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A black girl in a white world

I was born in a black and white world. If you were white, everything was okay. You could do what you liked. But if you were black, your life was controlled by the government. We weren't seen as humans. We were treated as part of the flora and fauna. We weren't recognised as citizens in our own country until the Referendum in 1967.¹

When I say they controlled our lives, I mean we had to live on the fringes of towns and on native missions and reserves. The missions were run either by the government or different churches. You couldn't marry who you fell in love with; you had to get permission from the government. You also had to get a permit to move from place to place. When you worked, they stole your wages. If you wanted to buy anything, you had to virtually beg for your money. You had to write a letter to the government to ask if you could buy a dress or shoes or stockings.²

I was born in Carnarvon, Western Australia, on 17 August 1951. I am Yamatji on my mother's side and Nyungar (some say 'Noongar') and Nhanda-Yamatji on my father's side. I am the first-born child of Alice Ethel Spratt, married name Webb, and Ronald Mack Ugle. They gave me the name Rhonda June Spratt. My maternal grandfather was Clarry Spratt and my grandmother was Edna Ronan.

I didn't grow up with my family because me and my baby sister, Debbie Anne Spratt, were taken from our mother and put into

Alice's daughter

*Co/ Mrs Fleay
Gurrabilba Str.
Meekatharra
5 March 1950*

Dear Mrs Stitfold,

Will you please send me a sunsuit a green one if possible. I'd like you to get me a pair of bathers and also a pair of wedgie sandals too, but if I haven't got enough money to get the sunsuit, and sandals, don't bother about them, but please get the bathers get sea green or blue, if you will please.

Thanking you very much

Sincerely yours

Alice Spratt

Mr. Lewis.

For advice, please, re Alice Spratt's trust account.

C. Stitfold
9/3/50

Letter from Alice Spratt to Mrs Stitfold, with annotation to Mr Lewis, 1950.³

Carnarvon Native Mission.⁴ I was only three at the time and Debbie was just seven months old. I always knew that we had a mother somewhere; I just didn't know where she was.⁵

Unlike some other missions in Australia, at Carnarvon, no Aboriginal families lived together. It was just us kids and the white missionaries. Most mission people call their parents 'mother' and 'father'. We don't say 'mum' or 'dad' because we didn't know them.

The full name of our mission was Churches of Christ Carnarvon Native Mission. Me and Debbie grew up in dormitories — from the Kindergarten dormitory, to Junior Buds, to Junior Girls, to Senior Girls, to Teens Cottage, and finally to Home Girls. All this time, my sister and me were in different dormitories because we were different ages. We didn't get to play together. The only time we were in the same dormitory was my final year, when we were together in Teens Cottage.



On any day, we had to be up at 6 am and have our beds made with 'hospital corners'. As girls, we always had to wear aprons. I hate aprons today.

We all had different chores before breakfast. Some girls worked in the Kindergarten dormitory, others down at the big dining room kitchen. A huge table filled the centre of the dining room. Under it stood heavy trolleys of flour, sugar and salt, with lids to keep them from spoiling. We worked very hard. Working in the kitchen was the best because we stole a bit of food on the side — like some dried fruit from the pantry, which we hid in our aprons.

One of the jobs I hated was in the laundry, ironing. We couldn't go and play until we'd finished. We had to starch everything too. When I worked in the Junior Boys dormitory, it made me sad when the little boys wet their beds. They had to wash their sheets by hand as punishment, standing on a bucket at a big trough. They were too small and couldn't hang their sheets up, so I helped them.

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The boys worked in the vegetable gardens, and rounded up the cows to milk too. In winter, they stood in the cow goon-na, to keep their feet warm. They chopped enough wood to fill a big truck. Even us girls had to go out and fill that truck up with wood. We all sat high on the wood going home. It was hard work, but we liked going out in the bush.

The dining room was used for both meals and church. We had to polish that huge wooden floor too. Those electric polishers were enormous; they chucked us around. When the missionaries weren't looking, we had fun giving each other rides.

We prepared breakfast for them missionaries. I loved standing by Lynda James, one of the big girls, keeping warm and watching as she fried the eggs on the big wood stove, spooning the fat over the yolks as the bacon sizzled. It felt comforting being next to her, smelling the bacon and hearing it crackle. We had a whole chookyard, but we were never allowed to eat the eggs. The white missionaries ate them and sold the rest to the hospital or the towns people.

The missionaries sat at the head of the table in nice comfy chairs. We sat on stools. The missionaries always started off breakfast with grapefruit, which we segmented, sprinkled with brown sugar, and topped with a red cherry. Next, they enjoyed hot porridge, bacon, eggs, tomato on toast and a cup of tea. We, by contrast, ate porridge and bread with butter, Vegemite, or molasses — you know, like they feed horses.

One day, at breakfast in the big dining room, a missionary said grace. Then Miss Barton, the young missionary nurse who always smelt of antiseptic, announced, 'Now we'll say our own special little grace for our table.'

Each child was to say something. So, we bowed our heads and prayed. It was the turn of the boy next to me. His name was Marshall Kelly, but we nicknamed him Diamond Face because his face was that shape. We were always saying prayers for the Kellys. Some of Marshall's brothers and sisters got sent to Perth because they were sick a lot of the time.

Diamond Face began, 'Thank you Jesus for my ham and eggs.'

I elbowed him. 'Why are you thanking Jesus for ham and eggs? We never ever have ham and eggs, *they* do!'

‘Rhonda Spratt! Open your ears!’ Diamond Face shouted. ‘I didn’t thank Jesus for ham and eggs, I thanked him for my arms and legs!’

I got a scolding and a slap on the arm from Miss Barton. We all laughed about it later though.

We had three meals a day, but I was still hungry. That’s why today, when I have a chop, there’s nothing left of it — the bone is left clean. We even broke the bone and sucked out the marrow. I ate dried banana and orange skins off the ground too. On the odd occasion when we got an orange, I peeled off each segment, and ate just one little juicy droplet at a time to make the fruit last longer. When making dinner, I even ate the raw potatoes. After we’d had enough to eat, we weren’t allowed to say we were full; we had to say, ‘I’ve had elegant sufficiency’, which means full anyway. I didn’t say that very often.

We were, however, force-fed religion. We had Devotion before breakfast, Christian Endeavour during the week, and on Sunday we had morning church, Sunday school in the afternoon, then evening church. Occasionally, on a Sunday, we went to the native reserve. Their church was a bough shed — it had four posts with wire strung over the top, covered with branches and leaves.

The only thing good about Sundays was getting dressed in our church clothes. We wore pretty little dresses, and combed our hair back neatly, tied with colourful ribbons. We all had shiny shoes with white socks, and we each got a handkerchief. To keep myself from falling asleep, and to save my sanity, I made things out of my hanky. I could make roses, lollies and even a banana.

Growing up in the mission, we heard religious stories over and over for years. But I knew my people had our own beliefs. There was this knowing inside me. I resented the missionaries. During church services, they held up large posters of a big white cross over a straight and narrow road. Their pictures showed all of our people in the gutter.

The only enjoyable thing at church was the singing. Even today I can remember the words of all those songs. They are deeply etched into every fibre of my flesh.

One time, when I was about twelve, me and Debbie had to sing an item about Jesus. We were at the Christian Centre in Perth in front

Alice's daughter

of a large congregation as we had come together with the Norseman Mission.⁶ We began, 'More about Jesus would I know, more of His love to others show ...' I can't remember who sang a wrong word, but there we were, standing on stage in front of all those people, laughing and giggling our heads off. Luckily, because so many people were around, we weren't punished, we just got told off.

Only one missionary man could play the piano well, honky tonk style. Honky Tonk wore his pants at high tide, up around his armpits. He was always playing friendly, putting his arm around you and smiling at you. Years later, we found out he was a paedophile. He was messing with the boys, not the girls. People want to deny that this happened, but it did. When we were in the Senior Girls dormitory, this man would come in when we were showering. When we turned away from him, he would shout, 'Turn around and face me and scrub your crotch!'

One time, one of the mission boys, Laurie Tittum, overheard some missionaries talking about the Senior Girls being 'full of virgins'. He got worried and came over to our yard and told us. He wasn't supposed to be there. Soon after, we could hear Laurie screaming, getting a flogging in the Superintendent's office. Laurie was always looking out for us. He was good at killing rats in the barn with a ging too, so we nicknamed him Rat. Rat was a clever detective — he saw things the rest of us missed.



We were told that Jesus loved us, but no one ever cuddled us. No one ever comforted us. No one ever said, 'You're a good kid, Rhonda.' I grew up feeling alone — a black girl in a white world.

They taught me well. I could speak their language. I wore their clothes. I read their Bible. I sang their hymns. But in my heart, I resented them for trying to make me white. It was like being dropped head first into a tin of white paint. But the real me was still there — they couldn't wash away 60,000 years of Dreaming and history that

tie me forever to this sacred land: the river, the sky, the claypans, the sandhills, the wildflowers and the sea — that is me.

Being apart from my family and any kind of affection had a big effect on me, even at the time. Once, in the middle of the night, when I was about thirteen, I woke up. The night was completely dark and still. No trees rustled. I sat straight up in bed listening, just listening. But all was silent. Maybe God had come back and taken everyone away, leaving only me. I thought that all the mission kids and adults had gone and left me here all alone. Even God didn't want me. It was such a lonely feeling. All my life I'd heard about God as love. But I didn't feel loved at all. I just laid back and cried.



The one time of the week that we loved was Saturday afternoon when we were allowed to go for walks. We called it 'the bush', but we had to ask politely, 'Can we go for a walk into "the common"?', a very English term. Usually there was a group of about four or five of us, including Beverley Pickett, Roslyn Flanagan, Irene Tittum and sometimes little Marjorie Hughes who, when she was nervous, used to stutter back then.

The next property was owned by a white man named Tucker Reynolds. Beverley would ask the girls to hold the barbed wire open and I'd climb through, coming face-to-face with a big bullock. I'd stamp my foot at him, and he'd stamp back, kicking up the dust. Soon he'd put his head down, ready to charge at me. But when he charged, I'd run at the opening and dive back through the fence, hitting the dirt on the other side, with all the other girls shouting and laughing. I was the only girl brave enough or silly enough to do this.

My favourite time in the common was spring. The land was fragrant with flowers and full of bush tucker like blackberries, orange berries (we called them wild orange), wild pear or gogola, and yams. Carnarvon is semi-desert, so when it rains a bit everything blooms. My favourite wild flowers included everlastings (white people call them paper daisies) in pink, yellow and white; button flowers, yellow

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like the sun; fluffy pussycat tails in a beautiful soft mauve colour; and purple vetch, that's what we called it, in the shape of a heart. I always felt free going out there, not having to worry about chores. We grabbed sticks and drew hopscotch squares in the sand. We played it in a circle, starting from the outside in, like a snail shell.

Springtime, or after rain, was good eating for other things too. Us girls followed the tracks of little insects that lived beneath the surface of the earth and left mounds. 'Iddy-iddy' we called them. We dug them up for fish bait. We could see all of the animal tracks then too. We got pieces of wire and bent them like fishing rods to catch big grubs as long as your hand from around the roots of gum trees. We fished them out and cooked them up for a snack. Someone told me later that they grow into these great moths. Then I felt sorry for them, because we ate them.

I often walked alone to the little creek near us and sat up high on a branch of my favourite gum tree, watching the birds flying above, and the big bullfrog tadpoles swimming in the clear water below. I sat there for hours watching sunlight dance on the water, wondering what my life would be, thinking that I hated the past, but was scared of the future. Being still for that moment, surrounded by nature and without any other kids around me, was good for my soul and good for my spirit.

Being a part of the natural world gave me a lot of joy. Here I could be at one with nature, the creek, the birds, the animals and the bugs. I spent time with nature and talked to her as if she were my mother.

By the water grew little royal-blue flowers with a yellow centre. They looked beautiful against the red earth. I would sit, taking all this in, looking at the reeds and freshwater turtles in the creek that was cool and peaceful and just for me. I didn't ever want to leave it and be back in the dormitories, in the noise, among the people.

Gifts from nature

*I drink the dew drops from the wildflowers
That grow on this sacred ancient red land,
So cool and so fresh to the touch on my tongue
Taste the sweet nectar, fragrance fill my soul*

*I see trees, half-human, standing tall and strong
Stretch their limbs up high into the daytime sky
Seeking warmth and life-giving light
From the sun god that lives so far away*

*I hear the wind sing her gentle lullaby
As she hugs and caresses our mother the earth,
The voice of the magpies, so beautiful,
Soaks into my heart with love, peace and joy*

*Find golden gumdrops on acacia trees
Juicy orange and blackberries wait, just for me,
Take only what you need, there's no need for greed
The gifts from nature are here for you and me.*

Alice's daughter

Granny Ruby Beasley came into my life when she started work in the mission laundry. One day she just came up and told me that she was my Grandfather Clarrie's sister. Her maiden name was Spratt, just like me and Debbie. She told us who all her sisters and brothers were. She'd grown up on Moore River Native Settlement made famous by the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.^{7,8} Through Granny Ruby we got to know who our family were, but by name only.

Granny Ruby lived with many other Aboriginal families on the Gascoyne riverbank in a tin humpy. Me and Debbie visited her at the camp when we were allowed to go for our Saturday afternoon walks. While walking there, we could always hear Slim Dusty songs playing in the distance. We passed by other Aboriginal people sitting on the ground around their campfires, roasting kangaroo meat on the coals, and cooking ashes damper. The smell was so delicious, it made our mouths water. We would smile and say hello as we passed them.

Every time we went there, Granny was drinking. She would tell me and Debbie not to drink, and then ask us to sing Christian songs. We began, 'What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer...'

She would start to cry. By this time, me and Debbie were crying too, but still singing, sitting on the sandy ground. Before we left to return to the mission, Granny would give me a matchbox full of silver coins. She told me to share it with my little sister, which I always did.

I'll never forget Granny Ruby. She was the first person to show me and Debbie true love. She was family. Our blood was the same.

One very hot day, all us mission kids were swimming at the netting crossing. I was having fun until a big girl started laughing at my Granny. She could see Granny Ruby in the distance, carrying her jimmy-john or plonk. Then all the kids started laughing at her as she fell over in the dry riverbed.

This made me so wild. I started shouting at everybody, but they still kept carrying on. I tucked my dress in my pants, fixing to fight the lot of them. I was angry that they were making fun of my precious Gran.

I started yelling at them to fight me. In the mission, you had to fight to survive. But nobody stepped up. They knew I was a good fighter.

When no one took up my challenge, I ran down the dry riverbed and pulled Granny Ruby to her feet. After picking up her bottles of drink, I helped her back to the humpy. When we got there, she asked me to pour the drink into another container because her hands were too shaky.

As I did this for her she cried, 'Look at your hands! They're so steady!'

She placed her long brown fingers on my shoulder, looked me in the eyes, and said, 'Don't you ever start drinking like me.'

So, on that hot day, in the middle of that sandy riverbed, I made a promise to myself that I would never let alcohol be my boss. Granny Ruby is my hero, her words of wisdom are still part of my life today. She gave me identity. She gave me history. She gave me family. And she gave me love that I had never known.



Alice's daughter

The river

*The river that I love is mostly dry
Tall gum trees watch over her
Swaying gently to the warm summer breeze
I walk along the riverbed looking for pretty stones
I am alone
I hear the sound of crunching sand beneath my Yamatji feet
I am alone*

*I stop and stare into the shallow water puddles
Reflections of the sky
Reflections of me
I reach into the water
and touch the clouds and then the sun
I am alone*

*I listen to the humming of the wind
Singing her song to the land and me
I watch the ants scurrying along
I am alone*

*I smell the scent of rain
I hear the whispers of a storm
I hold my riverstones tight in my Yamatji hands
I am alone*

*I gaze into the dark sky and tremble at the thought of lightning
Dragonflies with beautiful wings and bulging eyes
dart and dance silently over still fresh water
I am alone*

*Raindrops shatter the stillness of the water like a breaking mirror
I watch the circles of water rush to greet each other like old
friends*

*I know the music of the storm
I know the songs of the rain
I know the stories of the river
I know the dance of the land
I am not alone
The river that I love is mostly dry.*

One time when we were little, visiting Granny Ruby down by the river, her son was there. He strummed a guitar and sang 'Showers of Blessing'. Later, he came to the mission evening church and sang. So, it was Uncle Jim Beasley who inspired me to learn to play guitar.

A big-name country singer, Buddy Williams, once visited the mission too. Later, I learnt that Buddy was a 'forgotten Australian'. He'd been brought out from England during the Second World War as a child, without his parents. I often wondered why he'd visited us. Maybe it was because he understood what it was like to grow up without the love of a mother or father.

Buddy stayed and had tea with us in the dining room. His group sat on the stage above and, after our meal, they entertained us. I still remember a special song Buddy sang to us all those years ago. It's called 'There's a little red bonnet our baby wore'. He told us the story about the song and how he lost his baby girl who was killed in a train accident as they were crossing a railway line.

I felt really honoured to have this famous singer visit, talk with us, and give us his precious time.

As the sun went down, the band had to leave. They travelled down the dirt track of the old mission road with all us mission kids running after their car, waving as they left us in a cloud of dust. That fond memory has lived with me all this time.