

*Joan Kerr*

## A PLACE LIKE LAE

Before we left Port Moresby, Albert said, "You must look up Len. He's working at the Teachers' College in Lae." I didn't take any notice, but Klara didn't feel the way I did about thrusting yourself on strangers in foreign places. As soon as we arrived in Lae she said, "Let's find a phone box so I can ring Albert's friend."

"Oh, Klara," I said, we're only here a couple of days, and it's the middle of the school week, so he'll be busy. And they've got a new baby! Don't you think we could just find our own way round?"

Klara was disgusted. I could see she thought I'd never get anywhere in life. Lose that, not needed? If she'd been like me she'd still have been sitting there in Czechoslovakia when the Nazis marched in. I looked out the window of our room to the main street of Lae, which was a paved stretch petering out at the edges in irregular patches of tar. When we went out we discovered that the view from our window was in fact the town of Lae. Around the corners were unpaved little roads of sandy red earth, deep and slightly soggy to the touch, disappearing into thickets of bright-green stubby trees with broad leaves like banana palms. Further away there were low hills, covered in the same bright-green trees with patches of red earth showing through. The air was heavy, moist and the sky low and tethered-looking, as if it were pinned all around the horizon and drawn above us in a flat, tight dome.

In the street Klara found a phone box and I watched as she rang Len. Her stubby little figure in its black and white flowered dress that I knew so well, her thick silver earrings sitting in the flesh of her ears, her broad feet with the thick pale sole showing around the edges, flat to the earth in the thongs she wore almost all the time. She gave her name and said, "We are friends of Albert, from Port Moresby. He told us to look you up." He must have said something like, "How is Albert?" because Klara said, "Good, good. We are here in Lae only two days. We would like very much to meet you and your wife." No, I was thinking, no, Klara! A pause, then Klara said, "No, we are leaving tomorrow evening, tonight is the only night we have here." The man spoke. "Five thirty? That would be good. We will meet you outside the hotel."

There was only one hotel in Lae, he couldn't make a mistake. Klara came out of the phone box rubbing her hands. "He is going to pick us up to take us out to his house," she said with satisfaction. "Now, what are we going to do this afternoon? I would like to find someone to drive us into the villages. Maybe we can see some ceremonies."

We went into a small shop that sold drinks. Klara started talking to the man behind the counter, a brawny Australian with a reddened face and receding sandy hair. "We are wanting to find someone who can drive us around and show Lae to us. We would like to go out into the villages," she said.

The man shook his head. "Not much to see," he said, "it's all like this around here," and he made a sweep of his hand at the street outside, the vegetation, the red road. "Not much to see."

"But I hear," said Klara, "that there are some villages not far away where you can see some ceremonies." I wished she'd stop going on about ceremonies. It sounded as if she were talking about performing giraffes. The man said, "Oh, they put on a bit of a show for tourists, but you want to be careful they don't rip you off." So not much luck there, Klara.

We went outside again and wandered down the street. A young boy of ten or eleven or so walked alongside us. "Hello, Mrs," he said. "You Australia?"

"Yes," said Klara, "we are from Australia, but we are living in Port Moresby. Do you live in Lae?"

He pointed towards the edges of the town, "My village there."

"You speak very good English," said Klara.

He giggled. "School, I learn school."

"We would like to see your village," said Klara. "Could you take us to your village?"

"My village, yes, I take you tomorrow".

"Tomorrow?" said Klara, "not today?"

"Tomorrow, I take you tomorrow." So we arranged to meet him there the next day at eleven.

\*\*\*

At five thirty Len drove up in a grey jeep. He was a rather nice-looking man, fortyish, with a kind, anxious face slightly flushed in the heat. The bones of his face were good, but there was something indecisive about them so that he just missed being handsome. Klara clambered into the front seat of the jeep and I into the back. Off the main road the red surface of the road felt hard and

juddery through the rough suspension of the jeep. There was a smell of earth through the open windows. I could see Klara's stubby hand with the bright red fingernails resting on the side of her seat. Her gravelly voice hung in the space inside the jeep, peppering Len with questions about Lae and about the everlasting ceremonies she was so keen to see. In a space in the conversation I thought, we should ask him about his wife and the new baby.

We turned off the main road towards a group of houses sitting together, the trees beaten back around them to make a clearing. There were seven or eight cement houses, square and unvarying in design, each with a wooden staircase of three or four stairs leading straight up to a tiny landing at the front door. The houses sat low to the earth, with the freshly-excavated earth still churned-up around the grey of the cement. Len's house had couch grass fighting its way up through the earth to make a kind of patchy lawn in front. As we drove up, Len said, "I'm afraid it'll be pot luck with the dinner. Our baby isn't sleeping very well, and Heather's not all that well herself."

I squirmed. I imagined the conversation Len must have had with Heather when he rang her that afternoon to tell her he was bringing two complete strangers home to dinner. "Tonight? You're bringing these women home to dinner tonight?" And he would have dithered, said he couldn't get out of it. He was weak, I decided, he was one of those weak men who can't get a grip on life.

We went up the stairs. The front door opened into a little living-room with seagrass matting and a tan couch and chairs perched under the window that looked out on to the couch-grass lawn. There was a round laminex table further back in the room against a kitchen bench behind which I could see the stove. A woman came out of the room beside the kitchen. She was thin, with reddish hair piled up on top of her head in a loose, scrambled way, and long pencil-like fingers that she carried slightly raised from the side of her body, her long arms hanging.

"This is Heather," said Len, putting his hand carefully on her shoulder.

"Hello," she said, looking briefly at us. There was a silence.

"And how is your baby?" said Klara in an ingratiating tone. "Albert told us about your baby, congratulations."

"Just gone down," she said. "He's been awake all day." It was as if she could only scrape up the minimum of words, not out of sulkiness but out of an exhaustion so deep that all niceties were sunk at the bottom of the well of it. She had that high, aquiline nose that often goes with sinus trouble. The air was full of her tiredness and the edge of something completely out of control.

"Would you like a drink?" said Len. "What have we got, darling?" She was walking towards the kitchenette.

"This really isn't the place for dinner parties," she said, "we just eat the same old thing all the time."

She started putting plates out on the laminex table, her long pale arms reaching out as if through water. I sat on the edge of one of the chairs, looking at the irregular hem of my dress as it stretched above my knees. I was that same unhealthy freckly white that they were. Klara's tan looked almost yellow in the light that came from the single window.

We sat down to eat. On each plate were a few slices of tinned meat, a few lettuce leaves, some tinned corn and sliced beetroot, leaking its red around the meat.

Len talked about his students, how they ran out of the classroom that day in the middle of a lecture because one of them saw a black snake going along the walkway outside, how they picked up their chairs and ran outside to kill it.

"Did they kill it?" I said, thinking this was just what our girls in Moresby would have done; even the little novice nuns who sat so politely in the class. I imagined them rushing outside with chairs held over their heads, rolling up their grey habits to clear their strong brown legs for action. I saw them like that in the afternoons after school as they went about the duties novices had, the cooking, washing, digging in the vegetable garden, always with their habits hitched up above their knees, barefoot, their faces shining with heat under the veils they never removed. I wondered what on earth they were doing there. They were a strange mixture, those nuns, the dour Australians, the nuggety Belgians, and these healthy young girls trussed up in habits and veils, the sweat on their slightly pock-marked brown skin shining round the rim of the veil where it sat across their hair.

Heather sat slightly sideways on her seat as if she were perched there waiting for the baby to cry. Klara asked her if she, too, worked in Lae. "I was a home economics teacher in Australia," she said, "but I haven't taught here." On a half-empty bookshelf was a picture of her and Len on their wedding day, her red hair thick and curly round her shoulders.

"What a beautiful dress," said Klara. "Heather made it," said Len immediately, "you made it, didn't you darling?"

"Do you still make your own clothes?" I said. An inept dressmaker, but a dressmaker out of necessity, I had a great respect for people who could sew

well. It seemed to me that they must have a really good grip on life. "No" said Heather, looking down at her shift dress, pale green and wrinkled.

Klara told Len we were going to look at a village the next day. Had he and Heather seen much of the countryside around Lae? "You can't get far by road," he said, "and it's a bit hot for bushwalking."

"Oh we don't mind the heat," said Klara, "we want to see as much as we can." I don't, I was thinking, I've seen as much of Lae as I want to see. I was feeling an increasing panic as if I were turning into Heather, as if I might one day find myself married to someone like Len, living out here in this hateful box of a house with the cry of a baby drilling through the walls, long hot afternoons doing nothing but sit in the tan armchair waiting for the baby to cry, or lying on the bed watching the hands of the clock move round. But I'm not, I'm not like her, I said to myself, Klara might think there's nothing to me, but she's wrong. My life is going to start, any time now. I wanted to say to Heather, as if to emphasise the difference between us, "I know you don't want us here, I don't mind, I don't want to be here either."

Eventually the meal ended. The conversation dwindled into silence. Klara said, "Well, I suppose we should be going," and immediately Len stood up and said, "You'll be okay, darling, I won't be long." We drove back to Lae in silence and watched Len's jeep disappear back up the main road.

"Well," said Klara, "she's not what I expected. Albert talked so much about her." Yes, I remembered Albert talking about Heather. She had been his girlfriend before Len came along, on holidays from New Guinea, and swept her off her feet.

The next day we met our boy at eleven o'clock. I was surprised he turned up, but there he was. He was wearing a red T-shirt and baggy white shorts, his bare feet gripping the earth easily. When Klara asked him if we might see some dances in his village he said yes. When she asked him if there was a chief in the village he said yes, the chief was his grandfather. Did he like the mission school? Yes, he did. What did he want to be when he grew up? Maybe he would be a teacher or a priest. After each answer he looked at us as if to see whether the answer was the right one.

We walked for half an hour or so away from the main street and through the trees towards one of the hills we had seen from the town. Klara stopped and said, "This isn't the way to the village, this is the way we came in from the airport." The boy looked at her questioningly. "The village," she said to him loudly, "we want to go to the village."

"Village here," the boy said pointing ahead. Klara looked even more dubious. In front of us we could see nothing but the reddish trail starting to climb into the

hills. The trail seemed little-used and we had met nobody coming down the other way. On the other side of the town we could see the tops of grass-thatched houses at the same height as we were. "I see the village over there," Klara said, pointing.

"Other village," the boy said "not my village. You come, see dances." And he started up the track again. Klara took a few steps after him and stopped. He disappeared round a bend in the trail then came back when he saw we weren't following. "Miss," he said to me, "you come, village not faraway." I stood there. "Come, miss," he said, "little bit here." I went a few steps up the track. "Mrs, you wait," he said to Klara. "I show you, miss."

Klara sat down on a stone by the track. She was panting from the climb. The boy went round the corner. I went a few steps and stopped, looking back at Klara. I heard his voice from round the corner, "Miss, come, look here." I took one more step and stood still. I could still see Klara's dress through the trees a little below us. The boy was standing a few steps above me on the track. It looked exactly the same as the track we'd been following so far. He looked directly at me, half-smiling, with a look of complicity in his eyes. "Little bit, miss, you come," in a cajoling tone.

"What do you want?" I said in as peremptory a tone as I could, as solid and Australian as I could. He half-laughed and held my eyes. He was only a kid! He was only ten or eleven years old! His long brown legs under the white shorts, his toes gripping the earth, his brown arm slightly shiny in the sun, the red of his t-shirt startling against the green behind him.

"Miss," he said again, urgently, "in here, miss," and he gestured to where the trees grew thick and moist, pressing in around the track.

"I'm going back," I said and turned around, watching my feet as I went clumsily back to where Klara was waiting.

"Is the village there?"

"No," I said.

"Well, what does he want? Does he want money?"

"I don't know," I said, "he's just a kid."

The boy, seeing us turn to go back down, now came climbing swiftly past us and went ahead back towards Lae without speaking.

"Well," said Klara crossly, "that was a waste of time."

We walked back to the town. I pulled my hat down over my face and held it on with a hand on top, but even so the sun seemed to radiate up from the red earth and bore into my wrong-coloured skin. I thought of Len's freckled hands and Heather's pink-eyed paleness. What were we doing here? Everything about us was wrong. My dress was too short, my legs too long and pale, my ignorance too palpable.

In the letters I wrote back to my friends in Australia, I talked of our travels with manufactured vivacity. I joked about our disastrous visit to Len and Heather's, but I didn't mention the boy who had taken us up into the hills. There was no way to write about him that was funny or manageable, no way of pulling the words comfortably around myself. When we got back to Moresby Klara told everyone she was very disappointed in Lae. We'd hardly seen anything at all.



**Bill Cotter**

## ALL THAT REMAINS

Sap is a grey coalescence of fibre and pus, an obscenity oozing slowly down  
Its side. On the clear-cut top, wombat droppings  
Piled together like rotten fruit. Its crown  
Once held the sun in check and by  
Its leather base, light, dark, warm and cool could turn  
The brown earth green and jewels could sprout from moss and fern.

Where canes of blackberries, rusty as chain mail,  
Now crept and the eager, brown backed ants come bristling  
In lines, its raw-boned branches once confronted wind and hail  
And it rode across the aeons, uncomplaining.  
But now, of the tree, little remains,

Just this stump on its patch of tight-lipped earth and those condemning stains.

