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## *Pictures from my memory*

My name is Elizabeth Warnngupayi Marrkilyi Ellis and I have lived a semi-traditional life. I was born in 1962 in the bush at Warakurna, Ngaatjatjarra country, in the Rawlinson Ranges just west of the West Australian–Northern Territory border in the Western Desert. Today, a small Aboriginal community is there but at that time there was only Giles Weather Station, built a few years before. My parents were Ngaatjatjarra. They were travelling through the area to attend a ceremony. It was business time; a time when people get together. I was their first child.

When the ceremonial time was over, my family travelled east, towards Pankupiri and south, still around the Rawlinson Ranges. I don't remember the name of the place where they camped, but it was where my umbilical cord fell off. In Ngaatjatjarra culture, the place where you're born and where your umbilical cord falls off when it is dry is your country, that's where you belong. It is your *ngurra*, your home.

We travelled around and lived in the Rawlinson Ranges, Pankupirri and the Tjukurla area. Tjukurla, north-east of Warakurna, is also a community now. My parents lived a traditional life. Western Desert people were among some of the last Aboriginal people to have had contact with whitefellas. Dad saw a whitefella for the first time when they were building the weather station. It was built as part of Australian and British governments weapons testing program in the Western Desert: the Weapons Research Establishment (WRE). They also made

graded tracks so trucks could travel through the area. Warakurna was in the middle of the rocket testing range. Mum and Dad told us stories about that time. There were quite a few people living there, near Warrupara and Kutjurntari, in the Rawlinson Ranges. They were from all around the area and they gathered around what is today Warakurna, where Native Patrol Officers Macaulay and McDougall employed by the WRE regularly visited.

The late 1950s to early 1960s was a time of great drought. Families were still living a nomadic way of life in our country but they were lean times, famine, so they moved closer to the weather station to get food. Old people went to the rubbish tip to get food scraps. The patrol officers started giving families tins of meat and other food, but our people thought it was evil or poison so they would dig a hole and bury the food. The whitefellas opened the tins and ate it themselves and then offered it to our people. This is how they learned it was edible and had a go of eating food they hadn't seen before.

My parents told me the whitefellas had big fridges at Kutjurntari, and that people from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) — Hetzel and Firth and others — were doing experiments on Mum, Dad and all the other Aboriginal people who camped there. They asked my parents and the others to go into the fridges 'to see how long you can last'. But they wouldn't go in a second time. 'Oh no,' they said, 'I am not going in there, it's too cold.' Mum and Dad told us they made them run up and down the road and tie a plastic bag around the top of their arms to measure the sweat, to test their stamina. Men and women had to do that. But they were testing babies too, collecting urine samples from us and wanted to put us into the fridges as well to see how long we could last in the cold.

My mum also told me funny stories about that time. She was collecting urine samples from me using plastic bags. She thought the bags had to be full. One night, the little bag came off me and all the urine poured out onto the red sand. Mum was worried. There was nothing left; the bag was empty. She was convinced there had to be

something in there, so she returned the plastic bag full of water. That must have been an interesting little test. Later, Hetzel and Firth wrote a book about nutrition and water and documented their findings about how the families could stand extreme cold and heat in their living environment.

Despite all those tests — the running, the fridges and the plastic bags — Mum and Dad spoke affectionately about that time. Everybody was there together; all the families were camping near each other at Kutjurntari. They were being fed and there was no fighting. They were one group in one place, a big extended family with ties to the area of Purli Karil, the rich hill, that's what we call the Rawlinson Ranges.

It must have been the time when they took the photograph of Mum and me with my mother's sister and her daughter (see Plate 2). Mum looks really unwell in that photograph. She was very sick and lost all her *mimi*, her breast milk, so they took me to Nyurrraya, Mrs Bennett, to breastfeed. She was one of Mum's sisters from Warupara, near the Gills Pinnacle, on the southern side of the road between Rebecca Creek and Docker River. My dad and Mr Bennett were close friends. They were from the Karrku–Warakurna area around the Rawlinson Ranges. Anyway, Mrs Bennett had a baby boy, Frank, at the same time so she had plenty of milk. She said Frank was a good baby: when he saw me being taken over to drink the *mimi*, he never got angry or selfish. He just sat there, curious, and watched me breastfeed. My relationship with Frank was very strong because we shared his mother's *mimi*, and I had strong links with Mrs Bennett and her other children. Mum, Mrs Bennett, and my brother Frank, are not with us anymore. I miss them very much.

Of course I was too small to remember anything from that time. The stories I tell here are ones my parents told me — living in the country, travelling around, hunting and camping. They also told me how they went to other ceremonies in the area with me when I was a baby, such as the Tjilkatja (manhood) ceremony, which took place on the other side of Docker River, to the east, towards Lasseter's Cave. Tjurnti is the Pitjantjatjara name of this place. One was a special boy

ceremony for one of our uncles who has since passed away. Every young boy has to go through this ceremony to become a man of the first order. Tjurnti was my family's country's south-eastern boundary and it was also one of the places that our families went to get bush onions in the right season. Bush onion was one of the main staples for Aboriginal people of the desert.

Dad told me about Mr Bennett and him hunting together for rock wallabies east of the Docker River in the hills at Tjurnti. Our two families were very close: walking around, camping and hunting together, fetching water, cooking, looking after each other's children. Mum's father's country is Kulail and Docker River, and both our families are from that area. Kulail is an important place to my family and me. Mum's father's brother is buried there close to Kulail waterhole. One day, many years later, Mum took us with her to look for her father's brother's grave. My sister Myra and her late husband, George, were living at Kulail at that time. They had created a homeland, an outstation of Docker River. This was when Nelson, their fourth child, was about one year old. We stayed there for a few nights. Mum took me with her and we walked across the dry river into the country to find the grave, which she said was close to a rabbit warren. We searched, but we couldn't find it.

My other grandfather, Mum's actual father, died near the Giles Weather Station. There are different stories about how he died, but the one Mum told to me is that he was shot dead at his camp. She said her older brother saw the white people responsible and fled into the bush to wait for his mother. When my grandmother came back to the camp, he told her what happened. They left that place, never to see my grandfather again. For a long time, they didn't know what had happened to his body. Then, about ten years ago, a whitefella or a descendent from someone of that group rang up. We don't know exactly who it was; he didn't say. He said my grandfather had been buried long ago at Giles Weather Station, not far from where they let off the weather balloons every day. The family went to see the

gravesite. We pulled all the weeds out and put flowers on the gravesite. We also made a headstone.

Our families were living in their tribal areas when I was a baby. This was around the time when a young Rupert Murdoch came to the Rawlinson Ranges to write a story about Aboriginal people. He came to the area because there had been reports going back to the cities about mistreatment of Aboriginal people. When Mum and Dad spoke about that time, they didn't talk about mistreatment. They just laughed about the silly things the whitefellas used to do to them. I don't think the experiments were funny, but they did. They just said, 'Oh those whitefellas were really stupid.' But there are also awful stories of families in the region being shot by whitefellas, possibly prospectors. People say that families were shot like dogs.

My family stayed around Pangkupirri, Kulail, Tjukurla, the Rawlinson Ranges and the weather station until the late 1960s. The very first thing I remember was walking up and down a hill when I was small. This was in Warburton, south of Warakuna. My family had walked from the Rawlinson Ranges south to the Warburton Mission a few times. Some families had been to Warburton before. William and Iris Wade set up the mission in 1934. They travelled from Kalgoorlie, Leonora and Laverton to teach the word of God to Aboriginal people. They also wanted to save our people from being massacred by pastoralists and prospectors. When they arrived in Warburton something broke on their wagon. They interpreted it as a sign from God that they should set up their base there. From then on, people came from everywhere to live at the mission although people were already living in the Warburton area because it was an important site. Mum went to the mission first with her mother Manitji, her mother's sister, and another time with her birth mum, Matjuwarri, Dad and his siblings. Families weren't together all the time; they only came together for ceremonies and other important events. Once these ceremonies were over, they went off again in small family groups. So when they met up with another family group who had been to Warburton, they told them, 'Oh, come with us, we're going to Warburton, because all

the families are there.’ They spoke about the abundance of food at the mission, so they went.

I don’t have any strong memories of staying at the mission. We were only there for a short time, and I was only about five years old. I just remember the hills and walking down a plateau that slopes down onto flat country. The mission was on a small hill; we had to walk up to get to it and walk back down to the flat area, where people used to camp and live.

Mum said my sister Myra was born at Warburton, so now there were two children. Dad said mission time was a good time, since there was plenty of food there, but he also said that, unlike Purli Karil country around the Giles Weather Station, there was a lot of fighting around the mission. In the old days, when someone did something wrong, that person would be followed so they could be punished. But it was hard to catch people out in the desert, because they were travelling around, usually separately. Sometimes things had happened a long time ago, but people remembered and were still angry. When they all got together in Warburton, they started big fights. Dad talked about him and all his brothers fighting against other groups. It was like a war. He said, ‘At Warburton, there was non-stop fighting, all day, and the next day, and the day after.’ There were men getting spears, being speared, spears being pulled out and getting more spears. They were bashed on their heads with clubs, and boomerangs were flying all over the place. The children and some of the women ran away and hid to get out of the way, while other women and men would be the *ngarlkilpa*, the mediators, for the fighters.

Dad was proud of how he and his brothers fought with courage and honour, supporting each other. He showed his scars from the spears with great pride. But he also said mission time was a bad time. It was the time of the biggest fights they had ever known. There was so much violence, so much blood wasted and life lost. Although, sometimes he laughed about it, especially when he explained how he would *wangurrilu pungkula karli, kurlata wiyalpayi*, duck and weave from the boomerangs and spears. I have fond memories of Dad showing me

how he moved around with a shield to avoid the oncoming spears and boomerangs. My grandmother lived at Warburton for a while, and my uncle, Toby Farmer, went to the mission school. But we ended up leaving Warburton, not because of the fighting, but because there were ceremonies going on and we joined other people on a truck to travel south-west to Laverton. They went because some family had already moved to the Laverton area. But we didn't stay long in Laverton either; instead we moved on to Leonora then on to Wiluna, and that's where I remember a lot of my early childhood. My first strong childhood memories are from that time.

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Leonora, north of Kalgoorlie, was a small sheep town. There also was a gold mine around Laverton and Leonora called Sons of Gwalia. It opened and closed a few times. So there were sheep stations, the gold mine, and a reserve where us Aboriginal people lived. My sister, Myra, and I lived on the reserve with our parents. There were one-room brick houses with just a fireplace, a window, a door, and a veranda; you just walked in and that was it. They had shared toilet and shower blocks but the houses just had one room with a fireplace.

The people living on the reserve came from all over the place — around Leonora, the Western Desert, and around Warburton way. But it wasn't like Warburton; there wasn't much fighting on this reserve. People went hunting, but they also went to the shop and I believe they also got rations. I remember going to a butcher's shop with my family. We could buy meat, kangaroo meat and kangaroo tails. The people at the butcher's shop hunted and shot the kangaroos. They skinned them and cut them up for people to buy. Mum and all the other women went to the rubbish dump to collect copper wire so they could take it into the shop and sell it. They used the money to buy food. My parents and the other families also collected sandalwood and sold it. Us kids collected bottle lids to get money. Sometimes we used that money to buy an ice cream or something else we wanted.

The reserve was on the edge of town, on the north-western side. Us kids had to live at the hostel, which was on top of the hill on the other side of town from the reserve, near the hospital. All school age Aboriginal kids lived at the hostel because at that time, the police made sure all the Aboriginal kids went to school. That was the time when they took kids away: the Stolen Generation. The authorities took away all the half-caste kids and trained them in cities, but they didn't take away full-blood kids like us. They left us on the reserve, at the missions, and made sure we went to school.

Kids stayed at the hostel during school terms. Every now and then, our parents walked up the hill to visit us, and we walked down to the reserve on weekends to see them. My brother, Leslie, was born at the Leonora hospital. After having the baby, Mum came by the hostel so we could see him. We went down to the fence and Mum pushed Leslie's foot through a hole in the fence. I remember touching his little pink foot. I think they didn't want parents and other people to come into the hostel because I don't remember parents coming in to see us. We would see them from a distance, walk over and talk to them through the fence.

I don't recall many kids at the hostel, but my cousin Dorothy was there at that time with me. I remember when I first met her. There were lots of older girls at the hostel and they liked fighting. They had big fights and made us little kids join in. I remember one such fight. Dorothy was new; she arrived at the hostel after I got there. She was sitting down by herself, telling stories drawing in the sand with a wire, *tjintjatjuranytja*. But the older girls made us call her nasty names. I didn't know she was my cousin at that time. She reported us to the manager and we got into trouble. Later, I got to know Dorothy very well because Mum cared for her for a few years when we lived in Wiluna after her parents died. She was like a big sister to me and we are still very close. My mother was very closely related to Dorothy; she was Dorothy's aunty and Dorothy is my cousin.

The reserve didn't have its own school so every day we walked from the hostel to the local school at Leonora. It was just a normal



country town school with a mix of black and white kids. There was a little creek we had to cross to get there although to me it looked like a huge river. At least I remembered it as being huge. But many years later, travelling to Kalgoorlie and Perth for work, I went across this creek that was so big in my mind. In reality, it was tiny. Anyway, one day it started raining while we were at school. When we left school to walk up to the hostel, we realised we couldn't cross the creek because it was flowing so fast. We stood there for a long time, asking ourselves how we could possibly cross that river. Luckily there were Aboriginal people living in a house next to the creek, and they carried us across on their shoulders to the other side. It is a very strong memory. There was big rain, and all the creeks were flowing.

I loved school. I loved learning to read and write. I remember how later I would read our old people's mail for them, from family or whoever. They showed me the mail and I read it, saying who it was for and told them what it said. But I didn't like school when I was being teased. At that time, we were known as the Farmer family, after Mum's maiden name. I don't remember who most of the kids were, but they teased us and sang that song, *Farmer in the Dell*, and I cried a lot. Those kids were nasty. Dorothy and a bigger boy, Yirriya, who I think was a skin brother, used to look after me. The big ones used to look after us little ones. When someone picked a fight with me, I went to Dorothy. She told them off or hit them.

At the hostel, boys and girls lived in separate dormitories in different buildings. In between the two dormitory buildings lived the lady who looked after the girls and the man who looked after the boys on the other side. The boys and girls toilets and showers were in the same block — girls on one side, boys on the other. We used to bang on the wall and yell out to the boys. Our dormitory was one long room, with beds all the way along and small bedside cupboards between each bed. At night, the big girls frightened us with ghost stories. But at other times we would be jumping along the beds all the way down.

Sometimes we went to the movies on the other side of the hill from the hostel and when we walked back we would scare ourselves. When

something moved in the dark, we would scream in fear and cry and run like mad to get back to the hostel. Sometimes the big kids scared us for fun and we would be crying and running at the same time.

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Dad worked as a stockman on some of the sheep stations. Dad's close friend, Ernest Bennett, Mr Bennett, who was one of my fathers, would fondly remember working with my father around Leonora as a stockman. While we were at the hostel, Mum and Dad both worked on the surrounding sheep stations. One of them was Kaluwiri station. They went mustering and did other kinds of work with animals. I don't know if they were paid — maybe they received rations such as flour, sugar, tea, tobacco, tinned beef and so on — but I know they lived on the station. Dad told me many stories about working there. He said they used to see a lot of *tjinakarrpilpa*, feather-foot men, travelling through the station. *Tjinakarrpilpa* have strong powers. They can become invisible or change into animals such as emus and travel through the land. *Tjinakarrpilpa* are killers or what whitefellas call assassins.

One day Mum was sitting down close to a fence when she saw an emu on the other side. Next minute it was on her side and she wondered how it got through the fence. She looked again but the emu had disappeared. It must have been a feather-foot man. You can see a *tjinakarrpilpa* if you have the gift. Another time, people watched some *tjinakarrpilpa* steal food from the storehouse but Dad and the other workers rode out to chase them away, and the station people, whitefellas, shot them. But when they went to pick them up, there was nobody there. They shot them from a distance and saw them fall to the ground, but they didn't see any bodies when they reached the spot where they fell. They just saw bags of flour, sugar and tea, and tobacco. Mum and Dad knew where these *tjinakarrpilpa* came from. They travelled a lot from the south up to Leonora and Wiluna and further north, then back south again.

Mum learned how to use a gun at Kaluwiri station. Later she went hunting with a .22 rifle at Wiluna. Women can hunt kangaroos and other animals with guns, but they can't use spears since spears are for men only. Women also have special hunting dogs. If a woman sees a kangaroo, she can use her dogs to kill it or use a gun. To train really good hunting dogs, they get *kumpu*, urine from the kangaroo, and rub it on a dog's nose when it's a puppy. The dog remembers the smell and becomes a good hunting dog for kangaroo. Aboriginal people have a close connection with their dogs and give them skin names. When somebody passes away, people don't want to kill the dog of the deceased person so someone will take on that dog and look after it. Some people who didn't have children have a few dogs and they treat them like their children. The dogs follow their owners everywhere; they are part of the family and are always with them.

Mum had lots of stories about the time at Kaluwiri station, because she was at home most of the time looking after the babies. She had Myra, Leslie and Susan too so she had three little ones to look after while Dad worked. Dad learned a little bit of English while working on the station.

I remember many good times at Leonora living at the hostel but we were only there for about a year, and then my family moved to Wiluna. Mum and Dad moved because of ceremonies and because other families were going as well. They always travelled with close and extended family. We were family groups living together and travelling together. Dorothy was with us at that time and I remember some of the old people, such as Dorothy's grandmother and Mrs Manupa Butler's mum, and old Mr Carnegie and his two wives with their children being with us.