

Australia



Lighting the Way - A story from Australia

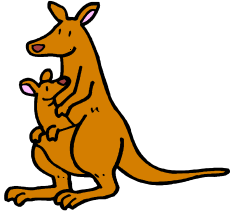
The tribesmen of Arnhem Land, the Aboriginal reservation located in Australia's Northern Territory, where this tale is told, have many myths about the natural world. This particular myth explains why the morning star shines so brightly.

In the dreamtime, the spirit girl Barnumbir (BAR-num-beer), lived on the Island of the Dead. She was a happy girl, content to do her many daily chores, but she always made time to spend with her friends.

Barnumbir's friends shared many of her interests, save one. While those girls often went fishing with the men in their bark canoes, Barnumbir preferred to stay on land. She would swim in the shallow waters close to shore, but she never journeyed out on the water. She said it was because she had once dreamt that her spirit had been lost out on the ocean, and that is why she feared the deeper waters.

One day Barnumbir's two closest friends, two sisters, announced that they would soon be leaving on a sea voyage with their brother, who was planning on making his home far away from the Island of the Dead. When Barnumbir heard this, she was greatly saddened. "You are my closest friends," she told the sisters. "Please don't go. I shall miss you terribly."

The two sisters hugged their friend. "We don't wish to leave either," they said, "but our brother needs us. We must help



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him make the long journey by boat, and then we will stay to help him build his home. We must go with our brother."

Barnumbir thought for a moment and then announced. "I will go with you. I am afraid of the sea, but I cannot bear the idea of your leaving."

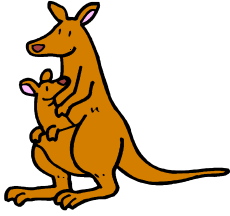
The two sisters smiled but shook their heads. "There is only room for three in our boat. You will have to stay behind."

Barnumbir was determined to go with her friends but did not know how she would manage to accompany them on their sea voyage. She asked others on the island if there was a larger canoe that could carry all of them, but was told that her friends' canoe was the longest there was. She offered to paddle another canoe alongside her friend's boat, but was told that the strength of one girl would not be enough.

Then someone suggested that Barnumbir visit Djanlin (Jahnlin), the magician. Perhaps he would turn her into a star that could light the way for her friends' canoe. She considered this for a time. Finally, unable to think of any other way she could go with her friends, Barnumbir went to Djanlin.

"Is it true that you can make me into a star that can travel through the air just above my friends' canoe?" she asked the magician. "Yes," Djanlin replied. "I can sing a magic song and make you a star."

He looked directly at Barnumbir, and then continued, "But you must know something. When you are no longer in sight of the Island of the Dead, I will have no way of calling you back. You



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will have to stay a star forever and forever travel over the water. You must think this over carefully before you decide."

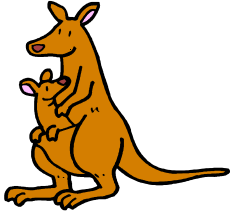
Barnumbir was even more confused. She went to ask the advice of two wise women on the island. The women sat on the ground rolling fibres of pandanus root between their hands and thighs. They coiled this thin rope round and round, forming it into a large basket that sat between them.

"Please, I need your help," Barnumbir said to the old women. "I wish to become a star to help guide my friends as they journey across the sea. Djanlin the magician has said that he can sing his magic and make me a star, but that when I am no longer in sight of our island, he will not be able to bring me back home. What shall I do?"

The two women sat in silence for a long time. They continued rolling the pandanus root fibres and building the sides of the basket. At last one of them spoke. "We must think this over. Come back tomorrow and we will have something to tell you."

Barnumbir returned to the old women's hut the next morning. She could hardly wait to hear what the wise ones would say, but she waited until one of them spoke first.

"We have considered your problem," one woman said, "We can help you. The way we see it, the sun will light the way for your friends by day. At night the stars high in the heavens will guide them. IT is during the early morning hours that your friends will need a light the most."



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The woman fell silent. The other women spoke. "Let Djanlin the magician make his magic so that you float as a star above your friends' canoe each morning."

"But what will become of me when I am far from the Island of the Dead?" asked Barnumbir, fearful that the old women, in fact, could not help her.

"We shall tie a long piece of rope to you." replied the first old woman. "When the sun has awakened from his sleep, we will pull you back to this basket. You will remain here on the island with your people each day and each night, but we will let out the rope just before the night stars have faded, so that you may light the way for all those who wander about in the early morning hours."

And so it is to this day. Just before dawn, you can spot the morning star in the sky. Her light is small but bright. Once the sun is up, Barnumbir's work is over and she is gone, back to the Island of the Dead where she still lives.