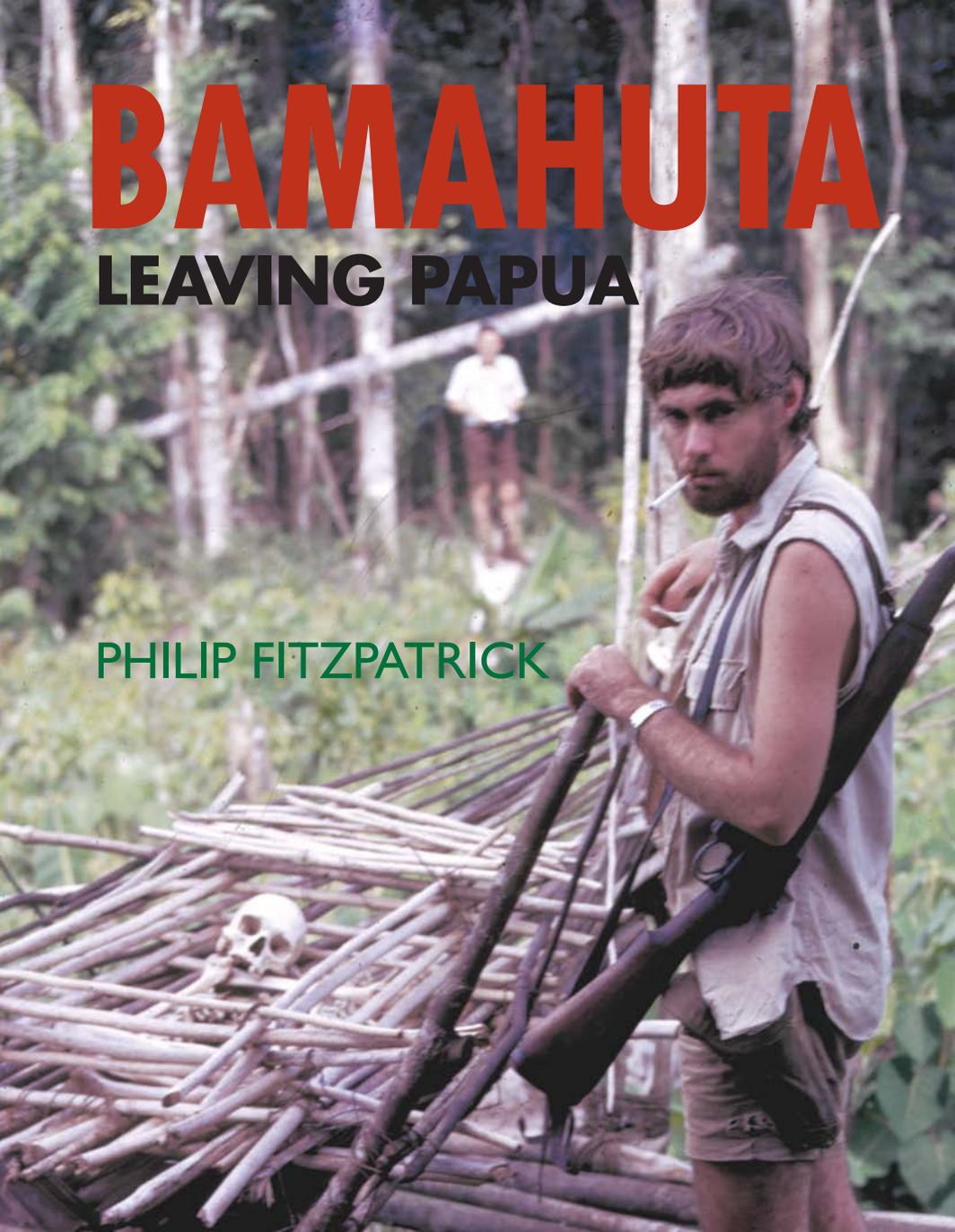


BAMAHUTA

LEAVING PAPUA

PHILIP FITZPATRICK



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*This book is dedicated to my wife, Sue,
who always groans when I mention Papua New Guinea*

*and to Kure Whan, my old cook,
who passed away a couple of years ago.*

Preface

Most of this story is true. I've changed a few names and shuffled a couple of events around in the hope of confusing anyone who might take offence. One of the problems writing about events that happened only thirty years ago is that many of the people involved are still alive. Some of the older villains, in fact, seem to be refusing to die. A number of characters are fictitious and one or two things didn't quite happen in the way I've described. I won't say who or what; I think this is my privilege to know and the reader's to wonder. If I've misrepresented anything or caused unnecessary offence to anyone I am truly sorry.

My aim has been to recreate the mood amongst the expatriates in Papua New Guinea, particularly the Patrol Officers, in those years leading up to Self Government and Independence. That period means a great deal to the Australians who were there. The rest of Australia didn't, and still doesn't, seem to care very much about Papua New Guinea.

There was always an unspoken rivalry between the Administration staff in Papua and those in New Guinea. This dates to before World War Two when they were administered separately. Papua has always been the older and poorer relative, which is part of the reason why I like the place, and why most of this book is centered there.

Parts of chapters 3 and 9 first appeared in a slightly different form in the old 1970s *Man* Magazine. Part of chapter 7 also appeared in a 1970s publication called *4x4 Australia*. Most recently *Una Voce*, the journal of the Papua New Guinea Association of Australia published two parts of chapter 5.

A lot of people have contributed to this book, many of them unknowingly. Some of them might recognize their unwitting contributions and recall my apparently innocent questions. There are a couple of people I would like to thank by name however. The first is Marie Clifton-Bassett. Marie was the editor of *Una Voce* when I tried out a few extracts from the 'work in progress' on her readers. Her positive response was the encouragement I needed to finish the book. The other is Donald Denoon from the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the ANU. Apart from correcting some factual errors and pointing out spelling mistakes he taught me, mostly via email, about economy of style and basic editing. Thanks to Pandanus Books for their help in bringing the manuscript to publication.

Philip Fitzpatrick

CHAPTER ONE

We were sitting ducks on the airstrip and I decided our best option was to make a run for it. I reasoned that if we were mobile we might stand a better chance. I called to the carpenters and cooks sitting smoking under the tailgate of the truck. ‘Let’s get the hell out of here; where’s the driver?’

‘Right here.’

‘We’re going; unlock the door. I’ve got a funny feeling we’re being set up.’

I climbed into the truck and pushed the metal mail tin containing the payroll under my feet. Peter Mantilla, the driver, leaned out of his window and shouted at the men in the back.

‘Hang on; we’re not stopping for anything!’ The men shuffled around among the boxes of groceries and supplies, clearing spaces near the side rails so they could hang on. They had done this sort of thing before.

‘Go,’ I said, and Peter planted his foot on the accelerator.

The usual procedure for collecting the payroll for the seismic survey camp had come unstuck. The payroll came into Waro airstrip every alternate Wednesday on the same aircraft that

carried the weekly rations and any exchange field crew. The arrival of the rations and payroll was flagged at the evening camp meeting so that a vehicle and helicopter were available. The trick with the payroll was to get it out of the aeroplane and into the waiting chopper as quickly as possible.

When I left the camp for the airstrip that morning I was reasonably sure everything was working to plan. I had double-checked with the party chief and the radio operator to make sure. The seismic camp was near Ai'io, a village south of the oilfield at Moro on the shores of Lake Kutubu in the Southern Highlands. The airstrip was about an hour's drive north-west at the end of the Hedinia valley.

When we got to Waro airstrip we parked the truck in the parking bay. I walked to some houses in the village adjacent to the airstrip with Timothy, the camp cook, and we bought several hands of bananas. One of the men casually mentioned that *raskols* from Komo were hanging around the village. At the time I didn't make the connection but several days earlier there had been an incident involving two Komo men following one of our recording crews through the bush and camping near them. When I heard this I contacted the police at Moro to have them moved on, but the party chief got in before me and had them escorted away.

Timothy and I wandered back to the airstrip just as the Twin Otter arrived with our rations and payroll on board. Peter backed the truck up to the Otter and we loaded the rations. We tossed a number of empty eskies and other surplus equipment into the plane for return to Mount Hagen. The pilot was fiddling around under the fuselage where a stone that had flicked up off the airstrip had damaged a fuel test valve and started it leaking. I leaned

underneath the plane and handed him my Leatherman. He flicked the handles back and twisted the valve with the pliers. The dripping fuel slowly dried up.

‘That did the trick,’ he said.

‘Don’t mention it,’ I replied. ‘Is it okay to use the radio now?’

‘Go for it,’ he said. I walked away from the plane and switched on the handheld radio. I called up the camp at Ai’io.

‘Where is the chopper?’ I asked. There was some shuffling and shouting on the other end. Eventually the party chief came on the line.

‘There’s a medical emergency on one of the cutting lines; some idiot put an aerosol can in the fire and it has blown up and injured a labourer.’

‘We need the chopper here,’ I said. Something sounded fishy, a medical emergency at exactly the same time the payroll was due to be picked up.

‘It will take about an hour and a half to get the labourer to the hospital at Moro,’ the party chief replied. ‘Can you hang on that long?’

‘Definitely not,’ I replied. ‘Are you sure it’s a genuine emergency?’

‘I dunno, I haven’t seen the labourer. The paramedic is up there now; he’ll let me know.’

‘Which line is it?’

‘Um, line Charlie I think.’

‘Isn’t that the line with all the Komos on it?’

‘Could be. What difference does that make?’

‘I’m not sure; just sounds too coincidental. We might drive the truck back with the cabbages on board.’ ‘Cabbages’ is a euphemism for money. It was politic not to talk about money and payrolls openly on the radio in the Southern Highlands. I was

beginning to feel uneasy. I walked back to the plane. The pilot was opening the nose locker on the Otter and pulling out the mail tin as I approached.

‘We’ve got some money for you here. Don’t forget it,’ he said loudly. I winced and looked at Peter. Bageley, the old Chimbu carpenter, grabbed the tin from the pilot and took it to the truck. Peter followed and locked it in the cab. We looked around. A group of villagers stood nearby. They had overheard everything. I walked over to Bageley and Peter.

‘What do you reckon?’ I asked. ‘The way I see it, if there are *raskols* from Komo about, they could hit us while we’re waiting on the strip for the chopper or try and ambush us on the road if we try to get away in the truck.’

‘We’re damned if we do and damned if we don’t,’ Peter said.

‘*Tingting bilong mi moa beta long rot,*’ Bageley said.

‘Okay, the road it is,’ I replied.

They hit us on a bend about two kilometres out of the village. A man stepped out of the jungle on the left-hand side of the track with a shotgun raised to his shoulder. Peter accelerated. There was absolutely no hesitation on the part of the gunman. He lined Peter up and fired. I saw the glass windscreen bubble and burst in front of Peter. He ducked but wasn’t quick enough. The shot burst through the rear of the cab and a splatter of blood slapped into my face.

Peter yelled and continued to accelerate around the bend in the track. The gunman jumped clear, trying to reload the single-barrelled shotgun as he went. I heard yells from the back of the truck and turned around. A group of men wielding bush

knives and axes had emerged onto the track and were gaining on the truck. As we swung round the bend we confronted a barrier of trees felled across the track. Peter accelerated again and we hit the middle of the barrier at full tilt. The truck spun to one side and slammed its tail into the bank. Peter was fighting to stay conscious. I grabbed the wheel and pulled us straight; he pushed his foot down again and we burst through the barrier.

There was so much blood coming from Peter's head that he couldn't see the road. I leaned over him and wiped the blood out of his eyes. He pulled the vehicle straight and we charged up the next hill. I slipped my shirt off and wrapped it around his head, tying it crudely in a tight knot. When I pulled my hand away two flattened shotgun pellets fell in my lap.

Between us we kept the truck going. I steered and he operated the accelerator. A couple of times I had to change gears. The next village, Hebai'ia, was not too far ahead. As we rounded a bend I noticed two people walking towards us. As we got closer I recognised them as the Australian Volunteers working at the school outside Waro. I leaned out of the window and waved at them.

'Get off the road! There are *raskols* with guns chasing us.' They obviously didn't hear me and simply waved in greeting and continued walking. I followed them in the rear-vision mirror and saw them turn off the main track onto a village track that would take them back to the school. 'Thank God for that,' I sighed.

We skidded into Hebai'ai and Peter slowed down and hit the brakes. I opened my door and ran around to help him out. He slumped in my arms and I half carried and half dragged him to the shade of a tree. Curious villagers were emerging from the nearby houses. I propped him against the trunk and checked his head.

Blood was seeping down his face and onto his chest. I slipped the makeshift bandage off, wrung the blood out and tied it back more securely. He groaned and said he felt cold. Bageley heard him and got a blanket from one of the newly arrived packs in the back of the truck. He wrapped it around Peter's shoulders.

I went to the truck and fished the hand-held radio from the bloody floor of the cab. I tried to call the camp but couldn't raise them. I swore and went back to check Peter. His pulse was racing and he had begun to tremble. I was worried that he was going into shock and wouldn't make it if we kept driving. I got back on the radio. This time I got an answer from one of the line-cutting crews. I explained the situation and they relayed the message to the main camp. Someone had gone to get the party chief. We played around with different frequencies while we waited and I managed to pick up the camp.

'The chopper is on the way,' the party chief said. 'The medical emergency was a false alarm; the labourer only had a small burn.' I was about to say something I might have regretted. Someone beside Peter was yelling in a loud voice and luckily distracted me. I turned and saw the village pastor. He had one hand on Peter's head and was waving his Bible in the other. He was reading Peter the last rites.

The chopper appeared overhead about twenty minutes later. We all waved. It cruised serenely past and disappeared.

'*Em bai I go long Waro,*' Bageley said.

'Stupid bastard,' I yelled in the direction it had gone and then remembered the radio. I called the chopper back. There was a clearing beside the road where I thought the chopper could safely put down and I ran to it waving a white towel from the back of the truck. The chopper reappeared and put down.

The paramedic emerged first, spotted Peter and headed for him. I shouted for the carpenters who had grabbed axes and bush knives from the villagers and were waiting down the track to take on the *raskols* if they turned up. Two security guards emerged from the chopper along with the camp mechanic.

We loaded Peter on board and the pilot motioned for me to jump on too. I shook my head and pointed to the truck. The pilot pushed a pair of earphones at me and I put them on. 'The party chief doesn't want any dead *kiaps*, even if they are old and grumpy. You're coming with me; the mechanic will drive the truck back. Throw the payroll in the back.'

'Okay,' I replied. 'We need to take Timothy the cook too; he's pretty upset and I don't want him having a heart attack.' The pilot nodded. Timothy looked grateful as we pulled into the sky.

I spent the next day nursing a bad case of sunburn. With my shirt wrapped around Peter's head I had been running around barechested in the midday sun. Peter made it to the hospital at Moro where the American doctor put twenty-seven stitches into his head. The shot from the gun had hit the stone shield in front of the windscreen first and then the glass. The steel pellets had been flattened into discs when they raked across Peter's head, and his wounds were mostly long gashes. We found nine flattened pellets on the floor of the cab when we cleaned up the blood.

'If the stupid bastard had hidden on the other side of the road he would have confronted the driver head on and blown his head off,' the inspector from the Mendi Mobile Police Squad said a few days later. His men were down at Waro village rounding up witnesses. He continued.

‘We know who the gunman is, he’s a nasty little Komo who we’ve been chasing for months. He’s travelling with a young girl. He must have set the diversion up with his mates on the line-cutting crew. We’ll nail them once we find out where he’s gone. The villagers reckon he’s taken off down the valley, following the river. He’s trying to get to Pimaga and back on the main road so he can make it back into the Highlands. I sent a car-load of men down there to wait for him. He conned the Waro villagers into helping him. It was their village shotgun that did the deed. The three blokes from Waro who helped him are also, um, helping us with our enquiries.’

The inspector was one tough cookie who I wouldn’t relish on my tail. The Mobile Police Squads in Papua New Guinea have a fearsome reputation. They are plunged into all sorts of hazardous situations. The Mendi squad probably has the toughest job in the whole country. Outside the main towns the Southern Highlands is virtually lawless and ruled by M16-toting clan war lords. They fund their activities by growing top-grade marijuana and shipping it via old jungle trade routes to the coast and by dinghy through the Torres Strait to Australia. The guns come back the other way. In the middle of all this a consortium of Australian and American oil companies are drilling oil and piping it down to the coast for loading onto Japanese freighters. The track alongside the pipeline is ideal for drug and gun-running.

The company I worked for is based in Mount Hagen, in the Western Highlands. It was set up by a couple of ex Patrol Officers (*kiaps*) and services the oil exploration industry, running their bush camps and providing expertise for dealing with landholders. Most of their European staff are *ex-kiaps* on short-term contracts. The work pays well when it is available.

The inspector went over to the hot water urn to make himself a coffee. We were in the mess, which was a bush timber structure covered with tarps and orange 'coffee' plastic. I heard a car pull up and a moment later the occupational health and safety officer from Moro walked through the door.

'How is the driver?' he asked. I was about to reply but he continued talking. 'I need to know all the details, especially about the work time lost while we round up another driver. It's a bloody good job the driver wasn't killed; that would have played merry hell with our safety record, not to mention our work-cover premiums.' I glanced at the inspector and he grinned back.

'Gotta get our priorities right,' he said.

'What's that supposed to mean?' the other man said. 'When will you catch this gunman, and what will happen to him? He'll just get a few months and be at it again. I imagine.'

The inspector smiled slowly. 'This one won't be going to court,' he replied. 'He's been too much trouble for too long. He'll probably resist arrest and try and fight my men, who will have no choice but to shoot him.'

'Good,' the other man said. He turned to me. 'Now let's get these details right. Have you prepared a statement? I'll need to check that.' He paused. 'Just to check the legalities, you understand.'

'Sure,' I said. 'Do we need to do it today? I'm flying out soon.'

'Let's get to it,' the man replied and pulled a sheaf of forms out of his bag.

The following week, after my replacement arrived, we drove back down to Waro to meet the plane. The Waro villagers were very

subdued. Peter was back in camp and he and the other men who had been on the truck were looking for compensation. We dropped the negotiating team off at the village and continued on to the airstrip. Although there were only camp rations on the plane, this time we had an armed police escort. Despite their presence the drive down was nerve-racking. When we were safely back at the camp I felt better. The inspector was waiting for me.

‘That *raskol* from Komo unfortunately drowned while trying to avoid arrest,’ he said. ‘The girl he was travelling with also seems to have disappeared.’

I shook my head. ‘Pity about her.’

‘Pity my arse!’ the inspector spat. ‘That little bitch killed two old ladies at Komo with a rock just to get their firewood money.’ I shook my head and the inspector continued. ‘I hear you’re leaving tomorrow. You’ll miss out on your compensation money. They reckon Peter will get over 20,000 kina. That will be a big chunk out of the Waro’s oil royalties.’

‘I don’t think I really want anything anyway,’ I replied.

The inspector shrugged. ‘Well, I can give you a lift into Moro this afternoon. You can spend the rest of today and tomorrow there and be all refreshed when the Moresby charter comes in on Friday.’

I took up his offer gladly. It was a long and lonely drive to Moro and I was still a bit shaky. I went off to tell the party chief I was on my way out.

We didn’t talk much as we bumped over the rough limestone track towards Moro. When we passed the first security gate and drove onto the graded road the ride became more comfortable

and the car quieter. We passed through the various processing plants attached to each well, and were soon on the downhill run to Lake Kutubu. The inspector eased back in his seat.

‘I hear you used to be a *kiap* in the colonial days.’

I winced. The word ‘colonial’ was usually a prelude to some sort of criticism. I answered slowly, ‘That’s right, I was here between 1967 and 1973, just before independence.’

‘The old people in the villages say they were good times, the days of the *kiap*.’

‘Sometimes they ask me why we left,’ I replied.

The inspector smiled briefly, looked at me for a few seconds and then said slowly ‘So what do you think has happened to my country?’

I was taken aback. I’d watched Papua New Guinea go downhill and wondered myself. I had a vague idea but I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell him. I think his country had been the victim of the times. The trendy sixties and seventies when colonialism was on the nose and countries like Australia were shedding their territories as quickly as possible whether the people were ready for it or not. I thought that’s what had happened, but who could be sure? It all seemed so complex. I decided to hedge.

‘I think this is just a phase you have to go through. It will eventually settle down and get better.’ I could see by his eyes that he knew I was trying to avoid the subject.

‘So what were those days like?’ he asked. ‘The days when the *kiaps* ruled?’

I sighed and leaned back in my seat. ‘How long have you got?’ I asked.

‘We’ve got all day tomorrow, I don’t have to be back in Mendi until the weekend. I’ll shout you a beer if you like.’

‘I thought this was a dry province.’

‘It is. We’ll be disposing of contraband.’

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘but I have to take it easy with the beer; it tends to knock my blood sugar levels around.’

CHAPTER TWO

At midday I walked up to the house. The crisp morning air had given way to muggy heat and I took off my shirt and boots. I sat on the veranda and watched the cloud move along the wall of the valley. Soon Kure brought tea and sandwiches. As I bent to pick up the cup I heard a shout from below. The men cutting grass in the drains around the airstrip parking bay had put down their sarifs and were signalling to the people outside the office. I followed their gaze to the lip of the ridge on the other side of the river but could not make out anything, and went inside to get my binoculars. By the time I returned the patrol was picking its way down the slope towards the station. I swept the binoculars along the winding column.

At the rear a tall, dark-skinned policeman strode. He was shepherding a bevy of youngsters carrying billy cans, folding chairs, tarpaulins and other assorted gear. I guessed he was a Kiwai from the bottom end of the Fly River. Ahead of the boys were the carriers proper with their galvanised iron patrol boxes slung beneath springy poles resting on grass shoulder pads. They were chanting a homecoming song, swaying the boxes sideways in time and stopping simultaneously every few steps. Like a samba,

I thought. The stubby little man carrying a white knapsack with a red cross on it seemed to be leading them in the dance. The next man was also thickset and carried a rifle casually across one shoulder as if it were a rake or shovel. He was not dancing and I could just make out the sergeant's stripes on his faded khaki shirt. He seemed to be in conversation with the interpreter, who was dressed in his station uniform of red and yellow-banded black serge blouse and *laplap*. Johnson was several metres ahead.

He was swinging a long *kunda* stick. He was taller than anyone else in the column and deeply tanned. He was wearing a broad-brimmed hat and khaki shirt cut off at the shoulders over a pair of faded black football shorts. His heavily muscled legs disappeared into a battered pair of canvas jungle boots. He pulled further ahead of the column, strode onto the airstrip and made his way straight down the middle towards the house. I put the binoculars down and went out to meet him.

The patrol post had been built at the northern end of a small mountain valley surrounded by steep limestone walls. The two rivers that run along the eastern and western edges of the valley tumble together into a gorge just below the station airstrip. The gorge forms the only access into the valley for aircraft. On the day I arrived the cloud was low, and as I watched the walls of the gorge on either side of the small Cessna drift past I wondered what would happen if the airstrip was closed and we had to turn around. The pilot read my thoughts.

'There isn't much room to turn around when it's like this,' he said. 'But the station clerk is pretty good with his strip reports.'

Johnson was not there when I arrived. A note left with the clerk explained that he was on patrol. I was requested to make myself comfortable until he returned. I found the small *kiap*'s house on the rise at the end of the airstrip cluttered with Johnson's furniture and gear. A huge set of rattan lounge chairs with thick, comfortable cushions surrounded a cedar coffee table set on a big fluffy carpet in the living room. The standard issue aluminium and nylon strap chairs had been relegated to the veranda, along with the Formica-topped dining-room table that had been replaced with a polished wooden one matching the coffee table. Framed prints adorned the walls and an elaborate cane bar sporting shelves of liqueurs and spirits stood in one corner.

The spare bedroom was packed with sealed crates and other gear. The dismantled bed was wedged against the window behind the crates. I sent Kure off to the station store with an anxious clerk to round up a stretcher and mosquito net and set up my bed at the end of the veranda. Kure, feeling no such sensibility about other people's property, happily commandeered the kitchen and made liberal use of Johnson's china and cutlery. The crashing of pans and the chink of cups and plates made me flinch from my refuge on the veranda.

'*Sapos ol bus kanaka kilim idai dispela kiap bai yumi kisim planti kago,*' Kure beamed, handing me a mug of tea and a selection of biscuits on an exquisite willow-pattern plate.

'I don't think so,' I replied. 'If something happens to Johnson it will all have to be shipped to his relatives in Australia.'

'*Sori tumas,*' Kure frowned. '*Em i nambawan samting trui.*'

I had dressed and eaten breakfast before Johnson arose the following morning. I heard the shower and then the rattle

of breakfast dishes as I sat reading in the morning sunshine on the grass below the house. I enjoyed mornings like these before the humidity and heat built up, and had inadvertently become an early riser for that reason. A parade of women carrying *bilums* of taro passed nearby and I stopped reading momentarily to ponder the tiny grass sporrans slung beneath their departing bottoms.

‘It’s to retain their modesty when they bend over,’ Johnson smiled, walking down from the house with two cups of coffee.

‘Looks uncomfortable,’ I replied. ‘What’s wrong with an ordinary grass skirt?’

‘I’ve never asked. It’s the same with those,’ Johnson said, pointing his coffee cup at a wizened old man sporting a thirty-centimetre phallic crypt who was following the women down to the station store.

‘Comfort and convenience doesn’t seem to be a consideration. That thing would always be in the way,’ I observed.

We tackled the Patrol Post accounts over coffee after the morning parade. The accounts, meagre as they were, were eventually made to balance. The station clerk stood by sheepishly as Johnson dug into his pockets for money to make up the shortfall in petty cash. I watched bemused as the green cash tin was deposited in the safe alongside a shoebox containing the station’s ‘emergency escape plan’.

‘Escape plan?’ I asked.

‘Sure,’ Johnson grinned. ‘Got to have a plan. Take a look inside, but keep it to yourself.’

I carefully opened the box. Inside lay a small phallic crypt and a tin of brown boot polish. I laughed out loud.

‘Don’t laugh,’ Johnson smiled. ‘Anything could happen here.’

Johnson’s gear was flown out over a period of three days. The seats of a twin-engine Britten Norman Islander were removed for the purpose. On the last trip they put one pair of seats back for Johnson’s cook and his wife, while Johnson squeezed in beside the pilot.

‘See you in Daru sometime,’ Johnson yelled over the noise of the engines. I waved back and watched the plane taxi down the airstrip. The morning sun was warm and the air crisp and clean as the plane disappeared down the green gorge beneath the fluffy clouds gathered above it. The gaggle of station labourers, police and other station staff who had come to see Johnson off milled about on the edge of the airstrip amongst the Faiwolmin shaking their wrists in sorrow at Johnson’s departure. I stood watching the space where the plane had disappeared down the massive limestone corridor until I felt a tug on my sleeve.

‘*Fiamnok ikam,*’ the interpreter said. ‘*Em i wet long opis.*’

I glanced at the sun shining off the limestone cliffs above the airstrip and noticed that the white fibro cement of the house on its rise beyond the airstrip had also caught the sun. I could plainly see Kure sweeping dust out of the front door and down the steps of the veranda. Below the house the Chimbu tractor driver was coupling up the grass-cutter ready to mow the airstrip. A small mass of naked Faiwolmin children milled about him as he backed out of the shed.

Further along the edge of the airstrip was an old office building, which had been relegated to the status of storeroom when its *limbom* floorboards had sagged and begun to crack under the weight of its occupants. Behind it lay half a dozen unlined fibro

'low-cost' houses occupied by the police and their families. These were separated from the larger, but equally unlined, houses of the two schoolteachers by a communal garden fenced with wooden stakes and bamboo to keep out everyone's roaming pigs and chickens. Off to the right the Aid Post teetered on shaky piles. I made a mental note to make its replacement a priority. Beyond the Aid Post lay the double classroom of the school with its leaky sago-palm roof.

'It's hard to fix the roof because you have to go too far to get new *saksak*,' the clerk told me. 'The teachers are always asking about corrugated iron but I tell them it costs too much on the aeroplane. They never listen and always ask.'

I sighed. The whole station looked in a sorry state, not least the present office building that I now approached. This rickety sago-thatched building had once been the Patrol Officer's house until it was replaced by the AR10 on the hill. I had guessed as much when I first saw it; its split sago trunk walls, *limbom* palm floor and thatched roof had been laid out in the style of a classic double-fronted Australian suburban house. The master bedroom was now my office, the other two bedrooms were now a store and radio room, the kitchen had become the clerk's office and the lounge room, with the addition of a rough counter, the general office. Stranger things had been perpetuated on one-man patrol posts.

I walked up the front steps of the office and stepped behind the office counter. Imbum, the interpreter, materialised from nowhere and stood at attention beside me. I was puzzling over this behaviour when a resounding thud shook the whole building. I glanced up and was confronted by a short pixie-like man in a black village

constable's uniform and a Robin Hood hat made of fine cane. The man stood rigidly to attention until he was sure he had my full attention and then snapped his right arm up into a brisk salute. I have never been a stickler for protocol and hesitated in surprise. The little man held his rigid pose until I realised he was waiting for a response. I offered a poor imitation of his salute in reply.

'Stand at ease *Mamusi*,' I said, and the man relaxed slightly.

'*Dispela lapun em i Mamusi bilong ...*' Imbum began but was cut short by a sharp hiss from the village constable and a quick signal to come closer. Imbum shuffled forward and looked embarrassed. The *Mamusi* coughed and Imbum stood to attention again. I waited. When the *Mamusi* was satisfied he began a speech in a loud voice, stopping only at odd intervals to nod to Imbum for interpretation. A hushed group of onlookers peered through the office door.

The speech was one of welcome. If this gamin of a man was to be believed he was the most influential man amongst the two thousand or so Faiwolmin in this part of the Star Mountains. When this point had been firmly established the *Mamusi* relaxed somewhat and beamed widely. Thinking he had finished I started to speak, but was cut off by another quick hiss. Imbum looked sheepish as the *Mamusi* admonished him for this error of protocol on my part.

The next part of the speech was the formal welcome. Johnson was described as a fine man who had managed to walk to almost every corner of this most rugged patrol area, and a wish that I might follow this fine example was subtly implied. A reference was also made to the rickety nature of the Aid Post and the leaky roof of the school, followed by a frank appraisal of the

superiority of galvanised iron over sago palm. The *Mamusi* then noted the fact that the airstrip was finally being cut before suddenly coming to attention again and throwing me another salute. I stepped back quickly and the man disappeared through the office door and into the crowd of onlookers, who parted rapidly to make way for him. Imbum sighed with relief and I stumbled over a large *bilum* of taro and corn left in front of the door as I attempted to see where the man had gone. When I finally untangled myself and peered out of the door over the heads of the departing crowd, all I could see was a black uniform disappearing into the jungle on the other side of the airstrip.

‘That was Fiamnok,’ Imbum explained, clearly relieved that the ordeal was over. ‘He is the most powerful sorcerer in the Star Mountains. The taro and corn will be very good.’ I glanced at the large *bilum* on the floor. ‘He also said if you need a woman to let him know.’

‘A woman?’ I said slowly.

‘He has many women,’ Imbum added thoughtfully.

The following morning was grey and wet. Giant black clouds rolled off the mountains behind the Patrol Post and massed over the gorge. Tails of thick cold mist hung from the clouds and drifted amongst the buildings and across the airstrip. The police and station labourers squatted in the tractor shed smoking and cooking taro on a small fire. Some of the condensation and drizzle produced by the mist seeped through the thatch on the office roof and dripped onto my desk. I bundled the treasury returns I had been working on into a thick envelope and swept the puddle onto the *limbom* floor where it dripped through and wet Imbum’s three

piglets sheltering there. I stared out of the window as they snuffled around looking for another dry spot.

Finally, bored with drinking coffee and watching the drizzle, I walked over to the rotting store to watch the clerk buying in the weekly supply of taro and vegetables for the labourers and prisoners. Three women of indeterminate age stood huddled in the lee of the building while a fourth stood on the veranda with the clerk weighing her bundle of taro and bananas. The women peered out from under their banana-leaf rainhoods as I approached and offered their hands as I ducked under the dripping overhang. Each one smiled shyly as I took their work-roughened hands. When I climbed onto the veranda, the woman having her vegetables weighed held out a hand and giggled behind the other at the gesture that she obviously found unfamiliar and awkward. I smiled reassuringly at her. There was no hint of pressure in her grasp and as her limp hand slid through mine I wondered if she had ever performed the ritual before. She appeared younger than the others and I noticed that one of her breasts was dripping milk, although there was no child in sight.

‘Where do the women come from?’ I asked the clerk, who was absorbed in precisely weighing a bag of rough brown lumps of taro. He seemed momentarily confused and muttered in the direction of the oldest woman who knitted her brow in concentration in an effort to decipher the clumsy rendering of her language. When the gist of the question dawned she offered a loud ‘Ahh!’ and pointed at the mountains behind my house.

‘Golgabip, Golgabip,’ she repeated.

‘Is that a long way?’ I asked the clerk.

‘About seven or eight hours walk and very steep, sir,’ the clerk replied.

‘And they came all that way to sell this little bit of taro and banana?’

‘They want the salt and tin meat,’ the clerk replied, indicating four little heaps of salt lying behind him on some fresh banana leaves brought by the women. I momentarily considered topping up the carefully weighed heaps but realised the precedent might cause more trouble for the clerk than it would be worth. Instead I stepped through the doorway into the store.

Inside the dimly lit building I encountered the usual clutter of galvanised iron patrol boxes with their large looped handles made to take carrying poles, plywood folding tables, deckchairs, axes and shovels and neatly arranged stacks of label-less bully beef, navy biscuits, yellow soap, rice and Chinese tea poking out of the canvas sail stretched over it all to keep out the water dripping through the roof. Tiny black pellets of cockroach dung, which fell continuously from the sago palm roof, littered the sail and rattled as I passed. Against a back wall I noticed two rusty pit saws. Both were blunt. I looked around and spotted a couple of files wedged into the woven cane wall with an array of bush knives and long-bladed, springy *sarifs* used for grass cutting.

The clerk watched puzzled as I carried the saws and files back towards the office. I passed the four women shuffling pigeon-toed towards the labourers’ compound by the river where they had stayed overnight. I noticed the tightly wrapped banana-leaf bundles of salt and shiny tins of bully beef in their *bilums*. The younger woman now carried a small, light-coloured baby boy against her previously leaking breast and I guessed he had only been born a few days ago. His skin would be much darker in a week or so.

Back in the office I pumped up the kerosene stove and put water on to boil. Imbum wandered inside and fetched two cups and mixed instant coffee, sugar and powdered milk in them. He was partial to sweet, milky coffee and since there was no shop at Olsobip this was his only opportunity to drink it. That was why I had been drinking so much coffee, I thought; Imbum keeps making me cups so he can have some as well. I gestured towards the saws I had left leaning against the wall.

‘Does anyone know how to use these?’ I asked.

‘When *kiaps* Hoard and Dutton first came here they used them to cut planks for the house that used to be where your house is now. That was in 1964. Five years ago, they built this house for the little *kiap*.’

‘The Cadet Patrol Officer?’

Imbum nodded.

‘Is the pit still there?’

‘I think so, up near Loubip, Fiamnok’s village. It might have fallen in by now.’

‘I want to open it again and cut wood for a new store and Aid Post. Can you ask Fiamnok if he will sell us some trees and hire out some men to cut it?’

Imbum brought the coffee. ‘It would be good to work on new houses,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘*Masta* Johnson was always on patrol and never had time.’

‘I might even be able to get iron from Daru for the roofs,’ I said hopefully.

‘Ah,’ Imbum replied, ‘there isn’t much *sacsac* nearby anymore’.

‘In the meantime I need some good sound wood to make handles for the saws.’

‘I’ll get some today,’ Imbum said between mouthfuls of biscuit and coffee.

I spent the evening on the veranda of the house sharpening the first of the saws. As I sat under the warm orange glow of the hissing Tilley lamp I heard a polite cough in the darkness.

‘Yes, who is it?’ I said, and the police sergeant emerged into the light.

‘I’ve got the handles for the saws,’ the sergeant said. ‘Imbum told me about building the new houses.’

The sergeant had changed out of his blue police uniform and was barefoot and dressed in a T-shirt and *laplap* but still retained that air of authority I had noticed in him earlier.

‘Thank you, Kasari,’ I said. ‘Come up. Would you like a drink? I have whisky inside.’ The sergeant looked mildly surprised.

‘Whisky would be good,’ he replied and climbed onto the veranda. When I came back with the bottle of Jamiesons, glasses and a jug of cold water I found the sergeant busily sharpening the other saw. I offered him a glass and the bottle.

‘You know about these?’ I said pointing to the saws.

‘I was here in ‘64 with Hoad and Dutton,’ he replied.

The following evening I brought all of the copies of the station Patrol Reports, including the first one, up to the house. Even though I wanted to begin a repair and rebuilding program for the station I could not neglect contact with the villages; this, after all, was why I was here. Somehow I would have to do both. Johnson had given me a rundown of how he saw the priorities for the

coming year's patrolling but had left the preparation of a program to me.

'You're the one who will have to hoof it all,' he said, 'so you had better plan it'.

I had also brought along a collection of maps, some printed and others hand-drawn. The printed maps were at a 1:250,000 scale and exhibited a lot of white patches bearing the caption '*obscured by cloud*'. There was also a warning that the maps had been drawn from aerial photographs and the reliability of topographical information was '*poor to fair*'. At that scale anything but major blunders would be insignificant anyway, I thought. I pondered this for some time, since the area most due for a patrol, the Murray Valley (no doubt named after the great Papuan Administrator, Hubert Murray) seemed to consist of more white than green. It was also interesting to note that the last patrol into the area was, in fact, the first sustained patrol there and some sort of scuffle had led to the discharge of a rifle. Under Standing Orders firing a gun was only condoned in special circumstances; any injuries to villagers would see the responsible officer charged and in court. I wondered about the old *kiap*'s adage that it was usually the second patrol into an area that ran into strife because by then the people would have evaluated their first experience, discounted the apparent supernatural appearance of the patrol and begun to plot for any return, especially in relation to the wonderful trade goods carried in the big tin boxes.

The other interesting point I picked up in the Patrol Report was the seemingly horrendous walking times between settlements. Even what appeared relatively short distances on the maps had walking times of nine, ten and even fourteen hours. There must be an awful lot of ups and downs, I thought, as I pondered the irony

that had brought me here in the first place. My transfer from the Western Highlands had been partly predicated on my flat feet. That I had made it through the medical without anyone noticing when I first became a Cadet Patrol Officer always amazed me. I reasoned that the Western District, being mostly flat and swampy, would suit me well and I looked forward to a minimal amount of walking and a maximum amount of paddling in canoes. Olsobip, I learned later, had the reputation of the steepest and most rugged patrolling in the whole of Papua. I had also wanted to get out amongst bush people and away from the development-obsessed Highlands where I had spent most of my cadetship building and repairing roads and collecting local government tax.

All this was making me sleepy. Time for coffee, as Imbum would say. I pushed the chair back and padded into the kitchen, giving the pressure lantern hanging beneath its blackened halo on the ceiling a few perfunctory pumps on the way. I filled an aluminium kettle with water, prised the hotplate off the stove and dropped a few sticks of firewood onto the dying embers of Kure's dinner fire. When the wood failed to ignite I put the kettle down and squirted methylated spirits from the little bottle used to preheat the pressure lantern onto the wood. When that failed to ignite the wood I struck a match and dropped it into the hole. A blue flame shot into the air, momentarily lighting up the dim kitchen. In that instant I saw a face in the window.

I blinked and looked again, but the light had gone and I found myself staring at my own reflection. Frowning, I placed the kettle over the hotplate above the now ignited wood and took a torch down from the cupboard. I thought about the jungle carbine

propped against the doorway but left it there. The face at the window, even in the split second of light, had seemed oddly unthreatening. I turned the torch on and opened the kitchen door.

A young girl of about fourteen stood blinking on the grass outside the door. She smiled shyly. I swung the torch beam across the rest of the lawn but no one else seemed to be there. I shone the beam on to the girl again and she put one hand to her eyes.

‘What do you want?’ I asked. The girl squinted at me and pointed beyond the house.

‘Fiamnok?’ she said softly.

‘Bugger!’ I muttered. The girl looked uneasy.

‘You have to go back,’ I said and pointed in the direction of Loubip, Fiamnok’s village. The girl smiled weakly and shook her head. I tried the same words in Tok Pisin and then Motu but she still appeared not to understand.

‘Go!’ I said, and made shooing motions with my hands. Finally she understood, but instead of leaving she looked confused.

‘Go, go, go!’ I hissed, and shooed her ahead of me to the end of the house and onto the path leading down to the airstrip. She hurried ahead but stopped whenever I stopped. Finally, when we were a hundred metres or so down the path I stopped shooing her and walked back to the house. I could feel her watching me.

The kettle was boiling when I got back, and I poured hot water into a cup of coffee and powdered milk mix and replaced the hotplate on the stove. I sat down at the table and sipped the drink. I would summon Fiamnok in the morning and make it plain that I did not require the services of a woman, especially one so young. ‘The old bastard,’ I thought; ‘I wonder who else he supplied with women’. None of my business if he did, I suppose, as long as the District Commissioner didn’t hear about it. The Department of

District Administration had strict rules about relationships with local people and while these often seemed paternalistic the practical aspects were compelling. The wrong relationship could make life in a place like Olsobip extremely difficult — which is precisely what that old bastard Fiamnok is planning, I thought. I'll have to fix him in the morning. I shook my head and returned to the maps and Patrol Reports on the table.

When the pressure lamp started to run low on kerosene it dimmed, and I finally gave up reading and bundled the reports and maps together at the end of the table. I slobbered the empty coffee cup around in the sink and left it to drain. Something about the poor mapping made me feel uneasy. Perhaps I could get the pilot of the fortnightly supply plane to take me up for a look.

I carried the fading lantern into the bedroom where I had shifted after Johnson left. I turned the lamp out and undressed. The coffee made me want to urinate and once my eyes adjusted to the moonlight that was beginning to flood the valley, I padded out on to the veranda. I trained a silver stream over the rail and stared across the airstrip. Something caught my eye as I turned back into the house and I stared hard into the shadows before recognising the outline of the girl.

'Damn!' I stepped inside and wrapped a towel around my waist. When I returned to the veranda with the torch the girl stood uncertainly in the beam and motioned in the direction of Fiamnok's village on the other side of the valley and shook her head. I sighed. She was either afraid of walking the three or four kilometres to the village or she was afraid of what Fiamnok might do if she returned. I signalled to her.

'Come up here,' I said but she hesitated.

‘For Chrissake, you were going to sleep with me but now you’re getting coy!’

She tentatively climbed the steps; maybe it was not me but the house which she found forbidding. I held the screen door open for her. This is ridiculous, I thought. I glanced outside again before going into the house but if Fiamnok or one of his henchmen had been hiding in the bushes urging the girl on they were well hidden.

Once inside I lit a candle and led her into the spare bedroom. I left the candle on the bedside table and fumbled in the wardrobe for a blanket. When I turned around she had removed the new bark cloak from her head and placed it on the floor with her string bag. Beneath the cloak she wore a brand new grass skirt cut in the brief Faiwolmin style. Her skin glistened with some sort of oil and I caught the distinct smell of perfumed soap. A necklace of cowrie shells, still very valuable in these mountains, hung down between her small breasts.

‘Fiamnok sure knows his stuff,’ I said to her and put the blanket on the bed.

The sound of Kure banging pots in the kitchen woke me early next morning. I wrapped a towel around my waist and went into the kitchen.

‘Good morning,’ I said. ‘*Wara istap on top?*’

‘*Emi stap,*’ Kure replied with a grin.

‘What’s so funny about water being in the header tank?’ I asked. ‘I need a shower.’

‘*Meri bilong yu i wet long hap,*’ he grinned, pointing with his chin to the back door. I looked out of the window. The girl was

sitting in the morning sun eating a piece of taro. The blanket I had given her was wrapped about her shoulders.

‘She’s not my bloody *meri*,’ I snapped. ‘She’s Fiamnok’s *meri* and she’s going home today.’ I stalked off towards the bathroom but not before I saw Kure wink at the girl and begin humming to himself.

‘Tell Imbum I want to see Fiamnok,’ I told the clerk as I entered the office. He looked uneasy, dropped the weather report he had been coding and pursed his lips.

‘Fiamnok is at the school,’ he said carefully, ‘I’ll send Imbum to get him now.’

‘What time are you going to talk to Daru today?’ I asked, trying to control the menace in my voice.

‘When I’ve finished broadcasting the weather report, sir.’

‘I want to order some food and supplies for this afternoon’s plane. If I tell Daru do you think BP’s will be able to get it to the airstrip in time?’

‘Yes, sir,’ the clerk replied; ‘Burns Philp are very good. Mr. Johnson usually ordered his groceries in the morning’.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘I’ll have a list ready shortly.’

Imbum and Fiamnok crept so quietly into the office that I did not notice them until I looked up. I had been daydreaming, following previous patrols in my mind, trying to jog my memory for a list of things needed for a new patrol. I was about to add dog food when I noticed the red and yellow cummerbund about Imbum’s potbelly bobbing beyond the rim of the desk. As I glanced up Fiamnok

instantaneously thumped his feet together and slammed his right hand to his head in a murderous salute. I jumped involuntarily.

'I wish you would knock, Imbum,' I said, pointedly ignoring Fiamnok.

'Yes, *kiap*,' Imbum looked nervous and I couldn't decide whether it was Fiamnok's presence or my own which caused it. I suspected that Imbum knew about the girl; he probably helped Fiamnok select her. I stared past him towards the massive wall beyond the airstrip. In the clear morning light it seemed very close.

'The longer you stay here the closer it gets,' Johnson had said. 'When it's sitting right over the top of you it's time to go on patrol.'

I noticed that clouds were billowing along the treetops below the wall. I was developing a preoccupation with clouds, I thought, as I turned to Fiamnok. He smiled pleasantly.

'Ask the *Mamusi* if he can spare any men to carry for a patrol,' I said. Imbum stared back in surprise. I waited while he gathered his wits; the fat little interpreter had definitely been involved in procuring the girl.

'Well, ask him!' I said again and he mumbled to the village constable, who began to grin broadly as the idea took hold.

'He says he will supply all of the men you require over and above those allocated to work the pit saw,' Imbum replied. 'He also asks where is the patrol to go?'

'Tell him east, past Bolovip, over the Dap Range and across the Strickland.'

Fiamnok shook his head and executed a little dance that shook the *limbom* floor.

'He says for a journey like that he will come himself,' Imbum smiled.

'I hope he can swim,' I replied. 'I hear the Strickland is a treacherous river and it could be dangerous crossing it.'

‘Don’t worry, *kiap*,’ Imbum smiled. ‘He has special water *puripuri*; the river does not frighten him.’

I watched the little *Mamusi*, who acknowledged my threat with a mischievous grin. Imbum looked puzzled. The crude subtlety had gone over his head.

‘Thank the *Mamusi*. That is all.’ The two men turned for the door.

‘Oh, by the way,’ I said as an afterthought. ‘Thank the *Mamusi* for the *haus meri*, she will be useful for washing clothes and chopping wood.’

Imbum whispered to Fiamnok. ‘He says he is glad you have found a use for her; it would have looked bad for him if she had returned. He will send some men to build her a sleeping hut today.’

‘Fine,’ I replied.

At nine o’clock I wandered into the radio room. The clerk was tuning the big AWA receiver. He handed me a note. On it was written: *two cartons SP lager, six bottles 26 oz. Rhum Negrita*. I frowned at him.

‘Is this your shopping list?’

‘Yes, sir,’ the clerk replied.

‘I wondered why a senior man with many children should be posted here. Do you have a problem with alcohol?’

‘Only a small problem, sir.’

‘If I order this, your wife will probably have my balls.’

‘Yes, sir,’ the clerk replied.

‘Apparently my balls are worth the risk.’

‘I’m sorry, sir.’

‘Listen, I’ve got a few bottles of beer up at the house and some excellent Irish whiskey. Why don’t you drop up after work for a drink? Bring the sergeant. You can tell your wife

I want to talk about work and offered you a drink and you couldn't refuse.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Better than both of us getting on her wrong side. It will cost a lot less and I could use some company. You won't go loopy on me, will you? If we ration the supply all three of us can enjoy it.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Now, here is my list. After you've organised that I want to ask Daru if I can use the plane to fly me east to look at the country.'

'Yes, sir,' the clerk nodded.

By late morning a series of great white cumulus clouds coming down off the mountains had piled up in the gorge and were turning grey as they tumbled about in the confined space.

'This stuff is going to back up right over the station,' I said to the clerk. 'You'd better get on the radio to Civil Aviation in Moresby and tell them we've got seven-eights cloud, getting thicker, and we'll be closing the strip down in an hour. You'd better raise Kiunga too, just to be sure. They can tell the pilot; he should be there soon.'

I wandered outside to stare at the sky. I could smell heavy moisture in the air. The clerk stuck his head out of the office window.

'I cannot speak to Moresby, sir; there is too much noise.'

'Okay,' I replied. 'Better get on to Kiunga before the static gets worse.'

I sucked in the damp air and climbed the steps back up to the office. The clerk had Kiunga on the line. I held out my hand for the microphone.

‘Hi there. Who am I talking to? Over.’ I shouted to be heard over the static.

‘Bob Gilbert. I’m the new cadet,’ came the reply.

‘Where is the ADC, Bob? Over.’

‘He’s downriver on patrol.’

‘Okay,’ I replied. ‘Listen, we’re clouding up fast here. Can you get a message to the pilot on today’s milk run? We can’t raise Moresby — too much static, over.’ There was no reply for several moments. I looked doubtfully at the clerk.

‘The plane left here ten minutes ago, headed your way. I’ll try and get a message through to Moresby but we’ve got bad static too.’

When he sees this stuff he’ll just turn around and go home, I thought, and probably lodge a complaint with DCA about our weather reporting. I was standing in the parking bay at the airstrip with the clerk, the sergeant and Imbum. The sky was filled with scudding grey clouds ramming into each other and spiralling upwards to escape the bottleneck of the gorge. Once in a while the odd patch of blue showed up.

‘*Balus ikam!*’ Imbum said. I could hear nothing. Sergeant Kasari had one eye closed in concentration and his head tilted upwards.

‘The Faiwolmin hear and see things before anyone else,’ he said, looking at Imbum. The interpreter shrugged. He could hear the plane distinctly now. I noticed that the station labourers on the other side of the airstrip had stopped cutting the grass and were staring at the sky. Then I caught it, the unmistakable hum of a single-engine plane.

We heard it pass very high overhead. Then it swung back and droned into the distance. I shook my head and turned back to

the office. Then it was back, making a second pass. I stared into the sky again. A small blue patch showed and I saw the plane pass across it, the distinct red and white markings of a Papuan Airlines Cessna 185 shining in the beam of sunlight above it. I heard the engine roar as the pilot wrenched the plane back towards the hole and dropped into it in a sharp downward spiral.

‘He’s at the wrong end of the strip,’ I said to no-one in particular. ‘He’ll hit the mountain!’

‘It’s Mr Dan,’ Imbum said knowingly.

The plane levelled off at no more than three hundred metres with its tail pointing skywards and its nose pointing down the mountain. It followed the tree line down at a sharp angle until it looked like it would smash into the ground. At the last possible moment the pilot pulled back as hard as he could and we watched the little plane buck and roar as it sped past the parking bay and down the airstrip, miles too high. I was fascinated and couldn’t look away. Halfway down the strip the pilot got the plane on the ground. It bounced once and came down again. It went up again. There was less than a quarter of the strip left. Down it went and this time stayed there, slewing everywhere and kicking mud all over the airstrip. Then it ran out of room and took half a banana palm with it as it spun to a halt on the soft grass at the wrong end of the airstrip, roared through the mud, and taxied back to the parking bay.

It had begun to rain and the labourers danced along behind the plane swinging their sword-like grass knives and whooping in amazement. I watched the pilot climb out of the cockpit. A large black dog with fierce orange eyes hopped out of the co-pilot’s seat and bounded towards us. The labourers moved as one behind Sergeant Kasari. I patted the dog’s head until a yell from the

veranda of the house sent it bounding up the hill. Kure and the dog rolled over ecstatically on the ground.

‘The mutt insisted we land,’ the pilot said.

‘You’re nuts,’ I replied.

Dan Fox stood in the office drinking coffee and staring out at the little plane huddled in the rain on the parking bay. A line of saturated chickens was bunched together under each wing. We watched the clear patch in the clouds making its way down the side of the valley.

‘You might get to look at the Strickland after all,’ Dan said, putting down his cup. ‘Let’s give it a whirl!’

We walked out to the plane. The black dog followed.

‘She’d better come,’ the pilot said. ‘She might get anxious if you leave straight after she’s arrived and I might not be able to get you back here today anyway.’

When the clear patch was square with the end of the airstrip Dan gunned the Cessna’s engine and let the brakes go. By the time we reached the halfway point the little plane was spattered with mud.

‘We’re not going anywhere at this speed,’ he yelled.

Then we hit a fairly solid patch and gained speed. The drop into the river at the end of the airstrip looked very close. The plane dropped into its incoming wheel tracks, rocked violently and gained more speed. Dan hauled back on the steering wheel and the little plane grabbed desperately at the air. The end of the airstrip passed below and we shot into the void thirty metres above the swirling mud of the river and dropped downwards with the plane’s stall warning screaming. Dan gave it all it had and we levelled out

and began to climb. We careered south through the gorge a dozen metres above the treetops.

‘Ah, the joys of flying in Papua,’ he grinned.

We broke into bright sunlight at the end of the gorge and I sighed in relief as the ground dropped away in a sweeping green vista. The tight confines of the gorge with the cloud sitting above us closing off the sunlight and the cliffs rushing past, seemingly at wingtip, had made us both nervous. Dan pulled the plane higher and veered off towards the east.

After twenty minutes of climbing, the thin silver snake of the upper reaches of the Strickland River came into view. We passed over a cleared knoll poking out on a bend where a thatched hut stood. Several hundred metres on we passed over a cleared garden area and I made out figures amongst the taro staring up at us.

‘Do you want to go any further?’ Dan asked. ‘I’ll need to get away for Daru soon.’

‘I guess not,’ I said. ‘If you can follow the river north and then head for Bolivip and then Olsobip I’ll try and draw a rough map.’

‘I hope we can get up that bloody gorge again,’ Dan said. When I frowned he added, ‘Don’t worry; the cloud’s clearing. There should be a big blue patch at this end by now’.

CHAPTER THREE

Our patrol left Olsobip two days later. We set out early in the morning when the air was cool and clear. I tapped my kunda walking stick against my boot and inhaled until I felt the chill penetrate both lungs. Soon it would be hot and the air would thicken. I walked down from the house with Kure and the two carriers allocated to my patrol box. Kure had a small knapsack and a shotgun over his shoulder. Kasari had the patrol lined up on the airstrip in marching order, Imbum and himself at the head, and a corporal, two constables and the Aid Post Orderly at the rear. On my instructions Kasari had dispensed with superfluous gear such as camping tables and chairs.

I was impressed with Sergeant Kasari's organisation. He had negotiated the employment of ten carriers with Fiamnok, organised the tins of meat and fish, rice and trade goods with the clerk, weighed and distributed the loads and chivvied the Aid Post Orderly into action.

'This is good,' I said, returning the sergeant's salute. 'Where are the swimmers?'

'The men with your patrol box and mine are the best swimmers.'

‘Good,’ I said and turned to the clerk. ‘I’ve told the corporal staying behind that while we are gone he has to supervise the sawing of timber for the new Aid Post. If you could make sure it gets done, it would be good. Also, I received a letter from the Mining Warden in Daru; he’s coming up here to see people about looking for metals. Get word out to the villages for anyone who wants to hear him talk.’

‘Yes, sir,’ the clerk replied.

‘Oh, and can you keep an eye on my refrigerator? There are things in it that must be kept cold or they’ll go off. Kure has left kerosene in a tin in the kitchen.’

‘Of course. Leave it to me, sir.’

‘Right then,’ I said, turning to the sergeant. ‘Let’s get this patrol on the road.’

The track from Olsobip to Bolivip wound steadily upwards along a well-worn ridge. After several hours on its relentless incline I began to realise how terribly unfit I was compared to the rest of the patrol. Soon I was lagging behind the last carrier and my legs were becoming heavier with every step. This was not good; I was supposed to be up front setting the pace. As I rounded the next bend I saw Imbum waiting with a deeply concerned look on his face. At first I thought it was my flat feet but I had long ago developed muscles to compensate for my fallen arches. This seemed as though all the energy was draining from my body.

I eased myself into the damp growth beside a bank on the track and wondered how I would get up again. Imbum disappeared and Kasari took his place. He deftly cut a leaf from a flat palm-like plant, folded it into a ‘V’ and pushed it into a soft part of the bank; soon a trickle of clear water flowed from the projecting leaf and I leaned over and gratefully drank.

'I'm not sure what's wrong, Sergeant,' I said. 'I'm not the world's best walker but I shouldn't feel like this.' Kasari looked at me sadly and shook his head. I felt pathetic. Then Imbum returned. He was carrying several strands of elaborately knotted bush rope. He hitched the rope over his shoulders, turned around and knelt down. I looked at Imbum and then at Kasari. I was aghast; they intended to piggyback me. With all the effort I could muster I stood up, shook my head, and began plodding up the track. Imbum and Kasari looked at each other and then followed. Imbum, I noticed, judiciously retained his bush rope contraption. I felt desperate. There were at least another five hours of walking before Bolivip. I hadn't, of course, counted upon the crazy little *Mamusu* from Darabik.

I reached the crest above the *Ok Bilak* in the early afternoon. *Bilak* was the Faiwol name for the Fly River, *Ok* meaning 'river'. I knew from the previous patrol reports that this was the only break in the relentless climb to Bolovip. After dipping down into the valley of the *Ok Bilak* the track again rose steeply for a last few gut-busting hours to Bolivip. After the long climb up the heavily timbered slope I was mildly surprised to see gardens among the trees. I walked down the slope until I reached a sweet-potato patch growing among felled timber. Olsobip was too low and hot for *kaukau* and this was the first I had seen since leaving the Highlands. I discarded my pack and sank to the ground.

I rummaged around in the pack and found a battered tin with no label, and prised the top off with my pocketknife. I sniffed suspiciously at the contents and when I was satisfied I shovelled the anonymous mixture into my mouth. There were vegetables and some sort of meat. After resting a bit I rose gingerly and buried the

tin, covering the hole with brush and moss. Feeling slightly stiff but marginally stronger I gathered up my pack and set off in pursuit of Imbum and Kasari.

Closer to the valley floor the slope became gentler and the forest thinned to reveal stretches of tufted grass. To my delight I found myself on a wide, well-defined and newly cleared path. At the base of the slope the path crossed a grassy meadow and entered a fringe of tall trees. Beyond the trees a small slope led over a rise. By the time I reached the top of the slope the tiredness had returned and I was becoming sweaty and starting to tremble. I was feeling a mild panic when I noticed the figures standing in the saddle below.

Imbum was in fierce conversation with a short man wearing a small penis gourd and an elaborate cassowary-feather headdress. The sergeant was standing behind him chatting to three women carrying heavy *bilums* loaded with *kaukau*, taro and sugar cane. As I shuffled down the slope two younger women emerged from the forest. They all turned and watched me come down the slope. Kasari looked at me anxiously.

‘We were about to come back for you when we met these people. There is a new village just ahead; this man is the new *Mamusi*.’ The little man grinned at me and started forward. Imbum jumped in front of him.

‘His name is Lorop,’ he said in an exasperated tone. ‘And he has made a new village called Darabik and he *thinks* he is the new *Mamusi*.’ I stared at the little man and thought, ‘you little beauty’. Imbum jumped around some more and Lorop looked confused. Then he took the initiative, pulled a stick of sugar cane from one of the women’s *bilums*, strode up to me and, after handing the cane over, stamped his feet together and threw me a lopsided salute.

I was wondering who had taught him to salute just as Fiamnok came along the track followed by a bevy of laughing children. He caught my eye and grinned.

‘Perhaps we’d better have a look at this new village,’ I said, absently chewing on the stalk of sugar-cane.

As we walked along the wide path towards the village, Lorop began to explain the new village. At each pause Imbum blustered around in a small dance translating. Lorop explained that he knew the track from Olsobip to Bolivip was a gut-buster for even the toughest *kiap*. He had also seen the expressions of disgust on the faces of the patrols that passed his gardens when, after hours of steady and slippery climbing, they dropped into the *Ok Bilak* valley and confronted an even steeper climb to Bolivip. Why not build a village on the *Ok Bilak*? Wouldn’t the poor *kiap* prefer to camp there in a comfortable rest house and wake up refreshed? I nodded sagely and chewed on the sugar cane. I was feeling my strength come back and the trembling and sweating had stopped. Within twenty minutes I had begun to feel fine. Maybe I could carry on to Bolivip after all?

I was toying with this idea and my new found energy when we emerged into the clearing of the new village. I stopped in surprise. Before me lay a wide thoroughfare between about a dozen new houses. Each house was identical in the accepted Administration fashion, about three metres by six metres in size, up on stilts to keep the pigs out, a small veranda on the front, woven cane sides and thatched roofs with a door at the front and small windows at the sides. At the end of the thoroughfare, well back from the other buildings, stood the *haus kiap*. Off to one side

was a bigger police barracks and behind that in the trees a long building with low sides for the carriers. Individual latrines for each building lay off little tracks forty or fifty metres away. A neat circle of stones around a tall pole ready to take a flag was planted in front of the *haus kiap*. Even Imbum stopped chattering and stared in disbelief. The Darabik *Mamusi* looked at me nervously.

‘This is all very impressive,’ I said. ‘You’d better explain what’s going on, *Mamusi*.’ Imbum quickly translated, placing emphasis on the word *Mamusi*. Lorop’s face broke out into a wide smile and he ushered me towards the *haus kiap*, all the while yelling at his people to bring food for the patrol.

When I had seated myself on the veranda of the *haus kiap* the *Mamusi* stepped into the space below the steps and ushered Imbum to one side to interpret. He waited a few minutes for the rest of the village to gather behind him and then coughed once for silence. As he began his speech the police and carriers moved silently through the buildings lighting fires, starting to cook rice and setting up bed sails and improvised tables and chairs. Kure brought tea and squatted beside me to listen to Lorop’s oration. Although Lorop’s speech wove and dodged through a maze of subtleties it was relatively easy to read between the lines and piece together a rough narrative. He began by alluding to the early European exploration of the area.

Bolivip was a pivotal place in the exploration of Papua New Guinea, yet it remained an outpost in an otherwise unexplored area well into the 1970s. To Jack Karius and Ivan Champion it was the first step on a ladder that would take them from the headwaters of the Fly River, over the ranges and down to the headwaters of the Sepik to complete the first crossing of Papua New Guinea in 1928.

Karius and Champion had to bribe the Bolivip headman with rice and an adze before he would take them over the range. There was a food shortage at Bolivip and the guides needed the rice if they were to return safely. The adze, which closely resembled the stone tools of the Min people, was a different matter; it was simply irresistible. And therein lay the key to the Darabik *Mamusi*.

Champion had presented the village with an axe and bush knife and these were duly stored in the men's house. The adze, however, was the personal property of the headman and became a badge of office. It had passed through the hands of several headmen and the inevitable had happened. Two men with a claim to leadership clashed, and possession of the adze found a new meaning. The Darabik *Mamusi* could not convince the people of Bolivip that he should hold the sacred adze, and the other man took it together with leadership of the village.

The Darabik *Mamusi* stewed and stomped and could finally take it no more. On a cold and rainy day he packed his belongings onto the backs of his wives and headed into the mist, followed by a small band of supporters.

I watched Lorop. He was short and stubby, with a pig's tusk through his nose. He obviously eschewed the shabby European shorts adopted by other important village men and instead wore a heavy necklace of dog's teeth to indicate his status. He continued his oration, raising his voice as he reached the end. At first he said he just camped in his gardens along the headwaters of the *Ok Bilak*, but when he heard of the impending patrol he hatched a bold plan. He would build a new village. Wouldn't that get up the nose of the Bolivip *Mamusi*? The *kiap* would stop at his village first; Bolivip would become an anti-climax! His voice dropped as he described the long labour of clearing and constructing the village; he praised his

people for their faith, diligence and hard work. When he finished he stood silently for a moment and then looked directly at me.

I had warmed to the little man but I felt uneasy. I couldn't quite place the feeling and, in any case, would have to listen to the Bolivian *Mamusi's* version of events later. 'What the hell,' I thought and stepped down off the veranda. I addressed the gathering.

'You have done well,' I said. 'It is a fine village and I will issue Lorop with a village book in the morning. In the meantime, is there a safe place to wash in the river? We are all tired and dirty from our long walk today.' Everyone sighed with relief. Lorop looked grateful. He had pulled it off. Darabik would go onto the Administration's list of village names and he would be recorded as the new village constable.

'There is an excellent place to bathe,' he said. 'It is just along the path; the children will show you where to go. Thank you, *kiap*.'

I took a towel and soap and headed for the river. The sergeant left one policeman at the rest house and together with Imbum and the medic followed with their soap and towels. The bathing place was at a point where a small stream entered the *Ok Bilak*. The stream must have flowed underground or was spring fed because its water was unusually clear. Just above us was a large flat rock around which the vegetation had been cleared. This was the place where the villagers collected their drinking water. Below this lay a deep but narrow pool, ideal for bathing. The stream pushed itself a few metres into the *Ok Bilak*, which, although clear now, would become muddy if it rained upstream. The water was crisp and I sank into it gratefully. When I stood up to soap myself I noticed the crowd of children watching from the flat rock. The sergeant

made shooing noises and they began to reluctantly leave. Some of the girls were more than children and the sergeant glanced sideways at Imbum, who had a distinct gleam in his eye, and shook his head. Fiamnok, who had come down to watch rather than bathe, clicked his tongue.

Towards evening, when the sun had filtered into the treetops, I carried a camp chair to the front of the rest house. A refreshing coolness drifted from the forest. Blue smoke seeped through the damp thatch of the village houses. Women returning late from the gardens paddled across the newly cleared ground before dispersing. Ten or twelve children slowly arrived and squatted in a semi-circle around me. I drew my legs up. This brought an audible giggle. After a while some of the children began to drift away. Soon only two girls and a small boy remained. They squatted together a few feet from my chair. Kure brought a plate of steaming rice and tin fish. He returned with a mug of tea and, seeing the boy and two girls still there, hissed at them. They giggled and only pulled back when Buka ambled outside and lay down under my chair. As I ate they came closer. The dog sniffed at them suspiciously. The elder of the two girls tentatively stretched out and touched the leg of the chair. I watched bemused. She lifted her eyes and, after a moment's hesitation, moved the heel of her palm to my leg. The other girl made tut-tutting noises but when there was no response she dropped her head and peered from behind her friend's shoulder. I felt the girl's hand glide over my leg and involuntarily brought my knees together trapping her hand for an instant. She pulled away and fell backwards into the arms of her friend. All three rolled around on the ground in a giggling, hugging mass. I leaned forward and hissed at them. The dog jumped up and growled. They scrambled to their feet and bounced off, the girls

swinging their hips. They turned briefly before disappearing into the tangle of forest.

Later that night, as I lay reading by lamplight, a rustling sound on the rest house steps alerted me. I reached for my revolver and then thought better of it. The bullets were in my small pack on the other side of the room anyway. I normally carried the revolver empty in my pack because it seemed dangerous banging a loaded gun up and down the hills and I found the webbing belt and holster uncomfortable. The sergeant, however, insisted that it be close at hand and had hung it on my bed. I got up and swung the lamp towards the door. The girl from the afternoon stood in the doorway. She was wearing a new, miniscule apron, as favoured by unmarried women, and gleamed in the light from a fresh coating of tree oil. These mountain people had a natural sensuality and innocence that I found unnerving and I shooed her away. She smiled in an understanding way and drifted off towards the police barracks. I will have a piece of the Darabik *Mamusi* in the morning, I thought. On impulse, as I climbed back into my stretcher, I checked the chamber of the revolver. It was loaded. Kasari left nothing to chance.

I spent the morning taking census figures. I didn't mention the girl to the *Mamusi*. Before drifting off to sleep I realised that making a big deal out of something that was obviously a longstanding custom would simply confuse the issue. It would be simpler to refuse any advances. That way I could maintain my political neutrality, avoid official censure and feel self-righteous. I couldn't help wondering, however, about my predecessors. No-one mentioned that sort of thing in Patrol Reports — gardens well kept, latrines clean, girls nubile and willing, tracks in good order!

When I had finished the census I handed the new village book to the smiling Lorop. I told him that if he walked to Olsobip when the patrol returned I would issue him with the black serge blouse, *laplap* and red cummerbund of the village policeman.

As I conducted the census and made my official tour, meeting the elderly men and women and admiring the gardens, the police and carriers packed our gear into the patrol boxes and lined them along the track to Bolivip. When I was ready they hefted their loads and swung upwards towards the next crest. Lorop had decided to accompany us and took up a spot in the line with Fiamnok. I suspected he meant to travel at least to Bolivip to relish his victory in front of the old *Mamusi*. I discussed the delicate diplomacy that would be required at Bolivip with Sergeant Kasari. I also noticed that the girl of the previous evening was carrying Kasari's backpack. As we climbed, the first rumblings of a storm echoed in an otherwise clear sky.

The air grew heavier. The first big drops struck on the third crest, where I had stopped to check the patrol's progress. The leaves rattled and wet splotches appeared on my hat and shirt. I took a stick of sugar cane out of my pack and chewed it. By the time the last carrier passed, the rainfall had become steady. Kasari appeared, drenched and grinning.

'*Emi bikpela ren, ino inap long pinis,*' he said. I shrugged; we had little choice but to endure it.

'*Lek bilong yu orait?*' he asked.

'I'm fine; this is good medicine,' I said, waving him up the track with the sugar cane.

When we rounded the next bend we came across an anxious and bedraggled Imbum. Kasari gave him a thumbs-up sign and

waved him on. Imbum looked at me and frowned slightly before trotting off. We followed him up the slight slope and when we reached the carrier line I strode ahead, leaving Kasari to cover the tail end. When I reached the head of the line Imbum was waiting and we pushed ahead together. My leg muscles were tightening and becoming hard and the feeling was good.

Closer to Bolivip, gardens began to appear along the track and we found ourselves snaking between felled tree trunks and taro plants with huge dripping leaves. The track followed the side of a long hill and was a conduit for the water coming down the slope. Over time this process had caused a great deal of erosion, and closely packed nodules of limestone had been exposed. These nodules had been worn smooth and slippery by many feet and the only way to negotiate them was to step from one to another. I quickly discovered that my rubber-soled boots were dangerous; every time my foot slipped off one of the nodules it was painfully jammed in the tight space between them. I needed to curl my toes over each nodule to maintain stability, and the only way to do this was to be barefooted.

Eventually the track began to slope upwards. We were on the last incline before Bolivip. At the same time the rain eased to a drizzle and the filtering sun created a bright, but eerie, yellow light. The old gardens here had become overgrown with tall stands of *pit pit* and other sharp-bladed grasses so that we seemed to be following a narrow, winding tunnel. The heat of the sun on the wet vegetation made the atmosphere oppressive and the carriers and police began to pull off their sodden shirts and shorts, preferring to chance cutting themselves on the sharp grasses rather than broiling in their sodden clothes. I followed suit and immediately felt relieved.

We began to make good time; the track had widened and was now composed of soft orange clay that oozed up between our

toes. Kasari, in a pair of starkly white Y-fronts, had taken up the lead, followed by Imbum in a pair of baggy nondescript boxers. I followed in a pair of garish leopard-skin-print jockettes. We pulled ahead of the carriers and swung around a bend in the tall grass. Before us lay a wide, straight corridor, possibly 200 metres long, which curved off into a stand of tall trees. When we were about halfway along the corridor something white bobbing above the grass caught my eye. Six nuns, marching in single file, pulled around the corner and strode towards us. They were each wearing a white habit pulled up between the legs and fastened at the back. They all had long white rubber boots, flowing veils and identical white umbrellas.

Kasari and Imbum pulled up abruptly. I was further back but had to stop to avoid colliding with them. I stood there in my Tarzan-like jockettes and watched the nuns pass. They resolutely stared ahead, except the last one, who was shorter than the others. She looked me up and down, grinned cheekily and gave me a great big wink. I winked back and she broke into a loud chuckle. There was a distinct shudder of collective indignation from the other nuns and then they were gone.

Imbum looked mortified and Kasari seemed stunned; then they both noticed me standing there and burst into laughter.

‘How far is Bolivip?’ I asked, shaking my head in disbelief.

‘Not far,’ Imbum replied, still giggling.

I swung my pack off, untied my boots and pulled out my sodden clothes. They felt warm and prickly. An hour or so later we reached Bolivip village, chafed and steaming but at least decent.

We entered the village in pleasant sunshine and were met by children bearing sugar cane and sweet bananas. The village was set

on a gentle slope of neatly trimmed grass and was extremely tidy. Everyone looked well fed and happy; the only thing missing was the village constable.

‘*Mamusi istap we?*’ I asked. A low murmur and a shuffling of feet answered me. I sat on a log around which bright red and yellow cordyline had been tastefully planted. Finally a boy about twelve years old presented himself and addressed me in perfect English.

‘He went hunting this morning, sir.’ Lorop and Imbum simultaneously raised their eyebrows.

‘That’s a shame,’ I said. ‘I’ve got his wages for the last year with me.’

‘I will send someone to find him if you can wait, sir,’ the young lad responded.

‘I’m not sure we can wait that long,’ I replied, ‘They are expecting us at the mission.’

‘We will find him very quickly, sir,’ he said.

‘Yes, I’m sure you will,’ I answered.

I despatched the patrol to the mission with Corporal Womi. The sergeant and Imbum remained in the village with me. We made ourselves comfortable on the log and two old ladies appeared with a kettle of tea, mugs, a plate of sweet potato and, of all things, a chequered tablecloth.

Bolivip is 2222 metres above sea level and about 2222 metres higher than Olsobip. The extra altitude was reflected in the superior quality and taste of the sweet potato.

‘This is good,’ I said to Kasari.

‘So is this,’ he replied holding up his mug of black tea. I took a sip of my own tea; it was strong and well sugared.

‘Tell the ladies their *kau kau* and tea are excellent,’ I said to our young interpreter.

‘Yes, sir,’ he replied and then added, ‘The village constable will be along shortly, sir.’

The boy moved to the end of the log and sat staring into the distance. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. To all intents and purposes he looked like any other village youth. He was dressed in the traditional penis gourd and cane belt but his hair, hanging almost to his waist, was braided into an elaborate, beak-like shape with cane fibre and red ochre. I asked him how he had learned to speak English so well.

‘I go to the high school in Daru,’ he replied.

‘Does the mission pay for your board and fees?’ I asked. He nodded.

‘Why is your hair tied up like that?’ I naively enquired. He looked uncomfortable and said something to Imbum. Imbum moved closer to me and whispered.

‘It is *Afek*; he has come home to enter the men’s house.’

‘Ah!’ I said, not really understanding. I had much to learn about these people. I was about to ask another question when the boy stood up.

‘The village constable is here,’ he announced.

He was a small, sinewy man with deep, dark eyes, a springy grey beard and shining bald pate. Something about him suggested earthiness, as if he were an integral part of the forest from which he had emerged, a gnarled, mossy limb snapped off and dropped into the sunny clearing. This outward eccentricity of appearance was appealing and he didn’t disappoint me when he spoke.

‘You are here!’ he said. His voice had an edge, like a chill breeze but with a wild flower scent and a hidden resonance that

caught me by surprise. I stared at him for a moment too long and he spoke in a softer, gentler voice. His Tok Pisin was fluent and effortless.

‘I am here too!’

‘We are both here,’ I said stupidly. I reconsidered my preconceptions. I had expected a dull ‘bushie’ enmeshed in superstitious village politics. This man was above that.

We dispensed with the usual salute and shook hands.

‘The book is in my wife’s house,’ he said, referring to the village book kept by all village constables. ‘We can have tea if you wish,’ he added.

‘Umm! I’ve already had tea, and some *kau kau* too.’

He turned and looked at me, then smiled gently. ‘Perhaps I will have tea while you write in the book.’

‘Perhaps you can show me the adze, too,’ I ventured.

‘Ah! The adze,’ he sighed. ‘Yes, you can see it if you want. It’s in the men’s house; I’ll send for it.’

His name was Kelepsok. He sent an old man to the men’s house to collect the adze and I followed him to his wife’s house where she was waiting with a tin of water bubbling on a fire and a packet of Bushels tea. I noticed a *bilum* hanging on the ridgepole brimming with cuscus, tree kangaroo and other unidentifiable marsupials — obviously the fruits of his hunt. He gave his bow and arrows to a boy, who strode importantly through the gathering crowd towards the men’s house, passing the old gentleman returning with the adze. As he passed, the old man made a playful feint at him with the adze and the boy scurried up the steps and through the painted doorway of the men’s house. The old coot was still chuckling when

he handed me the adze and the village book, which he had extricated from the thatch of the house.

It looked like an ordinary worn-out village adze, except for the fact that it had been painted with red plant dye.

‘Lorop did that when he stole it,’ Kelepsok said.

‘He stole it?’

‘Well, someone stole it; I’m not sure if it was Lorop but I imagine it was him.’

‘Ah!’ I said and opened the village book.

The thin navy-blue volume contained the comments from visiting *kiaps* for the last few years. These comments ranged over the state of the village, notable events and, inevitably, the performance of the village constable. Words like ‘stubborn,’ ‘intractable,’ ‘stupid’ and ‘recalcitrant’ featured prominently. I glanced at the man so described. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. I wondered about the blithe assumption of my predecessors that village constables didn’t know what was being written about them.

‘The boy who goes to high school reads the book for me. Sometimes he has to borrow the priest’s book of words to find out what the big words mean,’ Kelepsok said unapologetically. I smiled.

‘So why are you so terrible, Kelepsok?’

He looked at me for a moment and I could see his mind ticking over. His wife brought him a cup of tea and he sipped it. ‘I suppose it’s because I like the old ways,’ he reflected. ‘The priest is a good man and the sisters are wonderful with their medicines and school.’ He laughed. ‘The village people think they are his wives.’ He paused and frowned. ‘Unfortunately, many of them also see the mission as a source of power and wealth — white man’s power and wealth. That’s why the adze is so important to Lorop;

it's a symbol of that power. He thinks that whoever holds it can use it to get access to the power and wealth, the mission's power and the government's power.' He looked at me quizzically.

'And what do you think?' I asked.

'I think it's just an adze.'

'If it's just an adze, why do you keep it in the men's house?'

'Because I'm the only one who thinks it is just an adze.'

'And you would prefer that the mission wasn't here?'

'It's too late now,' he smiled. 'But I hope we can keep the old ways too.'

'And keep the village where it belongs?'

'Perhaps if we keep the old ways here, the men's house, the spirit house and all the old customs, Lorop can have the new things at Darabik.'

'But not the adze?'

'Ah! If he has the adze everyone will follow him and then what will happen to this place? No, I will keep the adze.'

'I'd better get up to the mission and meet the priest,' I said.

'You have to write in the book.'

'Village clean and tidy, village constable doing good job,' I said aloud as I wrote in the book. I paid Kelepsok his annual salary and joined Kasari and Imbum and we strolled up the path to the mission.

The Catholic Mission at Bolivip was impressive. A Canadian-style log cabin stained a deep brown-red for the priest and a larger one for the nuns; a school and teacher's quarters in the same style nearby, and the foundations for a hospital further back still. A large fishpond (still settling) near the airstrip and, just beyond, a calf

housed in a small pen. Father Raoul Dashaies hoped to use a nearby waterfall for power. The airstrip, although steep and a bit rough, was serviced by a bridge made of the wings of a crashed Britten Norman Islander.

As I stood at the top of the airstrip I could just make out the spirit house in the village below. Father Dashaies nudged my arm.

‘Come,’ he said. ‘We have a guest room and the sisters are waiting to meet you. They are baking bread.’

How could I refuse? There would be a month of hard walking separating me from my next proper bed under a proper roof. I didn’t mention that the sisters and I had already met.

The small nun with the knowing eyes was Sister Bertha. Everyone called her ‘Bert’. She had been a nightclub dancer in Vancouver and retained her trim figure, as far as I could see, beneath her swirling white habit. She had that peculiar dancer’s gait and bounced as she walked. The other two sisters seemed to have had conventional convent upbringings. Bert’s English was excellent but she insisted upon calling me Philippe. When we were formally introduced she thumped her considerable little chest and said, ‘Me Philippe, you Bert!’ The oblique reference to my underwear was lost on the others. They only spoke French, which limited the conversation. Their bread was excellent, however.

To my surprise, when I mentioned my conversation with the Bolivip *Mamusí*, they agreed with his sentiments.

‘It is a dilemma,’ Bert said in her charming French accent. ‘We would like to preserve their culture, except for the bad bits, but by introducing ours we destroy it nevertheless.’

‘So why try to teach them to be Christians? Why not just bring in the schooling and medicine?’

‘Ah! We ‘ave to. It is our job, just like yours is to bring them law and order.’

‘We try to be as unobtrusive as possible but still teach them about Christ. It is in our nature; we cannot help ourselves,’ Father Dashaies added. ‘But Jesus and *Afek* can live together, I think.’

‘Tell me about *Afek*,’ I asked.

‘Ah, *Afek*. Now there’s one hell of a lady!’ Bert said. The other nuns grimaced. Even though they couldn’t really understand our conversation they picked up on the word and Bert’s obvious enthusiasm.

‘I don’t really understand *Afek*,’ the priest said. ‘I mean, I know some of the details, I know the knowledge is held in secret by the initiated men, yet *Afek* is a woman. She came from outside the area and established the first cult houses among the Min people and taught them the rituals associated with the cults. But that’s not all. Everything she did, or does, had something to do with the Min world. I think *Afek* means “old woman”. She had a younger brother but she killed him and put his bones in a cult house so that the taro would grow. She created everything; she turned animals into people. I think she died and her bones are up at Bultem in the cult house there. It is as if she were a god, a sort of creator. But, as I said, I have much more to learn about her and the Min rituals.’

I raised my eyebrows. The priest seemed mildly perplexed at his inability to explain the concept. Bert smiled; she had no problem with a female creator. The other two nuns looked politely bored. I stretched and almost yawned.

‘You have a long walk tomorrow. I’ll show you to your room,’ the priest said.

‘Breakfast at six!’ Bert added.

In the morning the other two nuns were missing; apparently they had left for Darabik for a women's clinic. I wondered how they taught health in French to the Min women and asked Bert.

'They speak Motu; they were at the mission in Daru before they came here.' How silly, I thought; I could have spoken to them after all. They were using English to be polite.

Father Dashaies and Sister Bert saw us off. When I glanced back from the head of the patrol they were standing together in front of the priest's log cabin, looking for the entire world like husband and wife. I shook the image from my head and turned towards the mountain.

CHAPTER FOUR

The track led out of the mission station into what appeared to be a sheer wall. All that day we trudged up a creek bed that rose interminably into the clouds. If not for the fact that it was described as a creek on my embarrassingly bare map it would have been the highest waterfall in the world. It also got colder as we climbed, and it felt like I had icicles in my hair when we reached the top and began the long descent into the valley.

In the late afternoon we came across a small clearing in a saddle on a ridge marked as 'Dap Camp' on my map. There was no village or other habitation this high up but a rest house had been built for overnight stops. It stood on a decided lean.

'Doesn't look too flash,' I said to Kasari as I leaned hard against one corner. Before Kasari could reply there was a creak and a groan and the rest house toppled over into a dishevelled heap of rotten wood and cane. The powdery dust made me cough. Wheezing like an asthmatic I pulled a box of matches out of my pocket and flicked several lighted ones into the mess. The whole thing went off like a bomb, with the powdery air momentarily flashing a bright orange. We all jumped backwards. The inferno raged for ten minutes and the Dap rest house was no more.

Some of the carriers pulled out tufts of grass and swept the remains away. Others appeared with cut poles and began erecting the tent sails. When the sails were up they cut saplings and planted them about thirty centimetres apart around the base of the shelters and wove sheaves of cut grass into the gaps. At the entrances the police built fires and we soon had several cosy shelters against the quickening cold.

We reached the bottom of the valley early the next day. It had rained all night and was still drizzling at midday. The valley floor was quite flat and became boggy as we moved across it; soon we were wading through water up to our knees. We pressed on until mid afternoon, stumbling on unseen tree roots and splashing into the deeper patches. By three o'clock the water was nearly waist deep. I stopped the patrol in shallow water on a slight rise. Imbum and I took a couple of carriers and eventually found a patch of high ground. A hunter and his wife emerged from the forest as we were setting up camp and told us the next village, Selbang, was only a few hours ahead. They said our patch of ground was the only high point for hours and was called Lapinal.

In the morning the hunter guided us to the Sei River. We emerged on the grassy bank at about ten in the morning with the sun shining brightly. Everyone downed their loads and plunged into the clear water to wash off the mud from the last two days. An hour or so later saw us ascending a steep slope to the new village site of Selbang. Everything was brand new and the *Mamusu* was hopping with pride. The site was excellent, with a breathtaking view down the Murray Valley. If the other villages in the valley are like this one, I thought, this patrol is going to be a breeze.

I lingered in Selbang for the whole of the next day. I had the census over and done with by ten in the morning and adjourned to the men's house to talk to some of the elders. The *Mamusi* could speak a rough Tok Pisin and translated the conversation. I enjoyed the talk, which culminated in a deputation of young men requesting the establishment of a rubber plantation. They had heard of experiments along the Fly River above Kiunga. I let them down gently and suggested a few alternatives. In the afternoon we were presented with a pig and a pile of premium taro. The villagers were especially proud of the quality of their garden food. I paid the *Mamusi* his annual salary and dispatched him to Bolivip as the escort for the few women we had recruited there as carriers who now wished to return home. I had ample volunteers from the young men at Selbang to replace the women and welcomed the relief from worrying about them. I knew the *Mamusi* would make good time because he wanted to spend his salary at the mission store. I would check on him by radio in a day or two.

About three in the afternoon I judged my administrative duties fulfilled and retired to a sunny spot to read and peruse the maps of the area. Each time I consulted the maps I ended up gazing at the spot where Kwermin village was marked and wondering about the reception we would receive there. The village was deep in the valley and I was not looking forward to an altercation like the one that greeted the last patrol when they tried to arrest a man for murder. The village was a good four or five days walk from help and on the edge of country that had probably never been explored. I pondered on that country too. There were reputed to be people called Kanai living there, but no one had ever made contact with them. I wondered if time would permit a foray and toyed with the idea of making 'first contact' on a patrol so late into

the century. Little did I know what lay ahead! The first disaster struck just before noon on the next day.

I guess I wasn't concentrating. I had been standing with one foot on a rock in the middle of a swiftly flowing creek and the other on another rock about one and a half metres away. Corporal Womi was anchored to one arm and Imbum to the other. Two desperate carriers were trying to manoeuvre the A510 radio box across us and against the runaway current. A log arrived from nowhere, hit the radio and took the five of us with it.

The carriers and Womi did the only sane thing and went with the tide. Being stubborn or stupid, I tried to fight it. Imbum, bless his heart, tried to rescue me. As the carriers and Womi, clutching the spinning radio box, went careening past, I involuntarily nose-dived. The numerous spectators later told us how a pair of green jungle boots disappeared from sight, gallantly pursued by a struggling Imbum. The consensus was that they had seen the last of their *kiap*.

We eventually lodged between two house-sized boulders with the entire contents of the creek pounding down on us. Fortunately Imbum was underneath and I was able to scramble on top of him and wedge myself between the two boulders with my head and shoulders out of the water. I then bent over to pull him up. However, when I took my weight off him the tide picked him up again and he was whisked away between the rocks.

I couldn't see at all for a few minutes because my eyes were full of grit. That didn't stop me yelling for help. When I eventually looked up I saw shocked faces about seven metres away. There must have been enough sense still in me to demand a rope because within a few minutes the toggle end of the patrol flagpole rope bounced off my head.

I had hauled myself halfway up the side of one of the slippery boulders before I realised that I had lost my shorts, underpants and one boot. A quick check revealed that I hadn't lost anything else of importance. Gratefully, I hauled myself up the rest of the way, sat down and coughed up a litre of water. My backside felt raw and the blood trickling on to the rock confirmed the ferocity of the creek that had so ungraciously snatched away my pants. I felt sick.

A shout from further down the creek heralded the sighting of Womi and I managed to hobble, bare-arsed and sore, after my rescuers to a large, relatively calm pool where the waterlogged constable was battling towards the bank with one of the carriers in tow. A red stain followed them ominously through the water and revealed a deep gash in the carrier's leg. Throwing modesty to the wind I shed the tattered remains of my shirt and bound his wound. Then we all sat down and coughed up more grit and water.

The radio box came to light bobbing undamaged in the middle of the next pool downstream. Unfortunately the lid was open and there was no radio in it. A few hundred metres more revealed Imbum and the other carrier stretched stunned and soggy on a gravel bar. Imbum had also lost his pants. He smiled weakly as we approached. I sat down gingerly and removed my solitary jungle boot.

'I think it would be a good idea if we camped here,' he said.

The next morning I sent a party downstream to look for the radio. An hour or so later they came back with a few battered bits and several metres of tangled aerial. I didn't like the idea of travelling without a radio and arranged for one of the young Selbang

men to head back towards Bolivip with a note asking Father Dashaies to contact Kiunga. I hoped they might be able to airdrop a radio to us when we got towards the flatter end of the valley. We were getting low on rice and an A510 broken down into pieces could be packed in a couple of rice bags which had been 'double bagged' and would survive being thrown from an aircraft.

As we worked our way down the valley getting closer to Kwermin everyone became nervous. The police requested ammunition above that which I was supplying for hunting. Even Imbum was touchy about the lack of ammunition. I decided I had better do something to ease the tension so in the next village I bought a pig.

It had become apparent that each village we visited now contained the odd Kwermin man, obviously sent to observe our progress. At Baktamin, a village that had hosted the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth the previous year, the friendly and knowledgeable *Mamusi*, Kaimeng, discreetly pointed out a Kwermin fight leader. We had just been inspecting Barth's old bush house, where tins and packets still stood untouched on his shelves. I called Kasari over and pointed the man out.

'I think it's time for a firepower demonstration,' I said. Kasari's eyes lit up and he went off to collect the pig we had bought. I explained my plan to Kaimeng and he grinned broadly too.

I took a .303 cartridge from my patrol box and cut off the tip of the bullet with a knife so that it was flat-nosed. I pushed this into the breech of Kasari's Lee Enfield. I told myself I wanted the Kwermin spies to realise it wasn't just the European Patrol Officer

with the power of the rifle. In reality I let Kasari do it because I was too squeamish.

The unfortunate pig was brought to the edge of the village and tied down behind a solid tree. Imbum shuffled and cajoled the Baktamin people around the pig, making sure the Kwermin man was in the group. Kasari marched up to the pig and indicated that everyone should get out of the line of fire. He then poked the rifle barrel into the pig's mouth, leaned in the general direction of the Kwermin man and said, 'Watch its arse!' I quickly looked the other way. Then he pulled the trigger.

The poor pig died instantly. But that wasn't the important part. What was important was that the Kwermin man, who had been intently watching the pig, was now covered in the remains of its backside.

Kasari came back grinning.

'Might make them think twice about attacking the patrol,' I said.

His grin widened. The demonstration had its desired effect. The patrol wasn't attacked. Instead they decided to assassinate Kasari.

From Baktamin we walked to Kasarnmin. The track from Kasarnmin led down a very steep slope to the top of a gorge. Across the gorge was strung an old single-stranded cane bridge. On the other side of the bridge a ledge led about fifteen metres to the beginning of a set of bamboo ladders snaking up a vertical rock wall. Everything was covered with fungus and slime.

I teetered across the bridge with Buka, scratching a hole in my shoulder. On the other side carriers were hauling patrol boxes

up the ladders with ropes. I looped a rope around Buka and sent a carrier aloft to secure it. Then, with her over my shoulder, I started to climb. She took up where she had left off on my back. With the extra weight, the weaker bamboo slats began to snap. I was bleeding from a bevy of nasty little bamboo cuts on my legs when I reached the top. Buka snorted and happily worked her way over the ledge to the top. I then went back down the ladder to check the progress of the carriers.

We had almost the whole patrol up the ladders when a yell came from the bridge. A carrier with a bag of trade salt strapped to his back had slipped and was now clinging to the single-vine floor of the bridge. The salt bag had slipped until it hung around his waist. He looked very frightened.

Gallant Imbum crept gamely out on to the bridge and stared down at the gasping carrier.

‘He is going to fall!’ he announced before crawling back to the ledge.

‘What about the salt?’ Womi asked.

‘Forget the salt,’ I said. ‘That I can replace. Lost carriers are harder to explain!’ I gave Imbum my knife.

‘See if you can cut the salt loose, Imbum.’ Imbum looked at the knife and grinned weakly. He didn’t, however, take it.

In a moment of rashness I took off my new jungle boots and began to edge towards the carrier. The corporal decided he could explain a lost carrier but not a lost *kiap* and began to follow. The bridge groaned. The carrier gurgled.

I spread-eagled myself across the single vine and leaned down as far as I could manage. With my feet wrapped around an assortment of vines I began to hack at what I thought was the salt bag. I couldn’t see what I was doing but a splash indicated that I had cut

something adrift. When I pulled myself up, the carrier gave a sigh of relief. I reassuringly patted him on the head. He had shed the salt along with his *laplap*. I must have cut through his belt as well.

Bracing both feet on the vine I leaned out again and grasped his arms. As I heaved he began to slip. My right hand came away and I frantically grabbed a handful of woolly hair. With a great heave I hauled him by the hair on to the bridge, which had now begun to swing wildly from side to side. We waited for the bridge to stop swinging and crept arm in arm to the ledge.

Once over the cliff, the going was relatively easy. Within an hour we were on a nice, well-made track only an hour or two from the dreaded Kwermin. I grouped the patrol, putting armed police at strategic points along the line, Kasari up front. This, of course, suited the Kwermin assassin travelling a few hundred metres ahead. He struck when we were about fifteen minutes out of Kwermin.

He wasn't very imaginative. He merely stepped out of the bush onto the track and aimed his bow and arrow at the sergeant. Kasari stopped walking. They were standing looking at each other when I caught up. I didn't know what was going on. Suddenly the sergeant threw up his arms and screamed. I jumped two metres sideways into the bush. Kasari was running, making a hideous noise, towards the assassin, who was transfixed in horror. Then he dropped his bow and arrows and fled. Kasari gave a satisfied chuckle.

When we reached the village a semicircle of armed warriors met us. Not a single woman or child was in sight. In their centre stood the village leader. He was wearing the black shirt and *laplap* of a village constable. He was clutching the village book left by the last patrol. He looked tense.

Feeling rather heroic after the bridge incident I strode boldly into the clearing. The village constable snapped to attention and threw me what he thought was a salute. At the same time his thirty-centimetre phallic crypt popped out of his *laplap* and also stood to attention. Everyone looked at it.

The *Mamusi* blushed and grinned weakly. Corporal Womi actually fell over laughing. Trying to keep a straight face I returned the salute and took the village book. The tension crumbled and was replaced by polite chuckles. The *Mamusi*'s 'dick stick' quivered between us. Then everyone was laughing, weapons were dropped and women and children emerged from the village houses. In half an hour we were old friends.

We stayed in Kwermin for a couple of days to cement our friendship. It was the second-to-last village in the valley. I did a census update that afternoon. There seemed to have been an unusual number of deaths in the village over the last year. When I came to the name of the man arrested on the previous patrol everyone suddenly seemed preoccupied and shuffled about looking everywhere but at me. I explained that the man was still in custody, was well and would probably come home with the next patrol in a year or so. The *Mamusi* looked doubtful.

At 6:24 the next morning the great central range of mainland New Guinea yawned and shook itself like a scruffy old dog. It sniffed the cool morning air, scratched an errant flea and, thinking better of it, curled back up to snooze.

High up in the Star Mountains I rolled off my bedsleeve and crawled across a tilting floor to the door of the rest house. Outside I saw giant trees whipping back and forth. There was shouting and screaming and a house pitched sideways off its stilts.

From the vantage point of the ridge on which Kwermin was located it was possible to see the undulations of the tremor travelling through the jungle in a south-easterly direction. Should hit Kiunga in about fifteen minutes, I thought, relishing the image of the ADC falling out of bed.

The tremor lasted just over a minute. Part-way through it I became aware of Imbum's voice in the distance. He was staggering around in a circle in the village centre, shouting '*guria, guria*'. He slowed down in unison with the subsiding tremor and sat down. A shower of leaves and other debris drifted down on him from the surrounding trees. It all looked picturesque and vaguely surreal in the early morning light.

I stood up and tested the ground. It seemed firm enough so I walked down and lifted Imbum up by one arm. He brushed himself off and we walked over to the fallen house to help the bewildered occupants out of the debris. Kasari came up behind us and threw a bucket of water over the smouldering remains of the household hearth.

'I'll go and see what's for breakfast,' I said.

'Good idea!' Kasari replied and took Imbum by the arm.

I learned later that the tremor had been centred off the coast of Madang and was felt as far away as Tari.

I had noticed a few of the kids about Kwermin snuffling with snotty noses and the medic was listening to people's breathing with his stethoscope and handing out aspirin tablets. I watched for a while and went over to talk to him. Earlier in the year influenza had swept through the Highlands to the north-east, killing over two thousand people. Some of it had seeped into the Papuan districts but had been effectively controlled. Samoki, the medic, confirmed my suspicions.

'This explains the high rate of deaths,' I said.

'Yes, I think they died of pneumonia,' Samoki replied. 'These ones seem to be recovering, though.' I called the *Mamusi* over.

'Someone went over the other side of the Strickland and came back with the sickness a few months ago. Everyone got sick and a lot of people died, mostly babies and old people. The sickness has gone away now, though.'

I looked at him and knew it wasn't that simple. The Kwermins would have dealt with the epidemic as if it were sorcery; some of those people probably hadn't died of flu. Then another thought occurred to me.

'Where has it gone now?'

'Down there,' he said, indicating the country to the south-east. I scratched my head and wondered.

'Who lives down there?'

'The Kanai.'

The next day we enlarged a clearing on the edge of the village so that an aircraft coming up the valley would have a clear line of sight and a drop zone. I hoped my message had got through and

a replacement radio was on the way. We could only sit and wait for a day or two. I didn't know what hope we had of finding any of the Kanai hamlets or what we could do for them if we found they had the flu. We could even add to their woes.

The plane did not turn up the next day or the day after. A helicopter came instead. In the early morning of the second day everyone stopped and listened. I had grown accustomed to the acute hearing of these people and waited for the telltale drone of an aircraft. Instead I heard a thudding beat. The *Mamusi* came up to me.

'Chop chop,' he said authoritatively.

'You mean chopper?' He beamed.

The Jet Ranger looped in over the treetops and came in along our prepared flight path. I hadn't anticipated a helicopter so the ground was still covered with cut timber. The pilot held the machine a few feet above the ground and a European in long khaki pants and a checked shirt hopped to the ground. He leaned back into the helicopter and pulled out an A510 radio. He crouched and made his way towards us.

'I believe you ordered this,' he said.

'Thanks very much,' I took the box from him. He had a broad American accent and introduced himself as Ted.

'I was in the office at Kiunga when the priest radioed your message through,' he yelled. 'We are going to do some more stream sampling up this way and I offered to bring the radio along.'

The pilot was waving through the Perspex of the helicopter's cockpit and Ted grinned.

'We gotta go,' he said, and then paused. 'Hang on, I forgot; we've got something else for you from the ADC.'

He staggered through the tree roots back to the helicopter and leaned in again and withdrew a cardboard box. He put it on

the ground, pointed at it, gave me a thumbs-up sign and hopped back in the helicopter. A moment later and the chopper was gone.

My ears were ringing. I felt a tug on my shirt sleeve. The *Mamusi* grinned at me.

‘Chop chop,’ he said

The cardboard box looked familiar and when Kasari retrieved it I heard the distinct clink of bottles.

‘SP, I think,’ he grinned.

When we divided the beer, which still had the chill from the refrigerator, we had two bottles each. The Kwermin sat around on their haunches as we swigged. They wanted the bottles. I finished my first bottle and gave it to the *Mamusi*. He sniffed the top suspiciously and recoiled. I drank the second one at a more leisurely pace, savouring the taste rather than the coolness.

We set up the new radio and I contacted Kiunga. The ADC explained that the helicopter belonged to the American mining company Kennecott. They were prospecting in the Star Mountains near the headwaters of the *Ok Tedi*. They were planning to collect mineral samples in the creeks and rivers between Olsobip and the Strickland River and I was likely to see more of them.

I told him about the influenza and the possibility of it having made its way down towards the Blucher Range after crossing the Strickland into country we had thought was uninhabited but now sounded like the domain of the elusive Kanai.

‘You’d better get down there,’ he said. ‘We’ve been hearing about these people for years and this might be a chance to catch up with them. Call me when you get there and if you’ve made contact I’ll send Dan Fox to drop more food and penicillin.’

We set out the next morning for Kimkermin, the most southeasterly village in the valley. The positively friendly Kwermins saw us off. They had dressed up for the occasion and many had SP bottle tops in their cassowary headdresses. One old bloke had cut the Bird of Paradise symbol off the beer carton and was using that as a head ornament.

The people at Kimkermin confirmed the spread of the influenza. Many of them were coughing and spluttering. Out of two hamlets of about two hundred and fifty people at least twenty had developed pneumonia and were quite sick. We stayed for several days after giving the worst cases penicillin and the others antibiotic tablets. The influenza struck these isolated communities savagely but, conversely, penicillin and the other drugs were efficacious and produced a result in a matter of a day or two. It was strange that we had nothing to treat the influenza but could knock it on the head when it turned into pneumonia, and it was the pneumonia that was killing people, not flu. We had, however, used up most of our penicillin and I had to radio Kiunga to be prepared to send us more once we got further south. When it looked like the outbreak was under control at Kimkermin we loaded up the patrol and set off. We had a couple of guides from Kimkermin and the country quickly flattened out, making the walking relatively easy. We followed hunting paths as we came across them but otherwise cut our own trails.

Along one of these trails Kasari and I saw our seventh cassowary for the morning. We had also seen cuscus, tree kangaroos and *Gouria* pigeons in abundance. Unfortunately, Imbum, with the shotgun, was hunting in the wake of the patrol. Every so often we heard

a distant 'boom' and we knew he had missed another meal for the carriers' pot. We had been meandering along in a southerly direction for two hours, enjoying the morning sun and carrying on an amiable conversation. We were some distance ahead of the main patrol line when the dog stopped and growled.

A cassowary was pounding through the scrub making its deep boom-boom cassowary noises. We stepped noiselessly behind a convenient ants' nest. I decided I would try and shoot it with my revolver. Kasari slipped a round into his Lee Enfield as backup. I knew I would miss and he would bring it down with one well-placed shot but I'd give it a go anyway.

As quietly as possible I slipped my .38 out of its holster and held it at the ready. The thump-thump of its big feet came closer and when I judged it was within revolver range I stepped out from behind the ants' nest, assumed a classic shooting stance and ordered the big bird to stop. Except it wasn't there!

Instead, I confronted a short, bark-clad individual frozen in mid-stride with a notched arrow in his black palm bow. We stood mesmerized for a full second before he unfroze and shot his arrow at me. Stunned, I watched it curl through the air towards my midriff, miss and bury itself in the ants' nest. Kasari was madly trying to get around me with his rifle.

The little man said something that sounded like 'ta', spun on his heel and disappeared into the forest.

'That was probably a Kanai.'

'I think so,' Kasari said with his mouth open. 'Hadn't we better follow him?'

With that we took off in the general direction of the little man's exit.

As we were blundering through the bush it occurred to me that this line of action was stupid. We could be running into an ambush. I stopped dead, waited for my head to stop bouncing and conveyed my concern to the sergeant. He agreed.

‘But if we don’t catch this one we may never find the rest of them.’

The sergeant agreed again. We renewed the chase.

About a kilometre further on we ran out of the jungle and burst into a clearing with a small long house at the other end. With like minds, we leapt off the track and behind the nearest log. Buka found herself alone in front of a Kanai long house. She stopped, sniffed and ambled up to a smouldering fire. After another sniff she extracted a steaming piece of something from the fire and began to munch on it.

Slowly and with care, the sergeant and I and approached the house. Guns at the ready we burst through the entrance.

Nothing. The Kanai had disappeared. Everything indicated they had left in a hurry. Drums, weapons and food were scattered everywhere. Another small fire was smouldering inside the house. Buka was chewing on a piece of nondescript meat that could have been the thigh of anything, including a human.

We had been sitting there for over an hour waiting for the patrol to catch up when the dog’s ears sprang to attention.

‘That’ll be the others!’ I said. When I was halfway through the door I saw a man and woman toiling up the hill to the long house. It was too late to duck inside so I stepped all the way out and whispered to Kasari to do likewise.

The man and woman continued up the slope, carting a big load of sweet potato and apparently unaware of our presence. Then, from somewhere far off, came the boom of a shotgun.

Imbum had taken a pot shot at our cassowary and missed again. The two looked up. The man turned to run. I began making frantic ‘don’t run — we are friendly’ signs. The woman gasped and fell over and the man stopped to help her. Both Kasari and I were grinning frantically and making friendly noises. Buka growled and they turned to look at her. I swore. Then they were scrambling like mad down the slope. Kasari and I stood helpless. Then with a stroke of genius I pulled out my revolver and fired into the air. They both fell down.

We jumped from the steps of the house and charged down the hill. When we got to them they were lying together, hands over their heads, quivering. There was a baby boy in the woman’s *bilum* happily munching on a piece of cooked sweet potato.

The sergeant lifted up the child and I gently pulled the man to his feet. The woman hissed at Kasari and he quickly handed the baby back. Slowly and carefully we escorted them to their long house and sat them down to await the patrol and an interpreter.

‘These,’ the sergeant said, ‘are definitely Kanai!’

I tried to photograph them but they wouldn’t sit still. I pointed the camera at them and clicked off a couple of shots anyway. They looked frightened, legs slightly crossed, arms hanging between their knees and heads drooped. I felt sorry for them, wrenched so unexpectedly into the twentieth century.

Imbum and the rest of the patrol rattled and clanged into the clearing and we soon had a three-way interpretation system. Then the explaining and questioning began.

Apparently the rest of the Kanai were further south, living in a small outcrop of hills in the middle of the swamps. I had seen

the hills during our aerial survey and had mapped them as a possible village site.

These people were nomads. Our hosts explained how they were on a sago collecting expedition. They had no permanent village but moved about from garden house to garden house as crops became exhausted. They had a couple of long houses but these were only used intermittently for gatherings and when there was danger. They were in the area and were using the long house for a few days while they dug the sweet potato out of a garden planted a few months ago. They intended to head back into the swamps to make more sago and then head south. This explained why they had never been contacted before. With their constant wandering they had unwittingly avoided patrols that had contacted all the groups around them. Our patrol had been extremely lucky to find these three. They said they would show us where the others lived. We never found the first man we had seen but the following afternoon we found our second group of Kanai.

The patrol set out early and walked all day into what appeared to be deepening swamp until the country rose abruptly and we came out in a cluster of hills overlooking the whole vastness of the Western District. Anyone not knowing the hills were there could have paddled straight past them. The jungle screened them perfectly. For the first time in days we could see more than a few metres. Then we saw a long house.

We carefully crept to a ridge opposite the house. Our guides then called across the valley. For a few minutes there was silence, then the high echo of a voice crossed the valley. We spent half an hour yelling back and forth. I stepped out into the open between

the Kanais while he explained that he had found the twentieth century if they were interested in meeting it. They were!

I led the patrol down into the valley and up the other side, policemen with rifles at the ready and my own revolver loose in its holster. We emerged before a group of old men sitting near a long house. Soon more people emerged from the bush, sweet potato was passed around and everyone relaxed. We smoked a communal pipe. I handed out trade tobacco and gave the patriarch of the group a ready-made cigarette. He was unimpressed. He did get excited when I struck a match, though.

In the ensuing days the same scene was repeated again and again with each group leading us to yet another long house. I soon had over 200 names listed in the first crude census. The carriers made friends easily and a brisk trade began. Incredibly filthy and tattered shorts were being swapped for whole pigs. A box of matches could buy anything. It was impossible to keep the whole thing realistic. The Kanai were as eager to trade as the carriers and were just as pleased with their purchases. I gave up.

On our fifth day in the Kanai hills we walked along a small valley and climbed to the last Kanai long house. The people from this house, hearing of the patrol, had visited it at the other hamlets. They were on the tail end of the hills and whereas the other groups tended to wander northwards these people trekked south into the land of the Awin people in the Kiunga area. Strangely, these people seemed to have missed the influenza that had affected the Kwermin.

They were slightly more sophisticated than the others. They had more trade shell and each family had a steel axe that had been

traded from the south. This was not unusual. Trade goods frequently reached a group before they were discovered by the Administration. Many a patrol has walked into previously undiscovered villages to be met by primitives wearing shorts and hats. This group, however, had acquired something from outside their area that was most unwelcome.

I was in the middle of my incredible lighting stick demonstration when I noticed a large house in the valley below the long house and asked about it.

‘What’s down there?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Is it a spirit house?’

‘No.’

‘Is it sacred?’

‘No.’

‘Can I have a look?’

‘You wouldn’t be interested.’

‘I think I’ll look anyway.’

This exchange took about fifteen minutes with our three-man interpretation system.

Imbum and I wandered down to the house and walked around it to find an entrance. A narrow slit on the opposite side provided an entrance and I squeezed inside. I must have been exhaling when I climbed through the slit because when I took my first breath inside the house it knocked my head backwards.

Everything in my stomach, breakfast, lunch and afternoon tea made a rush for freedom and crashed in a great lump in my throat. I lurched backwards, ripping my shirt, in a crazy rush to get into the open. I fell over Imbum and sat gasping on the grass outside. The stench of rotting human flesh is terrible!

There was no way in the world I was going to put my head back in there. Imbum, however, having a cast-iron stomach, managed, with the aid of a bandana and tightly held nose, to count seven bodies in various stages of decomposition. Then the concentrated, confined smell penetrated his defences and he crashed out backwards. The Kanai had followed us and now stood around with 'the jig is up' expressions on their faces. Late that afternoon they led us to another house in the bush.

I sent Corporal Womi into this house. He emerged a few seconds later, apparently unaffected, and Imbum and I entered. Scattered about the house were more bodies, except this time they were moving weakly and moaning.

This explained why the Kanai seemed influenza free. They had been isolating people who became ill and, in doing so, seemed to have reduced the spread. The poor individuals who had become infected, however, had been left to fend for themselves, with tragic consequences in the first house we discovered and almost a tragedy in the second.

We were low on penicillin but had plenty of aspirin. The medic used the penicillin on the worst cases and dosed the others with aspirin and antibiotic pills. When a few of the sick began to respond the Kanai took us to two other bush houses. We ended up with over thirty patients. It became rapidly apparent that we couldn't treat so many people without more penicillin.

I managed to contact Kiunga on the radio. The ADC seemed slightly peeved. It seemed that there was an influenza epidemic raging on the station. His voice had a distinct snuffle to it. He promised an airdrop the next day. I asked him to include my mail.

The following morning Dan Fox circled our marked site in his Cessna and hurled a package out. Foxy was remarkably accurate. He flew his heap of junk with one hand at about fifteen metres and wobbled over our pad in a forced stall, almost hit a tree and was gone. The sergeant retrieved the package from our bush toilet.

On his second pass he was less daring, obviously perturbed about the trees. He lobbed my mail, in a biscuit tin, from about seventy-five metres. I watched as the top of the tin gracefully separated from the rest and my mail fluttered earthwards at the will of the wind. Carriers were out for hours looking for soggy envelopes.

The penicillin didn't last very long and the following morning I was onto the ADC again. This time, however, Foxy's Cessna was out of action. Something vital had fallen off and Foxy couldn't find it. The Kennecott helicopter was in the area still and the ADC promised to try and con them into doing another trip. I started looking around for a flat spot to clear for a chopper pad and couldn't find one. We began chopping down trees anyway.

That afternoon the chopper appeared way off to the north. I began shooting orange flares into the sky. They were very old and were ignited by scratching a pad of sulfurous material on their base. I wasn't sure how they were supposed to work. I suspected that they were meant to be placed inside some sort of launcher.

I'd been dying to try them ever since I pinched them out of the Administration Store at Kiunga. I continued scratching. The first one went off with a bang and burned my hand. I dropped it and flare streaked across the clearing and exploded into a tree. There wasn't a Kanai or a carrier to be seen. I wrapped a wad of cloth around the next one and scratched it. It set the cloth on fire

but I managed to point it skywards at the crucial moment. The chopper did a neat turn and headed towards us.

It couldn't land but came close enough to the ground to allow Ted to climb out. He came out grinning in a whirlwind of dust and debris, handed me a carton and plonked a sixpack of cold beer on top, said something I couldn't understand, patted me on the shoulder and returned to the helicopter. I put the carton down and waved. The chopper backed off and swung away. I picked up the carton of penicillin and the pack of beer. As the chopper's din faded the Kanai began to emerge from the bush. They were having the twentieth century tossed at them lock, stock and barrel.

I turned around happily nursing the carton and more especially the beer. I bumped into Imbum. He bumped into the sergeant, who fell over the medic, who grabbed the rest of the police detachment and my cook before falling over. They all sat grinning in the tangled web of timber eyeing the beer. When it was divided up we only had half a cup each this time. It tasted good. Strangely enough, none of us were regular beer drinkers.

We stayed another seven days with the sick Kanai. I sent half the patrol under Kasari back to Olsobip on the third day. When the last Kanai seemed well we broke camp and started walking. We took a couple of younger Kanai men with us to introduce to the patrol post, learn Tok Pisin and eventually return to the group as village constables.

We were dangerously low on food. I had stayed on until I figured we had just enough to make Olsobip. The ADC couldn't raise another airdrop so we had to leave. We marched on a rough compass bearing to the nearest Murray Valley village following a wide, dry riverbed. With the valley almost five days walk away the first carrier keeled over with flu.

We broke up his load among the other carriers and built a stretcher for the two Kanai men to carry. He could still walk but only for a few metres at a time. We couldn't afford to wait for him so he was carried. The following day Fiamnok collapsed. The flu attacked bodies that had no built-up immunity. The weakened state of their systems began to give free rein to the ever-present but suppressed malaria everyone was carrying after so long in the bush. Fiamnok stoically trudged along after I dosed him up with anti-malarial tablets. He publicly eschewed the pills, saying his *puripuri* would deal with the sickness, but privately he sought me out and gulped them down. His pathetic look said, 'Don't tell anyone or my reputation is shot'. I quizzed him later on his lack of faith in his sorcery and he explained that he could do some things but other things eluded him. He was quite frank in this admission and must have truly believed in his *puripuri*.

By the third day I was staggering at the head of a stretcher. Then the thing hit me and I had to abandon the carrying and concentrate on keeping up with the patrol. We were in a pretty sad state when we finally broke onto the beginning of the Murray Valley tracks. When we had been on the valley floor for two days we ran into an armed party of Kwermins. Womi spotted them first and pulled up swiftly. For one awful moment I thought they were going to have a go at us. We wouldn't have stood a chance. I could hardly lift my arms above my head and I was the fittest of the whole patrol. Then they waved and grinned.

Kasari had met them and told them to collect food for us but to stay back in case they caught the flu, hence their furtive lurking in the bush. They had left food on the track and sent messages up the valley to alert the other villages. I didn't want the thing travelling up the valley and killing people in our wake.

We teetered up the valley and finally staggered over the Dap Range into Bolivip. When I reached the bottom of the steep creek Father Deshaies was sitting there on a log with Kasari. They had a fire going and were boiling water. I shook the priest's hand and he produced a glass and a gin bottle. He slopped some gin into the glass and added the hot water. I made it into Bolivip in record time.

At Bolivip the rest of the patrol was in the tender care of Sister Bert and her compatriots. Our lot joined them and lapped up the attention. A week later we topped a ridge and saw the sun filtering through the cloud over Olsobip Patrol Post. We were home and we had made contact with the Kanai.

CHAPTER FIVE

One of the most enjoyable things about returning from patrol was the accumulated mail. And it wasn't just the personal mail I enjoyed. While I was away the clerk opened the dark blue nylon mailbags and did a rough sort. Any personal mail for station staff he handed out. The rest he sorted into my personal mail and the office stuff. The former he took up to my house and left on the kitchen table, checking the refrigerator at the same time. The latter he piled on my desk.

Anything that looked like a circular, a gazette, or other official mail he opened and read. This he placed in a separate heap. Sometimes he made mistakes and corrected them by putting the letters back in their envelopes and pasting the flaps shut again. I never knew if a letter had been opened unless I asked him outright. His answers were often cagey, depending upon the content of the letter; if he thought there was no harm in reading it he readily owned up, otherwise he denied opening it. Sometimes he made mistakes with my personal mail. For a while I subscribed to a couple of photographic magazines. These were often re-pasted back into their envelopes. They came in plain envelopes and I guess he could have mistakenly opened the first one but the recurring 'mistakes' amused me.

I had a ritual with both my personal mail and the official stuff. With the personal mail I did a rough sort by date and type. Packages I broke open straight away; they were usually things I had ordered, like books and records, and I knew what they were anyway. The other mail I opened in sequence, usually a couple a day until the novelty wore off, then I'd open the rest in one hit and read them in one sitting. Once read, the letters were resorted and I would tackle the pleasurable task of replying to each one. For this purpose I used a small Olivetti 'Dora,' a handy little portable typewriter that I'd had tropic-proofed so the keys wouldn't stick. After a long patrol this process could fill up my evenings for a week or more.

With the official mail I would clear the top of my desk, which consisted of a big sheet of stained and varnished plywood on a frame of bush timber, and sort the letters into their different categories. At the side of the desk I positioned three grey, Administration-issue, metal bins. These provided a receptacle for the usual bureaucratic fluff, out-of-date correspondence, letters on subjects beyond redemption and the out-and-out silly stuff — 'the Commissioner of Police has requested details about the issue of rations to Constabulary members; will you please tally the number of bars of soap issued to lower ranks over the past quarter'. The letters sorted by category and kept on my desk were then divided into two groups labelled 'must be done if you want to keep the station running,' and 'file this stuff; it could be useful later'.

Invariably the three grey bins received the greatest share of the official mail. This material was not wasted, however. I took great pains to resist screwing up even the silliest letter; there's nothing worse than trying to roll a cigarette with crinkled paper.

The clerk dutifully carried the bins away when I had finished, stacked the sheets of paper in neat piles and took them over to the store for issue, half a page at a time, with the labourers' tobacco ration.

When I had finished sorting the official mail I restored my various 'in,' 'out' and 'pending' trays to the top of my desk, along with my jam jar of pens, stapler, rulers and other bits and pieces. The various piles were then assigned to the 'in' tray in order of priority. Once that was done I quickly left the room and went looking for something practical to do elsewhere on the station. For the next few days I would circle the doorway in the mornings and then hastily head off to the airstrip or somewhere else to supervise the gravelling, pit sawing or house building.

After a week or so the telegrams would begin to arrive — 'require staff situation report asap' etc. This would make me circle the office door maybe twice a day instead of the usual quick squiz in the morning. By the end of the week the ADC from Kiunga would be on the radio demanding responses. I knew by then that the DDC in Daru was on his back and time had run out. At that stage I took a deep breath and headed into my office.

The funny thing about this equivocating was that once I'd gotten into it I enjoyed dealing with the bureaucratic side of running the patrol post. I liked to order things, supply statistics, fill in forms and write reports. I particularly liked writing patrol reports and answering letters. For the patrol reports I developed a special style teetering on the edge of colourful; I liked to turn a phrase here and there and slip in a touch of irreverence. I once wrote a report in the form of a dozen or more sonnets because I had heard someone else on a lonely patrol post had once submitted one in rhyming couplets, but I thought better of it and

revised it down to simple purple prose. When I started reading Hemingway I wrote short, neat and succinct reports; when I stumbled upon Faulkner I wrote long rambling things that I hoped someone would understand.

The letters were different again. Here I preferred 'bureaucratese'. Some people love this stuff. Toss in a half dozen acronyms, spice it up with the current public service buzz words (and be sure to throw in a newly invented one that no one had heard of and watch it turn up in the letters coming back to you), tack it all together in fractured public service grammar and make sure the 'to', 'from', 'subject', 'date' at the top was out of sync with the accepted norm. Lovely stuff!

Sometimes I misjudged the reactions of my superiors. Occasionally people took my tongue-in-cheek responses seriously. The hundreds of extra rounds of ammunition and the specially chartered aircraft to carry in the double bed are incidents I would rather forget.

As I began to tackle the urgent mail I noticed a small party of men descending the scarp opposite the airstrip bearing what appeared to be a stretcher.

The bundle the men carried to the door of the office was indeed a stretcher. Flattened lengths of *sikin diwai* had been tied to a frame of saplings and padded with ferns and grass. On this bed lay a battered-looking man who I guessed to be of middle years. I knelt down and poked about amongst the foliage to examine him. He was covered with bruises and swellings. His face was also puffed up but it was his eyes that caught my attention. He looked as though he had seen a ghost. My white face hovering over him didn't help.

I patted him reassuringly on the arm and he recoiled to the edge of the bark bed.

‘What happened to him?’ I asked one of the stretcher-bearers. The question drew an interesting response. The man started and stood open-mouthed in confusion. I lifted my eyebrows and pointedly looked at Imbum, who was staring in fascination at the stricken man. I nudged the interpreter with my foot. He looked down at me in surprise then, realising what I wanted, turned to the group of men. As they broke into a confused babble I examined the man’s limbs and abdomen. Nothing seemed broken and his chest, stomach and spleen seemed unharmed. Judging by the damage, I guessed he had been beaten fairly methodically with a piece of wood. He was going to be very sore in a day or so.

‘Where is his wife?’ I asked.

‘What?’ Imbum blurted.

‘His wife?’ I repeated.

Imbum shouted at the babbling men. They stopped moving and talking in the same instant.

‘He isn’t married!’ one of the men relayed through Imbum.

‘Then who did this to him?’ I asked. Sheepish silence. I stood up.

‘Well?’ More silence. I stepped towards them.

‘It was a *maselai meri*,’ Imbum said quickly.

‘Oh yes?’ I replied, raising my eyebrows. ‘And where is this *maselai meri* now?’

Imbum pointed with his chin and whispered. ‘She’s in the forest at the edge of the airstrip waiting for nightfall when she can finish him off.’

‘Where did they bring him from?’ I asked, trying to hide the scepticism in my voice. Imbum consulted the group again and when the babble had died down turned back to me.

‘They found him hanging onto a rock in the middle of the *Ok Kinim* on the track to Bolivip. When they shouted to him he told them what had happened and they became frightened and ran away, but one of them stopped after a while and said he felt sorry for him and was going back to help. They argued about what to do for a while and finally decided on a plan.’

‘A plan?’

‘Yes, they decided to make a stretcher out of bark, creep back to the river, rescue the man and carry him here as quickly as possible.’

‘So the *maselai* couldn’t catch them?’

‘Yes, *kiap*.’

‘And what are we going to do if the *maselai* comes looking for him tonight?’

‘They say the police can shoot her with their rifles.’

‘Ask them what really happened,’ I said to Imbum ‘Who beat him up and why?’ Imbum looked puzzled and shrugged his shoulders. He was obviously wondering why I doubted the story.

Maselai are malevolent spirits who lurk in the forest. Often they lure unsuspecting individuals into the forest and do unspeakable things to them. I’ve never been able to obtain a useful description of these things; old ladies cackle, children cringe and men look distinctly uncomfortable when I ask. A favourite trick of the *maselai* is to turn into the shape of a seductive nymph to lure men

into the forest. The only way to get away from a *maselai* is to manoeuvre a body of water between it and yourself. They won't cross water for some reason, hence the battered man on the rock in the river.

'They say it was definitely a *maselai*,' Imbum announced.

'Okay,' I sighed, 'Take him down to the medic and get him examined and then put him in the empty police house down by the store. Tell Kasari to put a guard on the door. The other men had better camp down by the river for the night. Send word up to Fiamnok; tell him I wish to consult him on a matter of professional interest.'

A camp of sorts, with rough shelters, had been established for people visiting the patrol post in an area just beyond the station on a bend in the *Ok Bilak*. I told Kasari I wanted the group kept there until we had gotten to the bottom of what appeared to be a criminal assault.

Olsobip had never had a formal jail. The odd miscreant sentenced at Olsobip was usually given a red *laplap* before being handed over to one of the station policemen. They usually served out their time working with the paid station labourers and sleeping in the policeman's cookhouse.

I thought it best to lock the injured man up in the empty police house as a form of protective custody. I guessed there wasn't a person on the station, except for myself, who didn't believe in magic and sorcery and for that reason the investigation would be difficult. I wasn't sure about Kasari.

Towards midnight I surfaced from a deep dream full of voices and lights. As I gained consciousness the noise and

lights remained. I rolled over and peered out of the bedroom window. There was shouting and flashing lights down by the police house. ‘What the hell is going on now?’ I said aloud as I pulled on a pair of shorts. A flashlight was coming up the hill towards the house.

By the time Kasari reached the veranda I had fired up my Petromax lantern. The bright silk mantle lit up the surrounding lawn.

‘It’s the *masela*; it tried to get at the man from under the house!’

‘Is he okay?’

‘He’s scared and shivering; some of the men shot arrows at it and it’s gone away.’

‘Okay, let’s go see him.’

The night was cool and I shivered as I peered under the house. There was nothing there except a dozen long-bladed arrows sticking in the ground at odd angles. In the extra light cast by the Petromax one of the men worked up the courage to retrieve them. As he crawled out from amongst the house piles I noticed that there was blood on some of the blades. Everyone else noticed the red stains and there was a collective shudder amongst the crowd. I peered at the blood; it was wet and sticky.

‘Come on,’ I said to Kasari. ‘Down to the camp. Look for dead chickens or someone with cuts on them, anywhere that blood could come from!’ Kasari looked puzzled then grinned.

‘*Yu tink oli gamon yumi long masela?*’ he said.

‘Of course,’ I replied. ‘It’s a set-up to reinforce their story. They beat the man up and got worried when he looked badly

injured; they decided to bring him in to the medic but needed an alibi. I imagine they threatened him to keep quiet.’ Kasari looked doubtful.

‘Just do what I say,’ He took off at the run for the river camp, swinging the Petromax as he went.

When I got to the river Kasari had the rest of the men from the injured man’s clan grouped in the firelight and was going through each of the huts in which they had been sleeping. I motioned the bowmen to join their companions in the firelight. Kasari came out of the last hut and shrugged.

‘Nothing!’ he said. I peered at the group of men. None of them had any recent cuts.

‘Give me the lamp,’ I said and started on the first hut. There was nothing, just like Kasari said. We scoured the ground and the nearby bush. Nothing. I checked the rocks by the river. Again nothing.

‘They’re very smart. They must have expected us to come back here to check and they’ve cleaned up beautifully.’ Kasari smiled weakly. I could see the doubt in his face. Who he doubted I did not know; the man’s clan group or me? I stomped off towards my house.

‘Tell them to stay put until morning,’ I said over my shoulder. ‘And keep the guard on the injured man. Don’t let these characters anywhere near the police house where he’s locked up. Give me the arrows.’ I didn’t sleep very well and woke early feeling decidedly seedy.

Fiamnok sniffed one of the bloodied arrows and then popped the tip into his mouth. He sucked for a moment and raised his eyebrows.

'It's not human blood but it's not chicken or pig either!' he said. He grinned devilishly as he withdrew the wet blade from his mouth. I decided I didn't want to know how he could recognise the individual tastes of blood, especially human.

'Bring the man here and get a basin of water.' He made the order casually but I was surprised at how quickly Imbum jumped up. The power in this little valley was complex. Fiamnok smiled pleasantly at me and I knew I was out of my depth. It was time for the morning radio schedule with the ADC at Kiunga. I padded up the office stairs thinking that I understood as much about *puripuri* as Fiamnok knew about two-way radios.

The ADC worked his way around the patrol posts and base camps. I wanted more of his time and was happy to wait till last. Finally he said, 'Olsobip, Olsobip, Kiunga, do you copy?'

'Olsobip here,' I said. 'You're coming in strength five.'

'So what's up?' he replied. I explained the situation.

'I need some advice. I couldn't find anything in the ordinance to hold anyone, let alone charge them with assault,' I added. There was silence at the other end of the radio.

I waited for a minute or two and then called again.

'Kiunga, do you copy?' Silence. I called again.

'Olsobip, are you still there?' came the ADC finally.

'Olsobip here,' I replied. 'What do you advise?'

'Olsobip, Olsobip, Kiunga, do you copy?'

'Olsobip here!' I replied loudly.

'Nothing heard, Olsobip; where have you gone?' I twanged the mike. The aerial pinged perfectly. I tried again. Nothing. They couldn't hear me!

'Anyone else copy Olsobip?' the ADC asked.

‘Nothing here,’ the OIC Ningerum chipped in. His was the closest radio and I never had trouble communicating with him.

‘Maybe the *maselai* got him!’ I heard from the Nomad River radio. There was silence and then, through the static, laughter.

I stomped back down the stairs. Fiamnok was sitting cross-legged on the grass in front of the injured man. Between them sat an enamel basin filled with water. A small crowd stood at a respectful distance. Imbum stood up and came over to me.

‘The *Mamusi* is going to ask the man about the *maselai*,’ he explained. ‘If the water moves, the man is telling the truth; if it stays still he is lying.’ I looked at Fiamnok; he looked serene. The injured man looked distinctly uncomfortable. The cunning old bugger, I thought; of course the water won’t move, then the man will have to come clean!

Fiamnok put the question. It was short and to the point. Imbum interpreted.

‘Did a *maselai* beat you up?’ Fiamnok asked.

The man twitched nervously. ‘Yes,’ he said.

We all looked towards the enamel basin. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, a ripple appeared in the centre of the water. It bubbled and a series of concentric ripples broke on the basin rim. No one was within a metre of the basin. Fiamnok stood up and the injured man followed suit. Fiamnok bowed slightly.

‘It was a *maselai*!’ he said. There was a sigh of relief from the crowd. I thought quickly. The old bastard could have set the whole thing up — but why? It didn’t make sense.

‘Thank you very much,’ I said to Fiamnok. ‘Your help is much appreciated.’ He gave me a sympathetic smile.

‘Take the man to the medic,’ I told Imbum. ‘When he is well he can go.’

When the crowd had dispersed only Kasari and I were left. I walked slowly around the basin, scuffing the ground as I went. There were no sticks or strings in the grass. I knelt down and tipped the bowl up slightly, careful not to spill the water. There was nothing there either. I looked at Kasari.

‘Come here,’ I said and positioned him opposite me with the basin in between.

‘Tell me the truth, sergeant,’ I asked. ‘Do you believe it was a *masela*?’

Kasari thought for a moment. He knew what I was up to.

‘I don’t know,’ he said finally. The water stayed perfectly still.

On routine patrols I usually took ‘Dora’, the portable typewriter. She would happily bump along inside a patrol box and with her along I could work on my patrol report at night in camp. When I had been based at the Sub-District Headquarters at Kiunga I took great delight in presenting my completed reports to the ADC the morning after my return. This was particularly gratifying because I knew he never finished his own reports for at least three weeks after his patrols had ended.

I didn’t take ‘Dora’ into the Murray Valley, however. The terrain and conditions would have been too rough for her. Nevertheless, I had the report ready for the next mail plane after our return to the station. This time I decided to play it straight. Something about the people in the valley and the flu epidemic

made me decide against flippancy. The report ran to over sixty pages, including the census figures and other statistics. For some obscure reason the whole thing seemed unsatisfactory. I read the report again before I sealed it in the envelope addressed to the ADC.

Part of the report comprised an Area Study. The guidelines for Area Studies addressed indicators of economic and social development. I remembered writing similar studies in the Western Highlands. These were filled with glowing reports of burgeoning enterprise among a people hungry for development. The Murray Valley report, on the other hand, was full of doom and gloom. The valley was too rugged, too isolated and too sparsely populated. If the Administration ever devised a list of promising regions it would have to be at the bottom.

Re-reading my grim prognostications it never occurred to me that maybe the people in the valley were happy the way they were and didn't want the development the Administration was hell-bent upon imposing. All I could see was that without development, health care and education would not come to the valley. As part of the census process the natural increases in settlement population were routinely calculated and recorded. For the Murray Valley the figures were without exception negative. I guessed the flu had something to do with that but when I extracted that element from the equation there was only a marginal improvement. And I couldn't, for the life of me, see how the trend could be reversed.

I wondered about the wisdom of bringing the two Kanai men out of the valley. They would go back with all sorts of unreasonable expectations. Perhaps it would have been better to have left them there.

‘Stuff and nonsense,’ responded the ADC on the radio after he had read the report. ‘Bring them down here. This place is booming, Kennecott has built camps and wharves and brought in barges and bulldozers and cranes and God knows what else; it will do the little bastards good to see the outside world!’

‘I hadn’t really intended to take them down there. I thought a look-see at Olsobip might suffice.’

‘Let them hear the radio and see the tractor and an aeroplane and put their hand in your freezer, you mean?’

‘Well, maybe a bit more than that.’

‘Look, the Mining Warden is going to start off his meetings here. Bring your Kanai and a couple of the local heavies down and they can all get a look at what’s going on, give them a better idea of what to expect from the mining company. You can meet with some of the Kennecott people; they’re probably going to use Olsobip as a base for some of their exploration and you can fill them in on the place.’

I thought about it for a few days. Part of the *kiap* mantra was development. We were supposed to be bringing the Territory to independence. I’d had a good dose of the development ethos as a cadet in the Western Highlands. In 1967 I remembered the legendary District Commissioner, Tom Ellis, telling us we’d be there for another twenty years at least. When I mentioned the things I’d heard in Australia from the unions and the Labor Party, not to mention the UN, he dismissed it as left-wing piffle. As it turned out I was neither good at nor did I enjoy building roads, running local government councils and organising business enter-

prises. I managed a transfer to the wilds of the Western District as soon as my cadetship was up.

Nevertheless, I had a duty to try; but where to start? Even Olsobip looked pretty dismal in the development stakes. I had tried a few things, back loading vegetables to Kiunga on the weekly charter, and I set up a small trade store, financed out of my own pocket but ostensibly belonging to the Olsobip Progress Association. Both projects had failed. It was impossible to get the Faiwol gardeners and their excess produce in sync with the erratic schedules of the charters, and the extortionate cost of getting goods to the trade store meant no one could afford to buy anything. We really needed a road into the station, through the gorge, over the waterfalls and rapids, straight down off the scarp for hundreds of metres and then across kilometres of soggy swamp. Fat chance there.

There was something that I'd noticed, however. The odd man from the northern hamlets had made his way across to the Kennecott base camp at Tabubil and had returned to Olsobip with cash. The amounts were usually the exact price required to purchase a shotgun. I had issued a few permits to buy firearms and it was a worry. The Star Mountains were the home of large colonies of Bird of Paradise and I suspected the guns were being used to shoot birds for trade to the Highlanders working in the mining camps. Maybe this was the beginning of a cash economy; maybe it would be possible to divert the money these men earned to more useful purposes.

'Okay,' I said to the ADC. 'I'll come down on the next charter!'

'I'll save you a beer!' he replied.

I sent word out to the Bolivip *Mamusi* telling him Dan Fox could pick him up on his way to Olsobip if he was interested. I knew Kelepsok's views on progress but thought his reaction to Kiunga would be a good counterfoil. Lorop, the Darabik *Mamusi*, was on the station already and had been parading around in his new uniform. He had taken the two Kanai men under his wing and they dogged me wherever I went. Fiamnok was a foregone conclusion. Imbum would be needed to interpret but Kasari would be needed to run the station and keep an eye on the clerk. I also hoped there might be room for the dog on the plane.

We got away on a bright Tuesday morning. Foxy swung the Cessna east of Gum Gorge and flew low over the well-trodden track south to the villages of Kuwsin and Duminak. The Faiwolmin only used these villages at certain times of the year for meetings, ceremonies and as retreats during inter-tribal fighting. For most of the year they lived in extended family groups in hamlets, clearing forest, cultivating it and moving on when the shallow soil gave out. I wondered how such lush rainforest could be so infertile. We passed many deserted gardens and decaying houses on our way and I began to understand why the people flying the aerial surveys for the first exploratory patrols had assumed there were large populations there.

From Duminak the track led due east into the Kaban Range and then north in a great loop back to the patrol post. We left it behind as we headed south. I peered over Fiamnok's head as the Fly River came into view. The great muddy channel wandered through a vast mat of rainforest, occasionally breaking into white rippled patches or splitting into narrow channels. Sandbars appeared on

the bigger loops and once Fiamnok pointed to a tiny canoe hugging the bank as it headed upstream. Fiamnok had his face pressed to the window and was humming to himself. For someone experiencing his first ride in an aeroplane he seemed remarkably relaxed. He was the first one to spot Kiunga and he waved to the people below as we passed overhead.

The ADC's house at Kiunga was a rambling affair built along the ridge of a low hill overlooking the Fly River. It had started out as a standard Administration AR20 but new rooms had been added at one end and a long veranda tacked onto the front. The ADC ambled over to the edge of the veranda and stared out across the river. In the early days it had been traditional to urinate over the rail. Legend had it that the original ADC who caused the construction of the veranda had built the rails at a specific height for this purpose. The flourishing crotons below the drop bore witness to the perpetuation of the custom.

'And what do you think of our friends over there?' he said, indicating the mining camp stretched along a cleared scar of red earth along the bank of the river. 'They reckon they need my house as a wharf site because it's too low-lying down there.' I shrugged and was about to reply when Dan Fox entered the room. A slim Papuan woman accompanied him.

'More to the point, what do they think?' she pointed to the Awin village just visible on an upstream bend of the river.

'God knows,' the ADC replied. 'The Mining Warden has spent most of the week trying to explain what mining involves.' He looked at me. 'He'll be going back with you; the people up there are the ones to worry about, I think.'

‘Maybe they’ll get something out of it,’ I said. ‘Jobs, maybe a road into the area. I don’t think they’ll object.’

‘No, I guess all they’ll see is dollars coming in and the chance to buy shotguns and transistor radios,’ the ADC replied.

‘And booze and tin fish and rice; then, when the land compensation money runs out and the village carpetbaggers have taken off with the royalties and they discover all the jobs are going to outsiders and no one wants to buy their taro and bananas, they can sell their wives and daughters!’ The force in the young woman’s voice impressed me. I introduced myself and extended my hand. I was rewarded with a grin.

‘Thini,’ she said, this time softly. She offered her name like a gift, carefully, with a pause so that I could savour it. I felt disarmed, as she intended. The ADC smirked.

‘What a lovely name!’ I said.

‘Thini,’ she said again, almost as if she had never heard it before herself and stood there silently considering it before she burst into laughter and put out her hand.

‘Thini will be going with you and the Mining Warden to Olsobip,’ the ADC said. ‘She’s a journalist working for the *Post Courier*.’

‘If this mining gets off the ground,’ she added, ‘it’s going to have one hell of a social impact.’

‘And that’s what you’re going to write about?’

‘Hell, no! I’ll write something about the wonderful opportunities the mining company is offering the Western District. You know — vast swamps, inhospitable mountains, small underdeveloped population, all that sort of stuff!’ She smiled when I frowned. ‘And then I’ll do a piece about the intrepid *kiap* and his loyal police. I’ll need some good photos for that; might even get it syndi-

cated in Australia!' Just then the ADC's cook emerged from the house and said '*Kaikai reti!*' and I lost my chance to protest.

The next day I took the three *Mamusi* and the two Kanai men on a tour of the new dock at Kiunga and they watched the cranes unloading cargo from the big barges onto trucks that drove out to the airstrip and the helicopters. I was surprised when they evinced no interest in the origin of the goods, but had tried to explain anyway. They listened intently but said nothing.

'They probably think their ancestors are sending it all,' Ihini had suggested when she joined us outside the Catholic Mission's cattle yards.

'Like a cargo cult?'

'Maybe. Then again maybe they know it's being sent here by a multinational mining company!' I frowned.

'Come on *kiap*, it's time for lunch. They've found something more interesting anyway'. She pushed me gently in the back. Fiamnok and the other men were leaning over the fence to get a better view of a Brahman bull's huge testicles.

The next day we all flew back to Olsobip. As we crossed the swampy river flats I watched Ihini talking earnestly to the Mining Warden. She had a notebook on her lap and was scribbling rapidly. Her frizzy hair was shining and I could just make out the aroma of coconut oil. She was wearing a short cotton dress with a bright tropical pattern and a plain leather sandal was visible where one of her legs reached out into the aisle. She looks just like one of those pretty Papuan girls working as clerks

or shop assistants in Port Moresby, I thought, before realising how condescending that sounded. Just then Fiamnok tugged my arm and pointed out of the window. The great maw of Gum Gorge loomed ahead.

A table and chairs had been set up on the grass for the Mining Warden's meeting and a board with diagrams and photographs was leaning against the station flagpole. Imbum was attempting to translate the Mining Warden's highly simplified explanation to a collection of station labourers and the odd villager. I noticed that Fiamnok, Kelepsok and Lorop, ever the politicians, were sitting in the front ranks and appeared to be taking a keen interest in the proceedings. Ihini finished photographing the small crowd and walked back to the office.

'I thought there would be more people here,' she said.

'So did I. The clerk sent people out to most of the villages nearby to let them know about the meeting.'

'I guess the whole concept is a bit beyond most of them,' Dan Fox added. Foxy and his plane had been placed at the disposal of the Mining Warden and he was enjoying the leisure time.

'You're not kidding,' Ihini replied. 'Most of this stuff is going over the interpreter's head, let alone the audience's!'

'They like the pictures!' Foxy smiled.

'You don't think photographs of smiling New Guineans in nice clothes behind desks and on top of huge bulldozers and beside swimming pools with bottles of beer in their hands is a bit misleading?'

'Of course not,' Foxy laughed. 'Everyone knows mining makes you rich!'

'You're a couple of cynics,' I said. 'They'll get the idea when the company gets here and starts work.'

'It'll be too late then,' Ihini replied.

'Can't stop progress!' Foxy said seriously.

'That's what the ADC said.'

We walked up the slope to my house. 'I'll get Kure to send the Mining Warden a sandwich and drink,' I said. 'He's going to be a while; Fiamnok has started to talk.'

'Aren't you interested in what the old bastard says?' Foxy asked Ihini.

'I've heard it before,' she replied. 'It will be a speech about his land and how many pigs he wants for compensation. It's all being taped anyway.'

'He makes a good speech,' I went to put the kettle on.

'So this is where the *kiap* lives,' Ihini said, casting her eye around the house. A patrol box full of books stood in the centre of the room alongside a canvas chair and another patrol box with a kerosene lamp and transistor radio on it. My single bed with the grey Administration blanket was just visible from the adjoining bedroom. 'Bit bare, isn't it?'

'You should have seen what the previous tenant had in here,' Foxy said. 'Stuff everywhere; took days to fly it all out.'

'Probably insecure,' Ihini offered.

'Johnson wasn't insecure; he just liked to be comfortable,' I replied. 'I've always travelled light.'

'Funny. The way you were pushing the development line I thought you'd have a house full of junk.'

‘Maybe there’s hope for me yet.’ I carried in three cups of coffee, a plate of sandwiches and two more canvas chairs.

‘Apart from the lack of furniture the house is quite nice. Got a good view,’ Ihini said as I juggled the chairs off one arm. I looked at her doubtfully.

‘It’s a standard AR10,’ I said.

‘Is that what it is?’ she replied. ‘I don’t get to see the insides very often.’

‘Ah,’ I said slowly. ‘Are you comfortable in Kasari’s house? I would have offered you the other bedroom here and put the Mining Warden down there but it would have looked a bit, um, funny having you up here.’

‘I’m fine,’ she laughed. ‘It’s nice *not* having the bloody *kiap* trying to get me into his bedroom.’ I think I flushed.

‘He’s okay,’ Foxy said. ‘Fiamnok supplies him with women.’

‘To chop wood and wash clothes,’ I added quickly.

‘Of course,’ she replied, enjoying my embarrassment.

‘Anyway,’ I added, ‘you can come up here tonight for the *mumu*; Kasari and the clerk are coming too and maybe Fiamnok — he’s promised a pig. The wash girl is digging a hole in the back garden for an oven now.’ I paused. ‘I mean Kure dug a hole and she is lining it with banana leaves now.’

‘In that case I’d better get back to the meeting so I have time to get ready later,’ she said.

‘The shower is warm; you’re welcome to come up here for a wash if you like.’

‘It’s okay,’ she replied. ‘The river is fine.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘See you in a few hours.’

‘You’re a real lady-killer,’ Foxy said after she left.

He was right. I'd never been much of a social animal. I found conversation hard work and women positively intimidating. I developed sweaty palms in their company and anything as complex as dancing left me floundering. It usually took me a long time to overcome my innate shyness and get to know people. My first impressions of people also usually proved to be wildly inaccurate. Foxy liked to rib me about it. He was one of those charming people who could talk to anyone and make himself at home anywhere. Strangely, I hoped he wasn't planning to charm Ihini.

After the meeting the Mining Warden wandered around the station with Imbum and the three *Mamusis*. They seemed to be in earnest conversation. The smoke from the *mumu* Kure had prepared on the hill was dying down and the food would be ready soon. I stuck my head in Kasari's front door.

'Bai me kam bihain,' he said. *'Meri bilong me wokim sampela kaikai na mi wet long karim igo antap.'*

'Do you want a hand?' He shook his head.

'Where's the journalist lady?'

'She went down to the women's place by the river to wash about an hour ago,' Kasari's wife shouted from the kitchen.

I started to head back up the hill before I stopped. An hour ago? That seems a long time. Maybe I'd better check just in case. I meandered off towards the river, making plenty of noise when I got close to the women's bathing place. I stopped before I got to the turn in the bank and shouted, 'Anyone there?' No response. I waited a moment and turned the bend.

She must have pulled herself out of the river and onto the log just as I stepped out of the undergrowth. She was intent upon shaking the water from her hair and didn't see me at first. I could only guess that the noise of the river had drowned out my warning. I didn't know what to do; if I withdrew she would surely hear me. She bent her head and turned it quickly from side to side creating a wide silver halo. Thousands of smaller droplets still glittered in her fuzzy brown hair. She squeezed these out with both hands, sending water in runnels down her front. I watched the water stream over her skin. She looked up. She didn't seem to be embarrassed.

'I was worried,' I stammered. 'You were gone so long.'

She put her hands over her head in a classic pose and turned slowly towards the river.

'What do you think?' she asked. I couldn't think of anything to say. She turned to look at me, her expression quizzical.

'This is a maiden performance. The rest of the program depends upon the response of the audience.'

'You're wowing it,' I managed.

'Hmm?' she said and bent slightly forward. I took a tentative step towards the log and stopped. She smiled mischievously and moved her hips from side to side. I stepped onto the log, put both of my hands on her hips and pulled her upright and around to face me. Her expression was serious. I kissed her and she put her head on my shoulder and hugged me. The smell of coconut oil from her hair caught in my nostrils and I wondered what I was getting myself into.

From that moment time seemed to speed up. It was soon time for the Mining Warden and Ihini to leave. She gave me a hug just

before she got on the plane. Fiamnok grinned at me over her shoulder. Later in the morning Lorop and Kelepsok left together for Darabik and Bolivip. They had come to some sort of agreement over the adze and now seemed to be on quite good terms. Back in the office I pulled out the patrol schedule. The high country behind and north of the station was next on my list. Somehow it didn't seem so exciting.

CHAPTER SIX

The day was cool and misty as we set off along the track to Bolovip. Word had come down from the high valleys that food was scarce. The year had been unusually cold and dry above Bolivip and the staple taro, sweet potato and banana were smaller and in less quantity. For this reason the patrol had been kept small and compact, with non-essential cargo replaced with rice, tin fish and bully beef. I had ordered extra medical supplies in case the influenza had reached the area.

I had despatched Corporal Womi to Bolivip a few days ahead of the patrol with a load of rice so that we could stage it into the area if necessary. We waited until he returned with his carriers before setting off. Some of his men elected to make the return journey to Bolivip and then continue on with the patrol. With any luck we would be able to pick up extra food at the Bolivip Catholic Mission and ferry the whole lot up into the valleys for distribution to the worst hit villages to give the people a bit of respite while their crops recovered.

Fiamnok had provided me with a venerable old gentleman who was to act as a sort of valet. He had an old hessian sack slung over his shoulder containing a small billycan, tea, sugar and sweet

biscuits. The sack was labelled in Dutch and had originated over the border. As we began the ascent out of the *Ok Bilak* valley towards the distant ridge above Darabik I wondered about the stamina of the old chap. The gesture from Fiamnok was nice but I didn't want to be hindered by an old man lagging behind the patrol.

I needn't have worried; the old fellow matched me stride for stride. Once, when I slipped on a gluggy patch of orange clay, I found him at my shoulder offering a supporting arm. Out of deference to his age I accepted his offer and was amazed at his sinewy muscles. After that it became a friendly competition. On a steeper section of the track I strode ahead and waited for him. Not to be outdone, he sped ahead to the next rise and waited for me. I offered him my arm when we had to climb over a fallen and slippery log. He accepted with good grace. A few kilometres on and I came across him solicitously holding back a clump of 'wait-a-while' vines that had fallen over the track. I nodded as I ducked under them. When he offered to carry my small rucksack in which I carried my camera and other odds and ends I feigned outrage and chased him up the track. Buka, barking her head off in glee, pursued us both. As we wove among the carriers they fell about laughing. This patrol is turning into a pantomime, I thought.

About noon the old man sped off again. There was a glade ahead with sweet water filtering through mossy rocks where I planned to pull up for a rest and to check the carriers' loads. As we entered the glade I smelled smoke. The old reprobate had a fire going. I crunched through a bed of slightly damp fern and he handed me a freshly brewed cup of tea. A packet of milk arrowroot biscuits appeared from his Dutch sack.

I sat down and he squatted on the other side of the fire and watched me with interest. I idly picked the leeches off my boots.

A few moments later Kure strode into the glade and threw down the sack of rice he was carrying. He glared at the old man, who smiled back sweetly. With a sound that distinctly sounded like 'humph!' he walked over to the recently arrived patrol box carrying my kitchen gear and food and pulled out the carrying pole. He returned to the fire with two extra mugs, poured himself a cup of tea and handed the other mug to the old man. The old fellow slopped a liberal dose of tea into the mug followed by three generous finger-scoops of sugar and helped himself to a handful of biscuits. Kure snorted, grabbed the packet and gave the dog a milk arrowroot.

'It's really good of you to help by carrying that bag of rice, Kure,' I said. He nodded brusquely but couldn't reply; his mouth was full of biscuits. When we had finished, the old man carefully washed the three mugs and stowed them in his bag. I guessed that I would have two extra guests for tea when we next stopped for a brew.

I wandered through the glade checking the carrier loads. I took care to note any bruising caused by the long poles thrust through the looped handles of the patrol boxes. These boxes were made of galvanised iron and were riveted and soldered to make them waterproof. The lids had a rubber strip around the inside of the perimeter to act as a watertight seal. Each box had two extra galvanised iron straps riveted around each end for extra strength. The carriers invariably slipped their bush knives through these strips for ease of carrying. The poles were lashed to the handle loops to stop them slipping.

While the police tried to even out the weights of each load, some were always heavier than others and I swapped carriers and

loads frequently. These little mountain men were strong and fit but had a strong sense of fairness that made swapping important.

Constable Arau handed out hard navy biscuits and tins of bully beef. Tea was brewed and everyone rested. I munched on a navy biscuit. Once they had eaten, the carriers set to sharpening their bush knives. Then someone took an idle swipe at a sapling. Soon they were all chopping and slashing, widening the glade for the next patrol. These men couldn't help themselves; they loved the power of sharp steel.

'Okay! Enough!' I shouted. 'Let's go. Constable, get the carriers loaded and on their way!'

We topped the ridge at Darabik late in the afternoon. Lorop came to greet us carrying sugar cane. I munched on a fibrous piece as we walked down to the village. Fires were going and the whole scene oozed serenity and peace. I caught the smell of freshly harvested sweet potatoes cooking and sat down on the steps of the rest house. A smoky mist filtered up from thatched roofs. I eased my soggy jungle boots off and shooed away the bevy of children gathering about the steps. I took particular care to hiss at the young girls.

Bolivip was especially cool. When I went rummaging through my patrol box looking for my old army jacket I couldn't find it. The mystery was explained when Kure returned from the mission store.

'*Sori,*' he said. '*Mi kol tru!*'

He shucked off the jacket and replaced it with a blanket. I noticed that the police had all broken out their gaberdine jackets. I made a mental note to check whether the carriers had enough blankets. It would get colder as we climbed higher and I chided myself for not thinking about the cold before we left Olsobip.

In the evening I walked up to the mission with Kelepsok. Father Deshaies and Sister Bert were on patrol recruiting school-children for the coming year. I talked to the nuns in my less than perfect Motu. When I discovered that a couple of them also knew Tok Pisin we communicated more effectively. Strange that they spoke Pidgin English but not English. I also managed to establish that they had ample supplies of blankets in their trade store. One of the sisters even ferreted out an old waterproof jacket for Kure. It was black and had little holes on each lapel for the little silver crosses that the Catholic priests wore. Kure loved it and persisted in wearing it even on warm days.

As we left Bolivip the next day I stopped and stared at the steep track heading off towards the Murray Valley. I sighed with relief and led the patrol off in the other direction. We met Father Deshaies and Sister Bert on the track between Bolivip and Golgubip, the first high village.

'It's bloody cold up there!' the good father announced, while eyeing the black shadow of Kure curiously.

He also confirmed that the food shortage was acute and I arranged with him to buy extra rice. He said he had been planning to send rice up into the valleys but had to watch his budget. Extra money from the Administration would be most welcome! We discussed the details around a smoky fire as Sister Bert in her white rubber boots and big umbrella crouched over a swag of diminutive sweet potato. They waved as they disappeared into the mist.

The track to Golgubip was steep with worn and slippery limestone nodules packed together like eggs in a carton. As we climbed higher

the forest closed in and the track became soft and bouncy from the dense leaf fall. Big patches of moss began to appear and a sly white mist crept among the trees. This was the track which one of my predecessors had walked over twice in one day when he found himself out of medical supplies while treating a flu outbreak at Golgubip. He walked back to Olsobip, collected the supplies and returned. It took him eighteen hours.

We stopped at noon and added the smoke from our fires to the thickening mist. As we stretched out amongst the leaves sipping our hot tea the sun sent shafts of bright light through the swirl and the track became a bright hazy tunnel. There did not appear to be any point where its edges met. I shook leaves from my clothes and took a tentative step forward.

The warmth of the sunlight enveloped me and I slowly walked into its halo. It was like night reversed. Instead of darkness I was enveloped in a bright white misty light. I put my hands out in front of me and they vanished. I turned and there was nothing. I heard a polite cough and heard a shuffling noise. When I looked down I saw Imbum staring up at me. He had a look of wonderment on his round face. His body was entirely invisible and his face appeared to be floating by itself. A light appeared and Kasari materialised with a torch.

‘This is going to make walking very tricky!’ I said.

The police and some of the carriers had brought along kerosene lanterns. Because of the fragile glass in the lanterns and the chance of tainting gear and food inside the patrol boxes with kerosene the lamps were slung on the carrying poles. There they swayed in constant view; if a tricky manoeuvre had to be undertaken, such as

a river crossing, they were quickly removed and carried until the obstacle was crossed.

I groped my way along the patrol line and lit every lamp I came across. Kure pumped up my Petromax and lit it. From the back of the patrol line I saw its bright neon-like light reflected in the millions of minute water droplets in the air. The Petromax is a good lantern. It glows brighter than the lamps issued by the Administration and ignites straight away from a high-pressure stream of vaporised kerosene. The Administration lamps require messy preheating with methylated spirits from a little bowl below the mantle.

I walked to the head of the patrol, leaving a policeman at the rear with a torch to catch any stragglers. Kasari took the lead and we moved off like a giant glow-worm through the mist. Thankfully there were no major creeks or rivers ahead of us. We were two hours, normal walking time from Golgubip.

As we struggled on, the mist neither thickened nor lifted. The carriers set up a whooping call that travelled down the line and back again. The mist made for wonderful acoustics and I marvelled at the weird light and sound effects. As I sat on the side of the track a dull glow would appear out of the gloom, followed by a grinning carrier, a box and then another carrier. As they receded into the mist I could hear them whoop. This sound was immediately echoed below me and a second or two later another dull glow would appear. My elderly retainer, perched alongside me, laughed and clapped his hands as each apparition appeared. When I rose to catch up with the head of the patrol he quickly scurried after me and took my hand, and together we slid into the ether.

After three hours I was beginning to despair of ever reaching the village ahead until Kasari came to a halt and stood listening

with his ear turned up the track. Imbum had caught something too and he turned to the first carrier behind and made a shushing noise. The shush glided down the patrol line and soon I could only hear a muffled dripping. Then I picked it up. There was whooping coming from up ahead. We waited. There was a glow and a man in a *Mamusi* outfit emerged from the mist carrying a lantern. Other faces bunched up behind him.

‘The village is just ahead,’ he said. They had been worried about us. The priest told them we were on the way but when we didn’t turn up they decided to come and look for us.

The mist thinned out slightly as we entered the village. The clear space must have allowed it to rise. Where it mingled with smoke from the house fires condensation dripped off the thatch. We waited for the rest of the patrol to filter in and I did a head count. Everyone was there. The police set up camp in the rest houses and Kure and the old man set to brewing tea while I set up the A510 transceiver. It was late in the afternoon. The radio poles erected by Father Deshaies were still lying nearby and I hooked our aerial to them and heaved it upright. I plugged the two parts of the radio together and laid out the earth wires in a cross on the ground. Kasari heated the batteries up on the fire and slotted them into their compartments, the big one for the transmitter and the little one for the receiver. I twanged the microphone and tuned the aerial.

The reception was remarkably clear. Even though I had earphones on, everyone else could hear. The mist must have been widespread to make the reception this good. Village kids drew around me and pressed their ears to the radio. Unfortunately I had very little to tell the ADC except that we had arrived at Golgubip. This was the best reception I had ever had on the old World War II radio and I had nothing to say! I sat back in

frustration and listened to the other stations. Then something interesting caught my attention.

Geoff Smith, from Nomad, was in Port Moresby for three months on secondment to the Security and Intelligence Branch. Apparently *kiaps* with experience working on the border with Irian Jaya were being used as cipher clerks in the branch. I'd never heard of it. In the months I was at Kiunga patrolling the border the branch had never been mentioned. I suddenly felt a need to find out more about it and the code-ciphering. I was already composing a letter to the DDC in my head.

The next morning was foggy and cold. The mist seemed to deaden all sound. I knew the atmosphere had spooked the patrol because the police and carriers carried on their conversations in loud and high-pitched voices. Kure banged pots and pans with extra vigour. I sat on the top of the rest house steps with Buka and listened in amusement. The village was indeed eerie. I pulled on a pair of thick socks and warm boots that had dried overnight by the fire. I patted the dog and went inside to rummage through my patrol box for the census book. I heard Buka begin a low moaning wail that built slowly into a blood-curdling howl. The noise and voices outside gave way to a hushed silence. Satisfied, the dog descended the steps and trotted off to check out the village canines.

The *Mamusi*, a dour man called Lepsok, came out of his house as I set up the table and chairs for the census. He explained that the cool and foggy weather had persisted for several weeks and had badly affected the village gardens. He showed me some pitiful

sweet potato tubers and described how fat the village *kaukau* was normally. His wife came past, lugging a *bilum* full of firewood. On top of the wood were spinach and bush cabbage leaves. She pulled some out and showed me the black edges caused by frost.

'*Dispela ais emi buggerupim kapis bilong mipela olosem,*' she said. I was surprised that she spoke Tok Pisin. She explained that she had worked at Bolivip for a while. I was always amazed at how bush people picked up Tok Pisin so quickly, especially since it represented a new grammar. She must have also lost her natural shyness at Bolivip too.

I chatted with the woman while the *Mamusi* organised the villagers for the census. When everyone was ready I sat at the table. Imbum took his place beside me on another chair and Corporal Womi stood nearby to act as usher. Kure stood to one side armed with an opened bag of rice and one of my saucepans. I started the proceedings by thanking everyone for coming and explained the importance of the census for the Administration.

I mentioned the food shortage and told everyone we'd be on our way as quickly as possible. We didn't want to add to the problem. I told them that we would pass out a ration of rice to everyone coming forward. This caused a mild stir and I noticed children at the back of the crowd being discreetly despatched into the bush to call in anyone not yet in the village. Shortly afterwards, as I worked my way through the little family groups, I noticed the odd person filtering into the village square from the surrounding forest. I wondered how many people avoided the census count when there wasn't any gain on offer.

Everything seemed to be going well until I got to the name of a man who had died since the last census. I asked a few questions to satisfy myself that his demise had been natural and then called his widow's name. No response. I called it again. The *Mamusi* shuffled uncomfortably.

'Is she still in mourning?' I asked. The *Mamusi* shook his head. I called the names of her children and three little heads bobbed forward and stood in front of my table.

'Where is your mother?' I asked. Embarrassed silence. Then I spotted her dodging about amongst the piles of a distant house. The penny dropped.

'*Emi gat mun?*' I asked. The *Mamusi* nodded. The woman was shouting and waving. I told Imbum to send one of her children over to her. The eldest child, a girl of about eight years of age, ran over to her. A pantomime of sorts followed and the girl disappeared beneath a house emerging a few moments later with a sago-bark dish. I stood up and walked around the table and she handed me the dish. I held it out to Kure and he filled it with rice. I gave it back to the little girl and she grinned before leading her smaller sister and brother off towards their house. The Faiwolmin, and most other societies in Papua, consider menstruating women dangerous.

The mist had thinned considerably by mid-morning and I gave the order to pack up the patrol and get ready to move. Normally I would have stayed longer but I knew that if the patrol spent another night in the village we would end up buying food the people could ill afford to sell. I also knew that the carriers would trade back some of the rice we had distributed and I didn't want that to happen either. By eleven we were on the track to the next village. I hoped the fog would stay away until we got there.

We spent the next night at Imigabip and moved out the following morning after calling the census and distributing more rice. The village had the same problems with food shortages. The distribution of the rice had the same effect as at Golgubip and I recorded a couple of extra families who had obviously avoided previous census patrols. I lectured the *Mamusi* and he apologised profusely, saying the men heading the families refused to obey him.

In Papua, the social order is democratic with a complex power base. In some areas the men with the real power often put lower-ranked men up for appointment and pulled strings in the background. The Faiwolmin were generally above such shenanigans. Nevertheless, I made the point to the village people that we were distributing rice at the behest of the *Mamusi* and they should be thankful to him. I told them I would send a police patrol back in a month or so with more rice if the problem persisted. I didn't know how much difference a few kilos of rice would make but I suspected that anything was better than nothing.

As we trudged towards the next village the track steepened and we found ourselves in moss forest. We stepped gingerly, testing every step before allowing our weight to tip forward. The moss on what appeared to be the forest floor was, in fact, lying on a jumble of tree buttresses and debris, sometimes metres above the ground. The mossy track was pleasant to walk on, but I knew someone would get careless sooner or later. Sure enough, as we broached a ridge I heard a yell from the back of the patrol. My elderly valet fished around in his bag and handed me a torch.

We peered into the hole that had appeared in what otherwise looked like solid ground. There were muffled sounds and the snapping of twigs coming from the hole. I shone the torch down into it. The pale soles of two large feet were visible about two

metres below. More muffled sounds and a great deal of Faiwolmin swearing ensued until a head appeared between the feet. Two shining eyes peered into the light. Kasari tossed a length of bush rope. Two hands grasped it and Kasari said, '*Lukim, gaigai ikam!*' The hands and head threaded past the feet and rose like a rocket. When the carrier was out of the hole I checked him for injuries. He seemed okay, except for a few small cuts, but was shaking.

'There was no snake,' I said. 'The sergeant was joking.' Muffled laughter echoed along the carrier line. I daubed him with iodine. He jumped as each dab bit. I patted him on the head and he shrugged. The patrol moved off again.

When we emerged from the track we were festooned with bits of shaggy moss. The moss hung untidily on every branch and caught on the patrol boxes and around our heads. I shook off my covering of debris and peered across a dappled brook shimmering in the afternoon light. Across the brook stretched a field of low grass dotted with wild flowers. The grass ended on the near horizon where lazy smoke drifted from the thatch of well-made houses.

Bolangon is high up in the mountains and isolated. It sits in a saddle with steep mountains behind and a view over the forest in front. The weather was warm but crisp and we seemed to have left the mist behind. Patches of small cloud sitting on the tops of the trees kilometres below us were clearly visible. The place had a gothic beauty about it that I found both disconcerting and pleasant. The houses were clean and well thatched. There seemed to be no shortage of food. Stacks of freshly dug *kaukau* were stored beneath each house.

We began the census the next day. I decided to continue the rice issue at a reduced rate to see if I could flush out any recalcitrant citizens. After a while it became apparent that no one was hiding from us. I had become intrigued by another interesting phenomenon, however. Everyone, especially the children, seemed in robust good health. There were none of the malformed limbs and mild retardation amongst these people that there was in most of the other isolated mountain villages I had seen in the Star Mountains. As I ticked off names, added new babies and toddlers, and crossed out the deceased, I wondered at the cause. Maybe they did away with their malformed or backward offspring?

I watched the *Mamusi* efficiently usher each little family group forward. There was something strange about him. Before me stood a man and woman with two children. The woman was pretty and so were her two children. She was about twenty-six years old according to the census book. Strange; these hardworking Faiwolmin women were usually middle-aged by twenty-five and showing all the signs of a hard life. Then I noticed her eyes. They were almond-shaped. I looked at her husband. He looked normal. Then I looked at the children and their eyes were just like their mother's. The *Mamusi* bent over the table to see why I had stopped. He squinted and then opened wide two tawny-brown almond eyes. I flipped back through the census book. The Administration had adopted the traditional practice of using the name of a person's father as a surname. It made cross-referencing blood relatives quite easy. The woman and the *Mamusi* were brother and sister.

I ticked the family off the census roll and signalled that it was time for a break. Everyone sat down and Kure went off to make tea. When he returned I beckoned the *Mamusi* over and

offered him a mug of sweet tea and some biscuits. He took them politely and I asked him about his eyes. The *Mamusi* looked uncomfortable. Imbum couldn't contain himself.

'I know this story,' he clamoured. 'They told us last night!' He turned to the village constable.

'Come on,' he said. 'Tell the *kiap* the story. Its alright; you've done nothing wrong.' The *Mamusi* looked doubtful. Imbum wriggled excitedly and translated as quickly as he could.

It transpired that a Japanese aircraft had crashed into the mountains above the village during the Pacific War. The Bolangon people had found two survivors wandering around in the forest. The men were injured but had survived for two years or so in the village. After that time they struck out south hoping to get to the coast. The Bolangon men had escorted them for a while but left them when they got into unfamiliar territory. They had never seen them again. I wondered what had happened. There were no records of Japanese airmen being found along the Fly River, which is where they would have eventually emerged if they had got through the mountains.

The *Mamusi* signalled for an old woman in the crowd and she shuffled forward.

'This is my mother,' he said. 'She looked after one of the men. She didn't know about the war; no one here did then. She just looked after him because he was hurt. She was a widow. The man was my father. I was born when he was here but my sister was born after he left. My mother was very sad after he had gone.'

'Did the other man have children?' I asked.

'Oh yes!' the *Mamusi* replied. 'There were three more children; they are all here and they have their own children now.'

And the new blood in the village explains why everyone seems so healthy, I thought.

From Bolangon we wound our way down through the moss forest towards the *Ok Wunik*. We crossed the river on a cane bridge. Kasari carried Buka over his shoulder and on into the nearby village of Kongobip. It was a long but easy walk downhill. Walking the other way up to Bolangon from Kongobip would be hell and I knew why the patrol route was clockwise from Olsobip. Kongobip was deserted except for a few old people, who told us everyone was down at Olsobip. We moved into the rest house and made dinner.

The next day we walked down to Olsobip. I had a long shower and checked the office. In the telegram book I came across an entry highlighted by the clerk. It said, 'You are seconded to Intelligence and Security Port Moresby for three months from end month. Stop. Confirm travel arrangements Olsobip — Daru — Moresby soonest. Stop. DDC Daru.' That afternoon I confirmed the arrangements and learnt that the ADC was on leave and his temporary replacement was not pleased. It seemed he only had a cadet to replace me for the three months. I half-heartedly told him that I could defer to someone else but he said the arrangements had already been made and there was nothing he could do about it.

The next day I struck out early for Kongobip and conducted the census. Everyone had been down at Olsobip for the initiation of a group of boys and they were all still wearing feathers and paint as they lined up. The next day I hiked up to nearby Loubip to finish the census for the division. I had lunch with the Summer Institute of Linguistics couple based there, heard a court

case of damage by pigs to one of Fiamnok's gardens, awarded him appropriate compensation from the pigs' owner, and then walked back to the station. On the way back I heard an aircraft overhead. Strange, I thought; the usual run isn't due in for a day or so. When I got there, Assistant Patrol Officer O'Hearn was waiting for me. He had been flown in on the Mission Aviation Fellowship Cessna en route to Bolivip.

'I've been told to stay on the station,' he told me.

'You'll be right,' I replied. 'Nothing much happens here.' The next morning I took him through the ropes of running the station and officially handed over. In the afternoon I wrote my patrol report and collated the census figures. They came out as a net population decline of 1.3 per cent. The next day I boarded the regular ration-run back to Kiunga and then on to Daru and Port Moresby.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The head of the Security and Intelligence Branch was an aloof, upper-class type, who had difficulty concealing his racism. He seemed to be suppressing other things too but I could only wonder at these because he deigned only to speak to his second-in-command. Any communications to the likes of me came down the line.

The second-in-command seemed to have stepped straight out of the pages of a Biggles novel and was very smart in an obscure sort of way. His esoteric interpretation of everything often left me bemused. He had the knack of making even the simplest proposition sound deep and profound. It was only after you worked out exactly what he was saying that you realised he was wanking. I think the Branch Head resented his second-in-command's mind.

The Branch Number Three was a perfect counterfoil. He was portly and middle-aged, with the demeanour of a distant but enjoyable great uncle. He knew exactly what was going on all of the time, and was damned if it was going to interfere with his comfortable sinecure. He smoked a pipe, of course, as did the other two; but whereas they gripped theirs, mostly unlit, in their steely-jutted

jaws, he used his to generate great clouds of aromatic smoke and to shed copious quantities of tobacco all over his desk and the surrounding floor. I was always shaking little shards of *Blend 11* out of the paperwork he gave me.

The other permanent fixture in the office was a ruffled lady of indeterminate age who was addicted to gin. She could have been English or European; it was hard to tell. She was generally pissed by midday. She tried to keep awake when the Branch Head was abroad but was mostly seen dozing in a happy daze. When I caught her sober she turned out to be a witty and charming lady with a healthier than average cynicism. Her trick with the gin was to pretend it was water. Every morning she made a point of loudly noting Port Moresby's oppressive heat while she filled a big tumbler of water from the fountain in the hallway. She plonked this tumbler in plain view on her desk and imbibed from it at regular intervals. The water level never seemed to drop, and she never seemed to revisit the fountain. I spotted the gin bottle in her bottom drawer on my second day there.

The other staff member was a fellow *kiap*. I'm not quite sure why he was there. I suspect he didn't know either. He had been pulled out of a hot, swampy and depressing patrol post on the border with Irian Jaya. He had had a number of highly publicised run-ins with Indonesian troops pursuing border crossers. Most of these incidents turned out to be simple navigational errors. It is almost impossible to work out exactly where you are in the jungle, let alone which side of the border you are on. In most cases you can only work out where you are when you stumble on a known point like a major river or, in the case of Indonesian troops, an Australian Patrol Officer striding down an airstrip in a possessive sort of way. Anyone could be excused for firing off a few frustrated rounds in

such circumstances. The media gave Sean a fleeting fame and I don't think the Administration knew what to do with him after that so they stuck him in the Security and Intelligence Branch out of harm's way.

While Sean was sanguine about the Indonesians, the last member of the Branch was less enamoured of them. This was Abraham, the office 'boy'. Abraham was about fifty and came from Irian Jaya. He had a neat row of scars on his back and a raggedy set on his chest from a lucky hit by an Indonesian paratrooper firing at him as he was swimming across the Fly River into Papua New Guinea. He had no family because the Indonesian soldiers had shot them all, along with most of the other people in his village who had been silly enough to fly Dutch flags. When he told me this I recollected seeing Dutch flags flying on the Irian Jayan side of the Fly River as I motored up the Papua New Guinea side. Abraham hated the Indonesian military with a vengeance and was a member of the OPM (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*) or Free Papua Movement. He had regular contact with an OPM cell in Port Moresby, but no one in the Branch seemed to be aware of this possibility — which was strange because Australia's official stance on Irian Jaya was pro-Indonesian and the OPM were technically the enemy. Indonesia, as everyone knew, was the only thing stopping the communist hordes in the north from sweeping down to our doorstep. This was true, because John F. Kennedy had said so!

I shared Abraham's misgivings about the Indonesian military. I had had a glimpse of them during my border patrol days at Kiunga. Border patrolling was a quick and lightweight affair. The idea was to move swiftly so that border crossers could be located and turned back before they got too far into Papua New Guinea. On my first border patrol an Australian Army Warrant Officer accompanied

me. I was fresh out of the Highlands and, despite my flat feet, thought I knew something about walking. Bill Laphorne was fifty-two years old and walked me into the ground. I came out limping after twisting an ankle trying to keep up with him.

On one of my later patrols I located a small group of border crossers carrying a stretcher. When they spotted us they took off and we set out in hot pursuit. They were tired and hungry and we ran them down in a matter of hours. They were sitting around in a dejected state when I emerged from the jungle into the clearing where the police had them under guard. The stretcher lay in the centre of the clearing, with a few palm leaves stuck into the ground to create shade. Buka sniffed and went straight to the body on the stretcher. I called her away and went over to look.

An old man stared up at me. I moved aside the damp and dirty cloth that covered his torso. He had two long slashes from his chest to his hips. The cuts crossed just above his navel. The gigantic wounds were pulled together with bloody rags. In the gaps I saw sections of his exposed bowel. I took a deep breath. My medical expertise consisted of a Senior First Aid course.

The edges of the wounds were too far gone for me to stitch; perhaps a doctor who knew what to do would have had better luck. I cleaned the wounds with a saline solution and sprinkled them with antibiotic powder. There were pain-killers in my first-aid kit but I was afraid to give him any fluid. In the end I crushed a dozen tablets, dissolved them in water, and swabbed his mouth with the liquid at regular intervals. I used all the butterfly closures in the kit on the wounds and carefully replaced the old bandages one by one so that the wounds wouldn't reopen. Through all of this he simply gazed at me, a soft smile occasionally flickering on his lips.

We cooked a meal of rice and bully beef and fed the rest of the group. There were eight of them, four men, two women, a young boy and a baby girl. They spoke Awin and were related to people on the Papuan side of the border. The old man was the elder of the village. The Indonesian soldiers had disembowelled him and his wife in front of everyone as a warning of what they could expect if they harboured OPM rebels. When the frightened villagers returned to their houses after the soldiers had gone they found the old man still alive. They had bundled his intestines up and pushed them back into the gaping wounds and pulled the edges together with ragged cloth. His poor wife had died in the night. The old man told them they must flee. He said they must find a Patrol Officer on the other side of the border and ask for sanctuary. They had been on the move for three days when we caught up with them.

There was a mission station on the Fly River just west of us. The wife of the missionary was a nurse and ran a clinic. There would be antibiotics and pain-killers there. That was the best bet for the old man. If he survived the trip he could be flown out to the hospital at Daru. I wrote a note explaining the situation and sent off a runner. The police lifted the stretcher and I gave their rifles to the Irian Jayan men to carry. They were not loaded anyway. I was not allowed to issue ammunition unless we were in dire straits.

We camped in the jungle that night and I sat up with the old man. He seemed reassured by the flickering lantern and I covered him with a blanket in the early morning chill. We crossed the river opposite the mission the following morning. I had to swim across and commandeer a canoe. When we had everyone across I walked up to the mission. The missionary and his wife met me at the door of their house.

‘Didn’t you get my note?’ I asked.

‘Yes. It arrived yesterday afternoon,’ the man replied.

‘I had expected someone to meet us on the other side of the river,’ I said.

‘We are not allowed to assist the border crossers,’ the man replied. ‘The Administration is quite firm about that.’

‘I am the Administration,’ I said, ‘And I want you to assist these people.’

‘We cannot break the law!’ the man replied.

Then the woman spoke. ‘The hospital is over there. Take the old man there and I’ll be right along.’

The clinic had been prepared for an emergency. The woman quickly stripped off the old man’s bandages and stood back. She had tears in her eyes.

‘I’m sorry about my husband,’ she said. ‘He takes things literally and is frightened of the Indonesian soldiers.’

‘Have they been here?’ I asked.

‘No, but we’ve seen some of their handiwork,’ she replied. Then she said, ‘This is going to take some time. There are quarters for you and your patrol down by the river. My people will take care of the refugees.’ I noted her terminology.

Before I left she beckoned me back and pointed to the old man. He had lifted his right arm. I walked over and clasped his hand in mine. He whispered a word two or three times. I couldn’t quite catch it.

‘He thinks you are Dutch.’ She smiled. ‘It means “thank you”.’

The old man died the next day. The rest of his family travelled upriver with us to an Awin village, where we left them with relatives. I later estimated that we had been about ten kilometres inside Irian Jaya when we had picked the old man up. Even though our patrol instructions were explicit about turning back border crossers I never knew of a *kiap* who had done so, and I wondered if Sean had harboured the same sympathies. I knew I had to be careful about what I said about Irian Jaya while I was in the Branch and I was never game to ask him.

Our rumpled gin lady was the only other person I heard refer to border crossers as refugees. When I was introduced to her nobody bothered to tell me what she did in the Branch. After a day or so I realised she was the secretary. They didn't tell me because it was assumed that I would automatically know that the only female in the Branch had to be the secretary. I mistakenly guessed she was some sort of academic attached to the Branch, such was her demeanour. I think I endeared myself to her by my mistake and thenceforth became privy to her astute observations and opinions. Her name was Zara and she delighted in correcting the grammar, spelling and other mistakes of the Branch Head and the second-in-command. She also altered terminology if she thought it was wrong or inappropriate, including turning 'border-crossers' into 'refugees'. Sometimes she just refused to type up letters.

'That clause is downright racist and insulting. Revise it, bring it back, and I might think about typing it for you.'

She could edit and type perfectly, even when she was pissed. When she typed my first memo I noticed a couple of subtle changes.

'This is not exactly what I wrote,' I said. She smiled benignly but refused to take it back.

‘I suppose it sounds better that way. Um, thanks.’ She nodded dreamily and took a swig from her tumbler.

When she wasn’t around, everyone complained about her.

‘So why not fire her?’ I asked innocently.

‘Oh, we couldn’t do that. Oh no, couldn’t get rid of her; there’d be hell to pay!’

‘Why?’

‘We just couldn’t, that’s all!’

Turned out that Zara had connections. Her husband was a lecturer at the university. The University was perceived by the Branch as a hotbed of political dissent. One of her husband’s friends was Josephine Abaijah’s political adviser. Josephine headed the Papua Besena Movement. Papua Besena was a separatist group that didn’t like the idea of being paired up with New Guinea come independence. Their fears stemmed from the increasing migration of Highlanders to Port Moresby, where they were taking up Papuan jobs and causing trouble with their boisterous lifestyle. Zara knew what Josephine was doing long before the Branch found out. And she wasn’t party to the view that Josephine was the political pawn of her academic adviser.

‘He might be a pinko playing political games but she’s no puppet!’ Zara told me. ‘She’s very savvy and he does what he’s told. She’s using his connections to the Australian National University in Canberra. People there have the ear of the Labor Party. If the Labor Party wins the next election they’ll set up a timetable for independence and she’ll have a direct link. She’s a smart lady. Trouble with this Branch is they’re a bunch of misogynists; can’t see women as anything but typists and housewives!’ I later discreetly looked up ‘misogynist’ in my Oxford dictionary.

‘Independence?’ I smiled. ‘How do you know the Labor Party is going to give PNG independence?’

‘Gough told me,’ she replied and took another swig of gin.

I knew independence was, in fact, also on the Liberal Party agenda because John Gorton, the Prime Minister, had said so. Now he was coming to Papua New Guinea to say it again. This fact didn’t particularly impress the people in the Branch, however. They were all dyed-in-the-wool Liberal Party supporters but John Gorton embarrassed them. They saw him as a party hack warming the seat until someone in the mould of Robert Menzies came along. And worse, this seat-warmer had an unpredictable streak. He liked his booze, told people what he thought and swore in public. Not to mention Ainslie Gotto; just what was that relationship all about?

He planned to go to Rabaul and talk to the Tolais, who were occupying plantations in a bid to gain land. I was assigned to spend a couple of nights lurking in the Administrator’s garden when Gorton arrived, presumably on the lookout for Tolais staking claims to the flowerbeds.

The situation around Rabaul on the Gazelle Peninsula of East New Britain was sad. It would eventually lead to the murder of the East New Britain District Commissioner, Jack Emanuel. When the Germans set up their New Guinea headquarters on the peninsula there was plenty of land, even after large areas had been taken up for plantations. With the cessation of tribal warfare the Tolai population increased, however, and by the 1960s there was not enough land to go around and they were eyeing the big plantations that were owned by, among others, the Catholic Church. The Tolais set up organisations to agitate for land reform. The Mataungan Association was one such organisation.

The crisis on the Gazelle Peninsula began to become really serious when the Mataungans refused to take part in any multiracial local government councils. These councils were a significant part of the Administration's planned path towards self government and independence. They were a particular passion of the head *kiap*, Tom Ellis, who had the ear of the Administrator, David Hay. Tom Ellis was hard-nosed and he knew that multiracial councils were working in the rest of the country and he wasn't about to make exceptions. Ellis thought that multiracialism maximised the expertise available to councils. The Mataungans thought that it allowed Europeans to dominate the councils.

Tom Ellis was something of an enigma. When I arrived in Papua New Guinea he was the District Commissioner of the Western Highlands. A couple of months later he was on his way to Port Moresby to head up the Department of District Administration. When I first met him I found it hard to believe he inspired so much respect and loyalty amongst his fellow *kiaps*. They jokingly referred to him as 'God'. He was not physically imposing. He was pale-skinned with aquiline features and soft, long-fingered, hands that must have served him well when he worked as a medical assistant. It was hard to believe that he had once left the Administration to work as a goldminer. It was only when you looked him in the eye that you recognised the power of his personality; his eyes were intense and penetrating. When he had flown fighter planes during World War II you wouldn't have wanted to stray into his sights.

When Tom Ellis ran the Western Highlands it was necessary to obtain a permit to hold a *singsing*. This was part of his strategy to limit the unrest that sometimes accompanied these events but it was also part of a more subtle strategy to discourage the practice of

traditional cultural pursuits, many of which, such as the *Moka* and *Te'* were exchange ceremonies with economic functions. Tom saw the Melanesian character and culture as an anathema when it came to 'proper' economic development. His view was that Papua New Guineans needed to shed their culturally divisive trappings if they hoped to develop as a prosperous nation.

This was one of the reasons why he encouraged resettlement schemes in the Wahgi Valley. These schemes took people out of their cultural cosiness and mixed them with strange people. The cultural void thus created could then be more efficiently replaced with a culture of capitalist endeavour. Tom knew this cultural shift was not going to happen overnight but he had an interim plan. This was the development of European-owned plantations and businesses. Such enterprises would create the need for infrastructure, like roads and towns. The Papua New Guineans could learn about capitalism by watching these developments prosper and in the distant future, after they had lost their Melanesian traits, they might be able to duplicate them. In the meantime they could be useful by providing labour and land. His view was savagely pragmatic and appealed to the Western Highlanders. They knew that if they had a European sitting at the top of an enterprise they would all prosper. These aggressive people had no truck with namby-pamby political sensitivities. It was this view that Tom Ellis took to Port Moresby.

When he was the District Commissioner in the Western Highlands he lived in a house near the Sub-District Office in the middle of Mount Hagen Township on a hill surrounded by lawns and gardens. I was sent up there with a team of *kalabus* to help him pack. As I looked at the big, neat boxes scattered about the floor of the living room I recognised the trappings of a man used to moving around unencumbered. I knew his daughter was about but I didn't see her.

The prisoners sweated all morning loading the packed boxes onto a truck. I ran around checking inventories and labelling the boxes before they left the house. By three in the afternoon we had most of it done and were sitting around on the lawns ready to leave. We heard a jangling noise from the house and Tom Ellis emerged carrying a big tub of water in which cut limes and ice floated. His cook followed carrying tin cups and a bag of mixed fruit. As Ellis passed the cups and fruit around amongst the prisoners I noticed the deference they showed him. He turned to me and smiled. I felt uneasy and ready to cop some sort of criticism about the packing but all he said was, 'I'll miss this old house!' His eyes were still intense and penetrating but seemed soft and sad at the same time; they reminded me of dormant coals in a fire that would flare up at the mere hint of a breeze.

The problem for Tom Ellis and the senior officers on his staff was that they realised the vast disparity of sophistication amongst the Papua New Guineans. Whilst they knew that the canny Tolais, for instance, were probably as well prepared for independence as they could be, their countrymen in the Southern and Western Highlands and the Western District were only just beginning to grapple with the implications of an introduced civilisation. What could Tom Ellis do? It just wasn't realistic to give one part of the country autonomy without granting it to the other. The only practical thing seemed to be to try and slow the whole process down.

Ironically, this was the worst thing he could do. By opposing the aspirations of the Papua New Guinean elite he fomented the sort of protests being carried out by such groups as the Mataungans, and it was this sort of crisis that was beginning to make people like Gorton think that Gough Whitlam might have

the right idea about pulling out of the country as soon as possible. When Tom Ellis dug his heels in about multiracial councils the Gazelle Peninsula suddenly became a dangerous place. And now John Gorton was going there. The 'situation reports' began to flow thick and fast.

The Mataungan Association on New Britain, Napidakoe Navitu on Bougainville and the Kabisawali Movement in the Trobriands were all nascent political organisations calling for local autonomy. They were unsettling to the European population of Papua New Guinea, whose favourite reading matter tended to be books like Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Tribe That Lost Its Head* and Robert Ruark's *Uhuru*. The latter was especially popular because it told of the white opposition to the *Mau Mau* in Kenya. Why anyone thought this was relevant is hard to tell. Perhaps it had something to do with Tom Mboya's visit in 1964. He retained close ties with a number of prominent Papua New Guinea activists until his assassination. Everyone seemed to be watching Africa as colonialisation there unravelled, often with disastrous results. It didn't help that successive United Nations delegations to Papua New Guinea included outspoken Africans who were pushing for the end of colonialism worldwide. The local organisations like the Mataungans were disturbing but tolerable. Many old hands pointed to the strange cults that sprang up from time to time and tended to regard the Mataungans and their fellow organisations as sophisticated cargo cultists. It was the Pangu Pati that really worried them.

Pangu was representative of people from all over Papua New Guinea and its main platform, as outlined in a submission to the Select Committee on Constitutional Development, was nothing less

than independence. Its founding members, the so-called 'thirteen angry men', were well-educated students and public servants. Pangu had developed out of a discussion group formed by students at the Administrative College at Waigani. It started out as a 'bully beef and beer' club, a sort of poor man's 'beefsteak and burgundy' club. Its political platform was well thought out and quite reasonable, calling for moderate reforms and a realistic timetable for self government and independence. It had real no similarities to any African independence movements. Its radicalisation was purely an invention of the media. This fact was brought home to me one day when I encountered one of its leading lights and later Papua New Guinea's first Prime Minister, Michael Somare, dressed in a *laplap* and thongs pushing a kiddy-laden trolley around a supermarket behind his wife. I later worked for another founding member, Sinaka Goava, and found him to be a lovely, gentle man.

This is not to say that some of the party didn't enjoy their newfound notoriety. When they found out the Branch was spying on them they played up to it. Ordinary meetings at the college or the university became secret meetings and anyone who had a telephone thought it was being tapped. It all became quite bizarre. Port Moresby was such a small place that the Pangu Pati leaders and Administration heavies were on a first-name basis and could often be seen drinking at the same watering holes.

While the Australian press played the 'dangerous radicals' line to the hilt the local press took a more realistic view and usually reported both sides of the story. Pangu got quite a good run in Port Moresby's daily papers. Many of the journalists were sympathetic and a few of them were active within the party. I knew one of the latter quite well. I was not surprised, therefore, when she didn't meet me at the airport.

‘What could I do?’ she laughed. ‘Turn up and throw my arms around you in front of your boss and probably in plain view of half of Pangu? Joe Nombri was in the terminal!’

‘I know Joe. We used to share a house in Kiunga when he was banished out there for a while. We upset the ADC by painting the fridge fire-engine red and putting Pangu Pati stickers all over it. He’s in town for a course or something.’

‘A course or something!’ she snorted.

‘I’m only a cipher clerk,’ I replied. ‘Besides, it was too good an excuse to visit you.’

‘I know,’ she said and ceremoniously planted a kiss on my nose. We were standing outside the Papuan Hotel in the main street of Port Moresby.

On the following morning I was introduced to the ‘spaghetti machine’. I was nursing a hangover, not so much alcohol-induced but nevertheless a hangover. I stepped closer to the shining copper-clad column with its myriad sockets and flailing red and black leads. Each socket and lead had either numbers or a set of letters to identify it. Number Three tried to explain it to me.

‘It’s your job to crank it up every morning,’ he said as he puffed out clouds of smoke. I rather liked the smell of his *Blend 11* tobacco but the smoke obscured the machine. I waved my hand around until it became visible again. I had hoped it might have disappeared in the smoke.

‘What you do first is look up the daily code.’

‘Where do I look that up?’ I naively asked.

‘In the Daily Code Book, of course,’ he replied.

‘Which is kept where?’

‘In the Number One’s safe; he’ll give it to you each morning.’

‘Bugger. Does that mean I have to talk to him?’

‘Not necessarily,’ Number Three said warily, ‘if he talks to you first you can reply; otherwise say nothing.’

‘Jesus — what if he’s not around?’

‘Oh, he’ll be around. First one in and the last to leave — always!’

‘Okay.’

‘All right. Next find the page with the relevant day’s date.’

‘Like today I’d look for today’s date?’

‘Don’t be a smart-arse.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Then read off the settings.’

‘Settings?’

‘Yes. For instance, tomorrow lead AA goes in socket 12 and lead AB goes in socket 93 and lead ...’

‘How many leads and sockets are there?’ I asked, squinting at the shiny surface.

‘About a hundred!’

‘A hundred!’

‘Give or take. Once you get the hang of it it’s quite easy.’

‘What if I make a mistake?’

‘The whole system fails.’

‘Fails?’

‘Yes. If you make a mistake we can’t communicate with Canberra, all the secure lines go dead and they set off an alert.’

‘An alert?’

‘They contact us by, um, other means, and, um, someone comes in to see what’s going on.’

‘Someone?’

‘Yes, someone.’

‘What does “someone” do?’

‘Checks the settings, fixes them and then roars shit out of Number One.’

‘And he roars shit out of me?’

‘Not quite. Number One then roars shit out of Number Two and he roars shit out of me and I roar shit out of you.’

‘Of course. And I have to set this thing up every morning, at 7 o’clock?’

‘That’s right, at seven sharp.’

‘Good. For a minute there I thought it was important.’

‘Now don’t be like that.’

‘Well, for starters I guess I’ll have to buy a watch, presumably with a day and date.’

‘You haven’t got a wristwatch?’

‘Never needed one. This is Papua.’

‘Uh-huh.’

The Branch had a little white Mini to run around in on its various secret errands. The car was indistinguishable from the other white Administration Minis around town. It was also remarkably similar to the older and slightly battered white Mini Geoff Smith had left behind for me to use and eventually sell on to either the next incumbent or another seconded *kiap* needing wheels. This was a *kiap* tradition. Battered Peugeot, hand-painted Nissan Cedrics and myriads of Minis and Baby Fiats exchanged hands as courses or secondments ended and others began. Usually the exchange rate was around fifty dollars. No one bothered to formalise the sales and most of the cars were simply re-registered in the long-gone, original owner’s name.

I used the Administration car quite regularly during the day, mostly collecting or delivering things. I didn't mind being the delivery boy because it got me out of the office. I regularly visited the airport to pick people up, went out to the university and administrative college at Waigani collecting mysterious padded envelopes and ran vinyl document holders round to various Administration offices in Moresby town or the outlying areas of Konedobu. In between I lingered at the Copper Kettle in Boroko drinking cappuccinos, visiting Ihini at the *Post Courier* and catching up with mates at the administrative college.

In the evenings I took Geoff's car to restaurants, the drive-in and, occasionally, plays, forums, music shows and lectures at the university. Most of these shows had political overtones but were pretty harmless. If she was not participating, Ihini was collecting pieces for the *Post Courier*. She usually had passes and knew everyone there. I got to know some of the 'radicals', both black and white, and grew to like a few of them. Some of them were on ego trips, especially the whites. These people were hard to like because they didn't realise how much damage their political games caused. Some of them didn't care and they were the ones I liked least. The honest 'radicals' were generally dedicated people who were invariably polite. It was a bit unsettling to hear lines like 'death to imperialists and colonialists' shouted in a totally inoffensive way. Afterwards we would get a takeaway in Boroko and go back to my donga in Newtown, stroll along Ela Beach or visit some of her relatives in the fringe settlements on the outskirts of Waigani.

Going back to the donga I shared with Sean became difficult. The house had a telephone so that anyone there on security duty could be contacted. Sean did a lot of security duty and he eventually mentioned my visitor to Number Three. 'Better meet

somewhere else', Number Three advised. I could see Sean's point because I also knew that Geoff Smith, who for some inexplicable reason known only to him and his ladyfriends was incredibly attractive to women of all colours and cultures, had maintained a harem there when he shared the house. I knew this because after he left they would turn up at the door at odd hours or casually lean in the window of the Mini when I was parked in town and start up bizarre conversations. When I explained this to Ihini she smiled.

'I don't know about the white girls or the Chinese or the half-castes but for many Papuan girls the time between puberty and marriage is a time of freedom. Many of the girls would be promised in marriage. The experience they gain in lovemaking before marriage is highly prized by their husbands-to-be.'

I was vaguely aware of this enlightened custom and Geoff had told me how some of his acquaintances delighted in regaling each other with details of their conquests, particularly if they happened to be senior Administration people.

'Some of my friends are like that too,' Ihini said, when I told her what Geoff had said. Before I could decide whether to ask her about what I was thinking she added, 'My people have similar customs.'

'You have a husband picked out for you?'

'Yes.' She hesitated. 'He's a nice man, a schoolteacher. My parents ask me about him every time I go home.'

'And what do you say?' I asked.

'Oh, I put them off. I say I'm not ready yet; they listen and sigh, but they accept what I say.'

'And what does he say?'

'I don't know; he's not supposed to contact me.'

'And will you marry him?'

‘I don’t know. It’s very difficult,’ she replied. I put my arm around her and she pushed her face into my shoulder.

I wondered about our relationship for several days. I could see the difficulty in her situation. She was a modern, well-educated woman who also valued her people’s traditions. If she abandoned those traditions she would be letting them down. In the end I decided not to worry about it; I would take each day as it came and be thankful. Whatever happened would happen. In any case, I had other things to occupy my mind. I had become enmeshed in the Gorton visit and an apparent racially motivated attack on the Branch Mini.

It had been an absurd night. We had been rostered to lurk in the flowerbeds and outbuildings around Government House for the night that John Gorton was there during the Port Moresby stopover of his tour. The Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary and the Pacific Islands Regiment were also there in force. These two organisations were bitter rivals. With so many bodies stumbling around it was guaranteed that a few flowerbeds would be trampled.

I had been paired with Number Three and we managed to get off on the wrong foot immediately. We had been issued with special passes that allowed us entry through the two perimeters set up for the visit. A policeman stationed at the usual guardhouse supervised the first perimeter on the road in to Government House. When we arrived the guardhouse was empty. We stopped the Mini and waited. I sounded the horn. Nothing. I shrugged and drove on. A second, temporary guardhouse had been established around the bend, about 80 metres up the road, and was manned by a soldier. We could see him pacing

about. He must have had a view of us through the shrubbery. He seemed agitated and I slowed down.

As we approached the soldier stepped directly in front of us and thrust out his rifle and bayonet. While doing this he yelled something incomprehensible. I was momentarily surprised and fumbled with the brake and accelerator pedals. The net result was that we lurched onto the end of his bayonet. A thin jet of steam slowly obscured the soldier. I got out of the car and walked round to the front.

'Miting mo beta yu rausim nip bilong yu esi esi,' I said to the soldier. He nodded and carefully withdrew the bayonet. The steam from the radiator continued to hiss. As we both leaned forward to inspect the damage a shout came from down the road. The policeman from the first guardhouse was running towards us. He had been in the bushes taking a leak and had rushed out when he heard the car horn to see us disappearing up the road. The soldier stepped out to meet him.

'Yu fukin longlong,' he yelled at the policeman. *'Bilong wanem yu no pasim dispela ka?'*

'Husat i longlong?' the copper replied. *'Taim mi pispis long bus emi taim bilong yu mas lukutim rot.'*

'Maybe you could work out a roster for pissing,' I suggested, but they didn't hear me; they were going hammer and tongs. More blue uniforms materialised at the top of the road, followed by another group of green uniforms. I left them to it, climbed back into the car beside a bemused Number Three and hissed off towards the house.

At one in the morning Number Three had had enough. One of Gorton's male staff imbibed a tad too much booze and began molesting the female house-staff at about midnight. Gorton's minders had shuffled him off towards his bed but on the way he had stopped to ask the wife of one of the delegates from Bougainville if certain parts of her anatomy were a similar colour to the skin on her face and arms. The woman had encountered this sort of crassness in the past and didn't make a fuss. Number Three apologised to her and her husband as he escorted them to their car.

'Time to go,' he said as he met me outside. 'If they want to assassinate Gorton, who are we to stand in the way!' I gave a sigh of relief; the mosquitoes had had a feast and I was itching all over. We found a bucket and garden hose and refilled the Mini's radiator.

In the morning I took the car around to the Administration garage.

'It's been wounded in the line of duty; be gentle with it', I told the mechanic.

When I got back to the office, Number Two was pacing up and down the corridor.

'The Branch Mini has been run into a ditch and covered with graffiti out at the admin. college,' he said. I scratched my head and was about to tell him I had dropped it off at the Badili workshops when he continued; 'Probably got something to do with Gorton's visit; probably those arseholes from the uni.' He was clearly enjoying himself. 'You can come with me,' he commanded. 'Might need a push to get it out.'

As we drove out to Waigani a disturbing thought occurred to me. My esteemed future brother-in-law was in town doing a course at the admin. college and I had lent him Geoff's car the previous day. I wasn't going to use it for the time I was supposedly watching Gorton's backside and I figured he might as well use it.

I knew what it was like to be stranded out at the college with no transport. I glanced across at Number Two. He had a glint in his eye. He was out to save the Empire.

I was right. Someone had picked up Geoff's Mini from where it had been parked and carried it across the road to the big concrete drain surrounding the college. They had positioned it across the drain with two wheels on either side. Crude slogans were daubed in mud on the windscreen and body. Number Two was literally huffing with indignation.

'This is a direct attack on the Branch,' he fumed. 'Those bastards will be brought to account!'

I thought about telling him the obvious but decided to spin it out a bit longer. Surely he'll notice that it hasn't got Administration licence plates, I thought.

'I'll go and phone for a tow truck,' I told him.

'Better get onto CID; we'll need fingerprints,' he said as I left.

I walked across to the mess. A group of Papuan students were sitting around the canteen store drinking Coke. I walked up to them.

'It wasn't us,' one of them said. 'It was your dopey *kiap* mates, came home pissed as farts last night.'

'Must have taken a few of them to carry it across the road,' I said.

'Thing is,' another said, 'if they don't own up, some of the Tolai and Buka boys are going to get blamed for it.'

I could see his point. 'I'll see what I can do. Where's the phone?'

When I walked back out to the stranded Mini there was a group of police and students standing around. 'Bugger,' I thought; but it got worse. A car from the *Post Courier* drove up and out stepped Ihini and a photographer. I sidled up behind her.

‘There’s a bunch of *kiaps* at the college on a course; they did it,’ I whispered to her. She looked at me in exasperation and slowly shook her head. I shrugged and sidled off to catch the senior policeman, who was listening to a red-faced Number Two. I nudged him on the arm.

‘Could I have a word?’ I asked.

Ihini was fairly subdued when I saw her that evening. ‘I know you’re not like that,’ she said, ‘but a lot of *kiaps* are. It gets a bit wearisome after a while.’ What could I say? She was right. A high percentage of *kiaps* were inclined to be redneck, and it only took a modicum of booze to bring it out. She continued as if she were reading my mind. ‘I don’t think terms like “redneck” are exactly right. You often see *kiaps* who you thought were out-and-out fascists going in to bat for Papua New Guineans at great risk to themselves and their careers. A lot of them have right-wing views on some things and left-wing views on other things. They’re impossible to categorise; some of them helped found Pangu.’

‘And some of them work for Security and Intelligence Branch.’

‘You said it!’

‘But that was a pretty stupid thing to do; it was ill-timed and thoughtless.’

‘I imagine they’ll get a roasting. At least everyone knows it wasn’t the students.’

‘Which has disappointed both Numbers One and Two respectively.’

‘And we won’t be writing about it, so it should die a natural death.’

‘You’re wonderful.’

‘I know.’

There was a long weekend coming up and Ihini was flying home for a holiday.

‘If you come back married I’ll understand,’ I told her.

‘Don’t joke about it; anything could happen.’

‘I could come with you.’

‘You like waving red rags at bulls?’

‘Good point. No, Smithy’s back for some obscure reason, and there are a couple of saner mates at the college; we were thinking of hiring a car and going down to Kwikila and maybe Hula to check out the fishing.’

‘And the girls?’

‘I’m strictly interested in tuna. Don’t know about the others.’

When I became a Cadet Patrol Officer in 1967 the Australian Government was hedging its bets about the timing of independence and had discontinued making permanent appointments in favour of six-year contracts. The training of staff, which once involved lengthy courses at the Australian School of Pacific Administration at Mosman in Sydney, had been cut back to a three-month introductory course and a couple of months at the administrative college at Waigani at the end of the two-year cadetship. The introductory course started at ASOPA ended with a month at Kwikila, east of Port Moresby.

I suspect the last month of the course at Kwikila was designed not only as a practical exercise in a real Sub-District but also to weed out anyone who had doubts about the job. We visited local villages, attended the local court and learned to shoot guns, repair roads, build bridges, eat local food and raft down rivers, among other ‘practical’ things.

We were also housed in a very basic hut where maggots from the concrete pit latrines often invaded the spaces between our closely crammed beds and mosquito nets. When it rained the thatch roof leaked and wet all our bedding. I guess it was good training for the bush. At the end of the course we flew off to our designated postings, arriving just before Christmas. Only one of our number pulled the plug and went back to Australia.

The short time we spent at Kwikila had its moments, some of them quite pleasant. On one occasion we went down to the coastal village of Hula where Jack Baker, one of our instructors, liked to catch tuna. We went out in a workboat and Jack tossed several lines over the back of the boat. By the afternoon we were back on the sandy beach near the village baking the fish in an open fire. As the evening grew closer the locals, including some very attractive belles, joined us and proceeded to help with the cooking. When the fish was gone they produced guitars and I heard my first ever rendition of the Papuan classic 'My Island Samarai'. Hula was a London Missionary Society base and there were students from all over the place there. It doesn't get better than this, I thought. Cold beer, a full stomach and swaying dancers on the sand.

We located a khaki Landrover of dubious vintage at the Dive Shop in Badili and piled our gear inside. The wet season had begun and we headed off through the Moresby murk, squashing cane toads and leaking profusely.

The first part of the drive was easy going. We passed through villages with little fibro schoolhouses and limp flags on white masts and painted stones at their bases. We crossed a big bridge over one of the estuarine creeks before we started to pass

through dank, dark and dripping rubber plantations. A weak sun glowed dimly through the drizzle and turned the long grass by the roadside into a lamplight yellow. In patches of jungle snub-nosed and decaying World War II 'Blitz' trucks nestled amongst the foliage. After a few hours we reached Kwikila. There was a new hotel but the town looked pretty much like it did when we were there as Cadet Patrol Officers. The Council Chambers were still standing by the oval with a row of low-cost housing to one side and the monolithic trade store on the other side. A few people were sitting under the trade store veranda chewing betel nut. We waved as we went past and turned left at the road junction on to the dirt track to Hula.

After driving for a while we halted. There were dirt tracks going everywhere and we hadn't bothered with a map. We proceeded carefully in what we thought must have been the right direction. An old man appeared on the track and Bob leaned out of the Landrover window to ask directions. The man scratched his head. I tried some of my fractured Motu on him with no response. '*Lau diba lasi, lau diba lasi,*' he repeated. Finally, Geoff, a fluent Motu speaker, crawled out from amongst our luggage and asked directions. The man still feigned ignorance. Geoff sighed. 'I think he wants a lift.' The old man climbed aboard and with betel-nutted teeth flashing promised us in perfect English that there would be sure-fire surf and sunshine at Hula.

The track got wetter and the wind began to pick up as we entered another estuarine area. The track appeared to disappear into a sheet wash of rain and salt water; we proceeded gingerly and eventually climbed out of it and onto a plateau of orange mud. The poor old

Landrover lost all of its traction and we dropped down to second gear and low range to no avail; the vehicle just skated on the orange film as its fancy dictated. Gordon, who was driving, eventually mastered the phenomenon and we began to sashay off in the general direction of Hula. We drove through a sorghum field and entered dense jungle. More sheet water appeared and then the track rose out of it again.

We eventually reached Hula but there was no sunshine, just a wild low rip coming in off the sea. A dissolute pig sloshed into the clearing between the tin and fibro houses. 'Weren't the houses made of *limbom* with *sacsac* roofs last time?' puzzled Gordon.

'I'm sure they were,' said Bob. 'I guess this is progress.'

The old man quietly climbed out of the vehicle as we were talking and nodded his thanks before disappearing into the drizzle. We climbed back into the vehicle and drove around the village before pulling up at the beach. I climbed out of the cab. A striation of driftwood, coconut husk and tin cans sloped off the windswept beach and into the sea. A covey of rusty galvanised iron houses on stilts were clustered in the distance.

We drove back through the village and stopped at the trade store. A rumped European man in a dirty *laplap* emerged from another room where a tinny radio was playing. We bought a few soft drinks and the trader asked if we were returning to Moresby in the not-too-distant future. He suggested we seek accommodation at the school for the night and dragged a blue nylon mailbag from under the counter.

'The Mission's mail,' he explained; 'We haven't been able to send it out for two weeks now.'

We tossed the mailbag into the Landrover, climbed aboard and headed for the school. The sole teacher was happy to see us. He provided lunch and opened up a big fibro house on the edge of the school for us. At the end of the oval three fibro classrooms with low walls and no windows stood on the edge of the beach; a row of tall coconut palms were bending in the wind and rain. We wandered over to the classrooms. Holes punched by stones and feet littered the walls. Beyond there was surf — wild, ripping and rain-lashed. We returned to the house and soon the teacher appeared with an offer of dinner.

Over the meal he explained the change: the young people leaving for jobs in Moresby; the ones who remained resorting to frustrated vandalism; the ones who found work salting their wages into fibro and galvanised iron. On a happy note he described the sun and surf that still pounds on to the coast in the dry season. We sat up late drinking the wine and beer we brought with us and finally retired to damp mattresses in the big house. In the morning we set off back to Port Moresby.

We drove through the jungle and splashed through the returning tide before reaching the sorghum field. The Landrover slid off the road occasionally and we manhandled it back. The field got muddier and the water deeper. Finally the Landrover bogged and we climbed out. The chassis and sump were firmly wedged on the hump in the middle of the track. The track was flowing like a miniature creek and cutting the clay away from under the wheels. We rocked the vehicle while Gordon played with the gears. Finally we jacked up one side and heaved. The Landrover slid off the jack and rocked gently on the hump again. Bob sat dejectedly in the flowing track while Geoff

began to harvest stalks of sorghum to stuff under the wheels. We finally freed the Landrover and proceeded at a snail's pace over the newly harvested bed of sorghum.

'Probably belongs to some rich planter,' mumbled Bob in mitigation.

Reaching the end of the field we proceeded cautiously. The black soil began to give way to yellow clay. We bogged the Landrover again but this time in sticky orange goo. We dug and heaved for an hour with no result and then sat under a tree wondering what to do. Geoff thought he remembered seeing a small village somewhere nearby and we walked up the track. After half an hour we saw the telltale coconut palms off to one side of the road and wandered into the village.

'At least this one looks like a village,' Bob commented as we took in the elongated beehive houses of *limbom* and *sacsac* and the carved platform in the corridor between them. Geoff approached the first house and knocked politely on one of the stilts. A face appeared from the smoky interior and Geoff explained our predicament. The man made apologetic gestures and indicated the black clouds gathering for another downfall. We stood around and he finally climbed out of the doorway, disappeared into another house and reappeared, shrugging his shoulders in the same gesture.

A bevy of children gathered under the nearest house and stared at us. We offered the man money but still he shrugged. Finally we gave up and returned back along the track. After a hundred metres a cacophony of children skittered through the mud to catch up.

We rocked the Landrover, pushed the Landrover and berated the Landrover until it finally relented and popped out of its muddy

bog. In triumph we splattered back into the village, a veritable travelling mass of mudstained children. Geoff and Bob pounded on the shuttered counter of the village trade store until a disgruntled man with many jingling keys appeared to open it up. We bought his entire stock of sugar, biscuits and sticky tin milk and handed it over to the kids. One of them raced off for a can-opener and the others retired to the jungle of house stilts to divide the spoils. We climbed into the Landrover and splattered on our way.

As we slid around a bend a little group of villagers with suitcases and parcels trudging heads down into the rain came into view. We stopped, made enquiries about their destination and apologised for not having room. A grizzled old woman appeared at the cab door clutching a younger woman by the arm. She gestured and jabbered until a young boy came to her side with a translation. The young woman was a nurse who had to be in Port Moresby the following day to start work. We conferred briefly and I opened the passenger door.

She climbed into the cab and over the seats, leaving dainty orange toe prints on Bob's shoulders. I glanced up as she disappeared into the maw of luggage and noticed Geoff's eyes shining in the gloom. There was a brief shuffling noise and giggles.

We swung around another corner and the track disappeared into an ominous bulb of turgid yellow water. Somewhere below the water there was a ford. We knew this because we had crossed it the day before. We dismounted and I gingerly waded into the water. After fifteen minutes' cautious probing I thought I had worked out where the ford was hiding. Gordon edged the Landrover into the

creek and Bob and I, prompted by a mutual fear of vehicles in flooding creeks, stood aside up to our knees in the water. There was no sign of Geoff.

The vehicle slid slightly sideways into the water and Gordon, in second gear, gunned the engine. The Landrover lurched forward and stopped suddenly with its nose in the air. The engine roared and a fountain of yellow water climbed up each side. Bob and I threw our weight behind the vehicle. Water shot up my shorts and nose as the Landrover screamed and levelled out. We heaved against the inertia until it finally moved and Gordon drove up the other side of the creek and squelched to a halt. We remounted.

The engine immediately roared again and I climbed out and looked under the vehicle. There was no muffler or tailpipe and I waded into the creek again and probed with a naked foot. Miraculously the tailpipe and muffler were wedged against a submerged rock and I retrieved them and trudged back to the vehicle. I considered the implications of reattaching the muffler and finally tossed it into the back of the vehicle; a soft grunt was the only reply.

Finally we reached the gravel road and chugged and gurgled into Kwikila. A petrol refill and we were on our way to Moresby. The first stop was the hospital. The Landrover rattled to a halt in the car park, shedding layers of orange mud everywhere. A shy smile, and the nurse climbed over the seats and waved goodbye. Geoff's head finally emerged from the depths of the luggage and he waved in return. We headed for the Dive Shop sounding vaguely like a low-flying jet.

Once over the hill and on the final run into Badili, Gordon cut the engine. We drifted silently into the driveway of the

Dive Shop. The proprietor emerged rubbing a greasy towel between his hands.

‘Lost the muffler, lads?’ he said.

They dropped me off and returned to the admin. college. The following day I drove out to pick them up for a meal in town. On the way into town, on the outskirts of Badili, Bob nudged me and pointed to the roadside. I let out an involuntary whistle. A twisted mass of khaki lay scrunched under a tree. The name of the owner of the Dive Shop was clearly visible on the upturned and crumpled door.

On the Tuesday morning I recounted the events of the weekend to Number Three. He listened intently. ‘There were a string of villages along the coast here when I first arrived after the war,’ he told me. ‘They were all picturesque places with houses made out of timber and palm thatch, but slowly the town absorbed them. Some of Moresby’s suburbs were actually separate villages in those days. Hanuabada is the only village to retain any identity but, as you know, that’s all fibro and tin now.’

‘Do you reckon that’s how Papua is going to end up?’ I asked, ‘Villages of fibro, cement and galvanised iron?’

‘Makes you sad, doesn’t it?’ he replied. I wondered what Ihini thought. I would ask her when she returned. In the meantime I had an appointment with Number One. Lord knows what he wanted.

He ushered me into his office with a peremptory wave and left me standing while he shuffled about at his desk moving papers and

pens about for no apparent reason. When he had gauged that I was sufficiently disconcerted he indicated that I should sit. I acknowledged the offer with a flicker of interest and tried to maintain an expression somewhere between boredom and indifference. I had watched Numbers Two and Three do this on many occasions but didn't realise it was such a cultivated art. I wondered if I could pull off their best trick, which was to feign total uninterest no matter what disastrous thing was revealed.

'You've been with us for almost three months now,' he began. I nodded — waiting for the punchline. He paused and looked at me over the rim of his reading glasses.

'You'll be on your way in a week or so.' I know that, I thought; get on with it.

'Your time here has been, um, satisfactory, I think?' Was this some sort of cynical praise? Did he want me to reply? I wondered what to say but needn't have bothered because he continued in his nasal monotone.

'You're to be posted to Nomad River, I believe!' That one took me by surprise! He stopped there and stared at me. I tried very hard but couldn't control it and grinned. There was a brief flicker of satisfaction on his face and then he bent down and began shuffling papers. Was I being dismissed? I rose and ambled over to the door.

'One more thing.' I stopped and turned. He still had his head down and was still playing with a file. 'The local ladies — not the done thing. Best find a nice white girl, you understand?'

Don't say a thing, I thought. Take a deep breath and walk through the door; don't turn around and for God's sake don't slam the door. Zara watched me as I walked past.

'He's a silly little prig; take no notice of what he says. He's living in another world.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

When I got on the plane to Daru it felt a bit like returning from leave. The big city life is fine but it wears you down. Ihini had seen me off with sadness and I suspected that she had been pressured while she was away to make a commitment to her future. I felt quite morose. The greeting from the Deputy District Commissioner at Daru didn't help.

After about a year as a Cadet Patrol Officer in the Western Highlands District I was put in charge of Mul Local Government Council. Mul was based near the hamlet of Bukapena, off the main road to Baiyer River and close to the actual peak of Mount Hagen. The people there were Medlpa. It was one of the councils on the fringe of the larger and more powerful Mount Hagen Local Government Council led by the indefatigable Wamp Wan, later Sir Wamp Wan. I was supposed to simply caretake the Council until someone more senior, who knew what they were doing, took over but, as these things inevitably happen, I soon became totally responsible for the running of the Council.

At first everything was rosy. I was mildly perturbed when the promised help with meetings, court cases and finances didn't eventuate but I carried on as carefully as possible, hoping to learn as I went along. The Council Vice Chairman, Kopen, was a genial and conscientious man from Bukapena who helped as much as he could. The Council finances looked good and there was a modest development program outlined in the budget. The principal sources of revenue were the Council head tax and profit from a sawmill located at the foot of the Hagen Range.

The first hint of a problem came as I began the annual tax collection. The tax rate was a nominal ten dollars per year for adult males. After I had collected the tax in the first couple of wards I began to realise that the estimates prepared by my predecessor were, to put it politely, highly inflated. Oh well, I thought, we'll just have to adjust the budget. Maybe the standard of the classrooms scheduled to be built for the Bukapena School could be scaled back to something less grand.

As I progressed with the collection it got worse. There seemed to be a fundamental problem related to the number of eligible taxpayers in each ward. I pulled out the census figures for the Council area and discovered that they were way out of date. The tax collection rates seemed to be based on projections of population growth that were highly unrealistic. The average population increase at the last census, some seven or eight years previously, was running at just under one per cent, which was about average for New Guinea. A quick comparison with the census figures and the budget revealed a projected rate of over ten per cent! I made a note to conduct a thorough census as soon as I had finished the tax collection.

The Council sawmill mainly cut decking for bridge construction. There was a serviceable saw bench with good circular

blades. The foreman, who came from Bougainville, had a couple of ancient but well maintained chainsaws. When he felled a suitable tree he trimmed it to length and called for the Council tractor to come up and haul it to the mill. By the time I took over he had a nice stockpile of bridge decking ready to go. The timber looked fine to me, not that I knew anything about wood, and I told him I'd contact the various customers listed in the ancillary budget papers and ask them to come and collect it. This was necessary because the Council didn't have its own truck. In fact the only vehicle it had, apart from the tractor, was a rough old Toyota Landcruiser tray-top that seemed to have been hammered to within an inch of its life by fast driving over bad roads.

I made a few rough calculations and came up with the number of planks per the super footage ordered by the Council sawmill clients. This was my second rude shock. None of the people and organisations listed in the budget papers had actually placed orders for timber! The profit from the sawmill, I slowly realised, was no more than wishful thinking!

I took a break from tax collecting and went in to see the ADC in Mount Hagen. Maybe I could sell him some wood. We began to talk bridges. 'You have to build roads,' he said. 'Culverts are the thing. Roger Gleeson at Dei Council is using rainwater tanks; he lays them down and packs concrete and stone around them so that when the galvanised iron rusts away you're left with a stone culvert. Brilliant stuff!'

'We've got plenty of roads,' I replied; 'I'm flat-strapped getting people out on maintenance days to repair them; they resent being pulled away from their gardens to provide free labour for the Council.'

'We have no trouble,' he replied. 'People have to realise that if they want development they have to maintain their roads.'

Which is well and good, I thought. But you've got police to round people up and watch them every Monday road repair day; I've got a total of one very junior constable for everything and besides, the Police Commissioner doesn't like his policemen being used as road foremen. I scratched my head and left, promising on the way out to look at suitable new road-building projects. I then realised I hadn't sold him any timber; he had deftly avoided the subject.

I went back to tax collecting and ran into Council Chairman Pung. Pung was one of the nascent Medlpa Mafia. He was in cahoots with the local member of the House of Assembly and together they had devised a system of bribes, kickbacks and nepotism to finance their devious moneymaking schemes based, it appeared, on preferential treatment in the disbursement of Council funds. He presented me with a list of projects in his ward that appeared nowhere in the Council budget. I explained this to him and he countered with a set of Council minutes purporting to reallocate already committed funds. The Bukapena school looked even less of a certainty.

The next day a radio telephone set-up arrived. It took me a while to sort out the aerials and batteries and to erect the transmission tower but it was soon working. In some ways I wish it hadn't. One of the first calls was from a local Mount Hagen car and truck dealer.

'Your Isuzu has arrived,' he announced. 'When do you want to pick it up?'

'What Isuzu?' I asked.

'The six-by-six tipper you ordered,' he replied. I went through the budget. There was no truck.

'I'll get back to you,' I said.

A few days later a local machinery company rang. 'The portable sawmill has arrived; when do you want to pick it up?' And so it went. Some of the items actually appeared in the budget, like the replacement for the aged Toyota, a lemon of a Landrover with a steel tray so heavy the vehicle actually sagged, but the differences between the budgeted costs and the costs in reality were awe-inspiring. 'I'd better go and see the bank manager,' I decided.

About that time I discovered the Council clerk had been liberally claiming non-existent overtime. I also discovered that his assistant was in on the game and had not actually been employed formally by the Council; he seemed to have just turned up one day and gone on the payroll. I didn't get very far with the bank and looked for other means to raise revenue. There were a number of defaulting taxpayers and I asked the ADC to send out a magistrate so I could collect the tax and fines. I managed to get one visit organised and when I asked about subsequent cases the magistrate said, 'Just fill out the charge sheets, collect the money and I'll check and sign it all later.' This struck me as vaguely illegal but I tried it for a while until I gave up in frustration when he could never make the time to come back. At some time during this period one of Pung's close relatives, who had the job of Council driver when he was sober, managed to roll both the new Landrover and the reluctantly purchased Isuzu truck.

I never caught up with my illustrious predecessor and I ended up carrying the can for the Council debt. I suppose it was inexperience but it put me off Council work forever. My next posting is going to be in the bush, I thought. I had escaped the incredibly depressing prospect of a lifelong career in banking by coming to New Guinea, and 'grubbing subtleties from paper', as Thomas Hardy put it, just wasn't my thing.

‘There are some financial problems at Olsobip,’ the DDC told me. ‘You will need to sort them out before you move to Nomad.’ He looked at me speculatively. He had obviously seen a file I didn’t know about recounting the debacle at Mul.

‘Oh well, I’ve got to get my gear and Fiamnok has promised me a farewell party.’

‘You’ll sort it out,’ the DDC replied.

Bob O’Hearn, the Assistant Patrol Officer who had relieved me, was not there when I arrived. In his place was a Papua New Guinean Assistant District Officer. His wife had a room waiting for me in my old house on the hillside. Kure had neatly stacked my personal gear in a patrol box and left it in the spare room. My pots and pans were in their patrol boxes on the veranda. The ADO’s small, three-year-old daughter watched me rummaging around amongst my gear looking for some comfortable old clothes. Her father stuck his head in the door.

‘C’mon Tesha,’ he said, ‘Mr Fitzpatrick wants to change his clothes in peace’. Tesha stared at me.

‘My name’s Phil,’ I said to her. ‘If you let me get dressed I reckon there might be something nice in that bag on the bed when I come out’. I glanced at her father and he smiled at his daughter.

‘They usually call me Rolly,’ he said.

I’d bought a collection of lollies and small toys in Port Moresby for the station kids and I pulled out a packet of jelly beans and put them in my shirt pocket. She was waiting on the other side of the door when I emerged. She spotted the packet straight away.

‘We’d better just check with your Mum first,’ I told her. ‘I don’t want to get into trouble’. She ran off down the corridor and burst through the back door, shouting, ‘Mama, Mama, where are you?’

When I went outside she was under the clothes line clutching her mother's skirts. Her mother had an armful of washing.

'Is it all right if she has lollies?' I asked.

'Please, please, please!' chirped Tesha.

Mary, her mother, shook her head, not in refusal but in exasperation at Tesha's boldness.

'As long as you share them and don't eat them all at once.' Tesha jumped with glee and I handed the jelly beans over. She gently took the packet and then raced off towards the little group of Faiwol kids clustered under the piles of the house.

'You forgot to say thank you!' Mary shouted after her.

'Thank you, Phil,' came the echo from under the house. Mary raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

'Rolly's down at the office,' she said. 'He came up for a cup of tea and caught her in your room.'

'She's adorable,' I said. 'But I'd better let you get back to work and go down and help Rolly sort out the financial mess.'

She was a short, compact woman, probably still only in her teens. I guessed she was a Highlander and briefly wondered how she had come to marry the tall Papuan ADO. As I headed down the hill Kure waved from the woodheap where he was splitting firewood. Fiamnok's house girl was with him stacking the cut wood. I was glad they were pitching in and helping Rolly and his wife.

I wondered what Rolly was doing at Olsobip, which had traditionally been a single man's posting. When I talked to him later the reason became obvious. He was a friend of Joe Nombri and was also a member of the Pangu Pati. He had been sent to the remote Star Mountains to put him out of circulation — exactly

why Joe had ended up repairing roads at Kiunga. I wondered how many other highly competent and intelligent Papua New Guinean *kiaps* were stagnating on remote and isolated patrol posts.

It took us the rest of the afternoon to sort out the financial problem. We began with the accounts as I had left them and slowly worked forward until we got to the mess awaiting Rolly when he arrived. A call to Bob in Kiunga on the 4.00 p.m. schedule confirmed our suspicions about unrecorded wages and bank withdrawals. By five it all balanced perfectly. I sat back and looked around the office. My mail was in a neat pile on top of a filing cabinet. Next to it was a stack of magazines. A note lay on top of them. 'Sorry, but I ran out of reading material — Bob.' Rolly smiled.

'I don't think he had much to do,' he said.

Bob O'Hearn was an 'instant *kiap*'. The financial mess at Olsobip was no more his fault than it was mine. He simply didn't have the experience or training to run a patrol post by himself. The Administration had recently discontinued the recruitment of Cadet Patrol Officers in favour of employing mature age men with 'appropriate work experience' on two-year renewable contracts. These men were run through a quick induction course and sent out to the districts as fully-fledged Patrol Officers. A lot of them didn't last very long. I hoped Bob would last the distance; he was a pleasant and seemingly dedicated individual. It wasn't the longevity of the 'instant *kiaps*' that bothered me, however; it was what the suspension of the cadet system portended. It seemed the Administration was slowly gearing down. I wondered what it knew that we didn't.

I discussed this with Rolly that night. His wife laid on a pleasant meal of steak, mashed potatoes, peas and gravy. Custard and fruit salad followed for dessert. I wondered how she got the

steak; it must have come up from Daru on the plane with me. Rolly's salary would have been at least half the rate of mine and I couldn't afford steak at Daru prices. I hoped Kure hadn't told them I ate steak all the time.

'This is a really nice meal,' I said to her. 'It's nice to have a treat like this every so often; I'm more used to local food bush pig is usually a treat up here.' She looked at me quizzically and turned to Rolly. He glanced at me and I knew he had understood my meaning.

'I like pig,' Tesha said and her father patted her on the head. He changed the subject.

'Anyway, as we were saying before, I think they're gearing up for self government,' he said.

'Isn't it a bit early for that?' I replied. 'I know Pangu wants a commitment to a timetable, but where I'm going they're still trying to stamp out cannibalism!'

Rolly laughed. 'Better you than me. But I don't think they're going to have much choice. Have you heard what Whitlam is saying? He doesn't like the idea of the United Nations calling Australia a colonial power.'

'But what chance has that got?' I replied. 'Labor has got a snowball's chance in hell of knocking off the Liberals.'

'I wouldn't be so sure about that, I hear the Administration is thinking about fast-tracking the training of local District Commissioners, some sort of mentoring scheme. Each district will have two DCs, a white one and a black one.' I scratched my head and he continued. 'They are also looking at golden handshakes for any white permanent officers who want to pull the plug.'

'Pity I'm on a contract,' I replied.

'They must have been thinking about the future when they stopped making you guys permanent,' he said.

‘Oh, I know,’ I shrugged. ‘I never expected this to be a permanent job but I had hoped for maybe 10 or 15 years at least. Tom Ellis told us we’d be okay for at least 20!’

‘We’ll have to wait and see,’ Rolly said.

I knew Rolly’s Pangu Pati had its spies in high places and what he said was more than just guesswork. That night I lay in bed wondering what the future held. As I drifted off to sleep my thoughts turned to Port Moresby, creamy brown skin and the smell of coconut oil in soft fuzzy hair.

The next morning Rolly and I strolled down to the office. ‘Have you seen the escape kit in the safe?’ I asked. He laughed.

‘Yep. I’ve tossed out the shoe polish but the gourd is still there!’ I liked Rolly. He was softly spoken but self-assured. He will probably be a District Commissioner before I make Assistant District Officer, I thought.

‘So what’s on the agenda today?’ I asked.

‘Well, we’ve got the finances under control. You can fill me in on the patrol areas and all the local villains.’

‘Which reminds me,’ I said. ‘I’ve got to see Fiamnok; he wants to have a farewell *singsing* before I go.’

‘Yep, he’s already talked to me about it. He’s bringing down a pig and a pile of taro and *kaukau*.’

‘In that case I’d better raid the trade store and buy up some sweet biscuits and cordial.’

‘Cordial. Hmm. I’ve got an idea that might appeal to the old bugger.’ Rolly raised his eyebrows and I wondered what he had in mind.

The *singsing* that afternoon went very well. We dug a pit in front of the office and cooked the pig while a bevy of drummers, panflute players and jew's harp enthusiasts banged out a peculiar Faiwolmin rhythm to accompany a colourful collection of dancers. The biscuits and other things I had bought from the trade store provided a sort of entrée for everyone and Rolly had filled a big 44-gallon drum with cordial into which the dancers and everyone else periodically dipped mugs. Towards evening the missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics camp down from Fiamnok's village said their farewells and set off on the short but steep climb home. They were vegetarians and wouldn't stay for the pig. Fiamnok stood beside me as they left. He was grinning and had a sort of surreal aura about him. He winked at me and clapped his hands. I wondered what he was up to. I didn't have to wait long.

From the evening dimness a group of female dancers emerged. They were all young unmarried girls dressed in brand new but tiny grass aprons. The rear aprons, which hung below their buttocks, were tufted and coloured with red dye. The music lulled and changed to a slower beat as they began to gyrate suggestively. Fiamnok clapped his hands and laughed. From the other side of the dancing ground appeared a group of young men. They all wore bright red gourds and had their hair slicked back with clay into pointy, cane-held ponytails. Opalescent forest moss hung from their cane belts. The scene sent the audience into raptures and they began swaying from side to side.

'This is a very old dance. They've been afraid to perform it until now,' Rolly explained. I glanced up the hill to where the missionaries had disappeared. 'It was Fiamnok's idea,' he continued. 'Come and check this out.' He picked up two tin mugs from under his chair and strolled over to the 44-gallon drum of

cordial. He scooped up two cups and handed me one. I took a tentative sip. I hadn't tasted cordial like this before. Rolly grinned.

'The old bugger came to see me about a week ago when he knew you were coming back for a visit and asked me if I could organise a load of South Pacific Lager for him. He apparently discovered the taste when he was in Kiunga.'

'The sneaky old bastard,' I said. 'I didn't know about that.' Rolly laughed.

'Anyway, he said he wanted to stage something special but he needed some magic to loosen up everyone's inhibitions and give them some Dutch courage. He figured SP would do the trick. I told him I couldn't do it, of course; I don't want to start importing booze, although the clerk couldn't see why not.'

'Of course not,' I replied.

'But then it occurred to me this morning. You know all those half-empty bottles of spirits and liqueurs that have been accumulating behind the bar in the house ever since the first *kiap* arrived here?' I nodded. 'Well, I caught Tesha playing with the bottles one day and I thought I'd better get rid of the stuff. I don't drink much and Mary doesn't drink at all.'

'So, hey presto! 20 proof cordial for my farewell *singsing*,' I added.

'You got it,' he replied. 'Promise you won't tell anyone?'

'Bob's your uncle,' I replied.

Foxy arrived early the next morning. Kasari and I did a quick sortie down the airstrip to make sure no one was asleep in the grass. It was very quiet. The usual gaggle of people around the office was

not there, although I had passed a number of sleeping bodies along the grass verge as I walked down from the house.

‘This is weird,’ I said to Rolly and Mary as I pushed my gear into the rear locker of the Islander. ‘Where is Fiamnok?’ They shrugged and Foxy looked at me suspiciously. I shook hands with Rolly and his wife. Fiamnok’s housegirl was going to stay and work for them and she had a tear in her eye. I suspected it was for Kure, who was already ensconced in the back of the aeroplane with the dog. Kasari threw me a farewell salute and then relented and shook hands. The clerk gave me a reassuring pat on the back. The dog snorted its impatience. Just as I was about to get into the plane a brown hand touched me lightly on the shoulder. I knew who it was; there was electricity in the touch. As I turned Fiamnok slammed his feet together and threw me a huge salute. I ducked and hit my head on the door of the plane.

As we flew out of Gum Gorge and turned south-east for Nomad River I eased back in my seat.

‘You’re quiet,’ Foxy observed.

‘I had a long talk with Rolly and his wife last night. They filled me in on colonial politics, traditional relationships, bride price, betrothals, the whole box and dice. Kind of made my head spin. They filled in all the gaps.’

‘I see,’ Foxy replied and returned to his instruments. A little while later, as we clipped over the treetops below the gathering cloud and crossed the upper Strickland he said, ‘Do you know what I reckon?’ I shrugged. ‘I reckon your biggest problem in the next few months is going to be figuring out how not to get eaten!’

CHAPTER NINE

The old man must have been watching us scrambling through the undergrowth on the other side of the small valley for some time. As we reached the bottom of the slope and began searching for a way up the other side he probably thought about the old days when he was young. Back then he would have crept past us without a sound and when he was sure he was safe he would have loosed off a few arrows, just to let us know he had seen us.

I picked him up in my binoculars when I dropped back with Constable Okomba to cover Geoff and Bosavi, the interpreter, as they began to climb the steep slope. Geoff had done this before and I was happy to stay back and learn.

‘There’s a *lapun* in a little garden hut on top of the ridge watching us. Doesn’t seem to be anyone else about,’ I whispered to Bosavi as he edged past me. The interpreter nodded. I swung the binoculars back on the old man.

He had a small fire going in the shelter with some sweet potato cooking on it. He seemed to be dozing. After a little while he stirred from his reverie and, using his arms, jacked himself across the floor of the hut.

‘The poor old bugger is crippled,’ I said to Okomba, who was squinting at the hut along the barrel of his rifle. The tall Sepik

policeman smiled softly but didn't put down his rifle. He was wearing the tattered remains of a Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary uniform and had a hideous red bandana tied around his neck. He looked like something out of a pirate film. Suit yourself, I thought. I guess you know best.

I watched the old man flaking the black crust off the sweet potato and stuffing the steaming pulp into his mouth. Satisfied, he pulled himself back across the floor and propped his lean body against an upright. He settled down. He seemed to be watching a hole in the forest off to his right.

'I think he's seen us,' I said to Okomba as I swung the binoculars towards the gap in the forest wall. The policeman grunted and tensed. He had a bead on the old man and was concentrating with all his might. I switched back to the old man just in time to see him tense and sit upright. I was playing the binoculars between him and the forest when I saw the two dogs break from the undergrowth and zigzag towards him with their muzzles to the ground. They stopped in front of the shelter. The old man was obviously frightened and I hoped Geoff and Bosavi were not too far behind.

The old man fell sideways and scabbled through the dust and ashes on the hut floor. When he pulled himself upright he had a stone axe in his hands. He tapped the axe on the ground to haft it securely. As he did so the two dogs began to take a few tentative steps towards him. I could see them grinning and panting. As Geoff's dog sidled to one side Buka crept forward. The old man slowly raised the stone axe. I could clearly see the muscles bunching across Geoff's dog's back. Suddenly it charged, low and fast, eyes fastened on the axe. Buka looked on, nonplussed.

The old man threw himself sideways as best he could and swung wildly with the axe. He missed the dog and hit an upright of the hut. The axe bounced from his grip. He must have felt the dog's breath as it passed over him. He rolled helplessly across the floor with his hands over his head. I could hear his long wail from where I watched in the gully below. He came to rest against the side of the house with his eyes tightly shut.

'Dog! Here! Out of it, you silly bastard. Get back here. Eh you! Silly bloody dog, attacking an old man!' Geoff's voice reverberated along the ridge.

I nudged Constable Okomba with my elbow and then followed him up the slope. When I reached the hut Geoff and Bosavi were squatting in the shade smoking bush tobacco rolled in newspaper. The dogs were flat out beside them, wide-eyed and panting. I walked up to the old man. He had his hands over his head squinting at me out of one eye. I ducked under the low-slung *kunai* roof of the garden hut and gently forced the old man's arms apart. He wailed quietly to himself.

'Bosavi,' I said quietly, 'Tell the *lapun* we won't eat him.'

As Bosavi squatted beside him I stepped out into the sunlight. Geoff was returning from the other side of the garden. He shrugged to indicate he had seen nothing. I sat down and watched the interpreter talking in whispers to the old man.

'He knows nothing,' Bosavi said after a while.

Geoff shook his head. I began burning off the swollen black leeches clinging in the tangle of mud and hair above my boots with a cigarette. Soon only thick streaks of blood remained. I pondered the absurdity of taking up smoking to kill leeches. I propped myself against the garden fence so I could see the track. It was some time before John Unkovic appeared over the ridge and out of the forest.

He looked tired compared to Corporal Krelo who was just behind him with his heavy .303 over his shoulder. The rest of the patrol slowly materialised. They were in a tight group, being ushered along by three constables.

There was a strong, sweaty, unwashed smell in the air as they shuffled on to the ridge. I wondered what Rolly and the others at Olsobip were doing. I knew they were not wallowing in sticky mud, sweat dripping off in the oppressive heat, armed to the teeth, and accompanied by an excess of very scruffy policemen who seemed extremely nonchalant about the prospect of running into an ambush.

I had left Nomad Sub-District Headquarters three weeks earlier. I had an Assistant Patrol Officer, Craig McConaghy, with me and John Unkovic, a lawyer doing research into inheritance systems throughout Papua New Guinea. We had covered the eight-hour walk to the Obeimi Base Camp in two easy stages so Unkovic could get used to the walking.

At least that's what I told him. In reality I was also feeling my way. My gear from Olsobip hadn't arrived and I was breaking in a new pair of jungle boots bought at the Seventh Day Adventist store at Nomad. I was unused to the canvas and rubber boots. They were a product of the Vietnam War and, I decided, perfect for walking in swampy country; water just oozed in and out of them without becoming heavy and the high, tightly-laced sides discouraged almost all of the leeches. I was also unused to carrying the heavy jungle carbine and revolver I had been issued with before departing. To make matters worse the ADC had insisted I keep both weapons loaded.

We left Craig at the halfway mark on the Kuma River where he was working on a four-wheel-drive track from Nomad to Obeimi. I hadn't seen Geoff since Port Moresby and we celebrated that night by winding up his kerosene fridge and drinking a large part of a carton of beer I'd carted along.

Two nights later we had stealthily surrounded a Biami long house. Crouching in the crisscross of trees that made up the outer defences of the house, we had waited until the first hint of light when we could see that the open log door of the long house was unguarded. The Waiofi Biamis obviously felt confident. A week earlier they had killed and eaten the headman of another hamlet.

From inside the long house a bright flame momentarily flickered, died and then caught. By its light we saw a small Biami man crouched over the remains of a fire, blowing over the embers to kindle a flame while he dropped dried leaves into it. He was the man in charge of the door.

I eased my revolver out of its holster and glanced at Corporal Krelo. Krelo knew exactly what was about to happen. He had done this thing many times before.

Crouching low, Geoff padded along the trunk of a felled tree towards the long house. Checking there were no black palm spikes planted in the ground he dropped noiselessly into the courtyard area. He had gone halfway and there was no chance of returning. Quickly he rushed the door.

The Waiofi man swung around as Geoff stepped through the door and into the gloom of the long house. He could see dark forms sprawled in the ashes of the fireplaces, some stirring. The man by the fire hesitated between gathering his weapons and

attempting to drop the log door. Fear and fascination with the huge, pale figure, something he had never seen before, froze him for a split second.

He decided to try for the door. From outside came Krelo's harsh yell followed by the shouts of the other police and carriers as they moved towards the long house. The Waiofis started to move sleepily about. The doorman plunged forward.

Geoff sidestepped and banged him on the head with the butt of his revolver. At the same time Krelo and I burst through the unprotected door followed by a stream of police. We could see figures bobbing past the arrow slits of the house. With his revolver Geoff indicated the long corridor opening on to the fight platform and Krelo and I bounded up the single log step into the centre of the house.

From the compartments on either side of the long corridor bodies were launching themselves towards the fight platform and over it into the tangle of felled trees that made up the frontal defence of the long house. From the steep decline old Constable Herihevera and his carriers appeared to gather the slower ones.

I raced along the corridor and out onto the platform, stumbling over the loosely placed logs. Waiofi men were leaping off the three-metre high platform, past twin burial baskets and into the forest – only to run headlong into Herihevera and his men.

In the cooking area of the long house Krelo had succeeded in lining most of the men against one wall and was quickly handcuffing them together. A cluster of women and children huddled on the opposite side of the room. An old woman, naked and ash-covered, stood wailing in the centre of the room until someone threw her a grass skirt. The doorman sat rubbing his sore head.

Outside, we lined the captives along one wall. The sun was well up and I could feel big sweat blotches on my sleeveless shirt. Krelo was busily retrieving the artefacts souvenired by the excited carriers. He walked over to the doorway and gently placed a *bilum* of human bones back into the long house.

A small boy sat propped against the door with a vivid crimson streak across his back. I bent over the boy and examined the cut.

‘Who did this?’ I asked in Motu.

Uneasy shuffling among a group of carriers seemed to isolate a youngish man dressed in grass sporran and nose-piece. Geoff looked around for Bosavi and walked over to the man.

‘Why?’ he asked. The man smiled and shuffled. Geoff waited.

‘He is a relative of the man who killed my father.’

‘And wasn’t your father avenged a long time ago?’

The handcuffed Waiofi standing along the wall watched the exchange with interest. I glanced at them and they stared back fearlessly. The carrier shuffled again and grinned broadly at his fellows.

‘I was on the point of thumping the little bastard with the butt of my rifle when Krelo stepped in front of me.’ Geoff told me later. Instead, we marched the Waiofis back to Obeimi base camp and discovered to our chagrin that the men responsible for the killings and cannibalism were not amongst them. We managed to extract the killers’ names from them, however.

We sat at Obeimi for a couple of days before returning to the long house. Geoff had insisted upon leaving Unkovic at the base camp while we raided the long house. This time, however, he was allowed

to return with us. We had our captives as carriers. At midday we crossed one of the beautiful streams in the Biami country and were back at the long house by late afternoon.

Geoff and I did a short reconnaissance around the area and found nothing. Krelo, meanwhile, set up camp to the rear of the deserted long house and under the cover of the forest. The Waiofi carriers were secured in the long house, where the police had set up their bedsleeves and fires. Unkovic, Geoff and I slept under canvas outside the long house on three bedsleeves, each stretched across two long posts supported by two stakes set in a triangle at each end. Unkovic chose to sleep in the bedsleeve closest to the forest. By nine o'clock that night we were well aware that we were not alone and he was regretting his decision.

First the sound of rustling bush, then whoops and howls from the darkness. One of the Waiofi in the long house answered them and was promptly told to shut up by a nervous policeman. The flicker of a fire could be seen in the long house, where Krelo was piling on logs to light up the immediate area of the camp. He retired back into the shadows and one of the police sentries took his place.

The firelight flickered through the camp and lit up our canvas shelter. A dozen new steel trade axes strapped to the top of a patrol box under Unkovic's bed caught the light. I vaguely wondered if it was best to move them into the long house and decided they would be too close to the Waiofi carriers. It was reassuring to know Corporal Krelo was awake. Just before midnight, when a bright moon had added to the light from the fires, the noise in the bush stopped and everyone, except for the two sentries, dozed into fitful sleep. The fire died down. The Waiofi had obviously decided we were not easily frightened. It was only in the morning that we realised how vulnerable we had been.

We decided to search the area thoroughly for two or three days. We issued the axes from under Unkovic's bed to the carriers so they could clean up the campsite and make it more comfortable. There was an air of camaraderie between the Waiofi carriers and the police by now and everyone seemed to be enjoying our cat and mouse game.

I started pulling the axes out from under Unkovic's bedsleeve. He was chatting to a policeman on the other side of the camp. Geoff stood behind me ready to pass them on to the carriers. I counted eight axes and crawled under the bedsleeve looking for the other two. Nothing. Geoff counted eight. We looked at each other and then realised what had happened.

'I don't think we'd better tell him; it might upset him, and he's a big enough worry already.'

I tacitly agreed. At some stage during the night a Biامي with a hatchet in each hand had been within centimetres of Unkovic's sleeping form.

We searched the area for three days, struggling along barely discernible tracks, through creeks and along hot ridges, gathering an ever-increasing harvest of nothing but foul black leeches which galloped along the track to get at our legs and squirm down our boots to the soft flesh between our toes.

On the second day we found the old man, too old to walk, huddled in his garden house. His people had all gone south into the forest. They had left him as bait to lure us away, thinking we might be content to kill and eat him.

Unkovic gave him a packet of cigarettes and we left him some food. The next day we pulled up camp and walked back to

Obeimi. The country that the Waiofi had disappeared into was unexplored and our food supply was dwindling. On the fourth day we left Obeimi for Nomad. It was months before Geoff finally caught up with the killers.

It was a fairly long walk back to Nomad and, again, for Unkovic's benefit, we did it in two stages, camping at the Kuma River road camp the first day and walking through to the station on the second. The going was good, although muddy, under the cover of the jungle. The leeches were rampant. Everyone had bloodied legs by the time we emerged onto the made section of the road. The midday heat dried our soggy clothes and continued to fry us.

The last leg was through long grass on the older portion of the road, until we emerged on the Nomad airstrip. We had been going at a fairly stiff pace as we neared the station. My legs were feeling sore and Unkovic looked all in. Geoff broke into a trot and completed the last five hundred metres in double time. Unkovic and I arrived at the house fifteen minutes later.

The first consideration upon arrival was an icy cold beer, then a hot shower, check the mail, see the ADC if he was on the station, which he wasn't, and then eat.

Unkovic used the shower first. I was next and Geoff last. Unkovic and I were dubiously dabbing our leech bites with iodine when Geoff came striding out of the bathroom, dripping water and grasping his pride and joy as if he had a Geiger counter attached to it. He plonked it on the table and said in an incredulous voice, 'Look at this!'

I jerked forward in my chair. 'Get it off the table! We eat there.'

He took no notice. Unkovic and I looked. A leech, only a centimetre or so long, protruded from the organ on display.

‘My God!’ said Unkovic, wondering if he had better check his own equipment. Geoff slowly squeezed the offending animal forward but it slipped out of his fingers and disappeared whence it had been discovered.

‘Christ!’

He slowly squeezed the organ from its base and along its length. The leech appeared again and popped onto the table, gorged and bloody. A thin trickle of blood wept from the eye of the outraged organ.

‘You’d better put something on — in it,’ I offered, passing him the iodine. ‘Only get it off the table!’

Geoff placed the pregnant leech in a matchbox and carefully squirted iodine on himself. He winced and swore. Then, still naked, he took the leech in its cardboard prison out onto the veranda and cut it into many pieces. He strode back to the bathroom and closed the door.

Geoff enjoyed a few days relaxation at Nomad before walking back to Obeimi and the Waiofi problem. Unkovic left for his next study area, somewhere in the Highlands, and I did a brief patrol to the Gebusi, a more stable area of the Sub-District. Almost a month later I returned to Nomad. I had visions of a peaceful sojourn on the station: unpacking the remainder of my gear, writing up the patrol report and generally loafing around the office. When I met the ADC on the airstrip he had other ideas.

‘You’d better keep your walking boots on,’ he said; ‘there’s been a murder and cannibalism at Dadalibi.’

Dadalibi is a Gebusi hamlet close to their border with the Biami. The Gebusi people speak a similar language to the Biami

but are traditional enemies. The Biami word for the Gebusi, according to the ADC, can be literally translated to mean 'our meat'. I had visions of Biami warriors crossing the river into Gebusi territory pushing shopping trolleys.

Craig and the ADC had set out immediately with an armed police patrol when word had reached Nomad. The area was only three hours walk from the station. The Kuma River, however, was in flood. They had sat beside it for a day but it had showed no signs of receding. Craig had then set about building a cane bridge while the ADC headed back to Nomad.

I threw a few tins of bully beef into my patrol box and rounded up carriers and police. I was on the move the following morning. I met Craig on the banks of the Kuma covered in soap, washing himself on a raft under a rather precarious footbridge. I took the opportunity for a swim in the now calm river.

Dadalibi was only a short walk up from the other side of the river, and obviously Craig's bridge-building efforts would have been observed and their reason deduced. Our reception would be interesting.

That afternoon we struggled up the steep slope into the deserted hamlet and set up camp. A long house was strategically placed on the end of the ridge. It was also deserted. Warm ashes and a surfeit of bark utensils, fresh food and weapons indicated a hasty departure.

We brewed tea and sat down to work out a plan. The Gebusi were relatively peaceful people. According to Craig, murder and cannibalism was out of character. They had lived without incident for years.

The first thing to do was to find out what had happened. We despatched police, accompanied by a few carriers as guides,

to round up the Dadalibi people. By nightfall we had almost thirty people in the camp. We asked them what had happened.

Apparently a withered and senile old Biami from a place called Sabasigi had decided to take on the Dadalibis. No one knew why, or at least they weren't telling. He had been staying in the bush near Dadalibi because he thought the people in his own hamlet wanted to kill him. The Dadalibi people knew him and were not particularly bothered by his presence nearby. However, one morning he had walked up to one of their garden houses with an axe and attacked the first person he saw. This was a man called Isara, who was sunning himself outside the house. Woroboi, his brother, emerged from the house and saw him lying in a pool of blood and the senile old Biami advancing with a bloodstained axe.

Woroboi ducked into the garden house, grabbed a bow and arrow and faced the old man. He shouted for the man to stop but he came on, babbling and laughing at the top of his voice. Woroboi fired point blank and hit the old Biami in the chest. The axe carved a piece off his bark belt as the old man lurched forward and rolled on his back.

Woroboi's clansmen helped carry Isara into the shade. They wrapped his body in a bark cloak and cut saplings to make a stretcher. By the time they had finished the old Biami had stopped struggling and was dead. Everyone stood around wondering what to do with the second body. Finally Woroboi went into the forest and returned with more saplings. They trussed both bodies up and carried them off to a nearby long house.

At the long house the men dropped the old Biami unceremoniously on the ground and set about building a burial platform for Isara. When it was finished they hoisted him into it. Someone was despatched to his sleeping cubicle at the back of the long house

and emerged with his weapons and clothes. These were bundled around him in the burial basket along with a bag of taro and sago; he would need food, clothing and his weapons for the journey to the afterlife. Then they got down to the serious business of mourning. Isara's praises had to be sung to ensure him a safe passage into the nether world of lurking ghosts and spirits. The old Biame's body lay where it had been dropped. Occasionally someone passing by would give it a peremptory kick.

That evening a band of six young Gebusi men from nearby Yulabi hamlet arrived for a *singing*. When they saw what had happened they offered to help with the mourning. They stood around the body of the old Biame and gazed in awe at the arrow protruding from his chest. One of them slapped Woroboi on the back and the others gathered around to congratulate him. The admiration of his nephews and friends somehow eased the pain of his brother's murder.

The young men were uninitiated. Initiation for the Gebusi — and the Biame — involved the consumption of a slain enemy. At some stage during the night it was decided that they would eat the old Biame. Here was an excellent opportunity for them to complete their initiation obligations, a rite that hadn't been celebrated by the Gebusi in three years. They may have been traditional enemies of the Biame but they admired their fighting prowess. In eating the old man they would absorb the courage that had made him attack a Gebusi garden house single-handed.

The following morning the six Yulabi men and another youth from Dadalibi carried the body to a nearby creek. They cut off its hands at the wrists, the legs at the knees and the head at the neck. Then they disembowelled the corpse and threw it on to a fire to cook. All told, seven young Gebusi men ate parts of the body.

Some of them were no more than boys. They then returned to their hamlet with part of one thigh for consumption later.

A few days later the people from the old Biami's hamlet at Sabasigi reported the matter to the ADC at Nomad. This in itself was a revelation. Previously they would have launched a reprisal raid on the Gebusis.

Our first problem was to find the whereabouts of both the man who had killed the old Biami and the men who had eaten him. At the time this seemed virtually impossible. We were presented with kilometres and kilometres of forest-covered hills to comb. They could have been anywhere.

I was beginning to get a feel for these people and decided on an indirect approach. Luckily the Dadalibi village constable had had nothing to do with the killings or the cannibalism. Within a few hours we had located him. Along with the other innocent members of the clan we sat him down and convinced him of the merits of law and order and suggested he convey this information to his friends hiding in the forest. Then we waited.

Just after midnight the *Mamusi* returned and announced that the men were about an hour's walk away in a garden house debating the merits of surrender. We didn't want to take the chance of an adverse decision, so, already dressed, we set off in the direction of the house. Into a possible ambush, or what, we were not sure.

Walking through rainforest at night has its disadvantages. We formed a line consisting of police and carriers. Every third man or

so carried a torch under his shirt. Occasional flashes were our only guidance and we stumbled through mud, up and down hills and between eerie trees covered with bright green and yellow phosphorescent moss.

Craig, stumbling along in an attempt to keep a bobbing carrier ahead of him in sight suddenly saw the man disappear. A faint splashing sound followed from somewhere within the bowels of the earth. I caught up.

‘Where the bloody hell has he gone?’ Craig whispered.

‘Down there,’ I replied, ‘I’ve done this before.’

Leaning forward, we picked up the image of a muddy carrier in our torchlight some six feet below. Everyone gathered round while a jungle vine was cut and lowered to haul him out. The sodden carrier caused general mirth, which rumbled up and down the line. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, especially the men ahead of the carrier who had missed the rotten root that had given way under him.

Sooner than expected we emerged at the edge of a clearing. The *Mamusi* indicated a building emitting the faint glow of firelight. Between it and us a small fire blazed under a rough roof of grass. Two women pottered about under it cooking taro. Their fire, unfortunately, lit up a good part of the clearing. To get within a reasonable distance of the garden house we would have to bypass the women. We eased back into the shadows.

A troop of carriers and police were dispatched around the clearing to the opposite side to cut off any other avenues of escape while we pondered the situation. There was nothing for it but to try and creep around the women.

Giving the others time to get established I sent off the remainder of the police and carriers belly-crawling through the

long, wet grass and available shadows until they were almost opposite the women and halfway across the clearing. Craig and I remained in the shadows; if anyone was going to trip over or make a noise it would be us.

All was quiet. Remarkably, the women had not noticed the black lumps wriggling past them. Then someone coughed. The women stopped talking and peered into the night. We waited, motionless. One rose and cautiously padded towards us with a blazing piece of firewood. The woman stumbled over a log and bent over to examine her toe. The firebrand illuminated three or four of our carriers yet she didn't seem to notice.

She stood up and kept coming. By that stage the tension was too much. With like minds Craig and I leapt to our feet and charged the garden house. The carriers and police followed and the woman screamed. But it was too late. We had surrounded the house. Confusion reigned within and taking full advantage we plunged inside.

The Gebusi were completely surprised at the ease of their capture. They were also greatly relieved to discover we were not a Biami reprisal party. Once cornered they offered no resistance and were eager to confess to their crimes. We handcuffed them together and stumbled outside. The women had fled.

The trip back was easier because we could safely use our torches. The Gebusi could have escaped by simply plunging into the dark forest but no attempt was made. Safely back at Dadalibi we mounted a guard on them and finally retired for the night.

In the morning I took statements through the interpreter and confirmed the *Mamusis*' account of events. The whole

Dadalibi clan were gathered around as I scribbled notes. A dishevelled individual kept leaning closer and closer to me. I shuffled sideways but he persisted. I looked up at him. He grinned weakly.

‘Tell this man to keep out of my way,’ I told the interpreter, who conveyed my wishes to the *Mamusi*. The *Mamusi* stared back at me.

‘But this is Woroboi?’ he said. I glanced at Craig.

‘Tell him to sit over there and I’ll talk to him later,’ I told the *Mamusi*.

The next morning Craig headed off south to continue his patrol and I headed back to Nomad with my prisoners. Within a week the District Court Magistrate had arrived and committed the Gebusi men for trial in the Supreme Court at its next sitting in Daru. As aircraft became available we despatched the men and the various witnesses to Daru. Four weeks at Nomad had had a marked effect on them. Washed, clean-shaven, with new red *laplaps* and glistening, well-fed bodies; a suddenly regular, adequate diet and medical care had transformed them. The Dadalibi *Mamusi*, equally sleek, went with them and was also housed in the Daru jail, although he was allowed the run of the town.

I was enjoying life on the station. The days consisted of a leisurely breakfast on the veranda of the house that I shared with Geoff and Craig. The house was on a point overlooking the Nomad River and was very scenic. After breakfast I shuffled off to the office, which was situated further along the high bank above the river. Once

there, I shuffled paper for a while, drank coffee and made occasional forays to different parts of the station to check on building projects we had going. About midmorning the ADC's wife appeared with a tray of scones for morning tea. What more could one ask for?

The ADC's wife was very attractive, with long sleek black hair and deep brown eyes. I had first met her on my way to Olsobip, sometime in the distant past it seemed. Foxy had some groceries and mail for Nomad so he did a loop before dropping me off.

'Give the cloud time to climb out of the gorge,' he said.

She came out with the ADC to meet the plane; everyone else was out on patrol. I rummaged around in the back of the Islander and pulled out the Nomad boxes and the mailbag.

'Have you got time for coffee?' she asked. 'I've just baked some scones,' she asked. I looked hopefully at Foxy. The ADC said nothing. He was a very tall and rangy man with russet-coloured hair, freckles and baggy shorts.

'Ah, sorry,' Foxy said. 'Got to get this bloke to Olsobip before the gorge snows in again.'

'Oh well, maybe next time.' I watched her walk back up the path to the station with the ADC. She was wearing very tight jeans.

When we were back in the air Foxy pointed the nose of the Islander towards the mountains. There was hardly a cloud in the sky.

'That was interesting, wasn't it?' he finally said. I nodded glumly.

'Makes a bloke who's going to spend the next year or so as OIC on a one-man patrol post glad to be alive.'

'Did you notice her husband?' he grinned. 'Could break your leg with one hand, I reckon.'

The attractiveness of the ADC's wife explained a lot about the ADC. For one thing it explained why he kept us out on constant patrol. At the time Tom Ellis was pushing his District Commissioners to increase patrolling levels. At first I thought this was what the Nomad ADC was up to. I presumed he wanted to record the highest patrol man-days in the district. Patrolling for the sake of patrolling — what perverse logic, I thought. When I shared my view with Geoff and Craig they chuckled.

'Have you noticed that when we're back on the station she's out with him on patrol and when they're back we're all out on patrol?' The penny dropped.

'And when we get to be on the station all together he wants to drink us under the table and arm wrestle all night?' Geoff added.

'A sort of alpha-male thing?'

'Can't say I blame him,' I added.

'She's got a younger sister,' Craig said.

'That's nice.'

'She's coming up here on a holiday; it's a big adventure.'

'And she's bringing a girlfriend,' Geoff chirped.

The girls arrived late. Apparently there had been a bit of a flurry in Port Moresby. The Nomad Sub-District had recently been taken off the Controlled Areas list and the media were playing it up. It had been one of the few areas left in the Territory where access was strictly controlled because of a perceived danger to outsiders. The publication of a book by an American photographer, James Anderson, subtly titled *Cannibal* and showing images of our immediate predecessors in the Sub-District out on patrol armed to the teeth, didn't help.

The *Pacific Islands Monthly* thought the removal was premature and politically motivated to appease criticism from the United

Nations. A number of journalists had challenged Tom Ellis to walk through the area unarmed. Ellis's reply had been typical. His knees were bugged and his walking days were over.

Of course the first thing the girls wanted to do when they finally arrived was to walk out to Obeimi into the heart of Biimi country. The ADC protested. The girls pointed out that since the area was now officially 'controlled' even the local missionary was going wherever he pleased. There was even a documentary film crew coming in to record Biimi ritual life. The ADC huffed and puffed but finally demurred. I wasn't privy to these machinations. Neither was Geoff or Craig. We had been sent out on patrol the week before the girls arrived.

I was pottering around in the foothills towards the headwaters of the Strickland trying to pick up some of the southern Kanai that I had missed on my Olsobip patrol. We had found a few extra families and I was convinced that there were no more un-contacted people in the area. That done, we had been camping beside the cool clear streams that issued from the nearby mountains, catching freshwater prawns and wild pig and generally enjoying the spectacular scenery.

I had been up half the night listening to the Kanai women reciting creation legends in a curious humming style of song. Their delightful voices had been accentuated by the sound of a small waterfall that glowed in the moonlight a hundred metres or so away from our camp.

The next morning I had risen late and strolled to the falls for a wash. Refreshed, with hot coffee and the smell of sizzling prawns and bush ginger in the frying pan, I was leaning back in

a camp chair with a book when the static on the patrol radio was broken by the ADC's voice.

'I need you to look after the station. When will you be getting back?' Bugger, I thought, why did I let Corporal Benson set that damn thing up? And why, all of a sudden, does it decide to work properly?

When I got back to the station the place was deserted. The two girls, the ADC and his wife and apparently every policeman on the station were walking to Obeimi. The jail warden handed me the office keys. Geoff was on his way back to Obeimi after finally rounding up the Waiofi murderers and had been instructed to clean the house up in readiness for the girls' arrival. Craig, who was working on the road somewhere on the Nomad side of Obeimi, had been told to stay put. I could appreciate this last instruction. Craig had a passing resemblance to Robert Redford and knew it. He was also the only one of us who had successfully beaten the ADC at arm wrestling. He also regularly read the *Bulletin*, the significance of which escaped me but seemed to annoy the ADC.

There was a note from the ADC. The mail and official correspondence from the last plane was in his house in the kitchen. There was also a note from the ADC's wife. She'd defrosted their fridge and wanted it started a few days before they headed back in from Obeimi. She had stored their perishable stuff in the office freezer. Better make sure the generator keeps going, I thought.

I strolled around the station, up the airstrip and across to the point on the river where the missionary had his house and

store. If there was any gossip about the girls' arrival the missionary's wife would know all about it. I tapped on the step below the bush-material house. A head emerged from behind the door.

'Um, could I get some biscuits and a couple of other things at the store?' By the time I had paid for everything I knew all the details of the trip to Obeimi.

'Such lovely girls,' the missionary's wife cooed and added, almost as an aside. 'It's a pity they have to swim in the pool near the church in such brief swimsuits, though. And those short skirts — it isn't a good example for our people.'

'Ah ... and where has Tom gone?'

'Oh, he's out on patrol; he left shortly after the ADC.'

'Going west is he, towards Obeimi too?'

'I think so.'

I know so, I thought; he's got a load of trade goods and he'll be trading for artefacts and keeping an eye on the ADC's group to boot. As I walked back to towards the ADC's house I remembered first seeing the mass of drums, shields and other things stored in the missionary's roof. He sent out regular shipments, to where I don't know, but I bet he made a handsome profit. Of all the missionaries who had come to Papua New Guinea to do good, the Seventh-Day Adventists had done very well indeed. He's out there flogging his religion along with his trade goods, I thought.

I let myself into the ADC's house and walked into the kitchen. I rummaged around in the pantry and found a tin of kerosene before pulling the burner out from the bottom of the refrigerator. I topped up the fuel so it was ready to go as soon as I knew they were heading back to Nomad. The door to the fridge had been propped open to air with an empty tube of KY jelly. As I slid the fuel container back underneath, the empty tube

bounced onto my head. I picked it up and stuck it back in the door.

There was a letter from Ihini in the mailbag. She had been reading the circuit lists for the Supreme Court. 'Does "indecently and unlawfully interfering with a corpse" mean what I think it does? Are you involved? If the answer to both questions is "yes" I'll see you in Daru!' She was very astute. We had struck a minor snag with our initial charge. Cannibalism was not included in the adopted Queensland Criminal Code used in Papua New Guinea. Apparently the government of Queensland presumed that people there would never do such a thing. On the advice of the Crown Prosecutor we had charged the young Gebusi men with 'indecently and unlawfully interfering with a corpse'.

I smiled at the thought of her rummaging through the lists looking for a story. I wondered what she would do with this one. I also wondered what was happening about her arranged marriage. This was her first letter since I had left her in Port Moresby several months ago. I had assumed she'd gone back to her home village to stay. Something else was going on but she didn't elaborate in her letter. I guessed I would find out soon.

Several days later the girls arrived back from Obeimi. I had spent most of the day working on the Sub-District Office books. Everything had balanced and I was counting the petty cash. I had coins and notes scattered all over my desktop when I heard the din outside. I got up and glanced out of the window. Figures were emerging from the forest at the end of the airstrip. I went back to

my desk. I would have time to finish off counting the cash before they got to the office.

I slipped the last roll of notes into a white calico bag and shut the safe door. I quickly added up the figures on my notepad. I drew a black line across the half dozen columns in the cashbook, added them together and checked that they matched the number on my notepad. Perfect. I leaned back in my chair. One of the few things I had brought with me from my otherwise inglorious first job with the National Bank was the satisfaction of a set of balanced numbers. I heard three thumping sounds on the office veranda and got up and went outside.

‘We won,’ the ADC’s wife announced as I stepped through the doorway. She was sprawled on the *limbom* floor. Her sister and her friend were similarly spread-eagled on the floor. All three of them were red-faced and soaked in sweat. Various pieces of white flesh were indiscriminately exposed through their ripped and soaking shirts and shorts. The ADC’s wife’s breasts, I noted, entirely covered her chest.

‘I’d better go check on the rest of the patrol,’ I said as I quickly descended the office steps and headed for the airstrip.

I met the ADC and Craig at the end of the airstrip. They were engaged in some sort of heated conversation and hardly acknowledged me. Geoff was strolling along a few yards behind them. None of them looked particularly hot or tired.

‘The girls okay?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, a bit sweaty but fine. What are those two arguing about?’

‘Stomach punching.’

‘Stomach punching?’

‘Yeah. One of them clenches his stomach muscles and the other tries to thump him hard enough with his fist to wind him.’

‘Is this the alpha-male thing again?’

‘Yep, but it’s getting serious, McConaghy has been cracking on to the ADC’s wife’s sister.’

‘He has some sort of death wish, I gather?’

‘Could be — but he’s got Buckley’s chance. She’s a nice girl from the eastern suburbs; got a boyfriend and regular job and is going to get married when they’ve saved enough for a deposit on a house.’

‘So what is Craig up to?’

‘Sees it as a challenge, I suppose.’

‘But they’re nice to look at,’ I added.

‘If you like that sort of thing.’

‘If you like that sort of thing? What on earth does that mean?’

‘Bit ordinary,’ Geoff said.

Craig persisted. In the evenings after dinner he would wander along the riverbank with the ADC’s wife’s sister, deep in conversation. Sometimes they were gone for several hours. The ADC seemed to have settled down, however.

‘He’s got Buckley’s chance!’ he said as we watched them wander off into the dusk on the last day before the girls were due to fly home.

‘But I can’t wait to tell Matthew,’ the ADC’s wife’s sister’s friend said.

‘Oh, you’d better not,’ the ADC’s wife replied and the girl giggled. I looked across at Geoff. He raised his eyebrows and took a swig of beer.

‘Why don’t you tell us more about your job? You know, the punch card thing?’ he asked her innocently.

Finally the Supreme Court convened in Daru and I climbed aboard a light aircraft clutching a cardboard box full of human bones, including the old Biami's hipbone. Tom, our youngest Biami interpreter, picked up as an orphan after an inter-clan raid, followed with the arrow extracted from the old Biami's chest.

Once in Daru I pottered around clearing up the paperwork attached to the case while the Supreme Court Judge worked his way through a bevy of rapes, larcenies and assaults. I had been put up in the Caledonian Hotel. The grand name was slightly misleading. The rooms consisted of clapboard boxes lined up along a raised walkway bent in a 'u' shape past an open dining area clad in mosquito wire and on to an office and bar on the other side, also built of clapboard. A woman with a vaguely European accent ran the whole thing. As I sat in the dining room one evening fingering the silver-plated cutlery with the little crowns and monogrammed handles and munching a buttered roll off a thick side plate that was also emblazoned with the hotel's name and crest I realised why the hotel was called the 'Caledonian'. The owners had bought all of their cutlery, crockery and linen second-hand as a job lot after the original Caledonian Hotel, wherever it had once existed, had closed down. I warmed to the place instantly.

Daru is a flat island just to the west of the Fly River mouth. The Torres Strait Islands and Australia lie immediately to the south. There is a long stone jetty on the northern side of the island adjacent to the main business area. At low tide mud stretches past the jetty end towards the mainland. Boats anchor in the channel in between but the big ocean-going *lakatois* are left in the mud and lean at awkward angles until the tide returns.

When I first walked out onto the jetty after buying a soft drink and a packet of potato chips at the Burns Philp store there were over a dozen of these huge canoes lying in the mud. Some adventurous teenagers had waded out into the smelly ooze and were poking about under the hulls with long sticks looking for mud crabs. I saw one pulled out of the slime, as big as a dinner plate.

The *lakatois* consisted of two or three huge hollow logs stitched together with cane to form one long hull. The hull actually flexes and bends over the waves when at sea. Smaller hollowed logs were attached, sometimes on both sides of the main hull, as outriggers. Flimsy platforms were stitched across the struts of some of the outriggers. Each hull was equipped with a tall mast and sail. The latter were made of either woven bark fibre or canvas and were V-shaped.

The people on the island are mainly Kiwais. There is a larger island right at the mouth of the Fly River, called Kiwai Island, which is their home island. They are a tall, intelligent and handsome people, in demand as policemen and clerks. Their features are fine and often aquiline, reflecting a long exposure to visiting Malay traders.

The island airstrip is located on the southern side. It is an old World War II strip and is surfaced with bitumen. It is very long and even the biggest jets can land there. Daru is an entry point for Papua and has always had a customs house. The whole island had the air of a run down Pacific backwater but, for some reason, it also had a very comfortable feel to it. I was pondering this apparent contradiction when I heard the sound of a DC3 pass overhead.

I spilled the remainder of my chips over the side of the wharf. They had gone soggy in the coastal humidity but the

seagulls didn't seem to mind. I walked back along the wharf, past the Burns Philp store and on to the hotel to wait for the bus bringing the passengers in from the airstrip.

For a second or two I didn't recognise her. She was wearing flared jeans, an embroidered cheesecloth top, sandals and a floppy hat. She also had several strands of brightly coloured wooden beads around her neck.

'You've gone hippy!' I said to her as she hugged me in greeting. She stood back and looked at me quizzically.

'I like it!' I added hastily.

The Daru courthouse was an open sided A-frame building. The same design had been replicated all over Papua. A thoroughfare of wide-leaved purple and orange cordylines, used in the Highlands as 'arse-grass', led to the building. A flagpole stood in a small circle of white stones about midway along the thoroughfare and the gravel path split around it before joining again a few metres in front of the open courthouse entrance. The courthouse was set in a park-like area of lush green lawn and tall, widely spreading shade trees. Benches had been built off to one side for visitors and waiting witnesses.

My seven cannibals were sitting on the benches in their red jail *laplaps* when I arrived for the first day of the hearing. Woroboi, who was standing trial for murder, Tom the interpreter and a couple of policemen and a warder were standing nearby. No-one else seemed to have turned up. Tom came over and we sat down with the cannibals. They greeted me like an old friend. I enquired after their wellbeing and they nodded happily. The food was good, the accommodation excellent and the new sights and surroundings most interesting. In short, they were having a good time.

The sound of voices came from the roadway and shortly the rest of the court participants came into view. The presiding judge, counsellors for the prosecution and defence and the court recorders all trooped into the building and began to set themselves up. Interested bystanders began to drift in and take up seats in the gallery. Last of all came the small band of journalists. Ihini detached herself from the group and came over to sit with me and the accused. She was wearing a short dress that appeared to have been made out of a shiny version of the Stars and Stripes. I was about to ask her about it when I was distracted by a policeman at the flagpole. I watched the flag rise and open in the breeze. It was the first time I had seen the new Papua New Guinea flag. Its black and red diagonally halved background with the yellow bird of paradise in the centre took me by surprise. Ihini put her hand on my shoulder.

‘It looks good, doesn’t it?’ she said. There was a hint of pride in her voice. I agreed.

We had dined the previous evening with Bernie Dennis, the ADC from Balimo. Balimo was located to the east of the Fly River mouth in flat and swampy country. Bernie was in town for a local government meeting. He was old for an ADC, about the same vintage as most of the current District Commissioners. He had a contrary streak and had been passed over for promotion, a fact that didn’t bother him in the slightest. He also liked his rum. His Papuan wife and kids were back at Balimo.

Bernie had patrolled to the edges of Biami country from Lake Kutubu in the Southern Highlands District in the 1950s. In those days the large stretch of plateau country between the lake and Kiunga on the Fly River was virtually unexplored by Europeans.

He had a typically contrary view about cannibalism. He could see nothing wrong with it.

‘If that’s the traditional way to dispose of a body, to eat it, what’s wrong with that? If people were going out and killing other people specifically to eat them then that’s a different matter.’ I tried to get my head around the idea. The ADC at Nomad had told me he thought that the seven men had eaten the old Biami either as part of an initiation process or to insult the old man’s clan. The ADC had even written a statement outlining his views and forwarded it to the court for consideration.

‘People like the Biami and Gebusi, who share common dialects and beliefs, are bound by tradition. If you take away the tradition their society begins to break down,’ Bernie added.

‘But you can’t have people eating each other,’ I said.

‘Change has to come gradually,’ he replied. ‘You must educate people about better ways of doing things. Clobbering them with the full force of the law is too drastic.’

‘You mean we should have explained the desirability of burying corpses and told them not to eat anyone else and left it at that?’

‘Exactly,’

‘It’s an interesting view,’ Ihini said.

‘Look,’ Bernie said turning to her. ‘I know that where you come from tradition is important. You’re a young girl, your family will be expecting you to marry and have kids, and it’s a traditional duty. They expect you will bring a high bride price. Your husband’s father and mother will want you to move in with them and look after them in their old age. It’s tradition. Imagine if you suddenly made all that irrelevant; your villages would fall apart. When I married my wife I went through the whole rigmarole, paid the bride price and

everything. I regularly send money to her parents and I fully expect to have to look after them until they die. Isn't that right?

Ihini looked at him and smiled.

'Actually,' she said, 'I've told my parents I'm not interested in marriage, traditional or otherwise. I think there are some women in Papua who are educated who are saying similar things. I see myself as an individual with equal rights.'

'Good grief,' Bernie grinned, 'a Papuan feminist! How on earth can you reconcile that?'

'Just watch me,' she replied.

Poor old Woroboi was dealt with fairly quickly. He was given three years (subsequently reduced on appeal) for the manslaughter of the old Biami. The judge deemed that running into his garden house, collecting a bow and arrow and returning to confront the old Biami constituted a degree of premeditation. I felt sorry for Woroboi and wondered how he would cope in jail. The court then got down to deciding the much more interesting case of the seven young cannibals.

As the arresting officer I was called to explain the circumstances leading up to the men's appearance in court. The judge asked me about the degree of sophistication in the area and why I thought the body had been consumed. I offered my opinion but made sure the court understood it was just an opinion. The conversation with Bernie Dennis had made me doubt my original assumption that the body had been eaten for ritual purposes.

There was a great deal of debate about what exactly 'decent' meant in terms of interfering with a corpse. The defence argued that within the context of Gebusi society eating a corpse was not

indecent it was just something that was traditionally done. Ihini scribbled in her notebook. Finally it came down to a technicality.

The judge dealt with the charge of unlawfully and indecently interfering with a corpse first. He said, 'I do not consider that the Queensland authorities were concerned with passing a statute against cannibalism, and it seems clear that this section was not designed to stop cannibalism. The mischief aimed at by the subsection was of a different, and what I am sure would have been considered a more minor order, such as acts of necrophilic perversion, indecent exposure, subjecting to indignity by way of mockery, and perhaps the kind of horseplay that is frowned upon but occurs in schools of anatomy and suchlike. I do not consider that the legislation had in contemplation the banning of a method of disposal of the body, namely by eating, as an alternative to burial or cremation.' I looked at Bernie and he winked. The seven accused young men stood shuffling in the dock. Everyone seemed to assume that they would know all about 'horseplay' in anatomy schools.

The judge continued. 'I must bear in mind the great leading rule of the criminal law: nothing is a crime unless plainly forbidden by law.' He went on to explain that he had been unable to find any suitable precedent for the case and added, 'On the full consideration of the evidence I have come to the conclusion that the conduct of the Yulabi villagers and of the man from Dadalibi in eating the body of the deceased Sabasigi villager, in all the circumstances of the case, was neither improper nor indecent behaviour on their part, being normal and reasonable behaviour for them as most primitive villagers living in the Gebusi area of the Nomad Sub-District in early 1971, in the limited condition of pacification and administration to which that area had then been reduced.'

In short, the judge had said the seven young men had not broken the law by eating the corpse because there was no law to break. I looked at Ihini and whispered, 'How are we supposed to stop people eating each other if there is no law against it? What the hell do we do when it happens again?' Bernie turned and looked at the flag fluttering outside. 'And there is no way the Administration or the Pangu Pati or the Australian government is going to introduce a Bill to outlaw cannibalism in a country that is just on the verge of self government.' Ihini nodded in agreement. The judge summed up.

'I take leave of this horrific subject by acquitting the accused of all charges laid against them. I sympathise with the difficulties of the Administration's field officers in effecting their laudable desire of putting down cannibalism without legislative backing.'

'Are you really a feminist?' I asked Ihini that evening in the bar.

'I don't really know,' she replied. 'I've read all the stuff by Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer and I agree with a lot of it. But, like Bernie says, it doesn't sit well in Papuan society.'

'And you don't ever want to get married and have kids?'

'Oh, I'd like to have kids. I just don't think marriage is relevant. I mean, if you need a piece of paper to prove you love someone, maybe you don't love them after all; maybe you just want to keep them all to yourself.'

'I guess you're right,' I replied. 'I suppose it's about needing to be loved more than anything else.'

'And about women as property,' she added.

'I knew it! You are a feminist!'

'But that doesn't mean I hate men!' she added, pushing her head under my arm.

‘Cut it out, you two,’ Bernie Dennis said as he came into the bar. ‘Who’s for a rum?’

She flew back to Port Moresby the next day. I watched the plane disappear over the sea. Her departure had been sad but more than anything I was worried about her. She seemed to be taking on the world all by herself. I hoped she was up to it. I sighed. My seven ex-cannibals had turned up. They were wearing shorts and T-shirts and were loaded down with baggage. Bernie and I had splurged and shouted them a shopping spree in BPs. The warder grinned at me and we ushered them into the waiting Islander for the trip back to Nomad. As we taxied out of the parking bay one of the ex-cannibals waved at the warder. He made a peace sign with his right hand and the ex-cannibal shouted back, ‘Peace, brother!’

“This officer gave his evidence with all modesty, and impressed me.” The ADC was reading from the transcript of the judgement. ‘What the hell did you say to him that was so impressive?’

I shrugged.

“No evidence tendered in the case really lent any support to the ADC’s theory in this regard.” Didn’t the silly old bugger know when someone is speaking from experience? Why didn’t you back up what I said in my statement?’

I shrugged again.

‘And bloody Dennis, what was he doing sticking his nose in where it wasn’t wanted?’

I shrugged for the third time.

‘How the hell am I supposed to run a Sub-District full of cannibals if we can’t even bring them to trial?’

I started to shrug again but the ADC stomped off.

‘We’ve got patrols to do!’ I heard him shout as he headed off for the airstrip. He was expecting a new Toyota Landcruiser. It was coming in three separate plane trips.

Geoff and Craig came in the door.

‘What’s up with him?’ Geoff asked.

‘He’s got his nose out of joint because the judge tossed out his statement and his bloody car is late.’

‘He spent days putting that statement together. I hope the Toyota is easier,’ Craig said.

‘Don’t I know it,’ I replied. ‘A lot of what he said is right. The law is a funny animal!’

‘So are Toyotas, I hear. It also looks like we’re all back on patrol,’ Geoff added.

CHAPTER TEN

Coconuts! Kure saw them first. There must have been six or seven palms slanting into the river.

‘*Taubata*,’ he said, ‘*Niue*.’

We had been sitting in a battered canoe on the Strickland for three days. Somewhere upriver a land party was waiting for us, blissfully unaware of the disaster that had occurred in the rapids.

‘If we can find a road route from Nomad to the Strickland at a point where shallow draft vessels from Daru can unload, we can offset the expense of flying everything into Nomad and spend the money on something else.’

The ADC had been standing beside the new station Toyota that had arrived in several crates when he uttered the fateful words. In his hand he held several nuts and bolts and a weird metal contraption that, despite our best efforts, we couldn’t find a home for. He dropped the items onto the rear tray and strolled off. Geoff looked at me.

‘He has a point, I suppose.’

Craig emerged from beneath the Toyota. Both his knuckles were bloodied. He tossed a spanner and another strange fixture into the back of the truck.

‘Bugged if I know what that is!’

I hadn’t thought much about a river link. When I flew into Nomad from Olsobip I had noticed the ominous swirls in the course of the Strickland River where whirlpools occurred. I knew some of the early *kiaps* had had trouble rafting down the river and some had lost people when they struggled past the swirling water. I also remembered the tremendous force of the water at the river’s headwaters when patrolling out of Olsobip.

‘What say we fly over the river to see if it’s possible?’ The ADC suggested as we drove up to the office steps.

‘I think that thing is some sort of torsion bar connected to the steering,’ Craig said as he turned the motor off.

It was raining on the day we flew over the river. Great jets of water spewed from the high banks around the station into the Nomad River. Huge forest trees rumbled over the gravel bed of the river on their way past. We had given up in the office. Sodden paper lay underfoot as more of the *kunai* roof was ripped away. Foxy was drenched. My rucksack, leaning against the safe, oozed cheap dye everywhere.

‘Better have another coffee,’ the ADC said as he pattered past in bare feet, soggy pipe spluttering between his teeth.

Then the sun came out.

The vagaries of the Nomad weather never ceased to amaze me. Soon everything was steaming. It was nice to get airborne and up into the cooler air.

Foxy tried very hard to follow the Strickland. He scared us half to death. Finally, while we were bucking along a few metres above the river in teeming rain, he scared himself. What we had seen, however, convinced us that the road theory was at least plausible. Back at the station we drew straws.

‘You may as well do the census while you’re down there,’ the ADC said as he pinched the short straw out of my hand.

I took the patrol to locate a road head and Geoff walked off to his base camp at Obeimi. Craig was left fiddling with the new Toyota. He had discovered a new box of bits and pieces in one of the packing crates and was puzzling over their relationship to the otherwise perfectly working vehicle. I was to travel down the Nomad River, the Rentoul and eventually the Strickland, find a spot that boats from Daru could safely reach, clear a campsite and then swing back towards Nomad, taking the census in the villages.

I walked to the Rentoul and bought a canoe. It was cumbersome and poorly made but seemed reliable enough when I set out with two carriers, Corporal Benson, Kure and Buka. The rest of the patrol was dispatched south on foot to the mouth of the Tomu River to wait for us. The Tomu flowed into the Strickland roughly where shallow draft vessels might safely reach. If we found it was possible to get higher up than the Tomu, that would be better. Otherwise, we would have to look further downstream.

When we finally reached the Strickland the river seemed calm and deep enough for any sized vessel. We knew the treacherous rapids were upstream. Happily I had paddled out into

midstream, thankful for a chance to relax in the sun and let the current carry us along. A few long stony patches had us battling for a while but the river quickly evened out. We slid comfortably into deeper water and the green banks grew measurably higher. As we rounded the next turn we were in great spirits, even taking time to rest our paddles.

I was engrossed in an Army survey map when a low groan caught my attention. Looking up, I wondered what had gone wrong. Then I caught Corporal Benson's concerned stare. The river ahead was neatly divided into three separate branches. I quickly checked the map. Nothing. According to the Army, the river passed this point in one main stream. We were gaining on the divisions rapidly.

'Head left!' I yelled over the increased pounding of the river as it quickly began to break into rapids. I wanted to stay as close to the walking party on the east bank as possible. It was the wrong decision.

We were swept rapidly into a narrowing aisle of water. The banks rose sharply and as we negotiated a stony bar I saw the current angle sharply into the left bank. We had no choice. Bouncing against the current we swung sharply left and were swept into the shadow of a fifteen-metre overhang. Through desperate paddling we managed to keep upright.

We pounded downriver for over an hour at breakneck speed. We had been well ahead of the land party before but now we must have been kilometres ahead. Through the spray Benson began shouting and a grin lit up his shining face. Ahead the river spilled into the mainstream and, after crossing a wide area of

broken water. calmed into a deep flow. Everyone breathed deeply. Then we saw the tree.

It had fallen from the upper bank and lodged itself across the whole breadth of our path, leaving a gap between it and the water of what looked like centimetres. We had no choice. Everyone flattened themselves in the canoe and waited.

The last thing I remember before hitting the tree was Kure insanely paddling backwards. My hat was wrenched from my head and I felt a searing pain along my back. One of the carriers cracked at the last moment and stood up. The tree hit him in the thighs and he toppled over it and into the water on the other side. The canoe grated for a second under the tree and a split opened in its bottom.

Remarkably, we were all in one piece as we emerged on the other side. The canoe was sinking rapidly. In the true style of the doomed captain I went down with my ship. I lost sight of the floundering crew as I concentrated on staying afloat.

Whirling away from the deadly stones in the centre of the turmoil I struck out for the bank. I became aware of a black shape near me and saw Buka gamely following. The current was too strong to make any attempt at getting out of the river and we floated rapidly downstream. This was the second time the Strickland had tried to drown me. Then we hit the rapids.

I could feel my bare feet bouncing off the stony bottom and once, when I attempted to dig them into the river bed I cartwheeled under water. I spotted a gigantic boulder with only a few centimetres of water flowing over it and lined myself up for it. I wanted to get out of the water before all my toes were knocked off. The current was too fast.

I coasted up to the stone, spent three or four frantic seconds trying to grab a hold and was spilled into the current

again. Buka walloped on top of me. Fortunately we surfaced in calm water.

Striking out for the bank, I cruised for a few minutes looking for a way out. Ahead the bank lowered and branches and tree roots stuck out into the water. I grabbed the first one and immediately became a water-bound yoyo with the current piling over me and dunking me every time I surfaced. I hung on grimly and managed to edge closer to the bank. My barking dog sped past and disappeared. Slowly and painfully I crawled ashore. I bent over, dragging great mouthfuls of air into my bruised lungs.

Very slowly I stood up. I was surrounded by nondescript jungle. For a full minute I was at a complete loss. I looked out over the river and shuddered. I began stumbling downstream along the bank. I had survived wearing a battered pair of shorts. That was better than last time I thought. I began yelling.

The first answer I got was a distant bark. I called again. The bark got louder and I headed in its direction. Between cooees and loud woofs I found Buka. She grinned shamefacedly and limped across to me. Then I saw Benson a little way off, jumping up and down on one spot. He was holding his rifle and bandolier. He had water in his ears. I never did find out how he survived holding ten kilos of gunmetal and ammunition.

We walked in silence downstream, stopping only for Benson to jump up and down to clear his ears. We came to a sandbar about half an hour later. Kure and the two carriers were stretched out in the sun. Kure shook his head when I approached.

We had survived but had little else to show for it. Benson had his rifle and a pair of shorts. I had a knife and shorts, Kure a small empty kitbag and towel. The two carriers had nothing. The dog had lost her collar. The radio was gone and so were the maps.

We were many kilometres ahead of the land party and away from the main tracks. Then we saw the canoe drift past. One of the carriers retrieved it.

The coconuts were a long way off the ground. I handed Kure my knife and he shinnied up the nearest palm. Soon green nuts were bouncing everywhere. Benson sharpened a stake with his bayonet and began husking them. The first one tasted heavenly. A month later I wouldn't have touched a coconut for the world.

I took a nut down to the canoe and sat happily munching the white meat. Then I began to itch. I scratched and made it worse. We had been in the water most of the day, trying to combat the intense heat and glare on the river. Our first night on the sandbar before we patched the canoe had been spent in teeming rain. It had rained for two days and I couldn't remember a dry moment.

My legs and arms and my whole back, cuts included, seemed alive. I dropped my coconut and lowered myself into the river. That eased it. I got out. The itch began again, only worse. I got back into the water and sat there.

'Watch out for crocodiles,' Kure said, handing me another husked coconut.

'Bugger the crocs.'

Why me? I thought; why not Kure or Benson or the dog? It must have been my fair skin. Then I noticed Benson squirming uncomfortably a few metres away. Soon he was in the water. In the next half hour Kure and the carriers were also sitting up to their necks.

'Watch the crocodiles,' I warned.

The dog stood puzzled on the bank.

When the sun went down it eased off a bit, and Benson fetched a piece of bush rope and rubbed up a fire. With nothing better to do we curled up around it and slept. Then the itch began again. I rolled in the sand. No good. I scratched, waited, and then bolted for the river.

We spent the night sitting up to our necks, with Benson gamely holding his rifle above his head to ward off the crocodiles. The dog watched us for a while then went back to the fire and snored all night.

We spotted the crocodile sleeping on a sandbar the following day. We eased the canoe out of the main current and nosed slowly towards it. The sword grass along the river rustled gently and little bubbles oozed from the croc's mouth. Benson slowly slid a cartridge into the breach of his rifle and took careful aim.

The shot deafened me for a second. It was the loudest thing I had heard in days. A hole appeared in the wet sand beside the croc's head. It opened its eyes.

'Jesusss, Benson,' I muttered. 'Give the damn thing to me.'

I lined up the croc and squeezed a bullet off. We were practically sitting on top of it now. Another hole appeared in the sand. The croc looked at us. Then it reared up and plunged into the river. So much for a crocodile dinner.

We were well and truly in the Strickland River swamps now. When we had left the sandbar I still believed the mouth of the Tomu was ahead of us. When we realised it wasn't, we had attempted to walk

upriver but had run into deep swamp. We tried to skirt it and got even deeper. I wasn't going to wade through two-metre deep mud for anyone. We returned to the canoe.

When we came across a deserted mining company campsite I knew we were well past our objective. I wandered morosely around the camp and found an orange. It was in reasonable shape so I ate it.

Since collecting the coconuts we had started searching the bush for food. We had found quite a bit of edible fruit, *limbom* roots and cooking bananas, and had spent a day making great lumps of orange sago powder. We had even shaken a tree kangaroo out of a tree. Food was no problem. The group at the Tomu River mouth would sit there for quite a while longer so no alarm would have been raised. Lake Murray Patrol Post couldn't be too far downriver and from there we could fly back to Nomad.

I was beginning to enjoy myself. I'd developed immunity to the water itch and was tanned brown all over. I'd lost enough weight to feel remarkably fit. We began paddling for the lake. Ten days after leaving the Rentoul River and almost three weeks out of Nomad we rounded a great bend in the river and saw smoke.

The Sukis from Lake Murray were hunting crocodiles. They seemed surprised to see us. Apparently they seldom ventured this far upriver. We explained our situation and they offered us some crocodile meat. It had that strong fish smell but tasted vaguely like bacon. I offered a bit to Buka. She recoiled at the smell and backed away. One of our new friends tossed her a coconut husk. She considered the two for a moment then picked up the crocodile meat and disappeared into the bush.

The Suki hunters had a few spare mosquito nets and a little after sunset we were snoring blissfully. Over the past few days we

had paddled through very swampy country and had been building sleeping platforms above the mud with fires underneath to ward off the mosquitoes. The mosquito net was wonderful and I slept soundly that night.

The following morning we transferred to a Suki canoe and set off again. The Suki live on Lake Murray, a great inland lake at the confluence of the Strickland and Fly Rivers. Their canoes are sleek, low and fast. Great naval battles had been fought on the lake and their prowess with a paddle is legendary. Our Suki friends disdainfully pushed our clumsy craft into the reeds as we left the camp.

The following afternoon we rounded a bend and glided into the kilometre-wide flow of the Fly River. That night we slept at Obo, a village set back from the river. The mosquitoes were incredible.

I lay on the floor of the village rest house on blankets acquired on credit from the village store. Another blanket covered me from head to foot and was tucked under the one below. The mosquito net was suspended by string from the roof and was also tucked carefully under me. By nine o'clock there were millions of mosquitoes trying to get at me.

I woke to a distinct discomfort. Several mosquitoes had somehow got under the net. I lit a match and reached for a candle. I spent the next few hours killing mosquitoes inside the net. Then, feeling distinctly seedy, I re-tucked everything and doused the candle. I couldn't sleep. I could hear them chewing the net and trying to lift the edge of the blankets. Finally, encased in a cocoon of sweaty blankets, I dozed off. At six a bleary eyed Benson appeared from the other end of the rest house and suggested we depart for more healthy climes.

We paddled back up the Strickland for a day and entered the lake system. For the following two days we glided across the glassy surface of Lake Murray in a big canoe paddled by half a dozen Suki men from Obo. As we headed north the lake gradually widened until all that could be seen was water and distant coconut-clad islands. We slept on the islands over smoky fires. The smoke worked beautifully, although there were fewer mosquitoes on the lake.

In the late afternoon of the second day we caught sight of Lake Murray Patrol Post. A few hours later I was washed, wearing borrowed clothes and eating a decent meal. A few days later we hitched north on a passing plane to Nomad.

‘Ah, you’re back,’ the ADC said.

We decided to abandon the idea of the river road. Towards the middle of the year we began a series of special census patrols. Similar patrols were going on all over the Territory. The upcoming House of Assembly elections, due in early 1972, were going to be special. The members elected for the next four-year term were going to serve a self-governing Papua New Guinea. The census would not only be used to update the electoral rolls; it would also collect statistics from individual households in selected areas to determine the social and economic state of the country. A special budget had been allocated for this last purpose and teams of special interviewers were recruited to help in the task.

Andrew Peacock was the new Minister for Territories. He was enthusiastic and likable and seemed to be making things happen. It was expected that the conservative United Party, under the leadership of the Western Highlander Tei Abal, would form

a government after the election and lead the country into self government. A special committee was hard at work writing a constitution and Peacock was openly talking about December 1973 as a possible date for self government.

The Administration sent us four special census interviewers — students from the college in Waigani — and a planeload of Australian Army C-ration packs. The four students were all male and none of them had any decent walking boots. Craig had opened one of the ration packs and had discovered a bar of chocolate in a khaki green wrapper. He tried to snap a piece off with his teeth without success. He put the chocolate on the veranda rail in the full sun to melt a bit and continued rummaging. He pulled out a small sheet of paper about the size of an ordinary envelope. On it were printed instructions.

‘You’re supposed to eat local greens with the packs and drink lots of water to avoid constipation.’ I nodded absently, wondering what to do about our interviewers’ lack of boots.

‘It also says not to throw this instruction sheet away — it doubles as toilet paper.’ He flapped the soggy paper sheet in the breeze and retrieved the bar of chocolate from the sun. It was still as hard as a brick.

‘Maybe we could attach some string or something to this stuff,’ he said. ‘It would make perfect soles for sandals.’

There was only one area in the Sub-District where the population was deemed sophisticated enough to vote in a meaningful way. This was the Pare area to the west of the Strickland. A mission had been running at Debepare for a few years and had produced good results with its education programs. We decided to concentrate on this area. The rest of the Sub-District was going to be a nightmare come the election, and we didn’t really want to think about it until then.

I had to leave Buka behind because she was heavily pregnant. Geoff was running the station. The ADC and his wife had gone north-east, exploring the little valleys where the Papuan Plateau met the Central Ranges in the vicinity of the Southern Highlands. Geoff promised to look after the dog and keep me posted on her progress. Craig's mutt seemed to have an interest in the matter.

The patrol was a leisurely affair. Instead of walking into the Pare from Nomad we were allowed to shuttle the whole patrol by Mission Aviation Fellowship Cessna to the Debare Mission. This saved several days' hard walking. We were also resupplied with rations by helicopter as we walked around the area. I could get used to this, I thought, and then wondered if our four interviewers thought this was normal practice. Who was I to disabuse them of the thought? Maybe it would become normal practice in time.

We walked to the southern Pare villages first and carried out interviews. Some of the questions on the form were a bit weird. 'How many motor vehicles in the household?' 'Who is the main breadwinner?' 'Where did you spend last night?' There must have been some cribbing from an Australian census form. After a while we learned not to bother with the sillier questions.

When we went back through to the Debare Mission I used their radio to contact Nomad. Our A510 was playing up again. Geoff reported that he had heard from the ADC, who was excited because he had located a sizeable group of new people in one of the valleys he was exploring.

'That's good,' I said. 'The only area we haven't really been over now is the patch way to the south between here and Balimo.'

‘Wouldn’t be too many people in there,’ he replied. ‘It’s just jungle and swamp. I’ve flown over it a couple of times and haven’t seen a thing.’

‘Who knows?’ I said. ‘Catch you later.’

‘Yep. Okay, and bye the bye, you’re a Dad.’

‘Huh?’

‘Five bouncing babies, two girls and three boys. They look just like you.’

‘How’s Buka?’

‘Confused, but coping. Craig’s mutt is helping.’

The Pare villages were neat and tidy and the rest houses were well maintained, with firewood stacked underneath and *bilums* of taro and fruit waiting for us on the verandas. The only hiccup came when we got to the Strickland River crossing on our way home and discovered that the Administration canoe that was usually moored there had gone missing. The mystery was solved when we received word that the village constable at Igabira, the nearest village to the Strickland, had apprehended an escapee from the Nomad jail. Constable Okomba was despatched with a pair of handcuffs to the village to collect the ruffian, who, it turned out, had cut the moorings on the canoe to prevent anyone following him — without realising we were all on the other side of the river anyway. The man’s name was Kon, which caused much mirth amongst our interviewers.

During the patrol several village constables approached us to discuss setting up a Local Government Council in the area. Their Awin neighbours to the west of the Fly River had a council and the Pare who had seen it in operation were most impressed. In my

estimation the Pare were just about ready for a council. Their degree of political sophistication was certainly up to scratch; the only thing lacking was a sound economic base to support a tax system. I promised to mention the issue in my patrol report.

The Pare were also flattered to know that their area had been selected for the special census. They opened up their homes and cordially invited the interviewers inside. The interviewers, for their part, were polite and cheerful. Given the personal nature of some of the questions on the census forms I was pleasantly surprised at the level of cooperation. As we progressed from village to village, however, it became apparent that there was still an enormous gap between our English-speaking and well-educated interviewers and the Pare. I asked the former about this one evening. One of the students from Popondetta looked at his friends and then answered.

‘We think these people are very primitive and we don’t think the Administration is doing enough to help them.’

I looked at Craig. ‘The problem we have is the isolation of the area. Any sort of economic activity would be saddled with impossible logistical problems.’

‘Why can’t the Administration build a road from here to Kiunga? That would solve the logistics.’ the student from Kerema asked. The Pare had been intermittently working on a four-wheel drive track to link their villages to the Debepare Mission but the work through swampy country with hand tools was difficult.

‘Some of the Pare villagers are working on a road to link their villages to the airstrip at Debepare and we have been promised a couple of *didimen* — you know, agricultural officers — in the not-too-distant future.’

‘But wouldn’t it be easier to bring bulldozers up the Fly River on barges and then just push a road through to here?’

‘I don’t think the Administration could afford it,’ Craig said.

‘But it should,’ the student from Erave said. ‘In my area they use big bulldozers to build roads.’

‘Perhaps it’s something to consider after independence,’ I said.

The interviewers looked at me but I couldn’t tell if they’d got my drift. Craig didn’t miss my meaning, however.

‘Why didn’t you just come out and say it?’ he said when we were alone.

‘Say what?’ I asked.

‘If the four of you are so smart, why don’t you do it?’

‘Now, I didn’t say that.’

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Maybe I should tell them.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ I cautioned. ‘They are young and idealistic — and besides, they might just do it.’

‘They might at that,’ he replied.

While I was surprised at the interviewers’ views about the level of sophistication amongst the Pare I was equally bemused by the Pares’ conclusions about the interviewers. One of the younger village constables enlightened me.

‘They are young; they’re well educated; they speak English; they are almost the same as you and the other *kiap*. How can we hope to compete against that? We are like pigs living in the mud compared to them.’ I didn’t have an answer readily to hand for him so I just said, ‘Give it time, *Mamusi*.’

After we crossed the Strickland River in the new canoe that I had bought to replace the missing one it was a long walk to Sugiabi village, which was in the Supei people’s country. The next

day, however, it only took us two hours to get back to Nomad. The interviewers busied themselves getting their paperwork in order. Craig and I offered to help but they respectfully declined any assistance. On the day before the plane taking them back to Port Moresby arrived they presented me with two forms for signature. One form was a list of personal items damaged during the patrol. The items included shirts, shorts and underpants. The student from Popondetta had managed to destroy three pairs of underpants, value six dollars, during the patrol. The other form was for overtime. They had calculated the extra hours over and above a daily allowance of eight hours and costed it at a set rate.

‘But this is just time when we got up early or arrived late in a village! It’s a normal part of patrolling. If there’s a long walk you get up before dawn. If you get into a village in the early afternoon you may as well get the census under way; who cares if it goes past five o’clock?’

‘Nevertheless,’ they answered, ‘it’s over and above the normal rostered eight hours.’ After we farewelled them at the airstrip and the plane became a mere dot in the distance, Craig said, ‘They’ll go a long way.’

I patted my now slim dog. She was taking a break from the kids; Craig’s mutt was babysitting. ‘All the way to Port Moresby I think.’

‘And then some,’ Craig added.

The ADC was still in the mountains when we finished the Pare patrol but he had left instructions for me to return to the Tomu River area to complete the census that I had been unable to carry out. He included a caution about avoiding ‘further aquatic

escapades' in his patrol instructions. I should have heeded his warning.

I started planning the patrol, working out walking times, calculating how many bags of rice I would need and so on. I also dispatched Constable Iomere with a couple of carriers and an interpreter to the nearest villages in the area to let people know we'd be there in a few weeks. From those villages word should spread south well ahead of us. He ambled back to Nomad a week later with a clutch of dead Queen Victoria pigeons on a pole. I didn't even know he was back until I spotted him at morning parade.

'So how did it go?' I asked.

He looked puzzled.

'I got five,' he replied cautiously.

'What?'

'Five pigeons.'

'But what about telling the villagers about the patrol?'

'Oh yes, I did that too.' I wondered if I should tell him that the pigeons were a protected bird and he had broken the law. No point in embarrassing him; I would talk to him later.

Constable Iomere was, to put it mildly, dim. He was the classic plodder. If you gave him one thing to do he toddled off and did it. If you gave him two things to do he became confused and achieved neither. Lateral thinking was to Iomere what quantum physics was to me — something from another planet. That he later managed to misplace a raft with nine carriers aboard didn't surprise me.

The Tomu River Census Division lies about fifty kilometres south of Nomad. The many rivers that flow west through the area into the Strickland River are divided by higher ground and it is there that the sparse population builds its long houses and

cultivates its gardens. Away from the ridges the land degenerates into swampy jungle. The rivers and swamps serve to isolate each hamlet so that getting to them involves long hours slogging through swamps teeming with snakes, leeches and crocodiles.

The people in the area are called Kabasi and they are very elusive, tending to be on the move as the seasons change from wet to dry. We went into the area during the dry season; I would hate to be there during the wet season. The Kabasi first became aware of the outside world when Ivan Champion went through in 1939. A patrol in 1964 managed to go through the area without seeing a living soul. They were officially contacted in 1968 by a patrol out of Lake Murray and our own esteemed ADC managed to keep them in one place long enough to count a year later.

As we walked through the area it became apparent from the numerous old tracks, settlements and gardens that the area must have once supported a larger population, maybe four or five generations ago. What happened to them no one knows. Perhaps the Biami know. As we travelled we kept running across dog skulls planted on posts in the middle of the tracks. These turned out to have been set up to prevent a curious itching 'measles' from entering the area from the south. The malady was reputed to have been introduced by an oil exploration company cutting seismic lines between the rivers. I wondered if our itchy experience during our 'shipwrecked' patrol was the same thing.

Apart from the Kabasi there are two other groups in the area. The first is a mob called Usuma, who are misfits from the Southern Highlands. They speak a separate language to the Kabasi but seem to have some sort of relationship with the Biami. Why they were kicked out of the area to the north no one knows, and we missed the opportunity to ask them because we couldn't find them.

The closest we got was accidentally stumbling across a family of four of them in the bush. I left Constable Iomere with them while I went back to get the rest of the patrol. When I returned Constable Iomere was sitting on a log in the sunshine watching butterflies. There was no sign of the elusive Usuma.

The other group lived in an annoyingly isolated village to the south just inside the Goiyobom census division. The people there come from the Rentoul River area to the north but were chased down the Strickland in the 1950s after an unsuccessful battle with some of their neighbours. They stopped running when they got to the banks of the Du River, just off the Strickland, and built a village after their own style, with separate family houses. It was in getting to them that Iomere lost the nine carriers.

When we had finished with the Kabasi hamlets we found ourselves at the headwaters of the Tomu River. The easiest way to get to Goiyobom seemed to be to build rafts and drift down the placid river to the Strickland and then hike the few kilometres south along the banks of the big river to the mouth of the Du River and Goiyobom village. The ADC had done the same thing in 1970 when he was last in the area. With that in mind I set the carriers to work building five rafts. The local Kabasi helped; they often travelled downstream by raft and assured us the river was deep and calm.

And they were right. We drifted at a leisurely pace, taking in the scenery. I took the lead raft and I placed Constable Aunip on raft number three in the middle and Iomere on raft number five at the back. From the poop deck of my raft I could look back and see the four other rafts as they followed. It seemed foolproof.

As we rounded a bend we frightened a treeful of flying foxes into flight. The *maroboi* flew off around the bend and joined

another colony in their tree. As we gained on them the larger group again took flight and again settled in another tree containing another colony a few bends downriver. When that lot took flight there must have been thousands of them in the air. On a long straight stretch we watched them all settle in a distant tree. As we approached the tree the *maroboi* began to agitate again prior to taking off. The combination of their weight and movement caused the big tree to lean over, pivot at its base and come crashing down across the river.

When we got there we found masses of the foul-smelling animals tangled in the broken foliage. We pulled in to shore and everyone began grabbing bats. I watched from my raft. The bats were quite large and every so often I heard a yelp as one of them sunk its sharp little fangs into someone's foot. After a while I shouted for everyone to get back on the rafts and we cut a passage through the broken foliage lying across the river. We were on our way but there were blackening clouds in the distance.

About three o'clock in the afternoon we passed one of the tracks that we had used on our way into the eastern part of the area. I was pleased, knowing we were on course. The rain came in about half an hour later. We sat in bright sunlight watching a grey wall advancing up the river towards us. We slowly drifted into the deluge. After twenty minutes or so of being pounded by sheets of rain I decided to pull in to the bank and set up camp. Kure spotted a likely spot and we paddled towards it. We soon had a tarpaulin up and sought shelter under it as the other rafts drifted in to the bank.

As the rain eased we set about making camp. A rough clearing was made and ropes were slung from nearby trees to support more tarpaulins. Any nearby trees that looked unstable were felled; I didn't want a tree crashing down on the camp in the

middle of the night. Clean water was fetched from a nearby stream and big pots were set on fires to boil the carriers' rice. Constable Aunip distributed tins of bully beef, one per two man, to eat with the rice. I brewed tea while Kure set about cooking our meal. Kure and I tended to eat the same meals when we were on patrol; it saved messing about with extra pots and pans and he looked forward to my more expensive tinned food. I took a mug of tea and wandered down to the river. The sun was out again and everything gleamed, including the four rafts moored on the bank. Wait a minute, I thought; didn't we have five rafts? I looked for Constable Iomere. He was cutting up a flying fox for dinner but left it and came running when I signalled to him. He was instantly obedient if nothing else.

'Where is the fifth raft?' I asked. He looked in the direction of the moored rafts and I could see him slowly counting. He stopped, glanced at me and started to count again.

'Shit!' I said. 'Get your rifle and follow me.'

We walked upstream until we reached the track that we had passed earlier. The fifth raft was moored to a tree and nine sets of footprints could be seen heading off north towards Honabi Village and probably Nomad. I looked at Iomere and he scratched his head.

'Didn't you see them pull in to the bank?' He shook his head.

'What the hell were you doing, then?' He scratched his head again.

'They've obviously deserted! Didn't you pick up on that? Didn't they complain to you about anything?' He shrugged.

'Ah, bugger them,' I said, exasperated. 'I'm hungry; lets go back and get some *kai*.' He looked at me, surprised. Surely I was

going to berate him for half an hour or so and threaten to have him disciplined and his pay stopped? The truth is I didn't have the heart for it. I imagined that it had happened to him so many times before that it would be water off a duck's back. Oh, to be so dumb! The bliss of it, I thought as we plodded back to camp.

At least Goiyobom was a pleasant village. It sat on a picturesque rise above the Du River, surrounded by banana plantations and taro gardens. The people were clean and the houses tidy. The *Mamusi* was polite and efficient and we had the census over and done with in an hour. Everyone on the books was in attendance. When I added the figures up, took off the couple of deaths and added the couple of births, the tally was exact. All we had to do now was head back to Nomad along the main river track. I knew it was a long walk but a pleasant one. When I was in radio range I would alert Nomad to look out for my missing carriers. And to think that a month or so earlier I had drifted past the mouth of the Du River without even knowing that a couple of hundred metres upstream was a pleasant and welcoming village.

It took us nine hours to get to the Ishom River and the wide, well-made track to Odogumbi Village. From there Nomad would be a short four hours' walk away. Once everyone was safely over the river I set up the aerials for the A510 radio. The ADC came on line.

'Your carriers turned up this morning,' he said. 'They reckon they stopped for a break and you left them behind.'

'That would be right,' I replied. 'Maybe you can take it up with Constable Iomere when we get back.'

'Well, that explains it,' he replied. 'Say no more.'

'I'll see you tomorrow, about midday,' I said.

There was a letter waiting for me from the District Commissioner when I got back. My application for leave had been approved. It was only a month overdue but it felt like a year.

‘When do you go?’ the ADC asked.

‘In about two weeks.’

‘Well, we won’t get much sense out of you until then. You may as well write up your report and then pack all your gear. Did the DC say where your next posting would be?’

‘Yeah,’ I replied. ‘Bloody Balimo.’

‘With Bloody Bernie, then?’

It took me a couple of days to write up the report. There were 1565 people in the Pare Census Division and it took us 13 days to count them and conduct detailed interviews with each household. There were 336 people in the Tomu River Census Division and it took me 18 days to count them, without the burden of lengthy interviews, and I still managed to miss some of them. I wondered how our interviewers would have coped and I wondered whether they would have still called the Pare unsophisticated.

I gave the ADC the report. He took it away to read and came back a little while later. ‘Well, I guess that tidies up that sordid little episode.’ I nodded.

‘Of course you realise that Balimo Sub-District is ninety per cent water; you’ll have all the opportunity you want to get your feet wet.’ I would have told him to get stuffed but I didn’t feel like getting involved in one of his arm wrestles and, besides, he told me I could leave on the next plane. ‘Spend a couple of days in Moresby on your way out,’ he said knowingly.

I packed my gear and arranged for Craig to look after my dog while I was away on leave. He didn't seem to mind having to find homes for the pups either; in fact, he seemed to be taking a proprietary interest in them. Then again, it was his mutt who was responsible for them in the first place.

Ihini picked me up at the airport. She had her own car now. It looked suspiciously like a hand-painted Nissan Cedric.

'I've seen this car before somewhere,' I said.

She laughed. 'Probably, I bought it off a *kiap* at the administration college.'

'There are still *kiaps* going to the college?'

'He was teaching there; he's "gone finish" now.'

'What was he teaching?'

'He was teaching Papuan New Guinean *kiaps*.'

She took me round to a flat that she was sharing with three other women. It was a neat two-storeyed, four-bedroom building at Gordons owned by the *Post Courier*. She introduced me to her flatmates. Two of the women were white; the other was a very dark lady from Buka. One of the white women held out her hand.

'So you're Ihini's toy-boy *kiap*?' The other white girl grimaced behind her.

'I must be,' I replied.

'Don't mind her,' Ihini said; 'she's really very nice.'

'A real pussy cat,' the other white woman added. The Buka lady raised her eyebrows.

We had dinner at Crazy Harolds in Boroko and then went out to the university where some of Ihini's friends were putting on a play in the open-air theatre. It was a traditional story from one of

the outer islands, a fable about young men and women and loose morals. It seemed perfectly innocent to me.

'You wait until the morning,' Ihini said. 'Someone will have twisted it into a political statement and your Security and Intelligence friends will be snooping around.' I had no doubt she was right.

The next day I called in at her office. She showed me the headline, which read 'Free Love at the University'.

'Told you so,' she grinned. I read the article. It was very imaginative.

'But never mind that,' she said; 'look at this.' She had the proof of an article for the next edition of the paper. It was an account of the Nomad ADC's patrol north of the station. Some of his sketches of people and their headdresses from his patrol report were featured in the article which was headlined 'Primitives Contacted in Remote Valley'. I read the account, which appeared to have been lifted in chunks from his patrol report.

'But this wouldn't have got to Port Moresby until last week. How on earth did the paper get a copy of it?'

'Under the table, I guess.'

'Why on earth would they leak something like that?'

'White-anting.'

'White-anting what?'

'Self-government, independence; they're trying to say, in a not unsubtle way, that the Territory isn't ready.'

'You mean it came from the Administration?'

'Probably. It would have to have come from there originally; maybe it was passed on through one of the anti-independence politicians. Who knows?'

‘The ADC was proud of that patrol. It was beautifully done; it took him months to get those people’s confidence.’

‘Somare made a comment in the House of Assembly about a week ago; he said Tom Ellis was a man of the 1930s and they would need men of the 1970s after self government.’

‘*Kiap* is becoming a dirty word, isn’t it?’

‘You should hear my flatmate on the subject.’

‘Can we drop this?’ I said. ‘I’d like to spend a happy day with you before I get on the plane.’

‘Sure. You guys will always be useful as toy boys if nothing else,’ she poked me in the ribs.

CHAPTER 11

While I was on leave I became friendly with the sister of a good friend whom I had known since primary school and who had become a *kiap* at the same time as me. I guess it was inevitable that we would experiment with a relationship, but two and a half months is not a long time. She had briefly visited the Territory while I was in Moresby with the Security and Intelligence Branch and I had gone up to Goroka with her to see her brother and his wife and to attend the Goroka Show, so she knew something about Papua New Guinea.

After I returned from leave she came to Port Moresby to work for a while but by then the relationship was doomed and she dumped me for someone else. We had a good time while I was on leave, however. Ihini was away on assignment when I passed through Port Moresby on my way to Daru and Balimo. Not that I was worried about her knowing; our 'open' relationship, as she termed it, apparently allowed for such liberties. It was the ribbing I would have had over it that worried me.

Balimo had a Local Government Council, so the DDC in Daru took me round to see Fred Parker, the District Local Government Officer. He introduced me.

‘I thought you were called Crusoe,’ Fred said. He knew who I was; I had fixed up his council books at Lake Murray while waiting for the plane after my disastrous Strickland River patrol. While that patrol seemed to be achieving currency as a debacle, courtesy of the Nomad ADC, I was beginning to secretly cherish it.

Fred was ‘different’. He was a herpetologist with a world-class reputation. He was presently dabbling with Papuan sea snakes, which are considerably more lethal than their land-bound cousins. He patrolled in sandshoes and had recently been through the Star Mountains. There were no Local Government Councils in the Star Mountains but there were lots of interesting frogs. Geoff Smith reckoned Fred wore sandshoes because he had no toenails. He also had the largest record collection (musical) I had ever seen.

I spent a couple of days with him getting up to speed on Balimo. I wasn’t going to be expected to work on the council; Peter Hawke, who I had worked with at Kiunga, had that job. Nevertheless, a lot of what I would be doing would revolve around Council business.

‘Besides,’ Fred said, ‘if you managed to sort out the books at Lake Murray you could be useful to us at Balimo.’ I felt flattered. Maybe Balimo wouldn’t be so bad after all.

I drove out to the airstrip to pick up Buka. She was asleep under the wing of Foxy’s plane. She looked quite content; she obviously didn’t miss her pups. I tiptoed past.

‘They were snapped up,’ Foxy said. ‘Craig had to turn people away; he’s got orders for the next litter.’

One of the first things I discovered about Balimo was that there wasn't a lot to do. The Council looked after the airstrip and the short road to the station; the primary school had a resident Education Department inspector; the mission ran the hospital; and a trader from Kikori ran the local store, bank, post office and lodge. An agriculture officer looked after the local fishing industry and the coconut and rubber plantations, and there was a vocational school that taught carpentry and other trade skills. The mission had been set up in 1934 and the local Gogadala people were well educated and so law abiding that there wasn't the need for a *haus kalabus*; court cases were rare and usually involved civil matters. It seemed that our role as *kiaps* was 'just to be there'. Apart from that, there was a tennis court and cold beer on tap at the lodge.

I was sitting in my office contemplating all of this when there was a knock on the door. 'Come in; it's open,' I called. A tallish, bearded white man sporting a rakish straw hat and a very bright Hawaiian shirt and no shoes stepped into the room.

'I'm Alan Quest,' he said defensively and held out his hand. He had a faded New Zealand accent. I had heard of him from Fred. He was a crocodile shooter and labour recruiter who ran a small launch called *The Butterbox*. He lived in the wilds upriver in the vicinity of Wawoi Falls, where he had, amongst other things, built a soccer pitch. He was rumoured to have walked all over the country between Balimo and Nomad in his bare feet carrying nothing more than a single-barrelled shotgun and a few cartridges. I shook his hand.

'What can I do for you?'

'I need to write a will.'

'A will?'

'Yeah. I've had a couple of, um, close calls lately and I think it might be a good idea.' I suspected that the close calls involved a bush knife and one of his lady friends.

'Okay,' I said. 'I'm not quite sure how to do it but if you give me the details I'll get back to you. Why don't you sit down?'

'First of all, I want to be buried on the nearest patrol post.'

'Yep. Go on.'

'Second, I want you to set fire to my boat with everything in it.'

'Set fire to it?'

'Yeah. I don't want anyone fighting over it.'

'Okay.'

'That's it.'

'That's it?'

'Um, well, you could tell my Mum if you like. She's in New Zealand.'

'Whereabouts in New Zealand?'

'Taranaki somewhere. It's in the North Island, about halfway up the west side.'

'Somewhere?'

'I'm not sure. Her name's Edna.'

'Right.'

'Okay. Thanks. I've got to go. Got crocs to skin.'

'No worries; I'll give you a yell when the paperwork's done.'

He got up, doffed his hat and left. I eased back in my chair. Why me? I thought.

When I arrived at Balimo I was put up in the Balimo Lodge because there were no houses available on the station. The lodge was a big bush-material building attached to the store. The owner, John Major, lived in Kikori, which was up the coast a fair way. He had a large, flat-bottomed boat that he loaded with trade goods and slowly piloted through the estuaries and swamps along the coast before coming up the Aramia River into the Balimo Lagoon. He had 'wives' in some of the bigger villages, including Balimo. His Balimo wife, Dinah, ran the store and lodge.

He was a big, intelligent man in his fifties with an opinion about most things. He had once been a *kiap* and was particularly critical of the Administration; he thought do-gooders had infiltrated it. He was a firm believer in 'discipline', whatever that meant, and applied the principle to his trading empire. He survived into the new century. The last time I saw him he was taking off in his own plane with his family from Kikori for Port Moresby. He must have been over eighty by then.

Anyway, his arrival at Balimo always created a stir. Dinah would be running around like a happy schoolgirl tidying the place up and making sure the books were in shape. The ADC and the Local Government Officer would show up at the lodge a few hours after he got there, and the school inspector and the *Didiman* would be hot on their heels. What followed would be a genial drinking session that wallowed on until the early hours of the morning. I guess John didn't care because there was money going into his coffers, although he usually laid on a free 'dinner' around midnight. The wives certainly cared, however. You could cut the air with a knife the next day. The missionaries also cared because, according to them, whenever John was in town there seemed to be a concurrent laxity in morals. Dinah had 'Jezebel' status with the mission.

After the first couple of sessions I decided I had better vacate the lodge. Apart from lack of sleep, I figured it would only be a matter of time before the taps at my bedroom window would start. The place had that sort of air about it. The ADC let me have a run-down house on the edge of the lagoon. The floorboards were dodgy and all of the plumbing had rusted through but at least it was quiet. Unfortunately, only a month or so after I had settled in, a Public Works Department man and his family were posted to Balimo. I was quickly bundled out of the house and into a low-cost police house at the other end of the station.

Kure couldn't believe it. 'This is a policeman's house!' he said in disgust. It had unlined fibro walls, no bathroom and no electricity. The toilet was out the back. I shrugged; at least it wasn't a tent. Luckily for Kure the indignity didn't last too long. The ADC was having a little tin teacher's shack repainted nearby. That at least had electricity, lining on the walls and an indoor bathroom. The front of the building had a door in it but no window. The ADC stared at the big blank sheet of tin by the door for a while and walked off. The following afternoon I noticed a huge orange dot painted on the wall.

I wondered why the Public Works Department man had been sent to the Sub-District. I asked the ADC and he looked at me in surprise.

'To do public works!' he replied.

'Like what?' I said. 'The Council looks after the roads and the airstrip.'

'Don't ask silly questions. How the hell should I know?' The PWD man must have wondered the same thing. He came into the

office and then wandered forlornly around the station for a few days scratching his head.

‘This is bloody ridiculous,’ I said to the ADC. ‘We should at least find the poor bugger something to do; he’ll go daft otherwise.’

‘Leave it,’ the ADC replied. ‘It’ll sort itself out.’ And he was right. I went looking for the PWD man a few days later and he was nowhere to be found. I whistled for one of the policemen. He looked disgruntled; I had interrupted the ongoing and highly illegal card game under the Sub-District office and he must have been on a winning streak. He rounded up a few of the school truants who habitually hung around the game, and dispatched them to various points of the station.

About an hour later one of them tapped on my door. ‘The new *taubada* is at his house,’ he told me. I set off for the house. As I walked down the slight slope to the back door I heard hammering from inside. The door was open and as I went inside one of the Council carpenters emerged carrying several sheets of old and warped masonite. I found the PWD man in his bathroom. Half the wall had been stripped off and he was inspecting the rusty pipes. He looked around.

‘Thought I’d fix this place up while they’re deciding what I’m supposed to do here.’ I nodded. That sounded fair to me. He was still renovating the house when I left Balimo a year later.

When John Major wasn’t there the ADC began to invite me to his house after work. My little tin shack was handy and his wife was away visiting her relatives in Milne Bay. He drank rum and expounded on everything under the sun. He seldom stopped for an evening meal and I began to rue my decision to abandon the lodge.

He told me he had contracted leprosy and had been sent down to Australia for protracted periods for treatment. I suspected he had been sent down there to dry out.

I don't know how he managed each day. He turned up at the office each morning about ten o'clock, looking chipper in a clean shirt and smartly polished boots. He retired to his house about three in the afternoon. His cook generally turned up at about five with a message that he wanted to see me. I began to dread the knock on the door and frequently organised not to be there until later. After a while that didn't work either; the cook would turn up as soon as I arrived home. He was going through a bad patch; there had been no hint of it in Daru, but I simply couldn't keep up with him. I was saved by the upcoming House of Assembly elections.

I worked out an elaborate strategy for the elections that would keep me away from the station for several weeks. This involved visiting all of the electorates first to advertise the event and to run an education program. The election itself was scheduled for a few weeks later. There wasn't a huge population in the Sub-District and all of the patrolling would be done by workboat. I had patrolled by boat when I was at Kiunga and knew it involved long hours of chugging up and down rivers to get to villages. I packed a supply of novels and a couple of assignments from a course I was doing through the University of Queensland. Since being at Balimo I had found myself reading a lot. After a while I tried my hand at writing and, to my surprise, published a couple of short stories. I decided to explore this further and signed up for a degree. At least my reading would have some direction.

The lagoon was low so we had to load the patrol gear into canoes and row out to the boat, the motor vessel *Jade*. The ADC insisted on checking everything before we left and the *didiman* turned up at the last moment with a load of rubber-tree stumps and a couple of trainees for Isago village. By the time we left it was half past three in the afternoon. I planned to travel up to the highest village on the Aramia River, alerting people to our plans on the way, and then work my way back downstream delivering my election spiel.

We passed the MV *Lakatoi* coming up from Emeti Patrol Post as we entered the Aramia River channel. Emeti was downriver in the swamps and was only intermittently staffed; most of the time a police sergeant ran the muddy little station. It was the only other post in the Sub-District. Someone once took a large rock down there and placed it on the office veranda. The locals came for miles to see it.

We stopped at the Kawito mission and bought a few supplies then stopped at Awaba village to pick up an aid post orderly. We got to our first stop at Pisi village at eight o'clock. There seemed to be people in the houses but none of them stirred. We struggled up the muddy bank with our gear and searched around for the rest house. Kure had dinner going by 9.30. We still hadn't seen any villagers.

In the morning a couple of old gentlemen wandered over to the rest house while we were having breakfast. I asked them if they knew about the upcoming election. 'Yes,' they said. 'We're waiting for the local member, Ebia Olewale, to show up.' Ebia was a founding member of the Pangu Pati and he had given expert evidence at the cannibal trial in Daru. I gathered that the South Fly open election was going to be a one-horse race. We chewed the fat a little longer and then I decided to continue on our way upriver.

We met Ebia coming into the village as we left and noticed that people were coming out of their houses to greet him.

We dropped the agricultural trainees off at Isago with their load of rubber stumps. I walked up to the village to look at the long house. It was two hundred metres long and was the last of the old traditional long houses in the area. The whole village lived under the one roof. It was looking old and needed repair. The villagers were talking about burning it and building separate family houses. A few months later Tony Crawford, from the South Australian Museum, talked the villagers into building a new long house instead.

Tony had turned up at Balimo a few months earlier carrying a collection of photographs of Gogadala people and their distinctive artefacts gleaned from a number of collections made from the area since the 1890s. The Unevangelised Fields Mission, which had set itself up in the area in 1934, had systematically burnt everything to do with the *Aida* ceremonies in the area. The carving tradition was still intact when Tony arrived, however, and he soon had teams of Gogadala carvers producing copies of the old artefacts from the photographs he provided. The teachers and students at the Vocational School at Balimo led the revival. The Isago long house eventually became a cultural centre.

We continued chugging upstream to Ali village, where there was an outbreak of whooping cough among the kids. A hospital orderly from Balimo had been in the village for a few days but was slowly being overwhelmed by new cases. I transferred our patrol gear to canoes and sent him and fourteen coughing kids off to the hospital in Balimo on the MV *Jade*.

The orderly had been sent up to the village at the request of a local councillor. Apparently the resident medical orderly from Isago had been in the village on leave when the outbreak started but had ignored it. When we arrived the coughing was audible. We left our own medical orderly in the village in case any more kids got sick and promised to pick him up when we came back to conduct the elections. There was only one village above Ali and we could drift downstream by canoe to the other villages while we waited for the MV *Jade* to return.

The people on the Aramia River were a queer lot. A five-year *tambu* against eating coconuts was in effect in the village. The instigator was an unnamed elder. The reason for the ban was economic, the theory being that over-consumption of coconuts leaves few for sale as copra. In a coconut grove near the rest house a small carving had been erected. This was the *tambu* objectified. Upon consumption of a coconut any *tambu* breakers were supposed to vomit violently. This was interesting because it demonstrated that the old missionary zeal for destroying heathen artefacts had not been successful. No-one was game to test the *tambu* and its power remained absolute.

We drifted downstream in our canoes the next day. We paddled across a lagoon to get to Makapa village and then entered a channel through tall grass until a solidly wedged grass island stopped us. We unloaded our canoes, dragged them across the island, reloaded them and carried on to the village. The floating grass islands were amazing. I later saw islands floating down the Bamu River

complete with trees and village houses on board. When we left the next day the island had disappeared. We spotted it floating across the lagoon as we re-entered the Aramia River.

We met up with the MV *Jade* the next day and transferred our gear back onto it. When we stopped at Isago again I pulled out my compass and chain and surveyed a block of land that the *didiman* wanted to buy to set up an 'extension' centre. I hadn't done any surveying since my time in the Western Highlands when I helped stagger through the Waghi Valley swamps near Mount Hagen to survey land for Tibia Tea Plantation. It all came back, however, and when I plotted it the ends knitted perfectly.

We continued to drift downstream in the MV *Jade*, calling in at the villages delivering our spiel about the elections. The level of interest was underwhelming. As we drifted out of the Aramia River into the Balimo Lagoon I joined Kure and my dog in the bow of the boat.

'I don't know about you two,' I said, 'but this place doesn't impress me a lot.' They both sniffed and kept their heads to the wind. There was a neat row of red fibreglass ballot boxes waiting on the Sub-District Office veranda when we got back.

The election went off without a hitch and we finished ahead of schedule. Ebia Olewale won hands down. The only problem I had was with the electoral roll; it was in a shocking state. There were frequent omissions, consistent misspellings, confusion of the sexes and errors in people's occupations. One withered old spectre was described as a student, as were many other middle-aged women. Numerous children were listed as eligible voters and the names of the station interpreter and the captain of the MV *Jade* just didn't

appear in their respective village rolls. At one stage I was tempted to toss the electoral roll into the Aramia River. I ran out of the envelopes used for votes by people not on the roll and ended up using plain envelopes bought at the Kawito village store. The roll seemed to reflect the whole sorry state of the Sub-District.

When we drifted back into Balimo Lagoon with the ballot boxes and the rescued medical orderly from Ali village on board, there seemed to be some sort of drama going on in front of the office. We drifted past an old man sitting in a canoe with a shotgun in his lap and moored the boat. I supervised the unloading of the ballot boxes and walked up to the office.

The ADC and the rest of the office staff, along with all of the station policemen, were gathered at the window staring out at the old man in the canoe.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked.

‘It’s the Sergeant from Emeti.’

‘So?’

‘He’s been sleeping with his daughter. When the ADC found out he brought him back here and left her back there with her mother. Now he’s threatening to shoot himself unless we let him go back to his daughter.’

I looked out of the window. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘We don’t know; the ADC is waiting for the Assistant Police Commissioner from Daru to come on the radio.’

‘What’s he going to do?’

‘Tell us what to do.’

‘Okay. Let me know what happens.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Home to have a shower and change. I’ve been out on patrol for the last month.’

When I strolled back to the office everyone was still staring out of the window. The old man hadn't moved.

'What did the Assistant Commissioner have to say?'

'He told the ADC to try and talk some sense into him.'

'Where is the ADC?'

'He's gone home for "lunch".'

'Right,' I said and went into my office. I sat down and pulled the typewriter towards me. I looked in my bottom drawer for paper. There was none there. I went into the main office and opened the stationery cupboard.

'Do we have any white foolscap paper?' I asked the clerk, who was still staring out of the window. 'There's only green in here.'

The clerk turned briefly and said, 'No, that's all we've got.'

I took a bundle of green paper back to my office and started typing up the report. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the ADC walking back towards the office. He wasn't walking very straight.

'Bugger it,' I said to no-one in particular and went back into the office. I went into the ADC's office and took his keys out of the top drawer of his desk. I pulled a rifle out of the gun rack, clipped a loaded magazine into it and went outside.

'What are you going to do?' the clerk asked.

'Sink him,' I replied, 'Can you tell someone to get a canoe ready to fish him out of the water.'

I walked to the edge of the water, knelt, and lined up the bow of the old policeman's canoe just below the waterline. I started to squeeze the trigger.

'What are you doing?' It was the ADC. His voice was slurred. I told him.

‘Put the rifle down,’ he said slowly, trying not to slur his speech. I slipped the safety catch on.

‘I’ll go and talk to him,’ he said. A policeman with a canoe had materialised beside us. The ADC beckoned for the paddle and stepped into the canoe. He began to paddle slowly towards the old sergeant on the lagoon. I knelt back down and slipped the safety catch off. As the ADC pulled towards him I lined the sights up with the sergeant’s chest.

It took a while. The old Lee Enfield was heavy. Suddenly the ADC stood up in his canoe. Standing in a dugout canoe is a practiced art but he didn’t waver. I saw the sergeant move and I sighted on his chest again. The shotgun came up in his hands and I took up the slack on the trigger. I held my breath. I didn’t know if I could do it; I’d never shot anyone before. Slowly the old policeman turned the shotgun around and held it out for the ADC. The ADC leaned across and took it. He dropped it into the lagoon. I put my rifle down. The old policeman stepped into the ADC’s canoe and they both sat down as he paddled it around and back towards the shore.

The ADC stepped out of his canoe and helped the old policeman ashore.

‘Someone take him to the hospital,’ he said. He was cold sober. He looked me directly in the eye. I looked away. He marched up the bank to the office.

I was sitting in my office the next morning typing up my patrol report when the ADC put his head around the door. It was half past seven in the morning.

‘Come into my office,’ he said. I followed him.

‘Sit down,’ he said and called for the clerk to bring coffee. ‘I have a letter here that you might be interested in. Your application for promotion came through; you’re now officially an Assistant District Officer.’ I took the letter. Somehow it didn’t seem to mean much. The ADC smiled.

‘You’ll be doing exactly the same work but now you’ll get paid a bit extra.’

‘I wouldn’t have a clue what I’m being paid now; it goes into my bank account and I occasionally draw cheques on it.’

‘You wouldn’t be the first *kiap* not to know how much he’s being paid.’

‘Maybe I should take a bit more interest. Maybe I should start thinking about the future.’

‘I would strongly advise that,’ the ADC replied.

‘Well, thanks for that,’ I said and stood up to leave.

‘Sit down,’ the ADC replied. ‘That’s not the only thing I want to talk about.’ I sat.

‘I’m leaving,’ he said. ‘The old leprosy is playing up again. I’m going south for a while. When I come back they’re going to post me to Port Moresby, some sort of advisory job. They’re sending a hotshot Highland ADC in to replace me. Clean up the Sub-District, I expect.’

We were all out on the lagoon having a barbeque and a swim on the Saturday afternoon that the new ADC arrived. Because the lagoon fluctuated in depth it was necessary to unload boats out in one of the deeper channels. For this purpose we had a large floating pontoon, which was ideal as a platform for weekend barbeques. For some reason the new ADC and his wife had decided to travel by

boat from Port Moresby. As we watched they steamed into the lagoon, waved as they went past, and headed for the shore.

They had all their furniture on board along with two cooks and a supply of food. When the new ADC's wife stepped ashore she was wearing a neat little summer dress and white sandals. I was sure she was also wearing makeup. She looked like she'd just stepped out of the Mount Hagen Country Club. The other station wives gave her a knowing look.

As it turned out, the new ADC and his wife were nice people. They camped in the lodge while Bernie's old house was repainted and repaired. When that was done they moved their furniture in and threw a house-warming party. The whole station turned up, including the new young male teacher from the vocational college. Even the mission doctor from the hospital came to the party. I sipped a beer and watched the proceedings from a safe distance.

The station wives were clustered around the new teacher and their menfolk were drinking off in another corner. John Major's new storekeeper, another *ex-kiap*, and his Bougainvillean wife stood off to one side by themselves. The new ADC noticed them and strode across the room. He talked with them for a while and then took them over to the ladies and introduced everyone. This might turn out right, I thought.

If it did, I planned not to see it. I had begun applying for other work in the Administration and had found a job with the Department of Lands as their Publications Officer. I wasn't the only applicant, however, and someone was appealing my appointment. That would take a month or so to sort out. I hadn't told anyone at Balimo yet.

I wasn't sure that I wanted the job but I had a sneaking suspicion that the time was right to be looking at other employment options. The new Chief Minister, Michael Somare, had taken over control of our Department and was agitating to get rid of Tom Ellis.

Ihini sent me an article from the *Post Courier*. It was headlined 'Control of kiaps will be changed.' It read: *Mr Somare said DDA officers would have to be sensitive to the feelings of the Government. 'These officers will also have to be sensitive to the feelings and aspirations of the political leaders representing both central and local government in the field. Much has been said of the overbearing attitudes of some DDA officers,' he said. 'This has often been unfair criticism because in the majority of cases such an attitude does not exist. Unfortunately, in isolated cases it does exist,' he said. 'I think I should make it clear that my Government will not tolerate overbearing behaviour by any public servants.'*

If that wasn't aimed at Tom Ellis I didn't know what was. In any event, it didn't sound very encouraging. Ihini also sent me another article from the newspaper dated a couple of days later. It was headlined 'Patrols to find primitives': *Patrols of the Western District are being intensified to establish contact with the last few remaining 'primitive' people in the district. District Commissioner, Mr Ken Brown, said that so far this year about 2800 days of patrolling had taken place. This compared with only 1300 for the preceding 12 months — an average yearly figure for an area of nearly 40,000 square miles. The next two months will see an extensive program of exploration, which will, it is hoped, fill in remaining blank areas on the map.*

Ihini's attached note said, 'Somare's telling the *kiaps* he's going to pull them into line and they're telling him his country is still primitive and he needs them.'

I knew what the second article was really about. Two months before I arrived at Balimo a Beechcraft Baron left Daru early in the morning heading for a mission airstrip on the fringes of the Southern Highlands. On board were six mining company workers heading back to their exploration camp. The weather was overcast, with the cloud level down to a few thousand metres, and they had debated whether it was safe to fly north into the ranges. They finally decided to give it a try.

They flew north-east over the Fly River mouth and then passed over the Aramia River and the Gogadala villages. Between the Aramia and Wawoi rivers, somewhere in the vicinity of the Soari River headwaters, the cloud had thickened and dropped lower. The pilot must have become concerned, because his maps showed the area as a white blank with the words 'relief data incomplete' printed across it. He knew that somewhere ahead of him there was a small range of hills peaking at 366 metres and somewhere off to his right were the falls on the Wawoi River. He kept going.

Geoff Smith was called in from Daru to walk into the wreck site and retrieve the bodies. When he got there it was clear that the pilot had seen the rise in front of the plane at the last moment and had tried to climb over it. He had clipped a tree with his tail and had cartwheeled into the side of the hill. The impact through the big trees ripped the plane apart, scattering debris everywhere and cutting a long swath through the jungle. Geoff and his patrol had to fell trees to get some of the body parts down. Wild pigs had got to the bodies on the ground. After he came out of the area he burned all his clothes to get rid of the stench. He even tossed his

transistor radio into the river; the smell had somehow permeated the leather case and the insides of the radio.

As he trudged out of the hills with his macabre cargo he thought he noticed a track through the forest. He pulled up his patrol and went to investigate. The track took him to a small garden area with an old house sitting in one corner. He took a note of the approximate location. When he emerged from the forest Geoff asked the pilot, who had been sent to collect him and the bodies, to fly along the ridge for a while before heading back to Daru. Sure enough, on a ridge jutting out into the flat forest plain stood a small long house. A kilometre or so further on he spotted another one. There didn't appear to be any occupants.

The District Commissioner read Geoff's report with interest. Geoff told a few other people in Daru what he had seen, including Malcolm Menzies. Mal was a short, swarthy *kiap* who got on well with everyone, including the DC. His colleagues affectionately referred to him as 'the littlest bighead' because of his forthright manner. It didn't take Mal and the DC long to begin planning a patrol. That people in Port Moresby would see the patrol as another opportunity to stick it up Michael Somare and the Pangu Pati didn't occur to them.

When the ADC told me I would be supporting the bid to find the occupants of the long houses I wandered down to the lagoon and tapped gently on the side of *The Butterbox*. Quest was inside; I could hear him snoring. I banged harder and heard him cough. I pushed the little boat off the bank and began to rock it from side to side. After a while I heard movement. A bleary head popped out of the hatchway.

Quest had an almighty hangover. He had received a cheque for his last batch of crocodile skins a day or so earlier in Daru. I had

picked him up at the airstrip the previous afternoon following a report that a white man was 'exposing himself' to a group of missionary women waiting to get on a plane.

'I was busting for a leak,' he explained. 'I tried to make it to the back of the shed.' I slapped a pair of handcuffs on him and a constable picked him up bodily and dropped him onto the tray of the Toyota. I ushered the ladies into the plane and assured them that such perversions would not be tolerated in Balimo and Quest would feel the full weight of the law. They tut-tutted self-righteously and got into the plane. When it had reached the end of the strip and was climbing into the sky I walked back to the Toyota and retrieved my handcuffs. Quest gingerly alighted from the tray and walked unsteadily around to the cab.

'I owe you one,' he said and promptly went to sleep.

I pulled the boat in to the bank and he waved me aboard. He had been sleeping for over sixteen hours. He offered me a seat and rummaged around in the depths of the boat. He finally emerged holding two empty glass jars and half a flagon of claret. He dipped the jars overboard and rinsed them. He raised the flagon in my direction and I shook my head. He shrugged and poured himself a jar.

'You didn't have any luggage when I picked you up yesterday?'

'Is that why you woke me up? I didn't need any luggage; I just went to Daru to get my skin money.'

'I gather you got it; did it make it back here?'

‘Yup, it’s safely stashed.’ I didn’t ask where.

‘Actually, I wanted to ask you about something else.’

Quest had been into the area where the plane had crashed but he was a bit fuzzy about the details. The hunting trails he had followed had taken him to a number of different hilly areas but he hadn’t seen any long houses, just the odd hunter’s hut. I asked him about the people at Wawoi Falls and he said that they came from ‘all over’, possibly out of the northern area but he wasn’t sure. I asked him if they were likely to work as carriers and guides for Mal Menzies, but he thought they would disappear into the forest when they heard the patrol was on its way. I asked him how many people there were at the falls.

‘I’m not sure,’ he said.

‘Have a guess,’ I suggested. He scratched his head and poured another jar of claret.

‘Well, there aren’t enough boys and men to make up two soccer teams. When we have a game the women and girls make up the numbers.’

‘What do the people call themselves?’

‘Kamora.’ I’d heard the name before; there were Kamora people in the upper Aramia villages.

‘So it’s true; you built a soccer pitch up there?’

‘Yeah, it eases the boredom and they seem to like it; they like the pictures of Pele that I showed them.’

‘Are they any good?’

‘I don’t know; we sort of use local rules.’

‘Local rules?’

‘Yeah, they’ve got a traditional game that is similar. I just introduced proper footballs.’

‘I think I will have a claret after all. This might be an interesting patrol.’

We took the small workboat. Once we got into the Soari River we would have to deal with a narrowing watercourse. We chugged up the Aramia River to the last village, called Makara, where I recruited a team of labourers. We hitched a couple of canoes behind our boat for their gear and I offloaded some of our gear into our dinghy to make room for them on the workboat. As we set off, the Makara men rolled long cigarettes using sheets from a mission newspaper.

Some of the men had been recruited by the mining company exploring along the Strickland and had learned how to build helicopter pads. I had the basics set out in my patrol instructions. Clearing approaches at the right angle was crucial. We chugged into the mouth of the Soari and continued upstream. We pushed the little workboat as far upstream as possible, clearing log jams and hauling her through shallows. We saw no signs of people. The area abounded in game, including crocodiles, cassowary, goannas, pigs, small wallabies and *Gouria* pigeons.

Finally, at a point about a hundred and ten kilometres from the river mouth we could push the workboat no further. I found a suitable spot for a helicopter pad and we made camp. We were about twenty kilometres short of the crash site and I figured that it was the best we could do. The DC had organised for Mal to head north from Balimo and for another *kiaip* from Nomad to come south so that they could catch anyone up there in a pincer

movement. The chopper pad was an exigency if they had to stay in the area to hunt the Kamora down. If Mal and the other *kia*p could relocate the pad they would be able to use it as a resupply base. I could only calculate its position roughly; there was no high ground and nothing to use for compass bearings. The best I could do was use speed and time readings as we descended the river.

We felled a huge tree after chopping at it for two days. The labourers made a few final adjustments with their axes as it began to teeter and it crashed down exactly where we wanted. The smaller trees in its path had been notched in just the right places and came down with it. We had a clear swath to the riverbank and a perfect approach angle for a helicopter. I marvelled at their precision.

Once the big tree was down we set to work on the pad itself. This involved felling all of the trees in a circle of about fifty metres' radius. When this was done logs were cut in the surrounding forest and a platform, about fifteen metres square, was built on top of the jumble of fallen trees. When that was finished I brought out a can of white paint and splashed a big circle with the number 'one' in the middle on the pad.

While the pad was being built Kure and I went further upstream in one of the canoes. We poked our noses into little offshoots of the main river and hiked inland where there was higher ground. We didn't see a trace of human habitation. We did return with a very nice bag for the pot though.

Graeme Pretty, the curator of anthropology from the South Australian Museum had heard about the patrol through Tony Crawford and was waiting at Balimo when I returned. I told him that I had seen nothing up there. He was hoping to get some nice

artefacts and maybe some photographs to add to the other material he had collected in the Highlands. He went back to the lodge to wait for news of Mal and the Nomad *kiap*, managing to get stung on the top of his head by a huge wasp on his way.

I felt sorry for him; he already had several welts on his arms and legs from the infamous Balimo ‘bug’. This creature was a harmless little insect that liked to drink the beads of salty sweat on exposed limbs. Unfortunately it had some sort of acidic juice running through its body. If one inadvertently squashed it — when it was in the crook of your elbow, for instance — the juice from the flattened bug immediately began to eat into your flesh. The wound took weeks to heal and the juice would have made an excellent rust remover.

Eventually Mal made his way back to Balimo. He had found the long houses and the people in them. He took photographs and brought back artefacts. Graeme bought some of them for the South Australian Museum. The District Commissioner was pleased. This looked like the last little patch of uncontacted people in the district. The newspapers ran stories about it and the people in Port Moresby chuckled over Michael Somare’s embarrassment at having uncontacted ‘primitives’ still wandering around in the bush on the eve of self-government.

When it was all over, the station slowly went back to sleep. I had won my appeal and was packing ready to move to Port Moresby. On the day that I was due to leave I wandered down to the lagoon to say goodbye to Quest. As I passed the office the police had abandoned their card game and were kicking a football around on the grass.

‘It looks like you’ve been recruiting the cops for your soccer teams,’ I said to Quest when he poked his head out of *The Butterbox*.

‘Not me,’ he replied. ‘They’ve been banging that ball around all morning; don’t know where they got it.’ Just then one of the police kicked the ball in the direction of the boat. It landed in the water and I picked it up. The owner’s name was written on one of the white squares in black text. It said ‘Beni’. One of the policemen signalled for me to kick it to him. I was about to do so when Quest said, ‘Can I have a look at that?’ I tossed it to him.

‘It’s one of mine,’ Quest said; ‘see, “Sureshot — Made in Taiwan”.’ He tossed the ball to the policeman.

‘Where did you get the ball?’ I asked the policeman. He looked momentarily guilty then shrugged; it was no big secret.

‘It was in the long house,’ he said. I looked at Quest.

‘Which long house?’ I asked.

‘The one up the river, past the falls, where we went with *Masta Mal*.

Quest grinned. ‘Beni is on the Red Team,’ he said; ‘he’s one of our best strikers.’

‘Don’t you dare tell a soul!’

‘Mum’s the word,’ he said with a glint in his eye.

CHAPTER 12

‘Are you trying to be a journalist?’ Ihini asked.

‘Well, if I am, I’ve come to the wrong place; they don’t know what to do with me. The bright spark who originally decided the Department needed a publications officer has gone. So far I’ve been asked to collect all the books in the Department and set up a library; apart from the fact that nobody wants to give up their books, there are only about two hundred and fifty books in the whole Department. I suppose it will give me something to do for two or three days. Someone else suggested that I should edit a staff magazine, although no one wants to contribute to it. That will fill in another day or two. I’ve already written a “This is your Lands Department” article for *Wantok* and a couple of other government magazines. And to top it all off the dog went missing over the weekend.’

‘Oh no, not Buka!’

‘It’s okay; I found her sitting on the steps outside my office on Monday morning. She’s asleep in the back seat of the car. She’s a bit confused about towns but she’s getting used to it — and she likes the beach’.

When I arrived I was taken to Ranaguri Hostel in Konedobu. Foxy was looking after the dog in Daru and was waiting for me to get settled before bringing her over. I took one look at the hostel and went looking for somewhere else to live. I eventually managed to get a room in a house with a couple of surveyors from the Department. I knew one of them from my time in the Highlands and he graciously offered me the spare room.

‘So what are you going to do about work?’

‘Well, I can bump up the study, take on a few extra subjects. No-one seems to bother with what I’m doing during the day. I suppose I could try writing a bit more fiction, see if I can get it published.’

‘I can see you slowly going potty,’ she frowned. ‘Surely they didn’t create a position just for the sake of creating a position?’

‘I think they might have. Apparently it’s going on all over the place. They seem to be just marking time in some departments, creating work for work’s sake. There are heaps of reviews going on — you must have noticed — but I’m not sure that anyone has got their heart in it. The Administration is acting like a spec builder. It’s running around patching up holes in walls and fudging the plumbing. I think the theory is that by the time the new occupants discover the shoddy workmanship it will be too late because they will be gone.’

‘I’ve certainly noticed that a lot of policy is being made on the run. And the rearguard action is still going on; the *kiaps* aren’t the only ones resisting change.’

‘Gough Whitlam has certainly set the cat amongst the pigeons.’

‘The most significant thing Gough has done, if you believe the polls, is promise all the expatriates who go finish that they’ll be

able to take their dogs and cats with them. He's set up a special quarantine arrangement.'

'The golden handshakes have gone down well too.'

'Pity I'm on a contract. Oh well, the dog was happy when I told her she could come with me if I leave.'

'If you leave?'

'If I leave; there's a hell of a lot to think about. My non-existent job is going to be *localised*. That means I will be lumbered with an understudy who will take over the job one day in the not too distant future. What I do after that I'm not sure.'

She frowned. 'Let's not think about all that stuff until it happens; let's just enjoy ourselves.'

'Typical bloody Papuan; live for today and bugger tomorrow.'

'You'd better believe it! If I worried about all the things on my plate I'd die of stress.'

'How are your parents anyway, still got plans for you?'

'I told you, I'm not thinking about any of that future-type stuff. Whatever will happen will happen; I'm a child of Aquarius, don't you know?'

'So you are not only a feminist but a hippy too.'

'You could be a hippy too; there's no reason why there can't be hippy *kiaps*. Except you're an *ex-kiap*; you could be a hippy *ex-kiap*.'

'That's what I like about you, so level headed and practical. She jumped on me and ruffled my hair. Maybe she was right; maybe I should live for the day and bugger the future.'

Included among the many reviews and enquiries going on was one designed to address land problems. As I sat at my desk wondering

what to do with myself I couldn't help noticing the frenetic activity in an office down the hall.

'Oh, that's Bill Welbourne. He's organising a Commission of Enquiry into Land Matters,' I was told. My ears pricked up and I wandered down the corridor and introduced myself.

'Let me know if I can help with anything,' I told him. 'I haven't really got a hell of a lot to do.'

He looked at me in his friendly way and pointed to a map of the Territory on his wall dotted with little coloured pins. 'Do you know the best way to get to these places?'

I looked at the map a bit more closely. 'I reckon I could find out.'

The Commission of Enquiry into Land Matters had been set up not only to address the problems of land shortage in places like the Gazelle Peninsula but also to devise legislation that would make traditional land tenure systems development-friendly. The Commission had evolved out of a Bill in the House of Assembly which was so complex that very few people understood it, including the House of Assembly members. It was based on an approach that had been tried in a number of other decolonising countries, with mixed results.

Fortunately, a few Pangu Pati members sensed danger and sought advice from some of their friends at the University of Papua New Guinea. They circulated this advice as widely as possible in the House and eventually won a reprieve in the form of the Commission. The Commission eventually came up with a set of recommendations that included systems to return alienated land to traditional owners in land-short areas and to develop land commercially without the inflationary practice of land speculation.

The former recommendation was largely dependent upon Australia coming up with the cash to fund a buyback program. Of course the Australian government knocked back that idea. The latter recommendation eventually bogged down in a complex mire. Land tenure is an incredibly complex issue in Papua New Guinea, but that seems to be how most Papua New Guineans like it. However, when the Commission began, everyone hoped it would come up with some useful advice.

Bill Welbourne was a teacher by trade. As secretary and principal organiser of the enquiry he was responsible for pulling together a team of commissioners from all over the country. He also had to hire a team of specialist consultants to advise the commissioners. These consultants, unfortunately, made most of the running during the Commission's deliberations. The Papua New Guinean commissioners, although disappointed, were not overly surprised and, in their polite way, did not officially complain. The only Commissioner to make an issue out of it was promptly tossed overboard.

As I had hoped, Bill discovered that he needed someone to organise itineraries for the planned tours and someone half-literate with an understanding of Motu and Tok Pisin to produce all the necessary propaganda and to liaise with the press. I went out of my way to be as helpful as possible.

The chairman of the Commission was Sinaka Goava. Sinaka is a gracious and kindly man who was then a Magistrate in the District Court in Port Moresby. He was also a founding member of the Pangu Pati. He lived in Hanuabada, the big village next to the capital. He turned out to be one of the best bosses I ever

had. This had nothing to do with the fact that on slow Friday afternoons he preferred to amble down to his house and take his canoe out to the harbour to fish; nor does it have anything to do with the fact that I was often required to render assistance. It was only later that I found out about his colourful family past.

His father, Goava Oa, was a sorcerer who had been accused of organising the murder of a warder in Badili Jail. At the time Goava was serving a long sentence for a tribal killing. The man who killed the warder, Karo Araua, was an ex-policeman serving time for killing a fellow constable. During his trial Karo claimed that he had committed the murder of the warder and his family on behalf of Goava. The murdered warder, Karo explained, was a relative from whom Goava had expected preferential treatment. When this was not forthcoming Goava, sought revenge.

Despite Karo's best efforts to implicate Goava in the murders, the court decided otherwise and acquitted him. Karo was hanged in 1938. During his trial Goava, with the assistance of a legal counsellor, presented his own defence and cross-examined witnesses, including the European jailers. This was remarkable in pre-war Papua. Goava went on to work with the Australian Army during World War II. Following the war he was re-interred in the Daru Jail. While he was at Daru he began a campaign to be released. His son Sinaka assisted him. He was eventually released in 1963 and died in 1976.

The first tour by the Commission was to the Gazelle Peninsula. This was the area with the most urgent land problems. I went

along, ostensibly to see how the itinerary and other arrangements worked but mostly because I wanted to see Rabaul and the New Guinea islands. I was 'swanning around', visiting places on the feeblest of excuses. I sensed that this was going to be my last chance to see these places without having to pay my own way.

One of the issues I had to deal with during the tours was the security and safety of the Commissioners. I worked out the security with the local police and *kiaps* who were most co-operative. I consulted the Department of Civil Aviation about safety issues and they suggested I put together a 'survival kit'. This was predicated on the fact that a lot of the tours would be conducted using chartered aircraft and it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that one of the planes might crash. In this event, DCA suggested, it would be useful if any survivors had access to emergency rations and medical supplies as well as signalling devices such as flares, emergency bedding such as 'space' blankets, and lightweight tarps for shelter.

I consulted the Army about how to put such a kit together. They responded with enthusiasm and I obtained the necessary funds to buy suitable containers and the range of suggested contents. By the time two boxes had been prepared I was wondering how we were going to cart them around; they weighed about thirty kilograms apiece. I needn't have worried. When we got to Rabaul I was left at the luggage bay with both boxes and my own suitcase. The commissioners waved happily as they sped past in their bus. I looked for a taxi.

Rabaul was a neat and tidy town overlooking a picturesque harbour and surrounded by spectacular tropical scenery. Only the black sand beaches were a reminder of the omnipresent volcanic nature of the setting. The hotel was modern and comfortable. It consisted of a double-storey block surrounding a swimming pool, with gardens on three sides. I had a room to myself on the top floor, overlooking the pool. I carted the emergency survival kits up the stairs and came back for my luggage.

The commissioners had a busy schedule of meetings with various local Tolai organisations and Administration officials. I went along to the first couple and the reception was cordial and friendly. It was difficult to imagine that only a year or so ago John Gorton was here packing a revolver supplied to him by Tom Ellis and that on his return to Australia he had almost initiated a call-out of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force to quell the unrest amongst the Tolai. One of the commissioners, Philip To Bongolua, was a local and he guided our entourage serenely through all of its engagements.

The following day I picked up a hire car and set out for Kokopo (around the other side of the harbour) and the Vudal Agricultural College in the hills, armed with posters and other literature to advertise the imminent arrival of the commissioners. On the way I passed the house used by the Japanese garrison commander during the occupation of Rabaul and dropped in to see the coastal tunnels and the remains of the big Japanese barges they housed. The small creek I crossed to get to the tunnels had a strong sulphurous smell. I had lunch with the students and teachers at the college and explained the role of the Commission.

As in Kokopo, a few students confused our Commission with the Constitutional Planning Committee that was also touring the country. It was dark by the time I got to the hotel. I had a shower and ordered a meal.

After dinner I typed up my notes and decided to get an early night. Before getting into bed I quickly reviewed the organisational progress of the commissioners and came to the unhappy conclusion that it was probably going to be unnecessary for me to accompany them on their whole tour. I drifted off to sleep with this troubling thought.

Just before midnight people shouting outside woke me up. The voices were accompanied by the sounds of splashing water. Bloody idiots playing in the pool, I thought and rolled over and pulled the sheet over my head. Someone started thumping on a door. I finally got out of bed, put on some shorts and a T-shirt and went outside to the balcony. I nearly tripped over John Kup, one of the commissioners, who was on his hands and knees looking for his room keys. I looked around, spotted the keys and unlocked his door. I put the keys on his bedside table and dropped a sheet over him. I flipped the gizmo on the inside doorknob, stepped outside, and pulled the door shut. I headed back to my room.

Before I had time to get inside, a sodden black shoe hurled up from the pool bounced off the wall. I turned around just in time to catch its mate spiralling over the balcony. I picked up both shoes and recognised them immediately. I placed them neatly together outside John's door. When I looked over the balcony to the pool below I saw two heads bobbing in the water.

‘Thanks,’ I said and waved to them.

‘That bastard tried to piss on us and then he threw his shoes at us.’ The voice was female and angry. Bigger, I thought; this is just what I don’t need.

‘We should report him to the manager!’ came the same voice.

‘Or the police!’ chimed another female voice.

‘Hang on, I’ll come down; I work with him and I don’t want him to get into trouble.’

John was the son of a Big Man from Mount Hagen in the Western Highlands. He had served in the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and had trained in Australia. I had met him in Hagen when I was a Cadet Patrol Officer. I was in the midst of trying to sort out a list of names of landowners for the purchase of several large blocks to be added to the township. My Tok Pisin was fairly rudimentary at that stage and I was struggling with the concepts of usufructuary ownership of land. John had stuck his head through the mass of men crushed around me and said, ‘G’day mate; need a hand?’

He was on leave from the army and looked like the rest of the crowd until I noticed his khaki pants and army boots. He sat on the tree stump beside me and addressed the men. I was surprised at the deference he commanded. We soon had several orderly lines of men, each one representing a different sort of right to the land the Administration hoped to purchase. As the men came forward John quickly made an assessment of their claim and spelled out their names. He rejected a couple of the claims but only after detailed discussions with the claimant and the rest of

the crowd. After several hours I had a neat and concise list of landowners to take back to the ADC.

As the crowd dispersed I thanked John for his help. He grinned in his happy way and invited me over to his family's house for a cup of tea. He introduced me to his father and mother. It was only then that I made the connection. His father was wearing a Local Government Council badge on his neat white shirt, but that didn't disguise the tough old fight leader who had greeted Taylor and Leahy when they first walked into the Wahgi Valley in 1938. I was nineteen and overawed.

As we walked back to the Landrover John explained how his father was worried about the way the expanding township of Mount Hagen was gobbling up his clan's traditional land. 'One day,' he said, 'the clan will run short of land and that will create all sorts of problems.' I remembered his words when I visited Peter Mantilla in the hospital at Moro after the payroll hold-up. Peter was from the same clan and he had no land. 'We lost it all to the town,' he said. 'My family used to have gardens where the hospital is built; now we have to work to buy our vegetables! If I had land I wouldn't have been driving that bloody truck!'

As a commissioner, John brought a unique perspective on the alienation of traditional land by urban development. As a Highlander he was innately conservative and was very concerned about the obvious preparations for pulling out of the country by the Administration. 'I'm getting the distinct impression that this rush to self-government and independence is only for Australia's benefit,' he told me. 'It is devolving itself of its status as a colonial power as quickly as possible simply to appease the international community. But what's good for Australia isn't necessarily good for Papua New Guinea. That, somehow, doesn't seem to matter.'

When he had raised his concerns at the initial planning meetings of the Commission in Port Moresby he had been quietly talked down. 'Everyone knows this is true,' he had been told, 'but we can't do anything about it. We have to make the best we can out of the inevitable. If we rock the boat too hard no-one will listen to us,' one of the commissioners said.

'In other words, the Commission is pro-independence even if half the country is against it?' John countered.

'We can't be pro-independence or anti-independence; we have to be neutral. Our job is to come up with viable land tenure laws.'

'Even if that's possible, and I doubt it, the country isn't ready for it — especially in the Highlands.'

'You sound like a *kiap*,' someone said. John shrugged. So what? The Administration had been trying to talk him into becoming a *kiap* for a long time.

'If you look at other post-colonial states, it's possible to identify certain principles that can be applied here. We need to see if such principles will help. It's important to do this now,' one of the lawyers said. John snorted and said no more.

'The thing that bugs me,' he told me later, 'is all of these so-called experts who have been pulled in by the Administration to advise all of the committees like this one. As far as I can see, they're not only advising us, they're setting the agenda. They're pushing their ideologies and we're meekly lapping it up. That bloody historian and his lawyer mates are running this show and what they think is what will end up in our report. Bloody commos, the lot of them.' This could get out of hand, I thought.

'Don't worry,' he smiled, 'I'll keep a can on it. There are other ways to skin a cat; I've got some good friends in the House of Assembly.'

Somehow I didn't find this particularly reassuring. I knew John had conservative views that had been honed in the army environment and that he had learnt to discipline himself and keep his ideas private; but the army had also taught him another lesson, that of hard drinking. That's what will bring him undone, I thought.

By the time I got to the edge of the pool the two girls had climbed out of the water and were drying themselves with towels. I introduced myself. 'I'll have a word with him tomorrow,' I said; 'I'm sure he'll be appalled when I tell him what he did to you and will apologise'.

They both looked at me and I wasn't sure if I sounded convincing. 'He tried to chat us up and when we told him to get lost he went up there and tried to piss on us,' the blonde girl said.

'It will have to be a bloody good apology,' the dark-haired girl added.

'We could have him for indecent exposure,' the blonde added.

I winced. 'I'm not sure what I can do,' I replied. 'He can't really afford to get into trouble in his position.'

The blonde girl shrugged; the other girl looked at me for a moment as if she was making some sort of appraisal.

'I reckon,' she finally said, 'a slap-up dinner at the Mandarin Club might do the trick.'

'You want him to take you to dinner?' I said in surprise.

'I guess he could come too, if he behaves himself. What do you reckon?' She turned to her blonde friend, who shook her head, turned to me and shrugged again.

'You're on,' I said quickly, 'I'll bring him.'

When we got to the Mandarin Club the following evening the clacking of mah-jong tiles was audible in the street. The place was jam-packed; most of the Chinese population of Rabaul seemed to be there. When we were told there would be a wait for a table we decided to try somewhere else. Our next point of call was the Smuggler's Restaurant on the seafront on the outskirts of town. The crowd there seemed smaller and we got a table straight away. I was surprised at the night-life in the town on a weekday.

The restaurant was built of local timber and had a thatched roof. The front of the building opened on to the harbour, with tables scattered on a stepped patio lit by flickering kerosene lamps on poles. We opted to eat outside and took a table on the lower level where the ocean lapped the shore. John was the perfect host. He apologised to the girls, explaining that he had had a few disagreements with his fellow commissioners during the day and had been depressed. His urbane conversation soon had the girls laughing and giggling.

The blonde girl worked in one of the Administration offices; her father had something to do with shipping and her mother was a nurse. The other girl was the daughter of a captain on one of Burns Philp's coastal traders. She had grown up in Rabaul; she didn't say what her mother did and I assumed she stayed at home. She sympathised with John about impending self-government. Her parents were now facing an uncertain future and she admitted that the prospect of leaving the islands was daunting. Even the Chinese traders in the town were talking about applying for entry into Australia, she explained.

I'd never really thought about the people in the Territory outside the Administration. I knew moves were afoot to pay out permanent Administration employees, the so-called 'golden handshakes'. These payouts seemed to be as much an inducement to leave the country as they were compensation for interrupted careers. There seemed to be an atmosphere of abandoning ship, some even gleefully saying a sinking ship. The idea of pulling out most of the experienced expatriate public servants between self-government and independence seemed crazy. The Papua New Guineans expected to fill that void would have to be supermen and women.

I had discussed the impending expiry of my contract with Ihini. In my view I had two options. The first was to return to Australia and start a new career. That would entail finishing off my degree and looking for suitable work. I didn't think there would be much call for experienced *kiaps* in Australia. If I chose that course, everyone told me it would be best to do it as soon as possible; there were already indications that employment in Australia was on the wane. Everyone blamed this on the Whitlam government and its profligate social policies.

The other option was to see out the contract, take leave and then return to Papua and set up some sort of business, probably in tourism. Now I was starting to wonder if this idea was viable if a major part of the free enterprise infrastructure was planning to abandon the country as well. I had a vague feeling that fitting into the Australian lifestyle was going to be difficult after Papua but it looked like I might have to bite the bullet and do it. I knew a lot of Papuans were thinking about claiming Australian citizenship and moving south and I wondered if this might appeal to Ihini. Somehow I doubted it. The captain's daughter broke into my reverie.

'You're miles away?' she said.

'Sorry. I was just thinking about what you said, all these people with their futures up in the air.'

'Don't worry about it. Everyone figures that if they've got to go they may as well have a good time before it happens. Bugger the future; something will turn up.'

'Which explains why all these people are here boozing in the middle of the week.'

'And why you can't get any sense out of half the expats in the Administration,' John added, 'They don't care anymore, they'll be gone soon.'

'Some of my Tolai friends are busy deciding which expat house they're going to move into and which expat car they'll be driving once independence comes,' the captain's daughter added.

John nodded. 'And no one is interested in the future. Why set up new development programs when you're not able to see them through? And do you think I can make those people on the Commission see that? No way; they've got no doubt they'll be able to run everything just the same as the expats. It's so depressing I think I'll have another beer.'

'Don't do that!' both girls laughed. 'You may end up pissing on someone without a sense of humour.'

'I suppose you're right,' he said. 'Maybe I'll just gorge myself on lobster.' He picked up the enormous tail on his plate. The blonde girl poked him in the ribs and he put his free arm around her.

'He's a smooth bugger,' the captain's daughter said as she winked at her girlfriend.

As the evening progressed John managed to strike up conversation with the people at the tables surrounding us. He procured invitations from both groups to join parties in the town. When we had finished our meal we danced for a while, something I'm not very good at at the best of times, and made ready to leave. John tried to talk me into coming with him and his new friends but I declined, pleading tiredness. To my surprise the captain's daughter also declined. As John and the blonde girl disappeared with their happy group of new friends I wondered how he was going to get back to the hotel. We had travelled out to the restaurant in the captain's daughter's car.

'Don't worry about them,' she said; 'someone will drop them home.'

As we drove towards town she invited me back to her house for a coffee. 'The hotel is just up the street, I'll drop you off afterwards.'

'Coffee is fine,' I said, 'but I've got a busy day tomorrow.'

'That's supposed to be my line,' she laughed.

'It's true; I've got to get our whole travelling circus to Kokopo and up to Vudal.'

'I'm convinced,' she grinned. I inwardly sighed with relief. She was attractive in a plumpish sort of way but I didn't need any other complications in my life at the moment.

The house was a standard fibro building with a pleasant garden of tropical plants. There were no lights on when we arrived and she said she presumed her mother was still at the mah-jong night. She set the coffee pot on the stove to brew and rummaged in the cupboards for biscuits. I sat in one of the big cushioned cane chairs in the lounge and flipped through an old newspaper on the coffee table. The coffee was excellent; it must have been a coastal

blend to which she had added a touch of whisky. We were just finishing when the back door opened.

A rotund woman in her late forties stumbled through the door. I stood up and the captain's daughter introduced me. Her mother swayed gently and looked at me. She then turned to her daughter.

'You bloody slut! How many times have I told you not to bring these friggin' sailors home? He's not staying the night; get rid of him!' With that she staggered off into the bowels of the house accompanied by the sounds of crashing furniture. I didn't know what to say.

Finally the captain's daughter spoke. 'She must have had a bad night gambling,' she said. 'I was hoping she'd have stayed out longer.'

I felt sorry for her. 'My old man is a boozier,' I said weakly. 'You can't do much about it.'

'I'll drive you to the hotel,' she replied.

During the short drive she cheered up a bit and when I stepped out of her car she leaned across the seat and said, 'How about breakfast tomorrow?'

'Breakfast?'

'Yeah, I'll pick you up about 6.30. You'll enjoy it.'

'Okay,' I said, wondering what could be so enjoyable at that time of the morning.

The next morning she was sitting in her car waiting for me. I got in beside her and she winked. She drove a few blocks and pulled up outside a nondescript house. She beckoned me to follow. We walked past the house into the backyard. A small group of people,

mostly Chinese, were standing around a little old lady cooking on what appeared to be an upturned 44-gallon drum. Every so often she handed little wrapped packages to someone and they paid her, bowed and left. The captain's daughter took her turn and came back with two neat, steaming packages. We returned to the car and pulled them apart. Inside there was a collection of greyish pastry rolls. I tentatively bit into one. It was delicious, a sort of gooey vegetable thing with mysterious lumps in it.

'This is great,' I said. 'What's in it?'

'Don't ask,' the captain's daughter grinned. 'The Chinese waste nothing.'

Over the next few afternoons, after the Commission meetings, she drove me around the town and up into the hills surrounding the harbour. We walked through the Botanic Gardens lying at the base of a smoking volcano and visited the Vulcanology Station. We paid twenty cents to a Tolai landowner and swam off his black sand beach. We even went aboard a visiting naval ship from Singapore and I met some of her newly acquired sailor friends. On the day we flew back to Port Moresby she left me with her address and an invitation to stay if I ever came back to Rabaul.

CHAPTER 13

Kure and the dog were sitting forlornly on the front steps when I got back to the house at Newtown.

‘*Wanem samting?*’ I asked as I got out of the car with my backpack. Kure shook his head slowly from side to side. The dog put her head in his lap.

‘*Ol raskol oli brukim glas long room bilong yu na sitilim sampela samting.*’

‘Someone broke into my room?’

‘*Oli kam long nait, mi no istap, mi wantaim dok slip long haus bilong mi.*’

The rascal gang had come in the night when Kure and Buka had gone back to his house to sleep. When he had returned in the morning he had seen the broken window and called the police, who took photographs and fingerprints and then left a message advising me to contact them at the Boroko Police Station.

I peered into my room. Kure had tidied everything up and nailed boards across the broken window. My room was one of two on that side of the house. The room next to mine was empty. Each room opened onto a flyscreened veranda that connected to the kitchen and bathroom. The same bedroom set-up occurred on the

other side of the house where the two surveyors lived. They were away in the bush but their rooms seemed to be untouched. I guessed they picked on my room because it was closest to the road. Maybe they were disturbed before they got to the other rooms.

I did a quick check of my belongings. I didn't really have anything of value in the room. Most of my gear from Balimo was in storage in the back of the hangar Foxy's company rented at Jackson's strip. Some clothes and shoes had gone, my jar of loose change, a leather portfolio containing my passport and a few other documents and the wristwatch that I had bought when I was working with the Security and Intelligence Branch and which I hadn't worn since. Kure told me they had pissed all over the bed and the floor but he had cleaned it up and replaced my mattress with the one from the spare room. He had washed all my bed linen and hosed the other mattress down and dried it in the sun. I told him he had done well, which cheered him up a little bit. He went off to cook some lunch muttering about 'bloody Kerema bastards' and how break-ins didn't happen in the Western District.

I dropped into the Boroko Police Station the next morning before going in to work and hunted up the constable who had attended the crime.

'We've got a pretty good idea who the gang are,' he told me. 'They broke into a couple of other dongas in the same area on the same night. All we really need from you is a description of the stuff they took. We'll probably raid the squatter settlement where they live in a few days when they think the heat is off.'

'My cook seems to think they were Keremas?'

‘More than likely; they seem to run a lot of the gangs in Moresby. Might be Chimbus; they’ve got a squatter camp not far away.’ I handed him my list of stolen goods. He glanced up and down it and nodded.

‘You might have to appear in court if we can’t get a guilty plea.’

‘Fine,’ I said and turned to leave. The constable beckoned me back.

‘We’ve arranged with Public Works for *boi* wire to be put on your windows. They should have done it a long time ago.

‘*Boi* wire?’

‘You know, cyclone wire mesh.’

‘Ah, thanks. Why is it called *boi* wire?’

The constable grinned. ‘All the white ladies in Moresby are afraid of getting raped at night by their house boys so they get cyclone wire put on their bedroom windows and locks on their bedroom doors.’

The wire on the windows harked back to the old White Women’s Protection Ordinance. It wasn’t that long ago when a Papuan man who even looked askance at a white woman risked imprisonment under the draconian law. Attempted rape had been a hanging offence and there had been a nine o’clock night curfew in Moresby town for Papuans then. Papuan men were supposed to lust after white women, who had to be protected by a special law. The repressed sexuality and the games bored women played with their male servants were legendary in Papua. A woman could parade naked in front of her houseboy and then have him up on a charge if he responded. A white man could sexually harass a female servant and nothing was ever said. When the first New Guinean married an Australian woman in the late sixties people

were predicting the world was going to end. The constable knew all this and he knew I knew it too.

‘Personally I can’t see a problem,’ he said; ‘they’re all a pasty colour, too skinny and they’ve got long noses.’ I thanked him again and left.

I dropped in at the *Post Courier* office and told Ihini about the burglary.

‘I’ve got bigger fish to fry,’ she said. ‘The crime reporter is down the corridor.’

‘They’re going to put *boi* wire on the windows.’

‘Who would want to rape you?’

‘I’m open to offers. The *raskols* also pissed on the bed.’

‘I hope you got a new mattress.’

‘That reminds me; do you know John Kup? He’s one of our commissioners.’

‘I know of him; he’s some sort of wonder-kid, army type. Why on earth is he on the Commission?’

‘I don’t know; I’m not sure how the selection of Commissioners happened.’

‘Anyhow, what about him?’

‘Oh, nothing much. He’s got a sort of contrary view about the Enquiry.’

‘I bet he has!’

‘So what’s the bigger fish you’ve got to fry?’

‘That’s for me to know and you to find out — when I publish the story.’

‘It wouldn’t have anything to do with Josephine Abaijah, would it?’

‘It might have.’

‘Can I take you out to dinner tonight?’

‘Now you’re being practical. What time?’

I headed back out to my car. The dog hopped through the open window and sat in the passenger seat.

‘That didn’t work too well,’ I said to the dog. ‘She’s not only a hippy feminist, she’s a Papuan Separatist hippy feminist. I don’t think John Kup is going to get much of a hearing in the press.’

The dog nodded but didn’t say anything.

‘Don’t say you’re in league with her as well! A black feminist dog! Has she been feeding you tin fish again?’ Buka loved tin mackerel and when we stayed with Ihini she fed her on it. I was about to follow up on the fish bribery issue when I noticed a dignified old Papuan gentleman staring at me in puzzlement.

‘*Bamahuta!*’ I said to him and waved. He waved goodbye back as I drove off for the office.

We had dinner at the Chinese restaurant in Boroko and then walked around to the Copper Kettle for coffee and dessert. The aroma of brewing coffee was quite strong. It reminded me of the captain’s daughter. It was busy as usual but we found a corner table. We spent dinner discussing the trip to Rabaul. When I told her about the expatriates who were getting ready to leave she said it was the same in Port Moresby.

‘So you reckon everything is being run down before independence?’

‘That may not be the intention but it seems to be what’s happening. It’s one of the things Josephine’s worried about; she thinks a lot of New Guineans will move in and take over after independence.’

'I've heard that some Papuans are trying to claim Australian citizenship just in case they have to leave, something to do with being a protectorate as opposed to a UN-mandated Territory like New Guinea.'

'I could never do that!' she said. 'This is my home. Anyone like me with an education is going to be needed after independence. There will be a lot of work to do; it's going to be hard.'

'I think you've answered the question I didn't really want to ask,' I said. She nodded. 'Anyway, what's this bloody fish you're frying?'

She perked up. 'Remember the old *hiri* voyages, those big *lakatois* that went down the coast to trade every year?' I vaguely remembered seeing old photographs of the big double-hulled canoes with their boxy cabins and crab-claw sails in the harbour. 'Remember the one they built for the South Pacific Games? Well, they're building another one; the university is helping. They're going to do a trial run down the coast in a couple of months. If it works they're going to try and set up a *hiri* festival every year. It will be a Papuan thing, like a Papua Day.' She sounded excited about it; I guessed it had something to do with the Papuan Separatist Movement.

'Don't tell me,' I said; 'you're going on the voyage to report on it?' She grinned and nodded.

'Do you think it will be safe?' I asked. 'I seem to remember that one of the reasons why it was discontinued was because they lost a lot of *lakatois* in a storm in the 1950s.'

'We're going to have radios and lifejackets and flares and a backup motor boat. I'll be safe.'

'Wasn't it just a man's thing?'

'Don't be a party-pooper! Sure it was, but times have changed.'

She seemed completely taken with the idea and I decided not to spoil her mood by mentioning that in a couple of months — at the same time as the voyage, it seemed — my contract was going to expire and I'd be heading for Australia, unsure whether I was going to return again. She launched into all of the details of the planned voyage. Apparently Sinaka was a patron. I listened to her excited description of the proposed route and when she had finished I took her arm.

'C'mon, sailor,' I said; 'It's time to get you home.'

As the Commission progressed, it became apparent that time would not allow the wide consultation process initially envisaged and some areas would have to be dropped off the itinerary. The first area to go was the Western District. The rationale for dropping the whole district was to do with its large area and small population; it was unlikely that there would be any pressure on land there for a very long time.

I could understand the logic behind the decision but somehow it irked me. The Western District always seemed to come at the bottom of Port Moresby's list of priorities. Besides, I thought, even if there were no land pressures the people maintained a variety of traditional land tenure systems, an understanding of which might help the commissioners in their deliberations and might, heaven forbid, point the way for the rest of the country. I shuffled this thought back and forth in my head for a couple of weeks until I had convinced myself that it was crucial for the commissioners to talk to landowners from the Western District.

The Member for South Fly, Ebia Olewale, was a Pangu Pati member and was flat out dealing with the Constitutional Planning

Committee. The Member for North Fly, however, seemed to be nowhere to be seen. I had a vague idea he was in Port Moresby and presumed he had office space somewhere in the town, probably close to the House of Assembly building. I had briefly met him at Ningerum one Christmas; he used to be the Sub-District Interpreter. I got on the phone and rang the House; they gave me a telephone number. I rang but no one answered.

I rang the next day and then daily for a week without success. This was most strange; every time I checked at the House they assured me that he was in town. I guessed he must be very busy. I let it lapse for a while. The commissioners had produced their first draft report and I had to arrange for its printing and binding.

I had used the Government Printer to produce posters and flyers for the Commission and I went back to them for the production of the draft report. The news wasn't good, however; they were flat out with work for all the other enquiries going on. I managed to wrangle the binding of the report out of them but I would have to organise the printing and collating elsewhere. I had heard that there was a fairly sophisticated roneo machine in one of the buildings next door to the Commission.

The machine belonged to an obscure arm of the Chief Minister's Office. It was sitting in a corridor outside a row of offices. I located its operator under a big frangipani tree cooking rice on a small fire. He pointed me to his boss's office. I knocked on the door and was greeted by an elegantly attired Papuan with an air of importance about him.

'No, we can't possibly make it available. We're expecting an absolutely crucial document for production at any moment now.'

Thanks for nothing, I thought, and went back to my office. I was starting to think I would have to go to a commercial printer. I rang a couple and was told they were booked up solid for the next couple of months. I got in the car and set off touring the town looking for someone with a roneo machine. Maybe I would have to buy one.

I didn't have a lot of luck but each time I came back to the office over the next few days I noticed that the operator from the Chief Minister's Office was either asleep under his frangipani or cooking his lunch. In desperation I thought I would try one more angle.

I went over to see the roneo operator's boss again, armed with a typed copy of the draft. He let me into his office.

'I just wanted to show you what we need to print,' I said. 'Just in case you can fit it in between your own work.' I put the draft report on his desk in front of him. He cast a dismissive hand over it and turned the first page. The crisp twenty-dollar bills that I had taken out of our petty cash tin caught his eye immediately. He carefully closed the page.

'I think we might be able to squeeze you in after all,' he said carefully.

'That's wonderful,' I replied.

'You will have to get a supply of stencils from the operator. If you get the typing done, I'll arrange for the printing.' I stood to leave. 'You might have to, er, "help" the operator a bit.' I nodded and he smiled. I picked up the report. The twenty-dollar bills accidentally slipped out and fell on his desk.

I collected the stencils from the operator and handed him a ten-dollar bill. His eyes opened wide. Ten dollars was a week's wages for him.

‘There’ll be another one of those when the job is done,’ I said. He nodded eagerly and then looked about furtively.

‘Its okay,’ I said; ‘I’ve cleared it with your boss.’ He grinned happily.

When I got back to the office with the stencils I set the typists to work. After each page was proofread I ferried it over to the roneo operator. After a while he got the idea and started turning up for each successive page. By the end of the day the whole report was stacked in neat piles in the Commission’s meeting room. I slipped the operator the promised tenner and wondered how I was going to collate the report.

I had noticed that about half a dozen couriers with their bicycles tended to congregate outside one of the trade stores across the road when the message business was slow. The next day I raided the petty cash tin again and set off to see them. The first thing I did was to get them to wash their hands and abandon their stashes of betel nut. I didn’t want dirty fingerprints or bright red *buai* stains on the report. Once I was satisfied the report pages would remain relatively clean, I laid out several lengths of black plastic that I had filched from the Lands Department store and set about laying out page one. I got through about two-thirds of the first page before I ran out of space. I ran some black plastic out into the corridor and continued. I made it to Sinaka’s office door before I ran out of paper. He looked up and came out to see what was happening. The group of couriers who had been watching me froze; they knew Sinaka was a District Court Magistrate. I started to explain what I was doing but he waved his hand. He knew exactly what I was up to.

‘Just make sure there are chits in the petty cash tin,’ he said. I scratched my head. Maybe what I was up to wasn’t so unique after all.

The couriers got the idea straight away. I armed them with bundles of pages and set them off along the lines on the floor. By midafternoon it was all done. I got the couriers to package the collated reports with string and brown paper and put them in the back of a small truck I had hired for the purpose. I gave them the promised ten dollars each as they trooped off. There was a plump expatriate in white socks carrying a bundle of courier bags desperately searching for a courier in the trees beyond the building. Three days later I picked up the bound copies from the Government Printer.

While I was busy with the draft report the young constable from the Boroko Police Station popped in to tell me that they had charged two Kerema men with the burglary at the house. He said he fully expected them to plead guilty, but could I attend the court just in case they changed their minds?

‘In any case,’ he said, ‘you can collect the belongings that we’ve recovered.’

‘That was quick,’ I said as I handed another pile of report pages to the next courier in line.

‘Yes,’ he said; ‘we hit pay dirt on the first raid. Haven’t I seen these guys hanging out near the Chinese store over the road? Aren’t they couriers?’ He watched as the men slapped each successive page on the hundred or so heaps on the black plastic.

‘Volunteers,’ I said. ‘They heard we were desperate to get the Commission’s draft report out and volunteered to help in between carrying messages. Wonderful public service spirit.’

‘Wonderful public service spirit my arse. I hope this isn’t a sign of things to come. How much are you paying them?’

‘Ten bucks.’

‘I don’t want to know,’ he replied.

The next morning I ambled into the Boroko Court and sat outside waiting for my case to come up. After about an hour a policeman with stripes on his arm came out to see me. He had a small clear plastic package with him.

‘I’m the Police Prosecutor,’ he said. ‘The men who broke into your house have pleaded guilty; they each got three months. This is all we recovered.’ He handed me the plastic package. My passport and other documents were inside.

‘Well, I guess it’s better than nothing,’ I said. ‘Thanks very much.’

‘You’re welcome,’ he replied and turned and went back into the courtroom. He was wearing a pair of my shoes.

Once I had the draft report back I checked it for errors and discovered, to my relief, that each consecutive page followed the other in the right order. I took a copy off the pile and whistled for the dog. She was up under the big shady tree at the end of the building with the woodcarvers who hawked their elaborate coffee tables with the complicated folding legs made out of a single piece of wood around the offices at Konedobu. She liked to sit amongst the wood chips as

they gossiped and idly carved when business was slow. She hopped through the open window of the car.

I drove around to the House of Assembly building in MacGregor Street. The building was originally the European Hospital but it had been converted in 1961. A rabbit warren of offices lay close by. Somewhere in the warren lurked the Member for North Fly. With the report tucked under my arm I started knocking on doors. I got very few answers. Eventually I ran into a man raking leaves on a small patch of lawn. I described the Member for North Fly and got an instant response. I found the right door and knocked. I heard a shuffling sound and eventually the door opened. The Member looked half asleep. I introduced myself and he seemed to recognise me. I stepped into his office.

There was a bare desk with two chairs and a rubbish bin. The bin was full of cigarette butts. A telephone sat on the floor near an open window. I pulled up a chair and laid the report on the desk. I couldn't remember if the member spoke any English. I took potluck and spoke to him in Tok Pisin. It was the right decision. I explained the work of the Commission and pointed out how it had not consulted anyone from the Western District. He offered me a cigarette and lit one himself when I declined. The phone rang. I politely sat back so he could answer it. He didn't move and eventually it stopped ringing. I asked him if he could read the report and let me know if he thought people from his electorate should be consulted. He looked at me for a moment and picked up the report. He flicked through several pages and nodded. He was holding it upside down.

The phone rang again and he ignored it again. He offered me another cigarette. I took it and put it behind my ear; this seemed to please him. I took a piece of paper out of my pocket and

wrote my name and telephone number on it and gave it to him. He pulled a brand new leather attaché case emblazoned with a golden Papua New Guinea coat of arms out from under his desk and opened it. He carefully placed the note inside. There was nothing else in the case. As I was about to leave the telephone rang again. I looked at him and he shrugged. I walked over and picked it up.

‘Is this the hospital?’ a voice asked.

‘No. You must have the wrong number.’ The phone clicked off. I put it back on the floor.

A day or so later one of the Commission’s lawyers came into my office.

‘Can you schedule a special meeting tomorrow?’ he asked.

‘No problem,’ I replied. ‘How many people?’

‘I’m not sure. There’s a delegation of local government councillors in town from the Western District on some course and they’ve especially asked to speak to the Commission. The Member for North Fly will be with them.’

‘That’s good,’ I said.

The lawyer raised his eyebrows. ‘I tried to put them off but the Member was very insistent — said they were pissed off because we didn’t visit them.’

‘Fancy that,’ I replied. ‘You never know; they might have something interesting to say.’

‘I doubt it,’ the lawyer replied. ‘About ten o’clock okay?’

‘Ten o’clock is fine,’ I replied.

The only person I knew from the delegation of Western District local government councillors was Sam Wingen, the Chairman of the Kiunga Council. Nevertheless, he and the other councillors, as well as the Member for North Fly, made a few interesting points. Among them were the effects of mining development on local land. A very large part of the Western District, particularly the southern three-quarters, is swampy and subject to annual inundation. It is only useful for hunting and gathering. If you deduct these areas from the remaining habitable land, the per-head ratio of population to usable land doesn't look half as impressive. When the exploration in the Star Mountains initiated by Kennecott started to develop into the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine a port facility was built at Kiunga on high ground overlooking the Fly River. This land was formerly part of the Administration station but, as Sam Wingen asked, 'What happens if they need more land? Do we end up losing village land to the company?'

The other point was related to the development of the district and its isolation from Port Moresby. The councillors said that in the northern quarter of the district there was plenty of land with very low population densities. If roads could be built into these areas from the Highlands development could take place. They pointed out that these northern areas were not in their local government council areas but could possibly be used to establish resettlement schemes if the local people were willing. The economic spin-offs just might filter south to the rest of the district, they argued. I'm not sure if the commissioners appreciated that they were talking about trading off other people's land for their own benefit.

I guess, at the end of the day, the councillors didn't contribute much — but at least they had their say. There were only

a few commissioners at the meeting and the advisers only dropped in for a short while. Sinaka, however, listened intently to everything they said and thanked them for their effort. He particularly singled out the Member for North Fly for his initiative in bringing the councillors to the Commission.

One of the commissioners absent from the meeting was John Kup. He wasn't there because he had been sacked. I had gone along when the Commission visited the Milne Bay District, mainly because I wanted to see the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski's fabled 'islands of love'. The islands, unlike most of Papua New Guinea, have hereditary chiefs. One of these is John Kasaipwalova. During our visit he was an heir apparent and spent his days writing poetry, upsetting the local ADC and running a tourist operation. When we visited his village a tour group had failed to turn up and, not wanting to waste the traditional feast prepared for his tourists, they handed it over to us. I still have pleasant memories of standing at the edge of the sea staring through crystal-clear water to the sea floor a hundred or so metres below while eating a succulent and very large crab. The bonhomie that the feast established carried on into the night and John Kup became a little the worse for wear. When we got back to Moresby the hammer fell and he was given his marching orders. I have never been able to decide whether it was his unruly behaviour or his conservative views that led to his downfall.

The other interesting event that occurred when I got back to Moresby was the captain's daughter waiting on my doorstep. 'I was wondering if you could put me up for a while?' she said by way of greeting. It appeared that she had had an almighty row with her

mother and life in Rabaul had become untenable. We went down to the wharves to her father's ship. Her car was tethered to the deck and her single suitcase was in her father's cabin. She introduced me to her father. He was a seaman through and through. His only regret seemed to be that his wife preferred to stay at home to drink and gamble rather than share his cabin. He seemed unperturbed that his career in Papua New Guinea might be nearing its end. His attitude to life was 'full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes'. He was a likable man who happily swung his daughter's car ashore and casually waved to her as she threw her suitcase in and followed me up the road.

She took over the spare room next to mine and headed off in her car to find a job. Within a day or so she was serving customers at a bakery and cake shop in Boroko. She eventually stayed for a couple of months. With her engaging personality, she made friends easily and seemed to fit in wherever she went. She went to political meetings with Ihini at the university and helped paint posters and make tea. When I was away she looked after the dog.

One day when I came home from the office her room was empty and there was a note on the door. She had found a young sailor and they were going to head south to Australia as soon as they had enough money. The dog sniffed at the door of the empty room. When Ihini came by she grumbled about losing a good poster writer. I never did find out where she went.

CHAPTER 14

Sinaka pulled in his fishing line and inspected the hook ‘You know,’ he said, ‘sometimes I think it’s easier to net the fish off the beach.’

‘I wouldn’t know how to use a net,’ I replied.

‘It’s easy,’ he said. ‘One day I’ll show you.’

We had drifted to within sight of the slip yard at Napa Napa on the other side of the harbour and could see the whole of Port Moresby and the stilt houses of Hanuabada. The exposed wreck of the SS *Macdhui*, sunk by Japanese bombing, sat in the middle distance.

‘I’ve pretty much packed up all my gear and I’ve dispatched the dog off to the quarantine station in Queensland. I’ll be moving into Ranaguri Hostel for the couple of days before I leave.’

‘I’ll miss the dog,’ Sinaka said.

‘I figure if I decide to come back she can come back too.’

‘What about Kure?’

‘He left last week. We went shopping and bought a pile of stuff for him to take back to Kiunga; got his wife a sewing machine.’

‘Ah yes, my daughter has one of those; she makes clothes for everyone’s kids.’

‘Dopey old Kure gave me a big hug and went off blubbering,’ I said.

‘He’s a good man.’

‘But a lousy cook; fries everything. Foxy has got him a job at the Kiunga Hospital; he’ll make a good hospital cook.’ Sinaka pulled up his line again. The bait was still on the hook.

‘I don’t think we’re going to do much good out here tonight,’ he said. I nodded and took up a paddle. We slowly pulled the little outrigger canoe towards the lights of Hanuabada.

‘I wonder how the *hiri lakatois* are going?’ I said as we pulled in under his house. He smiled in the dark.

‘They’ll be fine,’ he said.

When I had finished packing the few bits and pieces that I had left at the hostel I walked down the hill past the Administration offices on Spring Garden Road and followed Champion Parade into town. The day was warm and muggy and I was sweating by the time I got to the Steamships Trading Company store. I bought a paper and went next door to the pub and ordered a beer and a sandwich. I sat at a table near the corner of the big square veranda where there was a view through the rain trees to the harbour.

The first *lakatoi* leaving Hanuabada came into view about 1.30. Brightly clad men and boys were clinging to the superstructure and climbing amongst the rigging. A small group of women in traditional grass skirts were crowded on the deck at the rear of the vessel.

I could hear shouting and laughing coming from the road in front of Steamships and turned to watch an impromptu parade spilling along the road just as the second *lakatoi* came into view.

The crowd turned up Musgrave Street and headed up and over the hill towards Ela Beach. As the noise of their passing faded I could just make out the two *lakatois* tacking around Paga Hill. I watched until they were out of sight, finished my beer, and headed off up the street. When I topped the rise just past the top pub I pulled up. The beach below me was a jumble of laughing and jostling people. I set off down the hill.

The *hiri* was once an annual voyage from the villages along the coast around Port Moresby to the Purari River area around Elema in the Gulf of Papua. The big canoes took earthenware pots and other goods to trade for sago and canoe logs. The last voyages had taken place in the 1920s. A series of catastrophes involving storms and capsizing vessels and loss of life about that time had seen the Administration curtail the voyages. They argued that since there were no longer food shortages in the villages during the dry season now that people had jobs and could buy things from the trade stores, the risk entailed in the voyages was not justified.

In 1969, some forty years later, the people from Hanuabada decided to build a *hiri*-style *lakatoi* as part of a cultural exhibit for the South Pacific Games that were being held that year. The big double-hulled canoe with its giant twin crab-claw sails was very impressive and people started wondering what it would be like to actually sail it down to the Gulf of Papua.

After the games the Hanuabada men quietly set about building another *lakatoi* while the women fired up their cooking

fires and started producing a few more soccer-ball sized brown pots that they would normally sell to tourists on the streets of Port Moresby. The whole project was lagging a bit until someone noted that the *hiri* was a distinctive Papuan thing that had no mainland New Guinea equivalent. At this stage the people from the university and the Papua Besena Movement got involved and the whole project took on an air of mystery, particularly for the groups of New Guinea Highlanders now occupying the capital and seemingly all of the available jobs. This newly discovered Papuanness was now spilling out across Ela Beach and cheering as the two big *lakatois* hove into view.

I waded into the crowd and worked my way to the rock wall next to Koki Market, where it looked like the canoes would dock to load supplies for the voyage. Some sort of parade was going on further up the beach, where a row of grass-skirted girls were swaying to the beat of several twangy guitars and drums. As the first *lakatoi* glided into the shallows its occupants leapt off and hauled it onto the grey sand and headed off towards the parade.

The second canoe followed a few minutes later and as it grounded I spotted Sinaka standing in the prow. He was waving to everyone. I waded into the water and pulled myself up onto the hull of the canoe. He was positively beaming; I could feel the warmth of it as I sat beside him.

‘Have you seen Ihini?’ I asked. He put his hand on my shoulder and, leaning forward, pointed up the beach towards the parade. I followed his gaze and spotted one of the *Post Courier* photographers. She wouldn’t be too far away. I slipped off the hull and into the water.

When I got to the parade the girls in the grass skirts were milling around two old ladies who were striding up and down between them. Someone had stuck a handwritten sign in the sand that announced the parade was for Miss Heranamo, the best traditionally-dressed village girl. There was a distinct element of theatre involved in the whole process. As far as I could tell, the two old ladies were berating the girls for exhibiting themselves in public instead of hiding in their houses waiting for their men to arrive back from the *hiri* expedition. The girls were feigning modesty and falling about laughing at the same time. I caught the eye of the photographer who was darting about and clicking madly.

‘Where is Ihini?’ I mouthed above the din. He grinned back and pointed. I stared in disbelief. There she was in a bouncing red grass skirt, coloured paper and flowers in her hair, a garland of shells around her neck, rattling gourd anklets and tattoos across her forehead, down her cheeks, over both breasts and across her stomach. She grinned when she spotted me and began to sway her hips in a most seductive manner. A couple of her companions followed her gaze and quickly joined her. I was only saved when the old ladies intervened and, in mock anger, drove the girls back to the main group. I retreated to the safety of the crowd.

‘You didn’t make Miss Heranamo?’ I said as she came up the beach and sprawled in the sand beside me. She had a big *bilum* with all her gear for the voyage over her shoulder and she leaned on it for support.

‘I’m only an honorary *kekeni* but it was a lot of fun!’

‘Ah, you’re at least in the Miss Papua category.’ She feigned modesty. ‘If you’re an honorary village girl now you’ll have to

become an honorary man for the voyage. The girls are supposed to stay home and become beautiful for the men when they return with the *saksak* and canoe logs.'

'Sinaka has fixed that,' she said. 'There are a couple of other women from the university coming along to record the voyage.'

'This thing could become an annual event if everyone's not careful.'

'Wouldn't that be good? I hope everything goes well; we're going to be gone for nearly a month.'

'You'll be careful?'

'I'll be okay. I was sailing canoes across the lagoon at home when I was six!'

She stood up and undid the grass skirt. She dropped it into my lap. She was wearing a pair of faded green shorts that she had rolled down at the waist to accommodate the low-slung grass skirt. She pulled the waistband up and rummaged in her bag until she found a T-shirt. I brushed the sand off her and she pulled the shirt over her head.

'You'd better look after that for me,' she said, giving me the grass skirt. I nodded.

'I hadn't noticed the tattoos before,' I said. 'They're very becoming.'

'Felt-tip pen,' she said. 'I hope it washes off before I go home; my father wouldn't appreciate me becoming Hanuabadan.'

'I wondered why you were growing your hair out. Are you disappointed that you didn't win? You were the prettiest girl there.'

'What, and cop all that feminist crap from my flatmate?'

The low groan of a conch shell came from the *lakatois*. The photographer, who was going with her on the voyage, was waving.

'Time to go!' she said. She took both my hands and leaned forward and kissed me. The shell sounded again.

'Have a good trip.'

She nodded. 'Goodbye, *kiap*.'

'Goodbye, Miss Papua.'

She took a deep breath, hugged me again, hefted her *bilum* over her shoulder and strode off towards the waiting canoes.

The commissioners gave me a nice send-off. They bought me a Parker pen and they all signed a 'good luck' card. Philip To Bongola, his wife, and the wife of the Opposition Leader came to see me off at the airport. I got my future brother-in-law, who was going finish at the same time, to take a picture. I was wearing a red striped shirt and light blue jeans. Philip had on a bright island shirt and Mrs Toliman wore a traditional *meri* blouse and *laplap*.

CHAPTER 15

I spotted the inspector on my way to breakfast. He was talking to the security guard on the main gate and waved when he saw me. He had put away a lot of contraband beer the previous day and I was surprised to see him up so early. I had only drunk a couple but felt queasy.

We talked about the weather and other mundane things while we waited in the queue at the mess door. A security guard checked my visitor's pass, peered inside my backpack and wrote my name in a book before issuing a meal ticket; the inspector was waved through.

'One of the perks of the job,' he said as we collected trays and followed the line of hungry workers. He watched in amusement as I rummaged through a tray of yoghurt looking for a diet pack.

'I might get some eggs and bacon,' he said and headed off towards the hot food area. The hot breakfasts included an array of flapjacks, muffins and hash browns as well as eggs, sausages, bacon and baked beans. The cuisine in the Moro mess had a distinctly American flavour. There was an ice-cream machine by the tea and coffee urns.

I sat down with my bowl of cereal and dumped the tub of diet yoghurt over it. The inspector sat on the opposite side of the table. He had a plate heaped with eggs, bacon and fried bread.

‘Helps settle the stomach after all that beer,’ he grinned. He watched me munching on my sticky mess.

‘I just figured out the sugar cane and the walking,’ he said.

I wondered what he was talking about.

‘Getting bugged on your first patrol out of Olsobip; it had something to do with diabetes.’ I twigged.

‘It must have been a precursor. Low blood sugar levels before developing diabetes are common. They really knock the stuffing out of you until you eat something sweet like sugar cane.’ The inspector looked satisfied; he liked to tidy up his facts.

After breakfast we took our coffee to a table in the breezeway between the mess and the main office. Someone stuck his head out of the office door. My plane had been delayed in Port Moresby because of bad weather. I looked around; the sky was clear and the air sharp. I turned back to the inspector.

‘It was interesting listening to you last night,’ he said. ‘I hadn’t really thought about independence from an expatriate point of view.’

‘Neither had I. You got me thinking about it for the first time in years; I woke up feeling vaguely guilty this morning.’

‘Guilty?’

‘Well, not exactly guilty; sort of half guilty.’

‘Go on.’

‘Well, we didn’t have much choice about leaving. That was a political decision, and it wasn’t just Gough Whitlam pushing that

line; Michael Somare and all the other pro-independence people were just as much to blame. The thing that bothered me was that we left with the job only half done.'

'That's what my old man keeps telling me. He's quite bitter about it.'

'One of the things about the *kiaps* was that they were pragmatic; some would say too pragmatic. I mean, that's the sort of person they looked for when they recruited us in the first place. When I was at ASOPA both *kiap* lecturers, Jack Baker and Fred Kaad, told us that; they also said we were a bunch of misfits. Who else would enjoy sitting on a lonely patrol post in a swamp? And Jack and Fred knew what they were talking about; they both manned some pretty ordinary patrol posts in their time. That put the wind up me and I really thought about quitting there and then but Fred convinced me that the spectacle of the dying days of colonialism would be worth watching — or something like that. We had some good lecturers from the University of Sydney at ASOPA but Jack Baker and Fred Kaad really knew how to grab your attention. Anyway, to the average *kiap*, pulling out as many expatriates as possible overnight seemed really dumb. I mean, what was wrong with declaring independence and leaving all the expats where they were until properly trained Papuan New Guineans could take over? What was the point of accelerating promotions amongst local staff? It was deliberately setting them up to fail! They could've let the Tolais and the other advanced districts run themselves and still have *kiaps* running the Highlands and the Sepik and the Western and Gulf Districts. None of the *kiaps* I knew minded having Michael Somare as a boss; some of them helped put Pangu together and some of them were up to their necks with the conservatives in the United Pati! Just because all the

other colonial powers were pulling out lock, stock and barrel didn't mean Australia had to do the same thing.'

'But they did,' the inspector said.

'And I'm bloody amazed your old man and his mates kept the place running so well for so long.' The inspector smiled.

'There were still a few white kiaps around. I remember them in the 1980s.'

'Yeah, I know a few. They were mostly the younger end of the ones recruited before the contract system came in. I suppose they actually had to resign before they could be kicked out. There was the odd instant *kiap* who stayed on too, which was strange because a lot of the poor buggers didn't even see their first contract out. Anyway, I think the *wantok* system eventually got most of them out. One *kiap* I know who stayed on told me that by the late 1980s if he told someone to do something and they didn't like it they would simply get onto a *wantok* higher up in the pecking order and get the order turned around.'

'Tell me about it,' the inspector laughed.

'Then when the Malaysians and Koreans and others started coming in for the timber they brought their bribery culture with them. It was their way of doing business, I guess; you can't blame them, but I reckon that's when things started to go downhill. I wasn't past slipping someone a few bucks to get something done, but some of the politicians have turned it into an art form.'

The inspector stood up and emptied the dregs of his coffee on the lawn.

'Well, that's history now, I guess. One thing still bothers me, though; why didn't the *kiaps* protest?'

'I'm not sure. Maybe the *kiaps* couldn't get their act together. They were spread all over the place and didn't have a lot of

contact with each other. Anyway, I think we thought it was too late; no one really thought Gough Whitlam would get elected.'

'My old man reckons the *kiaps* should have told the Australian government they were wrong to think about leaving so early.'

'You've spoken to your old man about this a lot, haven't you?'

'Yeah. I'm the only one who will listen to him; the young ones think he's a silly old fart. Bigmen in the Highlands aren't respected like they used to be.'

'Tom Ellis made plenty of noise but not many others did. I think there were a lot of *kiaps* who didn't like Tom's methods anyway. Besides, there were lots of other problems. We seemed to be always at war with "head office". Look at the West Papua thing; how could anyone with any compassion send people back to the Indonesians? And yet, "head office" was telling us to do exactly that. We copped a lot of flak for that; in fact we copped a lot of flak for doing all sorts of things we didn't have much choice about. I think in the end we became scapegoats. When I left, I went to work at the South Australian Museum and I quickly learned to be careful about telling anyone I was an *ex-kiap*.'

'Here comes your plane.'

I retrieved my backpack from under the table and we walked through the compound to the airport security gate. I glanced at the razor wire on top of the fence as I handed over my visitor's pass. The inspector wandered off to watch the security guards in the terminal going through the incoming passenger bags while I picked up my boarding pass. When he came back he said, 'Did you ever see her again?'

'See who?'

‘The journo.’

‘Once, in Brisbane, a long time ago. She was there on a conference; she was fairly high up in the university.’

‘And?’

‘We had a coffee, talked a bit. She married the village guy her parents picked out. Got four kids; one of them is a journalist.’

‘That’s how it goes,’ he said.

‘I was always planning to come back. Doing what, I don’t know. Setting up a business or something like that. Kure and I fantasised about a string of tradestores throughout the Gulf and Western districts and Ihini and I often discussed tourism; taking thousands of rich Americans into the Star Mountains. In hindsight it might have worked. There were quite a few *kiaps* I know who stayed on and are still here. They’re in mining companies and places like that; Craig McConaghy ended up running a coffee company. I used to collect stuff for the South Australian Museum. When I got back to Australia I was walking through the Canberra airport and I ran into one of the curators and he said, “Hi, whatcha’ doin’? Do you want a job?” And I said “yes”. I don’t know why I said yes, but that’s history now.’

The inspector looked like he didn’t believe me.

‘I had wanted to become a *kiap* since I was ten or eleven years old. I read all Jack Hide’s books and Jim Sinclair’s *Beyond the Ranges* and that’s what I wanted to do. I think I really wanted to stay being a *taubada*, and when independence put paid to that I think the attraction faded. That sounds racist but I think that’s what did the trick; I think that’s why I said yes.’

‘Makes you wonder what might have happened if you’d come back earlier.’

‘My first first trip back was in 1997 when I came up to work for the oil companies. I sat next to a woman from Porobada. She had married an Australian and had gone to live in Queensland. It was her first trip home in twenty years. We were both glued to the window so we could catch a glimpse of the coast as we neared Port Moresby. It was hazy coming in to land because of the drifting smoke from the fires burning in Indonesia.’

‘The bastards burn out their rainforest to make gardens,’ the inspector said.

‘Yeah. I ended up spending three days in Moresby trying to get a flight to Hagen in that horrible old terminal; hot as buggery, nowhere decent to have a leak, no food to buy. I got on two flights that had to be aborted. One was because of an electrical fault — you could smell the burning in the cabin — and the other was because of the smoke and an irate passenger who had to be thrown off the plane. We eventually ended up in Madang on that one and then had to come all the way back to Moresby. I got there on the third try only because there was a plane on the ground in Mount Hagen and the pilot guided us in over the radio. We pitched out of the smoke halfway down the strip and the pilot had to brake hard to pull up. He got a standing ovation when we finally slowed up. Then I saw Mount Hagen. All the razor wire, rubbish everywhere, you know what it’s like.’

‘And you couldn’t believe the change?’

‘No, it took a while. The country is still magnificent; there are lots of great people, especially in the bush; but I’m not sure I’d want to live here anymore.’

‘What happened to the woman from Porobada?’

‘When we landed, there was a big crowd of people clinging to the cyclone wire fence waiting for her to arrive. She tried to go

over to them as we walked to the terminal but a security guard headed her off. When we got to customs she was waved through without her bags being inspected. I was right behind her in a sort of daze absorbing all the old smells and noise in the place when the customs bloke asked me to open up my backpack. I was about to do so when I heard her say to him in Motu that I was a friend of hers. The customs bloke waved his hand, told me not to worry about the bag and ushered me through.'

'The old *wantok* system.'

'Anyway, outside the terminal the mob from the fence descended on her. She looked back at me once and I think she waved before she was caught up. I watched them disappear up the road to some waiting PMVs. It was quite strange; she was completely absorbed by the mob and I couldn't distinguish her at all.'

'She was back where she belonged.'

'I'm sure she was; it was as if she had never been away. I didn't ask her how long she was going to stay.'

'Maybe forever. I guess it's the only country we've got; maybe it's not so bad after all?'

I smiled and shook the inspector's hand.

'Safe trip,' he said.

I watched him amble off before I walked past the group of passengers in from Moresby who were having their baggage searched. The guards were looking for drugs, booze and pornography. The Southern Highlands was a dry province and anything raunchier than the *Readers Digest* was considered to be pornographic. I walked straight onto the plane with my small backpack. As we pulled away from the strip I watched Lake Kutubu drift serenely past. I wondered if this would be the last time.

PANDANUS BOOKS

Pandanus Books was established in 2001 within the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS) at The Australian National University. Concentrating on Asia and the Pacific, Pandanus Books embraces a variety of genres and has particular strength in the areas of biography, memoir, fiction and poetry. As a result of Pandanus' position within the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, the list includes high-quality scholarly texts, several of which are aimed at a general readership. Since its inception, Pandanus Books has developed into an editorially independent publishing enterprise with an imaginative list of titles and high-quality production values.

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