

The Jesus Bug

It was early in 1960 when Richard Cranium caught ‘the Jesus bug’ really bad. He became a fully-fledged preacher and uprooted his wife Ethyl, and their son, Nigel, from the tranquil rural town of Allora on the Darling Downs to the Presbyterian Mission Station at Aurukun on Cape York Peninsula. In those days, the only access to the mission was by air or sea. It was not until more recent years that road access became available.

No alcohol was permitted on the mission. Aboriginal teenagers were locked up in separate dormitories at night and, much to Richard’s delight, the entire community attended church on Sundays.

From a child’s perspective, it was an idealistic lifestyle. Nigel used to go fishing and hunting with the Aboriginals. He got to eat and enjoy kangaroo, crocodile and emu long before it became trendy to consume them. Nigel learned to throw a spear using a woomera or ‘throw stick’—a wooden Australian Aboriginal spear-throwing device that enables a spear to travel at a greater speed and force than is possible with only the arm.

Nigel remembers how excited he was when he speared his first fish. Bloody unlucky fish was how his Aboriginal mates described it. Nigel just loved fishing and quickly learned that

fishing is not a matter of life or death, it is much more serious than that.

The Aboriginals were lethal at throwing a boomerang to catch kangaroos. One lad told Nigel that he had recently crafted a new boomerang but spent two weeks trying to throw the old one away.

The same lad also told Nigel that ‘vegetarian’ was an old Aboriginal word for bad hunter.

On occasions, Nigel would go hunting for mud crabs with his mate Johnny. This involved walking through salt water up to your knees and literally spearing them. They were just there for the taking. Whilst it was hard to tell illegal female crabs from legal male crabs using this method, the mission had only one part-time ranger, so the chances of getting caught were slim.

In shallow water, you did not even have to use the spear as you could just pick them up from behind, or at least Johnny could. Nigel was too scared of being grabbed by them. On one occasion Johnny had just picked up a large female crab and placed in in a bucket, just as the ranger appeared on the scene. The ranger inspected the bucket and identified that a female crab was in it and advised the poor lad that he was going to be summonsed to appear in court as well as having to throw the crab back.

Johnny said, ‘This is my pet crab, every day I come down to the river, I let him have a swim.’

The ranger’s having none of this says, ‘Prove it’s your pet crab, let it go and we’ll see if it swims back.’ So, Johnny chucks it in the water. Sure enough, it swims away and doesn’t come back.

The ranger said, ‘See, it wasn’t your pet crab!’

Johnny replied, ‘What crab? I didn’t have no crab.’ This did not deter him from writing him up for the offence.

The following Sunday, Richard was on a crusade and was getting excited and filled with healing power. Richard would ask the congregation for anyone with an illness to come forward. He would then hold his hands on the persons head and say, ‘Pray with me people, let the healing power of the Lord prevail.’ The congregation would chant and pray feverishly, and the person often walked away, healed, and full of Jesus.

It was little Johnny’s turn. ‘Tell me,’ says Richard. ‘What is the problem?’

Johnny replies, ‘It’s my hearing pastor.’ So, Richard places both hands over the lad’s ears and the whole congregation chant and pray.

After a few moments Richard releases his hands and says loudly, ‘So Johnny, have we fixed your hearing?’

He sheepishly replies, ‘How would I know, my hearing’s not till next week.’

The very next week when Richard and Nigel were out fishing in their small dingy the same ranger pulled up beside them and stepped onto their boat, almost capsizing it. The ranger asked Richard if there was anything on the boat that shouldn’t be. Richard replied, ‘Just you.’

Nigel became so infatuated with his Aboriginal mates that he often put Nugget boot polish on his face so that he could “look like them”. Because of this and his nuggetty shape the Aboriginals nicknamed him Nugget. This stuck for the rest of

his life. He became Nugget Cranium or Nugget Head. At least it was not as bad as his father who was often called Dick.

Swimming at the mission did not come without constant risk. You always had to be on the lookout for crocs and in the summer season you could not go in the water because of marine stingers.

One Aboriginal story identifies two crocodiles that were sitting on the bank of the river. The smaller one turned to the bigger one and said, 'I can't understand why you are so much bigger than me.' The larger croc asked what the smaller one ate, to which he replied, 'White missionaries, same as you.'

'How do you catch them?' asked the larger croc.

'Well, I crawl up out of the water when they are fishing and grab them by the leg and shake the shit out of them,' he replied.

'Ah,' said the big croc, 'I think I see your problem. You are not getting any real nourishment because by the time you finish shaking the shit out of them, there's nothing left but an arsehole with a fishing reel.'

Richard was one of those hell fire and brimstone preachers who would frighten listeners into believing in God so they could avoid the flames of hell. During a severe drought Richard got the flock together to pray for rain. On the day of the prayer, all the people gathered, but only Johnny came with an umbrella. Richard was so excited and proclaimed his action as an example of faith.

The Aboriginal culture was abundant with stories of the past, some true and some not, including one about the first visit by missionaries.

Soon after the three missionaries landed, they are ambushed and kidnapped by the Aboriginals. They are taken back to the village and bound at the hands and feet and placed around a campfire.

The tribe's leader explains that they will all be killed, and their bodies will be used as crafting materials for the village. He said that the most important use for them would be to use their skins to seal their canoes.

The leader explained that they were a merciful people and that the missionaries could choose how they would die. They had to make that decision fast, though, or the leader would choose for them. The first man sombrely asks the leader to shoot him with a gun he had stored in his luggage. He obliges and shoots the first man.

The second man begrudgingly asks for death by blade, and the leader obliges once more, killing the second man using a knife from his luggage. The third man, having had time to think, asks politely and confidently for a fork, also in his luggage. The leader, confused, retrieves the fork. The third man asks if he could have permission to do it himself. The leader agrees.

The third man takes the fork, and with a huge grin on his face begins to stab himself all over his body while screaming, 'Stuff your canoes.'

It is legendary how the Aboriginal people know their land and its weather patterns. Being April, the younger tribesman asked their elder, Sammy, if the coming winter was going to be cold or mild. Sammy looked up into the sky then contemplated for a

full minute and told them that the winter was indeed going to be cold and that they should collect firewood to be prepared.

Being a practical elder, after several days Sammy had an idea. He sent a telegram to the Bureau of Meteorology and asked, 'Is the coming winter in Aurukun going to be cold?'

The meteorologist responded, 'It looks like this winter is going to be quite cold.' So, Sammy went back to his people and told them to collect even more wood to be prepared.

Two weeks later Sammy telegraphed the Bureau again. 'Are you absolutely sure that the winter is going to be very cold?' he asked.

'Absolutely, it's looking more and more like it is going to be one of the coldest winters ever as our satellites have reported that the Aboriginals in the north are collecting firewood like crazy, and that's always a sure sign.'

Richard insisted that Nigel attend Sunday school. At one lesson, Miss Gillan, the Sunday school teacher, told the class to discover one fact about Jesus to relay back to the class the following week.

When that time arrived, Miss Gillan asked each child in turn what he or she had learned. Susie said, 'He was born in a manger.'

Bobby said, 'He threw the money changers out of the temple.'

Nigel pipes up and says, 'Jesus has a red pickup truck, but he doesn't know how to drive it.'

Curious, Miss Gillan asked, 'And where did you learn that Nigel?'

‘From my dad,’ said Nigel. ‘Yesterday we were driving around the village, and this red pickup truck pulled out in front of us, and Dad yelled at him, “Jesus Christ! Why don’t you learn how to drive?”’

Richard was sitting with a group of elders who were having a serious discussion about the government and how effective they were, especially in relation to the treatment of Aboriginals and respecting their traditions.

Richard questioned Sammy who was the oldest elder, ‘You have observed the white man for many years, and you have seen his progress and the damage he has done.’ Sammy nodded in agreement. Richard continued, ‘Considering all these events, in your opinion, where did the whitefella go wrong?’

Sammy stared at the Richard and then he calmly responded, ‘When whitefella found the land, blackfellas were running it. No taxes, no debt, plenty kangaroo, plenty fish, women did all the work, medicine man free, Aboriginal man spent all day hunting and fishing, all night having sex.’ Sammy then leaned back with a smirk on his face. ‘Only whitefella bloody stupid enough to think he could improve on a system like that.’

One day Sammy takes Richard duck shooting. Richard shoots one and goes to retrieve it, and Sammy stops him. ‘This duck is on my land, so it’s mine.’ Richard argues that he shot it, so it’s his.

They go back and forth for some time, and finally Sammy says, ‘We have a tradition here for settling disputes – we take turns kicking each other in the nuts, and whoever gives up first, must also give up the duck.’

Richard agrees and Sammy says he will start because it's his cultural right. He gathers all his strength and kicks Richard as hard as he can in the scrotum. Richard falls to the ground, holding his crotch, tears in his eyes, barely able to breathe.

After some time, Richard gets to his feet and makes his way over to his opponent. 'Okay, my turn,' he says.

'Nah,' says Sammy, 'you can have the duck.'

One day the local garbage collector went on walkabout, so Richard had to do the run. Richard began the task and noticed that one house hadn't put their bin out. Normally, the usual garbo would just drive straight past, on to the next house, but Richard was in a good mood, so he got out of the truck and knocked on the front door. An Aboriginal man answered the door and Richard asked, 'Hey mate, where's your bin?'

'Oh, I've bin fishin',' said the resident.

'Nah mate, where's your bin?' he says pointing to the garbage truck.

The response was, 'Ahh, I really bin in jail, but I tell everyone I bin fishin'.'

The Cranium family used to take short breaks and go to the mouth of the Archer River in the mission punt. They camped there with fishing being the main pastime. Nigel decided to go for a swim one winter's day as this was the time of the year when there were no marine stingers. Nigel went about two metres in from the water's edge and sat down. A shark, about one metre long, swam between him and the beach. Nigel panicked and yelled, 'Shark, help, shark.'

The Aboriginals, including little Johnny, who witnessed the scene laughed as they knew that the shark was not going to help Nigel. They later asked Nigel, ‘Do you know how much it costs to swim with the sharks?’

‘No,’ replied Nigel to which they laughed and said, ‘An arm and a leg, lad.’

They continued with the ruse and asked Nigel, ‘What do you call stuff caught in a shark’s teeth? Slow swimmers.’

Snakes were also a regular occurrence at the mission. Many a time a big brown or taipan would be across the path to the outside dunny, which was about forty metres from the back steps of the Cranium household. Nigel recalls an incident upstairs where he was doing his homework. A snake dropped from the curtain rail onto the floor beside him. His hop, skip and jump across from his chair, bed and out of the room may still be an unofficial Olympic record.

The local dunny man had a habit of balancing the cans on the top of his head when he moved the cans from the residence to the truck. One day the bottom of the can must have been rusty, and the can enveloped his head. Someone tried to lift it off, but it just would not budge. The only way they could save the dunny man from drowning was to tip him over and remove the contents. They could then attend to the task of removing the can from his head. Nigel noticed that he never carried cans in this way ever again.

One day Johnny and his brother Neil, dressed in their traditional lap laps, were running through the scrub when suddenly a snake reared up and bit Neil on the penis. Johnny raced to the mission

surgery and told the attendant, ‘Quick, quick I need your help, my brother got bit by a snake on his penis.’

She replied that the doctor was not there so he would have to go back. She said, ‘You are going to have to suck the poison out.’

‘What if I don’t do that?’ said Johnny lad.

‘Then he might die,’ was the reply.

Johnny races back to his brother who asks him, what the clinic advised. Johnny replied, ‘You probably gonna die.’ As luck would have it the snake was a harmless tree snake.

Once every three years the Cranium family would go south on an extended holiday. Richard was expected to visit other churches to tell parishioners about the church’s work at the missions. They used to fly to Cairns then take the train to Brisbane. When they arrived at the station to jump on the old hissing steam train, it blew its whistle. Nigel “hit the frog and toad” and Richard caught up with him about a mile down the road.

On the way back they used a pedestrian crossing. Nigel asked his father why only Presbyterians could use it. They alighted the train without further mishap and began the twenty-four hours plus trip south. As the train rattled past some tennis courts on the outskirts of Cairns, Nigel asked his mum what the cages were for. Obviously, Nigel led an adventurous yet sheltered life on the mission.

The mission used to regularly show movies on a big outdoor screen. It was there where Nigel was introduced to the jingle for

the introduction of decimal currency which occurred on the 14th of February 1966.

Once a year, the dentist used to fly in from Cairns and spend a couple of weeks attending to the mission's dental needs. He would always get agitated at the endless noise the crows made just outside the surgery window. On one occasion when Nigel was in the chair, he caught the dentist staring intensely at a group of crows... You could see the 'murder' in his eyes.

A few minutes later the dentist picked up a .22 calibre rifle and took pot shots at the crows. Years later when Nigel recalled the incident, he thought of the commotion that this action would cause in the modern age where crows are protected.

Miss Beatrice, the church organist at the mission, was in her eighties and had never been married. She was admired for her sweetness and kindness to all. One afternoon Richard came to call on her and she showed him into her quaint sitting room. She invited him to have a seat while she prepared tea.

As he sat facing her old Hammond organ, Richard noticed a cut-glass bowl sitting on top of it. The bowl was filled with water, and in the water floated, of all things, a condom! When she returned with tea and scones, they began to chat about the hymn list for the following Sunday's service.

Richard tried to stifle his curiosity about the bowl of water and its strange floater, but soon it got the better of him and he could no longer resist. 'Miss Beatrice,' he said, 'I wonder if you would tell me about this?' pointing to the bowl.

'Oh, yes,' she replied. 'Isn't it wonderful? I was walking through the park a few weeks ago and I found this little package

on the ground. The directions said to place it on the organ, keep it moist and that it would prevent the spread of disease, and wouldn't you know, I haven't had a dose of the flu all winter.'

In the few months before they left the mission, Nigel, Johnny and a few other lads were playing tag. They used a tennis ball to inflict as much pain on the person who was being tagged as possible. Nigel was chasing Johnny and when Johnny turned a corner, he ran straight under the front wheels of the mission utility. The scene was just terrible, Nigel recalled to his father. 'My best mate Johnny did not stand a chance and it was all my fault.' Richard consoled the lad as best he could but realised the time was not right to provide some much-needed counselling.

Johnny was buried, wrapped in a blanket, as was tradition at the time in the local cemetery. The whole mission attended the service conducted by Richard. For the next few nights, the grieving Aboriginal family and relatives could be heard wailing as Nigel cried himself to sleep. From that day forward, whenever Nigel heard a curlew scream in the night he was reminded of the loss of his best mate.

A few days after the funeral Richard chose to have a quiet moment with Nigel to discuss what had happened. He explained to Nigel that death was an unfortunate fact of life and that everyone had to face it one day. He did not go down the path of explaining that it was Gods will as Richard just did not believe that this was the case.

Richard instead told Nigel that Johnny would want him to live life to the fullest as he now had the opportunity of living the life Johnny couldn't. Whilst this did not make Johnny feel

much better at the time the message did resonate with the lad as time went on.