TO THE ISLANDS

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LET'S OPEN WITH the fairytale of Snow White. Except Snow White is not named for her pale complexion but for her hair. Her skin is actually a creamy brown, and she is ninety years old.

In 2007, I was twelve, and I was gifted my very own video camera. It was a type of awakening for me, and I thought maybe I'd be a scriptwriter or a director. I filmed nearly everything. From boring footage of book spines, lovingly and neurotically organised on my shelves, to odd facial close-ups of my family members that they'd growl about back then and probably groan and laugh at now. I filmed myself playing the flute, giving tours of my room and of my aka's house over the holidays. I wrote scripts with my sister and filmed a movie with our dad overacting and our younger siblings just trying their best. My small bala (brother) and I constantly made content just for us: we joke now that had we had consistent access to the internet – and parental permission – we would have surely been YouTube-famous.

A memory of mine was recently restored because of this film. For that same bala's twenty-first birthday early in 2020, I digitised the tapes. I wanted criminal footage of him to embarrass his adult self – and I found plenty. Our silliness and fun were extreme.

But I also found a video of some of my cousins, aunts and uncles and my great-grandmother on Kirriri (Hammond Island) in the Torres Strait recreating Snow White. An island version of Snow White.

Before Snow White's story begins, we're not doing much: sitting around enjoying each other's company while I annoy everyone by shoving the camera in their faces. But then my voice, childlike yet deep, begins the narration: 'Once there was a beautiful princess named Snow White...'

And on it goes.

Aka Nene, my great-grandmother, is Snow White: she sits on her green plastic chair for the whole short film. My cousins and I are the seven dwarfs; my aunt plays the witch and my uncle the prince. Snow White does her usual thing – drinking tea from her enamel cup and, instead of biting into a poisoned apple, eating poisoned syrup damper. And the seven dwarves don't take Snow White to their home; the house belongs to her.

The video cuts in and out, voices are cut off and there are no second takes – obviously my filmmaking skills were somewhat lacking and my actors impatient. But there's humour in each scene: 'louse [lice] there crawl' on the witch's head, and the dwarves take up so much time the witch asks to herself, 'koleh, what time I gor poison em'. Before almost every scene cuts off, raucous laughter rings out from behind the camera from the family witnessing our attempts at acting. It's like a real-life island sitcom.

What struck something in my heart as I watched this footage as an adult was the ending. Aka Nene, Snow White, takes a bite of the syrup damper and makes sure to look into the camera and throw the damper away before fake dying, a hand against her throat and a smile on her face. The prince kisses her on the cheek quickly, without a word, and her eyes snap open to the sound of our laughter – our pure joy.

My Aka Nene is no longer with us, but the remnants of her love are still here. And part of it remains attached to her house on Kirriri (Hammond Island).

This year, on Facebook, my small cousin posted a picture of Aka Nene's house with the caption #OneHouseWithManyMemories. The house is red, with a cement veranda on which sit green plastic chairs. It has two bedrooms and one bathroom, and its yard is framed with mango trees, the grass peppered with fallen fruits. To the side is a tin shed, now held together with rope. Hibiscus bushes line the other side and, in my mind, they bloom red. A Hills hoist stands under the sun out back, and I can feel the metal of that clothesline, hot to the touch. I can see the deep freezer out the back and, inside, the kitchen where I sat, where my young cousins sat after me, with a bowl of dough to knead to make fried scones or damper.

Memories and stories like this are our reservoirs, our holding bays for vital knowledge and history. For me, they connect me to culture, family and place.

THE TRADITIONAL OWNERS of Kirriri are the Kaurareg people, who were forcibly removed in the 1920s before the island became a pearling station headquarters and, later, a Catholic mission. My memories of Kirriri centre on Aka Nene's house. Or her two houses. For in front of this red-brick home there is the green house on stilts – the original that is now too broken to live in. This house is tiny, with only one bedroom, a bathroom underneath and a cement block where an outhouse once stood.

Thoughts of these two houses connect to the smell of sweet mangoes, grass and dirt mixed up from many young feet playing and dancing; to the feel of linoleum floors, woven island mats smooth under feet; and to the sound of voices from *The Bold and the Beautiful*, laughter and, down the way, music playing.

I know, though, that these houses are not where my family lived when they first moved to Kirriri from the central islands of Poruma and Warraber.

When I began talking to my own aka, my grandmother, about Kirriri, about the history that preceded me and my mother, I had to call her at a specific time: after *Days of our Lives* finished at 2 pm and before *The Bold and the Beautiful* started at 4.30 pm. I wanted to get a sense of her memories of this island that is important to our family – to those who live there still and those who don't.

Aka had moved to Kirriri, then a Catholic mission, when she was a child, though she can't remember how she, her siblings and parents travelled there, guessing it was likely by a sailing dinghy with two towering sails or by lugger. She did tell me that they would have needed government permission to make the trip.

'When we got to Hammond Island, the mission gave us a place to live called the training school. And it was like a big hall but closed in the middle – repurposed to fit two families inside.' But it was all concrete: four walls and a roof. No beds, so they slept on island mats on the floor. No furniture, no kitchen or bathroom. Athe, my aka's dad, made a kitchen table and constructed a bathroom and kitchen outside. He made a stove by cutting a forty-four-gallon drum vertically and putting sand inside as a base and iron across: it became a fire pit, a homemade barbeque.

'In the training school,' Aka said, 'we didn't have a water tank, but we had a well down the road. We'd carry water from the well in a bucket to wash clothes, shower and to drink and cook.'

I tried to see this life as my aka spoke. The sand pushed into the drum, the harsh concrete and the salt in the air. Moulding my own memories with the ones she offered to me.

I ASKED MY mum about her brightest memories of Kirriri. We started talking on the phone, and she was hesitant at first: the memories were not quick to come. But it didn't take long before she started recalling things from when she was as young as two years old. An uncle who dressed up as Santa Claus, his strange and eerily inhuman mask traumatising her as his dark hands didn't match the pink plastic face. She remembered walking to her aunt's place with a torch on weekends because her aunt had a generator, and they were able to watch old British shows like *Fawlty Towers* and *Dad's Army* on the TV.

Mum spoke about one peaceful memory of sitting outside under mango trees with family. Someone had made benches from petrol tins and pallets and smoothed them over with island mats. They'd place these makeshift seats under the mango trees and in the mornings and afternoons, Mum and her cousins and siblings would sit there for shade and breeze as people came and went.

She told me about discos at the hall where Aka Nene sat on an island mat to supervise. She remembered visiting from Cairns for a tombstone unveiling, she and her younger sister dressed in matching outfits and getting off the dinghy to walk up the beach to Aka Nene's home.

As I talked to Mum on the phone about this island we love and the memories she could conjure, she told me about sea glass she'd found on a visit to Thursday Island just the other day. She talked about the family she was able to see and the flight she'd taken from Thursday Island to Mabuiag. It left a feeling of both longing and nostalgia in me, a stirring in my gut similar to the one I'd felt when I watched Aka Nene act as Snow White.

Aka's answer, when I asked for her brightest memories, were her thoughts of the school and the church. As a child, her weekends were spent at the convent, helping the nuns with washing and ironing (with one of her younger sisters), sweeping the church, feeding the chooks in the convent and collecting the eggs.

The church she talked about is St Joseph's. It stands high on a hill, facing the ocean. Made of blue metal boulders, broken to fit together – the Irish priest used a mattock to break the stone and the people of Kirriri helped build it, including my aka's uncle.

'We went to the church to clean up and that's how I got into music.' On Saturdays Aka had the chance to learn how to play the pedal organ. 'If you don't use the pedal,' she told me, 'you can't make any sound.' During the weekdays at school, she had piano lessons.

My aka has a naturally musical ear, honed from when she was young by first playing the harmonica then the ukulele, the guitar and the lap steel guitar. Her cousins on Poruma and Warraber taught her to play, introducing her to an old gramophone to listen to Country and Hawaiian records. These days, the two of us sit together at her piano in Cairns each time I visit her, and she is able to summon tunes effortlessly, without sheet music, while I labour over just one bar.

'A big thing was the church,' Mum said to me when I asked of her memories. 'We went Sunday Mass many times and Mass during the week. And I remember the singing was amazing because everyone went. Aka Olive when she would sing...ahhh, her voice was beautiful.'

This small church is where my aunt and uncle got married, where my cousins received first communion. It's also where Aka and Athe got married.

In the State Library of Queensland's online catalogue are two pictures of Aka and Athe as they emerge from St Joseph's as newlyweds. They're beautiful images, and in them I'm able to see the face of my athe, whom I never got to meet – I see the familiar lines that were passed down to my mother and maybe to me. My aka doesn't know how these pictures ended up in an online collection or who took them.

But in our conversation, Aka and I don't talk about this. She focuses on the layout of Kirriri, the places where people lived, including inside the mission where she lived and other places, such as the village that's settled past the cemetery and along the beach. She speaks of a big wharf that's no longer there and the wells that remain, some still holding natural spring water. Mum describes another wharf, one that's there now but wasn't when she was younger.

It's interesting to learn the shape of this island and how it's changed through listening to my aka's words and my mother's. Sadder still to learn the new ways it may be changing, the ways it and other islands are disappearing. Kirriri, though threatened by rising sea levels, is also fairly large: it has hills and places for people to move. Islands that are smaller, sitting on coral and sand low in the water, offer less opportunities for people to escape the encroaching waters.

THE COP26 SUMMIT took place in late 2021 in Glasgow while I was writing this piece. I read articles and saw social media posts calling for greater emissions reductions by 2030 – people advocating for adaptation. Australia should be a leader in this field: we can afford to show the way. Yet Prime Minister Scott Morrison refused to change current commitments for emissions reductions by 2030. I don't want to spend too much time on our politicians and their words; it was hard to read or listen to what that government has put into the world on this issue.

The advocacy and legal projects of First Nations Australians around climate change make me hopeful: the knowledge is here, and it's in our history – in the soil, sand and sea that my people have cared for and continue to care for. Seed, an Australian youth-led climate change network, has long been advocating for a sustainable future in Australia. Its campaign director, Tishiko King, travelled to Glasgow to attend the summit and to call on political leaders to do more against climate crisis. Afterwards, she highlighted Australia's abysmal performance, particularly the Prime Minister's. She spoke of his plans to continue fracking for gas under the guise of a 'transition fuel': 'A climate-wrecking fossil fuel, that will worsen the impacts of the climate crisis.'

This response was realistic. In describing what had happened, she wrote, 'Outnumbered by fossil fuel lobbyists, First Nations people witnessed an aggressive big business approach to climate negotiations, hardly the turning away from and permanent closure of extractive, polluting industries that we are all calling for.'

Her exhaustion was clear, but so was her hope. And it's the same hope I cling to. It's uplifting to see the advocacy work of First Nations peoples around Australia and the world. But as King suggested, these voices need to be raised again, and they need to be listened to and heard. 'Countries said they would be ambitious, but without implementation by all governments at all levels, these are just empty words when we desperately need action.'

EIGHT TORRES STRAIT Islanders have now taken a case – the first of its kind – against the Australian Government to the United Nations. I spoke via email to one of the claimants, Yessie Mosby, who described the group as 'Traditional Owners from Masig, Poruma, Warraber and Boigu: Kabay Tamu, Keith Pabai, Stanley Marama, Nazareth Fauid, Nazareth Warria, Daniel Billy, Ted Billy and myself.'

Mosby also told me how the case began: 'We had deep concerns about our islands already, having seen how much climate change has affected the Torres Strait in our own lifetimes. When we had scientists come and predict that we may need to relocate in the future due to rising sea levels, that made us move.'

The case is a part of Our Islands Our Home, a Torres Strait Islands campaign supported by 350.org Australia, Gur A Baradharaw Kod (the Torres Strait Islands land and sea council) and Seed. It aims to have Australia fund programs to help my people adapt to climate-change impacts and to support community-owned renewable energy. It seeks commitment to 100 per cent renewables in the next ten years, a transition away from fossil fuels as rapidly as possible and a stronger push for the world to keep warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius. These demands lay out a plan to save our island homes.

As support for this campaign has bloomed across social media over the past couple of years, First Nations and non-Indigenous voices combined to show what our country needs. We've seen solidarity across arts spaces, particularly through artwork by Violet Cully and Dylan Mooney. Even the brand Ben & Jerry's participated by making a custom ice-cream flavour for Our Islands Our Home campaigners to present to federal MP Warren Entsch along with an invitation for Entsch to travel to Warraber and meet with claimant Kabay Tamu.
I spoke to 350.org community organiser Waniki Maluwapi about this pint of ice cream – a pineapple passionfruit flavour with custom artwork. Entsch's office was aware of the invitation, Waniki told me, but had yet to respond.

A telling silence.

To me, this campaign is one fuelled by deep love and connection – and by a knowledge that these islands we are trying to save are vital to culture and life.

Mosby and the other claimants are now waiting for a formal response from the United Nations. He told me: 'We want the people to hear our voices. We want people to understand the struggles here on a coral cay island [on Masig] and how we face climate change every day. We want people to listen and understand but mainly empathise.'

THE OCEAN IS a mesmerising thing in the Torres Strait. It can also be a dangerous thing, and learning how the sea moves and lives is vital for my people. On the plane trip to Horn Island, it is a striking blue and green, islands interspersed between lapping white foam and depthless saltwater. My mum described the trip on a small aircraft from Mabuiag to Badu, a trip she has taken many times this past year: she can see dugongs arching above the sea, the changing colours of turquoise within a vibrant blue. Flying over the reef, the water shows channels of a deeper blue, and these, Mum told me, are the channels that ships and boats need to navigate to pass through the Torres Strait.

Not only are these waters rising and eating away at the land, but the water itself, and all the life below, is also changing. The oceans are warming, becoming more acidic as carbon dioxide levels rise.

The ecosystem of this ocean is one that takes care of people and that people take care of in turn: there is a balance within life under and above water. Aunty McRose Elu, the Queensland recipient of the 2021 Senior Australian of the Year award, speaks of this balance in the edited collection *Woven Histories, Dancing Lives* (2004). She writes about the balance between land/sky and sea bottom/sea, noting the animal equivalents within each: fish/birds, turtles/tortoises, dugong/pigs. 'Imbalances between the two can cause catastrophes and so maintenance of the ecosystem was, and is, very important,' she explains.

My aka described seeing the ocean from up in a plane. 'We can see from the top,' she said, 'from flying above the sea, that the coral is dying. We can see the new seaweed and, on the beach, the dead seaweed. We know the wind pushes the sand up on the beach, but then the tide takes the sand back to the reef. Eating at the land. We know the island and, from above, you can see that sand move. And that sand won't come back.'

In our sea-oriented culture, understanding the weather, the currents and sea-life underwater sustains life on land. An online seasonal calendar, designed by Steve Foster with additions by Jeff Aniba-Waia and Steve Grady, demonstrates the importance of knowing the minute details of each change in plant, sea, bird and wind life. Knowing that when the dangal, the dugong, are young, they should not be hunted. Knowing when tupmul, the stingrays, come to the edge of the beach, when waru, the turtles, are mating, and when the rain or dry weather is coming. Changes in weather are normal: Aka told me these changes are something our people understand. But what is happening now is out of balance.

ADAPTING TO THESE changes has already begun in the Torres Strait. The Torres Strait Regional Authority has played a part in constructing new seawalls around low-lying islands, creating new projects to assist in sustainability across the islands and finding opportunities to reduce the area's carbon footprint.

Aka and I have discussed the changes occurring in the islands she was born and grew up on – the central islands of Warraber and Poruma. She's told me about landmarks she can no longer stand on because the water has risen above them. About the plant life that has died because saltwater has reached its roots.

Last year she sent me two pictures of a tree on Warraber. The first, taken eleven years or so ago, shows me standing at the tree as it bloomed with greenery. The second, more recent image shows the tree faded to grey, roots upturned. In my aka's lifetime, as well as mine and my mother's, the shapes of these places are changing drastically.

Aka's words, her memories, highlight the immediacy of the problem.

I am able to learn from a multitude of family members, and I go mostly to my aka or my mum with questions. Through conversations and stories about places I have seen – and about those I haven't – I learn about life and sustainability.

But how can I learn the shape of my homeland, these islands, my aka's home? How can I see the places of my aka's memories if the shoreline has eaten the places she knows? How can my future children learn the changes of the sea? Or the ways to sustain life and to have our lives sustained through culture?

How can I do this completely as the land slowly disappears?

This is a question I think many First Nations communities are asking – all across the country, and all across the world as sacred sites and ecological necessities, such as rivers and wildlife, are so obviously threatened.

An intergenerational fear and anger carries from the people who live there, on the frontlines, to those of us on the mainland: I wish I could properly describe it. But the words I have at the moment cannot hold the magnitude of what can be lost and what is being lost. These are things that have started happening and yet are preventable.

My talk with Aka turned to future conversations and how she might relay more information to me. She suggested that my mum and my aunt could help us, creating bridges between her generation and mine. Mum and my aunty have a way of helping Aka's memory form story and of helping guide my questions into something more coherent. This writing has not been an individual task, nor is my learning. Still, in this conversation, Aka and I made do with the thin connection of our two phones.

History of place and people make up my very being; I know myself more after talking to Mum and Aka. In this way, I know that the future is dependent on the past. To save the islands, to save the shape of the lands my aka lived on – where my family continues to live – maybe we need to look back at how people used to (and continue to) take care of land and sea. To prioritise the voices of First Nations people all over Australia who are doing the work and calling for immediate change.

From early this year, my partner and I are living in Darwin for six months or so. Aka worried about this, explaining La Niña and El Niño to me over the phone. She worried about cyclone season in Darwin, though cyclones are prevalent in Cairns, where she lives, too.

The weather is on her mind no matter where we are. During Brisbane's storm season, she and my aunt and uncle in Cairns will often text those of us who live in South-East Queensland to make sure that we're safe, that we keep the cars undercover, that we don't drive anywhere. Caretaking in my family is what holds us together. My aka described the video of Aka Nene as Snow White as an act of love. 'She would do anything to please youpla then,' Aka told me. That's caretaking too.

My Aka Nene, my island Snow White, is buried alongside Athe, her husband, and with others from our family near the beach on Kirriri. From the cemetery, the view is beautiful. You can see Wednesday Island in the distance, Horn Island and Thursday Island nearer. The mangroves and the trees frame the horizon and dinghies bob in the shallows.

It's picture perfect – you could say that it looks like a place in a fairytale – but the changes are coming here so fast now that we can afford no more delays in action, in adaptation, in political and practical response.

The land in the cemetery itself has already been eaten away and there is no sea wall. You can see the ocean, with its varying shades of blue and green, and you can feel – and see – the threat of its impending arrival in the place where my Aka Nene rests.

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