

## **CHILDHOOD.**

Bombilla was a child of the Mapoon Tjungundji, one of seven tribes of seven rivers flowing west from Cape York into the Gulf of Carpentaria.

He had lived through eight monsoon seasons and not yet old enough to carry the Nara – the smell of his father's sweat. At corroboree time, when the tribes assembled, Bombilla would watch from bushes, impatient to experience the many adventures he knew crowded an adult world.

Bombilla's spiritual understanding was not yet complete but, what of it he knew, came into him through the osmosis of everyday life, and the instruction of his people.

He knew of the Rainbow Serpent which woke from her Dreamtime slumber and made all living things. He knew she made him and one day he would follow his mother and father and, like others who died before him, return to the earth.

This morning as the sun climbed, Bombilla reasoned the ocean, on its ebb by now, would have withdrawn its brackish waters from the creeks. He had a job to do and although he knew the tides were influenced by the moon, in his mind he kept a tidal schedule calculated by the increasing angle of the overhead sun. On the bottom of the tide the upper reaches of the creeks divided into pools where many fish would be captive.

Bands of worker ants were shoring up the bund walls around entrances to their nest. From that Bombilla concluded the monsoons were threatening. Soon, because of flooding rains, Tjungundji would move to higher ground. But each element of the seasons brought a reward of its own. The rain would soften the soil and, with his mother, he could then dig the sweet yams.

Mindful of the tide, Bombilla crossed the now exposed creek bed, the settling sand not yet firm. His footprints the only blight on a riverscape made virginal by the morning's receding currents.

In upper reaches of the creek residual ponds revealed fins, signalling helplessness. Bombilla tore a length of heavy vine from its bush. Stripped of its leaves he wielded it like a whip, cracking it on the pond's surface across the bodies under those darting fins. He collected those he stunned. He had learned the ways of the black hunter, and took no more than his family's immediate needs. He strung his catch on a piece of vine passed through the fish's gills and slung the lot over one shoulder.

He headed home.

Where the creek-bed widened, there was a commotion in the bushes. Bombilla became frightened, he hid. A young woman emerged. It was Minna from the Athokurra across the river. She ran to the centre of the clearing and was brought to

the ground by a man with skin a lighter colour than sand on the beach.

Never had Bombilla seen such a man. But his father had told him the story of a hunter who came to a river which he decided to swim. Halfway across, a water-snake swallowed him but could not digest him. The snake passed the hunter, with other waste, through its tail orifice. The man was unchanged except for his skin, which was white. Bombilla's father told him there were many of these special, white snake-people on the other side of the distant mountains. This snake-person hit Minna with blows from his fist and she fell.

The man then lay on top of Minna and Bombilla could see a pair of bare buttocks, in themselves quite commonplace but, in their colour, unique. The backside began a violent thrusting. Both people were silent except for occasional grunts from the man. His face gradually darkened. When it reached the colour of the red earth he cried out, he then left.

Bombilla wasn't sure he should be witness to this happening. Without disturbing Minna, he also left.

A crowd milled by his gunyah. A man as large as Bombilla's father was shouting. Bombilla's mother informed her son, Minna was missing. She had wandered from the main party to gather nuts and berries. The large man was Ngarlu, the missing woman's husband. Bombilla told them he saw Minna in the creek bed. She went to sleep and a snake-person fell on her. The incoming tide would waken her he told them and she would soon go home.

The big man pointed to the river mouth. The water was lapping the full tide mark, "She did not return, take me to her."

Minna would never waken. The rising tide had drowned and carried her upstream. The mangroves had snagged her hair. Ngarlu, weeping, lifted Minna gently in his arms. "I want you to show me this snake-person," he ordered.

Don Watson swung his pick, loosening more of the red soil. He picked up a handful. "Rich, Jack," he told his offsider, "they'll love this."

Watson was one of a small army of geologists sent by the newly established state government to assess mineral deposits in the hinterland. This new state of Queensland was, like Victoria, once part of New South Wales. It had authority and needed to know how potentially wealthy it was.

Travelling the west coast of Cape York, Watson had come upon large tracts of bauxite. He knew, by overseas reports, it was a precious resource and the tracts were wide, deep and extensive.

The sun was nearing the western horizon and Watson liked to eat his dinner in daylight when he could distinguish what was edible on his plate from what was hungry and had legs

He was about to tell Fahey to pack up the gear when two black figures emerged from scrubland. A tall man and a small boy. Something about the man's demeanour caused Watson a shiver.

The small boy pointed and spoke in dialect. The man carried two spears, he attached one to his woomera. Watson's mouth worked but not his larynx.

Fahey turned to look why his boss gawked at something behind him. He grunted as the spear took him in the chest and continued through. Hands gripped on the bloody shaft, Fahey fell backwards. His body, jerked in spasm and became still.

Ready to bolt, Watson cast a fearful glance towards the two blacks. The spearman broke his remaining spear across his knee.

The pair disappeared into the bush.

"Your offsider was murdered? Speared?" The policeman checked the inkwell in his desk and inserted the nib of his pen. "We heard a rumour some bloke porked a boong out near the Wenlock, but Christ... This makes it bloody serious!"

Watson nodded, "Dropped him cold. Broke the other spear over his knee and disappeared."

Jack Ferguson sighed. After taking Watson's deposition, Ferguson pushed the form across the desk and ordered, "Put your John Henry there."

Watson signed the statement and asked, "What happens now?"

"There's a government boat on its way, left yesterday with some Holy Joes from down south. They're going to set up a Mission on the Wenlock. I'll get a message to the skipper to call at Thursday Island and pick up some Native Police. They'll sort this out," said Ferguson nodding agreement to his own decision.

Watson had made a hasty departure from the remote campsite. He hadn't slowed until he thought it safe, then only because the horses needed a spell. Five days later he was here in Cardwell, stiff and blistered, complaining to Sergeant Jack Ferguson.

The Most Reverend Richard and Mrs Smith were on deck when the M.V. Courage tied up at Thursday Island. The boat stayed just long enough for the waiting troopers to board and get their horses into padded stalls on the after-deck. "Me Billy," said the one with a stripe on his sleeve, "me boss, Rebrand, dis Jimmy," Billy pointed to the other trooper. Reverend Smith shook hands.

Bombilla felt important pointing to the killer of Jack Fahey. He was proud of his involvement in the application of tribal justice. He saw it as a milestone on his journey to adulthood. Soon he would ask for his father's Nara.

How could he now refuse?

He watched the Native Police approach Ngarlu. The man seemed nervous, his

eyes darted from one to the other policemen. Ngarlu had to turn his head to see each uniformed man. When he looked back at the one in front, the other policeman acted swiftly. As Ngarlu turned he was struck behind the ear with the butt of a police shotgun.

Bombilla saw Ngarlu crumple. This was wrong! He saw the police chain Ngarlu's hands and attach the chain to a metal collar. It was too much for Bombilla. If he was ever to become adult he must prove to be worthy of that station. Wrongs must be put right.

Bombilla's attack met with the same fate as that of Ngarlu and they were both dragged, unconscious, back to the beach where Bombilla, earlier, had been deputised.

Bombilla was confused. He could not remember ever being asleep when the sun was in the sky. His head was sore. A policeman hauled him to his feet and he gazed into the eyes of a white person. The eyes held a kindly sparkle. But Bombilla's confusion, when it settled, turned to apprehension. Before him was one of those special snake-people.

"What's your name, Son?" The snake-person was not talking in a dialect Bombilla understood. "What's your name?" the snake-person asked again. "Reverend Smith," he said slapping his own chest and then poking Bombilla hard in his chest. The act was repeated several times.

"Bombilla," said the boy finally, blinking tears.

"Bob Miller, eh. All right, Miller. Get over there with the other boys."

"Bombilla," the boy told him again.

"Miller, gettum in line belongim other boys." Only the troopers understood the words but an impatient edge was creeping into Reverend Smith's tone.

Bombilla understood the tone and he turned to run, one of the troopers knocked him down. "He be orright now, Rebran. He no run now."

"Heathens! We'll educate them, Billy. We'll get them into the mission and put some God into them. See they get their clothes, girls through that tent and boys through the other."

Dragged behind the troopers' horses Ngarlu's manacled wrists streamed blood. The horses' gaits, when Ngarlu stumbled, never slackened. When he fell, he was pulled along the gibbered track until he fought his way to his feet.

As the sun neared the western horizon the trio stopped. Ngarlu was chained to a tree and released at sundown to eat by the campfire. After the meal, Jimmy moved to secure the prisoner once more.

"Nah!" Billy said, and picked up his shotgun, "Leave 'im," he motioned with the barrels. "You free. Run!"

Jimmy knew what was coming, they had done it often.

Ngarlu also understood. He shook his head and faced Billy. Soon, he knew, he would be with his Minna.

Upturned, Ngarlu's body awaited carrion which would prick his sightless eyes and rip his flesh. His bony frame would bleach under a harsh northern sun. Dingos would scatter his bones. The troopers broke camp and rode east into approaching dusk. "I know where we catch *diyin*," Billy told Jimmy. "We got time now."

## ADULTHOOD

The first drop kicked up dust before spreading to become a large, dark brown stain. Followed by many more of similar size and velocity, they smarted, causing hatless to cover bare heads. The reddish-pink landscape took on a freckled look before darkening as the van of the northern Wet arrived at Big River station on the upper Burdekin. Patches of straw-coloured foliage, struggling to maintain life, seemed to green before the gaze.

"Before we saddle up you better warn Charlie down river, the Wet's here, Iris!" Tom Flanagan shouted to his wife as he changed into his working gear. "And pack us some scran, Love, a coupl'a day's worth. I'll come back if we need more. We gotta get the cattle outa the valleys, up onto connected ridges near the homestead where they'll be safe and easier to feed."

Bobby Miller trailed two pack horses burdened with grain-feed to salt a trail to high ground for those beasts he found in the gullies on the Flanagan property. Iris and Tom rode south on a similar mission.

From a hilltop, Bobby looked down upon a series of billabongs, the result of a five-mile confluence where two creeks met the mighty Burdekin. Downstream from the reedy billabongs, on a bend of the river, two hobbled horses drank from its muddy edge. A thin column of smoke spiralled above a low ridge hiding a campsite. A breakfast fire? Two travellers camping, Bobby guessed from the two hobbled horses.

The young black wondered if the campers knew of the power, the irresistible force of the Burdekin in the Wet.

"There's some riders camped, Boss," Bobby reported, when Tom and Iris returned from the south, "where Six Mile Creek hits the Burdekin."

"They still there?"

"Don't know."

"You better get out there and warn 'em off the river."

“Be a day’s ride there’n back.”

“Don’t matter, get Iris to pack you some tucker.”

The season was primed. These fools were camped where, each year for the past six, Bobby Miller had seen this river in its annual, angry magnificence. When the rage subsided, this site would be littered with logs or covered with silt or boulders – void of life.

Bobby dropped the rein, he let his mount choose its gait. It walked. The soporific motion had its rider dozing. In a dreamlike state, Bobby’s mind wandered to his childhood. Far from these mountains, he was back on the Mapoon in the Wet. He was with his mother digging yams from red soil softened by receding floodwaters.

Bobby’s mount began a trot and he was jolted from his dream. When the horse spied clear, undulating pasture leading to the mountains, it broke into a canter.

Nearing the edge of the large cleft, Bobby picked up the rein. The brink over which the mount now slithered and slid would soon be the mighty river’s bank.

Bobby looked for smoke.

The two men were camped too far around the bend downstream of what was, yet, a gentle flow. If a windstorm was to precede the devastating torrent, now imminent, its crashing, roaring sound would be masked by noise of the storm lashing the forest.

The men wore uniforms, one of them reached for a shotgun. Bobby held high the rein in one hand, his other he held at shoulder height as he edged his mount on.

“Mornin’!” Bobby said. “You be camped here long?”

“Long as it takes,” from the one holding the shotgun.

“This is Flanagan property,” Bobby said, he paused, distracted from the warning he was about to issue. One of the men moved to get behind him, the action aided Bobby’s memory. Suddenly he was eight-years-old Bombilla again, on the beach at Mapoon. He spurred his horse sideways till he was again confronting the two police. One with the stripe was Billy, the other Jimmy.

Instead of the warning Bobby said, “You c’n stay as long as you like. You got tucker?”

Billy shook his head.

“I’ll bring you some from the homestead,” the young black wheeled his mount, it scrambled back up the river bank and headed home.

“Yair! I told ‘em, Boss. They were packin’ up, movin’ to higher ground when I left. They’re a couple ‘a Black Traps lookin’ for a Mission runaway.”

“See the missus Bobby. Take ‘em out some supplies,” Tom Flanagan said. “Gotta treat the Traps right, eh?”

“Yair, Boss.”

Propelled by the accompanying wind, rain needled bare skin like grapeshot. Unwilling to confront the storm the horse covered the ground at a shying trot. Bobby thought about the two Black Police and the supplies he carried for them, if he read this weather correctly they would never need them.

Bobby tethered his horse to a sapling and proceeded on foot. When he reached the ridge, he lay down in the mud and peered over the edge. The Traps were still there. They were in the tent. On the walls, he could see pale shadows cast by the weak glow of a hurricane lamp. Two horses were securely tethered to nearby saplings, their rumps to the storm.

The river had risen a foot or so and Bobby could see, from where he lay, the mile of river upstream. If he cupped his hands to his eyes he could see all the way to the next bend where white water was spilling over a dam of the river’s own making.

A sizeable tree broke away and muddy water, as though to recapture it, broke out in pursuit. Bobby made his decision. He scampered down the incline to where the horses were tethered. They pranced and whinnied, skittish with instinctive knowledge the men in the tent lacked, impending devastation. Bobby released the animals and they bounded quickly to high ground.

As Bobby followed the horses to safety the two Traps burst from the tent.

“What the bloody...? Hey...!” Billy squinted after Bobby, “That bloody bloke fr’ m yesterdy. He steal our bloody horses, get the guns!”

Jimmy emerged from the tent, he threw down the weapons and ran to the nearest tree. Billy ran towards Bobby and the safety of the rise. It was a race Billy was handicapped to lose. He disappeared under the first muddy mass of brush and soil and rock.

Bobby saw the terror in the man’s face, the whites of those bulging eyes, it would remain in his memory. He knew it would not worry him.

He turned his attention to the other man, now high in a tree bent at a dangerous angle by the river’s force. It shuddered as rocks and other debris hammered against its trunk. In a few short minutes, Bobby saw the puny roots as the tree tumbled, with its human cargo, end over end down the gorge.

“They still there?”

Bobby, unused to lying, gave Tom an evasive, “No, Boss. They’re gone.”