

The Ghost River

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The river boys camped along the low bank when the weather was on their side. On summer nights they sat by the fire, passed the bottle and cooked a feed, a couple of tins of baked beans or bacon bones in steaming water and bread toasted on an old stove rack. If one of them got lucky with the throwing arm and landed a kill with a fistful of rock, they shared a rabbit on the coals.

Most nights there'd be four or five boys round the campfire, Big Tiny Watkins, Cold Can, the Doctor, Tallboy and Moses, the undisputed boss.

They once had regular names, like you and me, but ditched them and took up with identities that appeared in no public record. The river kept them off the streets and brought them some peace, away from the eyes of the police, who also loved the drink and were notorious for kicking the winos round the streets.

The river boys would end a night's drinking with a tune. They sang to the stars, the moon and, naturally, the river. On warm nights the wind travelled from the north. It swept through the valley, off the water and ran up the hill and carried the river with it.

I'd pick up their drunken choir from my open window, where I perched of a night smoking cigarettes and looking up at the same stretch of sky. The scent of the water, sweet and damp, floated on the warm air. It circled the room, teasing me. I'd take a good sniff and wish I were down on the water with them.

Each of the river boys carried the story of his life; where he'd come from, how he'd sunk low and how he was going to fight his way back to the top, which was nothing more than the drink talking. They spoke one part truth, two parts trickster and, as my father liked to say, "a truckload of bullshit".

Moses was in charge of the campfire, and made the rules on when to light up and when to dampen the coals. He also led the cook-up and the singing. He could play the spoons and the gum leaf and sang country and western as good as a singer on a record album.

He was a man from another time, marching round in his cowboy boots, woolen pants and jacket, and a hat cocked back on his head with a blackbird feather sticking out of the band.

I headed for the river whenever I could, sometimes on my own, but mostly with my closest friend, Sonny, who lived next door, and like me expected to grow up to be an outlaw. We knew

the best spots to swim and the death holes to steer away from, where the skeleton tree snags lurked beneath the water, waiting to snatch hold of a foot and never let go. We knew the bridges and trees that were safe to jump from without hitting a submerged rock or a stolen car wreck dumped in the water.

The river had been poisoned over the years, because of all the rubbish and shit dumped in it. Signs had been put up round the waterholes warning swimmers off with skull-and-crossbones markers, frightening off most kids, but not us. Neither of us ever got sick taking in river water and we only ended up with sores full of pus if I went into the water with an open cut.

Any time we heard an animal running through the bush we went chasing after it, whether it was a rabbit, a snake or a wild cat. I never caught one of them cats, and maybe I was lucky I didn't.

Tallboy had once worked as a rabbit trapper along the river and told us that a river cat could wipe out a team of ferrets in a morning and take down a hunting dog if there was a pair of them working together.

"We trapped one of them fellas one night, in a crate we kept to grab the rabbits when they came running out of the burrow with a ferret up the arse. We had this big old Tom in the cage, fangs like a tiger and nuts like bowling balls. The old trapper I worked with back then roped a snare round the cat's neck. Growling and spitting at us, it was. Would have gone us on the spot if we'd freed him. We dropped the cat in a hessian sack along with a rock and tied it up with wire. 'Watch this,' my old mate said and flung the sack in the water. There was a mighty splash and the sack sunk. We waited a bit. And then, bugger me, a couple of minutes went by and I spotted bubbles on the surface of the water. And then the cat, he comes to the top. He swam to the bank and snuck off into the scrub, giving us an all mighty growl."

Eventually we knew the river as well as anyone. I could lie on my bed at night with pencil and paper and draw maps of the river, marking every bend and water hole, the bridges and jumping trees, the empty factories and car wrecks, and the old pontoon floating on forty-fours roped to a wooden landing down river from the campsite.

Moses knew the river better than anybody, and he didn't need no map. He carried every inch of the river in his head. He was also a champion storyteller and we loved listening to him weave a tale. The only story I never got was the one he told over and over again about the river. The more times I heard it the less I understood it.

When he was about to begin the river story Moses would stamp at the ground with the heel of his boot and call out to the birds in the trees, "Listen hard now." He'd clap his hands together a couple of times, make a clicking noise with his tongue and the birds would lift off from the trees in the distance and move a little closer, to the wattles lining the riverbank.

"Back in the old time, before the humans," he would begin, "this girl, the river, she didn't stop her life where she does now, at the mouth at bay there. There is no bay in the time I'm talking with." He'd stop and turn in a circle, flapping his arm about like a bird, and click his tongue again. The birds in the trees would whistle as if he was talking to them.

"All the land was full up." He stuck his stomach out like he was a pregnant woman. "The river, she went on. She went on and she didn't stop 'til she touched the ocean."

He'd pick a stick up from the ground, snap it in two and draw a map in the sand, of a secret river he was sure lived beneath the sea. He'd stamp his foot again and stare everyone around the campfire in the eye. Moses didn't look like any helpless wino when he did that. He was fearsome. He'd slap his thigh as he went on.

"Here's the first lesson. You find yourself out on the bay there, you get yourself in trouble," he'd slap his leg again, "you must be thinking with a sharp eye, search for the quiet water. The still water. Your mother."

He'd draw another swirl in the sand and spear it with the stick.

"She is calm right there. In her heart. The Ghost River, she's there waiting for you. You find yourself in trouble, you look out for her."

The first time I heard the story a shiver went through my body and I was forced to swallow spit before I could talk. "A ghost river?"

"The Ghost River," he nodded. "All she is. You believe in her, she's there to take care of you. If you're no believer that girl will take you down and teach you a rock-hard lesson. Don't expect her be spitting you back neither. You fuck up on her, you never be coming back."

With the story over Moses would be sweating and shaking. He'd go quiet, sit by the fire and wait for the old Moses to return. I never understood the story the first time he told it, and over the years it only got spookier. I put it down to the drink digging holes in his brain and crippling his body. He slowed down round the fire, could hardly sing a note and ended up blind in one eye.

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The next winter was the wettest in years and Moses and the boys were forced to take shelter in the old pumping station downriver. The building was over a hundred years old. In the old days it took water from the river and pumped it up the hill through a pipe for the machines in a woolen mill. The station had shut down long ago along with the mill.

The pumps had stopped running and rusted up. The wooden floor and foundations of the building had rotted away and it had sunk into the riverbed. From the far bank the station looked like a red brick boat somehow floating on the water.

The cellar was flooded out and home to river rats and snakes. They went at each other for a feed, day and night, thrashing about in the oily water. The iron roof had blown off in the wind and the upstairs floor was covered in bird shit half a foot deep. Bats flew into the station on sundown and wrapped themselves in their leather wings and hung from the ceiling rafters until the morning.

The only spot dry enough for the boys to bed down was in the storehouse on the ground floor. They bunked on tables and shelves, under blankets stinking of piss and the grog. They came to of a morning, around the same time as the bats, with their blankets hugging their stooped shoulders, reciting a graveyard cough to get the lungs going.

Over the months of that dark winter the river boys turned grey and moldy. Eventually the cold and rain and the flooded river got the better of them.

Big Tiny was the first of the boys to go. He slipped over and rolled down the muddy bank one night, whacked his head on a rock and split it open. He tried getting to his feet, fell a second time and rolled into the river.

Tiny's bloated body was found a little over a week later. It was wedged in the branches of a big old tree that had toppled over earlier in the winter and been left to rest half-in-half-out of the water. With his arms outstretched he looked like a man who'd been crucified. The yabbies had eaten his stomach away, the hawks had swooped down and taken off with his eyes, and his skin hung in shreds from his bones.

Moses was quick to pick up how bad his death had upset the rest of the mob. He put his hands together for Tiny and declared that we had to understand that there was good in Tiny's death. In explaining himself he added something more to his Ghost River story.

"When a fella has a clean soul the river takes hold of his body before it's lost, lifts it up and tells it to float along there until it finds a home. Tiny found a home in that old tree. That's why it fell over in the first place, back then, in the wet. That tree was waiting for him to come by."

He gave us the stare and slapped his thigh before going on.

"Now, if a man's soul is dark and dirty, the ghost river drags that body to the bottom and buries it in the mud. The body is trapped there, like in old Purgatory there, for Mr. Lucifer to come up through the earth and claim that fella for his own self."

He walked round and touched everyone on the forehead, even Sonny and me.

"So don't any of you be sad for old Tiny. He had a pure soul, that old boy. All them other fellas feeding on his body after he's gone, the crabs and the birds flying off with his eyes, he'll be seeing us through them. This don't do no harm at all. Not for Tiny."

Cold Can was the next to leave us. He'd never spoken a word any time we'd been down the camp. He always sat close to Moses and nodded in agreement at anything Moses said, even when he was drunk and cursing the world.

Cold Can was crossing the street from the wine shop one night and was knocked down by a truck. He died on the spot. He had no family and no money and was given a pauper's burial.

Moses had a shave and a wash for the funeral. Later that night, when they were sitting round the fire drinking he told the rest of the mob that at the gravesite he'd clammed his eyes shut and willed Cold Can's body out of that coffin and set him free before they could bury him in the ground.

"Where's he now?" Tallboy asked as Moses passed him the flagon. "If he's not in the ground, where the fuck is he?"

"Where would you reckon," Moses shouted, as if the answer was obvious to all of them. "He's gone with Big Tiny, on the ghost river. I put him there. Myself. Be there too, one day. All of us mob."

"Hope so," the Doctor mumbled. "Don't want the Devil getting hold of me. I'm gonna fly with that river," he cackled. "Damn sure you will, Doc," Moses assured him.

Tallboy inspected the flagon, checking how much they'd drunk, in no doubt that the grog had got them for good.

The Doctor disappeared a week later and was never seen again. Moses had no doubt where he'd gone and said the time had come for the ghost river to call each of them home. Poor old Tallboy fell apart, hearing those words. He felt the river turning against him and wasn't ready to die.

The next morning he hiked the track to the streets above, picked up a decent house brick, lobbed it through the front window of an electrical store and waited for the police to come and arrest him.

It was Tallboy's lucky day. The judge gave him four months inside with a clean blanket and three meals a day.

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In the end, Moses was left alone, by his fire. He got lonely and sad and angry. He said we weren't to hang round the river any longer.

"How long you been sitting by the fire here, boys?"

"A couple of years," I answered as Sonny tried adding up on his fingers.

"You spent two years wasting your time with a bunch of no-good drunks? It's time for you to piss off and grow up."

I'd never heard Moses sound so mean. And we didn't want to go anywhere. We were happy on the river. "I like the fire," Sonny protested. "And your stories. Even the ones that aren't clear. You still tell them good."

Moses huffed and puffed and took a swig from his bottle. "Listening days is over. I'm telling the two of you to piss off. Anyhow, I'm going and won't be back. There won't be any stories to listen to."

"Where you going to?" I asked, not really believing what Moses was saying. "We want to be here with you, and be outlaws like you, and Big Tiny and Cold Can."

"No outlaws," he laughed. "You don't need to be like us. We're gone."

I couldn't work out why he was laughing now. I was angry with him, and screaming. "We come to this campfire every chance we get, don't we Sonny?"

He was holding his chin in his hands and had tears in his eyes. He tried saying something but couldn't talk.

Moses struggled to his feet, shuffled through the dirt to where I was sitting, in an old car seat. He waved at me to stand up.

When I refused to move he grabbed hold of me under the arms and hugged me tight against his bag-of-bones body. He stunk of the grog and dirt and sweat. But I didn't care. I didn't want him to let go of me. Not ever.

He rocked me from side to side as he spoke. "It's time for old Moses to go with the water, back with my people. Before this river is killed off proper."

"What people?" Sonny called out. "You said you had no people but the river boys."

He kept hold of me. "Oh, I have them, all right. From way back. The Doc and Cold can too. Even Tallboy. He'll find his way back."

With his palms resting on my chest, he pushed me away. "But not you. Not yet. You got to leave the river. Go away. Time for you to grow. Come back when you men. She'll need you then."

I cannot remember exactly what I said to Moses after that, but I know I told him I hated him, and that he knew nothing and that he was crazy with grog.

I couldn't sleep on account of what I'd said to him and headed for the river the next morning to tell him I was sorry. Moses was nowhere to be seen. He wasn't at his campsite the next day, or the following night after school.

It was months before Sonny and me accepted that Moses was not coming back. On the first warm day of the summer we went for a swim at one of our waterholes and made our way across the public golf course to Phoenix Bridge, our favorite jumping spot.

I always liked to jump first. The drop never frightened me, until I'd leapt from one of the wooden pylons supporting the bridge. As I fell through the air I'd suddenly be gripped by the craziness that I would never find the river and would fall through the sky forever.

But I did hit the water. But not like I always had. Soon as I went in and plunged beneath the surface a shock of cold clawed at my lungs. I knew there was something wrong. I couldn't breathe, in or out. I was sinking into darkness and swallowing poison water.

I was afraid and knew I didn't want to be with the river boys and I didn't want to be an outlaw. But I couldn't help myself. My body was stiff with cold. And then I heard him, Moses, clicking his tongue, stamping his foot and calling to the Ghost River, not to take me but set me free.

Sonny said he'd never seen nothing like it. "I'm looking down from the bridge for you, thinking you'd done your last jump, and then, fuck me, you bob up on the side of the bank like one of them wild cats Tallboy used to speak about. The water lifted you on the bank. How crazy's that?"

I coughed up water all the way home. I felt sick the next morning and told Sonny I wouldn't be going for a swim. I was lying on the couch watching daytime television.

"What about tomorrow?"

"Dunno. I'll see how I'm feeling."

"That'll be two days away from the river. And it's holidays. We haven't done that before. So when we going again?"

"Like Moses said, when it's our time."