

The Singing
Boomerang

By

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The Singing Boomerang

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Author's Note

This story is a fantasy. All of the characters, incidents, persons, institutions and cultural idioms are fictitious.

A brief glossary of "Australian Slang" used in this book can be found at the end of the novel.

Chapter 1

I flung the charcoal stick onto the veranda table with a sigh.

“It’s no good, Bindy. There’s no life in it. Doesn’t do anything –”

I was trying another portrait of Bindy my Persian cat, as she posed on the veranda couch. For some reason my brain wasn’t picking up what my eyes could see so clearly – the silver-white elegance of her long fur against the gold silk cushion and the sort of - easily contained life of her.

I closed the drawing pad and shoved it into my pants pocket. The juices weren’t flowing today. Maybe another time.

“That’s it, Bindy.” I said. “I’ll have another go later. I’m off to the billabong. Are you coming?” Clearing the veranda steps I headed for my favourite spot by the river.

I talk to my cat all the time and I don’t care who hears me. She knows what I’m saying and she often answers me with ‘meows’ in various tones and a sort of quarter smile; like the Mona Lisa – kind of mysterious. Anyway I talk to her a lot when Jim isn’t around.

And that’s my gripe. Jim isn’t around any more. They sold the place next door – Hilltop Farm. My mate Jim, now lives miles away – the far side of

Canberra. And I've just had a text to say they're all going to Queensland for the Easter break because Jim's aunty is getting married. Big deal.

So that's the end of our plans to go camping in the Snowies. And no messing around on Lake Jindabyne either, this Easter.

Maybe it'd be different if I had a brother – or even a sister. Only thing is, watching Jim's lot, I have to admit, sometimes they can be a serious pain in the – *fundament*, as Dad would say. Hah!

* * * *

Bindy followed Ben down to the billabong at her own pace. She knew he didn't expect her to trot at his heels like a dog and so she wove around bushes and tree trunks at her leisure, ignoring the path.

He was in a bad mood. And she knew why. The mobile phone had played its little tune after breakfast. When he read the message his face had darkened. It must have been from Jim, because he was muttering about it ever since.

She padded around her favourite stringy-bark tree, where she usually stopped to sharpen her claws, but right now she only wanted to get to the flat rocks under the river gums and listen to the Molonglo river singing as it chuckled over the big stones of the crossing.

Here she could relax into *the Beyond Reality*. And here she would be able to scan the vibrations for Sam's identifying 'note' – the personal sound of her big, black cat friend. She needed to assure herself that

he was still safe, as he made his way through the long grasses on his journey back to his barn at Hilltop Farm.

Ben was talking to her again.

“I heard Dad telling Mom that the new people had moved into Jim’s place over the weekend. Wonder what they’re like, Bindy?”

She brushed past his ankles wishing she could answer him. When would he learn how to communicate with her? *I hope it happens sometime soon. If only he would focus his attention, he would be able to ‘stop the world’ and get into the Beyond Reality, the place where everything – well, just about everything, is possible.* She glanced at him quickly as she padded close to his ankles. He seemed to be coming back to normal.

* * * *

I realised that Bindy was brushing around my ankles, trying to smooth me out. “Okay Bindy! I get the message.”

The river is fairly low at the moment. But that’s the way it is, after the long hot summer. It’s a good thing the water is always deep in the billabong. Only top drought conditions can lower that.

I came around the last big outcrop of rock and looked down at the crossing.

“Shiii!!” There was a fire burning on my favourite flagstones by the riverbank. Two guys – trespassers, were larking around, drinking from beer

bottles. I saw the skinny jerk fling his empty bottle into the billabong!

"Hey! You two! What d'you think you're doing?" I was damn-well furious, racing down the track, trying to get my hands on them. "Don't you know there's a total fire-ban?" I yelled.

The two louts grinned like hyenas. One of them, a big brute, picked up a flaming branch from the fire and waved it around in a menacing way.

"Put that down," I shouted, "and douse that fire!"

"Put that down!" The clown was lumbering around, mimicking me.

"And douse that fire!" the skinny one sang out, and laughed.

Careful, I thought. They're older than I am – the big brute anyway – and he looks mean.

"Come and make us put that down!" dared the skinny one.

"Come and make us douse that fire!" chanted the Neanderthal, waving the live brand and glancing around to see what damage he could do.

I looked back at Bindy. She had flattened herself to the ground, a safe distance away. Then I made a rush at the big yobbo with the firebrand, hoping to knock it into the water. But before I could reach him, the stupid idiot flung the live branch onto the hillside, where it ignited the dried grasses.

Next thing I knew, I was being grabbed by two pairs of hands and flung into the billabong. Fully dressed.

* * * *

From the shade of the ti-tree scrub Bindy watched the human behaviour with interest. There didn't seem to be much sense to it. She was shocked when the big human flung the flaming branch onto the hillside. She watched the small tussocks of dried grass on the gravelled slope flare into life. *Just a little breeze, is all it would take –*

She didn't notice the third youth who came up behind her, picked her up and flung her into the middle of the billabong with Ben.

She surfaced immediately and trod water as she looked around. The noisy humans were running towards the lower gate, laughing their contempt as they disappeared in the direction of the main road. *Really, humans are so undignified.* She allowed the river to carry her towards the crossing while she paddled serenely to the bank.

* * * *

Those creeps have thrown my cat into the river! She'll drown! I called to her frantically, "Hold on Bindy! I'm coming. I'll get you. Don't worry!"

To my astonishment, Bindy paddled away from me, as if swimming in the billabong was no big deal. Is it possible that Persian cats can swim?

Well, Bindy certainly seemed at home in the water. Hmm. I let up on the Olympic-speed swimming and watched as she went with the flow of the river, allowing it to take her towards the shallow crossing. She was paddling to the edge at the same time, in total control of her situation – how did she

know to do that? No sinking- drowning- or struggling! She was simply swimming to the bank.

I turned my attention to the fire on the stony hillside as I struck out for the campsite. The small, blazing centres of flame were hardly visible in the fierce light of the sun, but the blackening clumps of grass smouldering between the rocks, showed the truth.

I climbed out of the billabong and searched around for something to hold water. Stuff had been scattered about the campsite – coke bottles, beer cans and take-away rubbish. But coke and beer cans were useless.

Then I remembered the plastic bucket which Dad and I kept hidden at the waters edge. We always snagged the handle on an exposed root of river gum. It was handy in case we managed to catch a fish or two and needed to keep them fresh. Now I whipped the bucket from the tree-root and dunked it into the billabong then raced up the hill to douse each flickering centre of flame.

Not enough. I ran back for more water, snatching the smouldering branch as I passed and tossed it into the water as I filled the bucket once more. On the hillside some of the tussocks continued to smoulder – but finally I was satisfied that I had quenched the centres of the flames. I tossed the remainder of the water on the campfire, and straightened up.

“Phew!” Wiping my sweaty face with the tail of my wet shirt, I looked about me. Bindy was sitting on

the flat rock, drying in the sun. I glanced towards the farm gates, but the louts had disappeared.

When I turned to look up the river I saw an Aboriginal man walking towards me from among the trees. He came up from the gorge, which is full of huge boulders and scrubby ti-trees. I wondered how he got there, because there was no way into the gorge from the other end and he certainly hadn't passed me while I was on the hill.

He wore a brown shirt over well-washed long pants. A snakeskin headband held his thick, greying hair in place and a small dilly-bag hung around his neck. A bigger pouch was attached to his belt. He called to me as he came up.

"I followed those fellas," he said. "Bad news for everyone." He waved towards the road where the youths had disappeared.

"Oh, Hi! Yes," I said, "they're yobbos – and they're trespassing." I held out my hand, "my name is Ben."

The native man shook hands and nodded. "I'm Rimaldee" he said, "I look after the birds, the animals – and the forests."

"Hi Rimaldee. Well, just look at the mess they've made." I pointed to my beautiful flagstones now smoke-blackened and littered.

"Well Ben. I don't know their names but I followed those three fellas all day yesterday. Followed them up from the coast. They were lighting fires in the bush – sneaky - then running away. I put out a fire in Tantawangalow forest and another at Captains Flat."

“Arsonists? That figures!” I pointed to the blackened patches on the hillside. “They should be in jail. Have you told the police?”

“No proof, son. Anyway, can’t let the fire blaze while I go to the police station. Besides, they drove away in their ute.”

“Did you get their registration?” I asked.

“Some of it.” He bent down and took a dry twig from the ground, then scuffed the sandy bank flat and drew some letters. A C T * NG* 034. “A white utility” he said.

“Mmm. There’s a number and a letter, missing?”

“Yer. They rub them out – with mud. Careful –”

“Huh! The old trick. It’s illegal of course, but they take their chance.”

“Okay,” the native man shrugged. “You watch out for them Ben. Maybe they live around here?”

“I’ve never seen them before, as far as I know. But I’ll catch up with them sooner or later if they come back. I’ll get their rego numbers and if there are any more fire outbreaks I’ll give them to the police.”

“Be very careful with those fellas, son. Don’t let them catch you interferin’ with their number plates.”

“I’ll only make a note of them.”

“So long as they don’t see you doin’ it. These fellas are dangerous.”

“I might be lucky and find their ute right after a good thunderstorm! Nothing to stop me reading their rego plates then, is there?”

Rimaldee’s white teeth gleamed in the sunlight. “Maybe. Maybe.” He straightened up and threw the dry stick away. “I must go back to the forest –

Tantawangalow- look after my birds. My birds –” he repeated softly. His voice sounded sad.

“Your birds?”

“Yeah.” A shadow crossed his face. “Bird-smugglers, son. Destroyin’ my birds. Greedy bloody fellas.” He frowned darkly. “Cruel men, who net the birds and hold them in little cages – maybe out in the open – no shade. No water. Then they sting them – like dead – and pack them in boxes. Sell them overseas.” He turned away.

I could feel his grief rolling over him, like a heavy cloud blotting out the sun. I could see it all as he spoke, and my anger just about boiled over. “Shit!” I hissed. “This is happening now? In Tantawangalow forest?”

Rimaldee stared at me. “That – and worse. For every sweep of birds they take,” he looked away into the distance and I saw him swallowing his pain “they leave heaps of dead or dying ones in the forest.”

“Oh my god!” I said, and I found my fists clenching hard. “What are the Rangers doing? Can’t they put a stop to it?”

“The Rangers do their best, Ben. Those smuggler fellas move around - real fast. Cages here today – gone someplace else tomorrow. It’s not easy.”

“Can’t we do something about it? Do the police know? Maybe the customs?”

Rimaldee shrugged. “I suppose they do.”

“Well, if only people wouldn’t buy them,” I fumed. But even as I was saying it I knew that people will buy beautiful things and never ask questions –

especially if they think they wouldn't like the answers.

"People wouldn't want to know, son."

"Yeah."

We stared at each other for a moment, and then I realised "Tantawangalow?" I asked. "That's the forest on the South Coast – behind Beegan, isn't it?"

"That's it, Ben."

"I'll be able to help." I said. "We're leaving for Beegan in a few days time – Easter holidays," I explained. "We have a beach cottage down there, and I know the forest well. I know all the trails there because I've ridden my bike around them – for years now."

"Good. Good. Do you still ride your bike there? Maybe you can watch out for bird-smugglers – look for covered utes or vans, driving around the forest roads?"

"I can do that for sure." I was keen to help. "I still use the forest trails for cycling – I know all the tracks. It's much safer than trying to cycle on the main highway. And we'll be down at Beegan in a few days time. I'll keep my eyes open."

Rimaldee seemed doubtful for a moment. Then he said slowly "You'll need to be very careful Ben. Watch out for any utes with cages at the back. Look for them in quiet places. Nobody around."

"If they're about, I'll have a fair chance of crossing their trails." I would make it my business to check every suspicious vehicle I saw. I could see myself getting plenty of exercise – nothing like a goal of some kind, to keep me from getting bored with my

own company. "Maybe I'll be able to check some registration plates there too- who knows?"

"Wait on! It could be very dangerous Ben, if they catch you checking their cars. Those men would stick a knife in yer back - no problem."

"Okay, I'll pretend to see nothing. But I'll let you know if I notice anything suspicious."

"Well - as long as you're very careful - just watching. Nothing more. Look here," he put his hand into the pouch hanging from his waist and brought out a small boomerang. It was very rough, more like a bent tree root which had been flattened. The surface was marked with a few symbols burnt into the wood. He explained, "A 'calling' boomerang, son. Wherever you are - doesn't matter how far away - if you speak these words

Over land and over sea, I call for help from Rimaldee and you fling it into the air - no worries which way - then it will find me. If it comes, I'll just throw it again and it will lead me right back to you - wherever you are." He handed it to me.

I was amazed. He didn't even know me and he gave me this magic little boomerang. Yeah, I believed this man. I just knew he was fair dinkum. Maybe he knew I was too.

"Thanks Rimaldee," I didn't know what to say. He patted my shoulder and said with a smile, "you're okay Ben."

So I knew he trusted me - and I decided right then that I would give him any help he needed.

"Is this bush magic?" I had to ask.

Rimaldee grinned. "No joke," he said.

I turned the little boomerang in my hand and said, "Well, thanks again Rimaldee," because I still felt awkward. "I don't expect I'll need to call you but I'll keep a sharp look-out in Tantawangalow for you."

"You do that Ben. And if you see anything, don't let those smuggler fellas know you're on to them – okay?"

I tucked the boomerang into my hip pocket. "I'll be careful," I promised. "But if I need to leave a message – where will I find you? I don't expect you want to be called with the boomerang every time I see anything worth while!"

He laughed. "No Ben. The little singing boomerang is only for emergencies." He paused and looked downriver to where Bindy was sitting. "You'll find me – or I'll find you. Just watch Bindy, watching the water."

"Bindy – watching the water? Okay ? But –"

He had turned away. With a wave of his hand he began to walk along the river bank, back to the trees.

"Bye, Rimaldee" I called, "see you?"

The Aboriginal man or Elder or whatever he was, waved to me and was suddenly lost in tree shadows.

"What do you make of that, Bindy?" I asked, as I joined her on the flagstones. "I could've sworn I didn't take my eyes off him when he walked away. He seemed to fade out."

She looked up at me for a moment and then went back to staring at the water.

“He must be one of those Clevermen you hear about,” I said, stroking her fur. I loved ruffling it through my fingers and Bindy never objected – seemed to like it because it made her purr.

“I wonder if he was telling the truth about this little boomerang?” I examined it closely, trying to make out the symbols burnt into the wood. Turning it over in my hands the boomerang seemed to grow lighter. It felt comforting – very odd! I could almost believe it was humming to itself! I listened harder. Yes, it seemed to be humming very softly; you could say, happily.

“Hmm. Strange. Maybe it likes being with us – what do you think?” Bindy gave a short, single *myow!* which I recognised as ‘yes’. So it sounded as if she believed the Aboriginal man too. “It’s not all painted up like the ones in the shops,” I said, “but I think it’s a little beauty.”

Bindy didn’t answer this time, or even turn her head. She just went on staring at the water.

I stood up, ready to get back to the house. I needed some dry gear. As usual I glanced in the direction of Jim’s farm. On a rock on the hillside – Jim’s favourite spot, a girl was sitting in the shade, staring at us. Or she might have been looking at the Molonglo River.

I waved my arm a few times and called loudly, “Hi?” But she didn’t wave back. Perhaps she couldn’t hear me. Probably deaf. Or maybe she was just like Bindy – not here, half of the time. Oh well. Not that she mattered.

Bindy was still looking at the river. "Okay," I said, "so you just want to do the 'cat' thing and pretend that I'm not here." I gave her a final pat. "See you when you come back from – wherever you are." Cats! Where do they go?

I moved onto the track and felt the sodden sketchpad flopping cold against my knee as I walked. I dug it out of my pocket. It would have to go into the recycle bin up at the house. What a waste. Glumly I glanced at the sketch of Bindy to assess the damage – and stopped dead.

I stared at it, fascinated. Blurred as it was, the water had given it a quality of aliveness – a feeling of action that I'd been aiming for but never quite getting. How had the water managed this effect? I stood there looking at it for ages.

Maybe I wouldn't toss it, after all. Maybe it would be worthwhile to figure out what made the difference; analyse the water effect, as Mom would say. If I could just get it down to a simple formula – it might be possible to use it in various ways for other drawings. I grinned to myself. Thanks Mom. Okay.

I was about to put the sketchpad back in my pocket when I thought that if I let it rub against my knee on the way up to the house, it could easily spoil the magic effect of the water. So I carried the soaked pad in my hand and when I got back to the veranda I put it carefully in a shaded corner where the air circulated but the breeze wouldn't whip it around.

If Mom was always talking about 'little gifts of inspiration from the Universe' I guess this was one.