

**A LONG WAY  
FROM  
NO GO**

**TJANARA GORENG GORENG**

**with Julie Szego**



## PROLOGUE

Few people, I suspect, can attribute a life-changing epiphany to a double-page spread in *Who* magazine. But it's thanks to that pop-culture oracle that I was jolted awake one cheerful morning in February 1995, seated at a desk by the window in the spare room of my friend's place in Glebe, the magazine flipped casually open.

Ironically, I had recently returned from India, where I spent the summer on a spiritual retreat—something I did so often you'd assume that if a blinding truth was going to strike me somewhere that would be the place. Instead I was back in Sydney, adrift, in between jobs, with no fixed-address, crashing at my friend's while I looked for an apartment and plotted a new course, or tried to.

The double-page spread was a story about Ballarat priest Gerald Ridsdale, one of Australia's most notorious paedophiles. He indecently assaulted an altar boy during confession. He abused a boy and girl after presiding over their father's funeral. The previous year a Melbourne court sentenced Ridsdale to 18 years in prison.

Mind racing, I looked up from the page, gazed out the window. I'm pretty sure the sunlight was streaming in—but maybe that's just an affectation of memory, embroidering the moment with cliché.

And even though I was in my 40s, a mother, an Aboriginal, a public policy expert, even though, during the course of a restless and fearless life, I'd roamed the continent alone, drunk myself to oblivion, mucked in with truck drivers, mingled with Canberra's most powerful, witnessed the shocking legacy of violence against my people, battled for Indigenous rights, even changed my name to fully 'decolonise' myself, experienced profound joy and bottomless despair and confronted my demons—or so I thought—the plain message in the *Who* feature still struck me with embarrassing, almost implausible force.

All it took was the photo of that man of the cloth condemned, his depravity bared to the world.

An idea, so self-evident it's childlike, coalesced in my mind.

You mean...?

You can put them in jail?



# 1

## GUARD OF HONOUR

To me, the row of Jacaranda trees that lined the roads between the school and town in Longreach, resembled a guard of honour—stately, graceful, distinguished, an orderly explosion of lilac. I secretly thought of the trees as my protectors, in the way kids secretly think such things.

My mum put her faith in more prosaic insurance, as adults usually do, her creed a tapestry of hard work, self-discipline, firm boundaries, devout submission. We went to church every Sunday, even in the sticky wet season. We lived in a spotless house. We always sat at the dining table during mealtimes. We always said grace before eating and the food was always plentiful and hearty. Having worked as a cook on cattle stations, mum knew how to make the kind of food men like: huge roasts, corned beef, apple pie with pastry made fresh. Impeccable Catholics to the last, on Friday nights we went down to Haddad's fish 'n chips shop. At the dinner table our conversation staples were unionism and left-wing politics—the influence of George, our father—and Catholicism.

Mum insisted we never get about town without nice clothes and nice shoes. She made me a pink and white polka dot dress with a

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bow at the back. When my little sister became a ballerina, mum made all her outfits too. When I attended St Joseph's Primary School—I still remember my feverish excitement on the first day—she sent me off in my freshly-ironed blue and white checked dress, panama hat and brown port (Queensland for 'case'). She taught us to sew, but if we didn't stitch proper French seams she didn't let us wear the clothes in public, even though no one could see the seams.

For a long time I thought it was disgraceful to walk around in thongs. My mother was adamant that no one would call her family, 'dirty blacks'. She would never give the authorities a reason to barge into her home and remove her children.

We were the only Aboriginal family living in Longreach, a town in central-west Queensland licked by the 'long reach' of the Thomson River, where the streets are named after birds. All my friends were white. Occasionally, another Aboriginal family washed up in town, but none stayed. One family, the Tobys, lived there for a while, their boy attending St Joseph's. But he didn't last long. He was relentlessly bullied, and soon enough, the Tobys went back to where they came from.

When I was five, a kid at school called my brother, Kevin, a 'nigger'. Kevin bashed the kid, which got him suspended. He was constantly getting suspended.

George liked to joke about white people or *migloos* as we called them. One time, waiting at a red light with several of us kids in the back, George watched a group of people traversing the only pedestrian crossing in Longreach.

He cocked his head back and grinned.

'Do you think we could run over all 'em *migloos*?'

He also used to make us laugh by claiming he was the son of an Afghan camel rider. We knew it was a lie though his skin was

dark. The problem was that George Arthur Williams—for some reason I always called him George, never ‘dad’—rarely talked about his background. The little I know, I gleaned as an adult from researching his family history. I discovered he was dark Irish with a sprinkling of Welsh; his ancestors arrived at Moreton Bay in 1873 on the migrant ship, the *Storm King*. His father, Jenkins Williams, moved to Charters Towers in the gold rush and married Georgina, my Irish grandmother, who worked most of her life at the presbytery of the Catholic Church to secure her son a free education at Mount Carmel Boys’ School.

We knew how George and mum met—she was working in a cafe in Rockhampton, still in her teens, when one day he walked in, ten years her senior, a dashing soldier, just returned from the Second World War. In a sepia-toned photograph of him in his uniform, smoky eyes peer out from under the slouching hat.

‘Do what makes you happy,’ George liked to say, although at other times he pushed us to do what made *him* happy, as did mum.

She worked as a cleaner at the ANZ Bank in town. Sometimes I tagged along during her cleaning shifts. While she mopped the floors, I gorged on Arnott’s biscuits in the tearoom. In the years to come, once I was at the Catholic boarding school, mum never saw a cent of her salary—it went straight to the school to pay for her children’s tuition.

‘If you have a talent for something then you have to let me know because it’s God’s will that we use our talents,’ mum said. And we were undoubtedly a talented family, and a big one, me being the middle child of seven. My brother, Peter, was a jazz pianist and our granny, Beatrice, mum’s mother, played too. In the evenings we stood round the piano, playing and singing together.

When I was about eight years old, Mum said to me, ‘You have to choose between swimming and piano because I can’t afford

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both'. I took some piano lessons at school, but the nun rapped me over the knuckles with a ruler; so I chose swimming.

According to family legend, when I was five, George clocked me swimming 58 seconds up a 50-metre pool. 'We have a champion,' he beamed. From that moment, George became my swimming coach and our special bond was formed. He dressed me in white togs and white tracksuits because he wanted me to stand out when I won gold.

I remember him saying to me once: 'When you've won a gold medal and you're up on that dais, make sure you shake the hand of the girls on either side. Because even though they're white, and you're doing this because we want to show them that being black is better, you never tell them that.'

George lost his father, my grandfather, Jenkins, when he was only six months old, probably in the First World War. I have very few childhood memories of his mother, my grandmother Georgina; I'm guessing she died when I was very young. In one photo she looks like a plump Irish woman, wearing glasses and one of those 1930s dresses. On one occasion in the 1970s, a brother of George's visited us with his son; and I was so shocked because they were both lily-white with blonde hair!

Mum said that 20 years later, she and George visited an estranged sister who lived in the town of Beaudesert in Queensland's Scenic Rim Region. Before this, mum had barely even heard of her. She said this sister looked exactly like him; the siblings cried; apparently, they hadn't seen each other since they were little. We don't know how they became estranged in the first place—perhaps my grandmother had been forced to give up some of her children because she couldn't afford to keep them all. But even after the siblings' tearful reunion, George maintained his silence about the past, and we didn't ever visit her again.

Otherwise, he liked noise. He furtively placed whoopee cushions round the house and when you sat on one he howled with laughter at the fart noise. When he was about to fart himself, he lifted his leg to make a performance out of it, and we would all run off, shrieking.

Georgina succeeded in getting her son through high school, but work being scarce during the Depression years, after graduation he got labouring jobs on properties in the bush and obtained a trade certificate as a machinist. He worked for the council, driving tractors and graders.

So, the George my mother stumbled upon in the cafe was battle-hardened from many theatres of conflict. We all knew he had seen service in New Guinea, but that's all we knew about his wartime experiences, at least back then. Other than his battles against the bosses, of course! George was a Communist Party veteran—he was 18 when he joined. He helped print *The Tribune*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of Australia, and hid the bundles in haystacks at Charters Towers because the cops used to chase him. And he agitated in the shearers' union.

On a more personal front, he was a fabulous dancer, and quite literally swept mum off her feet. It was when they married in 1948 that she converted to Catholicism. But this was always tempered with commonsense. After school one day I felt troubled—one of the nuns told the class that Captain Cook discovered Australia and when he arrived, there was no one here. Mum shrugged it off. 'You know what, love, the Catholics don't know everything,' she said.

And away from the townspeople, on the secluded banks of the Thomson, mum sang the songs. She never dared speak language in the town because that would risk attracting the attention of the

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authorities. But here, with me at her side, she was uninhibited, here she preserved the traditional knowledge her grandfather, Alick, bequeathed to her when she was little.

I heard many stories about great-grandfather Alick because my mother, born in 1929, the year of the Depression, practically lived with him until she was ten. Her mother moved around central-western Queensland, as did many Aboriginals during that time, living in humpies that resembled *gunyas*<sup>1</sup> with corrugated iron.

Alick was a proper law man as he had been initiated and had, himself, initiated other men. He sat around the fire with sticks, telling stories at night. In later years, mum depicted this scene in a special heirloom quilt, now hanging on a wall in my big sister's home.

During her years with Alick my mother even got to attend school. When her mother, Beatrice, took her back to live with the family in Rockhampton, mum's education abruptly stopped at age ten—a fact she related to me with sadness and a pinch of anger.

Alone together in the bush, we sang *Garin Inna Narmin*, a song that every Aboriginal in southwestern Queensland knew. And we collected bush tucker, just as she had done with Alick. She would forage for mushrooms, possums, goannas. 'We'll never starve,' she said.

'Sit by the rock over there,' she said one time, 'and if any animals come, don't move. Just sit very still.' Mum ambled further down the river, searching the scrub for tucker, disappearing from view.

A rustle of leaves. Suddenly, a goanna! I held my breath. But though I was impatient for mum to get back, I wasn't really scared. In that moment I felt a connection between the earth, the trees

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1 *Gunyas* is the Aboriginal word for a type of house/lean-to that is built from materials available in the natural environment.

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and that goanna, and I sensed a voice saying, 'You're going to be alright'. And because my mother talked about him all the time, I decided the voice belonged to my great-grandfather, Alick. My ancestors were watching over me. Along with the jacarandas.

When I was older, I told mum I wanted to learn the business. But she shook her head. 'That stuff is past now.'