



A Reader's Theater Script

An Aboriginal folktale retold by William Harryman

Word count: 1,355

Characters:

Narrator
Old Man
Cassowary, the Elder
Mar, the Cockatoo
Prite, the Wren
Tatkanna, the Robin
Quartang, the Kookaburra

Narrator:

Ages ago, in the Dream Time when the world was created, the first people lived as birds and other animals. One day near sunset, a village of birds was returning home when they met a very old man. The man carried a spear and an empty daypack called a dilly bag. As the old man approached, he threw his spear into the ground as a sign of peace.

Old Man:

I have come a great distance, my brothers, and many moons have passed. I have traveled to the place where the water speaks with the voice of thunder. I have passed beyond the mist-hidden mountains to the great red plains. And I have traveled to the land that lies beyond the dawn. I would like to rest with you for a while. In return for your kindness, I will tell you the secret of the fire of the sun.

Cassowary:

We will gladly take you into our village and give you some food. We have often wondered how to take fire from the sun to keep us warm when the snows come. We would like to be able to warm our food and our bodies. Quickly everyone, prepare a meal.

Narrator:

A wonderful meal was made, and when everyone had finished eating, the birds gathered around the old man. During the Dream Time, no one knew how to keep fire, so they were very eager to hear him speak.

Old Man:

Now I am old, and my people have scattered like dead leaves in the wind. But I have journeyed to the land behind the mountains that hide the sun. There was no water, and the creeks were filled with animals that had died of thirst. I nearly died, as well.

I hurried without rest, afraid I might not survive. One day, when my tongue was swollen with thirst and my legs were weak, I saw a brilliant pool of water in the distance.

I ran, I stumbled, and I crawled until I reached the water. When I lowered my face to drink, it was only sand—pure white sand shimmering in the sun. In my frustration, I began to dig and dig until my hands were sore. Beneath the sand, the ground grew hard like clay. But I found water, and the small trickle saved my life.

I rested for a day, and I felt refreshed. Then I found a land where large trees grew. One morning before the sun had risen,

I saw a fire shining through the trees. I saw Mar the Cockatoo take fire from under his wing and hold it in his hands. I accidentally stepped on a dry stick, and he heard me. As I ran away, he threw his spear, but he missed me. From there I traveled to the hunting ground of my people, but they were gone. I followed their tracks until I found you. And now I offer you the gift of fire, if one of you is brave enough to steal it from the fierce cockatoo.

Cassowary:

I believe I have devised a plan. We will hold a corroboree, a big party, and invite Mar the Cockatoo. While he is here, one of us might be able to steal the fire from him.

Narrator:

The birds all agreed, and they held a great corroboree. There was singing and dancing and lots of food and drink. There were even mock fights and tests of strength. Mar was there, but he didn't participate. He would not take the choicest piece of kangaroo flesh, though he did take a kangaroo hide just as he left.

Mar:

This party has nothing to interest me. I can have hot, cooked food and warmth at home whenever I like.

Cassowary:

Well now, Mar has left, and we could not steal the fire from under his wing. I wonder if the old man's story is true.

Prite:

I think Mar is hiding something. I am going to follow him home and see what happens.

Narrator:

Prite followed for many days, always staying out of sight. By the time Mar reached his camp, Prite was very weary. But then he saw Mar take fire from beneath his wing, and he raced back to tell the birds.

Prite:

The old man's story is true after all! I journeyed over the mountains to Mar's camp, and there I saw him draw fire from under his wing.

Cassowary:

Prite, you have been ingenious and brave. I believe we should send someone to Mar's camp to steal the fire from him. Who will go? I cannot go, because I cannot fly.

Prite:

I would go, but that long journey has made me so weary, I don't think I could do it again.

Tatkanna:

It is a frightful job, but I will go.

Narrator:

Tatkanna the Robin traveled for many days. The sun was very hot, and Tatkanna became thirsty and tired. But she continued, and arrived at Mar's camp one day just as the sun was setting. She decided to sleep for the night before stealing the fire, so she unrolled her kangaroo rug and quickly fell asleep.

The next morning, Tatkanna woke up to see Mar take fire from beneath his wing. He lit a stick and began to burn the hair from the kangaroo hide the birds had given him.

Tatkanna:

Now is as good a time as any. I'd better charge right in there and steal the fire.

Narrator:

And she did so, grabbing the stick before Mar knew what was happening.

Tatkanna:

Ow, that fire is hot! It singed all the feathers on my chest and turned them red!

Narrator:

Tatkanna was so frightened at being burned that she accidentally lit some grass on fire. Soon, all the grass and bushes behind her were burning, spreading quickly.

Mar:

Come back here with that fire, before you burn the whole outback to a carpet of ashes! Don't you even see what you've done? You've set the fire free, and I no longer have the power to control it. I'll kill you for this!

Narrator:

Tatkanna fled before Mar while the flames roared like ocean waves as they spread out over the landscape. Birds and other animals raced in front of the flames, trying to find safe places. Finally, Tatkanna arrived at her own camp.

Tatkanna:

I have stolen the fire, but Mar is right behind me, and he says he will kill me! I'm so small that I will never be able to fight Mar.

Quartang:

I'll defend you, Tatkanna.

Narrator:

Right behind Tatkanna was Mar.

Mar:

Let me have her. She stole my fire and then set the outback aflame in her haste to escape.

Quartang:

The fire is for everyone now. No one should have to freeze through cold winters anymore.

Mar:

If you stand in my way, then I will kill you, too.

Quartang:

I have promised to defend my friend Tatkanna as best I can.

Narrator:

Mar lunged at Quartang, and the two fought for many minutes. Soon it became clear that Mar was bigger and stronger than Quartang, and Quartang retreated to the trees to save his life.

Mar:

What's the use of fighting? Even if I am larger and stronger, I am still nothing but an ordinary bird without fire. Look, even this tribe of feeble birds has made their own fire.

Narrator:

Mar the Cockatoo, sad and depressed, walked away.

Cassowary:

Tatkanna, your bravery has finally brought us fire. We will prepare a great feast for the celebration. With fire, we can dance late into the night and sing until dawn. We will share the gift of fire with all our neighbors.

Tatkanna:

Quartang, won't you come out of the trees and join the celebration? I don't much like being the center of attention, and I miss you.

Quartang:

I am ashamed because I lost the fight with Mar.

Tatkanna:

But you saved my life, Quartang.

Quartang:

No, I will stay in the trees, for you are the real hero. People can see your bravery in the red burn across your chest. I will remain in the branches.

Narrator:

And from that day forward, Quartang remained in the trees and Tatkanna wore a red blaze on her chest. And Mar the Cockatoo has never forgotten how important he used to be, and he is just as mean as ever.