

The Croc at Coopers Rock

Even upside down the desert was boring. Jana studied the islands of cotton wool.

They were drifting across a bright blue sea. Above them, the endless sands made a reddish sky. The scene shimmered in a heat haze. Pretty, but definitely a yawn.

Jana jumped down from the desert oak. Her head felt dizzy, but that passed as her bloodstream flowed back towards her feet. The sky and the ground were back where they belonged. But they were still dull, not to mention hot. The guesthouse garden was roasting under the oppressive sun.

“What ya doing?” The words caught Jana by surprise. She wheeled round. It was the Aboriginal boy, coming down from the guesthouse. Jana had seen him before, running errands for the landlady. Jana’s mother didn’t approve of her talking to the Aboriginal children. Still, Mum wasn’t there now.

“I’m waiting,” she said grandly.

“Waiting for what?” the boy asked, scratching his thick mop of hair.

“Waiting for Mum to come back. Waiting to go home to Sydney. Waiting for the world to end. Waiting-”

“Alright. I getcha Missy. Where’s your Ma?”

“At the Observatory, she’s important.” Jana was talking in her queenly voice. Mum said she had a gift for it.

“Alright, lot of city fellas come out to see the star house.”

Jana smirked. Probably he couldn’t say *observatory*. Back in Sydney her schoolmates loved telling Aborigine jokes. Mum said you shouldn’t laugh at other people. Yet Mum had forbidden her to play with the Outback children, even before they boarded the bus in Sydney. Mum also said the correct term nowadays was

‘Indigenous Australians,’ although Mum never used those words with other grown-ups, only with Jana.

The journey to Coopers Cross lasted two days. Mum kept herself busy with her laptop. She looked at maps of the constellations and revised her calculations. But the trip had been extremely tedious for Jana. Hours of driving, watching the green farmlands fizzle out into red soil.

The Outback was another world. Jana understood now what people meant when they said that. Millions of tons of rust-coloured dirt lifted from Mars and scattered as far as the eye could see. Even the plant life appeared alien.

Clumps of grass filled the redness with green streaks. Stumpy white gum trees were scattered everywhere. Jana imagined them as skeletons bursting from the earth, as if in a horror movie. But a wilderness was a wilderness, spooky trees or not. There were no fast food restaurants, no cinemas, and no malls. Totally nothing. So it was weird and boring. Jana didn’t like that combination.

The boy stood in the shade of a wilting jacaranda tree.

“What ya got red hair for?” he asked casually.

“Scottish ancestry,” she explained proudly, as if it made her a millionaire’s daughter.

“Aw, right,” he replied politely pretending to understand, though Jana knew he didn’t. They stared at each other for a moment. Then the boy spoke.

“I’m going to the Rock if you wanna come.”

“Rock? What rock?”

“The white fellas call it Coopers Rock. Out of town, about a mile.”

Jana screwed up her sea-blue eyes and stared at the boy hard. *The white fellas call it Coopers Rock.* What did that mean?

“Yer, the Rock has a Dreamtime name. But that’s secret, Missy!”

Jana said nothing. She knew the Indigenous Australians believed their legends were sacred.

“OK why not, I’ll get some water and meet you out front!”

The inside of the house was quiet and cool. The landlady told her guests to treat the place like home. So Jana helped herself to two large bottles of water, and a selection of sandwiches she found in the huge old refrigerator.

On the porch she picked up one of the communal bikes. The boy was waiting on the street, perched on a rickety old cycle.

They slowly cycled out of town, heading west. The route led deeper into the baking sands. The boy pointed out Coopers Rock. It looked like a prehistoric termite nest. A series of orange globes stacked up, one on top of the other.

It was too hot to pedal fast. They laughed as they took turns at overtaking. There was plenty of time to talk and Jana learned more about her new friend. His name was Josiah but his nickname was J-Boy. His family was so a large he couldn't count how many relatives he had. Mathematics was his favourite subject at school.

J-Boy didn’t need to ask Jana any questions. She eagerly told him everything she knew about her mother. How Mum was a world famous astronomer at the University of New South Wales.

“Does she know any astronauts, Janie?” J-Boy wanted to know.

“Not really. Mum’s more concerned with distant galaxies than space shuttles. That’s why we’re here. Mum’s researching the Big Bang.”

“What’s that mate? A bomb?”

“It’s a very special explosion. The Big Bang created the universe, the beginning of everything”

J-Boy laughed loud as if Jana had said something foolish.

“You city fellas! That’s Dreamtime.”

“What?”

“The beginning of the world was Dreamtime. No bangs.”

Jana started to explain that the Big Bang was a scientific theory, while Dreamtime was just a myth. But the words died on her lips. What exactly was the difference between a theory and a myth? Out in the fierce heat Jana wasn’t too sure.

Close up Coopers Rock was even more peculiar, almost manmade. It was as if a giant had carefully polished some stones, then piled them up on the desert floor.

“The Big Croc’ done Cooper’s Rock, back in Dreamtime.”

“Sure,” Jana replied with a big grin.

J-Boy pointed up to a V-shaped cave, where one cliff leaned against another.

“Lot of Dreamtime magic there,” he said. “Wanna see?”

Before Jana could answer J-Boy scrambled up over the smaller boulders that made steps to the cave.

For a moment Jana contemplated the danger. Just for a moment.

“Wait up!” she hollered and started after him.

The cave was more of a crack, running down between two rock-faces. Peering dubiously into the gloom she spied a triangle of light below. But would she get stuck on the way? No wonder her mother didn’t want her talking to the Aboriginal children!

“C’mon, it’s easy,” J-Boy said, with a big grin.

He disappeared into the hole.

“Don’t be a wuss.”

“You might be made of rubber, but I’m not,” she replied. But the gibe worked

and Jana scrambled in, head first.

Out of the desert sun it was much cooler. J-Boy had vanished. Jana shuffled down the stone gully. Sandstone ridges scratched at her knees. The light seemed to shrink away. The gully tightened. Worse it started to slope sharply.

“Help!” Jana was tumbling.

The next thing she knew the cave spat her out, as though she tasted disgusting. With a nasty bump she landed on a pile of pebbles. Angrily she looked around for J-Boy, with a few rude names in mind. She couldn’t see him anywhere, but the sound of giggles stirred through the grass.

What a strange place, Jana thought. She was in a gully surrounded by rock. Was this one of those Aboriginal watering holes? Mum once told her the Outback was sprinkled with secret oases. The native people had used them for centuries.

A deep pool filled the basin, like black glass. Yellowy reeds grew all around, with the odd eucalyptus tree struggling upwards. One tree caught her attention. A peculiar writhing ball clung to its trunk, a bee's nest!

J-Boy appeared at the tree, laughing.

“Don’t worry Missy. Cooper bees friendly.” He reached up, delved into the mass of insects and pulled out a handful of honey. The bees ignored him.

“Delicious,” he said, licking his palm.

Jana hopped across three stepping-stones in the pond. She stumbled on the last one, but J-Boy caught her with his clean hand.

“Want some?”

“Why didn’t they sting you?”

“Aw, they’re sleepy. No worries Miss Jana. Wanna go?”

The afternoon was turning into one dare after another, but Jana was not to be

outdone. She lifted her hand to the opening in the trunk. The nest was inside.

“Not too quick, not too slow, alright?” the boy said.

Carefully she pushed her hand deep into the hot buzzing morass. She felt something sticky. Out came her hand, dripping with dark honey. Jana gave J-Boy a triumphant sneer. It tasted sweeter than anything on the supermarket shelves.

“CROCODILE!” J-Boy screamed. For a second she didn’t believe him. J-Boy was pointing to the far end of the pool. A huge shape was moving towards them, under the surface.

“RUN!” he shrieked.

In panic Jana slipped off the stepping-stone. She bounded away from the water, into a maze of boulders.

A noise of something *slithering* whispered around the cavern walls. Jana’s heart iced up in fear.

“Jana, stay there,” came J-Boy’s voice, trembling. “Big crocodile outside your hiding place.”

“There AREN’T any crocs here,” Jana stammered, trying to sound brave. Surely the nearest crocodiles were five hundred miles north, in Kakadu.

“This Pikawu, crocodile man from Dreamtime!”

Jana scanned around, but there was no escape. Cliff walls towered above her.

“Pikawu very bad croc. He eat many children. Ancestors kill him with nulla-nulla.”

Jana wasn’t too sure what a nulla-nulla was, but she wished she had one right now. A stone the size and shape of a rugby ball lay at her feet. Jana heaved it up and hugged it to her chest. Thoughts flapped through her head like frightened birds.

Was she strong enough to batter the monstrous reptile and live? No way! Was there really a croc anyway? Could it be another of J-Boy’s pranks? But then what had

she seen under water? What had made all that scraping and padding?

“Bad Pikawu. Go away. This place safe. Ancestors sleep here.” J-Boy was talking to the beast. Ancestor spirits? Real or imaginary Jana prayed for their help.

A sudden inspiration struck.

“J-Boy, where is it now?” she called out.

“Outside your rock, near the honey tree.”

Jana let out a terrible grunt and leapt from her hiding place. The creature stood before her in the blinding daylight, a great, scabby, evil-eyed dinosaur. With all her strength Jana threw the rock. It flew right over the crocodile’s head, perfectly aimed for quite a different target.

The boulder smashed into the bee’s nest and exploded into a thousand splinters, small, striped, angry splinters.

“Our very own Big Bang,” Jana gasped. The bees erupted in cascading patterns. They danced ferociously, making furious fireballs in the air, before diving upon the nearest moving object. This was the unfortunate crocodile. Terrified, the poor creature waddled away on its fat legs. The bees flapped after it, like a cape in the breeze.

Only it wasn’t a crocodile. No, it was a beautiful, multi-coloured goanna. True, it was unusually large but nowhere near right the size, for even an adolescent croc. This wasn’t Pikawu.

J-Boy, who was up a eucalyptus, shrugged his shoulders.

“Pikawu very tricky today,” he beamed.

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The desert felt hotter at night. The sand was releasing the heat it had trapped during the day. Jana sat on the balcony, nursing a bee sting. Mum was inside on the bed, absorbed in her calculations. She turned and gave her daughter a long thoughtful

look.

“Are you seeing that boy with the vivid imagination tomorrow?”

“Yes Mum.”

“Be careful,” Mum said, none too pleased.

Another silence passed and then Jana spoke.

“Why don’t you put down those star charts and come and look at the real things!”

“Good idea.” Mum said and joined her.

The wilderness was dark and brooding. The stars shimmered in the heat as brightly as fireflies.

“I’m so glad we came,” Jana said.

“Really? I thought the Outback was boring you stupid?”

“Boring?” Jana sounded shocked. “The desert’s alive! Everywhere there’s something to see. I think there must be as many secrets in the desert as there are up in your stars!”

Jana’s Mum laughed.

“Maybe you’ll discover a few before we leave?”

Jana looked right back at her and smiled.

“Maybe I will.”

The End

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