

CHAPTER
EIGHT

The Old Rugged Cross

GLORIA'S LEAVING US FOLLOWED the second major tragedy of my life after losing Jack and that was losing my mother in July 1973. My sister Thelma had rung me to say Mama was very low and slowly dying and to come up to Cherbourg. When I arrived at the hospital she asked, 'Rita, where Dadda?' A lump came to my throat and the tears fell. I asked her if she wanted some food, some guvung, and she said, 'Yes'. So I got a little tiny teaspoon but she didn't open her mouth so I never forced it down. Thelma took over to comfort her.

After a few days visiting her in hospital I went back to Brisbane to the children. When someone dies in our Aboriginal community, we believe we get a sign. There is a strong belief that the messages come through an animal or a bird. We call it the death bird. It was no different for me. I got up early one morning and I looked through our window. On our jacaranda tree in the backyard I saw a black crow, perched on a branch right at the top. His arms were outstretched and the rest of his body was straight. It was in the sign of a cross and suddenly his beak raised up and he looked right at me. I knew that Mama had left us then. Not long after, I got a phone call to say Mama had passed away.

When you lose your mother, you lose part of yourself.

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Her funeral was so beautiful. They had put her in a coffin on top of an old dray led by a draught horse. The coffin was made by Aboriginal people who were so used to making things with their hands. They made their own houses, they made the cupboards and the chairs. Many of our men worked in the local sawmill and so there was plenty of wood around.

When we dressed Mama, her eyes were open. We don't like our dead people looking at us so we closed her eyes. We put flowers in her hair and she looked so peaceful. When I bent down to kiss her she was as cold as ice. We walked from the hospital to the gravesite behind the dray. Everyone was wailing and crying. 'Who's gonna be next?', the old people asked themselves. They had seen their people come and go.

The Christian ceremony began a few hours after the men had dug out and prepared Mama's grave alongside Dadda's. Gylma was going to be with him now. I was so overcome by grief that I hardly remember anything more except seeing her body being given back to the earth from where it came. We sprinkled a handful of dirt into the grave to show respect and let her spirit rest.

At the Cherbourg cemetery, there are hundreds and hundreds of crosses, painted white, to mark the graves. It looks so natural and the grass is growing on the graves. I feel as if the people are speaking to me when I sit down and listen to their voices in the wind.

After the ceremony, people came back to my mother's house. Hundreds came and went that day, one lot goes and another comes which is not unusual at Aboriginal funerals. We had cups of tea, damper and biscuits. It was a time to catch up with those relatives and old friends who we seldom see. We spoke about my adoring mother Gylma and what a gracious lady she was. People passed on their condolences and those of others who could not attend.

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Cherbourg like many other Aboriginal communities has lots of dogs. When funerals are on, the dogs are fed to the hilt and never bark, remaining quiet all day and night. There are never any dog fights either. It's as if they behave themselves and pay their respects, too.

Mama's funeral was conducted by the Aborigines' Inland Mission (AIM). In the early days it was the only church on Cherbourg. The AIM was set up in 1905 by the missionaries who were sent to work all over Australia. When I was a girl at Cherbourg, Miss Shankleton, Mrs Long and Mr Brainwood were the missionaries that I had a lot of respect for. They seemed to love the Aboriginal people and valued our culture. They didn't stop us from speaking our language as others did. I would only accept advice from these missionaries and help them if I felt they were not taking my culture away from me.

Even though the missionaries had control, our spiritual life and white religion existed together somehow. It's a strange thing but we had a spirit in common. I hate people knocking religion because I believe there is something in it. There is a spirit inside everyone. It just chooses to come out or not. I don't know any Aboriginal people who don't believe in something.

During my OPAL days, religion remained. I tried to keep it separate from OPAL and it didn't worry my work there. I went to OPAL during the week and church on the weekends. The spiritual, working and peaceful life kept me going. I went to the Salvation Army church near us in Inala Avenue. One day I sent the kids to Sunday School and as I was walking past the bushes I heard this little voice say, 'Hi Mummy'. I looked and there were three pairs of black eyes looking through the grass. Then I heard a scuffle as they all came out blaming Johnny for calling out. He'd blown their cover.

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Later, my good friend the late June Bond introduced me to the Inala Church of England. I'd take the kids as often as I could but again they wagged it. Instead of going to Sunday School they'd go off to the Bond's house in time for the ice-cream man. In the end, I gave up making them go.

I went to church by myself as a mother and grandmother because I felt I needed some spiritual help to cope with the responsibility of raising my children and grandchildren by myself. The thought was a burden at times. I did it, though, with the help of someone up there.

I have dabbled in different religions. These have been the usual Christian ones, Anglican, Uniting Church, Pentecostal and I've even tried Ba' Hai. There is a certain strength about them and it gives me great comfort to attend a church service when I have many fears and troubles. By sharing my problems with somebody, it takes the burdens away.

Although I don't attend services regularly these days, I am still a firm believer. The Church I came to feel most about is the Aboriginal Church at Paddington. The services are lively and soulful. We had services there which talked about Aboriginal culture, which is what I like. It also talked about real life things. The services are usually taken by an Aboriginal pastor who brings his family along. His extended family and friends come also. The attendance is usually small. The sermon is often about our families, communities and ways of life. Sometimes white people who are married to Aboriginal people or who know about Aboriginal culture come along, too.

Serious issues are talked about — death, poverty, alcoholism, violence, employment, gaol, involvement in the community, National Aboriginal Week and many more. And people from the congregation are invited to speak about any problems they might have. We are then asked if we can do anything to help those people less fortunate than we are. Perhaps it is the friendliness that is the most important thing about Aboriginal churches.

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Strangers are taken into the congregation just like strangers are taken into the family, especially if they are Murries from out of town. We all have connections right across Australia so they are bound to be known to someone among us. We are able sometimes to put them in touch with their mob in Brisbane, too.