Sally Morgan was born in 1951 in Perth, Western Australia. Her father was a white man and her mother was part-Aboriginal. When Sally Morgan was nine years old her father committed suicide, leaving her and her four sisters and brothers to be raised by her mother and part-Aboriginal grandmother. Sally Morgan is a descendant of the Palku people from the Pilbara region.

She completed a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Western Australia in 1974, majoring in Psychology. Today she is a very successful novelist and artist. Her first book, My Place, was very popular and it won her the Patricia Weickhardt Award in 1988. She is married, has three children and chooses to live a very private life.

Some of Sally Morgan’s books are:
- My Place (1987)
- Arthur Corunna's Story (1990)
- Mother and Daughter: The Story of Daisy and Gladys Corunna (1990)
- Sally’s Story (1990)
- The Art of Sally Morgan (1996)

Before reading 'The Letter' by Sally Morgan, discuss in small groups what you know about the ‘stolen generations.’

The Letter by Sally Morgan

The bus swayed back and forth making my tired old head hurt even more.

Really, I wanted to cry, but no-one cried on a bus. I glanced down sadly at the old biscuit tin sitting on my lap. Scotch Shortbreads, they weren’t even her favourites, but she’d liked the colour of the tin so I’d given them to her.

I sighed and wiped away the tear that was beginning to creep down my cheek. She was gone, and I felt old and lonely and very disappointed.

My fingers traced around the lid of the tin and slowly loosened it.

Inside was all she’d had to leave. A thin silvery necklace, some baby photos, her citizenship Certificate, and the letter. I smiled when I remembered how it had taken her so long to write. She’d gone over and over every word. It was so important to her. We’d even joked about the day I would have to take it to Elaine. That day had come sooner than we both expected.

I’ve failed, I told myself as I lifted out the necklace. It’d been bought for Elaine’s tenth birthday, but we hadn’t known where to send it. Now we knew where Elaine lived but she didn’t want the tin or anything in it.

I placed it back gently on top of the photo.

Elaine had said the baby in the photo wasn’t her. She’d said it was all a silly mistake and she wished I’d stop pestering her.

It was the third time I’d been to see her and it looked like it would be the last. I picked up the letter. It was faded and worn. I opened it out carefully and read it again.

To my daughter Elaine,

I am writing in the hope that one day you will read this and understand. I suppose you don’t want to know me because you think I deserted you. It wasn’t like that. I want to tell you what it was like.

I was only seventeen when you were born at the Settlement. They all wanted to know who your father was, but I wouldn’t tell. Of course he was a white man, you were so fair, but there was no love in his heart for you or me. I promised myself I would protect you. I wanted you to have a better life than me.

They took you away when I was twenty. Mr Neville from the Aborigines Protection Board said it was the best thing. He said that black mothers like me weren’t allowed to keep babies like you. He didn’t want you brought up as one of our people. I didn’t want to let you go but I didn’t have any choice. That was the law.

I started looking for you when I was thirty. No-one would tell me where you’d gone. It was all a big secret. I heard they’d changed your last name, but I didn’t know what your new name was. I went and saw Mr Neville and told him I wanted to visit you. That was when I found out that you’d been adopted by a white family. You thought you were white. Mr Neville said I’d only hurt you by trying to find you.

For a long time I tried to forget you, but how could I forget my own daughter? Sometimes I’d take out your baby photo and look at it and kiss your little face. I prayed that somehow you’d know you had a mother who loved you.

By the time I found you, you were grown up with a family of your own. I started sending you letters trying to reach you. I wanted to see you and my grandchildren, but you knew all about that because you’ve sent all my letters back. I don’t blame you and I don’t hold any grudges. I understand. When you get this letter I will be gone, but you will have the special things in my tin. I hope that one day you will wonder who you really are and that you will make friends with our people because that’s where you belong. Please be kind to the lady who gives you my tin. She’s your own aunty.

From your loving Mother.

My hands were shaking as I folded the letter and placed it back in the tin. It was no use, I’d tried, but it was no use. Nellie had always been the strong one in our family, she’d never given up on anything. She’d always believed that one day Elaine would come home.

I pressed the lid down firmly and looked out the window at the passing road. It was good. Nellie wasn’t here now. I was glad she didn’t know how things had turned out. Suddenly her voice seemed to whisper crossly in my ear. ‘You always give up too easy!’

‘Do not,’ I said quietly. I didn’t know what to do then. Nellie was right, that girl was our own flesh and blood. I couldn’t let her go so easily. I looked down at the tin again and felt strangely better, almost happy. I’ll make one last try. I thought to myself. I’ll get a new envelope and mail it to her. She might just read it!

I was out in the yard when I heard the phone ring. I felt sure that by the time I got inside it would be too late. It takes me a long while to get up the back steps these days. ‘Hello,’ I panted as I lifted the
receiver. 'Aunty Bessie?' 'Who's this?,' I asked in surprise. 'It's Elaine.'
Elaine? I couldn't believe it! It'd been two months since I'd mailed the letter.
'Is it really you Elaine?' I asked. 'Yes, it's me. I want to talk to you. Can I
come and see you?' 'Ooh yes, anytime.'
'I'll be there tomorrow and
Aunty ... take care of yourself.'
My hands shook as I placed the
phone back on the hook.
Had I heard right? Had she really
said, take care of yourself Aunty? I sat
down quickly in the nearest chair and
wiped my eyes.
'Well, why shouldn't I cry?' I said
out loud to the empty room 'I'm not
on the bus now!' Nellie felt very close
to me just then. 'Aah sister,' I sighed.
'Did you hear all that? Elaine will be
here tomorrow?
'Did you hear that sister? Elaine's
coming home.'

1 What was in the tin? What was the significance of the items in the tin?
2 How did Elaine react when she first saw the tin? Explain why you think she reacted in
   this way.
3 Describe the characters of each of the sisters, Nellie and Bessie.
4 What do you think changed Elaine's mind in the end?
5 Write down your reaction after reading this short story. Share your responses in groups.