

The Laugh

An original story by JB Rowley

Near Uluru in the heart of Australia the children of the Anangu people played in the shade of a gum tree. With their knuckles they drew impressions of kangaroo paws in the red earth.

As they were playing one of the boys whose white teeth flashed in a happy grin, began to laugh. The giggles rippled up in his throat and spilled out into the air. The other children looked at him and smiled at each other. Then one of the other children felt the laughter rippling up into her throat and she began to laugh too. Soon all the children were giggling and laughing.

Their laughter floated north across the hot sandy deserts and all the way to Darwin. Children playing in the school yards in Darwin looked up when they heard the laughter. Then they looked at each other and they too started to laugh. Soon all the children were laughing and the laugh became bigger and bigger. The laugh travelled further across the continent. It floated south down the west coast of Australia to Broome. Children playing in the school yard at Broome heard the laugh. Soon all the children in Broome were laughing. The laugh travelled further south along the west coast to Perth. The children playing in the school yards in Perth looked up when they heard the laughter and one by one they began to laugh. Soon all the children in Perth were laughing. The laugh was becoming bigger and bigger. It travelled east across the Nullabor plain to Adelaide. Children in the schools in Adelaide heard the laugh. They began to laugh and soon all the children in Adelaide were laughing. The laugh floated across the southern ocean to Tasmania. Soon all the children in Tasmania were laughing. The laugh travelled north again, across the Bass Strait to Melbourne.

By the time the laugh got to Melbourne it had travelled a long way and the winds in Bass Strait had blown some of it away. It was not such a big laugh anymore, it was very faint. But one little girl, called Annie heard it. She was sitting in the school yard alone, separate from the other children who were playing noisy games. Annie sat under a gum tree with her back to the schoolyard.

Annie used to live in the bush and had just moved to Melbourne. She was very shy. The other children teased her because she was different to the other children. Her clothes were different and she spoke differently because bush ways were different from city ways. Annie didn't think she was different and she did not understand why the other children teased her. Because they made fun of her she stayed away from them. She hated break times because she didn't know how to join in with the other children so she just sat under the tree until the bell rang. That's where she was when she heard

the laugh. The laugh floated closer to her and the leaves in the tree began to tremble. Annie looked up. The tree seemed to be laughing! Then one of the slender green leaves dropped from the tree and landed in front of Annie. It lay on the ground shaking. As it shook it grew bigger and bigger. As it grew bigger it took shape and there in front of Annie was large green coolamon!

Annie knew what a coolamon was because she had seen Aboriginal women near her family's sheep station carrying them on their backs. They would pick berries and carry them in the coolamon. Sometimes they carried little babies in them.

Annie looked around. The other children were still playing. She stepped into the coolamon and sat down and as soon as she did the coolamon lifted off the ground and up into the sky! Annie could see the kids playing in the school yard and the teachers standing near the fence. No one noticed her flying through the sky. The coolamon rose higher and higher until she could see the tops of the houses.

It wasn't before she saw the Sydney Opera House. Then she saw the Brisbane River and after that she looked down on the outback deserts. She saw kangaroos and emus bounding across the plains. Then she heard laughter and she saw the big red rock Uluru. She knew what it was because she had seen pictures and videos at school. The teachers said it used to be called Ayers Rock. The coolamon landed gently on the ground right under the tree where the children were laughing. When they saw Annie they welcomed her into their little group.

"I heard your laugh in Melbourne," said Annie.

She looked around at the dark smiling faces. Suddenly she realised they all looked very different from her. They were all dark skinned, dark haired and dark eyed. She was fair skinned with blonde hair and blue eyes. Yet she didn't feel different at all. She felt as though she were one of them.

"Why were you laughing?" she asked.

The children shrugged their shoulders and looked at the boy who had started the laugh. He just grinned.

"I forget," he said, throwing his arms in the air. Then the giggles rippled up into his throat again and spilled out into the clear desert air.

Annie felt the laughter swelling inside until she was laughing with the others—laughing so much it hurt.

Later the coolamon took Annie back to Melbourne. It landed gently in the school yard under the tree where her journey began. When she stepped out the green coolamon

began to shrink. Slowly it became a slender green leaf once more. Annie ran toward the other children. She was still laughing and forgot about her shyness. The children stopped their games and looked at her. Her laughter made them laugh too. Soon they were all laughing together and Annie felt happy with them.

She looked back at the tree where she had sat alone and sad for so long. She saw the slender green leaves begin to tremble and she knew the laugh was starting another journey.

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