

'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.

It wasn't long before I was too caught up in my preparations for my Junior examinations to bother too much about where we'd come from. At that time, the Junior exam was the first major one in high school, and, to a large extent, it determined your future. If you failed, you automatically left school and looked for a job. If you passed, it was generally accepted that you would do another two years' study and aim at entrance to university.

Mum was keen on me doing well, so I decided that, for her, I'd make the effort and try and pass subjects I'd previously failed. For the first time in my school life, I actually sat up late, studying my textbooks. It was hard work, but Mum encouraged me by bringing in cups of tea and cake or toast and jam.

After each examination, she'd ask me anxiously how I'd gone. My reply was always, 'Okay'. I never really knew. Sometimes, I thought I'd done all right, but then I reasoned that all I needed was a hard marker and I might fail. I didn't want to get Mum's hopes up.

Much to the surprise of the whole family, I passed every subject, even scoring close to the distinction mark in English and Art. Mum was elated.

'Now, aren't you pleased? I knew you could do it. Mr Buddee was right about you.'

Good old Mr Buddee. I didn't know whether to curse or thank him. Now that I had passed my Junior, I sensed that there was no hope of Mum allowing me to leave school. I should have deliberately failed, I thought. Then, she wouldn't have had any choice. Actually, I had considered doing just that, but, for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I guess it was my pride again.

WHAT PEOPLE ARE WE?

Fourth year high school was different to third year. It was supposed to be a transitory year where we were treated more like adults and less like difficult teenagers. Even our classes were supposed to be structured to mimic the kind of organisation we might find later in tertiary institutions. I was a year older, but I was still the same person with the same problems. I felt this was also true of school. The changes were only superficial. However, some deep and important things did happen to me that year.

One day, I happened to bump into a girl who I'd been friendly with in my Sunday School days. She invited me to a youth meeting to be held at a nearby church hall.

'Aw, no thanks, Sharon. I won't come.'

'Look, it's not going to be anything like you might imagine', she said confidently. 'Nothing to do with religion, just some Chinese food and a bit of a get-together, that's all.'

'You sure?'

'Positive.'

'Okay, I'll come. I know some other kids who like Chinese food. I might bring them, too.'

'Great. See you there.'

I arrived at the meeting with seven girls from around our neighbourhood and two from school. The food was quite good, and, even though everyone else there ignored us, we enjoyed ourselves. When everyone had finished stuffing themselves, a chap stood up and said, 'We have a Mr McClean here to give us a little talk. I'd like you all to be quiet while we listen to what he has to say.'

Uh-oh, I thought. Here it comes. I looked towards the back of the hall, the door was closed and there were two elderly gentlemen standing in front of it. I was trapped. I could feel my insides twisting themselves into a knot. I knew if Mr McClean turned out to be half as boring as some of the teachers I'd had in Sunday School, my friends would never forgive me.

Mr McClean stood up and smiled nicely at us all. 'I'm here to talk to all you young people about your future', he said. Your eternal future, I mouthed quietly in unison with Mr McClean. I'd heard it all before. It was going to be a long night.

As he continued, I began to think of other things, like the new clothes Mum had promised to buy me, the latest quiz show on TV and the way Jill seemed to be able to whip up an outfit on our old treadle machine in no time at all.

Suddenly, there was someone talking to me. I knew it wasn't Mr McClean. I looked around in a furtive kind of way, trying to see who it was. All eyes were fixed on the speaker, there was no one new in the room.

'Who are you?' I asked mentally.

With a sudden dreadful insight, I knew it was God.

'What are you doing here?' I asked. I don't know why I was surprised. It was a church hall, after all.

It had to be Him because the voice seemed to come from without not within, it transcended the reality of the room. I couldn't even see my surroundings any more. I was having an audience with Him, whom I dreaded. The mental images that I had built up of Him so far in my life began to dissolve, and in their place came a new image. A person, overwhelming love, acceptance and humour. What Nan'd call real class. In an instant, I became what others refer to as a believer.

I joined the local youth group after that. I was full of ideas for making the meetings and outings we went on more interesting, but it was difficult to change the pattern that had been set in motion so many years before. I became friendly with a girl a few years older than me. She was reasonably conservative, but less so than the other girls I'd met, and she had an excellent sense of humour. I could never understand why a lot of the girls at church considered cracking jokes unladylike. Thank heavens Pat wasn't like that.

One day, she said to me, 'You know, no one here can figure out why you like Youth Group so much, but hate church. What's the difference?'

In Pat's eyes, one was a natural extension of the other, but to me, church was practically the antipathy of Youth Group. I always felt uncomfortable in church, it was so formal and lacking in spontaneity. The sermons were full of cliches and things I didn't understand. To me, church was like school, more concerned with red tape than the guts of the matter.

I think Mum was relieved that I was finally channelling my energies into what she saw as something creative. Up until then, she hadn't been sure how I'd turn out. Now she hoped that, with the encouragement of people at church, I would begin to lead a more productive and less rebellious life. She was wrong.

One night, one of the deacons of the church asked if he could talk

to me. I was friendly with his daughter and he seemed like a nice man, so I agreed.

'You and Mary are having quite a lot to do with one another, aren't you?' he asked.

'I suppose so, but we're not best friends.'

'No. I know that, but you see a lot of each other at Youth Group and church.'

'Yeah.'

'Well, Sally', he smiled, 'I want to ask a favour of you'.

'Sure, anything.'

'I'd like you to stop mixing with Mary.' He smiled his charming smile again.

'Why?' I was genuinely puzzled.

'I think you know why.'

'No, I don't.'

'You're a bad influence, you must realise that.' Believe it or not, that was one part of my character I was unaware of.

'What do you mean?' I wanted him to spell it out.

'This is Mary's Leaving year, the same as yours. I don't want her mixing with you in case she picks up any of your bad habits.'

Aaah, I thought. He's heard about my truancy.

'What about after Leaving?' I asked meekly. I sensed there was more to this than just that.

'No. I don't think so. Really, it'd be better if you broke off your friendship entirely. You do understand, don't you', he said in an incredibly charming way.

'Oh, I understand', I replied. I was amazed that he could have such a charming manner and yet be such a dag.

'Good girl, I knew you would.' He was relieved. 'Oh, by the way. I can count on you not to say anything to Mary, can't I? You'll find a way of breaking things off between you, won't you?'

I nodded my head, and he walked off.

I was hurt and disappointed. He was a deacon, I'd looked up to him. I was lucky I had my pride, it came to my rescue yet again. I didn't need people like him, I decided.

It was about that time that I began to analyse my own attitudes and feelings more closely. I looked at Mum and Nan and I realised that part of my inability to deal constructively with people in authority had come from them. They were completely baffled by the workings of government or its bureaucracies. Whenever there were difficulties, rather than tackle the system directly, they'd taught us it was much more effective to circumvent or forestall it. And if that didn't work, you could always ignore it.

That summer, the State Housing decided to paint the exterior of all the houses in our street. A decision that really panicked Nan. She

made sure the front and back doors were kept locked so they couldn't come inside, and she spent most of the day peeping out at them from behind the curtains.

I tried to reason with her, but to no avail. The fact that State Housing employees had only ever called to collect the rent or carry out routine maintenance meant nothing to Nan. For her, they were here to check on us, and the possibility of eviction was always there, hanging over our heads like some invisible guillotine.

I thought back to all the years she had spent buttering up the rentmen. Each rent day, Nan would go through the same routine. She rose early and spent all morning cleaning the house, not that she ever intended letting the rentman in. It was just a way of relieving all her nervous tension. Then she washed and dried our best cup and saucer and arranged a plate of biscuits in tempting display. After that, she hunted for a milk jug that didn't have a crack in it. Her final touch was to plump up the cushion we had sitting on the chair on the front porch. She wanted him to be comfortable.

And the whole time Nan was preparing morning tea, she'd grumble under her breath, 'That bloody rentman! Who does he think he is, taking up my time like this. Doesn't he know I've got work to do?' Of course, once he arrived, it was a different story.

'You're here at last', she'd smile, 'sit down, you must be tired. They shouldn't make you walk so far.'

Why did she do it? I asked myself. Why was she afraid? It was a free country, wasn't it? I decided I'd try and talk to her again. Try to explain how things worked.

After Nan had given the painters a slap-up morning tea, I cornered her out the back, where she was raking up leaves. 'Nan', I said suspiciously, 'I think I've just realised why you've been treating the rentman like royalty all these years. You've been bribing them, haven't you?'

'I don't know what you're talking about, Sally.'

'Yes, you do. All these years, you've been frightened that we'd get evicted. That's why you've been buttering up the rentmen. You thought if it came to the crunch, he might put in a good word for us.'

'Good men have collected rent from this house over the years, Sally. Don't you go running down the rentmen.'

'You know I'm not running down the rentmen, Nan, I'm just trying to talk about all this.'

'Talk, talk, talk, that's all you do. You don't do any work.'

'Nan', I said, in a reasonable tone of voice, 'I don't think you understand about the house we rent'.

'What do you mean', she muttered as she kept her head down and continued to rake.

'Well, you only get evicted if you don't look after the place. For example, if we were to smash a wall or break all the windows, they

might think about throwing us all out, but otherwise, as long as we pay the rent, they let you stay.'

'Hmmp, you think you know everything, don't you?' she replied bitterly. 'You don't know nothin', girl. You don't know what it's like for people like us. We're like those Jews, we got to look out for ourselves.'

'What do you mean people like us? We're just like anybody else, aren't we? I didn't even know you knew Jews existed, how on earth could we be the same as them?'

'In this world, there's no justice, people like us'd all be dead and gone now if it was up to this country.' She stopped and wiped her mouth with a men's handkerchief. Her eyes looked tired and wet.

'Nan', I said carefully. 'What people are we?'

She was immediately on the defensive. She looked sharply at me with the look of a rabbit sensing danger. 'You're tryin' to trick me again. Aaah, you can't be trusted. I'm not stupid, you know. I'm not saying nothing. Nothing, do you hear.'

I suddenly felt terribly sad. The barriers were up again. Just when I thought I was finally getting somewhere. 'Nan', I coaxed, 'I'm not trying to trick you. I just want to know what people we are, that's all.'

'I'm not talking, I'm not talking', she muttered as she dropped her rake and put her hands over her ears.

I sighed and walked back to the house. Inside, I felt all churned up, but I didn't know why. I had accepted by now that Nan was dark, and that our heritage was not that shared by most Australians, but I hadn't accepted that we were Aboriginal. I was too ignorant to make such a decision, and too confused. I found myself coming back to the same old question: if Nan was Aboriginal, why didn't she just say so? The fact that both Mum and Nan made consistent denials made me think I was barking up the wrong tree. I could see no reason why they would pretend to be something they weren't. And Nan's remark about the Jews had confused me even more. I knew a lot about the Jews because of the war and Dad. In my mind, there was no possible comparison between us and them.