

Wanimuk Murrup

The land was a place of spirits before the white man. They built a town in that place and they called it Clunes. The Djargurd Wurrung lived in a steep valley where the volcanoes once were. A girl was born near that place and she was a rare girl. She was the first child of her parents. Her father didn't have any other wives and her mother was the daughter of the most respected elder. He had unusual spirit in him. He was called the Ngurungaeta, which means the rare man and most respected elder. Being near him made other people feel calm. It was like he affected the spirits inside others when they were near him. He made them calm. His daughter had the same parts of the spirit in her too, but not quite as many. The totem of these people was Waang the crow.

The parts of the spirit that make us who we are is called Pututjal. The spirit by itself is called Kutjel. The Djargurd Wurrung people have known Kutjel for tens of thousands of years. It's the oldest spirits. When a baby is born it's made up of lots of different pieces of Pututjal. But occasionally a baby is born with a rare piece of the spirit in them and it gives them a unique gift. It makes them rare.

When the baby was born it was a cold night. Her father built a hut to give her warmth and cover her. He waited with the men for the aunties to come and tell him when she had been born. The Ngurungaeta looked at his son-in-law and smiled. The young man came from a nearby people. He had been brought by the Ngurungaeta to marry his daughter. His people were Bunjil the eagle people. The Ngurungaeta smiled because he knew that he had found his daughter a good man. They sat quietly by a small fire. Just the two of them. Slowly, one by one, the others around them also became quiet too, and then the night animals became silent. By the time the baby was born the whole night was silent. When she let out an almighty cry everyone jumped to their feet with eyes wide, hugging and yelling with happiness. The Ngurungaeta stayed calm and got to his feet slowly. He walked to the women's camp and found his daughter inside the hut.

"It's a girl" she told him with a tired smile.

The Ngurungaeta knelt down inside the small room with some difficulty as his knees cracked and his back gave a twinge of pain. In the dim light of the little fire that burned to the side of the room he could make out their forms and he smiled patiently. He looked at the baby as she fed from her mother, and he went to place his large hand on her head. But as his hand came near her he paused. He looked over at the small fire of coals, and he watched as its glow dipped suddenly. He took his hand away and it's small flames licked back up again, brightening the room. His daughter had not noticed, as she smiled a weary smile again. The Ngurungaeta knelt down and kissed the baby on her forehead, and the fire went out.

"We will name her tonight," he said quietly.

“Why?” His daughter asked. It was customary that the aunties would meet any new baby, and with the mother they would discuss the parts of the spirit that made the baby unique and they would bring a name to the father and the Ngurungaeta.

“Because she is rare,” he replied. A wind blew through the camp. Two of the aunties came back in and took up what little space there was left in the hut. One of them saw that the fire was out and she shot the Ngurungaeta an angry look, then knelt down next to it and began blowing on the coals to make it burn again.

“We will name her Wanimuk Murrup,” he said, as he kissed his daughter on the forehead. The name translates in English as similar to small offspring spirit. The word Wanimuk would normally be used affectionately when referring to describe a small child. But it wasn’t used as a person’s name any more than word “small”. Yet the word Murrup was almost considered to be a holy word that usually wouldn’t be said by women in the presence of men. And it also wasn’t used as a positive term, but instead to describe someone’s unusual traits. His daughter looked at him with surprise, but his spirit made her calm again.

“Her spirit is in the waters,” he said in a whisper.

As she grew up the little girl became known as Wani, as the female elders wouldn’t say her full name because of its holy word. They initially treated her with suspicion, but that changed by the time she was a toddler. Her grandfather watched her with interest as she grew. She fascinated him.

On a warm afternoon when the family were preparing to travel to the Bunjil people to trade baskets for axe heads, he watched Wani as she played in the shallow pools beside a river. His daughter sat beside him. They watched the three and a half year old playing in the sun-warmed water with her older cousins. It had taken her all this time to find the courage to ask her father, but finally, she broke their silence. “Why did you choose that name?”

He didn’t stop watching Wani. He looked at the tops of the trees then back at her. “The same reason I haven’t touched her since then.” He said. She’d never noticed that he hadn’t touched his own granddaughter since he kissed her. The Ngurungaeta broke the silence.

“The spirits that became her are water. Mine are fire. I can make my spirits bring calm, or warmth. But water is far more powerful. It can grow, wash, nurture and nothing can live without it.” His daughter was speechless. He smiled at her then gestured for her to look back at Wani. She was astonished that Wani was standing right there in front of them. Staring at them; motionless. The Ngurungaeta smiled.

“See? She knew. And she came because my spirits were calling hers.” He smiled at Wani. “You are like a blue yabby. Most yabbies are brown, but sometimes we catch a blue yabby. But we send it back because it’s spirits are too strong to keep it. And you’re like that yabby. You are too strong to keep.”

The people of Waang the crow left that place near Clunes as the summer became cooler. They walked for three days through the flat land toward the sun to meet them. For two days and then another two days they stayed there, with Wani's grandparents. Her mother brought with them the legs and tail of a wallaby and she picked as many berries as they could find along the way to fill her basket with. She would trade the basket for three smaller axe heads or one big one. When they had finished their time with the Bunjil people of the eagle they began their journey home. It was on the second day of that journey that Wani's spirit showed itself for the first time. She'd slept in her mother's arms for several hours that morning, and then asked to be put down to walk. Ahead she could see the Ngurungaeta, and she ran ahead to catch up with him. When she got to him she slipped her little hand inside his large, soft hand. She looked up at him and smiled. Without looking down he fell to his knees. Others rushed to help him up.

"What happened?" His daughter asked. The Ngurungaeta had a pained look across his face as he got back to his feet. He shook his head and didn't speak as he continued walking.

The second time Wani's spirit was seen was connected to the first time. But as her grandfather had said, the rare part of her spirit that was the spirit of water made her far more powerful than she could have ever imagined, as the spirit came to her that day. The community had stopped at a pool that formed at the bottom of a wider river named Toolaroop. The water ran clear into a large pool where yabbies could be caught under rocks and later eaten. The community knew they were close to home when they found toolaroop, and they used it as a guide to walk downstream to a large tree whose long network of roots were exposed. Then they would leave the water and walk the rest of the journey across land. As they walked they turned stones over, revealing small brown yabbies for dinner. The Ngurungaeta walked near Wani, watching her with fascination as she turned over rocks. All of the other children found yabbies under the rocks. But Wani didn't. Under each rock she found nothing. But it didn't bother her. She would just shrug and move to the next rock. The Ngurungaeta stayed close to her as the rest of the community walked ahead. They had fallen back considerably in her search for yabbies.

"Wani, we need to..." the Ngurungaeta began. But as he spoke she spun to face him, smiling. In her hand was a blue yabby. It was as vividly blue as cobalt, as it flipped its tail to be freed. Wani smiled with beaming pride, but the expression on the Ngurungaeta's face surprised her. His gaze was focussed off far in the distance behind her. She turned around and could just make out the image of men on horses galloping toward them. Wani had never seen a white man before, or a horse. The Ngurungaeta grabbed Wani and he ran, carrying her closely. The claps of gunshot soon began to ring out, and the others from the community also began to run. "Here!" the Ngurungaeta said as he caught up to his daughter. "Take her! Run into the bushes and hide!"

Wani dropped the blue yabby into the shallow water, and watched it as it flipped its tail, pulling itself back into the river as her mother ran away up the bank. The Ngurungaeta yelled to the others to move into the water because he didn't think that the horses would be able to swim. It was a pool so wide that it didn't seem to have any current to it at all. Most of the women and all of the children had fled up the banks and into the bushes. The men waded

deep into the water until only their heads were visible. A short silence fell over the area, as the water around them became calm again. The rumbling of horse hooves grew closer, interspersed with the occasional claps of gunfire. The bullets hit the dirt on the bank, then the water, making intrusive plops deep into the water as they hit. The men huddled closer as the riders on the horses arrived. They were yelling loudly in white language, and their guns exploded. A bullet hit one of the men in the water. He let out a scream, then a bullet hit another in the head. Both went under the water. Most had never seen horses or guns before. The community had stayed away from white people where possible. They weren't sure if it was the horses or the white men that were casting the spells from the guns against them to make them scream and disappear under water. The Ngurungaeta frantically told the men to go under the water, as it was dark brown in colour and it would hide them. They drew deep breaths and went under. Suddenly a calmness was all around the Ngurungaeta. A bullet pass through the water as he struggled to hold his breath. He began to swim downstream underwater, thinking he could get away. But as he did he heard another whoosh of a bullet. It hit him.

The women watched on in horror, crying before they began to run. Wani and her mother were amongst the last to leave the bushes. They watched the chaos, as the horses screamed and the guns clapped, when one of the white men, their leader, a red headed man named McLachlan looked directly at Wani. He stared for a moment, as his eyes locked onto hers. And in that moment as the water ran red, the fire from her grandfather came to her in the horror that the white man had made.

When Wani's mother saw her father's body laying face down along with the bodies of the other men, she ran behind the other women. She held Wani tightly in her arms, falling back into a jog, then a walk. When night fell they slept under branches that her mother laid on them for warmth.

Wani was 19 when the gold rush came. At the mission she had been instructed to tell others that she was Italian, as her features were fairer than others. She took the name Martha and married a man who was an actor in a theatre tent on the goldfields. She wore a corset and worked as a ladies maid, and a helper at different shops before she had her own children. Without her grandfather to tell her what the fire could do, and explain what the water could be for her, the Pututjal bond was broken. But it always stayed with her like a small whisper that she couldn't quite hear. She tried to push it aside each time she felt it, like a prickly feeling inside her kneck. But then one day a chance event completed her life.

The spirits inside Wani rose up inside her again one day. She was taking a delivery to Glengower station, near Clunes on a warm morning. She was with the delivery boy in the horse and jinker, taking a selection of lace to Mrs McLachlan, at the station. As she rode the distance there she smelled smoke. She asked the boy if he smelled it, but he didn't. As they arrived at the station they were greeted by Mrs McLachlan's daughter in law and their two children. "Come through," she said. They were walked to the back room of the house, with its wide windows that laid view to the grassy sloped lawn as it stretched down through trees to the creek at its bottom.

“Do you have them?” Mrs McLachlan asked Wani. It startled her, and she jumped. She had been staring at the river for some time. “The lace... does she speak English?” young Mrs McLachlan asked the boy rudely.

“Sorry, maam, yes I do,” Wani said, as she opened up her case of samples.

“Good god we thought you might be an Abo they’d dressed up as a joke,” old Mrs McLachlan said in disgust.

“No... I’m Itali...” Wani began.

“We used to have a lot of problems with them when we arrived. They murdered our cook even, you know!” She added.

When it came time to leave Wani had her cases packed and the delivery boy was sent for. But the Pututjal was stirring inside Wani. It was the fire Pututjal, and she remembered it. She looked out the window again and she saw the river glisten with sunlight. “Could I please go down to the river and see it’s water before I go?” She asked young Mrs McLachlan.

“Why of course. It’s very beautiful,” she replied. As they walked along the pathway in the knee high lawn Young Mrs McLachlan added, “do you smell smoke?” Wani had never seen this part of the river before but her spirits knew it’s waters. When they came to its edge, with a small flat bank of pebbles like a beach, she walked closer. “Oh do be careful, the waters are dangerous under the surface,” she added. The sunlight on the river was almost blinding, and Wani wept quietly. She didn’t entirely know why, but from the small stories told to her before her mother died, her spirits knew. She squatted down, and placed her hand in the water. It was warm. But she felt fire. She ripped her hand out quickly and put it under her arm as she felt the white cold shock of adrenalin flash through her body.

As they rode back on the horse and Jinker the boy talked endlessly. His spirits reminded Wani of the lorikeets that jitter in the trees at dusk. She told her husband, Arthur, about the spirits that night. But he didn’t understand. She told him about the grandfather she had who drowned, and that his spirits were fire, and hers were water. He smiled because he loved her. He believed in one god with three spirits and everyone shared the same three parts equally. She chose not to tell him she wasn’t Italian.

The spirits only ever stirred in Wani one last time, about a month later. She could feel it when she woke. She was restless inside and she couldn’t understand why. She couldn’t bring herself to light a fire to cook Arthur breakfast. She just stood there staring at the hearth.

“Did you see this?” He asked, as he read the paper. “You remember that station you went to where you saw the spirits? That lady you met and her youngest drowned. Left behind just the older boy.”

Wani didn't feel the spirits again after that. The shooting of her family came to be known as the Blood Hole Massacre. There was never an inquest into the shootings and the body of the four year old boy was never found.