

A Dreamtime Story

by

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Long ago in the Dreamtime, all of Arnhem Land was given to the Yolngu to guard and nourish according to Dreaming law. The keepers were divided like a seed, with the Duwa half created by the ancestral brolga crane and the Yiritja half created by the ancestral jabiru stork. The moieties were intimately bound through marriage and through ceremonies, which the people performed faithfully and with great joy. Because of their devotion, the ancestors blessed each moiety with a special child. Little Brolga and Little Jabiru were betrothed from an early age by the elders in the hope that they would strengthen the Yolngu people for generations with their natural gifts, the girl's beauty and dancing and the boy's hunting and quick learning of sacred rituals. After his initiation and required exile, Little Jabiru returned to his home land to claim his wife. During his absence, some men of little honour tried to woo or capture the girl, or request her in marriage from the Duwa elders. All failed. To the wooers, Little Brolga turned away; and to the predators she danced off like a running emu. And the supplicants were rejected by the elders, less from fear of the ancestors than their commitment to the children, the embodiment of the best and the future of their people.

All loved the boy and girl, except one. Nonega was a Duwa sorcerer of extraordinary powers, and though not hitherto evil he had always been secretive and jealous of his knowledge. His lust for Little Brolga drove his lust for dark powers, and after years of preparation he dared to defy the tribal law against marriage within one's own moiety by demanding her for his wife. Although afraid of Nonega, the other elders had no choice but to prohibit this great crime. Some wanted to banish him from the tribe, but the oldest of the old cautioned that the sorcerer might seek revenge on the boy. As a Duwa overseer of Yiritja rituals, he had already made Little Jabiru's initiation as difficult as the Yiritja elders would permit in the hope that the boy would be disgraced or die. But Little Jabiru passed all the trials with ease---all except not seeing Little Brolga until the fourth rainy season of his manhood. But he knew what was in her heart, the dancing and the singing and the laughing, and that her heart was for him alone. And his heart, Jabiru told Brolga as they looked upon their creations, was that of a hero. Jabiru clapped his bill in contented agreement, though he felt a faint breeze of luckless fate cool his celebration. He foolishly kept it to himself.

Nonega could not have Little Brolga by love or by law, or even by force because of his fear of the now grown Little Jabiru. He could only stop her from becoming another man's wife. For days, Nonega hid near the camp waiting for the young girl to dance out onto the open plain alone, as she often did in an ebullient expression of love and loneliness. When she appeared, he robustly swung his ancient bullroarer over the dusty ground while chanting incantations to make a swirling duststorm on which he could ride. From its centre, he guided the whirlwind over Little Brolga and drew her up inside. For the first time since she was a baby, Little Brolga could not dance away from danger; and after the cloud of dust passed, she was gone. Where she had stood was a large, grey-feathered bird with wonderfully long legs, a long, straight bill and a bare head mostly the colour of blood. The bird flew up to the people who had gathered to watch the strange storm and danced Little Brolga's own dance.

When Little Jabiru arrived, the elders told him about the crane. When he called her name, "Little Brolga! Little Brolga!" she pranced back and forth in front of him, with half-open wings shaking and head bowing. She then suddenly stopped, threw back her head and trumpeted frantically "garooooo." After leaping into the sky and floating back to the ground several times, she began wildly tossing grass and sticks into the air in, he imagined, a display of despair. For the first time since he was a baby, Little Jabiru wept. "I will kill Nonega, for it is the law," and his right. And he began to chase the dust storm on the horizon.

Little Jabiru pursued Nonega across Arnhem Land until they came to the edge of the Timor Sea. Here he stopped, because he did not wish the shaman to turn the storm back inland. On the top of a cliff overlooking the Sea, he called for Jabiru to empower his rangga with the air and water of a cyclone. Faster and faster he spun the large,

oval piece of wood on a long rope, making the voice of his ancestor, who gathered a current of sea and wind into a fierce maelstrom. Little Jabiru jumped into the vortex, surfing through the tempest on his sacred bullroarer. From high in the sky, he swooped down on Nonega and shredded him into random motes.

When he returned to his home camp, Little Brolga was gone. The oldest of the old told him to go to a djang place and ask the Yiritja ancestor to change him into a stork, for only then would he be able to search for his wife. Jabiru granted his request, but in his sorrow Little Jabiru vowed never to speak again until he found Little Brolga.