ALCOHOLISM POVERTY RIOTING RACISM ARSON MURDER WECOME TO PALM ISLAND

From left: Palm Island's remote location off of northeast Australia has made it the ideal place to dump 'undesirables' since the Twenties

Just 25 miles off the coast of Australia's tropical tranquillity lies the Aboriginal reservation the Guinness Book Of Records calls "the most dangerous place in the world outside of a combat zone". Crippled by oppression and infighting, the dark island is a reminder of the horrors of colonialism. Story by **Will Storr** Photographs by **David Kelly**

Walking back from the shop this morning, I met a charming stab victim. Suspended between two wooden crutches, the Aboriginal woman halted as I approached. I enquired about the bandage on her leg. "My boyfriend stabbed me," she said with a submissive smile. "What with?" I asked. Her slight body took on this deferential, almost bashful wilt. "Ahhh, just a knife," she said. "Can I have your name please?" I asked. "Kellie Palmer. You want my date of birth? 26 May 1976."

Two hours later, I'm sitting on the porch of my ant-infested motel and I can't forget the last bit. The date of birth is the first piece of data demanded by a person with power; a police officer, bank clerk or a bureaucrat from, say, housing or social services. It's your numerical fingerprint, as good as a bar code or ID card. It's your entry to the system. And the first thing Kellie Palmer thought, when approached by a white man, was to present it willingly, like some appeasing offering.

Sighing, I dial Lex Wotton for the 12th time. Voice mail, again. Lex, my fixer, is 90 minutes late and I need him. Here on Palm Island – Australia's most incendiary Aboriginal reservation – there's no public transport or vehicle hire. I wonder, briefly, if he was caught up in any of last night's ructions: the car chase that ended with a fractured skull, or the incident with a 13-year-old who, incredibly, managed to drive a car almost all the way up the steel-rope support of a telegraph pole. But I don't think so. Lex is too thoughtful for that. He's too intelligent, too teetotal.

Further down the long wooden patio, two Aboriginal cleaners are having a break at a green plastic table.

"Who you waitin' for?" asks one of the girls.

"Lex Wotton," I say. "He was supposed to be here at nine."

"Ahhh, you're running on Murri time now, boy."

I pick up a newspaper. There are two Palm Island stories today. The first concerns a man fracturing a policewoman's skull; the second a teenager burning down a school. They're just tiny snippets, no surprise to anyone, barely news at all. After all, Palm Island is, according to the commentators, a "poisonous paradise" (the *Australian*); an "island of lost souls" (the *Observer*), "the Aborigines' dark island home" (BBC), a place that suffers "one of the highest violent crime rates in the world" (criminologist Dr Paul Wilson) and "the most dangerous place in the world outside a combat zone" (*The Guinness Book Of Records*).

I've come to find out how a place like this came to be a place like this. I have a list of interviewees and a self-imposed schedule of times and places, none of which, so far, I've managed to meet. I resign myself to another half an hour watching maggots crawl out of the bin.

The fall of Palm Island began, of course, with the English invasion of Australia. The year 1788 was the beginning of a lingering apocalypse for the people who inhabited this country for 70,000 years. In the seemingly endless tracts of time they lived in this incomprehensively weird and massive place, in barely the space of a breath, the English came, killed, put up fences, introduced them to alcohol, gambling, sugar, capitalist-individualism, police brutality and the dole and then dumped them, out of sight, in reservations like this.

Founded in the early Twenties, Palm was always unique: because of its isolated position, in the middle of shark-infested waters 25 miles off the coast of the northern state of Queensland, the government found it a handy place to send Aboriginals causing problems in other settlements; playing truant, for example, or swearing, asking about wages or ▶

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[DANGER]

▶ being "a wanderer". Where other encampments usually housed members of a single clan, in Palm's first two decades, 1,630 people from at least 57 different language-speaking districts were sent to live under the control of the white superintendent whose power was total and unaccountable. Today, the superintendents have gone, but the reservation remains and is totemic among many white Australians, a fearsome dot in the Pacific where everything that's wrong with the "bloody blacks" can be seen.

Am I being unfair to the Australians? Of course – to some. But before my arrival, I spoke with lawyer Andrew Boe, who's famous for representing Palm Islanders *pro bono*. He said, "The number of people in Australia who'd genuinely break bread with an indigenous person as an equal would be in the acute minority. There's a special level of racist disregard for indigenous people in this country. It's peculiar and it's sophisticated and it's unrelenting."

When Lex finally arrives, I treat him with as much courtesy as my fractured temper will permit. Which is quite a lot, actually, given what I already know about this startlingly handsome 40-year-old. Lex has the physique of an action hero, the scars of a torture victim and served time as a younger man. When I asked him how he found prison, he replied, "It was great. I had a good rest."

We drive in silence along the road to the house of local matriarch Auntie Kathy, who has set some hours aside to talk to me. This morning, with the white Pacific sun having melted the clouds from the peaks of Mounts Bentley and Lindsay – which dominate the geographic centre of Palm Island – the place looks magnificent.

A triangle-shaped island, Palm is a 25 square mile tropical lump of volcanic earth and rainforest, surrounded by coral, and dumped cars and covered in wild horses, eucalypt and hoop pine. There's a main road running along the triangle's short edge, which connects the tiny airstrip and Butler Bay on one end to Wallaby Point on the other, with the town square and Coolgaree Bay in the middle. Running off this road are tracks that connect to small sub-settlements, which house the 2,000-odd residents, 94 per cent of whom are indigenous, the rest being white staff from the schools, police station and the busy hospital, which tends to a population who have a life expectancy of 50, a full 30 years less than the Australian average.

Most of these Caucasians live in elevated conditions behind walls of razor wire. A few of the Aboriginal homes are also beautifully kept, with neat gardens and painted gates. Others, though, are dark at the windows and alive with the drone of misery, all abandoned toys, upturned chairs and layers of marker pen graffiti that scream out at you in too many colours and look like the onset of a schizophrenic's migraine. Emitting from some of these houses is a catastrophic barrage of music. To walk past their

shuddering walls is to feel as if you're being physically taunted. It's not the noise itself that's so intimidating, but everything it infers about the people creating it. What kind of mind would sit in the middle of that for pleasure? What state would it have to be in? It's as if the music's being used as a kind of sonic dynamite, as if the sheer brute power of it is blasting away all thoughts, feelings or human connection. It's jamming all sensory evidence of the terrible present.

As well as the houses, you can see the ruins of old white rule – abandoned farm buildings, vegetable plots and a prison which is reputed by the locals to be haunted by the violent ghost of an old suicide victim. Its doors are jammed open on crusted hinges to reveal empty cells, their concrete beds and steel toilets still in place, their floors covered in calcified faeces and elaborate etched graffiti – "Johnny Pompey", "Fonzie, XIV days, Palm Is", "Crack Head 78".

We drive past the town square, a rough, open patch of dusty nothing, just over the road from the wooden jetty and overlooked by the Palm Island Retail Store, the council offices and the school. As we do, Lex addresses me calmly.

"I've become aware of some *frustration* on your part," he says. "But you have to realise, Will, you can't have your schedules and your timings and things on Palms. You need to allow things to happen, to unfold."

When we arrive at Auntie Kathy's, we discover she has decided she's not in the mood to chat after all, so I finally decide to give Lex and Andrew Boe the credit of their wisdom. I will toss away my "timings and things" and collapse into the slow and unfamiliar pulse of "Murri time". Perhaps, I think, if I just walk around, things *will* unfold. If I simply

From left: Lex Wotton is accused of inciting the riot that followed the death of Cameron Doomadgee. The signs of neglect on Palm Island are everywhere (opposite)

'THERE WERE DORMS FOR WOMEN... THEY LOCKED US ALL UP BEHIND MESH, LIKE ANIMALS'

EX-PALM ISLAND MAYORESS ERYKAH KYLE

listen to the stories of the people I happen across, maybe I will begin to sense something of the hum and logic of this beautiful, haunted place.

Lex drops me back at the town square and I set off alone, drawing urgent glances from the gabbling, conspiring locals who have gathered under trees and along low walls. I'm beginning to wonder if the force of my self-consciousness is powerful enough to break the laws of physics and make me invisible, when I'm approached by Erykah Kyle, the radical, angry and prominent ex-mayoress of Palm Island who often appears in local and international media reports concerning this place. She tells me her story from the shade of a eucalyptus, tapping her chest for comfort when the emotion begins to swell too much inside it.

THE BROKEN HEART OF ERYKAH KYLE

"I wouldn't usually talk about this to anyone. It's very painful. I fell in love when I was 17. Waverley Swain, his name was. I still think about him all the time...

"This was an authoritarian place then. Relationships weren't permitted, but there was a lot of romance. There were two dorms for women; well, they called them

dorms, but they locked us all up behind mesh, like animals. The men would come past at night and give a certain whistle and the women would escape up the hills with them. But you'd be punished. They'd shave your head and dress you in a hessian bag with the corners cut out for arms. You'd have to sweep Mango Avenue, the white area. We weren't allowed to walk in Mango Avenue. I call it Apartheid Avenue.

"Waverley Swain had a beautiful whistle. Only I knew it. We disappeared for a few hours and I was escorted by the police to the superintendent. I had to go to the doctor. He examined me something terrible. They put Waverley in jail. He was flogged by my relations, by the men. They beat him bad and put him on the first boat out. Never saw him again. I'm 70 years of age now. I've had other relationships, of course, but my heart has always been his. I'll go home and cry now. It brings back all the pain. Terrible pain."

I watch Erykah walk off in the direction of the post office, where the locals have to queue to collect their mail. I'm just trying to work out what to do with myself when I realise I'm being I'm beckoned. He has soft grey hair, a blue checked shirt and a nose like a marvellous root vegetable. From his seat beneath the mango tree, he can see the all the principal landmarks of the superintendent days. "I can tell you like it is," he says, as I sit next to him. "I'm the encyclopedia of this island."

MAURICE, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA

"You see over there where the ferry comes in? They took all the dogs out in a bloody big sack and drowned them there. You couldn't have no dogs. You couldn't speak your language either, or you'd be punished. You see this street here? We had to line up here every morning. And if you're not there, bang, the Aboriginal police would ride you down. Even if you had a good reason, you'd cop six weeks in jail.

"See that office? I was carrying soil past there. You know what I mean when I say soil? A shit bucket. It was a hot day and my shirt was hanging out. I got sent straight to jail. Four weeks. You see this mango tree? We had a big bell right there. You'd wake up by that bell, you'd go home by that bell and the bell would tell you when to go to sleep.

"The superintendent, Mr Bartlem, we were sacred shitless of him. If you went to get your teeth out, the dentist ain't going to ask you if you're feeling numb. They held me down. Bloody gum ripped out. You were too frightened to speak up and say, 'Hey, it's not numb yet!' They'll send you to Mr Bartlem, see?

"Same today. People are afraid of the system. Simple people don't talk because they're scared of the police, the children's services, the council... You don't talk to that kind of system. You steer clear of them.

"We had discipline then, though, and respect for the elders. Kids today got none whatsoever. They're like spoilt brats. Got their own way now. At that time, we had no grog or drugs. It's our own people killing us now. It was the white man in those days. The new generation buggered up. We got a pub now. That's condoning."

The first thing I see as I round the front wall of Palm's pub is a beer bottle flying in a perfect slapstick arc and clonking a man on his head. On one side of the wall, there's an empty beach and a meandering herd of bolt-ready wild horses, traumatised, no doubt, from incessant chases and rock attacks by children. On the other is the single-storey grog bunker, the Coolgaree Bay Hotel, sitting squat and steaming like a spiteful toad, with its pop reggae and its facing wall made up of steel prison bars.

It has just gone five o'clock and there are more people outside than in, all drinking stubby beers. Someone's shouting at me: "Eh! I don't like you coming round our people!"

ONE NIGHT IN THE COOLGAREE BAY

A man is leaning over the wall, staring at me from the churning centre of a juicy, boozy rage.

"This is our land! This is our bread! Why'd you come here?" he says.

"I just want to find out what it's like," I reply.

"They say this is the most violent place in the world outside New York. It isn't!"

Someone starts verbally assaulting him from a distant picnic table. He turns and shouts, "At least I got the guts to talk!"

I fail in an attempt to make friends and so walk in to order a drink. Behind the bar are Aboriginal flags and hand-drawn posters declaring "Our land! Our country!" and "Try Our Pies". I sit to watch a pool game and am joined by a malnourished-looking woman with downward-drawn lips and scarlet tracksuit bottoms.

"Don't you be runnin' down Palm Island," she says. "Palm Island isn't a violent place."

We then watch a man leading a woman out of the pub by her hair.

"I stabbed two men," she tells me. "Haven't done time for neither. I know how the justice system works."

Soon, my attention is taken by four of the campest men in Australia. They're flopping around, pouting and flirting and sticking their bums out, creating their own sparkly cloud of fruity-pink fun to bounce about in. As I'm watching them, some force blasts me in the back and I'm thrown onto the unpainted concrete floor.

"Get out of the way!" shouts my attacker. I turn my head to see a pool player, his tombstone torso and tough little ball-bearing face topped off with a white bandana. I'll find out later this a boxer named Assan.

I pick myself up and watch him miss his shot. He fronts up to me: "You fucking put me off my shot, you fuck!"

"I didn't see you," I say and move away, dodging pregnant dogs, yapping drinkers and a man lost in his own mad sonic maelstrom, playing air guitar to the Aerosmith version of "Walk This Way".

Later I see a young woman screaming at a man who doesn't look much older than her. "I'm your niece! Why'd you do that?" Her right arm has a two-inch slash on it. His head is sliced open above his right eyebrow. His shorts are covered in blood. In a menacing situation like this, it's sometimes the ambient indicators that are the most disturbing. Right now, it's the utter disinterested quiet of everyone. ▶

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▶ When terrible events are taken with such perfect nonchalance, it's the silence that tells you everything. I watch him as he sways back and forth in a thick, drunken trance, mouthing the words to the Bob Marley song that's playing. I touch him on the shoulder. "You want me to walk you to the hospital?" I ask.

He slumps into laughter, the mirth so rollicking he's forced to hit himself on the thigh to ease the force of its passage. Then he stops. He turns on his stool and looks me in the eye.

"Thanks anyway, bruv," he says, then he shakes my hand. As he returns to his bleeding and swaying, a shadow falls over me. It's Assan.

"You're lucky I won," he says.

The next day, I ask Lex about the terrible scenes of hostile boozing I walked into last night. He tells me binge drinking began when they rationed each islander to six cans of beer – which were provided opened, so they couldn't be squirrelled away. Thus, the grog had to be drunk as quickly as possible, so it wouldn't go flat.

"By the time I was old enough to drink you were allowed a carton of beer a day. They were opened, too. You had to drink them all during pub opening time, between four and nine," Lex says, with the spooky coastline of Wallaby Point stretching out behind him.

"Why do people drink so much here?"

"Boredom," he says. "Unemployment is 90 per cent. Lack of facilities. Lack of entertainment. Lack of education. Low self-esteem."

"It's quite a violent place, isn't it?" I say. His brow stiffens.

"No, it's not all that violent."

"But I was pushed over last night, and saw hair being pulled and a couple of stab wounds."

"But that's not violence," he says. "You go to a rock concert or a football match and the same thing happens."

"You honestly don't think that there's no more violence here than anywhere else?" I ask.

"No," he says. "It's a way of painting a negative picture of the indigenous people and keeping them down."

There's not much else I'm allowed to ask Lex. He's not permitted to speak to the media about the upcoming court case that's rounding on his days like a fast-approaching winter. But I can tell you this: he's accused of being involved in a riot that resulted in the burning down of a police station in a situation in which rioting and burning down the police station might seem, to some, to be the only possible response.

THE BLACK HOUSE OF URSULA DOOMADGEE

There are two mattresses flung over the front fence, the garden is long untended and the music is loud enough to knock passing birds straight out of the sky. I knock on the fly-screen door. Three shadows bob up behind it. The music shuts off. I walk into a dismal place, empty but for a table, three chairs, a blanket, a box of beer and a cheap hi-fi. On the walls, there's a picture of Jesus and a photograph of the simple wooden grave post of Cameron Doomadgee.

At 11.20am, on Friday 19 November 2004, Doomadgee, known to the locals by his tribal name of Mulrunji, died in police custody on Palm Island. A popular man with no criminal record, that morning found him drunk but capable and singing "Who Let The Dogs Out?" as he walked past senior sergeant Chris Hurley. Deciding that "dogs" was a reference to the police, Hurley arrested Cameron for creating a "public nuisance".

There was, allegedly, a struggle in a police station corridor. The two men fell, Cameron threw a punch and, some say, Hurley retaliated. One eyewitness stated, "Chris laid him down here and started kicking him. All I could see [was] the elbow going down, up and down, like that... 'Do you want more Mister Doomadgee? Do you want more of these, eh? You had enough?'"

Cameron suffered four broken ribs. His spleen was ruptured and his liver was almost split in two. CCTV footage from the cell in which he was placed shows him writhing on the floor calling for help. Nobody did.

An independent coroner judged that Cameron was killed as a result of punches by Hurley. Regardless, a jury found him not guilty of manslaughter and assault. He is now posted on Queensland's Gold Coast.

The woman in front of me is Ursula, Cameron's niece. She stands dead still on the concrete floor, her sister and mother sitting behind her, and talks, dabbing her tears with the hem of her shirt. It's 30°C and 90 per cent humidity, yet this ghostly, diminished woman is wearing woolly socks in her sandals, long trousers and a flannel top underneath her maroon nightshirt.

"We miss him. We love him. And we miss our grandmother and our baby brother. They died too, because of this.

Clockwise from top: Johnny Clumpoint is one of the many islanders to spend time in its cells; some of which are now an animal pound; the fences of fear abound on Palm Island

Our grandmother died of hurt because she lost her baby son. She let herself go and got sick. We lost our dad a couple of days after. He was Cameron's son. He died because he missed his dad and grandmother. He hanged himself in the woods.

"This house was a lively house when Cameron was alive. Then it just all went black. It's a black house, this house. We're going to be unhappy for life, while [Hurley] is out there smiling."

In 1990, there was a Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody. Cameron's was the 147th since its recommendations were handed down.

THE ISLAND MESSAGE BANK

Something evil is about to happen. I'm passing a house that has always been jammed with impressively lounging young men when they all spill out behind me. Picking up speed, I continue along Beach Road as yet more youth pile in and follow me. Panicking, I move to the side. Either they'll pass, I think, or I'll have to deal with whatever horrors they're going to deal me. But they continue on and merge with a slow carnival of cars and children on bikes and wild horses. I trail them to the square, which is teeming. There are faces crammed in all the windows; the alleyways are full of giggling, chattering, whistling people. A rock hits a police car.

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WHEN YOU BUILD A CELL IN THE CORNER OF THEIR HOME AND FORCE THEM TO LIVE IN IT

"You're a queenie fucker!" shouts one woman, who's being held back by a policeman.

"You're a queenie fucker!" says a young man who's being similarly restrained.

"Queenie fucker, you! Maaaan fucker!"

I watch as they're led away to boos and cusses, directed at the lawmen.

"It's gossip," explains 30-year-old Dwayne Blanket. "Gossip's the cause of all the arguments. We call it the Island Message Bank. If you slipped over and hurt your back on one side of the island, it'd get down the other end – faster than a mobile phone – that you broke your neck."

An hour later, I'm talking to the island's popular matriarch, Auntie Kathy Gibson, about love on Palm Island. "Did you escape up to the hills like Erykah Kyle?" I ask.

"Erykah Kyle?" she says. "She was never classed as an Aboriginal, you know."

THE DISPUTED YOUTH OF ERYKAH KYLE

"Erykah Kyle?" I say. "Are you sure?"

"She had the privileges white people had," she says. "I suppose she didn't tell you that. The Kyles had a housemaid, yardmen and a person to run up and get their meat. You weren't allowed to walk up Mango Avenue – but she was allowed."

The next day, I bump into Erykah, who's wearing a crocheted hat depicting the Aboriginal flag. She begins telling me, "I refer to Captain Cook as Captain Crook" when I ask her if she was allowed on Mango Avenue. Her face collapses.

"No we weren't! No! That is unbelievable! You've got your history very, very wrong. Who said that?"

"I've not got anyone in trouble have I?"

"No, no, no," she says. "It's made up! It's made up! Oh, she's very bitchy, you know. And there's maybe some jealousy there too."

"What will you do?"

"My daughter will be a lawyer soon. I'll talk to her. And my sister. If Danielle hears about that, she'll jump on a plane and she'll smack her."

THE WET DREAMS OF THE SISTER GIRLS

Walking to the pub, one night, I ask Trenton Bligh – a key member of the island's formidable team of gay men – if there are homophobes on Palm Island.

"Oh no, no!" he laughs. "They understand it and they accept it. They call us 'sister girls'."

"Do you think Palm Island's gayer than most Aboriginal settlements?"

"Oh yeah!"

"Have you ever been in love?"

"Yeah. He was a straight man. I never told him. I just had wet dreams. There was one fella though, I told him straight up, at a party – 'Here, fuck face. Are you coming home with me or not?' We're not looking for love. We're looking for a fuck. There's a lot of married men on Palm Island who like to go with people like me." He thinks for a moment. "Me, I'm proper homosexual. But what do you call a straight man who goes with someone like me?"

"Bisexual?"

"I'm confused. Arseholes, that's what I call 'em."

I'm examining the clay Last Supper scene that's for sale at the Palm Island store, when I'm approached by a handsome gardener with eyes as sad as twilight and an Old Testament beard.

"You doing a story about this place?" he asks. "I got a story for you. Story about being stabbed in the fucking back."

JOHNNY CLUMPOINT'S SADNESS

"Cameron Doomadgee was very popular on the island. When the coroner's report came out, everybody went berserk. They burned the police station, but I was nowhere near the place. Then, 5.30 the next morning, 15 police smashed my door through. I was out the back in my boxers and singlet. I had red dots all over me from the gun sights. I was scared shitless, mate. They came up with a gun and hit me, shouting, 'We got the ringleader!'

"I got charged with burning the building, 26 witnesses from Palm Island pointed the finger at me. I was screaming at them in the courtroom, 'What are you doing?' They're a mob of dogs, mate. Fucking dogs, just saving their own skin. I got a lot of sadness now. I used to go to the pub. I don't go anywhere any more. I don't mix with these people. They've torn me and my family apart. There's no way this can be healed."

I'm about to leave on this, my last day on Palm Island, when Johnny says, "I heard a rumour yesterday, and you were involved. You said Erykah could run up and down Mango Avenue. It's not true at all. She's very angry with what you said."

"Shit," I say. "I had to ask, to check whether it was true."

"Well," he says. "She's thinking of punching old Kathy Gibson today."

What am I to do with these memories of Palm Island? What am I to do with the stories I've heard? Not only of fiendish white superintendents and heartless bureaucratic systems which are *still* feared utterly, but of the vicious Aboriginals of this century and the last?

I think the episodes from the past and present form two sides of an equation. They balance each other out; explain each other. The story of Palm Island is the story of what happens to a people when you build a cell in the corner of their home and lock them in it for six generations. In the white world, we think of ourselves as the good guys: we are the mighty enlightened; the iron defenders of democracy and human rights. But we're still leaving the savage consequences of our colonialist adventures unaddressed – not only in Australia but also in Canada and north America, where indigenous reservations also teem with life, humour and all the ferocious derelictions of the serially disadvantaged. In judging these people by their visible scabs and condemning them as brutish and hopeless, as many still do, we're ignoring the simple physics of dysfunction: you push people, they fall over. GQ