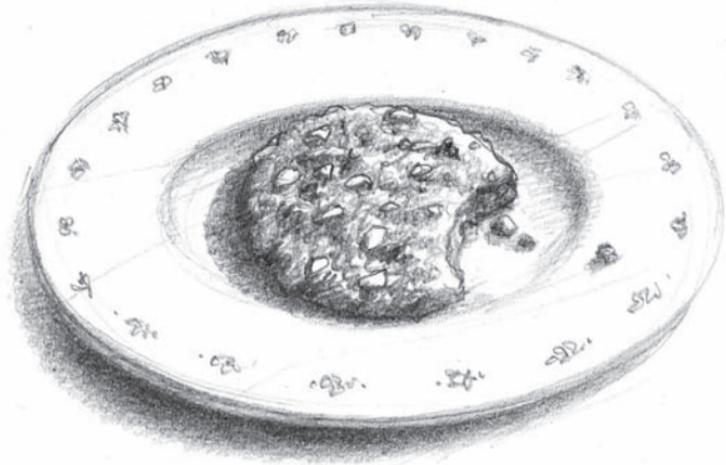


A Stealthy Expedition and Some Ancient Treasure



Yared scuffed down the hallway, watching his shoes plough through the unruly tufts of the carpet. His schoolbag dragged off one shoulder.

‘Through to the kitchen now, Yared,’ his nanna said as she strode along in front. ‘I’ve put some afternoon tea out.’

Yared didn’t answer but trudged after her, past the patterned wallpaper and the faded flower cross-stitches. He was scowling as he clumped through the doorway to the kitchen. It smelled of porridge, and Yared didn’t like porridge. On the table that was squeezed into

the middle of the room were two empty plates and a glass jar half full of biscuits.

‘Put your bag down and come and sit up,’ his nanna said, turning on the electric jug.

Yared let his bag slide off his shoulder and fall to the lino with a thump.

‘I said *put* your bag down, Yared, not drop it. Now sit up, quick smart.’

He flopped onto the chair and sat frowning at his plate. He wished he didn’t have to stay at his nanna’s – she was so brisk and stern, so different from his mum. He wished his parents had taken him with them. But more than that, he wished he hadn’t gone to school today.

‘Would you like an Anzac biscuit?’ his nanna asked as she unscrewed the lid of the biscuit jar.

‘Yeah.’

‘Yes please, Nanna.’

‘Yes please, Nanna.’

She placed a biscuit in front of him and he slowly picked it up and took a bite. His nanna sat down opposite and Yared could feel her eyes on him as he chewed a mouthful of the crunchy oats.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘how was school today?’

‘Bad,’ Yared said.

‘Why? What happened?’

He scowled and started thumping the wooden chair with the heels of his shoes.

‘Now stop that kicking,’ said his nanna. ‘That’s not the way to treat furniture.’

‘Why not?’ Yared said and kept kicking.

‘That’s enough, Yared. I said stop it, and I mean it. If you’re going to behave this way you can go to your room.’

‘It’s not my room anyway,’ he said. ‘It’s the spare room.’

His room had his comics and his batman doona and his football cards, not a blue flowery bedspread and a bookshelf full of old-fashioned girls’ adventure stories.

‘Right, off you go,’ his nanna said, rising from her chair and clapping her hands sharply. ‘Off to your room until I say you can come out. I’ll have no more of this nonsense from you. Go on, quick smart.’

She began moving around the table towards him, so Yared slid off his chair, snatched the biscuit from his plate and ran down the hallway to the spare room.

‘And there’s no running in the house, thank you Yared,’ his nanna called after him.

He hurtled through the doorway and almost tripped on the scruffy rug. Near the window

specks of dust were floating through the afternoon sunlight. His bed was neatly made, a folded blue towel lying on the pillow, but it reminded him of Nanna and not of his own house.

Yared lay on his stomach on the hard floorboards and wriggled under the hangings of the bedspread. Under the bed it was dusty and dark and smelled of mosquito coils, but he didn't care. He rolled to face the wall and curled into a ball. He wasn't coming out until Nanna came to find him, and he wasn't saying sorry for kicking the chair. And no matter how hard Nanna tried to make him, he wasn't going to school tomorrow if they had that Mrs Richmond again.

Yared's cheeks grew hot as he remembered what she'd said to him. Ugly old Mrs Richmond with her huge glasses and her teabag smell. He hoped she'd get sick or lose her job, so he'd never have to have her as a supply teacher again.

Yared brushed a dead moth away from his face. It was all because his parents had gone away, he decided. His class was doing a unit on family history and they'd been meant to come to school today ready to talk about their ancestors, but with all the fuss at home last night Yared had forgotten. When Jayde, the girl next to Yared, had finished her turn, he hadn't known what to say.

Mrs Richmond had been standing up the front near the board. 'Next boy,' she said. 'Boy with the curly black hair.'

'Um...' Yared said.

'Come on then,' said Mrs Richmond. 'You'll obviously have a lot to tell us.'

'Um...' Yared said, confused. 'Why?'

'Well you're not Australian. You must have some interesting stories about your ancestors.'

Yared's face grew hot and he started to feel sick in the stomach. 'I am Australian,' he said.

Mrs Richmond glanced around at the class before looking back to Yared. 'Oh?' she said. 'Where are your parents from then?'

'Australia,' Yared said.

'Well of course they live here now,' she said, 'but where did they come from before that?'

Yared heard Lincoln start laughing in the row behind him and he dropped his head. 'They're just Australian,' he said.

Yared was used to people's surprise when they first saw him with his parents; he'd been adopted from Ethiopia, so he had dark skin and hair and didn't look anything like his family. His cousin Max found it funny when people wouldn't believe they were related, and normally Yared didn't mind much.

But no-one had ever tried to tell him he wasn't Australian before. Even though he'd been born in Ethiopia, he didn't feel Ethiopian. He'd seen pictures of the country but he couldn't speak Amharic and he couldn't remember living there. His mum bought pancake-like injera every year for Ethiopian Christmas – they'd tried cooking it once, but it had gone all rubbery – but that was just for fun. His parents were Australian, his grandparents and cousins and aunts and uncles were Australian, and he'd always thought he was Australian too.

Yared started nibbling at the Anzac biscuit clenched in his fist. He wished his mum was here; she always knew how to make things better. She didn't yell at him like Nanna did. He frowned at the wall in front of him, which was a blotchy grey in the low light. Nanna never cared about him, he thought. When they came over for dinner she always sent him to watch boring children's videos while the grown-ups sat and talked. Stupid *Thomas the Tank Engine*, Yared thought. At least at Aunty Kat and Uncle Michael's he could play with Max and Tameika.

The feathery strands of dust on the skirting board wriggled like the tentacles of a sea anemone every time Yared breathed. He swiped

a finger along the board, bulldozing the dust into a brownish-grey heap, and rolled onto his back. It wasn't fair that he had to stay at Nanna's, he thought. It wasn't fair that his parents were on holidays without him. If they'd just stay friends instead of shouting all the time then they wouldn't need to go away together.

Yared turned his head to look out at the room. Through the gap beneath the bedspread he could see the bottom few centimetres of everything – the legs of the bedside table, the lowest shelf of thick-paged old adventure stories, and sitting in front of the wardrobe the scuffed wheels of his dad's second-biggest suitcase. He wondered what would happen if his parents weren't friends by the time they came back from holidays. He didn't know who he'd live with if they stopped being married; his mum said they both still loved each other, but sometimes he wasn't sure. Sometimes he wasn't sure if they still loved him. After all, they'd left him at Nanna's.

Yared frowned. Where was Nanna, anyway? He wasn't going to wait under the bed forever. He wormed out, brushed the dust from his clothes and crept to the door. When he glanced down the hallway there was no sign of movement. Well,

thought Yared, he'd had enough of that room. He was going to see what else was happening.

He tiptoed through the doorway and down the passage, moving as quietly as he could. When he reached his nanna's room he stopped and pressed himself against the wall, then took a deep breath and peeked inside. The room looked empty: just the big double bed, the cluttered dressing table and the old wooden wardrobe. Yared bit his lip. He'd never been in there before; Nanna wouldn't let him. He took another deep breath, glanced up and down the hallway and crept into the room.

The faded lace curtains were blowing inwards and the air smelled of dried flowers and mothballs. Yared inched his way across the room to stand in front of the dressing table, which was covered with clips and hairbrushes, small ornaments and mismatched containers. A glint caught his eye and he reached out a hand for the carved box sitting beside a porcelain ballerina. The box was full of coins that flashed in the sunlight as he stirred them with a finger. They were old - strange-looking coins, Yared thought, like buried treasure from a cave. There were brown ones, tiny silver ones and larger copper-coloured ones. Most of them were tinged with

green. Yared's heart started beating faster. Maybe the reason Nanna never let him in here was that she didn't want him seeing her treasure.

'Yared?' came his nanna's sharp voice from the hallway.

He started and the box of coins slipped from his hand and clattered to the floorboards. The coins scattered, clinking and jangling as they rolled in all directions. Yared swallowed and turned to face his nanna.

'What on earth are you doing in here, sir?' she said, advancing through the doorway, her eyebrows close together. 'I told you to go to your room, didn't I?'

'Yes,' Yared mumbled.

'So how do you explain the fact that I've found you in here, going through my belongings and throwing them all over the floor?'

Yared's vision began to blur. 'I didn't mean to,' he said.

'Well "didn't mean to" isn't good enough. When you're in my house you abide by my rules, and I expect complete obedience from you.'

'I didn't mean to,' Yared shouted and ran towards the door.

His nanna was in the way and he tried to dodge her, but she put out an arm and caught

him round the chest. Although he struggled she wouldn't let go, just pulled him around so he was standing in front of her, then put her hands on his shoulders.

'Now,' she said, 'running away won't work. What's all this about?'

Yared dropped his head and bit his lip to keep from crying. 'Nothing,' he said. 'Go away. I want Mum.'

'That's no good either. Your mother's not here,' she said. 'You'll have to make do with me.'

Yared stood and sniffled and wouldn't meet his nanna's eye. She sighed, walked him backwards to the big double bed and sat him down on the edge. From her blouse she pulled a hankie.

'Now Yared, I want an explanation,' she said as she handed it to him. 'What's wrong with you?'

He scrunched the hankie in his fist and stared at the floorboards, which shimmered and wobbled in front of him. I want to go home, he felt like saying. I want Mum and Dad to be friends. I want people not to say I'm different.

'Nothing,' he said.

'Hmm,' said his nanna. 'This isn't to do with school, is it?'

Yared shook his head and a tear fell from his chin and splattered on his shorts.

There was a pause then she said, 'Are you lying to me?'

Yared shrugged. Yes. No. He didn't know. He wiped his nose on his arm and said, 'Mrs Richmond said I wasn't Australian.'

'I beg your pardon?' asked his nanna.

Yared took a deep breath. 'She said I'd have a lot to tell the class about my ancestors because I'm not Australian.'

His nanna was silent for a few minutes. 'Well,' she said at last, 'legally you are in fact Australian but I suppose you're Ethiopian by blood.'

'I'm not,' Yared said. 'I'm Australian. I have to be Australian. Why can't I be?'

'Well... that is...'

'You are, and Mum and Dad are. So I should be too.'

'I... well... It's not a question of should,' his nanna said. 'It's how things are, that's all.' She shook her head and turned away. 'Now come on, let's get this room tidied up.'

She moved to the dressing table and knelt on hands and knees to collect the scattered coins. Yared crossed his arms and watched while she dropped them one by one into the carved box.

She was in the middle of reaching for the last coin when she stopped and glanced up at him.

‘I did ask for your help,’ she said.

Yared wasn’t paying attention. ‘I can’t tell them any Ethiopian stories,’ he said. ‘And I don’t want to, anyway – I want Australian ones.’

His nanna frowned. ‘Stories? You want Australian stories?’

‘Yes,’ Yared said, his arms still folded.

She looked at him closely. ‘Don’t you know any?’

Yared shook his head. Only ones from school; not real ones.

‘No, I don’t suppose you do,’ she said to herself. ‘Your father never was much of a storyteller, was he? Wouldn’t sit still long enough to listen to them.’

She picked up the last coin from under the dressing table and brushed the dust from it. ‘This penny could tell you some stories,’ she said as she began to place it in the box. ‘It’s been around a while.’

‘Can I see it?’ Yared asked.

His nanna paused, looked up, then slowly climbed to her feet and moved across the room towards him. ‘It’s my oldest penny,’ she said. ‘From 1911.’

She passed it to Yared, who held it in his palm and stared at it curiously. It was copper-coloured, about the size of a 50 cent piece, but it didn't feel as heavy. On the front, when he rotated the coin, he could read "Commonwealth of Australia". On the back was a splotchy-looking man wearing a crown.

'That's George V, you know,' said Yared's nanna. 'Queen Elizabeth's grandfather.'

Yared squinted at the back of the coin. 'Is this written in code?'

'It's Latin,' said his nanna. 'George V, by the Grace of God King of all Britain, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India.'

She leant towards him and took the penny from his hand; Yared wished he didn't have to let go of it.

'Can it really tell me a story?' he asked.

His nanna stopped with the coin halfway to her pocket and frowned at it for a moment. 'Yes,' she said slowly. 'I suppose it can.' She turned it over in her fingers, making it flash and sparkle in the sunlight. 'Tonight,' she said to Yared. 'Tonight it will tell a story. The story of the first child to hold this penny in her hand.'