat stones over the flames. The rashers immediately began to sizzle in the hot pan and released their aroma to the breeze of the morning air. He pushed the fire-blackened billy with the remainder of last night's tea into the flame's edge to boil as his mouth began to water in anticipation of the frying food. Then he turned his attention to his surroundings. He was right to worry about his feet and was tempted to go on without his boots. It was too difficult to walk on the stony ground without them however, and he grimaced with discomfort as he dragged them on over his swollen and pained feet. He was eager to get back on the trail and find the entrance to the escarpment but he had gone without food for longer than he would have liked and was prepared to lose a little time over a breakfast. He stared into the distant scenery and calculated that he would reach the entrance some time about mid-day. His eagerness though, was balanced by a similar degree of reticence. Meeting ghosts was not something any culture anticipated lightly.

The sun was high but still over his left shoulder as Jacky made his way through the rocks that hid the entrance to the gorge. He paused to survey the scene, looking for a path to follow. Slightly to the right and above his line of normal vision he spotted the five flat stones artificially stacked between two boulders. He saw, even from this distance, that they were river rock and had no business being here amid the native granite outcropping. He walked directly toward them and found the centuries-old path worn into the stones by the passage of countless bare feet. A large granite boulder, cleaved through natural forces, had slid down the basalt rock face thousands of years earlier. It split again as it tumbled and fell precisely on to two upright slabs of rock to form a doorway complete with lintel. The force of the impact shattered some of the uneven edges of the upright stones and gave them the appearance of having been worked. It was so artificial looking that it could give rise to speculation as to how a supposedly primitive people could have completed such a major construction, the significance of the portal, and its purpose. To Jacky, it was simply the point where ritual and protocol began before attempting to enter this most sacred place. Jacky had long forgotten the song and litany that was a requirement before entering the valley of the escarpment, if he ever knew it. His memories from that time

of his life were usually indistinct and blurred with the other memories of places the wanderings of his family and the clans took him to. Spirits guarded the land. The protocol was necessary to warn them of your arrival. It was also necessary to appease other spirits that protected the land so that they would accommodate your being there. It was rather like booking ahead for reservations. Land was the property of everyone but certain land and utility sites were the property and the responsibility of specific clans and tribes. It was awarded to them in the Dreamtime. They were its guardians and owned sole rights to its bounty in varying degrees. These people, though long dead, still owned the land in trusteeship because their spirits never died. When they lived they left footprints and made marks upon the earth. They urinated and defecated, which in turn was taken up by the earth and made into plants and other animals. When they died, their bodies returned to the earth-spirit to be reborn also. The spirit never died nor did their ownership of the land and they still tended it. There were, of course, other more practical reasons for loudly advertising your intention to enter a closed area. There may already be others in residence. They might not be pleased to have you drop in just because you happened to be in the neighbourhood. There were very few, if any, marauding groups in the Central Plains. Their spheres of influence overlapped too much with kinship and all of its obligations to allow it to exist in any large degree. Small family groups however, were certainly at some risk. Please knock before entering was always a good rule. Jacky, torn between his childhood spirituality and an adult atheism, solved his dilemma with a loud and extended cooe. Receiving no answering call, he went through the portal.

The path twisted and turned through the rock barrier allowing only single file access. Several more pathways of greater promise were offered along the way but they petered out after short distances and the return could become devastatingly mazelike. There was only one entry. Jacky could almost feel the passage of so many people before him. The ground, which for the most part could not be seen in the confined space, was sculpted to fit each step, worn into a groove by the traffic of feet. Some sections of the rock were polished from the rubbing of hands to maintain balance as bodies wove along the path. Entry was made only in the full light and warmth of day when the rock was warm enough to give some comfort, never at night. Superstition even forbade entry on days of rain. There was no breeze between the rocks and their sheer mass was intimidating and even threatening, almost alive. Small noises sounding like scurrying animals echoed and were magnified by the boulders and strange, unnatural clicking sounds made him wonder if someone else was approaching from the other end of the path. He was becoming spooked. Nothing grew here. There was no lichen clinging to the stone, no tufts of grass or fern that had found a niche to cling to. Even his

breathing seemed to bounce off the rock in a warm cloud about his face. The usual sounds of life, like the buzzing of insects and the call of birds, simply failed to find a way down the steep face and into this eerie and claustrophobic personal space. He was unable to carry his swag on his back except in small pockets that afforded more room and was obliged to drag it in after him. Sometimes the floor became too narrow and he would have to shove the pack back along the path to where he could lift it up to slide it along, shoulder high, across the rock. This unusual exertion was taking its toll and his muscles were cramping and complaining. Jacky recalled that the trip was always made in silence. He learned the probable reason for that when he was required to push the pack back more than twenty-metres before being able to lift it clear of the rock and dragging it back again at more than head height. Even at that height the bulky pack threatened to become wedged and he tugged at it and swore explosively. His bellow of anguish and rage slammed off the stone, front and back, like a slap in the face from the amplified echo. It was sobering. It caused an instant startle reaction that left his heart pounding far longer than one would have supposed. Finally, anticlimactically, the path through the rocks simply ended. He stepped out into forest and a wide shoulder of pathway next to a hill of grass that fell into the valley below, studded with scrubby trees here and there, almost as an afterthought. He came into sight and sound of the waterfall little more than a half-hour later, and with several stops to loudly call a cooe along the path. He stopped then and gazed out over the vista and marvelled at its sheer magnificence. The spirits of the Dreaming left the people a legacy of unparalleled beauty and bounty. He was nearly home. He squatted to sit next to a small boulder, his feet dangling over the edge of the path that led into the valley and allowed the spirits of this place to seep into his soul as he became one with the world again.

People who live off the land and make their living from its bounty usually feel as if they are woven into the fabric of the land. They know their place in the warp and woof of the natural laws. They know that their destiny is to return to the land from which their spirit has never strayed and they look forward to being at one with the earth-spirit again. Others, who have cunningly been able to make the land conform to their needs, at least in the short term, tend to feel they live on the land and that they can thwart the natural forces forever. Their fears are of death and their own mortality. Their dreams are different from those people who are of the land. Yet, throughout the world these lost spirits seek to find the union, the blending of soul with the spirit of the earth. They make pilgrimage to parks. They hold fast vast areas of wilderness from their own development and destruction. They move to the country away from urbanity not realising that they have exchanged one for the other and they must move again. They seldom realise that the psalms of their own contentment tell them the truth of their bereavement of spirit: "He

*maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul*". Unknown to the boy that was now a man and to the man who had lost his way, the healing had begun. Jacky removed his boots and socks before he stood, and allowed himself some time to savour the feeling of the cool, dry soil against his skin. He then made his way into the valley. The spirits would receive him now.

Two weeks later, Jacky had consumed his own food-supply and was making a living out of the larder of the land. He used the last of his store of flour to make a damper using some of the bacon grease he had retained. He idly wondered if he was up to the task of making flour from the various grass and waterweed seeds he identified. Not far from the edge of the largest of the billabongs, he found and recognised a large grinding-stone, used for a millennia of milling seeds and nuts. Someone, recently, had used its worn, concave surface as a fireplace, with the result that the stone cracked and split. It was a criminal act of vandalism born out of ignorance as to the intrinsic value of the stone and its heritage, and could, thus, be forgiven. There was however, little excuse for the several empty beer tins littering the site a few metres away. The pestle, shaped by some now forgotten artisan to provide finger grips for the two-handed rock, was lying well removed from the area. Jacky found and retrieved it and laid it next to the mill. He sat on the ground in front of the mill and shuffled through mental images of his family using the large stone. He could recall, or believed he could, the sound of the grinding and the making of paste. He first ran his hands and then his fingers around the rim of the stone trying to evoke some sense of human warmth from this cold tool. He obviously hoped to forge a psychic link with the past and with his family, however tenuous and fleeting, but no spiritual bond was forthcoming. The stone lay there, mute and inanimate, cold and broken. It suggested an epic story about the people but it would not give them life. It hinted of their struggle but mentioned nothing of their dreams. Like a gravestone, it chronicled life but bespoke only death. He broomed away the charred sticks and mud-like ashes of the fire that destroyed the stone, like an old man carefully pulling weeds and planting special blooms at the gravesite of someone who once loved him. It was, if one wished to be charitable, an act of remembrance but it was truly a deed of self-pity proved by the stinging of tears in his eyes.

He catalogued a likely site for yams on the first day in the valley. He decided to test his skills and early the next morning he returned to the site to look for the heart-shaped leaves and traced the twining stem of one plant to where it entered the ground. He stood back and surveyed the scene. Then, attacking the ground some distance from the stem he began digging in earnest. He dug, using a knife, a stick and his hands for more than a half-metre into the ground before deciding he had made

an error. He pushed the disturbed soil back into the hole and began digging to the other side of the vine. This time, more than a metre below the topsoil, he was rewarded with three tubers the size and shape of large carrots, which he carefully removed so as not to damage the skin. He purposefully left the top of the stems intact and covered them with the soil and replanted three peanut-sized yams connected to the stems of the others. He examined his prize. It was not a lot for so much effort and he chuckled softly. It was no wonder this was considered women's work. He decided that another damper was out of the question having thus gained some deeper insight into the amount of effort required. The gathering, threshing, winnowing, and grinding of the seeds and grains could not justify the need. He reached this conclusion just as a group of kookaburras broke into a chorus of mocking laughter from the open forest area that bordered the billabong. Fishing was much easier with greater rewards and considerably more enjoyable than the effort of digging. He inherently realised the significance of the communal effort of the women and older children in the gathering and processing of foods. Many hands made the work easier and the banter and socialising removed the drudgery for such meagre reward. The women kept the family from starving when the hunting was poor. The women retained the knowledge of season and where the fruits and nuts and corms, tubers and bulbs could be found. The women knew the complicated and involved processes needed to make the foods palatable or, oft-times, even edible. They leached the deadly poisons from the large seeds of the ancient cycads that dotted the valley and ground them into a paste, which they roasted in the fires before eating. The cake, though this was unknown to the families, still retained carcinogenic properties if consumed in quantity over a long period but the toxins that made the *Zamia* nuts so perilous were defeated and another anti-starvation food was added to their list. Only the women knew when to gather and when to harvest or when the nests would be full of eggs or the small animals fat with new food. Few men could make it by themselves, alone in the dry-country, through the difficult times.

He caught several fish over the week using different strategies. Some worked far better than others and on a day when nothing seemed to work, he resorted to jigging for yabbies with a fish head as bait. He cooked his varying catches by as many methods. He flavoured many of the fish cooked over the hot coals of a fire with leaves, cresses, worts and bark. It would be nice to believe that these were ancient rituals residing deep in his memory. The truth was that they were improvised recipes or methods others showed him over the years. His greatest success however, was to simply pan-fry the fish along with any herbs he could find to hand. His innovative cup-marri ovens and steamers, fashioned like those he saw on visits to friends in Cape York and the Top End, gave way to simplicity and conservation of energy. His own memories of



creating ovens using ant-bed material to retain heat to use as slow-cookers were scant. Jacky had, in his metamorphosis from aborigine to Aborigine mostly wiped the mental records of his past by the expediency of learning to think in a different language. It was now almost necessary for him to mentally translate images and knowledge from his early life, and so he rarely did anymore. Everyone is superstitious. It is a common trait of humans. We invoke the protection and benevolence of our individual gods and spirits with phrases, exclamations or gestures. We name our boats and other inanimate objects. We christen our ships by exploding a bottle of sparkling wine against the hull and perform other ceremonies and rituals at the outset of each new endeavour. We create verses and songs to remember important events and procedures—Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme. The skills required to create items for use in aboriginal everyday life have stories associated with them to explain how they came into existence during the Dreaming and how they are to be constructed or used. The item thus created has its own spirit-representation and song that goes with it. These were the images and the crafts that were so difficult for Jacky to recall after the passage of so many years and his adaptation to the taboos, superstitions and teachings of a new culture.

He tried to build a fish trap but his first several attempts fell apart in the water or collapsed, defeating the principle. Daunted but determined, he worked solidly for two days to gather the materials and to weave a long open-basket. He plaited reeds into a chain-loop around the large mouth of the trap. The purse was left open to allow fingerlings and leaf debris to escape but woven tightly enough to hold any pan-sized fish that entered the mouth then the neck of the trap. He inserted hoops made from greenwood sticks to act as ribs to hold the trap open for its length, binding them in place with reeds. He laid the finished trap on the ground and stood to relieve the stiffness in his shoulders, back and buttocks. He examined the three-metre trap from a distance for several minutes and realised, with some chagrin, that he spent the past two days making a windsock. He promptly named it, The Jacky Wonga Patented Fish trap and Windsock, with the motto, Guaranteed to catch fish or show you which way the water is running. All that was left was to trial it, set it, and wait. He waded out into the flowing water carrying the trap over his head to where deep water rushed between two large, basalt boulders. The heavy surge of the current threatened to take the trap downstream or tear it apart as it did with an earlier version. He hauled the trap out of the water and onto one of the rocks while he sat on the other and tried to think like a fish. He spotted an eddy behind another rock and guessed it would form a pocket of still water as two currents collided. He explored the rush of water around that rock and found a quieter place to install the trap. It was not as deep as he would have liked and if the trap worked at all, he decided, he would spend the time

deepening the course by removing more debris from the bottom of the channel. He braced two upright poles with rocks, tying the mouth of the trap to them and locking it in place with more rocks. The heavy trap stayed on the bottom but its length caused the tail to weave sinuously about in the current. Jacky could do nothing more, so shrugging his shoulders with finality he waded back to shore.

All of his fresh tealeaves were gone now. He used and reused the over-stewed leaves to where they were of no further possible use except to the soil. His billy then became a stew pot for portulaca, waterlily, and whatever protein source he was able to knock down, snare, or catch. Jacky tended to stay around one particular area that had, to his mind, become his main camp. It was here that he left most of his belongings while he wandered the area. The pack was heavy and the loose items like the billy were awkward to carry with him on his explorations. Many of his meals were cooked not far from where he trapped, snared or hunted the small animals. He became adept at chasing down meal-sized lizards and these he threw directly onto the coals of a fire or into an oven dug under the fire-bed and then covered with the coals. His ranging explorations became smaller dimensioned however, as more of the area became familiar to him and he slowly began to move in smaller circles until almost every venture resulted in a return to his main camp. This was well because the area was becoming spotted with the ashes of his many cooking-fires and began to look as if some strange animal had moved in to leave curious piles of black ash spoor. A large part of his problem was the wood supply. Australian timbers have developed strategies over eons to defend themselves against attack by insects and other grazers. They have created toxic resins and saps and girded themselves with oils and chemicals that defeat all but a few specialist predators. The Australian icon, the koala, is able to eat sparingly of certain eucalypt leaves because of a specialist bacterium living in its gut. The koala is not born with this protection; it must be passed from the parent to the offspring in regurgitated food or the faeces of the parent. Humans, unlike the koala, cannot eat these leaves or even allow the coals of the timber to cook his food. The food is tainted at best and toxic at worst. Other timbers, because of the resins and oils, burn too quickly and too hot so are of little use in the heating of ovens. Consequently, when using the coals directly for baking or roasting food, only certain types of wood can ideally be used in the fire. Fortunately, brigalow, the Australian acacia is ideal and plentiful. A local supply of dry and dead branches quickly runs out however. It simply became easier for Jacky to use whatever fuel was available, cooking his food in metal containers thus avoiding all the problems.

He camped at several sites up and down the valley as he explored the area in a search for food sources. He cut several galls from the branches

of the bloodwood gums. They yielded a grub when sliced open with his knife, and a soft, pithy interior with a taste reminiscent of coconut, all of which he scooped out and ate. He found several trees with plum-like fruits but these were not yet ripe and tasted bitter and vile. He located two very large specimens of wild fig, which, though edible, were tasteless. Both trees grew precariously from the rocks making access to the fruit ripening on the trunk and branches a little dangerous for a man of his years. Insects also attacked the ripening fruits and the ripest of these were filled with small, thin, white larvae. Several prostrate bushes clambering over the rock surfaces yielded small, red berries. These were pleasantly tart yet sweet. He declined to eat too many of them at one time as he did not recognise the plant and many berries of the forests and desert are quite toxic. The women of his tribe would have known how to make these and other fruits safe for ingestion. He wondered if all of that knowledge, wrested from the guardians of the land over an eon, would simply return to the earth like fallen leaves that vanish when the season changes. He thought back to a conversation when he and Mary visited friends at Weipa and Bamaga. They enjoyed two hectic weeks of what amounted to a family reunion though none of the people in the community was blood related to either of them. Mary spent the time visiting health clinics to gather more grist for a thesis and speaking with the Community Council. Jacky fished in the Gulf and went on wild hunting trips bouncing along in the back of a ute with several other men over the rough terrain of scrub, anthills, rocks and bauxite claypans. Ostensibly, they were after feral pigs but nothing that didn't wear a brand or ear-tag was particularly safe. It was exhilarating. It was fun. He hadn't experienced such a lust for life since his time on the cattle station decades before. It felt good to be with a bunch of men in pursuit of something, joined in a common goal replete with jibes and boasts, laughter and jeers, improbable exaggerations of one's own prowess and a feeling of immortality. It was also a sobering education. Jimmy Grogan, on one such outing, was standing next to Jacky and, like him, holding on for dear life to the headboard in the back of the ute. He pointed out features of the landscape over which he hunted for most of his life. He identified several trees from which his family gathered fruits when he was a boy.

"The kids today, they don't bother eating bush tucker".

Jimmy was yelling into Jacky's ear over the roar of the diesel engine and rattling of the vehicle.

"It's easier to buy from store and soon all these trees die from disease or fire and no one will care. No one even bloody bother notice".

He shook his head dismissively.

“These bloody ecology and conservation blokes, they think that you leave the bloody land alone it will look after itself. But it don’t. They want to lock it all up and no one bloody go there. But they don’t never have to survive out there and feed their families out there. They don’t know the land needs to be looked after and that’s why the spirits of the Dreaming gave this land to us blacks. We got to look after it”.

He then spat hazardingly but successfully over the side of the jouncing vehicle.

Jacky looked for most of his food in the forested area of the gorge well away from the water’s edge where dense clouds of mosquitos sought their own brand of bush tucker. He changed into a pair of green cotton drill shorts and a short-sleeved shirt to alleviate the heat of the day. He quickly changed back into his jeans and long-sleeved shirt as mosquitos and March flies persecuted him without mercy. He was also obliged to move his swag up into the rocks where the mosquitos seemed less voracious and certainly fewer in number. Nonetheless, several sought him out, and the taunting, threatening, high-pitched whine in his ear made for an uneasy night’s rest. The exercise and the radical change in diet caused Jacky to lose several kilos in weight before the bacteria of his digestive system began adapting to the new foods and irregular feeding. Until this occurred, he was plagued by the misery of stomach cramping and the need to quickly find a toilet at impromptu moments. He became subject to the torment of mosquito hordes in his most vulnerable moments since this was often necessary while close to the edges of the billabongs. Times such as these would have seen the mosquito gladly added to the list of extinct species were it within his power. He visited the ledges and caves where the rock paintings passed on messages like a bulletin board and recorded the history of the gorge for posterity. An intuitive sense of loss made him realise that posterity for those earlier, venerable generations was rapidly drawing to a close. A lifestyle of dignity, reverence for life, and a perceived connection to the wellspring of life was fast in ebb. He startled himself and suddenly felt light-headed as he realised that, at one point, he was standing exactly where he stood once before as a child. The recollection of the memory was so vivid as to even the same moment of day that he fully expected to see his own child’s footprints in the dust at his feet if only he were to look down. He did look down and saw nothing but his own adult feet. Still, an enormous and eerie feeling of *déjà vu* persisted long after the event, even though he was able to separate the two images clearly in his mind.

He went to the waterfall and swam in the twin rock-pools at the base of the falls. There was a story attached to the pools, and he remembered his aunts sitting here on the rocks relating the story to him.

Banahm and Nyuguhn were in love. Nyuguhn however, was promised to another man through the laws of kinship even before she was born. That man paid her price and fulfilled his obligation according to the kinship law and custom. So Banahm and Nyuguhn ran away together. Her family was now in default of the law and they complained to the Rainbow Serpent who was the maker of the laws. Then the tribe chased Banahm and Nyuguhn along the belly of the Rainbow Serpent and caught them at the edge of a cliff near the tail. Banahm and Nyuguhn joined hands and jumped off the cliff to their death when the males approached them with hunting spears. The Rainbow Serpent filled the hollow of the land where he was resting with water and it flowed down and over the cliff. He then turned the bodies of Banahm and Nyuguhn into pools of water to teach everyone the law and the custom.

Jacky stared into the pool at his feet. The water in the pool was icy-cold despite the time of year and was clear enough to see dead leaves and granules of eroded granite that had fallen to the silt at the bottom. The pools were flushed when the seasonal rains deluged the escarpment and flooded the billabongs. Life here was an endless cycle of renewal. Jacky was sitting on the rocks below the cataract, still shivering from his numbing time in the pool, and warming himself in the afternoon sun like Magil, the water monitor. He watched the enamel-red bodies of dragonflies hovering then darting about just to hover again. Clumps of bottlebrush, stunted and gnarled, clung impossibly to the otherwise barren rocks and had just begun to flower. Their red brushes of flowers were attracting small, yellow, honeyeaters to explore the possibility of nectar and pollen. As he gazed around, he was positive he could hear in the roar of the falls the excited shouts and laughter of the children who played and swum here with him two generations and one world ago. He recollected the images of glistening black bodies naked and bejewelled with drops of water as they splashed, jumped and dove in and out of the pools like ebony otters. There were shrieks of laughter as they pushed each other into the water and shouts of derisive comment by the victims. All of the boys and girls swam together, naked, unabashed and unashamed. It would be a fleeting moment of time before the rituals of separate paths would place a gender barrier between them. Children were allowed much latitude to be children and were indulged by their families but childhood was a short process and the intensive learning for survival needed to begin early.

Jacky, on one of his rounds through half-forgotten pathways, found several pieces of chert that was worked, faulted and discarded next to the rock ledges. He squatted and built a smoke while he pondered the find. The cigarette was a luxury. He bought a few extra pouches of tobacco for his sojourn but stupidly left them in the glove compartment of the ute

and he was now down to very short rations. There was no evidence to indicate that the source of the chert was local and Jacky supposed it to have been carried in to the valley to be worked at leisure and it prodded him to remember his purpose in coming here. He absently fingered the sharpened edge of one blade that was probably intended as a scraper as he mulled the obvious message in the flint tool. He needed to approach the cave. He saw the path to the cave shortly after his arrival even though he consciously avoided looking at the spot. It was somewhat overgrown with branches from trees and clumps of sedge, bearing bright-blue berries on long, stiff stipes, but it was still quite discernible to a practised eye even with a cursory glance. He was avoiding the ghosts and simply allowed himself to be distracted as long and as often as possible. He now moved up the valley and sat across from the path, gathering resolve to undertake the short climb through the rocks to the cave. The afternoon sun that would soon be disappearing over the edge of the escarpment sent shafts of greyish-blue light filtering through the trees that grew next to the path. One very distinct shaft of light fell directly on a flat stone that was the first step to begin the climb. You bin em one plurry big fool, Jacky Wonga, said a familiar voice in his head to which he nodded. Mary Wonga spoke flawless English, passable French and was immersed in learning two dialects of the Aboriginal tongue when first diagnosed with cancer. She was a natural mimic and comic and loved to tease an uneducated Jacky with her pidgin style of English. This concocted, rudimentary and contrived language of the Europeans, who were too ethnocentric to bother learning another tongue and too elitist to teach these ignorant piccaninnies their own, created another barrier to a cultural bridge. It was a social oxymoron: A group of people touting their intellect while displaying abysmal stupidity. It was not something encouraged by those whites in the desperate outback where simply staying alive was a chore. But no one had the time or the vision to change things and it simply became an accepted way of life to be learned along with all the other hurdles to surpass. And of itself, it became a handicap for those white children suddenly being faced with boarding school and who could hardly speak any other way. Mary Wonga was not a nice person. That is if by nice you mean someone who doesn't rock the boat or rail against stupidity. Mary had an axe to grind. She had a clear vision of what she believed to be social injustice of such magnitude that those who allowed for it were clearly stupid. She was well educated academically, mostly by her own effort, and determined to right the wrongs (and God knows there were many) that had humiliated, disenfranchised and destroyed the souls of a proud group of people, who had, dammit, been here first. Mary had on occasion, while being patronised by some insufferable bureaucrat, purposely lapsed into such a broadly accented pidgin as to be almost unintelligible. She made them work very hard to make sense of what she replied to their inane questions or instructions, all to the absolute delight of her workmates.

She would make them repeat the questions again and again and watch them squirm in frustration as they tried to get the gist of their query across against her blank looks. She would then mimic their exaggerated slow, staccato and loud style in reply. More than one workmate was obliged to leave the room before bursting into convulsive laughter. This backfired only once. A member of the clergy visited the office where Mary worked and seemed a little too eager to empathise with the Aboriginal condition. Mary decided he was a pompous little ass and proposed to take the mickey out of him when it came her turn to be addressed by this man with the soft Irish drawl. He put up with it and followed her lead as long as he could before breaking into laughter and responding in a chortling New Guinea pidgin himself. Mary was obliged to mentally back pedal. She immediately recognised his unpretentious ability to speak Tok Pisin but had never spent time in Papua New Guinea and could not converse in this creole. She also experienced an abrupt and urgent sense of disquiet as he then dove into a scarred and scuffed brief case to extract several lengthy and highly regarded reports Mary had submitted for publication. Waving them in front of her with a smile that seemed to light up the room, he beamed at Mary as she became flustered and mortified. She wished she could escape the room and her embarrassment as easily as a TV witch could with a twitch of her nose. The Reverend John Evelyn Miles would become a lifelong friend and frequent dinner guest when he flew north from his offices in Sydney. He also enjoyed retelling the anecdote at her expense whenever the occasion arose. He frequently related the story as well though, to illustrate how easily differing cultures could be offended by well-meaning but clumsy attempts to assist them.

Jacky stared at the dancing shaft of light before relighting the butt of his cigarette.

“Bloody Hell, missus, you just never stop nagging a bloke”.

He agreed to visit the cave in the morning but he wished that he had thought to bring Mary to this place when they were both so alive.

#### **CHAPTER 4**

##### ***Buluhlmang***

Yinang-gahl-ngukhar walked slowly across the dusty soil in search of the small, fleshy fruits of the desert solanum. She carried a shallow bark basket balanced on her hip. Feeling irritable, she quickly tired of the teasing by her sisters. Their talk was about sexual matters again and they speculated that her husband was not quite as good at some things as he was at hunting. They were married for a year and she had not yet

conceived. There was talk of sorcery and appeasement of spirits but such things quickly brought about arguments that soured their relationship for days at a time. They made love the night before he went hunting with the other men but she had, without reason, resented his departure and provoked a heated and unfair argument that resulted in her being abused by him. She was justified, in her own mind, for she was unwell and vomited frequently. An elder of the clan with whom they were travelling earlier censured her for shameless behaviour around other males. She was proud of her body and enjoyed the attention she provoked and was warmed by the furtive but lusting looks of the young bloods. Her sisters though, were not impressed by the rebuke and warned her to be a little more discreet, which caused her to lose her temper. This was so unlike her usual placid and happy outlook as to cause her to wonder what was wrong with everybody else these days. Her basket contained only a few fruits and she wandered quite some distance from her camp in her search. She stooped to gather a few more when she was suddenly assailed by a dry, musty scent. Then, abruptly, her face and eyes were peppered by sand. The willy-willy, Buluhlmang, the dust spiral of the bush, developed next to where she was standing and swirled around her body blinding her. Then it spiralled off, picking up anything loose to toss around in a circle as it wobbled and wove around the hot desert sand. It towered three and four times her height and broadened as it went. It seemed to pause, gathering strength, then toppled in her direction and raced towards her where it sandblasted her body with grit and dust and bits of vegetation. She was unable to catch her breath and began to panic. She put her arms over her face to protect her eyes from the stinging sand, which further exposed her body to the onslaught. She dropped her arms to protect her breasts and the sand and grit stung her loins and entered her nostrils. She dropped to the ground finally, to crouch in a ball and in the same instant the current of air died. The fury of the wind abated and the sand and dust and debris settled to the ground. It was in that instant, curled in the foetal position on the warm sands, that Yinang-gahl-ngukhar knew the spirit of the whirlwind had impregnated her. She was now with child. Only a child herself, almost the first trimester of her pregnancy had passed without her knowledge, or suspected by anyone else. She continued hunting for the solanum berries but her demeanour and her attitude altered with the knowledge that she was pregnant. Her world was one of open knowledge. Camp life was such that little or no privacy existed at all or for only very brief periods. Great importance was thus placed on secret activities, objects, sites and locations. Here she was however, aware of a significant event that no one else even suspected. It buoyed her spirits for the rest of the day.

She told her husband that night in an offhanded though casual way that Buluhlmang had put his seed in her. He came back from the hunt very



successfully. As was the custom, he gave the best portions of meat to the least successful hunters. Then he awarded the succulent organs to his kin as part payment of his obligations of kinship, and other portions to the older members of the clan. He kept the smallest portion for himself and his family. He stared at her for some time wondering if she was tricking him. She was irrational and even unreasonable lately and went out of her way to provoke him into fighting with her. He supposed her capable of setting him up once again for an argument. He never spoke of how much he wanted a child. He believed that if you wanted something very badly, then your enemies could use sorcery against you. The result was that he was very quiet and taciturn. He was slow to anger but then it erupted in a rage usually accompanied by violence, as is the case it seems with most such people. He allowed himself to be elated with the news when he finally decided she was telling the truth, despite his fear of sorcery. He made certain that he squatted over a pile of excrement deposited by someone else from the camp when he next went into the area used as a latrine however, so that his droppings could not be identified and used against him. He remained on his guard for the following six months until his son who would be called, of course, Buluhlmang, was born. Then, on that occasion, he gathered the umbilical cord, carefully dried it and stored it safely in a dilly bag that he always carried with him.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### ***Secret Site***

Jacky spent the rest of the day gathering palmetto, clay, vines, long grasses and reeds and finally, two, small, river stones that he discovered in his earlier travels. These stones, along with several others identical in size and shape were placed in a circle at the foot of a large tree that did not normally grow in the area. Who did so, how long ago and for what purpose, Jacky couldn't speculate. They must have been carried into the valley specifically however, and so must be regarded as having some magical quality for the effort expended. Jacky wove the palmetto into an apron, bundled and tied the grasses and reeds. He mixed the clays into pigmented paint, as the shadow from the late afternoon sun glided across the valley floor. The soft shadows of dusk made this work difficult and he added more fuel to the small fire that crackled and sent shafts of sparks high into the evening air currents. He worked on, though his fingers were sore and several sharp cuts to his hands and fingers stung from the juices of the plants that had sliced his flesh. A cool breeze rushed up the valley from the south preceding a sudden downpour that eased into a gentle rain. The fire hissed and shadowboxed as if trying to escape the water droplets but retreated and finally died. Jacky continued to work in the dark, all the while trying to recall fragments of

ceremony and ritual. His clothing was soaked and smeared with muddy clay. The drenching rain left him cold and shivering. He did not bother to cover his swag when the rain began and knew that it too would be sodden. He continued with his endeavours with some degree of fatalism. The guardians of the cave, it would seem, were unhappy with his intentions. Jacky was very fearful of the valley and its ghosts despite his age and his newly found intimacy with the site. He hated the night, which enveloped him and left him cloaked in closet darkness before the jewels of stars rose to lift the ceiling for him. He had unconsciously been stoking his fires longer and more often than necessary and avoided sleeping for as long as he could, or at least until the night gave way to morning. Each sound of the bush, though as familiar to him at night as in the day, seemed filled with menace. Several daylight hours were wasted trying to catch up on the sleep he lost through these late night vigils. His fear became palpable now that he had provoked the ghosts with his decision to go to the cave in the morning. His back felt unprotected and vulnerable. Something seemed to crawl at the nape of his neck, which he tried to rub away with a nonchalance he didn't feel. He wished he had not allowed the fire to die, as the tumult of the rain muffled and disguised the sounds of the bush, filling him with dread. Throughout the night that seemed to last longer than normal, he continually turned his head to peer into the darkness behind him as he worked. Jacky was spending the night alone in a graveyard and prayed fervently for morning.

He attempted to gather some dry kindling and sticks as the light of the false dawn relieved his anxiety. He needed to boil some water for a warming drink if he were to carry out his intention of ascending to the cave in the morning. When the true dawn broke, he built a fire somewhat removed from the earlier fireplace that was now too wet to promote good heat for a billy. He removed his wet clothing and laid them over rocks to dry in the morning sun, with the billy on to boil. He proceeded to use both the clays and the wet ashes from his earlier fire to paint his face and body, shivering with the cold and anticipatory dread. He draped the woven palmettos around himself and tied them with the vines. He tied bundles of grasses and reeds, attached to the ends of lengths of vines, to another vine tied around his waist like a belt. These bundles hung from their ropes down to his knees and swung back and forth as he moved about. Finally, he tied bracelets and anklets of grass to his wrists and legs and donned an elaborate headdress of grasses, reeds and leaves. He was torn between the desire to use a mirror to assist him in his dressing and the relief that he could not see himself. The woven palmetto was stiff and he was unable to sit. He was obliged to lean against a rock as he drank the hot brew from the billy into which he threw several berries, leaves and chunks of bark to make a spicy, warming beverage. The discomfort of the costume ensured that he would

make an early start to his endeavour. The birds of the valley, though quiet enough when the rain began, now burst into vigorous affirmation of their territorial boundaries, creating a cacophony of high-level sound. Jacky added to this with a counterpoint of beginning chant. He took the two stones from the circle and beat them together to produce a satisfying clacking noise not unlike clap-sticks as he began to dance in slow circles and chanting the words, "I am Buluhlmang; I am of his seed". Dancing in the same slow circles, chanting and clicking the stones, he made his way to the flat rock marking the path to the cave. At this point he stopped the chanting but continued to beat the rhythm with the stones, while proclaiming loudly that he certainly was Buluhlmang and he was here to visit the sacred cave of his family. Then he began to weave and spin in imitation of his namesake, the desert willy-willy. The bundles of grasses and reeds tied to his waist whirled back and forth as he spun in awkward and rather clumsy pirouettes. He waved his arms over his head in a circle and the grasses tied to his wrists shuddered in the breeze. Overall, it was a credible display of dancing. Not authentic perhaps, but quite convincing. It was a case of so far so good. He hadn't been struck down or challenged yet, so he ventured to climb the path while still doing his unrehearsed routine and loudly yelling out the reasons why he was daring to enter this sacred place, as if the spirits were in their dotage and becoming hard of hearing. The gyrations and the rhythmic clapping of the stones at least caught the attention of several birds and two grazing wallabies that ceased their own activities to watch the performance with some interest. The only fault, if it could be called that, was when he bent his knees to swoop low before rising again to tiptoes, arms in the air to show the wind rising up from the ground. The grasses of his headdress occasionally fell over his eyes and he failed to see where he was squatting and painfully received a prod in his nether regions from one of those stipes with the blue berries growing out of the sedges bordering the path. It added an impetus to the choreography that was lacking and inserted several Aussie swearwords into his calls of demand for safe passage.

Jacky, breathing hard and tiring from his exertions and the emotional drain, was relieved as he suddenly realised that he had arrived at the entrance to the cave. He needed to squeeze between two granite projections to achieve the path and he wondered as he pushed himself through how his aunts with their abundant bodies managed it. He stood looking at the gap just above the floor of highly polished basalt trying to remember the feel and the look of it from before. Rock wallabies were now in possession of the cave. Their bodies buffed the floor of the ledge outside the cave. Their scat was evident everywhere. It was difficult to believe that he and his aunts were able to slide under that rock and into the cave. He was certain the opening was much larger or at least it was larger in his memory. He really doubted if he could squeeze into the

crevice now. Nonetheless, he gave one small encore of his dance of the willy-willy and accompanied it with boastings and affirmations of his right to be here. Removing his headdress, anklets and bracelets he squirmed under the lip of the rock and into the cave where he was able to stand upright. The cave was not much larger than a broom closet, but it was a perfect place to store family artefacts and heirlooms, with many convenient ledges upon which to place them. It occurred to Jacky that he might be in danger of sacrilege. His few memories of visiting this sacred cave were always with his mothers. No recollection of any male member of his family being here came to mind. He did remember being left behind with the men on one occasion though, as the women began their songs and ascended the path. He resorted in that instance to an out-of-character tantrum, which resulted in some abuse from the uncle responsible for guiding him along the road to manhood. This cave was quite probably a women's secret site, a place of women's business, and therefore he had no business being here. He equivocated shamelessly. He decided that since, technically, he never completed his initiation to manhood the rule didn't really apply, no more than it applied to all of the others that pillaged and vandalised these sacred sites over the years. He still hadn't been challenged or punished so he pushed the thoughts away. He wished he had brought some method of providing light, as he was only able to dimly perceive items on the ledges by the reflected light of the polished anteroom floor. Furthermore, the cave was fetid with the stink of wallaby and of bat dung. As the minutes passed however, he was able to see sufficiently to grope along one ledge and retrieve several items, some very light, some heavy, that had been sitting there in the gloom and sanctity of the cave for many decades, at least.

He placed each item he found by the opening and grimaced when the stronger light bathed them and he realised that some were human skulls and bones. He pushed all of the items out of the cave when he was content that every ledge was searched and then he slithered out. The sudden bright daylight hurt his eyes and his immediate thought was that the guardians of the cave sought retribution but the sweet fresh air was a welcome relief from the foulness of the cave and his fear evaporated. He examined each of the skulls. Two were complete with lower jaws, one was missing the lower jaw and two more had the lower jaw tied to the skull with a twine made of dry plant material. They all were yellowed, like ivory on a seldom-used piano, taking on a warm patina. The other commonality was that each was missing the same front tooth, a tribal mark of initiation. Jacky inspected the skull that was missing the lower jaw and discovered a hole in the left temple that smashed through part of the cheekbone before penetrating the skull. He had little knowledge of such things but his impression was that it was a bullet hole and he wondered what his ancestor did to warrant such a death, for surely it would have killed him outright. Jacky remembered the bullock from a

muster. They smelled it long before locating it in a dry, sandy creek bed. The other ringers immediately pronounced it as having been killed by dingoes. The carcass certainly looked like a legitimate dingo kill but Jacky didn't see any supporting tracks in the sand. Riding off by himself slightly downwind of the kill, he found a partial print of a man's bare foot. The tracks were swept, missing only this one print. He rode further until he picked up a definite trail. It convinced him that three Aborigines killed the bullock, took some choice cuts of meat, hacked the carcass to make it look like the work of dingoes and wandered off to camp some distance from the crime. He rode in silence alongside Billy Thornton until he found it difficult to keep his peace. Then he queried Billy.

"Were you thinking of going after those dingoes, Billy"?

Billy glanced in surprise at Jacky then shook his head.

"Nah, mate. If we went after those dingoes then we would have to shoot one of them if we caught up with them, wouldn't we? Besides, that kill is a couple of days old now and none of us is doggers".

The last comment, referring to professional hunters of dingos to collect the bounty, was made with a bit of a grin. They rode in silence again for a while. Jacky couldn't leave it alone.

"There's a bounty on dingo scalps, isn't there, Billy"?

Billy again glanced at Jacky with some surprise.

"Too right, mate, but only on dingo scalps".

Jacky pondered this for some time and it wasn't making a great deal of sense. He wanted to blurt out that dingoes hadn't killed the bullock, but loyalty to his own people, though tenuous, caused the dilemma in which he was now placed. Billy rode on, biding his tongue while watching Jacky struggle with himself for another few minutes before turning in the saddle to face him.

"Struth, Jacky! You can be as thick as two planks at times. For a blacktracker you don't read sign all that bloody well. Some of your mob killed that bullock and made it look like dingoes done it. The poor bastards are probably near to starving. Our animals have trampled and eaten bloody near everything they have to live on and there probably isn't enough tucker to last them another day out there anymore. There weren't any lubras with that party so they can't find much bush tucker".

“Now, if we go back and tell the boss that some Abos killed one of our animals then he has to tell the wallopers, and the next damn thing you know, is a couple of hungry blackfellas are dying from bullets or rotting in a bloody gaol somewhere. If, on the other hand, we tell the boss a dingo got the bullock, and if it doesn’t happen too often, then he won’t have to do anything about it. Everything is sweet”.

Jacky was more surprised that everyone else had read the signs so quickly and accurately than he was this revelation of ethic from Billy. He knew that the masking of killing a bullock or sheep was not rare and many times had resulted in those responsible being tracked down, often by using their own people, and killed. An Aborigine stealing a beast for food, it seems, was viewed as far more serious than the theft of several animals by white poddy dodgers. Fortunately, not every station manager found any logic to this argument. Most considered it a small price to pay. But even in an era of jet engines, television and ballpoint pens, some things went unnoticed and reports were overly long in being investigated.

Jacky mused over the skull for a while and then placed it with the rest on a level rock and sat, uncomfortably, due to the palmetto skirt he still wore, on a stone across from them. He began a discourse on who he was and to whom he was related, as much as he could remember, and what happened to him over the years. He began his story with the sketchy details of what should have been his initiation to manhood followed with the chronicle of his life in the company and employ of whites. He crossed his legs and adopted a casual pose as if he were sitting in a pub talking to his mates. He spoke in English, at first haltingly, and then as the dam burst, he spoke in a torrent of released emotion. He told the skulls about his Mary and he wept openly. He told of the pain of the loss of his aunts who were his mothers. He went into detail and plumbed the depths of his memories to explain his sense of alienation from the world in which he was born and grew. The hours passed. The palmetto fronds were scratchy and irritating and he removed them again. Jacky’s throat, unaccustomed to such use became sore. The emotion of the ordeal left him weeping like a child. He attempted, out of habit, to pat his pockets for a handkerchief. He was naked, having discarded the palmetto apron. He was forced to expel the mucus from his nose by leaning forward and snorting, with a finger closing one nostril at a time. He wished, desperately, that he had thought to bring his tobacco. Furthermore, he needed a cool drink to ease his abused throat. Still, he went on with the outpourings of his misery, his joys and accomplishments. He told of his children who went to foreign countries to be educated and bring pride to their heritage, and of their children and what they would surely accomplish. This led him to telling the skulls about Mary, again. The cycle completed itself with him weeping and crying. He stood several

times, growing numb from sitting on the stone, and paced the small stage, talking all the while then sat once more. It was past noon when he suddenly stopped talking as if a switch had been flicked. He realised that his legs had both gone to sleep. If the skulls really did contain the spiritual entity of the previous owner, then they too would surely have fallen asleep during this boring and seemingly endless, monologue. As for Jacky, apart from stuffiness in the head and a sore throat, he felt as if the weight of two worlds was lifted from his shoulders and from his soul.

He replaced the skulls on the ledge inside the cave. He asked for forgiveness in taking them out into the daylight and wished them peace and restfulness before pushing them back under the lip of rock and then making his own difficult entry into the cave. He was tempted to hold his breath against the unpleasant stench of the cave but realised that it would be pointless and simply breathed through his mouth. The rest of the items that he removed, he wrapped into his now discarded costume and carried them back to his campsite to examine at his leisure. The clay, which he mixed with animal fat to make greasepaint, was now dry and itchy on his body. The scratches from the rough costume were stinging with perspiration and he wanted nothing but to soothe his throat with cold water. Arriving at his campsite, he recovered his swag, placed it on the rocks to dry out thoroughly, and took his muddied clothing with him to the waterfall to wash both it and his body. He had not slept at all the night before; that and the emotion of the morning were taking its toll. He dressed in his green drill shorts and short-sleeved shirt while waiting for his other clothes to dry and lay supine in the sun, his arms and hands cradling his head and quickly fell asleep. He awoke several hours later. The sun was gone from sight over the edge of the escarpment and the air was rapidly cooling. He lay there looking up at the cloudless sky, lost in thought. He caught the movement before he heard the sound of the Royal Flying Doctor Service aircraft, a Queen Air, crossing the gorge from east to west at low altitude. It took only seconds to cross the gap at this, the narrowest end of the gorge, but the drone of its engines persisted long after it disappeared from view. The memory came unbidden.

A young Buluhlmang was playing a complicated game of strategy with four other children, using pebbles as markers, while their parents rested and dozed in the heat of the afternoon. He looked across the red sands to see his spirit-father rise out of the ground and lightly whip the dust into eddies before retreating. He was still staring at where the spirit-wind was when he became aware of the sound. It was the harshest and loudest he had heard, even louder than the thunder of the summer rains beating against the rocks and the sands. He spun his head in the direction of the noise to behold an alien sight. It approached at a speed

he could barely comprehend. The noise level increased to reach a deafening state. A flight of twelve P-40 Curtis Kittyhawks of an American Pursuit Squadron thundered overhead at barely three hundred feet in search of a refuelling depot on their way to Darwin. The ear-splitting noise cocooned him, pulsing as each fighter of the squadron passed in its formation. The other four children were crying with fear but Buluhlmang took his cue from the elders. They had all stood to watch the flight pass over to quickly disappear in the distance, and then went back to ground as if nothing untoward occurred. His ears ringing, he looked back at his playmates. Two were still shaking with fright and crying as widening dark patches on the ground was evidence they involuntarily wet themselves. Jacky relived the moment he first recognised that his was a world within a world. It was now difficult for him to accept his ignorance when he learned, much later in his life, that at the time he was fighting off his primitive fears, another Aborigine, Leonard Waters, would soon be in command of an identical aircraft in combat in the skies over New Guinea. He broached the subject obliquely for this was clearly something he was not being inducted to by the adults. The dismissive response in every respect from each individual was much the same; Whypella business, he was told, and nothing to do with him.

Jacky barely ate at all for nearly two days past, which possibly accounted for so many of his anxieties. The light was fading rapidly so he quickly gathered lotus and waterlilies, not much stout fare for a hungry man, and then he remembered the fish trap. Everything else went so well today that it was certainly a fair option. There was little more than an hour of full light left as he reached the cascading water pools and his trap. He waded into the water and broke into a huge grin of self-congratulation. The Jacky Wonga patented Fish trap and Windsock lived up to its guarantee. Three pan-sized perch were held at the purse end of the trap. The Mark II version would have a trapdoor to release the fish he decided, as the only way of getting at them now was to remove the entire trap from the water and carry it precariously back to land. Darkness settled in at the same time as he sat back to enjoy the crisp-skinned, fried fish that he stuffed with some peppery cress, carrot-tasting wort and small, tart, fruits that smelled of citrus. He was so hungry that the removal of bones from almost every bite hardly bothered him at all. The flesh was sweet and the size of the fish sufficient to give him a pleasant full-stomach feeling. The munching on the roasted stems of the waterlilies was more of an after-dinner treat than part of his supper. For some strange reason, he craved a cup of coffee. He celebrated the day with the last of his tobacco. Jacky crawled gratefully into his swag and fell into a dreamless sleep when the fire banked its coals to a luminous glow of ruby-eyed embers. He slept comfortably and peacefully through the night and well into the morning sparkle of a new day.



Jacky laid the treasures from the cave in a row for examination. One of the stones was a remarkably lifelike phallus. He was convinced it had been worked to achieve some of the details but close examination revealed no tool marks on the native rock and he reserved his judgment. The next item he picked up was a conglomerate that looked like it belonged in a joke store alongside the plastic vomit and whoopee cushions. He was uncertain if the sausage shapes were, indeed, fossilised excrement or a natural geologic formation. Nevertheless, he handled it with some distaste as it looked decidedly like the former. A third rock, with a featureless flat base and a coating of small shells meant absolutely nothing to him. He picked it up, examined it several times, and put it down again. He held it at arms length, then at eye level and at arms length in the vertical and still he could find nothing to distinguish this rock as worthy of being an heirloom. He went on to the next, an orb of shiny black obsidian that could have doubled as an artificial eye. A flaw in its surface gave the impression of a pupil, while the shape and size was near perfect. Jacky wondered how many times this little beauty was used in acts of sorcery. He was about to imitate a tribal elder opening his hand to reveal the eye to the horror and fear of the others around him, when it occurred to him that perhaps the glass eye was used exactly as that; a glass eye. He quickly dropped it back onto the woven palmetto frond. He saw what he came specifically to find but would leave it to the last as he examined and considered the other artefacts spread out before him. There was an ancient dilly bag with a device that he did not recognise woven into the fabric and coloured with red ochre. The bag was stiff with age and he was reluctant to open it for fear of destroying it. He sniffed at it and decided from the pungency that he really did not want to know what it carried. Dilly bags were potent medicine at times and were used for carrying all manner of disgusting things from circumcised foreskins and bodily secretions—to make them unavailable for purposes of sorcery, to the slightly more practical unguents and pharmacopoeia derivatives of medicinal plants. The dilly bag was a ubiquitous fashion accessory used to carry things in the absence of pockets and designer-label backpacks. Generally, they were loose-woven and sometimes decorated by dyed stripes of material. Some were tightly woven however, as the one that Jacky held, and featured intricate designs. This indicated the special nature of the dilly bag and its intended use.

There were three long bones, which Jacky assumed were human. One, he decided, was a rib and the others were parts of the leg. The bones were so yellowed with age as to be almost orange and the striations and crevices became blackened. He almost dismissed them with a cursory inspection until he saw they were inscribed. It was hard to see the characters and impossible for him to decipher any message. It was

evident that this scrimshaw was originally coloured by dyes but time reduced both the intricate images and the chromatography. He idly wondered what tool the engraver would have in his possession to work such fine and intricate lines. Another smooth rock looked like a life-sized sculpture of a young girl's breast. It even sported a raised and erect teat that was discoloured, either artificially or naturally, to mimic the nipple. He suspected it was dyed but was uncertain how. He never saw any of these relics before and realised that they would have been hidden from him because he had not yet migrated to a level where he was allowed to view them. Moreover, if his suspicions that the cave was a secret women's site were correct, then he would never have been allowed to see them. That was a pity, because each of these artefacts would have a story to relate the history of its value, and he dearly would like to have known it. The final item was a flat clay disc the size of a saucer. It had a hole drilled through its edge to accommodate a thong, presumably to wear the heavy disc as a necklace. An intricate series of whorls dotted by beads and small symbols, moulded into the clay, adorned the disc. It was the Aboriginal equivalent of a road map. The symbols represented landmarks, water sources, and major geological features as the whorl was traced. The beads represented the sun marking the passage of a day's travel. The overlapping whorls followed the main highways of travel from and to the various sites within the tribe's domain. This one relic was shown to Jacky, the symbols explained to him and the memory of it was the reason for his coming to this site. He could now travel over the land of his people as surely and easily as finding his way around Melbourne with a street guide. Jacky picked it up with the reverence of an art-museum curator for a centuries old manuscript or painting. It was perhaps just as priceless for, as far as Jacky was aware, it represented the last vessel of knowledge of the migration of the people of the lakes. Holding the sacred object in his hands, he felt for the first time like a tomb robber. The obverse of the disc was adorned with other small whorls, rayed lines and a series of symbols. He held absolutely no recollection of them and was unable to identify any of the symbols or interpret their meaning, although he was certain that these would have been taught to him as well at the time. He wished Mary were here with him for he was certain that her knowledge of Aboriginal history would have given her an insight into the arcane markings. He became lost in reverie as images of his Mary drifted through his mind until the discomfort of sitting dragged him back from memory and daydream. The sun had passed overhead by then and the collection of items from the sacred cave was bathed in its rays. Concerned that exposure to light and the differing humidity would have a deleterious effect on the bones and the dilly bag, he bundled up all of the sacred relics and returned them to their niche in the cave, with the exception of the clay disc. He made the ascent and entry to the cave with neither ceremony nor trepidation. He felt that he either was granted

freedom of access or had already committed so many transgressions that it no longer mattered. Moreover, he was not about to don the heavy, scratchy, uncomfortable costume again in any event, and hoped the spirits would accept a degree of reverence and humility as his passport.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### ***Primitive***

Food was becoming a serious problem. Jacky was obliged to spend a considerable amount of time and effort sourcing and acquiring enough food to remain active. The bland and bitter foods he gathered from the water's edge and forested areas were becoming distasteful to him. He was able to supplement the vegetable diet of fiddlehead ferns, portulaca, waterlily roots and stems, cresses and yams (yams were becoming harder to find and even harder to access) with fish, yabbies, small mammals, flying foxes and the occasional pigeon. The fishing was a game of patience and the yabbies contained little meat for the efforts involved. He tracked small mammals to their burrow or nesting log and fought to extract them, receiving several serious bites in the process. Then they needed to be carried back to camp and prepared for a meal. He experimented once with cooking a whole animal on the coals of the fire in what he regarded as the traditional method. He made a small incision and extracted the intestines and other organs of the digestive system through it, skewered the incision with a sharpened stick, and placed the animal into the flames to singe the fur. The smell was abominable and it tainted the meat, if only in his imagination. Butchering the animals attracted hordes of flies and left him with quantities of inedible materials that would soon require disposal in some manner. His main camp was acquiring an unkempt appearance and building up with rubbish, which began to offend him by both sight and smell. The flying fox camp was another lesson in why hunters travelled in groups. He didn't require his tracking skills to locate the camp, the smell and noise was a beacon. He fashioned several throwing sticks, which took him the better part of the morning, and went to the camp in the early afternoon. The squabbling, restless animals took flight, showering him with foul-smelling droppings when the first of his sticks spun into their midst. He waited for them to return to the roost before another throw set them off again with the same result. No animal fell to the ground although he scored a hit on both attempts. Twice more he subjected himself to becoming the target for their disgusting abuse before he conceived the idea that they were most vulnerable when the delicate, fragile wings were open. He threw one stick and just as the animals took flight, he threw a second, which spun into the milling mammals taking its toll of their fragile wing-bones and membranes. Two of the fruit bats fell to the ground and he quickly clubbed them. He tried this technique a few more times before, once

again, being rewarded with two animals. It was difficult to throw a stick, then take aim and throw a second stick before the bats rose out of range. It was taking longer and ever longer between attacks for the flying foxes to settle. He opted for the four small mammals and returned to his own camp where he dropped the rufous bodies of the bats on the ground next to the fire and continued on to the pools to wash the evil smelling material from his clothes and body.

Crested pigeons frequently visited some seeded grasses next to a bench of rock at the edge of the forest. Sensing opportunity, he loosely wove some fine waterweed stems into a small net about the same area as his two hands opened flat. He attached leads from each corner and to the middle string. One end he secured to the stem of a small tree growing next to the dais. The other end he held lightly in his fingers as he hid himself in the tall grasses on the other side of the rock. He flattened the net on top of the rock and sprinkled seeds from the heavy heads of the grasses onto the net. The idea was that when a pigeon stood on the net to eat the seed, he would jerk the leads ensnaring its feet in the net long enough for him to grab it. He snared two pigeons at the same time within minutes of his first attempt, which surprised him no end but left him flushed and elated with a feeling of success. However, he was left with what amounted to little more than a snack after plucking and cleaning the birds. Worse, there were feathers and down blowing through his camp for at least two days thereafter; and so another idea was abandoned. He speculated one afternoon, while trying to spear a rather large eel he spotted in the clear water of the pools, how long it would take him to walk back to his Toyota, drive to a supermarket and return. His addiction to the sins of caffeine, tea, nicotine and a taste for sugar taunted him in every quiet moment.

Jacky went back to the area where he found the stones he used to accompany his chanting to appease the spirits guarding the sacred cave. He first decided to take the stones because he believed they held some magic. He replaced them each with a twenty-cent piece taken from a soft, kangaroo-leather pouch on his belt so as not to interrupt their power by breaking the circle. It was coincidence that both coins were placed heads-up in the dirt that held the stones. He now noticed though, that the two bright coins were minted in the same year. His original intention was to recover the coins and to replace the stones. But he paused to reflect for a moment, and then ceremoniously placed the stones back in their beds without removing the coins. He used the magic and he should pay a price. A belief in magic is simply a superstition. But everyone is superstitious in one manner or another. It is just a common trait of humans and Jacky was no exception. Another superstition, in which Jacky believed, was money. Jacky always carried money with him. He was never without it now. That was not always the

case. He did not know of its magic the day his few first-earned shillings were passed into his hand. He was vaguely aware of money. He saw coins and even notes in his time at the mission station. He was taught, mathematically, the value of pounds, shillings and pence but he never fully understood money. It was a concept he couldn't grasp in other than very vague and general terms and so he attached little importance to it. He knew, and had experienced also that money was usually exchanged for something else. He had sometimes been handed large, brown pennies adorned with a kangaroo, from one or other of the staff at the hospital, to hand over in exchange for lollies at the mission store. Jacky understood trading and bartering where items of near-equal value were exchanged. But he could see no value in the metal coins or the paper notes or, especially, the symbols on them. So why would anyone trade something of obvious value for things of no worth or use? That made no sense to him but as so many things in that strange, confusing environment made no sense, it was just one more accepted puzzle of ritual. And there seemed to be so many rituals to learn, living with white men. He worked and he was paid. That was the ritual. And that was one ritual he didn't understand. His early jobs included shelter and food and, in some cases, perhaps clothing. The money, which he kept for convenience in a Log Cabin tobacco tin, was never spent. Only occasionally, did someone request payment from him and they were the ones who told him how much. He could count how much and he gave that to them. He just went along with it all as best he could. He sensed too that the amount of money earned was important but didn't understand why. It was Billy Thornton who set him straight and explained the magic and the power of money. Jacky, curious, watched Billy carefully count and place notes and coins into a pouch attached to his belt.

"Why do you do that, Billy"?

"It's me stash, mate. Don't want to lose it all through a hole in your pocket, do you"?

Jacky looked blank.

"Look, mate, this is leather and it won't wear out as fast as your pockets will. If you get a hole in your pocket then you can lose all your money, see"?

Jacky still looked blank. It then dawned on Billy what was bothering Jacky. He held up a pound note.

"You don't know what this is, do ya"?

Jacky wasn't certain and sensed somehow that it may be a trick question. He took a moment to deliberate and consider the question before answering in the positive.

"Yair, it's money".

Billy grinned.

"Nah, mate. That's just what it's called. This is magic".

He reinforced the comment by waving the note in the air.

"And it works every time".

Jacky knew about magic. And magic that worked every time was a cause for scepticism, and his looks betrayed how he felt. Billy continued to grin.

"If you were hungry and had to find something to eat, how long would it take you"?

Jacky was still looking for a trick question.

"Not long".

Billy nodded.

"And if you were sick or hurt bad and couldn't walk, how long would it take"?

Jacky suddenly had visions of two campsites. One old man could no longer move and his teeth became infected so that he couldn't chew. The old women of the tribe chewed food and spat the pap into his mouth. But the time came when they had to move on from the camp. The old man was carried into shade by the rocks and left with his spear and a bladder of water. None of the women were obligated to him in kinship so none stayed. No one looked back as they left the camp. At the other camp, one of the hunters, a tribal uncle to Jacky, fell from a rock-face, breaking both legs. He was kept still and given his share of the food of the camp. But when the hunting became difficult and no food could be found, he was left where he lay. Some weeks later his woman turned up at their camp alone and no explanations were asked for or given. Life was harsh and dying was a release.

"A bit longer".

Jacky said this with some unintended determination. Billy offered him a withering look as he waved the note again.

“This, Jacky, is you hunting. This is you making a spear and tracking a ‘roo. This is you gathering wood for a fire and cooking that ‘roo. You may not need to eat that ‘roo today but when and if you do, then here it is. You take this and give it to the right person and he will give you that ‘roo, already cooked. All of those hours that it took you to make a spear, find the ‘roo and kill it. All of the time it took you to gather the wood and make a fire and to cook the ‘roo are all wrapped up in here. Everything you know how to do and lots more that you know you can’t possibly do have already been done. And it is all wrapped up in this piece of magic paper or in one of these magic coins. Every time someone gives you a piece of this magic, put it away Jacky until the day you need it and try to get as much of this magic stuff as you possibly can. Someday, when you are old and can no longer catch your own ‘roo, the magic of this money will do it for you”.

It took a while and a lot of silence before Jacky digested this information. He remembered exchanging the pennies for lollies and suddenly realised that someone else had given him some of the magic trapped in the penny that was theirs and that the magic still worked for Jacky even though it wasn’t his. All he needed to do was hold the magic in his hand for it to work. Jacky spent much of his life acquiring and keeping the magic money. And his first few coins were proudly placed in a small, leather pouch that Billy gave him the day after this conversation took place.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### ***Stockley House***

Many saw Harold J. W. Stockley as dissolute. It was a fact that he was often seen in the gaming salons of London. It was also true that his inherited estates went in rapid decline following the death of his father after lengthy illness, and true that he sold off large parts of the estate. The reason supposed for this was to pay for his gambling debts and licentious lifestyle. That part was not true. The young Stockley was obliged to give up his law studies and return home to care for his father when his elder sister, Anna, developed rheumatic fever and was herself confined to bed. She died not long after from an assortment of complications. His father’s condition worsened within a week of her funeral. Young Stockley arranged for physicians from London to attend him. He lingered for several weeks, then wasted and died despite their ministrations. Young Stockley, numb with grief and shock, took to sitting for long hours in the study trying to map out his future. He had, he realised, better get the household accounts into order before

arranging to see his father's lawyers the following week. He called for the housekeeper to bring him the accounts. She was grimfaced and hesitant as she spread the books on the large, ornate desk in the study. He was wrong, had he thought that the fates were finished with him. The servants had not been paid for some considerable period and tradesmen's accounts were long outstanding and some were endeavouring to recover through legal means. His sister, loving and kind though she was, had not grasped the problems of maintaining the estate. The housekeeper, reluctant to burden young Stockley with the grim news, kept hoping and waiting for a more auspicious moment to dump the problem into his lap. The visit to the lawyers was even more shattering. Huge debts, including land taxes, were piled up. He was cautiously advised that if something were not done, more or less immediately, then he stood to lose everything. "Virtually penniless", was the term used. The fates turned kind at this revelation. The young associate of the law firm with whom he was dealing and was now seated across the desk from him, was sympathetic and inclined to help this man who was looking as though he had just been slapped in the face with a wet fish. The problem, he explained, was to liquidate such assets as could be done profitably and immediately and to do it in a manner as not to attract the attention of vultures. The most pressing accounts must be paid in full without delay. All small debts must be settled as well and within the same time frame. The other debts would need some payment made on them but in such a manner as for it to seem routine. Outstanding and inactive debts were a worry to tradesmen and shopkeepers alike but active accounts were viewed as favourable business. A looming problem however, was the lack of income. The tenancies that had at one time supported the estate were no longer viable, as taxes, maintenance and repair were outstripping rents. Mr Stockley needed an income source. The French, the lawyer went on to instruct Stockley, had come up with a novel idea for printing on silk. This seemed to be an interesting and, presumably, a profitable industry. One might eventually find oneself in a rather lucrative position were one a gambler and willing to take a risk on developing this process, he suggested. He then enquired of Stockley if he were a gambling man. Stockley avowed he had better be, faced with financial ruin and the concept of the word, penniless, still rattling in his mind. The first step then, said the lawyer, was a visit to some bankers of his acquaintance.

Stockley made a large fortune in textiles. He also made what amounted to a small fortune at the gaming salons in various cities. Stockley was indeed a gambler and a good one. His instincts for making money caused him from time to time however, to repudiate his winnings in exchange for a small favour from those who had not been so fortunate with the cards. These favours, cheerfully given, became the pathway to greater earnings and much insider information. He eventually met,



wooed and wed Christine Buckingham, youngest daughter of James Farnham Buckingham. They spent the first year of their marriage touring the world. Five years later, in 1892 and following the stillborn death of a daughter, they sought residence in Australia. No one has recorded what vision inspired his wife to join him in this endeavour. Stockley however, saw himself as a pioneering pastoralist. It was rumoured that he won title to the large holding in outback Queensland in a series of card games, thus spawning the idea. The record of sales and land transactions tell a different story. He hired carpenters and journeymen to build Stockley House on the Queensland property along with outbuildings and sheds in keeping with a large cattle station. It was a massive structure built in the style that would become known as Federation Queenslander. High pressed-metal ceilings, ornate timber mouldings and architraves, wide verandas on all sides and fitted with many doors and windows that allowed for both light and breeze. It was pretty and practical. Stockley oversaw the project while Christine lived and entertained in rented premises provided by family friends in Gippsland, Victoria and when it was still some months from completion he began attending cattle sales to populate the holding. The whole project took far longer to build than estimated and suffered setbacks and unexpected expenses. An unusually intense and prolonged wet-season precluded much work being accomplished during that period. Most of the workers, especially the skilled artisans, prudently left the site before the wet set in. The others made do with dwindling food stores until they too simply flitted the project as best they could.

Stockley spent the months in caged frustration with Christine in the Gippsland premises, and then arranged for passage to Brisbane for them both. He hoped from there to again hire carpenters and others needed to complete the project. He wanted Christine to see the homestead and to add her views to its completion. That never happened.

They arrived in Brisbane and three days later, Stockley woke feeling ill. He was dead two days after that from encephalitis, though more likely meningococcal meningitis. Christine blamed it all on Australia and insisted on shipping his body home to England for proper burial. She was not interested in Stockley House or the property on which it sat. Three years later she was comfortably remarried. Two months after that event she was killed in a hunting accident; shot it was said, by her new husband. No records of the Queensland property appeared in her personal papers to attract her heirs.

Stockley House deteriorated with time. Other homesteaders appropriated parts of it over the years as needed. Entire sheds were dismantled and relocated on other properties. No one questioned it and no one told of it. The property was resumed by the Queensland government for unpaid taxes and failed at auction. Stockley House was

recommended in 1934 to Reverend John Flynn (Flynn of the Inland) for inclusion in his mantle of security program of the Australian Inland Mission. Whether he ever considered the property is unknown for at about the same time, the Queensland government was looking for a likely spot to build an inland hospital, despite the success of the Aerial Medical Service, to deflect the tyranny of distance, and seen by some as a much cheaper alternative to a railway. Local pastoralists, aware of the sudden interest and also long aware of the advantage of the Aerial Medical Service, began to level an airstrip on the property and to restore, refurbish and repair the buildings. The original carpenters selected most of their timbers from those that were not considered to be delectable by termites. This and the dry air preserved the structure rather well over the years. It all came together in 1937. The Presbyterian Mission did eventually become involved through its efforts with the local Aborigines. The government tabled regular funding for the hospital. Early provisions were made for one doctor and a nurse who would travel the area in regular rounds tending the medical needs of the pastoralists. Two additional nurses were to be based permanently at the hospital. They and an administrator would share the radio communication and Aerial Medical Service tasks. The hospital received an unsolicited donation in 1938 for the purchase of an electrical generator from a Brisbane chandlery that victualled and supplied many of the remote properties with household goods. Stockley House Aid Station was well and truly in business.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### ***Whypella World***

Life at the mission station was frightening and presented a difficult period of adjustment for Jacky. He came out of a coma that was filled with visions of spirit beings to be confronted by real life Wandjina. This was how the nurse and the doctor with their white skin, which he had never seen before, and in their uniform and lab coat, appeared to him. Their thin, bloodless lips gave them the appearance of having no mouths as depicted on those inexplicable cave paintings his aunts showed him. If he was a little tentative about Wandjina, having been shown the rock paintings, he was truly terrified and traumatised by this new event. The white wimple worn by the nurse looked just like the strange halo that surrounded the heads of the Wandjina in the paintings. He often asked his aunts and the elders of the tribe to tell him the story of the Wandjina but they could not. No one knew who painted the Wandjina or what it represented, except that being painted in white was not good. White was the colour of mourning, the colour of grief, the colour of spirits. The mystery of the Wandjina and the seeming reluctance of the tribal elders to discuss it gave the figures a certain menace and a handy tool for

parents with which to frighten their unruly children. And here he was now, surrounded by them, the Wandjina. He could not understand the language these strange, white beings spoke at him. Nor did he understand what the somewhat less terrifying black people that drifted through the ward occasionally, and whom he guessed were the servants of the Wandjina, said to him, even though the sound of the words was more familiar to his ears. Everything was something he never saw before; shining things like sunlight on water and bright fires that did not dance or give heat. Absolutely nothing he saw made any sense to him or was familiar in any way. He was especially unable to focus on the strange thing over his head that seemed to go around and around, making him very dizzy. He awoke one afternoon to find himself covered by a spider's web and he screamed in terror.

The mosquito netting moved with the current of air from the ceiling fan and a gurgling noise of distress from the young boy caught the attention of the nurse. She was changing the burn dressing on an Aboriginal child who had tripped and fallen into a cooking fire and was badly injured. The Flying Doctor Service was contacted by radio and an aerial ambulance was on its way to transfer the child to a hospital with a burns unit. Stepping over to where Jacky lay, she peered through the mosquito netting at the wide-eyed figure in the bed, and was in time to see him focus on her before his eyes rolled up, his eyelids closed and he passed out of consciousness once again. She reached under the netting and checked his pulse. It was weak but stable. Poor pigeon, she crooned. But the boy is a fighter, she thought, as she recalled the day he arrived at the mission hospital.

Sister Roslyn Naomi Watson, acting Matron of Stockley, finished her morning rounds. This was not difficult as the hospital only had two bed-ridden patients at the moment. An Aboriginal elder inflicted a major gash on his leg when a steel axe caromed off a log he was attempting to chop open. The blackfella then ignored the injury, and as it festered, tried bush-remedies. The wound became gangrenous and flyblown despite these often-efficacious treatments. Some young men from his tribe carried him, protesting, to the aid station. Fortunately, the wound responded to treatment with the new sulphanilamide drugs and he would not lose the leg. Moreover, he had not suffered any adverse reaction to the drug, which was, perplexingly, not always the case. The blood poisoning from the morbid flesh had not advanced to a critical point and he would recover but would carry a large scar from the loss of much calf-muscle and would probably suffer a permanent limp. He was, though complaining bitterly to anyone who would listen, presently enjoying the attention, the free food, and the ability to lie around doing nothing. He was also quickly wearing out his welcome with the young lubra aides whom he pestered to their wits' end. The other patient was

an eight-month pregnant white woman who aborted each of two earlier pregnancies in her seventh month. She was ordered to the hospital to rest by Dr Bellow, the travelling doctor and chief medical officer for the region. The woman was fretting that she was needed on her own property. They were tailing bullocks from the muster and were already short-handed. Both Peter Bellow and her husband were adamant that she must go back to Stockley House until the baby was born. She felt impotent and insisted on helping out with the daily chores around the hospital. An exasperated Dr Bellow ordered her to bed.

Ros was listening to news of the war on the wireless before going for a cuppa. The news was almost always good these days. The upset in the Coral Sea, frustrating the landing of Japanese troops into Port Moresby by Major General Horri, followed by the Battle of Midway, as it was now called, was a punishing loss for the Japs a year earlier. Those in the high-echelons knew then that any planned Japanese invasion of Australia was unlikely and perhaps bordering on impossible. But they kept this information from the Australian public in order to keep the war effort in top gear. It was the late half of 1943 before they calmed the fears of its citizens. Ros was working at the Cairns Base Hospital during those crucial weeks in April and May of 1942. Ros made friends easily in the small town of Cairns. She and two other nurses went to the Fitzgerald Hotel in Kuranda for tea. One of the nurses with whom she worked was dating an American 'lootenant' she met in Townsville and who was temporarily stationed on the Atherton Tablelands. He was involved in the construction of airfields for bombers, like the B-17 Flying Fortress and B-25 Mitchell. An unfortunate pilot from the 3rd Bomb Group stationed at Charters Towers near Townsville, crashed one of those Mitchells on Mt Bartle Frere, south of Cairns on April 21. It was returning in the early evening from a search mission, hunting for the Japanese fleet in the Coral Sea. Ros was told to hold herself ready in case survivors were found and transported to Cairns. Despite her prayers that they be found alive, none survived.

Airfields, like the strip at Mareeba nestled next to Mt Aunt and Mt Uncle, were being built in just over a week. The Mareeba strip hosted the American 19th Bomb Group. The American lieutenant was able to secure a jeep with the connivance of two other officers from that group and invited the nurses out for a picnic. This metamorphosed into the more formal linen and silver-service dinner at Kuranda. It was fun, and a superb meal, given the state of rationing that existed at the time, and the American Officers were polite and charming. They all left Kuranda late in the evening to drive down the newly completed, but precarious and narrow, range-road through the rainforest back to Cairns. They stopped near the top of the range at what would become the Henry Ross Lookout. The moonlight over the water of Trinity Bay was breathtaking.

Far out to the northeast, a small rainstorm lit up the sky with the occasional bolt of lightning. Ros, impossibly, liked to believe that they witnessed the flash of the guns of that Coral Sea battle. It was comforting for her to think, looking back on her life many years later, that she was there to witness the turning of the tide in the Pacific war. The American General, Douglas MacArthur, out of military retirement and now based in Australia was appointed Supreme Commander of all Allied Forces in the Southwest Pacific Area. He was warmly welcomed, and his disorganised arrival overlooked, by the Right Honourable John Curtin, Prime Minister of Australia, the media and the Australian public. He was viewed as a hero and a saviour to the defence of Australia, though some 20,000 American personnel left to their fate in Bataan might have other thoughts about Dugout Doug. His aim was to break the hold the Japanese had on the area and to push them out of New Guinea, Burma and the Philippines.

The Australian Imperial Forces won a decisive land battle at Milne Bay in New Guinea, and the Yanks began island-hopping and pushing the Japanese further and further away from threatening Australia. Australian Diggers of the 7th and 9th Divisions, the so-called Rats of Tobruk, had made their own claim on history in North Africa, and Allied forces landed in Sicily with little opposition only a few days before. The push into Fortress Europe seemed imminent. The Yanks appeared to have invaded Australia as well. Their presence over the past two years was felt all across the country. Heavy censorship of the press played down some of the more dramatic and morale-damaging results of animosity between Diggers and the Yanks. The Battle of Brisbane in November, the year before, was almost the last major incident affecting the strain in relations and was considered by some as more or less cathartic. The Americans impinged upon the lives of nearly every Australian, and for better or for worse, there was no escaping them. The Americanisation of Australia began. New words crept into the language, new foods, new music and even a new morality seemed to have taken over. Life, somehow, seemed more positive and far less desperate than it was only a year before.

Ros heard the commotion of the raised voices, unusual for so early in the morning. The Aboriginal lubras began gathering for the morning clinic. The clinic was held every second week, usually when the doctor had returned from his rounds. The blacks just seemed to materialise like a gathering of crows. They camped outside the perimeter fence of the hospital and sat in small huddles in any available shade. They waited patiently to bring in their children for treatment of endless ear, nose and eye infections. The women would be cautioned, following treatment, to keep the children out of the billabongs, the source of many of the tropic-ear infections. The lubras would nod and give verbal assurances that

they would keep the children out of the water. But it became an impossible task as the sun toasted the land or the humidity rose to the point of suffocation. No force on earth could keep overly energetic, adventurous and playfully mischievous children out of the cooling waters. The flies caused endless eye problems as they crawled, ignored, across the eye and chased the moisture in the conjunctiva. There was little to do other than to bathe the eyes and apply ointment to the infections that often seemed to lead to trachoma and its woeful results.

The men were not always as eager to undergo the prodding and questioning of these whitefella doctors. They resented the condescension and patronising attitude these foreigners adopted towards them. They particularly disliked being ordered about by the females—the missionaries and nursing sisters. Secretly, they all knew exactly what these women needed, and if their own blokes weren't able to give it to them, well then—. Several of the women from the community worked inside the hospital and other mission buildings. They acted as orderlies and aides, cleaners, translators, cooks, and walking encyclopaedias about the Aboriginal condition. Treated more as children than adults, and more as acolytes than employees, they were scolded frequently for laziness and constantly upbraided over cleanliness. They were worked tirelessly. They were long-suffering however, and through it all retained a sense of humour, which they employed in secret to lampoon the worst of their antagonists. Young women within the white community having spent some years in religious boarding schools would have instantly recognised the condition. A rift of open hostility broke out amongst the males of the local community. Many of the young bucks wished that all these white blokes would go off to fight in this war they all talked about and leave them alone. Others were happy to adopt the trappings of the new-order civilisation. They saw it as being inevitable, regardless of who might win the war, and even with their second-class status they sensed they might be better off. The whitefella never seemed to be short of tucker and there seemed to be so many of them that they must be doing something right.

An American Army Corps vehicle from a remote inland refuelling airstrip for fighter aircraft called at the mission to deliver some much needed medical supplies as a gesture of goodwill some months earlier. Two officers were bemused when one of the locals, clad only in a leather apron and carrying two long and favoured hunting spears approached them with the intention of joining up. They pacified him with a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes in its distinctive green package (Lucky Strike Green had not yet gone to war) a Hershey chocolate bar—badly melted in the heat of the Australian outback and some American coins. Other Aborigines from other parts of the nation met with more success and served proudly with the AIF. That their services to their country went

largely unremarked and unrewarded was to the shame of the Australian Government. That many died on foreign lands for a nation that largely ignored or reviled them was a tribute to their own nobility, pride, and humanity. There was a lot of work available since so many of the white blokes went off to fight, and that meant a quid now and again to buy tobacco, lollies and that bane of Aboriginal health, flour and jam. The novel concept of money carried a lot of responsibility with it. Many Aborigines began to do the work that thus far was the province of the whites. They did not, though, get the same wages and were seldom treated as equals. More than a generation would pass before wage-equality, at least, would become an issue of law. Even those aborigines who procured the infamous, dog tag, Certificate of Exemption, thus virtually severing all connection with their families, friends and cultural ties, were similarly disadvantaged. Almost every Law or Act passed with a view to improving the lot of the Aborigine was double-sided and where it could be worked to his or her disadvantage, it was done so. When granted certain rights at State level, it wasn't automatically applicable at the Commonwealth level, and, of course, the opposite applied. But there were people trying hard to right these wrongs.

Ros walked out on to the wide veranda with her cup of tea, the screen door banging behind her, and stood in the shade of the porch. A large, white wicker armchair, replete with a wicker footstool and side table beckoned her. This was her favourite resting spot. She would often spend a delicious hour on a Sunday morning ensconced in the chair with its overstuffed cushions, reading any newspaper or magazine available, regardless of its age, while letting her tea go cold on the side table. The two squatter chairs that stood next to the wicker ensemble were more in favour with the male staff and visitors. She found them uncomfortable no matter how she tried to sit in them. She ignored the lure of the armchair for the moment and stood to survey the scene of the commotion.

Several local lubras gathered near the open gate to the property next to the recently deployed, whitewashed air raid siren tower and were haranguing two other gins standing there. The two seemed to be holding something between them. If it was animal, it was dead. Ros squinted her eyes against the glare and tried to make out what it was they were holding. She finally determined that it was indeed an animal of some sort, perhaps a wallaby or a kangaroo joey. She could see what may have been its long legs hanging down from the cradle of the women's arms. How strange, she thought, the antics of these people never ceased to amaze her. She wondered why they were bringing a dead animal to the clinic. Two lubras became very animated and began yelling and shaking their fists at the newcomers. Ros knew that the newcomers were not local. Almost all of the local lubras had taken to wearing that

straight shift known colloquially as a Mary dress. The missionaries who took their endeavours and their faith to this remote part of Australia were, one supposes, offended by the nudity of the natives. They arranged for charitable donations of clothing to be distributed, and encouraged the tribe, especially the women, to wear them. Wearing them had several benefits. They were warmer at nights for a start. The Christians, as they called themselves, liked to give them food from the vegetable garden if they wore the clothes and sat around listening to the Christians telling them about their God, or something. If they seemed attentive and asked questions, they often got additional treats. Life wasn't all that bad hanging around these strange foreigners. So, in order to be helpful, they told them whatever they thought they might like to hear and dressed in these strange clothes, even though they seldom fitted the Aboriginal frame. Many though, truly adopted the teaching and the religion and became part of the proselytising mechanism themselves, and the strange clothing was seen as part of the religious garb. The only serious problem was that these clothes always needed to be mended and washed. There were no facilities for the Aborigines with which to do this even if the inclination was there. White people were simply not very good at solving problems created by a cultural gap. The result, of course, was that the tribe forever looked ragged, and they stank, at least as far as the whites were concerned. Nevertheless, the mission took its Christian duties seriously and all of their efforts were intended and aimed to better the lot of the Aborigine.

The non-local lubras stood there stoically ignoring the harangue, which only served to inflame the situation. Finally, two men stood from the circle in which they were sitting with other men and went over to the women. They, in turn, soon began to yell loudly at the locals pushing them away from the altercation and shook their fists at them to emphasise the point of discussion. Ros knew not to intercede or interfere. She was always there to help or advise when asked, but the easiest way to avoid offending these people was to stay out of their affairs and wait to be asked. Sister Ros became a favourite with the aides. She stepped closer to the railing and as she did, she moved into the sunlight. This attracted the attention of the two newcomers. Suddenly, one of the two lubras grabbed the animal from the other and brushed past the arguing men and the local gins before they could react. Ros became aware that the woman was bringing the animal to her and, placing her teacup precariously on the newel post, went down the steps to meet her. The locals stopped their shouting deciding it was no longer effective and went about their business. The two men returned to the circle as if nothing had happened and only one woman turned to shout something, which was obviously profane, and then wandered off. It wasn't until the woman got closer that Ros was able to determine that the supposed



animal she carried was a human child. Her heart felt squeezed and her eyes began to burn with a sudden welling of tears.

The gin approached Ros without taking her eyes off Ros' eyes and did not stop even though she was but an arms-length away. Such unusual eye contact was disconcerting and most unlike these people and Ros did not know what was expected of her. She certainly didn't understand how difficult it was for the approaching woman to maintain that eye contact. Aboriginal kinship is an involved concept of duty, politeness, responsibility and social protocol. A person is kin to others while not necessarily blood-related and the relationship determines how one may or may not interact with others. It parallels and combines the complex deference and obligation rituals in other societies. Kinship is not hard to understand considering hand shaking protocols, body posturing, hat doffing, kowtowing, the caste systems, the arranged marriages, and other similar social contracts of people throughout the world. The structure of kinship is taught from a very early age in the Aborigine community and learning continues on into adulthood. Simply put, there are groups of people with whom you can interact and others with whom you must avoid all contact, either permanently or until the social status changes. So, to be safe, the easiest way to avoid a social gaffe is to avoid or ignore everyone not already known to you by their status name. Europeans, unaware of this device, consider the reluctance of eye contact to be a snubbing rudeness or worse, the sign of a certain shiftiness of character.

The gin stared at the building in the distance ignoring the yelled abuse by the other women and hoping they would not begin to attack her with sticks or rocks before she did what she set out to do. She was well aware that she was committing a grave offence but she was defiant and this was not the first sacred cow she had kicked. Two men got up from the circle where they were sitting. They both wore large penis-sheaths decorated with feathers and she assumed they were important and potent elders of the tribe. The matter now took on a different, serious and greater dimension. Not knowing the status of either the women, who were becoming more strident and threatening, or these angry looking males approaching her, she determined to make them invisible. She had not eaten or drunk in some considerable time. Her empty stomach, and the flush of adrenaline into her system over an extended period made her light-headed and contributed to another consequence. Just as the two scowling men got close enough to touch, her stomach involuntarily rumbled, gurgled audibly and she farted. Both men darted looks at the other and broke into snorts of laughter. They were obliged to turn away to hide their mirth and had, as a result, to begin a face-saving argument with the women of their own camp. A white person stepped into the sunlight from the shadows of the building. This was the moment, and summoning as much courage as she owned she pulled the child into her

own arms, and locking her gaze directly on to the frightening figure she had spotted, she brushed past the men and walked the path that led to destiny and fate. She had seldom known such terror or such resolve. All she wanted was to run away or to lie down and let the earth-spirit take her soul. She needed to believe that the white people could do something that neither her skills nor the invocation of her tribal and totem spirits could do. She needed a leap of faith against all of her beliefs and prejudices such that an apostle might shrink from. She had to beg for help from these savage and unforgiving people that often regarded her kind as an enemy—with no way to repay her obligation. She had to break the bond with her own spiritual past and place her trust in a concept of a universal god that could somehow bridge the gap between these culturally different people. Heroism, it seems, takes many forms. It also seemed to take forever to cover the distance and it was an effort of will to keep her eyes locked on the strange white woman who had just climbed down from the building to confront her. She was covered in mourning-colour and the sun flared off it so that it was even difficult to focus on her. The terror mounted and her mouth became brassy and dry. She never saw eyes of that hue in a person before. They were the colour of a blue sky and rimmed with red. It was slightly repulsive, which was its own fascination, and the terror mounted even more. Then, as she unwaveringly held the adored child out to the alien before her, she saw a tear leak from that strangely coloured eye and slide down the red-painted cheek. In that one single instant, the terror abated.

The young boy the woman carried, pitifully thin and dehydrated was dead. A tear sliding down Ros' cheek, Ros saw, did not go unnoticed by the lubra holding the child out to her. Ros, more to hide the embarrassment of the tears than for clinical reasons, casually studied the limp body of the piccaninny. Bush-flies were crawling into its nostrils and the corners of its eyes and into the slack-jawed open mouth. The stomach was smeared with mud and a compress of moss and leaves covered most of the orderly lesions across the abdomen. Ros had seen similar cicatrices on the back, belly or limbs of much of the male population and guessed that this child recently began his final initiation rites to pass into manhood. She didn't connect the two events, the rites of passage and the death of this apparently prepubescent child. For it appeared he was not circumcised, and Ros erroneously associated the two rituals. Standing there in the hot morning-sun, Ros felt uncertain and impotent. The event was unprecedented and Ros became slightly flustered as a tension of expectancy built up.

"Oh, my dear God! He's alive".

Ros had just noticed the chest move. She leaned forward and snatched the child then spun on her heel and sprinted up the stairs. Barking

orders as she disappeared into the cool, shadowy depths of the interior of the building, she called loudly for the doctor. And in her heart, she implored the child to keep fighting. The screen door banged noisily and the teacup on the newel rattled on its saucer but held fast. Then there was a sudden silence as if one was caught up in an old photograph or if the world, for a moment, had forgotten to breathe. The woman left standing at the bottom of the stairs still held her arms as if she were cradling the child. The events of the past few days followed by the confrontation at the path to the house left her emotionally supercharged and she was, consequently, very slow to react. She stood there staring up at the porch, and gradually began to wonder if she and her sister had, in fact, done the right thing after all. Then, slowly, Jacky's aunt turned and walked back to join her younger sister.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### ***Difficult times***

Time evaporated. Obligated to spend several hours attending to the necessary chores of his daily camp-life, Jacky's day simply vanished. He would commence work on a project to make life a little easier, if he was able to save some food from his evening meal for a breakfast, and didn't have to resource some other supply of nutrition. Then suddenly it was noon, which left only a few more hours to gather, hunt and prepare for his supper. Jacky was well aware of the need for variety of diet and it required him to make imaginative use of the resources to hand. He became circumspect in his selections, conscious of the hazards of bush-tucker and the risk of poisoning, thereby requiring additional effort. Many of the items of edible and nutritious bush-food with which he was familiar, and they were many, either did not exist here in the valley, were out of season or involved too much effort for one person to be useful. He took the trouble to move his latrine well away from the camp and into the scrub. He dug a large hole in the unyielding and stony soil with his knife, sticks and hands. His hands and, in particular his nails, suffered from these and other abuses over the weeks, as did the blade of his knife. He carried quantities of river-sand bundled into his shirt to the latrine, which he used to cover the excreta, defeat the flies and stop the aroma from wafting into his camp with the change of the afternoon breeze. He thought of it as his litter-box. The gathering and on-site storage of suitable leaves for use in his toilette were just additional problems requiring effort and ingenuity. Those commodities, effort and ingenuity, like food, were becoming scarce however. Something always needed doing and the effort was tiring him out. He continued to lose weight. His pants were constantly in danger of sliding off his hips, although his body now adapted to the radical change of diet. The belt was cinched to the last notch but the weight of the various pouches and

sheaths holding an assortment of knives and tools weighted it down so that it rested uncomfortably on his hips. It was a minor annoyance that, though he was becoming scrawny, he retained an unflattering paunch. He consciously sucked in his gut.

His hair needed cutting and he had not bothered to shave so that the white stubble was threatening to become a beard. He had packed a razor with extra blades and a toothbrush but forgot his toothpaste back where he left the Land Cruiser. He wished he hadn't because his mouth tasted foul and he was certain his breath could be used as a weapon. He always carried that image of the old man whose rotten teeth caused him to suffer the humiliation of having others chew his food for him. Jacky had ever since been conscious of oral hygiene. He discovered he was sliding into a miasma of indolence and wasn't certain if it was a physical or mental condition. He decided there wasn't much he could do without someone else as a gauge to the extent of his depression, were it mental. Besides, he definitely didn't feel depressed, just chronically tired. The one positive thing he could do was to somehow increase his food intake and his mind turned to larger animals like the wallabies bounding among the rocks of the gorge and to quantities of fish via the windsock trap. This posed the problem of storage and he briefly wondered if he could build a Coolgardie Safe until he was able to smoke and jerk a quantity of flesh. Jacky was not an eater of offal. He ate it as a child because it was food that everyone ate, or starved. The taste was too harsh for his liking though some considered it a delicacy. He ate it as a young ringer because some station managers doled it out to him, either in the mistaken belief that it was the boongs preferred tucker or that it was good enough for an Abo. He chose not to eat it at all when he later became self-supporting. He was mindful that the organs contained necessary vitamins so he took the trouble to include them in his stews and gravies. He still didn't like it though. Jacky experimented with several batches of stock from the bones of some of the animals he killed but the keeping quality of these brews was brief in the sultry, hot atmosphere of the valley. He sealed one batch of particularly zesty and rich stock in his billy while it was still hot. He took the billy to the cold water of the pools and weighted it down with stones in an attempt to keep it for more than a few hours. It developed an unpleasant odour by the second day however, and faced with the risk of food poisoning, he was obliged to throw it away. He was determined not to allow hunger to override better judgment.

He faced several problems of logistics and each of these weighed heavily on his mind. He was having difficulty feeding himself in a virtual Eden. It was going to be harder and perhaps beyond his capacity to do so in the harsh, flat country through which he was planning to travel. Therefore, he needed to prepare and carry a quantity of food with him. He should

be able to amass a cache of food beyond his immediate needs given time, but time was another problem. He would need to manufacture bags of some sort to carry the food. The wet-season was not too far off. He already thought he heard distant rumblings of monsoon thunder. He certainly couldn't afford to be trapped in the valley if the wet were early nor be caught on the flood plains with the hazards of estuarine crocodiles, disappearing food resources and being driven mad by voracious hordes of mosquitos and biting midges. The advantage was that the country through which he would travel had developed in the half-century since his family roamed the area. He would inevitably pass several homesteads, roads and at least one small outback-town on his trek. He already knew of some roads that existed over his proposed route even though it was his intention to avoid civilisation wherever possible.

Several mining areas that died at the turn of the previous century once again became a subject of interest and profitable activity. These mine sites might offer a safe-haven if he became caught by an early wet. Jacky remembered his one and only brief occupation as a miner with the Fisher family on the Wenlock River in Cape York. It was the off-season for the cattle station and Jacky took his leave. He had a little money put aside but determined to find employment that would add to his small, but growing nest egg. The onset of the wet put an end to the mining also but the equipment needed to be maintained and protected. A chance meeting led to the offer of employment, which he readily took up. Lacking experience and knowledge of the job made him the labourer. The excitement of the new adventure made him a willing and energetic one. Nonetheless, he saw that everyone else, including the principals of the mine, worked just as hard, and often in more dangerous and precarious circumstances. The heat, the humidity, the dirt, the danger and the backbreaking toil all induced an enormous amount of respect for these scratchers of the earth. Jacky was proud to work alongside these men and massively relieved at the end of his contract to discover he had not caught the fever that drove them on in their relentless pursuit of the next shovelful of dirt. The hard life on the cattle properties seemed, somehow, tame by comparison.

He idly supposed that a wallaby or two would provide him with a large quantity of food and placed the problem on the back burner of his mind to slowly stew until a reasonable plan for acquiring and killing one, and what to do with the meat could formulate. Jacky was a practical man in all respects save the odd aberration of this pilgrimage. He owned three rifles and was a proficient shooter. His eye to hand coordination was developed and honed at a very early age. It was perhaps a heritable trait from his father but long practice with sticks and stones made him a natural marksman. He earned a lucrative living tracking and shooting

feral pigs on station properties for several years. It simply did not occur to him to bring a rifle on this occasion and he would have been hard pressed to give a valid argument as to why not. He decided to make either a spear or a lance strong enough to kill a larger animal if he was able to get close enough to one. He considered the long and straight flower-stalk of the grasstrees but couldn't be certain that they wouldn't break if used as a lance. Finding a tree branch that was relatively straight and sufficiently long was not as easy as he imagined. Furthermore, he wasn't exactly certain what kind of tree should be used. Some woods, he discovered, tended to shatter or snap easily. Others were too soft and wobbled through the air when thrown or bent when jabbed at something hard. He spent much of the day finding what he considered might be suitable and then tested them by throwing them at rocks from as far away as he could stand and still reach the target. Having decided upon the wood to use from his tests, he went back into the bush searching for an ideal example that he whittled from the tree rather than breaking it off as he had done with his test pieces. He carried it along with the other usable sticks he tested back to his camp. There he peeled the bark, scraped the wood with a blade, and then rubbed it smooth and dry with sand. He built a hot fire next to a flat, level stone that he chose to use as an anvil for straightening the spear. He placed the spear over the coals, heating the moisture within the wood and softening it. Holding the spear against the anvil-rock with his foot, he rolled the spear until it was straight. He repeated this action for the length of the spear. Then he began again until the stick hardened as the moisture was driven off and the shaft was as straight as a pool cue.

His original intention was to sharpen the spear to a point and harden it in the fire. This would work well enough for small game and fish, but against the hide of a wallaby it might fail. He recalled the chert tools he found. At least one of the spear points he examined was, to his untrained eye, quite acceptable, though these were all, presumably, seconds and thus discarded. He now faced the problem of attaching the point securely to the spear. For this, he would need to obtain some resin from the common grasstree. Jacky worked on the spears for the rest of the day and made preparations to leave the next morning to find some mature grasstrees. He was obliged to leave the valley the way he came in with a long half-hour climb up the escarpment wall, then the rather daunting passage through the rocks followed by a lengthy hike to where he had seen many grasstrees growing in the stony soil. The grasstrees in this region differed slightly from those in other areas of the country but they all produced resin. He looked for a large plant and foraged around the base finding several chunks of the dried resin. The dead leaves of the grasstree are persistent and drape around the trunk like a grass-skirt, fuel for a fire. When fires sweep the area, the heat causes the moisture within to expand and ooze through wounds and to bubble out on to the

trunk of the grasstree. The resin serves to protect the plant from insect invasion and wind-borne fungal spores. Eventually, the hardened globs of resin fall to the ground at the base of the plant. Very few Aboriginal tools are found, even in archaeological digs. The difficulty in dating the few that are found is compounded by the knowledge that a large trade in tool-technology existed for millennia over much of the country. If it could be determined where the tools originated however, it would make dating them a simpler and more reliable process and would expand the knowledge of the trade routes and the extent of the trade. This, in turn, would give a more accurate picture of the domains of many of the tribes that are now extinct. There are few species of *Xanthorrhoeaceae* and each grows in a reasonably well-defined area of Australia. It might be possible to determine where the tools originated, by analysis of the minute shreds of resin still adhering to the tools, if the resin from each specimen of grasstree could be positively identified.

None of this presently preyed on Jacky's mind. He was wondering, as he wound his way back down the trail into the gorge, if he still remembered how the resin was used and worked, and if his skills were good enough to bond the rock spear point to the haft of wood. He paused once again at the bend where the waterfall became visible, and silently thanked the spirits for looking after this magnificent place. Time was the enemy. Time was always the enemy. Most of the day had already disappeared when he finally returned to camp, and he was required to spend some additional time in acquiring enough food for a meal. Then it was dark. The ghosts no longer bothered him and the anxieties of his precarious position allowed him to quickly seek refuge in sleep. The positive side was that this preserved his dwindling stores of wood and gave him more time in the daylight hours to work on his other, and seemingly increasing, problems. He retrieved the discarded spear points and then began early the next morning to pulverise and grind the chunks of resin on the flat stone he used for his anvil. He added some charcoal from the earlier fire as a binding-agent and, finally, several pellets of dry wallaby manure for the fibre. He ground the charcoal and resin together into an amalgam then rubbed in the wallaby dung with his fingers to spread the fibres evenly through the mix. He sliced a cleft into the end of the spear, spat on the end and then rolled it in the powder. He heated it over the coals until it bubbled, then allowed it to cool slightly and rolled the end into the powder once more. This process was repeated until a large quantity of resin, still soft to the touch formed on the spear. He inserted the basal-end of the best spear point into the cleft and bound it tightly with twisted, wetted grass. Then he began to apply the powder over the join and the base of the spear point, heating it each time until the chert was firmly attached to the spear. He moulded and shaped it, while it was still warm and pliable, until he was satisfied with his efforts and allowed the resin to completely cool and harden. He applied more resin to the

haft end for balance and again scraped the haft to remove any small bumps that might hinder or influence its flight. Not once did the incongruity of the nickel-forged stainless-steel blade with which he was planing the shaft of the Neolithic weapon he just created cross his mind.

The fish trap was proven successful and Jacky made his way back to where he sited it with the intention of deepening the sluice before resetting the trap. Standing more than knee-deep in the rushing water, he ducked down and felt with his hands for loose rocks along the bottom. He pulled these out and threw them aside. One rock, slightly smaller than a cricket ball and almost perfectly round caught his attention and he placed it on one of the large river-rocks for recovery later. The job, unlike so many others, didn't take as long as he expected. The force of the water quickly washed away sand and any of the smaller stones from the bottom once the larger rocks were removed. He replaced the trap after modifying the purse for easier removal of his catch, tying it to the stakes and beefing them up with additional rocks before wading out of the pool. He looked back and felt fully satisfied with his efforts. The water was cold and chilled his skinny frame through. He sat on a rock in the sun's warmth and inspected the unusual round rock he pulled from the bed of the river. He hefted the comfortable weight in his hand. It was hard to imagine that it was a natural occurrence but there was no evidence that it was anything else. He cocked his arm as if to throw it once or twice and hefted it with his right hand then transferred it to his left and back again. He came out of his abstraction to wade ashore, dress and go in search of food as the bright afternoon sun began to burn across his shoulders. He tossed the rock into the air one-handed as he wandered along the path that he was slowly wearing into the ground by his frequent passing.

The rock became a talisman of sorts over the next few days and was seldom out of his hand despite its weight and inconvenience. He stood in his camp and feigned the exaggerated wind-up stance of a baseball pitcher or ran a few steps with the overarm bowling-action of a cricketer. He would only stop these practices when it occurred to him that others could, conceivably, be watching—and wondering. Then he would self-consciously end the performance and even put the ball away. Then pick it back up again a little while later. The sun was just showing above the horizon and Jacky was determined to try his hand at hunting a wallaby. His predations were having an effect on the small-animal population and these were increasingly harder to find. The worry of dwindling food resource was sending a shadow of panic over his ruminations. He picked up his spear and the throwing-sticks he made earlier. Then, as an afterthought, a nulla-nulla, the clubbing stick he found in his never-ending search for firewood and thought might be useful. It took him nearly an entire afternoon to carve the nulla-nulla to his liking and



comfort. He thus far only used it, unnecessarily, on a few small animals but decided it might be needed to dispatch the wallaby. His frame of mind was positive at least. His practice at throwing the spear was limited to several tosses but he was satisfied with its performance. He hadn't risked throwing the spear at an actual target for fear of damaging his only spear point and was really more concerned with the flight of the weapon for balance and accuracy. He and other children practiced throwing long sticks with both a woomera, a device for chucking a spear, and without. He was confident that, like riding a bicycle, he would always remember how to do it. The analogy was just a little unfortunate in Jacky's case.

Jacky guessed it would take him perhaps an hour to climb to the area of rocks where he witnessed the most wallaby activity. He needed to catch them before they retreated to their resting places for the day. Once there, they would be hard to spot before they spotted him and bounded off to safety out of sight. This was the reason for his need to start early. He stopped, every so often, almost absently, to perform his ritualised baseball throwing technique with the round rock as he picked his way through the foothill scrub a few minutes from camp. He wandered along lost in thought like a child on his way to school. His rough and incomplete plan was to achieve a likely location where he could ambush a wallaby. He would prepare his weapons and wait his moment. Waiting in ambush meant that quick access to his weapons would not be needed. So he devised a way to sling his throwing-sticks, the nulla-nulla and the spear across his back in order to free his hands. It was a plan that needed serious revision as the long spear constantly fouled branches and shrubs as he walked, or dragged on the rocks he skirted.

Jacky's anxieties preyed upon his mind over the weeks and he responded with several classic obsessive-compulsive behaviour symptoms. He now routinely performed unconscious rituals, such as always leaving his camp in a northerly direction regardless of his destination. He couldn't sleep unless the collar of his shirt, particularly his football jersey, was turned up. He needed to promptly turn it back down again the moment he arose in the morning. The first three sticks placed on his fire in the morning, and only the morning, needed to be broken exactly in half before being fed to the fire. None of these patterns was considered strange by Jacky in any way nor did he even notice them. He just felt more comfortable and relaxed if he adhered to them, and so he did. Therefore, it simply never occurred to Jacky to leave the stone ball behind and carry the spear in his hand. His mind was somewhere else and the ball became a token of security.

Jacky continued to climb the path through the rock, only occasionally looking up to what he thought might be a good ambush point. Again,

illogically, he was certain that if he looked too often to his destination, he might somehow be broadcasting his intentions and his hunting foray would fail. His poor diet and his age combined to weaken him and he was obliged to pause frequently to catch his breath and regain his strength, especially when the path grew excessively steep. He rounded a grouping of large boulders and was able to clamber up to another obvious beaten pathway frequented by wallabies. He stopped, looked around and decided that this would be a place as good as any for an ambush. He envisioned a wallaby jumping down through the rocks and turning to follow this well-worn path. He would be waiting, spear in hand. As it turned out though, it was to be Jacky that was in for the surprise. Jacky was certain that a wallaby anywhere near the ambush site would have heard or seen him coming and bounded off to safety elsewhere. He expected it to be some considerable time before the wary animals resumed feeding and returned to their normal activity. His only worrying concern was that he may have already left it too late and the animals would have finished grazing and retired to their resting places until the late afternoon. He had not eaten since a small meal the night before and if he had to sit here until the late afternoon, he could not eat until the next day again. He was beginning to feel frustration along with his panic. He could break off the hunt and go in search of a meal, but that meant he had accomplished nothing and would have to repeat this step over again. It was becoming difficult to assess his priorities. In either event, he was going to have time on his hands. He removed the spear and the rest of his hunting tools and stood for a while determining where he could best hide in ambush. He absently hefted the round rock as he surveyed the layout. Then, once again, he took on the exaggerated stance of a baseball pitcher, wound up, cocked his arm and sighted through a cleft in the rocks directly ahead of him. He was startled to find himself staring at the face of a curious wallaby framed in the cleft. He needed to drop the rock and grab his spear but he was trapped in this improbable stance. In frustration, he simply flung the rock at the cleft. The alarmed wallaby disappeared from view. The rock hit the sides of the cleft and caromed through to make cracking sounds as it smashed and skipped against other rocks and then, finally, hollow rustling sounds as it bounced its way into the brush.

Jacky, annoyed to a point of rage, cursing his own stupidity and his inability to react more quickly, scrambled to pick up his spear. He knew that the wallaby was bounding off and that it was unlikely he could cover the distance through the rocks in time to get a decent spear throw at the fast disappearing animal. And a nearby group of screeching cockatoos only added to his frustration and mounting anger as he felt their derisive catcalls were directed at him. He idly wondered if his skill was good enough to impale a cockatoo or two. He clambered over the rock and dropped to the grass but there was no sight or sound of the hastily

retreating wallaby. He turned to look back towards the cleft to assure himself that he was at the right spot. It took him more than five seconds to realise that the wallaby hadn't bounded anywhere. It was lying still at the base of the rock. He cocked his arm for a panicked spear toss before an apparently dazed wallaby recovered. But it wasn't necessary. The wallaby was dead. The rock came hurtling through the opening before it could react and smacked against its skull just under the eye killing it instantly. Jacky picked up the limp head and neck. There was only a slight smear of blood where the rock impacted, though it was beginning to ooze now that Jacky moved it. The wallaby was warm and felt alive as if its spirit had not realised that its life was over and vacated the body. Jacky looked into the eye of the wallaby and it looked as if it was still able to see. Jacky dropped to his knees. Every detail of the wallaby seemed to be viewed as if under a magnifying lens. Each hair, the eyelashes, the muzzle all stood out sharply. The soft hair in the ears and the soft damp eyes, not yet turned vacant, were etching themselves into his mind. He felt a sense of loss as one does when a long-loved pet has died. He began to weep. He knelt there holding the head of the wallaby and began a keening chant that arose unbidden from some long-stored memory. He honoured the memory of the wallaby and asked it to forgive him his need for the taking of its life. Never before had killing an animal for any reason, justified or not, impacted upon him so strongly. He was at a loss to understand his own reaction but he knew that it was unavoidable and a necessary thing to appease the spirits that guarded this most sacred place. He knew, intuitively, that the spirits gave him this wallaby. He knew the wallaby gave its life for him as it had long ago promised the Rainbow Serpent to do. Why else would it have stayed and waited for Jacky to climb the path to its home? Why else would it have presented itself, sacrificed itself to Jacky's need? In this highly emotional state, it simply never occurred to Jacky that the wallaby had no fear because no man ever hunted it before. It had, in this remote and protected place, never seen man before, hence no reason to fear him.

Jacky ran through many emotions as he knelt cradling the head of the wallaby. Elation was not one of them.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### ***The Crocodile***

A wiry vine growing at the base of the rock served to lash the wallaby's legs together, and he hefted the animal on to his shoulders like a stole. It was heavy and the residual warmth of the body gave it an intimacy that made him feel uncomfortable. He decided to leave his weapons at the site and return for them later. Jacky had no reason to feel guilt but he did nonetheless and unconsciously looked around in a furtive manner for possible witnesses to his crime. The vague feeling of unease began to

seep through causing him to ponder the situation in an attempt to dispel the unsettling disquiet he was experiencing. Answers are sought in the irrational when no rationale can be found, so Jacky turned to the ghosts of the valley to explain his discomfort. His earlier lamentations following the death of the wallaby should have appeased the spirit of the wallaby and the guardians of the lakes, so it followed that more ceremony was required of him. Jacky was aware that, traditionally, large animals were ritually divided for distribution among the groups within the camp. He saw several depictions of those animals found in the area on the walls in the gallery. These showed, in most instances, not only the peculiar x-ray view of the animal displaying many of the organs and skeleton but also lines whereby the animal should be dissected for parcelling out to kin. Totally absorbed in this proposition, he wound his way back to camp.

He arrived at the campsite weary and breathing raggedly open-mouthed. His neck was tender and his shoulder began to ache in morbid fashion. The perspiration caused by his efforts and the contact with the still-warm animal's fur resulted in a burning sensation of the skin of his neck and shoulders. Part of his mind worried about ticks and mites migrating from the dead animal to his own body, and suddenly his entire scalp became itchy. He unceremoniously dropped the wallaby to the ground where it landed with an obscene thump. So much for the reverence he displayed at the scene of the wallaby's demise. He hobbled, for his knee was inexplicably sore, to the cooling shade offered by a group of spindly eucalypts and gratefully lowered himself to the ground. Jacky was strong and direct all of his life. He always worked to a plan both in long and short-term objectives. His early upbringing always revolved around his position within a group. The obligations of kinship directed his actions whether he endeavoured on his own or worked as part of a unit with his family. When he found himself bound to a new culture, he simply transferred the kinship concept to fit the new situation. His employer became the tribal obligation and his workmates the family group. It was not an academic decision, for Jacky was incapable of such introspective self-examination, it simply transpired. Now however, Jacky was a solitary entity. No one was reliant on him. He could rely on no one. No one even knew where he was. No one, perhaps, even brought him to mind in order for him to exist. He had fallen through the web. For the first time in his life, Jacky was truly alone, and it was to be him against the universe. For the first time in his life, even his gods seemed to have deserted him. Suddenly, every demon from every myth, from every nightmare, from every dark-side rose up and attacked him. They collectively or each in turn stripped him of purpose, robbed him of objective, assailed and assaulted his nobility, his dignity and left him empty, bereft and mired in self-pity. Jacky began to weep in disconsolate fashion, his body shaking in convulsive sobs as blowflies began to gather around the wet sera and drying blood on the head of the wallaby carcass.

The blazing midday sun outside of the barrier of the shade shimmered, danced, and threw waves of heated air into the small sanctuary. Cold sweat formed across his brow and his salivary glands began to offer copious amounts of salty liquid. The buzzing of insects became a buzzing inside his own head and he suddenly went into a retching-spasm, contorting his face in pain and disgorging his stomach contents in a vile and viscous puddle on the earth next to him. Engulfed by the Herculean tasks of simple survival and awash with feelings of impotence and failure, he rolled to his other side and slept.

He awoke barely twenty minutes later. He felt cold inside and his head seemed remarkably clear. Dry vegetation and dust stuck to the side of his face where he lay on the ground. He absently rubbed and brushed the matted material from his face and beard as resolve and singleness of purpose began to prioritise the many tasks that lay ahead of him. He stood, staggering slightly as the inflamed knee protested with a shock of unexpected pain. He mentally fought it down and isolated it, forcing it into the background, and walked stiffly to the wallaby carcass. Bending awkwardly, he hoisted the dead animal up and over his shoulder. Several days earlier, he spotted a likely tree that would suit his purpose when he had imagined this scenario of bringing a wallaby back to his camp. He limped towards it. The tree had a low branch with a convenient fork and he trapped one leg of the wallaby in the fork and lashed it with the vine he used to tie the legs earlier. He quickly and deftly, with long experience gained in butchering animals on the cattle stations, bled and eviscerated the carcass, dumping the warm entrails on the ground. He then went to gather a large quantity of wood. Less than an hour later, he built a fire and when the flames ebbed to heat-producing coals, he threw the wet entrails onto it causing the fire to hiss and threaten to die. He placed several more sticks on top and watched briefly until certain they would catch and burn. He originally envisioned burying the organs but a large monitor lizard visited his camp on several occasions, digging up his middens and dragging the bones and debris around the camp. He imagined, at one point, that he might set a trap to lure the goanna and add him to his dinner menu. He sagely changed his mind as he measured the tracks and estimated the length of the lizard to be more than two metres. It would be a formidable and foolhardy risk for a man on his own to tackle such an animal. He decided not to encourage these visits by burning all of his refuse in future. The smell from the fire was, at first, pleasant and hunger provoking but soon worsened as flesh scorched and burned. Nonetheless, it provoked Jacky into slicing a small roast of meat from the animal, tying it into a parcel of paperbark and burying it beneath the coals of the fire. He honed one of his knives using a small whetting-stone pocketed in his knife sheath, and skinned and boned the animal with slick expertise. No thought was given to cultural protocol or any apology offered. He cut meat into strips

and placed the strips into a large plastic bag from his swag. Long shadows were arriving with the late afternoon breeze as Jacky covered the hardwood-fire with leaves and damp sticks to create perfumed smoke. He threaded strips of meat onto greenwood sticks and placed them over the smoke and the heat while he tended the fire and turned the meat to expose it to the smoke. He quickly wove lattice baskets to hold larger pieces of meat and tied the baskets to arched frames over the centre of the fire to dangle somewhat precariously. These he would need to turn frequently to avoid simply cooking the meat or risk setting fire to the baskets. It would be a long vigil and an equally long night.

Jacky gathered worts and cresses and some of the berries that grew among the rocks and crushed these together to make a marinade in which he soaked the rest of the meat left in the plastic bag. He finished as colours began to fade in the failing light. Several hours passed since he buried the haunch of wallaby meat under the coals, and as hunger cramped his belly, he pushed the coals aside to unearth the parcel from the ground oven. Sometimes, hunger alone is the gourmet sauce that declares a meal as blue ribbon. Sometimes, though, it just happens, and this was one of those times. Jacky leant against the trunk of a tree and sliced mouth-watering wafers of meat from the roast, which he popped into his mouth. The roast was redolent of the herbs and the outside was slightly charred but each morsel was juicy and savoury. He delighted in the repast until his stomach bulged and sleep threatened to overtake him. He continued to feed the fire leaves, twigs and small chips of hardwood that smouldered and smoked as they blackened and charred and finally disappeared to white ash. He turned the meats every half-hour or so and listened for any rustling that might signal the return of the monitor. He knew all too well that these lizards were attracted to fire as they learned that fires also meant food. Bush fires were commonplace happenings and the tricky winds of the valley often trapped both small and large animals to face death in conflagration. Scavenging goannas, kites, eagles and hawks all learned that where there was smoke, there was often a free meal. The smell of blood-meat and the scent of cooked flesh on the fire would carry long distances on the current of cool night-air. This particular lizard would be king of the valley and Jacky had no particular desire to confront him in the dark. He sat close to the fire for comfort and the ease of tending it but tried to avoid looking at it so as not to lose his night vision. Every sound, every rustle, startled him and made the hairs on the back of his neck move, which was disconcerting in its own right. He kept a stout piece of branch only a hand's-breadth away from where his arm rested, and was obliged to resist the urge to keep it firmly in his grasp at all times. He was fortunate the sky was clear and cloud free and he could stare up and watch the constellations drift westward as he counted the hours until dawn. Night was not Jacky's friend.

It was a night not unlike this one when he camped out at the mouth of the Edward River. Fred Wiley, Peter "Brumby Peter" Harris, Hiram "Yank" Goulding, Neville Hudson and Jacky all caught barramundi almost as big as the boat they were fishing from during the day. They cleaned the fish, filleted them and cooked them a dozen different ways. They stuffed themselves full of warm beer and fish amid laughter and humorous anecdotes until the fires died and the swags looked more inviting than the women depicted in the yarns they spun. Jacky walked down towards the mudflat near the mangroves at the edge of the water to empty his bladder. The moonlight painted the soft mud bright pewter and cast suspiciously deep shadows of inky-black where crabs scuttled about. The hiss of the lapping water and clicks of snapping shrimp became a little unnerving and Jacky was quick to finish his business and retire to the safety of the camp and company. The conversation died as each man settled for the night and Jacky readily slid into sleep.

He awoke fully alert and inexplicably aware of the rush of movement from his right. He rolled rapidly left in several turns to spring to his feet running. He would never know how he was able to extricate himself from his swag, as he had no memory of it and his only impression was that a charging bull assailed him. He gained the safety of a tree and stood behind it as he suspended all movement and looked for the beast. He heard nothing. There was no sound of an enraged animal thrashing and snorting in rampage. He saw nothing at all save for a log next to where he imagined he had been sleeping. The explosion of gunfire startled him into a vertical leap and the involuntary expulsion of breath which, to his own surprise, he was holding in. The log suddenly spun in its own length and rapidly moved to the water's edge where it disappeared in shadow and vanished soundlessly. Jacky was tremendously lucky. It is a rare occasion when a saltwater crocodile snaps its maw shut on air alone. The senses of this relict of the age of dinosaurs allow it to target its prey like a modern missile; swim under water and surface only a few feet from the prey where it can launch itself with unerring accuracy even as the startled prey reacts to move away. The commotion awoke Fred Wiley, the man sleeping closest to where Jacky was. Two years of jungle fighting in the highlands of New Guinea made him a light sleeper. He felt safer sleeping with a loaded Lee-Enfield .303 rifle next to him when he was out in the open. He was quick to react, was quick to identify the crocodile and quick to fire a single shot into its hide. Although aware that someone was sleeping over there, he did not know which of the group it was and was certain they fell victim to the croc. Swearing profusely, he rushed to examine the remnants of the swag highlighted in the moonlight. The single crack of sound rending the night mobilised the camp like a disturbed ant's nest. Loud queries and the muttering of oaths of indignation added to the commotion. Jacky was still not able to

visualise exactly what had happened and clung to the trunk of the tree as his breathing slowly returned to normal. He suddenly felt vulnerable and was eager to join the company of his mates but, for the moment, his legs wouldn't work. The others in the camp slowly realised the events of the night and, after a head count, determined that it was Jacky who became a croc's dinner. They began a search for the body as best they could in the darkness and shouted out his name. His first attempt at reply was a strangled gargle but he eventually called back and rejoined the camp amid backslapping and handshaking and general disbelieving comments. They all stood in reverent awe in the morning light examining the tracks of the estuarine crocodile whose length they estimated as more than twenty feet from snout to tail-tip. Crocodile hunting was a lucrative endeavour and few of these giants were left. Those that were learned new survival skills, avoiding men and their noisy machines. The warming mug of tea did little to thaw the block of ice that persisted in Jacky's gut as he gathered up his swag while surveying the scene.

A sudden sound of movement in the scrub behind him brought Jacky back to the present. He spun quickly but could detect no shape or hear anything more. He edged slightly closer to the fire and resumed his vigil. His body began to ache and his eyes were strained from staring into the dark, but morning finally came to his relief. He went out to gather more wood for his fire and was pleased that he could smell the smoke from a considerable distance to camp. Visions of the marauding monitor indulging himself in Jacky's absence made the forays for wood brief, but each return to camp revealed everything intact as it was left. Jacky slowly relaxed. The process of jerking and smoking the flesh of the wallaby would take a couple of days and considerable amounts of wood. The tasks no longer seemed insurmountable though, and he could envision an end to it. He decided to risk leaving the camp for a few hours to examine the fish trap. If he was lucky enough to have caught a few fish, he could smoke and preserve those as well. Luck was beginning to favour him. The trap yielded a dozen pan sized perch and a large, confused eel, which could have swum out of the trap at any time. Jacky quickly despatched the eel and strung the fish. He wasted no time in returning to his camp, not wanting to tempt fate too often or for too long. Everything was as he left it. He prepared the fish and the eel for smoking and sampled some of the drying meat as his mood turned even brighter. A full belly, successful endeavour and the return of good-fortune restored his equanimity. He slept soundly for several hours as the marinated meats were exposed to the perfumed smoke.

He fed the body parts of the dead wallaby to the fire in small portions, which he cut from the skeleton still hanging in the fork of the tree branch. He cracked several of the bones for their marrow and chewed



the charred meat that remained on them after boning. It was a relaxing way to idle the hours away as he tended the fire. He spent some time gathering palmetto to weave into bags to carry the dried meat. He also visited a patch of clay, and worked a large quantity into dough consistency that he took back to camp and left wrapped in a wetted shirt. He used what little fat he could find on the wallaby to lard several chunks of the smoked meat and smoked them again. He dried and pulverised the peppery leaves of a small herb he found growing in the open forest, then rolled other slices of meat in the powder and returned these to the smoking process as well. Finally, all of the meat and fish was preserved, wrapped into packets of paperbark and stowed in the palmetto bags. It was time to finish up and leave before the huge cumulus clouds that would be building over Cape York turned gun-barrel blue and Turrpak or Dhuludur ruled the land.

Jacky returned to where he killed the wallaby to retrieve his weapons. It took him more than two hours of methodical searching to find the rock he threw. He stood where the wallaby had been feeding, turned his back to the vee shape and plotted the course of the missile as it spun through the opening and hit the hapless animal. He was wrong three times and found it only by accident, almost treading upon it as he went back to attempt a fourth plot. Still, he was pleased with himself and took time to enjoy his wander back to camp. He chewed on one of the peppery sticks of meat as he set off to dismantle the fish trap and wondered if there were any commercial potential for his wallaby jerky.

## **CHAPTER 11**

### ***When Worlds Collide***

Life at the mission station altered young Jacky's perception of reality. His health was restored but not his equanimity. There were far too many people. There were too many languages, too many artefacts. There were just too many happenings and events to allow him to adjust to the bizarre situation in which he found himself. He had the run of the station but found hiding places to keep out of sight while he attempted to fathom what happened to his world. Reality blended with fantasy and fantasy with dream and dream with nightmare. The change in his world was so dramatic and of such profundity, that it tended to keep him in a state of perpetual shock, even as understanding crept in, albeit ever so slowly. Each day was a new learning experience, a new hurdle, but a step closer to rationalization. At the very edges of sleep, something was struggling for recognition. Something was touching a chord somewhere that would allow his two worlds to tie together. The memory of it came from an unexpected source. And when it came, it brought with it images that were simply ignored previously as inexplicable. The images and their significance hadn't impinged on the daily grind of existence, and so

were pushed to that remote region of his memory where they would eventually fade, as does the colour from a desert-flower.

Jacky, by late November 1943, came to grips with the new world but not to terms with it. Sister Ros always thought of him as the poor pigeon and referred to him as that. One of the lubra aides began to call him, Wonga, for pigeon in her own language, and it tended to stick as the others adopted the word. Several children were hangers-on at the mission. They were basically unwanted and dispossessed, often of mixed parentage or whose parents had become outcasts within the community. Some of these would later come to identify themselves as part of the stolen-generation. The mission staff cared for and tried to educate them. Their diet improved with regular and balanced meals and this, in turn, reflected on their ability to learn. These and other children who lined up at the fortnightly clinic sought Jacky out as children do. Sister Ros encouraged this. Each encounter seemed to pull Jacky further out of his self-imposed solitude and further away from the abyss of terror he experienced at the outset of his hospitalisation. He spent much of his time though, close to the doorway or at a window, staring off into the distance at a land that was once all he knew and all he wanted. He was now too frightened to leave the sanctuary of the hospital as a profound agoraphobic response to his trauma took hold of him. Ros dragged many reluctant lubras to meet Jacky. Though there were many common words in their dialects, none found common ground with him. They all became almost uncomfortably evasive with Ros and simply said they didn't know him or his tribe. Some offered improbable theories but it was clear he simply was not their problem and they had no intention of making him so. Ros imposed upon one of the aides to take him to the blacks camp before his present phobia had presented itself. He was hesitant and fearful of what was to happen and went very unwillingly.

The gathering blacks would camp down at the airstrip as clinic day approached, but a more or less permanent camp was situated some distance further away in a large patch of scrub. Jacky found nothing in common with the locals and sensed they were somehow trapped. They weren't the proud and determined people he was used to. They seemed indolent, lethargic and goalless. This translated to their dress and mannerisms thus giving them a seediness and shabbiness that he didn't recognise. There seemed to be a constant tension in their midst with many squabbles and arguments that often erupted into violence. They were unclean and the rubbish in their camp built up. He was not impressed. Aborigine families and tribes normally move on when food and resources are diminished, and nature's recyclers cleanse the detritus of their camp. Termites eat wooden artefacts, fungi, where moisture is available, breaks down everything else and microscopic life in the soil processes the leftovers. When the cycle is complete and the aborigines

return to the same camp, there is little to say they have ever been there before. That was the way life was meant to be, not like these beaten and humbled look-alikes. Jacky felt little kinship to these tame people at all. He could even smell the dankness of the Community or thought he could. There was something unhealthy in the way they lived. He found more comfort in the company of these white foreigners, although strange, somewhat frightening, very confusing and absolutely alien, than he did with his own people. He dressed accordingly. He put up with the khaki shirt and shorts that was the uniform worn by the children being educated at the mission, although far more comfortable without clothing, simply because this seemed to be the custom here. Politeness was second nature to Jacky. He was proud enough of himself to have mastered the art of buttons so that he also wore the clothing as a symbol of achievement.

He was standing by the doorway, pressed tightly against the wall as usual with only his eyes clear of the jamb, staring off into the distance, mentally back with his aunts and thinking of his family, when the dust cloud began to billow in the distance. The talcum-like bulldust blossomed and fumed and as Jacky watched it, fascinated, another memory slipped quietly into his conscious mind. His family climbed the ridge of the hills and were enjoying the slight, but cooling, wafting of air that fanned the slope and the sweet smell of grasses flowering on the sunlit crest. Several of the adults were standing in repose at the edge but watching some activity below. His father stood leaning on his spears with one foot lifted to rest on the knee of the off leg. They all stood poised as motionless as an egret on the hunt for a swamp delicacy. Jacky climbed silently and with some stealth to stand next to the adults in order to see what they were watching. An object down below that Jacky failed to recognise was travelling with the speed of a frightened emu, and a cloud of dust exploding behind it. A questioning look to his aunts was ignored. His curiosity piqued, he risked a verbal question. The eldest of his mother's sisters answered, "Whypella", and turned away with some degree of resignation and disgust. Other images began to run like a slideshow through his mind. Visions of steel knives and tomahawks, and people wearing strange clothing snapped into focus in his mind along with a strange set of unbroken tracks that went on forever in the soft mud. Fence lines with wire and odd, straight trees marching off into the distance tied together with vines. His family ignored all of these things, and took pains to move away from them. He had not attached much importance to such phenomena at that time, or to the reticence with which his family discussed them, if ever. More and more of these unexplained images and instances popped into his thoughts, culminating with the terrifying episode of that hot afternoon when his playmates wet themselves as alien objects flew overhead and deafened them with the noise of their passing.

He focussed on the billowing cloud of dust. He stepped outside and on to the veranda with the revelation that all of these things were part of the world, his world. He continued to walk towards the signal plume of dust, awkwardly negotiated the stairs and took several steps along the path to the gate before stopping. He felt a sudden twinge of alarm when he finally became aware that he was once again out in the open and under a blue sky, and then relaxed as he comprehended that he was no longer in the alien world, just a part of his world he had never before explored. Several others, including the nursing staff began to join him on the path to the gate as the cloud closed the gap. Sister Ros was among them and was standing next to Jacky. She reached down and took his hand. The move startled Jacky but before he could react, the warmth, the novelty and the pressure of her hand in his moved him in a way that he could not have described. He then became afraid she might let go. The billowing cloud began to settle as the truck reached firmer ground and swung towards the hospital. The roaring of the engine and the whine of the transmission caused some nervousness but the steady pressure of that comforting hand in his enabled Jacky to face the brief panic attack. He was becoming used, to some small degree, to the notion that almost every item in this world made an uncomfortable noise. He would have taken flight had he been alone as the alien object made its determined approach, but the cluster of people with him gave him resolve and he bravely faced his fate. He even managed to thrust his jaw forward. He was, after all, a man, wasn't he? The khaki truck with a five-pointed star emblazoned on its doors ground, whining down through its gears, into the yard and halted at the gate in front of the group that came to greet it. The tarpaulin covering the back was thick with the yellow dust, and chevron shaped patches of windscreen appeared where the wiper blades attempted to keep the dust at bay. An odour of petrol, hot oil and the acrid smell of bulldust permeated the air as the vehicle sat in sudden silence save for the ticking of cooling metal. Jacky was very relieved when the terrible noise stopped. The passenger door opened and an American army officer jumped from the cab, dusting himself off with his forage cap as he reached the ground. Making his way through the gate, he approached the group, nodded to the women and removed his sunglasses before beaming an American smile, replaced his cap and with his hand outstretched grabbed and pumped the hand of Pastor Duncan Adair, one of the first to arrive on the scene.

"I'm Lieutenant James McIvor, United States Corps of Engineers".

It was a soft Virginian drawl.

"Some of my men and I were hoping to share a little hospitality with you. We were told that this was a hospital and we are sure mighty tired of

dust, flies, hard rock and harsh sun and would love to talk with somebody not wearing khaki and whom we don't have to salute".

Duncan, though considerably larger than the soldier facing him, was becoming a little concerned for the safety of his arm still being pumped by the youthful blonde-haired lieutenant and was at a momentary loss for words. Sister Ros was the first to react.

"I suggest then, lieutenant, you and your men get out of the sun and on to the veranda and refresh yourselves with some lemonade, and I'm sorry we have nothing stronger".

"Thank you, Ma'am. Lemonade will do just fine".

He turned towards the truck and aided by a hand gesture, shouted an order.

"Dismount".

There was a flurry of activity and noise at the rear of the vehicle as a dozen men vaulted the tailgate and assumed a loose formation. The driver of the truck was a corporal and he shouted an order as he alighted to the ground.

"Squad. Atten—hut".

The squad, dusting themselves and pulling sweaty blouses away from their bodies complied with the order with a lack of parade square sharpness, but a willingness and pride in their outfit. The lieutenant turned and smiled at Ros before addressing the squad of neatly dressed soldiers.

"Gentlemen, we have been invited to sit on the veranda and drink some lemonade with this very attractive young lady".

The result of this news was also a broad smile on each of the baker's-dozen faces and some *sotto voce* comments that would have been extremely flattering to Ros had she heard them over her shock. She and the other civilians stood as if rooted to the ground, unblinking, frozen and staring. All of the soldiers, fine physical specimens and handsome to a man, were American Negroes.

"Squad. Dis—miss".

The perfunctory command, loudly spoken rather than yelled, acted upon the civilians as well. They each scrambled to regain their equilibrium.

The White Australia policy so deeply entrenched in the Australian culture left them wholly unprepared for such an event. The cultural shock was just as profound for the station Aboriginal aides as for the whites. Each of the civilians sneaked quick surreptitious looks at the other, either out of curiosity or to gauge their own reaction as the group of soldiers and civilians headed *en masse* for the veranda. The one exception was Jacky who did not realise the significance of the event. He pressed his hand deeper into Ros' hand as the throng somewhat overwhelmed him and determined not to let go, ever.

The tramping of so many hard-soled shoes on the steps and veranda of the stately Queenslander building sounded like an assault was in progress, and Ros hoped the aging structure was up to it. The men, pleased to be in the cooling shade, strung themselves along the railing, each too polite to risk sitting in any of the chairs. As each man ascended the stairs to reach the veranda, he automatically removed his cap and tucked it under his shoulder epaulet or folded it over his belt. Ros issued instructions in a whisper to one of the aides who hurried off to the kitchen to arrange for pitchers of lemonade, glasses and a variety of sandwiches. After surveying the size of these huge men in their attractive, clean and pressed uniforms, she doubted if the stores held enough food to sate their appetites. Pastor Adair got over his initial shock and engaged the lieutenant in conversation. The Aboriginal aides, shy but curious, disappeared into the building but continued to peep around corners, out of windows and doorways to the amusement of the men on the veranda. Jacky was becoming even more confused. He sensed the deference the locals afforded the whites and saw and experienced the patronising manner of the whites towards the blacks. He too felt somehow superior to those poor people. The whites, though, were treating these new men, also black, as equal, and to some degree, even with polite deference. He sensed the innate pride these men had in themselves and their own quiet strength and confidence with which he easily and readily identified. He studied them in an attempt to discern what made them seem so different. One young man in particular captured his attention. His ready smile lit up his face and each movement he made was lithe and deliberate. Jacky continued to watch him. The tall, lanky serviceman became aware that the skinny young boy in badly fitting shirt and shorts, and attached to the hand of the pretty nurse was staring at him. He stared back and broke into a grin.

"Hello, Kid. My name is Albert. What's your name"?

Ros, fielding simple questions made difficult by thick American accents and syntax, was still able to hear the query, and with a quick glance at Jacky replied to the soldier.

“He doesn’t seem to have a name yet and doesn’t speak any English”.

Her eyes twinkled and her face lit up with a mischievous grin as she appended an afterthought.

“Or American”.

She then went on to briefly explain how the youngster came to the hospital near death and fought his way back to health. Ros did not know that Jacky was blissfully unaware of the existence of this other world and assumed that much of his odd behaviour was the result of shyness. Consequently, she treated him as a child younger than his true age. This was, by chance, the exact treatment needed to deal with the trauma Jacky was experiencing. Jacky was aware that the two people were talking about him and responded by pushing himself behind Ros, but not for a moment loosening his grip on her hand. The soldier closed one eye briefly and Jacky knew that somehow it was directed at him and that it was also somehow conspiratorial. He didn’t know how to react and pushed even closer against Ros, and for the first time smelled the perfume of some heady flower above the usual odour of medicinal alcohol and soap with which he normally associated her. Overall, it was pleasant being here but it was also all happening too fast for his reeling mind. The arrival of the lemonade and sandwiches broke whatever tensions may have existed, and everyone engaged in conversation as if there was nothing at all strange or unusual in a dozen or so American Negroes sipping lemonade on the veranda of an Aid Station Hospital in outback Australia. The curious local community, meanwhile, began gathering to examine the dusty American truck that brought this unprecedented event. Lieutenant McIvor noticed the group of Aborigines beginning to crowd around the vehicle. Several men, with spears in their hands were peering into the cab through the open windows and a few small boys were clambering on the back of the vehicle.

“Uhhh, those guys aren’t likely to do any damage to a US Government vehicle, are they”?

Duncan Adair was obliged to choose his next words very carefully. He held a deep-rooted belief that all black-skinned people were born thieves. He tempered this belief with a paternalism borne of his Presbyterian religious teachings, and suggested simply that if anything of value was contained in or on the truck, it wouldn’t hurt to move it somewhere safer. The lieutenant turned to the soldier next to him and simply raised an eyebrow. The soldier rattled off three names and the four of them clattered off the veranda and made their way to the truck. One of the four climbed up over the tailgate and began handing out parcels and crates to the others. Each, laden with a box, crate or large tin carried

the prizes up to the veranda and deposited them by the door before heading back to the truck for some more. Within minutes, there was a mound of booty. There were two cases of tinned butter and several cases of soft drinks. Cartons of cigarettes and boxes of Spam could be seen in the pile. There was coffee and there was tea and there was sugar. There were biscuits and there was soap. There were also boxes with a Red Cross motif hidden in the pile. If it was a sample of America, it seemed to be there on the veranda. Ros idly wondered what the Americans were hoping to get in exchange and how much trouble they might be in when this all was discovered missing. The lieutenant turned to Duncan, who he now knew was the administrator for the hospital, to remark softly.

“We have orders to move out in a couple of days and we thought that a lot of this stuff could be, sort of, you know, lost in transit. Some of it would just be left behind anyway and perhaps you can use it. I’m sorry there isn’t more medical equipment and such but we don’t always seem to get what we need ourselves”.

Duncan was simply staring at the stack amazed at the largesse of these allies. Waste was clearly not part of his Scots heritage. It was clear by the look on his face that he was more than grateful. The look of thanks that Ros gave the lieutenant and the smile that went with it caused him to feel a bit awkward and embarrassed.

“We just didn’t want to come empty handed and we knew that rationing must be making it difficult for you’.

He was rescued as the four soldiers returned to the veranda with baseball bats, gloves, mitts and balls. Albert, the tall soldier who spoke to Jacky earlier, grinned a smile that seemed to be all teeth.

“We were hoping we could get you all to join in a game of ball”.

The afternoon was spent in picnic fashion with laughter and jeers from onlookers and players as the loose game of work-up was played out in the front yard of the hospital. Jacky seldom took his eyes off the soldier who had winked at him. Only the need to surreptitiously slide another quarter-sandwich or scone off the plates on the veranda, when he was fairly confident no one was watching him, occupied him when he wasn’t watching the soldier. Other children simply materialized to stealthily advance up the yard to the steps of the hospital and managed to pilfer their share of the sandwiches and scones. Jacky soon felt safe enough to venture awkwardly off the veranda and mingle with the other mission children. Still, he watched his friend out there playing with the ball. He didn’t understand the game at all. But he did realise that it was a game, especially with all the obvious banter and laughter that accompanied the



play. He knew the object was to hit the ball that was thrown at you and then to run in a pattern. Beyond that, he couldn't guess the strategy or the rules. What he did notice was that when his friend threw the ball to one of the three nursing sisters or the aides, it was soft and deliberate but when he threw it to one of his own, it was fast and devious. He seemed to hold the ball, stare at the other player and then take a peculiar position with his body before letting the ball fly almost faster than Jacky could watch it. Most times when he did this, the other person was unable to hit the ball. Jacky was fascinated. He wanted to hold the ball and to see what his friend and the other players wore on their other hand. He moved further from the steps and closer to the play while constantly watching the ball. Then the doctor managed a hit. It went looping high overhead to fall where Jacky was standing. The other children began to scatter. A player, one of the soldiers, began to move following the trajectory but gave up knowing he could never get there in time. Besides, one of the local kids standing there looked like he wanted it. Jacky was concentrating on the ball. He watched it falling closer and closer. He made a small adjustment to his position, put out his hands, and took the ball out of the air cleanly. He almost dropped it as the noise of the applause and the shouts broke over him at the same instant. It was only the fact that everyone was smiling that convinced him he had not committed some grievous transgression. But he was still a bit bewildered by the sudden tumult. It was clear by his gestures that his friend standing in the middle of the play area wanted him to throw the ball back. Throwing stones and sticks was Jacky's passion. He temporarily wanted to try the exaggerated stance his friend used but settled for his own when he considered the distance needed to throw the missile. He cocked his arm and let fly as low and as straight as he possibly could, aiming for that strange thing on the hand of his friend and that he was now holding out. The ball smacked into leather and applause rippled across the field again. This time Jacky knew it was an acknowledgement and he suddenly felt very proud and his chest swelled. The game broke up almost immediately after that event as tea was being served in the large dining room of the house. The rumbling of the generator to drive ceiling fans and give light to the dining room became an unnoticed backdrop. The equipment from the game was stacked in an uneven pile on the veranda. Jacky was almost always hungry and his attachment to Ros caused her to take him under her wing. This meant sharing food with him and taking him into the dining room for several meals. Duncan and Doctor Bellow discouraged it, but Ros, using her considerable feminine charm, convinced them that it was necessary for Jacky on his road to recovery. Jacky was more than tolerated for some reason that no one could put a finger on. He was liked and his shy manner was taken for politeness. And he tended to stay out of trouble. So the objections were not severe, the application of feminine persuasion from Ros not unwelcome, and his presence in the more unlikely places

and venues was overlooked. Today however, Jacky was more interested in the baseball equipment than he was in food. And that was remarkable.

When everyone went inside or went about their business, and this included the group of aborigines that gathered at the fence to watch the strange goings on, Jacky sat next to the pile of equipment. Soon after, he touched one of the strange leather things that caught his interest. He had already held the ball so that was probably safe enough to do again without incurring someone's wrath. He picked up a ball and examined it closely, something he hadn't been able to do earlier. Using the encroachment method he was finally able to pick up the glove worn by his friend and slip it on over his own hand. He saw no reason for it and it felt strange and awkward. He also picked up a bat and let it sit on his legs running his hands over it. None of it was very encouraging or empowering and he was just about to put it all back when he heard the sound of shoes on the wooden floor behind him. It was the white soldier that seemed in charge of the others. Jacky didn't know quite what to do or what the penalty would be for touching these sacred items. He went cold inside. What he didn't expect was the smile. The lieutenant picked up a ball and a bat. He took the glove from Jacky and motioned for him to follow him. Jacky found it difficult to stand. He wanted to run to avoid his punishment but knew that it was probably futile and would likely increase the severity of it. The soldier, when they had both reached the yard, placed the bat, label up, in Jacky's hand and adjusted his grip on the bat for him. He then stood behind Jacky and, grabbing his wrists, showed him how to swing the bat. He grabbed each of Jacky's stick-like legs and shoved them into the correct position. Jacky had no idea why the soldier was manhandling him and stoically awaited his punishment. Then the soldier walked away, turned and softly threw the ball at Jacky exactly as the other soldier did to the nurses. Jacky was still frozen with fear and failed to respond as the ball looped over the outstretched bat and fell harmlessly behind him. The soldier kept up a constant dialogue that Jacky couldn't understand and could not even guess at its intent. The soldier pointed to the ball and put out both his hands in a catching gesture. Suddenly it almost all became clear. The soldier was not annoyed. Jacky was not in trouble. This was not the start of some cruel punishment. The soldier was giving Jacky the chance to hit the ball. Why this was so was not particularly clear to Jacky but then, white people did so many strange and inexplicable things. Jacky recovered the ball and threw it the short distance back to the soldier. He proffered the club when the soldier again made to throw the ball at Jacky but the soldier shook his head. He advanced on Jacky once again, causing him some trepidation, and adjusted Jacky's hands on the grip and pushed his legs into position again. Then he retreated and made to throw the ball at Jacky once more. This time Jacky was ready. When

the ball looped up he blocked it with the bat and it dropped in front of him, rolling a few feet towards the pitcher. Jacky was pleased and expected the soldier to be pleased as well. He obviously wasn't. This time he grabbed Jacky's wrists and swung the bat back and forth, back and forth. Then he took the bat, gently pushed Jacky out of the way and assumed a batting stance. He held the bat cocked level with his ear and then swung the bat through an imaginary ball and into a solid follow through. He did this a few times and again fitted the bat into Jacky's hands and adjusted his feet. Holding his wrists, he moved the bat up and cocked it level with Jacky's ear and swung the bat through the same imaginary ball. This time he left Jacky standing there with the bat cocked and walked back to his position. The ball looped towards the bat. Jacky followed it with his eyes, and at the correct moment he unloaded the bat and swung through the path of the ball with a satisfying crack of wood on leather and continued with his follow through. The ball whistled straight back at the pitcher who reached up with his gloved hand and captured the ball as it smacked into the leather mitt. Jacky felt like dancing. This, to Jacky, was a whole new ballgame. The soldier gestured in mock applause. Jacky understood the meaning and grinned with delight. Jacky's friend, Albert, showed up on the veranda just in time to catch the action. He whooped and clattered down the steps. The lieutenant tossed Albert the glove and ball.

"Okay, Lincoln, your turn. I've gotta take a leak".

Albert gave the glove to Jacky and pulled another off the veranda. Jacky was not good at playing catch. He continually tried to catch the ball with his ungloved hand completely forgetting the purpose of the glove. Finally, though it was awkward and unnatural for him, Jacky began to get the hang of it. They were playing catch for about fifteen minutes when Albert threw a deceptive ball that looked to leave his hand at the same expected speed, but hurt Jacky's hand in the poorly fitting glove. Jacky ignored it and returned the ball normally. The next ball was harder and stung right through the leather. It made Jacky slightly apprehensive and a bit annoyed. He threw the ball back a little harder. It came back to him harder still and Jacky almost dropped it this time. He clamped his jaw, and with malice aforethought, threw it back and was gratified to see Albert look surprised. Albert grinned and threw it back sharply once more. This time, though, Jacky expected it and allowed his gloved hand to move back with the impact, and without any delay at all whipped the ball back at Albert's gloved hand. It caught Albert unaware and the ball smacked the glove. Albert took off the glove, shook his hand and blew on it, pretending that the ball had hurt. There was no confusion in Jacky's mind as to what this gesture implied and he felt like swaggering. They played catch for another while, then Albert showed Jacky how to throw the ball in the air and hit it out with the bat. This

kept Jacky occupied until it was time for the American troops to return to their base. As the Americans were lining up to climb into the truck, Ros went over to Private Albert Grisham Lincoln from Chicago, Illinois and took his hand. She explained that in the space of the one afternoon the Americans, and in particular, Albert, brought Jacky further out of his shell than happened since he came off the critical list.

“Thank you, Yank”.

Albert looked a little embarrassed.

“Don’t mention it, Miss. He reminded me of my little kid brother”.

The soldier turned to go and then stopped.

“Just a second, please, Miss”.

He leaned over the tailgate and spoke to one of the soldiers already in the truck. A bat and a glove and a ball were handed back over the tailgate. Albert, with a huge grin, turned to Ros and handed the items over to her.

“You might want to give him these. If he ever learns to talk maybe you can tell him where they came from”.

Ros watched the boys climb aboard the truck and was struck by their youth, politeness and physique. She noted that none of them, other than the driver, had any ranking above a Private First Class and that the only officer was white. She thought back to Cairns for the Fourth of July celebrations in 1942 when a parade of Yanks was drawn up in front of The Bluebird Café; whites in one parade, blacks in another. There too, the Negroes paraded under a white officer. They were seldom seen in the streets of Cairns and she wondered too if they had separate camps. It wasn’t something that bothered her at the time but it was something she noted. And she remembered it again when she received a letter from the administrator of a small and remote hospital deep in the Queensland outback, confirming her appointment as acting Matron. The letter went on to explain that her duties would include nursing and health instruction to the local Aboriginal Community, part of the Presbyterian Mission.

The truck ground up through the gears and left the mission station with hands waving out of both doors and the back of the truck. Further down the road a plume of bulldust enveloped it and it became lost to sight. Jacky, standing on the veranda, watched it disappear. A distant dust cloud would forever be a symbol of loneliness and sadness to him.

## **CHAPTER 12**

### ***Decision Making***

Sister Ros made her morning rounds with the doctor the day after the visit from the American engineers. The doctor looked around.

“Where’s the Pigeon”?

Jacky usually plodded along behind them like an imprinted duck as they did the rounds of the ward. He seldom disappeared to one of his several safe refuges until they finished and left the ward.

“Margaret said he was out in the yard standing by the fence since early this morning. Tell you what. You meet me on the veranda and I’ll bring us a cup of tea and some of those biscuits the Yanks left us, and we’ll have a discussion. Right”?

Peter Bellow, sensing a problem was going to be dumped in his lap, shrugged.

“We’ve got a half-hour before clinic. Why not? I’ll see you out there”.

“Oh, and two sugars now that we have plenty again”.

This last was called out over his shoulder as he made his way to the room he used for his office, examination room and supply cupboard. Despite the detour, Peter got to the veranda before Ros and was sitting in one of the squatter chairs adding a few more lines to an ongoing letter that was now already several pages long. Sister Lawton, the District Nurse, joined him directly after and assumed the other squatter chair. Ros arrived like an event. The screen door hinges protested being disturbed and announced her arrival as she pushed her way through the entrance, balancing three cups on saucers together with a small plate whose contents were threatening to slide off its tilted surface. Once through the doorway, Ros then attempted to control the screen door from banging shut by the expediency of her hip, thrust out in an unladylike fashion. That was to almost no avail. The screen door, fitted with spring hinges to ensure its automatic closure, still managed to bang shut, characteristic of such doors wherever they are found. Ros grimaced at the result and placed the rattling teacups on the side table and the plate of biscuits, or cookies as the Yanks called them, next to them. It was a decent juggling act with the cups and the plate, and Peter watched her deft struggle to put them all down without tipping anything over or splashing tea into the saucers. It was his experience that only women were capable of such dexterity, and he didn’t know why that should be. He had considered getting up to lend a hand but Ros seemed totally in

control and he decided he might be more of a hindrance than a help. He was watching her closely.

Peter reassembled the gold fountain pen, a graduation gift from his father, with which he was writing the letter, and fitted it back into his lab coat pocket, then, gratefully, reached for one of the cups, passed it on to Deborah Lawton and took his own. The tea was surprisingly good. This was also something, in Peter's estimation, that only a few men were capable of but almost any woman could do; make a good cuppa. He liked Ros from the first day of her arrival here at the hospital. She was in every respect the country girl that she indeed was but she was also exceptionally attractive and he took the opportunity to admire her body while she was busy with the plates and couldn't see him looking her over. Deborah caught him out but simply smiled smugly. She would use it to tease him with at some later date. It took Peter some considerable time to finally get to know Ros. She was one of those people who simply don't think of themselves as interesting enough to be a topic of conversation. Even when asked specific questions, Ros always answered in as few words as possible, she just never found her own life interesting enough to expound on its details. Duncan Adair allowed Peter to read the one-page recommendation from the Cairns Base Hospital but Peter knew little else of Ros' personal life, her training or her ambitions. Apart from that conversation with Duncan some weeks before she arrived and a few comments volunteered by Ros in the course of conversation, he was still very much in the dark about her. Several weeks after her arrival, becoming curious, he tried to casually ask the other two nurses about her. They immediately became coyly suspicious as to his motives and offered very little. His motives, actually, were in no way sinister or lecherous. Quite apart from his own work ethic about fraternising, he was contentedly married. His wife, Gwen, now an army nurse following the incorporation of The Australian Army Nursing Service into the Australian Military Forces in March, was in the army hospital at Greenslopes, Brisbane. She had been seconded there not long after her safe arrival in Darwin from New Guinea. She and Peter both offered their services to the army within days of war being declared. She was accepted but Peter, for reasons unclear, was not. They simply agreed to put their marriage on hold until the war was over. Both hoped it would be soon. Peter reached for one of the biscuits on the small plate to go with the tea.

"So, what's wrong with the Pigeon? I thought he was doing fine the last time I examined him. Or don't you agree with my diagnosis"?

He turned to look at Ros with a grin on his face to show he was pulling her leg. Peter relied heavily on his charge nurses and took most of his cues from their attitude. If the Matron or a nursing sister was reserved

and strictly business, then he acted and treated her accordingly and all those over whom she was in charge. He was quite prepared to run his surgery or his hospital as if she owned it and he worked for her. If the nursing contingent was a little more relaxed, as they tended to be in the smaller centres and towns, then he too took a somewhat more relaxed attitude. Peter's relationship with Sister Lawton who accompanied the District Medical Officer on his rounds of the primitive cattle properties was a case in point. They had become close and intimate friends when in the field but displayed less familiarity when, with relief, were back at base again. The rounds were difficult, dangerous and stressful. Sister Deborah Lawton, who was married to a bomber pilot now serving in England, admired Peter. The difficulty of her job allowed her to worry less over her husband. She knew the risks her husband faced as a bomber pilot, and the likelihood that he would not survive. She had sought to bury herself out here, partly because of love for this part of the country, but mostly because she was removed from life's other realities. Mail was always a slow process, and out here even slower. She hoped that by the time the bad news arrived, as she was sure it would, then so much time would have passed that it wouldn't hurt as much, and there would be so much to do that she wouldn't have time to cry. She struck gold getting to work with Peter. He was more than competent and she enjoyed every aspect of her job with him. He had a way of dealing with these desperate people in their lonely struggle to carve a living out of the land that made them grateful to him. She hoped that someday she could meet Gwen and tell her of the work that Peter did out here and the way he affected so many people's lives. She was certain that Peter would dismiss it all himself. For now though, there were the letters that she was afraid to read that still sat unopened on her lap.

Peter's father, a graduate of medicine from Sydney University and a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh, was a surgeon of considerable experience and some renown and a dedicated medicine man. His priority was the patient, not protocol or procedure. And he believed that the practice of medicine was only as good as the nursing staff. He was an army doctor in the First World War and he impressed upon his son that were it not for the courageous and tireless nurses, the casualties, in his opinion, would have been double the frightening figure they actually were. He instilled the same compassion and morality in Peter. A few weeks before Peter was to receive his doctorate, his father turned up with a bottle of Scotch whiskey and an invitation to sit and get stinking drunk. Peter and Gwen, not yet wed, planned a night at the cinema. Gwen overcame Peter's objections and they all sat in comfortable chairs and emptied the bottle while Peter's father shared his experiences. He was proud of Peter and also of Gwen, already a fine, experienced nurse and he told them both how he felt. He adamantly stated, when the conversation drifted to Peter's impending graduation,

that if he were the one setting the curriculum for medicine, he would insist that every doctor pass the examination for veterinary surgery first, and then have to practice the craft for one year before being allowed to work with humans.

“The thing about working with animals is that they can’t tell you what’s wrong or what hurts. They don’t know what you are doing or even that you are trying to help them. So, if you hurt them or frighten them in any way, well, most of them are bigger than you and you are in big trouble. If you can gain the trust of a sick, or injured and frightened animal to try and make it well again, then being a people doctor is a piece of cake”.

This was said in a rather inebriated slur that somehow managed to make him sound professorial. Then he turned to face Gwen and held his whiskey glass out in a toast.

“If you can do that, then you can get a good nurse to trust you as well. And a good nurse will make you into a pretty fine doctor indeed”.

Ros liked Peter Bellow. He was quiet and very professional but showed a lot of concern for his patients and treated them all with dignity and courtesy. This was her first position that dealt so intimately with so many blacks and he was very kind to them. She liked that. He was also kind to the much put upon aides and she liked that even better. He didn’t seem flappable. Nothing needed to be hurried, or at least that was the impression he always gave. He was able to move quickly to administer treatment but never seemed to be rushed as he did so. When it was necessary to move a patient he was able to do it without causing them any greater discomfort. She didn’t know how he did that and made it a point to watch him closely as he examined patients to see if she could discover the tricks he used. She spoke with Sister Lawton about him, trying to gauge the man better. She was slightly apprehensive towards the District Nurse. She was at least eight years older than Ros and with far more accredited experience. Yet Ros was the acting Matron and she was not certain how well this sat. She need not have worried. As for Peter Bellow, it didn’t seem of much matter whether he was dealing with an adult or child, black or white, male or female; he somehow appeared to be a specialist. He kept an open-mouthed jar on the edge of his desk. It was just within reach of the clinic chair he sat the children on to examine their ears and throat, and to manipulate their joints or listen to their heart. The jar was full of boiled-lollies, red-striped and strongly flavoured with peppermint. An adult couldn’t get a hand into the jar but a child could sneak a hand in and was able to extract a single lolly. Every child in the community knew the game. Near the end of the examination, Doctor Peter would swivel his squeaky, wooden office-chair around to write something on a pad of paper, just long



enough for a child, if quick, to lean over and snatch a lolly. Sometimes, he would turn away as if to write something down on the paper, but turn back abruptly as if he had forgotten something, giving the child a virtual heart attack. Sometimes he would turn away two or maybe three times. The look on the faces of the children as they sat there beaming and grinning from ear to ear was worth the price of a whole jar of lollies, even with sugar being seriously rationed. Ros was about to enter his examination room on her second day at the hospital and was in time to see a child steal a lolly. She wasn't certain how to react but knew she wasn't about to dob the child in, and thought of saying something to the doctor about, lead us not into temptation. Then she saw Peter swivel around and look sternly and suspiciously at the jar, and then at the child, who was doing all she could to keep from giggling. When Peter turned his back again and the child was able to snatch a second lolly, Ros almost giggled herself. She knew she was going to enjoy working with this man. Ros settled her body comfortably into the wicker chair, having fluffed up the pillows behind her back and tasted her own cup of tea. She sat there in pleasant silence for the moment and then began.

“When those two gins brought the boy to the hospital, Peter, they handed him over to our responsibility. They gave him to us. Those lubras weren't local. They knew he was dying and they needed to take a chance on us being able to save him. I sent Margaret out to find them later that day, but they had gone—back to wherever they came from, I suppose. I'm going to remember that day for a long, long time. It was so strange. I know Duncan wants to release the boy but release him where? He's not part of the local mob. He doesn't even speak their language. Margaret can't even find out his name. She says she doesn't understand what he is saying except for only a few words, that he is not from anywhere around here at all. She says none of the locals recognise those tribal markings carved on his abdomen and they all say he is a Myall”.

She wrinkled her nose at the vision of the tribal scars.

“I wish they wouldn't do that. I've been hoping those gins will turn up again to see how he is doing or if he died or whatever, but I don't think they are going to”.

Peter stayed silent waiting for Ros to get to the point.

“Do you know, Peter, he didn't even know how a door worked. How can somebody not know what a door is”?

Peter assumed the question was rhetorical but chose to interject anyway.

“Someone who has never seen one before, I would guess. Ros, there are lots of small groups of Abos living out there in the never-never that avoid any contact with civilisation. God alone knows why those Myalls brought him here but at the risk of presumption this is, after all, a hospital”.

“Peter, we can’t just stick a label on him saying ‘I’m cured’ and shoo him out the door to find his own way home. He’s frightened, and he doesn’t seem to trust the locals and he was absolutely terrified of us when he first was able to open his eyes”.

“You reckon? He didn’t seem all that frightened when he caught me out at baseball yesterday”.

“Well that’s the point. Something happened to him yesterday. I have no idea what it was but it definitely was a turn around. I think we have to help him do this. Besides, the way you play baseball anybody could have caught you out. Are you any better at cricket”?

For that she received a withering look. Deborah Lawton received one in turn for her muttered, hear, hear, just loud enough to be certain she was heard. There was a brief silence before Peter replied with a mock frigidity to his voice.

“I would suggest, Sister Watson, that you are speaking with the wrong person and you would be much better advised to have this conversation with the good and reverent Pastor Adair, who is, after all, the administrator of this fine establishment”.

“Oh, poor Duncan, I have been so frightful to him. He keeps asking me about the boy and I keep fobbing him off and pretending he isn’t quite mended yet”.

“May I remind you, Sister, that I am the District Medical Officer and the chief medical authority at this hospital and that it is I who has been delegated the responsibility of advising on things medical”?

Ros was mortified and very quickly began to stammer an apology.

“Doctor, of course you are. I am sorry if I was out of line. I didn’t mean to imply that—”

She then saw that Peter was smiling.

“You’ve already spoken to Duncan about this, haven’t you”?

“We discuss every patient every day when I am not on rounds. We had a particularly deep discussion about him late last night and again early this morning. Duncan too, noticed the change in the boy’s demeanour. And he too has attempted to speak with the boy and discovered the same dialect problem. Don’t sell Duncan short, Ros. He’s got a tough row to hoe here. He has to account for every single thing that happens in this community and at this hospital, not just to the Mission, but to a couple of government bodies as well. And that nonsense last year about the blacks from the Lutheran mission at Cooktown sending smoke signals to the Japs has brought every mission under scrutiny. This hospital is funded almost entirely by government, but it operates because of the Inland Mission. You and I are paid wholly by the government, but we *are* also wholly accountable to Duncan Adair”.

Ros nodded in acknowledgement. She was a little discomfited as she wondered how Peter came to hear of the treatment of the blacks at the Cape Bedford Lutheran Mission. It was a highly classified matter for Army Intelligence and she only came to learn of it because one of the nurses at Cairns Base Hospital was a sister of a sailor on the boat that transported them out of Cooktown to be relocated. The story of their treatment was abominable despite the fear and paranoia of the time. And it was ludicrous and insulting to think that these simple people were capable of such treachery. The injustice of that affair was part of the decision making process that caused Ros to apply for and accept the position as acting Matron at this remote station.

“What decision did you make, if I may be permitted to ask”?

Ros was uncertain if she had really been rebuked but decided that sincere-polite-formal would not be amiss. Peter put a damp finger on some biscuit crumbs left on the small plate and transferred them to his mouth.

“Duncan is much of the same mind as you, I gather. He is hoping that the women who brought him in were related to him and that they simply didn’t just find him out in the whoop-whoop somewhere, and that they might come back for him. Meanwhile, he thinks the boy should earn his keep as a Jacky-Jacky around here and maybe get some schooling. The first big problem is learning to communicate with him. And that, Acting Matron Watson, is to be your penance for your frightful treatment of the good Pastor. It was his decision and, I, of course, support and agree with him”.

Peter worked his way out of the chair, picked up his cup and headed indoors.

“Don’t forget your cup, dears”.

The screen door accentuated his departure with its customary bang on closing behind him. Ros and Deborah looked at each other, both with raised eyebrows and slightly pursed lips. Then they chortled, finished their tea and went to open the clinic.

### **CHAPTER 13**

#### ***Training Begins***

Ros tried all day to catch up with Duncan but from the moment the clinic opened until after supper, she always had something to finish. Days here were like that. There were times when everything that needed doing was finished and you sat around catching up on correspondence to friends and family and looking for things to keep you occupied, then others where you didn’t stop all day and feared it would be the next before you did. She rehearsed her speech. She asked Peter if she should perhaps apologise to Duncan. He mused rather theatrically and opined that she should, then made a query.

“What, exactly, were you planning on doing to him”?

She, in a manner not prescribed in any medical procedure, elbowed him in the ribs. She threw out her speech. She was finally able to make her way to Duncan’s office. The door was partially closed but a softly hissing Tilley Lamp on the desk showed that Duncan had as much catching up to do as she. She rapped gently on the door and pushed it slightly further open in order to peer around it and show herself.

“Ah, Matron, please come in. I have been hoping to catch up with you sometime today. Please, please, sit down”.

He pointed to the chair next to his desk that always reminded her of the chair in the headmistress’ office at boarding school. She was invited to sit in that chair as well more times than necessary and far more than she would have preferred. Duncan cleared a space in front of him by closing a manila file folder in which he was furiously writing, putting it aside, and then tidying up the blotter and penholder. He was about to give her his undivided attention. This was something that characterised Duncan Adair; anyone seeking an audience with him always was treated as a far more important event than anything he was already engrossed in. She was never certain if it described the man, Duncan, or Pastor Adair, but it was a little disconcerting at times. Ros found that even when she dropped into his office to make a simple request or to advise him on a routine matter that might take only a moment of his time, his reaction was invariably the same. As a consequence, she always tried to meet

him in slightly less formal circumstances but this, tonight, couldn't be helped. Duncan began as if the meeting had been his idea.

"Now, were you aware of the significant change in your young charge? He seems to have suddenly come out of a dark spot yesterday. Did you notice"?

It apparently didn't matter whether she had or not for he gave her no time to reply and continued.

"I think it is necessary to grab this opportunity and build on it. Yes. I think we must not let him go backwards. I do not wish to add to your burden of work but I would appreciate it very much, Matron, if you could please find the time to instruct the boy in English so that he can make his needs known to us. Can you do that"?

Ros was about to say something in reply but he cut across her thoughts again. She didn't know much about Duncan. His Presbyterian Scottish parents, or at least his father, left Aberdeen to eventually become missionaries in New Guinea. His parents were living and doing God's work in Africa when the imminent arrival of their first-born induced them to return to Scotland. Duncan's father, with the unlikely name of Rodney Leopold Adair, was an authority on malaria and other tropical diseases and a survivor of the 1918 Spanish Influenza outbreak that killed as many as fifty million people around the world. Still, he managed to die from malarial complications. Young Duncan wound up in Australia. He was young enough yet to acquire certain Australian colloquialisms and speech mannerisms but he retained a soft Scots accent that became more evident when he entered a serious discussion that required some considered wording. His burr was evident now.

"I am hoping that the women who brought him here will come back for him. I suspect though that they should not have done so and may even be punished for having done so. Some of the laws in their world are very strict. So, I suggest we put him to work here and when he is able, we can find a job for him on a cattle property somewhere so that he can make his own way in the world. Do you agree?"

He didn't wait for a reply.

"Good. Splendid. Now, what was it you wanted to talk to me about"?

Duncan opened his hands, palms up, as if waiting for something to be placed in them and smiled cordially in expectation. Ros felt as if she'd been ambushed but since everything was exactly as she would want it to be, could find no reason to demur or complain. Her father, who had

never been to sea in his life as far as she knew, always used the expression of having the wind taken out of one's sails. It was apt, for it was just the way Ros felt at the moment. She was going to have to try to make certain never to underestimate people in the future. After all, Duncan Adair's position here was a difficult one and he would not, she suddenly realised, have been appointed to it were he not supremely capable of doing the job. Ros stood and placed her palms against the front of her thighs as if she was holding down her skirts against a spanking breeze, shaking her head in the negative.

"No, that's what I wanted to speak with you about as well".

"Oh".

Duncan actually sounded disappointed that there was not another subject to discuss.

"Let me know how you get on then, would you? Have you found an opportunity to survey some of the medical stuff the Yanks left us? If you get the chance, you must try some of those cookies as they call them. Rather nice".

Though still in place, his smile somehow changed to one of dismissal, and Ros took the cue and departed with a hasty acknowledgement.

"Thank you. Good night, Pastor".

Ros completed her evening rounds and wrote her reports, feeling subdued, introspective and slightly defeated. She had no idea how to begin a dialogue with the boy or to make him understand what was in store for him. Things just went on without any forward plans up until now. That all changed after the meeting with Duncan. There was now a definite plan and it was her job to follow it through. She just didn't know how. It was so much easier thinking that something must be done. Anyone could be an authority on something must be done. It's the doing it that is the tricky part. She sat at her station doodling on a piece of paper as her mind went over the meeting earlier that evening. She tried to formulate some steps in the carrying out of the plan but that failed. Ros numbered the side of the paper from one to five to list the steps and their order of precession and stared vacantly at the numbers for several minutes. The end result, she knew, was for him to become a Jackeroo on a station property and so she wrote, Jacky, next to the five. It was hard to think of him as a grown man. She wondered if her poor pigeon was already homesick and if those gins that had lovingly carried him to the hospital had, indeed, suffered punishment for their caring as Duncan suspected. She remembered the word for pigeon that one of the

aboriginal aides used and wrote, Wonga=Pigeon. She dressed the words up with curlicues and drew five-pointed stars dancing around those and blocked in a rectangle, anything to keep from actually making a start. She stared at her scribble and realised that she had, in fact, already made a start. The boy needed a name and since no one, including Duncan, understood his Aboriginal name or if what he was saying was indeed his name, then, Jacky Wonga, was as good as any. All she had to do now was find some way to explain it to him. She threw the pencil on the slanted desk. It bounced and then rolled to the lip at the bottom. She put her notes away and went to bed.

## **CHAPTER 14**

### ***Breakthrough***

Ros collared Margaret, an aboriginal aide, at breakfast the next morning and asked her to come back for a quick chat. Margaret came to Stockley House from a convent school in the Sydney surrounds. Ros asked Margaret once, out of curiosity, how it was that she wound up in a convent school and why she was here working with Protestants. The answers she received were glib and unsatisfactory and Ros took the hint. Another enquiry about it to Duncan was glossed over and she concluded it was none of her business and promptly forgot about it. When they were together and basically, alone, Ros went on to explain what was about to happen with Jacky. He was to be used as much as possible around the station with any and every chore that he was strong enough to do. He was to be kept continually busy. But he wasn't to be treated as simply a worker. It was all designed to be an education for him. Ros didn't quite have it clear in her own mind, hence found it more difficult to explain it properly to Margaret. She persevered though and decided to take it one step at a time. Margaret never questioned any orders whether or not she agreed with them or even if, in fact, she understood them. But she did trust and like both Pastor Adair and Sister Ros and felt sympathy for Ros' poor pigeon so was eager to assist her in the plan. The theory proved more difficult than the actuality. Jacky was frustrated with not being able to communicate and the events of two days ago percolated through his head to produce questions demanding answers. It would have been impossible for him to be more receptive to the input of new ideas and understanding. He was in a positive frame of mind and in need of someone to help him learn everything there was to learn. He went in search of Ros. The first three words of a new language that he learned were his own name and, "good", and, "morning". He didn't understand the meaning of either of them though he did suspect that, "Jacky", might have something to do with him. Jacky still slept in the ward at nights for no reason other than any different decision was yet to be made. So he was never very far away when Doctor Peter and the

nursing sisters did their rounds. He heard the sound of Ros' voice approaching the ward and hustled to the doorway and was standing there as she appeared.

"Good morning, Jacky".

Ros then turned as Peter arrived.

"Good morning, Doctor".

A chorus of, "Good morning, Doctor", from the other two nurses promptly followed. Peter smiled and bade a, "Good morning, Matron", to Ros followed by, "Good morning, Nurses", to the others. Peter, as he was approaching the ward, heard Ros use the appellation, "Jacky", in her greeting to the boy. He turned deliberately to face the boy and smiled and said clearly and distinctly, "Good morning, Jacky". Jacky heard the expression many times before but it was simply unintelligible gibberish. Today however, it took on a new meaning and he was able to distinguish between the first and last parts. He was tempted to parrot the first part to see what the result might be, but the others already began to walk to the first bed, and Jacky, as usual these days followed them.

"Jacky".

Jacky turned to look at Ros, not because of any understanding but simply because she spoke a little loudly. He was surprised to see her holding out the piece of wood she used to draw the marks on that he assumed were sacred symbols. It was thrust at him in such a manner that he was obliged to take it from her. She turned away to talk to the doctor and they walked to the next bed. Jacky followed, trying discreetly to decipher the marks on the piece of wood. The usual examination took place and suddenly Ros again said, "Jacky", rather loudly, with the same result from Jacky. This time, she was holding out her hand in a silent demand for the object she had given him earlier. He passed it back. She made some more marks on it while speaking to the doctor.

"Here, Jacky"

Ros held the clipboard out to him again. There were only three occupied beds in the hospital. The third was a young ringer who made the mistake of forgetting which end of the bullock to be most careful of. The horn had caught him just below the belt buckle and punctured the flesh. The wound was not severe but Peter was worried about the aftermath of possible infection, so the ringer would get to lie on clean sheets for a couple of days. They all stopped by the side of the bed to the slight amusement of the ringer who considered any more than two people to be



a crowd. As Peter peeled back the bandage to examine the wound for signs of infection, Ros turned to find Jacky holding out the clipboard to her. He received a smile from her that almost made him tingle. Duncan appeared without warning. There was a chorus of, "Good morning, Pastor", to which Duncan returned a serial of individual greetings by name. He lastly turned to Jacky and bade him, "Good morning". At this point Peter stage-whispered the name, "Jacky", and Duncan turned again and amended the greeting to, "Good morning, Jacky". It was Jacky's big moment. He knew that something was needed at the end but he chanced repeating only the first part, "goodmorning". It got an abrupt, instant and surprising result. One surprise was a hug from Sister Ros. Another was a look of respect from the two men and the third was his own realisation that they would teach him anything he wanted to learn.

It is interesting how soon a good thing can turn to too much of a good thing. At first everyone wanted to teach Jacky anything and everything. He showed a degree of intensity and such a thirst to learn that was, of itself, very rewarding to the person that taught him anything. The more Jacky learned the less, he realised for himself, he understood. Each thing learned prompted the need to learn a hundred more. This was exacerbated by his lack of a common language. Each of these hurdles though, he took into his stride. Learning was not a chore; it was enlightenment. Understanding was not problematic; it was a doorway, and Jacky went through as many doorways as opened to him. The lustre of teaching finally grew pale beside the gleam of learning and people began avoiding Jacky as much as possible. Any proposition beginning with, "why" or, "how" or, "what" tended to remind people of another matter requiring their immediate attendance somewhere else. Finally, Jacky was enrolled for two hours of academic studies each morning and afternoon at the hands of Ros and Duncan. Everyone else suddenly became less jumpy. The intense tutelage at the hands of two of his favourite people paid handsome dividends and the end of each session was a disappointment to Jacky. He was provided with many and varied chores however. These, to his mind, were bestowed upon him and he carried them out with an impressive dedication. This left little time to pester those others who now felt a slight pang of disappointment at being left out of the loop. A boy named, Buluhlmang, was completely without prejudice. A few months later, a boy named, Jacky, was filled with contempt in varying degrees. No one had prompted or promoted such prejudices. It came as a consequence of his endeavour for knowledge. Jacky was, if he thought about it at all, trying desperately to catch up. He witnessed the side-by-side worlds of those within the primitive local community and the mind-boggling technology of the hospital. He watched these slow moving, tame people of the local community as they wandered the grounds of the hospital. He saw their obsequious

behaviour and felt repugnance. He studied the aides that worked in the hospital. They were, somehow, an amalgam of both. Margaret was by far the most educated and the most competent among them but even she displayed a certain reluctance to take her place in this exciting new order of things. Jacky now had a target at which to aim. To his mind, he was already far above that lowest strata, and he now set his sights to exceed the next level. His failing, of course, was that he was still working with the uninformed mind of a twelve-year-old and did not have an inkling of the prejudiced legislation that kept the black people in this invidious position. He thought he knew it all. Had he the competence of a mutual language, he would have expounded his masterful theories to any who would listen. Lacking such competence, he was thus spared the bemusement adults normally display towards the pronouncements of teenagers. Nevertheless, without regard for social status, education or even consent, the scheduled release of certain amino acids within his organs was shaping his body and even his brain. A new and regular diet hastened the onset. Jacky was growing up. Jacky acquired the English language as he acquired all knowledge. He was not proficient enough to translate from his own language into English, and simply compartmentalised his two lifestyles. Where the new religion being taught by his white mentors, for example, clashed or simply didn't fit what he already believed to be true, he shut one off from the other and learned the new religion as an academic construct. Writing, hence reading was a foreign concept to him. He knew and understood symbology and it was a potent force in his life. He just never conceived the possibility of conveying complex ideas by a written language. He knew it was so however, for he saw all those around him doing it almost constantly. He studied these symbols when the opportunity arose and decided that it was dauntingly impossible to learn and memorise the thousands of symbols used. He marvelled that so many could draw and interpret them with such ease. Then he was introduced to the alphabet. The day came when Jacky saw, for the first time, his own name written on a piece of paper. He learned to draw each letter of the alphabet in a shaky hand and then learned to draw different letters side by side to create a word that he knew and understood. But to see his own name written there and knowing that others could read it, as they demonstrated, was a profound and near religious experience for Jacky. This was the first thing that Jacky ever owned outright. It was not something that was communal. It was not something he was allowed to use then had to share with someone else. This was his. It could be his whenever he wanted and it could not be taken from him. He stared at the piece of paper with his possession on it for a long time. He drew it over and over again and asked others what it said. When they told him, he almost felt giddy. He spent countless hours learning to write the names of all those for whom he held respect or those few he regarded as kin. It was a time of ecstasy for Jacky. Three major personalities in his

life, Ros, Duncan and Deborah all had a neat and flowing style of forward slanted handwriting. Having mastered the printed version, Jacky took pains to copy that style of scripting. He literally spent hours copying notes they each had made, almost to the point of forgery. He simply loved to see words take shape as the pencil gave them birth across the page. He held a belief that if he could replicate the exact style then he could make the symbols speak in the voice of those he copied. Having mastered the art of copying, Jacky began to create his own notes, each written in the voice of his friends. It was, therefore, disconcerting for Duncan to occasionally find a note in his own hand and on his own desk that he had no recollection of ever having written. Peter Bellow, on the other hand, seemed to use different symbols for each combination of two letters that always appeared together, and he wrote in a vertical and abrupt manner that was anything but flowing. Jacky found it almost impossible to copy the style and was presented with sufficient difficulty to simply read the scratching. It somehow set the doctor apart and personified the man. And to Jacky, it seemed fitting.

Jacky had seen, he thought, everything there was to see in and around the hospital. Almost nothing surprised him anymore. He became used to the noises and even accepted the daily sessions of the radio. He didn't and couldn't understand it all but he was prepared to concede that it wasn't magic. Anything he could learn to operate he spent as much time operating as he could get away with. This included the generator on the oily cement pad in a small hut at the rear of the building. Being able to bring it to life was an unimaginable thrill of which he never tired. The roaring diesel engine gave him a sense of power as he stood as close to it as he dared. Though the heat was unbearable and the smell of the raw diesel oil and the acrid exhaust not the least enjoyable, there was something empowering about being able to bring it to life and to take it to death. Duncan, in addition to his many other talents, was an adept at combustion engines and compression motors. It was he who lovingly maintained the diesel motor that drove the generator. To do so without Jacky peering over his shoulder just to the point of being yelled at was hopeless. Giving in to Jacky's enthusiasm, it was he who taught Jacky the intricacies of oiling, fuelling and operating the motor, and the hazards of the hand-crank that made its heart beat. Jacky did not grasp electricity other than it was a result of the generator. That too was fascinating. Some things, once explained, became part of his understanding. Some things, like the workings of the two kerosene fridges in the kitchen that made things cold by fire, were simply beyond his understanding. Some things, though, were part of a recurring nightmare.

It was late afternoon and Duncan Adair came out into the sunbaked yard. Duncan was a tall, large and beefy individual with short-cropped

red hair and freckled skin that seemed to perennially suffer from the effects of the sun. Duncan had no need to foster an image at 58 years, and dressed to suit whatever he deemed was appropriate for the occasion. That was further modified by a very limited selection in his wardrobe. Any image of what a Pastor should look like did not fit well with that of Duncan, who seemed closer to the image of a foundry worker than a spiritual leader. Clothes did not sit well on him. He tended to wear grey work clothes that seemed never to have known an iron. The pants were inches too short and the shirtsleeves, normally rolled up, were too short for his arms when rolled down. Nor could the buttons of the cuffs be fastened around his thick wrists. The leather belt seemed to be just long enough for his girth and was notched at the first hole so that the overlap wasn't long enough to fit the next belt-loop and hung down, unsecured. Whenever he was in the yard, it was generally to do some manual chore or other, and he affected a greasy and dusty looking wide-brimmed hat that added to his height. Few people chose to argue with Duncan. His mere presence was a serious deterrent. He always spoke softly. That combination of quiet confidence and perceived strength was a menace for any that might contemplate a challenge. Jacky was already there in the yard, studying and marvelling at the woven wire mesh of the front fence. He was waiting. Doctor Peter called by radio earlier in the day saying he was bringing a patient in to the hospital. He gave an estimated time of arrival. One of Jacky's latest and proudest accomplishments was learning to tell time. He was taught to do so out of necessity. Jacky loved both doing his chores and his sessions of tutelage with Ros and Duncan. He would inconveniently turn up too early or too late for his lessons and would be told that he should arrive for a lesson in accord with the placement of the big and little hands of the clock. This resulted in Jacky rushing in to examine the clock every few minutes to see where the hands were positioned. Peter Bellow, in self-defence, taught him to tell time and how to mentally gauge the passage of time. Jacky wished only that the school clock hanging on the wall in the examination room needed to be wound more frequently. That task was awarded to him and he wore the honour proudly. Jacky was thus standing in the yard testing his ability to determine correctly the time when the Doctor would arrive. One thing Jacky had not been able to bring himself to touch or even broach the subject of, was a black device with two large perfectly round rings. It was the property of Duncan Adair, who, Jacky understood from simple observation, was the headman here. No one else touched it. He had no idea what the penalty might be for doing so, but he was certainly not inclined to find out. He had on three occasions, at least, seen this powerful person command this object to life and to carry him on its back almost faster than Jacky could run. The creature was left to stand against the wall when Duncan was carried back again, to wait until it was next brought to life and commanded to carry Duncan somewhere. Jacky took pains to walk a wide circle around

the object whenever he was obliged to be close to it. Duncan stopped staring in the direction from where Peter and Deborah were to approach and turned to the east to study the sky. He stood stock-still, watching, then suddenly turned and began to walk around the back of the building. He pulled the bicycle away from the wall, mounted and began riding towards the airstrip. The bicycle looked insignificant under his massive frame and anyone watching felt there should have been some kind of protest from the machine. Jacky followed in his imprinted duck fashion. Duncan dismounted and propped the bike against the fence and Jacky, arriving somewhat puffed from running after, moved far around it. Then he heard a familiar nightmarish noise. His belly turned to ice. Duncan could hear it too but stood watching the distant speck on its first approach to announce its arrival and perform a flyby to check out the strip.

Jacky would remember this event far into the future as well. He did not know what to expect other than terror and he desperately wanted to cling hold of Duncan's hand hanging loosely at his side. He unconsciously moved closer to the big man. Duncan chanced to glance at Jacky to see why he was so close and saw the cowering body language. He put a heavy arm around Jacky. Jacky was used to being close to other males and to being touched by them in ceremony and ministrations, but he was not used to being protected by them. It felt strange but it felt good. He was glad Duncan was here. He was glad he was here with Duncan. The Flying Doctor aircraft, a DH-84 Dragon, roared the length of the strip barely a hundred feet high and began a climb to set up a final approach into the wind. A few kangaroos were lazing in the heat of the afternoon at the end of the extended strip, but they bounded off as the aircraft buzzed them. Duncan, ordering a terrified Jacky to follow him on to the hard-packed dirt strip strode off. Jacky was not about to stand there all by himself, and even if he had not been so ordered, he followed Duncan as closely as possible. Duncan surveyed the strip and found nothing untoward other than two beginning termite mounds several inches high. No other kangaroos or debris were obstructing the runway. He set about kicking down one ant's nest while pointing the other out to Jacky. Duncan was wearing boots whereas Jacky was barefoot. Nonetheless he kicked at the mound with absolutely no reason as to why. Several kicks later he managed to knock it over it with some little satisfaction. He then began nervously to wonder whence the nightmare had disappeared. He had watched it until losing it against the afternoon sun and then been obliged to follow Duncan to the runway. Duncan looked up behind Jacky. Jacky saw the direction of the look and his heart felt like it just popped into his mouth and his belly grew cold again. He knew the nightmare was coming behind him, but how far? He wanted to run but his stick-legs suddenly had all gone rubbery. Duncan took one long last-look up and down the runway and smiled at Jacky.

“That should do it, mate. Let’s go”.

He put his beefy hand between Jacky’s shoulder blades and nudged him gently in the direction of the fence. Jacky found his legs and, trying not to outpace Duncan, moved off the strip. He earnestly resisted turning to look to his left. They both stood watching the twin-engine bi-plane on its final approach. Duncan had once again placed a heavy arm across Jacky’s shoulders but he made it feel matey, and not protective. Jacky was actually aware of the difference and he appreciated the opportunity to show he was a man. He steadfastly refused to give any outward sign of fear or apprehension. It was clear that Duncan was untroubled so it followed he shouldn’t be either. The aircraft, once it had bounced to the ground at the end of the strip became no more fearful than the other vehicles that came and went every several days. Except that this one was far noisier, and bigger. It rumbled past them in a Doppler-roar that beat the eardrums as it traversed the strip. There the noise intensified and the machine slowly spun around to face them and to lumber and bounce its way back to where they were standing. It turned towards them when it got level, and advanced. Jacky forgot all about his earlier resolve and took a hesitant step back but was impeded by Duncan’s arm. The aircraft, thankfully, stopped, the engines revving to an almost scream while they rent the air around them. Then they noticeably powered down and off. The propellers spun slowly a few times, spun back and stopped. The sudden silence was unnerving. Another distant, whining engine-noise was approaching them from behind. Jacky turned to see Peter’s vehicle arriving. There was movement at the aircraft. Duncan began to walk towards the runway again. Doctor Peter and Sister Lawton pulled up and drove out to stop next to the plane. Jacky was having trouble following all this activity but it all appeared to be happening out there and so he made a few tentative steps that way too. He was soon standing next to the fuselage behind the massive wings with their confusing maze of strut and guy-wire. It was truly impressive. He was not exactly certain what was happening but a man, bloody and bandaged, was on a stretcher (which he now knew all about) and it looked like Peter, Duncan and another man inside were now trying to drag the stretcher into the aircraft. Jacky stepped forward to steady one corner and lent his weight to the lift. He could see a nurse through the doorway of the aircraft. Suddenly it was all done. Peter and Deborah climbed into their vehicle. The door to the aircraft was pulled shut. Duncan dragged Jacky along by the arm till they stood at the fence. He motioned for Jacky to stay put and, for the moment, a still nervous Jacky was not inclined to argue. Duncan strode back to the Dragon and stood in front of the starboard engine as if about to do battle with the beast. A signal that Jacky couldn’t see occurred and Duncan reached up and swung the propeller. The engine putted, coughed and roared to life

with dust from the strip whipping off behind it. Duncan moved around to the port engine and, standing squarely in front, swung through that propeller with the same result. Satisfied, he raised a fist into the air, turned and walked back to the fence. The twin engines of the airplane whirred and revved, finally catching themselves in a synchronised roar. The roar reached vibration levels and slowly, reluctantly, the airplane turned away from them and sedately made its way to the end of the strip. It increased the noise level, turned around to face into the wind. The noise built up louder, and even from this distance Jacky could see the aircraft trembling. Then it began to trundle forward. It gained speed. It moved faster still, leaned forward, and as it drew level with them, it began to claw its way into the air. Nothing in Jacky's life thus far had seemed so magnificent. Even a gentle tugging by Duncan could not stop him watching this fabulous event out of sight. Duncan and he walked the half-mile back to the hospital. Duncan pushing the bicycle, Jacky sorting out his feelings, and managing to put an innocent hand on to the bike from time to time.

Jacky was given the second thing that he was to ever own outright only a short while later. Sister Ros called him out of the vegetable garden where he was engrossed in weeding out those plants that didn't belong there. Most people charged with that onerous task would consider it a chore. Jacky didn't. He looked upon all of the chores he was allocated as a privilege in fact, and not as an odious duty to be performed under some duress. Most of the work assigned to Jacky involved the use of machinery or devices that were fascinating to him. Even the simple event of shutting or opening a gate was rewarding to him and he took considerable pride in doing it well. Hence, given a hoe and a tool for sharpening it was a delight. To use the hoe, deftly and with purpose, filled him with a sense of accomplishment. And the fact that he could, whenever he chose, sample the swollen foods growing there, gave him a great sense of wellbeing. For some reason, potatoes favoured the sandy soil and there was always an overabundance. Jacky developed a taste for the small new potatoes, which he ate raw. Another crop that did particularly well was a waxy grey-green pumpkin known as a Queensland Blue. These grew from a mound of soil at the back of the garden bed and the large yellow flowers and the huge, heavy gourds were a gardener's delight. Roast pumpkin was an accompaniment to most meals at the hospital and Jacky learned to love it. It was with the pride of a breadwinner that Jacky took the boxes of the harvested vegetables to the kitchen and to watch those he loved eating them. When others commented on how well he did his chores and, in particular, how well the garden was growing under his stewardship he was unable to stop a self-satisfied grin from appearing. Thus, both parties were rewarded. A garden tool shed, converted to a humpy, and not too far from the garden, became his living quarters. An army camp cot had somehow been

diverted and this became Jacky's bed. He was given an oil lamp for his own personal use and a lantern for night-use around the premises. He treasured both. Wax Vestas to light the lamps were as thrilling as contraband fireworks to a teenager. Part of the problem of the garden was that blacks, as quiet as shadows, made off with much of the vegetables during the night. They were particularly fond of the sweet potatoes that grew from a mound next to the pumpkin and frequently bandicooted them, digging up the tuber and replacing the green tops so that they looked untouched. The sweet potatoes tasted better than yams, were considerably larger and easier by far to dig up. This was to lead to some major dilemmas for Jacky and to provide the basis for many personal prejudices. He simply couldn't see why these sad look-alikes were unable to plant their own gardens. He resented the thefts. It was he who tended the vegetables. It was he who planted most of them (under instruction) and it was they doing the stealing. There was, somehow, a certain lack of justice inherent in the matter and it bothered him. Worse, his complaints to Duncan Adair were met with excuses for their behaviour. It just didn't seem fair. Jacky wasn't certain what he resented most, the fact that they made off with the vegetables or that they made off with the vegetables despite all of his attempts to safeguard them.

Sister Ros was standing on the veranda and could be seen mostly as silhouette but there was no mistaking a baseball bat that she was using as one does a walking stick. Jacky sensed something important was about to happen and he wanted to savour the moment so it took him a while to advance as far as the veranda. And it took him, as it always did, a while to negotiate the stairs. Climbing pathways and clambering over rocks is something that everyone is capable of doing. Climbing a set of precise stairs is something that must be learned. Small children are able to climb onto each step and then begin the next. But normal stairs are designed for one foot only, and to push off with that foot to attain the next step is not intuitive to the brain. It must be learned. And, once learned, it is difficult to climb stairs with a tread so wide that a pace in between is needed. It is interesting to watch small children attempt to step onto a moving escalator. It is even more interesting to watch experienced people attempting to use an escalator that is stationary. It would, in fact, take Jacky almost a year to routinely negotiate stairs. He found the veranda floor with a foot that was poised for a greater effort and put his foot down, as he almost always did, a little too heavily. But he was there. And he was looking at the items Sister Ros was holding in her hands. Ros saw the perspiration drenching Jacky's shirt and beading on his ebony brow and realised how hot it must be in the sun, for it was uncomfortably hot and humid enough in the shade on the veranda. She saw the sweat-stains on the hat that was rarely absent from his head. The crown and brim were shaped in a familiar manner



and she smiled with the realisation that it mimicked Duncan's tattered piece of felt. She practiced making this speech, but it was by no means a matter of simple rote. And she began almost hesitantly.

"Jacky, do you remember when the soldiers came here? Those black soldiers? Do you remember Albert"?

An epiphanic event, such as that day was for Jacky, could scarcely be forgotten. He did not know an Albert, yet Jacky sensed that Ros was referring to his smiling friend of that day. And so he nodded in agreement.

"He said he thought of you as his younger brother. He wanted me to give these things to you when you learned to speak English. He wanted you to remember him".

She handed over the glove, ball and bat to a stunned and stricken Jacky. However Ros may have pictured Jacky's reaction to these gifts, she could not have anticipated the actual result. Jacky's face suddenly contorted, he virtually threw the items to the ground, spun around and leaped off the veranda and running as quickly as she ever saw him run, disappeared from sight. She thought to call after him but was at a complete loss to understand this, thus far, uncharacteristic behaviour. She waited a while then bent down and picked up the glove and bat and retrieved the ball that rolled almost the length of the veranda before being caught by the railing. She leaned the bat against the wall, placed ball in glove and put them onto the small side table. Still puzzled, she went back inside, allowing the screen door to be her exclamation point. Jacky ran until he stood under the sky. He could see nothing but horizon in any direction. He stood there amid patches of tough, dry, yellow grass and hard-packed, red dirt. The only sounds were his laboured breathing and the strangled call of a distant crow. He trod heavily on a sharp stone in his race from the veranda and it finally began to pain him. He wanted to look at it to make sure it wasn't bleeding but simply stood there in the sun unable to move. His breathing returned to normal and the crow stopped its protest and the silence enveloped him like a shroud. The sky was a cloudless, brilliant blue that promised more heat, and even the horizon was clear of the, now late, monsoonal cumulus that promised the wet to be not far away. He watched large, black ants scurrying hastily across the red soil as if they had important jobs to attend to and were running out of time. And tears began to fall from his stinging eyes and slide down his cheek. A stone was embedded in the soil next to his foot. He looked at it for a while, studying it. Then he bent down, angrily prised it free of the dirt and threw it with all of his might at an imaginary demon that stood somewhere in front of him. He would have thrown another just as hard but there wasn't any other stone

or rock close to hand. He just stood there and continued to cry. Then stopped and took a moment to look at his injured foot. It wasn't bleeding but it was probably bruised and Jacky rubbed it soothingly as one rubs a youngster's perceived injury. Jacky was, as was any child entering his teenage years, subject to raging hormones. Exhilaration and depression picked him up and slammed him down so frequently in the past months that he was hard-pressed to determine a median. The worrying and inexplicable loss of his aunts and others of whom he was fond, chronically threatened to overwhelm him and he was forced to keep it all in tight check. The trauma of this new predicament, and predicament it was, exerted immense pressure on him. He continually had to hold himself back from running away. His only argument to prevent a headlong flight of escape was that there was no place to which to run. Still, the urge to simply stampede in panic created a certain amount of skittishness that kept him under stress. What prompted this last breakdown was the image of the soldier having called him his brother; a moment in itself, and awarding him something that was, to Jacky, the virtual Holy Grail of sacred items. The totemic-magic of those crafted items was to Jacky, who had seldom known a surplus of anything, the epitome of all that represented the earth-spirit. The impact of this munificence by a man of such obvious importance and potency was overwhelming to Jacky. And the fact that he, as had his aunts, disappeared out of his life, but somehow was able to reach back and touch him so strongly, so forcefully, gutted Jacky. He was unable to absorb and process such a magnitude of emotion. Nor could he allow his adored Ros to witness the weakness of his deflation and collapse. The sun burned hot through his shirt but Jacky continued to stand there morose and forlorn. He could think of nothing else to do. Finally, as standing there was achieving nothing and his foot still hurt, he drifted back to the hospital, slowly and without any formula or plan. He just had nowhere else to go. He stood in front of the veranda for some time looking at the gifts. He hadn't expected them to be there. He expected they would have been taken back and given to someone more worthy. Maybe they had. Someone calling out from inside the building startled Jacky into movement. He went back to the vegetable garden and resumed his chores. The bat, ball and mitt stayed on the veranda exactly as they were left for more than a week. Ros spoke with both Peter and Pastor Adair about Jacky's extraordinary reaction. Peter offered a clinical observation but it was Duncan who reminded Ros that she was responsible for healing the wounds of the body. Jacky was a child of God and it was God who was responsible for healing the wounds of the soul. He suggested simply leaving the items on the veranda where they were until God had spoken to Jacky about them. She wished that she could find the faith that guided these people of the cloth. Peter told her not to make any mention of the event as that could magnify it out of proportion. Everyone knew the boy was troubled but he seemed to be

finding his own way out of the quagmire of his trauma. So, let it be, was his observation. Ros had no answer of her own, either as to what precipitated the event or what treatment it required. So she went along with both sets of advice and left the baseball equipment on the veranda and pretended nothing untoward had occurred in her dealings with Jacky.

Jacky went from ignoring the items to touching them to picking them up and putting them back as he found them. He was still afraid that they would be taken away or now belonged to someone else. Hence he was still surprised and relieved each day when he saw them sitting, untouched on the veranda. At week's end, he daringly took all three items and placed them under his bed in the humpy. That brought about no reaction. No one queried their disappearance and no search for the missing items was initiated. No one even mentioned them. So a week later he carried them with him through the hospital to gauge reaction. There was none. He was totally ignored insofar as the baseball equipment was concerned. He stowed them back under his bed. Peter watched the progressive events and the next time he saw Jacky, he gave him some oil for preserving leather and told Jacky how to use it on the baseball glove. Jacky was so pleased with the world that he was humming the crooning lullaby melody of a favoured hymn from the Sunday services as he passed Pastor Adair's office. It took Duncan a few moments to recognise, Rock of Ages. Duncan smiled.

## **CHAPTER 15**

### ***Another year older***

Metaphors of turning points or hurdles leapt are often used to describe a specific moment of a significantly changed event. Jacky's final bout of trauma-induced manic-depression was not such an event. The condition simply no longer existed. It became clear to Jacky that his life was in his own hands and that those around him were prepared to accept him for whatever worth he displayed and for the value of what he achieved tomorrow. His status, he realised, depended solely on him. He was an equal partner in life. Filled with this new comprehension, Jacky experienced inner calm and peace. He was in rapture. He found Nirvana. He was one with the Universe. The earth-spirit of the Dreaming enfolded him. He found God. Simply put, Jacky was alive and well, and much advanced on his own Road to Damascus. Earlier, before these events, 1943 became 1944. The war seemed less obtrusive and certainly less threatening of invasion. Everyone knew the invasion of Europe however, must be soon. By the end of June and the successful D-Day invasion at Normandy, people were planning a Christmas with the boys at home, for they were certain it would be all over by year's end.

Optimism on all fronts was running high. Peter Bellow took leave to resume his marriage to Gwen. Together, they visited Peter's dad, now retired from practice but certainly not from life and consultancy. Deborah Lawton cried for most of one morning when she opened a letter from her bomber-pilot husband, still stationed in England, to tell her he had completed his tour of duty and was now training other pilots for their deadly missions. He was safe, and would remain that way.

December was a busy month for a Christian religious office. This one of two significant calendar events occupied everyone, in spirit if not in detail. Jacky was excited in an anticipatory way for what would amount to this whites' version of a corroboree. He understood it not at all the first time, neither the significance nor the celebration. He did not comprehend the rituals, especially the involved one of gifting. Ros presented him with a wide-brimmed hat. It was not something with which he was familiar, nor could see the value of, and would not have worn it except it appeared to be similar to the head covering his mentor, Duncan, wore, though smaller. Consequently, he was seldom without it, and Ros was pleased he liked it so much. What Jacky did remember from his first Christmas, was the many and varied sweet-treats. He was hoping they were part of the event and would reappear this year. The missionaries did their best to explain the spirit and the religious significance of this month to all of their charges. Jacky was happy to observe and participate (for they planned a Christmas pageant that was to include Jacky in a starring role) in the festival. It was very much in keeping with the significant ceremonies of his own past life; a life that was tending to be relegated more often to the rear corridors of his mind. Jacky's fluency of English was still weak though he understood what was being said better than he could conjure it up to speak it, which he did with a slight Victorian accent due to Ros' influence. He was content to let it splash about him like a small spout in a flow of water whenever he became involved in a lengthy discussion or lecture. Sister Ros attempted to tell Jacky of her own experiences of Christmas as a child. She went on to tell of the feasting, the singing, the gathering of families and friends. All these events of corroboree were very familiar things to Jacky. He always paid close attention to Ros. She generally painted her lips the colour of the ripe-berries that birds liked to eat. It was enjoyable to look at her blue eyes, now that he was accustomed to them and they were not so frightening or repulsive as when he first saw them, and to watch her mouth move as she spoke. He always tried to stand close enough to smell the fragrance that surrounded her from his memory of that day on the veranda when the soldier had conspiratorially winked at him. Ros explained to him about the giving of presents in memory of, and to perpetuate the giving of gifts to the Christ Child by the Magi. She also told him that family and friends gave presents to each other on their birthday but as her birthday was only three days before Christmas, she

often missed out on greedily receiving her share, when compared, say, to her brother and sister. Much of the meaning and relative importance was lost on Jacky who neither understood scheduled days of gift-giving or some of the words that tumbled out of her mouth. But he was happy enough to be near her and to have her undivided attention for she frequently smiled at him and his stomach did funny things whenever that happened.

Ros wrote to her parents early in November in a special letter in addition to the regular correspondence that she took pains to complete and mail. Her prosperous family owned a sheep station in Victoria. Ros had an elder brother and a younger sister. Another brother, the youngest in the family, succumbed to poliomyelitis a scant three years earlier. Ros' original ambition was to become a large-animal veterinarian. At that time her male friend was soon to be a veterinarian and Ros hoped, no, daydreamed that she and he might be partners in practice and, if she allowed herself to turn daydream to fantasy, partners in life. No veterinary school would accept her. Female professional anything was a difficult pursuit in a male-dominated society. When her brother contracted poliomyelitis she edged her way into medicine and nursing. She became, naturally, caught up in the debate in the treatment of poliomyelitis. She not only sided with the Sister Kenny therapy regimen, but was making her way to Mackay in Queensland hoping to join a clinic there. Then the war overtook her and bent her pathway and altered her priorities. She applied for a position at the Cairns Base Hospital and took one-way passage to Cairns out of Brisbane on a weekly steamer for £4/12/6. Ros always considered that trip to be the start of a second adventure and the folded ticket became part of her treasured mementoes that she kept for the rest of her life. Her male friend joined the Australian Imperial Forces. He was now thought to be a prisoner of war of the Japs. No word of his death or capture had reached his family or friends, but no word was better than certain knowledge. Though Ros dated or saw other men as she was moved to from time to time, she remained just a little distant as if waiting for the eventual return of her one true love. The fact simply was that Ros was a practical person. This was not the time to involve oneself in cemented relationships to be subjected to enforced and maybe permanent estrangement. She had seen this war inflict far too much grief and tragedy on dear friends and their families to wear her heart on her sleeve. The extra letter to her parents was a shopping list of items not available in her remote part of the country. Ros arranged for most of her stipend to be sent to her parents' account. She fully expected to return to the sheep-station and resume her life there when the war ended. The items she listed were planned for Christmas giving. She managed to arrange for presents to her family to be delivered a few days before Christmas but now needed special gifts for those close to her at the hospital. The advent of Jacky

imposed some new requirements and she penned another short paragraph asking for some small gifts that he could, in turn, give to others. She did not want him left out of these important celebrations.

It was Friday morning. Cloud and heat built up and the weather was oppressive with humidity. Everyone who could stay in the shade, stayed in the shade. Perspiration dripped from arms and faces while simply sitting still, so movement was kept to a minimum. The sun still hadn't reached its zenith and not a breath of air moved on the veranda or elsewhere. Ros and Peter were both on the veranda, drinking tea and avoiding anything involving work. Ros remembered wet-season days like this from her time in Cairns. At least there, though, she could go to sit under the shady trees next to the sea and find some semblance of a breeze if the sandflies weren't too active. She loved Cairns from her short time there and it would always have a place in her heart. They both heard the distant drone. They raised eyebrows at each other, confirming that neither knew of any planned flight inbound. Neither really wanted to move from their comfortable positions but the event warranted investigation. They both stood at the same moment, almost as if responding to an agreed pact, and wandered to the edge of the porch. Ros' uniform was sticking uncomfortably and immodestly to her body and she discreetly tugged it free. They could not see the source of the drone but the sound confirmed it was approaching the hospital. Neither Ros nor Peter was prepared to step out into the full blast of the sun until and unless necessary. The screen door made its protest as Duncan joined them on the veranda. It seldom mattered if the arrival of a visitor was on horseback, bicycle or petrol-driven motor, Duncan was somehow tuned in and among the first to arrive to greet the visitor. In this respect, Ros was reminded of her family dog. It could be fast asleep but a single footfall on its side of the gate brought it up barking and eager to greet or ward off trespassers. This was a resemblance she would keep from Duncan, however.

The sound of the approaching vehicle eventually confirmed it was not an aircraft. It was a motorcycle with sidecar destined for the hospital and it swung into the long drive off the dusty road. Duncan, Peter and Ros all braved the fierce sun and walked down to the gate to meet it. Ros was surveying the shadow cast by the air raid siren tower and hoping she would be able to stand in it and so jockeyed for that position as they walked. The motorcycle stopped and the driver killed the thudding engine. He was an Australian soldier. He removed his gauntlets and helmet and dusted himself off before fumbling in the sidecar and pulling out a slouch hat to replace the goggled helmet. He was wearing a full kit of wool tunic buttoned to the collar and pants wedged to boots by gaiters, and a wide web belt. This was despite the heat and humidity that would have made the uniform unbearably uncomfortable. It looked

unpressed, misshapen and ill fitting and a misery to wear at any time. Ros mentally compared this to the tailored and fashionable uniforms of the Americans and felt sorry for her countrymen for losing so badly in the fashion stakes. Ros guessed the Digger to be in his thirties and his eyes had that quiet look so many men had these days. It wasn't like that when they all joined up, eager for adventure and filled with patriotism. But when they came back, reluctant to talk about their exploits except with their mates, their eyes all had that quiet look. His smile was pure larrikin though and it shone past his troubled eyes. He lifted his chin to tilt back the brim of the slouch hat.

"G'day".

He meant it for the pretty sheila nurse but Peter was unlatching the gate to bid him entry and it was he who replied.

"G'day, Sarge".

"I've got a parcel for a Pastor Adair, if he's about".

The soldier stayed put despite the open gate and made his announcement with a flat Queenslander drawl. Duncan stepped forward and opened the gate further.

"Too right, mate, you found him. But let's have a cuppa first, and then we'll worry about the parcel".

The chameleon-like ability of Duncan to shift his speech to fit any occasion once more awed Ros. And the sergeant grinned back at Duncan.

"You won me, mate. Never pass up the chance for a cuppa".

He stepped back to the sidecar to extract a large squarish cardboard-carton. An envelope with oversized printing was stuck on the top of the box. It was addressed to Pastor Duncan Adair, and Ros, with a quick glance, thought it looked disturbingly familiar but she had no chance to examine it. They all marched back to the welcome shade of the veranda where Duncan took the carton from the sergeant and went inside to arrange for some tea and sandwiches to be served on the porch. Both Ros and Peter, engaging in small talk with the sergeant who was perched uncomfortably on one of the squatter chairs, tried to extract some detail about the parcel as its method of delivery was, to say the least, curious.

“You’ve got me, mate. It’s top secret or something, I suppose. It came all the way through channels and wound up in my lap. I’m just doin’ what I’m told, mate, just doin’ what I’m bloody told”.

Faced with this obvious stone-wall and well aware of the admonition of loose lips sink ships, both Ros and Peter returned to small talk; the fact that the US presence in Australia had all but disappeared now and other rumours that always abounded about the war effort. When the sergeant made to leave an hour or so later, he managed to get Duncan off to one side for a quiet chat that resulted in several nods of the head by Duncan and a firm departure handshake. The rest of the day passed uneventfully until tea. The meal was served and consumed and everyone at the table was waiting for dessert, usually, with luck, stewed-fruit or bread-pudding. The strains of several voices singing, more or less in unison, for she’s a jolly good fellow, preceded the opening of the door to the servery and the ushering in of several aides with a cake on a platter, adorned with three lit votive candles. A blushing and flustered Ros had known it was her birthday but did not know how the others discovered it. The cake, when she was given the honour of slicing it, was her childhood favourite. The cake alone, given the extreme rationing situation, was cause for celebration but it being her favourite hinted at some collusion and preparation, and Ros became warily suspicious. Then Duncan presented her with a small, tissue-wrapped box and wished her many happy returns. Duncan also gave her the box that had arrived earlier in the day, before she could recover her wits. It too belonged to her and a letter of explanation was enclosed. But before Ros had time to read the letter and sort through the carton, Duncan took her aside and explained briefly that it all was from her parents in Victoria. They had received her shopping lists, including the amendments, and packed all of the requests into the box along with a surprise birthday present. Her mother had included all of the ingredients, a tin of butter and the recipe for Ros’ birthday cake. The aides had baked and frosted it for her. This was the surprise part of the gift and the reason it was sent care of Pastor Adair. Her mother also added a dozen homemade, individually wrapped, boiled-Christmas-puddings, replete with the traditional sixpence in each one all on behalf of Duncan by way of a thank you. What Ros hadn’t known and still didn’t know was that, in addition to her own letters about life in this out of the way place, her parents received regular reports from Duncan, keeping them informed of their beloved daughter.

The problem had been in finding a way to get the parcel to so remote a place in time for her birthday if even in time for Christmas. For once though, the war worked to their advantage. The laconic Hugh (Dunny) Dunston from the adjoining property was now Major Hugh Lloyd Dunston DSO. He was happy to call in some favours and orchestrate a delivery system that got the parcel on board an American military flight



to Darwin. It then filtered down until winding up in the hands of a certain sergeant in the AIF with instructions as to where to take it and to whom to deliver it. The whole operation took three days from conception to completion. The sergeant, for his trouble, was given a bottle of bourbon, compliments of an American canteen officer who had shepherded the op from its inception. Later that same evening, Duncan was completing a required form. He carefully began to fill in the spaces: Jacky Wonga. Male. Aborigine. He stopped at the next space requesting Date of Birth. He deliberated for a moment and then penned 22 12 1932. Jacky Wonga officially existed the moment Duncan scratched his signature at the bottom of the completed form. Duncan blotted the ink. He was thinking of those plum puddings.

The first of the wet-season rains began on Christmas Day that year to turn the dusty roads into impassable mires of mud that halted the delivery of supplies and isolated the stations. Drovers, happy to see the rains start for it would bring feed for the stock, cursed it as rivers broke their banks and swollen creeks claimed bullocks. Dingoes chased cows into soft mud where they foundered and became trapped, easy prey. Life in the outback was as harsh in the wet as it was in the dry. Many were injured, many died and many gave it up and went to live in the towns and cities. Most of those regretted the decision. The oath to never throw another leg over a horse rang hollow as the lonely, harsh and bitter life was forgotten and replaced with the memory of friends and mates that were always there to lend an unquestioned hand. The Christmas pageant was as well received as if it were performed by a troupe of professional players. People laughed and people applauded and people forgot the war and people passed small presents to one another. Ros took Jacky aside and gave him several small parcels. She explained that these were for him to give to special people. She got him to write out names on small pieces of card. She tucked the relevant name under the ribbon of each parcel. Jacky was unsure what was happening nor of his role in the event. He understood what he was to do but uncertain of the result. As he passed each gift on to the person named on the card and watched them unwrap the parcel however, he felt mounting excitement to see their reaction. Jacky was learning the joy of giving. He had a gift to give Pastor Adair, Doctor Peter, Sister Lawton, Margaret and one of the missionaries who had taken over much of his formal education, Therese Beckwith from Adelaide. Therese later married her long-time friend from Adelaide, Thomas Folger. She included this particular celebration of an outback Christmas in a series of stories chronicling the life of a missionary in these remote places in those remote times. Peter Bellow took him aside in the general confusion and told him to write Ros' name on a piece of paper. He did what he was asked without question. Peter then gave Jacky another small, wrapped gift and affixed the nametag to the parcel and nodded towards Ros. Jacky presented Ros with the

parcel. She took it, almost stunned with surprise and began to unwrap it. It was a small bottle of the heady, flower perfume she wore. She dabbed it on her wrist and the fresh remembered scent evoked warm memories in Jacky. She kissed him. Unknown to Peter Bellow, he had just made an adoring and immutable friend for life of Jacky.

## **CHAPTER 16**

### ***Extra Lessons***

There were some things no one bothered to teach Jacky. They assumed these were things he already knew. For instance, no one bothered to teach him equine protocol like not turning up unexpectedly behind a horse, especially one like Bugger. That was a dingy white pony that some might call a grey if they were charitably disposed. Bugger was named for its disposition and it was not happy with its lot as a horse. It hated everybody, horses and people, alike. As for Jacky, his only experience with any animal, and he had only ever seen a horse or bullock at a far distance before, was to sneak up on it as a food source. Jacky had no intention of eating Bugger, but his approach to the animal, tethered to the hospital fence, was the same. Bugger was aware of Jacky long before he went into stealth mode. Jacky, not being familiar with horses, didn't note the ears go down and back. He didn't see the eye move or the neck drop for leverage. He kept moving in stealthily from behind. It is fair to say that Bugger was a vicious beast and revelled in being so. Any chance it had to show its displeasure with the way of things, it took. Jacky, feeling slightly smug at being able to get so close to the smelly animal, stood straight. The bellow of warning from the stockman, and the kick to the gut that sent him stumbling backwards off balance to land with a, "Whoof", on his behind came in the same instant. If horses could smile, then it was likely that there was a grin on Bugger's face. Jacky, stunned and finding it difficult to breathe again, just sat on the ground wondering what had just happened. The stockman grabbed him by his upper arm and yanked him to his feet. Jacky scrabbled, trying to get his feet under his body to face the new onslaught. He now recalled the bellow of the stockman and wasn't certain at how he had managed to hit him from such a distance, and was afraid he was going to cop it again.

"Never give that bugger a fair go at bitin' or kickin' ya. He's a fair cranky old bastard that one".

The stockman bent down to pick up Jacky's hat and shoved it back on to his head while helping Jacky to catch his balance by hanging on to his arm and lifting him so that his feet were in danger of leaving the ground.

“You right? Tried to warn ya but didn’t see ya in time, mate. I should shoot the old bugger ‘cause he’s not worth feedin’. I just ride him cause it annoys the hell out of the mean old bastard. Come on mate. You’re looking like you copped a good one. Let’s go and have the nurse take a look at you in case he did some damage to ya”.

He grabbed Jacky’s upper arm again and started dragging him off to the hospital. The Doctor was on his district rounds with Sister Deborah in tow, leaving only Sister Ros and the third nurse to handle the medical side of things at the hospital. Ros received the medical-injury report from the stockman who somehow felt he was in part responsible for the accident. He intended to stay only long enough to make certain the boy wasn’t seriously injured, and that wasn’t long in coming. Ros told Jacky to remove his pants for examination. There is no reasonable explanation for Jacky’s response. Jacky spent his first twelve years of life in comfortable nakedness but now he had absolutely no intention of exposing himself to Ros. He was not going to pull down his pants for her examination for any reason. He was adamant that he was not injured and would have lied that the horse missed in the attempt to kick him except for the obvious witness of the stockman and his abrupt and unplanned seating arrangement after the event. Ros and the stockman looked at each other. The stockman smiled and shrugged, thinking he wouldn’t mind at all if this pretty sheila asked him to drop his pants. Jacky stepped off, holding himself straight and wincing with the pain only when his back was to the pair and they couldn’t see him. He examined himself later in his humpy. He was badly contused in a sharp semi-circle that would pain him for more than a week but he would live to confront a horse again another day.

The Doctor and the District Nurse returned three days after Jacky’s introduction to horses at close quarters. Stockmen had turned up before but Jacky was always reluctant to approach these rather large animals, the biggest he had known. He was concerned too that the riders of these animals might be jealous of them and resent Jacky showing any interest in them. It was only when an Aboriginal stockman rode in with a bullock that was to be butchered for the hospital kitchen that he decided to examine the next horses that came in. The stockman wandered over to Jacky and asked if he had a smoke. Jacky didn’t, and oddly enough for the times, no one of the staff did. This small dialogue was enough to break the barrier for Jacky, who was forever curious. Ros told Peter of the injury Jacky received and the fact he was still in obvious distress as he went about his chores. Peter went to see Jacky and had a look at the wound. He pronounced him fit for duty and cuffed him over the head and teased him about refusing to be examined by Ros. Jacky was as non-committal and embarrassed as any teenager by the good-natured teasing.

It was a long time since Duncan joined the medical staff on the front veranda for morning tea. Peter was recumbent against the veranda railing with his ankles crossed in front of him and holding a mug of tea in his hand. Ros was in the wicker chair that somehow by default was considered her property. Deborah was tucked back into one of the squatter chairs. Duncan selected the other. None of the chairs was comfortably adequate for his frame, which may have been the reason his tea-sessions of a morning on the veranda were few and far between. The ward nurse was on leave. Jacky wandered past the veranda intent on some errand connected with his chores. It prompted them to discuss Jacky's recovery from a horse's hoof-to-the-breadbasket injury. They made light of it only because he had not been seriously hurt. He could have been and many others had. Fortunately, for Jacky, the pony was unshod. Duncan suggested it was time that Jacky, who was soon going to have to make his own way in the world, become familiar with a stockman's life. Ros, with the sudden vision of Jacky leaving the hospital, opened her mouth to object but shut it again. There was no valid objection. Peter agreed. Deborah stayed out of it. She was looking at Jacky just a few days before as he was chopping wood. His too-tight shirt that restricted his movement was off. He was becoming taller and muscular and had obvious shoulders. Jacky, she realised, was growing up before their eyes.

Peter and Deborah took Jacky on their rounds three weeks later. It was his first real ride in a car. He was driven around on the hospital grounds for the novelty of it before, but this was his first trip away. He would be left on one of the properties to get a taste of the skills and frustrations and labours of an outback stockman. He was uncomfortably wearing boots that once belonged to Deborah. They were too wide for her and she guessed they might fit Jacky. They did, as if they were cobbled for him. He wore them around all day for more than two weeks as instructed but still could not get used to them. He did not want to offend Sister Lawton whom he liked almost as much as Ros, so he wore them. This was in May. Peter and Deborah brought Jacky back to Stockley House two months later. The war in Europe was over. The madmen that brought so much hatred, death and destruction to Europe were finished. Troops were starting to come home. Everyone lined up to look towards Japan. The Americans were bombing Japanese cities with impunity and regularity. Firestorms swept Tokyo. Japan was finished. Everyone knew it except the Japanese who remained stubbornly and unrealistically implacable. Those marines that struggled ashore on Pacific islands to face the grim tenacity of the Japanese soldiers who preferred death to surrender, and had watched entire families of Japanese civilians jump to their deaths from cliffs rather than surrender to these reputed barbarians from America, were not looking forward to

the invasion of the Japanese homeland. Politicians, also well aware of this entrenched attitude of the Japanese, were adding up the probable cost in lives and in votes. Jacky did not understand war. Tribal or sectarian violence was simply not any part of his life either practical or academic. Nor was world war a thing he knew much about because he had conceptual difficulty with the idea that beyond his world was this world and beyond this world was another world. Why the people from all these worlds were fighting he had no idea. He certainly sensed the happiness and relief that everyone here was experiencing and he understood the feeling of joy people would have when their family returned to them. It was just too confusing for him to grasp. Besides, he was having some other conceptual problems that were more personal and more relevant to him. He was glad to be back and was sitting in his humpy idly dropping the baseball into the glove he just finished oiling. He wanted to speak with Duncan Adair but had no idea how to approach the problem that was dragging him down. Nor was he absolutely certain that Duncan would tell him the truth or could be of any help in either event. He wanted truth and he needed a friend and he sought advice. He hoped Duncan would be there for him. He just didn't know how to broach the several subjects of his dismay. His two months at Coolum Downs was a whirl of confusion. The family agreed readily to the terms discussed with Peter in exchange for enlisting the aid of an extra pair of hands, even the inexperienced ones of Jacky. It was a critical period of intensive work that had to be done. Both sons enlisted in the AIF and both, to the immense relief of their parents, were still safe and well but that left the family very short-handed for the necessary labour to run this extensive property. They employed several blacks and their lubras but it was barely enough. Their fifteen-year-old daughter, Susan, was now the mainstay. The eldest son enlisted almost as soon as war was declared and both parents were proud to see him go. They expected the younger son, Cole (named Coleridge by his mother after the English poet and philosopher she once studied in school), would stay on the property and take over for his elder brother. He was afflicted with youth and believed his greater duty was to King and Country. He went off with his mates to the adventure and glory of war. He told his parents after the fact. Coleridge would return at the end of that war, though none of those mates would. He was awarded medals for bravery that at other times would be considered acts of stupidity. He never wore them, even much later in life when he finally agreed to march in the ANZAC parades to honour and mourn revered comrades. He never spoke of the war except to his brother and then only in general terms. He refused to allow his own sons to willingly enlist for a war in a place called Viet Nam. His wife won a local raffle. It included a seven-night holiday package to Japan. She took their daughter when Cole adamantly refused to even consider it.

Susan, who took over for Cole, became the leading hand around the station. A lifetime of competing against her brothers made her strong-willed and determined. She was either by nature or by dedication a perfectionist and she hated anyone who suffered less. She would have become a martinet had not the teasing by her brothers developed a strong sense of humour within her. She was not a beautiful woman by any classical sense of the term but she was most agreeable to look at and displayed a figure that caused much contemplative silence in her male peers whenever and wherever they met. She was given the task of teaching Jacky to ride and work cattle. It annoyed Jacky that Susan, a mere girl, could do so many things he could not. She was patient. She was firm. She demanded he do it correctly or not at all. She showed him as many times as necessary how to do it and how she expected him to do it. The problem for Jacky, in all of this, was that she did these things absolutely without effort and she insisted he do it too. He sat on the fence at the horse paddock. She walked out and looked at a horse that crowded with others to escape this potential predator. She had a long, limber stick and she tapped the horse on the rump. It shivered and tried to escape. She stood in the centre making the horse run in circles. The other horses crowded together and shunned the running horse. Then she turned her back on the animal and simply ignored it. The other horses were ignoring it as well. Horses are a herd animal and do not like to be alone. It moved its ears and neck asking submissively for permission to join up. Susan began to walk away and the horse followed her. Jacky was impressed by the performance but was even more impressed that she would dare to stand amongst all those huge and rather scary animals. Jacky was to learn her secrets but first he was to learn what the word, saddle-sore, meant. Susan taught Jacky not to fight with animals. Her philosophy was to make them do all the work. It was far simpler and much faster. She showed him this every time they were working a mob, it was simply a matter of directing traffic and of making the animal think that, where you wanted it to go was the same place it wanted to go. He was up and riding his first day at Coolum Downs. He was still learning to ride on his last day. Susan was an excellent horsewoman. She teamed well with her mount, an intelligent buckskin pony named, Peony. Jacky learned the fundamentals of riding, and learned to hate the shout of, "back straight, keep your back straight, Jacky, sit up", and when he was rather smug-sure that he could ride as well as this aggravating girl, he learned another lesson. Two lessons, actually. The second was to never, never underestimate a woman.

Susan swung into the saddle from a block of timber she used as a leg-up assist. She looked at Jacky. She sat comfortable in the saddle, her back straight and her head straight. She then placed both hands on top of her hat. She made no movement whatsoever. The reins were loose across Peony's neck. Then Peony walked in a straight line and abruptly

broke into a trot. The mare turned and went into a canter, turned again and went back to a trot, all of it done in a very relaxed and almost casual manner. It stopped. It walked, it changed stride, and it changed gaits. It walked sideways in a neat leg-crossover. It stopped, lowered its head, put one front leg forward and bowed. It trotted loose limbed, stopped and walked backwards. It trotted to where Jacky was astride the fence and bowed again. Susan never once moved her hands nor spoke nor appeared to move in any way throughout the five-minute performance. Jacky was spellbound. Jacky had just seen his first dressage performance. He was sold. It didn't matter from that point on what Susan made him feel like, she was the master of her craft and he was going to learn it or die. Suggesting it was a tough two months for Jacky at Coolum Downs would be gross understatement. The physical work was punishing. It never seemed to stop from daybreak to sundown. Muscles grew tired and muscles ached. Thirst and flies and unrelenting heat added to the extreme discomfort. Jacky seemed always to be bleeding from some point on his body. Scrapes and cuts and abrasions and smeared skin seemed to be part of the ethic. One task was completed and that simply meant there was time for one more. Part of the problem was that Jacky simply didn't understand what was going on. He knew what the job was but didn't know the why of it. He was unable to pose his questions in a way that they made sense to Susan. She understood the why of it but didn't understand that Jacky couldn't and was unable to give any answers that made sense to Jacky. This though, was not the problem. The problem was social status. Jacky was given a place to live that amounted to no more than a dilapidated lean-to. It offered some shelter from the weather but that was about all. He saw the huts that belonged to the black families that lived and worked here and they were hardly much better. He took his meals at the main house but this seemed more to do with Susan's need to induct him to the chores than it did his acceptance as a member of a team or the family. Moreover, these people did not expect anything from him. Anything he contributed was fine but there was no expectation that he would or even could contribute. He was an inferior. This did not sit well with Jacky. He understood intolerance as he had developed his own prejudices of late. The failure of expectation however, didn't seem to reside in whether Jacky could or could not complete something; it was directed at him because of who he was, an Aborigine. It was endemic. And it was unfair.

He thought back to the mission community. Were they so abject because the whites condemned them to be by withholding expectation or was it systemic? Did they see themselves as derisory life-failures or did they simply choose not to follow? There was no difference between whites and blacks other than being pigmented or not pigmented, in exactly the same way that a red-haired Duncan Adair was no different from a brown-

haired Peter Bellow. Jacky was unable to think in such abstracts but the feeling inherent to those abstracts confused him. He resented both the confusion and the feelings. He spoke with the other blacks (and that was tough going as they seemed to speak a totally different language to the two he knew) living in the crude huts and found they had no idea what he was talking about. He also learned that they didn't much like him. Now that was a revelation. Jacky had never in his life been not liked. Susan and her parents, on the other hand, liked him. He could tell that and had no doubts of it at all. Why then did they view him as one of life's transients, not required or expected to contribute? That hurt. He would almost prefer not being liked. It had less impact on his self-esteem. Why also did they expect his compliance to live in such humble conditions without apology? It was one thing to be unable to offer better but quite another to expect he wouldn't mind. He didn't actually, but there was a principle involved here somewhere. And if there is one thing that a teenager likes to defend, it is principle, especially as it applies to them. The other soul-bleaching problem confronting Jacky actually did result from his being an Aborigine. Susan, in answer to an obtuse Jacky about why they all worked so hard was that they owned Coolum Downs. It was theirs and they needed to make it a success. That was the point at which she lost Jacky. Ownership of land was not something Jacky understood either in abstract or in practical terms. It was like owning air or like owning the daylight. You can occupy it certainly enough but owning it was something different, and even so, why would you want to own it? What was there to own? There were traditional lands over which certain tribes earned their living but nothing stopped other tribes from also making a living from that land, other than traditional stewardship and guardianship rules. Jacky could not seem to get his head around the notion. Even viewed in the terms that Susan used, it seemed to Jacky that ownership of land simply enslaved you to it. So much effort was exerted in constructing buildings and fences and dams and sheds. What happened if the land went bad? What are you supposed to do then? It would make far more sense to simply use what the land gave you and move on somewhere else when it had little to offer. His argument was rock-solid as far as he was concerned for he had no idea how many people there were in the world, all wanting someplace to make a living. The largest crowd ever seen by him was less than sixty people. The only counterargument was that so many whites apparently thought it to be a good thing. Considering some of the wonders he experienced in his brief encounter with them, perhaps there was a good reason he just had yet to discover. Perhaps there was some magic associated with owning land, but for now it made no sense at all. Then came the blockbuster. Susan was shaking her head in exasperation.

"I don't see why you are in such a lather over it, Jacky. Abos can't own land so it's not likely to affect you anyway".



Jacky remembered that moment for many years after. It became a compelling influence in his life. He could not recall what kicked the wind out of him more, that simple statement by a girl on whom he was developing a boyhood crush, or a horse named Bugger. He was too stunned to frame a query. What she just said could not possibly be right. And if it was right, then it certainly was not going to apply to him. He would make sure of that, somehow. He wished Duncan Adair were around, he needed to talk to a man he could trust. He watched Susan walk away to open a chute to a primitive cattle chase for branding cattle. She was wearing jodhpurs. They were baggy and strange looking but they certainly accentuated her long legs. And they stretched tight across her buttocks as she walked. She had such a cute way of walking. And she—.

"C'mon, Jacky, we don't have all bloody day".

Jacky snapped out of it.

Duncan watched Jacky doing his chores. He always did them with directness and concentration and pleasure. He seemed to have added something else since his return from Coolum Downs. What that was Duncan couldn't be sure but there was a difference. Jacky was sawing timber, aligned on a trestle, to be chopped into firewood later. It was a two-handed crosscut saw and Jacky relished the way the carefully sharpened teeth bit into the wood. He loved the fragrance of the timber and the way the saw felt when it cut straight. He learned that the sound of the saw changed when it was riding a straight cut or when it began to bind as it went off line. He sang along with the blade and watched the line draw its way through the log. He anticipated the final stroke and made certain it was a push forward. He allowed the weight of the saw to do the cutting, he just guided it until that final stroke when he drove the teeth deeper into the wood and virtually sliced the off-cut cleanly as it dropped to the ground. Duncan watched the intensity of effort and realised this was the new ingredient. Something was bothering Jacky. Those early days following Jacky's return were busy for Duncan and he seldom got a chance to have a conversation with Jacky. They spoke several times at meals and when Duncan came out to give new instructions or new chores to Jacky but it was always light-hearted. He told of the work he did at Coolum and of Susan, especially her ability to ride and work beasts. He spoke of the meals and the conversations. He never spoke about what was troubling him. Duncan's problem was to determine if Jacky needed to speak to Duncan Adair or Pastor Adair or possibly both. Duncan wondered if either Peter Bellow or Deborah Lawton noticed anything on the long ride back with Jacky from Coolum. He wandered into the hospital in search of either one. The Doctor was

his first find. Peter confessed to noticing nothing unusual other than Jacky becoming a little taciturn but put that down to his being a teenager, not troubled. Deborah was a little harder to find until he heard her gentle laughter from the kitchen. She and Ros were chatting by the stove, drinking tea and getting toasty from the fire that was cooking what smelled like the evening meal. It was late July and winter rains had begun and brought chilly temperatures with it. The whole kitchen was homey, warm and fragrant with whatever was in the large stew pot on the cook-stove. He made acknowledgement to the two nurses and lifted the lid on the stew pot to see what smelled so tempting. This resulted in a loud objection from cook who ordered him to leave it alone and get out of her kitchen. He looked suitably reprimanded and put the lid back in place but ignored, for the moment, the second directive. He asked Deborah about her thoughts on Jacky. She said that she suspected he might have a crush on young Susan from the way he raved about her but nothing other than that. Ros interjected to say she was heartbroken that Jacky had thrown her over for a younger woman, and wasn't that just like a man. So, obviously, neither of these two was approached by Jacky with his troubles. He turned his attention once more to the stew pot and that brought cook over to confront him with a large, threatening ladle. He smiled and made good his escape.

It was back to see Peter Bellow. He sat on the chair next to the lolly-jar in the examination room to talk to Peter. His foray into the kitchen had aroused his hunger and he managed to extract a lolly that made his speech a little slurred as he explained his concerns to the doctor. He suggested that since Jacky was a teenager with the usual assortment of teenager problems and questions, especially about the opposite sex, it might be a good idea if a reliable friend of his, who just happened to be a doctor, could tell him where and why babies came from. Peter stuck out his lower lip and folded it back over his upper lip in contemplation. He agreed but suggested that the openness of Aboriginal camp-life probably gave Jacky a distinct advantage in that direction. He might be able to tell *us* a few things, and they both laughed. Duncan instructed Peter to watch for any clues from Jacky as to problems. Peter nodded and slid the lolly jar away from Duncan's reach as Duncan telegraphed his next move. Peter reported back to Duncan that his man-to-man talk with Jacky had gone well, if a bit clinical, but Jacky didn't seem to want to unburden himself. Peter suggested that the next move was either up to Jacky or Duncan.

"I think, Peter, the next move is actually up to Pastor Adair".

Peter nodded agreement. It was now August 1945 and many people worried about the next push to end the war. Others wondered how long it would be until the end of rationing. The war, in their minds, was

already over. The heartening demands for the unconditional surrender of Japan at the Potsdam Conference in July bolstered spirits and contained a surety that it really was at an end. Not many people had heard of two Japanese cities: Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the end of those first two weeks of August, few would ever forget them. Duncan stopped Ros in the hallway and asked her, if she saw Jacky, to send him in to Duncan's office. Ros knew better than to say anything other than compliance. However, it was the first time to her knowledge that Jacky was summoned. She wondered if he were in some kind of strife. The message was relayed in due course to a very anxious Jacky, for he also knew that this was a first-time occurrence. He tried very hard to think of what he may have done wrong, and if he could find some way to shift the blame. He had not thought of any sins to account for by the time he reached Duncan's office and rapped as softly as he could upon the partially open door.

"Ah, Jacky. Come in old son, take a pew".

Duncan began clearing his desk to give his sole attention to this new event. Jacky sat and tried not to look nervous. He failed. Duncan wanted him in this precise frame of mind because he intended to lie to him and he didn't want a calm and collected Jacky to stop and consider and catch him out. Duncan had been writing with a pencil. He now tapped it on the edge of a varnished, wooden file-tray on his desk as if collecting his thoughts. That was totally unnecessary for he knew exactly his approach. It is the distractions the magician creates after the trick is already performed that make the watchers believe it is yet to happen. Jacky was suitably distracted. Duncan looked him straight in the eye and lied.

"Jacky. Everyone has been reporting to me that you have been troubled by something ever since your return from Coolum Downs. It is upsetting everyone and can't go on. You are not leaving here until we get this thing sorted. Now come on. Let's hear it and see if we can't get things set dead-to-right. I cannot have everyone pestering me about this anymore".

He looked at Jacky, totally deadpan. No one, in fact, had found Jacky seemingly bothered about anything, only Duncan had detected some sense of disquiet. Duncan considered his lie a ruse and it troubled him not. Jacky was startled at the revelation but very much prepared, for it was stewing since his conversation with Susan, and he opened his speech with her comment about owning property. Duncan then became concerned that it might be lunchtime before he finished it. Eventually he wound down. Duncan had, of course, caught the drift of Jacky's concerns rather early in the summation but thought it would be impolite to interrupt him, having been the *force majeure* to create the concession.

There was a palm-sized shaving mirror on the edge of Duncan's desk. It had a stand to prop it upright. Duncan's eyes, like most people his age were not quite as good as they once were. He owned a pair of reading glasses that perched on the end of his nose. He did not like them. He felt that they looked as if he had borrowed them from someone else and was wearing them for the gag effect. He was quite correct about this. Moreover, they felt heavy on his nose and soon became uncomfortable. Duncan's ability to read was, of course, enhanced by good light conditions. The intense light of the pressure lamp illuminated his desk at night. The main problem was the dim light in the office during the day. His desk was more or less in the centre of the room. He tried it closer to the window to achieve extra light in the daytime but had felt uncomfortably vulnerable with his back to the window. One day, quite by accident, he placed the mirror he was using to examine a cut on his chin from a wayward tool in such a manner that it directed the light from the window onto the paper on his desk. He made good use of the science and the mirror stayed. He picked it up and stood it in front of Jacky without bothering with explanation. The mirror, with which Jacky was quite familiar, was an object of fascination to Jacky. It was the first true-mirror he ever saw. It was round and double-sided. One side was a simple, silvered, flat mirror and the other was shaped to produce a magnified image. He spent considerable time playing with and looking into the mirror. It was, in fact, one of the main reasons he enjoyed his lessons in Duncan's office. Whenever Duncan was obliged to attend to some duty elsewhere, Jacky would spend the time in detailed examination of his tongue, his teeth and up his nose. He would make faces. He would contort his face by pushing with his hands. He would breathe on the mirror and stare in amazement at how it could even catch his breath. He sent patches of bright light scooting about the walls and ceiling, reflected from the window. He was convinced that no magic was involved in any of the devices around the hospital. The magnified mirror was one object about which he reserved his opinion however. Jacky found an identical mirror in a chemist-shop several years after this meeting with Duncan. He bought it on sight and it remained in his possession for the rest of his life. He did not know, at the moment, why Duncan placed the mirror in front of him nor could he avoid looking at his own image. Duncan looked directly at Jacky and spoke in a quiet voice.

"I believe in my god, Jacky. I do not know if you believe in the same god or if you believe in a different god. That choice is yours. All of us, Jacky, are children of the god in whom we believe. And only that god knows who each of us is. When you look in that mirror, what you see is an image that you believe to be you. God sees your image in a different mirror. When I look at you or see your reflection, that which I see is what I believe you to be, and that may be very different from how you see

yourself, and how God sees you. Each of us, Jacky, looks at the other and sees something different than what that person believes himself to be and different from how God sees us”.

Jacky was staring at his reflection as Pastor Adair spoke. He was wondering how God, and for that matter how Duncan, saw his reflection. The Pastor must have been reading Jacky’s mind in light of his next comment.

“What I see when I look at you, is what your own mirror reflects. If you are strong, that is what I will see. If you are good, I will see that. If you are dishonest or a thief or a liar then that is what you will show me, and I will believe it for I see it with my own eyes. What each of us sees, Jacky, is what we are shown by that person we are looking at. Only he and his god know the true person. And how others treat you, Jacky, is the mirror of your own reflection. Become all of the things you want, Jacky, and that is how everyone, including your god will see you in their mirror. That is how they will believe you to be because they can see it with their own eyes”.

Pastor Adair had said his piece and Duncan Adair and Jacky talked quietly about specific issues Jacky raised until lunchtime. Duncan wasn’t at all certain if Jacky understood the importance of a projected image and queried him as they walked together to the dining room.

“Tell me, Jacky, if you saw two horses standing side by side and I asked you what you saw, what would you tell me”?

Jacky wasn’t certain where this was leading and made a cautious reply.

“I would tell you I saw two horses”.

“And what if one of those horses was a bullock simply pretending to be a horse. What would you tell me then”?

Jacky hated these types of questions because he never knew what he was supposed to answer.

“I would tell you I saw one horse and a bullock pretending to be a horse”.

“No, you wouldn’t. Because what you saw were two horses standing side by side”.

It took Jacky perhaps another three weeks before he understood. That was Tuesday. The next day was a Wednesday. It was August 15, 1945.

Everyone at Stockley House gathered by the wireless to hear the words of the Prime Minister of Australia, Ben Chifley:

*Fellow citizens, the war is over.*

*The Japanese Government has accepted the terms of surrender imposed by the Allied Nations and hostilities will now cease. The reply by the Japanese Government to the note sent by Britain, the United States, the USSR and China, has been received and accepted by the Allied Nations.*

*At this moment let us offer thanks to God.*

*Let us remember those whose lives were given that we may enjoy this glorious moment and may look forward to a peace, which they have won for us.*

A small prayer meeting of thanks and remembrance was held shortly after the announcement. Everyone at Stockley House attended.

## **CHAPTER 17**

### ***Changes***

Deborah Lawton felt ill. She needed to speak with Duncan and was reluctant to do so. Deborah had come to think of all the people at Stockley House as family. Now she was leaving. She wanted to, of course, for she was going to be with her husband. She received two long letters from him following war's end. The second, not his usual rambling style and seemingly hurried, said he would be back in Sydney, giving a date that was now just a week away. He would be demobilised. They were to go back to England to meet up with his friends and together they would arrange to move to Canada. The four friends were going to start an airline. One had an inside track to a lucrative mail contract. There would be aircraft going begging after the war. It was, he said, an adventure. His letter did not make it seem so. He had changed. His comments were thoughtful and well presented and argued. The military officer was showing through. From outback Australia to snow and forests of pine, all in the space of a few pages written in pencil on lined paper in a letter from England. She supposed that being a nurse in Canada would not be much different than being a nurse in Australia, just a funny accent. But now she had to tell Duncan and Peter and Ros and Margaret and everyone else she had grown to trust, love and confide in. And she had to tell them she was leaving. She had to tell them she would not likely see them ever again. She felt ill.

Gwen Bellow stayed at Greenslopes for many weeks after the war. There were the casualties from the field hospitals coming in and many prisoners of war. These were the sad cases. They were ill or wounded and emaciated. Many were mentally destabilised. The shock of battles won and battles lost and the dull monotony of imprisonment that gave

them so much time to think took its toll. They smiled, looking more like recruits in their brand-new uniforms than battle-weary veterans. They looked happy they were going home. They talked about it. Their eyes, though, were vacant and jumpy and they wore a haunted look on their thin, sharp faces. They all had difficulty sleeping. Walking wounded, all of them. But her war had ended too. She spent two and a half months with Peter at Stockley House as Acting District Nurse when Deborah left. They never met, Deborah and Gwen. Deborah never got the opportunity to tell her about Peter.

Peter was contracted until the end of the year so he and Gwen would spend their first Christmas after the war together at Stockley House. Peter was out of touch. He needed to go back for more education before resuming a career in surgery in a big-city hospital or practice. He and Gwen left Stockley House on the third day in January 1946 on the same airplane that flew in the new District Medical Officer. Gwen continued nursing to support them while Peter got up to speed. The war brought about radical changes in medicine and surgical techniques. It was a difficult study path for Peter but it was a thing he needed to do and wanted. He persevered. Gwen planned on continuing her nursing career. She never did. She became pregnant. A year and a half after their daughter was born she became pregnant again. Neither pregnancy was planned and both thought it a bit late in life to be raising children. They both loved being parents and contributed happily to a new term that would be heard often, baby boomers. Peter was as well respected as his father before him for skill and dedication and he remained on the cutting edge of practical surgical science. His team was not far behind that of the first successful Australian heart transplant.

Acting Matron Roslyn Naomi Watson had originally planned to go home to her family in Victoria as soon as the war was over. She had her reasons for doing so. There was a certain veterinarian who played and preyed upon her mind. That plan no longer seemed important now, though the rumours that he was a prisoner of the Japanese were indeed true. But he would not be coming home. He was reported to be one of the more than 500 mixed-nationality prisoner of war unfortunates bound for Japan in late June 1944 aboard the freighter Tamahoku Maru and sunk by an American submarine just 40 nautical miles from the Nagasaki port. When Peter and Gwen left on that hot Thursday in January, Ros walked into Peter's examination room and stood there for long minutes. Then she picked up the lolly-jar from the edge of the table and took it to her room. She eventually found a lid for the screw-top jar and closed the jar as it was, with the red and white peppermint-lollies still inside. She never opened the jar again. Ros stayed at Stockley House until May 1947. She went home for several months to her family's sheep station but resumed her nursing career in Melbourne. She

travelled to America and met old friends, then returned to take on Matron duties at a New South Wales children's hospital. Roslyn never married. The attractive, young country-girl became a handsome woman. She kept in touch with Jacky by frequent post and managed to be there on the day he was married. She visited Jacky and Mary in Cairns in 1973, staying at their home in Whitfield. It was a visit full of memory and nostalgia. They boarded the ferry from the not long-opened Hayles Wharf for a day-trip to Green Island and spent their time on this tropical sand cay walking on the coral reef and visiting the underwater observatory. Ros was unable to visit the island when she lived here during the early war years and particularly wanted to see the observatory when she first read about its construction by the Hayles family in 1954. The return crossing on a rolling sea left each of them slightly queasy and, feeling the need to walk it off, they wandered over to the Marlin Wharf to watch the returning marlin boats weigh their trophy-fish. Ros was still a strikingly handsome woman and always stood out. That caught the attention of Lee Marvin, who acknowledged her presence with a, "Good Day". The Hollywood actor, a frequent visitor to Cairns during the Black Marlin season, engaged in quiet conversation with Ros until he was required to assist with the weigh-in. She had gone when he turned back to find her again. Several others on the wharf that day wondered what the association was between the well-liked actor and the attractive woman with whom he seemed so familiar. Ros travelled to Atherton and Mareeba. So many things were the same and so many things so vastly different. They stopped on the Kuranda range road at the Henry Ross Lookout. There was now a pedestal there with a circle of brass displaying a map to commemorate the war. She stood there in the warm afternoon-sun and stared far out to the Coral Sea. Her blue eyes misted over and she thought of other days. Jacky and Mary drove her to the Cairns airport on the day she left. The sun on that day, as on most days in this tropical town, was benign at that time of year. The Alexander palms that lined the highway across from the hillsides at Aeroglen stood like flagpoles against the backdrop of the TAA terminal. They walked slowly from the parking lot, ruminatingly quiet and sad to be saying goodbye. A small single-engine Cessna 150, VH-SOJ, from the North Queensland Aero Club was taxiing for an intersection departure, waiting for the just-landed, lumbering, Bush Pilots DC-3 to clear the runway. A modern twin engine Beechcraft, painted in the livery of the Royal Flying Doctor Service with large RFDS letters painted on its vertical stabiliser, was sitting in the holding bay, its propellers a blur as the pilot methodically did his pre-flight checks. Ros stopped to look at it until it too made her sad with distant memory. They stood in the terminal until her flight was ready to leave. They hugged and made promises. Ros promised to come back. She did make a brief visit in 1984 then never returned. The town of Cairns was quickly becoming a city and held little attraction for her now; she preferred her memories. She retired soon



after and went to live with her sister. She died in 1999 and was buried next to her parents. Jacky did not learn of her death in time to attend the funeral. He arranged to have one hundred trees planted in her name.

Jacky was sullen and morose when first Deborah then Peter left. It seemed that everyone he loved in his life, sooner or later, went out of his life. It was made worse when Gwen, who was regaled with anecdotes of Jacky in each letter from her husband, hugged him with familiarity when they met and again when they parted. Peter gravely shook his hand then he too reached out to enfold Jacky in a backslapping embrace of farewell. Jacky stood at the edge of the airstrip and watched their plane until it went from sight. The others had wandered off soon after it was safely airborne. He drifted back to resume chores but then simply went to his humpy, sat on the army cot and cried silently, wiping the tears only when they became uncomfortable across his cheeks. He met the new doctor at tea that evening. He was likable, Jacky supposed, but he wasn't Peter Bellow. Duncan suffered Jacky's depression for as long as he could and then made arrangements for Jacky to go back to Coolum Downs for a further two months of hard work, instruction and training. Gwen, when she came to Stockley House, brought Jacky several school textbooks and picture books, in case he wasn't as good at reading as Peter implied in his letters, and spent a lot of time working with Jacky to expand his knowledge and academic skills. Duncan seized on the textbooks and devised an additional homework schedule for Jacky. Duncan insisted he take the books with him when he went to Coolum, despite Jacky's insistence that the daily work regimen at Coolum Downs began at first light and finished when it was too dark to see your hand in front of your bloody face.

Jacky was pleased to see Susan again. She greeted him warmly but she had somehow changed in the intervening period. She looked much older and her demeanour was less that of a teenager and more of a young woman. Jacky was not certain what to make of it. Part of the difference was brought about by the return of her two adored brothers. They both had changed significantly and this reflected in her behaviour. Her eldest brother, Ernest, was tall and lean and pale skinned. He was almost an aesthete and given now to writing poetry. His passion for the sunburned-country had waned somewhat and he was finding it difficult to get back into the swing of things. He did the work that needed doing with a willingness to get in and get the job done but without the satisfaction of a job well done. His passion, it seemed, was for fencing and he and Jacky spent a lot of time together in almost wordless conversation digging postholes and stringing and straining wire. Jacky thought Ernest was strange. So did Susan, now. Coleridge sized Jacky up and decided he'd do. He took him under his wing and taught him

skills with the same patience and care as Susan did on his first visit. He was not the perfectionist that Susan was but still he insisted that every job be completed and done properly. Cole was virtually a twin to Susan, other than being older and male. Jacky could see easily they were brother and sister at a glance, unlike Ernest who favoured his father and looked merely a close relative. Coleridge had changed also, according to Susan. He felt guilty about leaving the family in the lurch and was trying desperately to make up for lost time. He took Susan aside one day out of sight of everyone. He faced her and took both her hands in his. She became nervous at this odd behaviour. Then he embraced her tightly enough to make her feel that it was inappropriate. She began to feel uncomfortable, as he gave no indication that he would release her soon. Her feelings gave way to alarm as he kissed her lovingly on the temple. Then he eased the embrace and stepped back but took both of her hands again. She looked at him. He was crying.

"Thank you, Susan".

He looked all around him to indicate, for all this, but it was unspoken.

"They are so old and so tired now. I don't think mom and dad will ever forgive me. But I am so glad you were here. Thank you".

He smiled wanly and strode off leaving Susan stranded in confusion. She carefully kept a distance from him for several days but the old Coleridge finally returned with his humour and larrikin manner as if he hadn't left. He never once named any of his former mates, even in recollection of anecdotes, but only Susan noticed.

Susan allowed Jacky to ride Peony as the mare showed her skills in cattle handling. Jacky, told to simply hold his seat and go along for the ride was amazed as the pony dogged the calf. It was as clever as a sheep dog in predicting the calf's next move and neatly forced the calf into the holding pen, all without intervention or instruction. Susan explained to Jacky the mutual trust needed between horse and man as partners. An intelligent horse knew what was needed and was prepared to do its part. Jacky learned much of this art and put it to use in later life to the nodding approval of his peers and employers alike. His problem though, was finding an intelligent horse. He never found a horse quite like Bugger but many who came perilously close, and he never found a horse quite like Peony but he rode many that were a good partner to him. He made absolutely certain to return the compliment; there was always the image of Susan to remind him. Those two months were the last he would ever spend at Coolum Downs. Almost a year later, Susan became engaged to marry. Her father suffered a mild stroke that would leave him with a partial paralysis and when a large holding company, with

financing from the US, made overtures to buy the Coolum property, Ernest agreed to sell at a very good price. His parents were settled on a large tract of land in the Blue Mountains. Ernest moved to Sydney and took up studies with returned servicemen's benefits to become a teacher. Coleridge used his share of the property sale to buy a smallholding in the Northern Territory. The American-financed holding company changed the name of the property and Coolum Downs became a memory, then that too faded.

Jacky was standing at the edge of the vegetable garden at Stockley House considering a cropping rotation when Bryan, the new DMO came out to talk with him. He was being issued with a new vehicle and Duncan had suggested that he seek out Jacky with a view to building an extension to one of the sheds to house it. Bryan had already studied it. There was a choice of three sheds that could be converted. The one he favoured was a small open shed used for storing fuel drums for the generator. Jacky pointed out that it wasn't suitable. During the rains, the dusty path to the shed became a bog and if fire should breakout in the shed, then it was likely they would not be able to get the vehicle out. Jacky suggested they would be better off building a new stand-alone shed for garaging the car instead.

"Of course, of course. Good idea, mate. Any thoughts where to build it"?

Jacky didn't hesitate as his mind was still involved with crop rotation and didn't have time for these speculations. Bryan or Duncan would have their say and make their decision and it didn't involve him one way or the other.

"The only really good place is down there by the front gate. You pop in a wider gate further down there, past the siren tower. Right? You are fair smack on the road going out and same thing on the path to the airstrip".

This idea was not exactly original, in all fairness. Peter Bellow occasionally parked the car there and said that he should cut in a gate to the main road sometime and leave the car there permanently. It was always parked at present next to the side veranda where it would get the most shade. Exit and entrance was via the gate leading to the airstrip, hardly convenient. Bryan nodded and kept nodding.

"Of course, of course. Well I shall go and tell Duncan what we've decided then".

He looked towards the front fence once more.

"Will the new gate be much of a problem, do you think"?

“Nah, mate, piece of cake. Piece of cake”.

Jacky went back to his crop rotation exercise and it was a full five minutes before his brain got around to examining the past conversation. Bryan had come and asked his opinion on something. Jacky gave it and Bryan took it. For perhaps the first time in his life, Jacky was not on the receiving end of advice or instruction. He was handing it out. It felt good. It would feel better at tea when Duncan and Bryan began to discuss it again and kept asking Jacky what he thought. Then it was settled. That's what they would do. Bryan was the first to leave the dining table. He gave Jacky a solid pat on the shoulder as he stood up. Jacky chanced a quick look at Duncan who was engaged in spooning sugar into his tea. There are two horses standing side by side, thought Jacky, remembering the conversation with Duncan.

## **CHAPTER 18**

### ***Bikes and Brakes***

Not long after Jacky had watched the arrival and departure of the Flying Doctor aircraft for the first time and was thrilled to discover that men could fly, he turned his focus towards the black bicycle. Jacky was no longer afraid of Duncan's black bicycle. He became very curious about it in fact. He surreptitiously at times tried to figure out how it worked. He pulled it away from the back veranda one day and stood it straight and let go. The bicycle fell to the ground noisily enough to frighten him and he fled abruptly. When he eventually returned to the scene of the crime, the bicycle was still lying on the ground, handlebars pointed one way, a wheel the other and looking like some freshly killed animal. Jacky crept in, stood the bicycle up, leaned it back against the railing, and departed. Another day, he squatted next to the bicycle to examine each individual part to see if he could deduce from that how the bicycle worked. That proved fruitless. He made another attempt to stand the bicycle up by itself. It again clattered noisily to the ground. About the only thing he hadn't tried, and it occurred to him to do so, was to mount the bicycle. Perhaps this was the key. He climbed over the railing and with some elaborate and difficult manoeuvring managed to straddle the bicycle and he pushed himself upright away from the veranda. He and the bicycle fell over in the opposite direction. He gashed his knee, hurt an elbow and an errant handlebar knocked the wind out of him. No one else had apparently heard the commotion thus far, and he was able to extricate himself from the wreckage, stand the bike back against the veranda and limp away to console himself. A few days later, an undaunted Jacky returned to ponder over the bicycle yet again. It was missing. He felt slightly guilty as if he was in some way responsible. Then he saw two

boys from the mission, younger than he by a couple of years, riding the bicycle down the slight-slope of the path that led to the airstrip. He was alarmed and expected that trouble would ensue and he deliberated being as far away as possible when it did. But pride got in the way. These younger kids had somehow learned the secrets of the bicycle and that was galling and annoying. He could not, he supposed, be in too much trouble for just watching. He went to join them. The boys were of identical age, but the one was considerably bigger than the other and of especially long legs. The long-legged boy rode the bicycle while the smaller child sat cramped on the cross bar. The smaller child was able to ride the bike also but unable to sling his leg over the seat of the bike. He mounted by first coasting the bike down the slope while he balanced on one pedal. He then put a leg under the crossbar and pedalled to gain momentum. When the bike was moving fast enough to maintain stability, he withdrew his leg and put it over the crossbar. He could now pedal the bike, though he could not reach the pedals from the saddle and could only rest by sitting on the crossbar. He was not strong enough to pedal back up the slope of the path. The bigger kid would take over and point the bike down the slope, coast and mount before hitting the drainage gully at the bottom and slowly steer the bike around. He pedalled back up the hill with the bike leaning and weaving perilously from side to side as he stood to pedal with his full weight and strength.

They offered Jacky a turn. When it was established that Jacky had never ridden before, they held the bike for him to mount and pushed him down the slope while a concerned Jacky tried a wobbly steer. Things weren't going all that bad so long as they held the bicycle. Then they let go. Jacky managed perhaps thirty or forty-feet under his own steam before the bicycle, maliciously, fell over on top of him. They tried it again and despite furious yells to, "pedal, pedal", the bicycle once more managed to fall on top of Jacky at its earliest opportunity. They taught him to stand on one pedal and balance the bicycle himself while coasting down the slope. He was able to coast the bicycle to a stop at the far end of the path, to his amazement and delight, where he was obliged to jump off the pedal and run with the bike till he was able to bulldog it to a dead stop. He had to walk the bicycle back. They told him to mount the bicycle when it was moving. He tried seven times, and he collapsed in a heap seven times. He was able to throw a leg over the saddle and remain upright only once. That lasted until he realised that he still had to steer and the bicycle veered off the path into a rut and he fell forward over the handlebars. That last attempt convinced him to leave the bicycle in the hands of the two boys and go and find some chores to do. This time only his dignity was injured. The next day, Jacky tried it all by himself. It went pretty much as it had the day before. His penultimate attempt did meet with qualified success. He coasted, swung a leg over the saddle, attempted to pedal as instructed the day before and was actually almost

riding for a moment. There was only one tree in the immediate area. Jacky steered the bicycle into it with the expected results. The bicycle was not damaged, fortunately, but Jacky came out second-best. He thought, though, that he actually had the hang of it. He walked the bike back up the slope to where it was flat enough to give him a start off. He stood on the pedal and scooted the bike until it was coasting down hill. He kept looking down the path and steering a correct line. He threw his leg over the saddle and began to pedal. He was riding a bicycle. He stopped pedalling as the speed of the bike increased and the front tyre began to pendulum on the loose gravelly-surface making steering more difficult. The speed and the pendulum continued to increase and the fence that was the demarcation line of the airstrip was rapidly getting closer. No one had bothered to tell Jacky the bike had brakes, much less how to use them. He decided to jump but never got the chance before the bike hit the drainage gully and he executed a neat cartwheel over the handlebars for the second time. The bike continued on into the fence and this time the wheel and handlebars were no longer aligned when a frightened Jacky picked up the wreckage at the foot of the fence. He was obliged to carry it the half-mile back to the House. He never again attempted to ride a bicycle of any colour. Duncan pulled the bicycle away from the veranda later that afternoon to find the wheel badly aligned. He straddled the front wheel and twisted the handlebars back into position. He assumed the bike had simply fallen over, suffered the damage and been picked up by the first passer-by, and he forgot about it. Jacky found the bike repaired when next he looked at it. He declined to ever mention the matter.

Timber and iron roofing arrived to house the DMO vehicle not long after the discussion with Bryan about a garage for the car. A carpenter showed up a week later, and with Jacky as his offsider, built a large three-vehicle shed on the site Jacky suggested. He and Jacky then cut and constructed a wide counterbalanced vehicle gate in the existing fence, painted everything again with a second coat of white paint and the carpenter left. It was all done in three days. Duncan was impressed, Bryan was pleased and they both congratulated Jacky as if he had done the whole thing himself. Jacky envisioned a shed only just big enough to house the doctor's car when first asked about it by Bryan. But Duncan, his mind always ahead of the game, knew the need to house extra vehicles. As they were planning to build from scratch rather than remodel an existing outbuilding, he sought and received permission to build the larger shed.

A large truck ground its way up the road to the hospital a few months later. The extended open-tray vehicle held on its back an identical Chevrolet truck to the one that brought the black soldiers to play baseball and release Jacky from his confusion and trauma just a few

years before. Jacky, for a moment, thought it was the same one. The driver, with planks and help from Jacky and guidance from Duncan, drove it backwards down the makeshift ramp and safely to the ground. A forty-four gallon drum of petrol was also offloaded via the ramp to add to the already full tanks of the truck. The driver was then given a signature, a cup of tea and biscuits, and some sandwiches to eat along the way. Everyone came to inspect and admire the vehicle after the driver left. Nobody thought to ask why the hospital now had a truck or even how it came about. It was not actually part of the inventory of the hospital or the mission. A close friend of Duncan Adair, who knew him well from the days before his becoming a man of God (for some of Duncan's more youthful exuberances and exploits) became moderately successful as a result of the war. He bought a large number of war surplus vehicles that were sold as one large lot at a government auction. He resold a few of these for a good profit, kept the rest for his own business and thought of his good friend when introduced to a man named Duncan that fitted his memory. He wrote to Duncan and asked him if he had use for a vehicle. This Scot was not ever going to turn down an offer of anything useful that was going for a good price, and especially not if that price was a simple thank you to an old friend. It was an American vehicle but converted to a right hand drive, and Duncan slid in behind the wheel while an eager Jacky slid onto the passenger bench. Duncan went through the procedure of starting the engine as if he had been driving this particular vehicle for most of his life. It fired smoothly with only a few cranks of the starting motor. Duncan put it into gear, drove it to the newly completed shed, and reversed it into position. Duncan turned to look at Jacky as the engine died and silence took over.

"I suppose we'll have to teach someone to drive this bugger if it's to be of any use at all to us".

Jacky looked overwhelmingly hopeful. He began driver education less than a week later. Jacky was frightened of horses when he was taught to ride at Coolum Downs by the self-assured Susan. He was now frightened a multiple of that in direct ratio to the number of horses under the bonnet. Duncan was patient and corrected faults before they appeared. Jacky apparently enjoyed the sound of clashing, grinding gears as he fought to keep the RPM in tune with the gear selected. He forgot the clutch or decided to use it instead of the brake and nearly met with disaster until an alert Duncan worked the handbrake. He also attempted to drive with the heavy handbrake on and learned the smell of that particular error. He slowly learned. There were days when even the patient Duncan had enough and ejected Jacky from the driver's seat and housed the vehicle, cutting short a planned one-hour session of driver training. His biggest problem seemed to be, as it is with many learner

drivers, to remember to steer. There was a massive oleander on the property that bloomed magnificently every year. It was one of the few surviving plants from the several trees and bushes originally planted at Stockley House while the building was being erected. It would, eventually, bloom again after Jacky pruned it to ground level with one pass of the runaway truck. That which thrilled Jacky more than driving the truck, was to peer over Duncan's shoulder while he tinkered with, wiped, and serviced the engine. Jacky knew almost all there was to know about the diesel motor that powered the generator. He also spent a lot of time servicing the doctor's car under the supervision of Duncan. He was soon going to become a very good bush-mechanic with a multi-cylinder petrol engine. And he learned to drive. He slowly came to master the art of the double declutch and learned to transition the gears by the sound of the engine and not by the oscillating speedometer needle. The sound of the crashing gears was no longer the accompaniment to a session with Jacky at the wheel, and Duncan was able to stop tormenting Jacky with his comments after a particularly bad change-up or change-down.

"Well, not to worry. At least they're all in a box".

The truck became so useful that all concerned wondered how they managed without one before. A rack designed by Duncan for a stretcher was fitted to the headboard. And this was used as an ambulance or simply to keep patients out of the sun while waiting for assistance or a delayed aircraft. The truck had a winch at the front and was used to pull many vehicles out of the mire of bulldust or bulldust made mud by rains. Duncan also designed benches that attached to the side gates and the truck became a bus. Jacky was the nominated driver for almost all of these adventures and he became an adept, proud of his skills. He was not so proud of the one battle-scar the truck wore. It acquired an obviously dented mudguard when an apparently suicidal tree jumped out in front of the truck. That was Jacky's version of the event. He sincerely wished it hadn't happened because people took pains to point it out whenever the teenaged Jacky became arrogantly annoying as befits a teenager.

## **CHAPTER 19**

### ***Departure***

As the year rolled over into 1948 it was Jacky's turn to leave Stockley House for the last time. He and Duncan discussed it at length over many weeks. More than a million returned-servicemen at war's end made a mess of the job market, but by this time, it was beginning to sort itself out. It was getting Jacky sorted out that was the biggest problem.



Jacky had never been on a train, in an aeroplane or on a boat at all. He had never been to a café or a big town. It would be easier to list those things Jacky *had* done or seen or been to. But it was time. Jacky was a blend of terrified and excited-beyond-comprehension as he considered what awaited him out there, as Duncan put it, in the beyond. He sought advice from any who had some to give and spoke to every person who turned up. This just made him more confused and uncertain as to whether he could actually do it. It didn't much matter what Jacky thought about it, it was up to Duncan and Duncan's mind was made up more than a year earlier. Duncan wrote many letters to many people when he realised that Jacky would have to soon go it on his own. He knew this back in 1943 and was working towards it ever since. He was finally able to get agreement, after much persuasion, to pay Jacky a wage for the work he did around the hospital. It wasn't very much but it did add up. Jacky would leave Stockley House with ten one-pound notes in his pocket, almost a full month's wage for a white stockman these days, and a brand new set of clothes including boots and hat and a job to go to. Duncan had spoken to friends and got Jacky hired on to a large property in the Northern Territory. Duncan also arranged for a ride to a place where he would be met by the station workers and taken to the property. He could do nothing else, except wonder if there was anything else he could do. He was as proud of Jacky as he would have been of his own children had that event ever transpired. Duncan, as a young man, enjoyed a modified style of hedonism. He liked to play games of chance, drink and carouse all as hard as he worked. Without parents to remind him of his responsibility, and a good nature to make him friends to share the joys of living, he revelled in youth. He enjoyed the company of young women. None of this was ill willed or even wild but he paid little heed to other than the moment, whether in enjoyment or in the simple pleasure of hard work. It may have just been some latent memory from his subconscious and his missionary parents. But Duncan left church one Sunday and instead of going home with the others who attended the service, he walked to the top of a hill and looked around. As he stood there in the soft rush of air that moved up the hill with the perfume of grasses and the warmth of the sun on the soil, he heard God speak to him. His self-indulgent lifestyle was over, God had work for him to do. He followed the calling wherever it took him and he devoted his time in dedicated service to God. Time passed rapidly. He thought of his own comfort from time to time and he began to look to the future. Duncan proposed to a woman he felt would make a good wife for a Pastor. He wasn't certain if he loved her for he hadn't fallen in love before and didn't know the symptoms. He enjoyed her company. She was certainly pretty enough and best of all, she had a keen sense of humour. At least she thought his proposal humorous enough but declined in such a way so as to not hurt his feelings. She may have regretted that decision as the

man she eventually married turned out to be a drunkard and a layabout. Duncan just never got around to proposing to anyone else.

Jacky attended to all of his chores and a few others as well the day before he was to depart. He sharpened all of the saws and tools, including a garden spade. He made certain the fuel tank for the diesel generator was topped up so full it would spill over if the temperature went up by as much as a degree. He serviced and washed the truck and quietly said a goodbye to it. He chopped enough wood and kindling to last more than a month. Suddenly, there just wasn't anything else to do. It was all done and it was all done for the very last time. Jacky sat on the army cot in his humpy, which he knew was going to be turned back into a tool shed for the garden. He thought about all of the people here that meant so much to him over the years and he became quite maudlin. A habit that Jacky picked up began one afternoon when he carried some firewood into the kitchen for the stove. Cook had just made a pot of tea, for this particular part of the afternoon was a quiet time for her. She invited Jacky to sit down and join her. He did and they had a great old natter. It became a daily ritual and something that Jacky looked forward to. Cook knew already that she would miss him in the kitchen of an afternoon. It was now just about that time. Jacky went to the fuel shed where he hung bundles of herbs to dry in the air at the doorway. He took several bundles and then went to the garden to gather some fresh herbs. Cook did not need them. The evening meal was already well underway but Jacky needed to say something by way of thanks. Cook made a big fuss over them and they were both happy. Jacky didn't know what to do about Duncan. He needed to say things to him that he was just unable to say. Jacky had not acquired much of anything over the time he spent here at Stockley House. His possessions amounted to almost nothing. Coleridge, from Coolum Downs gave him an old, army kit bag. Jacky packed everything he owned in that. His too-small clothing was passed down to other boys at the hospital or in the community. The only possession of value to Jacky was a baseball, a glove and a bat. And these he valued beyond even his dreams. He picked them up. The glove was soft and pocketed for the ball. Jacky had spent a lot of time rubbing oil into the leather. The ball was scuffed and had taken on the colour of the surrounding dirt. It had a few dog's teeth-marks on it as well. Jacky would hit the ball, then go and have to fetch it in order to hit it again. It wasn't much fun. He could occasionally coerce one of the other kids to shag for him but they wanted a turn at bat and Jacky just wasn't up to that. One morning when Jacky walked around back of the hospital, there was a red cattle dog sitting on the back veranda. No one recognised it or who owned it. It looked thirsty so cook told Jacky to give it some water. Eventually they had to feed it. It sat on the back veranda almost all day. It was friendly enough and never barked or growled at anyone and seemed to be grateful for any food and

water given it. Jacky had a box of freshly-dug potatoes for the kitchen and was taking them to cook but when he got about even with the back stairs that led into the kitchen, he noticed that one of the potatoes was sliced by some inept, for Jacky, spade work. He decided to simply replant it and threw it back in the direction of the vegetable plot figuring to pick it up on his way back. The potato had barely left his fingers when the cattle dog cleared the back stairs in about two leaps and took off after the potato, grabbing it before it had even stopped bouncing on the ground. The dog then brought it back tail wagging so hard it made its whole hindquarters wiggle. Jacky suddenly had a brainwave. The dog and he spent many days enjoying their favourite pastime and Jacky improved his batting skills. It came to an end when a squatter turned up to have his bunged-up arm looked at. The squatter looked down when he felt something next to his leg.

“Bluey, you old bugger. What in hell are you doin’ here, me old china? I thought we lost ya”.

He knelt down and gave the dog a friendly scuffing around the neck. The dog, it seems, had simply gone missing. How it managed to turn up at the hospital was just one of life’s mysteries. Jacky hoped the dog really didn’t belong to the squatter, but the squatter offered to pay for Bluey’s keep (that was turned down) and when he walked down the path to the front gate the dog followed to heel without a backward look. Jacky looked at the teeth-marks and smiled. Jacky took the glove, bat and ball and walked up to Duncan’s office. The door to the office was always partly closed, which meant one had to always knock first. It was only ever fully closed when it was advisable not to bother knocking unless some apocalyptic disaster had just occurred and it was believed that Duncan might have a solution, otherwise, simply go away and try later. Jacky tapped on the door with the handle end of the bat. Duncan bade entry to whoever it was on the other side of his door, and as soon as he saw it was Jacky, he immediately began his desk-clearing routine. Jacky adopted an air of studied nonchalance. He simply said to Duncan that he didn’t expect he could take the equipment with him and maybe Duncan would be able to find someone to whom he could pass it on. He placed the items on Duncan’s desk, smiled and dismissed himself having said his much rehearsed speech. He partially closed the door behind him. Duncan stared after him for several long minutes. He shook his head in wonderment at the eloquence of the gesture. Had Jacky offered to cut off his right arm as a gesture of thanks to Duncan, it would have been short of the mark. The spiritual value of these items was incalculable. What they represented to Jacky, no one could possibly guess but Duncan had a pretty fair idea. He, of course, had no intention of letting Jacky part with them and certainly, giving them away would be unthinkable. Duncan, less than two weeks after Jacky moved on to

challenge the world, packaged up the bat, ball and glove and arranged to post them with an explanatory letter to Ros, who still kept in contact. She, years later, on hearing that his Mary was pregnant with their first child, sent them on to Cairns by rail along with copies of some photos of Jacky that he never saw before nor knew were being taken at the time. Jacky would cry when he thought of his friends.

## **CHAPTER 20**

### ***The Aunts***

Jacky awoke early, washed and dressed. The dunny was a double affair, one side for female staff and the other for the men. Attached to that was a bathhouse with a shower that worked by the simple expediency of a bucket of water heated to boiling on the kitchen stove, carted to the bathhouse and decanted into another bucket with a water rose that opened by pulling a rope attached to a valve. The bucket was hoisted overhead by a rope and pulley. The boiling water, by the time it had reached this point and was ready for use, had sufficiently cooled to make it a hot or at least warm shower. One bucket of water was quite enough to get anybody clean, or one was able to learn how to make it do. Early risers also had to be good fire-starters for the stove had to be lit to boil the water. He dressed in the new clothes he was planning to travel in. He walked some distance away from Stockley House to where he could see the whole place in one vision. He wanted to remember it all. Vignettes of memories formed a montage in his mind all the way back to the day when he found himself here among the Wandjina. He thought of his aunts and his mothers. He wondered what had happened to them. He knew it must have been difficult for them to make the decision to bring him here, made more difficult by physically having to carry him the entire distance. These charitable views were not of his own authoring. His views were more along the lines of betrayal by his aunts. It was only the voices of Ros, Peter and Duncan that made him see and realise what they faced in giving Jacky the only possible reprieve from a certain death, and the courage they found to take that chance. His mind drifted back to the day his journey from boy to man began.

That day of initiation also began in the early morning. Buluhlmang and four other boys were taken away from the camp by their uncles. They were led single-file through the rocks and into the hills. It was a quiet, auspicious place of secret ritual and no one else was allowed to go there. They were painted with ochre. Each had stripes of white clay painted around their arms and their legs. Each had lines of white ochre painted vertically on their bodies. They were naked. Each individual was then painted with red ochre with his own personal tribal marks. When the painting was done they were taught a dance that was sacred and used

only for this ceremony. Each individual was given a chant, a song, that only he could sing and then only for the duration of the ceremony. The boys sat on the ground and were told secret stories and secret things that they must not forget. The things they were taught were to be passed on to other initiates when their time came. Most of the secret things made no sense at all to Buluhlmang and he was told that it would all be revealed in his dreams. That was a most convenient ploy because they were warned these things were absolutely sacred and must not be mentioned ever again. Fires were built. The gidarchie, the medicine man, came to them. He wore the skin of a red-kangaroo over his head and down his back and had feathers from different birds attached to a headband. These drooped down over his face that was painted black with the ashes from the fire. The boys were led each into a gunyah. There was a fire burning slowly, generating considerable smoke. They sat there in the smoke and fumes, and from time to time, the gidarchie would enter the gunyah, sing to them, and add more things to the fire. Neither boy had eaten or drunk anything since the night before. They would stay there the full day and night without food and very little water. Each would sing their own song of initiation until the smoke and sleep deprivation robbed them of their senses. The only food was a few bitter leaves the medicine man poked into their mouths. If the smoke overcame them they would be led outside to breathe again and to dance the dance they were taught. They would be sent back inside. The next day they were led back to camp. They were given a lot of water but no food and they danced the sacred dance of the initiates. All the members of the camp sang and danced and ate, except for the boys about to become men. Ritualistically they were taken to a gunyah and there, anaesthetised by the smoke, the leaves they chewed, the lack of sleep and the overall power of the ceremony, tribal markings were cut into their flesh and held open by hot pieces of charcoal from the fire. The dancing, the singing, and the ceremony lasted all night. They were led back to the hills in the morning and taken to separate places of overhanging rock. Their wounds were bathed and cleansed and a compress was applied to the flesh. Here they could remain for up to another four days without food. Each had a small bladder of water to serve them. They were told to sleep and dream and await their visions. They were left sitting cross-legged in front of a smoky fire from more of those leaves the medicine man threw into the smouldering ash. When their visions came, or when they simply became hungry enough and the effects of the smoke had worn off, they would come down and rejoin the camp. Most would take new tribal names formed from the visions that visited them. Others would only pretend they had visions and choose new tribal names anyway. It did not matter. They were never to speak of anything to do with the rites again. They would be men and allowed to do men's things. They may be circumcised at another ceremony later in life, and have a tribal-specific front tooth removed. This would depend

on how powerful they were to become. It was a kick up the ladder of success.

Four days is a long time to worry over a loved one. Buluhlmang's mother and her sisters worried about him. They expected he would be one of the first down, long before the fourth day. One of his aunts went secretly to the hill and watched him on his first day. He was still cross-legged in front of the fire. She was relieved to have gotten there and back without being seen by the men and punished for such a gross sacrilegious crime. Two of the initiates wandered into camp early the following morning, looking dazed and confused. Two aunts sneaked back up the hill. Buluhlmang was lying on his back unmoving. They hid there for two hours and he did not move or even appear to be breathing, but they were too far away to see that clearly. A third boy, now officially a man, wandered into camp late in the afternoon of the second day. The fourth came in a few hours later. Buluhlmang was never to appear. One aunt crawled back out of the hill and made her way back to camp from a route opposite to the sacred place. She told her sisters what she saw and feared. They knew they must save him. Death resulting from these ceremonies was not common but not unheard of and the elders and medicine men protected themselves by saying that it was the will of the spirits. They made dances to the unfortunates to celebrate the spirits wanting them for their own. And that should keep everybody off their backs about the tragedy. They would only check on the inductees on the fourth day in case one or more had become too weakened to make his own way back to camp. They would check on Buluhlmang on the morning of the fourth day and find him gone without trace. His aunts, who needed to save his life and spirited him away in the evening of the second day, were far too clever to leave any marks betraying their treachery. They also knew they could not return to the tribe. They did what they could. They bathed him and washed off the ochre. They cleansed his wound that was inflamed and swollen and putrid smelling. They applied spider's webs to the festering cuts and pasted the inner bark of certain trees to his belly. They used compresses of moss to cool the inflammation and they dribbled water into his mouth every few minutes. He was not dead but he was going to die, this was now certain. They had no other lore, they had no other prayers, and they had no other hope. Except one and that was as radical and impossible as it sounded when an aunt first voiced it. His mother and one of her sisters returned to the camp before they were noticed missing, and appeared mystified and frightened when made aware that neither Buluhlmang nor his body could be found. They complained to the elders and demanded that a new search be started immediately. They called the elders names and blamed them and their stupid ceremonies for the disaster. Needless to say, this was not taken lightly by the elders and they, almost haughtily, declared that there was not going to be a search. If these annoying women

wanted a search so badly, then they could bloody well go and search if they wanted. This was exactly the reaction the women expected and they made a show of going to look for Buluhlmang. They did not bother to look, of course, and the men thought they were very clever and put those bloody, annoying women in their place. Everyone was happy. Everyone except Buluhlmang's father, that is. Buluhlmang's father smelled a rat. He lost a cherished son. He thwarted sorcery and those who wished him ill to make certain that his son was born. He was proud of himself and of his son. Now, at the end of it all, sorcery had won out. He knew how clever these women were, he was married to one of them and learned that, first hand, and he could also count. Two of the sisters were missing. He sensed treachery but could not prove it and these women, though they were only women, still outranked him. He could and would bide his time.

Meanwhile, Buluhlmang's two aunts discussed their only option. They could not even bring his body back to the camp for it was clear that they were administering medicines to him. His father might claim they were using sorcery and demand that the elders point the bone at them in turn. Pointing of the bone was a death sentence for a superstitious people. It was only used in very grave circumstances. Those who were the object of the bone slowly wasted and died. There is much anecdotal evidence to prove such claims, still more explaining it as the result of hysteria and much again regarding it as a load of codswallop. The consequence of the sentence was greater than the probability of dying as the result. It also meant that everyone else disowned you. It is nearly impossible, for any lengthy period, to live alone in the Australian outback as a nomad living off the land with only primitive tools to sustain you. It also often meant that other members of your family were banished from the tribe too, but usually at a later date, after you had died or gone far away. The aunts held little hope that the white men living at the station could help. This view was despite their having been told by people from a different tribe of the powerful magic they could do. They did not trust any white people; they were proven vicious and mean, and they hated the blacks. Even if the magic they could do was powerful enough to save Buluhlmang's life, what would happen to him then? The answer seemed to be that it didn't matter, for an alternative did not exist. They would have to trust in the spirits to protect them and him. They, of course, wondered of their own fate but love was their motivation. There was no other course. It was three days away and they had to leave immediately. Jacky knew none of this. His last memories of his final days with his tribe were simply fevered images and nightmares. These began soon after his being seated under the overhang on which the stencilled handprints of all of the other tribesmen who had undergone these rites featured. Each man went back in the days after his initiation and stencilled his hand on the honour roll with the others who went before

him. The hands were stencilled with either white or red ochre. It was thought that centuries earlier there was a distinction but its meaning was lost now, and the ochre was a matter of choice. As soon as the clays dried it began to fade. These overhangs were subject to breeze and light. It didn't matter how subtle the breeze or how dim the light, their energy slowly began to abrade the images. New stencils of other hands would be painted over the old and faded ones, as space became a premium. No one cared because by the time a stencil had eroded to near invisibility, the man who laid it down had gone back to the Dreaming. It is said that in Arnhem Land there are some of these overhangs where the stencilled handprints appear. When they fade, the local aborigines tend to restore them, but they are not the original prints and their value is lost. Still, it is a memorial to days of dignity. It is an acknowledgement to the skill and tenacity of survival that characterises a unique group of people deserving of far more than they have ever been shown or offered or given credit.

Jacky would never know or even guess that his aunts, after some months' absence, and hoping the furore would have died down, rejoined their sisters. The elders wanted to know where they had been and what they had been up to. The aunts were non-committal and the elders, from long experience, were not inclined to provoke them overly much. Buluhlmang's father was not happy with this result and attempted, on many occasions, to force the elders into a confrontation with the aunts. The elders remained untroubled and unmoved however. It came to a head a few months later. The tribe was passing out of a valley and climbing hills to pass through on to the flatland where sweet grasses attracted the wallabies. They were high on the hill, resting for a spell. Suddenly, Buluhlmang's father could contain his suspicion and his temper no longer and he began to yell and accuse the women of sorcery and treachery. The elders were not in the mood to be provoked and told him so. He worked himself into a deep anger and finally, in frustration, he took a club and decided to take matters into his own hands. He rushed at the eldest aunt, determined to exact revenge for taking his son. She never liked this puny man and she was not overly happy with her little sister for accepting him in the first place. He was nothing to be feared and she neatly sidestepped his raging attack. He was expecting anything but that. He lost his balance and continued on to stumble over the edge of the hill, and before being able to grab on to something, because of his momentum, plummeted off the hillside to his death, a self-fulfilling prophecy. A year or so earlier, two family groups independently melded with other less transient and established communities. All that remained of Jacky's tribe was now standing on the edge of the hill looking down upon the dead remains of Buluhlmang's father, one of the most successful of the tribe's hunters. This was the twilight of the tribe. The elders were tired from the climb and still in a



bit of a shock over the sudden violent outburst. They chose to do nothing about it for the moment. But clearly, something had to be done about these women. Perhaps the rumours and whisperings about their sorcery had some foundation. All four had been married and all their husbands save one were now dead. The elder who was to have the final say in the matter was the one who was married to the third-eldest aunt. He left her when their three-year-old son died from a mystery disease. The next man to take her as a wife died from the effects of acute dysentery when he failed to respond to local remedies. No one else was game enough to claim her officially. The elder, her first husband, was far too old to believe in such things as sorcery but also far too old to discredit it entirely. His decision to banish the women from the tribe, made some weeks later and after consultation with the other elders, was the seed of the tribe's destruction.

The four sisters lived together for several months on the central savannas and finally came in out of the cold to join a community in Western Australia. A small black and white photo of the four of them together appeared in a government tourism folder many years later. Each of them lived into their early eighties, respected and liked and mourned. They are buried there in well-marked graves in the local community cemetery next to the historic graveyard of Chinese miners. Eventually, certain welfare benefits, previously denied to Aboriginal Australians, were now made available to them, and several of the remaining elders, too old to hunt, surrendered their dignity and pride and accepted their rightful due. Some even managed to die on clean sheets in a white-run hospital. The tribe faded and all that remains are stencilled handprints and artwork on the stones of their passing. These too are fading.

Jacky looked carefully at the neat buildings of Stockley House, committing them to memory. He realised that, though he was robbed of his heritage and rightful place in his tribe as a man, he had indeed completed that journey. It had finished here, in this place. His rites of passage were far different and perhaps more demanding than any who had gone before him. And perhaps his aunts knew this and wanted it for him. He was now a man and his new tribal name was Jacky Wonga. He would make his mothers and his aunts and his fathers and his uncles proud of him. He would take his place in the world. He walked slowly back to the hospital. He vaulted the fence next to the air raid siren tower and walked to the new vehicle-shed. He found a sharp stone and etched, Jacky Wonga 1948, into the timber of a corner post. He stood back and stared at his stencilled handprint. It felt good and Jacky felt proud.

## **CHAPTER 21**

### ***The Stockman***

Jacky was late for breakfast. Everyone else not on duty was already there. He stood the mostly-empty khaki kit bag against the wall next to one of the squatter chairs on the front veranda. It was everything he owned, certainly not much for sixteen years of living. He was carrying his new hat and would place it under his chair as he had always done since he once saw Duncan do it. Everyone looked up when he entered the dining room. Duncan nodded his approval at the sight of Jacky in his new shirt, moleskins and boots. He turned to Jacky with a huge grin.

“Jacky, you look as flash as a rat with a gold tooth”.

There were mutters of agreement and Jacky was slightly embarrassed by the attention. The next twenty minutes or so were laced with advice, don't forgets and well wishes. Some would not be there when his ride turned up and they shook his hand or patted his shoulder in a friendly manner. The lump in their throat embarrassed some as they said their goodbyes. Jacky tried to remain serious and austere in an adult manner as he accepted the proffered good wishes but he too found it hard to speak without a break in his voice. The rest of the morning was spent saying silent goodbyes to inanimate objects and shaking hands with people from the community. It was clinic day and many people he knew turned up to see the doctor. Then it was lunchtime and Jacky's last meal ever at Stockley House. It was mostly a silent affair and quickly over. Jacky spent a half-hour following the noon-meal with Duncan, receiving last-minute instructions, reprimands, advice and dire warnings. Then the fuel truck was heard pulling into the path to the gate. All who could do so, assembled to see him off. Duncan was the last to shake his hand. He was able, as the truck turned, to get a glimpse of these people and to wave a final goodbye out of the open window of the yellow truck.

The ride, which at first was exciting and fresh to Jacky as they travelled over new country, became humdrum and then boring, for the view never seemed to change. It was to remain so all the way into the Northern Territory to the lonely, uninhabited designated drop-off point. The driver was laconic and terse, used to driving long distances with only himself for company and conversation, and Jacky had little to say. Conversation was difficult over the roar of the motor and the rattle of the truck on the road. Even when the driver gratefully took a break and a kip, leaving Jacky to follow the dusty dirt road behind the wheel for several hours, the ride remained boring. The few stops they made at lonely outposts to drop off drums of fuel were the only diversion from the monotony, and most welcome indeed. Jacky found it hard to sleep sitting up and he nestled into the corner of the door and the seat. The truck jounced frequently, banging his head against the doorframe and it was hard to

get comfortable. He seemed always to be breathing in dust. The sandwiches that cook packed for him were drying out and tasting stale. He had not thought to take along anything to drink, not even water. Fortunately, the driver stopped to make a billy of tea and cook some food at regular times, and he offered a dirty tin mug found in the dust under the seat to Jacky. Jacky was grateful. The driver began slowing down and Jacky wondered if he were about to make another delivery. How he found these places was anybody's guess in Jacky's mind. He frequently found there was nothing at all to identify them other than a barely visible track and maybe a badly painted metal sign nailed to a tree bearing a one-word legend. The drop-off point was exactly one of these. When the truck finally stopped rolling, the driver looked at Jacky and pointed with a nod of his head.

"Here ya are, mate. I expect they will be down shortly to collect ya".

Jacky fumbled with his kit bag and his confusion and tumbled out of the cab. He walked around to the driver's side. The driver leaned out of the window.

"Good on ya mate. Thanks for the company"

He waved and put the truck in gear and moved off. Jacky watched the truck disappear in the distance. The noise ran out first then the truck became small and got lost in heat shimmer and was gone. Jacky looked around and could see nothing except a rusting, empty forty-four gallon drum off to the side of the road. He boosted himself on to the drum and waited in absolute silence. Not a birdcall, not an insect not even the sighing of a breeze broke the silence. The sun was hot and the flies found him. He began to wonder if he should start walking back. Three hours later, his bum sore from sitting on the drum, his feet sore from standing when his bum got sore, he was staring off into the distance. And there was no shortage of that.

"G'day. Reckon you're Jacky".

The vertical leap was impressive. He landed in front of the forty-four that almost upended but managed to balance on the rim before falling back into position. He spun towards the voice to find an Aborigine and two horses, less than five feet behind where he was sitting. It wasn't obvious where they had come from, and how they had soundlessly clopped up to where he was posing on the drum, he couldn't figure out. His heart relaxed finally as the stockman handed him a jam-tin billy of water.

"Reckoned ya might need a drink. It gets a bit thirsty out here".

Then he led the other horse around, ready to ride back, and waited impatiently for Jacky to get himself organised. Jacky met the boss and the leading hand. He was given some brief instructions, some orders, and left to get on with the job. The last hour spent in conversation with Duncan before leaving Stockley House was put to good use. Duncan told him not to pretend to know something if he didn't.

"If you say you don't know, then they will tell you. Otherwise they are going to think you are pretty damned dumb and will be cranky when you stuff something up. If they want you to do something, and you don't know how, then ask them to show you. They might be a little annoyed but they will show you how, and respect you for asking".

It was good advice as Jacky found out and he spent a lot of time asking. And a lot of people began to think he was very eager. He learned quickly and he already had a few impressive skills. He got on well. It didn't matter if Jacky thought he was as good as any other person, which included a white person. It wasn't up to him. He was an Aborigine, an Abo. It was what the white person thought that made the difference. And very few white people thought very much at all about the Aborigines other than as a source of cheap and uncomplaining labour. When legislation needed to be passed, it was done without much regard for what the Aborigines needed, much less wanted and so nobody asked them. And they didn't want much, just to be treated as equals. It was modern times before they were even given the status of being Australian. They were put on reserves. Then that land was resumed. Lands already ceded to them were taken back without payment because their lands were needed for their mineral wealth. Laws were enacted to give everybody social benefits, everybody except Aborigines. If they could vote in a local election, that didn't mean they could vote in a Commonwealth election. Half-castes were treated either with greater or lesser equality. It didn't seem to matter what happened, Aborigines of any percentage always got the short end of the stick. A stockman's wage was never anything to write home about. They deserved far more for those hours of backbreaking toil and the deprivations they endured. Especially Drovers. Droving of these huge mobs of cattle across the interior might be looked at with some nostalgia and romance today, but it was hard, dirty, dangerous work. It is unlikely that even one of those who went droving did not personally know somebody that had managed to drown in one of the rivers of legend. The rigours of a stockman's job shortened his life expectancy, and chronic conditions, like Sandy Blight a painful and worrisome bacterial condition of the eye, like trachoma, just made it all so much worse. A white stockman's wage was a king's ransom compared to the earnings of an aboriginal stockman. A white stockman earned, in those years, almost three pounds a week. An aboriginal stockman only earned about ten shillings and some supplies. Some never were paid at

all in terms of cash and worked for boots, clothing, inadequate shelter and poor food. There are records that when these unfortunates had figured enough was enough and walked off the job, the police were called in to bring them back as they were indebted to the station-owners. Equality is in the eye of the beholder. All kinds of jiggery-pokery went on to almost guarantee the Aborigine never got a fair deal, or in some cases, no deal at all. There was an undercurrent of unrest in the Northern Territory in those years that made a lot of white people nervous. And a lot of white people should have been nervous.

Jacky learned that his wages, though for some reason considerably more than other blacks was still less than half that of a white stockman. He didn't object as he considered he was still in the position of an apprentice. But as a year and a half went past and Jacky no longer felt like the new kid on the block he began to feel some dissatisfaction. The stockman who met Jacky the day he was to begin the job became a *de facto* friend simply by association. He told Jacky that conditions in Queensland were better than in the Northern Territory. They were, but only marginal, and jiggery-pokery was practised there as well. Nonetheless, Jacky, as the wet season approached, politely told the boss-cocky he was settling up and moving to Queensland. Jacky stuck out his hand before his boss could respond to this, and shook the boss' hand warmly and thanked him for all that he had taught him and done for him. He thanked him for taking a chance on him and hoped he hadn't let Duncan Adair down. Whether it was Jacky's manner or the inclusion of Duncan Adair's name, his former employer settled up with all of Jacky's earnings and no deductions. Jacky thanked him again and promised to keep in touch. His employer thought about it and wondered if he shouldn't have offered Jacky more money. He had seen Jacky working stock and his ability to calm horses impressed him. It was a case of too little too late, it would have been an empty gesture and he wondered if he actually would get to hear from Jacky some time in the future. Jacky's friend, who went by the unlikely name of Bunchmeup, knew he could find work in Queensland. He and Jacky, along with Bunchmeup's wife and children, went to Queensland. Jacky began to think they were going to walk the whole distance and he was getting some idea of just how big this country of his really was. They turned up in Queensland as the weather began to fine and Bunchmeup steered them to a large cattle property and a job. Bunchmeup was warmly welcomed. He worked here before and was well liked. He told his new/old employer about conditions in the Territory and what he thought was about to happen up there, which is why he decided to leave. He was from there but he had a family to feed and didn't want to take any chances of not having a job. His wages in Queensland were quite a bit better than before and he was happy to have come back. He took his family to get settled in their new quarters, again only marginally better

than how they lived in the Territory. Jacky showed his prospective employer two letters of recommendation, from Duncan Adair and Peter Bellow. Both were extremely complimentary and neither followed the usual format of such letters. The letters impressed the employer with their sincere and direct comment. Jacky explained what his wages were from his former position and that he accepted them only because he considered himself to be an apprentice. Now that he was experienced in all facets of the job (which wasn't anywhere near true but Jacky simply didn't know that yet) he expected to be paid commensurate salary. The stunned property owner didn't know how to respond. His idea of hiring a blackfella was nowhere close to Jacky's expectations. He reread the letters however, thought about Jacky's demeanour and hired him on at less than a white man's wage but certainly more than Jacky was earning before. Both were satisfied with the bargain for the moment, and the audacious Jacky Wonga left the employer bemused.

## **CHAPTER 22**

### ***End of an era***

Duncan was retiring said the letter in Jacky's lap that he was reading in almost disbelief. He was now beginning to read it for the second time. Duncan began almost all of his letters with a small joke or witticism then proceeded to answer or reply to any questions or comments made in the previous letter to him. That part finished, he would comment on all the things that were happening around him. Finally, as he neared the end of the letter, he would add personal comments about himself. This part opened with the first line being, "I retire next month". Jacky simply hadn't thought of Duncan not being Duncan. He read it all again. Duncan was taking the truck and his bicycle and leaving Stockley House. It had recently been downgraded. The Flying Doctor Service had improved its operations immensely in response to its value and the regard in which the people of the outback held it. There was no longer a position for a District Medical Officer or District Nurse. Almost every property owned a medical kit sold by the Flying Doctor with all the ingredients numbered. Symptoms, also numbered, could be radioed in and the required medicine-by-the-number could be prescribed. This gave rise to the hoary, oft-repeated joke of the station-owner told to give his wife a dose of medicine number nine. When the doctor next queried the man about his wife's condition, he was told that the owner couldn't find a number nine so gave her a dose of five and four and she came good real quick. Duncan figured on settling in Perth, a place he had always liked and hoped to buy a small cottage there and spend his days pottering in the garden. He planned to drive the truck to Perth and swap it for a suitable car that would see him through until he couldn't drive any more. Jacky could tell by the way it was all said that Duncan really

wanted no part of it. He would have liked simply to go on with the way things were until he was unable to do so. However, the position of administrator was no longer needed and it was kept viable only until Duncan was to retire. Someone, to make even this one concession, had returned a favour to someone else, as funding for the hospital was to cease soon, and the hospital to be closed. Upgrading the hospital had too big a price tag and simply could not be justified, as surrounding towns grew bigger with needs considered more pressing. The day quickly arrived when Duncan did retire and did drive the truck to Perth to swap it for a suitable car. He was quite happy with the deal he got. He bought a cottage that suited his needs and settled down to the job of being retired, but he never saw the year out. He suffered a massive stroke while working in the garden and died without recovering. The Inland Mission took care of his funeral and burial. He lies now in Perth. Jacky did not hear about his death until a comment from Peter and Gwen Bellow in an enclosed note with a Christmas card. He went cold when he read it. 1951 fell in the midst of a harsh period of drought in inland Australia. A fire began on the tinder-dry land and it burned its way to the Stockley House property. There was little that could be done to save it. The large old Queenslander burnt to the stumps. Everything that was wood became fuel for the relentless flames. All that was left to mark the property when the fire burned itself out, was a large galvanised water tank, a small portion of woven-wire fence, a decade old air raid siren tower and a three vehicle shed whose white paint was blackened by the soot of the fire.

The siren tower was built after Duncan Adair received instructions from one of the government offices involved in the defence of the nation, when bombs began to rain down in Darwin in the mid war-years. An air-raid siren was to be mounted on a tower and used to warn the local populace of an impending attack. The letter came with detailed specifications as to the construction of the tower and arrangements for costs involved. Duncan ordered the material as listed on one of the enclosed sheets and arranged for a local bush-carpenter to come over and build the damned thing. The carpenter looked over the pile of materials neatly stacked close to where the tower was to be built. He studied the plans carefully. He looked at Duncan.

“You sure you want to build this jolly thing, mate”?

Duncan really couldn't have cared either way but the letter was more or less a directive. He had no choice and the government was paying for it.

“Any idea just who is supposed to crank this thing up”?

Duncan hadn't gotten that far around in his thinking yet and supposed it would be him and said so. The bushy snorted.

"Not likely, mate. By the time you made it up the ladder they designed for this thing, the Japs would be back on the ground drinking that Sake of theirs. You're gonna need a monkey to get up the top of this thing. Who's supposed to tell you when they're coming anyway"?

Duncan discovered another good point that he hadn't gotten around to thinking about. The bushy looked around.

"I don't see anything around here the Japs would want to waste a good bomb on anyhow".

That one Duncan had thought about. The hospital and its outbuildings were readily visible from the air and the airstrip would be just as noticeable.

"I suppose they might see the airstrip and figure it was being used by fighters or something".

The Bushy shook his head.

"Nah, mate. The Japs aren't going to bomb the jolly airstrip. They're going to need it to land on when they bloody well run out of fuel just getting here".

He adjusted his hat, rolled up the plans and got to work. It was finished and painted by noon the next day. He got Duncan to get a few of the locals to give him a hand to stand it up. It was built in two parts, upper and lower halves and they bolted together. The carpenter left, telling Duncan to give him a cooe when the siren arrived and he would fit it. The siren never arrived.

The hospital was never rebuilt after the fire. A new hospital was constructed in the nearby town to accommodate its growing population and Stockley House is forgotten by even those who live not far from there now. After the fires, acacia seedlings sprung up along the airstrip making it unusable and quickly hid it from view. By 1990, termites and an occasional fire accounted for those few timber items remaining on the property. Other than an out of context but determined oleander bush, a few sheets of rusted iron and a crumpled, galvanised bucket with a water rose attached, there is nothing to say it ever existed. Be careful if you ever wander around the place, some pretty mean snakes like to live under those bits of rusty iron. The land itself became part of a portion of



land handed back to the local tribe by the National Native Title Tribunal in a land-rights concession.

Jacky moved on. He took a job with a large holding, also in Queensland. It was bought with foreign money and managed by people who were more interested in running a business than a cattle-property. Sentiment gave way to bottom line and employment was done on the basis of who could do the job. A written application and then a meeting with the stock agent determined who this would be. All wages started at the Queensland minimum and were added to from there based on the amount of experience and skills they brought with them. Jacky was hired. He was being paid wages based on his skill and not his birthright. Jacky however, did not understand money yet. He still had the money he took with him when he left Stockley House and had yet found no cause to spend any of his earnings other than the money he gave to Bunchmeup to buy some food on their trek to Queensland. He had no vices, they were to come, and his clothing was part of his allowance up to this point. He did equate wages with status and was therefore keen to get his share. He had to make his own way to Chillagoe and would be met there and taken to the station. He was able to find a ride into Petford and they showed him how to buy a ticket for the train to Chillagoe. He was almost as impressed with the railway as he was with the airplane. He got off the train in Chillagoe with no idea of what to do or where to go. He sat on the platform and waited. A stockman came out of the pub and ambled across the road to him. When he was near enough, the stockman broke into an amiable grin and thrust out a bony hand to Jacky.

“You must be Wonga, mate. I’m Billy Thornton, mate”.

Jacky jumped up, shook his hand, and replied unnecessarily.

“G’day, I’m Jacky Wonga”

The blonde-haired stockman reached down and grabbed Jacky’s kit bag, swung around and started to march off. He called back over his shoulder.

“C’mon mate we’re all over at the pub. It’s my shout”.

It’s hard to believe that an 18 year-old male in Australia had never seen a pub. Jacky was a virgin. He barely knew what a pub was much less snuck inside of one and he wouldn’t have known even that much except for conversations with his workmates. He ambled along in imitation of Billy across the street and into the darkened interior of the hotel. The smell of stale beer hit him when they got close to the bar and he was all

for leaving the place. He perched himself on the barstool imitating the others. There were two Aboriginal stockmen already at the bar. The publican shot Billy a look and he held up four fingers. Jacky watched in fascination as the golden fluid filled and foamed over the glasses. He wasn't too certain that he wanted to drink that stuff. The last time he saw something that looked like that, he was standing next to a horse. Billy introduced the other stockmen.

"That good lookin' bloke there is, Choco. He is as sharp as a sting from a whip. He is always thinking, aren't you, Choco? If you ever have a problem, let Choco have a look at it. He'll find a way to sort it out, guaranteed. That other bloke we call him, Blister, 'cause he only shows up after the work is done".

That went over Jacky's head like a dunny door in a cyclone. It would take Jacky almost two years before appreciating the humour. His first taste of beer was the same as his first impression. He never acquired a taste for it, and his first taste of hard-liquor was gin and it smelled and tasted like the medicinal alcohol used at the hospital. He never got the habit though he enjoyed sitting around with his mates and drinking one to their five and listening to the banter and the jokes and the yarns. He had one more ritual to learn: The ritual of the shout. It was complicated etiquette but it had to be learned and followed or he would lose many friends. It didn't seem to matter if you were drinking or not, when it came your turn to buy a round, it had to be done without hesitation and it was you that had to place the order, even if you had no idea what to do. It seemed reminiscent of his childhood when a successful hunter returned to camp and divided up his kill with everyone else in a ritual ceremony. Jacky was barely nineteen and he was black. Somehow, no publican anywhere ever seemed to take any notice. It may be that Jacky never went into a pub unless he was with a crowd, and that usually always meant a bunch of white blokes or it may have been that his manner defeated any decision to argue the toss. Whatever it was, Jacky didn't know any different and it wasn't until later in life when he recounted some of his yarns that people asked him about it. Jacky was always surprised.

They were planning on having a counter meal at the hotel when Billy asked Jacky if he had ever seen the caves. Jacky looked blank. The limestone bluffs of the Chillagoe area hosted three fine caves a short drive from town and easily accessible. They grabbed meat pies instead of sitting down to a counter lunch and piled into the station vehicle. Jacky got to see the Donna. They lit carbide lamps and wandered carefully into the cave. It was as significant an experience as he had ever known before and one he would never forget. Almost as often as he came to town he managed a tour of the caves and was one of those who, just

quietly, took a souvenir of a dainty stalagmite from the floor of the Royal Arch. Nowadays the three major caves are part of the Mungana Caves National Park and signs admonish you to take nothing but photographs and leave nothing but footprints. They finished their impromptu spelunking and headed out of town for the long drive to the station property. Jacky saw the chimneys of the smelter and asked what they were. When he looked blank after Billy told him they were the furnaces from the copper smelter that shut down not long before the war ended, Billy knew he was going to have to do an awful lot of explaining to Jacky over their time together. He didn't mind; he already liked Jacky. Of course, it would be difficult to find someone that Billy really didn't like.

Jacky was camped out one night with two other ringers. One of them was a white bloke about sixty maybe going on seventy and answered to the name of Ted. The other was a similarly ancient and wrinkled Aborigine. The two of them had been together for so long neither one could remember just how long it was. They hardly ever spoke to each other or needed to. It was mostly a language of grunts and an agreeing, "I reckon". They preferred to handle their own meals rather than relying on the skills of the camp cook. They both could tell you stories about camp cooks, and hardly one of those was flattering to the man involved. To hear them tell it, there wasn't a camp cook in the whole bloody country that wasn't a drunk and spent most of his days as full as a State School hat rack. It was a full moon; almost bright enough to read a newspaper by, though Jacky wasn't certain either one of the two could read anyway. They had a small fire going and a billy being used as a stew pot hanging from a hook over an iron tripod that spanned the fire. The tripod, the billy and the hook were blackened from the smoke of many such camps. The stew smelled friendly and there was steam leaking from under the lid of another billy used to brew the tea. They had damper cooked from a late lunch and dumped into a hole under the coals to be ready in time for tea. The white-bloke pulled it out, dusted off the ashes, cracked off the burned parts, and broke the rest into three roughly equal sections. One part each was sitting in a dish waiting for the stew to declare itself ready to eat. The Abo was scrunched down on his haunches, sipping black tea from a china mug. Jacky had seen the mug in daylight, and the inside was stained the colour of burnt sienna that no amount of soap and washing would ever remove. It had just become part of the mug itself. The white bloke was also hunkered but he had one foot directly under him that he was actually sitting on, and the other straight out in front of him. He looked comfortable enough, Jacky decided but he, Jacky, could never adopt that pose for very long before cramping set in. The white bloke was building a smoke. He had a tin of Log Cabin tobacco that also housed both the papers and matches. The bloke was in no hurry. He took his time. He pulled out enough tobacco for the smoke and put a bit back in the tin and then readjusted it by

taking a bit more out. Satisfied, he rolled it in the palm of his hand then reached for the papers and pulled out one leaf, which he stuck on his lower lip. Jacky was fascinated. The old bloke picked at the tobacco as if he were taking out seeds or tough bits then rolled it again into a cylinder in the palm of his hand. In between these diversions, he was making conversation about nothing in particular that usually ended in a soft query to his Abo mate, "you reckon, Char?". The reply was always the same, "I reckon". He transferred the tobacco to the paper and rolled it between both thumbs and forefingers. He caught the edge of the paper and rolled it into an almost perfect cylinder. He licked the paper like he was playing a mouth organ and stuck it down. When he finished the cigarette, he examined it and poked it in the corner of his mouth and continued talking while the cigarette wiggled up and down for emphasis. He pulled a splint from the fire and cupping his hands around the cigarette lit the smoke. He dropped the splint back into the fire and blew spent smoke out of the other side of his mouth. Jacky was mesmerised. Jacky took up smoking just so he could duplicate this performance.

The Abo, who was called Char by the white bloke and Snow by everyone else put down his mug of tea and asked Jacky why he wanted to be a ringer. No one had ever asked him that before. As a consequence, very few people knew Jacky's story and just considered him some Aborigine same as all the rest. It took a while for Jacky to come up with an answer. And that wasn't particularly satisfactory. His intended profession even chose his name. He had just never been trained to be anything else. He had never wanted to be anything, he said, it all just sort of happened. He told them his story, trying to make it a yarn like so many others did over these quiet campfires. He must have done it pretty well because he kept the attention of both blokes until the end. About the only thing missing was 'Once upon a time' and 'They lived happily ever after'. Snow fiddled with the billy of tea, and using a stick to tilt the fire-heated can, poured out his third fresh mug.

"You don't want to be a ringer, Jacky. It's too hard mate. Never have anything to show for it. You reckon, Ted"?

"I reckon".

"What you need to do is get a job in the city or sumpin. Make a heap more money working in a city. You reckon, Ted"?

"I reckon".

Snow sipped from his mug.

“Mebbe get a job with Queensland Rail. Lots of blackfellas working there these days. Gotta make more money working there than this hard yakka. You reckon, Ted”?

Jacky swivelled his head to look towards Ted, the white bloke, knowing in advance exactly what his reply was going to be. He wasn't disappointed.

“I reckon”.

Jacky took the immediate lull in the repartee to interject with something that had him puzzled. He spoke to Ted as if the old Abo, Snow, wasn't even sitting there.

“Everybody calls him Snow, why do you call him Char”?

Ted was spooning out the stew onto the dishes; obviously considering it had declared itself ready and worthy of taste. Ted finished by tapping the serving spoon on the edge of the stew pot in an attempt to clean it of anything adhering to its surface.

“Me ugly old mate is from Charleville, is why. Ever heard of it”?

There weren't a whole lot of places that Jacky had ever heard of. This one, though, with its association with the Flying Doctor Service, now upgraded to the Royal Flying Doctor Service, was certainly one he knew all about. Jacky, Po-faced but with an invisible smile, couldn't resist.

“I reckon”.

The three of them, Jacky, Snow and Ted, were riding together the next day trailing cows and carrying on the conversations of the previous evening camp. Ted pushed his horse close to Jacky.

“You know what you ought a do is buy some land. Not a whole lot, just bits and pieces here and there. You buy the land and just sit around and wait a few years. It will be worth a whole heap more than you paid for it soon enough. Its always good to own a block of land or two, especially when you are getting old”.

He spurred his horse and called out in a loud voice.

“You reckon, Char”?

Char, or Snow, who couldn't possibly have heard the quiet remarks from where he was strung out in front, called back.

“I reckon”.

Jacky, in due course, took both bits of advice. It began with the acquisition of some land. Jacky was determined to take his place in the world. To this end he knew he had to keep bettering himself in every possible way. Somewhere along the way he acquired a lexicon, or that was what it called itself, and he spent as much time as he could learning the meaning of words. Once he figured he knew a word, he would make certain to insert it somewhere in a conversation. This often led to several hilarious moments when the word he chose also had other meanings that appealed to the more ribald of his campmates. He made a point of reading everything and anything that he came across and this included newspapers like the North Queensland Register. It was here he read of a government property auction of five-acre blocks near the town of Mareeba.

He took the paper at his first opportunity to the station manager to ask how this worked. Selwyn liked Jacky. As often as he met him, Jacky always surprised him. Jacky was an absolute contradiction in terms. Just when you figured you had him all worked out, he would up and surprise you again. Like the day Selwyn couldn't get the bloody station vehicle to fire up. Selwyn, like a lot of station blokes, knew quite a bit about recalcitrant and cantankerous machinery, and that included petrol engines. But this one had him stumped. Jacky happened along and stopped to peer over Selwyn's shoulder. Other than some exasperated name-calling of the vehicle by Selwyn, nothing was said. Selwyn figured he needed another tool and went to get it. He was confident that Jacky couldn't know anything about motors. He didn't even know that Jacky could drive at this stage, so never considered asking for his advice. He heard, to his dismay, the impotent cranking of the engine. He was afraid that Jacky might flatten the battery to add to his troubles. Then silence. He had just found the tool he was looking for when he again heard the dry-crank of the starting motor followed by the roar of an over-revved engine. It settled down to the usual vehicle sound. He came out, questioningly, to find Jacky wiping his hands on a hanky. He turned and said, “Blockage”, and mounted his horse and rode off. Another time, an articulated vehicle turned up on the property and the driver just parked it where he thought it would be out of the way. He then took off for town and wouldn't be back for a couple of days to pick up the loaded vehicle. They were to trial sending a truckload of beasts to another property by road, and it had to be backed into a loading chute. Almost everyone on the property had a go at getting the truck lined-up and were all becoming pretty well fed up and about to admit defeat. Jacky was in the crowd of onlookers. Selwyn was so cranky he was almost at the foot-stamping stage. One ringer, smart enough not to try his luck with the vehicle

wasn't smart enough not to try putting a spur to Selwyn and got roundly told off for his trouble. Selwyn told another ringer that he hoped his chickens grew up to be emus and they kicked his dunny down. Everyone else had just taken to staring at the problem. When it seemed obvious no one else wanted a turn, Jacky stepped out and asked if he could have a go. At this stage, Selwyn was so upset he would have let his three-year-old daughter have a go. Jacky climbed into the cab and brought the engine to life. Everyone was standing there looking on with interest and enjoying the fun of watching the articulated vehicle going in every direction but the one the frustrated driver was steering, and this promised to be fun as well. Jacky eased it into gear and drove it some distance straight out from the chute. He clutched it back into reverse gear, opened the driver's door, leaned out, looked back and simply drove the truck back and into the chute. He closed his door before reaching the chute, checked both mirrors, eased it down to a bare crawl and touched the brakes just as the rear of the trailer touched the wall of the chute. He shut it down and climbed down from the cab. Some shrugged their shoulders, some shook their heads but they all adjusted their respect for Jacky up a notch. Selwyn walked back to look at the rear of the trailer. It was absolutely square on.

Selwyn explained about the auction and asked Jacky how much money he had and how much he was prepared to pay for the land. They worked out a figure together and Selwyn said not to worry, he would find a way to contact an estate agent. The auction was held but there were few takers, and Jacky got the best block for the upset price. Jacky was now a landowner and Selwyn was wishing he had made an offer as well. Three weeks later a deed to the Crown Land was delivered to Jacky and he found he owed three peppercorns a year to Queen Elizabeth if she wanted them. The sixth George had died and the second Elizabeth took over the reins, though this meant nothing at all to Jacky. Jacky held the deed in his hands. He had read through it and seen the reference numbers and, apart from some of the quaint wording, understood almost all of it. He thought of Susan and how much he owed her. He hoped they would meet again so he could tell her. They never would.

At this point, he still did not understand the value of owning land but he did understand magic. And money, as he learned from Billy Thornton, was magic. This title deed was supposedly even greater magic because it would increase the money it represented. It would grow. That, he understood. Even better than simply holding on to the magic as Billy Thornton had instructed him, was to have magic that grew into greater magic all on its own. Consequently, this was only the first of the many large and small properties Jacky would eventually buy and sell. By then, he understood what it meant to own land and the magic inherent in its ownership. He did not, however, relinquish the Mareeba acreage until

long after the units used to measure it changed to metric and the money used to buy it became decimal. He sold it finally because the only reason for holding it was sentiment and the price offered could not be refused and meant he need not gather magic any longer. Around the same time as he sold the Mareeba property, a columnist, in a brief biography of the man, referred to Jack Wonga as “—a canny and forward-thinking businessman”. Maybe so, but the Beatles said it better—‘With a little help from my friends’.

The handsome woman in her white uniform and white comfortable nursing shoes couldn't help but notice that the good-looking bloke in the waiting room was having trouble keeping his eyes off her. He kept sneaking looks at her as often as she turned away and he pretended to be absorbed in something on the wall every time she turned back. She was not interested. She had her own agenda and it certainly did not involve some hot-blooded railway fettler, regardless of how cute he looked or polite he seemed to be. Still, she was flattered. She was also used to it. She was quite striking and very few men could resist trying their luck. It wouldn't hurt though just to have a look at his name. Jacky was sitting in the waiting room of the doctor's surgery. That's what it was called, a waiting room, and that was just what he was doing, waiting. He had a low priority. This was one of the doctors that vetted employees for Queensland Rail and these examinations were quick and routine. It seemed to take longer to complete the forms than it did to complete the examination. He was hoping it would take even longer for he was enjoying the scenery. There was something about that girl that kept disappearing into the other office to reappear again only moments later that appealed to him and it was hard to take his eyes away from her. It wasn't polite to stare but it was equally hard not to. He wondered if she was maybe from the Torres Strait because she had an Islander-type face and a nice full figure. Maybe she was from the Cape. He wondered what her name was. If he knew her name then maybe he could guess where she was from. She never got close enough for him to read the nametag pinned to her uniform. The neat uniform certainly looked good on her, or she maybe made the uniform look good, he wasn't sure which. He liked her legs and the brisk way she moved when she walked. He had to keep looking away because she kept catching him looking at her. She casually picked up the file, all carefully routine. She turned slightly away from the cute bloke sitting in the corner so he could admire her if he wanted. Was he looking? He'd better be looking. Open the file casually as if it is something that you need to do, part of your job. Make it look important. Right, close the file. Damn, forgot to look at his name. Put the file back before Bettina starts to wonder what you're doing. Yes, he is looking. Good. Let him look. Boys are such perverts. Go back to the other office. Bettina, the thirties-something Italian receptionist said nothing even though there was no reason for Mary to peruse that



particular file. She saw the man in the corner of the room watching Mary. That wasn't unusual. What was unusual was Mary's reaction, and Bettina was enjoying it. She had never seen Mary flirt with anyone before.

The doctor came out of his examination room behind the patient he had just finished with. He left the patient with a friendly comment about making the next appointment with the receptionist and picked up the patient card. Jacky Wonga, it read. There were only two people in the waiting room, Mrs Cockburn and a young Aboriginal. He put on his doctor smile.

"Mr Wonga? Would you come in"?

Jacky put down the two-year-old Readers Digest he was pretending to read and followed the doctor down the short hallway to the examination room. Mary came out of the other room refusing to look at the corner of the waiting room. She smiled and acknowledged Mrs Cockburn.

"G'day Mrs Cockburn. How are we feeling today"?

Mrs Cockburn admitted to feeling fine which belied the fact she was here in the doctor's office. Her scheduled appointment was for next week. Glance quickly to see if good-looking bloke is looking. Bettina, had a curious lilt to her voice.

"He's with the doctor".

Mary was tempted to ask who but realised that was pointless and tried to look efficient, or rather, more efficient than usual. It didn't work. That was obvious by the look on Bettina's face. Mary gave a guilty smile and was about to go back and do some real work when Bettina stopped her.

"Mary, Mr Wonga didn't fill in the name of the place where he was born. Can you make sure to ask him before he leaves? I'm going for lunch, I'm really feeling peckish".

Mary would perhaps have believed that, if Bettina hadn't been wearing that supercilious grin. Bettina was really enjoying this. The doctor followed Jacky out of the examination room. He never saw such extensive tribal marking before. He asked Jacky the usual questions about prior illness. The patient form was curiously blank. It was the duty of the receptionist to fill in these answers to save the doctor time in his examination. Jacky explained as briefly as Jacky could about his life. He had suffered no illness on the list since his rebirth at Stockley House. But prior to that he simply didn't know. The doctor shook his

hand. He was pleased to have met Jacky. He looked at the next patient card and smiled his smile for patients.

“Mrs Cockburn”?

The woman stood to be ushered to the doctor’s office and Jacky was reluctantly making his way to the door while trying to have another look at the pretty girl behind the desk.

“Mr Wonga, I need some more information please”.

Mary’s smile at Jacky was a much less wooden smile than the doctor’s. Mary was at a distinct disadvantage though she didn’t know it then. She decided early in her life that she could only achieve her ambitions by obtaining a good education. Consequently she didn’t have time to waste talking to boys who only wanted to waste her time in their own interests. She was very good at putting boys in their place as well as anybody else that made the mistake of selling her short. She worked hard and she studied hard, forsaking all those things that other girls her age were concerned about and fretted. Hence she missed out on some important education and just wasn’t adept at dealing with polite boys who were all charm. And Jacky was, in a word, charming. One mustn’t forget that Jacky spent his first twelve years in close company with his aunts. He spent months dealing with a demanding teenage Susan. He was always around the beautiful young Ros. He spent years talking with a more mature Deborah Lawton and weeks in close study with Gwen. There wasn’t a great deal that Jacky didn’t know about having to and how to get along with women. Getting past unsophisticated Mary’s defences was a piece of cake. Several years later, they met Sister Ros at the Cairns airport. Ros hoped they would like the wedding gift she brought.

## **CHAPTER 23**

### ***Roadmap***

Jacky was thinking of the day he first met Mary as he made his way back to the fish trap. He smiled when he remembered how she smoothed down her uniform each time before she stepped back to the reception waiting room. She would never admit it in later years but she was as interested in him as he in her that warm day so long ago. Jacky was uncertain how he rigged the weapons over his back to climb to where he killed the wallaby. It was barely secure now on his way back down. The spear seemed to be slipping and moving about and the club bounced uncomfortably with every step hitting him in the kidney region. He stopped several times to make futile adjustments until he eventually decided to just carry the spear in his left hand in order to carry the ball

in his right. That tied up both hands making it difficult clambering between the rocks. He just seemed out of step and out of sync this last day or so. He was glad to get to the rocks where the fish trap was installed further downstream. The fish trap routinely proved its worth again with three fish. Two were the usual perch that Jacky was catching in all the waterholes. Of those, one was too small to bother about and he released it. The third fish was not one that he recognised. It was, as fish go, rather ugly with pronounced scales and a leathery looking head. He killed them both and strung them through the gills, finding it very hard to work the piece of vine through the operculum of the ugly fish. He stood knee deep in the water and worked the scaffolding of the fish trap free from the rocks. The water, rushing in eddy around his legs had a slight brownish tinge to it like very weak tea and persistent flecks of foam circled in the vortex. He wrinkled his nose to sniff at an unusual hint of muskiness emanating from the surface of the water. It was all just unusual enough for him to take note of and then dismiss it. He towed the heavy fish trap out of the currents and on to the bank. It had a bedraggled appearance to it now. He stepped all over it to flatten it and break the ribs, unsuccessfully. The greenwood sticks were too resilient from their time in the water and simply fell over, but giving the same effect as crushing. Jacky dragged it up off the bank and into the bordering scrub. He turned and walked back to recover the weapons and the fish and avoided the urge to take one last look at the now discarded fish trap. He wanted to go to the falls one last time but a sense of urgency was building up in his mind. He convinced himself it was a long distance to walk just to look at falling water and made his way to his camp without looking back. He would not pass this way again.

Jacky cleaned the perch and fried it quickly over a hot fire for an early lunch. The smell seemed different today and the fish had a tendency to stick to the pan. He levered the fish from the base of the pan with a stick that he began using as a spatula some weeks earlier. The fish broke free but left small chunks of skin and flesh adhering to the pan. These bits quickly browned then blackened on the hot pan. Normally, or as normal as living was these days for Jacky, he would eat his meals directly from whatever container he used to cook them in. This included using the bark of the melaleuca, with which he wrapped food to bury under the coals of his fires to slow cook, as a handy take-away container. The frying pan had an unpleasant smell of burned protein and he slid the fish onto an aluminium dish normally used for preparing marinades. It tasted, despite the usual flavourings Jacky used to stuff the cavity of the fish, very ordinary. It was also tougher and far less flaky than usual. He wondered what he had done wrong, for on a scale of one to ten this entire effort was considerably below the halfway mark. He hoped the second fish would be more of a culinary success. It proved to be difficult to prepare. The skin, under the scales, was thin and leathery and had a

feeling of slime to it. The flesh was a buttery colour rather than the delicate white of his other catches and it had a rank smell. He rubbed it down with some of his dried herbs, slashed the flesh and crammed the several cuts with fresh cress and the red berries that were now becoming desiccated and falling into crevices between the rocks where they grew. He wrapped the fish in bark and parcelled it with vine. That was usually rather easy to do. Today however, he seemed to be all-thumbs. The bark, normally as soft and pliable as paper, resisted his rolling and folding attempts, reminding him of his troubles with the art of Origami. The vine, normally as useful as twine, snapped or tore when he tried to secure the bark with a simple knot. He was not having a good day by any measure.

Jacky tended to leave his frying pan unwashed. This was not so much laziness as an attempt to retain cooking oils. Most of the animals on which Jacky survived were lean and fats were scarce. So he used whatever fats or oils he did acquire several times. His lunch was so unsuccessful that he took the frying pan to the water and scoured it out with sand until both sides gleamed dully. He plodded back to his camp, his demeanour changed. He took the clay-disc that he removed from the sacred cave, placed it on the ground, and scribed the dirt around it with the tip of his knife. He got the wetted shirt with the pug of clay and tore off an amount equal, in his best estimation, to the amount needed to copy the disc. He worked the clay, added more water from his billy, and worked the clay some more. It finally became plastic and doughy. He made a second batch. Australian Aboriginal art began to flourish as a commercial venture in the 1970's and stores that sold only authentic bark-paintings and traditional-craft items, mostly to the tourist trade, opened in several prestigious tourist destinations. They added to their stock-in-trade with boomerangs, both the traditional hunting boomerang, which was never intended to come back, and the virtual-toy returning boomerang. The haunting, low frequency chord of the didgeridoo became an oft-heard sound being demonstrated and attempted by would be buyers of this native instrument. The use and design of the instruments, found nowhere else in the Pacific region, are faithfully recorded and dated for as far back as two-millennia. The sheer number of these unique aerophones being sold however, tended to defy their claim to authenticity. The almost two-metre pipes are traditionally hollowed out by termites or borers on living eucalypt trees and thus must have some upper-limit to their availability. The tourists were willing to spend and the owners of the stores were willing to sell. The list of trade items grew to textiles, bush foods, leather crafts, jewellery and painted fabrics. These began to include items that the Australian natives seldom had use for, like pottery and clay figurines. Almost every community began to develop their skills and talents in all manner of the crafts and

arts, for the market seemed insatiable and few other ventures were open to these people trapped in their own cultural time warp.

The former Mary Eileen Pritchard, now Mary Eileen Wonga, Jacky's well known and well regarded wife (although Jacky was often better known in some circles as Mary Wonga's husband) visited the Yarrabah workshops on the far side of Trinity Bay outside of Cairns to document and see first-hand some of the beautiful pottery being produced there. She brought back several small, open pots of primitive-design and glaze. She also brought back an interest in seeing how easy or how difficult it was to create these ornamental craft items. Armed with books from the local craft-shop in the Andrejic arcade, some hints and advice from a friend at the TAFE College, and a head-shaking husband, she began to practice the art. It was not a project with a long life and Jacky, having been roped into becoming the master of the kiln and applier of glaze, developed an interest himself. It put him in good stead as he now attempted to duplicate the terracotta art-treasure of the cave. He patted out two circles of clay exactly the same size as the circle drawn on the ground, copied from the original. He put one back into the moist shirt for safekeeping and set about trying to duplicate the whorls and symbols of the original. He failed. It was not as simple as it seemed in theory. He rolled out a thin worm of clay to apply as a whorl on the disk. The process of rolling it out also tended to dry it out. It sat precariously on top of the disc and Jacky knew it would simply fall off in the firing process. He wetted the disc first and this seemed to work a bit better but when he applied pressure to make it stick to the disc, the worm flattened to about twice the size of the original. He could not roll the clay into a worm long enough to complete even one of the smaller whorls, it would simply flop about at the end and eventually break off. When he attempted to join two pieces end to end on the disc, they would leave a gap between them as they dried out. Any attempts to smooth them together simply flattened the section of the join. After several attempts he got one complete whorl looking almost as good as the model. Then he tried to apply the beads to represent the sun and ran afoul of the art involved there. The beads became pads under the pressure needed to make them stick. Where they actually rested on top of the whorl (some were to the right and others to the left) they perched like a berry atop the worm, and any pressure applied to make them stick simply deformed them. It would not do at all. Hours passed. As the late afternoon-sun became more a visual display and less of a furnace, Jacky was no further advanced in his craft but well rehearsed in frustration and annoyance. He sat cross-legged, cramping and stiff and bereft of ideas. He swore. He swore almost a full paragraph of crudity, profanity and meaningless four-letter words and hardly repeated himself. It was of absolutely no value to the project but it made him feel considerably better about

things. He put the clay away and went off to relieve himself, walking stiffly from the long hours of sitting.

When he came back to the camp he decided enough was enough and put the clay back into the wetted shirt and dampened it with a few splashes from the water in the billy. He would rethink the project. He wanted a cigarette and his mind wandered tantalisingly back to the packets of tobacco in the glove compartment of his ute. That simply reminded him of his own stupidity and he felt he had experienced enough self-deprecation for one day. But the day, unfortunately, was not over yet. Jacky had a fleeting moment of despair thinking that he had forgotten to acquire some food for the evening meal before remembering the fish buried under the fire. He hoped it had not cooked itself to a charred and mummified piece of dry flesh. He was so preoccupied with the doomed and damned clay-disc project that he had given no thought at all to the fire, other than to throw the occasional stick in its direction, or of the meal awaiting him beneath the bed of coals. He dug it out and was relieved to see the protective bark was burned no more than usual. He carefully broke through several layers of the corky bark to examine his meal. It was fine or so it appeared. The buttery flesh had turned more to a urine colour, which Jacky attributed to the herbs he used to fill the cuts in the meat, and it was slightly rubbery when prodded by an inquisitive finger but hadn't been fire or heat damaged. It was still early and Jacky not overly hungry, but he knew that the fish, if left, would turn chewy and tough. It has already been established that Jacky was a practical man. However, he was given to some less than practical applications of his time, probably better served attending to the acquisition of food for his survival. For example, in his search for firewood, he dragged an almost complete log back to his camp with no way of chopping it into usable pieces. He mollified his own arguments by envisioning sticking the end of the log into the fire and simply shuffling it along as it burned away. That ridiculous idea needed serious revision, which this practical man was loath to do. However, in the absence of any reasonable solution, including a few that beggared lucidity of thought, the log simply became something to sit on. A practical man would not have considered this a particularly radical idea. But Jacky was not happy with simply having someplace to put his bum other than the sometimes-damp ground. He spent an entire day creating a backrest and arm rests to turn the log from a seat to a chair. It was quite possibly more comfortable than the hard seat but it took an entire day to fashion and it used much valuable timber that would be better used for his fires. This fuel was becoming scarce and took longer and longer to find and carry home to his camp.

Jacky grandly leaned back in his chair and unwrapped the parcel of fish. The first steamy morsel he placed in his mouth from thumb and

forefinger tasted muddy, mouldy and decidedly fishy. His first thought was to taste his finger but that was simply acidic from the clay with an overlay of the muddy, fishy taste. He sampled the herbs to see if they were at fault but they tasted as sharp and clean as usual, other than their degradation from the wilting heat. He tried some of the fish untouched by the bark. It tasted muddy, mouldy and fishy. The flesh was as rubbery to the palate as it was to the prodding finger and the taste, at first only muddy, now seemed almost putrid. The whole fish was inedible; the skin that he also sampled had the consistency and flavour of cling-wrap and seemed almost as digestible. He was not interested in trying. He packaged the fish again and flung it with some disgust off into the scrub where it could become food for the ants, if they could find it appetizing. He actually sighed aloud when he realised that the first guest might be the huge goanna he was at pains to keep from his camp.

Early morning saw Jacky, trident in hand trying his luck at spearing fish for breakfast and a later meal in the day. The valley seemed, somehow, altered in an almost imperceptible way. It was like being at a party where you knew no one and everyone was a stranger. He simply felt left out. He successfully struck a silvery-sided fish and lifted it quickly out of the water. The fish flapped and broke free of the impaling spears, only two of which had pierced its body. It splashed into the water and darted in a wounded, crabwise motion towards a deeper stretch. Flashes of silver as it turned and caught the sunlight, moved like a strobe through the greenish water. Jacky watched it disappear with dismay. Then there was a slight ruffle on the surface that displayed a widening vee and a sudden swirl that roiled the water over where the fish would have been struggling in its escape. Jacky remembered this was home to the Johnston's river crocodile, the totem of the people of the lakes. He looked around him before retiring to the shore and a comfort zone of safety. Jacky, in all the time he had spent in the valley on this occasion, had seen, thus far, only three crocodiles. Two of those sightings, and possibly all three were likely the same animal as it was seen in roughly the same area each time. Jacky, more concerned with the supernatural elements of this sacred site early in his occupation of the valley, hadn't much noticed that so few sightings of the animal took place. And, after that, his preoccupation with his own needs and comfort meant he never gave it any thought. He looked around now and counted, to his absolute surprise, five of these reptiles visible in the light of the warming early sun. He slowly began to take fright. The small animals did not worry him. They were not a danger to him unless he tried to grab one and received a bite for his trouble, as their food was insects, fish, turtles and birds. He was becoming frightened however, of the supernatural implications implicit in these many subtle changes. He made a promise

to himself to leave here the following day. The valley was no longer prepared to welcome him. He was being evicted.

Jacky waded back into the water and waited poised with the spear. He caught the flash of silver and tossed his weapon at it. The spear was tied to his wrist with a length of vine that allowed him to throw it at fish in the deeper water without losing the spear. He caught it by the vine and quickly pulled it in. A large fish, that somehow managed to look startled, was trapped on the spines. He threw it on the shore and quickly looked to see where the cheeky heron was that dogged him on these hunts. It became an unnerving mystery to him some weeks earlier when five fish he tossed to the security of the bank simply vanished without trace. It was eerie, and a very preternaturally attuned Jacky became exceedingly jittery and prone to startle rather easily. Then he lost two more fish on a different day to the heron that suddenly seemed to creep up on long, yellow legs to snatch the tossed fish before they even hit the ground. Jacky needed these fish today and he was not feeling particularly charitable towards cheeky herons or predatory freshwater crocodiles. He snagged four more fish in quick succession. They came to feed on a cloud of insects hovering around a waterlily and these somehow managed to lose several of their members to the reflective surface of the water and were featured on the morning menu of the lake's fish population.

Jacky hurried back to his camp. He quickly made a fire and dry-fried one of the fish for breakfast without worrying about any herbs, cresses or worts. It was, when Jacky sampled it, just fine, delicious in fact. He no longer needed the clay as his project was abandoned in favour of moving day. He took some of the excess clay and flattened it out to a pancake thickness and enrobed the largest of the fish. When it was completely enclosed in the clay sarcophagus, he buried it in the coals of the fire. The other fish he quickly split and threaded them on sticks to dry in the smoke of the fire. His problem with copying the disc was still quietly stewing in the back of his mind even though the project had failed. He then, suddenly, had an inspirational idea. He could not match the application of beads and whorls and other icons of the clay-disc but he could etch them in the pad of clay. He whittled a stylus, sat on the ground with the model disc between his legs and deeply etched the replica pad. The lines had to be deep and definite otherwise they simply moved slowly together with every movement of the thin disc, healing the wound. He transcribed the whorls first, brushing off the curls and dots of clay dug out by his stylus. He copied them with painstaking accuracy. When finished, he examined them carefully. Where a second whorl overlapped another, he made the effort to clean out the intersection so the lines were cleanly incised. There perhaps should have been a flash of coloured light or the ringing of a gong or the sudden applause of an



audience to mark the event. There wasn't but there should have been, and Jacky looked around to see if anyone was watching him in his stupidity. For he suddenly, clearly saw how that ancient artisan had so neatly created the disc's adornments. He fished under the wet shirt to find the long worm he made the day before. He laid it out in the incised track of the whorl. It fitted perfectly, of course, and Jacky locked it in place by smoothing the edges of the incision with the stylus. It was unnecessary to touch the surface of the worm thus flattening it. He created more worms and fitted them to the incised whorls. Wetting the joint and simply brushing it lightly with the stylus made the joins appear unbroken. He dug out receptacles for the beads of the sun and the other ornaments and fitted those as well. It became easier and faster as he quickly developed deftness for the art. He was working so well that he barely paused before picking up the second pad and began to complete the second duplicate. He was so adept at the art now that this copy could have passed as a forgery. He was careful to copy the designs exactly as they appeared; in fact he took pride in doing so, and completed the second facsimile in less time than the first. It was done. Jacky sat there feeling strange. He wondered if this hollow befuddled sensation was that experienced by Michelangelo after his very last stroke to finish the Sistine Chapel ceiling. It left a distinct anticlimactic mood of, now what?

Jacky originally planned to only copy one side of the disc. He had no idea what the symbols and straight lines on the obverse meant. The lines radiated from a vanishing point that was imagined far from the disc's edge. Symbols, from what may have been a legend along the inner circumference of the circle appeared in the ray-like spaces between the lines. There were several whorls here as well but none overlapped as they did on the other side. He looked at it only in its complexity and dismissed it as being indecipherable. It actually was not that hard to figure out. It was a seasonal guide to food and resources, an aboriginal almanac. Jacky almost discovered how it worked but chose to misinterpret his own conclusions. He sat there wondering if he should copy the entire disc and examining the detail to determine the degree of difficulty. He was studying what he thought was a background and faintly recognised something. This spurred him along as he felt maybe his memory of the disc was coming back to him and he laid his thoughts open to recall. What he recognised was a constellation familiar to every Australian, the configuration of the Southern Cross. He thought he could determine other night sky constellations from his nights of camping out under the stars, but he was not certain. Astronomy, and the knowledge that those jewels of the night-sky were other worlds well removed from this, was simply mind-boggling to Jacky. So, he ignored it, quite content with his galactic flat-earth philosophy. He guessed wrongly that the rays were pathways to those stars and that one side of the disc

showed the paths the people of the lakes used and this side showed the pathways of the Spirits of the Dreaming. Jacky was too caught up in the spirituality of his childhood culture so that he overlooked the fact that these people were inherently very practical. Far more of their lives was devoted to the exigencies of living than the pagan superstitions of dying. His second guess was that the obverse was a navigation tool for nighttime travel; completely ignoring the fact that the tribes seldom moved at night, they had no need to. The background of the disc was the entire panoply of the night sky. The rays showed what that sky looked like at different times of the year as the earth spun about the sun. The symbols within the rays showed the resources available when the overhead sky looked like that portion within the ray. The matching symbols on the circumference showed how to hold the disc to match the sky. The whorls, had Jacky bothered to compare them to the other side, showed where one should be to find the resources. The rest was only a matter of knowing where these things were, and every woman knew that and the maps on the other side told her how many days' travel distant they were.

Jacky, proud of his mastery of the method used to create the disc, decided to copy both sides, but did so with less fidelity than his original duplication owing to the fact that he did not understand the significance of the symbols, and felt they were more or less fictional or artistic. That was unfortunate as no one would be able to correctly interpret this priceless artefact and the original, which Jacky intended to replace in the cave, would probably remain hidden for all time. He wetted the backs of the first discs, they had now become leather-hard, with clay slurry and pressed the new ones into position, using what he had assumed was a hole for a thong to align the discs. It may have been but it allowed for perfectly matching the two pancakes of clay. To Jacky's surprise, it was only shortly after noon when he completed the discs to his satisfaction. The original was unglazed. He saw no particular advantage in that. Earlier, he took the effort to gather some oxides to make into a glaze for his labours. He mixed these now. It was not an exact science and he had no real idea what colour the glazing would take. He expected it to be a dirty dark colour, much the same as the mixture in the pannikin at the moment. He found a softwood twig and pounded the end with a rock on a rock until it flattened and split into fibres. It would work rather well as a brush for the glaze. He assembled flat river rocks and extra clay for a makeshift kiln and gathered bunches of leaves and grasses to add their smoke and chemicals to the oven. He hoped the clay would harden and cure in the hot smoky oven by the following day. Now it was lunchtime. He shovelled back the coals of his fire in order to find the clay sarcophagus in which, he hoped, his fish repast was ready. He dragged it out of the fire. The greyish clay took on a warm terracotta colour on firing almost matching the original disc and he had second thoughts

about the glazing. But it was too late for second thoughts now. He found a suitable rock and gently tapped the clay sarcophagus until it broke and shattered. The shattering of the clay pot worried him slightly about the end results of his discs now being fired in the makeshift kiln. He shrugged the concern off for there was nothing to be done about it. He focused his attention on the meal. The enrobed fish was baked to perfection. The steaming aroma was tantalising and mouth watering. It was just too hot to handle properly for eating. He was forced to sit, impatiently, for it to moderate sufficiently to pick out chunks with his fingers and transfer them quickly to his mouth to sit on his tongue as he sucked in and blew out cooling air over its surface. Having thus destroyed an incalculable number of taste buds, he missed the particular piquancy of this last hot meal in the valley. The rest of the day and well into the night was spent tending the smoking of the fish, one of which he had already consumed half, and the firing of the clay-discs. He heaped more leaves at the door to the kiln, banked the coals and went to bed. The old man was becoming very tired.

## **CHAPTER 24**

### ***Moving Day***

The kookaburras announced first light. He woke with a woolly mind and a sense that something was supposed to be an event. It took him longer than usual to concentrate his thinking and remember where he was. His surroundings were becoming more confused with days of his childhood and nights on muster and weekends of camping. He almost did not know where he was when he awoke these days and it took him a while to work it out. The one thing in his favour was that he generally woke with an urgent need to relieve himself and he had scant opportunity to muddle his way through the identity crisis before rushing off to pass water. He would stand there in the predawn darkness or in the grey of very early morn easing his too full bladder. It would give him time to find himself. Often, later in the day he would notice that he failed to close his flies and that would disturb him and he would wonder if his mind was going. This morning though, the only urgency was to get everything ready. He crawled out of his swag and checked the kiln. The banked coals and the leaves were still cooking the clay, driving off the moisture and performing an ancient alchemy on the structure of the clay-particles. The fish, to his relief, were still there curing in the smoke of the coals. He was pushing his luck with the goanna. He removed the fish and added them to the parcels of wallaby meat. He began to pack up everything from his camp. He was surprised at how much he left lying around to his convenience. He put the billy close to the fire to warm. He felt uncomfortably chilly, which was strange given the early morning warmth of the summer. He packed everything he could fit into his swag.

He kept lifting it off the ground to test its weight as he did so, wondering what he could omit, for its weight seemed considerably greater than when he began his journey. Much of the weight, he supposed, was attributed to the large quantity of wallaby meat and smoked fish. Considering that it was dried it was surprisingly disparate for the heaviness of the pack. However, eating the food would slowly reduce the mass and he was prepared to be a little forgiving.

The water in the billy was reassuringly hot and he took several slow mouthfuls. Then, after tending the need of the kiln again, he picked up the original clay-disc and the stone-ball that accounted for the life of the wallaby whose smoked remains burdened his swag. He headed off to the path that led to the cave. He stood for a rather extended period on the first step, waiting. What he waited for he was not exactly certain, but he felt a little reluctant and contrite like an unwelcome houseguest coming down for breakfast. Then, without ceremony, he climbed the path, pushed past the guardian rocks and slid under the ledge of the cave. He half-expected to disturb a wallaby living here but didn't, and that was a relief for he was feeling quite edgy and did not need the fright it would have caused him. It was darker in the cave than on any previous visit and he could not see much at all in the gloom. He patted the wall with his hand until he found a ledge that was large enough to accommodate both the disc and the stone. It was only much later that he thought of the risk he took, for it occurred to him that these empty ledges could be home to Redback spiders. The close foulness of the cave hastened his dedication speech of the stone to this treasure house. He addressed the skulls that he could not see in the dark but knew were still there on duty in the cave and told them (in the quietest voice he could muster as every sound in the cave seemed amplified) of the feat of the rock and why he thought it worthy to join the other honourable and sacred relics. He suddenly ran out of things to say and simply fondled the rock with his hand as if saying goodbye to an old friend and slid out of the cave. It was left to the guardianship of several pieces of bone and a succession of wallabies and bats that might persist as long as the valley itself. He never looked back here either. He simply walked as sedately as he could along the path that led away from this treasure-altar in the cathedral of the valley, trying not to think any thoughts at all. There was an uncomfortable lump in his throat.

Almost a full day had come and gone since he began firing the clay. He had no more time. He ate more of the fish, drank what remained in the billy and went down to the water to fill it to the brim again for his journey. The day became heavy with overcast. He went back to the fire and broke out the discs from the kiln. They were a beautiful verdigris colour given to red tones where the glaze mixture had built up. He was rather impressed and wondered what the oxides were. He allowed them

to cool and carefully packed the near-perfect one away. The other he kept as handy as possible. He scuffed the fire with his boot spreading the coals and opening them to the air. A few sparked and were enveloped by orange flame but that died and the coals quickly turned black. Jacky made certain they could not catch anything else alight, took one long last-look at his camp, picked up his one completed spear and began a long walk south to exit the valley at the opposite end to which he entered. He paused only briefly to gaze up at ledges and overhangs where the artwork of perhaps thousands of years was carefully maintained by successive generations who thought of this valley as home. It was a difficult march but Jacky was a little less muddleheaded now as he strode along with an objective in mind. Two-hours after his trek began, purple and grey clouds three-hundred kilometres to the north signalled the start of the monsoon wet with dancing lightning strikes, rolling thunder and rain that made it hard to see more than a few metres distant. The rivers that flowed to the valley would become engorged from the streams, hills, and banks to finally be thrown in a muddy torrent off the escarpment to flood the valley, this year as in every year past. He seldom wore his boots in the valley and they were uncomfortable on his feet now. He knew though that he would need their protection and guessed he had best break himself to wearing them sooner than later. He expected to turn out of the valley an hour or so before dark set in. There was a path over a hilltop if he could find the beginning of it and he planned to make his first camp on the other side. If he could find the path, and he wasn't all that certain he would be able to, it would cut more than forty-kilometres off his southward trek before the valley would open onto wide plain. And if he could make it up the path and over the hilltop, he would be rewarded with an extra-hour of light from the western sky and the setting sun. He would then be advancing on the flood plains and by the looks of the sky behind him it was not a day too soon.

Jacky was much attuned to his surroundings now and he was able to note the small trails and the ancient pathways almost as if they were signposted. Most that he saw were the result of animal behaviour. Some pathways were marked with chemical scents and successive generations of animals followed these in their own hunting-forays until the ground was worn and packed along the slim line of their passing. Some paths simply followed the line of least resistance around the rocks and over the hummocks and past the trees. Human trails were of the latter and Jacky found the turnoff to the ancient pathway with relative ease. It could do with some housekeeping as detritus and litter and overgrowth crowded some parts to obscurity, but a glance or two some twenty-metres ahead usually showed the obvious line of travel. Still, it was arduous going as the heavy and awkward swag fouled branches and brush on the steep, upward climb. His knees were the first to feel the

pressure, then the thighs and buttocks. His shoulders and back added to the discomfort and he, for some period of time, began to wonder if he was strong enough to go on. His open-mouthed breathing became gasping with the exertion and he was obliged to stop frequently to let his heart rate settle. He continued to let his mind wander in its pointless debate about simply giving in and giving up and continued to lift one weary leg after the other until, abruptly, he was walking level through tall, dry grasses and the trees became sparse and well separated from each other. The land, just as abruptly, rolled sharply over the edge. The pathway now seemed fresh as if it were still in use and it fell steeply downhill. The path of least resistance was also followed by water and it coursed the same trail and scoured it of any vegetation that dared to attempt an existence there. Jacky was forced to plant his feet firmly on the downward path to keep from slipping or being pushed into a run by the force of gravity working on his heavy swag. The colour of the soil on this side of the hill was totally distinct from that of the other. The side facing the valley was yellow and grey but this side was turned red by oxides of iron into a startling contrast. Jacky began to slip despite his efforts and began losing his balance. He became rather fearful of falling and injuring himself. Just when it became a certainty that he could no longer keep his footing on the steep path, it suddenly branched right and followed the contour of the hill and he was able to stand upright again. The path now wound down the hill in a series of sharp chicanes until it flattened out and resumed a more or less straight-line amble. He was bathed in the last glow of the setting sun as he reached a wide, level plateau amongst curiously pitted rocks and stunted, gnarled trees and coarse grass. He made camp there. He had left the valley. The valley would hardly change over a new millennium. Jacky had seen it for the last time.

The next few months were spent in a desperate dance with death. Food was not totally scarce, but it had a lot of space to occupy and was, therefore, not easy to find and when found, harder to harvest. Jacky used his spear on several occasions and found it not just adequate but lifesaving. He encountered many emus, the large flightless birds of the inland, and though he imagined himself spearing one of these daunting ratites, the thought that a non-fatal spear thrust might result in the creature running off with his spear embedded in its flesh made him reconsider. His family hunted the emus by sneaking up on them out of hides. They lassooed the bird's long neck with a kangaroo-leather thong attached to a lengthy stick, jerking the bird to the ground and attacking it with a club. These very strong birds often weigh almost as much as a human adult. Memories of such hunts were not always flattering. They included, along with injuries caused by the powerful feet of these birds, the almost hilarious situation where a hunter was either not quick enough, or perhaps not strong enough, to dog the bird to ground to be

dragged painfully along behind the avian as it took off running. That was not necessarily the worst of it for the hapless hunter had to endure the humiliation as he returned, sometimes badly hurt, to the rest of his tribe or family. His fellow hunters seldom had the good grace to keep their mouths shut and their thoughts to themselves. Jacky spent many fruitless hours searching for their nests as visual observations proved it to be the start of the breeding season for the birds. The large eggs however, a much-prized meal of the Aborigine that would feed a family, do not generally appear until late April and May, still some time away. This was only part of the encyclopaedic knowledge of the Aboriginal women.

The further north Jacky moved the more water he encountered. The monsoon trough over the tropical north of Australia filled the rivers and streams to overflowing and the waters moved along the course of ancient waterways to fill the hollows and flats of the dry lands to the south. This particular year sent so much water coursing the sands that pelicans, attuned to some instinct not yet determined by modern science, returned to the salty Lake Eyre to breed and rear their clutches until the bounty of food disappeared as the lake dried out once again. The wet is a promise of plenty for the animals who eke an existence out of this particular niche in the poorer times, but just as often, it is a time of tragedy. Kangaroos, living on barely-edible tough, wiry grasses, now flourish in a garden of sweet, tender shoots that quickly add fat to their stressed body. The waters that give the grasses new life however, also give rise to vast clouds of midges that torment the faces of the kangaroos. Their muzzles become swollen and painful as the bites fester to a point where the kangaroos are no longer able to feed and starve to death in fields of sweet grass. The midges carry bacteria that can sometimes lead to blindness in an otherwise healthy kangaroo. Life is harsh even in the good times. These were good times too for the carrion eaters.

Jacky finally reached an area that crouched under the brooding trough. He was forced into the hills to sit out days and nights of solid sheets of water that fell from the sky. He would sit, hungry and disconsolate, under the eaves of overhanging rock. There he would see the graffiti of other bored and frustrated men who also camped here over hundreds of years to escape the discomfort of the pelting rain and the danger of flash flood on the plains below. For some reason that he was at a loss to understand, there always seemed to be a plentiful supply of stray wood lying among the rocks though there were few trees to provide it. These individual sticks, once gathered, provided a large source of fuel for fires that would, through their warmth and light alone, give him comfort. Jacky was once again working himself into a strange period of self-examination and introspection. He felt isolated, as indeed he was. He was becoming very aware of himself and of his own existence. Even the

discomfort of sitting painfully on hard stone for hours at a time became proof of his existence. He began to feel it was him against the universe once more and he well appreciated that he was unarmed and unprepared for such a confrontation. He refused, as consequence, to eat his store of the dried and smoked wallaby meat though hunger was an almost constant companion. He willed himself into believing that once it was consumed there was nothing else left, no hope whatsoever. Hunger, in turn, created its own set of anxieties and Jacky was slowly dragged into a morass of self-pity restricting his industry and eventually even his movement. He felt ill. He wasn't, but he expected that he should be, so he adopted the feeling. This led to a certain expectancy that he would die here on these ancient ledges and he warmed to the idea in the belief that it was fitting and poetic. He rejected that idea only when he looked at his swag, so totally out of context with the primordial fantasy in which he was indulging himself. At one point he thought he would lay himself out on a ledge and wait for death to come for him. He decided to throw his heavy pack away over the edge of the precipice, along with the clothing he wore, and to await death with his spear in his hand. He began to unpack the swag in readiness for this foolishness and found the green clay-disc. It gave him a small sense of purpose once more and he abandoned the ridiculous plan. He carefully repacked everything except for one of his remaining packages of wallaby-jerky and that gave him something to do to distract his mind. He developed a cough and feared, nay, expected it would turn to pneumonia. He pretended that tightness in his chest was becoming pleuritic. He was revelling in his own form of hypochondria and, in fact, finding solace within it. Every ache, every stabbing pain, every wayward twinge, every belch was evidence of his imminent demise. It was here he began to have his visions. The DNA that had constructed this vehicle to protect its own existence began to issue streams of chemical orders to various structures and organelles of his body from somewhere deep within. These, in turn, manufactured chemicals and released them into the bloodstream to be carried elsewhere and obeyed. Synapses and motor neurons complied. Jacky dreamed he was six years old. He was seated on the red earth while the hot sun burned across his shoulders and his shadow was short and dark in front of him. His aunt, who had surprisingly become his own wife, Mary, was admonishing him for being lazy and ordered him to get up and walk to where she was eating what looked to be an enormous hamburger. He woke to the cold damp air of the stone ledge and the acrid smell of ashes from his fire and promptly fell asleep again.

Mary stood in the kitchen of a house he never saw before and in which they certainly had never lived. She made sandwiches of freshly baked bread and thick slices of aromatic corned beef, spread with mustard and pickle. She told Jacky he could not have any until he mowed a lawn that looked as large and lush as a golf club fairway. The rich green fairways



turned to meadows of wildflower that hummed with the sound of bees. He woke once again to the cold damp air and sharp smell of cold ash. He curled into a warmer ball and slept. His sleep continued to be interrupted with similar vagaries of mind until he awoke in the early morning to a vision of Mary, in a startling-white nurse's uniform, standing near a corner of the ledge on which he was camped. She taunted him as one taunts a child into an act it doesn't wish to perform. The vision actually frightened him for he began to think he had already perhaps passed over, and this was not quite the welcome he hoped for and expected. As his befuddlement eased he realised the vision was simply the reflection of daylight against a wall coated with water spilling down the face of the rock from heights above. He could not account for the taunting that he heard however. The day was without rain for the moment but the clouds were still thick and threatening. The sun broke through a gap and painted the distant landscape with gold to highlight whatever colour it could find. Jacky crawled out of his swag, rolled it roughly and without care. He felt desolate and unloved and unwelcome. He simply picked up his belongings and moved on. It was a good thing. For that would have only begun his torment of visions and hallucinations. Our DNA has a strong sense of self-preservation and many tricks up its sleeve to motivate us in that duty.

A few more weeks whittled themselves from the calendar of the wet-season. Jacky found it more convenient to stay in the foothills of the ranges. He was able to find most of his food sources there. He moved onto the flatlands only occasionally to try his luck at billabongs but was obliged to move off again shortly after when mosquitoes and midges plagued him. He tried to find some simple and perhaps clever way to capture a goose or other waterbird that flocked to these watering holes. He was bereft of plan. His one idea to fashion a snorkel of reed and wade out underwater to grab an unsuspecting fowl by its legs, seemed feckless wagered against the forbidding possibility of an estuarine crocodile claiming the billabong as its feeding grounds. He already noticed what he believed to be several slides where these reptiles hauled themselves out to bask in the warmth of the sun. Some looked uncomfortably large and he was careful to keep his eyes open as he skirted these deep and muddy pools. He was beginning now to see more tracks from feral pigs. New ideas began to form in his mind. It culminated with the loss of his spear, broken in twain, and the smell of roast pork on an open campfire. Jacky heard the pigs before he sighted any spoor and he wondered if he was maybe getting too old for this style of living. Such mistakes could be costly or even deadly. There wasn't much wildlife out here, other than crocodiles, that didn't consider him a predator and were quite quick to run for their lives on sighting him. But many of these animals were also protecting their young and would take him on in an instant if they thought he posed a danger. Porcine parents are particularly dangerous.

One swipe from their formidable tusks could slice open flesh as deeply as a scalpel but the incision would be far more of a problem than that caused by surgical steel. He circled the area where the pigs were camped and left his hat and his swag among the rocks where he hoped they would remain safe from any inquisitive animals. He took his spear and enjoined the hunt. There wasn't a great deal that anyone could tell Jacky about hunting pigs that he didn't already know. He developed considerable expertise hunting the feral pest in a bid to keep their numbers down on station properties. That was with high-powered rifles equipped with scopes. He had not ever hunted the dangerous animal armed with only a primitive weapon like the spear he held lightly in his grasp at the moment. He was in fact beginning to take enjoyment from the prospect of the hunt and adrenaline was fuelling his muscles and honing his senses. He cut through the grass downwind of the animals. They would be resting or rooting peacefully through the mud in search of buried delights not mindful of danger this far from the water where sinister eyes poked above the surface to watch their every move. He could hear their contented identification grunts, no alarm yet. It was not likely there would be much time to make a decision when he broke cover. Much of the decision-making would be left to the pigs to flee or attack. He hoped the former would be the choice of all the animals. It was far better to chase them than to be chased by them. Worse, all could flee except an enraged sow hidden in the grass. It wasn't a nice proposition at any time but was not nearly so disconcerting when an automatic rifle was plugged into your shoulder. Standing there with only one spear against the hide of a rapidly charging pig was not a moment of consolation.

He parted the grass to find all of the pigs, almost incredibly, facing away from him. He saw no piglets that would need protecting and a huge boar was at the farthest remove. He spotted a young porker, lean and muscular, soon to be prime and this was his choice. At such close quarters there is no such thing as downwind. There was a sudden squeal of alarm and the ground rattled to the sound of escaping pigs. Jacky took his chances and this old man raced after them on the tail of the porker he selected. Pigs run in a straight line heading for safety and the individual pigs will widen the distance beside them, forcing the predator to choose one animal. That animal, sensing it has been targeted, will soon start to display various dislodgement techniques and escape routines. One of these invariably is the sudden change of direction. Jacky was waiting for it. He hadn't been too far behind the pig and was expecting the change to be to the right. That was his bet. It paid off as the animal turned on a sixpence. It broke to the right at the same moment Jacky hurled the spear. The spear, thrown to slightly lead the animal caught it in the shoulder and held. The pig squealed in distress and broke direction again. The shaft of the spear came to

ground and was being dragged by the pig. It must have caused considerable pain as the spear-point was constantly being worked in the wound by the bouncing haft. The pig continued with squeals of protest and pain and fear. Jacky wasn't able to see at what point the spear broke. He only noticed when the pig skirted a tree that the spear was missing. He thought the pig was able to dislodge it and he experienced some let-down but then saw a portion of the wood still projecting from the shoulder of the animal, and the animal was slowing down. The animal stopped. It stood there as if out of danger. Blood from the wound was trickling down over its foreleg. Jacky caught up to it and the animal still didn't move. This was just a bit disconcerting. Jacky extracted a knife from his belt. He was not looking forward to his next requirement as the muscular pig looked to be in no distress and could still prove a danger. Then the pig fell over.

He dropped the carcass of the pig on a ledge that showed earlier occupation by wallabies. The overhang was barely wide enough to provide shelter from the elements but the crude attempts at rock art proved it was used before. He now had to clamber and walk all the way back down to recover his swag, then make the arduous climb back up to the ledge. He would have liked to lie down for a quick nap first. He hoped, most sincerely, that no other predator would find the pig before he got back. It is strange how often success breeds success. Another important requirement was water. He would be staying on this ledge for some time and the trip back and forth for water would be more than taxing. Just short of the ledge, no more than thirty-metres, was a small waterfall that showed no sign of abatement until the dry was long established. Jacky built a fire and dressed the pig. He simply threw anything he didn't want over the edge of the hill. Anything edible by some other creature would be their good fortune. Anything else would simply become part of the never-ending struggle. He sat back to assess the scenery with the rocks at his back and his food frying rapidly in the pan amid its own juices and fats. The pig he selected proved to be an excellent choice.

The rock-art here on this ledge was very amateurish and incomplete though it validated that the ledges and the hills were occupied before. He supposed there were also caves to be found hereabouts but had not yet come across any. There was evidence that some of these sites were, in relative terms, explored only recently. At one such site he found a corroded flashbulb for use with a camera of the fifties before the introduction of strobe-light flashes. At his most recent camp, there was an old sneaker and an artist's faded sketchbook lying next to the wall of a deep ledge. The paper of the sketchbook was stuck together and provided a source of handy meals for various insects and nesting material for a rodent. The sneaker looked to be almost as old as the

rock-art on the ledge. He spent many hours trying to work out a scenario that would allow for one sneaker and a valuable sketchbook to be left there to rot with time, and the fading of the rock-art the artist had come to sketch. He just was not that good a storyteller.

Jacky was fortified. His stomach felt heavy. His demeanour was relaxed. His prospects looked bright and promising. A short scout for firewood found enough for a bundled armload. He had running water at his back door. There was food enough for several meals. What more could a man ask? Perhaps not much, only to doze in comfort by a fire. Jacky slept a deep and untroubled sleep to waken in the morning to a sky of blue and soft, white cloud burnished by a rising sun. He tidied up his swag and laid everything out to air. He would get no sun here until the late afternoon but the slight breeze that huffed its way along the inclines of the hill carried with it the smell of cleansed air and the perfumes of the dainty flowers that bloomed amid the rocks. He found a small stub of bath soap buried deep in his pack and decided it would be a good day to have a shower, especially as he could still smell the ammoniac stench of the pig on his clothing and skin. He stood under the surprisingly cold water tumbling off the rocks and lathered the suds over his body. It was not long before he was shivering and his teeth were chattering from the frigid water. All of his clothing and even his towels smelled dank and unpleasant despite their airing. But he towelled off briskly and donned some clothing that smelled less rank than the other. He washed his jeans and shirt and underwear under the tiny cataract, laying them out to dry as well. There were stains of soil and vegetation that only soap would remove and this he couldn't spare.

Jacky went native on many occasions. He either wore no clothing at all, which was not as comfortable as he thought it might be or just a pair of shorts. That, he found, was an open invitation to a vast biting insect world. He took to not wearing underwear as a compromise. That was not as comfortable in practice as it was liberating in mind he discovered. He returned to dressing completely in long pants, long-sleeved shirts, underwear, socks, boots and hat. He was ready for anything. He filled a billy and boiled it to lather his face with the miniscule particle of soap now left from his showering in preparation to shaving. He brushed his teeth with hot water and wished for the umpteenth time he had not forgotten his toothpaste. He was concerned about the dank state of his clothes and whatever else that may signify. He was uncertain if the unpleasant smell was caused by moulds or by bacteria. He was planning on carrying some of the cooked pork with him but that may have to be abandoned if unpleasant bacteria had found its way to populate his pack. He unpacked all that was left of the dried wallaby. He was pleasantly surprised to find that it was still dry to the touch with no feeling of sliminess at all. It all smelled healthy and smoky. He carefully

repacked it and used the muslin bag that he had brought his bacon in to pack the cooked pork. This he knew, he would have to eat without much delay and it would need to be protected from blowfly.

He reassembled everything with considerable care and neatness into his swag and picked up the broken spear that he recovered from the pig. He could find no use for it. He was not prepared to attempt a repair and his knives were better suited for anything that the small portion of spear that was left could do. He carefully laid it against the wall of the ledge not far from a rock painting that had to have been done while the artist lay prone, as it was only centimetres above the floor. That too was just one of life's mysteries. Jacky studied all of the various scratching, etching and drawings he found on the walls of the different shelters along his way. He doubted if much of it was of any importance. It seemed more like graffiti from bored children than serious interpretation. He saw one drawing of a kangaroo in a typical feeding pose that looked to be highly crafted but on closer inspection turned out to be a natural feature of the stone. The artist had seen the likeness, embellished it with a sharp stone, and then shaded it with grease and charcoal, presumably from his fire. Mary Wonga compiled several albums of her photographs of Aboriginal rock-art from many locations. She spent a week photographing the several sites at Laura in far north Queensland. She met the affable Percy Tresize there and he kindly took her to places very few others had seen in this Quinkan country treasure house of culture. Even there, some of the art, though probably older than Christianity, appeared to be simply graffiti or aids to story telling. Mary, mused Jacky, would have loved to see the art adorning these hidden places and could, perhaps, have interpreted the meaning of some cartoons that were simply meaningless to him. Jacky considered the impact his discarded tool would have within the scientific community if eventually found. They would test the clays of the rock-art and test the age of the soil in the nests of the mud wasps that overlayed the art. They would test the wood to find it still almost green and test the spear-point to find it was considerably older. What would they make of it, he wondered. The ledge he was on went for some distance and he could see a trail beyond that. He headed north.

## **CHAPTER 25**

### ***Biddinburra***

Jacky often came across signs of civilisation but he avoided these areas, moving through them as quickly as he could as he made his way through the centre and just east of the ranges. He passed places where small communities of Aborigines still lived their quiet lives looking to the past for answers and to the government for the present. Several of these

received their funding from mining leases or tourism dollars. Others sold their artwork and crafts and others hunted for the seeds of plants that were now of some scientific interest to horticulturalists, nutritionists and medical research. Anything living in the vast centre of Australia must have a niche to support it. It is hard to make a living out there. He was caught once or twice by an unexpected shower of monsoonal rain that seemed to simply develop where cool and warm moist air met in the upper atmosphere of a still blue sky. It taught him to track the foothills more closely, though these now were becoming difficult to make his way through. It was easier on the flatland but more comfortable close to the hills despite strange and sudden breezes. The daytime rains eased, leaving the sun to turn the land into a sauna, though night rainsqualls still pelted down without warning. He pulled up into the hills where it looked promising to find some shelter away from the almost nightly deluge of rain. He gathered any dry wood he could carry as he worked his way up and across. He was now higher than almost ever before and still had not found a suitable spot and the light was flattening into shadow like a sputtering candle. He finally found a place large enough to squat and remain out of the wind and wet almost at the edge of the carapace of rock. It was not the hide of any of the earlier nomads, or at least it showed no sign of prior inhabitation either by midden or art. He was content to simply find a place to stop. The walking and climbing was becoming more difficult than ever before and joints and muscles complained at the continual exertion.

He gratefully removed and stowed the swag and built a hearth for a small fire that would heat some water for a drink. He made the mistake on another evening, to pile some of the pork into the billy in semblance of a stew though he had no vegetables or greenery to add. It simply boiled off the fat, which adhered to the sides of the billy. It now made drinking from the billy unpleasant. Every time he heated water, the fat melted again and lay as scum on the surface of the water. It was a bad mistake and one that he regretted. He carved off pieces of the meat to fry in the iron skillet. He used his knife to shave tinder from one of the larger sticks and nested it under a tepee of small twigs. He took his one remaining disposable lighter from a pouch on his belt to fire up the tinder and start a flame growing in the hearth. The flame from the lighter barely issued from the device. He was soon going to be without the means to light a fire. That was devastating. He was quick to apply the meagre flame to the tinder and relieved to see it catch and hungrily start on the larger sticks. He nursed it all carefully; this was no time for mistakes. He sat wondering what happened to the matches he packed in addition to the five disposable lighters. He was most of the way through a meal of pork that satisfied his stomach for the moment (but not his palate) before he remembered the night he prepared for the visit to the secret cave of the women. The rain that quenched his fire that night also

soaked his swag. The boxes of matches were sodden and useless. He threw them with some degree of annoyance into a fire where they made no impact whatsoever. The night rains began almost on cue, first as a whisper then as a drumming on the rock and finally as a lullaby to sleep. He slept.

He woke to a fully bright, clear day of blue sky and newly washed cloud when a bird that must have been standing beside his head for the sound it made in his ear disturbed him. He looked for the bird that ejected him from his pleasant dreams but it was long gone, if it ever existed. He needed to relieve a full bladder. He could find no place that was not intimate to his surroundings without having to wander some distance away. So he simply peed off his platform, taking juvenile delight in the act as it arched out to fall some considerable distance below. He was standing there looking out to the horizon enjoying the relief of pressure when he suddenly realised that a road stretched across the floor of the plain off to his right. He studied it closely and was certain that he could detect signs of habitation before it blurred into haze short of the horizon.

He had sufficient wood to start another fire if he could coax his waning lighter into one more small flame. His attempt to bank the coals overnight was not successful as the sticks he used were small and he could not build up a sizable pile of ash. He carefully shaved thin scrapings of tinder into another large pile and constructed a fire pyramid that was almost architecturally sound. He might have only one very brief chance. The lighter produced a wimp of a flame but he held it close to the shavings and they finally consented to burn. The flame of the lighter was not quite extinguished but it would fire nothing more. He placed the scummy water on to heat again and threw some more pork into the greasy skillet for his breakfast. He was actually considering the dried wallaby rather than the now tiresome pork. Jacky wanted nothing at all to do with civilisation up to this point. He was content to live in this little world of his by himself. He wanted not at all to share it with anyone. He was enjoying the latitude gained by being a virtual hermit. He need not be polite to anyone nor consider their feelings one iota in any of his choices of endeavour, pleasure or destruction. He did what he wanted, as he wanted and when he wanted. He was not quite ready to relinquish these prerogatives. Then there are times when one must go hat in hand to seek out the favours that simply do not abound in singular existence. This was one of those times. He needed fire. That was a must, a given. He could certainly start fires with nothing more than flint and steel or pieces of wood rubbed until friction produced a smouldering that could be coaxed to life. But neither is easy. Hitting steel to flint hoping for a spark to catch in a bed of tinder is a game of chance. Winding a hardwood skewer of wood with a piece of twisted hide into a block of softwood is an exercise in frustration. He expected it would leave him to

swear and curse and beg for even a wisp of smoke as reward for the effort. To do such things when the wood is damp or when standing in the rain guarding a small pile of sticks is a test of faith. His faith was in matches. Gas lighters that give as much a flame as needed to ignite even damp wood are even better. Jacky was a modern man despite this aberrant return to his roots. Jacky also needed soap. He could find leaves full of saponins that lathered enough to wash his hands (or to stun fish in a small creek for easy catching) but too many were needed for a body wash or to clean his clothes. He knew how to make soap from the ashes of the fire and the rendered fats of animals as most of those of that generation knew. But most native animals in inland Australia are of lean, red meat with little excess fat. Thus lye soaps are hardly practical and the rendered fat of the animal would be best used for food. Emus and goanna are sources of oil but Jacky would have to catch them first. Sugar, flour, dried vegetables, toothpaste, tea, coffee, tobacco and headache tablets to relieve simple aches and pains, and even toilet paper, are all the product of civilisation. So Jacky would go hat in hand for the favours civilisation could offer.

He crossed the road and headed in the direction, west, that he thought was a cluster of buildings from his perch on the hill. There was nothing more informative other than a seldom-used dirt highway that stretched in a theodolite line east and west. He hoped he was not making a painful mistake that would have to be undone in the heat of the late afternoon. He plodded on. After some time he hoped for a truck or a car or, now that he had surrendered his self to the inevitability of civilisation, even a bicycle that he could flag down and find out where he was going. It appeared that a distant sign by the side of the road might have something informative written on it. He actually hurried himself a little. He got there to find a Telstra signpost declaring, in large white letters on a green background, Telephone, and an arrow pointing north. He read it several times to make certain he was not hallucinating. He asked himself, where. He looked in the direction of the arrow that led off across a pathway of blue-metal gravel to a small stainless steel stand a decent walk away. He could see the solar-cell array and a short antenna that presumably, out here, hooked up to a satellite somewhere in space. He thought of wandering over to investigate. He even wondered idly whom he might call and what might be their reaction when he did and explained whence he was calling. His sense of humour got the better of him and he chuckled at the idea. He did not however, bother to investigate but went on his plodding way.

His mind drifted to days of his youth when he walked forever across the hot, dusty cattle-country beside dirt roads just like this one. He was able to spend several hours thus engaged and as noon approached he could see he was walking in the right direction for there were, indeed, some



buildings off in the distance that danced and shimmered in the heat. The annoying flies were not daunted by the proximity of civilisation. Jacky was now looking forward to a clean, cool, glass of water and not that greasy beverage that tasted faintly of mud now in his billy. He then had misgivings and wondered if they used bore water. He could not, at this stage, have abided the sulphurous, smelly stuff that came courtesy of the Great Artesian Basin. Another sign appeared in the distance. He wondered if this sign were to point out a rest spot by the expediency of a picnic table icon. It wasn't taking much to keep Jacky amused this day. As he approached the sign however, and could see it better, it was obviously not a sign posted by any roads department. It was a hand-painted sign that proclaimed, Biddinburra, when he was close enough to read it. Jacky stood there looking at the sign. He didn't think the word was actually a part of any Aboriginal language although the burra part meant water. It looked like an appeasement sign. The politically correct white population liked to name towns in honour of some now-forgotten tribal name for a place. What was it he had read? A subdivision is a place where the developer cuts down all the trees and names streets after them. He wondered briefly if this was some bloke's idea of a joke and maybe the, biddin, part was a corrupted form for a bore. Maybe the water here was bore water after all. He slumped just to think of it. Jacky pressed on towards the buildings. A mirage of water shimmering in the distance indicated that the road became paved further up. This was a good sign. He was considering the possibility that this was some lonely cattle station for he saw a couple of Droughtmaster stock standing in the shade of some trees that were now becoming more numerous. It was a town with a bitumen road that started metres away from what would likely be the town-line and continued down and past the few buildings, where it again became dirt and disappeared into a crossroad that seemed to go nowhere. Okay, Jacky, old son, you can now tell everyone that you've been to Biddinburra, Jacky thought as he nodded his head.

Dean Phillips watched the Aborigine approach from the edge of town. He looked a caricature of some old swaggie from a bygone era. He could see from this shorter distance that the blackfella was old and the swag on his back a bit ambitious for a man of his years. He looked pretty well beaten and had missed out on a few meals too many. He wondered what the black wanted here. Those from the community drove their four-wheel drives into the city to do their shopping and the Community Council frowned on the tiny pub in Biddinburra selling grog to their people. It wasn't banned from the community as this would drive the price up and tempt more people to break the ban. It was simply frowned upon by both factions. Dean studied the old man. He looked like he was a stockman, there was just something about him, and Dean wondered if the old-timer was hoping to get a job worrying cattle to make himself feel

useful until his time was up. There weren't many jobs that Dean Phillips wasn't personally responsible for in the town. About the only thing he wasn't in charge of was the post office. There weren't many people who lived or used the town anymore for that matter. It carried supplies for the few mines and miners and the cattle properties when they ran out before their big orders from the city arrived. There wasn't much out here for anybody at all apart from a few tourists and truckies and government employees. He tried to get the government to upgrade the highway, unsuccessfully. There were no votes in that. He also argued that Biddinburra wouldn't be a nowhere place if there were a paved highway leading to it. No one was interested in the kind of expenditure required to see if he was right. The town just barely ticked over as a result.

Dean dumped the water he was washing the dust down with and went back into the pub. Whenever they wanted anything from directions to repairs to food this was where anybody coming to town started. It wasn't long before the old black wandered in and dumped his swag next to the door as expected. He stood there getting his eyes adjusted to the darkened interior before he crossed to where Dean was standing behind the bar pretending to do some work. Dean sized Jacky up.

"Bloody warm day for a hike, mate".

"My word, mate".

Jacky, dropped into vernacular. He could see the slight hesitancy of the publican. He guessed at what he must look like and decided to take the initiative to ease the plight of the fellow. Jacky was looking forward to clambering up on the stool and resting his arms across the bar. He hadn't thought about how much you could miss something to lean on until you had done without a table for a long, long time. He reached across the bar, thrusting out his hand, at which he took a mental double-take wondering if it was anywhere near clean.

"Good day, mate. My name's Jacky Wonga. And yours is"?

Dean was taken off guard. He was forced to reply to the thrust out hand and stuck his good-sized mitt into Jacky's hand and gave it a polite pump. The well-spoken Jacky had cut off his intended line of questioning.

"Dean Phillips, Jacky. I'm just about everybody around here from town clerk to waste management resource engineer and publican".

He smiled at his own witticism.

“How I can help you”?

Jacky eased himself onto the bar stool, absolutely grateful to be seated on something besides the ground and spread his forearms luxuriously across the bar to take the weight of his upper body.

“Mr Phillips, I’ve got a list of wants and needs about as long as that road leading into this place, but could I start with a glass of cold water”?

Dean was well ahead of him. He was expecting the old Aborigine to ask for some alcohol, in particular a cold beer, and he already had a large glass lined up under a water spigot whose copper pipe ran out of the bar and into the fridges. His ploy would be to make a soft apology about not being allowed to sell him alcohol by the request of the local Community Council as he placed the glass in front of the man as an alternative for his thirst. He would offer a cordial or patented soft drink as a publican’s shout if the Aborigine protested. It was always an invidious position in the absence of any hard laws on the matter. Human Rights violations and anti-discrimination laws loomed in the background, and those lawyers seldom took heed of common practice, common sense or good intention when they could use inflammatory comment to add scalps to their belt. Some of these fire-starters often confused indigenous with indignant and that was to no one’s gain except theirs. The request actually caught Dean a little off-guard for a second time but he recovered well and produced the glass of water that was already beginning to bead against the heat of the room.

“How’s that for service”?

He was beaming like a magician who has successfully pulled a rabbit from a hat. Jacky thanked him and carefully sniffed the glass as unobtrusively as possible for the odour of bore water. There was none and he gratefully swilled half the glass at one go. The water was sweet and lacked even the taste of tank water. He was about to ask where it was from when Dean broke in.

“We don’t have a regular counter lunch unless we get a tourist bus or something, but my missus can probably make you up a cut lunch if you’d like”.

Food was not the next priority on Jacky’s list but he suddenly had a craving for something. It was speculative but worth the asking.

“Do you suppose she could fix me a corned beef sandwich with mustard and pickle”?

That was the third time this man had caught Dean off-guard. Dean raised his eyebrows to Jacky as if no such novel combination had ever been thought of before and eased his way to a doorway running off from the bar where he called out the name, Sandra. Things tend to go together and this includes people. Most times we are not surprised to find this man and that woman are partnered. There may be times when it does seem a little unlikely a pairing and takes a little getting used to. There are times however, and this was one of them, when if you had to choose the least likely out of ten women to partner up with Dean Phillips, it would be Sandra. She was a red-haired self-contained dynamo who would have been typecast as Maureen O'Hara. She would not have been out of place in any pioneer setting, but here she was superfluous to her character as if she were the victim of a time warp. Jacky liked and admired strong women, especially strong women of strong character. Sandra Phillips was quite obviously both. Jacky liked her before she even spoke. Sandra saw the old Aborigine sitting at the bar and became immediately reserved. It wasn't that he was an Aborigine it was the old, grubby, smelly part of the picture that made her apprehensive. Jacky was watching her eyes. He saw the withdrawal in them, the way they sharpened to take in the detail and then passed judgment. He could see the strength and quickness of mind that those eyes mirrored. He smiled inwardly. He admired strong women.

"What would you like"?

This was said in a no-nonsense voice that reflected her slight distaste at having to be of service to this squalid person perched at the bar. Has it been mentioned elsewhere that Jacky was, if nothing else, charming? Has it been pointed out that Jacky was comfortable in the presence of women, that he did in fact actually like being in their company and knew almost instinctively how to deal with them? His request for a corned beef sandwich was made with such politeness and charm that Sandra was actually pleased to construct one for him. It arrived with a side of fried-potato and a quartered tomato dressed with some homemade, herbed garnish that made the eating of the sandwich a repast. The sandwich (could she have possibly been aware of his dreams) was served on bread baked that day in the kitchen of the hotel and filled with a slab of aromatic corned beef that tasted slightly of cloves and spread lightly with a mustard-pickle relish. His taste buds demanded a second helping but Jacky simply savoured every morsel, chewing slowly in his enjoyment of the meal. Just the fact that it came without any effort on his part was a celebration but that it was exquisite to the palate was soul satisfying. It was like discovering a chef of five-star fame preparing the meals at some dreary soup kitchen. Sandra watched the deliberate enjoyment of the sandwich by Jacky as she made several unnecessary trips out of the

kitchen to, ostensibly, get or put things. It was rewarding and would make her feel good about herself for much of the day.

The hotel had no rooms. It was not one of those palatial country pubs endemic to every small town in every part of Australia. It was a smallish, by comparison, concrete block affair more suited to a bowls club than a public drinking establishment. The original timber building, with verandas and stained glass windows and ornate carpentry burned down more than a decade before. It had almost spelled the death of the town, for without a pub, there was almost no reason to continue on. It happened that the general store was also the post office and sported two old, outdated petrol-bowsers and the feisty little lady that ran the whole thing wasn't about to give it up. So, a new pub was built with the idea of adding on a motel or a caravan park at the back as needed. There were now four serviced cabins out there. Dean planned on building as many as a dozen or more, as well as concrete pads for caravans in the best caravan park tradition. He never had all four cabins occupied at the same time so far, so it hardly seemed necessary. Jacky rented one of the cabins and was now standing over a row of three concrete laundry tubs in the ablutions block getting everything of cloth scrubbed free of grime and odour. He scrubbed himself down earlier in a slightly inconvenient shower recess. The water was hot and seemingly plentiful and his room was provided with an actual bar of bath soap rather than those individually wrapped wafers that seem barely adequate for the job but beloved of motels and hotels. He was wearing his green drill-shorts and shirt. Fortunately they had not yet been dunked into one of the water and suds-filled tubs. They had been part of the chain of process as Jacky stood to do the laundry clad only in one of the rather thin towels provided by the hotel. His plan was to complete the washing, hang it to dry and then retire to his cabin for a nap, hence the rather casual attire. Sandra suddenly appeared to ask if he had any particular thoughts about the evening tea before she began the menu. He hadn't gotten anywhere near that far in his forward planning and stood there feeling uncomfortable in what amounted to little more than a loincloth. Nor would Sandra go back about her own duties it seemed. She made small-talk conversation in order to justify her standing there as she examined this man. He was old and that was obvious and he was skinny to the point of looking emaciated but there were hard muscles there as well. She was fascinated by the tribal scars across his abdomen and wondered if he would tell her about them if she asked. She studied him as if he were a museum specimen to where Jacky was becoming sensitive. He was aware he wasn't wearing much at all and suddenly felt vulnerable. He was glad of his pigmentation for he felt he was blushing under her open scrutiny. He was reprieved when Dean called out for attention. Sandra turned to go, much to his relief, but turned back and hosed him with her eyes once more.

“You need a haircut. There isn’t a barber in town but I’m sure we can give you a good shearing. We’ll do something about that tomorrow morning”.

Her eyes briefly rested on the towel but that was an automatic and she would not have thought she did. Still, Jacky noticed and was embarrassingly unnerved. As soon as she was gone, he quickly donned the shirt and shorts. His jeans, Jacky saw, apart from being greasy and badly soiled, were showing signs of the hard wear they were subjected to and were about two sizes too large for his now gaunt frame. He decided to take a wander through town to see what other than a barbershop the place didn’t offer. He found a dusty-windowed clothing shop not far removed from the pub and wandered in. The owner of one of the few vehicles Jacky saw parked in front of the false-fronted buildings was also in the market for wearing apparel. Nothing seemed changed since his arrival other than the addition to or movement of some of the vehicles. Presumably, there were people actually living here but it could have passed as an abandoned set on a movie lot somewhere. Jacky found a pigeonhole shelving arrangement with a few brands, styles and sizes of jeans stowed neatly in some order familiar only to the storekeeper. His hat was showing signs of wear in keeping with his other garments but it needed, in his estimation, only a good brushing. He would not replace it. His boots also had withstood the rigours but could do with some polish. He wandered around the faded and discoloured signs depicting stockmen or pastoralists touting this or that brand of garment, and browsing through an occasional carousel of shirts that would have been better preserved on shelves.

A friendly cherubic-faced woman left the only other customer to admire himself in the mirror of the single change room and came over to assist Jacky. He was certain she was not the proprietor and wondered what relationship she had to him. It was clear though, that she had been here probably as long as the shop itself. Angela Dembrowski had indeed been in this part of the world a long time. She was one of the vacant-eyed refugee children from a war-destroyed Europe clinging to the hand of desperate parents hoping to find a new life in America or even Canada. Her parents were not certain they had even heard of a country called Australia. It was their only option and the only place that seemed to want them. Angela was not Mrs Dembrowski then, of course, she was Angela Petrofsky and her father was a musician. Angela and her parents boarded the ship and sailed into the tropical southern waters of the Indian Ocean. They spent time that lasted forever at an austere staging camp learning Australian culture and the English language. Stanislaw Petrofsky found work as a miner in a place so remote it could have been another planet. His hands, trained to play the violin, became older than

his body from the hard relentless labour. He fell in love with the country. He felt safe at last. No one way out here coveted anything except to see the sunrise of a following day. No one out here cared what your name was or where you were born. When they bid you a good day, you could tell they meant it. They called him a wog or made fun of his name but that didn't mean they didn't respect him. It didn't stop them from slapping him on the back for a job well done. He learned the intrinsic value of the word 'mate'. He was a wog as far as they were concerned, but he was an Aussie wog. He was their wog mate, and there wasn't anything you wouldn't do for a mate. Stan prospered. Angela went to boarding school. Angela came back from boarding school. More people moved into the area and the town grew. One of those people was a handsome 20-year-old Mikhail Dembrowski. He was a tailor as was his father before him. The son of Mikhail and Angela Dembrowski took over the business when Mikhail died. Cattle business went through the hard times and mines cost more to produce than they earned. The town stagnated and people moved to the city. Angela's son spent most of his time pursuing other interests to earn a living and Angela spent most of her time clerking at the store. Mikhail Dembrowski changed his name to Michael Brown and that is why the shop's name was Brown & Son, Fine Tailors, of course. Angela Brown was rushed off her feet today. Jacky was her third customer.

Jacky wandered the town looking in forlorn empty-storefronts that boasted only dust and dead flies and a few empty boxes stacked here and there. He found a small general store that doubled as the post-office and sold groceries, souvenirs, manchester and a strange assortment of camping gear, mostly made in China. It did however, have a few specialty items that would appeal to people interested in nostalgia. This included a cabinet devoted to fruit-gums and assorted lollies stored in large, heavy-glass jars with red screw-on lids that stood at a convenient angle thanks to a flattened bevel at the base of the jar. The shop even sold linen tea towels with pictures of local flowers, trees, cattle, a mine adit and Biddinburra in large, red letters across the bottom. Jacky was tempted to buy one simply for its kitsch value.

The hot afternoon sun left Jacky's clothing, hanging on the line behind the ablution block, stiffly dry by the time he returned. He gathered the clean clothes, which still smelled faintly of the laundry soap, and bundled them off to his cabin. He changed into his old jeans and shirt and took his new clothing (their purchase had probably created boom times for Brown & Son Fine Tailors) and those items he had just been wearing back to the cement laundry tubs and washed them as well. It was in fact a pleasant way to spend the afternoon. He was looking forward to a meal at the pub and a good night's sleep on a real bed. He decided not to count how long it was. It was now too late for a nap and

Jacky found himself at loose ends. He bought a small soft-bristled brush for his hat on his earlier impromptu shopping spree, and sat on the edge of the bed and tidied the Akubra as best he could. Not much could be done about the sweat-stains but the hat looked presentable. He also bought polish and a shoe-brush. His boots were badly scuffed but the polish hid most of that and his boots gleamed with the buffing. He bought a new, leather belt that was still stiff and almost rigid but it at least fit him and was not in danger of allowing his pants to slide over his hips. He bought a comb and some more shampoo. The courtesy-shampoo he found in the ablution block wasn't as nice as it claimed on the label and was barely enough for a good lather. He brushed his teeth three times in succession. He also bought, in addition to three jumbo-sized tubes of toothpaste and some new brushes, some dental floss. He never flossed before and probably would not do so in the future but his commitment to oral hygiene was probably the cause of such impulse purchases. His new clothes were dry when he checked the line and these smelled factory-clean in addition to the slight perfume of the laundry soap. He dressed in the new clothes and looked every bit the stockman. He winked at himself in the small mirror in the bathroom.

Jacky wandered into the pub in search of Sandra and a decent cup of coffee. He owned tobacco again but new laws seemed to forbid him from smoking almost anywhere that wasn't underwater or so far removed from any other person that he automatically qualified as a member of the Explorers Club. He was stunned to see the pub was almost full and wondered where they had all come from. He entered from a rear door that led to the cabins and hadn't seen all the vehicles now parked on the street in front of the pub. There was music in the background and blokes belly-up to the bar joking and laughing. Every stool was occupied and some of these were pulled away to face each other as three or four blokes formed into groups. Several young sheilas were seated at tables drinking white wine spritzers or whatever they were drinking these days and totally ignoring every bloke in the place as if they were a different species. Jacky was impressed. There was even a barmaid helping Dean to keep the glasses filled and the cash register chuckling away. Jacky heard a familiar voice from behind him.

"You clean up real good, Cowboy"

Jacky turned to see a hustling Sandra loaded with trays of snacks destined for the tables. She called over her shoulder to him as she began spreading plates of fatty high-cholesterol foods at its proper table.

"What can I get you"?



He waited until she swung back in his direction before calling back that she looked a little too busy to worry about him. Sandra smiled and wondered if his charm was natural or from something he had once read.

“It’s just the Friday-night crowd, it will slow down in a moment, this is just a watering-off point for the start of the weekend. The serious drinkers won’t get here until another hour or so when the kitchen is open”.

Jacky seriously had not known what day of the week it was. It never occurred to him to think about it. He started to wonder how different things would have been for him if he had wandered into town on a Sunday. He dug out his watch after dressing and placed it on his wrist simply as an afterthought because he felt undressed without it in his new clothing. He looked at it now. It was still Wednesday according to the little date window. The hand counting off the seconds was also still. The battery had died somewhere along the way. He wondered how he could get it replaced. There was now an empty table in the dining area that four sheilas had vacated. They were drifting towards the door with each one stopping to make comments to someone else as they passed. Jacky went over to the table and sat down. Sandra arrived almost immediately to throw the empty glasses and rubbish on to one of the trays. She produced, magically, for Jacky hadn’t seen it anywhere on the trays, a rag with which she briefly scrubbed the table. Having performed the tidy-up routine, she smiled a friendly smile and asked him what he wanted. Jacky made a friendlier smile back.

“Just a coffee if you’re sure it won’t be too much trouble, please, Sandra”.

Sandra made a quick nod and spun towards the kitchen. She wanted to ask him about his wife. No man that charming and good-looking could stay out of the bullseye of a husband-targeting woman for too long. She was afraid to ask though, because the obvious answer would likely cause him some discomfort and she didn’t want to bring grief to this pleasant man.

The tea-menu for the evening featured a fragrant rabbit-stew with dumplings or traditional roast-lamb and three vegetables. It was going to be a very tough decision. When he came back for the evening meal, he did a mental coin-toss in favour of the lamb. The rabbit would have had to be exceptional to compete. The problem was that he was certain it was just that.

Jacky stayed in Biddinburra for another two weeks. He ate all of his meals at the pub and spent long hours talking with Sandra over cups of tea in the kitchen while she prepared meals. He even gave her a hand to

tidy up so he could continue to be in her company while they chatted. He slept well and he rested in both the sun and the shade and he gained back some weight. His stomach, suddenly surprised at the wealth of food at regular hours, put out the word and any molecule not needed to keep his factory going was immediately stored away. He was relaxed and positive and enjoying being alive. It was time to move on. He stocked up on everything he could carry from the small general store. To his surprise, they had a battery for his watch. They could even have supplied him with a battery for a digital camera if he needed one.

He was sitting at the bar of the pub eating a ham sandwich for morning smoko. The sandwich was delicious and he took it apart to taste the ham. That was why it tasted so good. He found Sandra and asked her about the ham. He was wondering how long he might be able to carry some with him. She told him it was local. An Italian-bloke who once owned the butcher shop in town had retired when business fell off but still smoked meats and cured hams to old recipes. She drove him over there and Jacky bought more smallgoods than he could carry or eat. He was never a spendthrift but his stomach was telling his eyes things and he was single-handedly bringing the town of Biddinburra out of its economic depression. He donated most of it to the pub despite Sandra and Dean offering to buy it from him. He packed what he could, shook hands with Dean and the kindly lady from the general store and post office, whose name he never knew. Looking spiffy, as Sandra declared him to be, he gave her a quick hug and headed out of town.

## **CHAPTER 26**

### ***Lost***

It should be difficult to become lost with all of the technology available today with Global Positioning Systems, mobile phones and Personal Emergency Beacons. State Emergency Service personnel understand why it isn't difficult at all. There are situations and circumstances where none of these gadgets will work. New roads and reliable, air-conditioned vehicles tend to get a lot of people thinking that some remote and inhospitable places are just a day-trip. People with that frame of mind don't take the proper precautions and things can, and do, deteriorate. A lot of little things, one after the other, tend to pile up until it all goes wrong. Even people who are experienced, equipped and prepared aren't immune from such problems. So, you need to have a bit of understanding and sympathy for Dieter Schumann. Dieter was a good driver and shouldn't have become bogged. He did all the right things. He might have made it across the patch of clay if he were driving a vehicle other than the big Land Cruiser with its off-road tyres. Maybe softer tyres and a lighter vehicle wouldn't have broken the fragile surface.

But the lugs of the off-road tyres ripped into the soil before he was able to do anything at all. The Land Cruiser's front wheels were pushing themselves axle deep in the clay. The rear wheels followed and he was hopelessly bogged by the time he realised what was happening. He stopped immediately but it was already too late. It really wasn't his fault.

Dieter wasn't one of those people who figure the way out of being mired is to give it all its got until it digs a hole so deep only a crane can effect a rescue. He was very familiar with four-wheel-drives and was a competent operator and he had done rather well driving in some pretty tough terrain, up until now. He climbed out of the car to survey the situation. He was in pretty deep. That was certain, and it was obvious that he couldn't drive the heavy vehicle any further forward through the clay. He walked out in front of the Toyota and could not make any impression on the soil but he could see that this slightly darker patch went on for another forty metres or more before it looked to become drier. The problem was that the wet season had more or less just petered out. The hot sun was baking the crust of the land but it was still soft under that crust and he had broken through. Once through he was into the slippery, greasy clay and lost traction. All was lost once traction was lost. He would have to try to take it backwards along his track in, if he had any hope at all of getting out. Dieter also wasn't a know-it-all. He listened to any advice anybody who knew about such things wanted to give him, and he took their advice. He bought a cell phone and a charger that could be used from the vehicle's electrical system. The hire company also rented him a portable Global Positioning System and an emergency radio beacon, an EPIRB. The vehicle also had an electric winch. Dieter used the GPS often to check against his maps and found it to be a very useful tool. The marks on his maps tended to look considerably different and much more benign than the view from where he was at that time. They had taken a tour bus drive to a place that looked like a scene from the movie, Crocodile Dundee, and just as unnerving as their driver went on to explain the hazards surrounding them. He was carrying his handheld GPS device and plotted his exact location on his map. It appeared that he stood just under the letter m in a neatly worded legend that simply said, "swamp". The word did not quite convey the same meaning as actually being there. The Personal Emergency Beacon he rented was on the standard frequency and had a satellite link-up. He also had a very useful inflatable jack. He could lift the entire front or rear of the vehicle clear of the ground by sliding the bag under the car and pumping it up. He had a shovel and blankets and a sun tarpaulin and most importantly, he had lots of water. He had packages of fruit and nuts and cereal and even muesli bars. So Dieter should have been prepared whatever might happen to go wrong. All he had to do was get un-bogged somehow and he still had several hours of daylight left in which to accomplish that task.

The Schumanns, Dieter, Esther and young Inge were enjoying their Australian adventure. The adventure started when they landed in Sydney. They already knew more about New South Wales than many of the locals and they could have acted as tour guides for Tasmania, their next stop. The amount of information available from tourism centres, libraries and the World Wide Web is staggering and they took advantage of all they could find; so on the day they arrived they knew exactly what they wanted to see and how to go about arranging to see it. It was planned to the last detail more or less. They had the clothes, they had backup identification procedures, they had phone numbers and they had access to funds in several forms and locations. They submitted vast amounts of digital photos and videos to a friend's computer in Stuttgart every time they found an Internet café. They were organised in a Teutonic manner. They were now in the final days of their planned eight-week adventure. They were in Far North Queensland (beautiful one day, perfect the next) and driving and camping in the outback. They were enjoying themselves so much they were already planning a return to see the things time wouldn't permit on this trip. This was the longest they were going to be without contact, however. No one was expecting to hear from them for another two weeks. So, no one was going to even think about looking for them until that time passed. That was just the start of their problems but the first that actually forced a wrong decision.

Dieter and Esther Schumann are both handsome. Dieter has a boyish look about him that is disarming to men and endearing to women and Esther has the confident poise, presence and *je ne c'est quois* typical of a certain class of European women. They are financially well off for such a young pair. Dieter is one-third owner of a large sporting goods and camping equipment store that is starting to become a chain of such stores. He gets to test much of the equipment personally and he was expecting the Australian trip to considerably add to his knowledge. Esther worked for a large and well-known European travel agency until she became pregnant with Inge. Her thinking is that if Dieter's company decides to branch out into the travel side of things, she might get to head it up. Inge is an absolute joy to them. Dieter and Esther are intelligent, levelheaded and decisive and Inge copies these traits. It stopped being two parents and a child to being three people having fun together almost from the time she was able to sit-up on her own. Inge was taught to swim as soon as she was able to crawl. Inge was also taught how to avoid getting into trouble and what to do if she thought that maybe getting into trouble was about to happen. Whenever they went where a crowd was likely, Dieter and Esther would pick out a landmark, and tell Inge that if she should become lost or separated, to make her way to the landmark and they would find her there. Dieter would test her knowledge about where the car was parked whenever they went for a

drive somewhere. He would often start out in the wrong direction, hoping that she would correct him. She mostly did. Inge was having as much fun on her Australian tour as did her parents. A few days before Dieter bogged the Land Cruiser, they parked the vehicle and went for a picnic at a magnificent waterfall. The waterfall was clearly marked by Queensland Parks and Wildlife and was at the end of a very long but obvious path through the park. There were several such trails to other scenic spots and these formed a maze of pathways but all were clearly signposted. Dieter noticed that Inge was crying as they made their way back to the car park. They stopped, very concerned. Dieter squatted to ask Inge what was wrong, had she hurt herself? Inge replied in a very tiny voice that she was confused by the many trails and didn't know where their car was parked. Dieter hugged her, trying not to laugh, and told her that it didn't matter; she would do better next time and there was no need to cry.

Dieter circled the bogged vehicle several times, viewing it from different vantage points. It didn't matter how many vantage points he chose to view it from, the Land Cruiser would stay mired in sticky mud. Esther was content to spend her time with Inge and leave Dieter to solve the dilemma. She had thus far made only one suggestion and that was to lift the car free of the mud via the inflatable jack and place some rocks under the wheels. Dieter explained there were at least two problems with that suggestion, which he declined to admit he had already considered and disposed of. One, was they would be moving long distances to find the rocks and would have to dig them out of the ground, for there seemed to be very few simply lying about. Secondly, it would not take long for the slippery mud to simply coat the rocks and render them useless. Esther and Inge went about preparing some food and fossicking about to enjoy the glorious weather and the stark, ancient landscape. Dieter intended to instruct them both to wear their whistles but forgot about it as he waded through the manuals to refresh his mind on the operation of the electric winch. Both Dieter and Esther liked gadgets. More than acquiring such gadgets, and there were some that they even used almost frequently, they liked to look for gadgets. Thus, whenever they toured large shopping malls, they kept their eyes open for a chance shop that sold gadgets. They had already discovered, and now owned, several uniquely Australian gadgets and pointless souvenirs. When they were in one shopping mall, Dieter spotted a large sporting goods store and opted to have a look around. He noticed a small display of referee whistles on one of the counters next to the cash register. He had a brainwave. He purchased three whistles complete with separately coloured lanyards. Whenever they would go off into the bush where they might become separated, even on a nature call, they each had their own whistle code. The shrill whistles could be heard over a vaster distance

than even the most powerful set of vocal cords. They were to never be without them, that was the plan.

It doesn't matter how well behaved the child, it is impossible to loop a whistle over their head and to expect the whistle to remain silent until needed. The first piercing blast, moderated somewhat by a clever Inge who knew it wasn't the best of ideas within the confines of the car, had a startling effect on poor Dieter who was trying to remember that they drive on a different side of the road in this country. He did not lose his temper. He never did with Inge, and as he secured from battle stations he began to appreciate the humour, especially as Esther who had seen the effect it had on him was having extreme difficulty restraining her laughter. They both knew, despite the admonition from Esther when she was finally able to straighten her face, that it would not be a single incident and were both prepared and expecting it. When it did come, later than anticipated, it was neither as alarming nor of similar duration or volume. They both smiled through tightly clamped facial muscles, heads looking directly forward so as not to be seen by Inge. She was admonished again when Dieter, this time, was able to control the laughter in his voice sufficiently to reprimand her. They were patiently awaiting the inevitable third trial. Esther was jiggling in her seat with suppressed laughter in anticipation. When it occurred, this time only a burble of sound as Inge tried to modify the degree of rebuke she knew would, rightfully, result, Dieter demanded the surrender of everybody's whistle and they were placed in the glove compartment until needed. This was likely the first in a chain of compounding mistakes that would lead to the disaster.

Dieter studied the winch manual and found illustrated methods of securing the wire rope around varying objects, especially trees. It included a large-type reference to the care needed not to damage said trees by the use of aids not included as part of the list of parts found on the front page of the manual, whether in the standard or deluxe model. It made no mention of what to do in an area like this that amounted to an arboreal desert anywhere within range of the extended wire rope. Dieter stopped to have a break and a beverage with Esther and Inge. During that interval, Dieter remembered having seen another trick. A hole was dug and the spare wheel buried as an anchoring point to which the winch wire was secured. This just might work. He was concerned that the wire, strung under the chassis of the vehicle, might cause some damage when a strain was placed against it but that was far better than their prospects at remaining mired. He was consuming a simple salad prepared by Esther and considering how best to do it all. He realised that the hole for the wheel would need to be probably three-times its depth. It not only had to anchor the rope as the winch skull-dragged the vehicle backwards through the clinging mud, but it was slightly uphill

and would also have to fight the tendency for the wheel to be pulled free instead. He pictured the wire disappearing into the ground, taut, as the winch took the strain, and Esther confidently reversing at a controlled speed while the tyres slipped and spun in a bid for traction and the winch motor slowly winding in the wire. He would be at the front of the vehicle pushing and straining to add some impetus. It would all come together and the bogged vehicle would be safely atop solid ground, albeit heavy with clay around the wheel wells and hubs. He felt supremely confident that it would work and his outlook became, accordingly, much less dark. Dieter had even thought to buy a pair of work gloves and he donned these, adjusted his sunglasses and wide-brimmed hat and recovered the shovel. It would be hot in the sun and he was far from reckless. He marched back through their set of wheel tracks to a point where there was no indication of the vehicle pushing into the crust. He marched it off to make certain that the winch rope was long enough to reach the point, which it did with plenty to spare, and turned to line it up with the back of the vehicle. The pull had to be straight, he reasoned, otherwise it just became harder on the winch motor to drag it. He hunkered to sight it with the handle of his spade like a golfer using a putter to survey the lie of the green. Satisfied, he scratched a large X to denote the centre of the tyre and scribed a circle dimensioned to accommodate the wheel. He attempted to dig. The shovel, actually an entrenching tool, was designed to shift sand or snow or to dig small trenches in reasonable soil or small pits for toilets or to bury organic rubbish. It was never intended as a rock-breaker or to work against the adobe this clay had become in the furnace of the sun.

Dieter surmised, correctly, that the heavy clay would be easier to prise out the deeper he got but though he scraped and jabbed at the adobe, he simply made little impression. Until finally, to his dismay, he saw that the pointed tip of the spade had curled back upon itself making the tool next to useless. Had Dieter brought along a spud bar or crow bar, that two metre hunk of steel rod sharpened to either a point or a chisel, beloved of the navy, he would have found that the reality of his digging may have soon matched his idle vision. Such tools however, are becoming a rarity with the advent of portable power-tools that make them near obsolete. It is unlikely that anyone not several years older than Dieter would have suggested he carry one. The amount of daylight remaining was seriously reduced by the time Dieter admitted defeat. He knew it was perhaps their only chance at getting unstuck and decided to tackle it again in the morning. For now, he needed to relieve his hands from the threatening blisters and to get out of the heat of the sun. That was when they heard the helicopter. Dieter immediately considered activating the EPIRB and placing it on the roof of the Land Cruiser, hoping the helicopter pilot was keeping a listening watch on the emergency frequency. He turned his mind to making some sort of visual

signal and forgot about the beacon when they saw it hovering in the distance. That may have been another link in the chain.

The helicopter veered away but returned to the same spot minutes later and dropped, it seemed, to ground. It rose again and darted around as if looking for something and then looked once more to land. Dieter and Esther had much the same thought at the same time. It was clear the helicopter was working there. It may have been a mine or a survey crew or any number of possibilities but there would, surely, be people there. They decided to chance their luck on finding a person or a shack or some communication equipment that was actually able to communicate. Their cell phone steadfastly refused to discover any sort of a signal that could be used for a transmission of a help or distress call. That had been their first recourse. Dieter knew it was not a good idea to leave the vehicle but the helicopter was working considerably less than a kilometre away and, if there was no one there, they could always return to the car. He sensibly filled up three canteens of water, made certain everyone had several muesli bars in their pockets and led the party off to locate the helicopter. He forgot entirely about the whistles locked in the glove compartment. His off-the-cuff plan was that if it took longer than it should to reach the helicopter and it left for another location and there was no one at the mine site (as he convinced himself it was) then they could overnight there and return to the car in the morning. They would have food and water. He was more than certain there would be some way of starting a fire with the equipment found at the mine site and they could leave a note detailing their grid location as determined by the GPS that Dieter had checked earlier in the day. It was all very sound and sensible.

Inge kept turning around to make certain she knew exactly where the car was as they worked their way along. Otherwise she simply stayed in whichever parent's wake was the easiest to follow. This was all part of the adventure and she was enjoying herself. Esther was the first to meet with disaster although she did not know it at the time. The clay she was walking over suddenly became sticky and she was sinking almost to her ankles in the mud. She looked around for another trail to follow and saw some dry ground around scrubby bushes further up a rise to her right. She looked behind her to see Inge walking closely behind Dieter and veered to her right to take advantage of the higher and drier ground. Inge saw her mother's muddy footprints and moved to follow a path to her left that went out over some heavy green moss and prostrate groundcover. She was light enough that the spongy mass easily held her weight. She saw her mother climbing higher to take a different path but expected to see her moving downhill again once past the muddy part. That should have been a safe assumption. Esther was slowed down considerably however, having taken longer to climb up the slope of the



hill and to argue her way through the shrubbery, and when she moved back down hill, she was behind both Dieter and Inge. She dropped to a position considerably to the left of their track. Esther stood for several quiet minutes waiting for Dieter and Inge to catch up. When they didn't appear and she could not hear any sound from their movement, she called out. She was facing in the direction she believed them to be following her, and that was the wrong way. Her calls were absorbed by the shrubs and scrub trees and were heard by neither Dieter nor Inge. She reasoned that she must be below them by now and that they had passed her. She turned sharply to intercept their path. She was nowhere close, and in fact now headed ninety degrees off course and getting further away. She heard the helicopter and turned towards the sound and continued walking in that direction pleased to know that Inge was safely with Dieter.

Dieter also heard the helicopter and moved clear of the shrubs for a look. He saw it hovering considerably closer than he expected and was pleased they were able to get here before it left for the day. He was a little surprised though, because he was certain he was heading in the correct direction but the helicopter was much further left than he would have thought. He wondered how he could have gotten so turned about. He had last seen Inge moving alongside Esther and was relieved that he could concentrate on locating the mine site. He heard some noise to his right that he concluded was Esther and Inge making their way through the scrub. Inge stopped. There was no sign of either her mother or daddy. She stood still and waited as she had always been instructed to do. It was easier to find somebody if one person stood still rather than everybody moving about. She waited for a long time, or a long time to a child and then she called out. There was no answering call. Esther, the first to become lost, was also the first to realise that she was, indeed, lost. She stopped and took a drink from her canteen, more to relieve her anxiety than to quench a thirst. She decided that she would only become more confused if she tried to find the helicopter site and decided to take the advice they always gave Inge, and head back to the car. It took Dieter almost another two hours before he was prepared to admit he was hopelessly lost and also decided to return to the car. The sun had moved rather dramatically by this time, and when he used its position to plot a course back again, he was a mile off. Inge was the only person who was not lost. She knew exactly where the car was because she had memorised the twists and turns on the way in. She did what she was told to do and headed back to the car hoping to find her parents waiting for her.

Jack Gordon sat in the Robinson R22 helicopter doing a cursory pre-flight check. His baseball cap was tugged low over his eyes despite the sunglasses. Normally, Jack was the station manager of the small cattle

property but in these tight times they could not afford a pilot on their payroll. Pilots objected to doing gardening when they weren't flying and though the helicopter was almost a necessary tool, it couldn't be left to just sit around. Maintenance programmes were needed even if the chopper wasn't flying. The station had tried commercial contract muster helicopters and, although effective, they were a costly fixed-price and cattle saleyard prices were not. Nor was it as convenient as having your own. The Robinson was affordable both in terms of acquisition and in maintenance and being able to drive one of these things was part of the requirement for his job. Ringers on trail bikes mostly did the muster and property maintenance these days and horses were used only when they were considered more effective. The fast and highly manoeuvrable motorcycles were needed to keep up with the far-ranging Robinson. The wet season was almost done and Jack wanted to have a quick look around to see what needed repair or attention and get the ringers on to it. A problem at this time of year was cattle getting bogged in the mud as waterholes receded. Those that could be extricated were, those that couldn't, needed humane despatch and temporary fencing needed to keep the bullocks away from the danger. It was all business these days. It had to be.

The helicopter thudded low over the scrub, flushing out cattle and feral pigs as it went. Gordon hovered briefly around each mob of cattle to check out condition and then flew on to check other items he had listed to have a look at. It was sometimes necessary to criss-cross a paddock to make certain of the condition and he would drop low to hover a few feet off the ground and swing the chopper in a wide circle before gaining safe altitude to approach from a different course. He was pleased. Thus far he saw nothing to give him any cause for concern and no damage to any outlying equipment. The cattle were looking pretty good. Maybe it just might be a good year. He did a long sweep at high altitude then dropped down low to make a final pass before heading home. He noticed the Land Cruiser at the southern edge. It was a bit soon after the wet for tourists and he supposed it would be pig-shooters. He decided to investigate. Some of these yahoos got tired of not scaring up any pigs and wanted to shoot something, or shot at what they just guessed was a pig. Either way, it often turned out to be one of the station's cattle. Contract pig-shooters weren't generally a problem but he was concerned about anyone out here just for their own amusement. He flew over to see if he could see anyone camped near the vehicle. The vehicle looked like it might be bogged. He circled around the area hoping that anyone nearby would step into the open. He saw no one and guessed they may have been in tandem and had carried on in the second vehicle. He was just a little uneasy because it didn't look like it was bogged badly enough that a second vehicle couldn't have pulled them out. It was probably pig-shooters. He turned and flew home.

Inge was tired from her bush trek and was disappointed to see that no one else was at the car. She opened the door and climbed in to wait. It was soon dark. Esther had no idea of the direction of the car anymore and she was afraid she was going to get herself hopelessly lost. She managed to find a small pool of oily-looking water that might be potable, just before the night-sky closed down on her. She avoided drinking from her canteen to conserve her water and figured she might need to plot this pool for future reference. She made camp as best she could in the hastening dark to await daylight and a new attempt at finding her way out. She ate one of six muesli bars in her pocket. She hoped Dieter and Inge were not too worried about her. Dieter was now three kilometres due west of the vehicle and entangled in some decision-making. He decided to stop for the night. There was a patch of low grass and a small tree he could rest his back against. He leaned back and took a small drink from the canteen and opened a muesli bar. He hoped Esther and Inge were not too worried about him. Inge awoke and hastily checked the front seat to see if her parents had returned during the night. They hadn't and her disappointment gave way to concern that she had maybe done something wrong and her parents might be cross with her. She made herself a breakfast of cereal and fruit juice. Then she realised she was desperate to go to the toilet. She climbed out of the car in her underpants and a white singlet and found a suitable bush for her needs. She sprinkled some water over her hands from the large plastic tub with the convenient tap then climbed in to eat her breakfast. Inge decided to get dressed. She opened a case to get clean underpants, a singlet and a pair of blue socks. She changed her underwear, folding the soiled ones and putting them in the dirty clothes plastic bag. She got out a pair of buff-coloured shorts, worked her way into those, and managed to get both socks on. She needed a shirt but didn't see one that matched her mood for that day and kept looking. She discovered a favourite blue dress in a second suitcase. She put it on. She got her comb and tidied her hair, brushed her teeth and cleaned up her breakfast dishes. She had hoped that her parents would be back by now. Inge owned a pair of Birkenstock shoes that she liked. They had straps with buckles in a style known as Mary Janes. It would take a bit of concentration to do them up but Inge always felt a measure of satisfaction and accomplishment whenever she did it by herself. She removed her socks. Blue was her favourite colour, although she didn't know she had a favourite colour, but the blue socks didn't go with the water ice colour of her shoes. Her mother told her that. Inge wriggled each bare foot into a shoe. She liked the feel of the soft leather against her skin. She sat on the floor and, with her tongue stuck out of the corner of her mouth in concentration, managed to buckle both shoes. Inge played around the vehicle for a while hoping her parents would come soon. Then she was certain she heard their voices in the opposite direction they had gone the

day before to see the helicopter. She looked out into the distance and in the shimmer she was certain she saw them. They were a long way away though. She was absolutely certain she could hear them talking. She decided to go to them. There were rules however. She put some nut bars into her pocket and took her canteen. It was still full from yesterday when her daddy filled it from the plastic tub with the tap. It normally clipped to a belt she wore but because of the dress, she had to carry it in both hands. Inge went to find her daddy. As she grew thirsty, she sipped water from the canteen and ate the nut bars. When the canteen was empty it made no sense to carry it anymore so she very neatly placed it next to a rock that looked like an elephant. She saw an elephant once and it wasn't at a zoo. She liked to tell people that.

Jack Gordon was checking out the northern edges of the property two days later and skimming low over trees, checking the waterholes. He completed his inspection and flew a wide arc out around the property and headed back home. He remembered the Land Cruiser and his concerns about the pig-shooters trespassing on the property and decided to carry his sweep outward and back in again to see if it was gone. It wasn't and it looked as if it hadn't moved. He fumbled for his binoculars and hovered low behind the vehicle and took down the registration. He buzzed the area again but no one popped out to see what he was doing. He made his way home and didn't know if he wanted a cold beer or a cup of coffee more. His thoughts remained on his belly. He was sitting in his office bringing his flight-log up to date and remembered the licence number of the Land Cruiser. He telephoned a police contact number and spoke to a pleasant young woman who said she would have it checked out and thanked him.

The report filtered through to Chillagoe. The vehicle was rented to a German tourist named Dieter Schumann. He had a wife and a young daughter with him. The officer thought about it and wondered idly why these things always wound up in the lap of the Chillagoe police. He was trying to picture the scene as described in the brief report from Jack Gordon. He hadn't seen Jack in probably a year and wondered how he was doing. It was unlikely the Schumann family was still there. The report said that they had an EPIRB and it hadn't been activated. It was likely they were travelling with another family and gotten a ride with them. Still, they should have reported to the hire company about the bogged vehicle and they hadn't. He drank some more of his tea. It was good that it wasn't an individual that was lost out there. That would mean the SES and maybe a blacktracker. It would be a low-key search for a group of people as there was a far better chance for them to make it until they were found. The only thing really worrying the police officer was that this was now the fourth day, at least, for there was no telling how long the vehicle was there before Jack spotted it. That's a long time

to be out there without some kind of help. He was hoping Schumann had been using his credit cards a lot so he would be able to figure out when they last made a purchase in the area, and thus how long they could have been stranded. He thought he would start a check with the petrol stations in the area. It wasn't likely they had turned up at Wrotham Park but he had better advise them to keep a lookout. A phone call later and Wrotham Park hadn't seen or heard from them. He wondered if he could impose on Jack Gordon to fly him out there. He made another phone call. A few hours later, he was shaking hands with Jack and commenting on past and current situations. Jack already sent a couple of boys on trail bikes to scout the area and have a look around. The helicopter would be at the bogged vehicle in less than a half-hour.

Jack agreed to buzz the area before letting down so his passenger could have a good look around and maybe guess in which direction the Schumanns may have gone. The Robinson R22 let down a safe distance behind the stranded vehicle and a very worried police officer got out. There were no tyre tracks through some of the softer mud. Only a single set of tyre tracks led up to where the vehicle was bogged. If the family was not in the vehicle, then they were travelling on foot out there. That was not a good scenario. Jack yelled to his passenger and waggled his index finger in a circle to indicate he was going back up to have another look, then got some altitude to see if he could spot anything at all that might give them a clue. The trail riders pulled up as he was lifting and they shook their heads to indicate they had seen nothing. He was hovering high above the Land Cruiser for almost another three minutes, but seeing nothing eventful or moving, decided to make a low-level sweep. And that was when he caught the movement behind the trees. He swung the door of the aircraft around to peer in that direction. A figure stepped into the open. Even from that distance, he could see it was a woman. It seemed they were likely camped out here after all. False alarm. A fairly expensive false alarm but better safe than sorry he supposed. He was about to let down but kept his eye on the woman. She was almost running. He eased the stick forward and moved towards her. Now she was running and waving. He moved slowly to a position behind the vehicle and carefully set it down.

Esther could barely stop crying when she learned that neither Dieter nor Inge had yet turned up anywhere. She had supposed it was only her that was lost. A few minutes later, when Esther discovered Inge's soiled clothes and breakfast dishes they all became worried. It looked as if Dieter and Inge spent the night in the vehicle but had then walked out for help in the morning. As they had not been heard from since, everyone had the same question. Where does the search start? What direction did they go? Esther was, understandably, distressed both from her ordeal and the disappearance of her husband and child. She said

that Dieter was certain to have left something obvious to tell them his intention. He would have left a trail or something. He was not dumb and knew the risks very well. There were no messages in the car so maybe he left some trail markers. The likely direction was back the way they came. A rider mounted his bike to travel back to see if anything indicated Dieter and Inge went that way. Oddly enough, Esther already knew the answer to that. She had found a set of tyre tracks in the soft mud when she was trying to get her bearings. She followed them, hoping they might take her to a house or a building or somebody camping. It never occurred to her that the tracks were those made by the Land Cruiser. She followed them until they disappeared on soil that was cement-hard. She gave way to frustration and never considered going the other direction. She was going the wrong way. If she had turned the other way and walked for perhaps ten minutes, she would have stumbled upon their car. Despite the reasoning, the seasoned police officer was not convinced. The EPIRB was still in the car. Dieter would surely have activated it had he returned to the vehicle. Jack Gordon considered this and then took the other trail rider as a second pair of eyes, and flew the helicopter back in the direction Esther had tumbled from. They were flying for no more than fifteen minutes in a square search-pattern when they saw a man, presumably Dieter; break into a clearing frantically waving his arms over his head. He looked to be reasonably fit and was moving well. Jack decided he could walk out to the car. He dropped lower, lining-up on the vehicle and slowly led Dieter in the right direction. Jack kept looking for the girl, a sour taste in his mouth. This would not be a happy reunion.

Two hours later, a search was being organised. It would be necessary to find in which direction Inge had gone. There was a blacktracker in Bamaga. He would be needed to augment a small ground search. The aircraft could then be called in when they were able to confirm her direction. It was always, it seemed, dropped into Chillagoe's lap. Jack Gordon ferried Esther and Dieter to a small airstrip where a fixed-wing aircraft from the Royal Flying Doctor Service could take them both to Townsville General Hospital. Jack Gordon hoped the doctor on the aircraft had plenty of sedatives aboard.

## **CHAPTER 27**

### ***Inge***

He saw the scuffmark on the rise of dirt before it actually registered. He was neither hunting nor tracking anything and his brain was simply ticking over, processing everything else as he struggled along in the heat of the day. Some other warning system was still alert though, and nudged him. He stopped to ponder it. It was definitely a scuffmark that

had no business being there. Something had slipped against the soil. Jacky stood in slight befuddlement, neither particularly interested in the anomaly, nor certain what he was doing before in order to carry on doing it. He peered blankly at the defacement as if lacking the inertia to resume his plodding trek. His mind, actually otherwise engaged, deigned to make an effort and made an observation. The mark was too shallow and the edges not sharp enough for cattle or a brumby. A quick glance around, although the action itself was neither quick nor positive, showed no other sign of hooves that might sustain such an argument anyway. He considered momentarily that it might be a pig as his mind, really not interested in playing the game, dealt out options, but a pig would have left other deeper marks. He discarded that idea. He bent over from the waist, bracing the weight of the pack and his own body, hands on knees, while he lowered himself for a closer look at the mark. It took him a few moments to remember what he was looking for. There was no granular build-up of soil at the bottom so it wasn't the digging or scratching of some small foraging animal. A wallaby should have left a second footprint as it broke the edge of the rise and a dingo would have leapt up or down the rise but there was nothing other than this one scuffmark. A reluctant brain metaphorically threw its hands in the air and agreed to concentrate on the riddle. Jacky stood straight and gazed into the middle distance but saw nothing he didn't expect to see. He wondered which way the animal was travelling. He dumped his swag on the ground, grateful for the excuse, and knelt to examine the scuffmark. Complaining lumbar vertebrae were thankful for the additional support. He put the tip of his right hand forefinger between his teeth and bit gently several times to restore the sensitivity. Whether that helped at all was moot but it was something Jacky had seen someone else do once and he copied it ever after. He rubbed the thumb and the pad of the finger together then placed it on the earth gently, and then pressed slightly harder. It gave in to his pressure and Jacky felt the slight movement as soil collapsed under the pad of the probing forefinger. His now interested brain confirmed that there was no solid packing of the soil at the bottom of the scuff. The heel would have compacted the soil at the bottom had it been the skidding heel mark of an animal travelling in the same direction that Jacky was drifting. The base of the scuffmark should also have been dug or pushed further into the back of the soil. It wasn't. So, whatever it was that scuffed the soil here was headed in the opposite direction. Jacky shuffled through the memories of the last couple of hours convinced he hadn't seen or encountered any sign along the way. He considered the evidence to reconstruct what occurred. Something, in an attempt to climb the rise, missed its footing on the soil and slipped slightly, scuffing its foot against the edge. Jacky stood again with an involuntary grunt as abused muscles complained, and stared back along his path for several minutes. He didn't need that long to see what he was looking to see but it was an excuse to enjoy the freedom

from the weight of the swag. He flexed and rotated the muscles of his shoulders unconsciously. The back of his shirt was soaked with sweat from contact with the pack. It suddenly cooled on exposure to the air but the wet and sticky shirt remained uncomfortable. He scanned the horizon. There was heat shimmer in the distance but that was all that moved on the humid, hot landscape.

In all fairness, Jacky tried to shrug off the puzzle. His brain, more interested in survival than mystery, was trying to nudge him back to the pedestrian realities of existence. It is true he had no appointment to keep, no schedule to maintain, and it certainly didn't matter if he stopped to examine something that caught his interest. He did however, want to keep up with the timetable of the clay-disc map he was following, interjected his self-serving mind. At least that was the argument it pled to stop hanging around here trying to solve a mystery of no consequence. And, indeed, it was of no consequence. There was simply an unexplained scuffmark, so what? It could be argued that many inexplicable things happen out here. But, of course, that simply wasn't true. Anyone who could read sign always knew just what happened. There was a time when the people who lived and wandered out here had to know exactly what had occurred, or possibly die. Jacky though, still tried to shrug it off. He wanted to be on his way. For all practical purposes this was not a good place to be caught by dark. There was no water and no shelter and few prospects. It was a good place to move through quickly and to find a camp of choice somewhere else. He grabbed up his swag and made to throw it back on his shoulder as his practical mind offered him a pat on the back. He paused part way through the action. There was almost a groan from that part of his mind pushing the case for continuing on his way. Still, he protested, that scuffmark shouldn't be there. The debate was, obviously, not over yet. He held the swag by a strap and slowly resumed walking his own prior course and path, but not with any conviction.

He began to drift in the direction whatever it was had come from, giving in to his increasing curiosity. He stared intently at the ground, looking to read the events. He found nothing for almost twenty paces and was deciding to forget about it again and go back about his business. He took one more pace. The small dots of loose soil were evenly spread but one small section, only a few centimetres in length, was pushed together. A foot had touched here and brushed the soil. It was a walking mark. Were it running or hopping the foot would have hit the ground harder and made a larger and more definite brush of surface soil. This was a foot that just barely dragged the soil as it was lifted up for the next step. It was getting weary or it was injured. This, together with the scuffmark on the rise, showed it had been walking for a while and was tiring. Possibly it was sick or hurt. That could account for the faltering steps,



but there weren't enough footprints to judge for that possibility. There was no way to gauge the size of the foot from the small drift of dusty soil but Jacky guessed it was a small animal because of the absence of other detectable footprints. He stood for a while to study the dirt. This was not a frequented animal pathway as there was no evidence of regular use. This was a one-time event. The mystery deepened for Jacky and he was being ensnared by it. Jacky went back to the scuffmark and dropped his swag once more. If it was a small animal it was a small foot. That meant there should be sign of another foot at the base of the rise. Jacky looked very carefully again. He found it. He hadn't seen it before because he hadn't been looking for it and it wasn't obvious. The other foot had stood on an embedded stone and loosened it. Small granules of soil tumbled from the dirt at the edge of the small stone when the weight of the animal was placed on it. These grains of soil were evident now that Jacky knew what to look for. This confirmed the size of the animal as small. Then the scuffmark was too big, said a fully attentive brain. Few animals out here, other than kangaroos, have large feet compared to body size. Jacky knew of no other. He had seen several rabbits thus far, and was disturbed to think that they were increasing in regularity here in the north but this was neither a rabbit track nor the track of any of the larger birds that moved about on these plains. That's what it wasn't. But what was it? Jacky examined the scuffmark again. It was regular. There should have been some ridging from the toes but it didn't look like it. The dirt was hard enough to resist the ridging but, still, the gouge was too regular. There was no animal that size that would not have left some other identification. He stared dumbly at the scuff while his brain sorted through details, almost whirring, as it made various posits. Eventually, some form of logic proceeded to define the event. The scuffmark had to be from a shoe or a boot. Ergo the animal was human. If it was a small animal then it was a small human. It was a child.

Jacky studied the signs again as this thought focussed in his mind. Everything confirmed the theory. He went back to where the other print was and examined the path. He could almost see the child walking towards the rise of compacted soil. He visualised the tired child trying to step up on to the higher ground and stumbling against the edge. He pictured tiny hands reaching forward to recover its balance before stepping again, harder and higher. He went back to the scuffmark and saw what he hadn't before. There were the two slide marks from the child's hands and noticeable only now that Jacky knew they were there. What was a child doing out here, who knows how many, kilometres from the nearest road? Was it alone? Jacky trailed either side of the line of footprints. He desperately wanted to find some other footprints. He hoped to find other footprints. What were they doing out here? His brief consideration of an Aborigine family walking through was unlikely because of the shoe print. Most children out here still went barefoot

even today, in an era of soft, strong, durable and cheap casual-footwear. Perhaps they were lost. Perhaps their vehicle had broken down and they had, foolishly, stupidly, abandoned it. Maybe there was a group of people and the child was walking in a line by itself. If the child was accompanied then there ought to be more prints out there. And hopefully they would turn around and come back. There was nothing for them in the direction they were travelling. Jacky knew that only too well. He would then perhaps need to abandon his own journey and go and find them if they were lost. That made him impatient. He felt imposed upon. How did they get lost? Wherever did they start from to get lost? There was no such thing as being lost out here in the outback in the end, however. You were simply out here and you were either living or you were dying.

His first reaction was annoyance. He didn't want to share the space with anyone else. He didn't want to be imposed upon. He had been living alone long enough now to value his own solitude and this was an intrusion. He thought, rather unreasonably, that maybe they didn't want to be bothered either. Besides, he argued, they had already passed each other. But that of course was the sore point. Jacky hadn't seen them. He hadn't cut any sign and that was a matter of personal pride. He should have. He was too good not to have. He became prickly. How dare they? That was the sticking point. He hadn't seen anyone and he should have. So where were they? He searched for perhaps another ten minutes or more but found no other footprints, no disturbed vegetation, no bruised leaves of a prostrate plant, no straws of dried grass broken or bent, no ants dead from an uncaring foot. There was nothing at all. So it was a child and it was alone. It, therefore, had to be lost. A lost child out here was a dead child. It was just a matter of how soon. A sense of urgency now set in and Jacky found himself starting to panic. He picked up his swag and walked back to the first print some twenty metres back from the scuffmark. He took a sight line from there to the scuffmark to determine the actual line the child was following. The child would slowly veer right. There was no way to determine how old the prints were other than they were made that same day. The changing overnight temperatures and errant breezes would cause more granules of soil to fall and the scuffmark would be blurred. Given two days and it would have disappeared altogether. He mentally drew a line to his right to intersect the circle the child would be describing. He guessed it would be slowing up the tireder it grew and decided to head only a few compass points to the right of its line of movement. He wasn't happy. He wasn't certain what he could do about the situation and the very last thing Jacky wanted, was to find the body of a child.

He didn't know how long the child was wandering without water. He expected that were it only a few hours its parents would be descending

on the area. They would be calling the child's name. Surely they would have noticed the child was missing by now. Surely they would be searching. They weren't, so either they too were dead or the child was wandering for at least a day and a night. Jacky wasn't happy with the situation, either way, and his sense of panic grew in proportion. He intercepted the path far sooner than he expected. There were three rather distinct shoe marks in a bit of soft sand. They were plain leather soles. He would have expected a fancy tread from a walking shoe or boot, which would have made a more definite mark to follow. These were from a street shoe. Jacky was lucky to have spotted them. A couple of metres right or left and he would have missed them. He had expected he would have had to cast back and forth before cutting any sign. He was buoyed by the fact that the child was still alive. But how much longer, he muttered to himself. He followed the line of prints but it was not easy. The fierce sun was baking the surface of the ground hard and the child was so light that prints were simply not evident except where there was an occasional scuffing of soil. Whenever he saw something, he would have to backtrack to make certain it was on the same line, then go back again to interpret the sign. The child was moving away faster than he was able to track it. A soft sweeping that pushed the surface dust aside caught his attention. It was the unmistakable slither mark of a snake. His stomach fell when he also saw the flattened dust granules that indicated a shoe print next to where the snake had crawled out of the roots of a scrub bush and across the line of prints. The child had stopped here. The child had seen the snake. He wondered if the child were bitten; if so, the trail would end soon. Snakes out here were extremely venomous and a small child would die quickly. Then he saw the clothing next to the termite mound. That particular colour of blue didn't belong in the scene and it caught his eye. It had to be the child.

Jacky suddenly felt sick inside and a sense of futility and frustration threatened to bring tears to his eyes. He would be unable to carry the body of the child back to civilisation and would be obliged to bury it out here in this lonely place. He looked around at the location as he walked slowly towards the body in order to fix reference points so he could find the grave again when the solemn, distressing time came to exhume the remains. He was still a few metres away when he exultantly realised the piece of clothing was a child's dress and it was empty, discarded. She had felt the need to urinate, and that was obvious, but for some reason known only to children and God, she felt it necessary to remove her dress first. Jacky held the dress out in front of him to measure it. It was a long time since he had held any garment of clothing this small. He guessed her age to be somewhere around six maybe seven years. At least she could talk and could tell him where she came from and follow instructions. He then wondered, with a jolt of dismay, if there were perhaps two children. He went back and examined the footprints in the

sand again. They were all from the same shoes, the same feet. He cast around but found no other prints. There was just the one child. A girl about six years old and, despite it seeming as if she had avoided the snake, was probably dying. They were coming to an area of denser vegetation. She was walking through grass now and it was easy to follow her path. Jacky almost found himself running. He stopped, caught short. She hadn't gotten far beyond there after all. His exultation died and his sick feeling returned. She was curled up under a stunted acacia tree. He could see, when he got reluctantly closer, that ants were running over her body and flies were exploring her face and covering the back of her snow-white cotton singlet. She was wearing buff-coloured shorts. His own daughter liked to do that as well; wear a favourite dress over shorts. She was dead, lifeless. There was no detectable movement of the little body from this distance. He saw a mass of almost white blonde hair. The tanned skin of her arms and neck was burned raw from the relentless sun. That would have been very painful for her. A distressed Jacky removed his hat and knelt beside the little body. He studied the delicate face, and in despair felt the need to brush the flies away from her. She opened her eyes and turned to look at him.

"Do you know where my daddy is"?

The words were in German. Jacky had been startled when she moved and the sound was a moment of gibberish. It took a further moment for the rush of emotion to wash and another for him to realise that gibberish was a foreign language. It sounded like it could have been German. The only German words that Jacky knew came from watching reruns of Hogan's Heroes. He wasn't even positive if that was the language she was speaking. He could not have been more thrilled, though. He wanted to hug someone. He threw down his swag and retrieved his pannikin. The quart-pot billy was still more than half full of water and he poured a very small amount in the bottom of the mug. He didn't want her to spill any of it. At this point, it was too precious. They would likely not be leaving here until the morning and it would be another long day before he would find water again, he imagined. She drank it all and he poured more for her. She drank that too and handed the mug back to him. She spotted her dress, folded and stuffed into one of the side pockets of the swag. She pointed to it and broke into a long unintelligible comment. Jacky stood her on her feet being careful not to press the flesh of her badly sunburned arms. He then carefully pulled her dress down over her head. It would become cool in a couple of hours when the sun began to wane, and her exposure to the sun would make her feel uncomfortably chilled. Jacky was worried and uncertain what to do next. They were probably more than three days away from civilisation on foot. Unless the girl was reported missing and a search was put into place he could not expect any assistance. He was very concerned about her badly burned

skin. She was not wearing a hat and, from the fact she was deeply asleep when he found her, she might already be suffering heat stroke. Her skin was hot but whether this was an increase in her own temperature or the result of the skin burn, he didn't know. He had no medicine and no real knowledge of what to do even if he did. He decided after a while to search his swag for the Panadol tablets he bought in Biddinburra, and gave her one tablet with another sip of water. He couldn't make up his mind as to whether her drowsiness was simply from being tired after her long walk or from the effects of overexposure to the sun.

The child stared at him for a while. Her soft blue eyes seemed slightly unfocused. Then, with her left hand cupping her ear and her right hand fisted to her mouth, she simply lay down again and slept. Jacky sat there watching her, feeling that he too could do with a nap. He didn't know if he should be worried about her falling back to sleep again. He would wait and see if she awoke or began to show any signs of deteriorating. In the meantime he rigged a shelter with his swag to give her shade. Then he leaned against the other side of the tree and examined his options. From time to time, he brushed ants off her legs. He decided to camp the night. If there were searchers, they would search an area at a time. He might pass through their sweep into a sector already cleared if he kept moving. It was best to stay put. He could, he felt, backtrack to where the girl had started but the problem was twofold. She would have been describing an arc on her travel but she would also have been distracted by objects and wandered away towards them. He would have to cover an extensive amount of territory in backtrack. The second problem was that she was unable to move along under her own steam. Clearly she was exhausted and perhaps ill as well as exhausted. He couldn't carry her in addition to his swag; it was hard enough to carry the swag.

Since leaving Biddinburra, he had taken an inventory of his swag on several occasions to see what he could divest in order to lighten his load. He was wise enough to keep it all. He refused to make it more difficult to exist. His own condition was not the best given the deficiencies of his diet and getting rid of tools or clothing would not make things easier, especially in the long run. That is what it takes to survive in the outback, longevity. Jacky had often thought about his age on this trip and his own state of health. He was already pushing the limit as far as life expectancy went for his mob. The inadequacies of his diet and the stresses of survival were taking their toll. This didn't particularly bother Jacky. He was, after all, a fatalist and a realist. If he didn't wake up one morning, that was not a problem. He was half hoping, half expecting for it all to end out here. He would be with his family. He would be with his Mary. He was born here of the Dreamtime and it was fitting he should

return to the Dreaming out here. He loved and cherished his children but they were virtually estranged to him now. The long and rambling letters they used to write home, replete with photos of themselves and their children, became sporadic until finally they became notes on postcards and greeting cards. Their weekly emails too, became something that needed to be fitted in somewhere, eventually, along with the requisite photo. Then those also became occasional, prompted only by an anniversary or seasonal greeting. He didn't regret this particularly. Complaining about the lack of communication, especially the visits, would only serve to make them feel guilty. There was little reward in that. It also meant that he and Mary had the freedom to do what they pleased as they pleased. And they did. Life was enjoyable, until a routine medical examination put an end to it all. From that day on it was a life of worry, a life of pain. Mary's pain was physical. Jacky's pain was of the spirit. It did not matter to Jacky if he failed to wake one morning. Nor did it matter if he was not found and simply became part of the earth. He thought about his friends, Craig and Irene Anderson. They would wait for him to return. When he didn't, they would write to his daughter in Colorado. She would phone her brother in England. One or the other would make the trip to Australia. Craig and Irene would meet them. It would all be taken care of. There might be some tears and maybe a memorial in good time. That was life and life was harsh out here.

It became a little easier to make the best of the surroundings, having decided to make camp. Right where they were was about as good as it was going to get without a long march first. There were tough grasses all about them that had shot with the rains, but they were on a slight rise and Jacky could see the soft lines of sand that marked the flow of water down and away from them. They should not end up in a pool of water if it rained, and the clouds were threatening and the heat made a promise. Jacky hoped it would rain, for they were short on water. The worst part for him was that he would have to do without a billy of tea, needing to save the fresh water for the child. Jacky set about fashioning a tent from the blue sun tarpaulin he had bought in the tiny general store at Biddinburra. It wasn't a necessity as it was not waterproof but it would stop any breezes from making the child more uncomfortable, would deflect much of the water if it rained, and serve as a signal to any searching aircraft that wandered over the area. It was difficult finding sufficient wood for a fire without leaving the girl alone for too long a time. He was concerned that she might waken and wander off in search of her parents again. He finally amassed enough sticks and other material for their needs. He found some rocks for a fireplace and built a small fire. It smelled faintly like rubbish burning. The only food he had now was some of the dried and smoked wallaby, and only a few packets of that. All of the extra food he bought in Biddinburra was gone. He eschewed

the wallaby for the delicious larded smallgoods from the Italian butcher. He did eat some of his own amateur product but there is a limit to how long tough, smoked meat remains appetising. He wondered if the child would be able to chew the sticks of meat. If there had been plenty of water, he would have stewed the meat until it became tender. He pulled a stick out of its wrapping and, with his knife, shaved strands of it off until it became a small mound of dubious black parings in the aluminium bowl that served as his only food dish. He thought about it for a moment and decided that she may be in need of salt. There was only the packet of Saxa brand sea salt he had bought for his own needs, and he sprinkled a small amount over the meat. He wondered how much longer he should let her sleep as he dragged everything under cover of the sun tarp and arranged the swag for her to sleep in that night. The rubbishy fire from long damp wood was very smoky and sent blue plumes a long way into the air. That was a bonus. It might act as a beacon if there were any search aircraft about. He stood examining the sky for any little black dots of movement. It was fruitless.

Jacky surveyed the area. It was barren as far as being a food source. There were no large animals here. They would return in the dry but for now they avoided the area. There was little food here for them either. The poor soil, leached of its minerals, and swampy with the wet was home to large patches of sundew that thrived in the baking sun, trapping insects for their mineral needs. Crouching scrub melaleuca and diseased looking acacia dotted the landscape on hummocks of wiry grass. The only residents here for the moment were deadly snakes, small rodents and other foragers. The skinks and lizards here were too small to be considered a worthwhile meal. He doubted that this foreign white child of refined tastes would be eager to eat the only bush tucker this forsaken place had on offer. He hoped it would rain again tonight. He was carrying sufficient water for his own needs but no more than that. He folded and clipped one edge of the sun tarp back on itself to act as a well in case it did rain. They needed water and he doubted that he could squeeze any out of these clays. The brilliant sun that made the landscape into a sauna and sent shimmering waves of air into the sky had breathed off any water that might weep into a small hole dug into the ground. He walked to where such an event looked most likely and scooped out a hole anyway. He waited but no run off filtered into the hole nor dampening of the soil. He hadn't expected it and wasn't particularly disappointed when it didn't happen and shrugged it off. He was going to need all of his bush skills and he irrationally resented the need for this extra effort. He didn't, of course, have any choice in the matter, as things were the way they were.

They were fortunate that the wet hadn't long petered out for the trees were still profligate and sending large amounts of moisture into the

atmosphere. They would be as stingy as a miser only weeks from now, turning their leaves edge on to the sun and drooping in the heat of the day, refusing to give up any moisture than that absolutely demanded of them. The leaves would narrow, turn grey green and display silver undersides to reflect the sun. The roots would develop a spongy mass of long filamentous fibres to extract scant molecules of water from the baking soil. It would host fungi along these fibres that helped to break down anything to give it nutrient. Even when leaves died, the tree would retain them, spots of red and orange against the green, to help protect other leaves from the probing rays of the powering sun while they manufactured sugars. Now they were in a state of lush growth and they were wasteful of the plentiful moisture. There were still several hours of hot afternoon left. Jacky rummaged in his swag and extracted a couple of large plastic bags. He bought a supply of these on his foray into Biddinburra. They had many practical uses and weighed little and took little space in his pack. He took three of these bags and walked to a small hummock on which acacia, though spindly and deformed, still sported a flourishing growth of new leaves along their branches. Jacky was slightly hesitant to step onto the hummock and into the knee-high entanglement of grasses. This was a place one could find snakes, even if one didn't want to. He thrashed the grass with his foot before stepping onto the hummock. He continued this until he reached the first tree. Hopefully, any snake tasting the air for rodents or frogs would feel his intrusion and decide to move off in the interest of its own safety. He tore off a piece of the wiry grass and slid the bag over a leafy branch of the tree. He then secured the open end tightly around the branch with the grass. The glasshouse effect would drive off moisture from the leaves. When the sun went down and the air cooled, it would condense and drain to the corner of the bag. It wouldn't be much. They would be lucky to get as much as a quarter of a mug. And that would contain any bugs that were making their home on the branch and its leaves. There would usually be several leaves as well. It would taste strongly of eucalyptus oil but it would be water and it would be lifesaving. The three bags, set on different trees should produce enough water for one good drink, if one didn't mind the taste. A full day in the sun might produce more than twice the amount but it would also distil more of the oils. It had to be balanced.

The girl was awake and exploring the makeshift tent when he returned. He was immensely relieved. He spoke to her in English. She replied in German. Both were quick to realise this was not going to be an easy relationship. She tried again.

*“Wie heißen Sie”?*



To Jacky it sounded like one word, veehighzensee, trilled in the soft, accented voice of this six-year-old. It was his turn. Visions of comic aliens demanding take me to your leader threatened to disrupt the very serious need to communicate with the child. He recalled those trauma filled days when he was the alien and tried, unsuccessfully, to draw on the experience. Nothing there gave him an edge to the immediate problem. He decided that they needed to know how to speak to each other and the simplest way to start communicating would be to establish their names. He thought about it for a moment more, and then did his very best. He put on his serious face. And unintentionally managed to look just as grave as a scarecrow of a man nearing his eighties could possibly look.

"Ish bin Jacky. Voss ist uh doo nam uh"?

The girl looked blank.

"Was"?

He tried it again with a little less gravity but with more of an accent, making sure to pronounce each letter in his best Hogan's Heroes style. She giggled. But she understood what he was trying to say.

"I am Inge".

That was something she had learned to say often on her visit, and Jacky would have felt taken advantage of to learn that she also understood, what is your name, little girl. At least they could call each other, though Jacky was slightly miffed when she giggled at his pronunciation attempts. Jacky was looking at her sunburn. It hadn't blistered but it still looked angry and very sore. Inge stoically ignored it and stood, staring at Jacky. He suddenly remembered the plate of meat and dived into the tent to retrieve it. He took the last piece of the meat and just tossed it on top of the shavings. He now took this and made a show of eating it and gave the dish to Inge. She looked for the moment as if she would prefer a dish of worms. She tentatively put a piece in her mouth. It was salty and that gave it a familiar taste and she began to chew it. She started to prattle on aimlessly in her language. She knew that Jacky did not understand her, and this was, though frustrating, of little matter. She was in the safety of an adult. All she needed now was to wait until they found her daddy. Jacky was trying very hard to make some sense of what she was saying, or at least to get some gist of an idea of what she was talking about. Consequently, he didn't notice that the meat had vanished until Inge put the dish down. He got out the billy and poured her another half mug of water. She drank it all. Apart from the redness of her skin and a slight hint of tiredness about her eyes, she looked to be

in fine condition. What amazed him most was how clean she looked. Her hair needed brushing but it looked as if it was recently combed. He remembered the snowy white look of her cotton singlet before he put her dress back on. Her face, though showing signs of her perspiration, was not smeared with dirt. Even her bare feet in the expensive looking shoes didn't look dusty. He wondered how she managed it.

The greasy, smelly smoke from the fire, following some edict that applies to every campfire, began to drift in their direction, irritating their eyes and making breathing difficult. They both moved to the other side of the fire. It found them again and forced another move back to their original position. Jacky studied the sky. It may not rain after all, he thought, and congratulated himself on his foresight of the plastic bags. Jacky was hungry. Mostly though, he wanted a brew of tea. What did Inge want? The sun was now at the tops of the trees, painting a golden halo around their silhouette as it continued sinking below the horizon. Night sounds were starting. A large bird, just a soft shape, swooped grandly from a tree and disappeared. Jacky, using hand signs and finger pointing, explained to Inge where she was to sleep. She provided the word, *nachtruhe*. He cut up some more of the smoked wallaby for Inge, resisting the urge to ease his own hunger. He carefully sniffed each of the remaining five packets of meat making certain they had not gone rancid. He opened each packet and felt the meat for sliminess but they all were dry and smelled meaty and tempting. Salmonella poisoning, this far from help, was probably a death sentence. He was fairly confident in his own body's ability to fight off encroaching bacteria, but he was quite concerned about Inge. It would be bad form to have her die while in his care, having rescued her, as in his perception. He wasn't sure he wanted the responsibility. He gave her a last drink of water. There was now only slightly more than a good mugful left in the billy. It suddenly occurred to him that she should go to the toilet before going to bed. If she woke during the night and went off, she could get lost again. He had absolutely no way of conveying the idea and decided he would just have to make certain he woke up as often as she stirred. He wondered if his own kids were this much of a problem. He sat next to the fire, throwing small sticks on to it to keep it burning. The wood was not making many coals and the heat could only be felt when the flames bent over in his direction. He tried to conceive a plan for getting this little girl back to her parents. He then remembered his earlier fear that they too were lost out here and may have already died. What would become of Inge? He dozed staring at the fire and awoke with a start as his body slumped. He had better go to bed. It was going to be a challenging day tomorrow. He made certain the fire was secure and crawled under the sun tarp next to his swag. The single blanket he allotted himself was hardly pulled over his shoulders before he fell asleep again.

## CHAPTER 28

### *Thirsty*

He never knew if Inge woke during the night and crawled out to relieve herself. He slept until the first threads of dawn began to sew the hem of a new day to the remnant of a passing night. He was befuddled and uncertain and it took him a while before he was able to get his bearings and figure out where he was. That was happening frequently of late. Inge was still asleep, or at least a large lump he assumed was Inge was still asleep in the swag. It was still too dark to see. He didn't know about Inge, but he definitely needed to crawl out to relieve himself. He inched out of the makeshift tent. The fire was cold and smelled dank. He went some paces away from the camp and made his toilet. The sky overhead was still dark, possibly with cloud, but the damp air was warm, contrary to his concerns. He gathered some sticks from around his camp and broke small bits off for kindling to manufacture a small fire. It was pointless. He had no food to cook and no water to boil in his billy. It was unnecessary for warmth but it was a ritual. And Jacky liked ritual, so he stuck by it. Besides, there was something comforting in a campfire. Daylight suddenly appeared, silvery and shadowless. Then the rays of the sun began to wash gold over the edges of silver, and colour emerged from even the shadows. He was growing concerned about Inge. He was torn between letting her sleep to full recovery and waking her up to make sure she was all right. His concern won out and he reached under the sun tarp to fasten on her foot and shake it gently. She responded almost instantly with a sudden delighted chattering in German that continued on into a virtual babble. Inge was obviously a morning person. Jacky went back to the fire and began to feed it more bits of inflammables. Some time passed and Inge still hadn't appeared so he peeked in to see what she was doing. She was seated in her underpants and singlet and struggling with her shoes. Inge's shorts and dress were folded neatly and stowed at the top of the swag. Still chattering, she won her battle with the shoes and crawled out of the tent. She turned to Jacky, said something he had no hope of understanding and pointed to a few bushes a few metres away. Without waiting for a response, she took off, almost running, and disappeared behind the shrub. Jacky's day became much, much brighter. He was sorry for her parents though, for if they were still alive they would be at their wit's end for the loss of this treasure. They would, he was certain, be inconsolable. He needed to get her home. She called out from behind the bushes then appeared, almost skipping, to hasten in to the tent. She came out soon after, wearing her shorts and her dress. She walked over to Jacky and turned around. Jacky was still seated but he could see that she was unable, or reluctant, to do up the three white buttons at the top of the dress. Obviously, he was expected to do it. She waited in a

pose that only very young girls can adopt. They appear to be standing patiently, but are in fact demanding immediate attention at the same time, and all without a look on their face or the aid of a single word. Jacky knew this pose from many years before and still retained the knowledge of the folly of non-compliance. He reached up and fastened the buttons.

Jacky was continually obliged to reassess things. To his consternation, it seemed that being lost in the Australian bush and separated from her parents simply didn't faze Inge. She appeared as if she was on a holiday camping trip and enjoying herself immensely. He would have discovered that Inge, on the other hand, had they been able to converse, was indeed worried about her parents but she felt totally safe with this strange, black man. She knew that he would find them for her so she happily put all her trust and faith in him. She just hoped it wouldn't take him too long. Jacky stood to study the sky for aircraft. Still nothing. He trekked to the hummock to retrieve the plastic bags and was pleased to see, incredibly, almost half a cupful in one of them. He carried them back to camp and drained them into a pannikin. He used his fingers to sieve the water to keep out the leaves and tiny insects. He thought about it for a while, then took some of the dried wallaby from the pack and sliced a small chunk into the pannikin as well, which brought the level of water threateningly close to spilling over. He tasted it to reduce the level and found it not unpleasant if a little medicinal. It was certainly potable. He placed it next to the fire to warm, hopefully to make some sort of a broth. He would offer this to Inge. A warm drink in the morning is always a good thing. He could finish it off if she didn't like it, as he suspected she wouldn't. God knows he needed a warm drink of a morning. Inge watched Jacky performing this elaborate procedure. She watched the mug until it began to show signs of steam drifting off the surface. She assumed this was the intention and looked patiently to Jacky to see what his next move was going to be. Jacky saw her look at him and then back to the pannikin. He looked at the pannikin. It was showing signs of warming but wasn't coloured from the meat as he hoped it might be. He stirred it with a stick but that made little difference. Inge watched his every move as if she would be expected to copy it herself. Jacky tested the pannikin to make sure it wasn't too hot from the fire and handed it to Inge. She took it, sniffed at it, tasted it and made a face but drank it all in slow sips. When it was empty she reached to the bottom of the mug and recovered the chunk of meat and ate that as well. It did not taste good at all but it was, Inge assumed, breakfast. And she ate it dutifully. Jacky watched her, bemused. She even ate the piece of wallaby he cut off into the pannikin. He wasn't certain of his feelings. He was rather proud of her but that was tinged with his own slight disappointment. He was looking forward to the warm drink himself.

Aircraft should have been up at first light and searching. He had not yet heard the drone of a fixed-wing aircraft much less the thudding of a helicopter. That probably meant that no search was underway. That probably meant no one had raised the alarm. That probably meant that Inge's parents were dead. Jacky faced the practicality of the situation. He tentatively decided the night before to backtrack from where he first found Inge's shoeprint to hopefully find her parents. Presumably they too were lost and wandering aimlessly out here. It would be easier to guide them all to safety. That was the plan. Now though, he was having his doubts. He kept arguing with himself over the likelihood her parents were still alive. That assumption was finally discarded. Without evidence of a search underway in reasonable weather conditions, then it could only be the result of no alarm being raised. That line of thought inevitably led to the death theory. His, and therefore Inge's best course of action was to draw a straight line to water, food and civilisation. Jacky, who was unconcerned about the possibility of dying out here was now almost frantic that he might do so. That would be a death sentence for Inge as well. That would be unforgivable. He had to take her back to safety if his life was to have had any meaning at all to the spirits of the Dreaming. He thought back to the skulls of his ancestors in the cave in the valley of the lakes and silently asked them for help. He asked Mary to help him. He asked God to help him. He made promises he had no intention of fulfilling for he could not do so but he felt a bargain was necessary. It suddenly occurred to Jacky that he wasn't dead yet and he had better get a move on before the inevitable eventuality became a reality. He scuffed out the fire and took down the makeshift tent. Inge tried her best to help. She was more of a hindrance but it kept a very worried Jacky amused and smiling.

They set out in the same northeasterly direction Jacky was travelling the day before when he spotted the anomaly of the scuffmark. His clay roadmap indicated a series of hills due east of his position. He wanted to skirt these because he was growing very weary and doubted his ability to climb them. He noted that some of the symbols used to denote the same feature were slightly modified from one to the next when he copied the clay disc. He originally assumed that this was of little significance but chose to copy them faithfully. He was pleased he had. He found that some hills, for instance, were steeper or more abrupt, and the symbol was altered to reflect this. The changed symbols reflected changed conditions. The symbol for the hills to the east showed that they were abrupt and many and would be hard to climb. He guessed they would be part of the rugged range eventually leading up to Mount Mulligan. Inge sometimes broke trail, ranging out far ahead of him as he lagged trying to push himself over uneven ground. At other times she trailed him, wandering disturbingly far behind. She slowed their progress but only because she was smaller and slower. Other than that she seemed

indefatigable and impervious to her own discomfort. Jacky examined her before setting out and was impressed that her sunburn, though deeply red, didn't seem quite so raw. She winced at times as she attempted to scratch herself for some fancied itch and ignited the flame of the sunburn. He administered another Panadol tablet with a sip of water. All the water they had left would be needed for her. And it would need to keep until late in the day after a full march. He doubted she would be up to it and wondered how much he would have to drive her along. He was still hoping for signs of a search and rescue operation. That would be their best hope. That would be Inge's best chance of survival.

At noon he stopped in the shade of some scrubby trees. Inge looked as weary as he knew he felt. He was desperately thirsty and could feel the effects of dehydration on his body. He poured her a mouthful of water from the last of the billy. There would be another mouthful, maybe two, at dark. He would then need to find some way to not only ease his own thirst, but that of poor Inge as well. She did not complain. He was thankful for that and marvelled at her temper. He threw caution to the wind and carved up some more of the wallaby for her. The chewing would ease the wooliness of her mouth and add to her strength. He needed to take on some fuel as well. He scanned the sky for small dots that might spell salvation. Unless the dots were painted bright blue, they were not there. Inge chewed the meat with some degree of relish. This batch was one Jacky larded with the fat from the wallaby and rolled in a peppery herb from the forest. The meat must have been marinated as well for there was a sweet and fruity aftertaste. Overall, it was quite good. He and Inge were swapping words for most of the morning and Jacky now knew German words for several objects. Inge innocently adopted some of Jacky's colourful English as well. He tripped earlier in the day when his foot caught in a tangle of grass and he was thrown off balance because of the heavy pack. He ventured an Australian colloquial two-word comment. Inge repeated it later when she was scratched on the leg by a stick she had not seen in time to avoid. Jacky didn't quite recognise the expression in her accented version but he knew it by the gusto with which she spoke it. He felt a little guilty and hoped it would not remain in her vocabulary. Otherwise it was amusing and endeared her even more to him. It was a long time since he experienced the delights of having a small child around to fill his life. Jacky was just about to get underway again, when he noticed that Inge had fallen asleep. He was about to give her a shake, then decided to have an hour's nap as well. Maybe something would happen to make their situation a little less precarious. He was almost gone before he closed his eyes.

He awoke to the prodding of Inge checking him out as he slept. His watch was in a pocket in the swag. He put it there again some weeks ago because it seemed heavy and felt so loose around his now skinny wrist

that he was afraid he might drop it somewhere. It was a gift from Mary and he did not want to lose it. He looked up and determined that less than an hour had drifted by. He again felt a little befuddled and reluctant but stood and prepared to regain the march. Only a few steps into it though, and he felt that he was revitalised. Inge looked as if she had slept for an entire night and was as annoyingly chatty as a parrot. Late in the afternoon, the vegetation began to change. There were fewer trees and woody shrubs replaced these. Some unripe wild passionfruit grew in the folds of soil. Sheets of pigface grew in patches in full sun. Jacky stopped and pulled out a plastic bag from the swag, watched with curious solemnity by Inge. He gathered the small pale yellow berries from the passionfruit and handfuls of the pigface and stowed them in the bag. He continued to do this whenever he found any succulent item along their path. Inge looked at him frequently as he did so but declined any comment. She tasted a few of the things that he gathered but spat as the bitter juices reached her tongue. She now became more curious about what he was doing, but, not knowing how to ask him, simply watched and waited and helped to pick the same things that Jacky did and stuffed them into the bag also. They moved in a plodding fashion over the grey clays. They stopped once as a large black snake made its way to safety ahead of them. Jacky considered despatching the snake and making it the topic of their evening meal but was reluctant to tempt fate. The snake was very venomous and very quick and very aggressive. Inge spied a small plant with hard blue berries. Blue it would seem was a favourite colour of hers and she was immediately attracted to it and popped one into her mouth.

*“Inge. Nein”.*

Jacky bellowed, as best he could with his dry throat, and made spitting gestures. She had not bitten the berry yet but obeyed instantly and was saved from its tongue-numbing poison. Jacky wondered why his own children had not been so ready to obey his instructions. He rewarded Inge with a smile.

*“Gut. Gut”.*

This virtually exhausted his store of impromptu German.

Jacky struggled along fighting his thirst. His movements became clumsy with dehydration and thinking clearly was a chore of some magnitude. He was having trouble hanging on to the plastic bag half full of succulent vegetation. Inge wandered close and dragged it out of his grasp and carried it for almost half an hour before he could see it was straining her. He took it back and forced himself to awareness. He also began to find more things to put in the bag until it was full. He then crammed things

down by the simple expedient of sitting on the bag thus making room for more. It was very difficult to carry now but he made the effort needed to do so. Finally, about three in the afternoon by his calculation, he knew he needed rest. He could go no further. He looked at Inge. They both needed rest and Inge needed water. Why she hadn't been crying and pestering him, he had no idea. Her stoicism astounded him and he revised an earlier calculation as to how long she would have survived had he not happened along. He would begin looking for a suitable campsite for the night. He found the best he was going to and stopped when no more than two hours of daylight remained. Inge was in one of her lagging far behind modes but slowly made her way to where Jacky was sitting fully exhausted by his effort and his dehydration. She collapsed along side of him and took off her shoes. She dumped sand and grit from them both. It must have been extremely uncomfortable and her feet must be very sore. He reached over and took a tiny foot into his hands and rubbed it despite his own weariness. Then he took the other and did the same. Inge managed to look grateful, and to Jacky's consternation, she still looked as clean as she had when they began in the morning. She sat with both legs stuck out in front of her then dragged one foot up and over her other knee so far that she could see the sole of her foot. She then massaged the foot herself. She did the same to the other. Jacky wished he were supple enough to do the same.

*"Durst haben".*

Inge's tiny voice sounded to Jacky like, thirst, and he found the water for her and poured a very small mouthful into the pannikin. She drank it noisily sounding like a child sucking the last drops of a milkshake through a straw in a tall glass. He waited another five minutes before giving her a second small mouthful. That left another very small mouthful for her later before bed. Now they were in trouble. It was hard to move and hard to think but Jacky forced himself to find enough material for a fire before tying the sun tarp between two bushes to make a tent. He lit the fire and fed it some woody material that probably wouldn't burn for very long. But enough of it would eventually form a bed of ash to hold the heat and he could put the few pieces of wood he could find on to it. He laid two stones on either side as a pedestal for the billy. He poured the remaining gulp of water into the dish to give to Inge later and filled the billy from the plastic bag with the succulent plants and berries he gathered all afternoon. He squashed all of these to a paste and added more and squashed that also. When the billy was almost full of the sauce from the squashed plants, he worked the empty pannikin into the sauce and put it on the fire to boil. He spread the plastic bag flat above the billy spearing the corners in place. He placed a heavy stone on top of the plastic directly over the pannikin so that the bag drooped into the mouth of the pannikin. Jacky kept feeding the fire



as the contents of the billy steamed. The steam was trapped against the plastic and as it condensed, it ran down to drip off the bottom of the stone, the lowest point, and into the pannikin. It was time consuming and he needed to make certain the pannikin didn't tip over. He also needed to make certain that not too much water vapour was lost away from the underside of the plastic, by adjusting how hard his mixture boiled. The mixture itself smelled raw and green. He was tempted to try it for taste but he wasn't sure if that was his muddy brain talking or a reasonable suggestion. He decided to eat the smoked wallaby instead. He and Inge sat side by side next to the fire. He would have liked to listen to her thoughts. Her animation of the morning was gone now and she had, he saw with a large measure of pity and sorrow, been crying. He didn't know whether she cried with pain, exhaustion, thirst, hunger or the loss of her parents, or just life in general. But he knew exactly how she felt. He admired her bravery and was honoured to meet this remarkable young girl. He worried for her parents and their grief, and if, as he now suspected, they were already dead, then he grieved for the child. They shared sticks of the meat, which Inge ate in a quiet and detached fashion. She wanted to find her parents. She was not comfortable and she wanted desperately to be hugged by her mother and to sit in her father's lap while he sang silly songs to her. She also needed to go to the toilet and there was no place that looked safe or acceptable and she couldn't talk to the man sitting beside her. She felt very much alone. She cried.

The mixture in the billy was scorching. The smell was unpleasant and Jacky knew there was little moisture left in that batch. He took it off the fire and fished out the pannikin, carefully because it was very hot. The heat of the pulp brought the water in the pannikin to the boil as well and Jacky had to wait until it cooled sufficiently to let him sample it. He dumped the residue of the mixture onto the ground and filled the billy again with the balance of the vegetable material and stirred it into pulp. The water in the pannikin was cool enough to investigate by that time. It smelled a little like lettuce and tasted slightly bitter, but it was wet and warm, and would help assuage his thirst. The pannikin was almost full and this pleased him no end. Inge sat watching him without complaint. He drank half of the pannikin and poured the water from the dish into it and gave it to Inge. She gratefully drank it down. Jacky then set up his apparatus again to make a second cup of much needed water. He didn't know what they would do in the morning. It might be possible to get sufficient moisture from the overnight dew on the plants and bushes by dragging a brush of grass over their leaves and sucking off the water that adhered to the brush. It was time consuming and not very rewarding, but it was water, and water was needed. Jacky again shared the mug with Inge when the second batch of pulp had given up all its water into the vapour. It was bitter for her as well and she didn't like it but she was

still thirsty and the man who gave it to her was an adult and her friend. She drank her share to the last drop. They crawled gratefully into the tent. Inge was still barefoot. She carefully removed her dress and shorts and folded them up neatly. Jacky thought he saw her in quiet meditation for a moment, as if saying her prayers. If so, maybe this was the source of her strength. His heart went out to her. He did remember something else in German after all.

*“Gute Nacht, Inge”.*

He distinctly heard her giggle before she replied. The morning was again bright and clear. Jacky woke to find Inge curled up next to him, using him for a pillow. He carefully rolled over to see why she had left her bed to discover she had moved it all over to his side and seemed content to cuddle next to him. She suddenly opened her eyes, clear and bright, and smiled at him, then closed them and drifted off to sleep again. Jacky desperately needed to relieve himself but went back to sleep despite it being already daylight. He felt her movement a short while later. He rolled over and looked. She was once again putting on her shoes. This time, she was fully dressed. He sat up and she began to prattle on in non-stop conversational German. Inge was definitely a morning person. He crawled out of the tent after her and found a decent place to relieve himself. Inge saw where he went and decided to find a place as well. They both arrived back at the makeshift tent. Jacky unwrapped some more of the dried meat and Inge put a look of disgust on her face before taking enough for a hearty breakfast. She wondered about water, though she was not overly thirsty at this point, and where he was going to get it from this time. Jacky scanned the skies again but did not expect to see any sign of a search aircraft. They were walking in the opposite direction to where the search would be happening and the chances of them swinging this way soon should be remote. Jacky looked around very carefully. He noted the vegetation. He drew the fall of the land in his mind. There were some plants growing here that never grew too far from a source of water. They were not the hardy plants of the interior. They needed frequent rain to flower, fruit and survive. He watched until he saw small birds. They too needed water and would not be far from it. He scanned the sky for the prevailing wind and found nothing of significance. Any breeze would be local. He watched the leaves to see which moved first in the trailing breeze. They were the ones in the line of the breeze. The breeze needed some temperature differential to propagate. There were only a few sources for that temperature differential. He could see no evidence of a large rock face that would hold the daytime temperatures and release them to the morning air. No plants here belonged to desert sands. There were no birds of the heavy forest calling in the distance. There had to be water. It would be downhill. He watched the breeze then decided the direction

and the easiest line to travel. Straight lines, though being the shortest distance, did not necessarily mean the fastest. The easiest was the fastest and the safest. He knew from the presence of the small seedeater birds that he would find a large amount of water before noon and knew too that he would find food there. Inge was animated and the sleep had done him no harm either. They would both survive. They packed up together. Inge tried to fold the sun tarp as she had seen Jacky do it the day before but none too successfully. Jacky patiently helped for her second attempt. She seldom stopped chattering. He seldom stopped smiling.

They had marched for more than an hour. He felt the difference in the air temperature and saw the beginning stands of timber. They were closer. Thirst was again a problem and dehydration was making it difficult to keep up the pace. Another hour passed and Inge doggedly, and now silently, kept up. Jacky felt it on the side of his face. The air was moving up cooler from the lower ground. As noon approached, he could smell the water and hear the sound of parrots. The grass was getting too thick to wade comfortably through and he pointed Inge up to the higher ground with a hand on her shoulder. The higher ground also gave a different view, and as they rounded the edge following a cattle trail, an absolute sign of water, they broke out into the open again with a view of a massive billabong below them. Jacky didn't know what Inge was expecting but she looked disappointed. She turned to look at him hopefully but Jacky had no idea what was on her mind and couldn't help. Inge felt that Jacky seemed less concerned and worried that morning. It made her hope that she would find her parents later that day. It lifted her spirits and she was eager to get underway. She wanted to speed up this process and tried to help with breaking camp. Jacky was smiling more and she was certain he knew where to find her daddy. She too noticed the change in the countryside as they walked. This was evidence to her that they were getting close to her parents. Jacky began to move faster the closer they got and she was almost forced to run to keep up at some places. She didn't mind because she was soon going to see her mother and father. She could feel it. Then Jacky pushed her up the hill and they found the pathway. She just knew that her parents would be up there. Then they came to the water. Jacky stopped. She didn't know why. Where were her parents? What was wrong? Were they lost? Didn't this man know where her parents were after all? Her parents were not here. She collapsed with disappointment.

Jacky began to walk towards the water. Inge, very reluctantly, followed. The setback of not finding her parents here was all consuming despite her thirst, and all that mattered. She followed almost in a sulk. The smell of the water and her body's need for it finally brought her disappointment to a manageable level. Jacky went about setting up

camp having slaked his thirst and monitoring Inge's intake so that she did not sicken herself. He made certain that they were not in the path of any animal likely to approach the watering hole. The next problem was food. He watched the water for a while and saw some large fish moving about in the shadow of the water lilies. He decided that he could spear at least one of those in a short time. He left Inge playing at the water's edge and went to find a long stick. It didn't take more than an hour to fashion a trident spear. It was modelled after one he used with some success at the lakes. Whatever spirit was looking after Inge had not deserted her. He was able to spear three large fish in less than ten minutes. Inge looked a little worried about it but hunkered to examine them for some time with obvious interest and tentatively poked her finger at one as an experiment. He quickly picked some worts and cresses. There was a grass growing near the edge of the water. He pulled some out and tasted the white bulbous stalk. It could have passed for lemon grass. Armed with these culinary delights he prepared lunch. Jacky was hungry and the smell of the frying fish was causing stomach pangs. Inge too was looking a little more than interested. He filleted the fish before cooking them and took the trouble to remove any bones. He wasn't quite certain if Inge would eat the fish but he didn't want any accidents with the bones getting stuck in her tiny throat. He needn't have worried about Inge not being prepared to eat. They sat there gorging themselves on the white flesh of the fillets of fish. He looked at Inge to see how she was doing. She looked over at him and grinned with a mouthful of fish.

*"Gut schmecken".*

Jacky didn't know what she said but he knew what she meant. He grinned right back. Jacky could smell himself and it was offensive. He got a change of clothes out of his swag. These had not been worn since they were laundered in Biddinburra and still smelled fresh and clean. He pulled out two bars of soap. One was a cake of laundry soap, the other bath soap. He was going to wash and he was going to have to find some way to explain to Inge that she too needed to bathe and that he needed to scrub all of their clothing. He decided to shave since there was all the water he wanted and he could use the billy to boil it up. He was eagerly looking forward to brushing his teeth. He would give Inge one of his brushes. Everything was about ready he guessed. All he needed now was to find a way to explain things to Inge. That wasn't necessary. He heard some splashing and turned to see Inge, clad only in her underpants running and splashing at the grassy water-covered verge chasing a brilliant blue dragonfly. He went further along to where the water was deeper and removed his clothing and slipped into the water as silently as a crocodile. And that thought sent his mind racing. He almost called for Inge to get out of the water. He lathered up with the soap in the deeper chilly water and quickly dried himself with a brisk

towelling action. He changed into his clean clothes and went to find Inge. She wasn't far from where she was playing earlier but was now sitting cross-legged in the shallow water simply amusing herself. Jacky was still a little hesitant about crocodiles and watched the water carefully for a while but saw nothing and thought about the size of the fish. Even freshwater crocs would keep the numbers of big fish down. His panic slowly subsided. He called Inge out of the water and gave her the bar of soap. He found her clothes and gathered them up and pointed to her underpants. She got the message and immediately divested herself of those, turned and ran happily back into the water to bathe with the soap. She also washed her hair, which Jacky wasn't certain was a good idea. Her deep sunburn of only two days earlier had become a milk chocolate brown. She looked absolutely none-the-worse for her ordeal and radiated health. Jacky, though pleased, was just a bit jealous. He found a clean football jersey for her to wear and called her in to towel off when he was convinced that what was left was tan and not dirt.

The water in the billy next to the fire was hot and he used some of it to shave. Inge hunkered to watch, fascinated. Her head moved with each stroke of the razor. Jacky had no mirror and was shaving by touch alone and he found this minute inspection by Inge a little discomfiting. He couldn't tell her to buzz off so decided to distract her. He rinsed and poured some fresh water into the pannikin and gave her a toothbrush and the toothpaste. She knew all about that as well and cheerfully scrubbed her mouth. He finished shaving and patted his face dry with the towel. Then he sat there watching her in the oversized Brisbane Broncos jersey that she somehow wore as if it were hers. Were all little girls this cute? Jacky couldn't remember. He spent some time in reverie thinking of his own daughter when she was this age. The house he and Mary built when they moved from Whitfield had a separate kids bathroom apart from the main guest bathroom. They had frequent guests from all parts of the country and even overseas. It was necessary to maintain a separate bath as the kids' bathroom was always filled with fancy soaps and bubble soaps and toys and a mound of towels. The bathtub had a shower curtain for when they eventually grew up. And they eventually grew up all too soon. He loved the times he played with his children in the bath. It was almost the only time he got to spend with them. They were, it seemed, always somewhere else or going somewhere else or just coming from somewhere else. And they always seemed to be with someone else. He was devastated when first his daughter then his son went to school in America, although Mary and he had discussed it at length and he had agreed it was the best thing to do, and the kids wanted to do it. Where had all the time gone? He was enormously proud of them, as he should have been considering their accomplishments but the promises that they would come home were never met. Opportunity

always got in the way. Then the years slipped past. Their accomplishments were rewarded with better jobs, more responsibility and families of their own. Jacky taught his daughter to ride a horse. She went on to gymkhanas and show jumping. Then she went with friends to school in America. She succeeded in brilliant fashion in everything she did, a legacy of her mother, Jacky supposed. She met and married her life's partner in a foreign country. She was always too busy to come home. Jacky had a memory of a young girl in a bathtub, blowing mounds of bath suds off her hands with a giggle and a smile that would break any father's heart. He taught his son to play baseball and that won him prestige and a chance to play in America. He took the chance because it came with a college of his choice. He earned everything good in his life. And his life was good. A summer of study in England led to a good job and a good wife. He loved learning and he loved history. His new job in an old country gave him both opportunities. His children would grow up to visit their father's birth home only twice. There was a welling of warmth behind Jacky's eyes as he watched Inge. He blinked it away and went off to do the laundry while there was still time for the clothes to dry.

Jacky sat by the late night fire smoking a cigarette made with almost the last of the tobacco he bought in Biddinburra. He knew that Inge must be worrying about finding her family again. He knew with absolute certainty that her parents, if alive, would be hopelessly devastated. He needed to get them together soon. He hoped he could. His biggest concern was the lack of searchers. They should be out in force but there was absolutely no sign of any ongoing search. He really wanted to know how Inge had become lost and where her parents were. Inge, clean, fed and physically untroubled except for that scratch on her leg, cried herself to sleep. She knew that it was still going to be a long time before the man found her daddy. She hoped they would not forget her and go home without her.

## **CHAPTER 29**

### ***Found***

Police Sergeant Charlie Boxall, known as, Boxhead, to his chums at primary school and, on occasion, behind his back by workmates, saw the white van off to the side of the road and decided to investigate. This was not a thoroughfare by any stretch of the imagination and to see another vehicle out here was of more than passing interest. He eased up behind it, noticing the curtaining over the rear window and the New South Wales license plate. The owner of the vehicle, a small grey-haired man in a neat, white, short-sleeved shirt, long trousers and a futuristic looking pair of sneakers on his feet, peered around the back of the vehicle on

hearing the noise. A lady, as small as the man and wearing sand-coloured cargo pants, safari blouse replete with cartridge holders over the pocket and matching futuristic sneakers joined him in peering around the back of the vehicle. This, presumably, was his wife. They both looked pleased, though slightly apprehensive to see the big police 4X4 pull in behind them. Charlie slid his bulky frame out from behind the driver's seat and reached back in for his hat. Clearly these people were part of the grey nomad brigade: retirees who sold up or gave it all to their kids and now spend their lives on a permanent tour of Australia. They would follow the sun until it finally set behind the gates of a retirement village or nursing home somewhere many kilometres and, if lucky, several years down the road. They both moved forward to meet him, wondering what rule they had managed to break. Charlie was quick to set them at ease.

"Good morning. I just saw you were pulled over and wanted to make sure there was nothing wrong. It's a bit of a long way from anywhere out here".

The response was instant, as Charlie knew it would be. Both faces beamed back smiles of relief. They were not in trouble. They had simply stopped for a tea break and to add a few more photographs with which to bore their children and friends. They took the opportunity to ask about road conditions and places to see and picnic. Charlie spent at least fifteen minutes drawing on their maps with his finger, pointing out items of interest, good and bad roads. They smiled and thanked him and Charlie got back into his own vehicle, pleased to have been of service. His own retirement was less than twelve years away. He was only just settled when the pair waved, climbed in to the van and cautiously eased out on to the road, being very careful to employ the turn indicator. Charlie smiled. He wondered why they were all so small looking. He wondered if he and Margie would look like that in twelve more years. They might retire sooner, actually. It would not be the grey nomad life for them. Charlie's parents, when they died, left their two sons a small inheritance. Charlie invested his share several years before in a large block of land when it came up for auction. It had once been a dairy farm, but it was marginal dairy country and the farmers couldn't keep it going to match resources against the big boys. It was a hard life on the land and the farmers' kids hadn't wanted to keep it on, so they sold up and moved out and went to live in the big smoke. Every year saw the rural life disappearing to broad-acre monoculture farms and mechanised harvests of plants and animals, more factory than farm. Charlie and Margie had discussed it time and again. They wanted a place to retire to but a place that could bring them in some money as well. They planned on building a small holiday resort with cabins for guests and activities for children. They wanted to take the old dairy farm back to an eco-

friendly wilderness state. They hoped to bring back the wildlife and some of the more rare plant species that had all but disappeared from the area. It was probably going to take a lot more money than their combined retirement payouts could contribute. Still, it was a dream. Who can put a price on dreams?

Charlie gave the van a good head start. He was planning on pulling off the road a few kilometres further on to finish his patrol but didn't want them to see the police car catching up to them and start to worry. Worried drivers sometimes become confused and confused drivers sometimes have unnecessary accidents. He caught the movement out of the side of his eye as he leaned forward to twist the key. The large diesel engine obediently rumbled to life. Charlie looked to see what the movement was as he slid the gear into first position. His fingers closed around the handbrake lever to release it but he was still watching where he thought he had seen movement. He dismissed it, checked his rear and side mirrors, flipped the turn indicator and smiled as he did so, and was just easing the clutch when he again caught the movement. He stopped and put the gear back into neutral. Maybe it was a bullock or a wallaby. Still, he sat there. Charlie was always an inquisitive man and he was content to wait. He saw it again. It was a person. What the heck was he doing way out here? It was a man and it looked like a local stockman or farmer but Charlie didn't recognise him and this wasn't anybody's property. No, there were two of them. A man and his son, maybe? Charlie shut down the engine, applied the handbrake and put the vehicle back in gear. The two figures were making for the road. They were passing behind scrub trees and anthills and kept disappearing from sight. Charlie fumbled to find his binoculars. He saw them now. It was an old man by the looks of him, skinny, dressed like a stockman, an Aborigine. He looked at the child. She was wearing a blue dress and something on her head. She was a bit too young to be his daughter. Charlie scanned the ground behind them to try to find the rest of the group. It was just a mob of Aborigines coming to town for supplies. He started to put the binoculars away again. He still hadn't seen anybody else. He waited. He scanned the area behind them again and saw nothing. He looked again at the pair. He was definitely an Aborigine. The girl looked to have bright blonde hair. There were many blonde-haired kids among the local mob but none quite like this. Charlie waited. The man would be close enough in a few minutes to clearly see the vehicle with POLICE in big letters down its side and the familiar blue and white chequered stripe. They would keep walking the line they were taking if it were just some Aboriginal family coming to town. They would veer away from the police car if it were something less innocent. Charlie looked at the clock mounted on the dashboard. He could wait a few more minutes.



He saw the man point at the vehicle. Charlie was alert and attentive now. The man veered towards the vehicle. Then he waved. Charlie had one last look through the glasses. He didn't recognise the man. Maybe there was some trouble and this man needed police help. Charlie put the glasses away, grabbed his hat and climbed out of the vehicle to show his uniform. He stood, looming, alongside the police car and waited to see the reaction of the man when he saw the uniform. He was definitely headed for the police car. Charlie was looking at the little girl. Blonde hair, blue dress. Blonde hair, blue dress. Charlie was trying to keep his anticipation in check. It wasn't reasonable that this was the girl of the search. How could she possibly be this far out of the area? Charlie was unable to stand there any longer and was forced to move forward to meet them. When they were within hailing distance, Charlie noticed the little girl reach up and grab hold of two fingers on the hand of the man and move in a little closer. She was obviously a little wary of the police sergeant. As he got close enough, Jacky reached out his hand.

"G'day, Sergeant, you wouldn't happen to speak German would you"?

Charlie took his hand and shook it warmly. He was trying to act natural but he was finding it hard to contain his delight.

"G'day, mate. If this is who I think it is, there's going to be a lot of people happy to see you".

He turned to Inge. He and Margie took a thirty-day European tour a few years back with some of the money from his inheritance and spent a few days in Bavaria.

*"Guten tag"*.

That just about exhausted his linguistic abilities.

Jacky adopted a bemused smile for he knew exactly what was going to happen next. Inge's eyes opened wide and her face lit up and she proceeded to let flow a torrent of words that seemed to fill the spaces between them. Charlie looked at Jacky for some help.

"I think she wants to know where her parents are, mate. I'm pretty sure she is expecting you to take her to meet them".

Charlie smiled his biggest smile used on little girls to appease them and retreated to the vehicle. Bugger me, thought Jacky, still bemused as he watched Charlie scrambling over the drainage ditch to the vehicle. Charlie opened the door to reach for the transceiver but had second thoughts. A lot of people like to use scanners tuned to the police

frequency and this was not something that should be broadcast without some forethought. He opened his cell phone and pushed the speed dial.

“Gayle, listen carefully. I need you to find me someone who speaks German and I want a doctor. I’m about three-quarters of an hour away, maybe more, but I want them waiting for me when I get there. Right? No, don’t tell the doctor anything other than I want him there. I want him to examine a little girl”.

There was silence for a moment as the other person was apparently asking another question, having put German and little girl together.

“I think it might be. A blacktracker just brought her in. She’s fine. In fact she looks like she just came home from school. But listen, Gayle, I don’t want a word to anyone about this. I’m serious, Gayle, if this gets out and we are wrong it’s going to blow up in our faces. We’ve got to be really clever about this. Oh, listen, I also need you to find out who is in charge of the search at Chillagoe and get me a contact number for him. I’m sure there is a protocol that should be followed for all this, and it might start with him”.

There was silence for a few moments as Gayle obviously asked if the Chillagoe police could be advised of the possibility that the child had been found.

“No, not a word, pretend we’re just trying to contact him for some information. I’ll call him as soon as we can confirm this girl is the one he’s looking for. Hey, Gayle? Not a bloody word or I’ll hang you out to dry”.

With that, he closed the phone and turned to look at Jacky who had arrived in time to hear the remark about the blacktracker. Charlie saw that Jacky had taken the well-used swag off his back. He looked a whole lot older than he did when he had it on. Jacky stuck out his hand again.

“I’m Jacky Wonga, mate. This is Inge. You’re the only one we don’t know”.

Charlie’s mind was racing a mile a minute. He needed to make sure he covered all the bases on this because there were going to be some bright lights shone on any dark corners. Departmental investigations and other enquiries seemed to be the order of the day for any high profile news story that could be twisted by the media to gain a few more readers or viewers. It was like living under a microscope. He pushed it away for the moment. He thought he had given the man his name. Then Charlie wondered if he had forgotten his name badge and looked down to see if it

was pinned above the right hand shirt pocket. It was but it was too hard to read for Jacky's poor eyes. He took Jacky's hand again.

"Oh sorry, Mr Wonga, I'm Sergeant Charles Boxall, Queensland Police Service".

He stuck out a hand to the girl.

"Hello, Inge".

She took his hand politely, but not without checking with Jacky first, Charlie noticed. Charlie opened the rear door and helped them inside. He threw Jacky's heavy swag into the back. He noticed the weight but forgot about it entirely as his mind raced back to the problems of handling this matter. It should have been easy, a phone call to the Chillagoe station to call off the search, good news, folks, we've found the missing girl, shouts, tears, pats on the back and photos in the paper. There were many questions going unanswered and unanswered questions didn't sit well with this particular policeman. First, though, it had to be kept under wraps until the investigation was absolutely complete. Not one facet could remain that wasn't examined and if word got out, it would all be taken out of his hands before he dotted and crossed the necessary letters. And if something went wrong they would be just as quick to turn around and point the finger at him. He really had to think this thing through every single step of the way. Part of the problem was the girl's condition. It really was as if she had just come home from school, as he had told, Gayle. Maybe this wasn't the missing girl, and to get the parents' hopes up would be cruel, and he would be pilloried if it leaked out before he had been able to verify it. The blonde hair, blue dress and only speaking German was an unlikely coincidence as well. That led to some other speculation. And if she hadn't been lost, then what was she? And what was she doing with the man who brought her in? Charlie was very much aware that he was on his own out here, unlike a larger centre where several people could make decisions and take the blame if something went wrong. And his career was made or broken by each decision he made. This balancing act had to be done very cleverly.

"Where are her parents"?

Jacky spoke quietly. He didn't want Inge to guess what they were talking about. Charlie was dragged out of his mental race momentarily when Jacky spoke. It took him a couple of more seconds to work out what he had said.

"I'm not sure, I think they are in Townsville".

Charlie stayed with the conversation, for he could see in the rear view mirror that Jacky was about to ask another question.

“So, they’re okay then”?

This conversation wasn’t making much sense to Charlie. This Wonga bloke should know about the girl’s parents. He was one of the searchers, wasn’t he? And there is the other matter about the condition of the girl. Neither of them looked like they had just returned from the bush. Charlie was getting nervously suspicious that something wasn’t adding up. Jacky noticed early in his relationship with Inge that she was fastidious. He watched her folding her clothes neatly each night in spite of exhaustion before she slid into the swag. He dug out his comb the day she first washed her hair at the billabong with the intention of combing it for her. She took it from his hand with delight and a string of comment to spend considerable time combing her own hair while she chatted away as if Jacky understood every word. She even had the curl toss down pat. He never actually got the comb back from her. It had simply been commandeered. Nor would he ever get it back and that, somehow, was pleasing. Jacky knew he would walk out to civilisation the next day when he and Inge made camp the afternoon before. He wanted it to be in the morning as Inge, to his mind, was definitely a morning person and if there was to be some very bad news about her parents that would be the time to break it to her. She sensed his relief and became certain she would see her parents the next day. They were camped by one of the many creeks that spotted this area. Jacky wondered why the gods didn’t take some of these and put them in places where they were really needed. A couple of days ago it was touch and go as regards water and now they had to find ways to get around the damned stuff. They made camp early and Jacky decided to bathe and shave and maybe borrow his comb from Inge before they walked out. Inge immediately started to unbuckle her shoes when she saw him pulling the bar of soap from the swag. It would be bath time for Inge as well. Inge also viewed the swag with a certain proprietary interest. It was she who stowed the football jersey she wore as a nightdress and as casual wear around camp, in the swag each morning and dragged it out as the occasion warranted. She dove into the swag and recovered it now. She removed her dress and singlet and donned the jersey before modestly removing shorts and underpants. She simply bundled all of these into Jacky’s arms as if he were the laundry maid. She then took the soap and the only clean towel and made for the creek bank. Bugger me, thought Jacky as he dug out the bar of laundry soap. His only consolation was that he knew the water would be bloody cold. Still, his smile was huge as he thought about her. He knew quite a bit about fastidious young girls. He was father to one. Inge was more animated than usual the next morning.

She carefully unfolded her newly washed clothes and dressed and primed and combed her hair. Jacky had yet to find where she stowed the comb. He would never see it, and then it would be in her hand. He watched her excited behaviour and realised that she too knew they were walking out, hence the need to look her best. He hoped, no prayed, she would not be devastated by whatever news awaited her about her mom and dad. Together they broke camp and when he had shrugged himself into the harness of the heavy swag, she reached up and took his hand and they began the last few hours of their trek.

Charlie Boxall decided to forestall any further conversation until they were back at the station with witnesses to what was asked and what was replied. He still had to answer Jacky's question though.

"They were pretty much the worse for wear when found, of course, and needed to go to hospital"

Unlike their daughter, Charlie said to himself.

"Nothing serious from what I heard. Just routine and precautionary I imagine".

He made a big show of paying attention to his driving to stop the next questions from Jacky. He watched Jacky from the mirror when he said it, to gauge his reaction. Whatever he expected, he didn't find. Perceptive Jacky saw the cop becoming a cop. He had a lot of questions of his own. They could wait because Inge was getting closer to her mom and dad, and that was the most important thing here. He leaned back into the comfortable seat feeling pleased for Inge. Charlie kept glancing at Inge in the mirror. Where had she been for the last six days? It sure as hell wasn't lost in the bush, wherever she was. Look at her. He thought back to his earlier remark to Gayle, like she had just come home from school. That's exactly what she looked like. Her clothes were clean and undamaged. She was clean and undamaged. Something just wasn't right here, and he needed to find out what before he lost control of it all to the media. He wasn't happy the way Inge kept sitting close to that Wonga bloke. She kept looking at him and smiling like he was her grandfather and they were on an outing that she was looking forward to. Some things just weren't adding up. If Charlie had anything going for him at all, it was experience. He spent very little time at a desk, only as much as absolutely required of him. The rest of his working day was in the field. He was good at his job. He knew volumes about people and very few things that people got up to surprised him anymore. Unfortunately, this tended to make Charlie a little cynical and he was reluctant to accept anything at face value. This made him a good cop but a bad judge of character. The closer he got to retirement, the better

he got at doing it all by the book. He was happy being a sergeant. Higher rank meant higher pay but it also meant more desk time and a further fall down the ladder when things went wrong. Charlie was content with the status quo, thank you very much. Charlie was pleased that Jacky kept silent for the rest of the trip. He was no further to figuring any of this out and he sure as hell didn't want to be answering questions that could be mentioned at a court hearing later, or even an in-house enquiry.

Charlie slowed down as he approached the station. He needed to be absolutely certain that there wasn't going to be a brass band out in front waiting for his vehicle to roll up. Everything seemed as normal. Nothing moved in the street. Only one person could be seen and he was down by the pub. He drove around the back and parked. It all was quiet. Maybe he had pulled it off. He opened the back of the vehicle and dragged out Jacky's swag before opening the doors to the rear seats. He let them lead the way to the back door, unlocked it and herded them in. There was a man and a woman seated on the wooden bench at the front of the shop by the reception desk. He caught Gayle's eye and motioned her with his head to join him in the office that was used, among other things, as an interview room. Inge was looking decidedly unsure of proceedings and showing some signs of reluctance. Her parents weren't here, obviously. She kept pushing close to Jacky. Charlie pulled in another chair from the other room and tried to give the impression that everything was quite routine. He felt it was anything but that. He asked Gayle to send in the interpreter and the doctor. She went out briefly and returned with the two in tow. Charlie smiled, rather woodenly, but perhaps understandably what with all that was going on in his mind.

The woman was obviously trained to work with children. Charlie didn't know who she was and he thought he knew everyone from this area but he could see that she knew how to handle children. He guessed she was about forty. Her hair was greying in long streaks that she tied back in a neat ponytail. She was dressed in a neat white blouse and a grey skirt and looked every inch a schoolteacher. Charlie assumed she was, and that would account for her ability to seem non-threatening to this little girl. The first thing she did was to get down to Inge's level before she began to talk to her. Charlie felt that maybe he should have given her a list of questions to ask. Then he thought it would be best that he didn't ask her any questions if he decided he should interview Jacky Wonga. The doctor was standing there looking impatient and waiting for instruction. Charlie took him outside and explained that he wanted the doctor to examine the girl. She had supposedly; he almost used the word allegedly, been lost in the bush for almost a week. Charlie wanted to make certain that she was not suffering from her ordeal. The doctor looked at Charlie as if he had lost the plot.

“Okay. She’s fine”.

Charlie looked startled.

“I want you to examine her”.

The doctor stood a little straighter.

“I already did. Look at her. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with her. You didn’t need me to tell you that”.

That last remark was added as an afterthought and voiced rather suspiciously.

Charlie was just slightly non-plussed. He was trying to understand the situation and every line of inquiry led to some unpleasant thoughts. He was very concerned that the little girl had been with this Wonga bloke since becoming lost, if that was what had happened to her. He had to eliminate some scenarios and this was not going well at all. He looked at the doctor and took a new tack. He was wishing there were a policewoman attached to the station that he could palm this off to. Finally, with as much dignity and delicacy as he could manage, he blurted it out.

“I was hoping you could also tell me if she was, well, uh, intact”.

The doctor stood there looking hard and coldly at Charlie. Charlie was making this very hard going for himself. He quietly pointed out to the doctor that the girl hardly looked like she had spent any time in the bush let alone lost out there. Neither of her parents saw her disappear and suddenly she turns up days later in the company of this bloke many kilometres away. She may not have gotten lost at all, he pointed out. The, if you know what I mean, was inferred. The doctor digested the facts and the inference.

“I can’t do that. You would have to get permission from the parents for such an intrusive examination. And, unless you have some evidence that she has been tampered with, you can’t even ask me to perform such an examination”.

Charlie knew all about procedures but what he wanted now was answers and he wasn’t getting any from any source. He admitted defeat and asked the doctor to write a statement saying she didn’t need medical treatment. Then he cautioned him against saying anything to anybody

about the girl being here. The doctor quickly wrote out a statement, handed it to Charlie, and looked at him coldly again.

“I trust I can go now”?

Charlie felt this was definitely not going very well. He nodded compliance. When this was all over he was going to have to mend fences with the doctor. This was a very small town in a very remote area of almost nowhere and you couldn't afford to get anyone offside, much less someone with particular skills.

He could hear the interpreter and Inge conversing in the other room. Actually, what he could hear mostly was Inge who was talking almost non-stop. He went out to Gayle to ask her the name of the interpreter. It was Anna and she worked for the health clinic. Gayle gave him a strange look and he began to wonder what the doctor said to her before he left. He thought about things for a while. It was all getting away from him and he had better get it back under control. He was here for less than ten minutes and so far he had disappointed Inge, barked orders at Gayle, gotten the doctor offside and thinking he was strange, and this Wonga bloke was definitely getting his back up. He needed to appease a few people. He suddenly realised that he felt hungry and wondered why he hadn't asked Wonga and the girl if they were hungry or thirsty. Maybe, he gave himself the excuse, the weight of the swag the blackfella was carrying made it appear as if they had sufficient food. He gave Gayle a ten dollar note and asked if she would mind going to buy a couple of meat pies and a Coke from the snack bar across the road. He was going to give them to Jacky, but if he didn't want them, then he, Charlie, would have them. He went to Anna and took her aside to ask her to ask Inge if she was hungry or thirsty or had said anything of any suspicious nature. She wasn't, she hadn't, she just wanted the policeman to find her daddy. Things were getting worse. He sent Inge and Anna out of the room and sat across from Jacky.

“I meant to ask you earlier if you and the girl were alright, mate. I've just sent someone to get a couple of pies before this place turns into a circus. Where are you from, Mr Wonga”?

He was trying to make it seem casually conversational and a matter of routine, not as an interrogative.

“Cairns”

Charlie looked up as if interrupted.

“You're a blacktracker from Cairns”?



Jacky wished he had some tobacco. He looked around and saw all the signs forbidding smoking. He grimaced as he thought to himself that there was probably a place in town where an addict could get free drugs paid for with taxpayer dollars, yet a bloke wasn't allowed to light up an over-the-counter smoke anymore.

"No".

Charlie had a pen in his hand but nothing on which to write. He was reluctant to start making things official. He put the pen down. He looked at Jacky and was about to say something when Jacky cut across him.

"I'm not a blacktracker".

Now Charlie looked confused. If he wasn't a blacktracker then what was he doing with the girl, or for that matter, to the girl? Where did he find her or had he possibly just taken her? He wouldn't be able to ask Jacky too many questions before the need to also advise him of his rights became paramount. Once that was done then Charlie was committed. If he didn't do it all properly then he would be hung out to dry. If he made a mistake and this Wonga character was a hero then he would still be hung out to dry. Charlie didn't see much of an opening for himself. He might just be retiring a whole lot sooner than he and Margie had even considered. He was thinking about starting again as Gayle came in with the Coke and pies. This would give Charlie a chance to regroup. Charlie pushed the food over the table with an expansive grin and assured Jacky he would enjoy the pies. Jacky nodded and dumped them both out of their respective paper sacks. They smelled as good as they looked and they looked homemade. The owners of the Point Tribulation Café created the pies on their premises. They were costly to make and would not have been worthwhile except that two pubs in the district had standing orders for a daily supply for sale to their customers. Two other pubs were badgering the snack bar to supply them as well but the owners were reluctant because of the time involved. They left a busy restaurant down south to enjoy the relaxed life style of far north Queensland and found they were spending almost as much time at the barely profitable snack bar as they had been at the hugely profitable restaurant in Sydney. This was not the way a sea change was supposed to work. Still, it was interesting to note how often passing tourists would walk away after a meal discussing how good the simple, plain food of these outback towns was, compared to the pretentious, overpriced and unmemorable meals served down south. Jacky smiled affably at the police sergeant.

"Have you got a glass"?

It caught Charlie unprepared and he hardly bothered to conceal his sarcasm.

“You need a glass to drink your Coke”?

“Not for me, mate. It’s for Inge”.

Charlie had the decency to look a little abashed.

“Oh. She doesn’t want any. The interpreter asked her”.

Jacky remained smiling pleasantly.

“I gather you don’t have any kids, Sergeant”.

He squared up each pie on its own sack near the edge of the table. He took his knife from its holster on his belt and proceeded to cut each pie into quarters, watched all the while by Charlie. The pies, one lamb the other chicken, were chock full of meat, peas and carrots in thick, rich gravy. Jacky looked up.

“Have you got a plastic fork or something, Sergeant”?

Charlie would have argued Jacky’s assumption about children except for two points. The first was that Jacky was right. He and Margie never had kids, which bothered him only slightly. His brother in those early days lived across the street from him and Charlie played uncle to three boys and two girls that seemed to arrive one each year like spring vegetables. The second point was that Inge, across the hall with the interpreter, kept her eye on Jacky and could smell the pies. She wandered back into the interview room intent on joining the picnic and brushing her blonde hair with a hairbrush on loan from Anna. Charlie went and found a fork and a glass for Inge. He sat there and watched her devouring her share of both pies, drinking more than her share of the Coke and babbling happily away in German to Jacky, himself and Anna the interpreter. She, Anna, was presumably expected to do all the translating, if she could keep up with the voluble Inge. Charlie reassessed the situation and his own position. Inge was happy to be wherever this Wonga bloke was. And clearly, was not going to let him out of her sight. When the impromptu picnic was over and Inge went to wash her hands again, for Jacky had insisted on her washing them before eating, Charlie was ready to take a totally different tack. One thing puzzled him, though.

“Tell me. You’ve been out there in the bush for a week and suddenly you insist she wash her hands before eating. Isn’t that a bit strange”?

“There are no people out there. So there are no people germs to worry much about. Here, there’s lots of people and lots of people germs. It makes sense to worry about the germs here, especially in this place”.

That was perhaps the least laconic Jacky had been since meeting the sergeant. Charlie looked blank. He had never thought about that before. He actually wanted to go and wash his hands at that moment as well. Jacky leaned forward confidentially to lower his voice.

“Look, Sergeant, I told Inge you would take her to her mom and dad. She is expecting you to do that. I think everything else can wait until she has been hugged by her parents, don’t you’?

This was the second time Charlie looked blank. He wasn’t entirely certain whether he liked or disliked this old man sitting in front of him but he was certainly learning to respect him. Charlie got up and went to talk to Gayle. When he came back to the room he sat again and rested his hand on the phone. He shrugged.

“I’ve asked Gayle to put a call through to Chillagoe. It’s their operation”.

He picked up the receiver as it rang and he looked at Jacky and smiled. He put the phone to his ear.

“Inge Schumann wants to know when she can see her parents. Yeah, mate, she’s here and in good health. The doctor has just left. I don’t know. You’ll have to ask the bloke who found her, hang on”.

He passed the receiver to Jacky and grinned from ear to ear. He was off the hook.

## **CHAPTER 30**

### ***Reunion***

Inge’s mother was sitting on the edge of the bed in the ward at Townsville General Hospital. She was elegantly dressed wearing a neat pair of white slacks, a plum coloured blouse in a floral pattern of tropic blooms and a white jacket. She was barefooted but a pair of comfortable looking strappy sandals sat next to the bed. She was holding a balled-up tissue in her hand. The small wastebasket next to the table was half full with similar tissues. She was being discharged today. She only had to wait for the doctor to release her. She and Dieter would check into a hotel. Neither had wanted to make any plans. They were both too frightened of what making plans would signify. They could not wait forever of course

and as each day passed it was becoming less likely that Inge's body would ever be found. They would have to face it head-on and soon. She accepted that Inge was dead. She was made aware of that on the day she found her way back to the vehicle and told the men that it was four days since she last saw Inge. She saw the look that passed between them. Dieter had not been found at that point yet. She hadn't known that both of them were lost, thinking it was just she. Her hope was revived that Inge might be with her father. Tears built up again and she mopped her eyes with the wet ball of tissue. She knew for certain when they found Dieter, who believed that Inge had safely been with her mother. She accepted her death. What she couldn't accept was how she died. Every scenario she contrived was worse than the last. She simply hoped that her death was painless. She knew it couldn't have been though and pictured poor Inge, in her final moments, wondering why her mother wasn't coming for her. She sobbed again and needed more tissues. Grief-stricken hardly described her emotion. She tortured herself with every thought through every minute. She thought of the possibility of wild dogs, dingoes, tearing at the poor body. She pictured birds of prey picking her flesh, as she had watched the kites do to small animals killed at the roadside. She saw her broken body at the bottom of some cliff, waiting to die. She sobbed again. A nurse, checking the medication requirement of a patient several beds away, wondered how long it was until she could suggest another sedative for the distraught mother.

Esther looked up at the movement in the hallway. She recognised the woman reporter from the TV network that had simply taken over for her. Esther had nothing but her purse that she hastily recovered from the Toyota, and the clothes she was wearing when she was brought in. Everything else was still in the bogged vehicle. Dieter had no idea where his wallet was. He was in such a state of hopeless shock over Inge he couldn't think. He just wasn't sure. It may have been in the glove compartment of the Land Cruiser. They had no money other than the few notes and what was available on a credit card Esther carried, and no access to any until they were able to get out of hospital and make some arrangements. The newswoman was very sympathetic and said quietly and matter-of-factly her network would pick up the tab. Esther knew that it also meant exclusivity but this woman was kind and considerate so she was content to agree. Esther, in fact, did mention to the journalist about how kind she was. The journalist looked at her for some long moments before replying that her own daughter was three days older than Inge. She had, she said, some idea of what Esther was going through. So much so, that she now telephoned her daughter each day just to talk to her and to tell her that she loved her. Esther asked her about getting clothes. Those she was wearing when found were in bad shape and needed repair and cleansing. She couldn't very well go

shopping in a hospital gown. She managed a laugh when she said it but both knew it was a stage laugh only. Within hours the white pants, jacket, blouse, shoes and expensive underwear all arrived. There was also a small bottle of *Je Reviens* perfume. The perfume was a personal gift from the newswoman. A simple brown card said in a neat hand, "I understand". The clothing fit perfectly. She half expected the elegance because the journalist herself had exceptional dress sense, but was surprised at how she knew the size of everything. The newswoman, Joy Ackerman, dressed in charcoal grey slacks, a salmon-coloured blouse and a charcoal loose-fitting jacket, strode through the ward. Her makeup was immaculate and her hair as neat as if it were a wig. She had as much presence off camera as on. She joined Esther in sitting on the edge of the bed. The newswoman looked closely at her and simply raised her eyebrows in query. Esther reached across and squeezed her hand.

"I'll be okay. I just need to know".

Joy patted her hand in return.

"I've been told that your vehicle has been recovered and is on its way back. It will be in Cairns tomorrow. We have arranged for everything in the car to be packed up and couriered overnight to Townsville. We have you booked in to a rather nice resort hotel. I'm just going upstairs to speak with Dieter and make sure he's ready, then we can get you both out of here and made comfortable there. Okay"?

There was the small musical signature of the network's evening news programme emanating from Joy's side pocket. She gave a little apologetic smile to Esther and pulled out the mobile phone to read the text message: "Police have called press conference one hour from now. Unable to find out why or what so suspect maybe Schumann child. Call back your advice". Joy tried to remain expressionless as she digested the message. She knew that Esther would be watching her. She agreed with her office that it was likely the bad news Esther and Dieter, and even she were waiting for. She wondered if she should tell Esther. They both caught the flash of a light blue uniform shirt. Esther froze. Then a policewoman moved into view in the corridor. She did not look in Esther's direction. Joy, pre-warned, stood from where she was sitting on the bed, deciding to go and see what was happening. Then a policeman took a step forward and came into view also. Esther was growing cold. Joy, sensing the gravity of the need for two police officers, changed her mind and decided to remain with Esther. None of the people in the hallway looked in the direction of the ward at all. A doctor arrived and they all spoke together. It was, for Esther and Joy, like watching a play whose plot has not yet been revealed. It was at this point that the

policewoman turned her head and looked directly at Esther without expression, for a brief moment. Then she turned away again. Why weren't they coming in? The doctor exited stage left. Esther, who had stood moments after Joy, lost her nerve and sat on the edge of the bed and waited. She was shaking. Another man suddenly appeared. He was dressed casually in an expensive looking, country style shirt and grey trousers with comfortable shoes. He looked familiar. He looked at the doorway. It was Dieter. She didn't recognise the clothes so obviously the TV network had performed their magic again. They all then trooped through the door and began heading to where Joy was standing, filled with apprehension. Esther sat frozen on the bed. She watched them approaching. This was it. They were all coming, a policeman, a policewoman, the doctor who had somehow reappeared, and her husband. They had found Inge's body. They were coming to tell her. She expected that it would be a relief. It wasn't. It was quite the opposite. This confirmation of her worst fears was a sledgehammer blow. She began crying again, openly. She looked at Dieter questioningly when they were all close enough. He shook his head to indicate he had no idea of what they were about to be told but he too was frozen inside and would liked to have burst into tears.

The Senior Constable, young, about the same age as Dieter, took the point while the policewoman moved to stand beside Esther. Esther wondered if there was a camera crew in the hallway. This would be great human interest stuff, shots of the family as they were told about the death of their only, and oh, God, so much loved daughter. She wondered briefly if they just weren't allowed inside the ward. The policeman was about to say something. He looked first at Dieter then turned to look directly into Esther's eyes. Esther wondered if she would remember this moment for the rest of her life. Would this picture remain sharply in focus whenever she thought of poor Inge? Would she see this tall, young man with the small scarring from teenage acne whenever she heard the laughter and giggle of young girls? The policeman smiled tragically.

"Mrs Schumann. We have some good news".

Esther, her heart squeezed, waited for the hammer to fall. Then her frozen mind translated the word, "good". She also noticed the delayed startle from Dieter as well and she suddenly felt sorry for him. The policeman continued.

"Inge has been found. She is alive, safe and quite well".

Esther shot up from the bed, and then her knees collapsed and she fell back down. Dieter stood unmoving in shock. There were tears running

down his face. The policewoman was not immune either. Joy Ackerman, having just scooped the competition, hugged both Esther and Dieter before getting the details from the policewoman and running out to inform her station and to get a camera rolling. She was kind enough to tell her competition counterparts, waiting outside for shots of the mother being discharged from the hospital, but only because she found it impossible not to tell somebody. The station vehicle was parked, illegally, close by. She waved at them to bring it around to the front door then ran back up to the ward. The Senior Constable was explaining to Esther and Dieter that Inge was to be flown to Cairns and that arrangements would be made for Esther and Dieter to fly and meet her there. Joy took command.

“Not bloody likely. You tell them to keep Inge there and tell her that her mummy and daddy are on their way. Come on you two, we’ll get you out to Garbutt and hire a plane there. I know that town and they have an airstrip not far away”.

She hustled both Esther and Dieter towards the door. She turned back to the Senior Constable and commanded him to make bloody sure Inge stayed put. He waited till she had gotten a bit further out of hearing before replying, “Yes, Sergeant”. The young woman police officer did her best to control her smile.

It was all taken care of. Her station was ready with a news bulletin, including shots of Esther and Dieter boarding the charter flight, to go on air the moment the press conference ended. A cameraman made the trip with the Schumanns and Joy. She would not be available for her normal anchor programming that evening but she would make a special presentation segment showing the reunion. She would endear herself to her viewers, but not her producers, as the usually cool and competent journalist was unable to keep the tears from flowing as she spoke into the camera microphone. The cameraman got good material of Sergeant Boxall and Anna the interpreter, as Inge introduced them both to her parents. Anna, who stayed in case her skills were needed and to see Inge reunited with her parents, was in doubt of her hearing when Inge said to her father, who was unable to stop crying, “Don’t cry, daddy. Just because you forgot where the car was isn’t so bad. You will do better next time”.

Inge did not introduce Jacky to her parents for some reason that no one was able to explain satisfactorily. Charlie Boxall relayed to them much of what Jacky had told him as they waited for the Schumanns to arrive. Dieter went over to Jacky and, rather formally, shook his hand, totally at a loss for words. He thought about it for many years after and wondered why he could not find something adequate to say. That was probably the

point. Anything he could have said would be just that, adequate and totally inexpressive of the gratitude that Dieter felt he owed the man. Dieter continued to feel indebted to Jacky in a way that was impossible to define but he was moved to make some effort. He arranged to obtain a telephone number for Jacky from Joy before they left Australia. He phoned from their Townsville hotel and got an answering machine. Esther stood where she was, arms at her sides, one hand clutching the purse that she had forgotten she was carrying, and stared expressionless at Jacky across the room until several people began to feel slightly uneasy. She then marched up to him and stood in front of him almost confrontationally. She continued to stare at him until welling tears rolled down her face. She reached out and grabbed him in a hug that threatened to topple him off balance. She stepped back when she finally released him, and then immediately stepped forward to grab him again and hold him to her. She stood next to him stroking his arm as she fielded pointless questions with obvious answers from a bevy of news reporters that had pushed their way into the tiny police shop. It was a rather incongruous picture of an elegant and immaculately dressed young woman hugging a skinny, aged aborigine in a dusty Akubra, red country shirt, worn and faded blue jeans. She spontaneously hugged him twice more before they left. Jacky, his legs giving way and tiredness overcoming him, sat down in a chair. He still hadn't been able to build a smoke and hoped for the hustle and bustle to end so he could find a place to buy a coffee and enjoy a cigarette. Inge, who had just been instructed to come along, wasn't going anywhere for the moment. She went over to Jacky, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. She then climbed into his lap and rested her head on his chest. After a few moments, she sat up, looked at his face, and broke into a serious babble. Anna stepped forward to translate but stopped. It was obvious from the tone of her voice and the lilt of the words what it was she was saying and a translation would have been superfluous. Jacky smiled and nodded and smiled wider. He put his arms around her and gave her a hug. He kissed her lightly on the forehead. Then he stood her on the floor. It was time for her to go. Inge walked away and then skipped to her mother, turning to wave a goodbye to Jacky and then to Charlie and Anna and Gayle. Inge suddenly disengaged herself from her mother's hand when they were almost all out the door, and rushed back to where Jacky was sitting. She squatted in front of the swag and fumbled with the openings. She dug down and extracted the neatly folded Brisbane Broncos football jersey and her toothbrush. She bounced up and made, what was to Jacky and anyone else in the room not familiar with German, a string of unintelligible comments in a fashion that Jacky, particularly, was familiar with. He smiled and Inge rushed to catch her mother. She never looked back. When the door closed behind them, it seemed also that a light, somewhere, had been



turned off. The room was suddenly empty though there were still several people there.

The cameraman was thinking it was a long day and there were still hours to go. He wouldn't be back in Townsville until the day after his flight into Cairns. He wondered where the Cairns station would book him overnight. Nowhere fancy, he reckoned. He went over to Jacky and offered him a lift in a Cessna 172 back to Cairns. Jacky thought about it for a moment. His odyssey was over. He was tired of sleeping on the ground and tired of lugging his swag. His large house was empty except for ghosts but the bed was soft and there was always food and cold water in the fridge. Two of his best friends lived across the road and they would be worried about him. Besides, he wanted to talk to Mary. He wanted to go and stand in front of the stone that marked her resting place. He wanted to thank her for helping him to find his way. He wanted to thank her for Inge. He wanted to tell her that he loved her and missed her and that he could wait, if she could wait. He wanted her to know that he still remembered that day in the doctor's office when a pretty young woman flirted with him. It was, perhaps, not the best day of his life for he had enjoyed so many best days, but it was certainly one of those best days he would never forget and even in the coldest hours before the final end, it would shine to make him warm.

The jewelled lights of Cairns formed a curved necklace around the neck of Trinity Bay as the Cessna made a straight-in approach on runway one-five. The moon reflected off the waters of the Barron River as the pilot reduced his speed and added another notch of flap on final. It touched down with only a slight screech of rubber and the pilot hurried for the first intersection turnoff to clear the runway, as a commercial passenger jet lined up behind him on a landing approach. A network vehicle from the Cairns TV station was waiting outside the security fence. The cameraman and Jacky, each burdened with their respective load of gear, made their way through the doors after thanking the pilot for the flight. The cameraman and the driver of the white station wagon knew each other and exchanged pleasantries and retorts. They offered to drive Jacky home. Jacky couldn't think of any objection, and if they were happy to do so, then he was happy to let them. All three knew that the station needed to keep Jacky happy. Otherwise a certain Joy Ackerman, who would be looking for a chance of an exclusive interview with Jacky, would not be happy. Joy Ackerman was enjoying a certain degree of power as her star continued to rise and it would not be good to get her offside.

Irene Anderson was washing up the dishes in the kitchen when she heard Craig call out from the other room.

“Bloody hell, it’s Wonga”.

Irene felt a sudden sense of relief as if she were carrying a heavy burden and finally put it down.

“Go and get him, Ando, the pot roast is still warm. Tell him we’ve got all his mail over here”.

“No, woman, he isn’t home, he’s on the bloody telly”.

Irene moved quickly to where she could see the TV. There was Jacky in the background to the pictures of that little girl that had miraculously been found alive.

“Look at how skinny he is, Ando. He looks really ill”.

Craig was trying to hear the story and was just a little annoyed by Reenie’s chatter.

“What is he doing there, Ando? What’s he got to do with that little girl”?

“If you’ll shut up for a moment, woman, I can find out and let you know”.

Craig had sat up in the chair to listen to the news bulletin. He heard the afternoon update newflash with the pictures of an attractive Esther Schumann boarding a charter flight to go and retrieve her daughter. He wanted to catch the evening news update. The grey-suited announcer droned on.

“The six-year-old Inge Schumann was located in dense scrub four days ago by blacktracker, Jack Wonga, of Cairns. They were cut off and unable to contact other members of the search party and were forced to walk for more than a hundred kilometres before being spotted by Sergeant Charles Boxhill of the Queensland Police. Young Inge was taken to the local health clinic where she was examined by doctors and despite being treated for slight exposure was pronounced none the worse for her ordeal. We’ll have a sports and weather update from Mike and Jenny when we return”.

Craig snorted.

“Blacktracker! I’ve seen him get lost in his own bloody backyard”.

He was as relieved as Irene.

The station wagon glided to a stop in front of Jacky's house. He got out and recovered his swag. He shook hands with the other two men and thanked them. The car drove off as silently as it had glided in. Jacky looked at his house. There were solar-powered lights that marked his drive and the front walk, and put to some artistic effect in his low maintenance native plants rockery. That didn't account for the porch light or the soft lights glowing behind curtains that gave the house a warm welcome feel to it however. His garage door was closed but the security light, normally motion operated, was turned on as well. He looked across at Craig and Irene's place. They were obviously home. They liked lights and their place always looked like a glowing Christmas tree. Jacky rather liked the effect actually, as it was somehow reassuring. He wandered up the path to his front door and noted the small patch of lawn was mowed smooth like a golf-green and the hedges were trimmed and neat. He hoped no one was living in the house. He still wanted to be on his own for a while. He had forgotten to dig out keys to his front door. One set was still hidden under the front wheel of his ute and the others were placed in a pocket somewhere within his swag but he didn't recall seeing them, ever. He tried the door. It was unlocked. He opened the door and entered cautiously. There was the sound of quiet music playing. He thought it may have been Sarah Brightman but it was in the background and simply a pleasant interlude at the moment. He called out an extended, "hello". There was no answer. He moved in to peer into the living room where soft light from the table lamps offered a certain ambience but found no one and nothing out of place. He went out to the kitchen after calling a slightly louder, "hello". There was a big and obvious note on the fridge: Welcome home, you skinny old black bastard. Saw you on TV and you haven't gotten any prettier. Pay no attention to him, Jacky. Welcome home, love. There are two full meals in the fridge. Take your choice. Just pop them in the microwave. The instructions for each are on top of the container. Come over anytime. We are expecting you. Love, Irene. He opened the fridge. The two plastic containers were on the top shelf with the notes attached. There was a fresh, he hoped, two-litre bottle of milk in the door, a dozen eggs, bacon and a loaf of oddly shaped bread that Jacky recognised as being from Irene's bread maker oven.

There was a plunger of coffee on the sink waiting only the addition of boiling water. He filled the kettle and when it clicked off he poured it into the plunger. He took the time while waiting for it to brew to quickly wander the rest of the house. His bed was made up and turned down. There were freshly laundered thick and fluffy towels adorning the bathroom, and bedside lamps lit and welcoming. Jacky went back downstairs to plunge the coffee and pour a mug and to read the note on the door of the fridge, once again. He thought of his friends, Reenie and Ando. They were looking after the place all of this time and that wasn't

worth a mention in the note. They must have spent a couple of very hectic hours with these last minute preparations and no comment about that. He reflected that his life had always been about his friends. He wondered what it was that attracted such wonderful people. He wondered if he was worthy of it. He hoped he was. There was a portrait of Mary that hung on a sidewall that was decorated with pictures of the children and their children. All of the photos that were sent them over the years, Mary made into a photo collage or had them individually framed. They all had pride of place. The large photo portrait of Mary was taken to adorn the back cover of a book that became almost required reading for Aboriginal studies. Jacky insisted it be placed at just above eye level on this wall of honour. He stood in front of it now, sipping coffee and looking at his wife.

“Well Mary, was I worthy of you and of all my wonderful friends”?

## **CHAPTER 31**

### ***Goodbye, old friend.***

Jacky found it difficult to sleep in the soft bed and was thinking how ludicrous it would be if he had to crawl out to sleep on the floor. He rolled over to his other side for perhaps the twelfth time and altered his position yet again. He was thinking to himself, I'll never get to sleep, when sleep overtook him. He woke in the still-dark bedroom. The only light was the large glowing dial of the bedside clock radio. It was only 5:30 AM according to the clock. Jacky felt that the sheets and the blankets and doona were too heavy and hot, and tried to kick his feet free of the encumbrance. He did get one foot to stick out into the air but that wasn't comfortable either and he retracted it like a turtle back into the safety and warmth of the bed clothing. He tried to sleep but laid there reviewing the past months until the window transitioned to grey then silver then blue and the clock declared the time as 6:43 AM. Jacky suddenly remembered that being home meant long, hot showers in clean surroundings and a comfortable flush toilet with as much toilet paper as he could possibly use and, almost as importantly, a bloody door he could close. He almost jumped out of bed. Clean, shaved and sweet smelling, Jacky discovered that there was nothing in his wardrobe that fitted him. Shirts were no problem although they did look as if they belonged once to a much bigger someone else. It was pants. He wondered if it was possible to play a practical joke where all the clothes in the wardrobe were replaced three sizes too big. He finally found a pair that, though not fitting, didn't look like they belonged to an older brother. He chose a polo shirt that hung outside the pants to disguise the cinched up waist.

He ate a breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast and coffee while sitting at the patio table in the back garden. He admired the manicured neatness of his surrounds and vowed that next time he would tell Craig to hire a gardener to come in. He knew there would never be a next time of course. He quickly washed his dishes in the sink, revelling in hot, soapy water at the touch of a tap. When the last item was wiped dry with the tea towel, he took down the note from the fridge door, and carefully put it away in his drawer of treasures where he kept all of the letters his friends sent him over the years. He never threw any away, not post cards or greeting cards or short notes like the one from his fridge. These all contained the sacred symbols. They were the words of his friends. He had learned to read these symbols and he knew what his friends thought and believed and feared and loved. He would read the words and hear their voices in his head saying these things to him. To throw these away was to deny his friends. Jacky Wonga would never do that. He often read backward or forward through the writings. He was amazed that he could travel through time so easily. He found it hard, sometimes, to read the letters from Ros because he missed her so desperately. And he found it impossible to read the final letters from Duncan. He would read them all but the last two, pretending they had never yet arrived and Duncan was still there at Stockley House. He would read the letters and promise himself to someday go back and look at his name scratched into the corner post of the three-vehicle shed. He knew Stockley House no longer existed but if he didn't read the last two letters, then Duncan hadn't died, he was still at Stockley House and Stockley House still survived. The time machine worked very well. He closed the drawer and walked across the street to his friends, Reenie and Ando. He had a lot to tell them. He might just spend all day with his friends.

The Courier Mail newspapers arrived in Biddinburra. The contract carrier driver dropped them off at the post office and wasted no time in turning around and driving out again. Sandra Phillips went to check the mail and to get the newspaper. There was a small bundle of envelopes, but nothing important she decided as she shuffled through them while walking slowly back to the pub. They could keep until she was in the office doing the books. Several yellow dandelions were growing in the meagre moisture at the corner of a building in the path of a downspout. She looked at them thinking at how determined life can be. It needed only a chance and, if chance were offered, it would take that chance. It was going to be a nice day and she hoped something nice might happen as well. She read the headlines as she walked. They weren't hard to read, it was only one word: FOUND. She knew it was the lost child and it pleased her. She thought about the torment the mother must have been going through and wished at the time there was something she could do to help. She almost wrote a letter but had nowhere to send it. It was on the television news the night before and a lot of people were talking

about it but she missed it. She was either in the kitchen or cleaning tables when any of the bulletins referred to it. She heard parts of the story but never got a chance to do more than glance at the screen. Still, it was good news and there wasn't a whole lot of that going around much these days. Sandra liked to sit with the fresh, clean paper with its smell of ink and read it slowly while she drank a leisurely coffee. She would sit in the courtyard of the caravan park under the one large tree and enjoy the day, if it were a pleasant morning. She never got that far today because she threw the paper onto the bar as she went to prepare the coffee. She came back and as she reached for the paper, the picture on the front caught her attention. It was familiar. She knew that person. She read through the story and looked again at the picture of her friend, Jacky Wonga, and thought to herself, well done, old man, well done. The rest of her day simply floated by. She felt good.

The man and his wife from New South Wales were thrilled to see the story of the found child on the small TV in their camper van, knowing they were in that town earlier. They were even more thrilled when they recognised the helpful and considerate policeman they met that morning. They were both certain that his name wasn't Boxhill as reported by the newscaster, and so the man checked the meticulous logbook they were keeping of their adventures as grey nomads. His name was Boxall according to the notation and, "—also very amiable and helpful as all the Queensland Police have been so far", was the neatly written comment that accompanied the diary notation. They bought copies of both The Courier Mail and The Cairns Post, which also carried the story, the next day. They carefully cut out the stories and appended them to a sheet in a large scrapbook. They were pleased that both newspapers had spelled the helpful police sergeant's name correctly. They were also impressed with the amount of detail both papers carried including the fact that Mr Wonga was a long-time resident of Cairns and neither a blacktracker nor involved in any way with the actual search. This contradicted what was said in the TV news. One thing neither paper did though, was explain why Sergeant Charles Boxall of the Queensland Police Service was waiting that day on the lonely out of the way roadside for the girl and Mr Wonga. Something, they were quite certain, was being covered up. How did the police sergeant know where and when the little girl and her rescuer would arrive? The more they discussed it, the more certain they became that the policeman was already parked by that road, when they pulled up for a morning smoko. He drove up behind them and politely, mind you, but firmly pushed them to move on when they hadn't moved on fast enough for his liking. Yes, there was certainly more to the story than what the papers were allowed to print. And, as for all of those errors in the TV news report, well someone had to give them those incorrect details didn't they? They could show you the notes they made, and where even the time of day was recorded, when the police sergeant,

realising that time was getting critical, came to push them on. It became the highlight of their tour of far north Queensland.

Craig Anderson stopped driving a year before Mary Wonga died. There was no medical reason, but he just wasn't a safe driver anymore. He had several near misses and Irene told him he made her nervous. Craig didn't want to give up driving. He was several years younger than his mate Wonga and Jacky still drove. Then one day he almost ran over a kid on his bicycle. He didn't see him, even when Irene warned him about the child. It was more good fortune than good driving that avoided the tragedy. Irene was frightened and took her fright out on Craig. Craig pretended to get on his high horse and declared that if she didn't like the way he bloody well drove then she could bloody well drive and he would sit and do the bloody complaining. Craig had frightened himself as well as Irene and knew he simply did not see the child. It was time to give it away. He never drove again and put out the word that it was Reenie's continual harping that made him let her drive all the time. Irene knew the truth, of course, but as long as she drove she was able to go along with Craig's attempt to justify his action. Reenie told Jacky about it the day he asked why Ando suddenly stopped driving. From that day on, whenever it was mentioned, Jacky always said he thought it was because Ando couldn't get his fat gut under the steering wheel. That always brought a retort and the issue was swept off and under the table amid the good-natured banter. They were sitting on the back patio of Craig and Irene's place drinking iced-tea late in the afternoon. Walsh's Pyramid stood out starkly to the south though it looked purple in the afternoon haze. Various birds were taking advantage of the wide, shallow birdbath that sat not far from the Tahitian Lime tree growing next to the sunny patio. A few Peaceful doves were strutting through the grass hoping to find a misplaced seed or two that had fallen from the feeder. Craig remembered a question he meant to ask Jacky several times before but had slipped his mind.

"What happened to the Toyota"?

Jacky explained where it was and that he hadn't figured out a way to go and recover it just yet. Craig made a rude noise and said he would drive Jacky out there. Irene saw Jacky trying to think quickly and interrupted him.

"You're not going anywhere, Ando. If you and Jacky take off, neither one of you is likely to come back, and I'm jolly well not going to hang around here waiting for either one of you to turn up. Besides it's about time I had some time away from here. If you two want to take off, that's just fine, but you're taking me with you. End of discussion".

It was settled then. Jacky insisted that he pay for everything and that they take their time going and coming. Craig, with a wink to Irene, opined that Jacky drove a hard bargain but reluctantly agreed. Irene, whose interjection had only been an attempt to rescue Jacky from an awkward moment, suddenly realised that she was looking forward to the trip. Jacky drove the Toyota Prius into town to get things he might need in order to recover the vehicle. The car was Mary's. She, as it might be inferred, was also concerned about the environment and insisted on buying the hybrid vehicle. He stopped into the Department of Transport offices and picked up transfer papers. When he came back from his shopping, he drove the car into Craig's drive, took out the recovery gear, looked in the compartments for personal items and completed the details for transfer of the Prius to Irene and left it on the driver's seat. He walked back to his place feeling good about it.

Jacky remembered to set-up his answering machine the morning they left. He was expecting another call from Joy Ackerman and he wanted to leave a message saying when he was due back. He was about to record the new message when the phone rang. It was, coincidentally, Joy. He told her where he was going and when he would be back and they made an appointment set a few days after his expected return. Jacky just left the answering machine hooked up as it was, despite the message being in Mary's voice. Some part of the Aboriginal culture finds it distressing to view images and hear the voices of those who have passed over into the spirit world but Jacky enjoyed listening to Mary's recorded comments. He particularly liked this one on the answering machine. He was there the day she recorded it. It was perhaps her seventh or maybe eighth attempt. The first try she got muddled up. The second was spoken too quickly and some of her words sounded slurred. The third sounded fine to Jacky but Mary wasn't happy with her voice. The fourth got rejected when Jacky stood in front of her making faces until she laughed. The fifth was aborted when he snuck up behind her and tickled her ribs. The sixth was abandoned too when Jacky stuck a finger up his nose and pretended to examine the result. Mary was too grossed out to finish. She threatened him with a paperweight as she attempted the next message. That was the one that was on the machine and he could still hear her break of laughter at his antics before she finished.

The trip was splendidly uneventful. Craig and Irene's aging Landrover performed reliably. They took several side trips and enjoyed themselves. They recovered the Land Cruiser and returned in due course and Craig was barely out of the car before he was powering up his lawn mower and hedge trimmers. Life was back to normal. It was almost a full day after their return that Jacky actually noticed the red light on the answering machine that indicated a message was recorded. He made a cup of tea with a teabag in a mug with a splash of milk already in the bottom. Then



he wandered back to listen to whoever had bothered to leave a message. It was a softly accented voice.

“Mr Wonga, this is Dieter Schumann. I wanted to talk to you and I am sorry you are not home. We are going back to Germany this afternoon and I just wanted to tell you how much I thank you for what you did. I did not say anything to you when we met first and I have regret for that now. I think maybe it was because I was so relieved about Inge. I want you to know that I am most grateful for you and that I will remember you being so kind for many years to me. Inge speaks often of you. I wish to thank you Mr Wonga very much”.

Jacky replayed the message several times. He was not concerned about what Dieter had to say. He knew it must have been a very emotional time for him and his wife. Why Jacky listened repeatedly to the message was that, in the background, he could hear the voluble Inge chattering away, presumably to her mother. He smiled. He unplugged the answering machine and put it away in his treasure drawer. He would listen to both messages, that of his Mary and that of Inge in the background, while Dieter stumbled for words, several times more in the weeks that slipped by as easily as did the season.

Joy Ackerman wanted to say her goodbyes to the Schumanns. She would not be able to accompany them to the airport due to other commitments, so she arranged to see them all the night before they were to make their way back to Germany. A news cameraman would be at the airport to film their departure and the segment would form part of the news bulletins for that day. Joy asked Esther if it would be alright if a cameraman took some footage of the reunited family in the hotel for possible inclusion in the TV news special that was due to be aired in a few weeks. Esther would have agreed to anything Joy requested as it, implausibly, seemed to her that none of it would have been possible without her assistance. Inge, who was getting tired of being hugged by both her mommy and her daddy every time she came within grabbing distance, was ready for bed. She was wearing the Brisbane Broncos football jersey that she now wore every night, and as casual wear around the hotel suite. Dieter was looking forward to seeing Joy Ackerman. He needed her to find him Jacky's telephone number and he also wanted her to find some extra football jerseys to replace the original when it eventually wore out. Dieter could see that this item was of some considerable significance to Inge and knew she would be heartbroken to lose it. It was also in the back of his mind that it might be good marketing for his stores to stock some of these jerseys. The news story had been picked-up by the European news services and the TV special was to be replayed there as well. The following day, Joy was viewing the tapes of their final evening. The cameraman had captured some rather

moving shots of the family. There were two segments of Inge dressed in the Broncos jersey that Joy particularly wanted to include in the special. It would appeal to the Queensland viewing audience. She kept her appointment with Jacky when he returned from his brief holiday and managed to wrap it all up in two sessions. He was a warm and charming man and she found that she liked him very much. She was quite impressed with his concerns for Inge and her parents during their ordeal. She thought of the football jersey that Inge wore. She asked one of the technical boys for a favour. An orange and white van pulled up in front of Jacky's house a day later and a courier delivered an envelope to Jacky. He signed for it, noticing that it was from Joy Ackerman. He opened it to find two large colour prints of a radiant Inge, smiling at the camera and dressed in the Broncos jersey. Jacky put one on the small sidewall with the photos of his children and Mary. The other he left sitting on the coffee table for several days before placing it in his treasure drawer.

It was hot and humid with the build up to the wet. Heavy cumulus clouds like fat marshmallows filled the sky to the east over the Coral Sea. Craig Anderson finished his gardening at the back of his house and came around to the front to determine if the grass needed trimming here as well, before he put the mower away in the shed. He wiped his sweaty body with his T-shirt. Craig never seemed to colour in the sun and though he spent much time in the yard without a shirt, he always looked as if he should be warned about the dangers. He stood, hands on hips and looked over at Jacky's place. A large macadamia tree grew at the edge of the native garden in Jacky's front yard. It took many years to attain any stature at all but it was now a tree heavy with leaf and abundant nuts in season. Jacky was sitting on the lawn under the tree avoiding the sun. Craig watched him and Jacky didn't look like he was at all comfortable. He should go back inside to the air-conditioning if the heat was getting to him, perhaps. Craig decided he might get a couple of glasses of iced-tea and wander over to see Jacky. He stood there a while longer. He called out to Irene. She quickly joined him on the front porch alarmed at the timbre of his voice. Irene saw him looking at Jacky and she looked too. Irene was a former surgical nurse. She had not done any medical work for almost a decade. She was still registered though, but maintained her registration more from habit and for the magazines than anything else. A sense of sudden foreboding welled within her and she took off rapidly across the street yelling back for Craig to phone for an ambulance. The ambulance arrived and two efficient members of the Queensland Ambulance Brigade bundled Jacky onto a stretcher and into the rear of the ambulance. It headed back into town, flashing coloured lights and a siren when needed through the afternoon traffic and along the Esplanade where the tide had receded to bare the mudflats and offer a buffet of choice meals for the wading birds. It passed the memorial to the Catalina Flying Boats that once operated in Trinity Bay and that flew

past the Cairns Base Hospital in those perilous days of the war in 1942 and where Sister Roslyn Naomi Watson would seek relief from the heat and humidity of days like this. The ambulance pulled into the crescent drive at the emergency entrance to the red brick building. This was at the same time as an aircraft of the Royal Flying Doctor Service was letting down to five hundred feet, to swoop in for a landing past the windows of the hospital, and over the mangroves to whisper on to the tarmac at Cairns International Airport.

The clock on the bedside table in the bedroom of Jacky and Mary Wonga confidently displayed 2:37 PM. That was when Irene's premonition that something was wrong had proved correct, prompting her to order Craig to call for the ambulance, and when, less than twenty minutes later, Jacky was stretchered into the back of the ambulance amid the neat installations of equipment. As the hours passed and the bedroom grew dark until the only source of light was the face of the illuminated clock, it would declare it was 2:39 AM when the doctor at the Cairns Base Hospital recorded the death of Jacky Wonga, legend, husband, father and friend.

### ***Epilogue***

A tall Jordan Wonga was now standing in the cemetery in front of identical headstones side by side. He came to the cemetery earlier, weeks before, to say a few words to his father. There was a memorial service but it was on his mind that he never had the chance to make his peace with his dad and so came out to say the words. Until that time, he had not seen his mother's gravestone. It was erected long after her funeral and he had not thought to ask his dad for a photograph of it. He had stood quietly and unmoving in front of the red granite stone remembering his mother. Under the incising that detailed the dates of the interval that was her life, was an inscription that Jordan recognised. It was from a letter Mary wrote to her husband and that his dad had allowed him to read once. She knew she was dying and it was not far from the end. She wrote to Jacky to tell him of her love for him and her thoughts and hopes and fears. In one of the lines she penned she said; "were you to ask me one more time to share my life with you, I would say yes, and yes again". Jordan was moved by that act and wanted something similar for his father's headstone. He went to the drawer that contained his father's prized possessions, his letters. Jordan did not understand why his father kept all of these things, many were more than a half-century old. He withdrew bundles of letters and noted a photograph of a gravestone tucked into one bundle. It was the grave of Duncan Jordan Adair. Neither Jordan's father nor anyone else at the hospital apparently knew that Duncan Adair even had a middle name. Dr Peter Lamont Bellow had taken the photograph when he visited

Duncan's gravesite many years later, while on a speaking engagement to Perth. Jordan Lamont Wonga was named for both men that played such a starring role in his father's life. Jordan idly read the last two letters from Duncan Adair, written to his father when he worked as a ringer on some cattle station or other. He was never certain of the chronology. The letters were quite moving, actually. He reread the line again. Duncan was exhorting his father on to better things. "Live your life to its fullest, Jacky, so that it may please God and instil pride in your children". Jordan adapted it to read; "I lived a full life. May it please God and give my children pride". Jordan may well be a noted historian but he is lacking miserably in romance.

Jordan stood in the cemetery looking at the two headstones. He had one more act to complete before tidying up his father's affairs and heading home to England. He saw on his first visit that there was a green piece of pottery leaning against his mother's headstone. It was round, about the size of a saucer, and had strange markings and adornments over it. His mother, he knew, was into pottery for a little while. There was still a kiln somewhere in the garage. It had not been a passion or even an interest that lasted for long. There were a few of her creations, or attempts as his father called them, about the house but he had never seen this one before. He assumed that his father placed it at the gravesite. When he was going through his father's things, especially the treasure drawer, he found a matching pottery piece. It looked identical as far as he could remember. It certainly was far from what he would call artistic and obviously had little value if his father would simply leave it there in the cemetery. But he thought it would be a nice gesture to place the other piece of pottery from his dad's drawer at the grave. There would be a matching piece at each headstone. He examined the pottery. It was very amateurish art, in his opinion. It must have been one of his mother's early works. Jordan looked at the pottery from his mother's grave to see which side was facing out or maybe in as the thought struck him. He made certain to place both pieces facing the same way. He stepped back, feeling a distinct sense of accomplishment. He then bade a solemn but hesitant goodbye to each parent.

It would be pleasurable to think that the spirits of Mary and Jacky Wonga are able now to wander together the paths of his ancestors, aided by the sacred object from the secret cave of the women of the Lakes. But to do so, one must believe in such things. One must be from a culture that is able to believe in Gods and spirits and other such superstitions. Is it not so?

**THE END**

**Disclaimers and Credits:**

This is a fictional work, with all of that which is thus implied, and based on the stories and memories of those who knew him best.

I appreciate the permissions of the Wonga family and access to Jacky's correspondence, notes and records that they so kindly provided.

There are areas where the chronology differs to that offered by those people kind enough to send me details of their association with Jacky Wonga. I hasten to my own defence in that even some official records do not agree. I simply took the most probable timeline.

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JDE