

CHAPTER
ONE

Don't Cry, Gunduburries

I WAS ONLY A SMALL CHILD when we were taken from my born country. I only remember a little of those times there but my memories are very precious to me. Most of my life has been spent away from my country but before I tell you any more of my story I want to tell you what I remember about the land I come from. It will always be home, the place I belong to.

My born country is the land of the Bidjara-Pitjara people, and is known now as Carnarvon Gorge, 600 kilometres northwest of Brisbane. This was also the land of the Kairi, Nuri, Karingbal, Longabulla, Jiman and Wadja people. Our people lived in this land since time began. In our land are waterfalls, waterholes and creeks where we swam and where the older people fished. Our mob always seemed cool, even on the hottest days, because the country was like an oasis. There were huge king ferns. I believe they have been described as living fossils because their form has not changed for thousands of years.

We were never left with empty bellies. The men hunted kangaroos, goannas, lizards, snakes and porcupines with spears and boomerangs. The women gathered berries, grubs, wild plums, honey and waterlilies, and yams and other roots with their digging sticks. Children stayed with the women when the men hunted so that they wouldn't be close to the hunt and frighten

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away the animals. The creeks gave us lots of food, too — yellow belly and jew, perch and eel.

My mother would use leaves from trees to make soap for washing our bodies with, and unfortunately for us kids there was no excuse not to take a bogey. I remember goanna fat being used for cuts and scratches as well as being a soothing ointment for aches and pains. Eucalyptus leaves were used for coughs, and the bark of certain trees for rashes and open wounds. Witchetty grubs helped babies' teething, and we used charcoal for cleaning teeth.

There were huge cliffs and rocks, riddled with caves where many of my people's paintings were. Most caves and rock faces showed my people's stencilled hands, weapons and tools, and there were engravings here, too. Fertility symbols and the giant serpent tell us of the spiritual significance of the place. This place is old. My people and their art were here long before the whiteman came.

The caves were cool places in summer and warm places in winter, and offered shelter when the days were windy or when there was rain. They offered a safe place for the women bringing new life into the world. As had happened for my mother and her mother before her, going back generation after generation, I was born in the sanctuary of one of those caves. My mother would tell us how my grandmother would wash my mother's newborn babies in the nearby creek, place them in a cooliman and carry them back to suckle on my exhausted mother's breast.

We lived in humpies, or gunyahs, that the men built from tree branches, bark and leaves. Gum resin held them together. We would sleep inside the gunyahs, us children arguing for the warm place closest to Mama, a place usually kept for the youngest children. More gunyahs would be built as they were needed in this serene valley that had nurtured my people since time began.

My mother, Rose, had a Bidjara-Pitjara mother known as Lucy Conway from the Maranoa River and a white father who

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was never married to her mother. I never knew who her father was. I don't know much about the contact my mother had with whites. She had a whiteman's name, but she also had a tribal name, Gylma, and she spoke language and knew the old ways. My father, Albert Holt, was the son of a Yuri woman known as Maggie Bundle and a whiteman, the owner of Wealwandangie Station. My father was named after that man. My grandmother may have been working at the homestead. Dadda was brought up on the station, away from his mother's people. When he grew older he wanted to be with Aboriginal people, and started visiting the camps. He saw my mother there and wanted to marry her. After that, he stayed in the camp with her, and then the children started coming.

One winter's night, troopers came riding on horseback through our camp. My father went to see what was happening, and my mother stayed with her children to try to stop us from being so frightened. One trooper I remember clearly. Perhaps he was sorry for what he was doing, because he gave me some fruit — a banana, something as unknown to me as the whiteman who offered it. My mother saw, and cried out to me, 'Barjun! Barjun!'

Dadda and some of the older men were shouting angrily at the officials. We were being taken away from our lands. We didn't know why, nor imagined what place we would be taken to. I saw the distressed look on my parents' faces and knew something was terribly wrong. We never had time to gather up any belongings. Our camp was turned into a scattered mess — the fire embers still burning.

What was to appear next out of the bush took us all by surprise and we nearly turned white with fright. It was a huge cage with four round things on it which, when moved by the man in the cabin in front, made a deafening sound, shifting the ground and flattening the grass, stones and twigs beneath it. We had never seen a cattle truck before. A strong smell surrounded us as we entered the truck and we saw brown stains on the wooden floor.

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They packed us in like cattle with hardly any room to move. The troopers threw a few blankets over us (we thought they were strange animal skins). There weren't enough blankets for all of us, and so the older people gave them to us younger ones while they went without. The night was cold and colder still on the back of the open truck.

It took the whole night across rough dirt tracks to reach our first destination of Woorabinda Aboriginal Settlement. Woori was a dry and dusty place compared to the home we were forced to leave. My memory of the place at that time is not clear but I do remember seeing some gunyahs and some people there watching us. The people were not smiling — just like us. Although curious to see us, the people did not come too far outside their gunyahs but watched from a safe distance as our older people were unloaded by the troopers.

I will never forget how they huddled, frightened, cold and crying in their blankets. Some of our old relations were wrenched from our arms and lives that day and it is for them that I shed my tears. One old lady broke away from the others and screamed, 'Don't take my gunduburries! Don't take my gunduburries!' as the truck moved off, taking us away from her. After running a small distance she was stopped and held by the officials who wanted to keep 'wild bush Blacks' on these reserves.

My father's ashen face told the story and we were never to see our old people again. Dadda could never bring himself to speak about it. Our tribe was torn away — finished. Perhaps the hurt and pain always remained for him. It was understandable then why he would hate and rebel against the authorities for the rest of his days after what they did to our people.

The old people from both Cherbourg and Woorabinda always told the story that the 'full bloods' were sent to Woorabinda and the fairer-skinned to Cherbourg. Both my parents were considered 'half-castes' because they both had white fathers. I had always wondered why our people were split up and found

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out sometime in my twenties that the government people thought that those of us who looked whiter would more easily assimilate than the darker ones, but this was not so. Sometimes it was vice versa. But skin never mattered to us. It was how we felt about being Aboriginal that counted. It was when I was in my twenties, too, that I was given a certificate which specified my 'breed'. 'Cross out description not required', it said. 'Full blood, half caste, quadroon.'

The truck went on, travelling for two terrible days, going further south. As if in a funeral procession, we were loud in our silence. We were all in mourning. I can't remember what we had to eat or drink, or where we stopped on the journey, but by the time we reached our destination we were numb with cold, tiredness and hunger. And this new country was so different from our country — flat, no hills and valleys, arid and cleared of trees.

Camp at Cherbourg (people and date unknown)



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It was Barambah Reserve (renamed Cherbourg in 1932) that we'd been brought to, just outside Murgon on the Barambah River. Here we were separated from each other into rough houses — buildings that seemed so strange to me then, with their walls so straight. Each family was fenced off from the others into their own two little rooms where you ate and slept. The houses were little cells, all next to each other in rows. A prison. No wonder that, along with 'mission', 'reserve', 'settlement', 'Muddy Flats' and 'Guna Valley', Cherbourg has been named 'prison' and 'concentration camp' by Aboriginal people. The place in fact had its own gaol. A prison in a prison. There were white and Aboriginal areas. Government authorities and teachers stayed away from us, and their areas were off-limits to all Aboriginal people.

One of the Aboriginal living areas was called top camp, and it was dotted with gynyahs. It was here that Annie Evans lived with her large family. She was the first person to greet us when we arrived, and gave us food. Her generosity was never forgotten by my parents or by myself. Her daughter Barbara was my age and we became best friends and stayed that way all our lives.

No one had the right to remove us from our traditional lands and to do what they did to us. We were once the proud custodians of our land and now our way of life became controlled by insensitive people who knew nothing about us but thought they knew everything. They even chose how and where we could live. We had to stay in one place now while the whiteman could roam free.

We took a trip back to my born country in 1986. It was the first time I had been back since that night we were taken over sixty years before. Tourism has taken its toll in the area, but the place still has its wild beauty. I felt the call of my people billowing through the trees and welcoming me home again. I saw the smiling faces of my elders, the ambers of the campfire, heard the

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women singing. In my heart was such a deep happiness because I knew I was home again. 'Rita Huggins was born somewhere out there', I said over and over again in my mind.

*R*eturning to my mother's born country as she refers to it complemented my own sense of identity and belonging, and my pride in this. It was important that together we make this trip as she had been insisting for quite some time, pining for her homelands. We shared a special furthering of our mother-daughter bond during this time, although we argued incessantly about nothing as usual or, as she calls it, 'fighting with our tongues'. I began to gain an insight into and understanding of her obvious attachment and relationship to her country and how our people had cared for this place way before the Royal Geographic Society and park rangers ever clapped eyes on it. The way my mother moved around, kissed the earth and said her prayers will have a lasting effect on my soul and memory because she was paying homage and respect to her ancestors who had passed on long ago but whose presence we could both intensely feel.

The land of my mother and my maternal grandmother is my land, too. It will be passed down to my children and successive generations, spiritually, in the manner that has been carried on for thousands of years. Fate dictates that nothing will ever change this. As Rita's daughter, I not only share the celebration and the pain of her experience but also the land from which we were created.

Like most Aboriginal people, it is my deeply held belief that we came from this land, hence the term 'the land is my mother'. The land is our birthing place, our cradle; it offers us connection with the creatures, the trees, the mountains and the rivers, and all living things. There are no stories of migration in our dreamtime stories. Our creation stories link us intrinsically to the earth. We are born of the earth and when we die our body and spirit go back there. This is why land is so important to us, no matter where and when we were born.

The removal of Aboriginal people from their lands has gone on since the arrival of the whiteman, and it still goes on. Alienation from

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traditional lands has just taken different forms at different times. Reserves like Cherbourg and Woorabinda onto which my mother's people were placed were set up under the Queensland Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act of 1897. The decades that followed the introduction of the Act were a period of acute isolation and control of Aboriginal people. Aborigines were deliberately and systematically cut off from their traditional ways of life and made to conform to, and become dependent on, European ways. The reserves refused Aborigines the rights to their own languages, ceremonies, religious beliefs and marriage laws, and in their place was put a culture of control and surveillance. Every action and association was monitored; employment — including any wages — was managed by the reserves' superintendents; personal relations were intervened in. Punishment, including days and nights in the gaol, sometimes in solitary confinement, was meted out with imperialist assurance.

Reserves were supposedly established for the care and protection of Aboriginal people, and there is a double irony in that. Not only were Aborigines subjected to humiliating treatment in the reserves, but if they needed protection it was from whites. In the decades preceding the introduction of the Act, bloody massacres had taken place in Carnarvon Gorge, and all across the country. The massacres were ritualised violence, intended to demonstrate white superiority and power. The poisoning of flour and waterholes may be common knowledge; burying Blackfellas alive in sand, tying them to trees for use in shooting practice, is less so. Who were the barbarians?

The history of violence on the frontier has only been partially addressed. More orthodox historians have tended to downplay the extent of the violences committed against Aboriginal people, and revisionist historians, such as Ray Evans and Gordon Reid, who have attempted to reconstruct the massacres around my family's area, are marginalised.

In 1857, the Jiman of the Carnarvon Gorge area, reacting against the rape of Jiman women, the dispossession of hunting grounds, and the destruction of sacred sites, killed the whites present at the Fraser homestead at the Hornet Bank Station. In revenge, whites conducted

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the six-month 'little war' over a vast area unrelated to the Gorge, shooting down men, women and children as they ran. No measures were taken to stop this slaughter.

The killings went on long after, and all over Australia. Aboriginal people were nearly wiped out and it is a wonder that we are alive to tell the story. Because our beginnings as Black and white Australians were steeped in bloodshed and murder, and Black survival depended on such flimsy pieces of fate, it makes it almost impossible for us to pick up the pieces, forget about it and make up.

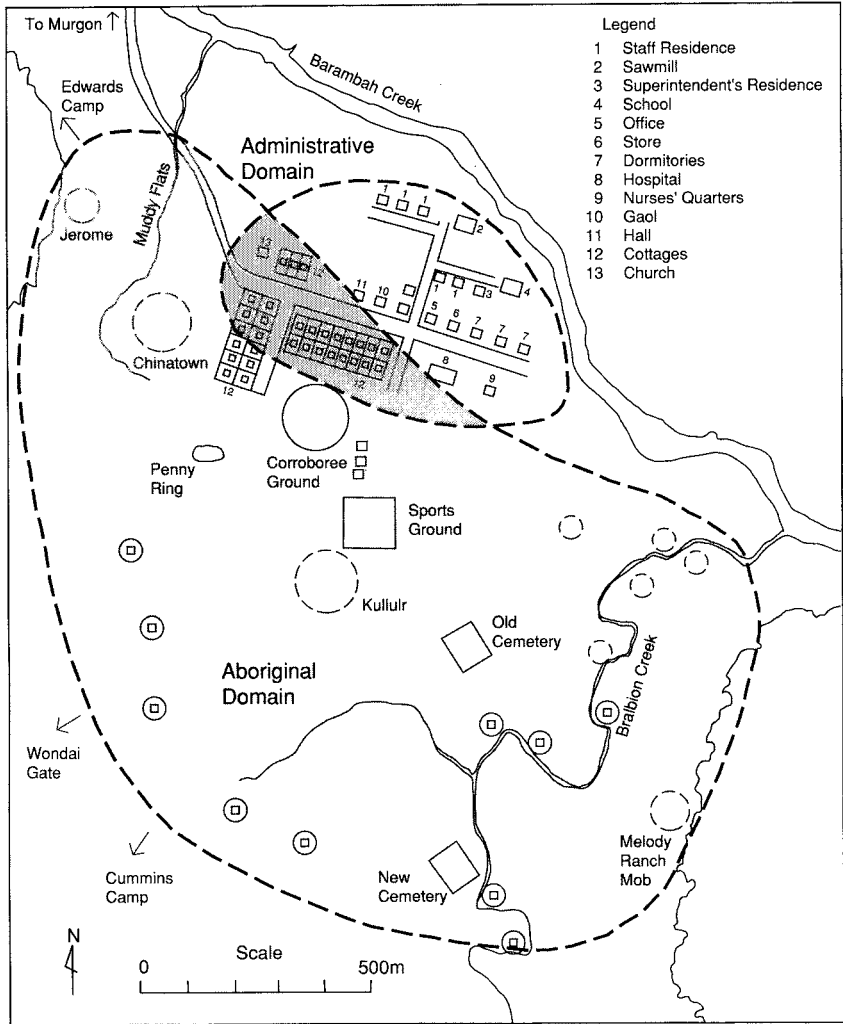
A man of my tribe, Grandfather Chooky, witnessed the killing of sixteen white people at Cullinlarigo near Springsure in 1861. The Wills family died in this pay-back killing. The same thing had been happening there as in other places. White men stole and raped our women. This made Aboriginal people very angry and unhappy.

Grandfather Chooky is said to be an ancestor of mine, and to have been well over a hundred when he died. The whiteman believed he was a leader of our people, so he gave him a breastplate and called him King Chooky. But there weren't any kings in our culture, only elders.



'Chooky, King of Rainworth'

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Barambah (Cherbourg) Aboriginal Settlement, 1930s (with thanks to Thom Blake)