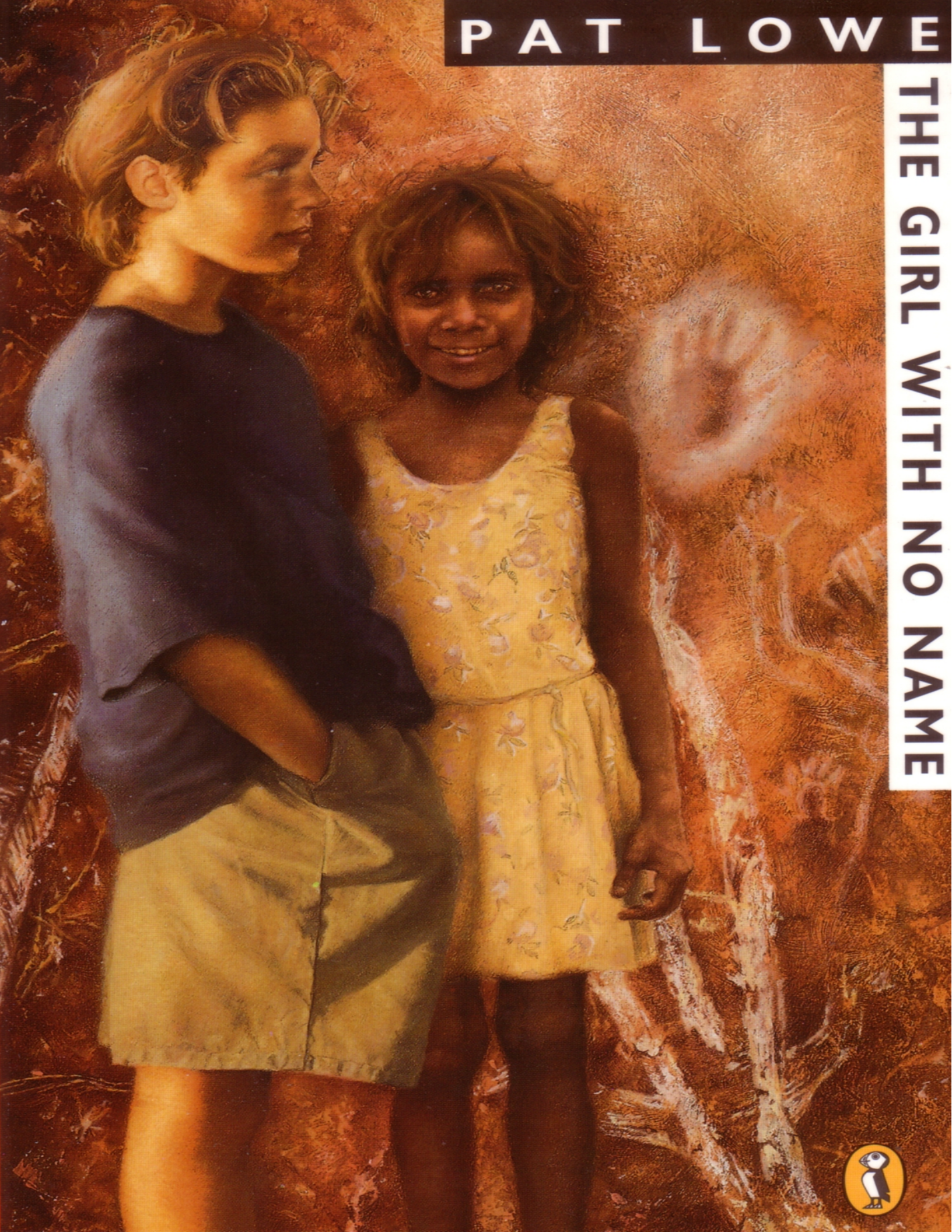


PAT LOWE

THE GIRL WITH NO NAME





*Puffin Books*



## ***The Girl With No Name***

*Matthew stood* on the top of the rocky ridge and shaded his eyes with his hand. He was suddenly acutely aware of all his senses. He felt the warmth of the sun striking his flesh, and the light wind that dried the sweat on his neck. He heard the distant, isolated sound of a bird calling once. In his stomach he felt the clutching of fear. He was lost.'

Matthew sets off alone to camp at Goanna Gorge. He is determined to find the Aboriginal rock paintings he knows are hidden there. But his plans fall apart when he realises he cannot find his way back. The strange wild country of the Kimberley, which Matthew thought he knew so well, seems to mock him with its secrets – until he meets the girl with no name ...

Other books by Pat Lowe

*Jilji – Life in the Great Sandy Desert* (with Jimmy Pike)

*Yinti – Desert Child* (with Jimmy Pike)

*Feeling the Heat*

*In the Desert*

***The Girl With No Name***

**Pat Lowe**

**Puffin Books**

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To Kim and B.J.

Glossary of Walmajarri Words *Jampijin* – a male subsection or ‘skin’ name *kartiya* – non-Aboriginal person; white person *Kumunjayi* – no name; used to refer to a person with the same name as someone who has recently died *Napangarti* – a female subsection or ‘skin’ name *piyirnwarnti* – people

*tartaku* – gall that grows on some eucalypt trees; sometimes called ‘bush apple’ or ‘bush coconut’

*warawu* – exclamation of surprise and pleasure or dismay *warntu*  
– parcel made of grass, used for storing food

## *Author's note*

*There were* many languages in the north of Australia before white people settled there, and some of them are still spoken, especially in the more remote communities.

Walmajarri is one of the languages from the Great Sandy Desert. There are old and even middle-aged people who were born in the desert and still remember traditional desert life. After white occupation of the north, Walmajarri people gradually left the desert and were dispersed to a number of different pastoral stations and settlements. Today the language is spoken, alongside other languages, in widely scattered places, including a coastal community at La Grange, desert communities around Balgo, and in and around the town of Fitzroy Crossing.

You will notice that the Aboriginal characters in this book have their own way of speaking English, and that the younger people speak it a bit differently from the older people. Perhaps you can work out why this might be so.

The places described in the book are based on, but are not exactly the same as, real places. The characters are invented, but the things they do are drawn from real life.



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## **Lost**

*Matthew Stood* on the top of the rocky ridge and shaded his eyes with his hand. He looked out in the direction he thought he had come from, over the endless stretch of red earth and rock and dull green grass, the few short trees and scattered wattle bushes. He strained to make out the dip of the valley, but it had disappeared somewhere in amongst the rocks and strewn boulders. He was suddenly acutely aware of all his senses. He felt the warmth of the sun striking his flesh, and the light wind that dried the sweat on his neck. He heard the distant, isolated sound of a bird calling once. In his stomach he felt the clutching of fear. He was lost.



Matthew had left his home early that morning, even before his mother was up. He had taken his bicycle with his sleeping-bag tied behind the saddle, and a backpack containing food and a bottle of water, and had ridden south. It was rare in the far north of the

country for the weather to be cool enough for cycling long distances, and Matthew had promised himself an expedition during the July school holidays. At this time of year he could count on warm, fine days, cool nights and early mornings. 'I'll go tomorrow,' he had told his mother the previous evening. She had agreed reluctantly.

Earlier in the holidays, Matthew and his parents had been through the question of whether or not he was old enough to go camping out alone. His father had taken his side. 'He's not a kid any more,' he had said. 'I left home and got my first job when I was not much older than he is.'

'What if anything happens to him?'

'He's as safe out there as he is riding to school every day. There's some risk in everything. You can't keep an eye on him for ever.'

'The Kimberley's not like Perth,' put in Matthew. 'There's not much traffic, and the only people likely to be around are locals or tourists. Lots of kids from my class go camping without their parents.'

'Not on their own,' said his mother firmly, with a meaningful look at her husband.

'It's an adventure,' pleaded Matthew. 'I've always wanted to see what it's like to sleep by myself in the bush. Goanna Gorge is only about thirty kilometres away – it's not as if I'm going miles out into the desert or something. It's just for one night, and you'll know exactly where I am.'

'He's a sensible kid,' his father added, ignoring his wife's look. 'We've encouraged him to be independent. No good trying to make a sock out of him.' He looked at his son as if sizing him up. Matthew had his mother's fair curly hair and blue eyes, but he was going to be tall like his father, with the same large, capable hands.

In the end, Matthew's mother had given in. She may have hoped that, having won the battle in principle, Matthew would forget the idea. But when her son announced his intention of camping out, she

did not raise any further objections. Even so, he could read her feelings from her face, and tried to reassure her.

‘I’ll ride out as far as Goanna Gorge and camp there. I can drink from the pool, and refill my water-bottle for the ride back.’

‘What time will you be home?’ Matthew could tell his mother was making an effort to sound matter-of-fact, as she busied herself with some papers on the table. He put his arm around her small waist and gave her a hug.

‘No later than sunset,’ he had promised.



The ride to Goanna Gorge on his new mountain bike seemed longer than Matthew had expected, and in spite of the chilly morning air he soon began to sweat. He liked this feeling of exertion, the sense of freedom and purpose as he glided down the empty road. The first part was mostly downhill, but every so often the road would rise again, and Matthew had to toil upwards to the crest, then coast thankfully down the other side.

The sun rose above the hills as he went, and the birds going about their morning business of feeding and pairing were the only other beings Matthew saw. He was half aware, even so, that the long brittle grass by the roadside was seething with the activity of myriads of little creatures – reptiles, insects, spiders and centipedes – that lived within its shelter.

Later, Matthew passed a couple of cars towing trailers. The drivers waved at him, and he lifted a casual hand in reply. At heart, he despised tourists. He tried to remind himself that they were only out trying to enjoy themselves, but the travelling of tourists always seemed pointless to him – driving from one place to another simply to look at it. When he was old enough to travel, Matthew decided, he would only go to places off the beaten track, and he would always travel with a purpose, and for the sake of real adventure.

Today's expedition had a special purpose, besides the bike ride and the adventure of camping out alone. Matthew had heard that there were rock paintings somewhere in Goanna Gorge. His father, who was an officer at the local prison, had been told about them by one of the prisoners. The man had described the place to find them: downstream from the pool and in line with a particular boab tree. Matthew had said nothing to his father at the time, but he made up his mind to find the paintings one day.

The unmade road to Goanna Gorge left the main highway and wound uphill again for the last two kilometres. The whole stretch was strewn with loose rocks, and the going was hard. Fearing for his tyres, Matthew dismounted a couple of times and pushed his bike. But progress like this was slow and scarcely less strenuous than riding, so he soon mounted again.

By the time he reached the top of Goanna Gorge, Matthew was thirsty and ready for a rest. He left his bike chained to a tree and slipped the straps of his pack off his shoulders, took out his water-bottle and had a long drink. He stood for a moment at the edge of the cliff, looking down the sheer drop into the valley below. Then he shouldered his pack once more and started to climb down the cliff steps to the rockhole.

At this dry time of year the waterfall that fell twenty metres into the rockhole was reduced to a trickle, and the level of water in the pool had fallen since he was last there. Dragonflies and other insects darted across the surface. Birds disturbed by Matthew's arrival called from the safety of their rocky perches. There was a plop! as a large fish broke the surface unseen and fell back again.

Matthew took off all his clothes and lowered himself into the pool. The first shock of the cold water on his overheated body drove the breath out of him. He gasped aloud and swam fast across the pool to the waterfall. He felt for the smooth rock that provided a seat underneath, and sat chest deep in the pool for a few moments, allowing the little stream to fall on his head and fill his eyes and ears. He cupped his hands in front of his face, directing water into his mouth. It tasted earthy. Then he slid down again into the water



and swam back and climbed out onto the rock. He looked around. The sides of the valley rose steeply but brokenly. Here and there the rocks had fallen away, leaving narrow cracks and ledges. In these unlikely places plants clung and flourished.

On a broader ledge about halfway up the valley wall stood a young boab tree. It seemed to be doing well in spite of its perilous and infertile position. Trees clung to other ledges, too small to hold them. Their exposed roots went down over the rocks to find a soil-filled niche somewhere below.

Matthew unzipped his backpack and pulled out a sandwich, devouring it hungrily. An ant, big as a beetle, discovered the crumbs he let fall, and raced off with one of them held up triumphantly between its mandibles.

Matthew knelt by the pool and scooped a few handfuls of water to his mouth. As he straightened up, his mind suddenly relaxed, free of thought, allowing his senses to be filled by the nature around him until, momentarily, he became part of it. Then his self-awareness returned, and with it his feeling of purpose. It was time to start looking for the rock paintings.

First, he stowed his pack and sleeping-bag in the crevice between two rocks, where they were hidden from sight by long grass and wattle bushes. He clipped his water-bottle onto his belt, stuffed an apple in one pocket and a packet of dried fruit and nuts in the other, and started off.

The valley was dry, but Matthew headed downstream from the pool, where water flowed during the rainy season. As he picked his way over the boulders he kept his eye on the western wall of the valley, looking for likely caves or galleries where the paintings might be. From time to time he glanced over towards the eastern wall, hoping to recognise the boab tree that would give him his bearings.

When Matthew had listened to his father's description of the place as the prisoner had given it to him, he had pictured so clearly in his mind's eye the flat valley wall and the lone boab tree standing opposite that he felt sure he would recognise it as soon as he saw it.

Now that he was down in the valley itself the scene was quite different. Not only could he pick out no obvious caves or sheer stretch of rock wall, but there were boab trees scattered here and there all through the valley. How could he possibly know which was the right one? His confidence began to fade.

After perhaps an hour of walking and scrambling, Matthew noticed that he was coming to the end of the valley. He must have missed the place he was looking for. He sat on a rock and looked back up the gorge in the direction of the now out-of-sight pool.

*If I wanted to make a rock painting, he said to himself, where would I do it?*

This thought brought home to him how little he knew about Aboriginal people.

*I wonder if they'd have gone for the easiest place? What were they painting for, anyway? They might have wanted their paintings to be hidden, not out in the open where everyone could see them.* Matthew remembered hearing about secret places, where only the initiated were allowed to go. He had seen photos of paintings in caves. But his father hadn't said anything about a cave. He began to feel disheartened.

Suddenly he felt sure that he could see the answer. Some way back and across the valley, behind a fall of boulders that had screened it from him when he had walked past, was a slight overhang. Beneath it the rock face was sheer.

*It's a natural gallery!* thought Matthew, holding back his excitement, only half-believing himself. He picked his way over the boulders in the valley floor, then climbed fallen rock until he was standing almost under the overhang. It was higher than it had appeared from the distance, and the gallery wall underneath was less smooth, with many uneven breaks in the rock face. Even so, this presented the only likely surface for painting he had seen so far. He turned and looked across the valley to the other side. There, prominent against the skyline, was a tall young boab tree.

A little more clambering upwards over loose rocks, and Matthew reached a ledge at the foot of the sandstone gallery. At first he saw nothing but the natural weathering of the rock; then, suddenly and unmistakably, there appeared in front of him, in colours that blended with the rock itself, the distinct outlines of paintings.

'I've found them!' murmured Matthew, with the thrill of discovery. Although he knew that other white people must have been there before him, in that lonely, unchanging spot he could imagine himself the first explorer ever to have stood there.

The red ochre paintings were outlined in white, which picked them out against the lighter red of the rock. Side by side, they covered most of the area beneath the overhang. Matthew made out the shapes of individual figures, including several haloed beings similar to the Wandjina he knew from books. There was a pair of reptiles that might have been crocodiles, or perhaps lizards, legs splayed out. A series of smaller figures formed a frieze, and here and there were stencils that had been produced by spraying ochre over a hand held flat against the rock, like the artist's signature.

When he was sure he had seen all the paintings there were to be seen, Matthew sat for a while, savouring his lone achievement, and thought about them. How old were the paintings? He tried to imagine who the artists were, and what their lives might have been like. They had been right here, where he was sitting now. He could almost feel their presence. Matthew pictured the artists as young men wearing headbands, such as he had seen in books, who left their spears leaning nearby against the rock while they worked. He could imagine older, grey-bearded men watching them with a critical eye.

*Or maybe the old men were the painters,* Matthew thought now. They could have been using the rock like a blackboard, to teach important stories to the younger people. He knew that much about Aboriginal society: the elders were the ones with the wisdom and knowledge, which they passed on in stages to the next generation.

Some of the paintings were weathered and faded with age, but others looked as if they had been more recently touched up with

fresh ochre. *How long ago?* Matthew wondered. It could have been in the last year or two. Maybe people still came here to do that. He looked back over his shoulder, almost expecting to see silent dark figures heading down the valley towards him. Suddenly he felt like a trespasser. With the strange sensation that someone might be watching him, he got up. He took one last look at the paintings, trying to fix them in his memory, then he turned to go.

It wasn't until Matthew reached the valley floor that the sense of uneasiness left him. The sun was now shining almost straight down into the valley, and he guessed it must be nearly midday. He decided to go on a little further, in case there was anything else to see. As the walls of the gorge got lower and less sheer, it didn't seem so far to the top. Matthew decided to climb right out of the valley and see what the country looked like from above. He'd make his way to the pool along the top instead of clambering back over boulders the way he had come.

Once he had left the valley and the rock paintings behind, Matthew looked across an expanse of spinifex country broken by hills. Still elated by his discovery of the paintings, he headed at once towards the nearest ridge.

Maybe he'd find more paintings. There could be some hidden away in an obscure corner of rock, and forgotten. He'd be the first white person to find them. Matthew wondered what he'd do. He imagined his photo in the local paper, under a banner headline: 'Schoolboy makes important discovery'. He'd be standing in front of the previously unknown rock paintings, surrounded by reporters, even television crews. No, that wasn't such a good idea. He wouldn't mind being famous, but he couldn't bear the thought of all those people trooping out to this wild place. And it wouldn't stop there. The paintings might become a tourist attraction. The local council, always looking for gimmicks to attract tourists, would put in roads and kiosks and toilets. The whole place would be ruined. No, it would be better to keep the paintings a secret. He could write about them in a private journal, and maybe years later someone would find it and realise he had been the first to make a great discovery.

So Matthew's thoughts ran on. The ridge was further away than it had looked, and when he reached it he could see that there was nowhere for an artist to paint. No natural gallery or wall offered itself. The entire hill was a jumble of broken rock. Nevertheless, Matthew scrambled to the top and looked about him.

A breeze he had not been able to feel down in the valley now cooled his damp skin. Matthew looked out over a great stretch of country, red and green under the unbroken blue of the sky. For as far as he could see in any direction, there was no sign of human life. He could not even see the road, hidden as it was somewhere amongst the hills.

He was surprised that even from this high viewpoint he could no longer make out the valley he had so recently left. Surely it was over there? He frowned, straining to see. But he knew which way he had come up the ridge, and he had only to get his bearings from there and head straight back to the valley rim. If need be he would retrace his own tracks.

Even so, Matthew descended the ridge at once, with just the slightest sense of uneasiness. At the foot, nothing looked familiar. Or rather, the whole length of the ridge appeared the same to his increasingly confused eyes. He couldn't be sure which was the exact spot where he had started to climb up. He thought it might be here – or was it a little further to the right? Annoyed with himself for not having taken more notice of his surroundings when he left the valley, but still keeping calm, Matthew started walking methodically from one end of the ridge to the other, trying to find a familiar feature, or some sign of his own tracks. The ground at the foot of the ridge was covered with boulders and small stones. To find any track was impossible.

*Well,* thought Matthew, uncomfortably aware of his own heartbeat, *I'm sure I came out of the valley over there. That must be almost due east.* He remembered his impression that morning that the valley ran roughly north and south. Now he was less certain. He tried to picture the position of the sun as it had shone down into the space. At this cooler time of year it would still be well to the north.



Had the sun been shining straight down the valley at midday, as it would have done if the valley ran north and south? He was ashamed that he couldn't properly remember.

*Don't start getting scared*, he told himself. *Just sit down and think. It'll come back.* He sat down for a few moments, but a feeling almost like panic swept over him, and he got up again at once. He felt driven to do something. He still had a strong sense that the valley lay to the east of where he now stood. There was only one way to find out. He made a conscious effort to register in his mind the exact spot at which he was standing. He noted the shape of the ridge just behind him, and tried to work out how it would look from the point where he wanted to go. Then he headed off. Having a sense of purpose calmed him down.

The scattered rocks gave way to a layer of small round pebbles, and then to hard ground thinly coated with sand. Keeping his eyes fixed on a stand of trees as his bearings, with the sun now well past the meridian behind him, he headed towards what he hoped was the valley. When he reached the clump of trees he looked back to the ridge. Already it seemed to be changing shape, but he thought he could still make out the point from where he had started off. He didn't want to become more confused than he already was.

Matthew continued walking in the same direction for a while longer, when suddenly he became convinced he had gone too far. It had only taken him about twenty minutes to walk from the valley to the foot of the ridge. He seemed to have been going twice as long on the way back. Now he began to doubt his own sense of time. Was it because he was concentrating so hard that the return journey seemed longer? Earlier, his mind had been preoccupied with other things – his discovery of the rock paintings and his feeling of exhilaration at being so successful an explorer. His mood was different now. In so short a time he had lost all sense of accomplishment and pride. He felt mocked by his earlier confidence.

Matthew squirmed inside when he remembered his daydream about making an important discovery. *No explorer worth his salt would get lost*, he jeered at himself. *I didn't even bring my compass –*

*what an idiot!* He'd been given a compass for his birthday, and had never used it except in fun around the garden and neighbourhood for the first day or so.

Then Matthew made another mistake. Instead of going back towards the ridge to get his bearings again, he headed off to the left, which he was sure was north. He reasoned that he should find the gorge more easily in that direction, where it was deeper. By doing this he lost sight of the ridge altogether, so that by the time he admitted to himself he had missed the valley, the ridge was well behind. Sweating in the afternoon heat, struggling against the feeling of panic starting to well up in him, he climbed another hill to try to work out where he was.

From the top he could see neither valley nor ridge, nor any feature he could recognise with certainty. He no longer had any idea of where he had started out. All he knew was that he was facing east again, with the afternoon sun behind him. This seemed important, but since he had lost all confidence in his ability to find the direction of anything, even the road, the knowledge was of little use to him.

Matthew was forced to admit to himself that he was lost.



## **Found**

*In the shelter* of the rock, where he had found a spot away from the wind, Matthew shivered. The stars were dense above him, and there was no moon. He looked up at the immense sweep of the sky, and for a moment almost forgot about himself and his predicament. He had never before spent a night alone in the bush. He had been camping out a few times, with a group of friends, but that had felt quite different. His main memories of those trips were of the fun he had had with the other boys.

*I wish Nick or one of the others was here now*, he thought. *At least we could keep each other's spirits up. I bet Nick would find something to laugh at.* Nick was the joker in the group, and that was one reason Matthew liked him. Where Matthew tended to be quiet and thoughtful, Nick was outgoing. Matthew laughed more when he was with Nick than he did with anyone else. To pass the time now he tried to imagine Nick sitting there beside him. He could picture the funny-sad face making a comedy out of being lost. When, in a few days time, Matthew told him about this night, Nick would be sure to tease him without mercy. 'Captain Matthew Scott the explorer!' he'd say, mockingly.

But when Matthew looked up again at the enormity of the sky, he forgot himself for a long moment. When he came back to earth, and tried to resume his imaginary conversation with Nick, he couldn't pick it up again.

*The others would never stay quiet long enough to let us feel anything serious, he thought, surprised at himself for thinking it. Sometimes you don't want to talk and fool around. You want to think. You want to feel just how vast everything is, and how small people are.*

On all those earlier trips with the other boys, their camping places had never been this far off the beaten track. They had camped in public caravan parks and down by the dam just out of town, and at other well-known waterholes. There had always been at least a few adults within reach. This was different. It was just Matthew and the bush. If he had not been lost, cold, hungry and a bit frightened, he would have revelled in the adventure.

He didn't doubt he would be found sooner or later. He knew that if he wasn't home tomorrow his father would have a search party out first thing the next morning. His colleagues in the prison service and the police force would join him. Some of them were in the State Emergency Service, and knew all about search and rescue. He'd eaten his apple hours ago, and nibbled most of the fruit and nuts, but he still had water in his bottle. If he stayed in the shade in one place during the day until he was found, he should be able to make the water last.

So Matthew kept telling himself, but at the back of his mind he couldn't quite get rid of the nagging thought: *What if they don't find me in time? What if my water runs out?*

If only it wasn't so cold. After the heat of the day, the drop in temperature seemed extreme. Fortunately it was a still night. The cold easterly wind that can blow all through the night in the cool season had dropped. In his backpack Matthew had left a fleecy windcheater. He thought of it now with longing. All he had on was a T-shirt and shorts, which were hopelessly inadequate cover for sleeping out.

Every so often Matthew got up and walked a few steps back and forth near the rock, flapping his arms to warm himself up. Then he did squats and star-jumps until his heart raced and the blood ran fast in his veins.

He watched the Milky Way move with interminable slowness through the sky. A few times he did manage to drift off to sleep, but the cold soon woke him up again. He listened to the rhythmic chirruping of insects. Once, he heard a nightjar give its excited call. He wondered what his parents were doing. They were probably asleep. They wouldn't even start worrying about him until tomorrow evening. That seemed ages away.

It was an endless night – the worst night Matthew could ever remember. By the time the first pale light appeared in the eastern sky he was stiff with cold. He was thankful when one bird, then another, started making conversation on the trees around, telling him the night was over. He sat up with his arms wrapped around his legs and watched the changes of the breaking dawn. The sky became slowly redder, then yellow. At last, the edge of the sun appeared over the rim of the earth. It was morning.

With sunrise the wind got up again, and Matthew walked about and did some exercises until his circulation was pumping. His optimism started to return. Tomorrow he would be found, he was sure. He was tempted to set off again looking for the valley. He felt confident he would find it this time. But he knew that would be foolish. It was going to be hard to sit and do nothing, waiting for someone to find him, but he knew that would be the safest thing to do. He dreaded the prospect of another night like the one he had just been through, but he decided to spend time making a nest for himself with leaves and grass and whatever else he could find to keep him warm. *Then I could try making fire by rubbing two sticks together*, he told himself. He had a vague idea of how it was done, but he didn't know what sort of wood to use. Still, it was worth a try.

Matthew took a good look at the place where he had spent the night. The rock wasn't bad as a shelter from the wind. *But I could*



*build it up at the sides with branches*, he thought. He tried collecting some dry ones, but the leaves fell off when he dragged them into place. Green branches would be better, but he had nothing to cut them down with. He spent some time breaking off wattle branches, and the work warmed him up. He then tried arranging the branches in different ways to form a screen that would protect him from the wind. Lying down to test the result, he found the best method was to stack the branches with the foliage downwards, next to his body, the bare ends of the branches leaning up against the rock.

Next he set about finding material for bedding. He collected dry leaves, but even when he had quite a pile he found they did not form the soft mat he had hoped. Instead, they crushed into pieces as soon as he stood or sat on them. He looked at the tussocks of grass, but they were coarse and spiky, and he decided they would be more uncomfortable than the bare ground, and maybe not much warmer.

The optimism Matthew had felt earlier began to desert him. This wasn't a game, after all. He had read accounts of people who had been stranded in difficult situations, and of what they had done to survive, and he had always imagined he would do well at that sort of thing. Now he was beginning to see that there was a world of difference between reading and thinking about survival, and actually having to do it. He had no tools and not many ingenious ideas either. He finished off the fruit and nuts, wishing he had something more substantial to eat for breakfast. Then he took a swig from his water-bottle, and realised with a jolt how thirsty his exertions had made him already. He would have to take it easy if he wanted the water to last.

Despondent, Matthew sat down under the overhang of the rock near where he had spent the night. He clasped his arms around his legs, and leaned his forehead on his knees, trying to think. It was going to be a long day. His mouth tasted stale, and he idly picked up a twig near his feet and started brushing at his teeth with it.

Suddenly, Matthew thought he heard a sound that wasn't the wind, or a bird, or a lizard. He sat up and looked around, but could see nothing that hadn't been there before. He went on brushing at

his teeth with the twig, but he suddenly felt self-conscious, as if someone were looking at him. He stopped and sat very still, listening. Then he heard a voice quite close by, laughing softly. It was a young voice. He stood up quickly, turned, and looked all around. Again he could see nothing. He wondered if he had started hearing things that weren't there. He sat down again under the overhang, taut and alert, waiting. There was a movement, a shadow fell. He glanced upwards and found himself looking into an upside-down face. It was a black face, mouth drawn back into a wide smile showing white teeth. Then the face was gone.

'Hey!' shouted Matthew, jumping up. He ran back a few paces from the rock to try to see who was up there. As he did so, a long, lean figure swung itself to the ground a few yards away, and stood shyly looking at him. It was a girl. She was wearing a crumpled dress with no sleeves.

'Hello!' said Matthew in astonishment. 'Where did you come from?' The girl looked at him without answering, still smiling. She was younger than Matthew, with a beanpole figure and no breasts.

'What's your name?' Matthew tried again. He was so grateful to see another human being that he felt tears nearly starting behind his eyes.

'I know your name,' said the girl by way of answer. 'You're Matthew Scott.'

'How do you know that?' Matthew was astonished.

The girl shrugged. 'Everybody know you. Your father work at the prison.' The girl's voice was soft, and she spoke English with a particular accent, as if she were not speaking her own language.

'That's right, he does. How come I don't know you?'

Even as he said this, Matthew realised he already had the answer. The only black kids he knew were the ones in his own class at school. But the girl just shrugged again.

'Where did you come from?' Matthew asked a second time. 'Do you know the way back to Goanna Gorge? I got lost yesterday.'

The girl laughed the same soft laugh Matthew had heard before. ‘Course I know,’ she said.

‘I’ve been here all night.’

The girl nodded. ‘I know. I seen your tracks.’

‘What are you doing out here?’

‘My family got a camp not far. Me, I’m going hunting.’

‘True? Do girls go hunting?’ Matthew was surprised.

She laughed again. ‘Course we go hunting. Got to get meat!’

‘What sort of animals do you hunt?’

‘Oh, goanna, snake, pussy-cat – any kind.’

‘Pussy-cat?’ Matthew said with alarm. ‘Feral ones? Do you eat them?’

‘Yeah, we eat.’

She looked around. ‘Where you did sleep?’

‘Right here,’ Matthew showed her. ‘It was perishing cold, I can tell you.’

‘What for you never light fire?’

‘No matches. I left them behind with my other things at Goanna Gorge, near the pool.’

‘Plenty bush matches,’ said the girl, pointing to a small tree not far from where they were standing.

‘Do you know how to make a fire from sticks?’ asked Matthew, impressed.

‘Course. Blackfeller got to know.’

‘Well, I wish you’d show me.’

The girl hesitated a moment, and he added, ‘I’ve never seen anyone make a fire from sticks. If you show me, I’ll be able to do it next time I run out of matches.’

She looked at him for another moment without saying anything, then seemed to make up her mind. She went to the tree and selected a couple of straight dead branches, only about half a centimetre thick, and snapped them off. She shortened them by breaking off the

ends, then looked around until she found a tuft of dry grass, softer than spinifex, which she pulled up. She picked up a couple of rocks, then sat on the ground with her legs crossed.

Firstly, she pounded the grass with the rock.

‘Why are you doing that?’ asked Matthew.

‘Make ’im soft,’ said the girl, ‘so ’e can burn.’ With the edge of a piece of stone she made a nick in the side of one of the sticks, and sharpened one end of the other. Then she placed the nicked piece flat on the ground, with a little wad of the softened grass just underneath it. Holding the first stick firmly under the side of her right foot, she placed the second stick upright with the sharpened end resting in the nick she had made in the other. She held the upright stick between the flat of both hands.

‘Might be I can’t light ’im,’ she remarked, glancing up at Matthew. ‘We don’t do it much.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘ ’Cos we got ’nother kind matches!’ she laughed.

Matthew watched while the girl, concentrating hard, twirled the upright stick back and forth between her open palms. The flat of her hands started at the top of the stick, pressing downwards, and after a number of rapid twirls they had moved to the bottom, whereupon she quickly shifted them to the top and started again. The idea was to keep up the friction and downward pressure on the stick. The girl frowned and breathed hard with the effort.

After a while, a tiny wisp of smoke rose from the friction point between the two sticks, from where a fine black powder fell onto the wad of grass. The girl stopped twirling, quickly picked up the wad and bent her head over it, blowing gently. Then she looked at it and shook her head.

‘No good,’ she said.

‘It didn’t catch?’ The girl shook her head again and got into position to try once more. This time she spat on her hands before she started. As she rubbed her hands fast back and forth, her whole

body tensed and the thin, hard muscles of her arms stood out. She clenched her teeth and breathed rapidly.

Again the wisp of smoke, and the smouldering powder. Again the girl stopped rubbing and blew into the grass, coaxing. She shook her head.

‘Let me have a go,’ said Matthew, sure he would be able to lend that extra bit of strength. ‘You hold the bottom part, and I’ll do the twirling.’ He sat in front of No-name with his legs crossed, and worked the upright stick as she had done. But he found it was much harder than it looked. After several sets of twirls his arms were aching, and there wasn’t the least sign of smoke.

‘Never mind,’ said the girl cheerfully. ‘You can do it next time.’ Matthew put the sticks carefully into the top pocket of his shirt, intending to practise later. He leaned back on his elbows.

‘You still haven’t told me your name,’ he said to the girl. She dropped her eyes, and seemed embarrassed.

‘I got no name,’ she said at last. Matthew looked at her disbelievingly.

‘You must have a name. Everyone has a name.’ The girl shook her head. ‘One woman did pass away,’ she told him. ‘Same name like me.’ A light flashed in Matthew’s head.

‘You mean people can’t use that name any more?’ He remembered hearing about the custom of changing names that were the same as that of a deceased person. ‘So what do people call you now?’

‘*Kumunyjayi*,’ said the girl after a pause. ‘That mean like, no name.’

‘No name,’ said Matthew thoughtfully, not game to try pronouncing the unfamiliar word. ‘That’s what I’ll call you: No-name.’ No-name laughed shyly.

‘Are we far from Goanna Gorge?’ he asked No-name.

‘Little bit far,’ she said. ‘You want me to show you?’

‘Yeah, I wish you would. I left all my things there, and if I don’t go home today my parents will have a search party out looking for



me.'

No-name nodded. She stood up straight. Matthew got up too, feeling a bit awkward to be dependent on a girl younger than he was. But this was no time to act smart. He needed No-name's knowledge.

To Matthew's surprise, the girl did not lead him back the way he had come, but cut across country.

'Is Goanna Gorge this way?' he asked.

'Yeah.' The girl threw out her arm in front of her, pointing with her hand extended vertically, inclining her head slightly to line up her sight. 'That way.' The words sounded like 'Darray'.

Matthew looked hard in the direction she was indicating, but could see nothing to distinguish that part of the landscape. He wondered how she knew. She seemed so confident, he did not for a moment doubt her. He simply followed.



## **No-name**

*The morning*, like every morning in the bush, was bright with promise. The sun was now well up, and the chill had gone out of the air. Matthew almost felt like singing.

The girl led him in a more or less straight line, deviating only to skirt hills and boulders that lay in their path. Once, she stopped to examine some tracks in the sand at her feet. Matthew came alongside and looked down.

‘Goanna, fresh one,’ said No-name, and set off walking fast after the tracks. Matthew followed. Suddenly the girl broke into a run, and Matthew caught a glimpse of the goanna running for all it was worth through the spinifex. No-name was after it, Matthew hard-pressed to keep up. The girl pulled up sharply, and fell to her knees. She started digging fast with her hands at a hole in the ground. In a few moments she grabbed at something and, with a wide swing of her arm, pulled the goanna backwards from the hole by its tail and held it up for Matthew to see. The goanna hung stiff in the air, its tongue flicking, eyes frightened. With her free hand No-name grasped the goanna around its neck and held it upright, then ran her hand down its body, feeling its scaly yellow abdomen with her thumb.

‘Fatfeller,’ she said, appreciatively. Then, before Matthew had time to comment, she had it again by the tail and with an expert flick of her arm had dashed the animal’s head twice against the ground. She inspected it to make sure it was dead, then handed it to Matthew. He took it a little reluctantly. Its head was bloody, its eyes closed, and its long narrow forked tongue flopped out.

‘You like eating goanna?’

‘Never tried it,’ said Matthew. ‘What’s it like?’

‘Good meat,’ said No-name, getting up. She started off again without even taking her bearings, or so it seemed to Matthew, who had lost his sense of direction in the course of the goanna chase. He strode along behind, carrying the goanna by its tail. It swung as he walked, and its tongue flicked against the side of his leg, leaving streaks of blood on his skin.

No-name wore her clothes as if she hardly knew she had them on. Her dress hung loosely on her lean body, bunched at the waist by its tie-belt. When she ran after the goanna, and even when she knelt on the ground digging in the sand, she paid no attention to her dress, not even making any attempt to protect it from the dust. Matthew thought of some of the girls at his school, and the way they preened themselves, conscious all the time of how they looked. Their clothes were always the latest style, and none of them would have been seen in a shapeless dress like No-name’s. *Well, I like her for being so free*, he said to himself, already in his mind defending her from criticism.

At one little hill, No-name pointed over to the right. ‘My camp that way,’ she said. ‘You want to look?’

‘Why not?’ Now that Matthew knew he was safe, he didn’t need to hurry back. He felt curious about his new friend’s life, and wanted to learn more about her.

No-name led Matthew off to the right, where she had pointed. Some distance away a stand of trees guarded the foot of a low hill, and it was towards these that the young pair headed. The morning sun was now higher in the sky, and Matthew luxuriated in its

warmth. In spite of his sleepless night, he felt energetic and suddenly happy.

As they approached the trees Matthew noticed an old utility parked under one of them. Near it a sheet of green canvas, almost hidden by the bush, was rigged up like a tent. Smoke rose nearby from a fire he couldn't yet see. It wasn't until they were within a stone's throw of the camp that he spotted someone moving about. A woman carrying a metal bucket came out from the shadow under the canvas and walked in the direction of the smoke. No-name called out to her: 'Eh!' The woman stopped in her tracks and shaded her eyes to look towards them. Suddenly Matthew felt shy. 'My granny,' the girl told him.

They drew close to the elderly woman, who seemed not at all surprised to see them. She put her bucket, half-full of water, on the fire and straightened up.

'This is Matthew,' said No-name, and the woman smiled and nodded as if she already knew him, and took his hand lightly in hers. The hand felt odd and Matthew glanced down at it. The fingers were bent and out of shape, like a claw. Matthew thought of leprosy and had to fight an impulse to withdraw his hand.

'*'E Jampijin?*' the old woman asked, smiling knowingly at her granddaughter, who went off into peals of embarrassed laughter and shook her head. Matthew smiled politely, and looked quizzical, waiting for No-name to explain the joke, but she didn't. The old woman released his hand at last, and sat down on the ground, smoothing her full floral dress over her lap. Again Matthew was struck by that indifference to clothes. He couldn't imagine his own grandmother sitting on the ground at all, never mind in the dirt without even a rug under her to protect her dress. No-name dropped down next to her grandmother, then held her hand out to take the goanna from Matthew.

'You bin get lost,' the old woman commented to Matthew.

'How did you know?' he asked.

'We bin see your track all round, last night,' said the woman. 'Up and down, up and down you bin go.' She laughed. 'But too late we bin see. Can't find you nighttime. We bin wait till morning time. My granny bin worrying for you. 'E bin take off early, look for you. But 'e bin find you all right.' She laughed again comfortably, with a glance at No-name, and leaned forward to push the unburnt wood at the edge of the fire into the centre of the blaze. The water in the bucket was cloudy with tiny bubbles as it came close to boiling.

So the girl had come especially looking for him. Matthew was beginning to understand that to people like No-name and her grandmother, the idea of getting lost in the bush was funny. They laughed, not unkindly, but with the same amused surprise with which he might laugh at someone of his own age who didn't know how to ride a bike. He had seen how easily No-name made her way through the countryside, without seeming to take her bearings or consciously look for landmarks.

*Maybe it's the same as me knowing my way around Perth,* thought Matthew, not liking to believe he was short on brains. *I was brought up there, and I suppose they ve spent all their lives around here.* His father had been transferred north two years before. Even though people who moved north led more of an outdoors life, they still lived in town and only went bush now and then, usually on long weekends, to well-known fishing and camping spots. No-name's people must know this whole country intimately; they probably used landmarks he hadn't even noticed.

Meanwhile, No-name had gutted the dead goanna, and was passing its body through the fire, holding it first by the head then by the tail. The body twisted and stiffened in the heat. As the flames singed the scales, the skin blistered and peeled. When the flames had died down and the fire was reduced to red coals, No-name leaned forward and used a stick to scrape a shallow pit at one side of it. With the same stick she rolled some of the red-hot coals into the bottom of the pit, and then laid the scorched goanna on top of them. She covered it with more of the coals and hot sand until there

was nothing to see but a hump in the ground, with the thin tip of the goanna's tail sticking out at one end.

The water came to the boil, and the old woman picked up a packet of tea torn open at one corner. She poured a pile of the leaves into her cupped hand, and threw them into the bucket. The tea-leaves seethed on top of the water for a few moments, then she leaned forward and lifted the bucket off the fire and put it down beside her. When it had settled she poured in some unheated water from a billy. Meanwhile No-name brought three chipped tin mugs, a tin of dried milk and an open packet of sugar.

While the tea was being prepared, Matthew glanced around the camp. On the ground under the sheet of canvas he could see several piles of bedding, as well as clothes, tools and various other objects in apparently random order. Two bare metal bed-frames stood in positions at some distance from the canvas. On the ground near the fire lay an assortment of tin mugs, plates and cooking utensils, milk tins, and a couple of upturned flour drums which looked as if they served as stools.

Matthew wondered where the other occupants of the camp might be. 'Do you live here?' he asked No-name, trying not to sound incredulous.

'Not all the time,' she told him. 'Only weekends and holiday time. My granny got a house in town too.'

'Whereabouts?' asked Matthew.

'*Piyirnwarnti.*' Then, seeing he looked nonplussed, she added, 'You know – Two-mile.' Suddenly Matthew was embarrassed. Two-mile was one of the two small communities that used to be called reserves. Some people still used the old term, because for white people the community names were too hard to pronounce. The communities were places Matthew had always, without fully realising it, looked down on. He had never actually set foot inside either of them, but sometimes he had ridden past on his bike during his explorations of the town. He had gained an impression of broken-down cars and ramshackle houses with fires burning in the dusty front yards of many of them, and people sitting outside on the

ground. The house he lived in, a prisons department house on the main road just out of town, was much bigger, cleaner and neater than any of the houses at the reserve looked from the outside. He took his own living conditions for granted because they were much like those of the other kids he mixed with. Most of them lived in government houses because of their parents' work, with prisons, police, or the public service.

Until this moment, when he found himself forced to think about it, Matthew had looked on the people in the communities as completely different from himself. If they lived in poor conditions that must be how they wanted it. He had heard adults, his own parents among them, tut-tutting about the way Aboriginal people behaved, and how few of them held a job. Never before had he thought of the Two-mile inhabitants as ordinary people much like himself. Nor had it crossed his mind that they might have another side to their lives than sitting in the reserve or hanging around town.

He looked at No-name and tried to imagine her amongst the other scruffy children he had seen playing in the yards with no grass.

'Are you two here on your own?' he asked then.

'No. My mother here too, and my relations, but they gone walkabout.'

'Walkabout?' said Matthew.

'Yeah, you know – hunting.'

No-name dipped each mug in turn into the bucket, filling it with the rich black brew, and spooned powdered milk and sugar on top, giving it a vigorous stir. She handed one mug to Matthew, who couldn't help looking a bit doubtfully at the chipped rim before sipping the tea. He seldom drank tea at home, but he could have done with a mug of it last night, to keep the cold at bay. He drank it now gladly.

No-name's grandmother unwrapped a cloth parcel lying on the ground beside her, and took out a large, freshly made damper. She broke off a piece and handed it to Matthew. She gave another to No-



name. Then she took the remaining piece and dipped it into her tea before eating it. No-name did the same, and Matthew followed suit. He was never allowed to dunk at home. His mother said it was bad manners. He had once told her he thought this rule was putting manners before enjoyment, because most people liked to dunk. He did so now with the relish of hunger.

‘What for you bin walk round self?’ asked No-name’s grandmother suddenly. ‘Where your family?’

‘My family? They’re at home. I wanted to camp out by myself.’ Matthew hesitated before adding, ‘And I wanted to look for some rock paintings.’

‘Blackfeller painting? You bin findim?’ Matthew was relieved that the old woman wasn’t offended. On the contrary, she seemed pleased.

‘Yes,’ Matthew told her, livening up. ‘I found them on flat rock, like a wall.’ He gestured upwards to give an idea of the height. ‘Do you know much about them?’

‘Very old, them painting,’ said the old woman, serious now. ‘Very old story, they gottim.’

‘What kind of story?’ Matthew was interested.

‘Old story, from before, long time. Before people bin walk round here. You know that kind story?’

‘I think so,’ Matthew searched his memory, but could think of nothing specific. ‘You mean stories about how things were made? Animals and everything?’

‘That right. Earlydays people bin puttim down story, they bin paintim, on rock. That painting still there today.’

‘Some of the paintings look new. The ochre looks fresh.’

‘Yeah, that right,’ the old woman said again. ‘When they getting worn out people renewim, keepim nice.’

Matthew pictured generation after generation of artists maintaining the records of traditional stories. He tried to think of a parallel from his own experience. School teaching? He supposed that was the nearest equivalent. Generations of school teachers

passing on the same rules of maths, say, to class after class of unwilling students. The comparison seemed unworthy of the artists.

After a while, No-name took hold of the protruding tail and pulled the goanna out of the cooking pit, dusting off the ashes. It looked stiff and dry as it lay near her on the ground. No-name twisted off the tail and handed it to Matthew. She peeled the skin from the goanna's belly, revealing a layer of soft yellow fat. With her fingers she pulled out a piece of the fat and ate it. Giving another twist she divided the body in two, and passed the forequarters to her grandmother.

'You bin havim goanna before?' asked the old woman. Matthew shook his head, looking at the tail in some alarm.

'Good one,' No-name told him. 'You try 'im.' She showed him how to peel the skin from the white meat. Not wanting to be a wimp, Matthew took hold of a piece of the tail between finger and thumb, and pulled. The meat came away from the bone in a long strip. It looked like a piece of chicken. Overcoming his reluctance by telling himself that's what it was, he put it into his mouth and chewed. To his surprise, the meat was tasty.

'Good one?' asked No-name, smiling broadly. Matthew nodded, and she and her grandmother laughed with pleasure, steadily tucking into their own portions.

When the goanna and the tea and damper were finished, No-name started telling her grandmother the story of how she had found Matthew. She spoke fast, in a dialect that seemed to be mostly English, but Matthew could only follow the gist of it. The old woman roared with laughter at some points, but he wasn't sure what it was she found funny. The part about making a fire seemed to tickle her especially – perhaps, thought Matthew, because he had shivered with cold all night, with fire-making wood all around him.

Matthew was beginning to wonder if No-name had forgotten about taking him back to Goanna Gorge. Perhaps she thought he should be able to find his own way from here. In fact, he was more uncertain than ever about where he was. He knew there was no real hurry, but he would feel happier when he was back in familiar

territory. Besides, he couldn't stay here all day. He didn't want to become a nuisance, something his mother often warned him against.

'I'd better start heading back, now,' he said then, a little reluctantly.

'Yeah, yeah. You go now,' said the old woman, nodding her head. Matthew thanked her for his breakfast, and she smiled and again said, 'Yeah.' He got the feeling that thanks were not expected.

'Can you show me the way?' he asked No-name, but she was already on her feet.

'That waterhole not too far,' she told him.

Again the girl seemed to know instinctively which way to go. Without a moment's thought she headed straight through the bush at an angle from the vehicle track. Matthew glanced at the sun, high now, and at his shadow, and calculated that they were going just north of east.

No-name didn't seem to be hurrying, but Matthew found himself walking fast to keep up with her striding bare feet. She never hesitated, but weaved the easiest way through the undergrowth, avoiding dense grass, dead wattle, clumps of bushes. Matthew felt a bit silly following the girl's footprints so closely, stepping exactly where she stepped. For a while he attempted to pick his own path through the scrub, but he soon found himself slowed down by obstacles. He realised that No-name's lifetime spent close to the bush had given her all sorts of skills that now came without effort. She was automatically picking the easiest path, so he might as well give up his own efforts to do better, and just follow her.

The sun was hotter, but there was still a cool easterly wind blowing, and Matthew didn't sweat much. His mind wandered back to his predicament of the previous night. He wondered how he would be feeling now if No-name had not come looking for him. Instead of the shame of having to wait for a search party to find him, Matthew would now be able to go home at the expected time, and his parents need not even know that anything had gone wrong.

*Maybe I shouldn't tell them?* he thought. *What if they don't let me come on my own again?* But he hated being untruthful, and he would have to give his parents some account of his two days. He could not imagine leaving out the most interesting part of his adventure. Besides, he wanted to tell them about his new friends.

Just then Matthew's attention was brought back to the present by a sense that the bush through which they were walking looked familiar. He couldn't be sure, but there was something about it that he felt he knew. No-name said something, and pointed straight ahead. Matthew was astonished to see his own bicycle, still leaning against the tree where he had left it.

'You've brought us right back to the top of Goanna Gorge!' he said in surprise. 'I had no idea how close we were.'

'True?' said No-name, grinning at Matthew as she came to a standstill. He walked over to his bike and felt the handlebars and saddle in wonderment, as if he had been separated from the machine for months instead of just twenty-four hours. When he turned around gratefully to say something to No-name, she had already gone.



## Home

*Matthew listened;* he could hear nothing but the wind and the call of a honey-eating bird. He resisted his first impulse to call out to No-name. If she had gone, she must have her reasons. Even so, he felt suddenly lonely, and stood waiting for several minutes in case she came back. Then he started to climb down again into Goanna Gorge, where he had left his belongings.

He stood near the water's edge, where he had been standing at almost the same time the previous day, and was surprised at how different he now felt, as if the adventures of the past twenty-four hours had somehow changed him. Then, he had felt exhilarated at setting out on his lone quest. But that had proved to be the least part of it. Discovering the rock paintings, which had so excited him yesterday, now seemed of much less importance. His night alone in the bush, frightening and uncomfortable though it had been, had left a far greater impression on his mind. And, he suddenly realised, the last few hours with No-name and her grandmother had been, in a different way, just as important. For some reason, he was convinced he would meet No-name again.

But when Matthew looked behind the bushes where he had left his backpack and sleeping-bag, they were not there. He glanced

around in case he was mistaken, but he knew this was the right place. The grass inside the rock crevice was crushed from the weight of his things. Someone had taken them.

As people do when they have lost something, Matthew searched vainly around, coming back several times to stare again in disbelief at the empty hiding-place, as if he expected his missing things to reappear by themselves. He looked also for signs to tell him who had taken them. At weekends and holiday times people sometimes came to Goanna Gorge for a swim or a picnic. Perhaps someone else had come yesterday, after he had left. He went back to the water's edge and examined the ground for signs that had not been there before – empty drink cans or food wrappings carelessly left behind – but there were none. There were plenty of footprints, but he didn't see any that were obviously fresh apart from his own.

Feeling deflated now, Matthew filled his water-bottle from the pool, took a drink, and then lay in the shade of the rock wall. He wondered why he had insisted on coming back so soon. He could have stayed longer talking to No-name. *I just wanted to get back to base, to feel sure*, he reminded himself. *And it didn't take nearly as long as I'd expected*. Now, he had time on his hands. For a while his mind buzzed with all that had happened to him, and all that would happen when he turned up at home without his pack and sleeping-bag. But at last his sleepless night caught up with him, and he dozed off in the warmth of midday.

When Matthew awoke, the sun had gone well past overhead. In the depth of the shadows the air was almost chilly. He wondered what time it was. Certainly time to start for home. He sat up, stared at the still, grey surface of the pool, and frowned as he thought about his missing things. Now there was no choice – he would have to tell his parents what had happened, to explain how he had lost everything. Even though he knew it was pointless, he still couldn't help having another look at the empty crevice to satisfy himself for the last time that nothing was there. Then he turned and started to climb the steps up the cliffside.

At the top he unchained his bicycle, checked his saddle-bag to see if the tools were still there, and was mildly surprised that the thief hadn't made off with them as well. Then he wheeled his bike onto the track and started his long ride home. As he rode he watched the sun sink towards the range of hills to the west, and finally disappear like molten gold behind them. Slowly the sky changed from pale blue to yellow, then orange, deepening to red. By the time he reached his own house, it was dark.

Matthew's parents were about to sit down to the evening meal when he walked in.

'We were just going to send out a search party,' said his father, jovially. 'Your mother was starting to get worried. Well, did you have a good time?'

'It was fantastic,' said Matthew. 'But nothing like I imagined.'

'Were you warm enough last night?' asked his mother, smiling happily now that her son was back. Matthew hesitated.

'Well, no, actually, I was cold.'

'Sleeping-bag no good?' asked his father, surprised. 'Where is it, anyway?'

'Dad, I've got something to tell you. And Mum. Don't get mad at me till I've told you the whole story.'

'Don't tell me you lost it? And where's your backpack?'

'Well – I think they were stolen.'

'Stolen? How could they be stolen? That's a couple of hundred dollars worth of gear you're talking about!' Matthew's father thumped the table with the flat of his hand. His wife gave him a warning look.

'I know, Dad, and I'm really sorry. It's a long story.'

'Well, if it's a long story you'd better tell us over dinner,' said Matthew's mother, always practical. 'Are you hungry?'

'I'm starving.' Matthew went to shower and change his shorts, then came back to join his parents at the table.

'Well?' asked his father, after a few minutes silent eating.

‘You know you said you were going to send out a search party?’ Matthew reminded him.

‘That was just a joke because you said you’d be back by sunset, and your mother was getting worried. What of it?’

‘Well, you nearly did have to send one.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Matthew, you didn’t get lost?’ His mother sounded alarmed.

‘Yes, I did,’ Matthew confessed. ‘I got lost yesterday. I had to spend the night in the bush.’

‘Not without your sleeping-bag?’ His mother was aghast.

‘Yes, that’s just it. I left my things back near Goanna Gorge pool while I went exploring. And then – I got lost and couldn’t get back.’

Matthew’s father glared his annoyance. ‘You told us you were going to Goanna Gorge. You didn’t say anything about going off exploring on your own. You know what we would have said about that!’

‘I know, I didn’t think. It was silly how it happened. I went along the valley looking for those rock paintings you told me about. I found them too.’ Matthew paused, but his parents didn’t react, so he went on. ‘But then, instead of going back the same way, I tried to follow the valley along the top, and I climbed a hill and somehow lost my bearings. I still don’t know where I went wrong.’

‘This country is so dangerous,’ said his mother, shaking her head. ‘Thank God you’re safe. Think what might have happened! You had your water-bottle with you, I hope?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Well, how did you find your way back?’

‘I didn’t. Someone found me.’

‘Well, you were damned lucky,’ said his father. ‘Who was it?’

‘A girl. An Aboriginal girl, younger than me. She was hunting and found my tracks.’

‘Hunting? On her own?’ Matthew’s father sounded sceptical.



‘Yes. She knows the bush like the back of her hand – it’s amazing. She showed me how to make fire too.’ Matthew wanted to tell his parents about the best parts of his adventure, but they only seemed interested in what had gone wrong.

‘And she took you back to Goanna Gorge?’

‘Yes. Not straight away, though. She showed me where she stays.’

‘What do you mean, where she stays?’ asked Matthew’s mother.

‘They have a place there in the bush – her family does. There was an old ute, and a sort of tent thing, and a fire ...’

Matthew’s father snorted. ‘A blacks’ camp!’ he said.

‘Well, what’s wrong with that?’ said Matthew, taken aback.

‘What’s wrong with it? Nothing if you don’t mind dirt and squalor.’

‘It wasn’t dirty or squalid,’ protested Matthew. ‘It was just a camp, where they go at weekends. I met her grandmother.’ He decided not to mention the old woman’s leper hands, or the chipped mug of tea. ‘They live in town most of the time.’

‘Where? At one of the reserves?’

‘Well, yes. Only they’re not called reserves any more.’

‘There you are – dirt and squalor.’

‘Oh, come on – you’ve never even been inside the communities!’ said Matthew, knowing he had once been guilty of thinking the same thing. He was surprised at how fiercely protective he felt towards No-name.

‘No, and I wouldn’t want to.’

‘Well, never mind about that,’ put in Matthew’s mother, frowning at her husband. ‘At least you’re safe. It was nice of that girl to help you, whoever she is. We’re grateful to her. If you ever see her again, you must thank her for us. Maybe we could give her a little present.’

‘If she hasn’t got one already,’ put in Matthew’s father.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You still haven’t told us how you lost your camping gear.’

‘That was gone when I got back to Goanna Gorge. Someone must have come yesterday afternoon, after I’d left, and taken it. I hid everything between some rocks, behind the bushes, but it was gone.’

‘Well, there’s no use worrying about that,’ said his mother. ‘Losing your things is the least of it. What if you’d fallen and broken your leg, or been bitten by a snake? Or what if you’d left your water-bottle behind?’

‘But I didn’t!’ Matthew reminded her.

‘Well, I hope you’ve learned something, Matthew,’ said his father sternly. ‘You were a stupid kid. I thought you had more sense than to go off wandering in the bush on your own. No compass, no sleeping-bag. You couldn’t have come to much harm if you’d stayed at Goanna Gorge, where you said you were going to be.’

‘I didn’t come to much harm,’ said Matthew, reasonably.

‘You got lost, didn’t you?’

‘But I got found again.’

‘That was just good luck. We’ll have to think twice about letting you go off on your own again.’

‘He’s not going, and that’s that,’ said his mother with finality.



That night Matthew lay in his warm bed and remembered how cold he had been the previous night. Yet it wasn’t just the cold he remembered. He stared up at his blank ceiling, and tried to imagine he could see through it to the stars beyond. But the streetlight outside his window sent a glow into his room, and his ceiling remained a ceiling. He tried to shut out the low murmur of his parents’ voices, the occasional roar of a passing car, and to hear again the sounds of the bush. He remembered the joy he had felt at the break of day, and the welcoming songs of the birds. The walk

through the bush with the strange girl, No-name; the goanna she had tracked and killed with such ease. He wondered what Nick and the others would say when he told them. They'd be sick with envy.

Getting lost had been an ordeal, but Matthew didn't regret it one bit. He sat up in bed. 'I'm going to learn about the bush,' he whispered to himself. 'I'll ask No-name to teach me!' It was with a feeling of delicious anticipation that he finally lay down again.



## **No-name Again**

*Over the next* few days, Matthew often thought about No-name. Twice he cycled to Two-mile, where she had told him she lived. The community lay on the outskirts of town, down a stretch of pitted gravel road with scrub on both sides. It was like a small village fenced into a compound of its own. When Matthew reached the entrance, where a sign displayed the community name, *Piyirnwarnti*, which he couldn't pronounce, and another sign prohibited entry to alcohol and unauthorised persons, he lost courage. Instead of going in, as he had intended, he hung about outside. For the first time, Matthew wondered why it was there. Why did most of the black people live tucked away in little compounds instead of having houses in the town like everyone else? Wasn't a reserve the same thing as a ghetto? He'd heard of Jewish ghettos in Europe, and black ghettos in America, but he wasn't sure what they were like. He'd have to ask someone.

From where he stood he could see people moving about between the houses, and others sitting in the shade of trees or front verandas, but no one noticed him. He waited, hoping No-name would spot him and come to talk to him. After a while he began to feel self-conscious lurking there, so he gave up and cycled away.

He watched for No-name in the streets. Whenever he saw a group of black girls walking together, he searched their faces for the one he knew, but hers was never amongst them. Doing this made him aware of how little attention he had paid to the black kids, for he recognised few of them. He was aware of their presence in the town, of course, but he thought of them collectively, as 'the black kids', never individually. Even at school, though he knew everyone in his class, none of his friends was black. He thought about Nick and the others. They weren't particularly friendly with the black kids either. He'd never heard them sneering, as some of the yobbos did. Matthew wondered if he was at fault for not being friendlier. *The black kids stick to themselves too*, he thought as he rode home. *Maybe they don't want to mix with us*. Yet No-name had been so friendly, out in the bush. He'd felt fine with her.

When Nick came back from his trip to Darwin with his parents, he called around to tell Matthew about his adventures.

'We went to Kakadu,' said Nick. 'Great place. They get much more rain than we do here. You should have seen the lakes and the wildlife, especially birds.'

Matthew listened while Nick described the places he had visited.

'They have Aboriginal rangers who know everything about the region. It's their own country, see. They can show you all these caves and rock paintings. I reckon it would be a good place to go on a camping trip, and have a real look round. We only spent a couple of days there, and I had to stay at the Lodge with the oldies, so it wasn't the same.'

'Yeah, sounds great,' said Matthew, not quite as enthusiastic as he would have been before he met No-name. 'I didn't go away, but I had a bit of an adventure here.'

'True? What d'you get up to?'

Matthew told Nick briefly about his trip to Goanna Gorge, how he got lost and found again. Nick was so interested in hearing all about fire-making and hunting that he forgot to tease his friend for getting lost in the first place.

‘You wouldn’t think the black kids here could do all those things,’ he said. ‘I thought they just hung round town all the time.’

‘Yeah,’ said Matthew. ‘No wonder some of them don’t show much interest in school. Who’d want to be learning social studies when you could be out hunting!’

‘Maybe we don’t need to go all the way to Kakadu after all,’ said Nick.



Four days after his adventure in the bush, Matthew was summoned by telephone to the police station.

‘Did you report the theft of a backpack and sleeping-bag last weekend?’ asked the sergeant, who was a friend of Matthew’s father.

‘Yes,’ said Matthew, though it was actually his father who had reported the theft. ‘A khaki backpack and a green sleeping-bag with a red tartan lining. Have you found them?’ He was astonished.

‘We think we might have them here, if you’d like to come over and identify them.’

‘I’ll come straight away,’ said Matthew, convinced the goods were his, and wondering who on earth could have taken them. He jumped onto his bike at once.

At the police station the sergeant, a thickset man with a moustache, was looking grave. He led Matthew through the hatch in the counter and into a room behind the office. On the table lay the lost belongings. But it wasn’t these that caught Matthew’s attention. Slumped in a chair against the wall behind the table was a thin young girl wearing a floral dress. It was No-name.

‘Hello!’ said Matthew in astonishment. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘You know this girl?’ asked the sergeant.

Matthew nodded. ‘Yes, I know her. She found me last weekend when I was lost.’ He looked inquiringly at the sergeant.

‘Did she now? Well, it seems she found more than just you.’ He nodded towards the things on the table. ‘Your gear was at her house.’

For a moment Matthew was stunned. Then he realised what the sergeant was getting at.

‘She didn’t take them,’ he said, without a moment’s hesitation.

The sergeant gave him a funny look.

‘What makes you so sure about that?’

‘I just know,’ said Matthew, unable to explain. ‘That’s right, isn’t it?’ he asked the girl. But No-name sat with her head hanging down and didn’t answer.

The sergeant led Matthew back to the main office, and shut the door. ‘You can’t trust these people,’ he told him. ‘Just because they’re friendly doesn’t mean you can trust them. They can smile at you and rob you at the same time, you know.’

‘I don’t believe it!’ Matthew said again. ‘She wouldn’t rob me. Besides,’ he suddenly remembered, ‘she didn’t have a chance. My things were already gone when I left her.’ He described his meeting with No-name, and how she had taken him back to Goanna Gorge.

‘You say she disappeared. She probably went straight down to the waterhole ahead of you, and knocked off your things before you even got there.’

‘She couldn’t have.’ Matthew was stubborn. ‘There’s only one way down, and she didn’t go that way. Anyway, there wasn’t time.’

‘Only one way down that you know about,’ said the sergeant, pointing his pencil at Matthew. ‘These black-fellers have their own ways of doing things.’

‘But she didn’t even know I’d left anything down there,’ Matthew insisted. ‘She only knew about the bike.’

‘You say she saw your tracks and knew you were lost.’ The sergeant tried a different tack. ‘She probably found your belongings first, and hid them in her camp before she went looking for you.’

‘I tell you, she didn’t steal them,’ said Matthew, with growing frustration. ‘Look, can I go back and speak to her? I’m sure she’ll be able to explain.’

‘It’s not usual,’ said the sergeant, ‘but we’re not going to charge her this time, seeing as we’ve recovered everything. She’s too young, and a bit simple by the looks of her. We’ll just put the wind up her and give her a caution.’

‘Simple?’ Matthew was amazed. ‘She’s not simple! She’s one of the cleverest girls I know!’

Again the sergeant looked at him oddly. ‘You sure it’s the same girl? Frances Bulu?’

*Frances*, thought Matthew. *So that’s her real name*. He wasn’t going to admit he didn’t know it.

‘Of course that’s her. Let me go and talk to her,’ begged Matthew.

‘You can have a couple of minutes, but leave the door open.’ Matthew went back into the interview room, and the sergeant continued doing his work in the office. Matthew stood looking at the girl, but she didn’t acknowledge he was there.

‘No-name – Frances – whatever you call yourself – just tell me what happened.’ No-name sat with her head down, looking at her hands, which were busy screwing up the hem of her dress. She didn’t speak.

‘Why won’t you talk to me? I know you didn’t take my things.’

Still No-name hung her head. He tried a different approach. ‘I went to the community at Two-mile looking for you.’ The girl gave no sign of having heard him. ‘I want to be your friend,’ he whispered desperately. No-name hung her head even lower.

Matthew sat in the chair nearest her, and leaned forward. He was trying to will her to look at him when he realised with a shock that she was crying. She made no sound, but tears dropped slowly, one by one, on to her dress. She did not attempt to wipe them away.

Matthew was aghast. ‘Hey, I didn’t mean to make you cry,’ he said in a hurry.



Just at that moment the sergeant put his head in at the door.  
'How are you getting on?'

Matthew got up. 'She's upset,' he said lamely. 'She won't talk to me.' Taking a last look at the tousled black head, he left the room.



'What I can't understand is why the police went to her house,' said Matthew at tea that evening.

'They had a good idea who she was,' said his father.

Matthew didn't understand.

'When I reported your missing things,' his father explained.

'You mean you told the police she had taken them?' Matthew was incredulous.

'She had, hadn't she?'

'No!' said Matthew. 'I don't believe it.'

'Well, there they are.' His father nodded towards Matthew's bedroom where he had put his recovered belongings.

'We know how you feel,' said Matthew's mother gently. 'That girl helped you, and you thought you could trust her. It's disappointing for you. But that's the way these people are.'

Matthew pushed his plate of chicken casserole, only half-eaten, away from him.

'What do *you* know about "these people"?' he almost shouted. 'I bet you've never even spoken to an Aboriginal person!'

'Of course I have,' said his mother, offended. 'I'm secretary of the basketball association, don't forget.'

'That's different,' said Matthew, not quite sure what he meant. He knew many of the town's best basketball players were black. It was just that he didn't think No-name's family would be the sort of people to belong to the basketball association.

‘Anyway,’ he said, pulling back his plate and forking up some chicken, ‘if you can’t trust the basketball crowd, why do you work as their secretary?’

‘I didn’t say I don’t trust the basketballers. What are you talking about?’

‘You said “That’s what these people are like”.’

Matthew and his mother sat staring at one another across the table in mutual incomprehension.

‘This is all beside the point,’ his father put in. ‘The fact is, your friend, who found you when you were lost, for which we are all grateful, also turns out to be a thief, for which we are not grateful at all. That’s life.’

Matthew said nothing more, but inwardly he was still seething with anger. He knew in his guts No-name hadn’t robbed him. But even apart from his feeling that he could trust her, he was sure she hadn’t had the chance to climb down into Goanna Gorge and make off with his pack and sleeping-bag before he got there. She didn’t even know where they were. And she would hardly have come looking for him in the bush if she had robbed him earlier. Besides, none of his things had been in her camp, he was sure of that, and where else would she have left them? But there was no use reasoning with adults who had made up their minds.

He left the table as soon as he could, and went to his room. He looked through his pack again. Everything was still there, just as he had packed it. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed at all.

‘Any thief would have tipped it out to see what was in it,’ muttered Matthew. He thought of No-name as he had seen her at the police station. As if all the stuffing had been knocked out of her. So different from the confident, smiling young girl he had followed through the bush. *She probably thinks I put the police on to her, he thought. No wonder she wouldn’t speak to me. She’ll never want to speak to me again.*

Matthew made up his mind he would find No-name the next morning and have it out with her. He couldn’t bear to leave so many

misunderstandings between them.



## A Mystery Solved

*The following* morning, Matthew was up at the Two-mile community again at seven. While he was mustering the courage to go in, two young men in narrow jeans and cowboy hats came towards the gateway. One had bare feet and the other wore a well-used pair of riding boots with high heels. They looked dishevelled and weary, as if they were suffering from hangovers. They glanced at Matthew, and one of them nodded.

‘Excuse me,’ Matthew said, and they both stopped. ‘I’m looking for a girl called ...’ he thought for a moment. What had the policeman called her? Frances something. ‘Er, I think her name is Frances.’ Then he wanted to bite his tongue. She had told him people didn’t use her name since someone had died. But he couldn’t remember how to pronounce the other name she had told him.

Matthew was relieved that the young men didn’t show any sign of distress at his mistake.

‘That young *Kumunyjayi*?’ said one of them.

‘Yes, that’s her!’ Matthew nodded eagerly. ‘Do you know her?’

‘’E’s my sister,’ said the other man.

‘True?’ said Matthew.

‘Yeah. You want to talk to ’im?’

Matthew nodded again.

‘ ’E stopping in that blue house over there.’

Matthew looked. The houses were painted in several different colours, and he saw that one of them had a bluish tint. ‘It’s okay if I go and knock at the door?’

‘Yeah, just go and have a look.’

‘Well, thanks.’ Matthew was breathless with nervousness, but he wheeled his bike in through the gateway and towards the house No-name’s brother had pointed out. The houses had been built in a loop, and a lot of people were sitting in their front yards talking in groups, or walking around outside. He felt sure everyone in the community was looking at him. He half expected someone to tell him to go away, but no one did.

As Matthew approached the blue house he saw that the door was wide open and there were several people in the backyard. No-name wasn’t amongst them, but Matthew was tremendously relieved to recognise her grandmother. The old woman saw him coming and called out to him. She seemed just as friendly as she had been the day he had met her in the bush, and he felt reassured. At least the whole family didn’t hate him.

‘You looking for that *Napangarti*?’ she asked. ‘ ’im not here.’

Matthew had no idea what *Napangarti* meant, but he knew the old woman must be talking about her granddaughter. ‘Oh dear.’ He was crestfallen, wondering why her brother hadn’t told him that. ‘Do you know where she is?’

The old woman shook her head, but said nothing. Matthew wanted to question her further, but didn’t like to do so in case she thought him rude.

He looked around, trying not to make his curiosity too obvious. The houses were all the same design, single storey, built flat on the ground, with only the colouring to distinguish them. They had been arranged in an oval, with a road running around the front of them. In the central space created by the arrangement of the houses,

which was evidently intended to be a sort of park, stood one or two biggish old eucalypt trees, but there was no grass. The ground was bare and dusty and marked with innumerable tyre tracks. A few front yards sprouted patches of grass, and in some of them young trees were growing, but most were of bare earth like the central space. There were no fences between the houses, and Matthew sensed that the people here lived much more closely and publicly than his own kind did. He remembered the community name at the entrance. This did indeed look like a community. He thought it might be all right to live like that, amongst other families instead of walled up behind a fence as his family was, intent on privacy. But then he thought of his neighbours. He couldn't imagine wanting to be seen by them whenever he moved out of his house. Perhaps it was necessary to know people very well before you could feel comfortable living this closely with them.

Matthew was used to being an only child and had never worried about it, but now he was struck by the thought that he could be missing out by having no relations living nearby besides his parents. He felt a touch of envy for No-name's way of life. She mightn't have much in the way of belongings, but she had her place in the midst of all these people.

No-name's grandmother didn't seem inclined to give any more information, so after a few minutes Matthew said goodbye to her and wheeled his bicycle out through the entrance. He rode slowly back down the bumpy road to town.



The following Monday, school started again. Matthew went off reluctantly on his bicycle, feeling that the holiday, which had started off so well, had turned out to be a disappointment. But he met Nick at the gate, and before long the two boys were in a circle of classmates exchanging news. Matthew's adventure gained excitement in Nick's retelling.

‘And then this black girl appeared out of nowhere and carried him off to her camp in the wilderness!’

During the morning recess, when his friends had left to play basketball and Matthew was sitting on a bench by himself eating an apple, a shadow fell on him. He squinted up into the sun at the lanky figure standing over him. He started.

‘No-name!’ he said out loud. ‘What are you doing here?’

No-name sat down at the other end of the bench, and smiled just as she had done the first time he met her – with mischief and delight. There was no sign in her face of resentment; it was as if she had completely forgotten the painful incident at the police station. Matthew could not get it out of his mind.

‘How are you?’ he asked lamely. ‘And how come you’re here at school?’ No-name laughed, and it suddenly dawned on Matthew that she was a pupil. Of course, she must be! It hadn’t occurred to him that No-name, the girl who had seemed so at home in the bush, so knowledgeable about things of which Matthew knew nothing, also went to school. She must be in a class a year or two below his. Yet Matthew marvelled that he had never noticed her before. She had been just one of the black kids running around the yard.

No-name still hadn’t said anything.

‘What happened at the police station?’ Matthew asked her.

The girl’s face went serious for a moment, then she shrugged. ‘They let me go home.’ She smiled sunnily again.

‘I’m sorry about all that,’ Matthew said, wanting to give her an explanation. But No-name didn’t seem to expect one. He longed to ask her how she came to have his belongings, but was afraid she would think he was accusing her of taking them, so he said nothing.

‘I came looking for you the other day,’ he told her.

No-name nodded. ‘Granny did tell me.’

‘I met your brother,’ he went on. ‘He told me you were at home.’

No-name grinned. ‘Who that bloke?’ she asked.

Matthew was puzzled. She must know her own brother.

‘Tall fellow, curly hair ...’

‘ ’E got boots?’

Matthew thought for a moment. ‘Yes, cowboy boots.’

No-name grinned again. ‘That’s ’im – Alfie. But ’e not my really brother,’ she said. ‘I call ’im brother. But ’e my cousin-brother.’

‘Your cousin-brother?’

‘Mm. His mother sister for my mother.’ She thought a moment, then went on: ‘But not really sister. They call one another sister.’

‘I see,’ said Matthew, not at all sure what she meant, but with that sense he’d had in the bush, that here was a different way of seeing the world. As then, he wanted to learn more about it.

‘That brother did find your bag,’ said No-name suddenly.

Matthew looked at her. At last he was going to learn the truth.

‘Your brother?’ he repeated, foolishly. ‘Alfie? The one with the boots?’

No-name nodded. ‘That day now, when I did find you. My brother was hunting near that water, and ’e pick up your bag. ’E never know it’s yours. ’E was thinking someone did leave it behind. But I tell him after – that’s Matthew’s gear! ’E was feeling sorry then. But too late – you was already gone.’

‘He brought my things to your camp?’ said Matthew. No-name nodded.

‘Mm.’

‘Why did he do that?’ He was still uncertain. No-name shrugged and looked away.

Now Matthew understood. No-name’s brother had taken his things, perhaps thinking they’d been lost, perhaps just because he liked the look of them. No-name had guessed at once that they belonged to Matthew.

‘So you took them home?’ he said.

‘Yeah, keep them for you. Can’t leave them in the bush. Someone might steal them.’

‘The police thought you did.’



‘I know. I was home by myself. The police come to my granny’s house. They ask me for your bag, and I show them. Then they take me to police station.’

‘Why didn’t you tell them it wasn’t you that took them?’

‘I was feeling frighten. Might be they blame my brother for stealing. They might lock ’im up. I never say anything.’

‘You don’t know where I live, do you?’ asked Matthew.

‘Yeah, I know. But can’t go your house.’ No-name laughed.

‘Why not?’

She shrugged. ‘Your father might get wild with us.’

Matthew said nothing. He couldn’t picture his father getting wild exactly, just stern and gruff, but he suddenly saw him from the girl’s point of view. How intimidating a prison officer must seem to her. He remembered how fearful he had been about going inside the community where No-name lived. A simple thing like knocking on his front door would be just as terrifying for No-name. Probably worse. And then having to explain how she happened to have Matthew’s missing things. No, he could see she couldn’t have done that.

Just then the recess siren rang out, and No-name ran off towards the classrooms. Her loose dress flew out behind her, and Matthew recognised it as the same one she had worn the day he’d first met her.



## **Jampijin**

*Matthew's father* reacted badly when Matthew told him what had really happened to his belongings.

'She was keeping my things for me.'

'I suppose you believe that story,' his father snorted.

'Of course I do,' said Matthew hotly. 'I know it's true.'

'And I suppose you believe you'd have got everything back if the police hadn't found it for you?'

'Yes,' said Matthew staunchly. 'She was waiting till she saw me.'

'It would have been a long wait, I can tell you.' Matthew's father went back to reading his paper.

'She'd have seen me at school.'

'Two weeks later?'

His father would not accept that No-name and her relations were too shy or too frightened to come to the house. 'Why should they be shy?' he asked. 'They know you. They know where you live. They had to drive right past this house on their way back to Two-mile. Of course they weren't going to give anything back. You're too trusting, my boy. You'll learn the hard way.'

Matthew held his tongue with difficulty. There was no arguing with his father. If he did he'd end up losing his temper, and then there'd be trouble. He went to his room blazing with indignation.



After that meeting in the schoolyard, Matthew often saw No-name. She didn't seem to go to school every day, and even when he saw her there she didn't always come and speak to him, and never when he was with any of his friends. When she did come up she usually spoke fleetingly and soon ran off to disappear amongst other black girls in her age-group. She seemed shyer and less sure of herself than she had been in the bush.

The memory of the day they had met was never far from Matthew's thoughts. It was as if a process had been started in him, and he was waiting for it to continue. He wanted to go into the bush again. He knew too that he only wanted to go with No-name.

One day after school he ran into No-name on his way out of the yard with Nick. He stopped to talk to her. Nick winked broadly, then hurried off to catch up with another boy. Matthew was grateful. He walked with No-name, pushing his bike, as far as the reserve. He hesitated at the entrance, but No-name seemed to expect him to go in with her, so he wheeled his bike beside her up to the blue house. A few people acknowledged him with a friendly wave or a nod of the head. He felt pleased to be recognised.

'Ah, *Jampijin!*' came the voice of No-name's grandmother as they approached the house. The old woman was sitting on the ground in the front yard. She had a naked little boy of about two at her side. Matthew greeted her and she took his hand in her claw. This time, he didn't wince. No-name went behind the house and came back holding a puppy, which she showed to Matthew, who took it and held it carefully in his hands. It was tiny, its eyes still closed. Behind

No-name came the puppy's mother, teats heavy with milk, looking a little anxious about her offspring.

'What's that your granny calls me?' asked Matthew, when he had given back the puppy. 'It sounds like Jamby something.' No-name laughed as she had done that first time.

'*Jampijin*,' she said. 'That's a skin name.'

'A skin name?' said Matthew, puzzled. 'What's that?'

'Everybody got a skin name,' said No-name.

'Yes? What's yours?'

'Me, I'm *Napangarti*.' No-name laughed again. Matthew remembered her grandmother had used a term like that when he had visited the reserve before. He tried to say it: 'Nabanahty.' No-name corrected him until he got it right.

'What does it mean, to be *Jampijin*?' he asked her. She hesitated.

'*Jampijin*, 'im right way for *Napangarti*!' put in her grandmother, who had been following the conversation while seeming not to. No-name laughed again while Matthew looked nonplussed.

'Right way? Right way for what?'

'*Jampijin* and *Napangarti*, they husband and wife,' explained the old woman. '*Napangarti* get marry to *Jampijin*!' She chuckled happily, while Matthew and No-name tried to hide their embarrassment by playing with the puppy.

Next day, during library period, Matthew browsed amongst the books on Australian Aboriginal culture. He wasn't sure where to start looking, so when the library teacher came past he asked her where he could find out something about 'skin' names. She seemed to know what he was talking about, and soon pulled down a book on Kimberley history.

'I think this one has a good chapter on the Aboriginal people before white people came here,' she said. Together they skimmed over the first pages until they found a section called *Kinship Systems*.

'This must be it,' said Matthew. 'Thanks.' He settled down at a library desk, where the girl who usually came top of his class was

already deeply absorbed in a serious-looking work, and started to read.

The book described the different categories of relationship recognised in Aboriginal societies, and it was here that Matthew understood what No-name had meant when she'd said her brother was 'not her really brother' but her 'cousin-brother'. It turned out that one's father's brother was also called 'father', and one's mother's sister was called 'mother'. It followed that one called the children of these 'fathers' or 'mothers' brother and sister instead of cousin. There were other differences Matthew had not known about. He read of classificatory kin – how everyone in the whole society was classified in relationship to everyone else. These relationships were determined by the 'skin' or section/subsection system. The chapter went on to explain about the variety of skin groups ... *still in use amongst people, mainly in the north of the country, where traditions are more intact than in places where European settlement has been going on for much longer:*

*There are other forms of social division known as moieties, having only two divisions,' he read, 'sections having four, and subsections, of which there are eight. There are different systems in different regions, but the main characteristic of all of them is that they determine relationships, and especially eligibility for marriage. A person belonging to one section should only marry a person from the opposite one. The eight subsection system restricts the choice of marriage partners even further.*

It seemed that one's subsection was determined before birth, and depended on the subsection of one's mother, but was not the same as hers. A number of systems from different regions were shown in chart form, with each skin name written opposite that of its eligible marriage group. He searched till he found *Jampijin*. Opposite *Jampijin* was the name *Napangarti* – No-name's skin. Matthew learnt that being *Jampijin* made him a possible husband not only to No-name but to most other *Napangartis*, and at the same time put him in corresponding relationships with everyone else in the society. He learnt that strictly he should not talk to No-name's mother, as his potential mother-in-law, nor indeed to the mother of any other

*Napangarti* who was eligible to be his wife. There was no explanation for this – it just seemed to be one of the rules. But he had heard of other societies in which sons-in-law and mothers-in-law were supposed to avoid one another.

‘*Jampijin*,’ he said to himself proudly. ‘*Jampijin*.’ He liked the sound of it. He had a skin name that related him to everyone in No-name’s community. That was something he wasn’t going to tell his father.



One morning when he spotted No-name with a couple of other girls outside the school yard, Matthew stopped to speak with her. The other girls melted away.

‘When are you going out bush again?’ he asked.

‘We go every weekend time, nearly,’ she told him.

‘Every weekend?’ Matthew hesitated. ‘I might ride down to Goanna Gorge again on Saturday,’ he said. ‘Maybe I’ll find you there?’

‘Might be you get lost,’ said No-name, matter-of-factly. ‘What about you come with us for weekend?’

Matthew’s heart jumped. To go camping out with No-name and her family was something he had not dared think of. ‘You reckon I can? What about your parents?’

‘Course you can come. I’ll tell Mummy.’ Matthew noticed how unselfconsciously she used the childish term. He thought then of his own parents. He could never have assumed the right to invite No-name on a family outing with them. Not that he would want to. His father would be sure to embarrass him by behaving gruff and unwelcoming, while his mother would try too hard to be nice and make everyone feel awkward. They were like that even with his white school friends; the thought of how they would behave with No-name was excruciating.

When Matthew asked his parents if he could spend a weekend with No-name's family, they were astounded.

'But they stole your things!' said his mother.

'They didn't steal them,' said Matthew, patiently. 'One of her relations picked them up. That wasn't her fault. I've explained all that to you before.'

'What's wrong with Nick and your other friends?' asked his father. 'Why can't you go camping with them?'

'Nothing's wrong with Nick. But he hasn't asked me to go camping, Frances has. What's wrong with her?'

'We haven't met her, or her family.'

Matthew hesitated. He didn't really want his parents to meet No-name's family. He felt sure they wouldn't know what to say to them, and would be patronising. But if that was the only way they'd let him go ...

'You could meet them on Friday,' he said. 'Anyway, *I* know them. They helped me when I was lost, don't forget.'

'Hm,' said his father by way of acknowledgement. 'That's true enough. You're probably safer with them than wandering around in the bush on your own.'

'Of course I am!' Matthew could see his father was relenting.

'What will you get to eat?' his mother asked. 'Snakes and lizards?'

'I hope so,' said Matthew, who was keen to learn about living in the bush. 'But I'll take some other food as well. To contribute.'

His father was scornful. 'Don't expect to have anything left,' he said.

Matthew couldn't see any point in taking food away for the weekend and then bringing some of it back again, but neither of his parents had said he couldn't go, so he let the comment pass.

After school on Friday, Matthew hurried home and was all ready waiting with his pack and sleeping-bag when four o'clock came. No-name had told him that was about the time they'd drive past, and he had promised to wait outside so that she wouldn't have to knock at

the door. His father would still be at work till six, and Matthew, in a state of anxiety, asked his mother not to make a fuss when the car came. 'Just say hello or something,' he said. 'Don't ask them a whole lot of questions. They might think you don't trust them.'

'Matthew, I do have some sensitivity,' said his mother, offended.

But four o'clock, then five o'clock came and went, and there was no sign of the old ute. Matthew walked restlessly to the end of the road and back. He hardly dared go into the house for fear the ute would come when he was not there and drive off without him. But at last darkness fell and he gave up and went inside. He was too dispirited to speak.

'I told you you can't rely on them,' said his father when he came home, having told Matthew no such thing.

'Something must have happened,' said Matthew with an effort. He was standing by the window still watching the road, in case they came late.

'Never mind,' said his mother, switching on the electric kettle to make tea. She seemed relieved he wasn't going after all. 'You can go for a ride somewhere tomorrow on your own, or with one of your real friends.'

'Frances is my real friend,' said Matthew. He didn't call her No-name to his parents. That was something special he kept to himself.





## **Back to the Bush**

*Next morning*, just as Matthew was wheeling his bicycle onto the road, a car pulled up in front of the house and a horn blared. It was the old ute laden with people, jerry cans of fuel, drums of flour, and a heap of swags. No-name was seated on top of the swags on the back. She waved, grinning. Matthew leaned his bike against the fence and went up to her. Everyone was smiling at him.

‘You coming?’ asked the girl, as if this was the arrangement they had made.

‘You bet!’ Matthew didn’t hesitate. While the car waited outside, engine idling, he ran indoors to grab his things.

‘They’re here!’ he told his mother. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’ Before she could utter the protest that was forming on her lips, Matthew raced into the kitchen for the food he had put back into the fridge the night before, and stuffed it in his bag. He ran outside, glancing back to see the worried face of his mother who was standing at the door. He gave her a quick wave and ran to the car.

No-name took his pack and sleeping-bag and stowed them in the back of the ute. Her grandmother smiled and nodded at him. There

were two other women in the back, and several children of different ages.

‘This my mother,’ Matthew shook hands with the woman in whose face he could see a likeness to No-name. ‘And this my aunty. And this my ’nother aunty.’ When he had shaken hands with all the women Matthew was about to climb up beside them, but they waved him to the front, where space had been made for him in the passenger seat. He looked up at No-name, but she smiled encouragement, so he got in next to a young man, tall and lean in narrow jeans. Matthew recognised the boots at once. No-name’s cousin-brother Alfie! He glanced up at his face, and was surprised to see the young man grinning at him broadly, with no trace of embarrassment. After a moment of paralysis, Matthew felt his own face breaking into a smile. The young man held out his hand, and Matthew took it. Not a word had been exchanged, but he knew they understood one another, and were now friends.

Squeezed in between the young man and the driver was a boy a year or two younger than Matthew. He looked at Matthew curiously and smiled, but said nothing.

The driver, a big man wearing a dark brown cowboy hat with a high crown, leaned across and shook hands with Matthew.

‘G’day, young feller,’ he said, giving him a warm smile. Matthew supposed he must be No-name’s father.

They drove at a leisurely pace, windows open, and Matthew looked out at the hilly countryside around him. He watched the hawks circling slowly against the endless blue. He felt utterly happy.

Just after crossing the dry creek north of Goanna Gorge, the car slowed down and turned off along a bush track Matthew had never noticed before. They went slowly, but the springs of the old car were well worn, and the track was bumpy. Now and again, when they hit a particularly big bump, the people on the back shrieked. By adjusting the wing mirror slightly, Matthew could see No-name with her head thrown back, laughing uproariously. It was the first time he had seen her so relaxed.

The track wound on through the dry elephant grass. Matthew wondered how the first people who drove through there could possibly have known where they were going. Then he remembered No-name's familiarity with the bush the day she had found him. Anyone who knew the country that well on foot would have known where to drive a car.

Some way along the track, the car pulled up. No-name's two aunties got out, with Alfie, some of the children and a pile of swags and bags and billies. They seemed to be camping independently. After helping with the unloading, the older man got back into the driver's seat and they went on.

At length they came out in a clearing, and at once Matthew recognised the camp No-name had brought him to the day she had found him. The sheet of canvas was still there, and the driver parked the ute in the place where Matthew had first seen it. Everyone got out of the car and unloaded the swags, drums and bags of food.

Matthew stood beside No-name, his pack at his feet, suddenly feeling shy. 'Where shall I put this?' he asked, more for the sake of saying something than because it mattered. No-name picked up his pack and dumped it on the old bed frame, and Matthew put his sleeping-bag beside it. Everyone else's swags lay in a big heap on the ground. Matthew hoped they didn't think he was being fussy.

Instructions flew from adult to adult, from adult to child, in a language Matthew did not understand, and necessary articles were found and fetched. No-name's mother was soon sitting on the ground in front of a big enamel basin, kneading flour and water into a great wad of dough. The man, meanwhile, had the bonnet of the car up, and was tinkering with the engine.

'That your father?' Matthew asked No-name, as he was helping her to pour water from a heavy plastic container into a billy.

No-name laughed and shook her head. ' 'E my uncle; brother for my mother. Peter,' nodding towards the boy Matthew had sat near to in the car, 'that 'is son.'

‘Haven’t you got a father?’ Matthew asked.

‘Yeah, I got a father.’ No-name paused, then added: ‘But ’e in prison.’ She gave a smile and turned her attention back to the water, which had stopped pouring.

For a moment, Matthew was speechless. No-name’s father in prison, in the same place where his own father worked? He pictured the black man in shorts and singlet taking orders from the white man in uniform. He felt his face burning.

‘I didn’t know. My father never said anything.’

‘Maybe ’e don’t know too.’

‘He must know. He knows all the prisoners. What’s your father’s name? Isn’t it the same as yours?’

‘No. My father got another name. I got name for my mother.’

‘Bulu, isn’t it?’

No-name nodded. ‘But my father name is Freddy Ajax. ’E come from Warntu way. That’s ’is country.’

‘Warntu?’ said Matthew. ‘That’s right down in the desert, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. ’E’s a desert man, my father. ’E was born in desert.’

‘What about your mother? Is she a desert woman too?’ No-name shook her head. ‘No, ’e come from round here. But ’e was working on station one time. Same station where my father was working. That’s how my father did find ’im.’

‘I see.’ Matthew thought a bit. ‘How long is he doing in prison?’

‘ ’E get out before Christmas, maybe. They give ’im twelve months this time.’

‘This time? You mean he’s been in prison before?’

‘Yeah, plenty time. Grog get ’im into trouble. Only for one week, two week, something like that. But this time they give ’im twelve months.’

Matthew wondered what the crime had been, but he didn’t ask. He was afraid it might be something No-name wouldn’t want to tell him. He always seemed to be asking questions, and he had noticed that No-name never questioned him about his family, though she

seemed interested in anything he told her. Perhaps it was bad manners to ask as many questions as he did.

The car bonnet slammed shut, and No-name's uncle said a few words to her mother and got into the driver's seat again. Peter jumped up behind this time, and No-name grinned at Matthew and climbed up next to him. Matthew followed. The car started, and was soon bouncing along the track past the camp. The day was joyous with warmth, and Matthew laughed aloud as he clung to the side of the ute, bracing himself against the bumps.

Suddenly, No-name gave a cry and drummed with her knuckles on the roof of the car, which pulled up sharp. The barrel of a rifle appeared at the driver's window, and Matthew looked in the direction in which it pointed. At once he saw what had caught No-name's attention: in the shade of a tree, its neck stretched high and its eye inquiring, stood a large bush turkey. The barrel pointed towards the unmoving bird, and steadied. A magpie-lark gave its urgent call, and everyone seemed to hold their breath. A shot cracked, and the turkey crumpled, its wings splayed. It lifted its head, but did not attempt to get up.

Peter was already off the ute and running towards the crippled bird. Seizing it by the neck, he half lifted it, and then handed it over to his father, who was just behind him. The man bent to let the ground take the turkey's weight while he grasped the head in one hand, the neck in the other, and twisted in opposite directions. There was a spasm of wings, then the bird went limp. No-name's uncle lifted it up by the neck and felt its chest, appraisingly. Then he swung it over his shoulder and carried it back to the car. It lay bloodied and heavy in the corner of the ute. Matthew leaned down and ran his hand gently over its silky smooth feathers. He saw that its eyes were closed.

They drove on. Eventually the track ran out, and the car bumped over the grass a short way, then stopped near a fallen tree. The three young people jumped down from the back. No-name's uncle reached over the side and lifted out an axe. Squaring up beside the tree he swung the axe and brought it down on a dead limb, again

and again in the same spot, until the limb fell free. He split another and another in the same expert and methodical way. The grey wood was hard and dry. When the man had cut it into manageable lengths, the three helpers carried them to the car and stowed them around the turkey. Then they fitted themselves in between the pieces of wood. No-name's uncle, who did everything in an unhurried, economical way, replaced the axe in the back behind the cabin and took up his place once more in the driving seat. He backed around until he was facing the way he had come, then headed the car back to camp.

No-name's mother exclaimed her appreciation when she saw the turkey, which Peter held up in front of her, having to use both hands to lift it.

'*Warawu!*' she said, in a tone that made it sound like Hurrah! 'Fatfeller, all right!'

Peter dragged the bird off to a bush at one side of the camp. He dumped it down in the shade, sat cross-legged in front of it, and started pulling out the feathers. Matthew helped No-name and her uncle throw the firewood out of the ute onto a heap next to the fire. He noticed the plump, moon-shaped damper her mother had already cooked and set to one side. Her uncle built up the fire and dug a pit in front of it – a bigger version of the one No-name had scraped out to cook the goanna the first time he had met her.

'You want to help clean 'im?' No-name asked, pointing with her pursed lips towards the turkey with which Peter was wrestling. She ambled over to lend her cousin a hand and Matthew followed. He had never plucked a bird before, and found it harder than it looked when Peter and No-name did it, sending feathers flying all ways. Clearly these two had had a lot of experience.

It is not easy for several people to pluck a turkey together, for they all tend to pull in different directions. Soon the exercise had turned into a game, the three young people sitting cross-legged on the ground with the turkey between them, its carcass being tugged back and forth from one to another as the feathers came free. The soft down from close to the body blew about light as air and caught

in their clothes and their hair. No-name and Peter looked as if their dark curls had been through a snow storm. Matthew set aside two of the long brown mottled flight feathers to wear in his hat.

When the turkey was naked and white, Peter carried it to the fireplace. His father picked it up by the neck and threw it on the fire, turning it this way and that till it was singed all over in the flames. This singeing seemed to be an important part of the cooking process in the bush.

Matthew went to his pack and pulled out the fresh food he had brought, and a packet of tea, putting it all on the ground near the milk tin and sugar, for everyone to share. He left the tins of meat behind, since there was going to be turkey for dinner.

‘You want tea?’ asked No-name’s mother, nodding towards the steaming bucket. They all did, so Peter picked up three tin mugs from around the camp, shook out the sand that had collected in the bottom, and scooped tea from the bucket into the mugs. He handed one each to Matthew and No-name.

No-name’s grandmother, who had disappeared while the ute was away from the camp, came back now, carrying a plastic bag overflowing with nuts of some sort. She emptied the bag on the ground, and Matthew recognised a woody fruit he had noticed before hanging in clusters from gum trees. He had assumed at first that they were the trees’ fruit, but then he had seen the true fruits in the familiar eucalypt form also hanging there, and had vaguely wondered what the larger ones could be.

‘You know *tartaku*?’ the old woman asked Matthew, who picked one up, examined it and shook his head.

‘They call ’im bush coconut,’ said No-name. ‘You want to try ’im?’

Settling herself on the ground, the old woman sent Peter to the car for a hammer and then used it to break open one of the fruits. Inside was a mass of something soft and pink. The old woman passed the opened fruit to Matthew.

‘Eat ’im!’ No-name told him. Matthew hesitated, so she picked up a second opened fruit and tossed the contents into her mouth. ‘Good

one!' she said, smiling a challenge. Matthew mustered his courage, threw back his head and opened his mouth. He shook out the pink substance and swallowed it. Not delicious, but not bad.

It was only when the old lady opened a nut in which the contents had further matured that Matthew realised what they actually were. The new nut was filled with a swarm of minute winged insects, of which the soft pink grains he had just eaten must have been larvae. As if to confirm Matthew's deduction, No-name showed him the inside of one of the fruits – firmly attached to the fleshy white inside the shell hung a bright green sac that looked suspiciously like a legless grub. No-name pulled it off between thumb and finger, offered it to Matthew, who shook his head, then swallowed it herself.

Matthew was relieved when No-name's mother broke off a piece of damper and handed it to him. He smeared it with apricot jam from an open tin she pushed towards him, and ate it washed down with tea.

No one had yet explained to Matthew why they had not come out to the bush the night before as planned, and he asked No-name now. She shrugged. 'No money,' she said, casually. 'We never had money for fuel.'

Matthew felt an almost physical jolt. No money. He had never in his life heard his own parents say they had no money. True, they often told him they couldn't afford to buy a particular thing, but it was usually something big they were considering – a washing machine or a new car. Never had they been unable to go anywhere for want of the price of fuel. He couldn't imagine how it would feel to have no money at all, even for one day. He wondered how No-name's family had managed to get money for fuel on a Saturday morning.

'The boss give us two jerry cans,' explained No-name.

'Boss?'

'Yeah – community boss – chairman. 'E got one full drum, and 'e give us some. My uncle can pay him next time.'



‘Have you always lived at the reserve?’ asked Matthew.

‘Not really always. When I was little girl, we lived bush. My father and my mother was working on a station, like I said.’

‘What did they do?’

‘My father was doing any kind work: riding horse, mustering, fencing ... and my mother was working in the house. Washing plates for the *kartiya*, cleaning, all that.’

‘Why did you leave the station?’

No-name shrugged. ‘My father fell off a horse, hurt his back. ’E was in hospital, might be three months, something like that. ’E can’t work any more. No more riding horses, doctor tell ’im. That *kartiya* wouldn’t let us stay after that. We had to go and live in town.’

‘Your father never had a job since then?’

‘No. We get Social Security.’

Matthew thought about that. He imagined the proud stockman suddenly being unable to work, and his family having to leave their home because of it. No wonder he had taken to drink. He felt sad, and shot a look of sympathy at No-name, but she was thinking about something else.

‘My grandmother ...’ No-name looked over at the old woman. ‘My grandmother was riding horses too, when ’e was young woman. ’E was a stockman. Good one, too.’ Matthew glanced over at No-name’s grandmother, astonished. He tried to imagine her as a young woman, riding around on a horse, mustering cattle. He knew she must be fit, capable as she still was of walking many miles when she went hunting. He now looked at her with renewed respect. She smiled back at him, having been half-listening to the conversation.

‘Yeah, I bin good rider,’ she told him. ‘We bin go everywhere, us girls. But then the manager bin tell us: you can’t go riding any more. Government bin say: woman can’t do stockman work now, only man. We never go mustering after that.’

She paused, her eyes focused on the distance as she remembered.

‘After that, they bin take me to leprosarium.’

‘Leprosarium?’ gasped Matthew. So he was right – the old woman had had leprosy. ‘I thought that was closed down long ago.’

‘Closed down all right. But I bin sitting down there before.’

‘What was it like?’

‘Mm. Not bad. But I never like it. I bin run away plenty times.’ She gave a mischievous laugh. ‘*Kartiya* got strong medicine today – they don’t lock people up now, for that leprosy.’

The old woman stoked the fire with more wood, and put the bucket of tea to heat up again.

‘Where were you born?’ Matthew asked her, shyly.

‘I bin born bush – long way from here. In my father country.’

‘Why did you leave?’

‘Oh, *kartiya* bin say: everyone gotta go station, working. They never like blackfeller stopping long bush.’

‘Why’s that?’

The woman shrugged: ‘I dunno. Maybe they never like us spearing cattle!’ she laughed.

‘Did your people spear cattle?’ Matthew had heard stories of people being savagely punished for doing that. The old woman laughed again.

‘Sometimes, might be,’ was all she said. Matthew longed to ask more, but he didn’t want to seem too inquisitive. No one had asked him any questions about himself. They all just seemed to take him as he was.

The turkey’s feet had slowly curled up with the heat, and were now sticking out of the sand. ‘Wake ’im up,’ said No-name’s mother, nodding towards the cooking place. Peter pulled some leafy branches from a low-hanging tree, and arranged them on the ground. No-name stood up, grabbed the curled-up feet, and tugged until the bird came free. Then she laid it on the bed of leaves. With another sheaf of leaves she brushed off the sand and ash still clinging to it.

Just then her uncle walked over with a sheath knife and a small hand axe. He sat down cross-legged in front of the turkey, and started cutting it up. He cut off the legs, and large pieces from the chest, and laid them on the leaves next to the carcass. Then he offered the lower part of one of the legs to Matthew, and handed the other pieces around to everyone else. Matthew took a bite from the leg. The meat was strong-tasting and firm, more like beef in texture than chicken. He was soon eating it with relish like everyone else. No-name's uncle finished his piece, then attacked the carcass with the axe, cutting through the breastbone. He handed out more meat, but Matthew hadn't finished eating his part of the enormous leg.

After the meal, everyone was so full there was only one sensible thing to do, and that was to rest. One by one people found themselves a spot in the shade and stretched out unselfconsciously on the ground. No-name lay next to her grandmother, and Matthew found a place under the same tree as Peter. For a few delicious moments he was aware of his body relaxing. He looked up through the foliage at the glimpses of blue sky in between. There was nothing he wanted more at this moment. Smiling to himself with quiet happiness, he soon drifted off to sleep.



## **Emu in the Sky**

*Matthew woke* to the sounds of other people moving about the camp, and for a moment he was unsure of where he was. Then it all fell into place like a jigsaw puzzle putting itself together. He sat up and looked around. The sun was at half-mast in the western sky, and everyone else had either gone or was going away from the camp into the surrounding bush. Matthew just caught sight of No-name's dress disappearing amongst a patch of acacia trees. Dismissing a momentary feeling of pique that she hadn't waited for him, he scrambled up and hurried after her.

No-name showed no reaction when he caught up with her, and seemed to have been expecting him. Matthew fell into place behind her. She was carrying a polished wooden hunting stick, and her eyes were now on the ground, now glancing up at the country around them. Matthew wondered what she saw. Where he saw only trees and wattle bushes, and found himself thinking again about the peacefulness and beauty of the bush, she must be noticing all sorts of details that escaped his attention.

As if to confirm his thoughts, No-name pointed casually at a small green shrub Matthew hadn't noticed growing in amongst the grass. Its leaves were attached to stems that swept upwards like

candelabra. 'Bush tobacco,' she told him, without breaking her stride. 'You smell 'im.'

Matthew bent to break off a sprig of the plant, and sniffed its surprisingly strong fragrance. It seemed to him wonderful to find such perfume in the wilderness. He held the sprig of tobacco to his nose as he hurried to catch up again, then pushed it through the buttonhole of his shirt. From time to time he bent his head to get another whiff of the scent.

'Do people smoke this tobacco?' he asked No-name.

'Early days, they used to dry 'im and chew 'im. Today, they get plug tobacco from shop. They like that strong one.'

'Where are we going?' asked Matthew. Although No-name was keeping an eye open for tracks, the purposefulness of her stride told Matthew she was heading in a particular direction.

'I'll show you something,' was all she would say.

Before long No-name stopped and signalled to Matthew to keep quiet. Then she crept forward slowly, apparently heading for a tree several metres away. Matthew, following at a distance, saw a big hole dug into the ground at the base of the tree. No-name beckoned to Matthew, then knelt down and looked inside the hole. She put in her hand, grabbed something and pulled it out. Then she handed Matthew a little sandy-coloured puppy. It had white paws, and a white tip to its tail, and smelt of that familiar puppyish smell that Matthew loved. It cowered passively in his arms.

'A little dingo!' said Matthew, stroking the pup gently to reassure it. 'It's beautiful. But how did you know it was here?'

'My uncle did tell me. 'E seen the hole before, when the babies was just borned. Can't go near 'im then. That mother dingo, 'e'll bite you!'

'Where's the mother now?' Matthew looked around, half expecting to see a ferocious female dingo charging towards them.

' 'E gone hunting.'

No-name felt around in the hole again, and pulled out a second pup exactly like the first. She held it up to look at the underside of

its body. 'Two little girls,' she said.

Then Matthew had a dreadful thought. 'You're not going to kill them, are you?' No-name laughed and shook her head.

'People used to eat dingo, before. But today we don't kill them. Poorfellers; we let them walk round. Some people eat them all right, but not us mob.'

'That's good. I wouldn't like to eat this little fellow – girl, I mean.'

'You want to take 'im home? You can make 'im quiet.'

But Matthew shook his head. He was very tempted, but he had heard stories about people trying to make pets of dingoes. They were all right while they were little, but when they started to grow up they had a mind of their own and couldn't be tamed. Lots of people had tried, but no one he knew had succeeded in keeping a dingo as a pet for long. They killed chooks and caused all sorts of damage. In the end they usually had to be shot. Besides that, he knew it was against the law to keep them, and he could imagine his parents' reaction if he turned up with a dingo pup.

'No, leave them here where they belong,' he said.

They put the pups down and watched them disappear into their hole.

They spent the rest of the afternoon wandering slowly back, looking for tracks. Nothing caught No-name's interest, and they eventually stopped to sit on a fallen log near the camp. They watched a hawk being chased away from a tree by a fierce little bird a fraction of its size.

The other members of the family returned one by one. No-name's mother threw a pile of dry leaves on the embers of the fire, added more wood, and set the bucket to boil for the last time that day. The sun went down over the horizon, stars appeared, and Matthew watched the silhouettes of the trees gradually blur.

After a snack of leftover meat and the last pannikins of tea, swags were unrolled and before long everyone was getting ready for sleep. No-name lay near her mother and grandmother at one side of the fire. Matthew noticed that Peter and his uncle had made a separate

sleeping place in the shadows. He pulled his sleeping-bag off the bed-frame where No-name had left it in the morning.

‘You can sleep on the bed,’ her mother said, but everyone else was lying on the ground, and Matthew didn’t want to be different.

‘It’s okay, I like sleeping on the ground.’

‘Well, grab that swag.’ The woman jerked her head towards a canvas bed-roll that didn’t seem to have an owner.

Matthew dragged the swag into the shadows away from the embers of the fire, not far from Peter and his uncle, unrolled it and lay down.

Unused to going to bed so early – he thought it could be no later than eight o’clock when they had all settled down – and still rested from the sleep he had had in the afternoon, Matthew lay awake for a long time. He watched the sky, and picked out different constellations that he knew. The millions of stars in the Milky Way stretched across the sky as they had stretched for ever. He thought of all the generations of human beings that had lain on the ground at night and wondered at the stars, as he did now. The artists of Goanna Gorge had done the same. They too had listened to the unceasing rhythm of cicadas hidden in the dark trees.

After a while, Matthew got up and walked some distance from the camp to relieve his bladder of all the tea he had drunk. He turned to go back to his swag, but after a few moments of walking in the darkness he realised he had lost his bearings. He stood still, looking for the glow from the embers of the fire, but could see nothing but blackness. He moved to one side, and looked again. Nothing.

‘Damn! I should have used my torch,’ he told himself, filled with embarrassment at the thought of having to call out and admit he had lost his way again. He stared hard into the darkness ahead, and to each side, not wanting to risk moving further away from the camp. Shapes of trees seemed to form in front of him as he looked. Then there was the stirring of a breeze, and he saw a flicker of flame. It died at once, but now he knew the way. As he got closer,

he felt rather than heard another figure moving about. Then No-name's voice: 'Matthew?'

'Yes,' whispered Matthew, coming closer to the voice. 'I can't sleep.'

No-name's hand brushed his arm. 'Yeah.'

By now they were standing close to the embers of the fire. No-name tossed a piece of wood on it, and sat down on the ground. Matthew sat beside her. For a while they didn't speak. Matthew felt utterly at peace. He shielded his eyes from the glow of the fire and gazed upwards.

'Look at all those stars,' he said at last.

'You know that emu?' asked No-name.

'Emu?' said Matthew, not sure what she meant.

'That big emu in the sky?'

'No, where?'

'See that dark place, near the Cross?'

'Near the Southern Cross? Yes. We call that the Coal Sack.'

'Coal sack?' said No-name, not understanding. 'Well, that's 'is head.'

'The emu's head?' said Matthew, not seeing. 'Where's its body?'

'Right along there.' No-name gave a sweep of her hand that seemed to take in half the night. Matthew searched the sky. He thought at first that he was supposed to be looking for stars in a constellation shaped like an emu, and couldn't see them. No-name showed him again. ' 'E's all dark,' she said.

Matthew looked again, starting at the Southern Cross. Suddenly, there it was – a huge, shadowy emu spread right across the Milky Way.

'I can see it!' he said. 'I can see it! A giant emu!' He etched out its shape with his hand.

Just then, someone stirred in the darkness, and spoke. No-name answered, and then there was silence again. Matthew and No-name got up shortly afterwards, and went back to their own swags.



‘See you in the morning,’ said Matthew before they separated. For a long time he lay in his swag tracing with his eyes the shape of the giant emu that had until this night been hidden from him.

The next morning, after a breakfast of damper, tinned meat and tea, everyone packed up the car again. Matthew was surprised they were leaving so early.

‘We’re going hunting halfway,’ No-name explained. This time Matthew climbed onto the back with No-name and Peter, and the two women squeezed into the front seat.

The car bumped through the bush, back along the way they had come the previous day. As they came to a turn they stopped and No-name’s uncle sounded his horn. A few moments later, the people who had got off there yesterday reappeared from the bush, laden with all their belongings.

‘They got their own camp in there,’ No-name explained to Matthew.

The children ran to the car, all talking at once, and climbed up on the back. There was a more sedate exchange of news between the adults, then instructions flew, and Peter jumped down to help the women load their things, while Alfie lifted up the smaller children. They too had some cooked meat left over from a successful hunting expedition. The rear of the ute seemed to sag as the last passengers climbed aboard.

They headed north for only the first few kilometres. At Omega Creek they turned off west again, down a rough track that followed the dry creek bed. The family seemed to know every square metre of the countryside, and wherever they stopped there was no hesitation about heading off into the bush on foot to look for game.

As was becoming his habit, Matthew followed No-name, who carried her wooden hunting stick. She stopped every now and then to point out to him something new. An almost invisible mark in the sand drew her attention.

‘Look,’ she said, and Matthew wondered what it was he was supposed to see. No-name touched the sand with her toe, and up

flew a grasshopper. She laughed at Matthew's surprise, and did the same thing again a little further on.

She pointed to a shallow, circular depression, no bigger than a five-cent coin, and then squatted down beside it. With the tips of her fingers she carefully lifted from the sand the edge of a hinged lid, beneath which was a tiny, perfectly round hole leading straight down.

'You can see anything?' she said. Matthew peered into the hole, and could just make out the forelegs and head of a spider, crouched inside the entrance. The lid seemed to be made of densely woven spider's web. No-name carefully replaced it over the hole, and they went on.

'Snake!' she said suddenly, looking at the ground near a clump of grass. Matthew looked too. All he could see was a slight shine to the sand, where it had been lightly flattened in one spot, but No-name was already following the track while he still stood there. He ran to catch up. 'How do you know which way it's going?' he asked, but she just laughed.

'You can see which way,' she said by way of explanation.

'What if it's poisonous?' Matthew wanted to know.

His companion shook her head. 'No, 'e not poison; 'e quiet one,' she said.

Again Matthew was mystified. The track ran over a patch of bare sand, and at last Matthew could see it clearly: a heavy, almost straight track flattening the sand, going slightly downhill.

'See – 'e going that way,' said No-name. Further on, the track went up a slight hump, and here it was no longer straight, but zig-zagged from side to side. Matthew stopped and looked at it carefully. Of course, he thought: going downhill the snake would be helped by gravity, but going uphill it had to wriggle, and so the tracks it made were different. He felt pleased with himself; he was beginning to understand the sort of clues No-name must be reading all the time as she walked along fast just ahead of him.

The tracks disappeared into another patch of dense spinifex, and No-name walked in a loop all around it, carefully inspecting the ground to see if the snake had come out anywhere. Apparently it hadn't, and she started pushing the spiky clumps of grass to this side and that. At length she revealed a hole tucked well underneath a particularly dense clump. Breaking off a long thin dry stick from a nearby wattle bush, she started probing the hole carefully.

' 'im here,' she said, now stabbing the stick into the ground all around the hole, until she had located the tunnel.

Matthew, who was watching the mouth of the burrow, saw a dark coil slide up and then back on itself. 'Here it is!' he shouted excitedly. 'It's coming out!'

No-name probed again, and the coil slid faster. Then a shiny black head appeared at the burrow's entrance, tongue flicking. Matthew jumped back. No-name, on her knees only inches from the snake's head, gave it a few more jabs and sat back on her heels. The snake, agitated, slid quickly out of the hole and through the grass.

'Give me that stick,' No-name said, dropping the dry one she had used for probing, and holding out her hand while keeping her eyes fixed on the snake. Matthew looked around, and saw the hunting stick resting against a tussock of grass where she had left it. He grabbed it and handed it to No-name. On her feet now, she poised the stick for a moment, then with a swift movement brought it down firmly on the snake, just behind its head, pinning it to the ground. Its body convulsed. Then, to Matthew's alarm she stepped on the snake's head, holding it down with her bare foot. The snake's body coiled and thrashed. The girl bent down, carefully grasped the snake by its neck, then took her foot away and straightened up. The snake hung writhing from her hand. She held it out for Matthew to look at. 'Black-head,' she told him.

'A black-headed python?' Matthew had seen them pictured in books and knew they were not dangerous, but this was the first one he had seen alive and at close quarters. He reached out and touched it, feeling the strong, muscular body moving under his hand, the warm back, the silky-smooth yellow scales on its belly. He took the

snake from No-name's hand, holding it firmly just behind its head, as she had done. He looked into its black, shiny eyes, and wondered what it was feeling. It hung heavy in his hand. He lifted the tail in his other hand, and placed a loop of the snake over his neck. He felt it slide around and squeeze him with its strong coils. He thought of boa constrictors.

'Kill 'im now,' No-name told him, but Matthew shook his head. He liked the feel of the harmless reptile, and was already beginning to sympathise with it.

'Can't we let it go?' he said, sounding a bit foolish even to himself, and knowing what the answer would be.

'E's good to eat,' No-name assured him, lifting the snake from his neck. She held it up so that it hung straight, and ran her free hand down its belly, which made a gurgling sound. Matthew winced. 'Fatfeller,' she said. Then, taking the tail in one hand, she raised the snake in the air, at the same time letting go of its head, and in one lightning movement she whipped it against the ground. She did this twice more, then threw it down. The snake continued to writhe.

'It's still alive!' said Matthew, slightly shocked at the sudden brutal act, but No-name shook her head. She picked the snake up again, and showed Matthew that its head hung limply: its neck was broken. Yet its body went on moving as if it were still alive. Matthew told himself, if this was hunting, he'd have to get used to it.

No-name handed Matthew the dead snake. He looked at it with a twinge of pity. Then he slung it around his neck to carry it back to the car. The reptile went on contracting, and he repeatedly had to adjust it to stop it sliding off. Several times he looked at the dangling head to remind himself that the python really was dead.

The others were already waiting, but apart from No-name only her uncle had caught anything. He had killed two goannas, both in the same burrow, he told them. No-name described killing the snake. When she came to the part about Matthew wanting to let it go, everyone laughed.

‘Good meat, that one!’ said her mother.

When the snake had been cooked, rolled up like a tyre, along with the goanna, Matthew had the opportunity to taste it for himself. He tried a little of the meat, pulled in thin strips from the fine, curved bones that reminded him of the bones of fish. His stomach rebelled at the idea, but he forced himself to swallow it, and had to admit it didn’t taste bad. Even so, he felt happier eating the piece of goanna tail he was offered next.

After a rest, it was time to go home. The old ute bumped its way back to the highway, and in what seemed like no time dusk was falling and they were coming into the town. The lights shone a welcome.

The ute dropped Matthew at his door, and he stood watching its rear lights disappear down the road before he went inside. He sensed at once that his parents had been talking about him while he was away, and had reached some sort of agreement, because they greeted him quite genially.

‘How’s the great white hunter?’ asked his father.

‘Good,’ said Matthew, relieved he wasn’t going to have to justify himself all over again. ‘I had a great time!’

‘What did you get to eat?’

‘Snake, goanna, damper, turkey ...’

‘Turkey?’ said his mother, surprised.

‘Not supermarket turkey – bush turkey. Frances’s uncle shot one.’

‘Half his luck,’ said Matthew’s father. ‘I’d be fined if I did that. They’re supposed to be a protected species.’

‘Well, you have to realise that Aboriginal people have always been hunters,’ said his mother.

‘Not with rifles.’

Matthew could sense an argument brewing, so he changed the subject.

‘They cook everything with hot coals in the ground, then put it on a pile of leaves. No plates, no washing up.’

‘That would suit you,’ his mother laughed. ‘I might even get used to it myself.’

‘So I can go again?’ Matthew looked from his mother to his father.

‘I guessed that was coming,’ said his father.

‘We’ve talked about it,’ said his mother. ‘In one way we’re not keen on the idea, but, well, you obviously enjoy it, and you seem to be learning a lot.’

‘And in another way, I envy you the opportunity.’ Matthew was surprised to hear his father making such an admission. ‘Just don’t get too friendly with that mob, that’s all.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Well, it’s all very well to go out with people and learn about their way of life – bush survival and that sort of thing – but don’t start thinking you’re one of them. You’ve got your own culture, and you’d better not forget it.’

‘How could I forget it?’ asked Matthew, who had been entertaining secret fantasies of giving up school and plans for a regular job later on, and going off to live in the bush instead.

‘We don’t want you turning into a blackfeller,’ said his mother. ‘We’re not racist or anything, but, well, people are usually much better off if they stick with their own kind.’



After that, Matthew often went hunting with No-name’s family. Sometimes it was just for the day, with a quick visit to their bush camp, and home by dark. Other times they camped out again overnight. Occasionally, No-name said they’d take him hunting, and then they failed to turn up. There was never any explanation unless

Matthew asked for one. Usually it was that they had had no money, or the car had broken down and needed repairs.

Now and again he felt uncomfortable to be spending so much time doing something his parents didn't really approve of, and he tried to understand their reasons. But in his heart he felt strongly that they were wrong. At first, he wished he could persuade them to see No-name as he saw her, and he did his best to explain what it was he found so likeable about her, and about her family. His mother seemed willing to listen, but his father's attitudes were not to be budged, and in the end Matthew gave up.

As time went on he started to question a lot of things he had taken for granted before. Why did people like his parents work so hard just to own a lot of things? Their belongings only tied them down. Why did they attach so much importance to their houses, and live such indoor lives? Every time he came home from a trip to the bush, Matthew found it harder to get used to being back within four walls. He was conscious of how they restricted him from seeing the world outside. At home he didn't even notice the phases of the moon.

'You can bring your little Aboriginal friend home to tea one day, if you like,' said his mother once. 'You are always going places with her, don't you think you should ask her back for a change?'

Matthew squirmed. He knew she was trying to be kind, and to make him happy, but even the way she said 'little Aboriginal friend' embarrassed him. It sounded so patronising. He could just hear her saying something like that to No-name. And he could imagine how his father would behave.

'There's no way I'd bring her back here with Dad the way he is,' he told his mother. 'Her relations are so friendly and easygoing, I'd die of shame if anyone made her feel uncomfortable.' He meant his mother too, but didn't say so. Even so, she looked injured.

'Your father's not a bad man,' she reminded Matthew. 'He's just a bit conservative. He's made a lot of concessions, letting you do what you want. We both have.'

‘I know,’ said Matthew. *But why should it be a concession?* he thought. He knew they’d never make such a big thing of letting him spend time with Nick and his family. Well, as long as his parents didn’t interfere with what he was doing, that was the best he could hope for, and he made up his mind to respect their wishes in other ways.

Meanwhile, his outings with his second family, as he secretly thought of them, became the most important part of his life. He drank in the knowledge the people gave him, and made it his own. He took every opportunity he could to spend time with them, and waited impatiently between one outing and the next. He found himself becoming more and more at home in the bush, sitting by camp fires, sleeping on the ground, looking for animal tracks. At the centre of all this was his friendship with No-name.





## **Surprise Encounter**

*One morning* when Matthew got up early, worrying about an assignment he had to finish for that day, he remembered his bicycle had a puncture he hadn't fixed. His father, who started work at six, was having breakfast.

'Dad, can you drop me off at school this morning on your way to work?' Matthew asked. He didn't mind getting there early, and quite often did so, though not as early as this. It gave him a chance to catch up on neglected homework, which he did sitting on a bench at the table in the bough shed outside the school. Once No-name had turned up early as well, and for a while the two of them sat watching the early morning birds come down to drink water from a dish the gardener had left under the tap. The girl told him the names of some of the birds in her language, and described their habits. Then the other kids had started to drift in through the gates and No-name had run off with some girls.

'You'll have to make it smart,' said his father. 'I'll be leaving in five minutes. If you're not ready you'll have to walk.'

Matthew swallowed down some breakfast and went to comb his hair and pick up his school-bag. He heard the sound of the car

starting up and ran outside.

‘Damn!’ said his father, looking at the fuel gauge. ‘I forgot to fill up last night.’ He backed into the road and started off at a steady pace in the direction of the prison. He kept looking at the gauge; Matthew saw that the needle was right on empty.

‘I’ll drop you off and then get fuel,’ his father told him. But almost before he finished speaking, the engine died and the car glided to a stop. Matthew said nothing, but watched his father out of the corner of his eye. The man’s face was murderous.

There were several seconds of tense silence, then Matthew’s father got out of the car and stood looking at it. Matthew joined him.

‘I’ll take the jerry can,’ he offered, knowing his father always carried one in the boot.

‘It’s a couple of miles to the roadhouse.’

‘I might be able to hitch a lift. Anyway, Mr Franklyn will get someone to bring me back.’ He was the proprietor, and good to his customers.

Matthew’s father opened the boot and took out the jerry can. Matthew started off on foot. It was too early for most other people to be heading into town, but he would be unlucky if no one came along. He looked about him, seeing lizards dart away as he approached, hearing unidentified rustlings in the dry grass at the side of the road. There were no sounds but those of his own footsteps and of nature preparing for the day. Had he not been aware of his father waiting impatiently by the car, he would have slowed down and enjoyed the walk ahead of him. It looked as if the assignment would have to wait in any case. As it was, he moved as fast as he could.

Just then he heard a car approaching from the opposite direction. ‘Murphy’s law,’ he said to himself, barely glancing at it. But the car slowed down as it came near, and he heard someone call his name. He looked up sharply, to see a rather dilapidated station wagon, which he didn’t recognise. He stopped, puzzled. There were several

young Aboriginal men in the car, all smiling and friendly as if they knew him. Then he saw that the man with the hat next to the driver was No-name's cousin-brother, Alfie. He grinned at Matthew.

'Where you going?' asked Alfie.

'To the roadhouse. We ran out of fuel.' Matthew nodded at the jerry can he was carrying.

'Where your car?'

'Back down that way.'

'You want fuel?' Matthew nodded. One of the young men in the back opened the door and they all squeezed up, somehow making room for Matthew. The jerry can was taken from him and pushed behind the seat. When the door was shut against Matthew's side, the car set off again. But, instead of turning around to go to the fuel station as Matthew was expecting, they went on in the same direction. When his father's car came in sight, the station wagon slowed down. Matthew saw his father, severe in his khaki uniform, glance up and frown, casually gesturing with his hand for the driver to keep going. He was leaning against the bonnet, but as the other car pulled to a stop and he saw his son hanging out of the back window, a white face amongst a sea of black ones, he straightened up, startled.

Everyone got out of the station wagon, talking and laughing. Matthew wished his father would unbend a little. He introduced him to Alfie, and the two men shook hands. The jerry can was produced from the back of the ute along with a short length of hose. One of the young men pulled out the screwed-up piece of cloth that served as a fuel cap, and started syphoning fuel from the tank of the old utility into the jerry can. When the can was about half full, he stood it next to the other car. Matthew's father, looking embarrassed to be receiving help, unlocked his fuel cap and took it off. The young man lifted the jerry can onto the boot, and Matthew saw his father wince as the bottom of the can grated against the paintwork. In went the hose, and this time it was Alfie who sucked at the end of it until fuel came out, then directed the flow into the tank, spitting

petrol as he did so. They all stood watching the hose as if they could see the fuel flowing down through it.

There was a sucking sound as the jerry can emptied, and everyone started talking again. The two young men shut the lid of the jerry can and threw the hose back into their car, and Matthew's father replaced his fuel cap. He turned around and took out his wallet.

'I must give you something for the petrol,' he said.

Alfie shrugged, smiling. 'No, 'e right,' he said. But the other man pushed a note into his hand.

'No, take it,' he said. 'You can't give me your fuel for nothing. You'll need to refill soon.' Alfie casually put the money in his pocket, and nodded his thanks.

'Well, thank you very much for your help,' said Matthew's father to the group of men, a little stiffly. 'I appreciate it.'

'Yeah, thanks a lot!' said Matthew, wanting to cover up for his father's awkwardness. The men had all piled back into the station wagon, and its engine started with a squeal from a loose fan-belt. But they waited until Matthew's father had successfully started his own engine before taking off. With smiles and waves they disappeared down the road, their exhaust pipe billowing smoke.

Matthew's father did not speak as they continued the journey to the school. But at the gate, as Matthew climbed out with his school-bag, he said, 'Not a bad bunch of fellows, those friends of yours.'



## **A Shock**

*The heat* had been building up for weeks, and the end of the school year was approaching. Matthew rode to the dam for a swim as often as he could. One day when he got back, he found his father home before him. He sensed an atmosphere that told him something important was being discussed, and he felt an unaccountable stab of dread.

‘Your father has something to tell you,’ said his mother, in unusually formal tones. Matthew waited.

‘We’re moving,’ his father told him bluntly. Matthew didn’t understand.

‘Moving?’ he said. ‘Where to?’

‘To Perth,’ said his mother. ‘Your father got his transfer.’

Matthew had been vaguely aware that his father had applied for a promotion and transfer south, but he had put it out of his mind as something unlikely to happen, and in any case a long time off. He had not fully registered the significance of it for the family, nor what it would mean to him. He stood stunned at his mother’s words.

‘Can’t be!’ he gasped in disbelief. ‘We can’t go back to live in Perth!’

‘What’s wrong with Perth?’ said his father. ‘You didn’t want to leave Perth when we came up here.’

‘That’s different. I didn’t know what it was like here then. I know what Perth is like. I hate it!’ he said, suddenly furious.

‘Oh, come on, Matthew, it’s not that bad. You were happy there,’ his mother reminded him. ‘Your dad’s got a promotion. Don’t spoil it for him.’

‘Yeah – congratulations, Dad.’ Matthew’s voice was lifeless. ‘It’s good for you, I know that. But can’t they give you a promotion and leave you here? There must be senior officers’ jobs here as well as in Perth.’

‘If I stay here I’ll still be an ordinary one-pipper when I retire. If you want to get on in this job you just have to be prepared to go where the promotions are.’

‘Yeah, I suppose. How soon do you have to go?’

Matthew’s parents exchanged glances. ‘Quite soon,’ said his mother, not looking at him.

‘How soon?’ Matthew demanded, fear seizing him.

‘Matthew, we’re leaving at the end of next week,’ his father told him, a note of apology in his voice.

‘Next week?’ Matthew almost yelled, shocked. ‘How can it be next week?’

‘There’s been a couple of resignations, and one of the senior staff down there had an accident. They need me to start as soon as possible.’

‘You applied for a transfer months ago, and you never heard anything all that time. How can they expect you to go in one week? They can’t do this to us!’

‘I know it’s a bit sudden,’ said his father again, ‘but that’s the way it is. We’d have to go sooner or later. It’s nearly the end of the school year for you anyway. It doesn’t make much difference.’

‘What do you mean, it doesn’t make much difference?’ Matthew was almost in tears. ‘Of course it makes a difference! It’s all right for

you. But I don't want to go. I just don't want to go!

'Well, that's just too bad.' Matthew's father was losing patience. 'We're going, and that's that. You might as well get used to the idea.'

'Why do I have to go?' Matthew turned to his mother. 'Can't I stay here?'

His mother laughed gently. 'Of course you can't stay here on your own,' she said. 'Where would you live?'

'With Frances's family!' said Matthew suddenly, without thinking, then wished he had kept his mouth shut. His father's face clouded.

'Don't tell me you want to stay here just so you can turn into a blackfeller!' he said angrily. Matthew felt his own rage mounting.

'What's wrong with blackfellers?' he shouted. 'I'd rather stay with blackfellers in the bush than be stuck in a house in Perth with a front lawn you have to mow on Sundays like everyone else!'

'You'd rather hang round with a bunch of criminals, would you?'

Matthew stared at his father. 'What do you mean by that?'

'That little thief you run around with. And the father she takes after.'

Matthew could think of nothing to say. So his father had known all along.

'Freddie Ajax is the biggest drunken rogue in the district. If I'd known he was her father I'd never have let you have anything to do with her in the first place.'

'How did you find out?'

'When that daughter of his came visiting him on the weekend, cool as you like.'

'Well, why shouldn't she visit him? He's her father!'

'I knew that girl and her family would be a bad influence on you,' said his mother.

'That girl?' shouted Matthew. 'That girl's my friend! She's the best friend I've ever had! You've never liked her, just because she's black! And because she doesn't dress up! And because her family's

poor, and they don't drive round in a flash car! It's not her fault her father's in prison. And she's not a thief!' Matthew was almost choking from holding back tears. 'Well, I'd bloody well rather live with her family than with you!' He ran out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

Matthew headed along the road towards town, walking fast, breathing heavily, trying to get his feelings under control. At first, he couldn't even think. He felt choked up, full of anger and grief. He marched along, cursing aloud, sobs shaking him, tears jumping from his eyes.

After a little while, he became calmer, and started to think about the row he'd just had with his parents. He knew he'd blown it, yelling at them like that. But he didn't care, he didn't care! He'd meant what he said. Oh, he loved his mother and father all right, and he didn't really want to hurt their feelings. But he'd changed! He was no longer the same person he'd been when they moved up here from Perth. And he knew why. In a way his mother was right – it was because of No-name and her relations. They had opened up a different view of life for him. It was as if he had been waiting for this to happen. It wasn't just the hunting, the excitement of learning new things, though that was part of it. More important was the feeling of being so at home when he was with his new friends. It was quite different from anything he'd known. He didn't care who No-name's father was, or what he had done.

He struggled to understand his own feelings. Why had he become so attached to No-name's family? Partly, it was the way people behaved with one another – they seemed so easygoing and accepting of other people – of him. And they were not caught up with having things, with making money, with being busy. They didn't worry about how they looked, or whether anyone spilt anything or made a mess. They weren't forever criticising one another. They seemed to take life as it came, to just get on with it. He knew people weren't saints. But they seemed to have a different idea of what was important in life, one that made sense to Matthew. Above all, they didn't worry about appearances, which his own



parents set so much store by. Couldn't they see it wasn't appearances that mattered, but the person underneath?

These thoughts didn't really satisfy Matthew. They weren't enough to explain this fierce sense of grief at the thought of leaving. His pace had slowed down a bit, and his fury had passed. He was beginning to feel guilty about the way he had left the house. Nevertheless, he kept walking, thinking, thinking about the future. He knew he couldn't stay behind if his parents went to Perth. They would never allow it. And in any case, he had nowhere to stay. All his relations were down south. He couldn't really impose himself on No-name's family, even without his parents' opposition. Yet Matthew felt certain that, if circumstances were different – if, for instance, his parents abandoned him, or died in an accident – and he asked No-name's family if he could live with them, they would say yes. Even though he knew that none of this was going to happen, and he wouldn't really want it to, Matthew took some comfort from the thought.

The bush was quiet, and yet alive with sounds of insects. As Matthew started to feel calmer, he listened. There was something comforting in hearing nature, oblivious of his problems, carrying on as normal around him. He would have to go to Perth, that he knew. He would have to complete his schooling there. But no one could keep him in Perth forever, no one. Once he had finished school, he would be free. And he would come back. Aloud, he made himself a solemn promise: 'I'll come back. Whatever else happens to me, as long as I'm alive, I swear I'll come back.'

Once he had made this decision, Matthew felt calmer. After a while he turned and started to head home. By the time he reached his front door he was ready to apologise to his parents.

'Look, I'm sorry I lost my temper,' he said. 'I know I have to go to Perth with you. I don't want to leave here, but I know if you go I have to. I just wasn't expecting it so soon.'

His parents listened without answering, still angry with Matthew for the things he had said. He tried again.

‘I didn’t mean that about living with them rather than you,’ he said, not sure he was telling the truth. ‘But I will miss them. Badly,’ he added. Matthew’s father grunted.

To avoid the risk of further discussion of No-name and her family, which he knew he couldn’t face without losing his temper again, Matthew went to his room. He tried to read but he couldn’t concentrate on the words, and found himself reading the same few lines over and over without making any sense of them. In the end he gave up and lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He felt heavy in his heart. He hadn’t yet had time to accept that he was going to have to leave his beloved north, or to realise fully what that would mean to him. He pictured to himself, one by one, the places he knew, and imagined never seeing them again. He thought about the school, about Nick and his other friends. But the pictures that kept coming into his mind again and again, and twisting his heart, were of No-name, her grandmother, and all the other relations he had now met. They were the people he would miss the most.

He remembered the first time he had ever seen No-name, as an upside-down face peering at him from the rock overhang. And then standing shyly in front of him, her mouth stretched into a wide smile. He could still see her shapeless figure, her dress hanging down loosely as if she hardly knew she had it on. He saw her again, as he had seen her so many times now, sitting unselfconsciously on the ground, her mind absorbed with gutting a goanna or building a fire.

He thought then of the bush. Almost without realising it, he had grown to love the local bush, scrubby as it had seemed to him when he first came up from Perth. He had learnt to know it a little, and to see it with different eyes. He now saw, not simply a mass of trees, all much the same, but different species; even, here and there, he was able to recognise an individual tree. Instead of seeing bare ground he had learnt to look for the tracks of lizards and of birds. Though not yet able to identify more than a few such tracks, he was making progress. Whereas once he knew nothing about these things, they had now become important to him. In short, he had changed.

And, he thought with a twist of pain in his chest, he owed all this, more than anyone, to No-name. How could he leave her and go to live in a place where their friendship was no longer possible? He tossed in his bed, groaning inwardly.



## **I'll Come Back!**

*In those* last few days before leaving, Matthew saw No-name as often as he could. He rode up to Two-mile each day after school, and she was usually somewhere around, waiting for him. Sometimes he just sat with No-name and her grandmother and whoever else was at their house, enjoying the camaraderie and trying to follow the conversation, which took place sometimes in English, sometimes in their own language. Other times, Matthew and No-name went for a walk in the nearby bush, looking for tracks. No-name pointed out birds' nests, the lids of buried spiders' holes, the tracks of scorpions. Once he dinked her on his bike as far as Limestone Quarry, just outside the town. The pair scrambled over the rocks, and then sat still and watched the birds and other wildlife that soon resumed their business once the human beings were tranquil.

Towards sunset, they climbed to the very top of the rock formation overlooking the town, and stood together staring down at the life below. Matthew remembered the first time he had climbed up there, with his father, not long after arriving in the north. In the two and a half years that had passed since then, the town had spread closer and closer to the rocks, like an organic growth. Now, he could look down into people's yards, see the separate articles of

washing on their lines, and hear their speaking voices carried upwards. Yet no one looked up to see Matthew and No-name standing there above them. They might have been gods or eagles.

Matthew knew this was the last time he would see this view for a very long time. He wouldn't let himself think the thought lurking just below consciousness – *perhaps for ever*.

'I'll come back, No-name,' he said suddenly, fiercely, without looking at her. 'I promise you, I'll come back!' No-name's hand touched his and fell again, but she didn't speak.

Most of Matthew's school friends seemed to think he was lucky to be going to Perth, and couldn't understand his lack of enthusiasm. He didn't try to explain. He had kept his friendship with No-name and her family pretty much to himself, sensing that it would be treated by some of the others as a bit of a joke. He didn't want to have to defend himself at school as well as at home. Besides, he felt just a little bit possessive about No-name. He liked to keep the time they spent together as something special between them. Only Nick understood what it meant to him, and like the good friend he was he had been careful not to intrude.

'You're going to miss all this,' he said one day, without specifying what he meant by 'all this'.

'That's for sure,' said Matthew, grateful that at least someone realised how he felt. 'Everyone else seems to think I should be glad to go back to Perth.'

'That's because they like doing different kinds of things. You've got into the life up here in a way none of the rest of us has. You've made real friends with the locals. It'll be hard to get used to life in the city. But don't take it too hard, mate.' Nick reverted to his usual cheery self, giving Matthew a friendly shove. 'I reckon you'll be back.'

'You think so?' Matthew looked at Nick hopefully, cheered by his words.

'Nothing surer!'

Matthew had noticed that the Aboriginal students treated him differently since he had been visiting the community at Two-mile. They were friendlier, and greeted him with a wave and a 'G'day, bro'!' when he ran into them in town. They seemed to know and accept him these days, treating him as an ally rather than a virtual stranger. He felt rather proud of this development.

A couple of days before Matthew was due to leave, Nick held a party for him. None of the black kids came, but Matthew wasn't really surprised. He thought they would probably have felt shy about coming to Nick's house, even though his parents were going to be out. Organised parties didn't seem to be their style. Nick gave a speech, clowning to make everyone laugh, and Matthew said his thanks and farewells, trying to keep the same tone of banter and fun. A lot of people promised to write, but he doubted if many of them would. *I'll soon be forgotten*, he told himself.



The morning of departure came, like the morning of an execution. Matthew's father was up at dawn, loading the last of the family's luggage into the car. His mother was rushing around with a duster and broom, fearful of leaving any dirt for the next occupants to find and criticise. Matthew cleared his room of his few remaining possessions, and put them in his backpack for the journey. In the front pocket he found the pair of fire-making sticks No-name had given him at their first meeting. He had never managed to make a fire with them. As he looked at the sticks again, the dark scorch marks still proof of her efforts, he realised they were the only tangible reminder he would have of her. He tied the sticks together with a length of twine, and wrapped them carefully in a handkerchief before putting them back in his pack. Then there was nothing else for him to do but have breakfast. He found he couldn't eat, and left the table to sit on the front step. His eyes were fixed on

the road that led to town, and beyond town to Two-mile, but it was empty.

At last everything was ready to go. The fans were turned off, doors were locked, there was nothing left to hold the family back. Matthew's mother and father were already in the front seats of the car. Reluctantly, dragging his feet, Matthew opened the door and climbed in next to the bags and boxes piled on one side of the back seat. His father started the motor. They were just pulling out of the driveway when the familiar old brown ute appeared suddenly at the bend in the road.

'Wait!' Matthew almost yelled. 'It's Frances!' His father said nothing, but he stopped and kept the engine idling until the battered ute pulled up on the verge. As usual, there were people leaning out of both windows and sitting on the back, most smiling broadly. No-name's face peered out, small and pinched amongst the hats and beards. Matthew jumped out of his father's car and went up to the ute. Awkwardly, he put out his hand and touched No-name's arm. He exchanged falsely cheerful words of greeting with the other people in the car. He saw then that her grandmother was crushed in the back with everyone else. She smiled at Matthew and he stretched over and shook her hand. He could not speak.

No-name climbed down from the ute and stood beside it, her eyes lowered. Matthew took her hand and held it for a moment, not daring to look at her. Then, turning away his face, which despite all his efforts was beginning to contort, he climbed back in the car behind his father. Both his parents waved at the people in the old ute, then his father let in the clutch and their own car started to move.

Matthew sat leaning out of the window, looking behind, waving. He was thankful that his parents had the tact not to speak. The ute was still standing outside the house in which he had lived, which would soon be occupied by strangers. He watched No-name, skinny as a beanpole, standing motionless, not even waving, staring after the fleeing car. She got smaller and smaller. The tears Matthew had been holding back now streamed down his face unchecked.

‘I’ll come back, No-name!’ he said aloud into the wind, which snatched his words and carried them triumphantly back to her. ‘I’ll come back one day, I promise!’

The road swept into a bend, and Matthew carried away with him his last image of No-name, a tiny dark splinter in the morning light.



## ***About the Author***

*Pat Lowe* was born in the UK in 1951. In 1972 she migrated to Australia, and after seven years in Perth moved to the Kimberley. There she met Aboriginal artist Jimmy Pike who introduced her to his country in the Great Sandy Desert. Pat is a clinical psychologist with ten years service in WA prisons. Her two previous books are: *Jilji – Life in the Great Sandy Desert* (Magabala Books, 1990, and shortlisted for the 1991 WA Premier's Award) and *Yinli – Desert Child* (Magabala Books, 1992, and shortlisted for the 1993 WA Premier's Award), both written with and illustrated by Jimmy Pike. Pat's young adult novel *Feeling the Heat* won the Young Adult Section in the 2002 Western Australian Premier's Award.

*The Girl With No Name* was shortlisted for the 1995 Australian Multicultural Literature Award, and commended for the 1995 Family Award for Children's Books.