

I am writing from the lands of the Wadawurrung people, but my family are from Mid-Northern NSW. My Grandfather was a First Nations man who lost his connection to his heritage and for a significant time of his life denied that he was a First Nations man. When pressed for why he was so dark, he told us as children that it was because we were Spanish, that his mother had been a flamenco dancer. Later in my childhood he told us that we were Gypsies. We always knew that he was a First Nations man to be honest, but it became a silent understanding in our family at best, or something we should never talk about at worst, for decades until he passed in 2020. He passed during Covid and was unable to have a funeral ceremony. It wasn't until 2023 that he finally had a belated funeral ceremony, and a Bundjalung Elder was present to do a smoking ceremony. I believe the Elder's name is Uncle Ken Gordon – I have only seen a video of the ceremony as I was not present. This is the first time that I saw my Dadda recognised as a First Nations man.

I realise that this is a truth-telling space for Victorian First Nations people and so the part of the story I would like to tell is my personal journey to find my Dadda's heritage when I am not myself living on his Country. In fact, apart from some possible clues to his origins, we are not sure exactly who his mob are.

This year is the first time I switched from ticking the box "prefer not to say" when asked if I identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, to "yes I identify". I have been attending the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative women's group as a way of starting that journey to connect to mob. I often speak with 13YARN, and I have found a Social Worker through my work who is a First Nations woman and is helping me to understand where I am from. I have been reaching out to mob up north, but at this moment it is a journey in its infancy.

My struggle is that I have been living in Victoria for all of my adult life, and whilst I can connect to mob here, I am still far away from where my Dadda is from. And so much of his history is lost or buried anyway. And whilst I know that skin colour has no bearing on Aboriginality, I still somehow feel nervous when amongst mob – as if I don't have a right to be a First Nations woman – I am fair skinned, light haired and blue-eyed. It is strange to say this – I don't think I'm black enough.

Emma Mayall

Wadawurrung Country

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