

A Refreshing Sleep

Kim Scott

*Ngaitj K— ngoordiny nooketiny kaat kwetj daarab koorlin ...
Last night I slept at the massacre site, and woke up much refreshed.*

The man paused, pen in hand. His two sentences surprised him; the first, in a language few could read and in which words came slower than drawing, was more like painting than writing. And then the second sentence – not a true translation, though most apt – came so quickly.

True, he did feel refreshed. That was the surprise.
How those words had bubbled up, spilled out.

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It was more than he'd written in a long time. He resumed his drawing. The soft scratch of the pencil soothed, and he drew the interlocking stone of the old homestead, the sheets of rusting iron and timber beams propped in yellowing stubble. He drew the land sloping down to the line of trees marking the creek. Later he would draw the spring there, how the water bubbled within the low walls built so many years before. But he did not yet know the spring, nor the bones buried along the sandy creek banks.

Last night he and his cousin had studied the full moon's face.
Leanne had handed him binoculars. Here, Warren, she said.
Take a look.

A bright bone face shining through a shredded belt of clouds.
How you feel, sleeping here where all our old people died?

He'd thought about that, of course. People said it was a spirty place, because of all that killing, an evil place for the likes of them.

But, he told his cousin, it happened over a hundred years ago ... If I'm related to the people killed here, I reckon they'd be happy to see me back.

When I was a child, Leanne told him, and they showed me the chips in the wall the spears made, I never knew it was my own people throwing spears.

And the people shooting ... They your people too, unna?

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The old man had opened a padlock, and led them into the house.

No electricity, he said.

My brother was living here right up until he died, the old man told them. Then we rented it out. They fixed it up like this, he said, waving his torch.

A number of computer components stacked along one wall.

That's what he did for a crust, repairing them.

The torch and the old man's words revealed details one at a time, spot-lit in the darkness: a chair; a checked vinyl table cloth; a number of bottles, each with a candle inserted.

They lit some of the candles.

A doorway. Curtains, more doors.

Outside again, the old man pointed out the little hut that was the toilet, a rainwater tank next to it.

Use a bucket of water to flush the toilet, he said. Tank's right there.

The old farmer left them. He rattled away, and the two of them, Leanne and Warren, stood at the door and watched the tail-lights like two red eyes retreating among the trees. A chill wind crossed the paddock behind them, came past the old stone homestead and followed those red lights down to the creek.

They looked up at the bone of moon.

Warren entered a bedroom, his candle feeble in the darkness, and the flickering light glinting in the low sash-window might

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have showed a face looking in: a cheeky spirit creature, ready to make trouble; a skull.

The candle light showed a well-made bed, and he fell backwards into a long warm sleep. Waking up he felt – as written – very refreshed.

The sun, barely up, hid behind clouds that coated the dome of sky. Warren scribbled on paper by the back doorstep. The cold wind made his eyes weep.

In daylight it was easy to see that the house was only a few rooms: a lounge room front and centre, a bedroom each side and a kitchen out back. Beside the kitchen another (locked) room. Storage, he guessed.

He went and knocked at his cousin's door. No answer. Peeked in: bags were packed beside the bed. She must be down at the creek, he thought, must've got up early and gone for a walk. Must be ready to be gone.

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They had walked the homestead yesterday afternoon, Leanne showing the way. The shearing shed seemed almost a cathedral, with two immense stone walls at each end, steps leading *up* to the floor, and a high, vaulted roof.

They're very religious, the Wartons, his cousin said. You'll see for yourself tonight when we eat.

The pioneer's grave was a concrete block not much larger than a coffin, broken and folded at the middle. A little sunken, it was surrounded by weeds and a faded, peeling picket fence. There was an inscription:

*William Skelly
Killed by Natives 1880*

Fifty metres away, perhaps less, the creek curved around and Look, said Leanne, how high it's been. Her trailing hand revealed the texture of debris caught and woven among the trees in horizontal lines like something intended, like something made for their visit. The flood level was clearly marked. They walked across a grey-pink and succulent groundcover. *Payn*, the woman said for her cousin's benefit, plucking the knobby remnant of a

flower and putting it into her mouth. Looking back from a clearing high on the bank the man saw tussocks and tufts of grass interspersed between rocky pools, and drifts of sand patterned by different rhythms: wind; the trailing leaves of trees; grass; animals; flood.

Mangart, his cousin said as they entered among small, thin-trunked trees. Jam tree. For a moment, in the grey light, Warren felt as if he stood among a crowd of stiff-spined old warriors, the leaves trembling despite themselves.

Used to be a lot of sandalwood growing with all these, she said. Gone now, but jam tree's good for fence posts.

Wouldn't need much cutting, the man offered. Because he could see the fence posts, waiting to be trimmed to the right length.

Hard wood too. Termite don't touch 'em.

Then she added: Someone showed me a grave here once, in among all this *mangart*. We followed a line of rocks straight to a clearing same size as a grave and these jam trees standing in a circle around it.

The two cousins looked, but they couldn't see rocks in a line or a small clearing among the jam trees. So they followed an old fence back to the creek bed, the posts stepping back down the bank one, two, three ... No wire linking them. Scavenged? Rusted? Swept away in some flood?

The creek bed curved again and the man's eye was caught by a tall tree perhaps half a kilometre away where a bird – remarkable for its size, even at this distance – was watching from one of the boughs.

Eagle, the woman laughed. Keeping an eye on us, unna?

She sang in the language of which he knew only a few words. And translated.

A bird singing. I wonder does he sing for me, or who, what?

Then, seeing his face: that's for us, you too.

Where'd you learn that?

Oh, lotta work. Old people.

I never knew. There are songs, still? I been learning, you know, I go to classes, I hunt them out. I got some books ... But eagle don't sing.

No. Not eagle. Curlew. Lotta people scared. They say the

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curlew's death bird. But it's us, ours. Curlew only signals death if he runs right into your campfire. But there's a lot of bullshit too. You can say anything to *wadjelas*.

Then they went to the Wartons' place, to share food under their roof, under our night sky, under that bony moon.

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Leanne drove. She knew the Wartons, had stayed with them when she was a child.

Their headlights picked out a car in a shed, and what must be the house behind a copse of trees. Thin lines of yellow outlined the windows and a jagged, flickering orange light was fire brimming in half an iron drum. Gravel crunched under their feet. They heard muffled singing, a piano. Leanne knocked, called at the door, which opened, and they were pulled into a small hallway. Their eyes were all for her. Warren looked around. A guitar, mandolin and banjo were propped against a piano. Large sheets of paper were stuck to the walls, and hymn lyrics written in thick pen. There was a pin-up board of clippings and old photographs of pioneers, so very stiff in their family groups, standing close to their horses and carts.

Electric light shone upon rough stone walls, yet the corners of the room were cobwebbed with darkness.

Long time no see, said Mr Warton, holding Leanne's hands, pulling her close. Not quite hugging. My cousin, she introduced him. The men shook hands. Mrs Warton nodded her head, quickly explained that she did not like to stand too close to people. She stood with her body at an angle, her head turned away, only glancing at her listeners as she spoke. A young couple, perhaps twenty years old, came and stood beside her.

Peter, Becky, said Mr Warton. They're staying with us, from the church.

While the others were talking Mrs Warton said, as she quickly brushed past Warren: You follow God?

No.

I'll get the salad together. She handed a tray of meat to her husband. The barbeque should be ready.

It was a comfort to go outside, to stand around the flames.

You made this yourself?

A barrel of fire, and a heavy hotplate of iron that pivoted over it. At the edge of firelight, a cat watching them.

Leanne helped Mrs Warton in the kitchen. Mr Warton – call me Robby – moved the meat around, introduced another man who'd walked from the darkness as his older brother, Noel.

Meat sizzled.

Noel is a painter,

Oh, not for a long time now.

You'll see his paintings inside, some of them.

The meat spat, fire crackled. The cat arched its back.

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Noel was visibly surprised when he saw Leanne. Mrs Warton came in quickly, sideways but direct.

Oh, weren't you here then? We looked after Leanne when she was just a little girl. She spent years and years with us, when her grandfather got sick.

What is it, twenty years ago?

Twenty five.

Seven of them sat around the table. They bowed their heads as Robby said grace. The legs of the table were thick, the timber heavy beneath the plastic tablecloth, its red and white checks. None of the plates matched. The very large print of hymns surrounded them.

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild

Tho I walk in the valley of death

Lead me Jesus lead me ...

After grace the young boy, Peter, read some passages from the Bible.

Then Noel spoke for some time. The certainty of your holy word, he said. Our conviction and faith in your word.

The meat was on a metal tray, under a metal lid. Thin, transparent plastic sealed the salad. There were rough stone walls and hymns. The room seem smaller than before.

And then they were passing food around the table, then they were eating.

Yes, we looked after quite a few Aboriginal children, from time to time. White children too.

They drank fruit juice.

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The man said it seemed very green as they drove down. Very green.

Ah yes, we've had good rain.

The woman had told her cousin she hoped the Wartons would not ask about her husband, her marriage or the church. She did not want to hurt them. She would feel embarrassed, ashamed of her failure.

But it's not a failure, necessarily, he'd offered.

They would see it that way, and I'd feel it.

But the Wartons never asked.

It's green, yes. Lot of birds. Mallee hen are returning. There's a few around again. And curlews, there used to be a lot of them, one time. We'd see them in the dark, in a circle around our camp, their eyes shining in the firelight.

The cousins' glances ricocheted from one another.

And emus, emus are nesting.

Robby was talking to the young boy and girl about Leanne, this Aboriginal woman they'd fostered when she was a little girl, who they'd been so very close to. And who had now brought her cousin to meet them. He said that several times. Said to his wife he was only talking because people mightn't know these things about the bush, and a lot of people were interested these days.

We are all more enlightened nowadays, and would like to know more.

The male sits on the eggs, he said. Funny things, emus. They run in a straight line when you chase them.

His smile was higher one side, and he tilted his head to make it more so.

They'll stick to the track, and if you're in a car behind them you can get so close you feel their legs knocking against the front of the car. They can't turn away.

Warren wondered if they'd be asked to sing hymns. But it was suddenly got very late and the Wartons had a long way to drive in the morning, had to get up early for mass.

Oh, you went out to K— today? Noel said, when Robby spoke of their visitors, this woman and her cousin planning to spend the night at the old homestead.

A lot of Aboriginal people say it's taboo, even in town. They don't like it.

Speaking to Leanne, his gaze flickered over Warren.

I'd always heard, Leanne said. But I never dreamt it might be my own family, or related ...

Did you find the bubbling spring? Noel asked. You can drink it, if you want. Got a lot of minerals in it, he said. Sheep drink it no problems. The pigs fairly thrived; they got very fat.

The paintings on the walls were of horses, some attached to carts and coaches. Horses drank from a painted stream, and one or two trees leaned over them in the dripping golden light.

Warren and Leanne had found their vehicle in the dark, and followed Robby Warton to the homestead. They'd watched red eyes retreat in the darkness, considered the moon. Had stumbled with candles, slept in their separate rooms.

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Now it was morning, and Warren looked up from his page. He thought he'd heard someone calling.

Leanne was waving from down by the creek.

Found the pool, his cousin said, when he reached her. She'd walked up the slope toward him.

It's not far, and how did he find the company last night?

Oh, a bit strange. I don't know many church people. Not like that.

No.

They know the place well though. The natural environment. And when they said that about the curlews, I thought of you singing the song.

Yes, she laughed. And the emus. They're vermin down this way. I remember, from when I was here. You never think, you know. But people would drive up close behind them, like he said, and you can hear their legs knocking the roo bar. They run right over the top of them. You can kill a lot of emus that way.

They came to where the creek was coarse sand, the banks almost like dunes. And like the sand of a city beach after a party, this was covered with footprints, and more.

Wow, lotta roos, and emus.

They studied at the prints.

Lizards ... Plenty of life about then. Tiny prints of birds. Snake.

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Grass and shrubs had drawn circles around themselves where they touched the ground with the wind.

The spring is this way.

They made their way around tussocks of spiky grass, banks of reeds and still pools of water. Sometimes a thin stream could be seen winding from one pool to another, but mostly the pools, like themselves, were isolated, united only by the lay of the land, the otherwise dry creek bed.

And then there was a low wall, less than waist high, of rocks cemented together to make a small well.

See?

The water was clear, cold. Small bubbles rose to the surface, and a circle regularly rose, swelled in a smooth curve, gently broke. Something beneath the surface, something held within the water's skin, needing release.

Forever brimming and spilling over the wall, water ran down the stone and became a tiny stream pushing through the damp sand. Sometimes it disappeared, but where the gravel track vehicles used to get to the homestead it was calf-deep, and several strides wide.

It persisted, sometimes unseen, running from pool to pool, now whispering: *Baalap nitja ngoordiny nooketiny.*

They slept here.

A very fine steam of water pushing grains of soil aside, following the way water had always flowed, keeping a little path for itself.

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Imagine, the man said, what it was like.

It was all those prints in the sand got them thinking this way. And the bubbling spring, of course. They followed the creek bed, often glancing up toward the unseen homestead.

They never camped too close to water, said Leanne.

Oh?

Well, mozzies and midgies for one thing. And where kangaroo and that would come and you wouldn't want to scare them.

The many different footprints in the sand.

And not to foul the water, I guess.

Except maybe for a special occasion, a ceremony or something.

But of course they were only guessing. Only imagining.

And so they walked back up the slope to the homestead: solid stone warming in the sun, windows overlooking that bubbling spring somewhere at their backs. They packed up. It was a long drive back to the city. Home.

Barely over the crossing, the wheels dripping water from the shallow creek, the man said, Look.

A mallee hen.

Oh. Thought they'd gone.

No. Remember, he said last night.

He slowed the car, stopped. The mallee hen stood before the car, facing them.

Hey! The woman was pointing. Another one.

A second mallee hen stood a few metres away, looking at them. Warren opened the car door, and the mallee hens turned and nonchalantly trotted deeper into the stunted, jam-tree forest.

Might be a nest, a what they call it ...? A mound.

Warren was out of the car, following the same small track the mallee hen had taken. He imagined the mallee hens' nest close by, that towering mound in a clearing. Twigs caught at his clothes, and he had to bend, crouch a little, but no matter, the pad was clear enough. He turned to see the way he'd come and already could not make out road or car. It would be easy to get lost in here. Lost in his own country. Shame, if he let that happen. It was very grey among these trees, trees not so much larger than him, grey with the bark and the heavily filtered light, and each tree spiked with bare twigs. The forest floor was sand and leaf litter. Pads, like the one he had followed, ran in different directions but too small for him to follow. As he turned to make his way back to the car, he saw an irregular shape on the forest floor. A tiny clearing, and the shape was ... Oh, it was the size of a grave, and seemed to glow, a sort of pale, almost phosphorescent grey-green. The shape of two bodies turned to one another, perhaps. He bent, and plucked at the tiny plants. Rubbery almost, resilient. A lichen of some sort? A piece came easy from the soft earth and he slipped it into the pocket of his shirt, and rushed back along the way he had come, ducking, crouching, surprising himself with the sense of something like panic in his breast.

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The woman's face lightened when she saw him emerge from the trees.

We need to be moving, to get home by dark.

That was amazing.

The Wartons said they were coming back, mallee hen.

Yes, but two! And they didn't want to run.

Well, they're nesting I guess. A couple like that.

I thought I might find the nest. Nothing, but. Thought I was gunna get lost, soon as I got off the road.

He started to tell her of the strange flower, but they were interrupted by emus – heads tall, high-stepping, leaning on one another – racing across the road not far in front of them. The birds ran up the soft bank, soil flying behind them, and then were gone, had melted into the yate trees gathered at this corner of the road.

Vermin, they call them here. Something they don't really want.

They drove into a tunnel of trees: tufts of leaves and the bark peeling back from thin, strong limbs.

Emerging, they glimpsed the black strip of bitumen, and the sky opened above them as they arrived at the gate. Two eagles perched there held their gaze. Opened their wings and lifted themselves heavily into the air, insisting.

Leanne and Warren burst into laughter, craned their heads to see the birds spiralling up into the grey sky. In moments they were enveloped in a sound like rushing tyres on bitumen, inside the wind like a car driven at speed.

*Kedalak ngaytj K— ngoordiny nooketiny kaat kwetj darapin bardlanginy
Night-time I (massacre site) lay down, slept, head bone inside travelling.*

Westerly