

## *Initiation*

by

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The open plains bordering the Eyre Sea lay far behind. Day after day, week after week, the road beckoned him on. It ran unnaturally wide and straight between the tall eucalypts. From a distance, when he had to leave it to hunt for food, only the puny growth upon it showed its route.

Close to, he could see clearly why the saplings and grasses were stunted. The hard subgrade of gravel and the broken black-topped surface gave little purchase to their roots. The surface and the width, far greater than that required for a riding trail, proved this road was something made by the Old People in the Dreamtime. Although it didn't trouble Yaraandoo's thickly callused feet, he'd have preferred to be on horseback. But riding was forbidden for this special journey.

"You must go no faster than a man can walk," Old Samuel had said on that last night, the firelight in the Cave of Knowledge glinting in his rheumy old eyes. "That way, you won't miss any details that could be important.

"Go softly, too, as if stalking a kangaroo, so you can avoid any people along the way. Not that there'll be many. They usually keep off the Old People's road.

"Once you leave our territory, it's forbidden to speak to anyone. Better they don't see you, so your silence won't give offence. Once you've reached the Cold Sea and seen what is to be seen, you may socialise with the other tribes, if they're friendly."

Yaraandoo wondered about that Cold Sea. It didn't seem right. The sea at home was warm and shallow; there, the children loved to race straight out from the shore, running on and on for hundreds of metres to see who would collapse to the drag of the water first.

Legend had it that before the waters rose to shrink the land, this sea was merely a much smaller salt pan, called Lake Eyre. Back then, it had rarely filled with water, and was surrounded by desert. Now, with its forests and grasslands, that was hard to believe. But Old Samuel had said it was so.

He thought of his daily swims in that sea as he washed in the icy stream by his camp, then wrapped himself in his cloak against the chill morning air.

His mother had made the cloak, sewing the soft rabbit skins into a light and comfortable garment for the journey. It hadn't seemed necessary at the time. Samuel had told him how the air could become cold in the hills, far from the sea, but he'd scarcely believed it. Now he began to appreciate the wisdom of the elders, and remembered his mother's chastening words when he'd asked her, rebelliously, why he had to make this journey and his sister didn't.

"There are some things we women know instinctively, Yaran," she'd said. "We have the babies and care for them, so we better understand Mother Earth. While you boys are off having fun fishing and chasing kangaroos, we tend the gardens. We know Mother Earth has to be cared for too, if She is to feed and clothe Her people. Her spirit is always with us.

“The Dozer Spirit troubles only the dreams of men. That’s why each young man has to go off and confront the spirit within himself, in the spirit’s own dreaming place. In that place, he can see what can happen to the earth if he allows the Dozer Spirit to possess him.”

Yaraandoo moodily stamped out the fire. He’d picked a goanna out of a tree at first light for his breakfast. Now he scattered the remains of his meal for the birds and ants to finish its return to Mother Earth. He set off again on the never-ending uphill climb.

He walked until just before mid-day, then sought the shade of the trees to rest. Even though he was blessed with a dark skin, unlike his red-headed friend Jacky, he knew the wisdom of hiding from Father Sun at his fiercest time. Father Sun was of a mind to punish his children, ever since the Old People had released the Carbon Spirit from the places where Mother Earth had imprisoned it, within Her own body, letting it free to work its baleful will on the very air they breathed.

As he waited out the sun, Yaraandoo thought about the old spirit legends, and his mother’s words. Then, finally, he allowed himself to think about the rest of the conversation he’d had with Samuel on that last night, and what followed. It had opened up so many new avenues of thought that he’d left them buried for his subconscious to work on, until now.

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Samuel lapsed into silence. Yaraandoo fidgeted. The old man chuckled, and said, “You always were a restless one, Yarran.”

Yaraandoo was puzzled; Samuel’s voice had sounded more affectionate than impatient. Emboldened, he said, “I must have irritated you a lot, teacher.”

Samuel cut him off with a dismissive gesture. “What you *saw* as my irritation was a test, too. It showed me that you have the courage of your convictions; that yours is an inquiring mind, not an accepting one.

“The sort of mind a leader and a teacher must have,” he added softly.

Another long silence followed, while Yaraandoo absorbed the implications of that remark. Then Samuel spoke again, with the familiar sharp testing quality in his voice.

“What do you think is the better, Yaran? The wisdom of Man, or the wisdom of Woman?”

Yaraandoo almost answered impetuously, out of his male pride, then stopped to consider. Samuel’s questions always had a deeper loading.

“Must one be better than the other?” He glanced at Samuel, but the teacher’s face was shuttered, waiting. “Can they not be different, but equal?”

The teacher smiled. “Now, you’re beginning to learn wisdom. Know this, Yaran: both man and woman have a masculine and a feminine side. True wisdom lies in keeping these aspects in tension and perfect balance.

“Your journey of initiation is to learn humility. That’s how a man gets in touch with his feminine side. And, if his mind is capable of it, he learns true wisdom.” The old man rose painfully to his feet. “Come with me. I want to show you something that few of the tribe have seen.”

They left the light and warmth of the fire. Samuel led him into the dark depths of the cave. He opened a door that Yaraandoo had never known existed, and reached inside. Yaraandoo clapped his hands over his eyes, repressing a cry of fear as a brilliant light blasted through the door. He opened his fingers a little, then took his hands away as his eyes became accustomed to the light. A corridor stretched before him, brightly lit by glass tubes of cold white light in the ceiling. He gazed for a long time, then turned to find Samuel watching him.

“What do you make of that, Yaran?” the old man murmured. “Magic, perhaps?”

Yaraandoo pulled himself together with a great effort. “Some artefact of the Old People?” he said.

Still Samuel waited. Yaraandoo thought again. “It’s a product of *human knowledge*.”

Samuel clapped him on the shoulder, with an expression of love and approval.

“Go on your journey, Yaraandoo,” he said, using his full adult name for the first time. “When you come back, I hope to be able to show you many more things.”

The primeval darkness descended again at the touch of the switch.

“Yaraandoo.” They paused at the entrance to the cave. “Understand that knowledge without wisdom can be fatal. That was the Old People’s mistake: letting the masculine side shut out the feminine side.

“And another thing.” Samuel’s voice sank. “I am old. I need a successor. Think about that, on your journey.”

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As he walked on through the short winter afternoon, mulling over these mysteries, clouds gathered to match his mood, sweeping in from the west to pile up against the hills ahead. Mist condensed into a fine drizzle. He pulled the cloak over his head and plodded on, unaware as the land rose ever more steeply. The road, continuing on the same grade, entered a gully.

With a shock, he now saw the gully was far too regular to be natural, with its gradual and precise leftward curve, the even side-grade only occasionally disturbed by the natural intrusion of a minor landslip.

Without realising it, Yaraandoo had entered the land of the Dozer Spirit’s dreaming. Born to the open plains, he felt a wave of claustrophobia in this narrow space.

Fearsome childhood tales rose gibbering from his memory. Tales of the Dozer Spirit, and his terrible avatars: Bull, who charged and knocked down the very mountains; Caterpillar, who crawled over the earth, crushing everything in his path; Alice Charmers, the beautiful witch-mother of John Dear, the worst of the lot, who came to Mother Earth with false, seductive words of love, then raped and despoiled Her.

What if one of these should come around the bend, snorting and roaring, filling the air with its black, foul breath, pushing the cruel blade that carved the Earth Herself, like a knife on a joint of meat? With shaking hands, he unslung his bow and reached for an arrow in the quiver on his back.

Then reason returned. These were dreams to frighten children. The Dozer Spirit had not troubled the earth since the time the Sea Spirit arose, and the land began to shrink.

He continued cautiously, however. If not the spirit, men might walk this road, and there were few hiding places.

At last the gully ended as the road cutting opened out on a ridgetop. Yaraandoo was overwhelmed by the strangeness of the vista that opened up, with softly falling rain accentuating its mystery.

Looking back, he saw the western slopes and plains far below, partially hidden by the rain clouds. He now saw to what heights the gradual rise had brought him. A plateau lay all around, dissected by gullies and shrouded by a vast, gloomy forest, the mist drifting eerily between the gnarled trunks of centuries-old trees.

It seemed a place inimical to men, so different to the open smiling plains of home. But, as he walked on, he saw that the Old People had penetrated even here. The trees thinned out on either side of the road; between them he saw the regular rectangular shapes of fallen walls, the cracked pavements surrounding what must have been a Supermarket where the Old People parked their cars when they came to worship. And a sign of one of their chief gods was still visible through the grime of centuries:

*Kmart.*

Another sign, mysterious in its missing letters, adorned an imposing ruin:

*SH-RE -F BLU- M--NTAINS.*

Yaraandoo hurried on to find a campsite away from their spirits, but it took several hours, and darkness was falling, before he left the town-place behind.

It was a fearful afternoon. The wind had swung around to the east, roaring in the treetops, and a rhythmic crashing up ahead gradually grew to accompany it. If it weren't for the greater fear of spending the night among the ghosts in the town-place behind him, he'd have lacked the courage to go on in the face of this new mystery.

Eventually the trees in front fell away, and Yaraandoo found himself standing at the top of a grim, rocky escarpment, buffeted by the gale. Far below, great grey combers, of a size undreamed of, hurled themselves against the rocks as if they would devour the earth.

Now he saw the terrible truth of the legend: how the Cold Sea had eaten up the coastal plains where the Old People had lived, until frustrated in its destruction by the defensive wall of the mountain range. Far out in the gathering gloom he thought he could see something throwing up clouds of spray, but he couldn't be sure if it was real or imagined.

Dizzy from the spectacle, he found a westward-facing rock overhang in the last of the twilight. By touch he gathered dry leaves and twigs, and spun his fire-drill. The comforting flames pushed his fears back into the shadows. He drank from a trickle of rainwater on the rock face, but he had nothing to eat. The traumas of the day had driven hunting from his mind. Sleep took a long time to come.

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He woke before dawn to stillness. The wind had died, and the frosty points of stars glittered in the clear blackness above. The roar of the waves had hushed to an occasional sound that rattled the shingle far below.

Wrapped in the cloak, Yaraandoo climbed out to the edge of the cliff, first looking southwards to find his namesake star-pattern. Reassured by its familiar cross, he squatted on the cliff, gazing out over the sea towards the faint flush where the sun would rise.

Gradually the light grew. Something was out there; something so totally alien that he could make nothing of its shape.

The sun's rim lifted, driving into his eyes and lighting up the cliff where he watched. He squinted against the coruscating glare off the sea, silhouetting the monstrous shape of the far-off reef.

Yaraandoo finally grasped that *this* was what he'd been sent to see and understand. The final Dreaming Place of the Dozer Spirit, the temple built by the Old People to the spirit's glory, driven mad, as they had been, by the powers he'd given them.

The tops of the brutal rectangular blocks of the city towers, and the spire towering above them, still stood proudly above the waves. They'd stood there since the time before the sea rose, and for three centuries thereafter. A monument to the power and folly of men possessed by the spirit.

The Sydney Reefs.