

Fingers

(This yarn is based on a real car trip. We are Karajarri people and have cultural permission to tell these stories. My cousins' names have been modified because they are shy but love our story and want it to be heard.)

The other night I picked up my cousins from Perth Airport. Had to smile watchin' Alma and Silvie waddle through customs lookin' like they'd come off the Polar Express ... beanies, jumpers, blankets, gloves, a mask and dark sunnies. Trust me ... us blackfellas mob, we're as *different* as the fingers on ya hand.

Now Alma she's the Middle Finger. Culturally she's a powerful Lore woman who towers above us mob. A real beauty with that dark red-brown skin and gleaming white teeth. Her long flowin' jet black hair has a single white streak, that's striking in more ways than one ... It's there to warn ya not to take her on, coz she'll flog ya first and ask questions later. Why? Coz she's the Middle not the Pointer Finger... She's a doer and a giver. And although it's her way or the highway ... She's got a heart of gold ... a memory like a steel trap and a laugh that stops traffic.

Silvie well, she's the Little Finger and a truly gentle soul. Small with pale-ish freckly skin, coz her mother was the product of a German priest. Like Heidi she plaits and coils her desert blonde hair into a bun at the back of her head and leaves a long ringlet to bounce freely in front of each ear. Her and Alma are sisters ... Same age... Same fathers... Different mothers ... They live in the same house up north ... I reckon they're the Twins of Destiny.

Me? I'm the Thumb. My skin looks like coffee-scum ... Ya got ya *long-blacks* and ya *flat-whites* but no body, not even white fellas want *scum* ... I'm always waiting for *full bloods* to accept this *mixed-blood* city slicker. It takes lots of road trips and time sitting on

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Country with extended family and a cultural elder like Alma to make proper kinship introductions ... so it's clear to them fellas exactly *who* I am and *where* this Kurdish/ Aboriginal woman fits into the family... You see, my father was Alma's father's brother's son. Back in 1919, my father's parents shipped their kids with a trafficker from Broome to his mother's sister who was a nurse in Burma ... this heart breaking decision prevented my dad as a toddler and his four year old brother being *Stolen* by the Authorities ... For a displaced person like me, discovering who you really are is a long slow process... And I'm alright with that.

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Anyway, Alma gets wind of me at the airport and hollers "Hey Cous!" ... the sea of white fellas separates at the sight of us huggin' and kissin'. I herd me cousins into the lift, wheeling in two huge empty suitcases. We was planning an op shop tour when them lift doors slid shut...real sneaky like and the whole dam thing started dropping down.

"What's this box?" Alma screeches

"Get us out of here!" Meanwhile, Silvie's buried her head into my chest, whispering "can't breathe!" As everything's going down ... my tears are coming up.

Hard to believe that just last week, this same Alma chucked a can of coke at a giant bungarra lizard...hit it right between the eyes...knocked it out cold. When she cut that dragon's guts open...alive deadly King Brown Snake was coiled ready to strike! ... True! This mob know stuff you wouldn't dream off. But when it comes to lifts and moving stairs ... they don't want to know.

As the lift doors opened, I remembered how the nuns punished little Alma by locking her in a cupboard for days ... Put the fear of small spaces deep into that warrior heart of hers. Can't even lock the dunny on a dark night. Bad hey? Just a little kid taken from the

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bush... Can't tell ya the shame I felt for putting her into that lift. You can imagine the greeting we got from security. But Alma, she told 'em straight up "We're from the bush ... we gotta have open spaces...this falling box shit just ain't natural." We walked to my car real quiet like.

"Alma, Wanna drive?" "Nah! This is your Country, Cheli. You drive" I was so nervous turning the key, the last time I drove Alma was bush bashing with a bunch of blackfellas. Everyone was screaming at me. "Come off the side of the road! You'll get bogged!" ... "Don't run over that snake! He'll wrap around ya wheel hub and when ya open the door... he'll be sittin' on ya lap!" ... "Watch out! ... Cattle bones! They'll rip your tyres ta shit" ... "Go faster!" ... "Go slower!" ... "Stop!" ... "Get out! ... I'm driving!" The Middle Finger had spoken and the Thumb respectfully got out. The only one not yelling at me was pissing himself laughing was Wayne. He's a Truckee from Beagle Bay ...big bloke, beautiful smile, sweet as...he's a Ringer...always does what the Middle and Pointer Fingers say. Ring Fingers never make trouble and can't move by themselves. They carry the burden of commitment ...the *ring*.

Pointers honestly believe they're *perfect*. Twenty years ago Wayne tied the knot with Mavis who's a Pointer to the back teeth. She practices tirelessly the ancient art *incessant criticism* that's been handed down from mother to daughter for generations. It's their finely tuned method of unarmed combat and law enforcement ..."What did I tell ya?... Ya shoulda. Shouldn't ya? ... But ya didn't. Did ya? ... Coz ya wouldn't. Would ya? ...Coz ya can't. Can ya?" ... In spite of the daily dumping Ringers like a blowflies hover around Pointers and consider themselves Lucky Bastards to have a Pointer in their life.

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I might as well tell ya now ... Reversing's not my thing ... It's against my religion ta go backwards. Actually, parking's not my thing either ... I reckon I've got issues with small spaces too. I didn't realise that as I turned the key I'd switch on me side and back seat drivers ... right hand down...left hand down ... no stop... straighten up ... watch the post ... straight back now ... I'm sweating bullets but soon I'm free of that *backwards* stuff and we're heading for the exit. Alma's got her tracker's eyes on, taking in every turn and landmark. I reckon I could drop her anywhere we'd passed and she'd know her way back.

Heading for the City, the bright lights and big buildings impress them and I'm starting to relax ... I'm a really good *frontwards* driver...True! I studied medicine with a brilliant doctor... a chinaman who won't mind me telling' ya ... that I never had a *fear of death* before I got into a car with him. Struth he was hopeless, I'd have ta cover my eyes to settle my heart while he'd weave through traffic lookin' for a head-on. But reverse parking ... incredible! He could slide his BMW into a parking bay with two millimetres to spare? Not like me ... I'd drive the kids around the Myers car park and get them to sing out at the top of their lungs ... begging the Almighty for two free bays beside each other. Our prayers were always answered... top floor from the ground under the blue sky. See ... We was properly looked after ...coz our little old bomb would never be squished when that car park caved-in.

We hit Northbridge late, for some reason there were hundreds of people crossing the road. It was like someone had opened the cattle yards and the creatures of the night were on the move. No one's obeying traffic lights. The walkers had brought us drivers to a grinding halt. Even the boys sporting lycra weren't zippin' around with their bums up .. I'm not worried...us Thumbs are used to waiting.

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But Middle Finger, she's got other ideas. She's scanning the terrain ...puts the window down and launches half her body out of the car yelling " Yeah youse! Stop that!" I hadn't noticed a gang of white and black kids fighting at the back of the crowd in shadows of the railway station. "If youse were in Broome Town the police would lock youse up!" Then she said the most horrifying thing ever. "Come here ... I'll give you a floggin' ya won't forget! " My blood ran cold." Alma stop! They're Ice Heads and we're stuck in traffic." The kids are racing towards us ...Her flogging arm's still egging them on. "Pull ya arm in!" I beg, trying to wind up her window ... Duck! Duck! Duck! I'm yellin' as I'm ducking myself. I was expecting a bottle and fists through the windscreen. Don't know what the Little Finger was doing but the Middle Finger wasn't bending for no body.

In the dark under the dashboard I was having an outer body experience... A vision came to me of our ALMA, the new Air to Land Missile Adapter ...She'd morphed into the biggest blow up statue you could imagine, tethered with long cables off the Top End of Australia. That flogging arm of her's was waving in the breeze and her razor sharp white teeth and *don't mess with me* attitude ...was seeing off them bullies that come here to *trash and snatch* a bit of our great land ... That flying blackfella was suddenly a symbol to me of the *revolution* ... restoring my faith in *freedom and the Great Australian Way*...Even migratory birds were chucking a lefty at the sight of ALMA. Forgetting exactly where I was, I stuck my head up and saw a tall skinny white kid in a long black jacket flash past the car bonnet like a ballerina. On the Heath Ledger Centre side of the road their fight continued.

Next thing Silvie's got her window down."Hey girlie you should be at home in bed with ya little baby...street's not the place for littlies." The teenage Goth gives her the finger and pushes the pram right in front of a police car...they stop to let her cross. Unfortunately Silvie's on a roll, she spots a Kimberley girl standing on the kerb. Skinny long arms and

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legs, she's flaunting a shimmery shift that half way up her bum. Our sweet Silvie ... like the rest of us is missing the edit button ... "Hey Sista ... your vagina's winking."... Burning up with embarrassment, my foot slipped shooting us up onto the footpath...How I didn't kill anybody is a miracle . My car lurched forward and I snuck into front position at the lights.

Silvie whispers "Cheli?"... "Behave you guys!" I snap... Silvie leans forward speaking into my deaf ear ... "Cheli" ... Thumbs can get mighty irritated ... "You mob are gonna get us killed"..."Cheli!"... "You can't tell *city people* what to do!" Grabbing the back of my seat and leaning into the driver's side, the Middle Finger speaks in a deep dark voice "What's *he* doing?" I look to the right. On the median strip leaning against the lamp post is a massive old white man in his seventies leering at Silvie. Lookin' like a blowfish that's about to pop, he's got his shots leg pulled up, showing his *you know what* to our Little Finger. I looked back to see Silvie with her eyes covered. Alma's shouting "What sort of people are these city types? You fellas got *no shame*." The lights change... I plant my foot to a chorus of repulsion leaving him smirking with his albino snake hanging down his leg.

We were rabbiting on about how city folk live *separate* like railway tracks. While country folk live like the *intertwined* strands of seagrass matting. That's how us mob get drawn into each other's lives...good or bad ... in the *bush* no one's *indifferent*. Last time I was in Broome Town, Alma and I were going food shopping. A lady approached waving two \$50 notes "Hey Aunty here's what I owe you". Alma's chuffed... us mob always need dollars. One minute later, Old Man Thomas asks her for a loan. Without hesitation Alma hands him one clean crisp \$50 note...nothing more was said ...he's family. As the sun was setting there was a knock at the door, an old man called out "Hey Daughter " Alma opened the

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door to an outstretched bucket stuffed full of giant crabs with a big fish on top. “For ya kindness, Girlie.”

I hadn't tasted fish like that since I was a child living in New Guinea. We didn't just cook for ourselves that night... We drove food to feed Silvie's daughter and family of seven and we fed the street kids at the park down the road, the church guy took some for the old people's bus trip the next day. Our final stop was to a lady who was unwell, her husband enjoyed the feed. We sat with them yarning about art and he showed us his latest paintings while I treated his wife. When ya live in *community* there's more to *family* than ya husband, the kids and yourself. I slept well that night with a full belly and a fuller heart.

As we made our final approach to the Cancer Foundation Hostel our conversations became deep and dark. Alma's yearly mammograms for the last five years have clearly shown progressively growing tumours in her right breast ... But no medicos reported it, or referred her on, or told her ... nothing. Yesterday, shocked by the massive eruptions from her nipple and the throbbing in her right arm, she paid to see a private doctor. Stage Four Cancer! Flown to Perth today. Well ya might know by now... Middle Fingers don't give up, they're strong and always thinking about the forward game. Tomorrow before chemo, she'll cut off all her thick long black hair for her grandson to weave into a belt for his coming-of-age ceremony. That's the sort of woman she is ... lecturer at the University, she's a clear thinking, self-made woman. Silvie's a good sort too. Although her knees are crook as, she's put her life on hold, left the grandkids up north and come down to the big smoke for six months to care for her sister. Black or white, when *the shit hits the fan*... it makes all the difference to know someone truly cares.

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As we pull into the Cancer Foundation grounds there's a bunch of their patients gathered in a little area they've made for smokers. I hear the window go down and smell cigarette smoke ... a strident voice yells out ..." Don't you guys want to live?"

My family's Fingers are a strange mix of... loud but shy ... loving but demanding ...totally accepting but strongly judgemental ... generous but self-centred ... wise but totally crazy ... never whitefella Politically Correct but always blackfella Traditionally Correct ... annoying like you wouldn't believe ... But... ya gotta love 'em coz they're straight and strong.