

Chapter 1

Childhood

*In 1934, when Minyjun was born in the dry creek bed of the Nullagine River near Warrawagine Station in the north-eastern Pilbara region of Western Australia, his parents and elder siblings had only recently arrived in the area from their homelands around Lake Waukarlykarly and Karlamilyi, the Rudall River, in the Great Sandy Desert. They referred to themselves as Ngulipartu, a subgroup of Nyangumarta-speaking people whose traditional country extended over 'an area from the south and east of Lake Waukarlykarly (towards Telfer) northwards to a long string of claypans that lie east of Sandfire, and which reach over 120 km into the Great Sandy Desert.'*³

In undertaking the journey west from their homeland, Minyjun's family was taking part in a larger population migration which had begun in the late nineteenth century, and which would continue until the 1960s. Over these decades, Nyangumarta people made the decision to leave their homelands to travel in small family groups northward to the pastoral regions of the Kimberley, or west to the pastoral and mining regions of the Pilbara. The journey may have taken several years, with families staying at permanent waterholes during the dry season and continuing their westward journey following rain when seasonal waterholes were full.

Having arrived on the edge of sheep and cattle station country, many families appear to have spent a period of time camped at waterholes such as Jukawalyi and Jirrirrikartinya on the Oakover River, taking in their new surroundings and the new animals and people they encountered there. It was while his family were camped on the edge of the station country that Minyjun and his sister were born, one day apart, to each of the two wives of their father. During this stage of their journey the newly arrived families met with local Nyamal-speaking people, and with people speaking a variety of Nyangumarta known as Walyarli, who told them what they needed to know about their new environment. For many it was their first encounter with the European Australians who had first moved into that area of the country in the second half of the nineteenth century. They called the Europeans walypila, 'whitefellas', and used the Nyangumarta word marrngu, meaning 'person', to refer to themselves as Aboriginal people.

When they felt confident to do so, desert families joined the station workforce on stations such as Warrawagine, which, located at the edge of the desert, accommodated a large population of new arrivals. While some remained working there, others, such as Minyjun's family, moved on after a short stay, joining family members on other stations, or taking employment with prospectors and miners in the small mining towns such as Marble Bar and Nullagine, and on the scattered mining fields. Alternatively, some scratched an independent living digging gold or tin in areas such as the tin field at Moolyella, near Marble Bar.

Like other Aboriginal children growing up on Pilbara sheep and cattle stations in the 1930s and 1940s, Minyjun received no formal schooling. Instead, he received training to prepare him for an anticipated life as an Aboriginal stockman, and became, while still a child, a part of an Aboriginal labour force that was crucial to the operation of pastoral stations.

Kakarni milpanyiyi pirraja

Wunyjurru wanikinyiyi pirraja kulumarniny.

Jartanga-jartangarra wanikinyiyi ngapanga-ngapangarrangu, yintangarrangu. Kuyikartipa yanikinyiyi wuntajinikinyiyiya minyjinikinyiyi wuntanga kuyi wirlikinyiyajaninyi. Yanikinyiyi mirrarnputu ngurnarringi wanikinyiyi. Kulpanyikinyiyi ngurrakarti ruka, ngurrarrangukarti janamilikarti palajun. Yimpinikinyiya ngurlukupa wunyjurru waninyaku ngurlukarra wanyjarningi yintanga palanga yanikinyiyi. Palakarti yulyajinikinyiya pala wanyjarni milpanyikinyiyi wiyirr ngurnarrija: kakarni, karangu, yalinyu palanga wanikinyiyi ngurlukarra. Palajun, karrpurrangu karrpu ngurnipali wanikinyiyi palajun.

Ngurlukarra jipi wurrarikinyiyarningu kulpanyikinyiyi ngurrarrangukarti. Palajun. Warajanga wanikinyiyi. Wani-wanikinyiyi palakurtirri janamilingi warrarnja.

Yartikarla yimpirn-yimpirniya wurrarnayarningu milpanyaku yakujarniku. Palanga ngajumili mamajipa kangkuji pirrangarra *born-jarrinyi*. Palajun. Ngajumajirringi yijangarra yimpirn-yimpirniya yanayi karakurnu; *now* yanayi ngarramarnti jipi. Jinta marrngu milpanyiyi walangkarrangu yakujarni mayakarti, kulpanyiya wurrarniyijanaku ngalya wurrupa kalkunayi marrngulu martumpirripa yinganyayijaninya. Yakarnaya janamili warrarn. Katu-katukarnayi kurilakurti yalinyakurti jinta kakarni, mayarrangukarti *now*.

Palan katukarnayi, munumpa jana. Yirrirniyi pala pinyji nyarra, *rabbit-proof fence* yirrirniyi. Ngani nyungayi yirrirniyi? Partal karntikinyiyi. Janalu wurruparnpinikinyiya ngurnarrikarti, yukurrupa parnpinikinyiyijaninya. Partanykarrangu wirrinikinyiyijaninyi. Karntikinyiyi palanga pinyjingi. Karntikinyiyi katukanikinyiyi ngurnarrikarti. Palajun pala.

Yijangarra milpanyiyijanaku kaninyipirntingi marrngungu. Jinta muwarrpinikinyiyi Nyamal, Nyiyaparli, munumpa. Kakunikinyiyijaninyi muwarrja. Nyangumarta pinakarrinyiyijaninyi muwarrja, karramarnayi Nyangumartarla nyungu muwarrpinayi nganyjurrupakan. Pala *now* Nyangumarta, Walyarri Nyangumarta, *Coast* Nyangumarta. Palajun yija. Ngaany ngurnungu ngalypajarrinyi, 'marrngu nyungu nganyjurrupakanngarra'. Nyangumartarla muwarrpinayi wurrarnarninya. Puntaju pinakarrinyiyijaninyi Nyangumarta *again* kakarnija. Ngalya *again*, ngaany ngalypajarrinyi. Milyangkulpa waninyi, nganirrangu wurrarnayarninya: Milangka, Purungu, Karimarra, Panaka. Yinkujiniyarninya palajun.

Kulumarniny nganarnamili pirraja wanikinyiyi warajanga, kakarni katukarnayi jartanga-jartanga Mangarlapa Ngulipartu, Nyangumarta, Warnman, Kartujarra, Manyjilyjarra. Nganarnamilalu kulumarninyju warrarn yakarnaya janamili pirra. Yanayi jurtu kakarni jinta yalinyakurti, jinta Jigalong kurilakurti ngalparra kakarni katukarnayi. Jinta marrngu kulumarniny yalinyakurti pirraja katukanikinyiyi Jirrpayinyakarti, jinta jurtu kakarni katukanikinyiyi, jinta kurilakurtiji palajun. Pipipa japartu ngajumili kulumarninyrrangu wiyirr nganarnamili milpanyiyi. Ngajumili jamujipa kamiiji, pipi muwarr Ngulipartu Nyangumarta, ngajumili japartu Pijakarla Nyangumarta. Ngajumili pipi Yantikujingi mirarljarrinyi, japartu ngajumili mirarljarrinyi yalinyakurnupa kakarrakurnu Karlamilyingi.

Pulanyju kurrngalngarra kanyapulujaninyi Wirriparnankarti palanga wani-wanikinyiyi. Munumpa jana muwarrku walypilamilikupa wariny marrngu kaninyipirti wanikinyiyi. Jana ngurrara marrngu. Marrngungarra jana muwarr warinyipirti Nyamal, Walyarli Nyangumarta. Jana walangkarrangupukun kakarni milpanyiyi pirraja munumpa walypilaku, kuwarrijakun yirrirniyijaninyi kawu mirtamirta. Ngurinjikarrikinyiyijanaku walypilaku munu palajunmarta yirrirnimiyijaninyi, juljulu jana karramanikinyiyi, nganija nganyjurru kawu warrukurla, jana mirtamirta kawu warinyin?

Coming in

This is the way my forebears lived in the desert.

Families used to live a long way from each other, all at different waterholes. When they hunted they would set fire to the spinifex plain and kill the animals on the burnt ground. They used to go out hunting all day and then in the evening they'd go back to their homes. They talked about Law and ceremony; how they were going to stage it, and at which waterhole they would hold it. They would go there to prepare the *ngurlu* place and everyone would come in from across the country: from the east, the west and the north, and they would live there for the time of the ceremony. That's how it was; that's how they lived, all their lives.

ngurlu
Restricted ceremony, literally 'fear'.

When they'd agreed that the ceremonies could end they all went back to their different homes. They all lived as one society, way out there in their own country.

Later however they started to talk about coming in this way. By that time my brothers and sisters had been born out there in the desert. Before I was born they talked about coming in to the west, and when they came in they came permanently. Others who had gone before them into the station country, had returned and told them of all the good things they had there, and of the food they'd been given. They left their own country; some came out to the south, some headed north and some came here from the east, into station country.

They wanted to come in but they knew nothing about the outside world. They came across that fence out there, they came up against the rabbit-proof fence. What was this they'd found? They couldn't get over it. So they threw all their things over, their dogs and all. They put their children over, and then they all climbed the fence; they climbed up and over to the other side.

Then they started to meet up with Aboriginal people who already lived there, people who spoke Nyamal and Niyaparli, languages my family couldn't understand. But some of them spoke Nyangumarta, they understood our Nyangumarta and they could speak Nyangumarta as well, like us. The Nyangumarta they spoke was Walyarli, or Coastal Nyangumarta, and it gave my family a good feeling to hear people speaking their own language.⁴ They thought, 'These people are really just like us', because they could talk to each other in Nyangumarta. Those people could understand the Nyangumarta of the people from the east, and that made them feel good. They introduced each other and they talked about all sorts of things, like what skin they were: Purungu, Milangka, Karimarra and Panaka. So then they knew how to relate to one another.

Our forebears used to live as one society out in the desert, but they came from the east to different places: they came as Mangarla people, Ngulipartu Nyangumarta people, Warnman, Kartujarra and Manyjilyjarra-speaking people. Our forebears left their country out in the desert. One after the other they came in from the east, some went north, some went down south as far as Jigalong. Some of those old people who came out of the desert went north to Jirrpayinya⁵, some came this way from the east, and some headed south. My parents and all our forebears came in like this. My mother's parents, *jamuji* and *kamiji*, and my mother spoke Ngulipartu Nyangumarta and my father spoke Pijakarla Nyangumarta. My mother had been born at Yantikuj⁶ and my father was born in the country north-east of there, at Karlamilyi, the Rudall River.

My parents brought their whole family to Wirriparnan (Barramine Station), and they lived there for a while. They didn't understand the *walypila* language but there were other *marrngu* people there already, the original occupants, who spoke Nyamal and Walyarli, or Coastal Nyangumarta. Those people who first came out of the desert from the east had never seen *walypila*, and now they were seeing people with white skins for the first time. They were intrigued by them when they first saw them and wondered, our skin is dark, how come theirs is pale?

Kuyipa wapina nganikinyiyi yarrkalju. Jana kukurnjariku munumpa, wirlanikinyijianinyi kanganyikinyiyi mirrarnkarti kampanaku. Kukurnjarijartiny ruka-ruka murlajartiny ngurrakarti kulpanyiyi. Ngurnipali janalu wurrarikinyiya, kuyiminyirrikapan marrngumili; nyungukarlarti walypilamili. Munurla nyungu yirrinikinyijianinyi warajanga wanikinyiyi kurrngal mirrarn wirtu mirrarnja nyarrakurnujirri. Nyarra yulupirti mirrarnja ngapanga wangka parrpakarra, rukaku mimanikinyiya warrijirringi yanikinyiyi wirrpa palajun ngananyaku.

Pala maaja yanikinyi winmalkarti, marrngu yirrinikinyijianinyi kukurnjarija yirtilmanaja ngalypangarra yakanikinyijaninya. Yarti wurrarnajanaku, munu ngulyulu wirlanaku kukurnjari, pala walypilamili jarntu.

Nyamalju wurrarnayijanaku, 'Nganarnalu munu wirlanakayirnijianinyi, tuku jinayirnijianinyi. Ngawuja yarranyurrulu jinmurntu warrarn warinykarti'. Palajun nyungu jana munumpa kukurnjariku kakarnija marrngu wapira yanikinyiyi. Yukurrulu pajinikinyijianinyi kukurnjari wupartu yirlamu yirtilmanakanu. Taki wirlanikinyijianinyi yurlukulu jalarnja jinakanu kanganyikinyiyi, pipimarniny warntaranga kanganyikinyiyi mirrarnkartilu kampanikinyiyi yawungu. Jinyjilu kawu yangkanikinyiyarninyi junturtu palajun. Yija, jana ngakumpa kuyiminyirrikapan. Janalu wurrarniyijanaku, 'Nyungu wirlanaku kukurnjari walypilamilirti jarntu: ngulyuja maninyajapa wirlanaja janakurra walypila kunymanikinyijaninyi karlungarnarralu. Maajalu manikinyi karlungarnarra muwarr ngakanikinyalu.'

Walypila jinta ngalypakata, walypila jinta kulikata. Palanga marrngu kakarnija warrkamukupa muwarrku walypilamiliku miranujarrikinyiya, yija. Palajun, winmaluku yarnimanaku, piinyikupa yarnimanaku, jarlingajinaku yawartaku manganja, nganin-nganirnku walypilamiliku jinaku. Palajun yartapa marrngulu yarnimanikinyijianinyi; maajalu: 'nyurra manikinyijaninyi warrkamuja ngalypa,' wurrarnikinya, pikalyjarrikinyi pala maaja. Palinyju wurrarikinyijianinyi ngakumpakapan; nyungu yijarti ngalypajinikinyiyi.

Nyungu jinta marrngu warrkamujarrikinyiyi, jinta marrngu wanikinyiyi ngatu ngurranga, jinta pingka yanikinyiyi kuyikarti. Walypila yirrinajalu wirnti mirtijinikinyiyi ngurnarrkartilu murrurlungulu. Wungkanikinyiyalu parrjanikinyiyi pala maaja yani-yaninyaja winmalja kulpanyikinyi yanikinyi warinykarti winmalkarti. Jana kulpanyikinyiyi minpinaku ngapaku pururli minpinikinyiyi ngapa. Yija, ngakumpa nganarnamili kurlumarniny palajun. Warajanga wanikinyiyi mayanga Warrukanyanga, yarti janalu jinta-jintapirniyarninyi yanayi wirrpa mayarrangukarti palajun.

Malyurtapa murrkangunya partanyirri yanapulu wirlarnapulujaninyi rawalpa maruntu, kulpanya yanapulu winmalkarti winujartiny. Minpirnipulu ngapa *trough*-ja. Munu minpinamapulu *tank*-ja ngapa tirlkungu. Wangal milpanya, pala winmal rurrijipirni warrkamjarrikinyi marrja. Palaja manapulujaninyi kuyirrangu mirtijirnipulu martukarti, wungkanikinyipula martungulu murtukaku. Pulanyju wurrarnapula, 'maajaku ngurnipali muwarr ngakarnalu'. Pulanyju parrjanikinyipulu winmal warrkamjarrikinyi, maaja munu milpama. Kulpanyapulujanaku mirrarnkarti kurlumarninykarti, palanga kampana nganayi kuyirrangu.

Wirriparanja yarti pipipa japartu ngajumili yanapulu Warrukanyakarti, palanga wanikinyiyi kuyikarra kurila Warrukanyanga Wanyjilakartanyanga.

People would go out hunting on day trips. They didn't know about sheep and would kill them and take them into the shade and cook them. They would return to camp in the evening with the cooked mutton. They thought it was good food for *marrngu*, but they really belonged to the *walypila*. They saw big flocks of sheep everywhere, lying down in the shade. They always stayed in the shade close to water in the heat of the day, but they were waiting for the evening, and when it got cooler they would spread out and feed.

When the *walypila* went out checking the windmills he saw *marrngu* chasing the sheep, but he left them alone. Later he told the local people, 'Tell them not to steal the sheep, they belong to the whitefellas'.



Wanyjilakartanya, Minyjun's birthplace, photograph by Anne Scrimgeour.

So the Nyamal people told the newcomers, 'We don't kill the sheep, we look after them. If you don't understand that, you'll be taken away and locked up.' Those people just in from the east lived by hunting, and they didn't know about sheep. Their dingoes would bite the sheep and chase their little lambs. The men would then knock them on the head with a club and string them in their belts, or carry the ewes over their shoulders to some shade and cook them over the coals. They would take the fat and rub it all over their bodies and heads. They really didn't know how to treat those animals. People would tell them, 'This is what happens when you kill the *walypila*'s pet sheep: the first lot of people who came in used to steal them and kill them, and the white policeman tied them up. The boss sent out a message for the police to come'.

Some *walypila* were good and others were hostile. Some of the *marrngu* who came in from the east learned how to work, and learned the *walypila* language. They learned how to fix windmills, how to mend fences, how to break horses in; they learned all the *walypila* work. They learned how to build yards, and the boss⁷ would say, 'You're all working really well' and would be pleased with them. He'd thought they were incapable of learning, but now he saw they were doing well.

Some *marrngu* used to work and some stayed back in the camp, while other people stayed out in the bush hunting. When they saw *walypila* they were frightened, they ran away and hid in gullies. Then they'd peer out and watch the boss until he left the bore to go off to another windmill; only then would they come out and have a drink; they just wanted a drink of water. Our old people really didn't understand these things. At first they stayed together at Warrawagine Station, but later they went off in different directions to other stations.

When they were children **Malyurta and Murrkangunya** went out hunting for the goannas we call *rawal* and the goannas called *maruntu*, and on their way back they were thirsty and came to a windmill. The air was calm and they drank water from the trough instead of the tank. Then a wind came up, and the windmill started to creak and spin around. They grabbed their meat and ran behind a rise, peering out, watching for a car. 'It must have sent a message to the boss!' they said. They stared at the windmill as it was spinning, then went back to their families in the shade where they cooked and ate the meat they'd caught.

Later my mother and father went from Wirriparnan to Warrawagine Station, and lived by hunting south of Warrawagine at Wanyjilakartanya.⁸

Malyurta and Murrkangunya

These were Minyjun's brother Dick McKenna, referred to as Malyurta as a middle child in the family, and Purnungurrara (Cocky Brown), called Murrkangunya as his mother's oldest child.

Palanga ngaju miraljarrinyirni manyjanga kurila Warrukanyanga. Karrpu warinyja miraljarrinyi ngajumili marrka. Yarti kulpanyiyi Warrukanyakarti wupartu ngurlingurli ngalaya jartungu wanikinyalayi. Ngajumili mamajirrangupa kangkuji pirranga miraljarrinyiyi kurrngalngarra kanyayijaninyi wirtumarta kakarni kuyi wirlanayi palajun.

Warrukanyanga maajalu wurrarnajanaku warrkamuku. Yijanyin jana warrkamujarrinyiyi kukurnjari majuramujinikinyiyi jinangulu patikirrangu patiki palajun. Jinta jarlinga yanikinyiyi yawartanga. Janalu ngalypakapan wurranikinyiyi jinangulu kukurnjari majuramujinaku; jana nyungu miranurla marntiku yananyaku kajaku palajun. Ngarrulu kanganyikinyiyijaninyi pinyjingi mirtipa, mirtilu kukurnjarilu pinyji yajanikinyiyi. Wangka-wangkajinikinyiya jirramuku palajun.

Warrukanyanga purlpi wanikinyipulu Nyamaljirri mirtajirri; palajirri wanikinyipulu waljararra pipija warajaja Kurtijikapujirri. Pulany jawalyka kuyiku karrikinyipula ngunjunikinyipula wunyjurrulu kuyi wirlanaku. Palanga yija, yanapulu kuyiku kanyjina karrpungu yirrirnipulu jukurti-jukurti jina ngapakartija lirrirla minpinikinyiyi kangkurulu.

Kulpanyapulu mimarnapulu rukajarrinyajalu palakarti jinapa kartapirnipulujaninyi kangkururrangu ngapakartija jukurti-jukurti mimanikinyipulujanaku. Yijalu, yirrirnipulu walanya parlkarrakarringu milpanyikinyi ngapakarti. Pulany kukujarri wanikinyipulu. Mirtijirni pala kangkuru kajarna liringi wangka kurtipakarna parrjarna ngurnarrijirri. Munu nganipa parrjanama paliny warrkina kawarna lirrikarti. Ngalpanya ngapaku minpinaku narnmajakun wanikinyi jalakarti junturtukurnu ngalpanya minpinikinyi ngapa palalu kangkurulu. Wungkarnapulalu pulanyju, yijalu yirrirnipulu narnmajakun ngayarta wanikinyi. Warinymarninyju wurrarnala, 'Ngaju, ngaju yankulumarnalu. Nyuntulu mimaliji wirlalaman taki'.

'Yu,' karramarnalu, 'nyampa yarralu turlpalipa' Palanga, yija, yanalu jakarn jakarrmajirri warlirni warntingulu. Palakurla wanparrku jitirna kangkuru pala kanka turlpanya nyampa mirtilu kanya purriri. Marrngumarninyju marrjalu warlinikinyi! Wirnti kangkuru pala wirturla kankawarrangu wirtitimanikinyili kurtirra-kurtirralu marrngumarninyju mantaljilu warnti warlinikinyi. Kamanikinyalu, 'Nyampajarra kurtalalu wirlalaman kuyi'. Palinyjukala pitarr-pitarrju. Nyungu marrkamarninyju jukamanikinyi kutu nyarrupinikinyalu munu yanamawalu nyampa wirlanaku wararrjungarrany jukamanikinyi. Mamajimurninyju jinirni pala kuyi manyurlajartinyju warntamarna. Marrkamarniny wurrarnala, 'Munurla nyampalu kuyi pala wirlanamngalika: manyurlajarrinyirni jinirni nganyju-nganyjujartinyju!'



Mustering group, Warrawagine, around 1935, photograph by Bill Hill.

It was there that I was born, in the bush south of Warrawagine. On the following day my *marrka*, **my little sister, was born**. Later they went back to Warrawagine when we were still newborn babies, carrying us in a *jartu*. My older brothers and sisters were all born in the desert, and when they were big enough my parents had brought them in from the east, hunting as they came.

At Warrawagine the boss told my parents to go to work, and so they worked with sheep, mustering them on foot into different paddocks. Other people rode horses, but they preferred to muster sheep on foot; they were used to traveling long distances on foot like that. They preferred to take the sheep along the fences, with the sheep running along the fence line. Shearing time was coming soon.

At that time **two Nyamal brothers** from the same mother, of the Kurtijikapu family, were living at Warrawagine. They hadn't had any meat for a long time, and, not having any weapons, tried to figure out a way to get some. One day they set out to look for some game, and found a lot of kangaroo tracks coming and going around a soak where they'd been coming down to drink.

The brothers went home and waited until evening, then went back and found the tracks again, and they waited for the kangaroos. Then they saw a big plains kangaroo coming down to the water. They stayed out of sight. The kangaroo came in and sat close to the soak. It looked carefully around, and not seeing anything went slowly up to the water. As it went down to drink only its hindquarters were visible; its head was down drinking. Looking up cautiously, the men saw its hindquarters right in front of them. One of them said, 'I'll go. You wait and hit it behind the head.'

'All right,' the other said, 'but hurry up before he goes.' Then he went slowly and soundlessly and grabbed hold of its tail. Startled, the kangaroo jumped up and hopped off. The man held on tight, dragged all over the place by the large and frightened kangaroo. Still hanging on he cried out, 'Hurry up! Come over here and kill it!' He was cut and bruised all over his body. Meanwhile his younger brother was laughing so hard he couldn't go and help him kill it, but just stood there laughing. The older brother let the kangaroo go, he was too tired to hold on, and he told his brother off. 'You didn't rush in to help me kill it,' he said. 'I ran out of breath and had to let go!'

my little sister was born

Minyjun's father had two wives, who both bore children at this time. The child born the day after Minyjun was Karlene Ponce, Beryl's mother.

jartu

a wooden dish, coolamon.

two Nyamal brothers

These were Fred and Jack Mitchell.