

Singing Country

This is a work of non-fiction. Whilst the individual people appearing in this story are real, identities have been fictionalised to protect their privacy, and that of innocent bystanders. Except where obvious, the author has only retold those aspects of the story which belong to him.

Sitting on the balcony of a fourth-storey apartment in Toorak Road, Melbourne. Wurundjeri Country, south of Woiwurung Country, just north-west of Boonwurrung Country. To be honest, I'm not sure how I got here.

Uncle James the Cowboy is talking to me. Sometimes he hits his clap-sticks together to emphasise a point. Hits his sticks in time with his heartbeat. Speaking to me in English to begin with. The hair on my arms and the back of my neck stands up when I realise he's slipped from English to Kriol, and now to Language. And I'm still sitting with my head down, eyes lowered, nodding my understanding.

Aawu. Aawu (Yes).

I get a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach when I realise that his lips are no longer moving and his voice is still in my head. Deep in my head.

I look to Ned. He smiles knowingly. Looks away.

I don't look into Uncle's eyes. Partly out of respect. Partly common sense. Partly fear.

They've been sitting on the balcony for a long time now — Uncle and Ned — talking, singing, clap-sticks going.

The voice in my head has stopped.
Uncle needs a cigarette. As I go inside to get it Uncle starts up a new song.

You know what he's doing? the Rat says.

I shake my head.

He's singing his Country.

He's what?

I'm not sure if I speak this question or just think it.

He's singing his Country closer.

I look at the Rat as though I suddenly don't understand English. I look out of the window to see the city crowding in. The lights, the noises, seem to blur for a moment. Like they're not really there. An illusion. Where are we really? We're in a land where an old Arrernte man can sing his Country. Can make his beloved desert move closer to him by singing. Time doesn't exist. Distance doesn't exist. Songs exist. Uncle starts up high and spirals down vocally. Repeating his sacred Dreaming word over and over. It buzzes like a bullroarer in his head. The building vibrates with the song. The very air around us hums and crackles.

But Uncle had disrespected Mum earlier on in the evening. Or it seemed that way, anyway. I didn't witness the incident. Uncle had asked Mum to sit on his knee, or something like that. So there is tension. Tension all around. Even for me. My first thought is, disrespect Mum and there's gonna be real trouble, no matter who the fuck you are!

But I wait for a sign from Mum. She can take care of herself. This is a Gunditjmara matriarch from a matrilineal coastal people. Fierce warrior people who bore the brunt of the Invasion. Never stopped fighting. Never will. A woman who

can stand back-to-back with her son in a country pub, smacking rednecks down. A woman who can take on multi-billion-dollar mining companies and send them packing with their tails between their legs.

Tension. Especially for the Rat. This is his place. Ned and Uncle James are Countrymen. Ned is Pitjantjatjara. The Rat is Arrernte. All desert men. Ned and Uncle James are Lawmen and the Rat hasn't been through Law.

He's had Ned at his place for a week or so now. Feeding him. Nyandi. Beer.

The Rat is stuck in the middle. Caught between the two worlds.

The Lawmen call him to the balcony and shut the glass door behind him. They drill him. His head is down. He goes to look up. Uncle hits him on the top of the head. A swift sharp blow. The Rat looks down. Has to. This is Old Way. Desert way. Not a Man yet. In Uncle's eyes.

Mum isn't happy about this. She knows the Rat has come up from the dirty streets of a red-dust desert town, Nbandwe (Alice Springs). He supports his brothers and sister and mother with his wages. Always has. Never had a childhood. Had to be the man for his family. The Rat is a warrior who has stood up his whole life — fighting The War of attitude, sometimes the fist war, for his mob. The Rat is a real man.

So the Rat tried to calm Mum down.

Mum is not my blood mum. She is Spirit Mum. Skin Mum. She's Henry's mum and Henry is my djaambi (brother). So my mum too. Has played my mum in a movie. In real life. I am honoured to call her Mum. Once, I mistakenly called her Auntie, but she quickly corrected me.

She's been there when I've needed her.

Ned is dancing now. Uncle James is playing slow sticks and singing. I see the firelight jumping and flickering in Ned's eyes. My mind tells me there is no fire. I've learnt not to rely on my mind. The mind can lie. I can't tear my eyes away from Ned.

Then Mum is telling Ned I am a good one. They share this look of deep openness.

When Ned speaks his voice is light but strong like his touch.

I look into his eyes — I see him. Not his skin, err ... colour.

Mum listens. Patiently waiting in case Ned has something more to say. It'd be years before I'd realise how important the silences are. How much is said with them.

I am honoured but shamed to overhear this, even though I had to be expecting it.

Earlier in the night I had stood with Little Big Man's woman. Little Big Man was close by, that tight bundle of Wiradjuri energy. I was telling her she had a good man. Made a big show of praising him up. She smiled her love to him. He to her and me. A family look. A brother to a brother, standing with his woman.

I'm away from my family. I feel homesick.

Uncle James tells me I am his nephew now. He hugs my head to his chest. He sings a song to confirm my nephewdom. Ned hugs me.

I keep the cigarettes and VBs coming when they want them.

I've lost track of time. I've lost track of me.

Ned tells me he is my brother.

You got grey in your beard? Ned asks me suddenly. How old are you? You got grey? Is your grandfather older than my grandfather?

My grandfather was born in 1896, I offer.

Ned nods sagely to himself. His big woolly Pitjantjatjara head computing my status.

Elder brother, he says, so quietly that a whisper would be a scream. I nod.

Aawu.

The Rat will always be my brother too. I sit next to my mum. I'm surrounded by family and definitions of family that I never expected but now must accept. I must accept them because they resonate deep within me, all around me, like Uncle's song. The other men are outside now.

Mum begins to speak. I listen.

The Nothingness. Mum talks about the vast Nothingness.

Culture and family are endless.

Individuals are Nothing. Feelings are Nothing. In the Nothing there is endless sadness and endless joy. Nothing.

Bigger than anything we could ever express. In any language.

Mum is annoyed with the Lawmen, at their treatment of the Rat. She is the only person here they don't outrank in Culture way. Seniority way. Any way. We are all grateful for her presence. Her balance. Even the Rat, caught in the middle. Mum doesn't think what they're doing to the Rat — pulling rank — is appropriate.

It's bigger than that, Mum says into the fire. Bigger than that.

But the Rat knows he has to go home. Any disrespect to Uncle will cost him dearly in his own Country.

Bigger than that, Mum repeats.

The bush sings around us. The fire crackles. We are so completely insignificant. Nothing. The tenuous grasp I thought I had on Culture is gone. Into nothing.

Behind us Cheree seems upset. Seeing her man in this situation is new to her too. She is a Murri from Cherbourg way, up there in Waka Waka Country in Queensland. Different Culture again. For Europeans, it'd be like comparing Sicilian Culture to Norwegian Culture. All Europeans — but completely different.

The Rat is with the men. I'm called to be with them. Even though Mum doesn't like it, I get up to go to the balcony. I got responsibilities too. I kiss Mum. It's not just Uncle. It's the Rat.

There are many ways to become a Man, I think.

Many rituals. Many ceremonies. Many paths. Nothing.

Uncle is different now from the shy old man bird I met hours earlier, shielding his power and playing Jacky Jacky. I was in the laneway outside the theatre. Uncle was introduced to a young gubbah next to me. The young gub squares off, squeezes Uncle's hand hard and looks him in the eye.

G'day, Mate.

Uncle looks off into the distance to hide his power. Big smile on his face, he goes into his cowboy-rave.

I'm Cowboy James. Me, I'm stockman. Drover. I bin riding bulls all over. I bin top boss cowboy, me.

Cowboy James reminds me of Bart Billon. Bart is Wangkathaa man. A stockman. A rainmaker. I wasn't even going to school the last time I saw Bart.

It's my turn. I drop my head and offer my hand. Just put it there. Cowboy James reaches out and his pink palm barely touches mine. His skin feels cool. When I speak my voice is quiet, just for him.

Hello, Uncle, I whisper.

Uncle flashes me a look I feel to my boots but I don't dare look up.

My boy, Uncle whispers back, and touches me on the upper arm with hardened old fingertips.

Now, hours later on this balcony, Uncle is strong. A rock. A tree. A lizard. Clap-sticks beat out his heart. He looks bigger. Older. Country must be getting closer. We talk for a long while, in the quiet way of the bush. The quiet way of family.

And then I must go. My own family pulling on a string attached to my lower belly from across the Nullarbor. I came over for this work. For my brothers. My sisters. Uncles. Aunties. Nephews. Nieces. Mum. Came to fight The War of attitude.

I drag my six huge pieces of luggage down the stairs. I go across the road to the taxi rank. I have kissed and hugged everyone. The Rat comes down to make sure I'm alright. Mum's words are all around me. Fuelling me. My feelings are Nothing. My doubt is Nothing. Uncle's parting ghost of a grip still feels like it has me. His cool strong hands. Ned's eyes with the firelight still dancing in them. Mum. Sister Cheree. These are my family too.

Kele mwerre anthurre (Go really good way), the Rat says.

Kele mwerre anthurre, I say back.

I'm gone. In the cab to the airport the Rat rings me twice. My brother. And I'm getting out. It's cold. The luggage is hard to manoeuvre. The line is long, my brain is tired. These things are Nothing. I get checked in. I stand out in front of the terminal and smoke a huge joint. Past caring. Caring is nothing. And suddenly I'm dozing on a plane.

Henry, my djaambi, has described his Gunditjmara coastline for me many times. As we cross the southern coast to leave Victoria, I'm looking out the window, looking out for his sacred Country. Then I see it swim into view, the bay, the three-pronged headland, like some marsupial crouched on the coastline. I watch it until it slides away, under the belly of the plane. I keep this close to my heart.

And I always look out for Wudjari Country when we cross the coast back over Western Australia. Where I grew up on Lort River Station at Coomalbidgup. Where I learned to love my Country. East of Munglinup, west of Dalyup. All Nyungar names. All Nyungar Country.

I can pick Yonda Quagi from the air, the beach closest to Red Island. The last island close to the shoreline on the western end of the Recherche Archipelago. I doze.

And then I'm sat up in my seat as though slapped — Uncle's song is in my ears. In my head. It's like he's sitting in the seat next to me, the sticks and song making the whole plane vibrate. I look around. No-one else seems to hear it. Uncle singing me home. I am Nothing. I doze off.

Look at me when I'm talking to you

How did I get there? On that balcony in Toorak Road? To explain that, I've gotta go back. Way back.

I'm an unemployed actor. Living in St Kilda. Boonwurrung Country. Finished a job a couple of months ago. I heard about this play set in the travelling boxing tents, written by this Arrernte fulla, Uncle Kumanjai Dempster. (Kumanjai means Spirit, used for people who've passed away. Some mobs say Pringhael. Same thing.)

I'd done some boxing training with Brett, this tough gubbah fulla on the periphery of the Melbourne acting world. Sparred a few times in Kelly's Gym. But I rarely shone in the ring.

I auditioned for the director by shadow-boxing in my singlet. Every boy spends a lot of time shadow-boxing. I was terrible. But got the job. Pointy nose. Pale skin. Thin top lip. Tough-guy eyes. I can do that.

A week later, I'm walking into the Fitzroy All-Stars Gym to meet Robby.

By then I'd also done a few training sessions there, with Old Don. Old Don had fought Uncle Kumanjai Dempster's father. Old Don lost the fight and an eye. Had to have it replaced with