

Walungurru Kuula

As we drove along the corrugated red dirt track towards Walungurru, aka Kintore (a place north west of Alice Springs not far from the Western Australian border) it felt like another country. I was expecting to see monotonous horizontal deserts, similar to my Nana's resting place in western New South Wales, but there were hills! Not just hills but mountains of rocky grey peaks that looked more like they belonged to alp formations in Europe, or sometimes more like pictures of Texas in the United States. Surrounding these surprising desert peaks was a sparsely covered flat land that also constantly changed. It fluctuated from huge clusters of grassy bumps, to forests of thin spindly looking trees, to masses of termite mounds and vast lakes of creamy-white sand. Groups of camels threatened to run out in front of our vehicle, but only one followed through. We skidded through the soft red sand a little and missed him.

I was nervous the whole trip, and not just because of the camels! This was my first ever teaching job and I was very anxious. I had finished my Bachelor of Education (Primary)/Bachelor of Arts a few years ago, and then decided I wasn't ready to teach and worked my way around the world using the hospitality industry. When I arrived back in Australia I still didn't feel ready. I did a Master of Learning Innovation, majoring in teacher-librarianship, convincing myself I might be better suited to library work, maybe in a university library. I was comfortable in universities. Unable to decide (perhaps because I was secretly scared to fail), I finished my masters and then went to look after my Nana (who was in her nineties and still living alone at Lake Carjelligo) instead. It wasn't until a friend of mine started teaching in Arnhem Land and said how great it was, and how different it was to being in mainstream schools, that I finally took the plunge.

Penny (who was driving the school troop carrier) was the current school principal but she was leaving in two weeks. Several hours later as we turned off the main road and approached the community Penny said “the first thing you’ll probably notice will be the rubbish”. What struck me though was the little cement buildings without windows or doors: the houses. They were similar in size and character to old blocks of toilets normally found near football fields and cricket ovals. Skinny dogs and old people hung around outside them. There were beds outside the houses too. Not just mattresses but sometimes entire ensembles. If I had a graffiti-covered house without heating or cooling in the middle of the desert, I’d sleep outside too, I thought. Later on I realised the beds surrounded the warmth of camp fires that close-knit families lit each night. Kids here were still sleeping under the stars like their ancestors would have, and suddenly the idea seemed much nicer.

During our long drive Penny said that she’d never been called a *whitefella* until she moved to Kintore and as the kids rocked up to school the next day I could see why. They all had beautifully dark black skin. And their hairdos were something else! Many of the girls had really short fringes forming mullets that were obviously their own creations. A boy called Jamie-Lee tied his curly black fringe to the top of his head and looked strangely *au courant*. They mostly had hair so knotty it was almost dreadlocked and usually doubling as a home for large head lice. Some of them bleached it until it was nearly all white. They dressed in soiled clothes not suitable for the cold desert winter. Nobody had shoes and not many wore jumpers or long trousers. They hurried in to the warmth of the classrooms speaking a language I was fascinated to hear for the first time. When they did speak in English it was broken and

heavily accented. I was greeted with big smiles, curious questions and infectious laughter.

Walungurru Kuula was a small school with only three classes. Marion had been with the little kids for three years already. Before Penny even had a chance to introduce us Marion said “looks like another one’s cracked it”! She wasn’t talking about one of the camp dogs, but an actual person. Marion was proud of what she had achieved during her time at Kintore. Her classroom was unusually bare with no student work displayed around the room. Tins of pencils were scarce, with only three pencils occupying each tin. Marion refused to follow group school protocol and had invented her own literacy and numeracy programme. This consisted of a handful of maths games, lots of worksheets and a huge amount of chanting and repeating everything that she bellowed during the course of the day. It seemed suppressive, but apparently she was nominated ‘Teacher of the Year’ and someone I was supposed to get guidance from.

I had never seen a teacher quite as strict or intimidating as Marion. She was fair-haired, moderately pale skinned and tall, with an overtly pear shaped body. She wore polo shirts and crisp white shorts with runners and flicked her pony tail around with an air of self-importance. Her voice was very loud and sometimes almost unreal. It reminded me of the way the women working in the home wares shop in *Kath and Kim* talked. Marion didn’t let the kids go to the toilet until recess when they were required to enter one by one, and occasionally heart-breaking screams of hysteria were heard if someone’s little bladder could not wait. I was equally dismayed listening to her tell a boy he was going down in life, “down where the *goona* [dogshit] is”, and hearing her repeatedly yell “STUPID, STUPID GIRL”. Aside from incessant chanting, pupils

were mostly required to remain silent. Being around Marion was so uncomfortable I felt like a kid again myself, vulnerable and unsure of how to respond.

The truth is I haven't really felt comfortable in schools since about Year Three when I started to become shy and wary of teachers who might embarrass me in front of the class, or laugh at my stories. We moved from the country to the Gold Coast when I was in year nine and I thought I would be able to re-invent myself and suddenly become loud and outgoing, rather than shy and sensitive. I learnt, of course, that life just isn't that simple. Desperate for friends, I joined a group of girls who were into drugs and not really sporty like I was. Straight away I seemed to have a bad reputation. We did a lot of truanting. Teachers started to accuse me of things I would never do, like stealing handbags and being stoned at school. I wanted to drop out in Year Ten like my friends, but Mum convinced me otherwise.

Mum had recently gone to *TAFE* to finish Year Eleven and Twelve herself, and had been accepted into a Bachelor of Arts at Southern Cross University. She made me think about going to uni too, and I decided to stop wagging school, change friends and make a big effort. The trouble was, no matter how hard I worked on an assignment, my marks in most subjects remained the same. Looking for clues as to how to improve, I asked Ashley, a 'straight A' student (who didn't seem to have to try at all) if I could read her English essay. I was angry at the low standard of her work. Aside from my Ancient History teacher (Mrs Gribble) who was fantastic, I realised that in my other classes I was still paying for the mistakes I had made in previous years. I was furious. This was my future they were playing with! I decided that there were not enough good teachers in the world, and that's what I should be, a good teacher.

Walungurru Kuula was part of a group school. A number of office staff including the principal of the group school, Phillip, was based in Alice Springs. Phillip had not managed to find a third teacher for us by the start of term three. Melinda, who was the new 'non-teaching' principal at Kintore, was instructed by Phillip to take the third class until another teacher arrived. Melinda was short and chubby with straight brown hair. She had a fringe that dangled on top of her trendy rectangular black-rimmed glasses. She said she was "only out here for the money" and seemed to spend more time trying to get out of work than actually doing it. Not aware of this at first, and after a terrible first few days attempting to teach, I jumped at her offer to team teach until a third teacher was found. After a couple of days she was missing in action and I ended up trying to manage two classes, with students ranging from year three to seven. I was fuming!

I was very frustrated with myself for not coping better with the cards I had been dealt. I wasn't acting like the enthusiastic and organised teacher I always imagined I would be. And there were so many times I didn't know what to do. The time Shania took the little eggs from the birds nest and brought them into class to eat. And on the same day when the pre-school kid tried to give me a dead bird. The time the volunteer told an older boy, Daniel, he was staying in the entire lunch time and then (when I didn't keep him in) suggested that I "follow through". The time Cheryl was throwing rocks at the window. The time Jason pretended to hit me in the head, and when Daniel pretended to be strangling me. The time Frederick (one of the Indigenous teacher aides) spat on Jamie-Lee's head. I just wasn't prepared for any of these things to

happen. I was very relieved when I heard that another teacher had finally been appointed.

Marion and Melinda took an immediate disliking to Drew (our new Year 5/6/7 teacher). Melinda called him a “new-age, half-baked greenie” and asked “what the hell is with his hair?” It was a kind of matted mess of thick brown tresses. On Drew’s first real day on the job, Marion carried out her usual performance of unlocking the front gate and ordering the kids to stand in single file with their chests out and shoulders back. Even the older kids looked frightened and seemed abnormally timid around her. They conformed to her military commands and marched to the front door of our classrooms. Drew, unaware of this ritual, did not come out of his room to greet his students immediately. When I came out to collect my new little Year 3/4 group Marion asked “can you tell *dickwad* his students are ready?” I stuttered something about inappropriate language before disappearing inside, hoping that Drew hadn’t heard the malicious comment.

It wasn’t long before Marion turned on me as well. She started to remark on the way my students behaved at assembly screeching things like “I CAN’T CONTROL THE WHOLE SCHOOL”! And “WHERE IS YOUR TEACHER”? I was standing next to her. It was very humiliating. Privately, Marion asked “do you want me to give you twenty dollars to cover all the phone calls you’ve made to Phillip about me since you arrived”? I was exhausted and I felt like quitting. Drew, who was also a neophyte teacher, was struggling too. Melinda seemed to side with Marion and also started to mention the “disgusting” behaviour of both mine and Drew’s students. There never seemed to be enough hours in the day, or even over the weekend, to feel geared up

and passionate about my job. It was months before Melinda took our classes in order to give us some time relief. For a few months there were no cleaners. After a long day teaching, and then cleaning, it was hard to find the motivation to reflect, assess and prepare exciting and inspiring lesson plans for the coming days and weeks. Even if I did have a great idea, what were the chances of finding the right resources to make it happen? The local shop sold little more than junk food and kangaroo tails. The school was not exactly packed with supplies, most of which were in an unbelievable state of disarray. The internet was often down. The photocopier sometimes broke. I nearly broke down myself. Some weekend bush trips saved me.

I was lucky enough to be invited on a women's day-trip. We drove for about 45 minutes to some awesome rock formations. The younger girls ran off to collect firewood and bush tomatoes while the old women had a look at the waterhole in the middle of the rocks and shook their heads. "This one always full long time ago, always empty now". They lit a camp fire and began wrapping kangaroo tails (that we brought with us) in foil. I was not the only outsider on the trip; a trainee doctor also came along. She was off taking photos of flowers and playing with the younger girls while I was enjoying sitting with the elders. We didn't talk much. I felt honoured as they showed me how to cook the tails and soon enough we cut up each one and shared them out equally. I ended up with a skinny end and with a lot of added salt was determined to finish eating my little bits of tendon. I was saddened by the trainee doctor's reaction as she spat out the meat and refused to eat the feast that was carefully prepared for all of us.

For a long time I viewed my time at Walungurru as a dismal failure. But what is it that warrants a successful journey anyway? If I had been employed at an outstanding school with supportive colleagues and perfect Indigenous staff, with cleaners and excellent resources, would I have learnt as much? When I was at high school I had to work harder than A-grade student Ashley, but my first ever result at university was a high distinction. Ashley, who was at the same university but doing a science degree, told me she was really struggling to pass. I realised that teaching is much harder than I had ever imagined and unexpectedly felt empathy for my own school teachers that I had always been so callous towards. Who knows what else they were dealing with besides trying to mark assignments fairly? My journey at Walungurru Kuula was successful because, although I was not the teacher I wished I could be, I didn't quit. I stuck it out and learnt so many things about myself, and about other people, in the process. My difficult career start helped me to grow as a person and I am sure will also help me to become the teacher I'm aiming to be.