

## Carrying What Was Taken

One time in primary school, my teacher made us write about everyone's culture and heritage—where we're from, what it means to us. Kids around the room immediately scribbled stories their grandparents told them of journeys across seas, lamb roast recipes their family made every Sunday evening, or traditions that had been observed for generations. It seemed so whole—so intact.

I just sat there, looking at a blank page, not knowing what to write.

I knew I was Aboriginal – that much had never changed - but I didn't know what that really meant. I didn't know a lot of language. I hadn't yet met a lot of mob. I had grown up on Country, even though I felt so far from it. What I had were fragments: a few family photographs, an echo of my surname, the way my grandparents said certain words. And something more fundamental – something deeper I couldn't explain. A knowing.

I ended up writing: *"I am Aboriginal, but I don't know what that means."*

I was embarrassed at the time. As if I had failed some invisible test of identity. As if I wasn't 'enough' – not Black enough, not cultural enough, not connected enough. I didn't yet understand that what I was feeling wasn't my failure - it was the aftermath of a broken system. A broken history. A society which had shattered into fragments with the expectation for us to piece it back together on our own.

I've realised that brokenness doesn't mean loss - not entirely. Pieces survive, often in fragments. Identity doesn't need to be loud or fully formed. It can be partial. Sometimes identity is below the surface – in the way you feel when you're standing on Country, in the stories your body recalls even when your mind can't. It's okay to feel disconnected and still have profound belonging within you.

I know I belong, but I don't know what that means. What does it mean to truly belong?

As I said before, we all innately inherit stories we don't understand - everyone does. Maybe this feeling isn't just mine. Family expectations, old photographs that have no context, names we're supposed to live up to. But what happens when those stories feel incomplete? Is the societal pressure to be 'whole' something we all quietly carry - some heavier than others?

For me, that pressure is wrapped up in something bigger. A complexity which adds layers upon layers. It's not just about who I am – it's about a history I didn't choose but choose to carry. A story I have never fully learnt. A story interrupted by policies, forced silence, and survival. But survival isn't just about continuing – it's about remembering, even when it hurts.

The story of my Great-Grandmother's upbringing reflects the painful legacy of a broken history – fragments of the past that I carry with me every day.

After losing her mother at the age of 7, she was sent to live with her white aunty, as her father was unable to raise her. Despite being Aboriginal, she was brought up under the belief that she was white, with very little discussion about her cultural heritage.

Her identity was quietly erased – not lost, but deliberately tucked away, hidden behind silence. The kind of silence that doesn't protect but erodes. A silence shaped by the weight of societal expectations and pressures that many First Nations children endured and continue to do so today. This erasure wasn't a choice: it was imposed upon by the ideologies and injustices embedded in a history that was designed to suppress and assimilate.

This doesn't just vanish over generations – it lingers. It shapes the way we see ourselves, the way we move through the world, and the way we try to fit in.

Fitting in today's society is complicated – especially when you carry something as old, as sacred, and as disrupted as a culture that was never meant to be silenced yet was forced to be.

I wonder sometimes if anyone really feels like they perfectly fit. Whether you're from the city, the suburbs, or even some place no one knows how to pronounce – everyone carries pieces. Everyone's trying to stitch something together. Everyone's trying to be their own puzzle piece, searching for where they fit.

I often think about how far I have come – from confusion to a quiet understanding.

And when I do, I find myself thinking back to that one time in primary school, staring at that blank page, unsure of who I was.

These days, that page isn't blank – it's just unfinished.

Maybe that's what identity is: not a final answer, but a story that we keep writing, line by line. Some lines are ours – some belong to our ancestors, all of them stitched together by memory, love and survival.