

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### A BEGINNING

I was very excited by my new heritage. When I told Jill that evening what Mum had said, she replied, 'I don't know what you're making a fuss about. I told you years ago Nan was Aboriginal. The fact that Mum's owned up doesn't change anything.' Sometimes, Jill was so logical I wanted to hit her.

'Jill, it does mean something, to have admitted it. Now she might tell us more about the past. Don't you want to know?'

'Yeah, I guess so, but there's probably not much to tell.'

'But that's just it, we don't know. There could be tons we don't know. What other skeletons are lurking in the cupboard?'

'You always did have too much imagination!'

'I'm going to keep pestering her now till she tells us the whole story.'

'She won't tell you any more.'

'Maybe not', I replied, 'but the way I look at it, it's a beginning. Before, we had nothing. At least now, we've got a beginning.'

'Mum's right about you, you should have gone on the stage.'

When Mum popped in a week later with a large sponge cake filled with chocolate custard, I was ecstatic. Not because of the cake, but because I had a bombshell to drop, and I was anxious to get on with it. I made coffee for a change and I waited until Mum was half-way through a crumbling piece of sponge before I said, 'I've applied for an Aboriginal scholarship'.

'What?!' she choked as she slammed down her mug and spat out the sponge.

'There's an Aboriginal scholarship you can get, Mum. Anyone of Aboriginal descent is eligible to apply.'

'Oh Sally, you can't', Mum giggled, as if speaking to a naughty child.

'Why can't I', I demanded, 'or are you going to tell me that Nan's really Indian after all?'

'Oh Sally, you're awful', Mum chuckled, and then she added thoughtfully, 'Well, why shouldn't you apply? Nan's had a hard life.'

Why shouldn't her grandchildren get something out of it?'

'Exactly', I replied.

I don't think Mum realised how deep my feelings went. It wasn't the money I was after, I was still receiving the Repatriation scholarship. I desperately wanted to do something to identify with my new-found heritage and that was the only thing I could think of.

When I was granted an interview for my scholarship application, Mum was amazed. I think she expected them to ignore me. She was very worried about what I was going to tell them. Mum always worried about what to tell people. It was as if the truth was never adequate, or there was something to hide.

She had been inventing stories and making exaggerated claims since the day she was born. It was part of her personality. She found it difficult to imagine how anyone could get through life any other way, so consequently, when in response to her question about my interview, I answered, 'I'm going to tell them the truth', she was flabbergasted.

I was successful in my scholarship application, but for the next few months, I was the butt of many family jokes. We all felt shy and awkward about our new-found past. No one was sure what to do with it or about it, and none of the family could agree on whether I'd done the right thing or not. In keeping with my character, I had leapt in feet first. I wanted to do something positive. I wanted to say, 'My grandmother's Aboriginal and it's a part of me, too'. I wasn't sure where my actions would lead, and the fact that Nan remained singularly unimpressed with my efforts added only confusion to my already tenuous sense of identity.

'Did Mum tell you I got the scholarship, Nan?' I asked one day.

'Yes. What did you tell them?'

'I told them that our family was Aboriginal but that we'd been brought up to believe differently.'

'What did you tell them about me?'

'Nothing. So relax.'

'You won't ever tell them about me, will you, Sally? I don't like strangers knowing our business, especially government people. You never know what they might do.'

'Why are you so suspicious, Nan?' I asked gently. She ignored my question and shuffled outside to do the garden. A sense of sadness suddenly overwhelmed me. I wanted to cry. 'Get a grip on yourself, woman', I muttered. 'You don't even know what you want to cry about!'

Slowly, over that year, Mum and I began to notice a change in Nan. Not a miraculous change, but a change just the same. Her interests began to extend beyond who was in the telephone box opposite our house, to world affairs. Nan had always watched the news every night on each channel if she could, but now, instead of just noting world disasters, she began to take an interest in news about black people.

If the story was sad, she'd put her hand to her mouth and say,

'See, see what they do to black people'. On the other hand, if black people were doing well for themselves, she'd complain, 'Just look at them, showing off. Who do they think they are. They just black like me.'

About this time, Nan's favourite word became Nyoongah\*. She'd heard it used on a television report and had taken an instant liking to it. To Nan, anyone dark was now Nyoongah. Africans, Burmese, American Negroes were all Nyoongahs. She identified with them. In a sense, they were her people, because they shared the common bond of blackness and the oppression that, for so long, that colour had brought. It was only a small change, but it was a beginning.

In a strange sort of way, my life had new purpose because of that. I wondered whether, because Jill and I had accepted that part of ourselves, perhaps Nan was coming to terms with it, too. I was anxious to learn as much as I could about the past. I made a habit of taking advantage of Mum's general good nature.

'Where was Nan born, Mum?' I asked her one day.

'Oh, I don't know. Up North somewhere.'

'Has she ever talked to you about her life?'

'You know she won't talk about the past. She says she can't remember.'

'Do you think she does remember?'

'I think so, but she thinks we're prying, trying to hurt her.'

'Mum, is there anyone who could tell me anything about Nan?'

'Only Judy.'

'Who? Aunty Judy?'

'Yes.'

'Why would she know anything about Nan?'

'Nan worked for their family.'

'In what capacity?'

'Oh, you know, housework, that sort of thing.'

'You mean she was a servant?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'How long did she work for them?'

'Oh, I don't know, Sally. Why do you always bring this up? Can't we talk about something else?' Nearly all of our conversations ended like that.

Amazingly, I passed my psychology unit at the end of that year, I even scored a B. I was looking forward to my final year because there was quite a large slice about people in the course and that, after all, was what I'd come to learn about.

By now, both Jill and I had many friends at university. All our lives, people had asked us what nationality we were, most had assumed we were Greek or Italian, but we'd always replied, 'Indian'. Now, when

\* *Nyoongah* — the Aboriginal people of south-west Australia. (Derived from man or person). Also the language of these people.

we were asked, we said, 'Aboriginal'.

We often swapped tales of what the latest comment was. A few of our acquaintances had said, 'Aaah, you're only on the scholarship because of the money'. At that time, the Aboriginal allowance exceeded the allowance most students got. We felt embarrassed when anyone said that, because we knew that that must be how it seemed. We had suddenly switched our allegiance from India to Aboriginal Australia and I guess, in their eyes, they could see no reason why we would do that except for the money.

Sometimes, people would say, 'But you're lucky, you'd never know you were that, you could pass for anything'. Many students reacted with an embarrassed silence. Perhaps that was the worst reaction of all. It was like we'd said a forbidden word. Others muttered, 'Oh, I'm sorry . . .' and when they realised what they were saying, they just sort of faded away.

Up until now, if we thought about it at all, we'd both thought Australia was the least racist country in the world, now we knew better. I began to wonder what it was like for Aboriginal people with really dark skin and broad features, how did Australians react to them? How had white Australians reacted to my grandmother in the past, was that the cause of her bitterness?

About half-way through that year, 1973, I received a brief note from the Commonwealth Department of Education, asking me to come in for an interview with a senior officer of the department. I was scared stiff.

Two days later, I sat nervously in the waiting area. I had pains in my stomach. I always got pains in my stomach when I was nervous. I'd been for interviews before, but always with more junior staff of the department. The senior people never usually concerned themselves with trifling matters like students, they were more concerned with important things, like administration. Several people walked past and eyed me curiously. I suddenly had the distinct impression that something was very wrong.

'You may go in now', the woman at the reception desk suddenly said.

'Thanks', I smiled and walked slowly into the office.

'Mrs Morgan', the senior officer said as I sat down. 'We'll get straight to the point. We have received information, from what appears to be a very reliable source, that you have obtained the Aboriginal scholarship under false pretences. This person, who is a close friend of you and your sister, has told us that you have been bragging all over the university campus about how easy it is to obtain the scholarship without even being Aboriginal. Apparently, you've been saying that anyone can get it.'

I was so amazed at the ridiculousness of the accusation that I burst out laughing. That was a great tactical error on my part.

'This is no laughing matter! This is a very serious offence. Have you lied to this department? I want to hear what you have to say for yourself.'

I felt very angry. It was obvious I had been judged guilty already, and I knew why. It was because Jill and I were doing well. The department never expected any of their Aboriginal students to do well at tertiary studies. They would have considered it more in keeping if we both failed consistently.

'Who made the complaint?'

'I can't tell you. We promised confidentiality.'

'It was no friend of ours.'

'This person is a student and knows you both extremely well.'

'But that doesn't add up. If they know us really well, they would have been to our home and met my grandmother and mother, in which case they'd never have made this complaint.'

'Is that all you have to say?'

'You've obviously already judged me guilty, what else can I say?'

'I expected more than that from you. You don't seem very keen to prove your innocence. You do realise that this is a most serious offence?'

I'd had it by then. 'Look', I said angrily, 'when I applied for this scholarship, I told your people everything I knew about my family; it was their decision to grant me a scholarship, so if there's any blame to be laid, it's your fault, not mine. How do you expect me to prove anything? What would you like me to do, bring my grandmother and mother in and parade them up and down so you can all have a look? There's no way I'll do that, even if you tell me to. I'd rather lose the allowance. It's my word against whoever complained, so it's up to you to decide, isn't it?'

My heart was pounding fiercely. It was very difficult for me to stand up for myself, I wasn't used to dealing with authority figures so directly. No wonder Mum and Nan didn't like dealing with government people, I thought. They don't give you a chance.

The senior officer looked at me silently for a few minutes and then said, 'Well, Mrs Morgan. You are either telling the truth, or you're a very good actress!'

I was amazed, still my innocence wasn't to be conceded.

'I'm telling the truth', I said crossly.

'Very well, you may go.' I was dismissed with a nod of the head. I was unable to move.

'I'm not sure I want this scholarship any more', I said. 'What if someone else makes a complaint? Will I be hauled in here for the same thing?'

The senior officer thought for a moment, then said, 'No. If someone else complains, we'll ignore it.'

Satisfied, I left and walked quickly to the elevator. I felt sick and I wasn't sure how much longer my legs would support me. It was just

as well I'd lost my temper, I thought. Otherwise, I wouldn't have defended myself at all. It was the thought that somehow Mum and Nan might have to be involved that had angered me. It had seemed so demeaning.

Once I was outside, I let the breeze blowing up the street ease away the tenseness in the muscles in my face. I breathed deeply to steady myself and walked slowly to the bus stop.

What if I had been too shy to defend myself, I thought. What would have happened then? I had no doubt they would have taken the scholarship away from me. Then I thought, maybe I'm doing the wrong thing. It hadn't been easy trying to identify with being Aboriginal. No one was sympathetic, so many people equated it with dollars and cents, no one understood why it was so important. I should chuck it all in, I thought. Paul was supporting me now, I could finish my studies without the scholarship. It wasn't worth it.

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 wasn't something I could control. Sometimes when I looked at Nan, I just wanted to cry. It was absurd. There was so much about myself I didn't understand.

The bus pulled in and I hopped on and paid my fare. Then I headed for the back of the bus. I just made it. My eyes were becoming clouded with unshed tears and if the bus had have been any longer, I would have probably fallen over in the aisle. I turned my face to the window and stared out at the passing bitumen. Had I been dishonest with myself? What did it really mean to be Aboriginal? I'd never lived off the land and been a hunter and a gatherer. I'd never participated in corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime. I'd lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me?

Half-way home on the bus, I felt so weighed down with all my questions that I decided to give it all up. I would telephone the department and tell them I wanted to go off the scholarship. I didn't think my family would care what I did, they'd probably be relieved I wasn't trying to rock the boat any more. They could all go on being what they'd been for years, they wouldn't have to cope with a crazy member of the family who didn't know who she was. That's what I'd do. And I'd do it as soon as possible. I wasn't a brave person.

Just then, for some reason, I could see Nan. She was standing in front of me, looking at me. Her eyes were sad. 'Oh Nan', I sighed, 'why did you have to turn up now, of all times'. She vanished as quickly as she'd come. I knew then that, for some reason, it was very important I stay on the scholarship. If I denied my tentative identification with the past now, I'd be denying her as well. I had to hold on to the fact that, some day, it might all mean something. And if that turned out to be the belief of a fool, then I would just have to live with it.

When I told Jill about my interview, she was amazed. 'I'm glad it was you and not me', she said. 'I couldn't have said what you did. I'd have let them think I was guilty. I can't stick up for myself like that.'

'I don't know how I did it, either', I replied. 'But you know what, I'm really glad I did. From now on, I'm going to say more, be more assertive.'

'Heaven help us!'

'Who do you think dobbed me in?'

'Dunno. It makes you suspicious, though.'

For the next few weeks, we watched all our friends closely, searching for any small signs of guilt and betrayal. There were none.

'I give up', I told Jill one lunch-time, 'if we keep watching everyone, we'll never trust anyone again, better to forget it'.

On the weekend, I told Mum what had happened. She was very upset, much more upset than I had anticipated. She took it as a personal slight on herself.

Nan took an interest in the proceedings as well. She wasn't angry, just very pessimistic. 'You shouldn't have done it, Sally', she growled. 'You don't know what they'll do now. They might send someone to the house. Government people are like that. Best to say nothing, just go along with them till you see which way the wind blows. You don't know what will happen now, you mark my words.'

'Oh don't be stupid, Nan', Mum yelled. 'She did right to defend herself. No one's going to come snooping around. Times have changed.'

'You're stupid. Glad', Nan grunted, and before Mum could reply, she shuffled out to her bedroom.

'You're going to be in for it tonight, Mum', I sighed. 'She's going to be in a real lousy mood.'

'I don't know why she gets like that', Mum said. 'She's frightened, you see. She's been frightened all her life. You can tell her things have changed, but she won't listen. She thinks it's still like the old days when people could do what they liked with you.'

'Could they, Mum?'

'What?'

'Do what they liked with you?'

'Oh, I don't know. I don't want to talk now, Sally. Not now.'

However, my run-in with the Education Department did produce some unexpected results. Mum suddenly became more sympathetic to my desire to learn about the past. One day, she said to me, 'Of course, you know Nan was born on Corunna Downs Station, don't you?'

'I've heard her mention that station', I replied, 'but whenever I've asked her about it, she clams up. Remember when David got that map of the north and showed her on the map where Corunna Downs was? She was quite excited that it was on a map, wasn't she? Yet, she still won't talk.'

'I know. It really upsets me, sometimes.'

'Mum, who owned Corunna Downs?'

'Judy's father.'

'I didn't know that. What was his name?'

'Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman.'

'Fancy that. I suppose that's why Judy and Nan are so close. That and the fact that Nan used to work for the family.'

'Yes. Nan was Judy's nursemaid when she was little.'

'Tell me the other things she used to do then, Mum.'

'I remember she used to work very hard. Very, very hard . . . Oh, I don't want to talk any more. Maybe some other time.'

For once, I accepted her decision without complaint. I knew now there would be other times.

Even though I was married, I saw my family nearly every day. There were such strong bonds between us it was impossible for me not to want to see them. Just as well Paul was the uncomplaining sort.

One Saturday afternoon, I was over visiting Mum when she asked me to help her with Curly. 'He's in one of his cantankerous moods', she said. 'He won't come inside, see what you can do with him.'

I eyed Curly in disgust from my standpoint on the front porch. He was lying in the middle of the road as usual. All morning, cars had been tooting at him, all to no avail. Curly moved for no one.

'You'll get run over, Curl', I called in my Let's Be Reasonable voice. 'You'd better come in.' Still no response.

'I don't think he'll come in, Mum', I replied. 'I wish Paul were here, he always obeys Paul.'

'You don't think he's going deaf in his old age', Mum asked with a concerned look on her face.

'Naah, just stupid.'

'He's a good dog, Sally', she protested. 'You shouldn't talk about him like that.'

'I think you'd better go inside, Mum', I advised. 'He'll never listen to me with you standing there.' Mum disappeared and I called once again to the flat layer of black fur lying on the road.

'Curl, Mum's gone now. If you don't come in, I'm gunna drag you in.' Curl raised his head slightly and growled. I knew what that meant. As soon as I touched him, he'd bite me. I'd been through this before.

'Listen, you bloody mongrel', I yelled.

But before I could continue my tirade, Nan came up behind me and said, 'Don't say that, Sally, it hurts me here', she patted her chest. 'Fancy, my own granddaughter sayin' that. I never thought you'd be the one.'

'You're as bad as Mum', I complained. 'I'm not allowed to say anything.'

'I been called that', Nan replied. 'It makes you feel real rotten inside.'

'It's no use you going on, Nan', I said without listening, 'he is a

bloody mongrel!'

'Don't! Don't!' she said, as though I was inflicting some kind of pain on her.

'Nan', I reasoned, 'someone has got to be firm with him or he'll get run over one day'.

'What are you talkin' about, Sally?'

'I'm talking about Curly', I replied in exasperation, and then paused. 'Why, what are you talking about?'

Nan gazed towards the oval directly opposite our house. Just where the bitumen ended and the grass began sat a small Aboriginal boy, I recognised him as belonging to a house around the corner from us. He was intent on some sort of game.

'Nan!' I said in shock. 'You don't think I was calling that little fella a bloody mongrel, do you? Oh Nan, I'd never call a kid that. That's a terrible thing to call anyone. How could you think I'd do such a thing?'

'I've heard them called that. It's not right, they got feelings.'

'Nan, did you say you'd been called that?'

She put her hand over her mouth.

'Who was it, Nan? What rotten buggger called you that?'

'Don't want to talk about it, Sally', she shook her head.

'You've been called that more than once, haven't you, Nan?' She ignored my question and turned to go inside. Half-way through the doorway, she stopped and said, 'Sal?'

'Yeah?'

'Promise me you won't ever call them that? When you see a little bloke like that, think of your Nanna.'

I nodded my head. I was too close to tears to reply. I wished I could wipe memories like that from her mind. She looked so vulnerable, not like her usual complaining self. It was times like that I realised just how much I loved her.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### A VISITOR

After I graduated from university, I continued post-graduate studies in psychology at the Western Australian Institute of Technology.

My brother David was also successful in completing his Leaving exams that year, and now Helen was the only one of us still at school. She was in third year high school.

Mum and I had many small conversations about the past, but they weren't really informative, because we tended to cover the same ground. Sometimes, Mum would try and get Nan to talk. One day, I heard Nan shout, 'You're always goin' on about the past these days, Glad. I'm sick of it. It makes me sick in here', she pointed to her chest. 'My brain's no good, Glad, I can't 'member!'

Mum gave up easily. 'She's been like that all her life', she complained to me one day, 'she'll never change. When I was little, I used to ask about my father, but she wouldn't tell me anything. In the end, I gave up.'

'Who was your father?'

'Oh, I don't know', she replied sadly, 'Nan just said he was a white man who died when I was very small'.

I felt sad then. I promised myself that, one day, I would find out who her father was. She had a right to know.

In 1975, I gave birth to a daughter, Ambelin Star. The family was very excited, it was our first grandchild. Mum cried when she saw her, so did Nan. Now, instead of collecting antiques, Mum started buying up toys and children's books.

I passed my course at WAIT and decided to give up study for a while and concentrate on being a wife and mother.

I continued to prompt Nan about the past, but she dug her heels in further and further. She said that I didn't love her, that none of us had ever loved or wanted her. She maintained that Mum had never looked after her properly. In fact, she became so consistently cantankerous that she gradually drove us all away. Everyone in the family got to the stage where, if we could avoid seeing Nan, we would.