

The Tall Man

BY CHLOE HOOPER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT KENNEDY

They are and will always remain children, and therefore must be protected, even sometimes against their will.

Annual Report of the Northern Protector of Aboriginals for 1904

All I really knew about Palm Island were the headlines I'd been reading: "Tropic of Despair", "Island of Sorrow". On 19 November 2004, a drunk Aboriginal man had been arrested for swearing at police. Less than an hour later he died with injuries like those of a road trauma victim. The Queensland State Coroner reported there was no sign of police brutality, backing up the police claim that the man had tripped on a step. The community did not agree, and a week later burnt down the police station. The state government immediately invoked emergency powers, flying in special police squads trained in counter-terrorist tactics who arrested countless locals, including teenagers and grandmothers. I went there two months later.

Travelling to Palm Island is like a sequence from a dream: the pale green sea seems so luminous and so fecund, and the plane flies so close to it, you see seals, and what might be dugongs and giant turtles. As the plane turns to land the island unfolds. The mountains meet the palm-lined shore, which meets the coral reef. But step from the plane into the hot, still day and you notice something is not right. The besser-block air shelter is decorated with a collection of fourth-graders' projects on safe and unsafe behaviour: *I feel safe when I'm not being bunted*, one project reads.

According to the *Guinness Book of Records*, Palm Island, population three thousand, about sixty-five kilometres north-east of Townsville in Far North Queensland, is the most dangerous place on earth outside a combat zone. I try to appear nonchalant.

Two men in their early thirties are stumbling around, leaning on each other.

"They're brothers," a local tells me. "They're blind."

"Obviously." I assume she means blind drunk. One of the brothers then shakes out a white cane and my heart nearly stops.

"How did they go blind?" I ask.

"Nobody knows."

The men are connected with string: the man with the cane holds the string, leading his brother through their dark maze by the wrist.

I am travelling with two criminal lawyers who will represent Palm Island's council in a coronial inquest into the November death. The island's chairwoman, wearing a hat crocheted with the Aboriginal flag, collects us from the



Police

airstrip and drives us into town along an old road fringing the water. We pass a large boulder with TALL MAN spray-painted in purple across it.

In the township there is a jetty, a beer canteen, a hospital, a long-broken clock tower and one store. Outside the store a child sits in a rubbish bin while another child cools him with a fire hose.

Two white women – teachers, or nurses, or police – are walking briskly in shorts and T-shirts. They look as awkward and out of place as I feel.

“Who are they?” I ask the chairwoman.

“Strangers,” she says.

One of the women smiles at me, curious perhaps, and, briefly, I’m not sure whether to reciprocate. I feel luminously white.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” says a lawyer, trying to make conversation.

It is very beautiful. In 1916, the island was to the Chief Protector of Aborigines “the ideal place for a delightful holiday”. The surrounding shark-infested waters also made it “suitable for use as a penitentiary” to confine “the individuals we desire to punish”. From 1918, Aborigines were sent to the Palm Island Mission in leg irons and deemed variously: “a troublesome character”, “a larrikin”, “a wanderer”, “a communist”. Usually they had made the mistake of asking about their wages, or were caught speaking their languages or practising traditional ceremonies. In its isolation the mission became increasingly authoritarian – a kind of tropical gulag, with all the arbitrary abuse of power that term implies.

Blacks were not allowed on Mango Avenue, where whites lived. Blacks were required to salute any white person they passed. White staff got choice cuts of meat; blacks got bones. Blacks had their milk watered down. At the cinema whites sat on chairs carried by black servants; blacks sat on blankets. White day-trippers were carried to the shore on black backs. Whites paid blacks to perform corroborees or shimmy up trees for coconuts. Permits were needed to fish; permits were needed to swim. There were garden competitions and European dancing, and those who did not participate were questioned by police. A brass band learnt to play jazz and marching tunes, but failure to attend band practice could result in a jail sentence. Each superintendent “got the law in his own mouth”. Even in the 1960s a man could be arrested for waving to his wife, or for laughing. A teenager whose cricket ball broke off a short length of branch would spend the night locked up. If anyone complained, they were sent to nearby Eclipse Island with only bread and water. On Eclipse prisoners tried to catch fish with their bare hands.

From the jetty, you can see Eclipse and the other surrounding paradisiacal islands, formed, the traditional owners believe, when the Big Snake broke up and left behind frag-

ments of its body. One of the fragments is the nearby Fantome Island. Until 1973 it operated as a leper colony, with a ‘lock hospital’ for those with VD. At the colony there was often no doctor, and patients took care of cooking, woodcutting, grounds-keeping and sanitary work, while Roman Catholic and Anglican missionaries fought over who would perform the funeral rites. Dying lepers were sometimes re-baptised several times as their overseers vied for souls.

In the 1970s, when it became legal for Aborigines to drink alcohol, a canteen selling beer opened on Palm Island. For people long used to intense subjugation, it was an opportunity to literally be ‘out of control’. It also unleashed a violence that had always been under the surface. In 1912, Queensland’s parliament was advised that “the grouping of many tribes in one area would mean continual warfare amongst themselves and practically survival of the fittest.” Nonetheless, over forty tribes were sent to Palm Island, often grouping together people with completely incompatible territorial, language and kinship ties. The island’s superintendent noted to a visitor in 1929 that “if there was to be any letting off of steam, they would go for each other.”

The chairwoman drops the lawyers and me at the community ‘motel’: a series of spotless rooms with no apparent supervisor. My room has barred windows, a steel framed bed, a ceiling fan, and a nail on the wall with a coat hanger.

Outside it is humid. Cicadas tune in and out of the heat. As it grows darker, I sit with the other ‘strangers’ on the veranda, drinking contraband red wine. Virgin forest surrounds us. Unknown creatures audibly begin their nocturnal rounds. We should, in theory, be safe: the motel is next to the locked police compound. Through the high wire fence, I can see a group of police in a mess room playing pool with some of the nurses. Two officers arrive and park their van, then heave an old mattress over the windscreen to protect it from stray rocks.

I’m still wondering what I’m doing here. My lawyer companions, however, are on a mission and have no such doubts: they drink a toast to the revolution.

Friday, 19 November 2004 must have looked like another grindingly banal day. Shortly after 10 am, Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley, 33, the island’s officer in charge, and Lloyd Bengaroo, the Aboriginal Police Liaison Officer, were escorting Gladys Nugent, a big, gentle-looking woman, to collect insulin from her de facto’s fridge. She needed the escort because her de facto, Roy Bramwell, had just beaten her.

Hurley waited on Dee Street – where, among the frangi-pani trees, every second house has broken windows, graffiti, small children playing in the trash. This was Hurley’s natural environment. He had spent most of his career working



