



The Panicum Tin

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Nobody knew what was hidden inside Gran's special Story Tin but Abbey and her cousins never stopped guessing.

"I think it's gold!"

"No it's precious jewels for sure."

"Oh it's just her old false teeth?!"

But no matter how wild and outrageous their guesses were, Gran kept the secret of the ancient Story Tin shut tight inside.

The tin lived on a shelf high above the old wood stove that huffed and puffed away all night and day inside Gran's farmhouse kitchen.

And Abbey knew that when Gran reached up and carefully brought down the Tin to rest in her lap it was storytime, and her and her cousins gathered around the huge puffy armchair.

"Well, I wonder what stories lie inside this rusty old tin tonight?" Gran always asked in that strange and mysterious voice, her eyes sparkling brightly.

Then she slowly eased off the lid, just a fraction, just enough to let the tiniest snippet of a story slip out and into her eager ear, before quickly shutting the lid tight again, with a story waiting on her lips.

After that, with those four magic words, "Once upon a time....", Abbey and her cousins were whisked away into endless farm adventures.

There were stories of sheep bobbing about in tiny boats rescued from flooding rivers; clever horses munching down entire crops of asparagus; and giant prize-winning pumpkins secretly fed on sugar syrup.

Floods, drought, bushfire, crops and cattle – Gran's farm had seen it all and the Story Tin kept the tales safe and sound inside.

But Abbey's favourite story of all was the tale of the tin itself.

According to Gran it had lived in the family since they first came to the land almost 200 years ago, and when Gran was a girl it was filled with baking flour.

Back then it was called the Panicum Tin and the story went like this.

"Once upon a time, many many years ago, a young couple, your great-great-great-great-great-great Grandparents, Charles & Winnifred, set off on a big adventure.

They packed their horse and cart with tools, food supplies, the wood stove and a trunk filled with clothes and thick woolen blankets, and headed off into the wilderness to find themselves a farm.

On and on they traveled underneath giant trees towering above like dinosaurs, following the swollen river that tossed and tumbled over rocks, so loud it drowned out their own voices.

Winnifred had heard many stories about the wild natives of this land – some good and some not - and she looked about nervously for signs of danger, her heart sometimes

pounding almost as loud as the river, as they went deeper and deeper into the thick forest.

Every now and then the tiny track turned away from the river and that brief quiet, Winnifred was sure she heard singing somewhere in the bush.

“Oh you’re just imagining it Wynn,” Charles said trying to comfort her, and although she couldn’t see any signs of humans or animals, that deep low and rhythmic singing grew louder and louder and louder, until finally the track opened into a huge clearing, almost like paddocks, and the singing suddenly stopped.

The endless golden fields were bathed in sunshine and freshly cut grass waved gently in the breeze, and to the side were neat little haystacks just like the ones from the wheat farms back home.

On and on they went, and finally, after three long bumpy days on the bush track, and three chilly nights under the stars, they arrived.

Their land was a small clearing, just big enough for a slab hut and a horse paddock, and they set to work dropping timber, sawing wood, building fences and shelters, turning the soil and planting seeds.

They worked hard all day, even Wynn with their first baby growing in her tummy, building a new life together with their bare hands, only resting their aching muscles and blistered fingers at night when they dreamt of a farm rich in crops and cattle.

But as the months wore on and the wheat and corn seeds still would not grow in the new soil, their food supplies began to run low and Wynn often wondered if her baby happily rolling about inside heard the grumblings of her hungry tummy.

Then, one morning they awoke to find a small package on the doorstep.

Was it left by an animal? Maybe fallen from the sky?

They scratched their heads in wonder before Charles curiously picked it up and unwrapped the dirty piece of leather to reveal a neat little pile of gritty powder that looked and smelled like baking flour.

Their hungry tummies grumbled at the delicious nutty smell.

Wynn quickly filled the empty flour tin, and before long they gobbled down their first fresh loaf of bread in months.

That night, with a full and happy tummy, Wynn wrapped a whole second loaf of fresh warm bread back inside the rough piece of skin and left it out on the doorstep, and the next morning they awoke to find it gone.

From then on, every few days the pouch of sweet grainy flour appeared, and every few nights Wynn left a fresh loaf out in return, until the morning came when they awoke to find not flour but instead, a small dark-skinned native girl with wild frizzy hair.

The girl smiled and laughed shyly before gently taking Wynn’s hand and leading her off into the thick bush.

On and on Wynn stumbled, the girl helping her, until finally she heard a familiar sound. It was the song, that same low steady hum, but this time when they stepped out into another of those open clearings, the golden fields were filled with native women, their naked bodies as black as night, each one harvesting the grass with a sharp stone in hand, their voices filling the air with their song.

They were piling the cut grass into those same neat little stacks and beside each one, little groups of women and children were working and singing together.

A short strong woman with wild and frizzy hair just like the girls, smiled and yelled and waved them over, talking excitedly in that strange language Wynn could not understand, calling in the other women.

One by one they surrounded Wynn, curiously touching her clothes, stroking her pregnant belly and running their rough hands through her fine hair.

Their touch was gentle and their voices kind and protective, and after a little while they pointed for her to sit down and rest on a rock.

Then the women and children, one voice at a time, began to sing again, and that morning your great-great-great-great-great-great Grandmother Wynn learnt the secret of the Panicum Flour.

First they grabbed big handfuls of cut grass from the pile, raising it high in the air before threshing it down hard against the earth, loosening the seed from the plant – whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.

Next the tiny seeds were scooped up into a long wooden dish and tossed high in the wind - up and down, up and down, up and down – the featherweight husks blown away from the heavier seed.

Finally they emptied the separated seeds onto a large rock where the children sat busy with large smooth stones in hand, grinding the seeds into flour - bang, bang, bang.

And all the time the women and children never stopped singing.

That afternoon, back at the slab hut as the little girl said goodbye, she dropped a pile of fine tickly panicum seeds into Wynn's open hand.

Wynn never saw the girl or the women again, but from that day on, her and her children, and her children's children, and the many children that followed including me, your Gran, we've kept a millet grass crop in the season, and the Panicum Tin was always full, right up until the day we sold off the farm not so long ago."

"But what's in the tin now Gran?", Abbey's cousins always burst out excitedly when the story was finished.

"Oh maybe some day you'll find out little ones, but not today," she giggled as she popped the tin back on the shelf.

And then one day, the time came when Gran couldn't tell her stories anymore.

Mum and Mum's brothers and sisters and all of Abbey's cousins came to help pack up the old farmhouse and everyone got to take a treasure home.

"This is for you sweetie," Mum said as she reached up high to the Story Tin and passed it down into Abbey's waiting hands.

For a long time Abbey didn't dare open it, afraid that one of Gran's precious stories might just jump out and be lost forever, until finally, she felt ready.

Ever so carefully, with trembling hands, she held the base of the tin between her legs and slowly eased off the rusty lid.

The smell of wood smoke and soil jumped out at her and her eyes had to adjust to the darkness inside.

Slowly she dug her hand into the soft gentle filling within, bringing out a handful of hundreds of fine tickly pale yellow seeds.

For a long time she stared at the delicate seeds, a strange but familiar song echoing in her ears, and she wondered if her hand looked at all like Gran's hand, or maybe even

Wynn's hand, or maybe even the dark hand of the little native girl when she first held the Panicum seeds.

And after she tipped her hand down and the seeds slid back into the tin, Abbey closed the lid and raced outside into her backyard to find a clear patch of dirt.