

Preface

Lesley

The sound of water droplets hitting the geranium leaves brought back childhood memories of rain beating down on the tin roof back home in Cherbourg.

‘Hello.’ A voice interrupted my thoughts.

I was pleasantly surprised to see my neighbour Jim standing by the fence. The kids and I got on well with Jim and his family, ever since they’d moved in next door a number of years earlier. He was the forestry manager for the local region; however, I didn’t see much of him during the day, as he commuted to work between Gympie and Murgon, the township near Cherbourg.

‘Sorry if I startled you,’ he apologised.

‘Oh, it’s okay.’ I turned off the tap and walked over to talk with him.

‘Look, I don’t want to take you away from your watering for too long, but I wanted to give you these.’ He reached over the fence and handed me a bundle of documents. I flicked through the pages and skimmed over the information while my neighbour continued talking.

‘Ever since you told me about your Dad passing away, I thought you might appreciate them.’ Jim explained that his secretary used

to work at Cherbourg, the Aboriginal settlement where I grew up. It had been her job to enter into the computer the details of the old paper records left over from the days when the government ran the settlement. 'Because she is interested in genealogy,' Jim explained, 'she went back to the records and compiled your family tree for you.'

There was a lull before Jim handed me the remaining documents. He appeared confused, and slightly concerned 'Lesley, apparently some of the records relate to your family's financial history. As you can see, listed next to the names of family members are transactions dating back to the early 1930s. Why would the government have recorded your family's finances – when it's such a personal and private matter?'

His interest spurred my own. For the remainder of the afternoon I rooted through cupboards and rummaged through drawers, searching for a newspaper article I'd cut out earlier that year on the subject of Aboriginal wages that were sitting in a fund. My sons Dan and Rodney often teased me for storing things in 'safe places' – so safe that not even I could find them. They'd even nicknamed my black imitation-leather handbag 'the black hole' – because whatever went into it was at risk of being lost forever.

The article I was looking for referred to an 'Aboriginal Welfare Fund'. It was believed to have contained some \$25 million of Aboriginal peoples' wages and savings, including my own. Over the years I'd often wondered what had happened to my wages when I was forced by the government to work out west on farms, as a domestic servant. Besides the odd pocket money I received here and there, officials had told me that 'they'd look after' the rest of my money. They did that for all Aboriginal workers under their control, who lived on or were sent out from government settlements.

At the time I was never told what my wage was, so I didn't have a clue how much it'd be worth in today's currency. But taking into account the interest accumulated over the past thirty years, I could only imagine it would be a handsome sum!

I laid the records out on my bed and studied closely the account balances listed in the columns. My stomach knotted with excitement and my mind raced as I thought about the possibilities this information might bring. Could this be the proof I needed to finally reclaim my lost wages and savings from the government? If so, then what next should I do?

When I first got the big idea in 1993 to 'write a book' about my life and the missing wages and savings, I found it difficult to even string two sentences together. The limited education I received as a child made the task seem near impossible. Although I knew what I wanted to say, I'd always clam up whenever it came time to put pen to paper. Therefore, in the early days, to tell my story I first had to say it, speaking into a tape recorder.

My daughter Tammy, who was all but a teenager, began transcribing all the words, and helped to make sense out of the jumble. She'd come back to me time and time again, probing for more information and details. On more than one occasion it felt like a therapy session, with my daughter as the psychologist asking me to relive my experiences aloud, and prompting me to evoke my senses. 'What do you see?' and 'What do you smell?' Tammy would ask, noting my responses on a writing pad.

I often found these exercises difficult, especially when I had to relive painful experiences all over again. There were many times when I wanted to give up, as I questioned the audacity of 'someone like me', believing they had a story worth telling. But I persevered at the urging of others, even when my heart didn't want to, in the hope that through this story I could connect with other people. Although on the surface the lives of others might appear so different to mine, there are some themes in life that are universal – they relate to all of us, despite our so-called differences.

As the years passed, Tammy continued to work as my scribe and ghost author, while her professional life took her on quite a different path from mine. And yet, no matter what her achievements and successes were, it was nonetheless clear that her personal journey was as entwined in mine as mine was in hers. After much reluctance, Tammy finally agreed to set her memories, her voice, down next to mine – and this is how the book's distinctive style of two voices in dialogue across two eras, came about.

Tammy

I could see Mum's frustration as she tried desperately to write. Each time she put her pen to paper, nothing came out. The blankness of the page seemed to be an unfair reminder of her so-called inadequacies – that only those who were famous and had a 'proper education' were entitled to record their life story.

I understood enough of Mum's life to understand her frustration at not being able to write. It wasn't a mere case of chronic writer's block, brought upon by self-doubt. Rather, the difficulties Mum faced could be explained, in part, by cultural reasons. As Aboriginal people, we belong to one of the oldest continuous living cultures in the world, with much of our traditions and customs shared orally from one generation to the next, across millennia. Mum, therefore, belongs to a generation who practise and still prefer the ancient art form of oral storytelling. That is why, in the early days of writing this memoir, I suggested the use of a tape recorder so she could recount her memories with confidence and ease. Through this project, she learned how to express her thoughts and ideas in prose.

Mum's story is one of resilience and tenacity, as she goes in search of the 'missing millions' of Aboriginal people's wages and savings, once held in trust by the government, while trying to overcome the effects of her oppressive youth. This story, I believe, needs to be shared with others. And so it is for these reasons that I, along with the support of

my brothers – and, later, our partners – offered to assist Mum in the writing of this story.

Lesley

This book doesn't set out to capture our complete life story – documenting, like an autobiography might, every major event experienced since our births. If we'd done that, much to our editor's horror, our word limit would have been exceeded, ten-fold! Instead, it is the memories and personal insights we have shared, which we hope can offer another perspective on how Australia's history of black–white relations has impacted across recent generations.

My story began in Cherbourg, a small community in rural Queensland – a government-controlled settlement for Aboriginal 'inmates', to be exact. My life as an Aboriginal person growing up on the settlement in the 1940s, '50s and '60s wasn't that different from the lives of thousands of Indigenous peoples throughout Australia. Only later was I to learn that our lives were very different from those who lived on the 'outside' – outside Cherbourg's boundaries.

At that time in Australia, almost every state and territory had laws similar to Queensland's, which regulated the lives of Aboriginal people. A single piece of legislation – the *Aboriginal Protection and the Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act of 1897* – and its amending acts allowed the Queensland Government to control the lives of Indigenous people living in the state, and at the same time outlawing the practice, widespread at that time, of paying Aboriginal workers with the drug opium. When the Act was proposed, some politicians argued for the Aboriginal population to be segregated from the community, by placing them on 'reserves' that would 'keep the white race pure'; while others hoped the law would be a way to 'protect this dying race'.

Whatever the reason behind the Queensland Parliament passing the 'Protection Act', it nonetheless made it lawful for the government

to uproot thousands of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands and clans and confine them in settlements and missions scattered throughout the state – six controlled by government and ten managed through the church. Yet this era was, I was later told, a time of great change and social progress elsewhere in the world. India was granted independence from the British Empire, and the United States Supreme Court ruled that the Montgomery, Alabama bus laws, which segregated African-American citizens on buses, was unconstitutional. With the atrocities of the Holocaust and the fallout from two world wars still fresh in people's minds, nations became aware of the need to protect the rights of all. And this, I understand, led to the creation of the United Nations and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

But of course, at the time, I knew none of this. For there was very little I knew and understood about the world outside the tiny Aboriginal settlement of Cherbourg and its government controlled boundaries.

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Innocence and ignorance

*... my childhood, as I knew it,
was to end abruptly.*

Chapter 1

Lesley

It was the mid 1950s and I must've only been about ten. As I jumped from one square to the next in our game of hopscotch, I remember my long black hair and cotton dress bouncing in time. My older sisters and I were playing with a couple of friends beneath the Bunya tree by the road's edge. This majestic, rough-barked native had been planted by our grandfather many years earlier. It gave us shade and shelter as we played, and our mothers could still watch us as they did their housework.

On this particular day, we were startled to see a grey bus coming towards us along the dusty road. We stopped our game and stood staring at the approaching vehicle in silence. We were not used to outsiders coming into Cherbourg. The only white people we saw were the government officials who ran the settlement and lived on it. We didn't have much contact with those living in the world outside its boundaries.

As the bus came closer, the older children realised what it was. 'Tourist bus, tourist bus!' someone shrieked. The rest of us remained frozen, not sure what we should do. The government

officials had drummed into us that we must always be on our best behaviour – especially when those from the ‘outside’ came for a visit.

Although we had seen a tourist bus weaving through the settlement’s dirt laneways before, it was still a bit of a novelty. The tourists came with their cameras, to look at the settlement and take pictures of us. A bit like you do when on a safari, I suppose. Their faces at the windows were creamy coloured, just like the white officials’ – not chocolatey brown, like ours. It was easy to believe that these pale-skinned people, always so in control, must be better than us.

We continued to watch as a white official boarded the coach to take the tourists on their ‘guided tour’ of Cherbourg. It wasn’t until the bus disappeared that we felt relaxed enough to resume our game. But before long we heard the sound of the engine again, as it returned from its tour of our streets. The great big black wheels slowed before coming to a complete stop, just metres away from where we were playing.

‘Wha ... wha ... what do you think they want?’ I asked my older sister Alexandra, whom we all called Alex. Back then I had a bad stutter and it ‘made me shame’, as we used to say. I’m not sure what caused the stutter, but I know it usually came out when I was especially nervous.

‘I don’t know,’ Alex whispered back, her full focus on the bus. I shuffled beside her, seeking some sort of sisterly protection.

I saw several of those creamy-white faces pushed up against the glass, peering down at us. A couple of passengers climbed out of the bus and stood not far from us, one with a camera at the ready.

‘Lollies, lollies!’ yelled Patsy, one of my best friends, as she ran towards the bus.

‘They’re throwing lollies!’ someone else yelled, as all different kinds of treats were tossed out of the opening windows of the bus. We jostled one another to grab the most. There were flashes of light from the camera and clouds of dust rising from the dry ground as we scratched, like chooks searching in the dirt for something to eat, and scrambled for those bloody lollies.

When I think back, it makes me shame, but as kids we didn’t sense this was degrading. We were just starved for a good feed of lollies. Any child would be, if you grew up like us. We didn’t know any different. How could we?

Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement became my family’s new home in the early 1900s after the authorities removed both sets of my grandparents from their traditional lands and relocated them. Grandfather and Granny Chambers, my mother’s parents, lived out their days crammed alongside us. At various times over the years, sixteen people called our small three-bedroomed cottage ‘home’. The old folk feature strongly in my earliest childhood memories, somehow making a homely life out of very little for my siblings and me. Yet, like all children, we never stopped to think what their lives were like before all of us grandkids came along, and took it for granted that they’d always be there to look after us.

Grandfather was a quiet, gentle old man. Without a birth certificate it’s difficult to say exactly when he was born, other than sometime in the mid 1870s, but he knew he was born near a river in northern Queensland. Somehow, as a young boy, he got into the clutches of Fillis’ Circus from South Africa. He once confided to a family friend that he was tricked by the circus into becoming an act, along with the performing animals, to entertain the paying public. Later, it was discovered that in 1892 Fillis’ toured the east coast of Australia – to rave reviews. In a Brisbane newspaper of the time, a resident from the town of Gympie complained about the circus’ treatment of the performing elephants – but there was no mention of the Aboriginal boy and the treatment he received.

The following year, Grandfather was found by missionaries on the streets of Melbourne, where he was deserted after the circus had abandoned him some 3500 kilometres away from his home. Without

being able to read or write and barely understanding English, he lived a hapless existence in a city of white strangers. Witnesses had seen him in a miserable condition, sleeping on the streets with other homeless boys.

The authorities charged Grandfather with some minor offence and later released him into the custody of the missionaries, who give him a new life and name – Charlie Chambers – to mark the Christian he became. With that, Grandfather lost the traditional name his mother and father gave him. I suppose, compared to others, he was lucky that at least his new name wasn't offensive. Some Aboriginal people in those times were given names like Billy Ugly Monkey, Blind Sally, Gin, Mad Tommy, Scratcher, Cigarette and Pluto No 1. My own ancestors on my father's side were bestowed the names Jimmy and Annie Flourbag. Could they have simply been near a flour bag when the government official was renaming them?

Grandfather Chambers, with the help of his new Christian family, was finally returned to his home state. But in the years since he had been taken by the circus, Queensland had passed the Protection Act and had taken total control of its Indigenous population. Under the Act, Grandfather, despite now being a young adult, was deemed a 'Ward of the State' – with every aspect of his life to be determined by the government.

'Aboriginal natives' like Grandfather, the government decided, were to be shipped off the mainland to the newly established Fraser Island Aboriginal Mission Reserve. But before this happened, Grandfather was charged by the authorities for vagrancy and sentenced to three months in the notorious Boggo Road maximum-security prison in Brisbane. It must have been far from the homecoming he was hoping for.

We knew less about my grandmother's life before she, too, was sent to the Fraser Island Aboriginal mission reserve. It appears, from the few surviving records of the time, that Granny Chambers was sent

there from the Magdalene Asylum at Wooloowin, which had opened in 1889 as a home for unmarried mothers, girls and infants. A young woman fitting Granny's description was placed in the asylum by the authorities 'for her own care and protection.' The records say she was severely abused by her boss, the owner of a cattle property at Longreach in western Queensland – a rural town not far from her traditional country near Winton. As a child I noticed Granny had a ridge along her scalp; she said it was from the stirrup of a saddle hitting her head. I didn't dare ask any more questions.

Granny and Grandfather's removal to Fraser Island signalled the start of their life under the Protection Act. From that point on, their lives continued to be closely monitored and controlled – being moved to different Aboriginal mission reserves and settlements throughout the state at the whim of government officials. There was little if any consideration given to the severing of family and friendship ties. It wasn't until three generations later – after the birth of my own children in the early 1970s – that an Indigenous family in Queensland like mine could live a life that wasn't minutely controlled by government authorities.

Tammy

For the first half of my childhood, in the mid 1980s, I had little understanding of my mother's past. She never spoke of the poverty and hardship that she and my grandparents had experienced. Nor did she speak of the segregation between races – of those by chance born black or born white, and the differences this skin pigmentation made to all their life prospects. Instead Mum insisted, somewhat obsessively, that her children – my two older brothers, Dan and Rodney, and I – must make the most of every opportunity.

'Grab it while it lasts,' she would say, worried that life's chances could abruptly disappear. Like all mothers, she wanted the best for her children. But I couldn't understand then the fear underlying her maternal wishes.