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Abstract
My Place 1 is an extraordinary, moving family autobiography in which the author, Sally Morgan, describes her attempt to trace her family origins. She tells of her childhood, drawing warm, humorous and engaging images of her mother and grandmother in particular, and describes her dawning realisation, in her teen years, that her family was different and that she knew very little about their history.
A Fundamental Question of Identity

AN INTERVIEW WITH SALLY MORGAN

INTRODUCTION

My Place\(^1\) is an extraordinary, moving family autobiography in which the author, Sally Morgan, describes her attempt to trace her family origins. She tells of her childhood, drawing warm, humorous and engaging images of her mother and grandmother in particular, and describes her dawning realisation, in her teen years, that her family was different and that she knew very little about their history.

So she set out to gather some information. Initially she met strong resistance from her family, which only strengthened her curiosity and resolve, and as she began to discover the facts, ever so slowly, her anger was roused at the enormity of the injustices buried in the history of this country. 'It could all have been done differently', Sally points out 'Aboriginal people didn't have to be treated that way'.

In 1982 Sally Morgan travelled back to her grandmother's birthplace. What had started out as a tentative search turned into an overwhelming spiritual and emotional pilgrimage as Sally and her family were confronted with their own suppressed history and fundamental questions about their identity.

Sally Morgan's whole family (and her husband, Paul) was gradually drawn into her search for truth, and finally her grandmother and mother were able to tell their own stories, which are incorporated into *My Place*, but not without enormous pain for all concerned. Sally says at one point in the book:

> I wanted to cry. I hated myself when I got like that. I never cried, and yet since all this had been going on, I'd wanted to cry often ... it was absurd. There was so much about myself that I didn't understand.

For Sally's grandmother, talk of the past was especially painful. Sally's mother, however, eventually became very involved in the writing of *My
Place. In fact, Sally talks about it as ‘our book’. It’s a true family autobiography.

Sally Morgan is also establishing a reputation as an artist. She has works in numerous collections, including the Dobell Foundation and the Australian National Gallery in Canberra.

Nancy Keesing has said of the book: ‘My Place is as compelling and as impossible to put down as a detective story, but unlike that genre, it is deeply informed with life and truth’.

What follows is a record of several conversations that Mary Wright has had with Sally Morgan and Sally’s mother Gladys.

Your book tells us that you started to write it when you began to question your origins.

S: Yes, that’s true. My first motivation was anger – I get very angry at injustice, and I thought, ‘Somebody should put this down, people should know about these things’.

So it wasn’t so much to simply explore your family history and discover where you came from, although that was linked to it, but more to provide a record?

S: Yes, because we had been deprived of that crucial knowledge as children, and I didn’t want my own children to be deprived. I felt that it was a record for them and if no-one else read it, it kind of didn’t matter. Remember how you came round one night, Mum, and I said I’m going to write a book and you laughed?

G: Well, you’re always going to do something. I just treated it as a joke at first.

S: I always have big ideas, but I never deliver. But then when I did....

G: She was like a terrier.

S: I wouldn’t normally be like that except that it was really important to me.

Gladys, it was hard for you when Sally was writing the book wasn’t it?
G: I think the problem was that as a child I'd been made to feel so ashamed.

S: It was very hard. We would either be getting on, or we wouldn't be talking to each other. She'd say, 'I've had it, that's it, no more, Sally, no more. You want to keep bringing up the past'. And I'd get angry with her because I'd think she was covering up something. See, Mum hadn't talked about her background much, and when she did finally start talking it was very upsetting for her. She had a lot of emotions that she hadn't worked through.

G: I think it was really important to me, and I didn't realise it at first. I got rid of such a lot of things I had buried there.

_Yes, there was a real sense of pull and tug for you. Part of you wanted to help Sally, and part of you just couldn't face it._

S: That's exactly how it was. Whereas with my grandmother it was just like a brick wall. So I was really lucky I think that before she died she told me anything.

_Because there are still some things she didn't tell you._

S: Oh, that's right, and I think, 'Oh, why didn't you tell me everything', but really, considering her life, I think I was very lucky to get what I did. I think it was probably only that my grandmother was diagnosed as being terminally ill that started making her think that perhaps she could say something. Also, I started reading her extracts from the stories my Uncle Arthur had given me, but not telling her who it was about, just that it was a man I knew. She thought it was fantastic, and she would laugh and cry, and when I told her it was her own brother's story, she got very jealous, and then she'd say, 'Well, I've got a better story than that', and I'd say, 'Well, you're no good because you won't talk. For all we know you might have a silly story'. Eventually she came round, and then it became important to her to tell. I think it became important to her because she wanted to feel she had achieved something outside her family setting. Once she decided to tell her story, she became more persistent than me. It gave her a sense that she had a value as a human being; she had something to say that other people might find meaningful.
You started to write the book while you were still asking questions; you were still chasing facts, the process of which was later written into the book.

S: Yes, it was totally incomplete, and of course I was having trouble getting information. Mum and Nan and my brothers and sisters found it very upsetting, and they’d say ‘Just leave it alone’. And I’d think, ‘Should I? Should I leave it alone?’, and I would think ‘Oh, it’s not worth it’; and then I’d think ‘Yes, it is worth it’, so it was a real kind of mixed-up thing.

There were points when I was reading it when I’d think, ‘I’d have given up by now if I were Sally’, and then you’d say ‘I felt I had to have one more go at Nan’, and you’d go back and tackle her about something in her past. And I’d take a deep breath and think ‘Can I stand it?’ because of the pain I knew you were chipping away at.

S: Yes, it was terrible. We used to cry a lot. By the time Mum got involved, she was crying all the time, I was crying all the time; Paul’d come home and there’d be no dinner, and he’d say, ‘Fish and chips again tonight?’ and I’d say, ‘Yeah’, and he’d say, ‘Had a bad day?’ and I’d say ‘Yes’, and cry some more.

In the book you describe how as a kid, you really didn’t question your mother’s and grandmother’s lives. You didn’t have a sense of their lives beyond your house in Manning.

S: No, nothing at all. Total ignorance – and innocence I guess. I think my sister did, but she didn’t talk to me about it. She was much more socially mature than me, and so she was always more aware of things like that.

So there weren’t any stories about what you mother or grandmother had done in their youths?

S: Well, we knew Nan had worked for a particular family, but we didn’t have a context. We just thought, ‘Everyone has a job, that must have been her job’. We didn’t understand the social circumstances of her life. As we got older and started to see the effects of her life – she was quite bitter, and afraid of authority, for example – we began to wonder why she was like that.
It wasn't until you were at school and other kids started to ask you where you were from that you questioned your origins.

S: That's right, and even then I didn't realise why they asked me. I thought I was like everyone else, and everyone else thought I wasn't! When I asked Mum she was shocked at first, and when I explained the kids at school were asking, she said, 'Tell them you're Indian', and I thought that sounded really exotic. the kids could accept that – they just didn't want me pretending I was Australian when I wasn't!

That little white lie...

S: Yes! I first started to question seriously what my origins were when I came home from school and found my grandmother crying, which was extremely unusual for her, because she tended to suppress that sort of emotion. I asked her what was wrong, and she said, 'I'm crying because you children want a white grandmother, and I'm black'. I looked at her and realised she was black, and all these years I'd thought she was white! Oh dear!

How do you both feel, now that the book is a reality?

S: Nervous. Embarrassed.

Embarrassed?

G: I feel sick. I feel like my whole life's paraded before everybody.

S: Actually, I don't feel embarrassed so much – what do I feel? I'm worried that all of a sudden people will think, 'This woman's an expert on Aboriginal affairs', and they'll ask me questions and expect me to have an answer, when I don't, I'm just an ordinary person.

G: What I've always hated is people feeling sorry for me, and I would hate that to happen, because when I think of it, I've really had a fantastic life. I've got so many memories. I've managed just lately to be able to talk about where I was brought up; up until now I haven't been able to, so it's good.
S: A lot of good's come out of the bad.

*Nancy Keesing likens the book to a detective story. It seemed to throw up more questions than it answered.*

S: Yes, there are still lots of things unanswered, I think we really only touched the tip of my grandmother's life. I think she probably had a quite dreadful life, but we can only guess, just by the effects it had on her. And there were broader questions of racism and Government policy ... there was a real snob thing in those days, there were the upper, middle and lower classes, and then there were the natives. But I tried to be generous to the family who controlled my grandmother's life.

Yes, you can see that in the book, but they hang themselves, anyway.

S: They do, don't they?

*And to give them their due, they probably thought they were doing the right thing by your grandmother.*

S: Oh, yes, but I don't think my grandmother ever felt grateful to them! And since I've written this, I've met so many older Aboriginal people who've just had terrible lives. A lot of them won't talk about it. They're frightened that if they tell the truth they'll incite young Aboriginal people to violence, you see.

*In 1982 you made a trip back north to your grandmother's birthplace. That was obviously crucial.*

S: Yes, now we go up every year. I don't think we realised how important it was until we actually did it. I knew I wanted to go up North, but I didn't know why - it was just an instinct. We thought everyone would be dead, and no-one would remember our family because it was too long ago. We felt stupid going up to strange people and saying, 'Did you know my grandmother?' We just went up on spec, and we were all uptight and nervous.
Gladys, you weren't sure whether you wanted to go, were you?

G: No well, I just wanted to take a metal detector up there (she laughs).

S: I think Mum felt to start off with, like me, that it was a waste of time and money and potentially it was, we could have gone up there and found nothing. But it all worked out, though, didn’t it. We kept bumping into people.

*Who then said you must see so and so...*

S: Yes, and we really found out much more than we expected to. And now each year when we go back we find out more, don’t we?

G: Yes, because they think about it and they wait for us to come back so they can tell us something else they’ve remembered. It’s a funny feeling – I suppose it’s like when people go into monasteries or to health farms to get renewed. Well I find that when I go up there, I get spiritually renewed. It’s a belonging, and you just feel part of everything that’s there.

*The land – physically, the land?*

G: Yes, everything, the people, the land...

S: We always get very emotional – Paul always complains and says, ‘Oh, these aren’t holidays’. (She laughs).

*Paul was obviously very supportive.*

S: Yes, I think he used to get as upset as we did, sometimes.

G: He did, didn’t he? He’d get really sad.

S: No, he was fantastic. I probably couldn’t have done it without him, because it was so emotionally draining that most guys would have just found it too much.
G: No, he was fantastic. Poor Paul, with all these women!

Speaking of women, it really seems that the women in your family...

S: are domineering?

They figure more, and they figure more in terms of caring about your project.

S: My brothers found it too hard to cope with. It wasn’t that they weren’t supportive, but they just couldn’t cope with the emotion.

G: It’s a bit of an Aboriginal trait, because when you look at any family, there’s always the mother and grandmother there.

S: It’s a matriarchal society, and also, from what we can see going back, all the women in our family have been strong characters in different ways. I mean, I know I’m domineering! And Mum is in her way, too. That’s probably why we conflict sometimes. People complain about me and say ‘Oh, you’re such a strong person, Sally’, but I mean, look what I grew up with!

Some of the warmest bits of the book for me were stories of Gladys interacting with her mother ... two very strong figures interacting. And your grandmother comes through as being a wonderful character.

S: She was a very strong person.

G: (laughter) She was strong.

S: (laughs, too) She was great. She had the most weird sense of humour but she’d been really badly damaged, and I’d love to have seen what she would have been like if she hadn’t had those experiences, I think she would have been quite a girl, don’t you?

G: Yes, because I mean the book doesn’t tell half of it.
S: She could mimic people, and she had an extremely sarcastic sense of humour. She’d mimic Mum, and make her so angry sometimes, but she’d also make you laugh.

G: She always had the ability to make me laugh when I was angry, and I used to get so upset with myself for letting her do it.

S: It’s amazing, really, that she retained so much of her humour; perhaps it helped her to survive.

But do you think that’s a feature of Aboriginal people, to retain that humour? I mean, to me My Place is humorous in the same way that, say The Dreamers or No Sugar are humorous, that in the direst of situations Aboriginal people can laugh, and laugh at the position they find themselves...

S: Oh, yes.

Which, I think, might have caused problems for non-Aboriginal people who saw The Dreamers, who didn’t want to laugh because they were afraid of being racist; they couldn’t appreciate that Aboriginal humour is really unique?

S: Yes, I can understand that ... when we go up north they’ll tell the most horrifying stories, and then they’ll crack a joke. One of our grandfathers up north tells a story about how when he was a kid he was sold. The station owner sold him to the butcher for ten shillings because he was strong – and then he’ll burst out laughing and say, ‘But that’s all I was worth then’. It’s funny to him that someone paid ten shillings for him, but underneath there’s the pain.

G: I was just thinking the other day about the time I was going to do my will, and Nanna was furious because I never left her anything.

S: And we tried to explain to her that she’d be dead before Mum, but it wasn’t the point, the point was that Mum should have left her something.
G: I had to end up leaving her something to shut her up. She was really hurt, crying and carrying on, saying 'To think, my own daughter...'

As I say, she comes across as a wonderful, wonderful person.

S: That's good, because Mum read through the book the other night, and she was worried that my grandmother had come across as being too bitter.

For me she was more ironic and afraid, and remarkably non-bitter for her experiences.

G: I think I felt that now she's died, I think of all the good times; I think about things and I laugh ... so when I read the book I was surprised. I hadn't read it for a couple of years.

*Why did you take the book to Fremantle Arts Centre Press?*

S: Ken Kelso knew I was writing it, and he suggested I take it down, so I took about half a dozen chapters, and Ray Coffey really loved it, and from then on, every time I finished a section I'd send it down, and we ended up with a whacking great manuscript that was miles too long...

G: And you had all the photos, too...

Yes, I was going to ask about the photos. There was a conscious decision made, wasn't there, not to include photos, because it would then assume the mantle of some kind of social historical reference, when really it wasn't, it was an extension of the Aboriginal story-telling tradition?

S: Yes, I'd prefer it was read like that.

*Can we talk about your painting? You drew as a kid.*

S: Yes, I used to draw a lot, and then I gave it up after a negative experience with my art teacher, and Mum had always wanted us to grow up to do something really super, like be a doctor, and I think in those days Mum was
realistic enough to see that to earn a living as an artist you’d have to be exceptionally good.

G: No it wasn’t that, I was worried about you going to Paris, you wanted to go.

S: That’s right, I did ... at that stage she didn’t want any of us to grow up, you see! She’s over that now, she’s prefer it if I went somewhere else.

G: I feel like sending her somewhere, sometimes!

S: And then on one of my trips up North I went out to visit an old relative of ours who lives out on the edge of the desert. he’s the local artist, and he showed me some of his drawings, and I thought ‘Well, mine can’t be so bad’, because a lot of his stuff was similar to what I did, so I thought that if he could do his, I could do mine! So I came back and started again. But I really had a mental block about it, I really had to force myself to put something on paper. And then I bought a packet of those magic textas, you can change the colours, it was fun, and then Paul said, ‘How unprofessional, you should be painting, not doing magic texta drawings, so he bought me some paints ... borrowed some money from you, didn’t he? So Mum financed my first painting. That was only last November.

Six months ago!

Yes, six months ago I started painting.

And you had some work in the Birukmarri Gallery in Fremantle?

S: Yes, and I sold all of that, and then some people in Sydney asked me to put some work in an exhibition, and the Dobell Foundation bought some of that, and now I’ve got a Sydney commission.

Were you drawing on your Aboriginality, albeit unconsciously, as a child for your art? How was your work different?
S: It was very flat. I couldn't draw a three-dimensional picture if I tried. I never felt the need to put in any horizon lines; I've always used really lairy colours; I've always liked patterns; I've always drawn animals, with little borders, and those things I saw in my Uncle Solomon's drawings. So I think I was probably drawing on it, but was totally unaware of it.

*The painting on the cover of the book was done especially for the book, wasn't it?*

S: Yes, it was originally a drawing. And so in six months the response to my work has been really overwhelming. I've got lots of orders and not enough time.

*And you're working on another book at the moment?*

S: Yes, I'm doing a biography on one of my grandfathers, with a grant from the Bicentennial Authority. And then I'd like to do two anthologies, one on stories about people being taken away, and another one on citizenship - the whole irony of the first Australians having to apply for Citizenship.

G: But then they saw the humour in that, too. There are so many funny stories.

S: They used to call it a dog licence.

G: And they weren't allowed to talk to anyone who was black.

S: I tend to get that material from my work around the Pilbara, but it would be good to get stories from the south-west and the goldfields. People were taken away from all over the place.

G: I think the thing is though that the people up north are related to us, and they'll talk. But if we went down south or to the Kimberleys...

S: Probably they wouldn't trust us. They wouldn't know how we fitted into the system. They've got to trust you before they'll tell you a story - especially when you're asking them for something that's painful. Which is fair enough.
I've collected stories from two old ladies I know; they know it's for a book, and they were quite happy to tell, but they're two extremely sad stories, one is absolutely horrific, but they wanted...

G: They wanted it known. Because they've got old now.

S: They want people to know what happened to them. But two isn't enough!

So you enjoy writing?

S: Yes, it's really hard work. I enjoy painting much more. Writing involves striving for words which is difficult, and it needs research in the Battye Library, and it means being really involved with people, which can be so heartbreaking.

G: It's like when we went down to the school to talk.

S: Oh it's really embarrassing. We went to give a talk at a girls' school, and we were sitting out the front - they had to give us chairs because we both had diarrhoea, because we were so nervous, so I said, 'You'll have to give us chairs because we won't be able to stand up, we're too weak', and I went first, and started to tell some history and some stories, and it was very sad, and Mum got all upset, so when it came to her turn, she started telling about a sad memory from her childhood and she burst into tears and just sobbed in front of all these teenagers, and all the girls were crying ... we've never given a talk since (laughter).

Do you see a relationship between your art and your writing?

S: There's a connection in that in both of them I use dreams a lot as part of the creative process. There's a spiritual side to my writing that I find I can't get away from, and that's true of my art. I'm also interested in not just writing oral histories, but painting oral histories, doing the same thing in a different form.

Like the cover of the book. You're both very spiritual, aren't you?
S: Yeah, I guess...

G: We have dreams all the time. I've had that all my life. I said to Sally, 'We won't put all those things in, people will just think we're a bit weird'.

S: Nan had dreams, too, but she wasn't as open about it, Arthur was more open.

*Is there a relationship between the spirituality of your heritage, if you like, and your Christian beliefs?*

S: I think one can enhance the other. I have many relations who wouldn't have the same beliefs as me, and would probably disagree with my religious beliefs, but they still have that Aboriginal spirituality, which I just think comes as part of that culture and as part of that inheritance. Having that in you tends to make you sensitive to other forms of spirituality, whether it comes in Christian terms or any other. You understand other people's religious beliefs quite easily. I think Nan had always been made to feel that anything that was Aboriginal was bad, and ...

G: That's the reason she wasn't allowed to use her own language. It was so wrong ... yes, she had lots of visions and things, but it was just kept in the family. To us it's very natural. I hope it's never lost, because you feel like you're at one with everything.

*It was extraordinary that your grandmother didn't use her language, yet she remembered it.*

S: Yes, I was totally shocked when I heard her talking. She was actually fluent; I suspect that she might have used it in her head.

*But if that's the case, what an extraordinary double life.*

S: Yeah, that's right. Makes you think that she was really quite a bright lady.

G: Oh, she was. She could put it over me all the time! (laughter).
Gladys, speaking of double lives, you were concerned about how your family was perceived, weren’t you? There was a facade...

S: Mum always wanted to do well socially, didn’t you? To do things the right way? Because Nan was very proper.

G: I think the whole thing was that as a kid I was in a very formal atmosphere, and some of that carried over. I was always worried people would find out I was an Aboriginal.

S: I think she thought they’d look down on her. Whereas now everyone in Australia will know. (laughter)

G: I was very scared of authority. I was always scared I might have the children taken away. That would have destroyed me.

So that law (that children fathered by white men couldn’t be looked after by their Aboriginal mothers) still operated? In suburban Perth of the sixties?

G: They’d only need some small thing. I was always frightened to bring any attention to us. I always kept a low profile. If the kids had gone, they probably would all have been taken to separate places.

S: And my grandmother would have just died.

G: Oh, well, yes, she would have died. She’d just have had a broken heart.

S: I’ve met people who were taken away in the sixties. It wasn’t enforced as rigorously as it used to be, but it was still in place, and it still frightened people.

So all that reinforced your need for the facade.

S: Yes, to live a lie, to be something you weren’t, just to survive.
The book incorporates your mother's, grandmother's and Uncle Arthur's stories; you got them on tape and transcribed them. Have you still got the tapes?

S: Yes, I've got the tapes. It took hours to transcribe them.

So the stories are word for word?

S: Virtually. See, when we did the tapes we had no system, so I had bits all over the place. I never asked Mum any questions, she just talked as she remembered. So cutting and pasting, I had bits here and there, and then it was retyped as it made sense. And for me, I started off at several different points in time and wrote what I could remember, and then researched at different times, and later it all started to come together. Originally I started to write about different themes, but I found that it was difficult to get the chronology. That's probably why it took me so long – it took me six years to write and to research. See, the original manuscript was much longer – it was actually three times the length. There were stories that kind of went off on tangents. It was very easy to go off on another funny story (laughter) – we chucked a few of those out.

So when you were telling your story, Gladys, or when you were typing it up, Sally, was there a temptation to politicise them a bit? I mean, did you have to be careful, not to project your anger into them?

S: In Mum's case, because she's so articulate, virtually what is written is what she said, word for word. She wrote her own story, and I just put it together. But with my grandmother, sometimes I would ask her a question, and older Aboriginal people will answer you, but not always verbally. So they'll you look at you, and you know what that means. that was really hard for me, because I knew what she was telling me, and she wanted me to know, but it hadn't been spoken. So I had to decide, do I include this or do I leave it out. And there were a couple of really crucial things; I'd asked her if she'd been pregnant before. That was a terrible thing, it was agony for her...

G: It was a shame...
S: And she couldn't talk about it, but her look gave me an answer. Initially I left it out, because I didn't know how to handle it, and later on as we researched more and found more out, I realised I had to write it in, because it was information she had given me. So I wrote it in very simply.

So you had to be careful to put the words that represented the look, and overcome the temptation to actually put your words into her mouth?

S: I think there was a danger there to get up on my high horse, but I think what I learned when I was writing it was that you don't have to be explicit to say something. It's better to just put something simply and let it tell its own story. I think it has more impact. And also if you're going to bash people over the head they don't always listen. You've got to get to people's hearts, make them feel about something ... if people could just see Aboriginal people as a people with the same human emotions, the same feelings; as just ordinary people.

EXTRACTS FROM *MY PLACE* BY SALLY MORGAN.

*My Place* traces the author's family history through three generations. It is a slow and very painful recovery of a past, full of humiliation and hurt, caused by white Australians' treatment of Aborigines. The personal histories of the writer, her mother, her grandmother and her grandmother's older brother overlap and weave together, creating a picture of struggle and suffering, culminating in the grandmother's withholding of part of her story, because it is just too painful. But the book also celebrates not only the family's survival but also the survival of the Aboriginal way of life and Aboriginal values in spite of separation and near slave conditions.

The following extracts contain highlights from each of the four life stories, told in the book.

From SALLY MORGAN'S STORY

In April that year, my youngest sister, Helen, was born. I found myself taking an interest in her because at least she had the good sense not to be born on my birthday. There were five of us now; I wondered how many more kids Mum was gong to try and squeeze into the house. Someone at school had told me that babies were found under cabbage leaves. I was glad we never grew cabbages.

Each year, our house seemed to get smaller. In my room, we had two single beds lashed together with a bit of rope and a big, double kapok mattress plonked on top. Jill, Billy and I slept in there, sometimes David too, and, more often than not, Nan as well. I loved that mattress. Whenever I lay on it, I imagined I was sinking into a bed of feathers, just like a fairy princess.

The kids at school were amazed to hear that I shared a bed with my brother and sister. I never told them about the times we'd squeezed five in that bed. All my class-mates had their own beds, some of them even had their own rooms. I considered them disadvantaged. I couldn't explain the happy feeling of warm security I felt when we all snuggled in together.

Also, I found some of their attitudes to their brothers and sisters hard to understand. They didn't seem to really like one another, and you never caught them together at school. We were just the opposite. Billy, Jill and I
always spoke in the playground and we often walked home together, too. We felt our family was the most important thing in the world. One of the girls in my class said, accusingly, one day, ‘Aah, you lot stick like glue’. You’re right, I thought, we do.

The kids at school had also begun asking us what country we came from. This puzzled me because, up until then, I’d thought we were the same as them. If we insisted that we came from Australia, they’d reply, ‘Yeah, but what about ya parents, bet they didn’t come from Australia’.

One day, I tackled Mum about it as she washed the dishes.

‘What do you mean, "Where do we come from?"’

‘I mean, what country. The kids at school want to know what country we come from. They reckon we’re not Aussies. Are we Aussies, Mum?’

Mum was silent. Nan grunted in a cross sort of way, then got up from the table and walked outside.

‘Come on, Mum, what are we?’

‘What do the kids at school say?’

‘Anything. Italian, Greek, Indian.’

‘Tell them you’re Indian.’

I got really excited, then. ‘Are we really? Indian!’ It sounded so exotic. ‘When did we come here?’ I added.

‘A long time ago’, Mum replied. ‘Now, no more questions. you just tell them you’re Indian.’

It was good to finally have an answer and it satisfied our playmates. They could quite believe we were Indian, they just didn’t want us pretending we were Aussies when we weren’t.

Towards the end of the school year, I arrived home early one day to find Nan sitting at the kitchen table, crying. I froze in the doorway, I’d never seen her cry before.

‘Nan ... what’s wrong?’

‘Nothin’!’

‘Then what are you crying for?’

She lifted up her arm and thumped her clenched fist hard on the kitchen. ‘You bloody kids don’t want me, you want a bloody white grandmother. I’m black. Do you hear, black, black, black!’ With that, Nan pushed back her
chair and hurried out to her room. I continued to stand in the doorway, I could feel the strap of my heavy schoolbag cutting into my shoulder, but I was too stunned to remove it.

For the first time in my fifteen years, I was conscious of Nan’s colouring. She was right, she wasn’t white. Well, I thought logically, if she wasn’t white, then neither were we. What did that make us, what did that make me? I had never thought of myself as being black before.

That night, as Jill and I were lying quietly on our beds, looking at a poster of John, Paul, George and Ringo, I said, ‘Jill ... did you know Nan was black?’

‘Course, I did.’

‘I didn’t, I just found out.’

‘I know you didn’t. You’re really dumb, sometimes. God, you reckon I’m gullible, some things you just don’t see.’

‘Oh ...’

‘You know we’re not Indian, don’t you?’ Jill mumbled.

‘Mum said we’re Indian.’

‘Look at Nan, does she look Indian?’

‘I’ve never really thought about how she looks. Maybe she comes from some Indian tribe we don’t know about.’

‘Ha! That’ll be the day! You know what we are, don’t you?’

‘No, what?’

It took a few minutes before I summoned up enough courage to say, ‘What’s a Boong?’

‘A Boong. You know, Aboriginal. God, of all things, we’re Aboriginal!’

‘Oh.’ I suddenly understood. There was a great deal of social stigma attached to being Aboriginal at our school.

‘I can’t believe you’ve never heard the word Boong’, she muttered in disgust. ‘Haven’t you ever listened to the kids at school? If they want to run you down, they say, “Aah, ya just a Boong”. Honestly, Sally, you live the whole of your life in a daze!’

Jill was right, I did live in a world of my own. She was much more attuned to our social environment. It was important for her to be accepted at school, because she enjoyed being there. All I wanted to do was stay home.

‘You know, Jill’, I said after a while, ‘if we are Boongs, and I don’t know if we are or not, but if we are, there’s nothing we can do about it, so we might as well just accept it’.
‘Accept it? Can you tell me one good thing about being an Abo?’
‘Well, I don’t know much about them’, I answered. ‘They like animals, don’t they? We like animals.’
‘A lot of people like animals, Sally. Haven’t you heard of the RSPCA?’
‘Of course I have! But don’t Abos feel close to the earth and all that stuff?’
‘God, I don’t know. All I know is none of my friends like them. You know, I’ve been trying to convince Lee for two years that we’re Indian.’ Lee was Jill’s best friend and her opinions were very important. Lee loved Nan, so I didn’t see that it mattered.
‘You know Susan?’ Jill said, interrupting my thoughts. ‘Her mother said she doesn’t want her mixing with you because you’re a bad influence. She reckons all Abos are a bad influence.’
‘Aaah, I don’t care about Susan, never liked her much anyway.’
‘You still don’t understand, do you’, Jill groaned in disbelief. ‘It’s a terrible thing to be Aboriginal. Nobody wants to know you, not just Susan. You can be Indian, Dutch, Italian, anything, but not Aboriginal! I suppose it’s all right for someone like you, you don’t care what people think. You don’t need anyone, but I do!’ Jill pulled her rugs over her head and pretended she’d gone to sleep. I think she was crying, but I had too much new information to think about to try and comfort her. Besides, what could I say?
Nan’s outburst over her colouring and Jill’s assertion that we were Aboriginal heralded a new phase in my relationship with my mother. I began to pester her incessantly about our background. Mum was a hard nut to crack and consistently denied Jill’s assertion. She even told me that Nan had come out on a boat from India in the early days. In fact, she was so convincing I began to wonder if Jill was right after all.
When I wasn’t pestering Mum, I was busy pestering Nan. To my surprise, I discovered that Nan had a real short fuse when it came to talking about the past. Whenever I attempted to question her, she either lost her temper and began to accuse me of all sorts of things, or she locked herself in her room and wouldn’t emerge until it was time for Mum to come home from work. It was a conspiracy.
One night, Mum came into my room and sat on the end of my bed. She had her This Is Serious look on her face. With an unusual amount of firmness in her voice, she said quietly, ‘Sally, I want to talk to you’.
I lowered my Archie comic. ‘What is it?’
'I think you know, don't act dumb with me. You're not to bother Nan any more. She's not as young as she used to be and your questions are making her sick. She never knows when you're going to try and trick her. There's no point in digging up the past, some things are better left buried. Do you understand what I'm saying? You're to leave her alone.'

'Okay Mum', I replied glibly, 'but on one condition'.

'What's that?'

'You answer one question for me?'

'What is it?' Poor Mum, she was a trusting soul.

'Are we Aboriginal?'

Mum snorted in anger and stormed out. Jill chuckled from her bed. 'I don't know why you keep it up. Why keep pestering them? I think it's better not to know for sure, that way you don't have to face up to it.'

'I keep pestering them because I want to know the truth, and I want to hear it from Mum's own lips.'

'It's a lost cause, they'll never tell you.'

'I'll crack 'em one day.'

Jill shrugged good-naturedly and went back to reading her *True Romance* magazine.

I settled back onto my mattress and began to think about the past. Were we Aboriginal? I sighed and closed my eyes. A mental picture flashed vividly before me. I was a little girl again, and Nan and I were squatting in the sand near the back steps.

'This is a track, Sally. See how they go.' I watched, entranced, as she made the pattern of a kangaroo. 'Now, this is a goanna and here are emu tracks. You see, they all different. You got to know all of them if you want to catch tucker.'

'That's real good, Nan.'

'You want me to draw you a picture, Sal?' she said as she picked up a stick.

'Okay.'

'These are men, you see, three men. They are very quiet, they're hunting. Here are kangaroos, they're listening, waiting. They'll take off if they know you're coming.' Nan wiped the sand picture out with her hand. 'It's your turn now', she said, 'you draw something'. I grasped the stick eagerly.

'This is Jill and this is me. We're going down the swamp.' I drew some trees and bushes.
I opened my eyes, and, just as suddenly, the picture vanished. Had I remembered something important? I didn't know. That was the trouble, I knew nothing about Aboriginal people. I was clutching at straws.

FROM ARTHUR CORUNNA'S STORY
(c. 1893 - c. 1950)

My name is Arthur Corunna. I can't tell you how old I am exactly, because I don't know. A few years ago, I wrote to Alice Drake-Brockman, my father's second wife, and asked her if she knew my age. She said that I could have been born around 1893-1894. Later, her daughter Judy wrote to me and said I could have been born before that. So I guess I have to settle for around there somewhere. Anyway, I'm old, and proud of it.

My mother's name was Annie Padewani and my father was Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman, the white station-owner. We called him Good-da-goonya. He live on Corunna Downs nine years before marrying his first wife, Eleanor Boddington. She had been a governess in the area. While on the station, he shared my aboriginal father's two wives, Annie and Ginnie.

Ginnie, or Binddiding as we called her, was a big built woman. She was older, argumentative. She bossed my mother around. I used to cry for my mother when she was in a fight. I'd run round and grab her skirts and try and protect her from Ginnie. Ginnie only had one child by Howden, and that was my half-brother, Albert.

My mother was small and pretty. She was very young when she had me. I was her first child. Then she had Lily by my Aboriginal father. Later, there was Daisy. She is my only sister who shares with me the same parents. I was a good deal older than her when they took me away to the mission, she was only a babe in arms, then. My mother was pregnant with other children, but she lost them.

On the station, I wasn't called Arthur. I had my Aboriginal name, Jilly-yung, which meant silly young kid. When I was a child, I copied everything everyone said. Repeated it like a ninety-nine parrot. The people would say, 'Silly young kid! Jilly-yung!'  

I loved my mother, she was my favourite. My mother was always good to me. When others were against me, she stood by me. She used to tell me a
story about a big snake. A snake especially for me, with pretty snake's eggs. 'One day', she said, 'you will be able to go and get these eggs'. I belonged to the snake, and I was anxious to see the pretty snake's eggs, but they took me away to the mission, and that finished that. It was a great mystery. If I had’ve stayed there, I would have gone through the Law, then I would’ve known. I didn’t want to go through the Law. I was scared.

When we went on holidays, we called it going pink-eye, my Aboriginal father carried me on his shoulders when I was tired. I remember one time, it was at night and very dark, we were going through a gorge, when the feather foots, ginnawandas, began to whistle. I was scared. The whistling means they want you to talk. They began lighting fires all along the gorge. After we called out our names, my family was allowed through.

One day, I took a tomato from the vegetable garden. I'd been watching it for days. Watching it grow big and round and red. Then, I picked it and Dudley saw me. He was Howden Drake-Brockman's brother and we called him Irrabindi. He gave orders for my Aboriginal father to beat me. Maybe he had his eye on that tomato, too.

I was beaten with a stirrup strap. I spun round and round, crying and crying. I was only a kid in a shirt in those days. My Aboriginal father never hit me unless an order was given. Then, he had to do it, boss's orders. He was good to me otherwise, so I never kept any bad feelings against him.

Dudley Drake-Brockman wasn't like Howden. They were brothers, but they were different. Dudley was a short little man. He couldn't ride. He was cruel and didn't like blackfellas. My people used to say about Dudley ngulloo-moolo, which means make him sick. We didn't want him there. In the end, he got sick and died.

I used to play with Pixie, Dudley's son. We used to fight, too, but I never beat him. I was afraid of his father. My mother used to say to me, 'Jilly-yung, never beat Pixie in a fight. When he wants to fight, you walk away.' She was a wise woman.

Howden was a good-looking man, well liked. He could ride all the horses there, even the buck jumpers. Old Nibro told me that. He used to help him break them. There was one big, black horse he named Corunna. He would always ride him when he went out baiting dingoes.
I remember Howden used to dance on his own in the dining-room. He’d be doin’ this foxtrot, kicking his leg around with no partner. I used to watch. There was a big dining-room then, and a great, huge fan that we had to pull to cool people off who were eating there. They gave us a handful of raisins for doing that.

From GLADYS CORUNNA’S STORY
(c. 1931-1983)

‘There’s been so much sadness in my life’, Mum said, ‘I don’t think I can take any more’.
‘You want to talk about it?’
‘You mean for that book?’
‘Yes.’
‘Well …’, she hesitated for a moment. Then, with sudden determination, she said, ‘Why shouldn’t I? If I stay silent like Nanna, it’s like saying everything’s all right. People should know what it’s been like for someone like me.’

I smiled at her.
‘Perhaps my sister will read it.’

I have no memory of being taken from my mother and placed in Parkerville Children’s Home, but all my life, I’ve carried a mental picture of a little fat kid about three or four years old. She’s sitting on the verandah of Babyland Nursery, her nose is running and she’s crying. I think that was me when they first took me to Parkerville.

Parkerville was a beautiful place run by Church of England nuns. Set in the hills of the Darling Ranges, it was surrounded by bush and small streams. In the spring, there were wildflowers of every colour and hundreds of varieties of birds. Each morning, I awoke to hear the kookaburras laughing and the maggies warbling. That was the side of Parkerville I loved.

That was my home from 1931 when I was three years old. I was only able to go back to my mother at Ivanhoe three times a year, for the holidays.

I think Alice Drake-Brockman thought she was doing a good thing sending me to Parkerville. Sometimes, she’d come up and bring Judy, June and Dick with her for a picnic. That was always in the spring, when the
wildflowers were out. Dick and I got on well, we were very close. He treated me like his sister.

I loved it when they all came up, because the other kids were so envious. There was a lot of status in knowing someone who had a car. I thought I'd burst for joy when I saw the black Chev creep up the hill and drive slowly down the road, to halt at George Turner. All the other kids would crowd up close, hoping I’d take one of them with me. I’d jump down from the wooden fence we sat on while we waited and hoped for visitors and I’d walk slowly towards the car. I felt very shy, but I was also conscious of the envy of the others still sitting on the fence behind me. It was a feeling of importance that would last me the whole of the following week. I always promised the other kids that next time, I might take one of them. It made me king until the following Sunday, when someone might get a visitor who brought a box of cakes. Even so, cakes weren’t as important as a car ride, because it was very hard to make a cake last a full week.

I often prayed for God to give me a family. I used to pretend I had a mother and a father and brothers and sisters. I pretended I lived in a big flash house like Ivanhoe and I went to St Hilda’s Girls’ School like Judy and June.

It was very important to me to have a father then. Whenever I asked Mum about my father, she’d just say, ‘You don’t want to know about him, he died when you were very small, but he loved you very much’. She sensed I needed to belong, but she didn’t know about all the teasing I used to get because I didn’t have a father, nor the comments that I used to hear about bad girls having babies. I knew it was connected to me, but I was too young to understand.

I had a large scar on my chest where my mother said my father had dropped his cigar ash. I tried to picture him nursing me, with a large cigar in his mouth. I always imagined him looking like a film star, like one of the pictures the big girls had.

The scar made me feel I must have had a real father, after all. I’d look at it and feel quite pleased. It wasn’t until I was older that I realised it was an initiation scar. My mother had given it to me for protection.
In the May holidays, I usually went to Ivanhoe. Willie would drive me down to Perth and I’d be met by Alice.

I was always pleased to see my mother and really excited that I was going to be with her for two whole weeks. She’d give me a hug and then take me into the kitchen for a glass of milk and a piece of cake.

I loved Ivanhoe and I really loved Judy, she was so beautiful and she always made a fuss of me. She liked to dress me up, but I’d cry when she insisted on putting big satin bows in my hair. I didn’t want to look like Shirley Temple.

I remember one holiday at Ivanhoe when I was very upset. I was in the kitchen with my mother. She had her usual white apron on and was bustling around, when Alice came in with June. I couldn’t take my eyes off June. She had the most beautiful doll in her arms. It had golden hair and blue eyes and was dressed in satin and lace. I was so envious, I wished it was mine. It reminded me of a princess.

June said to me, ‘You’ve got a doll, too. Mummy’s got it.’ Then from behind her back, Alice pulled out a black topsy doll dressed like a servant. It had a red checked dress on a white apron, just like Mum’s. It had what they used to call a slave cap on its head. It was really just a handkerchief knotted at each corner. My mother always wore one on washing days, because the laundry got very damp with all the steam and it stopped some of it trickling down her face.

At Christmas, I also went to Ivanhoe. We’d all sleep out on the balcony at the rear of the house, we had a lovely view over the Swan River from there.

At the top of the house was a large attic which June was allowed to use as a playhouse, it was a lovely room. There were seats under the windows and dolls and a dolls’ house. There were teddies and other toys and a china tea-set. We’d play tea parties and practise holding out our little fingers like grown-ups did. June’s dolls were lovely, they were china and dressed in satin and lace.

It was strange, really, at the Home, nobody owned a doll. There were a few broken ones kept in the cupboard, but when you asked to play with them,
you had to play in the dining-room until you’d finished. You were never allowed to take one to bed.

I was lucky, because I had a rag doll my mother had given me called Sally Jane. I loved her very much. She was kept at Ivanhoe for me and Mum let me take her to bed every night.

On Christmas morning, we’d wake up early and check the pillowslips we’d hung on the ends of our beds the night before. Alice always gave me a new dress, with hair ribbons to match. Mother always made me doll’s clothes and I would dress Sally Jane in one of her new dresses. We were very happy together, Judy, June, Dick and I. It was like having a family.

Every year after each of the holidays, I found it harder and harder to leave my mother and return to Parkerville. I couldn’t understand why I couldn’t live at Ivanhoe and go to school with Judy and June. You see, I hadn’t really worked out how things were when your mother was a servant. I knew the family liked me, so I couldn’t understand why they didn’t want me living there.

But after Mum had been at Morgans’ about two years, Alice asked her if she would come back to Ivanhoe to work. I wanted her to stay at Morgans’, because it was easier for her, but I think Mum still felt a loyalty to the family. It was easy for people to make her feel sorry for them. She was too kind-hearted.

Alice’s mother had come to live with them and she was very difficult to look after. I think that’s why they wanted Mum back. She had to accept a cut in wages and no annual holidays, but she went anyway. She told me that it was to be permanent and she’d never be leaving there again.

I went to Ivanhoe for Christmas that year, I was about fourteen by then. Judy, June and Dick suddenly seemed a lot older than me. It wasn’t the same as our carefree childhood days. Even though we had all loved each other as children, something had changed. We weren’t children any more, Judy, June and Dick had begun to get more like their mother. They treated Mum like a servant, now, she wasn’t their beloved nanny any more.

June had a friend who was a bit of a snob and this girl was always putting me in my place because I was only the maid’s daughter. I’d go and sit in Mum’s room and cry. I was suddenly very unsure of my place in the world.
I still ate with the family in the dining-room, but I felt like an outsider, especially when Alice would ring a little brass bell and my mother would come in and wait on us.

I suddenly realised that there hadn’t been one Christmas dinner when Mum had eaten her meal with us. She’d had hers alone in the kitchen all these years. I never wanted to be in the dining-room again after that, I wanted to be in the kitchen with my mother.

FROM DAISY CORUNNA’S STORY
(1900-1983)

My name is Daisy Corunna, I’m Arthur’s sister. My Aboriginal name is Talahue. I can’t tell you when I was born, but I feel old. My mother had me on Corunna Downs Station, just out of Marble Bar. She said I was born under a big, old gum tree and the midwife was called Diana. Course, that must have been her whitefella name. All the natives had whitefella and tribal names. I don’t know what her tribal name was. When I was comin’ into the world, a big mob of kids stood round waitin’ for to get a look at me. I bet they got a fright.

On the station, I went under the name Daisy Brockman. It wasn’t till I was older that I took the name Corunna. Now, some people say my father wasn’t Howden Drake-Brockman, they say he was this man from Malta. What can I say? I never heard ’bout this man from Malta before. I think that’s a big joke.

Aah, you see, that’s the trouble with us blackfellas, we don’t know who we belong to, no one’ll own up. I got to be careful what I say. You can’t put no lies in a book.

Course, I had another father, he wasn’t my real father like, but he looked after us just the same. Chinaman was his name. He was very tall and strong. The people respected him. they were scared of him.

He was Arthur’s Aboriginal father, too. He was a powerful man.

The big house on Corunna was built by the natives. They all worked together, building this and building that. If it wasn’t for the natives, nothing
would get done. They made the station, Drake-Brockmans didn’t do it on
their own.

At the back of the homestead was a big, deep hole with whitewash in it. It was thick and greasy, you could cut it with a knife. Us kids used to mix
the whitewash with water and make it like a paint. Then we’d put it all over
us and play corroborees. Every Saturday afternoon, we played corroboree.
We mixed the red sand with water and painted that on, too. By the time we
finished, you didn’t know what colour we were.

I ’member the kitchen on Corunna. There was a tiny little window where
the blackfellas had to line up for tucker. My mother never liked doin’ that.
We got a bit of tea, flour and meat, that was all. They always rang a bell
when they was ready for us to come. Why do white people like ringin’ bells
so much?

Every morning, they woke us up with a bell. It was only ’bout five o’clock,
could have been earlier. We all slept down in the camp, a good way from
the main house. Every morning, someone would light a lamp, walk down
into the gully and ring a bell. When I was very little, I used to get frightened.
I thought it was the devil-devil come to get me.

There was a tennis court on Corunna. Can you ’imagine that? I think they
thought they were royalty, puttin’ in a tennis court. That’s an Englishman’s
game. They painted it with whitewash, but it didn’t stay white for long, I can
tell you. I had a go at hitting the ball, once. I gave up after that, it was a silly
game.

When I got older, my jobs on Corunna changed. They started me working
at the main house, sweeping the verandahs, emptying the toilets, scrubbing
the tables and pots and pans and the floor. In those days, you scrubbed
everything. In the mornings, I had to clean the hurricane lamps, then help
in the kitchen.

There were always poisonous snakes hiding in the dark corners of the
kitchen. You couldn’t see them, but you could hear them. Sssss, sssss, ssssss,
they went. Just like that. We cornered them and killed them with sticks.
There were a lot of snakes on Corunna.
Once I was working up the main house, I wasn't allowed down in the camp. If I had've known that, I'd have stayed where I was. I couldn't sleep with my mother now and I wasn't allowed to play with all my old friends.

That was the worst thing about working at the main house, not seeing my mother every day. I knew she missed me. She would walk up from the camp and call, 'Daisy, Daisy', just like that. I couldn't talk to her, I had too much work to do. It was hard for me, then. I had to sneak away just to see my own family and friends. They were camp natives, I was a house native.

Now, I had to sleep on the homestead verandah. Some nights, it was real cold, one blanket was too thin. On nights like that, the natives used to bring wool from the shearing shed and lay that beneath them.

I didn't mind sleeping on the verandah in summer because I slept near the old cooler. It was as big as a fireplace, they kept butter and milk in it. I'd wait till everyone was asleep, then I'd sneak into the cooler and pinch some butter. I loved it, but I was never allowed to have any.

Aah, but they were good old days, then. I never seen days like that ever gain. When they took me from the station, I never seen days like that ever again.

They told my mother I was goin' to get educated. They told all the people I was goin' to school. I thought it'd be good, goin' to school. I thought I'd be somebody real important. My mother wanted me to learn to read and write like white people. Then she wanted me to come back and teach her. There was a lot of the older people interested in learnin' how to read and write, then.

Why did they tell my mother that lie? Why do white people tell so many lies? I got nothin' out of their promises. My mother wouldn't have let me go just to work. God will make them pay for their lies. He's got people like that under the whip. They should have told my mother the truth. She thought I was coming back.

When I left, I was cryin', all the people were cryin', my mother was cryin' and beatin' her head. Lily was cryin'. I called, 'Mum, Mum, Mum!'. She said, 'Don't forget me, Talahue!'.

They all thought I was coming back. I thought I'd only be gone a little while. I could hear their wailing for miles and miles. 'Talahue! Talahue!'
They were singin' out my name, over and over. I couldn't stop cryin'. I kept callin', 'Mum! Mum!' 

I must have been 'bout fourteen or fifteen when they took me from Corunna. First day in Perth, I had to tidy the garden, pick up leaves and sweep the verandahs. Later on, I used an old scythe to cut the grass. All the time, I kept wonderin' when they were goin' to send me to school. I saw some white kids goin' to school, but not me. I never asked them why they didn't send me, I was too 'shamed.

Funny how I was the only half-caste they took with them from Corunna. Drake-Brockmans left the others and took me. Maybe Howden took me 'cause I was his daughter, I don't know. I kept thinkin' of my poor old mother and how she thought I was gettin' educated. I wanted to tell her what had happened. I wanted to tell her all I was doin' was workin'. I wasn't gettin' no education. How could I tell her, I couldn't write. And I had no one to write for me.

We moved into Ivanhoe, a big house on the banks of the Swan River in Claremont. I was lookin' after children again, there was Jack and Betty, Judy, June and Dick. I was supposed to be their nanny. You know, like they have in England. I had to play with them, dress them, feed them and put them to bed at night. I had other chores to do as well. I never blamed the children, it wasn't their fault I had to work so hard. I felt sorry for them.

At night, I used to lie in bed and think 'bout my people. I could see their campfire and their faces. I could see my mother's face and Lily's. I really missed them. I cried myself to sleep every night. Sometimes, in my dreams, I'd hear them wailing, 'Talahue! Talahue!', and I'd wake up, calling 'Mum! Mum!' You see, I needed my people, they made me feel important. I belonged to them. I thought 'bout the animals, too. The kangaroos and birds. And, of course, there was Lily, I wondered if she had a new boyfriend. I missed her, I missed all of them.

Alice kept tellin' me, 'We're family now, Daisy'.

Thing is, they wasn't my family. Oh, I knew the children loved me, but they wasn't my family. They were white, they'd grow up and go to school one day. I was black, I was a servant. How can they be your family?

I did all the work at Ivanhoe. The cleaning, the washing, the ironing. There wasn't nothing I didn't do. From when I got up in the morning till
when I went to sleep at night, I worked. That's all I did really, work and sleep.

By jingo, washing was hard work in those days. The old laundry was about twenty yards from the house and the troughs were always filled with dirty washing. They'd throw everything down from the balcony onto the grass, I'd collect it up, take it to the laundry and wash it. Sometimes, I thought I'd never finish stokin' up that copper, washin' this and washin' that. Course, everything was starched in those days. Sheets, pillowcases, serviettes, tablecloths, they was all starched. I even had to iron the sheets. Isn't that silly, you only goin' to lay on them.

The house had to be spotless. I scrubbed, dusted and polished. There was the floors, the staircase, the ballroom. It all had to be done.

Soon, I was the cook, too. Mind you, I was a good cook. I didn't cook no rubbish. Aah, white people, they got some funny tastes. Fussy, fussy, aaah, they fussy. I 'member I had to serve the toast on a silver tray. I had to crush the edges of each triangle with a knife. Course, you never left the crusts on sandwiches, that was bad manners. Funny, isn't it? I mean, it's all bread, after all.

I had my dinner in the kitchen. I never ate with the family. When they rang the bell, I knew they wanted me. After dinner, I'd clear up, wash up, dry up and put it all away. Then, next morning, it's start all over again. You see, it's no use them sayin' I was one of the family, 'cause I wasn't. I was their servant.

I 'member they used to have real fancy morning and afternoon teas. The family would sit on the lawn under a bit, shady umbrella. I'd bring out the food and serve them. You know, I saw a picture like that on television. It was in England, they were all sittin' outside in their fancy clothes with servants waitin' on them. I thought, well fancy that, that's what I used to do. They must have that silly business in quite a few countries.

I 'member the beautiful cups and saucers. They were very fine, you thought they'd break with you just lookin' at them. Ooh, I loved them. Some of them were so fine, they were like a seashell, you could see through them. I only ever had a tin mug. I promised myself one day I would have a nice cup and saucer. That's why, whenever my grandchildren said, 'What do you want for your birthday?', I always told them a cup and saucer.
In those days, the Drake-Brockmans were real upper class. They had money and people listened to them. Aah, the parties they had. I never seen such parties. The ladies' dresses were pretty and fancy. I always thought of my mother when I saw their dresses. How she would have loved one.

I never like Perth much, then. I was too scared. I was shy, too. I couldn't talk to strangers. People looked at you funny 'cause you were black. I kept my eyes down. Maybe some of those white people thought the cat got my tongue, I don't know. I'm not sayin' they was all bad. Some of them was nice. You get nice people anywhere. Trouble is, you get the other ones as well. 'Cause you’re black, they treat you like dirt. You see, in those days, we was owned, like a cow or a horse I even heard some people say we not the same as whites. That's not true, we all God's children.

Course, when the white people wanted something, they didn’t pretend you wasn’t there, they 'spected you to come runnin' quick smart. That's all I did sometimes, run in and out. Someone was always ringin' that damn bell.

I'm 'shamed of myself, now. I feel 'shamed for some of the things I done. I wanted to be white, you see. I'd lie in bed at night and think if God could make me white, it'd be the best thing. Then I could get on in the world, make somethin' of myself. Fancy, me thinkin' that. What was wrong with my own people?

In those days, it was considered a privilege for a white man to want you, but if you had children, you weren't allowed to keep them. You was only allowed to keep the black ones. They took the white ones off you 'cause you weren't considered fit to raise a child with white blood.

I tell you, it made a wedge between the people. Some of the black men felt real low, and some of the native girls with a bit of white in them wouldn't look at a black man. There I was, suck in the middle. Too black for the whites and too white for the blacks.

When Gladdie was 'bout three years old, they took her from me. I'd been 'spectin' it. Alice told me Gladdie needed an education, so they put her in Parkerville Children's Home. What could I do? I was too frightened to say anythin'. I wanted to keep her with me, she was all I had, but they didn't want her there. Alice said she cost too much to feed, said I was ungrateful.
She was wantin’ me to give up my own flesh and blood and still be grateful. Aren’t black people allowed to have feelin’s?

I cried and cried when Alice took her away. Gladdie was too young to understand, she thought she was comin’ back. She thought it was a picnic she was goin’ on. I ran down to the wild bamboo near the river and I hid and cried and cried an cried. How can a mother lose a child like that? How could she do that to me? I thought of my poor old mother then, they took her Arthur from her, and then they took me. She was broken-hearted, God bless her.

I felt, for Mum’s sake, I should make one last effort to find out about her sister. So a few nights later, when Nan and I were on our own, I said, ‘There’s something I want to ask you. I know you won’t like it, but I have to ask. It’s up to you whether you tell me anything or not.’

Nan grunted. ‘Ooh, those questions, eh? Well, ask away.’

‘Okay. Has Mum got a sister somewhere?’

She looked away quickly. there was silence, then, after a few seconds, a long, deep sigh.

When she finally turned to face me, her cheeks were wet. ‘Don’t you understand, yet’, she said softly, ‘there are some things I just can’t talk ’bout’. Her hand touched her chest in that characteristic gesture that meant her heart was hurting. It wasn’t her flesh and blood heart. It was the heart of her spirit. With that, she heaved herself up and went out to her room.

One night later that week, Nan called me out to her room.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ I laughed when I found her with both arms raised in the air and her head completely covered by the men’s singlet she was wearing.

‘I’m stuck’, she muttered, ‘get me out’. I pulled the singlet off and helped her undress. It had become a difficult task for her, lately. Her arthritis was worse and cataracts now almost completely obscured her vision.

‘Can you give me a rub?’ she asked. ‘The Vaseline’s over there.’ I picked up the jar, dobbed a big, greasy lump of it onto her back and began to rub. Nan loved Vaseline. Good for keeping your body cool and moist, she always told me. She had a lot of theories like that. I continued to massage her in silence for a few minutes.
'Ooh, that's good, Sally', she murmured after a while. As I continued to rub, she let out a deep sigh and then said slowly, 'You know, Sal ... all my life, I been treated rotten, real rotten. Nobody's cared if I've looked pretty. I been treated like a beast. Just like a beast of the field. And now, here I am ... old. Just a dirty old blackfella.'

I don't know how long it was before I answered her. My heart felt cut in half. I could actually see a beast in a field. A work animal, nothing more.

'You're not to talk about yourself like that', I finally replied in a controlled voice. 'You're my grandmother and I won't have you talk like that. The whole family loves you. We'd do anything for you.'

There was no reply. How hollow my words sounded. How empty and limited. Would anything I said ever help? I hoped that she sensed how deeply I felt. Words were unnecessary for that.