

Grace and the Mokoi (*Grace and the Heart Thief*)

Written by Hannah Bengtsson, 6th August, 2010.

Grace used to sleep beneath the whispering gums with the acid moon shining down. There was the warmth of a fire and the whispering murmurs of the elders as they half sang, half talked through the stories of the ancestors. Grace knew she was safe in the heart of the red country, nothing would harm her. Until They came. Soft hands, like the softest fur of a dingo pup, They had soft smiles too but Grace could see that they were the sharpest flint beneath.

They dragged her away, wrenching her from her home beside the muttering creek and the whispering gums. Her mothers' wailing filled her ears. Grace saw that her heart had been ripped out, leaving a ragged hole in her breast. The space was filled with the grey mist that lurked over the creek in the morning. She shivered slightly, but didn't cry. They clutched her heart in their hands and squeezed it with knowing cruelty. Grace watched it from far away and felt nothing.

They carried her to a long dark space. There was no fire, no moonlight and no whisperings. There were only shadows and shapes that sobbed and muttered. Grace curled up on a hard board covered with a white man's mat and kept watch. Her daddy had told her about the Mokoi spirit who kidnapped and ate children at night.

The daylight dawned like a puddle of spilt tea into the dusty, now shadowless room. Grace saw other children like her whose hearts had been ripped out. She could see the misty shadows in their chests that consumed them. It made her wonder where They kept all the hearts. Grace was determined to find out.

Days passed and Nights were filled with the Watch of the Mokoi. Around Grace the shadows swelled and sobbed in a harmony of dialects. But there was no sign of the Mokoi. Grace knew better than to stop watching.

"The Mokoi, he is a tricky fella," her daddy had said. "I watch you at night so the Mokoi don't take you and eat you up."

Her daddy had said, "You never stop watching the tricky Mokoi. He'll creep up on you and he'll be nice and then when you're least expecting it...he'll eat you."

And then suddenly Grace knew. She knew where the Mokoi was. She had been taken to his lair. They were the Mokoi and the Mokoi was Them. The Mokoi had taken her heart and her daddy hadn't been there to save her. Grace closed her eyes and she could hear the creek calling her plaintively. Her daddy was there too. He carried fire in his fist, sending the shadows squealing.

"You got to get out of there Gracie," he said and his teeth grinned in the dark. "You've got to find your heart. It's there, hiding. That Mokoi keeps all those hearts in a brown box."

The mist on Grace's heart-space lifted briefly and she made her way out of the hard board with the white man's mat and swam through the shadows to the light beyond.

As silently as the grass snake she made her way towards the brown box. She opened it, kneeling on the cold floor. What was in the box didn't look like her heart but more like the sand that the creek raced over.

Grace let it sift through her fingers slowly. Her daddy squatted beside her. He grinned his white grin and said, "You have to eat it Gracie. That's how it gets back inside you. Then we can go home."

So Grace slowly ate the creek sand. With each mouthful she felt a little heavier in her chest.

"That's enough," said her daddy. "You don't want to be eating somebody else's heart by mistake."

He took her hand gently. "Are you ready?"

Grace tried to nod but she couldn't move. Her body felt unbearably heavy. There was a heavy rock on her chest. She closed her eyes and recalled the whispering gums and the smell of rain on a baked earth in the summer time. She recalled the singing heat of the grassfires and the bitter charcoal smell that was left in their wake. She called on the wind and the rain, the sun and the fire to give her strength back.

Grace sighed and got to her feet, still holding her daddy's hand. "Ready?" he said. And they walked away from the crying shadows. They walked away across the red earth beneath the brilliance of the stars that stretched above them in an inky blue sky.

Grace paused and looked back briefly. The Mokoi's lair was a slight light on the horizon, from which came the sound of angry screaming. Her daddy grinned his white shining grin at her and swung her hand. Grace turned away and walked onwards, her heart safe in her chest.

The nurse pursed her lips in disgust and disapproval as she eyed the little girl's body on the floor of the laundry. A new one too, such a waste. She gingerly brushed the crumbs of rat poison from the girl's blue lips and crossed herself fervently. Some of these Darkies just couldn't take to good Christian Charity.