Inspector Metau

The Case of the Angry Councillor

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DEDICATION

For Lydia and Peter Kailap and all the CUMA kids
INSPECTOR Hari Metau always tried to avoid the Poreporena Freeway. The helter-skelter traffic frightened him and his battered old Land Rover was usually spewing clouds of black smoke and overheating by the time he reached the top of the rise and started the downhill run into town.

The freeway also took him directly past police headquarters where he worked, and he was never quite in the mood for that edifying experience. A coffee at the Beachside Brasserie was his top priority at this time of the day.

Another reason was that the massive scars of the cutting through Burns Peak and the speed of the traffic were too reminiscent of the brash new twenty first century Port Moresby. The world was going too fast for Hari Metau.

He had been to the airport at Jacksons to drop off a young constable who was booked on an early flight to Alotau. The constable had been assigned to him for the last three months to learn something about detective work.

He was a personable young man but with an unfortunate addiction to violent movies and loud music. He also fancied himself as a lady’s man. The Milne Bay Province, which is famous for its beautiful women, might not have been a wise
choice for his next posting. In all honesty Hari had been glad to drop him off and was looking forward to working by himself for a while.

Hari preferred the old laid-back Moresby with its shady trees and ‘there’s always tomorrow’ attitude. That’s why, on this mellowing Monday morning towards the end of the dry season he was pottering down through Badili and Two Mile towards Koki and the town centre along the old Hubert Murray Highway.

He was savouring the strong briny smell of the ocean when he levelled out along Healy Parade and noticed the group of people gathered in one of the parking bays near the seawall. ‘What’s this then?’ he said out loud as he pulled up.

He turned the Land Rover ignition off, took the key out, and waited while the motor coughed and farted before deciding to stop. The poor old thing was still creaking and complaining when he walked towards the crowd.

Inspector Metau wasn’t a big man, barely five foot three inches tall, but he exuded a presence that parted the crowd. He was also well known to this mob of squatter settlers, fishers and shell gatherers who lived on their double-hulled canoes opposite Koki.

It was thus that he came to the seawall and stared down into a tide that was just starting to ebb. What he saw didn’t surprise him. He had seen many corpses, floating and otherwise, in his long and chequered career as a policeman.

This one looked like a middle-aged man, reasonably well dressed, with streaks of grey in his frizzy black hair. He had a piece of rope tied to his right foot which was secured to a
large cement block. The water wasn’t deep and the tide would soon be out.

Hari didn’t feel like getting his feet wet so he told one of the young men standing knee deep in the water some distance away to go and turn the body over. The man shied away and shook his head. Hari understood the man’s misgivings. What was on the other side might not be pleasant and there was the ever present danger of contracting whatever sorcery had been involved in the man’s demise.

Hari looked around and pointed at two men who were holding paddles over their shoulders. ‘Hey, you two, get in there and turn him over with your paddles, you don’t have to touch him.’ The two men looked nervous. ‘This is police business,’ Hari said, ‘do as you’re told; I want to have a look at his face.’

He walked deliberately towards the men and they quickly scuttled over the seawall and into the water. After a couple of false tries they finally succeeded in levering the man over onto his back. Once done they backed away as quickly as possible.

‘Anyone know him?’ Hari asked. The man was a bit battered from the rocks but didn’t appear to have any fatal wounds. He had a big lump on the back of his head and the little finger on his right hand appeared to be missing but that wouldn’t have killed him Hari thought, maybe a fish bit it off. Someone behind him coughed politely. ‘It’s the ward councillor from Kaugere Settlement,’ the man whispered in his ear.
‘Does anyone know his name?’ Hari asked. There was an acute silence from the crowd. Hari shrugged and fished in his pocket for his mobile phone. He dialled the number for the police station. A recorded but polite female voice informed him that he had run out of credit. ‘Bloody Telecom,’ he muttered under his breath and fumbled around in his pocket again.

He held up a ten kina note. ‘Who wants to lend me their mobile phone for a minute?’ he said. There was a ripple in the crowd and the proffering of half a dozen mobile telephones. He took the nearest one, handed over the ten kina note, and dialled the police station again. He was now developing an overriding need for coffee.

Meanwhile, walking briskly past Koki Market, there was another sight unusual to any but the locals who lived in the area. The Sinabada from the school run by volunteers at Kaugere was out of fuel for her car again and not having the price of a bus fare was walking into Moresby town to collect whatever money her son in Brisbane had sent for her. Normally she was accompanied by a group of Kaugere boys but today she had given them the slip and taken off unnoticed.

As she neared the seawall a few boys ran to her to tell her what was going on. ‘Mum’s! Someone has killed Manu and thrown him in the solwara!’ they shouted. Her reply was unexpected.

‘Good,’ she said. Inspector Metau’s ears pricked up.

‘His body has been tied to a big stone with some rope; one sanguma did this,’ one of the boys added and shook his head.
‘One human *kopina* I think; spirits don’t need rope,’ the *Sinabada* replied.

The crowd, recognizing an interesting development, gathered around the *Sinabada*. Hari strolled to the edge of the throng and beheld an aging white woman in slippers in the centre of the throng speaking rapidly in an eclectic mix of English, *Motu*, *Tok Pisin* and *Tok Ples*.

The first thing Hari noticed was that she was about three inches taller than him; the second was that she appeared to be unperturbed about the news of the councillor’s demise. He called one of the boys over and asked about this strange lady. She lived, the boy told him, in the very same settlement as the slain councillor.

Gathering his wits together Hari approached the *Sinabada*. He involuntarily took in her pearly white cleavage. Missus, I am Inspector Hari Metau; we have discovered a body in the *solwara* and I am told he is the local ward councillor.

‘So the boys have told me Inspector,’ she replied.

‘Do you know anyone who would wish to kill the councillor?’ Hari asked.

‘Inspector, there are over ten thousand people living in the settlement; any one of them could have killed him; he wasn’t well liked at all,’ she replied.

‘Could you look at the body Missus? It won’t take a moment, although it is not a pretty sight. It would help if you could formally identify him. Perhaps I could buy you a coffee later? It would be good if you could tell me more about the councillor in a less public place.’

‘That’s very kind of you Inspector, I accept your offer but you must pay; I don’t want to be seen as someone paying the
police anything.’ Hari raised his eyebrows. ‘Of course Missus; I understand completely. I have to wait for the ambulance to take the body away and then I can give you a lift if you like.’

The Sinabada sent two of the boys back to her house to tell her husband to meet her and the inspector at the Beachside Brasserie. She then walked over to look at the body in the water. Sure enough it was Councillor Manu.

‘I haven’t seen you around the office for a while,’ Superintendent Tabai said. He was standing beside Hari and the Sinabada by the seawall watching the body being loaded into the ambulance. When it was safely stowed in the back one of the ambulance officers came over and handed Hari the rope from around the councillor’s leg. It was still wet and dripped seawater onto his shoes. The superintendent eyed it speculatively as Hari slowly coiled it up. ‘I guess you’ve been too busy then?’ He glanced at the Sinabada. ‘Perhaps you’d better come and see me sometime Hari.’

‘Yes sir,’ Hari replied. ‘Would next week or perhaps the week after be alright? It might take me a while to sort this one out.’ He held up the wet rope as if it somehow embodied the mystery of the councillor’s untimely demise. With any luck by next week the superintendent would have forgotten their conversation.

‘Will it take that long?’ the superintendent asked. ‘Looks like just another settlement murder to me Hari. The murderer is probably long gone. You don’t want to waste too much time on it.’
‘This one’s a ward councillor,’ Hari replied. He left the inference hanging in the air - this one might be slightly harder than normal to sweep under the carpet. The superintendent nodded several times and Hari knew he’d got the message.

‘I’ll leave it to you then,’ he said. He tipped his hat to the Sinabada and put his hands behind his back and strolled over to his car. His driver opened the passenger door. As he climbed aboard he added, ‘Leave the media to me Hari, no point in blowing it out of proportion; I’ll see you next week.’

Hari and the Sinabada watched the dark blue and highly polished Land Cruiser drive off. The ambulance followed it. The crowd had begun to dissipate and Hari and the Sinabada found themselves almost alone in the parking bay. He tossed the soggy piece of rope through the passenger window of the Land Rover.

The tide was well out now and Hari said, ‘Excuse me a moment,’ and gingerly climbed over the seawall and began fossicking around among the slimy stones and shells. A couple of young boys sat on the wall watching him. ‘Keep an eye on the Missus and my car for me,’ he said to them, ‘it’s a valuable antique.’ He hoped the Sinabada hadn’t misunderstood his reference to antiques. He waded out for about a hundred metres but couldn’t find anything that looked like a weapon.

When he climbed back over the wall the crowd had thinned out considerably, there were only a few people hanging around the street vendor’s stall at the other end of the parking bay. The vendor, a plump lady of middling age, normally only picked up the passing trade from people
walking to Koki or in to town for work, this morning she had done a roaring trade. *Buai*, bottles of lolly water, single cigarettes and Wopa biscuits had been snapped up by the crowd. At one stage she had to despatch someone with money into town to get more stock. Hari made a mental note to talk to her later.

He moved the soggy piece of rope into the centre seat. ‘I think we can go now,’ he said to the *Sinabada* and opened the passenger door for her.

‘Don’t you need the concrete block that was attached to this as evidence too?’ the *Sinabada* asked.

‘Only if you want to help me carry it back to the shore,’ Hari said. The *Sinabada* raised her eyebrows. ‘I know where to find it if I need it,’ Hari added with a smile.

The Beachside Brasserie was an upmarket restaurant and coffee house attached to the Ela Beach Hotel. Hari remembered when the hotel was called ‘The Davara’ and didn’t have the elegant security fence around it. When he had originally discovered the excellent coffee served there he had parked inside the fence a couple of times but the old Land Rover had looked distinctly out of place among the sleek cars parked there. The old vehicle had also attracted telling glances from the even sleeker clientele of the hotel and after a while he had taken to parking over the road next to the aptly named ‘Davara Ela Beach Sewerage Pumping Station’. There, beside the blue-painted and graffiti-covered pumping station, the old vehicle looked perfectly at home. An ancient, rusted and barely recognisable steam engine in the children’s playground on the other side balanced the
scene nicely. Perhaps the clients of the hotel and restaurant were accustomed to ignoring local eyesores when they stared out towards the ocean and the reef; looking at unpleasant things but not seeing them was a well-developed skill in Port Moresby.

He was sitting at the Beachside Brasserie drinking his second flat white when he heard a polite ‘ahem’ behind his shoulder. The piece of soggy rope was on the table in front of him. The Sinabada, who was sitting across the table studying the exhibit, looked up and said, ‘You’ve got a visitor Inspector.’ Hari turned around in his chair and eyed the young man in the impressively neat police uniform.

‘Constable Robert Bokasi reporting for duty sir,’ the young man said and executed a smart salute. This is all I need Hari thought. He eyed the young man up and down. ‘Superintendent Tabai sent you no doubt?’ he said resignedly while stroking his moustache.

‘Yes sir,’ the young man replied. ‘I’m to help you with the murder investigation.’ Hari nodded and took a scrap of paper out of his shirt pocket. He held out his hand and the young man passed across his pen. Hari scribbled for a few minutes, folded the note up and handed it to the constable.

‘Take this back to the superintendent,’ Hari said.

The constable put the note into his back pocket. ‘Well, what are you waiting for?’ Hari asked.

‘The superintendent said you would give me a note but he told me to ignore it and stay with you sir.’ Hari sighed with exasperation and looked at the Sinabada. ‘See what I have to put up with,’ he said. The Sinabada merely smiled and winked at the constable.
The customers in the restaurant were from the well-heeled end of town. Overweight businessmen brushed past overweight politicians while wealthy European visitors wended their way in between. The sight of the young constable in his neat uniform standing beside Hari’s chair was beginning to make some of them curious, if not nervous. Hari pushed a chair out with his leg. ‘Have a chair Constable but you can buy your own coffee.’

The following morning Hari and the young constable pulled up by the seawall and walked over to the plump street vendor. Getting a good spot was important to the vendors and they were usually among the first people abroad in the morning. Sometimes the competition for the good spots became fierce and fights ensued. This morning the same lady had won out. The rush of workers going into the town was over and Hari hoped she would have time to talk.

He leaned under the faded umbrella and inspected the goods laid out on the planks of wood stretched between two big concrete blocks and tastefully covered with a coloured cloth. ‘I’ll have a beef Wopa and a bottle of lolly water please; the constable will have the same,’ he said.

The lady handed the items to him and took his money. ‘You must get up early in the morning,’ he said. The lady looked at Robert’s uniform and Hari could imagine what was going on in her mind. ‘We’re not interested in your stall,’ he said to reassure her, ‘we’re just curious about whether you saw anything yesterday morning before they found Councillor Manu’s body.’
The lady considered them both for a moment and then decided what she was going to say. ‘I didn’t see anything really, it was only just getting light and I was busy setting up my stall.’

‘No cars parked here or people hanging around? The constable asked.

‘Not that I noticed, as I said, I wasn’t really looking around.’

‘It’s a bad business when a ward councillor gets murdered isn’t it?’ The lady nodded. ‘Okay, thank you very much,’ Hari said and turned to go back to the Land Rover. Street vendors, like most of the poor people in Port Moresby, were reluctant to give information to the police for fear of reprisals; it looked like this lady was no different. But then she coughed and Hari turned back.

She considered him for a moment and then said, ‘You’re the husband of Grace Metau from Hanuabada aren’t you?’ Hari nodded. ‘You could ask my son Thomas, he gets here before I set up the stall. We leave the bricks by the wall and he brings the planks. Sometimes people throw the bricks into the sea and he has to get them back. He didn’t tell me he had seen anything though.’

‘Thank you; where might we find Thomas?’
‘You mustn’t frighten him, he’s a good boy.’
‘We’ll be very careful,’ Hari said.
‘He’ll be outside the offices on Champion Parade; he sells things there.’

‘What does he look like so we can recognise him?’ the constable asked.
‘He’s only small for his age; he’s got black shorts and a red top with an SP baseball cap.’

Hari parked the Land Rover down by the fence outside the wharves and they walked up to Champion Parade. There were the usual newspaper sellers, **buai** vendors and digital telephone tables sprinkled on either side of the street. There were also cars everywhere beeping their horns at people dodging across the traffic.

Motorists in Port Moresby only gave way to other vehicles and pedestrians as an act of last choice. This was another reason why Hari drove a battered old Land Rover. Several urchins were playing the parking game. As soon as a parking space became available they would race each other towards it and lay a claim on the off chance that the next motorist to park would give them a tip.

When people were trying to pull out of the parks into the unforgiving stream of traffic the urchins acted as guides, signalling with their hands when it was relatively safe to back out. This manoeuvre required a considerable degree of dexterity; getting the driver out into the melee of traffic and pocketing a tip in those crucial seconds was a fine art.

Weaving amongst this chaos of people and vehicles were other urchins carrying collections of DVDs for sale. Hari and the constable walked along the street looking for Thomas. As they went by the urchins faded into the crowd and only reappeared after they had gone past. The constable whispered to Hari, ‘Over there by the wall in front of Ela Rumana House sir, I think that’s him.’
‘Okay Constable, you hang back a bit and I’ll tackle him.’ The constable nodded and drifted into the foyer of the Mogoru Moto building. Hari sidled up to the boy, who gave him a quick glance, decided he looked okay and flipped a spread of DVDs along his arm into view.

‘Let’s see, “Virgins in Heat”, “Lesbian Action” and “Debbie Does Dallas Twice”; that’s quite a selection son.’

‘Fifty kina, two for eighty,’ the boy replied, ‘best quality guaranteed.’ He was about to expose more titles when the constable appeared. The boy’s grin quickly faded.

‘It’s okay son, we just want to talk to you; your mum said it was okay; where on earth do you get these DVDs by the way?’

The boy looked like a cornered animal, ‘That man gives them to us; if we sell any he gives us one kina each.’

‘That doesn’t seem like a very good deal; what’s this man’s name son?’

‘I forget’.

The boy looked quite frightened now and Hari said, ‘It’s alright, we won’t tell him we spoke to you.’

‘It’s Mr Kwan, that *lapun kongkong* out at Boroko.’

‘Have you ever watched any of these DVDs Thomas?’ Robert asked.

‘A couple. Why? Mr Kwan, he showed us some, he said we can tell the customers that they’re good quality, *plenti puspus moa yet*.’

The constable frowned and Hari said, ‘Anyway, that’s not what we wanted to ask you about, forget about all that stuff. Your mum said you go down to the seawall early in the
morning to set up her stall before anyone else gets there. We wanted to know if you saw anyone there yesterday morning.’

‘When the councillor got killed?’

‘That’s right, we’re trying to find out who killed him, you can help us.’

‘I don’t know who killed him!’ Thomas said quickly.

‘We know that Thomas; we just need to know if you saw anyone there, that’s all.’

‘It was dark when I got there.’

‘And you didn’t see anyone?’ Hari persisted.

‘No sir, just one car was there.’

‘A car; what sort of car Thomas?’

‘I dunno; it drove off pretty quick.’

‘Was it an ordinary car? You didn’t see what colour it was did you?’

‘Sort of dark, maybe blue, a bit like Mums’ car.’

‘Your mum’s got a car?’

‘No, not my mum, the Sinabada, we call her Mums.’

‘But you’re not sure?’

‘I reckon it must have been another one, Mums’ car is out of fuel and she’s walking around.’

‘Okay Thomas, that’s good. Have you sold many DVDs today son?’

‘Nah, maybe later I think, I mostly sell them after work up by the hotel.’

Hari took a five kina note out of his pocket. ‘Okay Thomas, you take this for helping us, is that okay?’

‘Thanks sir.’

‘No problem, we’ll see you around, if you think of anything else you can come and see us at the Beachside
Brasserie, you know, near the big hotel on Ela Beach, we sometimes go there in the morning for coffee.’

As they were walking back to the Land Rover the constable said, ‘That’s terrible, letting those kids watch those films; we should go and see that Mr Kwan sir.’

‘I’m not sure it would do much good Constable, he would only deny it and then Thomas would be out of a job, the other kids saw us talking to him. Those DVDs are illegal but they’re everywhere; no point in depriving some street kid of a few kina if it’s not going to make any difference. The people we need to talk to are the ones supplying the pirate copies to Mr Kwan but I suspect they’re too hard to get to easily. Besides, we’ve got other fish to fry.’

‘I suppose so sir, what next?’

‘We can’t solve all the world’s woes in one day Constable. I suppose we need to talk to the councillor’s wife. She’s somewhere in the maze at Kaugere I guess. Before I do that I wouldn’t mind getting a bit more background on the councillor though,’ Hari replied unlocking the door of the Land Rover.
CONSTABLE Bokasi was waiting in the roadway outside Hari’s house the following morning. If anything his uniform was even neater than the previous day. He gave Hari a smart salute. Hari eyed him from the other side of his battered cyclone wire gate with its rusty coil of razor wire on top as he jiggled the key in the big padlock. The tumblers finally fell into place and the lock opened. The constable helped him pull the gates apart.

The old Land Rover made a series of rrring noises when Hari flicked the ignition on but failed to start. ‘Just help me rock it a bit,’ Hari said, ‘sometimes that helps.’ They both pushed the vehicle from side to side until Hari held up his hand. He climbed into the driver’s seat and tried the ignition again. The old car coughed a couple of times and then spluttered to life. Hari slowly pushed the choke in and waited until the motor began purring without too much interruption. ‘She’ll be fine now,’ he said and looked towards the door of his house.

A portly woman holding a large woven bag descended the steps and made her regal way to the waiting vehicle. ‘This is Mrs Metau,’ Hari said by way of introduction, ‘she’ll be coming with us today.’
Mrs Metau cast a discerning eye over the young constable and said, ‘What is your name young man?’

‘Constable Bokasi at your service Ma’am.’ He opened the passenger door for her and held it while she climbed into her seat.

‘I meant your first name,’ Mrs Metau said when she was settled.

‘Robert, my name is Robert Ma’am.’

‘You may call me Grace,’ Mrs Metau replied. Hari rolled his eyes. ‘Shut the gate and lock it Constable and climb in the back,’ he said.

‘He’s much nicer looking than the last one and he’s got better manners,’ Mrs Metau said to Hari as they chugged up the road and turned away from the city.

‘Where are we going sir?’ the constable asked from the back of the vehicle. ‘Aren’t you going to headquarters?’

‘We’re going for a drive along the Magi Highway and Mrs Metau is going to do some shopping Constable. If you’ve got other more important things to do at headquarters we can drop you off at a bus stop.’

The constable looked slightly perplexed and then nodded. ‘No, that’s fine sir, shopping sounds good.’ Mrs Metau smiled at him.

The constable sat in the back of the Land Rover and watched the green countryside drift by while Hari negotiated the numerous potholes and slowed down for the numerous speed humps. Stall owners used speed humps made of soil spread across the bitumen road to slow potential customers down while people in the villages made them to stop
speeding drivers running over their children, chickens and pigs. These unofficial humps never had signs and one had to be careful about hitting them too fast, especially at night.

Shortly Hari pulled up at some roadside stalls and Mrs Metau dismounted and adjusted her hat before wandering off with her bag under her arm to do business. The people at the stalls seemed to know her and waved and smiled but she ignored their effusions with a regal disdain. Hari leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. He was disturbed by a polite cough from the constable.

‘Excuse me sir, but who do you think might have murdered the councillor?’ Hari sighed and opened one eye. He turned the question back on the young constable.

‘Who do you think murdered the councillor Constable? You tell me and I’ll tell you what I think.’

The constable thought for a moment. ‘Well, it seems the Sinabada with the big white . . .’

‘The big white what Constable?’ Hari cut him off with a frown and sat up.

‘I’m sorry to be disrespectful sir but I think the Sinabada seemed overly happy at the councillor’s demise; she obviously didn’t like him, perhaps she paid someone to murder him.’

‘Is that what you think Constable?’

‘Well, yes sir, what do you think?’

‘I think it’s much too early to be jumping to conclusions Constable. Nevertheless, let’s analyse your proposition. Before you arrived I spoke to the Sinabada and her husband over coffee, for which I paid I might add, and she told me some very interesting things.’
‘Yes Sir,’ the constable said. He was all ears and eager to hear what Hari had to say. Hari smiled benignly and began.

‘The Sinabada and her husband, he’s a musician from Gulf Province by the way, started their little school at Kaugere because they were sorry for all the kids who didn’t seem to have much future. They thought that if they could provide some free education it might help.’

‘How could they afford to build a school?’ the constable asked.

‘Well, as they tell it, they pretty much used their own money with some donations in cash and kind. A lot of the unemployed young men in the settlement helped with the building.’

‘A lot of those ones are rascals aren’t they sir? You mean the rascals built the school? That’s hard to believe.’

‘Surprising isn’t it Constable? The teachers are all volunteers too and they even provide lunch for the kids and some of those kids without safe homes actually sleep at the school at night under the care of the teachers.’

‘It sounds very good sir,’ the constable said.

‘And it was Constable; that is until the councillor started to interfere.’

‘You’d think he would have been happy about the school. Didn’t they involve him in the beginning sir? That would have been wise.’

‘Indeed they did Constable; they involved him and the other councillors as well as the community leaders.’

‘Then what went wrong sir?’

‘First of all, the councillor tried to kick all the kids out of the school that weren’t from his tribe. When that didn’t
work he wanted to control the financial management of the school. When that was declined he began to spread rumours about the Sinabada and her husband.’

‘He must have been very jealous sir. What sort of rumours?’

‘He told people that the Sinabada was getting overseas aid money and had bought a big house in Australia with it. Some people believed him. Then he worked up some of the young men with homebrew and they attacked the school destroying furniture and equipment, slashing holes in the water tanks and burning an old school truck and bashing some of the smaller students.’

‘That’s terrible sir. Alcohol is such a big problem; people use it for false courage. What happened next sir?’

‘He started threatening the students. He told them they would get beaten up if they went to the school. He told some of the parents the same thing and threatened to have them beaten up too if they let their children go to the school.’

‘Why didn’t the Sinabada go to the police sir?’

‘Ah, that’s another thing again Constable. You are only young and a recent recruit and you have a lot to learn. We might have to talk about that too.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘But some other time I think; here comes Mrs Metau and she doesn’t look too happy. First things first Constable.’

Mrs Metau opened the passenger door and plonked her bag on the seat. ‘I’m not at all happy; the sweet potato is old and the bananas are too small and overripe. We need to find a stall with fresher food,’ she said.
‘Excuse me Ma’am, why don’t you just buy vegetables at the market in town?’ the constable asked innocently.

Mrs Metau looked at him in exasperation and then hauled herself onto the passenger seat. ‘I thought you said this one was reasonably smart?’ she said to her husband.

‘Indeed I did,’ Hari replied. ‘But he’s young and he lacks tact my dear.’ He turned to the constable. ‘Normally the food in the roadside stalls is very fresh and it’s also much cheaper than in town; you’ll see when we find a better stall; isn’t that right my dear?’

Mrs Metau did not deign to respond to the obvious and sat in silence. ‘We’d better get going I think,’ Hari said to the constable and turned the ignition switch to start the old Land Rover’s motor.

Mrs Metau stopped at a number of other roadside stalls as they motored leisurely towards Kwikila. Each time she came back complaining. ‘Look at this pathetic piece of kaukau, it’s the best I could find, it really isn’t good enough!’ Strangely though, when they eventually pulled into Kwikila she seemed to have accumulated a bag full of vegetables. The constable was even nursing a giant hand of cooking bananas in the back of the Land Rover.

Hari winked at the constable. ‘We’ll try to pick up some fresh fish on the way back, people who fish in the morning bring their catch to the stalls in the afternoon to sell it in time for dinner. At the moment, however, we have to think about lunch.’

He drove to the barn-like Kwikila Store and pulled up. When they walked through the front door they were confronted by a fast food section. All sorts of deep fried
things, including ubiquitous flour balls, sat in their yellow batter in the warmers behind a steel mesh grid. Behind the warmers three unsmiling Chinese people stood staring out at the crowd of shoppers.

The constable was about to take a closer look at the battered morsels when Hari tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the supermarket section on the right. Another Chinese man, also unsmiling, was perched on a pile of boxes like a vulture watching every move made by the checkout girls operating the cash registers.

Hari walked over to a shelf of bread rolls, picked up a packet, paid for it and walked back to the Land Rover. Mrs Metau took the bag and prodded each roll to make sure they were fresh. The constable tried to scrape off the mud from the car park that had stuck to his otherwise shiny boots.

Hari started the Land Rover up and drove out of the gate. He turned off the main road onto a muddy track, crossed a small bridge and went past the baby-blue painted District Headquarters building and pulled up outside a nondescript fibro house. ‘This is one of the old low covenant police houses that they used to build before independence, the district headquarters building dates from the same era; my old friend Sergeant Kasari lives here,’ Hari said by way of explanation.

Sergeant Kasari turned out to be a wizened old gentleman of indeterminate age sitting in a battered cane chair in the shade by his front door. When he stood up to shake hands with Hari and the constable he displayed a fine array of coal black teeth behind lips stained deep red by betel nut. He
held the constable’s hand for a few moments and looked him up and down. The constable had a vague feeling of being inspected and hoped his boots were not too muddy. Finally the old sergeant let his hand drop.

An equally wizened old lady emerged from the house and stepped sprightly around the men and embraced Mrs Metau. Hari held the bag of bread rolls up and said, ‘Is Dinah here?’ As if by cue a plump middle-aged woman poked her head through the door and took the bag. She returned shortly with two more battered cane chairs and put them down for Hari and the constable to sit on.

‘Is there water for tea on the stove?’ Hari asked. Dinah nodded and went to embrace Mrs Metau; then the three ladies bustled past and went back into the house.

When they were settled Hari said to the constable, ‘Dinah is Sergeant Kasari’s daughter; she looks after the household now.’ He then turned to the sergeant and asked, ‘How are you these days sir?’

The old sergeant smiled. ‘You know Hari; the odd ache here and there, but I can’t complain. What brings you to my house apart from a little shopping along the way? Your visits are always coincidental with some case that you are working on.’

Hari gave the sergeant a delighted smile and patted him gently on the shoulder. ‘Sergeant Kasari was my mentor when I was a raw recruit just like you constable. He taught me everything I know.’

‘Including how to be circumspect,’ the old sergeant replied. ‘What are you up to Hari? You haven’t come to see me for no good reason.’
‘The young constable thinks I came all this way so Mrs Metau could do some shopping,’ Hari said with a twinkle in his eye; he doesn’t approve, he thinks I’m abusing my office as a policeman.’

‘That’s not so sir,’ the constable began but was cut short by the old sergeant who snapped, ‘Get on with it Hari, what are you up to?’ There was a deep authority in the old sergeant’s voice and the constable was impressed. He wondered what he would have been like on the parade ground in his younger days.

Hari didn’t seem perturbed by the gruff old sergeant. ‘Sergeant Kasari not only trained me and a lot of other young constables but he also trained a lot of young patrol officers in his day; he is a man of great experience.’

The scowl on the old sergeant’s face softened. ‘Cut the flattery Hari, let’s cut to the chase.’

Hari decided that he had had enough fun and looked serious. ‘I’ve come to ask you about Councillor Manu,’ he said.

The old sergeant leaned back in his chair. ‘Ah, the good Councillor Manu; I believe he was found floating belly down in the water off Koki tied to a big rock.’

‘What do you know about the councillor Sarge?’ He turned to the constable. ‘Sergeant Kasari doesn’t come from here, he comes from the Western Province, but he knows what goes on.’

‘I don’t know too much about him Hari; he lived in Moresby most of the time. He comes from Kalo on the coast. He owned houses there and also lots of shacks in the settlements in town. He rented them all out at exorbitant
rates. He had aspirations of being a politician I believe; used rascals to do his dirty work bullying people who got in his way, the usual thing.’

‘Did he have any special enemies Sarge?’ Hari asked.

The sergeant scratched the few remaining grey hairs on his head. ‘Who hasn’t got enemies in Papua New Guinea Hari? The fellow he beat in the council elections claimed the results were rigged, probably right about that too but what politician doesn’t buy votes and rigs ballot boxes these days? It was different in my day. There were a few heated exchanges in public after that and a lot of threats were made; the usual bravado and strutting about like roosters. The council elections aren’t that far off and the same fellow is going to run again and the rhetoric was building up.’

‘Anyone else?’ Hari asked.

‘Well, those people who own the settlement shacks are always at each other’s throats; their gangs are always fighting.’

‘Anyone in particular?’ Hari asked. The sergeant scratched his head again. ‘Now that you mention it I did hear there was no love lost between him and that Lea Lea bloke, the one with the big ears, I can’t think of his name, my memory is not good these days. They were both buying up shacks, you know, leaning on the owners and terrorising them until they sell. He and that Lea Lea taiana lata hated each other.’

They both looked at the constable who had begun fidgeting on his seat. Hari smiled. ‘The constable here thinks the Sinabada with the rata bada is the prime suspect,’ he said, ‘what do you think about that Sarge?’

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‘Her rata bada or her status as a suspect Hari? From what I hear the councillor was a big problem for her and the fact of the body in the ocean points to a degree of organisation; there might be something in it.’

‘You don’t look too convinced Sarge,’ Hari replied.

‘It’s obvious the Sinabada paid to have him killed!’ Mrs Metau said emerging from the door with a tray of tea cups and a plate of buttered rolls smeared with peanut butter which she handed to Hari.

‘Why is it unlikely?’ the constable asked when Mrs Metau had gone back inside.

‘I don’t know,’ Hari replied, ‘just a hunch; it’s too convenient, too obvious; besides, whenever Mrs Metau decides who the killer is she’s invariably wrong!’

‘I’d stick to your hunch Hari,’ the old sergeant said picking up a mug of hot tea and carefully sipping it. ‘Hunches have a way of working out. Don’t you think Constable?’ The constable looked nonplussed and the old sergeant winked at Hari.

The rest of the afternoon was pleasant and uneventful. The constable sat in the shade and was enthralled by the reminiscences of Sergeant Kasari as he described patrols into the wilds of the Western Province. The young constable couldn’t believe that only a few years before independence the sergeant was still chasing cannibals and raiding their fortress-like longhouses for suspects in the early hours before dawn.

‘See these scars?’ the old sergeant said pointing to his feet. ‘They were caused by treading on poisoned black palm
spikes hidden along the tracks leading to the longhouses.’ The young constable was suitably impressed with this irrefutable evidence.

When the ladies had finished gossiping they drove back to Port Moresby. Hari left the constable at his bus stop clutching a bag of vegetables and two very nice fish on a string.

‘Where shall I meet you tomorrow sir?’ he asked before Hari drove off. ‘At headquarters perhaps?’

Hari eyed him knowingly. ‘I don’t think so Constable. Tomorrow I think we might visit Kaugere. Why don’t you meet me at the bus stop?’
3

A Black Dog and a Tattooed Girl

THE next day Hari picked the constable up at 7.30 am. He had asked him to come in civilian clothes. ‘No point in provoking trouble in the settlement,’ he had told him. ‘Police uniforms tend to make people nervous.’

As he sat in the old Land Rover watching the young policeman approach he scratched his head. The constable was wearing shorts, thongs and a nondescript T-shirt but he still looked like a policeman. Perhaps it is the short hair style and the athletic carriage Hari thought.

He pushed the passenger door open. ‘Is this alright sir?’ the constable asked as he sat down.

‘Perfect!’ Hari replied with a smile.

When they pulled up Hari looked around at the group of curious children who were gathering around the vehicle and picked out one of the older boys. He beckoned to him and slipped a five kina note into his hand. ‘Make sure no one interferes with my car son,’ he said. The boy grinned from ear to ear and took the note with a nod. The constable raised his eyebrows. ‘They haven’t failed me yet,’ Hari said, ‘it’s only when I park outside the government offices that I worry about the old girl.’
There was a smell of smoke in the air; a mixture of village wood smoke and the acrid stench of burning garbage, a distinctive town smell. ‘Now who is going to show me where Councillor Manu’s wife lives?’ Hari asked. A clamour of children surrounded him. ‘You’ll do,’ he said pointing to a little girl in a ripped T-shirt and a runny nose. ‘Lead the way my dear, we’ll discuss your remuneration when we get there.’

They followed the little girl up the road and then along winding paths through tightly packed shacks built of mismatched pieces of timber, scrap metal, bits of old carpet, cardboard and cheap plastic tarps. Finally, halfway up the hill, she stopped and pointed towards a large and shady unu tree alongside an old but substantial fibro cement house. A woman with her right arm in a sling was sitting under the tree. The tree was loaded with ripe breadfruit. Nearby came the sound of an upraised voice and a loudly barking dog.

Hari leant down and patted the little girl on the head. ‘Is that Manu’s wife?’ he asked. The little girl nodded and hitched up her shorts. Hari reached into his pocket and pulled out a neatly wrapped piece of kaukau that Mrs Metau had given him for his lunch and gave it to the girl. ‘What’s your name?’ he asked her.

‘Nem bilong mi Ani,’ the little girl answered clutching the sweet potato to her chest.

Hari felt around in his pocket and pulled out several coins. ‘Well Ani, if I give you this money will those other kids steal it from you?’ he asked.

‘Nogat, bai me givim mama bilong mi,’ the girl replied. ‘That’s good then,’ Hari said, ‘make sure you give it to your mama.
You’d better go do that now Ani and we can talk to Manu’s wife. Thank you for all your help.’ The little girl looked up at Hari and then took off down the hill clutching her sweet potato to her chest with one hand and her money in the tightly clenched fist of her other hand.

The police inspector and the young constable squatted in the shade of the unu tree in front of Manu’s wife who smiled weakly back at them. She knew who they were and why they had come when she saw them coming up the hill with the little imp in the baggy red T-shirt and was resigned to answering their questions.

The shouting that they had heard coming up the hill seemed to be coming from behind the house.

‘What’s all that noise?’ Hari asked.

‘It’s that mangy sisia,’ Manu’s wife replied. ‘Arthur is trying to kill it.’

‘You’d better go see what’s going on Constable,’ Hari said. ‘I’ll talk to Mrs Moiva.’ The constable looked momentarily disconcerted; he wanted to know what Alice Moiva had to say about her husband’s death. ‘Go on Constable, do as you’re told; I won’t ask any pertinent questions until you get back; just stop that horrible noise.’

The constable walked around the house and past a pen of chickens clustered around what appeared to be several old packing cases stacked on top of each other. The noise was coming from an old wartime Blitz truck, rusty and wheel-less and sunk into a matted bog of leaves and other debris under another unu tree. As he got closer the constable could see a large black dog on a chain attached to the trunk of the tree
and a grey haired white man, bare footed and wearing dirty shorts and a string vest wielding an axe above his head. A younger Papuan man stood to one side urging the white man on with shouted encouragement.

Just as the constable appeared the man lunged at the dog with the axe. The dog advanced to meet him and, as the axe neared its head, feinted to one side and then the other and, neatly avoiding decapitation, nipped the man sharply on the knee. The man fell over and dropped the axe and the dog took it by the end of the handle and dragged it back towards the tree.

The white man scrabbled to his feet cursing and swearing and lunged unsteadily after the dog, which dropped the axe and advanced on him snarling and frothing. The man quickly retreated to the limit of the dog’s chain and rubbed his bleeding knee.

‘It’s no good; we need a bloody gun, go and get that water pipe pistol of yours, there’s some bullets in my box under the bed.’ But the young Papuan didn’t answer; he was too busy looking at the constable.

‘You must be Arthur,’ the constable said extending his police warrant card for the man to see. ‘Homemade guns are illegal; you’d better show it to me and then we’ll think about what to do about the dog.’

Hari was discussing the price of the three bread fruit lying on the ground beside him when Robert appeared with the two men. He had the homemade gun in one hand and was leading the gaunt black dog by its chain in the other.
‘Are you going to shoot me or let that monster eat me?’ Hari asked. The constable smiled; he was slowly getting used to the inspector’s sense of humour. ‘It’s Manu’s dog sir; they were trying to kill it.’ The dog looked at the constable and then at Hari as if to confirm the accusation. ‘That’s not very nice,’ Hari replied looking at the dog, which appeared to be nodding in agreement. ‘Why would they want to do that Constable?’

‘It’s Manu’s bloody dog,’ Arthur said, ‘we chased it away but it keeps coming back and howling under the house.’

‘I thought this was Manu’s house; why should it bother you Arthur, are you living here too?’ Hari asked.

Arthur looked quickly at Mrs Moiva and then back at Hari. ‘I’m looking after her, someone’s got to do it now he’s gone.’

‘And who is this then?’ Hari said looking at the young Papuan man.

‘I’m Suli,’ the young man replied, ‘Manu was my father.’

‘That’s a nasty black eye you’ve got Suli,’ Hari replied. ‘How did you get that young man?’

‘I had an argument with my father,’ Suli replied.

‘Not long ago by the look of that eye; was it about your mother’s arm?’ Hari asked pointing towards Mrs Moiva’s sling.

‘She’s not my mother,’ Suli replied; she’s my aunt; my mother lives in Lea Lea, but it wasn’t about that, it was about the Sinabada and the school.’

‘Is your arm okay Mrs Moiva?’ Hari asked, ‘it looks sore to me. Have you been to the hospital?’
‘We went to the hospital but the nurse wanted too much money to show us to a doctor,’ Suli said. ‘The Sinabada tied it up; she said it might be broken but should be okay with the bandage on it.’

‘The Sinabada seems like a nice lady,’ Hari offered.

‘I helped her with the school building,’ Suli said.

‘You know, if you make another gun,’ Hari said looking at the weapon in the constable’s hand, ‘you should use stronger pipe, that one is too soft, it will bend and it might blow up on you.’

Hari and the constable walked down the hill to the Land Rover carrying the homemade gun, three bread fruit in a plastic shopping bag and leading the black dog on its chain.

‘What are you going to do with the dog sir? It doesn’t seem half as savage now.’

‘I would have been savage too with a scruffy old taubada in baggy shorts chasing me with an axe.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘I think the first thing we should do is find a shop and buy it some tinpis, it looks like it hasn’t eaten for a while.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Then we’ll go to the Beachside Brasserie for coffee and see what we’ve got today so far.’

‘What we’ve got sir?’

‘Well Constable, we seem to have a wife who has been beaten up, not for the first time I would guess, a scruffy old white man with a mysterious relationship to our dead councillor’s wife, a stepson with a nasty black eye inflicted by said councillor and another wife we didn’t know about
back in his home village. To me that’s at least three possible motives for murder.’

‘Yes sir,’ the constable said thoughtfully opening the door of the Land Rover while Hari thanked the lad who had looked after it.

‘You know, they’re not bad kids really; they hustle and steal on the streets but the real rascals are elsewhere,’ he said as he drove around the hills towards Koki and Ela Beach.

Hari dropped the constable off at police headquarters in the afternoon where he said he had paperwork to attend to. ‘Are you coming sir?’ the constable asked getting out of the old Land Rover.

‘I’d like to,’ Hari replied, ‘but I’d better do something about this dog. I don’t think they’d like it wandering around the office.’

‘Yes sir; alright then, I’ll see you tomorrow?’

‘I’ll pick you up at the bus stop again,’ Hari said and then as an afterthought after shuffling among the junk in the shelf under the windscreen said, ‘Could you drop this off for me Constable, it’s my expenses and time sheets, that sort of stuff, they’ll know what to do with it.’ He handed a fist full of crumpled and scrunched up forms out of the window. The constable was unfolding and flattening them against his chest when Hari drove off.

Mrs Metau’s response to the appearance of Hari and the gaunt black dog on the steps of the house was immediate and conclusive. ‘Argh! What’s that horrible thing you’ve got?’ followed almost immediately by, ‘Get it out of here
right now.’ Hari and the dog looked at each other and quickly retreated down the stairs.

‘I’m going to have a beer, do you want one?’ Hari asked the dog when they were safe under the house.

I don’t drink beer, I’m just a dog, the dog replied.

‘Suit yourself Hari replied, ‘wait there, I’ll be back in a minute.’ He ventured back up the stairs and shortly reappeared clutching a brown SP bottle. He took a long pull.

‘So what is your name?’ Hari asked. ‘And what are we going to do with you?’

Manu used to call me Frank the dog replied.

‘And what do you prefer?’ Hari asked.

‘Well, Errol Flynn is appealing; I’ve always fancied myself as a bit of a swashbuckler.’

‘And what are we going to do with you?’

‘Well, this doesn’t look too bad; I could happily sleep down here or in that old bomb of yours; I could be a watchdog maybe.’

‘That’s a good line. Mrs Metau might swallow that one; what about sustenance?’

‘The tinpis was nice, or the odd can of Ox and Palm, I’m not fussy.’

‘That’s settled then,’ Hari said finishing his beer. ‘I’m going upstairs to see what’s for dinner; what are you going to do Flynn?’

‘I thought I might lift my leg on your house piles and front gate, sort of seal the bargain,’ the dog said.

‘Sounds good to me Flynn; I’ll see you in the morning, we might see if we can find out a bit more about your dead
owner.’ But the dog didn’t respond; it had sauntered off and was sniffing among the grass along the fence.

The next morning Hari and Flynn waited for the constable at the bus stop. Hari had dispensed with the chain and tied an old bandana around the dog’s neck.

‘So what happens today Hari?’ The dog asked.

‘We keep at it,’ Hari said. ‘We sniff and we talk and we wheedle and we pry and we look under things and poke around in the dark until we know everything we can possibly know and then we think about it, kick it around, chew on it, rearrange it and finally we know who did it. It’s simply really.’

‘I think I know who did it Hari.’

‘But you can’t tell us Flynn; you said it yourself, you’re just a dog, isn’t that right? You don’t even drink beer Flynn!’

‘I guess so Hari. Here comes the young policeman; he’s in uniform today, very smart.’

The constable carefully opened the Land Rover door and peered inside. He looked at the dog sitting in the back compartment hanging over the seat. He looked puzzled as he climbed aboard.

‘You still have the dog sir?’ he said.

‘He’s decided to come in from the cold as it were; he’s abandoned the dark side and I’ve decided to give him the benefit of the doubt,’ Hari replied.

‘I see sir,’ said the constable uncertainly while the dog eyed him with a look that was half defiance and half speculation. The constable didn’t see it at all Hari guessed, but he
proceeded anyway. ‘We’ve decided on a new name; he was previously known as Frank, as in Sinatra, but will be henceforth known as Flynn, as in Errol.’ Hari watched the constable with amusement.

‘Who was Errol Flynn sir? Frank Sinatra was a singer I believe.’

‘And a member of the Mafia; did it his way apparently. Errol was more of a swashbuckler and hell-raiser – but with a good heart. He used to hang around the pubs in Moresby in the early days; it is a most apt persona for our scruffy friend I think.’

‘Yes sir; where will we be going today?’ the constable was getting out of his depth as well as his comfort zone.

‘Well young Robert, after much deliberation Flynn and I have deduced that a visit up the coast might be in order today.’

‘Up the coast sir?’

‘Why yes, up the coast, go west young man. Why not Constable, did you have other plans?’

‘Of course not sir, I was just wondering. Will Mrs Metau be coming today sir?’

‘No she will not Constable, the attractions out west are mostly of the *buai* kind, a habit Mrs Metau deplores.’

‘Do you want to buy betel nut sir?’

‘Good gracious no Constable! What I want to do is engage in conversation a certain gentleman, who appears to have had a similar, if not competitive interest in local politics as our dearly departed councillor. And by a stroke of luck it just happens to be in the same place at which our dear friend Suli’s mother resides.’
‘We are going to Lea Lea sir?’
‘Exactly Constable and it’s not so far away as to preclude a quick diversionary tipple at the Beachside Brasserie on the way!’

When they pulled up in the village one of the men lounging on the platform of the tin-roofed dobu descended the stairs and peered in the window of the old Land Rover. ‘That’s Frank isn’t it?’ he said. ‘What are you doing with Councillor Manu’s mangy dog?’ The man then noticed the constable, or more correctly his police uniform, and smiled obsequiously. The dog uttered a low growl. The man quickly retreated up the stairs of the dobu.

They gained directions from the men on the platform and meandered slowly on through the houses in the village. There was no obvious layout or anything like a roadway between the hodge-podge of disparate buildings. The usual gaggle of laughing children followed them. Finally they pulled up in front of a house that bore a passing resemblance to the one described by the men. It was of moderate size and was well-built with a fresh coat of paint and a pretty avenue of crotons leading to the front steps. A man of considerable girth with large ears was sitting on the top step chewing betel nut.

Hari and the constable climbed out of the Land Rover but the dog refused to move and sat staring out of the open driver’s side window.

‘Good morning sir,’ Hari said cheerfully. ‘Are you Mr Rabu Dosu by any chance?’
‘The very one,’ the man replied. ‘What can I do for you and your policeman friend?’

‘We’d like to talk to you about Councillor Manu if you can spare the time,’ Hari replied.

‘Of course; what a terrible business; please come up.’ The man shifted his considerable bulk and, grasping the railing, pulled himself to his feet. He spat a large gob of betel nut juice over the side of the stairs, obscuring the sheen of an unfortunate croton, and lumbered across the veranda to the first of a collection of motley looking kitchen chairs. ‘Can I get you a cool drink?’ he said indicating that they should be seated.

‘That’s very generous of you, there’s a bite in the sun today,’ Hari replied and the man clapped his hands together. The squad of tiny faces that had been peering out of the house windows suddenly scattered and a few moments later a slim, grey-haired woman emerged from the door with a tray on which sat a jug of clear water with ice cubes and two pieces of lime floating in it surrounded by three upturned but mismatched glasses. The woman put the tray down on the floor in front of them and after hissing at the children gathered around the base of the veranda stairs, retired to the confines of the house.

With their thirst quenched Hari got down to business. ‘I understand you were planning to run against Councillor Manu in the upcoming elections,’ he said. ‘Why is that I wonder?’

The man emitted a short chuckle that was strangely and deliberately devoid of humour. ‘Don’t get me wrong,’ he said, ‘Councillor Manu was a fine upstanding citizen and we
all mourn his sudden passing but between you and me I was getting a bit worried about him.’

‘In what way?’ Hari asked pouring himself another glass of water. ‘This siporo is nice,’ he added.

‘Well, for one thing, he was conniving with that Sinabada and her husband who run the school to subvert the funding they get from the council and from overseas aid.’

‘You think they were pocketing the money?’ Hari asked. ‘Why do you think that?’

The man scratched his huge stomach and then ran his fingers through the stubble on his chin. ‘I have it on good authority that the Sinabada has a big house in Cairns, yet she always says she has no money.’

‘How do you know that?’ Hari asked.

‘I have friends; they go to Cairns on business; they tell me what’s going on.’

‘Business in the casino perhaps?’ Hari said.

‘That too.’

‘And what else?’

‘Manu was involved in the buai market; he had something to do with that pamuk woman and her son and daughter and that old white man.’

‘You mean Suli’s mother? I didn’t realise she had a daughter too,’ Hari said.

‘Oh yes, there’s a daughter alright; not Manu’s either, that woman sleeps around.’

‘You seem to know a lot about them Mr Dosu,’ the constable said. Robert had been quiet until then and the man hadn’t really paid much attention to him. Now he glanced
nervously past Hari in his direction. ‘Do you deal in *buai* too?’ the constable added.

‘Everyone deals in *buai* out here; it’s the major source for Port Moresby, here through to Bereina and then out along the coast; there’s nothing wrong with that is there?’

‘Of course not,’ Hari said.

‘Exactly,’ the man replied.

‘Sounds very simple after all,’ Hari added.

‘It’s not as simple as that really; what happens is that the big boys in Mosbi put up the purchase money, which is fine as long as business is good. If things get a bit down they want their money back; that’s when you have problems.’

‘The big boys, who are they?’ the constable asked.

‘You know, politicians, the police; those sorts of people.’

‘And was there a big boy who had an interest in Councillor Manu?’ Hari asked.

‘I don’t know; Manu is gone now and you can’t ask him.’

‘Perhaps Suli’s Mum knows?’ Hari said.

‘It’s possible.’

‘I guess you wouldn’t have been helping anyone?’ Hari said.

The man stared at him for a moment and then said, ‘You don’t think I had anything to do with his murder I hope?’

‘Of course not,’ Hari replied. ‘He was killed somewhere near Kaugere and dumped in the sea at Koki; you are miles away and can probably account for your movements in fine detail.’

‘Indeed I can,’ the man replied. ‘You startled me; that’s all. I only have the welfare of the community at heart.’
‘And a very noble cause that must be,’ Hari replied. ‘I gather you are still planning on running for election then?’

The man nodded. ‘It is my civic duty, now more so than ever after the tragic events of the past week. I feel it is my duty.’

‘As I said, very noble; now, I don’t suppose you could direct me to the abode of this licentious woman and her scurrilous daughter, we need to explore this partnership with the late councillor in more detail I think?’

Hari piloted the Land Rover down the slope among coconut palms until they came to a house sitting by itself in a clearing. A battered red Toyota Hilux was parked outside what appeared to be a shed joined to the house. The back of the vehicle was piled high with white sacks. Two old men were sitting on the ground propped against the wheels of the vehicle, one at the front and one at the rear. Hari leaned out of the window.

‘Ah, taudia rua, umui namo?’ he said.

The old man propped against the rear wheel squinted up at him and said, ‘We’re okay, just a bit hot; we’ve been loading the truck. How about you taubada?’

‘I’m good,’ Hari replied. ‘Is this where Suli’s mother lives, we’d like to talk to her?’

‘And who is we?’ a voice came from the depths of the shed.

Both the constable and Hari turned in the direction of the voice. Hari heard the constable catch his breath.

A tall young woman stepped out of the shadows carrying three bottles of beer. She was wearing skin tight jeans tucked
into a pair of high-heeled boots and a tight, sleeveless tee shirt which ended at a point just above her navel, but the most striking thing about her was her face, which was aquiline with the deepest brown eyes Hari had ever seen. But that was not all; there was a two-lined symmetrical tattoo made up of intricate diagonals running from her forehead to the tip of her nose, across her top lip and on to her chin and then down her neck and into the top of her tee shirt. On either side of her mouth similar patterns curved up around her cheeks. The pattern emerged again in the area of her navel and disappeared into the top of her jeans. Her wavy black hair was curled on top of her head in a bouffant making her appear even taller.

The constable let his breath out slowly and the girl crossed to the old men and handed them a beer each. They were grinning like Cheshire cats at the effect their granddaughter had on the two policemen. The girl knocked the top off the third beer and took a swig.

Hari gained his composure first. ‘We’re investigating the murder of Councillor Manu and we’d like to talk to your mother if possible,’ he said.

‘That bastard,’ the girl replied. ‘I was going to chop him myself but someone saved me the trouble.’

‘Is your mother here?’ Hari asked. He had correctly assumed that the girl was the daughter of Manu’s consort.

‘She’s down the coast, she’ll be back in a couple of days; why do you want to talk to her? She didn’t kill the bastard either!’

‘I gather you didn’t like your stepfather?’ Hari said.
‘He wasn’t my stepfather, he was Suli’s stepfather; his only interest in me was with his dirty grasping hands.’

‘I see,’ Hari replied. ‘You have a nice load on the truck - buai I gather?’

‘So what; it’s not illegal?’ the girl replied.

‘Taking it in to Mosbi for sale I guess?’ Hari said. ‘Isn’t it a bit risky, just you and a couple of old men, what about raskols?’

‘I can take care of myself,’ the girl said with a slight smile as she fixed her eyes on the young constable who suddenly felt uncomfortable in his seat.

‘I guess you can at that,’ Hari replied. ‘We’d still like to talk to your mother; perhaps we can come back later?’

‘You do that, I can’t stop you, I might even be around too,’ the girl replied looking at the constable again.

‘Okay, well thanks,’ Hari said lifting his arm in a farewell gesture.

‘Tell that fat bastard in the village he might be next when you go past,’ the girl added and the two old men grinned broadly.

‘No worries,’ Hari said and turned the Land Rover around. ‘That was interesting don’t you think?’ he said to the constable as they drove away but the young man wasn’t listening.

‘You didn’t ask her what her name is!’ he said.

‘Hell, you’re right,’ Hari said.

On the way back to Port Moresby Hari was unusually silent. The constable seemed preoccupied and didn’t mind. As they neared the centre of the city Hari took a deep breath.
‘Now young Robert, I have to point out something very important to you. Whether you realise it or not we have just poked a stick into a hornet’s nest. You should be aware of that and get ready to take a few stings.’

‘I don’t understand sir,’ the constable looked alarmed and Hari felt for him; the young constable was about to get his first reality check.

‘Our enormous big-eared friend back there has got powerful connections, probably right up to the minister and the department. The buai market is a hotbed of shady deals and very big money. Some of those connections will be up to their necks in it; wallowing in mud so to speak; they will get most upset if someone threatens their particular mud puddle. Our enormous friend will be on the telephone alerting them as we speak.’

‘You mean politicians sir; corrupt politicians?’

‘Exactly, and down the line too; some of them will be senior policemen; do you understand what I’m saying Constable?’

‘I think so sir; I know corruption is bad and gets into everything; I didn’t realise it might effect a murder investigation.’ The constable suddenly looked aghast. ‘You don’t think they had anything to do with it do you sir?’

‘It’s entirely possible Constable; I’m not ruling anything out at this stage.’

‘What should we do sir?’

‘Nothing Constable; I just want you to be aware of the possibility. I also want you to tell me if anyone approaches you about the case. We have to cover all our bases. Do you think you can do that for me Constable?’
‘Of course sir.’

‘Good on you Constable; we might make a good copper out of you yet.’ Hari smiled and pointed out of the car window. ‘That looks like your bus now; better be off with you and I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ve got a couple of things to do in the morning so I’ll pick you up outside headquarters about midday; is that okay?’

‘Yes sir; thank you sir,’ the constable said and climbed out of the Land Rover.

‘So how is young Bokasi shaping up?’ Superintendent Tabai asked. They were sitting in the Beachside Brasserie drinking coffee.

‘He’s fine,’ Hari replied; ‘a bit green, a bit naive and a bit wet behind the ears, but otherwise okay. What puzzles me is why you lumbered me with him. You were happy to leave me plod along in my eccentric way before; why do I suddenly need a watchdog again? You know what happened to all the others’

‘Aha! You acknowledge that you are eccentric; I never thought I’d hear that from you Hari.’

‘I’m getting old I guess; it helps to acknowledge the realities now and again. You haven’t answered my question.’

‘And you seem to have acquired a watchdog anyway, judging by that fleabag sitting in your car.’

‘Flynn is okay; we have an understanding; now answer the question.’

‘Alright Hari,’ the superintendent said looking suddenly serious. ‘Young Bokasi is all the things you describe but there’s something else there too. I can’t put my finger on it.
There’s honesty there too. When I got to know him a bit I decided I didn’t want to throw him to the pack and watch him become corrupted by the system. That’s why I thought you could help Hari.’

‘I see; what you’re really doing is lining up a replacement for me. You think I’m getting a bit long in the tooth and you’re thinking ahead.’ Hari had a twinkle in his eye. The superintendent humoured him.

‘That’s right Hari; you should think of him as a kind of apprentice.’

‘What if it doesn’t work out? None of your other protégés did.’

‘Then I can say at least I tried. I’m not holding my breath. Things have changed since you and I were young bucks in uniform Hari. If it doesn’t work out no one will be to blame.’

‘But you think it’s worth another shot anyway?’

‘Yeah Hari, why not, one can but try.’

‘So he’s not a watchdog at all?’

‘No Hari and I’m hoping he’s not a lapdog either. What does Mrs Metau think of him?’

‘I think she has reserved her judgement, but he’s coming to dinner this Sunday; that’s a good sign.’

‘Is that lovely unmarried daughter of yours going to be there too?’

‘As a matter of fact she will be; you don’t think Mrs Metau is scheming do you?’ Hari began to look worried. He was happy that he had already made the same judgement about the young constable as the superintendent but this was something more serious. The thought hadn’t occurred to him when his wife had casually asked him to invite the young
man around for dinner. ‘He must be lonely in the barracks; so far away from his family; why don’t you invite him around on Sunday when the girls come for dinner? He might enjoy the company Hari.’ she had said with an innocent look on her face. The superintendent smiled, raised his eyebrows and gave Hari a knowing look.

‘Anyway, I’d better be going Hari; thanks for the coffee and don’t forget to drop by the office sometime; you seem to forget all the time, maybe you should make a note. Hari nodded. He hadn’t carried a notebook for years.

‘Why don’t you like going to the office; is there something in there that you are afraid of Hari?’ Flynn asked when Hari pulled up outside police headquarters and remained waiting for the constable in the Land Rover

‘You and that superintendent are becoming a bit of a pain you know,’ Hari muttered. ‘You need to remind yourself who is paying for the tinpis.’

‘I thought so,’ the dog replied. ‘Has someone got it in for you Hari?’

‘The fact is, smartass, I don’t like policemen; there I’ve said it, are you satisfied?’

‘You wouldn’t be alone there Hari; but what about young Robert, he seems likeable enough?’

‘That’s the point, he’s young, he’ll change eventually; they all do.’

‘Even you Hari?’

‘If I spent all my time in there, it’s highly likely. Look you stupid mutt, there’s a police car over there, what’s it got written on its door?’
‘I can’t read Hari; I’m just a dog’.

‘It says “Securing a Safer Community: to Protect and to Serve”. That’s rubbish; there are coppers in there who get three pay packets every fortnight, one from the government; one from the big companies they favour and one from the criminals they let off. Why do you think there are so many PMVs running around unregistered and with unlicensed drivers merrily waltzing through police road blocks? Why is it if you need a policeman you have to cough up money for their fuel? Why do people get beaten up in the cells? Why do investigations involve “raids” where property is destroyed and people’s things pillaged? Why do an old man and woman have to lose their house in a village just because some petty raskol happens to come from the same place? That’s why I stay away Flynn.’

‘So how do you get away with it? It sounds bizarre to me.’

‘Because I sometimes get results, smartarse; and because I’m not too fussed about who takes the credit for it.’
HARI’S house sat on a small wedge-shaped block of land on the lower slopes of a hill above Hanuabada village. He had long assumed that the land had acquired its inconvenient shape because of some colonial surveyor obsessed by neat squares and rectangles. Having worked his way around the hill laying out neat square blocks he had come to a dilemma at the apex of the curve and had left the triangle so that he could continue on his merry but symmetrical way.

When Hari first saw the block it was covered with vegetation. A warehouse had been built along one side with a yard facing out the other way. The tin structure had been painted a dark green and the whole block surrounded by a high cyclone wire fence. What was stored there Hari never deduced. Trucks came in the night and the gates creaked open but he never actually saw what went in and out of the big sliding doors.

A family of pythons lived in the warehouse and occasionally strayed on to Hari’s block, much to the dismay of Mrs Metau, but Hari found them friendly enough in their fat and lethargic way and despite his wife’s protestations did little to discourage them. When Flynn arrived the dog gave them a baleful look and went back to sleep.

On the other side of the block there was a long narrow cinder block shed with what Hari suspected was an asbestos
sheet roof. The original purpose of this building was unknown but it had eventually become the abode of several Simbu squatters. These people were no more trouble than the pythons on the other side and they kept the grounds neat and tidy with every available square inch planted with vegetables. Mrs Metau did not approve of them on principle but often bought the produce that they offered for sale at their stall on the roadway outside.

Hari had actually noticed the jungle-covered block a short time after he and Grace had been married. At the time they had been living in her parent’s house built on stilts over the sea at Hanuabada. Despite being descended from the seafarers of Mailu Island Hari found the rickety walkways over the water between the houses tricky to negotiate, especially in those early days when he was still partial to the occasional bottle of Buka Meri rum. He had asked his wife about the triangle and it had turned out that it was owned by one of her uncles, an adept and ancient man who was charging the productive Simbus rent even though the ownership of the building and land which they occupied was obscure.

At a meeting of the iduhu, which was the extended clan family into which Hari had married, the matter was duly debated by all the venerable uncles and a decision reached. The leader of the iduhu told Hari and Grace that they were welcome to use the block. There was no formal signing over or issue of a deed; the land was communally owned by the clan; when Hari and his wife no longer had a use for it the block would simply go back into the clan pool.
Hari bought an exercise book and a ruler and pencils and drew up a plan for a house. His wife, who was more complaisant in those days, nodded her approval and Hari scratched his head and wondered where he would get the money to pay for the building materials. His constable’s pay was meagre even with the money he saved by not living in and paying rent for the two-roomed government apartment to which he was entitled as a married man.

He needn’t have worried. A short time after he had cleared the block and chased all the Papuan blacksnares away, a battered tip-truck had appeared and dumped a collection of rusty pipes and some battered bags of reject cement. That weekend a posse of young men from the idubu had turned up with spades and crowbars and sunk the holes for the house piles.

It took Hari and the men from the idubu over two years to build the house. The exercise book with the carefully drawn plans was given to one of the kids to scribble in and Hari found himself the owner of a house laid out in the traditional Hanuabadan manner with one or two concessions to modernity. The house consisted of a central family room with bedrooms along the sides. Down below were washbasins and a toilet which Hari suspected were illegally plumbed into the government’s water supply. It took him two months to dig the hole through the rocky ground for the septic tank. He also hoped that one day they would be able to afford to lay on an electrical connection; in the meantime kerosene lamps had to suffice.

At the front of the house was a veranda with a fine view over Hanuabada village and Fairfax Harbour. At the back,
steadily diminishing in width, was Grace and her daughter’s vegetable garden. Over the top of it all and providing welcome shade were three gigantic mango trees; one of which was rooted on Hari’s block. Hari was under this tree tinkering with a recalcitrant Land Rover carburettor and awaiting the arrival of the constable late that Sunday morning.

There was always a stream of visitors to Hari’s house over the weekends and he was constantly interrupted in his mechanical endeavours with all sorts of gratuitous advice. Mostly they were relations of his wife from Hanuabada but occasionally his own acquaintances in the police force or individuals, sometimes with dubious antecedents who he had befriended in the course of his work, wandered in for a while and then ambled off again.

During the week he kept his high front gate with its razor wire on top locked but at the weekends he left the lock undone. Over the years he had employed a ragtag collection of ex-criminals and street urchins as security guards. He reasoned that if someone was going to break into his yard or house, those guys would know best how to deal with them. Whether they engaged in their own nefarious activities when they weren’t guarding his gate he didn’t know and didn’t want to know.

He had had only one case of an inside job by someone he employed in the early days and the miscreant had been rounded up and slammed behind bars so quickly that his successors never again thought about breaking into the house.
Mrs Metau regarded security guards much as she did the rest of humanity, with resignation and distaste, but she nevertheless made a point of grilling the latest recruit extensively before giving Hari the green light to employ him. Occasionally one of them would tug at her heart strings and she would befriend him. Hari couldn’t afford to pay them very much but the hot meals that Mrs Metau provided and the cosy place to sleep under the house partially offset this shortcoming.

The present security guard was a young man called Silas. Strangely enough when Flynn was introduced to him the lad had shown no fear and had patted the scruffy mutt on the head. When the dog wasn’t riding around in the Land Rover it happily camped in the shade with Silas by the gate.

When the constable strolled up to the gate around midday the dog trotted over to him. As Hari watched from underneath the bonnet of the Land Rover he smiled to himself; the constable seemed to have lost his reticence about Flynn and the dog, for its part, was wagging its tail. The constable talked to Silas for a few minutes and then walked into the yard.

‘Hello Sir; I hope I’m not too early,’ he said by way of greeting. Hari screwed the hose from the air filter back on to the top of the carburettor and gently closed the bonnet of the Land Rover.

‘Not at all Constable; the ladies are putting the finishing touches to the meal as we speak.’ He eyed the constable who was dressed in a clean white shirt and light grey slacks. He had a coloured bilum over his shoulder but Hari still thought that he looked like a cop.
‘That young fellow on the gate comes from Kaugere,’ the constable said.

‘Indeed!’ Hari replied. ‘I didn’t know that. Did he know the councillor?’

‘Yes Sir; he wasn’t very flattering about him either; no one seems to have liked him very much.’ Hari nodded and made a mental note to question the young man later. That must also explain Flynn’s ready acceptance of him he thought. He gestured to the stairs and followed the constable into the house rubbing his oily hands on a kerosene soaked rag on the way.

The meal was delicious; fresh fish cooked in coconut milk and wild ginger with a sweet potato mash and an assortment of green vegetables followed by a desert of fresh diced fruit – all a result of Mrs Metau’s latest foray along the Magi Highway.

Afterwards they retired to chairs on the veranda where the afternoon sea breeze had begun to waft. Hari carried two beers from the battered kerosene refrigerator in the kitchen for himself and the constable while Mrs Metau and her daughters sipped freshly brewed coffee. Flynn climbed the stairs to cadge sweet biscuits while Silas stayed in the shade by the gate replete with his share of the main meal.

Hari’s youngest daughter was paying particular attention to the young constable and she leaned closer when Mrs Metau asked him about his home village.

‘I come from a big village called Bun on the Yuat River south of Angoram. The people live on the river and catch fish and have gardens in the forest; it’s a fairly remote sort
of place, lots of mosquitoes and crocodiles,’ the constable said.

‘Ah, a Sepik,’ Hari said sipping his beer. ‘There have always been a lot of Sepiks in the police force, just like there are lots of Kiwais from Daru. But I thought with a name like Bokasi you might have come from the islands somewhere?’

‘My father comes from New Britain but my mother comes from Bun. He was a policeman and they met at Angoram where my mother was a teacher,’ the constable explained.

‘So policing is a family tradition,’ Hari said. ‘Strange how that works. Why didn’t they go back to New Britain to live?’

‘The people around the Yuat River follow the mother’s line and they exchange sisters when they marry. My father couldn’t really do that so he arranged an exchange through another man and his family. Because Mum’s people follow the mother’s line and because Dad had an obligation to one of Mum’s cross cousins they decided it was best to stay in Bun,’ the constable explained.

‘So your people have matrilineal moieties?’ Hari’s youngest daughter said.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ the constable said with a hint of surprise in his voice.

‘Don’t mind Bella,’ Hari said, ‘she’s studying at university, anthropology and literature, a deadly combination I think.’

‘They’d be exogamous matri-local moieties too I bet,’ the girl said with a wicked glint in her eye.

The constable looked nonplussed and said, ‘I’m not really sure, I guess so.’
‘She’s showing off now,’ Hari said. ‘She means one lot can’t marry internally, they have to marry people from the other moiety and when they get married they live in the wife’s village,’ Hari chuckled. ‘I’ve been poking around in her textbooks ever since she started talking in that sort of jargon.’

‘It’s all gibberish if you ask me,’ said Mrs Metau. She had been silently watching the interplay between the constable and her youngest daughter and slowly rose to her feet.

‘No it’s not Mum, its scientific; Bella’s just practising, aren’t you Bella?’ Hari’s other daughter, Rose, said with the same wicked look in her eye. Hari looked at both of his daughters and was wondering just what Bella was actually practising when his wife spoke again.

‘Well it’s not getting the dishes done,’ Mrs Metau said. ‘You girls can come in and help me and leave the men in peace I think.’ She went into the house and both girls giggled and looked at their father.

‘Go on; do as you’re told and leave us men in peace,’ Hari smiled at them.

When they had gone he said, ‘That’s what it’s like living in a house full of women constable, it’s terrible, believe me.’

But the bemused constable, while he nodded at Hari, was thinking just the opposite.

Although Hari assiduously avoided police headquarters he occasionally had to go there to drop off paperwork and to pick up mail and other things necessary to do his job. He was careful to pick his time however, usually the afternoon
of the fortnightly pay day was the quietest and the time he was least likely to run into troublesome colleagues.

It was on one of these afternoons that Superintendent Tabai spotted him. Hari had a wad of paper under his arm and was surreptitiously heading for the exit with an equally furtive Flynn at his heels.

‘Ah, Hari, you’ve come to visit me at last,’ the superintendent said loudly so that the few people left in the office could hear. Hari stopped in his tracks and muttered softly under his breath.

‘I’ll just put this dog and my paperwork in the car,’ he said, ‘won’t be a moment sir.’

‘Don’t worry about the dog Hari, he can come into my office, he hasn’t got fleas I hope?’ the superintendent said quickly. Flynn looked suitably affronted and hesitated before following Hari into the superintendent’s office.

‘Two coffees and a bowl of water please Martha,’ the superintendent said to his secretary before closing the door so that Hari and the dog couldn’t escape.

The coffee was some sort of appalling instant variety with too much milk and sugar. Hari held it in his hand taking occasional sips. Flynn pointedly ignored the water bowl that Martha had placed on the floor before him.

‘So how is business Hari; how is that young constable shaping up?’ the superintendent asked.

‘Everything is coming along well enough,’ Hari replied. ‘I’ve tidied up a couple of burglary cases this week and we should have an arrest for the rape out at the university soon; everything’s fine sir; the young constable is very keen.’
‘And what about the investigation into the murder of Councillor Manu Hari; any progress there yet?’

‘A bit too early to say sir; I’m still trying to establish a motive.’

‘I would have thought that was self-evident Hari; you shouldn’t expend too much time on it.’

‘It’s not as simple as it seems sir; it appears that quite a few people wanted him out of the way,’ Hari replied.

‘Yes, indeed Hari, that may be the case but sometimes the first and most obvious answer turns out to be the right one after all and you discover all your extra efforts have been wasted.’

‘You mean the Sinabada sir? I don’t think she killed him.’

‘Perhaps not directly Hari but she seems to have the most reason to want him out of the way, that school of hers and everything; don’t you think she might have paid someone to do her dirty work? Perhaps she meant to just scare him and it got out of hand. That often happens Hari and you don’t need to be afraid of bringing her in just because she’s a Sinabada.’

‘It’s a possibility sir but I’d like to make sure of all the facts first; if we charge her it could invoke a diplomatic incident.’

‘Not necessarily Hari; if she tells us who she hired to do the deed they’ll carry the can and she can be quietly deported for her own safety; payback and all that sort of thing, the Australian government will understand Hari.’

‘I’d like to be sure first,’ Hari persisted, ‘I shouldn’t be too much longer.’

The superintendent sat back in his chair with his hands clasped under his chin for a moment. ‘Alright Hari; you take
your time, you’re a thorough officer but sometimes you take your duties too seriously.’

‘Thank you sir,’ Hari said taking another miniscule sip of his coffee.

The superintendent stood up to signal that the interview was over. ‘It’s good to see you Hari; you should come to the office more often.’

‘Yes sir,’ Hari said rising and picking up the dog bowl with his free hand. The superintendent came around his desk and opened the door. As an afterthought he said, ‘I’m having a few drinks at my place tomorrow afternoon after work with someone you might like to meet Hari; I want you to come along and bring that young constable of yours with you too.’

Hari nodded and went out the door. He carefully placed his cup of tepid coffee on Martha’s desk along with the untouched bowl of water. Both he and Flynn then scurried out of the building and into the waiting Land Rover as quickly as possible. They chugged off in a cloud of black smoke.

The superintendent’s house was an imposing building wedged into the side of Touaguba Hill with a fine view over Fairfax Harbour. In colonial times the upper levels of the hill were the exclusive domain of senior government officers and rich business people. Nothing much had changed since then, although quite a few of the old colonial buildings that remained were now hidden behind high fences and foliage. The constable seemed quite impressed as the old Land Rover wheezed and coughed its way up the winding and narrow Portlock Road with its frequent u-bends.
The house was a relatively new and modern split level building with the high security gates at the head of the short paved driveway operated electronically by a uniformed policeman in a nearby guardhouse. As they drove through the gates they saw a large black Toyota Land Cruiser with heavily tinted windows parked beside the superintendent’s police vehicle.

‘This could be interesting,’ Hari said to the constable with a wink. ‘I hope this old girl doesn’t leave too big a patch of oil on the driveway.’

‘It’s a very nice house,’ the constable replied. ‘The superintendent’s family must be well off to afford it.’

‘He certainly couldn’t afford it on a policeman’s salary,’ Hari said with a wry smile.

‘No sir,’ the constable replied with a frown and Hari knew he’d got the message.

‘Better let me do the talking,’ he added with a grin.

They found the superintendent on a wide wooden deck beside a small plunge pool. A large gentleman in a rumpled black suit with his tie askew sat sweating in one of the deck chairs set around a glass-topped table under a shade sail. He didn’t get up when Hari and the constable were ushered in by the superintendent’s wife.

‘Have a seat Hari, Constable Bokasi; can I get you a beer?’ the superintendent asked.

Hari nodded but the constable said, ‘I’d better not sir, not while I’m still in uniform.’

‘A soft drink then? Would you like another beer George?’ the superintendent asked the man in the suit who was staring at the constable with a barely hidden smirk on his face. The
man grunted and the superintendent’s wife went off to get the drinks. The superintendent watched her leave and then turned to his guests.

‘This is Inspector Hari Metau and his assistant, Constable Robert Bokasi,’ the superintendent said to the man in the chair. He turned to Hari and the constable and said, ‘Gentlemen, I’d like you to meet the Honourable George Dosu, Minister for Regional Development.’ The man did not get out of his chair but extended his hand. Hari and the constable crossed the deck and shook it.

‘I’ve heard about you,’ the minister said when he took Hari’s hand.

‘I hope what you’ve heard is not too terrible,’ Hari replied, discretely wiping his damp palm on the back of his trousers.

‘The superintendent tells me that you are tenacious and nearly always get your man,’ the minister replied.

‘Sometimes I get lucky,’ Hari replied. At that moment Mrs Tabai returned with a tray of drinks and bowls of potato crisps and peanuts and put them on the table. The minister shifted his considerable bulk and scooped up a fistful of crisps.

‘I also hear that you’ve met my cousin, Rabu, out at Lea Lea Inspector,’ the minister said.

‘That’s right; he gave us directions,’ Hari replied in a non-committal way.

‘I hope you don’t think he’s got anything to do with the murder of Councillor Manu Inspector; just because he was running against him in the council elections. We’ve got high expectations in the party for Rabu, one day he might run in
the national elections; we wouldn’t want to jeopardise his reputation in any way.’

‘We were just following leads,’ Hari replied. ‘I don’t think your cousin has much to worry about Minister.’

‘That’s good Inspector. I also hear that you’ve tidied up that unpleasant rape case out at the university, nasty business that, in broad daylight too, you’d hope that the female students could feel safe on the campus wouldn’t you Inspector, even if some of them seem to delight in dressing like hussies and sluts?’

‘Indeed,’ Hari replied. ‘We have the culprits but the circumstances are still a bit murky; I’ve a bit more work to do there sir.’

The minister leaned over and took another fistful of crisps. The constable stood to one side and sipped his soft drink. Hari hadn’t touched his beer yet.

‘I understand that you have a daughter at the university Inspector, studying law and anthropology. It must have caused you and your wife a great deal of concern,’ the minister added.

Hari looked the minister directly in the eye and took a swig of his beer. He was about to reply when the superintendent interrupted.

‘Anyway, that’s enough shop talk gentlemen; we’re here for a relaxing drink. Why don’t you have some peanuts Hari?’

A short while later Hari and the constable drove out of the gate, leaving an oily patch behind on the driveway and rolled down the hill. The old Land Rover, apart from its squeaky brakes, handled the downhill trip much better than
the uphill one. Hari, nevertheless, said little and just gripped the steering wheel with both hands. The constable was deep in thought. At the bottom of the hill Hari asked the constable where he wanted to be dropped off.

‘I might wander around town for a while and then catch a PMV back to the barracks if that’s alright sir,’ the constable replied.

‘Sure Constable,’ Hari said. ‘Will this do?’ He had pulled up in front of the InterOil Service Station. The constable nodded and climbed out of the Land Rover. ‘Where should I meet you on Monday sir?’

‘Same place, at the bus stop, okay?’ Hari replied.

‘That’s fine, what are we going to do then sir?’

‘We’re going to find out a bit more about our friend Rabu Dosu Constable and then we’re going to ask a few questions about the Minister for Regional Development; what do you think Constable?’

‘I’m game if you are sir. Will you be seeing Bella over the weekend sir?’

‘I sure will and I’ll tell her to be careful, don’t you worry about that young Robert,’ Hari replied before he drove off.

The constable was wondering about the conversation at the superintendent’s house but more especially about Hari actually calling him by his first name as he left him at the side of the road. That was the first time the inspector had dropped the formality of rank. Perhaps he was just worried about his daughter and forgot; it’s not every day you hear such a blatant threat against a member of your family; he should have talked more about it to Hari. It was incredible
that a government minister would say such a thing, especially in the presence of a senior police officer like the superintendent. The constable suddenly realised that he had much to learn about being a policeman.

He was wondering whether he should go out to the university on his day off tomorrow just in case Bella was there, when he felt a tap on his shoulder. When he turned around he was confronted by a tattooed face topped with a pile of thick black hair.

‘I thought I recognised that bottom,’ the girl said with a grin. She stood back with her hands on her hips and closely scrutinised the constable. She was dressed in tight jeans tucked into soft leather boots and a clinging top with a scooped neckline partly filled with a large red bandana around her throat. ‘The uniform looks really good on you. I wonder if you’d look as good out of it?’ she added.

The constable felt himself blushing. He said, ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Just dropped off a delivery, my uncles are waiting in the truck; I thought I’d grab a quick drink before we head home; can I buy you a beer Constable?’ She pointed across the road where the two old gentlemen were sitting together in the tray of the Hilux happily chewing betel nut.

‘Sorry, but I’m still on duty and in uniform,’ the constable replied uncertainly.

‘That doesn’t normally stop a copper having a beer,’ the girl laughed.

‘Sorry again,’ the constable said weakly.

‘What about a coffee then, there’s a restaurant in Steamship’s Arcade; you can tell your boss that you were
following up on a lead.’ She tilted her head on one side. All the aggression that Hari and the constable had encountered out at the village seemed to have dissipated and been replaced by playfulness.

‘What about if I buy you a coffee?’ the constable offered as he gathered his wits.

‘If you like,’ the girl said. ‘By the way, my name is Ruby, Ruby Vagi; I’m related to that fat pig back in the village. What’s your name Constable?’

‘Robert Bokasi,’ the constable replied and took the outstretched hand that the girl offered. The constable felt a strange tingle when she shook his hand and she laughed again. ‘Lead the way Robert,’ she said.

After their coffee, Ruby offered to drop the constable off at his barracks at Gordons. ‘It’s on the way,’ she said, ‘I’ll drop you off before we get to the gate; your friends won’t see you with the disreputable kekeni buai.’

The old men in the back of the battered Hilux bared their red gums at him and cackled gleefully when he climbed into the passenger seat. The young constable was mulling over what Ruby had told him in the coffee shop and was quiet for a while.

Apparently Councillor Manu had been running a protection racket with both the sellers and suppliers of betel nut in his local area. There were a couple of well patronised street markets in the vicinity of the squatter settlement and the councillor’s thugs, recruited from local raskol gangs, regularly demanded ‘rent’ and ‘commissions’. For anyone who went against them a beating was commonplace.
Ruby told him that she and her mother had resisted the intimidation for a long time but after the repeated breakages of their truck windows and the slashing of their tyres they had succumbed and paid the graft.

‘But Manu and your mother had a de facto relationship; didn’t he make exceptions for his family?’ the constable asked.

‘He was a greedy bastard, probably screwed his own grandmother too; he supplied young girls for the kongkongs. Someone did us all a big favour by getting rid of the creep,’ she replied in a matter of fact way.

As they climbed up Spring Garden Road onto Poreporena Highway Ruby leaned over and passed the constable a small bunch of betel nut. ‘You can give that to your friends if you like; it’s top quality Mekeo buai.’

Robert took the bunch. ‘What makes it so good?’ he asked.

‘See the base of the nut where the little cup holds it to the branch? That’s called a cupule by botanists. If it’s big and reaches around the nut a long way the seed will be very white and especially potent. The highlanders like it that way; they call it mit buai because it’s low in moisture.’

‘I didn’t realise you needed to know about the biology of betel nut,’ the constable replied.

‘Oh yes; as you know, this is big business. Papua New Guinea’s economy relies on it, although you’ll never see it in the official statistics. It is part of the informal economy and it’s worth millions of kina Constable.’

‘Which is why the councillor wanted his cut I guess,’ the constable said.
‘Exactly; betel nut is big business right throughout Asia. With all the new mines opening up here there are heaps of Chinese coming and they are big consumers; *buai* is set to take off very soon and people who control the market will make the most money.’

‘Does that include you and your mother?’

‘You bet! We’re into quality over quantity. See what your friends say about that,’ she replied tapping the bunch of betel nut on the constable’s lap. ‘That’s worth one kina minimum per nut right now but in a year or so, who knows what it will fetch.’

‘Thank you very much,’ Robert replied uncertainly.

‘It’s good *buai*,’ Ruby added in encouragement.

‘I don’t think you chew it very much, your teeth are very white, not at all red.’

Ruby flashed him a grin. ‘It’s the lime that does that, when it reacts with the nut in your mouth it turns red, it’s that combination which releases the arecoline, which gives you the buzz. I would rather have white teeth, but your friends will enjoy it. All the cops chew *buai*, it’s no worse than tobacco or alcohol and it’s quite legal.’

She pulled over to the side of the road. ‘Here’s your stop,’ she said.

‘Thank you,’ the constable replied and stepped out of the cab holding the betel nut like a bunch of flowers.

‘And don’t forget to tell your boss about what I said about the councillor,’ she added.

‘Can I tell him you had nothing to do with the councillor’s murder too?’ the constable asked, but she winked and didn’t
reply before taking off in a shower of gravel. The old men in the back of the vehicle waved goodbye to him.

When he passed on the conversation to Hari, the inspector screwed up his nose and scratched his head. ‘This is getting very complex Constable; maybe we need a break; how do you feel like another shopping trip and a yarn with the sergeant?’

They found Sergeant Kasari down by the river. He was sitting under a large shady tree holding a hand line which he had cast into the muddy water. About fifty metres downstream several women were standing on a gravel bar casting nets into the same flow. They had a pole balanced horizontally between the forks of two small trees upon which hung a dozen fish that they had caught. The sergeant had no such pole and didn’t appear to have caught anything.

‘The ladies and I are working in tandem,’ the sergeant explained. ‘When the fish swim past my pathetic attempt at catching them they burst into laughter. They are so busy chuckling away to themselves that when they reach the ladies’ nets they just fall into them without noticing that they’ve been caught. Did you know that happy fish taste better?’

‘No, but I’ve been wondering about it,’ Hari replied, ‘otherwise you’d be just wasting your time Sarge.’

‘Perish the thought Inspector; when I decide to leave, those grateful women will probably give me a couple of fresh fish for tea.’ The sergeant paused and scratched his knee. ‘Talking about tea, am I to presume that Mrs Metau is
sipping on the very same and gossiping happily with my good wife and daughter up at the house?’

‘You can at that Sarge; and we’ve got a Land Rover full of lovely vegetables to take home too,’ Hari replied.

‘So what can I do for you this week Inspector? I see you’ve brought your fine new constable with you again.’ The sergeant nodded towards Robert.

‘Nothing special Sarge,’ Hari replied. ‘We’re still plugging away on the councillor’s case. We also had an interesting meeting with the Regional Development Minister at Superintendent Tabai’s house.’

The sergeant raised his eyebrows. ‘Ah, the Taj Mahal on the hill; I went there once, very impressive. So, why would the minister be interested in a simple murder case Hari?’

‘That’s what I’ve been wondering Sarge. We came across his cousin, Ratu, in our travels, the fellow you were telling us about before. He’s not of any particular interest to us at this stage but he’d obviously alerted the minister to our visit and got him worried enough to haul us in for a chat.’

‘With the superintendent along for the ride; do you think there’s enough smoke there to lead to some sort of fire Hari?’

‘Not really Sarge; there must be something else going on that they don’t want us to stumble over, but I can’t think what.’

‘A bit of a mystery Hari; what are you planning on doing about it?’

‘Well, it’s tempting to stir it up a bit to see what happens but there’s something else I have to consider.’ Hari told him about the veiled threat to his daughter Bella.
The sergeant was quiet for a while and busied himself jiggling his fishing line in the river. Finally he said, ‘What do Bella and Mrs Metau think?’

Hari shrugged. ‘I haven’t mentioned it to them Sarge.’

The sergeant went back to jiggling his fishing line. ‘You’re getting on a bit now Hari, not far off retirement. If they suddenly offer you a generous early retirement package I’d say there’s something definitely going on. Maybe it would be wise to take up such an offer. The only other thing I can suggest is to be very careful.’

‘That’s what I thought too,’ said the constable, who hadn’t contributed to the conversation thus far. The sergeant and Hari both looked at him.

‘The constable has taken it upon himself to keep an eye on Bella,’ Hari said. ‘There’s a whole squad of his Sepik wantoks at the university watching her like hawks as we speak.’

‘Oh-oh, and what does young Bella think of that Hari?’ the sergeant chuckled, winking at the constable.

‘She doesn’t seem to mind,’ Hari replied diffidently.

‘And Mrs Metau?’ the sergeant asked, clearly enjoying himself.

‘She hasn’t said anything so far,’ Hari replied. The sergeant raised his eyebrows in mock horror and winked at the constable again.

He was going to add something else but he was distracted by a jerk on his fishing line. He began reeling it in towards the bank. ‘I’ve caught another bloody log,’ he muttered. ‘I’ve lost so many hooks and lines to this river over the years it’s amazing it hasn’t clogged up its mouth.’
He manoeuvred up the bank to see if he could dislodge the snag. The line stretched and went taut and the sergeant muttered to himself before giving it a hard tug. ‘Bloody thing won’t let go,’ he said and tried hauling it in again. This time the line jumped in his hand. ‘Well, I’ll be buggered,’ he said, ‘there’s something alive on the end of it; must be a bloody crocodile!’

‘May I, sir,’ the constable offered holding his hand out for the line, ‘I’m from a village in the Sepik and we fish all the time.’

‘Not on your bloody life Constable,’ the sergeant replied. ‘This is my bloody fish!’ The constable stood back wondering about the string of expletives coming from the sergeant.

When he had landed the big neku the ladies from the gravel bar came up to look at it. They bobbed around shaking their wrists as the grinning sergeant hefted the big catfish onto his shoulder.

Hari and the constable made up the tail end of the triumphant procession as it made its way up to the sergeant’s house. Flynn came bounding down the path to meet them and joined the parade directly behind the sergeant.

‘Where did that great monster come from?’ the puffing sergeant asked. Hari explained and the sergeant stopped. ‘Here, you carry this,’ he said to the constable and unceremoniously passed the slimy catfish to him.

Mrs Metau and Dinah took charge of the neku as soon as they got to the house. While the constable was inspecting the fish stains on his uniform the ladies carried the catfish around to the back of the house with the other women to
gut and fillet it. The sergeant’s wife, beaming widely, fetched tea and biscuits for the conquering heroes. Flynn momentarily dithered between the sweet biscuits and the promise of fishy offal before opting for the latter and ducking around the back of the house.

After the soothing tea and a quick back rub from his wife the sergeant became quite effusive and Hari winked at the constable before going off to check on the ladies. When he came back the constable was sitting in rapt attention.

‘I was just telling your young friend here that while traditional policing methods are very effective there’s nothing wrong with good old intuition; sometimes a hunch can go a long way; haven’t I always told you that Hari?’

‘Indeed you have Sarge; in fact, why don’t you tell him about the famous Balimo bicycle case Sarge?’

The sergeant looked up at Hari with a slight frown. He considered the matter for moment and then shrugged. ‘Why not; it’s turned out to be a good day. He might think it’s a bit too far-fetched though Hari?’

‘No Sarge, he’ll appreciate it; he’s coming to terms with talking dogs so why should a bit of *sanguma* bother him?’ The sergeant shrugged again; he was in too good a mood to argue.

‘It was when I was a lot younger,’ he began. ‘I was posted to my home town of Balimo in Western Province. One day a nurse from the mission hospital came to report that her bicycle had been stolen. It was painted a beautiful blue colour and it was her pride and joy. She used to ride it up to the sub-district office every day to collect the mission mail.’
‘We searched everywhere for it and eventually found it in some reeds on the edge of the lagoon. Its front wheel was all buckled and the nurse saw red and got so mad she went to see the \textit{kiap} about it.’

‘This was before independence you understand. Anyway, the \textit{kiap}, who was a nice old bloke, came to see me and said, ‘Kasari, you’d better nail this one fairly quickly, that nurse is talking about writing to the District Commissioner.’ The nurse was a fiery little Goilala woman and we all knew she would carry out her threat. There are some terrible sorcerers up in those mountains’

‘Anyway, I talked to people for two days and got absolutely nowhere. By then the \textit{kiap} was starting to get really worried. The friends of whoever had stolen the \textit{wiliwili} were obviously covering up for them; they were as much afraid of the nurse as anyone else.’

‘That night I had a strange experience. One of my grandmothers came to talk to me in a dream. When I woke up I went round to the station labourers’ compound where the men were having breakfast. I walked up and down the long table with my arms folded looking at the men until I saw a couple who seemed to be getting especially nervous so I took them outside and arrested them for stealing the nurse’s bicycle.’

‘The \textit{kiap} convened the court that morning. The little nurse came rushing up from the mission to give evidence. When the \textit{kiap} asked me to present my evidence I told him that my grandmother had told me who had stolen the bicycle. The \textit{kiap} said that was fine but could I please get my grandmother into the court to explain further. When I told
him that she had been dead for over twenty years he looked a bit pale.’

‘So what did you do then?’ the fascinated constable asked.

‘Well, the kiap and I had a little chat and then he cleared the court except for one of the accused who looked the most worried. The kiap said to the man, “Look; we know who stole the nurse’s wiliwili; if you cooperate with the court we’ll consider a reduced sentence.”

‘And did that work?’ the constable asked.

‘It sure did,’ the sergeant replied. ‘It turned out that the two men had been drinking with some friends and stole the bike as a dare. They rode it back up the road, one pedalling and the other sitting on the luggage rack, but they were so drunk that they crashed into the bank and bent the front wheel so badly they couldn’t ride it. That’s when they hid it in the reeds by the lagoon.’

‘So what did the kiap do?’ the constable asked.

‘He made them pay for a new wheel out of their wages and he gave them two months in gaol each; he reduced the sentence of the man who had turned state’s evidence to one month.’

‘And what about your grandmother?’ Hari asked with a grin. ‘Explain that Sarge.’

‘Well, even though she solved the case the kiap thought it best to exclude her from the evidence.’

‘So she didn’t become famous after all?’ Hari asked.

‘Well, things like that tend to get out no matter how much you try to keep it to yourself. After the court case the nurse came to see me and brought a nice fresh fish; she said it was
for my grandmother, she understood what had happened alright.’

‘Maybe that fish out the back that you just caught is some sort of omen, what do you think Sarge?’

‘Stranger things have happened Hari,’ the sergeant smiled.

When they all climbed into the old Land Rover ready to leave Hari leaned over the seat where Robert was sitting guarding their share of the catfish fillets from a bright eyed Flynn and said, ‘By the way Constable, did I ever tell you that the Sergeant’s wife is a retired nurse from Tapini in the Goilala?’

The constable shook his head. ‘Nothing would surprise me,’ he chuckled and looked to where Hari was pointing with his arm. An ancient faded blue bicycle was leaning against the side of the sergeant’s house.

Hari was pulling weeds out of his vegetable garden when the dark blue police vehicle pulled up at his front gate. Flynn barked and Silas woke up from where he was dozing under a tree. Mrs Metau came out on to the veranda and waved at Superintendent Tabai.

Hari was wearing a baggy pair of striped shorts and the sweat glistened on his back and chest as he padded on dirty feet to greet his boss.

‘You can come and dig my garden when you’re finished here,’ the superintendent said with a smile.

‘I hope the ground up there isn’t as hard as the stuff down here,’ Hari replied. The superintendent shrugged and Hari wondered whether he had ever sunk a hoe into the ground in his entire life; probably not, he concluded.
When they were settled on the veranda with cool glasses of water and lime the superintendent leaned over and said quietly, ‘I’ve come to apologise Hari.’

‘What for?’ Hari replied. ‘Surely your garden can’t be that bad!’

‘Not my garden Hari; for the deplorable meeting we had with the minister the other afternoon.’

‘What’s to apologise for?’ Hari asked.

The superintendent sipped his drink and took his time. Eventually he said, ‘In this line of work Hari there are terrible pressures. We policemen walk a very fine line. On the one hand we have the public to protect and on the other we have the demands of our political masters. In many cases, as you well know, the latter can override the former.’

This was not news to Hari. ‘I’m not complaining,’ he replied, ‘I’ve known that for a long time.’

‘The minister’s comments were completely out of line Hari. You realise that he was threatening you?’

‘That’s the impression I got,’ Hari replied.

‘We live with it all the time; the higher up the ladder you go the more the pressure increases.’

‘I know that too.’

‘I’m not complaining Hari; heaven knows we get our compensations, that house I’ve got doesn’t come without its costs.’

‘I thought your family owned it,’ Hari said.

‘I wish that were true Hari; unfortunately that’s not the case, it belongs to one of the minister’s cronies; I’ve only got tenancy while I behave myself.’

‘Behave yourself?’
‘You know what I mean Hari.’

Hari nodded and wondered where the conversation was going. The superintendent took another sip of his water and continued. ‘You’re one of my best men Hari; I don’t want to see anything happen to you or your family.’

Or get kicked out of my big house Hari thought.

‘You’re not far off retirement Hari; you should be winding down and enjoying life, not getting caught up in nasty political deals. I’m worried about you and just wanted to reassure you that I’m on your side; that’s why I decided to drop by today, over the weekend when everything is informal.’

If this is informal I’m a big black muřuk Hari thought. ‘That’s very good of you sir; I appreciate your concern and I know exactly what you are saying.’

When the superintendent had gone Mrs Metau came out and said, ‘What was that all about?’

Hari smiled. ‘Something the old sergeant told me would happen; that old bugger is worth his weight in gold.’

‘What does that mean?’ Mrs Metau asked.

‘It means,’ Hari smiled, ‘that if it’s the last thing I do as a copper I’m going to find out who murdered Councillor Manu, that’s what it means my dear.’

‘You must be very careful Hari, I might not say it often but you’re the only policeman I’ve got and I’m too old to find a new one.’

‘I’m flattered, Mrs Metau.’

‘So you should be. Now what are you planning to do?’
‘I thought I might go for a drive down the coast, maybe to Kupiano. I could pick up Kasari on the way and the constable would enjoy the break.’

‘Isn’t that where the minister and his oily cousin come from Hari? I thought I told you to be careful.’

‘Is it dear? I was just thinking of the fishing, Kasari is all fired up after that last big catch of his.’

‘You are an impossible man Hari Metau,’ his wife said with a frown.
THE constable was equally surprised when Hari mentioned his plan to him the next afternoon. ‘Down the coast sir?’

‘Yes, we’re going on patrol. Bring some sleeping gear, we might be gone a couple of days. We’ll pick up the Sarge on the way’

‘How far are we going sir?’

‘To Kupiano and points east, I want to check out some rumours that I’ve heard and maybe test a theory that I’ve got Constable.’

Port Moresby, at the end of the dry season, was at its best and its worst Hari thought as they drove out towards the beginning of the Magi Highway. Not so much because of the times, as Dickens had it, but more so because of the weather. It’s best because the days were calm and clear with mostly blue skies and humidity so low that one had to sometimes throw a blanket over the bed in the early hours of the morning; there were also fewer mosquitoes, the dry season was good for sleepers, something that Hari enjoyed more and more as he got older.

At its worst because of the dust and aridity; someone had explained it to him once, something about the disposition of the surrounding mountains and a thing called a rain shadow. How rain could cast a shadow mystified him. Whatever the
explanation, while those looming mountains glistened in
their verdure the hills of Port Moresby became sere and bare. The parks and sporting grounds around the town turned brown and little whirlwinds of dust skittered across them in the afternoons. The fact that people set fire to the grass on the surrounding hills to clear land for their wet season gardens at this time of the year didn’t help either. Sometimes the dust and smoke haze hung over the frizzled town until the early afternoon sea breeze came to blow it away. Until then the red-eyed citizens sneezed and blew their noses.

By the time they got to Gaira, about thirty kilometres down the coast and past the March Girl Resort, the countryside had become green and lush. Hari had been past the gates of the resort many times and often wondered whether it had been named after a team of precision marching girls or some girl who did something special in the month of March. He had never been in there to ask but he did notice that it was a favourite haunt of government officials. This day was no different and there was a line of government cars outside the open air dining area. Some sort of meeting he surmised, a workshop or a seminar perhaps. Hari assiduously avoided formal meetings, particularly special ones and he shuddered to think what was going on in there.

The countryside opened out as they motored along the smooth bitumen road; the only noise was the gentle hum of the tyres. The constable seemed happy to gaze across the undulating grasslands towards the blue massif of the Owen Stanley Ranges on their left and Flynn, taking advantage of
the rolled sleeping mats and blankets in the back, slept blissfully.

They travelled through pretty villages and settlements with their neat fibro cement and galvanised iron roofed houses and surrounding well-maintained gardens. Occasionally a more traditional house with woven cane walls and thatched roof appeared. They were only slowed down by the ubiquitous speed humps and entered rolling hills between small brown streams. The Land Rover was performing admirably and the car rolled around the bends and up and down the slopes with ease. It was only on the steeper hills that she spluttered a bit. Hari suspected that the float in the carburettor was a bit wonky.

They picked up Kasari at Kwikila on the way through. Hari had telephoned the police station the day before and they had sent a constable round to alert him. He met them outside his house sitting on a battered old galvanised iron patrol box.

The constable picked it up by its long handles and put it into the back of the Land Rover. Flynn gave it a suspicious sniff.

‘That old tin box has been around a long time and you wouldn’t be the first mutt to piss on it,’ Kasari told Flynn as he patted him on the head.

‘It certainly looks well-travelled,’ the constable said.

‘It has swung on the poles of many a carrier that’s for sure; they don’t make them like that anymore Constable, handmade in the government workshop, issued to me in 1966, the year that I graduated.’
They stopped at the police station at Upulima to say hello but the office was locked. An old man passing by told them that the three policemen usually stationed there had gone to Kupiano about a week ago and hadn’t come back yet. He said their wives were getting anxious. ‘Bloody meeting I bet; the world is obsessed with meetings, no wonder nothing ever gets done,’ Hari replied. ‘I’ll tell them to come home if I see them.’ They climbed back into the Land Rover and headed off. ‘Bamahuta,’ the old man said and waved.

Somewhere past Upulima they encountered road works and the bitumen gave way to a smooth gravel road. There were new drains and culverts along the road and signs of construction activity but there wasn’t a worker or bulldozer in sight. A few kilometres on they crossed the river at Imila and bumped onto a road made of river cobbles. The old Land Rover began to squeak and rattle. The grassy hills slowly gave way to encroaching forest and the streams became wider and swifter; most were spanned by World War Two vintage Bailey Bridges with wooden decking and running boards in various states of disrepair.

There were clearings here and there along the road where small hamlets had been built. In other places rubber plantations followed the road for short distances. It was much wetter and the dips in the road were filled with muddy puddles through which Hari navigated slowly and carefully.

‘The old girl seems to be going alright,’ Kasari observed glancing back at an anxious looking Flynn sitting upright and staring through the windscreen; he was an urban dog and all the greenery was making him nervous. ‘How old is she Hari?’
‘Same vintage as your patrol box Sarge; they don’t make them like this anymore either.’

The constable, bouncing around in the back with the dog, thought to add ‘thank goodness for that’ but thought better of it and said, ‘Where did you get it sir?’

‘I bought it off an old kiap who used to be the magistrate at Ela Beach. It’s an ex-government vehicle; he bought it at salvage when they swapped over to Toyotas. I think he had been in the war and couldn’t bring himself to drive one of the new Japanese Land Cruisers. There aren’t many of them around now; you can pick them out by the light blue paint. Back then they were all that colour, with white roofs.’

Hari swerved to avoid a heavily laden PMV coming the other way. The PMVs were almost all small trucks beyond Port Moresby, with seats and shelters built on the rear tray and crammed tight with people returning in the late afternoon from their gardens tucked among the trees along the road. They were a happy, sweaty lot who laughed, waved and shouted as they went past.

‘Nearly there,’ Hari said as they reached the tee junction near the aptly named Works Camp. The road to the left went on to Cloudy Bay down the coast and Moreguina up in the hills but the one on the right, which he turned into, went to Kupiano. The road got better as they got closer to the town. Soon they passed the Seventh Day Adventist High School and rolled down towards the estuary where the main trade store and wharf were located.

‘They’ve got a guesthouse at the back of the store and I’ve arranged for us to stay there,’ Hari told them. ‘We’ll chase up the local coppers in the morning.’ He turned the motor
off and the Land Rover gave a great sigh of relief. Flynn hopped deftly out of the back and began sniffing things.

When they went to the Kupiano police station the next morning they found that it too was locked. ‘That’s strange,’ Hari muttered, ‘there are supposed to be seven policemen posted here according to the commander at Kwikila.’

‘Something is up, we’d better ask around,’ Kasari replied.

‘What about the school sir? They might know what’s happening, it’s just over there?’ the constable suggested.

They left the Land Rover in Flynn’s care and walked across the road. A low murmur of voices came from the classrooms as they walked past; the children had their heads down and were studying hard.

They found the headmistress in a new-looking building with another teacher. The walls were lined with bookshelves all newly polished and unused. Hari introduced himself and his companions and by way of further greeting said, ‘These will look good when they’re stacked with books.’

The headmistress looked at the other teacher and they both let out an audible sigh. ‘This is Mr Ronavi, he is our grade six teacher and part-time librarian; to answer your question, we have no books; we have a fine building but unfortunately no books Inspector.’

‘How is that?’ Hari replied. ‘Surely the Education Department knows that a new library needs books for its shelves.’

‘The department didn’t pay for the building, it was the local member, the Minister for Regional Development,’ the headmistress said.
‘A bit of poor planning there,’ Kasari said, ‘bookshelves but no books!’

‘It wasn’t poor planning sir, we costed the building and the books very accurately when we applied for the funds. It was the commission that we didn’t reckon on, that’s where we lost the money for the books,’ Mr Ronavi said with a wounded air.

‘Commission?’ Hari asked.

‘We didn’t realise we had to pay the member ten percent commission on the grant, otherwise we’d have the money to buy books, we even made up a list with prices,’ Mr Ronavi said with another sigh. ‘Before we could get the grant cheque we had to raise the ten percent; we borrowed it from the parents, they were very good but we had to repay them straight away, they’re not rich people.’

‘But you got the cheque?’

‘As soon as the ten percent was in the member’s hand he gave us the cheque and we built the new library in which you are now standing; we tried to cut back on costs but we’d calculated too finely and there was nothing to spare.’

‘How curious,’ Hari replied. ‘What are you going to do now?’

‘We’ve written to a couple of organisations in Australia who collect second hand books for Papua New Guinea; we’re hoping we can get books that way.’

‘But not the ones that you really wanted?’

‘We don’t know what will turn up but we’ll be grateful if we get something.’

‘And meanwhile the kids suffer.’
‘I’m afraid so; that’s Papua New Guinea for you,’ the headmistress said.

‘What a terrible shame.’ Hari paused. ‘Actually, the reason we dropped by is to enquire whether you know where all the policemen have gone. The station is locked and there’s no note on the door.’

‘Oh, that’s easy,’ Mr Ronavi said, ‘they are all up on the Moreguina Road with the logging company.’

‘I see; is there some sort of trouble up there?’

‘Oh yes; the local landholders are protesting, they say no one told them about the logging; the police are helping the company.’

‘How far up the Moreguina Road is this happening?’ Hari asked.

‘Not far, less than halfway, just past the member’s house at Sisinapapa; you’ll see the logging track going north, they are up there.’

‘The member lives there?’

‘Yes, but he’s not there now, he’s in Moresby.’

‘I see,’ Hari replied. ‘Thank you for your help and I hope you get some books soon.’

The three men walked back over the road to the Land Rover. ‘Is that right sir, they have to pay ten percent before they get a government grant?’ the constable asked.

‘Of course it’s not bloody right,’ Kasari replied, ‘the bastard is ripping them off and pocketing the money.’

‘What should we do about it then?’

‘I’m not sure yet,’ Hari replied, ‘but we’ll do something, that’s for sure. Now, back to the trade store, we need fuel and food if we’re going up the Moreguina Road gentlemen!’
The local member’s house was a grandiose and elegant affair spoiled by the very high unpainted galvanised iron fence topped with razor wire surrounding it. Outside the gate an elaborate sign featuring a smiling portrait of the man together with a list of his many accomplishments and official positions stood opposite a smaller sign announcing that trespassers would be prosecuted.

When Hari pulled up in the road outside, the noise of large barking dogs could be heard. Flynn looked aghast at Hari and then Kasari. ‘Not much point in stopping if he’s away in Moresby,’ Hari said patting Flynn on the head.

‘Not unless you want to be eaten alive,’ Kasari added. Flynn nodded quickly in agreement.

‘That must be the road north over there,’ the constable said pointing to a place a few hundred metres up the road where a rough looking track joined it.

They followed the track for several kilometres through dense forest. It was deeply rutted, obviously by trucks hauling logs, but the old Land Rover took it in its stride, wallowing and bumping through the muddy sections; it was much more attuned to rough bush tracks than urban bitumen.

After a while they came to a wide swathe of cleared forest, perhaps five or six kilometres wide. Without the shade of the trees the going became quite hot and they were all sweating profusely when they came to a road block manned by several uniformed policemen. A camp of sorts had been established in a remnant grove of trees and there were three police vehicles parked there along with a small water truck.
A policeman with his hand held up came to greet them. ‘You must go away, this is a private lease and you are trespassing,’ he said before noticing the constable in his uniform. Hari held up his warrant card. ‘Where’s your boss?’ he asked.

‘He’s further up the road sir, there are some trespassers harassing the company people,’ the policeman replied.

‘You don’t happen to come from Upulima by any chance do you?’ Hari asked.

‘Yes sir, I’m second in charge there, why do you ask?’

‘Oh, nothing really, it’s just that your wives are becoming anxious, they suspect that you’ve all run off with some loose women.’

‘That’s not true sir, we’re on special duties here, that’s all!’

‘Quite so,’ Hari replied. ‘Now, if you’ll kindly lift that boom so we can pass through, we need to talk to your boss.’

They found the other policemen further up the track. By the time they got there the Land Rover was slipping and sliding on the bare orange clay exposed by the logging operations. A logging truck with a huge decapitated forest giant strapped to its back was parked on one side of the track; a stubby D6 bulldozer with four nasty looking spiked teeth and a steel towline attached sat a short distance away in a tangle of broken undergrowth. The two drivers were squatting uncomfortably under the tray of the truck smoking cigarettes. Two police vehicles were parked in the middle of the track. On the other side sat a small circle of men surrounded by policemen holding batons.

Hari and Robert climbed out of the Land Rover and walked over to the group. Kasari and Flynn stayed in the
vehicle. Hari introduced himself to the police sergeant who appeared to be in charge, ‘What’s going on here Sarge?’ he asked.

The sergeant looked slightly peeved. He hadn’t expected any headquarters types to show up. ‘We’re in the process of arresting these protesters sir,’ he replied.

Hari squinted over the heads of the cowering men. One or two of them appeared to have bloodied heads. ‘What exactly are they protesting about Sarge?’

One of the men with blood all over his face pointed across the track towards the logging truck and said, ‘It’s them; they’re cutting all our trees down; no one asked us about it, we want them to stop.’ He would have gone on talking but a policeman gave him a sharp tap on the arm with his baton. ‘That’s enough of that Constable!’ Hari snapped. ‘I want to hear what he has to say.’

‘Sorry sir,’ the policeman replied and gave the man a sharp nudge with his knee. ‘Tell the inspector what he wants to know.’

‘Put the baton away Constable,’ Hari said very softly and beckoned the man towards him. The constable heard the menace in Hari’s voice and quickly helped the man get up. He was unsteady on his feet and looked frightened. ‘It’s alright sir,’ Hari said glancing deliberately at the constable and emphasising the last word, ‘I just want to talk to you. You come over here too sir,’ he added pointing to the other man with a cut head and emphasising the last word again.

They walked back towards the Land Rover with Robert assisting both men. Hari beckoned the sergeant to follow. When they got close Kasari climbed out of the vehicle. He
handed the two men a bottle of water and they all squatted in the shade of a nearby tree. ‘Now, tell me what this is all about,’ Hari said to the two men.

The first man cleared his throat. He still looked frightened but was determined to have his say. ‘It’s this sabl thing; they say it gives them the right to log our forest.’

Hari held his hand up. ‘Sabl? What’s a sabl?’

‘It’s a Special Agricultural Business Lease sir, SABL for short,’ the sergeant explained.

‘You’d better enlighten me Sergeant.’

‘It’s a special lease for agricultural development; the company can use it to clear the area for agriculture.’

‘What sort of agriculture?’

‘Around here it’s oil palm sir, just like over at Cape Rodney.’

‘They don’t plant anything; they just cut down the trees and take them away,’ the second man said.

‘Besides, no one asked us and we’re the traditional land owners,’ the first man added.

‘Is this true Sergeant?’ Hari asked.

‘No sir; the company signed an agreement with the registered Indigenous Land Group and are paying them royalties.’

‘It wasn’t us,’ the first man said. ‘We’ve got a much older registered ILG for this area and no one came to see us.’

‘It was the local member, George Dosu, he’s also got an ILG for the area; he took it out a long time after us, when the company started sniffing around,’ the second man added.
'I think I’m getting the picture,’ Hari said. ‘You’d better go back and join your friends, thank you; I want to talk to the sergeant now. Constable, take them back over there and make sure those batons are kept under control.’ When Robert had helped the two men up Hari turned to the sergeant and raised his eyebrows.

‘It’s a difficult situation sir. Anyone can register an ILG; as soon as there’s a whiff of development they sprout like cabbages; the companies can pick and choose who they deal with; we’re the meat in the sandwich,’ the sergeant said.

‘That’s another thing I’m curious about Sergeant,’ Hari replied. ‘There seems to be too much meat in the sandwich by far; why are all your men here? You realise that while you are all here there is no police presence anywhere between Upulima and Moreguina? What would happen if some raskol gang decided to rob the store in Kupiano or murder someone?’

‘I know sir, but we didn’t have any choice, we were all ordered to come here.’

‘Ordered here, all seventeen of you from all three stations; isn’t that a bit of overkill?’

‘There were nearly a hundred people protesting sir.’

‘A hundred; there wouldn’t be more than a dozen men over there, where are the rest of them?’

‘They ran away into the bush sir.’

‘I see. And who ordered you up here Sergeant?’

‘The minister sir.’

‘What about your commander; didn’t he have a say in the matter?’

‘I don’t know sir.’
‘And who’s paying for all this, your food and fuel, wages, that sort of thing?’ Hari thought he knew the answer but waited for the sergeant to reply.

‘The logging company sir,’ the sergeant confirmed.

Hari was quietly fuming as they drove back towards Kupiano. He had ordered the arrested men released and had cut the police presence down to six, two from each station, and sent the others home. He didn’t know if he had the authority but he had done it anyway. The Kupiano sergeant hadn’t questioned him but he had no doubt he would get a rocket on his return to Port Moresby.

‘You can’t blame them Hari,’ Kasari said as they drove. ‘You know as well as anyone that the average copper’s pay is lousy and sometimes they don’t get paid for weeks at a time. Plenty of them do it; moonlighting is a way of life, the government turns a blind eye and the big companies, especially the loggers and miners, have no compunction in using public servants to guard their personal property. At least they’re not hiring out their guns at the weekends so the raskols can rob banks anymore.’

Hari grunted, ‘They could refuse to do it Sarge, honesty and integrity are always an option.’

‘Maybe in the old days, but not now Hari.’

‘I suppose you’re right Sarge but that’s not what’s worrying me at the moment. What’s worrying me is that we came down here to try to work out the political network that Councillor Manu was tied up in and we’ve come away with an entirely new set of crimes – fraud and corruption. What are we going to do about that I wonder?’
‘Nothing if you don’t want big trouble Hari. You can check out any local member in the country and you will, likely as not, find the same thing, it’s beyond mere mortals like you and me. What do you think young Robert?’

The constable had been sitting in the back of the vehicle listening intently to the conversation between the inspector and the old sergeant. He didn’t say anything immediately but finally said, ‘I think we should solve the mystery of Councillor Manu’s murder first sir and then think about what to do about the minister.’

‘A clear head, that’s what we needed,’ Kasari chuckled.

‘I suppose you’re right Constable but I suspect we might hear from the minister sooner than later,’ Hari added.

‘And, of course, anyone capable of defrauding his own clan members, not to mention stealing books from school children, might very well be capable of even worse crimes,’ Kasari mused.

‘You think he might have arranged for the councillor’s murder sir?’ the constable asked.

‘I agree with the Sergeant; I don’t think we can cross him off our list of suspects quite yet,’ Hari replied with a frown.

‘And there’s the matter of the logging company abusing the law sir, they are using a law intended to develop agriculture as a de facto logging permit,’ the constable said.

‘Apparently in collusion with a government minister; I wonder how much they are giving him in bribes.’ Hari added.

‘Ah, the woes of being a copper!’ Kasari chuckled.
WHEN they got back to Port Moresby Hari dropped the constable off and announced that he was going fishing. ‘You take the day off too Constable but be careful, I think we’ve really stirred the hornet’s nest now. When we’ve had a rest we can think about what to do next.’

The next day Hari loaded an old cooler with sandwiches and water and called out for Silas to join him. ‘Mrs Metau wants a fish, so we’d better go see what we can get,’ he announced by way of explanation. Silas jumped at the chance. Sitting for hours behind Hari’s gate bored him and he was happy for the change but a little suspicious of Hari’s motives.

A warm breeze rustled through the fronds of the coconut palms standing along the grey sands of the beach as Silas pushed the rickety old outrigger into deeper water and pulled himself on board.

Hari dropped the old canvas sail and headed them out into the harbour towards the rusting hulk of the *MacDhui*. Flynn took up a position up front and thrust his long nose into the wind like a canine bow spit.

A few of the rusty old patches on the wooden hull made out of flattened tin cans backfilled with clay began to weep...
and Silas occasionally scooped water over the side with a coconut bailer.

When they got to the wreck, Hari pulled the sail down and tossed a long rope to Silas who clambered across the rusty hull and secured it to a section of superstructure exposed by the Japanese bombs. He climbed back into the outrigger, followed by the curious dog and they drifted out to the end of the rope.

Hari tossed a couple of wire pots baited with fish heads over the side and threw a line out on the other side. Silas fiddled around baiting another line and then did the same. From where they sat they had a fine view of the wharves and the city in the fading light.

They said little and when it got dark enough Silas lit a smoky kerosene lamp and hung it on a pole over the water. Flynn stretched and curled up in the bow out of the cooling wind.

After a while Hari said, ‘Do you know Councillor Manu’s son Suli very well?’

Silas shrugged. ‘I’ve seen him around,’ he replied.

‘Do you know why he had a fight with his father? Everyone tells me he was upset about what Manu was saying about the Sinabada and her school?’

‘Maybe,’ Silas replied.

‘You think there might be another reason?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Come on Silas; why didn’t you tell me you live in the settlement?’

‘I didn’t think it was important.’

‘Even after the murder?’
‘It didn’t have anything to do with me.’
‘Of course not; but I’m a copper, I like to know these things.’
‘Sorry!’ Silas replied.
‘You reckon Suli might have been trying to assert himself or something; the young buck taking on the old bull sort of thing? Was that white man egging him on maybe?’
‘Could be.’
‘You’re not much help to me Silas; I hope you can catch some fish to make up for it.’
‘Yes sir; I’ll try.’

The next day was overcast. There was a light drizzle falling and the mist across Fairfax Harbour had obscured the hills on the other side. Hari had parked the old Land Rover under a big rain tree on a loop on the narrow Portlock Road as it wound up Touaguba Hill. It was a favourite spot for contemplation. The air was still cool from the night. The only noise was the buzz of Flynn’s snoring from the rear. People with umbrellas were padding resignedly down the hill towards the city high rises to work. An occasional jogger, usually a European from one of the big houses on the hill, flapped past adding to the tempo of the dog’s efforts.

Hari watched the ghostly outline of a big container ship take shape out on the water as it executed a series of cumbersome dance steps designed to get it closer to the wharf. When it was near enough it began edging in sideways. A small orange boat hovered around its stern. A rope went out and the little boat took it across to the wharf. Slowly the
big ship was pulled against the concrete piles. Half a dozen other ghostly shapes waited in the harbour for their turn.

The drizzle started to turn to rain and a bevy of highlanders working at laying concrete on a building site below began whooping as they ran for cover. Water dripped through the gap between the door and the roof of the Land Rover and formed a puddle at Hari’s feet. On the ship the unloading of the containers had begun. One of the three rusty coloured cranes standing on the deck furthest away from the bridge swung its yellow crab claws out and clamped itself to a topmost container. Hari watched it swing the big box onto the wharf. The word ‘Maersk’ was painted on its side alongside a blue logo of what looked like a six-pointed star. Hari wondered what the word meant.

The building site from which the highlanders had scrambled out of the rain was where the original House of Assembly had stood; before that it had been the European hospital. The sign outside the chain link fence announced that a new historical museum was being built. The irony of bulldozing a building that was in itself an historic artefact and replacing it with something brand new purportedly celebrating what had gone on in the original building was not lost on Hari. If he remembered correctly there used to be a small museum in the House of Assembly as well. Now there was a white elephant out at Waigani without power, water and telephones, inside which were heaped piles of frayed and rotting artefacts over which a recalcitrant management was bickering with its board.

In some ways Hari was feeling a bit like one of those ancient and musty artefacts. People made sympathetic
noises about looking after them but in the long run they just weren’t interested enough to care, especially now that there were so many glittering and shiny new things like smart phones and the internet to distract them. Am I just a musty old artefact Hari thought? Was it time to call it quits and retire? That would probably make a lot of people happy, Mrs Metau included. He peered out of the windscreen. The traffic coming down the hill was increasing.

Flynn stirred and sat up. He hung his head over the seat and sat morosely staring into the rain. Occasionally he flipped his eyes over to Hari. The poor bloke has got something on his mind he thought and sighed. Hari glanced across at him and patted him on the head. A white utility came up the hill with a tall, narrow box with big round holes drilled all over it and a cage door at one end strapped onto its tray. Two men in orangey-yellow fatigues sat on either side of the box with their eyes hooded against the rain. A sign along the side of the vehicle said ‘Discount Security Services’. I used to do that, the dog said, when I was younger.

‘A security guard? Who would have thought; I suppose you’re big and ugly enough. So you were once on the right side of the law?’ Hari said.

Not really Hari; Manu used to steal things from the places we guarded. After a while he couldn’t get any more business and had to sell his vehicle. He kept me around for some reason.

‘What did he do then?’ Hari asked.
I don’t know; he left me at home and went off somewhere, whatever it was it was probably illegal, the dog replied.

The security business in the towns of Papua New Guinea, particularly the capital, was very competitive. By far the most lucrative trade was with the bigger stores and the high class residences at places like Touaguba Hill. Security people affectionately referred to it as “shit-scared hill” because of the high density of expatriates and the ultra-elaborate security measures.

Hari had had reason to delve into the security business on a number of occasions and he knew that maintaining the impression of a place under siege was important for business. Indeed, some companies he knew about actually paid raskols to break into houses simply to maintain that atmosphere. If the councillor personally stole from lucrative clients in places like that he was more than stupid Hari thought.

Competition was also fierce between the multitudinous companies and it was not unknown for one company to target competitor’s clients by breaking into their premises and then offering alternative and “better” services. It was all part of the shady side of Port Moresby and it sounded like the councillor and Flynn had been minnows in a much thicker fish soup.

Hari peered out of the windscreen. ‘The rain is easing off, it’ll probably start up in earnest soon, we’d better go get our young constable, don’t want him to be left standing in the rain at his bus stop.’
The dog yawned. Hari cranked the old vehicle to life and they drifted down the hill. The constable hadn’t yet arrived at the bus stop and they pulled up to wait.

‘Your boss is a bit of a worry,’ Flynn observed after a while. He had hopped into the passenger seat and was looking out of the windscreen.

‘How do you mean?’ Hari replied.

Well, he’s obviously at the beck and call of the minister; and how does he explain living in a big house like that? Manu used to talk about having a house like that one day. Your boss must be on the take Hari.

‘I don’t doubt that you’re right,’ Hari replied, ‘but he’s a good-hearted and honest man too.’

That doesn’t make sense Hari, even to a scruffy old mutt like me.

‘I admit it’s a bit hard to understand,’ Hari mused. ‘He’s like an honest man who has fallen into a den of thieves. Rather than running away he’s somehow decided to hang on and try to change them for the better; at least that’s what he thinks he’s doing; I could be wrong.’

If he’s on a rotten ship and is planning to sink it he’s more than likely to go down with it too, the dog observed scratching behind his ear with a hind leg.

‘I hope you haven’t picked up fleas again?’ Hari said.

Just a stray itch Hari; nothing to worry about. Why would he want to do something as suicidal as that, surely he doesn’t want to be a martyr?

‘I don’t think he really knows what he is doing. There must be dozens of other honest senior public servants in similar invidious positions; why they stay on is a mystery. I
just think that when it comes to the crunch Superintendent Tabai will come good and stand by us and the law.’

‘At least you hope so Hari,’ the dog observed wryly.

‘That’s right Flynn; if some bad-arsed politician is involved in your ex-owner’s murder and we nail him we’re going to need all the help we can get.’

‘Is it worth it Hari? That bloke wasn’t that good to me. Besides, politicians can afford lawyers and they will probably get him off anyway. And what about Mrs Metau and Bella and Rose; you don’t want them to get hurt?’

‘You think I haven’t thought about that already?’ Hari replied. That’s what I was doing sitting on Touaguba Hill in the rain; I’m not that interested in ships and wharves. I think about it with every case I tackle you silly old mutt!’

The dog sniffed. ‘Here comes the young constable Hari, he looks a bit damp; I reckon he’ll hang in there too.’

‘You’d better shut up Flynn; he’ll think I’ve been talking to myself again.’

The dog burped and gave Hari a lick on the nose before hopping into the back of the Land Rover. Hari had his nose screwed up from the sudden assault of tinpis-breath when Robert opened the passenger door.

When he was comfortable in his seat Hari told him about his fishing expedition with Silas.

‘The bugger came back with two big snapper; I didn’t even get a nibble!’ The constable made sympathetic noises and Hari looked him in the eye but could not detect any real sympathy. He changed tack.

‘I tried to get him to tell me about Suli, the councillor’s son, but he clammed up tight.’
‘Maybe he doesn’t know anything,’ Robert offered.
‘Like hell he doesn’t. There’s something going on there but he won’t talk to me; maybe it’s because I’m too old or because I employ him and he doesn’t want to lose his job.’
‘Would you like me to talk to him sir?’
‘That’s exactly what I was thinking; but not in an obvious way; casually, if you know what I mean?’
‘Yes sir, I understand.’
‘Maybe we’d better invite you around for dinner again; how does that sound? You can have a yarn to him then?’
‘That would be fine sir.’
‘Good, I’ll tell Mrs Metau.’
‘Will your daughters be there sir?’
‘Probably, why do you ask?’
‘No reason sir, just curious. If I talk to him Bella might like to help; I’ll bring some drinks or something.’
‘You do that,’ Hari said.
‘What are we going to do today sir?’ the constable asked as Hari pulled out into the traffic.
‘I thought we might start with a coffee,’ Hari replied.
‘Of course sir,’ the constable said with a wry smile, ‘but after that?’
‘What do you think we should do Constable? You were the one who suggested that we get back on the murder case. Do you think we should send the soggy rope to forensics for a DNA test and then run it through our data base to match it with the owner and the possible murderer? Or we could check the CTV footage from Healy Parade to see who was there at the time maybe?’
‘Excuse me sir,’ the constable looked nonplussed.
‘Sorry Constable, I’m day dreaming; we’re not in the USA, this is poor old Moresby.’

‘Ah, yes sir, well, I’m a bit curious about where that old white man, Arthur, fits into the picture. He might have some interesting information.’ A low growl came from Flynn in the back of the vehicle.

Hari smiled. ‘I’ve been thinking the same thing; there’s hope for you yet young man - now what about that coffee?’

Hari cruised down the hill past the police headquarters on to Champion Parade and turned left. After the roundabout and the InterOil service station he turned up the hill along Douglas Street past the big Crown Plaza Hotel and wound his way down to Ela Beach.

After their coffee they climbed aboard the Land Rover again, tossing Flynn a croissant and heading out along Healy Parade towards Kaugere. Before they got too far however they noticed a small crowd gathered around a car that had pulled into a space by the edge of the sea.

‘What’s this then, not another body I hope?’ Hari said and pulled over to investigate.

The small white sedan of recent make had one of its front wheels missing. The axle was propped up with several large rocks. Inside the car two youngish European ladies sat staring out of the front windshield looking most uncomfortable.

‘What’s going on here?’ Hari asked one of the bystanders. ‘They got a flat tyre,’ the man said, ‘it’s got a nail in it.’

‘So what’s the problem?’ Hari added. ‘Where is the tyre anyway?’

‘They’ve taken it away to get fixed,’ the man replied.
‘Who is “they”?’

‘Some lads from the settlement, they shouldn’t be too long.’

‘So what are the two ladies in the car doing?’

‘They’ve locked the doors and won’t come out,’ the man said with a slightly exasperated tone. ‘I don’t know why. They pulled up and got out to look at the flat tyre but when some of the boys came over to help, they jumped back in the car and locked all the doors. When they wouldn’t come out one of the boys fetched a wheel brace and they took the tyre off to repair it.’

Hari looked at the constable. ‘It’s a good thing you’ve got your uniform on today I think. Why don’t you go and talk to those poor ladies Constable?’

The constable worked his way through the crowd and tapped on the driver’s window while smiling reassuringly. After a short exchange with her friend the driver wound the window down a few centimetres.

‘Are you both alright?’ the constable asked. ‘It must be terribly sweaty in there with this rain.’

The driver did indeed have a line of sweat on her top lip and forehead. ‘Are you a policeman?’ she asked timidly.

‘Indeed I am; Constable Robert Bokasi at your service Ma’am.’

‘The people at the hotel told us to be very careful of rascals, especially around here, and not to leave our car under any circumstances and to ring them, but our mobile phone doesn’t seem to be working; we didn’t know what else to do officer.’
Hari sidled up to the car. ‘I’m Inspector Metau,’ he said and showed them his warrant card.

‘We don’t have much money,’ the woman replied, ‘the people at the hotel told us not to carry too much in case we got robbed.’

‘Why would we be interested in how much money you’re carrying?’ the constable asked.

‘Don’t we have to pay you? The people at the hotel said the police always ask for money,’ the woman replied.

Just then the crowd parted and three bedraggled youths appeared carrying a wheel with a repaired and inflated tyre on it. Hari waved the crowd back and the boys set to replacing the wheel. Some of the men in the crowd helped by going to the front of the car and lifting it bodily off the ground; others pulled the supporting rocks away. The wheel was quickly slotted onto the studs and the nuts tightened. When it was done the men gently lowered the car to the ground. One of the youths popped the hubcap back on.

‘All fixed,’ Hari said and grinned at the three beaming youths. There was polite applause from the crowd.

‘Do you know your way from here?’ the constable asked the ladies. ‘Where are you staying?’

‘At the Crown Plaza,’ the driver said.

‘Straight down the road to the end of the beach and then up the hill and down the other side, turn right and take the first right again, up the hill and you’ll be there!’

‘Have a nice day ladies,’ Hari added and stood back as the car jerked off towards the beach. He clapped his hands and said, ‘Good one boys’ and they beamed with delight before setting off down the road.
The constable shook his head as they climbed back into the Land Rover and Hari said, ‘That’s what rumour and innuendo does for you; now, what were we doing Constable?’

‘The white man in the string vest,’ the constable said.

Arthur wasn’t at Kaugere. They drove in from the Korobosea village side and walked down the road towards the councillor’s house carrying umbrellas to keep the rain off. The through road had been cut off to stop raskols speeding through in stolen cars and skittling children and old people. People peered at them from their houses and waved in greeting while a gaggle of sodden ragamuffins formed a phalanx around Flynn.

There was no one at the councillor’s house and after ascertaining directions from their entourage Hari and the constable plodded back up the hill and across towards the school. Mrs Moiva was sitting with the Sinabada drinking coffee and eating coconut cake. Her arm was no longer in a sling but was still tied up in a bandage.

The school consisted of a tin roof and a raised floor with bookshelves along two walls but was otherwise open to the elements. The Sinabada’s mattress was propped against a wall. On the other side of the books a saksak roof continued out over a kitchen area and an open space where a dozen children were gathered around one of the volunteer teachers listening to her read from a battered story book.

Hari and the constable accepted a cup of sweet instant coffee and a slice of coconut cake each.
Mrs Moiva explained that Arthur had a couple of daughters who worked in the shops in Steamship’s Arcade off Champion Parade. ‘He might be down there or he could be at the Salvation Army in Douglas Street on the computer,’ she said.

‘The Salvos have got an internet cafe,’ the Sinabada explained. ‘He spends a lot of time there; follows all the blogs and likes to contribute his two-bob’s worth, he’s an opinionated old bugger, typical army type.’

‘He was in the army?’ Hari asked. ‘He doesn’t strike me as a military type.’

‘Pacific Islands Regiment. I think he was a major; isn’t that where the time-servers end up?’ He’s on some sort of pension now, can’t be too great because he’s always short of money, just like the rest of us.’

‘Has he got a wife?’ Hari asked with a sideline glance at Mrs Moiva.

‘She died of AIDs late last year,’ the Sinabada replied.

Hari didn’t say anything for a moment or two and both the Sinabada and Mrs Moiva waited while the cogs in his head dropped into place. It was the constable who asked the question however.

‘So Arthur is HIV positive?’

The two women looked at the constable, ‘Not as far as we know,’ the Sinabada replied.

‘But how ... oh, I see,’ the constable spluttered.

‘There are plenty of people in the settlements with AIDs,’ the Sinabada said, ‘that’s why there are so many homeless kids wandering around.’
Hari nodded and looked at the constable. ‘Manu was HIV positive too!’ Mrs Maivo said quietly.

‘Oh dear; I’m sorry,’ Hari replied.

‘But I’m not,’ Mrs Maivo added with a sad look.

Again the cogs in Hari’s head rattled around before sliding into place. ‘Are you saying there’s a connection between the death of Arthur’s wife and your husband’s condition?’ he eventually said.

Mrs Maivo looked at the ground and shrugged. ‘From what we’ve been told it’s highly likely,’ the Sinabada said placing a hand on Mrs Maivo’s arm.

‘It’s true, I’m sure of it!’ Mrs Maivo said with a heave of her chest. ‘I feel so sorry for that man and those two girls of his with no mama anymore.’ The Sinabada patted her arm again. ‘It’s not your fault Alice,’ she said soothingly.

The constable had never tasted wine before, let alone bought any. When he had explained his predicament the man in the shop had fetched a bottle of pink wine that became shot through with tiny bubbles when he put it on the counter. ‘The ladies especially like this one,’ the man said with a soft smile.

‘Is it a good one?’ the constable asked examining the smooth glass bottle and the impressive label.

‘It’s from the Barossa Valley in South Australia, we sell a lot of it, so it must be good,’ the man replied.

‘I’ll take it then,’ Robert said.

‘Your lady friend will be most impressed I’m sure,’ the man said slipping the bottle into a brown paper bag and taking the notes the constable offered.
The bottle was bouncing in the constable’s bilum as he walked from the bus stop towards Hari’s house. The rain from earlier in the week had blown away and the sun was pleasantly warm, even with the breeze off the harbour. All in all he felt pleasantly at ease. That is until he felt the push in the back.

He had been vaguely aware of someone walking behind him but hadn’t paid much attention. The push was hard and deliberate and he stumbled before stopping. When he turned around he was confronted by three young men. He looked from one to the other. ‘What do you want?’ he asked. He was more curious than afraid. They were playing some sort of joke he guessed.

‘It’s not what we want Mr Policeman, it’s what you want,’ the man who had pushed him said.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ the constable said glancing at the man’s companions, who were grinning broadly. There were other people on the street and they glanced curiously at him and hurried on their way. The man who had spoken moved closer to him and prodded him in the chest.

‘You’re some dumb policeman I think,’ he said prodding harder.

The constable pushed the man’s hand away and said, ‘Look, I’ve got to go, I’m late, I don’t know what you’re talking about, sorry!’

As he turned to leave the blow from the man’s fist caught him on the side of the head. He staggered for a moment until another blow, this time from something more solid, caught him in the side. He fell over and landed on his back on the pavement. The bottle of wine in his bilum shattered.
and he felt the warm liquid soaking into his shirt. Around him people were scurrying quickly away. Out of the corner of his eye he caught the glimpse of sunlight on the blade of a bush knife. It was the flat of the blade that had knocked him over.

He rolled sideways into the grass and pulled himself upright. He could feel glass grating along his back and knew he was bleeding. He shook the glass out of the bilum and wrapped it around his fist. The man with the bush knife was advancing on him and the other two men were coming in behind him.

The man swung the long bladed knife and the constable dived in under it and caught the man around the waist and heaved him backwards into his companions. As he stepped back he collected the neck of the broken wine bottle off the ground and brandished the jagged edge towards the men. The men began to circle him. The one with the bush knife was grinning broadly.

‘You’re going to get it now Mr Policeman,’ he leered, ‘we going to chop you proper good now!’

The constable swiped the bottle neck at him and the man stepped back quickly. The leer had gone from his face and had been replaced by a nasty sneer. He stepped forward swinging the knife back and forth.

Just as the constable was bracing for the attack he heard an ear-splitting explosion just behind him followed by the distinct metallic click of another round going into the breech of a pump action shotgun. The men in front of him stopped in their tracks and backed away before turning and fleeing down the road.
‘That usually does the trick,’ Ruby said as she stepped away from her red Hilux.

‘They broke my bottle of wine,’ the constable said and then winced as Mrs Metau pulled another sliver of glass out of his back. He was sitting sideways on a kitchen chair on the veranda of Hari’s house. His blood and wine soaked shirt was lying on the floor. Rose scooped it up and said, ‘I’ll give this a quick rinse and hang it out to dry, it won’t take long.’

‘Watch out for splinters,’ Mrs Metau said.

‘You could have one of Dad’s shirts but it would never fit, not with those broad shoulders,’ Bella added.

Ruby, who was leaning on the veranda railing raised her eyebrows slightly and Hari glanced across at her and said, ‘I think he’ll be okay, there are a couple of deep cuts there but they’ll heal, he was lucky you rescued him.’

Ruby shrugged. ‘I was just going past, it was a complete coincidence.’

‘It was also lucky that you just happened to have a loaded riot squad shotgun in your car too,’ Hari added.

‘You can’t be too careful these days,’ Ruby replied with another shrug.

‘Hmm, yes, I guess that’s right,’ Hari replied. He knew it would be pointless asking her where she had acquired a police issue firearm and equally pointless in taking it off her. Wherever she had got it she could always get another one.

‘I guess we’ll have to drink beer instead,’ he said answering the constable’s original complaint. ‘I hope you didn’t pay too much for that bottle of wine young man.’
‘It was rather expensive sir; I was hoping Mrs Metau and your daughters would enjoy it.’

‘Never mind,’ Bella said, ‘there’s always another time; the main thing is that you’re not badly hurt. Do you think you could recognise those men if you saw them again?’

‘Oh yes,’ the constable replied. ‘I’d know them anywhere.’

‘Except you won’t see them again,’ Ruby said. ‘Whoever sent them will make sure they disappear until it’s safe for them to come back.’

‘Unfortunately she’s right,’ Hari added. ‘We’d be wasting our time looking for them I’m afraid.’

‘That’s the last of it I think,’ Mrs Metau said straightening up. ‘You’re a lucky young man Constable; it could have been a lot worse. Now, you girls can help me finish off getting dinner ready.’ She ushered Bella and the returning Rose into the kitchen and turned to Ruby.

‘Would you and your uncles like to join us for dinner? It’s the least we can do to thank you.’

‘No thank you all the same, we’d better be off,’ Ruby replied as she glanced down at the two old gentlemen who had made themselves comfortable on the floor of the veranda.

‘It’s tuna from down the coast, there’s plenty to go around,’ Hari said catching the disappointed look in the old men’s eyes.

Ruby hesitated and then smiled. ‘Why not, we were just going to pick up some fried flour on our way home, fish sounds good.’ The old men grinned and Hari winked at them.
The plan for the constable and Bella to talk to Silas went by the board. When Ruby had driven up to the gate of Hari’s house and unloaded the bloodied constable Silas was the first one to meet them. He had seemed more surprised at the appearance of Ruby than the condition of the injured policeman.

Mrs Metau and her two daughters had come running and they quickly ushered Silas out of the way and took over. As he went back to the gate he had caught Ruby’s curious backward glance at him. Her two uncles were also staring at him from the tray of the Hilux. In all the fuss only Hari noticed his discomfort.

After dinner, when Ruby and her uncles were about to leave, Hari thanked her again.

‘It was just lucky that I was going past,’ she said in a matter-of-fact way.

Hari wasn’t so sure about that but he didn’t push the point. ‘I was half expecting something like this to happen, just not so soon,’ he said instead.

Ruby shrugged. ‘That’s the way it is,’ she replied.

‘So you know Silas?’ Hari said, taking a different tack. ‘I’ve seen him around,’ Ruby replied, a little too hesitantly. ‘With Councillor Manu perhaps?’

‘Just now and again.’

‘That’s handy to know,’ Hari replied. Ruby shrugged again. He smiled, shrugging as a response to questions came naturally to her. He shook hands with her two uncles. ‘You three take care,’ he said.

‘We can look after ourselves,’ Ruby replied with a smile. ‘I’ve no doubt that’s true,’ Hari replied.
They kept the constable at the house overnight. After much fussing over breakfast by the ladies Hari drove him over to his barracks and he changed into his police uniform. After that they went to police headquarters and lodged a report of the attack. Hari made a photocopy and gave it to Superintendent Tabai’s secretary, Martha, with instructions to make sure he saw it. Then they both crept out of the building and headed for the Beachside Brasserie.

They didn’t talk about the attack. Violence, especially in the big towns, was commonplace. Hari knew that young men like Robert grew up seeing and sometimes being the victims of it. In some ways it was a cultural thing but in many cases it was caused by the loss of culture and its inbuilt restraints. The bands of raskols that proliferated in the squatter settlements were now so disconnected from the villages of their parents and grandparents that they had evolved their own fractured cultures replete with violence and crime.

The constable may very well have assumed that the attack was a random event but Hari knew better and so, he suspected, did Ruby. He would try to look after the young constable and hope that realisation came sooner than later. In the meantime they still had to track down the old white man in the string vest.

Before the attack they had talked to some of Arthur’s acquaintances and worked out his likely haunts. By the end of the week they concluded that they had warned the old man and he was deliberately avoiding them.
‘I wonder what he’s got to hide,’ the constable said sipping the last of his coffee. Hari noticed that he was moving stiffly in his chair and avoiding leaning back in it.

‘I don’t know but it has suddenly made him a lot more interesting don’t you think?’

‘Yes sir; we probably need to know more about his relationship with the councillor.’

‘Exactly what I was thinking Constable, but where are we going to find that out?’

‘Mrs Maivo I suppose; I can’t think of anyone else sir.’

‘Good thinking Constable, but before we bother the poor lady again there might be another place we could check.’

‘Where is that sir?’

‘You’ll have to wait and see Constable, see if you can guess; in the meantime we’d better buy Flynn his croissant, he’ll be getting grumpy sitting in the back of the Land Rover by himself.’
'THIS is Murray Barracks sir,’ the constable said as Hari pulled off Wards Road.

‘Indeed it is Constable,’ Hari replied. ‘I have a special working rule, when in doubt it is useful to fall back on the wisdom of old sergeants. This one happens to wear a green uniform rather than a blue one.’

‘I see sir; the Sinabada told us that Arthur was in the defence force and you have come here to collect background information.’

‘What do you think Constable?’

‘A very good idea sir.’

‘I’m glad you agree,’ Hari waved to the guard on the gate. The soldier stuck his head into the Land Rover and quickly withdrew it when he saw Flynn in the back. ‘I’m after Sergeant Goava, is he receiving guests this morning?’ Hari said.

‘I’ll ring him and check Inspector,’ the soldier replied. He knew Hari by sight and didn’t bother asking him for any identification. When he came back he said, ‘The sergeant says he’ll put the kettle on sir.’

‘Excellent!’ Hari said with a wave and drove off, turned left and then right and headed towards a row of low set workshops.
The sergeant was waiting for them outside. ‘What’s wrong with the old heap now?’ he said by way of greeting.

‘Nothing Sarge, she’s ticking over nicely, although if you’ve got any old carburettors lying around I’m having a bit of bother with my float; we just went for a run down the coast and by the time we got back it was spluttering a bit.’

‘Follow me; I’ll have a bit of a rummage; that old Series 2A of yours is holding up pretty well if all you need is a float for your carby Hari. By the way, who is your friend?’

‘This is Constable Robert Bokasi, he’s helping me on a couple of cases,’ Hari said as the sergeant extended his hand.

‘What happened to your last minder Hari? She was quite cute,’ the sergeant said with a wink to the constable.

‘She’s gone on to bigger and better things Sarge.’

‘I didn’t think Grace would let that one last long,’ the sergeant replied as they followed him down a row of shelves. He stopped every so often and opened various boxes and shook others. By the time they had reached the sergeant’s office Hari had three spare carburettor floats and several other useful parts in a cardboard box.

The sergeant filled an electric jug at one of the sinks outside his door and plugged it in to a power point near his desk. He pushed some paperwork out of the way and placed three battered enamel mugs in its place. From out of his desk drawer came teabags and sugar.

‘Have a seat.’ He indicated two mismatched office chairs in front of his desk before going over to the door and letting out a shrill whistle. A soldier wiping his hands with a greasy cloth appeared. ‘Kisim susu wontaim swit biskit ikam,’ he told the man.
While they waited for the milk and biscuits the sergeant busied himself interrogating the constable about why he had joined the police force rather than the army. ‘I know the army and the police have never got on well but there’s still a good career to be made here,’ he said. ‘We’re all short of money and resources but it will get better one day. Getting young men to join up is getting harder all the time.’

Hari nodded in agreement and wondered about the relationship between the police and the army. Their roles tended to blur, especially in terms of civic control, and the politicians either couldn’t work it out, or didn’t want to work it out. Back in 1961 the police had put down a mutiny involving disgruntled soldiers from Taurama Barracks and the confrontation still rankled on both sides. Hari had been a young schoolboy then but the sight of soldiers marching on the town and being confronted by riot police was a disturbing thing to have witnessed.

When they had their tea and biscuits the sergeant leaned back in his chair and said, ‘So who is it this time Hari?’

Hari smiled and popped a soggy biscuit which he had just dunked in his tea into his mouth. ‘Major Arthur Lennon, retired and now living somewhere near Kaugere. We want to ask him a few questions about a recently deceased ward councillor but he is proving quite elusive. We’re curious to work out why.’

‘This would be about Manu Moiva, would it Hari?’

‘The very same Sarge, did you know him by any chance?’

‘A long time ago, he and the major were great mates.’

‘They were friends? How’s that Sarge?’
‘Manu used to act as a pimp for the single officers; he lined up the girls, sold dope, that sort of thing.’

‘Manu used to work here?’

‘He was a soldier Hari; he was a cook in the officer’s mess. He eventually got the boot but the major kept in contact. Manu even lined up a wife for him, some relative of his own wife I think, maybe even her sister, she’s dead now but there are a couple of daughters.’

‘Yes, we’ve heard about the daughters, a couple of nice girls, very pretty apparently. Why did Manu get the boot Sarge?’

‘He had a nasty temper, always getting into fights; he eventually put one of the other cooks in hospital, poured boiling tomato soup all over him. He was going to be charged but the major got him off and he was quietly discharged.’

Hari resisted the urge to ask why tomato and not pea and ham and looked at the constable who was busy scribbling in his notebook. He lowered his voice slightly. ‘The major’s wife died of AIDS yet the major, as far as we know, is not HIV positive; Manu was however.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me one bit Hari.’

‘How do you think the major would have reacted to that Sarge?’

‘What, Manu sleeping with his wife, or giving her AIDS?’

‘Both Sarge, but mainly the latter.’

‘I don’t know Hari; the major never struck me as having the balls to total someone, if that’s what you mean; he was strictly a desk jockey and a pisspot; unless he got someone else to do it for him, that would be his style.’
Hari put his mug down. ‘Thanks for that Sarge. It doesn’t explain why he’s avoiding us but it paints an interesting picture. Do you ever see him around?’

‘Nah, not much, he sat out his time, took his pension and pissed off; I wasn’t one of his mates anyway.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought so Sarge. Thanks for the cuppa, we’d better get going.’

‘No worries Hari. If that young constable of yours goes the way of the others we can always find a spot for him. Say hello to Grace and the girls.’

‘Will do Sarge; thanks again.’ Hari picked up his box of spare parts and went to the door followed by the constable still scribbling in his notebook.

The sergeant watched them go and then whistled again for the soldier who had brought the milk and biscuits.

‘Keep an eye on the place for me Corporal,’ he said. ‘I’m just going to duck out for a while.’ He put his hat on and strode out of the door and towards the main gate.

‘Take off your shirt and sit on the chair,’ Mrs Metau commanded. The constable did as he was told.

‘I’ll just go try this new float in the carburettor,’ Hari said disappearing down the stairs.

They had come back to the house after seeing the sergeant. Hari passed Bella on the stairs on her way back from the morning lectures at the university. ‘The constable is upstairs for his afternoon appointment with the doctor, we just made it in time, thank goodness,’ he said to his daughter. She shook her head with a smile and went into the kitchen.
‘Put water on for tea Bella,’ Mrs Metau said. ‘I’m nearly done here and your father will be fiddling with that car of his for at least an hour.’

Bella put her bag down and filled a kettle. She gave the small kerosene stove a few pumps and a dash of methylated spirits and lit it. She glanced across at the constable sitting bare-chested on the kitchen chair. ‘How are your cuts?’ she asked.

‘They’re healing up nicely,’ Mrs Metau replied, ‘no sign of infection at all.’

‘I’m just feeling a bit sore and stiff,’ the constable added with a serious look.

‘You were very lucky that Ruby came along when she did,’ Bella replied. ‘Is she a friend of yours?’ She’s very striking to look at with all those tattoos and that hair of hers.’

‘Oh no, she’s not a friend, she’s just someone we interviewed for the case of the murdered councillor, I hadn’t met her before that,’ the constable said a bit too quickly.

Bella began pouring the tea. The constable is indeed a handsome man she thought, that’s a powerful set of shoulders he’s got, but he’s very naive too. She remembered once as a child seeing her father come home bloodied and bruised after a run-in with some thugs sent by a local politician whom he had upset. She doubted whether the constable had yet made the connection.

‘Have you got any idea who those men were who attacked you?’ she asked handing him a cup of tea.

‘Not really; I guess they were just bored and felt like picking a fight.’
‘You don’t think it had anything to do with the investigation into the councillor’s murder or your trip down the coast then?’

‘That’s what your father thinks but I’m not so sure, raskols are always picking fights for no reason. If it had been over the investigation wouldn’t they have picked on him rather than me? I’m just helping, he’s the one in charge’

‘You don’t think that perhaps they attacked you to give my father a message?’

‘I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘I think that’s what it was really about,’ Bella said.

‘Of course that’s what it was about,’ Mrs Metau added with finality. ‘My husband is used to it, it happened all the time when he was younger, I was always patching him up. They leave him alone now because they know what will happen to them if they attack him or one of us. He has friends who look after him. They attacked you because you’re working with him; it was a message for him to back off and be careful where he pokes his nose in future, that’s all.’

The constable didn’t reply. He wasn’t thinking so much about being used to give Hari a message but rather how nice it would be to be part of a family like Hari’s. His musing was broken by Mrs Metau tapping him on the shoulder. ‘Put your shirt back on young man, I’ll take another look at your back in a few days. Give me my tea Bella and take a cup down to your father and tell him to stop fiddling with that car.’
Bella was looking intently at the constable but when she caught the flash in her mother’s eye she quickly went down the stairs.

When the constable followed her down a few moments later he found the Land Rover with its bonnet up and Hari, Bella and Silas all bent over the motor. Flynn was sitting between their legs staring intently at the radiator. ‘Is everything alright? The constable asked. When he got no answer he moved closer.

‘Hold this out of the way,’ Hari said to him as he leaned over between Bella and Silas. The constable took the ribbed black rubber air filter connector hose. ‘Alright Bella, when I put the float in place you line the hole up and slide the spindle through; Silas will tighten it up; ready everyone, let’s do it.’

There was a quick shuffling under the bonnet. Flynn couldn’t contain himself any longer and stood up on his hind legs and stared between the constable’s arms. Hari stepped back, ‘That’s got the bugger!’ he said with satisfaction. ‘I’ll just put the top cover and gasket back and we’ll be done, just keep that thing out of the way a moment longer Constable.’ He fiddled for another minute or so and then replaced the connector hose to the air filter. ‘Just a bit of fine tuning to get the mixture back on an even keel and we’ll be all set,’ he said as he went to the cab and turned the motor on.

When the old Land Rover was ticking over nicely Bella brought a bowl of warm soapy water and they all washed the oil off their hands. ‘Nothing like teamwork,’ Hari said. ‘I was a bit worried about that float; it’s a bit old and battered like me.’
As Hari sat in the ramshackle office of his friend, the lawyer, he wondered why he had received no rocket over the trip to Kupiano. Worse still, his report of the attack on Constable Bokasi also seemed to have been ignored. The silence seemed ominous. Perhaps what he was doing in the lawyer’s office would provoke a better response. Hari needed a response of some sort to plan his next move.

‘James shouldn’t be too long Hari,’ the white-haired lady behind the reception desk said again for the third time; can I get you a cup of tea or coffee?’

The office was a one-roomed affair tucked into the side of a house up the hill from the Hubert Murray Highway at Badili. A line of filing cabinets along one wall had overflowed and spilled their contents in uneven heaps across the floor and around the legs of the old aluminium table in the corner that was James’ desk. Over by the other wall was a sink and cupboards. The only outstanding feature in the room, a shiny stainless steel coffee maker, stood on the bench beside the sink.

‘A coffee would be nice Margaret,’ Hari replied eyeing the expensive looking silver machine. Margaret was James Aino’s wife and she doubled as his secretary. Hari had known them both for many years. James was what some people referred to as a human rights lawyer. Hari regarded that as meaning he was both honest and not too money hungry.

‘He’s at the Boroko Police Lockup,’ Margaret said as she expertly fiddled with the knobs and dials on the coffee maker. ‘They’ve locked up some poor man from Yule Island
who is trying to get a visa to take his daughter to Australia for medical treatment.’

‘I didn’t know that was a crime,’ Hari said.

‘He created a scene at the visa office in town and they arrested him. The ladies there were giving him a hard time, like they always do, and he cracked up. If his daughter doesn’t get the treatment she will die. The whole island collected their fares and the fees but now they won’t give them visas; she’s only ten years old.’

‘Where is she now, while her father is in the lock up?’ Hari asked.

‘She’s staying with us Hari; she’s out the back with my daughter and her family.’

Hari took the cup of coffee and sipped it appreciatively. It was premium highlands coffee and a carton of it had come with the machine from an appreciative group of land owners at Goroka that James had helped in some way, Margaret explained while sipping her own cup. Hari was about to make a comment about the inequitable Australian visa system but was cut short as a sweaty and excited James bustled into the office followed by a timid looking man in a rumpled grey suit.

‘We got him out; G’day Hari, I’ll be right with you, where’s Lucy? Her father is really worried about her.’ He looked at his wife and waved some documents around in his hand.

‘You look after Hari; I’ll take Mr Waniga through to see his daughter. She’s fine. What’s that you’re waving around?’

James stopped waving the documents around and looked at them. ‘It’s their visas for Australia,’ he said in
wonderment, ‘I got them too!’ Margaret deftly whipped the documents out of his hand and ushered Mr Waniga through the door to the house. She pointed at Hari with the papers as she left.

James lifted both open palms in the air and grinned broadly before pointing at Hari and stalking over to his desk. ‘I’ve got some interesting news for you too,’ he said with a wink.

He rummaged around in the pile of papers on his desk and then triumphantly pulled several stapled sheets out of the mess. ‘There is no agreement down there on that particular piece of forest, SABL, logging or otherwise; this is the latest printout of ILG agreements. George Dosu and his clan, which, incidentally, seems to be comprised of himself, his wife, his son and a cousin living in Lea Lea, have no agreement with anyone over anything!’

‘You mean they’re clearing land and logging illegally?’ Hari asked shaking his head.

‘Sheer bluff Hari; it goes on all the time. The loggers wave an official looking document under the noses of the land owners, it could be their wife’s shopping list for all anyone knows, and nine times out of ten the land holders meekly accept it; especially if the company promises them hefty royalties at the same time, which, also nine times out of ten, are never paid.’

‘So what can we do about it?’ Hari asked.

‘Leave it with me Hari,’ James replied. ‘I’ve dealt with that company before; they know me well and they also know I mean business; just give me some names and I’ll do the rest.’
‘I’ll send Constable Bokasi around to see you,’ Hari replied, ‘he took down all their names. I’ll also alert the sergeant at Kupiano, he can help you serve any papers down there. Well, fancy that, you’re a gem James! Only I don’t think those land owners will be able to pay you much I’m afraid.’

‘I enjoy my work Hari; sometimes that’s enough reward, besides, with a bit of luck the company will settle.’

‘What, you mean compensation?’

‘Exactly, and then they’ll try to negotiate an agreement with them but this time it will be legal, I’ll see to that.’

‘So the trees will eventually get cut down anyway, that’s a shame.’

‘Not necessarily Hari, people down there know what clear felling does to the environment, but that’s the way it usually works out. I can only do so much I’m afraid, innate greed is beyond my bailiwick. I’ll explain their options to them. You never know, the trees might be lucky.’

‘That’s a very fine coffee machine,’ Hari said putting his cup down and shaking James’ hand.

‘Ah yes; better than a fee payment of a pig or a bilum of kaukau any day. Atlas Energy & Oil bought that for me in a roundabout sort of way.’ He was still chuckling as Hari went out of the office door.

When Hari got home Sergeant Goava was waiting for him. ‘Where’s your shadow?’ the sergeant asked.

‘It’s his day off but I suspect he’s out at the Uni keeping an eye on Bella.’

‘What sort of eye would that be Hari?’
‘I’m not really sure; you might have to ask Grace, she’s more attuned to that sort of thing. Are you coming in for a drink?’

Silas swung the gate open and Flynn hopped out of the back of the Land Rover. On the stairs Hari looked up at Mrs Metau and said, ‘Sergeant Goava has come to ask you a question.’

Sergeant Goava chuckled. ‘He’s just stirring Grace, I came to see him, and he’s trying to divert my attention.’

‘That would be right,’ Mrs Metau said. ‘Sit down and I’ll put the kettle on.’

‘So what brought you out of your foxhole Sarge?’ Hari asked after they were seated on the veranda.

‘You did Hari. After you and your shadow left the other day I nipped out to Kaugere on a hunch.’

‘This sounds interesting.’

‘It was Hari. That place is like a rabbit warren, a real labyrinth; people could hide in there for years without being found, including our mutual friend Major Arthur Lennon’

‘And did you have any luck?’

‘I did Hari.’

And . . . ?’

‘He’s not in very good shape Hari. He thinks someone has been using sorcery on him; he looks like someone who has had his insides sucked out. He also thinks you are going to arrest him for the murder of the councillor.’

‘Has he got any reason to think that Sarge?’

‘I don’t know Hari; he told me he could have done it while he was under some sort of spell. He also thinks his wife died of sorcery.’
‘She had AIDS Sarge, courtesy of the councillor. That’s unusual for a white man to believe in sorcery. Who does he think is responsible?’

‘He reckons some politician has paid someone to give him the evil eye, it’s all a bit confusing, I couldn’t really make sense of it all.’

‘Where exactly is he in Kaugere Sarge?’

‘He’s staying with one of his daughters and her husband.’

Hari scratched his chin. ‘I knew we should have followed up on those girls.’

‘What are you going to do now Hari? I can take you out to where he’s hiding.’

‘I’m not sure Sarge; we all live with sorcery but I don’t really know much about it.’

‘You should ask that kekeni, Ruby, she knows,’ Mrs Metau said plonking a teapot on the table.

‘Ruby? How do you know that dear?’ Hari said with surprise.

‘I’ve been talking to the ladies in the village, they know all about her; her grandfather, Anu, is a meamea tauna, a very powerful one too.’

Hari scratched his chin again. ‘Do you think you could get Arthur to come and see this Anu bloke Sarge?’

‘I can give it a go Hari; what are you thinking?’

‘Well, he’s not going to be much good to us if he’s zonked out under some curse; if we can get that lifted he might be a bit more forthcoming. Apart from that, the whole thing has got me intrigued. I wonder where Anu lives.’

‘The same place as that shotgun kekeni,’ Mrs Metau said with a look of exasperation.
‘Of course dear; I’m missing the obvious.’
‘How are you going to contact him Hari?’ the sergeant asked.
‘I’ll go out to see him; it shouldn’t be too hard to find a man with a reputation like that; if that doesn’t work I’ll get on to Ruby. The constable and I can go out there tomorrow and we’ll let you know how it goes; is that alright Sarge?’
‘Fine by me Hari; if you can organise a day away from the grease pit for me that would be even better.’
‘That sounds like a deal then,’ Hari replied.
Mrs Metau simply raised her eyebrows and poured more tea.
THEY found the old man on the beach sitting under a simple palm frond shelter. The grey sand dropped steeply into the sea and was covered with logs and other debris washed down by the river. The day was overcast and humid with the opaque glow of the sun behind the clouds hard on the eyes. There was hardly a rise in the water and its sluggish breath against the sand was barely audible.

‘Are you Anu?’ Hari asked as they stood sweating near the edge of the water looking up at the old man.

‘I am indeed, come in out of the heat, there is room here to sit and I have water if you would like a drink.’

He patted the woven mat on which he was sitting and moved aside a lumpy bilum and a well-worn ukulele. He was dressed simply in a multi-coloured laplap; his long white hair was tied up in a ponytail and his body was rapier thin. There was a necklace of woven fibre with a fish hook carved out of shell hanging on his bony chest.

‘I sometimes like to strum,’ he said touching the ukulele affectionately with his fingertips. He smiled softly, revealing sound white teeth.

‘Something strange has happened and we would like your opinion,’ Hari explained. He picked up the plastic water bottle and took a long draught before handing it to Robert.
'The people in the village and your granddaughter, Ruby, tell us that you are a healer; that you can talk to the spirits.'

The old man looked at Hari carefully before answering. ‘You are a policeman I think; it is against the law to practice *meamea*, you know that!’

‘No, no, we don’t mean that. I’m also a Papuan, more so than a policeman perhaps. No, we didn’t come here for that; we just need your advice.’

‘In that case it is true, the people in the village say that about me, as does my granddaughter.’

‘You say that as if it isn’t true,’ the constable said.

The old man shrugged. ‘I know things that everyone knows, they just don’t think about them like I do.’

‘But you have healed people we hear,’ Hari said.

‘That is true, but it is only because people are too stupid to heal themselves.’

‘But don’t you know about special bark and leaves; don’t you use magical things like bone and hair?’ the constable asked.

The old man chuckled. ‘No more than anyone else; you are talking about *vada gaudia*; I find that *meamea* doesn’t really live in those things, it lives in people’s heads.’

‘In their minds, their subconscious you mean?’ Hari said.

‘That’s right.’

‘And you can fix that sort of thing?’

‘I can help people fix that sort of thing, yes. Do you have someone with a problem?’

‘Yes, but he is a white man, does that matter?’

‘I don’t know, I’ve never treated a white man before, I understand that their minds are quite different from ours.’
‘This one thinks that he has been cursed by a sorcerer.’

‘That would help if he believes those things,’ the old man said leaning over to his bilum where something had started moving about. He stroked the outside of the bilum until it became still. The constable gave Hari a worried look. The old man smiled, ‘It’s just my friend; she gets restless sometimes.’

‘Could we bring this white man to see you?’ Hari asked.

‘Yes, certainly, I can talk to him; I may be able to help.’ The constable was now standing up and had backed out of the shelter. Hari looked up at him and back at the old man. A very large Papuan Taipan had uncoiled from the bilum and was now resting its head on the old man’s lap. The old man stroked it on the head.

‘Then we’ll be going,’ Hari said carefully. ‘Can we come back with him next week?’

‘Of course, I’ll be here or in the village, we don’t go too far these days, we’re both getting too old,’ the old man said with a pleasant smile. The taipan had now wholly emerged from the bilum and was curled up in the old man’s lap. When Hari and the constable reached the track back to the village they could just hear the faint thrum of the ukulele.

On the way home they passed Ruby in her red Hilux. Hari pulled up and walked back to where she was parked on the road.

‘Has that mother of yours turned up yet?’ he asked looking into the cab.

Ruby leaned across her two uncles and said, ‘Have you been to the village looking for her?’
‘We’ve been to the village but not to find your mother, we had a word to your grandfather.’

‘Momokani!’ Ruby said looking surprised. ‘What do you want with my tubuna?’

‘A bit of professional advice; we have a patient for him.’

‘That’s alright then; as long as you don’t think he’s involved in anything. When is this going to happen?’

‘We’re not sure yet, the patient might be a bit reluctant.’

‘I see; who is this patient?’

‘Our mutual friend Arthur.’

‘He’s no friend of mine; he’s Suli’s friend. This sounds very interesting Inspector. Will you be bringing the constable with you?’ she asked nodding with her head back towards the Land Rover.

‘Indeed I shall.’

‘In that case I’ll see you there,’ Ruby said easing the clutch of the Hilux out and slowly taking off.

Hari was left standing beside the road. He scratched his head and walked back towards his vehicle.

‘Is everything alright?’ the constable asked. ‘You look worried sir.’

‘I’m fine,’ Hari replied, ‘it’s you I’m worried about Constable.’

Hari didn’t elaborate on the ride back and the constable was left wondering what his boss was talking about.

Arthur had been very subdued when they picked him up. Sergeant Goava had collected him up from his daughter’s house and brought him to the school. The daughters were co-operative but still worried about Hari and the constable.
They had asked Sergeant Goava not to tell Hari where they lived. Arthur’s eyes had a slightly glazed expression and he didn’t acknowledge Hari at all when they sat him in the middle of the front seat of the Land Rover. He said nothing on the drive to Lea Lea. Flynn sniffed the back of his head and visibly recoiled. He glanced at the constable and went to lie down in the far corner at the rear of the vehicle.

They met Ruby in the village. She pointed out a nondescript house styled in the old beehive fashion at the far end of the central thoroughfare. Anu emerged from the house as they arrived and with Ruby’s help led Arthur up the steps and inside. They laid him out on a sleeping mat in the centre of the single room.

‘We’ll wait outside,’ Hari said and the old man nodded and then pointed at the constable.

‘He might be able to help us,’ he said.

The constable looked slightly alarmed but Ruby touched him on the arm and said, ‘It’s alright Constable; sometimes people get distressed and struggle a bit, my grandfather is not as strong as he used to be, you’ll be fine.’ There was a hint of a smile in her eyes when Robert looked at her. That and the tattoos on her face, which seemed to have gained a vivid newness, tingled the tips of the hair on his head. He didn’t know if he liked the feeling or not. When she took her hand away the sensation slowly dissipated and he followed her inside.

Ruby helped her grandfather to a comfortable spot on the floor and then took his bilum and went to sit on a chair in the corner of the room. Robert followed the lumpy bilum with his eyes and then looked into her face. She still had a
curious smile on her lips. When he looked down he saw that she was stroking the great head of the snake, which had partially emerged from the bilum. In the shadow of the corner her eyes seemed to gleam, just like the glossy black coat of the snake. The snake was wide awake and seemed to be taking an interest in the proceedings. The constable felt distinctly uncomfortable. Then she beckoned to him.

The people of the village clearly knew what was happening. When Arthur had been led from the Land Rover they all suddenly realised they had urgent business in their gardens or down by the river mouth where their canoes were moored. When Hari climbed down off the veranda of Anu’s house there wasn’t a soul in sight.

‘I might go for a wander along the beach,’ the sergeant said from the open door of the vehicle.

Hari nodded. Even the sergeant was spooked he thought. ‘I’d better stay here in case something untoward happens,’ he replied.

‘Give me a yell, I won’t be far,’ the sergeant replied as he set out for the river and the path down to the beach.

Hari opened the back door of the Land Rover and sat on the tailgate. He took the flask out of the basket containing the lunches that his wife had prepared and poured himself a cup of coffee.

He really smelled funny, Flynn said sniffing the basket, I’ve never come across anything like it before and I’ve smelled some weird smells in my time I can tell you Hari.

Hari rummaged in the basket and took out a bread roll and gave it to the dog. ‘I must admit, I haven’t seen anyone in a state like that before either; he looked like one of those
living dead you see in horror films, what do you call them, zombies I think?’

What are you going to do if that old witch doctor can’t fix him up? The dog asked munching on the roll.

‘I don’t know Flynn. If he had anything to do with Manu’s murder we need him to be reasonably sane so we can talk to him.’

He was never really what you would call sane Hari, not while I knew him at least. It’s all a bit sad, getting mixed up with that nasty councillor and then losing his wife and all. I feel a bit sorry for him, even if he did try to shoot me.

‘And you reckon you know who might have done the deed Flynn; if only you could talk.’

Sorry Hari, they’re the rules, I’d tell you if I could, you’re going to be really surprised when you finally work it out.

‘I’m sure I will. What worries me is that the longer it takes the more other stuff we’ll uncover. We’ve already got enough evidence to prosecute a government minister; lord knows what I’m going to do with that.’

‘Do you always talk to yourself Hari?’ the sergeant said returning from his walk. ‘What’s happening, any noises from in there yet?’

Hari looked at the dog, which raised a shaggy eyebrow and went back to chewing its bread roll. ‘Nothing yet Sarge; do you want a drink, hot coffee in here?’ he said lifting up the thermos.

They waited another twenty minutes before the constable emerged from the house. He signalled to them both. ‘He’s asleep sir, I need a hand to carry him.’

‘Why don’t you just wake him up?’ the sergeant replied.
‘Anu said we have to leave him asleep sir.’

The sergeant shrugged and put his cup down. They cleared a space in the back of the Land Rover and carried the sleeping white man down the stairs and laid him out with a blanket for a pillow. He had a relaxed and placid expression on his face.

Ruby appeared with her grandfather at the door of the house. The bilum was nowhere to be seen. Hari looked up to them.

‘Take him home and let him sleep,’ Anu said, ‘he should be okay in a couple of days.’

‘Did you find out who put the curse on him?’ Hari asked.

Anu shook his head. ‘You’ll probably never find out,’ Ruby said from his side, ‘does it matter Inspector?’

‘Probably not, whoever did it is unlikely to admit it and it’s not something you can easily prove anyway. Besides this is all getting too complicated, the last thing I want to do is try to pilot a sorcery charge through court. Should we pay your grandfather something?’

‘The invoice will be in the mail Inspector,’ Ruby said with a smile.

‘I see. Seriously, he deserves something for his time.’

‘He is partial to tinned peaches,’ Ruby replied, ‘but you’d better wait to see if it has worked; he might wake up and still be cursed.’

‘Okay. Thank you Anu, we’ll be going now; his daughters will be anxious to see him.’

The old man waved and went back into his house. Hari heard the distinctive thrum of a ukulele before he turned on the motor of the Land Rover. As they drove out of the
village, faces appeared from the other houses and children emerged from the river path.

‘Exactly what went on in there?’ the sergeant asked as he glanced back at the sleeping white man.

‘I’m not really sure sir. The old man spent a lot of time leaning over him and whispering in his ear; I couldn’t hear much of what he said.

‘Is that all that happened? No rattles and dances? Did that girl help with anything?’

‘The only thing they did after whispering to him was let that big snake coil up on his stomach.’

‘What big snake?’ the sergeant asked.

‘The old bloke has got a pet taipan,’ Hari said.

‘Oloman! With that on his belly any masalai inside him would have skedaddled for sure.’

‘That’s what Anu said sir. He said that what was eating him inside would be sucked away by the snake. After that Arthur seemed to relax a lot.’

‘What did they do with the snake after that?’

‘Ruby put it back in the bilum and gave it to me to look after.’

‘You were game young Robert,’ Hari said with a smile.

‘It wasn’t that bad sir; it just curled up in the bag and went to sleep, it seemed very exhausted.’

‘And that girl handles it; she looks like a witch with all those tattoos,’ the sergeant said.

‘But a very attractive witch,’ Hari added.

‘Too right there but I think I’ll stick with my little Simbu pudden,’ the sergeant replied with a grin.
‘She was very good sir, she helped a lot,’ the constable replied softly before they all fell silent and stared out of the vehicle windscreen. Flynn sniffed the sleeping form of the white man but didn’t recoil this time. He curled up by the man’s legs instead.

Hari sat in the Beachside Brasserie with Arthur and the constable. Arthur had tidied himself up and was looking quite presentable in a grey polo shirt and neat shorts. He had on a pair of leather sandals and had shaved off the stubble on his face. The dirty string vest was nowhere to be seen.

‘I was at the 6-Mile cemetery that morning. I usually go there once a week to visit Annie and take her some flowers. While I was there Mrs Moiva turned up with Bessie, Suli’s mother. She had been in to deliver a load of buai and had run into Alice and they decided to say hello to Annie as well. They were a bit surprised to see me but we got to talking. I remember that Alice had a black eye and that annoyed me.

Anyway, I mentioned to them how bad the AIDS epidemic was in Papua New Guinea and how the government should really be doing more to educate people. I told them how easy it was to get infected if you don’t take precautions. Annie was a nurse and she sometimes helped out at the Kaugere clinic; she got pricked accidentally by a needle there. There wasn’t much she could do about it, no one checks these things, and she didn’t think much more about it.

When she got sick I took her to a private doctor. I couldn’t really afford it but I was worried about her. They
did some tests and confirmed that she had AIDS. She went rapidly downhill after that. I tried everything to get her treated. I even tried to get her a visa to Australia to see someone but they wouldn’t have a bar of it. I’m over seventy and I didn’t have the funds to support myself if I returned for any length of time and they wouldn’t give me a visa either. Then she got a very bad case of flu and then pneumonia and then malaria, all at once, and that was the end.’

‘How very sad,’ the constable said.

‘Yes, she was just a simple village girl but I loved her. When I told Alice and Bessie all this they were looking at each other and I asked what was the matter. Mrs Moiva shook her head but Bessie said I had to know and they told me about Manu being HIV positive. I’m afraid I got angry then and stormed off but it nagged at me all day and I finally decided to go and confront him. I was sure Annie got sick from a needle prick but I had to know for sure.’

‘When I got to the settlement there was some sort of ruckus going on at the CUMA School. I could hear the white woman shouting at the top of her voice. I went to see what was going on and when I got there all the kids were huddled at the back of the classroom looking really scared and the white woman was marching up and down threatening to do all sorts of things to the councillor. I calmed her down enough to find out about Manu’s visit.’

‘Apparently he had accused her of getting government funds and stealing them. He also said he was going to have the school closed down and then burn it to the ground. He said he was going to set up another one where only the
students he picked could attend. He also said that he would collect the school fees and look after them properly. The white woman was really mad and her husband wasn’t there so I thought I’d better go find Manu and straighten things out quickly. He used to go off like that when he was in the army and most times I could calm him down.’

‘Except when he threw boiling soup over someone,’ Hari said.

‘That’s right; you know about that then? The sergeant told you I guess.’

‘He did,’ Hari nodded. ‘What happened when you found Manu?’

‘I didn’t find him. When I got to his house he wasn’t there. I only found Alice and Suli. Alice had another black eye and what looked like a broken arm and Suli had bruises all over him. When I asked them what had happened they said Manu had stormed up the hill and hit Alice before they could find out what was happening. He had hit Alice the day before, like I said, and when he did it again she shouted at him and said that she had told me about Annie and that I was going to kill him.’

‘He got really uncontrollable then and took to her with a piece of firewood. Suli was afraid he would kill her and tried to intervene but Manu attacked him too. Apparently he only backed off when that dog Frank went for him. It tore into his legs and knocked him over; according to Suli it was quite horrendous and he had to pull him off.’

‘Come to think of it, he did have torn trousers and cuts on his legs when we found him; I just assumed it was caused by rolling around in the sea on those jagged rocks.’
‘No, it was that dog, Frank.’
‘Errol Flynn; he’s called Errol Flynn now.’
Arthur looked slightly puzzled. ‘That’s a strange name,’ he said.
‘It was his idea; why were you trying to shoot him?’
Arthur looked across the table at the constable, who merely shrugged. ‘It was Suli, he was really scared by the dog, even though it had saved him, he thought it was some sort of demon that might attack him too.’
‘That’s interesting,’ the constable said. ‘Was there some special reason why the dog might single him out?’
‘I’ve no idea,’ Arthur replied.
‘Alright, then what happened?’ Hari asked.
‘I took Alice down to the hospital but no one would see her. Then Suli took her down to the white woman and she tied her arm up.’
‘Then what happened?’
‘We just sat around for a while and then I thought I’d better go find Manu and see if he was alright and try to calm him down before he did any more damage.’
‘And did you find him?’
‘No; I went to all the places I thought he might have gone but I couldn’t find him.’
‘You’re sure about that Arthur?’ Hari said. ‘You must have still been angry with him after what Alice and Bessie told you. Someone surely must have seen him.’
‘No, I’d calmed down a bit by then; their story seemed too unlikely, I think it must have been the needle prick that caused my wife’s illness. Anyway, there was only one person, the security guard at Steamships. He used to be in the army
too and I knew him slightly. He told me that Manu had come in looking for my daughters, I don’t know why he wanted to see them but it was the day before payday when it’s very quiet and they were rostered off anyway. He told the guard that he was trying to find a meamea tauna to put a curse on me. He told him that I had beaten his wife and son! After that I stopped looking for him.’

‘And then you got sick?’

‘Yes, a couple of days later. I thought it was something else at first but then I remembered about the curse. I got into a sort of depression. A curse from a murdered man is supposed to be extra strong. After you came around I also realised that I was a prime suspect in his murder. I’m afraid it all got too much for me after that.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘He eventually found my daughters at home. They said he was drunk and raving about sorcerers. He was gone when I got there and I was very tired and I went to bed. I’m not a young man any more Inspector.’

‘What else did he say to your daughters?’

‘Nothing much, he sat around drinking and then went off somewhere when it got dark.’

‘And you didn’t hear anything else until someone told you he had been murdered?’

‘That’s about it Inspector. What’s going to happen now?’

‘Well, I’ll have to think about it; in the meantime I’m going to talk to that dog.’

‘I’m sorry about Frank, Flynn I mean; we were all a bit unbalanced at the time.’

‘I’ll let him know,’ Hari replied.
The constable had drawn up an elaborate chart of all the possible suspects and the other key players in the mystery of the ward councillor’s murder. He had arranged it horizontally across two pages of his notebook. It looked like a very complex genealogical chart. There was no dearth of arrows and asterisks. Both he and Hari were engrossed in it at a table at the Beachside Brasserie when Superintendent Tabai walked in and sat down.

‘I noticed that you’ve cleared up the rape case at the university,’ he said before signalling a waitress. Hari looked up in surprise; he hadn’t even noticed the superintendent sit down. The superintendent ordered a cappuccino and two croissants with strawberry jam and cream.

‘Yes sir,’ Hari replied warily. ‘It was Constable Bokasi who made the breakthrough; he overheard some gossip among the students and when we followed it up we got a confession and an arrest.’ It was actually Bella who had heard the rumour. She had told the constable and he had passed it on to Hari. Hari figured there was no harm in building up the young constable’s stocks. He gave the constable a very pointed look when it looked like he would clarify the matter for the superintendent. The constable got the message and said nothing.

‘Who would have thought that one of the lecturers was responsible,’ Superintendent Tabai said. ‘Well done Constable!’

‘Just goes to show how tricky these things can be,’ Hari replied. ‘He’d been exchanging good grades for favours for a long time. A lot of teachers and lecturers give their
students artificially high marks to increase their own standing but this was more sinister. When some of the girls rejected him he failed them and when that didn’t work he attacked them.’

‘Hopefully he’ll get his just desserts Hari.’

‘It depends who he knows, which lawyer he uses and how much he’s willing to pay I suppose,’ Hari replied.

‘Always the cynic Hari! How is the family? I hope Mrs Metau and the girls are well.’

‘Never better sir,’ Hari replied as the coffee and croissants arrived.

‘I saw your report about the attack on young Robert here. How are your injuries Constable?’ the superintendent asked, eyeing the two plates piled with cream and jam.

‘They’re fine sir, all healed up, they weren’t too bad anyway.’

‘That’s good to hear. I doubt whether we’ll ever find out the identity of those thugs I’m afraid, that sort of thing seems to happen all the time; they just disappear into the settlements with all the other raskols.’

‘I realise that sir,’ the constable replied watching the superintendent hoe into his two croissants. Both he and Hari watched politely until the two plates were bare. The superintendent wiped his lips with a serviette and picked up his coffee.

‘What else have you got on the go? How’s the ward councillor case coming along? Any chance of an arrest Hari?’ he said between sips. He had a thin line of chocolate and froth on his upper lip and a dab of cream that he had missed on his chin.
‘Just about there,’ Hari replied. ‘We’ll keep you posted sir.’

‘Very good,’ the superintendent replied putting his empty cup down. ‘Well, I’d better be on my way; I was going past and saw your car with that great big dog hanging out of it and decided I needed morning tea.’

‘Very good sir, we were about to leave anyway.’

When they went through the glass doors of the restaurant the superintendent’s dark blue Land Cruiser pulled out of a car park and glided to a spot in front of them. A constable in uniform got out and held the passenger door open.

‘Excuse me sir,’ Hari said as Superintendent Tabai settled his considerable bulk in the car seat, ‘but I’m curious why you haven’t mentioned our investigation at Kupiano.’

‘Did you write a report Hari? I must have missed it, I’ll check with Martha.’

‘No sir, I haven’t done a report yet; I just thought someone might have mentioned it to you, George Dosu perhaps’

‘No Hari, I haven’t seen the minister for some time now, thank goodness for that, all very quiet. Does it concern him in some way?’

Hari gave the constable a quick warning glance. ‘It might sir; he comes from down that way.’

‘Okay Hari, when I get your report I’ll get back to you; if we need to talk to the minister I’ll let you know.’ The superintendent was thinking about the possibilities of more cream and jam croissants, rather than something to do with the minister.
He signalled his driver forward. Hari and the constable watched the vehicle briefly stop as the security gate slid open and then accelerate into the traffic on Ela Beach Drive.

‘Now that was very interesting I think Constable. I wonder what’s going on there; I was expecting a roasting at least.’

‘I don’t know sir,’ the constable replied. He had two buttery croissants in a bag and he handed them one at a time to Flynn as they climbed into the Land Rover.

Hari looked across the blue sea towards the reef. ‘I guess we haven’t spooked the minister at all. He must have a very thick skin. I guess he shrugs off accusations of corruption all the time, but I thought he’d at least tell the super to pull us into line, especially after that dodgy attempt to take it out on you Constable.’

The constable shook his head. The political machinations of the government and the police still left him more confused than anything else. He was still coming to terms with the idea that a government minister would send thugs to beat him up.

‘There must be more to this than meets the eye,’ Hari speculated as they drove off.
9

Gardens and Shotguns

MRS Metau dumped another pile of rotten leaves on the garden bed and went off with her old bed sheet to collect more from under the mango trees. Hari spread them out with a rake and then began to turn them into the soil with an old fork. He had used the rocks that he had prised out of the hole for the septic tank to build terraces at the back of the block and they had been conditioning the soil with leaves and other organic waste for many years.

His Motu ancestors and those of his wife had been adventurous seafarers who became uncomfortable whenever they got beyond the sound and smell of the sea. They were not great gardeners and had been content to trade their fish, shell necklaces and clay pots for vegetables with the inland Koiari people for hundreds of years but times had now changed.

Hari doubted whether his family would now be able to survive on his wage alone without the vegetables that he and his wife inexpertly grew in their garden. Despite that, he had yet to emulate the prodigious greenery that his Simbu neighbours had been able to extract from their erstwhile diesel and oil soaked yard next door.

The patriarch of this clan was called Abraham. With his grizzled beard and biblical looks his name suited him well.
Hari had absolutely no idea about his age; he could have been sixty or eighty or a hundred. He was the only surviving member of the family who had actually been born in the highlands. His wife and his sons and all their wives and children had been born in Port Moresby.

‘We are Galkope but they can’t speak the language and their relatives would disown them if they ever tried to go home,’ Abraham explained as he expertly ran soil from Hari’s garden through his fingers and smelled it. ‘We’ve gone from being the lost tribes of Israel, as some of the early explorers claimed we were, to the lost tribes of Papua New Guinea; we now have no land, which is where people derive their identity. My son says we are part of the highlands diaspora; it’s a big word he learned at university but I think I know what it means. We could also be evicted from here at any time.’

‘That might be sooner than you think,’ Hari said. ‘With all the development going on in Moresby that fellow you pay rent to might get greedy if he gets a good offer. What would you do then?’

‘Move further out; there’s land out around Rigo for rent they say.’

‘It’s getting pretty crowded out there too Abraham, lots of migrants are going there.’

The old man shrugged. ‘We’ll just have to see, no point in worrying about it.’

‘I suppose not; what do you reckon about this dirt anyway?’

‘More compost Hari; it’s losing its sweetness, old mango leaves are good.’
Hari kept turning the soil over. His back was starting to get sore when he heard the rustle of another load of leaves. This time it was Bella. ‘Mum’s gone to start dinner, this is the last lot; I’d better go and help her.’

Hari stretched and picked up the rake. Flynn, who had been mooching around by the gate came over to watch.

‘I’ll let this settle down for a week or so and then plant it out Flynn. Pity we can’t grow tinpis or bully beef in the garden; that would make you happy I reckon.’

‘The stuff from the kongkong store is okay Hari.’

‘Everyone relies on the kongkongs now Flynn, you don’t see many gardens in the settlements any more even.’

‘That’s because people steal all the vegetables as soon as they come up.’

‘Yeah, I guess so, still you don’t have to worry about that Flynn, you’re welcome to stay around as long as you like.’

‘Thanks Hari.’

Hari concentrated on his digging for a while. When he had finished he was dripping with sweat. He pulled his shirt off and sat on one of the retaining walls and swabbed his face with it.

‘I meant to tell you that I thought what you did getting Manu off Suli was a very brave thing Flynn.’

‘Someone had to do something Hari.’

‘Yeah, but I was thinking about it; if we hadn’t come along later and Manu had come back you would probably be a dead dog. You must have realised that when you attacked him Flynn.’

‘Not really Hari, I had seen it so many times before that I just snapped. Funny thing is it was Manu who taught me
how to do it, going for the back of the legs and damaging the muscles’.

‘I keep forgetting that you’re a hardened criminal Flynn; so you’ve done that to people before?’

‘I’d rather not say Hari.’

Hari was about to reply but he looked up to see Bella staring at him with a slightly puzzled smile on her face. ‘Mum said you’d be talking to that dog but I didn’t believe her,’ she said.

‘He understands every word I say,’ Hari replied. ‘What’s up?’

‘Dinner is ready Dad; you need to get washed up. She also said it was better than talking to that old car, which you also do apparently.’

‘That’s a very intelligent Land Rover, I’ll say hello to it before I come up; I hope it doesn’t think I’ve been ignoring it. Is Flynn’s tinpis ready too?’

‘It’s ready,’ Bella replied with a laugh, come on you silly old man, both of you, hurry up.’

‘Who’s she calling an old man,’ Hari said as an aside to Flynn but loud enough for his daughter to hear as he headed for the sink under the house.

Flynn had eaten his morning croissant and was lollipping around in the water off Ela Beach with a ragtag band of children. He had taken to having a morning swim after breakfast and the children seemed to have taken his presence in their stride. He even chased the sticks that they tossed into the sea for him to retrieve.
‘It stops him smelling so much and it probably gives the fleas a hard time,’ Hari said to the constable.

‘He’s certainly a different dog to the one we rescued at Kaugere,’ the constable replied.

‘That you rescued, young Robert; you have to learn to promote yourself in this game or you’ll get nowhere; even little things like transforming a hardened criminal like Flynn into a model mutt that romps around with trusting school children in the sea,’ Hari said with a smile.

The constable picked up the Inspector’s jovial mood, ‘Like taking credit for solving the rape cases at the university sir?’

‘Exactly; you have to blow your own trumpet Constable.’ Hari watched Flynn bounding along the beach after the bits of wood and thought about how much he had come to like the young constable. He couldn’t quite put his finger on what made Robert different from the legion of other minders that Superintendent Tabai had assigned to him. Most of them had been smart enough, especially the women that Mrs Metau had seen off so quickly, but they had also been ambitious and street wise and happy to use him as a stepping stone in their careers. Robert, on the other hand, seemed to be scrupulously honest and, even if a tad naive, guileless and open. Hari hoped that wouldn’t be his eventual undoing but he didn’t say that. Instead, he said, ‘So where do we go now? We know that Manu went around to Steamship’s Arcade after Flynn bit him on the leg looking for Arthur’s daughters but after that our next link is his body in the sea. We don’t even know why he was looking for those two girls - any suggestions Constable?’
‘We could try talking to the girls but they aren’t likely to explain why Manu would be interested in them sir.’

‘No, you’re right there. However, I think whatever it was might be useful to know; maybe we need the opinion of a third party. I doubt whether Mrs Moiva will know, what about Suli?’

‘Or Suli’s mother sir?’

‘I can’t think of what she would know but it’s an excuse to get out of Moresby for a few hours Constable; we’d better round up that sodden dog and towel him off I suppose.’

Bessie turned out to be quite different from what they were expecting. She was not a tall woman like her daughter, Ruby or of middling size like her son, Suli. Instead, she was pixie-like, well below Hari’s height, with a halo of frizzy white hair, laughing eyes behind a pair of ancient glasses, and a wide, welcoming mouth set in a round face. It was difficult to picture her driving a truck up and down the coast collecting *buai*.

‘Ruby takes after her father,’ she explained, ‘he was a very tall man; Suli takes after me and my father, Anu and a tiny bit after his father. My brothers are also small, as you already know; they help Ruby do the town deliveries.’

‘And a good job they do too,’ Hari replied, ‘Ruby doesn’t seem to have any problems.’

‘Ruby is very different to a lot of girls, sometimes she scares me, there is much of my father in her; the relationship of her and her brother to my father are well known and people respect his powers.’
‘So we noticed. We mostly wanted to ask you about Manu however. We are yet to identify his murderer but we are not short of suspects. Anything you can tell us about him would be useful. How long were you with him for instance?’ Hari asked.

Bessie looked at the ground and said softly, ‘I was never “with him” Inspector.’

‘Oh, but he’s Suli’s father isn’t he?’ Hari said with a puzzled look.

Bessie sighed. ‘Yes, he’s Suli’s father Inspector. I’d better explain it to you.’

‘Please do, we’d be most interested,’ Hari replied.

‘Manu and my late husband were in the army together. They both worked in the kitchens under Major Lennon. My husband came from around Bereina in the Mekeo and he and Manu used to collect buai to sell to the soldiers as well as around Port Moresby. They used to sell it at the Sergeant’s Mess at Murray Barracks. It was against regulations but they did it anyway. Major Lennon knew about it but turned a blind eye; he may have even taken a commission, I don’t know.’

‘My husband got sick when Ruby was only little and went downhill very quickly. The doctor at the barracks said it was cancer from smoking and chewing buai. They gave me a small widow’s pension and I came back to the village. I hadn’t been here long when Manu arrived. He was interested in carrying on the buai trade but didn’t have any contacts after my husband died; he wanted me to buy it for him; he said he would provide a truck. He said my husband
owed him a lot of money and I could pay it off by working for him.’

‘I didn’t say yes or no but he came back with a small truck and a man to act as the driver. I didn’t really want to do it but I felt I had to clear my husband’s debts. I left Ruby with my parents, my mother was alive then, and I started buying *buai*.

‘So that’s how you got started,’ Hari said, ‘working for Manu?’

‘That’s right. It went well for a while and then Manu got into a big argument with another man, Rabu Doso, who was also a *buai* buyer. They argued about taking over each other’s suppliers, the people who grow the *buai*.’

‘We’ve met Rabu,’ the constable said.

‘Yes, he’s still in the village. Anyway, he and Manu became big enemies. Manu started to come out here a lot to keep an eye on Rabu. One day when he came out he had been drinking and he came into my house and said Rabu had been poaching his suppliers and it was my fault for not being more attentive. I denied that of course and he got angry and hit me. I hit him back and we struggled and fell on the floor. That’s when Suli was conceived Inspector.’

‘He raped you?’ Hari said. ‘Did you report him to the police or tell anyone?’

‘No, I was too frightened; I didn’t even tell my parents. I was afraid about what my father might do to him.’

‘How did you explain the birth of Suli then?’ Hari asked gently.

‘I told people that Manu had been courting me. In our culture, as you know, widows are sometimes courted by
many men; they think widows are knowledgeable and more reliable than young girls.

‘And they believed that?’

‘I think so; but my father suspected something different I think.’

Hari stood up and said, ‘Thank you Bessie; you’ve been very helpful, we respect your frankness and we understand Manu a bit better now.’

Bessie looked infinitely sad, an expression that didn’t sit well on her small pixie face. ‘You’re the first people I’ve told about Manu; neither Ruby or Suli know; they think Manu was briefly my lover and then just my business partner for all those years; I kept buying buai for him but I hated him; he had power over me because of Suli and he used it to force me to cooperate. I’m glad that he’s dead Inspector.’

‘You’re not the only one it seems Bessie. We’ll be going now. We won’t say anything to anyone - either Suli or Ruby. If you think of anything else please let Ruby know and we’ll come back to talk to you. Thank you, goodbye.’

On the drive back to Port Moresby Hari said, ‘What do you think of that little revelation Constable?’

‘I’m thinking about the possibility that Suli knows what his father did sir.’

‘Very good Constable; I was thinking the same thing.’

‘If he found out about the treatment of his mother he would have good reason to hate his father I think sir.’

‘Exactly, the plot thickens again Constable.’

It was Saturday afternoon and what looked like a leisurely weekend - Hari was sitting at the kitchen table reading the
weekend edition of the Post Courier newspaper. He was shirtless and barefooted with a sprinkle of white stubble on his chin. Mrs Metau was busy at the sink.

‘According to this article, my dear, you and I are part of a generation called baby boomers, born just after World War Two; we helped change the world but now we are greedy spendthrifts and because there are so many of us we are going to bankrupt the country with our health care and pensions,’ Hari said pointing to the page he was reading and peering at his wife over the rim of his reading glasses.

Mrs Metau was kneading dough for bread on a big wooden board laid across the sink. She punched the round white lump several times and then sprinkled flour on the board and flipped it over ready for another assault. Hari involuntarily flinched at each savage blow.

‘We’re not getting any younger, that’s for sure Hari. Come to think of it though, there were a lot of children around when we were growing up; people had bigger families in those days.’

‘We have spent all our money on new cars, wide screen televisions and overseas holidays and there will be none left for our children to inherit it says.’

‘I’ve seen those big televisions,’ Mrs Metau said after another round with the lump of dough, ‘we would have to get electricity if we wanted one though - and a thing for the roof.’

‘An aerial my dear, to receive the transmissions, they come from a satellite.’

‘From outer space?’

‘Something like that dear.’
‘You could watch the rugby on it and I could watch films; I like dramas and musicals.’

‘The article is written by someone called Randy Sweetwater,’ Hari added, ‘he or she must be an Australian or an American.’

‘They are both very rich countries; no wonder they have those things.’ She wrapped the dough in a tea towel. ‘I’ll put this in the sun to rise if you heat up the oven,’ she said going out of the kitchen door.

The oven consisted of a forty-four gallon drum on legs at the side of the house into which Hari had bolted a shelf and added a rough door on hinges. Heating it up consisted of lighting a fire underneath and using pieces of drift wood scavenged by Silas from the harbour.

As they sat on the veranda a few hours later drinking tea and watching the sun set over the water the yeasty aroma of the baking bread wafted upwards. Flynn was on high alert. He was sitting at their feet with a silly grin on his face; he knew what was going on in the oven below.

‘I don’t think we need a wide screen television, do you dear?’ Hari said sipping his tea.

‘Not really Hari, it might disturb the quiet too much. I like times like this, but I wouldn’t mention it to Bella or Rosie, they like that sort of thing.’

‘Of course not dear,’ Hari agreed as the sun tipped the top of the hills behind Napa Napa. ‘My, that bread smells good.’

‘I’ll go get it; I think it’s done; you get the butter and some plates.’

When the bread had cooled a little and Flynn had had his share, Hari sat back with a thick slice. The butter oozed
through his fingers and dripped onto his chest. Mrs Metau frowned at him and daintily ate a thinner and less buttered slice. Hari scooped the yellow liquid off his chest with a finger and sucked it into his mouth. When he was done he looked down at the slight paunch of his stomach and the saggy muscles of his chest.

‘We are getting old though my dear,’ he said. ‘Bella said I was a silly old man the other day.’

‘I know, she told me, but that’s because you talk to motor cars and dogs.’

‘They have character,’ Hari replied. ‘I like that in cars and dogs.’

‘What are you thinking about Hari?’

‘Oh, nothing really, just that maybe we should be thinking about retirement. I’ll be eligible in a year or so.’

‘Then what would you do Hari?’

‘I don’t know; fish, garden; we could take an overseas trip even.’

‘How could we afford that Hari?’

‘I’ve got a small amount of superannuation. I was too old to accumulate enough to retire on; I could take it as a lump sum; that would pay for a holiday.’

Mrs Metau didn’t say anything for a while. Then she said, ‘Perhaps after Bella is married; I’d worry about her otherwise.’

Hari nodded and they sat in silence as the evening glow quickly turned to black night. They cleared up their plates and went inside. Hari yawned and Mrs Metau lit the kerosene lamp on the table and pulled out a bilum that she
was working on. They sat in companionable silence until it was time for bed.

Hari and the constable went to police headquarters very early on Monday morning to drop off their time sheets and an updated report on their investigations into the councillor’s murder. Hari had an old Olivetti Dora portable typewriter at home and the constable had come around for dinner on Sunday and they had spent the afternoon putting the report together. The constable had brought another bottle of wine with him, this time without incident, and both Bella and Rose had been there to share it. They were both a bit giggly when Hari had driven the constable home.

Hari had bought the typewriter at one of the second hand stores at Gordons. He had gone in there looking for a book to read. Apart from the university there were no bookshops in Port Moresby. Some of the bigger stores like Steamships had small displays of new books but the prices were too high for most people. On this particular day he had selected a couple of likely paperbacks, including a battered copy of Vincent Eri’s The Crocodile, which he thought he might read again, and gone to the counter to pay for them.

The old Chinese proprietor, who Hari had known for many years, was sitting behind the security grill typing assiduously on what looked like a brand new laptop computer. Hari watched with interest for a while and then noticed the little grey typewriter on the shelf above the display of second hand electrical goods. The proprietor had looked up and said, ‘Sorry Hari, I was miles away, this thing is the devil but I think I’m getting the hang of it.’
‘So you’re putting the old typewriter out to pasture then?’ Hari said with a speculative tone in his voice which the old Chinaman immediately picked up on.

‘Are you interested in it Hari?’

‘I might be,’ Hari replied.

‘It’s a good little typewriter and I’ve got a heap of spare ribbons for it.’

‘How much would you want for it?’ Hari asked.

‘It’s got a nice little green vinyl case too.’

‘It’s probably too much for me anyway,’ Hari replied. ‘It would just be nice not to have to go into the office all the time when I need something typed up.’

‘You don’t like the office do you Hari? That typewriter would be ideal for you I think.’

They had haggled in a friendly way for a while and Hari had put a deposit on it. Two paydays later and it was his.

On this morning he handed the desk sergeant the three crisp typed pages of their report and said, ‘What’s going on Sarge, anything interesting?’

The sergeant slipped the report into a manila folder without glancing at the contents. He would photocopy them later and put a set in Superintendent Tabai’s in-tray. ‘The usual Hari; a few brawls, a couple of break-ins. They found a fellow all beaten up at Kaugere; that’s in your patch so you’ll probably need to check it out; the poor fellow is in hospital; a couple of car accidents, some kid at Six Mile was skittled but is okay, probably another one for you there, a couple of old blokes and a girl were run off the Hiritano Highway just outside town, someone ram-raided two
*Kongkong* stores at Fourteen Mile, the Triad will probably take care of that one. Just the usual stuff Hari.’

Hari’s ears pricked up, ‘What happened on the highway Sarge?’

The sergeant rummaged around in the papers on his desk. ‘Here it is;’ he scanned the page briefly and gave it to Hari, ‘looks a bit more interesting than I thought.’

Hari read the page and handed it to the constable, ‘I think we know those people Sarge. Do you know whether they were hurt very badly? It doesn’t mention it here.’

‘I think it was Constable Pus who went to that one Hari, hang on, he’s around somewhere.’ He signalled to one of the clerks, ‘Go see if Pus is downstairs,’ he said, ‘Inspector Metau wants to talk to him.’

Constable Pus was a round, jovial policeman who had once been one of Hari’s ill-fated minders. He came upstairs munching a fried flour ball in a greasy bag.

‘It was a red Hilux full of buai,’ he said. ‘There was this scary looking woman driving and two old blokes. The car that forced them off the road got away, we’re still looking for it sir.’

‘Sounds like Ruby sir,’ the constable said with a look of concern on his face. ‘Were they badly hurt?’

‘Hurt? Goodness no; it’s the other people who got hurt, but they’ve disappeared,’ Constable Pus replied.

‘If Ruby and her two uncles weren’t hurt where are they now?’ Hari asked.

‘She is in the cells at Boroko and the old men are back with the truck,’ the constable replied.

‘In the cells? What on earth for, isn’t she the victim?’
‘According to the witnesses when the Hilux went off the road into the barat four men from the other car were walking back towards it when this crazy woman opened up on them with a pump action shotgun. She got two of them with one shot. When they picked up their friends and ran back to their car she blew out the rear window.’

‘That’s definitely Ruby sir,’ the constable said.

‘They were digging out their Hilux when we got there,’ Constable Pus said. ‘It was very heavy with all the buai. She threatened us with the shotgun and made us help get it out. After she arranged for someone to look after it and her uncles she surrendered sir.’

‘We’d better get out to the Boroko Lockup,’ Hari said. ‘That’s a dangerous place for a pretty woman.’

‘I think she will be alright; it would take a brave man to try to force himself on that one sir.’

‘That’s what I’m worried about. Let’s go Constable; coffee and croissants can wait!’

‘It was only birdshot,’ Ruby said as they drove out along the Hiritano Highway to pick up the red Hilux. ‘I wish I’d had solid shot; that would have made their legs really sting.’

‘Do you know who they were?’ the constable asked from the back of the Land Rover.

‘I don’t know who they were but I know who sent them,’ Ruby replied.

‘You think it was Rabu?’ Hari asked.

‘That fat big-eared pig! He was probably involved, but it came from higher up than that let me tell you!’

‘You mean the minister?’ the constable said.

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‘Him or one of his politician friends; I’ll find out and they’d better look out,’ Ruby replied.

‘Is that wise?’ Hari asked. ‘You’re already on an “unlawful possession of a firearm” charge Ruby. They might still get you for “assault with a deadly weapon”.

‘Someone has to do something about them Inspector. My mother and I are lawful wholesalers of buai; we’ve got permits to sell at Koki and Hohola, we’re not going to be forced out of the market by thugs just because Manu isn’t around anymore; our suppliers and buyers rely on us, we’d be letting them down if we didn’t.’

‘It could get dangerous Ruby,’ the constable said.

‘Thanks for worrying Constable; that’s sweet but I can take care of myself,’ she replied. ‘Besides, you two have upset them as well, with their logging deals and ripping off school funds.’

‘You know about that?’ the constable said.

‘Of course I do,’ Ruby replied. ‘After that attack on you I asked around; people travel up and down the coast all the time and its common knowledge!’

‘We’re going to do something about that,’ Hari said. ‘But in our own way, carefully, without fuss. Don’t let that embolden you Ruby, we don’t want you risking your neck.’

‘Like I said, I can look after myself Inspector,’ she replied.

Hari had no doubt that this was the case. When they had arrived at the Boroko Police Cells the duty officer had been over-anxious to get rid of her. He had referred to her as “that masalai meri with the evil eyes’ and had bundled her out the door in no time.
The Boroko Police Cells, like many others in the country, were notorious for the abuse of female prisoners. Several policemen who had manned them over the years had been charged with rape, which Hari surmised, probably meant that the practice was widespread and only occasionally reported. It appeared that Ruby, on the other hand, had her guards thoroughly rattled.

She had been arraigned on the possession charge to appear before a magistrate at an unfixed date in the future. When Hari had asked about bail the duty officer had shaken his head and waved her out the door. Ruby had snarled at him and he had quickly retreated behind his desk. Hari wondered when she would appear in court. He would mention it to James, his lawyer friend, just in case she needed help. At least they had taken the pump action shotgun off her he thought. He hoped it would take her a while to find another one.

‘Here’s your truck,’ he said as they turned off the highway. ‘What are you going to do now Ruby? Perhaps it would be a good idea to go home and get some rest.’

‘I’ve got buai to deliver Inspector,’ she replied as she jumped out of the back of the Land Rover.

Hari sighed. ‘We’ll follow you back, just to be on the safe side,’ he said, ‘don’t drive too fast otherwise I won’t be able to keep up.’

‘Coppers protecting my back; that’ll be a change from what they usually want to do with it,’ she said winking at the constable.
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Morning Tea

‘IF we go to Steamship’s Arcade on the same day that Arthur’s daughters are scheduled for a rostered day off we might be able to catch up with the security guard who the councillor saw,’ Hari said when he picked the constable up from the bus stop at Gerehu. ‘We might be able to get a lead on his movements or at least an idea of which direction he took afterwards. That’s the gap we still have to fill’

‘Yes sir,’ the constable replied.

‘You look a bit doubtful Constable.’

‘I was thinking about Ruby while I was coming in on the bus sir. What if she goes after the minister or one of his friends? She could get into even more trouble.’

‘I thought of the same thing Constable. Anything could happen; she might turn him into a pig or a flying fox.’

The constable looked perplexed. ‘Well, if everyone thinks that she’s a masalai, isn’t that what she would do Constable?’

‘I don’t think she’s a masalai sir.’

‘Neither do I Constable. But if she mentions Kupiano we might be in the firing line too. That will probably happen after James, my lawyer friend, has spoken to the landowners and teachers at the school, but I’d rather that happened later than sooner. That said there’s not much we can do to stop
her. If we talk to her it will only make her more determined. I’m just hoping she hasn’t bought another shotgun.’

‘I think you’re right sir but it is worrying nevertheless.’

‘Juggling live hand grenades is part of the game Constable; you must have realised that by now.’

‘Indeed I have sir. They didn’t teach us anything like that during our training though.’

They found the security guard within a few minutes of arriving at the arcade. He was scheduled for a break and Hari invited him to Asia Aromas for a coffee. As usual the service was slow. A party of overweight executive-types had taken over a big table in the alcove at the end of the restaurant and were hogging all the waiters. Hari went to the counter and ordered the coffee directly from the owner. She apologised for the delay. ‘They’re from the oil company in the highlands; everyone, including my staff are falling over backwards sucking up to them.’ After giving Hari his change she strode off to sort it all out. Her husband poked his head out of the kitchen to watch.

Hari sat down again. ‘Shouldn’t be too long; have you filled our friend in on what we want to know Constable?’

‘Yes sir; he doesn’t remember much.’

‘How long have you been a security guard?’ Hari asked. The man, who was called Nigints, looked intelligent and quite smart in his uniform.

‘About a year sir; I was in the army before that.’

‘Didn’t like it there I gather,’ Hari said.

‘My ten years were up and I didn’t want to sign on again.’
‘With a name like Nigints you must come from around Mount Hagen. Doesn’t it mean “red” or something like that? You didn’t feel like going home to the Western Highlands?’

‘No sir, there’s nothing much up there for me. I’m from a Medlpa clan and most of our land has been taken over for the town; my parents have to rent land for their gardens and they don’t need another mouth to feed. I saved a bit while I was in the army and I tried setting up a business fixing cars but it didn’t work out; people whose cars I fixed would run off without paying.’

‘That’s a shame, there isn’t much help for small business in Papua New Guinea, the government has failed badly there I think. At least you’ve got a job I suppose.’

‘Being a security guard is the most boring job in the world sir. I worked night shifts guarding houses on Touaguba Hill; there’s absolutely nothing to do all night except trying to stay awake. I kept praying for a break-in but nothing happened. They moved me down here when I told them I was slowly going crazy; at least I interact with people now.’

The owner of the restaurant brought the coffees over; there was a small complimentary plate of biscuits with the order. The waiters continued to hover around the oil company people.

‘Do you have any qualifications?’ Hari asked the guard.

‘I trained as a mechanic in the army sir; I’m a good mechanic.’

‘You should try those people over there,’ the constable said indicating the alcove.
‘I’ve already tried that Constable. Their contactors only employ people through an agency; you have to be a *wantok* to get a job and the queues are really long.’

‘The money from the oil and gas is supposed to be our saviour,’ Hari said. ‘Isn’t everyone going to be rich?’

‘Not people like me I’m afraid sir,’ Nigints replied.

They talked to him further but he couldn’t really tell them much. The councillor had been agitated and angry when he couldn’t find Arthur’s daughters and his leg had been bleeding under his ripped trouser leg. Nigints said that he had gone off up Hunter Street and was probably going back to Kaugere, possibly to hunt for the girls there.’

‘Did you know him very well?’ the constable asked.

‘Not really Constable. Arthur knew him better I think; they were old friends. I only knew Arthur for a few months before he retired; that was a long time ago.’

They finished their coffee and left the restaurant. ‘Good luck,’ Hari said as Nigints walked back to his post at the entrance to the arcade.

The conversation with the security guard left both Hari and the constable feeling a little bit morose. Flynn’s sullen look after they returned to the Land Rover without croissants didn’t help.

‘I’ve often wondered what those ladies collect out there,’ Hari said as they sat on the seawall rolling up their trouser legs. ‘Every time I drive past when the tide is out there they are with their tin pots and baskets. Mrs Metau says its shellfish, but surely they’ve all been collected and it must be
some time before new ones grow or arrive or do whatever they do.’

‘I don’t know sir; I come from the swamps and rivers. My mother collects freshwater mussels, frogs and kindams but I don’t know what’s in the sea.’

‘Let’s go and find out then,’ Hari said gingerly lowering himself into the rocky stretch of tidal littoral.

They had gone to Kaugere looking for Arthur’s daughters but hadn’t found them there. Arthur was not around either. They had asked some of the children who had followed them up the hill. ‘Oli go long solvara, klostu long Koki, long kisim sel,’ the children sang in unison and fell about with laughter at their cleverness. They kept up the song all the way back to the Land Rover where they waved at Hari and the constable before racing back up the hill.

‘Those kids seem to know exactly what everyone is doing at any one time,’ Hari said thoughtfully.

‘The women have gone to look for shells in the sea off Koki,’ the constable said repeating the children’s chant.

When they pulled up near the seawall they saw a lot of women out in the sea wandering about in the shallow water. ‘How do we know which ones are Arthur’s daughters?’ the constable said doubtfully.

‘Head for the biggest group and go from there I guess,’ Hari replied, untying his shoe laces and slipping off his socks. ‘Are you up to this Flynn?’ The grumpy dog looked out over the sea and back at Hari. ‘We might have to get a coffee to go with our lunch at the Beachside Brasserie after this Constable; you never know there might be some croissants left.’ The dog hopped out of the back of the Land Rover.
and walked over to the seawall and sniffed the air suspiciously. When Hari and the constable started heading out Flynn remained sitting on the wall. By the time they were a hundred or so metres out he had joined them. Hari stopped and patted him on the head. From there Flynn took the lead.

It only took a few enquiries before they found Arthur’s daughters. Their light skin and shapely outlines were easy to see once they had been pointed out. Hari thanked the ladies who had given them directions and peered into their baskets. There seemed to be an eclectic mix of shell fish, cone shells and cowries, small crabs, starfish, sea slugs, empty plastic bottles, tin cans and the occasional coconut. ‘Now we know,’ he said to the constable as they carefully picked their way towards the two women who had stopped foraging among the broken coral and rocks and stood waiting for them.

‘We’re sorry that we have been avoiding you,’ the eldest daughter said, ‘but we were afraid that you were going to arrest our father for Manu’s murder.’

Hari nodded. ‘Alright, let’s forget about that for a moment; we’re interested in where Manu went after the dog here attacked him. Did he come to see you and your sister?’

The two daughters looked across at Flynn, who was perched on a large broken coral head carefully watching the water and otherwise ignoring them. ‘He’s scared of sharks,’ Hari said.

The women briefly looked amused but then returned to Hari’s question. ‘He came round to see us,’ the same daughter replied. ‘He went to Steamships first but when he
‘What time was that?’ the constable asked as he scribbled in his notebook.

‘I’m not exactly sure; it was late in the afternoon.’

‘What did he say to you?’ Hari asked.

‘He said that Mrs Moiva had told our father that he was the one who gave our mother AIDS but that it was a lie and he wanted us both to speak to our father and convince him that it wasn’t true.’

‘What did you say to that?’

‘We were shocked at first. Our mother got AIDS from a needle stick injury at the clinic. We told him Mrs Moiva shouldn’t have told him that. He then said he was afraid of what our father would do to him. He said that if we couldn’t convince him otherwise he was going to get a sorcerer to help straighten out his head.’

‘Straighten out his head? He didn’t say anything about a curse then?’

‘He said that too; he said that if our father didn’t believe him he would have no choice but to put a curse on him.’

‘What did he do then?’

‘He sat under the tree by the house. He said he was going to wait for our father. He had a bottle of whisky in his pocket and he kept taking swigs from it. He was acting very strange. He kept muttering to himself. I went out to make sure he was alright and he sort of looked right through me, it was as if I wasn’t even there. Then he shouted out that he was going to the school to see the Sinabada. He called her some bad names and said that she must have been telling lies...’
about him to Mrs Moiva. He seemed to recognise us again and said he would come back to see our father later but in the meantime we had to convince him that he hadn’t given our mother AIDS.’

‘Then what did he do?’

‘He went off up the hill; he was shouting and he kept tripping over in the dark. A little while later our father came home and we told him about the councillor’s visit. Dad told us about how the councillor had beaten Mrs Maivo and how that dog had bitten him on the leg;’

‘Did you tell your father about what Manu said about the sorcerer and the curse?’ the constable asked.

‘Yes Constable, we told him everything that Manu said,’ the youngest daughter, who had been quiet up until now said.

‘What did your father do then?’ Hari asked.

‘He sat up for a while waiting for Manu and then he went to bed.’

‘Wasn’t he worried about Manu going to see the Sinabada?’ the constable asked.

‘He said there were a lot of people up at the school that could protect her and we were not to worry.’

‘Did you father go out later?’

‘No, he was very tired; he must have slept all night. He only got up when some of the kids came and told us they had seen Manu’s body in the sea and that the police were there.’

‘So you’re sure he didn’t go out again.’

‘It’s possible but we didn’t hear him.’ Both girls looked at each and nodded in agreement.
‘Okay girls; I think that’s all we need for the moment; we’ll let you get back to your collecting.’

Hari and the constable turned around and began walking back to the seawall. The tide was coming in and the rocks and broken coral were becoming slippery so it took them longer to get back. Eventually they climbed the seawall and drove off towards Ela Beach and Flynn’s croissant.

Papua New Guinea prides itself on being a Christian country. The London Missionary Society had landed in Port Moresby in 1874, some ten years ahead of the annexation by the British. Since then the people around Port Moresby had grown comfortable with their faith and their churches. There was no fire and brimstone, just an easy going relationship that worked for everyone’s benefit. The churches not only provided for people’s spiritual needs but also in a practical way in the form of schools and medical facilities.

Both Hari and his wife had attended missionary schools and remembered those days with affection. Nowadays the churches were struggling. In the brash new world of the twenty first century many Papua New Guineans had abandoned most of their old and not-so-old gods for the new ones of commerce and profit.

Hari, despite his upbringing, was ambivalent about religion. As a policeman his belief in the fundamental ability of people to be good had been tested to the limit and he often wondered what sort of god would tolerate such evil among his flock. He had argued the point on several occasions with the pastors and priests that he encountered.
'Why was it necessary to make people blind or allow the elderly to become incontinent,’ he asked; ‘why was it necessary to allow husbands to beat their wives mercilessly; why was it necessary to allow people to steal from each other; why was it necessary for people to kill each other over land and pigs?’ The inevitable reply that it was the will of God never satisfied him.

Mrs Metau, on the other hand, had what appeared to be an unshakeable faith. Despite her dedication she never placed any pressure on her husband to conform. In her view he was a good man and would be remembered as such when his time came to depart for whatever lay beyond these earthly shores. She not only visited their local church at Hanuabada for Sunday services but also went there three times a week for a scripture meeting, a woman’s auxiliary guild and to clean and tidy the dilapidated building and its grounds. Hari suspected that she also went there for the tea and coconut cakes and more especially for the gossip.

This gossip had occasionally proved useful to him in his investigations and it was to this end that he went with her to a working bee one weekday afternoon. He dragged the constable and his notebook along too. The constable was initially reluctant, he was supposed to be on duty after all, but when he found out that Bella and Rose would also be there he had a change of heart. Flynn went along for the coconut cake.

The church pastor was well past retirement age. In his younger days he had been a junior contemporary of the irrepressible Percy Chatterton, who had arrived in Port Moresby in 1924 and had gone on to help frame the
constitution of the new nation. In his dotage, as he called it, Pastor Lohia tended to dwell on those halcyon days, as did the other geriatric elders of the church. Hari didn’t mind that at all; he was of an age when reflection assumed a large part of his life too. The longer the life the more the reflection he thought.

‘Perhaps that’s what is wrong with the youth of today,’ Pastor Lohia said, ‘they have no basis for reflection and seek other diversions instead.’

‘But then again life is a lot more complicated than it was then, especially in Port Moresby,’ Hari replied.

They were standing beside a pile of building materials - timber, roofing iron, big cement blocks and other similar materiel. ‘This is our new church,’ the pastor said. ‘It has taken us several years to buy all this but we have run out of money and cannot afford to pay the carpenters to build it.’

‘Aren’t there men in the village who can volunteer their help?’ Hari said.

‘We have many good tradesmen but they are busy building all the new shops and houses going up all over town.’

‘That’s a shame; what will you do?’

‘We will have to pay someone to do it; we will collect more money to pay them. One day it will rise up and we will be able to pray under a roof that doesn’t leak; I just hope I’m alive to see it Hari.’

‘I’m sure you will be,’ Hari said without conviction.

‘There is very little distance between the living and the dead, Hari and it seems to be getting narrower by the day.’

‘There are plenty of unemployed young men in the villages, what about them?’ the constable asked.
‘They are educated men Constable. When you have an education you turn your back on manual labour; it is beneath them, they are waiting for jobs in air-conditioned offices. I’ve asked them; some of the older carpenters not working in town have offered to train them but to no avail. Sometimes I think that education is not all it is made out to be, especially in a place like Papua New Guinea.’

This contrary view took the constable a few moments to digest. He had great respect for his elders, unlike many young men of his age, and had discovered on many occasions that the scepticism he sometimes harboured about their views invariably turned out to be misplaced in one way or another.

‘We have lost a lot of our traditional way of life in places like Port Moresby and I fear that education has helped us do that. Even though I was a teacher for many years I can only now admit to the truth of it,’ the pastor added watching the young constable’s face closely. ‘We were always a peaceful and tolerant people, not like the highlanders, but now our young men are as aggressive as everyone else.’

‘You might be right,’ Hari allowed. Both he and Robert had been swinging long bladed sarips to clear the long grass around the building materials so that they would not become a haven for snakes. Flynn took the same view of snakes as he did of sharks and was sitting on top of the pile. Both Hari and the constable were bare-chested and sweating when Pastor Lohia came over to talk to them. They were still cooling off when Bella came to tell them that tea and cakes were ready. She cast an appreciative glance over the constable’s broad chest and her soft brown eyes distracted
him and the response he had been constructing to answer the pastor’s view about education dissipated.

‘Then again, some things never change,’ the pastor said to Hari as they followed the constable and Bella down the slope to the shady trees where the women had laid out morning tea. Flynn was already there and they squeezed past him and took up seats among the eclectic mix of elderly guests arranged around the table with its spotted blue and red cloth. The constable’s fine chest seemed to also attract the attention of some of the ladies, especially after Mrs Metau turned him around so they could inspect the scars on his back from the attack by the raskols. He deftly pulled on his tee shirt but Hari remained bare-chested, as did most of the other elderly men.

‘We heard about that,’ one of the elderly women said, ‘didn’t that witch from Lea Lea shoot them all?’

‘Indeed she did,’ Hari said.

As they munched on the cake the conversation gradually worked its way around to Ward Councillor Manu Moiva. This was what Hari had come for and he spurred it along by describing his and the constable’s progress on the case to date.

‘Didn’t he come from down Hula or Kalo way?’ one of the old men asked.

Hari nodded. He was waiting for one of the women to take up the theme. They tended to be a bit shy but once you got them going they could be a goldmine of information.

‘There are a lot of people from down there who have business interests in Port Moresby,’ one plump lady with a handful of coconut cake said.
‘That one rented out houses in the settlement,’ another lady said. ‘Those people always charge high rates and it is not even their land, they pay us low rent for the land and build rubbish houses to rent to highlanders and people like that; it’s not right.’

Hari knew all this but he let the conversation take its own course for a while. Criticising people from up and down the coast was a favourite sport of the Hanubaduan ladies. Finally he said, ‘We have a gap in his whereabouts on the evening of the day he was killed. He visited a house in the settlement and drank a bottle of whisky and then where he went after that we don’t know. The ladies at the house thought he was going to the CUMA School but he didn’t turn up there the Sinabada told us.’

‘That woman and her husband are doing a good job,’ another lady added, ‘some of those kids have got no parents because of that illness going round.’ Hari sighed; the conversation was going off track.

‘My son says he saw him at the tavern in Badili about ten o’clock that night,’ another lady said.

‘Did he say what he was doing there?’ Hari asked quickly before the conversation diverged again.

‘He just said he was with some other men from the settlement; he was buying them drinks. My son remarked on it when he heard about the murder.’

‘Can we talk to your son?’ Hari asked.

‘I don’t think he saw much else; he just went there to get some beer after work; he drives a taxi and works late sometimes,’ the lady replied. ‘He’s a good boy and wouldn’t get mixed up with people from the settlements.’
Because the old Land Rover had proven to be more or less indestructible Hari had never really had much reason to use a Port Moresby taxi. On the odd occasion that he flew anywhere and needed dropping off at the airport he arranged for a police vehicle to do the honours. This sometimes took some deft organising and the recall of past favours to ensure that it had the requisite fuel and was actually roadworthy but he had only been let down on a few occasions over the years.

Mrs Kitai, from the church working bee, had given Hari her son Miki’s mobile telephone number and they telephoned him from the Beachside Brasserie the following morning and arranged to meet him at Ela Beach. He pulled up alongside the Land Rover as they were giving Flynn his morning croissant. He gave the dog a wary look and stayed seated in his taxi.

‘Where do you fancy going today?’ Hari asked the constable.

‘You mean in the taxi sir?’ the constable said with a slightly puzzled look. ‘We can talk to him on the beach, can’t we?’

‘And have everyone and their dog watching us Constable.’

‘I see sir; what about Gordons, the second hand books from Moale Dabua are very good, I wouldn’t mind having a look at what they’ve got out there sir.’

Hari smiled. The young constable seemed to be adapting to his modus operandi better and better. ‘What about running us out to Gordons and back; how much will that cost?’ Hari asked Miki.

‘You don’t need to pay me,’ Miki said, ‘we can talk here if you like.’
‘Fair’s fair,’ Hari replied, ‘if we did that I’d worry about you, besides I haven’t had a taxi ride in ages.’

‘It would be twenty there and the same to come back,’ Miki said with a smile. Port Moresby taxis don’t have meters and negotiating a price was an integral part of using them.

‘What about thirty for the round trip?’ Hari said. ‘My expense account is a bit low at the moment.’

‘Sounds good,’ Miki replied, ‘but that big dog can’t come, dogs aren’t allowed.’

‘Flynn has to guard the Land Rover, it’s a valuable antique,’ Hari replied. ‘He’ll be okay here.’

They both climbed into the taxi, the constable in the back and Hari in the front. ‘This is a nice car,’ the constable said strapping himself in with the seat belt.

‘It’s a Toyota Camry,’ Miki replied, ‘I’ve got three of them now; my two brothers drive the other ones.’

‘Three taxis, that must have cost a lot of money,’ Hari said. Mrs Metau had an eye on a family sedan and Hari was resisting valiantly. He argued that they couldn’t afford one.

‘They are second hand,’ Miki replied, ‘a company brings them in from Japan; you have to go down to the wharf when they arrive otherwise you miss out.’

Hari decided it might not be a good idea to find out how cheap the cars were after all. ‘The taxi business must be profitable then?’ he said.

‘It’s not too bad; sometimes you get plenty of fares; the Americans who work for the oil companies are best, they tend to pay what you tell them and then add a tip but Papua New Guineans like to bargain. Some of the Americans and the other white people hire us on a daily basis; if you can get
a deal like that it’s really good. We will have the loan paid off on the last car by next year, after that we can make a better profit.’

‘You borrowed money to buy the cars; I didn’t think you could do that.’

The kongkong who brings the cars here lent us the money; the banks won’t do that, unfortunately we have to pay a high rate of interest.’

They chatted all the way out to Gordons and on the way back Hari asked about the councillor. ‘I didn’t know him very well,’ Miki said, ‘I just went into the tavern to get a few brown bottles but I recognised him. He was arguing with some boys from the settlement; he said he had a job for them but they were asking for too much money.’

‘I wonder what sort of job the councillor had in mind,’ the constable said as Miki skilfully guided the taxi through the roundabout coming into Koki. He straightened up and stared ahead. The constable glanced at Hari, who raised his eyebrows imperceptibly.

As they glided in beside the old Land Rover Miki turned the motor off. ‘I don’t know what the job involved,’ he said carefully, ‘but they were saying that it was very dangerous and they would go to gaol if they got caught; that’s why they wanted more money. It was something to do with a school. I think it was at the settlement because one of them said they would have to wear masks so they wouldn’t be recognised.’

‘Did they say anything else?’ the constable asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Miki replied, ‘that’s when I left; a couple of them were giving me strange looks and I started to feel uncomfortable.’
Hari gave Miki the thirty kina and got out of the taxi. ‘Very good,’ he said, ‘we must do this again sometime.’ Miki looked doubtful and Hari added, ‘Don’t worry, we won’t tell anyone we talked to you and if anyone saw us you can just tell them we were passengers going out to Moale Dabua to buy some second hand books.’ Miki still didn’t look too convinced as he drove off. They watched him turn onto the road. Outside the oval someone flagged him down and he stopped briefly and did a U-turn to get back to them.
FLYNN watched Hari tip half of the contents of a can of *tinpis* over a small mound of rice lying in the battered aluminium bowl that had become the dog’s sole item of property. Hari bent the lid back into the can and put it on the stairs before putting the bowl on the ground. Flynn sniffed the contents appreciatively and set to eating it. When he had finished he slid his long tongue around the bowl twice to make sure he had caught every stray grain of rice. Then he sat down and burped loudly.

‘I gather that was acceptable then,’ Hari said washing the bowl out under the tap.

‘Very nice Hari, please give my compliments to the chef.’

Hari sat back to look at the dog. He had put on condition over the weeks and his coat had become glossy. The patches of dermatitis caused by flea bites had cleared up and were now covered by hair. He was becoming quite a handsome dog Hari thought.

‘There are kids in the settlements who would love a meal like that,’ Hari said.

‘There are dogs in the settlements that would kill for a meal like that,’ Flynn added.

‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ Hari replied. ‘I guess that’s true too.’
'Hunger is a terrible thing Hari. Dogs are always hungry.'
'They say the best hunting dog is a hungry dog,' Hari said.
'I come from a long line of hungry dogs Hari. I think my ancestors were hunting dogs from around Mount Giluwe; somehow we got mixed up with German Shepherds.'
'Those dogs that howl and sing; some people say the Giluwe dog is the ancestor of the Australian dingo.'
'They were a proud race Hari but I think they are mostly gone; just us mongrels left.'
Hari nodded. He was thinking about the sorry state of dogs in Port Moresby. They were all mangy creatures, bony and flea ridden, rummaging around the shops and markets for scraps of food. He had seen one poor creature that morning with an injured rear leg and pendulous dugs dodging traffic on the freeway. He wondered why people didn’t take better care of them. Even in the old days the emaciated and pitiful creatures were a common sight in the villages. It was only occasionally that one saw a healthy animal and those, strangely enough, seemed to be owned by elderly men like himself.

Pigs got a better deal by far than dogs, probably because they represented wealth and prestige. Even those people who traditionally ate dogs never kept them in good condition. And yet in some places necklaces of canine incisors were used as wealth in bride price. The sight of starving dogs upset white people with their foppish and overfed pooches but local people seemed indifferent to their fate. It was indeed puzzling. The white people thought that it confirmed their view about black savages.
‘Someone once told me that the measure of a society’s civilisation was the way they treated their animals; or was it the way they treated their children? In either case we seem to be going backwards rather than forwards,’ Hari observed.

But you are very much a civilised man Hari; I picked that up straight away.

‘You think that because I buy you tinpis and croissants Flynn? That doesn’t strike me as a very scientific assessment.’

‘Never mind the science Hari; it’s how you feel in your heart that counts; ask Mrs Metau, she’ll tell you the same.’

‘Yes, the heart is very important; almost as much as the belly,’ Hari replied. ‘Yours is full but mine has started to grumble. I think I can smell chicken cooking upstairs.’

‘Chicken with brown gravy, steamed taro and greens fried in coconut oil,’ Flynn said with authority. ‘My nose never tells lies Hari.’

While Hari was discussing the inequities of a dog’s life in Port Moresby the Minister for Regional Development was stepping out of the shower in one of the executive suites in the Crown Plaza Hotel on the corner of Hunter and Douglas Streets. He dried himself off, doused his underarms with a lethal dose of deodorant and waddled out to the bedroom dressed in one of the hotel’s complimentary white fluffy bath robes. The wide screen television in the room was playing a satellite program about beauty contestants from the Philippines. He snapped the top off a Crown Lager from the mini bar and sat on the end of the bed.
He had spent the evening with some businessmen from Manila and they had recommended the program. They had told him that if he liked what he saw they might have a pleasant surprise for him later that evening. By the time he finished his second beer he had decided that he indeed liked what he saw. Just as he got up to get another drink there was a discreet knock on the door. He put the beer back in the refrigerator and smiled to himself before switching off the main light and turning on one of the small bed side lamps. The room dimmed to a faint orange. He was a vain man and deeply conscious of his huge girth and rolls of fat.

He opened the door. ‘Come in my dear,’ he said to the tall lady standing outside. He was a bit puzzled because she was clearly a Papuan but the tight jeans and tee shirt hugging her voluptuous figure reassured him. This one must be particularly special he thought as he waddled over to the bed. ‘Would you like a drink my dear? A wine before we start perhaps,’ he said with what he contrived to be a debonair look.

‘No thank you. Perhaps if you take off your robe and lie on the bed I can get myself ready,’ the woman replied in a husky voice. She has to get herself ready he thought with mounting excitement. This is going to be very interesting.

He watched her slip an elaborately decorated bilum off her shoulder and put it on the bed. ‘Close your eyes for a moment,’ she whispered.

The minister did as he was told and lay tingling with anticipation on the bed. He heard a shuffling sound like clothes being shed and then what felt like a cool sinuous arm
gliding across his belly. ‘You can open your eyes now,’ the woman said softly.

He blinked in the dim light and beheld the head of a very large Papuan Taipan hovering a few centimetres from his nose. He tried to scream but nothing came out of his mouth. ‘I wouldn’t make any sudden moves,’ the woman said. The minister was hyperventilating and desperately trying to control his heaving chest. The snake watched him with interest and the woman sat on the edge of the bed and stroked it along its back. ‘Her name is Vada,’ she said. ‘You know what that means I think?’ The minister nodded ever so slightly. *Vada* was a particularly deadly form of sorcery.

Finally he rasped in a squeaky voice, ‘What do you want?’ The snake picked up the vibrations in his voice and began to sway gently to and fro.

The woman continued to speak quietly in a soft and seductive voice. ‘A certain ward councillor died in mysterious circumstances a short while ago. You know who I am talking about. He was a direct competitor in the *buai* trade with your cousin. Now that he has gone, your cousin, who you pay and are grooming to take the councillor’s place, has decided to intimidate me and some of the other traders. A few days ago his goons ran my truck load of *buai* off the road near Lea Lea. There is no point in talking to him about it because he is your puppet. The incident has upset my long black friend here and we thought we’d better let you know.’

‘I don’t know what you are talking about,’ the minister whispered. ‘I have no interest in *buai*, it’s a filthy habit.’

‘Of course not,’ the woman said, ‘just like you know nothing about illegal logging or the theft of school funds.’
The minister watched the snake slowly curl around and slide back into the *bilum* that the woman had opened up for it. When it had settled she picked the bag up and put it over her shoulder. ‘We’ll be seeing you,’ she said with a slight smile and opened the door to leave. The minister lay on the bed for a moment and then tried to get up but for some reason his legs failed him and he rolled on to the floor and lay there gasping.

In the hotel foyer Ruby alighted from the lift and walked over to the diminutive Asian woman waiting patiently in one of the plush chairs. She held out a handful of kina notes and said, ‘He’s all yours; be gentle with him.’ The woman smiled and tucked the notes into her ample cleavage. The clerk on the reception desk fingered the wad of notes in his pocket and looked the other way. ‘Oh; he’s made a little mess in the bed, poor man, wet himself with excitement; you might have to tidy up a bit,’ Ruby said.

The man who had been beaten up was sitting on a chair beside his bed in the Port Moresby General Hospital. The top of his head and one arm were neatly bandaged. A woman with two small children was sitting on the bed. Underneath it was a nest of rumpled blankets, a large *bilum* and an aluminium pot half full of boiled rice. Around them the beds in the ward and a large part of the floor were occupied by other people, including children. It was difficult to tell at first glance which ones were patients and which were visitors. In one corner two nurses were changing the dressings on a young man who appeared to have been burnt.
The orderly who had accompanied Hari and the constable brought two chairs for them. Hari introduced himself to the man, showed him his warrant card and said, ‘How are you going?’

The man smiled. ‘I’m okay,’ he replied.

‘You were lucky that someone found you and wrapped your head and arm up in a towel,’ Hari said pointing to the bandages. The man nodded and scratched his chest with his good hand. ‘Do you know who chopped you? I presume it was done with a bush knife.’ The man shook his head. ‘You didn’t see them?’ Hari continued. Again the man shook his head. ‘Alright, do you know why you were attacked?’ Hari said a little peevishly. The man shrugged this time. ‘Do you know anything at all?’ The man shrugged again. ‘Look, if you are in pain we can come back later to talk to you; is that’s what’s wrong?’ The man shook his head.

Hari turned to the woman on the bed. She had pulled aside her blouse and was feeding the smallest child. ‘Do you know what happened?’ he asked her. The woman shook her head so vigorously that the child lost the nipple; she quickly popped it back into his mouth.

‘The nurse gave us your names and told us you live at Kaugere; is there anything else you can tell us?’ Both the man and the woman shook their heads together. Hari stood up. ‘Okay, if you think of anything just tell the nurse and she will contact me.’ The man nodded.

Outside in the car park while they were walking to the Land Rover the constable said, ‘That man and woman seemed very frightened sir.’
‘Didn’t they just Constable! I imagine whoever did that to him is still around and he knows it.’

The constable slowly shook his head. Hari decided to change tack; unresponsive victims of crime annoyed him. ‘You know Constable, I nearly ran someone over in the car park here last year; actually it was several people.’ The constable opened the Land Rover door and climbed aboard. ‘In the dry season when the nights get cool homeless people come here and sleep on the bitumen because it’s warm and holds the heat. I rushed in here one night with an injured colleague and nearly ploughed into a heap of them. He was in a bad way and there’s no point in calling an ambulance, they never come in time. Anyway, the poor people that I’d almost killed helped me carry him inside.’

‘Yes sir,’ the constable replied, wondering why one of Hari’s colleagues had been in such a bad way.

‘He was bitten by a village pig, right up high in a soft part of his anatomy and he nearly bled to death,’ Hari replied as if he had been reading the constable’s mind. He shut his door and his mobile telephone rang. He picked it up gingerly. He didn’t often receive calls and they were invariably from people wanting him to do something. He listened for a while saying, ‘Yes, yes’ several times. Finally he slipped it into his top pocket. ‘It was Martha; apparently Superintendent Tabai wants to see me urgently.’

They drove out of Taurama Drive and turned left onto the Hubert Murray Highway. The constable looked at Hari with a frown; police headquarters was to the right. ‘I’d say the proverbial has hit the fan Constable; I think I need a strong coffee before I do anything else,’ Hari said.
‘I think the constable had better wait outside,’ Martha said to Hari when they arrived at Superintendent Tabai’s office. This must be serious Hari thought. His suspicions were confirmed a few moments later when the superintendent said, ‘Do you know a young woman named Ruby Vagi Hari?’

Hari nodded. ‘Has something happened to her?’ he asked.

The superintendent shook his head. ‘Not that I know about Hari but she’s caused some sort of kerfuffle; I’m not sure about the details but the Minister for Regional Development is resting in the Port Moresby General Hospital after a suspected heart attack and her name has been mentioned.

Hari nodded again. He didn’t know where the conversation was going but he didn’t have a good feeling about it. The less I say the less chance I have of getting deeper into trouble he thought. ‘She’s just someone we questioned,’ he said carefully and then added, ‘she was also there when Constable Bokasi was attacked.’

‘Apparently she was arrested for illegal firearms possession too,’ the superintendent said.

‘That’s right; she’s waiting to go to court,’ Hari replied. ‘With respect sir, would you mind cutting to the chase; we’ve known each other for a long time and I don’t think I’m going to like what’s coming.’

The superintendent placed his elbows on his desk and put his hands together as if he were praying. He peered over the top and sighed. ‘It’s come down the line Hari; I got it from the station commander.’ He paused and took a deep breath.
‘You’ve been suspended on full pay pending the finalisation of arrangements for you to take early retirement.’ He paused again. ‘I’m sorry Hari.’

Hari felt an icy chill creep up his spine and the skin round his head tighten. So it’s finally happened he thought and the chill and tightness went away and was replaced by an enormous sense of relief. He savoured the unusual feeling for a moment and then looked at the superintendent, who had a deeply distressed look on his face.

‘It’s okay,’ he said, ‘I’m only a year off retirement anyway. I guess I’ve just stepped on one toe too many.’

‘And you’ve trodden on a lot of toes in your time Hari,’ the superintendent added.

Hari chuckled. He was feeling remarkably relaxed now. ‘Mrs Metau will be pleased I think,’ he said.

The superintendent looked visibly relieved. The unpleasant confrontation of the sort required to tell someone they were effectively sacked didn’t come easily in the Papuan psyche. Papuans avoided confrontation at all costs and Hari knew that what the superintendent had just done took real courage. The superintendent undoubtedly knew this but he hadn’t expected Hari to take it so well. No one had given him any details or reasons why the suspension order had come through but that was always the way. He presumed it had originated with the minister.

‘You can get that garden shipshape and enjoy a bit of fishing now,’ he said.

‘I could do that I suppose,’ Hari replied with a smile.
As predicted, Mrs Metau was pleased. She did not say as much however but assumed a very jovial demeanour as she went about preparing dinner that evening; at one stage she almost broke into song but contented herself with humming what sounded suspiciously like a love song. Flynn was mesmerised and kept glancing back and forth between her and Hari with a silly grin on his face.

‘The constable was a bit crestfallen when I told him,’ Hari said, ‘he’s not sure where he will be reassigned. Presumably someone will have to take over my caseload and he’ll probably have to work with them.’

‘He’s a nice boy and he can still come and see you,’ Mrs Metau suggested.

‘I thought I might invite him around for dinner this Sunday,’ Hari said.

‘That’s fine Hari. What about that dog, didn’t you say it was an exhibit or something?’

‘Exhibit B my dear; after exhibit A, which is a soggy piece of rope.’

‘What does that mean?’ Mrs Metau said.

‘It’s alright my dear; I gave him a field promotion; he went from exhibit B to assistant canine; I suspect he is now a fellow suspendee, if such a classification exists.’

Mrs Metau snorted and Hari assumed it was because she had also become attached to Flynn; not that she would ever admit it. Hari watched his wife for a moment more and then said, ‘On a serious note my dear things might get bumpy for a while. They have to still pay me until my pension comes through but knowing how the system works, or rather how it doesn’t work, we’ll be filling in forms and arguing with the
clerks for a while. No doubt they won’t pay me the correct pension and we’ll have to fight them to get it right.’

Mrs Metau paused in her cooking for a moment and frowned. Hari quickly added, ‘But we’ll get it right my dear, don’t worry about that.’ He rather liked Mrs Metau in a jovial mood, it reminded him of when she had been a young woman, and he now thought better of what he’d said. ‘We’ll tackle that bridge when and if it comes, my dear, no point in discussing it now.’

This was an excellent opportunity for Mrs Metau to begin a tirade about useless and incompetent public servants but thankfully she refrained. Hari took the opportunity to disappear down the stairs with Flynn. After a while they heard her begin to hum again. Hari wiped some imaginary sweat off his brow and patted Flynn on the head. ‘Remind me to watch what I say in the next few weeks,’ he said to the dog.

‘It looks like I’ll be home a lot more now,’ Hari said to Silas as they pulled out the last of Mrs Metau’s kaukau and heaped up the soil ready for a new crop. Sweet potato didn’t do so well in Port Moresby but they persisted with it on the basis that it tasted better straight out of the ground than bought in the markets or along the road side. Silas brushed the soil off a tuber and tossed it onto the small heap they had collected. Hari pushed on with his line of thought, ‘So it probably means I can take care of security myself now.’ Silas looked up at him and Hari backtracked a bit. ‘I’ll be on full pay for a couple of months more but after that we won’t get
as much on the pension; we’ll have to watch our costs more closely I’m afraid.’

Silas picked up another tuber and began brushing the soil off it. Finally he said, ‘It’s alright; you don’t need to pay me; I like coming here and looking after the gate and the garden; I haven’t got much else to do anyway.’

‘Are you sure about that?’ Hari asked. ‘I really can take care of it by myself.’

Silas smiled in his shy way. ‘That kekeni with all the tattoos, the masalai vada one, I saw her at Koki the other day and she said I had to keep a special eye on you.’

Hari was surprised. ‘She said that?’ That’s strange; she’s probably the cause of my early retirement; not that I’m complaining but it’s interesting that she’s worried. She didn’t threaten to work puripuri on you did she Silas?’

‘That George Dosu is a bad man,’ Silas said ignoring the reference to magic.

‘I think he’s had his revenge now,’ Hari replied.

‘The kekeni masalai vada said it pays to be careful just in case something else happens.’ Silas looked up again; he had a vaguely troubled look on his face.

‘I hope she isn’t planning anything else,’ Hari said.

‘She didn’t say,’ Silas replied.

‘Anyway, it’s nice that you are all concerned about me,’ Hari smiled. ‘Perhaps we’ll leave things as they are for a while and see what happens. How does that sound?’

Silas nodded and patted the mound of soil with his spade. ‘I’ll get some fresh kaukau cuttings from Abraham tomorrow and plant them; his kaukau is much better than ours,’ he said.
Hari nodded. The old Simbu certainly knew how to grow vegetables but the other part of their conversation somehow left him feeling slightly disconcerted. It was all over, the police and crime thing, he thought but he suspected that he was being too optimistic. He wanted it to be over because in the last few days he had slowly come to realise how tired he was and how his premature retirement had been such a relief, something he hadn’t expected. He wondered if he would start to miss it. He hoped not.

The constable brought another bottle of wine to dinner on Sunday. This time it was a Banrock Station Rosé from the River Murray in South Australia. The man at the bottle shop had shown him some relatively inexpensive Italian Chianti with a funny basket on the bottom of the bottle but he thought he would stick to the Australian wine for a while. ‘I like this better than the last one you brought,’ Mrs Metau said pursing her lips appreciatively. ‘It’s a pretty colour and it’s lighter and sweeter; what do you think Bella?’

‘It’s nice,’ Bella replied, ‘but it’s still got a slightly sharp taste.’

‘I think we can try a Riesling next time,’ the constable said with a very serious expression, ‘they tell me that it’s even sweeter.’

Rose wasn’t there to offer an opinion nor was she able to refute the dig about the sharpness of the wine and the similarity to her name that a mischievous Bella now pointed out; she was down the coast visiting her husband’s relatives. Hari, who was sipping a brown SP stubby, raised his eyebrows at all this pretentiousness but then thought better
of it when Mrs Metau said, ‘We must get a bottle of Riesling next time Hari.’

‘White wine goes better with fish,’ the constable added maintaining his serious expression.

‘I’ll have to tell Flynn,’ Hari replied.

‘So do salt and vinegar and chips,’ Bella added joining in the fun.

‘What’s wrong with fresh kaukau and greens?’ Mrs Metau asked looking slightly offended.

‘Nothing my dear,’ Hari said quickly. ‘The meal is excellent; Bella was just tossing that in for you gourmet and wine buffs.’

Bella laughed. ‘We’re just not connoisseurs like Mum and Robert but let’s change the subject before we come to blows; what have you been up to Robert, has it been a busy week?’

The constable looked slightly miffed. He would have liked to continue the conversation about wine and food but both Bella and Hari were looking at him expectantly and he scratched his head and said, ‘Not really; I’ve just been at headquarters tidying up files and going out to the occasional domestic dispute.’

‘That’s strange,’ Hari said, ‘haven’t they assigned you to another officer yet?’

‘No sir; I don’t know what they are planning.’

‘What about the murder case, who is leading the enquiry now?’

‘No one sir.’

‘No one?’

‘No sir; when I asked the sergeant about it he said the investigation has been discontinued; he says they haven’t got
the resources to follow every murder in the squatter settlements - there are too many of them.’

‘I see,’ Hari said with a slight frown that only Mrs Metau noticed. ‘What about the beaten up man and the little girl skittled by the car?’

‘No sir, I don’t know what’s happening there either.’

‘It’s almost as if they were giving us cases that they didn’t care about, just to keep us out of their hair,’ Hari said more to himself than the rest of the table. The constable didn’t reply and sat there glumly sipping his wine.

‘Are you sure you wouldn’t like to try some wine Hari?’ Mrs Metau said. ‘There’s still a glass left in the bottle. It’s something new; you might like it.’

Hari looked at the bottle in an absent sort of way. Finally he said, ‘No thank you my dear; I’d better stick to what I know; I’m too much of an old dog to change tricks now.’ He held up his half empty bottle of beer.

Mrs Metau looked at him quickly and then turned back to the table, ‘Who wants the last of it? You two had better share it.’ She poured the wine into the constable’s and Bella’s glasses and thought to herself, Oh dear, what is he thinking about now? Hari, on the other hand, was wondering if he really was as old and tired as he thought.

Kasari cast his line into the river before making himself comfortable on a log. Hari watched the turgid brown water for a while and then joined him. The old sergeant looked decidedly content Hari thought. Perhaps it was because he didn’t expect to catch anything. He had already landed a great, great grandfather of a catfish and knew that feat was
unlikely to be repeated. All he was doing now was paying homage to the fish and the river. Was landing one big fish in life the secret to contentment Hari wondered?

‘You look like you’ve got the weight of the world on your shoulders,’ Kasari remarked. ‘Shouldn’t you be happy now that you’ve retired? Grace seems to be a lot more relaxed; she and Harriet were jabbering away like school girls up at the house, even Dinah remarked on it.’

‘I know Sarge; it was really a huge relief but what the constable told me has been niggling away for the last few days and I can’t seem to shake it.’

‘What; that no one cares who killed the councillor? That doesn’t surprise me Hari. Or is it the fact that you realised that they’ve been foisting that sort of stuff on you to keep you out of their hair?’

‘Sure, there’s that Sarge, but I think I realised that a long time ago. No, it’s this feeling that they got rid of me so they could gloss over the whole thing.’

‘To protect the minister you mean Hari? That doesn’t surprise me either.’

Hari screwed up his face and picked up a stone and threw it into the river.

‘Stop trying to scare the fish away,’ Kasari said.

Hari smiled. ‘There are no more big catfish out there Sarge; you caught the last one in the river.’

‘There are always big catfish in the river Hari; you just need to be lucky.’

‘Okay Sarge, you’re probably right as usual but don’t you think we live in a sorry place if ministers can get away with having troublesome people murdered?’
The sergeant gave his line a tug, let it go slack and then
tugged it again. ‘Bloody snag he said, ‘no matter what you
do there are always snags.’

They sat in silence for a while and then the old sergeant
said, ‘I know what’s wrong with you Hari!’

‘What’s that Sarge?’

‘It’s called noblesse oblige Hari. An old white kiap who
thought he had it told me about it once. Not that we’ve got
any nobles in this country, despite what some people think
of themselves. I might not have it quite right but it’s the
reason you became a copper in the first place; it’s the same
reason young girls become nurses; another word for it is
duty; it’s an innate sense in some people; they need to see
the right thing done, justice and all that sort of thing Hari.
It’s becoming rarer these days but you still see it occasionally.
That young constable, Bokasi, he’s got it, I picked that
straightaway. That’s what’s bugging you Hari!’

Hari raised his eyebrows. Perhaps the sergeant had
something there. ‘So what should I do about it Sarge?
They’ll just tell me to go away if I make a fuss.’

‘You don’t necessarily need to be a copper to solve a
mystery Hari, even a murder mystery.’

Hari looked at the sergeant who winked back at him.
‘That big nehu’s cousins must be down the coast visiting. I’m
not going to catch anything here, besides, those scones the
ladies were baking are probably ready by now; why don’t we
go up and see what’s going on before that mangy mutt of
yours eats them all?’

‘Lead the way Sarge,’ Hari said scratching his chin and
looking distracted. The old sergeant laughed. ‘You’re a
strange one sometimes Hari; did anyone ever tell you that?’ he said with the twinkle still in his eye.

Hari was old enough to remember 1954 when the first market buildings had been constructed at Koki, followed by a proliferation of Chinese stores in the 1960s. He also remembered that Gabutu Moto Moto Island at the end of the causeway, where all the people from Hula and the other villages along the coast moored their house-boat canoes, had been the gaol before the one out at Bomana had been built.

The market and stores had always been a gathering place and on Sundays the nearby churches had always brimmed with people. An old man on one of the houseboats had told him that the real name of the market site was Koké, spelt with an ‘é’ but that people had been mispronouncing it for so long that Koki, with an ‘i’, had become accepted as its name.

The produce at the market was never of a very high quality because of the poor gardening land around Port Moresby and the traders were somehow always reluctant to barter but it was a colourful place, especially in the afternoon and at the weekend and Mrs Metau often went there for the atmosphere and the gossip. She was a little surprised when Hari volunteered to drive her there on the afternoon of the day after their weekly shopping expedition to Kwikila.

‘I just need to find a couple of things that I couldn’t get at Kwikila,’ she said, ‘I can take the bus to town and walk to the market like always.’

‘I haven’t got anything else to do and we can get coffee at the Beachside Brasserie afterwards,’ Hari replied.
Mrs Metau nodded. What is he up to she thought, he surely doesn’t want to stand around while I talk to my friends? Hari smiled at her and jangled his car keys. Flynn woofed; he knew the keys meant a ride in the Land Rover and the possibility of a croissant. Mrs Metau finally acquiesced. He probably just wants something to do she thought. She would have to think more about that, perhaps they could redo the garden, although he was getting a bit old for that now. She was wondering about all these things when she climbed down the stairs and got into the Land Rover. Silas waved them out of the gate.

At the market Hari followed his wife around as she poked among the vegetables and walked haughtily past the numerous stalls selling packaged biscuits, rice and tinned meat and fish. She was inspecting a rack of fish strung on a pole when he said, “I’ve just seen something interesting, I’ll just be a moment my dear, I’ll meet you at the car if you like, take your time.’ Mrs Metau, preoccupied with a large tuna, waved him on.

‘I heard that you’d been given the sack,’ Ruby said pulling a bundle of betel nut off the back of her Hilux.

‘They call it early retirement,’ Hari replied.

‘Does that mean your cute shadow has been sent somewhere else?’

‘Constable Bokasi is shuffling paper at headquarters; all our cases have been closed down.’

‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’ Ruby replied, echoing Kasari’s sentiments and pulling another bundle off the truck.
‘Something spooked the minister; nearly gave him a heart attack I’m told. You wouldn’t know anything about that would you Ruby?’

Ruby stopped what she was doing and stepped away from the truck. ‘I might,’ she said carefully.

‘You didn’t happen to mention the logging and school business did you?’ Hari asked.

Realisation slowly spread across her face. ‘The bastard,’ she said. ‘He had you sacked as revenge!’

‘And to stop me asking any more questions.’

‘I’m sorry Hari; I just wanted to get his thugs off my back.’

‘That’s alright Ruby; Mrs Metau has been trying to get me to retire for a long time and I’ve got a lawyer friend who is following up on the logging and school thing.’

‘Does that mean that whoever murdered Manu will get away with it now?’

‘Not necessarily; there’s no reason why I can’t keep making enquiries.’

‘Like a PI; that’s cool Hari.’

‘A PI, what’s that Ruby? I’m not good at acronyms.’

‘Not an acronym, whatever that is Hari, a private investigator; you know, a detective, you see them on television all the time.’

Hari looked at her for a moment while he digested the suggestion. ‘That’s an interesting idea Ruby; I’ll have to think about it.’

Ruby looked enthused. ‘I’ll help and I bet your constable will be interested, and that old sergeant down at Kwikila.’

‘You know Kasari? Robert is a serving policeman, he can’t get involved.’
‘I’ve just heard about the sergeant, I don’t know him personally; I didn’t mean that the constable should quit his job but he’d be a handy inside contact for you Hari.’

‘You’re miles ahead of me Ruby; as I said, I’ll have to think about it. What I wanted to talk to you about was Manu. I still can’t account for his whereabouts just before he was killed. I thought you might be able to provide a bit more information about him so I can figure out where he is likely to have gone.’

“Hari Metau & Associates Detective Agency”; doesn’t that sound good Hari?’

‘You haven’t answered my question Ruby.’

‘Sure Hari, I’ll tell you what I know but shouldn’t you be talking to Arthur and the others first?’

‘Arthur is scared of being accused of the murder. The others are being very cagey about what they say; they’re scared but I’m not sure why; when I find that out I’ll be a lot closer to figuring it all out.’

‘It’s probably sanguma Hari; they’re scared of being targeted by sorcerers; you should know that.’

‘I guessed that Ruby but I need to know the details.’

‘Okay Hari, I’ll help; I owe it to you don’t I? I’ll finish unloading this stuff and we can talk.’

‘That’s good Ruby but maybe a bit later; I just wanted to sound you out first; I’ve got Mrs Metau with me at the moment. How about I come out and see you and your father sometime soon?’

‘No worries, anytime you like. You’ll need an office Hari, have you thought about that?’
‘All in good time Ruby; now, I’ve got to find my wife, she’ll be gossiping somewhere, Flynn needs a croissant and I need a coffee.’

‘I need to talk to you Hari,’ Mrs Metau said the next morning. He was fiddling with the wiring in the Land Rover. The horn, an essential component for driving in Port Moresby, had ceased to work and he couldn’t figure out why. He felt a mild sense of panic. His wife’s request to talk could portend some dramatic and momentous event in their relationship or it might be that she just wanted something fixed in the house. Either way it would involve discomfort for him. He carefully closed the bonnet of the Land Rover and went up the stairs.

Mrs Metau had tea and scones ready on the veranda. She poured a cup of tea and passed it to him. ‘I’m worried about you Hari,’ she said after he had taken a sip and picked up the buttered scone she had placed on his plate.

This is worse than I thought Hari said to himself as he dropped crumbs all over the floor. ‘Why my dear; I’m perfectly fine?’

‘I’m worried that you’ll get bored now that you’re retired. You need a new interest Hari!’ Here it comes, Hari thought, what is she cooking up now? ‘I’ve spoken to Pastor Lohia and he agrees. He says he has seen many active men of your age who retire and have nothing to do who end up dying young.’

‘I’m not planning on dying anytime soon my dear,’ Hari replied defensively.
‘Of course not Hari; but it can creep up on you before you know it.’

‘What did you have in mind my dear?’ he asked holding his breath. If she suggested he get involved in helping with the church he knew he was in deep trouble.

Instead she said, ‘You need a hobby Hari!’

‘What sort of hobby my dear?’

‘I’m not sure but it has to keep you interested.’

Hari was thinking as fast as he could. ‘Actually I was thinking about setting up a small business my dear; that would keep me busy.’

Mrs Metau looked at him suspiciously. ‘What sort of business?’ she asked.

‘Well, I’m not really sure but one that helps people.’

‘Like a charity, something that does good work?’

‘Something like that my dear; what do you think?’

Mrs Metau sat back and buttered another scone. She broke it in half, popped one piece into her mouth and gave the other half to Flynn.

‘You spoil that dog,’ Hari said with some hope at last of changing the subject but Mrs Metau was undeterred.

‘I think it’s a good idea Hari; I’ll ask Pastor Lohia about it.’ She began to tidy up the teacups and plates.

‘I’d better get back to the Land Rover,’ Hari said. The horn doesn’t work and we’ll need it next week when we go down the highway to Kwikila.’

‘What would you call this business Hari?’ she asked.

‘Oh, I don’t know; I might have some other people who are interested; maybe “Hari Metau and Associates”, something like that my dear.’
Mrs Metau considered this for a moment but didn’t say anything. Hari shot down the stairs as quick as he was able.
A Tattooed Politician

‘WHEN I was a young man I worked at the Kwato Mission at Amau, inland from Cloudy Bay,’ Anu told Hari. Hari knew about the mission. It was originally set up on Kwato Island near Samarai by Cecil Abel and the London Missionary Society but broke away and became independent. Many of the early educated elite in Papua owed their success to Kwato. Amau was one of its head stations set up on the mainland in 1936.

‘Up in the mountains north of Amau there was a very pretty little valley occupied by people called Kevere; that wasn’t their real name but that’s what the prospectors who went up there looking for gold called them. Kevere was really just the name of nearby Mount Clarence. By the time I got there, just after the war, most of them had come down to Amau but there were still a few isolated hamlets in the hills. They were once great warriors and sorcerers and much feared. The government stopped them fighting but they kept up their sorcery, even after the mission came and I suspect they are at it still.’

‘I had developed an interest in sanguma because I saw its potential, not just for evil but for healing. One day some Kevere men asked me if I would like to go up to the valley to see them carry out a procedure that they called mimi. I
didn’t know what it involved but I went anyway. It was only when we were in the valley that I realised what they meant to do.’

‘This was bad *sanguma*?’ Hari asked.

‘Very bad,’ Anu replied. ‘They were out to take revenge on a man who had outraged one of their daughters. When they found him in his garden they signalled for me to wait in the long grass and then they crept up on him and knocked him to the ground. Four of them sat on his arms and legs while the other, the father of the girl, grabbed his head and twisted it. I was sure he had broken his neck and was horrified. All of them then went into the man’s garden hut and smoked a pipe. Then the oldest man, the one who had asked me to come along, walked over to the body. He called me over to watch. He poked and pressed the man all over and chanted some incantations and, much to my surprise, the dead man came to life.’

‘So he wasn’t murdered after all?’ Hari said.

‘Oh yes, it was murder all right. They dusted him off and sent him down to Amau. He seemed dazed but he could talk and walk alright. The men explained that the man was actually still dead but they had revived him and he would die again in a few days’ time at Amau, where the outraged girl could witness his demise.’

‘And did that happen?’ Hari asked.

‘Indeed it did. He walked around Amau in a sort of disembodied state, everyone knew what was happening, including the girl who watched him very closely all the time; he didn’t appear to recognise her though. A few nights later he passed away again in the night.’
‘Do you think someone might have done that to Manu; it would explain his erratic behaviour?’

‘It’s possible; do you want to hear the rest of the story?’

‘There’s more?’

‘There sure is!’ Ruby, who had been quiet so far, said. ‘Go on Grandfather.’

‘When I was at Amau I had fallen in love with a Kevere girl but she and her family were still very traditional; they had only come to Amau because everyone else had left the valley. Now, in the old days it was the rule that a young warrior had to present his bride with the little finger of someone he had killed before she would consider accepting him. I knew I couldn’t do that and had resigned myself to losing her but one day shortly after we had returned from the valley the men came to the house where I was staying and presented me with a little finger bound up on a stick.’

‘It was from the man they had killed?’

‘Exactly!’

‘So what did you do with it Anu?’

‘I presented it to the girl and we were married.’

‘Are we talking about Ruby’s grandmother here?’ Hari asked looking at the smiling girl.

‘The very one, Hari. Ruby comes from a time before. She is my granddaughter and a young woman but the blood of ancient Papua is flowing in her veins.’

‘So why have you told me this story?’ Hari asked with a puzzled look.

‘You told me that when you found the councillor he had his little finger cut off.’
‘Are you suggesting someone killed him to get his finger to present to a potential bride? That sounds incredible?’

‘People still believe in sorcery, it has certain attractions, sometimes people prefer a supernatural explanation to the truth. In a place like the settlement, with its poverty and intrigue, the revival of the old ways is not beyond the realms of possibility.’

‘You reckon we need to check whether there were any marriages at about the same time as the murder?’

‘I’d check up on people who come from down Abau way first Hari; but the finger might have been to seal an engagement or a betrothal too.’

‘This is confusing,’ Hari said. You’ve introduced sorcery as another motive for the murder. And the minister comes from down that way too.’

‘Indeed he does,’ Anu replied.

It was Mrs Metau’s habit to visit the ANZ bank on the corner of Hunter Street and Champion Parade on the Monday morning following Hari’s payday the previous Friday. She was generally waiting outside the doors before they opened and was ushered through the two sets of security doors with the rest of the small crowd by the guards. Once inside she took an appropriately numbered ticket from the machine in the foyer and went to wait in one of the chairs in the centre of the bank floor between the enquiry desks and the numbered tellers’ cages on the other side.

When her number was announced over the loudspeaker she would proceed to the relevant teller and hand over her plastic card. The teller, who generally knew her by sight,
would duly advise her of the amount of Hari’s pay which she
would scribble in a small notebook she carried for the
purpose. After a quick calculation she would withdraw a set
proportion of money.

Once out of the bank she walked back along Champion
Parade and dropped into the supermarket near the marina to
pick up a few items of canned or packaged food. Hari had
warned her time and again that such a regular pattern of
activity was an open invitation to any observant rascal but
she seemed to accomplish the feat every fortnight without
incident. When Hari suggested that she consider taking Silas
with her she retorted that it was more likely that the house
would be broken into while they were away.

On this particular morning, a fortnight or so after Hari’s
suspension, things did not go as planned and her routine was
rudely broken. She was there on the doorstep when the bank
opened as usual and duly took her seat in the queue and went
to the teller when her number was called. This time however
when she handed over her card the teller informed her that
there had been no deposit the previous week. Presented
with this information she demanded that he check again but
the result was the same. ‘Perhaps if you check again in a day
or so it will be there,’ he politely suggested, ‘sometimes the
government payments get delayed.’

Mrs Metau took her card and walked huffily out of the
bank. She knew about these so-called delays; the same thing
had happened before several years ago. On that occasion
the police department had actually run out of money and it
was six weeks before anyone got paid. She knew this wasn’t
the case this time however because there had been several
other policemen’s wives in the bank and they didn’t seem have any trouble collecting their husband’s pay.

When she told Hari he arranged to see the paymaster the following day. The paymaster was a middle aged lady whom Hari had known for years. ‘What’s going on Emily?’ he asked. ‘I’m supposed to be on full pay while I’m on suspension.’

Emily frowned. Hari had been threatened with suspension many times before for stepping on important people’s toes but this was the first time it had actually happened. ‘Let me check Hari; it’s all done by computer.’ She began banging numbers on the battered keyboard of her computer while staring at the flickering screen through her spectacles. She stopped and scratched her head. She gave Hari a nervous glance and banged a few more keys. Hari watched with a bemused look; he was totally ignorant of the workings of computers and people’s reliance on them always intrigued him. Emily scratched her head again. ‘Your pay appears to have been cancelled Hari. This might take me a while to sort out, can you come back later?’

Hari nodded. He was not unduly alarmed. Glitches in the payroll system were a never ending problem. He didn’t feel overly confident however. The coincidence of his suspension and the glitch in his pay made him feel vaguely uneasy. His pay was not large and like many government employees he tended to live from payday to payday. A break in the process tended to be more dramatic in those circumstances because it created unnecessary stress and anxiety, especially when Mrs Metau started to complain. ‘Okay, I’ll come back later but if you can’t find out what’s
going on you might have my good wife to deal with.’ Emily frowned and pushed her spectacles back along the ridge of her nose. ‘I’ll try my best Hari,’ she said in a voice that was not exactly convincing. Hari smiled reassuringly and went out to join Flynn in the Land Rover. He had experienced a sudden need for a coffee and a croissant.

When Hari came back in the afternoon Emily shook her head and put her hands in the air. ‘I don’t know what’s going on Hari,’ she said, ‘you know what these people are like.’ Hari didn’t exactly know which people she was talking about but he tended to agree and it was beginning to worry him.

‘What did they say exactly Emily?’ he asked.

Emily shook her head again. ‘They said they’d been told that you’ve been sacked and not to pay you any more Hari. I’ve explained that that’s not right and they said they need to check with the minister.’

Hari knew a delaying tactic when he heard one. ‘Which minister would that be Emily?’ he asked.

‘The police minister I assume Hari; who else could it be?’

‘Okay Emily; I think I know what’s happening; you just try to sort it out and I’ll check back tomorrow.’ Hari guessed that the Minister for Regional Development, George Dosu, had told the police minister to get rid of him. He could imagine the scene with the red-faced minister threatening and shaking his fists while demanding Hari’s head. He also realised that there was very little that he could do about it. At best he might get his lawyer friend, James Aino, to make a few phone calls and make some threats about possible legal action, unfair dismissal or something like that. He saw no point in harassing Emily any further.
James made the necessary calls the following morning but it was several days before anything arrived in Hari’s bank account. When it did come the amount was incorrect, about half his normal fortnightly pay. He went back to Emily and got her to chase it up again. James made some more calls and wrote a formal letter to the police department demanding an exact explanation for Hari’s suspension. There was no reply, which James explained was normal, but Hari’s pay was back at the right level on the next fortnightly payday. ‘Our friend George Dosu has twigged that I’m involved,’ James explained, ‘this isn’t the first time I’ve tangled with him.’ There was no mention of making up Hari’s short pay from the fortnight before however.

Hari took a philosophical view of the whole affair. He had seen similar things happen to his fellow policemen who had dared rock the boat and he knew that he was going to have more trouble in the future. He tried to explain this to Mrs Metau but she failed to grasp the concept that the public service and their political bosses could be so vindictive. The only sympathetic ear he got was from Flynn, who was accustomed to the perversities of the world, and from Robert, who had been appalled at Hari’s perfunctory suspension and was seriously considering his own future in the police force.

Hari explained that disillusionment was a natural reaction early in any career and he counselled him against any drastic action explaining that even though the system was corrupt and dysfunctional it was only from the inside that it could be truly fixed. The constable reluctantly agreed and Hari left him with a feeling of inadequacy. He suspected that the
despondency created by the whole episode would dog them both for a while to come, not least because of the realisation of how close to the edge public servants in Papua New Guinea lived.

Hari never doubted that he had been a dedicated and conscientious policeman. He was proud of the fact that he had never accepted bribes or bowed to any other form of corruption or used his police powers for his own gain. While he was proud of his record he never really understood why he had acted in that way. He had watched some of his fellow officers, who often came from the same background as he had, succumb to the myriad temptations placed in their way. Some of those men and women, and the women were often as bad as the men, had come to grief but others had flourished in the system and made very comfortable lives for themselves. Hari had stopped puzzling over these inequities early in his career and as he got older he no longer bothered to question his motivations.

He was an intuitive policeman. Although trained to be observant and analytical he seldom sat down to consciously think through a case. Constable Bokasi’s insistence upon taking copious notes and creating tables and graphs amused him more than anything else. The concept of thesis, antithesis and resolution was way above Hari’s head. He was simply a good copper.

He applied the same sort of intuition to his present situation and life in general. He did not really understand why people did what they did or what motivated them. He had a wide-eyed view of the world and was constantly being surprised. He liked it that way. If everything in life had a
logical explanation he reasoned it would invariably be dull. The predictable bored him. When he courted and married his wife Grace he knew he was doing the right thing and over the years, despite the occasional hiccup, this had proved true. How he knew she was the right one was beyond his powers of explanation and neither did he want to attempt it.

His observations went in one end of his brain and through some sort of mysterious process emerged at the other end, often with disconcerting timing, fully fledged and rounded. How or why these conclusions presented themselves bothered Hari very little. If he was ever asked to explain his reasoning he usually shrugged and explained it as a hunch that had paid off. He was, he sometimes thought, a disciple of the Sergeant Kasari missing bicycle school of policing. This, of course, made him a lawyer’s nightmare. Fortunately for the prosecutors most of his cases resolved themselves with a confession and it was unnecessary to engage in complex legal gymnastics in court.

What usually happened was that at some point in an investigation a tiny crack of light would appear in the deep recesses of his mind. The sliver of light was usually so tiny that it was impossible to see through to the other side. However, as he plodded along the opening would grow bigger, miniscule by miniscule. On rare occasions the gap burst open and everything was revealed in a glorious sunburst but mostly it just glowed there, barely noticed, in its secret little cave in his mind. Then it was a case of waiting for the right key to unlock it. When the first faint glimmer appeared, that was when Hari knew that he was on to something. It was like a forgotten word that steadfastly
refuses to come back into one’s head; all one can do is wait for it to make up its mind to return. In the case of the murdered councillor the crack of light appeared that afternoon.

Constable Bokasi was sitting on the veranda of the house with Mrs Metau and Bella when Hari got back from the latest of his frustrating meetings with Emily. The constable was still in his uniform, which was unusual. Hari had assumed that his visits since the affair of the suspension had more to do with Bella than an ongoing interest in the cases they had been working on together. He had resolved to broach the subject of the young people’s relationship with Mrs Metau at the next convenient opportunity but that never seemed to happen; when Hari judged the moment to be ripe something else was always there to inexplicably divert his attention. Flynn, who was also taking a keen interest in the matter, had pointed out that this reluctance was merely cowardice on Hari’s part. Hari scoffed at this suggestion and explained that it was simply a matter of timing. The dog gave him a knowing look as Silas waved them through the gate.

‘What brings you to our humble abode Constable?’ Hari asked after ascending the stairs and taking the glass of cool water offered by his wife. ‘I hope it’s not official, you still being in uniform and all.’

‘No sir, I’m off duty but I haven’t had time to change; I just wanted to discuss something with you – a few things actually.’

‘This sounds serious,’ Hari said glancing at his daughter and wife. ‘Go ahead Constable.’
‘First of all sir, do you remember the man in the hospital who was beaten up in the settlement?’ Hari nodded. ‘Well, he died sir. He went home after we saw him and seemed perfectly alright, just a bit vague, but then he passed away overnight.’

‘Have they got you back on the case Constable?’ Hari asked with a hopeful expression. Punishing the young constable with clerical work simply because of his association with him seemed grossly unfair and petty to Hari.

‘No sir, Constable Pus went out there; he told me about it. Apparently the man’s wife came into the station to complain that her husband had been killed by a sorcerer.’

‘Everyone thinks its sorcery when people die,’ Hari replied. ‘Why did she think that was the case?’

‘The body was mutilated sir. After he died they laid him outside on an old blue tarpaulin and went to fetch a pastor to pray for him. A neighbour agreed to keep an eye on the corpse but he got called away to answer the telephone. When they all got back they discovered that someone had cut off the little finger on the man’s right hand.’

The constable paused and Hari said, ‘Just like what happened with the councillor?’

‘Yes sir.’

Hari thought for a moment and then said, ‘In that vein, I had an interesting discussion with Anu at Lea Lea, I’ll tell you about that later. What else did you want to tell me Constable?’

‘The council by-election for Manu’s seat has finally begun sir.’

‘Yes, I know that, what’s so unusual about it?’
‘This sir,’ the constable said reaching into his top shirt pocket and extracting a folded piece of paper. Hari opened it and gave a slow whistle. Bella and Mrs Metau leaned over his shoulder to look. Hari held open the poster showing a photograph of a beaming Ruby with a caption underneath saying “For positive change Vote (1) for Ruby Vagi”.

‘Is that Rabu Dosu character running for the same seat?’ Hari asked.

‘Yes sir, they are the only two people contesting it.’

‘I thought there were residential requirements, don’t they both live in another ward?’

‘They’ve set up camps in the settlement sir; Ruby is using the CUMA School as her campaign headquarters.’

‘This sounds more like a war over buai than a by-election,’ Hari said.

‘Show Dad the other poster,’ Bella said to the constable.

The constable took another piece of folded paper out of his pocket. When Hari unfolded it he beheld a picture of what appeared to be a large brown cane toad surrounded by a circle with a slash through it.

‘She’s calling Rabu “the fat brown toad” Bella said with a smile. ‘She’s telling people that toads are pests and need to be stamped out. She’s paying kids to stick those posters everywhere.’

Hari hadn’t taken much notice of the by-election; his pay problems had kept him preoccupied. He took a sip of his water, which he noticed had become warm. ‘Is there anything else Constable?’ he asked.

‘No sir; I’m not sure what to do about any of it.’
‘Perhaps if you stay for dinner we can think about it,’ Hari replied. ‘Even though I’m suspended I think I’m allowed to express an opinion.’ He glanced at Mrs Metau but she didn’t blink.

‘I didn’t bring any wine sir.’

‘Then you’ll have to drink some of my common old beer,’ Hari smiled. ‘Is it alright for the constable to stay dear?’ he asked Mrs Metau.

‘I’ll add some vegetables to the pot, there’s enough fish to go around, Silas caught heaps today,’ Bella said before her mother could answer. Hari smiled and sat back in his chair. It was then that he became aware of the light. Later on when he thought about it he could not pinpoint at what exact time it showed up or the reason it appeared. Perhaps it had something to do with the information from the constable. Maybe it had been there since before he had been suspended and he just hadn’t noticed it. In any case, although it was no arbiter of logic, he knew its effect was always compulsive and addictive. He also knew that he would have little choice but to follow it down whatever path it chose to lead him.

Later that evening, after Constable Bokasi had departed and they were all in the kitchen drying dishes, Hari, who had been distracted by the light since the constable had gone, said very carefully, ‘Young Robert seems to be taking the abandonment of the case of the murdered councillor to heart.’ When he got no response from Mrs Metau or his daughter he hung up his tea towel and added, ‘Perhaps he needs some help?’

‘You mean to solve the case?’ Bella said sitting down at the kitchen table beside him. Hari nodded and they both
looked at Mrs Metau, who continued stacking away dishes on the shelf above the sink. She finally turned around and resting her hip on the edge of the kitchen bench cast a critical eye over the two of them.

‘Would that be part of your plan to go into business to help people Hari?’ she said.

I fell neatly into that trap Hari thought as he quickly tried to think of an answer. Bella saved him. ‘It would be really good for Robert’s career if he could solve a case like that,’ she said.

‘I thought the minister was a suspect,’ Mrs Metau replied, ‘I don’t think that would help his career very much.’

‘No one is above the law,’ Hari replied.

Mrs Metau sniffed. ‘I wouldn’t be too sure about that,’ she said.

‘I meant it would be good for Robert’s self-esteem if he could solve the crime,’ Bella interjected. ‘If it turns out that the minister had anything to do with it he would have to consider his options but at least he would have the satisfaction of having gotten to the truth.’

‘Since when have you been interested in Robert’s self-esteem?’ Mrs Metau asked with a raised eyebrow.

‘Well, you saw how dejected he was at dinner, but I’m just taking an academic interest,’ Bella replied without blinking. ‘It’s an interesting case, there’s sorcery and history all tied up in it, I might be able to write a paper about it.’

‘What sort of paper?’ Mrs Metau asked.

‘Well, Dad was telling me about Ruby and the customs of the people from around Kevere near Abau. The people from Abau and Suau have got a long history in Port
Moresby. In colonial times a lot of the domestic servants came from down that way; just like the clerical and shop people came from Hanuabada and the police from Western and Gulf. There are people in Mosbi who are fifth and sixth generation migrants and it would be fascinating to know how many of their customs they brought with them.’

‘Like killing people with sanguma and buying brides with people’s little fingers?’ Mrs Metau said.

‘That’s right, you think about it Mum. When people meet for the first time sooner or later they get round to asking each other where they come from. You look at those people next door. They are the grandchildren of migrants who came to Mosbi in the 1950s but if you ask them where they come from they still say they are Galkope from the Simbu; when in reality they are now Port Moresbeans.’

‘But they are still good gardeners,’ Mrs Metau added.

‘Exactly!’ Hari said without being sure why he said it.

Mrs Metau put her hands on her hips. ‘That may be so my girl but it doesn’t explain why your father needs to get involved again. Next thing he will be setting himself up as a private detective like in the movies.’

Hari pursed his lips and waited. He could see his wife puzzling over what she had just said and then he saw the glint in her eye.

‘It would be a way of helping people,’ he said slowly.

Mrs Metau shook her head and smiled. ‘And who will pay you to solve all these mysteries?’ she asked.

‘It will take a while to build up a reputation and a client base; James has said that he will give me some work. With
my pension we wouldn’t need too much more money; it would also keep me out of your hair my dear.’

Mrs Metau had been plotting Hari’s life after retirement but her plans had revolved around the church in Hanuabada. If she was honest with herself, however, her main motive was really to keep her husband out from under her feet. Heaven knows she loved him but to have him in the house all day long filled her with dread.

‘You’re a wily one Hari Metau,’ she said.

‘Yes dear,’ Hari replied.

‘Let me think about it,’ she replied, noting the momentary look of elation on his face. Bella put her hand over her father’s and smiled reassuringly at him. What a clever daughter I’ve got he thought.

Silas had found an old tube of Bostik in the bottom of Hari’s toolbox. It had become too set to repair a radiator but it was still pliable enough to force into the long split in the base of their canoe. Left to harden in the sun it had proved to be an effective caulk.

‘We used to get *gea* resin to repair canoes when I was a kid,’ Hari said. ‘It worked in much the same way.’

‘Maybe that’s where Bostik comes from,’ Silas replied as they launched the canoe into the harbour.

They paddled out past Elevala to cast their lines. Someone had told Silas that mullet had been running past the point for the last few days. Hari was partial to mullet but he was also happy to eat the longtom and snapper that prowled around the deeper waters of the harbour. When he was settled he leaned over to inspect the repairs.
‘It seems to be holding up well,’ he said.
‘It is an old vanági; I think you will have to get a new one very soon,’ Silas replied.
‘We used to get canoes from down Baimuru way but no one does that any more. We might have to look somewhere else; if I’m going to be semi-retired I’ll need a good canoe.’
‘You could still get one out past Kwikila, they have good logs down there; they bring them down the Kemp Welch River.’
‘I suppose I could get Kasari to organise someone to carve one for me,’ Hari mused.
‘I could get one if you like,’ Silas said.
‘Do you know people down that way? I thought you came from Port Moresby.’
‘My grandfather came from Cloudy Bay,’ Silas replied.
Hari’s ears pricked up. ‘There seems to be a lot of people in Moresby who originally come from there,’ he replied casually.
‘Grandfather came down from the mountains; he wasn’t really a coastal man, his tribe came from the Tufi side; he worked on the rubber plantations; when they started to bring highlanders down after the war he came to Moresby.’
‘They took his job, that’s a shame!’
‘No, he could have stayed but the highlanders used to fight all the time and he was frightened of them.’
‘I thought those mountain people around Abau were fierce warriors; my mother always told me that if I didn’t behave they would come and get me in the night. I heard that they couldn’t even get married until they’d killed an enemy in battle.’
'That was in the olden days, it was different when my grandfather was young.'

'Someone told me that they used to cut the little finger off the people they killed; I wonder if people still remember that?'

Hari knew that he had pushed it too far and he was not surprised when Silas shrugged and fell silent. Imagine that, he thought, in a modern city like Port Moresby the old warrior traditions are still alive.

Silas pulled in several big mullet. Hari, as usual, got a few bites but lost them. He managed to land a miserable looking longtom but felt so sorry for it that he took out the hook and released it. Despite that he was pleased with the day. There’s fishing and then there’s fishing he thought with satisfaction.

The next day Hari went to Kaugere. Ruby and Suli were there with the Sinabada and her husband Peter. ‘The way she’s going I wouldn’t be surprised if she ends up running for national parliament,’ Hari said to the Sinabada. He was sitting drinking coffee, eating coconut cake and watching Ruby and Suli sitting on the end of the veranda folding campaign brochures. The children in the classroom next door were singing a lullaby accompanied by Peter on his guitar. A copy of the brochure outlining Ruby’s policies was lying on the floor beside them. At the top of the list was a promise to tackle corruption; next was a promise to crack down on crime in the settlements.

‘Have you met her grandfather and mother?’ the Sinabada asked. ‘If you have you’d understand her drive.’
‘Indeed I have,’ Hari replied, ‘but she’s a power in her own right I think.’

‘She reminds me a little of Josephine Abaijah. She beat that rap in court, that surprised me,’ the Sinabada said.

‘Constable Bokasi was there, he told me about it. Apparently she turned up to face the magistrate carrying a bilum. No one knew what was in it but she kept stroking it. The magistrate ordered a policeman to take it off her but none of them were game; the story about the minister must have gotten around. I’m not sure how she did it; the police shotgun was lying on the prosecutor’s desk with a big ‘Exhibit A’ label on it for everyone to see. Anyway, she got a fine with no conviction recorded; otherwise she wouldn’t be running for council I guess. Robert talked to her afterwards and she showed him what was in the bilum; it was six pieces of cooked kaukau!’

‘She understands psychology, just like her grandfather taught her,’ the Sinabada said with a laugh.

‘She seems to be concentrating a lot on the settlement though; I wouldn’t have thought too many people from here would vote.’

‘You’d be surprised Hari but that’s not all; most of her customers come from the settlements. The buai sellers come from here as well as the people who buy and chew it.’

‘There’s nothing on here about buai,’ Hari said picking up the brochure. ‘You’d think lower buai prices would be a sure fire vote winner.’

‘That’s a little too close to bribery Hari; she’s not that dumb but the message is getting through anyway. I’ve heard some people ask her about it and all she does is wink.’
‘At least she’s not openly giving it away. That’s more along Rabu Dosu’s line.’
‘That bastard; he’s using all the old tricks, free beer and buai coupled with threats.’
‘I heard that he’s got a goon squad.’
‘Courtesy of the minister Hari.’
‘At least they’re staying away from here.’
‘Give them time Hari.’
‘This coconut cake is very nice; you used to sell it down by the service station as I remember.’
‘The cops started hassling us too much and we gave it up.’
‘That’s a shame.’
‘What did you do with your lunch Hari? I bet you gave it away again.’
‘That same little kid. She’s up there with her big brother guarding the Land Rover. He’s a bit shy but she makes up for it; I’ll give them a few kina for their mum.’
‘That’s Ani and her brother Lucas; they haven’t got a mum Hari; the lady who is supposed to be looking after them is their aunt. The reason she does it is because with the kids she can get a weekly food package from the Four Square Church. I’m not sure how much of the food they actually see but I doubt that it’s very much. She insists that they call her mum, probably to fool the church.’
‘What happened to their parents?’ Hari asked.
‘The father deserted them a long time ago; their mother ended up as a prostitute to support them, a two-kina meri; she died of AIDS a few years ago.’
‘It all sounds very sad,’ Hari said.
‘That’s not half of it Hari; you just don’t want to know. That poor little Lucas; I really feel sorry for him.’

‘Oh, why is that?’ Hari asked.

‘Those buggers from Boroko got to him. He staggered in here one night and we thought he was going to bleed to death. They dumped him on the highway near the roundabout and he managed to crawl up here.’

‘You mean he was sexually assaulted?’

‘At least with that bastard councillor and his little mate gone its slacked off a bit.’

‘Slacked off?’

‘They used to do the procuring here; it’s a big business in Mosbi, young girls and little boys.’

‘I knew there are some very young prostitutes in town but you don’t hear much about trafficking.’

‘Some of those kongkongs and the fat politicians, they like virgins. There are lots of expats living in Mosbi who come here for the kids too Hari. You ask those young hookers, they’ll all tell you that’s how they got started. The lucky ones get a sugar daddy but most of them end up on the streets. They don’t last long; most of them die of AIDS in their twenties.’

‘So who was the councillor’s “little mate”?’ Hari asked.

‘That one you saw in the hospital, the one who had his finger mysteriously chopped off. He got pretty bold after Manu was dead, figured he’d like to become the new cock of the roost.’

Hari sat back in his chair. As a policeman he had come to learn about Port Moresby’s dark secrets but he guessed he was like everyone else; what was out of sight was out of
mind. What he did know, however, was that the tiny gap of light in the back of his head had just opened up a little more.

‘I’d better get going,’ he said, ‘I’ve got a lawyer who wants me to do some snooping for him.’

‘I hope he’s paying you Hari,’ the Sinabada said.

‘So do I,’ Hari replied waving goodbye to Ruby and Suli.

When he got back to the Land Rover he found Ani and Lucas sitting under a shady tree with Flynn. Flynn had helped them eat Hari’s lunch. The unscathed Land Rover was parked nearby. Hari took two five kina notes out of his wallet and handed the children one each. They stood up and took the money.

‘I’d like to talk to you if that’s alright?’ Hari said squatting down beside the dog. The boy looked momentarily frightened. ‘It’s alright, I’m a policeman,’ Hari said quickly. Technically that was still right but it didn’t seem to reassure the boy. ‘I just want to ask you a couple of questions,’ he added, ‘there might be another five kina each in it for you.’

When he drove off he was deeply troubled. He pulled over and called James. ‘Could I come in to see you tomorrow instead?’ he asked. ‘Something has come up that I need to check out.’ James was in no rush, he liked to dangle his victims as long as possible. Hari was grateful. He wanted to speak to Mrs Metau. He also wondered how soon he could get the constable out of police headquarters to talk to him.
Orphans

WHEN he got home Hari pecked his wife on the cheek and said, ‘Let’s make a cup of tea, I want to tell you something.’ Mrs Metau gave him a quizzical look and shrugged and lit the ancient little brass kerosene stove that they used during the day for boiling the kettle.

‘It’s not nice,’ Hari said when the tea had brewed, ‘but I need to tell someone, I hope you don’t mind. Then I need to work out what to do about it.’

Mrs Metau nodded and Hari told her about his visit to the settlement.

‘There are lots of orphans because of that horrible disease,’ Mrs Metau observed. ‘A lot of them end up being looked after by their grandparents; all because of their selfish parents’ bad habits. There’s an old lady in Morata who looks after dozens of them; the government doesn’t help at all but the Catholic Church helps as much as it can. Children are dying every day from lack of love. They can’t even afford the two kina to go to hospital. I hear that there are dead children stored in the morgue because their relatives can’t afford to pay for their funerals.’

Hari was slightly taken aback. ‘How do you know all that?’ he asked. ‘You’ve never talked to me about it.’
‘The ladies at the church and the market talk about it sometimes. It’s so common nobody takes much notice of it. You must have heard the stories too Hari?’

Hari thought for a moment. ‘Well yes, I guess I have now that I come to think about it; it’s just that if it doesn’t confront you directly you tend to block it out; you look at the kids on the street and they are just there, you don’t think about how they got there I guess.’

‘Is that what you wanted to tell me Hari?’ Mrs Metau asked.

‘Partly, but there’s more to it I’m afraid. I talked to a couple of orphans today, a little girl and her big brother. He was really shy and I couldn’t work out why and then the Sinabada told me that he’d been sexually assaulted. Apparently the dead councillor was involved in procuring kids for paedophiles and he was one of his victims.’

‘That’s terrible Hari, the poor child, they have such hard lives, they don’t need that sort of thing as well,’ Mrs Metau said patting him on the hand.

‘They also had an elder sister,’ Hari said.

‘Oh dear, what happened to her?’ Mrs Metau asked.

‘She was about ten years old. The aunt is also involved in prostitution but she is a bit more selective about her clients and has managed to avoid AIDS so far. Anyway, one of her clients was the councillor. It’s amazing how many married men use prostitutes. They must have connived to get the girl involved in it; at least that’s what I assume. Anyway, according to her brother and sister she resisted and ended up dead. They said she refused to go with a white man who lives on Touaguba Hill.’
‘Who killed her Hari?’

‘I’m not sure; I don’t think anyone reported it to the police but I need the constable to check just in case. A lot of policemen are afraid to go into the settlements and the people there tend to prefer to look after their own affairs anyway. She was severely beaten and then thrown off a bank down onto the roadway. Her little body was smashed and battered but she was still alive when some neighbours picked her up and carried her to their house. They didn’t have a car or the money to take her to hospital but they kept her as comfortable as they could.

The little girl I met and her brother and some of her friends were there when she died. They all sat beside her and sang songs and told her stories. She was very popular with the other children. She always had a big smile and laughed a lot; she mothered many of the smaller children they said.’

‘Oh dear, that’s so sad Hari!’

‘Those two kids told me without any sign of emotion; it was all so matter-of-fact; that’s what shocked me I think. Then they showed me the scars they both had from beatings by the aunt’s drunken boyfriends. They’ve both had broken bones that had to heal by themselves. The bastards that did that are still living in the settlement doing it to other kids as we speak.’

‘And you think the councillor had something to do with the girl’s death?’

‘I’m not a betting man but I’d put money on it my dear.’

‘Have you spoken to the aunt yet?’

‘No; she’ll deny everything anyway.’

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‘So what can you do? You’re no longer a policeman Hari.’

‘But Robert is, my dear. That woman needs to be brought to account. What scares me is what will happen to those two kids if people hear I am asking questions. It’s a horrible dilemma my dear. Even if the aunt is arrested that would deprive the kids of what little food that they get. I don’t really know what to do.’

‘Neither do I Hari. This was once a good and caring town but we are turning into animals, it’s very sad.’

‘At least I’ve got it off my chest; thank you for listening. I’ll think of something I’m sure.’

Ruby and Hari stood at the top of the cutting looking down onto Scratchley Road. ‘It’s a wonder she wasn’t hit by a car,’ Ruby said. ‘As it is she must have bounced off the rocks in the retaining wall on the way down. That must be at least a twenty metre drop. I wish Manu was still alive so we could throw him off.’

‘We don’t know that it was the councillor for sure,’ Hari replied, ‘but given his record I’d probably help if you asked.’

‘My wife and I carried her along the edge of the road and then we brought her up the hill,’ the old man with bandy legs standing with them explained. ‘She didn’t weigh much but we were puffing when we got to her aunt’s house. We called out to that babine pamuk but there was no one there; that’s when we took her to our house. She was moaning a lot but after we made her a bed she smiled at us and said thank you.’

‘How did you know she was on the road?’ Ruby asked.

‘Some kids came and told us; they’d been looking for her aunt but couldn’t find her.’
‘Was the aunt very upset when she found out about her?’
‘Not really; she said that she was a bad girl who never did as she was told and she wasn’t surprised that she’d fallen down onto the road.’
‘Fallen on the road – did she think it was an accident?’
‘That’s right, but everyone knows that’s not true. She didn’t even bother to come and look at her body. The Sinabada was away when it happened, she went down to Australia to have her baby but some of the boys borrowed her car and took the body to the morgue. Everyone collected money for her funeral but the aunt didn’t come to that either.’
‘Do you know where the aunt is now; she doesn’t seem to be at home?’ Hari asked.
‘She goes off with men all the time, that’s probably where she is now.’
‘What happens to the kids? The house is all locked up.’
‘Sometimes they come and sleep at our house; otherwise they sleep in the school. A lot of kids sleep up there because it’s safe with the Sinabada and she gives them food; they know the drunks are less likely to bother a white woman.’
‘What about the ward councillor; did you ever see him at the aunt’s house?’ Hari asked.
‘Now and again; he was there the night before they discovered his body out in the water. He was drunk and singing out for the aunt but she wasn’t there; she had gone to Gordons, she’s got some boyfriends there I think. The councillor woke us up with his shouting. He was carrying on about needing a woman. We kept the door shut because he got very violent when he was like that Inspector.’
Hari let the reference to his soon-to-be defunct rank pass and said, ‘You and your wife must have been some of the last people to see, or at least hear, the councillor alive.’

‘That might be so Inspector but we didn’t kill him and I don’t know who did. I’m too old for that – if I was a younger man, who knows, there are a lot of people in this settlement that we’d be better off without,’ the old man said with a toothless smile.

‘Not many people liked him did they?’ Ruby said.

The old man shrugged. ‘He was an evil man. Why he was like that I don’t know; as I said there are many others just like him here. When he couldn’t find the aunt he shouted out that he was going up to the school to get a young girl for the night; he had no shame, none of the men have shame these days.’

‘But there were only little kids and the Sinabada and her husband up there; what do you think he was talking about? The Sinabada would surely have seen him if he’d started bothering the kids.’

‘He might have found someone on the way,’ the old man replied.

‘Or someone found him,’ Ruby said.

‘That too,’ the old man replied. ‘I think that’s what happened.’

The old man leaned over and patted Flynn on the head and then took a sweet biscuit out of a fold in his faded laplap and handed it to him. The dog took it gently between his teeth and then crunched it in one bite. ‘That’s Frank, the councillor’s dog,’ the old man remarked. ‘He’s a nice old thing; I don’t know how he put up with Manu.’
‘It’s a long story,’ Hari replied. ‘He’s living with me now.’

‘Aren’t you the lucky one,’ the old man smiled and patted the dog again. Flynn nodded and smiled back.

They thanked the old man and he returned to his anxious wife who was staring from the door of their house. They walked up towards Korobosea village where Hari had parked his Land Rover. He had different minders this time. He and Ruby were both immersed in their separate thoughts and didn’t say much until they got close to the road. Then Ruby said, ‘Perhaps I should change my priorities for this by-election Hari. Everyone says they’re going to fight corruption and do something about law and order but it never happens does it? People know when you say that that it doesn’t mean much.’

‘So what would you change Ruby?’ Hari asked.

‘Maybe I should think about doing something to help these kids, especially the ones without parents, that would be more worthwhile I think; that other stuff seems trite by comparison.’

‘It would certainly clearly distinguish your campaign from Rabu’s but what could you do for the kids? It seems like an insurmountable problem to me Ruby.’

‘I’m not sure Hari; maybe I should talk to my mother; she’s doing the buai deliveries while I’m campaigning, she should be in Mosbi tomorrow, she might have some ideas; Grandfather might have some thoughts too.’

‘You might also like to talk to Mrs Metau,’ Hari suggested. ‘She and the ladies at the church appear to have been discussing the issue of late; you might get some ideas there.’

‘Really Hari? You don’t think she’d mind?’

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‘I’ll ask her if you like; give me a day or so and I’ll let you know.’

‘That’s good of you Hari. I guess I’d better get back to the campaign. Where are you going now?’

‘I’ve arranged to meet Constable Bokasi at the Beachside Brasserie for coffee. Flynn’s coming for a croissant.’

‘I like croissants too Hari; maybe I should come with you.’

‘So you can stir up young Robert; you can come if you like Ruby.’

‘It’s alright Hari; I was only kidding, say hello for me and tell him I’ll be around to police headquarters to make sure he’s working hard as soon as I get elected.’

She waved goodbye and Hari opened the Land Rover door for Flynn. ‘Let’s go get those croissants,’ he said to the dog before handing a five kina note to each of the two young boys who had edged up to him as soon as the dog was safely in the car.

‘I went through everything that I could lay my hands on, including the Sergeant’s day book, and there is no record of a little girl being assaulted or dying at Kaugere around that time sir. The only record I could find was at the morgue; there’s no record of a burial, I thought she might have been cremated but there’s no record there either. It’s a very sad case sir; the morgue record just refers to her as Susie, there’s no surname or father’s name mentioned.’ Robert was reading from his notebook as he and Hari sat drinking their coffee. It was one of his rostered days off and he was out of uniform and dressed casually.

‘At least they’re letting you out a bit more,’ Hari observed.
‘I went during my lunch breaks sir; I didn’t think it was wise to ask permission.’

‘They’ve got to let you get back on the beat sometime,’ Hari replied.

‘There’s an inspector on transfer from Mount Hagen due to arrive soon sir; I think that I’ll be assigned to him; that’s what the sergeant thinks anyway.’

‘What’s the inspector’s name?’ Hari asked.

‘Mek Pung sir; he comes from Mul or Dei, somewhere like that.’

‘Doesn’t ring a bell,’ Hari replied, ‘must be a younger man.’

‘I don’t know sir; I don’t think he’s worked in Mosbi before.’

‘If he’s managed to survive in the Western Highlands he’s either very corrupt or very tough; let’s hope the latter is the case. Is there anything else of interest going on Constable?’

‘Yes sir; the Minister for Regional Development has been meeting with Superintendent Tabai. They’ve been making plans for the council by-election; the superintendent told us the minister is especially worried about people in the settlements not being able to vote without undue pressure. He also says we will have to be vigilant to make sure there are no irregularities in the ballot process.’ The constable was reading from his notebook again.

‘I don’t recall the police being interested in local level elections before; I’d better warn Ruby; thanks for the tip Constable.’
‘They’re going to send two mobile squads out on the day of the election sir. In the meantime they are going to have foot patrols going through the settlements.’
‘That will really go down well Constable.’
‘If there are any troubles they plan to call an emergency in the settlements and institute a curfew.’
‘I think that’s called state sponsored terrorism Constable. By the way, Ruby sends her regards.’
‘Yes sir.’
‘You don’t seem very impressed Constable.’
‘It’s not that sir; it’s just that I find her a bit unsettling.’
‘So do a lot of people Constable, especially the minister.’
‘Do you think they will use the police to ruin her chances of election sir?’
‘I’m absolutely sure of it Constable.’
‘What can we do about it sir?’
‘Not a lot Constable; I’ll talk to her and try to get her to avoid being provoked or getting into confrontations.’
The constable looked glum and they ordered another coffee each.
‘Okay, let’s forget about Ruby for a moment,’ Hari said when their coffee arrived. If I was still working on the case of the murdered councillor do you know what I’d be doing right now Constable?’
‘I’m not sure sir; perhaps we need to review the evidence.’
‘That’s exactly right - very good. Have you got your notebook handy?’
‘Yes sir.’
‘First of all let’s see what we know about the councillor. We know he comes from down Kalo or Hula way. What else is there Constable?’

‘He was in the army sir; he worked as a cook in the officer’s mess at Murray Barracks. That’s where he met Major Lennon.’

‘Otherwise known as our good friend Arthur of the string vest. And he pimped for the officers and sold them dope. He also traded betel nut to the soldiers in partnership with another soldier, Bessie’s late husband.’

‘Then he was discharged for pouring boiling soup over another cook.’

‘Tomato soup, not pea and ham or mulligatawny but tomato soup,’ Hari added. ‘But he had a short temper and did other nasty things before that; finally his mate Arthur couldn’t cover for him and they kicked him out.’

‘After that he set up a security company sir.’

‘And employed a dog called Frank. He then stole from the premises he was supposed to be guarding until no one would employ him anymore. That not only means that he was bad tempered and violent but also stupid.’

‘Then he appears to have been involved in renting out shacks in the settlements at exorbitantly high rates.’

‘While still trading in buai and running protection rackets using raskols to intimidate the sellers and collect the money.’

‘Yes sir; that’s what he was doing just before he was murdered.’

‘So what else do we know about him, apart from his very bad temper?’

‘He was HIV positive sir.’
‘I wonder if that had an effect on his mind Constable, perhaps we should ask someone?’
‘It’s possible sir; his behaviour was very erratic.’
‘But he was also a drunk, maybe that affected his mind too?’
‘If he was still dealing in drugs sir he was probably also using them himself; that might not have helped either.’
‘Good point Constable. What else?’
‘He regularly beat his wife and son sir.’
‘And Bessie, Ruby’s mother, who he also raped.’
‘He may also have been involved in the murder of the little girl Susie.’
‘And he was procuring children for paedophiles. He might have been one himself.’
‘He was using sorcery to threaten people sir. He put a curse on Arthur.’
‘I’m not sure that’s admissible Constable; sorcery is a vexed legal problem.’
‘Nevertheless, he paid sorcerers to harm people sir.’
‘Hmm, I’ll have to think about that one Constable. What else?’
‘He was involved in some sort of feud with the Sinabada over the CUMA School. He thought she was ripping off overseas aid money and he wanted a share sir.’
‘To the extent that he was threatening to arrange for some raskols to burn the school down. What else?’
The constable flipped through his notebook. ‘I think that’s about it sir.’
‘A thoroughly unsavoury character but not an unusual one for these times I think. Now, given all those vices, who had reason to murder him Constable?’

‘Well, the first person who comes to mind is the Sinabada sir. She could have arranged to have him murdered to protect the school and the children.’

‘Unlikely, but not to be discounted Constable, despite what Mrs Metau says, the Sinabada could be a consummate actress and have us all bluffed. Remember, in this game it pays to assume that nothing is as it seems.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Then we have a corrupt politician who may have arranged to have him murdered so that he could replace him in the council with his wantok, in this case his cousin.’

‘I think that we’ve established that the minister is very greedy and does not seem to have any moral scruples sir.’

‘But he wouldn’t do it himself of course; so there might be, as in the case of the Sinabada, an unknown hit man, or more likely hit men.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘And for that we have to consider three possibilities Constable; the first is a raskol gang, the second is a sorcerer or sorceress and the third is an urban warrior.’

The constable looked puzzled. ‘An urban warrior sir; I don’t think I understand.’

‘The little finger Constable; it’s the trade mark of a Kevere warrior; an old custom that seems to have been imported from the mountain valleys to the city. I find that scenario particularly appealing and, before you ask, no, I don’t think it’s far-fetched.’
‘Alright sir, I’ve made a note of it.’
‘Good, we have to consider all the possibilities Constable. What else?’
‘Arthur sir; he may have murdered him because he thinks that the councillor gave his wife AIDS and she died from it.’
‘Quite so; that would make the case very simple but I don’t think we will be that lucky Constable. What else?’
‘The councillor’s son sir; Suli may have murdered him to stop him beating his aunt as well as himself.’
‘And Suli may have discovered that the councillor raped his mother and he is the result; that would be psychologically damaging for anyone.’
‘And of course Suli’s mother Bessie may have done it for having been raped in the first place.’
‘A murder bred of hatred that had festered away over many years; a classic case in anyone’s book.’
‘I think that’s all sir.’
‘Not quite Constable. He wasn’t obviously beaten up, he may have just been drunk and fell in the sea and drowned.’
‘I hadn’t thought of that sir; but how does that account for the rope around his leg and the missing finger?’
‘Precisely Constable; it’s an unlikely scenario but, nevertheless, one that cannot be discounted entirely.’
‘No sir; it’s a pity the forensic people couldn’t have examined the body.’
‘Too busy with other stuff to worry about another settlement murder; same old story Constable.’
‘Yes sir. Which one do you think is right?’
‘None of them!’ Hari said with a finality that surprised the constable.
‘None of them sir; then who killed him?’

‘I don’t know Constable but I doubt whether it was any of those people. I think I know how and why he died and I think it shouldn’t be too hard to find out who was responsible. However, this is where it gets a bit tricky; not so much for me but for you Constable.’

‘For me sir; I don’t understand?’

Hari finished his coffee and looked around the restaurant. They were sitting by the window well away from the counter and there were no other patrons sitting nearby. He leaned forward in his chair and lowered his voice.

‘You will agree will you not Constable that the councillor was a thoroughly despicable character. He made many people’s lives miserable and he probably contributed to the deaths and depravity of several of them, not the least being children who he forced into prostitution; he may very well have killed one of them.’

The constable nodded and wondered where Hari was heading.

‘Would you also agree that everyone is better off with the councillor gone?’

The constable nodded again.

‘This is the important part Constable and you don’t have to answer me if you feel uncomfortable.’

‘Yes sir; please go on.’

‘What do you think is more important Constable, law or justice?’

‘I thought they were the same thing sir.’

‘Not necessarily Constable. In this particular case we have a thoroughly despicable character who seems to have
received his just desserts. Just desserts Constable; it’s very similar to justice. On the other hand we may also have a person or persons who have broken the law by murdering him. As policemen we are duty bound to arrest that person or persons and bring them before the courts, are we not?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Do you think that would be just Constable?’

‘I don’t understand sir.’

Hari took a deep breath. ‘I’m fairly sure what happened Constable and I’m confident that I can identify the murderers, if in fact he was murdered. Do you understand that?’ The constable nodded. ‘But I’m disinclined to arrest them Constable. I would much prefer to leave this case unsolved. As we both know, no one in authority is in the slightest bit interested. It would be an easy thing to do. On the other hand we could be accused of condoning a crime. It’s a difficult call Constable.’

‘I see sir; it’s a very difficult decision.’

‘Indeed it is Constable. I’d like you to think about it.’

‘Alright sir; I think I need some time however.’

‘Very good Constable; we understand each other.’

‘Yes sir. Why do you think you know who did it?’

‘I can’t explain that Constable but I’m fairly sure that I’m right. I told you that Ruby and I had spoken to the old couple who found poor Susie. I also think they were the last people to see the councillor before he died. On the night before he was discovered floating in the sea he was on his way from near their house to the school where quite a few children were sleeping. He was drunk and he was looking for sex. I think he died on the way.’
WHEN Hari arrived home he discovered that Mrs Metau wasn’t there. ‘Where is my wife?’ he asked Silas.

‘I’m not sure; some ladies in the old church minivan came around this morning and she went off with them,’ Silas replied. ‘She said that I had to stay here and that she had left a note for you in the kitchen.’

‘Off to one of her auxiliary meetings I suppose,’ Hari replied as he went up the stairs with Flynn closely following. Hari wasn’t sure what the ladies discussed at their meetings but he suspected that it was just an excuse to get together to gossip. Good luck to them he thought picking up the note on the kitchen table. The note said, “Gone to the settlement for an election rally, back in the afternoon, lunch in the oven.” Hari scratched his head. An election rally? What does that mean? He went downstairs to the 44-gallon drum oven, which was still warm from the embers underneath, and took out the two spicy sago rolls. He bit into one and broke off a piece for Flynn. They both sat down on the stairs to share the rest.

The election rally was being held in the old Salvation Army hall off Scratchley Road. Ruby had despatched a team of children all over the settlement the previous day with
flyers advertising the event. When a crowd had gathered she went to the front of the hall to address them. The old building was open and breezy and people on the outside were hanging through the doors and windows to hear.

She began by introducing herself, not that this was really necessary because everyone knew her, and then related the events which had led up to the by-election. Everyone nodded; it was a well-known story. They were waiting to hear what she was actually going to promise them.

‘I’m only going to make one promise,’ she said, ‘and that is that I will work as hard as I can for you all.’ This was an unusual promise in Papua New Guinean politics; most candidates tended to promise things which everyone knew they couldn’t possibly deliver. She continued, ‘Whether I am successful or not will unfold over time. If I fail I won’t make excuses and I will not expect to be elected again.’ This was also unusual and the crowd’s interest had been stirred. She paused for a moment to let them digest what she had said. When the chattering had died down she continued.

‘I know many of you from the bungs where you buy my buai. I hope you like it; it’s top quality buai; my mother and I make sure of that personally in the same way I hope to provide you with top quality service if I am elected.’ There was a smattering of clapping from the crowd.

‘My priorities, if I am elected, will be slightly different to the person opposing me. My focus will be on the young people in our communities. They are the future and we must look after them and give them the best chance in life; if we don’t there will be no future for this great city and our
country Papua New Guinea. Why have I decided this should be my top priority? Let me explain.’

The audience seemed particularly attentive as Ruby explained all the problems facing the children and youths in the settlements. She mentioned all the orphans who led such precarious lives. She was describing the work done at the CUMA School and how it must be supported when a man’s voice rang out from the back of the hall. ‘What about corruption, what about all the crime, what are you going to do about that?’

The crowd was turning around to see where the man’s voice had come from when another voice echoed from the other side of the room. ‘Why are you all listening to this kekeni buai with all her tattoos and sanguma; she can’t help anyone; she just wants to get more power so she can sell her buai; shame on you kekeni!’

Ruby was about to reply when another voice came from the centre of the room. The other voices shouted back. Soon the crowd began to grumble and become restless. A scuffle broke out towards the back of the hall and someone threw a chair into the air.

Ruby looked around. Behind her, as if from nowhere, several policemen had appeared. Some of them advanced on the crowd, another swung a baton and someone yelped in pain. Two of the policemen took her by the arms and pulled her towards the door. People began running across the lawn outside and up the road back into the settlement. A police van with its siren flashing pulled up in the road.

A small knot of people collected behind Ruby as the police dragged her towards the van. People were shouting
and milling about. Total confusion was taking over when there was a sudden hush and Ruby found herself pulled to a halt. She peered through the phalanx of policemen. Ahead of her, between the police and their van, stood a group of elderly ladies. At the centre Pastor Lohia and Mrs Metau stood side by side. The crowd from the settlement was slowly gathering behind them. The police seemed confused. Off to one side a small group of young men had become isolated.

‘I suggest you let Miss Vagi go,’ the pastor said in a strong and level voice. ‘She has done nothing wrong and you have no reason to arrest her.’ The policemen hesitated.

‘You should be arresting those raskols over there,’ Mrs Metau said. ‘They are the ones who have been sent here to cause trouble.’

‘But you know that don’t you because you arranged for them to be here?’ another of the elderly ladies added. ‘Shame on you.’

The crowd was still quiet and then someone echoed the lady in a hushed voice. Others took up the call. Soon a subdued chant began. ‘Shame, shame, shame,’ the crowd repeated.

Ruby took advantage of the confusion among the police and pulled herself free. She crossed over to stand with Mrs Metau and the pastor and held up her hands.

‘This is the way my opposition behaves,’ she said. ‘They organised for those raskols to be here and the police to come. Do you want that sort of person in council?’

There was a murmur among the crowd and then someone shouted, ‘No, no, no!’ loudly. Soon the crowd took up the
chant again. Ruby signalled for quiet and when the crowd was silent said, ‘You have heard what I said and you have seen my opposition’s reaction. You are not fools; you know what is happening.’ The crowd began chanting, ‘We know, we know,’ until Ruby signalled for silence again.

‘I want you to go home now and think about what you have witnessed. I will talk to you again but not at a meeting that the police can disrupt. I will come to your homes. Go quietly now and think about what you have seen.’

With that she turned to face the policemen. The look on her face was a combination of defiance and triumph. The policemen hesitated and then surged forward, thought better of it and then slowly turned around and went back to their van. The group of raskols had disappeared.

Hari was pulling weeds out of their kaukau patch when he heard the old church minivan pull up outside the gate. He heard the clank of metal as Silas undid the padlock followed by the creak of hinges as the gate was swung open. He stretched and brushed off his hands. He met Mrs Metau at the base of the stairs. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek. She had a ripe pawpaw under one arm.

‘Did you have a good meeting my dear? You must fill me in on all the gossip.’

Mrs Metau gave him a careful smile. She looks a bit flushed he thought; I hope she hasn’t been drinking wine again. Why she would have been drinking wine at a church auxiliary meeting didn’t occur to him.

‘We had a very successful meeting Hari; we might do it again next week!’
Hari scratched his arm and followed her up the stairs with a puzzled look on his face.

There are two daily newspapers in Papua New Guinea. They are both tabloids. The first is the venerable old Post Courier, established by a merger of the old South Pacific Post and the New Guinea Times Courier. Originally owned by the Herald and Weekly Times it was later taken over by Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited. The Post Courier has always done its own thing and because Papua New Guinea has always been considered a media backwater it has managed to maintain a robust and independent editorial line.

The other newspaper is The National, which started life as a church-owned affair but is now owned by a timber logging magnate from Sarawak. The National tends to run a pro-business editorial and hardly ever mentions anything about the notorious logging trade. The paper is a bit more upmarket and trendy than its rival and is slowly winning the circulation wars. Both papers are fiercely competitive and like a lot of people in Port Moresby Hari tended to buy both papers so that he could get the different perspectives on any story.

Now that he wasn’t such a regular customer at the Beachside Brasserie, where copies of both papers were provided free for the clientele to read, he had resorted to despatching Silas to the local store in the morning to buy a copy of each one. Silas had a petty cash float for the purpose secreted in a tin can under a rock by the gate. If he wasn’t sleeping under the house overnight he generally took the K2.40 for both papers home with him so he could collect
them on his way to Hari’s house in the morning. Since he was an early riser he tended to read them both before passing them on to his boss.

This was the case the next morning. Hari paddled down the stairs about 7.00 am in his shorts and bare feet, patted Flynn on the head and went over to Silas at the gate to get the papers. Silas passed both folded papers over to him with a broad grin on his face. Silas wasn’t normally prone to grinning; anyone meeting him for the first time might even describe his demeanour as sullen or gruff. Hari knew that he wasn’t like that; he had just had a fairly rugged upbringing and was more defensive than most young men of his age. Hari gave him a quizzical look in return but didn’t say anything. Silas watched him ascend the stairs and then waited in eager anticipation.

Mrs Metau was pouring tea when Hari sat down. He took a grateful sip and then flipped the folded newspapers open. The headline in the Post Courier read, “Church Elders Diffuse Election Riot”. The National’s headline read, “Police Outgunned by Militant Ladies”. Both papers featured a large coloured photograph of Ruby facing off against a confused looking group of policemen.

‘Look at this my dear; it’s Ruby on the front page of both papers,’ Hari said turning them around for her to see.

‘Oh dear,’ Mrs Metau said.

Hari gave her a curious look and turned the papers around again. He peered closer at the photographs. In each one, he could see, quite clearly, just behind Ruby, his wife standing next to Pastor Lohia. The pastor looked calm and resolute
but Mrs Metau appeared to be threatening someone with a clenched fist.

‘I didn’t notice any photographers there,’ she said with a slightly embarrassed smile. ‘That Dosu man must have arranged for them to come.’

Hari sat back in his chair and beheld his wife.

‘What’s the matter?’ she said in a slightly huffy voice. ‘Pastor Lohia and I both agree that our church leaders have become a lot like our politicians, they are too tied up with policy and grand plans and having a good time to care about the ordinary people any more. When it was the old London Missionary Society it was different, they were there to help the people but now that it is the United Church it seems that the people have to help the church. We must tell our church leaders that it is time to change, our people are in great trouble and they need help and our leaders must become less selfish and more caring. What Ruby wants to do for the young ones is a good start. Maybe our church leaders will see what she is doing and have a change of heart. We can only try.’

Hari chose his words very carefully. ‘There is nothing the matter my dear, I was just wondering about the photographs, that’s all. It’s good to see you taking an interest in local politics. As you say, there should be more of it. I’ve always said that if more ordinary people took an interest in politics we wouldn’t be in half the mess we are now.’

‘That’s good,’ Mrs Metau replied in a mollified tone. ‘What do you want for breakfast?’

‘Was that a ripe pawpaw that I saw under your arm last night?’
‘It was.’

‘Then perhaps pawpaw would be good for breakfast my dear.’

When Mrs Metau went inside to slice the pawpaw Hari glanced down towards the gate where Silas was sitting and watching carefully. Hari waved at him and the young man slapped his knee and slowly fell over sideways onto the grass. Flynn glanced from one to the other with a puzzled look on his face.

Hanuabada, the big village, has always been there. It was there when the crazy Owen Stanley, personally refusing to go ashore because of his morbid fear of cannibals, cruised past in his ship Rattlesnake in 1852 and it was there when the British and Australians first arrived on shore in the 1870s. The only time it hadn’t really been there was during the war in 1942 when everyone had been evacuated to safer places along the coast to avoid the Japanese bombing. After the war it was rebuilt using sawn timber and iron. It was originally three villages, Hanuabada, Tanobada and Elevala. These days there are still some people who make the distinction between the Hanuabada and Elevala ends.

Before the government started extending the town into the harbour using landfill from the cuttings through Burns Peak the currents and tides used to dump debris among the house stilts of Hanuabada. However, since the creation of the Poroporena Freeway and the massive landfill, there has been a subtle shift in the current and now debris tends to wash up at the Elevala end of the village. This is a matter of some complaint because this new debris, unlike the palm
fronds, driftwood and coconuts of the past, tends to be chiefly comprised of plastic bottles, shopping bags and other unmentionable human detritus.

It was into this urban soup that Hari and Silas came to launch their new canoe on its maiden voyage. They had driven down to Kwikila to collect it from Kasari’s house the previous day. Silas had sourced the log upstream and had floated it down accompanied by a highly regarded elder carver. After it had been carried up to the old sergeant’s house the carver had set to with a traditional style hand adze to hollow it out. In this case the adze was a plane blade bound to a small tree-fork handle. Kasari helped with the work and insisted upon leaving an extended section at the front end. When the hollowing was finished he set to with a chisel and carved a traditional Western Province Gogodala crocodile head prow.

Once that was done they turned the whole thing over and gave the hull several coats of a pleasing blue-coloured paint purloined from the District Office. After that the old carver fashioned a traditional outrigger, mast and sail. It took all four of them, Hari, Silas, Kasari and the carver, to load it onto the roof of the Land Rover for transport back to Port Moresby. Although they disassembled the outrigger and mast and padded it all well with blankets and tied it down tightly with ropes Silas fretted all the way back to town and insisted upon frequent stops to check it.

With the help of Robert and Bella they had unloaded it on the beach that evening. So fine did it look after they’d re-attached the outrigger and mast that Silas slept by it overnight to make sure it wasn’t stolen. Mrs Metau, upon
beholding the distinctive prow, christened it Pukpuk 11. The faithful but battered and well-patched old Pukpuk 1, until then nameless but honoured retrospectively, was broken up on the beach and piled into the back of the Land Rover. Its venerable remains would fuel the 44-gallon drum oven under the house for some time to come.

The new craft was a finely balanced thing and sat serenely in the water. It skimmed across the harbour with consummate ease and was absolutely watertight. Both Hari and Silas wondered why they had put up with its lumbering predecessor for so long.

‘That’s what you get when someone who knows what they doing builds a canoe; that old carver and the sergeant are fine craftsmen,’ Hari said with elation as he ran the crocodile head prow into the waves. Silas, steering from the rear nodded in agreement. ‘I told you those logs from out there are good ones,’ he said with pride. He had spent several days upstream inspecting trees and negotiating a price on the one he had chosen. They gained speed, the old sacked policeman and the reformed young raskol, united in the thrill of salt spray and wind in their hair.

The constable was wearing his uniform when Hari met him at the Beachside Brasserie. He had a resolute and vaguely defiant expression on his face. It looks like he may have made up his mind about our talk Hari thought as he sat down.

‘I’ve ordered the coffee and croissants already sir,’ the constable said by way of greeting. There was a note of authority in his voice that Hari hadn’t noticed before. This
could go either way Hari thought; he will either give me a dressing down about the sanctity of the law or he will wax philosophically; in any event, I think I like this new assertive style.

‘What’s new Constable,’ Hari asked as innocently as possible.

Robert took a sip of his coffee and carefully replaced the cup in its saucer. Hari waited in anticipation.

‘I’ve thought about what we talked about sir and I’ve come to a conclusion.’

‘Go on,’ Hari replied.

‘I don’t think you are right sir!’

Hari was slightly taken aback. Oh dear, he thought, he’s going to be like all the others. He nodded for the constable to continue. The constable noted the look of disappointment on the old policeman’s face.

‘It’s not about law and justice sir; it’s much simpler than that; it’s about right and wrong,’ he continued. ‘It’s also about good and bad; it’s about how we as human beings treat each other; it’s also about honour sir!’

‘It’s about all of those things Constable; I couldn’t agree with you more.’

‘I’ve written a letter sir.’

A letter - now what’s going on? Hari thought. ‘To whom?’ he asked.

‘To the Police Commissioner sir.’

‘Good grief! What does the letter say?’

‘I told him about what has happened to you and how I disagree with it. I said that the police force must stand up against outside political influence. I told him that I joined
the force because I thought it was an honourable profession and now I’ve been disappointed. I said that if I do not get a satisfactory answer I intend to resign. That’s what I said in the letter sir!

Hari didn’t say anything for a few seconds; instead he twirled his spoon around in the milk froth at the bottom of his cup. He finally lifted the spoon and sucked the froth into his mouth. Then he looked the constable in the eye and said, ‘I’m very proud of you Robert; Mrs Metau and I were not lucky enough to have a son to go with our beautiful daughters but if we had I would have liked him to be just like you.’

‘Yes sir,’ the constable replied. ‘I would have been proud to be your son sir.’

Hari smiled. ‘But before we get too sentimental we have to deal with some realities Constable.’

‘Yes sir; what do you suggest?’

‘I think you should come fishing with me and Silas on your next rostered day off Constable; that’s what I think.’

As it turned out the constable saw Hari before the planned fishing trip. He came to see Hari after work two days later. Hari and Mrs Metau were sitting on the veranda after dinner watching the sun set over Fairfax Harbour. The constable waved to them and spoke to Silas for a short while before coming up the stairs. Bella, who had been studying at the kitchen table under the light of a kerosene lamp, came out to join them.

‘I’ve got some bad news,’ the constable said after he had sat down.
Hari glanced at Mrs Metau. He had told her about his conversation with the constable in the coffee shop two days ago.

‘You’ve heard from the commissioner?’ Hari said.

The constable shook his head. ‘No sir, not yet; it’s about that little girl and her brother.’ He paused briefly. ‘We went out to a traffic accident at the Gordon’s market last night; a woman had been hit by a car crossing the road. It’s very busy out there at night. It appears that she was drunk and stepped right in front of a car. She died before the ambulance arrived. It was the children’s aunt sir.’

It appeared that Robert had confronted the duty sergeant the day after his talk with Hari and had demanded that he be put back on active duty. The sergeant had gone to see Superintendent Tabai and the constable had been called into his office a few minutes later.

‘He explained that what had happened to you was not my fault. He said he had been saddened by the whole affair and that he had not slept well for several days afterwards. He said if he had his way you wouldn’t have been suspended. He said his job was very difficult and he often wondered why he continued to do it. He was very open about it sir. When I left he told me I could go back on active duty immediately and if anyone said anything about it I was to tell them to go and see him sir.’

‘So you went out to a traffic accident at Gordons and discovered little Ani and Lucas’ dead aunt; what a shame!’

‘What will happen to them now?’ Bella asked.
‘I’ve spoken to Silas; he said that he will try to find someone to look after them. Meanwhile, he said he will get the Sinabada to look after them,’ the constable replied.

‘The world is not fair is it?’ Hari said. ‘She was all they had, it wasn’t ideal but it was better than nothing.’ He glanced at Mrs Metau but she said nothing.

Mrs Metau was uncharacteristically quiet for the rest of the evening. The only thing she said was when they were in bed together ready to go to sleep. Hari was staring at the moonlight on the ceiling that was filtered through the swaying leaves of the mango trees outside. ‘I hope those poor children are safe tonight,’ she said before rolling over on her side. Hari didn’t reply. He was wondering the same thing.

The next morning Mrs Metau was up very early and walked down to the store with Silas to collect the newspapers. The news of the accident was mentioned in a small column on page four of the Post Courier but there was no mention of it in The National.

After breakfast Hari went off to see James, the lawyer, about some sleuthing that he required. A short while after he had driven out of the gate the old church minivan pulled up and beeped its horn. Mrs Metau descended the stairs with her bilum over her shoulder and Silas opened the gate for her. This time, however, he locked it from the outside and handed the key to their neighbour, Abraham, before getting in the van himself. When they were settled Pastor Lohia pulled out on the road and they puttered off leaving a trail of faint blue smoke behind them.
The matter that James wanted to see Hari about was a simple one. A forklift driver on the wharves had been injured several years ago when a shipping container had slipped sideways off a crane and pinned him to the ground. He had lost a leg from the knee down as a result. James had doggedly pursued the matter of compensation for the man and had finally been successful. There were two problems however. The insurance company was insisting on knowing which leg had been amputated before paying the claim. James, for the life of him, couldn’t remember and he was loath to make a guess in case the company already knew and was playing some sort of game. The other problem was that he had lost contact with the man. The case had gone on for so long that he had given up and gone back to his village. Where that might be James had no idea. He hoped Hari could find him.

‘A good policeman would have written all those details down,’ Hari observed with a wry smile.

‘I’m only a humble lawyer with too much on his plate,’ James shrugged.

‘Don’t worry; it shouldn’t be too hard,’ Hari said as Margaret brought them freshly brewed coffee from the fabulous silver machine. ‘His name is a good indicator of where he comes from and it’s not as if he doesn’t want to be found. Someone at the wharf will remember him I’m sure. The only thing I will have to be careful about is letting on why I’m looking for him. Once people, especially wantoks, know there is money involved all sorts of charlatans will come out of the woodwork.’

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'That’s right,’ James agreed, ‘it would pay to be discreet about your enquiries Hari.’

‘How do you want the missing leg described,’ Hari asked, ‘from his perspective or from the perspective of someone looking at him?

‘Always the policeman Hari!’

‘How about I take a photograph?’

‘Excellent idea! I’ve got a camera somewhere that you can use.’

They sipped their coffee in companionable silence for a while until James asked whether Hari’s pay issues had been resolved.

‘Everything seems to be back to normal now,’ Hari replied. ‘That letter you wrote seems to have done the trick.’

James munched on a biscuit and then said, ‘You know Hari your suspension was manifestly unfair. I’m not sure that it would be too hard to have you reinstated. You’re a good cop and an honest one. Maybe it would be better if you went back?’

Hari glanced at him and then looked out of the window. ‘I must admit I’m a bit worried about what I’m going to do with myself,’ he said. ‘Get under Grace’s feet I suppose!’

‘It’s not like you to give up so easily Hari,’ Margaret said.

‘I’ve thought about that too,’ Hari replied, ‘but I am getting old and tired Margaret and I think Grace was looking forward to retirement. I think she might be having second thoughts now that we’ve tried it though. I was thinking of perhaps setting up a small investigations agency, tracking down people like your missing forklift driver, that sort of thing.’
‘What does Grace think of that?’ Margaret asked.
‘Well, she hasn’t really said one way or the other; she never really does, with Grace things just seem to happen.’
‘Much as the idea of having you around to do the odd sleuthing job appeals to me Hari I think in the long run you might be better off with your old job back. You don’t really want that slimy politician to beat you do you? The bigger they are the harder they fall is my motto.’

Hari finished his coffee. ‘The young constable was saying something very similar a couple of days ago,’ he said. ‘Perhaps I’ll talk to Grace again and think it over a bit more. I think it’s the thought of the fight that will be involved that has put me off challenging it. Then again, as you say, maybe it’s not yet time to roll over either.’

Hari was mulling over his conversation with James and Margaret when he arrived home. The gate was open and the old church minivan was parked near the house. Silas was nowhere to be seen. He climbed up the stairs wondering what was going on. When he entered the kitchen Pastor Lohia was sitting at the table and Mrs Metau was at the sink washing teacups. Silas came out of the spare room that had been Rose’s bedroom before she married and was now a de facto storeroom. He had two boxes stacked together and precariously balanced when he staggered past Hari and down the stairs. Hari’s curiosity was thoroughly aroused. ‘What’s going on?’ he asked.

As he spoke two small figures emerged from the spare room. It was Ani and Lucas. Hari looked from them to his wife. He knew instantly what she was up to.
‘They’re going to be staying with us for a while,’ Mrs Metau said with an anxious smile.
BY mid-morning on the constable’s rostered day off both Silas and Robert had each caught two substantially sized fish. Hari had none. They were drifting off Elevala towards the wreck of the Macdhui, carried along by the outgoing tide and a light breeze. They had engaged in small talk over the course of the morning, ranging from canoe construction to Ruby’s chances in the coming by-election.

‘You know,’ Hari said as casually as possible, ‘anything we say out here just gets swept up by the wind and dumped in the saltwater where it sinks. It’s strange to think of all those words tumbling into the sea and disappearing forever; no one gets to hear them again, it’s not like on the land where they get caught in bushes and trees and under people’s houses for everyone to see.’

Silas gave him a puzzled look. He liked Hari very much but sometimes he said some strange things.

‘Sometimes those words are best left in the sea,’ the constable added, ‘sometimes it’s best not to carry them back to shore.’

Now the constable is doing it Silas thought; maybe it’s just because they’re policemen. Now they were both looking at him in a strange way. Slowly it dawned on him what was going on.
‘We’re policemen,’ Hari said gently. ‘We need to know what happened to the councillor, Silas. This need to know things is in our nature. That doesn’t mean we are going to arrest anyone. We think we know the story but we need you to confirm it. Your words will fall into the sea and never be seen again. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

Silas nodded. For a brief moment he thought about jumping overboard and swimming for the shore but it was a very long way. He felt trapped. These policemen were very clever. He sighed and looked from one to the other.

‘We know that he was very drunk when he left the aunt’s house and we know what his intentions were but we don’t know what happened after that; we’ve got a good idea but we need you to tell us about it,’ Hari said.

Silas shifted his position in the canoe but he still hung on to his fishing line. ‘You say no one will be arrested?’ he said.

‘Not if what you tell us confirms what we think,’ Hari replied.

Silas took a deep breath.

‘We were sitting on the roadway playing cards. We had a Tilley lamp to see by. We saw the councillor coming up the hill. He was drunk and staggering all over the place. When he got to us he shouted at us to get out of his way. One of the boys told him to go around and asked him where he was going anyway. The councillor sort of snarled at him and said he was going up the hill . . . he used a very bad word and said he was going to do it to that boy’s little sister. Then he started to laugh. He said that when he had finished with that one he was going to do it to all our little sisters and maybe our little brothers too.’
‘And you knew that wasn’t an idle threat didn’t you?’ Hari said. ‘Because he had done that sort of thing before; he probably did it to that little girl Susie who died.’

Silas nodded. ‘So we told him to go home and not be so stupid. We blocked the road so he couldn’t get past.’

‘And did he turn around and go home?’ the constable asked.

‘No; he tried to push some of the boys out of the way but they wouldn’t let him get past. He shouted at us and then he punched us.’

‘He punched you all?’ Hari asked.

‘He swung his fists around at everyone; he hit a couple of the boys and then he fell over.’

‘What happened then Silas?’

‘He must have hit his head on the ground or a rock or something because he didn’t move.’

‘What did you do then?’

‘We didn’t know what to do; we were afraid we would be blamed for killing him.’

‘Did you think he was dead?’

‘He was dead! One of the boys had worked in the clinic and he tried to feel his pulse but there wasn’t one.’

‘Then what?’

‘We got a wheelbarrow and put him in it and wheeled him down to the main road. Then we got a taxi and took him to the seawall.’

‘Didn’t people see you, what did the taxi driver say?’ the constable asked.

‘It was dark and we told everyone he was drunk and we were going to the sea to get him some fresh air?’
‘Just like that?’ Hari said.

‘It was easy,’ Silas said. ‘People don’t want to know about such things, they turn a blind eye. We waded out and dropped him in the water.’

‘Who tied the rope to his leg?’

‘That happened in the morning. It was someone who found him. We were hoping he would have been washed out to sea.’

‘What happened to his little finger?’ the constable asked.

Silas was quiet for a moment. Then he said, ‘Some of us originally come from the mountains down Abau way. We’d heard stories about warriors cutting off fingers. We thought that if his body was found it would be a warning.’

‘A warning?’

‘He was a bad man; there are many others like him in the settlement; we wanted them to realise that there were warriors in the settlement who would deal with them. It was a silly idea but we did it anyway.’

‘What happened to his little finger, did you give it to some girl?’

Silas smiled briefly. ‘You know about that? No, we knew that it was an old custom but we just threw it in the sea.’

‘Now we know; thank you Silas. I think those words are safely sunk in the sea. There’s just one more puzzle we need to solve. The fellow who was beaten up also had his finger cut off?’

‘We didn’t kill him either,’ Silas said. ‘He was a wantok of the councillor’s. Sometimes he helped him with things, bad things. After the councillor died he tried to take over where he had left off. He didn’t heed the warning about the finger.’
Perhaps he didn’t know about the custom.’
‘I think he knew,’ Silas replied.
‘So who beat him up?’ the constable asked.
‘Some raskols, probably some of Rabu Dosu’s boys. They didn’t want him taking over; Rabu was planning on taking the councillor’s place; it was either him or one of the minister’s gangs.’
‘And they came back and killed him after he got out of hospital and cut his finger off?’ the constable said.
‘No, that’s not right; he died from the original beating I think; the hospital didn’t pick up on it, they fixed his arm and head up but he must have had something wrong inside.’
‘So it wasn’t delayed Kevere sorcery that killed him?’
‘No, he just died.’
‘It was probably his spleen,’ Hari said. ‘People who have had malaria have enlarged spleens and they rupture easily; it only takes a small bump; you would have thought the hospital would have checked that out but I guess they are too busy and he was just a man from the settlement.’
‘But what about the finger?’ the constable asked.
‘One of our boys did that. His body was left outside on a canvas and no one was there so he crept up and cut his finger off. He said it would really make people believe there were warriors in the settlement.’
‘So what happened to the finger?’
‘I’m not sure; I think he just threw it away.’
‘He doesn’t have a girlfriend?’
‘Yes, he’s got a girlfriend; they’re going to get married soon.’
‘I see,’ Hari said. ‘I think we might leave that line of enquiry alone. What do you think Constable?’

‘That would be a good idea sir but perhaps you can let the boys know that it’s not a good idea to do it again Silas. I also don’t think our chances of catching the raskols who beat him up are very good either.’

‘Alright, I can tell them that. What are you going to do now?’ Silas asked with an anxious look.

‘I’m going to catch a decent bloody fish if it’s the last thing I do,’ Hari replied with a smile. ‘I didn’t cart this fine canoe all the way up from Kwikila just so you two could catch all the fish. Flynn is expecting at least two good ones!’

Ruby had a brief and uncharacteristic crisis of confidence towards the end of her election campaign and came to Hari to talk about it.

‘A lot of people think that men attack women because they see them as weak and vulnerable and easy targets. That may be true of your average male coward, and there are a lot of them in this country, but some men attack women because they feel threatened by their power; they are actually afraid of women.’

‘You reckon you might be in the last category?’ Hari asked. They were sitting on the leaning hull of Pukpuk 11 staring out at the darkening surface of Fairfax Harbour and Hari wondered where the conversation was going.

‘I see and hear things that other people don’t seem to notice. Grandfather says my mind travels on other planes and in different dimensions. It all seems to come from somewhere deep and dark, that’s why some people call me a
witch or *masalai*, but I don’t mind that really; it’s just that sometimes it becomes a bit overwhelming. What makes me strong is the fact that I care but that is also my biggest weakness. The more I care the more vulnerable I become. It’s the same for many women Hari.’

‘Mrs Metau is a strong woman and despite what she says I know she cares about things a lot. She hides the fact mostly; I guess that’s because she thinks it’s a weakness too,’ Hari said.

‘That’s right Hari; I knew if anyone understood it would be you.’

‘There are a few men like that too Ruby.’

‘I know Hari; you and Robert and that lawyer friend of yours, my *bubu* too.’

‘But sometimes you just wish you were just an average woman Ruby?’

‘Not really Hari; I’ve never liked being an average anything.’

‘Then it’s the fear of losing the election that worries you?’

It’s not the fear of losing that’s got me worried Hari; it’s what happens if I win. Losing is an easy option; it’s an easy way out if I lose my nerve, all I would have to do is play up the *sanguma* angle and the voters will run for miles. No, it’s not that Hari.’

‘Then what is it Ruby? Are you afraid of what Dosu and his political friends will do if you win; the intimidation and all that sort of stuff? That’s a tough road Ruby; as a copper I’ve been there and it isn’t pretty!’

‘I can handle fat bastards like Dosu and any other men that want to take me on, that doesn’t faze me at all. It’s not
them, it’s those kids; I don’t know if I can deliver for them Hari and I really don’t want to let them down. If that happened I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.’

Hari could see the anguish in Ruby’s eyes and he had an overwhelming urge to take her in his arms and give her a big hug. ‘I don’t think you’ll let them down Ruby,’ he said at last. ‘What you’re doing is very important. Despite what people might think Ruby, ward councillors are extremely important. In this great big unwieldy system of government that we inherited from Australia, with its local level, district, provincial and national governments, the ward councillors are at the frontline. They are the ones who live in the communities and have direct contact with the people. I know they have very little direct power and don’t control the purse strings but they have enormous potential; with the right people in place they could make a tremendous difference. Once they realise that and start working towards gaining that power they will be able to make a big difference to the way this country is run; it just needs strong and dedicated people to make that happen; people like you Ruby.’

She looked him in the eye for several seconds until he started to feel uncomfortable. Then she looked away.

‘Don’t all politicians in this country eventually become corrupt Hari? They go into it with lofty ideas and after a while, when they can’t achieve what they want they decide they may as well stick their noses in the trough like everyone else; I don’t want to end up like that Hari’

‘You won’t Ruby; I can tell you that now; you’ve got friends who won’t let that happen. If you win things will
start to change, you wait and see. And after that there will be other young men and women, just like you, who will come along and carry on; just you watch.’

‘Thanks Hari,’ Ruby said and stood up. When he followed suit she stepped forward and engulfed him in a giant Papuan hug. What Hari didn’t see, with his head tucked into her shoulder was the single tear that trickled down each of her tattooed cheeks.

When she eventually let him go they walked up the beach towards the house where Mrs Metau had dinner ready. By then the light over Fairfax Harbour had gone.

Ruby won the by-election with a convincing majority, despite the vote rigging and the theft of several ballot boxes by the opposition. When the ballot was declared they all adjourned to the CUMA School to celebrate. Hari didn’t catch any fish when he was out with Silas and the constable but when they typed up their report on the case of the angry councillor they were able to say his death was the result of an accident. In the case of the beaten up man they recorded a finding of accidental misadventure. The case of the little girl hit by the car at Badili remains unsolved but she has recovered well and is back at school. If it was you who ran her over or you know the driver you should have the courage to come forward and report it to the police.

The constable delivered all three reports to the duty sergeant under his name. The sergeant passed them on to the superintendent and the constable duly received a note congratulating him on a job well done.
Another strange thing happened. While Hari and Mrs Metau were at the by-election celebrations, hand in hand with Ani and Lucas, Superintendent Tabai arrived. He was beaming and went over to congratulate Ruby. Then he walked over to Hari and reached in his pocket. A short, pugnacious little man was following him.

‘Here’s your police warrant card back Hari. I don’t know whether you still want it but I’m hoping you do.’

Hari looked at Mrs Metau and she nodded and smiled. He took it and put it in his pocket.

‘You’ll also be interested to know that I’m moving out of that big house on Touaguba Hill and going to live at Hohola with my wife’s relatives.’

Hari raised an eyebrow and Superintendent Tabai continued, ‘Your young constable wrote a letter to the commissioner. It made us all sit back and think deeply about a number of things. I think that young man will make an excellent policemen Hari.’

‘So do I,’ Hari replied.

The superintendent stepped aside to make room for the man behind him. ‘This is Inspector Mek Pung, Hari, lately of Mount Hagen. He is going to be working with us. I want you and Constable Bokasi to show him the ropes.’

Hari put out his hand and Inspector Pung shook it vigorously. ‘I understand that you are a coffee connoisseur,’ he said with a broad smile.

‘Indeed I am!’ Hari replied.

‘I brought a good supply down with me; perhaps we can exchange notes?’
Hari smiled and picked little Ani up. Lucas hung on to Mrs Metau’s hand.

‘We’d better get these kids home for dinner and washed up for bed,’ he said. ‘I’ll meet you and the constable tomorrow Inspector.’

‘What about at the Beachside Brasserie?’ Inspector Pung said. ‘I hear they make an excellent coffee and I’m not really a great office person.’

‘Done!’ said Hari and the superintendent shook his head in disbelief.

That evening, after Ani and Lucas had been tucked up in bed Hari was sitting under the house on an upturned wheelbarrow watching Flynn polish off a plate of tinpis and rice. ‘All’s well that ends well I think,’ he said to the dog. Flynn licked a stray grain of rice off his nose.

‘I didn’t want to be a private detective anyway he said.’
GLOSSARY

P = Tok Pisin, M = Hiri Motu.

Bamahuta – goodbye (M)
Barat - drainage ditch (P)
Bilum - net bag (P)
Buai - betel nut (MP)
Bubu - grandparent, grandfather, grandmother (M)
Bung – market (P)
Daka - mustard bean (MP)
Davara – beach (M)
Dobu - speaking platform/meeting place in centre of village (M)
Gea - gum tree (M)
Hahine - married or mature woman (M)
Hanuabada – literally ‘big village’, large Motu village near Port Moresby (M)
Iduhu – clan (M)
Kaukau - sweet potato (P)
Keken - teenage girl, unmarried woman (M)
Kiap - patrol officer, government officer (P)
Kindam - prawn, lobster, crab (P)
Kisim susu na biskit ikam - get some milk and biscuits and bring them here (P)
Kongkong - Chinese, Asian (P)
Kopina - human, body (M)
Laplap - sarong, rami (P)
Lapun - elderly person (P)
Masalai - supernatural woman or girl (MP)
Meamea - type of sorcery, meamea tauna – sorcerer (M)
Meri - woman, considered a derogatory term by some (P)
Metau - difficult (M)
Mimi - sorcery involving raising the dead (M)
Mit buai - strong betel nut (P)
Moale Dabua - literally ‘glad clothes’, a second hand clothes shop (M)
Momokani - is that so, true (M)
Mosbi - Port Moresby (MP)
Muruk - cassowary (P)
Neku - catfish (M)
Nem bilong mi - my name is (P)
Nogat, bai me givim mama bilong me - no, I’ll give it to my mother (P)
Oloman! - goodness! (P)
Pamuk— prostitute (P)
Plenti puspus moa yet - lots and lots of copulation (P)
PMV - ‘passenger motor vehicle’, vehicle licensed to carry paying passengers
Pukpuk - crocodile (P)
Puripuri - magic, sorcery (P)
Raskol - rascal, delinquent (P)
Rata bada - large breasts (M)
Saksak - sago palm (P)
Sanguma - sorcery (P)
Sarip - long bladed flexible grass cutting knife (P)
Sinabada - big mother, European woman (M)
Siporo - lime, lime tree (P)
Sisia - dog (M)
Solwara - salt water, sea (P)
Taiana lata - long or big ears (M)
Taubada - big man, European man (M)
Taudia rua, umui namo? - are you two men okay? (M)
Tinpis - canned fish (P)
Tok pisin - pidgin English (P)
Tok ples - local language (P)
Tubuna - grandfather, grandparents (P)
Unu - breadfruit tree (M)
Vada gaudia - sorcery objects (M)
Vanági - canoe (M)
Wantok - one talk, fellow clan member speaking the same language (P)
Wiliwil - bicycle (P)
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Fitzpatrick was born in Oxford, England and migrated with his parents to Australia as a child. He was a field officer in Papua New Guinea between 1967 and 1973. Between 1974 and 1994 he worked as an Indigenous Heritage researcher. Since 1994 he has worked as an independent social mapping consultant in both Australia and Papua New Guinea. He is widely published and writes fiction for pleasure.

His books include:

- Bamahuta: Leaving Papua
- Dingo Trapper
- Harry Flynn’s Last Odyssey
- The Floating Island
- Inspector Metau: The Case of the Missing Professor