

BENEATH
the
MOTHER
TREE

D.M. CAMERON



MidnightSun

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Even though the island of Moondarrawah is fictitious, this story takes place within the landscape of Quandamooka country. Moondarrawah is a Ngugi word granted to me by revered Ngugi Elder, Uncle Bob Anderson. All Indigenous content was written under the guidance and encouragement of Uncle Bob who decided upon the spelling of the Ngugi words phonetically because he learnt through an oral tradition. Please accept this as my love song to a place that formed me, written with deep respect for the three clans who belong to the Quandamooka past, present and future – the Ngugi of Moorgumpin, and the Nunukul and Gorenpul of Minjerribah.

Strongly I feel your presence very near
Haunting the old spot, watching as we Disturb
your bones. Poor ghost,
I know, I know you will understand.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal

Get up from the stool, through the lattice step lightly And we'll
rove in the grove while the moon's shining brightly.

The Spinning Wheel
(Traditional Irish song)

1.

On the wind, Ayla heard a tune so sweetly mournful it made her toes curl in the sand. Had she imagined it? She glanced behind her to see the world had turned a sickly green. Even the rich red of Mud Rock was tinged.

The pied cormorant's heart pounded against her wrist through the stained pillow case. She placed its webbed feet gently on the shoreline, uncovering the head last. Freed, the bird skittered up the deserted beach. The only remaining sign of its ordeal with fishing line was a featherless patch on its curved neck.

'Go Buster.' Ayla knew not to name rescued wildlife, but a name always came.

Buster opened his yellow beak and cried to the sky at the injustice, before uncurling his oily blackness to glide over the water and behind the headland.

'Bye Buster.'

Even my voice sounds green, she thought, as she heard it flop onto the sand. She looked down to see her voice had turned into khaki seaweed – faded and brittle. She stood on it, imagining vocal chords crunching underfoot. The stench of rotting seaweed clung to the roof of her mouth.

Moving out of the sinister shadow of the Rock, she saw the source of the strange coloured light was the sun caught behind boiling black

clouds, miles out to sea. The storm that passed over earlier, still lingering.

A ripple came across the water, reaching the shoreline as a breeze, filling the air with electricity. Her hair stood on end as the eerie music came again, twining itself around her, drawing her up the beach into the pigface – its feathery flowers closing on the day. A thrill coiled through her as she followed the melody into the trees, creeping as lightly as soldier crabs scuttle across sand.

She paused in the thick stand of bent she-oaks.

He was sitting, his bare back to her, on a dead banksia in the clearing, a strange wooden flute dancing in his hands. The colour of his jeans blended with the faded log so he became part of the tree. The spirit of the old banksia, perhaps? Ayla enjoyed the fantasy, peering through the she-oak's prickly curtain at his hair, so black it looked blue in the sun. He turned his face to the sky and she saw it was a gentle profile. His music reached out, took her by the hand and she danced with him in her mind.

He stopped, flute poised, staring toward her clump of trees.

Ayla merged with the she-oaks she had known since childhood, when she had rested on their horizontal trunks bent by the wind, murmuring her grandfather's stories.

The stranger's dark eyes were unblinking. He blew one low solitary note. She felt the ends of her hair split. Was it the music, or the eerie green light that was so bewitching? She considered stepping into the clearing, but backed away, stumbling onto the beach. Where the sand was wet and firm, she danced, eyes shut to let her body connect with his rhythm, slow, deep, divine. She lost herself in the pulse of him.

He paused. She ran, exhilarated, leaping on the tide line to notes on the wind then running again for sheer joy along the empty beach. Who was he? Where had he come from and why was he here on her little island in the middle of the wild old sea? She scrambled to the top of Mud Rock. Little Beauty bobbed on the water of the next bay. Her

grandfather's launch, a ruby floating in the turquoise inlet. Hibiscus Bay curved in a crescent moon: the headland jutted out to protect the calm water from open sea.

She cooed. Her grandfather emerged from the cabin, barefoot and bare-chested. He waved, unhooked the dinghy and rowed to shore.

‘Getting in or am I getting out?’

She was already in. The small row boat felt safe and familiar and the stranger with his music could not touch her here.

‘What?’ He rested his oars for a moment. The hem of his favourite shorts frayed now, the strands of white matching the hair on his chest.

‘Hey?’

‘Usually go round the Rock, not over it.’

She shrugged. ‘Felt brave for once.’

Her grandfather rowed and said the wind was unsettled. She agreed and felt tingly all over.

Climbing from the rowboat into Little Beauty, the mixture of smells she had known all her life – kerosene, fish guts and whisky – wrapped comforting arms around her. They sat at the table that folded to a bed and he put the kettle on. ‘You look flushed.’

She felt her hot cheeks and picked at the sand under her nails. He threw tea bags into chipped enamel cups, slurping a dash of whisky into his. They waited for the water to boil, listening to the waves lapping against the boat, as they always did.

Ayla's heart began to settle. ‘Tell me one of your stories, Grappa?’ Grappa had been the first word she had spoken, a failed attempt at Grandpa. Because Grappa was a form of alcohol, the island community thought it apt, so the name had stuck.

‘Why?’

Ayla's heart tightened at the sad look on his crinkled face. It had been too long since she had asked for a story. ‘You told me about a dark-haired man once. Far...something?’

‘Dorocho.’

‘Far Dorocho.’ She repeated it like a secret.

‘God help those who fall under his spell.’

‘You said he played an instrument?’

‘Can do. A flute, a pipe, sometimes a drum. The one I met didn’t play anything.’

‘You met one?’ Ayla acted as if she hadn’t heard the story. When she was a child, this technique could always draw the tale from him.

‘Up at the hall. The Stop Progress Association’s Annual Masked Ball was on. You know the rest.’ Grappa was wise to her. She was twenty now, too old to get away with it.

‘Tell me again.’

He looked at her sideways.

‘Please?’

His voice dropped so there was a dangerous edge to it. ‘No moon that night. I remember ‘cause he appeared from nowhere – stepped straight out of the blackness. Not a soul had seen him catch the barge across. No water taxi back then. Barge was the only way on and off. Nettie and I weren’t long married, but he took her under his spell. Last thing I remember was her twirling round with him – couldn’t take her eyes off the bugger, like she was in a trance or somethin’.’

‘What do you mean, the last thing you remember?’

‘Dunno. Lost time. Woke up on Three Mile with sun in me eyes, sand in me ears and couldn’t for the life of me remember how I got there. Thought he’d taken her for sure. Ran all the way home, but there she was sweeping the kitchen with the kettle on, waitin’ like nothing had happened. ‘Course she denied everythin’. But I knew she was under his spell. Counted the hours ‘til he came back.’

‘He came back?’

‘Nup. Must have known Nettie’s heart was part of mine. She could never truly leave me. One thing about ‘em...they respect love.’

‘And usually they play an instrument?’

‘That’s what Gran said. They pull you towards ‘em with their

music.’ On the word, pull, he gestured with his hands, drawing in an anchor. ‘Once you’re under his spell, then he takes you down into the black abyss, into his realm, never to return.’

‘What did he look like?’

Grappa watched her. ‘Why?’

‘Maybe I just saw one.’

His eyebrows jumped. ‘Maybe it’s the same one?’

Grappa was so serious, she hid her smile. ‘Can’t be. He looked my age.’

‘Ayla, they don’t age. Where was he?’

‘Beyond the she-oaks. I heard this music and had to follow it. Couldn’t help myself.’ Her laugh escaped.

‘It’s not funny. What was he playing?’

‘A strange wooden carved looking thing, curved at the end but held at the side like a flute. It had markings burnt into the wood. Never seen an instrument like it.’

Grappa looked like he was about to explode. ‘And he had pitchblack hair?’

‘Black as.’

‘Holy Mary, Mother-of-God.’ He poured more scotch into his tea.

‘Don’t worry, he didn’t see me. I hid in the she-oaks.’

‘They don’t need to see you. They can feel you.’

Grappa was scaring her now, not because she believed him anymore, but because something had happened. The stranger’s music had woken something in her. Something dormant deep inside was alive again. She glimpsed herself as a child, sitting here at this table with a head full of possibilities and a fist full of Smarties – rainbow colours smudging her palms.

Grappa peered through the porthole towards Mud Rock. ‘Unless...’

‘What?’

‘The she-oaks hid you.’ His rumpled features sharpened. ‘Those trees know you. They would’ve protected you. That’s how you escaped.’ She smiled. He always brought it back to the trees.

‘Now I know why you went over the headland ’stead of round it. Scared you, didn’t he?’

‘No. It was fun, running. His music, and the way he looked in the clearing, he...’ She felt herself blush under Grappa’s glare.

He shook his head. ‘Jesus Ayla.’ All colour had drained from his face. ‘Knew today was gonna be a bad day.’ He covered her fine hand with his spotty clump of a thing. ‘Not to worry. You’re safe now. Those old she-oaks saved you, girl. Don’t forget to thank ‘em.’

She marvelled at how his eyes lit up at the thought of the trees saving her. His hand was shaking. She had upset him to amuse herself, an attempt to momentarily recapture the magic of her childhood. Her guilt had her gulping the rest of her tea. ‘Thanks for the cuppa.’ ‘Got some whiting you can take. I’ll walk you home.’

‘I’ll be fine.’

‘Go straight home, hear me? Long way, via the road. Not goin’ past the she-oaks again.’

As Grappa rowed her back to shore, Ayla thought of a time when his words were intoxicating. She wanted to believe in the ominous encounter with his black-haired demon, but the flute player was probably a tourist. A backpacker who had come to the island for the day. Everything was so easily explained away now. Adulthood already felt stale at its threshold. Where had all the wonder gone?

Reaching the road, she glanced back to see Grappa in the late afternoon glow at the shoreline, scratching his bum. Grappa, who still believed in magic, guarding, watching until she was out of sight. She waved and blew kisses, envying his blind faith in it all.

He headed up the beach behind the Rock into the tangle of cottonwood trees, towards his ‘Far Dorocho’. She hoped the young man had gone so Grappa wouldn’t make a fool of himself. Remorse

shot through her. She had set him up for more ridicule. Only yesterday she had overheard locals joking about him. ‘Great old bloke, but mad as a cut snake once he’s had a few.’

They misunderstood. He wasn’t a ranting drunk. He was simply living his life through the stories his grandmother had crowded his head with. Stories carried from the other side of the world, precious gifts from a childhood in a cold green country, adapted to suit this bright tattered land. Grappa had seen it as his duty to fill Ayla’s head with the tales.

I’m the only one who really understands him.

This lonely thought made her pace quicken. The darkness of early evening fell on the dirt road of Hibiscus Beach Drive – abandoned holiday houses at one end and the old Johnston place on the mangrove swamp at the other. Most islanders believed the old house was haunted.

Ayla crossed Hibiscus and swung left onto the bitumen of Long Street, the main road bisecting the island. The air felt heavy and the frogs in the swamp started grumbling. Perhaps the storm had changed direction? She began to run.

At the top of the rise, she slowed to a walk as the breeze from the sea caressed her, bringing to mind the flute player.

Turning left into her street, she heard women laughing. Mandy’s mother, sister and grandmother lived on the corner in a ramshackle Queenslander that often wobbled on its stumps from women’s laughter. The island felt empty without Mandy.

At home, she found her mother in the kitchen, an easel on the bench, wooden spoon in one hand, paintbrush in the other, painting as she cooked. The canvas covered yet again with a watery green background. Please, not another drowning.

It had been months since her mother had painted. ‘Grappa sent whiting.’ She jammed the parcel of fish in the freezer.

‘Hmmm?’ Her mother lowered the skyline with a stroke of the brush and wiped her face with the back of her sleeve.

Ayla saw now, she had been crying.

Her mother's head jerked towards the back window. 'Bloody chickens. Would you mind, darling? Bugger.' She lifted the pan as the scent of burnt milk pervaded.

Ayla walked behind the chickens, clapping to a beat in her head. 'I often hear rhythms,' she told Grappa once. He said that was the Irish in her and that his Gran had hated Australia, claiming, 'There's no music. At home, there's music all around. How can you thrive in a land without music?'

Clapping, Ayla shooed the chickens out of the vegetable patch into the bracken fern. The black Bantam darted down the sandy track to the beach. She cut it off, sending it toward the coop.

Pausing in the messy softness of the paperbarks, she leant against a spongy trunk, breathing in the tea tree balm. The clearing was close enough, if the handsome musician was still there she might hear him. The lone honk from a peacock pierced her hope. She knew she would never see him again.



The seductive tone of a wind instrument wound its way through the maze of cottonwood limbs. Grappa broke into a sweat at the sound of it.

So help me Mother-of-God.

The events of the day now made hideous sense. The dead dugong on Three Mile Beach at dawn, propeller cuts still wet with blood, a lone crow pecking viciously at the milky eye. It filled him with the memory of the last time he'd found a sea cow's carcass washed up. The day Nettie died. He couldn't shake the premonition that today was akin to that day – death had closed in on the island. All morning he'd noticed birds acting up, then the unnatural storm that blew in from nowhere, lurking out at sea, turning the light peculiar. Grappa knew now, none of this was coincidence. Far Dorocho had returned.

Grappa stepped into the clearing at the banksia log. The only thing staring at him was a hairy cone of eyes: a spent seedpod from the old tree.

The flute sound drifted in from the ocean. He pushed his way through the she-oaks, whispering, 'Thank you for protecting her,' caressing their rough trunks, drawing courage from their solid presence.

The beach too appeared empty. He waited in the papery grass that grew where scrub met sand.

The same melody began to waft out of Mud Rock itself. As Grappa listened, the haunting tune faded away. The demon was playing with him, leading him on into the night, if Grappa were silly enough to follow. 'Leave her alone. Hear me? You don't stand a chance. She knows what you are.' He felt moronic calling to no one.

For a time, the only sound between waves was the wind through the grass tickling his feet. He looked at the disappearing sun and farted. I too can be musical, he thought.

If he hurried, he could reach the Nor Folk Tree to ask protection for Ayla before night fell. The Nor folk, according to his Gran, were 'faeries, nature spirits. Call them what you will.' Gran had convinced him they lived in the circle of Norfolk pines on the southern end of the island. 'See lad? See how the old fig grows smack bang in the centre of the pines? That's no coincidence. That's a sign. This Moreton Bay fig is easily the oldest tree on the island. Has to be here. I'm sure of it.'

'What has to be here, Gran?'

'The way into their realm. What else would I be talking about?'

Grappa walked toward Dead Tree Point as fast as his tired heart allowed, dodging sea sponges, faded coral and mangrove seeds washed up after the storm. The sharp whiff of it all caught on the wind. He was breathless when he arrived at the sandbank full of half-buried trees lying on their sides, roots reaching to the sky. The jumble of petrifying limbs pushed over years ago by a cyclonic wind was a graveyard of bones in the ghoulish twilight.

Grappa detected movement near the cave half way up the cliff. He peered into the dark opening. Something large shifted in the scrub nearby and he almost messed himself.

‘Wallaby. Idiot.’ The sound of his own voice was comforting.

The curve of a swollen yellow moon crept from the ocean. He paused at the sight of it. Gran always said the Fey were at their most potent when the moon was full. The foreboding that had been building all day swamped him. ‘No time to go to the tree – dark soon,’ he mumbled to the ghost crab at his feet before it turned to sand.

Hurrying back to Little Beauty, he knew in his coward’s heart, more than anything, he needed a drink.

Grappa struggled up Mud Rock. Little Beauty waited in Hibiscus Bay, as did the dinghy, floating now on the incoming tide. No sign of any creature, not even a bird. He listened for the faint sound of a flute.

‘Where are you’ – the words poison on his parched tongue – ‘Far Dorocha?’