

MY PLACE

'Can't you just leave the past buried? It won't hurt anyone then.'

'Mum, it's already hurt people. It's hurt you and me and Nan, all of us ...'

In 1982 Sally Morgan travelled back to her grandmother's birthplace. What started out as a tentative search for information about her family turned into an overwhelming emotional and spiritual pilgrimage.

My Place begins with the experiences of Sally's own life, growing up in suburban Perth in the fifties and sixties. Through the memories and images of her childhood and adolescence, vague hints and echoes begin to emerge, hidden knowledge is uncovered, and a fascinating story unfolds. It is a deeply moving account of a search for truth, into which a whole family is gradually drawn, finally freeing the tongues of the author's mother and grandmother, allowing them to tell their own stories.

Sally Morgan is from the Palyku people of the Pilbara region of Western Australia. Born in Perth in 1951, she grew up in suburban Manning. Sally completed a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Western Australia in 1974, majoring in Psychology. She also has postgraduate diplomas from the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University) in both Counselling Psychology and Computing and Library Studies.

My Place is Sally's first book, and upon publication it immediately achieved bestseller status. It was the winner of the 1987 Australian Human Rights Award for Literature and the 1990 Order of Australia Book Prize, and is now considered an Australian classic.

Sally has gone on to write, edit and illustrate many works for both children and adults, including the verse novel *Sister Heart*, winner of the 2016 Prime Minister's Literary Award. She is also a celebrated artist with works in numerous private and public collections in Australia and overseas.

MY PLACE
SALLY MORGAN



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Some of the personal names included in this book have been changed, or only first names have been included, to protect the privacy of those concerned.

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To My Family

How deprived we would have been
if we had been willing
to let things stay as they were.
We would have survived,
but not as a whole people.
We would never have known
our place.

The hospital

The hospital again, and the echo of my reluctant feet through the long, empty corridors. I hated hospitals and hospital smells. I hated the bare boards that gleamed with newly applied polish, the dust-free windowsills, and the flashes of shiny chrome that snatched my distorted shape as we hurried past. I was a grubby five-year-old in an alien environment.

Sometimes I hated Dad for being sick and Mum for making me visit him. Mum only occasionally brought my younger sister and brother, Jill and Billy. I was always in the jockey's seat. My presence ensured no arguments. Mum was sick of arguments, sick and tired.

I sighed in anticipation as we reached the end of the final corridor. The Doors were waiting for me again. Big, chunky doors with thick glass insets in the top. They swung on heavy brass hinges, and when I pushed in, I imagined they were pushing out. If it weren't for Mum's added weight, which was considerable, I'd have gone sprawling every time.

The Doors were covered in green linoleum. The linoleum had a swirl of white and the pattern reminded me of one of Mum's special rainbow cakes. She made them a cream colour with a swirl of pink and chocolate. I thought they were magic. There was no magic in The Doors, I knew what was behind them.

Now and then, I would give an awkward jump and try to peer through the glass and into the ward. Even though I was tall for my

age, I never quite made it. All I accomplished was bruises to my knobbly knees and smudged fingermarks on the bottom of the glass.

Sometimes, I pretended Dad wasn't really sick. I imagined that I'd walk through The Doors and he'd be smiling at me. 'Of course I'm not sick,' he'd say. 'Come and sit on my lap and talk to me.' And Mum would be there, laughing, and all of us would be happy. That was why I used to leap up and try and look through the glass. I always hoped that, magically, the view would change.

Our entry into the ward never failed to be a major event. The men there had few visitors. We were as important as the Red Cross lady who came around selling lollies and magazines.

'Well, *look* who's here,' they called.

'I think she's gotten taller, what do ya reckon, Tom?'

'Fancy seeing you again, little girl.' I knew they weren't really surprised to see me; it was just a game they played.

After such an enthusiastic welcome, Mum would try and prompt me to talk. 'Say hello, darling,' she encouraged, as she gave me a quick dig in the back. My silences were embarrassing to Mum. She usually covered up for me by telling everyone I was shy. Actually, I was more scared than shy. I felt if I said anything at all, I'd just fall apart. There'd be me, in pieces on the floor. I was full of secret fears.

The men on the ward didn't give up easily. They continued their banter in the hope of winning me over.

'Come on sweetie, come over here and talk to me,' one old man coaxed as he held out a Fantale toffee. My feet were glued to the floor. I couldn't have moved even if I'd wanted to. This man reminded me of a ghost. His close-cropped hair stood straight up, like short, white strands of toothbrush nylon. His right leg was missing below the knee, and his loose skin reminded me of a plucked chicken. He tried to encourage me closer by leaning forward and holding out two Fantales. I waited for him to fall out of bed; I was sure he would if he leant any further.

I kept telling myself he wasn't really a ghost, just an Old Soldier. Mum had confided that all these men were Old Soldiers. She lowered her voice when she told me, as though it was important.

She had a fondness for them I didn't understand. I often wondered why Old Soldiers were so special. All of these men were missing arms or legs. Dad was the only one who was all there.

I tried not to look directly at any of them; I knew it was rude to stare. Once, I sat puzzling over a pair of wooden crutches for ages and Mum had been annoyed. I was trying to imagine what it would be like being lopsided. Could I get by with only one of my monkey legs or arms? That's what I called them. They weren't hairy, but they were long and skinny and I didn't like them.

I found it hard to comprehend that you could have so many parts missing and still live.

The Old Soldier rocked back on his pillow and I sneaked a quick glance at Dad. He was standing in his usual spot, by the side of his bed. He never came forward to greet us or called out like the other men did, and yet we belonged to him. His dressing-gown hung so loosely around his lanky body that he reminded me of the wire coathangers Mum had hanging in the hall cupboard. Just a frame, that was Dad. The heart had gone out of him years ago.

Once Mum finished having a little talk and joke with the men, we moved over to Dad's bed and then out onto the hospital verandah.

The verandahs were the nicest place to sit; there were tables and chairs and you could look over the garden. Unfortunately, it took only a few minutes for the chairs to become uncomfortable. They were iron-framed, and tacked onto the seat and across the back were single jarrah slats painted all colours of the rainbow. When I was really bored, I entertained myself by mentally rearranging the colours so they harmonised.

As Mum and Dad talked, I sniffed the air. It was a clear, blue spring day. I could smell the damp grass and feel the coolness of the breeze. It was such an optimistically beautiful day I felt like crying. Spring was always an emotional experience for me. It was for Nan, too. Only yesterday, she'd awakened me early to view her latest discovery. I had been in a deep sleep, but somehow her voice penetrated my dreams.

‘Sally ... wake up ...’ Even as I dreamt, I wondered where that voice was coming from. It was faint, yet persistent, like the glow of a torch on a misty night. I didn’t want to wake up. I burrowed deeper under the mound of coats and blankets piled on top of me. In my dream, they were heavy and lacking in warmth. I wrapped my hands around my feet in an attempt to warm them. Sometimes, I thought coldness and thinness went together, because I was both.

Every night I’d call out, ‘Mum ... I’m cold.’ And then, to speed her up, ‘Mum ... *I’m freezing!!*’

‘Sally, you can’t possibly be.’ It was often her third trip to my bedside. She’d lift up the coat I’d pulled over my head and say, ‘If I put any more on you, you’ll suffocate. The others don’t want all these coats on them.’ I shared a bed with my brother Billy and my sister Jill. They never felt the cold.

I’d crane my head over the moulting fox-fur collar that trimmed one of the coats and retort, ‘I’d rather suffocate than freeze!’

Nan had only to add, ‘It’s a terrible thing to be cold, Glad,’ for Mum to acquiesce and pull out the older, heavier coats hanging in the hall cupboard.

Now, sitting on the hospital verandah, I smiled as I remembered the way Nan had rocked my sleepy body back and forth in an attempt to wake me up. It took a few minutes, but I finally came up for air and murmured dopyly, ‘What is it? It’s so early, Nan, do ya have to wake me so early?’

‘Ssh, be quiet, you’ll wake the others. Don’t you remember? I said I’d wake you early so you could hear the bullfrog again, and the bird.’

The bullfrog and the bird, how could I have forgotten. For the whole week Dad had been in hospital, she’d talked of nothing else.

Nan encouraged me out by peeling back the layers on top of me. I lay temporarily in a tight, curled ball. The underneath of me was warm, but, with all my coats and rugs removed, the top of me was rapidly chilling. With sudden decision, I leapt from my bed and shivered my body into an old red jumper. Then, barefoot, I followed Nan out onto the back verandah.

‘Sit still on the steps,’ she told me. ‘And be very quiet.’ I was used to such warnings. I knew you never heard anything special unless you were very quiet. I rubbed my feet together for warmth and tried to shrug the rest of me into my misshapen red jumper. I pulled my hands up inside my sleeves, wrapped my arms around my legs, and waited.

The early morning was Nan’s favourite time of the day, when she always made some new discovery in the garden. A fat bobtail goanna, snake tracks, crickets with unusual feelers, a myriad of creatures who had, for their own unique reasons, chosen our particular yard to reside in.

I wanted spring to last forever, but it never did. Summer would come soon and the grass would yellow and harden, even the carefully nurtured hospital grass wouldn’t look as green. And the giant nasturtiums that crowded along our side fence and under our lemon tree would disappear. I wouldn’t hunt for fairies any more, and Nan wouldn’t wake me so early or so often.

I’d heard the bullfrog yesterday, it was one of Nan’s favourite creatures. She dug up a smaller, motley brown frog as well, and, after I inspected it, she buried it back safe in the earth. I shivered as an early-morning breeze suddenly gusted up between my bare legs. I expected the bullfrog to be out again this morning. I gazed at the patch of dark earth where I’d last seen him. He’ll come out any minute, I thought.

I felt excited, but it wasn’t the thought of the bullfrog that excited me. This morning, I was waiting for the bird call. Nan called it her special bird, nobody had heard it but her. This morning, I was going to hear it, too.

‘Broak, Broak!’ The noise startled me. I smiled. That was the old bullfrog telling us he was broke again. I looked up at the sky, it was a cool, hazy blue with the promise of coming warmth.

Still no bird. I squirmed impatiently. Nan poked her stick in the dirt and said, ‘It’ll be here soon.’ She spoke with certainty.

Suddenly, the yard filled with a high trilling sound. My eyes searched the trees. I couldn’t see that bird, but his call was there.

The music stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

Nan smiled at me. 'Did you hear him? Did you hear the bird call?'

'I heard him, Nan,' I whispered in awe.

What a magical moment it had been. I sighed. I was with Dad now, there was no room for magic in hospitals. I pressed my teeth together and, resting my chin on my chest, I peered back at Mum and Dad. They both seemed nervous. I wondered how long I'd been daydreaming. Mum reached over and patted Dad's arm.

'How are you feeling, dear?' She was always interested in how he was feeling.

'How do ya bloody well think!' It was a stupid question, he never got any better.

Pelican shoulders, I thought, as I watched him hunch forward in his chair. The tops of his shoulders poked up just like a pelican's. I wondered if mine were the same. I craned my head to look. Yep. Pretty much the same; my elbows were pointy, too. Dad and I had a lot in common.

Dad's fingers began to curl and uncurl around the arms of his chair. He had slim hands for a man. I remembered someone saying once, 'Your father's a clever lad.' Was that where I got my ability to draw from? I'd never seen Dad draw or paint, but I'd seen a letter he'd written once, it was beautiful. I knew he'd have trouble writing anything now, his hands never stopped shaking. Sometimes, I even had to light his cigarettes for him.

My gaze moved from his hands, up the long length of his arms, to his face. It dawned on me then that he'd lost more weight, and the realisation set my heart beating quickly. Dad caught my gaze; he was paler and the hollows under his cheekbones were more defined. Only the familiar hazel eyes were the same: confused, wet, and watching me.

'I'm making you something,' he said nervously. 'I'll go and get it.' He disappeared into the ward and returned a few minutes later with a small, blue leather shoulder bag. There was maroon thonging all the way around, except for the last part of the strap,

which wasn't quite finished. As he laid it quietly in my lap, Mum said brightly, 'Isn't Daddy clever to make that for you?' I stared at the bag. Mum interrupted my thoughts with, 'Don't you like it?'

I was trapped. I mumbled a reluctant yes, and let my gaze slip from the bag to the large expanse of green grass nearby. I wanted to run and fling myself on the grass. I wanted to bury my face so Dad couldn't see. I wanted to shout, '*No!* I don't think Daddy's clever. *Anyone* could have made this bag. *He* doesn't think it's clever either!'

By the time I turned back, Mum and Dad were both looking off into the distance.

'Can we go now, Mummy?' I started guiltily. Had I really said that? My eyes widened as I waited for their reaction. Then I noticed that they weren't even looking at me, they were both staring at the grass. I breathed a slow, undetectable sigh of relief. The last time I had voiced that question out loud, Mum had been cross and embarrassed, Dad silent. He was silent now. Such sad, sad eyes.

The visitors' bell rang unexpectedly. I wanted to leap up. Instead, I forced myself to sit still. I knew Mum wouldn't like it if I appeared too eager. Finally, Mum rose, and while she gave Dad a cheery goodbye, I slowly prised myself from my chair. The backs of my legs must have looked like a crosswalk, I could feel the indentations the hard slats had made in my skin.

As we walked into the ward, the men called out.

'What? Leaving already?'

'You weren't here for long, little girl.'

The Old Solider with the Fantale smiled. He still held the lollies in his hand. They all made a great show of waving goodbye, and just as we passed through The Doors and into the empty corridor, a voice called, 'We'll be waiting for you next time, little girl.'

Strong, cool air blew through the window all the way home in the bus. I kept thinking, can a person be wrinkled inside? I had never heard adults talk about such a thing, but that's how I felt, as though my insides needed ironing. I pushed my face into the wind and felt it roar up my nostrils and down into my throat. With cold

ruthlessness, it sought out and captured my reluctant inside wrinkles, and flung them onto the passing road. I closed my eyes, relaxed and breathed out. And then, in a flash, I saw Dad's face. Those sad, silent eyes. I hadn't fooled him. He'd known what I'd been thinking.

Dad came home for a while a couple of weeks after that, and then, in the following January, 1957, Mum turned up on the doorstep with another baby. Her fourth. I was really cross with her. She showed me the white bundle and said, 'Isn't that a wonderful birthday present, Sally, to have your own little brother born on the same day as you?' I was disgusted. Fancy getting that for your birthday. And I couldn't understand Dad's attitude at all. He actually seemed pleased David had arrived!