

Prologue

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.

Chapter 1

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 niggler 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-handed 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 wagged 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 scabbling 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 Norsemen 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 Dauilo 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 overnighing 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 dosed 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.