

Riding
THEY
black
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ALLEN & UNWIN



CHAPTER
ONE

Have you ever blurted something out in conversation, and a nanosecond later wished that you'd kept your trap shut? Well, that's the way my family secret came out – *blurt!* And once my secret was out, it just sat for all to see, like a bright blue jellyfish washed up by a king tide, stranded between the double glare of sun and sand, wishing it could wobble back into the ocean and glide inconspicuously once more among a billion other jellyfish secrets.

{ LATE AUGUST–EARLY NOVEMBER 2005 }

This story goes way back, further back than any of us can imagine. But it became part of my family's dreaming just before I was born, 40 years ago. Like a distant storm flickering across the horizon, this story crept across the landscape patiently; it knew just when to announce itself, just when to hit. And when this story first began to rattle my windows I was a man – or perhaps just a boy – lost, still trying to find my path.

I'd tried lots of things in life, but nothing had stuck. I still hadn't found what I was meant to do, what I was supposed to be. I had a wife now, and two daughters who seemed to be blowing out birthday candles every other Sunday. I felt time was ebbing away. So I enrolled at university as a mature-age student and began a double degree in arts and education; I was – to everyone's great relief – soon to become a teacher. And it was there that I enrolled in a class called 'Indigenous Writing'. This class was a departure from the other subjects I'd been studying. I'd signed up for Indigenous Studies units in previous semesters but always chickened out at the last minute and changed to something 'safer'. I was unsettled by so many things surrounding Aboriginal

Australia; I felt ashamed of my own ignorance of their culture, I felt guilty and dirty over our theft of their country, and deep down, perhaps I was afraid that they possessed 'something' that if unleashed might upset the nice orderly nature of my white world. But I knew that I had to learn about Aboriginal culture and history – after all, I was studying to become a teacher, and an understanding of Australia's traditional owners seemed to me as important as anything I might teach in maths or science. So Indigenous Writing seemed a soft way in, and besides, the unit covered indigenous writing from all over the world, so it wouldn't be too confronting, too uncomfortable, *too* Aboriginal.

It was a small class of about fifteen, and the discussions meandered all over the place like a long, winding creek. Our lecturer was one of the sharpest people I had ever met, and the reading list she prepared read like the itinerary from an adventure holiday company; Inuit short stories, nineteenth-century anti-colonial novellas, Native American chants, desert poetry. It was like sliding into a warm bath with a stack of *National Geographics* close at hand. Each week we got together for three hours to discuss the readings, setting off like well-fed, middle-class

adventurers into the literary landscapes of ‘the Other’. What a strange term, ‘the Other’; to white people it conjures up images of figures lurking in the shadows, of big round eyes peeping out from the jungle edge, and in a strange way that is exactly what it refers to – people living outside the mainstream. Yet the term was originally coined by persons of colour (particularly coloured women) as a way of discussing the cultural dominance of mainstream society and the methods used to mark them as inferior. Over time the term has been embraced by other groups whose genetics, sexual orientation and lifestyles defy convention; the sort of people who baffle, shock, antagonise or titillate ‘straight’ society. But most commonly the term is still used by Indigenous people as a way of understanding how ‘Otherness’ has been forced upon them. ‘The Other’; it was a buzz-phrase our little group deployed with uncomfortable regularity – as if any of us could ever truly understand what it meant to be shoved to the risky margins of society. We were all white, and most of us had similar world views; it was a caricature of a liberal arts class, in a safe, cosy environment. Of course, what the class really needed was half a dozen Indigenous people – or even one. Now *that* would have

taken the discussions into some interesting territory! Besides our worldly lecturer, I don’t think many of us in the room knew – really knew – a person of colour. In this class, the closest we came to ‘the Other’ was the occasional visit from an extremely angry young woman who felt the need to remind us regularly that she was ‘queer’ as well as thoroughly pissed off with the world. A heavy vapour trail of marijuana followed her into class and everywhere else she went on campus. But she seemed just as much of a cliché as we were. We all had the luxury to buy into whichever off-the-rack look we felt best projected our self-image: tree-hugger, tree-cutter, flag-waver, flag-burner – we all had the opportunity to choose. Cocooned in the cottonwool of white-bread suburbia, we were all quite comfortable and, I suspect, quite numb.

{ 14 SEPTEMBER 2005 }

After many weeks of sampling the outer reaches of Indigenous literature, the class finally got around to discussing ‘the Australian situation’. We were sitting, as usual, around a long table sipping tea and coffee. It was very informal and relaxed, a class reminiscent of the ‘good old days’ when universities were places of

inquiry and exploration rather than the biscuit-cutter conveyor belts of vocational training they tend to be now. I had scurried in late, but not very late; being a mature-age student I was generally punctual and studious (I'd been ejected from two campuses some 20 wild years ago and was determined not to blow it this time). As I took a seat, my ears pricked up; our lecturer was halfway through a confessional about her family's dark past. She recounted the brutal divide between the whites and Indigenous peoples of her childhood town in northern New South Wales. Aborigines fulfilling community service duties, usually as punishment for minor offences, were allotted the most humiliating and disgusting tasks by the community's police and menfolk. Often they were forced to work naked, sometimes before jeering onlookers with cameras. As she began to revisit the degradations and humiliations that these men and women had been subjected to, our lecturer's voice tapered off into an embarrassed silence, as if she'd already said too much, as if she'd already betrayed her bloodline. But she didn't need to go into detail; the weight that clawed at her face and shoulders finished the story and hinted at a cupboard full of unresolved memories. She would later share with me

that she had kept closeted away, safe from her father's bigoted gaze, a photograph of her childhood tennis idol Yvonne Goolagong.

Then came my announcement. Perhaps I said it to divert some of the attention away from the rattlings of my lecturer's family skeletons; I also suspect I said it partly out of the desire to go one better – mature-age students can be terrible know-alls and I was no exception.

'*Well*; I grew up with an Aboriginal skull on my mantelpiece.'

I said the words with a sort of worldly swagger, somehow expecting the announcement to impress my younger classmates. I might as well have unzipped my pants and flopped my penis onto the table – everyone turned and stared at me with a mixture of incredulousness, disgust and horror. My worldliness withered. There was silence; and in that seven-second eternity my childhood was teleported from the Polaroid feel-good fuzziness of the 1970s into the cold, hard glare of the year 2005.

And then came the chorus. 'You *what*? You have a *what* in your living room?'

'No, no, not *my* living room,' I backpedalled furiously; of course *I* was too enlightened to permit

such a heinous display in my own home. ‘It was on my family’s mantelpiece, in the family home, where I grew up, and it’s not as bad as you think, things were different back then . . .’

Now it was time for my voice to taper off. A different kind of silence filled the room. It was a silence accompanied by a collective unblinking stare, and I sat at its epicentre.

‘Some—’ my voice squeaked, ‘someone – an uncle, actually – gave it to my father when I was a baby. I grew up with it, it was always there. Dad collected stuff, it just sat up on the wall unit with all his other bits and pieces; old stuff, rifles, wild boar tusks, deer antlers—’

The eyes grew wider.

‘Guns?’ asked one girl, almost tearfully. ‘You mean this Aboriginal skull is displayed with guns, like a trophy?’

‘And pigs’ tusks?’ added another.

‘*Country people*, my family are country people, we grew up with guns. And it’s not what it sounds like. Dad’s a veterinarian, he’s into stuff like that, he’s even got two Siamese piglets floating preserved in a fish tank full of formaldehyde. The skull was a scientific curio, not a trophy.’

But it was too late; I had waded so far out into the gloop that every word I uttered just mired me deeper. I was up to my bottom lip in it. My beloved childhood home sounded like a cross between Ripley’s Believe It Or Not and the trophy cave from *Wolf Creek*.

‘Is it still there now?’ asked the teary-eyed girl.

‘No-o-o,’ I answered with unconvincing reassurance. ‘I asked Mum to put it away years ago, when she started babysitting my daughters. I didn’t want them spooked out.’

‘Spooked out’; what an understatement! Eventually the eyes turned away and the discussion moved on. And there I sat, utterly deflated. Over the years I could have filled a hot-air balloon with my bluster about equality, justice and the brotherhood of man; but here was this terrible truth – this secret shard – that brought my seemingly normal childhood and world view crashing back to terra firma.



I can’t recall the first time I saw – I mean, *consciously recognised* – an Aboriginal person. Children, after all, don’t naturally differentiate between people of colour, it is adults who hand out the labels, generation

after generation. ‘Australian Aborigine’ sounds so anthropological, almost zoological – like ‘Australian marsupial’. Yet in a strange way that was how I was brought up to see Indigenous Australians, as some sort of museum exhibit; an oddity that sat somewhere on the evolutionary scale between Oog the Caveman and a brave white fellow in a pith helmet called Rupert. I was taught that it was acceptable to marvel at the Aborigine in his natural setting – preferably in the most distant corner of a far-flung desert, where he could launch boomerangs or sit in the shade of a brigalow tree to his heart’s content. We admired his hardiness and his healthy, gleaming, ‘Yes, boss’ smile as he looked up to the camera – as long as he stayed on the far side of the horizon. Like the kangaroo – iconic in the wild but troublesome in *our* paddock – Aboriginal contact tended to upset our idea of the order of things. Indigenous people disturbed the neat fencelines of our logic; they messed with our empirical minds. For *their* collective mind seemed like a mysterious storehouse stacked high with what the modern world considered superstitious mumbo-jumbo and redundant knowledge. Only now are we awakening to an understanding that this 60 000-year-old storehouse holds answers to questions

we have just begun to ask. The custodians of this storehouse possessed a playful ability to live in the moment that both baffled and annoyed the hell out of us. But of course our biggest bugbear was the colour of their skin.

Black. The negative images embedded in our language go back centuries; black is the night, black is my soul, burnt black, eyes black with rage, black heart. To a white boy growing up in the safe, suburban 1970s, ‘black’ conjured up the beating native war drums of Saturday-afternoon Tarzan movies. It meant cannibal cooking pots, violated white missionary women, and spears thrust deep into the unsuspecting backs of noble explorers. It meant voodoo, shrunken heads, witchdoctors and inexhaustible armies of fanatical Zulu warriors. As a small child I was chased down the jungle tracks of my imagination by every black cliché imaginable; a Negroid Frankenstein stitched together from Hollywood and *Boy’s Own Annuals*. African, Caribbean, Islander, Australian; they were all tarred with the same evil brush. Black was black, and even in a suit or a doctor’s gown, I was warned, a spear-chucker lurked just below the surface. As I type these recollections I cringe at how monstrously offensive such

stereotypes are. In fact, I can't believe I'm writing this at all. Part of me wants to skip to the next chapter; it would be so much easier for all of us. But if this story is going to make any sense, it has to include everything; I need you, my reader, to peek into the freight cars full of baggage I've been dragging behind me all these years. Of course, none of this will be big news to Indigenous folk!

As a child, I viewed Black Australia through the same smudged lens that I imagine a lot of other people looked through. It was a lens that allowed us a one-way intimacy, like those one-way windows in police line-up rooms; we gawked and scrutinised without getting up close. And if we didn't like what we saw, or if what we saw made us uncomfortable, we could turn away, turn the page, switch the channel or change the subject. Not that the subject of Black Australia came up that often. To show too much interest in Aboriginal affairs aroused suspicion; to speak in their defence amounted to betrayal. Australians then didn't much like do-gooders; they seemed to somehow threaten our way of life, our collective values and our right to a good time. But if do-gooders were tolerated, 'Abo-lovers' were despised. We appropriated the term 'Nigger-lover' from the

Americans and re-jigged it to suit our language. And like the Americans, we used the term to keep 'our own kind' in line – just as a bitch nips at its young pups for straying too far from the litter. That's how it was when I grew up.

It's hard to imagine just how straitjacketed by conformity most Australians were only three or four decades ago. Take beer, for instance. In the 1970s, 99 per cent of Queensland beer drinkers drank Fourex – and full strength at that. Walking into a party or barbecue with another brand like Foster's or Carlton (there wasn't much to choose from back then!) immediately branded you an outsider. If you were visiting from overseas or had recently migrated from the southern states it was forgivable, you were let off with a mild ribbing. But if you were a local and actually *preferred* the taste of that southern swill to Fourex, you were immediately branded by the phalanx of men huddled around the barbecue as someone of questionable social standing – an eccentric, an academic or a poofster, and certainly not one to be trusted with the ladies. That was beer! It seems unbelievable now. So just imagine what it was like to buck the social norms governing race relations in this country. Of course there were brave

souls who did, but I never met one.

When the subject of Aboriginal Australia came up during my childhood, which was rarely, it was usually in the form of third-hand stories or jokes. The stories went like this: 'A mate of my cousin's works somewhere out west, and he swears that this is true; when the blackfellas run out of petrol they push their government-funded Toyotas off the side of the track and set fire to them – too lazy or too stupid to refill 'em. They just wait until they get another government vehicle and do the same thing all over again. Useless bastards, all of 'em, and we're footin' the bill.'

The other men around the barbecue, bar or lunch-room would all shake their heads in disgust and utter statements like 'Fuckin' useless black cunts'.

Then, without fail, one of the more sensitive souls in the group would roll out this chestnut: 'Trouble is, the poor bastards are cavemen. I hate to say this, but they would've been better off if we'd wiped 'em all out.'

I heard that statement many times over the years and I could never help but wonder, 'Hang on, just how could an extinct race be *better off*?'

But of course I never asked the question out loud.

Then there were the jokes; there seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of Abo jokes doing the rounds of the schoolyards and campfires of my youth. We often brought these gags from home; and the fact that Uncle Bazza had told them around the table at Sunday lunch seemed to legitimise their craven humour. Deep down I had an inkling that something was amiss and my stomach often twisted in guilty discomfort, but it was always easier to laugh along. These jokes were never really funny and they connected with the mean streak that lurks within us all, the mean streak that left unchecked can spread like a toxic bloom. There was one particular joke that stepped beyond meanness. This joke began circulating during the 1980s Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. This was a major inquiry into the disproportionate number of Aboriginal men who were committing suicide or dying while in police watch-houses and prisons. I found this joke so disturbing that every time I heard it, the seconds seemed to slow down as I waited for an adult – anyone – to say, 'Now listen here, that's not funny! Those dead men have grieving mothers.' But no one said a thing, least of all me. Another memory, another shard for my hot-air balloon.

The joke ran like this:

What do you call three blackfellas in a prison cell?

A mobile.



CHAPTER
TWO

{ 18 SEPTEMBER 2005 }

A few days after my big announcement to the class, I called into my parents' house to feed the cat; they had gone away for the weekend. I hadn't been sleeping well; I'd lain awake all night obsessing about the skull and the girl in my class – her unbelieving eyes. As I stood at the kitchen sink replenishing the cat's water bowl, I decided to look for Mary. That was the name my father had given to the skull when it was handed to him 40 years ago. Years later, a medical specialist told Dad that the cranium actually belonged to a male, but

the female name stuck. The specialist also informed Dad that the 'specimen' had most likely died from syphilis. Syphilis, or 'the pox' as it was called in the days when it was common and highly feared, is a sexually transmitted disease that if left untreated eats away the organs, including the brain, and literally rots the skull from the inside out, causing agonising pain, madness and then death. This disease was just one of many that English soldiers, sailors, convicts and settlers brought to Australia. Before contact, the Indigenous population was largely free of influenza, tuberculosis, whooping cough, measles and most sexually transmitted diseases. Aboriginal people had no immunity to these alien diseases, and when they spread the local population perished – not just in ones or twos, but often by the community.

'See these cracks and lesions on the temple,' my father used to explain knowingly to curious visitors, 'that is where the syphilis ate away at the skull. The poor wretch would have been quite insane when he died.'

I started to poke around the mantelpiece, where Mary had always sat. When Mum and Dad started babysitting my first daughter, Bianca, I had quietly

asked Mum to put Mary out of sight. She understood. It was easier approaching Mum on such a delicate matter; Dad would have responded with one of his looks, the kind that suggested in no uncertain terms that I'd gone soft in the head.

The 'mantelpiece' was really a 1960s wall unit that took up an entire wall. The bottom consisted of cupboards containing Mum's good dinner set and boxed pewter doodads – things given at births and christenings, things put aside for special occasions that never actually saw the light of day; the sorts of things that when you open them release the scent of four-decades-old air. There were photo albums here, and an enormous case of slides, a cantankerous old slide projector and a rolled-up, yellowed screen that had long forgotten what it was to be flat. The centremost cupboard had once snugly housed the television set; now, in this age of widescreen plasma, it housed Dad's collection of football videotapes. Above the bottom cupboard level was a sort of buffet area on which sat my parents' new TV, their stereo gear and record collection; and above that were two levels of shelves for books, framed photographs and prized pieces from Dad's collection of curios.

Dad had been a bush vet, a vocation which generously fed his appetite for collecting. Over the decades his profession had taken him into hundreds of the nation's farmyards, outbuildings and machinery sheds. Amid the smell of bagged animal feed, fertiliser, diesel oil and cracked leather, his magpie eye would scan the gloom for dust-caked treasure hanging from rafters or half concealed beneath ancient tarpaulins. Over the years Dad had amassed a mind-boggling haul. He had scores of antique bottles on display around the house and many more in boxes. There were convict-made bricks with the makers' thumbprints still clearly visible; there were rusted handshears gleaned from shearing-shed walls; tobacco tins, branding irons, dingo traps, rabbit traps, and snakeskins as long as beds. He'd collected interesting pieces of stone kicked up in paddocks and cattleyards: thunder-eggs, lumps of petrified wood, lumps of quartz, even a baby-head-sized lump of coal. He carted home horse-driven ploughs and pre-Federation hand tools, a grinding stone the size of a car wheel, blown-out Model-T Ford radiators, kerosene-powered refrigerators, and rusted-out milk urns. There was *so* much stuff. He had a double-ended timbercutter's saw the length of a small car which was

thoughtfully displayed next to the metre-long, toothy-edged nose of a sawfish (not many families had one of those!). But it wasn't all blokey stuff, he also had an eye for the delicate: fob and pocket watches, an exquisite pair of round-rimmed tortoiseshell glasses that I liked to imagine once belonged to a Chinese spice trader, miniature scales for measuring gold dust, snuffboxes of carved bone, old pearl brooches and pins, silver matchbox holders and ladies' pocket mirrors. At the height of my father's mania, it was not unusual to wake up and find a horse-drawn buggy (without the horse) that he had lugged home from the bush and reassembled overnight in the front yard.

Dad was a keen sportsman too, and there was a constantly fluctuating collection of rifles, guns and muskets. There were bayonets, a wickedly sharp Gurkha fighting knife, and an intricately inlaid samurai sword. There were the brass casings of artillery shells, and assorted bullets of every size. There were deer antlers, and the razor-sharp tusks from wild boar that he had dispatched on regular hunting trips.

Show-and-tell days at school were never a challenge; my brother and I would just grab something – anything – from around the house. Even if we didn't know what

the object actually was, we could always make up a good story. My favourite was an old grinding iron from a flour mill; it was about the size of a cricket ball, black and mottled, and to the untrained eye looked like a small cannonball. I remember regaling my classmates with stories of how it had been used by Captain Cook's crew to disperse 'troublesome natives' as they were preparing to land their longboats on the beach of Fraser Island. I told them my father had been on a fishing trip when it was washed up by a wave at his feet – all three kilos of it! No one ever bothered to ask how we knew the history of this great lump of iron; my classmates – especially the boys – were too busy turning the Fraser Island Cannonball over in their hands with the silent reverence that boys bestow on implements that kill and maim.

Dad's collection could be divided into three broad categories. First there was the outside stuff – artefacts that were either too large to fit in the house or so grimy and dilapidated that they couldn't get past Mum. Then there was the downstairs stuff that filled drawers and boxes in the garage and lined the walls of the pool room. Third, there was the upstairs collection, the bits deemed special enough to live with us: the lamps, the

vases, the pottery pieces, the shiny brass things, and of course Mary on the shelf above the record player. Mary sat in for every record change of my childhood. From the swinging sounds of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass in the 1960s to Nirvana's bellowing-at-the-moon through the 1990s, four decades of middle-class white music reverberated through Mary. I sometimes wonder what his spirit would have thought of it all, especially on nights when the windows rattled to Mum and Dad's favourite, the thunderous organ prelude to *Phantom of the Opera*. It's a wonder that the combined sonic assault of Andrew Lloyd Webber and modern speaker technology hadn't reduced Mary to dust, or at the very least vibrated his teeth from their sockets.

I worked my way through the cupboards with a detective's touch, sneaky fingers feeling around corners, behind picnic baskets and over little boxes tied up with string. As a child, I had an almost paranormal knack for unearthing our gifts weeks before birthdays and Christmas. I peeked behind framed family photos up on the higher shelves, making sure that everything was put back just so. I said hello to my grandmamma, 20 years gone, and she smiled back at me through the dust-speckled glass from her beloved garden. In that

photo, wild grey hair that she could never be bothered with blew in an eternal breeze and a green cardigan stretched across her abundant frame. How I loved her.

I abandoned the wall unit and wandered down the hall to my old bedroom. It's a bit of a junkroom now, a holding pen for things my mother is trying to get out of the house, and things my father is trying to hang onto. My old bedroom, once made wall-less by imagination; I saw again the Himalayan base camp on top of my wardrobe where I would sit amid clouds with my survival rations of Vegemite sandwiches. I saw again the endless shark-filled ocean over which my creaky bed rolled; I saw again the virgin, pea-green, shag-pile Amazonian forest over which my model planes floated. I looked through the window, seeking out familiar sights; the fire station tower where the hoses still hung like spaghetti strands dripping themselves dry; across the street, the young married woman's bathroom window on which I had trained my binoculars at 7.15 each night for one wonderful year – where was she now? The bedroom walls began to close in – too many memories for such a tiny room.

I drifted around downstairs, eyes and fingers flitting through the pool room, the workshop, my brother's

old bedroom stacked high with things that had not yet made the skip or the local auction centre. The auction centre! In a recent effort to de-clutter the house and to appease my mother, Dad had been taking stuff there by the ute-load . . . Surely not! They wouldn't accept a human skull, would they?

I went back into the lounge room and flopped into my father's lounge chair. It sat dead square in front of the wall unit; the best seat in the house for watching the telly. The cat glided between my legs, her appreciative purring the only sound as I wondered out loud, 'Where? *Where* could Mary be?'

In the distance a rubbish truck emptied wheelie bins in quick, cacophonous crashes of falling beer bottles and the dull thuds of rubbish bags. 'Oh god, not the wheelie bin, not that!' I imagined Mary lost forever in landfill, entombed in maggoty meat scraps, festering nappies and all the never-to-break-down plastic refuse that makes up twenty-first-century waste.

Family homes are like time machines; just the hint of an odour, the groan of a loose floorboard, the slant of morning sunshine through half-opened drapes can peel away years, even decades. I gazed down at the lounge-room floor and pictured my brother and me

sprawled out on the carpet with pillows and blankets watching Saturday-morning TV. I drifted back even further, remembering Neil Armstrong's first step into moon dust; I remember the big fuss being made by the adults in the room and being told it was too bad that I wouldn't remember the moment. I was three years old and I remember it all. The whole world was space-crazy; perhaps that is why we were disdainful of Indigenous culture. Now we were hurtling through space, did we see boomerangs as an embarrassing reminder of our origins?



I grew up on a cultural combo of American and Japanese cartoons and Australian children's television drama. All the shows were great, but there was *one* show that every young kid rushed home from school for: *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*, the hit children's afternoon television show from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Skippy was the star of the show, but it was his partner in adventure, the gumleaf-blowing Sonny Hammond, that every little boy wanted to be. Sonny had the biggest back yard in Australia; the fictional Waratah National Park where he lived a Boy's Own life with his park-ranger

father Matt Hammond, brother Mark, and the daring chopper pilot Jerry. Sonny wasn't even encumbered with a mother telling him to be home for dinner or rousing on him for messing up his signature red-and-white-striped shirt. Together Sonny and Skippy hopped and clambered through bushland, rafted across shark-filled inlets, and roamed through hidden valleys and into the imagination of many an Australian boy and girl. And it was in one of these hidden valleys that Sonny and Skippy stumbled upon Tara.

Tara looked as though he'd just jumped off the two-dollar coin. He was as black as black could be, with wiry white hair and a sinewy grace. There was a lovely economy to his movements and he spoke like a sage. He was the cliché native Australian, but he was a magnificent cliché all the same. Tara was the last of a clan that had been relocated from its tribal country decades before. When Sonny and Skippy stumbled into the Hidden Valley – accessible only through a spooky secret cave – they found Tara living as his ancestors had, in a simple humpy high on an escarpment from where he could survey the valley below; a valley that provided sustenance for his belly and his spirit. Tara's only concession to the twentieth century was a discreet

pair of red underpants – it was a children’s show after all. Sonny was besotted with Tara – and what ten-year-old wouldn’t be? The pair threw boomerangs, hunted for bush tucker and chilled out on the escarpment as fluffy white clouds rolled overhead. One lazy afternoon as the two sat enjoying the silence, Sonny turned to his friend. ‘You’re like Skippy, Tara, happy and free. You do whatever you please. I bet there are a lot of people that would like to change places with you.’

The boy had a point – Tara’s life did have a certain Robinson Crusoe appeal to it – but in reality Sonny’s words were no more than a scriptwriter’s pipedream. In the 1970s, as now, you would have been hard pressed to find too many White Australians willing to trade places with an Aboriginal person.

No episode of *Skippy* was complete without nail-biting drama, and halfway into the show it came from the sky. On a routine air patrol over the park, Jerry decided to look for Sonny in the Hidden Valley. As the helicopter blades thrashed at the air over Tara’s campsite, the terrified elder became convinced that the horrendous hovering noisemaker was the ‘spirit of death’. Tara ordered his young friend to leave the valley so that he could prepare to join his ancestors. ‘Time for

Tara to die, leave this place of death.’

‘Please, Tara, please don’t die. We’re not going to let you die,’ Sonny pleaded, tears streaming down his freckled cheeks.

That afternoon, little kids all around Australia repeated Sonny’s words like a mantra: ‘Please, Tara, please don’t die!’

And then, something *truly* terrible happened. Three little words crawled across the screen: ‘To be continued . . .’

The Tara episode was just too big to fit neatly into a half-hour slot, and had been split into two halves. The words *To be continued* could be a devastating thing for a child of seven. That evening as I slurped milk from my Skippy mug and picked listlessly at the dinner on my Skippy plate, I stared blankly into the lime-green geometric kitchen wallpaper, pondering Tara’s fate. As I lay in bed under the subtropical sky, my sweaty head tossed and turned on my Skippy pillowcase. The next day, there was a palpable sense of tension in the schoolyard. By four o’clock, the streets, playgrounds and back yards that usually resonated to the sounds of bicycle bells and cricket bat thwacks fell silent. Every little Australian knew that in Aboriginal culture

‘pointing the bone’ was an act of sorcery, a curse that brought about certain death. I’m sure my little brother wasn’t the only bullied child to point a half-gnawed chop bone at an annoying older sibling and announce, ‘That’s it, you’re dead.’ But this was the real deal; Tara had effectively pointed the bone at himself and was halfway back to the Dreamtime. Only Sonny and Skippy could save him. It was absolutely gripping stuff, and we were all as gripped as gripped could be!

As the sun slowly set on Tara’s life, Sonny desperately rummaged through the old man’s few belongings and discovered a medal and citation for bravery. As a younger man, Tara had heroically saved a small boy from drowning, and that small boy had grown up to become a powerful dignitary. Upon hearing of Tara’s plight, the well-heeled dignitary organised the airlift of a songman and a full troupe of dancers from Tara’s far-flung Akara tribe to be by their fading tribesman’s side. *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo* had never seen anything like it, and neither had we; a dozen painted-up full-blood Aborigines (in underpants) dancing in jerky supernatural movements. The continual drone of the didgeridoo and the clack-clack of clapsticks echoed throughout the Hidden Valley and through Australian

lounge rooms from coast to coast. The ceremony ran uninterrupted for ten mesmerising minutes. The dancers jerked slowly around an unconscious Tara, tension building, until at last his eyes flickered open and he slowly rose, joining his tribesmen in their otherworldly dance. And so the ending was a happy one; Tara was saved and allowed to stay on in the park, and Australian children were treated to an extended encounter – however artificial – with Indigenous Australia. At the end of the show, after some well-intentioned dialogue about black and white having much to learn from each other, Tara pronounced that ‘Tara has many friends.’

I’m sure that at that moment every child watching wanted a friend just like Tara; a friend to reveal to them the mysterious secrets of the country in which they lived. For most of us, however, there would be no Tara to show us the ropes, and besides, we would soon be too distracted growing up into busy white Australians to remember or care.

I returned from my memories, rose and opened the centre TV cupboard of the wall unit again. Inside, stacked high, were videotape towers of AFL football games – Essendon games mostly, and a smattering of

finals matches. I poked my head into the cupboard for a closer look. As my nostrils registered the faint, lingering whiff of burnt-out Rank Arena valves, I accidentally brought down a teetering pile of videos. There he was, Mary, upside-down in the far back corner of the TV cupboard – how uncomfortable he looked. Gently taking the skull from the cupboard, I returned to my father's chair. I put him to my nose and inhaled (don't be shocked, we were old friends). My grown-up fingers reconnected with him, tracing the little cracks that ran like the rivers of a faded atlas. The temple – the area known in spirituality as the third eye – was corroded by the syphilis that would have gnawed away at Mary's sanity and spirit.

Placing two fingers into the base of the skull, I recalled how once my entire hand and wrist could fit inside this space; I remembered the way I once wiggled my index and pinkie fingers through the eye sockets like graveyard worms. My fingers glided over the dry interior; once there was fluid here, and a brain floating in a continuous synaptic lightning storm that swept this way and that over a landscape of consciousness. Hunger and contentment, triumph and disappointment, wonder and awareness, every thought

and feeling; they had all resided there in that cavity. My fingers felt like a stranger's legs, tiptoeing about in a long-deserted house, wondering at the private dramas and dreams which had once played out inside.

How yellow it had gone. Dad used to lacquer the skull every so often to prevent the bone from crumbling away into chalk and, I suspect, because he enjoyed lacquering things. After Mary was given to him, he had glued the lower jaw into position with Araldite and fixed a matchbox-sized block of wood to the base of the skull to prevent it from tipping over backwards. The teeth – except for one at the front – were all accounted for and in remarkably good condition – testimony, no doubt, to a cola- and chip-free diet. There had been the odd occasion in the 40 years that Mary sat on the shelf, firm-jawed and resolute, when some joker – usually when my parents were hosting a party – had placed a cigarette into the gap left by the missing tooth. And there were a few occasions when my younger brother Guy and I would test the nerves of the neighbourhood kids by placing a small pocket torch inside Mary so that the eye cavities and the slight gaps between his teeth glowed with an otherworldly radiance. We had the ultimate jack-o'-lantern. Although we sometimes

revelled in the macabre weirdness of living with a skull on the mantelpiece, we always handled Mary with care. Apart from the occasional cigarette, Mary was never mocked or ridiculed; he became part of our landscape. It seemed no different to having my grandmother's ashes on display next to my grandfather's false teeth and a dried-up block of his favourite chewing tobacco (which we did!). There was a twisted yet sweet form of suburban ancestor worship going on in our house, and in a weird way Mary had come along for the ride.

My rational self knew the skull was as empty as the abandoned shell of a hermit crab, yet my heart told me otherwise; I felt *something*, but whatever it was, the harder I tried to see it – to understand it – the further I pushed it away; it was as elusive as mist. I tried to send some positive thoughts to the bones in my lap, something profound, but it was a strain to think; I wondered if I was losing my mind, yet at the same time there was a rare and unfamiliar calmness about my thoughts suggesting I ride this ripple that seemed to swell with each passing moment. I put Mary back with the tapes – the right way up this time – and jiggled him about a little to make him more comfortable. Then the words came, three simple words: 'You're going home.'