

# A LONG WAY FROM HOME

**I**F YOU WERE TO ASK ME IF I HAD A HAPPY CHILDHOOD, THE ANSWER would be a definite yes. I was loved, fed, clothed and cared for not only by my parents, but also by our extended family that lived around us. We lived in a small hut made out of wood and corrugated iron. We had a table, chairs, two beds, a cupboard and a wood stove. There was no electricity and no running water. Behind our house was a dam where we used to catch fish and yabbies, using a bit of string tied to a small empty tin with bait in it. Often these yabbies fed the whole family with Mum's soup as well. I had a normal, poor but very happy Australian family life. Well, almost.

Most Australian families lived in a place of their own choosing, coming and going whenever they felt like it. They went to work, came home, did the shopping and bought and ate what they felt like eating. Not us. We lived on the Purfleet Mission, just outside of Taree in NSW, about 300 kilometres north of Sydney. It wasn't a place of our choosing, we couldn't come and go whenever we wanted, there were no jobs to go to, no shopping to do and no decisions about what to buy and eat. All of our food was rationed out, and if the manager was displeased with us our rations could be cut or held back.

The management at Purfleet had no knowledge or interest in Aboriginal culture and so had their own idea of how we should be treated. This was the period of assimilation. Aboriginal culture and heritage were out. White man's culture and laws were in.

It was into this tumultuous period in Australian indigenous history that I was born to Isaiah (Ike) Carter and Grace Simon on March 30, 1947. My

Bill Simon was 10 when he was stolen from his Aboriginal family and sent to the notorious Kinchela Boys' Home. There he endured years of harsh and degrading treatment. This is his story.

Photography Dean Sewell

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father was from the Black Duck Tribe from down near Wallaga Lake, my mother from the Biripi people who inhabited the area between Tuncurry, Taree and Gloucester.

The rules imposed by the Aborigines Welfare Board had a devastating effect on the men on the mission. Aboriginal men were by nature the hunters and food providers, but mission life obliterated their role and their identities. Their hereditary ways weren't just discouraged; they were outlawed. If my dad brought a kangaroo back to the mission to cook, he would be punished by a reduction in flour rations. If the kangaroo was shared with other families, their rations were also cut. Strangely, instead of the manager taking the view that our catch would just top up the food already supplied, he subtracted rations to keep everyone on minimum levels.

As children, we knew none of this. My world was not the world of stories around the campfire, of hearing Dreamtime tales of animals, spears and water holes. I knew nothing of our ancestors' skills in hunting and dot painting. Neither was it the world where children went off to school every day and had piano lessons and rode ponies. I was living in an in-between "assimilated" world and I just got on with playing the games that kids play.

The more time passed, the more anxious my father became. He longed for a different life for his family, an independent existence, away from the rules and regulations of a government-controlled community. The glaring reality was that any Aborigine living on a mission would never be able to improve their lot. He decided we had to move. One night in 1953, my parents woke their children and, under the cover of darkness, the family stole quietly out of Purfleet.

*The Simon family moved into a modest home next door to the children's Granny Doris, Uncle Ray and Auntie Deb in Kendall, 50 kilometres north of Taree. Ike began working part-time for the Forestry Commission. The rest of the time he worked as a boxer, appearing in different shows around the district...*

OUR WONDERFUL NEW LIFE AT KENDALL WAS TO BE short-lived. We were there about 10 to 12 months when Mum and Dad received a visit from the welfare people ordering us back to Purfleet. My dad knew the authorities would be back, so he again planned an escape. Ten days later we moved into Platts Estate, Platto we called it, in Newcastle. The house was short on space and so the beds would be brought out at night and put away in the morning. There was one tap on the whole estate, which everyone shared.

As we got older, we began to be aware of the anxiety that our parents lived with concerning the authorities. The welfare people appeared about once every four to six weeks. Sometimes we'd see them sitting on a nearby hill with binoculars, spying, waiting for the right time to strike. "Run and hide," our parents shouted as soon as a car was spotted. They told us that if the welfare people found us, we'd be taken away.

They must have been very quiet. We hadn't heard anything at all: no sound of a car pulling up, no crunch of footsteps on the path. They had picked their time, waiting until my father was out.

It was winter 1957, seven o'clock in the morning. The sun was up and the sounds of birds drifted down into our small kitchen. My baby brother, Lenny, was sitting on the floor, eating toast; my brothers, Murray and David, and I, rubbing our eyes in a state of half sleep, were waiting for Mum

to smear Vegemite on our bread before we dressed for school. A routine day in the Simon household.

Someone rapped on the door. My mother didn't answer it. The knocking got louder, and finally my mother, who was reluctant to answer any callers when my dad wasn't home, opened the door and exchanged words with three people. We strained to hear what they were saying. Three men then entered the room. A man in a suit ordered my mother to pick up Lenny and give him to me. My mother started to scream. One of the policemen bent down and picked up my brother and handed him to me. My mother screamed and sobbed hysterically but the men took no notice, and forced my brothers and me into a car. My mother ran out onto the road, fell on her knees and belted her fists into the bitumen as she screamed. We looked back as the car drove off to see her hammering her fists into the road, the tears streaming down her face. Then we saw her stand up, turn around and go back inside the house, shutting the door behind her.

His name was Mr Norris. He said nothing once we were inside the car. No explanation. I knew the answers to my questions. Our mother did not want us any more. I was 10, it was the first taste of rejection, and it was by my own mother. It hurt. That three-second thought was to plague me for the next 40 years.



The following day, after a court hearing at the conclusion of which Ike and Grace were charged with negligence, Mr Norris took the four boys on a long car journey. There were two stops. Two-year-old Lenny was dropped off first at a boys' home in Taree. Then Bill, Murray and David were driven to one of the country's most notorious institutions, Kinchela Boys' Home, near Kempsey.

**T**HE MEDICAL OVER, WE WERE EACH HANDED a pair of pyjamas with a number Mr Borland, the manager, had given us earlier printed on the pocket, and a shirt and pair of shorts also. I was number 33. Not Bill. Not even Simon. Just number 33.

We were shown to our dorms. Mr Pooley, the guard, allocated beds to each of us. "Don't forget which bed is yours. You wet the bed, you'll have to wash your own sheets. And you'll be punished."

The boys slept in their age groups. The young ones, aged five to seven, were in the first section; eight- and nine-year-olds were next; then came the 10- to 12-year-olds up the other end. So David was up one end, Murray was in the middle and I was up the other end. I sat on my bed, looking at the other boys. There were about 30 of us. I can still see their faces in my mind today: the sad faces, the lack of expression, of spirit, of life. Each boy was looking from David; to Murray and then at me. No one



Lost boys: (below, from left) Bill Simon reunited with his mother, Grace Simon, before her death in 1996; Bill (at right) with other former residents of Kinchela Boys' Home in 2002; Bill (at left) with his brother Murray in 1975.

said a word to us; they obviously knew better.

During that first night at the home I could hear my brothers sobbing for most of the night. They weren't the only ones. The boys who had arrived in the previous days were still getting upset at bedtime. It seemed to take a few weeks for each boy to settle down. Everyone coped differently, depending on their ages and their circumstances. My crying had to be done quietly, or else David would hear me and become even more unsettled. I lay there at night, knowing I couldn't do anything to help either of my brothers. I couldn't even be physically near them.

I wondered what had become of Lenny and whether we would ever see him again. Dad would be angry at me for not looking after him better than I had, because I was the eldest and Dad was always telling us to keep an eye on him whenever Mum wasn't near. I felt I had failed my father. I started crying softly, remembering that the others weren't allowed to hear me. It was long after most of the other boys were asleep before I finally drifted off. I believe that first night was the saddest and loneliest I have ever been in my life.

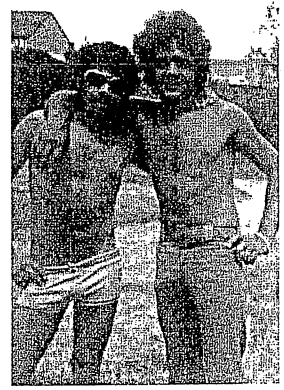
It took about a month before any of the other boys would start talking and being friendlier towards newcomers. The guards discouraged bonding of any kind. The government policy of

ment remembered it long into their adult lives.

During my time at Kinchela, the sports equipment room doubled as the solitary confinement room. A boy would usually be sent there for one to three days, depending on his infringement and the severity of his wounds. While in solitary, he'd receive basic food and water only. It was thought that this time in confinement would improve our manners, but the real reason was to keep the boy out of sight until his lacerations healed. On many occasions when on kitchen duty, I was the one responsible for passing the "meal" to the boy being held in that room.

Words of comfort for the bleeding boy behind the door were usually not much comfort. Time spent in that room was always associated with pain and loneliness and nothing anyone said could help. A few of the boys were often very angry and sometimes violent when they were locked up in there. When it was their mealtime, I'd place the food under the door and just leave it.

By far the worst punishment Kinchela inflicted on its inmates was a barbaric practice called "walkin' down the line". This punishment involved all the boys; we were lined up from the youngest to the oldest. Mr Borland would call the name of the offender to come and stand between him and a work boy at the beginning of the line,



**"We were each handed a pair of pyjamas with a number Mr Borland, the manager, had given us earlier printed on the pocket. I was number 33. Not Bill. Not even Simon. Just number 33."**

day was that brothers and sisters from the same family were taken, but only one family per area was taken, so that ties with any other friends in the community were severed. Similarly, when a boy turned 18 he was often sent out to work, but he was purposely never returned to the area from which he had come. This ensured that family ties which had been lost were not renewed.

**P**UNISHMENT PARADE STARTED AT FOUR o'clock each afternoon. Mr Borland would be waiting eagerly, greedy for the pleasure of the physical punishment that was about to be meted out. Regardless of age, it was bare buttocks and two to six savage hits with a four-foot cane for any boy who had been reported to him during the day for any wrongdoing.

It was humiliating enough to have your name called out in front of other boys, but having to pull your pants down and expose your buttocks was far worse. Mr Borland would apply the strokes across our buttocks in such a way as to force the cane to wrap around our legs. The tip of it would land on the inside of the leg near our groins. Embarrassment was soon forgotten and replaced by an unbearable pain. Welts appeared around our inner legs followed by multiple green and red bruises, which took days to heal. Boys who spent time at Kinchela and received this sort of punish-

in front of the youngest person. It was the work boy's job to be the "striker". The offender would stand in front of the first boy in the line and be punched by that boy. Afterwards, the offender would move on to the next boy, and it would be his turn to have a hit. Then on to the next boy and so on all the way down the line.

If Mr Borland didn't think a punch or a hit was hard enough, then that person would have to hit the offender again, only it had to be harder than his first punch. If Mr Borland still wasn't satisfied, he would call on the "striker" to give the offender a punch. And this time he would definitely be struck as hard as Mr Borland required. So if you didn't hit the offender hard enough when it was your turn, you were actually making it worse for him, because he received your not-so-hard punch as well as the hard one from the striker.

The darker you were, the more likely, the more often and the more severely you were punished. The darker-skinned boys were always getting into trouble for the most trivial of things. We all felt desperately sorry for them. Yet the Darby brothers, Daniel and Joel, coped well with the results of their beltings. One day, Daniel was in trouble for something, but when the punishment was meted out to him, it was far, far harsher than that received by lighter-skinned boys for the same infraction.

"How do youse put up with hidings like that?" Daniel was asked. "It's awright, we used ta this," was the reply. "Things different now, it's okay."

And he smiled. He was only 13, in enormous pain and he still managed a smile. These boys were always smiling. We couldn't understand how they did it. We had a lot of respect for them. The guards could never break them, no matter how cruel the punishment. We felt good being around the Darby boys. They had a natural ability to lift our spirits. Because the hidings and beatings they got never seemed to bother them, I used to wonder if their smiles were a separate physical entity and not connected to their emotions. Now, I realise it was probably their way of coping, although it didn't always prove successful. I learned much later that those two boys had hung themselves.

**T**HERE WERE MANY METHODS OF ALIENATING us from our own parents and culture. One incident that left me extremely distressed occurred when I met up with my uncle at the Kempsey Show. The local show was one of the few events we could attend. I headed straight for side-show alley, with the hope my father would be there working in the boxing tents, and looked closely at each boxer along the line. Suddenly I stopped and went back to look at one in particular. I felt my spirits lift. Standing there, looking proud and strong, was my uncle, Jim Simon.

Jim fought under the name "Coogan Brown" and was a highly regarded southpaw. He was flown over from Wellington in NSW to Wellington in New Zealand to fight for the British Empire title. In this period of his life, Uncle Jim was saving his boxing earnings to buy a truck and tour Australia as a missionary. He took his Bible to all his fights.

**"After a couple of years, it became obvious to us our parents weren't coming to get us. We found out years later that all relatives were denied access to the home."**

Seeing him standing there in his silk boxing robe filled me with pride. My need for family, for someone who loved me and for a familiar face was so strong that I ran forward to the front of the stage shouting, "Uncle Jim, Uncle Jim", pushing past other spectators and jumping in front of the stage. He jumped down and hugged me.

The feeling of being so close to a relative, to someone who actually cared about me, was overwhelming. I broke down in tears. He took me into the tent and I watched him fight and win. After the fight he came back and spent some time with me. He told me what he knew of the family and how Mum and Dad were. I told him about life at Kinchela and what was happening to my brothers and me. I remember him shaking his head but not saying too much; it wasn't part of our culture to discuss painful topics with children. We walked and talked and then the time came for me to return to the pick-up point, where he gave me a photo of himself boxing.

As we said our goodbyes a rush of panic engulfed me. My past family life was flashing before me. Now the only contact with that life was about to leave me and I had no idea when or if I'd ever see him again. Tears flooded down my face and I couldn't control my sobbing. He was on his way back to his life and I was on my way back to mine.

That photograph was the only link with my previous life. To my brothers and me it became the most important possession in the world.

Many boys were told that their mother or their father (quite often both) was dead, when in fact they were alive. Being told this news caused many to suffer severe depression, which would go undiagnosed and untreated. Some boys lost all hope and just wanted to die. We had no way of knowing

our parents didn't even know where we were.

After a couple of years, it became obvious to us that our parents weren't coming to get us. We found out years later that all relatives were denied access to the home. The State Archives File number 1/9812 - the "Visitors Book" - from 1951 to 1962 shows the only visitors to Kinchela were Welfare Board staff, and others involved in the operation of the home. Not one relative's name is entered in the book for that 11-year period.

**A**FTER EIGHT YEARS MY RELEASE DAY CAME. One morning Mr Worthington (Mr Borland's replacement) informed me I was going to work for some fella in Sydney. I was to leave in four days. There was no farewell party, no words of good wishes for the future, no presents or cards, nothing. I had mixed feelings: elation at being released, sadness about leaving my brothers. I kept reassuring them they'd be all right and I promised I would come back and visit them. I think they knew I'd never be able to do that. We didn't know when we would be together again.

Finally, departure day arrived. We were given our sealed files, some small change and our tickets to Sydney. After many hours the train finally pulled in at Central Station and I walked into my new life, the last words of Mr Worthington still beating in my brain: "Remember, 33, black people are the scum of the earth." GW

Edited extract from *Back on the Block*, Bill Simon's Story, by Bill Simon, Des Montgomerie and Jo Tusciano, published by Aboriginal Studies Press on Monday; rrp \$35. Bill Simon is now a pastor based in The Block in Sydney's Redfern, where he assists Aboriginal people and fellow members of the Stolen Generation. He will be appearing today at the Sydney Writers' Festival. For details, see [www.swf.org.au](http://www.swf.org.au).



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