

boy many stories. He related how his own grandparents had guided the first European cattle drovers around the vast Gooniyandi country almost two hundred years ago, and how these elders had shown the newcomers where the waterholes and billabongs were, yet deliberately avoided telling where their special dancing places were. Like Binnu, Grandfather had also learnt the ways of living in the bush and surviving on the land, learning to read it and learning to look after it. Grandfather was old and soft and wrinkly and hobbled along, but Country and its Law ran through his blood like an electrical current.

Suddenly, the warning screeches of cockatoos pierced the silence of the morning as they spied the boy moving through the grass below. Binnu trod into a small clearing under a clump of tall river gums and looked up into the trees. In every branch above, cockatoos sat like large, glossy black-and-red fruit waiting to be picked. He crouched in the grass below, watching the birds fuss and nip at each other. The chorus of bird noise was

‘Ya can’t take him up in the gorges, he’s too young an’ he got boarding school soon!’

‘E right, there’s something he gotta do. We go up for one week and I show him some Law stuff up there and then we ’ome.’ Grandfather was adamant.

‘One week? That’s too far for him to walk, and anyway ’e’s too young for any Law stuff, don’t fill ’im with that, that’s not gonna get ’im a good education, a good job,’ she pleaded.

‘Don’t you worry, ’e be right. I gettum helicopter take us up there.’

‘A choppa? Well, all I can say is it must be serious if ya goin’ to so much trouble. Just make sure he’s not gone too long. I gotta get ’im uniforms and bags and stuff,’ Binnu’s mum argued in a last-ditch attempt not to have her plans thwarted.

Grandfather fumbled in his pocket. ‘Give ’im this.’ He pulled out a small, round shell that had been threaded onto a worn piece of leather thonging and placed it into Mum’s cupped hand. ‘E gotta wear this one. Make sure he get it, eh?’

Binnu's mum looked at the soft, pink shell. She could see fine etchings on it and shook her head in dismay. 'I don't know what 'e's been up to, but if 'e's in trouble you betta let me know.'

'E right,' Grandfather answered, ending the conversation.

He gathered his stick, shuffled around and headed down the back stairs. He knew that she loved the boy, but she gave him too much freedom to roam around and do what he liked. Going to boarding school was a different story though, and he knew that she was going to miss him. Binnu needed a strong mind, like Grandfather's, to steer him in the right ways of his mob.

Through the window, Binnu's mum watched Grandfather leave, then popped the small shell talisman in her pocket.

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Through Binnu's fear, the Cockatoo Man continued to draw him into a Dreaming story that he wished to be no part of. In the