

THE BEAUTIFUL NECKLACE

By Cecilia Busby

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“Tell me the story of the beautiful necklace,” said Izzie to her grandmother. Her grandmother gathered Izzie on to her lap, kissed the top of her head, and began.

Long ago, your ancestors lived on the island of Kiriwina, in the deep blue Pacific Ocean. There, the blue green waves would roll up to the bright shores of the island; and kiss the silvery-white sand; and leave gifts of beautiful pearl shells.

There you could find shells that were milky white like the moon, and you could find shells that were deep rose-red, like the sunset over the ocean. Craftsmen would make those shells into beautiful armshells and necklaces; milky white armshells and rose-red necklaces.

But there was one necklace that outshone all the others that had ever been made or ever would be: it was called Toluwala. Toluwala was cunningly wrought by a master craftsman, Kaibola, and when he made it he chose from his collection shells of the deepest red—shells that shone like the dying sun—shells that glistened in the darkness with all the colours of the sunset on water.

He cut and shaped these shells with love and care, and polished them till they shone, and strung them each to the next so they reflected each other a thousand times back and forth and it seemed as if the necklace was made of red stars. When he had finished, he said, “This is the greatest and most beautiful necklace in all of Kiriwina—maybe in all of the islands of the Kula.”

Now, little one, the Kula was a great and wonderful pastime of your ancestors, for they lived on little islands scattered like seeds across the blue Pacific Ocean, but they would cross from one to the other in fragile wooden canoes, to meet and give each other gifts. Such brave adventurers, they would think nothing of the crashing white surf and the hungry sharks and flying witches, and the long days of bright sun and little water.

For when they met the pounding surf of a new shore, they knew they would find friends waiting, and the friends would have gifts for them—gifts of wonderful armshells or beautiful necklaces. And they in turn would have gifts for their friends, brought all that way in the long canoes—beautiful necklaces or wonderful armshells.

But always a necklace was given in exchange for a pair of armshells, or a pair of armshells in exchange for a necklace. This was the law of the Kula.

And the second law was that you must always give, you must pass your gift on, and never hoard it or keep it to yourself. So, after a little while of enjoying their gifts, people would give them again to another friend, on a different island, and they in turn would give them to another, around the circular path of the Kula, so everyone could enjoy them, until maybe, many many years later, a necklace or armshells would come back to the person who first made them, and he would see them again in all their loveliness. Then he would hear from the person who gave them back all the tales of their travelling, all their adventures in faraway islands and the stories of those they had passed to on their journey round the Kula.

But Kaibola loved his beautiful necklace Toluwala, and could not bear to give it to another. Toluwala shone like the sunset as he turned it in his hands, and it gleamed like a string of red stars in the velvety night. Kaibola said to himself, "I will just keep it a little while, before I send it out on its travels," and he put it in a basket in a dark corner of his hut.

After a while, people began to wonder about the beautiful necklace. When would Kaibola give it away? Who would he give it to? But the necklace never came out of his hut, and when he went on the Kula he took only other, lesser necklaces or armshells. After a year had passed, and still the necklace had not been given as a gift to anyone, people began to mutter that Kaibola would never give it away, that he had become too selfish, that he wanted it only for himself.

"A little while, just a little while," Kaibola said. But he would not meet people's eyes, and soon he stopped joining the Kula expeditions, and stayed more and more in his hut.

Now Kaibola had a granddaughter whom he loved very much. Her name was Lepani, and she had long black hair that was braided with beads, and clear brown eyes, and she loved her grandfather in return. She would often visit him in his hut, and sometimes he would take out Toluwala the beautiful necklace to show her, and she would marvel at its loveliness.

But after a while, Lepani started to notice that the necklace did not shine as much as it had, and the colours seemed dull. "Toluwala is sad, Grandfather," she said. "It wants to go travelling. It wants to be shared by others. It wants to be seen and admired and then given again and again as a wonderful gift."

Kaibola looked down at his granddaughter and sighed. "You are right. I must give it. But how can I? There are no armshells in the world as beautiful as this necklace! How can I give it to anyone when they cannot possibly give me back a gift as beautiful?" And he put the necklace back in its basket and shut the lid.

A few days later, a Kula expedition came to Kiriwina, and Lepani went out with all the people of the island to greet the newcomers. There was feasting and laughing and storytelling, and then there was the important business of Kula.

Among the men, Lepani saw a young boy, Dani, just old enough to be allowed to join the expedition, who had with him one small pair of armshells. Lepani could see he had made his armshells himself because of the proud way he carried them. Dani needed to find a partner, a friend, that he could give the shells to and in return receive a necklace, so he too could be part of the great adventure of Kula.

But no one approached Dani to take his gift, and he began to lose any hope of finding a partner. The armshells gleamed like his pearly teeth as he smiled sadly up at the milky white moon above the palm trees, and Lepani saw that although his armshells were small, they were very special.

Lepani ran to her grandfather's hut, and she took Toluwala the beautiful necklace from its basket, and she ran down the beach to Dani. "Here," she said, holding it out. "This is Toluwala, it comes to you from Kaibola of Kiriwina, may it bring you good fortune in Kula." And as Dani touched the necklace, it started to gleam with all the deep red colours of the sunset, to shine like a thousand red stars in the deepest night.

Kaibola came running down the sand when he saw what Lepani was doing—but when he saw how the necklace gleamed and shone in its new owner's hands, he smiled.

"You were right, granddaughter," he said. "I should not hold on to my necklace and hoard it—its beauty is meant to be shared and passed on. Good fortune to you, Dani, may you enjoy Toluwala for a while and then give it well."

In return, Dani gave them his little pair of armshells, and Kaibola smiled and said: "This is your very first Kula gift—you will remember it always, all your life, and so, though it is small, it is very special, and I am glad to have it in return for the beautiful necklace, Toluwala."

"So what happened to the necklace, Grandma?" said Izzie, putting her arms round her grandmother's neck. "And what happened to Dani and Lepani?" Her grandmother smiled, and kissed her on the nose.

Many, many years later, when Kaibola was an old, old man, and Lepani was nearly grown up, the necklace came back to Kiriwina.

In all those years, they had heard many tales of its adventures, for every time a new expedition came to Kiriwina they sought out Kaibola and told him what they knew of Toluwala, how it had gone to another island, and how all who saw it marvelled and

told each other it was the greatest necklace in all the Kula ring. And Kaibola would smile and be glad that he had sent the necklace out for all to see and share.

And whenever Dani came to Kiriwina, he too would seek out Kaibola and his granddaughter, and tell them of his travels and adventures—and Toluwala brought him good fortune too, for he chose well and wisely with his gifts and grew famous as a generous and brave man of Kula.

Then one day, a Kula expedition came, and with it a man who sought out Kaibola and handed him a small basket made of woven grasses. “I owe a great gift to Dani,” said the man, “For he gave me a pair of armshells of such size and beauty that I thought I could never repay them. Now I have the perfect gift—but he has asked me to give it instead to you, for he owes you a great debt from long ago.”

Then the man smiled, and opened the basket, and in it was Toluwala, the beautiful necklace, glowing even deeper red than Kaibola remembered, gleaming with the light of a many-coloured sunset across the sea, shining like a string of a million red stars. The beautiful necklace had travelled all around the Kula ring, and been seen and admired on all the islands, and now it came back to rest again where it had started.

Kaibola was so happy to see it that the tears shone on his face, and he took the necklace in his hands and turned to his granddaughter. “Toluwala has seen many places and many owners,” he said. “But it would never have left this hut if not for you, Lepani—so now, I give the beautiful necklace to you to be your very own and do with as you will.”

Lepani put the necklace round her neck, and she smiled, and the necklace gleamed beneath her dark braids like red stars, like a sunset on the sea.

“So did she keep it, Grandma?” said Izzie. And her grandmother smiled, and touched the deep red necklace round Izzie’s neck, and said, “No, little one—Lepani kept the necklace till she married the man she had first given it to, Dani, who had loved her from the moment he saw her on the beach. And then she gave it to their daughter. And a long time later, her daughter gave it again, to Lepani’s granddaughter. And that is you.”

“Yes,” said Izzie happily, fingering the beautiful necklace round her neck. “That is me.”



Note on Story Background:

Kiriwina is the main island of the Trobriands in the Pacific Ocean, and at the centre of what is known as the Kula ring, a system of gift exchange studied by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the early 20th century. Kula expeditions really

do set out on long canoes to travel many miles from island to island so the men can give gifts of shell necklaces and armlets, necklaces travelling one way round the ring and armlets the other. The most beautiful and impressive of these shell valuables are given names, and bring fame to their owners, and people vie with each other to see who can entice the current owner to give them the gift of a famous or beautiful Kula valuable. Some are taken out of the Kula, to be passed down as heirlooms, just as Toluwala is in this story, and they would pass from mother to daughter, as they do here. However, in the real Kula armshells and necklaces are not exchanged at the same time, as they are here: when a real Kula expedition comes to an island, they give the gifts they have brought without getting anything back: it's not until the men of the island return the visit that the original givers get their 'return gift'.