



My grandmother, my Kami

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'Tjitji,' Kami calls, 'Come, we must go now, leave her to rest. Her Kurunpa spirit is weak. Aunty will take care of her.' I shoo away the dirty flies that feed on her sticky, sweaty skin. My legs tingle from having crouched for too long. The dusty wind carries the far-off scent of the eucalyptus tree and clears my head. My feet soak up the warmness of the earth as I stare off into the red sandy plains. While I see nothing but sand, Kami sees the beauty and the richness of the land.

I remember as a child, Kami would wake me up early in the morning to go looking for bush tucker and medicine. The sky was still dark with just the faintest whisper of sunlight. The morning air filled the deepest parts of my body as I inhaled its crisp, fresh scent. Kami would often stop to overturn a log or carefully pluck a leaf that I wouldn't have so much as given a glance at. 'Tjitji', she would say after revealing the hiding place of a squirming white insect, 'This is a Witjuti, bush tucker, you can eat it but if you ever have a burn, crush it into a paste, it's good for the skin, but never use it unless you have to.' Kami was always teaching me ways to eat or use different plants and insects with respect. It wasn't until later on that I understood what Kami truly was.

The wind breathes fire into Kami's grey wispy hair as it leaves behind specks of red dust. The scalding sun does little to deter her as she powers on ahead with her shaky legs, unafraid of the vastness of the land. She begins to sing a song in her

native tongue. It is an unfamiliar tune; meaning that wherever we're headed will be new to me. Her voice does not fight with the constant gusts of warm air, but rather it embraces its harshness. As her voice grows louder, so does the force of the wind. The sand becomes a flurry of red dust as it moves to its beat. The wind scrapes against my skin and leaves me feeling raw and exposed. I use my arm to shield my eyes as I struggle to keep up with Kami's dark figure. It is only her voice that guides me through the redness. However, just as quick as the wind comes, it goes.

There is an odd yet peaceful silence that ensues as I watch the stillness of Kami's back.

'Tjitji!' she cries, 'Look! Do you see it?' But before I can respond, Kami sets off. I follow in her stride and I survey the scene that lies before me. The vivid bursts of yellow that have bloomed against all odds from the harshness of the sand are nothing like I've ever seen. 'Ngalyipi ... snake vines,' Kami exclaims. And then it clicks. Snake vines, as I recall Kami once teaching me, are used to cure headaches and alleviate pain. Maybe for mother, maybe it can ... I shake such thoughts from my head. I don't want to raise my hopes and be disappointed. That's the worst type of pain. After collecting only what she needs, she wraps the vines gently in a cloth to make sure they don't get crushed or damaged.

As we start on the journey home, I glance one last time at the small flourish of yellow among the red. It reminds me of a time when mother's laughter rang as loud and clear as a kookaburra as we sat lazily on the sandy ground shaded by a eucalyptus tree listening to Kami's warm voice telling stories of the land, our culture and to a time before us — the dreamtime. Mother to me was like the hairy mulla mulla that grows within

the harshness of rocks but blooms into the most vivid colours of purples and pinks after having the slightest lick of rain.

However, the sickness changed it all.

No longer did I hear stories of the land as Kami struggled to keep her daughter's spirit intact. The pains grew worse and each time they did, the distance between my family grew too. I had overheard her arguing with Aunty about mother.

'She's not getting any better mother. Please let's send her to the white ones. Perhaps they'll have a way,' Aunty pleaded.

'Nonsense, she is my child. I will heal her. I am a Ngangkari of the Anangu people, I am a healer!' cried Kami.

'I know mother, I know, but please. Times have changed. Please just let her go ...' said Aunty.

'How could you say such things, I will not lose another one of my children to the white ones. I am her mother and she belongs here, with the land,' shouted Kami.

And that's when I knew. Kami was a Ngangkari, but beneath that, she was a woman of anger, anger that had been fuelled by generations of pain. She had been burnt in the most horrific of ways. By ripping her first child from her arms, they had shattered her heart. Her child would never learn the ways of the land and her child would be deprived of their culture. They had committed the greatest crime of all.

I think of this as Kami bandages mother's head with the crushed snake vine and sings to her spirit. The night is peaceful, and stars scatter across the dark sky. For Kami, this is her last straw. Trekking out into the land against the torturous heat to collect medicine for mother has taken a toll on her body. Her wrinkles grow deeper each day, and her legs shakier. She knows she has done all she can and that by tomorrow, she will have to let go of her daughter if the snake vine does not work.

'Take her', cries Kami as she bites her quivering lips. My aunty gently places her hands on her small shrunken shoulders and nods. And for the first time, I see my Kami cry, she cries the way the rain falls heavily long overdue into the dry and parched land.