CHINESE POKER

JOHN FRANCIS KINSELLA

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Chinese Poker

'When the Missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the Missionaries had the Bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible.'

Jomo Kenyatta

Prologue

'*I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally,' he began, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would like best to hear; 'yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light.*'

Now I did not write those lines, they were penned by Joseph Conrad in his novel Heart of Darkness, lines which seem appropriate to me as I recount my story of New Guinea, of the greed of men who plundered the resources of naive and defenceless people.

Conrad wrote those words in the closing years of the 19th century, in a story that shocked the world, describing the horrors of Western colonialism. Today, more than a century later those horrors persist on the island of New Guinea, where Chinese and other businessmen exploit the island's natural resources with little regard to the hopes and desires of the Papuan peoples or their future.

CHAPTER 1

Burgundy

THAT SPLENDID EARLY SUMMER day, we arrived in the village of Entrains-sur-Nièvre, somewhere between the Loire and the Natural Park of the Morvan.

We, that's Lucy and I, the guests of Anne de Fieubet de Launay, daughter of a French viscount. We had been invited to a party to celebrate her graduation from Langues O', that's in Paris, where we had been studying various exotic languages.

Anne's family had been owners of the chateau since the 17th century. The splendid edifice and its dependencies lay in the heart of Burgundy, a region of more than 30,000 square kilometres, covered by rich farmland, vineyards and forests, filled with history, which according to legend went back to Saint Mary Magdalene who was buried in the basilica that bore her name in Vézelay.

Lucy's father, Wang Huiyao aka Henry Wang, was one of those crazy rich Asians, worth a billion or so, head of a conglomerate specialised in mainly though not only, real estate, construction materials and commodities. He'd built his business during China's boom years, when fortunes were made in the decades of double digit growth and billionaires mushroomed almost overnight.

Henry Wang discovered another kind of commodity in Burgundy—French oak, which he bought in large quantities and exported to China, but I'll tell you more about that later.

Henry was a connoisseur of fine wines and French cuisine, thanks in part to the viscount, André de Launay, who he had met at an auction of the world's finest wines in Paris at an annual Sotheby's Wine sale. André's family was one of Burgundy's oldest winegrowers and a respected member of the Bourgogne Wine Board.

The sale was memorable with the region's most famous wine—Romanée-Conti, selling for thousands and even hundreds of thousands of dollars a bottle. Henry broke a record with the highest successful bid for several lots and was invited to André's chateau and domaine. He hit it off with the viscount and soon became a regular visitor to Burgundy and its capital, Beaune, arriving by helicopter from Geneva or Lyons after jetting in from Shanghai with his friends in his own private jet, an Airbus 320.

Lucy's brother, Long, was six years older than her, he was in fact her half-brother whose mother had died in a road accident when he

was young. Long, or Xiaolong as Lucy liked to call him, had spent three years in London—two at the LSE and a year at a City investment bank.

Long and Lucy counted amongst their Chinese friends certain princelings—the sons and daughters of leaders, high level Party members and government officials with whom they had studied in London or Paris, jetsetting around Europe on occasions, developing guanxi, that essential Chinese networking that would later serve them when they went into business, which in Long's case would be soon.

CHAPTER 2

Provence

THE TROUBLE IS MY GUANXI wasn't sufficient. If it had been perhaps I wouldn't have ended up in this Chinese prison? Me, 32 years old, the over-educated privileged son of an Irish diplomat.

How long I'd been here was anyone's guess. There were no windows. No doors, neither to the interrogation room nor to the shower or crapper. The lights were on and off intermittently. I had no notion of time, night or day, no watch, no phone. Meals were delivered through a hatch. The temperature was constant—cold.

Well, it was a complicated story.

Perhaps I should start at the beginning.

It commenced a fine Tuesday, July 3, 2018, to be precise, in Bonnieux, a small and picturesque medieval French village near Avignon. At approximately half ten in the morning a tourist fell from a wall high above an ancient stone stairway.

The village stood on a hill dominated by the old church that dated from the 12th century, the Haute Eglise de Bonnieux, which the hapless tourist had been visiting with four companions and a guide. In the distance, beyond the wall that bordered the church, were the mountains of the Petit Luberon, clearly defined under the luminous morning sky. In the foreground the intense green of the pines and

cedars on the flank of the hill contrasted with the white stone of the church and the surrounding houses.

The village, set in a splendid Provencal panorama, admired, photographed and painted by countless visitor as far back as locals could remember, was suddenly struck by what seemed to be a dramatic accident.

I, together with my then girlfriend, Suzie, witnessed the accident. We were strolling up the stairs of the steep stone passage that led to the old church, when we heard screams. As we rounded a corner we saw people rushing down to a landing, a dozen or more steps ahead of us, where a man wearing a red polo and a beige Bermuda lay in a small pool of blood on the polished grey stone slab, apparently he'd fallen from the wall that rose high above us.

We stopped in our tracks, stunned, there was nothing we could do. We stood paralysed, hypnotised by the drama.

It was not long before help arrived followed by a local doctor, then the village police officer who took control of the situation and ushered us away, down the stairs, where we crossed medics from the emergency services hurrying up to the scene of the accident.

We were in Provence for the summer festivals—Avignon, Aix and Vaison la Romaine, which ran for most of the month. We'd been taking in the picturesque villages that dotted the region between Avignon and Aix, enjoying the fine weather and remarkably beautiful landscapes.

We were shaken by the accident, Suzie more so than I by the fact that it had happened to a Chinese tourist. There was nothing we could have done as the others accompanying the injured man were immediately at his side.

How it had happened we didn't know, a silly accident it seemed. Apparently he was alive, still breathing, from what we'd seen.

We decided to move on and walked back to our car, then headed for L'isle-sur-la-Sorge, further along the road back to Avignon.

* * *

We skipped lunch and wandered through the town, trying to forget the accident and concentrate our thoughts on something less disconcerting, admiring the antique shops and ancient waterwheels on the River Sorgue which wound its way through the town centre.

It was four in the afternoon when we finally stopped for a pause, taking a coffee and a pastry in a small café. We'd almost forgotten what we'd seen in Bonnieux and were figuring out our plans for the evening and where to eat diner.

We'd driven down from Grenoble where we'd bid a final goodbye to our student's quarters and the city, where I'd spent the last couple of very agreeable years at INP-Pagora—the Graduate School of Engineering in Paper, Print Media and Biomaterials.

We were looking forward to the long summer vacation, both of us had completed our post graduate degree courses and were unfixed on our future plans, apart from our immediate priority, which was enjoying the next couple of months.

That evening we wandered through the narrow streets of Avignon, looking for a not too touristy restaurant with a terrace. It wasn't easy as the crowds were already pouring in for the festival about to start in another day or two.

We found a nice place set in a small courtyard, stylish, a bit expensive, and not yet full. They seated us at a table shaded from the evening sun, under an ancient fig tree, where we ordered a couple of before dinner drinks and started to study the menu.

The evening was delicious, the air, the food and Suzie.

I'd met her in Grenoble where she was studying French, she was into fashion, and French went with fashion. She was from Beijing, her family was something in media and arts, exactly what I didn't really understand or care that much. I enjoyed her company and she tried to teach me Chinese, which suited me fine.

The meal and the wine were great, then as we paused to order coffee Suzie checked her messages. In Beijing it was early morning.

Her eyes opened wide. 'Mike! He's dead!'

'Who?' I said alarmed.

'Wang Jian, the head of HNA!'

I was none the wiser.

'The man we saw today in Bonnieux, who fell from the wall, he's very famous in China, very rich.'

'He's dead?'

'Yes.'

'Who was he?'

'One of China's top businessmen, his group HNA owns Hainan Airlines.'

I googled HNA, it was one of the world's biggest leasers of commercial aircraft, into airports and hotels, worth billions.

'What was he doing here in France?'

'No idea.'

The next morning I learnt HNA was a hugely indebted diversified conglomerate. It seemed crazy, the flamboyant boss of a multinational group as huge and indebted as HNA, had according to Chinese media reports fallen off a wall posing for a banal photograph in that small Provencal village so, far from his home.

CHAPTER 3

A Tech Baron

IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE conspiracy stories about Wang Jian began to circulate, starting with a notorious friend of Donald Trump's former campaign manager Steve Bannon.

Bannon's friend, Guo Wengui, an exiled tycoon and self-styled whistleblower, told the press there was little doubt that Wang Jian's death was a political assassination perpetrated by Beijing.

Bannon and Guo Wengui had announced the creation of a 100 million dollar fund to investigate abuses committed by the Chinese government, including arbitrary imprisonment, torture, and assassination—disguised as suicide or accidental death.

According to Guo, Wang Jian knew too much about the links between HNA and top Chinese officials. In particular, the role played by Wang Qishan, the Vice President of China, close to Xi Jinping. Wang Qishan was said to be an undisclosed shareholder of HNA concealed behind a secret offshore vehicle in the British Virgin Islands.

Locals in Bonnieux raised questions concerning Wang's choice of his souvenir shot, since the view from the stone wall he had fallen from, was a long way from being the best in Bonnieux. On the other side of the old church, the panorama seen from the belvedere included fields of lavender and Mount Ventoux in the distance—a landscape

particularly admired by the many tourists who visited the village each summer.

Curiously, it was a less picturesque view from the wall on the other side of the church that Wang Jian had preferred to immortalise on that fateful day.

Wang had arrived at Marseille's Marignane Airport the previous day, in nothing less than his own luxuriously appointed Boeing 787, one of the biggest and most expensive jet airliners in the world, for what was described as a vacation, after attending an annual golf tournament at Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines near Paris, sponsored by his group HNA.

Just a few days earlier, Wang had called his friend, Frenchman Daniel Vial, owner of an ancient priory transformed into a rich man's vacation home in Bonnieux, informing him of his intention to return to the village that they had visited together the previous year.

That evening, Vial joined Wang's small group for champagne and dinner at the Bastide de Capelongue, the luxury boutique hotel where Wang and his friends were staying, a short walk away from his restored 11th-century priory.

Wang already had tickets for the opera by Richard Strauss—Ariane auf Naxos, and The Magic Flute—Mozart's final masterpiece, at the international music festival in nearby Aix-en-Provence, Vial informed the media. Wang told his friend he was also looking forward to attending the annual summer photography festival in Arles and visiting the region's lavender fields.

Vial's links to China went back to the 1980s when he coordinated an extravagant weekend culminating in an auction of paintings by Deng Lin, daughter of Deng Xiaoping—successor to Mao, one of the

many Chinese guests Vial received at his priory in Provence. The auction was billed as a fundraising event for the restoration of the Great Wall of China.

The HNA Group hired Vial when one of its subsidiaries bought Servair, an Air France owned aviation services company. He also coordinated a lavish gala at the Petit Palais, a pavilion built in 1900 for the Universal Exposition, now a museum, where guests were treated to champagne and lobster, followed by a performance of the Peking Opera. The event was held to mark HNA's philanthropic works that counted 1.5 billion dollars in donations since the company's founding.

* * *

The story became even stranger when I learnt that in 2017, Guan Jun, a man in his thirties transferred more than 29% of the shares in the HNA Group—worth 18 billion dollars at that time, to a New York based private foundation, theoretically a philanthropic organisation.

Guan, a director of a company based in the HNA building in Beijing, registered his address, also in Beijing, in a modest apartment at the end of a dingy hallway littered with discarded furniture and bags of trash according to journalists who visited the building.

Guan was in fact a front man, acting for a Hong Kong company, a large shareholder in HNA's opaque ownership structure, deepening a mystery which had intensified after Wang's strange death in Bonnieux, casting further doubt on the group's murky ownership.

However, when Wang had met his friend in Provence, he was more interested in enjoying a cultural programme, relaxing with a change of air. He had arrived at the Bastide de Capelongue with his friends

in the early evening, in time for dinner, which was served on the terrace of the Bergerie, where they were joined by Daniel Vial together with a friend, Sylvie Ouziel, head of the Allianz insurance group.

Vial had become one of Wang's advisors for HNA's operations in Europe, in aviation, tourism and finance, at a moment when the group was buying up everything Wang set his eyes on, when the group's worldwide assets reached an estimated value of 146 billion dollars.

Geoffrey, the maître d'hôtel of the gourmet restaurant, remembered Wang looked extremely tired and spoke very little. The discussion turned to business and the difficulties of the group which had become overextended with Airbus halting the delivery of six A330s which had been parked on the tarmac of Toulouse's airport for several weeks.

At about ten, Wang, without taking a dessert, called it a day and went back to his room. The next morning, looking more relaxed, he appeared at 9.30 for breakfast—served on the terrace facing Bonnieux, where he could admire a fine view of the ancient church and its surrounding wall.

After breakfast, he decided to visit the church and the small group left in a couple of Mercedes vans, a detail confirmed by the hotel's CCTV cameras which recorded them leaving an hour later.

Five minutes after leaving Capelongue, the two vans parked below the hilltop village and they continued on foot. A waiter in a nearby bar observed the group as they made their way up to the church passing under a stone arch.

Another witness saw them arrive as he tended the grass in the nearby garden. He described how the four Chinese visitors arrived and walked across to a tree about six or seven paces from the wall. Suddenly one of them started to run. When he reached the wall, he leant on it, straightened up, then after pausing three or four seconds jumped.

To the other side of the wall was a vertical drop of eight or ten metres onto the stone stairway. The witness insisted the man jumped, he did not lose his balance, nor was it an accidental fall.

There was little doubt in this mind it was a suicide, 'He was crazy, he threw himself off the wall.'

Wang's friends rushed down to his side while the interpreter ran to the nearby bar for help, shouting in English a man had jumped.

According to the waiter Wang was still breathing as his friends tried to talk to him and give him some water. A little lower down the stairway the interpreter was crying.

As they awaited the emergency services the waiter saw one of Wang's friends take out an acupuncture kit and put needles on Wang's face and arms. 'There were needles everywhere, on his forehead, even

on his lips,' the waiter remembered. 'The guy's eyes were spinning, he was going.'

The emergency medics attempted a cardiac massage, but the doctor declared Wang dead.

Vial collapsed on hearing the news.

The next day Wang's wife and son arrived from the US, where they lived, soon followed by a team of investigators dispatched from China.

According to the French police, the Chinese were were afraid that Wang Jian had organised his own disappearance and they wanted access to the body, the autopsy report together with blood and DNA samples.

Wang's wife identified the body. The French police had the dead man's passport and declared the question of identity was an open and shut case, as was the cause of death.

Wang had fallen on his feet with the lower body forced into the abdomen by the impact with severe internal bleeding, in addition he had a fractured femur, his pelvis was broken as were several ribs and two vertebrae in the lumbar region, and as if that wasn't enough his liver had burst.

He was definitely dead.

The French concluded there was no evidence of murder and whether it was an accident or a suicide was of little importance.

Wang's remains were flown to Seattle in the US, where they were cremated.

However, a mystery remained, why did Wang need to climb the low wall when just a few steps away there were large stepping stones for those who wanted to risk standing on the wall.

And the run-up? Several witnesses had mentioned Wang's sluggish walk. Why would a tired worried man suddenly start to behave like a teenager? According to Daniel Vial he was a reserved, thoughtful, individual. He couldn't imagine him running and jumping onto a wall, unless that is Wang wanted to escape the vigilance of those with him, to throw himself off the wall.

It was not the first time the head of a troubled Chinese multinational died in strange circumstances. Wang's business, HNA, had overextended itself, was struggling under a mountain of debt, and the centre of a fight for power.

Had Wang Jian been pushed to suicide by his thirst for power and money? Or perhaps for his wealth—by those who had hoped to benefit from it, or by those who had something to hide?

In any case his death resolved many knotty problems in China and justified Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign to rein in the freewheeling tech barons, escaping the Chinese Communist Party's orbit, setting up residence overseas, building property empires in the US and the UK.

The leaders of China's business and cultural elite were flocking to New York—Wang Qishan, Tian Guoli, Tian Huiyu, Chen Feng, Chen Guoqing, Wang Jian, Sun Yao, Guan Yun, Liu Chengjie, as well as many relatives of the Central Politburo of the CCP.

Two days after Wang Jian's death, his 15% share of HNA was mysteriously transferred to the Cihang Hainan Foundation, a charity

registered in New York, with an opaque offshore operation, the main shareholder of the HNA Group.

* * *

I didn't dwell too long on those questions. Some people seemed to think that modern Russia, with its oligarchs, or China with its mega rich billionaires, were changing, I didn't.

I'd lived in Putin's Moscow, though I admit I had been too young to know the Soviet Union, but I did know that what exists today had risen from the ashes of the Communist system engendered by Mao and Stalin, where unchallenged power cliques flourished, untouched by weak kowtowing media, unrestrained by equally weak selfserving fellow travellers.

In the old days corruption had been everywhere. It still is everywhere. At the very top the elite had lived in secret luxury, carefully concealed from the people. Today the lives of oligarchs and tycoons are more visible, at least to the media.

Whereas criminals and gangsters fought to get control of the assets the Communist Party had once controlled when the Soviet Union collapsed, China was different. Deng Xiaoping told the Chinese to get rich, and they did, at least some of them, in a frenzy of unrestrained capitalism, getting richer than could ever been imagined, thanks to a spectacular avalanche of credit and no obligation to justify its use or its repayment.

It was a Faustian pact and the moment to pay the price had come ... and for those mortals who thought they could elude their part of the bargain the price was high, as Wang Jian had discovered in the medieval village of Bonnieux.

CHAPTER 4

Suzie

I FIRST MET SUZIE AT THE BAR of a theatre in Grenoble. It was during the interval, she was there with a couple of girlfriends taking in Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest'.

I told her I was Irish, that pleased her, especially when I laid on the oft told stories of James Joyce's Dublin—with a dash of Irish art and literature for good measure, it was always a good line with that kind of studious girl. We hit it off and I invited her for a drink after the show and discovered she was anything but studious, just bored.

That autumn Suzie went home to Beijing and I headed for Indonesia where I spent six months as part of an exchange programme linked to forestry plantations with a large international group, Asia Pulp & Paper. I travelled to Sumatra and Borneo where APP had pulp mills and plantations then spent some time in their offices in Jakarta and with the Ministry of Forests teams.

It was a good six months, I learnt a lot at APP, where I discovered many of their engineers and key managers were Chinese or overseas Chinese. More than ten million overseas Chinese lived in Indonesia, seven million in both Malaysia and Thailand with three million in Singapore, compared with just half a million in the UK.

In the past the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia were scapegoats, victimised by politicians when things went wrong, attacked and

murdered by the rable. Today more than 40 million overseas Chinese live in Southeast Asia where they wield both financial power and influence in the functioning of their respective home countries, where they are protected under the wing of a new and powerful China. For some a fifth column with links to their regional clan associations in the land of their ancestors, facilitating business, political and cultural exchange.

I kept contact with Suzie, my first and very special Chinese teacher, who insisted I visit Shanghai, which I said I would. Suzie had a fiancé, she'd already told me that, I didn't really understand the arrangement, some kind of affair between families, at least that's what she explained me. Anyway, ours had been an open ended affair, we'd enjoyed ourselves, besides I had no immediate plans for anything permanent.

So after my six months with Asia Pulp I decided to head up to Shanghai, stopping in Hong Kong and Macau on the way. Part of my education I told my parents, who approved.

Hong Kong was in turmoil with massive demonstrations against the introduction of new laws formulated by the government in Beijing. It was a good time to visit Macau, less than an hour away on the highspeed jetfoil across the Pearl River.

I suppose it was my Uncle John's tales that persuaded me to visit Macau. He had told me Chinese were inveterate gamblers, and Macau's reputation seemed to confirm that. It was said only one place beat that legendary gambling paradise and that was Las Vegas.

* * *

John Ennis had first visited Hong Kong and Macau more than fifty years back, long before I was born, when Hong Kong was a seedy, steamy, British colony, immortalised by The World of Suzie Wong, the Wanchai district and the old Luk Kwok Hotel, then on Gloucester Road, between Fenwick and Luard, an infamous spot overflowing with seedy night clubs and bars, and a reputation for drugs, prostitution and crime.

Hong Kong at the time of the Vietnamese War could have been summed up in three words, drugs, sex and booze, when the city seethed with American GIs on R&R as well as the enlisted men of the British and American fleets along with merchant seamen drawn from almost every seagoing nation on earth.

Nearby, Macau, then a Portuguese colony had reputation that was even worse than that of Hong Kong, and it lived up to its legend—a sinister steaming gambling pit of iniquity, enshrined in the public imagination by Jean Delannoy's film, Gambling Hell, which starred Erich von Stroheim, a dark story set in the 1940s, of vice, crime, smuggling, Triads and spies, the wickedest city on Earth.

Hong Kong's crumbling buildings and tenements of that time were streaked with grime and tropical mould, its airport Kai Tak one of the most hazardous in the world, on the edge of Kowloon, where 747's skimmed the roofs of tightly packed rundown apartment buildings and godowns.

Today that has all been replaced by the gleaming glass and steel towers of banks where investors can risk their money on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, or in one of the 34 extravagantly glitzy gambling palaces in Macau, amongst them were the Venetian, Sands and Wynn, which had nothing to envy of their counterparts in Las Vegas.

After a week, what with the chaos of the democracy demonstrations, I decided to cut short my visit to Hong Kong and headed up to Shanghai. There I reconnected with Suzie who introduced me to her fiancé. I must admit I felt a little peeved, but I got the message.

She made up for it by introducing me to Lucy, a real looker, who announced she was planning to go to Paris on a student exchange programme. We immediately clicked and when she suggested I prolong my stay in Shanghai I didn't need much convincing.

I found myself an intensive Chinese language course at Shanghai Fudan University. Its campus was situated in the Wujiaochang district, but I opted for an Airbnb in the downtown area, getting familiar with everyday life in China, taking the Shanghai metro to my classes.

It was not long before I was introduced to Lucy's friends and family and discovered the Chinese world of nouveaux riches, one where money flowed like a river.

* * *

Now when Lucy told me her father's business interests included tropical timber, I was at once interested, after all it was part of my future profession, specialisation if you like, even though, for the moment I couldn't see myself stuck in some pulp mill, be it in the forests of tropical Indonesia or the frozen forests of Scandinavia.

When I'd set out to study for an engineering degree, I opted for Imperial College London and was accepted at the Faculty of Engineering in Kensington, a good choice, better than one of those places in the boondocks.

It was just four stops from Pimlico—the nearest underground station to the pied-à-terre my parents owned in Dolphin Square, to Imperial College in South Kensington, which encouraged me to spend another couple of years at Imperial's business school.

I then headed for Grenoble, it was time to quit Imperial where I was becoming part of the furniture. At Grenoble INP-Pagora, I studied for a master's, which included, amongst other things natural raw materials—especially wood, but it was all very abstract. I associated it with the forests I'd seen from car and train windows, and I'd seen a few. My dad was a diplomat and we were nomads—Paris, Moscow, Berlin. Those were temperate forests, much changed by the work of man over hundreds if not thousands of years.

When I set my eyes on real tropical rain forests in Sumatra and Borneo it was only then my uncle's stories began to make sense. My eyes were opened to the question of ecology and climate change. Businesses too were getting big on that and I'd seen how APP had built a green image, one of fighting climate change and all that green washing shit.

Green was a must for any business and I have to say it's everywhere, we're inundated with it by the press and the media in general,

politicians spouting off, lying messages on the packaging of the food we buy, in schools, by businesses, oil and chemical companies, even banks—all green. But what does that mean? Save the forest, orangutans, koalas? Disasters, they make the headlines. In any case all that happens in China or Brazil or some other faraway place.

I was 29 years old and like my friends and most other people had been bombarded for most of my life with messages about saving the planet by ecologists and greens of every shade.

Even my uncle, John Ennis, vaguely mentioned it, something about the jungle. I smiled, he was a family legend, our Colonel Fawcett, getting on in years now, doting on the good old days. Given the chance he'd allude to his adventures in Borneo, some time before I was born, he was never very precise. We younger ones—the new generation, humoured him, as if he were a latter day Livingstone or even Magellan, hacking his way through the jungle, dodging cannibals and head-hunter's poisoned arrows.

He was like his friend Pat O'Connelly, the writer, who on arriving in Shanghai insisted on a suite at the Astor House. It was one of Shanghai's iconic hotels, not in the same class of luxury as the Peace Hotel on the Bund—where he had reservations for a book tour arranged by his publishers.

Why the Astor House? Because it had been a favorite spot for American and European visitors during the period prior to the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in December 1941.

At that time Shanghai was one of the world's greatest cities with a population of three million, a vast metropolis at the mouth of the Yangtze River, gateway to the heart of China, a booming industrial and commercial centre. The Bund, in the International Settlement, was a symbol of the wealth and success of Shanghai. It was an

extraterritorial treaty port and governed by the Shanghai Municipal Council, which was effectively controlled by the British.

* * *

When Mao and his communist army, hardened by two decades of civil war, took Beiping in January 1949, without a fight, he changed its name back to Beijing, declaring it capital of the newly founded People's Republic of China, few outsiders, or even convinced communists, could have imagined the miraculous transformation that awaited China, even though it would take more than half a century, from a bankrupt peasant society into the world's second most powerful industrial nation and its citizens into capitalistic consumers.

But, even fewer would have given a seconds thought to how that miracle would transform the world and its natural environment.

In 1949, the population of the planet stood at something over two billion with China counting for about a fifth of that.

When I arrived in Shanghai fresh from the forests of Indonesia, I realised why people said this would be China's century, and I wanted to be part of it. How that was another matter.

I'd spent most of my life learning, school, university, as a graduate, post graduate, majors and minors, specialisations ad infinitum. Until recently my dad hadn't seemed worried by the fact that I'd manifested little urgency about entering into professional life, that is earning a living.

Dad was too busy in Brussels or somewhere like that. Mum, she worked for the BBC—documentaries and that stuff. They were both from wealthy Irish landowning families, inherited wealth, more interested in their careers than their property, run for them by an estate

manager, only returning to their ‘big house’ for holidays and family gatherings.

So, as long as I was at Imperial College, Grenoble or Langues O’ in Paris, they were happy about letting me procrastinate.

That changed when my dad’s conscience pricked him and he woke up to the fact I was now 32 and going nowhere fast. He spoke with my uncle, John Ennis, and they arranged a meeting with an old friend of theirs, John DeFrancis, who headed the Fitzwilliams Foundation in London.

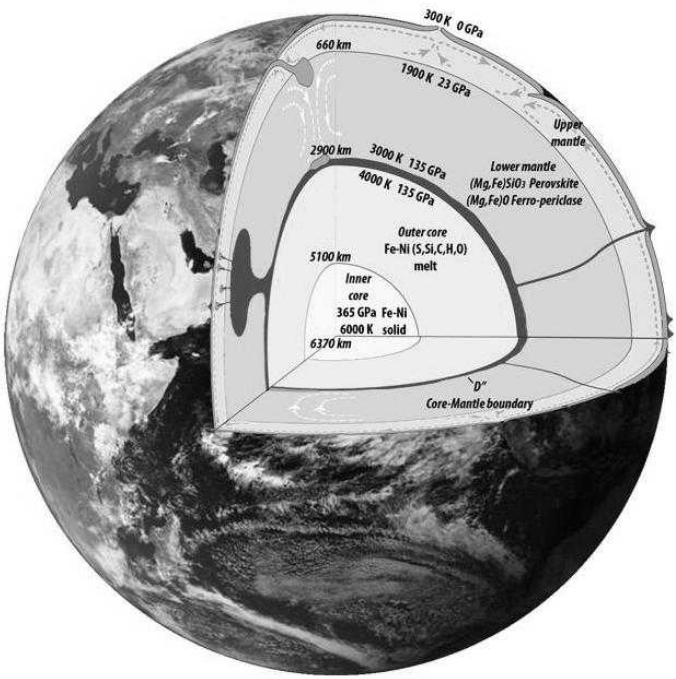
They thought that perhaps I could do something for the future of the planet as I’d just come back from Indonesia, where I spent another couple of more months stomping around the jungles of Sumatra, Borneo and Irian Jaya—that’s the Indonesian half of the island of Papua New Guinea.

So what about the planet? Well I had my ideas about that, not very conformist. Having spent the last 14 years in university, I’d had plenty of time to discover the world. It was something I’d grown up with, shuttling from place to place, with or catching up on my parents, as my dad was posted to embassies, international institutions and then Brussels.

Those years weren’t wasted, but what I had learnt, is that we, you, me, and all the rest of us, were hell-bent on destroying everything we touched, and the destruction was accelerating. Concerned governments spouted green, finance and industry got the message, that is to say new business opportunities—electric cars, windpower, solar panels, batteries, recycling, carbon reduction, carbon storage, hydrogen, take your pick.

On the one hand politicians, bankers and businessmen talked about growth; ecologists wanted everything green—forests, seas and wildlife; humanitarians wanted to save the children; NGOs wanted to care for refugees and indigenous peoples; and institutions like the UN wanted to protect us from war, dictators and predatory capitalists, and so on.

The problem I'd discovered was sustainable economic growth was impossible, the Earth's ecosystem is finite, it's a closed system, it doesn't grow. The only thing that has been growing for the last couple or more hundred years is our numbers, human beings, and exponentially, destroying everything in our path—forests, wildlife, rivers, lakes, fish, insects, to make space for our crops, plantations, domestic animals—cattle, sheep, pigs, fowl, fish and all the rest.



Unknowingly I was drifting towards geochemistry, the study of the fragile ‘critical zone’, the incredibly thin envelope in which life exists on Earth, and how man’s impact on it had grown dramatically over the last century.

I had toyed with the idea of a doctorate in geochemistry of the critical zone at the IPGP in Paris, but I was more attracted to tropical rain forests, a scientific field I could study at CIRAD in Montpellier.

CHAPTER 5

Kennedy

'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.'

Oscar Wilde

SIR PATRICK KENNEDY JOINED his close friend John DeFrancis for one of their regular reviews of world trends. Both were very rich men, their vision was long term. In appearance they were still in the prime of their lives, and they were, though very few casual observers could have guessed their real ages.

Kennedy was the head of the INI Banking corporation, a vast loosely structured holding with regional HQs in Hong Kong, London, Amsterdam and Moscow.

Their concern was China.

Three years earlier, before the Covid pandemic and the huge pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, signs of cracks had appeared in the Chinese economy—overheated growth, debt and stories of wild speculation. However, until recently the problems had seemed manageable and only as a precautionary measure Kennedy had refocused certain of his bank's activities in other markets to spread risks.

Now it seemed those problems had come to the surface with fears that they ran deeper than at first thought. Liquidity and debt figured high on the list, followed by corruption, nepotism and plain greed.

China was a big country and change had happened fast, too fast, and Xi Jinping would have his work cut out to stop the rot that had permeated through the system, even into the highest circles of power.

Evergrande, a real estate developer was the latest in a series of Chinese business groups that had got themselves in too deep, certain of which had been either forced into liquidation, asset sales or drastically scaling back on their foreign acquisitions.

Many of China's tycoons had made same bet and they were now caught on the same hook—debt. The problem was when property prices stopped rising, the whole system would start unraveling and it would collapse like a Ponzi scheme, spelling the end of three decades of explosive growth

Dalian Wanda, one of China's spectacular success stories, should have been a warning to the other developers. Only five years earlier its head, Wang Jianlin—not the same Wang as HNA's, had waltzed into London in the entourage of the country's leader, Xi Jinping, on no less than a state visit.

The visit coincided with the MIPIM UK 2015, that's an international property event held at the Olympia Exhibition Centre, where thousands of promoters, exhibitors and investors gathered together, they included a surprisingly large number of Chinese investors, developers and construction companies.

At that time relations between David Cameron's government and China were riding high, contracts galore were signed and hands pumped before the cameras of the international news media.

It was a high point in Wang Jianlin's business career, at the time he was Asia's richest man, worth over 42 billion US dollars, and work had begun on One Nine Elms, Dalian Wanda's first development outside of China, a pair of residential towers of 58 and 43 stories respectively, situated on the Thames South Bank, in London's Vauxhall district.

The conjuncture was perfect for Chinese investors, especially those who wanted to establish overseas residency, when 20 European Union member states offered golden visas, which in the case of Greece required an investment of just 250,000 euros to qualify for a passport.

The UK was at the top of the preference list, where for the first time, more tier 1 investor visas were issued to Chinese nationals than to Russians. And even though it was no longer a member of the EU, the UK remained an attractive destination, where an investment of two million pounds sufficed, a mere bagatelle for a Chinese tycoon wanting a home in London.

It was the natural destination for Hong Kongers, already owners of over 220,000 UK properties, who together with Mainlanders had overtaken Russian and Indian buyers.

Chinese real estate developers with money to burn had poured vast sums of borrowed money into London, with Boris Johnson, mayor of the city at the height of the boom, rubbing his hands in delight.

It was a golden moment for exchange between the two countries, the UK imported Chinese high-speed trains and nuclear power plants, and in exchange, the wags said, exported high-quality British pig semen.

Unfortunately the fairy tale didn't last long, and six years later, high flyer Wang Jianlin, was submerged by debt, licking his wounds, after losing three quarters of his fortune in a record time, forced to sell off his skyscrapers.

'He won't find himself sleeping in an Oxford Street doorway,' remarked Pat sourly, his bank was exposed to a few hundred million dollars in loans it had extended to Wang's group.

'Well, he's a damn sight luckier than the owners of HNA,' replied John to console him. 'Just another example of how these Chinese tycoons have run wild in their asset binge, snapping up everything they set their eyes on. A real spending orgy. I suppose it marks the arrival of China on the global stage, an excess that is about to choke them, like the naive nouveaux riches they are.'

'On top of that everything they buy is through shell companies in the Caymans.'

‘Yes, the Caymans, I ask you, why on earth are these Chinese companies registered in British offshore territories, I mean tax havens!’

They both laughed.

‘Communist China. It’s just unbelievable.’

Pat was familiar with the story, many of his bank’s clients were listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, with their business focused on Guangdong, Hong Kong and the Macao Greater Bay Area, some extending deep into Central and East China.

The truth was the Caymans and other offshore havens were seen as Plan B bolt holes by many wealthy, globally connected Chinese families, who distrusted the CCP and its political, economic and long terms vision of China. And if Xi Jinping had his way they had every reason to have a Plan B at the ready. The CCP didn’t pussyfoot around when things didn’t pan out, not only were jail times long, it wasn’t unusual for hapless would be billionaires to end up with a bullet in the neck when a fall guy was needed.

It seemed that Chinese businessmen thought the risk was worth taking, since the planet’s six richest developers were all citizens of China, including Hong Kong’s Lee Shau-kee, 93, the world’s oldest and richest real estate tycoon, who controlled Henderson Land, whose net worth was over 30 billion dollars.

Those six billionaires had a total worth of more than 150 billion dollars, at least in the spring of 2021.

Six months later Evergrande hit the wall and its head, Hui Ka Yan, one of the six billionaires, saw his dreams evaporate in a crash of mega proportions, dragging down the whole cohort of property

developers, a good many of whom would be studying the details of their Plan Bs closely, ready for a quick exit from their Communist paradise.

For Zuo Hui, of KE Holdings, whose business was real estate brokerage, rather than construction and development, it was too late. He died suddenly at the age of 50 in May 2021. At the time of his death his stake in KE Holdings was worth near 15 billion dollars.

China counted more than 800 billionaires, 100,000 super-rich and over five million millionaires.

But were they happy?

That was difficult to say, though one thing was certain, in no other country did so many of the super-rich billionaires die untimely deaths, from suspicious causes—suicide, accident and murder. Some, relatively young, jumped from high buildings or into rivers as the pressure to maintain their wealth grew. Others ended up in prison where they died a lingering death, some were spared the shame of failure and loss of face by execution for economic crimes.

The winners struggled to find time for leisure, the time to relax with their families, take holidays, play golf or even enjoy a karaoke session with their friends.

Most were workaholics, work was their pastime, keeping their eye on the ball, closely watched by the CCP, in an authoritarian state that controlled every aspect of daily life, especially watching those who tried escape its orbit, threaten its power, its monopoly of data. Information was power and data could be used to engender opposition.

CHAPTER 6

Lucy

‘OUR BELIEFS, CHRISTIAN and others, perpetuate the idea we are not animals,’ Steve declared.

‘That’s ape shit Steve,’ Lucy replied fiercely. She had her ideas and was often right, she took after her father.

She was tall, pale skinned with clear coloured eyes for a Chinese, a real looker, good fun, but wild for a future archaeologist. On top of all that she was into ecology and all that crap, not that I disagreed with it, but there was a lot of crap ideas mixed into it.

Lucy was also into ancient Middle Eastern languages, Aramaic, Hebrew and Ancient Egyptian, it was to do with archaeology. It was why we were sitting in a one of those modern cafés on avenue de France, a short walk from Langues O’, in the 13th district in Paris.

As perpetual students, dodging the professional careers we had studied for, we enjoyed a kind of privileged limbo, an in-between world where we spent a lot of our very generous spare time philosophising and arguing, and as usual Lucy was in a heated discussion with Steve.

Steve was an American, from New Orleans, whose parents and most of their family were Baptists, and whilst he himself wasn’t particularly religious, like many Americans he was impregnated with beliefs that many Europeans had left behind.

The argument had started with me asking Lucy what she thought about zero population growth.

‘Well how would you feel about living like a peasant in Gansu or Guizhouan,’ she’d retorted, then adding when she saw my blank face, ‘or like an average Indian?’

‘Why not, if our leaders showed the way,’ I replied not very convincingly, ‘which doesn’t seem to be the case considering the revelations in the Pandora Papers and all the other papers.’

‘I see.’

‘Well what about a reduced population?’ I suggested hopefully.

‘Well, the trouble is nobody ever talks about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,’ said our friend Steve, ‘Do we?’

None of us knew, remembered or cared about the details.

‘I’ll tell you, in 1967 the UN Secretary-General, U Thant, told the assembly, those rights were enshrined in the rights of the family as the natural and fundamental unit of society.’

Steve paused for effect

‘Therefore, any choice or decision with regard to the size of the family must inevitably rest with the family itself, and cannot be made by anyone else. This is a basic human right and an indispensable element of human dignity.’

There was a silence.

‘So there it is,’ he said triumphantly. ‘How do you change that?’

He was right, if things were to change something had to give. As the way promises were kept none of the objectives would ever be met as humanity slouched towards a dystopian future. And I knew, I'd seen what was happening in my short life, everywhere I cared to take a closer look.

What I learnt was the familiar ideas and customs of our own time and place always appeared so reasonable and those of the past so incomprehensible, as ours no doubt will to our grandchildren. As for the future I suppose deep down we felt powerless to change events.

'The problem lies in the idea that we are intelligent,' Lucy said, her startling eyes flashing, 'have souls and all that shit, which gives us the right to destroy what is not ours, a totally absurdity.'

'Oh,' said Steve, somewhat taken aback.

'We are an integral part of the planet, created by it, depending on it, and yet we are destroying it, sawing off the branch on which we live. What we are witnessing is the wild multiplication of the human species, like locusts eating up everything we alight on, blindly plunging headlong towards collapse.'

She was really worked up. I wondered what her father would have thought of her.

I'd heard it all before. She'd had grown up surrounded by one child families in China, where for decades the government had pursued a one child policy to limit the country's population to under 1.2 billion. It was invented way back in 1979, when China's population was approaching one billion, and of course it hadn't worked. The population was now 1.4 billion, though admittedly growth had stalled.

Steve frowned, obviously he thought that was against some constitutional amendment or other, that protected the right to go forth and multiply, as was Amnesty International, which saw the policy as a violation of sexual and reproductive rights, even if Xi Jingping had approved changes to the one child policy that now permitted Chinese families to have up to three children.

Joshua Rosenzweig, one of those Amnesty International spokesmen had declared, 'Governments have no business in regulating how many children people have. Rather than optimising its birth policy, China should instead respect people's life choices and end any invasive and punitive controls over people's family planning decisions.'

It was a paradox, on the one hand were society's altruistic ideas, saving lives at any cost in the fight against Covid, and on the other it saw nothing wrong in fighting foreign wars that reduced other lives to cinders and statistics, forcing hapless populations into flight and migration, refugees in their worn clothes—all that they possessed, reaching out with their bare hands in the hope of being able to share in the wealth, comfort and security of the consumer society, to escape the desperation of the famine, misery and oppression that ravaged their homelands, mostly scattered across large parts of Africa, the Middle East or in countries like Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

'If we are supposed to be God's creatures, as Steve seems to believe, then that god must be incredibly blind or just plain cynical,' Lucy added.

Steve, an anthropologist, looked sheepish as she continued her tirade. He was sufficiently lucid to explain religious representations were not all transparent to the mind. He had learnt that whenever people had thoughts about gods, spirits or ancestors, a complex

system of mental processes was set in motion, a great part of which was completely beyond our conscious understanding.

‘If you want to know how our minds develops religious ideas,’ he as the anthropologist told us, ‘why religion becomes credible and why it awakens such powerful emotions in us, you’ll find yourselves confronted with your ancestors, whose thoughts and emotions lay in the deep evolutionary past when we were hunter gatherers.’

Lucy looked at him strangely.

‘According to Jane Goodall, the kind of behavior reminiscent of ritual observed in many animals. In the case of chimpanzes, which along with bonobos are our closest living evolutionary kin, they dance to the sound of rain at the end of the dry season when the first drops start to fall—rythmically swaying to the sound.’

‘We’re not monkeys Steve!’

‘Well, Neanderthals had language and spiritual concepts.’

‘You can’t compare them to modern hunter gatherer peoples.’

He shrugged.

‘Explaining the existence of life after death has created some fairly extraordinary religious concepts,’ said Lucy. ‘For example, ethnic groups in New Guinea were really astonished when missionaries them told that three persons really were one person while being three persons, or that the damnation of all humanity was caused by two of our ancestors eating fruit in a garden.

‘Then there’s the Christian idea that God is all-powerful and we at the same time are free to lead our lives as we wish, which is incongruous to say the least.’

‘God?’ I said wondering out loud. ‘Who is God, what is God, wasn’t Spinoza right with pantheism, the idea was that the universe as a whole is God!’

Lucy closed her eyes in despair, she wasn't into philosophy, nor was I for that matter.

CHAPTER 7

An Informal Chat

WHEN JOHN ENNIS, that uncle of mine, suggested I work for the Fitzwilliams Foundation, I was at first reticent. It wasn't exactly what I had in mind—an office in Westminster on Queen Anne's Gate, overlooking St James's Park on the garden side. It seemed nice enough, but I'd imagined something more exotic.

He fixed up an appointment with its founder and honorary president, John DeFrancis, a family friend, who though he was getting on in years struck me as being remarkably spritely. I must say he was charming, and as I discovered, a good friend of Sir Patrick Kennedy the well-known City banker.

The Fitzwilliams Foundation was a think-tank that carried out futurist research—where the planet was going and that kind of stuff. It was specialised in predicting the unpredictable, economic and geopolitical crises, the impact of climate change, according to John Ennis.

In a way the foundation was into black swan events, those that have a deep impact on world affairs, events that DeFrancis saw as predictable, if governments and institutions searched for clues that anticipated the kind of dramas that impacted the future, which were increasingly complex in an interconnected world.

What had once been the work of intelligence agencies had been harnessed by the foundation to provide Sir Patrick Kennedy's bank with the tools to anticipate crises and market movements, by redistributing and diversifying its investments to capitalise on events.

'What we're interested in Michael are rain forests and that I believe is your field,' DeFrancis announced.

I acquiesced.

'Your uncle has contributed his knowledge for Sir Patrick's guidance over the years and he's brought your background and training to his attention.'

I smiled politely and listened.

'With COP26 approaching, we, the Fitzwilliams Foundation, have been asked to present a paper on China's encroaching activities on the Pacific Rim and its impact on resources in that part of the globe, that's to say Papua New Guinea, Indonesia and Australia,' he paused to see if I was following him. 'By resources I mean timber, minerals, like copper, iron ore and coal.'

I nodded, discreetly studying his spacious office, its furniture and decorations, refined and expensive—antique Chinese vases, an oil painting in the style of Delacroix, but no bookshelves, or for that matter papers on his magnificent 19th century desk, probably mahogany from a now vanished Caribbean forest

We were seated in leather armchairs facing a pair of French windows, which overlooked the garden that separated the offices from Birdcage Walk and St James's Park.

Set before us on a low table was a silver tray, two cups and saucers with silver spoons and a china coffee pot.

‘The foundation keeps out of politics, that’s a house rule,’ he warned me, ‘no getting chummy with politicians, keeping an arm’s length relationship with political parties.

‘Our expertise lies in the fact that we do original research, not just repurposing something done before or elsewhere, we’re neither politicians nor journalists. That’s why you interest us Michael, not because your uncle is pulling strings, but your language skills, training, your youth,’ he said with a smile. ‘Old fogies like me can no longer tramp through jungles in search of facts.’

I made a sign of polite protestation as he proceeded to pour the coffee.

‘Sir Patrick Kennedy’s bank, INI, has important interests in China and what happens there has a direct influence on the bank’s future. Of course our base in Hong Kong with its branches in Beijing and Shanghai have their fingers on the pulse. But our interest is in things banks and economists don’t report, on-the-ground research, investigative reporting on raw materials, forestry operations and mining projects, checking out things only qualified specialists can spot, raw material chains, energy supplies.

‘The Chinese economy has surfed the wave for the last couple of decades or so, now a change is at hand, a slower growing economy will be complicated for a country geared to cheap exports. The fallout for the countries that export to China is they will have to find new markets. In addition real estate development in China will suffer as homeownership ceilings. Needs will change.’

He placed a coffee in front of me after the lesson in economics and geopolitics.

‘Which brings me to Papua New Guinea, what do you know about that part of the world?’

What the fuck! I thought that’s a leap from China.

Cautiously I told him I’d spent several months in Indonesia, studying logging operations in its rain forests and had visited Irian Jaya, that’s the Western part of the island of New Guinea, Papua, which is Indonesian.

‘Excellent,’ he said beaming broadly, ‘It confirms what I’ve been told, besides it’s a good starting point.’

I perked up, perhaps there was something interesting in what he was beating the bush about.

‘What we’d like you to do is to is ...,’ he searched for his words, ‘do some groundwork on forestry resources ... covering the whole island of New Guinea, which unless I’m mistaken is one and a half times the size of France, making it the world’s second biggest island, or as big as Alaska and California together.’

‘Forestry resources?’

‘Yes. According to our information organised illegal logging by Malaysian companies, owned by overseas Chinese, leads back to China. A huge network of tropical timber trafficking that generates billions of dollars every year.’

‘I see.’

‘With your knowledge and language skills we can hopefully expose the damage being done to the rain forests of Southeast Asia.’

I was a little puzzled and asked, ‘What about ecologist organisations?’

‘You mean like Mongabay?’

‘Yes.’

‘Unfortunately the people that matter don’t listen to them, they brush them off as wokish eco-warriors. On the other hand banks like INI can cut those conglomerates and companies, linked to that kind of trade, from banking services.’

‘I see.’

‘Some of INI’s Chinese clients, real estate developers, could be concerned, and we’d like to know who. We wouldn’t want to be accused of aiding and abetting criminal organisations involved in the destruction of the rain forest, would we?’ he said in a grandfatherly tone.

I got the message and if I wasn’t mistaken it seemed like I was already onboard.

Not only would it be good way to get away from Boris Johnson’s ‘Make Britain Great Again’, it was also a good way to get away from the pandemic, the crush of a crowded city, London’s daily dose of bottlenecks, public transport nightmares, not to speak of chuggers, beggars, drunks, druggies, litter, vomit, and all the other symptoms of what was making London look more and more like a dystopian city—so much for ‘Unleash Britain’s Potential’ and restrictions on liberties ‘when there is an overwhelming reason to do so’.

‘According to your uncle you are in good physical form, quite a sportsman I believe.’

‘I run everyday, between five and ten kilometres. I’ve run a few semi-marathons and three or four full marathons. Besides that tennis and badminton whenever I can.’

‘Excellent. We’ll set up the details to prepare you for your programme, we’ll call it a ‘study’ if you like. It will also take you to China, which by the way plays an important role in New Guinea’s forestry industry, processing the wood and other raw materials it produces,’ he said with a smile. ‘Your language skills will be of great use. If it suits you you can start next week,’ he concluded with what seemed to me a certain lack of … restraint? ‘I’ll have an office made available for you here and introduce you to our research team which will back you up.’

It was as if his proposals were made to measure for me, much broader and much more to my liking than I had anticipated when my uncle had vaguely talked to me about the foundation, which had seemed rather like a stuffy sincure for old men.

‘Our HR and accounts service will look after all your needs, including your remuneration and a generous budget that will take care of all your needs, together with credit cards and the like,’ he concluded pushing back his chair and standing up.

That was it.

‘Now we can go for lunch at my club,’ he beamed as he looked at his watch, ‘just across the park, off St James’s Street, we’ll talk about your mission.’

Programme, investigation, mission, study, whatever, it sounded somewhat vague, imprecise. In any case my uncle had obviously much more pull than I had imagined, though the word ‘mission’

provoked a moment of doubt, which was quickly dispelled once we set off for Saint James's Park in the bright late morning sunshine.

* * *

As we left the foundation's office on Queen Anne's Gate, in the direction of the park, a young woman of about my age joined us, falling in three steps behind us. We stopped at the crossing for the red light on Birdcage Walk, then continued to the park and the footbridge over the lake.

I had passed by there countless times, especially when I was a kid. To the left was Buckingham Palace and to the right Whitehall.

'I'm sorry,' John said suddenly stopping. 'I didn't introduce you to Valentina. She's part of our security team.'

She smiled.

She looked vaguely Russian, was smartly but plainly dressed, very reserved, formal.

We continued as John talked about the foundation whilst I wondered why we were accompanied by security. Then, as if he could read my thoughts John informed me that I would be given a telephone number to contact if ever I ran into difficulties.

Valentina didn't join us for lunch she simply disappeared without a word as we entered the club's restaurant.

'What I'd like to speak about Michael,' John said searching for his words, 'is China and its immense influence today, something that directly concerns us at the Fitzwilliams Foundation and our founder, Sir Patrick Kennedy.

‘As you know Sir Patrick’s banking group, INI, has one of its important bases in Hong Kong and what happens in China concerns him as the bank expands it’s interests into Latin America and the Caribbean, where China has an ever growing presence.’

He talked about China investing hundreds of billions of dollars in its overseas programmes, not only for its Belt and Road Initiative, but also for disproportionately large development projects in British and former British territories in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

By providing huge sums of money to small island nations, such as Barbados and Jamaica, for their development China was setting a debt trap as it expanded its influence, burdening those small countries with unaffordable debts, debts they could never repay, eventually forcing them to cede, in compensation, the ownership of key infrastructure assets, seaports, airports and the like to Chinese owned companies.

In the case of Barbados, China had invested almost 700 million dollars in infrastructure and tourist facilities, with promises of more to come for shipping, aviation and agricultural sectors. At precisely the same moment, as if by coincidence, the government of Barbados had taken the decision to become a republic, relinquishing its centuries old links to the British crown.

The same thing was happening in Jamaica, now one of the poorest islands of the Caribbean. Beijing was pouring money into the country, making it the biggest recipient of Chinese money in the region.

The crunch came when China wanted backing at the UN in matters relating to its draconian new security laws in Hong Kong, it was payback time, and Papua New Guinea as well as the small Caribbean nation of Antigua and Barbuda—two of the remaining sixteen Commonwealth nations, gave Beijing their votes.

Papua New Guinea received huge Chinese investments, which made it difficult for its government to vote laws against environmentally unfriendly plantation and mining projects.

Even in the UK, China had huge interests in key infrastructure businesses, including Thames Water, Heathrow Airport, UK Power Networks and Hinkley Point nuclear power station. It had invested two billion dollars in Britain, much of it by Chinese state owned companies.

That kind of money bought influence in Beijing's battle for Taiwan. Other Caribbean island nations severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan in exchange for aid and loans with the result Chinese companies now controlled shipping and container ports in Cuba, Jamaica, Guyana and Suriname in addition to rights in multiple oil and gas blocs and large-scale mineral deposits of bauxite and gold.

'I'm sorry to say the list is long,' John said. 'China, directly or indirectly, has interests in British Steel, Jaguar Land Rover, Rio Tinto and many more iconic firms.

'Our objectives are business oriented,' he concluded. 'As you known we were founded by INI, and our goal is to understand the world we live in, anticipate events, avoid certain issues, especially being linked to corrupt or environmentally unfriendly businesses.'

John DeFrancis made a sign lunch was over, asked me to report to the office the following Monday morning to commence my briefing period, then offered me a lift, but I declined.

As we left the club Valentina reappeared at the door of John's chauffeur driven Jaguar that was waiting to pick him up.

John bid me goodbye and I walked up St Jame's Street to Piccadilly. I was at the same time dazed and vaguely exhilarated.

My title was 'Programme Manager Raw Material Sources' and my brief was to prepare a report on the production of raw materials in the Asia Pacific Rim region. The brief was large and covered a vast geographical zone rich in raw materials, ranging from timber to coal, iron ore, precious metals, oil and gas

I pondered the words of John DeFrancis. It was true the general public and most politicians knew next to nothing about China. It was logical he had told me, 'For more more than a century we've been conditioned to European enemies—Nazis, the Kremlin, their plots, spies and wars. We were used to German and Russian names. But China has an insurmountable barrier to our understanding, their language! The same sounding names of people and places, a vast country the geography we known little of, an opaque political system, weak and economically unimportant until the very end of the 20th century.'

It was a fact, the cities we knew something about were the most westernized—Hong Kong and Shanghai, described in books and films through the eyes of Europeans, recounting the stories of Westerners with little more than caricatures of the Chinese protagonists.

'It's the reason your talents are of interest to us,' John had told me. 'Your language skills, Fudan University and Langues O',' he'd said approvingly. 'The well-travelled son of a diplomat, your technical and business qualifications, a triathlon athlete, and … I believe,' he said with a knowing smile, 'the insight into China your young lady friends have given you.'

Evidently the foundation had done its homework. It was a strange interview and I hoped he was right.

I re-ran the film through my mind as I walked towards Picadilly Circus. At one point during the lunch, I'd even wondered whether John DeFrancis was recruiting me for MI5. His eyes had twinkled in amusement as though he knew what was running through my mind.

What was certain was China had a panoply of tools to play their dirty tricks, including fake Facebook sites operated by state organisations and state-linked propaganda accounts on Twitter.

CHAPTER 8

Briefing

I REPORTED THE FOLLOWING Monday morning at the foundation's offices, a pleasant twenty minute walk from Dolphin Square, down Rochester Road and through Strutton Ground market. An office was put at my disposal with a secretarial assistant. On my desk to my surprise was a smart glossy box containing my visiting cards.

The next three weeks were spent preparing for my 'mission', talking to the foundations specialists, studying maps, reading reports and listening to people from associations like Mongabay and Greenpeace.

The foundation's work was to sift through the vast quantities of big data now available, intuitively searching for clues, trends, political and economic shifts that would impact events down the line, the now proverbial flapping of a butterfly's wings, say for example in Iran Jaya or Papua New Guinea, that would end up with a market rout on the New York Stock Exchange. However, the foundation still needed foot soldiers—a human element, to infiltrate and investigate on the ground, and that's where I came in, unknowingly inducted as its ad hoc 'eyes and ears' to investigate movements on the fringe of China's strategic zone of influence.

It was all linked to deteriorating relations with Beijing, you know, Covid-19, the democracy movement in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Uighurs in the Northwest of the country.

I learnt facts I wasn't aware of, China was the world's biggest producer and importer of coal and iron ore, the former imported from both Indonesia and Australia, the latter from Australia alone. China was also the world's biggest importer of timber, consuming half of the timber shipped globally, but especially tropical timber from Southeast Asia and the Pacific Rim. The same went for the coal which surprisingly was mined in the forests of Indonesian Borneo.

It was little wonder that China had developed a predatory reputation for the mindless destruction and desertification of its own and its neighbour's tropical forests.

As such, China and its numerous woodworking enterprises and middlemen had aggressively exploited timber sources globally with little or no concern for equity and sustainability, its only goal being the access to the remote forests of not only Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, but also the Amazon and Congo basins, opening the way to illegal settlements, poaching, mining and land speculation, to the detriment of the natural environment and indigenous peoples of those regions.

As a major consumer of wood pulp China was driving large-scale deforestation in Sumatra and Borneo. In Indonesian Papua forests were exploited for valuable raw and sawn timber, which was exported to China at just a twentieth of its value on international markets. The huge added value on arrival in China was then doubled after the timber's transformation into premium quality wood flooring for export to Western consumers.

Other timber was transformed into furniture, veneer, plywood, disposable chopsticks, toothpicks and other wood products.

I swatted-up on independent reports detailing massive illegal logging and timber operations in the Indonesian province of Papua,

the timber smuggled out of the country to China in containers operated by crooked shipping companies with the connivance of corrupt Indonesian insiders.

I, and no doubt you, knew next to nothing about the history of the immense island of New Guinea, one of the last places to be colonised by European empire builders.

The eastern half of the island formed the independent nation of Papua New Guinea. The other half formed part of Indonesia, Western New Guinea.

When Papua was first visited by Portuguese and Spanish navigators, in 1512 and 1526, it was very sparsely populated, probably less than a million inhabitants, and of no immediate interest to the Europeans until 1545 when it was claimed for the Spanish crown, then in 1606, Luís Vaz de Torres passed through the straits that now bear his name.

Tasman, Cook, Dampier, d'Urville, La Pérouse, Bougainville and others followed, drawing maps and discovering islands.

But that was all they did. The vast island offered little interest, surrounded by deep oceans, dangerous straits and a coast line bordered by dense mangroves. Its impenetrable forests and high mountain ranges were the home to dangerous tribes of cannibals and headhunters, without towns, cities or treasure, offering no rich civilisations to conquer.

It wasn't until 1828, Europeans laid the first serious claim to the island, but only the western half, which offered the Dutch an extension to their already large colonies in the adjacent Indonesian archipelago which had been established in the 17th century.

At that time the British were more preoccupied by the colonisation of Australia and New Zealand, where the climates were more propitious to northern Europeans.

It was in the latter part of the 19th century, in 1884 to be exact, when latecomer Germany woke up to the idea of possessing a colony in the South Pacific and a protectorate over Northeast New Guinea was declared in spite of a lack of enthusiasm from Bismarck.

The sudden appearance of the Germans dismayed the British, and especially Australians, who until then had little of interest in a region covered with high forest covered mountains, peopled by threatening tribes. The Kaiser's claim provoked an immediate reaction—the proclamation of a protectorate over the South East corner of the island by Queensland, which they called British New Guinea, hoisting the Union Jack over Port Moresby in 1883, a claim officialised by London a year later.

The island was thus divided into three parts, to the west the Dutch, the northeast the Germans, and to the southeast the British.

In April 1885 a further German protectorate was declared over the nearby Solomon Islands, composed of Bougainville and a handful of smaller islands, all of which lay to the northeast of New Guinea.

Today, almost five centuries after the first Europeans laid eyes on New Guinea's coastline, it seemed extraordinary to me that daring adventurers—and daring they were, left the westernmost shores of Europe, crossed oceans in their small sailing ships and appropriated in the name of Christ and their kings islands and entire continents.

Swashbuckling captains and soldiers, armed with their superior weapons of iron and steel, cast aside ancient civilisations and cultures. Christian friars and missionaries, carrying bibles, backed by the

sword, imposed their god and beliefs to enlighten the darkness of what they saw as savages or heathens.

Fast forward and the German protectorate came to an end with the victory of the Allies in World War I, sealed by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, which saw Germany stripped of all its colonial possessions, including German New Guinea. Four years later the League of Nations voted to give Australia the mandate to administer the former protectorate.

Today, the island is still very sparsely populated, even though the numbers have grown considerably since the period of colonisation came to an end.

When the Portuguese first visited the island in the 16th century, its population was made up of countless tribes, speaking hundreds of different languages, a land where tribal warfare, headhunting and cannibalism were common practices.

Since then the population has grown fifteen fold thanks in part to improved agriculture with the introduction of new root crops, including the sweet potato, and to a lesser degree manioc—also known as cassava, imported from South American, supplemented by taros and yams—traditional subsistence root crops cultivated in the region for thousands of years.

CHAPTER 9

The Beginning

I CAUGHT UP WITH LUCY AT THE in Paris for a long weekend, meeting her on a Friday afternoon at the Bulac library, that's part of Inalco—informally known as *Langues O'*, short for *Langues Orientale.* Inalco, the *Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales* established by Colbert in Paris in 1669, and as its name suggested teaches languages and cultures.

She was there for discussions, something to do with a cultural exchange programme with the Musée du quai Branly, which interestingly had its the roots in the Colonial Museum, near the Bois de Vincennes in Paris, built as part of the Colonial Exhibition of 1931, which I'll tell you about later.

Lucy was delighted, like myself, with the news I'd be going to Shanghai and that we'd be able to spend time together.

Up unitil that point in time I'd spent a lot of time between London and Paris, mostly postponing the inevitable, that is putting my training and education to work, an ominous prospect after more than ten years of higher education, swanning around the continent and other exotic places. Though now it seemed I'd finally found something that was up to my expectations.

* * *

Me? I forgot to tell you, my name is Michael D'Arcy, Mike to my friends, though it doesn't seem like I have many at the moment.

I was born in Dublin, grew up in London where I went to Imperial College to study engineering, my dad said that together with business studies would get me anywhere. He was right. That's why I'm locked up in this grim shithole of a detention centre on the outskirts of Shanghai.

As I told you he'd said the other important thing in life was an exotic language, that's to say non-European. He should know he's a diplomat at the European Commission in Brussels, that's why I grew up a nomad, shuttling between Dublin, the golden triangle—London, Frankfurt and Paris, and Moscow, which explains why I became a polyglot of sorts, European languages were an almost second nature in our family.

The obvious choice was Chinese, though you'd perhaps wonder why I ended up studying it in Paris? Well it was to do with tropical forests, Suzie, Lucy and evidently China, which I vaguely believed held the key to my future.

You of course by now know I'm an engineer, I have a master's in engineering, paper science, print media & biomaterials from Grenoble INP-Pagora. Why Grenoble, well it was a damn sight better than the alternative—Manchester or Strathclyde in Scotland.

The following year I enrolled for a master's extension in tropical rain forests, woodlands and mangroves at CIRAD—Montpellier University.

In my second year at Montpelier I'd participated in an expedition to Borneo to get a background in ecological concepts and field techniques in tropical rain forest ecosystems and explore ecological

aspects of the rain forest canopy. It included tree climbing certification and the exploration of the canopy—a unique subsystem of the rain forest.

Later, during the summer of 2016, I travelled to Indonesia, to do research work on sustainable raw materials at APP where I was introduced to tropical rain forest operations—quite a different thing to the butterfly farms and orangutan sanctuaries I'd visited in Sarawak with my grandfather. It was there in Indonesia that the biomaterials part of my engineering studies came to life.

By that time I'd reached the point when post graduate studies became quite laid back and I decided to follow my dad's advice, adding Chinese to my CV with Indonesian thrown in for good measure, discovering the latter was as easy as the former was difficult.

You be mistaken to think I was especially talented, the truth is I had become a professional student and as such I didn't need to be a genius, but a good memory helped as did my organised approach to work, something I inherited from my mother.

But why tropical forests, I suppose that all goes back to my grandfather, his stories of Indonesia and Malaysia had fascinated me when I spent my summer holidays at his place in the Basque Country when I was a boy.

The last place I wanted to spend my life was in a pulp or paper mill. Neither did I want to end up in one of those specialised engineering firms in a freezing suburb of Helsinki or Toronto. So what choice did that leave me, since places like London or Paris had long given up on that kind of business?

My dad had spent a good part of his life sitting on commissions, committees or at conferences in Brussels or Frankfurt, which was

definitely not my idea of a career. I wanted to travel like my grandfather, explore the exotic places he described, which reminded me of the stories of Joseph Conrad or Somerset Maugham I'd read after a family adventure holiday in Sarawak.

I was lucky that my educational qualifications had landed me a job, my technical and business masters combined with my language skills fitted nicely in with the foundation's needs.

There were simply too many factors and variables, not to speak of languages and cultures, in the hotchpotch of Southeast Asia and South China.

Evidently my dad's connections had not been negligible in fixing me up with the foundation.

As I said he was a career diplomat with the European Commission, a diplomat and senior economic advisor, my grandparents were Irish, well-off landowners in County Wexford, that's a couple of hours drive to the south of Dublin. Dad moved to London when he was young, his background was macroeconomics, but he got into diplomacy after Ireland joined the EU, which led the family to Brussels when I was a kid.

Today he oversees the EU's geopolitical early warning system, that studies things like GDP, regional economic data, military and security systems, land, agriculture and forestry, population and climate data. They track political events, wars, revolutions, terrorism, famine and disease as well as the impact of climate change.

He worked with think-tanks including the Fitzwilliams Foundation, as I said there was simply too much data out there, too many languages and cultures, not to speak of conflicts. It was why John DeFrancis, who had been his economics professor at Trinity in

Dublin, was a consultant and advisor to the Europeans Commission's early warning system.

I wasn't very up on those things, but I learnt fast. I'd been learning for all my life up to that point.

What I did know quite a bit about were the forestry and paper industries which fed China's voracious appetite as its standard of living rose rapidly. But I hadn't fully understood the implications that it had for its neighbours in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Rim.

Before I left John DeFrancis advised me to use my good sense and avoid unnecessary risks. It was a pity he hadn't warned me the job they'd sent me on was politically sensitive, very, both in China and Southeast Asia, well beyond saving orangutans and the usual ecological activists save the planet spiel.

That one billion dollars had been spent protecting orangutans since 2000, hadn't saved them, more than 100,000 had died as the result of deforestation, harassment, and outright killing over the same period. Which makes me wonder into whose pockets and what useless schemes that money went?

CHAPTER 10

Uncle John

WITH THE NEWS I WAS heading off to Southeast Asia my dad suggested I do one last thing before I left and that was catch up with my uncle, John Ennis, who lived in Paris. He too was getting on in years, but he had a solid background in tropical forests, especially in Indonesia where he and my grandfather had worked together back in the 80s.

John was rather a character who we'd often met during our summers in Hendaye on the Basque Coast near the Franco-Spanish border. Last summer he'd moved into a fine early 20th century house that he'd renovated, facing the beach, built by some long dead Bordeaux banker whose now financially straitened descendants had over the years run out of the means needed for its upkeep.

According to my parents John had spent something between two and three million euros transforming it into a head-turning landmark amongst the traditional neo-Basque Durando villas that lined the seafront. On the driveway was his large black Volvo SUV, plus a new Ferrari sporting Parisian number plates, which attracted a lot more attention, not what you'd really expect for someone of his age, though he looked remarkably young, as did Sir Patrick and John DeFrancis.

The house in Hendaye was one of the latest surprises he'd sprung on us all, another mystery, like the one that surrounded his money and the rumours whispered in the family about his days in Indonesia.

I called him and he invited me over to his place on Avenue Gabrielle overlooking the Bois de Vincennes in Paris. His spacious architect designed home was an incredible museum of Oriental art, a collection he had built over a lifetime.

A couple of my friends had likened John to Gatsby, which looking at his pile in the Parisian suburb seemed a well merited sobriquet.

John talked to me about CIRAD in Montpellier and in passing told me they still had a presence in the Bois de Vincennes, which I wasn't aware of. Situated in the Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale, its original site, he told me. He had known it as the Centre Technique de Forêt Tropicale, a vestige of France's colonial presence in Equatorial Africa.

Whatever the changes he assured me that the CTFT would be a mine of information. We decided to pay them a visit.

Effectively, it was not far, just across the broad leafy avenue that circled the bois. We entered into the garden through a pair of high iron

gates and then under a Chinese arch which had evidently seen better days. The path led to a motley collection of shabby buildings that had a rather sad air about them.

We peered through the dust grimed windows, the place seemed deserted. It was obvious John had not visited the place very recently.

Venturing inside we looked for the reception or a secretary in vain. We continued along along a maze of deserted and not very inviting corridors until we finally waylaid a friendly looking individual. He introduced himself as Jean Husson, an agronomist and invited us to his office, a cluttered room with an outdated laptop on his desk.

Husson explained that almost everything had been moved to Montpellier and the centre was more or less taken over by various NGOs, such as his own, specialised in tropical agronomy, and financially hard-pressed by the looks of the place.

Having spent more than a year at CIRAD in Montpellier, I was somewhat familiar with the work of these NGOs, most of which survived on cash tight budgets financed through aid programmes and private funding.

The Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale had been created in 1899 to carry out research work for rubber, coffee, cocoa, vanilla and banana plantations in the French colonies. During the Colonial Exhibition of Paris in 1907, five villages representing the colonies were built in the gardens and visited by more than one million people.

A few vestiges of the past were still present, a crumbling souvenir of colonial power and glory, greenhouses, monuments and ornamental bridges, forgotten and overgrown by vegetation.

My uncle was disappointed. ‘France has evidently abandoned its place to the Chinese,’ he muttered. ‘As usual you’ll have to count on your own resource,’ he added with an air of foreboding.

CHAPTER 11

Papua

A WEEK LATER I WAS in Hong Kong, a stopover on my way to New Guinea. There, thanks to an introduction from my uncle, I visited the Apple Daily where I met Jimmy Chan, who headed the newspaper's climate and environment desk.

Jimmy, a garrulous old hand, a veteran reporter with more than thirty five years experience behind him in the region's forestry industry, agreed to introduce me a group of activists who had infiltrated logging companies, investigating the ever growing scale of deforestation in Sumatra, Borneo and the Malaku Islands.

That evening we met Jimmy's friends in a crowded bar in Wanchai. There were two of them Lou Lin and Jenny Cheung.

Lou explained how until recently there had been four types of concessions in forested regions, selective logging for timber, clear cutting to supply the paper making, oil palm plantations and mining.

Export licenses for timber were issued to prove wood came from legal and sustainable sources, however, with the Covid pandemic labour was in short supply, licenses became difficult to obtain and exports dropped, forcing buyers to turn to Papua New Guinea.

Timber was smuggled out of Indonesian Papua, across the border of the densely forested frontier region and into PNG, an arrangement encouraged by bribery and corruption.

The black market for illegally logged timber prospered and severely impacted Indonesian forests, intensifying the scale of deforestation.

Licensing made Indonesia the first country in the world to have its timber recognised by the European Union with traceability of all wood imported from Indonesia—in theory.

What Jimmy's friends told me wasn't really new. Myself, I hadn't been more ecologist minded than most people of my age. As an engineer I had always been convinced of the need to build production plants to provide the needs of consumers, especially those in developing countries, if you see what I mean.

I had even believed well managed tree plantations in tropical regions were a necessary part of the process for the production of paper, cardboard and construction materials.

But that was until my first visit to a logging operation in a tropical rain forest of Borneo—a brutal awakening.

There I'd witnessed destruction on a huge scale. Swaths of million year old forests were destroyed by chainsaws and bulldozers, the living forest transformed into a blackened landscape by fire, hell-like apocalyptic scenes in three dimensions, the smell of burning, the air impregnated with soot, silence, the annihilation of any semblance of animal or plant habitat, opening the land to the searing equatorial sun.

The scale was much more frightening than the wokish presentations made by that media darling, Kyristophe Kristofors, whose money spinning ecological films like 'Indians' had been acclaimed by critics

I was deeply disturbed by what I witnessed, which was repeated again and again, in Papua New Guinea, Burma, the Congo, Brazil and Colombia.

More startling was the discovery that beneath Borneo's land were vast coal deposits, which were mined on an unimaginable scale and the coal exported to China to fuel power plants, whilst plans were made to build hundreds more coal fired plants across East and Southeast Asia. China alone planned to add another 200 gigawatts to its existing, already huge, network of coal-fired power stations.

* * *

The only way to get to Kota Jayapura, the capital of Indonesian Papua, was from Jakarta or Bali, there were also flights from Ambon or Makassar, but why complicate something that already looked complicated.

It wasn't my first visit to Jayapura, I spent a few brief days there when I had accompanied an APP team to a conference on forest management organised by the Ministry of Forests with visits to log yards and sawmills in a forest area up the coast from the city.

What I remembered most were the restaurants and karaoke sessions with APP guys, most of whom were overseas Chinese, who had no qualms about drinking in Muslim Indonesia which was in any case very laid back, and besides Jayapura was a melting pot with nearly two thirds of its population already non-Papuan.

It was why I arrived with a vaguely preconceived idea, built around the little I had learnt at that time, which didn't correspond to the reports on the rain forests and independence movements I had read about in London during my briefing period.

I nevertheless expected something similar to that I had encountered in Sumatra and Borneo. Instead I discovered another world. A world

stranger than those I had travelled to in my wandering life as the son of a diplomat and as a very privileged student.

* * *

Papua had long been the centre of a simmering independence movement in a region of Indonesia as big as France, most of it mountainous and covered by dense tropical forests, which offered endless possibilities to the rebels and with very few roads of any kind, a formidable obstacle to government forces.

The island was one of the last great wildernesses on earth, covered in virgin rain forest, second only in size to that of the Amazon, and the home to many unique species of flora and fauna.

An incredibly diversified and almost unspoiled paradise, now under attack by the chainsaw, loggers, oil palm planters and powerful international mining companies.

A human tragedy with Papua's one million indigenous people trapped in an unequal struggle with Indonesia, threatened by waves of newly arrived Javanese immigrants, from their densely populated island, transported by the government in Jakarta to colonise the region, immigrants culturally and ethnically different from Papuans, in a movement they called the great replacement.

It was colonialism practiced by Jakarta that itself had experienced centuries of colonisation by the Dutch.

Papua, a region of the world, distant and out of sight of the former colonial powers, was the victim of ethnic gerrymandering, just as Borneo was, subject to the violence of Jakarta, three quarters of a century after Netherlands New Guinea's independence from Dutch rule.

During the pre-World War I colonial period, the western region of New Guinea was controlled by the Dutch. However, in reality, the larger part of New Guinea remained beyond colonial influence. Little was known of the interior, large areas of the map remained unexplored, even the number of inhabitants of the island was unknown, occupied by an almost unbelievable number of indigenous tribes of hunter-gatherers.

The present day tragedy of West New Guinea went back to the withdrawal of the Dutch who had colonised the western half of the vast island of New Guinea.

In 1898, Germany declared a protectorate over the northeastern region and its outlying islands, whilst the neighbouring region to the south of the protectorate was occupied by the British.

As was the case in Africa and elsewhere, it was a carve-up by the then colonial powers with little consideration given to the indigenous peoples, their traditions or history.

At the end of WWII, Japanese and German occupation came to an end, unfortunately for the Papuans the Dutch returned to Papua to reclaim their possession. A long and still unfinished war of independence commenced, compounded by the claims of the newly independent Indonesian nation and its president, Bung Sukarno, founder of the Third World group of nations, who gained control of Papua, approved in 1962 under a United Nations mandate.

The violence and repression engendered by the Indonesian occupation continued as Papuan independence movements pursued their struggle for self-determination faced by the invasion of ethnic Indonesian immigrants dispatched by Jakarta to bolster its claims to the region.

Papuan freedom fighters were denounced as terrorists and killed by the military in a forgotten war during which, according to some estimates, half a million Papuans had been killed.

It was a real war.

* * *

I chose Bali, a four-hour-flight from Hong Kong, then after a cool weekend relaxing on the near deserted tropical island, hard hit by the pandemic, I continued on to Jayapura, another four-and-a-half-hour-flight on a half-full Garuda 737-800, over the Banda Sea, then the mountainous forests of Papua bordering the Pacific, finally descending to Jayapura over Humboldt Bay, on my mission into a world where a new species of conquistadors were pillaging the treasures of their rightful owners.

Dortheys Hiyo Eluay International Airport, until very recently known as Sentani Airport, had been renamed after the former leader of the Papua Presidium Council, who was murdered by members of the Indonesian Army special forces command.

The airport which lay at the end of Lake Sentani was approached over a lagoon that I later learnt was Youtefa Bay, then over Kota Jayapura and low over the water to the airport's single runway.

Looking to the right through scattered clouds I got a closer view of some very densely forested mountains, to the left the land was low lying covered with dense vegetation, trees and palms.

There were few formalities and I was soon in the arrivals area where I was met by the bank's representative, Rudi Budiman, who was carrying a white plastic panel bearing INI's logo and my name written with a black marker.

‘Welcome to Kota Jayapura Mr D’Arcy,’ said Rudi greeting me with a broad smile. He was about forty, his hair slicked back, wearing a Batik shirt and sporting an expensive looking watch. Then, pointing to the baggage conveyor he announced, ‘The driver will take you bags.’

Looking around I couldn’t help thinking it wasn’t the busiest airport I’d ever seen nor was it very international—all arriving and departing flights were to or from destinations within Indonesia.

Rudi pointed the way to the exit where a Toyota Land cruiser was parked, explaining it was 40 kilometres to the city centre. The driver followed a modern highway along the winding northern bank of the lake. The city that lay between the lake and the ocean, overflowing into the steep valleys and dominated by a series of rugged hills.

Rudi informed me that my hotel, the Mercure, was outside the downtown area, to the north, between the hills overlooking a small bay further along the coast.

‘Not far from the beach,’ he said with a smile, though the beach wasn’t part of my plans.

I checked in, then Rudi, after announcing we’d meet for dinner that evening at seven when we’d be joined by a forestry specialist recommended by the CIRAD, bid me goodbye

The hotel was modern and comfortable with a splendid view over the ocean and the Cyclops Mountains.

* * *

Rudi was an Indonesian, obviously of Chinese descent. I was only half surprised, even though I had been told that there were few Hong

Kongers or Chinese nationals in Papua. People like Rudi Budiman were Peranakans, part of the Chinese diaspora, as my uncle had explained, the descendants of those who had migrated from Southern China to Indonesia over past centuries, and had, over time, married into the local communities creating a syncretic culture, Chinese though not Chinese, some more so than others, many speaking Chinese dialects in addition to Indonesian and regional languages, and most were in business in one way or the other.

In the past they had known bad times when their communities were attacked, however, in more recent times, since China had emerged as a world power to be reckoned with, they were held in more respect.

The Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua had suffered decades of violence as Indonesia asserted its claim to the territory following its independence from Dutch rule. Strangely the conflict had received little reaction from the US, China or even Indonesia's neighbours, most of which were members of the Southeast Asian bloc of ASEAN states, except Australia and Papua New Guinea.

According to my brief at the foundation, Indonesia's strategic position in today's geopolitical configuration explained the silence. A vast archipelago situated between the Pacific and Indian oceans, with more than 220 million inhabitants, the fourth most populous nation on Earth, and the majority of its peoples were Muslim.

Economically speaking it was the most important market in the region and with its highly influential Chinese diaspora counted many extremely powerful business leaders who enjoyed close links to China, which played a key role in Indonesia's huge ongoing infrastructure developments.

In the geopolitical balancing act of the great powers, the US saw Indonesia as vital to stability and progress in Southeast Asia and was

reluctant to spoil its relationship with Indonesia by criticising its internal policies.

* * *

I met Rudi in the lobby as agreed, he was accompanied by a man of about my age, dark skinned with tight curly hair, an ethnic Papuan.

'Hi Michael, this is Lukas Wenda,' announced Rudi. 'He's a forestry specialist, he's also a professional guide.'

Lukas stretch out his hand smiling broadly, displaying his perfect somewhat large white teeth.

'Lukas graduated at Waikato University in New Zealand,' Rudi added, 'a masters in forestry management and tropical ecology. Speaks perfect English.'

Lukas bowed his head, a little embarrassed by the introduction.

'Let's go, there's a small place down by the waterfront where we can eat and talk.'

It was less than half a mile, but we took the Toyota, it seemed it was too hot and humid to walk.

The Blue Cafe was on the other side of a small bay. Once inside we were hit by the cool air of the air-conditioning, it was quite full and a band played on a small stage. Rudi pointed to the outside veranda where we took a table overlooking the water, across the bay I could see the Mercure and the lights against the shadow of the hills beyond.

'It's quieter here,' Rudi said.

He ordered chilled beers and the meal—grilled fish, normal we were facing the Pacific, accompanied by deliciously spicy vegetables

'So Michael, if I've understood rightly you're preparing a report on the forestry industry for the bank,' Rudi said turning to business.

'Yes, I'm trying to get some background on behalf of INI,' I told them. 'They commissioned a study of raw material flows from us, you know regional interchanges. The bank has a number of clients active across the region and figured they should know more about it to improve their service.'

'Sounds good. Lukas here is an expert. Myself I have to admit I know very little about raw materials, my business is customer relations and general banking services,' he said smiling apologetically. 'I've given Lukas your suggestions and he's worked out a schedule with transport.'

'Great. It shouldn't be too complicated, what I'm interested are raw materials, mostly forestry, agricultural products and minerals,' I said.

'Good. Lukas will take you into the forest and logging areas and over the border into New Guinea. I've obtained a permit which will allow you to cross the border, about 40 kilometres east from here.'

I talked to Lukas about the programme he had outlined, where he proposed taking me and the transport. The rest I'd have to improvise as we went along.

Lukas produced a map and traced the border, a straight line, apart from some zigzags as it crossed the high central mountain range. Longitude 141° E, running north to south, to the east of Jayapura. Running his finger northwards was the Pacific Ocean and Japan, to the south the Torres Straits and Cape York Peninsula in Australia.

We talked and enjoyed the diner, then headed back to the hotel.

‘Lukas will pick you up tomorrow,’ said Rudi. ‘If you need me just call.’

That was that, it was the last I saw of Rudi. Evidently I didn’t come high on his list of priorities.

CHAPTER 12

Indonesian Papua

ON EITHER SIDE OF THAT dividing line—141° E, New Guinea was covered by nothing but almost endless forests. There were lowland rain forests, hill forests, montane forests, savanna woodlands, swamps and mangroves. To the west was the Wismunurti mountain range—part of the Central Highlands, north and south of the mountains was little sign of human life, no cities, no towns, just a sparse scattering of very small villages. At the most southerly point of the line, near Merauke, was a savanna-like plain beyond which was the Torres Straits.

Papua New Guinea was the world's second largest, but least known island, marked by that rugged mountain range that runs from east to west, its highest peak, Puncak Jaya, soars to 4,884 metres.

The whole the island was 2,400 kilometres and long and 700 wide, covering some 880,000 square kilometres of territory, that's twice the size of California, more than three times that of the UK, sparsely populated with less than 15 million souls living on its coastal regions and in its steep often hidden valleys.

The island was one of the most biologically diverse in the world. It lay to the east of two invisible lines, the Wallace Line and Lydekker's Line, which delimited a bio-geographical region named Wallacia. The former named after the naturalist George Wallace, separated the fauna

and flora of Asia from that of Australasia, the latter the easterly extent of Asian species.

Papua New Guinea was nature's mysterious island, the home of marsupials, birds of paradise, tree kangaroos, cassowarys, sago palms, strange epiphytes and countless unique species of orchids. Its rain forests were second only to those of the Amazon in their bio-diversity, and like the Amazon were threatened by logging, mining and urbanisation.

Along the coast of Indonesian New Guinea were seven or eight small shipping ports, the biggest of which was Sorong on the West Papuan Bird's Head Peninsula, a regional hub for containers, almost exclusively loaded with sawn timber—the export of whole logs from Indonesia being illegal.

Papuans, like my guide Lukas Wenda, were the indigenous people of the region that constitutes the Western half of an island shared with Papua New Guinea. Ethnically, linguistically and historically very different from the people of the Indonesian islands to the west, who were not Melanesians, but mostly Malaysian.

I have to admit I knew next to nothing about the history of New Guinea. That's not surprising, in the UK, as in much of Europe, we were taught next to nothing of the history of our neighbours and even less of their colonies, except for the skirmishes that occurred when friction developed along the lines where the tectonic plates of empires met.

The same went for explorers other than our own. In fact we only learnt about the bad things other nations and their empires were accused of.

It would be of course be difficult to ask schoolchildren, when they are already struggling with elementary French to retain names like the *Generale Nederlandsche Geoctroyeerde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, which later became the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*.

Perhaps, but more to the point, the archipelago named the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century had originally come to the notice of European as the almost mythical Spice Islands, said to be the source of the much prized spices that arrived in Europe over the centuries by varying overland and sea routes that led to Byzance, called the silk roads, along which Arab and other traders carried their precious wares.

Cities like Venice and Genoa enjoyed a monopoly of trade with Christian Byzance, which came abruptly to an end when the city fell to the Ottoman Turks.

It was only after Vasco da Gama discovered a sea route to India, and Afonso de Alburqueque reached the Moluccas, and claimed the islands for Portugal, did the spice trade recover. Their sailing ships loaded with nutmeg and mace returned home and fortunes were made, followed by an enforced monopoly whereby Portugal limited the production of spices to the islands of Banda and Ambon.

Europeans called them the Spice Islands, where nutmeg, the fruit of a smallish tree, *Myristica fragrans*, grew. Thereafter the islands

became an important strategic base for the hugely profitable spice trade.

Nutmeg and cloves, the two most common spices, were originally endemic to those islands, and since spices were worth their weight in gold, the control of the Moluccas became synonymous with vast wealth.

Meanwhile, the Spanish, not to be outdone by their neighbours, backed Columbus in his plan to find an alternative route to the Indies by sailing westwards, instead he discovered the New World.

Finally it was Magellan, another Portuguese navigator, who discovered the route after persuading the Spanish crown to finance his project. He believed he could find a westward passage to the South Sea and a route to the Spice Islands by circumnavigating the globe. This he did in 1520, by discovering a passage between the Chilean mainland and Tierra del Fuego, sailing through what became known as the Straits of Magellan into the Pacific Ocean, which he then crossed, landing on the island of Guam in the spring of 1521.

Antonio Pigafetta, an Italian scholar, accompanied Magellan as his chronicler recording the voyage of discovery and circumnavigation under the flag of Charles V of Spain.

Magellan never reached the Spice Islands, he was killed in a skirmish at Mactan, off Cebu in the Philippines. However, two of his remaining ships under the command of Juan Sebastian Elcano finally reached the Moluccas in November 1521.

But, only one ship, the Victoria, completed the voyage, circumnavigating the globe, arriving back in Seville in September 1522, loaded with a rich cargo of spices. Aboard were just 18 survivors of the original crew, Pigafetta amongst them.

The Victoria carried 26 tons of spices, the value of which not only covered the cost of the four ships lost during the voyage, but also made a profit of 500 gold ducats, more than justifying the cost of the expedition sponsored by the Spanish king.

A confrontation between Spain and Portugal was inevitable, since by 1512 the Portuguese had already established several bases on the Spice Islands. This was followed by the arrival of the British and the Dutch who coveted the wealth of their rivals.

Finally, after many battles, the Dutch emerged victorious in 1663 and founded the *Generale Nederlandsche Geoctroyeerde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, in English the Dutch East India Company, or VOC, monopolising the trade of spices produced on those distant islands after the company was granted a charter to wage war, build fortresses, and make treaties across Asia, establishing its base in Batavia, founded in 1619, now Jakarta.

Over the next one hundred years or so the VOC expanded its territory and monopolised the spice trade until it was dissolved in 1799, when its colonial possessions in the Indonesian archipelago were nationalised by the Dutch government.

During World War II the Dutch East Indies was occupied by Japan until August 1945. In 1949 Indonesia became an independent nation, excluding the territory of Dutch New Guinea—the western part of New Guinea, that is the Papuan provinces.

In 1962, following a running dispute with the Netherlands on whether Dutch New Guinea would become an independent state or an Indonesian province, Dutch New Guinea was occupied by the Indonesian military, then formally annexed by Jakarta with the approval of the UN in 1969.

Since that time the Papuan provinces have been wracked by the simmering conflict between independentist and government forces with the Free Papua Organization accusing Indonesia of essentially replacing the Netherlands as a coloniser.

'Today, under Joko Widodo, abuses and violent attacks by the army and police continue with mass arrests and crackdowns,' Lukas told me. 'Both physically and mentally, Indonesia intimidates us every day.'

Once Rudi Budiman was no longer present, Lukas became surprisingly more talkative. He was a true Papuan nationalist and defended the rights and traditions of his peoples.

Widodo's role as the president of Indonesia was to perpetuate his country's vision of Papua as being an uncontested, indivisible part of the Republic of Indonesia.

Papua represented not only land and space for the over-populated islands of Java and Madura, but also natural wealth in the form of energy, minerals and forests together with the riches of the seas that surrounding it.

'That wealth is plundered,' Lukas almost whispered, 'by the destruction of our ancestral homelands by international consortiums who ruthlessly exploit the forests of the Papuan provinces, our forests, as they have the forests of Sumatra and Borneo. Now, after depleting those forests the timber companies have invaded Papua.'

'But I thought the government had declared a moratorium, freezing all new permits to clear primary forest.'

'True, but illegal logging is rampant, logging companies have paid the military to turn a blind eye. Like the palm oil companies that pose

an even greater threat to the forest—clearing the land for plantations to produce biofuels.'

It was ironic that biofuels were being produced from palm oil with plantations replacing the rain forest at a rate of 300,000 hectares each year.

'It's a double tragedy, because much of that forest was sacrificed without the agreement of its customary owners,' Lukas protested, 'many of whom depended on it to feed their families, now plunged into a life of misery and dependence in slum settlements.'

It was little wonder that violence flared in Papua, as thousands of Indonesian troops were deployed to crush activists, imprison journalists, shutting down internet, forcing villagers to flee into the forest.

The confrontation had worsened following the death of a senior Indonesia police chief in a violent clash with the West Papua National Liberation Army.

'The situation is explosive. Widodo has ordered the army to pursue and arrest all rebels and the leader of the People's Consultative Assembly in Jakarta even told the government to destroy rebels first and discuss human rights later.'

'Is it safe where we're going?' I asked alarmed by this news.

'Yes, but you'll have to be careful, avoid the areas where it's become very dangerous, reports say it's almost like a war zone, at times heavy machine gun fire and explosions can be heard.'

It wasn't exactly what I signed up for, especially when he said 'you'.

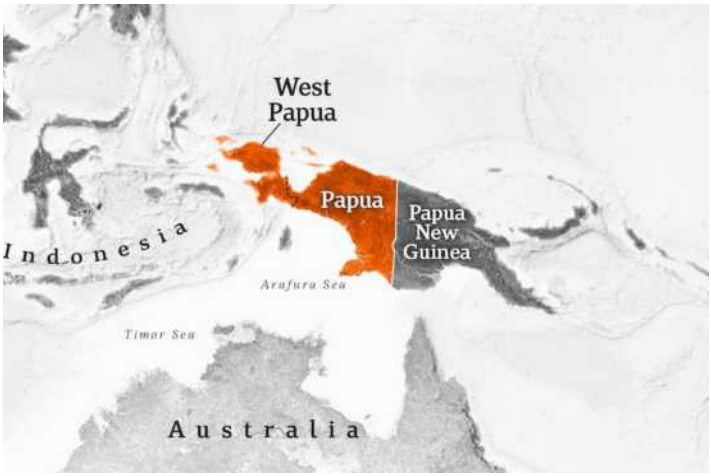
CHAPTER 13

The Bird's Head

I WAS IN A HURRY TO VISIT PNG, Indonesia I already knew. The army was ruthless and I didn't want to mix with them.

It was tempting, from Jayapura to Vanimo on the other side of the border it was only 80 kilometres. It was described as a surfing hotspot. A town of around 12,000 overlooking the Bismarck Sea, capital of the Sandaun Province in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea.

But not before I'd taken a look at Sorong, at the tip of the Bird's Head, in West Papua, which Lukas told me was the jumping off point to the Raja Ampat Islands. Their forest and nature resorts were just a couple of hours away by the fast ferry from Sorong.



Lukas informed me that the islands had been systematically looted under the guise of Kopermas permits, that is to say small scale

concessions granted by the Ministry of Forests to community logging cooperatives, which were in reality fronts for timber companies operating with the complicity of corrupt military, police and forestry officials.

Not only were the timber companies ultimately owned by Chinese and Malaysian conglomerates, but the logging was carried out in areas designated as protected nature reserves often situated on uninhibited islands.

The trees were illegally felled, loaded onto barges and into containers, then transported to Sorong, where they were directly transboarded onto ships, destination Shanghai.

The smugglers operated by exploiting loopholes in the laws governing small-scale logging permits, where Indonesian middlemen, called ‘foster fathers’ tricked villagers into allowing them to log on their customary lands, in exchange for promises of gifts—food, cash, tools, speedboat motors and generators, or promises of dispensaries, community schools and even churches.

I have to admit that the idea of visiting Sorong, swanning around the islands and overnighting in small hotels on idyllic beaches or diving in the unspoilt coral seas was difficult to beat, better than risking my life under the threat of bombs and bullets in the forest.

Once in Sorong, it was not complicated to observe the comings and goings where I had an unhindered view of the business activities as any casual tourist would, almost all of which turned around timber, from raw logs to sawn timber for building materials and the river and sea transport, where the movement of the wood was visible for all to see, and which evidently pointed to intrusions into the natural environment.

To help me in my work I'd brought a couple of drones and cameras. For discreet observations a compact drone that could fit into the palm of my hand and the other, a more up market model with a high end camera, for detailed photography.

They fell in the range of what an amateur naturalist would use, nothing to upset officials unless they were looking for an excuse to make trouble.

I'd spoken to Valentina, the security officer at the foundation, and she had strongly advised me to upload films to their cloud and wipe memory cards after filming anything that might be sensitive.

One evening over drinks Lukas asked me what I knew about the Grasberg Mine. I shrugged my shoulders. He then proceeded to tell me of the extraordinary mineral riches discovered near Puncak Jaya, formerly known as Mount Carstensz, the highest mountain in Indonesian Papua, the site of the largest reserve of gold and the second largest reserve of copper in the world.

In 1936, a Dutch geologist Jean Jacques Dozy, a member of an expedition climbing Mount Carstensz, picked up an unusual green coloured rock, what he had stumbled upon was the largest deposit of gold and copper ever discovered.

In 1939, he filed his report which was forgotten when World War II broke out. It was only in 1959 it came to light again when Dutch geologists were searching for the source of alluvial gold washed into the Arafura Sea.

Forbes Wilson, geologist and vice president of Freeport recognized the potential and in 1960 an expedition was sent to explore the site, an arduous six week long trek that confirmed the presence of an immense deposit of copper.

Construction work commenced at an altitude of 4,100 metres with an investment of 175 million dollars, involving a new town, an airport, pipelines and a power plant. Production started in 1972 with ore in the form of a slurry pumped down a 166 km pipeline through mountains, forests and swamps, to a new port at Amamapare on the south coast, where it was dewatered and shipped to smelters overseas. Each ton of dry concentrate contained 317 kilos of copper, 30 grams of gold and 30 grams of silver.

In 1977, a rebel group calling themselves the Free Papua Movement attacked the mine, dynamiting the slurry pipeline, causing tens of millions of dollars in damage. The Indonesian military retaliated by killing an estimated 800 people.

In the mid-1980s, mining was extended to Grasberg and business prospered as China opened up and the demand for copper boomed in Asia. The open pit mine was transformed into a two kilometer wide crater producing tens of millions of tons of raw ore annually.

The concentration process generated tailings at a rate of 700,000 tonnes a day, an immense source of pollution downstream of the mine, dumped into the Aikwa river system and Arafura Sea, contaminating 130 square kilometres along the river's the floodplain, destroying plant and aquatic life.

The overburden remained in the highlands, covering eight square kilometres and hundreds of metres deep with its acidic runoff washing into the headwaters of the Wanagon River.

In total the mine was generating billion tons of waste that was released in one form or another into the natural environment.

I would have liked to have visited Grasberg, but I was not an expert in mining and decided to postpone that until I'd learnt more about the forestry industry and timber exports.

* * *

After returning to Jayapura, where I overnighted, I bid Lukas goodbye and set off with a driver for Vanimo which lay 40 kilometres from the Indonesian and PNG border. In all the drive was about 80 kilometres along the Jayapura-Vanimo Highway, about three hours including the stop at the border crossing.

The landscape was a reminder of the immensity of PNG's forests. What I had seen over the course of the previous couple of weeks, from cars, boats and planes, was an endless vista of mountains, lowlands and coastlines covered by dense forests with a mere handful towns, as for the villages they were small and lost under the cover of the island's vast forests.

I couldn't help asking myself what would happen if these forests were replaced by fields and plantations? If the loggers had their way. As had already happened elsewhere in the world. After all it was part of human history.

As we entered Vanimo my driver informed me the road turned inland a few kilometres further east of the town and disappeared into the endless forest where it apparently petered out with nowhere else to go.

He dropped me off at the Surf Lodge, a small hotel favoured by the surf enthusiasts and bums who rode the Pacific rollers.

I was now a surfer, there was no problem with that, I had spent many summers surfing on the Basque coast at Biarritz or Hendaye.

To the east of Surf Lodge was Town Beach where the surf was fairly basic, beginners' stuff, which suited me as I hadn't surfed for a couple of years. In any case it wasn't my objective.

Besides the surf were the usual trips for tourists wanting to explore the surroundings—waterfalls, jungle trekking, snorkeling and game fishing, or simply relaxing on the beach, which I opted for, sipping an iced coconut at the grass-roofed bar, shaded by swaying coconut palms whilst I studied the lay of the land and checked out a YouTube video—Bikpela Bagarap—Big Damage, that described illegal logging in Papua New Guinea.

Laid back like that I started my exploration plan with the aid of Google Earth Pro. Anyone could download it free and using it was elementary. I zoomed in onto the north coast of the island of Papua New Guinea and then started searching for logging ports to either side of the Indonesia and PNG border.

The first was at Vanimo 2°40'53"S 141°17'29". Go-ahead, check it out in 3D, and you will have a magnificent image of the huge log park and a berthed ship being loaded with hardwoods recently cut from nearby forests. Looking closer you can see cars. Compare them to the logs and you will get some idea of how big those trees were.

Now click on 'Photos' and you'll get a shot of logs piled up and a ship at the quayside.

So there you are, anyone with a decent laptop and internet connection could zoom in with Google Earth, then for good measure, those with a budget, could order quality high definition images from any number of specialised companies.

That's what I expected to find, that plus the villages and the thatched roofs of buildings and homes.

What I didn't expect were the mission houses, churches and all that, in even the smallest villages, bigger with brightly painted iron roofs.

That was the other business in PNG—proselytising, some like Lukas saw it as reeducation, brain washing.

CHAPTER 14

Trafficking

VANIMO WAS THE CAPITAL of Sandaun Province, a region of 35,000 square kilometres, more than half the size of England, but with only two towns of any importance.

There were several staging yards dotted along the coast between the border and Vanimo, from where the logs could be shipped by barge to the bay that lay to the westside of the town. There they were unloaded or stored on large barges ready to be transboarded onto ships that would carry entire logs or containers of sawn logs to China.

I downloaded the latest high definition satellite images in which almost nothing escaped detection. The images were damning. All along the northern coast of PNG logs were being transported to staging yards for collection and loaded from barges onto ships anchored offshore.

Blocks of logged forest were also visible, and to the east of the island oil palm plantations could be seen—everywhere.

Before the forestry industry came to Vanimo, it was a traditional fishing village, where men in their outrigger canoes fished the lagoons and reefs with their nets and spears. The villagers practised scarification, tattoos and used clay cooking pots. The only outside influence came from the missionaries.

That changed little by little as outsiders arrived with generators, iron roofing for previously thatched homes, tinned food and rice, soon little remained of the past, just the traditional singsins with drums, dancing, songs, and costumes of feathers and leaves.

Soon Vanimo took on the air of a Wild West frontier town as cash started to flow in when a forest products company, owned by a Malaysian group, moved in setting up a base to export timber cut in the forests a little further inland.

Forests there were, endlessly spreading out in in all directions. Trees were felled and transported by barge to Vanimo where they were dried and sawn or simply exported as raw logs. Almost all was shipped to China for processing. It wasn't surprising to learn the port was soon to be extended to handle the increased demand for timber and palm oil in China.

Slowly the picturesque village with its fine beaches, lagoons and creeks grew as business prospered, building hotels for tourists and visitors as more loggers arrived, expanding their operations, hacking into the primary forests, legally and illegally felling the hardwoods.

The Malaysians established a local company, Vanimo Forest Products, owned by Rimbunan Hijau, its headquarters in Sibu, Sarawak, Malaysia, which after stripping its own forests bare to make way for oil palm plantations had now invaded PNG.

Soon Vanimo Forest Products and companies like it transformed PNG into the world's largest exporter of tropical timber, with the cleared land turned over to oil palm plantations.

Land rights were obtained through government issued Special Agriculture and Business Leases, called SABLs, which transferred the land from the indigenous communities—customary owners of the

land, to the logging companies. In effect these SABLs authorised the felling and export of timber worth hundreds of millions of dollars to the detriment of local people.

Rimbunan Hijau, RH, was in fact a tentacular conglomerate of nebulous companies, owned and controlled by the Tiongs, a Sarawak family, whose business empire had interests in forestry, palm oil, plastics, mining, media and publishing.

RH had been founded in 1975 by Tiong Hiew King, who died in February 2021 and was succeeded by his brother. Among other many things RH owned an hotel in Port Moresby, a local airline and newspaper as well as palm oil plantations in PNG's East New Britain Province.

* * *

Tens of housands of hectares of virgin rain forest had been clear cut in the province and more than a million cubic metres of timber exported, causing irreparable losses to indigenous communities with the total destruction of their vital resources, traditionally supplied from their forests, leaving communities destitute, ignored by politicians and government organisations and unprotected by the police.

Where land was unsuited for plantations secondary forest sprung up, not only was it poorer than the primary forest it was often an impenetrable tangle of low growth which would take generations to recovery. Especially affected were the large dominant species that would have difficulty in re-establishing their presence, becoming locally extinct as farming, roads and villages moved into the cleared forest areas.

The port was relatively quiet, but I was told that just a couple of years earlier, before the pandemic, the bay was filled with ships, ready to be loaded with logs from a continuous stream of overloaded trucks rumbling into the port each day.

Those logs came from land cleared for oil palm plantations owned by companies that preached a policy of 'No Deforestation, No Peat and No Exploitation', guaranteeing their palm oil was produced without harm to forests of 'High Conservation Value' or 'High Carbon Stock', or developed without local community consent.

I needed to take a look at the oil palm plantations and the forestry operations belonging to another Malaysian Chinese family, the Tees, owners of Bewani Oil Palm Plantations.

At the Surf Lodge, I made pals with a couple of Australians from Melbourne, Jim Hogan and Dave Warner, who made a living with their surf school during the southern hemisphere winter. After an evening drinking beer we got on to the subject of the rain forest and logging. I discovered they both not only spoke Tok Pisin and were ecologist minded, but also made a sideline offering their services as guides, organising nature trips into the jungle for visitors.

They generally worked with politically correct tour organisers and ecologists, avoided activists, kept in the good books of local business interests, obeyed the police, as the last thing they wanted was to be thrown out of PNG.

But business was bad what with the pandemic and they agreed to organise a trip for me to the nearby forest areas and rivers, passing through the palm oil plantations and logging areas.

According to Jim, nearly a third of PNG's forests were in the hands of foreign companies, many of them I'd already learnt were owned by

Malaysian-Chinese. Forest blocks leased under government programmes and SABLs, exploiting the unworldliness of the local customary landowners, who were more often than not robbed blind by the Malaysians.

It was a modern version of glass beads for gold.

The Malaysians hid their business interests behind a web of offshore companies in anyone of a dozen British tax havens, where companies changed hands like the dominoes in a mahjong game.

Amongst them was PNG Plantations Development that had previously owned 100% of Bewani Oil Palm Plantations and Vanimo Green Palm Oil Mill.

Originally the shares were spread amongst the members of the Tee family dynasty, that changed in 2019, when most of the shares were transferred to a holding company in an opaque offshore jurisdiction. However, links to the Tee dynasty could still be traced from the cross holdings in associated companies.

* * *

We set out a couple of days later, taking the road that was to the other side of the town, in the direction of the Bewani logging camp which lay about 60 kilometres southwest of Vanimo, a surfaced road that basically went nowhere. Almost immediately after leaving Vanimo we were in the forest covered hills. There were no suburbs, filling stations or anything else. Almost no traffic and few pedestrians.

I expected to at least see movement and trucks, but no, apparently we were in a recently planted zone and the palms were still growing.

It was not a seasonal business and Jim recalled the palms took about four years to reach maturity, for fruit to grow and ripen. They then produced fruit continuously, about a dozen bunches of fruit a year with each bunch weighing up to 25 kilos

It was late morning when we came to a large clearing, the Bewani camp, low buildings in wood with iron roofs. The plantation covered 140,000 hectares of deforested land and more was planned.

Jim gave a running commentary as we drove past a newly built oil mill, which he told me would eventually process 250,000 tons of crude palm oil a year, handling the production of four main estates—Bewani, Imbio, Sumomini and Ossima.

Beyond a vast extent of red earth was being prepared for new planting. Further on were mature oil palms standing in endless rows. They needed little tending, they flourished under the tropical sun and the frequent rains.

Once the fruit was ripe it would be pressed in the oil mill and the crude oil exported from Vanimo on bulk carriers of up to 11,000 tons, to China, India or Malaysia for refining.

We stopped in a small settlement next to a plantation where the workers and their families lived. They told us how before the land had been cleared they had lived in their village as long as the elders could remember.

One of the old men told his story:

‘One day a huge barge appeared on the river, loaded with machines, guarded by armed police.

‘The company, Rimbunan Hijau, moved in. We could do nothing, we were helpless, I felt like crying, there was nothing we could do.

Under a lease we did not understand, issued by the government, which ignored our customary land rights, the company began cutting down our trees, in our forest.'

Jim calculated that over the last few years RN had clear-felled an area more than three times the size of Manhattan, exporting 120 million dollars worth of timber, planting endless rows of oil palms on the land where the ancient forest had once stood.

Villager's lives were devastated, they were moved to settlements, groups of dismal shacks, slums, surrounded by bare land scorched by the sun. The men were employed as labourers in the logging camps or plantations as their forest homeland was razed. The small gardens where they had cultivated wild rice and vegetables ploughed up, the forest in which they had hunted wildlife, gathered fruit, wild honey and sago gone, all that they depended on for food transformed into a desolate landscape of monoculture plantations.

'The forest provided us food and water, wood to build our homes, medicines,' the old man told us. 'It was our ancestral home, our sacred land.'

It was no isolated development. It was taking place all across PNG, the fault of politicians and corrupt officials with their treacherous land-leasing schemes, SABLs, that stole the rights of local communities, handed them to foreign-backed logging, palm oil or mining companies for generations to come.

The time had come for me to discover the interior of New Guinea.

CHAPTER 15

A Mission

With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all

Queen Elizabeth

ACCOMPANIED BY A GUIDE, Walt Bamave, we boarded a Twin Otter at Vanimo airport, a Missionary Aviation Fellowship flight. I had asked Jim Hogan to show me how those untouched by the loggers still lived, the authentic people of PNG, he'd agreed and now we were climbing in the direction of the Central Highlands.

We were on our way to the Oksapmin, a flight that offered spectacular scenery with deep green valleys and steep hills, rising and falling in dramatic succession.

It was not long before we saw mountains of the Victor Emmanuel Range looming in the distance before us with their jagged peaks.

There were few clouds, the air was clear, the luminosity and colours made the details of the mountains particularly clear as we flew over an unchanging and almost uninterrupted forest, punctuated by occasional puffs of white mist that clung tenaciously to the canopy on the steep flanks of the hills and mountains, which at times seemed perilously close.

From time to time patches of red earth appeared below, holes in the thick carpet of green. Then as we started our slow descent I saw the first homes, shacks with thatched and rust red iron roofs, strung along the edge of forest clearings like ragged cubes laid out on the ochre coloured earth.

Dirt tracks radiated out from the settlements like spokes, straight lines across the landscape leading to transit points, where the green was marked by felling, beyond as the hills rose were grasslands.

The ten thousand or so Oksapmin lived in the rugged mountain region, between 1,500 and 2,200 metres above sea level, in the Trangap and other close by valleys, almost directly to the south of Vanimo in Sandaun Province. It was a region of mostly uninhabited cool mountainous forest in the Telefomin district, not that far from the border with Indonesian Papua.

The Oksapmin were first contacted by white men in 1938, when a small army of Australian explorers set out from Mount Hagen, a small city in the New Guinea Highlands, now the third largest in the country. It was composed of an auxiliary force of armed Papuans plus over 200 bearers and cooks, headed by three white officers. It was the first time such a large expedition had been organised in what was then the Australian Mandated Territory of New Guinea.

The goal of the expedition, called the Hagen-Sepik Patrol, was to explore a huge area of unmapped territory, which lay between Mount Hagen and the border with the Dutch East Indies, and study its geography and population.

Though the region had been visited by gold prospectors and missionaries almost nothing was known about the nature of the region and its peoples.

The exploration took one year with the expedition covering some 3,000 kilometres and encountering many groups of previously uncontacted peoples. One of these was the Oksapmin with whom the first contact turned into a bloody confrontation when a group of fearsome looking warriors suddenly emerged from the forest, they wore wild boar tusks in their noses, dogs' teeth necklaces, bright red parrot plumes, and penis gourds tied erect by a string waistband, holding bows and poison tipped arrows at the ready.

'These people have the wild unkempt air of cannibals,' one of the Australians later noted.

One of the officers panicked and fired at the leader, killing him, the auxiliaries joined in and killed another two Oksapmin men. It was a brutal introduction to the whiteman's universe.

* * *

After a flight of nearly one and a half hours the flimsy looking Twin Otter made its final approach over the trees into the Trangap Valley and touched down on the rough grass airstrip some minutes later. After landing we bumpily taxied towards the tiny settlement which consisted of a dozen or so wooden huts with palm thatched roofs, an Australian Baptist missionary station, and what passed for an airport office.

We were warmly greeted by the Papuan pastor, Willi Kotena, who pointed to the mission centre where he had prepared a couple of rooms for us.

Once we'd stowed our baggage in the rooms we were introduced to Josiah Torino and his assistant who would organise a visit with Walt Bamave to the local communities—all of which were within an hour

or two's trek from the station. Josiah spoke an approximate English and we communicated with the help of the rudimentaries of Tok Pisin I had now acquired, the lingua franca of PNG, where languages could vary from valley to valley and even over distances of just a few kilometres.

That evening after eating with Willy and his assistants, I sat outside talking with Walt, who recounted the history of the Baptist missionaries in PNG, who had debarked in 1870, a knee jerking reaction to the growing influence of the French in New Caledonia, when it was decided that the London Missionary Society should extend its activities to Papua New Guinea.

They had set off from Australia across the Torres Straits landing at Hood Point, where in their words they 'discovered the savages spoke a great many non mutually intelligible dialects', evidently a problem for spreading the good word.

The truth was Papuan beliefs and deities were binned by evangelists and other bible thumpers who were persuaded that their belief culture was better. It was part of a package of conquest and colonialism that had been peddled since the times of Columbus and Magellan to all the unfortunate peoples of newly 'discovered' lands.

Until not so long ago, the Oksapmin were uncontacted peoples, living to all intents in the Stone Age. They believed in the spirits of their ancestors, waged tribal warfare, practiced cannibalism and fiercely defended their territory, killing and wounding police, missionaries and other intruders.

However, the missions also functioned as colonial administrators after Australia had set up a protectorate independently of London. Inevitably the Oksapmin did not approve of the invasion and there

were clashes with patrols with casualties and deaths, which provoked a violent reaction from the Australian governors.

A radiogram sent by to Canberra on 14 November 1953 illustrates the violence:

‘Located Szarka’s remains in two latrine pits at site of Misinmin Rest House at eight o’clock Friday morning thirteenth. Body shockingly mutilated and apparently chopped into pieces with tomahawks. From first latrine pit recovered lower trunk right leg amputated at knee left leg at thigh also right leg and few bones.

From second latrine recovered left foot and three pieces of flesh. Thorough search of scrub over wide area revealed no trace of body arms or head. Constable Buritori’s body recovered at base of ridge near rest house identified by tattoo marks on left arm which had been amputated at wrist.

Body on finding was being ravaged by dog and pig. Only portion of body remaining was chest which contained deep wound possibly by tomahawk. All other flesh removed from body possibly by dogs and pigs. Have carried both remains to Telefomin.’

The Australian report on the investigation into the events was as follows:

‘At a prearranged signal, Kaiobengal of Uguntemtigin, who was standing behind the officer, seized him, pinioning his arm to his sides. At the same time Novonengim seized Buritori.

Kaiobengal and Szarka, in their struggles, rolled over one side of the ridge, while Novonengim went over the opposite side. The natives Olsikim of Inantigan, Irinsomnok of Inantigan, Tigimnok and Warimsep both of Iwartigan, ran down to where Kaiobengal was struggling with Szarka a short distance down the ridge. Szarka was held down and an axe was called for. This was brought by the native Timengin of Uguntemtigin, and Tigimnok ran up the slope and took it from him.

Unlike Harris, Szarka therefore had time to realise what his probable fate was to be, even if he did not understand what the natives were saying. His feelings during those moments of delay are hideous to contemplate.

While the others held him down on his back Tigimnok raised the axe and struck Szarka in the throat, completely decapitating the head in a very few blows. Then Tigimnok cut Szarka's body through at the waist into two parts. Olsikim took the axe from Tigimnok and cut off both of Szarka's legs.

While Szarka was being slaughtered, women and children ... were pillaging the belongings and patrol gear from the Rest House and the Police Barracks ... the murderers returned up the slope, dancing the killing dance ... Tigimnok was holding the bloodstained axe in two hands above his head.'

Today the Oksapmin have been converted by Evangelical Protestant missionaries, who generally speaking are focused on social issues rather than personal salvation.

* * *

Walt Bamave, a good friend of Jim Hogan, was a university educated and open minded Papuan nationalist. During his three years at university in Brisbane he had not only studied botany, but also history.

Walt saw Papua as one nation, a unified island, without Indonesians or those who exploited its riches.

We spent hours philosophising about Papua, its history and future, an undeveloped country, prey to China, Malaysia, Australia and large international corporations.

To him Papuans like others were taught by the colonial powers to abhor everything of their own culture, to accept a new and strange way of life, a new order that alienated them from what they originally been.

When Europeans like Cortes and Pissarro set out to colonise the New World, they arrived with a sword in one hand and the bible in the other, casting down idols, burning temples and erasing the cultural identity and heritage of the peoples they conquered.

The religion of the Europeans was steeped in the idea that the natives of their new colonies were backward, barbaric and uncivilized and the missionaries role was to civilise them.

Those Christian missionaries were evidently impregnated with Western values and as much part of the colonising forces as were explorers, traders and soldiers, that is instruments of colonialism and an alien culture.

'Preaching peace, forgiveness and submission, rejecting rebellion and self-determination,' Walt told me. 'Building a master-servant relationship between us Papuans and themselves.

'They taught submission, destroyed our culture and left us without the means to defend ourselves against those who steal our land, our resources, leaving us lost with this new culture and laws we don't understood, nothing but handouts from their pollyanna NGOs.'

I had to agree with Walt.

'It was the missionaries that built airstrips in Papua that the Indonesian military use to attack defenceless villagers,' he whispered not wanting Willy to overhear his blasphemy. 'And what did the missionaries do? They jumped on their planes and disappeared leaving the soldiers to burn houses, kill the villagers' animals, destroy their meagre crops.'

What could I say?

'Then after the army left,' he continued, 'the missionaries came back and told the villagers to pray, repent, thank god for sparing them, telling them to forgive those who had done them harm, and if we fought back we'd go to hell.'

It was a damning truth

‘The Indonesians wanted to convert us to Islam, the Australians and Americans wanted to convert us to Christianity, but what they really wanted was our timber, our land.

‘What they do is use our bodies and kill our souls.’

It was clear that the missionaries in their role to civilise the villagers contributed to the destruction culture, governance and beliefs of the indigenous peoples.

Missionaries were a sore point with independentists and opposition movements with villagers being converted by the pressure brought to bear by outsiders.

Pressure came in the form of dispensaries, schools, churches, radio stations and airstrips, all of which offered undeniable advantages to materially poor isolated communities.

It was another of those Faustian pacts and the price came later when loggers, planters, miners, industrial fishing interests moved in, even the local stores were owned by foreigners.

‘What of the Oksapmin culture and beliefs,’ I asked him.

‘Well before the arrival of the white men and their religion, as elsewhere in Papua, fierce interethnic warfare was one of the most notable features of Oksapmin society.

‘In our societies we don’t have a word for religion,’ Walt told me. ‘Our sacred beliefs and practices established over countless generations are part of our universe with its rites, taboos, myths and superstitions.

‘Each stage of life is marked by iniation, rituals and instruction in essential life skills and attitudes. The initiates earned the right to wear

penis gourds, hair nets, ceremonial bags called bilum decorated with feathers, and armbands.

‘Initiation involved many rituals, some of them resembled torture by fire, there were trials, anointing and washing.’

‘Was cannibalism common?’

‘Yes, before contact with the outside world canabalism and ritual sacrifice was practiced to promote the fertility of land and people.

‘The victims body was divided up in the same way as a pig’s. In other rituals the body was burnt and reduced to ash except for the bones which had magical powers and were distributed amongst the clan.

‘Magic is still used with sacred incantations, sorcerers manipulate real, physical objects to pursue their evil objectives, and witches are thought to act spiritually, using their evil powers to attack the soul of their victim.

‘Do you believe in afterlife?’

‘Me no, but most Papuans like the Oksapmin do, traditionally death and afterlife are based on the idea that each individual possesses both a mortal body and a soul. After death a person’s body is taken into the bush and placed on a platform and left to decompose until only the bones remain. These are then taken and kept, either in a ceremonial house or a cave. It’s the duty of the living to ensure the departed spirit reaches safely to the afterworld, part of the universe in which we live.’

‘And today?’

‘Even after evangelisation the Oksapmin have never fully abandoned their traditions. I suppose the introduction of Christianity into Oksapmin society created a certain kind of syncretisation.’

The motivation for conversion to Christianity took different forms, he explained, to start with was access to the material wealth of the missionaries. But then the missionaries were there to save souls and were prepared to do whatever it took to achieve their ends.

Evangelisation had far reaching consequences for local beliefs, culture and traditions—the very foundation of Papuan society, were brutally cast aside by the missionaries.

‘A new set of rules were imposed by the missionaries, after we were told our traditions were wrong, but you see our traditional beliefs are deeply embedded, linked to our world, its mountains, forests, rivers, and creatures.

‘Tragically when our elders die, our links to nature, our knowledge of plants and animals will be lost, forever.

‘Today, Oksapmin men are abandoning their villages to work in mines, like at Ok Tedi, where a different set of values is at work.’

The next couple of days were spent visiting small villages with their garden plots where the women cultivated their vegetables. There were few young men, most had left to work in the mines or plantations. It was certain that the villages would disappear as the country developed and the towns grew. The lure of material possessions and comforts of modern civilisation were too great for the Oksapmin.

CHAPTER 16

The Rain Forest

THE MEDIA AND ITS ARMCHAIR ecologists never turned down an invitation to jet around the world to be interviewed for money spinning TV series, that talked a lot about rain forests, but what exactly was a rain forest? Well I think nothing describes it better that the words of Christopher Columbus wrote when he discovered the island of Espanola in the Caribbean in 1492:

'Its lands are high and there are in it very many sierras and very lofty mountains, beyond comparison with the island of Tenerife. All are most beautiful, of a thousand shapes, and all are accessible and filled with trees of a thousand kinds and tall, and they seem to touch the sky. And I am told that they never lose their foliage, as I can understand, for I saw them as green and as lovely as they are in Spain in May and some of them were flowering, some bearing fruit and some in another stage, according to their nature.'

Those words were written in 1493, one of the earliest descriptions of a tropical landscape—an evergreen tropical forest, which at that time covered most Caribbean islands, and still covers the equatorial lowlands of South and Central America, Africa and Southeast Asia, though much of it has been severely depleted by man in modern times.

To complete my engineering degree at Imperial College, I'd spent two years in Grenoble at the INP-Pagora—the Graduate School of Engineering in Paper, Print Media and Biomaterials.

There I learnt the paper industry was almost entirely dependent on wood, harvested from forests and plantations, and even if part of the paper and cardboard was recycled it nevertheless originated as wood fibre.

Most of that wood fibre came from temperate forests in the northern and southern hemispheres until the mid-seventies when eucalyptus was introduced—harvested first in Portugal and then in Brazil, followed by mixed tropical hardwoods from Cameroon and Indonesia.

Tropical rain forests are those found in equatorial regions, enclosed by a well defined canopy that receives abundant, year round rainfall, warmth and sunlight, and are the homes to an immense variety of plant and animal species, trees alone number 53,000 different species—of all imaginable sizes and forms, and of which the island of Papua New Guinea has an estimated 11,000 species.

Such rain forests morph into other forms depending on altitude, latitude, soil, water and climatic conditions—equatorial evergreen rain forests and moist forests with the latter including monsoon forests and montane cloud forests.

Equatorial rain forests generally get well over 2,000 millimetres of rain annually with little seasonal variation, that's twice that of the UK. They are found in lowland Amazonia, the Congo Basin, the Southeast Asian archipelago of Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea.

The destruction of the rain forest, which covers a large portion of the Earth's surface, commenced seriously about 400 years ago when tropical hardwoods were first use for shipbuilding, dwellings and furniture by the colonising nations, then with the advent of the industrial society in the early 19th century for railway sleepers,

mining props and construction materials, and use continues at an ever accelerating pace for flooring, doors, windows and garden furniture.

At the time of Louis XIV any decent palace needed parquet flooring, more than 300 years later a middle class family wouldn't be seen dead without parquet flooring in their home, be it in Shanghai, Moscow, Paris or New York.

The rain forest is a superorganism, a community of living plants and creatures, of which man is just one small part of that ecological community, the whole of which exists in a steady state climatic climax.

Undisturbed rain forests are described as primary forests, where the floor is mostly free of heavy vegetation as the canopy prevents light reaching the lower stories, that is apart from natural clearings where large dominant trees may have fallen.

Secondary forest is created in these natural clearings, or when the forest is disturbed by man, historically cleared by slash-and-burn agriculture, and more recently by the intrusion of timber companies and selective logging, that is to say the felling of large dominant trees, certain of which may be two or three hundred years old.

Peat forests are typical of Borneo and Sumatra where over millennia dead waterlogged vegetation is transformed into peat, which when swamps are dried can be the source of uncontrollable seasonal fires with smoke covering wide regions of Malaysia and Indonesia.

Mangrove forest are found in silt-rich, saline coastal regions and along large river deltas. Such forests, amongst the most threatened ecosystems, are the breeding grounds of many species of amphibians, fish and birds, and in addition serve as a natural barrier to erosion.

All of these forests form diverse habitats that teem with insects, fungi, lichen, birds and bats, and provide a source of food and shelter for countless invertebrates.

The life cycle of trees varies according to species, certain hundreds of years old, which when they reach the end of their lives the trunks hollow, holes and cavities appear and small animals, insects, fungi and bacteria occupy the space, transforming and enlarging the niche and recycling the decaying material.

Restoration to primary forest with large dominant species forming a full canopy, can, if permitted, and under favorable conditions, take hundreds of years.

CHAPTER 17

The Interior

IN JAYAPURA I'D ASKED Lukas if it was possible to go further into the interior, towards the Star Mountains. He'd refused. Too dangerous. Operations against independentists. I dropped the subject.

It was why on our return to Vanimo I asked Jim if we could take a look at the frontier region near Tabubil, to the south in the central mountains.

There were two reasons for my interest:

First it was near the Ok Tedi copper mine—the site of one of the world's worst ecological disasters, an occasion to learn more about mining, since Lukas had spoken of the Grasberg copper mine in neighbouring Papua.

Second it was near the border, just a dozen kilometres from Kwirok—the site of violent clashes, forcing locals to flee across the border into PNG.

Jim agreed, but there were no roads and no scheduled flights from Vanimo, it was a very remote region, the only way to get there was by helicopter charter to Tabubil, close by the Ok Tedi mine, not far from the border between Indonesian Papua and PNG.

I felt uneasy about flying over the high mountain range, especially after what I'd seen on the way to the mission and the Oksapmin, but

Jim reassured me that the charter company regularly flew its Bell helicopters to the mining town, providing weather conditions permitted.

We took off from Vanimo and flew south over an endless carpet of forest and the spectacular Star Mountains, passing to the east of the highest peaks. The weather was perfect, a clear blue sky, apart from the cottony puffs of white cloud that clung to the dense green canopy below.

We arrive in Tabubil a little over an hour later, it was situated in a river valley of the North Fly District of PNG's Western Province, on the southern slopes of the mountain range. To say it was remote was no exaggeration, certainly the most isolated place I'd ever visited.

The vast open-pit copper and gold mine lay near the headwaters of the Ok Tedi River, a gaping hole in the summit of a 2,000 metre high mountain, just a dozen kilometres from Tabubil airport.

Formerly owned by BHP Billiton, the world's largest mining company, it was now state owned and accounted for one quarter of the country's entire export earnings.

It was a polymetal mine, that is to say rich in copper, gold and silver, where over the last two decades huge quantities of those metals had been mined and shipped overseas, mostly to China.

The copper ore, after mining, was refined, concentrated into slurry and carried down a 130 kilometre long pipeline to low lying Kiunga, a port on the banks of the Fly River, from where it was shipped along the broad river in 5,000 ton barges to Port Moresby, 750 kilometres to the south.

Strangely, Port Moresby, the capital city of PNG, had no roads connecting it to the other regions of the country, which explained why all goods were transported by river and why the copper concentrate carried by the barges from Kiunga was transboarded directly from the barges to ocean going ore carriers at the mouth of the Fly River.

The only other seaport, Lae, was situated some 500 kilometres to the north of Port Moresby. It was the country's biggest port and second biggest city. Its population of just 100,000 explained a lot about how sparsely the population of the vast country was spread out.

Lae was the former capital of German New Guinea, today the economic capital of PNG with the Markham River and the Highlands Highway linking it to the central highlands region and the north coast. However, its only link to Port Moresby and the south was by sea.

I was beginning to appreciate just how difficult it was to travel in PNG, which though it had an impressive 490 airstrips, only a score had surfaced runways, the rest were grass or bare earth.

* * *

Until 1981, the site of what was to become one of the world's largest copper mines had been the unspoilt, but inaccessible home to the Wopkaimin people, who lived as they had always lived, in harmony with nature's rain forest, in one of the most isolated places on earth.

With the discovery of vast deposits of copper and gold their lives were turned upside down, almost overnight a mining town of many thousands sprung out of the ground as the uninvited arrivals set about hacking into the forest and digging into the mountain with their fearsome machines.

Originally the mine's residues, or tailings, were to be stored behind a dam, where solid matter would be settled with the filtered water flowing down the Ok Tedi River and into the Fly River on its long journey southwards to the sea.

What hadn't been foreseen were the frequent earthquakes and heavy tropical rains, and in 1984 the half-built tailings dam collapsed, which didn't deter the mine owners from going ahead.

The mining residues, containing traces of copper sulphide and cyanide—used to extract gold, accumulated on the lower Ok Tedi River bed, resulting in flooding with the buildup of sediment on the flood plain, poisoning the vegetation over an area of more than 1,300 square kilometres and polluting an even larger zone of forest.

* * *

On the other side of the border, in Indonesian Papua, a brutal armed conflict simmered, forcing villagers to flee deeper into the densely

forested region that straddled the border, one of the most remote parts of the island, and crossing into PNG.

The indigenous peoples on both sides of border were part of the Min or Mountain Ok ethnies, a broad grouping of peoples sharing languages and distinct but similar rituals and cultural traditions.

The most recent flashpoint in the conflict occurred when Indonesian government forces carried out operations against Papua Liberation Army fighters, who they accused of attacks on health workers in the Kiwirok district.

The government forces launched their ripost with helicopter borne troops, burning 14 suspected villages, said to be strongholds of the OPM Free Papua Movement's military wing, forcing hundreds of villagers to take refuge across the border along the unguarded trails into the densely forested mountains where few people lived.

We were lodged in a Tabubil guesthouse and the next day we were awoken at dawn and set out in an SUV with our guide, Markus. The rough track we took petered out after just a few kilometres, leaving us to continue on foot, a grueling trek through the forest that rose before us.

Jim had not only promised a visit to the mine, but also, thanks to Markus, the possibility of a meeting with the independentist rebels in one of their mountain hideouts. He had persuaded me, I could never understand the history of the country without talking to the fighters.

'We're very near the border now,' Markus cautiously announced after nearly three hours march. 'It's easier than in the old days,' he added with a smile as he waved his GPS. He then warned us not to talk unnecessarily as we followed the path through the twilight of the

forest. Not because of the fighters, but there was always the risk of meeting an Indonesian patrol.

We'd walked for another couple of hours through the gloomy forest, it was fairly easy going as there was little undergrowth beneath the thick canopy. Where we were going was unclear, but we had left the visible trail.

We descended into a valley, there were obstacles everywhere—fallen trunks, tangled thickets and streams. At times dense impenetrable vegetation forced Markus to slash a path with his pahang.

It recalled Klaus Kinski hacking his way through the jungle in his iconic film 'Aguirre', the 'Wrath of God', a green hell.

We followed a shallow stream lined with low vegetation, ferns, saplings and the like. A white mist hung in branches above, there was no movement, no sound apart from our breathing and the splashing of our boots in the stream.

After some time Markus raised his hand, we stopped, a few moments later a group of fearsome looking Papuans slowly emerged from the trees, all heavily bearded, carrying automatic weapons and bandoliers of cartridges slung across their shoulders.

'*Hi, Longpela taim mi no lukim yu*,' Markus said greeting them in Tok Pisin.

'*Welcam Yu stap gut?*' The chief replied inspecting us.

They then spoke in a local language and after some minutes they made a sign, turned into the thicket and we followed them. Thirty minutes later we arrived in a clearing which was evidently their camp. Their shelters consisted of makeshift platforms built on stilts, covered

with rough platted palm leaf roofs and protected on the sides by tarpaulins.

It was very basic.

They were a rag-tag band, a couple of them wore military shirts, the others were dressed more traditionally, feathers in their hair, large nose and ear rings, necklaces of beads and wild boar tusks, armbands, and all wearing khaki coloured rubber boots, and most of them chewing betel.

‘These soldiers are a unit of the West Papua National Liberation Army,’ announced Markus grandly, ‘the military wing of the Free Papua Movement.’

Their leader introduced himself in broken English as Colonel Isak. It seemed incongruous, but so was Castro and his ragged Barbudos in 1959 when they descended from their mountain stronghold in Cuba.

‘We are not as well armed as Indonesian army,’ Isak warned, ‘but here in the mountains the jungle is home, we stronger and we have the Papuan people with us.

They were cooking a wild pig they’d killed in the forest together with sweet potatoes and other vegetables. They pointed to the bamboo flooring and invited us to eat, film and photograph them. In exchange we gave them beer, cigarettes, rice, batteries and a used iPhone with a small hand cranked battery charger, it was part of the arrangement Markus had made with them.

Isak was from Merauke in the south. He told us they lived mostly off the forest eating everything from fruit, roots, larvae, wild boar and other smaller animals as their people had for countless generations. In their villages their main food came from the sago tree, but that was too complicated for their small mobile unit.

‘In the past we ate our enemies,’ he told us, then added with a broad smile, ‘and outsiders.’

‘It meant absorbing their power, health, and brought immortality,’ Jim said laughing, joining in the fun.

They told us their tactic was to instill fear in immigrants from Java, harassing the soldiers of the Indonesian army, spreading dread and misgiving, setting booby traps in the hope of confining them to their camps, sabotaging their installations, ambushing their patrols and killing laggards with poisoned arrows, hanging their bloodied bodies in the trees to terrorize their comrades.

'Our struggle is against Indonesian colonisation and transmigration, a fight against creeping genocide, please transmit this message to the outside world,' Isak pleaded.

They also targeted collaborators, Papuans who lived high, driving around in flashy cars, living in fancy villas and profiting from business deals with foreigners whilst their countrymen and women lived in misery.

We talked late into the night. The next day returned to Tabubil, there was little else to see but the endless wilderness. The rebels clearly had a hard, but very symbolic duty before them.

* * *

The next day a visited the mine on what was left of Mount Fubilan. We were greeted by a very cordial public relations officer, an Australian, at the mining company's office. Before setting off on a standard guided tour of the vast mine, he treated us to a presentation of the company in the conference room—a video describing the operations and environmental protection measures undertaken by the company.

But the truth is, nothing prepared me for the magnitude of mine itself—the summit of Mount Fubilan had literally been lopped off, in its place was a huge open pit a kilometre or more in diameter and at least half a kilometer deep.

The mine and refining plant worked 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, removing a quarter of a million tonnes from the mountain each day, overburden from the pit, producing 60 thousand tonnes of copper ore delivered to the plant by a relentless succession of giant dumper trucks, where it was crushed, milled and separated, the copper-gold concentrate pumped in a slurry to the port of Kiunga, where it was dewatered, stockpiled, ready for transport.

The mine with its adjacent installations was several kilometres long including the town to house thousands of expatriates and workers, along with roads and other infrastructure, all of which would be worthless in a decade after the mountain was evicerated of its mineral wealth, forgotten in one of the world's most isolated corners.

According to the PR man, between 1984 and 2019, Ok Tedi had produced 4.93 million tonnes of copper, 15.1 million ounces of gold and 34.2 million ounces of silver. In other words billions of dollars in profits, little of which profited New Guinea.

CHAPTER 18

A mysterious importer

WE RETURNED TO VANIMO WHERE I had just one more thing to investigate before I left for Port Moresby. I had seen how raw materials, timber and copper, were being exported to China, by companies based in Malaysia, Singapore or Australia. These were owned or operated by shell companies in the Caymans or British Virgin Islands, very far from China, the real owners hidden by a cascade of screen companies.

To go further I needed to know where for example timber was being shipped. I asked Jim Hogan if it was possible to get hold of documents for cargoes on departing ships—bills of lading, commercial invoices and certificates of origin.

Walt introduced me to another activist who had friends at a shipping agent working with Vanimo's PNG Ports Corporation. It wasn't difficult, a few dollars and photocopies of almost anything could be had.

I agreed and a few days later I received an envelope filled with various documents in English and Chinese.

The papers were related to a couple of particular consignments of raw logs and containers which were shipped to Delta Timber, a Chinese company, destination Zhangjiagang on the Yangtze, upriver

from Shanghai, a vast port specialised in timber, where 75% of China's log imports arrived, several million cubic metres annually.

Delta seemed to ring a bell and I started with an Internet search on the timber port.

According to Interpol between 15% and 30% of the global wood trade came from illegally logged trees with China one of the world's top buyers, especially from Pacific nations such as PNG and Solomon Islands.

Logs were loaded onto bulk carriers, often registered in Panama, destination Shanghai, where after another couple of hundred kilometres up the Yangtze, they arrived in Zhangjiagang.

It was almost impossible to know who ultimately owned the wood, but it appeared about a dozen or so companies were linked to 85% of the logs imported from PNG, shipped from Malaysian-Chinese owned timber companies, much of the wood identified by forged certificates that specified tree species and ID barcode tags stapled onto the log ends.

From Zhangjiagang the logs continued their journey by canal to China's floor manufacturing hub in Nanxun. There legal and illegal timber was mixed into unidentifiable sawn wood to manufacture products such as high grade parquet for home and export consumption.

My search revealed Delta Timber was part of the Delta Pacific Group. I connected to the group's site where I learnt it was a large Shanghai based conglomerate whose business was centred on property development, and also construction and building materials.

I was getting warmer. I switched to the Chinese language site and the heading ‘News’. A photograph showed the group's chairman at a reception in the Peace Hotel on the Bund. The caption announced Wang Huiyao being presented with an award for the property developer of the year by a Chinese real estate association.

I zoomed in. There was no mistake, it was Wang Huiyao aka Henry Wang—Lucy’s father.

CHAPTER 19

Port Moresby

THAT FINE MORNING TWO MONTHS earlier, when John DeFrancis and I walked across Saint James's Park decked out in its finest early summer greenery, little did I realise what I was getting myself into, or the extraordinary contrast between that peaceful royal park and what awaited me in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, described as a city 'built for trouble' in a country plagued by crime and violence, where corruption was rife.

If I'd bothered to check the UK government's travel advice page on Port Moresby, I would have discovered that serious crime flourished not only in the capital, but also in other cities where bush knives and firearms were commonly used in assaults and carjackings, where cash machines were the targets for criminals, and walking after dark was particularly dangerous.

And if that was not sufficient to deter visitors, gangs set up roadblocks outside towns to holdup and loot vehicles after attacking their occupants.

There were also frequent reports of outbreaks of tribal fighting, starting in the settlement areas of Port Moresby, an extension of the ethnic disputes in the Highland provinces, which if not contained were quickly transformed into full scale scenes of tribal warfare with looting, injury and even death, especially when the opposing parties were armed with military grade firearms.

In spite of all that, I'd discovered that outside of Port Moresby and a few other places to be avoided—where it was said cannibalism and witchcraft were still practiced, life was generally speaking peaceful and the people extremely friendly.

In any case the capital was a young city and its population, a complex ethnic mix made up of Melanesians from all over New Guinea with a sparse scattering of foreigners—less than one percent, mostly Chinese, Philippinos and Indonesians.

There were not more than about one hundred thousand Whites in the whole of the country, mostly Australians and Americans, a good many of whom were expatriates working for foreign mining and construction companies. They included a legion of missionaries, NGOs and other do-gooder foreigners, swanning around in new Land Cruisers, like they often did in famine and disaster relief zones, vehicles worth much more than the average Papuan could earn in a lifetime.

The indigenous population of Papua New Guinea was certainly one of the most varied in the world, an incredible ethnic kaleidoscope made up of thousands of different communities, speaking more than 800 languages—to a large degree unrelated, many spoken by just a few hundred persons like the Oksapmin peoples I had visited.

A great many of those linguistic groups were scattered across distant regions, where access was difficult, some with very few speakers, living in isolation in the rugged highlands, large parts of which were covered by dense forest.

Customs and traditions were extremely varied as were beliefs, which were based on animism and the veneration of the dead. It wasn't surprising that certain of these groups lived in a state of almost permanent tribal warfare.

By now I'd managed to improve my rudimentary Tok Pisin, a pidgin developed from English in the 19th century, which served as the lingua franca of Papua New Guinea, which with standard English was the language of business and government.

Port Moresby's problems were due in part to high urban drift which like in other regions of the world, such as Brasil or the Congo, the poor quit their impoverished homes and villages and flocked to the cities to seek work, where they ended up in squalid settlements, shanty towns plagued by high unemployment and social problems, and often found themselves caught in the web of Christian missionaries.

I wasn't surprised to learn that almost two-thirds of Port Moresby's population were either Roman Catholic, Lutheran or belonging to other Protestant denominations.

* * *

I'd left my Australian friends in Vanimo after we'd returned from our adventure in the frontier region and on arrival in Port Moresby I was met at the airport by James Leung, an Australian Chinese, another representative of INI Hong Kong.

He commenced by reassuring me that his MPV was secure for the 40 kilometre drive to my hotel.

'Secure?'

'Yes, you'll see it's a reinforced Toyota Vellfire,' he said earnestly, 'bulletproof, fitted with window grills, anti-shock bars and special tyres. Our drivers are always accompanied by an armed security guard.'

Shit, I wondered what Leung was talking about. Then he reminded me of the city's reputation, which was not to be taken lightly, warning me not to leave the hotel alone, even for a short distance, most districts and suburbs were no-go zones.

'Seriously?'

'Yes, seriously, Port Moresby is notorious for high levels of violent crime by the raskol gangs.'

'Ras.....?'

'Tok Pisin, pidgin, means criminal, comes from rascal, they don't joke or hesitate to kill.'

'You're kidding?'

'I'm deadly serious, most of us live in secure compounds.'

'Jesus.'

'One piece of important advice, don't be in a hurry this country runs on island time. That means everything happens—eventually, at some point, but never immediately. People don't like to be rushed.'

I reminded him I'd been in PNG and Indonesian Papua for over a month.

He laughed.

We set off for my downtown hotel and I soon discovered it wasn't unlike Jayapura, about the same size, the same population, though there were no Indonesians. The roads were modern as were most of the buildings, light traffic with recent model vehicles driving on the left-hand side of the road. As we approached the city I was almost

surprised by several high-rise buildings which I'd seen few of over the last weeks.

Like Jayapura everything was pretty clean and well ordered for a developing country. As we entered the downtown area that first impression continued, few pedestrians, nice buildings and no traffic jams.

For the moment I hadn't seen the waterfront villages and settlements where Leung told me poverty was rife, just a short distance from the modern downtown area. Those areas had few roads and those that existed were potholed and almost impossible to drive on without a sturdy SUV. In any case, Leung remarked, there were only a handful of hard surfaced roads in all of PNG, as I had discovered, the rest were unmade and often dangerous.

I was booked into the Crown Hotel. 'Overlooking Ela Beach,' Leung announced with a complicit smile, 'the best in Port Moresby.'

I quipped I wouldn't have much time for the beach and as far as the difficulties and dangers were concerned I'd spent several months in Indonesia, most of which were in Sumatra and Borneo. I knew Jarkata well enough with it's traffic jams, crowds, both modern and rundown districts and bustling street markets.

Admittedly Port Moresby was different, with a population of not much more than 300 thousand compared to Jakarta's 30 million. The same went for PNG's population, more than twenty times less than that of Indonesia.

Apart from Vanimo, the villages and the settlements were similar to those I had seen in Borneo, though smaller, wooden waterside shanties, small stores, makeshift work and repair shops, half naked

children, dogs, small black pigs, chickens, vegetable gardens, muddy roads and piles of smoking garbage.

As if Leung hadn't heard my remark about the beach, he spoke of the expat community, the Port Moresby Golf Club, the Nature Park and jungle walks. He obviously hadn't been told why I was in Port Moresby and when I announced my initial objective was the Kokoda Trail he looked horrified, though I hastily added the botanical garden would certainly be of interest.

From my room I could see the traditional waterside villagers across Walter Bay, that was where boat people, fishermen and small traders and their families lived, in wooden houses built over the water on stilts, joined by rickety boardwalks, as they were in many places across Southeast Asia and that part of the Pacific Rim, picturesque, but apparently best avoided in PNG.

For those who sought local colour it seemed Boroko and its markets were worth visiting ... providing I was accompanied by a guide.

* * *

That afternoon I set out to visit the Tiong family's businesses in Port Moresby. The Tiongs were listed as directors in a number of companies that made up the RH PNG group of companies, registered in the city at 479, Kennedy Road.

To help me I fished out the report I'd brought with me entitled 'The Great Timber Heist: The Logging Industry in Papua New Guinea', prepared by the Oakland Institute. It exposed the systematic tax evasion and financial misreporting of foreign logging companies.

Many RH companies were located at the same address, part of a complex and opaque financial structure based in offshore tax havens,

generally in the British Virgin Islands, a territory reputed for facilitating illegal deals.

I took a taxi to the Hilton in Hohola North, there I continued on foot, it was about a kilometre, past modern hypermarkets, low rise offices and other businesses. I didn't attract any particular attention, I was dressed down, my usual style, a kind of well travelled not too rich student cum low budget tourist.

As I took in the surroundings I wondered how the largest logging operator in PNG managed to lose money year after year. It wasn't complicated, my programme at Imperial's business school in London had taught me about such fronts and offshore havens to which profits were siphoned off.

I found Kawai Drive, passed the RH Hypermarket Gordons, a little further on at the corner with Kennedy was RH's PNG headquarters, a pleasant looking modern building, suitably green coloured to match their name, which meant 'lush green' in Malaysian, like I'd seen in photos of their headquarters in Sibu, reflecting their forestry and palm oil business. It was surrounded by solid steel railings and a gate with a checkpoint.

It was remarkable how all those companies managed to fit into the small office building. There were at least 30 of them, most engaged in the logging and agribusiness, and even more remarkable my sources showed were all loss making and on top of that they had been collectively losing money for at least ten years, and millions of dollars.

The unpretentious building was protected against unwanted intruders by armed guards as were many buildings I had passed on the way. With little more to do I returned to my hotel.

* * *

The next day Leung turned up early, accompanied by a guy who looked to be about my age, who he introduced as Chris Taylor, an Australian. Leung had spoken with Hong Kong and had been instructed to provide me with a personal security guard, one who could help me organise my programme.

I listened, it sounded like London was concerned for my safety, a bit late I thought, but I wasn't going to argue with them, besides I knew almost nothing about Port Moresby or the Kokoda Trail.

Without more ado Leung said goodbye disappeared, leaving me in the care of Chris Taylor, who apart from looking in good shape, was quietly spoken and could evidently take care of himself.

We headed for the coffee shop where Chris told me he had grown up in PNG, where his parents had worked as part of Australia's aid programme before returning to Melbourne. There he finished his schooling and then joined the Australian SASR in search of something more challenging than city life. With his knowledge of PNG, he was posted there as part of the Australian Defence Organisation's cooperation programme, to help the country develop a professional defence force.

Australia's special forces had a history of jungle combat and survival that went back to World War II, when they fought the Imperial Japanese Army in particularly harsh conditions. Their present-day interest was understandable considering the size of their populous neighbours, especially Indonesia, which lay not far off Australia's north coast.

In addition to speaking Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu, the two most common languages after English, Chris had trekked the Kokoda and

other trails and was familiar with the terrain, the forest and the dangers.

He listened carefully as I told him about my experience and explained my plans. He assured me that though he was not some wet nanny, he could not only look after the security aspects of my modest expedition, but could also show me some of the isolated villages off the trail.

The trail started about 50 kilometres from Port Moresby he told me. ‘You don’t need a Maserati to drive up there.’

‘Maserati?’

‘Yeh,’ he said laughing. ‘It’s a joke in these parts, they ordered a fleet of 40 Maseratis to drive international delegates around for the 2018 Apec meeting, a two day event. The cars, cost more than 200,000 dollars a piece, flown in from Milan on two chartered Boeing 747s cargo jets. Can you imagine that in a country where the longest decently surfaced road is not more than about 50 kilometres long.’

It only went to confirm what I had seen, anything went, corruption and bad management were rife whilst the population was confronted with a health and poverty crisis and a struggling economy, little wonder the Chinese did what they liked.

CHAPTER 20

The Loggers

IT WAS TIME FOR ME TO start thinking about moving on—follow the logs, to China, their ultimate destination.

The supporting pillars of the rain forest were shipped to manufacturing hubs in China, upriver from Shanghai, Lucy's hometown, with much smaller volumes going to other countries. There on the banks of the Yangtze, Delta Timber dispatched the raw logs to thousands of factories, where they were transformed into commercial products and sold domestically or exported to markets in Europe or North America.

It was there in China the loot stolen from the people of the pristine rain forests of PNG arrived. The people who had lived as they had for countless generations, in what can be only be described, when compared to our great cities, as an untouched Garden of Eden, were thus deprived of their resources, their livelihoods and their children's future.

Their lands were invaded by loggers employed by politically well-connected, powerful, well organized businesses, equipped with 21st century machines—chainsaws, bulldozers, skidders and heavy trucks built by Japanese, Chinese and Koreans, businesses bent on destroying the forest for financial gain.

The first step to extracting rain forest logs was identifying and marking valuable trees for felling, that is to say in old-growth forest, untouched by man, where the trees were often hundreds of years old. This was only done if selective cutting was chosen, in the case of land clearing for plantations all was razed to the ground and the low- lying vegetation burnt off.

Two main techniques to handle a tree after felling were used, namely the short wood and whole tree options. In the first case trees were fully processed, debarked and cut to predetermined lengths on the logging site.

In the second trees were simply topped and had their limbs removed at the site, a process that reminded me of an abattoir, I mean trees cannot run or protest when death and extinction is visited upon them.

With selective cutting only the dominants, that is larger trees, are felled by chainsaws. I first witnessed that in Sumatra where I'd been been gathering information during one of my exchange programmes, an experience I will never forget in some of the last tropical rain forests that remained intact on that island, which like elsewhere, I regret to say, whatever we are told, will soon be gone forever.

At nights, in my Chinese prison, I can still see the blue smoke of the chainsaws, hear their metallic hammering reverberating through the forest, hear the hideous creaking of the massive living pillars of the forest, echoing like a death shriek as the hardened steel teeth bit into their bark.

Eighty and more metre high giants, like *Shorea faguetiana* or *Araucaria*, stand erect on the forest floor, the former supported by their huge buttresses, their powerful trunks dressed in epiphytes, reaching up into the cool air, disappearing into the dark canopy high above. Araucarias, an ancient species of conifer, which had survived

since the Jurassic, when dinosaurs roamed the forests of Gondwanaland.

Certain of these giants had reigned over their territory for as much as one thousand years. Now they were threatened with extinction by men who pursue their destructive work deep into the dark forest, far from eyes of absent authorities, and even further from the world beyond.

In my dream I watched the loggers waiting patiently to delimb their victim, reducing it to a sterile easily transportable carcass that no longer resembled a living tree.

Once the chainsaw has done its work the giant crashed down through the lesser growth in a huge explosion of branches and lianas—some as thick as a man's body, with birds and small animals fleeing for their lives as their universe collapses, bringing death to entire colonies of plants and creatures that lived peacefully in the complex three dimensional ecosystem which filled a living space between the earth and the sky.

The loggers then stepped in to dismember the carcass, cut it into transportable lengths, extracting them from the cutting zone with tracked skidders to a landing or roadside area, where the raw logs loaded onto trucks or barges for the long journey to the coast.

Selective cutting sounds clean, surgical, but in reality it causes immense damage to the forest around it, an area maybe 50 or 60 metres in diameter comes down with the canopy above it, for what is finally a relatively small volume of timber extracted.

The damage to soil by tracked bulldozers and skidders used to clear the huge tangle of vegetation and haul the trunk out to an already cleared area is irreversible. The thin soil is ploughed up and the

subsequent erosion caused by tropical rain accelerates drainage, increasing the risk of fire as grass and scrub takes over the clearings, transforming the landscape into the kind of barelands I'd witnessed in Borneo, where so-called specialists had persuaded authorities that the impact of logging was small and that logged forests would be ready for a repeat harvest within 30 to 40 years.

The end result was the disappearance of 90% of the natural forest after 40 years of logging and the destruction of a unique part of the Earth's most diverse forest habitat and the rich biodiversity within it.

* * *

I learnt that PNG's constitution, guaranteed legal ownership to its people of the land they had traditionally lived on as well as the forests that grew on that land.

However, a significant portion of that land had been leased for exploitation by compliant government officials in connivence with Malaysian businesses controlled by the Taib and Xiong clans as well as other foreigners, in the form of large agricultural concessions known as Special Agriculture and Business Leases.

Thanks to these SABL leases, Malaysian controlled companies logged and cleared vast areas of rain forest, exporting the timber to China, violating laws designed to protect the customary owner's land rights.

Not only that, but the rights of Papuan landowners had been abused by police in the pay of logging companies, harassing, arresting and beating those who had tried to to defend their rights.

Even after high court interdiction the loggers flaunted the law by continuing to fell trees without the permission of the landowners,

exporting entire shiploads of raw timber to China, the world's largest timber importer, where in total billion of dollars worth of unprocessed logs were imported without the least thought given to international law.

The trafficking of timber and timber products, generated huge profits by converting illegally cut logs in to legally certified timber with the complicity of shipping agents, forestry authorities, corrupt port and customs officials and the assistance of police and military personnel.

According to Interpol, illegal timber trafficking was valued at almost 152 billion dollars a year, accounting for up to 90% of tropical deforestation in a long list of countries commencing with PNG and Indonesia, a business that attracted organised crime and which encouraged corruption, tax evasion, violent crime, fraud and money laundering.

There was not a single country in the world where valuable commercial timber grew that remained untouched by illegal trafficking. A sad augur for the future of natural forests.

Our encroachment into the natural forest, driven by legal and illegal logging and evergrowing need for agricultural land, was not only catastrophic for our environment, but also our health, as human contact with viruses borne by wildlife threatened us all as evidenced by the Covid pandemic.

CHAPTER 21

Sarawak

DURING MY BRIEFING AT THE FOUNDATION, I'd learnt that a company based in Kuching, Rimbunan Hijau, ruled the timber trade over a large part of Southeast Asia. Sarawak was the largest of the thirteen states that made up the Federation of Malaysia and was situated in the northwest corner of the island of Borneo with Kuching its capital.

I'd spent a memorable holiday in Sarawak with my parents when I was about fifteen. We stayed at the Hilton Batang Ai Longhouse Resort, visiting orangutan shelters and butterfly farms with an expedition up the Batang Ai River to visit Iban longhouses in the jungle.

I suppose it was partly for that I decided to make a detour to Kuching before heading up to Hong Kong, perhaps I would see the changes. The trouble was Lucy was getting impatient, so I suggested she join me. Seeing the forest would be the best way of telling her what was happening and discovering more about her father's company Delta Timber.

She jumped at the invitation and I met her at the airport in Kuching a couple of days after my arrival from Port Moresby. She was delighted to see me and the feeling was reciprocal.

It was her first visit to Borneo and we spent the weekend together relaxing and visiting Kuching, a large bustling garden city on the Sarawak River, reputed for its easy going manner and colour.

Our plan was to visit Sibu, 400 kilometres to the northeast, a four hour drive from Kuching during which I would be able to see the transformation of what had been virgin rain forest when I had first visited the state.

We left early the Monday morning, taking the A150, Pan Borneo Highway, which ran East from Kuching before turning north to Sibu and then on to Brunei and Sabah finally arriving after 1,300 kilometres in the north of Borneo at Kudat.

Our plan was to visit logging and oil palm plantation areas along the road which made a dog's leg south before turning north again, following the path between the coast and the mountains. Using my well tested method I'd googled the region over the weekend and marked the zones where there were plantations and logged-over rain forest.

After Serian, where the road continued south, we turned off, then ten or twenty kilometres further towards the Indonesian border we saw our first plantations. It didn't need much searching, they were everywhere, as far as the eye could see.

We stopped to photograph the plantations and deforested areas, compared them to the nearby still standing forest—now broken into isolated parches, and saw evidence wherever we looked of the transformation of forest land into large scale agribusiness, passing logging trucks, roadside depots, woodyards and sawmills.

* * *

Incongruously Sarawak's tourist promotion board's described their state as a vast wilderness in its brochures, in reality less than ten percent of its rain forests remained untouched. Former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown had declared that the destruction of Sarawak's rain forest was 'probably the biggest environmental crime of our times … Malaysia's once vast pristine jungle has been stripped bare and enormous areas have been planted with oil palm in an environmental nightmare that shows no sign of slowing'.

One man had been responsible for that tragedy, Sarawak's immensely rich former Chief Minister, Abdul Taib Mahmud, described as an exceptionally powerful and corrupt man, who had abused his public office in an outrageous effort to enrich himself and his family members.

When criticising oil palm plantations I thought of olive groves in the Mediterranean Basin

John Ennis had told me Sarawak was worth checking out, a natural paradise, the home of the hornbill, perhaps. My research described it as a wealthy state in the Malaysian Federation, wealth, yes, but I also discovered it was a cesspool of corruption and political dysfunctionality, a hub of environmental crime and illicit wealth derived from the predatory methods use by powerful politicians and their families to exploit the hereditary land of the weak and unworldly forest dwellers.

I learnt that Taib and his family members had used their illicit gains to acquire assets worth billions of dollars in Malaysia, Canada, the UK, Australia, the United States and other countries with vast holdings in over 400 companies around the globe worth billions of dollars.

Malaysia had the dubious world record of capital flight, hundreds of billions of US dollars had disappeared mostly via Singaporean banks, depriving the people of Malaysia of vital capital and taxes.

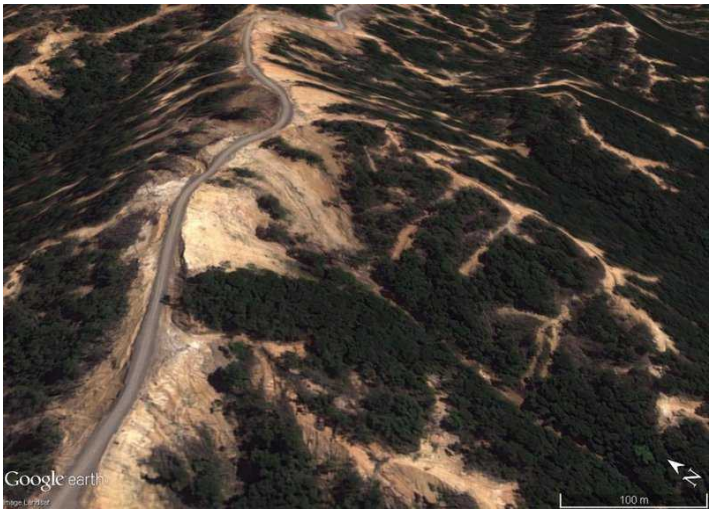
Sarawak's timber export boom had lasted three decades under Chief Minister Taib's rule during which some of the world's biggest timber companies were created, including Samling and Shin Yang, both of which had since been transformed into palm oil producing companies, thanks to the lands they stripped, replacing the rain forest with wealth producing oil palm plantations.

Malaysia was mined by corrupt governance, ecological disaster and financial scandals on a vast scale, the most remarkably of which implicated its previous prime minister, Najib Razaj, in a 4.5 billion US dollar fraud, involving a sovereign fund, pillaged in partnership with Jho Low, a Malaysian-Chinese businessman, who on a wild spending spree had thrown the money away of yachts, jets and

jewelry, showering Hollywood stars and starlets with millions of dollars in fastuous extravaganzas in Las Vegas.

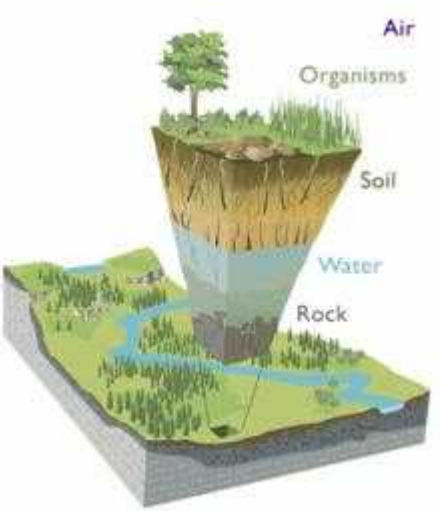
Today Najib is in prison and Low is a fugitive holed up somewhere in China.

Malaysia, a modern state, also the home to unscrupulous business dynasties, destroying the natural wealth of their nation for short term gains, now stood on the edge of a political and economic crisis.



Taib and his family had presided over the destruction of the Borneo rain forest through logging and oil palm plantations, pocketing immense profits, hidden offshore to satisfy their immense greed whilst Sarawak's indigenous peoples were impoverished, their homelands razed to make way for plantations.

They were guilty of ecological crime, the destruction of the fragile matrix that geochemists call the critical zone, which enabled life to exist on Earth, humanity's small blue planet hurtling through an otherwise dead universe.



The destruction of the near surface environment, in which a complex interaction, involving rock, soil, water, air, and living organisms, regulated the natural habitat and the availability of life sustaining resources.

* * *

Another of the Malaysian timber dynasties, controlled by the Tiong family, threatened Papua New Guinea, the Congo and Brazil, and wherever else rain forests flourished.

Tiong Hiew King was born into a poor Foochow family in Sibu, where they had emigrated from Fuzhou—as it is know today, in the Province of Fujian, also called Hokkien, situated on the southeast of China facing Taiwan.

Foochow became one of the Five Treaty Ports following the Opium War and the treaty of Nanjing in 1842. At that time China was extremely poor and many families were encouraged to immigrate to

Southeast Asian to find work. The Tiongs chose Sarawak, a prosperous sultanate ruled by James Brooke, a British adventurer, known as the White Rajah.

The new arrivals spoke their Foochow dialect, common among many Hokkien Chinese speakers from Fujian province, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Taiwan. They settled around Sibu, where labour was in demand for Brooke's plantations. Later with the development of rubber in 1900, hundreds more immigrant families arrived in what became Little Foochow.

Life was hard clearing the jungle to make the way for agricultural land, many immigrants succumbed to tropical diseases and others ended up in the opium and gambling dens that flourished at the time.

Tiong Hiew King was born in 1935, a few years before the Japanese invasion which brought much hardship to the colony. As a boy he tapped rubber in the plantations, then, after the war, he started work

in his uncle's small sawmill, setting up his own timber business a few years later.

In 1975, Tiong founded Rimbunan Hijau, which he transformed into a remarkable success story, a vast conglomerate engaged in forestry, oil palm plantations, media, oil & gas, metals & mining, and others sectors with certain of its subsidiaries like RH Mining Resources Ltd. incorporated in the Cayman Islands.

Over the last two decades Tiong Hiew King, since succeeded by his sons, transformed Rimbunan Hijau into the world's biggest tropical logging company. Today his son controls a diversified multinational business conglomerate with operations in Malaysia, Indonesia, PNG, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Brazil, Vanuatu, New Zealand and even Russia.

Old man Tiong could have looked back on an extraordinarily successful life, culminating with the honour bestowed upon him by the Queen of England, who dubbed him Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Amongst his friends he could count Malaysia's veteran politician and many times prime minister, Mohammed Mahathir.

Regretfully there was one terrible black mark on his success story, the legacy Tiong bequeathed to future generations, the large scale destruction his business wreaked on many of the world's rain forests, aided and abetted by his Chinese partners, and, the millions of faceless consumers in the West, that is to say you and I.

Perhaps, if the Queen had known more about Tiong's track record, she would have knighted him with a chainsaw, not a sword, my uncle John Ennis had remarked.

Tiong's family also controlled an important global Chinese language media group, employing more that 5,000 people, publishing five daily newspapers and 30 magazines. Its editorial policy was to link China's vast diaspora, promote China, Chinese culture and the rise of China, 'a media network that belonged to the Chinese of the world' with newspapers in Hong Kong, New York, San Francisco, Toronto and Vancouver.

A few years back Greenpeace reported that Tiong's 60 or so companies controlled more than half of Papua New Guinea's commercial logging operations, accounting for a huge part of the country's total log exports.

Nothing had changed since then except those companies were now behind a screen of opaque offshore shell companies. A fact carefully hidden from public view as Tiong's English language daily, The National, rarely if ever reported on the country's logging industry or environmental issues.

Greenpeace, on top of environmental crime and forest destruction, also accused the Rimbunan Hijau group of having an appalling record of human-rights abuse.

The Tiong family had close links with Chinese media groups, including those of Hong Kong, and Liu Changle a former People's Liberation Army colonel, head of China's Phoenix TV, a satellite television operator, which I suppose explained the family's enthusiasm for Communist China, after all most of their timber exports worth billions went to China.

His company was responsible for the destruction of vast areas of forest in Sarawak, the home to the Penan and Kenyah forest people, many of whom struggled to find food in what had been their natural larder, now empty of its rich flora and fauna after Rimbunan Hijau's loggers had stripped the forest of its vitality.

* * *

We arrived in Sibu—the Gateway to Sarawak, sometime before nightfall and after checking into the Kingwood—a modern high-rise hotel owned by Rimbunan Hijau, we set out to explore the city centre and the night market.

Sibu was founded by James Brooke, the White Rajah, after building his fort in 1862 to protect the settlement from the Dayak attacks, the fierce headhunters who lived at the junction of the Rajang and Igan

Rivers. It was there immigrants flocked from Foochow to work on Brooke's plantations, setting up a Chinese colony that would develop into Sarawak's commercial capital over the next half century dominated by the descendants whose most important businesses were focused on timber, palm oil and the city's port.

The hotel overlooked the broad Rajang River and was within walking distance from Rimbunan Hijau's headquarters which we set out to visit the next morning.

There was nothing much to do but admire the magnificent futuristic edifice, green like in Port Moresby, but much bigger, we even went into the huge entrance hall, though it wasn't in my brief to do anything more than take a few photos and report on the group's activities. In any case timber exports from Sarawak and the rest of Malaysia had been falling for two decades now, for the simple reason most accessible timber had been cut and the land turned over to oil palm plantations, it was precisely why RH was now in PNG, and the reason for my investigation.

Today the RH headquarters, which dominated Sibu's skyline, was the symbol of an agribusiness empire built around palm oil, a highly profitable commodity produced on the group's vast plantations on land torn from the forest. Their ambition was to repeat that success in PNG and they were well on the way.

Our departure was complicated by the fact it was impossible to fly to Hong Kong directly from Sarawak, but that problem was solved by Lucy in a display of what real money can buy. After speaking with her father a company jet was dispatched to pick us up the next day. First stop Hong Kong, where Henrique da Souza had set up a meeting for me with Sammy Foong, a friend of his with the South China Morning Post.

CHAPTER 22

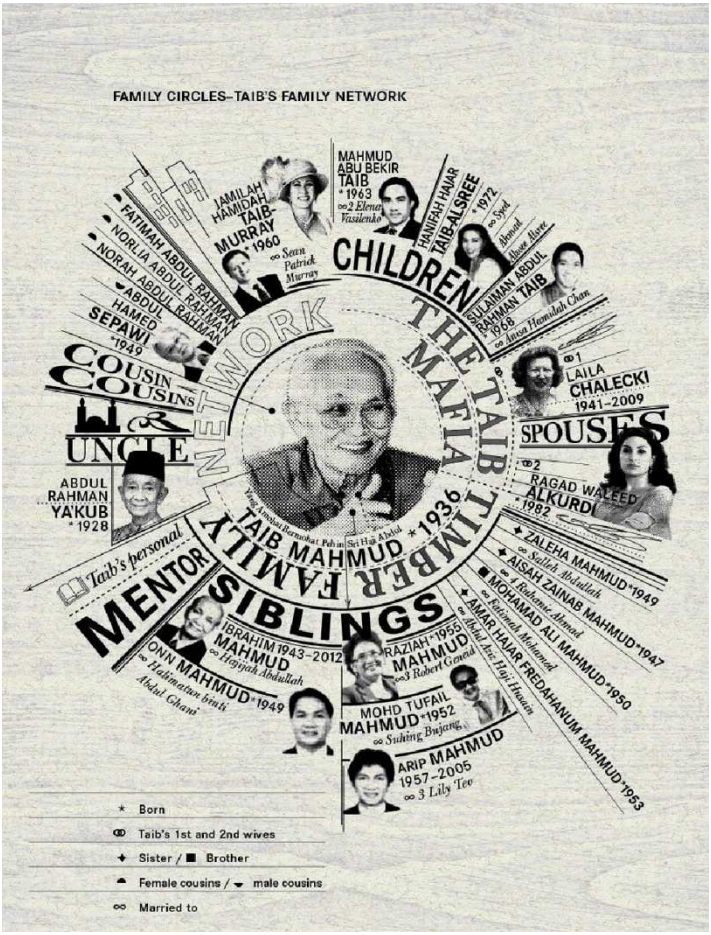
Timber Mafia

I hadn't wasted my time in Kuching waiting for Lucy. There I'd contacted a couple of conservationists whose names had been given to me by Lukas Wenda in Jayapura. One of them was a campaigner, Mat Jau, a Kenyah, one of the Borneans at the front line in the fight to preserve their communities and protect their native lands.

The local figurehead was Ang Lai Soon, a respected but aging activist and philanthropist, whose fight had now been taken up by a younger generation, men like Mat Jau, who told me about the other face of Sarawak, a cesspool of corruption at the highest level, behind which was the probable murder of Bruno Manser who disappeared in Sarawak in May 2000. Manser, a Swiss environmentalist and human rights militant, had lived with the Penan tribe in Sarawak, and was an activist for rain forest conservation and rights of indigenous peoples.

For 30 years, Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud ruled Sarawak during which time almost all of the state's once vast rain forests fell to the chainsaw, sacrificed for the ephemeral profit to be made from timber and to make way for plantations, less than 5% remained of the forest my Uncle John Ennis visited in the 1980s.

Another Foochow tycoon was Hii Yii Peng, recently succeeded by his son Hii King Chiong, close friends of the Taibs, beneficiaries of timber and plantations distributed by the chief minister.



Mat Jau spoke to me of the undercover investigation by Global Witness, which described exactly how Taib's family and their cronies by-passed Malaysian laws to sell off Sarawak's land and forests, using offshore banks to hide their corrupt deals.

Japan had been one of the largest buyer of timber products from Sarawak, it had accounted for one third of the state's exports of all timber products and half of its plywood exports. Today China has taken the number one spot as the main client of these Foochow

dynasties, but since little timber remained in Sarawak and other parts of Borneo, they turned their attention to Papua New Guinea and its nearby islands, more especially the Solomon Islands.

It went a long way to explain why buildings were being torched in Chinatown, a suburb of the Solomon Island's capital, Honiara, situated on the island of Guadalcanal. Anti-Chinese rioting and looting had broken out after the government's decision to switch diplomatic ties from Taipei to Beijing.

Chinese businesses were targeted as they were favoured by corrupt officials for government contracts over local companies, especially when it came to extracting resources, namely timber.

It was why I had decided we should see for ourselves and drove north to Sarawak's border area with Indonesia in a hired car, where we soon came upon logged forest areas, certain abandoned, others transformed into oil palm plantations, and small newly built settlements evidently for the displaced populations.

Hillsides denuded of their forest cover had been the cause of lethal floods and mudslides during the monsoon, which not only cost lives, but intensified severe weather conditions and accelerated climate change.

Stopping we were approached by uniformed logging company guards and ordered to turn back. Knowing how activists and investigators disappeared I obeyed. I did not want us to end up like Bill Kayong, an activist, who on his way to work in his pickup stopped at a traffic light, when two bullets shattered his window, striking him in the head, killing him instantly.

What was driving deforestation was palm oil and its plantations. The decades long oil palm boom in Indonesia and Malaysia had created

one of the fastest and most destructive transformations of forest landscapes ever witnessed in the two countries.

It was an industry plagued with problems, creating land conflicts and deforestation as plantation owners rode over all legal, social and morale principals with total impunity.

Global demand for palm oil was projected to continue expanding for at least another three to four decades, with China and India being the main markets. As a consequence the incentives for landowners and plantation companies to continue their encroachment were contagious.

Illegal land clearing had been the cause of the frighteningly unequal distribution of wealth, forest fires, the destruction of peatlands, greenhouse gas emissions and the loss of irreplaceable natural heritage.

CHAPTER 23

The Clearing

IN FOREST CLEARINGS LEFT by the natural death of giant hardwoods, new growth sprung up as nature repeated its eternal cycle. After fifty or one hundred years, clearings would have disappeared, reclaimed by the forest.

Unless that is subsistence forest dwelling farmers moved into the clearings, planting their wild rice, yams and sweet potatoes.

Today, the forest could no longer count on nature's cycle to perpetuate itself, as population pressure not only transformed natural clearings, but added to their natural occurrence, day after day, as more and more shifting cultivators moved in whilst loggers with their chainsaws cleared the forest for timber and plantations.

The larger part of equatorial rain forest of New Guinea was like all others—a warm, moist terrestrial biome, where little light penetrates, where the ambient temperature remains remarkably stable between 20 and 30 degrees centigrade.

Nearer coastal regions the vegetation transforms into swamp and mangrove forest whilst further inland, on the flanks of the vast mountain range that runs along the entire length of the island, it is transformed into montane forest.

Such forests, though they only cover one tenth of the planet's land surface, are the home to two thirds of the Earth's entire biodiversity.

Soon all that will remain will be parks, theme parks, the rest will disappear into history, just like the dinosaurs that once roamed the rain forests, as the man-made sixth extinction wreaked its destructive force—led by a host of willing soldiers armed with Chinese made chainsaws, clearing vast swaths of forest, across the equatorial zone that encircled the globe. An army of diligent soldiers, working night and day, felling the pillars of the sky in a frenzy of destruction—to supply you and me with parquet flooring, garden furniture, veneer and the raw material to make paper and cardboard.

Forests are an incredibly complex natural system, a fragile living organism that has evolved over hundreds of millions of years, one that lives by recycling its many parts—microbian life, plants, insects, animals and birds in a continuous process of life, death, decomposition and rebirth with each species playing its role in the symbiotic balancing act that perpetuates the cycle of life and survival.

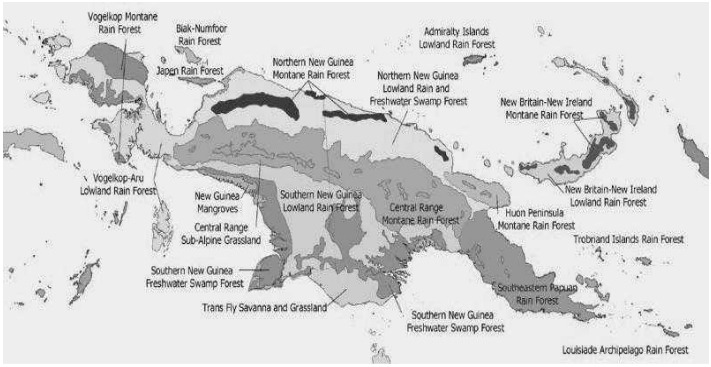
As I already described the canopy is a complex multilayered structure mostly composed of branches, woody vines and lianas together with hemiepiphytes, epiphytes, orchids, ferns, mosses, and lichens.

Beneath, the permanently dark floor of the forest was a necrobiome—the home to insects that thrive on dead creatures and in its natural litter and humus, they included termites, ants, cockroaches, beetles, centipedes, millipedes, and scorpions. Earthworms and fungi used the organic litter as food. Large mammals foraged for roots on the forest floor, though there were no large predators in the forests of New Guinea, apart from man and dingos, both of which arrived in prehistoric times, though crocodiles were present in its many rivers, like the snakes and birds of prey that abounded and smaller carnivores and what they didn’t eat provided food for other scavengers to recycle.

As loggers, planters and subsistence farmers penetrated deeper into the forest, it became fragmented. Progressively the fragments become too small for the survival of many species, too far apart for reproduction, which inevitably leads to the collapse of the remaining habitat and its food chain—a complex symbiotic web, the loss of diversity, an increase in the numbers of seed eaters and herbivores, and an insufficient number of pioneer plant species to prime the regeneration process.

The blatant lies of industrialists, such as the Taibs and Tiongs, government ministers and high level officials, whose regular declarations, that developments only took place on abandoned land, or that oil palm plantations were not the cause of deforestation, were staggering.

The fact was oil palm as well as pulpwood plantation industries had been the principle drivers of deforestation on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo over recent decades, and the same causes were now at work in New Guinea.



CHAPTER 24

Bougainville

TO THE EAST OF Papua New Guinea was Bougainville, an autonomous island, the tragic home of the Panguna mine, which as I learnt was the principle cause of a drawn out civil war. Mineral wealth often came with misery whether it was nickel in Norilsk, silver in Bolivia, diamonds in Angola, rare earths in the Eastern Congo, oil in the Middle East or copper in Papua New Guinea, it was the same story.

Rio Tinto's operations in the copper and goldmine had dumped an estimated one billion tonnes of waste into the Kawerong-Jaba River Delta, which today, even after the mine's closure, continued to wreak catastrophic damage.

The abandoned gold and copper mine, which had left a gigantic scar in the earth, had been operated by Rio Tinto, a British mining company that had plundered the island's resources on a vast scale for decades, leaving behind a trail of destruction and pollution after shirking its responsibilities in 1989.

The story of Rio Tinto in Bougainville was that of civil war, ethnic rivalries and devastation of the natural environment, the site marked by a legacy of crumbing hulks, abandoned buildings, rusting machines and mountains of poisonous waste.

Decades passed before Rio Tinto finally made a first timid step in its admission of responsibility, promising to finance an independent environmental impact assessment of the damage wreaked by their past operations and the impact on the human rights of the peoples effected.

More than one billion tonnes of mining waste had been dumped into the river delta causing catastrophic damage to what had previously been a natural paradise, a Garden of Eden, where those who lived there had prospered for tens of thousands of years.

Rio Tinto had profitably exploited Panguna during its lifetime, during which it was one of the world's largest sources of gold and copper, immensely profitable, though less than 1% of profits from the mine went to the people of Bougainville.

The roots of the civil war were entwined in the history and exploitation of the mine, complicated by the fact that Bougainville, though geographically part of the Solomon Islands, was politically part of the vaster territory of Papua New Guinea.

During the period from 1988 to 1998 the island saw one of the most violent conflicts in the Pacific region since the World War II, which resulted in Bougainville devolving into an autonomous region of New Guinea.

Traditionally the people of Bougainville lived off their land largely from subsistence farming, hunting and fishing. Theirs was a matrilineal society in which each person was identified as belonging to his or her mother's clan.

The troubles commenced with the discovery of copper deposits and the arrival of Conzinc Riotinto Australiao, which commenced open-pit mining operations in 1972. Soon Panguna became the largest copper mine in the world.

Constitutionally all mineral rights belonged to the State, however, that conflicted with Bougainville's vision of itself, especially when women were excluded, in spite of their traditional role in a matrilineal society, where they were traditional custodians of the land.

The government held 20% of the shares and once operations commenced the mine was soon producing 45% of Papua New Guinea's export revenue. This was the cause of resentment when certain landowners received more payments than others.

The situation became exacerbated by the non-payment of royalties and the growing environmental pollution caused by waste from the mine with the slow realisation the land would never be restored to its natural state. To this was added friction between mine workers from other regions of PNG and locals.

The discontent exploded in 1988 when disgruntled landowners and secessionists sabotaged the mine, resulting in its closure and the intervention of the army, launching a conflict that was to last eight years.

An estimated 20,000 people died as a result of the conflict during which the Bougainville Revolutionary Army and the Bougainville Resistance Forces emerged and a large part of the population was displaced.

CHAPTER 25

The Landscape

AT THIS POINT IN MY STORY I had to pause and ask myself what was I doing in New Guinea, evidently enjoying myself, trekking through its extraordinary rain forests, meeting strange people, visiting mines and logging camps, it was certainly a darn sight better than the run of the mill routine in a London or Paris office, or in just about any other big city.

I began to understand the attraction of working for an NGO, like those guys in the Tropical Garden in Paris, at least they felt like they were doing something useful.

Those big cities were worlds apart from New Guinea, not only separated by time and distance, their climate, environment and landscape, but also an immense cultural divide.

In terms of development Western societies could seem far ahead of those in the Highlands of New Guinea, many of whom still lived in Stone Age hunter gatherer communities. In reality, in terms of human existence, a couple of thousand years were inconsequential.

Two thousand years ago much of Great Britain lived in the Pastoral Neolithic and the lives of its inhabitants resembled those of New Guinea, of course climate and landscape implied differences, but it was essentially similar with subsistence farming and a few domestic but different animals.

One of the interesting things about flying is it gives us the opportunity to study the land beneath us. All frequent flyers have seen the difference between the landscape of the UK and Mediterranean countries, or between New England and California.

The natural landscape of almost all of England is hugely altered compared to that of say pre-industrial Britain. Seen from a plane on its descent to any English city, there is nothing but intensely farmed land, crisscrossed by roads and motorways, railways, warehouses, factories, endless residential suburbs, city centres filled with office buildings, shopping centres and car parks, with the constant toing and froing of traffic and the interminable lines of cars, trucks and buses.

This of course is no revelation.

Now, looking from my plane as it flies over New Guinea I can see nothing but undisturbed forest, absolutely nothing, no roads, no railways and no cities. Just the vast green forest. For how long more? That is the question.

Today the forest forms a predominant part of New Guinea's landscape and natural environment. As such it still plays a vital role in the life of its peoples. Unlike almost all of the planet's peoples, those of the island of New Guinea still live in harmony with their natural surroundings. Their society and its economy depends almost entirely on the wealth of the biological diversity of their forests and rivers, the living natural resources that have sustained them for countless thousands of years.

Over a large part of the last 10,000 or 12,000 years of human existence, agriculture emerged and was a major source of food together with that found in the forests—game and plants.

The agriculture of the forest, in Ancient Britain or New Guinea, was based on a swidden system, that is small patches of forest cleared for gardens, cultivated for a few seasons and then abandoned, leaving the natural processes to restore the soil's fertility and the regrowth of the forest.

Game was not only a traditional source of food for Papuans, hunting was also a daily occupation for a great many people. Each year millions of wild animals living in the island's immense forests were hunted and trapped to provide Papuans with essential proteins.

World War II and decolonisation suddenly thrust PNG into the Western world, a world with an ever accelerating need for raw materials. Those needs included timber, a natural resource in which that almost untouched island abounded.

Demand exploded after Communist China under Deng Xiaoping reformed its economy, launching the greatest creation of wealth the world has ever known with a phenomenal demand for raw materials, to meet not only its own needs, but those of the world as China became its manufacturing power house.

As a consequence rain forest logging became the PNG's main industry with millions of cubic metres of logs exported to China in the form of unprocessed logs, sawn timber, veneer, plywood sheets and wood chips.

At the same time PNG's population grew, at the rate of one million each decade, adding to the pressure on the forest, which not only supplied timber but also resins, gums, oils, sandalwood and rattan, and more recently a destination for ecotourism with attractions that included butterfly farms, the discovery of insects, orchids, crocodile hunting, handicrafts, trekking and relaxation.

At the outset logging developed in easily accessible forest areas in the lowlands where the trees could be trucked to the coast or floated down the many rivers on barges or in the form of rafts to ships anchored offshore. Since that time logging has exploded, spreading to the highlands and the many nearby islands.

The dense natural forest with its extraordinary biodiversity was replaced by impoverished secondary forest, grassland, scrub, subsistence gardens or plantations. In addition the landscape was scarred by bulldozers, trucks, camps, staging areas, road building, bridges, wharves and ramps to facilitate logging operations and the transport of logs to river and coastal ports for export.

The resulting secondary forests were the source of catastrophic fires in the low lying sparse regrowth, where any surviving saplings succumbed in the absence of the protective canopy and exposure to the fierce equatorial sun.

In recent years millions of hectares of rain forest with its fauna and flora have disappeared, which combined with increased subsistence farming caused by population growth has contributed to the loss of a quarter of the island's natural forest, a phenomenon that is accelerating with each passing year.

Compared to the much publicised losses in the Amazon basin, the percentage rate of loss in PNG is two times greater.

New Guinea is a land of villages with only a handful of small cities and where many Papuans live in a bygone age where subsistence farming is vital, however, since 1970, PNG's population has grown from 2.5 million to 9 million, 80 percent of which is dependent on small garden farms that now cover one quarter of the island, eating further into the forest with each passing day.

The future was not looking good as the population was forecast to reach 14 million by 2050.

CHAPTER 26

Return to Bonnieux

BEFORE I'D LEFT LONDON John DeFrancis had suggested I speak with Henrique da Souza one of Sir Patrtick's men. Henrique, in spite of his name, was Chinese, from Macau, the son of an old Portuguese-Chinese family.

We met in a pub off Kings Road in Chelsea where there was a small garden to one side. John had briefed Henrique on my assignment and we commenced by chatting about Hong Kong and China and the changes that were taking place.

We sat outside enjoying the evening sun and after exchanging stories about our respective experiences in tropical forests, he in Brazil, me in Indonesia, Henrique told me the story of how he had precipitously quit Hong Kong more than two years earlier. He had been exfiltrated to Brazil by Sir Patrick Kennedy, following his arrest in the pro-democracy demonstrations, where he joined Sir Patrick's yacht on an expedition up the Amazon and into the jungle to film the indigenous peoples with a team of modern day adventurers.

It was a fascinating story of how Henrique, an up and coming banker, had been thrust into a world unknown to him by the transformation forced on Hong Kong by the Chinese government in Beijing.

Hong Kong's leader, Carrie Lim, had created a nightmare of media oppression by enforcing China's draconian new laws on the city, putting a brutal end to free speech in what was an Autonomous Region, formerly a British colony, in a grim reversal worthy of the Mao era politics, clamping down on Hong Kong's news media and freedom of expression.

Henrique's warning about China seemed a bit exaggerated to my inexperienced mind. My previous sojourn in Shanghai had been anything if not great, I'd never seen any cause for concern though I did realise changes were taking place.

We went to eat in a small French restaurant not far from Henrique's place where I continued by telling him about Grenoble and INP-Pagora where I'd spent a couple of years and where I met my previous girlfriend Suzie, which brought me to the story of how we had witnessed Wang Jian's tragic and untimely death in Bonnieux.

Henrique was astonished to learn I had been there at the time, even witnessing the drama. For a good part of his life he, like many others in China, had followed the meteoric rise of Wang and his company, the HNA Group, which amongst many other things had been the world's third largest aircraft lessor with a fleet of 636 aircraft and 14 airlines.

Less than six months back the group had been declared bankrupt in what was described as a web of nepotism that stretched around the globe, Hong Kong, London, Paris and New York.

HNA came to an end in the most sensational collapse since China introduced laws governing bankruptcy in 2007. Only 100 or so businesses had been declared insolvent in the intervening period and none were comparable in size to HNA.

It seemed that Wang's group and a number of its affiliates were now under administration with the forced restructuring of its tentacular corporate empire and its huge debts.

In short HNA had got out of control as had many developers in China's overheated property market, and local governments—whose principal revenues came from land lease sales to the same developers, risked losing one trillion dollars a year from the sale of those leases.

The danger was private businesses would be replaced by inefficient over-leveraged state owned organisations, whose goal was not profits, but the ideological motivations of the Chinese Communist Party.

As we ate Henrique told me HNA's story, that of a group that had interests in aviation, real estate, financial services, media and entertainment, tourism, logistics and technology, which in a few short years had grown exponentially on a 40 billion dollar acquisition binge, buying 25% of the Hilton World Wide Holdings, 10% of Deutsche Bank—one of Europe's biggest banks, to the point its total assets had grown to over 150 billion with 400,000 people working in its holdings scattered across the planet.

Now, with HNA's bankruptcy, the capital of its founders and major shareholders, which at its peak had reached a staggering 180 billion US dollars, had evaporated. Where? Well on markets and in bad deals, but more than nine billion dollars of that were still unaccounted for.

The history of the conglomerate's ownership was just as opaque. Caixin, a Chinese media group, reputed for its investigative journalism, took five years to trace HNA's shareholders and, more or less, understand its Byzantine corporate structure with its multifarious assets.

It was a fascinating story, as apart from the drama I'd chanced upon in Bonnieux, not only had I known almost nothing about HNA, but I'd had practically forgotten Wang.

But there was more to come, since HNA's two largest shareholders were two obscure charitable funds—the Hainan Cihang Charity Foundation registered in the US which held 29% of the company, and the Cihang Foundation based in Hainan Province which held 23%.

After the co-founder Wang Jian's untimely death in 2018, his share in HNA went to the Chinese based foundation, giving the two charities a combined 67% and leaving the other co-founder, Chen Feng, with 15%.

HNA had started out in 1989 as Hainan Airlines, an insignificant start-up airline, with neither planes nor a civil aviation license. However, based in Hainan it had huge potential, as the tropical island was China's Riviera, and bigger than Hawaii.

HNA's founders included the Hainan provincial government and a group of former Civil Aviation Administration employees, amongst whom were Wang Jian, Xiao Zengli, Chen Feng and Li Jing.

In 1992, Hainan Airlines became China's first joint-stock airline with the Hainan provincial government holding a little over 5%, backed by banks and investors. Chen and Wang were appointed president and vice president respectively, each with a minority shareholding.

As China opened up, business developed and they broadened their interests, attracting new capital, with Chen and Wang gaining majority control.

Then in 1995, Hainan Airlines became China's first joint-venture carrier by selling a 25 million dollar stake to American Aviation, backed by billionaire George Soros and his Quantum Fund. At the same time the Hainan provincial government's holding continued to shrink until it finally withdrew.

In 2011, Soros with American Aviation backed out transferring their stake to Wang, Chen and others.

When Hainan Airlines became a publicly traded company, Wang and Chen were still minority shareholders, though Qixing—a company controlled by Wang and Chen, was listed as the second largest shareholder after it had acquired Hainan Airlines' shares at nearly 20% below market price.

In 2000, Qixing's shares in HNA were transferred to two other companies controlled by Wang and Chen—Yangpu Hengsheng Industrial Investment and Sanya Xiangtai Industrial Investment whilst the two founders' family members and business partners became shareholders of Hainan Airlines through onshore and offshore companies.

Hainan Airlines then acquired a number of regional carriers and airports, including China Xinhua Airlines, which transformed Hainan into a national airline.

This marked the start of Hainan Airlines' leveraged acquisition period, and by 2006 Hainan Airlines became China's fourth-largest airline, owner of eight domestic airports, symbolising the arrival of China on the world stage in aviation

Courted by Wall Street, Wang Jian became a globe-trotting tycoon seen hobnobbing with Xi Jinping and David Cameron.

As the group continued to expand many of its diverse subsidiaries were held by nebulous shareholders including the Hainan Province Cihang Foundation, set up by the HNA Group, which soon became the controlling shareholder of HNA Group.

The foundation's aim was supposedly supporting a variety of charitable causes, however, these were never disclosed, nor was the use of its funds and assets.

The foundation in fact looked very much like a gravy train, its board composed of retired officials from Hainan's political, legal, financial and taxation authorities, including the former mayor of Haikou.

Amongst the initial investors in the foundation was a Beijing-based advertising company controlled by Wang's brother Wang Wei.

Even murkier was the mysterious figure behind the Hainan Cihang Charity Foundation registered in New York, Guan Jun, a childhood friend of Chen's son.

Wang's explanation was that Guan had got the HNA shares from an Indian businessman, Bharat Bhise, who had acted as an offshore consultant for HNA and had received the shares from the company as a gift.

However, when HNA acquired the Swiss airline catering firm Gategroup Holding AG, it was required by Swiss regulators to declare its ownership structure. HNA explained the shares held by Bhise and later by Guan, were in fact held on behalf of six HNA founders, including Wang and Chen.

During this period, Chen appeared unfazed by the group's growing debt. In an interview with state broadcaster China Central Television in 2004, he famously likened leverage to lice. 'When you have so

many you don't itch any more. When you've borrowed so much, you sleep easily at night.'

Before HNA began to fold under the weight of its debt fuelled expansion and questions over its ownership structure, it ranked 170th on the Fortune 500 list of the world's biggest companies in 2017.

Wang's death inevitably raised more questions surrounding HNA, its ownership structure and alleged links to Communist Party leaders, which reassured certain bond holders who perceived the connection to power as positive, in the sense Beijing would come to HNA's rescue if the group ever found itself in difficulties.

In February 2020, everything changed, the Covid pandemic dealt a death blow to HNA. Airlines, airports and the travel sector were severely hit, leaving the group desperately scrambling to unload its debts, dumping its assets at fire sale prices.

With the group's aviation and tourism businesses paralysed by the shutdown the situation became untenable, leaving the government of Hainan Province with no choice but to intervene and seize control of HNA.

Chen Feng and his group were faced with at least 63 billion dollars in claims from its creditors and after the group missed a court ordered payment Chen was hit by a travel ban.

Chen had reached the end of the road after it was revealed that billions of dollars of company funds had been misused for non-business purposes. He, along with HNA's chief executive officer, was arrested for unspecified crimes.

Chen and his group were among the hundreds of billionaires and business empires spawned following Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, liberalising China's economy following the death of Mao Zedong. The Chinese Communist Party had instrumentalised business to build China's financial and business power overseas, but as the financial power wielded by nouveaux riches businessmen increased they were perceived as a potential threat to its authority.

Under the leadership of Wang and Chen, the group had taken advantage of the easy credit that flooded China since around 2010, funding speculation on a raft of overseas acquisitions, including investments in the US worth 35 billion dollars—hotels, luxury properties, golf courses, and to top it all, 245 Park Avenue, an iconic Manhattan skyscraper for 2.2 billion.

The pandemic announced the end of Chen's career as a tycoon, the only question that remained for him was to avoid the fate of Wu

Xiaohui, the former chairman of Anbang—another troubled group. Wu was sentenced to 18 years imprisonment in 2018 for fraud and embezzlement.

* * *

'The day of reckoning has come for China's tycoons,' said Henrique, 'especially the Evergrande Group, a huge conglomerate, on the verge of bankruptcy, struggling under one of greatest debt burdens ever seen in a modern business venture.'

I'd never heard of it.

'It's facing a mountain of debt five times that of HNA. Founded by Xu Jiayin, a colorful tycoon, or soon to be a has been tycoon, famous for his flashy gold buckled Hermès belts, who's now keeping a vry low profile.'

This was all new to me and apart from the link to my experience in Bonnieux seemed of little relevance to my task.

Henrique then lowered his voice. 'That's not all.'

'Oh!'

He told me the story of Guan Jun, a mysterious and apparently nondescript individual in his thirties, who in 2917 donated more than 29.5% of the shares he purportedly held in the HNA Group, worth around 18 billion dollars, to the New York based private philanthropic foundation, the Hainan Cihang Charity Foundation, on 747 Third Avenue.

Guan, it turned out was the director of a company located in the HNA Group building in Beijing. His home address was recorded as

also being in Beijing, but in a modest Beijing apartment, found at the end of a dingy hallway littered with discarded furniture and bags of trash.

I seemed to remember hearing that before.

Described as a Beijing businessman, Guan was in fact a front man, acting for a Hong Kong company, a large shareholder in HNA's opaque ownership structure.

Some reports said Guan Jun was behind the Hainan Cihang Charity Foundation and was a childhood friend of Chen's son, Chen Xiaofeng. In 2017 Wang explained that Guan had got the HNA stake from the Indian businessman Bharat Bhise, who acted as an offshore consultant for HNA and had received the shares from the company as a gift.

But later HNA said the shares held by Bhise, and later by Guan, were actually held on behalf of six HNA founders, including Chen and Wang.

Together the two foundations held a little over half the shares in the group, whilst a dozen founding and senior executives held the rest, led by HNA's founding chairmen Chen Feng and Wang Jian.

Guan, who had momentarily held a huge part of one of China's most acquisitive private conglomerates, resurfaced in a video posted online, though without clarifying how his inexplicable share in the huge conglomerate was transferred between insiders and without attracting the scrutiny of Chinese or overseas regulators.

In the video he refuted allegations by Guo Wengui, the exiled tycoon, that he was a family relative of Wang Qishan, the nation's anti-corruption tsar, who it was alleged was a secret shareholder of

HNA, and held power over other major shareholders in the group, who with his wife and other relatives held substantial assets in the US.

The shares were in fact transferred to Guan from Bharat Bhise, the Indian-American businessman, CEO of Bravia Capital, a Hong Kong based boutique investment firm, who declared he held the shares in trust since 2004, which were then transferred to the New York based foundation.

Bhise, now resident in New York, had managed the 1995 investment in Hainan Airlines for George Soros, and had sat on the aviation company's board until 2000, he had also had been one of HNA's top dealmakers.

That still left several important and unanswered questions. Who exactly was Guan Jun? How come he and Bhise owned the shares registered in the filing records. How had he and Bhise been compensated for their roles? What had happened to the missing billions?

Little was known about how the philanthropic organisations had been managed or how decisions had been made, though its donations had reached a colossal sum, tens of billions of dollars.

Donations to whom and for what?

Little did I realise my investigations would provided answers to certain of those questions soon after I arrived in Shanghai with Lucy.

CHAPTER 27

All roads lead to China

BESIDES THOSE CRAZY ASIANS, I was learning China's interests were more profound, as was illustrated by another development, just 150 kilometres to the east of the Ok Tedi mine, on the north side of the Hindenburg Range. There in the Sepik River basin, the Frieda River project was being planned, a mine to exploit another vast polymetal deposit.

This mine, according to my friends, would be the PNG's largest. It was planned by an Australian company, PanAust, owned by Guangdong Rising H.K. (Holding) Limited, the wholly owned subsidiary of a Chinese government asset holding company of the same name based in Canton.

I was beginning to understand the China link to New Guinea. Either the businesses were owned, or operated, by friends of China, and in any case most of what was produced was going to China.

Business in PNG couldn't be understood without looking at China's involvement.

Was that good or bad? Well it wasn't for me to moralize, after all Europeans had taken advantage of most of the world for its valuable materials for centuries, and to colonising vast regions without the least excuse me to the natives, including parts of China.

Be that as it may, the mine would be one of the biggest in the world and would affect more than 60 villages in the district—the customary landowners of the mine, who accused PanAust and its subsidiaries of not obtaining consent from the Sepik River communities, violating the right of the customary land owners to give their free, prior and informed consent to developments that affected them.

Each year China received more than half the seafood, wood and minerals exported from the South Pacific region, and its voracious appetite was of growing concern to governments of the countries concerned.

In 2019, China imported 4.8 million tons of wood, 4.8 million tons of mineral products, and 72,000 tonnes of seafood from the Pacific.

That included more than 90% of the total tonnage of wood exported from Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.

It was time to leave PNG, to pursue my investigation in China, the beneficiary of the Papuan mana.

But before I left I decided to pay a visit the Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery. I had seen the forest and the villages and the museum would broaden my insight into the rich cultural heritage of that strange world, one that represented our ancestors and possibly our future.

The museum boasted tens of thousands of anthropological, archaeological and natural science objects in its collections. There was also the war museum, which did not interest me very much, the story of a bloody episode in the history of our ‘civilised’ world, neither did the independence museum which covered contemporary history.

The real history lay in humanity's past, and its future lay in PNG's future, where the soon to disappear cultural relics of the deep past were preserved momentarily in that extraordinary collection in Waigani.

It was a moving experience to contemplate the wealth of our past and how we, humanity, had once lived in harmony with the natural world.

CHAPTER 28

The Trail

BUT FIRST WAS THE Kokoda Trail, a track that ran through the Highland rain forests of the Bird's Tail Peninsula, across the mountains of the Owens Stanley Range, the highest point of which was Mount Bellamy that rose to 2,190 metres.

Since I had been in PNG many people had spoken to me of the Kokoda Trail, which in all honesty I'd never heard of until my arrival on the island. It was part of the history of the country, a monument to the Second World War, when the Japanese fought British and Australian forces as it attempted to take control of the South Pacific Islands.

It was part of the World War II legends, like those I heard in Borneo of headhunters. The story went something like this—the Japanese offered the Dayaks 'a yen for ten' and the Brits replied with 'a bob a nob'.

On the morning of December 7, 1941, the Japanese Air Force attacked Pearl Harbour and Papua New Guinea was all that separated Australia from imperial Japan's ambitions.

It did not go as planned and even Admiral Yamamoto, the Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet, who planned the Pearl Harbor attack, was shot down and killed in 1943 over Buin on the island of Bougainville in the battle for the Solomons.

The Japanese were defeated in the battle of Coral Sea as they prepared to launch their attack on Port Moresby from the Owen Stanley Mountains. Thousand of soldiers, sailors and airmen from all sides lost their lives in some of the most desperate battles of the Pacific islands.

The trail commenced 50 kilometres to the northeast of Port Moresby and in good condition after my exploration in the northwest I figured I could complete it in five or six days, the time to add to my modest though improving knowledge of PNG and in a region that that was particularly rich with over 4000 plant species and many endemic bird and animal species—not forgetting the people that could be met in the villages of Menari, Kagi, Melei, Efogi, and Naduri along the trail.

I wasn't put off by the stories of the hapless trekkers that died on the arduous trail or those who died in a plane crash trying to reach the Kokoda Station at the northern end of the trail. In any case it couldn't be tougher than the Star Mountains.

Chris Taylor, my guardian angel, hired a local guide, Eric Buka, and together with another trekker, Bill Quinn, an Australian, we drove up to Owens Corner about 50 kilometres from Port Moresby. Bill was a runner like me, I'd met him leaving the hotel early in the morning the day after I'd arrived and we teamed up to avoid the dangers of Port Moresby that Chris and our respective governments had warned us of.

I usually managed ten or twenty kilometers on a good day in London or Paris, but in the heat and humidity of Port Moresby we clocked up less than ten.

Luckily it was still the dry season, which in fact meant a little drier, somewhat less rain than in the wet season.

Our team consisted of Eric—our guide and his assistant Kaymala and four porters. It seemed a bit exaggerated to me for a four or five day trek, especially after my adventures with Jim Hogan and Dave Warner.

Eric equipped us for a real expedition—waterproof hiking boots and gaiters, trekking poles, water flasks and purifiers, small backpacks with our essentials in dry waterproof bags—documents, money, satellite telephone, cameras and GoPros. The camping equipment included lightweight sleeping bags and jackets, food plus cooking equipment and utensils, mosquito nets, medical gear and power banks for recharging our electronics was carried by the porters—a real expedition.

In addition I took the precaution of bringing my drones to film the canopy and any logging operations that we might come across.

I'd already learnt to keep things like clothes to a minimum, a couple of quick dry t-shirts, same for underwear and socks, one pair each of shorts and long trousers and a pair of flip-flops for the camps.

The track meandered along narrow crests offering magnificent views—mountains, water falls and deep dark gorges where the thick green vegetation blocked out the daylight, but in truth I'd now gotten used to the extraordinary scenery of New Guinea.

The 96 kilometre long trail passed through rugged mountainous country—rain forest, jungles of fern, orchids, birds and clean mountain streams.

The villages along the trail were used to passing trekkers compared to the Oksapmin, welcoming visitors with smiles, selling handicrafts, fruit and vegetables.

The mountains rose to 2,000 metres, where dense undergrowth confronted trekkers at every turn, the kind of jungle as we often image it. It was in fact secondary growth, the vigorous vegetation that springs up whenever a clearing appears in the forests.

Many Papuans along the trail lived from subsistence farming on cleared forest patches; where crops were grown for three or four years after which they moved on to make another clearing. They did not move away from, but along the trail, which gave me a better idea of how secondary forest developed as clearings were invaded by a dense tangle of vegetation and pioneer species that made them almost impenetrable.

It was a process of rebirth, a kind of dry mangrove where small animals could thrive in the dense vegetation, a jungle within a jungle, filled with predators and the preyed, swarming with insects.

It contrasted with the undisturbed rain forest, where there was little vegetation between the trees on the forest floor far below the canopy, where the little light that penetrated cast strange shadows across the open spaces, where huge buttresses betrayed the giants of the forest rising and disappearing into the vaulted canopy that hid the sky, creating a closed almost unvarying climate.

Below in the cool silent stillness of the shadows, where the silence was broken by the occasional cry of a bird or whoop of a monkey, the rarer large animals wandered grazing on the fruit fallen from the branches high above.

I carried with me a copy of The Tropical Rain Forest written by P.W.Richards in 1948, a reference I had discovered during my time in Grenoble, one that had accompanied me in Sumatra and Borneo, that formed part of the Indo-Malayan chain of rain forests which ran from southern India to Malaysia, Borneo, the Celebes, the Philippines, the island of New Guinea and to the coast of northern Queensland.

Alfred Russel Wallace wrote in his book, Tropical Nature:

'If the traveller notices a particular species and wishes to find more like it, he may often turn his eyes vain in every direction. Trees of varied forms, dimensions and colours around him, but he rarely sees any of them repeated. Time after time he goes towards a tree which looks like the one he seeks, but a closer examination proves it to be distinct. He may at length, perhaps, meet with a second specimen a half a mile off, or he may fail altogether, till on another occasion he stumbles on one by accident.'

* * *

It was early morning and a column of white smoke wafted over the tops of trees of the forest that hugged the roadside. I imagined it was some forest operation.

'What's the main driver of deforestation here?' I asked.

'Well apart from logging, plantations and small agricultural,' Eric replied, 'the answer is firewood and charcoal.' Then pointing above the trees he added, 'That smoke there is probably a charcoal burner.'

I was surprised.

He smiled. 'The population of PNG is over 7 million people and 70% of us are still using solid fuels like firewood and charcoal for cooking daily.'

The use of charcoal was not as common as in Africa or Madagascar, where it was the main source of cooking fuel, cleaner and easier to use than firewood, cheaper and more readily available than gas or electricity.

Roadside hawkers sold charcoal made from wood hacked from the branches of trees in nearby forests, quickly depleting them, forcing the charcoal burners deeper into the forest.

In Africa it was a major problem as it much more urbanised with the population expected to double even triple by 2050, when deforestation together with climate change would present leaders with a redoubtable challenge as the forest and the soil was degraded.

Unlike Papua, much of the charcoal production in Africa illegal, uncontrollable, threatening sustainability, as more and more people were pushed into the charcoal economy working as tree cutters, charcoal burners, transporters, middlemen, agents and financiers.

* * *

It was an enjoyable trek with my new friends, our guide and porters. I added a lot of knowledge to that I'd already acquired over the last weeks. But I was now in a hurry to get to China, not only was Lucy waiting for me, I also wanted to discover more about the activities of Delta Pacific.

CHAPTER 29

A Strange Story

‘LET ME TELL YOU THE STORY about Anbang,’ said Sammy Foong settling down in his favourite leather armchair in a quiet corner of The Bar at the Peninsula, Hong Kong’s oldest and most famous hotel, once billed as the finest hotel east of Suez, situated in the heart of the Tsim Sha Tsui district of Kowloon.

Lucy had disappeared, shopping with a girl friend in the boutiques across the road from the Peninsula, where we were staying for a couple of days, me to recover from my more than month long expedition in PNG, she to catch up with her friends.

I sipped my beer as Sammy smiled, obviously going to savour telling his story. Sammy was in fact a freelance correspondent of the SCMP, a Hong Kong newspaper that now belonged to Alibaba, his field was business and finance.

‘You’ve heard of them?’

‘No.’

He looked at me disappointedly. ‘Well I’ll start at the end, when an Uber driver, named Daniel Belitskiy, walked into a California deeds office to register a number of documents.’

I made myself comfortable, it looked like it would be a long story.

‘This Belitskiy guy, who was already known to the police, had been hired by a mysterious elderly Chinese businessman,’ he paused for dramatic effect, ‘but not to drive, his job was to sign the transfer of ownership titles linked several luxury hotels. They included the Essex House on Central Park South in New York and the Ritz Carlton Half Moon Bay Resort in northern California.’

‘Transfer of ownership titles?’

‘Exactly. In California transferring a real estate title is a very straightforward process, thanks to the use of a property deed. You simply fill in a standard form, which anybody can download from the web, sign it and file the deed at the county recorder’s office.’

‘As simple as that?’

‘Yes, as simple as that.’

I nodded

‘In this way the hotels owned by Anbang, a Beijing based conglomerate, were transferred to various Delaware shell companies which were run by a mysterious Andy Bang.’

‘Incredible.’

‘Now, whilst this took place, Wu Xiaohui, Anbang’s chairman, was imprisoned, sentenced to 18 years behind bars for fraud as the Chinese authorities set about concluding the sale of the hotels owned by Anbang in a 5.8 billion dollar deal.’

Unluckily for the buyer of the hotels, they didn't know Wu had used a Delaware law to make a transfer of title agreement with the shell companies, which meant that the hotels no longer legally belonged to Anbang. Now, the real question is whether Andy Bang was a real person or the invention of some Chinese crooks.

'And the shell companies?'

'The Delaware firms? They were real, and were, from a legal point of view, acting to protect the properties from confiscation by the Chinese government.'

'So what was Anbang's business?'

'Well the story starts with Wu Xiaohui, he was a car dealer who married the granddaughter of Deng Xiaoping.'

'Deng Xiaoping!'

'Yes, the self same paramount leader who succeeded Mao.'

'Unbelievable.'

‘So, in 2004, Wu set up an insurance company to cater for the needs of the Chinese middle classes which were growing fast.

‘The company boomed as China’s economy took off and premiums poured in. Wu evidently dazzled by the money, set off on a stupendous buying spree, splashing out nearly 20 billion dollars, snapping up everything he saw, including the New York Waldorf Astoria hotel, which set him back nearly 2 billion, followed by the Dutch insurer Vivat, then Blackstone Group’s Strategic Hotels & Resorts for 6.5 billion.’

‘I’m beginning to think a lot of Chinese businessmen really are crooks,’ I said half jokingly.

Eddy laughed, then continued, obviously enjoying himself. ‘Well Wu, shortly before his arrest, signed an agreement empowering a number of Delaware LLCs, that’s limited liability companies—shell companies, to act on his behalf. The advantage of such companies, according to Delaware law, was that amongst other things the owners were not listed on public records.

‘In addition Delaware laws authorised the recording of grant deeds, that is to say legal documents used to transfer ownership of property. Thus the ownership of certain properties held by Anbang, was transferred to the Delaware LLCs, giving Wu’s family and other signers of the contract claims to the hotels.’

‘I see.’

‘The signatories on the one hand were Wu and Chen Xiaolu—one of the Communist princelings, that’s to say children of Communist Party elders, who had amassed large fortunes after China opened up its economy, and on the other hand the signatories were Andy Bang and the LLCs.’

‘So what happened to Chen?’

‘Chen died of a heart attack after being questioned about Anbang.’

‘Shit.’

‘So Belitskiy had effectively transferred the ownership of the hotels to the LLCs, the Delaware shell companies.’

‘Who exactly was Belitskiy then?’

‘Well he explained he had gotten into the title transfer business after he picked up an Uber fare named Andy Bang.’

‘So who was Andy Bang?’

‘Ah, that’s another story.’

I left Sammy wondering about business in China, it sounded like a Chinese puzzle.

Chinese Poker continues with the story of Michael D’Arcy in China in Part II

Post scriptum

They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.

Joseph Conrad

Heart of Darkness

1899

A bottomless pit

And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit. And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power. And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads.

And to them it was given that they should not kill them, but that they should be tormented five months: and their torment was as the torment of a scorpion, when he striketh a man. And in those days shall men seek death and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them. And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions. And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle. And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power was to hurt men five months"

Revelations 9:2-10

Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the data and information published on the Internet and in the world press collected over a period of years, starting in 2000, when I wrote Offshore Islands, and Pat Kennedy was launched on his initially precarious international career some of which is described in this story for clarity.

I have trawled numerous British, Irish, US, Russian, French, Spanish, Chinese, Israeli, Colombian newspapers, news blogs and specialist Internet sites, and books (authors cited). And of course Wikipedia.

During this period I have collected information during my visits to the USA, China, Hong Kong, Macau, Indonesia, India, Dubai, Thailand, Cambodia, Libya, Egypt, Kenya, Tanzania, Senegal, Mali, Morocco, Mexico, Colombia, Panama, Brazil, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, the Philippines, the UK, Germany, Belgium, France, Spain and Italy. To this I have added my experience in other parts of the world, notably Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Taiwan, Japan, Burma, Switzerland, Algeria, Russia, Scandinavia, the Baltic Countries, Poland, Hungary, the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Russia, Turkmenistan, Jordan, Syria, Israel, Egypt, the Caribbean, Central and South America.

I present my thanks and excuses to all the willing and unwilling contributors to the information included in this book, I am not the first to tread in the footsteps of Jack London, using the information supplied to us from those who convey it. I have tried to verify all the facts, but this is an impossible task. In my humble opinion most data

reflects real events and the opinions of the vast majority of persons affected, directly or indirectly, by the multiple events and crises that constitute our collective existence.

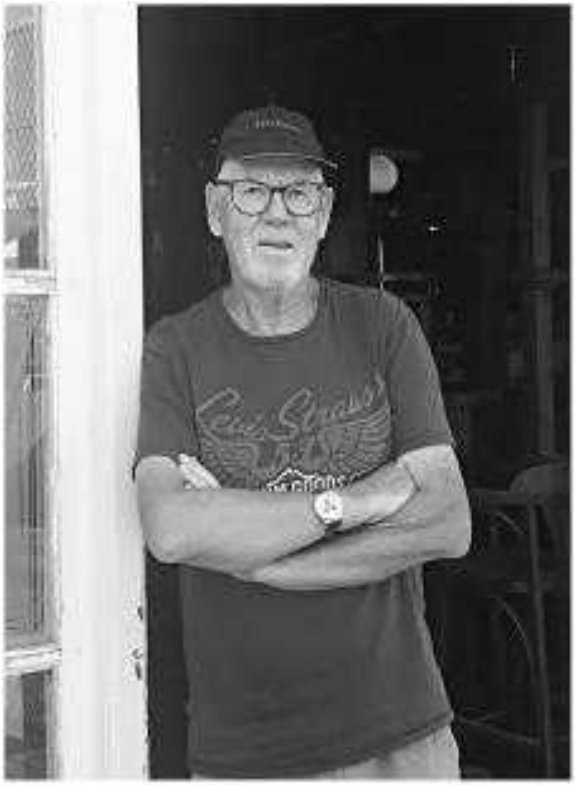
This story is a serialised novel of events, real or not, where the fictitious characters are fictitious, and where the real characters, such as Joe Biden, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Nicolas Maduro, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and Emanuel Macron, are real.

The story of 2000, and its sequels in 2010-2012, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 are recounted in my other tales.

With my very sincere thanks to all contributors, direct and indirect, knowing and unknowing, willing and unwilling.

John Francis Kinsella

Paris, January 2022



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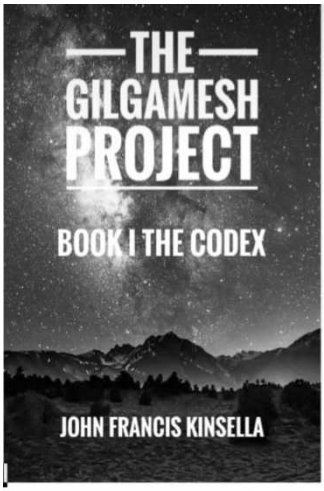
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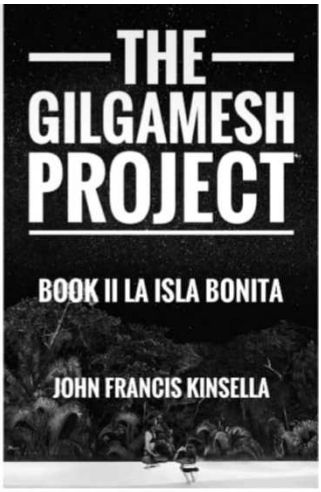
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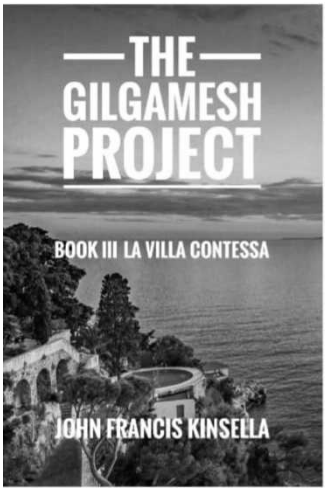
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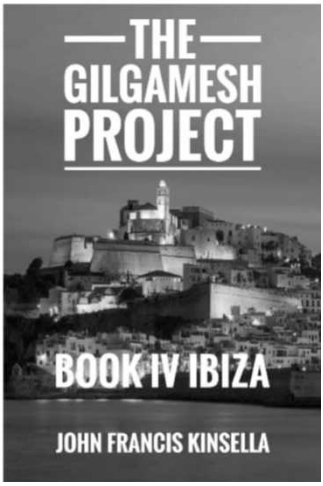
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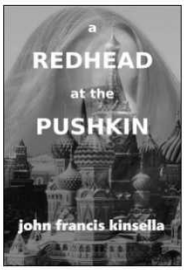
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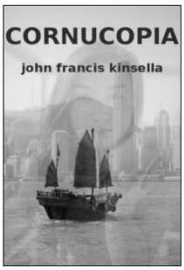
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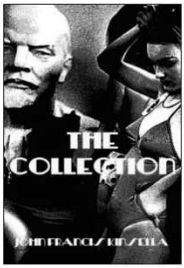
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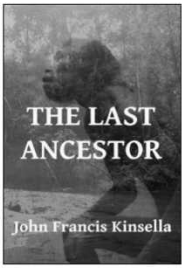
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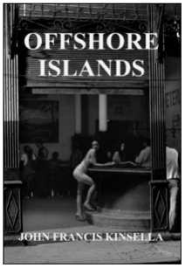
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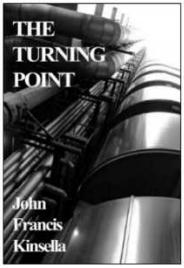
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