

'JUST LEAVE IT. IT'S GOOD THE WAY IT IS.'
BONITA MASON

Prologue ...

I make a three-day road journey north to Broome, where a new job waits at the Kimberley Land Council. Here, the weather changes overnight from the Wet – hot, humidity and everyday rain – to the Dry. No rain or humidity, it's cooler, the wind comes from the east and the dragonflies swarm. Overnight dew is heavy and some mornings I wake to a warm, thick mist – a shrouded world. In the few weeks I've been here, I know of two people who have died by hanging. One young man and a girl aged nine. A grandmother who is known for her laughter accidentally backs her car over her grandchild. She was raising that child and we have to wait a long time for that grandmother's laughter to return.

I encounter this with an immediacy and completeness I could not have imagined. Whether about international human rights principles, a negotiation over a local mine agreement, or the accidental death of someone's grandchild, these things do not become abstract. They

keep their flesh and blood, and their flesh and blood lives down the street and across the road.

They, them, we, us ...

I move to a neighbourhood through which groups of people of all ages walk at the pace of the smallest child. The houses, 1980s-built fibro and brick veneer – some damaged, most cared for – sit on quarter-acre blocks. They were built with no apparent concern for the comfort of their occupants: a series of enclosed rooms, small windows, few gestures towards the cooling breezes. The fibro houses are painted different colours: blues, yellows and ochres, rust and pindan, greens and, one, purple. My neighbour, M____, wears her commitment to the Fremantle Dockers AFL team on her walls. This neighbourhood is known locally as the Bronx.

There are at least three neighbourhoods in Australia that have been known as the Bronx. An East Fairfield social housing estate in south-western Sydney was nicknamed the Bronx in the 1990s, by the Sydney tabloid press but not by its occupants, because of persistent neighbourhood violence. Those areas known as the Bronx in the Western Australian towns of Broome and Carnarvon, both areas where Aboriginal people live (but less exclusively so in Broome), are known as the Bronx by the people who live there, by the people for whom it is home. In all cases, the nickname brings the stigma of poverty, drinking, drug dealing and violence, which denies these places their complexity and life.

M___, my neighbour, knows everyone in the street, except for the white man who lives on the other side of us. But she knows of him – some of what he does, where and with whom. He has the highest fence and front gates in the street, which he keeps locked. He is a drug dealer, known to the police. The days of people coming and going to buy have passed, but he comes and goes quite a bit himself, slamming the gates each time. He has telephone conversations in which he tells the person on the other end of the phone: ‘I’m going to fuck you up.’ He often screams these things and we can hear every word. We hear his sudden 5 a.m. music so loud it seems to be not only in our rooms, but in our heads. We seek advice from the police. ‘Don’t talk to him,’ they say. ‘He once spent time in jail for smashing a glass in someone’s face.’

I go to Town Beach to clear my head. It is early stinger season, but the beach at high tide looks and feels irresistible. I enter the water and am carried away on a tide of children. ‘Take me deep, take me deep,’ the older ones entreat, their arms feeling their way around my neck and shoulders, gently, persistently tugging towards depth. The small children, whom the older children cannot leave without their parents or someone like me to keep an eye on them, hang off older arms or bounce in the shallows. I am theirs and, one at a time, I will take them into the deeper water and bring them back. I will never forget it. I wonder if any of these children live in my neighbourhood.

Our neighbourhood is home to Aboriginal families,

some buying their houses, others renting from Homeswest, and some non-Aboriginal people, many of them single, who have taught and worked alongside Aboriginal people.

It is school holiday time, and visitors and relatives from other communities arrive in the Bronx. Many carouse, the neighbourhood is noisy, and sleep harder to come by. Much of the noise is sociable – loud conversation, laughter, music, singing – some of it at unsociable hours. Some turns from one kind of noise to another. A mob gathers in a front yard a few houses away to talk, play cards, drink, listen to music, party. Late into the night the noise abates. I wake in the early morning dark to one voice rising above the others, an old man who sings:

Old MacDonald had a farm, EE-I-EE-I-O
And on that farm he had some ducks, EE-I-EE-I-O
With a quack, quack here and a quack, quack there ...

The old man sings on, with the odd variation in animals, until after dawn. He becomes angry, drunk-sounding – child’s song as threat.

The baby who lives across the road cries and cries. This baby lives in the same house as the 2 a.m. fighting, of the young couple, both late teens, with two small children. The oldest is about eighteen months, the youngest a few weeks at most. The young woman yells: ‘I want my smokes, you fucking slut.’ Curses ring out: Him: ‘My cock

not good enough for your cunt. Slut.' Her: 'You fuck off. You think I want your wrinkle, dinkle dick? Fuck off.'

I am amazed at the invention in these and other curses. In the weeks that follow I learn that curses like slut, cunt, prick apply equally to anyone. They are not gender specific. I think about this as I lie in wait for the sound of the fight to change from merely loud, abusive and damaging to violent, crippling, final.

When to call the police? Is it all right to call them when my peace is disturbed, or do I wait until someone's life or safety seems threatened? This choice means listening and waiting for the moment when revelling turns from dangerous to murderous.

'I hate you, you big fat prick,' screamed through the quiet hours before dawn. More screaming, crying and the sound of things smashing. A pause. More incoherent screaming once the light of morning sets in and the day is already too warm. She throws rocks at the house and leaves holes in the recently painted fibro walls. 'Give me my gunja. Give me my gunja. You give me my gunja. Give me my ...' Her voice becomes hoarser, but no less powerful. We call the police. The young man sits quietly on a grey milk crate under the carport, small child in his arms. As we leave for breakfast and peace at Town Beach, he picks up rubbish in the driveway.

A true story (fiction) . . .

As X___ lies in bed, waiting and hoping that the noise will stop, she marvels at the strength and clarity of the

young mother's voice. 'With that projection, she should be on the stage,' she thinks. 'Someone ought to tell her. I wonder if I could, and if it would help – help all of us?'

In the daytime she finds herself watching this family. Looking for its different characters, charting its relationships – the young, young parents of a toddler and a baby, the old man who is possibly these child-parents' great-grandfather. She reminds herself of a nosey stereotype, watching through lace curtains. But she feels implicated. From worry and sleep deprivation to, if she doesn't call the police, someone could die. If she does, someone could die.

The next morning X___ sees her neighbour in her front yard. Her neighbour gestures to her to come to the fence, all the time keeping her eyes cast down. 'You shouldn't have got the police last night,' she says. 'We see too much of those cunts as it is.'

'I'm sorry, but too bad,' X___ says. 'Last time I didn't call the police a woman died. Stabbed.'

An old woman walks slowly along the early morning street. She stops and waits for her old dog to catch up, then continues as the sun climbs the sky. Dogs' balls, everywhere. Here, male dogs still have their testicles and dogs live more independent lives than urban dogs in other places; many of them roam in groups.

One warm evening, I walk down the street to visit someone who lives a ten-minute walk away. The street hums with children, dogs, groups of people sitting, talking, playing guitars with missing strings. One man,

sitting on a milk crate in his carport, calls out a warning: 'You shouldn't be walking around here at night.' 'But I live here,' I reply. 'That's all right then,' comes back. I walk on, feeling sanctioned.

Journal entry, 27 December, 7.50 a.m.

The street is quiet this morning. On Christmas Eve it knock, knock, knocked on heaven's door from quite early in the morning to quite late the next day. Watch out for the broken glass. It's a feature, a constant, tyre-crunching, glinting part of life. The cardboard formerly containing slabs of beer cans, the cans themselves – twinkling in the hot sun like wrecking jewels.

'You and my own father, what you want to bash me for.' A cry of pain comes across the neighbourhood. 'Why? Why?' These cries go on and on. The words can't be made out, but the sound carries. She'll get a bashing for sure. That's too much pain to sit quietly by. Knock it senseless. Put lumps on her face that don't go away, knock out her teeth, break her arm on a lump of wood, but don't listen to that. It can't be borne.

I can't remember if I call the police or not.

Journal entry, 15 January, 8 a.m.

Yesterday evening it rained, just a little. Finally, the weather of the Wet. The cool gusting air before rain brings relief from relentless heat. The brilliance of after-

sun brightness, golden light bouncing off and diffuse in the many forms and layers of cloud. Technicolour sky in muted tones, like stepping outside into a brightly lit room.

Journal entry, 15 January, 10 p.m.

It's raining. A storm: close-up lightning and far-off, rumbling on-and-on thunder. It sounds as though we live in a swamp. Swarms of insects, first one kind – flying ants – then another – stink beetles. Frog and geckos call, mostly frogs – different notes of waterborne celebration. Except for the house down the street, where the shouting and the odd scream carries on through the storm. People stand in the rain, seemingly not noticing, while a light so white it is blue lights their night-time street. Anger, grief and misery are a captivating force.

My neighbour, M___, has spare fish from a fishing trip. She offers us some, which we swap for vegetables from our garden. We see small children walking and riding their too-big bikes to school. My neighbour points out the owl in the tree.

Journal entry, 24 April, 7.40 a.m.

Two young men sit drinking across the road. They are talking and laughing, a pram in front of them. The father of the two looks often towards the child in the pram. They seem to be talking about this child as heads and bodies incline towards the pram. Tender.

In the background and getting louder is the tinny tune of the ice-cream van. 'Greensleeves'. The neighbourhood Pied Piper. In the background the young woman yells: 'Who took my gunja? Give me back my gunja.' All is quiet for a while, then: 'Those cunts, they poop their holes, they arseholes.'

The young woman 'walks past in a red t-shirt, head down, like she's thinking. They reconcile, and keep hurting each other.

They, them, we, us ...

WA neighbours are at war as the trend towards higher density housing means residents are living closer than ever before, with one of Perth's major councils reporting about 20,000 neighbourhood complaints every year.

West Australian newspaper, October 2010

Most of these complaints are about noise – music and loud parties, dogs, air-conditioners. The *West* reports that these complaints and other problems are increasing because of increased density.

Broome's residential codings range from R10 to R50. The great majority of new lots that have been created are between 600 sq.m and 900 sq.m. 'Larger' blocks (i.e., greater than 700 sq.m) are justified by climatic factors and the need to allow cooling breezes to

circulate freely through and between dwellings, and the high ownership levels of larger vehicles (4WDs), boats and caravans, which need to be accommodated on-site.

Broome Shire Council Local Housing Strategy, February 2009

The Broóme shire plans to rezone the neighbourhood to R30, which means three houses where now there is one (one house per three hundred square metres). People will be living closer together. Those who live in the area can see the problems. Some of their submissions to council on the proposal say:

The rezoning to higher density will affect the lives of all residents in the area and increase noise, traffic and social problems.

While the area has improved, as most people are willing to get to know their neighbours, the area is socially fragile and the problems need to be addressed before there is an increase in housing density.

The council response to these submissions, and many like them, is that there is capacity for more traffic, local projects will address any problems, and:

There is no linkage between the issues of overcrowding and quality of life.

The increase in density does not have a direct correlation to an increase in social problems, noise and desirability of the neighbourhood.

The rezoning proposal passes council at its November 2010 meeting, as if this increase in density is exempt from trends elsewhere. Here, reducing the space between people will not exacerbate noise and other problems or reduce the effect of cooling breezes, and local community projects can succeed in alleviating problems where governments have failed.

Epilogue ...

I travel to One Arm Point for work and stay in the home of a woman who makes radio broadcasts through Radio Goolarri. She knows everyone in my street, and she knows it would be good if our drug-dealer neighbour left.

One day, someone smashes through his front gates – in a pick-up truck in full-speed reverse – and a large man goes after him with a baseball bat. Our neighbour calls the police, then tells them to go away when he is less frightened and embarrassed at having called for help. It seems he sold an encumbered car to one of the biggest, and now crankiest, men in town. Soon after, at 3 a.m. one morning, someone sets fire to his car in the driveway. Our neighbour is not there; he is in the police lock-up for trouble earlier in the day. Police and firefighters arrive to deal with it. The volunteer firefighters bring

their children and talk of the fishing trip they plan for later in the day. A community atmosphere prevails as many of us gather on the street. The fire is put out, the police and firefighters leave and we return to our homes and sleep.

We wake about an hour later to the sound of smashing windows and the glow of fire from next door. Molotov cocktails. I call the police; tell them I think that the house is now on fire. ‘You’re joking,’ they say. They and the fire brigade return.

Our neighbour gets the message and leaves town. Two or three years later, I hear that he is dead. Shot, in a small town in Queensland.

The Broome council wants to clear up a wide stormwater drain that serves as a pathway in the neighbourhood for those who walk. The council’s preferred method has been razing via bulldozer, all vegetation gone. Local residents have other ideas.

C___, who lives at the end of one of the streets and next to the drain/pathway, has planted trees and other natives there, slashes the grass when it needs to be cleared and collects the rubbish that blows in. At the beginning of this project, A___, who also lives next to this drain/pathway, stood in front of a council bulldozer, mobile phone held aloft, as it threatened a stand of trees. The bulldozer stopped, a discussion followed and the council has agreed not to raze the area. Now, with support from other people and organisations, C___ is making a park.

She says those in the neighbourhood not directly involved in the project respect it. There has been no vandalism, and little rubbish is left in the area. Once, when there was some trouble in the incipient park, the word went through the neighbourhood to make sure it doesn't happen again. Now, she has forty trees to water, and children playing in their shade ask her what she's doing.

'Just leave it. It's good the way it is,' says a man – drunk, eloquent, at home.

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