
CECILY

Cecily was born in Bega in 1961 to Aboriginal parents. She was a baby when her mother left her in the care of her Nanna and Auntie. At the age of six, Cecily was fostered into a white Australian family in whose care she remained until she was 18. She has 4 foster siblings and 5 half-siblings. Cecily has been painting for 20 years and for the last two years she has been teaching art at Jerringa Mission. Cecily has always respected her foster family who loved and looked after her and she enjoys telling others what her life was like in a white family. Cecily is now living in Nowra with her Aboriginal people whom she is getting to know.

I know a couple of Kooris who were fostered by Koori families. They would say to me "I'm glad I wasn't fostered into a white family". I smile at these people because they don't realise how lucky I was to be so loved and wanted. I was fostered for 12 years by a lovely white family in Bega on the far south coast of NSW. Overall I was grateful and I have always respected my foster family, but it wasn't always a perfect time and there were moments that were very difficult. I want to share with you the story of those years when I, an Aboriginal girl, was raised by a white family. My story might enlighten you, sadden you or bewilder you. Most of all I hope it gives you some insight into my life.

"C'mon Fran", I yelled, "Let's go race through the tyres". We'd grab the tyres, line them up and race through them, laughing all the way. Francis is my cousin, we were playmates and very close. Fran lived with Auntie Ettie in an army tent and I lived with Nan and Pop in a tin shed. Mum

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left me when I was baby, Nan and Auntie Ettie took me in. Murray Flat, where we lived, was like a mission. All the families would sit around on logs or old chairs drinking and laughing. One of my uncles would pull out an old guitar and start strumming, everyone would join in singing. I remember helping with the bean picking. A local white farmer let some Aboriginal families stay on his land and in return we'd all help pick his beans and corn at harvest time. Bean picking was boring. Francis and I would usually escape and go swimming in the river. It was like a miniature beach, with a sandy shore and clear water. The big kids would swing from a rope in a big willow tree, us littlies would splash around on the shore. It was so much fun. That was how I spent the first six years of my life, living and playing at Murray Flat with Francis never too far from my side.

The first day that I met the strange white lady was a Sunday. Her name was Mrs B, she had come to take us to Sunday school. From the next weekend on I went with some other Aboriginal kids to Sunday school. Francis and I went to Mrs B's house for lunch one weekend. She had a lovely home. We played in the yard; I didn't want to leave. I stayed at Mrs B's the whole of the next weekend and the one after that. The telly was a great attraction for me because Nan and Pop didn't have one.

Finally school started again. Fran and I were in first class. When we sat on the mat one morning I fell asleep, the teacher woke me but I was really weak and tired. I missed school for three weeks. The second time I got sick I went to hospital with malnutrition. Things changed when I got out of hospital. Auntie Ettie and her family were moving. Nan and Pop had a drinking problem. My mother hadn't been heard from for six years. Dad had come to see me while I was in hospital. Nan said he couldn't stay but he wanted Nan to tell me that he loved me. I was confused by what my Dad had said and by all the changes. I knew there was a big problem

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when the next day Nan said to me, "Cecily we are going into town to see Mrs B".

Nan had arranged for Mrs B to take care of me. With no real explanation I moved to her place clutching my plastic bag of clothes. Weeks went by with no word from Nan or Auntie Ettie; they had all moved. I really felt that no-one wanted me. I remember the court day. Mrs B dressed me beautifully in pink. To my surprise Nan and Auntie were there, I smiled at them. When it was over I waited patiently wondering what was going to happen. I could see an Aboriginal lady with Nan and Auntie. Mrs B said, "She is your mother, Cecily". I stared at her and I started to cry. My mother was very beautiful, she had long, long black hair. "Doesn't Mummy want me?" I asked, Mrs B just smiled. As we were walking down, Mum yelled out "I don't want any part of the little bitch, let her go with the white family". I cried as I was hurried away. So my 12 years with the B family began. In the family there was Mr and Mrs B, Mrs B's mother and the children, Jeoff, Helen, Wendy and Johnny.

A cherished memory of mine is of my first birthday with the Bs, my sixth. Two of my Aboriginal cousins and my white friends came, I received lots of presents and had a triple sponge rainbow birthday cake. Mr and Mrs B, now Mum and Dad to me, gave me a white cane pram with a dolly. I had family birthday parties with Nan and Pop, but they were nothing like this.

I got along with everyone in the family, except Johnny, who was 11. Johnny was the only one who was unsure if I should become part of the family. He had a good side but I knew the bad side too. I tried to avoid him as much as possible. One time he got really angry and shouted at me "Why do you have to live with us, you're nothing but a black bitch, I wish you weren't here". Johnny didn't seem to want to accept me, he was really angry. He wouldn't even bring his friends home from school. The way Johnny treated me really affected me, it made me feel different. One day when I was

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having a bath I started scrubbing my arms with a scrubbing brush. I scrubbed so hard that my arms began to bleed. Mum came in and asked what I was doing. I replied "I want to be white like you". Mum explained to me that God chose people to be different colours. I was chosen to be black.

Us Aboriginal kids copped a fair few racist remarks at school. I sometimes wished that I wasn't Aboriginal, but each day we would get by. Eventually I got sick of being bullied and called names. On one occasion a boy ran up to me and pulled my hair. I grabbed his fingers and bit his thumb making it bleed. I felt good because it made me feel strong. I wasn't going to let anyone stand over me. In primary school I didn't have any problems with the other Aboriginal kids. They were a little confused by my situation but they didn't seem to mind. At school, even though all of us Aboriginal kids weren't related, we classed ourselves as one. When I got to high school things changed, names came flying at me from all directions. "You're a posh blackie" or "Cecily you are nothing to us". It made me cry and really wonder where or if I belonged at all. It was like a nightmare, no matter what I did the other Aboriginal kids just ignored me. In the end I gave up and just hung around with my white friends.

Johnny started to change his attitude towards me when he saw how I was treated in high school because of my colour. He became more supportive and understanding. When he came home to visit from college he would ask me how school was going. I would say there were always some hassles. Johnny would tell me to hold my head up high and be proud of who I was. Mum and Dad were so pleased we were getting along and that Johnny had finally accepted me. Sadly, Johnny was killed in a motorbike accident. It was a devastating moment for the whole family.

I sometimes thought that I was in the way, but I never said anything to Mum and Dad. When I was in my teens I started to think about my real family. I hoped they would come and get me, I was really starting to miss them. I had so

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many questions - would Mum come and get me? Did Mum and Dad get back together? Did I have siblings? Did Nan see Mum? Did Nan keep secrets from me about Mum? I would lie in bed at night thinking. My most frequent thought was that no-one wanted me. I would think to myself, "Tough luck Cecily, you just have to take it day by day".

When I was in my early teens, Nan finally got in contact with me. She brought sad news and some answers with her. My father had died in a car accident with three other Aboriginal men in 1968. I was shocked, even though I had never met him I had the sense that he loved me. Nan told me he was an alright guy - liked his grog and loved to paint. I also had a brother who died when he was two from pneumonia. Then I was told that as a baby I had been in a car accident. Nan broke both her legs and I got a severe bump on my head. I could feel the pressure rising in my body, I broke down and cried; why had these things been kept from me for so long? I also learnt that my mother had married and had five other kids. Why didn't she keep me? Why? She didn't care about me, why should I care about her? She had pushed me aside and hadn't wanted me to grow up with her new family. I started to hate her, I didn't want to accept her rejection of me.

When I was 15 I decided I wanted to see my birth mother and her family. I wanted to see what she looked like, I wanted to see my brothers and sisters. They lived in a small town in Victoria. Leading up to the meeting I had been sick and was a nervous wreck. Boils were coming up on my body like tennis balls. During the lead-up I hadn't wanted to talk much, I'd come home and hide in my room. Questions were pumping through me day and night. I would have exploded if my foster Mum had not been there to support me. Mum would tell me to relax, be brave and face my fears.

The day arrived. I knocked on the old fly screen door and a lady came to the door, it was my birth mother. She looked at me and started to cry and then gave me a big hug. I was to stay for a week. I watched my Mum leave and then I

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went inside. I could see that my birth Mum and her family were struggling. It was an old home with old furniture but it was clean and tidy. There was such a difference between my homes.

“Come and meet your brothers and sisters” my mother said. Steven, Ted, Maureen, Mary and Slade. My mum and I then retreated to the kitchen. She started talking about why she and Dad went their separate ways. She didn’t really explain it properly though. I understood some things but I didn’t accept the fact that I was left behind by her as a baby. I just kept staring at her, she was very pretty. You could tell I was her daughter. My brothers and sisters asked me lots of questions. Steven wanted to know what it was like living with a white family. Maureen asked me about my nice clothes. I felt a bit intimidated but I knew it would not be easy. I was expecting questions about my clothes, my manners, my different way of speaking and where I lived. My youngest brother was particularly interested in his new older sister, especially when he realised we had the same birthday. I was nervous meeting Eddie, my mum’s husband. But the nervousness disappeared as he made me welcome in the family; he seemed to like me. I really was excited, I couldn’t believe I was staying in the same house as my mum and her family.

I met my Auntie and Uncle and my cousins, there were so many of them. I remember one day Eddie’s brother came around. They were all drinking in the shed when a fight broke out. Eddie’s brother was severely bashing his wife. Us kids were watching from the back sunroom window. I was really upset because I had never seen anything so horrible. Seeing the blood pouring from her face made me feel sick. Steven told me not to worry about it, but I couldn’t get the picture out of my mind.

Unbeknown to my family I went and saw my foster Mum. She opened the door of her motel room and I started to cry. “Can I stay here? Can we go home?” I asked. I wanted to go back to Bega. My birth mother had said that she wanted me

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now that I was older, but I didn't want to stay. I was glad that I had seen them and I would never forget the days I had spent there, but I knew that I belonged where I had grown up and that was in Bega with my foster family. My new family was confused but they let me return to my white family. I sobbed as I left them but I felt that I couldn't move away from Bega because I would also worry about Nan. I knew Nan better than my Mum, after all she had raised me from a baby until I was fostered.

At 17 the pressure within me started mounting again. I was trying to establish my identity. To my shock, and my parents' horror, I fell pregnant. It was time for me to leave my lovely foster family. I went to live with my Auntie Ettie, who had moved to the next town. For the last months of my pregnancy I moved to Melbourne. I didn't have to leave my family, I know they would've helped me. But I couldn't stay there, I didn't want people whispering and talking about me. I wish now that I had stayed and faced the challenge. Finally I had my baby, a beautiful baby boy.

After leaving my family I travelled around Australia. I eventually settled down and finished year 12 and went to college. I had three more children along the way. Life was just beginning. Seven years ago I returned to my community at Jerringa Mission, just outside of Nowra. I teach painting there two days a week.

One of the most settling things for me has been finding my Dad's brothers. After many years I managed to track them down in 1988. I was wrong to think they didn't care for me. They did care, but felt I was better off in my foster family. My Uncle apologised for not letting me know about my father's death; he presumed I had been told. I sat and talked with him for hours, his family were lovely, they understood me. He said to me, "Niece, now you have found us, don't forget us because we will never forget you". We all started to cry. I felt like I belonged.

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Being raised first in a black and then a white culture has given me an understanding of each culture. I am now married to an Aboriginal man. I am getting to know my people in the Nowra area. The best thing about it is that I am accepted. My people ask me about my years of growing up in a white family and I am only too glad to tell them. I really enjoy sharing with them what my life was like.