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A Hollywood Life

1995

If I had known what was to happen, before I got involved with the Kumarangk bridge business, I would absolutely have done the same thing no matter what. I'm a fighter. But one thing that bothered me was that I could feel my hatred for white people coming back. Over the years I have got to know a lot of white people and I have many white friends. But I never knew people could be so narrow-minded, ignorant and nasty. My supporters and I were getting racist hate mail and the media turned on us. They took to calling me 'Mrs' Kartinyeri, even though it wouldn't take much to find out that Kartinyeri is my birth name. At the same time I was an 'activist' and making all the women's knowledge up. What for? Some had it that the men had put words in my mouth. It just wasn't possible for the white public to accept that I was a custodian of traditional women's knowledge.

I thought there was a lot of prejudice against blackfellas when I was growing up, but it's still here. And the minute Aboriginal people start speaking out for their culture and heritage and history, the first thing white people say is, 'Oh they just want the land'. They're only concerned they might lose what they wrongfully took from us all those years ago when Captain Cook came to Australia. When Native Title came in, there was a big fuss because white people thought they were

going to be kicked off their properties. But Aboriginal people just want access to go to their hunting grounds and the farmers was bolting the gates and keeping them out. People in the cities thought that their homes would be claimed, but that isn't going to happen. Aboriginal people are only asking for respect for our culture. We just want to be able to share the land that has always been so precious to us, not take it away. All I was asking was that they don't desecrate the land and waters that my tradition says must be treated with great care.

I prayed to God that my hate wouldn't come back like it used to, and because I had been all over the country in recent years and seen all the things I'd seen and talked to the people I'd talked to, I realised there will always be black and white in this world and I was brought up not to hate.

1951

Looking after Ron, Bobby and Heather was just the beginning of my fostering career. I started looking after my cousin Topsy's three boys, Eddie, Dick and Wayne, while Topsy was expecting the birth of her next baby. Topsy and Lester Rigney were living in a de facto relationship and therefore weren't allowed to live on Raukkan, and she wasn't allowed to go into the hospital to have her baby, so she did what a lot of the women did and went to Aunty Laura's shack at Three Miles so Aunty Laura could deliver her baby.

At the same time my cousin Sarah Jackson (née Rankine) was also expecting a baby, and I was helping her out as well. I was running down to her place every day doing the washing in an old hand-pump washing machine and hanging it out. I'd hang up her things, take Nanna's and Eddie, Dick and Wayne's clothes back to our house and hang them up to dry. Come half past three in the afternoon I'd be running down to Sarah's again to bring the clothes inside and wait for the big kids to come home from school. I was constantly going all day, and about six o'clock every night I'd grab the kids and throw them in the big old tub. I used to have to fill the copper outside, strip the kids down and argue them into the bath. Then I'd get them into bed.

After that I'd go and tend to Nanna and my grandfather, and by the time I'd finished that and emptied the water out and propped the tub up against the wall, I was exhausted. That was my routine for about nine months.

But I loved them to think that they trusted me to look after their children and I looked after them well. Topsy and I were always dearest sisters and friends until she died. I was only sixteen, but my mothering instincts were always there, even though I'd never had a steady bloke, never had sex. I wasn't worried about that. I believed I would know when the time was right for that and when it was I would get on with my own life.

After a while, my cousin Stella's husband Jim Cross called in at Raukkan on his way back from shearing, and he suggested I go with him to see Point Pearce play in the football grand final. I needed a holiday, so I decided to go. It was my second trip to Point Pearce since my sister Nancy died in 1943. Aunty Rosie wasn't yet exempted, so she and Uncle Nat still lived on the mission. I met up with her and my Nanna's brother, great-uncle Wilf Varcoe, and his wife Holly and a lot of other people.

Back at Raukkan, in the second week of December, Bruce Rumbelow brought me a message from Topsy to take her boys up to Three Miles because the baby was due. Aunty Laura sent the big boys away for a few days, so there was just us women and the kids. I got out my *Phantom* and *Felix the Cat* comics and read them while I waited.

That night Eddie and Dick went to sleep, but Wayne played up. So I brought him outside with me and I set an old rug on the floor and he and I played knucklebones with stones while I waited. Next minute Aunty Laura said, 'Light up that fire, my girl'. Aunty Laura had put some nice big chunks of charcoal in an old screw-top biscuit tin and poured some kerosene over them. To start the fire quickly, I poured the coals over the pine cones and stacked wood and lit it, and immediately there was a lovely fire.

I was nervous because I'd never ever seen a baby born in my life. Then Daughter was born. She was named Janice, but always known as Daughter. Aunty Laura called me in to have a *nakun* [look]. I picked

her up and put her in the little box that was her crib. Aunty Laura told me to soak the sheets in the cold water drum. I had to stir them with a big broom handle. Then I went back into the caravan and I saw something near the windowsill at the back of the caravan and I went to see what it was. Aunty Laura said, 'Leave that alone. Don't touch that'. It was the afterbirth. Aunty Laura showed me the cord that connects the baby to the mother's *pulangi* [navel].

Aunty Laura was an excellent *puthari* (midwife). She had all her own equipment, the women had faith in her and she coped very well. We were all very excited. Topsy already had eight children and now another little girl. I thanked God I had only been there for the one! It was quite an eye-opener for a young teenage girl.

It was a wonderful experience to be there when Daughter was born, but that was it for me and mothering for the time being. I thought if I was meant to be mothering I might as well get married and have my own children! Of course that didn't mean I wanted to rush off and get married. All in good time and in my own way. But Sarah had her baby soon after Daughter was born, and I thought it was time for me to move on.

The opportunity came up to go over to Point Pearce again, and I snapped up the chance. By this time Aunty Rosie had got exempted, so she and Uncle Nat were living off the mission. Aunty Rosie had a bad hip, and they told her if she got exempted she would be able to go in and get treatment to correct it. So she got her exemption and went into the hospital, but they said there was nothing they could do for her because the bone had already set. So she was dismissed from the hospital and she had to wait until all the exemptions was actually abolished in 1962 before she was able to go back onto the mission. That old lady spent more than ten years away from her family because of that.

Along with a number of other Aboriginal families, they were living at Hollywood, near Reef Point, right on the beach front. Hollywood got its name because a lot of the exempted people thought they were big shots — like movie stars. They all lived in little tin shacks, which

were very nicely done out. They had no electricity, so they used wood stoves, and a couple of the women had kerosene fridges. Aunty Rosie had an old ice box and they had to go into Port Victoria to get blocks of ice for it.

I stopped on the mission with my cousin Aileen Wilson and her husband Mark. Aileen's father, my mother and Aunty Rosie were brother and sisters, and Aileen and I were very close. On the weekends all the young boys and girls would jump on the horses and ride out to Hollywood, and I'd spend the weekend with Aunty Rosie. That's when I really began to get to know her well. Kim Kropinyeri said that we were two of a kind. My sisters Doris and Connie are like our Mum, but I'm more like Aunty Rosie, and there was a wonderful bond between us.

She had the most marvellous way of expressing herself, and as we worked together on the weaving or making feather flowers she would teach me many things. She started at that time to talk to me about kinship, all the people on Raukkan and other yarns. She taught me all about the old ways. She told me how they used to initiate the young girls to get them ready for sex. She told me boys were prepared for first sex too, but women had no details of that. Aunty Rosie told me Auntie Laura knew these things too, even though she was a bit younger. She had been through the initiation and all the girls a bit younger than her, before it was stopped by the white staff on Raukkan. Just Aunty Rosie and me, weaving and yarning. She made it very, very clear I was not allowed to tell anyone else any of this information.

It was on those rides down to Hollywood that I also first met Terry Wanganeen, who was to become my husband and the father of my nine children.

While I was at Point Pearce I kept myself by getting a job at the Maitland Hotel, where they were taking on Aboriginal girls in the kitchen, cleaning rooms and doing the laundry, so I did a few of those kind of jobs.

During this visit to Point Pearce, I experienced the death of Aunty Rosie's grandson Jimmy, who was a twin to Joy. I remember Mark and

Cyril came running down for Aileen. So we ran up there and Jimmy was dead. They had him laid out on the bed. They sent someone down to Hollywood to pick up Aunty Rosie and bring her to the house. It was so sad. He was a corker little kid, and Aunty Rosie was quite hysterical.

When I returned home after a couple of months, I knew I just had to get away from Raukkan, because though I loved my Nanna dearly, I couldn't handle her continuous crying. I used to jump into bed behind her and she'd stroke me and pat my hair and talk to me, but it was really starting to get to me, so I talked to Aunty Martha one day and asked her what I should do. Aunty Martha told me there was nothing more I could do for Nanna; that I just had to let her go.

When I look back now, I'm upset Nanna never got proper treatment for her depression. There should have been more done to help her. She shouldn't have suffered like that all those years.

Grape picking

After Christmas and my seventeenth birthday in February 1952, I headed up the river to go grape picking. Lila and Elsie were living down on the flats by the river just over a mile out of Berri, where there was quite a lot of work fruit picking, and Lila had written to tell me about it. The pay was a bit better than I'd had before, so I decided to give it a go. Soon after I got there, Nanna's youngest son, Uncle Francie (nicknamed Uncle Buddha), got into a fight, and when he fell, his head hit the corner of a brick and he died from his wounds. Nobody had any money to take him back to Raukkan, so they buried him in Mildura. I could just imagine my Nanna's grief then.

I stayed with Elsie and her husband Freddie in their little wood-framed house with hessian walls. Paint was hard to come by so the walls were painted with calcimine. It was a powdery substance that you mixed up into a paste, and we used crepe paper to dye it and paint the walls in different colours. Photographs were pretty scarce in those days, so we got little packets of chewing gum in the shop with pictures of all the old movie stars. I would tie sticks together to frame the pictures and then cover them with cellophane and hang them up to

decorate the walls of the house. It looked really nice. We didn't have much, so we became quite clever at using what we had to brighten up our surroundings.

I worked at grape-picking from the end of February to about June. Then I got a job in Percy Slaughter's packing shed at Barmera. We dried the grapes to sultanas, currants and raisins, and they had to be packed into boxes to go to the markets. There was a big conveyor belt and I packed the fruit into boxes, someone else sealed them and another person stencilled the boxes. It was back-breaking work, especially for me because I was a *minya* [little] one and I had to stand up to reach the table. And I couldn't stand the dried fruit anyway.

So I moved over to Barmera and stopped with Aunty Gertie Goldsmith, who was a cousin to my Dad. The boss of the shed was Bob Bickmore. I became friendly with his daughter Wendy, and her brother Graham and I became very pally.

We used to go to the movies together and Graham took me out to the block [orchard] on his motorbike. One Easter weekend Graham and Wendy and I were down at Lake Bonney. It's a pretty spot. At Easter time they had a showground down there, a big ferris wheel, lucky dips, darts, knock-em-downs and all that, and it was a really lovely turn. We were sitting down looking out over the lake. At the time I knew a bit about sacred sites around there, but I didn't say anything to those whitefellas about what I knew. Then Graham told me that a couple of years earlier after a big storm, some Aboriginal people's remains were found floating in the lake. When they were taken into Adelaide by the police for forensic analysis they were found to be about a hundred years old. According to Graham it was well known that when white people first came to the area, they used to get rid of the blackfellas by knocking them on the head and throwing them into the lake to drown. He said he'd heard his father talking about this when he was a little boy.

I was angry that those *gunyas* had kept quiet about it, and I told Graham how I felt. Well that scared him, and he made me promise not to tell anyone he told me.