

## RED OCHRE

### LUCY SUSSEX

Fogarty's Animal Show had just crossed that invisible border up north beyond which people are strange. The first signs were dark looks and mutterings in front of the snake cages. Ian Limrock watched, intent as if he were tracking game, then padded off to tell his boss. 'They don't like the Python Plus.'

Old Frank Fogarty was counting takings in his caravan, a glass of gin within easy reach, and was none too pleased by the interruption.

'Who don't like my snake?'

'The locals.'

'I don't care, so long as they pay. Look at this lovely money! You'd think they'd never seen wild animals before.'

Ian persisted. 'They mean trouble.'

Fogarty snorted. 'Garn, you black bastard.'

There was a splintering crash, and a shout from Eileen, Fogarty's most valued employee (after Ian Limrock).

'Frank! Ian! They're smashing cages!'

Fogarty abandoned cash and gin and bolted out the caravan door, one second after Ian. In the interval before a beer-bellied yokel threw a punch at him, he noticed a ring of the Queenslanders around the Python Plus, armed with pieces of the snake's cage. The blow connected, and as Fogarty staggered back, the Python fainted, then shot between a pair of legs in sawn-off jeans. Ian suddenly ran away. Fogarty swore at him, ducked a second blow, and charged into the melee. In the centre of the fight Eileen was standing on top of a flour bin, clouting methodically. Another cage smashed, and something small and rat-like emerged from the wreckage, shook itself and sped off. The locals parted for it as if they were the Red Sea. It was the Snakecatcher. Fogarty grabbed a hick by the hair and reached with his free hand for a weapon. Then Ian screamed.

Typically, while the rest of the staff fought, Ian had looked to the animals. He'd followed the Python along the line of the caravans, where the creature obviously hoped to find some peace. As it happened, it found the Snakecatcher, a mortal enemy, and the precious pair took fang and claw to each other. Ian intervened and got bitten: the Snakecatcher nearly severed two of his fingers.

'Well,' Fogarty remarked as he tied the tourniquet, 'look on the bright side: you might have been munched by the Python.'

The Plus was poisonous.

Ian's screaming stopped the battle. Some of the marauders ran off, and the rest were outnumbered enough to surrender. Fogarty had the captives brought up to where Ian lay, to keep them quiet until the police arrived. It was a sight: torches, Ian in shock, the Python writhing inside a tied-up sack, and the Snakecatcher making sepulchral noises from inside Eileen's handy flour bin. Then the prisoners started their dark looks and mutters again, this time at poor Ian.

'Shaddup!' yelled Fogarty.

Somebody said 'Mutie' loudly and then the order took effect. They were silent even when the police arrived, all draggle-tailed and sleepy-eyed, quite unfit for handling half a dozen charges of assault and malicious damage against their drinking mates. Fogarty thoroughly enjoyed that part of the evening. Then a big blue van removed the defendants and a little white van took away Ian and his fingers. Fogarty gave him his bottle of gin to sip on the way.

'You can't say Francis F. Fogarty doesn't stand by a good employee,' he announced to the staff. 'Well gang, show's over - let's clean up this mess. Yes, Diz?'

'Mr Fogarty, I got me head kicked and it hurts.'

'Show Uncle,' said Fogarty and the boy parted his lank locks. There was no lump nor bruising, but Dizzy looked worse than usual, usual being useless.

Fogarty sighed. 'Okay, you're exempt.'

The next morning Fogarty woke up late, cut a big bunch of bougainvillea, and went down to the infirmary. He was met by a woman, in police uniform.

'I'm Sergeant Muddiman,' she said.

You don't look it, thought Fogarty. Her uniform was immaculate. 'Well, ma'am, er, Sergeant, pleased to meet you. I'm Frank Fogarty. You busy interviewing Ian about the spot of affray last night?'

'Mr Limrock isn't here.' She stepped aside to reveal a rumped bed with an empty gin bottle beside it, but no Ian.

'Where is he?' Fogarty suddenly remembered Ian lying in pain, and the townspeople looking evil at him. 'If my Ian's been harmed I'll...'

'Relax. He's safe.'

'Safe where?'

'The Mutie reserve. Your Ian was ferried up there by aerial ambulance, this dawn.'

'Oh!' and Fogarty sat down on the bed, still clutching the flowers. Muddiman stood looking at him, not without sympathy. Fogarty felt a sudden temptation to offer her the flowers, but then decided against it. Might take it as police bribery, he thought. Then he pondered her words, running them around and around in his head, but getting nowhere.

'Ilan told me Queensland had reserves for his kinda people, but that's past, innit?'

'It's past.'

'And no way is Ian a mutant. Jesus, what happened?'

'I was off-duty last night,' she said, 'and out of town. When I got back, your employee was out of my jurisdiction, Mr Fogarty. I don't condone what the staff here did, but I can't blame them for panicking. Not with a patient who'd been bitten by a Mutie animal.'

'He wasn't. What bit Ian had a set of perfect chromosomes - the Snakecatcher, alias Mongoose, alias *Herpestes Edwardsi*.' Muddiman gave him a dirty look. 'But since that's Greek, er, Latin to you, I'll say it's a small furry carnivore from India.'

'An enemy animal?'

'No, no,' said Fogarty. 'Not Indonesia, India. They've never invaded Oz, well, not yet.'

'Mr Fogarty,' said Muddiman, 'the Indo army got within fifty kilos of this town. We don't forget that, not with the Muties to remind us. Okay, so Mr Limrock wasn't bitten by your pet snake, but you had no business bringing such an animal up here. Don't you realise that where people are scared stiff of the DNA plague, even a Mutie serpent is a threat?'

'I've been trying to tell you. The Python isn't a Mutie. Mutated sure, but not by Indo bad-loser germs. There's a notice on the cage, if your mob had bothered to read it. I bought the Python from a bunch of gene-splicers with a funding crisis. It's poisonous - the extra genes come from the Indian cobra - but not plaguey.'

She was silent. 'Point took?' he asked after a while.

She nodded.

'Then get me Ian back!'

'I see no reason for that. Ian'll get proper medical treatment at the reserve - in fact the Mutie hospital is the best equipped in the North. And it isn't far off the main Cape road. You can continue your tour, and pick up Ian when he's recovered.'

'Hospitals, they're 'xpensive.'

She sighed. 'You won't have to pay a cent, I'll tell the reserve doctors to bill this town. It was, after all, our mistake.'

'Very good,' said Fogarty.

'Now about the six respected citizens charged last night...'

'More got away. But me 'n' the staff could identify.'

'I'm sure you could. Hmn. How would you like replacement cages for your animals? And a

police escort to the next town? One condition: drop the charges and keep your mouth shut.'

'That's two conditions.'

'Here's a third - when you come down Cape York on your way home, don't pay us a return visit. You've caused quite enough trouble already.'

They bargained a bit, while the bougainvillea wilted in the early-morning heat. It put Fogarty in mind of a wedding bouquet, with him the bride and Muddiman the groom, as they concluded the marriage between his and her conditions. Knot tied, Fogarty sauntered back to the camp, and found Dizzy waiting outside his caravan, as welcome as a mum-in-law.

'Mr Fogarty, me head still hurts.'

'Okay, take sick leave and fly back to Sydney. One condition: take that Mutie snake with you.'

Fogarty was still in Muddiman mode.

'Gee thanks,' said Diz.

They fed the Python three whole cans of meat substitute, so it wouldn't do much more than burp for a couple of months. Then Fogarty sent Eileen down to the airstrip to book a seat on the next flight south.

'They pay,' he instructed.

Eileen raised one eyebrow.

'Diz got a kick in the head, din' he? Only fair the locals cough up for causing his ...'

'Percussion,' Dizzy said helpfully.

'You said it. Now get packing ... your bags.'

Eileen still looked quizzical, and Fogarty leant towards her. 'Reckon meself it was the midwife dropped him. But nobody here'll know he wasn't percussed yesterday.'

She grinned.

Next morning Fogarty saw Diz off at the airstrip, with his luggage and a travelling cage marked 'goanna' in large red letters.

'Eh, what's that?' said the airstrip groundsman, pointing at the cage.

'Bloody big lizard,' Fogarty said quickly, waving to Dizzy as he stepped onto the aircraft. The plane took off, but Fogarty lingered around the green corrugated-iron terminal. He felt at a loose end, and knew he was missing Ian.

'You play poker, mate?'

It was the groundsman again, shuffling a pack of dirty cards.

'Haven't you got anything useful to do?' said Fogarty.

'Not with the traffic at this strip. C'mon, give us a game.'

'Or two,' said Fogarty. At the least it would stop him thinking about Ian being alone and sick in a strange place, and locked up with Muties into the bargain.

'You must practise every day,' he said to the groundsman, five games later.

'Used to, mate. But the folks around here went off the game. Dunno why - I think it's great.'

You would, thought Fogarty, eyeing the untidy pile of his money in front of the groundsman. Then he noticed the other had put his head on one side.

'Work to do,' said the groundsman sadly. Fogarty could hear it too, now - the sound of a light plane heading up from the south. He wandered outside and watched as the aircraft circled the strip, then landed. It had a little row of *wayang* figures painted on the fuselage.

'What's with the decoration?' he asked the groundsman.

'War surplus. The shadow puppets mean Indo kills.'

'Who's the pilot, then?'

'Doctor from the Mutie reserve.'

'Yeah?' said Fogarty, thinking, how very interesting.

The plane pattered up to the terminal, like a tropical wasp heading for a big green banana plant. Fogarty narrowed his eyes at it, a plan forming inside his head. Looks like there's room for a passenger, he thought, and followed the groundsman over to greet the pilot.

'Can you do me an intro?' he asked, catching up.

'No worries, mate ... Giddyay, Doc Jon. Frank Fogarty here wants to meet you.'

That done, he ambled off to see to the plane, leaving Fogarty and the doctor shaking hands.

'Actually, I'm Jon Blackmore.' Unlike Muddiman he suited his name, for the hand in Fogarty's was dark. 'What can I do for you?'

'I was hoping I could get a lift up to the reserve, to see a mate of mine.' Fogarty launched into the whole silly story. At the mention of animals the doctor gave him a strange glance, not hostile, like the townspeople at the Python and Ian, but as if the zoo man had touched upon a private thought.

'Can I take a look at your animal show?' he asked, when Fogarty at last fell silent.

'We charge,' said Fogarty.

'Not if you intend to bum a ride off me.'

The two walked back along the dusty airstrip road, Fogarty now and then glancing sideways at the newcomer. Reminds me of someone, he thought, and after a few more steps, Fogarty's noisy and Doc Jon's quiet, realised that it was Ian.

At the camp, he escorted the doctor around, showing him the animals in their old and new cages (the town carpenter and his apprentice had visited in his absence, courtesy of Muddiman). Doc Jon said nothing, but gradually the line of his mouth softened, and he began to smile. By the end of the show, which finished with drinks in Fogarty's caravan, he was almost affable.

'When you pick up Ian - ' he began, then drained his glass before continuing. 'Is there any chance of you putting on your show at the reserve?'

'Ah,' said Fogarty. 'What kinda audience would we get?'

'Muties.'

'That's what I thought.'

'They'd really love to see it,' said Doc Jon.

Yeah, but could they pay? thought Fogarty. 'Maybe,' he said.

'Think about it. OK, I'm off to the pub to rent a room for the night. I'll see you on the strip tomorrow - at dawn.'

Fogarty spent the rest of the day getting the show all packed up and ready for Eileen and the police escort to take up the road to the next town. Next morning, he went off to the airfield dark and early to find the groundsman still wearing his sarong, the North Queensland equivalent of the dressing gown (despite the war, some Indonesian influence persisted). Doc Jon stared at Fogarty, without acknowledgement. This morning he put Fogarty in mind of a marsupial: he had pouches, under his eyes.

'Bit tetchy today,' murmured the groundsman. 'They had community singalong at the pub last night. Got a bit out of hand, and by the time ol' Muddy read the riot act to them, it was three a.m.'

With that warning Fogarty didn't say a word to the doctor - except 'Morning', without the prefix 'good', in case he disagreed - and was repaid in kind. It was not until they had been in the air for half an hour that Doc Jon's vocal cords creaked into action.

'There's no wild animals left on the Cape.'

'That so? I heard they were scarce ... Well, they're scarce everywhere, that's how I make my living.'

But Doc Jon was talking right through him.

'Population pressure, a war, pollution - maybe something else.'

'Like what?'

'I'll show you!'

The plane suddenly swooped sideways and down, and Fogarty closed his eyes. When the flight seemed more or less stable, Fogarty peered through his eyelashes, and regretted it, because they were zooming down the middle of a narrow valley. There was a big wall of rock at the end of it, coming up fast.

'Look to the right,' said Doc Jon, and Fogarty reluctantly obeyed: the doctor was using the tone you say 'Yes sir' to. He glanced sideways and into a hollow halfway up a sandstone bluff: there was a red streak on the flat stone, the shape of something that looked like the Python's great granddaddy. Then Fogarty slammed his eyelids shut again, because the plane had shot upwards as if on kangaroo legs, over the rock wall and into a clear blue sky.

'Did you see it?'

'Red,' Fogarty said blindly. 'A sort of snake.'

'That's Serpent Dreaming Shelter. I went there once, on foot. It's a place where the poor old people, Murri, the local Aboriginals, made rock paintings. A lot of those paintings were of animals, and they were magic, to ensure a continued supply of game.'

Fogarty opened his eyes again, and looked at the doctor closely. Now he could see traces of the people that Doc Jon talked of, diluted like the blue in much-washed jeans.

'Come the white invasion, the painting stopped. The artists were dead, and their descendants detribalised. Like me. Without the increase magic, the wild animals died out.'

Fogarty could not think of anything to say, so said nothing.

'Make of it what you will,' said Doc Jon, then shut up again. Fogarty dozed a bit, and dreamed his pilot threw him off the plane, straight into the maw of the Dreamtime serpent. He awoke with a start, and found they were circling an airstrip. Beside it was a big white hospital building: pre-fab housing, each with a chunk of garden to it; and red desolation.

'Funny place to put a hospital,' he said.

Doc Jon swore at the distraction and the plane landed with a thump. The pilot-doctor put the brakes on, and they lurched to a full stop in the middle of a cloud of dust. Now that they were earthbound, Doc Jon replied.

'You ever hear of lepers?'

'Long time back.'

'We've brought the Indo disease down to the same level of contagion - bloody low - but

still nobody wants Mutie neighbours.'

Fogarty stared out the window and saw figures walking towards the plane, through the veil of red. They were only silhouettes, like the *wayang* puppets, but it did not look like a freak show to him. The doctor sighed.

'The Muties won't want to see you, Mr Fogarty, they've met too many brutes like your cage-smashers. So please only go where I tell you.'

'Sure,' said Fogarty, his mouth dry in a way that had nothing to do with the dust. But he forgot all that when he saw Ian. The injured man had a little room to himself and was sitting up in bed.

Fogarty grinned like a melon.

'Hi, you black bastard.'

'Hi whitey,' replied Ian, as always. There was a little pause, and then Ian said, 'This is my fault.'

'Aw, it could have happened to any of us.'

'Yeah, but I had the idea to go up the Cape in the first place.'

Fogarty looked at him sharply. Come to think of it, Ian *had* pushed for this trip.

'I didn't only have your profits in mind,' Ian confessed.

'Treason,' and Fogarty wagged a finger at him. 'Go on, tell Uncle, what was your real reason?'

'Roots.'

Fogarty thought back. In the tautologous city of Townsville Ian had said something about...

'I thought you said your folks came from an island south of here.'

'Not to start with. That island used to be a prison for bad blackfellas from the mainland. The ones that wouldn't die quietly.'

He almost spat at his boss, and Fogarty said, 'Easy, Ian.'

'Detribalised folk have short lives and shorter memories,' Ian said, in distress. 'They forgot where they came from.'

'You reckon it was the Cape?'

'I thought one day, Limrock, that's a bloody odd name. I've never seen it on any but me relatives. I wondered if it was a translation of a Murri name. So I went to the record office -'



'And looked up the family gum tree!' crowed Fogarty.

Ian nodded. 'Me old tribal ancestor, who went to the island in chains, was called Jacky Limnrock, L-I-M-N-R-O-C-K. I sat around with some of me family trying to work it out. Cousin of mine, she works in a library, said 'limn' was an old whitefella word, meaning to paint. Jacky the rock-painter. And where could he come from but where there's the greatest collection of rock art in Queensland? All those big cliffs around here, they've got paintings on them.'

He laughed.

'Funny, I didn't mean to come to the Mutie reserve, but it's slap in the middle of rock art country.'

Fogarty thought of a swoop into a skinny valley, the glimpse of a painted snake.

'What a way to come home,' said Ian, leaning back against the pillow, one black hand fiddling with the white bandage on the other. Then his eyes changed. It was not that the pupils dilated, or that he opened the lids wide; he did not move a muscle but Fogarty became suddenly aware that Ian was looking not at him but at something in the open doorway, a metre from his unprotected back. Fogarty twisted round, and whoever it was reached for the handle and slammed the door shut in his face. Bare feet ran away up the hospital corridor.

'Your first Mutie,' said Ian.

Fogarty nodded, thinking of what he had seen, just for a second, with the corners of his eyes. There had been the white uniform of a hospital orderly, that was only to be expected, but the rest was not. The head and hands had been all - wrong.

'I saw him before,' bragged Ian. 'When I was coming out of the anaesthetic, a whole bunch stole in to look at me.'

'Christ!'

'They're curious - natch.'

'I got told the Muties wouldn't want to see the likes of us normal folk.'

Ian pursed his lips. 'Who said that?'

Fogarty told him about Doc Jon, and all that had happened since the flight.

'The Doc sounds interesting,' said Ian. 'Must have a chat to him, if he knows about the paintings.'

'You do that, kid. Make the most of your time here. We'll swing around the Cape and be back for you when they've grown your fingers back on.'

'Thanks,' said Ian absently, from the look on his face thinking of the near future, and the far past.

To snap him back to the here and now, Fogarty said, 'Eh, Ian, what did that orderly look

like? What about the others you say, the delegation at your bedside.'

'They look like -' began Ian, then stopped. 'Never you mind.'

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One month later, Fogarty was sitting in his caravan, counting takings, and feeling pleased with himself. The Animal Show had travelled up the east side of Cape York and down the west side, skirting only Bamaga at the tip, where the twain met. The DNA virus had been released there and Fogarty thought it best to follow local practice and avoid it like the plague.

He took another swig of Weipa's poor attempt at gin, and began reading Dizzy's weekly Python report. It was always short - what could you say about a sated snake? - and as he came to the end a knock sounded at the door.

'Enter at your peril!' he yelled, expecting Eileen or someone else on the staff. There was a horrified pause, and Fogarty realised the person on the other side of the door was unaccustomed to his jokes. Then Doctor Jon Blackmore came boldly in.

'Oh hi,' Fogarty said awkwardly. 'Siddown and have a drink.'

'No thanks. I'm flying later tonight.'

'Shame. Well, what brings you to Weipa? Surely not to see dear little us.'

Doc Jon's dark face twisted in a grimace.

'No. The reserve got word of a mutant baby on an island north of here. When I arrived, everyone swore blind it had never existed, which means that it's been disposed of.'

After saying that, he looked in need of a restorative, and Fogarty stroked the gin bottle, wondering whether to re-offer its contents to the visitor. Somebody had to drink the stuff. Then he pictured the little war surplus plane swatted like a mozzie against a rock wall, and let the bottle go.

Doc Jon looked at him levelly.

'But I was looking for you as well.'

'Wassamatter? Ian eating the reserve out of house and home?'

'Certainly not. He volunteered to help around the place, as a way of saying thanks. That flummoxed Admin - they didn't know what to do with Ian. But then he started taking the Muties out to see the rock paintings, and that fitted the guidelines for occupational therapy.'

He paused. 'Ian even got the Muties copying the paintings.'

'Yeah, he's good that way,' said Fogarty. 'Hempathic, that's the word. Nobody I ever had got on so well with the animals.'

'Good with animals,' Doc Jon repeated, and gave Fogarty an odd glance. 'Well, the art

classes were a great success, and Admin even got the idea of putting the Muties' work on the market.'

'So what's the trouble?'

Doc Jon looked uncomfortable.

'Ian's been giving the Muties ideas.'

'What sort of ideas?' asked Fogarty suspiciously.

The Doctor hesitated. 'Murri ones. The Muties are treated as if the old Queensland Aborigines and Islanders Act were still in force. It's okay to be paternalistic, because the poor brutes are sub-human. You see the similarity, if you're Murri.'

'You saw it before Ian,' said Fogarty. 'But you'd never stick your neck out.'

Doc Jon shrugged in reluctant agreement.

'All right, I encouraged Ian, from atavism, and the ideal of Mutie rights. But it's gone beyond identification with the likes of Jacky Limnrock ... too weird. I don't want to talk about it. The word is, Mr Fogarty, that you come and get Ian pronto.'

'Hmn,' said Fogarty. 'Are the Muties rioting?'

'No.'

'Not burning down the hospital or bashing out the bureaucrats' brains? Then there's no hurry. I'll keep to my schedule, thank you, and come when I damn well please.'

The Animal Show still had a couple of communities to visit before the jaunt to North Queensland became cost-effective (or as Fogarty said to Eileen, 'Before we've covered all the hicks').

'Admin won't like that answer,' said Doc Jon.

'Tell them to get stuffed!'

Doc Jon laughed. 'I'd love to. But seriously, Frank, don't leave it too long. See you soon.'

'See you.'

Fogarty knew that Ian could look after himself, and if he had the Muties on his side, so much the better. So it was two weeks before Fogarty's Animal Show turned off the main road and onto the dirt track leading to the reserve. The caravanserai blazed a big trail of dust which said 'We're coming!' better than a smoke signal in the baby-blue sky. Given such notice of their arrival, Fogarty expected a red carpet, if not a firing squad, out to meet his show. But the only reception committee was Doc Jon, sitting alone on the hospital doorstep.

'Ian's not here,' he said.

'This is getting to be a habit,' said Fogarty. 'They dispose of him, did they?'

Doc Jon winced.

'Kicked him out, three days ago.'

'So where is he?'

The doctor opened his mouth to answer, but at that moment a louvred window clanked open behind him.

'Split Rock,' said a husky distorted voice, and the louvres slammed shut again. The slats of glass were tinted against the tropical glare, and it was dim inside the hospital, but the white smock of an orderly could be glimpsed, in strips.

'Thanks a lot, Gideon,' Doc Jon shouted over his shoulder. He turned back to Fogarty. 'They're all his mates now.'

He shut his mouth and simmered down.

'Split Rock is a painting site just outside the reserve. Ian's there with a bunch of Muties right now. Tell your crowd to wait, and I'll take you down in the staff jeep. It's not far.'

'Hold on a mo,' said Fogarty, and dashed back to the first truck, opened a cage, and took out a certain something (warm and sleepy). He put it down the front of his shirt and rejoined Doc Jon, who had driven the jeep round to the front of the hospital.

'Ready to go,' said Fogarty, and clambered aboard. The doctor stared at the bulge in his shirt, seemed about to ask a question, then put his energy into the accelerator. The jeep bolted down the road. There was a pierced strip of metal beneath the windscreen of the jeep, through which air gushed, cooled by its passage. It was a poor man's airconditioner, and Fogarty, refreshed, looked alertly round him.

The land demanded his attention. They were driving between sandstone bluffs like those of Serpent Dreaming Shelter, each with a sparse cover of blue-green trees on their lower slopes, then the steep exposed rock face, then a layer of trees again on the flat hilltop.

'Old wise hairy people, that's what they're like,' said Fogarty.

'Are they?' said Doc Jon. 'Look again.'

Fogarty did as he was told, and after a moment nodded. There was nothing human about those hills, rather something else, as pervasive as the red of the road dust, the earth between the mesh of spindly trees and the cliffs themselves. He tried to think how to describe it, and after a while gave up.

'There's something about this place. You can't pin it down, because it's like words won't fit it.'

'You can't anthropomorphise the land.'

'What's that you said?'

'Anthro: man. Morph: form. We can't force our terms on this country. It won't let us.'

They fell silent again, as the jeep neared a hill from which great chunks of rocks had straggled, in a line from just below the crest to mid-point. The landslide must have been ancient, for the rocks were well entrenched.

'This is Split Rock,' the doctor said unnecessarily. He parked beneath the megaliths and started to get out.

Fogarty said, 'No, wait here Doc. I'd like to see Ian on my lonesome.'

The doctor sat back, looking as if he wished he had a good book handy. Fogarty got out of the jeep and stared up at a sixty-degree slope, with a little trail leading up it. He cursed, but started up the track, more climbing than walking.

He was just below the first of the giant rocks, when something moved in its shadow. Fogarty squinted and saw a wild black man, near-naked, with unkempt hair and a stubby beard.

It's the ghost of old Jacky Limnrock! Fogarty thought, then, that's my Ian. He waved, but the gesture froze on him. The other had given no sign of recognition, indeed was looking out over the valley as if Fogarty was invisible, as if there were no road there, no sign of the white gubba men, just the land as it had been since its formation in the Dream time.

Far below a jeep door slammed: Doc Jon was going for a walk. Fogarty started, slipped and sat heavily on the ground. He looked up to see Ian's eyes focused on him.

'Hi.'

'Hi.'

'What the hell have you got in your shirt?'

Fogarty stood up awkwardly. 'Hold out your hand.'

Ian did, displaying the scars at the base of his fingers, bright pink on the inside of his hand, charcoal outside. The doctors at the Mutie hospital had done a good job. Fogarty felt a very brief qualm, then put the Snakecatcher into that healed hand. Ian flinched, but the mongoose ran up his arm and sat on his shoulder, making long-time-no-see noises. Fogarty swallowed. 'Just checking to see if you still had your nerve.'

'You white bastard,' said Ian. He lifted the animal off his shoulder, gave it a hard look, then replaced it.

'Glad to see you Frank, I'm even glad to see Biter here.'

He led Fogarty around the rock and there was a little camp, with a rubber mattress, a gallon drum half filled with water, and tins of food. Everything had an institutional look to it.

'The Muties been looking after me.'

'So I see.'

'They're up at the main painting site. You can't see it from here, there's a bloody big rock in the way.'

He dipped a mug in the water, handed it to Fogarty, then filled one for himself. The Snakecatcher crawled down his arm and lapped delicately at the water.

Fogarty wiped his mouth. 'Now, suppose you tell Uncle how you came to be camping out with Muties.'

Ian stared into his cup.

'Doc Jon reckoned you'd been telling the Muties about the bad old days, sorta consciousness-raising.'

Ian looked up.

'Bet he didn't tell you that was his idea. Then it misfired.' He paused, frowning. 'I was taking the Muties to the rock paintings, and telling them about massacres, which they just listened politely to. The old tribal legends they liked better.'

'Ian, you ain't tribal.'

'There's books of legends, written down by white blokes.' He spat into the dust.

Fogarty changed the subject, fast. 'What happened then?'

'The Muties found out what a' - he fumbled for the term - 'totemic ancestor was. You see, in all the Dreamtime stories, the animals started as people. Then they ... mutated. I'll show you.'

He put down mug and mongoose and started towards the next rock, Fogarty following reluctantly. The old zoo man was not in the mood for climbing. Ian skirted around the monolith and there was a scuffling noise, muted panicky cries. A voice hissed, 'Stranger!'

Fogarty stopped with a foot in mid-air. Ian answered, 'It's only me old boss, he won't bite you.'

The noise continued. 'Frank, wait!' called Ian, then in a different tone, 'Oh all right, run off then.'

There was silence. For lack of anything else to do, Fogarty followed Ian's path to the rock. By the time he reached it he was panting heavily, and he leaned against the bulk for a moment. Then he followed the curve round, keeping one hand always against the monolith. Behind it, coming more into view with each slow step, was a very large fissured rock, shaped like a cube.

There seemed nothing remarkable in the sight, yet he felt unease, a creeping sense of intrusion. It was very quiet by the rock, the only sounds his breathing, and his boots against the hard-packed earth. At the edge of his eyesight he caught a sudden flurry, as if a Mutie dived into a welcome shadow. Ian, where are you? he nearly shouted aloud. Why'd you leave me alone in a

creepy place like this? It was so hard to go on, with Ian out of sight, perhaps forever, but he forced his feet forward. One step, then another, and the whole of the rock was visible. One side was overhung and in its recess was vivid, sacred colour.

Layer upon layer of figures. Some were red, some ochre, some chalk-white, some charcoal - and all were piled on top of each other as if Ian's people had more respect for that lump of sandstone than for their own artistry. It was like looking into a starry sky, that same feeling of time and clutter.

Fogarty, experiencing visual overload, glanced away and saw Ian standing among a number of small lengths of hardboard, slabs of masonite, even a sheet of bark. All had copies of the animal figures painted on them. Ian cocked his head at Fogarty and wandered through the open-air scriptorium, halting when he came to the rock face. He pointed at one of the greater magnitude figures, a squat shape in purple-black and white.

'Frank, what's this like?'

'Hmn. Echidna, alias Spiny Anteater. Seen from above.'

Ian nodded. 'Jacky Limnrock would call him Bulinmore. In the Dreamtime he was a man, who had no stone axe to cut a honey-bee nest from a hollow tree. He tried to borrow one from his tribe, but everyone said no. So in revenge Bulinmore drank the waterhole dry. The tribe asked him for water, they were thirsty, but he just grunted. Then they threw all their spears at him, and when he was dead, they cut him open and their water gushed out. The waterhole was filled again.'

'Don't understand that story, Ian.'

'Bulinmore had to keep wearing those spears, as a reminder to the Murri that they should share everything.'

'Oh. Well, Ian, it's your culture.'

'My secondhand culture, got from gub books,' Ian said sadly.

Fogarty was looking at the figure of Bulinmore again.

'You said downhill that the Muties got interested in those animal stories.'

'Yeah. They think they're going that way too, 'cept that they seem to be mutating by degrees rather than all at once.'

'They think they're some kind of... whatever it was?'

'Totemic ancestor. And if you look at them, there's something in it. I've seen Muties like snakes, lizards, turtles ...'

'Kee-rist!' said Fogarty. 'Do you believe that?'

'It happened before,' said Ian.

Fogarty shut up and looked at his feet, rather than look at Ian. The dust around the shelter was deep, and pressed into it were many-shaped footprints, as if his Animal Show had been wandering loose up here. Just then, there was a scrabbling sound behind them and Fogarty turned, half-expecting a Mutie. But it was only Doc Jon who came round the rock, red and panting.

'Can't... you two ... hurry up?'

'We're coming,' said Fogarty. Ian had walked a little distance off, and stood looking away from them. The doctor sat down beside a masonite copy of Bulinmore and wiped his face.

'I heard the whole story,' Fogarty said softly to him.

Doc Jon rolled his eyes in answer. He said nothing for a few minutes, regaining his breath, then got up and remarked, seemingly to the rock paintings, 'I don't believe it was the virus. *You* did this!'

That was all he would say, and the two made their way down the hill, Ian following a distance behind. When they got to Ian's camp site, Doc Jon took a long drink from the drum and said, wet-mouthed, 'The whole of your camp's reserve property. This could be construed as theft.'

'You gonna charge the Muties?' said Ian. The doctor glared at him and for a moment they threw mental spears at each other. Fogarty frantically pondered some peace-making gesture.

'The Muties still like to see my animals?' he said.

'Of course,' said Doc Jon, still looking at Ian.

'Well, you tell them, and your bosses, that in gratitude for the medical treatment Ian's had, it's freebie night at the show.'

'Have it here,' said Ian. 'S'nicer than the reserve. There's a good flat space down in the valley.' He pointed. 'Everyone could walk out. I'd like to see Admin get some exercise.'

The doctor laughed.

'Very well. I'll get the zoo to drive down. Anything else I can do?'

'No,' said Fogarty. 'Just come back to see the show, seven o'clock should give us time to set up.'

'See you later, then,' said Doc Jon, and headed down to the jeep. His departure raised a great sheet of dust from the road, which slowly drifted up to Split Rock.

'Did you hear that?' Ian shouted. He added to Fogarty, 'For the painters. Rocks have ears in this place.'

A handful of sandstone flakes landed at their feet.

'Message received,' said Ian. 'Frank, come down and take a look at the site.'



They collected the mongoose, who was nosing among the tinned food, and slithered down the slope. As they crossed the road Fogarty said, 'You and the Doc don't seem to like each other much.'

'He's lovely,' Ian said bitterly. 'Half Uncle Tom, half anguished white liberal. He reminds me of the gub who said the Queensland Aboriginals and Islanders Act would 'smooth the pillow of the dying race'. They thought we were gunna die out. Well, we didn't, and neither will the Muties.'

After some time a snake composed of caravans and trucks came into view, people leaning out of the windows of the head vehicle. Fogarty gazed at the angle of the sun.

'Bugger it! This show will be a real rush job!'

During the frantic work that followed, Fogarty did not give much attention to Split Rock. The tropical dusk came down like a shutter, and they worked on under lights. Once he glanced up and saw the red of a camp fire, as if the painting class were cooking tea. At least there was a breathing space, a little time to relax before the visitors from the reserve arrived.

Fogarty got up onto Eileen's flour bin.

'Ahem, may I have your attention? Shaddup! Okay gang, two things. First, a big hand for Ian, great to have you back again. Thanks. Thank you. Secondly, a few words about some of the people coming here tonight. They're Muties, and they don't look like you and me. But they're Ian's mates, and I want them to feel like very special guests. Got that?'

There was a general murmur, then a resounding, 'Yeah!'

Fogarty jumped off the pedestal, with thoughts of his caravan and its liquor cabinet. Then he saw Ian walking towards the outskirts of the camp, carrying a torch.

'Where you going?' he called.

'To get the painters. They won't come down on their own.'

'I'll keep you company.'

Ian lowered the torch so that it shone into Fogarty's face.

'Frank, you near gave yourself a heart attack climbing up there last time.'

'Well Ian, I'd sooner have that than you going up there and never coming back.'

'Yeah?' said Ian, but they walked on together. Negotiating Split Rock by torch and starlight was not particularly easy, but they climbed up, following the path by touch more than anything else. As they went, they lost sight of the camp fire, for the first large rock blocked the view from below, the obscured flames giving it a red corona.

'Did you mean,' said Ian, 'that I'd go bush?'

'Maybe,' panted Fogarty.

'Oh I was tempted, when I first came here. But that's over now.'

They felt their way past the rock, and came to Ian's camp site. The fire burned in tatters from the night breeze, shining on silver metal, torn open jaggedly. The Muties had been feasting on the tinned food.

'They must be up at the shelter again,' said Ian.

'Painting by torchlight,' said Fogarty. 'How dedicated.'

Ian gave him a look that had knives in it, and Fogarty moved away, walking through the camp to the other side of the rock. He gazed down into the valley and for a moment he thought he had double vision, for the cluster of lights from the show appeared to have twinned. Then he distinguished the line of torches, yellow stars, winding along the road from the reserve. 'Looks like the guests have arrived,' he said.

Ian turned uphill and yelled, 'They're here!' There were answering cries from the main painting site.

'Come on,' said Ian to Fogarty. 'Let's bring the painters down!' They scrambled up the slope, and around the great rock again, moving towards clamour. This time Fogarty was not afraid; he felt curious and excited.

Long branches had been ripped from the thin trees, set alight at the leafy end, and propped against the unadorned areas of rock. The red light shimmered and danced, and the ochres of the ancient paintings glowed back at it. Beyond the rock face was a swirl of movement, the strangest people.

A woman leapt, twisting her distorted body into the air, with a great inarticulate 'Aagh!' of greeting. Her head was long and flattened, her features recessed, and although Fogarty could not be sure in this red flickering, her skin looked grey-green. She landed and bent to pick up a painting, with fingers that were clubbed at the tips. She hoisted the picture, grinning widely.

Beside her, another Mutie imitated the gesture, with difficulty, for he had short limbs and a squat round body. A figure waving a short length of flaming bough, hard to see because it moved so wildly, almost bowled this artist over. He staggered, but stood fast. Fogarty looked at the sheet of bark the Mutie held. It was a careful if naive copy of an image from the rock, also short-limbed and rounded. He searched among the jumble of the painted recess for the original, and found it - a dark-red and white turtle. There were two copies of it before his eyes, one living and breathing.

Fogarty gazed at the Mutie woman, at her painting, then at the rock face again. She was a lizard. And the others in the firelight, staring at Fogarty warily yet with welcome, each corresponded to a figure painted on the rock wall. There was even a Bulinmore, lurking half in and half out of the shadows.

Fogarty turned towards Ian, and saw his face was expressionless, as if several emotions had cancelled each other. He said, 'I found my roots, Frank. Fine new growth they've got.'

*First published 1990.*