

Chapter 1

This is the story of one bilby. His name is Walpajirri, which is an Aboriginal name for his kind. Walpajirri was born in modern times, hard times for bilbies, but he did not know this. He did not know that he was the next fragile link in a bilby chain stretching back a hundred million years or more. He did not know that most of the bilbies were gone. He only knew his mother and the burrow in which he lived.

His mother cared for him and found food for him in the harshest of deserts. She knew how to keep away from snakes and goannas. How to dig deep burrows to keep her babies safe. She was proud, carrying her tail like a flag when she hopped through the bush. She was a smart, brave bilby and she raised her son to be a smart, brave bilby too.

Walpajirri was born in a burrow in the tussock desert country. He came out of his mother as a small pink embryo equipped only with tiny but strong clawed forepaws that he used to drag himself into her pouch. He attached himself to a teat after his exhausting journey and fell asleep as the warm milk flowed.

He grew alone in his mother's pouch although she has seven other nipples. Times were hard for his mother. Her country was infested with rabbits that competed with her for food, and with cats, which wanted to kill her. Still, in this harsh country, even rabbits and cats found it hard to survive. But Walpajirri's mother clung to life and found enough food so that her son could grow up safe inside her pouch.

For 75 days, Walpajirri enjoyed the safety of his mother's pouch. During the long hot days, they slept together in her cool burrow. At night she went hunting with Walpajirri tucked safely in her pouch. She wandered about, smelling, listening and digging for food. Walpajirri bounced along with her, suckling or listening and smelling the sounds and smells of the outside world. Eventually he even poked his head out and gazed in wonder at the desert lands around him.

One twilight night, Walpajirri emerged from the pouch while his mother slept. He began to explore his burrow. When he reached the entrance, the light of the setting sun blinded him and his mind was touched with wonder and bewilderment. He retreated to the safety of the pouch again.

In the next few weeks, as Walpajirri continued to grow, he spent less and less time in the pouch. He was half the size of his mother now and it was easier for her to leave him behind while she hunted for food. When she returned at the end of a long night foraging, she brought him insects to play with. Then she would lie on her side and let Walpajirri nurse. They nuzzled each other with affection and Walpajirri played with her tail before they slept.

At first when his mother left him alone, Walpajirri stayed safe in his burrow. Then as his curiosity overcame his caution, he ventured out into the night to explore. First he poked his head out, sniffed and listened. He peered about with his near-sighted eyes but he depended more on hearing and smell to warn him of danger. He did not know what was dangerous yet and what was not, so he reacted to everything. The slightest sound sent him scurrying back down the burrow.

An ant frightened him one night and down he went. Then slowly he re-emerged to sniff it. It bit him on the nose and he retreated again. The bite did not hurt for long so Walpajirri came back out. He picked up the ant with his tongue and swallowed it. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time and his

stomach did not mind. The sound of the wind frightened him at first too. But it did not hurt him, only ruffling his fur and he lost his fear.

Each night he moved further from the burrow, but always with caution. He explored all around the spinifex bush above his burrow. Then he explored the open spaces between it and the neighboring spinifex. He learned to find and eat little seeds, ants and even small spiders.

His mother usually left Walpajirri when he was sleeping so that he did not follow her. However he was sleeping less now and one night he decided to tag along. She heard him and waited, recognizing that he was old enough to learn how to hunt for himself.

Together Walpajirri and his mother moved through the cool desert night. The little bilby was excited. He carried his tail high in the air behind him, a banner announcing his emergence into the wide world. Whenever his mother stopped, he sat up on the alert, ears swiveling, nose and whiskers quivering. When his mother found something edible, she pushed it to him. He sniffed it, played with it and then ate it. At last they returned to the burrow and Walpajirri collapsed, exhausted by his first night out.

Each night, he learned something new. He learned to find and eat all sorts of different insects and their fat grub-babies as well as lizards, worms and edible plants. His mother warned him when he sniffed at poisonous plants. She growled in fear when they came across the smells of predatory animals. He listened and learned from her, just as she had learned from her own mother.

Early each morning, before the sun rose, they returned to the burrow and would lie for a while at the entrance. They rested and groomed each other and digested their hard-earned meal. Then Walpajirri played. He teased his mother's tail till it jerked and jumped. He played hide and seek around her, while she ignored him. He jumped on her and tried to frighten her, without success. Then at least they retreated down their burrow, leaving the desert to the burning sun.