

# Chapter 1

## From time immemorial

**A** NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY.*  
THE BELLS PEAL EVERYWHERE.  
CHURCH BELLS CALLING THE FAITHFUL TO THE TABERNACLE  
WHERE THE GATES OF HEAVEN WILL OPEN, BUT NOT FOR THE  
WICKED. CALLING INNOCENT LITTLE BLACK GIRLS FROM A  
DISTANT COMMUNITY WHERE THE WHITE DOVE BEARING AN  
OLIVE BRANCH NEVER LANDS. LITTLE GIRLS WHO COME BACK HOME AFTER  
CHURCH ON SUNDAY, WHO LOOK AROUND THEMSELVES AT THE HUMAN  
FALLOUT AND ANNOUNCE MATTER-OF-FACTLY, *ARMAGEDDON BEGINS HERE.*

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The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously – if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground. Looking down at the serpent’s wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight, long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time. It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into – scouring down through – the slippery underground of the mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys. The sea water following in the serpent’s wake, swarming in a frenzy of tidal waves, soon changed colour from ocean blue to the

yellow of mud. The water filled the swirling tracks to form the mighty bending rivers spread across the vast plains of the Gulf country. The serpent travelled over the marine plains, over the salt flats, through the salt dunes, past the mangrove forests and crawled inland. Then it went back to the sea. And it came out at another spot along the coastline and crawled inland and back again. When it finished creating the many rivers in its wake, it created one last river, no larger or smaller than the others, a river which offers no apologies for its discontent with people who do not know it. This is where the giant serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin.

This tidal river snake of flowing mud takes in breaths of a size that is difficult to comprehend. Imagine the serpent's breathing rhythms as the tide flows inland, edging towards the spring waters nestled deeply in the gorges of an ancient limestone plateau covered with rattling grasses dried yellow from the prevailing winds. Then with the outward breath, the tide turns and the serpent flows back to its own circulating mass of shallow waters in the giant water basin in a crook of the mainland whose sides separate it from the open sea.

To catch this breath in the river you need the patience of one who can spend days doing nothing. If you wait under the rivergum where those up-to-no-good Mission-bred kids accidentally hanged Cry-baby Sally, the tip of the dead branch points to where you will see how the serpent's breath fights its way through in a tunnel of wind, creating ripples that shimmer silver, similar to the scales of a small, nocturnal serpent, thrashing in anger whenever the light hits its slippery translucent body, making it writhe and wrench to escape back into its natural environment of darkness.

The inside knowledge about this river and coastal region is the Aboriginal Law handed down through the ages since time began. Otherwise, how would one know where to look for the hidden underwater courses in the vast flooding mud plains, full of serpents and fish in the monsoon season? Can someone who did not grow up in a place that is sometimes under water, sometimes bone-dry, know when the trade winds blowing off the southern and northern hemispheres will merge in summer? Know the moment of climatic change better than they know themselves? Who fishes in the yellow-coloured monsoonal runoff from the drainages, with sheets of deep water pouring into the wide rivers swollen over their banks, filling vast plains with floodwaters? The cyclones linger and regroup, the rain never stops pouring, but the fat fish are abundant.

It takes a particular kind of knowledge to go with the river, whatever its mood. It is about there being no difference between you and the movement of water as it seasonally shifts its tracks according to its own mood. A river that spurns human endeavour in one dramatic gesture, jilting a lover who has never really been known, as it did to the frontier town built on its banks in the hectic heyday of colonial vigour. A town intended to serve as a port for the shipping trade for the hinterland of Northern Australia.

In one moment, during a Wet season early in the last century, the town lost its harbour waters when the river simply decided to change course, to bypass it by several kilometres. Just like that. Now the waterless port survives with more or less nothing to do. Its citizens continue to engage in a dialogue with themselves passed down the generations, on why the town should continue to exist. They stayed on to safeguard the northern coastline from invasion by the Yellow Peril. A dreadful vision, a long yellow streak marching behind an arrowhead pointing straight for the little town of Desperance. Eventually the heat subsided. When the Yellow Peril

did not invade, everyone had a good look around and found a more contemporary reason for existence. It meant the town still had to be vigilant. Duty did not fall on one or two; duty was everybody's business. To keep a good eye out for whenever the moment presented itself, to give voice to a testimonial far beyond personal experience – to comment on the state of their blacks. To do so was regarded as an economic contribution to State rights, then, as an afterthought, to maintaining the decent society of the nation as a whole.

Normal Phantom was an old tribal man, who lived all of his life in the dense Pricklebush scrub on the edge of town. He lived amidst thickets of closely-growing slender plants with barely anything for leaves, that never gave an ant an inch of shelter under a thousand thorny branches. This foreign infestation on the edge of Desperance grew out of an era long before anyone in the Phantom family could remember. They had lived in a human dumping-ground next to the town tip since the day Normal Phantom was born. All choked up, living piled up together in trash humpies made of tin, cloth, and plastic too, salvaged from the rubbish dump. The descendants of the pioneer families, who claimed ownership of the town, said *the Aboriginal was really not part of the town at all*. Sure, they worked the dunny cart in the old days, carted the rubbish and swept the street. *Furthermore*, they said, *the Aboriginal was dumped here by the pastoralists, because they refused to pay the blackfella equal wages, even when it came in. Right on the edge of somebody else's town, didn't they?* Dumped the lot of them without any sign of lock, stock or barrel.

No, the Pricklebush was from the time before the motor car, when goods and chattels came up by camel train until Abdul and Abdullah, the old Afghan brothers, disappeared along the track called the 'lifeline', connecting north to south. After much time had

passed the jokes came about Afghans being *shifty dogs, dodgy dogs, murdering dogs* and *unreliable*. When the cupboards turned bare, the town talk finally turned to the realisation that very likely the camel men were never coming back – then everyone in town assumed they had died. A few of the Christian-minded, trying to capitalise on the gross lack of decency in town, sniffed, *Well! That ought to teach you now, won't it?* But no one else thought so, because by then the grog and the tucker was being freighted up by mail truck, which everyone thought was a more convenient method of road transport by any stretch of the imagination.

One cloud-covered night, the camels finally turned up in Desperance, jingling and a-jangling, their foreign bells swaying around their necks, vespers on such a still night. The residents woke up in childlike fright, sitting straight up in their beds, eyes wide open like zombies, seeing dark figures moving in their pitch-black bedroom, same time reckoning it was ghosts with an Afghan smell, true God, just came straight in, levitating, taking over, helping themselves, walking around people's homes with no *mind youse*, not one shred of good manners whatsoever. Couldn't even knock on the door first before coming into someone's house. That was the trouble with new Australians the town claimed: *Even dead ones had no manners*. Unnaturalised. Really un-Australian. *You shoulda sent out a search party*. What a relief it was for dawn to come and everyone could see for themselves it was just poor old Abdul's and Abdullah's camels.

Over the following days no one thought to capture the animals to retrieve the rotting pack saddles. The townsfolk had a deeply felt aversion to touching the belongings of dark-skinned foreigners – or their animals. So, the camels just wandered around at their own will, covered with sores from the rotting packs of foodstuff: flour, sugar, grain growing sprouts that had died, still strapped over and hanging off their backs until something had to be done. The poor

beasts were officially rounded up. The screaming, uncooperative animals didn't comprehend English, or barbarism either. After being hounded for several hours by their pursuers on foot and horseback, and stoned and whipped, the camels were eventually moved out over the claypans and shot. In the archival records written with a thick nib by a heavy-handed municipal clerk it is recorded, *Camels removed*. The first entry of work completed by the Town's Municipal Council.

In the old camel-drivers' camps the seeds of mimosa embedded in camel dung sprouted their hard little shoots in the Wet season. Thousands of seeds spread along every track and gully, flooding with sheetwater from the rain to regenerate in shallow mud pools. The shoots sent down their fat roots to take a steely grip on the claypans, holding the land together in a mirage that looked like it might last forever without water. In this mirage the cattle properties prospered on traditional lands taken but never ceded. Today, herds of Brahman-cross cattle leave their tracks crisscrossing the landscape in the dry season, as they search for stubbly patches of bluegrass and grind the top layers of soil to powdered bulldust.

The Pricklebush mob say that Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father's fathers did before him. His ancestors were the river people, who were living with the river from before time began. Normal was like ebbing water, he came and went on the flowing waters of the river right out to the sea. He stayed away on the water as long as he pleased. He knew fish, and was on friendly terms with groper, the giant codfish of the Gulf sea, that swam in schools of fifty or more, on the move right up the river following his boat in for company. The old people say the groper lives for hundreds of years and maybe Normal would too. When he talked about the stars, they said he knew as much about the sky as he did about water. The prickly

bush mob said he had always chased the constellations: *We watched him as a little boy running off into the night trying to catch stars*. They were certain he knew the secret of getting there. They thought he must go right up to the stars in the company of groper fish when it stormed at sea, when the sea and the sky became one, because, otherwise, how could he have come back?

'How you do that?' was the question everyone asked.

'The water doesn't worry me,' Normal Phantom answered simply, although he knew that when his mind went for a walk, his body followed.

Everyone in Desperance was used to the sight of Normal's jeep driving north to meet the river's edge. It was the only vehicle he had ever owned. Always, the small tinnie boat, full of dints, a stray bullet hole or two, strapped onto the roof. A vessel purchased with cross-country road transport in mind, much more than water safety.

They say he knew these deep muddy waters better than the big salties: crocs that got tangled up in the nets in the middle of the night. Glassy-eyed monsters that came over the side of his tiny craft looking for action with the big river man. Jaws charging for a winner-takes-all kind of fight in the swamping boat, snapping in full flight, water splashing up into a storm with the swishing, thrash, thrash, thrashing of an angry tail against the side of the boat. People like to remember Normal saying in melancholy fashion (faking a thoroughly modern Americanised impersonation of a Presidential Captain Hook): those snapping jaws meant diddly squat to him. Meanwhile, he moved like a hopping hare, fumbling for what seemed like ages to find the gun. Normal ended hundreds of lives of prehistoric living fossils this way, with his gun pointing all over the place in a turmoil of water and thick leather crankiness, until he made a direct hit between the eyes of the reptile caught in an instant of moonlight.

In this otherwise quietly living population of about three hundred people, no living soul remembered what the port had looked like before. No picture could be put on display in a showcase at the museum of scarce memorabilia, because no one at the time of the heyday thought it was worthwhile to take a photo. But everybody knew that this was Normal's river.

One day, someone in town, whose name is not worth a mention, was languishing around in a laconic stupor following the months of heatwave in the Wet season build-up, waiting for the rain to come. Lying flat-out like a corpse on the bare linoleum floor in the hallway of a house exactly like the one next door. Capturing in a long sigh of appreciation the northern sea breezes that came waltzing straight over twenty-five kilometres of mudflats, whistling their arrival through the front door while, on the way out, slamming the back door open and shut. All of a sudden this someone of no consequence thought of changing the name of the river to Normal. And, in a town where change never came easy, it came to be.

There was a celebration by the local Shire Council. The occasion was the anniversary of the port's first one hundred years. It coincided with a spate of unusual happenings during a short-lived era of Aboriginal domination of the Council. *Harmless coercing of the natives*, the social planners hummed, anxious to make deals happen for the impending mining boom. Meaningful coexistence could now accommodate almost any request whatsoever, including changing a river's name to Normal. During this honeymoon period, those Aboriginal people who took the plunge to be councillors, wisely used their time in public office to pursue scraps of personal gain for their own families living amidst the muck of third-world poverty.

All this was part and parcel of the excitement of Desperance when the first multinational mining company came into the region. Numerous short-lived profiteering schemes were concocted for the

locals, in order to serve the big company's own interests as they set about pillaging the region's treasure trove: the publicly touted curve of an underground range embedded with minerals.

The elaborate white linen ceremony, paid for by the mining company, attracted southern politicians who flew in for the day. Most of them were known by the local dignitaries as a bunch of fly-by-nighters. And what's more, as they rolled out the welcome smile, some locals whispered unmentionable insults behind the backs of their very important visitors. Other locals who liked the sound of their own voices attacked the politicians straight out with a diatribe of insults. Yelling out, the crowd picked up bits wafting in the wind gusts: *Youse are always cowering down on the ground. Are youse the runt of the Australian political litter or something? Yah! falling over yaseelves to any foreign investor flocking up the steps of Parliament, knocking on the big door, and smelling like money.*

The politicians and mining executives mingled uncomfortably with the crowd, then pushed themselves up against the old hero Normal for a photo opportunity, and got snapped by members of the media circus who had jockeyed for free rides on the official executive jets. Then everything got ruined by a normal sort of dust storm thundering in from the south. A thick wall of red dust mingled with all manner of crunched vegetation and plastic shopping bags gathered up in its path, damaging the cut sandwiches when it came through. The fidget-prone adults panicked, running for cover along with their red and green cordial-stained screaming children.

Then came a violent electrical storm when the rain ruined the day anyway – as the town's sceptics said it would. A taut occasion, despite these dramatic interventions; enough time for the now disposed-of State Premier to complete the ceremony of officially changing the name of the river from that of a long deceased Imperial Queen, to 'Normal's River'. Traditional people gathered up for the event mumbled, *Ngabarn, Ngabarn, Mandagi*, and so did

Normal in a very loud and sour-sounding voice over the loud-speaker in his extremely short thankyou address, although those who knew a fruit salad full of abuse in the local languages knew he was not saying *Thank you! Thank you!* and belly-laughed themselves silly because the river only had one name from the beginning of time. It was called *Wangala*.

It was a funny thing about the river. Anybody and everybody thought they might ride this river like some legendary buck-jumping wild horse called Diesel or Gidgee or Mulga. People were always travelling up to the northern coastline over the rough roads of the Gulf on long weekends. They'd haul up and launch straight over the side into the yellow river: flash fishing boats with sixties country and western names, like *Donna*, *Stella* and *Trixie*. Bright-coloured boats, powered by engines of many horsepower, bought with top dollar gained from doing stretch shifts two kilometres down underground, hauling up rich ores scraped from the mother load embedded in sequences of rock that looked like the growth rings of a powerful, ancient being.

And on the water they would cast a line here, a line there, over the sides with state of the art fishing tackle, but no knowledge of the way of the river. Nothing was thought about it. There was a considerable number of people living in the region now, with the great influx of mine workers who had nothing to do on their days off. More new mines became established in the region with little regard to anyone's say-so.

After the mining stopped, neither Normal Phantom and his family, nor his family's relations, past or present, rated a mention in the official version of the region's history. There was no tangible evidence of their existence. Even in Uncle Micky's collection of bullet cartridges.

Micky had lived with a metal detector for God knows how long.

He said he had a fever which drove him on because he would never know when he picked up the last piece of evidence – all of those forty-fours, thirty thirtys, three-o-threes, twelve gauges – all kinds of cartridges used in the massacre of the local tribes. He had maps, names of witnesses, details, the lot. A walking encyclopaedia. Now his voice lives on in the great archive of cassettes which he left for the war trials he predicted would happen one day. But no tourists go to Micky's museum. Maybe because it was built in the wrong spot. That's fighting for you. Fighting, fighting all the time for a bit of land and a little bit of recognition.

All the old mines, old mining equipment, old miners, old miners' huts, skeletons of miners in the cupboard, anything to do with mining was packaged in a mishmash of nothing words and marketed on gloss as the ultimate of local tourist attractions. The shiny covers of these tourist brochures celebrating selected historical sites and museums ought to grab you from across the room at airports, hotels and motels, or from the rack of any tourist or travel centre selling the highlights of mining. You can't even hide the stuff because of its iridescence.

But this was not Vaudeville. Wars were fought here. If you had your patch destroyed you'd be screaming too. The serpent's covenant permeates everything, even the little black girls with hair combed back off their faces and bobby-pinned neatly for church, listening quietly to the nation that claims to know everything except the exact date its world will end. Then, almost whispering, they shyly ask if the weather has been forecast correctly today.

If you are someone who visits old cemeteries, wait awhile if you visit the water people. The old Gulf country men and women who took our besieged memories to the grave might just climb out of the mud and tell you the real story of what happened here.