

Colours

Tony Birch

Before I was sent to the local school for education, my Pop was my only teacher. He would take me out to the paddock behind the government house we were given on the Reserve and stop and tell me to look up at the night sky while he took a pouch of tobacco from his pocket. Pop wouldn't speak another word until he'd finished his cigarette, a habit he enjoyed years after the advertisements on the TV started warning us that people who smoked would lose their legs, eyes and tongue and die a painful death.

When smoking time was over Pop would point a pair of nicotine-stained fingers at the stars and tell me that the day would come when they would be there to help me. He'd then wave a hand in the air, smile at me and raise his eyebrows like we were sharing a secret. But the secret was his alone, seeing as I didn't have a clue what Pop was talking about. Even though alcohol was banned on the Reserve, Pop drank a lot of grog back then; *too bloody much*, my mum used to say. *Cooked himself*.

This fella, he told me one time, raising a bottle of wine in the air, *I love him, but he don't love me*. Mum was working on the chicken line and Pop was supposed to keep an eye on me. He didn't mind that I took off on my own for the day. Down to the supermarket mostly, where I'd lift ice cream and biscuits. He'd sometimes forget to feed me. And he hardly ate at all himself. The grog was his only tucker. He also loved a fight back then, against anyone who might be up for it. He'd tell all-comers to *fuck off* and up with the fists he'd go. He'd fought in the boxing tents when he was young. Pretty good too, they reckon. But once he hit the drink hard, he was ruined. He'd mouth off in a pub or in the street, get into a blue and end up belted round the street like an old dog. The coppers went after

him plenty of times, locked him up and give him a smack as well. He was always telling me, *ya see the Gunji coming, run like hell*. And I would. Anytime they drove down our street, coming to the house for him, I'd run to the dry riverbed and hide until they left, sometimes with Pop in the back of the van, kicking at the doors, letting them know where they could go. He'd come home the next day with blood under his nose, maybe a cut on the head, and tell me that the *fucken Gunji done this*. Maybe they did, I reckon. But then Pop could easily get into a fight on the way home. Like they say, my Pop could *find himself a fight in an empty house*.

The Welfare were gonna put a stop to me seeing him and then my mum, she died. She had a bad heart from the day she was born and was always catching her breath between smoking plenty of cigarettes, just like her father did. She was walking down the road after work from the chicken factory with one of her sisters, my auntie Beryl. Mum said to her, out of nowhere, *we had good times when we were kids, didn't we Bee?* She fell down in front of auntie and was dead. At the funeral Pop kneeled on the ground and grabbed two fists of dirt and shoveled them into his mouth, almost choking himself. Some thought he was crazy and tried to stop him, until his older brother, Ronnie, stepped up, put his hands in the air and said *let him be with himself*. And they did.

Pop lay down and cried into the earth. He told the ground he was ashamed of all the drinking he'd done and he was to blame for his youngest daughter dropping dead in the street. Ronnie kneeled down next to Pop and told him he wasn't to blame at all. The drinking was his own doing, for sure, but not Mum's bad heart. The doctor at the co-op had said her heart had been *broken in childhood* and no matter what anyone had done she'd have died anyway, sooner before later. Didn't matter to Pop. He took his daughter's death as an *omen* — that's what he called it. He gave up the grog from the day of her funeral.

He got himself into a different sort of trouble from that day on. He marched around town and told everyone, blackfellas and whitefellas both, that the grog was an evil, and they had to stop drinking if they were to become *decent*. Some of them drinkers, old mates of Pop, they got sick of his preaching,

threw empty beer cans at him and told him to *fuck off home* as soon as they saw him walking along the footpath toward them. A couple of famous drinkers, *Salt and Pepper*, who sat out front of the post office on the bottle most days, threw a half bottle of wine at him one time. The altercation did nothing to stop Pop spreading the word every chance he got.

He became spiritual too. Most thought it was the craziness from the drinking he'd done and the knocks on the head he'd taken. They paid no more attention to the religion talk than they did his sermons about alcohol. He'd been on the church mission as a kid, and out with the old fellas in the bush before and after the mission days. His spiritual talk was a jumble of blackfella and the Bible. He didn't make sense to most people, me included. But he could tell a good story in there with the religion and I liked to hear that from him. Once he'd quit the drink I loved him even more and looked forward to sitting with him after school. He'd make us a cup of tea and watch the tele until my auntie Beryl came and collected me once she'd finished work at the factory.

We kept our love for each other going like that until he had a stroke. It stopped him from moving on one side of his body. He couldn't walk proper and he found it hard getting his words out. Auntie Beryl tried looking after him, but couldn't keep up with the cooking and feeding and washing him as well as going to work. So they put him in a Home with the other old people, out beside the irrigation road that runs out of town. Blackfellas, yellowfellas and whitefellas, men and women. I'd never seen a mixed mob like. And they got on together like family, singing songs and playing cards, and the old boys telling dirty jokes. I'd walk the mile to the Home after school and sit with Pop for a time, then walk the mile and a bit more to Auntie Beryl's for my tea.

Pop liked to take me by the hand, using the other hand to prop himself up with his walking stick, and lead me out to the garden. He'd talk slow and jumble some of his words, but I could make out that he said *It's a good night*, he'd say, pointing his stick into the sky and talking about *constellations*. I'd listen carefully. He told me that blackfellas all over the country had their own names for the stars and their own stories. One night he whispered a *special story* to me, slow and sweet. I can't tell it

to you here because it's his story. Doesn't matter who you are, blackfella or whitefella, Elder or kid. Only Pop can tell it.

He finished the story and put his open hand on my chest. Pop told me I had a strong heart and I was to remember the story he'd told, and that it would be important to me to remember the shape of the *constellation*, which star went where in the dance of the story. *Right there's your map*, he said, *there in the sky*. I ran all the way home that night, the stars above looking out for me, following me down the road, through the bush track I took for a short cut home, all the way to auntie Beryl's front door. I hopped into bed that night and looked out of the window and up at the sky. The stars were there, watching me, the story whispering its way into my ear.

The next weekend I was sitting with Pop in the dayroom and told him I was certain the stars were keeping an eye out for me just like he'd said they would. He smiled wider than he had back when he was enjoying a big day on the grog. We worked together that day, making the Aboriginal flag—black, yellow, red—from coloured paper. Others in the room were making their own flags. Families all together. When we'd finished the carpet was covered with scraps of coloured paper. I collected them, with the idea of taking them home to make a picture. Pop closed his eyes a couple of times while we were sitting. He'd worn himself out and wanted to go to bed. I helped him climb into his cot, tucked him in, said goodnight and kissed him on the cheek like I always did when it was time to leave.

Afterwards I skipped down the middle of the road, feeling happy with myself and looking up at the stars. I was close to my auntie's place when I seen the Gunjis speed by me in a highway car, kicking up dust, two coppers in the front seat and one in the back. I heard the car brake, looked around and saw the police car doing a U-turn. I started to run, like Pop had taught me, about to head into the bush and lose them. But I was too slow. The car pulled into the side of the road and blocked my path. The driver got out and slammed the door. It was Camel. An ugly old copper everyone hated. He'd been kicking blackfellas around for longer than anyone knew. *What shit are you running from?* he asked, hitching his pants up. I kept my eyes off him, looking down at the dirt until he poked

me in the chest, real hard, and barked in my ear that I was a *half-caste cunt*. The other copper from the front seat, he got out of the car too. A big fella I hadn't seen around the town. He was drunk.

You been drinking? Camel said to me. I shook my head. *Liar*, he said. *You all drink, your mob. Can't stay off if, don't matter what age you are.* He turned to the young copper. *You know their fucken women breastfeed them grog.* He grabbed me by the throat with a claw, pressed hard and shook me. *I reckon we need to take him in*, the young copper said. *He needs a lesson.* Camel stopped shaking me, smiled and patted me on the cheek. *Yeah, why not?* He put his arm over my shoulder. *Back to the lock-up for some fun.* They threw me in the back of the car with the third copper. He was sleeping against the back of the seat with his mouth open and a bottle of grog in his hand. He come to and looked across the seat at me like I was a mystery.

Camel looked in the rear mirror and called out to the copper, *this is our little mate. Give the boy a drink, Murph, and warm him up.* Once the copper worked out what Camel was on about he grabbed me by the jaw with one hand and tried pouring the grog down my throat with the other. It went into my mouth and I tried spitting out so it wouldn't choke me. Most of the grog went over my front, the rest in the copper's face. He got angry and punched me in the mouth. I could taste blood, mixed with the grog. I started to cry and Camel called him off and they let me be until we were back at the lock-up. They walked me through the office, one copper under each arm, Camel out front like he was leading a lynching. Another copper, a lady sitting behind a desk, saw the blood on my face and the grog stains on my T-shirt. She stood up and was about to say something when Camel gave her a *shut it* look. She turned away and sat down. Camel grabbed hold of the bunch of keys swinging from his belt and opened a cell door. One fella was in there, one of Pop's old drinking mates, Corky, laying on the cement floor in his vomit. *No good*, Camel said to the young copper trailing him. He opened another door. The cell was empty cell. He threw me inside. *Tidy yourself up*, Camel yelled. *We're coming back for a play.*

The cell had no windows, a rubber mattress on the floor, and a toilet in the corner. I walked over to take a piss but the

toilet was blocked. I read the messages scribbled on the walls, some written in shit, about who'd been in the cell before me and which copper was a *NO GOOD DOG*. I could hear the old fella moaning in the next cell and starting thinking that when they come back to my cell the coppers would be out to beat me. Or kill me. I remembered then that Pop had once said to me that there would be no place worse to die than in a police cell. *If that happened, he'd said, everything, my body, my heart, would be taken.*

Pop came to me then, inside me, and again put his hand over my heart. He whispered in my ear that he had one more story to tell me. And he did, reminding me that I had the many pieces of coloured paper with me. The black, yellow and red. I took them out of my pocket, one at a time, and chewed on each piece for a bit, rolled them into small balls and stuck the coloured dots on the wall in a proper order. My map of the sky. It wasn't long before I'd made my own constellation, with Pop's help. Chewing on more scraps of paper, soon enough I'd created a night sky full of stars, each one with its own story. Camel came walking along the hallway, marching toward the cell, his keys ringing like a broken school bell. I could hear the young copper behind him, screaming something I couldn't understand. I pressed my body to the wall, where *my* stars were dancing with each other, where *my* story was waiting for me. The coppers, when they opened the cell door and looked inside I was gone. They turned the mattress over. The young copper was silly enough to put his head in the toilet bowl searching for me. Camel stood in the middle of the cell, scratched his head and said *fuck me, he's vanished.*