

EILEEN CUMMINGS



Eileen Cummings, a Rembarrnga Ngalakan woman, was born in Arnhem Land in 1943. She was raised at Mainoru, a cattle station where her mother and stepfather worked, until she was about five years old.

Life there was good. Until Native Affairs came to take her away.

‘They told me they were taking me for a ride in the truck. So, being a child I thought, “Alright, that sounds like fun.” I remember Mum was sort of saying “yes” and waving but she thought I was just going around the yard and back to the station house. But no, they just kept going and they didn’t stop.’

As it started to get dark, Eileen realised she was going further and further away from her mother and home.

‘Mummy wasn’t there and I started to cry. I was crying all the way.’

Two days past before her cousins arrived at the police station where she had been taken. From there they were put on a truck bound for Darwin.

‘We stopped briefly in Pine Creek, maybe not even enough time to go to the toilet or wash, so by the time we got to Darwin we looked like kids that were neglected. I think that was their way of justifying why they’d picked us up. But that wasn’t right. I was happy at home with my mother.’

They stayed in Darwin for about a week before they were put on a boat called the Larrapan and sent to Croker Island. That was a scary experience in itself, as they had never seen the sea.

Eileen and her cousins tried to protect each other. Her cousin Lorraine became like her mother and looked after the younger ones. She was only eight years old.

‘If we didn’t have Lorraine, me and the two other little girls wouldn’t have survived. She used to talk to us all of the time in language—who our mothers were (both their English and Aboriginal names) [and] what country we came from. She kept teaching us about our culture and reminding us who we belonged to.’

Eileen was 19 when she saw her mum again, but the experience wasn’t quite what she’d hoped for: ‘You know when you’re going to get to meet someone you get really excited? Well, with Mum there was nothing. She just didn’t know how to react. So I was thinking that my mother didn’t want me.’

Years later she asked her mother about that day. ‘I asked her if she was happy to see me. She said of course but she didn’t recognise me because I was taken as a little girl and came back as an adult. All of us children taken at that time were clean, healthy, happy. Why did it happen? I still don’t really know.’