

TRUE COUNTRY

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Author's Note

This novel began with a desire to explore a sort of neglected interior space, and to consider my own heritage. Having turned my attention to that primarily personal territory, and the blank page, I selected some words and images from my little store and scattered them before me. Here, I hoped, might be some place from which to begin.

Actual place names, I thought, would help anchor it all in 'reality' and assist it to become something other than mere personal indulgence. I used details of Kimberley topography, and borrowed from the dialect and past of one community I had lived in.

It is not difficult, for those so inclined, to trace Karnama back to a specific community. But then it's no longer Karnama. In terms of its character Karnama could, it seems to me, be one of many Aboriginal communities in Northern Australia. I created fictional characters that seemed appropriately 'typical' and who would be most able to assist me in my explorations. Many of them ran away from me. None of them bear any relation to any real person.

As I continued to write, the story developed in ways which I had not anticipated. None of the events or situations of the narrative are intended to correspond to any real occurrence. And although in a few instances, aspects of certain actual events are suggested, they are used as stepping off points for the imagination, and this work remains wholly fictional in every aspect.

We carry in our hearts the true country
And that cannot be stolen
We follow in the steps of our ancestry
And that cannot be broken.

‘The Dead Heart’ — Midnight Oil

(then why) ... this sense
of gain and loss, the now I am
not there, then, despite the giveaway
smile? I am a born exile, or they
are tokens of infinity; and distance
like love is a necessary fiction.

‘Distances’ — Charles Boyle

I

First Thing, Welcome

You might stay that way, maybe forever, with no world to belong to and belong to you. You in your many high places, looking over looking over, waiting for a sign. You're nearly ready, nearly there.

You're trying to read a flat pattern, like the sea, the land from high above. Or you might see your shadow falling upon this page. And maybe that's all you'll see and understand.

Or you might drift in. Fall or dive in. Enter.

Wind drift, rain fall, river rush. The air, the sea all round. And the storming.

You alight on higher ground, gather, sing. It may be.

You listen to me. We're gunna make a story, true story. You might find it's here you belong. A place like this.

And it is a beautiful place, this place. Call it our country, our country all 'round here. We got river, we got sea. Got creek, rock, hill, waterfall. We got bush tucker: apple, potato, sugarbag, bush turkey, kangaroo, barramundi, dugong, turtle ... every kind. Sweet mangoes and coconuts too.

There is a store, school for our kids and that mission here still. That's all right. Yes, you might never see a better place. Our home.

When it's rainy season rivers fill up and food and surround us.

Is like we are a forgotten people then, on a maybe shrinking island; a special place for us alone.

You might fly in many times, high up and like reading river, hill, tree, rocks. Coming from upriver and the east, you flying flying fly in looking all the time and remembering; you flying quiet and then you see this place. You see the river. You see the water here, this great blue pool by High Diving where the kids swim. You see the mission grounds all green, and the houses all quiet and tiny from up in the air. You notice the dark mango trees, and the coconut trees standing tall along that airstrip road. That airstrip is like a cross, because there's two airstrips. The old people built them in the war, with the army and the fathers, when those Japanese bombed this place. They make a cross for someone like a sky pilot to land on.

But, first time, you in a plane. You go over the gorge and you see the landing where the barge came in long ago. You see that and you see where the river goes into salt water, and the islands scattered blue offshore. Then the plane banks and maybe you see nothing just sky, or maybe the trees the road the rubbish then in front of you the gravel coming up and bang you are landed.

Welcome to you.

Long White Walksocks

Two white men would have been at the mission workshop, crouched beside a four-wheel drive. They stood up together, looked at their watches, and squinted into the sky. One was tall like a tree, the other one short with a round gut. They spoke, and got into another vehicle.

Many kids and young people, dark ones, were over near the store and the basketball court. One tall boy leapt into the air, hovered, and tossed a basketball toward the backboard. The orange ball gently arced and descended through the hoop without touching it. The boy rolled over onto his back, laughing. He looked into the sky, and pointed up and to the south-east. All the kids stopped their games, and looked, and they pointed too. Their eardrums, even those that were perforated, or congested, or — in one or two cases — hindered by sprouting watermelon seeds, trembled with the drone of airborne engines.

Next to the lumpy and cracked basketball court was a corrugated iron shack with rubbish and graffiti scattered along the wall. People were sitting on the ground there. A man put his head out the door. 'Teacher plane,' he said.

'Teacher plane teacher plane. Gissa ride, gissa ride.' The utility, coming up now, pulled over. Bodies poured in, all sizes. The same was happening to other utilities there. Boys standing

on the trays, young women sitting holding their babies, people cross-legged on the roof of the cabs. The old people, sitting around the office and out the front of the houses along the road to the airstrip, watched them drive by. The corrugated iron resonated with the rumble of the plane flying overhead, the cars driving past, the shouts, the barking of dogs.

I am flying. I was coming to a landing.

The plane had flown in low, under the rain clouds, navigating by the rivers and coastline. My wife, Liz, still held the small motion sickness bag and could only smile weakly at me. The pilot shouted, but because of the roar of the engines and the earmuffs I wore I couldn't hear him. He pointed ahead and I saw a small settlement. There were tall, deep-green trees, buildings glinting in the sun, and a blue pool where the river slowed and widened.

'Ah, that's it?'

The pilot nodded. We'd been flying for an hour and a half. In the plane with us were Alex and Annette Seddum and their eight-year-old son, Alan. Alex was to be the principal of the school we were flying to.

The boy squeezed his hands between his knees and wriggled. 'We nearly there?' and he turned and called to his mother, 'At last we're nearly there at this place whatever it's called.'

Annette smiled at him. Alex patted the boy's head and turned his own furrowed brow away.

We flew over a large curved pool in the river, and saw the mission with its lawn and buildings and plantation. There were small huts and large trees, and a scratch of a track that dipped

through creeks. It scratched past the powerhouse and the school, turned the corner of the basketball court near the mission gates and continued, lined with coconut palms, past corrugated iron huts to a gravel airstrip in the shape of a cross.

Not far from the airstrip the river flows through a gorge before widening to a mangrove-lined mouth and into the sea. The plane flew low and banked to make its approach to the airstrip. I saw the white ribbons of water which poured from the rocks and were shredded and swept downstream. That river is always a torrent at this time.

As we lost altitude the scratch became a dirt road barely wide enough for two vehicles. It went cautiously through the bush between the gorge and the airstrip which we saw before us, through the settlement and then out the other side of it. The bush was littered with old car bodies, tins, plastic, all sorts of rubbish. We landed with a crunch and the gravel spat at us, the engine roared, and we were taxiing over to a crowd of dark bodies waving from the back of four-wheel drive utilities.

We all waved back from inside the plane. It was very hot and humid on the ground. We shouted at one another over the roar of the engines.

‘Quite a reception.’

‘Good eh? Friendly.’

‘Look how many in each car.’

‘Gaw, they’re really black aren’t they?’

Yes, whereas these people in the plane looked even paler than usual. My wife from travel sickness, the others from what? Exhaustion? Apprehension?

The pilot turned off the motor and said to the mostly pale faces around him, ‘What do you reckon? Think you can teach them?’ He opened the doors for us.

Annette pointed to two white men. 'Look, Alex, there's two men there.'

'Yeah,' he said, 'that must be the project officer. One of them will be anyway.'

It was. His name was Gerrard. The other was Murray, the mechanic and general tradesman for the mission and community.

We all shook hands, a small group circling in the space between the plane being unloaded and the welcoming crowd. Small children shyly zig-zagged toward the long white walksocks among us.

We new teachers sat in the back of the utility with our few boxes and cases. Our clothes stuck to our flesh. We tightly gripped the sides of the tray, worried we'd fall as the ute bounced along the track. A number of other vehicles accompanied us, and we rattled in a great cloud of dust and noise. We came through the corridor of coconut palms and, smiling stiffly, regally waved back at those who watched from the shade of the huts.

Many of the younger children held lengths of nylon fishing line, the other ends of which were tied to cans dragging behind them.

'Hey, I used to make toys like that when I was a kid. I'd forgotten.' It was true. I'd forgotten.

The half-naked children turned, their faces splitting into grins, and waved also. Old car bodies rusted in long green grass. Clothing was strung out on low barbed wire fences around some of the shacks. In one yard a circle of people sat under a big tree, hunched over a game of cards.

What were they saying?

'Who dem gardiya?'

'Teachers.'

'Look out, 'm fall off not careful.'

'Wave 'em, look at 'm they wave. Think they pope, or what?'

'Look at that one, blondie one, that short one.'

'See that hat? That John Wayne maybe, ridin' Toyota.'

'Aice! That red hair girl, mine!'

Screams of laughter.

Fatman Murray turned into the backyard of the teachers' housing behind the school and the front wheels of the Toyota went through the grass and sank deep into the mud.

'Shit.'

At a card game someone fanned his cards out on the top of his belly. 'Coonce!'

I win.

The Midst of a Battle

So, a beginning has been made, and the person I was then might have wanted to compare it to the beginning of a game; have believed it is like a basketball tossed up to begin a game. But what if the basketball were to continue rising? What if, amazingly, it continued rising, away from the control of whistle and game, and right up past one returning aeroplane? It would startle the pilot, that's for sure, and leave him blinking and shaking his head for the rest of the flight. It would leave him wondering and not knowing whether to believe his eyes, the laughter in his ears, or what. How could he explain it to others?

The ball stops rising, is poised, about to plummet. What would you see now, so removed and high above, up there with that basketball?

My first impressions of Karnama were from above, over a map. I looked at several maps. Karnama was labelled either 'Aboriginal Community', or 'Mission', depending on the age of the map. On each map there was a small red symbol of an aeroplane hovering over my destination. And there were variously drawn lines; lines of different colours, of dots, dashes, or dots and dashes, each indicating a different path, whether it be 'unsealed one lane road', '4WD track', 'river' or 'foot trail'. It was like a treasure map.

And then, the reality. A large 'X' helped mark the spot.

School started the day after our arrival. We hardly knew where to begin. The kids seemed friendly and affectionate. They were all Aboriginal. Karnama had no television, radio, telephones, and only a weekly mail plane. There were few books in the community, but many videos. Few of the adults could read and write, and the students had very low levels of education. We had trouble pronouncing their surnames, and understanding their English. Our students were shy, but curious to know about us, and somehow very concerned for our welfare. One youth especially, Deslie, would even guide us around the large wet-season puddles.

The school, apparently, had a reputation for arranging performances of traditional dancing for community visitors. Alex told us near the end of the first school week that the school would be putting on a dance for some visitors in a couple of weeks. He would get a few of the local adults to come in to help with rehearsals.

A couple of days later the whole school gathered in the shade of the mango tree in the centre of the schoolyard. Some of the elder women from the community dipped chewed twigs or small paint brushes into tins of white ochre as the smaller children clambered over and around them. The children closed their eyes to have their faces painted and stuck out their chests when the ochre was placed there. They were all laughing and chattering, with the women occasionally shouting 'Keep still!' or 'Shut up you, you ...' Alex paced around them.

The adolescents were reluctant. The older girls leaned against a fence several metres away on the edge of the shade.

Some of them sat facing away from the rest of us. It was hot. Francis, awkwardly bursting out of his clothes and seemingly growing before one's eyes as his hormones bustled, polished his thick spectacles and looked bewildered. The other teenage boys joked.

Sylvester, one of the tallest, called out. 'Look at little Willy! Proper blackfella Willy.' Tiny Willy stomped his feet furiously as if in a corroboree.

Deslie shoved Sylvester and turned away pouting. 'I'm not dancin'. I don't like dancing. No men here.' I could see Alex glancing angrily over to where the high school students were. I was responsible for them.

I went over to them. Alex wanted the boys to change into the lap-lap things and be painted, to enter into the spirit of the occasion, he said, and not destroy the enthusiasm of the young ones. One of the boys said, mockingly, 'We should do it or we'll lose our culture.'

'Yes Sylvester, that might be right,' I said earnestly.

'But so what? I'll still have me.' Sylvester puffed out his chest and pounded it. 'Rambo,' he intoned in his deepest voice. The others laughed with him. Francis, with his head tilted back to stop his spectacles sliding from the bridge of his nose, gave a loud and high-pitched laugh.

'Come on now boys, you have to join in.' I turned back to the younger children, shouting at them to get down from the tree, off the verandah, away from the school gate, to stop fighting, stop throwing rocks ... I smiled at the old women who were laughing as they watched two small girls hurling fists and tearful words at one another.

One of the senior primary boys swung from a branch of the tree, screaming out 'Ninja!' and fell, with a different scream. Liz

tried to help him up from the ground where he lay, beginning to sob. ‘Sir! Miss! Look! Cyril fell!’ Voices everywhere, yelling, laughing. Through his tears Cyril groaned, ‘My fuckin’ arm, don’t you laugh Willy, I’ll lift you boy you you ... I’ll make you sting.’

On the outside of this crowd, this whole excited school jostling around the tree from which bodies and sticks were thrown and fell, I saw Annette with two small boys. The boys danced around a rubbish bin, pounding the earth with their bare feet and exhaling in noisy bursts. Annette turned away as she praised them, calling to the crowd. ‘Isn’t that good? I want to see more of this, all of you.’ But I think only I heard. She saw the chaos, her words not heeded, and her smile fell. Her face became a pale tissue, crumpled.

One of the old women lifted her eyes from painting a small face, and I heard her say, with a little smile, in all that noise, ‘We doin’ your teachin’ for you.’

Liz and I met Alex as we were walking across the school lawn from our class late in the day. It was almost sunset and the air had thickened. Everything was deep and rich in colour as the day turned overripe.

Alex stood bare chested before us in his thongs and sagging shorts. ‘It’s a shambles, a bloody farce.’ His brow furrowed again.

‘Yeah it wasn’t too good.’

‘Ha! They don’t teach. They expect the kids to just do it!’ He tilted his head to one side. ‘Could you work it out, step by step?’ Alexander pounded his feet rather feebly on the lawn.

He stopped, and looked at his feet. There was a little silence. ‘No. No, not quite, mate.’

‘What a mess. There’s no teaching method.’ Alex turned away, shaking his head.

‘But,’ Liz tried to insist, ‘that’s their way, maybe.’

I said to him, ‘Alex, what about the men? How come only the women came?’

‘I don’t know. The AEWs — Aboriginal Education Workers — said the men would come, but apparently they were playing cards or something. Commitment eh? Anyway,’ he turned to go once more, ‘there’s a meal on at the mission tonight, for us. About six. Everything supplied.’

He walked away, shaking his head on his rounded thin shoulders. Alex moved like a puppet on strings; high-stepping and as if hesitating just before each foot fell. His pale skin gleamed, and then faded away as he passed under the mango tree where the darkness first gathered.

We sat at a long table in the courtyard of the mission monastery built, Father Paul assured us, some fifty years ago. Brother Tom mentioned, as we admired the illuminated courtyard and the solid walls made of stones from the riverbed, that the natives weren’t much help building this place. They helped as they could.

A fan whirred overhead. We were surrounded by palms and tropical greenery. Father Paul introduced us to the others: Sister Dominica, Sister Therese, Murray, Brother Tom, Gerrard, Jasmine.

The loud fizz-static of insects dying as they hit the insect electrocutor punctuated the whirr of the fan. It seemed an appropriate accompaniment to the prickling heat, the sensation of sweat trickling beneath my fresh clothes.

The tablecloth was white and the Sisters were dressed in

white. Everyone was clean and scrubbed. Knives and forks scratched, glasses clinked, jaws masticated.

Annette sighed and settled her stout body in the chair. 'A week in Karnama seems like an eon. Suddenly, here we have it again. Civilisation.' She raised her arm as if proposing a toast, a wine glass in her fist.

Father Paul leaned forward. 'So, you're finding it a bit difficult then?'

'Oh, it's so frustrating. Kids that don't know how to sit still, and not getting to school until recess time. What are their parents doing? Do they feed them? No, they're playing cards. Alex goes out to see them, like to get them to help with the dancing, and they're all yes sir no sir but as soon as he's gone they forget.' She drained her glass.

Alex glanced nervously at his wife and tried to catch her eye. The other conversations around the table had lulled. Brother Tom called from the far end of the table. 'Ah yes, it can be trying, working here with the Aborigines.'

Annette lifted her chin. 'Well, we were in a little town in the Wheatbelt last year. Alexander was the principal there. When you were the principal's wife you were somebody. And there was sport to play. It wasn't so far from Perth. But here! People laughed at us, other teachers, they couldn't believe that this was a promotion for Alexander. They didn't understand that.' She smiled at her son, Alan, beside her.

People looked around the courtyard, listened to another insect electrocuted.

Liz tried to joke. She tapped her temple and made faces. 'Well, a thicko like me is going to learn a lot here. The kids might not, but I'm sure I will. I need to!' Everyone laughed with relief.

‘Oh, they’re lovely, friendly people,’ we agreed, all nodding and sipping at our drinks.

‘Everyone in the office is lovely,’ said Jasmine. ‘They might not work too hard, but they’re sweet, really. This lovely old lady came over today, the first baby born on the mission she said.’

‘That would be Fatima,’ said Brother Tom.

‘Yes, I think so, very tall and heavy. Quite old I think. Well, she’d have to be if she was born ...’

‘The mission moved here from out at a bay past the river mouth, Murugudda,’ Father Paul interrupted, ‘about fifty-odd years ago, she was born at the old mission. In the middle of the yard I understand.’

‘Fatima, ah yes, she likes to talk, very much!’ offered Sister Dominica. Her skin was tight and lined as if she was too tightly tucked into the folds of her white habit. She spoke with a strong Spanish accent. The mission staff chuckled at the sister’s comment.

‘We see her a lot. We feed the very old people, and her. She helps. Her husband lives with the old people, he’s sick. They’re a very strange couple, very strange.’

‘She must have some interesting stories to tell. She would have seen a lot of changes in her life, when you think about it.’

‘Yes, that’s true. She might even colour things a bit, ham it up if you give her enough attention for it. They’re like that,’ smiled Father Paul.

‘Okay, just improve the story.’

‘She seemed nice. Proud of herself too,’ said Jasmine.

‘She’s among the last of them with any understanding of their culture, you know, though lots of them believe parts of mumbojumbo,’ said Brother Tom.

‘But some sort of new culture must evolve, surely?’

Father Paul snorted. 'But look at what it is,' he said. 'You'll see. I don't think it's very creative or promising. When the mission first came here they were dying out, in terms of numbers. It's only in the last couple of decades that the numbers have started to increase. There's a lot of children now.'

'As a people they can't last,' said Alex. 'They need to organise themselves. Set some sort of goals. Face up to the way things have to be done nowadays. A management plan. And look after finances.'

'There've been a couple of project officers run off with the loot. It's quite common in these sort of communities. It doesn't help.'

'At least they look okay,' Annette offered her wisdom. 'In the Wheatbelt ... well, you know. What a way to be. Better not to last if you end up like that.'

'But they've been here, everywhere, in Australia, for such a long time. Maybe they'll still be here, long after we've gone.'

Some of those who heard Liz's comment appeared to be in pain. They winced. But Jasmine nodded enthusiastically at Liz, and said, 'Yes! Maybe not quite the same, but ...'

'Like cockroaches you mean?' suggested Alex, and small laughter circled the table.

He turned back to Jasmine with a sharp little movement of his head. 'You're new here aren't you?' he said. 'Bookkeeper, that right?'

Gerrard spoke for her. 'Yep. And I'm the new project officer, so Jasmine and I form the team at the office. That's the shed near the basketball court.' He leaned forward, resting his heavy forearms on the table.

'Some basketball court.' I think Annette hiccupped as she said this. She gave a wan smile, her red lips stretching to reveal

her teeth. Her lipstick had spread to her teeth and glass.

‘It’s unusual to have so many new people, white staff, arriving at once,’ said Father Paul. ‘It’s a coincidence that the previous staff left at the one time.’

Murray called out from where he was serving himself more dessert, a lavish salad of tropical fruits grown on the mission plantation. ‘So, it’s pretty well a new bunch all round.’ He waddled back to the table.

‘And a wet bunch we’ll be too, if this rain keeps up,’ said Liz. ‘I bought white shoes to wear to school, and they’re nearly ruined already.’

‘It’ll probably get wetter,’ said Father Paul. ‘It’s not unusual to flood at this time of year. The river comes up, and the creeks the other side too, and we turn into a sort of island.’ He waved his arm around to indicate where the water would surround them, and the smoke trailing from his cigarette marked the arc he made.

More insects stuttered and exploded above us. The whirr of the fan was louder. We sat around the table, looking at one another, as if in the midst of a battle. Huddled in the light, within these walls, in this courtyard, in the great expanse of night.

Brother Tom returned to the weather. ‘It really upsets things here when it rains heavily. The Aborigines just sit at home, because there’s no work for them, and play cards. Play even more than usual, that is. Play guitar. Talk. The kids can’t come and work here straight after school when it’s too wet. So they get up to mischief, and cause trouble. Everyone gets cranky, very cranky.’ He had a soft voice, and spoke slowly. His skin was covered with red patches.

‘More wine anyone?’ Murray asked, holding up a new bottle. He filled Annette’s glass first and she sipped at it before placing it back on the table. Murray tossed the bottle into the

bin before he completed his lap of the table. The Sisters had gone to bed. Brother Tom excused himself also.

‘You get thirsty living in this heat. Well, I seem to anyway,’ I said, and my voice seemed to echo. I took another sip.

‘Much drinking among the natives here?’ Alex leaned forward as he spoke, and placed his elbows on the table the better to pivot his swinging forearms and hands. His chin went into one of those hands and kept it still. I wondered whether he was about to tie himself in some sort of knot.

‘Sometimes.’ Father Paul leaned back in his chair, his large working boots propped against the legs of the table. He didn’t look like a priest. ‘It’s a bit of a bloody cock-up really.’ He didn’t sound like one either. ‘Officially, there’s to be no drinking, that’s the council’s decision. But, it happens. Most of the councillors drink, but at the same time they say they oppose allowing it.’

‘The Aborigines like their drink,’ said Father Paul, as Gerrard handed me a beer from his great height.

‘The school gardener, Milton, he’s a pretty good worker.’ Something in Murray’s voice seemed to indicate that he had definite ideas on who was, and who was not, a good worker. ‘That’s relative to this community,’ he added, ‘they’re none of them real top workers. Can’t rely on any of them really. Rather have a good time, and be with their mates, fishing, playing cards, talking.’

There were only the four of us left.

I think I went home very late. The darkness smelt of mud and rotting vegetation as I picked my way through the puddles and heat. Even at that late time of night, and in all that darkness, I heard a ball bounce among the cowpats on the basketball court.