

# *'Kahli's Gift'*

*By*  
*Bianca Millroy*



*Eina dottvr berr Alfra ðvllaþr hana Fenrir fari;  
sv scal riða, þa er regin deyjia, modvr bratir mer.*

*A daughter is birthed by the Sun after she has been for the long sleep.*

*The New Sun shall rise as she follows the old paths of her mother.*

*- st.47, Poetic Edda*



Echuca, 2010

The time was 8.52, on the morning of December 2<sup>nd</sup> when the message came.

As her phone emitted its tell-tale vibration, Kahli's hand fumbled across the table, sending her teacup and saucer into a clatter. *Who could it be?* Jo had already called to check she had taken her pills, watered her pot plants and hadn't collapsed from dry Victorian heat that rolled in this time of year. To Kahli's mind, the call was more out of obligation to make sure she hadn't lost her marbles. Weeks had passed since she'd heard from her other daughter; she was still on edge from the diagnosis. As far as Kahli was concerned, no news was good news.

*Hi Kendra,*

*Grace is having an operation today in hospital and  
the nurses put a blanket on her made by her  
grandmother. It brought a tear to my eye knowing  
that Kahli's memory is here with Grace today, hope  
u r well, would love to catch up. Thinking of you at  
this time of Kahli's anniversary.*

*Jo.*

Then, Kahli noticed the date it was sent: Tuesday, 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec, 2015.

Five years from today, *her* today.

Moments after pressing the 'send' button, Jo felt remorse start to creep up on her. She and Kendra had not spoken for weeks. The cracks were starting to show: Jo's bed had been left crumpled for days, dishes piled haphazardly in the sink. The clock in her bedroom stopped working and she had not bothered to replace it, waking late most mornings.

Each day that dawned was hotter than the last; reminding her that Christmas was not far away. Normally they decorated the house with fairy lights and snowflake bunting, especially when a certain little girl was expecting a visitor. This year, however, the tree was still in plastic, along with the rolls of tissue paper and foil bows. What gifts Jo had bought were still in boxes, tags attached, until the 'all clear' was given.

Jo was late arriving the first day, which made Grace mad. Jo blamed the train, the traffic, *anything and everything* else, except the part where she had fallen asleep and missed the hospital station. Jo did everything not to disappoint Grace. She did *everything*, full stop. Rushing to her side, Jo grasped the edge of the bed and lowered her head to Grace's.

'Look...it's started.' Grace tangled a loop of auburn hair around her finger, breaking it away like fairy floss.

'Oh darling, the nurses said this would happen remember? They said it would get worse before it gets better.' Jo caressed Grace's cheek.

'I know,' Grace pouted, 'but I wanted to look pretty for Christmas Day.'

'You *are* pretty. You shouldn't lose it all; even if you do we'll find lots of nice hats. Is there anything I can get you?'

'Like a wish?' Grace's eyes widened.

Jo smiled. 'Sure, a wish.'

Grace looked thoughtful. 'Well, I'd sure like to see the Lights this Christmas. The old lady told me, if I wish hard enough, there would even be snow!' Grace reached out with frail arms, catching the imaginary flurries.

Jo's eyebrows knitted together; she was sure Grace meant the Christmas Lights. *Could she drive her as far as the city? Would she be safe?* Seeing the Lights was possible, but as for snow...

'Which lady told you about this...snow?' Jo leaned in, her voice lowered, 'was it one of the nurses?'

Grace scrunched up her face. 'Uh...I don't think so. She was old, *really* old and spoke in a funny accent. Said her name was...oh I forget. I think she's my Fairy Godmother. She visits me sometimes, at night and sits right there.' Grace pointed at the foot of the hospital bed.

'And this lady *speaks* to you?' Jo smoothed over the folds on Grace's sheets.

Grace suddenly weakened as she was overcome by drowsiness.

'Some...times. She sings me...lullabies too. But usually she just...sits there, kind of...lit up like a...Christmas tree.'

Trying to ignore the tingles going down her spine, Jo placed her hand under Grace's neck, lowering her back down on the pillow. 'Okay, missy. I think that's enough fairytales. You need to rest.'

'But I *like* reading them,' Grace protested, 'my favourite is *Sleeping Beauty*.'

Jo glanced at the nightstand where Grace's books from home were piled.

'Is it now? Why that one?' Jo reached over to the first book on top. The pages were dog-eared as if they had been ruthlessly turned.

'Because the girl is...like me. Except...her name is Princess Aurora. She gets pricked by...a spindle and falls...into a deep sleep...like I will.'

Jo braced herself against the hospital bed for a moment, squeezing Grace's hand. 'Don't be afraid, my Princess Grace. The long sleep will fix you and when you wake up we can go see the Lights on Christmas Eve.'

Grace's eyes lit up once again, a bittersweet sight for Jo.

'You mean...we can *all* go see them? After I...wake up?'

'Together, sweetheart. You and me.'

Grace was adamant. 'Well, it's not the 13<sup>th</sup> for another...' she paused to count on her fingers, '...11 days.'

'What's on the 13<sup>th</sup>, darling?'

'The beginning of the...12-days-of-Christmas!' Grace replied, matter-of-fact, 'Mum promised she'd send me a...snowflake every day before my...birthday. Like those paper ones we cut out...and wrote wishes on...when I was in school. But, I think...I'd rather save my wish and see the...Lights and snow *this year*.'

'Sweetheart, keep your wish for now. It's too hot for snow this time of year, even in the mountains. Your mum is...not herself. She had to go away for a while.'

Grace raised herself up from where she rested on the pillow.

'She'll be back *before* the 24<sup>th</sup>? She has to Aunty Jo...she can't miss out.'

'Yes, yes she will my dear.'

Jo barely managed the words before excusing herself to leave the room.

*This was too much for a little girl to endure.* Checking the time on her phone, she remembered what she needed to do; she quickly typed the message, and sent it.

When Jo returned to Grace's room, the nurses had started their checks. Jo watched as tubes were taken out and put back in, machines *blipped* and a finger clamp was placed on. In the time it took for Jo to reach into her bag and unfold the white blanket, Grace's eyes were already closed.

Instead of snow, she would be seeing nightfall.

In Echuca, the Hinks family was well known for bringing a White Christmas each year. Kahli took pride in their federation-style home built after the war by her late husband, Finn; with its wrap-around terrace, brick chimney and wide bay windows overlooking the paddle-steamers that made their daily pilgrimage up the Murray River. Kahli always went to the effort of 'blessing' the house; sprinkling what she called 'lustre' around every nook and cranny and whispering a Nordic chant passed

on from her great-grandmother, Freya. This tradition came from her hometown of Trondheim, where it snowed abundantly every winter, and the townsfolk celebrated on the longest day. The *Solstice*, they called it.

During Solstice, come nightfall, the Northern Lights lit up the sky in ribbons of red and green. Kahli always thought it was more than a coincidence that these 'auroras' were the colours of Christmas, or Yule Tide as it was called in her homeland. One of the rare sights to witness were particles of light from the auroras and mineral dust frozen by the heavens, drifting down. Once the flakes of snow had melted, the particles remained; moulded in their fragile skeletons that disintegrated to a lustrous powder with the slightest touch. Kahli wanted to bring some of Norway back to her new home in Echuca and so, on her last visit before her and Finn immigrated in the 1950s, she collected some 'lustre' in her mother's Delftware urn. Neighbours thought she was just plain 'old woman' mad. Kahli's daughters, however, knew she was up to her usual tricks when she opened the door to them on Christmas morning, 2009.

Kendra: 'Aw, Ma...at it again with the snowflakes?'

Ebba: 'Good luck trying for snow this year; it's another scorcher!'

Marta: 'Mum and her silly sprinkles. How many times?'

Jo: 'Oh forget the *ruddy* lustre. Shall we get the turkey on?'

Delightful nymphs they were, three of them already with a handsome beau linked at the arm, stepped into the house. Growing up, the Hinks girls had gained quite a following around town. *Good genes*, Kahli mused.

'Stop fussing. Come in! Come in! The turkey's still thawing. Be patient.'

One of the girls, the youngest who, thankfully, had not yet given in to the charms of the local country lads, steered Kahli's chair towards the balcony.

'Here mum, take in the cool breeze. I'll get the turkey basted.'

Kahli winked at her daughter, 'Ah Kendra, my gem. You will make a fine mother one of these days.'

May, 2010

The impossible words shook her. Kahli gripped the phone and exhaled...*in what? Relief?* It had been weeks since she had heard from her daughter and now, in one phone call, everything had changed.

‘Kendra, *you’re* going to be a mother?’

‘Yes,’ her daughter replied nervously, ‘six weeks along. Due in December.’

Although she was alone, Kahli lowered her voice, ‘who else knows?’

‘Just us, mum. Just us.’

There was something about being the youngest that Kendra never quite liked. As a teenager she relied constantly on her older sisters until they moved to the city. After their father’s accident, Kendra met a traveller named Charlie. Together, they worked in the orange orchards, spending the long afternoons lazing down by the river. But Charlie only stayed for the summer harvest, returning to France once he had pocketed his keep.

When the news of her pregnancy reached Jo and the others, an emergency family meeting was called.

Jo was the first to fire. ‘How will she cope?’

A succession quickly followed. Kahli put up her hand to silence the others.

‘Kendra has the ability to cope just as any mother would. She just needs a little more...courage.’

Jo, as much propelled by her profession as her duty being the eldest, knew this was not going to be an easy decision for anyone. ‘Maternal or not, without a father we *are* her only encouragement.’

‘I have a say too, you know.’ Kendra turned to Ebba and Marta, both sitting quietly, their eyes barely meeting hers.

Kahli spoke, her voice husky with age yet softened by her melodic accent.

‘This is my first grandchild. I will go to my grave before any harm comes to this child. Kendra, you are first and foremost responsible as her mother and then, Jo as the eldest will take care of the child if you are ever unable. I know this has come as a surprise to all of you, but we must make preparations. I think it’s best for Kendra to move to the city, close to Jo and the hospital, where she will have better care. Ebba, Marta, you need to follow your careers, travel, set up your lives with the good husbands you have chosen. Although we will be apart, remember, you will always be my little girls. My four Snow Angels.’

That Christmas Eve, Grace Abigail Kahli Hinks was born into the world. With wisps of auburn hair to match her mother’s, she was the beginning of what would be a lasting Christmas legacy.

#### Melbourne, 2014

‘Jo... I need you to come over. It’s Grace. She’s sick...something’s wrong.’

At the sound of her sister’s panicked voice, Jo called to cancel her shift at the hospital. Jo was at the mercy of her duty, especially when it came to family calls. *Once a nurse, always a nurse*, she reminded herself. She was at Kendra’s in fifteen minutes, which was all it took for life to deal Grace’s body a life-threatening blow.

Jo found Kendra holding Grace’s pale body as she writhed in fits of agony. At the same time, her mobile rang. It was the hospital.

‘I’m afraid I have some bad news, Jo. You might want to tell your sisters too. Kahli has just passed away. I’m sorry. There was nothing more we could do.’

Jo held the phone to her ear until her head became numb from the static. Her other hand was still holding Grace’s when they were taken away in a blur of flashing red and blue.

Kendra cradled her head in her hands all the way to the hospital.

‘I should have tried harder,’ she sobbed.

Jo tried to ease her sister. ‘You couldn’t have known.’

'No, I mean with Kahli. With our mother.'

'Mothers and daughters fight, it's just the way it is sometimes.'

'No, there's no excuses, Jo. I hadn't called her in weeks...and now...Grace...'

'Be strong, have courage *for Grace*. We have some decisions to make.'

'Kahli's Gift?' Kendra asked.

'Yes.'

### December 2015

It had been a year since the diagnosis. Grace was still fighting the battle. Twelve months before, Kahli was left with no choice but to give in to hers. Young against old; eventually one became the other. Just as day turned to night, the cycle of the seasons and the myriad of medical experiments that Grace's outcome depended on, Jo wondered if her faith was enough. As the weeks passed, she hoped the message would be the impetus for Kendra's return, however it seemed Jo had reached a roadblock, or the wrong number. As surely as the sun rose each morning, Jo was determined to see Grace reunited with her mother.

Little did she know how much Kahli's gift would help save her too.

Grace woke to the ruffling sound of the curtain billowing out of the open window. She was startled at first by how light the room was; it must be a full moon. *How long had she been asleep? Days? Weeks?* A monitor near her bedhead blinked faintly: Dec 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 11.59pm. The silvery reflection of the medical equipment made the wind feel even colder and she pulled the covers up over her paper-thin gown. Grace had barely closed her eyes when she felt a warm hand on hers; the familiar hand that held her, the comforting voice that lulled her to sleep.

*'Sleep, darling Grace. It is Christmas and I will be here when you wake up.'*

Grace remembered all the nights the old lady had visited, sitting where Jo had sat and where her mother was sitting now, tucking her in. The white blanket was as soft

as Grace imagined snow might be and, she could have been dreaming, but in the moonlight it looked like a thousand crystal snowflakes.

### Echuca, 2010

A week after Jo's message came, Kahli was knitting the final touches. It was a gift for her granddaughter-to-be; the one forming like a graceful little snowflake inside Kendra's belly. Kahli was pleased with her efforts; her aching hands had spent hours interlacing the white cashmere to resemble a miniature snowfield, complete with pine-trees, sleighs, snowflakes...and a little 'lustre' sprinkled in for good measure. Kahli had given her daughters the instructions: the Gift could only be used once, and it would be her final wish to see the legacy passed on. One day, long after she had crossed over, Kahli dreamed of her granddaughter travelling back to her place of ancestry. She imagined Grace in Norway as a young courageous woman, witnessing the auroras; the Northern Lights she had once seen; making snow angels in the fields she had once played in, and singing the lullabies just as she had once sung.

*Sól ek sá, svá þótti mér, sem ek sæja göfgan guð*

*henni ek laut hinzta sinni aldaheimi í.*

*I saw the Sun, and it seemed to me I was seeing a glorious goddess;*

*To Her I bowed for one last time in this world of Light.*

*Olde Norse Mythology - Solarljód st. 41*



Contextualising Paragraph:

Inspired by a true event and Norse mythology, 'Kahli's Gift' is a short story aimed at young adult readers, (aged 16+) due to the confronting and emotive themes it discusses. Originally, the idea sparked from a text message I received by accident, (the actual message Kahli's receives through a 'wrinkle' in time). The story has evolved into a modern re-telling of the Norse myth of Frigga (pronounced Freya), Goddess of Motherhood and the 'seer' of future events. Although Frigga could not change her son's ill-fated destiny, it is the imperative of the myth passed down by her ancestors that a wish could be granted by a kiss under a sprig of 'Mistletoe' during Winter Solstice (Christmas-time). As Grace, the young protagonist of the story, is battling stage 4 Leukemia, her family's hope lies in a special blanket made by her grandmother, Kahli. Interwoven with elements of magic realism, time displacement and the theme of enduring love, this story intends to reach into the hearts and minds of readers, both young and old, to share and help families cope. In doing so, I aim to create awareness of the trauma and great **courage** of those suffering, in the hope that their star-crossed fates may be re-written.

– Bianca Millroy, December 2017