This is dedicated to my husband Percy, my children James, Aaron, Alice and Shannon Kearing and their partners, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Thank you for the love and support you have given me, and for your patience and interest in the many stories I have told over the years. Also to Mum and Dad and the old spirits who, by the grace of God, have protected and guided me throughout my life.

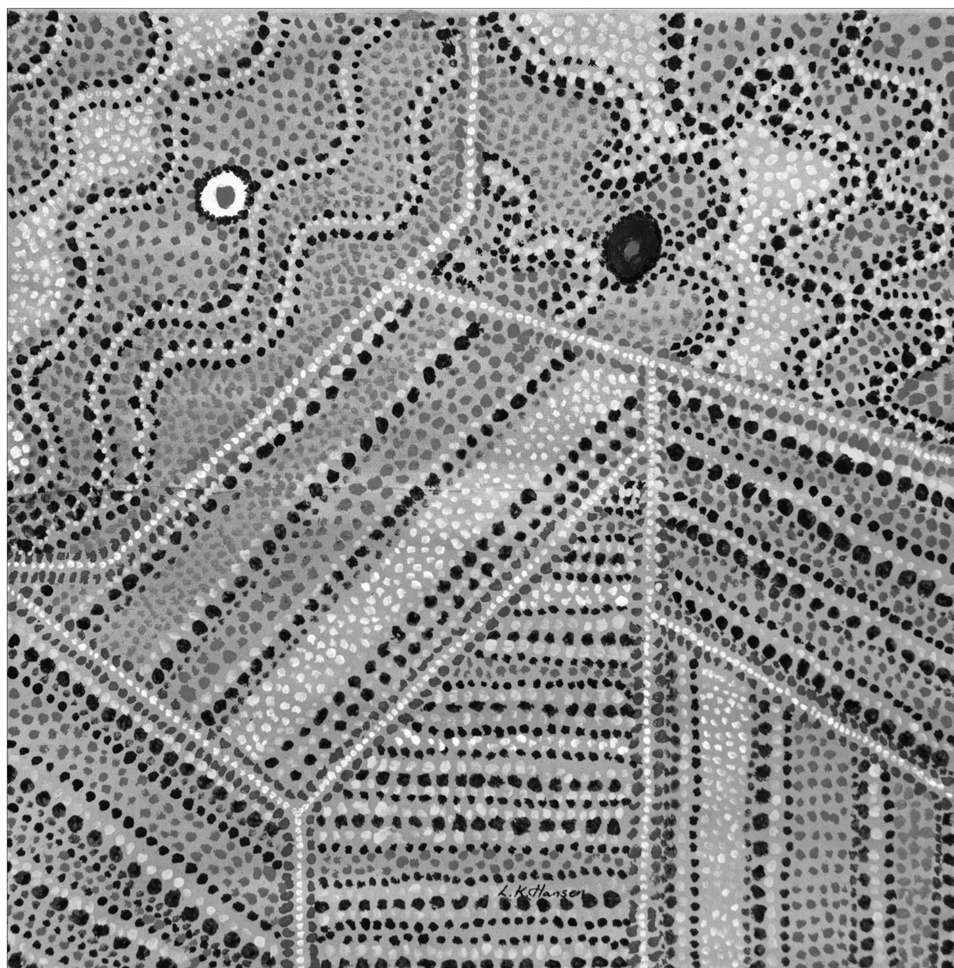
This story is inspired by actual events. I have changed the names of the people out of respect for them and others who are now deceased. The Nyoongar words used in the story are Binjarib specific, as taught to me by my mother.

SMASHING SERENDIPITY

THE STORY OF ONE MOORDITJ YORGA

LOUISE K. HANSEN

FREMANTLE PRESS



'Two Worlds', 2014
by Louise K. Hansen (12.5.1950–24.7.2022)
60 × 60 cm, acrylic on canvas

This painting tells the story of my parents' respective birth countries. The top orange half depicts Dad's Palyku land in the Pilbara in its original state before mining. It has all natural vegetation and food sources, uncleared with fresh water and rivers running through it. It is a beautiful but harsh land.

The bottom half shows Mum's Nyoongar country and how, since colonisation, it has been cleared of nearly all its virgin bushland. It is fenced off. It too is quite beautiful but our people can no longer access areas that used to contain our songlines and stories, or any that may have had significance to us. We cannot hunt there anymore. It is now used for farming, with rows and rows of planted crops and trees. The land is very green, organised and structured to accommodate eventual harvesting.

In the top half of the painting there are two circles, one dark brown with a red centre and one white with a red centre. The dark brown one represents my Dad's mother – my grandmother. The white one represents my Irish grandfather. They fell in love. And their skin may have been different but they had at least one thing in common. Both had red blood.

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KARLA WAANGKINY

It was a balmy summer evening and my son had just stoked the big fire. Even though we were camped nearly a hundred yards away from the river, there was a chilly wind coming directly off the water. I had rugged up with a warm jacket and an old blanket and sat alongside my grandchildren taking in the warmth and marvelling at the patterns created by the sparks that flew into the darkening sky. More sparks flew as my son put even more wood on the fire. The flare-up from the flames made it seem like the Milky Way was within arm's reach.

Except for two boys and a young girl, all my grandchildren were adults, some with children of their own, and those little great-grannies were now sound asleep. It was early summer and Biruk was upon us, so as a family we had travelled down to the Bend, some three miles west of Pinjarra, to camp a few nights and do a bit of fishing.

'So, you young ones looking for a good story about our mob, are you?' I asked.

'Yeah Nan, tell us some ghost stories,' said one of the little ones.

'Well, I'll leave the ghost stories for later, when it gets a bit darker. They will sound so much scarier then. What would you like to know?'

My grandson Bruce said, 'Nan, tell us about your life. You hardly ever let us know what it was like back in the days when you were young.'

I pondered the question for a while, watching the dancing flames. There was so much I could say. To gather my thoughts and to give myself time to consider what to tell them I said, 'On one condition, Bruce. First, you get me a cup of tea and a piece of that dampa your mum made. Make sure to put some quandong jam on it, please.'

After a couple of sips of tea, I began.

'So you want to know about me and my life? Okay, I will tell you part of it. It's about me and my Nyoongar family and our lives in Pinjarra. You gotta realise though, what I tell you is coming from my own experience. It's what I have lived through myself and what I have been told by our old people. Like it or not, it deserves to be respected.

'The main purpose for me telling you now is for your information. You lot. My children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I reckon you all need to know about the past. At least some of the things that I have experienced in my lifetime. Also what my Elders, your ancestors, have been through. It is only some of what our Nyoongar families have had to endure, just to survive.'

For a few moments there was total silence. Then I started to talk, and apart from my voice, the only other sound was the gentle cool breeze every now and then rustling the leaves in the big gum tree.

BLACK AND STRONG

I was born Lavinia Kate Connell in May 1950, almost exactly in the middle of the twentieth century. Nothing extraordinary about that fact. But some of the things I have been through in my life might give you a better understanding and an appreciation of what it's like to be born an Aboriginal female in this place the world calls Australia.

I have to start with my parents because without them I would not be here. My mum was born in 1910. She is a Binjarib woman, a direct descendant of the original Nyoongar people from the Pinjarra area in the south-west of Western Australia. A Binjarib Nyoongar. We consider ourselves coastal plain people and we have a strong spiritual and cultural connection to both fresh water and salt water. Fresh water because we lived right near the bilyah, the river which flowed down from the hills to our east. Salt water because within walking distance of where we lived, the river emptied first into the estuary, then the ocean to the west. It was the perfect location for hunting and fishing throughout the year.

Our mob are the Binjarib traditional and custodial owners. Our ancestry can be traced through both our oral history and the recorded history of the wadjerlar colonists since settlement. It was Mum's people, my ancestors, who were killed by white soldiers at the massacre which took place in Binjarib country at Pinjarra in 1834.

Our stories and songlines, our sacred and special sites, and our very cosmology is deeply imbedded in our Binjarib language, land and cultural knowledge. My mum taught us her Binjarib Nyoongar language, but insisted we never spoke it at school. To the white authorities our language was the devil's own. We risked being taken away from our families if we were ever heard speaking it.

We loved listening to the yarns Mum told. She made us so proud that some of our people had survived the 1834 massacre. How our ancestors had come up against wadjerlar soldiers on horseback, with guns and swords when our maaman only had spears, koondees and boomerangs. Yet despite the overwhelming odds, with many of our people dying, there were those who had lived to pass on to our own children and grandchildren the stories and language for us to share the truth of what happened.

My mum was a very special woman. She was born in Nyoongar Boodja – Nyoongar country – the only sister with five brothers. Like my mum, my uncles passed the Binjarib stories on to their children as well. Of course, their recollections were from a male perspective, but the outcomes all tallied. Each one of her brothers loved Mum and treated her with utmost respect. I have never known any of my five uncles to have said even one angry word to their sister. Ever!

Mum was the keeper of our Binjarib history and stories, a very strong-minded woman, much loved and respected by all her family. Not even government policy could break the family bonds that existed between Mum, her husband, ten children and all her brothers.

One particular policy that really irked Mum related to the citizenship rights papers, as it was referred to among our family at the time. Those Aboriginal people who were given the papers were allowed to enter the pubs and buy alcohol. They were also permitted to be on the streets before the six o'clock morning curfew and after the six o'clock evening curfew. It gave them quite a bit of freedom to go about their business and they were seen

as 'white citizens'. On the downside, anyone granted those papers was not allowed to interact or socialise with other Aboriginal people. Family members included. If caught doing so, they would lose their papers and face jail.

As Mum told us, 'I would never apply to get those papers. I have spent too much of my life being separated from my brothers. First, in New Norcia Mission, and then I was put in Moore River Native Settlement. My brothers and their families are worth more to me than being classified as a white person. I love my family so the government can keep their papers.'

Dad, too, was born in 1910, in the springtime. At least, that was the year the authorities estimated he came into the world. Dad was not a Nyoongar man. His mum, my paternal Nanna Mary, was a Palyku Mulbpa woman from around the Nullagine area. His father was a wayfaring Irishman. Dad was born in the Pilbara on the banks of the Shaw River at Hillside Station. The homestead was not far from Marble Bar, about seventy miles south-west of the small gold mining town, but it was more than nine hundred miles north of Perth. He was taken away from Nanna Mary and sent to Perth when he was very young, about eight years old.

Dad always told us that he first met Mum when he was living in Moore River Native Settlement. Mum had been sent to the same place from New Norcia Mission as a fourteen-year-old when she was deemed old enough to go out and work on the stations.

Although they were never sent to work at the same place, Mum and Dad told us it was really tough working on the stations. He cleared the land, put up fences, broke in horses, rounded up cattle and fixed windmills on the stations where he worked. Mum worked in various homesteads as a housemaid. She kept the homes clean and cooked all the meals for the station owners and their family, sometimes for ten or more people. The hours were long, from

sunrise to sundown, and they were paid a pittance. But my mum and dad were survivors. And they always caught up with each other whenever they were sent back to Moore River Native Settlement if their work ran out on the stations.

As it turned out, government and religious rules proved to be hurdles to their plans for a long-term relationship. Back then, if Aboriginal people wanted to marry, they had to apply to the government, and their respective churches, for permission to do so. When my parents finally married in 1934, after years of red tape, they shared a whole lot of love, mutual respect, appreciation and tolerance for each other, and it endured over their years together.

As Dad often told us, 'I met the love of my life at Moore River Native Settlement when I was fourteen years old, back in nineteen twenty-four. From that day onwards, I knew your mother was the only one for me. I have never regretted marrying that beautiful girl.'

Theirs was a love story that lasted more than fifty years. Right up until he died in August 1992, many years after Mum, who passed away in 1975, he still proclaimed his love for her.

Apart from his own children and our mum, Dad had no other immediate family living around Pinjarra. From time to time he was visited by our people from up north. And though it was usually very late when they turned up, Dad always walked to our fence line to talk with them. Mum warned us kids not to stickybeak when we tried to sneak a glimpse of them standing out in the moonlight talking with Dad. From what I could barely hear, the men spoke in a language I couldn't understand. Mum said it was 'men's business'.

I realised later that us kids were multicultural even in our own country. Binjarib Nyoongar, Palyku Mulbpa and Irish. When tracing our family tree, very early mention is also made of an American ancestor who sailed here and married a Nyoongar woman from the Albany region. Another interesting fact Mum often told us was that her great-great-grandmother was of Chinese heritage. In the

features of some of my siblings there is definitely a strong Asian influence.

Ancestry aside, to the Australian government back then we were classified as Aboriginal. Since colonisation, our people had been through some traumatic times with very limited freedom to do what we wanted. Even as adults, government policy dictated everything we did – and you will find this story is full of them. The rules applied to everyone, and authorities made sure they were diligently enforced. Our people had to be strong just to survive.

OUR OLD PLACE

There were some good times in my young life and my childhood was a happy one. There was Mum and Dad, four older sisters – Jane, Lucy, Verna and Rita – and four older brothers – Trevor, Jono, Edwin and Clem, before me. Then there was one little sister, Hannah, born after me. I was surrounded by family and never short of company. Mum's brother, Uncle Levi and his wife, Aunty May, and their family of nine children, including Gertie, Rhona and Claude, lived close by, so there were plenty of first cousins around.

Our families were always under the watchful eye of the local police. If our people wanted to travel to another place, for whatever reason, they had to check with the munartj. They had to tell them where and why they were going, if they would be staying with anyone and when they would be back. Should anyone not report their movements, they could be arrested. If they had children and that happened, the koolungahs could be forcibly removed.

Life was pretty tough for all Nyoongars, but Mum and Dad managed to make a good, safe home for their family. Soon after moving to Pinjarra – a sheep and dairy cattle farming district about fifty miles south of Perth – Dad found work clearing the land on various farms. At times he and Mum lived on the farms in sheds or makeshift dwellings. Other times they lived in tents. By 1950, just before I was born and after six years of moving from place to place, Dad had enough money saved to actually purchase a five-

acre block of land. By hand, he cleared it of trees and bushland and built a three-bedroom house on it for his family.

Our home was made out of wooden upright planks with strong interior beams that supported a galvanised tin roof. The house itself was a pretty simple structure of three rooms, plus there was a passage down the centre with a kitchen area which had an open fireplace leading into a wide chimney.

We had no electricity or running water. In order to get light and fresh air inside, the windows were a hinged tin flap, pushed out and supported by a piece of wood to hold it open. There were two windows in the front and two windows at the back. To ensure our safety, each night the flaps were let down and tightly secured with a lock. Even during the day, if no one was home, the flaps would be shut tight. Our family didn't have fancy things, but Mum and Dad wanted to protect what we did have.

For the first few years, our house had a grey bare-earth floor that looked like it was made with compacted ant hills. Later Dad filled that area with cement. An open fire and kerosene lamps gave light at night-time. About eighty yards from the house there was a deep well, dug out by Dad and Uncle Levi, and that provided us with clean, clear water that was carted to the house in metal buckets. We never even heard of a fridge until our parents purchased a kerosene refrigerator. Before that, in order to keep our food cold, Mum used a lightweight metal cupboard, or 'meat safe', to hold the perishable food. It would be covered with wet hessian bags and suspended from a wooden beam in the house near a window, or even outside from a tree. Similar to a canvas water bag, whenever a breeze blew, it would cool the contents of the safe. Dad said it was a 'Coolgardie cooler'.

Television was a decade away but it made little difference to us because we didn't have electricity. We did listen to an old portable radio, but Dad mainly tuned into the parliamentary debates on the ABC radio broadcasts and that was boring to us kids. Mostly we

read cowboy books or comics – *The Phantom* and *Adventures of Billy Bunter* – and the English *Women's Weekly* magazine that Mum ordered every week from the local newsagent.

An old outhouse, or goonamia, with a shit bucket, was built about three hundred yards from the house. Once full, the waste was taken another hundred yards further away by Dad, and later by my older brothers, and buried. Living conditions were pretty rough, but Dad and Mum managed to raise us ten kids right there on our property.

Along with Mum, Dad and us ten kids, we had a female dog named Gypsy, fifteen chooks and three geese. We also had a big vegie garden. Every autumn Mum planted different vegetables and some flowers and, come spring, we'd have the best Nyoongar garden in town.

The men in our family and our extended family had spears and fishing lines. Uncle Levi also had several big dogs for hunting kangaroos and rabbits. Sometimes the blokes walked for miles but they always came back with enough rabbit, possum and kangaroo meat for both families. Plus, Dad was always working and earning money and Mum made sure most of that went into paying the bills and keeping our cupboards full, so we hardly ever went hungry.

Because we were Nyoongars, the government decreed that the house and land could not be situated any closer than a mile from the local post office. No black person was allowed to own land or live any nearer than that to the post office in town. As youngsters, none of us kids knew about that rule or cared. We considered our family to be lucky, even though it meant a long walk to school and the shops if we needed anything.

My Uncle Levi and Aunty May had purchased a block of land just north of Dad's property and they looked after their family of nine children the same way. To me their house always seemed bigger than ours, with its extra rooms and a front verandah. Because it was close to our place, company was never far away. Uncle Levi was

Mum's oldest brother. She also had four younger brothers but she and Uncle Levi were really close. Being Nyoongars and kept under close and rigorous scrutiny by the government policies of the time, both had come through some very tough years in their early lives. And though Dad had five brothers-in-law, there was an obvious friendship between all of them.

At the time of my growing-up years, those same government policies, introduced soon after colonisation, still had an enormous impact on my parents' lives. In so many instances, those policies continued to dictate a lot how we kids were brought up by Mum and Dad, especially what we could and could not do. It was like all our Nyoongar families had to walk on tenterhooks in case it even seemed we might break some law related to us.

These polices created problems when our menfolk found jobs on farms and had to travel away from Pinjarra each day to get to them. A number of my uncles and older male cousins, who had to travel on the train to get to work before six in the morning, had to get special permission from the local sergeant. In those days, they often had to catch a ride on the goods train going through our town at four or five in the morning. They had to report their weekly whereabouts to the local munartj and get written approval for all their movements outside curfew hours.

Our men were not criminals, just hard-working blokes trying to earn some money to support their wives and children. Times were very hard for everyone in the 1950s, but it was made so much more difficult just because we were Aboriginal.