

Ngurra

This is a  Magabala Book
LEADING PUBLISHER OF ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STORYTELLERS.
CHANGING THE WORLD, ONE STORY AT A TIME.

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Magabala Books is Australia's leading independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander publishing house. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Country on which we live and work. We recognise the unbroken connection to traditional lands, waters and cultures. Through what we publish, we honour all our Elders, peoples and stories, past, present and into our collective futures.

Carl Merrison & Hakea Hustler are previous recipients of the Daisy Utemorrhah Award. The Daisy Utemorrhah Award recognises excellence in junior and YA fiction and seeks to grow Indigenous writing for younger readers.

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Ngurra Home

Carl Merrison & Hakea Hustler
Illustrated by Dub Leffler

Magabala
Books 

Glossary of Jaru, Kriol, Aboriginal English (AE) & Noongar words

There are conventions used in *Ngurra Home* around upper- and lower-case spellings (relational) that may be mistaken for incorrect use of grammar and spelling. This reflects the accuracy of relationships in Jaru culture.



bi – slang term meaning ‘eh?’ (AE)

big mob – a lot (AE)

bin.girrjaru – bush turkey (Jaru)

Bindjareb – Pinjarra (Noongar)

boomerang – a traditional hunting tool

Boorloo – Perth (Noongar)

code-switching – alternating between two or more languages or dialects of language in conversation, changing the way you interact based on the social norms of the culture you are in and who you are interacting with

dambul – whip snake (Jaru)

dirrarn – red-tailed black cockatoo (Jaru)

eatem – eat them (AE)

gaalyalya – white cockatoo (Jaru)

galbun – hawk (Jaru)

gulyulyu – budgerigar (Jaru)

gunyarr – dog (Jaru)

jaja – grandmother/granddaughter; a respectful term of address used by both members of the pair (Jaru)

jarriny – conception totem (Jaru)

jawiji – grandfather/grandchild; a respectful term of address used by both members of the pair (Jaru)

humbug – annoy, ask things from (AE)
jangarn – brushtail possum (Jaru)
 jij – sister (AE)
 jjiyirr – rainbow bee-eater (Jaru)
lingga – snake (in general) (Jaru)
lilgurn – golden bandicoot (Jaru)
 mardee – maybe (AE)
 marlu – kangaroo (Jaru)
milbardiri – spectacled hare-wallaby (Jaru)
 minija – quoll (Jaru)
 mob – group
 na – now (AE)
ngoolark – Carnaby black cockatoo (Noongar)
 ngurra – home (Jaru)
 ngururn – cabbage palm (Jaru)
 nyarlgu – bilby (Jaru)
 Rubibi – Broome (Yawuru)
songlines – cultural knowledge & navigational method used to
 navigate Country
 stealing bird – bowerbird (AE)
sugarbag – Australian native stingless bees that
 produce honey (AE)
tucker – food or bush food (AE)
 wan.gura – crow (Jaru)
wijari – rufous hare-wallabies (Jaru)
 yagu – fish (Jaru)

Carl & Hakea

We pay our respects to Noongar and Jaru Elders past and present. We give thanks to Murdoch University, Charles Darwin University and BirdLife Australia for their extensive research in the field of black cockatoo studies and conservation in general. We acknowledge the hard work of all the organisations, including Environs Kimberley, working to protect the Kimberley and Western Australian country, landscapes, animals, languages and cultures.

We give thanks to Pat Lowe for her edits and advice. As always, we appreciate Shel Sweeney from A Worded Life for her editing and mentoring as well as our agent, Alex Adsett. Rachel Bin Salleh, Sharona, Arlie, Melena and the Magabala team, we appreciate your hard work, dedication and support through this journey of three books.

Finally, we give thanks to Dub Leffler, for his beautiful illustrations across this series.

Dub Leffler

I would like to thank Carl & Hakea for writing these important stories & for allowing my illustrations to be a part of them. Also, my heartfelt gratitude to Margaret, Rachel & Miguel for seeing value in my work.





*The Jaru people are from the East Kimberley
(in Western Australia) and their traditional homelands cover
approximately 23, square kilometres of Country.*



*This book is dedicated to all the remote First Nations children
who dream big at home or away.*

*Your future isn't gifted to you from any teacher or school, you
hold the power to shape your future in your hands.*

Dream big and fly high.



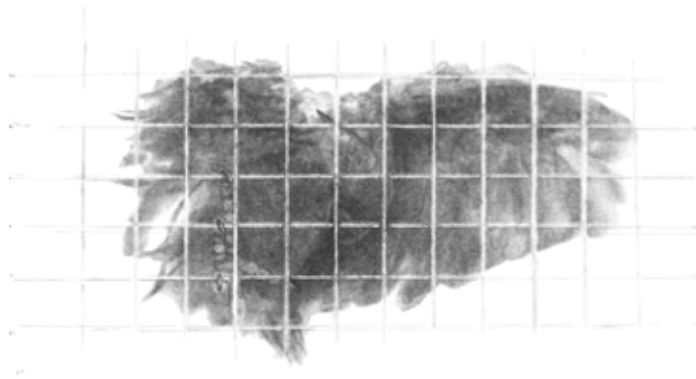
1

The hit came hard, dragging the black cockatoos crashing down to the ground. Mia approached cautiously, net gun in hand, to inspect her endangered targets. The black cockatoos lay sprawled under the black nylon bird net.

‘Let’s get these cockies into the crates,’ said Ash, crouching down by the stunned animals. ‘We’ve got to get them back to the sanctuary to get the trackers on them.’

Mia acted immediately. She held one of the black cockatoos down while Ash untangled it from the net. Ash, bird in hand, looked around for the cage. The animal struggled

and strained its head to take a nip of Ash's finger.



'Ah! Steven, get me that cage, quickly,' Ash directed the other volunteer, who had been leaning against the van watching the catch unfold. New at volunteering for the sanctuary, he looked surprised that he was needed but moved the cage from beside the tyre over to the net. Ash quickly transferred the bird. Mia moved swiftly to restrain the other bird tangled in the nylon.

'Black cockatoos mate for life and are often found flying around in pairs or with their juvenile young during breeding season up north.' Mind back on task, Ash took the moment to educate Mia and Steven. It squawked in protest, shock worn off. 'During their time down here from February to June, they can be seen in flocks of large numbers.'

Of course, as a final-year student in her Bachelor of Conservation and Wildlife Science, Mia already knew this, but she just nodded in respectful acknowledgement. Here on Noongar Country, they caught the Carnaby black cockatoo species, known as ngoolark by the Noongar, or which were different than the red-tailed black cockatoo, the durrarn as they were named in Jaru, that Mia knew back home. The Carnaby didn't have the strong red under-tail feathers. Mia would have never imagined as a teen what she now knew about the black cockatoo species

in general and four Western Australian subspecies: forest red, Carnaby, Baudin and the northern red-tailed black cockatoo.

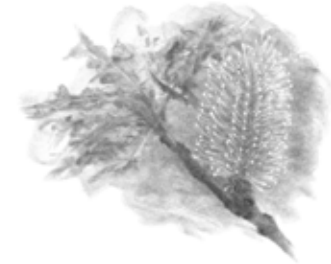
‘What do you two think our chances are of getting another today?’ Ash asked, birds safely in the back of the van, looking towards the sky.

‘I’ll take your lead, Ash,’ Steven said, looking around. ‘I can’t see any others.’

Mia stood for a second, listening. The sounds of other birds and insects rang clear but Mia did not hear the ‘wee-loo’ call of the Carnaby, which was different from the calls of the forest red tail and different from the calls of the red-tailed black cockatoos back home. The flock had moved on.

She looked up at the area they had chosen, bushland with banksia, dryandra, hakea and grevillea. She knew that she was not likely to see any chicks poking their heads out of the holes in the larger gum tree trunks, as


the Carnaby often migrated north to the Wheatbelt during their breeding season.



She looked towards the sky, bright and sunny. At mid-morning, on a sunny day for June, the flock had probably gone to roost through the middle of the day. With two cockatoos in their care, Mia thought it was best to go back.

‘I think we should prioritise getting these two tagged and released and see if we can catch another pair in the afternoon,’ Mia replied.

‘I agree,’ Ash said. ‘The less we handle and the quicker we tag, the better.’



Back at the sanctuary, Mia, who was more experienced, was able to assist Ash to attach the GPS transmitters while Steven observed. To minimise stress to the birds during attachment, Ash chose to use anaesthesia. Mia administered the isoflurane gas and oxygen in the perfect mix, watching the monitor carefully. The first bird lay on a warming blanket to maintain its body temperature during the procedure. It lay prone, dorsal tail feather exposed so the small, lightweight GPS box could be attached.

‘Can you give it some intravenous fluids?’ Ash said, nodding her head towards the

Hartmann's solution already measured and prepared. 'Give it a little boost for when it's back in the sky and to help counteract the effects of the anaesthesia.'



Mia did as requested; giving fluids was one of the standard tasks in her part-time vet-nurse job and she'd helped Ash often enough to have developed trust.

The whole procedure took about fifteen minutes from gas mask to attachment, and soon Mia was wrapping the first bird loosely in a towel. She placed it back gently in the bird carrier.

'How do you feel about getting the

next bird out, Steven?' Ash asked the new volunteer. 'You watched how Mia did it last time. I can talk you through it.'

'Yeah, sure, I'll give it a crack. That nipped finger didn't look terminal,' Steven said confidently.

Mia wondered how he would go. This was her first shift working with him and he had been observing rather than taking part in the activities of the day. She wondered about his past. Mia was pleased to see he was able to use the arm guards to avoid the strong beak and grab the bird around the middle, holding its wings to its sides. She liked his confidence.

'Just bring it over here onto the table,' Ash laughed, shaking her head. 'Mia, apply the mask please.'

Mia placed the large mask over the black cockatoo's face, and watched its eyes close and felt its body relax.

'Great teamwork, you two,' Ash said. 'Just

lay it down gently on the heating mat, Steven.’

Ash talked the pair through how to attach the mini-GPS tracker to the tail feathers as she worked on the second bird.

‘Doesn’t it annoy them or stop them from doing normal bird stuff?’ Steven asked, looking over at the last of Ash’s work.

‘The team at Murdoch University has shown that the tail-tracker has minimal impact on the bird. There is no evidence of the tags interfering with the bird’s ability to fly, feed or perch, and no effect on skin or feathers under the tag. We can expect these two Carnabys to have the tracker on for between 150 and 200 days. They fall off naturally with the moult cycle. Steven, can you do the light wrap of the towel and carefully put it back in the recovery cage?’

Steven did as asked. ‘So, what are you hoping to get out of the data?’

‘These tags are programmed to transmit for

five hours, every fifth day. These cockatoos are listed as endangered under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*. They are threatened by habitat loss and fragmentation, competition with other bird species, feral bees, poaching, disease, illegal shooting and impacts of human interactions,’ Ash stated, his passion shining through. ‘We don’t really know enough about them though. We need the data to understand the ecology of black cockatoos as well as identify critical feeding, roosting and breeding habitats to inform our conservation-management initiatives.’

Ash appeared pleased at the new volunteer’s questions. This was one of the reasons Mia enjoyed Ash’s company: extension knowledge, passion and willingness to share.

‘Makes sense, you can’t conserve what you don’t know,’ Steven said, looking down at the two birds in their cages.

‘They’ll be out for a little while now,’ Ash

said. 'You two have a break, I'll just make some calls and then we might head out later and release these two.'

Ash left Mia and Steven behind, standing awkwardly. Back home shared cultural protocols defined how she could behave with different people in community. Mia had struggled when she was younger in her early days in Boorloo Perth, code-switching to a world with different expectations around interactions. It had made her a little shy in different places.

'Did Ash show you around this morning?' Mia said, comfortable when moving around outside, surrounded by the sanctuary she had come to know over the past few years of volunteering.

'A little bit,' Steven replied. 'Happy to have another explore though.'

Mia walked with Steven past the aquatic cages in the back of the building out to the

sanctuary beyond. The sanctuary was open to the public on certain days of the week, to schools and universities on others. As a working animal sanctuary though, the hours were limited. Today, Mia and Steven had most of the place to themselves. A few other volunteers worked on different projects and tasks around the grounds.

As they walked, Mia explained the animals and backgrounds, a topic she felt comfortable sharing with her new volunteer colleague. He listened attentively.

'You know a lot about this stuff, hey?' Steven said, as they looped back around.

'I've been volunteering here for a while now,' Mia replied. 'What about you? What inspired you to volunteer?'

'I've always had an interest in how people manage the interactions between humans, animals and land. An aunty inspired me to kind of take the next steps to formally

learning about it,' Steven replied.

'A place like this is a good spot to learn about the negative impacts, that's for sure,' Mia said solemnly as they walked past the cages closest to the sanctuary building with the most recently injured animals.

'Perfect timing, you two,' Ash said, as the pair walked back into the building. 'It's been about half an hour and the cockies are moving around.'

They kneeled to peer into the cages.

'What are your observations?' Ash asked.

Mia moved over slightly to allow better light. 'Alert,' she responded. 'Appears to have normal movement and vocalisations. I can't see any negative effects of the procedure.'

'First day here! I'll take your lead,' Steven said with a smile, putting his hands up in defeat.

Ash smiled back, 'I think they are ready for release.'

Ash and Steven chatted away about all things 'sanctuary' on their drive out to the release site, Mia happily listening and watching the world go by out her window. Soon they arrived.

After checking the site for any dangers for their two captives, Ash said, 'You two can do the honours.'

Ash took out the camera to record the event for the sanctuary's social media channels.

Mia watched as her black cockatoo stretched its wings edging towards the opened wire door. She knew it played an important role in the conservation work the sanctuary and university were doing. Realising the door was open, it gave a squawk, rushed out and took flight. The cockatoo in the other cage, emboldened by its companion, followed straight after. A strong wind stirred the leaves around them, and Mia could feel the black cockatoos' sense of freedom.

3



The chorus of voices hummed as the friends sat around the restaurant table on the Boorloo Esplanade. The teppanyaki chef threw the ingredients straight on the hot plate, reminding Mia of home. The waiter handed Mia the bowl of edamame beans. Food and culture on Boorloo was so different from her own Country and yet reminded her of sitting around the fire in the backyard. Mia put the bowl in the middle to share with her friends. Different cultures, different places, different faces – brought together with friendship and food.

Orders placed, the friends sat around

yarning while they watched their food being prepared and cooked.



‘Tell us that story you mentioned last time I saw you,’ Haylee said to Naya, after she had chewed some edamame beans from their shell. ‘You promised you’d tell it to me this time.’

Haylee worked with Mia at the local veterinary clinic as a vet nurse too and had become good friends with Mia and Naya over the past few years while the pair studied at university.

‘You gotta come up and see it all in person one time, hey?’ Mia said to Haylee. ‘You know most of the stories by now. Bet you could even walk in and know half our families.’

Haylee laughed, ‘Gosh, I would love to visit one day. But for now, I’ll settle for good food and good stories!’

Naya smiled and began her story as her friends nibbled on the entrees.

‘When I was younger my nanna took me to a spring out on Country. There were big mob gum trees and eucalypts overhanging the water, making it cool and shady. Me and nanna would sit down there, enjoying the cool breeze. She’d teach me how to weave. And she’d teach me how to be still, watch, listen. Learnt a lot about the world, just sitting in that spot.’



‘We’d watch the little willy wagtails dancing their way to the water, the noisy crows, the flocks of black cockatoo. And if you sit still long enough, and often enough, you become part of the landscape to them birds. We saw black cockatoos dig out nests from old tree hollows, and hawks make nests from sticks, and willy wagtails craft their shelters. And nanna would tell me stories.

‘She told me about when she was little and they’d travel for a really long time. Things took longer back then without cars. And they’d go to the waterhole. And one day my nanna was exploring and she found a new stealing bird, you know one of them blue bird’s nest. The bird had just put up the sticks and started collecting. Some stealing birds have a specific colour they want for their nest. Some go for blue, others white. This one loved yellow things. Nanna didn’t tell anyone about this special nest.

And every time she went back, she would take just one treasure when she checked. Sometimes a yellow flower. Another time a yellow beetle’s shell. One time a yellow ribbon. Nanna didn’t know where the bird would have found the yellow ribbon that far out bush.

‘We all knew that if something went lost, you’d go to the stealing birds’ nests. They pass their nests on, so the same nests my nanna would search when she was little, my mum had looked in, and now I explore. Sometimes you find old rings, or bottle tops, or coins. We always check. When we walked around the nest, we saw the blue bird, that stealing bird, make a display with reeds and colourful things.’

‘I like that they keep the place safe for their chicks to inherit,’ Haylee said. ‘Kind of powerful that little birds can understand the importance of that.’



‘We were GPS banding some birds today at that sanctuary I volunteer at,’ Mia said as the teppanyaki was served. ‘Perfect timing. We got two black cockatoos, just before they migrate for the breeding season. Should give us some pretty good data about migratory patterns, breeding locations and bird behaviour. I reckon your nanna would be fascinated with how this new technology matches with her old stories.’

‘True,’ Naya replied. ‘And I reckon those scientists might be surprised how traditional knowledge could help those new studies. Although she probably would have loved the trackers to keep an eye on us back in the day.’

Naya had been studying teaching, majoring in anthropology and philosophy, which had led to some interesting discussions between the friends.

‘You know I agree about the traditional knowledge part,’ Mia said between bites. Naya knew exactly why Mia was studying – to bridge the gap between worlds and bring the best from both together to improve her Country and the people and animals in it.

‘Be the change you want to see,’ Naya said, picking a piece of hot tempeh off Mia’s plate and popping it in her own mouth.



‘Well, you two can’t be any change until you hurry up and finish your studies,’ Haylee sighed, shaking her head at the pair. ‘You have got to be close now?’

‘I’ve got one semester left,’ Mia said, the pressure of assignments, work and volunteering rushing to the front of her thoughts again.

‘Me too,’ Naya replied. ‘Almost done.’

‘Well, I think it’s impressive. Doing veterinary nursing at TAFE was hard enough for me,’ Haylee said in awe. ‘No way could I go back and study something extra! Full-time work is enough!’

‘I’m impressed Mia had the energy to do TAFE. Then work and study conservation at uni and volunteer,’ Naya agreed. ‘You were the first person in your family to get your diploma, right?’

Mia nodded and clicked her tongue, a way of saying yes from up in the Kimberley, ‘Better

off being busy than sitting around missing home. You’ll be the first in your community to get your degree.’

‘Guess I was wrong,’ Haylee smiled. ‘Looks like you two are being the change already.’

4



In the morning Mia looked around for her work uniform. It was unfolded and crinkled, in the newly washed clothes pile on top of her chest of drawers by her jaja's dirrarn painting. Tiredly, she remembered that she had an assignment due tomorrow afternoon. She wondered if she would have time to finish it between work today and university lectures tomorrow. Mia was exhausted. She didn't feel like there was anything in her busy schedule she could drop: part-time work to pay the bills, study to achieve her dreams, volunteering to get the experience and knowledge to make a bigger difference.

Back home she would go out bush and float in waterholes, cradled on Country, to find peace and unwind. Here she always felt on the go. Always busy. Always chasing to achieve something, prove something, be someone. Mia longed for home.



Pulling on her uniform, Mia grabbed her assignment notes from the kitchen table and stuffed them in her bag, hoping that she could squeeze in some work on her lunch break, and rushed out the door. Luckily for Mia the vet clinic was just around the block, a walk that usually worked to inspire her as she watched the animals adapting to life in

the city just like she had. Today, she just felt rushed, stuck in her mind, thinking through the long list of things she had to do.

‘How can you be late when you literally live around the corner?’ Haylee teased with a sympathetic smile when Mia walked into the staffroom, dumping her things in her staff locker.

‘I didn’t miss anything did I?’ Mia said, flicking her eyes to the clock. Only ten minutes late. Haylee, mop in hand, was cleaning the floors like she did every morning, and both cleaned after surgeries, messy animals and every evening. Hygiene was important at the clinic.



‘Nah, staff meeting soon then first surgery scheduled for nine am,’ Haylee said, reciting the usual morning routine that they both knew well. Like most mornings the vet would be checking the patients and how they fared overnight, the receptionist would be checking voice messages and emails relating to the day and the two vet nurses would be preparing the surgery room.

Mia checked the schedule – a tumour removal on a ten-year-old poodle – then set about putting out the necessary equipment and tools they would all need.

‘Let’s get this day started! Staff meeting!’ the vet called everyone together in the staffroom.

Mia had worked part-time for Dr Margaret Collins, or Maggie for short, for the past two and a half years, since graduating as a vet nurse the first year after finishing high school. Maggie had been empathetic and

understanding when Mia had to return home for cultural reasons and had been supportive of Mia’s studies. Mia wasn’t sure if she could have done the past few years if she hadn’t had the supportive boss and workplace she did. Naya hadn’t been so lucky, working in different childcare centres. The ones she had casually worked for called her ‘unreliable’ when she had to attend funerals or got stuck during big Wets and was unable to get back to the city in time. Those centres didn’t see the strengths that Naya had to bring. While Mia was sad at the prospect of leaving the vet clinic in a few months when her studies finished, Naya couldn’t wait to go home to work as a teacher.

Maggie did the Acknowledgement of Country, outlined the day and shared any new concerns about animal patients in the back.

‘Haylee, you are on in-patient care and routine check-up and wound-care

appointments this morning. Mia, you are on surgery with me. Sandra, you're holding the fort at the front desk. Any comments or questions?' Maggie asked the team, looking at them across the table. They all shook their heads. 'Let's have a good day then!'



Soon Mia was in surgery, poodle before her, as Maggie made the first incision. Mia watched the oxygen levels and heart rate carefully on the monitor. She handed Maggie each tool requested as if on autopilot. The

blood that might have put other people off working at the vet's didn't bother Mia; she had been hunting and fishing since childhood.

The only thing that still got to Mia was unnecessary suffering or suffering they couldn't help. Like the time a passer-by had brought in a greyhound, a victim of the industry and an angry owner, bloodied and frightened. Or the time someone had brought in a pelican starving and close to death with a large hook embedded in its gullet.

The monitor beeped, pulling Mia from her thoughts.

'Up the oxygen there, Mia,' Maggie said urgently, eyebrows drawn. 'Suction.'

Mia inserted the suction tube in the incision, assisting Maggie to get a clearer view. It was hard, the blood pooled with each pump of the heart. That wasn't a good sign.

'Get Haylee in here too, please,' Maggie

commanded tensely, hands working quickly in the small cut on the dog's side.

Mia rushed to the wall and pressed the button that would send a buzzer to Sandra in reception and make alert lights discreetly flick on in the other rooms. Mia rushed back to adjust the anaesthetic and oxygen levels. Within a minute Haylee was scrubbing in too.

'Suction, Haylee,' Maggie instructed. 'Give me more light.'

The three worked quickly and in sync, doing everything they could to save the dog.

Maggie's hands stopped. She looked up at the clock. 'It's been too long. Time of death, nine-forty-seven am.'

The poodle before them was well aged and loved. Mia knew it was lucky. Not every pet got that love and attention. Not every person deserved the privilege of a companion animal.



This also reminded her that not every community had the privilege of access to animal care and medicine. She remembered her own puppy and how they had raced from her remote community into the nearest town with a vet clinic. The drive took hours and it had been too late to save the puppy. It was something Mia wanted to change.

The faded, smooth footpath was coloured in the warm afternoon sunlight when Mia stepped out of the clinic. She looked at the lazy clouds as they made their way across the sky and stretched her arms and back. With a deep breath, Mia put her hand into the side pocket of her bag, feeling the cold, hard reassurance of the spearhead artifact from home. Mia always kept it close. Whenever she was stressed or worried it would bring her back to herself and her connection to home, helping to ground her. Still, Mia needed the walk home to clear her mind.



Mia and Naya had made do in their tiny, seventies-style, two-room ground-floor flat because it was both cheap and in an amazing location, just one block from the beachside. They didn't get the views of the ocean, or parking, and they faced north so it was hot in summer, but they didn't mind. They got to live together and it wasn't forever.

Mia walked along the foreshore to get home, the light ocean breeze in her hair – something she loved Noongar Country for. Back home, in the heart of the Kimberley, they didn't have the relief of the 'Fremantle Doctor'.

Mia knew she should be rushing back to work on her impending assignment, but her mind wandered back to the poodle that

had passed that day. Ten years in dog years is pretty good. But ten years passes so fast for humans. It was ten years ago that she had had to make the big decision to go to boarding school and leave her family, friends and Country behind. Mia thought about all the challenges she had to overcome, all the opportunities she had that many others never got the chance to even dream, all the things she had seen.



Mia wandered off the pathway and onto the sand. Kicking off her shoes and putting them in her bag, she felt the relief of stretching her toes out. Mia still wasn't used to wearing shoes non-stop. Back home she walked around barefoot most of the time. The smooth, squeaky beach sand was so different from the darker, coarser river sand on Jaru Country. She let her eyes flow over the shells and the seaweed washed up on the shore, and her mind wandered along with them. She let her thoughts float and dip and swim across the many things on her mind.



Out of the corner of her eye she saw it: a smooth, light-brown oval on the black rocks. Mia adjusted her eyes. A turtle was wedged between two rocks, entangled in fishing line.

Mia picked up pace and moved swiftly to the animal's side, unsure if it was still alive. It was far south and off course during the winter. Mia bent over and peered into its tear-stained sunken eyes. The turtle blinked, let out a gurgle and feebly moved its flipper.

Mia put her bag on top of the rocks and looked around. There was no immediate danger to herself or the turtle. She pulled out her water bottle, hurried to the waves that were gently lapping the beach and filled it with the salty sea water. Returning to the turtle, Mia took her cardigan out of her bag and used it to shelter the animal's flippers and barnacle-covered shell from the afternoon sun. Mia gently poured the salt water over the turtle. In winter, Boorloo's average temperature was

twenty degrees, the water too cold, but the weather and sun too hot, out of the water.

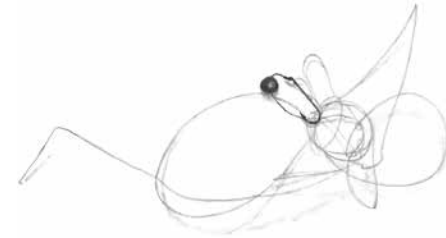
She gave the turtle a gentle nudge to see if it could easily dislodge by itself. It was jammed hard.

Mia looked around. The foreshore was relatively quiet, as it was just on school pick-up time on a weekday afternoon. Further up the beach and on the pathway a few cyclists sped by. There was no one she could immediately call to get to help. She reached into her bag for her mobile, only to find it out of battery. Frustrated, Mia looked over her shoulder back towards the clinic, so close yet so far.

Realising that there was no help coming, Mia scanned the beach for anything she could use to lever the turtle out of the rocks. She spied a large stick. Running to collect it, she wasted no time as she placed one end deep into the sand and tried to manoeuvre the

turtle. The turtle grunted at the movement and salty tears rolled down its face. With one last heave, Mia was able to dislodge the turtle, who fell with a heavy thump. Mia struggled to push it out of the large rocks.

Mia knew that the turtle was tangled and too sick to survive in the cool seas. She looked again towards the path to see if there was anyone who could help. A couple in exercise gear were walking their dog on the other side of the grassed area.



‘Hey! Excuse me! Help!’ Mia yelled out, waving her hand and standing up from the turtle in front of her. Without looking up,

the pair kept their eyes on the grass and picked up pace. Mia felt frustrated by the disconnected way people in the city lived. If someone had been calling out for help back home, another person would have gone to check up on them. She hoped that they hadn't heard her.

Aware that she had to keep working, Mia searched through her bag looking for the mini multi-tool on her keychain. She knew it was in there somewhere. As a kid she had used it many times to cut lines when fishing down at the river.

The line was wrapped tightly around the front left flipper and across the turtle's neck, restricting movement and cutting into the soft underskin.

As carefully as she could, without pulling the line tighter, Mia cut the fishing line. She knew it was something others shouldn't attempt without some veterinary knowledge.

Even though the turtle was exhausted, Mia could feel the power in the flippers as it moved them in protest.

'I've got you,' Mia gently soothed as she worked. 'Let's get you out of this, hey?'

With the turtle finally free of the line, Mia realised she had no option but to get help. Pouring one last bottle full of salt water over the turtle's head and flippers, Mia raced up the beach, across the path and over the grassy nature strip. She looked carefully both ways and dashed across the road before the pedestrian lights changed. She didn't want to lose her second animal for the day.

'Mia, are you okay?' Sandra exclaimed as Mia burst through the clinic door, startling the animals and creating a noisy scene in the waiting area.

'Can you call Ash at the sanctuary? I've got an injured turtle on the beach, about 500 metres from here, towards the city!' Mia

tried to catch her breath. 'Are Maggie or Haylee free?'

Sandra shook her head and dialled. The sanctuary's number was on speed dial for the times when the public brought in injured wildlife.

Mia walked swiftly through to the storeroom and collected towels and the largest plastic box the vet had – a large dog whelping tray.

'I'll be back there with the turtle. If Haylee or Maggie are free soon, can you get one of them to come down?' Mia asked as she dashed out of the busy waiting room. She knew the chances of them being able to come were slim, but hopefully someone from the sanctuary wasn't too far away. One of them would arrive soon.

Back at the beach, Mia protectively noted an approaching dog and its owner. She would need to work fast. She ran down to fill the

tray with five centimetres of ocean water and carried the heavy container back up to the turtle. It barely responded when she awkwardly lifted it by the front and back shell. The dog owner saw what Mia was doing, leashed his dog and jogged to the foreshore to tie it to a tree.

He ran back over to Mia. 'Here, let me help,' he offered. He reached over and took the turtle by the back of the shell, 'One, two, three, heave.' Together they lifted the turtle into the container. Mia was pleased to see that it just fit. The turtle responded by moving its head and a few flaps of its flippers.

'Thank you,' Mia said, scooping water up and over the shell. 'I'm just waiting for the sanctuary to come and collect it.'

'It was lucky you found it!' the stranger replied, looking down at the sea turtle in the container. 'It looks like it's in a bad way.'

Mia nodded in agreement and put the wet towel over the shell.

‘I’m Noah,’ the stranger introduced himself. ‘I’ll stay with you until they come if you like?’

‘No need if you have somewhere to be,’ Mia replied, looking back towards Noah’s dog tied up, excitedly pulling at his lead as a jogger ran by.

‘Nah, I’m on my day off,’ Noah said, and pointed towards his dog, ‘and he’s in the shade.’



Noah took a turn at cupping water over the turtle's face and back. 'How'd you know to do this? And where did you get this huge tub?'

'It is large, right?' Mia smiled, realising how silly she must have looked running down the street with it earlier. She sat cross-legged next to the box, her hand dangling in the water, watching Noah out of the corner of her eye. 'I actually work at the vet clinic across the road and found the turtle after my shift. It's a whelping box for big dogs and puppies.'

Noah's eyes twinkled as a smile lit up his face, 'Well, that makes more sense now.'

‘What about you?’ Mia asked, looking towards the carpark to see if the sanctuary van had arrived. It was imperative the turtle was taken to specialist care as soon as possible. Mia knew that many turtle species were endangered. In some, the survival rate was one turtle out of a thousand that survived to breeding age. This one looked like it had just reached breeding age. Every one was important to the survival of its species.

‘You mean how did I know to help a pretty girl and her turtle on the beach?’ Noah laughed. ‘That was easy.’

Mia blushed and looked down at the turtle.

‘Hey Mia!’ Ash shouted, rushing quickly towards them, the animal stretcher in his hands.

Mia looked up, breathing a sigh of relief as she saw her sanctuary mentor. ‘I’m glad you came!’

She proceeded to give Ash the rundown:

turtle and entangled, signs of dehydration and exhaustion, far south from its natural habitat.

‘You did well,’ Ash said approvingly, looking at the box, towel and water. ‘Can you two help me get it into the back of the van?’

Noah, Mia and Ash used the lift straps to carry the turtle into the van.

‘Thanks, mate,’ Ash said, shutting the back door. ‘You want to jump in or you right, Mia?’

‘I would usually love to but I have an assignment due tomorrow,’ Mia replied, tapping the back of the van. ‘Drive safe, and I’ll come visit it when I volunteer next.’

Ash waved to them both before pulling out into the traffic and driving back towards the sanctuary.

‘What are you studying?’ Noah asked, as they walked back down to untie his dog. It jumped eagerly up to lick and sniff at Mia.

She was sure she had all sorts of interesting smells on her after her day at work.

‘Conservation and wildlife science,’ Mia replied, patting the dog, who sat happily under her touch. ‘I’ve got big plans.’

‘I’m sure you do,’ Noah replied. ‘And I doubt I’ve even seen a fraction of it this afternoon.’

‘And speaking of which,’ Mia stuttered, ‘I better get back to it.’

‘What way are you going?’ Noah asked, giving his dog a pat too. Mia realised that they were walking the same way. She pointed up the way Noah had been walking. ‘Great, I’ll walk with you,’ he said.

‘I take the next turn,’ Mia added, before realising that she should continue the conversation. Noah had been kind. ‘What about you? What do you do when you aren’t using your super strength to lift turtles in distress?’

Noah laughed. ‘I’m studying journalism. And I work part-time at the youth centre. I usually hide my superhero strengths in my day job.’

‘I won’t tell your secret,’ Mia said in a hushed, secretive tone, motioning towards the street she needed to turn down. ‘This is me.’

‘It was nice to meet you, Mia.’ Noah’s shoulders dropped a little as he looked down the way he was headed. ‘Maybe we might bump into each other again some time?’

‘I’d like that,’ Mia replied.





Mia was tired when she arrived in her tutorial class the next morning. She had stayed up late working on her assignment that was due in the afternoon. She had been tempted to miss her class but remembered back to how her jawiji never let her miss school when she was a child. Education was important. A privilege her grandparents hadn't been afforded.

Mia decided to sit in the back row, hoping it would give her a reprieve from some of the interactions that come in tutorial classes. She wished it had been a scheduled lecture in the large hall instead.

‘Conservation needs to happen in consultation with many groups ...’ the lecturer began the lesson at the front of the classroom.

Mia found it hard to concentrate and focus on what the lecturer was trying to teach them. She drew scribbles down the side of her notebook, daydreaming of turtles, spinifex and cockatoos.



‘To explore this concept further, we will be working in groups,’ the lecturer said, looking around the class of fifteen students. ‘I will allocate you members from different majors and different years than your own.’

University was different to Mia’s remote primary school, where everyone knew everyone, or her boarding school where she took most of her classes with people in her year group. At university, classes were more fluid across courses, so being in this elective did not mean that you were studying the same major or even course. This unit was one that considered conservation as collaborative and was open to students from a variety of courses across any year depending on their study sequence. Mia knew some of the faces, but not all, and not closely. Some were young, some grey and older.

She was surprised to see Steven, the other volunteer from the sanctuary, sitting across

the room from her, as she scanned to see who she might be teamed up with for the task. He waved her over, and they were joined by two others. So much for an easy lesson where she could just sit back.

‘I didn’t expect to see you here,’ Steven said as they waited for further instructions. ‘I thought I recognised you at the sanctuary.’

Mia shrugged, ‘I’m in my last year, I’ve been around the place for a while.’

‘First year,’ Steven stuck his hand up slightly like he was responding to roll call. ‘I think I might’ve taken on the hardest units first.’

Mia smiled, ‘Just take it one assignment at a time.’

The lecturer explained the task and handed out scenario cards: they had to work from their different perspectives to come to a conclusion about several conservation scenarios.

Mia looked through the lens of wildlife

and conservation, Steven through the lens of his land-management degree, and the two others from the perspective of geography and social science.

A new hospital has been proposed for current agriculture and lightly forested areas. The site has been assessed by council as the best location for the growing community, taking into consideration access routes and proximity to other services such as existing aged-care facilities. A study has found the presence of an endangered species local to the pocket of land to be developed. Discuss the best course of action from your perspective.

The geologist shared her comments on minimal flood and bushfire risks and the lack of geotechnical risks. Mia could see where they were coming from.

‘From a social science standpoint, I can

see the importance of the hospital being in a convenient location for those in need in the community such as the aged-care, rehabilitation centres and other major facilities such as schools,' the other group member contributed. 'It also makes sense from a transport point of view with several roads connecting to the site for ambulance access and to reduce congestion.'

Mia thought back to her community and region with poor access to services including healthcare. More thought needed to go into how best to service remote communities too, she thought.

Steven looked at Mia. 'The conservation and wildlife-management lens is relatively clear here,' she said. 'An endangered species should take precedent. The impact that agricultural activities in the surrounding paddocks would have had on the native forest habitat would have already been significant for many years.'

Further development, instead of rehabilitation of the surrounding farmlands, goes against the work I do. As it is, animal agriculture takes up around forty-four per cent of the usable land on earth but only contributes to eighteen per cent of food. In Australia we clear 500,000 hectares for development a year. When we take into account water use, pollution, carbon footprint, I would argue that both the hospital development and the surrounding farming should be ceased.'

'And from an Aboriginal perspective?' Steven asked Mia, eyebrows cocked. Mia wasn't sure how to take the question. Was he serious or was he mocking her? Should her Aboriginality come before her qualifications? Could her qualification stand on its own without her cultural lens? Or were they mutually inclusive? Could she even separate the two if she wanted to?

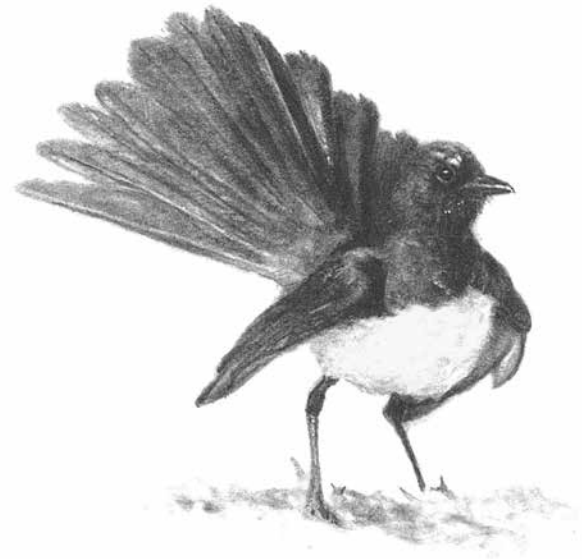
'From an Aboriginal perspective, I am not

an Elder, nor am I from this area, so I would have less knowledge and authority to speak for the proposed land. It could be sacred, have artifacts or areas with deep cultural significance,' said Mia. She pointed out the importance of consulting the Traditional Custodians, not just asking for broad First Nations opinions on local land matters.

'From a general standpoint, Aboriginal people are living with and have been caring for their Country for over 65,000 years or since Creation times,' Mia continued. 'Our agriculture practices and forest management are very different from Western farming practices. Our healthcare systems are holistic. From a First Nations perspective, whatever hospital to be built, wherever it is built, it is important to include mob in the process.'

'Well said,' stated a voice behind Mia. She turned to see her lecturer smiling. 'And very important voices in this discussion.'

The group members nodded; Steven smiled. Mia felt a sense of relief. She was used to having to defend and explain herself and her culture. It was nice when others listened without defensiveness.





Mia was happy when the weekend arrived. Polly, now working with the Royal Flying Doctors in the Pilbara, was down for training. She had arranged for her friends to go on a tree-top walk.

Mia was up early. She couldn't hear any sound from Naya's room, and tiptoed past Polly asleep on the couch. She carefully and slowly opened the front door so it wouldn't make the usual creak. They all deserved to sleep in but when Mia finally had the chance to rest, she was restless. She decided to walk down by the beach for a while.

The morning breeze was cool as the sun

sent pinks and yellows across the city. Mia missed the red hills of Country back home, and the way they could appear purple or blue or pink or the richest reds depending on the time of day. But there was something amazing about the way the sun hit the tall buildings and their mosaic of windows too. Mia liked looking up and seeing the city slowly wake. Lights flickering on, curtains being drawn open, people like specks sipping coffee on high balconies.

‘Hi.’

Mia had been walking, eyes to the sky, along the even pathway, and hadn’t noticed the other walker. She looked towards the voice. Noah.

‘Oh, hi!’ Mia replied, hand going instinctively to her messy hair. ‘You’re up early?’

‘Yep, we have a pancake breakfast at the youth hub on Saturdays. I’m heading over to

help out,’ he replied, looking in the direction Mia had been looking. ‘You’re up early too.’

‘A friend’s staying over in the lounge room. I didn’t want to wake her,’ Mia said, shrugging her shoulders. ‘And sunrise is beautiful here.’

Noah nodded in agreement. ‘You hungry? You should come with me to the youth hub.’

Mia nodded, ‘Maybe. Is it far?’

‘Nah, just around the block,’ Noah said. ‘I’ll show you.’

Mia knew the others wouldn’t be awake for a while, so she had time before needing to get back.

‘How’s the turtle?’ Noah asked as they walked, the cool breeze ruffling his hair.

‘I’m not sure, my next shift’s not until Monday,’ Mia replied, looking out towards the waves. ‘It’s in the best hands though. Ash is an expert at wildlife rehabilitation.’

‘Wait, you work there too?’ Noah looked across at Mia surprised.

‘I volunteer once a week,’ Mia smiled. ‘Gives me a chance to see wildlife conservation in action, not just in books at uni. And kind of give back, you know? Say thanks to Noongar Country for having me so long.’

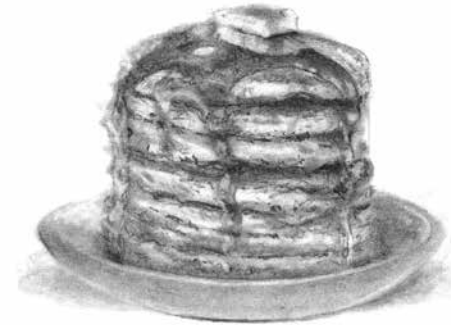
‘You’re not from around here then?’ Noah asked as he pressed the button on the traffic lights, leading them away from the beach. ‘That all makes perfect sense. Don’t know how you have the time.’

‘I’m from the Kimberley. Jaru Country,’ Mia stated. ‘And you make time for things that are important, right?’

Noah turned to look at Mia, ‘Yeah, you do.’

Mia enjoyed chatting with the teens at the youth hub and helping Noah make pancakes. It felt like back home – surrounded by lots of people, sharing stories and eating food. Mia found herself applauding as one of the teens

did backflips on the grass and smiling when one of them blasted Baker Boy.



‘I better get back,’ Mia said to Noah when there was a lull in the action. ‘My mates will be wondering where I am.’

‘Maybe we can catch up on purpose next time?’ Noah asked.

‘Yeah, I’d like that.’ Mia gave Noah her phone number and apologised in advance that she was slow to reply, as she didn’t usually carry her phone with her.

Naya and Polly were dressed and ready when Mia walked back in.

‘Where have you been, Mia-girl?’ Polly asked, looking her up and down. ‘And why aren’t you ready?’

‘Sorry!’ Mia said hastily. ‘I’ll be ready in five minutes!’

After a quick shower, Mia brushed her hair, put on some tinted moisturiser and a change of clothes, and was ready.

‘Take this,’ Naya said, pushing a piece of jam toast into Mia’s hand. ‘Let’s get on the road.’

The three jumped into Polly’s car. Naya and Mia used public transport around the city. Mia enjoyed the fact that it was more sustainable and affordable, and she could daydream out the window as they moved. But the freedom of Polly’s work’s hire car was exciting for this weekend.

Naya wound down the window and let the

air blow through her hair. ‘Us mob nearly there, bi?’

Polly laughed, ‘You remind me of little-kid time sitting in the back, asking questions like that.’

‘Young at heart?’ Mia smiled back at her friend. They weren’t little barefoot bush kids anymore, or the nervous teens they had been when they met in boarding school.

‘Good to let my hair down with the sister-girls,’ Naya said. ‘You know what it’s like being us mob together just normal way without having to worry about code-switching all the time.’

Soon they left the skyscrapers and busy roads and went into the bushland. It always amazed Mia how quickly it could go from skyscrapers to houses, then to native trees. Different worlds.

Polly parked the car up in the gravelled carpark. ‘You ready, you two? Let’s climb!’

The girls decided to do both walks: the high walk on wooden bridges looking down from the tree canopy, and the high wire, an obstacle course through the branches.

Mia wasn't afraid of heights ... now. She'd gone up in cherry pickers to attach nesting boxes with the sanctuary, taken elevators in the highest skyscrapers in Boorloo and been on too many small aeroplanes to count. A lot different to the kids who thought 'jump rock' at Kununurra was good enough high.

They walked up the ramp and climbed the steps as they twisted around and around a large tree trunk, emerging onto the bridge in the canopy. Mia looked around in awe. This was a new view for even her. A sea of greens and browns. But the longer you stopped and looked, the more details unfurled. The nuts, flowers. The shades of green. The insects, birds and wildlife hidden and camouflaged.

'You coming, Mia?' Polly asked, walking forward on the bridge. 'Daydreaming?'

'Naya understands,' Mia smiled, throwing her arms over her friend's shoulders. 'It reminds me of the story of deep watching at the waterhole with your nanna. Up here, the more you look, the more you see.'

'Well, look at that!' Polly said, pointing towards the skyscrapers and urban sprawl not so far away. Mia felt confronted by it. The stark contrast. How close it was. And everyone said Boorloo was a nice city, a clean city, a green city. Mia imagined what it would have looked like just 200 years ago. From a vantage point, what would she have seen then? How things had changed.

'So what took you so long on your walk this morning?' Naya asked, hanging her head over the railing to look straight down. 'I heard you go out. Made a girl hungry. Thought you'd be bringing back breakfast!'

‘Argh, sorry,’ Mia replied, looking down the way Naya was at the layers of foliage, down to the forest floor. ‘I thought I was quiet. Give you two a sleep-in.’

‘I slept in fine!’ Polly said. ‘Even with Naya mucking around in the kitchen. Nothing was waking me up.’

‘Hey, least you got a feed out of it when you got up,’ Naya laughed, walking towards the steps down from the treetops.

‘True, gave me good enough energy too,’ Polly said, pushing Naya playfully. ‘Race you down.’

Next Mia and her friends found themselves all harnessed up and receiving instructions on how to navigate the high wire. Mia went first. She clipped herself onto the guide wire and took a step out onto wood planks below. They wobbled beneath her feet. Mia looked ahead: ten of these, then another tree, beyond

that a flying fox, then hoops and more that she couldn’t see. The unknown.

A flock of white cockatoos roosted playfully in the trees around. Back home they were called gaalyalya, but here they had another name. One hung upside down by a claw squawking gleefully to its friends, dropping chewed gumnuts to the ground below.



Naya stepped onto the wobbly, sparsely spaced planks that Mia had passed. She faltered, nervously, holding tightly to the guideline.

‘You got ’em, jij!’ Mia called from the safety of the next tree. ‘One step at a time. Just focus on one step at a time.’

This reminded Mia of the advice that she had been given by her aunt when she first arrived at boarding school: ‘Take one step at a time, one day at a time, and soon you will be proud of how far you have travelled.’

Polly urged Naya forward, ‘If you don’t push out of your comfort zone you’ll never fly. Come on Naya-girl, spread those wings.’

Naya took her next step, making space for Polly on the course. Mia turned to her next challenge, friends at her back, pushing her forward.

As Mia took hold of the flying fox handle, she noticed a cockatoo pair roosting and preening in a large gum tree. Startled by the whirr of Mia’s flying fox as it slipped down the wire, a white cockatoo flock flew into the air loudly, disturbing the roosting pair. Mia

landed on the next platform and looked back at the retreating black shapes.

At the end of the tree-top course, Mia stood on the last platform, high above the forest floor with a ladder to the ground. The last steps to go. She looked back at how far they had come, all the obstacles in between. She started the final climb down. Mia was brave enough to do the course, and she did not get stuck or turn back. Soon her feet would hit the ground, and the new path could take her anywhere.



Mia sat with her university friends out the front of the First Nations Learning Hub. The smoke of the barbeque wafted across as they yarned and waited. She watched the hub staff doing the last preparations, setting out the banners and putting on music through the speakers, the deadly tunes making her smile. Kind of set the tone for the Sunday afternoon. Mia was grateful that she had this place to chill, connect and feel understood during her studies. There were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from different mobs, but all together. She wondered what their Countries were like. They yarned about

home, big mob times over the years, but Mia thought it would be amazing to travel to see the different landscapes, cultures and peoples.

‘Must be hard on events like this one, Mia?’ asked Shanequa, a Noongar student from just south of the city, leaning back on her chair, hands behind her head as she soaked in the sun. ‘Community Open Day.’

‘It’s a long trip down. Would take them days to get here. They are saving up their money for my graduation before they come down,’ Mia replied, picturing her mum and grandparents sitting under the shade of the big old gumtree in her backyard. ‘You probably got too many people coming to fill up the whole place anyway or what?’

Shanequa wiggled her fingers, ‘Too many to count. But think it’s just my siblings rocking up later. Mum wanted to show them what they can do too. “If you can see it, you can be it”, she reckons.’

‘Your mum is one smart lady,’ Mia replied, remembering her trip down to Bindjareb Pinjarra way to meet Shanequa’s mob. They’d taken the two Kimberley girls in like family. Mia looked forward to seeing Shanequa’s mum and the kids again.

‘I’ll look forward to meeting your family when they come down. Heard too many stories about them to never meet ’em,’ Shanequa laughed. ‘Can you believe we are almost there? We graduate in a few months.’

Naya had been chatting with some other friends in the group and tuned into their conversation. ‘Girls, we are gonna do big things.’

‘On the backs of our ancestors, sister-girl,’ Mia said, thinking back to the fights and resistance her ancestors and First Nations people had to go through to get the rights that she now enjoyed. Even the struggles her own grandparents and mother had had to overcome in their times. The intergenerational

strengths, passed down from them to her. Mia knew she had the strength to make a difference.

Things had changed a lot even since her grandparents' time, but not enough. Mia thought about the kids back home who grew up in the shadow of intergenerational trauma. And she thought about the systemic racism she experienced back home and here in the city. She thought about the way people sought to take advantage of Country and people. She now felt empowered to do something about this with her old people's knowledge passed down and her university degree.

People began arriving, milling around the university grounds, snacking on chips and listening to the music. A small stage had been set up near the steps to the hub, the information table and the student work displays. One of the hub staff tapped on the microphone.



‘Friends, families and community, we are really happy that you’ve given up your beautiful Sunday afternoon to join us here at the First Nations Learning Hub,’ the staff member began. ‘We think it’s deadly that we get to share what we do with you all, and maybe inspire some fresh faces to come study with us here at the university. Before we get into sharing our stories, information about the university and some amazing performances from our students, I’d like to invite the Traditional Custodians to the stage.’

Mia sat in reverence and respectful silence as she listened. The strong eucalyptus smoke drifted over the crowd, cleansing and

strengthening the guests on this Country. Mia listened to the Noongar words of welcome, mutual expectations and protection. When it was time she walked through the smoke, using her hands to waft it over her face and body.

‘Please enjoy the barbeque and students’ work display while we listen to some deadly original music from Shanequa and her band,’ the staff member said after the crowd had walked through the smoke. ‘We will begin the formal presentations in about twenty minutes.’

Shanequa and a few of her friends got up from their chairs near Mia and Naya and walked to the stage. Mia let her gaze float over the Traditional Custodians who were just leaving the stage area, the faces of Noongar Elders and respected community members she had seen many times at these events. She stood up, intending to take some of the food over to the old people and invite them to take

their seats, like she would back home; make sure your Elders have a feed first. Mia was surprised to see another familiar face with the group.

Steven was bending down by the smoking bowl, putting water on the smouldering leaves.

‘Here Aunty. Here Uncle,’ Mia said, handing two plates of fresh fish and salads to the old people she greeted. While not Mia’s actual relations, she greeted them this way out of respect. ‘Have our seats over there.’

The Elders accepted and Mia went back to get extra plates for the others as they settled in the chairs. Mia sat down on the grass by an old Aunty she knew.

‘You met my nephew yet?’ the Aunty asked, motioning over to Steven who was serving himself up some food from the barbeque. ‘He just started studying here this year.’

Mia nodded, ‘We are actually in a class

together. You bring any other kids down today to get 'em studying?'

The Elder nodded her head towards a group of teens on their phones under a tree nearby. 'That's my lot. Got good enough brains, just gotta keep them off that technology. Sucks all the motivation and creativity outta them. They get caught up in some trend learning from five-second reels and forget to learn from us Elders on Country.'

Mia agreed. It was so easy to get sucked into social media, missing home and feeling sad about all the things she was missing out on. She knew she could waste hours on there, when she had her mates, job, volunteering, study and a beach and city practically on her doorstep. She was thankful that she had grown up out bush. She knew the power of being in the moment, living in real life.

Mia yarned and ate with the Aunty some more until her plate was empty. She stood up

to get a cup of water. Steven walked over and filled his cup too.

'Hey, surprised to see you here,' Mia said in greeting, turning her back to the water jug and looking over the crowd. Steven stood by her side looking out as well. 'I didn't know you were Noongar mob.'

'Us mob come in all shapes, colours and sizes, hey? Pop up everywhere,' Steven answered. Mia caught him smiling out of the corner of her eye.

'You should have said back in class,' Mia replied. 'Would have had some good things to add from both a land-management and Noongar perspective too. You had me do all the talking!'

'You're the final-year uni student. "Respect your Elders",' replied Steven with a grin.

'Hey!' Mia said indignantly. 'I'm not that old!'

'I actually think we are the same age,'

Steven replied. 'I worked a few years for the local council. It's what inspired me to study, to play the game, to make change. I started uni a bit late.'

'Yeah well, all the more reason you should have piped up,' Mia said. 'You were testing me or what?'

'I've seen the inside of council. That scenario the tutor gave us was actually all too familiar,' Steven replied. 'I just wanted to hear your thoughts on it too. You come from a different place than here. Have a different view on things.'

'True, we can all learn from each other. That's kind of why I'm here too. Learn to be stronger and smarter. Learn how other people do it. Use the best of everything,' Mia said, thinking of her old people back home. 'But only Traditional Custodians' voices can speak for Country.'

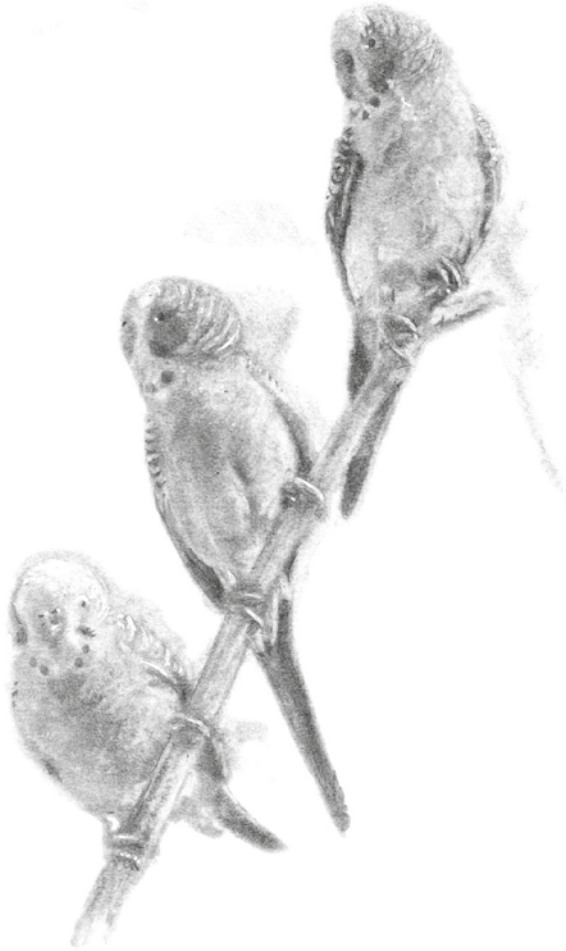
'Yeah, well I liked learning from you,'

Steven said. 'You really knew what you were talking about back in there.'

'My jaja says, "You should never stop learning",' Mia replied. 'Her lighter skinned sister was stolen when she was a child and had to relearn most of her culture and language when she came back home after finding family. My jaja is one of the reasons I'm here. Be strong and smart both ways – white way and our way. You gotta know both ways to stop history repeating.'

'I'd love to know more about your Country,' Steven said, pointing over to a shady spot under a tree. 'Wanna yarn?'

Mia and Steven went to sit under the tree on the grass and listened to Shanequa's music and told stories of home. He shared stories of growing up around Boorloo and the hinterland beyond. Mia was amazed at the ways their lived experiences were so different, and at the similarities they shared.



10

‘Glad you’re here,’ Ash greeted Mia as she walked through the entrance of the sanctuary on Monday morning. ‘The turtle you rescued is doing really well. Shall we have a look?’

Mia quickly put her bag on a chair in the staffroom and followed Ash down the back to the aquatic pools and tanks. A spa-sized pool, round and waist height, was set up in the corner of the space, with bubbles circulating the water. It was designed for river turtles, fish and other small aquatic life. Inside was the turtle Mia had saved, swimming lazily around in circles.