

One: Night Delivery

The truck engine howls beneath us, cool desert air rushes past our windows. I'm holding on tight to the console, my white knuckles paler than the stars. Mularabone is driving. He stares ahead into the darkness, a picture of relaxation. Mularabone only knows one way to drive – fucken flat out.

'You still with me, coorda?' he asks, smiling through each word as though delivering the punchline of a joke.

I glance down at my white knuckles: is he taking the piss?

'Wide awake, bro.'

'That's never stopped you from dreaming off.' And this time his smile is like a shoulder hug.

I look out into the dark. I don't know if I can take any more of this wild speed.

'Slow down,' I say through tight teeth and jaw.

'Low down? I'll give ya the low down, brother.'

'Slow down, fuck ya!'

'Nearly there.'

'Nearly where?'

Mularabone laughs.

'There's not even a road,' I say, as Mularabone changes down and guns the big diesel engine even harder.

'Roads are overrated, brother.'

Ahead of us in the darkness stands a lone figure, an old Countryman with a big hat and a white beard. I hear myself swear again. Mularabone jams on the skids. The big rig, with

its two huge tanker-trailers, locks up in the loose dust of the desert. The old Countryman in the darkness ahead doesn't move a muscle. He stands patiently as though waiting for a bus. The trucks slides in the dust, with Mularabone fighting the bucking steering wheel. It finally comes to a halt just a metre or so from the old man's cowboy boots.

My head drops and I suck in a big breath. Mularabone is already out of the truck to greet the old Countryman, even as they are enveloped by the dust cloud the truck has stirred up. I gingerly climb down from the cabin and move around to the front, walking unsteadily as though I've been chained in a ship's hold for six months. Mularabone and the old Countryman are still embracing. Then the old Countryman steps away and turns to me.

Uncle Birra-ga.

For the briefest of moments I feel the old Uncle's eyes burn into me through the darkness, and then I drop my gaze and put out my hand. I dunno if Uncle is gonna take something off me with those eyes, or give me something to go on with, like the Country itself.

All I know is it's a little more than respect and a little less than fear that makes me avert my eyes. Uncle Birra-ga takes my hand in a feather-light grip.

'Hello, my nephew.'

Uncle's voice is like a gentle breeze and the dust cloud raised by the truck is gone as quickly as it stirred up.

'Hello, Uncle.'

Without warning, Uncle pulls me in close; that sudden strength always surprises me. He may look frail but I know he isn't. I've heard the stories of Uncle as a young man, when the civil war was raging. His name, Birra-ga, means man-killing stick. Like all of his mob, he is well named. Some men are named after particular ancestors. I'm named for my

grandfather. Mularabone too – for his grandmother’s brother – in a different kind of way. Some names wait patiently for generation after generation to find the right host. Some names leap out from behind an unfamiliar rock and try to kill you. Like Birra-ga. When his fingers touch my arm as he speaks to me, they are as hard as steel rods.

‘We gonna talk later, my boy,’ he says to me in his light half-whisper.

I nod, my eyes still down, staying silent in case there is more.

Uncle steps back from me, and turns to face Mularabone. They have a rattling conversation in Language. Then Uncle Birra-ga turns and walks away.

I look to Mularabone. He knows I don’t speak. My father couldn’t wait to take his sons from the Language program. For three hundred years Djenga bin learning Language in this Country. The protocol was always to start with the Language of where the whitefullas were born. What Country we did our learning in. Whenever people moved around, like we did, it was the Language of the Country of residence – so Djenga and Countryman alike could pay proper respect to Country and elders and ceremony. My father loathed the whole thing. I never knew what made him so bitter. Towards me. Towards the Countrymen. Towards the Country itself.

‘Let’s get some water flowing, brother,’ Mularabone says through his huge smile.

We walk back along the side of the truck. We see the concrete manhole cover set into the ground. It takes both of us to lift it off. Mularabone slides under the truck and unhooks the outflow pipe from the tanker-trailer and connects it to the system beneath the manhole cover. I go up the ladder on the first trailer to loosen off caps on top of the water tanks. Sometimes we have to get our pump going but with Uncle

Birra-ga’s system we let gravity do the work. I swing back down and go to the main valves. Mularabone is finishing screwing down our outflow pipe onto the pipe beneath the concrete cover. He is done in a flash and looks up to me. I open the valve and we hear the water rushing into the system below the desert floor.

Mularabone fishes in his pocket and pulls out his ngumari. He rolls a cigarette and holds it to me. Before I can take it, Uncle Birra-ga reaches out and grabs the cigarette. He puts it into his grinning mouth.

Uncle’s right hand gestures to me – two subtle, yet distinct movements: fire; question (You got im waru, Nephew?).

I pull out my lighter, flick the flame on and offer it to him. He sucks on the cigarette and it glows red. Mularabone hands me another one. We all stand there smoking, listening to the water flow out of the truck and into the storage system below.

Around us is the desert, awash in the light from the moon and stars. For a moment we are at the bottom of a vast ocean. I look up to the night sky to see a prehistoric marine predator as big as two train carriages turn and flip straight down at us, massive jaws lined with teeth bigger than me, opening to envelop us. I stand like a tree, imitating Uncle Birra-ga in his big hat when we arrived, with over twenty tonnes of water truck bearing down on him in a dusty slide.

I exhale my smoke and there is only the night, the desert night. I glance sideways at Uncle Birra-ga. His eyes twinkle like the stars.

The water stops flowing. Mularabone and I move in unison, it’s what happens when you spend too much time together. We stub out our cigarettes, pick up the butts and move in different directions. He goes to the truck cab. I go to the back of the first trailer and undo the pipe. I close the stop on the trailer.

‘Yo! Yo-yo!’

Mularabone revs the engine and the truck moves forward. I see his eyes shining in the darkness of the mirrors. Medieval scholars used to believe that our eyes emitted light to illuminate objects, thus allowing us to see. Medical science eventually proved them wrong, but out here in the desert with this mob I always get to wondering. Not that those eyes are like a spotlight, or a candle; more like moonlight shining out through brown billabong water, and the water is warm, like a fire, or embers glowing all friendly without the bald bare light of a flame.

The second trailer is there now, lined up.

‘Yo! Yo-yo!’

The air brakes go on with the rush-hiss of a whale breathing. The whale is on the surface, way above our heads, but we hear the rush-hiss as if it is all around us. I move in and attach the hose and screw the valve out. The water rushes through the pipe into the system below. Mularabone comes down to join us at the back of the truck but by the time I straighten up from the pipes, Uncle Birra-ga has disappeared.

Mularabone and I look around as though we are astronauts accidentally left behind by our expedition, standing all alone on the surface of the moon. We stand there unmoving, looking up at the blue planet rising in the clear atmosphere-less sky, until the water stops flowing.

We unhook the pipe, slide it back into position and replace the concrete slab, grunting with the effort. We stride back for the truck, run up the steps, Mularabone guns the engine and the truck starts to move. We are still driving without lights, but in the darkness to our left, we see the old Countryman standing there, like his father, the tree.

‘We gotta come back, after we stash the truck,’ says Mularabone.

I look over to him.

‘We haven’t got time,’ I say. ‘If we’re gonna walk out tonight, we haven’t got time. We’ll never get back to the refugee camp in time.’

Mularabone laughs.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Dunno, just, I reckon, it’s you he wants to see, not me.’

‘Won’t be funny if the Water Board get us. They ain’t gonna be too impressed about the trucks.’

I look ahead into the darkness. Uncle did say he wanted to talk to me. I look over at Mularabone driving. He furrows his brow in mock deep concern-contemplation. His mimic of me is startling in its accuracy. I get the giggles.

‘I gotta work on my poker face,’ I say, deadpan.

‘Poke her face?’ Mularabone queries, dry and naughty.

I giggle again. ‘You are one bad-ass white shareholder, brother! Poke her face? You’re a sicko, bruz.’

‘Don’t go all virgin on me, brother! You wouldn’t say no!’

He looks over to me. I do the tongue in the cheek thing, and I get him. He laughs.

‘Yaaaaah!’

‘Yaaaaah!’

The truck drives through the trackless night. Mularabone always goes south with his humour when stuck for a response. I spose I do too. It’s a hangover from another time. And it works for us. The tension goes. We’re both old-school when it comes to women. Lustful thoughts are confusing in our world. You can deny them. You can savour them. As long as you do it quietly where no one sees. We both already know that a woman’s trust is a far more valuable thing than her flesh – as valuable as that is to us men. Dying and laughing are connected. Like laughing and living. Lust and fear. Semen and blood. This desert sucks at my mind. I’m still that astronaut on the surface of the moon, gazing up at the blue planet rising,

and the vacuum of space is trying to suck my helmet off, so that my body will be obliterated instantly and all that will remain are my thoughts. A thought. A message. A song. Our brains talk to themselves with little song phrases. Like we talk to the spirit world. Like the whales talk to each other. To us.

Ahead, some large rock formations loom out of the desert night. Mularabone glances across to me for confirmation. Behind the rock formations is the dried-up river. I can't see it in the dark – but I can feel the water motion in my veins, I can feel it as if it were still flowing, and not dammed upriver by the Water Board. I give Mularabone a little nod and he spins the wheel left-hand down to back the trailers in. I open the door and jump down while the vehicle is still moving. I hit the ground rolling and then I'm up and running. My hands are gripping an imaginary weapon as I run. I take a few steps then come to a halt, looking down at my hands and the weapon that isn't there. I open my hands and let it drop. Something thuds softly in the dust at my feet. I don't look down. Got to stay out of that dream.

I look to the truck to see Mularabone's eyes watching me in the mirrors. I wave the truck back.

'Yo!'

Mularabone gets the trailer in first time, snugly into the narrow canyon.

'Yo! Yo-yo!'

The big whale breathes again, way over our heads, and the truck stops.

I run in and unhook the trailer.

'Yo!'

Mularabone pulls the first trailer away. We'll put them all in separate spots. I grab the blower off the back of the first trailer as it pulls away and pull-start the engine. It goes with a howl and I aim it at the truck tracks, pulling my facemask

up and over my mouth. It only takes a few minutes to do the job. This machine is a ripper. Mularabone modified it from agricultural equipment he stole from the market garden where the refugees slave away on the other side of the dam; he calls it the little wind. By the time I'm finished, there are no truck tracks.

Mularabone jumps down from the cabin. He has the cloaking device in his hands, programming it as he walks. These new ones are so small. He lines it up on the tanker-trailer and initiates it. His fingers are long and delicate and play across the tiny keyboard like a musical instrument. He loves this technology. He scoops up some sand, puts the device into the earth and covers it over again with the sand.

We turn and walk back to the idling truck.

In an hour or so we've parked both tanker-trailers and the rig. We walk backwards for another hour or so with the blower, washing our tracks away with the little wind. We take the blowing in turns. I'm on my second go when I stumble and fall backwards, overcome with exhaustion. I lie there with the blower in my hands, unable to move. The shaft of air points straight up at the stars, the little wind trying to scatter those distant and ancient lights.

Suddenly, Mularabone is there, his face in the airstream, his hair blowing back from the wind. He waggles his head from side to side and breaks into song in this kind of crazy falsetto:

Oh these Waterboys drive round a big old truck
When they feeling that kind they need a good old ...
Fact-finding mission to find that good sweet water
Keep ya sons at home and lock up your daughter
Waterboys always doing what they shouldn't oughtta.

I'm laughing with him. 'What they *shouldn't oughtta!* What's that?'

'Well – it rhymed!'

I'm giggling so uncontrollably that the blower falls down and engulfs us both in a mini sandstorm. Mularabone bends and kills the machine.

A silence comes down on us like a white drug in our brains. There's only me giggling silently, and wheezing for breath, and a million, million stars. I look up to see Mularabone's hand outlined by those shining stars, hovering just in front of me. I take the hand and am hauled up to my feet.

We stand there, our hands still clasped, looking at the stars reflected in each other's eyes.

'Let's walk now,' he finally says.

'How far?'

'Two hours.'

I look at him.

'Tops,' Mularabone affirms with a grin.

We start walking. As we go, Mularabone pulls out a plug of herb and offers me some leaves. I take them. We chew and walk. Walk and chew.

When we were doing our initial training, years ago, before the cadres, The Sarge used to say to us, 'If ya can't do it walkin, it ain't worth doin.'

We used to joke about how The Sarge had sex with his missus. There were all sorts of stories about him marching around his backyard with her straddling him and holding on like a mad Afghan camel driver, especially as his knees always give out when he comes. Even if Mularabone made them up, they were good stories. The Sarge would always demand to know what was so funny, and then laugh his hard little laugh when we told him, may his spirit find peace.

We walk in silence now. Sometimes I think I hear that

ancient whale-song in my head, sometimes I think it is Uncle Birra-ga. My own breathing is like a sea-mammal, down here on the desert floor. I am so empty, so nothing, that I almost forgive myself.