Boroko, Pt. Moresby 1968: After mass at the Catholic Church
Dulcie’s father (William Thaiday), Sister Loyola (Dulcie Isaro),
and Dulcie’s mother (Marge Thaiday)
My name is Dulcie Isaro (Nee Thaiday) part Aboriginal and part Islander. I was born on the 11th of April 1942 on Palm Island. My father was an Islander and came from Darnley Island in the Torres Strait. My mother was an Aboriginal and was born on Palm Island.

My parents were married in 1936 on the 14th of March. My father was twenty-three years of age and my mother turned sixteen on the 14th of March, the day of her marriage. A year later my eldest sister Margret was born on the 29th of January, but soon after birth she died. My other sister Nina was born in 1938 on the 23rd of July. Two years later my brother James was born on the 29th of April, 1940.

Soon after I was born, my father took us out to the mainland to live. He had a corn picking job in Atherton. It was here that my brother Bill was born in 1944. To our great sorrow my brother James died in the hospital with pneumonia. Although I have no memories of him, I feel a great love for my brother whom I believe watched me carefully when I started crawling around. The town of Atherton was crowded out with American soldiers, so we were told.

Soon after we lost James in 1945, my father took us to Tully to live. We were still in the war years, although it was soon after we moved to Tully that the war came to an end. Our parents told us about the ending of the war and how celebrations were held in Tully as in many other places. There were displays on floats which passed through the street in Tully. We were the only black float. My father put our float in, with the help of his brother-in-law, Pop Dickman, and my mother’s tribe from Murray Upper. They had a big Mimi built on the truck and the old people danced the corroboree. We were well appreciated by the people. And do you know what? We won the first prize.

In 1946 my sister Dallas was born in Tully. This birth of another member of the family made our numbers to four children. We lived out of
Tully near Tup Jones, because my dad was working on his banana farm. Tup was a good man. He admired my father for his hard working spirit. In fact my father thrived on work and could not be out of a job for more than a week. Tup Jones wanted my father to go half shares with him in the banana business.

Tup gave my father some of his land to start his own banana farm. One day my father took all of us to spend the day while he cleared the land for planting of the banana suckers. We had to remain with mum and not go too far into the bush, because there were a lot of dingoos, who no doubt attack children on their own.

Just before we called it a day, my father came out of the bush with a piglet. It must have been three to four weeks old. We jumped for joy when we saw it. We loved it straight away. As the weeks and months went by the little pig, whom we called Gracie, grew and was more like a little pet dog. It played all kinds of games with us, even hide and go seek. If we got into trouble and were sent outside for punishment, the little pig was there with us.

Gracie grew into a beautiful large pig. Nobody could come into our yard. She was like a watch dog. She’d run for them and bite them. We had to keep an eye on her. Tup could not come into the yard and had to call out from his truck. Gracie was truly one of the family. When we’d go to the toilet she’d go also. Her toilet was a little way from ours. What we did was tie the long grass together just right for her to fit in and she really knew how to use it. Even in the cyclone weather she would be on the verandah of our house.

Because nobody could come into our yard, my father was ordered to kill her. I could just remember my father coming home and calling us together to tell us what he had to do. We sat there crying. Tup came down to shoot it, but Gracie went mad and ran up and down the fence, so he told dad to do it. My father went into the kitchen and got the big butcher knife; called her over. She came to him straight away. He did the job. I can remember us crying so much for her. She was our playmate and pet. My father did it against his will. We had to listen to the white man!

It wasn’t long after that my father met one of his relations from his Island and when he came home, he told us that we would be moving to Halifax. He left his banana farm. Looking back now, I think he wanted to go because he knew he had broken the hearts of his children, by having to do what the white man said he had to do and thus hurting his children. My father and mother both had a great love for us children and would have...
sacrificed anything for us. So he said goodbye to the farming business and went to look for another job.

When we moved to Halifax we stayed with his relation for a while; then they moved on to another house leaving us to live in that house. My father got a job working on a canefarm. Because it was hard to get work my father had to return to the farmers over and over until they were tired of seeing him every day. They ended up giving him a job.

My father being a black man, found it extra hard to get a job, until of course they'd see his work and how hard he worked. When he went to ask for work, they would say "go away nigger", but this did not stop him. He would only return the next day. My dad did this for his family. But before the season was over, he was not called nigger but Mr or Willie. The farmers came to respect him and would try hard to have him to come and work for them next year.

My brother Tellay was born in 1948. My mother went from Halifax to Ingham by ambulance. We stayed with Uncle and Auntie Saylor, until mum came home.

While staying there with our auntie, we all went swimming in the swollen river, just at the back of their house. I was swimming around enjoying myself when suddenly I was being taken by the current and I could feel myself swirling in a circle and going under. Then I felt someone pulling me by the arm and out of the water. It was my cousin Norrena. She saved me from drowning.

It was in Halifax that my sister and I started school. We went to a Catholic school taught by the Sisters of Mercy. We lived in Halifax for two more years, until March of 1950, when my mother applied to return to Palm Island.

We were taken to Lucinda by the police and caught the Irex bound for our own Island home, beautiful Palm Island. I was now seven years of age.

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Since I could remember, my childhood was a very happy one, full of love and care. Because we always had watchful parents who loved us and brought us up in strict discipline, my father taught us his Island customs, which I think was the most beautiful way to bring children up.
My mother was the main one who trained us in prayer and taught us our very deep Christian faith. Together my father and mother brought us up as strong Christians.

On our return to Palm Island my sister and I went to St Michael’s school around Caseman. This school was out of the main mission, where the sisters lived. They were the Order of Franciscan missionaries of Mary.

My first day at school was not a very friendly one, because the children at school were not very friendly. In fact most of them looked for a fight, because to them we were intruders, being of Islander descent.

I was put in grade one, but to me the teaching was very different from the teaching of the Sisters of Mercy. As a result I could not quite understand the maths that sister tried to show me on the board. With the other girls giggling at me I could not think, and made a fool of myself, because I had all wrong answers on the board. My teacher often made me stay in at recess and do all of the maths again.

As one year melted into another we became more like Palm Islanders. We learnt to fight; I mean real fist fight. Many times I got busted up, until I learnt to take hits and to return them. I won’t mention the names of girls whom I got the better of, or the girls who got the better of me.

My father, who was a beautiful dancer in his own native dancing, also a composer of his own songs, decided with our cousin Assan Sam to teach the girls to dance. This was now 1952 or 1953.

We always wanted an elder brother. When our cousin arrived at Palm Island, we were very happy to have a big brother. Assan Sam was a young man who was travelling from Darnley Island with a group of dancers on the way to Brisbane to dance in the celebrations for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. When in Cairns, he called the Superintendent “cat’s ears” and was stopped from going further on the journey to Brisbane and sent to Palm Island. Bala, as we called him, was twenty-two years of age.

We were very proud of him and looked up to him with respect and pride. He was our own big brother and what’s more he came from Darnley. We were very proud. Bala played a big part in our growing up, as regards correction and training us to dance. I remember when he came home one day and told dad he was going to get married, to a girl named Ivy Clay. We were all excited and wanted a chance to see the girl who was going to be our sister-in-law.
So one day after school we decided to go home the dormitory road way. On our way past the dormitory, my sister pointed her out to the rest of us. We were very happy and said that we were going to have a fair or light skin sister-in-law!

They were married and our sister-in-law became Sis Assan. We never ever called her by her name Ivy. This was the Island custom for in-laws. This is a sign of respect we show to the men or women who join in the family, through marriage.

After Bala and Sis were married, it was about a week or so later I think that mum got sick and dad was called out to go diving again. Bala and Sis took us home with them. I remember feeling very sorry for our new sister-in-law, because she was just married into the family and already she had a ready made family. Sis being the person she is, did all she could to take very good care of us. It must have been hard for her just newly married and all, but being the gracious lady that she was and still is, she did everything with a smile.

It was not all fun and games. We each had our own jobs to do. One of the biggest jobs we learnt from our father was to make our own banana garden. It took up four to five acres. The acres had three creeks running through. There were also beautiful waterfalls which we enjoyed very much.

It was not too long before the fruits of our labour had grown and we were proud children who collected the bananas, not each his or her own, because the bunches were heavy. We each helped the others.

This was not the only job we had to do. There was collecting of the firewood for the next morning fire, setting the table and helping mum in the kitchen. If mum was not well or was too busy, we, my sister and I, had to see that our little brothers and sister had their bath and were clean before our father came home from work. He was now a policeman, as well as working around the back farm. He planted the coconut trees in the back farm in the early fifties and in 1957 he planted the coconuts closer to the beach. The rehabilitation centre is now built there where many of the trees stood, although there are still a lot of coconut trees around the building also down along the cemetery road.

In our growing years we were a family of prayers. Every night we gathered around our parents and recited the rosary followed by the little trimmings, then our father would give a talk about our future and how hard we would find life and of mistakes he made and how he would try to help us avoid making the same ones.
As time went on we got to know everyone in the mission, especially the dancing girls. Most were related. The dancing girls became top entertainers on the Island. We were invited to Townsville to dance. We also danced on the two show days on Palm Island.

One of the things I have always remembered is the ladylike graciousness of my mother. So far I have said a lot about my father who was a magnificent man. It was a totally different life for my mother. She was often left at home. She never walked around to visit her friends or relations, so many of them would come all the way up to Palm Valley to visit her. There was Auntie Isabel Baira, Auntie Millie Watson (her sister). There were also a lot of other families, I don’t remember all of them. All I know is that to me my gracious mother always reminded me of a solid rock. She was always alone, yet she was a very strong person, not so much in health, but in her personality and character.

My mother was the perfect woman of that time. Once you were married your place was in the home, where you cared for the family, by way of cooking, ironing, sewing, cleaning the house and so on and so on. In 1951 on the 12th of February my brother Josuia (Tat) was born. He was another one added to the family. My brother Michael came on the 22nd of November 1953. Yes! another boy. My sister and I were outnumbered now. But it was not for long, because in 1955 my sister Wakada was born on the 29th of December, and all together we now numbered nine children in the family.

We often had my father’s people visiting the Island when they called in the lugger for water or for a break from their diving. Their visits often brought life to the Island. Since we all knew everyone, it was always good to see new faces. There was often a dance put on for them, either an English dance as it was called, or an Island dance in which they would perform. This gave the people a lot of pleasure.

While they were in port, they often taught us a lot of new dances which we did not know. This was good, because we were always dancing and entertaining the people. My talented father often made his own dances and songs, and also put on concerts on the Island nobody had done before or since. We were glad when these boys came to visit the Island.

One year uncle Douglas Pitt brought the Australia to Palm Island, and took the families for a picnic across to the other small Island. We had the most enjoyable time. It was good that the superintendent gave us permission to spend the day across the Island.
Many of these boys who were working on these luggers ended up marrying some of the girls on Palm Island, so today we have many part Aboriginal and Islander people living on Palm Island, and yet they are real Palm Islanders.

We have many mixed races on Palm because from the time the first people who were sent to the Island, there were people from different tribes in Queensland. Since we are descendants of many different tribes, it always make me think of the phrase “from many tribes we became one people,” and this is just what we are today.

My grandfathers, Toby and Barney King, both came from Bowen. They were sent to Hull River mission, where my grandfather Barney met my grandmother from Murray Upper, and they married and were sent over to Palm Island after the cyclone smashed Mission Beach and the settlement there. They, my great grandfather Toby and my grandfather Barney, with their families, lived around Onion Bay. They both died and were buried there. Their graves are still there to this day. So you see my roots run very deep on the Island of my birth.

One day, please God, I will be able to return again and build my house and live there around Onion Bay, so my children or grandchildren will grow up where my mother grew up.

There were a lot of kind people among the murries. Everyone who was older, we always called uncle, auntie, grannie (male or female). We were never allowed to call them by their names unless of course it was uncle Douglas or auntie Isabel and so on. This was out of respect for those adults who were older than yourself.

I remember Auntie Kippie who was then married to Uncle Max Simpson (he was a very good friend of my Uncle David, my Mother’s brother). It was the most natural thing to call him uncle and her auntie.

Anyhow I came home with my sister and brother from Mass one Sunday. On the way home we had to pass their house. After walking two miles over the hills and two miles back in the hot sun, arriving at the mission about eleven o’clock, we were very hungry.

In those days we had to fast before going to Mass and receiving Holy Communion, so we decided to call into Auntie Kippie’s house and ask for something to eat or to drink. To our delight, auntie took us all into the kitchen, sat us down and served a beautiful meal. I would never forget the kindness of this gracious lady.

Auntie Kippie like many of the people of Palm Island had to struggle to make what little meat or rice, flour, sugar, salt and other things
she had last until the next fortnight. The milk brought from the farm was first given to the white people and what was left over was then given to the Islander people, watered down.

I remember another Sunday about seven thirty in the morning, my sister Nina and brother Bill and I went to Mass. It was early, before anyone else had started out for Caseman. We arrived at the Mill at Caseman Point and sat under a bush plum tree. We were there for about fifteen minutes, when out of the cave came a witch’s laugh. It was so loud. It was wicked. The three of us froze for a minute or so, then with one mind we took off, running towards the mission again from whence we came. However we met our uncle coming along the same road we were on. Eyes wide open we told him. He laughed, encouraged us and told us to go to Mass with him, so we did.

Now that I’ve told you that story, I tell another, although I can’t explain it, because it happened when we were small. I must have been eight. It was soon after we arrived from Halifax, and when we first lived with Grannie Peter and Jane Nightisland.

This old man had always told us not to draw on the ground after dark and not to make a lot of noise. However this night we took no notice and played longer than we should have. Grannie Peter called us and told us to watch him, and to sit still, because he was going to call something out of the ground.

We all sat in stillness and waited, eyes kept on the spot he told us to watch. Then there it was, two big red eyes, moving around on the ground. Old Grandad kept on talking. The eyes drifted back and forth for about twenty minutes, right on the place we were playing. Up until today I still do not know what it was. Anyhow it vanished after old Grandad told it to go.

My father told us often, that there would be people who had magic, or witchcraft or purie/purie, but we were to know that God’s power is and will always be stronger. We were not to be afraid of these things, if our trust and love of God is strong. He made sure that he watered our faith with prayers every night, our family prayers.

The old people told us many stories of different strange happenings, but the stories are for me to keep and to pass on to my children, although I think I’d be inclined to teach them the way my dad taught me, because God is to me beginning and the end, the east and the west.
Don’t misunderstand me. These stories are sacred, because each has its origin from the Great Spirit who is God. After all He is the Ancestor of us all both black and white. I believe the One Great Spirit dealt with people of all races all over the world, from the beginning of time, each people and tribe in their own ways and customs and in their dreamtimes.

My father told us many stories from his Island, about Gelam the boy who made a dugong body out of a tree and travelled to Murray Island, where he rested and was caught in the north west wind (or Koki) and was turned into stone.

These and many other stories he told us. I respect and love them just as I do the stories my mother’s people told. The stories will always be in my heart. It’s part of customs and traditions.

Black people continually live in the spiritual world. This is not something they have to do, but it is part of us, natural and supernatural go hand in hand. It is something that’s born in us. It is passed down to us by our parents, and their parents before them.

In spite of our Christian upbringing, we got into a lot of mischief at school and at home. We were never allowed to leave the area which was near our house, without permission, either from our mum or dad. But being children we managed to slip away from home and ended up in a mud fight with the other children, or went up the creek to look for lady apple, which was our bush apple.

The best bushwalks or hunting trip were with our grandfather George Watson. He is my mother’s stepfather. When her father Barney King died, her mother married George Watson. This was the only grandfather we ever knew. We loved him as if he were our very own.

Grandad would call around from Butler Bay and would take us through the gap looking for fowl eggs or for condongs or even for possums. Grandad would show us a lot of bush food such as wild cabbage, that we cut out of the cassowary palm tree, how to fold a harp leaf up to make a cup for us to drink from the creek. There were many trips and many hunting times spent with him. He was also the best wood chopper on Palm Island. With his brother Toby Watson he came first at every wood chopping competition held. He was the one who trained my father how to be a good wood chopper and my father also won many wood chopping competitions.
As I grew older and my sister left school, we moved from Palm Valley, down among the other people. It was one of the first new homes built. Before the builders were finished the house, my father had the most beautiful garden planted and growing very well. Everyone could not get over it. But that was my father, he was great.

I was fourteen when we shifted down — that was in 1957. I don’t think I realised as to who I was, or if I was half Aboriginal or half Islander. I grew up as a Murray. I knew I was Islander, but somehow saw them as over there, and I over here. Don’t get me wrong, I loved my father and his people. I was and am still very proud of being part Islander especially when we knew we had learnt our father’s customs. Not all children over at Palm had this chance as we did, having a father who was an Island Man.

The most important time in my life came in June of 1957 when the strike took place on the Island. This was the time I felt the pain and the proud moments of my life. It was one afternoon my father came home from work looking worried and yet somewhat relieved. It wasn’t until the time for our family gathering for our evening prayers that my dad told us. I remember his words clearly. He said “Nina, you Bill and Dulcie may be too young to understand what a strike is because we have never had one here on the Island, but in years to come you will look back and remember this night.” We still did not understand what he was saying to us.

His face was serious. His words were firm as he spoke. “Two weeks from now we are going to have a strike, which means we are going to stop from going to work until they put Uncle Albie back on his right job again”. Uncle Albie was a Head Overseer on the job of spraying around the houses to kill mosquitoes and other pests, but because Mr Crooker arrived, (he was Mr Bartlem’s brother-in-law), Roy Bartlem stepped Uncle Albie down and made his brother-in-law Overseer, yet he expected Uncle Albie to teach Mr Crooker his job.

This was the chance my father was waiting for, because he and Roy did not see eye to eye. You see my father was a leader in many things. He saw how he could beautify the Island so he went ahead and planted a lot of coconuts. He also made huge banana gardens over the hillsides. This gave the Island a beautiful tropical look. Another thing my father did was to supply the Island with fish. By doing this he built the biggest fish trap which covered most of the space from Frances Creek back to the end of the mangrove, near what is now the Rehabilitation Centre’s beach. He carried stones from dry land out to the place where the fish trap was to be made. It was done in Island way, as he and his people did on Darnley.
Roy Bartlem was the Superintendent at that time. Roy of course took the credit for my father’s hard work, and was praised by the Heads for his training of the blacks. One instance I remember clearly, was when I was going to school. My parents hardly cut our hair because it was our custom to let their daughters’ hair to grow, this being a sign of beauty. The Matron (who was Roy’s wife) did not like it since the girls all had theirs cut, so she sent for me one day after school. A black policeman escorted me there. My dad was around the farm working, planting the same coconuts I mentioned earlier. Well, I was taken up to where the Matron waited. When we got closer I started to walk in a way of refusal, and I was hushed on by the black police to hurry, because the matron was waiting. I went in and she ordered me to sit on the chair. I did this sulkingly, then chop, chop, my hair came falling to the floor. I remember feeling so small and ashamed with some of the dormitory girls looking at me and smiling. I fought back the tears until I got home. My mother was shocked but could not do anything about it. These people acted like gods; if we had to go against them we would face jail.