

Barkinji

He should never have named it Barkinji.

That was my father, Lachlan Cassidy, son of an Irish thief and a Scottish whore, both convicts. I wouldn't tell my daughters that story, but it's the truth. His parents met on the First Fleet and set up house together as soon as they could. She gave up her profession, my father always said, after he'd had a few drams, because there was nothing worth whoring for in New South Wales in 1788.

'Never forget where you came from, lass,' he'd bellow, and laugh, and hug me, then swat me on the nethers and say, 'But don't you talk about it, mind.'

My father, born a Currency lad, made his pile in ways best not asked about. Unlike most, he didn't gamble or drink it away – maybe that was my mother Sarah's influence. She'd had six children and lost five by the time he cashed in and headed west. I was born on the journey, by the side of the track, cradled in a bark coolamon one of the local tribeswomen gave my mother, out of sheer pity. That woman was from the Barkinji tribe, and my father named the station thinking that all the blackfellers around came from the same tribe.

Barkinji is on Burundji land. The Burundji think it's funny. My friend Alice used to laugh about the stupid white man who couldn't tell one blackfeller from another.

It was slab hut and sleeping on camp beds in those early years. I think my father wasn't good at taking orders, because he'd go off for a month or two 'to get eating money' but sure enough he'd be back sooner than he planned, fresh from a fight with Mitchell, head of Fort Bourke, or some other boss.

My mother I don't remember. She died of a fever when I was still in long skirts.

My brother Stanley, 14 years older than I, was left to run the station as best he could when my father was away. He hated it, hated being responsible for me, hated being tied down. I daresay that's why he became a drover as soon as he could. So I was brought up by half a dozen Burundji women, my aunties. The word isn't 'aunty' in Burundji – it's more like 'mother', but not exactly. I spoke Burundji better than English.

Oh, those days glow like a magic lantern! Barefoot, hair flying, leaping from rock to rock in the dry creek beds, playing 'you can't track me' until the shadows called us back to camp and an aunty would urge me home, pushing my reluctant back with gentle hands.

And the next morning, waving to Stanley or Father as they set off on their rounds, one of the black stockmen by his side, and then hide and seek in the termite

mounds, or hunting goanna with the older girls, or climbing trees to drink the nectar in the blossoms. I had my friends; one best friend my father called Alice, but her real name was different – secret; a secret I've never shared. I had a name, too.

Together we and the other girls practised being adults: finding narwoo seeds, tracking the big lizards, diving for lily roots.

Who has such freedom? No white girl I know.

Of course no child grows up without restrictions. I was given the same skin as Alice; the same place in the tribe. So there were people I couldn't speak to; people I couldn't look in the eye (all the elders, of course, but others too). If I killed a goanna, there were rules about who the meat went to, who got which part. If I collected seeds or fruit, I was expected to share them according to custom. Of course.

But within those strict, absolute customs, there was freedom such as I've never known since. Barkinji became who I am. That red dust, that blue sky, the deep cut of shadow in the gullies, the smell of the campfire, the puff of dirt as a finch took flight, the wheeling shadow of the wedge-tailed eagle... I'm not one for poetry, but when my daughter Ruby recited to me Dorothea MacKellar's 'My Country', I felt, for the first time, as though someone had read my soul.

I love a sunburnt country...

All things end. My father had a good season; good enough to build a new homestead. The next year my uncle died and my aunt Cecilia, for whom I am named, came to stay with us.

So my freedom ended.

Clean plaited hair was not so bad. Being bathed was even pleasant. That first night I was hopeful. Aunty Cecilia kissed me on the forehead and told me I was a good girl. She tucked me in, smiling, so that I drifted off to sleep on sheets that carried the faint scent of spinifex, feeling safe. After all, she was an aunty, and I knew that aunts wanted only the best for me.

I can be fair. At this distance, I can be fair. Aunt Cecilia *did* want the best for me. But her 'best' was the best of Sydney society, such as it was in those days. Embroidery and home management and cooking and sitting still, like a perfect little lady.

Boots. Buttoned boots. Wool stockings. Wool, in the Australian heat! The agony of the itch, and the hard leather around my feet. The blisters, the corns...

But worse, my friend Alice banished to 'the native's camp'. And me, prisoner, day after day, inside the homestead.

I don't like to think about it; it was like caging a wild animal. I... pined.

Aunt Cecilia made boiled mutton and potatoes. She ignored the larder of the bush and planted cabbages in the back garden. She tried to tempt me with plum pudding, but what was pudding to someone who'd stolen honey from the wild bees?

I lingered by every window, watching the clouds pass over my country, hearing the cockatoos, the crows, the dingoes howling at twilight. And sometimes I saw Alice, creeping from bush to bush, trying to catch a sight of me.

My aunt started me on lessons. I could read; my brother had begrudgingly taught me from the family Bible at night by the light of a kerosene lantern. But of numbers I knew no more than I could count on my fingers, and that only in Burundji.

So our mornings were spent in housework, and our afternoons in lessons, and my father was deaf to my pleas for freedom.

'Time to make you into a lady,' he said. 'Your mother would be ashamed of you, the state you're in.'

I set my teeth and scowled. If she had wanted me to be a lady, she shouldn't have died, I thought, knowing it was a wicked idea. When my father gave me the switch for being cheeky, I knew I deserved it.

I think I would have died of loneliness, in an agony of yearning, of bewilderment, except that Aunt Cecilia brought one more thing with her, apart from 'manners' and 'behaviour'. She brought a painting box.

Charcoal, pencils, watercolours, India ink, brushes, that special, rough-edged paper...

The first day I was allowed outside for more than a 'gentle stroll' was the day Aunt Cecilia gave me my first drawing lesson.

That is, my first lesson in whitefeller drawing. I'd learnt how to paint myself and Alice already, for those ceremonies that little girls were allowed to attend. For me, painting was about belonging, about defining which stories were yours, which dreaming was... well, I shouldn't talk about that, I don't think. I gave my word to keep it secret.

That day Alice's brother, Jonah, carried two seats and my aunt's easel out to the home paddock. We were in big broad hats. ('Your skin, Cecilia! As brown as a native's!' she'd said, and I gathered that this was bad, but I didn't know why.)

My aunt was scandalised (again) when I tried to paint with my fingers, as the aunties had taught me.

'Cecilia!' she said sternly. I froze, sky blue on my fingertip. I didn't know what I'd done wrong, but I knew that tone. She took a paint rag and wiped my fingers. I remember, so clearly, sulking at her. Pouting my lip out. Then she took up a stick of charcoal. 'Watch,' she said.

We were out by the windmill and the water trough. A brace of young steers were watering there.

Aunt Cecilia looked, and then her hand swept across the page pinned to her easel. A few swift strokes, and there they were: cattle, trough, windmill, a scud of clouds above them.

Magic.

In more ways than one. 'Roaming around the property isn't suitable for a young lady', but 'taking the easel out to sketch' was fine.

I didn't understand, but I wasn't stupid, even then. Suddenly sketching and painting became my favourite pastime. I chose shady places – Aunt Cecilia approved the care I was taking of my complexion, but more importantly it meant that Alice could skulk in the shade and tell me the news of the tribe. It was the only time I was able to speak what I thought of as my mother tongue.

I can picture her, bright-eyed, funny, so clever – far cleverer than I was, I knew. She was my salvation, that year. The worst year of my life. Only Alice's company and the growing satisfaction of making the landscape appear in my sketchbook sustained me.

Then Alice was married.

It would be years before the marriage was consummated. But she went from her mothers' care to her mother-in-law's, and was no longer allowed to consort with the young girls. She had duties to perform, as I did.

I remember that year. 1855. Stanley went off two months after Aunt Cecilia arrived, to the goldfields in Ballarat.

'Too much like a convent around here,' he said. I envied him his ability to make decisions for himself. I thought, at the time, that it was only because he was older that he could control his own destiny; it was years before I found out that women are the property of their menfolk.

I was nine. Alice, perhaps, ten. She was married and I, truly alone without Stanley, felt my spirit wither away. I could no longer bear to take my sketchbook out – but I couldn't bear not to. I went away from the places Alice and I had met and found other, strange views of the property. And I poured my love and my loneliness and my need into my pictures. It was all I had.

'Cecilia has a gift,' my aunt told Father. 'She needs more instruction than I can give her.'

'She's a girl,' Father said irritably, lighting his pipe. 'What good will it do to train her? She can't be a painter anyway.'

'God gives us gifts and it's our responsibility to deserve them.'

Aunt Cecilia had taught me about God. This was the first time I'd heard anything good about Him, Aunt's version of the Bible being long on obedience and short on understanding.

My father grunted.

'Besides, it's not good for her, all alone out here with no other girls to socialise with. How can she learn to comport herself in society when there *is* no society?'

I was filled with hope. At last my aunt would let me go to the campfire! Alice was married, but I was rapidly getting to the age when I would be married off too, as I thought, and then we could be together.

'She needs to be sent to school,' Aunt Cecilia said.

School.

No need to go into the horror of it. It troubles me, even now, to remember.

No doubt it was a good school. A parlour school, this being before the big boarding schools were set up. There was no active unkindness. No bullying. The two older girls were really quite sweet to the young ones.

It was horrible. The city – dirty, smoky, blackened, terribly noisy. The garden 'respectable', which meant small and manicured. The sky so far away, so pale and drab. I learnt not to cry, not to complain, not to object. To be a lady.

Only the Harbour gave me a glimpse of space and sky and freedom; but of course we were not allowed on the Harbour often, only a quiet boat up the Parramatta River once a term for a sedate picnic at Little Coogee. The Harbour and Mass, which soothed my anguish with litany and light and incense.

I went home only at Christmas; the trip was too long by Cobb and Co for any other holidays.

I grew to dread those trips home, because inevitably they would end in a tearful goodbye. As the years past, I learnt to control the tears, because they made no difference. I was a girl. I had no control over my own life. I had to accept that and deal with life as it was. But I didn't bring my sketchbook home; I drew only the views assigned by the drawing tutor at school.

And then, in my last year, just before I was due to go home, I met him.

An invitation from a classmate to her brother's wedding. A new dress. My hair up for the first time. And Harold standing there, a little shy, a little dreamy, listening to the music. I don't think I even noticed how handsome he was. But I saw the kindness in his brown eyes, the gentleness in his hands, and he reminded me of the Burundji men I'd known, who moved quietly and without bluster and never hit their children.

He looked over at me and – well. Who can understand love? Not I. But I knew it when I saw it. And felt it.

I didn't go home that Christmas. Instead, I stayed with my friend in her brother's newly vacant room and was courted by Harold Carter.

He was a city boy; his parents were well enough-to-do, running a men's clothing store. They offered to put up the money to start us off in our own shop.

It was a choice between home and Harold. Harry won. But before we could marry, before we could set up house, my father telegraphed that Aunt Cecilia had died. He wanted me to come home, and what was this nonsense about getting married? I was far too young.

I was eighteen, and needed his consent. Even then I knew he was more concerned with his own comfort than with my future, but I had no recourse.

'When I'm twenty-one,' I said, a little desperately, to Harry.

'I can start a shop in Bourke as well as anywhere else,' he said. 'At least we'll be able to see each other.'

That was him. He saw through complexities to the simple truth, and he acted on it. He was a good man. The best I've ever known.

So I went back, and Harry bought the haberdasher's shop in Bourke, and rode out to Barkinji on Sundays to visit.

'After what you can get, are you?' my father sneered, but he knew as well as I did that Stanley would have the station on his death, and that I would need a husband, someone, or be Stanley's dependant all my days.

That first month was torture and joy – to be back home, to feel the heat, the hard rain, that particular smell of the sticky red mud, the calling of crested pigeons – to share it all with Harry was wonderful. But only one day a week, and only a few hours at that. Torture. And when I went to the camp to try to find Alice, they told me she had died giving birth. The baby died too. I didn't go back there, after that. That time of my life was really over. My father sneered at me for crying over 'a poxy black gin'; it was the last time I spoke anything unnecessary to him.

Only two months after I came, Father was struck down by an apoplexy; he became afterwards a halting, drooling creature who needed to be fed by spoon, and whose angry eyes said all that his twisted tongue could not.

I cabled Stanley, by that time shearing down the Castlereagh, and he came home to take on the property. He wasn't married; he said he would never marry, and city life had taught me enough that I knew his best friend Andrew, who accompanied him and settled into the shearer's cottage, was the reason.

There had always been something a little odd about Stanley; he had always, it seemed to me, been filled with a kind of self-loathing. Now I knew why.

But Andrew made Stanley laugh, made him happy, though my father literally foamed at the mouth when he saw them together, grunting inarticulately and jerking his body as though trying to get to them and do violence on them.

My Harry, God bless his soul, offered to marry me and take Father to live with us in town.

Stanley jumped at it; and he was my guardian now, so he gave his consent and we were married. I know I should disapprove of Stanley's sin – but it led to so much happiness in my own life I am guiltily unable to wish him otherwise.

Nursing Father was a small price to pay for being with Harry. I paid it gladly, until he was taken by another seizure a year later. His body jerked against the iron bedstead so hard I was sure he would injure himself, so I tried to cushion him, but his elbow struck me solidly in the abdomen. That was how I lost our first baby.

In the city, I had learnt not to speak of such things, but in the bush there are few niceties like that. Well, it was a long time ago and best not to think about it. Four little ones lost before Myrtle. It seemed that elbow had done permanent damage, and I had begun to give up hope.

First Myrtle and then Ruby, my girls.

When Myrtle was born, in the house behind the shop in Bourke, with the noisy after-shearing rowdiness of a Friday night outside the windows, I cradled my little lamb and thought about my own girlhood. About the freedom, the delight of discovery, the excitement of exploring, the love of country, bone deep. And I thought about having it taken away; pain, anger, yearning, a longing never sated, never ending, even then with my beloved husband nearby and my own little baby in my arms. A yearning impossible for a white woman to satisfy.

I determined, then and there, to bring up my girls as ladies from the very start. To teach them all the things I had been spared those first eight years. To make them conform, to make them sensible and orderly and anything, anything but wild. Because I knew I could not bear to cage a wild thing; I would not be able to turn the lock on as free a being as I had been. But it was my duty, my solemn duty, to do so, in order to prepare them for the life they must surely lead.

Better never to have been free than to know what it was to be free, and then to be caged. So I became their Mother, and nipped disobedience in the bud. Because I loved them.