



**THE DRY SEASON**



Catfish Creek in the smoke.

It was now August. We were in the midst of the Dry Season and everywhere the air was filled with smoke from innumerable fires lit by the Park Rangers. Their purpose was to minimise the amount of flammable material which might catch fire and rage uncontrollably through the country during the lightning storms of the following Wet.

The local tribes had been burning-off country since time immemorial, for by doing so, they eliminated the impenetrable thickets of speargrass that grew taller than a man, and thereby made it easier to pursue the elusive game that they relied upon for food. A further benefit lay in the fact that where the country had been burnt, new grass would soon spring up, and that would attract the game to come and graze the fresh green shoots where the tribesmen waited nearby with their spears.

I would wander the country close to the East Alligator River in the early mornings when the sun shone through veils of smoke, hunting for pictures. Later in the day I would look after Ubirr.

Trevor's other employee, Ian, had been offered another job — one which he couldn't refuse — and so someone else was required to look after surveillance of the art sites. The Rangers had decided that I was a suitable replacement as I knew Bill, I knew a little about his country from what Old Man had told me, and, as I was working with him, I had no plans of leaving. And so, for five hours each day I found myself in a green Ranger's uniform with a hat, two-way radio, a water bottle, and a large pair of boots in which to do my rounds. My job was to ensure that nobody damaged the natural features at Ubirr, especially the rock art, and so each hour I would walk the entire art site, keep an eye on things, and answer as many questions from the tourists as I could. I was looking after Old Man's country for him. It was as pleasant a job as you could wish for, and the wages came in handy too. However, I still found it hard to get used to the idea of looking into the mirror each morning and seeing a Ranger looking back at me.

Ubirr was a large complex of sandstone outliers where Bill's people had lived for many thousands of years and left evidence of their habitation in those innumerable paintings upon the walls of their caves and rock shelters. At the summit of the largest outlier was a lookout with warm rocks to sit upon, and here the eye wandered the green of the floodplain below with its sparkling billabongs, the East Alligator River snaking into the hazy horizon between the distant massif of Cannon Hill and the vast cliffs of the Arnhem Land plateau.

Every evening hundreds of folk would gaze upon the scene and fall into silence, for it was easy to feel that tribal people had dwelt here forever, and that this had been their home. Below the lookout black cockatoos would slowly fly by on their way home to roost in the nearby treetops, while a crowd of magpie geese, honking to each other down upon the mirror of the billabong, might suddenly erupt into flight as a dingo or two stalked an agile wallaby through the long grass of the floodplain.

It was a place be quiet, to watch and to let the mind wander.

I would wait until the sun had set and the sky let fly its final colours, and then tell the visitors that it was time to go, it would be dark soon. I'd escort them off the summit and back down to the car park where I would lock the gates and leave the place to the peace of the night.

When I was out of uniform I could return to being a photographer again. I felt that part of my job as a photographer would be to illustrate the sheer poignancy of Old Man's situation, for while he was still a child the twentieth century had arrived in his country in the form of the buffalo shooters. His father had worked for Paddy Cahill, one of the most successful shooters, hunting and skinning the beasts and being paid in sugar, tea and tobacco.

Nowadays Bill's people had left their traditional ways and followed an easier lifestyle where they could go down to the store and buy their food, rather than go hunting and gathering every day of their lives.

Bill passionately felt that without their traditional values his people were lost. His fear was that their beliefs, their story, represented by the Law that had been handed down to them by the Dreaming heroes, would disappear and that their culture, one of the oldest on earth, would soon be no more than ancient history.

Old Man Bill believed in the values of his 'old people', of which he was one of the last. Here was a man who held the secrets of his Law, but who had no-one that he could pass them on to, for, as Old Man said, no-one in his mob wanted to go through Law anymore.

In my time in the Park I had come across many pictures of Bill, but there was no portrait of him, nothing that depicted the sheer importance of who he was. So it occurred to me that I should take a photograph that epitomised his role as the tribal storyteller, the keeper of the flame; a picture to speak for him after he had passed on.

So, with that idea in mind I drew a layout on a large piece of cardboard showing Old Man 'telling story' to a youngfella sitting beside him by an open fire like when he was a boy and had camped with his old people and heard their stories, night after night, out there on the floodplain.

But what words should accompany such a picture?

At the summit of Ubirr, overlooking the floodplain was a National Parks sign with some of Bill's words upon it. They provided the perfect caption:

'My old people all dead.  
We only few left, not many.  
We getting too old...  
Young people, I don't know if they can hang on to this story.  
But now you know this story.  
Might be you can hang on to this story, this earth.'

I took the layout around to show him one evening while he was sitting on his bed in the warmth of the evening air out on the verandah, casually flicking flies with a goosewing fan. I sat beside him and explained what I had in mind.

He looked at the illustration for a long time, and then said, 'Yer, good one. We do that one. Good idea that one.'

He was still weak from a recent bout of flu so I suggested that we wait until he was feeling stronger, and then we'd take Ricky out to try and find a location, somewhere nearby. He nodded slowly, and said, 'Good one, right.'

And so started the longest photographic saga of my life.

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I had to wait two weeks for him to recover from the flu, then another week or so for the smoke to clear from all the burning-off. I had to hope that when Old Man was feeling up to it Ricky would be available too, as he was often away fishing with his father. And when the fish are on, the fish are on. Never mind about taking a picture...

One afternoon everything was looking good, so Jamie and I picked up Old Man and Ricky and drove to Cannon Hill to park up beside the billabong. But as soon as we arrived the wind got up, ruining the chances of our building a quiet fire. Old Man sat in the truck and frowned, shaking his head. We sat and watched the waterlilies waving in the wind for a while, but the breeze remained constant. The sun began to sink behind us; it would be dark soon, so we had better think of starting back. Ricky fell asleep.

'Moon might be good for picture,' suggested Old Man.

I thought of the complexities of shooting by moonlight, inwardly thinking that things were hard enough already. We started back through the gathering gloom, Ricky snoring in the back.

'Maybe we should do the shot on the moon,' quipped Jamie with a grin.

'Hmmm, need big mob diesel for that one,' said Bill.

The next morning I started cooking a curry, and knowing that Old Man was partial to a good Indian curry, went around to his house to see if he wanted some brought around later. He nodded, then told me a story of finding a cat's claw in his plate when he was eating curry at a Darwin restaurant. Having assured him that I wasn't cooking a cat, he agreed, but then he said, 'Might be we do some more story this afternoon?'

'Of course, Old Man,' I said, shelving all other plans.

I picked him and Ricky up after lunch, and he told me to drive around the back of the outlier that stood like some vast ship among the trees near his house, to the overhang where the paintings were and the old spirits that I felt had helped me earlier.

I lifted him out of the truck to sit upon the ground, Ricky beside him, while I set up the microphone and waited for him to prepare his thoughts.

He sat quietly, slowly crushing March flies with a finger into the dirt. Then he looked up at me, and nodded.



Alamangere cave.

I'm here at this place, the name of this rock here is Alamangere.  
 Me and Ricky.  
 I'm going to teach him, you know, he look what doing.  
 So that's it.  
 Few painting here, where old people was camping.  
 I used to come hunting and camp here, you know, nice to camp.  
 Wasn't any tourists, or people, so we was quiet.

In the night they used to take dog, find possum, bandicoot or porcupine.  
 That's the food we used to eat.  
 And morning they used to go hunting bush honey.

We used to go down floodplain and get long-necked turtle,  
 frill-neck and blue-tongue lizard.  
 We used to eat that animal because that our food.  
 They used to make ironwood spear to get one barramundi.  
 No fishing line, no fish wire.

Before now, missionary came here.  
 Well, he teach little bit wire.