INNOCENCE TO INDEPENDENCE

Life in the Papua New Guinea Highlands 1956–1980

Judith Hollinshed
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LIFE IN THE PAPUA NEW GUINEA HIGHLANDS 1956–1980

Judith Hollinshead
Cover: The author and her dog, Simba, crossing the cane bridge over the Nebilyer River at the end of the Alimp road. Photograph by her husband Barry

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For my family
Traditional Papua New Guinean practices vary greatly from place to place and reference in this book to cultural and traditional aspects of the Papua New Guinean lifestyle relates to the people of the Western Highlands.
The locals at Alimp were against having my husband’s ashes scattered but they were happy to have them buried. I imagine they had a carry-over suspicion that, as a white person, he had been a spirit of some sort and they had enough of these without Barry floating around. We buried him there 20 years after we had all ‘gone finish’ from Papua New Guinea. There was no minister, no hymns or eulogies, only his immediate family and a few score of the native people who knew him at Alimp.

We buried his ashes there because that was where he set up Verona Coffee Estates, the place he never wanted to leave. With me were our sons: Christopher and Julian, and Julian’s wife Julie. Christopher’s wife Lee had a baby just weeks old, too young to come. But we all felt as though Barry, too, was one of the party. One or other kept asking: ‘Is Barry off the plane?’ ‘Where’s Barry?’ making sure the little calico bag was with us, conscious of what he would have been thinking on revisiting this place he had identified with so closely.

The occasion was a jumble of emotions. Bringing him back to Alimp was like renewing an association with a man we’d known years before and not the sick and debilitated Barry of latter years. It was the revisiting of a time when the isolated people who lived there knew our every move and a reminder of the severity with which the ties were cut when we left. The warmth of the welcome the Alimp people gave us on our
return prompted an awareness that we had too easily cut them out of our lives.

After self-government was granted in 1973, we experienced the hiatus in the lead-up to independence in 1975. I came to believe it would not be tenable, eventually, to go on living there but Barry would not think of that, or if he did he would not admit it. We hung in there for more than five years after independence, which left us among the last of the expatriate planters in the Western Highlands to leave.

I had foreseen deterioration but never the breakdown that was evident on our return in 2000 and Barry would have been saddened by the situation in Mt Hagen, the main provincial town. We all were; everywhere was the bleak evidence of lawlessness and a deteriorating infrastructure. Homes and businesses surrounded by high security fences, mostly ragged corrugated iron affairs topped with razor wire, with heavy security gates behind which lean dogs padded restlessly. The hotel and motel were tucked away securely and ugly, box-like stores with barred windows were crammed together in the two main streets. The roads were deeply potholed and the verges strewn with rubbish. People in their thousands wandered this way and that, apparently aimlessly, though many headed for the town’s perimeter where the sale of betel-nut was permitted. The only two things we saw that thrived were the town’s market and an avocado tree we had planted 30 years before over the grave of Barry’s boxer dog.

Stretching away from the town, though, the fertile highland valleys were as beautiful as ever and the mountain ranges a changing tableau: peaks challenging a brilliant blue sky, or veiled and hazy, sometimes stark and forbidding. Despite appearances in the town, we learnt from our host George Leahy that behind the sorry streetscape were many active enterprises, some successful, though 2000 was a bad year for coffee, one of the area’s main sources of income. Many clans had long ago planted their own coffee trees while others acquired expatriate plantations, such as ours, when government policy required land to be returned to the original landowners. A number of locals were employed in ancillary activities, buying
coffee at the roadside or working in central processing and packing factories. Some entrepreneurial locals owned coffee-related businesses.

Papua New Guineans live for the day and that’s understandable for they never did have a very secure future. Apart from an abbreviated life expectancy, there were enemies on all hands and tribal fighting was endemic. Saving, other than in a complex traditional form, was unheard of and when the consumer society hit the country, money was for spending and the future could take care of itself. Most of the coffee trees we saw reflected the lack of fertiliser and pruning, even the most basic care and maintenance. The plantation trees were hanging on grimly, some still surprisingly productive. But the quality of coffee was deteriorating and the meagre flush of beans in 2000 followed a rare and prolonged drought which also hit the industry hard.

We could hear, as though he was with us, the comments Barry would have made as we travelled the 34 kilometres to Alimp, driven by George in his capacious four-wheel drive. The first 16km had been sealed, though they were as full of potholes as the dirt had previously been. The smaller bridges had been replaced by culverts to counter the theft of bridge-decking for firewood. We had been told that local gangs would wait until travellers crossed a bridge and then remove planks, demanding money before replacing them for the return trip. Little clusters of people appeared along the roadside wherever trade stores stood and the ground around them was littered with everything from kaukau peelings, empty cans and wrappers to betel-nut spit. Most groups included a couple of tethered pigs, and the scrawny dogs I thought marginally less lean and hungry-looking than they used to be.

The sealed section of road stopped at the Korgua/Alimp intersection giving way to a dirt track where tall grasses intruded almost to the wheel ruts, hiding from view the magnificent Nebilyer Valley and the lofty ranges flanking it. There had always been bad stretches along this lonely track but not total breakdown as there now was in many places. It was hard to believe I once drove it regularly in a station wagon with two children on board.
I could feel the excitement mounting as we drove down the steep, stony road to the Bailey bridge over the raging waters of the Trugl Gorge. Everything here was just as I remembered it, the climb out of the gorge way above standard gradients. From the top we could see another vehicle coming behind us. It was Joe Leahy, formerly almost close enough to be called a neighbour, and I felt tears sting as we stopped to say ‘hi’. Then we were on the straight home run, driving past the coffee trees we had planted more than 40 years earlier. George had ensured the local people knew we were coming for we needed their permission to leave Barry with them.

I think the whole population of the little Alimp hamlet had turned out for the occasion and the welcome was overwhelming. There were tears, pats and hugs and much hand-wringing; I was still ‘Missis’ and they remembered Christopher’s and Julian’s names all right. I was stunned by the familiarity of their gestures, the smell of unwashed bodies and pig grease, the heat shimmer and the openness of their emotions. It was as though I had never left. After a time, we settled down for a ‘discussion’, an inevitable part of any PNG event. Joe, fluent in the local dialect, reiterated the reasons why we had come back to bury Barry at Alimp. The locals nodded and smiled and a couple rubbed tears from their eyes with grimy fists and it was clear they were pleased about what we were doing. They explained that they had recently cleared a ples matmat, or cemetery, where they had buried Nintepa, one of their bigmen. They wanted to plant Barry beside him, which pleased me as it seemed likely they would care for the area.

Towards the end of the discourse, they pointed out that things weren’t going too well for them and they were not getting what the pollies had promised. In fact, it seemed to me they were not getting anything at all, the only difference in 20 years being the addition of a couple of run-down-looking trade stores, grubby shorts and T-shirts instead of traditional gear and an air of neglect. Or maybe it was hopelessness. They urged us, or at least Christopher and Julian, to return to help look after everything. Joe pointed out succinctly that they should have thought about
all that before they hustled the expats out of the country. But, of course, these people never had any say in the matter.

So Barry was buried at the place he had never wanted to leave. We were all saddened that the plantation was becoming overgrown and the trees were in gradual decline, though still productive, which was more than we had dared hope for. I made a mistake in walking up the driveway to where our house had stood and further on to our prized processing factory. Oh, the poignancy of memories; unsettling. There was nothing left to remind me that we had ever lived there; the old grass house, of course, had long since fallen down and the factory was disused and embraced with jungly growth.

And so we left Alimp for the second time, 20 years after the first and I went away with three things on my mind. I knew we had done the right thing in bringing Barry back, I thanked God we had left when we did, and I wondered sadly what was to become of those warm and hapless people whose children were turning into criminals and who seemed to have nothing in the world to look forward to.
When I stepped out of the single-engined Gibbes Sepik Airways Norseman on the Minj airstrip in the Western Highlands in 1956 I was married to Mike. Had I been more honest with myself, I would not have been married to him.

I was headstrong, forever testing the rules, and my family had plenty. My parents did what they could to rear me to a neatly structured existence in which I would marry, have my babies and enjoy a social, suburban life. The process bogged me down and I dreamt of marriage which, I thought, meant freedom, passion and personal fulfilment and the opening of doors hitherto firmly locked. So I married nice Mike, even though I think we both had moments of doubt. After the wedding, he and I moved into a small inner suburban flat. I took on a full-time job, from which I hurried home to cook a meal, had sex when Mike’s work hours allowed us to be together, washed clothes in the shared laundry, ironed, and cleaned the flat plus the shared bathroom and regularly forgot to tip the water out of the ice-box tray. It was not what I had envisaged. Of course, Mike had no idea he was supposed to be the shining knight of impossibly optimistic dreams. After three years of a distinctly uninspired union, Barry, a former neighbour of Mike’s, came up with an astounding proposal.

Barry found his first job restrictive and he was out of step with the corporate world of Melbourne. He was not even enamoured about having a boss. So he opted out of the mechanical
engineering career for which he’d trained almost as soon as he got started and went jackarooing for long enough to decide he wanted a life on the land — and to be his own boss. He was set on the coffee-growing path by author and former New Guinea war correspondent Osmar White, a long-time family friend. At the time, this was being encouraged by the Australian administration. Financially broke, Barry needed a partner.

Mike was a journalist with a major Melbourne daily and seemed content with his life. When Barry aired the PNG concept, I was madly enthusiastic. It was the confirmation, formerly only a niggle during fruit-picking days in university holidays, that I hankered for more than Melbourne and marriage appeared to offer. It never really occurred to me to question what on earth made urbane, punctilious Mike want to be part of it. I don’t know to this day. Heaven knows, we had little in the way of finances to contribute, but a proposed partnership went ahead and I was ecstatic.

Stepping out of the plane on the Minj airstrip came as a huge shock. My parents had done a better job than they knew and I had all the inhibitions of a mid-century upbringing as well as all the trappings of a middle-class background. I was wearing a very smart, broad-brimmed hat and two stiff petticoats under a full-skirted frock. Those were the days of the stand-out petticoat and, since they were too stiff to be packed, I had to wear them both. In my suitcase were other smart outfits and a fur stole I used to wear to the theatre in Melbourne.

The crowd at Minj consisted of a couple of whities and a throng of smelly, near-naked people with frizzy hair and dark, greasy-looking skin. The grass airstrip was edged by a dusty dirt road on one side and a tall, frondy type of sugarcane, called *pitpit*, on the other. It was a sun-drenched place but not sunburnt, hot but not humid at 1,500 metres above sea level. There were few buildings, all but one made exclusively from native materials. As for theatres! I didn’t really notice what sort of reception greeted my appearance as I and my petticoats forced our way through the small door of the Norseman. A planter who met the plane that day told me much later that he wouldn’t have given two bob for
me when he first met me. What the native population thought I can’t imagine, but then the highlanders had been subjected to nearly 25 years of massive surprise so I expect they took my arrival philosophically.

At the time, Barry was based in Mt Hagen, some 50km from Minj and the main town in the Western Highlands, where the administration employed him and another would-be coffee grower to build houses. Neither could tolerate even moderate heights and it was never clear how the houses they built were roofed.

Mike was employed in the Minj administrative office and seemed to spend most of his time balancing books — or not, as was the case. Minj could not be described as a town. There were no shops or public buildings, other than the administrative office where Mike worked, and only one vehicle, if you don’t count motorbikes, and that was a four-wheel drive Land Rover belonging to the District Officer. There was a malaria-control unit housed in a native material structure and a similarly styled hospital with a dirt floor run by an expatriate medical assistant and his wife. Tiny grass houses lined red-dirt tracks and served as residences for the administrative personnel, Gibbes Sepik Airways staff and Mike and me. It was here, in the glorious Wahgi Valley, bounded on either side by prodigious mountain ranges, that I emerged from the tiny aircraft looking ridiculous.

The job market was minuscule and full up so I joined Barry in the pursuit of our coffee project, vetting plans and writing to friends and family urging them to invest in our plantation. Barry seemed to have more freedom to come and go than Mike, despite his employment, and it wasn’t until much later that I discovered he created free time as he wanted. He quite often spent weekends in Minj, his arrival heralded by the strangled moans of his motorbike struggling against the build-up of red mud between tyre and mudguard. Once he took the mudguard off in a fury and paid the price. His arrival always livened things up and I looked forward to his visits.

Coming to PNG had made little difference to the relationship between Mike and me but I was imbued with
the spirit of making my bed and lying in it and had no thought of the marriage failing. I wasn’t feeling deprived, because outside our relationship there was so much to experience that was infinitely exciting, colourful and challenging; Barry was part of it. Sometimes he stayed over and he and I worked on estimates and how we might cajole a land board into believing we suffered no serious shortfall in capital. Sometimes I rode pillion while we searched for suitable land. Once, I was carried by locals, under Barry’s instructions and despite my objections, through swampland in Ulya country. It was the weirdest experience, like something you read about in a book.

In Minj I came to learn a little about the life of the native people, about their apparent acceptance of our presence, even if it did take a long time for them to be assured we were not the pallid ghosts of their ancestors nor evil or kindly spirits to be handled to best effect by traditional observances. I got to know the pit-saw team of locals who brought in timber planks at Barry’s instigation. The team went into the foothills where the mountain trees met the swaying sea of kunai grass in the valley. Here they dug their pit and, with one standing in it and the other at ground level, used the long two-handled saw to cut the logs they had collected along a lengthwise chalk line.

I often walked into the foothills, mostly setting off alone but invariably joined by children who accompanied me with much chatter and happy laughter, leaving me only temporarily should I inadvertently walk through a ples matmat, or burial place. The children were gorgeous. Crinkly hair cut short didn’t show the dirt, though fingernails did. Their huge, dark eyes were fringed with outrageously long, thick eyelashes and their teeth gleamed white behind great big smiles. One little boy brought me a posy of flowers which he handed over shyly, a gesture which touched me immensely although the medical assistant’s wife pointed out they certainly came from her garden. It didn’t matter — she had plenty.

But the children weren’t always physically beautiful; many had the grossly distended belly that spoke of an enlarged spleen, most carried sores, sometimes aggressive skin ulcers crawling with
flies — and sometimes other things. Some had been burnt in fires, scars ragged against velvety skin, and some were deformed. But always they seemed cheerful, happy.

On weekends, Mike and I, sometimes with Barry, occasionally ventured higher into the mountains, welcoming the coolness offered by lush growth, marvelling from on high at the splendour of the Wahgi Valley, the sweeping bends of the majestic Wahgi River, and intrigued by the shiny, toy-like aircraft coming in to land way below us. I had not anticipated the effect of altitude, thinking I was physically fit for anything. It was very demeaning to be overtaken easily by the local inhabitants despite my best efforts to move faster.

The highlands airstrips were surprisingly busy and without the intrepid pilots we might still be waiting for the highlands to be opened up. Without the Otters, the Cessnas, the Norsemans and the ubiquitous DC3 we might still be awaiting the development of a coffee industry — or any industry. Only one road linked the highlands with the coast and that was to the seaport of Lae, but it was not opened to unrestricted traffic until 1966. There never was a road to Port Moresby.

Flying in the highlands was very much a ‘seat of the pants’ affair, the pilots exercising great resourcefulness along with hair-raising manoeuvres. There was no night flying in the highlands, of course, but quite frequently the airstrips would also close in during the day. Burning off, mostly as preparation for new native gardens but also in the hunt for bush rats for tucker, caused smoke to bank up at the pass through which pilots guided their craft westward from Goroka. Cloud was the big enemy and the pilot of a small plane would not hesitate to ask his passengers to watch for a hole in the cloud through which he could make his landing approach. And always the unforgiving mountains, as well as the valleys, were there under the cloud and they cost many lives and many aircraft.

One and sometimes two Gibbes pilots were based in Minj and a new experience was being manifested as a bag of rice and sitting up beside the pilot while we waggled wings in greeting above the various plantations in the valley on our way to Hagen
or Enga or the Southern Highlands. One expatriate was up on his roof when we came in extra low to say hello, so low the look on his face changed from greeting to sheer terror as he pressed himself into the thatch. One time a message had to be dropped, the bearer sitting up front with the pilot with me in the back. We buzzed the plantation to alert them and came in low on the second circuit. Disoriented because of the aircraft’s sharp bank, I glanced out the window, willing my wobbly gut to behave and saw no sky but only very close trees. The connecting door to the pilot’s cabin had swung open and I could see both pilot and passenger scrabbling around on the floor where the message in its weighted container had accidentally fallen. The handful of people waiting to receive it were running frantically in all directions but the message was found and the plane righted before disaster struck.

The tales related to flying experiences in PNG could fill a book, but one of the most entertaining related to a woman who, certain the plane was about to crash, began to pray and promised God she would give all her jewellery for the benefit of the needy should she survive. She did survive and, being a responsible person, agonised over her commitment. Her husband, who was responsible for much of the jewellery, worked overtime to invent less intrusive ways to help her honour her promise. I was aboard a single-engined Cessna with three Australian tourists and a woman golfer from Lae when we made a hair-raising landing on the drenched, grass Kainantu strip in dense cloud to off-load the golfer. I’d been on the brink of suggesting she settle for golf at Goroka when the pilot saw a hole — more specifically, a faint change of colour — and dived sightlessly into it. When asked by one of the tourists when he would be taking off again, the pilot said, ‘When my knees stop shaking.’

One manoeuvre really defied the odds and I was mighty glad I had no part in it. Two Norsemans took off from the narrow Minj strip side by side, peeling apart as they got airborne and returning to pass wingtip-to-wingtip beneath a wire cable at the town end of the strip. Madness but apparently wonderful fun.
Besides the aeroplane, another thing that greatly advanced the budding coffee industry that year (1956) when I was in Minj was the arrival of Baron Goto, Professor of Agriculture at the University of Hawaii. He had been working as a consultant in the field of coffee-growing for many years and few highlands planters ever doubted that Baron Goto was, in large measure, responsible for the eventual production of top-quality Arabica coffee in the PNG highlands.

Land in the New Guinea highlands was officially alienated for expatriates to grow coffee only between 1952 and 1958, though a few were granted additional and even new acreage after that time. The Australian Government policy was to preserve the land for traditional owners and there must have been some reluctance to offer blocks for private enterprise, if only because there was no way of assessing the potential impact on the native population. But after that introduction would come the support infrastructure: the mechanised road-makers, the shops, service stations, teachers and doctors and the foundations of development to which Australia was committed.

Any concerns about land sales were overridden by the urgent need to pilot some sort of commercial activity that the natives could emulate on their own land. One or two speculative plantings in the Eastern Highlands had shown that coffee grew well in the area. The proposal to allow planters into the highlands renewed the age-old debate: what right had Australia to intervene in a subsistence society whose culture was intact and whose customs had no common ground with those of the outside world? What right had Australians to bring with them their certainty that they knew what was best, their sicknesses, their fetish for consumerism, while imposing upon a whole race of people a set of values that had no relevance and, despite the best of intentions, in many ways proved to be destructive?

The other side of the argument, of course, was how long could this primitive society remain cut off from the rest of the world and who would get there first if it wasn’t Australia? When the mandate to govern was bequeathed by the United Nations to Australia, should there have been a separate set of rules that
denied New Guineans the right to education, health, a democratic system of government and an independent future? Yet in bringing these enviable objectives to PNG, Australia created the environment in which things started to go awry. They were trying to make a leap in time that simply was not possible.

We all know history is being made all the time, but in this place, where time had been on pause for ever, it was monumental and rapid history-making. The expatriates brought with them knowledge that was so comparatively profound the people of the highlands shook their heads in amazement and looked to the heavens for understanding. The newcomers brought a consumer society and the people again looked to the heavens for signs of an aeroplane bringing the white man’s cars and radios, rum and smokes, axes and generators, which they believed surely would be coming for them, too. Some of these foreigners brought a special and totally alien kind of God, but the missionaries — or the honest ones — were conservative in their estimation of true converts.

And those amazing, ingenuous people accepted what was happening with grace and dignity. ‘Noble savages’, a friend called them. Later, he was to lament the loss of dignity and its replacement by an aggrieved and avaricious approach to the new life.

The leap in time had to be attempted for that was Australia’s mission. What might have happened under a less benevolent and well-meaning government hardly bears thinking about. Private enterprise was a necessary part of the transition and so a number of highlands blocks for coffee growing were bought by the Government and gazetted. There was a surge of interest by foreigners willing to forsake job security and take a punt, although only lowland coffee had been proven commercially. Why would anyone do this? Call it love of adventure, call it philanthropic ideology, call it a cheap way to get established on the land, call it escapism. Whatever led expatriates to this glorious wilderness, few long-termers left without many regrets and an affinity with the highlands that stayed with them for ever.

Not long after Mike and I had invested in our own motorbike came an event that changed everything for us. With Mike obliged to work, one early weekday morning when the sun
was still behind the mountains and the *kunai* grass was unmoving in the valley, Barry and I set off on our two bikes for Goroka, some 150km away in the Eastern Highlands, to meet Osmar White and his wife Mollie. They were in charge of a group of schoolchildren who had won a Qantas/Sun newspaper-sponsored competition. It was an epic journey that I, at least, was lucky to survive. It was dirt all the way and the bridges we had to cross were surfaced with round saplings fixed lengthwise so the front wheel of a bike did its own thing. Some bridges had a quaint thatched roof over them pretty well ensuring they seldom dried out, which made it even harder not to fall.

By the time we reached the Daulo Pass, at more than 2,400 metres, it was dark. We were tired and hungry, my leg was hurting from exhaust pipe burns resulting from several falls and the rain had set in. At the summit we paused in rain-soaked cloud for Barry to clear the mud from his front wheel. Out of the darkness came a ray of light which swayed about until it found us. Behind the torch was a logger who was overnighting in a ramshackle one-man rest house. ‘Care for a rum?’ he asked. He had a fire burning in a crude stone fireplace and we sat on the earth floor around it, hands outstretched to the fire between guiding chipped cups to our lips. Getting back into my rain gear was the hardest thing, but clearly we could not stay the night. It was midnight when we finally made Goroka where it was too late to find food or accommodation at the hotel. We eventually dossed down at Gibbes’ Goroka flat after despairing minutes hammering on the door trying to rouse the only occupant, a pilot who had been celebrating the birth of a daughter.

We were there on the Goroka strip the next morning to welcome Os and Moll and the schoolchildren. I had not anticipated the emotion which swept through me at the sight of the Whites. I practically fell into Mollie’s arms, not realising how grateful I would be to see someone from home. The children, year 11 secondary I think, were apparently fascinated by the two mud-speckled derelicts on motorbikes who accompanied their four-wheel drive convoy back to Chuave, where we all spent the night in the school house.
This trip was about the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me and after it I was aware of a kind of highly charged emotion in me and a new urgency about seeing Barry. He became intense and uncommunicative and I, pretty soon forced to admit I was hopelessly in love with him, believed he felt the same way but was unable to come to terms with the feeling he had betrayed Mike. I was guessing, because the topic of our feelings for each other and what we were to do with them remained unspoken. We never were able to speak about anything intimate. It was all very dramatic and we went about our separate lives looking drawn and pale until, at a party, Barry and I danced all night and Mike was forced to ask whether there was anything between us.

I knew I had to get away from New Guinea to seek some sense of perspective. It was never easy to find perspective in New Guinea, where everything was larger than life and overly uninhibited. All I could think of was to go south, sort myself out and then think about the future. Mike deserved better; guilt, a sense of disorientation and enormous relief were a confused tangle in my mind.

In Melbourne I languished penniless, dependent on the goodwill of friends. I was not allowed to join my parents in England, where they were in London for my sister’s wedding, because I had been a bad girl. I set about trying to find a job so I could start saving for our coffee plantation. After a year of separation I spent my Christmas holiday with Barry back in Mt Hagen where he had built a bush house. But it was too fraught with loving and love-making and the constraints of a five-week time-frame to add much realism to the situation. Barry came twice to Melbourne and in between we made do with letters, never faltering from the certainty we would marry.

Barry’s letters outlined considerable progress. He identified suitable coffee-growing land in the Nebilyer Valley in the Western Highlands, south of Mt Hagen, and won it in 1958 at the last formal land board at which land was alienated for expatriate coffee-growing. This was despite an application backed by the pitiful sum of £11,000, a large part of which came from
family and two faithful friends. The offering had suffered somewhat by the breakdown of the original partnership. I suspect the block was granted to Barry rather than to applicants with more capital because he was known, had shown resourcefulness and commitment and had identified the land personally. Thankfully, a PNG friend felt comfortable about his prospects and later threw in another £2000 and, over the years, Barry built our holding by taking shares in lieu of wages.

Barry set up a coffee nursery from seeds produced at Aiyura in the Eastern Highlands and a native material house was built on our lovely block of land. The block, for which we paid a nominal rent, was bought by the Government and alienated on a 99-year lease. There was no freehold for expatriates in the highlands but we were not empire-builders and 99 years seemed like a lot more time than we would need.
Chapter 2

Barry and I married in June, 1960, and spent the first part of our honeymoon at the family house at Portsea in Victoria. It wasn’t a huge success because the house was equipped with television which, since it wasn’t available in New Guinea, commanded a great deal of Barry’s attention. Time was spent watching TV when we should have been joyously as one on the winter beaches, where wind-whipped grasses scribed circles in the sand and the sea crashed on to tormented rocks. But we weren’t out there. And the telly was turned on even when we made love on the woolly rug in front of the fire.

Much more successful was the camping trip up the east coast of Australia in our brand-new Land Rover. It was never clear to me how we paid for it. We always made camp too late at night to see whether we had chosen our camp site wisely, but we invariably awoke, clearly blessed from above, to find ourselves in yet another magical spot. The exception was a camp beside a river near Tweed Heads on the New South Wales/Queensland border where we arrived after dark as usual. My father, not at all strait-laced at heart, had provided us with enough bottles of red to get us to Brisbane and that night, beside the river, we cooked veal schnitzels on our camp-fire and served them with anchovies and lemon, accompanied by fresh peas, carrots and baked potatoes, with Cadbury’s milk chocolate for dessert. Being close to Brisbane, we decided to finish the red and retired to the mattress
in the back of the Land Rover in a languorous and loving state. When we tottered half-naked from the back of the vehicle next morning, expecting to be alone in the wilderness, it was to be greeted by waves and toots from an endless procession of vehicles bearing their drivers to work along a major collector road.

In Brisbane we put out feelers for a second-hand treadle sewing machine. I could not envisage life without a sewing machine just as it was not possible to envisage a home without curtains. As our new home had no source of power, nothing I had used in the past would fill the bill.

In the well of the Land Rover, under the double bed mattress, was stashed my gear (which included no stiff petticoats as they had, fortunately, gone out of fashion — and no fur stole, as the locals in Minj had cut it up for arm-bands), and all our camping and cooking paraphernalia. Later, we also had to carry spare diesel. The sewing machine, a well-kept but antiquated treadle Singer, had to travel on top of the mattress and got put out at night.

We shipped the Land Rover from Brisbane to Lae on the SS Bulolo. I had sailed in Port Phillip Bay during holidays all my life and I had never felt remotely seasick until I set foot on the Bulolo, so this part of the honeymoon wasn’t everything I’d hoped for either. After off-loading in Lae, we resumed camping on the 580km haul to Mt Hagen, nearly a third of the trip in the heat and dust of the steamy Markham Valley. Camping in New Guinea was a different thing to camping in Australia. It was very hard to have a pee without an audience, for instance. Just driving was a different thing, come to that.

As I was preparing for our departure from Lae, I overheard Barry on the phone talking about cowboys, I thought, and their cost. In fact, he was making arrangements to hire a team of entrepreneurial locals, known as kabois, who, by attaching a long rope to vehicles and generally heave ho-ing en masse, ensured safe passage across the wide, fast-flowing Umi River, where many vehicles had been swept to their destruction.

We crossed three memorable, unbridged rivers in the Markham Valley. I and my camera were saved by a child at the
first of these: the Leron. The little girl had been watching with interest my attempt to wade the river in order to photograph Barry at the helm of our battleship as it surged through the torrent. She was clearly ready for the emergency, holding me steady as a rock and easing me from the river’s stranglehold when I stumbled on the rounded stones of the river bed and floundered in the racing current. She was fully 12 years old and I felt a complete idiot, albeit a grateful one.

We camped late on the banks of the Umi where a few sightseers, dressed sparsely as was certainly appropriate in all that offensive heat, came to say ‘hi’ at length in a mix of pidgin English and the local dialect. The next morning, when we awoke, it was already fiendishly hot and steamy and we were surrounded by a gallery of onlookers, which included the kaboi team, distinguishable because they wore shorts instead of traditional gear. Barry had some conversation with them, but my pidgin, always lacking, was much worse after my time in Melbourne.

We ate a quick breakfast under the watchful eyes of the tribespeople. I have to tell you I was, and still am, in the business of putting on make-up each day, much to the mirth of fellow-campers. Since leaving Melbourne, I had used the Land Rover’s rear-vision mirror to get my eyebrows and lipstick straight, but at the Umi, whenever I looked into the mirror, there already were the black brows and dark, long-lashed eyes of the native people as they pressed in around me inquisitively.

While this show went on, the kabois started unloading the back of the Land Rover. They found the sewing machine where it had been dumped under a tarpaulin the night before and examined it closely before gathering up everything and wading waist-deep across the river. As it turned out, the flow in the Umi was nothing to write home about, but the kabois had been contracted to do a job — and be paid for it — and they weren’t to be put off.

Much, much later, just when we were congratulating ourselves for having survived the worst, we came across the third river. This had half an inch of water in it and could not possibly present any threat. Needless to say, despite four-wheel drive and
low ratio and all Mr Rover and Barry’s ingenuity, it was in the shale-disguised sand of this river that we got stuck. There was no kaboi contract, nor any semblance of pulling power among the pikininis who emerged to view our plight. It took ages to gather together enough men to drag us out and the cost was astronomical. It must be pointed out that these men were not commercially experienced but simple, primitive tribespeople. The ability to haggle and use circumstances to their advantage was simply built in.

After this ordeal and a restless, mossie-ridden night, we ascended the formidable Kasam Pass, which took us virtually from sea level to more than 1,500 metres in a number of precipitous sweeps of dirt road cut into the mountain. Each sweep passed directly above the one below, an engineering feat that ensured, should there be a landslide at the top, the whole pass would be wiped out.

Thus we reached glorious cool air. Soon after, we came upon the town of Kainantu and later Goroka in the Eastern Highlands. West of Goroka and having negotiated the Daulo Pass, we passed through Watabung, Chuave and Kundiawa and some of the most breathtakingly beautiful countryside. We also eased our way over some of the most breathtakingly inadequate bridges and soon after were among friends at Banz, whom we had known from Minj days and from whose friendly clutches it took some time to escape.

We finally headed for Hagen, taking the north road from Banz. It was late in the day when we arrived and the climax to this particular day was a full-sized ball to celebrate something or other for which Barry had agreed, all those weeks ago before he left for Melbourne, to cook omelettes for supper. He was a top omelette-maker. In fact, the whole of this seemingly unprogrammed, happy-go-lucky trip from Lae had been geared to having us in Hagen at a specific time for the purpose of preparing some 140 omelettes. Life with Barry was never boring.

The fact that Hagen had a building suitable for staging a ball was not the only change I saw in the town. Of European materials, it was built as a school but doubled as a social club and
served as the venue for many memorable events. The airstrip still ran down the middle of the town and on one side were the embryonic hospital, the *kalabus* (an easily escaped grass prison), a few native-material houses, including Barry’s up on a little hill, a small timber trade store built for Danny Leahy by Barry, and, behind it, huge piles of passionfruit, new and used, that Barry had bought for Danny who was the agent for Cottees. On the other side of the airstrip, across which children, dogs and motorbikes dodged Cessnas and the tireless Norseman, were the administrative buildings and various *pitpit* homes. I found it intriguing that the seat of authority in the Western Highlands was a greying native-material affair with a fine crop of weeds growing from its thatched roof. On a knob of hill stood ‘The Residence’, a timber home with a galvanised iron roof and glass windows. It was really quite humble, though, in the circumstances, it looked very grand and came complete with a parade ground and flagpole on which flew each day the Australian flag. Still no shops.

Our first night in Hagen we spent on our feet cooking. For me, it was an egg-beating, weepy sort of onion-chopping occasion while Barry issued directions. He expertly spiced and cooked the ingredients to tender creaminess and delicately folded each omelette for serving. At the end of it, I was exhausted, but he didn’t seem to be. The second night we spent at Cannery Row, the home of unmarried patrol officers or *kiaps* and lesser personnel, which fronted on to the airstrip not far from the Leahy trade store. I don’t think women often stayed there and I wasn’t keen to again.
The next morning we had to wait for the Madang plane bearing our freezer bag of meat and a box of groceries. We then set off for our home 34km away, due south and almost on the border of New Guinea and Papua.

The road took us first west towards Tomba and Tambul, turning off at the Hansenide colony at Togoba. Policy later required that lepers continue living in their villages rather than in a colony and the Togoba station was eventually closed, but I'll never forget the cheerful waves and smiles of the dreadfully maimed people in their tattered lap-laps who sat at the road's edge watching hopelessly for something to happen. The road here, just a dirt track, was particularly rough with deep potholes and permanent puddles where it ran beside the tiny Togoba airstrip. So began our practice of using the airstrip instead of the road.

Next we passed Father Joe Krimm's Catholic Mission station and then turned off for Alimp at the corner where Joe Leahy was to establish Kilima plantation. Here the valley opened up in all its splendour, the ranges on either side massive and forbidding. The road descended at a gentle grade, with a few ups and downs before falling away steeply to the awesome Trugl Gorge, where the river churned ferociously some 30 metres beneath a Bailey bridge. Leaseholders had been advised that until 1956, this area had been restricted and were warned that the bridge over the Trugl could not be guaranteed. Since it had now
been tested by the weight of tractors on two occasions, I felt fairly confident. Having toiled our way up out of the gorge, we passed the access road to one of only three properties in the area, Wagil-Sipia, and made somewhat less hair-raising progress along the flat leading to the Piemble, the second to last creek before our farm. Here progress ended in drama as the heavily laden Land Rover broke through the flimsy bridge decking and left us stranded.

So we did not arrive in triumph but had to be extricated by our *bois* — for which read employees. *Boi* is a pidgin English word and describes workers, whether or not grown men. Even so, the moment of arrival was semi-triumphant as the pride and pleasure the *bois* took in seeing us equipped with our own Land Rover was written all over their faces. Before this, Barry and our coffee farm had been little better than *rabis*, meaning ‘rubbish’.

I had seen the block of land we had been granted at Alimp on my Christmas holiday stay with Barry. He called the farm Verona Coffee Estates because his father was named Valentine and his mother Sylvia, key characters in Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. At the peak of the plantation era, ours was one of just 41 developed in the entire Western Highlands. As we crossed the Kiempi Creek and neared the entrance to our block, the road was lined with well-wishers — mostly men as the women were busy, as ever. They wore the gear common to the highlanders: a wide bark belt with a bunch of *tanket* leaves stuck into it at the back and a tightly woven, string-bag sort of curtain looped over the front. Most wore a finely woven snood arrangement hiding matted black dreadlocks and their always-bare feet were enormously wide with splayed-out toes. Several wore a nose-piece cut from a cone-shaped shell and others had the coveted gold-lip pearl shell hanging from their necks. Many adopted less traditional forms of decoration, such as a pendant made from a pilfered saucer pierced with holes or wrappers from food cans. One had a matchbox firmly closed over his left nipple.

Excitement and curiosity welled up as we turned into our driveway. After all this time and planning and hoping and longing, it had happened. Simba, my Alsation-cross from Minj days, was first to greet us. I swear he remembered me. Then came
a delegation of locals, all in traditional gear, one or two of the more important ones wearing the *omak* or pendent rows of bamboo slivers signifying the extent of their wealth. One sported a *luluai* badge in his headband indicating he was appointed by the Government as a link with the village people. They smelled awful but wore big, welcoming smiles and proudly presented us with two stringy, half-dead chooks.

‘Good God, Barry,’ I whispered, ‘what are we supposed to do with those?’, but a quick glance showed his features arranged into a look of pleasure so I tried to follow suit. As pay-back for everything, including gifts, was integral to tribal practice, in return we later offered a bottle of Brilliantine which Barry advised them was an aphrodisiac to be applied externally only.

Our house was charming. On wooden stumps, it was made of local materials but was rectangular in shape and not the typical round highlands style. It had a floor of springy woven bamboo, its rooms were divided by woven *pitpit* ‘blinds’ and its windows had timber-framed panes of X-ray plate, cleaned of their dental records. Barry’s father was a dentist. The roof was thatched with *kunai* grass on which the rain fell silently and unproductively, providing no supply of water. The *haus kuk* or kitchen was made of the same materials but removed from the main house by some 15 metres of thatched walkway so the house could be saved if the kitchen caught fire — a theory we later proved. Outside the *haus kuk* were two 44-gallon drums containing our water supply collected from the river by the *haus kuk bois*.

The loo was an outhouse ‘long drop’, so long that everything descending into its depths also fell silently and every time I went there I marvelled that the diggers had ever found their way back to the surface. There was no door, but a framed *pitpit* blind screened the occupant from most of the garden while also allowing a glimpse of trees where birds of paradise were wont to perch.

The garden was lushly green for here we were just over 1,220 metres above sea level and the flora was more luxuriant than at Hagen. There were deep-red hippiastrum, bright-yellow...
allemanda, poinsettias, two poinsiana trees, a Bauhinia, pawpaws heavy with fruit and bananas with huge, wind-torn leaves, all set in a goodly stretch of well-kept lawn. A skinny grass track led down a slope towards the Kiempi Creek to a secret Barry-garden where thrived pepper, cardamom and gardenias.

A two-roomed, native-material guest house perched on a bank overgrown with sky-blue flowers of the ‘Mrs Pitts’ vine. To reach the guest house from the main house one crossed a deep barat, or drain, by way of a quaint little timber bridge. Barats were everywhere for though we had no water supply laid on, we had a rainfall that, in the only year we recorded it properly, totalled 3,023mm. The Mrs Pitts-clad bank overlooked the track to Mt Hagen where seldom anyone passed except the locals on foot. Vehicular traffic was mostly Will, our next-door neighbour, Father Krimm coming to take mass on Sundays and, maybe a couple of times a year, a visitor for us or Will. Beyond Will’s place the track finished abruptly at a scary cane bridge over the Nebilyer River, which carried the valley’s outpourings, including the Trugl’s frenzied flow.

The day I arrived, four manki mastas turned out for the occasion. In pidgin, a manki is a boy and a masta is a boss and so a manki masta is the boss of boys and this was the term used for all haus kuk staff. That is, until the administration decreed that such locally used terms were derogatory and caused manki mastas to become ‘domestics’. And that was in the days before political correctness. These four chaps worked to a staggered roster — devised by them — their working hours otherwise too long because of the odd hours Barry kept. He was an extremist night owl and I found dinner was seldom served before 10pm, and mostly later. Although Barry was not an early riser, manki mastas had to prepare for the event by lighting the stove and hot water fires, collecting water for the haus kuk and laundry drums, as well as the bathroom, so four were needed just to keep the routine going. Barry was not intentionally into overworking his bois but neither was he willing to relinquish any part of his chosen lifestyle.

Barry occupied the four or five hours before dinner chatting to the locals or to his bosboi, listening to the news,
partaking of substantial amounts of over-proof rum and showering. Showering took time because the system incorporated an elevated four-gallon drum outside the house, reached by a ladder and filled from buckets of pre-heated water by a manki masta. This water was fed by a hose into the time-honoured Australian outback innovation of a drum which released its water through a shower-rose when you pulled the string. Barry’s showers were a time-absorbing ritual because he refused to put up with unacceptable water temperatures. Shower-time was punctuated by continual cries from the bathroom of ‘Putim hot wara moa’ (put more hot water) or ‘Kol wara moa’. Since the bathroom’s window was positioned to give the bather full view of the bucket brigade and vice versa, I learnt to put up with temperature variation and, if on the verge of icing up or being scalded, gave it away and got dressed. This was irritating, but it was worse if you ran out of water half-way through washing your hair.

Beyond the house and garden, and separated to the west by the Kiempi Creek and the east by a substantial vegetable garden, were the neat rows of coffee. Mature coffee trees are very beautiful, with dark-green, shiny leaves and the ripe fruit is bright red; the flower is like orange blossom and smells as sweet. Left to their own devices, the trees are well-shaped but when continuing productivity becomes an issue, shade trees and judicious pruning are vital, especially as we were not using any fertiliser at that time. We planted our trees agobiada style so the main stem of the seedling, grown in our nursery, was planted at a 45-degree angle to the ground. This prompted numerous verticals, four of which were allowed to grow. As one vertical tired of bearing it could be lopped off, leaving three others producing while another shoot developed in time for the next overworked vertical to be lopped, theoretically without reducing yield. The coffee grown in the highlands was the superior Blue Mountain Arabica variety which had a top liquoring content. The seeds and seedlings commonly available when we started were Typica and Bourbon, which we planted exclusively. Later there were experiments with other varieties, but these two proved hard to beat in that environment.
At the time of my arrival, our trees were babies only, not flowering, not fruiting and still five years from producing a commercial crop. They were set out around the contours of our hilly — and, in some places, precipitous — block, unlike the standard planting pattern adopted in the highlands of a three-metre by three-metre grid. The land west of the Kiempi was still to be planted.

Living all around us were the local tribespeople, nearly all of whom spoke only their own dialect. Only a few worked for us as casuals. Most planters avoided a close relationship with their immediate neighbours because of the attendant complications and squabbles. The women toiled endlessly in their kaukau gardens but the men didn’t have a great deal to do once the kiaps, or patrol officers, had persuaded them to stop fighting. For a while, they obeyed and virtually gave fighting away, despite the traditional enmity that existed at every hand. The men pulled logs for bridge bearers, the work accompanied by a chant which created the pulling rhythm. For big bridges they had to pull massive trees from the mountains, sometimes hundreds of them all pulling in unison. It was a spectacular sight and I found their deep-throated, resonant chant exciting, compelling. The men maintained the roads — sort of — they built houses, collecting the sugarcane-like pitpit which they beat flat and wove into blinds for walls. And they argued and squabbled and, I suspect, deliberately let their pigs into our coffee.

They also developed illnesses and wounds that needed attention and I quickly found that, in the days before we had a dokta boi in the area, it was my role to tend to everyone with a complaint and to persuade the malingerers I was not to be duped. Depending on the nature of the affliction, caring for them was mostly a smelly and less than agreeable task, their noses running goo, their coughs spraying and their sores often horribly ulcerous. Many sores were caused by infestation of their wide bark belts. Sometimes we had to take them to the haus sik in Hagen but I had some successes and, keen to be useful, I found this task gratifying, especially when it involved children. Almost every morning there was some sort of sick parade, mostly of men,
and I was intrigued at the care with which they tucked their bunch of *tanket* leaves under their bums and spread their *bilums* decorously around their genitals as they sat cross-legged before me for the consultation. Occasionally women turned up, not infrequently and always stoically suffering the agony of a finger deliberately severed at a joint in a gesture of mourning.

What with learning to work in the coffee, pruning, planting, endless weeding between the coffee rows on the tractor, making curtains, attending the sick, exploring this magnificent valley and the weekly trip to Hagen, I had little time to ponder the magnitude of my change in lifestyle.
There was no antagonism because of racial differences in our dealings with the natives but neither side pretended there were no differences. Barry and I were us, with our ways, and they were them, with their ways. We were educated, through experience of things unknown to them and from formal schooling. They were not educated; their experiences were on a different plane and comparatively limited. They knew things we didn't, but they had a lot of catching up to do with the sort of world they were being invited to enter. Despite our easy interaction, I freely admit, since it seems to be some sort of universal criterion, that had I a daughter of marriageable age I would have been considerably dismayed had she chosen one of our bois at Alimp as a lifelong partner, but not because they were black and we were white.

My relationship with the haus bois was largely that of teacher and student, me doing most of the teaching. I never believed the local people had much of value to impart to an Australian housewife. Had I worked with them in the bush, things would have been different, but in my home their understanding of cleanliness, diet, house cleaning, ironing, the work ethic and most other things were nil or not worth passing on. I watched the industrious women rubbing endlessly away at the bark of special trees to make twine with which they made much of their wardrobe. The twine was used to make pulpuls, the
string curtains the women wore in lieu of grass skirts, to make the bilums worn looped over the broad bark belt by their menfolk and the string bags, also called bilums, in which the women carried suspended from their foreheads everything from their babies to firewood and food. It was an art in its own right, but I lived to a calendar and it would have offended me to think I had the time to emulate the skill though I knew how valuable it was to the natives. I learnt about their traditional cooking methods but the *mumu* required the digging of a pit into which went pre-heated stones topped with the food encased in banana leaves and a layer of earth. This took so long it bore no relation to the 24-hour day which was an inseparable part of my pattern of existence. I was driven by different imperatives.

We were offered *mumu*’d food at numerous ceremonies (*singsings*) and feasts and, though the meat was beautifully tender, everything tasted bland. I cooked that way only once when visitors brought a Christmas turkey which would not fit into the oven of our tiny woodstove. Christmas lunch was served at 5.40pm and even then the turkey was not properly cooked. That was also the time that one of the visitors discovered a cockroach in his demitasse which I had produced to demonstrate we could still show a bit of class even in the Nebilyer Valley. As far as cooking was concerned, the natives took to the introduction of iron cooking pots, and later saucepans, with relish and it wasn't long before the *mumu* was reserved for ceremonial occasions.

I didn’t interfere with the bois’ lives unless they came to us looking for help. But my life, and the bois’ involvement in it, was lived our way, though vast compromises were required. There was no way we could live in isolation from the people of Alimp or the bois we employed, nor did we wish to. We were surrounded by natives and we had only two reasonably close expatriate neighbours: Will next-door on Alimp South and Bill and his mother, Mabel, at Wagil-Sipia five kilometres away. Apart from them, there were the tribespeople who lived in the area and our workers, who were mostly recruited from elsewhere. All of them, though mainly the people we employed who lived on the property, would come to us with their personal problems and we
always heard them out and tried to come up with a solution. So-and-so pinched *kaukau* (sweet potato) from their garden, so-and-so’s number-two wife beat up her husband because the number-one wife was getting too much attention. A pig had damaged a garden. One depressing confession was made by Mek, a bright lad of top *manki masta* potential, who came into the house after dinner one night, head hung, and said, ‘*Mi go apim meri, na trabel I kamap*’, which translated means, ‘I screwed the girl and now there’s trouble’. The trouble was the girl’s father, who was hell-bent on receiving compensation. After hearing stories about the girl from others, Barry and I were reasonably sure she was a *pamuk*, or prostitute, and that the affair was set up by her family to get money. Still, we had to let Mek go home to Minj to beg, borrow or steal from his family and he never came back.

Guru was my favourite *manki masta* and it was very distressing when he suddenly vanished and was found some days later languishing in the Hagen jail. I had invested considerable time and patience in his training and he was becoming an excellent cook. Besides, he was the nicest chap. Incensed at losing my most efficient help and top student, I paid no heed to whatever crime he had committed but wrote to the authorities suggesting that, as a first offender, he should be treated leniently. A totally selfish response to his plight. He got two months and when I was in Hagen I used to hand him bars of soap through the jail fence. I’d heard they were well fed in jail but I didn’t want him to forget what he’d learnt about cleanliness under my tuition and neither did I want him to forget about us and simply go home after his time was up. Guru was a fun sort of person and I felt I could understand his thinking a bit. I missed him and was overjoyed when he returned to us.

Waim was another favourite. More serious than Guru, he was thoughtful and reliable, a unique trait among his fellows, and we were lucky to have him. He was Barry’s *bosboi* and supervised the *kago bois*. The name *kago boi* originated from the carriers who bore the white man’s cargo on patrol. The arrival of the first expatriate coffee growers in the highlands was less than two
decades after the first white party ever set foot there. Exploration and patrols were the order of those early days and the kago bois had a vital role to play.

Another fellow deserves a mention, though I never knew what to make of him, and that was Aipos, whom we all called Eyeballs. Eyeballs was always on the make. He was hard to read and liked to have his nose into everything. He made a point of knowing all that went on and did his best to capitalise on this. It was impossible to tell how much of what he said was fact and how much fiction. He was quick to tell us about Mek ‘going up the meri’ and to listen to him you would have thought tribal warfare was imminent as a result. He was very put out when it became clear that we already knew of Mek’s indiscretion.

There was Wabi, the plantation clown, who I thought was the ultimate big-head and didn’t like much, though Barry thought he was great fun. There was Kum, a sort of stolid, dependable type, but not very lively. Joannis, who used his mission name, was a very skinny chap and when he vanished it could have been because of a puff of wind, but when a strange bump appeared between the two pitpit blinds that made up our living room wall, the legend spread that the bump was Joannis and this persisted for the life of the house. Later there was to be Toby, loyal and lively manki masta, who became the nearest thing to a friend that we claimed among our Alimp employees.

These were the people I got to know best and, interestingly, most of them came from Minj, which was at least 80km away. They had known us, or of us, from the very early days. Later I got to know some of the children of Alimp who came to play with our two boys and there was always dear old Pappy, skinny, wizened, wrinkled and, rare among a people with such a relatively short life-span, grey-white of crinkly hair and beard. He was a local villager but somehow became a part of the establishment, though we could not understand a word he said. I had a nodding acquaintance with most of the kago bois as well as some of the more vocal locals besides Pappy. Some of the Alimp folk, including women and children, made it clear they wanted to be involved with what we were doing and were first on the list for
casual work. We saw quite a lot of the luluai and his tultul, the government-appointed local chief and his second-in-command and interpreter. These official appointments gave them a totally undeserved sense of pride and self-importance and I doubt they ever understood that they were supposed to help the kiaps implement Australian government policy and not traditional New Guinean practices. Certainly they didn’t like being held accountable for recalcitrant tribespeople such as those who failed to turn up for road maintenance work. They could get quite shirty when confronted but they bowed to the authority of the kiap.

I often wondered whether the appointment of the luluai and tultul wasn’t the start of the breakdown of the tribal pattern of existence. Traditionally, in the Western Highlands, leadership came not through birth-right but through wealth and power: the men with the longest omaks and most wives were the real leaders — the bigmen. The luluais and tultuls appointed by the kiaps were vocally prominent but not necessarily regarded as true leaders by the people. Later they were replaced by elected councillors. When the time came to elect representatives, including members of parliament, it was those with a modicum of education who got into power. They better understood the way of the newly evolving world and how to make promises and buy votes. Small wonder the conflict between these people and the traditional bigmen; small wonder the confusion in the minds of the people.

Because there were so many people around to help, it was impossible to feel like a pioneer. I would have been a drudge if I had to carry gallons of water from the river each day, if I had to gather wood and light a fire to heat water to wash our clothes in the 44-gallon drum Barry had split lengthwise and folded open over a timber frame, if I had to run up a ladder to put up a shower. But I didn’t have to do any of these things. As quickly as was humanly possible, I taught the mānki mastas to cook a variety of basic meals, wash dishes clean before they came near the tea-towel and take over ironing our work clothes with the kerosene iron that scared me to death. They were remarkably adept, especially Guru, though they did way-out things from time to time. Like seasoning vegetables with sugar instead of salt,
like using tea-towels as sweat rags around their necks or fishing a dead rat out of a drum of fresh water without replacing the water. Once our breakfast toast arrived on a saucepan lid and I had one *haus boi* who took half an hour to set the table because he thought the fringed edges of the table mats required combing, a task he carried out laboriously with a fork. I would not have interrupted him for the world.

The lapses in preferred kitchen practice led to a series of jokes called ‘*kiap*’ jokes, as most of them came from the patrol officers. Typical was the *kiap* who introduced a toast rack when he found his *manki masta* placing his breakfast toast straight from the toasting fork on to the floor. The *manki masta* caught on quickly and next morning he was found seated barefoot with a toasting fork in front of the stove, with the toast delicately arranged between his toes. Another *kiap* placed the ingredients for a curry on the kitchen bench and set an alarm clock at the time everything was to go into the pot ready for his evening meal. As instructed, everything went into the pot at the appointed time, including the clock.

We grew our own vegetables and, before shops were introduced, relied on other supplies from Madang. These arrived by air as regularly as weather permitted and the boxes and bags were off-loaded and lined up at the side of the airstrip waiting to be picked up. Invariably, by the time we arrived, the meat had defrosted in the hot sun, bloodying its white calico bag. My parents’ wedding present went to the purchase of a second-hand fridge and it was quite an achievement to find such an item in the highlands at that time. I thought it was a rather paltry gift considering our impoverished state but, since they’d already parted with one wedding gift on my account, it was probably understandable. In any case, that second-hand fridge made an enormous difference to our lives, which is more than you can expect of most wedding presents. Before the advent of the fridge, there was much pre-cooking and salting while half of the week’s supply went into the Wagil-Sipia fridge five kilometres away.

The problems associated with getting supplies were exacerbated by the *bois’* nasty habit, which quickly became
entrenched, of stealing. We had to accept that we were regarded as fair game and that every worker on the station was likely to pinch what he believed he could get away with. Since the *haus bois* had ready access to the storeroom, we lost a lot of sugar, kerosene, salt, bread, butter, matches and packs of soup — which the rats also enjoyed — and everything else they had a feel for. The thing that annoyed me most was their enthusiasm for my talcum powder, which they used in vast quantities. Barry yelled abuse at them every night because his razor was always blunt. They pilfered quite cleverly, except for my talc, taking small amounts at a time and it was not easy to notice supplies dwindling, so we often ran out of things.

Some cases of theft were especially trying. One I recall, which had a happy ending because of the *haus bois’* influence via the grapevine, was the loss of some family silver napkin rings. I was never able to work out why they would want these. There was one incident that left me terribly upset. On rare occasions, not being neutered, Simba would head for Hagen to try his luck. After an exhausting time indulging in whatever orgy he had been able to find, he was clearly not fit to make the return trip home and would wait at the Togoba road until we picked him up. But one time he left with his night chain (known by us as pyjamas) still attached and I was worried. I set off to find him, ending up in Hagen, but he was not waiting and not to be found. Four days later he turned up, minus the chain and with his left ear badly torn where he had struggled to get free. I suppose you couldn’t blame someone for wanting to steal him. He would have been wanted as a sire, unlike cats, which were wanted for the cooking pot. The natives’ own dogs were miserable, skinny, little, mangy, flea-ridden disasters and Simba was a handsome German Shepherd cross, big and strong and gleaming of coat and fabulous to look at. But the attempted kidnap did not endear the suspects to me. There were always suspects because the *haus bois* knew all the tittle-tattle, though we never proved anything in this case.

The day after his escape, Simba sought his own form of recompense. Going outside to the loo, I noticed him slinking off with something yellow in his mouth looking guilty as all hell.
On closer inspection it proved to be a baby chicken — not ours; we had only ducks. I crouched down to try to retrieve it until dog and I were eye to eye. He stared at me balefully for a long moment, gobs of drool revealing his imminent intention to swallow. Then, without a word from me, no doubt mindful of former chook-eating penalties, he spat the tiny creature out — pfft. I stared in amazement as it tottered off behind the smol haus, wet and wobbly.

A smol haus is a loo and I found ours unusually enjoyable. Through the gap left exposed by the angled pitpit screen there was much of interest to be seen: the bauhinia opening into delicate bloom and fruit ripening on the pawpaws almost as you watched. In the first years of coffee planting there was little bird life but as growth returned and the foliage thickened the birds came back, expressing their pleasure with sweet warbles and twitters, sometimes in collective clamour but never harsh and ugly, except for the birds of paradise. Maybe it is not part of nature’s scheme of things that a creature should look glorious and sound glorious as well. I’ve never been versed in birdkind and made little effort to study them or identify species, but I always heard them with great pleasure. Our loo was like a hunting blind, where you could sit and watch without the birds knowing they were being observed. One of my favourites was the kingfisher; these abounded at Alimp and intrigued me because they delighted in meat and, after a while, would take it from the hand. Like their relative, the kookaburra, they were agreeable to human overtures but they didn’t laugh at people. Our variety was friendly as well as spectacular with their brilliant blue feathers.

The loo was also the place to be at dusk when a recording of Bach or Brahms or Mozart was playing at volume in the house, filling the darkening night with the majesty of music written for a world that knew nothing of a boundless, mountain theatre, its listeners the creatures of the valley hidden away in the night, a handful of black men and women and Barry and me. Sometimes I was reduced to tears at the sheer beauty of sound and it seemed wrong that its composers could not have heard it so: music that is placeless as well as timeless.
Also, the timber seat of the box over the long drop was warmer than its synthetic counterpart down south and more comfortable. The downside was getting caught short at night after the fruit bats had settled upside-down on the bananas hanging outside the back door, sucking juicily, so close it seemed inevitable that one would flip on to my shoulder and start sucking on my nose or something. Even worse was being in bed at night and being woken by the thudding beat of bat wings coming ever closer to the open space which was our bedroom window. Only the living room was graced with the X-ray plate windows.

Rats, cockroaches, I could hack — in fact, I had a sneaking regard for the resilience of cockroaches — but the thought of a bat flying through the window filled me with dread. Eventually, we got hold of some ‘windolite’ and made crude shutters for the window but I was on the losing side of the battle of the bananas at the back door. Barry liked the bunch handy and, though I moved the hook further along the covered way towards the haus *kuk*, somehow the bananas eventually returned to the original spot. Over time, I realised the bats were so hooked on bananas I was not on the menu and night trips to the *smol baus* became less of an ordeal.
Eventually, the *haus bois* were trained to the point where I really had little to do of necessity in the house. That says a great deal for the intelligence and competence of these people from the Stone Age and nothing remarkable for the skills of the expatriate housewife. I’d brought fabric with me from Australia from which I made curtains for the living room. They were in different shades of green with splodges of white in a sort of stylised basket-weave pattern that I thought admirably suited the woven *pitpit* walls. I made a bedspread for our bedroom and a cover for the living room daybed, fitted snugly around the mattress to show off the excellence of Barry’s design and craftsmanship. I made heavy-duty khaki lap-laps for the *haus bois*, which they always wore over shorts, maybe in case the lap-lap came undone and fell off.

That completed, lacking cupboard space for our clothes, I decided my first move should be to off-load clothes I was never likely to wear again. I also cast my eye over Barry’s, among which was an ancient tweed sports coat which had become virtually transparent from years of nibbling by invisible mite-like creatures, but I thought better of making decisions on his behalf. My most obvious throw-out was a divine pink velvet, full-skirted frock with a plunging V neckline I had worn as matron of honour at my sister-in-law’s wedding. I should never have taken it to PNG, but I was reluctant to part with it. That, and an elegant, slim-fitting French sheath with matching jacket passed on to me by
my mother, were first to go on the pile for disposal. I thought the proper thing would be to give what I didn’t need to the women on the station and, when I had achieved a reasonable collection, I let them know there was to be a hand-out. There were only a handful of wives on the property and, unfortunately, they took it on themselves to invite some of the villagers. This proved disastrous as so many turned up that the station women got very little. So, although well meant, handing out freebies landed me in deep water. I had nothing but complaints from the women who got nothing, lots of anger that so-and-so got such-and-such when someone else wanted it. Annoyed at the outcome, I vowed in future to sell any clothes I didn’t want and they would just have to accept that they brought it on themselves.

The aftermath of this debacle was when heading home from the new coffee block one day, I came across a generously built Alimp meri (pidgin for woman) carrying kaukau in a bilum suspended from her forehead and wearing the pink velvet matron-of-honour’s frock. The hem trailed around her feet, the side zip was fully undone and agape, exposing rolls of grubby black flesh. The darts in the bodice failed in their task, the woman’s slack breasts unable to conform to their shaping. I knew then I had made a double mistake. The poor soul had been reduced in appearance from a dignified human being to a grotesque caricature. Not much later, on driving home from Hagen one day, I came across Kum’s meri wearing the fine French jacket which had been my mother’s. Not the frock, but just the cropped jacket below which pendulous bare breasts peeped.

I tried my hand at bread-making, jam-making and cooking the occasional feast for which we dressed up ourselves and the dining table, lit candles and pretended we were at a top restaurant down south. This eventually fell through because Barry got sick of dressing up and, anyway, I cooked these treats myself and the meal would be ruined before I could get him to the table. One of the cleverest skills I was able to teach the manki mastas was how to keep a meal ready to serve until Barry was ready to eat it. Before I arrived, being wiser than me, they would time the evening meal for about 10pm. Ever hopeful, I would
have it planned for 8.30-ish yet it was still edible two hours later in some miraculous fashion, though it was not at its best. But then, neither was Barry, and sometimes I wasn’t either, though I was learning to adopt a go-slow pattern of drinking, adding lots of water. I was no wowser, but I found our extended happy hour very trying.

Barry was socially charming and good fun, extremely well-read and intelligent, creative, good-looking and he loved growing coffee in PNG. He had this incredibly gifted pair of hands that could mend and make almost anything, often making the equipment with which to do so when it was lacking. A slow and meticulous woodworker, he made the most beautiful things out of timber. As a person, I didn’t have any huge personality problems that I know of. I wasn’t ugly, sour-tempered or dumb, I made a reasonable fist of managing in the primitive circumstances and I was very active and eager to help on the farm. Still, something wasn’t gelling and I think it was because my thinking was largely confined to the square while Barry’s roamed elusively everywhere else. Barry was a maverick; our thinking was not compatible. There was also my in-built urge to air differences of opinion while Barry avoided confrontation like the plague. For me, his attitude was frustrating; for him, mine was intrusive.

Tension between us arose over my attempts to help with the farm work. I found it odd that he’d been willing enough to teach me how to prune and so on, but once I got into regular farm work, especially if I had an opinion about the work, it bothered him. There were a hundred and one jobs that I felt contributed more to our financial progress than housework and, to my mind, they were considerably more interesting and enjoyable. I never could enthuse about cleaning showers and loos and, at Alimp, I couldn’t even begin to think how to go about it, so I left it to the *haus bois*. If I had wanted that, Alimp was the wrong place for me. Meanwhile, the *kago bois* had to be taught how to prune, more coffee had to be planted, and there were never-ending weeding jobs. When permitted, I happily spent hours on the tractor weeding between the rows of coffee, plus
more hours waiting to be dug out when a tractor wheel sank into one of the natives’ disused ‘long drops’.

Eventually, I guess Barry realised he could do with the help and I was accepted as a ‘hand’ rather than a colleague. I sometimes felt kago boi most accurately described my position. Well, we worked hard enough and when we took time off we sometimes went for a walk. A favourite was to climb a hill from where we had a clear view of the whole plantation. It was a small hill with a magnificent clump of bamboo right at the top; the track was steep but it was a relatively short walk. On one memorable occasion, when we were half-way up, a pig came charging down the skinny dirt track while we were toiling up it. Barry, behind me, leapt behind a tree but there was nowhere for me to hide. ‘Jump,’ Barry shouted as the pig bore down on me, so I did and came down square on its back. Happily, it was quite young and I guess it was as scared as I was. It took to the bush and was followed a second later by its owner, who stopped to pass the time of day and shake hands, before pursuing his recalcitrant pig.

On another occasion we decided on a longer trek and headed off for the kanda bridge over the Nebilyer, intending to walk into the Southern Highlands, whose ranges flanked the Nebilyer Valley. The dogs came with us on all our walks but we were stupid to let them come on this one. We did have the wit to invite Guru along as we expected the dogs to give us trouble at the bridge. Made entirely of cane it had a woven platform barely wide enough to take a boot. The platform was suspended by haphazardly spaced uprights hanging from lengthwise stringers attached at each bank to logs dug into the earth and anchored with more cane. The top stringers served as hand-rails and three or four others were roughly interspersed with the uprights giving a sort of random weave which was 99.9 per cent open space. More cane was angled back to the bank from midway along the length of the bridge, which I imagined was intended to stop it from swaying. If so, it didn’t work.

This incredible device sagged sharply in the middle, bringing the churning river even closer and making the climb to safety alarmingly steep. Simba and Barry’s boxer, Puddenhead,
baulked at all this open space and the roaring river below but, attached to chains and with tender encouragement, were finally coaxed across. We skirted the East West Indies Bible Mission complex at Pabarabuk, one member of which left a motorbike at our place to use when he needed to go to Hagen. I didn’t like to think of anyone being dependent on that bridge but Pabarabuk did have a crude airstrip which could be used in an emergency. These particular missionaries were stoical people, but heavy going socially. Later, a road was built into the Southern Highlands on the southern side of the Nebilyer River but in the early days people trying to get there had to use the execrable Tambul/Ialibu road or fly.

The three of us and two still twitchy dogs walked for ages, high into the mountains where the air was cooler and the growth thick and tall. The views were stunning and we spent some time photographing ourselves with the best of them as a backdrop. The sun was low as we approached the Nebilyer and its infamous bridge on the return trip. The dogs carried on dreadfully and had to be dragged on to the shaky contraption. A couple of metres from the bank Puddenhead started struggling, lurched and slipped into open space suspended by the chain held by Barry. Guru was fantastic. With one arm around an upright for security, he reached down to take her around the shoulders, lifting her back, choking and spluttering.

‘Yu wet,’ he told us, obviously deciding we were inadequate in the circumstances. We obediently waited where we were, Simba shaking like a leaf, while Guru carried Puddenhead to the Alimp side of the river, chained her up and then came back for Simba. Simba was a big dog and determined not to proceed. Guru needed both arms to carry him and there was no way he could hold on to a stringer as well; I was fearful the dog would struggle and put Guru at even greater risk. It was not possible for either of us to help as the bridge was so hopelessly narrow. It was something of a miracle that Guru was able to maintain his balance on that agonisingly slow walk during which he had to contend with the erratic swaying of the bridge and the steep climb off it. Remarkably, Simba remained passive, seeming to
know he was safe with Guru or perhaps he was rendered immobile within the fierce hug of those brawny arms. Together they made the bank, all of us aware that Barry and I could not have done what he did.

It was on these walks that I came to appreciate the particular charm and hospitality of the local people. They lived not so much in villages, as little clusters: extended families and sub-sub clans of sub clans of the greater tribe. Frequently, some lapun — which is pidgin for old person — would call a greeting and come to shake hands, having little now to do in life. Often, when we stopped, refreshments would be called for. A child, maybe only four or five, who was baby-sitting a toddler while the mother worked her garden, would emerge from a hut with some charred pieces of kaukau which the lapun would offer us. Sometimes we were given pieces of sugar-cane to suck or a length of bamboo filled with fresh water to quench our thirst. We could not understand a word these village people said but the message was loud and clear: ‘You are welcome where I live.’ We seldom saw the women for they were at work in their gardens, some of which were a good distance away.

These people were skilled agriculturalists, versed in drainage and mulching techniques, moving their gardens as the soil became exhausted and unproductive, for they had never known fertiliser. Because of land left fallow and the building of new gardens, a clan had genuine need for substantial amounts of land and this was acknowledged by the Australian administration which did what it could to ensure land with future use, or potential use, for the owners was kept in their hands.

The system meant that vast areas of land were held in reserve, unproductive for most of the time. I was interested to hear an outsider’s point of view when, many years later, representatives of the World Bank, who had flown over thousands of hectares of PNG land, made it clear they were not impressed by the meagre signs of productivity they had seen en route, which they took to mean a lack of interest in disciplined work. Perhaps they had previously flown over Indonesian countryside, where every mountain slope grew something to the
very peak. Our highlanders were advised to make submissions to obtain a grant but it was clear the visitors did not like their chances.

It was not possible to feel isolated surrounded by all these people and their activities but I did miss visitors who spoke our language — even passers-by would have been an interest. Apart from Will, about the only people we ever saw were Father Krimm and the Pabarabuk mission chap coming over to pick up his bike, but he came so infrequently, and then didn’t stop to socialise, that he didn’t count. I was greatly excited, therefore, at seeing headlights one evening and must have conveyed a false sense of urgency when I rushed out to the _haus kuk_ and asked someone to run to the road and make sure whoever it was came in for a chat and a drink, mindful that the visitor might be headed for Will’s place and not ours. After some time, a dour individual turned up asking whether we had an emergency. He had been told simply that the Missis wanted him to come to the house. Barry immediately offered him a rum, but when I clarified the situation the guy said he was in a hurry, walked out, hopped into his car and drove off. It never occurred to me that he might be visiting the mission at that hour but he apparently left the car at the cane bridge and went on to Pabarabuk.

Another time, Guru came to us after dinner to tell us several _kago bois_ had seen headlights on the hill running down from the Wagil-Sipia access road, but no vehicle had turned up. It was a terrible night, the road like grease with slick left after a heavy fall of rain. It was always worse after rain, not during. We were all worried that someone had ended up in a river, so Barry and I set off in the Land Rover employing all the anti-slip aids on board. We descended sideways to the Kiempi, negotiated the Piemble without too much trauma but simply had to give up after that. We saw no one and no vehicle. We got out of the car and, building up heavy platforms of red clay on our boots, walked to where the headlights had been seen. Nothing. We had awful trouble turning the Land Rover but eventually made it home, wondering if someone had been playing a joke. The _bois_ were so upset we’d found nothing that we dismissed the thought.
They had decided if there was no vehicle the phenomenon must have been a masalai which, because it was an evil spirit, had them really worried.

One day a masalai was said to be in the new coffee block and no one would work there while it lurked, so Barry got the 12-gauge Breda and shot it. I doubted the wisdom of this action since the natives had ways of appeasing bad spirits and encouraging the good and I suspected shooting one to death might invoke all kinds of incorporeal retaliation. Evidently, Barry was able to persuade the bois that this was one masalai they should no longer fear. Our headlight masalai never took human form and eventually ceased to be a fearsome omen, fading into mythology.

One welcome visitor was Danny Leahy, who would come regularly enough if you call intervals of many months regular. Dan had moved from Kuta high on the range behind Hagen, where he had built a superb timber house with a view to die for. He moved down the mountain to Korgua in the Nebilyer Valley. So, in a loose sense, he, his 10 offspring and his various women, his nephew Joe, Bill and Mabel and later Pam at Wagil-Sipia, Will at Alimp South, the mission folk over the other side of the Nebilyer along with planter Ron, who never wore socks, and ourselves were neighbours, the only white inhabitants of the Nebilyer Valley. Dan, with his brother Mick, both on the hunt for gold, had been half of the party of white men to first set foot in the Western Highlands in 1933. The story of this first contact, the exploits and the conflicting friendliness, fears and dangers they encountered, has been told many times. Only Dan stayed on in the Western Highlands, retreating from his spectacular eyrie at Kuta to fertile Korgua when he decided coffee-growing would be more lucrative than searching for gold. Plantings at Kuta proved unsuccessful, the coffee buffeted by winds and numbed by frosts.

Dan had stayed in PNG during World War II and, working for Australia New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU), had been involved in evacuating expatriates after Japan attacked. Much of his work was on foot, taking place over long periods in
wilderness country with an inadequate diet, so the Dan we knew had been severely affected by malnutrition. He became increasingly blind and deaf as a result and a draivaboî would bring him to our place often accompanied by his eldest son, George; already Dan found the couple of steps to our front door difficult to negotiate. I could have wept to see his decline except that he ignored it, or at least made the best of it. Every morning at Korgua he went out with one of his bois at the other end of a cross-cut saw to keep fit, cutting not saplings but great logs; he would take the hand of a daughter or son who guided him among his coffee at Korgua telling him what the plants were doing. Dan was quietly spoken and a ready smiler, an incredibly modest man. What he had achieved called for a toughness that belied the gentle man I knew, but his family knew all about his firmness.

I wanted to write his story — the full story from his childhood — and my interest was later reinforced by urgings from the Chair of History at the newly established University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby. I tried three times to get Dan's OK. The first time he dismissed the idea out of hand, the second time he asked me to give him two weeks before making a commitment and eventually refused. The third time he said he wanted to give the opportunity to write his story to one of his children, but that didn’t happen and so a wonderful opportunity passed us all by. Much has been written about Dan, and shown on film, for in later life he gave snippets of his story to many journalists. But I wanted more, I wanted the background to that remarkable man. I wanted everything in its proper context not just an atlas of when and where he went and what happened there. I wanted to understand why he ever left Brisbane, what drove him to a life of such uncertainty in the search for gold. I wanted to know how he felt on seeing the reaction of a native people who had never seen a white man before and his emotional reaction to being left in charge, still little more than a boy, when big brother Mick took time out to go to Europe. I wanted to describe his relationships with his family, his white brothers, his PNG women and the children he acknowledged freely and
greatly cared for. We have a lot of facts but we don’t have the meaning behind them and so we don’t have the reasons why things happened as they did. And his refusal was all because Dan feared for his children should it be openly revealed that he and others in those early times had shot and killed many people. And, inevitably, this fact did emerge and was made very public.

Many years later, when I took my turn at the Hagen hospital nursing Dan through the night after he had a heart attack, he told me he was ready to give me his story. I was overwhelmed by the knowledge that it was too late, even if Dan survived. He did, but I was soon to leave the country.
Before very long, all the work we were doing around Verona Coffee Estates proved of little consequence when, still a long way from producing coffee commercially, we started running out of money. I had to turn my hand to making some. Many growers opened a trade store to help tide them over the lean, waiting years, stocking up with tinned fish, matches, pearl shell, clothes and anything they thought the natives would buy. This wasn’t much of a prospect at Alimp. The market was practically non-existent, there was no passing trade and the locals weren’t going to have the money to buy anything until our coffee started producing and they got paid for picking it. Anyway, we didn’t really have the cash to build a properly secure store.

So I tried dressmaking for the expatriate women in Hagen. I was competent in this respect, having always made my own clothes, but I rebelled when a woman with no boobs, round shoulders and a sway back expressed angry disappointment that my efforts failed to make her look like Audrey Hepburn. In a fit of pique, I directed a pin into the hip of one discontented woman for whom I had toiled long and arduously and that was the end. I started making children’s gear, which was much more fun. My mother sent up fabric from Melbourne but I quickly found that putting care into the workmanship was pointless. When I beheld one little tot messily playing in the mud in a gorgeous little
Liberty lawn-party dress with an organza pinafore I had made, I quickly wrote Mum and asked her to send up cheaper stuff.

Making rubbish was depressing and, besides, there was now a couple of Chinese trade stores in town and I soon found however sloppily I put the clothes together, I could not compete. So, as Christmas loomed, I turned my hand to making gifts: table mats and coasters, drawstring sachets, sewing kits, decorations and anything with the slightest chance of selling. This was fine but seasonal and hardly a financial bonanza; in the meantime, the coffee still did not come. We then decided that one of the greatest needs in the highlands was furniture. Barry had done a course in woodwork in Melbourne years before and it was decided he should teach me and we would make furniture to order. Allowing Barry to teach me was positively destructive and one of the bravest things I ever did. A perfectionist, with all the appropriate skills, he had no patience with blunders. His observations when a door I made wouldn’t fit the cupboard I made it for were very demoralising and almost caused me to resign from the job. Considering the workshop was attached to the house with its bouncy woven bamboo floor, it was a miracle anything turned out square, but Barry’s stuff always did.

I actually did resign at one stage, when Barry discovered a nick I had made in one of his chisels, but was eventually forced back to the workbench. That happened soon after Burns Philp set up a store in Mt Hagen. I had suffered the ultimate ignominy when, with a loaded trolley of goods in BP’s Hagen version of a supermarket, I was informed by the cashier that our credit had been stopped and I had to return home without the week’s supplies. This coincided with an order for cupboards and shelves for the Hagen Hotel and later for six tables for the Banz club. So the joinery was on again but, without any electricity, it was slow and laborious work. We did have an alternative source of power for the sandpapering job in the form of Du, an undernourished looking kago boi who was only too happy to stand all day rubbing away with a sandpaper block and, eventually, even learning to rub in the direction of the timber grain. My pièce de résistance was a sideboard which I proudly sold to Norm and Esma, who owned
Bindon Plantation, buying it back when they ‘went finish’ years later. I brought it back with me to Australia.

All this frantic activity was not enough to pay the small number of *kago bois* we retained as well as sustaining us. The coffee we were producing was barely enough for our own consumption. Barry then came by a job working for Norm building the coffee factory at Bindon which was two kilometres out the other side of Hagen. This job took him away from home for nine working weeks and left me free to eat at eight every week night but minus a vehicle or any means of communicating with the outside world. Still, such was the nature of the relationship between whites and blacks in those days, I thought little of it until one night Eyeballs came into the house quite late. I suddenly felt a surge of fear, because this was not usual practice and, although he came with some spiel about a miscreant among the *kago bois*, I spent a great deal of time telling him I was not the usual kind of missis and wasn’t going to stand any nonsense. I was enormously relieved when he left, though none of the doors or windows could be locked and there was nothing to stop him coming back.

The coffee production was still so minimal we didn’t need to employ casual pickers as our own *bois* handled it easily. In Barry’s absence, they tried me out by refusing to bring their picking drums down to the hand pulper. The pulper consisted of a perforated revolving drum which removed the red skin from the two coffee beans lying flat-side together inside the cherry, as it was called. The skin had to be removed promptly before the beans inside started fermenting. The *bois* were clearly looking for a revised workplace agreement and would have done any self-respecting trade union proud. Waim came and told me they refused to bring the drums for processing until they were assured of better wages. Little did they know they were bloody lucky to be getting anything at all. What they did know was that we were white, we had a coffee farm, a Land Rover and we were fair game, especially me, a woman. I was more angry than scared and went back to the house to call up Simba in case someone had a go at me. In fact, the beloved dog, who was once nearly put down
because of his early predilection for chooks, saved the day. Maybe the *bois* were just scared of him, unsure of the command I had over him, but it seemed to me he deliberately rounded them up, urging them with an insistent sort of prowling and the occasional growl towards the primitive pulper where they quickly weighed in their coffee and forgot all about wages. It was a try-on; I don't think any of them expected anything to come of it and they certainly didn’t appear to bear any grudges, so I didn’t either.

One fright I had in Barry’s absence came about two o’clock one morning when I was woken by voices over by our laundry, where no self-respecting native should be at that hour. I listened for a long time. No effort was being made to keep the voices down and I needed to find out what the hell was going on. I also thought that if they were planning something unpleasant for me, I should take the initiative and make the first move. By the light of fireflies, I slipped into shoes and Barry’s dressing gown, hoping it would be more authoritative than my more feminine job. I picked up his unloaded Luger from the storeroom, shoved it into the dressing gown pocket, grabbed the torch and quietly whistled up Simba from the living room where he slept unchained while Barry was away. With the dressing gown sash tight around my waist and hand in pocket, I marched nervously outside into the overcast night, past the bananas, past the kitchen and out towards the laundry where a hurricane lamp and a small fire under the 44-gallon hot water drum outlined several figures. I moved towards the light demanding to know what was going on while pushing the Luger against the fabric of the pocket and shining the torchlight towards it, hoping its outline and Simba were clearly visible.

Eyeballs responded rather pompously saying they were just having a chat. This was totally untoward at that hour and not at all convincing and, besides, Eyeballs was getting to be central to too many of my concerns. By now I was wishing the Luger was loaded, though that was not possible as we had no ammunition for it. I told them firmly they were disturbing me, that this was no place to be at that time of night and to go to their homes. Whether it was a perfectly innocent gathering, whether they were
acknowledging Simba’s presence and/or the Luger, I will never know, but they went off, to my enormous relief, without a murmur. Simba slept the rest of the night in my bedroom with a pleased look on his face.

Barry’s work at Bindon brought in a very handy sum and it also prompted him to start thinking about planning a coffee factory of our own. After all, we must sooner or later get a decent crop. This meant the replacement of the primitive hand-pulper to which water was pumped up from the Kiempi by a small and very erratic pump. The cherry was tipped into the mouth of the pulper direct from the picking drums which meant there was sometimes a queue of pickers waiting to empty their drums when they would have been better employed picking more coffee. Still, though they were paid according to their productivity, they liked to stand around and chat to each other. Nothing in their lives was hurried.

The factory design was to incorporate a substantial tank to hold the picked coffee, a large, more efficient powered pulper and concrete flow channels leading to a series of concrete fermenting tanks. Water was to come from a *barat* from the eastern boundary creek, still to be dug, and the flow of water and pulped coffee during processing would be gravity-induced.

We were required to process our coffee only to the dried parchment stage and after that it was handled by the central plant in Hagen. Our task was to strip the red skin off the cherry, ferment the beans and then dry them. The drying was done in the sun on long lengths of bright-yellow plastic, which initially were laid out on our lawn and, as the crop grew bigger, on terraces dug into the hill slope down from the factory site. Every afternoon the plastic was folded over the coffee ahead of the probable rainfall. When it reached the Hagen factory each coffee bean still had a tough ‘parchment’ skin and inside that a fine ‘silver’ skin, both of which had to be removed mechanically before grading and bagging for sale.

Although I was greatly excited that all this planning highlighted the inevitability of one day making a coffee sale, just as exciting was the prospect of having a generator to power the
factory. This meant having power at the house which meant electric lights and goodbye to the second-hand kerosene fridge and the iron. Portagas lamps had replaced the early petrol lamps which needed recurrent pumping and suffered habitual disorders. These sometimes tried Barry’s patience to a point where he was known to toss the offender out the window, committing us to some pretty gloomy nights, in more ways than one. He was prone to terrible language. The prospect of having electricity was very exciting and prompted my father to lodge an order, from far-away Melbourne, for a two-way radio so we would no longer be cut off from the rest of the world.

These developments, and knowing the coffee was getting closer, also prompted thoughts about starting a family and soon I became pregnant. To confirm this I had to fly to Madang and visit the Yagaum Lutheran Mission complex where there was a proper hospital and medical and nursing expertise. Although it was planned, my first reaction on confirmation of my pregnancy was negative, as I was certain I was for ever to be deprived of my freedom. Back home, and in defiance of a potentially curtailed lifestyle, I made a foolish move in helping to load some bags of cement into the Land Rover. Barry saw me and remonstrated. I recognised the fairness of his comment and dropped the bag, conceding in silence that I was about to enter a new dimension to my life and I’d better accept it. So I did and our little grass house saw huge activity as I sent off for catalogues for baby equipment, made baby clothes and confronted Barry about the hundreds of magazines he had acquired over the years which were neatly arranged by title and in chronological order on pitpit shelves along two walls in the only room available for a baby.

The confrontation made me realise just how concerned Barry was about intrusion on his way of life. Looking back, I can see he was extraordinarily anxious about this. He had spent 30 years finding a lifestyle that suited him and, much as he was happy to marry and have a family, he wanted his world unchanged. There was resistance to a great many things that seemed senseless to me. He felt a sense of intrusion very readily and was permanently on his guard against it, imagined or not.
There were quite bizarre objections to any minor innovations I planned or introduced and he did not hesitate to tell me so in terms that once again put me on a level with the _kago bois_. Maybe I’d brought that on myself by working in the field and not being a proper housewife? Now there was reluctance to move his mountain of magazines, though there was clearly no room for a baby, its gear and the magazine racks as well.

He stalled for time and defused the situation by designing and making the most superb cot any baby could have. It was a curved structure, quite beautiful and a model of complex joints and elegance. It was wired against insects with a fine, nylon mesh and the top was hinged at the back to give easy access. I made a cupboard, and though I had an easy pregnancy, I left my furniture-making run rather late so that my sheer bulk made it difficult to finish some of the interior work. We painted everything a cheery yellow, mainly because, in some miraculous fashion, we had come by yellow nylon netting for the cot. Finally, Barry had some _bois_ put in a plywood ceiling so that bits of _pitpit_ and dust and borers would not flake down from the ceiling and, at last, when it was time to install everything, the magazines had to be moved. It was done, but there was a terrible fuss and I knew Barry was really hurt as well as angry. The magazines went out to the guest house and I suspect were never looked at again.

Christopher James, aka Christoph, arrived by Caesarian section at Yagaum hospital, some 17km out of Madang, and at two weeks of age made the flight to Hagen where we stayed at Bindon overnight. This was a good place to stay as Norm and Esma already had children and this gave me confidence, even though they were only a couple of kilometres from Hagen while we were 34km away on a road that was often impassable. I knew so little about babies I didn’t even know enough to be scared and we happily made the drive home the next morning, the valley a-shimmer in the sun, the sky rather an overdone blue and the road dry but not yet dusty. It was a triumphal arrival, the entire workforce lining the driveway to greet us. Once ensconced in his newly furnished room, the hardest thing was to keep the _haus bois_ away long enough for Christopher to sleep.
I can say now, this tiny creature soon started worrying me quite a lot. Everything remotely out of the ordinary — a reluctance to eat, a sniffle, a wakeful night — had my imagination working overtime. I pictured death from starvation, from pneumonia, from insomnia; no half measures. Christopher did a lot of crying during the day and I pored endlessly over Dr Spock for help. He always had suggestions but few of them worked. And, horror upon horror, in those days we were told to sleep our babies on their tummies; for the life of me, I cannot see how Christoph survived. I now did little work outside and hung around the house too much. Eventually, he did get a dose of gastro which persisted despite three trips to the new doctor in Hagen while I became increasingly agitated. After some weeks, when it was clear he was beginning to lose weight, we took him to Hagen and, in tears, I rang the Yagaum Mission hospital where the doctor told me to hop on the next plane to Madang, which I did. From the moment Christoph was admitted to the Yagaum hospital, there was no further sign of diarrhoea or vomiting. He ate heartily and glowed with health. That’s Christopher. I was so relieved I didn’t mind what they thought about over-fussy mothers. I was reassured by the doctor’s comments on the basically healthy state of our little boy and back home I tried to relax more with him.

Meanwhile, the coffee trees were beginning to bear more prolifically and the construction of the coffee factory became a priority. We needed a loan. It was arranged that the manager of a Goroka bank would inspect the place. It was generally recognised that about 100 acres of planted coffee were required for a viable coffee plantation in the highlands. We had more than 40 acres of healthy, flowering and lightly fruiting trees on the block east of the Kiempi and to the west of the creek some 20 acres of more recently planted trees. These were struggling and, even to my eye, it was clear their survival could not be guaranteed.

More to the point, most of the available land on our block had been planted and, when the rest was planted, there would still be a shortfall of trees. We had foreseen this problem and blamed the authorities who never bothered to inspect the block.
Back in their Port Moresby offices, they had decided from examining a plan of the area for which Barry had originally applied that it was big enough to run two plantations. Had they seen it and known how many acres were lost to production because of the steep creek slopes they would have been wiser. As it was, our neighbour, Will, and ourselves were forced to look for more land. Will found it in an existing plantation, called Wurup, near Hagen and we eventually applied for an extension to add to the original 99-year lease. But this was in the future and we realised the bank manager would not find present indications very promising.

The day of his arrival dawned clear enough, but this did not dispel the gloomy overtones. It seemed a pity we had to actually take the man around the plantation — surely he’d be footsore and sick to death of looking at coffee? If only we could just show him around the garden where the thriving grapefruit, oranges, lemons and avocados bore witness to the fertility of the soil, where the asparagus, silver beet and carrots in the veggie garden belied the apparent aridness on the other side of the Kiempi. If only we could show him the robust excellence of the established coffee and get by with a chart showing the planted acreage of the newer stuff. Pipe dreams — he wanted to see everything. Sure enough, we eventually received a polite little note saying sorry. The manager was unable to equate our projected figures with the state of the newer coffee. He even expressed regrets at being unable to accommodate us as we appeared to be hard-working and dedicated to progressing our enterprise. Small consolation!

We were still trying to come to terms with this awful disappointment when Ian, a *kiap*, came down on patrol and off-loaded his gear at the patrol post. Of course, he came across later in the day to socialise, stayed for *kaikai*, which happily was a rack of lamb enough for all of us. The socialising went on well into the night which, as usual, ran late because of the hour dinner was served, by which time the rum had already taken its toll. How Christopher slept through it all I’ll never know, for there were only two woven *pitpit* blinds between him and the earnest and
rowdy debate we embarked on. PNG presented a huge set of problems to solve, unlike anything I was accustomed to when sitting over a bottle of red with friends and solving the state of affairs in Australia. We finally gave up and drove Ian back to the patrol house, which was barely 70 metres away, but it was still a miracle that we made it. It was one of those irresponsible things I still prefer not to think about, especially what would have happened to Christopher if we had ended up dead, or even damaged, in the Kiempi.

Once home, Barry and I were well primed for the row that erupted, at the heart of which was some long-forgotten disagreement. I went to bed and he walked out — out of the house and into the night. I thought, ‘Good — don’t come back.’ But when he didn’t, I became frightened. I climbed out of bed and went to the bank of the Kiempi to see if there was a light in the patrol house but there wasn’t. I thought of rousing Waim, but was mindful that Barry did not care for intrusion. I had no idea if he was furiously angry, bursting with energy or simply trying to make a point. Barry had unusual ways of making a point. I waited and waited, becoming increasingly certain that he must have come to some harm. At last, as the sky took on a greyer tinge and long before sun-up, I dressed and walked across to Ian, waking him. He was very understanding and immediately roused his police to act as scouts, one of whom reported, sleuth-like, that Barry had headed for the Nebilyer bridge crossing and the Southern Highlands. Ian and I looked at each other in dismay for none of us had been in any state the night before to attempt that wildly swinging cane bridge, if that was what he had done. The sun was up and Ian had finished organising a search party when Barry walked in. He had crossed the bridge and walked deep into the Southern Highlands. He didn’t say why and, later, when I told him what I thought of his exploit, he adopted his devastating ‘attack is the best form of defence’ response, leaving me speechless.
I now had a visit from my parents to look forward to and the house contingent was thrown into extensive preparations. These included a huge clean out of the guest house, scrupulous attention to cleanliness, inasmuch as this was possible, and a few extra lessons for the manki mastas about hand-washing and hygiene in general. I ordered plastic containers from the Madang chemist to protect the parental toothbrushes from cockroaches and stocked up on the latest anti-diarrhoea medication. Preparations included an excavation in the garden where it sloped down to the Kiempi Creek, which we set up as an outdoor eatery overlooking Barry’s secret garden. We surfaced it with stone, cut a barbecue into the bank, lined this with rock, and made a garden table and benches which we painted orange. It looked great and was much used.

Mum and Dad’s visit was mainly on account of their new grandson, of course, but it was timed to coincide with the second Western Highlands Show. Late in 1960, the District Commissioner of the Western Highlands, Tom Ellis, had summoned representatives from his department, from all local organisations and all private individuals to a meeting at the Australian-curriculum primary school in the town. Such was the nature of the man, few people failed to turn up. At the meeting, we were informed that there was to be a Western Highlands Agricultural Show the next year and all of us would be involved. Goroka in the Eastern Highlands
had already led the way but ours was to be the biggest thing since sliced bread, bringing together the disparate tribes of the Hagen district in a mass *singsing* that would astound the world. Mr Ellis dismissed entirely the fact that many of the tribes were lifelong enemies and the prospect that fighting could break out and put lives at risk. What could happen would not happen, Mr Ellis informed the meeting. Mr Ellis was not called ‘God’ for nothing and, despite grave misgivings, a committee was formed and the first show duly occurred in 1961. Without loss of life.

This show, held at the fringe of Mt Hagen town, cannot be dismissed without a further word. Its success was phenomenal and this was as well since the work that went into organising it was also phenomenal and all things unrelated to the show virtually ceased to exist months before. It was a massive project for a one-horse town that had just one deep-freezer, a couple of trade stores, a limited and unreliable power supply and few permanent buildings. On a scale to Mt Hagen it would be akin to that of the Olympics to Sydney.

A vast, grassed central arena was fenced and surrounded by small *pitpit* and *kunai* round houses. These were used for district exhibits and by one or two special tribes flown in from outside the district because of their unique forms of regalia and dance. A rise to the east of the arena was roped off as an enclosure for the resident expatriate population and the 990 stunned expatriate visitors who attended. Not only the visitors were stunned. I shall never forget the abrupt silence that fell among the spectators, nor the goose-pimpling thrill as the first of the tribes surged proudly into the arena in their hundreds, guided by a handful of police and *kiaps*. They were masters of the art of self-decoration and their faces were brilliantly painted, the reds and ochres and yellows vying for honours with the dancing bird of paradise plumes that adorned the ornate and sometimes massively heavy wigs the menfolk wore. The air was filled with their rhythmic chant as they paraded around the perimeter of the arena in a characteristic kind of stamping march, spears held high and thrusting. They halted in their rows of five or six at some hidden signal as the leaders came level with the wooden tower where the official party overlooked this incredible sight.
The men wore freshly cut, multicoloured *tanket* leaves and special ceremonial *bilums*, which swayed seductively as their shiny, pig-greased bodies dipped and rose to the beat of their *kundus*. Like the birds of paradise, the women were less gorgeous than the men, but they were bedecked with beads and plumes and splendidly dressed for the occasion with, at this happy stage in their civilisation, not a bra to be seen.

The first tribe kept up its movement and chanting as the next tribe followed and the next and the next until 50,000 chanting figures filled the arena, swaying together in the deep knee-bending action that so superbly displayed their finery. They came from all over the highlands, some walking for five days to get there. They should have been exhausted, yet they kept stopping along the roadside, not to rest, but to break into impromptu *singsings*. Acres of *kaukau* had been planted to feed these masses and long houses of *pitpit* and *kunai* built to accommodate them. They were not enough. Expatriate homes, too, were strained at the seams caring for visitors from all over PNG and overseas. Residents constructed timber frames in their gardens and walled these with sisal-craft, roofing the structures in many ingenious ways. We stayed overnight in a house designed to accommodate six which had been stretched to take 14, but I heard of one which, by dint of sleeping children in cars, managed to put up 36.

As it turned out, Barry and I lived sufficiently far from the planning action to escape most of the preliminary work. Instead, we decided to try to capitalise on the event financially. We borrowed a polaroid camera and bought masses of film, confident the tribespeople would hanker for instant photos of themselves in full dress. To our dismay they did not, though our price went down almost to cost over the two days of the show. What we did make, I probably spent in fuel in the next weeks, driving to markets around the district trying to sell the rest of the film.

For the second show, in 1963, we were seconded to one of the many organising subcommittees and played a bigger role, supervising displays and judging things such as vegetables, which
outdid anything that can be imagined for size. Mr Ellis’s concept of a show had its genesis in Australia and we even had a needlework section and cattle on show which were later auctioned. Barry and I exhibited some of our furniture and won a couple of awards; the first of two paintings he ever attempted also attracting a prize. We won a first in the B-grade coffee section, our exhibit representing pretty well every B-grade bean on Alimp. As far as the tribespeople were concerned, the biggest attraction of the second show was the pristine white uniform and sweeping white plume adorning the helmet of Australia’s Governor-General Lord de L’Isle, who officially opened the show. He was a huge success.

The whole show was a huge success, though nothing was ever going to be as good as the first one, because the highlanders were so fired up for that occasion, not knowing what to expect but determined to shine above all others. Tourists, however, knew no difference and were greatly impressed, as were Mum and Dad. Less impressive, in fact, my greatest shame ever, was my mother who, while I was guiding Lord De L’Isle through a craft exhibit, burst into the shed declaring over-audibly that baby Christopher, whose gut had been knotted up a bit, had successfully had a poo.

As the shows continued and the tribes knew what to expect, they adopted a more laconic approach to the event and in time became so apathetic that the administration was obliged to provide trucks to bring them to Hagen and improve facilities where they stayed. Perhaps, too, the restraint they had exhibited towards their traditional enemies wore thin and it was simpler and less challenging to stay away. Despite the Government’s urging, by the mid-1970s, tribe numbers attending the show had shrunk abysmally, but it says a great deal for the spectacle made by the remainder that tourists kept flocking to see them from around the world. Tom Ellis’s brainchild had put Mt Hagen on the map. Before long the show was moved out of town to a purpose-built showground near the Kagamuga airstrip, which had superseded the old one running down the centre of the town. The name and intent of the show sensibly changed from agricultural to cultural.
Mum and Dad’s departure after the 1963 event was a fairly emotional moment, for I had no idea when I would see them again and I was beginning to feel a bit deprived of familial support. Barry and I needed broader social scope and I wanted something that was not all coffee and not all men. Barry responded by becoming one of the founding members of the Mt Hagen Rotary Club which met every month on a Tuesday night. His attendance was surprisingly regular and most times he managed to get back to Alimp the same night — how I don’t know. That Barry should want to join any sort of organised group seemed to me out of character, but he persevered with this and was much sought after for his innovative handling of practical projects. He remained with the Rotary Club for many years and eventually was made a Paul Harris Fellow for his long-standing commitment.

Night-life had changed from the romantic interludes enjoyed only by Barry and me, to dinners with our neighbours on Wagil-Sipia Plantation, Bill, his new wife, Pam, and his wonderful mother, Mabel, who had sold everything in Sydney to give her son his chance in PNG. Will, who owned Alimp South next door was closer, but after buying his second plantation near Hagen in lieu of an extension at Alimp, he was seldom there. His stay was shorter than usual on one awful occasion when he turned up at our place in the first light of morning, his limbs badly swollen and having trouble breathing. He had developed a severe allergy to a tetanus shot he’d been given after cutting his hand with a circular saw. I rushed him to Hagen, dismayed that he had lived with this frightening experience all night rather than disturb us — a fiercely and recklessly independent type, was Will. Before he was married, Bill, on the other hand, would occasionally come around by himself regardless of whether it disturbed us or not. He was known to stay the night once or twice while he caught up on his reading with our books. With no means of communication, I wondered how Mabel felt about that.

One of our earliest attempts to spread our social wings had been to climb Mt Hagen with David and Ian from Banz. We took the Tomba road to the foothills of the mountain accompanied by
two *bois* who helped us carry the tucker, a large sheet of plastic, sleeping bags and otherwise the barest essentials with which to set up camp and cook a meal. The track up the mountain was steep, clogged with undergrowth and laced with roots over which we stumbled single-file for what seemed like hours. About the 2,800 metre mark, the growth gave way to grass and Pamba, wearing skimpy *bilum*, dead tanket leaves and a torn shirt, hoisted a pink umbrella against a light patter of rain. No one was admitting it, but I, at least, found the going hard at this altitude and was relieved when it was judged time to make camp. This consisted of a sort of lean-to contrived from the plastic sheet tied to saplings cut by the *bois* who also pushed up bundles of twigs and grass to block any draft under the plastic. No matter that the front of this contraption was fully exposed to the elements.

The rum was tremendously good that night and happy hour was the best fun for once. Fortified, the men hunted for dry timber, stoked the fire and laid out the sleeping bags while I applied myself to the billy of curry I had made at home and to doling out the rice and fish we had brought for the *bois*. Pamba, however, once more flourished his pink umbrella and set off down to a village at the base of the mountain saying he preferred *kaukau*. He was back next morning before we were out of our sleeping bags. Astonishing. The two *bois* had the fire going as we crawled from our warm cocoons, and beyond the smoke, looking down to the valley we had come from, there was nothing to be seen save oceans of puffy white cloud; we might have been alone in the world.

Though Barry and I had no great experience at altitude, we’d done a lot of walking up and down hills and gullies and I considered us both fit. Yet for the last few hundred metres of this 3,026-metre mountain, I was fully extended. I wasn’t gasping for air, nor did I feel exhausted; it was as if I was in the grip of a terrible lethargy and my legs simply begged to stop moving. All that was forgotten as we neared the top and the early sun gilded the jagged peaks of neighbouring Mt Giluwe at 4,360 metres; a fiery brilliance in the clear morning sky that was absolutely stunning.
Our second mountain venture was an assault on Mt Wilhelm, PNG’s highest mountain. To get there we flew into what I was told was the second-highest airstrip in the southern hemisphere: Keglsugl. Its height was not its only claim to fame. With the mountain at one end and a chasm at the other, plus two humps across its length, there was no room for error. Most people were more impressed that we had flown in and out of Keglsugl than that we climbed Wilhelm. There was still a lot of climbing to do after landing, despite the airstrip’s height. Towards the peak there are two icy lakes and there was, then, a crude pitpit hut where I elected to stay the next day while two of the men went on to the top. At the time, I was pregnant with Christopher and rather belatedly took fright about being on a frozen mountain 3,500 metres up with at least another 1,000 to go. Barry was not keen on climbing further and I was glad, for I had a nasty attack of ‘what ifs’, though I kept my fears to myself.

But you can’t keep climbing mountains for your social life, especially when starting a family. Most of the expatriate coffee plantations in the Western Highlands were in the Wahgi Valley and many of the owners became good friends. In fact, some had been friends from the days when I lived there and we weren’t short of invitations to visit. One we accepted for a bit of companionship over Christmas was nearly a tragedy. A mutual friend from Hagen, Tas, had been invited to join us over Christmas at Darminie Plantation in the Wahgi Valley with Noel and Sandy, their three boys and Sandy’s mother, Dorothy, who was holidaying with them. Barry and I arrived on the afternoon of December 23 to find our hosts deeply concerned about their youngest son, Angus, who was ill. Minj now had a doctor and he had been sent for via the Darminie radio link.

Angus had had mumps and contracted the dreaded complication, encephalitis. His condition deteriorated markedly in the time it took for the doctor to arrive. The doctor poured antibiotics into the child and later said he had exceeded all normal dosage as the boy was close to death when he arrived and he believed there was nothing to lose. He ordered Angus to the Goroka Hospital but as there was no night flying in the highlands...
and darkness now hung thickly over the valley, the best that could be done was to leave at first light the next morning. Noel, with the unconscious Angus, spent the night in Minj with the doctor and back at Darminie there was little sleep for any of us.

In the predawn stillness of the next day, the Reverend Doug McCraw sat in a tiny aeroplane tuning up on the Minj strip. He was one of the finest pilots ever to fly in the highlands and normally one of the most careful. That day he broke the rules, flying out of the valley in near-darkness and putting his faith in the hope of a lightening sky as he approached the dividing range. He was a man of faith in whom we readily put our faith for he seemed inviolable. Considering the adverse conditions which frequently confronted him in the air, it was ironic that he should die in a car accident.

We spent a difficult Christmas Eve at Darminie, our problems exacerbated by Dorothy, who was in a state of near hysteria, and the haus bois who were very tearful. Tas arrived during the day to a strained and volatile situation and mid-afternoon a message came through sending for Sandy as Angus was not expected to live through the night. She was incredibly stoical, showing me where the Christmas presents were hidden and explaining her arrangements for Christmas dinner.

‘Christmas must go ahead,’ she said, assembling all of us and explaining to her other two sons that they would probably never see their brother again. This message was delivered with a frankness I could have done without and made it virtually impossible for Christmas to go ahead with any normalcy. Tas and Barry did what they could to distract the two boys, though the younger revealed his distress with fits of wild rebellion which including stamping his feet in a box of ripe, home-grown tomatoes. My job was to bring some sort of order to the haus kuk and to try to soothe Dorothy. Barry and I revised our plans, knowing we must stay on while Noel and Sandy were absent. We heard no word for four days except that Angus was hanging on to life. Then came the amazing news that he was expected to recover and we all wept and laughed and hugged each other. But then we learnt that doctors would not know for some time whether
Angus had suffered any permanent brain damage. It was not easy to accept that the joyful news we had scarcely dared to hope for was still subject to a possibly adverse outcome. Eventually, miraculously, Angus recovered fully with no hint of associated problems.

That was a Wahgi time to remember, the worst-ever time, but we also spent many wonderful weekends in that lovely valley and a number of our friends reciprocated by coming to our equally lovely valley. Almost all the expatriate coffee-growers were in a similar position to us, living in grass houses with coffee trees not yet in full production. Most, however, had started a year or two sooner and their development was more advanced. We learnt a lot from their work and we needed every advantage we could get.

Weekends away in the Wahgi were not all coffee-centred. There was, for instance, the annual Minj Ball, a formal occasion. This was staged at the Minj Golf Club and was, at that time, the highlight of the year’s social calendar. The work that went into preparing for this gala event was amazing. The committee went to incredible lengths to transform the club house into an exotic cabaret. It organised a splendid supper, all produced by the handful of residents in the area, who also had to accommodate the out-of-towners, like ourselves, overnight. Everyone who could ply a needle made a new frock for the occasion — full-length ball gowns, I might say — and the men dug ancient dinner jackets out of mothballs and moaned about tying their black ties.

During the ball, police were scheduled to patrol the car park where almost every vehicle was equipped with mattresses and bedding on which slept the children. The police would report any problems via a doorkeeper and one or other parent could be seen picking his or her elegant way through the mud to pacify the malcontents. Eventually, the kids learnt to play up for the fun of involving the police. But the police learnt quickly, too, and, before long, were able to handle most situations without bothering parents. We all felt the need to take our children everywhere we went; part of this was uncertainty about whether native minders could handle an unusual situation that might crop up and part was the fearful risk of fire in our dried-grass houses.
Before long everyone with children had a station wagon and the car reps must have been overjoyed at the boost to wagon sales in the highlands. The children accepted this arrangement well as a general rule and slept soundly, but given the excitement surrounding the Minj Ball and the chance for collective wakefulness and interaction, we came to rely heavily on the police. The practice of sleeping children in the back of vehicles persisted until, one night at the Banz Club, a father went to check his four offspring and found the children crying and all the bedding gone.

Hagen people had fewer private functions than the Wahgi mob but made up for this by the number of clubs they set up. There was a social life for expatriates second to none for those in a position to enjoy it and, although we lived at a distance, we certainly weren’t greatly deprived in this respect. One of the first groups we joined was the clay target shooting club which met near Hagen every month or so. In Hagen, people had to create their own entertainment and it was one of those places where expatriates with enthusiasm and aptitude in a particular activity quite often prompted the formation of a new group which inevitably became a club. In time this led to a golf club, a tennis club, a bird watchers’ club, squash club, painters’ group, stock-car racing club, a children’s mini-bike club, a horse-racing club, the drama group, known as the Hagen Players, as well as the clay target club and, of course, the social club which became the Mt Hagen Country Club. Most of these persisted through all the years I was there.

In the early times, almost the entire expatriate population became involved in one or more of these activities, but there were no Papua New Guinean members until much later. I’m not sure how committees would have reacted in those days had a native sought to become a member, but to the best of my knowledge none did. Our activities were the social interactions of an elite group, they cost money and very often involved alcohol, while highlanders had no money and were not permitted to drink. More significantly, to these primitive natives our activities were too alien and they were not ready to mix socially with a group of whities, whose origins and intentions they were suspicious of, many still not sure whether we were spirits.
For the first time, it was possible to see light at the end of the coffee-producing tunnel and furniture-making took a back seat. A priority was to push for an extension of our land and the first step in that direction was to talk to the local *kiap* and make an official application. Having done that, Barry spent hours chatting up the locals in the area north of our block where they had allowed us to plant our original coffee nurseries while we were laying out the block. We needed their agreement to sell land to the administration which we could add to our 99-year lease. It should have been a fairly simple deal as we were not proposing that they should dispose of land with houses, gardens or even *singsing* grounds on it, but only unused bush. With foresight, they might have refused, realising it would be more profitable to grow coffee on it themselves. Indeed, they were given every opportunity to recognise this by the administration. But more importantly, a sale meant cash in hand and they wanted the money. This seemed pretty straightforward.

The trouble began when neighbouring clans heard of the impending sale and rushed to stake their claim to the land. Finding the true owners was a nightmare as it involved tracing back unwritten history and the locals recognised no dates but only before and after the war. It took endless negotiation before Barry was confident he had established the truth, which he passed on to the administration. Then one evening a *kiap* arrived
equipped with surveying gear to start pegging out the boundary of the land we wanted. He off-loaded all this at the patrol post before joining us for dinner during which we talked about everything except the extension. The patrol post was a small plot of land on the far side of the Kiempi on what was then the northern boundary of our block. If we got the extension, it would be in the middle of our block. It consisted of a tiny corrugated iron hut destined to be an aid post when a dokta boi could be made available and a two-roomed rectangular house, made of pitpit and kunai grass, in which kiaps on patrol could sleep on their rare visits.

The next morning was glorious, an early mist shafted with sunlight which always took its time to climb up over the mountains. The night’s rain had settled the dust without making mud and the coffee trees were in the most prolific flower we had yet seen. As we went to join the kiap at the patrol post, Puddenhead and Simba romped along exuberantly scattering little knots of natives chatting by the roadside and nosing curiously at the stoic meris carrying huge loads of kaukau in their bilums. The natives of Alimp had never seen anything like Puddenhead, with her squashed-in boxer face, when Barry arrived with her as a pup. Asked by the locals how a dog could have a flat face and no tail, he explained that by grasping and pulling strongly on the tail, the nose retracted to the required degree at which point the tail was cut off. Barry later swore that a local clansman complained he had tried the procedure and it hadn’t worked. I wouldn’t have been surprised if it was true. Mostly, our dogs were very good with the natives, but they tended to get excited when they saw people running. Once Simba treed a chap who later came to me looking for compensation. His face, when I handed him a banana, was a picture.

By the time we reached him, Dick, the kiap, was surrounded by throngs of jabbering people, the various claimants to the land eyeing each other antagonistically and the one or two pidgin speakers in high demand to act as tanimtok, meaning to ‘turn the talk’ from local dialect to pidgin. A good interpreter was worth his weight in gold and it wasn’t until much later that
I became aware of how freely some of them distorted the original version.

When we arrived at the patrol post the noise subsided, adding to the tension we felt. Much depended on the outcome for us as well as the owners of this land. Barry told Dick which clan he believed owned the land and the kiap, who had also done his homework, agreed. But when this was announced, all hell broke loose and, since the argument could not be stopped, eventually Dick rose, collected his surveying gear and set off to the corner boundary at the road where, after taking sights, he instructed his offsider to hammer in a marker. He had come a long, slow way to do a job and do it he would. The favoured claimants stood in silence, arms wrapped across their chests against the morning freshness, but the dissenters went into paroxysms of distress, throwing themselves to the ground and stuffing their mouths with earth to demonstrate their sorrow at losing it. I don’t know whether they actually swallowed it. Then they pulled out the kiap’s marker and threw it away.

As though nothing untoward was happening, Dick philosophically continued on his round, causing markers to be hammered into place at regular intervals around the proposed extension boundary. The protesters removed every marker and when the last was duly hammered in and removed in its turn, we retired with Dick for a well-earned beer. It had been stored for a celebration, but it was not clear whether we had anything to celebrate. Eventually, after some months, another kiap appeared and announced that the extension was ours to be added to our 99-year lease. He brought with him bags of one shilling pieces which he distributed among the clan regarded as the true owners, refusing them extra for the coffee trees they claimed, which in reality were the left-over runts from our original coffee nurseries. In the normal way of things, land under dispute would not have been alienated, but it was not in anyone’s interests to have a nearly productive development fail, especially because of an oversight in the Government’s system of allocation.

To celebrate the acquisition of our extension, we talked about having a dinner party for the people we knew in Hagen.
‘No one would come all this way, especially at night,’ I said.

‘Hagen people would go anywhere for a party,’ was Barry’s response.

‘Wouldn’t a lunch affair be better?’

‘Not as memorable,’ Barry assured me.

We were determined that our party, as the Hagen Show had done for the township, would put Alimp on the map. No one from Hagen ever came there, no one knew what our place was like. Only a handful of Hagen people really knew us well, unlike our Wahgi friends, but apart from the urge to entertain, we did owe hospitality. So we threw ourselves into planning for the party to end all and, in doing so, found a bond that had been missing for many years. As the guest list grew, it became apparent that the house could not contain everyone and we must have the party in the garden. That called for a marquee and some means of providing warmth, for it was cold at night. Barry solved the latter by making three metal braziers with new-moon and star cut-outs in the sides. It was also clear that, if the weather was unkind, guests must be able to stay the night. With the party outside, we could set up the house and the *kiap* house at the patrol post with mattresses and palliasses, though some people would sleep in their vehicles. Plates and glasses we would have to borrow from Mabel.

I turned my mind to the production of a menu whose ingredients I was confident would be available, which did not require guests to be seated at a table and which could be produced from our tiny wood-burning stove, with its even tinier oven. After a bit of thought, it was clear that not enough of anything could be produced on that stove and that I’d need to use a couple of four-gallon drums over open fires. I was worried about using kerosene drums for cooking but Barry set a *boi* to cleaning them and the spit and polish that went into eliminating every vestige of kerosene and odour from these drums was evidence of our determination to make this party right. Nothing was going to be too much trouble.

To my astonishment, almost all the 36 people invited accepted. About 10 *bois* were assigned to help us prepare for the
event, the first task being to make a number of sacking palliasses. Next they cut timber for the uprights of our marquee and fitted rafters from a centre pole. We borrowed a tarpaulin for the marquee and stretched more canvas around three sides. One afternoon we cooked up some rice, tinned meat and vegetables for our helpers in one of the cleaned-out kerosene drums as the ultimate safeguard, sampling it ourselves. No one fell sick.

The meal was to consist of a baked aubergine entrée, beef stroganoff and rice, cold platters of pork and chicken with an array of salads and a cold soufflé and fruit for dessert. I can't imagine what possessed me, but I also made a pile of brandy snaps to go with coffee. It was my first attempt and it took a while to get the knack; it was only in the process that it occurred to me to wonder how the hell I was going to fill them with cream at the last moment so they wouldn't go soft. I need not have worried as the *haus bois* had the necessary patience, born of many slow and laborious traditional tasks, like sharpening stone axes. Two were assigned to the brandy snaps equipped with pliant cones I made for the task out of plastic from an old tarp. The day before this momentous event I was desperately trying to figure out arrangements for serving the meal, most of the hot components of which were to be cooked in the drums in the laundry lean-to.

I was surrounded by a huge amount of activity on the part of the *haus bois*, Guru organising firewood to keep the oven on all-day stand-by and overseeing the preparation of aubergine and fruit which had been picked from the garden. Our other helpers were also busy, having taken it upon themselves to decorate our marquee. They brought in masses of hibiscus, fixing the stems with vines twined around the uprights and hiding the construction with an array of foliage and flowers which transformed the bare poles and blue tarpaulin into a fairyland. As it got darker, Barry gave the braziers a trial run and we lit lamps and hung them from the rafters on wire hooks. I was delighted at how beautiful it looked. Not only that, but we were all having the time of our lives: Barry and I bent on proving ourselves, the *haus bois* puffed with pride at the importance of their tasks and the helpers aware that they alone had lifted the setting from the ordinary to the magical.
The worry on the big day, of course, was the weather and — would people come. I worried all morning about that until I discovered that the fresh cream was slightly off. There was no way I was going to forsake my brandy snaps so I had the boys beat it stiff and injected just enough rum to disguise the unwanted flavour. I then thrust it back into the desperately overcrowded fridge and succeeded in forgetting about it. The guests did come and it was a happy, noisy party that turned the normal Alimp social life upside-down and had locals lining the road watching as the handful of cars and numerous four-wheel drives arrived from Hagen. The stroganoff was a miracle of tender tastiness, such as I have never achieved since, the rice was impressively al dente, coming piping-hot from the kerosene drums, and the brandy snaps were a huge success; as far as I know, no one suffered any adverse reaction.

Rain threatened half-way through the afternoon but held off until well after midnight. Most people left in time to avoid a wet road but others stayed on until they had missed their chance and were apparently happy to fall on to the nearest mattress and sleep the night away. Next morning, the first task was to dislodge the puddles of water that had collected in the tarpaulin before the weight tore it. The next task was to keep the supply of coffee up to demand.

So the little hamlet of Alimp saw its first expatriate party and the villagers knew not what to make of it. But we knew it was a success.

Soon, construction of our coffee factory began. A little timber shed was built in which a 4kVA Lister generator was installed and our grass house was wired for electricity. Work started on a barat, or channel, leading to the factory site from the eastern boundary stream, from which we would tap the water needed for processing our coffee. PNG was a place of ever-running streams. There were no dams or reservoirs in the Hagen district until reticulated water was introduced to the township of Hagen in the 1980s. But there were great rivers and endless creeks plunging into them from the mountains. The water to fill them fell from the sky most nights and more heavily and
frequently between December and March. Highlanders did not need reservoirs since the creeks served as their water supply, their bathroom, laundry and pig wallows.

Our monster *barat* was an average 1.3 metres deep and a model of precision. It was cut by hand by the *kago bois* and some casual labour to a template prepared by Barry to ensure its width and the slope of its sides did not vary. Barry was a perfectionist in everything he did. I took my turn at the dumpy level, ensuring that gravity would prevail. We all became increasingly excited as the *barat* neared the creek until came the final breeching when the water rushed in and headed sweetly downhill to the factory at a pace and depth determined by Barry. All of us were ecstatic, jumping around and yelling as the flow of water proceeded from the creek to the factory 250-odd metres away, governed by a couple of adjustable gates. It provided an endless supply for our processing before being diverted below the factory to the Kiempi.

At the factory site, formwork was laid, cement mixed and concrete poured, and the holding tank and pulper installed. Four fermenting tanks and the flow channel leading to them began to take shape and steel struts to support the corrugated iron roof were installed. A panel was set up in the house at which the power could be turned off at the press of a button. It could be turned on only at the generator, so it was no time to toss out the portagas lamps. All of this was terribly exciting even though we were reduced to penury once more. Even more exciting was the night the power was switched through to the house. The bare light globes suspended from our *pitpit* ceiling were the most beautiful light fittings I had ever seen. Barry had connected the radio and we settled back with our rums to enjoy this wondrous experience.

The *haus kuk bois* had come in to view the coming on of the lights and oohed and aahed with great enthusiasm before retreating to discuss this amazing happening. Then Barry needed some more cold water. ‘*Haus kuk!* he called, which was our way of summoning a *manki masta*. Guru came to the back door and was asked to bring a jug of cold water. He returned with it but
instead of bringing it to the table, stood at the top of the two steps that split the levels of the house, his eyes fixed on the radio.

‘Biringim I kam,’ Barry said, puzzled at the delay.

‘Masta,’ Guru said in a worried voice, ‘smok I kam ap long wailis.’ The radio was on fire.

A thatched home with pitpit walls is pure tinder — the most effective in the world — and fire spelled disaster. I have watched native houses catch and, within seconds, become ashes.

Much later we had occasion to test the wisdom of separating the haus kuk from the main house when our thatched kitchen roof, blackened and dried to a crisp, caught fire. Desperately pounding the old gas cylinder outside the kitchen, which served as a gong to start and finish the working day, I immediately attracted the attention of the kago bois who had already knocked off for the day. Quickly Barry directed them into teams, one up on to the main roof where their task was to quench every spark, one to man a chain from the Kiempi to deliver extra water and one to tear the thatch from the kitchen roof and the thatched walkway to the house. We were lucky. Just as we were lucky that night when the power was switched on and Guru picked the smoking radio before anything else caught. It appeared there had been a slight mix-up with the connection at the radio.

About the time our factory became operational, we were visited by Terry. Terry’s background was obscure but he had come to New Guinea from Canada, he told us, with a permit to kill and capture one of each species of bird of paradise. While in the country, he produced a number of paintings intended to illustrate a book about these birds, painting in intricate detail, with a scientific eye and considerable talent, though the draft text I read was a disaster. I don’t think he ever finished the book and last I heard he was with a maharaja in India working with elephants. I believe it.

Terry had been in the country for some time before he came to us, botting on a series of planters until they got fed up and moved him on. When he ran out of more central accommodation, he came to Alimp, bringing with him three pets
which he ensconced in his bedroom in our guest house. These were a tree python, which ate only live rats, a sparrow hawk, which required steak, and a baby owl. The hapless owl was killed early in the piece at the talons of the sparrow-hawk in a flurry of flapping wings and flying feathers, leaving the guest room in chaos.

Terry must be mentioned for several reasons besides his paintings. One was the remarkable procedure he adopted in teaching his sparrow-hawk to catch quail. During training, it perched on his arm, which was protected by a leather gauntlet. The bird was linked to Terry by a string long enough to reach a tree where the bird could perch. He would literally throw the sparrow-hawk into the air, allowing it to fly to the limit of the string and perch. When he wanted it to return, he attracted its attention with a whistle, waved a red cloth, to which the creature seemed to develop some bond, and gently wound in the string, revealing in the palm of the glove, as it got closer, a lump of steak. Our steak. Eventually, he allowed the bird to fly free. It soared away majestically and would return in response only to the whistle and the red cloth. I don’t know if this is a customary training process, but it worked. Unfortunately, the first time the bird was thrown towards quail, it got tangled up in the coffee trees and, frustrated, homed in on Wabi’s chooks instead, one of which it killed before Terry got it under control.

Another fiasco occurred when I was using bright-red paint for a kitchen cupboard I’d made. A couple of meris turned up with bush rats for the tree python which accepted only live meals. Terry peered curiously into a lap-lap the meris had used to carry the rats, accidentally freeing a couple and causing me to yelp and leap sideways, spilling the paint. We wore the red stains of that episode for the life of the house. Later, Terry found and introduced to the household a baby lesser bird of paradise which quickly became tame and was allowed lots of quality time out of its cage, much of which was spent on Terry’s shoulder. The man certainly had a way with birds. But he left it uncaged just once too often and it roosted on my typewriter. Since it was fed largely pawpaw, the mess when I next caught up with my typewriter was
indescribable. Nevertheless, all of this was pretty interesting stuff and livened up our days, so we kept feeding Terry and his creatures, although he contributed not a penny, until he was offered use of Danny Leahy’s house up on Kuta. I confess that I’d had enough of him and his interesting ways when he finally moved out, taking with him, we discovered over time, a quantity of Barry’s clothes.

Despite all the emerging social activity, Barry and I went to town only once a week, except for his Rotary and emergencies, as there were many times when the rain-slick road home would have stopped us — or put us into the nearest creek, despite the Land Rover’s multitude of gears. Soon the neighbourly dinners palled, mainly I think because the conversation exclusively concerned coffee, accentuating our insularity. The gun club meetings weren’t all that frequent so we became founding members of the Hagen Players and, over time, put on a number of shows. The first, called Why Not Tonight was produced by Barry while I played a part and for which he and I made most of the sets. We were all hopelessly amateurish but it was great fun and the whole town turned out for the event, inspiring the group to keep going. The last play performed by that group, 11 years later, was Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, in which I played Olive Leech. A relative newcomer called Jim, who produced it, was more professional than any we had known and I knew we had a success on our hands when, at the end, I noticed a few people wiping their eyes, including, to my amazement, our normally phlegmatic neighbour Bill.

Going back, though, our second play was so trivial in nature I’ve forgotten its name but we all had to wear togas and I remember that making the Roman sets was very time-consuming. It took so long to produce that by the time it got to an audience I was nearly five months pregnant with Julian and was having extreme trouble designing a toga to hide it.
I was also pregnant with Julian when I once more had cause to rue the day Terry was ever allowed into the country. I was in town to pick up a load of construction materials that were required for a huge shed Barry was building. This was needed as a garage, a store, a workshop and an office and we claimed it was the biggest native materials construction in the highlands. Although thatched and walled with *pitpit*, the foundations for our shed were designed to last and were to incorporate sections with a concrete slab and a certain amount of milled timber.

The load I had in the Land Rover was massive, I was weary and I wanted to get home. As I was coming out of my parking spot in the main street, I was hailed by frantic arm waving and was told someone at the hospital was trying to catch me before I left. Not very enthusiastically, I headed off to the hospital where I was advised that medicine was needed urgently at Kuta, where Terry still lived. I looked at the Land Rover, overloaded and sitting low at the back, and knew I was not going to take that load over Kuta. The *dokta boi* who came out with the medicine sympathised with my problem and, noticing my state of pregnancy, offered to organise a couple of *bois* to off-load some of the cargo which could be stored at the hospital.

I was most unhappy about having to make this detour as the road on the other side of Kuta was dangerous, a winding track that dropped away to the Nebilyer Valley even more steeply than
the road going up. I was also worried about leaving behind some of the cargo, which Barry would want and which we didn’t want stolen. Though I kept quiet about it, I knew I had done enough driving on rough roads for that day. However, it was incumbent on every expatriate in the highlands to do what was necessary to help others in an emergency. Terry didn’t drive and had no vehicle and if he had urgent need of medicine, I would have to take it. I toiled up the Kuta road, jolting over potholes and deep runnels formed by incessant rain and running at angles to the slope. The road went within cooee of the house but left an ascent of some 40 metres that was little short of vertical. And cooee was what I planned to do, intending to attract the attention of a haus boi to get the medicine and report on Terry’s condition. If he was really bad, I would have to take him back to Hagen.

I could hardly believe it when I saw Terry hopping down the track in his usual sprightly, bird-like way looking as fit as he ever did and smiling brightly. Mouth open in stunned silence, I clutched the medicine and waited for an explanation. It transpired that he needed the medicine for one of his birds, something that the person who took the original message and who packaged the medicine had failed to pass on to anyone. In the circumstances, I had no interest in passing the time of day with Terry, though he was clearly put out by my terseness. Almost throwing the package into his arms, I started the engine and pushed on up to the pass leading to the descent just as the rain started. It was an awful drive down that tortuous track, sheltered by magnificent rainforest and slickly wet at the best of times. In four-wheel drive, I slid down the mountain, heart thumping as I strove to keep all four wheels on the road. The smallest error could see me stranded for the night, even if I did not fall into a gully and kill myself or the baby or both. I wished, despairingly, that I had kept more cargo in the back to give better traction. It was dark and seemed hours before I reached the valley at Korgua. I did not know if Dan was home, but had little inclination to be sociable and decided to push on home.

That was a sort of close call for Julian, who, in utero, had his share of problems. One of these occurred during the second
act of our Roman play. My female rival was supposed to clobber me over the head with a pretend club, but she slipped and the club descended heavily on my head while her elbow dug sharply into my belly and God knows what part of Julian’s anatomy. Another of Julian’s problems was tractor-orientated. Barry was tied up with the coffee factory so much that I had been supervising the planting of coffee seedlings on the remaining section of our original block and trying to teach George, an import from Hagen, how to drive the Fordson tractor. George told us he knew how to drive a tractor but this proved inaccurate. At the start, I negotiated the steep bits of road to and from the Kiempi and let him take over as driver when we reached the flat.

Eventually, at the end of one work day, I decided he was ready to do the whole trip back over the Kiempi and up the hill to home. We lined up at the top of the descent to the creek, the trailer full of *kago bois* and me perched on the mudguard to keep a hand near the throttle. I told him to keep in first gear no matter how long it took. He did very well, down to the culvert and up the hill without a hitch before turning right into our driveway — no worries. But then he forgot to straighten the wheels and we kept on turning right. We forged up a sharp bank, still in first gear, the right front wheel slogging into a tree while I slipped from the mudguard on to the hydraulic gear behind the driver’s seat and the *kago bois* leapt frantically from the tilting trailer. George remembered to put a brawny arm back to clutch hold of me and Julian but he forgot to throw the clutch and we kept trying to mount the tree. It was a miracle we didn’t tip. Eventually, my yells penetrated; he threw the clutch and we shuddered to a halt, slipping back marginally but still tilted at a terrifying angle. Barry came from the shed attracted by the noise. Seeing me alive, his concern centred around a sharp stake of timber that had driven between the tractor tyre and wheel. He was reassured when neither tyre nor wheel seemed to have suffered permanent damage.

Julian survived that episode without a hitch, too, but perhaps his closest call came in his first year of life when he slipped under four inches of water in the galvanised iron tub.
I used for the children’s bath. I didn’t see him go under but I was there, at the door of the bathroom saying something to Guru, and rushed to him in an instant. None of the turning upside-down, back-thumping worked. I panicked and screamed for Barry who, miraculously, was in the storeroom. He came so quickly but it seemed like hours before he got that child breathing again. It was a moment for which I still feel shock and, while Barry calmly breathed into Julian’s mouth, I was utterly useless, leaning sick and faint against the *pitpit* wall, waiting.

While Julian was getting ready to be born, a group of enthusiasts had progressed well with plans to build a nine-hole golf course in Mt Hagen and, being a keen player from way before, I knew I would want to play. We probably took on too much in Hagen but these commitments did much to relieve the isolation of Alimp and I was reluctant to forego any of them. Besides, golf could be a weekly form of recreation, instead of monthly. It was becoming increasingly important, especially with children, to have the use of a bed in town so we weren’t forced to make the trip home at night if the weather turned sour. This need was most evident one late, moonless night when, after taking the Togoba airstrip in lieu of the road as usual, we miscounted the bumps in the strip and took off into a *kaukau* garden. It took ages to dig ourselves out.

We were really fortunate that Tas, who was single and a district supervisor with the Department of Education, had two spare bedrooms and seemed happy to have us call his place our home away from home. This took a lot of pressure from us and made our Hagen activities much more enjoyable, although my regular visits were still limited to weekends.

We had just returned from a weekend in Hagen one late Sunday afternoon when Waim came to us and asked if it was true that the sun was going away and the world would become dark because of all the sins committed by unworthy mankind, especially those who had not converted to Christianity. It took time to determine how this rumour, spreading wildly among the villagers and *kago bois*, came about. The next day, we heard on the radio of an impending eclipse of the sun and the whole thing
began to fall into place. After some judicious questioning of the local villagers through a tanimtok, we realised that some missionary was capitalising on the coming eclipse by frightening the locals into acknowledging the power of God and their need of Him to purge their sins.

I thought this a heinous state of affairs and was unexpectedly able to confront the Catholic ‘bigman’ himself when Father Krimm arrived with the Catholic Bishop from Hagen right on lunch-time one day. Both were shocked and denied all knowledge of the matter and it never occurred to me to doubt them. Even so, my concern at the deception, whoever promulgated it, combined with embarrassment at the poorness of our lunch offering, drove me to forget protocol and I took a bite before the Bishop had a chance to say grace. It was close on shopping day and the unexpected visit had caught us short: a plate of desolate-looking sandwiches, followed by bananas and coffee was the best Guru could manage.

We spent the next few days spreading the word that an eclipse of the sun was not a new phenomenon, that it was a natural event and nothing to do with the badness of man, woman or child. We went further, telling them that they weren’t really very bad at all, though we could not resist emphasising that the practice of blinding their pigs to stop them wandering should cease. In particular we pointed out that, although it was a major eclipse, the sun would return and all would again be light. We told them when it was going to happen and how long it would last and we believed we were able to reassure them. Nevertheless, when the time arrived, Waim came again to tell us the kago bois were very frightened and wanted to spend the day in their houses. This they did until the moon gave way to the sun and they all emerged with much merry-making and yodelling in relieved celebration.

It frightened me a bit to think that our bois and the villagers should be so accepting of whatever snippets of information came their way — right or wrong. They had no choice but to believe what they were told for they had no way of finding out for themselves. We were frequently subjected to deception on their
part but they were easily found out and when they were, they chuckled about it, as though they had known all along that their wiles would not carry any weight. I often wondered about the impact this kind of life would make on our own children. Would they be broader of mind because of these diverse lifestyles and ways of thinking or would they be confused by it? Would it lessen their sense of identity and make their place in the world uncertain? Would they adopt a set of values, from close association with people who acted and related to others in ways so different from our own, that would serve them ill in the future? Would they adopt habits we find unbecoming, such as picking their noses?

These thoughts came more frequently as the time for Julian’s arrival came closer, although I felt pretty calm about the birth, having the Christopher experience behind me. It was another easy pregnancy and he gave me no worries. I was worried, though, when I went for a check-up at Yagaum six weeks before the birth was due, to find the doctor had been sent south for medical reasons and would not be available. This was to be another Caesarian birth and although there were surgeons in Lae and Port Moresby, I knew nothing of them and decided, in something of a panic, that I needed to be in Australia for this birth. Then I unexpectedly started bleeding and had to rest in Madang for some days before I was allowed to fly home to prepare for the trip to Melbourne where my parents would be able to look after Christoph. By the time I was ready, I was extraordinarily lucky the airline was prepared to carry me at such a late stage of pregnancy. Julian grew up to be a six-foot, healthy, strapping sort of chap and it seems to me embryos must be very resilient. I shudder sometimes when I look back.

He was born in 1965 and Christopher doted on him when we left hospital for my parents’ home, but the minute we boarded the aircraft for PNG and he realised the newcomer was coming with us, his enthusiasm waned. PNG was a good place in which to deal with the jealousy syndrome as the *haus bois* took over most of the time-consuming baby tasks and Pagi looked after the walking, airing and minding-of-Julian jobs, leaving me free to give plenty of time to Christoph. Pagi can only be described as
a gem who I employed at the recommendation of a Hagen friend. Pagi adored babies, as did most PNG women. In fact, as I come to think on that, the menfolk were very appreciative, too. If you stopped the Land Rover anywhere near a group of them, they would be at the window wanting to feel and stroke the soft, rosy cheeks, making little grunty noises.

Unlike Christoph, Jules was a happy chap, content to gurgle away in his bouncinette and in no hurry to get started in life. His slowness in starting to walk alarmed my mother so I invested in a walking trainer, a gadget with a seat suspended from a frame that moved on wheels. We tried him out in this device in the living room where the bamboo floor had been replaced by planks after a friend, staying with us for a couple of nights, fell through a worn section of bamboo at the back door. While the planks were firm, we had not realised just how much some of the stumps beneath the house had subsided and that there now was a distinct ridge running the length of the living room in the middle of the floor. This became evident when the trainer took off downhill with Jules in it, leaving him stranded against the wall unable to move in any direction. The trainer evidently persuaded Julian that he was being remiss and he took up walking without further ado.

In no time, it seemed, Jules grew out of the cot and we needed a decent room in which to house both boys; an add-on room became the next project. The bois built it of pitpit with kunai thatching, linking it to the sewing-machine room with a bridge over the barat. Barry made a splendid bunk bed for them and I made a chest of drawers. It was the most attractive room in the house with a painted ceiling and a firm masonite floor, complete with mat. I made bright-print curtains and lined the cupboard and toy shelves with fun stick-on shelf liner. All the furnishings were painted except the bed whose workmanship, Barry-like, was too excellent to hide. While I was at it, I made a chest of drawers for us, too, which was a boon, as the pitpit shelves which housed our clothes were infested with those wool-eating mites that had destroyed Barry’s tweed coat. They also destroyed a sweater I knitted. I am not a good knitter. In fact,
every knitting session left me exhausted from the business of taking my hand off the needle at every stitch. All the remaining woollens went into the chest of drawers and it was a long time before I knitted anything again.

The years now became tougher for us in some ways and kinder in others. I had learnt not to have expectations of closeness or affection in the marriage and, to some extent, stopped feeling hurt and disappointed about its failings. I had learnt not to expect support on the few occasions I was sick — Barry’s instinct was to get away. I had learnt he was not into hands-on caring for children. The only time I ever asked him to change a nappy, he threw it out the window and seemed unable to secure a replacement. But now grog started to intrude on our well-being. I was no slouch with a glass, but for me the smell of rum was losing its appeal and Barry was drinking it very thick and could not, or would not, cut the pace of his consumption.

Tempers became strained when I started pressing for an earlier meal in the hope of cutting short happy hour which, including shower time, was lasting four or five hours. Barry did not respond positively to pressure and my protests exacerbated the problem. There were the odd times when he was so fed up with my disparaging comments that, when the meal finally arrived, he simply poured another rum and refused to eat it. Once I tried to make some sort of impact by going to bed myself before dinner arrived but that achieved nothing. I don’t think Barry noticed, or at least he pretended not to. Eventually, the nightly rum intake, the anger that built between us and my consequent reluctance to have sex, put impossible pressures on the relationship. Love had become seriously compromised.

Barry always rose late and seldom showed signs of a hangover. It constantly amazed me how he could rise each morning as though all was goodness and light and nothing unpleasant had happened the night before. This was true even after one awful night when I hit him in a fury and another time when he returned the favour. We never had ‘kiss and make up’ times and, since Barry couldn’t, or wouldn’t, talk about it, my only options were to put it out of my mind or leave.
On the other hand, financial pressures eased. The coffee was bearing and sales had started. We were still pretty well penniless and development of the extension was pitifully slow. But as a family we didn't need a great deal of money. I was enjoying the two boys and had returned to coffee tasks while Pagi watched over sleeping Julian and played with Christoph. The furniture-making had ground to a halt as more things became available in Hagen and now I was free to make things for the boys. We needed a potty chair and a cot small enough to come with us on our travels and these were both straightforward. We also needed a playpen for outdoors with a floor because of crawlies and dirt and perpetual dampness. Since it, too, had to be portable, it had to be collapsible, though ideally not while child was within. There was no way I could work out how to make such a thing so I enlisted Barry’s aid and an ingenious design was produced in a matter of moments. It was so ingenious I couldn’t understand how to go about making it, so he did. My main contribution to the playpen was painting Winnie the Pooh scenes on a grass-green plywood floor which I thought would endear any child to his new cage. But not Christopher, who hated the playpen, and, when Julian’s turn came, he wasn’t too keen on it either. The only person who spoke highly of this work of art was our Alimp South neighbour Will, who lamented that no one had ever bothered to make such things for him when he was little. More popular among my offerings were a red submarine that was weighted appropriately with lead and a wooden train with hook-on bunkers.

I never did learn to think a woodwork project through properly — always too keen to get started. One Christmas, when I decided the boys were old enough to start making things themselves, I made them a scaled-down workbench with a central frame for storing the smallest tools I could find in Hagen with which to fit it out. I was pretty thrilled at the rapturous greeting this received and the eagerness with which they set to work. But since I hadn’t thought to gift-wrap any timber to go with the bench, their first project was to start cutting up the workbench.
Barry was incredibly resourceful and gifted at overcoming obstacles such as designing a folding playpen and tricky things like making wooden train wheels. He welcomed a mental challenge and, if necessary, would spend hours dealing with it. He liked to try out new ideas though he tired of them if they couldn’t be put to immediate use. One of his ventures was to establish a stockpile of adobe bricks. These were housed in a small shed near the factory where they stayed against the day they might be needed. The need never arose and brick-making ceased. One project was a major planting of asparagus which I thought might earn us pin money at the Hagen market. In the end it mostly met our personal needs which seemed a waste as it was excellent asparagus. Another project was the design of a tree house for Christopher and Julian. The bois who built it could not believe that anyone would want to spend time cramped up in a tiny box way off the ground when they could have every comfort in a proper house 30 metres away. They took some persuading that it was not some kind of bird aviary or possum cage. This tree house had concentrated use for a short time but our boys didn’t always get on well and whether they found the close proximity too testing, or whether they opted for the greater comfort of the house, I don’t know. They obviously found no joy in climbing up to sit there alone.

Barry also brought in milled timber which gave me hope of improvements to the house. But it went into store and spent the next years drying out at second-storey level in our massive shed. Photographic equipment languished in a tin trunk while new and more up-to-date replacements were introduced. Editing of movies became a hobby for a short while. Oil paints dried out in their tubes for want of action and this was a pity for Barry had talent. I was allowed a turn with the paints one time and tried my hand at reproducing a coloured slide. So conventional was my eye for colour, it took me two days to work out that the water in the photo was not blue but dun-coloured. Well, I was not going to be an artist.

One expensive interest that persisted was the acquisition and fairly regular updating of calculators. Barry loved calculators...
and he could make them do remarkable things. He ended up, in the pre-PC era, with an incredibly sophisticated model that could do everything but speak. I never dared touch any of them until, needing help while he recorded results in a complex Barry-style pattern, I actually had to hold the thing and press the print-out button according to his instructions. Of course, I pressed something wrong and the bloody thing went into paroxysms, emitting what could be loosely described as a death rattle. Eventually, the words ‘The End’ in red lettering flashed on to its tiny screen. There was something sinister in the wording and, meeting Barry’s hostile gaze, certain that I had lost all sorts of vital data, I felt as though the end had come.

Life with Barry was never boring and once I had come to understand the way of things, there were some good times. One thing very special to me was the occasional Sunday when we all clambered down a slope to a secluded little spot along the Kiempi. Here the water flowed clean and fast and the sun beat on exposed rocks that had been worn smooth by eons of deluges. Here I could wear bathers without being seen by the *kago bois*. In those days, women were very particular about the dress they wore in front of natives and I mostly wore pants but never shorts. Down in the creek bed Barry and I would dam up the water and make a pool in which Christoph and Jules splashed joyously. This was the precursor to teaching them to swim in the coffee factory fermenting vats and was lovely family stuff, which I badly wanted and was an important adjunct to seeing friends in Hagen and Banz and Minj.

Though it was important to have quality time at home together, I took every opportunity to have the boys mix with other white children of their age. I was never quite sure how much they were absorbing about *kanaka* life and how much they accepted native practices as the norm. Unless they knew of the differences between our civilisation and that of the natives, one could, with a stretch of the imagination, envisage Christoph inviting his girl to sit cross-legged opposite him to rub noses and cheeks together in the traditional courting ceremony *tanim bet* or ‘turn the head’. Both boys must have learnt all sorts of
un-European practices from the village children with whom they played more and more freely as they grew older. Would they think, for instance, that Barry and I were out of order by living in the same house when all around us men and women slept in separate houses?

All of this was an important reason why I was convinced the two boys should go to primary school in Hagen, though, at this stage, it was hard to see how it could be achieved. I was first to admit that Christoph and Jules were enjoying experiences that children in Australia, or even the bigger PNG towns, might not — but I was also anxious that they shouldn’t miss out on experiences taken for granted by children down south. I was especially concerned that they would grow up with no appreciation of art, of music, of theatre. They did all right in most respects, learning to swim, to ride horses and motorbikes; they learnt to drive and they learnt how to be boy scouts. Culturally, they were deprived and our warped 33⅓ records did little to excite their interest.

When they were older, I bought each of them a guitar and found a young woman in Hagen prepared to teach them how to play. They came home from lessons and played things like *Michael Row the Boat Ashore*, to which we would all sing along. Their skills seemed to be developing and at least they were learning to read music so I took it that all was proceeding according to plan. Then one night Barry and I went to a party where the guitar teacher had been invited to play for the guests. She was an attractive girl, facile with the instrument and it took a couple of verses before I realised she was reeling off some of the most lecherous ditties I’d ever heard. One could only wonder what the boys were learning besides *Michael Row the Boat Ashore*. 
One night an earth tremor, or guria to use the pidgin term, woke Julian. Gurias were not unusual and though this one was not especially big, the night was so still and silent the child had heard something or sensed movement. The electric lights could be started only at the generator, some distance from the house, so I took the torch and went out to reassure Jules. It was so quiet that, as I crossed their little bridge and opened the door, I could clearly hear an army of cockroaches scuttling into the pitpit walls. It was a sickening noise and I spent the next morning working out how I could get rid of them. Setting off a gamma bomb was pointless because the fumes bypassed the closed door and windows and escaped through the woven walls. I was reluctant to use a new insecticide I had recently tried because it had given me the headache to end all and I was afraid it would affect the boys. But something had to be done. I was frustrated and anxious, not knowing the best way to go, when Guru appeared at the door, looking as anxious as I felt, telling me Barry was involved in a fight.

‘Missis, niupela man na masta I pait,’ he announced.

‘What?’ I asked, imagining a war of angry words. ‘Pait tru or kros tasol?’

Nothing in the whole of my relationship with Barry allowed me to picture him engaging in fisticuffs, but Guru assured me he was. I was concerned for him since he was light of
build, though tall, and I was sure he had no idea how to fight. The confrontation was taking place on the other side of the Hagen track near the bank of the Kiempi where a special house had been built for a self-styled mechanic, who had not long been with us, and his wife. John spoke English, in a sort of way, wore his shirt tucked into his shorts and most times he wore shoes. His pay packet was bigger than anyone else’s and we felt obliged to class him as an employee rather than a "kago boi." Joined by Guru, I rushed across the house to the bedroom window from where I could see them both, fists raised, Barry fronting up awkwardly to the shorter, beefy-looking Papua New Guinean. They were moving around on a bare patch of earth but weren’t throwing many punches, I noticed.

Whatever the outcome, I realised it would be something of a crisis. If the newcomer floored Barry, it would be a terrible loss of face, and face in PNG was a vital ingredient in everyone’s life, but especially those aspiring to authority. If, by chance, Barry flattened him, he would undoubtedly lodge a complaint which would probably lead to an inspection by Native Affairs. We didn’t want any black marks there, thank you. If neither flattened anyone, all of these problems would probably accrue. Clearly it was not appropriate for me to butt in and I was at a loss for intelligent ideas when Waim suddenly appeared crossing the Kiempi bridge with several "kago bois," all of whom hated John intensely because he was getting perks they were not. Their appearance defused the situation and the sparring duo took advantage of the moment to back off, John no doubt seeing that the odds were now stacked against him. He marched smartly into his house brushing roughly past his wife who had been watching from the doorway. Barry flicked some imaginary substance from his sleeve and dusted down the sides of his shorts, looking victorious. As far as I could gather, John objected to Barry’s tongue-lashing when he found the generator had been allowed to run out of oil. In fact, John turned out to be yet another fraud despite a recommendation written in good English.

‘Obviously written by a wantok with some education,’ Barry guessed. The pidgin term wantok means people who talk
the same language (‘one talk’). Because of the fragmentation of tribes, often isolated by formidable geographical barriers, more than 700 languages were spoken in the country. Each pocket of people spoke its own language and so the term was much more specific than might be imagined. All the Alimp villagers were *wantoks* but they weren’t *wantoks* with the Hagen people despite their proximity. Integral to being a *wantok* was an ineluctible set of responsibilities. Expatriates adopted the term colloquially in the context of ‘mate’.

The practice of writing letters of recommendation had its amusing side. One late afternoon I was trying to cut Barry’s hair as he lay on a rug on the lawn, glass of rum in hand. He had agreed to have it cut but wasn’t going to make it easy. A PNG stranger arrived looking for work and was led to us by Guru. Pulling a worn piece of paper from his grubby shorts pocket he passed it to Barry. It was written in pidgin and translated into something like: ‘I would not under any circumstances employ the bearer of this note. I have found him to be unreliable, totally incompetent and a thief.’ It was not signed.

I wondered how many times he had used this as a reference.

John, the so-called mechanic, left Alimp promptly but it seemed he made no complaint. This led us to believe he was either ‘known to police’ as the saying goes or staged the whole event with an eye to compensation. There had never been any labour-line trouble on Alimp and it always amazed me that we had such a relatively small staff turn-over considering there were periods when we simply hadn’t the money to pay the *bois* on time. They seemed to appreciate Barry’s unstructured regime, his unorthodox way of handling situations and his maverick nature. He was not like the usual ‘big boss’ and they learnt to shrug off his bursts of abusive language as temporary aberrations, which I never learnt to do successfully. Other times, he would joke with them; he never slung off at them for being primitive or black, though he was harsh enough when they messed up something they should have handled better. A few of the Berabuga people from Minj stayed with us for ever, leaving for important *singsings*
and Moka ceremonies, but returning after weeks or months depending on the significance of the tribal occasion. It was always a source of irritation that they never bothered to tell us when they were going. Neither was there any way we could tell when, or if, they would be back.

It did look as though we might be in trouble with the Department of District Services and Native Affairs when Barry sacked the only person I ever knew him to sack. This chap was found to have the very characteristics listed in the revealing note handed to Barry on the hair-cutting rug. He also caused disruption over one of the Minj wives. A few days after his departure, a four-wheel drive administration Nissan lurched over the Kiempi culvert and, seated beside the kiap in the front seat, was our sacked friend. I was astounded. At least four hours of an expatriate’s working day plus vehicle and fuel for 68km all on the say-so of one individual’s complaint seemed a bit over the top. We did have a post box in Mt Hagen and a request for an explanation would have seemed more appropriate. No wonder the native looked smug.

The kiap, whom we did not know, was strictly impartial and this impressed me greatly. Many Australians in that position might have gone softly with his wantoks but we were subjected to quite a grilling. Fortunately, we had a loyal core of kago and haus bois to speak for us and we came out of it well. A quick inspection of the bois’ housing, however, clearly did not impress the kiap greatly. He made several suggestions and duly noted them in writing for his records before accepting a glass of lemon juice or muli water, and departing with the not quite so complacent complainant beside him.

At this time, all employers were bound by the Native Labour Ordinance. We had to provide what was considered the necessities of life to counter our worker’s lack of buying power. This emanated not only from lack of money but having few places to shop. Also, when they did shop, they did not buy the necessities of life. The ordinance was designed to ensure labour housing was adequate and stated a precise amount of living space per individual, also requiring window space, though not
stipulating the need for any sort of shutter. It was designed to ensure the provision of nutritious food, which really meant tinned meat and/or fish and rice to supplement the *kaukau* we bought by the tonne and whatever greens we could supply. We grew Russian comfrey for them at one stage as it was said to be highly nutritious. The comfrey prospered and practically reared itself, but sadly no one would eat it, not even the dogs. Blankets, lap-laps, matches, tobacco and salt were on the ordinance list as were *meri* blouses for women. These were hideous, sloppy garments with puffed sleeves all cut in the same style. Someone in authority deemed bras to be an essential item for women though I thought this was overkill. Since the only *meri* we employed full time was Pagi, it didn't really matter. She had a bra, though I suspected only one.

The locals who worked for us on a casual basis didn't benefit from the ordinance because they had their own accommodation and gardens. Generally, the *kago bois* accepted what we were able to give them with good grace and there were few complaints. Most of the *bois* were free to grow food gardens and those who had been with us for some years were allowed space to plant coffee. Their biggest problem, apart from the official rate of pay, was finding enough cardboard boxes to block up their window spaces. Village houses had no windows and our *bois* were uncomfortable exposed to the elements. They also were accustomed to being enveloped in the smoke from their cooking fires and didn’t care to have it escape through open holes in the walls. Although the days were hot, the nights were cold at that altitude and the smoke helped keep the huts warm. Always some of it seeped through the thatched roofs and the soft haze of smoke rising skyward in the evening and early morning gave the little huts a special charm.

The Australian administration had a daunting task. It was accountable to the United Nations and its mission was to bring these fragmented tribes to a state of independent democracy as soon as possible. In the highlands, we could see it was simply not feasible to rush the preparation for independence while trying to bridge the gap between the Stone Age and the industrialised
world. The speed with which the more practical aspects of development were introduced was stunning. One of the most impressive was the introduction, in little more than a decade, of a road network traversing some of the most formidable country in the world. It was surveyed by *kiaps* and built by natives using picks and shovels. It was no use establishing a coffee industry, or any local enterprise, until there was a network of roads. Only then could schools and hospitals be built, and only then could the support infrastructure, the services and shops and banks, move in.

But practicalities were not enough. Because of the Government’s need to match the pace of these introductions with social change, the primitive societies lost their sense of direction. By too suddenly exposing the people to democratic principles and practices, the innocents and the sophisticated were set on a collision course. By trying to expand the cultural pattern of existence and rid it of anomalies considered unacceptable, such as tribal fighting, inherent social structures were collapsing. The concept of equal rights for all was as far removed from their understanding as it was possible to be. The superimposed system of justice was in perpetual conflict with their own.

Never could the Australian Government be accused of not having the interests of the PNG people at heart. Its planning was thorough and the means of implementing policies through the comprehensive system of patrol officers, or *kiaps*, was brilliant. If the Australians had anything to answer for, it was for over-accommodating the PNG people. Figuratively speaking, Australia gave them a PhD without expecting them to learn anything, it gave them perks without requiring them to be earned. The Australians set up in business anyone with enthusiasm and assured them of future contracts. We gave them compensation at a level often beyond reason and the people quickly learnt to take advantage. They were very smart people.

When I worked for the *Post Courier* in the late 1970s, which at the time was the nation’s only daily newspaper, I walked an area of land with the owner who was claiming thousands of dollars for losses he would incur when the land was
acquired for the development of Hagen’s reticulated water supply. The owner, in cahoots with an adjacent landowner, had succeeded in preventing heavy equipment from reaching the site in a manner Australian anti-logging protesters could have learnt from. As we walked, this man enthusiastically pointed to the equipment he had purloined from a private earthworks firm and would not allow the owners to claim. He showed me over the two small sites in question which were so badly degraded it would take years to reclaim them. The coffee trees were in the last stages of die-back and so few in number that the compensation demanded — which was finally signed off at K65,400 — was ludicrous. Everyone in authority knew of this sorry situation in private, but I was asked by the developer not to reveal to the public the sum agreed as they feared further set-backs to the project. After all, the Australian Government and not the developer had to pay up.

When I protested to my editor, I was told the paper had a policy of ‘protecting the people from themselves’ and at some levels this made sense. But when the Australian administration left, the people had not learnt about real life and how to cope without the altruistic umbrella. That was a direct outcome of the push to hasten the transition to independence and a disservice to Papua New Guineans.

Time was the enemy; there was not time to effectively set in place PNG institutions capable of taking over the administration, there was no time to properly train the future public servants, no time to help them understand the concept of supply and demand or of financial fundamentals. There was no time to demonstrate why pay-back killing was unacceptable, why law courts were required to establish innocence and guilt. There was not even time for the Australian magistrates and judges to reach agreement on whether to take tribal penalties into account when sentencing a defendant, who, depending on his crime, might already have been severely punished by his tribe. And what we knew as crime was often not regarded as crime by the highlanders. The gap had to be bridged too quickly in response to the pressure to grant independence, virtually all of it coming from outside the country. The ‘bushies’ like the Alimp mob had
no idea what ‘underpants’ (which was roughly how they pronounced ‘independence’) was all about; they were certainly not consulted about its introduction and gave little thought to it. A few young ‘townie’ Papua New Guineans thought it would be a great thing. But they were not the instigators and their understanding was akin to a snail tackling Collins Street during Melbourne Cup Week. In the highlands, more thoughtful people, like Hagen *bigman* Wamp Wan, were saying ‘*Mipela no redi yet*’ (we’re not ready yet).

Compensation in tribal speak and in tribal commodities was a huge part of traditional life. The highlanders were in a perpetual state of owing and being owed. Compensation was required for things such as pigs destroying a neighbour’s garden, for pinching a neighbouring clan’s property or when a woman left her husband, to name a few. It was required when a fight left the enemy with ruined gardens, with wounded clansmen or if a man was killed. Compensation payments would be planned well ahead and invariably became ceremonial occasions. As well as paying for wrong-doing, every clan was in the position of owing something to someone. Women tallied up what was owing, what was owed and what needed to be given and, at certain times, a ceremony would take place to make an exchange of gifts.

These were the *Moka* ceremonies which occurred at times nominated by a tribe’s *bigmen*. The *Moka* was designed to encourage new alliances or re-affirm the strength of old ones. Tribal fighting was endemic and allies were in perpetual demand. The tribes fought to increase their territory, they fought over dissatisfaction with pay-back arrangements and they fought, very often, just to preserve their population and stay in existence. The payments traditionally took the form of pigs and shells and plumes and oil, the latter stored and carried in lengths of bamboo.

*Wealth* was in what you were owed; this was the real power and being owed was just as powerful as having, especially as pay-back necessitated a return of gifts at some future date with interest, so that a gift of pigs would be worth considerably more pigs by the time it was repaid. A straight pay-out would have left no one owing and the system would have dried up. This was their
wealth at work, earning interest and as good as a bank account. Through the *Moka* a man gained status, wives and pigs. The *omak*, which hung suspended from a *bigman’s* neck, was a kind of register of what was owed him. The *Moka* ceremonies could be between sub-clans within a tribe or between quite separate tribes. Sometimes *Moka* ceremonies were huge affairs for which a tribe might put in months of preparation. Pigs by the score would be tethered to stakes in neat lines, while others had passed their last gasp in preparation for the monster *mumu* which, along with a *singsing*, would play a large and important part of the ceremony. The bigger the occasion the more kudos for the clan with the wealth to dominate the event. Importantly, *Moka* was insurance for the future. The more exchanges a clan could initiate, the greater its security later. It was significant that in the old days, no clan would demand compensation. It was incumbent on the clan owing to initiate payment and ensure it was adequate.

With the introduction of money and the consumer society, all this changed. Clans required compensation for a whole new range of things, one of the most devastating being car accidents, because of their frequency and the fact that the tribespeople felt free to determine blame. Not only was cash now in demand as compensation, as it was in the payment of a bride price, but no longer was the aggrieved party prepared to wait half a decade before the score was settled. Payment was sought in a matter of days and, if it was not forthcoming, violence frequently resulted. Clans often sought an instant death for a death.

One bright, sunny morning, 2,000 tribesmen tore the peace apart when they stormed into the town of Hagen, their pounding feet churning up red dust, spears darting and tomahawks clawing the air. They were Tambuls come to collect the bodies of several of their number killed in a road accident involving a Mogei driver. A group of maybe 200 broke away from the main body looking for a Mogei to kill as retribution. They pelted homes and cars with stones and made a terrible mess of those parts of the town they raged through, including the market, in their unsuccessful search for a victim. The Mogeis had gone to ground.
Compensation came to be a huge issue that threatened life and limb as well as progress. Not many expatriates were exposed to the violence personally, but in 1971 a precedent was set which unnerved expatriate residents as well as the authorities. On the way to Hagen an expatriate coffee grower's vehicle hit a Jiga tribesman who later died. When the hospital announced his death, the expatriate, Peter, was savagely attacked by a mob of Jigas in the centre of Mt Hagen. He went down but, as his attackers moved in for the kill with a heavy lump of concrete, they were shoved aside by a brawny European tourist who towered over them and held them off as police arrived. Peter was luckier than others to escape with his life but compensation was required. The word 'accident' was meaningless to highlanders. An eye-for-an-eye people, they believed the driver whose vehicle hit a man was to blame if he died, regardless of fault, and he must pay for it.

The road was Peter's lifeline and it was clear he must appease the local people. Government authorities, fearful of allowing such reckless bending of the law, were instrumental in having the sum demanded reduced, but allowed a pay-back to go ahead in cash and cattle, knowing that the man's life was worth nothing if it did not. In subsequent accidents, neither native drivers, nor even one or two expatriates, necessarily lived to pay compensation, but this did not absolve a clan's responsibility from making payment. This kind of incident was responsible for the outbreak of many tribal fights.

Normally, expatriates had little to fear, even in the town at that time, except house and shop break-ins, providing they did not become involved in clan affairs. A teacher at the Mt Hagen High School suffered the consequences when, in front of the whole class, he denounced the actions of a student's father. The student's wantoks later attacked the teacher with a heavy piece of wood for his comments, even though they were in support of the student.

The kiaps succeeded in halting tribal fighting for a number of years but no one could have foreseen the implications of doing so. The Australian Government could not tolerate the continuing fighting. Apart from being what today would be termed...
euphemistically un-Australian, it was terribly destructive. It involved whole tribes and very often neighbouring supporters, it destroyed houses and the gardens in which the women had toiled ceaselessly and left near-starvation and homelessness in its wake. Tribal fighting caused dreadful wounds and death, though traditionally clan leaders often had the power to stop fights. Most disputes were about land and a fight could go on for years and years much of it in ‘cold war’ mode but ready to erupt at the least provocation. Since fights were men’s business and something they needed to do, provocation was deliberate and frequent.

The fighting left the clans of the highlands surrounded by enemies and increasingly fragmented, foiling the administration’s attempts to bring unity to a people who in all too short a time were expected to join as one as a democratic nation. Although the *kiaps* did halt the fighting for a time, well before independence it had broken out again in a new and more devastating form. A form in which leaders no longer had power enough to halt a fight and many deaths could result. A form that seriously set back the burgeoning development of a local economy as warring tribes hacked down the enemy’s coffee trees and burnt their homes, trade stores and cars. While the fighting was stopped, the men had little to do — or nothing they wanted to do. The women had always worked the gardens, taking the babies with them in their *bilums*. In the village, young children looked after even younger children until they were old enough to go to the gardens. Traditional men’s work, apart from fighting, was relatively trivial: new gardens to build and fence, firewood to gather and, from time to time, blinds to weave and houses to build.

The highlanders didn’t need to work for money because at home they had all the things that had ever been important to them: their land, their pigs and their women, in that order. Their land was the substance of their being, pigs were their physical sign of wealth and their women fed them and gave them sex and sons and, in the very old days, they were killed if they caused too much trouble. Adultery, especially, was a serious offence, more so than murder. Although most young men could not afford to indulge, it was a polygamous society, so if you had the
wherewithal for down-payments on several wives, one was no great loss. Very quickly the white man’s money jumped to second place and people cast about for the means to obtain it. Those who sought employment didn’t know much about the work ethic and were confused when they were reproved or had their pay docked. To them, a few hours work a day or taking two weeks off after one on was OK. It took the workers a long time to fathom why employers objected to this and many left their jobs before they ever found out.

The almighty dollar, although it was then the pound, had the same kind of pull in our isolated highlands as it has in any developed nation. Money gave our highlanders hope that soon they would have all the expatriates’ trappings. When they found that a month’s wages did not buy a car, they settled for Twisties and packets of cigarettes. The concept of saving for something bigger was alien. For the same reason, when they planted their coffee trees and eventually started earning from them, the money was for spending, not for returning to the land by way of equipment and fertiliser. In the 1970s, much of the local coffee was bought at the roadside as cherry. Taking short cuts with coffee to bring in ready cash was the order of the day. Coffee was picked too green and hidden in the bag under a ripe layer. Small pickings of ripe beans would be allowed to ferment inside their red skin while owners waited for sufficient volume to fill a bag for roadside sale. By 1980, 70 per cent of highlands coffee was produced by small-holder Papua New Guineans and it is not surprising that the quality of coffee coming from the highlands had declined 20 years later.

By the mid-1960s, barely 30 years after the first white men walked into the Western Highlands, the Government was bending over backwards to help train highlanders in preparation for the country’s future. An agricultural college was established, the Mt Hagen Provincial High School was built to cater for secondary students to form four, a technical school and vocational centres taught trades to primary school leavers, tea-growing had been introduced, pyrethrum became a promising industry and sericulture showed potential. Medicos trained locals in the basics of medical
treatment, doing the sort of work in the field that I did from home. I could go on and on, but within the bounds of possibility, no stone was left unturned to encourage learning and enterprise. The problem remained that all the stone-turning in the world did not lead to instant acculturation, as a senior *kiap* described it, and the new era was in constant conflict with the old culture.

Circumstances made it impossible to provide schooling for everyone, yet the people sought education for their young as the next best way, after money, to secure a future for the clan. Children would walk 10km, starting in the chill mist of first light with arms hugging goose-pimply bodies, sustained only by cold *kaukau* left-overs. They would follow steep, treacherous tracks, slush through swampland and wade rivers just to get to primary school. They did it because primary school was a prerequisite for high school and clan leaders believed those who made it to high school were assured of a future. The *bigmen* decided which youngsters should be schooled and which should stay behind to preserve the traditional lifestyle.

At that time, there were five high schools in the entire district, most of them small and missionary-run, so secondary education remained a dream for most. In the mid-1970s, barely 45 per cent of children even made it to primary school yet the problem of an over-supply of school leavers was already being recognised, with only 100 new paid jobs being created each year. In response to this, primary schools became known as community schools and the curriculum was redesigned to be more relevant to village life and needs. In some places adult education workers offered tuition in the village, hoping to attract school leavers. But the students did not want to return, for the village no longer held the sort of future they dreamed of. The clansmen, who had put such faith in education for their young, were sadly disillusioned. A handful of school leavers went back to their clans, starting enterprises to improve the lot of their people and of these only a very few succeeded, despite being given every help by the Australian administration. The students, even in the 1970s, had to find out the hard way that at the end of all their schooling, half of them would be unable to find employment.
A few expatriates believed they were doing a kindness by sending promising natives to Australia for training. Some Papua New Guineans moved mountains to send their children to Australian schools. Much later I became aware that a number of leading Australian doctors who had worked in PNG believed the ultimate reward for excellence for PNG medical practitioners should be an Australian Fellowship. It always worried me that Papua New Guineans should be encouraged to aspire to Australian ideals rather than having goals of their own. I worried that this sort of aspiration would add to the already divisive social structure being created by education within PNG. Yet there were areas where specific training was not available in PNG, such as defence, for which the country depended on Australian training.
We had very nearly missed the chance to grow coffee in PNG, being granted permission at the last official land board to alienate land for that purpose. Although overjoyed to get it, the timing turned out to be not altogether in our favour. Income tax was introduced the next year, not that demands were made of us for a long time, but also by the time our first crop came on to the market, the price of coffee had dropped. Originally, all highlands coffee went to Australia where we were availed of tariff protection, but coffee-growing countries were soon in the grip of world over-supply and, until import duty on coffee imported from other countries was increased, Australian buyers gained little from taking the PNG product. It was clear we would soon be subject to global market forces, in which Brazil, where the industry was huge, played the leading role. This meant, after the establishment of the 1962 International Coffee Agreement, fighting for an export quota which would take PNG’s special needs into consideration. It was not until the quota system was abandoned at the end of 1972 that marketing conditions eased.

Although we were members of the Highlands Farmers and Settlers Association, like most of the 174 expatriate growers in the five highlands districts, few of us fully appreciated how dependent we were for survival on the activities of organisations such as Farmset and the Coffee Marketing Board. While coming
to terms with the imbalance between supply and demand, we were hit by a further set-back when authorities clamped down on standards of operation for aircraft and new load restrictions forced a rise in freight costs. The entire coffee industry was dependent on the ubiquitous DC3 and the restrictions struck fear into the hearts of growers who simply had to hang in there until the Highlands Highway was opened to unrestricted traffic in 1966.

When prices dropped, native growers were loud in condemnation of the daily newspaper which they thought guilty of determining the coffee prices it published. We were confident we could ride out a few months of low prices, though we had little in reserve, so we went ahead and took our longed-for leave in Australia and didn’t rescind the order we had lodged for a small truck. Our departure caused a monumental upheaval for some of our *bois*, who became terribly upset despite our assurance that we would be back. The experience left Pagi in a terrible state, weeping copiously and noisily. We were more concerned that the leaks in the *kunai* roof would cause damage inside the house and had serious thoughts about starting to build the permanent house which my architect father had already designed. Most of our friends had graduated to permanent houses, reflecting their owners’ faith in the durability of their 99-year leases. The new homes were made of brick and were built to last; one enterprising couple at Banz contributing to the new-look highlands architecture with a charming adobe brick cottage.

Nearly all the homes had lovely gardens where *gaten bois* toiled and plants of incredible variety flowered in great profusion: flame trees, jacaranda, magnolia, bauhinia, poinciana, poinsettia, hibiscus, wild ginger, frangipani, the velvety ivory of gardenia and the sweet, fresh, white blossoms of the coffee. One Banz house was designed with an atrium between bedrooms and the living area and this was hung with an extravaganza of indoor plants. One end of the atrium was open to an expansive lawn, which was never less than manicured, where bougainvillea in gentle apricot, fiery red and soft mauve ran rife in a permanent haze of colour.
This house at Wagamil belonged to Anna and Jim with whom we spent many memorable weekends. Anna was the ultimate hostess and Wagamil parties were truly brilliant, the menu on one special occasion including ingredients flown in from Australia. Our dogs were always invited as outdoor visitors and one night, being overly replete, I forgot to feed them. They found their cans in my basket and overnight pierced the metal with their teeth, squashing out every morsel of meat and flattening the cans. I thought this very resourceful.

The design Dad produced for our house was beautiful, every window taking advantage of the superb views of the valley to be had from an elevated peninsula created by a sweeping bend in the Kiempi. It must have been one of the most spectacular residential sites in the world. We were not financially ready to build this house and, indeed, the plan was too ambitious and had to be refined. But we were beginning to have a real need. We had already restumped much of the original house but the biggest problem was the roof. In reroofing a native material house the replacement kunai grass had to be fresh and pliant when it was bundled for tying in place. Fresh kunai was a lot heavier than the dried grass it was to replace and we dared risk only one rethatch before deciding a new roof would probably bring the house down. I remember avoiding the drips one wet day sitting cross-legged on the double bed to wrap Christmas presents.

Going south for leave was an expensive proposition and, in those days, it happened very infrequently. Happily, the occasions were interspersed with the occasional visit to Madang where we were able to economise by staying in the CWA house. At that time, virtually everything we needed at Alimp, and which we couldn’t grow, came from Madang and all our coffee was initially shipped from its port, so our visits combined business with pleasure. Much later, Hagen friends introduced to Madang the Smugglers Inn, a stunning motel on a spit of land fronting the sea. Dinners on the patio under a balmy night sky, accompanied by the murmur of the sea as it lapped the rocky embankment, were bliss. Our Madang visits by then were more frequent. Madang was lovely but, for me, nothing was ever as
good as getting to Melbourne, being with my parents, catching up with friends and gasping over the wonderful things in the shops.

It was during that leave we couldn’t afford, before we took possession of the truck, that Mabel was in touch to tell us that Simba, who she was minding, had died, apparently of a heart attack. I was distraught. Of course, I knew that people who keep dogs inevitably face heartbreak as successive dogs die, but this was my beloved Simba and for days I agonised over the prospect of life without him. Poor Mabel, too. But life went on and, after completing the routine visits to dentists and doctors, Dad introduced us to some of his regular suppliers. We went mad choosing bathroom and kitchen fittings for our new house and spent hours at Stegbar, selecting window frames, though fortunately no orders were lodged. It took many years for me to acknowledge that our fabulous house was a pipe dream that never progressed further than levelling the ground and erecting three or four sheets of roofing material over the proposed kitchen.

On our return to Alimp, it was sufficient to patch up the kunai roof which we were eventually forced to cover with an enormous blue tarpaulin. This was terribly ugly, but still a great relief. Meanwhile, we took delivery of our new truck. Even though the price of coffee was nothing to rejoice about, our trees were becoming more productive and the vehicle was needed to carry the dried beans to Hagen for final processing and dispatch. We were given a great welcome when we arrived home although, surprisingly, since she was so upset about our departure, Pagi was not there and never came back. Ah well, they are an emotional people and see nothing untoward about displaying their feelings openly. We no longer had the same need for a nanny, anyway.

Christopher now whiled away much of his time playing with a little village boy called Mak, who would wander down the driveway almost every day and wait out by the big shed until Christoph was liberated from his breakfast, teeth-cleaning and hair-brushing routine. Mak would have been older than Christopher but was a good deal smaller. He wore a tatty pair of shorts or a strip of cloth hanging from vine tied around his waist.
and he had lustrous dark eyes and long, thick eyelashes to kill for. He was still young enough to be living with his mother in the women’s house, which was where the family food was cooked and eaten and which the women shared with the pigs. Before very long Mak would graduate to the men’s house and he would be expected to help with men’s tasks and become aware of male preoccupations including clan affiliations and warfare. He would be inducted into the fight as soon as he was big enough to throw a spear.

In the meantime, the children enjoyed a playtime similar to ours: a kind of hide and seek was a favourite and sliding down slopes on banana leaves, the one who got furthest the winner. A popular pastime and also something of an art was batting a home-made hoop or can, or anything else that would roll, along the road. The big bugbear for the native children was having to mind a younger child just at the time when they wanted to be free to play. Parents seemed easy-going but some things were a no-no and there was a slap or a blow with a stick for a child who pooped without using the hole-in-the-ground or who damaged or raided a garden.

Jules, never greatly fussed whether he had company or not, was good at entertaining himself though he sometimes joined Mak and Christoph. He was given plenty of attention by the haus kuk staff and when the kago bois had tasks close to home, such as planting the long row of eucalypts along the Hagen road beyond our driveway, Jules would wander off with them. He would always have a self-appointed minder who kept close. Jules would also follow the pickers and watch them dump their cherry into the holding tank at the factory; he would squat down beside the sickies who came for treatment and listen to a tanimtok explain the problem and he would watch the to and fro of villagers, pigs and dogs on the Hagen road from the grassy bank near the guest house.

The term kanaka was used to describe people who lived in the villages and it was not used in a derogatory fashion. The kago bois used bus kanaka (bush kanaka) when they wanted to draw attention to any especially uncivilised individuals and long long
kanaka when referring to crazy types. The kanakas seemed genuinely fond of our two boys who I knew were utterly safe in their hands. This, of course, was where local know-how came into play. Christopher and Julian were probably safer in the local environment with the original inhabitants than they would have been with Barry or me.

The two boys would watch while one of us weighed kaukau brought in by meris from the village gardens and gave them their pay. Sometimes they would be allowed to hand over the money and the meris would giggle, pat the boys delightedly and jostle each other in amused appreciation. It was quite amazing what these women were capable of carrying suspended from their heads. There might be 30 or more kilograms of kaukau in one bilum, a collection of greens in a second and a baby, in a specially made bilum of twine softened with possum fur, in a third, all riding low on a woman's back. I once weighed in a bilum of kaukau at more than 45 kilograms and this particular load was brought in by a frail, skinny creature who looked like a lapun but was probably in her thirties. The women mostly wore a laplap or length of cloth over their heads and under their bilums. On rainy days they wore over the lot two woven pandanus mats joined at one end and one side which served as a raincoat. The practice of carrying things in this fashion tended to give them a nasty lordosis, with the accompanying rounded shoulders and forward thrusting head. The meris were incredibly stoical and bore their massive workload and their status as chattels with great fortitude, retaining a sense of humour that defied the odds and emerged delightfully at the most unexpected times. Jules tickled their humour greatly when one rainy day he mimicked the way they wore their ‘raincoats’ by hanging from his head a sack split down one side, which he had seen the kago bois do.

At other times our boys were the centre of attention when they came with me in the Land Rover to buy kaukau at the roadside and both would play up to their audience unashamedly. Even away from the Alimp surroundings, I never had any sense that the children were creating feelings of animosity by their familiarity with the natives, or anything but welcome friendliness.
and bonhomie. I never felt conscious that I antagonised them either, though perhaps I did simply by having things they didn’t. The days for me and the children passed busily and Barry seemed happy in his freedom to do his thing. There was never any time when things stood at a standstill or time hung heavy — except happy hour.

About this time, Father Krimm began to feature more in our lives, confusing Jules, who thought he was Father Christmas and called him that. He was the biggest man I have ever seen, not fat but taller than 6’8” with a stalwart body to match his height, his legs like trees and heaven knows where he bought his shoes. An American, he showed us photos of himself as a handsome giant of a young man at the wheel of a sporty car and it was not easy to understand why he had chosen the life of a missionary in PNG. He didn’t complain much but, perhaps because we were Anglican while he was a Roman Catholic, he felt free to unload some of his frustrations. One of these involved the Bishop who, living at Rebiamul near Hagen, had first pickings at incoming air cargo. Even when this was addressed to him, Krimm said he frequently never saw things he later learnt had been sent to him from America.

Father Krimm would come to Alimp most Sundays to conduct his third and last communion service for the day. This was held under an open-sided, *kunai*-roofed structure at the edge of a large cleared area. This area was kept slashed by the villagers, with help from our *bois*, so they could play *kik*. Rugby caught on in the highlands in a way the Government could have wished for tribal unity and economic acumen. As a hang-over from my Melbourne days of teaching physical education, I had brought with me a baseball bat, a catcher’s mitt and a couple of baseballs. Often I went out to the *kik* field with a team of *kago bois*, trying to teach them the elements of the game but my attempts to enthuse them were futile. Rugby was it. *Laki*, played with cheap cards bought at trade stores, a game which frequently incurred the most un-*laki* losses, came second, for the people were great gamblers.

After he had completed his service, Father Krimm took to calling on us and, since he was not permitted to eat before
communion, his great frame would be starved when he arrived and he’d eat us out of house and home. Happily his church eventually gave dispensation allowing its priests to take food before conducting communion. One day he came to our place very late and was grateful when we invited him to stay the night. I had the haus bois prepare an enormous meal and asked them to put up a shower for him in the drum outside. Not surprisingly, the water-worn bearers supporting the Marsden matting, which was our bathroom floor, were not up to Krimm’s weight. The whole structure collapsed leaving the poor man floundering among the house stumps in the muddy drain beneath, a good deal of him exposed to all outside who cared to look. Barry and I sat in our chairs paralysed — clearly, it was inappropriate to go to his aid. There was no door to the bathroom, so we were obliged to keep our distance and could only call out words of encouragement. He was a great sport though and climbed back up, eventually emerging fully dressed and ready to accept a rum.

Some time later, he brought with him a priest from Tambul, a bottle of bourbon and a case of 7-Up. After marching up and down the drive a few times catching up with their spiritual obligations, they returned to the house and opened the bottle. Their conversation turned out to be extraordinarily interesting on the implications of converting primitives to the faith and also a lot of fun. After a few drinks Barry put a record on the player and I mistakenly judged that Joe Krimm might be sufficiently under the influence to dance with me. I thought I had tempted him when he stood, helping himself upright with a hand on the timber beading edging the dining table Barry had made. The beading fell away with a sharp crack and Father Krimm, mortified, sat down quickly, so I never knew whether he had been about to have a dance with me or not. In retrospect, I’d have to say half a bottle was nowhere near enough to make a man of that size the slightest bit tiddly.

We sometimes called on Father Krimm on our way home and he obviously enjoyed the company. He made a point of showing us the work that had been carried out on his station since our last visit and we watched in awe the progress of
a substantial new church being made of permanent materials by himself and the locals. I admired him greatly and so, I think, did Barry, despite his disapproval of missionaries as a matter of principle. Finally, a lay sister came to help as a teacher and, in the long run, I guess disillusionment caught up with Joe Krimm — and maybe love. He left the church, married his lay sister and went to live in Europe. I was glad because he had always seemed so lonely.

At last came the day when we were to have a permanent ‘aid post’ at Alimp. A corrugated iron shed had been built as a medical store and dispensary at the patrol post site months before. Everyone was delighted that a dokta boi had now been allocated and that the shed was about to be put to use. Under kiap instructions, the luluai rustled up some house-builders and garden-makers from among the villagers to prepare for the big moment. They built a native material house, complete with floor, a smol haus, or loo, was erected over a long drop on the Kiempi side of the house and a small garden took shape adjacent to our number-two coffee, some of which was beginning to show signs that it might survive. It never occurred to us that we might one day live to regret the proximity of this coffee to such a public place as the patrol post, itself adjacent to the Hagen road. Theft of coffee cherry was eventually to become endemic.

The dokta boi duly arrived in a government vehicle amid happy yodelling from the villagers and much wrist-shaking on the part of the meris, their habitual way of expressing wonder and amazement. His name was Nambuga Mara and he came from the Kilipika clan on the other side of the Nebilyer River near Pabarabuk. Willing hands helped him carry to his house his bulging personal baggage and to the shed his meagre medical supplies. The shed, until now, had been unlocked and used from time to time by the local people for unknown reasons. Now, no one was allowed in and the small number of labelled cardboard boxes were stored on the grimy shelves by the dokta boi himself. When this was done, Nambuga produced a shiny padlock and, under the gaze of the fascinated villagers, clicked it firmly shut and attached the key to a ring which already held a number of mystery keys.
Dokta bois were trained to cope with the basic medical problems encountered in village life and diagnosis was probably the most important aspect of their training. They learnt to dispense anti-malarials, antibiotics and to patch up sores and wounds. They knew how to treat gastroenteritis, the main infant killer in the highlands. The dokta boi knew about dehydration but the parents did not. By the time a child was brought in, its condition was often beyond help from the dokta boi, or me, and too advanced to benefit from a mercy trip to Hagen. One day, Barry and I heard the mournful, dirge-like wail of mourning as a group of men and women went past our house, plastered with grey mud and carrying a small child we were told was dead. We watched, sad for them, from the bank by the guest house.

‘I wonder if it’s really dead,’ Barry said to me and we both slid down the bank to the road.

The group paused but with that glazed expression in their eyes that showed they weren’t really seeing. Barry thought he saw tiny pouting movements about the child’s lips and the skin colour was not that of death. Pidgin English could be tricky. The expression dai or ‘die’ did not necessarily mean death unless it was dai pinis or ‘die finish’, meaning irrevocably dead. I rushed the child with several supporters to Hagen against the clan’s wishes as they had already accepted its fate. It was too late.

All complicated cases were referred to the Hagen hospital, but it was necessary for expatriates to be involved as the dokta bois had no radio and no wheels. Although these mini-doctors had relatively few skills, the concept offered at least the sort of help most likely to be needed and it was far better than nothing. Except where expatriates like myself were present to cope with medical problems, there was otherwise no help at all for remote village people.

Theoretically, the villagers tended to the needs of the dokta bois, providing them with kaukau to supplement the government issue, working their gardens and keeping the aid post clean and neat. In practice, we found the villagers reluctant to part with their kaukau when it could be sold at profit to us and I think we were largely responsible for Nambuga’s kaukau intake. I think,
also, that it must have been very hard for a semi-educated highlander who had experienced the bright lights of town to be sent to a place like Alimp where the most fun thing to ever happen was chasing a recalcitrant pig. Although at first I noticed a decline in the daily line-up seeking medical attention from me, it soon built up again as Nambuga sought relief from rural monotony by way of itinerant PMVs (public motor vehicles) and coffee-buying utes.
Chapter 12

The next thing we had to think about replacing was the old Land Rover. It still had life in it, though a vehicle did not live long in those conditions. Soon it would be time to introduce Christopher to preschool so he would have the chance to mix with other children. Visits to Hagen would become more frequent and, misreading the predictions for coffee prices, Barry decided we could afford to swap the Land Rover for the added convenience of a car. So our small Isuzu truck was later joined by a new station wagon, flown in from Madang in a Junkers. Its arrival caused great jubilation at Alimp, especially to our *bois*, who basked in the reflected glory of the new upmarket Verona image.

It was quite sad to say goodbye to the old Land Rover which had served us well and carried many memories, some hair-raising, some intimate, some funny. It had brought Barry and me all the way to Alimp from Melbourne. It had tackled bravely the most formidable roads, rivers and bridges in the world, it had carried our little family all over the highlands, complete with collapsible playpen, cot, ball gown and dinner jacket, golf clubs, shotguns, picnics and stage sets. It had carried sick people to Hagen and, on one occasion, it returned a dead man to his Alimp village. They brought him out from the morgue wrapped in an ‘issue’ blanket, his feet poking out the end and his *wantoks* laid him gently in the back of the Land Rover, beseeching me to preserve his dignity by not crowding him with cargo. The Land
Rover proved its worth when, its tray chock-a-block with *kago bois* all yelling and yodelling encouragingly, others heaving on ropes, it pulled the Fordson out of a bog that had looked like claiming it for ever.

On one occasion, laden with Alimp villagers who had botted a lift to go to a *singsing*, the old Land Rover had been hailed at Togoba by a policeman accompanied by a prisoner. The policeman was running late and wanted a lift. There was no room but the man persisted. Barry got down and took a look in the back, conceding there might just be room for one. Whereupon the policeman handed his rifle to the chap under arrest, climbed in with the *singsing* mob and told the prisoner to present himself and rifle to the police station in Hagen. Our Land Rover had a history second to none, I reckon, but it was not family-friendly and it was starting to cost money.

The next months were, to say the least, interesting. The Holden wagon era for us started with me developing a wicked toothache, which did not coincide with the presence of any dentist closer than Lae where it was arranged I should stay with our then accountant, Keith, and his wife. I elected to drive myself, partly for the challenge of the drive and partly to have some mobility in Lae. I had never left the children with Barry but he accepted the arrangement, grateful, I think, that my trip would be at minimum cost. He agreed that I should take Kum with me in case of trouble on the road and I was pleased about that.

I got more than the challenge I was looking for. The Wahgi Valley presented no problems but there had been a lot of rain in the Kundiawa and Chuave areas and there were numerous landslips as a result. Some six kilometres short of Watabung, one of these slips nearly stopped us and I longed for the low ratio and four-wheel drive of the old Land Rover. There had been no warning at Kundiawa and no one was working on the road but, with help from Kum, we managed to cling to the road, albeit at an unpleasant angle, and negotiate the bend, making it without much further trouble to Watabung. Here, no decision-making was required as the bridge had fallen into the river. Again, there was no one working on it and it was clear that its repair was not
going to happen overnight so we had no choice but to return to Kundiawa. I stayed at the sole hotel and Kum at government quarters. Next day I put Kum on the back of a PMV headed for Hagen and I flew to Lae. So much for my cheap trip to the dentist, but at this stage I didn’t care as that tooth was bad and eventually a nerve had to be removed to quieten the pain.

Tooth fixed, I became anxious about Christoph and Jules and pondered how best to pick up the car and get home. Miles, a Wahgi Valley coffee grower, was also staying with Keith, farewelling two gorgeous British women (cousins he said) who had been visiting. In the end I set out for the highlands in a convoy of three vehicles: Keith in a Land Rover, an associate of his from Port Moresby in a regular sedan, and me with Miles in his Land Rover. Only Miles and I made the Western Highlands that week and that was partly on foot. The Kasam Pass had virtually disintegrated after deluges of rain, forcing us to turn back to the patrol post at Kaiapit for the night. But at least there was heavy equipment working on the road and this gave us hope of getting through the next day. The three of us made the attempt but the muddied mess proved too much for Keith’s mate, who opted for the 200km trip back to Lae. Somehow Keith and Miles negotiated the Kasam, with help from a bulldozer, but Keith, frazzled from the day’s adventures, decided to drop out at Kainantu, reversing the order of his business plans.

Miles and I overnighted at Goroka and next day set out on a hazardous trip over the Daulo Pass. In parts, the road had slipped badly and my heart was in my mouth as we gently descended to the new level, having no idea whether it would slip further taking us with it. We drove as far as Watabung where, needless to say, the bridge was still in the river. Because my car was at Kundiawa, not so far away, we left Miles’ Land Rover and risked finding a lift on the Kundiawa side of the river. We walked for maybe 12km, carrying our bags, before a native driving a PMV headed our way not knowing the road was closed. He accepted our word on that and obligingly turned around and drove us the rest of the way to Kundiawa — for a sum.
That was the dentist. Then Barry had eye trouble and we decided he had to go south for tests. On the day of his departure I was aware that Jules was off-colour and had a bit of a temperature but, determined not to fuss, I headed home in the early afternoon after dropping Barry off at the Hagen airstrip. It had been arranged that I should have dinner with Mabel and Bill, who was now married to Pam, at Wagil-Sipia and stay the night. I got there about 6.30, already concerned about Julian's worsening condition. By two in the morning I was seriously alarmed. He was behaving and responding strangely, he was burning hot and seemed to be having trouble breathing. I was terrified at being so far from help and decided to get him to Hagen, where a hospital built of permanent materials and headed by an expatriate doctor had been built in 1965. No one offered to come with me but fortunately it was one of those rare, relatively dry nights. Bill lent me a manki masta for the trip and we set off into a pitch-black night about 2.30am, hoping against hope that the blackness that enveloped us was not overladen rain clouds.

In Hagen, I took Jules to friends where Jane was a trained nurse who was able to get his temperature down. Next morning, because Jane had a houseful, I took my two out to Bindon before going to the doctor who diagnosed German measles. To my horror, I later discovered that Esma was pregnant and had never had German measles. We moved out to Tas’s place and Esma rushed off to the hospital where she was given a massive dose of gammaglobulin. All ended happily; we three went home to Alimp after a few days and Esma didn’t contract German measles. Barry returned with the news that his eye problem was sunburn and that he was not to go out in future without a hat. I don’t know anyone, including me, who ever saw him in a hat. I had learnt a long time ago, however, that nagging Barry never worked and only invited a perverse response. He was his own man and always would be.

Late that year, Father Felix Doering of the Lutheran Mission at Ogelbeng was to baptise Julian and Pam and Bill’s new baby, Kerry-Ann. Father Doering was a lovely man and went to a lot of trouble to come by two pairs of booties as a gift for
each child. I believe it was his wife who pointed out that Julian, at two years of age, was out of booties, which prompted the dear chap to buy Jules a toy giraffe. Where on earth he found it, I don’t know, but G’affe was quite a feature of Julian’s early life, though not as desperately important as Christopher’s ‘blankie’. We went to a lot of trouble to splint G’affe up when he broke his neck.

It was not long before Alimp and its patrol post saw an even more dramatic event than the arrival of the dokta boi. Fixed-wing Cessnas and Otters frequently passed our way but we had never seen a helicopter. The beat of a rotor one day, coming closer by the minute, had us all running out into the open to look. Closer it came until it hovered over our garden. The villagers streamed out of the bush, kago bois dropped their spades, pickers dumped their picking drums and everyone rushed towards this astonishing monster, hesitating only as fear of the unknown caught them. The pilot waved, gave us a thumbs up and took the big bird back over the Kiempi to the patrol post. He put it down gently, churning up a cloud of dust which kept the onlookers momentarily at bay. The pilot cut the motor while three men descended, doubled forward as they escaped the downdraft. We had grabbed the camera but got there too late to capture the stunned expressions of the natives as the helicopter landed. By the time we arrived, they were still wide-eyed but creeping closer, anxious to touch the passengers to see if they were real. The highlanders were a very touchie-feelie people and a lot of expatriates took exception to this, especially males who might be subjected to groping of the genitals, no doubt in a bid to confirm genuine manhood?

The three men turned out to be the director and producer of the Seaspray television mini-series and a technician, all from Australia. We had already been involved with the series when Barry was invited to play the part of the police superintendent in a re-enactment of a segment of the Hagen Show. The role was not arduous, requiring him only to race up a ladder to the raised platform which housed the official party, played by various coffee growers and their wives, point vaguely into the distance and shout: ‘They’re coming!’ I think he had been quite looking forward to the diversion.
The fun went out of it for Barry, however, when we arrived at the appointed time and he was ordered to get a haircut. He didn’t want a haircut. With a short back and sides he was then taken to the police station where he was presented with the appropriate uniform and arrived at the showground in a police vehicle looking outrageously handsome in a police officer’s cap and jacket. Everyone was vastly impressed until he opened the door and stepped from the car wearing his own overly brief grey shorts which reduced his audience to gales of laughter. It seemed no police trousers could be found to remotely fit Barry’s lanky, slender figure and filming was held up until a police sergeant arrived with the best he could manage, still far too big round the waist but the right length. Someone found a belt and the pants were tightly secured; it would not do to have them fall down as he ran up the ladder in the midst of a crisis.

This time, the Seaspray, a two-masted topsail schooner if I recall, was berthed in Madang and the boss came to Alimp wanting to shoot an episode in the highlands. They required a native materials house but also enough power to run their equipment and had been told that our place might suit. We all walked home from the patrol post, had a beer and Barry and I watched while the technician checked the generator and the others looked over the layout of the house and gardens. They got pretty excited about it all and decided Alimp was it. They then settled down to discuss when it should happen, explaining they would need more than one day of filming. They neglected to tell us that for indoor filming a coloured light filter would be stretched across the doors and some windows of the house so that there would be lengthy periods when we would be unable to get in.

The schedule included a weekend which coincided with a pre-arranged overnight visit from Banz friends. We didn’t put our visitors off as we thought they would be interested in the proceedings. Fortunately, the weather was kind and we were able to lunch outside at the eatery we had cut into the slope running down to the Kiempi. The storyline involved one of the actors being tied up as a prisoner and, although we didn’t have much chance to see what was happening, it seemed a raid to rescue him
was mounted. The chief baddie was to fling open a window and fire shots from a revolver at the oncoming raiders. As he went to fling open the window, his hand went straight through the X-ray plate which, after all those years of service had become very brittle. I think his biggest problem was whether to shoot with his hand sticking through the window or whether to stop and open it properly first.

Eventually, we did get to see some of the action when, under our very noses, a baddie rushed from the house down the slope towards the Kiempi. He was a stunt man and was pursued by a stunt goodie. They got into a wonderfully realistic fist fight, rolling about on the slope, that impressed all of us enormously. Christoph and Jules kept jumping up and down in their excitement and it was a real challenge to keep them quiet. The *haus* and *kago bois* watched from the far side of the garden in a lather of amazement and anxiety. We thought the actors turned on a fantastic performance and applauded loudly when the sequence came to an end. But the director was not happy. They repeated the performance once, twice, three times until the stunt chaps must have been exhausted. Eventually, the director was seen to smile and we concluded that they’d finally got it right. But as the baddie succumbed and, while his opponent was still bent menacingly over him, Christopher, who had been about to explode from his enforced silence, yelled, ‘What now, Mummy?’ For a moment it looked as though there would have to be a repeat performance and very ugly glares were cast our way, but evidently it was decided a small editing cut would not diminish the overall effect.

The film crew and its paraphernalia had arrived from Hagen in two four-wheel drives and left late in the afternoon while we relaxed and explained to the *bois* that it was all *giamin*, or pretend. I don’t think they were convinced. Next day the whole crew was back and there was more drama when the continuity man discovered that the bunch of bananas at the back door, which had featured the previous day, was only a bare stalk. The fruit had been demolished by the actors during the day and it was astonishing how long it took to find a ripe bunch with which to replace the original.
By mid-afternoon, they had finished filming and sat around lazily on the lawn, ripping the caps off beer stubbies, shaking hands with our *bois* and showing tricks to Christoph and Jules in between munching their way through the new bunch of bananas. They were entertained in their turn by one of our ducks which waddled into the scene furiously shaking from side to side a small snake it held firmly in its beak. This intrigued the *Seaspray* crew which, to a man, applauded loudly when it eventually killed the poor snake, the noise frightening the duck into frantic wing-flapping escape. It had been exciting having all this filming activity going on at Alimp and when the crew piled into their cars I felt quite sad that it was all over. We never saw them again and, since there was no TV in PNG, neither did we see the *Seaspray* series to find out what it had all been about. Very frustrating. The only memory we had of their visit was another bare banana stalk and the snake which the duck had released in its fright and left at the door of the loo.

Snakes were not a problem at Alimp and I was glad I did not live in the Baiyer Valley which was home to death adders. Both well-meaning and evil spirits, sorcery and poisons were still very much a part of the highlanders’ existence. The venom from death adders, along with special seeds, the decomposing livers of the dead and, later, gramoxone and battery acid were used to concoct lethal poisons. Many villagers, especially those in powerful positions, lived in fear of a poison pay-back. Even after independence, a member of parliament confessed to me that he was a prime target for being poisoned as pay-back for actions taken by his father. ‘I always have to watch out,’ he said.

If some of our snakes were venomous, they kept out of our way. I never came across one in the bush and most of those I saw had been captured. The most common of these was the green tree python which grew very large and, though it could give you a nasty bite, it was not venomous. A couple of our villagers took some sort of ambivalent pleasure in capturing tree pythons and the confident way they handled these heavy, sinuous creatures seemed to me rash, at best. The highlanders loved an audience and would turn on any sort of impromptu act to attract one,
showing off with uninhibited enthusiasm. Demonstrating the
tortuous convolutions of a python at close range held audiences
enthralled and was heady stuff for those game enough to play
with them. These pythons were certainly not accustomed to
being handled as Terry’s was and I foresaw the day when
Nambuga or I would be required to repair a python bite.

We were lucky in the highlands for, not only did we not
come across snakes, we did not encounter as much in the way of
spiders or mosquitoes as we had down south. Certainly, the
anopheles mosquito was present and, in the early days, Malaria
Control sent teams around the countryside spraying likely
breeding places. Malaria was a real threat in the highlands but
never rife and, after a while, the spraying with DDT ceased.
Christoph and Jules took anti-malarials regularly but Barry and
I took extra large doses if we suspected the onset. I have no idea
whether we cured ourselves of malaria in this way or whether our
incipient malaise had not been malaria at all, but we never
seemed to go down with it. Tas succumbed to a dreadful cerebral
malaria of some sort which manifested itself while he was on
leave and we were told he nearly died.

Later the incidence of malaria became a greater problem as
the organism started to develop immunity to available drugs.
There was also a growing rumour that anti-malarials had an
adverse effect on eyesight. I became anxious about the two boys
taking prophylactics regularly and wrote to the Medical Officer
in Charge of Malaria Control asking for a comment. The gist of
her response was that there had been documentation of retinal
changes, mainly from high dosages, but the risk was thought to
be small. The word ‘thought’ spelled out the lack of certainty and
an urgent need for research. Obviously, nothing was known of
the long-term effects of new drugs being developed to counter
resistance by the malaria organism. But the doctor pointed out
that the prophylactics in current use had been used for many
years by many thousands ‘if not millions’ of people and had
‘greatly relieved suffering while considerably lowering mortality’.
This, compared with the recorded cases of retinal damage, was an
overwhelming plus, but she did admit that it was a difficult
problem. I was grateful for her honesty and it probably taught me, as much as anything, to look carefully at my options before making decisions. I concluded leaving PNG was not a real option and that the probably small risk of retinal changes had to be preferable to ‘suffering’ and possible ‘mortality’. Christopher and Julian were kept on their regular intake of prophylactics though I was never happy about it. Fortunately, I had no cause for concern.

We might have been short on snakes and spiders and the sort of mosquito that keeps you awake all night, but we did have to put up with rodents and cockroaches. Neither could be kept at bay as the bush rats came in from the cold and took up residence as soon as one lot were disposed of while the cockroaches were unassailable. I hated cockroaches but simply had to find ways to live with them. This meant ensuring they could not fall from the kitchen roof into the soup. Already we had special little plastic cases in which to house our toothbrushes but I also painted chemicals on the cupboard surfaces in the children’s room where, on the top shelf, we kept all things most beloved of cockroaches.

There were other creatures like the possums that were called *kapals* and the little tree kangaroos or *sikau*, one of which we kept as a pet. The unfortunate animal was called Archieapalkapal, although he wasn’t a possum. The only thing I never learnt to come to terms with was the fruit bats, the beat of whose wings made my skin creep, although they never did me any harm, poor things, and they had cute little faces. I was terrorised by those years of an open bedroom window through which a bat might fly and make a forced landing on my face. It was all those moments of cringing past them on the way to the loo as they hung upside-down sucking revoltingly at the bananas. It was one of the happiest moments of my life when Barry decided the fruit bat population had become excessive and we were to have a cull. In the dim light of evening, we set off with Waim, Barry and I armed with shot guns and Waim with a torch. Our destination was a huge pandanus tree near the vegetable garden that had become the stamping ground of hordes of the bats which hung there in such numbers it was almost impossible to see the tree.
Many people would be dismayed to hear that, from a hunter’s viewpoint, they were like sitting ducks, but I was delighted. We killed a great many and the next morning their bodies had all been taken — and it wasn’t by Archieapalkapal and his pals. One could only surmise they lost their lives to the benefit of protein-starved village folk.
I never knew what upset the order of things for some of our Minj fellows but I learnt to my great dismay that we were to lose Guru and two of his wantoks, all of whom had been with us for a long time. Apart from the fact that Guru had become so competent, he knew our ways and we had developed an understanding that I was convinced would be irreplaceable. Besides, I liked him enormously. We had limited values and experiences in common, although they were growing, but he was just a nice person. All the Minj chaps were special, with a keen sense of fun and a love of the dramatic. The Hagens were more earnest, proud and quite arrogant while the Nebilyers, by comparison, I found a bit on the apathetic side. I thought the Minj exodus must have involved some ancient enmity between the clans back home but, of course, these chaps were young and needed to maintain links with their people. They were no doubt thinking it was time to marry and they’d need clan help to pay the bride price. These were things I had overlooked or, at least, conveniently put out of my mind.

Soon after this set-back, we had cause to call on our old friend Terry, the birdman, who by now was ensconced in the first permanent materials house ever built in Hagen — the old kiap’s house at the top of the hill beside the parade ground. I had come across his manki masta, Paul, before and was impressed. We had to wait for Terry — ever unpredictable — and spent the time
chatting with Paul who graciously brought us a *muli* drink. It soon became clear that Paul was having trouble relating to his erratic *masta* and was planning to leave him. It seemed like just retribution to poach him, which we did.

Paul was a coastal man and already an accomplished *manki masta* who required little training. He was a short, slight man with bug-eyes and quick, bird-like movements, quite different from the more ponderous Guru. Paul was delightfully straightforward and did not indulge in the prevarications and deviousness often affected by highlanders. This tendency was a sort of time-buying exercise to give the speaker time to decide on the most suitable answer; they liked to tell you what they thought you would want to hear. Paul seemed to feel at home with us and we were incredibly lucky to find him. He was reliable and had a genuine regard, perhaps love, for Christopher and Julian. He stayed with us for nearly eight years until he was afflicted with a dreadful kidney disease which made him swell up into a round ball. The Hagen hospital couldn’t treat him so we sent him to hospital in Port Moresby and paid for his specialist care. For some time, we communicated about his condition with the hospital staff but then he left the hospital — whether cured or incurable we never knew. He never contacted us and all our attempts to trace him failed; he was lying low for some reason and it was curious and distressing that he never sought us out. I believe he knew his illness was terminal, otherwise he would have come back to us. I never saw him again and supposed he must have gone back to his *bles*. As he was a coastal man, whose clan we did not know, we had no way of finding out what had happened.

Xtopher, as my father called him, started preschool in 1967, attending one morning a week while Jules and I shopped and visited or just sat around at Tas’s place. The big decision now had to be made: to enrol Christopher with a primary correspondence school for the next year or get him to Hagen each day. My feeling was that he needed to experience school life if he was to relate to teachers and students when he had to go south. A few mothers in remote outstations were obliged to teach
their children by correspondence but it must have been hard on these youngsters when they finally had to mix with others. The Hagen High School curriculum went only to year four and other secondary educational options in Hagen were minimal. At that time, most of the expatriate children and many of mixed blood went south to Australia.

There was also reluctance on my part to embark on the huge correspondence commitment, which I knew would be a severe test of my temperament. The question was: how to get Christoph to school and back when it was not feasible for me to do the Hagen trip every day. Neither Barry nor I trusted PNG drivers; they were erratic and still at a stage when a distraction could cause driving skills to go out the window, like our tractor driver who forgot to straighten the wheels after turning a corner. None of our locals had a vehicle and if a *draivaboi* was to use our wagon to get Christoph to school, there would be occasions when they would need to stay overnight because of the weather. The thought was just too anxiety-making.

As 1967 progressed, another factor overrode other considerations. Instead of recovering, coffee prices continued to decline, making the operation of Verona unprofitable. It was no longer a case of laying off *bois* because now there was coffee to be tended, pruned, picked and processed and the people who did that had to be paid. We had no reserves and the town stores, which bankrolled so many of the plantation owners in the early days, finally gave up on us. It got so bad we both needed to earn just to keep things going and hang on in the hope that prices would lift. Tas, in the Department of Education, found a niche for us, Barry teaching trades to PNG primary school leavers at the vocational school in Mt Hagen and me teaching woodwork and home economics at the provincial high school, where I also coached potential athletes.

So we moved to Hagen for the working week and commuted to Alimp at weekends. Hagen was very different now from the Hagen I had known a decade before, though it was still a frontier town. For a start, many more people wandered the roads, more of them wearing lap-laps and shirts or *meri* blouses.
PMVs, their trays laden with passengers, plied the streets, their drivers stopping haphazardly, mindless of other traffic, for roadside chats. A particularly popular place for chats was the wide, grassy verge beside the nine-hole golf course, where friendly greetings frequently went on long enough to bring other traffic to a halt, infuriating drivers and causing a cacophony of horn-blowing.

Opposite the golf course were several Chinese trade stores, all stretched along the old airstrip, which had been moved in 1964 some eight kilometres from Hagen to flat land at Kagamuga in the Wahgi Valley. There was the coffee processing factory, a post office, a few offices and Steamies’ and Burns Philp’s supermarkets, a few specialist shops, including a much-needed chemist, a newsagent, a dress shop, a bakery and an electrical contractor. There had long been a mechanic’s workshop but this had multiplied, most of the owners becoming agents for various vehicles as well as suppliers of spare parts. As well as the Hagen Hotel, which had been renamed the Highlander Hotel, we had the Hagen Park Motel, which was a popular venue for the expat population, and Kimininga, a mission hostel out at the ‘one mile’ opposite Bindon. A little further on was the high school where I was to teach.

There was an excellent market where produce of all kinds was laid out on lap-laps or woven pandanus mats, some gaining space on *pitpit* benches under a crazy-looking, winding thatched roof. Much later, when I saw it from the air, I realised its twists and turns took a precise form and learnt that it was designed to represent the looping meanderings of the Wahgi River. Neither roads nor market-place were sealed and the dirt, trodden down by multitudes of bare feet, became firm as macadam until it rained. The earth in and around the market was stained with the red spit of betel-nut, one of the most popular products among the highlanders.

While expatriates were guilty of introducing their diseases into the highlands, plus tobacco and alcohol, which was to have a disastrous impact, the origin of many significant illnesses lay in PNG. These included malaria from the anopheles mosquito,
neglected respiratory disorders, gastroenteritis from filth and cancer of the mouth from the lime always chewed with betel-nut to reduce its bitter taste and give it potency.

By the time Christoph started school there were about 600 expatriates in Mt Hagen, the numbers increasing as private firms set up business. Many built houses for their employees but most of the houses had originally been built for public servants. They were clad with fibro sheeting and had corrugated iron roofs, the mandatory two water tanks and were universally depressing in style. You never had to ask where the lavatory was when you visited. Most Papua New Guineans who had found employment in town left their villages and now lived in crude, corrugated iron lean-tos, patched with bits of pipit blind, on the perimeter of town. By the time we came to live in Hagen, the size of the indigenous population was guesswork but a sample census two years later put it about 9,000. It varied a lot.

Papua New Guineans working and living in the town were enormously disadvantaged because they, in the same way as their families in the village, were obliged by traditional responsibilities to provide support to their wantoks. The system was a kindness to old people who were assured of lifelong care, but it was also a bonus for villagers wanting to see the bright lights to know they had wantoks in town they could legitimately sponge off. The hapless wage-earner, obliged to feed and house them, found it hard to make ends meet, much less get ahead.

We moved to a two-bedroom, fibro, government house attached to the vocational school where Barry was to be one of two teachers. Before long he became the sole teacher, which put him in charge and meant his personalised timetable was not questioned. This was essential if he was to endure his new job. Each Friday afternoon we would all trundle off to Alimp where Barry and Waim would plan the forthcoming week's work schedule. I would leave for Hagen with Paul and the boys on Sunday but often Barry didn't make it until Monday and sometimes later if he had to load coffee for the Hagen coffee factory.

All his pay went into the plantation and paying the bois; mine went into supporting the family: food, clothing and even
Barry’s rum, without which life would not have been sustainable. One joy for me was being able to swap the dreaded over-proof rum for whisky now I was earning money of my own. I was not about to become a wowser but the smell of rum had become absolutely abhorrent to me and I jacked up on buying Barry’s alcohol the minute his teaching career came to an end. At the same time, I coaxed him into having Verona pay our electricity bills which, until the phones were laid on, was about the only service the town offered. I had never had any input into our financial arrangements and it felt good to have a salary again, although there was little choice as to how it would be spent.

So, it was back to teaching for me while Jules went to preschool in the mornings and to ‘Auntie Betty’s’ most afternoons. Becoming a teacher had little effect on Barry’s lifestyle and, in profoundly unprofessional ways, he succeeded in revolutionising the system. He always had a late start in the mornings but went up to the school during the day, as he might go to supervise the work at Alimp. I imagined his students would have trouble following his instructions for he was like a teacher I knew at school who knew her subject so well she skipped over basics that I, at least, never found out about. Becoming a teacher in PNG, threw up a lot of challenges I had not faced in Australia. For the first couple of years it was interesting.

But it was not a lovely time because the house was so awful. It had two minute bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen and a living room. It was little more than a hovel with the insubstantial feel about it of a van in a caravan park and not much bigger. It was situated on a V-shaped block between the red clay road leading to the Kum River and the red clay track leading to the vocational school. Paul’s best efforts could not prevent the washing on the line from acquiring a permanent red tinge and the furniture a dusty red film. I found living there extremely unpleasant and Barry loathed it, but Christopher and Julian ignored the ignoble circumstances and seemed to regard the move as an essential part of getting educated. I think Paul, who dossed down with a wantok, disliked it, too, for it was a serious loss of status, though he was uniformly good-humoured.
Puddenhead hated it and eventually was killed, run over on the Kum road. We planted her in the yard and it was from her grave that sprang the tall, thriving avocado tree so evident in the prevailing dilapidation on our return years later with Barry’s ashes.

Julian used to get croup and in Hagen he got so bad he and I spent the odd night in the hospital with a respirator which, after a while, the new paediatrician, Brenda, entrusted to my care at the hovel. I found croup a very frightening experience. It had started at Alimp where all the walls were *pitpit* and there was nowhere to build up a head of steam. Once, in the grass house, it was really bad and we pitched a tent over Jules’ bed and placed an electric kettle on the floor so the spout directed steam into the tent. I eventually dozed off in a chair despite every endeavour to stay awake and woke to find the kettle boiled dry and the bamboo floor beneath it black and about to burst into flames. Had it caught, the tinder-dry grass house and its contents would have been destroyed in a matter of minutes. It didn’t catch and Jules survived but the kettle, which I had won at golf and was using for the first time, was a distorted wreck.

In Hagen, both the boys got measles — thank God we now had Brenda — which Jules managed to later transpose into a partially collapsed lung. He had developed a lump under his arm which we had checked out while on leave, fearful of leukemia. It wasn’t, but that’s when they discovered the lung problem and Jules spent the rest of his summer beach holiday in bed watching television, interspersed with upside-down lung-draining exercises. Thank God, also, we were in Australia where comprehensive tests could be made. I often wonder what sort of a recovery Jules would have made had it not been for the facilities which gave us a decisive diagnosis and prompt treatment.

We took this leave just as soon as possible after Barry signed up as a teacher with the Education Department because his job entitled us to paid leave fares as well as the rent-free house. These perks never applied to me. Being a married woman and therefore a temporary officer put me in an underclass. I was not entitled to a free house or to leave pay, much less fares, and could never be eligible for promotion. These were harsh realities that
made sense of couples living in sin. As a temporary officer, in the nine years I taught at the Mt Hagen Provincial High School, I saw six permanent headmasters come and go.

After little more than a year and a half with the vocational school, coffee prices stabilised and gained a bit after a frost hit Brazil. Barry announced he was returning full-time to Alimp. This left the vocational school without a teacher and me without a house. Christoph, Jules and I embarked on what was to total 14 moves in 14 years. We packed up endlessly and trundled from one government house to another as expats went ‘finish’, always, it seemed, taking the curtains with them. Inevitably, the new windows we inherited were wider or taller than the last and, in Hagen, curtains were essential. After making three new sets and altering others, I was eventually offered a house at the high school which had its own curtains but was otherwise not unlike the hovel, except that it was on stilts and at a distance from red clay roads. This lasted for a couple of years until someone in the department woke up to the fact that my presence, as a temporary officer, was against the rules and I was invited to move on. By then, Verona could afford to rent us a Steamships Trading Company house that became vacant and gave us some security of tenure.

Never, through all of this, did it cross my mind that I should return to live at Alimp where the house was virtually falling down. The boys were both at the Mt Hagen Primary ‘A’ School (Australian curriculum), I was gainfully employed and I had involved myself with the Western Highlands Chamber of Commerce and the Primary ‘A’ School Board of Management, for both of which I became secretary. Once again, I had a sense of direction and, emotionally, was much more secure.

For the first time since marrying Barry, I felt it was safe to start thinking more laterally without making myself vulnerable. This had always been Barry’s exclusive domain and I had spent my married life trying to balance the equation. Barry’s skills, his creativity, his wide-ranging knowledge and intelligence, off-beat humour, and all the reasons why I fell in love with and married him, were never to be denied, but neither was the growing
understanding that he was inherently a loner. He preferred to stay on the periphery of family life, accepting of it but excluding it, neither knowing nor caring how to relate to its needs. It was impossible for him to express intimate thoughts and emotions and he had no idea how to demonstrate care or affection. Neither he nor I were all charm to live with — I guess that’s true of all marriages — but it got too hard to drag myself up from the black hole where Barry’s indifference and omissions led me. I never tried deliberately to isolate myself from him, but after a few years in Hagen, I acknowledged that I had fallen out of love. I had to, because loving Barry was too painful. I came to regard his foibles and excesses as fodder for the divorce court should I ever decide to leave him. Instead of being hurt, I looked at them dispassionately, marking them off on a mental slate for future use. Thus armed, I found him easier to get on with and I never used them.

Before leaving Alimp, we had mysteriously acquired the agency for a Danish furniture firm. It was a carry-over from our joinery days and highlighted the need for furniture in the area. I don’t think the Danish firm had the slightest idea of the paltry size of the local market when they awarded us the agency, but we were actually on the map in one of their brochures. This featured a number of purple blobs representing branches in Europe and we were the only purple blob in the southern hemisphere. The range of furniture was excellent and the product brilliant, but the PNG market was not only small but largely transient and the delay in delivery put people off. We didn’t make our fortune, but in our first year of teaching we sold a heap of furniture to Miles’ new wife at Banz which was terribly exciting. Not only did it seem to justify the purple blob, every bit of money helped.

I was able to persuade the Hagen Country Club committee to engage my father to design the first purpose-built, highly ambitious, three-stage Hagen Country Club. He was later to design the Mt Hagen picture theatre, commissioned by a local Chinese entrepreneur, on a budget to which Dad referred in derogatory terms. Neither project was of much financial benefit to him, but they entitled him to a couple of free trips to Hagen which was lovely and he did benefit from a job for a school
colleague of mine who commissioned a duplex. Dad sent me a cheque for £100 for soliciting the work which was also lovely. Stage One of the Country Club was built, consisting of entry, lounge, generous bar and wide verandahs. It was graced by our elegant Danish furniture and, since we also formed a connection with Sebel in Australia, some practical bar stools and outdoor furniture. When, sadly, the club folded some years later, this terrific furniture found its way into numerous Hagen residences, but we weren’t quick enough to get some ourselves. Dad missed out seriously on final payments for the Country Club, too, but I didn’t offer to return the £100.

It was while we were living in a little house adjacent to the Highlander Hotel that we once again became the target for television. This time it was the ABC, a representative of which was directed to us by a Sydney friend, deputed by her boss to find suitable material for a Chequerboard episode to be called ‘It can’t last much longer’. This came at a time when the role of private expatriates in PNG was being questioned by stirrers from outside the country. We were outcasts from Australia, misfits looking for greener pastures. We were vilified for exploiting the natives and depriving them to better our own interests. We were holding out against granting them independence for our own ends. I don’t doubt this was what drove the ABC to take a look for themselves and their representative came to PNG looking for a story from the highlands and the islands. She told us the focus was to be on the planter’s wife, but after a week in the school holidays staying with us at Alimp, she announced that the focus had changed and would now be directed at the planter. Well, it was very easy to take a shine to Barry. In the long run we all featured.

The ABC team duly arrived and filmed our family over a whole week, me at the high school and shopping with Christoph and Jules, Barry and me at a dance at the Pioneer Club, Barry at Alimp and then all of us together. They asked us how we felt about PNG and how we responded to the highlanders. They suggested we lived in isolation from the highlands people, which was patently absurd since few other expats would have been so involved at so many levels. They
suggested we were making a fortune at the expense of the locals and we were able to tell them they’d picked the wrong horse. They wanted to know how much pay the bois got and were advised to look at that in proportion to their output, to the stage of development in the country and to be mindful of pay in kind as well as cash.

They asked how we felt about staying on after independence. My reply was cautious for already I was having qualms about the future on several grounds, but my response was to question whether staying on would be tenable under a PNG administration. Would the roads and bridges be maintained without the kiaps, would we be able to get our coffee to Hagen? Would there be a breakdown in law and order? Barry said simply, ‘I’d hate to leave. I love the place.’ That stole the show and negated any doubts about our integrity that the interviewer may have thought to generate.

We didn’t see the episode until 15 years later when I was able to dig it out of the ABC archives. But a friend put the sound on tape for us at the time and we were both enormously relieved at the treatment we had received. After seven days of filming and all that had been said in that time, it was impossible to guess what direction the story would take. But we were not portrayed as exploiters and our need to make money was depicted realistically and sympathetically. We did not crack any whip, forcing people to work. As we both pointed out in different ways: ‘How could we? These people don’t have to work if they don’t want to — they’re free to come and go as they please.’ There were some anomalies in the production, such as the request to have Paul pick the children up from school which I normally did, but these were minor.
I had taught physical education for a few years in Australia but teaching in the highlands of Papua New Guinea was another thing. In Australia, I knew how to make students relate to me as a person and to my subject. I was able to motivate, to interest and amuse, to make useful comparisons and demonstrate the value of what the subject had to offer. None of my skills seemed to work in PNG. My jokes did not amuse, the girls thought home economics irrelevant. It was incredibly difficult trying to introduce the concept of hygiene to a group of girls whose mothers and siblings shared the dirt floors of their grass homes with pigs, who had no running water and preferred to buy cigarettes than soap.

Soap was a complete mystery to the highlanders at first. The story goes that when a missionary brought it to a highlands village and showed the local villagers how to work up a lather in a nearby river, they were attacked by a downstream clan protesting against this evil, frothy stuff invading their river frontage.

It was just as hard trying to adjust the girls’ thinking on rearing children, providing a balanced diet, offering mental, physical and emotional experiences and encouraging balanced development. I had grave doubts whether the ‘Australian way’ would ever be meaningful, though maybe some of what I had to teach flowed on to those who settled in towns. Sure, we were there to improve their lot and one of the things we must do was improve
the survival rate of infants and increase the average life-span of the people, but I found the curriculum too uncompromising.

In woodwork, the lads thought the answer to everything was brute strength. I was amazed at the way students were able to force a blunt chisel or plane blade through a piece of timber. I was also amazed at the extent of bluntness they were able to achieve and how quickly they could do it; I spent most of my lessons at the grinder and oilstone. To my students, the idea of a box, a table or a picture frame having to be square was incomprehensible. Neither pidgin nor any of the local dialects had the equivalent word for squareness — for the good reason that in their village lives there was no need for squareness, no cupboards in which doors must be fitted, not even a hole in the wall in which to fit a window frame. I solved this problem by making a table drastically out of square, with legs of uneven length for good measure. I proved the point by demonstrating the fate of a bowl of water placed on it.

After a year, most students were able to make a box with a sliding lid which could be open and shut without Herculean strength. I often wondered how many students found the items they made of subsequent use or whether the skills needed to make them were of any value, but they were invariably tickled pink when they completed a project, no matter how disastrous the result. Over the four years of secondary schooling, however, they did master basic design thought processes and practical skills that would stand them in good stead if they chose to use them. When I graduated to more senior classes, I had them build a little pitpit house with a mill-sawn, timber frame, windows, a floor and a door for use by the home economics girls. The boys also made the table, benches and stools for this while the girls made curtains, aprons and tea-towels out of government-issue blue and white checked cotton and sundry decorations for their little house in which we held a number of classes. Blatantly gender-biased, but that’s what the curriculum said they should do.

I used the term ‘boys’, but the ages of my male students varied wildly, one balding chap regularly bringing his two children to class. Christoph and Jules came, too, when school
holidays didn’t coincide and this is where they both picked up the rudiments of joinery which were to stand them in good stead. The Hagen Provincial High School was the original government seat of learning for all who aspired to greatness among the Western Highlanders and many of my students became VIPs, politicians and entrepreneurs, including Paia Wingti, who was to become Prime Minister of the country.

There were many more boys at the school than girls and my senior home economics classes never numbered more than 14. I might have enjoyed the woodwork more if there had been fewer classes. As it was, woodwork was compulsory for the boys in all four year one and two classes and so the work was very repetitive, especially sharpening cutting edges. At first, I was responsible for many of the junior woodwork classes under the management of Peter while he, and another expatriate, John, looked after the rest as well as the metalwork classes. Expatriate staff came and went and I eventually graduated to the top position, ending up in charge of the manual arts department, ably assisted in the metalwork shop by 2IC Dos, a highlander and a great guy. The promotion did not earn me any higher teaching rank.

In home economics, my real interest was in nutrition. The students were all boarders and you didn’t have to look far to see the deficiencies in their diet. It became clear to me that I could not spend class time telling the girls how to improve their diet without making it possible at the school. Enlisting the aid of another staffer, we introduced into the school’s big cooking coppers a kind of soupy stew with meaty bones and lots of veggies, thickened with rice. We really worked at this, spare lessons spent in the open-sided kitchen adding a bit more of this and that and stirring away at these great steamy coppers, until then used almost exclusively for boiling kaukau, showing the school kuk bois what to do. The change of fare was extremely well received, but once we withdrew our constant attention there was marked regression.

My dress-making classes were directed mainly to making clothes we could donate to the pikininis at the hospital. A good
deal of class time was spent at the children’s ward where mothers and sundry relatives sat around on the grass outside, defying the hot sun. Like the relatives of all the patients, they were responsible for providing food and washing clothes. Not only did we donate our gifts personally, we were able to review the various complaints of the children. This helped my teaching enormously. Although inured to the sight of dreadful wounds and sickness, the awful evidence of what the students saw on those hard, wooden beds in the hospital brought home clearly the need to prevent toddlers from falling into the cooking fire, the need to treat respiratory infections promptly and to prevent the killer gastroenteritis. The students learnt what an enlarged spleen indicated, why flies shouldn’t be allowed to congregate on sores and they began to understand the meaning of infection. After our hospital visits we would go back to the classroom to talk about prevention.

At the hospital, I held a few nutrition workshops for the parents but, not surprisingly, they weren’t interested. Children in PNG did not starve except in extreme circumstances and the ever-present problem of malnutrition was too remote a concept for them to understand. Fat tummies and stick arms were OK. They saw expatriates eating lollies and sweet biscuits and could not fathom why an exclusive diet of these for their children was not a desirable option. The idea of a balanced diet was altogether alien. I think our hospital chats succeeded only in making the poor mothers wonder why the hell they’d sent their daughters to school. Eventually, I wrote a nutrition booklet in pidgin for villagers which I wanted the girls to take home, but I left the school before that got off the ground.

One useful thing I did at the high school was to start a school newsletter. I say useful, because the students were obviously starved of this means of expressing themselves. Contributions came pouring in, most of them referring to village life and legends about the mountains and caves, the birds and animals and how they came to be. One of my requirements was that stories must be written in English and deciphering some of them was not easy. English became more difficult for high school
students when Papua New Guinean teachers were introduced to
the primary schools. Although they were instructed to teach in
English, most of them cheated, finding it easier to use pidgin.
This made communication at secondary level increasingly tricky.
There was no question of us teaching in pidgin. For a start,
pidgin was too limited and few of the secondary teachers learnt
to speak it but also, without English, students could not use
reference books or progress to further training or the types of jobs
they wanted.

Probably the greatest learning curve I went through at the
high school was getting to know a different kind of Papua New
Guinean from those I had worked with at Alimp. In preparation for
independence, the Government began to localise the positions
held by expatriates who were supposed to stay on only as long as
it took to train their PNG counterparts. This happened in every
government department but it did not happen overnight. In fact,
trying to institute this change proved to be one of the great set-
backs to the smooth transition to an independent nation and the
wantok system played a very adverse role.

Gradually, more Papua New Guineans joined the teaching
staff at Hagen High, so I was introduced to a breed of natives to
whom one simply did not dictate terms and who must be treated
with the respect due to colleagues. Initially, they came from
coastal towns where they had been educated and had far more
awareness of developments than the highlanders I had known. It
was fascinating to be privy to their thought processes, to discover
the different ways in which they and expatriates interpreted
events and responded to situations.

It had been decided that the senior class members should
write and perform a play as part of their English curriculum. The
details were kept very secret but on rehearsal days great gusts of
laughter could be heard coming from behind closed doors and by
the time it came to production, everyone was agog with happy
expectation. The play was staged under a kunai roof in an open-
sided structure where the student audience sat cross-legged on
the grass and the teachers were provided with chairs. The story
was minimal, the plot non-existent and the whole thing was
pervaded by the intense humour the highlanders found in bodily functions. The one of most interest to them was defecating, a subject which brought howls of enjoyment. The word *pekpek*, pidgin for faeces, was reiterated over and over during the play and when one of the actors pretended to go through the motions, the PNG teachers roared with laughter while the expatriate headmaster and a senior teacher got up and left in disgust.

On a completely separate occasion the term *pekpek* brought an amused response from a group of resident expatriates at a Hagen Park Motel function. A dewy-eyed visitor to the country, coming from the coast, claimed to have seen the most enormous *pekpek*. He told his spellbound audience that the thing was metres long and he'd seen it floating in the Sepik River. He had seen a *pukpuk*, which is pidgin for crocodile.

There were often differences of opinion among the staff about the need to discipline students. What expatriate teachers found unacceptable was often regarded as perfectly reasonable to the Papua New Guinean teachers and vice versa. In the latter years of my time at the high school, when I was in charge of the manual arts department, I had the privilege to work with Dos. He was a highlander whom I found entirely reliable but also, at least on the surface, was accepting of the practices that were integral to the way we operated. He was outspoken in denouncing the thefts that regularly took place from the school vegetable garden, while other local teachers believed the temptation was understandably irresistible. This changed when a highlander took on the senior agricultural position. Dos was punctual for classes and was prepared to tick off students who were late, while some PNG teachers were a lot less firm. The students didn’t live by the clock traditionally and it was not clear why they should start now. Regular attendance of staff was at first not a major priority among newly graduated teachers while to students it was a totally foreign concept. Also not well understood among students was their need to reach certain educational standards while at high school. It was commonly thought that once a student was lucky enough to reach high school, the future was assured and no further effort was required. Many who were pushed to achieve simply dropped out of the system.
It was while we were at the high school house that Barry became ill. For weeks he seemed generally run-down and not interested in anything, even staying in Hagen rather than returning to Alimp. It was always hard to tempt Barry’s appetite, but now it became impossible and he soon lost weight to the point of emaciation. The doctors in Hagen were mystified and conducted all sorts of tests, some of which had to be sent away for assessment. This took time and before all the results were available, it became obvious to me that he urgently needed expert care. Without waiting any longer for medical reports, and learning that a long-term expatriate resident, Jim, was going south, I asked if he would look after Barry during the flight. Jim didn’t hesitate, the flight was booked, wheelchairs arranged at every port of disembarkation and his sister alerted to meet him at Melbourne’s airport.

Down south they called him the ‘Belsen horror’ and whipped him into hospital on arrival. It took them a matter of hours to discover that he had a virulent abscess over the kidney and not much longer to cut it out. No one could believe it hadn’t been diagnosed in Hagen. Always thin, Barry had become so debilitated that recovery was still some weeks off and, during that time, I received regular reports from a telephone operator who always presaged her message with ‘Don’t worry dear, everything’s going all right.’

Once Barry’s medical troubles had been resolved, I had time to consider another urgent need that had been brought home by a trio of old hands from Alimp who arrived on the high school house doorstep one day. That was the need to check things at Alimp and to pay the bois. It was weeks since they had been paid. Had I tapped into the bank account we would have had nothing left and still been short. Talking to the bank manager and Banz friends in the coffee industry, I decided to accept the option of making a forward coffee sale. The suggestion was made by a friend on the Farmset committee and I was incredibly grateful. The coffee flush had finished for the year and he knew nothing much would be forthcoming immediately, but he found the money and my relief was great. With the pay in white bank
bags, I set off with Christoph, Jules and Sam, our new boxer pup, on a Saturday afternoon to pay the *bois* at Alimp and let them know what was happening.

It was a strange afternoon, the sky murky, almost threatening, from the accumulated smoke of grassfires. Burning off was step one in the production of new gardens and also a means of smoking out little furry creatures, such as bush rats, that made a good meal. It was ideal weather for burning for we were in the grip of a rare and severe drought. It was quite strange, too, driving to Alimp with Barry’s work to perform; handling the pay was something I had never done. Not only that, I felt strangely remote from Alimp and its *bois* now. Many of them were new to me for I had little contact with them during the weekends when I was there with Xtoph and Jules. I wondered how the *bois* would react to the money we gave them, which Waim and I had decided upon with the help of the most recent but out-of-date pay statement I could find. No pay day ever passed without dissatisfaction at one or more levels, but I hoped to God I did not create any really volatile situations by getting it seriously wrong.

When Barry did return, his joy at finding the money from the next coffee sale mostly spent was not great but at least payments were up to date. The *kago bois* were clearly relieved at his return and we decided to throw them a super Christmas party to thank them for their patience and forbearance. They might easily have all departed for more profitable climes in Barry’s absence. Christmas itself we were to spend at Baiyer River where Tas had established a cattle property after resigning from the Department of Education. Not only had he made this monumental career change and set up a model farm, called Trauna Valley Farm, he had married Brenda, our resident paediatrician. Brenda was amazingly resourceful in many respects and her medical skills were frequently called on when the town was short of a vet. When Sam was run over, she pinned his broken leg for us and, while we were at Trauna for Christmas, she pinned the leg of their own boxer when he was clobbered by Tas reversing the tractor. Not having appropriate equipment at hand, she used one of the substantial steel kebab skewers I gave her for a Christmas present.
Before we headed off for our Christmas at Trauna, we bought a steer to barbecue for the *kago bois* on a home-made spit, devised by Barry. We bought lots of tinned meat and rice, laid in vegetables for a big *mumu* and tossed up whether we could afford beer as well. Since prohibition was abandoned in 1963, the highlanders had shown a disastrous affinity for alcohol and it didn’t seem quite right to be seen encouraging a practice that was causing much heartache in family and clan circles, as well as at administration level. But then, we didn’t want this to be a ‘rubbish’ party, either.

‘A stubby each won’t break the bank or give them a chance to get “spark”,’ Barry decided, and we laid in beer, too.

The day before the party, Barry called a meeting of the 30-odd *bois* who, at that time, lived on the property and worked for us full-time, and warned them earnestly not to let the local villagers in on the act.

‘Sipos ol kanaka lukim bulmakau, oli kaikai ologeta na yupela gat nating,’ he told them sternly. (If the villagers set eyes on the steer, they’ll eat the lot and you’ll get nothing.) Despite the warning, some idiot decided he could repay a debt by letting just one local into the secret. The word spread fast and what happened was more or less as Barry had predicted. There was dismay but no ugly scenes and even those *kago bois* who didn’t score much more than a finger-lick of *bulmakau*, though disappointed, settled reasonably happily for the tinned meat, fish and *mumu’d* *taro* and *kaukau*, not to mention the beer.

Before Papua New Guineans were permitted alcohol, the only source was to be found in expatriate storerooms as well as the methylated spirits used universally for lighting lamps. It was not surprising that rum and beer and gin were favoured above methylated spirit, which I once elected to try for the experience. My hesitant sip barely passed my lips before it blew me away. The way Papua New Guineans drank their rum and gin and whisky had much the same effect — neat gin with whisky chasers was the go.
After World War II, civil administration was restored and a trusteeship agreement for New Guinea approved by the UN. New Guinea and Papua were then jointly administered from Port Moresby. In 1949 provision was made for a New Guinea Legislative Council which, by 1961, included six Papua New Guineans. This, and the District Advisory Councils which followed, were not at first representative but they were the forerunners of the constitutional processes that would eventually bring the country to democratic independence. The nation’s first truly democratic legislative council, with a majority of elected members, was formed in 1964, and 1968 saw the start of party politics and a new House of Assembly with 94 members. The greater the involvement of Papua New Guineans, the more confused the highlanders became. Elections were an alien concept, the people had no understanding of the unfolding regime, nor of the role to be undertaken by the candidates. Besides, these were not the traditional bigmen they had been taught to respect.

In the late 1960s, criticism was levelled at the Australian administration, mainly by outsiders, for its need of greater regional focus. This need was exacerbated in 1967 when agreement for the operation of a huge copper mine on the island of Bougainville was reached between Conzinc Rio-Tinto Australia and the PNG Government. Before long, rebels on the island decided the mine
didn’t offer the islanders benefits that were due to them and threatened to secede. Rumblings also came from Port Moresby which was feeling left out and deprived. Papua not only threatened secession but got as far as announcing an independence date before it could be persuaded to integrate. By 1972 the Constitutional Planning Committee had decided a system of provincial government would allay the various problems.

All this was taking place in the run-up to self-government and independence. Chief Minister Michael Somare had nominated 1973 as the date for self-government and this was upheld by Gough Whitlam’s government in Australia. Independence was intended as soon as possible and initially was planned for 1974. There was so much to do and the speed with which these dates loomed was frightening. It was feared the constitution might not be finalised in time but the introduction of provincial government was duly written into it and this was hurriedly awarded to Bougainville on an interim basis. These decisions did not take place without bitter division in the PNG Parliament.

In the long run, it became clear that independence could not be achieved in 1974 and the date was set for September 1975. Expatriates in PNG, in the main, deplored the pressures which had brought on what they regarded as a mindlessly premature decision. The humble villager in the highlands had no idea what it was all about, the tribal bigmen in the highlands were worried that the expatriates would all leave and almost universally spoke out that the country was not ready. The relatively few young, educated Papua New Guineans, however, were elated by the prospect.

Not only did serious constitutional dislocations arise in the lead up to independence, they came at a time when lawlessness was becoming more prevalent in the towns and the police were less able to contain it. Tribal fighting had resumed some years before and intertribal disruption to peace and good order was taking an untraditional course and becoming more frequent and more vicious. In the highlands, there had always been the fear that localisation of kiap positions would create problems which the expatriates had not experienced, especially in
the administration of justice. PNG *kiaps* did not have the same spread of experience or the impartiality of expatriates. Some of them came from the coast, ignorant of highland mores and were not well accepted by the highlanders, while others were *wantoks* and could be manipulated. Even those of integrity did not command the same respect as the expats, who were better placed to make authoritative judgements and whose decisions were consistent and acknowledged by the tribes as fair. The same thing was true of the police. Eventually, the *kiap* system was abandoned as being inappropriate for an independent nation.

Many *bigmen* pleaded to have independence delayed until systems were better prepared. Delegates from Third World nations at a UN mission were frankly disbelieving when told of this. Long after independence, highlanders were asking for the return of expatriates to conduct elections to help quell disorder fuelled by bias and nepotism. Also after independence, at the reopening of a section of the Hagen hospital which had burnt down, Mogei *bigman* Wamp Wan asked publicly for the full return to the Western Highlands of the Australian administration. The Western Highlanders were very uncertain about their future. They were an eye-for-an-eye people and understood tough authority but it had to be fair and they couldn’t count on this among their own people. I think, too, in the back of their minds was a fear that the coastal people, with their much longer exposure to European culture, would dominate the emerging nation and this added to the mounting unease and aggression in the mountains and high valleys.

The introduction of self-government on December 1, 1973, made very little impact in the Western Highlands. Nothing changed obviously. Independence Day, on the other hand, dawned to a mixture of emotions although everything seemed the same. In Hagen, the formal ceremony took place at the newly named Independence Hill, adjacent to the original *kiap* house and under the watchful eye of the symbolic Hagen eagle which, cast in bronze, overlooked the parade ground. It was September 16, 1975. The highlanders watched the Australian flag come down and cheered as their new flag was raised, deeply
proud of the occasion and recognising its importance but with no understanding of the implications. An emotive people, they were excited by the pomp and ceremony, but at heart there was joy for only some, while most of them felt uncertain and others had grave misgivings.

Because independence had been promoted as good for the people, most of the tribespeople would have been expecting something tangible and imminent; their thinking aligned to cargo cultism which had always had a strong following. Disillusionment was inevitable. They knew nothing good about the power of the vote, of the rights of man, woman and child, of the freedom and equity that offered in a democratic nation. But they knew the benefits of owning a radio, a car, a gun.

The expatriates watched the flag change-over with foreboding, not a few with tears in their eyes. Even though PNG was becoming a less lovely place to live, the old hands had formed bonds with the country and its people, as well as with the expatriates with whom they shared experiences, which would never leave them.

I went to the market as usual at this momentous time and ran through my ritual of choosing someone to carry my basket — not that I needed help. The children knew my practice and there was always a line-up of youngsters eager to earn a few toea. The toea, with the kina, was the basis of the new PNG currency. They would hold out their hands palm-up so I could check for cleanliness, which was the only fair way I could think of for making the selection. I’d been doing this for years but I fear the practice had done nothing to entrench a sense of cleanliness among them. There was something different about the market this day. It was more hushed and people were looking around them as if expecting something to happen. Many of the expatriates stayed at home, just in case. It was subdued, but absolutely nothing did happen.

Independence was not the only event of major significance for coffee growers in 1975. The Brazil frost in 1970, which had encouraged a moderate upward trend in coffee prices, was nothing compared with the terrible black frost that country
suffered in 1975, which brought the Brazilian industry to its knees. Suddenly, every buyer was prepared to pay a premium for the PNG highlands coffee and our prices rocketed — doubled, tripled. This could hardly have been more timely for us as Christopher had finished primary school and had moved on to boarding school in Australia. It was a great relief to know we could pay for it!

I had always comforted myself that expatriate children in PNG knew from an early age that boarding school happened to all of them and was a matter of circumstance, not parental rejection. Despite knowing it was inevitable, it must have been tough making that transition at the age of 12. Christoph had left an intimate home life and a little complex of fibro school buildings in a tiny outpost of civilisation where everyone knew everyone, including the teachers. This was replaced by an institution with its own chapel in a huge city, without the familiarity of family, where most of the students had grown up with each other, where all the buildings were brick — or bluestone — and where all the rules were different. It had to be traumatic.

I could only guess what was going on in Christoph’s mind but I knew well enough what was going on in mine. And it was not happy stuff. I had not brainwashed myself adequately in preparation and I was horrified at the way my sense of isolation from him manifested itself in sudden ways and in unexpected places. Like the first time a letter addressed in Christoph’s handwriting was among those in the post office box. I meant to save the mail to read in the car but by the time I had reached the Steamies’ butcher’s counter, I could contain myself no longer and tore open the envelope.

‘Yes, Judy, what can I do for you today,’ inquired the smiling butcher when my turn came, as I was desperately scanning a typed circular to parents. I barely glanced up, scrabbling deeper in fruitless search for a filial message. Even ‘hi’ would have been good.

‘Oh, I’ll have …’ I gulped and burst into tears.

In some ways I had expected his departure to be something of a relief. I’d been having problems with the two boys as Jules grew to resent the big brother attitude adopted by Christoph.
They had always bickered but now Jules had decided to stand up for himself, and the fighting and rebellion got out of hand. I believe Christopher provoked most of the incidents but, being an elder daughter myself and always held to blame for rows, which I keenly resented, I tried to discipline both, working on the basis that it takes two to tango. I was opposed to depriving children of treats or events they wanted to attend and it was no use saying, as my mother did, ‘Just wait till your father comes home.’ Instead, I used instant retribution with the flat of my hand which graduated to a plastic strap, for which I probably would be arrested today.

Especially with Christopher, I reached a point where I knew I had to find a better way of handling things. It was a difficult time for I had no support. Barry, who these days often came to Hagen at weekends instead of us going to Alimp, would want peace at all costs. He would invariably undermine my attempts to create order, leaving me on the outside and cast as an ogre. The problem was resolved, at least during term time, the minute Christoph went south to school. Yet his absence brought distress at another level for I hated him being so far away and in some ways, it seemed, so did Julian.

When I was evicted from the high school house, we could afford to rent and moved to a house owned by Steamships Trading Company. Our new manki masta was a woman who, I suppose, should have been called a manki missis. She lived in a bleak flatlet under our house with her small daughter. Her name was June though others in Hagen called her the ‘town bike’ and she was not of a joyful nature. Before long it became clear she was entertaining and earning extra keep at night but when I threatened her with the sack, things quietened down again, so I kept her on for want of someone else and because she knew her work. This proved to be unfortunate for the daughter who, I discovered by chance, was being fed almost exclusively on a diet of tinned chocolate roll. I held myself responsible for this as chocolate roll was my boys’ favourite switkai or dessert which, not unreasonably, led June to believe it was OK as a diet for her child.
Having househelp in the town was not the same thing at all as my experience with *manki mastas* at Alimp. For one thing, in town you did not have the same need. There was power and a telephone, the water came from a tap and the Steamies house had a clothes washer fitted with a wringer. The help had much the same responsibilities as the househelp you might have in Australia. They did not become part of the family but were there to do the washing, ironing and house-cleaning while I took over the extras and the cooking. During the week, the boys and I dined together, but we went back to separate dinners when Barry was in town. Barry was an excellent cook and especially enjoyed Chinese cooking. He often produced Chinese stir-fries on Sunday nights — late Sunday nights — which were far more imaginative than my offerings.

June cleaned up the breakfast mess I left before going to work and made the beds, swept and dusted — sometimes — but she didn’t come into the house in the afternoons or evenings. It was much more formal and not nearly as much fun, but still, we were spoilt to have help at all and it was still cheap.

At the Steamies house we came by Miranda, an Alsatian cross who replaced mad Sam who was run over a second time and killed outside the high school house. Sam was still only a pup and a particularly foolish one at that. I guess you could say it was good that we’d barely had time to get close to him, for his death was nothing like the loss of Simba and Puddenhead. Mim grew into a big girl and slept inside the house on her blanket. She looked protective but had the mildest nature of any dog I knew and wouldn’t have hurt a flea. She was with us at Alimp, making friends with Barry’s new Rottweiler, Bepi, when the Steamies house was broken into. The intrusion gave me an uncomfortable feeling but, surprisingly, the only things missing were a couple of belts and some beer and left-over roast chook from the fridge. Mim slept comfortably on her blanket in the living room while natives wandered around the garden and into the downstairs laundry at night. She slept while they left their dirty footprints on the vinyl upholstery in the car which I deliberately left unlocked to avoid having a window smashed.
She even slept through an attempt to steal the car one night and so did I. Thieves tried to push it out to the road before starting it but, in their attempt, ran it down a small bank between our house and the next where it became wedged between the bank and the next door wall. When I discovered this the next morning, I rang the police and reported the attempted theft and soon after Barry arrived from Alimp. He answered the phone when police rang from Kagamuga, eight kilometres away, to say they had found our car and could see it as they spoke. Barry looked at it from the living room window and said in his deliberate way ‘That’s funny — I can see it too, as I speak.’

Another phone call, which came for me at recess one morning at the high school, had a confusing impact. It was a PNG public servant telling me that an investigation of complaints of unfair treatment at Alimp had revealed that Barry had taken a *meri* and that the Alimp *kago bois* were fed up with the special treatment her father and relatives were receiving. The phone in the staff room was kept in one of the lockers and I was conscious of the absurd circumstances in which I was receiving this startling news. I pushed my head further into the locker in case I had not heard properly what the man was saying. When I was convinced I had not misheard him I told him it was not his business to talk about our private affairs and hung up. At lunchtime, I went home as usual, to find Waim, Eyeballs and Kum waiting to tell me the same story. I told them I would believe it when I heard it from Barry.

Waim said: ‘*Emi tru, missis, Masta I tokaut pinis na meri istap yet*’ which translates into ‘It’s true and the master has spoken out about it. The woman is still there.’ They went on to list their grievances as long-standing and loyal Verona people who were suddenly missing out in favour of the *meri*s extended family.

I thought about the months since Barry’s illness when we had not had sex, choosing to believe it was a carry-over from his operation because I was frankly relieved that he no longer seemed interested. I had asked him about it and whether his illness had created any sort of problem and he answered with ‘you don’t seem to like it any more’. This was so true that I was more than
happy to let sleeping dogs lie. Of course I should have realised he was finding sex somewhere if not with me and there was certainly no lack of opportunity. I told the three bois to go back to Alimp and said I would talk about it with Barry.

Always one to air what was on my mind and not clever at waiting for an auspicious moment, I broached the matter soon after he next arrived in Hagen. I told him about the phone call and the arrival of the three Alimp bois. He said nothing at all. I asked him if it was true and he said ‘if you think it is’. There was silence between us; nothing more on the subject was said then or later but I read guilt into it. At first I was dismayed; shattered would be too strong a word. Strangely enough, now Barry and I lived largely apart, I felt he’d come to accept me better as a person and I felt more comfortable with him. Except for the years apart before we married and the first few adoring, hand-holding months after, there never had been closeness. The cogs that drove mind and spirit did not engage. Now there was no sex either there was not much left, except 15 years of a marriage and the two boys, yet the gap between us made the relationship easier.

It was impossible for me to talk to Barry about the meri, so we left it at that. Later, my father was to say that this relationship of Barry’s had nothing to do with our marriage but was simply a convenience he had adopted because of the circumstances of living apart. I thought it a very enlightened observation for a father to produce though it didn’t account for the fact that I was not about to share my husband with any other woman. In reality it forced me to admit to myself that the meri wasn’t making a scrap of difference to the way Barry and I now lived our lives. They say if you’re not happy in your marriage, get happy or get out. But I had come to terms with my situation and I was happy enough, at one with myself. I was not about to walk out on a second marriage and certainly not about to look for a third one. I knew I couldn’t relive the Alimp phase of our lives. Alimp had been so many wonderful, interesting and exciting things for me, but it would for ever be linked in my mind with a sense of repression, of being an intruder, and a succession of miserable nights culminating in unloving lovemaking and the smell of rum.
The option I had chosen was working out as well as I could expect. I had no idea what Barry’s feelings were but he wasn’t making any move to get out either. In fact, there was really nothing to suggest it was time to quit.

Barry took to joining us in Hagen most weekends well before Christopher started school in Australia. The Alimp house had become so uncomfortable that he had actually started to build a permanent kitchen and storeroom complex. Also Christoph and Jules had new activities in Hagen and were reluctant to spend all their weekends in the bush. One of these was swimming with friends in the pool at Wurup, the plantation bought by our neighbour, Will, in lieu of an extension to his Alimp block. With other friends the boys were also learning to ride stock horses at Korn Farm, while we parents barbecued and danced on the lawn to Neil Diamond and the Beatles. We had become urbanised. Barry and I socialised together, went to parties, enjoyed the terrific dinners turned on at the Pioneer Club by a remarkable Australian woman called Alison. Nothing had changed except that he had more of what he needed and I felt reassured that I had given our marriage my best try and that if it collapsed altogether, it would not be my fault. Another thing to chalk up on my mental slate. This was a conveniently self-centred way of saying it was all Barry’s fault and it made me feel better.

It also gave me the licence to enjoy attention from other men. For a while I thought I was falling in love with a long-time friend but was saved from making a fool of myself by his happily married state. It was a small town in which I had earned respect and I had no desire to kindle the expatriate population’s hunger for gossip. The Minj episode, when I left Mike, was enough for my lifetime. I went to bed with other men on two occasions and loved them both for it — but only for the few hours of love-making for neither they nor I were looking for more. I have to admit it was a good feeling to be at the receiving end of male interest and attention, but I didn’t want or need any new relationship. I was not about to leave Barry and if it had been possible to ‘hate’ or even ‘dislike’ the man, I would have left him a long time before.
Short-term, we socialised at a perfectly civilised level — no fights, no recriminations and no demeaning of each other in public, but when it was decided we could at last afford to take our first overseas trip, I foresaw difficulties which would best be avoided by travelling in company. So, I worked on Peter and Jan, good friends, though both years younger than us, who were also thinking of an overseas holiday. Peter was in the surveying business and his firm had an office in Jakarta where an invitation for us all to stay at the boss’s home was generously offered. We had an enormous amount of fun planning things in the weeks before we left, Jan and Peter deciding on the best Thai destination through a friend’s recommendation. I was in Steamies with a crowd of shoppers when Jan came looking for me, saw me from the door and shouted at the top of her voice ‘We’re going to Fuckit Island.’

So, when Christoph came home for Christmas, we all set off from Hagen, flying out the back door direct to West Irian, Indonesia and Thailand, via Wewak. The arrangement worked brilliantly and the two boys were great ambassadors, making instant friends with all the Jakarta house staff and the Phuket Island gardeners, porters, waiters and the boaties who plied their craft between sun-drenched islets, ensuring us of first class service and opportunities I suspect other tourists might not have.

I was never a person who makes friends easily — for me it takes time — but after a while of living in Hagen I had many wonderful friends. These were shared happily by Barry who, I found, tended not to make lasting friendships of his own. One of the most important things I discovered from living in PNG was that age and background had no bearing on forming friendships. Had I stayed in Melbourne I would have associated with friends of my own age that I’d made at school, at university and later, at work. Anna and Jim from Wagamil Plantation at Banz, and originally Melbourne, were friends with whom we shared a similar background and could easily have met in Australia. But the PNG scene opened the doors to a broad cross-section of friendships and acquaintances with people of diverse experiences, lifestyles and values, which I like to think taught me a bit about tolerance and understanding.
My associates ranged from 15 years of age to 70, most of them Australians but many from other countries and, increasingly, from PNG. We had wonderfully stimulating talks out at Ulya where John and Edith, some years our senior, grew coffee. John was among the first elected members of parliament and we enjoyed his visionary thinking and the intellect that made sense of it. Edith was 95 per cent common sense and practicality, but this was laced with magical, fey moments. She cared greatly about her local community, giving much time to it, and had enviable people skills. John, with two others, had started the Hagen coffee factory where he was managing director while Edith ran the plantation. They were great friends to both of us.

The closest friend I had at the high school, Jenny, was nearly 20 years my junior. Tom, blatant womaniser, raconteur, crocodile hunter and coffee grower, was 20 years older. These were people I would never have met in Australia and they were not alone. One of the most exciting times I ever had on the job was with the PNG provincial police superintendent in a helicopter. The nearest I got to the seat of power was sharing a beer, also in a helicopter, with the then Opposition Leader, Michael Somare. The sexiest dance I ever had was at an impromptu party with a man whose hands were rough and calloused from doing hard labour in jail. The craziest dance I ever had was a relic of my ballet class days when late one night someone chose to play *Swan Lake* and Denis played Siegfried to my dying swan, both of us laughing fit to kill. Denis was married to Alison, whose dinners were the drawcard at the Pioneer Club. Heaven knows what the pioneers thought, looking rather dourly upon our antics from the frames where they hung on the wall.

The maddest party I ever went to was a fancy dress do for grown-ups which was notable mainly because of the incredulous look on the faces of the *haus bois* as they watched the arrival of the guests. From their point of view, the chap dressed in a nappy and bonnet and sucking at a bottle and Edith in a fairly revealing animal skin dressed as a cave woman were clear winners.
Chapter 16

Not long after we had moved to the Steamies house there were rumbles about the propriety of having separate ‘A’ and PNG primary schools in Hagen and it was decided to form a single establishment. I could see the need to reinforce the concept of equality, but the problem was how to devise a curriculum appropriate for black children, the vast majority of whom would return to their villages, and for white children going south to secondary school. It couldn’t be done, but the attempt was made anyway, all the children from the Hagen PNG and A Primary Schools moving to a new site at Tarangau.

Black and white staff attempted to run the operation as a single school, in which different streams were catered for in single classrooms. A PNG student was elected school captain and Jules was vice captain. It didn’t take long to realise the new system was not working and the classes were separated, the two streams taught again as separate units. The children came together for sport and were urged to interact out of the classroom. But the dual curriculum school failed in its intention and the best that could be said was that all the children had bright, newly painted classrooms and a lot more playground. Native and expatriate children played happily together out of school hours, so the failure had no racial overtones and was more to do with an unrealistic attempt at political correctness.
So Jules ended up being captain of his school and I hoped that would be a boost to his morale and overcome an uncharacteristic apathy that seemed to have settled on him. He felt left behind with Christopher gone and most of his close friends leaving for Australia with parents going ‘finish’ or to attend secondary school. He needed a distraction and it came through a stock car racing club which was started by a couple of enthusiasts on a dirt track at Kagamuga. There was a time when everyone tried out the new activities introduced to Hagen but now the expatriate population was bigger, participation was more selective. Barry became involved in the stock car club as an official and I took part in the races on a couple of occasions, driving a friend’s car complete with roll bar and lurid motifs. I didn’t disgrace myself and there was a certain kick attached to driving like a maniac. But the track was dirt, dry as a chip by the time events started, and racing was a hot and gritty business, breathing stifled by a protective kerchief over nose and mouth beneath the helmet. It didn’t seem like a relaxing way to enjoy a Sunday after a heavy week at school.

Then the club decided to construct a mini-bike track with jumps for a children’s competition. Trying to provide what I hoped would be the necessary distraction for Jules, I went mad and ordered a mini-bike — without even looking at my bank balance. I have always believed there is a solution to every problem and that it is simply a matter of finding the best. On delivery day Jules came home from school and sat at the roadside waiting and waiting until darkness fell and at last it arrived. The bike did lift his spirits and Jules soon showed an aptitude that surprised me, winning most of his events and taking out the youngsters’ championship, for which he scored write-ups in the newspaper sporting pages. I was terrifically proud of him, but still he seemed at a loss and his schoolwork began to suffer. I spoke to his teacher and Jules and I talked about what was happening. In the long run, I asked him if he would like to go south for the next term instead of waiting until the next year and the smile on his face said it all. I had to speak to Barry about it and I had to check if it was OK with the school, but that is what happened.
I found losing him, too, very hard, but at the end of the year we were due to take another set of leave in Australia and I comforted myself with that knowledge. At their new school, both boys went through a transition period which covered the first two years of their secondary education at the junior school premises. I was pleased about this because, although strangers to the system, they at least were biggish fish in a little pond instead of being minnows in an ocean, which I hoped would boost their confidence. So it was that both boys celebrated the 1976 end-of-year break-up together and Barry and I were there for the occasion, me once more bursting with pride as Christoph was called on by the headmaster to receive the boarders’ prize.

Making travel arrangements to and from PNG for school holidays was a nightmare. My parents and Barry’s sister and her husband were incredibly good about looking after the boys for long weekends and Easter, but we wanted the boys back for the term holidays and those Christmases when we didn’t take leave. Invariably there would be an airline strike at holiday time, the timing carefully planned to maximise the impact, but leaving me and all the other PNG parents desolate at the loss of a day or two from the all-too-short holidays.

Because they were unlikely to make a fuss, school children were always first to be put off an over-booked flight and sometimes it was sheer good luck that I managed to find out when they would arrive. On one occasion Christopher was in the co-pilot’s seat with an ear-to-ear grin on his face when, instead of the Fokker Friendship he was booked on, a Cessna touched down at Kagamuga. Another time, when he was bringing a school friend back with him, I was advised when checking their ETA that the flight had been cancelled and I would have to pick them up at Kundiawa. That was a little matter of a full-day return trip.

The worst ever was when the aircraft they were supposed to be on landed without them. I rang the PNG airline office, I rang the Melbourne office. I rang our Melbourne family but no one was able to tell me anything. Finally, I rang the school, which gave me the Port Moresby phone number of a fellow student. This boy had arrived safely home in Port Moresby and was able
to tell me Christoph and Jules had been off-loaded at Brisbane and were overnighting at the Travelodge. I rang them there and, of course, they were having a ball, never having considered any need to ring me. Whatever way they arrived, however late, in whatever plane, I was wildly excited by the time they stepped on to the tarmac where I rushed to meet them and no doubt embarrass them with huge hugs. Barry’s method of greeting was always a polite handshake but I couldn’t see these occasions as a time for restraint.

Going back in the other direction was as bad but for different reasons. We would rise at 5am and be at Kagamuga at first light as instructed, but the strip would be clouded in. Then we had to wait and wait to see if it would uncloud in time to make the connection to Australia. Sometimes it didn’t and we’d try again next day — and the next. Sometimes the airport staff would tell us to come back in a couple of hours and we, along with one or two youngsters from the Wahgi returning to school, and their parents, would all go back to our place where the kids would get through a second, more leisurely breakfast while the adults consumed gallons of coffee.

With both boys at school I was in the Steamies house with just Mim for company and it wasn’t very good, even though I had become involved in numerous activities. The evenings were lonely. I filled them by drinking more whisky and smoking more cigarettes than I should have and I didn’t make a very realistic effort to cut back. I had been teaching at the high school for more than nine years and was desperate to give it away if only an alternative presented itself. I no longer had to worry about picking up family after school and they were old enough to occupy their time with friends during the school holidays. I’ve been told I’m a survivor, but this was a testing time.

The thing that probably saved me was a position that came up as Western Highlands correspondent for the nation’s daily, the Herald and Weekly Times-owned Post Courier. The position had been more that of stringer in the past, but the paper was now prepared to set up a Hagen office, no doubt prompted by the fact that not a day went by without some momentous
happening in the district. The incumbent was to be responsible for all hard news, features, photography and advertising on a full-time basis. I should say I had university English behind me and had written for my own pleasure all my life. I had a vast number of contacts in the province and was well-known in return, so the idea of applying was not inappropriate as well as being very appealing. The big problem would be the loss of salary. The localisation program had made many expatriates redundant and the paper was duty-bound to offer little more than a PNG salary. Still, I had no family to feed except Barry on weekends and I could now put the hard word on him for Verona’s help if I needed it and I was eager to make the change. I applied; I got the job. I resigned from the high school with a profound sense of relief, not realising until the time came just how tired of it I had become.

The Mt Hagen Post Courier office was a rented room in the Local Government Council chambers. The paper sent up a Nikon camera and invited me to use my own typewriter. The stories were to be sent down on Airniugini’s last flight for the day along with the day’s roll of film with a list identifying each frame. I tended to get a bit carried away taking photos and sometimes forgot to list all the captions. For that I suffered the embarrassment of my photo of, say, Kama Kerap from Mendi captioned ‘John Hunter from Australia’ and Nambuga Mara being called the PNG Prime Minister. You’d think the editor would have known.

This was an enormously exciting and rewarding job from which I was to eventually resign with great reluctance. There was much to learn and since the work entailed knowing everything that was going on, I never did learn it all. But I mastered the procedures after some dismal set-backs early in the job. My first assignment had all the makings of a coup. Paul, one of the last expatriate policemen in the Western Highlands, was headed with three policemen to check out the situation in a remote area high up in the Baiyer Valley where tribal fighting had broken out. I went with him. We lurched for miles over a narrow, potholed dirt track and, as we neared the scene, tribesmen could be seen stealthily emerging from behind bushes and tall stands of pitpit,
frightened by the proximity of the police car into hasty retreat. As I looked out the window, I could see, on a ridge, a line of tribesmen, armed with the traditional bows and arrows and spears, making a more leisurely way, confident of their ability, at that distance, to outstrip any police who might be sent in pursuit. Paul was heading for a village where he hoped to talk with clan leaders.

Although I knew the bumps in the tray of the utility would be even more bruising than in the cabin, Paul stopped while I got in the back for better photo opportunities. More armed tribesmen raced away from their places of hiding giving me some fabulous shots. Here a tribesman was crouched low thinking he was safe from prying eyes, here a cluster of little houses was burnt to the ground, black rings in the dirt the only reminder that they had been someone’s home. The single-file line of warriors on the distant ridge was silhouetted against the skyline like a neat row of tiny insects. I had only the one film with me, an omission which was never to be repeated, and had managed to save a few for the negotiations which were to take place.

Unfortunately, the village was deserted, though still intact. Paul sent his men in search of the inhabitants but they came back unsuccessful. He must have felt like yelling, ‘I know you’re there — come out!’ He needed to talk to the leaders; sending out men in the hope of capturing one or two of the warriors would have been futile. He used a loud-hailer to call out, saying he wanted to talk, but eventually there was nothing to do except turn back and rethink his strategy. In the meantime, he noted the evidence which had been provided along the road.

It was late, but, greatly excited by the afternoon’s events, I wrote the story before I went home. The same night I had to cover a Rotary meeting, the story for which I wrote up with a couple of trivial events the next day, packaging them all up, together with the film and identification, for the late plane. I took the package out to Kagamuga, certain I had made a commendable start to the new job and madly anxious to see my tribal fight piece in print. Instead, I had a call from the editor. Had I realised that the film had not been properly loaded into the
camera and that none of it had been exposed? No world-shaking photos of a tribal fight at all. I was devastated and so was the editor, no doubt tormented at the prospect of having to deal from then on with an idiot.

The fight was only one among a dozen or more taking place in the highlands at the time, most of them in the Hagen district, including the Nebilyer and Baiyer Valleys but also in Enga. Later, they were to escalate in Chimbu and, by that time, I had become the only correspondent in the highlands. Many fights were continuing, with perhaps many years between them or running one into the other. The clans would not accept defeat; they would not accept greater loss than their enemy. Vengeance festered as they planned strategies to equal the score. Fights were deliberately provoked by stealing pigs or maybe by attempting to poison one of the enemy. Simple things sometimes worked, such as by hurling abuse or giving the PNG equivalent of a two-finger salute. Fights erupted after a fatal car accident, after a murder, after a poisoning was suspected, after clansmen pinched another’s coffee. The reasons for fighting had multiplied with the coming of the consumer society.

Now there were trade stores and PMVs to burn and there were coffee trees to hack down. Worse, the traditional bigmen now had less power to stop a fight. The women, whose role was once to lead the pigs and young children away from the border zone where the attack would come, now sometimes helped to maintain a supply line. Fresh weapons were needed as spears and the long-shafted, fire-hardened, featherless arrows were expended — into the bush — or someone’s body. Guns were not used until after we had left PNG, but the killings were particularly vicious, the dead were being mutilated and this was the ultimate insult, often serving to reinvigorate a fight. Unlike the old days, few tribesmen bothered to dress especially for the event, though most blackened their faces with charcoal and replaced the broad bark belt with vines to allow them maximum agility. One thing remained the same: fearing ambush, our highlanders did not fight at night.

Hand in hand with the style of fighting employed was the new style of compensation payment. Shells and plumes had lost
value while pigs and cash were a must. One clan offered a *meri* as part of a compensation pay-out, which shattered the *Post Courier*-reading public. The pay-back ceremonies were still a big deal. Tall banner-like frames mounted on stakes were studded with kina and ornately decorated. These were paraded proudly among the tethered pigs and the crowds which came to witness the ceremonies. All the district’s councillors and local identities would be invited to attend the major ceremonies. The bigger, the better. All this and yet it would often not suffice to end the fight. Any omission or imagined slight was enough to unhinge the peace and, within a few weeks, they could be planning a new fight strategy.

There wasn’t much peace anywhere in the country. In Port Moresby, the infighting between politicians was bitter as they sought consensus on a dozen vital issues. Bougainville remained restless and the constitution, including the set-up of provincial government, was not signed off until 1977, after independence. In case a staged introduction led to friction, provincial government was, in theory, granted to all districts simultaneously, whether they were ready or not. There were protests from a number of districts demanding more time. A big reason for delay in the Western Highlands was the difficult task of convincing the Jimi and powerful Wahgi areas that there was no chance of them having their own separate government. Interim provincial government was not inaugurated in the Western Highlands until October 26, 1978.

Provincial government did not solve the Bougainville problem, which became one of bloody insurrection, involving thousands of deaths and the closing of the mine. Neither did it work for most of the other districts, now known as provinces, especially those in the highlands and more remote areas. Few provinces had people of sufficient competence to run the provincial secretariats and departments which, much later, were merged. Localisation, especially in the highlands where European contact came so late, was a slow process. Most of those progressing to positions of responsibility did so because there was no one else to fill the position or because they had *wantoks* in high positions, not because of their experience or expertise. The elected members of provincial assemblies were voted into power.
for various reasons but not the right ones. Indeed, the voters did not know what the candidates were expected to do.

In the Western Highlands, our former *dokta boi*, Nambuga Mara, became premier of the interim Provincial Government in 1978. Although a former president of the local Area Authority, he and his ministers had no previous experience in handling the substantial sums of money which now came as grants from the national government. They had no experience of governing any sort of community, not even a tribe, much less some 270,000 people of disparate character, many of them bitter enemies. Keeping records and accountability were alien concepts. Temptations loomed and the chance to legislate in favour of ministers’ clans was an irresistible force. Apart from mismanagement, outrageous pay scales were devised and we saw things such as an extension of minister numbers and perks for them, such as cars and radios and new roads to their homes.

Provincial government was the seat of a huge misappropriation of Australian taxpayers’ money. With the exception of grants for a few individual projects, Australia’s grants to PNG at that time went into revenue and were not tied. The money was sinfully wasted. As well, there were serious anomalies in the structure affecting interaction between the public servants and the elected ministers. The Western Highlands was not alone when its Provincial Government was suspended in the mid-1980s for mismanagement and misappropriation of public money.

Provincial government in the Western Highlands did nothing to allay the lawlessness and neither, for any length of time, did the State of Emergency that was eventually declared for the highlands area. So entrenched did tribal fighting become, a VIP meeting was convened to discuss the problem. At it, the nation’s chief ombudsman, a Papua New Guinean, declared tribal fighting must be stamped out once and for all. But the Western Highlands premier, our friend Nambuga, told the meeting neither schools nor universities, governments nor a State of Emergency could influence the traditional structure. ‘It is in the blood of our youth,’ Nambuga said in pidgin. ‘The Government will not be able to stop Western Highlanders fighting.'
Despite my new-found job satisfaction, I still had twinges of doubt about our future in PNG. I was becoming concerned at the mounting lawlessness which seemed to bear out the comments I had made to the ABC Chequerboard team all those years before. More importantly, a Land Acquisition Act had been introduced late in 1974 empowering the Government to acquire expatriate plantations. The idea was to acquire these for local people who were short of land and, despite assurances that compensation would be paid, planters were understandably nervous. What sent some expatriates south though, was not compulsory acquisition, but pressure from local groups aspiring to expatriates’ assets.

Our Alimp neighbour, Will, was one of these. His main plantation, Wurup, became an object of desire among a group of high-flying highlanders and Will, fed up with threats, theft and hurtling stones, and mindful of his young family, was one of the first to go. Although no pressure was applied for him to release Alimp South, Will wanted out. It was returned to local landowners in 1975 and Wurup was sold to the raiders, the Government providing most of the money. The ceremonies which attended these hand-overs were heavy with PNG VIPs and, while the newly created local entrepreneurs celebrated, Will and his family left the country, their home and the hard-won achievements of 18 years. He had been singled out because of the
success of Wurup and its central location. As time went by, and no properties were acquired under the Act, calm among plantation owners was restored. No pressure was applied to Barry for the return of Alimp North, but the possibility of a take-over was always in the back of my mind.

I was also concerned about the pace of the localisation program which made a future in the country for Christopher and Julian problematical — if they wanted it. Although PNG was independent, I realised expatriate expertise would still be required for many years, probably for a lot longer than expatriates would be allowed to stay. I hoped that our boys would take some tertiary training in Australia as the best way to set themselves up. After that, would there be a place for them in PNG or was it better to gear my thinking to life in Australia? I tuned out because there were still some years to go before Christoph left school and there was no immediate indication of pressures that would force us to leave.

What we needed, now Verona was not poverty stricken, was an investment in Australia, so not everything we owned was tied up in this unpredictable place. We needed a flat or something that could earn us a penny immediately and be there as security. Barry concurred and, despite my delight, it did occur to me to wonder why, since he never entertained the prospect of leaving PNG. Indeed, he had recently procured an extension to Alimp on which to run cattle and Verona’s land now bordered Wagil-Sipia. I pursued the idea of this investment as though my life depended on it and, through a builder friend in Melbourne, and, sight unseen by us, we bought a suburban townhouse. Not only was I greatly relieved by its purchase, but Verona reaped a useful rental return from its commitment.

In the Post Courier job I had more freedom than I did teaching and, when I took time out from the office, there was always a story to be found and photos to take. I never went anywhere without the camera. The road to Lae, now known as the Highlands Highway, was still the only road to the coast. A huge amount of work had been put into its upgrade and now most of the highlands’ supplies came from Lae instead of
Madang. This meant the occasional road trip to Lae for Barry and most of these times I went with him for the break. I was always subject to attacks of ‘itchy feet’ and leaving the teaching job gave me new opportunities. These trips meant catching up with friends who had moved to Lae from Hagen and we always had a place to stay. They were convivial times that I think Barry enjoyed as much as I did.

Barry was definitely less defensive in his attitude towards me, as though at Alimp he had seen me as some sort of threat. The concept of a revitalised relationship between us, however, carried only so far. We came together when it suited and parted company when it didn’t and we had stopped having holidays in Australia together. The boys came home for the term and alternate Christmas holidays, fares paid by Verona, and I generally took leave down south every other Christmas, staying with my parents. I understood that Barry was not prepared to spend time with them. For one thing, Mum maintained a strict routine which meant woe betide anyone who was late for 7pm dinner. You can imagine! But they lived right on the beach at Sorrento on Port Phillip Bay which was great for Christoph and Jules. I had thought Barry could be with us for the few days over Christmas and then enjoy time in Melbourne. His mother was invalided and he and his brother did not always see eye to eye, but he had a loving sister in Melbourne and always enjoyed the company of her husband. He simply was showing an increasing reluctance to leave PNG and, most particularly, a reluctance to expose himself to alien routines that would conflict with his way of living.

In Australia, I had the company of the boys, my family and friends and my concern was not that I missed Barry’s company but that he needed to get back into the real world more often. Always in the back of my mind was the understanding that we would probably have to return to it permanently one day and that Barry would find it awfully hard to fit in. Although he would never agree with me, in some ways PNG was not kind to people of Barry’s disposition. It offered a licence to indulge, it forgave lack of self-discipline and encouraged freedom to live outside recognisable bounds. The imposed disciplines involved in
working for others made it easier for me to bow to outside pressures and kept me on a straighter and, admittedly, narrower course. It was easier for me to adapt. Why did I worry for Barry on this account? Maybe I was more worried for his family should we all live together again at some future date.

On one holiday, I planned for me and the boys to visit Tas and Brenda who had recently sold their cattle property at Trauna Valley and had moved permanently to Western Australia. They had been close friends and I was sure Barry would come with us, but I was wrong. I invoked the help of others in the coffee industry to persuade him to join a coffee study tour to Brazil. He resisted for a long time, but finally agreed to go, insisting on an abbreviated version of the tour, cutting out the African segment. This was a pity, since that part of the tour was to take in Kenya where Arabica coffee was grown and which would have been of special interest. In the long run, his travel arrangements were so circuitous, he arrived in Hagen not much sooner than the rest of the tour members. With him, to my surprised delight, he brought a lovely pair of topaz earrings he had bought for me in Sao Paulo. With him also was our only suitcase into which I was waiting to pack my clothes before taking off for Port Moresby and Melbourne to coincide with the boys’ Christmas holidays. The suitcase was special; we had bought it in Singapore and it was notable for the violence with which the salesman had jumped up and down on it to prove its strength.

The breaks Barry and I took together consisted of weekends with friends in the Wahgi Valley, the odd visit to other friends in beautiful Madang and occasional drives to Lae, where we also stayed with friends. The drive to Lae was not the same adventure it used to be, but was now challenging for different reasons. Most of the people we passed on the road were friendly. They wandered or sat at the roadside with produce spread out on lap-laps, waving to passers-by and encouraging them to stop and buy. But there was a new element. Aeroplanes were still the people-movers but the highway was now the most economical way to transport freight. Coffee went out by road from the highlands and deals were struck with retailers to ensure
a backload, keeping costs down. The problem was beginning to emerge of how to keep cargo safe from thieves as the trucks laboured up the mountains in low gear. We were aware of this and felt very vulnerable on a trip back from Lae, the open tray of our truck loaded with cement, tinned mackerel for the *kago bois* and salt-lick for the small mob of locally bred cattle Barry was soon to take delivery of.

A group of highlanders, dressed in worn shorts and T-shirts with their hair cut short, unlike the villagers, appeared at the roadside easily keeping pace with our truck as it toiled up a particularly steep ascent in the Chimbu Province. Three of them hopped on the back and we could only watch as they removed the tarpaulin looking for something worth pinching. They did this at their leisure, knowing well there was nothing we could do to prevent them. I have never felt so frustrated. We could not stop — it would be too risky. We could not jiggle them about and upset their balance because we were not mobile enough. All I could do was shout from the window which I did at full blast until I lost my voice. Barry simply drove on, realising there was nothing else to do.

There was enjoyment in the episode, however, when they uncovered the salt-lick and tried to work out what it was. I watched the whole performance through the cabin window, the camera poised in the forlorn hope of being able to identify them later. I saw them lick the fingers they rubbed over the heavy salt blocks. This left them grimacing and confused and, after a bit of discussion, they decided to abandon the salt-lick. Salt was traditionally hard to get in the highlands and was much prized, but the thieves were obviously suspicious of this unknown form of presentation. They had started to investigate the rest of the cargo when their mates shouted a warning. We had nearly reached the top of the pass and they would soon miss their chance to jump off the truck safely. They got away with one case of fish but I was voiceless for a good quarter-hour. Too many cigarettes.

That was in the days when the thefts were impromptu and amateurish, but as time went by they became professional, the timing and sites for a raid chosen with great precision, often
planned so that thieves could drop down from an embankment and slash open tarpaulins. The practice eventually led to serious financial losses for businesses. It was not hard to see why drivers started to arm themselves. One gang was particularly well prepared, boarding a freighter toiling uphill at snail’s pace. The truck was one of the biggest on the road and the thieves knew they had to hack through a padlock to gain entry. They dropped to the road 21 bags of processed coffee which their mates loaded on to a white four-wheel drive that had tailed the truck from the bottom of the slope, netting the thieves coffee worth thousands of dollars.

The *Post Courier* gave good coverage to my report of the incident because theft of coffee had reached epidemic proportions, not just processed coffee headed for export, but coffee from buyers on the road and direct from trees. And theft came on top of the fraud practised by local growers and the native buyers who were cashed up by processing factories. It was so easy for the buyers, who often short-changed the growers, to hang on to unspent cash. The growers had their own lurks, filling bags with wet parchment coffee for the extra weight — they were a sharp race. Highway robbery was carried out by gangs, in some cases overseen by Papua New Guineans in high authority. My report carried dire warnings from police, but everyone knew thieves could easily elude patrols in the area. Besides, with the lawlessness that prevailed, police had not the resources to spare for theft when all around was murder and tribal mayhem.

One of the outcomes of the lawlessness was to highlight the inadequacies of the justice system. Until 1962, the *kiaps* were responsible for hearing local disputes in the village and for dispensing an appropriate form of justice. Maybe they were akin to ‘kangaroo courts’ but they met the indigenous need for instant, unbiased solutions and fair penalties. The *kiaps* knew enough about village custom to help them integrate village and Western practices, though of necessity at a fairly primitive level. Like the aid posts, these ‘courts’ went a long way towards resolving immediate problems which otherwise would have magnified while resentment festered away in frustrated minds until someone launched an attack and fighting started.
There was a belief in high Australian places, however, that justice must be delivered indiscriminately, the same for all blacks and whites, and that it must be independent of the administration. There was to be a single system of courts which, perforce, must be conducted in the major towns for want of trained magistrates and police who were capable of prosecuting. The highlanders could not relate to the Western system of justice. They did not understand it and it did not satisfy village needs. I am convinced that in trying to make such a prodigious change in the application of law and the definition of criminality, lay some of the most fertile seeds of the disorder that was to come. Later the central courts were augmented by a system of village courts conducted by local magistrates. This, too, had its failings, the wantok system being one of them and, another, the inability of the courts to make arrests without the presence of police, who were already stretched thin on the ground.

The upsurge in lawlessness caused a massive increase in the number of court cases, which it was my job to report. When I was working for the Post Courier, Mike was the resident magistrate in Hagen and major crimes were tried by Supreme Court judges from Port Moresby rostered to a national circuit. They had a terrible job, one of the most difficult being how much credence to give to tribal law. Often, a tribe would seek out an offending clansman and mete out what we would regard as vicious punishment. The problem was whether to apply the full weight of British justice to a murderer, for example, or whether to allow dispensation on account of penalties already imposed. And if so, how much.

Another problem for judges was having to work through a tanimtok or interpreter. Sometimes more than one was needed, one to turn the talk from a local dialect to pidgin and another to translate into English. The tanimtoks had an extremely responsible role and, of course, were free to convey less than the truth, or any story they felt like, if they so wished. Even when they did not wish, the local dialect and pidgin had major limitations and often it would have been difficult to convey a precise meaning.
Sometimes the exercise of their duty was hilarious. There was the time when a prosecutor instructed the interpreter to ask a witness if he had ‘received any money from the fund’. The *tanimtok* muttered a few words and the witness broke into an impassioned, three-minute monologue. At last there was silence and all eyes turned expectantly to the interpreter who told the court simply: ‘He said no.’ The judge raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

The incidents before the court were sometimes so complex that judges found it hard to picture the scene. On one occasion, I came across a Supreme Court judge in the newsagent buying Matchbox toy cars. I must have looked at him quizzically for he bothered to explain that he needed them in court to clarify the nature of a car accident which had claimed two lives and started a tribal fight of some magnitude. This exchange was to be the start of a friendship which made it easier for me to ask him, on a later occasion, to repeat out of court a section of a judgment I had not fully grasped.

The case concerned Tom Amaiu, the then Opposition spokesman for police. He was charged with drunkenness, five counts of assault, stealing $K10,120 and resisting arrest, but his answers were so disarming I thought the prosecution had got it wrong. In the judge’s room at the rear of the courthouse I expressed surprise at the guilty verdict. The judge said, ‘That’s the problem with Engas. They’re terrible liars but incredibly plausible.’ Tom was apparently not overly concerned about the jail sentence which greeted him and later I found out why when I ran into him in Hagen, unsupervised and happily at large when he was supposed to be in jail. He explained, in a friendly way, that he was in the process of appealing.

It was too easy for a prisoner to escape custody from the native material jails in the highlands. No one except his fellow miscreants would have noticed Tom was missing and none was going to dob in a parliamentarian like Tom. Whole mobs were not easily contained either. Barry and I were among a large group of friends just finishing a barbecue lunch at a friend’s farm when a hullabaloo arose from the direction of the Kagamuga *kalabus*.
Coffee cups poised, we stood in stunned silence as some 15 figures wearing the prison lap-laps ran through the party with total disregard for our presence and with guards in hot and hopeless pursuit.

The biggest problem for the courts was how to cope with tribal fighting and how, since the tribesmen gathered in such numbers and were so easily able to elude police, identification could be made and charges laid. The problem led eventually to a radical solution that helped considerably to meet the need but was deprived of ‘teeth’ when the section which allowed the ‘onus of proof’ to rest with the defendant instead of the prosecution was found to be unconstitutional. The Act was introduced at the end of 1977 and called the Intergroup Fighting Act under which whole clans could be charged for illicit gathering with intent to fight. Clans found guilty could be ordered under the Act to pay fines of thousands of dollars to the Government for their involvement. Before it could be enacted, troubled areas had to be declared a fight zone and not many months elapsed before Mt Hagen was so proclaimed. I found it amazing that the clans should be expected to find the kind of money required to meet these fines. Even more amazing was that they did.

There were many extraordinary scenes enacted in and around PNG courts but the most hideous ever encountered must have been when Chief Justice Sir William Prentice took his Port Moresby court to the scene of a road accident accompanied by court officials, the defendant and 13 policemen. The ‘court’ was ambushed by some 100 villagers who axed the defendant to death before the horrified eyes of the justice team, leaving Sir William helplessly trying to staunch the dying man’s blood.

The *Post Courier* work was utterly absorbing and I cannot imagine finding work more interesting and stimulating. I had felt so low after both boys went south to school that I found myself thinking vaguely about taking up residence in our Melbourne townhouse and taking them out of boarding school. As I became more assured in the role, I grew to understand the responsibility that went with it and was determined to give our province the fullest and most impartial coverage possible.
It was while I was in this confident state of mind that I received a letter from Steamies saying the company wanted its house back. It didn’t plunge me into deep depression but my heart sank — another move to I knew not where and, this time, with not even the boys to help. Barry regarded my numerous moves as exclusively my business and left me to it. He read the letter and said nothing, but a week later came back and announced we would build our own house in Hagen. The Melbourne flat was not quite fully paid off and Barry had just completed the kitchen complex at Alimp; I was amazed that we could afford to build and I was surprised and delighted that he should want to. With the Alimp house the way it was, I guess he was as tired as I was of living a hand to mouth existence and maybe he planned to be more often in Hagen. Whatever his thoughts, I was overjoyed and promptly forgot my upset at having to move again. All doubts about our future in the country went out the window. No more moves, somewhere comfortable to call home — a place to take pride in. I admit to fleeting doubts that the project, like the house Dad planned for Alimp, would actually get off the ground but it was no time for cynicism and I wanted desperately to believe in it. If Verona could afford it, we would do it; investment-wise, it could only be an asset, whatever the future.

So when Christoph and Jules came home next, there were two bits of good news to report. One was about our new house and the other was that we were to spend a few days of the holidays on an island off Madang. Christoph, in his adolescence, was not into showing enthusiasm about anything much but he did respond to these bits of information and Jules, not noticeably affected by this stage of his life, was frankly excited. We had never stayed on a tropical island before and visits had been restricted to day boat trips out of Madang. It sounded blissful but it was not. As far as I was concerned, the words ‘idyllic’, ‘romantic’ and ‘tropical island’ became altogether dissociated in my mind thereafter.

The four of us flew to Madang where we overnighted and joined two other families the next morning. After lunch we all boarded a borrowed boat moored at a rickety jetty where we sat
unprotected in the sweaty heat for nearly two hours. First, we waited for our host, next for a couple of slabs of beer to arrive and then for the boat’s draivaboi, who had gone missing during the wait.

We approached the island late in the afternoon and were enchanted with its shoreline, its small but pristine, white beach, trees overhanging an azure sea and a charming little palm frond hut, all irritation at our extended wait forgotten. We off-loaded what seemed a huge pile of gear but the driver departed with the boat before we remembered to get the first-aid kit and insect repellent from the stern locker. It was dusk by the time we had finished exploring our tiny resort. The only wood we could find was wet and the entire supply of weekend snacks had been eaten before we had a fire going and produced a meal. The mossies were the size of small birds and thirsty, so we spread out our swags, pumped up air mattresses ready for the night and took ourselves outside with a lamp and a couple of powerful torches to investigate the reef. Beneath the glassy water there were starfish and sea anemones and spectacularly striped, spotted and colourful fish but prominent among them were literally dozens of the lethal stonefish. I could not imagine allowing the boys to swim the next day, but in the end I did, of course, albeit wearing sneakers, because the other children were allowed.

Eventually, we settled down for the night, the men, especially, fairly well anaesthetised. The mosquitoes droned on, someone snored, someone else had a camp bed that squeaked and it took a while to get to sleep. I was in that lovely hazy state of near slumber when I became aware of a hissing sound. It was the air escaping from my mattress which lowered me abruptly to the woven sheet of pandanus that separated me from the hard earth. Another member of the party was suffering from the same problem. By the time we had found a torch and the pump everyone was awake and we started again from scratch. The slot into which the stopper of my mattress was supposed to fit had split while a patch had dropped off the other mattress exposing a hole; we two had to make do with the pandanus. I slept little but near dawn crashed off despite the discomfort. What seemed
like 10 minutes later I was woken by the grizzles and complaints of the assembled company, several nursing a hangover and calling for coffee. We did better the second night but spent most of the day preparing for it. The rest of my stay was spent in a state of anxiety about children being spiked by stonefish. We had no means of communication and not even a canoe. It was not my idea of fun; the best part was when we saw the boat approaching and knew we had not been forgotten.

On the whole, the boys had some wonderful experiences during their holidays. As they got older they joined friends of their age on treks into the mountains, Christoph climbing Mt Giluwe and Jules weekending on Mt Okka behind Ulya. Sometimes parents were involved, like the fishing trip to the headwaters of the Minj River. We went with John, a former *kiap* who, with his wife Joan, had built a profitable little trading empire in the highlands they called Coltra. Barry was not a camper or a fisherman and neither was Joan so, with borrowed fishing gear, John and I, with Robert and Peter, Christopher and Julian, set off in John’s four-wheel drive. Behind Minj, we corkscrewed our way up a tortuous track into the foothills of the Kubor Range, past the picturesque Swiss Mission and into the chill and rarefied air of the mountains. The track petered out and way below us we could see the river crashing and tumbling among giant boulders.

The villagers knew John from his *kiap* days and many remembered me; the reunion was joyous. They assured us that trout were abundant in the river and that conditions were excellent; they showered us with attention, bringing food, firewood and arranging our tarpaulins into a cosy shelter. They even lit the fire; forestalling every opportunity that our boys had to develop their bushcraft skills, which had been one reason for the trip.

Our camp was near the river and noisy but the sleeping bags were cosy and the care with which the villagers placed bundles of grass beneath the floor tarpaulin gave us a good night’s sleep. Next day we headed upstream with a couple of backpacks, the river growing narrower, shallower and more pebbly and
playful the further we went. At likely pools, our party halted to try our luck with an assortment of fishing rods. We cast into the water the most superior lures, hooks and sinkers the river was ever likely to see. In the end, young Gideon, a local hanger-on, who, using a bent pin and a handline weighted with a stone, was the only one to land fish — and they were a couple of the trout we had been angling for all day. Our boys were disgusted and, in fact, Christoph swapped his elegant rod for Gideon’s handline in an unsuccessful attempt to compete.

Lunch was a lazy picnic and we might have stayed there all day but for the chill that soon replaced the body heat generated by the climb. We were pretty fed up with the bent pin act and tried again with our posh equipment a bit further upstream. Despite returning empty handed, we were happy and comfortably weary by the time we returned to camp. Everyone except me, whose big toe proclaimed the water too cold, and Christoph, who occupied himself erecting a tarpaulin over our camp kitchen, decided it was time to freshen up with a swim. I was finally provoked into joining them and the shock to the system of that turbulent, icy stream was awful. During happy hour there was a bit of a fracas when the corn in our billy started to burn before it popped. The billy was plunged into the stream but had to be released because the handle was too hot. It headed off downstream tossing about at a furious rate before being recovered more by luck than good management.

Another time John, Joan, Barry and I, plus offspring, flew to Porgera, which was to be a working holiday for me. Porgera is in the highlands at the extreme western end of Enga, just short of 2,200 metres above sea level. The Porgera airstrip had a reputation for its elusiveness and it was strictly one-way because of the cliff face at the top end. The road was actually an extension of the Highlands Highway but it ran through precipitous country in a geological fault line where the earth could shift a metre in six months taking the road with it. ‘Highway’ was euphemism at its best. We were headed along this road for the Arapis Camp, five kilometres from Porgera. The camp belonged to Porgera Alluvial Goldmining, a subsidiary of Mt Isa Mines, Australia. The
company was extracting alluvial gold which had been shed from veins higher up in the parent rock. It also accepted and sent off for assay the product of villager panning.

Higher up the mountain, Placer (PNG) Pty Ltd, a subsidiary of Canadian Placer Development Limited, was investigating the hard rock to determine the extent of mineralisation. It was in partnership with Mt Isa Mines and Consolidated Goldfields Australia, and acted as manager for the project. The Placer geologists were working to a grid extending over some of the most rugged country in PNG. They hacked tracks through the rainforest and climbed almost sheer faces, all at altitude. The work was tortuous and often hair-raising and I was there to find out what progress had been made. Already a positive pattern was emerging and the decision to mine or not to mine was getting closer. Although I didn’t know it, the story I wrote up on our return to Hagen was about the emergence of the hugely rich gold mine — Porgera.
Barry obtained land on the Kum road in Mt Hagen, just short of a confused intersection we called Spaghetti Junction. Jim, a colleague of mine with the Chamber of Commerce, and his team of locals, built our new house. It was the most exciting time. There was nothing grand about the place, just three bedrooms, but it was made of concrete block and it was solid. There was a fireplace in the living room and the line of demarcation between it and the dining room was a one-step split level which I’ve always liked. It had an upstairs and downstairs loo, which to me was the height of luxury, and the staircase landing featured a tall window with a wide sill for creative somethings. Above all, it was roomy to make up for our long-time cramped conditions. I was permitted to design it, perhaps because my adaptations to Dad’s original plan for Alimp had gone well and, also satisfactory, had been my design for a group of flats built by a Mt Hagen businessman. I have always been a frustrated architect. Barry approved, I sent the plan away to make sure it complied with building regulations and work soon started.

It was my task to check on the building progress since Barry was mostly at Alimp during the working week. Jim had plenty of work on hand so I went there frequently and this was soon justified. One important omission was the door to the exterior from the laundry but the most unusual discovery I made was finding the staircase window frame under the landing where
it would be hidden by the stairs. Jim was not particularly surprised and quickly rectified the problems.

Meanwhile, it was time to get out of the Steamies house. I moved into a Coltra flat while the occupant was on leave. That gave me two months. Then I moved to one of the duplexes Dad had designed for my high school colleague. Next I moved to a one-bedroom outhouse built to accommodate an engineer’s offsider. This proved to be the ultimate test when school holidays came around. None of these moves could possibly be described as pleasing, but the worst was the duplex because of what happened while we were there. It was only a couple of weeks before the school holidays for which we’d planned a week at the remote Bensbach Wildlife Lodge.

Mostly Barry would arrive on a Friday, but often not until Saturday. That weekend, all I knew was that he was coming. On Saturday I shopped, went to the market and put the house in order. Now I was the cook, Barry knew dinner wasn’t going to be on much after 9pm. When he didn’t turn up I ate my own and kept his hot for a while, not worried because I had learnt he had many reasons for being late and none of them meant he had come to harm. On Sunday afternoon I left a note to say I was covering a rugby match for the paper. It was late and I was tired and cold by the time I got back to the duplex. Still no Barry. The tuna pie went into a low oven and though I thought I’d come to terms with Barry’s Melanesian concept of time, this night it got to me. At 9.30pm I poured my third whisky, a stiff one topped with fury as well as water and when he walked in I was ready to explode. He had actually arrived while I was at the football and, finding me out, went to visit friends. That he could explain this without any qualms or thought of apology told its own story and I did explode. Whisky-charged, I went right over the top and for the first time in my life understood the expression ‘something snapped’. Suddenly aware that I was in a duplex and had neighbours only a wall away, I marched out into the night mindless of where I might be headed and knowing only that I must get away. Within a few minutes, some sanity returned and I headed for our new house, just a block and a bit away and now nearing completion.
Thirty metres short of the house I was conscious of two figures walking towards me along the Kum road. I didn’t give that a second thought and was about to call out ‘goodnight’ when one of them veered towards me and, in the split second before he shoved me, I knew I was in trouble. I went down the bank where it fell away from the road and he was on top of me before I could think. I’m told it was foolish, but instinctively I resisted, first struggling aimlessly and then pressing heavily against his windpipe. I’m a strong person and I could tell it was giving him trouble, but then his hands closed around my neck and that’s all I remember. He must have hit me in the face and knocked me out. I came to my senses to see headlights shining over the bank, the man gone and my jeans torn from me. Two men were silhouetted against the lights and one came down the bank, to help or harm, I did not know. But it was he who had saved me from rape and he helped me now. It was he who had been walking with my attacker and, almost certainly knowing me, either wanted to help or saw a chance for compensation. He had run to a nearby house from where a wantok operated a taxi service. They pulled me up the bank, bloodied and barely knowing what had happened. My shirt had tails and my briefs were still in place but I felt terribly vulnerable between the two of them. They could not have been kinder, opening the door of the taxi for me and driving me back to the duplex.

Barry gave them money for their help and the doctor came, declaring me lucky to be alive. He patched me up, sedated me and, despite the hour, phoned Alison, a trained nurse as well as a first-class caterer, asking her to mind me overnight. Next morning, predictably, Barry hurried back to Alimp but not, it later transpired, until he had searched unsuccessfully for a gold chain which had been torn from my neck in the struggle. Alison packed me some gear and took me to Jean and Jim’s place where I was looked after with great care and kindness for the next week. That was not the end of it, as it was later discovered that my nose had been broken and a trip to the Lae dentist followed the realisation that two teeth had also been broken. Soon after my return from Lae, Barry handed me a small packet which
contained a replacement gold chain for the one that had been lost. I was quite overwhelmed by this gesture which he spoiled somewhat by saying he realised his early departure the day after the attack had not done his image any good. His image!

I was still having the odd dizzy turn when the boys arrived on holiday. I had almost decided not to go to Bensbach, but I’ll be everlastingly glad I did. Our friend Norm, of Bindon, was instrumental in the establishment of the Bensbach Wildlife Lodge. That place was magical. The Bensbach River is as close as you can get to the West Irian border and abounds with wildlife: birds of every description, barramundi and saratoga, bream and mangrove jack in the river, Rusa deer in their thousands roam the flood plain. When we were there, the plain was shared by pigs and wallabies and crocodiles were said to inhabit the river further upstream. Eucalypts lined the river and water lilies, wild mangoes and orchids were in abundance.

Upon this natural abundance, man had made virtually no impact. There was just a dirt airstrip that the pilot had trouble finding, a few flat-bottomed river trucks moored to a pontoon and a native material lodge for guests. The natives were among the poorest I had known with little in the way of resources, but they were paid for the licences needed to fish and hunt and were also paid royalties for all the fish, duck and deer taken. Other wildlife was tambu to visitors as it made up part of the locals’ staple diet. Years before, I was told, a small herd of deer had been imported by a missionary in West Irian and strayed across the border where it multiplied at a staggering rate. How anyone could shoot one I can’t imagine, so tame they weren’t even spooked when the boat got close, so trusting with their great, soft eyes. Sadly, some had the misfortune to possess prized antlers, but hunting was for professionals who faced strict terms and could shoot only from the west bank of the river and never from a boat. A local guide accompanied all expeditions to introduce guests to his fascinating part of the world and make sure no one broke the rules.

Back at the lodge, weary and content after a full and exciting day, tame wallabies joined us on the verandah to sip at our beer and a huge pig called Henry barged among us looking
for affection. A young stag recovering from an injury, and now feeling his oats, strutted his budding antlers before us, offering an obvious challenge to Christopher and Julian. The game was to take hold of his antlers and try not to get tossed off. The three of them thoroughly enjoyed this and we couldn't keep the deer away. We hooked many fish and, even more than playing with the deer, the boys were ecstatic about the 12 kilogram-plus barramundi each of them succeeded in landing, among a number that were not much smaller.

Back home in Hagen, after the boys had gone back to school, I had to decide whether I was going to let the attack govern the rest of my life. It made sense to tell myself, as I did my friends, that it had been my fault for walking out in the dark. I had always felt free to walk home from neighbour’s places at night but I now understood there was a new mood. I had been asking for trouble and, since it was something I could avoid doing, I would. I had learnt a late lesson and there was to be no more walking abroad after dark. I even learnt from one lustful individual not to stay in my office after the council staff had knocked off for the day. Fortunately, he was as nervous as he was randy and was easily put off, but coming on top of the attack, it was unnerving.

Things had changed and I could not help but think back to the nights I had spent alone at Alimp surrounded by men, presumably all with the same instincts but a totally different attitude. An attitude that appeared in general not to have changed all that much out in the bush. Barry was still unable to lock the Alimp house, or even fully close the back door, yet he had no trouble with criminals. The villagers in the range behind Minj were overcome with joy at seeing their old expatriate friends. The local people at Porgera and Bensbach had welcomed our visit, opened their hearts to us and urged us to come again. The trouble was in the towns where the educated and employed had become more involved in the white man’s world.

Manga Bengi, from the Office of Information, explained to me that when the black man started working more closely with the white, and became more aware of material differences,
there grew a sense of competition. ‘It is not a competition you can win so pretty soon you get frustrated and resentment builds up,’ Manga said. And, of course, it would, but the worry was that independence didn’t look like easing the problem. The country would not be equipped to manage without expatriates for many years, I thought.

Three months after the attack on me, my friend Joan told me my right eye looked funny, adding to concern I had about increasing double vision. I went south to Australia where it was found that I had a blow-out fracture of the optical floor leaving a hole the size of a 10-cent piece into which my right eye was slowly subsiding. This required a bone graft and that, too, was not the end of it. Although Barry had paid the good Samaritan and his mate the taxi driver for the help they gave me, they wanted more. One day in my office, after I’d returned from Australia and had been restored to working order, I was approached by a councillor and a chap who turned out to be the taxi driver, seeking more money. I gave them K10, which is all I had on me, and hurried around to a senior kiap asking him to lean on the councillor. The whole affair had cost us a fortune and this was plain extortion. I had the feeling it could go on for ever, but I got the help I needed and that was the end of it.

I moved from the duplex to the one-bedroom engineer’s bungalow which was surrounded by a high security fence, not because the hut was worth doing over but because it was part of a complex. Barry and I were in the house one weekend when coffee-grower-turned-businessman, Peter, came to offer Barry a price for Verona. He had already bought a small parcel of shares from my sister and from a close friend who needed the money when her husband died. Barry’s parents held a few shares and he and I held almost all the rest. Peter had recently bought Wagil-Sipia and he must have been thoroughly fired up about buying us out, too, because he couldn’t make us hear him at the gate and had to climb the security fence. Barry refused his offer point blank. It was not a fair price and I must admit it was not a good time to make a bid with the move to the new Verona house in Kum road imminent.
It was interesting in this most meagre of accommodation that I should have had more visitors than ever before. It was so meagre we had to employ a mattress on the floor quite frequently. One of these occasions was when Hugh, a journalist from an Australian newspaper, came and stayed a while, occupying the day bed in the living room while Barry scored the floor. This was an interesting time for me because I saw in Hugh the reflection of many Australians who believed that tribal fighting in PNG was like an extension of the soccer field, a game. This hurt. I had seen the devastation caused by tribal fighting. It was a form of destruction as serious to an embryonic nation as a V2 hitting London. I had listened to the doctors’ and the kiaps’ reports, seen the anguished faces of those who lost friends and family and I had seen the lust for revenge. At first hand, I had seen the meris mourn their dead and the loss of gardens into which had gone their constant toil. They feared for their sons, their husbands, their fathers and they had no recourse but to accept and start again. I had seen the burnt houses, trade stores and trucks, the wrecked coffee trees. It was doubly tragic because the tribes had no idea how to stop it, even if they wanted to, and neither did the police.

Barry and I, realising Hugh would be in an excellent position to let Australians know the true impact of tribal fighting, took him to the scene of a big Nebilyer Valley fight and it was all there for him to see. Two of the dead had been hideously mutilated and were now hidden away but the devastation was cruel and desolate, newly homeless meris sat hunched and weeping in the ruins of their gardens. It was not pretty and I think Hugh went back to Australia with a different mind-set about the recreational propensity of a tribal fight.

It was unbelievable that I now stood on the threshold, as it were, of living in my own real house, never having to move again unless from choice — a notion that was beyond anything I could imagine. Jim conferred frequently as the house neared completion and it was tremendously exciting. I had decided on a fence for the house and he went one further, thinking I might be nervous about being alone. He insisted on having the ground
floor windows barred and went to some trouble to have the bars made in a decorative form. The front fence featured concrete block pillars with iron pickets between them and the side and back fences were two metres high, made of arc mesh tilted outwards at the top. That decided, he asked whether I wanted ‘brownies’ or ‘greenies’ for the tops of the pillars. This sounded a bit like pixies or girl guides and I had no idea what he meant. He proposed to set broken glass into concrete to top off the fence pillars and wanted to know whether to use the brown or green bottles in which PNG beer was sold. We didn’t exactly start the trend which eventually turned homes into fortresses, but we certainly advanced it.

At last the house was finished and I moved in with Mim. That first night, someone broke through a gate Jim had built into the back fence and this he quickly reinforced. Maybe it was less an attempt at burglary than an act of defiance — ‘Your fancy fences can’t keep us out’ sort of thing — I didn’t know. Neither Mim nor I heard a sound and no attempt was made to break into the house, though there were give-away footprints right around the unmade garden.

I was still able to divorce the surrounding lawlessness from my own existence. It had always been a case of ‘if you don’t interfere in their lives there’s nothing to fear’. I knew of other attacks made on expatriates, as well as my own case, but I reasoned that they, like me, had probably been asking for trouble. There were some ghastly incidents in which expatriates were stoned to death as a result of fatal car accidents. I kept telling myself: stay out of trouble and you’ll be all right. I wanted it to be all right. The new house gave me great joy, the job was fantastic and I had great friends.

Social life was good. First there was our house-warming party for the preparation of which Alison lent me some of Emi’s time. Emi was her number one *manki masta* who agreed to show me the proper way to bone a chicken. Emi was the original gem; he’d grown plump in the service, he wore a lap-lap and laceless boots with floppy footy socks hanging over them and he was of a somewhat autocratic nature. He learnt everything he knew
about cooking from Alison and could produce dishes such as Beef Wellington, Chicken Chausseur and cauliflower *au gratin* that would have earned him a chef’s job in a leading restaurant — if they could stand the look of him. These were the sorts of dishes that kept the patronage of the Pioneer Club at peak levels.

I went to Alison’s place for Emi’s lesson. He watched my inept attempts in silence for a minute or two and then put the kettle on the stove, saying: ‘Moabeta yu sindaun wantaim misis na dring kopi.’ He was telling me it would be better if I sat down and had a cup of coffee with the *missis* and he was right. I watched in awe as he deftly boned my two chickens.

The party was very special, being in a real house of our own, and I wallowed in what I hope was a well-concealed thrill of pride. Emi’s chooks, now stuffed and housed decoratively in aspic, and the rest of the menu was everything I had hoped for, except that some of the guests took the jellied borsch with its dollop of sour cream for dessert and put it aside.

Then the big Croquet Happening came to Hagen and this gave us endless entertainment. It took the form of Sunday parties with a knock-out golf croquet competition. We followed the rule book in a loose sort of fashion but since everyone played to the same rules it didn’t matter if they were not according to Hoyle. There was always a scrumptious lunch and plenty of wine and beer and since it was mandatory for all guests to compete, numbers were restricted so we had time to declare the winning partnership before dark. There was always room on the guest list for special visitors such as a couple of visitors from Sydney and the Supreme Court judge who featured in one line-up but quite a few hopefuls had to miss out. I still had no lawn so I couldn’t host a croquet bash but there was great rivalry between hostesses in Hagen and Banz. It was most likely this kind of thing that caused so many Australians to believe expatriates in PNG spent their days reclining on a lounge with a gin and tonic while a slave waved palm fronds about.

Alimp could have been in another country so remote did I now seem from it. But I discovered, because of a moment of forgetfulness, that it was still very close. One Friday I went there
for the weekend, mainly out of curiosity as I hadn’t been since the new kitchen and store were finished. I was given a great welcome by the *bois* who knew me, but over the weekend I didn’t seem part of Alimp any more. This was different from my feeling that Barry had never really wanted or encouraged my involvement and more that I had grown apart from it. Perhaps I was uncomfortable about the *meri* who everyone there would have known about — whether or not she was still with him. I left mid-afternoon for Hagen with Barry in the laden truck ahead of me and I was happy to get away. It wasn’t until evening that I realised I had left my camera and handbag behind with quite a bit of cash, a cheque book and all my keys including the one for the office.

I woke early the next morning and knew I had to go back to Alimp to retrieve them. I left a note for Barry and it was not yet dawn when I set out. As I drove past the Catholic Mission, past Joe Leahy’s place, Kilima, and along the straight stretch to the Trugl, I found that the previous day’s mood had completely vanished. Morning light was creeping skyward from behind the mountains, smoke filtered through the thatched roofs of village houses, someone appeared at a doorway and gave me a cheerful wave. This time I felt as though I had come home. I was greeted by the surprised *haus bois* and they came into the house with me, as relieved as I was to find camera and handbag still on the chest of drawers where I had left them. Nothing was missing.

I had been more than ready to leave Alimp for Hagen the afternoon before but now I dallied. I wandered around the house, trying unsuccessfully to shut out the tangle of emotions and mental images that crowded me. I walked across to the guest house, inspected the new kitchen again and went on down to the factory, returning along the road we’d built beside the water supply *barat*. When *belo* was struck, I went across to say hello to the line as it assembled and smiled at the surprised look on their faces.

Still, I could not leave. I asked for a cup of coffee and sat at the old dining table, sipping at the best coffee in the world, thinking about all the things that Alimp had meant to me. The sun climbed to the top of the range and peeped over, spreading a benevolent warmth across the valley floor. Then, out of the
silence, came the rhythmic chant of a line of villagers pulling a log. It was only a small log, a small line, but still it was a deep and haunting sound, an elemental sound and it made me feel ineffably sad. It was time to go. I shut out this unsettling frame of mind on the drive back, concentrating now on getting to Hagen as fast as possible to let Barry know I had found what I went for and to start the week’s work. I think I knew that this trip was a swan-song for the travel-worn Holden and I guess the old car wasn’t sorry when, slowing for a bridge not far short of Hagen, a rock hurtled across the bonnet. I put my foot down but the sharp right turn off the bridge gave whoever it was a second chance and this time the rock clipped the driver’s mirror. Then I was gone up a little hill and around the corner. Others had not been as lucky.
The tribal fight with probably the greatest repercussions was the big one across the river in the Nebilyer Valley west of Pabarabuk, although it was only one of many taking place at the time. It happened like this: a councillor from the Ulga/Ugabuga alliance in the Nebilyer Valley attacked a Kilipika man, also from the Nebilyer, in the public bar of the Highlander Hotel. The man died six days later. The councillor was charged with murder and a close ally of the Kilipika, the Kulga clan, offered its support by attacking the Ulgas. It was really an extension of a fight that had started in 1973, some five years earlier, over a dispute involving a woman. By 1974, seven Ulga/Ugabuga men had died to a nil enemy loss and the dead men’s clansmen moved heaven and earth to provoke further fighting in a bid to make pay-back killings. The Kulga/Kilipika had to pass through Ulga country to get to Hagen but repeated goading and insults failed to provoke. The Kulga/Kilipika had the winning edge and therefore had no need to fight. A series of compensation payments were made before huge audiences, some to say sorry for loss of life and damage caused, some to say thank you to allies, but the Ulga/Ugabugas were not satisfied. At best, an uneasy truce was in place at the time the Kilipika man was attacked in the hotel bar.

The new fight was horrific. Before the end of the month the Kulga had burned 26 houses and destroyed more than 4,000 coffee trees. Skirmishes continued through June until the total
Ulga/Ugabuga dead numbered 12 and the Kulga had lost three of their clan and 15 houses. Desperate, the Ulga/Ugabuga sent a deputation to Port Moresby asking the police minister for an inquiry into the fight. The authorities committed extra resources to the problem, bringing the instigators to court and trying them under the provisions of the new Intergroup Fighting Act. The Ulga/Ugabuga alliance was ordered to pay the National Government K15,000 in fines and the Kulga/Kilipika K18,000. Traditionally, it was also necessary that they pay each other compensation for the lost lives and damage caused in the May/June fight. Then they had to pay their allies for their help. It was going to be a tough year financially with so many coffee trees destroyed.

Some of the injured died, others were too afraid to go to the hospital and some lived maimed for the rest of their lives. The premier of our interim Provincial Government stayed at home too. Nambuga Mara was a Kilipika, the Kulga ally, and he played it safe, staying away from his office for seven weeks, prompting a vote of no confidence instigated by the Deputy Premier, Awap Rumint, in which he seemingly won a sympathy vote. This fight and continuing skirmishes were, in large part, the cause of the declaration of a State of Emergency in the highlands. It was an extension of the same fight that many years later forced Clem Leahy, who took over Malda Plantation from Ron, he who never wore socks, to walk away from his property for ever.

Apart from me, the only Hagen representative of the media was John Nekints, a Papua New Guinean who ran the National Broadcasting Commission office in Hagen. He and I had a regular Monday meeting with the provincial police commander and we were both in a good position to see the emerging crisis. The police report each week was full of murder, theft and the proliferation of fights which, after the killing of two expatriates held responsible for the death of a girl in a road accident, had escalated in the Chimbu area, too.

I found it hard to show a balanced picture in the stories I sent to the Post Courier. Aggression in one form or another was the substance of most of the breaking news. Yet the highlanders
in the village were the same people, friendly and eager to help. It was not easy to find newsworthy material to try to maintain the balance and one highland member of parliament complained to me that too much about tribal fighting was being made public. I had to agree that my reports of what was going on in the province were hardly image-building stuff but I wasn’t making the news and the reports were truthful. Much later it was recognised that the breakdown of law and order was responsible for formidable set-backs to all aspects of the country’s development and people acknowledged the dangers of attempting to whitewash the issue.

I covered a lot of ground but it never seemed like work. Quite frequently I was able to go to Wapenamanda and Wabag in Enga and sometimes Mendi and Tari in the Southern Highlands with kiaps who had work in the area. For special events, such as the Mendi Stampede in the Southern Highlands, I sometimes was able to fly. I was no longer happy to drive those distances by myself in my car. There were always stories coming out of those places and a visit to their divisional heads was rewarding. Not infrequently, we drove between warring clans and mostly clansmen would take time off to wave to us before resuming the battle. This greeting was recognition that their troubles were not ours and belied the deadliness of their intent. In less than 16 months, I recorded more than 70 fights in the Western Highlands and they were only the ones I got to hear about. Enga was not far behind and Chimbu was catching up. The deaths, the injuries and the damage were appalling.

Liquor was responsible for many of the car accidents and for the violence that resulted from a host of mainly untraditional incidents, many of them trivial. Liquor was destroying the family and weakening the clan. The Government put in place a liquor ban, forbidding take-away sales on Fridays and over the weekend. This created a thriving black market and sales at the border flourished. Though it was very much responsible for accidents and the proliferation of pay-back killings, liquor was not the only factor to blame. There was peace no more; compensation payments were over the top, prompting the Lands Minister,
Thomas Kavali, to draw attention to the trouble this insidious practice was causing across the highlands. A Mt Hagen councillor berated the *wantok* system which he said was corrupting the country. Guards and police were releasing their *wantoks*, the hard-pressed local hospital staff was treating only *wantoks*, village economic development funds were going to *wantoks*. Attending to the needs of *wantoks* was not only exhibiting friendly favouritism, but a social obligation to which the highlanders were tied.

The police were having a bad time of it and were wearing too much blame. I treated them with respect for many times I had seen how hopeless was their cause as they tackled the fiendish ridges while the fighting tribesmen mocked from afar and outran them with ease. I suppose it was because the provincial commander recognised he was getting fair treatment that I was frequently given the opportunity to join their patrols, by road and by helicopter. The latter made the policeman’s lot only marginally easier. Helicopters were fine for reconnaissance and could be used to break up a fight temporarily but as far as stopping one or making arrests, they were not a great help.

I was with the provincial commander in a helicopter reconnaissance exercise one day, headed for a known, makeshift landing pad high in the foothills in an area where fighting had been reported and landing places were scarce. *En route* we cleared a ridge up which a police mobile squad slogged laboriously in single file on its way to the scene of the fight. The men wore heavy boots, they were heavily equipped with gas grenades and sufficient sustenance to last them until they got home — many hours later. A number of men were from the coast and were not well acclimatised to the altitude. The people they sought to arrest, on the other hand, were fleet of foot, their gear pruned to essentials. The familiar scrub, the mountain forest was their citadel and their spears and arrows were swift and silent, often directed at police if they got too close. It seemed pointless to send out a mobile force in country like this. Already, the warriors in this fight had disappeared; by the time the patrol reached the scene, they would have melted deep into the forest.
Our helicopter swept past a devastated area where smoke billowed from burning houses and hacked bananas and casuarinas littered the ground. It probed further, flying low along the ridges and at every hand there was destruction. The raiders had retreated to their villages, feeling secure in their mountain isolation but they were not always safe from prying eyes in a helicopter. Soon, at a distance, we saw a small cluster of the victors’ houses. As we came closer we could see a cooking fire burning outside the huts and near it was a handful of men who rushed for shelter as we closed on them. Two of them hesitated and ran back for bloodied chunks of chopped up meat they had prepared to cook. ‘The enemy’s pigs,’ guessed the commander as the machine hovered close by.

The tribesmen knew there was no space there for the pilot to put down his machine, but the superintendent was heartened at seeing them and was hoping to land at the makeshift pad, now close, and cut off their escape until his squad arrived. He then would use the helicopter to seek out others and, hopefully, drive them towards his men. When we swooped in towards the landing patch, a mere few metres in diameter, we found it spiked. Clansmen had hammered stakes into the ground and sharpened them to a point. We hovered while two constables cautiously jumped out and cleared the stakes, but the delay foiled the superintendent’s plans and no arrests were made that day.

Travelling by helicopter in PNG was an enlightening experience. I had hundreds of names of villages, mountains and valleys stored in my mind but it was not until I had flown over the five highlands provinces in a helicopter that I could relate them geographically. My first flight in a helicopter was to photograph a home-made Pitts Special, a tiny, tandem-style two-seater biplane with a quaint, old-fashioned look that belied the fact it was designed for aerobatics. This had been purchased as a kit from Wyoming in the United States by Graham, a Mt Hagen air traffic controller, and Tony of Rotorworks Helicopters. The two had been helped in the assembly of the Pitts by a willing band of enthusiasts and the work was completed just 10 minutes before its first flight. Since no one had yet learnt how to fly it
safely, much less perform aerobatics, Art Daegling who ran his own aerobatic club in Honolulu, obliged by coming especially to test-fly the beautiful little plane. Graham could barely watch the nerve-racking moment of lift-off, understandably agonising about how, or even whether, his beauty would respond. By the time Art put her down again, we were all a bit wobbly at the knees.

‘Worse than having a baby,’ Graham told the crowd that had gathered, to which Art responded warmly by declaring the baby a ‘sweetheart’.

Art was so impressed, he was prepared to put the Pitts through its paces for a filming session and I got the job. Tony, Graham, Art and I attended a briefing session one brilliant sunny morning out at Kagamuga. I was to be equipped with the Post Courier Nikon, Graham’s camera and a movie camera I didn’t know how to use that was thrust into my hands at the last moment by a visiting American tourist. The filming was to take place over the wildest Enga country where the sky was more full of murderous mountains than blue. I was to fly with Tony in a Bell helicopter from which the passenger door was to be removed to facilitate filming. It is true that, when we took off, I was worried about the absent door but I didn’t even notice when, somewhere over Enga, one of my sandals fell out. There was absolutely no time for fear and, before long, I found myself straining at the seat belt, leaning way out of the door trying to keep that wicked little Pitts in sight.

The object was to capture on film the most extreme manoeuvres possible, one of the least hairy of these being flying upside-down. Because the plane was designed to do this, the sponsor’s name was lettered upside-down on one side of the aircraft and right way up on the other, but the photos were supposed to read ‘Solar Energy Systems PNG’ right way up at all times. This didn’t happen quite as it should have and there were moments when I wished the helicopter could fly upside-down, too. At the briefing, we planned seven or eight special manoeuvres which included the Pitts flying upside-down, hanging in the sky by its propeller and executing a dramatic turn away from the
mountainside with a waterfall, which we first had to find, in the background.

One act that I found impossible was when Art brought the Pitts up from under the Bell at what seemed little more than arm’s length away. I was poised with the camera focused, every muscle tense, warned by a count-down from Tony. And then the red body of the Pitts filled the lens and shot skyward before I had a chance to even change cameras. We repeated this exercise a few times so each camera had a chance but it was incredibly difficult to hold the Pitts in the lens. Our session finished over the Kagamuga Showgrounds where Art was to be invited back to give the next Hagen Show an extra dimension. And it turned out to be a heart-stopping thriller. The little red biplane was eventually to fly all over the Western Highlands where it was known affectionately by the natives as liklik binetang or ‘little insect’.

At ‘all’s right with the world’ moments like this, with congratulations and goodwill flowing from all sides, with the happy grins of the highlanders and good news for the Post Courier, it was hard to remember the harsh realities that faced this province. The problems were so extreme that I thought they would be resolved through absolute necessity. I should have known better, but I believed that more resources would have to be forthcoming, even if it meant looking for outside help. For Australia, intervention was a poor option. Attempting to quash PNG lawlessness would call for zero-tolerance and a level of violence that would attract world-wide, as well as PNG, vilification. The alternative of speeding up independence had extra appeal.

At Alimp, Barry saw little of it; the Nebilyer fighting was away on the other side of the river and the people he mixed with were the same old kanakas from the village, the same old devious, happy-go-lucky kago bois. He didn’t read the paper and the NBC was over-protective in not allowing negative comment much air time. It was a policy they called ‘protecting the people from themselves’ and ‘preserving the reputation of the nation’. The term raskol, usually associated with naughtiness, was in general use to describe ruthless criminals, an outlandish euphemism that was politically soothing but I thought shamefully misleading.
Now serious issues affecting us personally were emerging. Expatriates were leaving. Many had become intolerant of the thieving and violence and the fighting that disrupted operations of every kind. Plantation owners were increasingly afraid they would be compulsorily taken over if they did not take the initiative and make a sale. Many were putting a price on their properties and accepting the Government money made available to ensure the land was returned to local people. Management agreements were part of many sales and former owners would stay on as managers and to teach the necessary skills to their eventual replacements. Others would return on a regular basis to oversee operations. All this proved unsatisfactory because the new and former owners did not see eye to eye about management practices, especially the reinvestment of money into good husbandry.

Norm and Esma had gone from Bindon, Bill at Wagil-Sipia had sold to Peter and that was getting close to home. Friends in the Wahgi had thinned out dramatically, most selling to Wahgi Mek, the business arm of the Wahgi Council, but Barry hung in there and made no move. We did not talk about it. Still no compulsory acquisitions had been made by the Government in the Western Highlands but some owners in the Eastern Highlands had been invited to ‘treat’ and ended up selling and leaving the country. The compensation paid was fair, but the worry was that as more plantations were bought, that standard of payment could or would not be sustained. The Prime Minister had made it clear that negotiations would not be based on a free market price.

After independence, some people had taken out citizenship but as Australia did not recognise dual citizenship it meant renouncing Australian citizenship. It was quickly shown that becoming a citizen of PNG did not guarantee favoured treatment when it came to the acquisition of plantations and I could see no point in making the change. Barry applied but I did not and when Nambuga approached me one day in the street and urged me to apply, I cited the uncertainty of our future, as well as our two boys in Australia, as my objection.
Apparently, it had to be both of us or neither. I imagine Barry was not impressed by my refusal but I was extraordinarily glad I had not consented. By now, I had been forced to pull my head out of the sand and I knew that it was all coming to an end, despite our lovely new home, my fascinating job and Barry’s determination to stay.

The end for Barry came when Peter offered him a much more realistic price for Verona. Barry didn’t want to talk to me about it and certainly didn’t invite my comment. I did, however, point out that he might never get another offer like it. No one wanted our place as badly as Peter because he already owned Baglaga and Wagil-Sipia and, if he could get hold of Verona, he could make a killing by selling to ANGCO. ANGCO was now the leading exporter of PNG coffee. It had been, and continued to be, financially supportive of a number of plantations, advancing money for development or for take-overs against future coffee sales. In this way the company helped growers increase production while building the volume of product it needed to meet future contracts and preserve its leading status. Peter was tied up with ANGCO.

I knew I could walk away whatever the outcome for Verona. I could live in the Melbourne townhouse and probably get a job. I also knew that if Barry had to leave PNG, he would probably never get over it. I got as far as telling him if it was me, I would sell, but knowing the enormous loss it would be to him, I couldn’t face the responsibility of trying to pressure him. It was not only the work he had put into Alimp, seeing a viable business grow out of raw bush, it was a way of life he would not find anywhere else. He did not want the constraints of civilisation. He did not even want the constraints of a marriage and I knew all this well enough. As he had told the ABC eight years before, ‘I’d hate to leave. I love the place.’

I felt anguished that it should matter so much to him, knowing how hard the decision must be and, for a long time, he couldn’t make it. His accountant tipped the balance, not only bettering the deal with Peter on our behalf but persuading Barry that losing Alimp was only a matter of time and that the
Government would be unlikely to duplicate Peter’s offer. Coffee prices were still high, helping to inflate commercial property values, but they were not expected to remain so for much longer. He reasoned that with Alimp South and Wagil-Sipia gone, if the Government didn’t push for a hand-over the Alimp people soon would. He pointed out that Verona, being so far away on the road to nowhere, would be one of the hardest plantations to maintain and it would be hardest hit by lawlessness and the collapse of the former *kiap* system. He told all this to both of us at a meeting in his office and, though it hurt, what he said was the truth.

Barry said yes to Peter, hating the man who was the instrument of his dislocation, and that was one of the worst weeks I have ever spent. Barry didn’t speak about it; he just said he’d agreed to sell on the basis that he would remain in the manager’s position for two years. That was one of the things about Barry; he was not able to relieve others by sharing their tribulations and he could get no relief himself by sharing his dark moments. At least he had two years’ grace and perhaps he could be motivated towards some other activity in that time. Perhaps his experience might earn him a spot somewhere in PNG, though with the rapid expansion of the localisation program this did not look promising.

ANGCO gave me a year’s grace before I had to vacate our new house. All our shares and the few still in family hands were handed over to Peter’s company, Kagamuga Trading, in October 1978, and we obtained permission to invest the money in Australia, the exchange rate working in our favour. It was going to be enough to get securely established in Australia, though not enough to live on as well. Peter sold the three properties to ANGCO which, in 1976, had been bought out by the Investment Corporation of PNG. Thus, officially, the properties were returned to the people of PNG but our old friends at Alimp quickly saw that this arrangement was not within the spirit of the Land Acquisition Act and objected. Our place was eventually sold back to them by ANGCO.
After the sale, Barry went back to Alimp to resume operations and, I hoped, to restore himself in doing so. I don’t know whether he broke the news to the Alimp bois officially or whether he skipped that and just let the news filter through. He would have found it terribly hard. Generally he seemed determined to get on with the normal routine — Hagen for weekends and back to Alimp. In fact, things stayed so much the same and, because of a few signs that he was resisting changes that ANGCO sought, I wondered whether he’d gone into a state of denial and was losing sight of the fact that he was no longer the owner.

My regrets at losing the new house were outweighed by the enormous relief at having our money safely out of the country. Being well into middle age before I had a real home, however, and losing it less than a year after moving in, was to influence my priorities for the rest of my life. I was much better prepared than Barry for this upheaval, but when Christoph and Jules came up for the term holidays, and I drove them back to our lovely new house, I found it terribly hard to tell them it had been sold. I made a commitment, when I saw the excited glow fade from Jules’ eyes, that we would soon have an even better house in Australia.

That was how and when I made my big decision — in the car, instantaneously, when I drove into our carport and had to tell the boys we had sold. Barry’s management agreement would end
in October 1980, the year Christoph was to leave school and I would go to Australia to provide for him a pad. Whether Barry would come or not we’d have to wait and see. The decision was easy — it just came to me. Where I would go in Hagen until then, when I had to leave the new house, did not bear thinking about, so I didn’t. What Barry might decide to do was not open to thought either. Neither of the boys spoke much about the sale but I knew it went much deeper than bricks and mortar in Hagen; Alimp was the place they knew as home, PNG was their homeland.

My plans, then, were all set around the end of 1980 but almost at once they came unstuck. A letter from ANGCO came advising that Barry’s management term would expire within months instead of two years. Initially, I saw this as punishment for Barry’s insistence on continuing to manage things his way and maybe that was an influence. But I came to believe the two-year management clause had been a bait to swing the sale and that ANGCO never intended to honour it. This was a terrible blow. Barry was stoical about it, or at least he did not talk about it, the hurt reflected mainly by his intake of rum. All I could do was to avoid confrontations and try to boost his spirits by deferring even minor decision-making to him. One time I went to bed with him wondering if it would be possible to resume that level of closeness but visions of a buskanaka meri, or even a town-bred meri, kept intruding. Anyway, he was not in a fit state. He was drinking very heavily.

I was so angry about ANGCO’s letter that I made an appointment and stopped off at the company’s Brisbane office on my way to Melbourne for leave. I knew Barry had not made of Alimp the big earner that it might have been, that he was not a businessman and that he didn’t aspire to be. But the Alimp coffee was excellent and the labour line was relatively content and stable under his management. I told the ANGCO people bluntly what I thought of a commercial decision that overrode personal consideration, especially one that ignored a deal and showed a complete lack of integrity. I was pretty heated and told them their letter of termination was a betrayal. They heard me out and
when I fell silent, addressed my comments in maddening, placatory tones. I was able to gain Barry a few more months but I don’t know whether that was to his advantage or not.

For the *Post Courier* highlands correspondent, 1979 was a very busy year; always exciting, every day a new challenge and the learning curve had no end. Instead of having to chase news, I found individuals and groups coming to me hoping for a public airing of their pet projects and theories and opinions. One of these groups taught me I could no longer feel safe walking abroad even by day. Several *bilum*-wearing, pidgin-speaking chaps came to my office to tell me that a *bigman* from their clan, not far from Hagen, had died and that his people wanted a story and photos of the wake they proposed for the dead man. I knew I had a walk ahead of me but no idea how long a walk. I drove the car along the Togoba road to where I had to take a foot track. This wound through undulating grassy country towards a bumpy line of hills. I seemed to walk for hours; the air was still and the sun fierce. Though the track was well defined, the locals didn’t run to signposts and I was not at all sure that I was in the right place. Eventually, I caught up with an oldish expatriate woman walking slowly under a huge straw hat, almost stumbling along the track. She was a missionary who had known the dead man and wanted to pay her respects. From her, I discovered I was on the right path, though little more than half-way there. I was worried she might not make it, but she assured me she went there often and was content to do it in her own good time. So I pressed on alone, knowing when I was getting close because of the soulful, dirge-like chant that hung heavily in the air.

I arrived hot and sweaty at a *pitpit banis*, or fence, that had been erected around the village compound to be greeted with overt hostility by three men who seemed to be on some sort of guard duty. They wore heavy scowls, they held their spears aggressively and raised their left arms as though to create a barrier. I told them I had been invited to attend their ceremony to write a report and take photos. They could not understand me and called a *tanimtok* who was not all welcoming charm either. I explained that I worked for the *Post Courier* and was there to get
a story at the invitation of some of their clansmen. This was passed on to the guards whose threatening aspect had not relaxed.

‘Yu wok tasol?’ he then asked, wanting to know if I was there for work only because the people didn’t want any stickybeaks. ‘Ol i no laik yu kam insait nating.’

I explained again that ‘ol i’ had invited me to attend and I was there at their request. Why I persevered I don’t know as I would have been more than happy to go away.

We had been inflicted with many niceties to observe in referring to Papua New Guineans. Kanaka was out, in the highlands ‘coon’ had never been in. The authorities tried us with ‘indigenes’ and ‘Nationals’, for everyday language ‘Papua New Guineans’ was too long-winded, but the expatriates had their own terminology and called the locals ‘oli’. This evolved from the pidgin ol i, meaning ‘all of them’ or ‘everyone’. It was part of their common language, it was succinct, it was not derogatory and the term stuck.

I was finally allowed inside the banis to view proceedings but it was one occasion when oli had me more than a little scared. There were no cops present and if there were any government representatives they were in traditional gear and hidden among the keening throng. There were only two whites for miles around, me and the missionary who still hadn’t made it. I was tempted to leave anyway, but worried this might be seen as a sign of fear or a belittling of their big moment and might provoke them into I knew not what. Inside the banis sat the massed clan, the men in traditional bilum and bark belts, the women in their pulpuls wearing piled strands of Job’s tears, all daubed — or, more precisely, coated — in grey mud and all chanting in unison the mourning song I had heard coming up the hill. Eventually, two men arose from their cross-legged position in the ranks and came across to me, one speaking good pidgin, so that I was able to get the dead man’s details and decide on what photos they wanted. It was one ceremony I was happy to leave and I decided against walking far afield alone in the future.

Then came an annoying business to do with the automatic sedan which had replaced our old black wagon and made me
long for a manual gear shift. An important court case took me to Minj and on that day, miles from home, the car started playing up. Eventually, it slowed to a crawl and ended up barely moving. I turned off the road and headed for a nearby plantation and a phone. A group of youths walking down the access track moved in around the car, keeping pace easily, cheering and thumping on the doors and bonnet. I could go no faster and yelling at them and tooting the horn didn’t scare them, but it did attract the attention of the plantation owner. The youths ran off, but the incident left me with the feeling I couldn’t necessarily feel safe even in the car.

I rang the Holden agent, Wamp-Nga, in Hagen and was irritated when a strange female at the other end adopted a patronising ‘what’s the silly woman on about’ tone of voice. The ‘silly woman’ had been driving for 25 years on roads the receptionist would never have contemplated. She had driven tractors, motorbikes and raced cars and she bloody knew her vehicle was in big trouble when it was being overtaken by pedestrians. She finally put me on to a mechanic who reluctantly agreed to send a truck to pick up the car, since it couldn’t be towed. Stupid automatic cars, I railed, as I missed the court case and waited for the truck and a lift home. I lost the whole day.

It turned out to be a fault in the automatic system that Holden was experiencing with many of the same models. So many, it was going to take time to get replacement parts but at least Holden was paying. The Wamp-Nga boss lent me a tiny two-door midget which was kind of him but wasn’t of a size to help in my latest commitment to ferry visiting Chamber of Commerce delegates from the airstrip — now called the Airport — or take them on sightseeing tours. This little car went into a decline whenever it touched mud and I had to be pushed out of the mire on numerous occasions, at cost, of course. Another thing it did was get a puncture. Punctures had been infrequent over the years, the most memorable being when I was driving home in the black wagon which succeeded in getting two flats along the Nebilyer road. That was an awkward moment which meant paying a villager K10 to get a message to Barry because
I had nothing smaller. I half expected regular punctures around the same area after that. Now they were on the increase because the roads were so frequently paved with broken glass from smashed bottles and smashed windscreens.

The midget had its flat outside the bowling club in Hagen and two PNG men came to my assistance. They were well dressed, spoke good English and were pleasantly courteous. They were unlike any others of their fellows I had met and could have been Melbourne friends of mine. They jacked up the car, changed the wheel and put the punctured job in the back. This put me in a terrible bind. Had they been any other Papua New Guineans, I would have paid them. But I wouldn’t have offered money to friends in Melbourne so, not wanting to offend them, I thanked them profusely and left it at that, never knowing whether I had done the right thing or not.

The time Barry had left at Alimp raced by and perhaps he did now recognise that the end was in sight for he took to spending a bit more time in Hagen. Barry was not a grasping sort of person and there was no way he was going to let the plantation run down before he left or, unlike some who sold, cream off profits first. In Hagen, he seemed to spend most of his time uncertain of where he should head next and what steps he could take to get there. One thing was certain: there was no thought of leaving PNG. I think he entertained ideas of a plantation management position but estate management was being taken over by newly instituted agencies. I knew the prospect of working for someone else, of having a boss breathing down his neck, would appal him and that this would be playing havoc with his options.

It soon became clear that Barry was not good at actively trying to find work or putting himself forward, but enough friends knew he wanted to stay on in the highlands to prompt a few inquiries on his behalf. One of these had a brilliant outcome. Battley, with the Department of Primary Industry, called in one evening after his golf and suggested Barry investigate a job opportunity at Kuk Agricultural Research Station. The station had been set up in 1969 and employed experts to conduct
research in fields as disparate as potato growing, cut flowers and entomology, with the object of enhancing existing agricultural practices and starting new enterprises.

An appointment was arranged and I believe Battley had primed his people for Barry was assured of a job as station manager on the spot. This meant organising resources and deploying native labour to maintain the Kuk research plots and gardens and supervising their work, as well as allocating workers as the scientists required it. He would be answerable to a senior in the department but there would be no boss looking over his shoulder at Kuk and, with that insatiable appetite for learning about things, he would have interesting company among the specialists working there. One area of research that took place at that time was carried out by Australian National University archaeologist, Jack Golson, who uncovered around Kuk evidence of elaborate agricultural drainage systems dating back 10,000 years. Jack and his wife, Claire, became good friends of ours.

As with all such positions there was no definite tenure for Barry since the work would be localised and he would be responsible for training his replacement, but it gave him time to think. It was a heaven-sent opportunity as far as I was concerned, though Barry reacted with an air of indifference that I suspect was a matter of pride and was intended to let people know he was under no compulsion and could take it or leave it.

The next step for him was to start packing up at Alimp and that must have been very painful. I had brought most of my things to Hagen already and hadn’t even been in the lower Nebilyer since work started on the permanent house there. I offered to help with the packing but Barry preferred to manage with the *haus bois*. In the long run, the job was less of a task than it should have been. Once they knew Barry’s departure was imminent, there was wholesale looting by both *kago bois* and *oli*. Among the things Barry held precious were the many books he had collected including dozens and dozens of cockroach-assaulted Penguins which had left Melbourne with him all those years before and which I doubt had been opened since. The heavy equipment, of course, now belonged to ANGCO but
Barry had a great number of treasured woodworking hand tools, many of them belonging to another era but superbly cared for and capable of doing a slow but precise job.

The books and tools, having priority in the packing procedure, were saved. We lost much of the furniture including the magnificent bunk bed Barry had made for Christoph and Jules and my chests of drawers. I even lost my hole-in-one golf trophy and the only painting I had ever done but the biggest mystery was why anyone at Alimp would want the old 78 gramophone records which had been stacked away in a box for years. Maybe the thieves smashed them on the ground in celebratory style like the Greeks are supposed to smash plates, except that I don’t believe they would really feel like celebrating our departure.

One weekend, when packing was all but finished, Barry arrived late from Alimp with a load of crates in the back of the truck and carrying a small cardboard box. A glance showed that he was feeling pretty desolate and I felt sad that he, always seeming so secure in himself, should have been put in a position of such vulnerability. There was a deep urge to try to somehow replace what he had lost, but I had no idea how. I poured us drinks and said, ‘What have you got there?’ He opened the box and lifted out a young female lesser bird of paradise. It had been hurt in some way and couldn’t fly. A bushie had found it and offered it to Barry for a kina. Had it been a male, which would have grown exquisite yellow plumage, it would no doubt have cost many kina.

Remembering from the Terry experience how easily domesticated these birds were, Barry forked out and now we had a new pet which he called ‘Bird’. It was lucky with its name as some of his offerings, such as Puddenhead and those he enjoyed putting forward for our sons, were not good. Barry made a perch and we put it on the floor in the laundry where Bird stayed by day. We did our best for her with food but, sadly, we didn’t seem to get the balance right as she lived only a few months.

I would take her outside perched on my finger and with gentle arm movements urge her to fly but she never did. I felt really sad that she couldn’t fly but Barry pointed out it wasn’t
worrying her because she didn’t know any better. Bird was amazingly person-oriented and when one or other of us came home and opened the laundry door, she would slip down from her perch, click-click over the timber floor to the carpet and hop across to the nearest person’s feet. From there she would climb up to your lap, up your arm, sometimes getting a bit of help, and finally on to your head where she never made a mess. The sight of this perky bird, sitting on Barry’s head while he sat reading in a chair, was very engaging.

So, when Barry left Alimp we had three pets: Bepi the Rottweiler, Miranda the Alsatian cross, and Bird. Our place was just one house removed from Spaghetti Junction. One road led to the industrial area, ours continued on to the Kum River and the other plunged down a hill like a big dipper, rising steeply to the residential area that housed the ill-fated duplex. Our house stood out among the others in the area with its high fences and bars on the windows and I was glad it was secure because behind us the gully was home to squatters and the industrial area also fringed squatter country. With Bepi around to support Mim, it became so fortress-like I had to make appointments for the chap to read the electricity meter.

Silly Bepi had a litter while she was in Hagen and killed all her babies. Then she went missing and I searched town frantically, fearful she would be terrifying people and would end up being shot. But she was found after four days in the garden cupboard where she had borne her family. The gaten boi had closed the door on her without realising she was there. Poor thing, lamenting her lost family alone like that and making no sound to let us know she was there, hungry and thirsty.

Having Alimp become a part of the past did not come easily to Barry. But dramatic things were happening in the province which kept my thoughts focused on the present and, as far as I was concerned, made our sale an increasingly desirable move, though I knew Barry would never agree. He moved out to Kuk, some 10km beyond Kagamuga with Bepi and all his books and tools, where he was provided with another fibro house on stilts. I stayed in Hagen where he returned for weekends.
Trouble in the highlands was reaching desperate levels and I was on the job for the best part of seven days in the week. Everyone in town was fearful and the tension was palpable. Out of town, things were no better. By mid-year, many primary schools were so threatened by tribal fighting they closed. Students at risk because of tribal affiliations left the high schools for home. Dokta bois fled from aid posts and the village court system largely collapsed. In the Upper Nebilyer, council voting was suspended as skirmishes kept alive the Ulga/Kulga fight. Public servants appointed from other areas refused to work in the Western Highlands, Enga or Chimbu and volunteers from abroad also kept away. Lynch mobs were pretty well free to mete out their own brand of retribution and every pay-back guaranteed another, for that was the nature of a traditional imperative from which no clan worth its salt could regress.

Several expatriates were stoned because of road accidents, one of them fatally injured. Two were attacked when they disturbed intruders in their Hagen home, one of them badly hurt. An expatriate woman was raped and stabbed. A couple had to watch a knife put to their little baby’s head when they were caught in their car showing a visitor the view from Mt Ambra. It was almost impossible to keep track of the clan killings. When an Enga man was killed at Avi, it started a chain of killings that nearly shut down the town. Two Kulis were killed in revenge, also
at Avi, and this was followed by an attack on an Engan who was hacked to death in central Hagen. Engans, who made up a significant proportion of the Hagen workforce, started leaving by the truckload, terrified of being involved in the continuing pay-backs. Exhausted expatriate doctors in Hagen went on notice saying they had been instructed to treat no more spear and arrow wounds but, since 40 per cent of the hospital staff were Engans who fled the province, and the rest were too scared to go to work, the Western Highlands Health Minister closed the hospital anyway. Trade stores and many shops closed.

The police, for whom I formerly had the greatest respect, were helpless, morale had bottomed, discipline was lacking and the provincial force was hopelessly undermanned. They were in a no-win situation, many fearing for their lives, too frightened to attend fights and riots. The crisis among police was exacerbated by the pressures inherent in wantokism, a system wide open to bribery and corruption.

On July 23, 1979, a State of Emergency was declared for all five highlands provinces and was to remain in effect for 60 days. This threw the villagers into a state of confusion for they had no idea what it meant. To help them understand, pamphlets were dropped from helicopters from which police also shouted distorted instructions through loud-hailers. The astounded villagers stood, eyes cast skyward in amazement as the white sheets fluttered down around them. The pamphlets were printed in pidgin and the people hastily sought a tanimtok who could read but found translation no help. I thought the way this information was handled was ludicrous. The printed orders relating to Mt Hagen started by identifying the town as that area defined by boundaries set in 1951 and which were gazetted in 1972. The villagers didn't know much about that or why the information should have been dropped upon them from the sky, nor did the native townsfolk, even the educated ones. It didn't mean much to me either. It went on to say the order would come into effect the next day because of a nesinal emegensi. A national emergency — what could it mean? It named roads leading to the town that would be tambu pointing out there would be penalties
for the recalcitrant. It said all this in hundreds of words and at the end of it no one was any the wiser. But they soon learnt.

The main features of this emergency were to be the impounding of unroadworthy vehicles and a ban on the carrying of weapons by ordinary citizens, although police were to be armed. Liquor sales were forbidden and you dared not carry alcohol even to your next-door neighbour. A number of men suspected of murder were charged and hundreds were arrested for a multitude of offences. Police at road blocks confiscated huge quantities of spears, bows and arrows, axes and pen-knives and village raids recovered stolen goods by the sackful. An Engan woman who had adopted the practice of wearing a wedding ring had it taken as a suspected knuckle duster. One man, whose vehicle sported brand new U-lug tyres, had it declared unroadworthy and impounded. I phoned Christopher and Julian and warned them that when they came for the September holidays not to carry pocket knives. After a time, people began to understand what they must not do even if they did not quite understand why.

Soon the roads became pretty well free of accidents, people stopped looking over their shoulders fearing a knife thrust and were once more able to walk the streets in safety. There were anomalies; I rang police asking if Barry could drive to the regular Rotary meeting after curfew. I was told he could try, but they didn’t know what the outcome might be if it was found to be against the rules. There were abuses, some police exceeding their brief, keeping confiscated liquor, roughing up villagers and raping village women. There was hardship for villagers in the bush learning to live again without their confiscated steel axes and the loss of trade was tough on small businesses. Infuriating was the time spent at road blocks going through the repetitive performance of proving your vehicle roadworthy and explaining that your registration sticker was out of date because the registry office had no current stickers. Still, no one was complaining seriously, the relief was as palpable as the fear had been before.

The State of Emergency was so successful and the police so heartened by the dramatic results that it was extended until
October. The aggressive initiative taken by police under these new orders, compared with the fainthearted and disorganised attempts they had made before, was one of the most encouraging aspects about the State of Emergency. We all knew unbridled lawlessness could not be permanently turned around in 60 days, even with an extension. We all knew there were those out there who were biding their time and that we would need a strong police presence if subsequent crime and fighting were to be nipped in the bud.

This was soon to be made abundantly clear to me. Some of the clans previously involved in fighting went to great trouble to show how willing they were to forsake the bad old ways by holding ‘peace rituals’ and burning their weapons. All the provincial leaders and NBC’s John Nekints and I were invited to attend these affairs where I was nearly always the only expatriate. How the highlanders loved a ceremony! When I arrived at one major peace ceremony, out in Kuli country, spears and bows and arrows and even a couple of shields were piled high over a pyre big enough to dispatch Joan of Arc. There were many speeches, all saying the same thing in different ways: the locals vowing to reform and behave in future and the provincial leaders congratulating them. The lighting of the fire was the dramatic climax and it caught in an instant, the blaze spitting sparks and climbing high surrounded by a pall of black smoke.

I was thankful when it finally burned down and I could leave. As I was about to get into my car, one of the village meris came to me looking anxiously around to see if she had been noticed. She came close and whispered despairingly that the clan had burnt only their old, useless weapons and that the good ones were still stashed away in the houses. I knew she was right and that hers was not the only clan doing it. I had no proof and decided, anyway, that reporting this perfidy would achieve nothing and only aggravate the situation. The police were well aware that, despite raids on villages, most clans were still well armed and if some weren’t, new weapons could be quickly fashioned.

During the State of Emergency I had opportunities to write more about law-abiding highlanders and the things that
were important to them and I earnestly hoped I would be able to maintain that balance. The emergency had been well received by native and expatriate populations alike, though it did nothing for the people trying to organise the 1979 Western Highlands Cultural Show. I don’t think anyone relished its end on October 9.

November was the month in which I was supposed to vacate the Kum Road house but I was quite happy to overstay my time, ignoring ANGCO’s directive to move out to make way for one of its staff. It gave me pleasure to thwart ANGCO’s plans though I should say I’m normally an almost mindlessly law-abiding person. With Barry once more on a salary, and me on the Post Courier pittance, I had taken in a boarder, a pilot based in Hagen. In doing so, I had agreed to make his tenancy available for a few months beyond the Verona sale arrangement. I was also determined to be in the house when the boys came up for the next holidays.

I did, however, prepare for the move to Kuk where I was to join Barry before ‘going finish’ at the end of the year. I planned to pack everything I would take with me to Australia and have it stored while I was at Kuk. This included the furniture I had made and a couple of beds the Alimp bois had made for the Hagen house as well as all the kitchen and dining paraphernalia that was duplicated by Barry’s things from Alimp. The living room chairs and sofa and the dining room furniture and furnishings were to go to Kuk where they would replace the government-issue horrors that Barry had borrowed temporarily and which we had optimistically supposed were behind us for ever. We had lost so much from Alimp that I would have to do some buying in Australia and I briefly wondered what with.

One thing I was really set on before I left was repossessing the veteran Hollis 12-gauge shot gun that Barry had given me as a Christmas present after we joined the clay target club. It had been confiscated when I was in Australia having eye surgery because the licence had lapsed. I wrote letters to the provincial commander in charge at the time, I wrote letters to the present commander and I wrote to the top brass in Port Moresby explaining why payment had not been made by the due date and
asking for the gun’s return, but I had no response from anyone. One day at the police station with NBC John for our usual Monday meeting, I came across Paul, the expatriate policeman who had taken me on my abortive first assignment for the Post Courier and who had been seconded temporarily to Hagen. It was great to see the return of an old friend, when so many were going the other way and, after the happy exchange of greetings and news, I asked him what more I could do to get the gun back.

‘Come with me,’ he said, leading me out of the office to the armoury which a corporal unlocked at his instruction. We went inside and there, arrayed on both sides of a narrow, windowless, brick building were the province’s weapons — a surprising number of them. He switched on a light, took me to a corner where a dozen or more confiscated guns were lined up and told me to pick it out. An old side-by-side Hollis with hammers that never failed to prompt facetious comments from among my fellow shooters had to be the only one of its kind in the Western Highlands and it took no time to find. Paul simply picked it up and gave it to me. It was that easy.

When it came to the business of actually packing, the most difficult part was what to do about the bigger of the deer antlers I’d bought the boys as mementos of our time at Bensbach. Antlers are very difficult to pack. Jules’ pair fitted tidily into the sideboard, their tips protected with towels and the whole thing wrapped in a blanket. Needless to say, being the elder, Christopher’s were the bigger of the two. Whichever way I tried they wouldn’t fit anywhere, though I wasted a lot of time trying. I knew this loss wouldn’t go down well and it did cross my mind that our first family fight in Australia could be caused by both boys claiming the bloody antlers since there weren’t really any distinguishing features except size.

The airline pilot was absolutely no trouble at all — I hardly knew I had a boarder, except for the welcome fortnightly pay. Often he overnighted in other towns, sometimes closed in by weather. But even when he was in Hagen, except for breakfast, he seldom ate at home and almost always had something he wanted to do at weekends. He left just a few weeks before Christoph and Jules arrived for the holidays so the timing was perfect.
It wasn’t the best of holidays. I was busy and there wasn’t much for the boys to do, either at Kuk or in Hagen. Alison and Denis were among the few friends of ours still in Hagen, but their two children were much younger than ours. Jean and Jim were still there and though their lad was younger, the boys saw a bit of their girls, scaring them to bits when they engaged in a monumental uprising one day. The Coltra family was still based in Hagen but was away at this time and all the other friends had gone. There were no invitations from Banz or Minj for there was no one left to visit except Anna and Jim, who were preparing to leave. Apart from Coltra John, who owned a tea and coffee estate out of Hagen, Anna and Jim would have been about the last expatriate plantation owners to leave the Wahgi Valley.

Alison and Denis held a farewell party for them and they stayed overnight with us. It was a notable departure eve because, between the party and breakfast the next morning, Anna found her jewellery had been taken from the beauty case which had been packed into the car. The moment of discovery was awful, all of us quite devastated that 20 years in the country should end on such a note, just a few short hours before their plane was due to leave. Apart from monetary value, there are always sentimental overtones and memories behind a woman’s jewellery and Anna was distraught. We rang the police first, then Mike, our regional magistrate, and the two remaining expatriate kiaps, who now administered their declining service and no longer worked in the field, asking them to interrogate their staff for leads. Unbelievably, almost at once we received a phone call to say jewellery had been found hanging from shrubs in a garden belonging to one of these kiaps. We rushed around in the car to find the necklaces and bracelets twinkling from the shrubbery, under the kiap’s watchful eye. No one could hazard even a guess as to how or why this had happened but everything missing was there.

Because they were bored and restless, Christopher and Julian seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time fighting. The town traffic was always chaotic so I had never registered the mini-bike. Instead I bought them push-bikes for Christmas but one was stolen from where it was parked outside Coltra during its
inaugural ride and they made no attempt to double up on the remaining one, I noticed. I took them out on a couple of jobs but peace rituals and court cases were not their scene and they needed their friends.

One day when I drove home early to be with them, Christopher had the mini-bike out on the Kum road where he was riding it up and down a steep, grassy track he had forged along a bank beside the road. I watched him for a while and it was spectacular stuff, the under-powered mini forced into quite stunning jumps and it was obviously the best time he’d had that holiday. But also watching him was an audience of youths and they weren’t applauding — or smiling. Imagination ran riot and I pictured them plotting to trip the bike and make him fall, and perhaps steal the bike. I jumped out of the car and ran up the road, demanding that he stop at once and bring the bike back to the house. He thought I was mad.

‘They’re hating you, can’t you see,’ I tried to explain, annoyed because he hadn’t seen he was being offensive, angry because I had been frightened for him. ‘It’s not like it used to be when everything you did was all right with the natives. Now they are angry. Apart from being plain rude, seeing you flaunt the things they can’t have is like a red rag to a bull. Don’t you understand?’ I demanded. He understood the words, but not that he was offending anyone or may have put himself, or the bike, at threat. He was 16 and inviolable — poor old Mum was losing her marbles. It was time to go, all right.

I waited until they had left again for school, wrote a letter to ANGCO giving them my date of departure and finished packing the rest of my belongings. Then I put my crates into store and moved out to Kuk, where Barry and I occupied two of the three bedrooms. I can’t say much about Barry’s work for he said little. He invited several of the scientists to the house and we both enjoyed their company. There seemed to be only one member of staff he really couldn’t get on with. I don’t think it could be said that Barry adapted to the routine — once again, he tended to create his own. I know that offended a couple of those in authority but to what extent I can’t say. The situation was
vastly different from his time at the vocational school, the work being done at Kuk much more in the public eye and much more closely monitored. He must have recognised some point beyond which there would be no return for he stayed on, despite disagreements.
I spent most of my day in Hagen, starting early so I could leave the office when the council staff knocked off for the day. I had another transport problem. The transmission in the automatic sedan — aka the ‘golden ’olden’ — was long-since fixed but I found the car had another unlovable quirk. This was a tendency to stop abruptly when its underside got wet, as it did frequently from several pond-sized puddles on the dirt road to Kuk. It would sit where it was, completely immovable, spewing out clouds of white steam, until its belly dried out. I certainly didn’t want to be held up that way after dark.

It was bad enough getting caught on my way to a compensation ceremony near Ulya when the stupid car came to a halt on a flimsy little bridge. The only approach was through a mini-lake and I’d used a bit of throttle for fear of getting stuck in the water. The car got to the bridge and there it stayed, white steam hissing and issuing forth in billows, terrifying three meris on their way to the party. Worse, I created a traffic jam which, for some time, held up the VIP guests.

I mostly lunched at the motel now I had no home to go to and quite often Barry came in from Kuk, which showed at least a degree of the freedom so vital to him. The Hagen Park Motel was a useful place to meet up with the kinds of people who were making the news, though one time I discovered I should have been at the Highlander where Michael Somare, who Sir Julius
Chan had replaced as Prime Minister at the recent March election, was lunching. So I went down there and learnt that he was to spend the afternoon campaigning, as Leader of the Opposition, in the Southern Highlands, flying in by helicopter. I checked with the pilot, who was part of the group at lunch, to find he had a full complement. These included the NBC rep and a couple of ministers, so it looked like an event I was going to miss. Then Somare turned, perhaps recognising me from a Madang outing we’d had some time back with mutual friends or perhaps being told I was the Post Courier correspondent. Anyway, he said hello which emboldened me to ask if I could join the campaigning party. He thought for a moment and told me there was no room, listing the all-black complement. I’m not a very pushy person but I heard myself observe in what I hoped was an amiable tone that it sounded like discrimination to me. He laughed and off-loaded the Health Minister and away we went. The minister was a very big man and I rather think everyone was happy he was grounded.

When we put down on a remote Southern Highlands strip a crowd had gathered to welcome this very special Big Man. I got out first to catch the arrival on film. As I was focusing the camera, a single native came rushing towards me, filling the lens until I took fright and backed off. To the amazement of the assembled company and me, the figure threw his arms around me, hugging and gabbling as though I was his long lost mother. I did realise he had a familiar look and he turned out to be Anna and Jim’s former manki masta who was thrilled to see someone he’d known in the good old days and avid for news of his long-term employers, who had left barely two months before.

While things were relatively quiet in the province, I wrote stories about the work being done by students at the Agricultural College and about the research at Kuk, I wrote stories about a couple of school leavers who returned to their ples to start enterprises they hoped would bring wealth to their clan. I wrote about the work of an all-woman agricultural vocational school, Maria Kwin Senta, run by Catholic sisters. I wrote of the introduction of trout in the Southern Highlands and about the
nation’s biggest potato project. I reported the Mendi group that had introduced sheep and set up Mendi Weavers and I wrote of what was being done with land formerly declared too wet for use and now being drained and reclaimed.

There was a tremendous amount happening when the relentless stream of criminal activity was stemmed and I had time to look around. Fascinating was an overnight expedition in the company of the then Minister for Primary Industry, Roy Evara, and Andree Millar, author and horticulturist, one of whose aspirations was to introduce a cut flower industry to PNG. Laken Enterprises was the initiative of a school leaver and had unexpectedly expanded when Ms Millar asked him for specimens of orchids from his *ples* high up in the Southern Highlands ranges. This led to the development of the Kaiap Orchid Safari Camp where orchids were collected and cultivated and where a primitive lodge was built in a wilderness setting of unimaginable beauty. It was designed to tempt tourists but especially orchid lovers, bird watchers and photographers. Ms Millar, a wonderfully knowledgeable and somewhat formidable personality, hoped to link it with experiments being done at Kuk, where Barry was.

At the invitation of his clan, I wrote the story of an old man called Tip Alimuga, who had been such an important *bigman* in one of the huge Jiga sub-clans that Bishop Bernarding and I were asked to take part in a small ceremony at Kaminch village, near Hagen, where Tip was patiently awaiting his time to depart this earth. At this time, the average life expectancy for women in the Western Highlands was 52 and for men it was 50, but Tip seemed much, much older. The Bishop had known Tip, an earnest convert to Catholicism, since 1941 and they had shared many experiences and much *kaukau* over the years. He took with him as a gift for his friend a special medallion of the Pope. I was there to record events and tell the story of a black man who was one of the first in the highlands to see a white man and of the remarkable work he had done in his community since.

A special place at his village had been erected where the old man was to sit during the ceremony. An arch, decorated with pandanus and fronds of *pitpit*, surmounted a seat to which the
old man walked with help, frail and shaky, his eyes lighting up when he saw the Bishop. Except for waves of murmuring from the gathered clanspeople, it was the quietest ceremony of all time, everyone mourning the knowledge that Tip’s death was not far off. The only other sound, apart from the Bishop’s blessing, was from one of the clan leaders who thanked us for attending and presented us both with stuffed, yellow-plumed birds of paradise mounted on sticks. I doubt Tip was any longer much interested in food, but as a sort of symbolic gesture a little feast had been laid out so the two could share one last meal together.

I went back to my office, clutching my bird of paradise which, against all the rules, I posted to Melbourne encased in a rolled up newspaper. There was no way I was going to part with this, the only relic or artefact I personally possessed of my time in PNG, except for a life membership badge for the Western Highlands Cultural Show and not counting the deer antler which wasn’t mine anyway. Besides, I welcomed a memento of this quiet ceremony that I had found strangely moving. I spent much time trying to do justice to the gentle old man’s fascinating life story.

One immensely exciting opportunity was to write about preparatory work on the huge Kaugel hydro-electric scheme in the Southern Highlands. With the potential to deliver 96 megawatts, this was to be for PNG pretty much as the Snowy Mountains Scheme was to Australia. Such was the expected capacity of the site and the power of the river, geologists believed it could sustain two additional generating plants downstream. In the event, though there was no hint of it at the time, the country’s economic difficulties prevented construction of even the first plant.

To get there we took the Southern Highlands Highway, crossing the mighty Kaugel River at a bridge beneath which wild water surged in spectacular fashion on its way to the Purari and the Gulf of Papua. We left the vehicles well up the mountain and walked 1 1/2 kilometres along a newly constructed corduroy track, on either side of which pigs rooted in coarsely grassed swamp. Where the corduroy track ended, a rocky track fell away sharply and the Kaugel could be seen 300 metres below, smashing on to
massive boulders, and where range after misty purple range formed the skyline. It was a humbling sight; I was filled with awe at being part of such a powerful, elemental scene and totally shocked when suddenly I heard the smooth purring of sophisticated machinery. There, 20 metres below me, perched on a shelf cut into the mountain, was a Longyear 38 diamond drill, probing hundreds of metres into the earth. It was one of three working on the project and had been brought there by helicopter in sections. By drilling, mapping and all other possible means, the geologists were seeking the most stable site for a tunnel and underground power station. Nature is grand and glorious; the enterprise and ability of mankind also fills me with wonder.

This more serene reporting of activities, many of which had vital implications for the highlands and, indeed, the nation, did not last. It was interrupted by the re-emerging signs of lawlessness and, almost worse, increasing signs of powermongering and corruption at provincial government levels and above. Evidence of this was brought to me by the CEO of the Mt Hagen Local Government Council in whose building my office was situated. Dominic complained that certain council funds had been directed to the improvement of a road, not earmarked by council for funding, at the request of the Member for Hagen, Paias Wingti, to whose homeland the road led. I sent in a report of the council’s concerns, quoting Dominic, and the paper gave it a couple of paragraphs. Paias picked it up and phoned me, more querulous than angry, and this was the first time I found myself in the cross sights of the powers that be. I told him I believed Dominic’s position entitled him to make public comment and invited Paias to respond. Sensibly, he said he was not about to enter into a verbal duel via the press and no more was said on the matter, but I realised just how careful I had to be. I knew it would not be in my interests to antagonise people like Paias, who had been Minister for Transport and Civil Aviation under Somare before he turned 30. I also knew I was not going to block people from having their say providing I had faith in their credibility.

I had the background and the contacts to give me a true picture of what was going on in the Western Highlands and,
though less at home in the Southern Highlands and Enga, again I was assured of the facts through my contacts. When the Eastern Highlands and Chimbu were added to my domain, the little matter of distance precluded frequent visits. The Eastern Highlands and its main centre, Goroka, were comparatively stable but Chimbu was another story. I knew only a little of the build-up of events in Chimbu and was at a disadvantage when I was invited to the main town, Kundiawa, at the instigation of four Chimbu divisional heads, two of them Papua New Guineans.

In a memo to the administrative secretary, which was ‘leaked’ to me, they had expressed dissatisfaction with the new provincial secretary and the partisan stance he had adopted in favour of private organisations. They hoped I would be able to draw attention to serious dereliction of duty and malpractice among provincial leaders. When I arrived I was presented with a second memo from the same source noting the ‘many accusations and counter accusations flying around’ relating to the misappropriation by the interim Provincial Government of more than K2.2 million and that the blame was being wrongly apportioned. The heads of division were deeply concerned about the tangled affairs of the province and were not at all confident that the full Provincial Government, which had recently replaced the interim Government, was working to resolve them.

I was quickly out of my depth as I had no background knowledge of events or the people involved and the circuitous nature of their dealings was incredibly hard to follow. I worried that I was hearing only one side of the story, which told of unauthorised Provincial Government ‘loans’ of K200,000, of the transfer of assets to a company part-owned by the Government and of blatant political interference in the operations of the debt-ridden Chimbu Coffee Factory. The interim Provincial Secretary, Barunke Kaman, had clashed irrevocably with his fellow clansman Iambakey Okuk, leader of the National Party and now Deputy Prime Minister. Kaman had wielded enormous power in the virtually illiterate interim Government, simply because he had been to school, and was accused of manipulating the Government. He wasn’t sounding to me like a nice chap. Besides,
I knew for a fact he had six convictions to his name in a six-month period, later to reach 10, mostly for assault. He was suspended as secretary but was still throwing his weight around as though he still had authority. Now it was feared his replacement was also guilty of the dubious transfer of assets and of granting illicit favours.

It was a horrific and complex political scenario, compounded by an upsurge in Chimbu’s lawlessness that put everything in that province prior to the State of Emergency in the shade. I was concerned about my ability to discover the full truth in a short space of time and whether I had sufficient understanding to report on it accurately. I was a bit nervous about being there. I finally sent six pieces away to Port Moresby and need not have worried for, if anything, they understated the situation. I hoped, for the sake of those few with integrity who were trying to fight the avalanche of intrigue and corruption, that the published articles opened a few of the eyes that mattered. Opening eyes was the easy part; arresting corruption and making good K2.2 million was much harder.

Our own province had celebrated the first anniversary of its interim Provincial Government in October, 1979, budgeted for at the unheard of cost of K24,238. In June the next year, the full Western Highlands Provincial Government was elected. Villagers always found the election of these new leaders difficult. It was clear that only those with know-how about the changed world in which they lived, with some education and, ideally, some experience in government, could do the job. The loyal and honest but uneducated Tei Abal, who led the United Party for many years, had proved that. But the people also wanted leaders who showed commitment to their electorate and who would be sure to look after the interests of their people. The leaders they trusted were those who lived among them, the unsophisticated, traditional leaders. Unfortunately, the ability to fight and acquire land and pigs and wives was no longer a prerequisite for leadership. So the villagers listened to the promises of the candidates, accepted vote-buying favours and often huge gifts, cast their votes and hoped for the best. They were to be sadly disillusioned.
Once the members were elected, they, in turn, would elect their premier. It was John Nekints who first made the observation, mid-1980, that most of the Western Highlands’ elected members seemed to have vanished. I knew only a few of them, including Nambuga Mara and Awap Rumint, the Provincial Member for Minjigina and Deputy Premier of the interim Government. No one seemed able to tell us where the missing members had gone but our inquiries suggested they were out of the province. And so, it transpired, they were. The leaders of political parties found it useful to have men of their choice in the provincial seat of power and lobbying methods were extravagant and innovative. Pangu man Paias Wingti, who had held the seat of Hagen at the recent election that put Sir Julius Chan into government, had spirited most of the Western Highlands’ elected members away — we heard it was to Wewak — for a week’s spree on the coast. The object was to make them feel obligated and to isolate them while he persuaded them to elect the man running the Pangu *Pati* ticket, Nambuga Mara.

On the day appointed for the premier’s election, John and I stood around outside the Melpa Area Authority building, surrounded by interested townspeople, waiting for the members to arrive. We waited for more than an hour until a PMV drove up and pulled in at the pavement, its driver yelling to us that we were in the wrong place and should be out at Bindon where, he said, Wingti had the members holed up at Norm and Esma’s old place. John and I went out in my car and found a goodly crowd standing around but the gate was high, like the fence, and firmly locked. One of the bystanders told us the group had been driven there earlier in the morning straight from Kagamuga Airport. It was not hard to guess that one or more of the flock, on which Wingti had apparently spent so much money over recent days, was proving recalcitrant, possibly holding out for a bigger pay-off. We waited half an hour or so but absolutely nothing happened. It was now after lunch-time and, fed up, we drove back into Hagen, John arranging to be notified of any developments.

I went to the Hagen Park Motel where Iambakey Okuk, the volatile Deputy Prime Minister under Chan, was finishing
lunch. He beckoned me and led me into the manager’s office. It was not hard to see that he knew all about the events of the day and was furious. He told me to meet him back at the motel at 4pm as he wanted to release a statement. I agreed to this, had a bite to eat and returned to the Melpa building. This time there was not long to wait. The Provincial Government members arrived and filed into the meeting chamber where seats had been neatly arranged with a ballot box in the far corner. It was clear that the battle for premier was going to be between Pangu man Mara and Awap Rumint, who was not a Pangu supporter. It was never intended that members of provincial governments should be affiliated with the major political parties but how could they resist, I had to ask myself?

I sat down with the others and waited. Nothing happened. No one went near the ballot box and not a single vote was cast, not in writing, not verbally and not by a show of hands. Soon Rumint stood up and left the chamber. Nambuga Mara was named the new premier and that was that. I was stunned. I dearly would have liked a comment from Awap Rumint, who I had always found to be a businesslike and sensible sort of chap, but he was not to be found. During my search for him, I came across Paias Wingti doing a victory parade of the town in a government vehicle with the high-cost premier, Nambuga Mara, beaming and waving beside him. Wingti signalled me to stop and, window to window in the middle of the street, told me to be at his office at 4pm. I told him quite openly Okuk had beaten him to the appointment time but I would come to his office as soon as I had taken Okuk’s statement. Wingti had a Buddha-like impassivity and wore his long, spindly beard like some kind of sectarian deliverer. He looked at me without expression and repeated that he wanted me there.

I did hurry there as soon as I left Okuk, who was predictably outspoken on the subject of politicians who failed democracy and cost the nation dearly, although he was more guilty than most, heaven knows. I suspect he was so mad because he’d wanted a National Party adherent for premier and hadn’t thought of Wingti’s lurk first. When I reached Wingti’s office he
had gone. I toured around town for a while but didn’t see him so I wrote my stories, dropped them off at Kagamuga and hurried out to Kuk before it got dark. Next day I went first to Wingti’s Hagen office in the hope he might be there so I could apologise for missing him the day before. He was and he produced a very regal ‘we are not amused’ look from unwavering, gimlet-like eyes.

I made my apologies and explained the situation but his advice was that journalists with political bias should leave the country. I was so mad at this injustice that I forgot my thoughts about nurturing relationships with the pollies and adopted the school-teacher voice I had no doubt used to him years ago in a woodwork class.

‘Don’t be so silly, Paias,’ I told him rashly. ‘I have no political bias whatever — what I had was a previous appointment with the Deputy Prime Minister. Anyway, as far as leaving the country, you needn’t worry because I’m going.’ I didn’t tell him what I thought of PNG politicking, of party disloyalty and self-aggrandisement, of corruption and nepotism. I didn’t tell him there was no way I’d be biased towards any of their political parties. Even I knew I’d said enough, so I stood up and marched out. There were no repercussions.

What I didn’t know at the time was just how disastrous returning Mara would prove to be. Problems started at the first sitting of the new assembly in October when, led by Mara, the members voted to amend the constitution to allow for up to 12 new members. This was obviously a good way to repay wantoks and it was Awap Rumint who opposed the motion, rightly pointing out it would be a terrible waste of money. Long after I left the country, the Western Highlands Provincial Government was suspended, among five others, and Mara was jailed for misappropriation of funds. He travelled a long way — for a dokta boi.

While the Kuk team was working to discover improved agricultural practices and build productivity, the inevitable signs of a decline among coffee plantations was becoming evident. The villagers who now owned them did not get on with former expatriate managers and sacked them, needled them into
resigning or refused to admit they needed help in the first place. It stood to reason the new owners preferred to have a white manager’s pay in their own hands. Very quickly, it reached a stage when positive action was needed; more expertise and more outside investment were in urgent demand. Prime Minister Chan decided the Land Acquisition Act had not been such a great idea after all and eventually it was shelved.

This might have seemed a cruel twist of fate because it came too late for us and others like us. But the people of PNG had been brought to a point in their relationship with expatriates where they could not turn back. This had been imposed upon them by idealistic pressures from outside the country, by an assortment of inexperienced PNG politicians and the nature of development. It was not what everyone wished for, but it was irrevocable. It was the end of an era that could not be reborn. I admit to cynical ‘I told you so’ thoughts, but it was time to think forward. What had gone had been magnificent and, for that, we were lucky.
The house at Kuk had only two assets. One was a magnificent frangipani that was in full bloom when I arrived and transformed the featureless entrance to the house. The other was an expansive area of well-tended lawn of croquet party potential. There were also jacarandas and borders of flowering wild ginger and gardenias. The gardens were lovely. For a while it looked as though the Kuk staff was going to stop tending our garden because they didn’t get on with Bepi and Mim, but Barry arranged something that seemed to work. There weren’t many of the old croquet school left but we had our party and it was a fun day. Preparing for it created another barrier to facing the fact I was soon to leave the country, about which I was becoming increasingly thoughtful. There was still the September school holidays left, the boys’ fares once again paid for by the PNG Government, thanks to Barry’s new employment, and that was about it.

I kept busy, there was plenty happening, but when Christoph and Jules came up I gave them lots of my time. I was not in a hurry to get away in the mornings. In fact, you couldn’t hurry away in the mornings if you wanted breakfast first — which I did. The electricity supply was seriously enfeebled by the time it reached our house at Kuk. The toaster took ages to colour the bread and you had to wait for that to happen before you could turn on the jug for coffee. Frequently it was necessary to turn off the fridge before either toaster or jug would perform and, inevitably, there were times when it didn’t get turned on again.
I took the opportunity to start teaching Christoph and Jules to drive the car, although it was still the despised automatic which I felt was a poor learning medium. The dirt roads to Kuk carried little traffic and we had several practice runs back and forth between Kuk and the main road, some kilometres away. I tried to have the lessons after the road had dried out a bit and before the rain came because of the car’s objection to having a wet belly.

It was during these school holidays that I suddenly realised Barry had started showing a much greater interest in the two boys and I think that was to do with the level of understanding they had reached in the things that interested him. He could talk to them and expect their interest and an intelligent response. They were deep in earnest discussion when I arrived home well after dark from a Chamber of Commerce meeting one night. I still had one more chamber commitment, which was to attend a national conference in Rabaul as a Western Highlands delegate, but I had opted out of regular meetings because I didn’t want the late drive out to Kuk. When I was asked to attend a sort of farewell gathering in recognition of my years as secretary, I did what I hadn’t done for a long time and asked for Barry’s help. He was to meet me at the Kuk turn-off on the home run but he wasn’t there. Expecting to meet up with him at any moment, I crept over the dirt road in heavy rain, fearful of a rock smashing the windscreen, of being jumped by a native, hauled out of the car and raped or killed or just broken up again, too scared to go any faster in case I stalled. When I arrived home I conveyed my state of upset to the happily absorbed trio about as subtly as a steam train and it wasn’t being scared that upset me so much. Neither were there many signs of regret though Barry said, ‘Oh fuck — I forgot.’

Everyone forgets things at one time or another, but the timing of this was awful. For years I had managed on my own and never asked for help. It was the last week we were to spend as a family in PNG, it was my last meeting for the chamber and it was only weeks before I was due to leave for ever. It was like a slap in the face — letting me know how little I mattered. After all this time it hurt, just like it used to.
Once when I had been explaining my plans to Barry he made a point of warning me that if I went, I’d have to get used to being a nobody instead of a somebody. I was curious about this. Was he, in his usual circuitous way, suggesting he wanted me to stay? Did he expect that I might stay after all? Indeed, there was no compulsion for me to leave until Barry did, except for Christopher leaving school and the fact that I was mentally and physically geared up for it. Now I decided Barry’s forgetful moment was a positive, because it killed unwanted, wishy-washy feelings about leaving.

I carried the mood to the airport when we went to see the boys off. I carried it for several days until I’d become once more immersed in the activities and concerns of the province. I was glad of the trip to Rabaul for I had never been there before and it took my mind off things. It was a picturesque place, the harbour, with its volcanic sentinels, unbelievably lovely. Jim, who built our Kum road house, was the other Western Highlands delegate and we took the chance to see around the town and its outskirts. So much about Rabaul was remarkable and not only visually. I was fascinated by the man-made tunnels, still intact, where the Japanese had safely harboured their subs during the war. The war cemetery was beautifully cared for and invoked in me a profound sense of pride and gratitude and sadness. A feature that stood out were the mission stations, beautiful with their luxuriant tropical growth and expansive areas of manicured lawn dotted with pristinely white religious statues. I thought the visibility of these estates excessive, over the top.

The chamber meetings only heightened awareness that my PNG days were finished. My presence there was pointless. Nothing on the agenda would have further meaning for me and I would never know the outcomes of the resolutions being made. I wrote up a report for the Post Courier but I felt like an outsider with no more relevance to the country. I was puzzled, my thoughts a jumble of confusion; I couldn’t tell what was disturbing me but I was crying inside about something I didn’t understand. I was leaving the country of my own free will, I had the boys to go to and I knew, without any doubt, it was time to
go. But I hated thinking about it, about leaving Mim, about what might happen to Barry and how I would suddenly have to forget the affairs of the province which had become so much a part of my life.

There was no point in trying to predict the future — there were too many imponderables: what Barry would do, whether I could find a job — I was getting a bit long in the tooth for an approach to the Australian job market — and, if not, did Barry accept that the boys and I would have to live on the interest from the Verona money? The Verona capital was not mine to dip into and what we would do with it depended on Barry’s plans. Meanwhile, the investment and management of the family finances had fallen into my hands, where it remained. It was as though Barry wanted no more involvement with matters that related to Verona and Alimp or a future without them. But then, neither had he ever pretended to be money conscious.

Even though Barry’s position at Kuk could not last, I half believed he would somehow find a way to stay in PNG. I couldn’t imagine what he might do if he came south, given that the Verona money was not enough to buy into any established rural activity. Starting a horticultural venture from scratch was obviously not a prospect, for Barry had not dug a hole or planted anything in the 22 years since he started employing kago bois; he was not young and far from robust. I couldn’t see him in a small business — or anything that required a commercially oriented outlook or having to deal with consumers on a daily basis. As for finding paid work, I’d be lucky if I could do that myself and certainly didn’t favour Barry’s chances — even if he was to try. Who on earth would want to employ the former owner of a coffee plantation? I had to STOP THINKING — it was getting me nowhere.

Then, suddenly, I was plunged into the last-minute arrangements for leaving. The Melbourne real estate agent had been warned to have the townhouse vacant for the end of October and, in the interests of economy, the boys’ school had been advised that Jules would not be a boarder in 1981. I resigned from the Post Courier with great reluctance for I knew
I’d never find another job like it. It was just so absurdly easy for me to forget my reasons for leaving. Hagen Hauliers was advised to take my stored crates to Lae for shipping for which purpose I declared the old Hollis and sold the revolver Tas had given me when he left. My flight had been booked and now all that was left was to get myself on the plane. I dragged out the Singapore suitcase and packed my clothes along with two cartons I’d salvaged from out the back of Steamies supermarket.

Barry had made few close friends, though he enjoyed the company of those we shared, but Ron, who had come into our lives fairly recently, was the exception. I had the feeling Barry was going to need Ron’s companionship — even a bit of psychological caring for — and I felt Ron would do that, as a mate over a bottle of rum. I was right and Ron was to become a great support to Barry.

So I left Kuk and Mim and we drove to the airport where everyone I knew who was still in Hagen was waiting to say goodbye in time-honoured PNG style, armed with stubbies and bottles of wine. I clung to Barry for a moment when the passengers were called, my face crumpling, and he just said ‘take it easy’ and so I left. It was a sad flight to Moresby and the tears came. I couldn’t tell if I wept for what might have been, or what had been that I was loath to leave. A bit of both, I suppose. I could hear a woman in the seat behind saying, ‘God, what’s she so upset about — I’d be jumping for joy.’
Once in the Boeing flying out of Moresby, my new life started to emerge. I deliberately thought through the next weeks, day by day. First, my visit to a couple of former PNG friends, who had settled for warmer climes than Melbourne where I was headed. Arrive in Melbourne and pick up the car — a manual for which we’d traded in the offensive ‘golden ’olden’. Attend a rowing competition on the Yarra in which Christoph and Jules were to take part — the first of their school’s sporting events I’d been able to watch. Unpack, buy a dining table and some comfy chairs and set up the townhouse. Get to know the boys again; school holidays in Hagen, exciting though they were, had artificial overtones. It was so important that we enjoy those few short weeks that I tried to avoid rows and the prospect of parting on a sour note at all costs, so there were many compromises to normal family life. Now it would be for real and I had visions of all the things we would do together. This new life was going to be all right.

Of course, my dream of family life was highly unrealistic, although we started on a high note. While Jules stayed on in boarding school until year’s end, I spent time wading through the VCE curriculum and asking likely exam questions of Xtoph, who had embarked on some heavy last-minute swotting. After Christmas, Jules resumed school as a day student and I belatedly became aware of the loss this was to him. All his long-standing
friends were in the boarding house while he had to change to a day house where he knew no one well. He now had to compete in sport against the teams where his real loyalties lay. Christoph, who’d had his fill of study despite his VCE pass and tertiary training offers, opted for a job which he secured quite easily. I found it terribly sad when, one day, struggling to hold back the tears, he forlornly asked whether this was all there was to being grown up: going to work, working and coming home from work. It reminded me of my early expectations of the freedoms and liberation marriage would bring.

But Christoph found a group of friends and recreational interests and soon led a life in isolation from Jules and me that I was not given a chance to understand. He didn’t seem a happy young man and, though he continued to live at home, he was not a cooperative element in the household either. I learnt the hard way that this was par for the course and it took his marriage to restore him to our family. It often does, I’m told.

Soon after Christmas, determined not to go back to teaching even supposing elderly phys. ed. teachers were employable, I found a writing job. It was as a casual writer of advertorial for a disreputable newspaper operated by an undischarged bankrupt whose pay cheques bounced. This job nearly lost me at least one good friend who was disgusted I could so demean myself, but no one wanted an ungraded journalist and this, at least, was a leg in. Chasing the advertisers around the suburbs helped me to find my way around Melbourne again and at least the fight for pay was challenging. Jules left school at the end of 1982, faring well enough to earn a couple of university offers. He accepted one at the University of New England to study Agricultural Science but deferred for a year of jackarooing at Hay in New South Wales.

While the three of us were trying to sort ourselves out, Barry wrote to say he and Ron were applying for one of a number of 10-acre blocks near Broome, Western Australia, sight unseen, which Barry would develop while Ron contributed financially. So I was wrong in assuming he wouldn’t attempt a project from scratch, despite the odds against it. I could not envisage how this could work and told him to count me out. I had a job and my
pioneering days were over. Later, when I heard from Ron, I knew he was worried about the venture and he and I, at least, were greatly relieved when the gazettal of the block was withdrawn because of a shortage of water. Much later, on a trip through the Tanami Desert to Broome, I saw these blocks and have never seen anything more desolate and depressing.

Barry’s position at Kuk was localised and he was asked to leave by the end of January 1983. I don’t really think I ever expected him to come south but he found a good home for the dogs and come he did, with 21 tea-chests of books and tools, a few PNG artefacts and some kitchen odds and ends; all the furniture was lost or stolen. By this time, the two boys and I were well and truly ensconced in a house, a move which had been forced on me by the size of the unit and its lack of storage space. When I came home after a weekend away and found Christopher’s motorbike in the living room I knew something had to be done. The new purchase was a charming little house with a small, but equally charming garden which was conveniently close to a railway station so Jules could get himself to school.

Barry didn’t intend to give up after his Broome disappointment but it took him a long time to recuperate after what had inevitably been a traumatic and debilitating pre-departure few months. When he did start to think more positively, he decided to investigate career prospects up north in a more salubrious climate than Melbourne’s. He bought a second-hand ute and the empty shell of a new campervan which he fitted out as an office and tool store. He made a superb timber filing cabinet for it and an elegant timber table with built-in seats, for which I made cushions, under which lift-out compartments provided a special space for every tool. Being the perfectionist he was, the work was time-consuming. It was nearly two years after his arrival in Australia, considerably revitalised in body and spirit, that he drove it to Queensland.

After a while he came up with a scheme to grow vanilla on rented land. Although I had always hoped that in some way we could make up for the loss of Alimp, I could see this was not that opportunity. I was not in a position to say ‘don’t do it’, but I had
become entirely responsible for managing our finances and did question the proposal as it stood, mainly because it involved planting on land he did not own. Vanilla was not then grown in Australia and his financial projections contained many assumptions. His figures gave the project a seven-year financial break-even point during which time he proposed to live in the campervan while ignoring the fact that he would have no long- term security of tenure to the land. Finally, I silently challenged his ability to do all the spade work, maintenance and marketing himself. I took the proposal to our accountant and, though Barry must have known the scheme was unrealistic, he didn’t take kindly to our doubts. We realised that to make it feasible he must own the land and I hastily wrote to the Queensland Government asking how to apply for a grant for an import replacement project. The reply was sent up to Barry.

We sat on this situation for a long time during which Barry made no further mention of vanilla and remained camped in a caravan park in Queensland where he met up with friends he had known in PNG. While this was going on, Christoph had found his real niche in the IT industry and Jules had opted out of academia saying all he wanted was to be a ‘cocky’ not a scientist. He stayed in New South Wales until, after a stint of fencing, ‘stick-picking’ on a mate’s property, and playing the guitar for the odd gig in a local Armidale pub, he settled for a farm management course in Victoria. This finally led him to a livestock management position in Western Australia.

After a course in writing skills and making endless job applications, I eventually found my way, thanks to the recommendation of the Post Courier’s managing editor and incredible luck, into the small, experimental off-shoot of a major public relations firm. All save one member of the five-strong team was under 30 years of age, including the boss, while I was rising 55. The off-shoot finally rejoined the parent company and I learnt even more as a PR consultant than as the Post Courier highlands correspondent.

Barry seemed quite settled in Queensland. He had started making coffee tables, using the back of the ute as a workbench
and was obviously enjoying the company of, and continuing reunions with, former PNG people. After two years of no further developments, either in vanilla-growing or anything else, and continuously doubling up on living costs, I suggested we buy a small hobby farm out of Melbourne if he’d come and live there.

That’s what we did and the little farm served as well as anything could have done to give Barry something positive to do while not driving him to meet deadlines or financial commitments or forcing him to get up early in the mornings. All my friends from before were part of this new life, Barry fitting in as though he had known them for ever. There was a fairly heavy two-month period when my parents stayed with us, waiting to take up residence in a retirement village and all of us found this a difficult time, but especially Barry, who managed to stay sane by becoming even more solitary than usual. My mother took exception to the way he avoided extended contact by adjourning to another room. She had for many years taken exception to his shortcomings as a husband and could find no reason to revise her opinion. But when Barry made a little wooden pot plant stand for her birthday she confessed to me in a grudging voice one day: ‘The trouble is — you can’t help liking Barry.’ That was the thing about him.

The farm was an old orchard, not commercially productive and pretty much overgrown when we moved in. It was not so isolated that I had to leave the job I was finding increasingly interesting. I was at work all day, so Barry had the place to himself and he looked after it beautifully so it ended up looking like parkland. Maybe the move couldn’t make up for Verona but I’m sure he really knew that nothing else he could now undertake would give him the same freedom to do things exactly as, if and when he wanted. Although he kept talking about more productive ventures, I don’t think his heart was in this and, as his health declined, he seemed to stop thinking about greener pastures. So he settled for what we had and it worked out better than I might have expected. We had our first croquet party on New Year’s Day in 1989 and his lawn was definitely superior to anything we had played on in PNG.
Neither of us spoke much about the past but we stayed in contact with our friends from PNG, most of whom settled in Queensland, convinced, I am sure, that Melbourne was part of the Antarctic. This gave us the excuse to go north from time to time, where we spent long nights talking about PNG. In Melbourne my friends from before were there for us as though I had never left and soon I, too, became wholly involved with the present. These friends were interested in PNG talk only for a limited time. Anyway, they didn’t understand. You could say things like, ‘The Australian Government was crazy not to tie its grants’ and you would shock people deeply. If only they knew what was happening to their money and what a wrong message the freedom to use it corruptly was giving the people. The accent on moral concerns often contributes to long-term problems.

I had cause to be grateful for what the farm had to offer us. As Barry’s health became an increasing concern, I needed to take on more of the regular maintenance jobs, but it gave him a *raison d’être* until the end. He died in 1997, two years after surgery to remove a malignant tumour. By then he was so debilitated and so totally without any quality to his life, that no one could have wished for less than the release of death. I was never able to speak for Barry nor act for him, much less predict how he might respond to things like having grandchildren. It’s sad he never saw them but, despite their moves to other states, he did become closer to Xtoph and Jules. It is sad that he was only 69 when he died, but he lived life the way he wanted. It is sad that he had to forsake his coffee farm, but he had 21 fulfilling years there and he had good times back in Australia. I think of us as among the lucky people.

I have stopped thinking much about my life in PNG — more, my thoughts rest with the people who live there now and what is happening to them as the country’s difficult experience of independence unfolds. But that high country where we lived can never be forgotten. It is so beautiful, its people so paradoxical and intriguing. They cannot be categorised by any standards I know, they are not easily understood but they and their home are all part of an addictive appeal that, for people who learnt to
understand a little, never goes away. The PNG experience will always be with Christopher and Julian and me, and Barry was at the heart of it. For our grandchildren and their children, the knowledge that his ashes are planted beneath a small square of red clay at Alimp represents a continuing link that I feel good about and so would Barry.
Papua New Guinea