Death in the Sand

The Unsolved Disappearance of James Annetts and Simon Amos

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"We totally believe they were murdered."

Sandra Annetts, 2009
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Clan Contractors’ bulldozer driver Johnny Brown was confused when he found the police team boiling the billy next to the scattered trail of Simon Amos’ bleached bones. A precise hole in Simon’s forehead marked the entry of a small calibre bullet, while the mushrooming ball of lead had left a messier triangular exit wound from the top of the skull. The boy’s eyeless sockets stared up to the sky from the sun-bleached skull as if in reproach at the indignity.

They were in a unique area of the Great Sandy Desert where the last of the invisible nomads carried metal tipped spears, and left their barefoot tracks around the bulldozers and swags of sleeping drivers. No one saw them, but in the mornings the dozer operators found the barefoot tracks of those who had crept around their beds during the night.

What bothered Johnny Brown in the glint of day was how a body could be reduced to bleached bones in less than five months? Back on the farm down south, that level of decomposition took 18 months. Perhaps the ravenous hunger of the creatures of the desert accounted for it, but what really bothered him was the next corpse.

Back on the moving search vehicles, Johnny took a standing view on the tray of the second. About a kilometre up the sand dune track, he jumped and rolled over the ground.

He carefully paced himself, until he found the old-style Dunlop shoe sticking out from a trouser leg. He kicked it, checking its substance, and like a cluttered RAM drive, his brain took a few seconds to realise what his eyes saw. The shoe was on an actual leg connected to a hip bone piercing the fabric.

Further across the dune he picked up then dropped a shirt, still filled with a backbone and intact ribs, brown and sinewy. The guts were gone: dried or hollowed out. The head lay twenty feet away, jaw still attached, some flesh and the hair, strangely red.
How could the remains of two boys be in such disparate condition when they died at similar times in similar terrain?

Why had those ancestors of Alsatian dogs, that had strayed from tourist convoys, ripped Simon to pieces while leaving James relatively intact? What had stopped the rapid decomposition of the remains of James? Insects didn’t prefer one human corpse to another. Johnny knew that much.

Chapter 1. Out on the Nicholson

Station manager Giles Loder had caught the doomed sixteen-year-old, James Annetts, skinning a duck, when he arrived unexpectedly at Nicholson homestead on Monday, 1 December 1986, about lunchtime. The weekly rations wouldn’t keep a fat-assed office worker satisfied, let alone a station ‘bore runner’, so James shot wild ducks with his Baikal shotgun, in the creek bed behind the ghost town. His Dad had taught him to hunt and skin ducks, not pluck them.

Nicholson Station had twenty years earlier employed 120 jackeroos, stockmen and cooks, who supported a mob of dependants in the creek bed. There were hundreds of horses and working dogs, electric street lights, a cool room compressor, hot water, and dozens of accommodation rooms, offices, workshops, kitchens, and machines. But by 1986 the profitability of the cattle industry had collapsed. The garden sprinklers were turned off, and the once bustling station was reduced to two streets of empty decaying buildings. And one inexperienced city boy, who hadn’t been paid for two months.

Loder was born in 1951 at Murwillimbah on the east coast, before it became a surfing Mecca. He left school at 15 and by 18 was thriving in the bullying atmosphere of Northern Territory stations. Within 17 years he'd outpaced and replaced half a dozen of Lord Vesteys’ managers who couldn't adapt to the fists and steel-capped boots regime of the new owner, Peter Sherwin. He was a Sherwin man at heart and produced beasts for the live trade on budget, whatever it took.
Sherwin made Loder manager of Nicholson, Sturt Creek, Gordon Downs and Flora Valley Stations. It was a big promotion, but Sherwin was no Father Christmas and expected maximum cattle for minimum cost. Loder wasn’t under any illusions.

The cook, the governess, a dozen jackeroos and Loder’s pregnant wife Vicki were quartered at Flora Valley, while the other homesteads were abandoned, except for James Annetts at Nicholson and Simon Amos down south at Sturt Creek station. The boys primed the windmills and fueled the diesel pumps that kept the troughs and tanks offering barely drinkable bore water. Thousand square mile properties no longer supported even a single family, such was the deteriorating profitability of the industry.

Raising semi-arid zone cattle is a brutish business, and violence towards men and animals was a de facto requirement on any manager’s ‘curriculum vitae’. The beasts had their own minds, and had to be prodded and intimidated to get them moving. So did the jackeroos. Twelve to fourteen-hour shifts in the blazing sun, and dusty trips on the back of open trucks for twenty days straight during the summer muster, reduced them to walking zombies.

The odd thing noted later was that Loder later couldn’t remember a word of his conversation with James. Like water poured onto hot sand that hour with the boy disappeared from his mind. All that remained was a feeling the meeting had been friendly despite the boy hunting ducks instead of watering the beasts.

He had whacked James in the head with a spanner two weeks previously, in the Flora Valley homestead workshop. The kid didn’t cry. They were the repairing a hairline fracture on the Datsun’s oil sump. Loder was ‘getting up him’, and threatened to take the repair costs out of his wages. James said he was leaving, anyway. Loder countered, saying he could kiss goodbye his two months wages still owing. That’s what made the boy cry.

James drove a clapped-out Toyota Hi-Lux 4WD for his 250 kilometre daily bore run. He leant sideways in the cab while bouncing over the ungraded tracks. A previous driver had rolled it, leaving a V-shaped indentation in the roof that protruded into the cabin. The windscreen was also gone.

Six weeks before disappearing, James had also rolled it while entering Duncan Road from a dirt track. A bee flew into the cabin and stung him, and he lost control.
Wallace Owen Mitchell and his wife were returning from Birdsville on the gravelled Buchanan and Buntine highways, across the northern Tanami desert. Wallace was the mechanic at Fossil Downs station near Fitzroy Crossing. They found the Hi-Lux standing across the road. There was blood on the seat and door trims. They followed footprints in the fine dust that veered off into the bush. They found James underneath a tree, bleeding from the head. He wasn’t responsive until they got him to drink some water, and put him into their vehicle. They left him at Flora Valley homestead, after James assured them there would be someone there to treat his injury.

James whispered not a word to his parents. Not to anyone. He knew the story of dyslexic jackaroo Paul Griffith. Paul was quietly spoken. His best mate, Shire President Malcolm Edwards, described him as harmless and not easily riled. But Loder was easily riled, particularly by the knife Paul wore on his belt. He called him Rambo. "Get fucked," Griffith responded one morning, and walked away. Loder rushed him from behind, punched him in the head, then thumped his steel-capped boots into Griffith as he lay on the ground.

Loder never touched the hard men. Tough stockmen who kept fighting after tasting their own blood.

Hence, Vicki Loder was running continuous newspaper ads across Australia for inexperienced 16-18 year olds. Ron Bickford heard her say inexperienced jackeroos were less trouble. They didn’t know their rights; they worked for lower wages. "Necessary, but dispensable," and when they became exhausted or injured, could easily be replaced. Andrew Beezley remembered that they “…couldn’t take the heat and a lot of them were passing out. I remember one bloke passing out, and having to drag him under a four wheel drive to get him out of the sun.”

And James wasn’t a hard man. His claim to fame was being Patrol Leader in the Scouts. This was his first real job, and the first time away from home.

After Loder’s ‘amiable’, but forgettable, last meeting with James he rose into a fog of timelessness and flew his bush plane over the dunes and across the Northern Territory border, to the oasis station of Birrindudu. For the next forty-eight hours he fought bushfires and supervised the erection of portable yards for the hot season muster. The problem is that those jackeroos working with him cannot recollect his presence during this week that Simon and James disappeared.
Chapter 2. Inside the fog

Loder’s first inkling of trouble upon returning on Wednesday 3, December 1986 was seeing from above the Brahmans milling about dry troughs, sticking their heads under the flow covers in their search for moisture at the Nicholson homestead bore.

He estimated they’d been thirsting for 24 hours, and could survive two days more, but with the approaching muster, every beast needed its strength to avoid collapsing while being chased by helicopters.

Loder got back into the air, and during the fifty kilometre flight to Flora Valley he checked Drew’s bore, Koolarong, Gera, No. 10, No 23 and Turtle Creek. The troughs were full. Limestone Bore pump was actually pumping, but no James and no vehicle. Thirty-six hours in hot weather without water meant death, for a human, but Loder’s nagging concern for James was overlaid with that of getting water for the beasts.

His amnesia prevented a clear recollection of what happened next, but after landing at Flora Valley, he might have talked to Shane Kendall, or maybe not.

Kendall was equally vague. At 24 he’d miraculously replaced veteran head stockman John Davis, despite having been in the industry less than six months. James and Davis had gotten along well, but in a letter home James wrote of Kendall: "This new head stockman doesn't show us what to do he just tells us to do it and if we make a mistake we end up in all sorts of trouble with the boss."

With a blend of charm and bully boy tactics, Kendall found himself bewilderingly supervising a dozen jackeroos, who maintained five thousand square miles of pastoral land.

The same cloud of amnesia descended on Kendall when he tried to recollect the evening when Loder touched down on the dirt airstrip. He remembered the sun had disappeared. He knew the ‘bore runners’had missed their twice-daily radio calls, but couldn’t recollect if Loder mentioned that James was missing.

Chapter 3. Instant jackeroos
July 1986

James Annetts couldn't believe his luck earlier that year when his aunt, Pat Johnson, mentioned an ad in ‘The Land’ newspaper seeking jackeroos 16-18, no experience required, for the Kimberley. He was struggling at school and had difficulty spelling words. His Dad supervised dozens of glaziers and apprentices, but was functionally illiterate. Les Annetts compensated by developing an acute memory that surpassed those who could read and write.

Les’ mother gave birth to nine boys and six girls, whose social circle was each other rather than outsiders. Les met his future wife Sandra at an ice skating rink near Central Railway Station in Sydney.

James was the eldest in a close-knit family of two boys and two girls, and rarely brought other kids home. When he visited friends or stayed out late he’d phone to say where he was.

The Annetts moved to 16 Bandys Road, Binya, near Griffith, in the Murrumbidgee irrigation district in New South Wales, in early 1986, nine years after the local anti-drug campaigner Donald McKay was murdered by the drug cartel that supplied politician Al Grassby with his bright clothing. Les drove tractors on wheat farms.

James was a tall, quiet boy with a half-smile exaggerated by prominent eye teeth. He did gardening work for elderly people, occasionally without payment, and delivered newspapers to earn money for a bicycle, then delivered milk to buy a fishing dinghy. He read about bush survival techniques, and wanted to join the army or work on a big property. Mostly, he wanted to be financially independent.

But Les and Sandra were concerned with his safety. Would he be constantly supervised? Would meals be supplied? Would he get award wages? Vicki Loder assured Sandra during a number of phone calls these would be supplied, and that neither experience nor a driver's license was necessary. After a heart wrenching month, Les and Sandra let their boy go.

They had a party the night before James left on the Greyhound bus. A faded photograph shows faces glowing with smiles. Les was proud his son was becoming a man. James was proud he was a man. He arrived at Flora Valley station on 21 August 1986, aged sixteen years and five months.
It was strange that people got James mixed up with Simon. They weren’t alike. Even in death, Johnny Brown remembers finding James’ skull covered in a shock of red hair. Simon was the boy with red hair, long gone when they found him. James’ brown hair had bleached red from lying in the sun for four months.

Simon Amos was a gregarious strawberry redhead, seventeen-years-old, with freckled white skin and a conniving child-like personality that verged on the manic, then slumped into a guarded aloofness, and one could only guess what he was feeling. He had "...a weird sense of humour. He likes carrying on and pulling jokes on you and that he was a sort of out-character person," Flora Valley’s sixteen-year-old governess, Therese Stansfield-Campbell, remembered, when it was all over. Halls Creek man Stan Tremlett described James as quiet and reserved, more of a thinker, while Simon had a "harum-scarum" personality.

Shane Kendall shared a room with James at Flora Valley, and agreed that Simon was harder to get to know. "I struck a friendship with Jim almost straight away. He was very straightforward, and would tell you about anything that was worrying him."

Paul Baikie replaced James at Nicholson. He described both boys as, "Mature for their age. There were no strange things about them. They were normal good guys," which was a powerful complement, considering the troubled characters that ended up on cattle stations.

James knew he was there to earn money, and went to bed early, but Simon talked into the night with the other jackeroos. Shane thought Simon got the easier jobs because he was, incredibly, one of the longer serving employees, having lasted three months.

Simon’s parents had divorced, and he’d lived with his mother, Patricia Clark, at 6 Baker Street, in the leafy Adelaide suburb of Paradise. Pat had remarried the easy going Barry Clark. Simon’s father, Robert W. Amos, lived in nearby Tranmere, where Simon also stayed.

Simon went to Saint Francis of Assisi Primary School, and then to the Christian Brothers’ Rostrevor College ('Rossi'), in the Adelaide foothills. Its fenced sports fields contrasted strangely with the deceptive green slopes fronting the children’s prison next door, but once through the gates of ‘Rossi’, visitors experienced the breathtaking vista of a green oval, huge shade trees and beautiful architecture.
Simon didn’t seem happy initially, at ‘Rossi’. His class photographs show him, usually in the back rows, looking grim. Best friend Heath Sampson said he hadn’t a massive personality, but had a good sense of humour. He was in awe of Simon’s courage in football, especially at a mini-league exhibition at Norwood Oval. It was prior to a Red Legs SANFL game. Simon grabbed the ball and ran from the back line, dodged opponents, took ten bounces and disregarding the umpire blowing his whistle furiously, kicked a goal to the cheers of the crowd. Simon’s schoolmates thought the red-headed bomber might reach the AFL, and by Year 8 his grim demeanor was replaced with the cheeky smile that characterised his later years.

His teacher that year was Wayne Edwards, who said that Simon disliked academic subjects, but became "interested and well-behaved" in agriculture classes, where they raised calves. Edwards showed Simon's class a film about mustering cattle by helicopter. "When I found out that he headed north to work on a station this did not surprise me as he was ideally suited to being a jackaroo. It was a long time ago and [I] can picture his face and even where he sat in the classroom…"

Stephen Orr began teaching agricultural science at ‘Rossi’ in 2007, seven years after he wrote "Attempts to Draw Jesus", a fictional version of the lives of James and Simon. He said the consensus at ‘Rossi’ was that Simon had been "a bit of a lad, a rogue, cheeky, misbehaving etc."

Simon’s father suffered depression. Robert Amos was described as a "beautiful man" who had been in a psychiatric institution and was readmitted soon after Simon went missing. Little is known of Patricia Clark, who has consistently shunned the media.

When Simon arrived at Flora Valley in July 1986, he wore a row of rings in one ear, a thick studded band on one wrist and a studded belt around his waist. Debbie Davis was the cook and with the grader driver, had a game of estimating how long each new recruit would last. They gave Simon a week. This pale school kid wouldn't hack twelve-hour shifts in 40C degree temperatures, lugging portable fencing and building cattle ramps.

Loder thought the same. Soft hands and a soft body — this kid wouldn't be worth his feed, like the other losers sent out by the Broome Commonwealth Employment Service. But Simon threw himself into the job, and his chirpy sense of humour carried others through grim dusty days. Even Loder liked him.
Perhaps it was their divergent personalities that forged James and Simon’s friendship that continued when Loder isolated them on stations 180 kilometres apart.

Chapter 4. Life at Flora Valley

The buildings on Flora Valley homestead were new, because the previous homestead on the Elvire River had been evacuated, due to being in the catchment area for Lake Argyle. But maintenance had essentially stopped when Sherwin gained ownership. Jackeroo Chris Rumpf described the rooms as smelly, with dirty mattresses, busted overhead fans and toilets that were flushed by sticking a hand through a hole in the wall. Debbie Davis said sewerage bubbled up the shower drains, and jolts of electricity raced through her body when she flicked a light switch.

Wednesday was the big day of the week when James and Simon rushed their bore runs and returned to Flora Valley as early as possible to pick up supplies, service their vehicles, collect their mail and share yarns. Debbie hadn’t found her true calling in food preparation, but she gave Wednesdays an extra effort. And she was good company.

When Graham Heleur replaced her the jackeroos called him 'the old man' - he was 32 and also a good cook.

Graham was stunned when he discovered the four stations were run by an inexperienced head stockman, a sixteen-year-old governess, the manager and his wife, Simon and James on the bores and seven stockmen, most of whom were inexperienced teenagers. He'd worked with cattle and men before, but never kids; he said it was a circus. He slept with a knife under his pillow after hearing that Loder put a previous cook in hospital.

Graham said the ‘bore runners’ ate "like starving horses" and made sure there was plenty of ice-cream on Wednesdays. They hadn’t TV or billiards or anything for recreation and the boys needed something more than work and sleep so the ‘old man’ entertained them with stories and bush yarns.
They danced with Therese’s blond hair waving in their faces while Graham played the drums on empty food tins. Simon told Therese the solitude of Sturt Creek got him talking to himself, and that it would be easy to go mad.

Peter Sherwin had dispensed with placing full crews and a manager at each station, instead maintaining a larger mobile crew at Victoria River Downs that included his own planes and pilots and experienced horseback musterers. The Flora Valley team was essentially labourers who set up temporary fencing panels brought in by truck. The cattle were run up ramps into six-deck road trains, after which the yards were disassembled and hauled to a new location.

It was tiring dog-work and the exhausted jackeroos lugged the hot iron panels on their bent backs like pack animals and, with limited scope for skill development, were not expected to last long in the industry. Nor did the violence, lack of safety and problems of getting paid attract many to long service with Sherwin.

After eight weeks working with the other jackeroos, Loder took James sixty kilometres east to Nicholson homestead. James was Nicholson’s new ‘bore runner’ and would live there alone for six and a half days a week.

James wasn’t happy about the transfer, despite the light work. He drove 250 kilometres a day over unformed tracks, and refueled pump motors and ensured the water kept flowing into the troughs. The hardest part was getting his guts shaken up over corrugated tracks that had never seen a grader.

When Jim Ghilotti had returned to Perth after being belted by Loder, he told his dad everyone was shocked, and predicted James and Simon would come to a bad end. They didn't have two-way radios in the vehicles, and if injured wouldn’t be missed for at least twenty-four hours. And they were city kids.

When James’ vehicle wouldn't start at a bore he walked back to Nicholson homestead for another battery, then radioed Vicki to ask that someone drive him back to the bore. "No," was her answer, so he lugged the battery along Duncan Road until a passerby gave him a lift.

When Sherwin bought a station he cut the water for inessential applications like lawns and gardens. James found the trees dying and the shrubs at Nicholson homestead dried to a
crisp. The dilapidated buildings resembled a ghost town whose population had suddenly disappeared en masse into the bush and left everything behind.

Loder told him to use the generator sparingly. Fair enough, it was a huge beast suitable for a busy homestead.

So James pottered around in the dusky silence, opening food tins without labels, some rotten and left over from previous musters, then after a sweaty night arose at sunrise for another lonely day. A sneakier ‘bore runner’ would have shifted his bed into the cool room, and let the generator tick over while he slept, but James wasn't like that. For some this could have been a dream job, but all his life he'd arrived home in the afternoon to find familiar faces, food and a nurturing atmosphere.

Debbie thought it outrageous that,

“James was stuck out there on his own, a 16-year-old boy who had never been on a cattle station in his life. It was madness. Every day he had to check the bores, driving long distances, on his own in a car with no [two-way] radio… James knew nothing about cars. He didn't even have a license. The car was a wreck and it could have broken down at any time and he wouldn't have known how to fix it.”

Giles Loder noticed that James' personal dress and grooming had deteriorated. Chris Rumpf understood the problem: "City slickers thrown by themselves into a cattle station."

About this time, Djaru stockman Bobby Sealer and a sick Malaga elder ran out of petrol near the Ringer Soak turn-off. They often traveled that way, expecting to run out of fuel, then waiting for tourists with jerry cans. James was returning from the Wednesday slap-up meal. James offered to take them to Nicholson for a feed and bring them back with some fuel, but Bobby said:

“No, mate. It’s a long way in, you know. I said I’ll be alright; plenty of tourists around here. He said he’s got no one out on the station to talk to, you know, reckon he just don’t like Giles. He was saying to go on holidays and seems that he said to me that ‘I’m not going to come back when I go on me holidays back home’.
“I wish I would have been out there working then. I would have looked after him. He got no elder, no older people with him, no middle-aged fellow. He was just only young, a kid. He made me feel old. Pretty sad, you know.”

Chapter 5. Twice daily radio reporting

You couldn’t beat the 100 watt transistorised 7727 model Codan HF eight channel two-way radio. The police, the School of the Air and the Royal Flying Doctor service used them.

James and Simon called in twice a day to Vicki Loder at Flora Valley to prove they were still breathing. If they missed two calls a search patrol was meant to be sent out. These were standard pastoral protocols.

While modern Codans automatically seek the correct frequency from a field of 400, the older model required each boy to choose one of eight frequencies generated by a crystal oscillator, then wait for a reply. If no one answered the next frequency was tested.

But setting up the aerial could be a problem. Surface signals are blocked by hills and dunes, so a way around this is to point the aerial skyward, so the signal bounces off the ionosphere, similarly to the Jindalee over-the-horizon radar technology. This allows the Codan to reach up to 3000 kilometres, providing the operator chooses the right setting, because lower frequencies are absorbed by the ionosphere, while higher frequencies shoot off into space.

Simon was much further out from Flora Valley, so had more trouble than James. He often reached Heather Snelling at Caranya homestead, who relayed his messages to Flora Valley. And the clapped out car batteries that powered his radio couldn’t hold their charge.

But all this meant nothing when Vicki Loder went to New South Wales in November 1986, to have her second child.

The governess Therese Stansfield-Campbell was more than adequate to operate the radio. She’d been educated with the School of the Air. The radio was her social medium on
which she listened to local chatter. But fate cast a cruel hand when Giles Loder told the girl to keep the radio off, and stay out of the radio room. Why he did so was never clear.

Shane Kendall took over. He was clueless. He didn’t know the station protocols, and wouldn’t even wait at the radio during call-in times. He’d call Simon on one channel, then not hearing a response, leave and return twenty minutes later. He’d been to Sturt Creek to adjust the aerial, but that made little difference. When both boys failed to call in during those crucial 48 hours from Monday evening to Wednesday evening he did nothing.

Chapter 6. The Case of the Missing Alibi

After landing at Flora Valley on Wednesday 3 December, Loder drove the sixty kilometres back to Nicholson, and worked on the bore motor well into evening. He checked James’ room. It seemed normal; his possessions were there, but instinct told Loder he’d been absent for a day, and that his vehicle must have broken down in the bush. Anyway, his first priority was getting water to the Brahmans, not looking for some jackeroo.

When the motor wouldn’t start, he began the 180 kilometre drive to pick up a spare motor at Sturt Creek homestead. Sturt was marginal cattle country close to the western Tanami Desert, where the pastoralists had abandoned their leases in despair. Even Sturt Creek, with its fine homestead house, was reduced to an occasional mustering camp, and living quarters for its eccentric seventeen-year-old ‘bore runner’, Simon Amos.

Loder’s home bed with its crisp clean sheets at Flora Valley held no attraction for him, despite being located one-third of the way between Nicholson and Sturt Creek homesteads. Instead of stopping there for the night, he continued another 35 kilometres to Munga Tank, then south along Sturt Creek Road. A dead donkey lay amongst the windrow, felled by a single .22 calibre shot to the head by Simon, who had pumped two more bullets into its body for good measure. Loder was suddenly overcome by exhaustion at 11pm, and slept on the side of the road until 4am, when he began his third day — without witnesses to corroborate his whereabouts. He reached Sturt Creek just before light, and finding the motor difficult to load, decided to awaken Simon.
Simon wasn’t a particularly good employee, at least not with vehicles. Loder described him as a maniac. He drove like he played football. He lost a tailboard and busted the springs on a vehicle, when he raced out to watch a bush fire approaching from Ruby Plains.

Loder replaced it with another Land Cruiser, that Simon promptly bogged in mud, then spun its wheels until he blew the differential. Loder sacked him on the spot, then rehired him the same day, but relegated Simon to an open cab Massey Ferguson tractor with a top speed under thirty kilometres an hour. Simon laughed off the demotion, and continued his charmed life, but Therese Stansfield-Campbell saw through his disguised moods. He was “…a lot harder to find. I mean, if he was unhappy he sort of covered it up,” she said. Perhaps it was his way of adapting to emotional turmoil.

Loder found Simon's bed cold and empty. The kitchen stank from putrid meat in the warm fridge. His cigarettes were left on the table. The tractor was parked in the shed, and his personal effects were there, so he couldn’t have gone far. Loder thought that he was out on foot, a dangerous situation in hot weather, and that he'd suffered a mishap while hunting.

For some strange reason he felt it necessary to open Simon’s letters, ready to be posted home. He felt a flush of annoyance upon reading:

Dear Mummy Dearest,

…I had a bit of trouble with Tojo [the Toyota] is done two diffs and gear box great heh. So I'll on the tractor doing the bore which is slow, but Interesting (good). I'm an old tractor puller from way back cool hey.

Love the man from Sturt Creek.

When Pat Clark read the letter her son’s body was being picked by carrion. What mystified some was how one of the unposted letters was mailed, and postdated that day, Thursday 4 December, at Kununurra, over five hundred kilometres to the north.

Chapter 7. The reluctant search
Loder loaded the bore motor by himself, then drove back to Flora Valley, arriving about 10am. He called the Halls Creek police through the Royal Flying Doctor radio telephone and asked: "Could you make inquiries around town to see if anyone has seen him [Simon]?" He didn't mention James or the Datsun.

First Class Constable Ronald W. Ensel drove around town, but couldn't locate Simon. By that time the boys had not been seen or heard from for 72 hours in over 40C degrees weather, when half that time without water was usually fatal.

Loder flew back to Sturt Creek station and from the air checked the Figure Eight water hole; 20 and 26 mile water holes and the ‘turkey nest’ dam supplied by No. 1 bore. The cattle were well watered, but he saw no trace of Simon. He landed on the homestead airstrip and after a rudimentary search of the buildings, and for reasons that never became clear, thoroughly searched Simon's belongings.

Back at Flora Valley about noon, he phoned the police again saying Simon was definitely missing. Police text of his call read: "I have just flown over the area of Sturt Creek Station on about a 5km radius and have not yet located AMOS. I have also had a ground party looking; I am now concerned re his welfare." No mention of James or the Datsun.

The ground party was a figment of Loder’s imagination, and the rest of the day became a blank in his memory. Did he return to Nicholson with the bore motor? Did he begin a search? The haze of amnesia had so permeated his mind that he couldn’t even remember if he spoke to anyone upon landing back at Flora Valley. Anyone who could corroborate his movements.

Superintendent Mervyn Charles Gardner was Officer-in-Charge (OIC) of the Kimberley police region and based at Broome, but was due to retire in three weeks. His name didn’t appear in the court transcripts or media reports so he was possibly using up his holiday or sick leave. This left Chief Inspector Leonard James “Crash” Craddock running the show. Craddock was a taciturn man thirty months from his own retirement, who had earned his nickname by leaping into drunken crowds and pulling out offenders. Craddock issued a Missing Persons Report describing Simon as "rowdy and jovial" and gave his height at 174 centimetres, with a medium to slim build, wearing four earrings in his left ear, and known as the 'Red Headed Bomber'. 
Within the hour First Class Constable Colin “The Counselor” Main picked up Constable Kevin Leslie “Porky” Roberts at his Halls Creek home. They arrived at Sturt Creek at 6:10pm and found the homestead in darkness. They searched the buildings, sheds, abandoned vehicles, tanks, water troughs and Simon's belongings and found $102.82, Simon's remaining letters, and 605 cannabis seeds in the kitchen. They camped overnight. Simon didn't return. He would never return.

They arose at 4am and did a second search. Roberts disapproved of Simon’s housekeeping, "The quarters where Amos had been sleeping were disgustingly dirty…the foodstuff in the refrigerator and cupboards was all infested with maggots…"

Loder landed at 7am, and surprised Constable Main by telling him that James was also missing. Main radioed Sergeant James Richard Guy, officer-in-charge at Halls Creek, at 11:45am, telling him they had a second person missing. Ninety-six hours had passed since the boys had been in contact.

Jim Guy was a fair-skinned man of medium height who had grown up near Boyup Brook in the south-west. He'd joined the Western Australia police in 1970 and served as a detective in Perth during the tumultuous Don Hancock/Mickelberg era, then returned to uniform in the Kimberley as a senior constable at Argyle Diamond Mine. After being promoted to Sergeant he relieved officers-in-charge at Derby, Wyndham and Fitzroy Crossing, and had arrived in Halls Creek the previous month, to relieve Sergeant Allan George Hogarth who was on holidays.

Jim Guy was acclimatised, but not bushwise: Nor did he know the area or have rescue experience. His dedicated professional manner was marred by petulance, where he refused to cooperate with anyone who criticised him.

Guy contacted Broome, and a second Missing Persons Report was issued and dated Friday 5 December, but curiously stated that James had been reported missing on Thursday. They also knocked 23cms off his height, making him a 155cm short-ass and gave him blue eyes and Simon's date of birth.

Loder told Main and Roberts he believed the boys went hunting, and may have met with trouble. Roberts flew west with Loder following the main track to Caranya store, and checked
a bore that the latter had missed the previous day, then landed at Caranya homestead, which was owned by Reginald and Heather Snelling.

The Snellings had left for Adelaide the previous day. Heather was pregnant, and wanted a hospital birth. She’d had complications with her first child Tim, who arrived eight weeks premature, and tried to come out sideways. At the Balgo turn-off they noticed the signs were pointing in the wrong directions.

Ray and Helen Holborow took over the store and station in their absence. The Holborows had owned three Kimberley stations, the last being Sophie Downs, north of Old Halls Creek. They told the coppers they hadn’t seen the boys.

Aboriginals camping next to their broken down vehicle on the gravel track south of Balgo met two white boys in a Datsun, who stopped and gave them water.

Giles Loder took charge of the search, by flying Constable Main northward rather than south towards Balgo. They followed tracks leading to bores and waterholes, then landed at Flora Valley homestead for lunch, and to refuel the plane. From there Main phoned Sergeant Guy in Halls Creek, then he and Loder flew northwest to Nicholson homestead.

They found $384 and an uncashed pay cheque in James’ room, along with letters from friends and relatives. Constable Main later had trouble recollecting the actual details, but Les Annetts recorded in his 1987 journal that he was told that twenty-dollar notes were sticking out of a wallet in a boot, sitting in the middle of the room.

Back at Halls Creek Sergeant Guy phoned Kununurra, Fitzroy Crossing and Wave Hill police stations, plus Bruce Farrands, whom he referred to as "a chap who runs a road house down at Rabbit Flat". Bruce and his French wife Jacqueline were the eyes and ears on the central Tanami Track, but after getting a rough description of the boys they didn't hear from the police again. Bruce wasn’t impressed. Others wondered why the police were casting their net over a vast area for two boys supposedly lost on a short hunting trip.

By mid-afternoon Loder's plane had spent four hours in the air, then Guy ordered Main and Roberts back to Halls Creek. After a gut thumping two-hour drive over dirt and stone roads they arrived back at 6:20pm, and told Guy that Loder had lied about organising a ground search. Flora Valley jackeroos corroborated this, saying they weren't told that James
and Simon were missing, but had known something was wrong, because the boys hadn't radioed in for a number of days. When caught out, Loder changed his story, claiming he ordered station staff to continue regular duties, but to keep an eye out for the boys. Chris Rumpf and others flatly denied this; they said Loder hadn’t told them anything. “No, nothing in the work behaviour changed… I wasn’t asked to join in the search or anything like that,” Rumpf later said.

An officer from the New South Wales police station at Griffith phoned the Annetts at 2:45am their time on Saturday 6 December, saying the Western Australia police had told them their son was lost after going hunting, and that grave fears were held for his safety. Les was overcome by emotion, and passed the phone to Sandra. The officer told her the WA police said not to bother calling them back for search updates, because the Royal Flying Doctor radio telephone would be inoperative until Monday morning. This wasn’t true.

Giles Loder then set in concrete a misconception that has endured to the present day: the boys stole his vehicle and were driving home for Christmas. He told police the Datsun ute had enough fuel to get to Alice Springs, neglecting to add that this was vehicle’s usual quota of fuel and carrying it was not unusual. The police caricatured James and Simon as “thieves” not deserving of a search, not a real search, anyway. But what thieves would forget to take their money, uncashed pay cheques and personal possessions? And so began a web of deception that masked the whole debacle.

Guy had little knowledge of the local terrain outside Halls Creek. Town Sergeants found themselves buried in paperwork, and feeding and guarding prisoners, while the constables and aides did the patrols, and made the arrests. Sturt Creek station’s territory alone covered over three thousand square kilometres, and was visited just twice a year by patrols that stuck to the main track. That’s why Guy relied on Loder to direct the search, despite more experienced cattlemen with superior local knowledge being available. Even those that did help — men like Graham Macarthur, John Boland, Lenin Christie, and Peter Vout — were treated as secondary searchers.

Constable Colin Main missed the second day of the mini search, Saturday 6 December 1986. It was his weekend off, then he went on scheduled holidays the following Monday. Guy himself replaced Main, and with Kevin Roberts they set out from Halls Creek at 4am. The boys hadn't been seen for five days.
The police hierarchy wouldn't authorise the hire of a mustering chopper to search the tree-lined creek beds, but Guy persuaded them to rent a plane from Kingfisher Airlines, a subsidiary of the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation at Balgo.

Kingfisher pilot John Attard picked up Jungarri T. Bradshaw and Police Aide John Drummond at Halls Creek during the dark hours then landed at Sturt Creek homestead after dawn. They’d checked the more popular water holes and gorges on the way, without success. Bradshaw was a heavy set traditional Aboriginal and despite his failing kidneys and the rough flight arrived good as gold, while Drummond staggered from the plane throwing his sick bag in a bin. No more flying, he thought, but Guy ordered him back up. “It’s like a horse, John, once you fall off you get back on again,” Constable Roberts wanted to go up, but Guy was concerned that “Porky” was such a “big boy” for such a small plane.

They flew to Caranya, and questioned the Holborows a second time. Ray and Helen hadn’t seen anything new since the previous evening, so the officers flew over what Drummond called the “Nicholson Road”, then returned along the Tanami Track to Billiluna Community, about fifty kilometres from Caranya. They buzzed the administration office to signal they needed a vehicle then landed on the airstrip, from where the community administrator drove them back.

Jungarri T. Bradshaw’s English carried such a strong tribal accent that television editors subtitled his speech. But Bradshaw was an educated man and grasped multiple indigenous languages, and questioned the elders in their preferred dialects. While wary of Drummond’s uniform, they felt less constrained with Bradshaw. No one had seen the boys, reported Bradshaw, but later told his own clan quite the opposite.

Drummond's investigative mind considered the boys might have gone south looking for lithe desert girls. It was a taboo subject, one that invited the wrath of the police hierarchy. No one wanted to know how mixed race children were fathered in desert communities, where the only white men were the police and the priest. He also considered the jar of dope seeds, what with a major waterway passing alongside the homestead.

John Attard refueled the plane at the Balgo airstrip, while Drummond and Bradshaw made a lightning visit to the town. Balgo hadn’t a police station, and officers rarely visited except for court sessions or to confiscate .303 rifles smuggled in from the Northern Territory, after someone took a few shots at them.
Some men still dressed in loin cloths, and carried metal tipped spears through the town. Officers drove up the Tanami Road each month, where they met the magistrate who flew in for the court session, held on a veranda. The accused that had been identified by elders during the previous thirty days, stood up to face the white judicial system.

Bradshaw and Drummond asked the elders whether anyone had seen the boys, but no one was talking, especially not about the lights that flashed across the town from a vehicle taking the southern track. Nor about two boys who stopped at the Balgo store in an “orange ute”, perhaps James’ cream coloured Datsun covered in red dust. For reasons that became apparent only later, some were surprised a search was in progress for boys who hadn’t appeared lost.

But why weren’t the locals more forthcoming? The older generation had grown up with a deep fear of white folk, including station managers, who basically had the power to do whatever they liked, and memories of deadly white vigilante patrols guided by black trackers from rival tribes.

Many had warrants, and any interaction with police meant an undignified four stinking hours on a dusty road back to Halls Creek, during which the police stopped at the causeway and boiled the billy, while the black fellas sweltered in the cage. Ashley Verdon remembered as a child being asked, “Hey, gudia boy, give us a drink of water,” then poking a water bottle through the grill for the thirsty Balgo fellas. He was white, but they were his people. They looked after him like he was their own and referred to him as their gudia boy.

But the police saw the prisoners at their worst, while some relished their power over them. Ashley’s father, Les Verdon, had graded ridges across the road north of Billiluna to promote water runoff, so after tea some drivers hit them with speed, to rattle the bones of the “bastards” in the metal box.

Drummond wanted to speak to Mark Moora, the full blood leader of Yagga Yagga, a new Aboriginal community hardly known to exist in the outside world. Mark was anti-police, anti-authority and anti-white and walked barefoot in the desert. Drummond understood Mark’s hostility. The elders had immersed him in chain gang stories, of men marched across country, then down to Fremantle to work on luggers, leaving their women and children vulnerable to abuse. But finding an elusive Mark could itself require a separate search, and they hadn’t time.
There was also a matter of trust. Desert people helped the gudia troopers locate and kill their enemies from other tribes, just as the whites utilised them for the same reason. The term “gudia” was translated as “white bellied lizard”. It wasn’t always derogatory, and often used as a term of endearment, but usually expressed their unwavering sense of superiority over the whites.

John Drummond was dark skinned, but from a coastal tribe on the western side of the Great Sandy Desert, from a different language group, and wore a police uniform. And maybe one of the Balgo mob killed the gudia boys. It wouldn’t be the first time.

"My enquiries reported negative," Drummond reported on his Balgo visit. But what the elders told Bradshaw, when he decided to talk, put him in conflict with the police narrative.

Later that day Loder’s 'loyal' jackeroo, 19-year-old Andrew Tanion Beezley, and another stockman arrived to ‘clean up’. Why they were described in reports this way is a mystery. They came to maintain the water supply for the beasts. Sherwin wanted cattle produced for market. He didn’t care about dirty living quarters.

Andrew was the son of Gulf country drover, William James Beezley, who had driven cattle down from Normanton, near the Gulf of Carpentaria, to New South Wales in the 1950’s. Andrew grew up near Toowoomba and began work on a dairy farm when he was 15. He thought the police were concentrating their search within the stations because they thought Giles Loder had murdered the boys, and buried them nearby.

Andrew Beezley proved uncomfortably resourceful, and discovered James’ Baikal double barrel shotgun, that Main and Roberts had missed. Where he found it was never clear. One report stated it was behind Simon's clothing cupboard, while Roberts said it was inside the cupboard, behind his clothes. The final verdict was in a cupboard of a spare room in the homestead. However it was described it didn’t explain Main and Roberts’ failure to find it.

Flora Valley station mechanic David Alexander Reid owned the weapon. Its cracked stock was held together with string. He lent it on the basis that James would eventually purchase it. James might have been an unrebellious sixteen-year-old whose mind encompassed the sanctity of life, but he understood the need to kill. When Reid later reclaimed his weapon he told police he'd lent it to James "for protection". From what or whom was never made clear.
Back at Sturt Creek, Loder and Guy flew expanding circles around the station vicinity and found skid marks in the homestead and in a cattle yard. Down on the ground Roberts examined the skids and in their collective wisdom the three men determined they were made by the boys' vehicle.

Meanwhile, Loder had persuaded Peter Sherwin to hire a chopper, quite a feat considering Sherwin's reputation for disliking expenditure that didn’t have an identifiable return. Peter Leutenegger owned Fitzroy Helicopters and landed his Hughes 300 at Flora Valley homestead to collect Guy, who had delegated himself as observer. It was a highly maneuverable two-person, four-cylinder petrol engine aircraft with a limited range, a type of motor with a reputation for overheating and dropping out of the sky.

After leaving Guy with Peter Leutenegger, Loder continued alone to Ringer Soak, where he was markedly unpopular with the Djaru residents.

Leutenegger noticed the disorganized nature of the search: no formal briefing saying what areas to search or what elevation to maintain or who to report to. Not even a search map. Nor was Leutenegger the perfect search candidate: he was a West Kimberley man who knew that area like the back of his hand, but the East Kimberley was foreign territory.

They soared into the sky as Sergeant Guy pointed here and there from altitudes between 1000 to 1500 feet. They swept over the Nicholson bores and homestead then up Duncan Road to Ord River station then back through the gorges, while sweating like pigs despite the doors having been removed from the bubble.

Trouble presented itself when they emerged from gorge country over flat grassland. Their low altitude flying with extended periods of hovering had stressed the machine’s engine.

According to Jim Guy what happened next was a defective piston conrod snapped and pierced the sump at 250 feet, and the chopper auto gyrated downward, hitting the ground like a pancake. Jim’s head was bent forward at impact causing a critical flexion compression of his upper spine. The pilot was okay.

They walked 8kms in the 46C degrees heat to a road from where they were picked up by Ord River station staff and taken to Nicholson homestead. Jim Guy was thirsty. "If we'd
have been out there more than another two hours, I consider we would have been dehydrated," he later recounted.

Chris Rumpf was doing James’ bore run, and met them at the homestead. When he’d arrived he found the radio room locked, and had to climb through the window. Reception was so bad that one night he spent until midnight trying to get through. He was living on jelly crystals, cornflakes and SAO crackers. He’d asked to return to Flora Valley for rations, but Loder told him to wait until the following Wednesday.

Chris didn’t recognise Guy’s whiplash injury. Neither did Guy realise its seriousness. His appearance at Nicholson was Rumpf’s first knowledge of the search, and that the boys were formally missing.

Loder picked up Guy and they returned to Flora Valley. As if influenced by some malevolent subconscious meme, Guy radioed John Attard telling him the Kingfisher plane was no longer required. It had spent six hours in the air.

Later that day Flora Valley cook Graham Helluer drove to Nicholson, and was overcome with sadness while collecting James’ meager possessions. The police had taken the money and cheques, and now wanted both boys’ personal effects. Everyone felt the premonition of doom, while the authorities maintained their imagined scenario that the boys had stolen the Datsun trayback and driven home.

John Boland from Ruby Plains station drove the next morning to Sturt Creek homestead. It was Sunday 7 December. The bow-legged manager worked seven days a week to put his kids through private school in Adelaide, but good neighbours downed tools when someone was lost.

John knew the dangers of leaving inexperienced boys alone. “One boy is half a man and two boys are no man,” he liked to say, adding that boys get into trouble even under supervision. Leave them alone and you’re asking for trouble. What troubled him was the police attitude. They weren’t overly keen for his help.

Boland brought along the eighteen-year-old, “Small Merv” Wortley, and another stock hand. Merv was a typical cattle station prodigy having left school at 13 and by 17 was head of the stock camp, and at 18 was assistant manager to Boland.
Twenty-six-year-old Constable Murray John "Tracker" Cowper began his own supplementary search. Cowper was a big man who joined the police in 1978, and was used to being obeyed. He’d been in the Kimberley for two years, and had adapted quickly to locals ethics, already accused of knocking off a couple of ‘killers’ from Ruby Plains. ‘Killers’ were cattle butchered for local consumption rather than sent for live export. Cowper’s presence made John Boland nervous, as he believed the police might try to nail him for some infringement, as insurance against him making an issue over the ‘killers’. That was how the police operated.

Cowper asked Graham Macarthur to fly in and help with the aerial search. 'The General' had managed Gordon Downs station under Vesteys, but left when Sherwin bought the property. He didn’t like the way Sherwin treated the beasts, nor Loder pressuring him to sneak cattle across the border without inspection certificates. Graham brought with him the experienced cattleman Peter Vout, and former Vesteys manager of Sturt Creek station Lenin Christie. Vout had worked for Christie at Mistake Creek. Lenin spoke pidgin and was known affectionately as ‘The Desert Rat’, though others like Jan Verdon referred to him simply as ‘The Rat’. He drank a carton of beer a day, and anything else he could get his hands on. The Rat’s kids grew up on Sturt Creek station. One became a chef after beginning her apprenticeship as a child “cooking yams, iguanas and grubs down at the camp with the blacks.” Christie thought Giles Loder, “...a hard working man; he didn’t put up with shit,” and had worked with Vicki before she married, and was the bookkeeper at Sturt Creek. “Vicki and me were good mates; I used to always be trying to pull her pants off,” Lenin remembered fondly in his declining years, neglecting to mention his lack of success.

When Vesteys put Sturt Creek on the market, Lenin showed a prospective customer around the property. His name was Peter Sherwin. Lenin's tour concentrated on the station’s worst aspects, and when Sherwin backed away it was bought by the cantankerous but kindly Dave Major, who later sold it to Sherwin anyway.

Macarthur, Vout and Christie had extensive knowledge of the local terrain, and gave their time without pay. ‘The General’ provided his plane at his own expense, while the Kingfisher aircraft from Balgo cost the government $1023 for 6.2 hours.

They flew south of Sturt Creek station to Wilson's Lake, then east to Slattery Creek and the Gardner Range, then over to the Dennison Range south of Bindi Bindi pool, paying
attention to waterholes and springs, while radioing any unusual signs to John Boland and "Small Merv" on the ground.

Macarthur flew at an angle to give the observers better visual access of the dizzying ground flashing by. Cowper was airsick and, back on the ground, sat on a drum with his head slumped forward, as the temperature reached 46 degrees in the shade.

Cowper believed the boys had gotten lost while hunting, but Jungarri T. Bradshaw disagreed. The two men followed tyre tracks from Sturt Creek homestead to the locked and damaged border gate with Caranya station. Bradshaw identified three sets of tyre tracks, the freshest, he said, were three days old. They returned to Sturt Creek homestead, where Bradshaw examined one of the clapped-out Datsun utes Dave Major had left behind. The searchers somehow determined the vehicle had similar tyres to the vehicle driven by the boys, and made the grand leap in logic that the damage to the gate was made by the missing Datsun, a theory turned into fact when Sergeant Guy reported to Superintendent Craddock in Broome. How the Datsun got through the locked gate after hitting it was not explained, because they later followed the tyre tracks to the Tanami Road.

But the police reports go vague on Bradshaw. Did he continue searching for similar tyre tracks on the Caranya side of the gate? A more detailed report on his involvement might have clarified whether the boys had passed that way or had taken another route, notably the north/south track that ran from Sturt Creek homestead to the Tanami Road, near the Balgo access road. However, if the gate was still locked then it appeared the boys had not used that route, unless it had been locked after they passed through. But the implication the boys had damaged the gate inserted another negative link into the false narrative — they’d stolen the vehicle to drive home.

Cowper was unimpressed with Bradshaw, and said "... Bradshaw could not track an elephant in a snow field." But John Drummond defended him, saying: “Bradshaw was a very good tracker...It’s not only your ability to detect, but your ability to detect the countryside, roads that haven’t been used...back roads no one really knew about....”

Bradshaw's country was the Gardner Range. He knew the layout of obscure tracks; if they were passable, and whether they came to dead ends, or entered busier thoroughfares. Drummond said Bradshaw was a good bloke, and the best tracker they had in Halls Creek, but agreed he was nothing like the old tracker who identified a twelve-year-old’s footprints, when
the boy was wearing the already broken-in shoes of an adult from their community. Or, Jeannie Daniels, the Walpiri tracker from Chilla Well, who performed a dance and, while holding her hands at knee level, sensed vibrations of what had passed over the ground, a psychic process rather than accentuated animal skills.

The police and the Aboriginals were worlds apart, neither motivated to cooperate with the other, but if the former had made some effort, they could have set on the trail fifty tribal women and men who wouldn’t need to be monitored, and who wouldn’t get lost.

They were lucky to have gotten Bradshaw, but what he didn’t initially tell John Drummond was that the elders at Balgo told him the boys had been strangled with fencing wire, and their bodies would be found in the desert. If a “proper big” search was done, he added, without sarcasm.

Lenin Christie also thought that searching Nicholson and Sturt Creek was useless. Further south was the answer. “I vowed and declared that’s where we would find them down there, but I didn’t think quite that far down,” he later recollected. One civilian searcher aroused police hostility, saying the boys were known to visit communities looking for girls.

John Boland remembered talking to Guy and:

“… he had a report they were seen going past Balgo and I said, what were they doing down there, and he said, 'that's what I thought', so no one bothered.”

Peter Sellby from Helimuster arrived with a new helicopter, but Guy wasn’t taking any chances. “Get back on the horse”, Drummond mocked him, but Guy had a headache, and flew with ‘The General’, in his plane. At least that would glide to earth if the motor seized up. So Constable ‘Porky’ Roberts finally got to fly in the helicopter. ‘Porky’ was a self-opinionated man with a black moustache, and strong as a bull. He practiced weight lifting, and such was his strength that the rumour mill promoted him to an Olympic contender whose career had been cut short from a damaged knee.

Guy and Macarthur landed at Caranya. Ray Holborrow told them some Aboriginals were camping at Red Rock waterhole on Sturt Creek, where they were attempting to establish a land rights claim similar to that at Ringer Soak. Possession of the water hole had been in contention since the 1890’s, when the pastoralists took it for their beasts.
But Red Rock was empty. The inhabitants had either gone to see the Pope in Alice Springs, or had withdrawn to avoid the police.

The Kimberley Hotel provided food and beer, and there was plenty to go around, as the search party consisted of just nine men. Usually, when someone was lost neighbouring stations and townsfolk rallied around. But Sherwin’s harsh business tactics had put him offside with other pastoralists. They’d help if he asked, but Sherwin wasn’t going to do that.

The search area included a fifty kilometre wide swath of terrain from Ord River station south to the Tanami Road: 100,000 square kilometres of rough terrain searched by never more than nine men, two planes and a part-time helicopter. No requests for help were made to the Curtin and Tindal air force bases, from where planes could have done quick flyovers of the seismic tracks. State Emergency Service trained people, both white and black, with radio-equipped vehicles and local knowledge, were willing to help but police rejected their offers, later saying they thought they’d be on holidays. It was as if a grey fog had descended on the searchers, and Superintendent Craddock in Broome, that prevented a full scale search, especially south towards the ominous dunes of the Great Sandy Desert.

Guy called it quits at lunch on the third day. They’d searched everywhere the boys could be, he reasoned. What more could be expected? Merv Wortley was surprised. He thought it a “little quick” to end the search. If the boys were lost hunting they’d now be in desperate circumstances. But since Beezley discovered the Baikal shotgun it seemed doubtful they’d gone hunting. This left the default explanation: that they’d stolen the Datsun and brought their predicament on themselves; so why should others risk their lives to find them? But anyone with half a mind, and knowing the boys had left their money and possessions at the stations, wouldn’t have given that explanation two seconds of thought. A mysterious impediment was blocking a proper search.

Hungry journalists gobbled any story fed to them, and Giles Loder’s strategic whispers that the boys had “stolen my vehicle” built up its own momentum, until it permeated the narrative. Superintendent Leonard Craddock and other officers did little to dispel this misconception, despite knowing it was silly. Simon had even left his car at Flora Valley. But the search was finished.
“Small Merv” and John Boland drove back to Ruby Plains. Andrew Beezley continued Simon's bore run. Jim Guy and Kevin Roberts stopped at Caranya Station, the fourth visit by police in 48 hours, and then went to Wolfe Creek Crater before returning to Halls Creek.

Unbelievably, Guy designated Monday 8 December as paperwork day. All officers were withdrawn from the physical search. Guy was exhausted and injured; Cowper was recovering from air sickness; Bradshaw was in the bad books, not only for his lack of tracking success, but for his mutterings of murder. Others had their routine police work to contend with: drunks, court, the odd tourist and an inundation of phone calls from local and foreign media. Some officers were concerned that irregularities in the Occurrence Books might come under scrutiny.

Guy spent the next few days checking bus and plane manifests, and phoned a friend of James in Griffith, asking if he’d seen him, and where he thought James would go if he had run away. He acted as if the boys were simply ‘teenage runaways’, an American term popularly used in the 1980’s. A picture of the missing vehicle was sent around Australia.

“Poor bastard,” John Drummond thought, when he walked by Guy’s office, its walls plastered with timetables and manifests. When the constables and aides finished their shifts and went home, Guy still had to front the media.

A journalist who phoned Halls Creek on Monday suggested to an officer that perhaps the boys had simply taken off. The journalist later reported Sergeant Jim Guy as saying the police suspected the boys had stolen the station vehicle and driven home for Christmas.

Murray Cowper and John Drummond continued with secondary searches, and drove up the Tanami Track on Tuesday 9 December. Cowper was amazed when Drummond became sun burnt. He'd never seen an Aboriginal suffer sunburn. John’s father had Slavic blood, while his mother, Katie Drummond, was a beautiful woman of Malay, Japanese and Timor ancestry who taught at the Onslow Primary School.

Cowper and Drummond followed a track along Wolfe Creek, over to the crater, then to Caranya, and spoke to Ray and Helen Holborow. They hadn’t heard anything new. After checking nearby seismic tracks, they camped the night at Sturt Creek station.
They followed fence lines the next morning, north to Nicholson, then checked bores and water holes like Negri, Calico Creek, Nicholson River and Marella Gorge, then returned to Halls Creek. On that day, Wednesday 10 December 1986, Les Annetts felt an intuition that James had just died.

There were no physical searches for the following two days, during which officers concentrated on paper work and phone calls.

Kevin Roberts and John Drummond drove to Sturt Creek station on Saturday, spending the day checking tracks, including those not listed on maps. No luck.

Sunday 14 December was also listed as a day off for all officers, but records of the ongoing search become vague, as phone log books weren't maintained, and an Occurrence Book disappeared.

Chapter 8. Crowded skies

Dorothy and Lloyd Thompson and their children Sharon and Lloyd Jr lived on Bandys Road, Binya, not a kilometre from the Annetts. James was Sharon Thompson’s first love, and wore a necklace bearing his name. She and her brother walked three kilometres along a dusty road to the school bus stop with James, Jason and Michelle.

When the police went cold on keeping the Annetts informed, Lloyd Sr spent his nights on a ham radio talking to a man in Halls Creek, who kept them abreast of developments.

Late one evening, Les Knight came over the air from Narrandera in western New South Wales, offering his twin-engine plane with night search capability, to fly to Western Australia to help look for the kids. All the Annetts had to do was provide the fuel. Dorothy began a fundraiser, and quickly raised enough money for the initial fuel costs.

The Western Australia police disliked speaking with the Annetts, instead leaving messages for them with the New South Wales police at Griffith. This cumbersome process proved invaluable when Dorothy phoned the Griffith police on 14 December offering the
plane and pilot. The text of her phone call was signed by Sergeant Third Class K. L. Jackson at Griffith.

“Could you please make inquiries with Halls Creek Police Station, Western Australia. It is in regards to the missing 16 yr old boy, James Arthur ANNETTS. The boy's parents and myself and another relative wish to fly to the search area, being Flora Valley station. I believe the station manager is Mr Lauder [Loder]. We have a twin engine aircraft available to us to fly there, but we would require permission to land on the Station property. The Pilot and the plane would be available to help with the search if needed. The parents are very worried and feel helpless being so far away.”

Sergeant Jackson also signed the text of the reply from Western Australia.

Request as per above detailed to Sgt Guy. Reply by him:

“I would advise them to contact Superintendent Craddock, of Broome police station on 091 921157 after 8am Monday 15/12/86 West Australian time. He is the Officer handling all inquiries. Locally I can say that the Station Manager Mr Lauder [Loder] is not allowing any private planes to land at Flora Valley. The area is so remote and large that any person not familiar with the country would also become lost. They are searching 6,000,000 acres. This does not prevent the family landing at the public air port at Halls Creek. There is a motel and a hotel available for accommodation in this town the hotel number 091-6806101. They can then liase locally with the police involved in the search. The father of the other missing boy, Mr Amos, is in town, returning to Adelaide tomorrow.”

Guy later denied he'd received the offer, even after being shown the page from the Griffith police log book, containing Sergeant Jackson's text notes. Halls Creek police records couldn’t be compared, because their log books had either not been maintained, or had disappeared. Guy later testified under oath that if he'd known of the offer, he'd have accepted it, and agreed that it would have been irresponsible not to have accepted it.

Sandra Annetts phoned Superintendent Craddock in Broome. He told her the skies were already too crowded for another plane, a response that would have made station and community children laugh in disbelief. Most mustering had ceased for the year, tourists had fled south from the heat, and there were few scheduled passenger or exploration flights passing over the largely unpopulated land. Certainly, no police or search aircraft were in the
air, except the one carrying Detective Sergeant Christopher John Crook on 15 December 1986.

He flew by helicopter from Kununurra to Ord River Station, managed by Donald Mathieson and his wife, and then got a lift to Nicholson homestead where he interviewed Giles Loder about "his alleged mistreatment of station hands".

Loder admitted there had been occasions where he’d found it necessary to give an employee “a clip around the ear”, but strongly denied taken matters any further. Loder described as “nonsense” the allegation that a jackaroo had badly injured his hands when Loder made him mend a fence without protective gloves. Detective Crook reported that Loder seemed "depressed by the whole situation and perhaps feels some responsibility for the loss of Amos and Annetts because of their youth." Crook was so impressed by Loder that he felt no inclination to ask for specific details of who had been given “a clip around the ear”.

Nor did he interview the other jackeroos, because uniformed police told him they’d left Flora Valley, and could not be located. Yet Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalists Chris Masters and Virginia Moncrief, with far fewer resources than the police, managed to contact many of these jackeroos months later.

By 16 December looking for the lads had become a secondary issue for Halls Creek police, and further searching was in conjunction with other police business. That prompted Les Annetts to describe the search aspect of John Drummond and Murray Cowper’s visit to Balgo as "looking out the windows while driving to Balgo on other business". This wasn’t far from the truth.

Chapter 9. The Air Wing extravaganza

Chief Superintendent Ron Kjellgren was in his early fifties, and headed the Western Australia regional police. He was based in Perth. His wife was supremely proud of his achievement, but he wasn’t happy in the job. He’d begun asking himself, “Why bother,” continuing, and his thoughts were drifting to an early retirement and more golf.
He believed there hadn't been "sufficient local endeavour" to find the boys. More aircraft should have hit the skies, so he sent the Western Australia Police Air Wing to Halls Creek.

Amid appropriate fanfare the one single-engine plane arrived at Halls Creek with its support crew on Thursday 18 December. Constable Sheehan and First Class Constable Linton Michael Robb were the pilots. First Class Constable G. Williams from the Argyle police station, and others, were the observers. Scanning the ground below requiring exceptional mental alertness, as a split second of inattention could result in the observer missing a person or vehicle half-hidden under a tree, or campfire smoke or the reflection of a mirror.

With daytime temperatures reaching 45 degrees, the plane crew covered a grid pattern over station country north of the Tanami Track, giving special attention to creeks and hilly terrain. They flew 34 hours over five days, covering the huge but hopelessly inadequate area of 18,334 square kilometres, none of which was south of Balgo.

To find the Datsun ute would have required forty continuous days flying over 146,678 square kilometres of land.

They called it quits on Monday 22 December, packed their bags and headed south for Christmas. The bill was $2700 for the airplane, plus regular and overtime pay.

The Air Wing effort was doomed to failure because they weren't privy to, or failed to treat seriously, rumours the boys had gone south from Balgo. Nor did they have the latest maps showing the seismic tracks that Norpac and Clan Contractors had been bulldozing through the dunes for Royal Dutch Shell and other mineral explorers. Another problem was that most of the Great Sandy Desert fell under the jurisdiction of the Port Hedland police region, but the tracks from Port Hedland to Balgo were so ill-defined that this area of the desert had effectively become a no-go zone.

During the Air Wing sideshow, Murray Cowper and Police Aide Hunter visited Gordon Downs and Ringer Soak, the latter renamed Kundat Djaru, and spoke to Aboriginals Albert Young and others. They knew nothing. The officers checked around Button Creek, the "Figure of eight" yards, and a track that led from near Banana Spring eastward to the Gordon Downs-Tanami Road track. Their hunch that the boys had taken this track was dispelled when
they found it not recently used, and overgrown with bushes that would have stymied access for the two-wheel drive Datsun.

Constable Roberts and Police Aide Shane Edward Baites also went to Ringer Soak, where they questioned two elders, but most of the inhabitants were still in Alice Springs. Roberts and Baites also checked tracks leading into the Tanami Desert, searched the Marella Gorge on foot, and talked to Don Mathieson, his wife and staff at Ord River Station. All a waste of time.

The owner of Kimberley Bush Taxis, John Kernot, was in Balgo on Boxing Day 1986, the day Superintendent Mervyn Gardner officially retired. Kernot was en route to Yuendemu to pick up Anita Gibson, and was parked in front of Pauline Sunfly’s house. Two boys came out of another house, and told Kernot the white boys had been shot, a hundred kilometres south of Balgo. When John returned to Broome on 7 January 1987, he phoned the Broome police station and spoke to George Dann, who told him: "That's just mission talk, John. Don't take any notice of it."

Chapter 10. The circus comes to town

“We had been sitting home in Binya thinking they were searching every day for James, but when we got to Halls creek we found out that the police had been telling us lies.”

Sandra Annetts, 1987

“Sandra Annetts and her husband came to the police station [and] created an absolute mayhem...”

Jim Guy, 2010

Old Halls Creek didn’t want to die. The town had character, the picturesque hills, stone country, the sweetest air, the Elvire River and seventy years worth of speared, exhausted pioneers buried in the ground. It was settled by white folk in 1885 after Charlie Hall found a
28 ounce nugget, but the gold rush fizzled out and most of the prospectors went south to Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie.

By the 1950’s town planners realised the land was too hilly for an airport. And the main dirt road, the Savannah Way, the Great Northern Highway, was 15 kilometres to the north. So in 1955 the post office and shops progressively shifted to reserved blocks on what became the reluctant town of Halls Creek. The original site was renamed Old Halls Creek, and has a current population ranging between two and six inhabitants.

Town camps were allocated to local tribes like the Ringer Soak Djaru, who got Nicholson town camp near the cemetery, while Mardiwah Loop was divided into huge lots for the Skeen, Gallagher, Stretch and other clans.

By 1986 Halls Creek had a thousand permanent residents, and hundreds more who lived in the long grass and lined the bitumised highway during the day, watching that new breed of steely-eyed creatures towing gleaming caravans behind gleaming vehicles. The ‘long grass’ locals were told not to speak to these gudias after dark.

Jim Guy's tumultuous two-month relieving stint was nearly finished when Les and Sandra Annetts hit town.

There had been trouble amongst the ‘connies’. Colin Main had resumed his counseling activities, when Murray Cowper spotted him in a vehicle with another constable's wife back of the airport. Cowper "nearly broke his bloody legs” racing back to the station to tell her husband. Main claimed he was giving marriage guidance to the woman, who’d been having marital difficulties. No one bought the story, especially her husband.

Simon’s father, Robert W. Amos had come and gone. The police wrote him off as a “psycho” and gave him the ‘bums rush’. He shuffled out of town sadder, but no wiser as to his son’s disappearance.

Simon’s uncle chartered a plane, and flew over the search area. According to Jim Guy he said: “I’ve got to take my hat off that this is the most depressing place that you could ever get lost in and I suspect these boys are not meant to be found if they’re out here.” Guy said they thought a lot of the Amos family, because they were realistic about the situation. But he still referred to Simon's parents as a "couple of psychos".
The slimmed down Annetts hit town in mid-January, after leaving James’ siblings with Les’ nephew Robert Malone and his wife Rose. Barry and Margaret Radcliffe gave them $800 towards expenses for the bus trip up the centre through Alice Springs and Katherine, where they were delayed by floods covering the road.

Clare Therese and Stanley Robert Tremlett opened their house to the indigent Annetts. Stan had been in Halls Creek since 1966, and worked for the Department of Transport as a groundsman at the airport. Their son, Mervyn Ross Ehrin, had died at age 22 from a seizure on 14 June 1981, so Stan and Clare empathised with Les and Sandra. The Tremletts had a history of hosting bedraggled teenagers retreating from inappropriate referrals to cattle stations by the Commonwealth Employment Service, or through Vicki’s newspaper ads. They gave the jackeroos meals, beds and occasional cash, and did the same for travelers broken down.

Kym Trim was also in town. He claimed to be Simon’s half-brother, and to have worked at Ruby Plains station. He knew enough about windmills to pose as a ‘bore runner’ on a television report. Les was spooked, and believed Trim was an imposter and a psychopath. Les spent one night in the kitchen chain-smoking Clare's cigarettes, while standing guard lest Kym grab a knife and go on the rampage.

Kym watched Sandra going through James’ belongings the next day, and saw a piece of rope. “That’s Simon’s rope,” he said, bursting into tears.

“That’s how good he was,” Sandra later recollected.

But John Boland had never set eyes on him. Kym had done four days at Flora Valley station, and was paid on 18 January, six weeks after Simon disappeared. He'd also been using the names Kevin Robert Amos, Kevin Baxter and Kevin O'Casey.

Sandra phoned Pat Clark, who denied all knowledge of Kym Trim. Simon’s sensitive mother didn't want the stigma of another weirdo in the family. When a woman from the eastern states later saw Kym on television, she phoned Les saying the imposter was her son. He’d been in an institution in Alice Springs, and had previously tried to stab her, and burn his baby sister in her cot.
The Halls Creek police station was in turmoil that January, not just from the dispute between the Constables, but from multiple transfers of staff. Guy’s stint was ending, and he faced the exhaustive process of handing the station back to Sergeant Allan Hogarth, who was returning from holidays. Hogarth had been the officer-in-charge since March 1984, but was being promoted to a position higher than what existed in Halls Creek. Within a few days of resuming command Hogarth repeated the process, transferring command to Sergeant John Hatton, who was new in the Kimberley. Other officers were coming and going, including Kevin Roberts who was being transferred to Kununurra.

In this atmosphere Les and Sandra climbed the steps of the transportable police building on stumps. The transfers appeared to them a conspiracy to disperse those who were informed about the case.

Sandra had initially believed the “gone hunting” story, but felt a stabbing doubt when that story changed, to the boys stealing the Datsun trayback. She knew James well enough to know that he wouldn't have left the station without contacting them first, let alone knock off the truck.

She told one journalist:

“The police assumed the boys had either gone out shooting and got lost, or broken down. But by the end of December, they started telling us they'd shot through.

“When we went to the police station, the only information they gave us was how much the search had cost - $35,000.

“We learnt that instead of a continual air search, they sent up two planes and a helicopter for a total of one and a half days. There was no further search until December 17, when planes were in the air for a total of about 36 hours. They only flew as far south as Balgo, even though Les had told them to check the Canning stock route and Rabbit Flat.”

The police were outraged. Who were these eastern states civilians, telling them what to do? They’d borrowed money for the bus across, and thought they had the right to direct and criticise the Western Australia police. But grief had stripped the Annetts of vanity, and like two bulldogs they gripped their protagonists and wouldn't let go.
The boys’ belongings were stored at the police station. Traditional Kija woman and local politician, Josie Farrer, offered to arrange a smoking by shamans. They would hold James’ garments over a fire and the sounds that arose would be interpreted to determine how they died. Sandra hesitated as she didn’t want to lose James’ clothing. It might be all she had left of him. Bonnie Edwards also offered a smoking.

When they examined the boys' belongings they found two rolls of undeveloped film. Why hadn’t the police had them developed and printed? James' hat with the initials "J.A.A." written inside was mixed up with Simon's stuff. It was splashed with blood gone dry. Les was a glazier and knew how a cut artery sprayed blood. “And that is how the blood was sprayed on James’ hat.”

"The blood doesn't mean anything," one officer scoffed. Jackeroos were frequently splashed from writhing beasts during dehorning. Sandra wanted the blood tested. The police wouldn’t agree. Guy wanted the hat out of his sight. Sandra could take it home. He slapped a bundle of paperwork on the counter. They could keep that too, including the original search map with the handwritten notations, showing where police had looked. There were no copies. The police were washing their hands of the case.

Chapter 11. Cold welcome

The first sixty kilometres of stony road to Flora Valley was passable by car, but once over the Edward Albert Range the wet season road of black soil was often a mass of water-filled depressions of sticky mud.

Giles Loder frequently did the hourly flight into town on various errands, so it would be little problem to carry a couple of passengers. Would Giles fly them out, Sandra asked Vicki? It was a favour. She and Les wanted to talk to them about their missing son. Vicki said she’d ask Giles. The answer was, “No.”

The police also discouraged the journey. Too dangerous. Loder had weapons and a reputation for using them. Was this another ploy? The constables and aides were told by Guy to discourage unwelcome guests from disturbing the Loders, including Les and Sandra. But
seeing the parents’ determination the police decided to escort the couple to the homestead, to keep an eye on things. But they weren’t giving Les and Sandra a lift.

Les Verdon flew them in his ramshackle plane without charge. He had regrets. He should have pushed the police harder, broken through their phobia of the arid country when they had discouraged, even prohibited volunteers from helping search for those kids.

Les was a chubby, good natured white Queenslander who came to the Kimberley in the early sixties and never let anyone forget he'd mustered the Gulf country. He'd been a bore mechanic for Vesteys at Sturt Creek station, and had worked for Bill and Lorna Wilson at Chilla Well, Mongrel Downs, Lake Gregory and Billiluna stations.

Verdon gave Constables Murray Cowper and Police Aide Tony Hunter a head start, then met them at the Flora Valley airstrip. Loder was waiting. It was the 23 January 1987, seven weeks after the disappearances. Shane Kendall avoided the Annetts. He and Andrew Beezley, and another jackeroo, left the next day and hitchiked down to Fremantle for the America’s cup yacht race. On the way back Kendall got a job at a tourist resort, and didn’t return.

The other jackeroos were mostly gone, and a heavy cloud hung over Flora Valley homestead.

Graham Heleur had departed two days before Christmas, leaving the station without a cook. Danny Verschurren shot through six days later, after Shane Kendall beat him up. He was sick of the place: the hot water didn't work, and with Graham gone they were living out of cans. A packet of biscuits was three years out-of-date. And the grief? They all felt it.

Christmas lunch at the manager's house had been a sombre affair, like an overdue tropical build up that didn’t come to fruition. Andrew Beezley was impressed by the big salad, ham and everything. He was a practical man. His Christmas gift from the Loders was the repaired Toyota that Simon had damaged. No more tractor pulling. This halved the hours on the bore run so he could fix fences and pull cattle, horse and donkey carcasses from the dried up water holes.

Chris Rumpf hadn’t felt Loder’s glow of approval. He’d given his resignation three times, but actually leaving was dependent on getting paid. Loder wanted him over the holiday
period, then on 4 January 1987 told him they were going for a flight, but didn’t say where. Rumpf’s other bag stored at Flora Valley had already been packed. They flew to Halls Creek where Loder left him on the airstrip, and where Rumpf found the coin collection given to him by his grandmother was missing, but someone had added numerous articles of women’s underwear.

Margaret Cavanagh replaced Graham Heleur in early 1987. She was a widowed mother of seven children, and had worked at Flora Valley in 1984 and 1985, before Sherwin bought the station. She’d enjoyed the job, but her enthusiasm was tempered when a Sister of Mercy nun told her on the flight that the missing boys had been based there, and that black trackers thought they’d been murdered.

Margaret nevertheless expected a pleasant arrival, but knew within twelve-hours she wouldn’t be staying long. She met Loder one evening while taking the meal tray to Vicki, who had returned from New South Wales with her new baby. He got out of his vehicle, and moved by her in slow motion as if she were invisible, then went into the house. She rang the gate bell, but no one appeared. She rang the front door bell. His head craned around the doorway then disappeared, and he began yelling at Vicki. He returned to the doorway, and took the tray, holding it at arm’s length for a few seconds, while he and Margaret stared at each other. After that her red heeler bitch wouldn’t accompany her past the front gate. Margaret began sleeping with a .410 gauge shotgun next to her bed.

Vicki and Giles had a lot on their minds, but Margaret noticed their demeanors change markedly, after a visit from detectives, as if a burden had been lifted from their shoulders. And thereafter the police increased their efforts to discourage unwelcome visitors to the homestead.

The following account relies on journals and statements written in pencil by Les and Sandra Annetts in early 1987. Giles and Vicki Loder have not responded to requests to speak about this period of their lives.

Sandra remembers there wasn’t a word of condolence, or a hint of sympathy, when they reached the homestead. Not even a cup of tea.

Giles avoided eye contact and said, "I can't understand why the boys have done this, stolen my vehicle." Vicki interrupted, "It is out of James’ character; it's not James. Anyone
else with Simon, yes, but not James." Giles responded with a lingering glare on Vicki, who remained silent for the rest of the visit. With his finger Giles drew a question mark in the air and said, "There is a question mark over Simon."

Les asked if James was owed any money and upon Giles instruction Vicki fetched three cheques totaling $922.68, a large amount for a 16-year-old in 1987. Loder hadn't paid him for two months, putting further into contention the theory the boys had stolen the Datsun. Sandra noticed Giles had a bandaged lower leg. She felt a sudden shocked nausea.

Returning to Halls Creek, Murray Cowper flew in the plane, while Sandra went with Tony Hunter in the police vehicle. It was a miserable trip.

Chapter 12. Tales of violence

Back in town, Sandra told police about Loder's bandaged leg. She wanted his blood tested and compared with that on James’ hat. They weren’t interested.

Few visited the Tremlett house by day, but after sunset Aboriginals and others arrived, with stories of Loder beating the smaller and younger jackeroos. Tracker Bradshaw visited, but with a police escort. Like many tribal men English was his second or third language. He was a quiet man who chose his words carefully, but in this instance even a few words were too much for the police. An accompanying officer announced that Bradshaw "has nothing more to say" and they left. But the tracker had much more to say.

Giles Loder was a tall and sinewy, hard man, respected by other hard men. Government stock inspector Peter Carmichael, thought differently. He described Loder’s attitude as similar to that shown towards the cattle: break their spirits and they were easier to control. Jackeroo Brett Lee, said Loder encouraged him to work harder by saying "get moving" or he'd hit him.

Sonny Mark Peckover was a cheerful 17-year-old when he started at Flora Valley. He started work before 7am and finished as late as 9pm, six days a week for $80. After giving notice he was assigned to pulling up fence pickets. John Davis belted each one with the Land Cruiser bull bar, then Sonny levered it from the ground. This caused his back to seize up, so
he decided to leave a day earlier than planned, but Vicki wouldn't pay his wages, even for
days worked. He decided to leave anyway, and was packing up his stuff with John Robinson
when Loder returned. He said Loder "started screaming at us, calling us gutless little cunts."
Sixteen-year-old Russell Linke heard this, and came out of his hut. Linke had a delicate
personality with crybaby eyes. Sonny said Loder was wearing steel-capped boots and towered
over Russell. Loder asked him if he was also leaving, and when Russell replied, “Yes”. Sonny
recounted that Loder:

“Leapt out of the Land Cruiser and started punching Russel, he attempted to throw
Russel over a weldmesh fence. Russel half fell over the fence and then fell backwards then
Giles started kicking Russel. Russel had a big cut on his arm and he lost a chunk of skin from
his foot.

Russell recounted that Loder:

“…threw two punches at me. The punches didn’t connect and I fell into a weld-meshed
fence and was cut. I was on the ground and Loder kept kicking me. John said, ‘Don’t you
think that’s enough?’ and Loder swung around and said: ‘Do you want some of it, too?’ He
kicked me a few more times and then left.”

Peckover says Loder told them to "get off his station" and walk the nine kilometres to
the front gate, then changed his mind and gave them a lift in the back of the ute, adding that
they were too low to ride in the front. Peckover remembers Loder left them on Duncan Road
without water, and paid them with unsigned pay cheques. Russell says they got a lift with a
Main Roads truck up to Nicholson homestead, where the ‘bore runner’, Andrew Lister,
secretly drove them to Kununurra, where their cheques bounced.

Peckover said Loder “…obviously loved the power of being boss…I tried to get Russel
to press assault charges against Giles when we got to Kununurra but he wouldn't he thought
that Giles might come looking for him.”

Teenager Brendan Berlin thought Loder a hopeless manager who couldn't communicate
with the jackeroos. He gave notice one evening in August when Loder had been drinking.
Berlin could smell it on him. Loder became infuriated and punched him "in the side of the
jaw," then pushed him into a thorny bush that ripped his shirt and gouged his back. Brett Lee
saw Berlin later and noted that his "shirt was torn and he looked a bit bloody." Berlin went to
John and Debbie's quarters. "I can stick up for myself, but the young fellows can't," he told them. After Berlin returned to his room Loder sought out John, saying: "This bloke has a big mouth; he needs to do some hard work for the next few days. However, Berlin left the next day. He walked thirty kilometres, until passing Aboriginals stopped and gave him a lift to Halls Creek.

Shane Kendall smiled through it all. He later recollected to Chris Masters from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that Loder gave Paul Griffith what is now called the “coward’s punch” then kicked him on the ground. He rationalised, through a sly smile, that Loder’s blows hurt Paul’s pride more than anything:

“What he did was wrong in respect of maybe hitting him from behind, whatever. It’s pretty tough out there, I mean, you know. You get in when you can. That’s my opinion.”

Kendall was heading for a promotion, and it came when John and Debbie Davis decided they'd had enough. They'd put up with pay discrepancies, and Vicki Loder questioning Debbie about the alleged disappearance of a cut of meat, but they couldn’t countenance the excessive beatings. John had already expressed his dismay over another incident where, even in the atmosphere of accepted station violence, he told Debbie "...that he'd seen a man beaten like he'd never seen anyone beaten before."

There was no trouble getting another job, and they were soon at Ruby Plains: John as a ringer and Debbie cooking.

Veteran stockman James Frank Ghilotti also quit, along with Douglas Johnson and thirty-five year old Bob Stewart. Ghilotti said safety issues were the main reason for his leaving.

Half the workforce also quit on 17 October 1986, when Paul Baikie, Ron Moir, Bob Rowe, Nigel Hepworth and Ron (Spook) Bickford left as a group. They knew what had happened to Berlin and Griffith, and wanted to avoid a similar fate. They tried to convince James and Simon to leave with them, but James wasn’t moving. It was his first real job; he was earning real money for doing a man's work.
Paul Baikie was later ridden by unwarranted guilt. He could have tried harder to get them to leave, he reasoned. "But what could he have done," his wife said twenty-four years later, "lock them in the boot"? Paul stated to New Zealand police in 1988:

“I had a guts full of working on the station as we were treated like shit…We couldn't get Simon or James to leave with us. They decided to stay as it was the lifestyle he [James] wanted. It was the first station he had worked on and didn't know that others were better in the way they looked after the workers. It was the first station both of them had worked on…Just before we left Giles told Simon that he was going to either Nicholson or Stuart [Sturt] Creek stations to work as loan [lone] station manager. James was told the same. Simon was rapt with the idea. He was keen to go. James wasn't quite so sure…James was happy where he was. But they were told they had to go and work on the other stations so James said he had better go.”

Peter Carmichael saw the five jackeroos return to Halls Creek, and half-joked to others that they should send out a Freedom Bus to Sherwin properties to release the slaves.

Clare Tremlett saw numerous bedraggled teenage jackeroos returning from properties: "My heart used to go out to them when I saw them on the street. They were so dirty, half-starved and miserable. I'd usually cook them a meal and let them have a clean-up…”

After a muster at Caranya, Ron Bickford, 36, moved to Halls Creek and warned new arrivals against going to Flora Valley, such was his passion.

The Annetts felt ice in their guts upon hearing these stories. They phoned Pat Clark, hoping to enlist her help to pressure the police to continue the search.

“We told her how we were totally shocked and couldn't believe what we heard that Loder bashed the boys and all the rest of it and she was just not interested.

She didn't believe a word we said and said she didn't want to have anything more to do with it.”

Chapter 13. Meanwhile, back at Binya
As Les and Sandra desolately waited for their connecting coach at the Adelaide bus station on 1 February 1987, the cycle of life and death continued four kilometres west, where Heather Snelling lay with her daughter, a healthy Naomi Thelma, born two days previously, without complications, at Ashford Hospital.

As Reg and Heather celebrated the magic of a new life, the exhausted Annetts grasped the intangibility of their own grief, as they boarded their bus. Their world had imploded, and the generational imperatives that had prompted them to retreat into their family, again reasserted control. They’d never dreamed the outside world would present such opposition to them discovering what had happened to their son.

Eight days later on 9 February, Pat Clark wrote and thanked Giles Loder for all he’d done for her son. She gave him Simon's Valiant Charger, still parked at Flora Valley homestead.

“The car on the station I am leaving to you…as a small token of my appreciation for what you did for Simon…I must have been awful for you that week with your wife away having your child, fighting bushfires and having to come back finding both boys missing.”

Vicki dispassionately filed Pat’s letter, which along with Simon’s letters, later became her husband’s ‘stay out of jail’ cards. She returned two letters that Robert Amos had written to Simon, marking them, “Return to sender,” without a word of apology or sympathy.

Pat Clark ran hot and cold between gratitude towards Giles Loder, while harbouring a foreboding mistrust. The day after giving Giles the Charger she wrote Sandra, saying:

“The police said they would go out to the station and chat Loder up and tell him write a cheque out for Simon's wages as I'm his next of kin. I wrote to Loder to tell him this and made it sound as though I knew exactly how much he was supposed to get.”

Back at Binya the indomitable Dorothy Thompson immersed herself in the crisis, and spent the next few months arranging fundraisers for search expenses, phone bills and, later, the funeral. She filing incoming mail, and formed the initial archives that in later years proved invaluable. Without her efforts much of this history would have been lost.

Les and Sandra spent their days and nights on the phone with journalists, Halls Creek people, total strangers, lawyers and politicians, but rarely the police.
When they collapsed from exhaustion, Dorothy sat by the phone and recorded names and numbers of callers offering commiseration, and journalists, both scouring the depths of the Annetts’ grief, and looking for clues as to why things went so badly wrong.

Sandra stopped eating and mentally fell apart, while Les dropped from 13 stone to 7 stone. They’d hear knocks on their front door then find food and wine on the doorstep. The three surviving children were always hungry, but Sandra had given up eating and Les had long forsaken wine after getting the ultimatum from his wife early in their marriage: alcohol or family.

Money and condolence cards flooded their mail box. John and Debbie Davis urged them to take strength that others were feeling their sorrow as well. Barry Coffey wrote that he’d salvaged vehicles and aircraft in the bush, and could help with the search as soon as he was sprung from Wooroloo Prison Farm. "Reasonable rates," he assured. The Angels held a fundraising concert to send the Annetts back to the Kimberley to continue their search. Peter and Florence Sherwin loomed large in their silence. Giles and Vicki Loder said nothing.

Sixty members of the Katherine branch of the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association met in March 1987. Keith Lansdowne from Kumbidgee station moved a motion for the association to ask Peter Sherwin to give his version of the boys' disappearance, "to help end rumour and innuendo". Ninety percent of those present abstained from voting.

Sandra bought a Realistic tape recorder from Tandy and the cassette tapes piled up in a fruit box next to the phone. They rented a house and were debt free, but the phone bill became their surrogate mortgage.

Sandra called the Halls Creek police every day for new developments, while they called her twice in the three months. They didn’t appreciate her search suggestions and Constable Ron Ensel told her he "can't and won't" tell her anything about progress of the investigation, then hung up. Sandra admitted she abused Sergeant Hatton: “… I said this was not our dog missing, it was our son. He kept telling us he didn't know if the boys had taken their money.”

And the other children: Jason, Michelle and Joanne endured those cold months of fear and anxiety. It left them with psychological scars but, like their parents they had the steel to meet the future.
The police breathed a collective sigh of relief when the media storm died down. Sandra was a natural interviewee, who delivered concise one-liners favoured by journalists. She instinctively understood time and space constraints and stuck to her subject without getting off the track. She looked good, too, like a normal mother of that era, who cooked food and did the ironing. One journalist said it was as if she been doing it all her life. But Sandra felt sick in the stomach at every media encounter.

But as the leaden clouds of the Wet rolled over the land, and without new leads to breathe life into the story, the media turned its eye elsewhere, that is, until Sandra struck again.

Chapter 14. The public relations search

Sandra Annetts told a single syndicated journalist that she was selling her wedding rings and furniture to fund another search. She’d already spent their life savings on their January trip, adding: "Searching ourselves seems the only way our son will be found." Her words swept the nation like flames racing through spinifex on a windy day, and the story was back on the media front burner.

When Sandra’s media firestorm reached Chief Superintendent Ron Kjellgren, he announced, as if by magic, that a new search would be mounted. Perth Detective Inspector Arnold Ian Davies would "cover all aspects of the search".

Davies told one journalist that Kjellgren wanted the police to be seen to be doing something. However rather than calming things down, this new investigation drew more gremlins from the woodwork, but what else could the police do? Sandra had backed them into a corner.

MTN8 Regional television announced that police now believed the boys hadn't absconded, as originally thought. It was an 'ah hah' moment, that explained the half-hearted search – the police thought the boys had simply shot through, and weren't worthy of a real search. It wasn’t a good look for the authorities whatever way you looked at it.
Davies realised Loder’s delay in calling for help had made it nearly impossible to find the boys alive. He found it disturbing that Flora Valley staff hadn’t been utilised, but were left performing their usual duties.

Davies ordered tests on the dried blood found on James’ hat. They proved Guy wrong. It wasn’t animal blood. It was Group B human blood.

James’ blood type was A-RH negative. Simon's blood test results couldn't be found, but his father, Robert Amos, had type O Rhesus (D)+. The blood on the hat wasn’t from Simon or James. What about Loder's blood? Was his bandaged leg the result of a fight with the boys? The police still declined to test Loder’s blood. He was not a murder suspect. He was a good fellow who helped with the search. Constable Main said he was an upstanding man. Detective Crook said he seemed sincerely depressed over the whole matter. But journalists, Aboriginals and the public down south thought differently: Giles Munro Loder was the prime suspect.

Journalists flooded newspapers and the airwaves with criticism against the police, who complained of “media harassment.”

First Class Sergeant John Hatton became officer-in-charge at Halls Creek in late January 1987. His dark moustache and wide-brimmed hat, pulled low over his head, gave the appearance of a jovial Mexican bandito. He charged forward to defend the police failure to find the Datsun saying that: “You could hide General Custer and his troops in a gully and you wouldn't know they were there.” This was true in the rugged gorge country near Nicholson station, but south of Balgo the flatter terrain and gridline seismic tracks made it easier to find a vehicle. A day in a well fueled plane might have found it. Police failure to give credence to common knowledge that the boys were seen near Balgo later drew scathing ridicule.

Veteran helicopter pilot Sean Murphy said on the Mike Willessee television program in 1987 that:

“'I've never heard anything like that in my lifetime. To start a search five days after they disappeared is bordering on criminal, really. Normally, you'd start a search within the same day they disappeared, certainly on the second day and nine times out of ten you'd find them.”

Jungarri T. Bradshaw, added, ever so subtly: "I think we'll find them later on if we do a proper big search, you know."
After fleeing Flora Valley Russell Linke found work on a Queensland cattle station. A helicopter there went down and:

“...within one hour thirteen choppers and four planes were out searching...In that country you have to move quickly because people can die quickly in the heat. Usually, when someone goes missing the whole area gets involved in the search and I find it strange that this didn’t happen when those two boys went missing...”

Others had little sympathy for the Annetts: They’d broken the Kimberley code of silence, where antagonists settle disputes between themselves without recourse to the police or, even worse, the media. They were southerners, not Kimberley people, and who did Les think he was dressing like a ringer and wearing that Stetson hat?

Chapter 15. The hundred years war

The Aboriginals backed the Annetts. They’d grown up with pre-gudia tales of open country free of fences and locked gates, and waterholes bursting with uncontaminated water. In their eyes Loder and Sherwin were descendents of the first white settlers, and the police the vigilante patrols that had dished out their deadly collective punishment.

Peter Sherwin stopped supplying cheap ‘killers’ to the locals. These were damaged bullocks and shags not suitable for live export or breeding, and used for local consumption. Supplying ‘killers’ was a legacy from pre-citizenship days, when Aboriginals sequestered in camps worked for rations, after their nomadic lifestyles became lethal, when they could be shot on sight. Equal wages, mass dismissals and welfare changed the dynamic. ‘Killers’ were still supplied to discourage locals from butchering healthy beasts on the sly, because welfare money didn't cover the cost of shop food, or the increased tempo of their nomadic lives, that now included Land Cruisers.

When sixty Aboriginals claimed ownership of Pigeon Hole outcamp on Victoria River Downs (VRD) station, Sherwin made their lives less comfortable by locking seven gates, blocking access to the bitumised highway at Victoria River roadhouse. This forced them and their Northern Land Council white lawyers to take the long route via the Buntine Highway.
At Ringer Soak the kids found it exciting using their slingshots against Loder’s plane swooping low like a dive bomber, but the elders were sickened with fear, having grown up with stories, or even seen the results of retribution killings like the Sturt Creek massacre.

But tragedy was shared all round in this unpredictable land. Generations of white pastoralists worked themselves to early deaths after watching their children die from inadequate medical care, and their hard work destroyed by drought and disease, then the government handing their stations back to ‘black fellas’ who let them go to rack and ruin, and who said the land had always been theirs, anyway, and the pastoralists were merely temporary leaseholders.

Chapter 16. Rough and tumble in Halls Creek

Sergeant John Hatton was used to laying down the law without question. His job was to take control of any situation, and not engage in debates. This worked with drunks or at car crashes, but it didn’t go down well with the media. Hatton came across as bombastic when he claimed the boys tired of being jackeroos and headed home for Christmas. Anyone with a rudimentary understanding of human nature knew the boys wouldn’t leave their money and clothing, and Simon his cherished Charger, and even his cigarettes, while knocking off the station truck for a one-way trip home. But that was the logic used by the police.

The life of a Halls Creek OIC wasn’t easy. The police station phone was connected to his house, so when no other officers were on duty, he took the calls on weekends or during the night. Hatton’s predecessor, Allan Hogarth, escaped with his wife once a month to a motel in Kununurra or Broome, but still had to be in contact with the officer he’d left in charge.

Halls Creek was frequently on the verge of a riot, and police on Friday and Saturday nights could make a hundred arrests, due to a “no tolerance” rule for drunken behaviour.

Police Aide Tony Hunter said three or four officers would often find themselves facing a hundred drunks so:
“...if you were standing up fighting in front of the pub...I’d walk up and hit you fair in the fucking head and drag you out and my mate would back me up and we’d lock you both up to get you out of the situation and the others would disperse.”

But things could backfire, and one night Hatton came close to being fried to a crisp when prisoners took over part of the station:

“There was a big riot at the pub and it just turned to shit and escalated and when they got back to the police station and started overpowering people there they threw these tyres on top of him and threatened to light them.”

But Halls Creek also had its perks, like cheap government housing, isolated area allowances, free beer on Fridays, and sexually charged packs of women that hunted men at night and spray-painted fences with the words: “fuck me”.

It was also painful for officers during the Annetts saga, as they suffered punitive and sometimes inaccurate media reports from southern journalists, who didn't understand the nature of the wet season, or the vastness of the country. And how difficult it was to explain why on many days not a single patrol went out to search.

Chapter 17. True lies

Police barked up the wrong tree when they checked the diesel tanks at Nicholson and Sturt Creek homesteads, to determine whether enough fuel had disappeared to power the Datsun to Alice Springs. It was a silly proposition that failed, as the journey would have required little more than a single day’s usage refueling the bore pumps. And despite telling the media they believed the kids had attempted the Tanami Road shortcut, few enquiries were made in that direction.

This lack of police interest bemused Rabbit Flat Roadhouse owner Bruce Farrands. He was at Billiluna in 1964, then later married Jacqueline, a French girl from Paris whom he met when they both worked for Bill and Lorna Wilson at Mongrel Downs. The Wilsons lent them money to start the roadhouse that began with a canvas tent, then graduated to a series of
modest buildings. These were years of dangerous skirmishes with the Warlpiri, until a mutual respect developed, and Bruce, Jacqueline and their two sons were given skin names.

Their isolation, and having to rely on themselves for protection, had honed their vigilance to perfection. During dangerous periods, Bruce served customers through a slit in the door, such as when German tourist Joseph Swab graduated from hunting buffalo and bush pigs to tourists, near Jubilee Downs. John Kernot remembered having to submit to an interview through the slit, before Bruce would serve him fuel. Even then, Bruce came out wearing a handgun and carrying a rifle. Later, when James Hepi and Bradley Murdoch supplied the Broome market with bulk cannabis from South Australia, they timed their trips to pass Rabbit Flat during the night.

Further north, Djaru man Mr Lightning, was travelling in a convoy of two vehicles from Ringer Soak to Halls Creek. They stopped at Munga Tank near the corner of Duncan and Sturt Creek Roads. Two girls went into the dry bed of Foster’s Creek, then ran back saying they’d found messages scratched on an abandoned vehicle, from James and Simon calling for help.

Police heard the story, and Mr Lightning was taken to the station for questioning. He wouldn’t say much to a gudia police detective who couldn’t speak his language, so they brought in translator Bonnie Rosita Edwards.

Bonnie is a straight talking Djaru woman, born in the creek bed back of Nicholson homestead. Her white father sent her to the city, so she could learn ‘proper’ English, which helped her to qualify in nursing. Later, in 1987, she and her husband Malcolm owned the Halls Creek Supa-Valu supermarket.

Bonnie found that, despite being educated and speaking two languages fluently, and owning a supermarket, she was still in the eyes of some white police an intellectually deficient black woman.

The detective left her in a room while he went out to recapture Mr Lightning, who had quietly wandered off. He left on a table a sheath of witness statements, one from Martin Trancollino.
Martin, then 59, had been driving to Gordon Downs to fix leaking taps, but instead of using the route past Flora Valley R & D yards, he cut through the bush off Sturt Creek Road. He found a white ute on the track, and needing some new tyres he crept up behind it, and found the tray covered in bushes, a common procedure to discourage flies laying eggs in a butchered ‘killer’. A blanket also covered the flesh.

But Martin’s acute sense of smell told him this wasn’t the stench of a rotting beast, and knowing of the boys’ disappearance he fled the scene. He returned two days later, after fixing the taps. The vehicle had disappeared, but not the rumour that one of the boys had been killed and his body hidden in the bush.

Another rumour was that two police officers, during the initial search, drove to Rabbit Flat, where they loaded up with beer for which they never paid. Bruce Farrands knocked that one on the head.

“Police got bogged, made no effort to shovel out, called a mayday, intimated they were 20kms out, actually 60kms. Got a lot of alcohol. Never paid for the tow truck work but they did pay for the alcohol, promised to pay for call-out. Very disappointed [they] never paid for call-out, never knew their names. Two white fellas in normal uniforms.”

Meanwhile, Pat Clark couldn’t bear the pain of not knowing if Simon was alive or dead, and gave up hope.

Chapter 18. Les Annetts’ second Kimberley search

Les Annetts felt none of Pat’s fatalism, and bristled with anger when he returned to the Kimberley with journalist Chris Warren and camera operator Greg Dunstone, for Eyewitness News in Adelaide. They flew to Alice Springs, then drove up the Tanami Road to Halls Creek. Eyewitness News paid for the trip and got exclusive film footage, while Les retained the right to tell other journalists what they had discovered.
They reached Halls Creek on 5 April 1987. Jim Guy, Kevin Roberts and Allan Hogarth were long gone, but the old attitude remained. Chris Warren sensed their lack of urgency, and felt the police considered the boys merely ‘teenage runaways’.

But investigations were continuing, and during that week Murray Cowper and John Drummond drove to Birrindudu station, then following Sturt Creek downstream to Wolfe Creek, checking tributaries and tracks leading away from the watercourse. Their vehicle was “all crap”, and the radio ineffective. John remembers waking up one morning and: “It was freezing cold; bloody dingoes: they were huge, they were just sitting around like small shepherds, long fur, just sitting under a tree watching us.”

Cowper was conscious of the danger of bushfires, and remembered one occasion southwest of the Gardner Ranges. He smelt smoke. He climbed onto the bonnet and searched the horizon with binoculars, then using his intuitive bush skills determined the fire was underneath his vehicle. Spinifex had caught up in the hot muffler. He said if they hadn’t extinguished the fire quickly, they’d have lost everything including the radio and water, and a rescue team would have taken a day or two to find them: “Plenty of time to have perished.”

Police also investigated 'believable leads'. John Drummond found some of them mind numbing, particularly those from clairvoyants. One said the bodies were buried in a filled-in well, while another said in a cave. Another report was they were sighted at Timber Creek, drunk. Thomas Clarke said he picked them up hitchhiking near Albany. There were rumours Loder had cut up the Datsun, and dumped the sections from his aeroplane over the desert. Another said he dropped the parts into the ocean. But Drummond was particularly bothered by one reported sighting.

Noel Tones was a heavily built man who dressed in dirt coloured singlets and stubbie shorts, and hauled cattle for Buntines. He said in early April 1987 he’d picked up James and Simon between the 10th and 12th of December 1986. They were dressed as ringers and walking along a road on the Wave Hill side of Katherine in the Northern Territory. One was quiet, the other talkative; one was broke, the other had money. The Adelaide boy was quiet and nervous, while James was worried about being away from the station. “I just sensed there was something wrong,” Tones said. They were going to Katherine to buy parts for a ute that had broken down along the Sturt Creek/Nicholson boundary fence. One boy gave a clear description of the Datsun's problem with stalling, something not generally known to the
public, though common knowledge amongst Flora Valley jackeroos. Tones said he dropped them off in Katherine, then later took them south to Daly Waters, as they were now going home. Tones also told friends he had won $100,000 in the scratch lottery.

Stock inspector Patrick Majella Barry saw the boys at the Hi-Way Inn roadhouse. One had big ears like he had as a kid, and the thought crossed his mind that jackeroos were getting younger, particularly the one with the baby face.

Patrick had worked off and on with Tones for ten years at a trucking yard, but had previously no knowledge of his lottery win. He thought Tones a decent fellow and a reliable truck driver, though they weren’t mates.

The police told Les to speak to Noel Tones, not from their phone, but from the phone box across the street. Les returned within twenty minutes fuming, “Tones was a liar.”

But the officers, Inspector Davies, and the Amos family gave credence to the sightings, and attention was shifted even further from Balgo.

Tones later admitted the lottery win was untrue, but could give no explanation for spreading that story. One story he didn’t share was that he’d worked for Peter Sherwin.

Both John Drummond and Lenin Christie believed there was more to this false sighting than met the eye, and that Tones should have been further investigated. Les Annetts developed a pathological suspicion of Tones, saying he was lying about giving them a lift. But how did he know so much about them?

Chris Warren and Les were determined to visit Flora Valley and Nicholson stations. Police told them Loder had firearms, and could be dangerous and, by the way, they weren’t going to provide an escort. Inspector Arnold Davies added to the warning, telling journalists that Les’ private search could be dangerous, and that it would be very easy to perish in the desert. They didn’t want Les snooping around.

Photographer Mary Mills and journalist Jerry Pratley of the West Australian newspaper received the same advice about Loder, but perhaps because they were Western Australians they received police escorts on two separate visits to Flora Valley homestead the following week on the 11th and 12th of April.
Also on 12 April 1987, the Reverend Murray Lamont from the Church of England parish at Kununurra travelled down to Caranya Station to christen Naomi Thelma, the ten-week-old daughter of Reginald and Heather Snelling. Ray and Helen Holborow also attended the ceremony, having stayed on to help with station duties.

Constable McLeod accompanied Mills and Pratley on their first visit, and John Drummond on the second. The police reported that on both days Loder had work commitments that prevented him from speaking to them, though Mills says at one stage Loder pointed a gun at them. John Drummond was a de facto bodyguard for the reporters, as previously there had been “an issue with a firearm”. He was also shielding Loder “because the media were giving him the raging shits”. The police were also shielding him from Les Annetts.

The police had lost sympathy for the Annetts, deeming them ungrateful and troublesome. When Superintendent Craddock and Sergeant Hatton spoke rudely to Les in front of the media, he asked to speak privately with them in another room. He recounts Craddock was "going on about the bullshit we were telling the media and we said we more or less are only copying what you've have done to us." Les told Craddock he'd go out and tell the reporters everything, and that Craddock "never opened his friggin' mouth from then on; he just glared at me.” Les also told him: “We will not let this go. Our son is not going to die for nothing. We're gong to find out the truth one day…I've got another at least 25 years to go."

Les later said that when he told Hatton and Craddock that he'd tell journalists about the 605 dope seeds found in Simon's quarters, their manner changed from lion to lamb. Why a cup of dope seeds would attain such importance only became apparent when John Kernot in Broome began his one-man war against drug dealers a few years later.

Les, Chris Warren and Greg Dunstone drove the 120 kilometres to Flora Valley. Chris was nervous about a confrontation with Loder, and went there on the belief that Loder wouldn’t be at the homestead during the day.

Greg hid in the vehicle when they parked in front of the Loders’ house, and filmed through the windscreen as Vicki walked down the outside steps, shielding her eyes from the sun with her left hand, while Giles watched from a window. "Is Giles around anywhere?" Les asked, adding that he sought information about the Toyota James rolled over, and "...some of the things I've been hearing about the car the boys were in."
"I don't think Giles knows anything about it, really," Vicki lied, covering her mouth with her right hand, then seeing the camera behind the windscreen told Les to get off the property.


The victim had crossed the line and become the predator, but it also showed the unremitting personalities of the Loders. They wouldn’t offer a sliver of help, not a hint of sympathy to the man whose son had died in their employ.

The unwelcome visitors drove back down the access road, then turned left onto Duncan Road, and continued seventy kilometres to Nicholson homestead. The homestead gates were locked and the property appeared abandoned, but after some clever lock picking, they drove up the main street.

Les described the dirty rooms as "unfit for a dog". The kitchen was a mass of unwashed dishes, old food, and a busted fridge. A printed page laid on a counter bore the words: "How can a man be seen alive, after he is most certainly dead?"

Les returned home, while Eyewitness News thundered over the nation's TV screens asking why the boys hadn't been found. The answer was that those who knew weren't talking; at least not to the police.

Chapter 19. Clan country

Andrew Patrick Brett and Gregory Owens ground their way through the water soft sand of seismic line RH 8612 on the Sunday morning of 26 April 1987. They were in the Great Sandy Desert near White Hills, 135 kilometres south of Balgo by plane or 200 kilometres by tracks. It was a unique, but sparsely inhabited area, frequented by the last tribal nomads and used for ceremonial and hunting expeditions.

RH 8612 was aligned east/west and followed the valleys between dunes that were continuously sculpted by westerly winds sweeping in from the Indian Ocean. Andy and Greg were the advance party for the Norpac exploration crews that had fled the heat the previous
August. "Me and a couple of other blokes with one caravan in the middle of nowhere," was how Andy described Norpac’s Baga Camp whose numbers peaked at thirty souls during the cooler season while the combined camps reached a population of 150.

Baga Camp was near the abandoned Lake Hevern No 1 oil well. The sometimes inhabited Aboriginal outcamp at Walgali, with its mysteriously large airstrip, lay on a sliver of flat land free of sand dunes smack dab in the middle of a seismic maze.

The two surveyors turned onto RH 8605, an older track sprinkled with small bushes and other regrowth. They were setting out lines for Clan Contractors to bulldoze the seismic tracks that allowed access to exploration vehicles. The Clan boys were mostly local men from Derby and nearby communities, who after a blistering day on the dozers dined in an outdoor kitchen, then slept in swags on the ground. Norpac and Schlumberger employees slept in cramped air-conditioned dongas and caravans.

The mineral explorers drilled holes into the ground into which they dropped sensors attached by cables to a Schlumberger vehicle crammed with esoteric electronics. The Clan men turned off their dozers, while Schlumberger workers pounded the ground with what resembled upside-down tables attached to the side of their trucks. While this occurred, technicians analysed the echoing vibrations, to determine the concentration of specific minerals deep below. Explosives were also dropped into the holes, for similar affects. The Great Sandy Desert was a treasure chest waiting to be exploited, and wasn’t then under Aboriginal ownership.

The Clan team had the roughest jobs, but it was dozer driver Colin Fuller who negotiated with the traditional owners. He was an accomplished bushman who understood traditional values, and had worked on cattle stations near Noonkanbah, but what made him especially valuable was that he could name his Aboriginal ancestors and their places of birth. This gave him the credentials to negotiate with the traditional owners from Yagga Yagga, as to where they could dig. Colin also gave survival briefings to new employees.

A typical Clan seismic maze consists of dozens of forty kilometre long tracks that crisscross each other at nearly identical intersections, then come to miserable dead ends, except for one track in and another out, and the latter might enter another maze. A single maze consists of two thousand kilometres of tracks, enough to run dry the fuel tanks of the best equipped travellers.
Some tracks resemble four lane highways, as if leading to a mysterious military installation, or to civilisation; but they inevitably end in desolate sandy quagmires. The roughest tracks rise over dunes up to thirty metres high, with just enough ploughed off the top to allow a high clearance four-wheel drive with a running start to reach the top, then cruise down the steep side.

Enthralled travellers race down east/west tracks between the dunes to prevent getting bogged, then are confronted by a crossing dune that forces them onto a north/south track, and their blood floods with adrenaline as the vehicle crashes down the steep sides. They stop to rest, perhaps have a beer from the fridge then backtracking, discover the steep sides of the dunes are impossible to climb. They attempt to find another east/west track, but their maps are hopelessly incomplete and the coded intersection markers meaningless, and there aren't any "this way out, back to civilisation" signs.

Their heat gauge goes into the red, and inevitably the slippery soft surface grabs the wheels, and the occupants feel the silence as the muffler pumps fumes into the sand. The driver shuts down the motor, and within seconds the radiating heat penetrates metal and glass. And then in the most humiliating act, the navigator plunges the EPIRB buttons, and waits for an expensive rescue.

Chapter 20. Finding the Datsun ute

“...bogged on a seismic line, numbered RH 8605 on co-ordinates 21 degrees, 31 minutes South and 127 degrees, 34 minutes, 42 seconds East.”

Western Australia Police Report, 1987

The sun was well above the horizon on Sunday, 26 April 1987 when Andy Brett and Greg Owens turned onto the north/south seismic line RH 8605. They spotted the fabled Datsun, number plate HC 529, at 7:15am from the top of a dune 4.5 kilometres south on RH 8612. They knew this was ‘The Ute’ because, like many others, not including the police, they'd heard the boys had been lost in the vicinity. An 'SOS' had been formed on the roof with
spanners, and a length of coiled wire, had withstood wind and sand for the previous twenty
weeks.

It was on the soft incline of a fifteen-metre saddleback dune formed from two dunes, when
the gap between the two became partially filled with dead vegetation and blown over
sand. Driving over a saddleback dune could feel like driving through water.

Johnny Brown and another Clan driver had taken two days with two D7 bulldozers to
cut the track the previous year. Each dozer had a three-metre blade, and they moved almost
side-by-side, the second dozer slightly behind, while a grader behind them pushed leftover
debris to each side, creating metre-high ridges called windrows.

Andy Brett saw the Datsun:

“…halfway up a dune facing north. Vehicle was bogged at the rear wheels. Occupants
had obviously tried to dig the Ute out. One side tray gate had been put under one of rear
wheels…We lifted bonnet. There was an alligator clip onto the positive pole. There was a
battery at the front on the ground. The occupants were obviously trying to jumpstart the ute…
On the passenger seat was a key labelled 'Back Door Kitchen'. There are no signs of violence
in the vehicle, no bloodstains or anything.”

Near the car a star picket and two charred branches formed an arrow pointing north. 75
metres further along they found a long handled shovel, and at 4.5kms the remnants of a red
chequered ringer’s shirt. Andy and Brett raced back to camp, where Clan’s dozer refueller
Peter Carter radioed their office in Derby.

Chapter 21. Action men

Peter Carter couldn’t get through to Clan Contractors’ headquarters in Derby because it
was a Sunday, but Clan truck driver Reg Thornhill heard his call forty kilometres north of
Halls Creek. He stopped at the police station, and found Police Aide Shane Edward Baites
alone with his feet on the desk and reading a Phantom comic. "We found that white Datsun
ute you have been looking for. It's down at Yagga Yagga," Thornhill told him. Baites nearly fell off his seat, then rang Sergeant John Hatton next door.

Hatton ran out to Thornhill's truck, and Carter gave their location. He advised police not to drive out in a petrol vehicle unless they had enough fuel to return, as Clan ran mostly on diesel. Clan would feed them, but they would have to bring their own beer and cigarettes.

Hatton ordered Constable Colin Main and Police Aide Anthony Scott Hunter to "go south" to Baga Camp. Hunter took a bit off rousing; he was still in bed recovering from the previous night’s drinking session.

They grabbed their swags and, according to Main, a box of food, and left for Baga Camp at 2:45pm as the news broke across the nation.

"No maps, no nothing", Colin described their journey into the desert. Their Codan radio was bolted onto the dashboard, and protected from the sun by a piece of cardboard taped onto the windscreen, and with a limited aerial, communication was difficult in the desert.

Main and Hunter arrived at Balgo at 6pm in darkness and got directions from Tony Wilson and Judith Karlson, and she provided a huge tray of salad and cold meat. They continued southward at 7:30pm, but near Yagga Yagga they took a wrong track, and arrived at the wrong mining camp. But they were lucky, because it was seafood night, so they settled down to a meal of crayfish and prawns. The miners also gave them proper exploration maps, and showed them how to read the tags attached to the star pickets in the seismic mazes.

They got bogged near Clan and Norpac’s fuel dump at 2:30am, where they slept until awoken by the camp’s generator at dawn. Peter Carter guided them back to the main camp at 6am, where John Hatton and Police Aide Baites had already arrived by plane. Hatton was still in bed. Their plane had been diverted to another airstrip due to flooding, and they’d spent part of the night being driven back to Baga Camp.

Clan dozer driver Johnny Brown wasn't impressed:

“The coppers came with nothing but their swags. They had a packet of cigarettes; they’d run out of beer; they’d bummed all our own cigarettes and our beer. We had to get a plane out of Derby to get re-supplied. And they ate us out of house and home; as well...they didn’t even have water.”
Peter Carter concurred:

“The police were absolute dickheads: idiots, basically. The Sergeant from Halls Creek, he’d only been there two or three months. It was his first Kimberley posting. He was not there when the kids went missing and he had no idea about the bush...we said when you come out, come in diesel vehicles cause we can give you as much diesel as you want. If you want to camp we can feed you, but bring cigarettes and beer. So they came out in a petrol vehicle and run out of bloody petrol and bludged beer and cigarettes off people and never re-paid them.”

Once Hatton had climbed out of bed the Clan men and police drove seventeen kilometres and reached the ute at 7:15am, on Monday 27 April 1987.

Chapter 22. Locating the remains

The vegetation was green and lush from recent summer rains. This often surprised newcomers, who expected a vista of golden sand dunes. What also surprised everyone was that the Datsun wheels and undercarriage were exposed. It didn’t appear to be bogged.

Five blue plastic twenty-litre diesel jerry cans sat on the tray: three full and one half full. There were two 4-litre oil containers, an axe, jumper leads, a kangaroo jack, tools, empty 12-guage shotgun shells and a plastic drinking cup from the top of a water bottle.

An overturned battery on the ground was partially covered in sand, but two charred branches and a star picket forming an arrow pointing north had remained incongruously undisturbed. But why wasn’t the ute more bogged? Constable Main rationalised that, “Because of the shifting sands out there it probably didn't appear as bogged as it possibly could have been.” But he didn’t provide an explanation why shifting sands hadn't done the same to the spare battery. He noted "The radiator in the vehicle still contained drinkable water when examined.

And why hadn’t the boys torched the Datsun? People investigate smoke. When dry bush is unavailable, the next logical step is to burn the spare tyre, then if there is no response the whole vehicle. The closest humans were the full blood Aboriginals at Yagga Yagga 70kms to
the east, whose acute sense of smell would have drawn them to the burning upholstery, tyres and diesel. James had been an outstanding member of the Scouts, and had read the Jack Absalom books, but instead of torching the vehicle, he and Simon began their death march.

Johnny Brown put the tools forming the “SOS” into a bag, then towed the vehicle back to the fuel dump with Clan’s Steiger 4WD tractor.

"Why don't you keep your nose out of it?" Sergeant Hatton yelled at Peter Carter when a map on the floor was put into the glove box. He ordered Peter to tender a statement as to how the vehicle had been found. It never became clear whether the map was a ‘mud map’ of the Nicholson bore run, drawn up by the previous ‘bore runner’ for James, or a map showing directions to the exploration camps.

Andy Brett and Greg Owen were deputised, and along with the police and Clan men, and using civilian diesel vehicles, they drove off in opposite directions. Johnny Brown stood on the back of one vehicle and Peter Carter went in another.

Carter’s vehicle reached James and Simon's abandoned camp about nineteen kilometres north of the Datsun. They found at least two empty water containers, a yellow dolphin torch with a dead battery, two empty food tins, two spoons, an empty Aerogard spray can, a box of Greenlite matches, a billy can, a can opener, a length of rope and a pair of pliers, lying on the ground.

Johnny Brown got there on the second vehicle, and found the first group boiling a billy thirty metres from a strewn out line of white bones: Simon's bones.

Brown had grown up on a farm down south and, apart from the lack of decorum, was surprised a body could be reduced to bleached bones in less than five months. He couldn't see much of Simon’s clothing either, though it was common for a dehydrated and overheated person to cast off his or her clothing in a misguided attempt to cool down.

Death from dehydration is terrible way to die. Humans consist mainly of water, and losing four litres through sweat and urination is enough to cause blurred vision, grogginess and dry retching. Eight litres can result in muscle spasms and delirium, while a twelve-litre deficiency causes the tongue to swell. This blocks the air passage leaving the victim gasping in desperation. The brain begins to die from the oxygen-depleted blood, and makes the heart
compensate by beating faster and faster until like an over-revved motor it seizes up and stops pumping. This can happen within 36 hours in hot weather, and in extreme heat much sooner.

Carter photographed Simon’s bones scarred from teeth marks left by dogs. These were the ancestors of German Shepherd and Alsatian pets, that had strayed from stations and traveler convoys, then interbred with dingoes. Their subsequent descendants had devolved or evolved, depending how you look at it, from docile animal companions into ferocious desert hunters. They had inherited the increased jaw strength of dogs and the cunning nature of wild dingoes with little empathy with humans.

Wind and rain had erased all human footprints, but Simon’s remains were surrounded by dog and camel tracks. After ripping Simon to pieces the dogs ate his flesh, while both species sucked marrow from his bones. Even his synthetic thongs bore tooth marks. When they had initially reached the death scene Colin Main saw a dingo slink across the track just metres from Simon’s remains.

Twenty-five dollars in cash was scattered on the ground. Simon's white shorts were still identifiable. Four live .22 calibre cartridges were found in a pocket, while a fifth expended shell lay in the breech of the stockless rifle that lay nearby. There was a neat hole in Simon’s forehead, with a larger, triangular exit wound a third of the way across the top of his skull. Eyeless sockets stared up at the blue sky as if in reproach.

The two vehicles continued in convoy. Johnny Brown was on the back of the second one. The police reports indicate that Baites and Hunter found James one kilometre north of the campsite, and 30 metres west of seismic line RH 8605. Brown saw the water bottle in the sand and “yelled out and they stopped. Copper jumped out, grabbed it, looked at it, shook it and threw it in the back.”

A scratched message on the lid read: "James, My Follt. I always love you Mum and Dad, Jason, Michelle, Joanne." On the handle were the words: "I found peece." Along the side of the bottle was another, but indecipherable message.

Brown jumped off the back and:
“…half fell over on the sand dune. I walked about 6 feet off the edge of the track; it might have been 10 feet towards my left and we were facing north and here was a pair of Levi jeans laying in the Spinifex.”

While the second vehicle was backing up he:

“…walked over to the jeans and then I noticed that there was a shoe there as well and it was like a Dunlop tennis shoe. You know the old type of shoe?... and that was attached to the jeans and I sort of gave it a kick and it was solid. Then I noticed that there was a part of a leg and you could see bones sticking out of the hips and in the jeans was all his legs and one shoe was still actually on the foot. The other foot was gone and so was the shoe. I didn’t know if we ever found that. I walked along a bit further and didn’t find anything so then I sort of walked down the sand dune... and here looked like a shirt laying on the ground in a piece of rag, walked up to it and there was a long-sleeved ringer’s shirt, like a flannelette shirt, checked shirt and it was torn up the back all the way up to the collar, in halves. The only thing holding it together was the collar and the sleeves and everything on it, and that was laying on the ground and a little bit further on was like a singlet type of T-shirt and I can’t remember the colour of it, but it did have something written on it: I don’t remember what it was, and I sort of half picked that up and in that was his backbone and all his ribs, all still together, brown and sinewy and no actual intestines or organs of any kind, but they’re all sort of dried up and a little bit further on, about 20 feet or so was his head laying there by itself. It still had the jaw attached, still had most of the hair on the head and the colour of the bones, all of them, were brown colour, sort of tan colour, quite a dark tan, I suppose you could say.”

Colin Main remembers seeing it ten metres up the side of a sand dune:

“…remains of legs still inside a pair of jeans with a boot on left leg…There was some flesh in there but there wasn't a lot of meat left...skeleton still inside T-shirt…ripped in half at the waist.”

Andy Brett was in the silent bubble of his mind, the experience being his alone:

“… was walking along and all of a sudden there was something in front of me and I couldn’t quite figure out what it was and it turned out it was a leg, a foot, and I think, boot attached, and that was all it was, the leg. It was quite horrific, you know.”
The experience disturbed him and remains with him to this day: "It was a very eerie, eerie sort of feeling that went around the place...it was a strange sort of feeling."

James’ three-bladed Old Timer knife lay in one of his pockets.

Johnny Brown was bothered about these remains. Dingoes on the Canning Stock Route routinely dug up and ate buried tourist faeces yet James’ remains were so much less decomposed and scavenged than were Simon’s.

Brown reasoned that if the sinews, flesh and hair represented the process of being dead for four or five months, wouldn’t it have taken considerably longer for Simon’s bones to be bleached white? And wasn’t a flannelette shirt on the torso of James and a T-shirt nearby preposterous considering those hot days and nights? And why were the boys’ remains found with so few personal effects, as if they’d been removed?

And why, Brown thought, would the boys having trudged twenty kilometres through slippery dune sand lugging a three-metre length of 20mm thick rope and an awkward torch with a dead battery? These items would logically have been cast off long before they reached the point of collapse. Particularly by the lily white skinned Simon wearing thongs and without a hat and carrying the rifle.

Johnny Brown’s observations led him to speculate James and Simon hadn’t died at the same time in the same location. Like Russell Tremlett and others, he speculated that one was killed before going into the desert, in this case Simon.

Peter Carter also grew up on a farm in the southwest of Western Australia. He didn't share Brown’s speculation about Simon dying much earlier than James, but nevertheless thought the difference between the remains was strange. He says the decomposition of a skinned animal left in a paddock still took 18-24 months to be reduced to bleached bones.

“If an animal dies it takes more than 5 months for every skerrick of flesh, whatever, to disappear so the bones [become] absolutely clean...You won’t lose all the flesh on an animal [after five months]. [James] still had flesh; he still had clothing on.”

Peter says there was evidence of fire in the area that might have accounted for the condition of Simon’s remains, but couldn’t recollect if the bones were charred. The forensic examiner didn’t report any burnt bones.
Brown’s views so contradicted the official verdict, that like Jungarri T. Bradshaw he was written out of the story.

The recovery party pegged the ground where each bone was found of the two boys. Simon’s bones were spread over a fifty-metre radius, so Colin Main cordoned off a 75 metre square with ropes. John Hatton ordered a 24-hour guard over the entire site.

Johnny Brown felt a wave of anger go through his body when he saw a uniformed officer carrying one of Simon’s thigh bones, and using it as a fly swatter.

Sergeant Hatton told Tony Hunter they would guard one body that night. He knew Aboriginals disliked being around dead bodies. Peter Carter heard Tony say: “No fucking way, boss. I’m not camping with a dead man.”

Hatton replied: “No, I’m not asking you to stay on your own. I’ll stay. There will be two of us together. We’ll camp together; we’ll camp out here with them and pick them up in the morning.”

It rained and thundered that night as a monsoon storm raced across the Great Sandy Desert. Tony Hunter was sitting in the vehicle to stay dry and in a flash of lightning the bellowing face of a bull camel appeared at the window. Later, while they were sitting around the campfire it bellowed at them from the darkness. Tony was frightened: “We were all there. Awe, we shit. Yes we did. It bloody bellowed like I don’t know what.”

Chapter 23. The recovery

Colin Main carefully kept count, while he collected the bones of each boy and put them in separate black plastic bags. "Proper medical body bags" he later emphasised, "Not in rubbish bags" He said they were folded over, and appeared to be rubbish bags, because the bodies weren't intact. But Johnny Brown saw the bones put:

“... in black garbage bags...the cook went back to the camp and got the fucking garbage bags. He drove back to the camp... and got the garbage bags and come back while we were boiling the billy and had lunch.”
Detective Thomas William Salfinger arrived by air at 9:55am the next day, Tuesday 28 April. Deputy Andy Brett collected him from an outlying airstrip, and remembers a cool headed, unassuming, decent man. The tracks were still wet, and water poured through the doors as they drove through shallow lakes.

Later Tom Salfinger, John Hatton, Andy Brett and others came to the collective belief there were no suspicious circumstances in the deaths. Fingerprint tests on the gun and vehicle were unnecessary. Nor did they consider examining the red checkered shirt found closer to the vehicle. Andy believed he could almost read the boys’ minds after they had become bogged, then executed each logical but disastrous decision as their condition deteriorated.

Peter Carter called Maxine, the Clan Contractor receptionist, on the Codan radio in his vehicle. She phoned Channel Nine who offered $200 for his 36-shot roll of film. Peter said add another zero. They agreed. Unfortunately for Peter, John Hatton was listening from another vehicle, and angrily grabbed the camera and film. Colin Fuller thought it repugnant that Carter tried to sell pictures of Simon’s remains. Where the negatives and prints ‘ended up’ became another mystery.

The media were clamouring for death scene pictures, and arrived in helicopters, big brutes with long range fuel tanks that hovered like birds of prey feasting on the corpses below. The police were galled the media had such machines, while during the search they had fluttered about in a donated two-person chopper that required refueling every three hours.

The police covered the mortal remains with tarpaulins and blankets, but not before a chopper photographer got a shot of the ‘Red Headed Bomber’, his head now a fleshless skull.

Murray Cowper was disgusted when the photographs appeared in the ‘Northern Territory Times’ newspaper and ‘Time’ magazine:

“When the boys were found, the media circus that turned out, particularly the television media from across Australia were ruthless and demonstrated how ravenous they can be. The photo was a disgrace and demonstrated the low base some of the media outlets are prepared to stoop.”

Tony Hunter loaded the black bags onto the back of a truck and Andy Brett drove them to the airstrip:
“We loaded the bones up…and then we drove back to the main camp…spent the night there then I was driving them back out to the airstrip [next morning], and we ended up getting bogged because of all the rain. We spent about four hours bogged in a creek with the body bags on the back.”

The media helicopters withdrew to disgorge their product for the evening news. They couldn’t linger as fuel wasn’t available at Baga Camp where they were somewhat unwelcome anyway. The chopper pilot carrying Mary Mills had gotten lost on the trip out, and there were some sweaty moments getting back on course. The margin between running out of fuel and making it back to a fuel depot was very close.

But the desperation ebbed and within two or three days the police and media retreated. And that fateful patch of desert was left to the grinding and thumping seismic crews, who themselves would soon be gone. And the desert would be reclaimed by those yowling descendants of household pets padding over the ground stained with the residues of two teenage boys.

Chapter 24. Forensic identification and ‘end of story’

Dr Edward James Elkington examined the contents of the black bags on the morning of Wednesday 29 April 1987 at the Halls Creek hospital. He determined the boys were deceased, then signed the death certificates stating James was found 504 kilometres from Halls Creek and Simon 503kms. A SlingAir charter plane carried the remains to Derby then Ansett Airlines flew them to Perth on Thursday night 30 April 1987.

Forensic pathologist Dr D. A. Pocock determined in Perth the following day at 10:20am that Body 1 had died from a "bullet wound to the brain", and that it was "self inflicted". Amongst the remains of Body 1 were a white necklace and four earrings. Its left humerus, the single long bone from the shoulder to the elbow, and its left ulna, one of the two bones in the forearm, were missing. Dr Pocock expected a slight error in determining the length of the bones of Body 1 "due to animal activity on the end cartilages after death". No samples were taken. Fifteen minutes later he determined, somewhat mystically, that Body 2 had died from dehydration.
That afternoon Dr Frank Jordan Digwood examined Body 2. James had broken his arm prior to going to the Kimberley, and he wanted to compare the right humerus of Body 2 to see if it had previously been broken. But the right humerus and left ulna of Body 2 had not been recovered from the desert.

On Friday 8 May 1987, Dr Digwood superimposed a photograph of James’ face over a photograph of the skull of Body 2 and compared the dental characteristics, particularly James’ prominent eye teeth. Body 2 was James Annetts.

Dr Digwood had confirmed the previous Friday that the remains of Body 1 were those of Simon, when he compared Simon's Adelaide dental charts with the teeth in the bleached skull.

That same day, First Class Constable Nigel Paul Savage from Holden Hill police station in Adelaide told Pat Clark they'd identified Simon's remains. The bones were cremated in Perth on Tuesday 5 May and the ashes sent to Adelaide, and now reside in the Eastern Niche Wall No. 2 at Enfield Memorial Cemetery, marked: "In Loving Memory of Simon James Amos. Died December, 1986. Aged 17 years." Simon's belongings were sent to Pat via Australia Post and Comet transport. James’ remains were returned to the Riverina.

Those involved noted the clocklike precision by which the mortal remnants were collected, identified and returned to the parents, in contrast with the initial search.

The Western Australia Police couldn't wrap up the case quickly enough. Like circus clowns slipping down a greasy pole they clung to the idea the boys had stolen the Datsun to go home, and weren’t deserving of a genuine search. But such a stance was embarrassing when their own ranks questioned why searchers hadn’t gone south. Even the surveyors who found the Datsun had heard it was in that area. And if anyone thought the sorry saga had come to an end, they were sadly mistaken. It had just begun.

*Chapter 25. Memorial service*
Les had just returned home when news came through, and within hours he was back in the air with Chris Warren. At Halls Creek the police didn’t want Les to view his son’s remains at the hospital. Les didn't want to see them. The shock of seeing his overjoyed son in the prime of life, transformed to stinking pieces of rotting flesh and bones in a black bag, would have been too emotional, too messy for the authorities. They suggested he identify James from photographs. Yes, they were him. Sergeant Hatton told Les about the message on the water bottle, but urged him not to tell the media.

Chris Warren and Les returned to the motel. A media pack gathered outside. Les didn’t want to face them, but Chris said he should. Les walked outside. Mary Mills captured 1/50th second in the life of a man drained of hope, who finally knew he’d lost his first son. Behind his death-like mask of a face Les answered questions from journalists eager to market his grief to millions of hungry television viewers and newspaper readers.

One asked him about the water bottle message. Sergeant Hatton had briefed them on its discovery. In his overwhelming grief, a tiny section of Les’ mind watched dispassionately, and asked itself why Hatton had told the media, then asked him to keep quiet about it.

The police had displayed it after obligingly darkened the scratches with a pen so the message could better be captured by cameras. Especially the words: "My follt."

Hatton added his own spin: the boys had only themselves to blame; they were runaways, thieves. He didn't want anyone reversing this theme.

Les returned home, numb with grief. Dorothy Thompson organized the funeral. What was left of James was buried at the Griffith Lawn Cemetery. Michelle screamed during the ceremony, and tried to jump into his grave.

Back in the Kimberley James O'Kenny exemplified the pastoralists’ hard man realism. He owned and edited The Kimberley Echo and wrote:

“All the ranting and raving will not bring them back," and that "Amos and Annetts… were brought up in a softer society which advocates walking away from things that are too hard, and that the boss is not necessarily right and ones peer group consists of ill-informed morons.”

And:
“...a TV interview with some university wanker who suggested that foul play was involved in their deaths because they would be very unlikely to want to commit suicide.”

O’Kenny said that he and two native trackers had years before searched for and found two missing mining company men. One tried grabbing O’Kenny's holstered gun, then failing that had pointed his finger to his head indicating he wanted to be shot. Once rehydrated, he remembered nothing of the incident.

In Halls Creek the People’s Church, the United Aboriginal Mission and the Country Gospel Church raised money to bring the Annetts back for a memorial service.

George Hrenuvic gave his time to build the stone work for a brass plaque, for which Warren Dallachy, from the Poinciana Roadhouse, had collected money. Some refused, saying the boys were car thieves.

When Andrew Beezley came to town, young jackeroos at the pub who had worked at Flora Valley, told him of Loder tying them up with barbed wire and throwing them through louvred windows. Beezley told them he was there at the time, and none of that had happened. There were arguments and scuffles. He said he’d never seen Loder “raise his hand in anger to anyone” and was as compassionate to workers as one could be on a cattle station.

Les and Sandra returned to Halls Creek with Jason, Michelle and Joanne for an adventure with a dark undertone — not simply their brother's death, but the saga that would follow them every day for the next ten years.

The memorial ceremony at the Civic Centre on the 30th of May 1987 included traditional Aboriginal wailing, and was conducted by Pastor Tony Riches of the People’s Church, with two hundred in attendance. Robert W. Amos, Simon’s grandparents, Bob and Aileen and his aunt Camille were there, but not Pat Clark.

John Davis unveiled the plaque on the front lawn near the highway. The Annetts were overwhelmed by the generosity of Halls Creek.

Conspicuous by their absence were Giles and Vicki Loder and Peter and Florence Sherwin. Neither couple sent a card of condolence or made a phone call.
Bonnie Edwards later said the deaths were a stain on the land that could be cleansed by finding the truth.

On the day of the ceremony Sergeant Hatton went on the offensive in the Kimberley Echo newspaper. He said Sandra’s claim that police told her not to ring them as "they have better things to do than talk to her all day" was wrong. He said the Annetts were kept informed regularly and Superintendent Craddock was in constant contact. He said the water bottle message was James admitting that “the whole sorry episode is his fault”. Hatton hadn’t a whisper of criticism for Giles Loder or Peter Sherwin.

But other officers empathised with the Amos and Annetts families. John Drummond was fishing with Mark Perry when the bodies were discovered:

“We took our wives on the Fitzroy River. We were fishing; we had no children in those days. We all had a great time, caught a few barra, had a couple of beers, enjoyed ourselves because we [hadn’t] been in the bush for a fair while, got back in town, and they’d found them. It was like being hit in the back of the head with a hammer.”

John and Debbie Davis took the Annetts on a tour of Ruby Plains station, then to the water hole at Old Halls Creek. Jason went hunting with Peter Carmichael and shot a dingo, and later they went to Wolfe Creek Crater. The Tremletts and others paid for a flight over the Bungle Bungles, and Jason flew the plane for a few minutes. Stan and Clare and their son-in-law took them prospecting, while Russell Tremlett arrived with a big barramundi, and Bonnie Edwards gave them a piece of gold.

Four days after the memorial service, a Requiem Mass for the repose of the soul of Simon Amos was held at the Rostrevor Chapel in Adelaide. In his Reflection fellow student Heath Sampson said, “…we can be sure Simon would have fought out his existence to the bitter end in the harsh and unrelenting conditions, against all odds.” Heath knew Simon’s strength.

Chapter 26. Meanwhile, back at the ranch
There were small changes at Flora Valley station. After the boys’ disappeared the work week was reduced from seven to six days. This was welcomed by many jackeroos, but for Andrew Beezley it left him with time to round up horses and choose which ones he’d ride the following week.

Jungarri T. Bradshaw’s son Patrick and his mob were driving to their land, and as per pastoral protocols, they asked permission from Loder to pass through Sturt Creek station. He readily agreed and enquired if they needed anything. A little tobacco, Patrick replied, but instead of a pouch Giles brought out a long tin box of Log Cabin. "Was this the one who killed the gudia boys?" someone asked. He seemed so nice.

But helicopter pilot Anthony Ryan hadn’t noticed any evidence of a ‘softened’ work environment. Ten weeks after the memorial service he’d heard there was a vacancy at Birrindudu station. Having watched the Four Corners documentary, “Dead Heart”, he phoned Florence Sherwin who, according to Ryan, told him the program was ridiculous, and that he shouldn’t believe anything he saw on television.

Anthony’s mother was worried, and phoned Sandra Annetts, who warned against letting him go. “But how can I stop him?” she replied. He was thirty-years-old.

Knowing that a two-way radio in their vehicle would have saved James and Simon, Anthony insisted the plane be so equipped.

It did have a radio upon his arrival, but was removed thereafter, and Anthony found himself communicating with jackeroos by dropping stones with attached messages from the air.

He said when the Western Australia Department of Occupational Health and Safety sent investigators to Flora Valley station in response to the deaths, Loder sent the jackeroos across to Birrindudu station in the Northern Territory, which was out of the jurisdiction of the inspectors.

"Cattle were number one, people were number two," Anthony said, “thirty white people lived on top of a semi-trailer, and blacks were in a camp without running water.”
With some trepidation he gave notice in November 1987, after four months of employment. Some younger jackeroos afraid to give notice, asked if he’d ask Loder for their money, as well.

Graham Macarthur heard a similar tale when a Sherwin employee crossed the border from Birrindudu to borrow six welding rods. Graham said take a box, but the fellow said, “You’ll never get them back,” and added that he hadn’t been paid for two years. Such claims corroborated the experience of James who hadn’t been paid for two months, and was told on the evening Loder hit him with a spanner, that if he resigned he wouldn't get his back pay.

Chapter 27. The reluctant coroner

The Western Australian Coroner David Arnold McCann wasn’t in any rush to announce a public inquest into the deaths. They were lengthy expensive affairs, and mysterious deaths in the Kimberley were too frequent to give them full consideration. Administrative inquests were acceptable, but only exceptional cases received a public inquiry. The question was whether Simon getting a bullet through his forehead was of special interest.

The delay gave Les and Sandra the same kick in the gut dread as Sergeant Guy sending the searchers home on the third day, or Loder delaying calling for help.

Journalists pestered the Coroner's office daily. Premier Brian Burke upped the pressure by saying he'd wait for the Coroner's report before deciding about a Royal Commission.

Les Annetts used the megaphone of media scrutiny to portray McCann as protecting incompetent police and pastoral figures. The media understood their symbiotic relationship with Les, and jumped on board and amplified his grievance.

McCann relented on 5 October 1987 and announced a December hearing. Kelly Graham from Radio 6KY told the Annetts that a Coroner's office employee had told her that media pressure had forced the announcement.

McCann told interested parties that he would gladly receive any information or questions they'd like asked. Susan Maxwell from Legal Aid in Wagga Wagga responded for
the Annetts. She told McCann they were concerned about the circumstances surrounding
James’ employment and treatment by Loder, and the investigative process after his
disappearance. She enclosed a thick packet from Les and Sandra including names and
addresses of potential witnesses, media clippings and densely handwritten statements and
questions. The paperwork must have made McCann wince.

Les and Sandra arrived without a lawyer at the first Hearing in Perth on 8 December
1987. New South Wales Legal Aid refused them a representation because James’ death had
occurred interstate, while the Legal Aid Commission of Western Australia refused on the
grounds that a lawyer would not benefit them. The Coroner's office told them they wouldn't
need a lawyer anyway. The other parties ignored that advice.

Peter Sherwin hired Peter R. Momber, whose briefing required him to portray Giles
Loder positively, and absolve Sherwin from financial liability.

Dymphna Eszenyi appeared for Pat Clark. Her speciality included negligence and
inquests. She and was funded jointly by Legal Aid in South Australia and Western Australia.
Ron E. Birmingham, later Judge Birmingham of the Western Australia District Court,
represented Simon’s aunt and grandparents. The Amos family was divided, with rumours that
Pat Clark had isolated Simon’s sister from relatives who disagreed with her stance. Both
factions of the Amos family felt little solidarity with the Annetts.

Mrs Joyce Delane from the Compassionate Friends offered accommodation and use of a
vehicle for Les and Sandra in Perth.

Coroner McCann told the interested parties he expected to wrap things up in half an
hour, and that some would be disappointed, as he didn't expect to find answers to the deaths.
This left some wondering: why then hold an inquiry?

Autopsy and police reports were tendered, and witnesses pushed through, including
Shane Kendall who went unchallenged when he prevaricated about knowing whether Loder
had hit James with a spanner.

The legally naïve Annetts were flooded with disappointment, and believed another
whitewash was proceeding in front of their eyes. Most people are fatalistic when faced with
legal cover-ups, but Sandra hit the pavement running as she left the Court. She claimed
disingenuously that staff had fooled her and Les into thinking a lawyer was unnecessary, when in fact they were unable to get legal representation. And, she said, Shane Kendall was lying. He’d already admitted he’d seen James after Giles Loder hit him with a spanner.

Sandra’s new media campaign brought forth a white knight, popular Sydney barrister, Daniel J. Brezniak, and Tim Robertson, the brother of Geoffrey Robertson. Brezniak and Robertson prompted opposition leader Nick Greiner to ask New South Wales Premier Barry Unsworth in Parliament, why his Corrections Minister Rex Jackson received Legal Aid to defend himself against charges of accepting bribes for releasing prisoners early, while good citizens like the Annetts were refused assistance.

Unsworth hummed and hawed, then realising the political damage, called for help from Western Australia Premier Brian Burke, on 11 January 1988. Burke issued a media release two days later, promising an ex-gratia payment for lawyers for both the Annetts and the Amos families. After two weeks of wrangling, WA bureaucrats authorised the payments, just days before the 2nd of February 1988 Hearing in the east Kimberley administrative town of Kununurra, 360 kilometres north of Halls Creek. Premier Unsworth later wrote that New South Wales would pay both legal and air travel costs for future Hearings.

The semi-literate working class couple from the Murrumbidgee had finally assembled their legal team.

Nor were they disappointed, when Sydney barrister Kevin Murray stormed into their Kununurra hotel room two days before the Hearing. The booming 57-year-old had been a Major-General, and head of the Australian Army Reserve, and arrived with Colleen Donnelly, his sharp minded twenty-nine year old instructing solicitor, sent by Daniel Brezniak.

Colleen self-deprecatingly described her crucial role as having “basically just carried all the paper around. Shuffled notes and tried to make sure the statements were in front of Kevin. Stuff a junior barrister would do.”

She was thoroughly in awe of Murray and during a four-hour stopover in Darwin:

“...everybody knew Kevin. He was being stopped all the time; everybody was pleased to see him… from his time helping with cyclone Tracy, but it also meant he knew quite a lot about rescue efforts… Kevin Murray was a force of nature.”
Coming down from their respective hotel rooms, they ate breakfast in the restaurant where, one morning, Colleen realized she’d seen him before, in uniform, on Geoffrey Robertson’s television show, “Hypothetical”.

One observer felt Murray electrify the court room with his presence. And despite having just days to prepare, he appeared under little stress, and got on top of his briefing very quickly.

Colleen saw the Inquest being rushed through. They sat one day from 10am until 7pm, when sittings were usually less than five hours, due to the intense mental stress. Her memories of witnesses and the gallery are blurry, as she was facing frontward, and concentrating on putting the appropriate paperwork in front of Murray. She remembers one jackeroo carrying a briefcase, who said he’d been living on cornflakes, and was not allowed to return to the main station for more food.

Outside the court one of the Chooga men whispered to Les not to expect anything, because he'd seen McCann routinely decide in favour of the police on deaths in custody.

The gallery was predictably filled to capacity for the high profile case. Ten police officers sat with Giles and Vicki Loder and Peter Momber. More men than had searched for the boys. They listened carefully every day, especially to fellow officers giving testimony so if they were questioned they wouldn’t contradict each other. Noticeably absent from the witness list were the Aboriginals from Balgo and Yagga Yagga, including Jungarri T. Bradshaw and Johnny Brown.

Peter Momber's role was to minimise liability to Peter Sherwin, and that required defending Giles Loder. His spoiler role was to reduce the credibility of dangerous witnesses and, arguably, minimise credible evidence presented to the Coroner. The Annetts wanted Loder charged with murder, but Kevin Murray, whose life clock was rapidly ticking to an end, was more realistic, and sought a criminal negligence verdict against Sherwin and Loder. John Boland wasn’t impressed with Murray:

“…the QC was a bit mad that volunteered for the Annetts...something wrong with him. I thought he looked like an old alky but that might not have been the case...the questions he was asking; it just went on and on. It had nothing to do with that [death of the boys and the Inquest].”
Patrick Barry thought the same, when Murray tried every trick in his legal repertoire on his workmate, Noel Tones. The ‘Sergeant-Major’ coaxed witnesses into unfamiliar areas with pedantic questioning, then when they became nervous and confused he relentlessly hammered them with a barrage of repetitive accusations.

Chapter 28. A bad case of amnesia

Twenty-four-year-old Shane Francis Kendall, wearing his sly half-smile and thin moustache, wasn’t overly concerned when he walked into the Kununurra court room. His interview with the investigating police, and his testimony in Perth had been a breeze. While mildly annoyed at the inconvenience of a second appearance, he wasn't averse to soaking up another fifteen minutes of fame. But he had a premonition this ride wouldn't be so smooth. Every time he opened a newspaper or turned on the television, Jim’s parents popped up, and they were telling anyone who would listen, they thought his former boss was hiding something?

Kendall had a gregarious and excitable personality. You didn't mess around with him. He entered the pastoral industry after Simon and James, but within six months bewilderingly found himself head stockman over 5000 square miles of grazing country.

He might have commanded less than a dozen stockmen, whose main job was setting up and dismantling yards, but he was still the stock camp boss, the third most powerful person on the four stations. And when Vicki flew to the east coast to have her second child, and Giles flew to Birrindudu to supervise yard erection, Shane found himself in command of the Flora Valley homestead.

Giles Loder consistently put in 16-hour days, but he was ineffective at delegating tasks. A middle-aged Shane remembered from his home in Broome in 2009, that Giles:"…was pretty much a pretty hard working fellow. He used to just go off and seemed to do his own thing a lot and left us to our own devices.”

But it was such a long time ago, the younger Shane Kendall complained under oath to Kevin Murray on 4 February 1988. Over a year had passed since he'd worked at Flora Valley,
and no, he couldn't remember whether Giles told him to take the radio calls from the ‘bore runners’, or that he'd done it off his own bat.

Chris Rumpf testified that it was Kendall's job, but the latter couldn't even remember the call sign, maybe VJ, maybe VJY, something like that. Kendall remembered operating the Codan radio morning and evening on the crucial days of Tuesday and Wednesday when raising the alarm might have changed the outcome. Maybe he used it on Thursday night also, but not Monday night, he said. He thought scheduled call-in times were: "Pretty sure 7:00am and 6:00 - 6:30pm," but became so flustered by Murray's barrage of questions, that he couldn’t recollect these times a few minutes later.

Nor could Kendall remember if he’d waited at the radio during the allotted call-in times, or walked off after not getting a response. Later in his testimony he became more definite and said he spent "probably about twenty minutes", at the radio and that if he didn't get an immediate response, he left the radio room and returned five-minutes later, despite the risk of missing their call.

His confusion became pitiful, when he couldn't remember whether he'd heard on Wednesday other voices that would have indicated the radio was actually turned on and operational.

It wasn't his fault, he said, because he hadn't been given instruction on radio use or call-in protocols. He'd used the radio just once at Flora Valley, though he couldn't remember if this was before or after the boys disappeared.

Nor could he remember whether he knew how long he'd be looking after the radio. Or whether Loder told him the purpose of his Birrindudu trip, and how long he'd be away, or even what day he left.

Shane Kendall claimed he told Loder on Wednesday evening at Flora Valley that the boys hadn't called in, but couldn't remember Loder’s response, except that he would take a look around the next day. He remembers Loder was worried the next night, Thursday, but couldn’t remember if Loder told him he'd called the police or not.

Kendall said he saw Simon at Sturt Creek homestead on the afternoon of Monday 1 December 1986, the same day Loder saw James, but a few minutes further into his testimony
changed the time to Monday evening, then became confused, and was not able to recall whether it was morning or night. It was so long ago, he moaned, as if repeating a protective mantra.

His memory had been stronger a few months previously when he’d spoken to Chris Masters during the making of “Dead Heart”. He told Masters he’d had a cup of coffee with Simon, who had been very happy though homesick and looking forward to driving home in the Valiant Charger with James and himself.

Kendall told Murray that he believed he was Simon’s only visitor that day, when he delivered the weekly food ration. This saved Simon the impractical ten-hour return trip on the tractor to Flora Valley, but it meant he would miss Graham Heleurs’ fancy Wednesday meal with ice-cream. It also meant Simon was effectively relegated to being alone at Sturt Creek homestead, without a break for the foreseeable future. And like Loder with James, Kendall couldn’t remember any part of the conversation he’d had with Simon Amos on that fateful day.

When Loder flew in from Nicholson on Wednesday 3 December, after failing to start the homestead bore motor, he told Kendall that James was missing. Kendall went into the kitchen, where the other jackeroos and Therese Stansfield-Campbell asked him why the ‘bore runners’ were absent. Did Kendall tell them he'd delivered food to Sturt Creek two days previously, and that was why Simon was absent? He couldn't remember.

Therese remembered. She didn't hear Kendall mention them until Thursday morning. Did he forget to tell the others, or perhaps he didn’t see Loder until the following day? One fact Kendall certainly forgot to tell police in his original statement was that the boys had missed their radio safety call-ins.

Perhaps a gentler questioning would have been more effective: Mr Kendall, you took the food down to help him, didn’t you? You tried to contact him by radio to help him. You did your best. Where did you meet Simon at the homestead that Monday? Did you have a cup of tea? What did you talk about? Was the boy upset about anything?

But Shane Kendall gave nothing away, except the appearance of deception. When released from the court, he avoided eye contact with the Annetts, and ran from the building,
back into anonymity, and hoping never again to be required to give an account of his actions during those crucial three days of his life.

Chapter 29. That other case of acute memory loss

Most journalists prowling outside the court missed Giles Loder on his first appearance. Rather than the clichéd villain with a busted nose and scarred face he appeared more an innocuous public servant, in neat slacks and shirt over his medium build body. Vicki wore a modest dress and hat, and appeared the dutiful wife and mother that she was. With heads held high they walked past the photographers, assuming nothing but their own dignity. The fact that two kids had died due to Giles’ incompetence, appeared to be the last thought on their minds.

Not that he could turn back. Too much bad water had passed under the metaphorical bridge, and the flow of negative media reports wasn’t decreasing. It was doubtful whether Giles Loder could have stemmed them, even if he’d been frank about his systematic use of violence against the younger jackeroos.

What put him in especially bad odour was his callous attitude towards the deaths. When Murray reminded him of Mr and Mrs Wallace finding James bleeding and dazed under a tree, rather than expressing condolence in the presence of the deceased boy’s parents, his reaction was that James was "probably speeding". While many Kimberley pastoralists saw death and injury as acceptable risks on cattle stations, most of the public did not, and Loder’s lack of sympathy propelled him into the position of media scapegoat, from which he never escaped.

He was otherwise a skilled witness, who avoided direct responses and answered questions with: "I feel I did"; "I don't recall that"; "I could have done" or "That is possible." Amnesia is a helpful disability, when trying to avoid self-incrimination, but staying vague for a day and a half, under the withering attack of a fearsome Sydney barrister, was no mean feat. As if intuiting digital technology he referred to his boss as Peter, to avoid peppering his testimony transcripts with Sherwin's full name. It was ironic that while having such high control over his words, he used brute force rather than subtlety while managing his employees.
But what Loder couldn’t conceal was the suspicious coincidence, that both he and Kendall suffered the same amnesia over the same three day period, when each had been the last to see one of the boys alive. Neither could remember what happened at these meetings, nor could they produce witnesses who could verify that James and Simon were still alive at their homesteads on that Monday. And Kendall’s rapid promotion over men with more experience, only added to the suspicion.

Loder couldn't remember if he told anyone the boys were missing, when he returned to Flora Valley from Sturt Creek homestead with the bore motor, on Thursday morning. Nor could he remember whether he told police that James was also missing, when he phoned about Simon. This meant that he waited forty-two hours in blistering weather before telling police James was missing, when twenty-four hours without water could be enough to kill a human.

Nor could Loder remember details of what should have been a lively discussion on Monday at Nicholson homestead, considering the spanner incident the previous fortnight, and that James was skinning a duck when he should have been tending the bores.

James had fallen behind keeping the troughs and ‘turkey nests’ full of water, and had required help from Kendall on three occasions. He’d also been doing 400 kilometre round trips to visit Simon at Sturt Creek, and the Caranya store. On one occasion he found a stone on the side of the road, with a message from Simon saying Loder was in the vicinity. Loder had discovered these visits, plus the swimming trips to Mistake Creek, probably from Shane Kendall, though it was common knowledge amongst the jackeroos. One might have expected a lively conversation on that fateful Monday visit, but Loder couldn’t remember a single detail.

Loder’s mind went blank for the period from Monday lunch to Thursday morning, when action might have saved the boys’ lives, and for which he hadn’t witnesses to verify his whereabouts.

He couldn’t say one way or the other whether he told Kendall to operate the radio while he was away. This memory loss absolved Kendall from blame, and defused a potentially dangerous witness, while Kendall’s own amnesia equally ‘absolved’ Loder.
Station protocols required that someone physically visit an outcamp when a ‘bore runner’ missed two calls. When Kevin Murray asked if the boys had missed ten calls Loder said he didn't think so, then later changed his answer to "possibly so", then further qualified that answer, by saying that Shane Kendall was attending the radio while he was away.

Arguably, the two most important witnesses at the Inquest, and with the highest duty of care, remembered practically nothing about what were three of the most significant days of their lives.

More anomalies littered Loder's time and place estimations. He began the drive in darkness from Nicholson to Sturt Creek homestead to pick up a bore motor, but stopped at 11pm, half way between Flora Valley and Sturt Creek. He arose between 3am and 4am, then reached Sturt Creek station homestead at about 5am, but after finding the bore motor difficult to load, sought out Simon, who was gone.

He felt Simon’s bed and found it cold, then after looking around the homestead buildings and finding the tractor still in the shed, returned to Simon’s room and read his letters, then loaded the bore motor and drove the 120kms back to Flora Valley, where he arrived at 7am, an incredible amount of activity in the space of two hours. Even more astounding was how Simon’s unposted letter to his father, read by Loder that morning, managed to be franked that same day at the Kununurra post office. Why would he seal the envelope and post the letter to the father, from a boy gone missing? “I wasn’t aware that I had posted it. I probably did…," he told Kevin Murray.

Loder showed his reactive capacity, when Chris Rumpf claimed the food at Nicholson was inadequate and spoiled, and he threw much of it away. Rather than explaining the food allocation he said Rumpf was the type who would "wolf down" his week's food in the first few days, and that the farm boy was probably a "gun nut", due to his ownership of two or three guns.

"Liar, liar," muttered respected local Aboriginal Bobby Skeen, in a background chorus to Loder’s testimony.

 Asked whether he told police he'd begun a ground search on Thursday, Loder replied: "I could have, I'm not sure," then when contradicted by a police report, replied: "I believe that could be right." But had he arranged a ground party? "No," he said, with uncharacteristic
frankness. Why he hadn’t enlisted the help of the jackeroos was never explained. The only rescue attempt by a Flora Valley jackeroo came later in court when Andrew Tanion Beezley tried to save Loder.

Loder called the police twice on Thursday 4 December, the second time saying Simon was actually missing. He testified he also told police on Thursday that James and the ute were also missing, but Constable Colin Main contradicted this saying he first heard James was missing when Loder told him on Friday morning at Sturt Creek homestead, when the three man search began.

Loder was generally unfazed by his 14 hours of interrogation from Sergeant Kermode and Kevin Murray. Murray tried every trick he knew to rattle Loder, and rather than becoming louder, Loder’s voice simply faded away. Just once he exploded and Murray countered: “Don’t yell at me. I’m not one of your employees.”

Outside the court, Vicki and Giles were in good spirits. They had lunch with Kimberley Echo journalist John A. Turner, then afterward during a conversation with them, outside the Sergeant's quarters at the police station, John became convinced Giles was guilty of a dark deed.

Chapter 30. The man who didn't need an alibi

Loder initially testified he’d returned from fighting fires at Birrindudu on Tuesday 2 December, then advanced the day to Wednesday, thus streamlining his ‘alibi’.

Suspicions might have dissipated, if he’d detailed his whereabouts hour-by-hour from Friday 28 November to Friday 5 December. Witness testimony could have triangulated his whereabouts during periods when he was alone, by showing who saw him last, and who saw him next, and where. This laborious process might have exonerated him from suspicions, but neither Coroner McCann nor Peter Momber felt the need to interrogate him in this direction.

McCann made it clear that Loder was not a murder suspect, so he accepted his unsupported testimony of flying to Birrindudu from Nicholson at midday on Monday after
speaking to James, to supervise yard erections in preparation for Sherwin's ‘black fella’ mustering crew.

These were superior trackers and stockmen who worked and lived in harsher conditions, and were kept segregated from the ‘white trash’ jackeroos, lest they compare food, working conditions and pay.

“Don’t shut the gate for no black bastards,” Russell Linke remembered Loder yelling, when he’d waited for a ‘black fella’ vehicle to pass through a gate before closing it. Linke said Loder told John and Debbie Davis not to talk to them.

Danny Verschurren, 25, Andrew Beezley, 19, Wade Morphett, 19, Tony Gordon, 17, Brett Goodman, 17 and Luke Giumelli, 16, had worked through the weekend at Birrindudu in low-forties temperatures, setting up iron fence panels left in the sun.

Loder claimed he saw from his plane, lightning hitting the ground and starting fires, and this took his attention from yard building. He sent Beezley and Verschurren back to Flora Valley. Danny returned with a grader, and Andrew with twenty more yard panels. Loder said they extinguished the fires by Wednesday, upon which he returned to Nicholson, and found James missing. This was his alibi for his inaction when radio calls from the boys stopped.

The thorn in his scattered recollections was Christopher Vivian John Rumpf. Rumpf grew up on farms in Queensland, and was less dazzled by the glamour of being a jackeroo than were the city boys. He testified that the other jackeroos at the Wednesday slap-up meal had asked Shane Kendall why Simon and James hadn't arrived, and that Kendall told Loder that evening they hadn't called in for a couple of days.

Rumpf disputed Loder’s alibi for the period, after the latter saw James, and later discovered he was now missing. Sergeant Kermode asked: "Wasn't Giles away at Birrindudu fighting fires at that time?"

"I don't think so," replied Rumpf.

"You do not think so or you do not know? asked Kermode.

"From what I recall there was one fire when I was there and there was myself, Giles, Tony and someone else went down to fight the fire."
“Was that before the boys disappeared or after the boys disappeared?”

“After the boys disappeared I think,” replied Rumpf.

Therese Stansfield-Campbell stated to police at GoGo station in late 1987 that: "I think the boys went missing during the Territory fire" then recollected differently at the Inquest. She thought the yard assembly at Birrindudu happened "…a little bit after…” the boys' disappearance and “…I think they were missing on a date before that fire started up."

Danny Cornelius Verschurren had worked several years in the pastoral industry prior to Flora Valley. He was the de facto overseer before the promotion of the inexperienced Shane Kendall. There was no love lost between the two men. Danny said it was well known that Simon, James and Shane Kendall were planning to leave in Simon's Valiant Charger on 17 December for the Christmas holidays, implying, so why would they try to drive to the other side of Australia in the station ute?

Danny also agreed the fires and the disappearance happened at different times, but it isn’t clear from his testimony which event happened first: "There was a fire, but that was previous to, it would’ve been a couple of weeks, about a fortnight or so back"

But he still challenged Loder's alibi for those critical 48 hours, during which he had to have been somewhere, and it wasn't fighting fires, said Verschurren. Kevin Murray asked Danny where Loder was on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of 1-3 December 1986. Danny replied for each day: "I don't know." If Loder wasn't there for those days, and if the fires had occurred at other times, then where was he?

Peter Momber knew Verschurren’s recollections were too dangerous to further interrogate, so he played the spoiler. He would discredit Verschurren as to why he left Flora Valley. “You had a fight?” he asked Danny, whose life would end at the end of a rope nine years later.

“A fight, too, yeah. So what was…,” Danny replied, but Momber cut him off

“Yes, with Shane Kendall?”

“Yeah. What was wrong with that? I never left…,” Momber cut him off.

“There's nothing wrong with it at all, except that fight occurred at Christmas time?”
“Yes.”

“It was over a woman?”

“No, it wasn't.”

“Therese Stansfield?”

“It was not over a woman that I can remember.”

“Can't you?”

“No.”

The Coroner interrupted and said: “I don't know that one should necessarily involve people who aren't here to…”

“Sitting in the rear of the court, sir,” Momber interjected.

Andrew Tanion Beezley came from a Darling Downs dairy farm in Queensland, before starting work at Flora Valley in early November 1986. When he testified on 31 May 1988, he'd been working eighteen-months as Simon's replacement ‘bore runner', and was the last jackeroo left from the James and Simon era.

As a Loder loyalist, he dropped a bombshell saying that Loder flew to Birrindudu on Thursday 4 December, and told the jackeroos, "The boys are missing. You'll have to come back and help out if you can." Was this the same week as the fires, the wily Murray asked him. "No, the fire was long before that," Beezley replied, not realising the significance of his answer.

Murray pounced like a cat, saying to the Coroner that Beezley's evidence "throws grave doubt" on Loder's claim that he was fighting fires during the crucial forty-eight hours, during which he couldn’t account for his whereabouts. McCann interrupted Murray, saying it had been a long day, and Beezley could continue his testimony the next morning. Murray protested. He knew he’d struck gold and wanted to continue. He was indestructible, he told McCann, but the Coroner was unmoved. He warned Beezley not to discuss the case with anyone, and to return to court the following morning.
Beezley left the courtroom, then went to 'The Big Rooster' for a chicken meal, then phoned his parents, after which he spent the rest of the night at Hotel Kununurra. He returned to court the next morning, a ‘new man with a new story’.

He'd been thinking, he told the court, that the fires and the disappearance were much closer in time than he'd previously testified, even days apart, possibly in the same week. "It couldn't have been more than a couple of days," he swore then, as if struck by the same amnesia that had slipped over Kendall and Loder, his mind fogged over, and any memory of his two trips to Birrindudu: the one assembling the yard panels, and the other fighting the fires, became lost in time. He denied having spoken to anyone the previous evening.

Murray boomed like an angler who had landed a fish, only to see it slip between his hands and fall back into the river. The Coroner admonished Murray, who replied that: "I will be as quiet and non-aggressive as I can," then attempting the same tactic Momber used on Danny Verschurren, he asked Beezley how much he earned at Flora Valley. Beezley didn't see the relevance of what he was paid, but the Coroner did, and stopped Murray dead in his tracks. He knew exactly what Murray was doing.

It was a shame McCann didn’t direct Andrew Beezley to disclose his amount of pay. In later years Andrew’s memory was hazy, but he recollected it had been $2000 a month, of which he received $1400, after what he called expenses were deducted, such as room and board, and purchases from the homestead store. It was never clear how much exactly James was getting, but it was a little over $100 a week. The difference would have taken a little explaining, though Andrew was a more productive jackeroo.

When the floods washed away a section of fence at Birrindudu, and cattle were getting out, the break had to be mended right away. Andrew Beezley tracked across a flooded creek on an inflated tyre tube, walked a kilometre through knee deep mud, and fixed the fence. He was a ‘can do’ man who threw himself into the job.

Peter Momber clamorously attempted to change the spin of Murray’s questioning, by introducing a list of dates from Loder's dated work diary, supplied to him by George Cridland, Sherwin Pastoral Company’s corporate lawyer. The pages were offered as proof that Loder was at the fire in the first three days of December 1986. But Andrew Beezley said days and dates meant little to him, so Momber proposed to read sections of the diary, like spoon
feeding a baby, and Beezley could either agree or disagree with the dates. He read a page where Loder described being at the fire.

Murray raged: "...it's wrong to lead a witness who is partial to your cause. Indeed, it's a breach of the evidentiary rules...if you want to get to the truth and you have a partial witness, you don't read him a page and pause while he grunts, 'yes'." He argued that Beezley had already said that days and dates meant nothing to him so how could reading sections of Loder’s diary to him be helpful? And, anyway, Beezley wasn't a real witness; he was George Cridland's offered witness. The Coroner hadn't actually subpoenaed him, like the other witnesses, real witnesses, Murray implied.

McCann said all witnesses were his witnesses, and allowed Momber to read pages from Loder’s diary. But Beezley proved not such a pliable witness, and said he couldn't remember the significance of many of the dates.

The credibility Beezley gained with this admission took a hammering, when he praised his boss of the past eighteen months, and with whom he might be sharing a meal that evening.

Loder was an approachable boss, he said. You could talk to him. When he replaced Amos at Sturt Creek station, Beezley said he found a cupboard full of food, the electrical generator worked perfectly, and the radio, what a radio. "I’d get through all the time," he testified. And during those call-ins Loder would ask if he needed anything, and would visit twice a week, even three or four times a week. It was a dream job, for which he had no complaints.

The media gave little credence to Beezley's new improved memory, or his praise of Loder, and instead focused on his first day of testimony. Margot Lang’s article in the West Australian newspaper screamed: "Station manager's evidence disputed". She wrote that Andrew Beezley and Danny Verschurren both said the bushfire was a week or two before the boys went missing. Mary Mills snapped a hawkish profile shot of Beezley smoking a cigarette.

But city journalists knew little of the relationships on pastoral stations. One afternoon, an hour before dark, Giles called Andrew Beezley on the radio, and asked him to bring some meat to the homestead. No problems. Andrew could shoot a beast and have the meat ready in two hours.
While knuckling a back leg to remove a hoof, and in a race against the dark, Andrew’s knife slipped and cut through the bone of his thumb, then slipped further and stabbed his leg. He bled badly and went into shock. A jackaroo with him tied up the wounds and drove the vehicle over the track to Flora Valley homestead.

Andrew later remembered: “I was in shock and passed out for half of it. I can remember sitting at the station there, Vicki Loder giving me pain killers, and wrapping me thumb up, and trying to get hold of the Flying Doctor, and tightening the tourniquet on me leg to keep it closed.”

The Flying Doctor was on another job, but could meet them at Halls Creek. Vicki drove Andrew over the mountain range as he slipped in and out of consciousness. He remembers getting needles in his thumb and joint at the Halls Creek hospital, then “getting flown off to Derby in the plane and when I woke up in Derby, me thumb was sewn back on me hand, and I still have full use of me thumb.” He says of Giles and Vicki: “They were definitely not evil people. She was one of the nicest ladies I ever met.”

Chapter 31. “A cuff behind the ear”

Giles Loder made an example of Paul Griffith in October 1986. The jackeroos saw it. Loder hadn’t a choice: Paul talked back to him. Twenty-four year old Jonathan James Bruce Davis saw it. Davis was a famous rodeo performer and a real jackaroo with a wide range of skills. He swore in a police statement that:

“Giles was making fun of Paul Griffith about a hunting knife that Paul used to wear. I was nearby at the time and Paul Griffith told Giles Loder to “Get Fucked”. Paul then walked away. Giles ran up behind Paul and punched him on the back of the head. Paul fell to the ground. While Paul was on the ground Giles kicked Paul three or four times in the stomach and chest. I also saw Giles punch Paul three or four times about the head while Paul was on the ground.”

John and his wife took Paul into town the next day. The police didn't become involved. Moderate beatings were a means of maintaining discipline on cattle stations. The police rarely
took action providing the attacks were perpetrated downward: a jackaroo beating up a station manager or an owner was not acceptable.

Loder testified in the Kununurra court room that he'd "cuffed him behind the ear", and that:"If my integrity and my leadership was in any way checked or overruled and if I was incited into a position, I would protect myself or arrest the situation.”

He was good with words.

Davis also recalled the night jackaroo Brendan Berlin rushed into his quarters, saying he'd told Loder he was clearing out the next day with stock inspector Peter Carmichael. Berlin said Loder pushed him backwards into a thorny hedge then punched him in the face. Davis saw Berlin's ripped shirt and scratched back. "I put my finger on his chest. He went back into the hedge," explained Loder.

Chris Rumpf saw the lead up to the spanner incident in the Flora Valley workshop three weeks before James died. Loder said he was "getting up" the boy over a hairline fracture in the oil sump of the Datsun ute.

The transfer box that switched it from two to four-wheel drive had been damaged by another driver, so mechanic David Reid disconnected it, leaving the Datsun in permanent two-wheel drive. Loder said the problem had flared up again, when a component began slapping against the oil sump, and James had continued driving it back to Flora Valley, causing the thin crack in the sump. However Chris Rumpf heard them arguing over a battery clamp, the battery being the mechanical failure that doomed the boys later out in the desert. Loder recollected at the Inquest: “I was exceedingly angry. I was angry because he had done the damage…he had done such a stupid thing…the verbal backlash…went on for a period of time.”

Loder told James he would take the repair costs out of his pay. James said he wasn't going to stay long anyway, whereupon Loder said if he left he wouldn't be paid what was already owed. Loder said: "Jim was very upset… had broken down and cried." The sixteen-year-old was not a hard man.

Loder told Rumpf to go to his room, or to the kitchen, while Shane Kendall watched the scene unfold. Danny Verschurren listened from outside the shed: "James was giving a week's
notice and Giles said to him, 'If you give a week's notice, if you leave I'll take out damage from your wages for the vehicle.'"

Therese Stansfield-Campbell saw a small red mark on James’ forehead, and he looked as if he'd been crying. "Giles threw a spanner. I don't know whether it was on purpose or not and it hit James on the forehead," she said. Chris Rumpf described it as a larger red mark on his forehead. Graham Heleur said James came into the kitchen with blood pouring from his nose.

Shane Kendall saw it differently. It was an accident. It was done, Kendall stated at the Perth Hearing, "…not in a malicious way. One day he was fixing the car and threw a spanner and it hit Jim in the face…Throwing it to him, and he had his face bent down, and happened to have it in the path of a flying spanner." Andrew Beezley also witnessed the event and thought it an accident. What no one said was whether Loder apologised to James, or simply continued with the repairs.

But the incident left little impression on Loder. Did he hit James with a spanner? "To the best of my knowledge, no," he replied, and when confronted with a contrary witness statement, said: "I feel that is incorrect."

But Loder had a reputation for throwing things. Chris Rumpf recalled a story from Tony Gordon that:

“Tony was sitting on the bull-bar and Giles Loder was up this windmill trying to fix the windmill and apparently this hammer came down from the windmill. He [Tony] said that Giles threw this hammer at him and it missed him by a couple of inches.”

**Chapter 32. Torn between two loyalties**

Beautiful in grief, the usually awkward Deborah Maree Davis walked into the Kununurra courtroom with her husband, Jonathon James Bruce Davis, their heads bowed in shame.
John wearing his silver hand-sized belt buckle, peered up from a hung head with cat-like sneakiness, as if caught in some guilty act. This wasn’t the seasoned rodeo performer people knew and loved.

The pastoralists were sick of being accused of racism, and hearing biased stories of one-sided battles against the indigenous people. John was born and bred in the bush, and was expected to defend his kin, and his Melbourne wife was expected to follow.

Trapped between compassionate sentiment and their unspoken duty to defend John’s people, they chose the latter. The mantle of shame that others should have worn was transferred onto their shoulders, like having to wear the smelly, ill-fitting clothing of strangers.

John had initially made no secret to journalists of his disgust at the violence and work conditions at Flora Valley station. He told police that: “I left because I was not happy about the way the station was being run and the way the station hands were being treated.”

But he changed his tune before the capacity-filled court room, where he blamed the jackeroos, saying 50% of them weren't worth their feed, and not up to the long hours. You could have heard the silent cheers from the pastoral hinterland. It was their truth.

His previous view that "…it is unusual to leave young inexperienced youths on stations," took a new convoluted course that boys shouldn't be left alone on stations, but that experience determined if someone was a boy and, "James wasn't a boy; James was a responsible fellow…” therefore it was acceptable putting James alone on Nicholson station. Similarly, the childlike Simon became "Quite capable of doing the bore runs." Setting up yard panels for two months had made them non-boys, he implied, being astute enough not to call them men at ages 16 and 17. Then in a display of graciousness that drew others to him, John Davis agreed that James had cried when he burnt his finger.

Davis previously stated to police that he’d witnessed Loder punch Paul Griffith from behind, then kick him on the ground, but in his new version for the inquest he hadn't seen or heard anything: "I don't really know what was said because…I was probably 30 or 40 yards away, underneath of truck." It was “Griffo” who told him what happened.
Amateur footage broadcast in the “*Dead Heart*” television documentary showed cattle in a Sherwin mustering yard lying in the mud twitching and dying while one staggered about with a foot missing. Davis had previously expressed his disgust that two hundred beasts had collapsed and died during a Sherwin muster. He told journalist Chris Masters that in contrast to a Sherwin muster there hadn’t been any deaths in the yard at Ruby Plains, but at the Inquest Davis rationalised that two hundreds deaths was commiserate with the huge numbers of animals mustered.

Brendan Berlin's abrupt departure also took on a new interpretation. Instead of leaving the next day, as previously stated, Davis said Berlin had parted on friendly terms a few days later. There wasn't any rush.

Davis didn't mention 16-year-old Maurice Roy Lewis. The Commonwealth Employment Service in Perth referred Lewis to Flora Valley station in September, 1986. Vicki Loder told him inexperience was not a problem, and he’d be paid $80 a week plus board. Lewis cancelled his dole payments in Perth, then caught the Ansett Pioneer bus to Halls Creek. James Annetts picked him up at 4:30am and they arrived at Flora Valley at 7:30am.

Lewis spent that day on the bore run with the person he later identified from a photograph as probably being James Annetts.

He met head stockman John Davis on his second day, describing him as "medium to solid build, black curly hair and white sunburned skin". They set up holding yards from metal panels, then Davis told him to use the jack to level the cattle scales and:

“As I had never done this before I questioned the head stockman as to what to do. A heated argument followed and he then knocked me to the ground and proceeded to punch me about the chest, face and back. He said that I was fucking useless. I requested to be taken back to Flora Valley Station so I could leave. He refused and said that I wasn't going anywhere.”

Things didn’t get better. When traveling on the back of the truck, James 'Jimbo' Ghilotti urged Lewis to hang off the side by his fingers to see how long before he was knocked off by a tree. Later, Jimbo "…tried to throw me off the back of a moving truck."

Lewis stated later that evening:
“… I was washing myself in a creek near the camp when Jimbo approached me carrying a boning knife. He told me that he would throw it at me if I didn't swim for it. I swam over to the other side and remained there for about ten minutes. I was very scared of the lot of them at this stage. The head stockman arrived and told Jimbo to do something and Jimbo left…

During the evening he [Jimbo] threatened me again…He said that no one knew I was here and that no one would care if anything happened to me. He said that they would all stick together on one story…The next day we returned to Flora Valley station. I went to see Mrs Loder for my pay. She asked me if I thought I deserved the money and I said that I worked hard over the last few days, working twelve hours a day. She paid me $29.00 and told me to pack my gear.”

Maurice remembered on the way back into town: "... the red haired guy was having a bit of a joke with everyone. He appeared to get on well with all the others. He was happy and in good spirits."

Debbie Davis was an exceptional woman, with the peculiar habit of going blank in the eyes while nodding dopily in agreement to her own statements. Journalists initially thought her mentally deficient. Her rambling answers lulled them into somnambulism, whereupon she would stop on a knife-edge, and the interviewer would be snagged by her re-focused eyes, like an insect in a trap.

Her spectacular about-face at the inquest left her husband in the dust for its sheer gall. She tossed logic out of the equation, and appeared unfazed while she contradicted her earlier condemnations of life at Flora Valley. Les and Sandra Annetts were enthralled and dismayed by her frightening performance.

During four media interviews Debbie had condemned conditions at Flora Valley. She said that James and Simon "…could go four or five days without one of them calling in and nobody seemed to care." In a television interview she said Paul Griffith "… was belted up by the manager…Oh, there were no marks on him, but he was given a fair hiding." Of another incident, she said: "My husband came home one day and said he'd seen one young lad get a beating, the likes of which he'd never seen in 10 years of working on stations."

But under oath she swept away her print media statements as “misquotations” or that she’d never even made them. Kevin Murray quoted her from “Dead Heart”: 
“Take, take, take from all the workers all the time. Men work 24 hours per day. No thanks for a job which proved to be demoralising. Even a bit of appreciation helps. A kick in the pants is all you get.”

"It was said less strongly than that," Debbie explained to the court. Just once she'd known the men to work 24-hours without getting adequate overtime payments.

Sandra Annetts was aghast. John and Debbie had been so kind to them and their children then "…all of a sudden started denied saying things they [had previously] said to us." Sandra said Debbie later told her they had to live in Halls Creek.

They’d moved to town after eight months at Ruby Plains. Debbie worked in Bonnie and Malcolm Edwards’ supermarket, and as a travel consultant at the Trading Post. John ran the power station and repaired saddles at home.

But life back in town wasn’t good. Their marriage was collapsing. John returned to Ruby Plains, but he couldn't face working with young jackeroos, preferring instead to drive the grader where he'd be alone most of the day. After they divorced he remarried a woman also named Debbie. They had two kids and lived next door to Bonnie Edwards. When that marriage fell apart, John became increasingly tormented, then shot himself in Darwin. Debbie told people she was going to become a medical doctor.

They had defended the legacy of the white pioneers, then hunkered down and accepted the blows that should have gone to others.

Chapter 33. The future search and rescue chief

Sergeant John Hatton ironically corroborated Les Annetts’ accusations the searching had become little more than looking out of windows, while doing other business. Hatton defended police efforts saying:

“We had contact with all the aeroplanes in the area. It was my instructions they were to look out for this white Datsun…There was an aeroplane that flies from Halls Creek to Balgo south every day to the little Aboriginal settlement of Kirrakurra …There are aeroplanes flying
to the Bungles; there are mineral planes in the air so there was quite a lot of surveillance
done…”

State Emergency Service volunteers from Halls Creek with 4WD vehicles, some
equipped with radios, had been available in Halls Creek. They lived and worked in the bush,
and stayed alive through their knowledge of the geography and survival techniques. Sergeant
Jim Guy rejected them, testifying that, "unskilled civilians would really create a danger for
them."

Kevin Murray questioned Guy's expertise. It was a year after the remains had been
collected. "How do you get to Yagga Yagga from Balgo?"

"I've no idea," Guy responded, without a trace of embarrassment.

"Is Yagga Yagga south of Balgo?" Murray asked.

"I'm not aware of where Yagga Yagga is," said Guy.

Guy had initially denied the police maps were unreliable, yet when asked about the
seismic tracks, said: "...I'm still not aware they exist."

"You mean you haven't been there and walked over them?" Murray asked.

"That's exactly right." Guy replied, then admitted the maps used by police had been
inaccurate.

John Hatton had conducted the next ten weeks of the search, after he replaced Guy near
the end of January 1987. But he knew so little of the initial search that he believed most SES
volunteers had been on holiday during this period from the 5th to the 7th of December.

He mounted a spirited defense of the local station, as Murray hammered him with a
withering list of questions, asking if police in future should liaise with local groups that know
the area in question, maintain a diary of events, get every available plane in the air, have
quick access to money to hire planes, rescue equipment and personnel, equip themselves with
the latest seismic line maps from the mining companies, improve radio communication, and in
the end examine where failure occurred. Everything Murray implied they hadn't done. John
Hatton, indirectly, but graciously, agreed.
"I suppose I should have added to the list that in future we won't stop the search on day two, will we?" Murray added sarcastically. Coroner McCann relieved Sergeant Hatton of the need to reply.

Chapter 34. That curious death ute

The Datsun ute with number plates HC 529 was manufactured in 1983, but after three years of pounding over rough tracks it had become an unreliable heap of junk. Its registration expired in July 1986, soon after Sherwin purchased the stations. This put the liability of driving an unregistered truck on ‘bore runner’ James Annetts, who didn't even have a driver's license.

Automotive engineer Police Sergeant Neville Douglas Stokes examined the Datsun at Halls Creek three weeks after it was returned from the desert. He reported it was operating from its rear wheels only, and that the fuel gauge, horn and dashboard warning lights were inoperative. The speedometer and odometer had stopped at 46192. The ignition switch was also broken, so the driver needed to reach under the bonnet and cut the fuel supply to turn the motor off.

The electric diesel injection control arm had been disconnected, making the engine difficult to start, and its low oil pressure warning circuit chronically shut down the motor. Finding an auto electrician in the east Kimberley was prohibitively expensive, so it had been disconnected.

The fuel filter was clogged, and this starved the engine of diesel, making the motor stall when driven above 80kmh, or in the case of the boys, when revving the motor in low gear to climb that last sand dune.

The motor could be restarted by manually filling the fuel line using a plunger pump attached to the motor. The air was bled through an opened valve, which was closed when the escaping air was replaced by fuel.
The battery was never fully charged, due to constant cranking of the stalled engine. Not that any amount of driving could fully charge it, because earlier it had overheated, and the plastic battery casing had melted into the boiling electrolyte that then exploded against the inside of the bonnet. This left two big holes in the top of the battery that exposed the lead plates. Hence a spare battery lying on its side in front of the ute, in the desert.

Peter Momber attempted to shift blame from Sherwin Pastoral Company, when Loder said that Greg Wheeler the new Flora Valley mechanic had driven the Datsun from Halls Creek back to the station without any problems.

Wheeler was never called as a witness, but Loder's claim challenged both the jackeroos’ and Stokes’ estimation of the Datsun’s roadworthiness.

Loder said he knew nothing of the motor frequently stalling, and that he thought David Reid had "… put on a new fuel filter." Jim Ghilotti contradicted Loder, saying it was common knowledge the vehicle was unreliable, as it had broken down before, and that “the vehicle would stall if it went over 50kph due to a fuel blockage.” Johnny Brown, out in the desert, had noticed the injector bleed nipple was butchered due to the problem having occurred many times over a long period. Loder obfuscated, but the evidence was so overwhelming that he admitted fuel needed to be manually primed to the motor each time it was started.

Momber tried to blame James and Simon, by suggesting the battery had been damaged at the death scene, but Sergeant Stokes knocked that one on the head, saying it had occurred prior to the boys going into the desert.

The melted battery had possibly been detected by Loder when he had “got up” James in the workshop. Loder claimed it had been about a "hairline fracture" in the oil sump, but Chris Rumpf testified it was about a battery clamp. One might see the logic of Loder emphasizing a hairline fracture, as prior knowledge of a faulty battery indicated culpability on his part. But there wasn’t any mention at the inquest of repairs made to remedy this hairline fracture. In fact, the notable significance of the "hairline fracture" in Sergeant Stokes’ report was its absencce.

Chapter 35. All is forgiven
When the last witness was heard, Kevin Murray QC rose to deliver his summation against Giles Loder, Shane Kendall and Peter Sherwin. Coroner McCann stopped him. “You might not understand Mr Murray that in Western Australian Coronial practice we don’t take submissions,” he said.

“Well, I think that might be something we need to change,” Murray replied.

Murray wasn’t bluffing. He and Daniel Brezniak appealed McCann's refusal to allow them to present the summation of their arguments to him, in the Western Australia Supreme Court. They lost, so they took it to the High Court of Australia, and won. The case is known as Annetts v McCann, and it set a precedent that prevented courts across Australia from excluding interested parties from stating their case. Daniel Brezniak described it as "a case about the Coroner shutting us [out] from making submissions at the end of the Inquest. It changed the law of natural justice."

Kevin Murray missed the victory celebration. He was stricken with a cancerous melanoma, and died in 1991 at the age of 60. Daniel Brezniak took over the case.

When the Inquest into the deaths of the two boys resumed, without Kevin Murray, Brezniak took on the case and apportioned blame to the Sherwin Pastoral Company and Giles Loder for the deaths. (The Annetts wanted a murder charge.) Peter Momber objected. McCann agreed with him and stopped Brezniak dead in his tracks, because even though the Annetts v McCann precedent allowed counsel to put its view on the general nature of the Inquest, it still couldn’t branch off into accusations of murder.

This meant McCann’s Decision of 23 October 1991 didn’t consider directly whether Giles Loder or Shane Kendall contributed directly to James’ and Simon’s deaths. And McCann was true to his word that he hadn’t expected to discover how the jackeroos died.

Instead, his Decision was a sermon of forgiveness. Giles Loder was taken at his word, while the numerous allegations of violence were given little credence.

“The Manager verbally abused James and James was upset. There was some evidence that there may have been physical abuse but I do not accept that evidence. There was other evidence which suggested that the Manager treated employees generally in a harsh and aggressive way. While it may be the approach of the Manager to his employees could be
described as direct I find that there is no evidence that he was cruel or inhumane in his dealings with them. The milieu of a cattle station is vastly different to that of say, a Solicitor's office.”

That the police tacitly allowed such violence was irrelevant to McCann, leaving one to speculate what he might have thought the appropriate police response should have been if Loder had fled to town after being kicked on the ground by a jackeroo.

McCann said: "The mother of James was told that he would be under constant supervision,” and "They were supervised by the Manager or his overseer or one of the more experienced workers."

Claims the jackeroos were overworked were described as: "After breakfast, work commenced at about 7am and finished at about 5pm with a lunch break of half an hour. The working week was Monday to Saturday but on occasion the working would extend to seven days.”

Sonny Peckover said they worked from 7am to up to 9pm, while James said they worked from 7am to 7pm, and sometimes later. When he left at 1:30am to collect Maurice Lewis from the bus in Halls Creek, and arrived back at 7:30am, he still did the bore run that day.

Shane Kendall’s half-hearted attempt to operate the radio, and his failure to visit the homesteads when the boys missed two calls was forgiven as

“… the Manager appears not to have given the employee precise instructions about maintaining radio schedules and did not give precise instructions on the action to be taken if a radio schedule was missed. In fact, no routine record was kept of radio schedules and no record was kept as to whether or not radio contact was made on each occasion.

Using the words "not to have given the employee precise instructions" also forgave Loder, as they implied he'd at least given some instructions, while Kendall was forgiven for not being able to follow imprecise instructions. It could hardly have worked out better for the two men, short of receiving medals of honour.
Coroner McCann determined James and Simon left Sturt Creek station on Monday evening, 1 December. To meet this timeframe required James leaving Nicholson not long after speaking to Giles Loder at midday. McCann believed the boys probably drove easterly to Caranya station, then turned south towards Balgo, on what he described as "the road which travels from Halls Creek towards Balgo and the Northern Territory", meaning the Tanami Road.

This raised the problem of the border gate between Caranya and Sturt Creek stations. Jungarri T. Bradshaw and the police found it locked, and showing damage of being rammed by a vehicle. When the gate had been locked was never investigated. Had the Snellings locked it before leaving for Adelaide, days after McCann believed James and Simon had passed through?

McCann said they would have seen the lights of Balgo by night, or the power lines and radio aerials by day, from the bi-pass road a kilometre before the community. He suspected they also passed Yagga Yagga, and wrongly believed that the community was empty, and thus the boys had been unobserved.

As to the bullet holes in Simon’s head, Coroner McCann said:

“…after his supply of food and water was exhausted, he became distressed so much so that he turned the rifle upon himself.”

McCann's view was possibly based on Detective Tom Salfinger's report, that if James had been present when the bullet entered Simon's head then he'd probably have taken the rifle to hunt for food and for protection. James was absolved of mercy killing.

And in a gesture of respect, McCann wrote:

“It should be remembered that the harsh country and the extreme temperatures would place great strain on any person in such a situation. Having regard to his age and his probable state of distress I am not satisfied that Simon Amos fired the rifle knowing the consequences of what he was about.”
McCann's conclusion was perhaps influenced by teenager Paul Stuart Baikie, who had fled Flora Valley with four other jackeroos in 1986. Paul is married today with children and running a fencing business in New Zealand, but is still tormented by those events, and won't speak about them.

The twenty-year-old Baikie stated in a sworn statement to New Zealand police in 1988, probably in answer to a leading question, that: "I didn't know anything about any alleged pact." But he did say in a second statement that:

“Simon Amos and James Annetts and myself had talked about it [if] we ever got stuck out in the middle of nowhere and we weren't rescued by anyone and we were on the last legs, we would draw straws. Whoever got the short straw would have to shoot the other two, then shoot himself. We talked about this while we were working and we all shook hands on it. It was a genuine agreement made by the three of us. We never thought it would happen. We decided that if we had water we would save that and drink the radiator water from the vehicle first. We would get that out of the road first then have our clean water. James Annetts was the weaker one of the two. He wouldn't have been able to shoot anyone. In that agreement he would have. I didn't know they had a gun … We all said that we would carry out this agreement but never thought that it would happen. I don't think they would have done it.”

The contradiction, in accepting the 'death pact', is that the Datsun’s radiator held "clean, drinkable water."

And James, McCann continued:

“…attempted to continue on from the camp site to search for help leaving Simon with whatever remained of food, and the rifle, but that he too succumbed to the harsh environment…it is reasonable to assume that the medical cause of death was dehydration and exhaustion in association with hyperthermia. The deaths of both boys arose from circumstances which, for their part, were unintended and which were not in their contemplation when they set out on their journey. Accordingly, I find that the death of each boy was accidental… There is not evidence that the boys were compelled to leave the stations by threats or force nor is there any evidence to suggest that the act of any other person directly caused the deaths.”
McCann deemed the time of death from Thursday, the 4th of December to Saturday, the 6th of December. This assumed they'd left the homesteads late Monday afternoon, because how otherwise could they have zoomed so far south so quickly in a faulty vehicle then promptly died.

But McCann’s estimated time of death didn’t take into account the boys’ stop for water south of Balgo, which would have sustained them for an extra day or two. Nor was it clear from the police reports how much water they could carry. Photographs of evidence gathered from the desert suggest perhaps 35 litres. Johnny Brown thought the containers dragged to the last camp could hold 55 litres.

The Coroner’s early death estimate lessened the urgency of Loder to prove he'd been at Birrindudu fighting the fires, because the boys would have been well and truly gone when he surfaced on Wednesday evening. But it’s reasonable to speculate they could have fled Sturt Creek station, after being caught there on Wednesday 3 December. They could even have gone as early as the Wednesday before, if one questioned the accuracy of their last sightings by those three-day amnesiacs, Kendall and Loder.

That Danny Verschuuren, Therese Stansfield-Campbell and Chris Rumpf remembered the fires happening in a different week from that of the disappearance, wasn’t a factor in McCann's calculations.

The belief the boys died quickly was a more comfortable thought than the possibility the search had been called off on Sunday, 6 December while they were still alive.

But the expensive inquest needed a scapegoat, and so the hapless Sergeant Jim Guy with his alleged neck injury copped McCann's blame. The man who later became the chief of the police rescue branch, the Western Australia Police Emergency Operations Unit, was told he should have coordinated the search from Halls Creek, and called in experts, rather than actively participating. He should have ensured officers kept better records, so they could have verified Loder’s claim he told them on Thursday that James was missing.

Conspicuous by his absence in McCann’s report was Superintendent Leonard James Craddock, the boss of the Kimberley police region. It was never clear who shut down the search from Sturt Creek homestead, who rejected qualified local volunteers, or who decided not to search south of Balgo.
Coroner McCann concluded that, "The two boys set off on an innocent adventure and paid for it with their lives."

Daniel Brezniak was predictably unhappy with the outcome. He thought McCann showed "no real curiosity" about the "suspicious circumstances surrounding the departure of each of the boys". Brezniak believed McCann should have taken more interest in the lack of certainty of the whereabouts of Giles Loder, and his false account of his “fire fighting". But all was not lost, and Murray and Brezniak had laid the groundwork for a negligence claim against Giles Loder and Peter Sherwin. The Annetts weren’t chasing money in particular: they wanted Loder back in court on a murder charge.

2009

Chapter 37. At home with the Annetts

“We totally believe they were murdered. We don’t believe for one minute that they just went out there and perished in the desert, no. They were taken out there. Both of the boys, their remains, every bone was still there but there was one bone missing from each boy and it was the identical bone and it was from one boy’s left arm and one boy’s right arm and so that indicates to us were they tied together. Why would an animal take the exact bone except from a different arm from each boy?”

Sandra Annetts, 2009

From under the dubious shade of a leafless tree outside Jerilderie, where Ned Kelly robbed the bank on his own hot day in 1879, I gaze at the blue sky, contemplating the short life of a 16-year-old, whose death created waves that still resonate today. A white light bursts across the sky then fizzles soundlessly into the horizon.
Further east a wrinkled man greets me at the end of a crescent shaped driveway at Darlington Point, on the southern bank of the Murrumbidgee River near Griffith.

Les Annetts takes me into the two-floor wooden bungalow backing against a levee bank, and purchased with compensation money from Heytesbury Beef, who inherited Sherwin Pastoral Company’s liabilities.

Les wears the fierce smile of small statured men who toughen up as children, then spend the rest of their lives proving they won’t be pushed around. The doorbell has been ringing all morning without anyone being there, he says.

Sandra is on the main floor upstairs, as if the house’s architect doubted whether the levee paralleling the back fence would hold. A locket hangs from her neck containing a tiny photo of James that she vows will be buried with her. Unlike others who cover their grief with a happy mask, Sandra is clear about one thing: the circumstances around her son’s death have not been resolved.

She cares for three of her grandchildren while her youngest daughter, Joanne, holds down two jobs. Joanne is home today and stands in the doorway like a stage actor, dominating the room with her presence. She was seven when her brother disappeared.

Les directs me into their cramped archive room then clears a flat surface for my copier, while I crawl under a desk amongst tangled cables looking for a power point. He takes a chair and blocks the open door, while I'm wedged in by folders and boxes of testimony transcripts, investigative paperwork, a small mountain of media clippings, letters from strangers, and boxes of videos and audio recordings from the saturation media coverage. Back against the wall are boxes of James’ possessions returned from the Kimberley.

Les is a natural archivist, who tirelessly filed every scrap of paper into correct categories. His mind is similarly structured, and to each question I fire at him he retrieves a memory or a document from the shelves. He disclaims having a prodigious memory, saying he can remember the gist of conversations from twenty years ago, but it is Sandra who remembers them word for word. He’s like a lawyer keeping up to speed on the case, as if expecting it to re-open next week, and he’ll need every fact and figure at his finger tips.
He takes back each document from my copier, and replaces it into its plastic sleeve before passing another, while simultaneously recounting the litany of evidence, witness statements, police inaction, and the impediments the system threw up connected with the information on that page.

One curious photocopied document entitled: "Boys lost in Great Sandy Desert" reads: "A white Datsun ute was spotted near Balgo Station on Friday heading towards Alice Springs about 50km south of Sturt Creek station." The copy doesn’t show the newspaper name or date, but someone has written in blue ink at the top '6-12-1986', a Saturday and second day of the initial search.

Balgo station, now known as ‘Ngulupi’, lies 125 kilometres east of Balgo in Western Australia and runs alongside the Northern Territory border near Rabbit Flat Roadhouse. It was founded from opportunity country — land never before grazed or farmed — by Father McGuire, from the Catholic Pallottine Order. McGuire intended it to operate as a cattle station, and had the homestead house built from local quarried stone.

When the Pallottines withdrew from the Kimberley it was transferred to Aboriginal ownership. It failed to thrive when the indigenous manager rustled the cattle and paid his stockmen with alcohol. Little attention was given to the stock, and in 2000 the troughs went dry and a hundred quality station horses and perhaps a thousand cattle perished from dehydration.

Before the transfer, back in 1986, gudia Jamie Savage ran the station efficiently. He saw nothing of the Datsun ute.

But the mysterious news report, if the date was correct, strengthens John Boland's recollection of discussing the sighting of the boys south of Balgo, with Sergeant Jim Guy, the next day, Sunday, at the Sturt Creek homestead search base, when the boys were supposedly already dead.

Guy had dismissed the report as unworthy of investigation, and apart from John Drummond and Jungarri T. Bradshaw making their lightning visits to Balgo and Billiluna, and Loder's flight down the Canning Stock route, the early search went east and north and interstate: everywhere except where the boys went.
The Balgo sighting was an anomaly, like not seeing an elephant in the room, but to Les it’s plain as day: "The police knew the boys were seen at Balgo yet they let Loder lead them up north and to Caranya. Loder told the police where to look; Loder didn't want the police down south."

A miniature horse slightly higher than a Great Dane watches, while I set up my camera and tripod on the back porch. Les hands me a series of finely crafted 8" by 10" black and white photographs, taken by Mary Mills of Chris Rumpf, John and Debbie Davis, Giles and Vicki Loder, Andrew Beezley and himself, blank eyed after viewing the photographs of his son’s ghastly remains.

Perhaps uneasy at another stranger in his house claiming to be writing a book, Les shouts to Sandra upstairs in an unpleasant tone, that I'm mostly interested in the photographs.

One manila envelope contains colour photos of James’ red water bottle, on which he purportedly scratched his death message.

"James, My Follt. I always love you Mum and Dad, Jason, Michelle, Joanne."

On the handle was scratched: "I found peece," proof according to some police that the boys weren’t victims of foul play.

One might think this major piece of evidence would be guarded like a treasure, but it soon disappeared. When the Registrar of the Western Australia Coroner’s Court, G. C. Spivey, returned James’ possessions, the water bottle was missing. Another official said anything not returned had been destroyed. It isn’t clear at what point the bottle actually disappeared, nor is there any record of the Coroner or the police expressing concern. When Les queried its disappearance a court official posted him a blue bottle that hadn’t any message.

Dawn Wright from the Western Australia Coroner’s Court recently located for me four dusty boxes of documents, which included the list of evidence admitted by Coroner McCann at the first Hearing in Perth. It included the blue and cream coloured water bottle listed as “BJ”, but not the crucial red bottle. This means it had disappeared within eight months of being found in the desert.
One former police officer told me access to the evidence room at Halls Creek police station was only through the main office – no back doors. Did someone souvenir the bottle for sentimental reasons, or for its commercial value to collectors? Or was it in someone’s interest that the bottle disappeared?

A court official with a faultless career record supplied the red bottle photographs to the Annetts in mid-1988. The film-based prints were taken against a blue background, and each photograph was identified by a file number, except one. This image contains the characteristic blemishes of the red water bottle lid, but without its scratched message. I tested a digital copy under magnification and various brightness and contrast stresses in Photoshop, but still no scratched letters were visible.

James’ Old Timer knife found with his remains was microscopically examined for plastic particles possibly left after scratching the lid, but none were found.

Nor could the Document Examination Branch of the Western Australia Police compare James’ handwriting with the scratched words, because the latter was a series of straight lines rather than curved symbols.

On my third day while we’re having coffee and biscuits, Les says he’d considered I might be a spy for Giles Loder, but after listening to my questions to see if I knew more than I should he now believes I am a genuine researcher.

A plane landed back of their house at Binya one night, a risky landing on uneven ground. The occupants showed no inclination to leave the craft, so Les spent that night sitting next to a campfire cradling his shotgun. He’d considered that if Giles Loder sensed a threat, he might want to ‘get in first’. The plane took off the next day.

Les declined an offer from a Calabrian source in Griffith to deal with Loder their way. Les had considered killing him, but had faith the court system would discover the truth. "The biggest mistake of my life," he mourns. Perhaps his need for truth surpasses that of revenge, and a dead Loder would take that truth to his grave.

Les lugs a wobbly box of unlabeled video cassettes upstairs, and after much fiddling with his analog player the image of a wrinkle-free Les with clear blue eyes and a 1950’s bodgie haircut looks out from the screen. A television interviewer asks if he blames himself
for James’ death. "Yes," Les replies. The camera holds the scene as silent tears flow down his face. But he won't blink.

Further on twenty-two year old Debbie Davis in white shorts, nods her head and tells how terrible it was to send Simon and James onto stations alone, and with inadequate food:

“There was no way of keeping fresh meat cold…that was definitely a health risk…I don't believe they had enough to eat. James shot wild ducks to supplement his food supply.”

And she says the sewerage rose up through their shower drain. John Davis mumbles into the microphone, head down, like Bradshaw, the black tracker.

We get through a third of the box then call it a day. I stumble back to my cabin across the Murrumbidgee and that night my brain lurches through a migraine. The next morning while I moan in pain Les admits he took something to sleep and Sandra, too, was facing the demons that won't go away.

Chapter 38. Poems and letters from people they didn't even know

Tragedies bring forth a range of responses from both friends and total strangers. Some people pounce like predators finishing off the kill, while others support the person brought low with both physical help and that hard to define intangible kind. Others are difficult to explain.

Anne Dejachy arrived from France in March 1987, on a work visa at the age of twenty-two, after her brother committed suicide the previous year. After watching television reports of the recovery of James’ and Simon's remains she wrote:

“I didn’t sleep that night and couldn't help thinking about those two kids, and what they and gone through. I layed on my bed staring at the ceiling until dawn… I felt shy and uneasy whenever people were talking about it, and I was terrified to be asked why I wanted to know…I was still unable to forget your son's face, and his eyes, the way he looks at the camera…Over three years have gone by since I came back here [Paris], but I still can't forget neither James nor Simon…I have often tried to guess the kind of things that made him laugh,
the kind of things that made him angry or sad or upset. But, somehow, I'm almost sure that the answers wouldn't surprise me...we are friends now...I will never forget him.”

In another letter, Anne wrote:

“When I came to Australia...I only knew I had to flee...I simply didn't want to live anymore, although I couldn't bear the thought of committing suicide...I have always considered [it] as repulsive and stupid...when I heard about James, then when I saw his lovely face in the WA newspaper, I thought, how unfair, I who wants to die and him, who probably wanted to live.”

Anne said she didn't expect to be around much longer and that was the last the Annetts heard from her.

George Stephen Lee, Ngalya, wrote a song called Kartiya Kutjarra. One translated verse ran:

Two white persons went this way.

We only saw the lights. (of the car)

Without water they got lost.

So they went and died in the desert.

"I hope this song brings you both comfort knowing that the people in the desert area have not forgotten what happen to your son," George wrote to the Annetts. But the Annetts would have felt the opposite of comfort if they’d known the lights were from another vehicle.

Therese Stansfield-Campbell wrote from GoGo station.

“I wrote some nice poems for the boys. I found hard to wrote it down. Theres one poem I wrote for you. I think james would like to tell you. I told games this poem and he like it so much. I miss them a lot, laughing, a sweet smile and see they sparkly eyes. Those boys where lovely to be with.”

My love for you

I will always love you
Where ever you are
If you are far or near me
Whatever happens
I will always love you.

A man visited the Annetts one night accompanying by a woman who later denied she'd brought him. They spent four hours hammering out a statement about his time working for Peter Sherwin.

“I, Jim Stone, hereby do declare what is written here is the truth and I give consent for this to be used in any way that comes forth.

“I have worked on Flora, Fitsroy [Fitzroy], Benmara and Dunmara Stations which are owned by Peter Sherwin and I'd have to say that these are the most appalling and inhuman conditions that I have ever seen. I wouldn't call it jackerooing. I'd call it white-slavery.

“You are taken out to the station by plane or station vehicle with no knowledgeable way out. You are set to work. You get paid when and if they want to pay you. If you disagree they say, 'Well, start walking', and when you are about 300 mile from nowhere and you don't know where to go how can you survive? The food on the station is absolutely appalling. On many occasions I've had to pick maggots out of my food to eat it. At one stage we had to shoot a dingo to eat.

“If the boss doesn't reckon your working hard enough they belt you up pretty badly. The horses they put the young jackaroos on are not even fit to be rodeo horses. I've seen a lot of 14-16 year old kids hurt (some badly) by being placed on half broken horses to give the boss a laugh.

“Peter Sherwin runs one of the biggest cattle stealing operations in Australia. I know as I use to steal for him. Once 'cause he wouldn't pay me I threatened to talk. A gun was put to my head by Frank Codey (an employee of Mr Sherwin). I was told if I talked I would go missing so I shut up until now.

“I was doing a droving trip with two thousand head of bullocks. The rest of the ringers were virtually pony club boys with no knowledge of cattle, bush or horses and on a day the
[cattle] wandered off and I was sent back to track them as I was the only one in the team that could track.

“My horse hadn't had water for 3 days and as a result he died. I was stranded with no water or food for three days. The only reason the search party was sent was because an Aboriginal mate of mine knew I was missing and alerted the police. Sherwin himself made no effort to find me until the police were called in and the only reason he came out to help was to cover himself. He's still got my swag, saddle and bridle and pay checks which he won't give me. He said that they got lost.

“All in all I personal reckon that station owners like this could commit murder and get away with it without any worries.

“The only reason I came forward and spoke was so that no more parents will have to go through what James’ and Simon's parents have gone through.”

Yours sincerely,

Jim Stone

Clive Stone ran Rosewood station on Duncan Road near Lake Argyle, and now owns the general store at Timber Creek. He told me his brother worked for Peter Sherwin for ten years, but knows no one named Jim Stone. I phoned his brother who was holidaying in Queensland. He suggested I ring back the following week, but when I did a woman curtly announced they wanted nothing to do with the subject. When I called a second relative referred to me by Clive she simply hung up the phone.

Les passes over another four stapled pages of roughly typed notes found amongst boxes of legal papers returned by his lawyers. The pages are entitled "Questions for Turner" from someone replying to "Robin". On the fourth page is a section labeled: "Evidence from [Constable] Colin Main".

“I was out there. It was horrible. There wasn’t even a girl in sight. We camped out. I mean I was sleeping alone, but I had the strong feeling someone was close by me during the night. In the morning I awoke to find a number of tracks. From looking at them I had a strong feeling we’d been threatened…but from my vast experience I knew they weren’t my wife’s footsteps!
“Some months later we were confronted by the media, but I knew they could be befriended and would believe my story. In evidence to the Coroner’s inquiry, I was able to not only reduce the mother of one of the boys to tears, but make the main nasty guy, Mr Kevin Murray, one of my closest friends.

“Finally, on June the 2nd, I ended a day of evidence drinking alcohol from the mini-bar of a woman who was gullible enough to become my friend and confidante.”

John Stanley Smith burst into the Annetts home one summer afternoon, LED lights flashing from his sunglasses, accompanied by his young Asian wife. He valiantly presented his unpublished manuscript, "Why did they have to die?" It included unique details of the search and reprints of court documents that must have cost him a small fortune. And money was John’s problem. It was also a problem of his editor from Freestyle Publications, Lorraine Day, whose voice hardened when I asked her about Smith. She owns and writes commissioned histories of cattle and sheep stations, whose market values are enhanced when they come with a written history. Lorraine offers editorial services for writers like Smith, and for whom there is the small matter of an outstanding bill.

Sandra Annetts sank rapidly after the inquest, when she realised it was over and they hadn’t discovered the truth. She was admitted to the Griffith Hospital suffering heart palpitations, hot and cold flushes, shaking, chest pains, panic attacks, feelings of unreality and an indifference to whether she lived or died. Les gave up work to care for her.

To keep the issue of James’ death in the courts Les began a claim for damages against Heytesbury Beef, for psychiatric shock.

The psychiatrist representing Heytesbury said Les and Sandra’s deep depressions were not expected to improve. They were unable and unwilling to let the matter rest. Heytesbury hadn’t been at fault, but had assumed Sherwin Pastoral Company’s liabilities when they purchased Flora Valley and Nicholson stations.

Author Smith phoned the Annetts in 1997, years after his visit, when he heard on the news that Heytesbury Beef had settled with the Annetts. Smith sought funding to self-publish his book, but Les and Sandra were still heavily in debt and declined his request.
Film makers and journalists flocked to the Annetts, intent on producing television dramas, feature films and books, but apart from Smith's commendable effort little was completed except for Chris Masters’ masterpiece, “Dead Heart”, for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Other researchers were derailed when they faced the onslaught of misdirection and hostility to enquiries. Les says they've gone one year without an enquiry, in 2009.

Sandra avoids us downstairs. Recollecting the past retraumatises her like flicking a healing wound. Down the hallway a room is crammed with child size teddy bears still wrapped in cellophane. They lean against the walls, cover the bed and floor space. "There's more upstairs," Les says. Seven dogs, the horse and Joanne's three boisterous children almost fill the emptiness inside her.

And murder they believe it to be: Giles Loder and Shane Kendall chased their son and Simon into the desert where they died, not between the 4th and 6th of December, but the 10th day of that month. That’s why Giles Loder directed the police to areas north of the Tanami rather than south. Because the boys weren’t yet dead and he didn’t want them discovered alive. This is what Les tells me this in the little room.

The lochs upstream have been opened and water is filling the dry river bed as Les and I end another day wedged amongst the archives. Sandra delivers another tray of biscuits and coffee then returns upstairs and sits under a portrait of James. Joanne’s youngest son, Ki, runs through the door and onto Les’ lap. He's just starting to speak. "Who's this?" Les asks, holding up a photo showing that famous half-smile. "Uncle James," the boy says, hardly able to form the words. Les looks up at me. It's hard to tell if he's happy or sad, but his look says, it's not over; not by a long shot.

Chapter 39. The bisexual angle

John Turner is an urbane man from an English newspaper family. He ran the police club bar when it was located back of the police headquarters in Perth, the "alcoholic side of the police force," he calls it and remembers many times driving drunken detectives home.
He later became a stringer for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and wrote for James O’Kenny’s Kimberley Echo.

Turner describes O’Kenny as an ex-Irish Republican Army sergeant at sixteen who transferred these skills to the Australian explosives industry. He was known as Gelignite Jim, due to his habit of blowing up buildings of people he disliked. Lenin Christie says there’s an outstanding $40,000 reward for the explosion that destroyed a building behind the motel, where the dignitaries were staying for the opening of the Lake Argyle Dam.

Turner tells me from his retirement village near Albany that O’Kenny’s name was originally:

“…Kenny, but he changed it to O’Kenny because he thought it was more Irish. He went to Kununurra under a bit of a cloud from Sydney. He was a bit of an explosives man… him and his mate blew up a block of toilets in Sydney one night, where all the poofers used to meet. They had to leave town rapidly before he got arrested.”

Their conflict arose when O’Kenny sold Turner a printing press on credit, providing he wouldn’t compete with the ‘Echo’. He hired Turner as a journalist to pay off the debt, but their opposing attitudes to the Amos and Annetts case stymied that partnership.

O’Kenny saw the deaths simply as the boys having made a mistake in the bush and paid with their lives. Turner felt Loder and Sherwin had a duty of care to protect the boys.

Turner had lunch with the Loders on 5 February 1988, and later outside the Sergeant’s quarters he asked them what they thought the verdict would be. He remembers them replying:

Vicki: "Well, Giles, what did Lindy Chamberlain get, 15 years? Well, you could do with a good holiday anyway."

Turner said Giles smiled and chuckled before he replied, "Well, I'd be out in five anyway." Turner asked surely they hadn't thought along those lines? Giles responded: "Well, I guess you have to be prepared for anything."

Turner, in an incomprehensible leap of logic, thought this an admission of guilt, possibly of murder. He was so dismayed by McCann's ‘accidental death’ determination that
he wrote to police Commissioner Brian Bull with his suspicions. Bull referred him to Detective Sergeant M. Cousins.

Turner wrote to Cousins, saying it was well known that James drove the 340km round trip from Nicholson to Sturt Creek to yarn with Simon. He speculated that Loder went to Sturt Creek to put the "hard word" on Simon, but found James there and shot him during a scuffle. Loder forced Simon and the wounded or dead James into the Datsun ute, with a trail bike loaded on the back, then drove into the desert where he killed Simon, and dumped James further up the track, and rode back on the motorbike. This was certainly the gossip doing the rounds of the east Kimberley.

After all, Turner reasoned, Loder couldn't establish a firm alibi for the 48 hours following his meeting with James at Nicholson homestead on Monday 1 December. Turner said his suspicions were supported by uncorroborated rumours that an old tracker at Balgo told police that motorcycle tracks discovered near the Datsun proved a third person had been there.

Turner also suggested Loder was bi-sexual. His source was John File, a gay man from the white community of Crossing Falls on Lake Argyle, who Turner says, was adamant Loder was bi-sexual.

Keith Wright is a Councilor on the Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley, and sympathises with Loder, believing he was unfairly judged. He was also a neighbour and friend of the now deceased File, whom he says was an upstanding man whom he and his wife chose as best man at their wedding. Whether John File was gay, Keith says he, "might have been a bit that way," but finds my questions repugnant and ends the conversation.

O’Kenny’s gravelly voice grinds out his enmity for Turner as if the event happened yesterday. He was out of Kununurra on other business, when Turner took the opportunity to publish his anti-Loder articles, which threatened to alienate the Echo’s largely pastoralist readers.

O’Kenny shouts that Turner:
“… was a known bullshit artist and liar. He made it up. He was looking for attention. He had all those problems, old John. He was a total fuckwit. Why it took so long for us to wake up to it I'm fucked if I know, anyway, we were desperate in those days for people.

“He wrote the article, I was away at the time or I would have thrown it out. It was a load of bullshit… it was a real Mills & Boon thing.

“We were desperate for someone and he had a bit of experience with journalism, and he owed us money, and I gave him a chance to cut it out, and so I didn't even bother with that in the end; I just got rid of him.”

John Turner clears his throat as his mind rakes the past. He was a brave man to challenge the republican sergeant, whose drunken pastime was shooting tops off beer bottles held at the end of another person’s arm. He says O'Kenny treated him badly, so:

“I thought I'll put him out of business. I'll start up a newspaper. It was a free newspaper whereas his you had to pay for and I was doing cheaper advertising and I almost put him out of business.”

There were other murmurings about Loder’s sexuality, when Mark Skulley from the ‘Western Mail’ newspaper in Perth obtained documents via the Freedom of Information Act. In one handwritten file note by Ian Johnston from the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) he mentions an allegation from a 16-year-old from Flora Valley station that:

“X claims that a number of young station hands were sexually harassed on the property…X alleges that on one occasion… [redacted]...others had been involved in this assault.”

Skulley wrote that a former Flora Valley station employee claimed, in a statutory declaration, to have seen another employee bashed by Giles Loder. Police declined to investigate because the actual victim had not lodged a formal complaint. Nor were the sexual allegations investigated.

But Andrew Beezley thought Loder had, “…copped a bit of the raw end of the stick... and got labelled a few things that weren’t true...It boggles my mind how the media have twisted it.”
Nevertheless, the Broome CES office wrote to Giles Loder on 23 February 1987, saying that five of the last ten job applicants they'd sent since the previous August had returned with complaints. They would no longer be referring clients to any station managed by Giles Loder.

2010

Chapter 40. Chris Rumpf

"I am the Chris Rumpf you are looking for," an intense voice tells me from Queensland, on the public phone at the Hidden Valley Caravan Park in Kununurra. The squawking of tropical birds in the trees above me blend with crow caws coming up the phone line from southern Queensland, where Chris lives. Children splash in the park pool as a blast of hot air hits me like a boxer’s punch.

Chris worked on other properties after Flora Valley then returned home to become a security guard in Warwick, south of Toowoomba.

His grinding dislike of Loder has matured into a sad resignation, as he recalls: “He was arrogant; he was easy to fire up. If you asked a question and he felt you should already have the answer he’d get angry with you. He was a very angry person.”

And when Loder hit James:

“… right between the eyes with a spanner. He had this big red mark on his forehead and…we had a few laughs, we knew how serious it was so we just got together and just changed the conversation so that we could get a bit of don’t look at the negative, this is the positive, sort of thing. 'Cause in a group like that you’re pretty much like family and if someone’s feeling down you try to cheer them up because, especially by yourself, it does get a bit of, not so much off-putting but you do get depressed.”

Chris says he’ll post his Flora Valley photographs. “Don’t send them back. I want to forget that part of my life.” The depressing sensation lands in my solar plexus with the
realisation that perhaps at the end of the day regret is all we have left. "You’re the only person that has rung me about James and Simon," he says.

Chapter 41. On the Tanami

The broad orange strip lined with formidable windrows on each side stretches into the distance as if endless, as if leading to each individual’s destiny within the national consciousness.

I wind out the little Excel as it glides across the silk smooth powdery surface that quietens the tyres until the thump of the front wheels slamming into an erosion crevice crossing the track wakes me from my dream. The momentum bounces the car back onto the road with a thud that snaps the exhaust pipe and a throaty roar penetrates the cabin.

Some call the Tanami Road the Tragedy Track, from the 1890’s when hundreds of would-be millionaires trekked out from Alice Springs, seeking their share of the mother lode in the district called ‘The Granites’. But what awaited most were sickness, dehydration and supplying the dingoes with their mortal remains.

The modern Tanami Road runs 900 kilometres of graded dirt, from the highway west of Halls Creek then south to Billiluna where it turns eastward towards Balgo, The Granites mine, Rabbit Flat Roadhouse, then southeast to the Walpiri town of Yuendumu. At Tilmouth Roadhouse it becomes a thin strip of bitumen that continues another 150 kilometres to Alice Springs.

The Northern Territory section got its first official grade in 1968, when previously it had been hopscotch of tracks that changed direction depending on who was using it. It passed through Balgo until 1967, when Father McGuire and the Aboriginal residents graded a new stretch, to discourage travelers visiting their community. McGuire tried to push it through Mongrel Downs, until Joe Mahood stopped that: he didn’t want to be plagued by tourists, escaped criminals and assorted riffraff.
One hundred and twenty-five kilometres south of Halls Creek, near Wolfe Creek Road, an exhaust system including the catalytic converter and sub-resonator lies on the road still in one piece, like a body laid out for a funeral. This was where James and Simon were thought to have entered the Tamami Road then gone south to Balgo.

Alongside the road lies the savage scrub that tribal hunters and gatherers used like a supermarket for products such as tobacco, glue, preservatives, lerp sugars, native fruit and vegetables, anti-bacterial lotions, poisons, weapons, clothing and housing materials, rope, native truffle, nuts and narcotics.

After a bone jarring 250kms the Excel reaches the community of Wirrimanu that isn't quite willing to throw off its colonial name of Balgo.

Chapter 42. The Pallottines

Balgo doubles its population of five hundred during the wet season. Its attractions are good water, the store, medical clinic, ATM, the phone tower, the weekly mail plane that accepts passengers and the Flying Doctor who can transplant bewildered patients from the desert to a Perth hospital in half a day.

The town is located in the midst of Kukatja, Ngarti and Djaru Country, but includes the Walmatjarri, Warlpiri, Pintupi, and those ever present colonists, the Pitjantjatjara. Throw in a mix of blow-in white and mixed-race bureaucrats, drug dealers, grog runners, priests and nuns, perverts, and white men and women who have joined the Aboriginal culture, and you’ve got the combative mix of cultures and ideologies that make Balgo the home of unparalleled Byzantine intrigue. And many wouldn’t live anywhere else.

Pallottine brothers and monks arrived from Germany in 1901, and staffed most Kimberley parishes. They ran a leprosarium from 1934 on the Rockhole cattle station west of Halls Creek, after Chinese, Fillipino and Malay immigrants introduced the disease in the late 1800’s. The first registered Aboriginal death was in 1908.
An expedition left Rock Hole for the desert just before World War 2, and the mission at Old Balgo was subsequently formed out on the Mulan Road. But the water supply was no good, so the community moved in 1965 to the artesian aquifers at its present site.

The early missionaries faced life and death hardships, to Christianise and rush the Aboriginals, with a race genome honed for desert survival, from the stone age to the modern age in four or five generations, a process that took Europeans twenty-thousand years.

The Pallottines discouraged corroborees in preference to Catholic services, and secluded children from their parents, in dormitories. An elite few were groomed as future leaders, but most were schooled towards farming, domestic skills and commerce jobs that meant sending them two-thousand kilometres south, where they missed, or had delayed, crucial Aboriginal cultural and coming of age ceremonies. Yet neither were they Australian citizens, but wards of the state, like mental patients and juvenile delinquents.

The 1967 referendum that gave citizenship to Aboriginals, which the locals called “drinking rights”, signaled the end of Pallottine dominance. By 1983 white bureaucrats were arriving in droves, and offering the community money, to replace the Pallottine administration with an Aboriginal council, run by white bureaucrats.

Father Ray Hevern was the administrator: "...when they came down and publicly told the community that if they kicked the church out, they would give them millions of dollars to run their own show and they didn't have to listen to us priests any more." The locals took the money in 1983, and changed the community’s name to the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation.

But the religious Orders stayed. There was a genuine affection and gratitude by some who recognised the kindness of the brothers and nuns. The pragmatic tribes also realised that being Catholic, albeit thin-layered Catholics, over hearts of Aboriginality, opened doors otherwise closed. The church institutions offered escape doors from destructive social environments. It counterbalanced the black magic that locals believed manifested as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and end-stage renal failure. In white fella talk these symptoms are called “X-syndrome”.

Kidney failure rates in communities often reach ten times the national average, and elders find their blood streams merged with dialysis machines while they’re stranded in sterile
medicals units in Perth, Broome or Alice Springs. They call it the "living death”, and compare it with the Biblical fires of hell.

"X-syndrome" is a symptom of lost mastery. Survival sensibilities are reduced to thumping the scratched display of the ATM machine pumping out daily rations of worn out money. Even the rhythm of nature is masked by the roar of the electricity generator, and the confiscation of hunting rifles that discourages hunting.

But strange things happen, like the de-criminalising of tribal initiation ceremonies involving cutting and scarring, after it became obvious that those enforcing the bans were themselves increasingly covered in tattoos and body piercings.

The Halls Creek hospital and indigenous medical clinics, if only to halt the spread of Hepatitis C, began offering sterile cutting instruments and swabs for coming of age ceremonies.

The days of black fellas with nulla nullas standing over an ashen faced tribal surgeon, working with a broken beer bottle, who knows he’ll be clubbed to death if he botches the circumcision, may be over, but the careful cuts signifying manhood, giving birth, meeting the ancestors and other milestones, are being revived.

Even thigh spearing is tolerated at some remote communities, as an alternative to the lethal risk of death in custody. And the clever black fellas at Bidyadanga thwarted one investigation of a tribal execution, by declaring the area a sacred site. Entry prohibited for the uninitiated.

Geoff Taylor lived at Balgo for nine years and married a local woman. The black fellas entrusted him to protect their artifacts and tools for the secret men's business. He thought this showed the deterioration of Kukatja culture, but they recognized his integrity, and the white man’s propensity to care for objects.

Chapter 43. The Byzantine republic of Balgo
The bulldozed area amidst prickly scrub near the Balgo turn-off road looks ideal to throw up the tent. Discarded truck tyres and oil stains usually indicate a good camping spot. It’s far enough into the bush for privacy, but close enough to watch the road. I’ll relax the evening away, then awaken refreshed for my meeting with Yagga Yagga elder, Mark Moora.

But I’m sick, and spend part of the night lying outside my tent, vomiting on the ground. It’s like gastric waterboarding, and even the deadly mosquitoes lose their appetite for my blood. By dawn I’m cleaned out and so exhausted, it takes four hours to pack up the tent, leaving no time for proper ablutions.

"No grog, no gunja, no humbug," warns a sign on Balgo’s lockable entry gates. It should also warn: No carpetbaggers. Of the bureaucratic variety, or those who entice top class artists to churn out high quantities of second rate paintings, in exchange for alcohol, drugs, food and clapped out Land Cruisers.

A seige mentality permates the town, starting with the police station near the front gate. Near midday patrol vehicles remain hidden within a high panel compound. Behind the locked front door, officers spy on the community through an array of flat screens connected to visible and hidden cameras.

A dozen adults outside the Catholic school respond to my wave with unblinking stares. A snow-haired black woman on an invalid electric scooter captures my attention with her glare. Not a glimmer of cordiality flickers between us.

Fifty people of all ages ignore me, as I park in front of the unmarked store. They sit under a slatted awning that flashes dark and bright stripes into the eyes of anyone moving underneath, like strobe lights jolting an epileptic into seizure. Unsmiling twelve-year-old children run back and forth under the strobe slats, throwing twenty-cent pieces across the brick pavers, lifting them from the ground when the coins slip between the cracks, while dingo-like dogs interweave amongst them as if in a separate dimension. They don’t beg or sniff crotches like city dogs, and are as much symbiotic as subservient. But when a bulldog bares its teeth at a Chihuahua, a chunky girl pulls up a paving brick and throws a warning shot that thumps into the store’s already dented corrugated iron cladding.
Panic floods my mind as I realise they're consciously ostracising me. I rush the kiosk for a sports drink, then retreat to the shaded porch of the administrative building at the other side of the courtyard.

Balgo was where doctors administered Depo-provera, a long lasting contraception injection to reduce the birthrate from teenage mothers. The drug has some nasty side-effects and is also used as chemical castration for male sex offenders.

"Are you here for the meeting? a plump, white woman asks me. She’s the sandwich making teacher. Her eyes focus on the patch of blue ink leaked onto my business shirt during the shaky road trip. Relief floods my body. In a euphoric moment I fantasise that I’ve flown in for some innocuous meeting, will be given a room for the night, then take the next flight out. And get paid handsomely for my trouble.

Her safe-haven smile fades upon discovering my business is with Mark Moora.

"Is he a friend?" she asks. I tell her I’m here to investigate the deaths of two white boys. She says he’s sitting in the crowd, but won’t point him out. A heavy door slams and she’s gone.

City folk say Aboriginals are indifferent to time, but arriving ninety minutes late, and stinking of gastric juices isn’t the best way to impress an elder with a phenomenal sense of smell and a reputation for not suffering gudia fools gladly.

Mark is easy to find. He sits alone where seating is at a premium. He’s been watching me. I bow in supplication, holding out my hand. He gruffly gestures me take a seat. "Where your Toyota?" he asks, the alpha male staying in charge by keeping others explaining their positions. We'd already agreed by phone that I'd arrive in a sedan and he'd provide a Land Cruiser for Yagga Yagga, provided by the government as compensation for maltreatment in the dormitory school.

Without a drink or exchange of pleasantries, we drive two-hundred metres to his daughter’s house, to borrow her Nissan Patrol. Sophia is a stout woman of thirty with a soft gaze and feminine voice, and obviously takes after her mother. Her husband, Greg, isn’t wildly enthusiastic about lending his Patrol, but Mark is family.
Still in shock from the bad night and lack of sustenance, I find myself at the store paying $150 for petrol. Payment is made before the fuel is pumped. I tell the cashier it's for Mark, hoping to trigger a spark of conversation. She turns and smiles at the other checkout operator then, unsmiling, hands me the receipt.

The pumps are encased in an iron mesh cage covered with scrambling children surveying the landscape and breathing the fumes. The petrol costs $2.30 a litre.

We end up in front of another house, where Mark's sister Bai Bai Sunfly lies slumped on the ground, as if waiting for an ambulance, a sharpened stick protruding from underneath her body. It resembles the short broken branches carried by homeless men in Adelaide. For Bai Bai it’s more than a handy weapon; it's a digging stick and a symbol of her womanhood.

She jumps up, laughing, while a smiling Bonnie James rises like a movie actor. Others run from the house. They’re laughing wildly, watching me load a suitcase, a jerry can of water, and groceries into the Patrol. They scream when Bonnie runs back to the house and returns with a twenty-litre can of water. “Are you going for a week?” someone mocks. Barefooted Mark growls that he's taking nothing.

Where to leave my car? Outside the house? "No, those crazy kids," says Mark. Outside the famous art gallery, where they sell paintings by Balgo artists, who fly around the world with their exhibitions, then return to their busted window houses, and sleep on the floor or in their back yard? No, it isn’t safe after closing time. We leave it inside the unlocked gate of the hideously expensive, invitation-only, three room motel without a reception, where the police find it thirty minutes later.

Chapter 44. Yagga Yagga

Mark slams the Patrol into the rutted track to Yagga Yagga, as if trying to sabotage our trip by wrecking his son-in-law's vehicle. He's journeyed this track many times, but the strangest was with two middle-aged white men, on 2 February 1988:
“They just came in ... and took me out there and asked me a couple of questions out there and I knew straight away this might be Giles Loder's people so I didn't wanna talk to them so I had to make it up to them to tell them that Giles Loder was good and everything. I didn't want to tell them that he was no good; he was bad. I didn't trust them so I said, ah, Giles Loder is good and all that. I just made it up. Yeah. So I came back and they dropped me in Balgo.”

They were Coroner David McCann, and Sergeant John Kermode, who had hitched a lift on a charter flight with Broome magistrate John Howard, for his monthly court sitting in Balgo.

McCann and Kermode wanted to question Mark in an informal setting. Their four-page report states that:

“Moora states that at no time did he see any vehicle or sign of a vehicle on the road nor was he aware of anyone in the area of Yagga Yagga or in that area which he regards as his.”

How could Mark have made such an error? He speaks twelve indigenous dialects and is the custodian over a huge tract of land? Perhaps McCann couldn’t escape the imperious manner of a man usually addressed as, "Your Worship", and didn't adequately explain the purpose for taking Mark to Yagga Yagga.

Mark justified deceiving McCann because:

“I didn't trust them people because I didn't want to get shot in the middle of nowhere and be dumped somewhere in the middle of nowhere.”

Few understand this sentiment, not even younger Aboriginals living in the towns, but Mark remembered campfire stories of the ‘killing times’, and when his brother Thomas was marched barefoot to Halls Creek for stealing a goat. And in 1986 there were still retired police officers alive who had put Aboriginals in neck chains.

McCann’s failure to gain Mark’s confidence was a missed opportunity to uncover what else the Moora clan saw that fateful week fourteen months previously.

I apologise to Bonnie for stinking. He laughs that he's been rolling around in the muck. Mark remains grim. He knew this day would finally come: “I knew someone would come
looking. White men never forget.” He makes it clear this trip is a distasteful duty. He doesn’t mention a duty of revenge.

He points to our left, saying that’s where his people, including one of the Mosquito men, were camping around their broken Land Cruiser. They saw the gudia boys.

A tinge of regret enters Mark's voice when we reach a divide in the road, and he explains its significance, not that anything could have shifted the cruel hand of fate.

He doesn’t reduce speed when the rocky strata changes to soft sand. Tree-like bushes slap the windows on both sides, and Mark raises his hand instinctively as branches hit the windscreen from both sides of the track. The high-clearance Patrol fishtails on the verge of rolling.

Exploration crews maintained the track to the standard of an arterial road during the 1980’s, to get their drilling rigs, bulldozers and tankers through to the seismic lines. Government contractors built a dozen air strips long enough for cargo planes that settlements like Yagga Yagga would never require. When the survey work was finished negotiations stalled. The oil and water wells were capped and nature reclaimed what was hers.

Mark stops on a dune, near a collapsed boundary fence half buried in sand, and points to a spot where he found a two-way radio amongst the vegetation.

Yagga Yagga is a slap in the face. A faded plastic playground glowers in the distance like an insult. Sagging power lines link two dozen widely spaced empty houses. The site might have been in use prior to white settlement of Britain, when the two cultures lived not dissimilar lives, but it's now a failed transplant of modern civilization onto an indigenous people.

Occasional hunting and secret business groups visit the area. Pintupi travelers drive up north from Kiwirrkurra through unmapped country. Rare convoys of aging adventurers sneak through, and by day document the locations of springs and by night repair tyres spiked by mulga stalks.

Yagga Yagga was what cynics called a boomerang experiment. The government pulled nomads from the deserts up until the mid 1980’s, then seeing how they fell to temptations of modern town life, decided to send them back. The Bal Bal and Sandfly clans had hardly come
in from the desert, when they found themselves encouraged to return, not to the old ways, but to transplanted settlements with plastic playgrounds. Then the money ran out and it was back to the towns.

Conspiracy seekers had their own theories: the government wanted to clear the remote areas, so they could practice their own secret business. The tropical McLarty Ranges northeast of Derby were declared a prohibited zone, but this didn’t stop those across King Sound on the Cape Leveque Peninsula from seeing electronic green snakes creep across the sky at night over Oobagooma station. One exploratory party got an extremely hostile reaction from a military officer when they went to investigate.

With more conventional armaments from an earlier era, Battlemount Rock in the McLarty Hills region of the Great Sandy Desert had been used as an weapons dump during World War 2. Military gardeners bulldozed dirt over the weapons, then replanted the mound with non-local flora to disguise the burial, which gave the tribal people a good laugh.

Mark jumped at the chance to establish Yagga Yagga. He brought young men and women down from Balgo, to have children and thus strengthen their ownership of the land through birth. He wanted his people away from the alcohol and violence at Balgo, and had plans for more communities further into the desert.

An older Mark reads the graffiti covered door of his old house, posing like a consummate professional for my camera. But it’s not an act. He simmers with regret and anger: his wife dying, his neglect of her; his years of blindness until cataract surgery returned the sight in one eye. And in the end, his dream bankrupt and abandoned, and his mob returned to Balgo.

Bonnie sits glumly in the Patrol. He backs it behind a house when I ask to photograph the empty road, then when I’m distracted for three minutes he rolls it back onto the track, and sits in the front passenger seat, the picture of innocence.

Mark seethes, his jaw clenched.

Mark’s rising anger, and my exhaustion, weakens my resolve and in a passive half-sleep dream I realise we’re returning to Balgo. Back on the sand Mark hits a wheel on the track and the Patrol nearly rolls, but even this fails to spark a glimmer of humour, and we return to
Balgo in silence. They drop me off at sunset at the motel and with gruff nods take off without looking back.

"No," shouts an older man locking up the store, when I ask him if he runs the motel. He walks away as if brushing a dung-laden insect from his arm. A dozen twelve and thirteen-year-olds sit on the tables outside the deserted courtyard, their snarls decidedly unfriendly. There’s a branch on my car. Constable Dave Risdale visits Mark an hour later, and they talk on his front lawn for thirty minutes.

Chapter 45. The Balgo/Yagga Yagga struggle

Vickneswaran Kandiah’s first visit to Australia was to interview for the position of Manager of Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation. He came in second, but when the man who got the job didn’t turn up, Vick got the position.

Vick brought his wife to Balgo. She was white, and had run safari tours in Africa. Vick was a Tamil from Malaysia, whose parents sent him to England to study accountancy. He was stone cold broke, and went to a restaurant offering to wash dishes in exchange for food. That’s where he met his future wife. The Balgo mob was impressed, seeing dark skinned Vick with his fair skinned missus.

It was a strange job. Vick’s office had disappeared prior to their arrival, when two semi-trailer trucks with a police escort had arrived early one morning. Furniture, computers, filing cabinets, fridges, decorations and pot plants were swiftly loaded onto the trucks, then hurriedly driven up the Tanami Road. The drivers didn’t stop at Halls Creek for fear of attack. They emptied their load at Kununurra, and thus Vick found his desert community office six-hundred kilometres north, in the tropics.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) had fled Balgo after threats and attacks against staff. The police were no help because by the time a patrol trundled down from Halls Creek the suspects had disappeared into the desert. Kununurra had plenty of police and less Balgo folk.
Vick found himself flying 1200 kilometre return trips once or even twice a week, frequently with other staff. The cost became obscene, considering Balgo's fourth world living conditions despite the community owning Kingfisher airlines. White pilots flew rented aircraft doing government contract work. They also returned at no charge the bodies of locals who had died in the Derby hospital. Their search and rescue work rarely made a profit. When locals without money wanted a flight they simply lined up across the runway stopping the plane from taking off.

The other problem was paying bills. Unsigned payment cheques were delivered on the weekly mail plane, signed by the appointed elders, then returned on the following week's plane. The previous manager had improvised, by sending books of blank cheques for bulk signing, making a mockery of the elders’ role in managing the community.

Vick's first priorities were building a store, an ablution block for older women and installing mains powered airport lights, so the Flying Doctor could easily land at night. He also wanted a small administration building, and to return the office from Kununurra.

ATSIC wouldn't cough up the money so he convinced the elected Aboriginal council to adopt a 'no work, no pay' welfare policy. Most residents lived on a form of unemployment payments, with a training component that was administered by the council. The council could legally enforce the 'no work, no pay' rule, so Vick’s proposal produced a small army of workers. The half-million dollars they saved from not paying those who didn't work, was spent on building materials. There was a lot of anger, and Vick began taking precautions for his personal safety.

When Yagga Yagga’s official population reached 120, Mark demanded a respective proportion of Balgo's medical and educational funding. Vick was against it.

He was a centrist and wanted Balgo the hub, with outlying tribal groups forming satellite communities five or ten kilometres out of town. They’d be separate entities, but still have easy access to the clinic, the store and government programs, especially during the Wet.

Transport and road maintenance costs to outlying communities soaked up most of their budgets, and left little for the actual services. Better to centralise the school and medical clinic, Vick reasoned. But he didn’t fully understand the strength of tribal loyalties, and
attachment to ancestral lands. Vick’s projects were derailed from what he saw as bickering factions.

"That Balgo bookkeeper," Graham Bloodworth complained of Vick in his English working class/Aboriginal accent to me, over a fading satellite phone. Graham married Nancy Lee, the daughter of nomads, and backed Mark as they wrestled government funding from Balgo.

Mark also infuriated the state and federal governments, by negotiating the sale of oil and mineral rights. The government wanted singular deals between petroleum companies and large aboriginal corporate entities, rather than with Mark's small mob, that nevertheless controlled a big enough chunk of desert to make each of them multi-millionaires. The black fella who claimed not to read or write English was sending shivers up the spines of both white and black powerbrokers.

But Yagga Yagga collapsed. What good was a plastic playground for kids who could dig up hibernating frogs with skins bulging with water, squeeze the contents into their mouths then cook the carcasses over a campfire for a decent feed? They utilised modern devices that complemented their proven culture, like metal attached to the end of spears, and guns; but ironing boards, annual reports and concepts like vehicle registration never quite gelled.

Yagga Yagga found itself sucked dry by instances, like when they bought a Toyota troop carrier, then converted it into an ambulance. The Institute of Sisters of Mercy was contracted by the government to provide nursing, but as Graham Bloodworth remembers:

“We had all the seats taken out the back and we had a partition put in between the driver and the back and they put all medical gear on the partition and [it] was equipped with one stretcher in the back. The only time we saw that ambulance was when... the sisters used to come out on a Friday morning and go back on a Friday afternoon, but they had a...house and a clinic [in Yagga Yagga], but they still lived in Balgo and were out for about two hours a week.”

The fuel truck had difficulty ploughing through the soft sand track from Balgo that deteriorated badly after the mineral explorers left the area. When it could no longer get through the generator shut down, the power lines went dead, and the shop's frozen food thawed out. When the most recent clerk called it quits after three weeks on the job, Graham
found himself doing the welfare payroll, plus being the store manager and mechanic. When he burnt out it was Mark's niece, the daughter of Nellie Njamme, who took over the payroll. She'd been schooled in Melbourne, whilst living in the home of anthropologist Scott Cane and his family. But her heart wasn't in the job and she withdrew, and the population drifted back to Balgo.

ATSIC was the main funding body. They'd sunk a cool $5 million into Yagga Yagga, then watched it disappear without a trace. ATSIC was run by white bureaucrats under policies determined by Aboriginal elected representatives. It was a government within a government, and its billion dollar budgets gave it plenty of wallop. But the cruel truth was that no government could fund hundreds of isolated communities with minimal populations that required separate schools, clinics and power stations.

And anyway, ATSIC was a ship floundering in the sea of nepotism, and hardly a month passed without another corruption scandal hitting the media. When the increasingly paranoid bureaucrats heard whispers that those registered as Yagga Yagga residents actually lived in Balgo, they sent a team south. But the investigators were so out of touch, that cheeky Mark fooled them by trucking people south for the day.

Mark returned the favour by taking his stormtroopers north. They crossed the Sturt Creek in flood, and reached Kununurra in the early morning hours. They waited until lunch, when the ATSIC office would be quiet, then barged in and kicked over furniture, ripped up papers and threw computers from the windows. Mark calmly led his group to the police station, where they turned themselves in. Mark knew ATSIC feared adverse publicity. They wouldn't lodge a complaint even when a white bureaucrat in the office went into shock, and died from a heart attack a few days later.

Chapter 46. A weekend in paradise

Left alone in the silent street, with eyes peering from every window, I scout a group of stone buildings on the Mulan side of town. The doors and window frames have been hacked out with sledge hammers, but are too close to town and maybe inhabited, definitely claimed. The dirt road east runs to Lake Gregory homestead, renamed Mulan when the Aboriginals
regained ownership. Five kilometres out a bulldozer gouge and a cleared space amidst prickly bushes looks a good camp to contemplate the day’s events.

Mark had phoned me when I reached Halls Creek. He urged me to visit earlier than we’d planned, as he expected to be in the desert with a mining company. But his reaction when I arrived felt like a friend breaking a relationship with blows. You feel them, but it takes awhile to realise what is happening.

A camel munches vegetation the next morning, outside an earth-coloured building, surrounded by a barbed wire topped cyclone fence. It’s the health clinic. I’m waiting to see a nurse. Mark appears from nowhere, and says the police are looking for me. Constable Dave Risdale and another officer find me at the store. Mark hovers in the background.

Before moving west, Dave guarded a secret military facility in Adelaide, where they develop algorithms to decipher coded radio signals, sent by who knows.

He says police have received four complaints about me. Why am I in town? He doesn’t tell me to leave, but says the Department of Aboriginal Affairs has been known to prosecute people visiting Balgo without a permit. Mark's permission for Yagga Yagga isn't enough; Balgo requires separate permission, and Mark hasn’t that authority.

Mark appears unabashed, and inside the administration centre we sit next to two dirty wheelie bins kept inside, otherwise they’d be burnt during the night. A grill covers the post office counter, while Centrelink gets its own door. A sign advises that no one will be served if a dog is in the building: collective punishment. When the health clinic was broken into, it stayed closed for a few days. The store doesn’t open until attendance at the Catholic school reaches fifty-percent.

Mark knocks on another door. Chief Executive Officer Matt Jennings peers around while holding the door as if bracing himself for a rush. He watches me through chilly surgical eyes, while telling Mark that only a Council member can issue permits. The door slams shut.

We sit silently. The door opens. Another white fella enters the reception area with his upraised arm holding a phone on video mode. His name is Brian. "Closing time, closing time, Mark. We have to let the girls do the cleaning," he shouts, while his eyes scuttle about the room to escape mine.
Outside, Mark flags down Chairman George Lee in his 4WD. George can sign permits, but says he can't stop, and has to be in Halls Creek that afternoon. He wants me out of town. Mark turns from the speeding vehicle with a "can you believe that?" written on his face. Something doesn’t ring true. George and Mark's clans are close. George is Nancy Lee's son. His grandparents were nomads, who settled at Old Balgo. George is part of the ruling elite, while Mark is a desert law man.

Mark was once the voice of Balgo, the cheeky black fella who stood up to the white fellas. Outsiders thought he was the Chairman, but now a newly arrived gudia bureaucrat kicks him out of the building, as if he were a vagrant. But appearances can be deceiving.

Mark will see me after lunch, but doesn’t appear. From the front door of his house a young man points to him, asleep on the hallway floor, the man who on his first flight into Perth thought the street lights were stars, and the plane was flying upside down.

The camel calf chomps grass across the road. "Will you eat it?" I ask the young man, trying to make conversation. He ignores me, then walks across the road and takes a blade of grass from behind the camel, and puts it in his mouth. The animal shows no fear.

The Excel slides back and forth across the Mulan road, as my energy drains away through my solar plexus. The locals have formed ranks. They aren’t going to say anything about James and Simon. The stream alongside the road takes an hour to drop, before it’s safe to plough through to my campsite.

A faint padding within the prickly waist high scrub becomes louder, and a stocky shepherd/dingo pup emerges, then jumps into the billabong and swims across and continues its journey. It seeks no favour as I’m irrelevant to its life.

Saturday morning is a uniquely bleak event. Mark isn't at the store, but a man watches me with a snarl. A teenage boy knocks into me without acknowledgement. The kiosk attendant passes me a dripping mess of ice-cream from a faulty freezer. No one sits under the verandah at the administration building. Muster as much dignity as possible I walk the path of shame to my car, and retreat to the airport, where Les Annetts and his lawyer were exiled one night – for their own safety.
A white council worker checks the runway. He stares through my wave. Through the haze a woman and four kids emerge from the bushes, and cross the runway. "Snake," the kids screech near the one room terminal. They burst into laughter when a goanna tail disappears into a chink in the stonework.

Back at the billabong, a wall of grey sky rolls across the desert like an aerial tsunami, nature telling us mortals we’re mere pinpricks in a larger tapestry. Leaves flutter delicately on the stunted eucalypts, then within three minutes the windy torrent snaps the fiberglass poles of my tent, yanks the pegs from the ground and the canopy rises like a hang glider held to earth by my hand hanging from my car window. The stream bulges, and yesterday’s buried rubbish rises from its grave in shame and rushes into the billabong that rises four metres in twenty minutes. Within an hour its rage has moved south into the desert, and a warm wind rises in the blue sky, and the water sinks through the porous ground and into the ancient aquifers below.

Chapter 47. Machiavelli

With a sense of bravado I walk through the solid wooden door of the store on Monday morning. The crowd ostensibly ignores me, like a dream; and they’re my forebears from previous millennia, and being a dream I can be no more than a spectator.

In a flat voice leaving no chink of kindness to hook onto, a white woman barks the store is closed. Her breath is on the back of my neck as she follows me to the door. She shouts to the crowd whether staff are available, then feeling their active indifference slams the door shut.

Mark appears as a hypnotic blur. His family will talk to me. They’re across the road. Bai Bai Sunfly sits on the ground with her digging stick, while Mark’s other sister, months from her final heart attack, masks her distaste with a strained smile. Sophia and her sister Andrea stand together. Sophia says her three-year-old hasn’t yet been to Yagga Yagga. Andrea carries her month old baby.

I hold the camera high over Bai Bai then lie on the ground for Andrea. Amongst laughter someone kicks a flattened bong out of the frame. A white priest from Boys Town
joins our group, introducing himself to each person except me. Andrea flinches when he pokes her baby, then masks her reaction with a smile.

Andrea and Sophia's eyes flicker in disbelief, when I tell them Simon's Mum gave his car to Giles Loder before her son’s bones were found. But their arms swing across their bodies and Andrea's eyes flash hungrily, when I say James’ parents want Loder jailed. Revenge they understand. Payback and honour, yes. And did they meet James and Simon?

Andrea’s husband laughs and says James and Simon died near water. He has no ill will, but like others finds it difficult to understand how white folk can be so ignorant of basic living skills. Everyone knows you follow the bird that flies a straight line to water each mid-afternoon.

Rabbits, donkey and kangaroo tracks also lead to water, and where an animal has dug into the ground this usually indicates a soak, where with luck water can be recovered at half a metre. But don’t follow camel tracks, because they go days without water, he advises.

He’d have excavated sand frogs for water and meat, and eaten the edible sap inside the nuts hanging from the stunted gum trees.

There were also nomads in the area. Johnny Brown found fresh tracks made by bare feet that appeared around their machines in both 1986 and 1987. A fire of tyres and diesel might have attracted rescuers.

My brain switches to the brink of seizure mode. Time stands still. Bai Bai drops her movie actress persona, and peers up through shrewd, half-closed eyes. Nellie Njamme is grim. And why has Mark staged our meeting in front of the store audience, when a stranger favoured by one Balgo faction becomes automatically the enemy of the others. This can mean a smashed car, and broken bones.

The movie reel of my mind starts rolling, and I hear Mark’s final advice, not to speak to anyone else. “They’ll only muddle your mind,” he says.

Andrea's husband suggests I wait around another day, to let the boggy track dry from the weekend rain. But I'm not leaving. I want to speak to Pauline Sandfly. "No," says Bai Bai, dropping any pretense of joviality.
A fog descends, and my mind is blank, and I find myself sitting across a store table from a sly-faced Mark. I ask Bai Bai two tables over if she wants a drink. “Food,” she says with an ambiguous smile. I return with bread and bottles of sugar-rich Coke that I put in front of her and Nellie. They ignore me. A white nun raises her eyes, sending a shiver up my spine. Mark will accept a Zero Coke, and a packet of Marlboro Red. Andrea and Sophia have disappeared. Mark tilts his head sideways, calls me friend, and says he wants the case re-opened and Giles Loder prosecuted. He mentions no further meetings, no invitation to drop around, but gives a clear implication to leave.

My default refuge becomes the cemetery, near the airport. You can’t wrong step the dead. The locals resisted Christian burial traditions, finding repulsive the concept of being buried, then eaten by worms. They preferred to expose the corpses to birds of prey, then store the bones in caves, and erase the dead from their memories.

Few of the pebble strewn graves are marked. Anyone living with a name of the recently deceased must change it. If an Alice or Katherine dies then those towns can’t be named, and are referred to indirectly. That’s why Aboriginals invent such unique names.

It was the coffin fire that broke Vickneswaran Kandiah’s spirit to continue.

Funerals sourced from Derby had become an extravagant waste of money, so he arranged the bulk purchase of coffins, and had the ceremonies performed at Balgo. The twisted wreckage of the burnt shed where the caskets were stored remains untouched. It was the straw that broke the camel’s back, and Vick’s six years at Balgo were over. He didn’t understand.

But the building program he inspired stands today, while a dozen subsequent managers and CEO’s have come and gone without leaving a trace.

Chapter 48. Retreat from Balgo

An unwelcome gudia can hang around an Aboriginal community only so long, without incurring someone's wrath. So by late afternoon I return to the administration office to obtain
a permit. The ‘girls’ hadn’t cleaned the reception area the previous Friday, nor for the last ten Fridays by the look of it.

After a twenty minute wait, Matt Jennings invites me into his office. His surgical eyes are neither sparkling with humour, nor laced with malevolence. We sit on plastic chairs, while George Lee sits behind a large desk. George’s ‘Stone Age’ grandparents would have been proud to see their son commanding white bureaucrats who stand when he enters the room.

Jennings says my presence has caused friction in the community, and that Mark told the police he was afraid, and didn't want anything to do with me.

"But I spent an hour with him this morning taking photos of his family," my voice rings plaintively.

"That wouldn't surprise me in the least with Mark," Jennings replies. George closes his eyes when I turn to him, and sits passively while I describe my research and hope to speak to Pauline Sandfly, Linda Daniels and Cathy Lee. He visibly jumps at the last name, and momentarily opens his eyes.

"Okay, I'll camp out of town tonight then fuel up in the morning and leave," I concede. George with his eyes still closed, tells the wall that the store is still open. He doesn’t say he saw James and Simon 48 hours before their deaths.

Mark smiles slyly, sitting on the ground with his tribal brothers, blocking the store gate. We don’t have to say a word to each other. The fellow pumping fuel says Tianna Sansbury from the Rabbit Proof Fence movie is his cousin.

The black pools covering the road reflect the moon in optical perfection that turns to agitation as I aim the Excel through the gravelly middle, to avoid the sticky clay lining the sides. The surging water vibrates through the metal body, and reconciles my mind that all is as it should be, and that worries are reflections from the past long gone.

Out on the Tanami Road the Excel emerges from more pools covering the road without missing a beat. Drivers returning from Halls Creek stop and exchange greetings.

Five hours later my world changes, at the New Caranya store, with its front door clattering in the night wind. The smashed display cases and ripped wiring inside the big tin
shed tell of gudia hope and heartbreak, and by its ephemeral passing, forgotten in history except by the few who stopped here during its short history.

Caranya was a battlers’ station of 880,000 acres developed by Bill and Jose Moyle in 1965, then by the Walton family, and finally by Reg and Heather Snelling who bought it in 1984. They trucked down a building from the Wyndham meat works, and ran the old store at the homestead, seven kilometres from Wolfe Creek crater. In 1991, the year of the floods, they moved the store to the new site.

The Snellings sold their lease in 1992, and returned to South Australia and ownership went to the S.K. Kidman Estate. The once green homestead with hedges and grass and laughing children, lies abandoned and pillaged and serves as a little used outcamp of Ruby Plains, the last fully functioning Kidman station in the Kimberley, managed by the indomitable "Small Merv" Wortley.

I awaken in my tent outside the New Store, as if recovered from a cyclic nightmare where you rise from the horror then fall back into it. Morning has brought a safer, less exciting world. The ‘No Trespassing’ sign is a reassuring reminder of a place where the rules are clear: such signs are to be ignored.

But the Balgo trip has crept into my subconscious, where it will be manufactured into ever changing mythologies, that I'll repeat for the rest of my life.

I pour my woes onto a truck driver hauling machinery from a Tanami mine, who stopped to check his load. He absorbs my tribulations and theories with rapt attention, like a starving man who knows he'll develop them into hours of improbable yarns that he’ll share across the radio waves. When his train disappears in a plume of dust, I soak up the atmosphere of the New Store, assuming wrongly that this was where Simon stocked up on confectionary.

As the sun turns nasty, I continue towards Halls Creek and find my truck driver parked with two road trains destined for Ruby Plains to pick up cattle. "Paranoid," one driver shouts, not smiling.

*Chapter 49. Halls Creek*
The fat guy at the Shell station doesn't know the location of the Simon and James monument. "Ask at the visitors' centre," he says.

Mark Nicholls runs the Shire tourist office, and speaks in a buoyant German-American accent, and uses his lower notes selectively like a game show host. He earns his keep from selling stunningly expensive helicopter and plane tours to the Bungle Bungles and other geographical wonders. He’s friendly to everyone on their first visit. "How can I help you?" he asks, even to down and out travelers, but if you don't purchase anything then on your next visit he asks, "What's up?"

Mark points me to Russian Jack's larger than life statue that sits between the visitors’ centre and the filthy toilets. Jack, whose real name was Ivan Fredericks, earned his place in history for the singular act of finding a sick man in the bush, then pushing him fifty kilometres by wheelbarrow to a doctor.

Further down the generous lawns a metal plaque bolted onto a waist high lump of stone memorialises two other historical characters: “Simon Amos and James Annetts who tragically died on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert south of Halls Creek in Nov.–Dec. 1986.” The indeterminate date hasn’t been changed, despite both Giles Loder and Shane Kendall swearing they'd each seen one of the boys alive on 1 December of that year.

I ask Daniel Milkins at the Council office if the plague can be cleaned of mineral encrustation from the bore water sprinklers. Nothing happens, but on my second visit another man carrying a sponge and bucket of soapy water springs from a side door like an actor stepping onto the stage. Andrew Vonarx had a safe job in the east, but retrained as an engineer, and moved west to become the shire’s Works Manager. But for all his engineering skills the encrustation won’t budge. Then he offers me a job. "I'm not good at anything," I profess.

"We'll find something for you," he says, optimistically.

With a population hovering around 1500, Halls Creek consists of a series of tribal and bureaucratic ghettos, similar to what Vickneswaran Kandiah was trying to achieve at Balgo. The mining boom hasn’t yet reached the town, and tourists who stock up on supplies in Broome and Kununurra stop only briefly, for fuel and water and to complain about prices and
being stared at. But anyone scratching below the surface is likely to fall into subterranean pathways from which they will emerge from the ultimate unforgettable tourist trip.

Despite Halls Creek being in an economic depression, caused by a ban on most take-away alcohol, cheapo motel rooms start at a hundred and twenty dollars a night. Even those taking more expensive units are blessed by the nightly chorus of "long grass" dwellers in the creek bed, drinking as much medium strength beer as their kidneys can process.

"What's up?" Mark asks when I return, then takes pity and mutters something about the caravan park, but doesn’t add his mantra about not recommending it. He knows my other option is the long grass.

"Ten dollars a night: one person, one tent, no power," Jacqueline, a straight backed thirty-five-year old says, while writing my camping receipt.

The caravan park doubles as a maintenance and salvage depot, and alongside a human-proof fence are racks of pipes, wood, corrugated iron and fibro sheeting, some covered by an open shed, in front of which are two battered rubbish trucks of uncertain vintage. Amongst a row of long term tenants is a 1950's bus with its windows covered in plywood and mould growing on its body. Two huge caravans near the ablution block each have three air conditioners that guzzle electricity 24/7 and are occupied by snarling road workers, who race their trucks through the encampment each afternoon, leaving a thick layer of scratchy dust on the proudly washed rigs of the grey nomads.

The park boasts three camp kitchens. The good one has an operable gas stove covered in grease and mould, and an overhead light, but no roof. The other two are used as storage shelters for tables and chairs.

A one-armed man named Ross bounds over to me and in a rat-tat-tat voice says the owner, Roland Nanani, is letting the place fall apart because his first wife is taking him to the cleaners. Jacki is his second wife. Lucky him.

A grizzled Terry Gunn in his troop-carrier deftly backs his caravan alongside a retaining wall, a polite distance from my tent, unlike Europeans who park two metres from strangers then grimly ignore them. He begins assembling a canvas annex, then finishes it four hours later, and relaxes next to an esky of beer.
He sits under his annex reading a book about Russian Jack. He says yesterday was his first attempt at the annex. Next time it might take just two hours. He’s a fitter and turner from Melbourne, testing a new career as gold prospector with his $7000 Mine Lab detector. He found three nuggets near Meekatharra and picked up a hitchhiker two days previously, and gave him food and drink, upon which the fellow tried to steal his nuggets. "I hope you're not another one," he says, adding that the hitchhiker missed $500 he keeps in the pouch behind the passenger seat.

You can see the amateurs streaming in from three-day trips with busted springs and spiked tyres and tales of confrontation with irate miners and occasionally a nugget or two. They lie in their rigs at night being guided to the mother lode by the souls of speared miners.

A French man from Broome says the surface gold is finished, and he might have to go south. No one believes him. Why do he and his thin French wife spend three months a year here? They sneak out during the night to beat a cavalcade of goldfever tailgaters.

More experienced prospectors finance their holidays with their discoveries. They torch swathes of spinifex then drink beer while the flames race over the horizon. When the ground has cooled, they return as innocent aged pensioners to scan the flat sooty surface. Others obtain mineral leases, then using rented front-end loaders and ‘dry processing’ equipment create mountains of dirt resembling housing developments in the bush.

I sneak into town and eat chips under the verandah at the Poinciana Take Away. The swimming pool is empty as usual, but the perimetre fence is well utilised, and serves as a backrest for a hundred proprietary black fellas, who jealously guard their country while watching the passing parade of humanity. One is a tribal executioner looking for a certain man from the desert, whose body will soon be found in the long grass, his throat slashed. Others watch for a tribal woman who lives with a white man. When they get her alone she will be pack raped, ‘gently’, purposefully.

A dozen laughing teenage girls with broad shoulders dance the dance of a thousand years, their outstretched arms landing punches to each other’s faces, then jumping back to avoid the returning fists. Seven-year-olds copy their big sisters and collapse shrieking with laughter.
Chapter 50. The Bottle Tree Bore hanging

My car won’t make it across the sandy creek bed, so I walk across to the sediment encrusted troughs, and frighten two calves that bawl amongst the bottle trees. The windmill feeding the trough is small, hardly big enough for man to hang himself.

Alice Downs Station Manager Don McKay saw two young men walking along the highway north of Halls Creek a few days before Easter 1984, while he was returning to the homestead. One wore jeans and a black tee shirt, while the other had a distinctive green and red checked shirt. They waved, but didn’t try to flag him down.

While checking Bottle Tree Bore after Easter, Don found the man in the checked shirt hanging from inside the windmill box. He radioed his wife, who called the police. Don helped Constable Kevin Roberts haul the body down.

The police deemed it ‘suicide’, and through an administrative inquest the Coroner determined the date of death as 16 April 1984. The report was not made public, nor is available today.

Don didn’t believe it was ‘suicide’. He says the body had hung for four or five days, yet hadn't fallen apart, as it would have if the neck had been broken from the snap of a taut rope. Nor would strangulation have killed the young man, because his hands and feet weren't bound. A choking human, no matter how filled with despair, would have involuntarily grabbed any of the bars and platforms within the windmill frame. The dead man’s feet were level with a cross bar. There was a lump on the back of his head.

Don believes the man was killed, then hung from the windmill to feign a suicide. He says this was feasible, as a strong assailant could have climbed the windmill with the body on his shoulder.

The dead man’s companion never came forward. Don believes he was also killed.

After helping haul the body down, Don asked Constable Roberts for his opinion. Roberts said that as a police officer he wasn’t allowed to have an opinion. “You can have your views, but we can’t.”
Kevin Roberts left the Western Australia police in 1994, after twenty-four years on the job, and now works in the mines. From his hometown of Kalgoorlie he told me that hanging bodies don't necessarily fall apart, and that he'd seen one that had been hanging:

“…11 days and his neck was definitely broken. I can guarantee it 'cause the muscles and shit take a long time to deteriorate before they start falling apart. Some of the strongest muscles in the body are the neck muscles that hold your head so tell Mr McKay to stick to cutting up cattle and not to worry what the Coroner finds.”

Kevin said the dead man had personal problems, and had left his Land Cruiser thirty metres from the bottom of the windmill. But Kevin’s former commanding officer at Halls Creek, Allan George Hogarth told me that: “You could probably write a book on the lies that Kevin Roberts has told. Whatever you get from Kevin take it with a grain of salt.”

Twenty-six years after the death, Don McKay stands behind the counter of his shop, ‘D and T Hardware’, in Halls Creek. He’s a short stocky man with chronically red and watery eyes, who with the presence of a stage performer, tells me in his weakened half-cry voice: “There was no Land Cruiser at Bottle Tree Bore.”

Another ex-cop, Miklo Corpus, speaks softly with downcast eyes, like a man who rations his memories. He agrees with Don there wasn’t a vehicle at Bottle Tree Bore, and tells me the strange thing about the maggot infested body was the rope around the man’s neck. It had been cut short, so there was no piece dangling. They searched the vicinity for a sharp object that could have cut the rope, but found nothing. Nor could identification be found with the body, so it was taken to Perth and put in an anonymous grave.

Miklo disagreed with the suicide verdict. He said his colleagues in Halls Creek showed little interest in investigating the case.

A wallet later found elsewhere, helped identify the dead man, as Fabian Rupert Butcher. His sister had been looking for him.

The story pieced together from various sources was that he and a mate left employment from either Flora Valley or Sturt Creek station, but didn’t stop at Halls Creek for fear of their lives. They got a lift with the “Winton boys” to the Springvale station turn-off, about ten kilometres south of Bottle Tree Bore. Miklo questioned why two men leaving a station would
be carrying a length of rope yet no water, money, food or personal possessions such as clothing.

Fabian’s companion was never located. Older locals in Halls Creek agree with Don McKay, and believe he was also killed.

Fabian died two years before James and Simon arrived in the Kimberley. Local folklore says that Giles Loder hung a boy on Alice Downs station. Was Loder involved with this death? Most assuredly not. He was working in the Birrindudu area, but hadn’t yet taken over management of Flora Valley and Sturt Creek stations. But with so few police resources, and so many unexplained deaths, how hard would it have been to fake a suicide in the Kimberley?

Chapter 51. The Tanami Track disappearance

Four men were travelling in the Yagga Yagga community store Toyota trayback in about 1994. It had been giving them trouble since Balgo, and finally broke down on the Tanami Track near the turn-off to Lajmanu, about forty kilometres west of Rabbit Flat Roadhouse.

Stephen “Flatty” Biebre, 45, and David Bumblebee, 26, went for assistance, while Ralph Nagomara, 45, and his nephew, Malcolm Kalion, 22, protected the vehicle.

The men had family and tribal ties. David had a Kukatja father and Warlpiri mother, and was married to Angela Lee. He spoke English well, and through his family became part owner of Mongrel Downs Station, renamed ‘Mangkururrpa’. Malcolm was Ralph’s nephew. Flatty had gone to school with Ralph, whose younger sister is Cissy Nagomara, whose country is at Lumbunya, near Walgari and Yagga Yagga – Kukatja country. They were related to Mark Moora.

David and Flatty walked forty kilometres to a mine site, then got a lift with locals to Rabbit Flat, where they camped the night.

When they returned to the vehicle, Ralph and Malcolm were gone. David and Flatty had seen a troop carrier and the fuel truck, and assumed they’d caught a ride in one of those
vehicles. David and Flatty then hitched a ride with a gudia driving west from Alice Springs, but when they reached Balgo, they found that Ralph and Malcolm had not arrived. A larger group, including Cissy Nagomara, drove back to the vehicle and found it dragged into the bush, and its contents and wheels missing.

Old man Chooga and other experienced trackers followed Ralph and Malcolm’s footprints 200 metres down the road, until the prints disappeared into the bush. What was strange was that Ralph and Malcolm had a gun and water, and were familiar with the desert. David said they “knew everything about it”, so getting lost and dying like a couple of gudias was out of the question. Some drunks from Yuendumu said they saw the missing men get into a vehicle.

Ralph’s Mum went to the police, crying. They showed little interest and the search became a low-key affair.

Two officers eventually arrived, but there weren’t any helicopters or airplanes. Blame for such a minimal search is difficult to apportion, as the locals mistrusted the police and didn’t want them snooping around their country. They would resolve the matter themselves, no matter how long it took.

Mick Shoemaker from Yuendumu police station and Bruce Farrands spent a day cutting trenches through old campfires. Murderers often buried bodies then built a campfire above to disguise the reason for the footprint activity.

In 2011 I visit police officer Shane Williams at his house in Halls Creek. He directs me to Sadie’s camp on Blueberry Hill, on the northeast side of town. She knew Ralph. Her camp is a mattress on the ground with furniture and personal belongings set around like in a house. She isn’t home, so I leave a photograph of Bai Bai Sunfly on a table.

The following day I wait on the highway, mustering the courage to return up the hill. A gudia man doesn’t just drive into a woman’s camp. It must be done with finesse. While I prevaricate, a driver edges a Catholic parish Land Cruiser carefully down the hill. Sadie hops out and with dazzling vitality runs across the road and tells me to follow them into town.
She introduces me to Simon Nagomara, who is leaning against the swimming pool fence. He evaluates me then says Ralph was his older brother. He dreams of Ralph near a tree in the desert. Their sister Cissy lives on Mardiwah Loop.

In this world, Cissy and her church pastor husband occupy a large house with generous verandahs, on a large block of land with a clear view of everyone travelling down the road. In the other world she sees Ralph and Malcolm in a tunnel: they might have been hit with a shovel. Others see them underground. One clairvoyant from Balgo saw an arm sticking from the ground where cars had been raced. Bruce Farrands believed the bodies were put in a stony crevice, to stop birds from drawing the attention of searchers.

Cissy tells me there were stories that Ralph’s death was payback, as he had been in a vehicle that had crashed, in which a man from another tribe had died. Ralph wasn’t driving, but tribal understanding meant everyone in the vehicle carried guilt. She doesn’t share this sentiment, nor does David Bumblebee.

Speaking to me from Balgo on his mobile phone, David says he “don’t like people talking about wrong ideas.” Mark Moora agrees, and says they don’t know who “finished” Ralph, and that is why there was never any payback.

Cissy says her Mum and Dad died of worry and heartbreak. Her mother said there would be payback and that: “You’ll see; someone will fall over.” Cissy dislikes black magic. Black magic practitioners obtain strands of hair or clothing, then perform magical ceremonies until the offender “falls over”. She says many women at Mulan are without men because one-by-one they fall over.


“No,” she replies, “No one knows what was wrong with them.” Before she says anything more Simon arrives, and makes it plain I should leave while I can.

The explanations and responsibilities for events in life take different forms in different cultures. In October 1995 Holliman and Mandijerry were driving along the Tanami Road between Ruby Plains and Billiluna. They were “brother cousins”: tribal brothers, but cousins in white fella talk. Holliman fell asleep and as the vehicle skid sideways, Mandijerry grabbed the steering wheel, and in the confusion the vehicle overturned. Holliman suffered heart and
lung lacerations, and died. Mandijerry crawled from the vehicle as it burst into flames, and incinerated Holliman’s body.

Mandijerry later gave contradictory recollections of the accident. In one he said his friend Holliman had escaped the vehicle, and was given a lift to town by tourists. But, more importantly, from his cultural perspective, he said, “In Aboriginal way there might have been a dog that cross that road, but I didn’t see it. My cousin didn’t see it.” And therein lays the explanation: a dog crossed the road. Neither of them saw it, but it was real; it was the truth and it caused the driver and passenger to lose control of the vehicle.

Similarly, the use of metaphor and analogy is a valid Aboriginal description of truth while not being literally descriptive. So when Tomato Gordon says the Datsun ute was taken into the desert on the back of an F100, and that Giles Loder killed the two gudia boys, he was telling his truth. Loder’s harsh discipline provided the impetus for the boys to flee into the desert, where they died. Loder’s treatment of the boys had the same effect as if he’d killed them, and dumped their bodies in the seismic maze. The F100 and the dog serve the same purpose.

Back in town I spend the next two days questioning people about Aboriginal justice. One initiated man was executed, after getting drunk then divulging secret knowledge to uninitiated young men and women. Younger men are occasionally ordered to deliver this deadly justice, against offenders who might have been their childhood friends. This is why the Assembly of God church has been welcomed by some, despite it being the religion of the invader.

A woman who asks not to be identified, told me she was rid of a bad spirit implanted when she was fifteen. She awoke one night and found herself paralysed. An older man was clipping the hair around her right ear. She felt something placed in her head behind her ear. She suffered from this until the age of 25, when a Pastor at the Halls Creek Assembly of God church discovered the psychic implant and with God’s help expelled it, and it flew away. “It’s gone sister; you set free,” he told her.

Chapter 52. Billiluna
Aboriginals take six-months to sum a person up. They don’t look at you, then every so often take this darkened glance, and in that darkened glance seem to be able to sum so much up.”

Des Peterson, Fitzroy Crossing

"This isn't Balgo," the stern Teutonic voice of Trudy Rosenwald tells me, when I confess to my expulsion from Balgo. She asks the chairperson if I can visit Billiluna. "Permission granted," she says ten seconds later.

Two hundred and twenty people live at Mindibungu or, Billiluna, as it is still called, 170 kilometres south of Halls Creek. It’s where the Tanami Road meets the northern end of the Canning Stock Route. Despite not having an art gallery, police station or mobile phone tower, it’s a friendly cosmopolitan town, popular for convoys of bush bashers charging up from Wiluna, who stop for fuel, ice-cream and a thirty-minute gawk they remember for the rest of their lives.

Bill and Lorna Wilson ran Billiluna cattle station, when the locals occupied a few tin shacks across the track. It’s where Bill shot Jamba Jinba Yupupu-Ross on 6 January 1976.

Jamba and five other men stole the school teacher’s car at Papunya, south of Yuendumu, and 246 kilometres west of Alice Springs. They refuelled the V8 at Rabbit Flat then raced west towards Balgo to ambush Father Ray Hevern, who was taking a load of girls to boarding school in Broome.

The story differs depending on who is telling it, but a common factor is: the girls had been promised in marriage to the Papunya men, who believed they would be subjected to abuse in Broome. Jan Verdon was convinced the Papunya men were on a mission to kill Hevern, not simply liberate the girls.

John Kernot, the ubiquitous Broome taxi owner, understood the blacks’ concerns. He used his drivers to monitor the traffic to drug dealers’ addresses, and by chance noticed the strange flow of taxi passengers to and from religious establishments, after dark.

Bruce Farrands radioed a warning to Birrindudu. Bill and Les Verdon went out in a three cylinder Suzuki ute to investigate, and found the men at the airstrip. They were on the
wings of Les Verdon’s plane trying to siphon fuel. Les got a little excited and fired shots and at least one man was hit by pellets in the leg.

Some say Les and Bill ran out of bullets, others that they didn’t want to seriously injure the Papunya men, who became enraged. They threw tools at the Suzuki. A wheel brace hit nine-year-old Ashley Verdon in the ribs, but the girl with him in the back of the ute wasn’t injured. Bill retreated towards the homestead, and crashed through the vegetable garden fence to escape the V8.

Jan Verdon handed Les a shotgun as Bill, him and the two kids ran inside. She hid Ashley and his sister Donna Lee in a cupboard. The Papunya men, brandishing tyre levers and spanners, followed them to the house. Les fired a warning shot from his shotgun, which blasted a chunk from a porch post, then as Jamba wound up to throw a tyre lever, Bill put a .22 bullet in his hip.

The southern media went wild, and journalist Margot Lang wrote a series of anti-pastoralist articles over the incident. After a tormenting process, Bill was not committed for trial on grounds of self-defence. Les got a small fine for having an unlicensed firearm. Jamba Jinba lived on, but the bullet was never removed from his hip.

The shacks across the track grew into a town, and the Aboriginais, using government money and government clout, pressured the Wilsons to sell their stations. The white children born and raised on that dirt found themselves exiled from what they believed was their birthright. Ashley Verdon left with Roy Wilson on three horses: Bonza, Ringo and a grey mare, Retania, named after one of Les Verdon’s previous girlfriends. The Billiluna homestead, the product of decades of backbreaking labour, was destroyed by fire soon after.

The locals still ask what happened to their gudia boys, and they remember Jan Verdon sitting up nights waiting for the Flying Doctor for black kids. Ashley Verdon, now in his late forties, remembers:

“All them poor black fellas. They’re my relatives. I might be white; they might be black, but them people taught me to survive the world even before I got sent to fucking boarding school. I love ‘em, mate. I cry, those clean, healthy people with pride who worked at Billiluna station then later seeing them in Halls Creek after the station was taken over by do-gooders”
And Manson:

“...unreal bloke, big black fella, Mum loved him, she was glad she had him around if Dad wasn’t around because he just looked after everyone. I seen him turn into just a poor drunk wandering around, because he had no purpose, the station was handed back, everything was given to them. I look back and I get wild with these do-gooders, what they done. I wish I could get them, eh, and drag them all around Wolfe Creek crater by the ankles [for] what they done.”

The Sturt Creek crosses the Tanami Road five kilometres south of Billiluna, and appears during the dry season a series of water holes spaced between parched flood plains, the only hint of its strength being overhead debris caught in trees and crevices of the elevated causeway.

Sturt Creek begins as an anonymous waterway in the Northern Territory, where the Kimberley gorge country meets the Tanami Desert, then moving north incorporates numerous other creeks and swings south west at Inverway Station near the Buntine Highway, then fills waterholes all the way to Wolfe Creek, that enters from the north near Skeen Waterhole.

During the Wet season Sturt Creek becomes a kilometre wide wall of water that sometimes puts sections of Birrindudu, Sturt Creek and other homesteads under water. It roars across the elevated causeway on the Tanami Road and fills the lagoons and water holes and Lake Gregory, then sinks into the Great Sandy Desert to replenish the aquifers and wells along the Canning Stock Route past Lake Disappointment.

A baby pram lies partially immersed in the water hole near the causeway, where a dozen grazing horses watch me warily. I chart a meandering pathway, then collapse against an ant-free tree. Metre by metre the horses edge closer three abreast, while others keep their eyes on retreat. They sniff my face and exhale their hot breath on my skin while I gaze into the pools of their huge eyes. Some say they’re descendants of Irish thoroughbred racehorses. Arab and Persian horses introduced by a Catholic priest in the 1930's, then crossed with the tough mustering horses brought over from Queensland by the early drovers. These powerful creatures with their scarred legs and chipped hooves flourish in the creek beds between the deserts, and despite being regularly faced with their own starvation they offer no threat to humans. And, luckily, they’re oblivious to the order from the Pastoral Lands Board ordering the superbly recalcitrant Aboriginal leaseholders to shoot them.
Five garden workers watch me warily as I park in front of the Billiluna administration centre next to the single generator power station. A thickset man fixes his eyes onto me, then taps his empty Coke bottle on a wooden bench. A man behind the counter inside the office ignores my presence for five minutes, until I ask for Mary Darkie. A European-accented man emerges from an inner office and introduces himself as Arthur Rosenwald, husband of Manager Trudy. She’s a thin slightly wrinkled blond woman only recently arrived, but wears the relaxed manner of an outback veteran. She greets me in passing, as she enters with Mary Darkie, a plump thirty-five year old with a guileless expression and pearl white teeth and nails, and described by others as being as much white as black. She treads both worlds with aplomb. She was ten when the boys disappeared.

"When we heard they worked for Loder, we knew it was murder," Mary says, guiding me across the road, where three retired stockman sit under the store verandah like statues, their dazzling white hair contrasts with jet black skins. They lower their gaze to the blind stare of the ridiculous hatless man in a long-sleeved white business shirt.

They ignore my barrage of questions, and mutter short responses to Mary. The man with a huge scar down the side of his face, and who worked for Sherwin and Loder, looks up with uncharacteristic directness. He appraises me for one long second then smacks one huge fist into the palm of his other hand and says: "When you finish up with Loder, you go for a smack-up in the round yard." He returns his gaze to the ground.

Three women playing cards on a blanket next to the road stop their game and sit still when we approach. One of them is Lucy Darkie, in her fifties, Mary's mother. She married Ronnie Tilbrook, while her sister married Ron's brother. John Kernot was there with Warlpiri woman Jeannie Daniels, when it happened.

A mob had gone to Rabbit Flat, ostensibly for ice, but things turned strange the next day east of Balgo, when the beer ran out. "Everyone was acting crazy. They'd been drinking spirits," Kernot said. He wanted to clear out, but Jeannie was familiar with such behaviour, and wanted to stay. The men were butchering a "killer" with long knives, while the traditional women stood round with cupped hands, soon filled with warm chunks of bloody meat. Lucy’s sister wasn't interested, and walked away, ignoring Ronnie Tilbrook’s brother’s shouts to return. “Fuck you,” she shouted. He chased her retreating figure and plunged his knife into her back. The point came out the other side. She expired twenty minutes later.
With minimal introductions, the women on the blanket passively reject my presence, like they would any bureaucrat sniffing around. I stand over them rudely, while Mary says her mother saw a helicopter circle Balgo twice, then head south towards Yagga Yagga, about the time the boys disappeared. Thinking Lucy doesn't speak English I ask Mary if her mother saw it land. One of the women shouts at me, but offers nothing in answer to my question. Mary says Sam Yamba of Mulan might have information, but I should get Julie Ann Johns to translate. Also Bobby Sealer at Madalla Block in Halls Creek, he worked for Loder.

I ask if the rumour that Loder went into an Aboriginal camp at Red Rock waterhole and shot the dogs is true. Mary says, no, it happened at Gordon Downs. She recounts Loder buzzing the camp with his plane. She smiles: "The boys tried to hit it with their shanghais."

A small boy climbs onto Mary, who loosens her buttons and takes the child to her breast. I turn my back pretending to be speaking to someone else across the road, occasionally turning my head around to respond to Mary. Her husband Robert Mckay suppresses a twinkle in his eyes. The jet black women on the blanket look at me with incredulity.

Mary suggests I visit Tomato Gordon at Gordon Downs. "Is that his real name?" I ask. Mary tells me the white men gave Aboriginals silly names like Mosquito, Breakfast, Sugar Sugar. "Larrikin", a voice from the blanket adds, emphasising each syllable. I laugh loudly, alone. "And Darkie," Mary says, her voice quieter. "Rosie La La and Bai Bai Sunfly" I add, to silence. Other surnames are Chatterbox, Tin Fish, Billycan, Lemon, Orange, Killer and Dreamer.

Mary says Eric Moora is in Billiluna, "at the Farmer girl's house." Robert will take me there. Mary says she'll stay with the women.

"How did you find me?" Eric asks, his displeasure evident. He moves me back towards the street, as Robert makes a discreet exit. A white woman walking by asks, "Are you alright?"

"Yes," I answer then realise she's asking Eric. He says nothing so I explain my presence. She ignores me, but consoles Eric then leaves.

At Balgo Eric asked to see the photos I took of him and his family, but this time his enthusiasm is qualified. And he’s rusty with dates. He remembers as an eleven-year-old at the
four tin shacks, seeing from a distance some “blue and white” containers on the back of a Datsun ute, details that weren’t published except as an obscure sentence in a confidential police report. Then he walks back into his house and closes the door.

The street phone rings. It's the sledge hammer-resistant model, without card or coin slots or display panel, and is activated by a password that comes with special phone cards. Two women across the street show no interest, so I lift the receiver. A recorded voice from a Brisbane prison announces the call is being recorded, then a human voice asks me to bring a certain woman to the phone. I haven’t a clue who she is, so try to pass the buck to the women across the street, while two stick-thin twelve-year-olds take the handset, and talk to the prisoner for a couple of minutes, then hang up. Problem solved, that is, until six snarling dogs with bared teeth snap at my Achilles tendons. The biggest one clamps its jaws onto my trousers. One of the women cracks a heavy branch over its spine. It yelps in pain, but the rest of the pack holds its ground, still snarling, while I beat a hasty retreat.

Lucy and the other women have disappeared with their blanket and cards, as have Mary and Robert, and the stockmen under the store verandah. Black smoke belches from the power station, then its motor chokes into silence, leaving only the blaring music belting out of a derelict 4WD, strewn with celebrity gossip magazines. The street is abandoned, except for the Coke bottle man staring from the space in his mind that no longer exists.

**Chapter 53. Back at Halls Creek**

The gossip network springs into action with a vengeance manufacturing reasons for my inglorious exit from Balgo. An Aboriginal cashier's glare follows me along the aisles of the Halls Creek IGA Express. A white woman wearing plastic flowers in her hair shakes her head when I try to pay with Balgo money. My wallet bulges with torn and taped notes with chunks missing and so worn out that Banjo Patterson's mother wouldn't have recognised her son's face on the ten-dollar bill.

Money gets trapped in the closed circuit of Balgo commerce until it breaks the loop when gullible tourists and contractors tender fresh notes and accept Balgo money as change.
Roland Nanani sympathises with me at the caravan park, saying the Kimberley Hotel unloads damaged notes onto drunks who try to use them to buy smokes from him. He'll accept worn money providing chunks aren’t missing, but when I pay the rent he returns Balgo-style notes in the change. I’ll unload them back as rent next week.

Terry Gunn rolls in from his three-day prospecting trip, during which he spent half that time digging his Land Cruiser from a dry creek bed, and the other half chased by irate “gold miners”. Ross jaunts over and hands me a plastic container. "To save your tea bags after you dry them out". He'll soak them in fuel to make fire lighters. "As soon as I can source some diesel," he says, enigmatically.

Two streets across town, a powerfully built black man at the Kimberley Interpretive Service brushes his hand dismissively as if batting away a fly, when I ask about the Sturt Creek station massacre. He calls a woman who says their archivist probably won’t know anything of the massacre, and anyway, she’s looking after her children today. They know.

The massacre at Sturt Creek station resonates through the gudia boys’ deaths like an undertow pulling witnesses into communal silence. It’s hard to prove because the settlers’ diaries didn’t say: “We killed a bunch of myalls last week and threw them into a well”.

Nor do surviving relatives broadcast the incident. It’s their story; they own it and to share it would weaken it. Like a genealogical website that gives access to births and deaths databases, and allows relatives to build their family tree. These searchers then discover the program has built a Facebook-style page, which the website owner then sells to others as a marketable product. Similarly, tribal elders have been aghast when they’ve walked into libraries and seen picture books about their ancestors, when naming their dead is taboo.

And the double kick they feel is when well meaning scholars like Keith Windschuttle, who work from written archives, doubt that such fragments of massacre history ever happened.

Russell Tremlett lives in his parents’ old Council house on Roberta Avenue, across from the caravan park entrance. The Shire Council is trying to kick him out despite his living there for over 45 years. They’re going to include it as part of a salary package to attract “skilled” workers from outside the Shire.
A cyclone fence covered by trees and creepers gives the house a leafy front yard refuge from the hot sun, and from the moonlight parade of drinkers streaming home from the airport long grass. Jim Ghilotti kept his clapped out Valiant Charger here before selling it to Simon. Russell works in his garden while he tells me that one of the boys was killed before they were taken into the desert where the other was murdered. It was not an accident.

Russell’s sister, Robyn Long from the Better Life Project suppresses her enthusiasm to my visit as impeccably as she is groomed. Her face wears the haunted look of a prisoner awaiting the hangman. She can't tell me much because by 1986 she was down south working as a nurse. And her memory is in decline, she says. She has trouble remembering her parents, but she’ll search for their photos. I write this on a piece of paper to jog her memory, but expect her to politely forget. Why should she share her private life with some stranger?

I ask how her bags of groceries have appeared next to us when they weren't there previously. She says that during our conversation she got up and brought them out as she is shortly leaving for home. Our eyes bulge at each other across the table. As to why they didn't want me in Balgo, she says perhaps they thought I was a drug addict. Or that speaking to me might cause trouble for Aboriginals. "Could do," I reply.

Josie Farrer stands outside her house on Welman Road like an unmovable sentinel. She is a mixed-race traditional Kija woman brought up by parents who spoke little English. She was born on Moola Bulla station, a disciplinary institution near Halls Creek for half-caste children and delinquents. When the government sold the station the kids were loaded onto trucks without warning and trundled down the dirt road to Fitzroy Crossing, a world away.

Josie says blacks know the sorrow of losing children, of old people still travelling the country, to Oldea, to Wiluna, up to Balgo looking for relatives separated during the Maralinga atomic tests, searching for children without birth documentation who were given Christian names.

She had been driving to Adelaide with her family days before James and Simon were reported lost. In her sleep the faces of two gudia boys appeared a handwidth in front of her, calling for help. But who were these boys? They weren’t from her culture; she couldn’t warn their relatives. Her dream at Marla Bore especially bothered her. The boys stopped calling for help. “There was a lot of crying in Halls Creek,” she remembers, looking into the distance.
She says the earth and spirits deal with miscreants in their own way. Like the helicopter that crashed over the forbidden area of the Bungle Bungles killing three women passengers.

Josie seethes at gudia laws that criminalise traditional marital discipline. Men are locked up, and women left without husbands, and children without fathers. Even verbal assault is a crime, she says, almost laughing.

Her culture forbids the naming of the recently deceased, Josie says, as this disturbs their living relatives and friends, who want to forget the hurt. She says Malcolm Kalion shouldn’t be named, but he can be described as the son of “Big Red”, who was so named because he was often coloured with desert dust or painted with ochre. “Uh oh,” Josie stops herself in mid-sentence. “Big Red” can’t be named because he also died, but his name could be written within quotation marks.

“Tough, tasteless, fatty meat at City Prices plus freight,” reads the plywood sign hanging on chains outside Lorraine and Jamie Savage’s Halls Creek meat store. Inside, the bloody flesh is transformed into the aroma of seasoned and preserved meats powerful enough to convert a vegetarian. The Savages’ free range beasts slaughtered locally produce arguably the safest and highest quality meat in the world.

Grey haired Jamie grew up on the stations, and his aged parents still manage Supplejack station south of Wave Hill. Mark Moora wanted Jamie to partner a joint venture near Yagga Yagga funded from a government start-up grant. But the land was too marginal, too far into the desert.

The wiry and small statured butcher is from a culture where men work until they drop or are carried off injured. He speaks of Giles Loder in the past tense: "If you did the right thing by Giles, he'd do the right thing by you."

Lenin Christie thought the same. He owned the abattoir and meat shop prior to selling it to Jamie, and from there he lent his 4WD to Loder, who flew in to round up new employees. Loder always returned the vehicle full of fuel, and on just one occasion Jamie needed to “sort out the man”
Constable Murray Cowper, now Minister of Corrections in the Western Australia government, thought "Loder was a hard man, made from a hard life on a harsh country. But he was no killer as some ridiculous comments were made."

John Drummond agreed: “I think Giles was a very tough man like all station stockmen, managers and overseers were in those days. I don’t think he was a cruel man though people depicted him as being cruel, didn’t they?”

Don McKay rings a similar tone from his hardware shop, but condemns Sherwin’s long distance helicopter musters that left a trail of dead calves.

Graham Macarthur felt the same distaste. He’s now a station and stock agent with Elders in Broome, but worked with Loder while managing Gordon Downs. He resigned for various reasons including the rough treatment of beasts, particularly the mustering of shags with calves during the summer heat. John Davis also quit Flora Valley in part due to animal deaths in the mustering yards, some two hundred. When Des Peterson managed Gordon Downs he was offended by Loder’s rough treatment of the Aboriginal stockmen. Others say Sherwin bought healthy properties then bled them dry through overgrazing, not maintaining fence and bore infrastructure, and that he abused both staff and cattle.

Aboriginals recount his buzzing their camps with his plane, and shooting their dogs, as if he's a direct descendant of Nat Buchanan and the early myall exterminators of the 1890's. Everyone has a Giles Loder story. Even a bus driver who drives crews to the Argyle diamond mine told me at a roadside stop, that while working at the Halls Creek supermarket she always got someone else to serve Loder. "He was too arrogant," she said.

Chapter 54. In the footsteps of James Annetts

In contrast to the haughty tones of welfare bureaucrats, billionaire Paul Holmes à Court talks like an average man receiving a call at home. But like a scrub bull jumping from a clump of thorny bushes he soon has me on the defensive.
"What bores do you want to see?" he asks, but James’ bore map is temporarily lost amongst the mess of my car, so I ramble on to obfuscate my unpreparedness. He ends my flailing saying he'll tell Laurie Curtain to expect me at Flora Valley. He also wants a signed copy of the book.

Like a dumb tourist, I camp that night at Cattle Creek amongst dung pats and hoof prints, while thirsty beasts nervously skirt my tent, waiting for me to leave so they can get to water.

Four vehicles stream from the Flora Valley homestead the next morning in the predawn darkness for the dry season muster, while I quietly peer inside the brightly lit house where Giles Loder once ruled supreme. A lean jackeroo stands in profile as if an actor posing for the camera. A fresh faced woman moves silently about the room while an unseen baby opens the sliding screen door.

"Did you have any trouble getting here?" Laurie asks, when I walk through the outer gate. He laughs when I say none. He speaks into a microphone and his voice booms through loudspeakers at the other end of the homestead. "Ben is down there. He's fixing a tyre," he tells me, his face showing no chink of weakness, no wasted emotion. His business with me is over. He takes a second glance then turns away.

Ben is the 20th direct descendent of James Annetts in ‘bore runner’ genealogy. He's a shy man, not huge, about thirty with a guru-like luminosity. Unlike James who needed people around him, Ben likes the privacy and seclusion of his job. No one bothers him providing he keeps the troughs and ‘turkey nests’ full. Heytesbury pay him one hundred and forty dollars a day plus board. His day ends when he finishes the job. We race through the homestead gates as if late for a plane.

Ben was born in Tasmania, then taken to France with his missionary parents, whose church funded them to spread their message. He had difficulty incorporating the opposing doctrines of the church and the secular French education system. It left him “confused”, as he puts it, but there’s no doubting his distaste for missionary zeal. What he describes as "Shoving religion down others' throats," he has one word: "Ugly."

He relaxes his grip from the shaking steering wheel to stop the vibrations pulsing through his body as the Land Cruiser bounces over ruts crossing the grass track. The trayback
is one year old, and will be replaced in another twelve months. "You'd be crazy to buy a used station vehicle," he says.

He charges a herd of Brahmans, carefully judging each beast's projected movement and drives where they won't be when he reaches that spot.

Brahmans arrived in Indonesia from Spain and Portugal centuries ago and then bred with a tough Asian beast called Zebu. Brahmans have supplanted most breeds in the Kimberley, due to their resistance to cattle tick. They'll eat almost anything, but their disadvantage is a low breeding rate of 50% per annum. They rarely fatten on south Kimberley grasslands, but that is fine because small beasts are required by the main export market in Indonesia. Once there the animals are generously fed in a sedentary environment to produce the fat laden meat loved by many Indonesians.

Our first stop is Calico Bore, surrounded by a decrepit barbed wire fence and cluttered with bushes, except where spilt diesel has sterilised the ground. Motors have come and gone, but the Comet pump from James’ era still pumps underground water into Calico Creek. The beasts are attracted by the scent of water then graze and browse the surrounding land.

Ben flicks on the electric pump attached to the diesel tank on the back of the Land Cruiser, and adds ten litres to the 200 litre drum raised above the bore motor. He bleeds the fuel line of air until diesel pours out one end, then vigorously hand cranks the motor that roars into action in a plume of black smoke. He washes away the spilt diesel with pressurised water and cleans his hands, then leans against the vehicle nonchalantly chewing a half cooked slab of pink beast.

After another bone jarring twenty minute drive through three gates that need to be opened and closed, we reach the next bore, where Ben replaces the metre and a half belt that connects the pump and the motor. This bore fills an above ground dam called a ‘turkey nest’ that gravity feeds a series of split-down-the-middle two-hundred litre fuel drums welded onto twenty-metre long frames. The nest leaks badly and has created an oasis, surrounded by lush vegetation and thousands of squawking birds.

Any beast found dead near the troughs is chained around the neck and dragged behind the Land Cruiser into the barbed wire enclosure, preventing other beasts sucking the marrow from its bones. They seek sustenance not available in the water or vegetation, Ben says, but
the unspoken reason for enclosing the carcass is to minimise the risk of endemic prion infection. These abnormal proteins are present in the bone marrow and brains of a tiny percentage of most mammals including humans and could evolve into the virulent Mad Cow Disease.

"How do the families feel about you writing this book?" Ben asks. The Annetts are 100% for it and Simon's family is dead against it, I reply. "Some things should be left alone and forgotten," he says, adding the word "Ugly."

After twenty minutes of uncomfortable silence we emerge from a bush track into the steel yard at Flora Valley homestead. Ben turns to me with pride and says: "This is what you've been waiting for."

In the distance, amongst pigeon splattered hulks of discarded machinery, lies a low slung, scarlet Valiant Charger: Simon's dream machine in which he would return triumphantly to Adelaide.

Rust has eaten through the roof, and its body has absorbed the obligatory outback bullet holes. The bonnet is raised and the motor and wheels have gone.

It was already a clapped-out bomb with serious oil leaks when Simon bought it from Jim Ghilotti for five hundred dollars. Simon told Debbie Davis it would be on the cover of 'Wheels' magazine, but now grass grows through the floorboards and the wind rustles through its body as if the dead boy sits behind the wheel and re-lives his adventures in the world beyond.

It was kept undercover like a shrine to the fallen, but as the years passed was moved behind a shed then finally to the steel yard. "The manager was told by the previous manager that no one is to touch the car," Ben says.

At the homestead kitchen Ben introduces me to helicopter pilot Nathan Covey, who transferred his jackeroo skills to the sky. Pilots are the gladiators of the muster and an hour of flight costs the equivalent as three days wages for Ben. The two-person machine guzzles fuel like a road train, and the rotor blade costs as much as a new car, and must be replaced every two-thousand hours of flight time. As with Roman gladiators you see very few white-haired mustering pilots, because they either die in crashes or wise up and find a safer occupation.
Nathan seethes against Sherwin and Loder for not protecting James and Simon. He says the manager must ensure staff safety: "Loder failed miserably," Nathan says, adding that the Datsun ute retrieved from the desert is still parked at Birrindudu Station due to the curse that will fall upon anyone who tries to move it. Then he jumps up shouting, “The girls have arrived,” as three powerful blond women return from the yards for lunch.

Chapter 55. Birrindudu oasis

The fine gravel of the Buntine highway rattling the undercarriage punctuates the creeping realization my Excel hasn’t enough fuel to return to Halls Creek.

But research is a linear roulette wheel for an addict, praying that another bet will trigger the ever delayed windfall. The track south at Inverway station turns to grey dirt and the vibrations pulsing through the car are like massage strokes, and clumps of grass roots that escaped the grader’s blade are the masseur’s gentle taps.

The grader driver waves a friendly hand. His silver caravan and diesel tanker sit on a dune where soil turns to sand. The narrow Excel lurches from one 4WD tyre rut to the other, bouncing across water soft sand like a boat tossed about by waves. The low slung muffler ploughs the centre ridge like a child playing in the sand pit. The sandy track turns to the hard clay surface of the Tanami and after three sets of gates, Birrindudu homestead appears, an oasis of green on the edge of the desert.

Janet Holmes à Court poured money in Birrindudu after her husband’s death, and built a workshop that enabled major equipment repairs on the station.

Sprinklers tick over an oval-sized expanse of grass within a circle of buildings. A man and woman wearing beatific smiles wave from the other side and quickly walk towards me. "We thought you were Peter," the woman says when we’re close. "We're expecting him." They point to the yards where I might find station manager, Lance Hutley, to ask about the ute.
A blond woman with blue eyes and creamy white skin splashed scarlet with blood gazes up at me while holding a writhing weaner in the crush. The bolt cutter device slices through a horn and the writhing animal creates a fresh spray of colour then is released to join the other beasts standing mournfully in groups, the sides of their heads a lively red.

"Peter?" asks a genial seventeen-year-old man, disappointed when I’m not, but he's still friendly. "I'd shake hands with you, but my hands are bloody," he says, and adds that Lance will return from the bore run in about an hour.

Ignoring pastoral ethics I sneak into the steel yard where it appears the homestead has had a bad run with washing machines, these being the most popular item. The cursed 1983-era Datsun ute lies without fanfare amongst the other wrecks. The roof is crushed, the wheels are gone and its rusted body is pocked with bullet holes. I take twenty photographs in fading light, then realise the number plates are HC 573 and not HC 529. Is this James’ Datsun? It was a common practice during that era to leave station vehicles unregistered then when needed for a town trip to screw on plates from the homestead’s only registered vehicle.

Peter arrives, and we drink tea with his brother and sister in-law in the kitchen overlooking the waterhole. She offers chocolate balls from a Tupperware container then carefully seals the lid. Peter ran a backpacker joint at Wentworth on the Murray River, but had to get away. He starts his new life tomorrow as the ‘bore runner’. I tell Peter the other two were overjoyed to see me, because they thought I was him. The tough man gulps back a sob.

Lance returns and says he knows nothing of the curse. He dragged the Datsun from the homestead compound, "To get it out of the way." And Simon, another Simon, the Birrindudu jackeroo killed in a rollover while returning from Katherine? That was months before he moved the vehicle.

He urges me to camp for the night, but the drops of rain patting the ground are the warning drums of doom. Fifteen millimeters can transform the grey dirt into a black glue that takes days to dry.

Lance’s smile dies when he realises I’m another fader, here today, gone today.

The station runs on diesel, but they keep a tank of petrol for the quad bikes near the big shed that he sells to me at city prices.
I race into the distance in a cloud of dust, noticing from the corner of my eye Lance and the jackeroos returning from the yards waving their hands over their heads. A locked gate looms. I’ve driven back into the inner homestead. Their grim stares follow me as I return—no waving this time.

Twenty-kilometres down the track the muffler plows a wet ridge of sand and in a series of thumps and bumps is ripped from under the vehicle, then two-minutes later the steaming metal lies in the passenger well.

I camp the night at an overgrown rest area on the Buntine highway, then at daybreak during a gossamer rain, re-attach the muffler using an empty salmon can, circular clamps and barbed wire from a fallen fence.

Over twelve hours just three vehicles pass, two of them road maintenance trucks, on what is the main gravel highway across the northern Tanami desert during the peak tourist season.

Chapter 56. Ghosts from the past

A round shouldered man leans back with mannequin-like stillness against the dining room window, like a jackaroo on a horse rounding the herd on a still night. The tick-tick of garden sprinklers breaks the silence under street lights blazing along the bitumised track in the middle of the day.

Bill Perry is four weeks from his third and most dangerous heart attack and epitomises the stillness of a man acknowledging his mortality.

Bill arrived at Nicholson station in 1962, the year the bores went dry and the cattle dropped like flies. He was given a war surplus .303 with orders to shoot any beast showing stress. “The poor buggers would just stand there and die.” When the carcasses dried he dragged them into rows with wood and diesel and torched the lot. Cooked meat for the dingoes. He also shot wild donkeys at Marella Gorge to preserve vegetation for the remaining cattle.
Being a jackeroo in those days was a pathway into the pastoral aristocracy, not a dead end laboring job. The jackeroos ate with the manager, away from the stockmen. Their initiation in blood included castration, de-horning and butchering ‘killers’ for the homestead. Then came the backbreaking construction of loading ramps, and those who survived that mended fences, loaded cattle onto trucks, stitched saddles, trained horses, learnt cooking, mechanics, pest and disease control, and managed the accommodation, kitchen and workshops. They also liaised with stock inspectors, interpreted weather charts, and placated the owners. A successful jackeroo needed the strength to work eighteen hour days and the courage to fistfight unruly stockmen—and cull useless animals: both beasts and humans.

Bill became manager of Kirkimbie station, just around the corner from Nicholson, at the ripe age of 26, during the great collapse. Pastoralists couldn’t incorporate equal wages for Aboriginals so they shunted them off to town camps, where hard work was replaced with welfare cheques and “drinking rights”. Nicholson’s 120 strong workforce in 1967 was reduced by 1986 to one sixteen-year-old boy, James Arthur Annetts.

“The best days of my life were at Kirkimbie station,” Bill remembers, as we make tea in the kitchen still decorated with its original corrugated iron cladding and work benches on the uneven cement floor. But he threw it away in 1976 and moved with his wife to Brisbane, where he worked as an executive in the building industry.

Nicholson today is essentially an abandoned outstation, yet as in tribute to its former status a huge green road sign in Halls Creek points the direction while the mail plane still lands on the dirt airstrip to deliver a single letter. The telephone is hardly more expensive than a city phone, and the Royal Flying Doctor Service will land on the airstrip.

Dean and Lee Scott-Virtue arrived as paid caretakers for an exploration company that rented the homestead, then departed suddenly leaving a cylindrical tank of diesel for the generator. Lee is a trained archeologist and historian. Dean, an electrician, has returned the power lines to full service, and with the water flowing they’ve turned the tinder try homestead into a verdant jungle. But after months of twelve-hour days they’re scrambling to raise funds, so Dean might have to do a stint on the Ord River irrigation expansion project.

Nicholson is an outcamp of Toadbusters, dedicated to stopping the wave of poisonous cane toads entering the east Kimberley. The goo produced from glands on certain Arizona
toads has hallucinogenic qualities, but the only ‘other-worldly’ affect from consuming the Australian Cane Toad is death from heart failure.

Lee and Dean run extermination tours where tourists sample methods of killing the slow moving creatures such as belting them with golf clubs. This is called toad busting, and is popular with German tourists. Lee has tried without success to encourage Aboriginal teenagers to rehabilitate the land, but says, “They do show enthusiasm for toad busting.”

Dean and Lee are in Kununurra buying food after Bonnie Edwards’ extended family cleaned them out on a weekend visit.

Bill suggests I camp for a few days until the roads dry out, so I choose a room opposite the kitchen, and one most likely used by the Annetts boy. It’s next to the bathroom, and the water steams and splutters through the shower rose from a small storage tank on the floor heated close to boiling by the idling generator.

That night as sleep claims my intellect and my subconscious spreads its wings, a ten-second black and white video loop flashes through my mind. James stands by the Datsun in the hazy dawn, immersed in a translucent grey cloud. He looks towards me with a certain resignation as if knowing his worldly doom, his death foretold. A fog descends as he gets into the driver’s seat. The loop repeats itself.

"Thirty-two millimetres in two days," Bill marvels next morning at the dry season rain. "But it did rain every month one year," he qualifies as the lights dim and the cool room compressor roars to life.

After breakfast in James’ dining room, Bill shows me the power house where two beautiful table-sized generators lie side-by-side, one silent and the other roaring evenly. They’re designed for a fully functioning station, not for a single person, and the blazing midday street lights are a release for the idling generator. The industrial cylinder outside the open fronted shed is refilled by trucking the diesel down the dirt road from Wyndham. The generators are similar to what James used and make Loder's order to run them sparingly quite understandable.

The years fall from Bill's life when we enter the station manager's house. "It needs to be lived in," he complains, happily rubbing the ill-fitting doors across the floor. A salvage crew
removed the roof in preparation to bulldoze the homestead, but when Heytesbury reversed its
decision, the corrugated sheets shaped by time were replaced haphazardly, so the roof leaks.

We find a green 1982 vintage Codan Type 7727 eight-channel transceiver in an enclave
room attached to the house and with an outside door. It sits on a dusty desk with rolled up
maps, a time capsule as if James has just walked out after struggling to make his call to Vicki
Loder at Flora Valley.

From the children’s tree house we gaze across to a pioneer grave Bill has been weeding.
His voice drops and fixing his eyes on the horizon he says he won’t be returning to the
Kimberley. It’s the Aboriginals. He can’t help comparing the drugs and alcohol and
unemployment and the devastation of their communities with how it used to be. Without
saying it, perhaps, he knows his place in this world has also gone, and the prescience of his
own mortality permeates the gloom.

Bill’s deep laughter fills the dining room an hour later, as he shows me his photographs,
their 1960’s colours greying with age. He’s brought photos not of his own people, but of
black fellas. He names each one as if they’re still waiting under the trees in the creek bed.
Men with scars and feathers. Not actors dancing for tourists, but priests and judges and
executioners.

The drizzle dampens our clothing, and Bill says the rain will have made the black soil
back to Halls Creek impassible for a week. "The holes will be filled with water." He urges me
to stay longer, but my body is racked with an inexplicable anxiety. I feel compelled to flee
despite the foolhardiness of the act. He sees me to my car. We avoid eye contact as if no
longer existing to each other.

Ten minutes later the zigzagging Excel slides into a shallow pool of water. The low
slung muffler grabs a clump of mud and stone and is ripped from its circular clamps, then
becomes entangled in the plastic bumper cover that pops its rivets and is dragged along the
road.

I re-attach the bumper with polyester cord, and the steaming muffler returns to the
passenger seat floor. It feels good, like the release of anxiety after a fist fight and a black eye
as a badge of honour.
A do or die attitude replaces my fear when the red road turns black on Flora Valley station. Despite being just a hundred kilometres from Halls Creek, getting bogged means walking twenty or thirty kilometres through mud for a landline phone then discovering the tow truck owner won't brave the sodden roads. Ben's Land Cruiser tracks occasionally cross the road that is otherwise abandoned. The police have stopped all but local traffic, to reduce ruts being carved in the soft mud that will later harden and create a driving hazard.

From a crest I view a three kilometre expanse of black mud and water stretching to the next rise. Stopping or even slowing down means getting bogged so I accelerate to 100 kmh. The car thuds against the water as if hitting a solid object. The windscreen wipers moan against the surge of mud and brown water that bursts over the car. The hot motor crackles as I fishtail amongst the dozen unconcerned Brahmans and Drought Masters immersed to their knees and unaware of their knife-edge proximity to becoming road kill.

The sucking mud drags the car's momentum down to 30kmh. The motor chokes on a wave of water as the tyres grab stony ground. Liquefied cow dung steams from the motor and the air filter is wet.

The black soil turns to stone as the road rises into the Albert Edward Range. Gold country. Optimistic signs wired onto fences shout: "No Entry, Gold Mine".

Toy-like horses whinny to each other amongst the trees down on the sodden plain. Further along the road Brahmans foul the air long before their tan bodies appear, neatly arranged in death, lying on their sides and fat with bloat. A driver clipped the raised windrow on a curve and the trailers went ass over. Twelve beasts didn't get up.

After passing Trooper Lew McBeth’s house, the bitumen of Halls Creek looms dull under grey clouds. Nicholson block on the left behind the cemetery: a dozen houses, work shed and hammer-resistant phones. It’s the Kundat Djaru outcamp in Halls Creek.

Outside the caravan park office Oscar, the volatile maintenance man and nephew of Roland, laughs good-naturedly at my car, covered in grey mud and lined up amongst the mightier and filthier Land Cruisers and Patrols.

Chapter 57. Voices from the ether
The invisible prickly fences of territorial grey nomads haven’t encroached on my tent site and the wet has forced the ants deeper underground. Terry Gunn photographs the mud-layered Excel, but tells me to keep out of the shot. "You don't look like who you are," he says not wanting my unblinking stare to mar his pictures. Ross gallops over and rummages through my boot muttering about needing to "source some Tabasco sauce". Terry looks at the detached muffler. "We'll start repairs tomorrow," he says, glad to have something to do while holed up in town.

Early next morning his screaming angle grinder slicing lengthwise through an aluminium pipe pierces the predawn bliss of campers finally having found the oblivion of sleep after the nightly cavalcade of medium-strength drunks. Ross bolts. He doesn’t want any association with the racket, and continues his early morning patrol to source items left by departing tourists.

Ross rejoins us back at the car. He says the muffler needs cleaning out with water so I poke a hose inside and the carbon-encrusted baffles soak up the liquid like a sponge.

"I've never lifted a muffler this heavy," Terry says, needing help to hold it in place. He prises the aluminium pipe around the two ends of the exhaust pipe, then clamps the contraption together with U-bolts that are much stronger than my circular clamps and salmon can.

I maliciously rev the motor that blasts black liquid from the tail pipe over Ross who is examining my tool box. He takes it with good humour, and I feel a tinge of remorse.

That evening we quietly drink beer under the annex. The leaves flutter gently while in the distance the sound of a vehicle approaches, and suddenly we are engulfed in a rain storm that pulls tent pegs from the ground and rips branches from the trees. Within twenty minutes the silence returns as if never lost.

Terry is relieved the unseasonable rains have put paid to his prospecting career. "A thousand dollars a tyre if you're caught on the dirt," he announces cheerfully, and jokingly says he gets heart palpitations leaving the entrance of the caravan park.

He demonstrates his detector using his Meekatharra nuggets, but the gold is hard to identify in a sea of surrounding metallic rubble.
The following day Merv Wortley tells me by phone from Ruby Plains, there’s no point visiting Sturt Creek station because the buildings and bores have been replaced since 1986. He says Simon had just four bores to maintain, and as if discouraging my quest says someone painted red on a door that: “Simon Amos lived and died for fuck all”.

Lenin Christie agreed Simon’s job was a bludge, almost a paid holiday:

“You don’t even have to look after the fucking bores on Sturt Creek station. There are only four bores...and the station bore. They got pumps and mills on them. Once a week at the most you’d go and look, you did not have to look after them because they [the cattle] got all their water off Sturt Creek...only when the water holes went dry you’d have to look after the bores.”

Perhaps this influenced Simon’s light hearted letters home, but what did he actually do to fill in the time?

Nathan Dyer’s article in the Kimberley Echo attracts an eclectic response. One man says he’s been in the Kimberley fifty-years and was told by a friend who drove for Buntines, that he saw Simon and James at Nicholson in 1986. The friend:

“...was loading six decks of cattle and the black fellas had pulled in there – 10 or 15 of these people on board from Balgo and they invited them [Simon and James] across to there and that’s why they went over there for a dirty weekend. They were going to Balgo to chat up these young girls and have a bit of fun on the weekend with them. There was no skulduggery or anything. It was just the boys going out for a bit of fun and they just took the wrong turn and it turned into a tragedy...because those seismic lines open up to about the same width as what the highway does – 20 metres wide, same width as the road, and they come out at angles so you’d swear it was just a turn-off to another place. If you really want to find out you go to Balgo and ask people there, but they won’t say anything, because they’re shit frightened that they might get accused of killing the boys.”

The caller won't disclose either his or his friend's identity.

Later that evening another caller’s intense anger wakes me from sleep. She says her mother arrived with tears in her eyes and holding a letter I'd sent. "Why do you keep writing
these letters? You don't have a heart; you aren't human." Sarah Amos says her brother was not murdered, then hangs up.

Chapter 58. Feather Man

The fifty kilometre track near the R & D Yards leading to Kundat Djaru resembles a railroad without rails. Deep Land Cruiser tracks have left a centre ridge of sharp ballast that pings and crunches against the undercarriage of the Excel, and dents the thick exhaust pipe crossing behind the petrol tank.

Kundat Djaru was the Ringer Soak outcamp for Gordon Downs station. The locals were placed there after white settlement, then used as cheap labour. When their land rights claims threatened the existence of Peter Sherwin’s stations he and Giles Loder ordered them off the land.

Stockman Bobby Sealer found the locals loading a truck. Loder had told them: “I don’t want any black fellas hanging around my station.” As they were leaving Loder told them they had two days to return to pick up their dogs. When they didn’t return he began shooting the dogs that sought refuge in the tin shacks whereupon Loder poured bullets through the metal sidings.

“Holes in every houses, bullet holes...He shot all the dogs anyway. Good dogs, too. One of my good dogs got shot, too, poor bugger. Some dogs was in the housing putting bullets through the iron.”

But within the year the Djaru people returned to set up the independent community of Kundat Djaru. Bobby Sealer remembered:

“We was sleeping in tents, you know. Giles wouldn’t let us go across that bloody area. That was his own private road from Flora Valley to Gordon Downs, that big black soil, to Ringer Soak. That was his own private road. So he told us to build another road somewhere, which we didn’t. We had to get the police, welfare and all that to guide us to the little bit of land that we were gonna get was Ringer Soak. And Giles he went flying up and down, trying
to get off, this is my private bloody road. Station road, but we used to keep on going in and out.”

If a single vehicle was going down the road Loder would land in front of them and they’d retreat back to Ringer Soak. Sealer remembers:

“We don’t carry guns, but he carry guns, revolver. We used to have seven, eight, nine, ten vehicles if we wanted to go in shopping from Ringer Soak to Halls Creek. We’re gonna have about a big truck, car, Toyota, we all being in one, 60 or 70 bloke [while Giles Loder was] flying, swinging around, come back so we big mob.”

Mary Darkie, Les Annetts and Bonnie Edwards all suggested Tomato Gordon is the man to see at Kundat Djaru. He worked with Loder. And a somewhat mischievous public servant suggested I might question Tomato about the man found wrapped in burning tyres at Marella Gorge.

I pull into the bush to pour in a jerry of petrol, and fry sliced potatoes. Four windswept faces appear silently gliding across the tops of the low scrub, then a 4WD emerges from the bush. The kids on the roof rack demand my chips and can of energy drink. The stocky driver jumps from the cab and rushes me like a boxer shaping up to deliver an uppercut. He demands to know why I’m here.

“I’m Tomato Gordon,” he says, assured of his own importance. He tells me to follow him to Ringer Soak, once his kids have finished my lunch.

Thirty kilometres down the track he stops, and jabs his fingers menacingly towards a windmill. “Gordon Downs,” he says, victoriously, grimly. Gordon Downs was the jewel in the crown of the 19th century white settlers, run by the legendary Nat Buchanan. The homestead grew the best grapes, but now it lies in ruins and not even worthy of a resident ‘bore runner’. And those myalls once blackbirded to work for rations have turned the tables and persuaded their conquerors to build them a town serviced by a steady flow of nurses, social workers, maintenance contractors, teachers and store operators.

Tomato puts his foot down and even with his kids on the roof my Excel can’t keep up. A pothole snaps another section of the exhaust pipe and my ears ring.
Kundat Djaru is a town of mystery. When Balinese woman, Ayu Ynema, ran the Old Halls Creek grocery store, she noticed her Ringer Soak customers spoke slang Balinese. This further fuelled the legend that Dutch and Balinese survivors of a pre-white settlement shipwreck had trekked to the area around Wave Hill, where they were culturally absorbed by the Aboriginals.

A dozen dogs lunge at Tomato’s Land Cruiser as we enter the streets of cannibalised 4WD’s on blocks in front of dark, broken window houses. The children don’t blink when Tomato drives over the leg of a small ugly creature that snarls, then cries, then limps off. Tomato pulls into his driveway and everyone begins unloading the vehicle, then as an afterthought, he crosses the road and asks what I want, as if we’d never met. He suggests we meet the next day. I tell him I’m in town for just an hour. He points to the children’s undercover playground. “Wait there.”

This isn’t my subtlest move, in a town that has suffered child abuse. The eight-year-old girl who ate my chips pesters me for more while older kids jeer from a distance. Tomato drives past in his Cruiser, then for thirty minutes talks to two white administrators. One of them walks towards me rapidly lifting his shoulders up and down, gesturing incomprehension then at twenty-metres distance demands, “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“I’m here to see Tomato Gordon,” I say, holding his gaze. He walks away without another word. Tomato’s family silently form behind me.

Tomato returns and sits unusually close to me, while the white administrator squats in front of me, his eyes burning with hostility. I introduce myself. “Lindsay,” he responds.

Tomato says he never worked with Loder, doesn’t know anything about him or Peter Sherwin, knows nothing about the two boys. The eight-year-old girl brushes against me in a non-child like manner. I look at Lindsay. His snake eyes won’t acknowledge what he saw. Tomato ends the conversation. I stand up and offer my hand. He shakes it while covering his eyes with the brim of his hat. The silence is deathly as I drive off the playground as if drunk and with a leaden weight in my stomach. Malicious laughter erupts from the surrounding houses, while dogs snarl and snap at my tyres.

That evening while I pace out the ley lines near the R & D yards, a high pitched shout bursts from a ute that pulls up in the darkness. A gleeful man standing on the back wipes his
sticky hands together, as if running a knife against a sharpening iron. They’re Ringer Soak
turkey hunters. The driver shouts what am I doing here?

I suppress my brimming anger. This may be Heytesbury land, but at night it’s black
fella country. An old man with cataract eyes in the cab jumps, when he hears the name, Giles
Loder, then turns away. They suggest I pitch my tent at the dirt intersection. Perfect position
for a hit and run. They return during the night in a hail of blood curdling screams.

Chapter 59. Peter Sherwin: Hard man on a hard land

“I was filling my water bottle with rainwater and Sherwin said, ‘don’t
touch it, drink bore water’ because he wanted the rainwater to wash his
clothes.”

Nathan Covey, Flora Valley Station, 2010

“[Milton Hayes] started pushing cleanskins over to him [Sherwin] from
Gordon Downs and he went to collect his money from him just before the
wet and Sherwin said, ‘I didn’t get anything off you,’ and he had a go at
him. [Milton] got cleaned up properly...Very hard man, yeah.”

John Boland, former manager of Ruby Plains Station, 2010

Peter Sherwin was nine when his father died in 1939. He and his two brothers and a
sister were raised by his mother on a cattle station near Texas, in northern New South Wales.

They were wealthy enough for young Peter to attend a Marist Brothers school, where he
learned boxing, a skill that proved indispensable when he quit school at 16 to work on a cattle
station near Gladstone in Queensland, then later at Alexandria Station in the Northern
Territory.
Sherwin’s astute head for business was matched with a ruthless courage. He bought two herds of cattle for six and twelve dollars a head, respectively, then drove them across the Northern Territory border to Camooweal in Queensland, where he sold them for $35 each.

He bought wagons, horses and dogs in 1954, and became a contract drover, a risky business when contractors were expected to pay for losses. Sherwin confounded his detractors when he reached his destinations with increased numbers of beasts, albeit with a variety of tags and brands.

Sherwin was no sentimentalist and soon understood that long distance droving was finished, when Noel Buntine began shifting sheep and cattle on his newfangled two and three deck road trains. Charlie Shultz had been first, when he trucked stud bulls from Adelaide to Humbert station in the Northern Territory in 1950.

Charlie was the third owner of Humbert. Bill Ward was the first, but had been speared by the blacks. The second owner sold up when Jim Crisp, the manager of adjoining station, Bullita, was also speared. The cattle were also speared and the black fellas that speared the white men also visited Charlie’s black employees during the night. Charlie slept with a revolver under his pillow.

Sherwin bought the Elliot store on the Stuart Highway between Tenant Creek and Katherine, and married Florence Fay Beebe, a solid girl from an established cattle family. It might have not been a match made in Heaven, but it has endured the vicissitudes of their lives. Flo managed the store with a ruthless friendliness, while Peter used its equity and cash flow to finance his road trains. The trucks made money, and proved handy when he sold a station with stock. The new owners would settle into the silence of their new property then eventually ask: "Where are the cattle?"

Daryl Elliot worked for the CRA pastoral/mining outfit when it sold Sherwin three Barkly Downs properties in 1979. After the deal was struck CRA station manager Elliot was removing a mob of cattle not included in the sale when Sherwin arrived by plane armed with a revolver and with his brother-in-law. Sherwin demanded agistment money for the cattle that had grazed the land past the sale date. Elliot refused the unconventional demand. The police became involved and said Elliot was within his rights, so he moved the beasts towards F bore. Sherwin landed his plane in front of the mob and brandished his revolver, but Elliot found his saviour in the form of one heavy gauge shotgun.
Sherwin later agreed to drop agistment charges against CRA on the condition they sack Daryl Elliot. CRA agreed. The Elliot family was devastated. CRA had betrayed Daryl for his loyalty to the company.

Even government stock inspectors weren’t immune from Sherwin’s intimidation. Granting permits to move beasts was fraught with conflict as they required vaccination certificates, and had to meet numerous protocols, any one of which could halt their movement.

Beasts moved south into tick free areas had to be dipped into pesticide. The process was repeated three days later when the inspector scratched them and ran his hands around the udders and up the back of the tail. If a single living tick was discovered the consignment was dipped a third time, then checked three days later. This left trucks waiting, the animals required extra feed, and the delay could mean missing the boat for the live trade to Asia and Arabia.

An inspector whom I won’t name refused to give a consignment of Sherwin's cattle the tuberculosis-free approval. He wanted a second examination. Giles Loder phoned, saying that he’d another Sherwin herd for inspection at a remote yard. The inspector drove out. The yard was empty except for Loder and one of Sherwin's sons. The inspector said the retreat back to his vehicle, and his rifle behind the seat, were the longest steps of his life.

Graham MacArthur had the same problem. Loder told him they wanted cattle moved across the border from Birrindudu without a permit. “That’s the way we do things,” Loder told him. Graham gave a week’s notice, but Loder, knowing “The General” would be hard to replace, asked wouldn’t he need three weeks to move his stuff. “99% of it is already gone, sonny boy,” Macarthur told him. When Sherwin bought Gordon Downs, Graham knew his days there were numbered, and had already moved his possessions to Sturt Creek homestead.

Sherwin liked his revenge served cold. In the year James and Simon disappeared so did his 19-year-old daughter, Marie Jan, also known as “Rusty”. She eloped from Walhallow station in one of Sherwin’s planes with 26-year-old mustering pilot, Craig Robert Commens. The plane was returned, but when Rusty and Craig married the following year, Flo and Peter Sherwin refused to attend.
The marriage was a fizzer. Rusty soon asked for money to buy two properties in south-east Queensland, 'The Glen' and 'Lonesome Dove'. Craig and Rusty were unsuccessful pastoralists. Craig said he couldn't work the land because he was caring for Rusty, who was depressed. Rusty returned home for more and more money. The total reached over a million dollars. When they divorced, Rusty returned home an alcoholic, and said she needed plastic surgery.

Sherwin hired a QC and sued his ex-son-in-law for the return of the money. Commens couldn’t get a lawyer because the bankruptcy court froze his assets, and Legal Aid refused help, because they considered that frozen assets were still assets.

Commens told the court the money had been a Christmas gift. Rusty escaped testifying because her psychiatrist said she had a "major depressive disorder", and that giving evidence would be too stressful. Sherwin's slick QC won easily despite the lack of signed legal agreements. Peter and Florence were awarded $1,120,000 plus $31,588 in interest.

Milton Hayes had managed Gordon Downs for Vesteys, when it struggled to adjust to the economic reality of equal wages for Aboriginals, and began the distasteful process of expelling hundreds of families from its leases. These were descendants of the myalls who chose seventy years previously to live on station encampments in preference to their increasingly precarious lives in the bush. Vesteys had run a feudal operation that paid its Aboriginal jackeroos and their families with food rations, tobacco and one change of clothing and a pair of boots each year. They also provided rudimentary medical care and education, but with equal wages they couldn't afford to keep big mobs of men, women and children on their books. They told them to clear off. Where to? Nobody quite knew the answer, but the result was new encampments on the edge of Halls Creek and other Kimberley towns.

Milton Hayes was dirty on Vesteys when they wouldn't build him a new house. This left him with just one alternative—in his mind, anyway. He decreed that all staff and their families would enjoy a Sunday picnic at the local waterhole, leaving the homestead empty. When a lone Aboriginal ventured into the homestead that Sunday morning, he found Milton hard at work soaking the base of his house with generous quantities of diesel and petrol. The unexpected visitor shot down the road to Kirkimbie station, where he found Bill Perry seeking absolution from a traveling priest via a free tank of fuel for his vehicle. "What's he saying?"
the priest asked Bill as the man blurted out the story. "Just black fella talk," Bill replied, suppressing a smile.

But Milton’s dream of a new house was further thwarted when Vesteys took two years to replace the burnt house, forcing him to live that period in even more reduced circumstances. However the contents had been insured, though it was noted that Milton’s wife was later seen wearing a fur coat that had been destroyed in the fire.

A fact of Kimberley cattle stations was that most managers and owners were poddy dodgers, that is, a cattle rustlers. Charlie Shultz was caught red-handed, but Elders didn’t prosecute. It just wasn’t done, especially to Charlie. Don McKay smiled when remembering those days: “Everyone done it. You show me a station manager that never branded next door neighbour’s cattle and I’ll show you a friggin’ liar. Of course, it’s against the law, but nobody ever went to court over it.”

Milton Hayes was unique because he rustled from his own employer. He rounded up one mob from Turners station, then trucked them “south”, but instead of sneaking though Halls Creek by night he parked on the highway in broad daylight, and had lunch with the stock inspector, while the beasts bellowed on the back of the truck.

Vesteys and other station owners tried to stop this ‘poddy dodging’ using spies, one being a shadowy operative:

“…not actually a private detective, no, he was actually employed in the cattle industry on another station, but his wages and everything were paid by another party, but he was a plant put in one station and he sort of had freedom of movement to suss out what was going on.”

Milton met his nemesis with arguably the biggest rustler of all, Peter Sherwin. The story varies from person to person, but the gist is that Milton drove a herd of beasts onto a Sherwin property and when payment was not forthcoming confronted him at Birrindudu station. Sherwin looked Milton in the eye and said he'd never received any cattle. Milton decided to teach him a lesson, but hadn’t counted on Sherwin's training with the Marist brothers. Lenin Christie said that:
“Milton took scars to his grave that Peter Sherwin gave him. He wasn’t a very big
t bloke, Milton, but he was tough, but Sherwin was a professional pugilist. They reckon
Sherwin played with Milton. He just chopped him to pieces and chopped him to pieces and
chopped him to pieces, eh, and Milton wouldn’t lay down to him."

Milton turned up at Gordon Downs to get help from Mrs Macarthur, who was a nurse. He needed extensive stitches.

Chapter 60. The fall and rise of Peter Sherwin

By 1986 Peter Sherwin owned or had pastoral leases on a string of cattle stations
comprising 1% of Australia's land mass. He was worth $50 million, then got richer when he
floated Australian Stations Pty Ltd as Sherwin Pastoral Company, which he listed on the
stock exchange. With 30% equity, he retained control providing the institutional investors
Elders and Bankers' Trust Australia remained happy. Sherwin's high debt load was
manageable provided he maintained annual profits at $12million.

Sherwin's modus operandi was to count cattle on stations that big pastoral companies
had difficulty operating. He'd fly over the leases, talk to jackeroos, and through his road train
connections discover what they were shipping out. He’d mustered 62,000 beasts from leases
he’d bought from CRA, whose estimate had been 35,000.

While other pastoralists were as clever as Peter Sherwin, they hadn’t the steely
personality that did anything to win. He’d buy a station, cut off the water to anything that
didn’t make money, overgraze the land, exhaust the infrastructure, not pay the employees,
beat up anyone who got in his way, steal the jackeroos’ equipment, and spend big to arrive at
a bush meeting with a lawyer flown out from Darwin. He was the hunter who returned with
fresh kill, while others were afraid to pull the trigger.

At his peak Sherwin controlled 72,500 square miles, had an estimated 400,000 branded
cattle, 15 prime mover trucks and five aeroplanes.
He and Florence had made the ‘A list’ of cattlemen families, yet rarely attended social functions. Some called them Ma and Pa Kettle, two 1950's bumbling hillbilly movie characters.

But the seeds of disillusion were built into Sherwin’s accounting system. Bankers Trust and Elders had been mesmerised by his initial prospectus that resembled a coffee table book rather than a financial statement. “Ma and Pa Kettle” employed sophisticated accountants and lawyers.

Profits were based on herd size and meat prices. When prices increased by 10% this was applied to animals still roaming the bush, beasts that might fall over from disease or drought and not reach market, or that didn’t exist.

Sherwin's dream run unraveled in 1987, the year Rusty hooked up with Commens; the year after the boys died. Meat prices dropped, and a northern drought killed animals and reduced births, so profits on paper collapsed, despite actual income falling by a lesser amount. Lower prices per beast on a smaller herd meant a disastrous end of year profit and loss statement.

Sherwin was determined to camouflage the sad state of affairs, but auditors Pannell Kerr Foster refused to sign his 1987 accounts. They said his estimated herd size of 347,000 beasts hadn’t been independently verified.

Sherwin was no smooth talking Alan Bond, but a taciturn recluse who thought he still retained absolute control of his company. Some creditors and shareholders saw him as sneaky. Maybe he was fiddling the books.

Like a stock camp manager picking ‘killers’, corporate predators circled Sherwin Pastoral Company, like wild dogs slathering over a weakened animal separated from the herd.

Shares floated at $1.00 slipped to 83 cents then the October 1987 stock market crash knocked them to 60 cents. Elders and Bankers Trust Australia began buying in preparation for a takeover bid. Elders offered Sherwin 88 cents for each of his shares in June 1988. Bankers Trust raised it to $1.12 eleven months later.

But the bells tolled when Australia’s most feared corporate raider sent a plane over Sherwin's herds. Its spotters estimated numbers might be as low as 280,000.
Michael Robert Hamilton Holmes à Court was born in South Africa on 27 July 1937, and spent much of his youth in Rhodesia. He had degrees in agricultural science and law, and married science teacher Janet Ranford in 1966. After forming a law practice with Nicholas Hasluck in Perth, he discovered the second love of his life: corporate raiding.

This quiet man thundered into small, underpriced, publicly listed companies then waited while major shareholders nervously increased their equity fearing they were a takeover target. He then sold his stake at the newly inflated price.

He also played the spoiler, by buying a crucial stake in a takeover bid in progress then like a small political party holding the balance of power, forced either the predator or the defender to buy him out at his price. When he got stronger he simply took control of his targets.

At their peak Robert and Janet were worth over one billion dollars, maybe two, making the Sherwins look like struggling deli owners.

But the October 1987 share market crash that crippled Peter and Flo also dealt Holmes à Court a hard blow: perhaps his personal death blow.

With unhappy creditors banging at his door he salvaged $340 million by selling his stake in Bell Resources to Alan Bond, who without a whiff of conscience stripped Bell Resources of its assets to prop up Bond Corporation, leaving thousands of Bell’s small investors holding worthless shares.

Holmes à Court’s deal was to let Sherwin keep his three main stations, but everything else was lost: Nicholson, Gordon Downs, Birrendudu, Flora Valley. Sherwin wouldn’t give Holmes à Court the time of day, but through his lawyer signed the deal. Heytesbury Beef signs appeared over station gateways.

It was argued that public reaction to Sherwin’s hard hearted reaction to the deaths of James and Simon impacted adversely on the Sherwin Pastoral Company, but the general consensus was that the drought, the share market crash and higher interest rates caused his downfall.

Sherwin affected indifference, saying a man needed little more than three feeds a day. Perhaps he had the last vengeful laugh, when Robert Holmes à Court died from a heart attack.
the following year, aged 53, while Sherwin rebuilt his empire and remains alive today in 2014.

Chapter 61. The Wyndham liaison

Sylvia’s feet squish across the sodden landscape near the boat ramp then she appears through the tropical night fog with another woman. She’s selling carved Boab nuts for $25 – a bargain if you like that sort of stuff.

Sylvia went to art school in Adelaide, and claims descendancy from the Bradshaw painters, a pre-Aboriginal people that lived from the northern Kimberley down into the Great Sandy Desert, when the latter had a tropical climate.

Ira Lans Junama asked me to meet him at the Town Hotel. He’d been a police officer before switching to the Department of Corrections, just before Andy Brett found the Datsun, before a frightened Mark Moora called him.

Ira phones from the beer garden while I’m in the bar. His face bears the same Balinese good looks as Sylvia, and wears an expression one instinctively trusts.

He went to Balgo in early May 1987 with Marshall Smith and Brian Charlie, both Corrections department men, at Mark Moora’s request.

Mark was worried. Police questioned him at Yagga Yagga after the remains were discovered. One officer stopped taking notes when Mark told them a helicopter had landed under the water tower, near the time of the disappearance, and that a small bore rifle lay between the seats – like the one that put a bullet into Simon’s head. Bai Bai Sunfly also saw it land at Yagga Yagga. It wasn’t the Telecom helicopter. That arrived the next day.

Can Mark be trusted? Ira says Mark's memory has been in decline, but that he is generally an honest man. Two white constables told me separately that Mark was an unreliable source. Ira says the police made a short visit to Balgo after the disappearance, and the locals told them the boys had stopped at the store, but the officers were too lazy to search the hot sand to the south.
Sylvia's friend joins our table. She’s a tough black woman who intermittently holds my gaze, then roars into a barrage of anger. We’re distracted by a breathless tourist running through the beer garden. "I bought an Aboriginal painting," she says, holding a still wet canvas from Sylvia, painting in the gutter under a street light. The buyer’s drinking companions exchange glances then praise her acquisition.

After a few rounds I bid my farewells not knowing what to make of this meeting.

Chapter 62. Giles Munro Loder at home

I don’t know how you tracked us down but you’ve obviously done a fairly fine job.

Giles Loder, 2010

After a year of failed enquiries I find Giles Loder in the Brisbane suburb of Taringa. People living in hiding are found through their friends, who aren’t hiding.

An older woman hands the phone to Giles, now in his late fifties. “Are you Giles Loder? I ask.

“Yes,” a shaky voice replies then gains a convivial tone with an occasional sharp edge that implies, ‘I’m nice, but I could go off’.

He stayed on at Flora Valley for a number of years, then worked in a welding shop in Berrimah, a suburb of Darwin. When his marriage to Vicki ended she stayed in Darwin with their two sons.

With the coolheaded skill he presented at the Inquest, he chooses his words carefully:

“A lot of people like yourself have done this sort of thing in the past and they've twisted things and it's never come out the right way...there was some terrible untruths that came out and were written incorrectly so... you could appreciate that I have a fairly sour taste about journalism...I was always advised to say nothing and let it ride...we took a blast a long time
and the sour taste has lasted with myself and my ex-wife and that was pretty bad so I don't have a high opinion of the journalism that went on…it was very, very difficult [with] the children at the time; they were children.

“For me to give you a true story I'd write my own book I think. There's been some terrible things that have gone on…we've taken a long time to get over it.

“I might leave it for the moment and you can always ring back on this number, but, um, I mean, you'd have to hear my side of the story from the start to the finish to give yourself a truthful book.”

When I call later his phone has been disconnected and Giles doesn’t respond to my written request to question him further on the subject.

Chapter 63. Shane and Julie Kendall's anger

After his stint in the pastoral industry Shane Francis Kendall moved to Broome, where he spent fourteen years working on council roads, then entered the concrete business. He met Julie during the inquest, and they had at least two boys and lived on Shearwater Crescent in affluent Roebuck Estates, behind the One Mile Aboriginal community, where naïve male backpackers awaken with old grannies in their bed.

Locals describe Roebuck Estates as "million dollar tin sheds", inferior to the older government houses built in Old Broome on spacious blocks, fronted by generous lawns and huge shade trees and, ironically, occupied by indigenous people, welfare recipients and discerning multi-millionaires. There are few welfare recipients at Roebuck Estates, but quite a few indigenous bureaucrats.

Shane has a gregarious manner with a tendency to begin sentences with, "I honestly believe". During a phone conversation the previous year he said of Loder:

“My dealings with him were that he was always firm and fair. He never had any nasty streak in his nature, I guess, and I always found him to be, did the right thing, there was never a problem.”
No one answers my knock about noon, so I return at night passing the memorial cross where Roebuck Estate man Josh Warneke was recently chopped to death with a tomahawk while walking home from the Bungalow Bar. A sharp crack like a belt buckle or slingshot hits my car as a 4WD passes.

A woman opens the door of Shane’s house. A little boy clutches her clothing. She's just moved in and directs me to friends of Shane’s next door. Edging sideways between gleaming vehicles and a seaworthy boat, I find four adults drinking beer in a covered garden. They don't know where Shane and Julie have moved, but say their son Steve works at Nor-west diesel in the light industrial area of Broome.

Steve is angry when I call. He suggests I’m drunk. His brother takes the phone saying Steve's hearing impediment and beer drinking have confused things. He messages me his Mum's number.

In a guarded voice Julie Kendall tells me that since meeting Shane during the inquest they haven’t talked about the boys' deaths. Not once. Shane works in the mines, but she’ll ask him to call me, if he’s willing to speak to me.

The Kendall’s low security screen door sits ajar in front of a flimsily stapled front door that a good kick would reduce to a heap of rubble. Julie and Shane aren’t living in fear, nor do they embrace change. As in Broome they chose a new house on a small block amongst narrow maze-like streets on the leeward side of coastal dunes, this time in the Perth suburb of Alexander Heights. The locked carport holds a late model car, while a sparkling new Land Cruiser sits in the driveway.

Relief pours through my body when no one answers my knocks, not because Shane might want to “get in first”, but for fear they’ll laugh at my pindan-stained Excel and my vagabond attire. I whisper a message on their answering service saying I'm outside the front door. And praying Shane won’t burst through in a fury.

Ten minutes later Julie’s grinding voice climbs through my phone like a subconscious grievance awoken from the dead and taking even her by surprise. Rather than speaking from an experience forgotten, her voice resembles a suppressed memory that won’t die. Amidst the tweets of sports whistles she snarls,
“I asked Shane and he said, ‘just forget it, don’t want to have anything to do with it.’”

Julie says that unless I agree never to call them again she will call the police.

"But I'm investigating the deaths of Simon and James," I plead.

“Dead and Gone. Buried. Forgotten,” her voice raises then drops like a hammer as if striking down a reviving corpse. “If you call us again we’ll call the police.”

Shane’s voice growls into my ear two hours later while I’m collecting my laundry at the Midland Caravan Park."I hear you've been harassing my wife.

“No.”

“Don’t call me; don’t contact me. I don’t want to have anything to do with this. If you contact me again there will be trouble. Is that clear? Understand, understand?”

"Are you threatening me? I ask.

"There will be trouble," he repeats.

“You played a major role in the deaths of those two boys.” I react.

“Bullshit, bullshit. Get a life. Do something useful, something else,” he shouts then hangs up.

Chapter 64. Strange Broome

The Broome Council would charge visitors for breathing if they could devise a billing system. Rangers patrol the hinterland dishing out fines to tourists daring to camp in the Australian bush, instead of paying top dollar to be squashed sardine-style into crowded caravan parks.

I pitch my tent at the Broome caravan park with its swimming pool lined with Lord McAlpine-style palm trees, under which lie sun-wizened grey nomads unabashed by their bodily degeneration. Owners Graham and Donna Sutherland slave seven days a week to put
their seven children through a Perth private school. Their strapping older son has finished high school and is filling his gap year with internet poker, wild women and drinking beer at the Roebuck Hotel.

In town a black man sits under a blue plastic tarp atop a sand dune with the turquoise of Roebuck Bay on one side and the prison on the other, the two separated by Carnarvon Street and what is arguably Broome’s most dangerous footpath, day or night. The police are regularly urged to destroy such camps by mixed race Aboriginal bureaucrats who resent the desert people camping on the local tribes’ land. These bureaucrats call the desert Aboriginals “blackies”, while the latter call the mixed race people “half-castes”.

A black woman with white hair sits on the dune overlooking the prison and desultorily shouts the name of a man inside.

Phillipa Cook has returned to Broome from a long stint in a Perth hospital for bleeding lungs. She was married to Labour Senator Peter Cook, who died from cancer. She says the rumour that she witnessed staff selling cannabis over the front counter at Centrelink is wrong. But she did receive a huge bill from the government’s Water Corporation. They ignored her claims that someone was tapping her pipeline, until workers doing routine digging discovered a diversion pipe that led to a dope crop further into the bush.

John Kernot tasted the hard edge of the cannabis industry when he owned Kimberley Bush Taxis in the late 1980’s. He was famous for 300kms fares to desert communities. Through numerous Aboriginal girlfriends and their subsequent children, and his acquired in-laws, he developed an intricate network of friends and relatives across the Kimberley. He also delivered mail and took passengers up the Cape Leveque Peninsula through Beagle Bay and One Arm Point.

Kernot’s taxi customers had high rates of contact with the police, prison and court system and told him the locations of cannabis crops, who ran them, who gave protection and how the product was distributed in Broome and beyond. He gained an unprecedented insight into how crop bosses ensured the police didn’t disturb production and distribution. Some passengers claimed that off duty police protected the crops at night and told would-be thieves they were doing a stake out.
It was dangerous knowledge, made more dangerous when Kernot drew a map of the Kimberley with crop locations, names of growers, protectors and distributors, then sent copies to the Premier and Minister of Police. Within weeks he was confronted at the Seaview shopping centre by drug dealers. His life was never the same.

The dope industry was less organised in the central and east Kimberley. Crops planted along the Fitzroy River were routinely washed away by floods then haphazardly matured wherever their roots gripped soft ground, thus giving birth to “Ganja hunting” as a local tradition.

Seeds were also dropped from helicopters during the wet season near springs east of Sturt Creek near Lewis Creek around the abandoned homesteads. It was prime cannabis country due to its remoteness and seasonal water. When the land dried out the mature plants were collected by ground parties. Crops were also planted in creek beds by a trio of growers from Balgo.

The police took seriously the 605 cannabis seeds in Simon's quarters to the extent that they disappeared from the investigation even quicker than James’ water bottle. While they portrayed James and Simon as little more than thieves who had stolen a station vehicle, they didn’t take the opportunity to label the boys drug users. Instead, they shunted the seed discovery out of the investigation.

Chapter 65. The enigmatic courier

The former police Inspector won’t speak by phone, but after exchanging emails he agrees to a face-to-face meeting at Fast Eddy’s restaurant at the Carousel shopping centre in Perth. I expect to meet a grizzled, low intellect ex-copper with a croaky voice who was promoted beyond his abilities, then botched the big event of his life. He’s half an hour late.

A courier wearing a high visibility shirt exchanges what seems a conspiratorial smile with the waitress. He’s a blond, fair skinned shortish man with an almost feminine demeanor. He warily introduces himself as Jim Guy.
Jim went to school in Boyup Brook in the sou’west. He served in the police Tactical Response Group, and was a Perth detective prior to returning to uniform, and being transferred to the Kimberley.

Following James and Simon’s entry into his life his career blossomed, and he became the officer-in-charge of the Emergency Operations Unit, the search and rescue branch of the Western Australia police. He reached the rank of Acting Superintendent before retiring in 2003. Jim is currently studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree in international aid and sustainable development at Murdoch University, and runs his own rescue consultancy. He also delivers parcels one day a week.

“We would do nothing differently now except use all available technology: satellite phones; satellite imagery,” he says, his voice hardly audible amongst the restaurant’s blasting music.

Who was supposed to be manning the radio at Flora Valley to monitor the boys’ welfare while Loder was away? “No clarity on that,” he says, like the Coroner who absolved both men. Who chose where to search? Jim easily sidesteps the question. He led the search, he says, adding that Graham Macarthur, John Boland and Jungarri T. Bradshaw knew the area and provided locations they thought should be searched. He avoids naming the elephant in the room until I do, Giles Loder. Guy praises Loder saying he knew the boys’ bore runs, and had the most recent local knowledge, so he followed Loder’s suggestions where to look, none of which included the land south of Balgo.

Jim can’t remember discussing with John Boland the reported sighting of the boys at Balgo. He says the theory the boys had stolen the vehicle was discarded quite early, despite this belief appearing in his July 1987 report. He says the “boys gone hunting” theory was also dismissed, but still implies a fault on them for getting lost. He says at Sturt Creek homestead there was, “Evidence that there had been smoking there. Evidence of smoking, but no evidence of cannabis with it. Paraphernalia and half-smoked papers.” But when I ask if he’s saying the boys were smoking cannabis he becomes vague and changes the subject.

Jim’s memory of Loder remains positive. “I found Giles Loder to be reasonably honest about what was going on. He was concerned more than anything,” he says. But the mention of Sandra Annetts fills his mind with distaste. Her claim that Loder told her and Les at Flora Valley homestead that the boys had stolen his vehicle must have been a misunderstanding on
Sandra’s part, Jim says. And her panning him in the media leaves him cold. And getting her local Member of Parliament, Adrian Cruikshank, to phone the Halls Creek police station wasn’t right, either, Jim says. There are strict protocols to be followed: “police call police; politicians call politicians”.

Jim says it was a round table discussion to call off the search on Sunday, Day 3, five days after Loder and Kendall claimed to have seen the boys alive. He says the pilots were doing it for nothing and told him, “We cannot afford to run our airplanes anymore.” But who said this, I ask, as the helicopter and Loder’s plane were supplied by Peter Sherwin. Jim had sent the Kingfisher plane home the previous day. The only other plane was from Graham Macarthur.

Jim corrects himself saying costs were not the issue. The pilots had to get back to work on Monday, and Graham had some charter work, he says, pointing the blame at Macarthur, who gave most to the search, without being paid.

Jim says they’d checked the majority of places that needed checking and then breathtakingly adds that the decision to stop was done by “police hierarchy, not me.”

The decibel blast of Muzak in Fast Eddy’s increases as Jim’s voice rises in pitch and his eyes narrow in pain. The hard man laying down the law wants to be understood: “We did the best in the circumstances with the resources we had. We were grasping at any issue that might give us resolution.”

As to systematic violence against jackeroos, Jim says they had no knowledge of that, and asks how can we know that those stories the kids were feeding the press were even real? Was Jim being disingenuous? Couldn’t he remember? The allegations were in sworn statements to police, as well as interviews to the media. Why couldn’t this sensitive man acknowledge that cattle station discipline was maintained by fists and boots, and it was police policy to overlook these assaults, even after they’d gotten out of hand at Flora Valley?

I ask him about the twin-engined plane that Les Knight offered to lend and fly, that supporters of the Annetts would fuel. He says it would have been too fast for a ground search, and weren’t the Annetts supposed to have been broke? Yet at the inquest he denied knowledge of the offer, but agreed that he would have accepted it if he’d known, and that to refuse would have been irresponsible.
Jim says his neck never recovered from the helicopter crash. He uses anti-inflammatory medicine to treat the chronic pain. He has a 25% disability rate. Jim’s phone rings, and I remove my two voice recorders from the table. We part outside the restaurant. No smiles. He wants to get away. That’s good for me because I don’t want him to see that I can’t remember where I parked my car.

“There wasn’t any crash,” Jim Guy’s helicopter pilot, Peter Leutenegger, tells me on the phone from Napier Downs near Derby in the Kimberley.

“There wasn’t anything damaged, or anything…We were flying relatively low and we still had some power and there was still three cylinders out of 4 producing power so it was more just an enforced, straight ahead landing. That’s about all it was…It wasn’t like a full engine failure in the helicopter when you have to put it in auto-rotation … we just landed….There was nothing damaged on the helicopter. It didn’t even require a heavy landing inspection. That’s how normal a landing it was.”

Peter also questions Jim’s recollection of an eight kilometre walk in 46 degree heat after the landing. Peter says his memory is hazy, but it didn’t seem that long a walk.

Peter does remember receiving a letter from a legal firm saying that Jim Guy was, “…claiming to have suffered some disability since, but there was no injury to my knowledge at the time and there was no damage to the helicopter so I don’t know how there could have been some injury, but that’s for him to say.”

Chapter 66. Harry Mason, Heather Snelling and Colin Main

I mention to a journalist about Pat Clark’s letter to Loder giving him Simon’s car, even before her son’s body had been found. The journalist’s muscles tighten around the edge of her face then converge in a mass of wrinkles at her mouth, as if she is trying to spit out a bitter pill. Like a physiological gymnast her face softens and through a gentle voice she wonders how a mother’s intuition could be so strong as to know that her son had died? Perhaps Pat had intuited Simon’s death and couldn’t face the anguish of false hope.
My next stop appears to be an eight hectare hobby block surrounded by a three-metre high electrified fence topped with surveillance cameras. A locked chain that would thwart the most vicious bolt cutter encloses fifty prowling alpine dingoes next to the Mundlinup Forest in the Perth Hills.

Geophysicist Harry Mason wrote “Bright Skies” in which he suggested Tesla scalar weapons were tested in the Great Sandy Desert that created a series of artificial earthquakes and that:

“...there is the case of the two young cattle station hands who died under very mysterious circumstances a few years ago in the Great Sandy Desert - south of Halls Creek - on the very seismic grid lines put in there in 1968 by Aquitaine Oil - and within the center of the Great Sandy Desert earthquake ‘test range’...”

Harry’s game keeper tells me through a fixed smile that his boss isn’t home. And Harry Mason isn’t the man to return phone calls.

Leaving Perth's winter rains I drive north through the monastery town of New Norcia, then set up camp after dark on a spit of sand over a swamp somewhere in the northern wheat belt. The rain pounds the thin nylon tent fabric while I lie inside dry and secure under a feather quilt. The phone rings sometime after midnight.

Mark Moora has awoken from a dream. Giles Loder came and shot his kids. “Some time these things true,” he says, and asks if I’ll provide protection for him and his family. This has been an ongoing fear since Coroner McCann and Sergeant Kermode took him to Yagga Yagga in 1988. But how can I reassure him? I tell him the “killing times” of early settlement are finished and that Loder is long out of the Kimberley.

“We were away when the catastrophe happened,” Heather Snelling tells me the following wheat belt Sunday morning, in a Morawa phone box. James visited Ron "Spook" Bickford, who worked at Caranya after walking off Flora Valley. Heather sold James the Old Timer three-blade knife in mid-September. Near the end of November he made the long drive from Nicholson to cash a cheque. On both occasions he was alone and seemed lonely. He asked about jobs in the area and said that when he returned from Christmas holidays he wouldn’t be working on a Sherwin station. She says the boys were “always asking about the road through to Rabbit Flat; if they could drive it.”
Simon also visited the store in a grey Toyota. He was much closer to Caranya than James. He'd buy "cartons of cool drink, lolly bars, chocolate bars and things like that…and a cowboy hat". He also asked Heather to keep a cassette player he wanted to buy, but didn't have the money until next pay day.

At Geraldton five boys throw stones at an old man outside the tourist information centre. They flee upon seeing my camera. A woman inside directs me to the police station for my appointment with First Class Constable Colin Main, and where the stone throwing kids fearlessly jeer people entering the building.

Colin is the only officer I’ve found from 1986 still serving. He wears a set of tiny golden handcuffs that partly obscure his name badge. Time has not wearied him. He wanted to see me in person to gauge whether he'll let me use his photos from the desert. Where he obtained them is another matter.

His search report was superior to those of his colleagues who went on to bigger and better things so I ask why he is still a Constable and not an assistant Commissioner. He gulps in a lapse of confidence and says he doesn’t want the stress of being a Sergeant. He doesn’t mention leaving the force to work for Hamersley Iron then returning years later.

Colin says that publishing the aerial photo of Simon's bleached skull and bones was a low act and he won’t license pictures of the remains, but he will search his storage material in Perth for other photos. They never arrive and he stops responding to my phone calls.

Where these prints originated is a mystery because both Peter Carter and Johnny Brown say that the police didn’t bring a camera and that the former’s camera was confiscated.

Chapter 67. Shadows behind shadows

Bonnie and Malcolm Edwards know how to make money, so their Halls Creek house on Welman Drive is a surprise. Someone has punched through the outside paneling; windows are broken and door frames eaten by termites. Instead of banging up two or three steps they’ve pushed an ill-fitting iron platform resembling a mini siege device against their front door. A
two-metre cyclone fence encloses the property with a gate that is chained at night. Friends say they’re victims of extended family humbugging, and have retreated to a single room.

Bonnie has been described as an Amazon, but when she and Malcolm answer my knock I look downward at a couple of short asses, then realise the siege device is a step higher than the floor level of the house.

They’re going to their daughter’s house, so I follow feeling vindicated upon arrival when Bonnie reflects my paranoia, and locks her late model magenta Nissan Patrol.

She isn’t the dour well-dressed middle class woman I’d expected, but wears a split skirt dress and a twinkle in her eye, and owns a commercial shed, and is in high demand as a speaker and translator. Born in a creek bed from an Aboriginal mother she was sent to Brisbane by her white father to learn English.

Bonnie and Malcolm were friends with Les Verdon, the campfire story teller who delighted listeners with ghoulish tales of violence, including instructions on how to disguise a murder. He recommended slashing the victim’s stomach or vital arteries, then letting the dingoes finish the body so the forensic pathologists couldn’t determine the cause of death, then return and smash out the teeth. James Annetts could have been a case study except for the teeth.

Ashley Verdon remembers as a six-year-old the cook at Billiluna went on holidays and was replaced over the Christmas period with an old white man from Alice Springs. Ashley was in a room when the temporary cook dropped his pants and asked the boy to touch his penis. Next minute Ashley remembers his father looking for him. Les was angry, but no words were spoken. The other man told Ashley not to say a word what happened. He didn’t, but next day they went hunting with large bore guns, and for the life of him Ashley can’t remember the cook returning with them, or ever seeing him again on the station. Frontier justice.

Malcolm was best friends with Paul Griffith, the son of a preacher. Paul found human society difficult. He developed a heightened wariness of authority after seeing Giles Loder walk free after the boys’ deaths. He had no doubts that Loder killed them. But how could he know? Malcolm asked. “I just know that,” Paul replied.
Not long after his time at Flora Valley, Paul moved to Wungu, the Aboriginal camp on the old Flora Valley homestead site, 70 kilometres by track west-north-west of Halls Creek. It’s the terrain where a cross-country traveler might fall upon the grave of an unknown prospector, buried in stony ground by a kindly stranger and remembered by the words written on the tombstone: “Speared by blacks, 1931”.

Paul worked for Bonnie and Malcolm in their Supa-Valu grocery store then lived with Sandra Sturt, Les Verdon’s former girlfriend, and eventually went on a disability pension. For twenty years he avoided authority, gangsters and the police. When a mining company left supplies near Marella Gorge in 2009 without posting a guard, Paul saw the locals steal the lot. He didn’t participate, but next time he went to town he didn’t return. No one in Halls Creek or Wungu has since heard from him, Malcolm tells me, disappointment pulling the back of his throat.

Bonnie says that one night in 1987 she was driving down Duncan road with her daughter. Another driver overtook them then further along blocked the Sturt Creek Road.

On another occasion while passing Marella Gorge Bonnie says she heard someone call for help. She said nothing until another passenger in the vehicle asked if she’d heard it.

Bonnie slips into Djaru while speaking to me as if translating to an unseen presence then looks up and says Aboriginals are troubled by the unsolved deaths as they leave a streak of wrongness over the land. She says unresolved business will go to the next dimension where it will be resolved.

Her voice becomes strident with frustration as I stare at the wall while impolitely contradicting her recollections, as if she’s on the witness stand being cross examined. “People use me up,” she says, bitterly, when we part.

Bonnie hadn’t heard of the burning man at Marella Gorge. Police officer Shane Williams was first on the scene. He’s a Wongatha man from Kalgoorlie who married the daughter of Josie Farrer. He’s been in Halls Creek for over a decade. With one arm across the front door of his government house in the “better part of town”, behind the police station, he tells me the pilot who discovered the smouldering body died a few days later when his aircraft flipped over. Shane says he’ll tell more if those “higher up” give permission.
This suggestion sets in train a series of unproductive phone calls, which proves once again the last place to seek information from the police is through their ‘media liaison unit’.

In a derisive voice Rex Haw of the unit says he was a journalist covering the Amos/Annetts case, and there wasn’t any mystery about their deaths. He refers me to a series of officers, who refer me back to Rex, who says he can’t phone Shane because he doesn’t know his phone number. At our next encounter he says Shane has quit the police. Then Rex is too busy helping a major TV station cover a bushfire. He says he can’t waste time with someone writing a book, when people are dying. He promises to call me back. He doesn’t. No media reports of the fires during that week mention any deaths.

Shane’s house is empty and a few pieces of furniture have been dumped out front, but his wife works at the Child Protection office, where I join the queue. They remove children from dysfunctional families, trying to lodge them with relatives instead of sending them to orphanages. Yet some locals don’t differentiate between this and the ‘stolen generation’ removals.

When I reach the front of the queue, and there isn’t anyone behind me, the mixed race bureaucrat behind the security glass looks me in the eyes, turns around and switches off the lights as he walks out the back door. I circle around the office to another counter window where he’s talking to another man. The latter tells me Shane works at the school.

The school receptionist can’t locate him, but when I return a few hours later she reaches him by phone. “Gudia”, she answers to his question. Shane agrees to see me at 9am the following Monday. He isn’t there. While I wait as the receptions tries to contact him, the Asian principal spots me from his office then stomps across the hallway and eyeballs me close up. He demands the reason for my presence.

After two more no-shows we finally meet during Shane’s lunch hour. He holds out a green coffee cup at arm’s length to stop me from shaking hands, then peers at me through half-closed eyes. He says the police told him not to speak to me. He says he’s got two years to decide whether to re-enter the police without losing rank so until then he must “protect his backside”.
Chapter 68. Jock Mosquito

Jock is the man to see; he knows about James and Simon. That’s what people say. He lives at Warmun, 150 kilometres north of Halls Creek on the Great Northern Highway. The community that hit the news in 2010 after its flooded creek washed away the art gallery, some houses and a few Land Cruisers. The community was underwater and people were desperate, the media reported. The black folk pissed themselves laughing as if floods were new phenomena.

Three women push-starting a Land Cruiser on the highway direct me to Jock’s retirement village, past signs shouting dire consequences to anyone entering Warmun without a permit. White workers wearing orange vests drip sweat as they lay concrete slabs for the new houses. The undercover basketball court is strewn with rubbish. The man driving a concrete mixer unflinchingly maintains speed as youths stand in his path then jump aside a split-second before being crushed.

The retirement village consists of four streets of transportable buildings separated from a similar array by a cyclone fence covered with layers of opaque shade cloth. The white construction workers live on one side while the other side forms temporary accommodation for older Aboriginals. Each donga contains one bedroom with a toilet and shower room.

Two dozen black men sit around seven or eight picnic benches surrounded by a dozen wheelie bins under a covered courtyard. Four tribal women sit cross-legged in the sun on an expanse of dazzling green artificial turf laid incongruously onto the bare earth. The entranced men watch a West Coast Eagles football game onto a flat screen mounted onto the side of the cafeteria donga.

None appear close to retirement age except Jock Mosquito, who politely suggests I return after the game.

Two hours later the empty courtyard and artificial turf are littered with food packaging, serviettes and paper cups. Jock sits majestically at the front of his donga.

Slow motion European backpackers emerge from behind another donga dragging a high pressure spray unit. One sprays the tables while the others collect rubbish. Within sixty
seconds of their job completed two dozen teenagers and children as if stage actors following prompts leave the retirement units and converge on the cafeteria, which consists of three or four dongas joined together. White servants dressed in chef uniforms stand behind heated displays and serve fried chicken and roast beef to the kids.

Jock accepts photographs of Mark Moora and Bai Bai Sunfly, then uses my phone to call his friends throughout Australia. But he has little to say about James and Simon, and those few words are incomprehensible due to his recent stroke. One sentence comes out crystal clear: he wants a hundred dollars to speak to me. We close at fifteen. He says return tomorrow, when his daughter will translate.

A bull circling the rubbish tip that night prevents me reaching deep sleep. Jock’s daughter is missing the next morning. She’s gone fishing. We drive up and down the streets looking for an alternative translator without success, until Jock decides he wants a feed at the Turkey Creek roadhouse.

He insists I park in front of the fuel pumps, then pisses on the passenger side front wheel. White construction workers having lunch on the verandah, stare at their plates in contempt and embarrassment. He insists I order him a corned beef sandwich, but the waitress says they had a twenty-minute shouting match the previous day. They don’t have corned beef. Chicken, ham, beef: no problem. “How about beef?” she asks. Jock nods his assent, but nervously grips his $15. He wants me to pay then relents and passes over a ten dollar note, almost enough.

After taking him back to the retirement village his reproachful gaze bores a hole in my head, as I hurriedly escape back onto the highway. Like most elderly Aboriginal men they see gudias serving one purpose only, as servants.

Chapter 69. Tapping on doors

Back in Halls Creek the hungry wails of roaming girls resonate down the darkened streets. Intense groups of huddled adults check their cards around blankets heavy with coins and fluttering notes under the glowing orange street lights.
Beverley Malay sips medium strength beer next morning once she’s packed her children off to school. She’s a lithe Kija black woman with a ready smile, proud to have born thirteen children. Her flash house on out on Mardiwah Loop is fortified with heavy mesh that could withstand a major assault, yet the side entrance appears not to have a door.

Her ancestral land includes Bedford Downs station. She remembers their massacre story. Most stations have one, but it was the white manager shooting their dogs in 1975 that affected her. She didn’t understand why her tribe left for Halls Creek, but thought it was connected to the dogs.

Her Mum was a traditional woman whose body and limbs were covered in scars from initiation cuts, a sign of her discipline and self-control. She fretted being away from the law grounds and the ancestral spirits, and died within a year.

Skin cutting and scarification is a sign of accomplishment and in some initiations connects candidates with their tribal ancestors. Beverley smiles proudly. One of her sons has been through the ceremony. The hospital provided sterile blades.

Further down the Loop at Woodhouse block I approach a house fronted with expensive ice chests. A white haired woman knitting next to a campfire in the back yard watches me with honest hostility. Children shout and run through the house. A healthy looking forty-year-old man yells at them to shut-up. They look at this ferocious black fella with amused curiosity then continue their noisy sport.

Embroidered on the man’s shirt are the words “Chris 30-pack Pty Ltd”. Chris 30-pack contracts the town’s rubbish collection. “I’m thinking of changing it to 60-pack,” he says and generously introduces me by phone to people in Billiluna who otherwise wouldn’t speak to me.

I call Merv Wortley about visiting Sturt Creek station. I can drive down Duncan Road to the homestead then cut across through Caranya on the way to Billiluna, following the track allegedly used by James and Simon on their last journey.

Merv has made excuses for two years to prevent my visit. His most recent, six-months previously, was that the creek causeway was too wet to cross, in the dry season. Mark Moora laughed at that one.
Now, in October, the country is bone dry. I leave a message on his answering machine asking to visit the “alleged massacre site”. Merv doesn’t reply. The cook hangs up on my next call. Mrs Wortley responds to my third call with an impressive sequence of crow calls disguised as speech. Merv finally phones saying they’re tired of people making money from them and he doesn’t want me there. “Is that from Head Office?” I ask. “Yes,” he says.

Jemaine Finley has replaced Louise Dreyton at Heytesbury. She asks Paul Holmes a Court if I could visit Nicholson and Flora Valley a second time. No problems. Call the stations first. Perhaps Merv’s unease was that while Heytesbury discharged Sherwin’s liabilities by paying the Annetts compensation, the Kidman Estate didn’t do the same because Pat Clark never sought damages.

I drive out early and camp again at the R & D yards near the Kundat Djaru turn-off. The stench of dead beasts from a recent muster wafts over the yards. Ben stops by the next morning after refuelling the Gordon Downs homestead monopump. He’s leaving for another station at Christmas, saying the job isn’t growing with his knowledge. He’s also unhappy that a friend quit after a difference with Laurie Curtain. And do I want to buy his Suzuki 4WD? It cost him $30,000 last Christmas. “I want one of these,” I say, tapping the station Land Cruiser. So does Ben. And did he ever accept Lee Scott-Virtue’s invitation to have his lunches at Nicholson homestead. “No,” he says.

Lee is whipper snipping the grass when I arrive at Nicholson. She was told to expect me and I feel humiliated. Not only is she my superior in knowledge, education and commitment, she could probably knock me on my ass if push came to shove. Cece has also returned. She’s a Swiss backpacker who visited four years previously. Another smart woman. Giving up time from her busy schedule, Lee makes tea and sandwiches and we sit in James’ dining room.

She refreshingly cuts through my monologue about needing to skirt around the negligence of the Balgo people not impressing strongly enough on the police that they saw the boys. That’s the typical downplaying of anything negative about Aboriginals, she says. “How it happened should be the way it is told.”

Like not naming people who have died is “bullshit”, she says, and gives examples of funeral notices stuck on notice boards by Aboriginals that show both the names and photographs of the deceased.
And Jock Mosquito wanting money for talking to me is because “do-gooders” have told him to do that. She says Jock arrived one day and said he owned Nicholson and was moving in. She told him to piss off or she’d “set the dogs onto him”, not that her dogs could scare off more than a couple of rabbits.

Lee adopted an indigenous child when he was 18-months old and one of her children married an Aboriginal.

She says she’s seen wrong sacred area claims by stolen generation people corrected by older women in their eighties and nineties who weren’t kidnapped and have retained true knowledge of their secret locations and rites.

I ask her about the idea spread by paedophiles that older men having sex with sexualised children is acceptable from a tribal viewpoint. The thud of the cool room compressor cuts into the silence. My breathing stops. Lee takes seconds to formulate her answer. She says such paedophilia is a symptom of social breakdown and not accepted behaviour. Children are promised in marriage, but actual sex doesn’t happen until after the girl has her first period.

A faded sign at Old Halls Creek Lodge advises campers to find a spot and pay later, another recommends a helicopter service whose owner from that era is now languishing in a Sydney prison. The grass planted on stony ground has died, and trees and bushes overrun some building entrances. The pioneer cemetery is overgrown, but not forgotten.

Marten Ynema is a shortish, stocky, fair skinned alpha man who wears high visibility blue and yellow coveralls 24/7. He won’t touch drugs, but drinks small quantities of what he calls “antiseptic”. “My weakness is ladies,” he tells me, “and some of them you wouldn’t call ladies.” He’s never been with a white woman, but had fifteen Aboriginal girlfriends. Lulu was next. For eleven years you could find her with a cigarette in one hand and a can of beer in the other while flipping hamburgers at her fast food caravan at the Broome wharf. She died at an advanced, but indeterminate age.
Marten then married Ayu from Bali, and they’ve been together for twenty-two years. Their two boys were born with black buttocks, a sign of Ayu’s Mongolian ancestry. She runs their restaurant in Wyndham, where they have a 75 foot aluminium survey boat. Marten is a self-educated autodidact, who ran an engineering workshop at the Broome slipway until 2001.

One of his claims to fame is having gone swimming naked with Gina Rhinehart when they were children.

The Lodge reached its heyday in 1996, when Marten hired a Hungarian “Count” and his German wife as managers. They frequently attracted two hundred diners a night. One evening the Count’s wife locked herself in a room, yelling that she would never serve another customer. The Count pounded and pounded on the door, but she wouldn’t budge, so he arranged to borrow a cook from Warren Dallachy at the Poinciana Roadhouse. Half way there he hit one of Warren’s horses on the road in his Volkswagen beetle, and damaged his neck. That was the end of his career at Old Halls Creek.

Marten says his subsequent managers were ‘weirdos’, and the business finally collapsed two years ago, when the “black fellas” stopped passing through on their way to Halls Creek for alcohol, in preference to Kununurra and Alice Springs. Marten says he put $2million into Old Halls Creek Lodge, and is trying to sell it for $700,000.

Marten spent three years as a self-described “black fella”, which left him with empathy for Aboriginals. He remembers “Monty” telling him of “turkey” shooting expeditions by companies of troopers, made up of white men and out of area tribal men. The “turkeys” were Aboriginals and the troopers would “grab the kids by the legs and smack them against trees as they rode past them.”

“Can this be true?” I ask incredulously.

“All different camps we went to related the same things. Not as if we had them all sitting around one table; we went to the different places,” he replies.

Marten remembers Monty telling him his real name was Montgomery Johannes, and that his father had been the “fierce white warrior” killed in the Sturt Creek station massacre. Monty said he was a descendant of the survivors of a Dutch shipwreck on the Kimberley coast prior to white settlement.
Another thing Marten remembers: Tomato Gordon and a man from Mulan told him they saw another vehicle follow James and Simon’s Datsun into the desert.

Marten had then been checking gold leases with geologist Greg Barnes and pilot Dave Swanston in a Bell Jet Ranger helicopter in the Cummins Range, south-west of Halls Creek. The big helicopter ran on a kerosene-based fuel and could fly 700 kilometres before needing refueling. Nor was it prone to overheating or dropping from the sky like the smaller mustering choppers.

Marten and Greg made a living surveying sand country from the air, and spotting outcrops or intrusions, then going in by vehicle to collect samples. If the subsequent assay showed promise, they’d peg the area. Marten said they were “making squillions,” and liked working in the hot weather, because there were “no prospectors or anyone to annoy them.”

Through this experience they knew the terrain, and had developed a sensitive eye for ground details. They told the police how easy it was to mistakenly head into desert country because the exploration companies had graded their seismic tracks to a superior quality than the Tanami Track. Greg said anyone travelling at night could easily cross the Track without realising it, and become lost in the seismic exploration area.

Marten said the police contemptuously rejected his advice that the boys were down south:

“They didn’t want to know about it; they reckoned it was north cause they’d been told by Giles. Heading north there’d have been from where they were possibly 8 or 9 cattle stations and Aboriginal outcamps, at least, and it was all good water country so they would have lived, but they were dead when they left Sturt Creek them boys.”

Mick Quilty at Ruby Plains also thought the search incomplete, and offered James O’Kenny and Lenin Christie the finance to mount a private search. But Lenin had just purchased the abattoir and meat shop in Halls Creek, and couldn’t get away.

On my second visit to Old Halls Creek Marten and his off-sider, “Uncle Gregory” Excell are washing dirt at the mine site. Greg is thin and tall and wears a kindly expression on his sun ruined face. He’s also known as “Little Moose”, son of “Big Moose”, a Broome
market gardener, and a strict Jehovah’s Witness. Greg divides his faith between God and day-old home brew.

With a front-end loader he fills a hopper with dirt, that is conveyed on a belt to a rotating drum, that spits the stones onto a heap next to the machine, while the silt is swept away in a torrent of muddy water, to a holding pond. A swirling dish like a gold pan collects the finer gravel that sparkles with flecks of gold.

Marten stands on the machine and looks wilder by the minute, when only tiny amounts of gold appear in the sluice dish. He’s hoping a high gold content will return him to the old days, when he was awash in money.

Greg maintains the faith, saying there is plenty of gold around Old Halls Creek. He points to plumes of smoke on the horizon. “Black fellas burning the country?” I ask.

“No,” he replies

“Arsonists?”

“No.” Greg holds his hands out as if holding a metal detector. Grey nomads are burning the spinifex. Marten allows them on his leases, providing they tell him what they find. But Little Moose is contemptuous, saying that in thirty years he’s found just one piece of gold using a detector. He’s a panner, like the original prospectors from 1885.

Chapter 71. The status quo 1

Back in Halls Creek I chase up the angle of police having sex with female prisoners. A smiling woman says she had two children to two officers. No problems. Other women won’t talk. Having a child from a wrong way round skin group, or from a white man, even when the sex was done under coercion, could damage the tribal social fabric, and result in a beating, even death.
If DNA testing was done on former police officers who had served in Halls Creek over the past forty years, then some men could find themselves with huge child support bills. The Yura Yingi health service and the Western Australia Police could facilitate the testing.

I introduce this subject to Josie Farrer and Bonnie Edwards, in the front yard of Bonnie’s daughter. Josie’s eyes dim. She’s practiced local politics most of her life, and took her children to stations, so they could learn not to fear white men. Near retirement age, she’s finally become the Labor candidate for the state seat of Kimberley. She’ll win at the next election.

Local critics call Josie a half-caste stolen generation woman who can’t identify her ancestors beyond her grandparents. But claiming ancestry is as much about land and mineral royalties as to spiritual connection. Disclaiming others’ ancestry is often an attempt to weaken their claims. It’s all politics, and discovering inconvenient ancestors could damage lives in a variety of ways.

Josie wants to know who I’ll blame for the deaths of James and Simon. I ramble on about Shane Kendall and Giles Loder having had difficulty explaining where they were for three days, from when the boys were last seen at the stations to when the search began.

“He didn’t answer the question,” she tells Bonnie, looking away from me, like George Lee at Balgo. She adds that I’m not paying her for her time. Maybe that’s why she isn’t giving anything away.

Bonnie isn’t talking either. She says she is worried about people dropping dead, such as Les Verdon hanging and shooting himself in Derby in 2009, as I began my investigation, and Paul Griffith disappearing within a month. She’s talking black magic.

Both men were long term boyfriends of Sandra Sturt. That’s who I came to see. She lives at Wungu, another failed outcamp, now a group of empty houses, and a free phone box with a satellite dish on the roof. She’s having mobility problems these days and is routinely rescued during floods.

Bonnie has gotten a man to collect Sandra from an outcamp near town. She won’t say precisely which outcamp. Sandra is having a shower next door, says Bonnie.
Les Verdon made no secret he thought James and Simon were murdered, and claimed the police refused his advice to search down south. He was also suspicious of a certain officer friendly with local boys, some of whom he took on a holiday to Bali, out of the jurisdiction of Australian law.

When Les and Sandra Sturt broke up she had an off-on relationship with Paul Griffith for two decades. She’s now spends much of her time with Allan Loman, the kindly grader driver on Ruby Plains station.

There are intense verbal exchanges between various people on the porch next door and those in Bonnie’s daughter’s front yard. A group appear on the porch, including a woman with impressive grey hair, who looks down at me without recognition then goes back inside. Josie and Bonnie grill me for an hour, questioning my motives. Josie wants to know if I’m related to either of the Amos or Annetts families. Inside a defensive trance, as a seizure grasps my brain, I realise they’re telling me very little. Halls Creek is keeping its secrets.

Like a coup de grace at the end of an interrogation, Josie says I’m wearing the same clothing as last year. Bonnie makes gagging sounds while describing my car, then switches to Djaru. Her daughter’s eyes are red-rimmed. And Sandra Sturt won’t be talking. They’ve made sure of that.

Chapter 72. The status quo 2

Lenin Christie calls from Queensland, and through a smoker’s growl sorts me out for waking him up the previous night, after forgetting Western Australia summer time is three hours behind the east.

He says back at Sturt Creek station in the 1980’s they received one or two patrols a year, and the police were only called for extreme events, leaving the stations a law unto themselves. “I had some real good blokes; I was hard on them; I didn’t muck about if they had problems. If anyone gave me shit I wasn’t frightened to give them a smack under the butt or the ear. Well, you’re on your own, aren’t you?”
Peter Leutenegger says violence is unacceptable today and was even uncommon in the early 1980’s, but there were some managers that ruled with an iron fist and,

“...if people did the wrong thing they might have got a bit of a clip in the ear or a boot in the backside and told to wake up to themselves. There’s a lot of those people I know now that have grown up to be good people and appreciate the people doing that to them.”

Helen Holborow is a no-nonsense woman with a hearty laugh. She says managers didn’t relish fights in which they could be injured, but it wasn’t practical to ask the police to drive hundreds of kilometres over rough roads to settle a station dispute.

For practical reasons the ‘connies’ and ‘aides’ ignored behaviour that could otherwise have attracted a prison sentence. Rule by fists and boots was the de facto law. It worked well, and only when things got out of hand did the police become involved.

Since his stroke, James O’Kenny speaks with an attractive slur. He’s lost mobility in one of his arms, and has retired from the explosives industry, but at 84 his mind remains sharp as a tack.

“Both my boys have been on stations jackerooing, and I expected them to get treated the same in that situation as other kids. It’s rough and hard, but it’s very good for their discipline and everything else. It makes them into men.

“City born kids like that never had a sniff of the bush. Coming to an outpost like that is a bit [hard] and that’s no one’s fault... They just broke the rules of the bush and got lost and died.”

O’Kenny’s rancor dissipates, as he explains he worked as a stock and station agent, and pre-hired staff on behalf of station managers. He made sure the young jackeroos knew what they were getting into, and recommended they visit stations first, before taking the job. “That’s why I was a bit upset about what happened out there with those two boys,” he says.

He says the searchers were “friggin around on the properties” when “It was obvious they had gone.” They should have been checking the roads, not the stations themselves, but says that wouldn’t have helped anyway, because the boys broke the rules of the bush, so the searchers couldn’t know what to do.
As if signalling the symbolic end of an era in the Kimberley, James O'Kenny hangs up the phone, and within a few months is dead.

Chapter 73. *The private massacre*

In September 1922, an Aboriginal man known in the gudia world as ‘Banjo’ speared two white fellas, Joseph Condren and Tim O'Sullivan, on Billiluna station. This shouldn’t have been surprising. The gudias had been shooting the myalls on sight for three decades, and even the tame Aboriginals could be shot if a prized bull was speared.

Jack Barry, who managed Sturt Creek station for Lord Vestey, organised a posse of police and civilians, headed by Constable Flinders, who was patrolling north of Ruby Plains. Banjo and his friends fled to Christmas Creek, then to Boolka Creek, where they were surrounded by Flinders’ posse at Baulka station on 22 October 1922, and shot.

More ominously, Constable J.J. Cooney’s patrol was moving south from Turkey Creek. It included one ‘special constable’, M. O’Sullivan, brother of the murdered Tim. Cooney’s patrol confined itself to a small area near Godfrey Tank, and between Wells 48 and 49 on the Canning Stock route. Cooney’s sketchy patrol log indicates they were searching for Balgee, who reportedly had possession of Tim Sullivan's revolvers and ammunition. They rounded up small groups of men, women and children then released them, according to Cooney’s log.

But Clancy Doomagie and Riwarra claimed to have escaped the massacre, and this historical record relies on their evidence. (Doomagie was still alive when James and Simon disappeared.) Their accounts were repeated by Riwarri's three sons, including Speiler Sturt and Boxer Milner, the latter interviewed on film by Kim Mahood just before he died. Daisy Kungah from Billiluna recounted Riwarri's story:

“They lined them up between two trees, tied together with wire around their necks and with their hands and feet tied with wire. Two policemen stood together on each side and shot them one by one from the ones at the end to the ones in the middle till they were all dead. Then they dragged some of the bodies to the goat yard, dumped them there in a heap and set...
fire to them using kerosene. They dragged the rest to the well, threw them in and set fire to them too.”

Cooney's patrol took three days to reach Billiluna from Ruby Plains, but close to a week to return, begging the question: what did they do during those missing days. Like Giles Loder’s missing days this blank in Cooney' official record was never explained. Was it during this unaccounted for period that the natives were killed down at Sturt Creek homestead?

Chapter 74. Ghost prisoners

“You're going down a rotten road, there. Not only Derby. If you want to go down that road you better be prepared for the ride.”

A former police office at Halls Creek, 2011

“You be careful then, them coppers, there's something not right.”

Anonymous, 2012

City owners visiting their stations were surprised how rarely their hard working employees frequented the homestead. Some were never located, yet still managed to collect their wages.

Ghost drinkers were also plentiful, where alcohol restrictions applied. Men and women, ten years buried in the ground, were signing for cartons of beer and spirits.

Ghost prisoners were fed three Spartan meals a day, consisting of a piece of mettwurst, bread thrown out from the bakery, and a cup of tea, but they never complained.

They were locked up for being drunk, but were otherwise obedient prisoners who never resisted arrest, never stabbed or otherwise attacked the arresting officers.

Female ghost prisoners were searched by the matrons, usually the wives of the officers-in-charge. Matrons were paid for providing meals, and bodily searches. It seemed they had
doppelgangers, for they were known to search prisoners at the station while simultaneously watching television at home, or even in bed fast asleep.

These ghost prisoners existed in the Occurrence Books. One book disappeared from the Halls Creek police station, when James and Simon disappeared.

The semblance of a normal police station was maintained by a constant flow of real prisoners. They could be troublesome characters, who spoke little English and hadn’t access to lawyers, meaning there was little fear that a 14-day imprisonment for habitual drunkenness would be challenged in court.

The race riots of 1996 were a weekend of excitement and reward, when police made over 400 arrests over a few days. Real prisoners were packed into the cells standing up, and couldn’t sleep. It was so crowded the ghost prisoners were thrown out. The staff fridge overflowed with beer.

Beer was the key. When the Constables and Aides bought in plenty of real and ghost prisoners, the Sergeant rewarded them with a well-stocked fridge of cold beer. During droughts of prisoners, the fridge went empty.

Occurrence Books were maintained at Western Australia police stations by officers finishing their shifts, who recorded incidents including arrests and numbers of prisoners in the cells. Officers maintained extra income for the Sergeant, by falsifying the numbers of prisoners. He rewarded them with a fridge of cold beer.

I phoned a former officer, now working in Fitzroy Crossing. He served at Halls Creek in 1987. Was there any truth in this absurd story, I asked? Surely, there wasn’t. He wouldn’t confirm or deny it and ended our conversation.

Another officer, whom I’ll refer to as ‘Harry’, caused great consternation with his colleagues at Halls Creek, by recording the true number of prisoners in the Occurrence Book. This contradicted the Sergeant’s meal claims, and called for immediate action. Officers covered Harry’s notations with Liquid Paper, then inserted the inflated numbers. The officer-in-charge told Harry never again to write in the Occurrence Book. Not even when he was ostracised and relegated to working alone in the station on weekends was he to touch the Book.
The local detective, Bill Dunlop, took Harry for a drive, after a white school teacher was raped in the Halls Creek Shire. He encouraged Harry to join the team, to play the game, to fiddle the books. Harry refused. Dunlop asked Harry where he was during the rape. Harry understood. The detective was warning him they could frame him any time, on any charge. They could “open and close doors” was the term used. Harry supplied an alibi, despite not being a real suspect. “Our life became hell,” his wife told me, choking back sobs, nearly thirty years later. “I thought I’d gotten over all that.”

Harry was transferred to Wiluna, where he and his wife were relegated to a house occupied by horses. There was an empty house reserved for a school teacher, but she preferred the caravan park, so Harry and his family could have it. But police management insisted on keeping it empty, until Harry called Premier Brian Burke. Six hours later they got the place.

But all did not go well. Harry was transferred to Newman, where police had been receiving complaints about a woman dealing drugs. Officers visited her house while her husband was pulling a 12-hour shift at the mine. They told her they could “turn the house upside down” or she could produce the dope. She brought out two one-ounce bags of cannabis. Harry was sent back to the station on a minor errand. When he returned he found a constable, whom he names, at the town’s lookout dumping the contents of one bag onto the ground. Harry says the constable told him the woman’s husband had applied to become a Justice of the Peace, so no charges would be laid. The irony was that when the local Magistrate wasn’t available, Newman JP’s acted as de facto magistrates on drug cases.

Life didn’t proceed smoothly for Harry and his wife. His colleagues put them in separate interrogation rooms one day, and told Harry’s wife there were plenty of mine shafts available, and that she and her children might find themselves down one of them.

But the police did investigate drug use. They had a particular person of interest. It was Harry. They searched his house, then told him they were transferring him to Perth, where he would occupy an office next door to the detective investigating him. Harry said he wanted to be transferred to Broome, where he grew up, and where there was a vacancy. The answer was, “no”. Harry resigned then complained to Commissioner of Police Brian Bull, who replied in writing that there were no ghost prisoners in police lock-ups.
Retired stonemason Norm Archer told me, in 2012, that a certain Sergeant at the Derby police station filled the cells on Friday night, knowing the prisoners wouldn’t face court until Monday morning. His wife served Wheat Bix and weak soup, while being paid for supplying premium meals, and for searching women who made up one-third of the prisoners. He said the Sergeant was later transferred to Fitzroy Crossing, then Halls Creek.

But another former Halls Creek officer doubts the ghost prisoner scheme could have operated. He agreed that in 1986 they got free beer on Fridays from the Sergeant, and that the meal money could amount to over $3000 a month for the Sergeant and his wife. The “mealies” were one of the attractions for senior officers posted in the Kimberley, he said, but that prisoners were so plentiful, why would the Sergeant jeopardise his career for a few extra dollars? “You wouldn’t have to; there would be no need to; you’d be stupid to do it,” he told me. And prisoners were fingerprinted, photographed, searched, and signed a document for their personal effects, so it would be difficult to fake arrest numbers.

What is evident is that Halls Creek police and Superintendent Leonard Craddock at Broome had much to hide. Twenty-five years after the events I have been warned that one officer was “muscling up”, and might come after me if details of the ghost prisoner racket were published.

Another factor that crippled crime investigations in Western Australia was detectives determining, over a few drinks at the Great Western Hotel in Perth, who they believed was guilty then building a case against that person using false confessions, beatings and planting of fake evidence. Likewise, if they decided a person was not to be investigated, then all the damning evidence in the world wouldn’t change their minds.

Under the auspice of Leonard Craddock, interrogation methods in Broome included bodily humiliations and beatings. Peter Carter from Clan Contractors visited the Broome police station in the early 1980’s on a minor matter and, while standing at the front counter he: “...could hear this bloody thumping, bashing sound and a bit of yelling and a door opened, closed very quickly and two coppers walked out and there was a guy lying on the floor in there, a white guy.”

Carter participated in the re-enactment for the ABC-TV television program, “Dead Heart.” He and Chris Masters played James and Simon. They were sitting around the campfire one night and talking about Masters’ previous investigation, “The Moonlight State,”
that resulted in the Fitzgerald Inquiry, and the jailing of the Queensland Police Commissioner Sir Terrence Lewis. Carter says Masters and his team had difficulty deciding whether to investigate the Queensland or the Western Australia police, as both seemed equally corrupt. They chose Queensland because they could more easily fly home to their families on the weekends.

At Halls Creek in 1986 the ‘connies’ extracted confessions by putting a suspect in a narrow metal cabinet, then locking the door and banging the sides with an iron bar. “It was surprisingly effective,” one officer me.

Chapter 75. Sex prisoners

But it’s the sex angle with young Aboriginal women in police cells that wipes the smile off the faces of officers from that period.

Djigadu Bal Bal was brought out of the Great Sandy Desert in 1964, on the back of a flat bed truck. Aboriginal electrician Sammy Jacks had convinced her parents to make the dusty trip. He took them to La Grange Mission, two-hundred kilometres south of Broome. When they reached La Grange the adults were told to live in the nearby bush, while their children were put in sex segregated dormitories. They were brought up by nuns, who encouraged them to shun their bush skills and stop “being primitive”. When the girls “played up” the nuns whipped them with thorny lemon branches. Today, there are still older women sitting in Broome parks who can show you the “nun scars” on their backs. Yet many remember the “white habits” with fondness, and refer to them as their mothers, for the nuns taught them to negotiate the difficulties of adapting to a ‘white’ society.

But their adjustment from alert and mostly self-sufficient nomads, to small town welfare recipients, was often disastrous. Djigadu’s Mum fell into the grip of alcohol, and was hit and killed by a bus near One Mile Community in Broome. Years later, Djigadu was hit by a car at the same spot, and has never fully recovered.

Before being maimed Djigadu lived with John Kernot, and was torn between her tribal background and her Christian education. She became a fully fledged alcoholic after Billy
Daglish, from Punmu near Canning Stock Route, killed her son with a tyre lever. Djigadu found herself spending increased periods in the Broome lock-up for drunkenness and unpaid fines. She told Kernot tales of sex between police officers and Aboriginal women in the cells, leading him to doubt even the paternity of their son.

Kernot wrote repeatedly to Assistant Police Commissioner Les Ayton, who headed the Western Australia Internal Affairs branch, formed to maintain ethical standards amongst serving officers. Kernot never received a reply.

After one particular night in the lockup, eight-month pregnant Djigadu described what she had seen to Kernot, who recorded her tale on his secretary’s Dictaphone:

“...I mustn’t allowed to see dat, but I just had a look, there they were …policeman was telling me…get in…having the sex behind…what dis thing here. Beth just went like dat…started bending down…doggy style behind de thing dere…she was drunk…yeah, but dey still had de sex…five…it was five, dat other grumpy man what is name? Where he from…Mexico or something…and Greg…stupid man…white fellow like you…yeah, Greg…and he like dis [Djigadu indicates put finger near vagina]...in Bethyl…sucking tits yeah, [other police watching] dey were waiting for dere turn…dey were telling me to stop in dat toilet…Greg dat policeman…he like his sex…dey told me to sit down in dat toilet… I wasn’t really bustin for toilet…dey tell me to sit down…”

When Djiaadu was released she said police told her

“I mustn’t say something about Beth…she badly wanted more…sex…and dey telling me keep your mouth shut…don’t tell anyone else…keep your mouth to yourself…”

Kernot said this was common at the Broome police station, and that officers beginning their shifts would drive around searching for Bethel O’Neil. He said John Bridge, the brother of then Member of Parliament for the Kimberley, Ernie Bridge, told him outside the Roebuck Hotel, he’d pleaded with the police to leave Beth O’Neil alone.

When I phone John Bridge, twenty years after the event, he denies having this conversation with Kernot. His withering anger raises the hairs on the back of my neck; his voice reduces to a whisper. He hangs up before I can ask him if he’d ever heard of allegations of sexual impropriety in the cells.
Don McKenzie was head of the Aboriginal Visitors Scheme in Broome during the 1980’s. He still is. I ask him by phone if it was common for police to have sex with Aboriginal women in the cells. He says he needs permission from his boss Laurel Sellers in Perth, to speak to me. Ms Sellers tells me she’ll tell Don that he can speak openly to me. But Don subsequently leaves his answering machine switched on permanently, and doesn’t return my calls. I phone Ms Sellers again. Her attitude has changed. She says Don is famous and has an oval named after him. She laughingly says of Don’s answering machine: “He probably doesn’t even check it.”

Nikki Wevers at ‘Flowers-on-Saville’ is a former Broome Councillor. She worked during the 1980’s at the women’s refuge, a project funded to protect Aboriginal women. I asked her in 2011 about the sex-in-the-cells claims from that period. She replied she’d: “Never heard those sorts of claims and if I heard them maybe I can’t remember.”

The police behaviour went unabated, and Djigadu arrived home crying one afternoon, saying police had grabbed her on the street and took her to the station, where they made her strip and mop the floor while they stood around laughing. “She cried for two days,” Kernot told me.

Similar allegations were made of police at Halls Creek in the 1980’s. A woman said her husband was an officer there, and suffered great anguish knowing what was going on. He’d been on the verge of physically attacking his fellow officers. To date he won’t speak to me.

John Kernot says sex between young black women and police on duty was common. They used Gantheume Point in Broome; Banjos Bore at Halls Creek and the swamp at Derby. He named women from Derby who he said were taken to the swamp either drunk or falsely accused of being drunk. If they complied with demands for sex, they were driven back to town and released without charge. Those who performed unsatisfactorily were not charged, but left to walk back from the swamp. Those refusing sex were usually charged.

Mark Moora said the practice at Balgo in the 1980’s was for police to strip Aboriginal women, take photographs of them with a “15-second camera” then take them out in the bush.

A Fitzroy Crossing community leader told me that it was “semi-voluntary,” and that police would give the women money, smokes or alcohol, but added that the epidemic of
alcoholism created this situation. He said police in the Kimberley saw sex as a “perk” that came with their job. This included both the white coppers and the police aides.

In one incident at Fitzroy Crossing, five men went bush after dark for a “killer”. The rustlers were butchering the beast when a police vehicle arrived. They expected to be arrested, until they saw the cocky cage full of Aboriginal women. The rustlers remained silent and motionless while they watched the scene unfold. They still howl with laughter today when recounting the incident amongst themselves.

Many ‘illicit’ sexual relationships between officers and women produced beautiful children, of whom both parents are proud. In other cases the women were abandoned and returned to a black fella camp with their half-caste baby, where they were disciplined by the tribal men, to put it mildly.

There are also stories of police running the drug trade in the Kimberley in the 1980’s and 1990’s. Most informants are discredited by their involvement in the trade.

By accident I found a person with impeccable credentials who hasn’t any criminal history and is respected, even by his business rivals, as being an honest person. This person told me how the staff at one Broome hotel got the surprise of their life when they hired a new barman in 1990. He was Detective Sergeant Rick Scupham, who was on long service leave and had decided to take a second job. Hotel staff and management were initially happy with the idea of a police officer serving drinks from behind the bar. Scupham’s presence would eliminate the drug dealing. They were amazed when he verbally presented them with a list of illegal drugs they could sell from under the counter. “We were shocked,” the person said.

Did the need of the Broome and Halls Creek police to maintain so many secrets compromise the search for James and Simon? Would an open search have exposed some of these ‘sly deals’, some of which have never been exposed? Did this fuel local rumours the boys had discovered something, and were eliminated to protect a secret?

Chapter 76. *What the Yagga Yagga mob saw*
"A funny thing I can tell you now. There was Toyota going backward and forward during the night, if you want to know. That’s all my children are grown up now. That’s why I’m gonna tell you because me and my family was on there...”

Mark Moora, Yagga Yagga

Balgo locals take every opportunity to be outside. You can find old people lying on the ground under a tarp in the rain, next to a warm dry house. And why waste the cool early hours asleep when you can be alive to the world? Or miss the cool evening breeze cooped up in a hotbox of a government house? And it wasn’t so late on that fateful December evening in 1986. The hum of the power station was masking the sounds of the earth, but the eerie street lights still left enough darkness for the beam of a vehicle on the bi-pass road to light up the sky. The locals were pretty sure it wasn’t the two gudia boys blasting through; hadn’t they gone through when the sun was high, and stopped for shopping?

Locals claimed when the police asked they were told, quietly, on the sly: the boys had gone south. Few wanted to become involved with the police, but some had a public conscience, even to the invaders.

Word quickly filtered down to Sturt Creek homestead, that the jackeroos had been seen near Balgo. Jim Guy didn’t welcome the news. He was ready to pack up anyway, when John Boland mentioned the sighting:

“They brought beer out, and chickens and all that sort from the pub and there was a relieving Sergeant [Jim Guy] there and he had a report they were seen going past Balgo and I said, what were they doing down there and he said, ’That’s what I thought,’ so no one bothered – That’s where it went wrong.”

A Kukatja mob had been camped at their broken down vehicle on the road to Yagga Yagga. They were perplexed upon arriving at Balgo, to find the police asking questions about the boys. They’d seen them the previous day, in good health, not agitated, not asking directions.

Down at Yagga Yagga, Mark Moora was expecting the Telecom helicopter to land near their two-way radio tower. Eleven-year-old Ronald Mosquito was with future chairman,
George Lee, 10, the latter banished to Yagga Yagga after running wild in Balgo. Ronald had seen James and Simon drive through earlier in the day, but didn’t see them stop. Ronald said the helicopter “wasn’t a fancy one”, but used for “mustering”.

Mark claims he saw it land near the water tank. He says it was a simple machine. There was a rifle between the seats. It wasn’t from Telecom.

Dates and times become confused, but Mark remembers going for a drive south of Yagga Yagga into the desert, where he came across three white fellas in a station vehicle, who said they were looking for drums. There weren’t any stations in the vicinity so Mark wondered why they would travel such a long distance over difficult tracks looking for relatively inexpensive empty fuel drums. He told them there weren't any drums, and they were on private property, and they left. But there were drums. Mark knew that. He later said men from Billiluna had dropped drums of aviation fuel, one spot including a patch of clay north of Yagga Yagga. This would have provided enough fuel for a mustering chopper to make a return journey to the seismic maze near Lake Hevern. Mark wondered who would go to the trouble of laying down fuel drums by vehicle then send a short range mustering chopper into the summer desert after the seismic crews had left.

Ronald said a helicopter had landed at Balgo, where the new store is now located, to refuel from an underground tank. That was when the community owned Kingerfisher Airlines. The kids had seen planes, but never before a helicopter.

Aircraft and other objects had been seen in the desert for at least a generation. The Nippon Empire had sent its fast reconnaissance planes down the coast. The Australians and Americans had built hidden airstrips and arms caches in the Great Sandy Desert, in expectation of a Japanese invasion.

Other events were more difficult to rationalise. Bai Bai Sunfly said she’d been abducted in a UFO. Monty Barr and Wayne Trembath were followed by strange lights for forty kilometres, along the track between Lake Gregory and Balgo, in March 1987, when they were delivering a portable building. "First of all it looked like a convoy of trucks, but there are no roads there," Barr said. They weren’t the only ones to see unusual lights. Oil rig supervisor Doug Hodgekiss saw unusual lights earlier in the year, and heard loud thuds, and found saucer-shaped burns on the ground.
More explicable movements were the scheduled flights between the east coast and Singapore. Geoff Taylor was awakened by his phone one night, by someone asking him to drive to the Balgo communications tower, and reboot the computer. Geoff got out of bed and looked into the sky, and saw a passenger airliner circling the community. He rebooted the computer, and the plane continued its journey, and he went back to bed.

Harry Mason told me a friend of his in the Australian Army was sent with his platoon into the Great Sandy Desert, to guard an isolated airstrip. The infrastructure consisted of a single house at one end of the runway. The bemused soldiers stood around until two Australian fighter planes appeared in the sky, escorting a cargo plane that landed on the strip. The fighter planes withdrew, while the platoon surrounded the stationary plane, whose occupants remained inside. The soldiers listened for three days to the frenetic activity inside the plane, during which time an Australian cargo plane also landed. The occupants of the first plane then quietly transferred to the Australian plane. The platoon was ordered to leave the area.

Then there were the two worried souls who graced Yagga Yagga on their final journey to eternity. The plastic playground hadn’t yet arrived, nor had the electricity generator, so the nights were quiet and dark at the four tin shacks. An approaching vehicle could be detected twenty kilometres away. Mark Moora had had the exploration company bulldoze a track to skirt the community, to prevent the seismic survey vehicles covering the shacks with dust, and to discourage snoops. But the new track was still close enough to prevent anyone sneaking by without being noticed.

Not that many got that far south, due to the heat. Occasional vehicles from the Pintupi lands came through on tracks you wouldn’t find on maps. Gudia tourists preferred the Tanami Track, or the rugged but more defined Canning Stock Route. Even the more adventurous travelers were too smart to enter the desert during the heat, so the two unexpected white boys surprised the dozen inhabitants.

Most of Yagga Yagga’s residents were still in Alice Springs partying and fulfilling social obligations, following the Pope’s visit. White fellas rarely stopped at the tin shacks, and these lads were neither hardened jackeroos, nor mineral explorers. Inexperienced gudia like them quickly became dehydrated and disoriented. If they were physically active in direct
sunlight, or cooped up in a hot vehicle, they could lose more moisture than could be absorbed from drinking even unlimited water.

Eric Moora, then eleven, saw the gudias from a distance filling “blue and white” water containers. They looked "sort of like school boys."

His sister, Andrea, two years younger, remembered them dressed like ringers.

“My grandmother gave them tucker and my Mum, but when they was eating, I'm not sure those two young fellas, they was shaking so frightened of something my Mum asked them what's happening to you two. They didn't told my Mum what's happening, yeah. My mum told them to stay for a little while. Mark will be here soon. And I saw them rushing around putting things back in the vehicle.”

Mark Moora was born in Old Balgo in 1945, "when no white people here". The country of his mother and father is the Yagga Yagga area, rich with unexploited diamonds, uranium, oil and water. Like other children he was put into a church dormitory and discouraged from spending time with his parents. There was a school, hospital, church and convent, and despite the harsh regime many parents volunteered their children as boarders, to remove them from the clutches of opportunists and carpetbaggers, and from what to some appeared their ‘slow march towards extinction’. Mark remembers the kindly German priests with favour, but describes their successors as “Australians”, and crazy.

Mark had gone north the day when James and Simon came south. He would have stopped the boys. The desert was certain death in their clapped out Datsun, and anyway, they were trespassing on his land. He would have told them this.

But the track between Balgo and Yagga Yagga divides into a loop, then reforms to a single road fifteen kilometres later. Mark drove north on the west track, while the doomed travelers went south on the east track.

"It was pity for me I just missed them by an inch. If they could've wait for about another twenty minutes, another hour I could've saved them," Mark said later in a rare moment of sentimentality.
He says his wife later told him these strangers kept looking back anxiously in the direction they’d come. He was perplexed and maintained a vigil that night: “I don't have to go to sleep like a dead horse.”

Around midnight the beam of the second vehicle appeared, far off in the distance, moving south, long before its sounds reached Mark’s ears. The driver stopped for an hour north of the community, then continued his journey and passed Yagga Yagga on the bi-pass road, with his lights off.

“Yeah, he's the one who was following them. He thought I was sleep, but everything was dark. I could hear that Toyota going past, white Toyota, moonlight, I could see that Toyota going past…He came through 12 o'clock, midnight (…) all I can tell you is he must have got rid of them. He went past [then returned] next night (…) he was a cunning old fella. He was a cunning fox (…) He must have planned it all. Bloody bastards they can get away with this sorts of things.

After what must have been a grueling day in the summer desert, the same vehicle returned about 1:00am the following night, again with its lights off.

Mark told his people what he and his family had seen, but said nothing to the police for fear of retribution. To this day he lives in fear of Giles Loder. Why he does hasn’t been revealed. “If we were to tell the truth what really happened [then] that bloody fucking mongrel manager would have come and finished us up.”

So when John Drummond and Jungarri T. Bradshaw visited Balgo during the search, no one was talking, except to Bradshaw in a language not understood by Drummond. And Bradshaw subsequently went around saying the boys had been murdered.

Mark grew up immersed in stories of frontier justice, when the death of a white man or even a prized beast, could result in lethal collective punishment, or the wrong person being blamed and hanged.

But white police officers from the 1980’s scoff at Mark's fears, particularly his belief that Giles Loder killed James and Simon. Bruce Farrands knows the Walpiri, Kookatja, Ngarti and Pintupi, tough people that he respects. But he doubts Mark’s fears are relevant today: “I
accept that quite a few terrible things happened on the frontier [but]…to think that that bloke [Giles Loder] was going to come down and shoot their kids, I mean, that’s a bullshit story.”

I went to Derby in 2012 to visit respected Noonkanbah tribal elder, Mickey Michael, just before he passed away. Sitting behind his Land Cruiser, on the concrete of his carport, he looked at me through watery green eyes while naming half a dozen white pastoralists. “Gone,” he said, gloatingly, after each name. With his eyes not leaving mine he said men with rifles had killed his mother and father. “What for?” he asked, and then looked at the ground while his wife, Joy Cooper, and her daughter, Tula, and the rest of his family, turned their backs to me.

Brian Charlie said Mark thought his people could be in trouble for not telling the police they’d seen James and Simon. Brian justified Mark’s reticence:

“… they say the only time police want information is when they thinking, when they go into town the police don't treat them too good, so they don't communicate too well with the police so they don't tell them nothing. They said, no, they didn't see 'em.”

But Brian was speaking about Mark and those at Yagga Yagga. The locals at Balgo had already told others they saw the boys stop at the Balgo store. This reached John Boland and Jim Guy, but the latter wouldn’t contemplate searching south of Balgo.

Collective punishment also discouraged Aboriginals from helping the authorities. Being the vicinity of a white death could be lethal. Marten Ynema, a white man of Dutch Frisian descent, spent three years as a “black fella”. He told me about

“...them crazy white troopers and police killing the two black fellas at Hangman’s Creek for killing the boys that had the Golden Hole and Baxter’s Hole [gold mines]. The black fellas speared them down the hole for not feeding them, but they were feeding the gins and screwing their gins so they ended up dead.

“What happened is they [the troopers] grabbed the two wrong black fellas and hung them at Hangman’s Creek...and the bloke that done it lived to die of old age at Louisa homestead, only another 20km’s away.”

Balgo had been an unruly place in 1986, twenty years after citizenship and equal wages resulted in mass layoffs from the cattle stations. Pallottine Father Ray Hevern ended the
segregation of boys and girls, and their tribal parents were no longer discouraged from visiting their children.

“We were suddenly treated as human beings,” George Lee’s father said, and Ray was dubbed "Father Heaven". He was honoured with a desert clay pan named, Lake Hevern, and the abandoned oil well, Lake Hevern No 1, within walking distance of where the remains of James and Simon were discovered.

But the law and order gap, that widened when the government replaced the Pallottine administration with departmental advisors and an Aboriginal Council, was not compensated by a police presence. Nor was the Council strengthened when ATSIC moved the white administrator’s office to Kununurra. The ever present grog runners exploited this chink in governmental rule, and brought in ever larger loads of alcohol, and cannabis crops began appearing in the bush.

“Keep talking,” a woman in the background orders as Robert Taylor, in a deep interrogatory voice, fires questions at me over the phone. He camped in Yagga Yagga in 1969, and wants to allay Mark Moora’s concerns about whose interests I’m representing.

Robert interrupts my litany of massacre acknowledgement, saying the “atrocities were more recent and widespread than known.” He mocks the theory of the boys getting lost, then one shooting the other, saying anyone who believes that is a fool. He says the secrecy of the Aboriginals isn’t over money or mineral rights: “That’s bullshit.” He says the “boys were going to a designated spot that coincidently had a nearby large runway” and the location was “extremely unique to the desert area.” He says those involved in the mystery are “dangerous wealthy people” and intimates they are prepared to kill. And “if you got close to the facts the media would pour in” and life would become a misery for the Aboriginals. Robert says that as an outsider I wouldn’t understand the disastrous consequences I’d set in motion.

Brian Charlie's theory of the gudia deaths echoes those of Les Annetts, Russell Tremlett, Les Verdon, Mark Moora and others. Brian wonders:

“Why would the boys go off-road, right? If they wanted to take off somewhere they would have headed on the Tanami Road, but obviously they didn't want to be found by somebody. They were avoiding somebody.
“They must have known something that the station manager didn't want to get out, and that's the only reason something would happen to them. They would have had information…[that others]…didn't want anyone else to know about, that they had to silence them.”

But the boys were alive when the occupants of a Land Cruiser followed them into the desert. But the truth is that no one has come forward and identified Giles Loder as being the driver of the Land Cruiser. There is no evidence to convict him of directly killing James and Simon.

In Aboriginal payback justice, when a killer can’t be located then another person from the offending tribe becomes a legitimate target for punishment, usually, the next closest kin.

This method of justice had a white perspective, when white authorities made multiple people pay the price for a crime committed by one person in their tribe.

Giles Loder offended the Aboriginals at Gordon Downs; he mistreated the teenage jackeroos; he hit James with a spanner, so what happened to the kids fell on his shoulders, whether he killed them directly or not. But the sighting of James and Simon at Yagga Yagga by the Moora family was real.

The case was unusual because there weren’t witnesses who saw or could explain why they left. Kendall and Loder were in prime positions to shed light on the mystery, but developed their ridiculous amnesia, that covered the crucial 72 hours after they saw the boys alive. They’re both haunted by the deaths, but despite being in a position to clarify the mystery, they act as if they’ve taken a vow of silence.

The muted half-hearted search seemed more caused by obstruction, from multiple levels within the police hierarchy. They refused to search south of Balgo. They discouraged local help. They promoted the erroneous idea the boys had stolen the Datsun to return home for Christmas, when it was clear they’d left behind their valuables. They appear to have had a hidden imperative to avoid finding the boys.

The Coroner failed, by not requiring Loder and Kendall to verify their alibis, hour by hour, for those 72 hours, and this left a terminal hole in the integrity of the Inquest.
Not only Kendall and Loder’s silences shout loud, but also the silence of the police who closed ranks, when a number of officers felt the possibility that James and Simon had been murdered.

James and Simon’s blood and soft flesh has merged into the animal/plant cycle, but do their spirits live amongst the howling animals and the night winds of Aboriginal cosmology? And what secrets did they take to their deaths? And did those long gone nomads see them in the seismic maze?


Out there in the land of anomalous airstrips, potable water near the surface, untapped aquifers, fertile virgin soil, diamonds, secret Aboriginal business sites, military intrigue, lays the ideal terrain for mysteries to brew, both real and imagined. And the subtle world of mind control that discouraged both searchers, and subsequent researchers, from delving into the mysterious deaths of two unwitting teenage boys.

On a vigil that will end with her death, Sandra Annetts watches beyond her thriving grandchildren, and her room of teddy bears, and the words echo through her mind: “Someone saw something; someone knows what happened.” The secret still awaits discovery.

Chapter 77. Whatever happened to…?

Simon Amos

Simon's ashes can be found in Site 11, Row HR, Eastern Niche Wall No. 2 at the Enfield Memorial Park cemetery in Adelaide.

James Annetts

James’ remains are buried in the Griffith Lawn Cemetery in Griffith, New South Wales.

Les and Sandra Annetts
Les and Sandra tried every trick in the book to get Loder in court where he could be cross-examined. Their personal calendars stopped on the day they were told their son was missing. While their children and grandchildren thrive they still wait for someone to come forward and say what really happened. But these days their phone rings less and the calls of interest are becoming fewer and fewer.

Andrew Tanion Beezley

Andrew was last living in Brisbane with his wife, Vicki. He worked four and a half years at Flora Valley, during which he was run over by the bull catcher, a 4WD with a special cage on the front. The broken bones and damaged vertebrae, and subsequent osteo-arthritis, now prevent him from working at physically demanding jobs.

Shane Edward Baites

Shane left the Western Australian police and now works for Rio Tinto near Karratha. He lives in Roebourne and is a keen gardener.

John Boland

John retired as manager of Ruby Plains station and lives in Coober Pedy near one of his daughters. He complains of memory loss and lack of money, and still wears tight jeans over his bowlegs.

Jungarri T. Bradshaw

Bradshaw passed away on 24 January 1991, still a young man, from a kidney and liver ailment. Patrick Bradshaw regretted his father drank the contents of so many flagons. John Drummond described him as the best of the young trackers and a man of word.

When I asked Patrick how to spell his father’s skin name he referred me to his mother-in-law, but for cultural reasons couldn’t name her. He asked his wife to name her and she did while carefully avoiding my eyes.

Andrew Patrick Brett

Andy continued his career in exploration and became a supervisor with Terrex Seismic. He later returned to Victoria and with his wife and son bought a coffee shop in Torquay. But
amidst the crackling steam from the coffee machine the alluring siren of the desert calls him back.

**Daniel Brezniak**

Daniel denies being the White Knight who legally rescued the Annetts. He names Tim Robertson, Kevin Murray and others as heroes of the story then laughs as if readjusting his mind to the epithet of White Knight, not an inaccurate description.

**Johnny Brown**

John owns and operates a petrol station with his wife in Williams, a small town south of Perth. He is also the parts manager for Kimberley Quarries at Karratha. He plans an early retirement followed by a life travelling the outback in a converted bus.

**Peter Carmichael**

Peter is an accomplished and cantankerous artist. He lives near Salt Lake in Victoria.

**Pat Clark**

Simon Amos’ mother lives in the Adelaide suburb of Paradise and retains her determination not to speak about the case. Like her daughter, Sarah Amos, she believes Simon died from misadventure and not murder.

**Murray Cowper**

Murray retired from the police in 2005 after serving 27 years then was elected member of the Legislative Assembly in Western Australia, representing the Murray Wellington District. He is now the Minister of Corrections.

In his maiden speech to the Western Australian Parliament he said “I have risked my life searching for the missing stockmen Amos and Annetts in the Great Sandy Desert.”

He believes the parents of both boys failed to adequately ensure the boys would be looked after when they went to the Kimberley. And that the Annetts were ungrateful to the police who had risked their lives venturing into remote country looking for their son.
He still believes that James and Simon had accumulated fuel then taken the Datsun ute to return home and that it was only a navigational error that led to their demise.

**Debbie Davis**

When Debbie’s marriage to John Davis ended she became involved with a church in Halls Creek and told others she would become a medical doctor. She returned to Melbourne and qualified as a General Practitioner under the name of Deborah Maree Blackmore then worked in Liberia with Medicine without Borders. She currently practices in Melbourne.

**John Davis**

John shot himself in Darwin in the early 1990's. Three hundred people attended his funeral in Darwin and then his body was flown by helicopter to Billawheela where another five hundred paid their last respects. Peter Carmichael said all “these big tough cowboys standing around all bawling their eyes out.” He was a loved man.

**Bonnie Edwards**

Bonnie and Malcolm sold their supermarket. Bonnie currently translates for the Kimberley Language Centre and works on projects for the betterment of Aboriginal people at the Bungle Bungles and elsewhere. She is also a professional speaker. She was asked to stand for parliament to replace the retiring Carolyn Martin in Broome, but declined. She frequently visits Nicholson Station where she was born in the creek bed back of the homestead.

**Malcolm Edwards**

Malcolm is the President of the Halls Creek Shire and works for the government.

**Bruce and Jackie Farrands**

Bruce and Jackie closed Rabbit Flat. They are both over seventy and Jackie has health issues. Business had suffered from loss of neighbours; government restrictions on alcohol sales; restrictions on gun ownership and Bruce was generally fed up with the “bullshit”. They’ve blocked off the driveway with drums and live in seclusion amongst their orchard. They sell preserves and souvenirs via the internet.

**Colin Fuller**
Colin lives in Derby where he works for the Western Australia Department of Agriculture helping indigenous people run their own cattle stations.

Paul Griffith

After his encounter with Giles Loder he worked at Bonnie and Malcolm Edwards’ supermarket then later moved to Wungu, the old Flora Valley station homestead. He lived with Sandra Sturt in an off and on relationship until 2009 when he went shopping in Halls Creek and was never seen again by his friends at Halls Creek.

James Richard Guy

First Class Sergeant Guy hasn’t forgotten being “canned” by Coroner David McCann. Despite the botched search for James and Simon he was soon promoted to officer-in-charge of the Western Australia Police Emergency Operations Unit. He retired in 2003 with the rank of Superintendent. He was recently studying at Murdoch University, working as a security consultant and as a parcel courier.

John Stuart Hatton

John died of cancer in Perth on 30 May 2003, aged 58.

The Horses of Sturt Creek

After years of prevarication by the Aboriginals at Billiluna the government finally took action in late 2013 against the wild horses in the Sturt Creek basin. Officials and some environmentalists said the horses were damaging the environment with their hooves.

Snipers from a helicopter shot seven thousand of the animals. They plan to return next year to kill the other three thousand. Those that survive the bullets will thrive from uncontested pasture.

Anthony Scott Hunter

Tony left the Western Australia police and now works for Rio Tinto near Karratha. He lives in Perth.

Matt Jennings
Gudia Matt has survived as manager at Balgo despite rumblings in Halls Creek where a “black knight” is being sought to depose him.

**Shane Francis Kendall**

Shane finished his short stint in the pastoral industry a few weeks after the boys' disappearance. He worked on the roads for the Broome council then went into the concrete business. He currently lives in Perth with his wife, Julie, and works in a mine.

**John Kermode**

John is 80 and lives in retirement in Western Australia.

**George Lee**

George is no longer chairman of Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation. Rotation is frequent to allow multiple groups to represent their clans. George was recently taken to the health clinic for heart problems from tension caused when a man named Brown arrived from the east with the declared intention of killing him with a knife.

**Peter Leutenegger**

Six-months after searching with Jim Guy, Peter’s next claim to fame came while mustering cattle near Fitzroy Crossing when he spotted Joseph Swab’s camouflaged vehicle beneath a bauhinia tree on Jubilee Downs. Swab was a German tourist who had shot five people and was himself killed by the police tactical response group.

Peter was working at Liveringa station on the day the media announced the discovery of the bodies and James and Simon. A teenage jackeroo told him that same day during a smoke break that it would have been a horrible way to have died. That afternoon the boy fell from his horse and was himself killed.

Peter runs Napier Downs station east of Derby and is a member of the Pastoral Lands Board.

**Vicki Loder**

Her last known address was in Darwin where she lived with her son, Brock.
Giles Munro Loder

Loder's services were no longer required when Heytesbury Holdings took over Sherwin Pastoral Company in a hostile takeover. He subsequently worked in a welding shop in Darwin and kept a low profile that verged on hiding. He lives in the Brisbane suburb of Taringa with his second wife, Carolyn.

Colin Main

First Class Constable Main participated in the first two days of the search before going on holidays. He secured the death scene in the desert where he counted and picked up the bones. He wrote the well researched sudden death report on the boys' deaths. He left the police to work for Hamersley Iron then rejoined the Western Australia Police and is stationed at Geraldton maintaining his rank of First Class Constable.

Mark Moora

At sixty-seven Mark Moora is still a respected and cantankerous elder living at Balgo. He remains a Yagga Yagga separatist and is trying to negotiate exclusive mining contracts for his kinship group.

Sean Murphy

Sean was a renowned pilot rumoured to have such bad eyesight that a wheel on his plane hit a man on horseback. The impact was so hard that the wheel fell off and a crowd subsequently gathered at the airport to watch him land with one wheel missing.

He was also considered a hero who flew in the dark and landed between fires lit alongside the airstrip at Louisa Downs to rescue Sheryl McCorry’s son, Kelly. The boy had been sitting on the bull bar when he slipped off and was run over by the vehicle that snapped his upper spine. He died as Sean landed.

Sean was also a stock inspector and owned two stations included Burk’s Park that he bought from Les and Jan Verdon.

Sean’s English wife, Ruth, was the hairdresser at Halls Creek who died in 1988 leaving him with two teenage girls and an eight-year-old son.
Sean died at the age of forty in 1990 when his helicopter crashed due to a defective rotor blade. He was mustering cattle on Balfour Plains, south of Port Hedland with Barry Lang who also died in the crash.

Kevin Murray

The former Army major, raconteur and barrister died in 1991 at the age of 60, from cancer, before Coroner David McCann brought down his Decision.

James O'Kenny

‘Gelignite Jim’ died on 15 August 2011 from a stroke. He founded the Kimberley Echo newspaper in 1980 with Brian W. Cole. In the months before his death his vitriol towards the Annetts changed to empathy, even regret that their son had died.

Peter Sherwin

Aged eighty Sherwin is reported to be dying from cancer, but has been quoted as saying: "They said I was dying twenty years ago and I'm still alive."

Rusty Sherwin

She had four children with Greg Commens, but recently divorced and returned home claiming to be an alcoholic requiring plastic surgery.

Robert Noel Tones

Tones career didn’t falter and he was later featured on a television documentary about road train drivers. He died in 2010.

Martin Trancollino

Martin found the white ute that contained rotting meat covered in brush on a track between Sturt Creek and Gordon Downs Roads. He died in 2004 at the age of 77 and is buried near Stan and Clare Tremlett in the Halls Creek cemetery.

Clare Therese Tremlett
Clare died in January 1988 and is buried in the Halls Creek next to her husband, Stan. One of her sons, Russell, works as a jackeroo on stations near Halls Creek while one of their daughters, Robyn Long, works for the Better Life program and is a Shire Councilor and former Administrator of the Halls Creek hospital.

**Stanley Robert Tremlett**

Stan was the senior groundsman at the Halls Creek airport and is buried next to Clare and near their son, Mervyn Ross Ehrin, who died from a seizure at the age of 22 on the 14th of June, 1981.

**John Turner**

At seventy-eight John lives in retirement in Albany, Western Australia after a career that included working in the police club in Perth. When he moved into the retirement village he threw his journalistic records in the rubbish. He continues writing and produces the monthly retirement village newsletter.

**Jan Verdon**

Jan died from blood cancer nine-months before the death of her husband, Les Verdon in 2009.

**Les Verdon**

Les shot and hung himself in Derby in early 2009, the day after being charged with possession of a gram of cannabis mixed in a tin of tobacco. There were various explanations for his suicide.

An anti-alcohol campaigner said he’d been pursued by government departments for trading dope for underage sex. “Smoke for a poke,” was how she described it. Lee Scott-Virtue described Les as a good friend and a brilliant story teller. Bonnie Edwards held him in high regard. Les Annetts remembers him with gratitude. Ashley Verdon says his father was persecuted.

**Danny Cornelius Verschuuren**
Danny worked with Bridgestone Truck Centre in Townsville from where he repaired truck and semi-trailer tyres on location. "Danny was pissed off the way the manager treated everyone. These two kids were really getting picked on bad by him," his brother, David, remembers him saying. Danny hung himself on 13 December 1997. His body was cremated and the ashes are located in an urn in his mother's living room.

Chapter 78: Photographs

(above) James Annetts at Nicholson Station in November 1986, weeks before his disappearance
(from left) Bonnie James and Mark Moora on the road to Yagga Yagga
(above) James Annetts’ water bottle was found near his remains. The scratched message was inked over by police for presentation to journalists then it mysteriously disappeared.
(above) An anonymous Coroner’s Court official sent Les and Sandra Annetts the police photographs of the bottle, including one of the lid, which did not show their son’s scratched message.
(above) James Annetts with his father the night before he left for Flora Valley cattle station in the Kimberley.
(above) Found on James’s hat was blood from neither him or Simon Amos, but it was human blood.
(above) The desert has reclaimed the track south of Yagga Yagga that James and Simon drove down to their death in the Great Sandy Desert.
(above) Sophia and Andrea Moora were children when they saw James and Simon at Yagga Yagga. Andrea described the jackeroos as “schoolkids”. She said they were nervous and kept looking back from where they’d come.
(above) Eric Moora (right) was eleven when he and George Lee and Ronald Mosquito saw James and Simon at Yagga Yagga filling “blue and white” water containers.
(above) Bai Bai Sunfly, a proud traditional Kukatja woman, was also at Yagga Yagga when the boys drove through.
(above) Former Ruby Station manager John Boland helped search for James and Simon. He told police the boys had been reported south at Balgo, but this was given little credence by the Officer-in-Charge.
(above) Fate dealt a cruel hand when James and Simon took the right fork south to Yagga Yagga while tribal man Mark Moora was driving north on the left fork. Later that night, back at Yagga Yagga, Mark heard a Land Cruiser follow the boys into the desert. It returned the following night, with its lights off as it passed the settlement.
(above) Cattle station manage, Graham Macarthur, provided a plane at his own expense to help search for James and Simon.
(above) A similar vintage eight channel Codan radio that was used by James in 1986 is still in use at Nicholson homestead today.
(above) Simon’s Valiant Charger rusts in the steel yard at Flora Valley homestead nearly three decades after his death. The police and station manager Giles Loder claimed the boys had stolen a station vehicle and driven home for Christmas in the eastern states. Yet Loder knew Simon had left his pride and joy at the homestead. And the police knew James had left his money and possessions at Nicholson homestead.
(above) Kym Trim, aka Kevin Robert Amos, Kevin Baxter and Kevin O’Casey, claimed to be Simon Amos’ half brother. He arrived at Flora Valley six weeks after Simon disappeared. Kym’s mother described her son as a dangerous psychopath.
Broome Taxi owner John Kernot was in Balgo three weeks after the boys disappeared. Two local kids told him James and Simon had been shot and dumped in the desert south of Balgo. Kernot phoned the Broome police a few days later, but was told:

"That's just mission talk, John. Don't take any notice of it."
(above) Clan bulldozer operator John Brown found the dismembered remains of James Annetts. He was perplexed at the lack of decomposition compared to that of Simon Amos' bleached bones.
Like many veteran Halls Creek jackeroos, Russel Tremlett believed that one of the boys had been killed before they had reached the desert. That theory explained the contrasting state of decomposition of the two bodies.
The abandoned Caranya homestead store near Wolfe Creek Crater. James bought his ‘Old Timer’ knife here while Simon stocked up on junk food.
Shane Baites was in charge of the Halls Creek police station when Clan Contractors’ truck driver Reg Thornhill walked in saying the boys had been found. Shane helped retrieve the remains.
(above) Police Aide Tony Hunter felt the grief of the boys’ disappearance. When reports came through that they’d been found dead he said it was like being “hit in the back of the head with a hammer.”
(above) Simon’s family didn’t want this book published and haven’t given permission for his school photographs to be published.
(above) Former Alice Downs station manager Don McKay at his hardware store in Halls Creek. He says that cattle rustling was standard practice and any station manager who denied it was lying. He doubted the suicide verdict on the hanging death of Fabian Rupert Butcher at Bottle Tree bore. He believes the man was murdered.
(above) Stan and Clare Tremlett generously provided Les and Sandra Annetts with a room and access to locals who kept them informed on the developments of the search.
(above) The entrance to Nicholson station homestead. The grounds are maintained by Lee and Dean Scott-Virtue of the Toadbusters organisation.
Bill Perry began his jackeroo apprenticeship at Nicholson station in 1963. He was dismayed upon returning in 2010 and finding the homestead empty of Aboriginal cattlemen and their families.
(above) Caranya station homestead store near Wolfe Creek Crater in 1990 when it was owned by Reg and Heather Snelling.
(above) Caranya today.
The old Comet pump at Calico bore, unchanged since it was serviced and refueled by James Annetts in 1986. Water is pumped into the dry creek bed to attract Brahman cattle that graze the nearby grass.
(above) Mark Moora could hardly contain his anger when he visited the abandoned settlement of Yagga Yagga. His dream of repopulating the Kukatja region of the Great Sandy Desert with his people had failed.
Dead power lines, empty houses and a plastic playground, but Mark Moora still plans to revive Yagga Yagga using mining royalties.
(above) Sturt Creek station massacre site near the homestead. One of many during the “killing times” that resonate through Aboriginal culture to this day. Thanks to Berkeley Fitzhardinge for permission to publish.
(above) Jackeroo Bobby Sealer saw James Annetts’ loneliness and was amazed such a young inexperienced boy was left alone on Nicholson station.

(above) Andrew Tanion Beezley was a Giles Loder loyalist and a professional jackeroo, yet wouldn’t give Loder a false alibi when pressured by Peter Sherwin’s lawyer.
(above) Sixteen-year-old governess Therese Stansfield-Campbell grew up on a cattle station, but Loder told her to keep the homestead two-way radio off, leaving the incompetent Shane Kendall to maintain contact with James and Simon on the outstations. He failed to alert anyone when boys hadn't called in for two days.
(above) Shane Francis Kendall was the last person to see Simon Amos alive at Sturt Creek Station, but couldn't remember any details of that visit.
(above) The gentle wild horses of Sturt Creek where it crosses the Tanami Road near Billiluna.
(above) Halls Creek Works Manager Andrew Vonarx cleaning the monument to James and Simon. It records their deaths as Nov/Dec 1986 despite Giles Loder and Shane Kendall saying they’d seen the boys on the first of December of that year.
Nearly thirty years after the death of their son, Les and Sandra Annetts wait for a break in the case, maybe from a deathbed confession. “Someone saw something; someone knows what happened,” Sandra says, as memory of the event fades from the public mind.
End Notes

Chapter 1. Out on the Nicholson


A high ranking officer in the Western Australia police who oversaw the search from Perth told the author in 2011 that in 1986 jackeroos were considered, “Necessary, but dispensable.”

Andrew Tanion Beezley spoke to the author on 20 March 2014.

Chapter 2. Inside the Fog


From a letter James Annetts wrote to his parents in November 1986.


Sandra Annetts spoke to the author in 2009.


An Inquest into the Deaths of Simon James Amos and James Arthur Annetts.1987-1991, D.A. McCann, Coroner, Coroners Court of Western Australia, Tremlett, Stanley Robert: Testimony. 31 May 1988

Shane Francis Kendall: Statement. 24 February 1987

Wayne Edwards, email to the author 1 April 2010


Stephen Orr, email to the author


Chapter 4. Life at Flora Valley

Brett Lee. Statement. Author's copy unsigned and undated. Sourced from material from the An Inquest into the Deaths of Simon James Amos and James Arthur Annetts.1987-1991, D.A. McCann, Coroner, Coroners Court of Western Australia.


James Ghilotti Sr spoke to the author in 2010.


Chris Rumpf spoke to the author on the 22 April 2010.

Bobby Sealer spoke to the author on 20 September 2012.

Chapter 5. Twice daily radio reporting

Heather Snelling spoke to the author on 6 June 2010.

Chapter 6. The Case of the Missing Alibi


Chapter 7. The reluctant search


Peter Conole, Police Historian, Western Australia Police. Email to the author dated 15 July 2011. Leonard James Craddock’s police record shows that he reached the rank of Inspector before retiring, but Mr Conole believes it is possible he held the position of Acting Superintendent when Mervyn Charles Gardner retired as Superintendent on 26 December, 1986. Leonard Craddock would not speak to the author when contacted in 2010.


First Class Constable Colin Main spoke to the author in 2010.


The tracker is referred to as Jungarri T. Bradshaw for cultural reasons. Patrick Bradshaw of Halls Creek told the author it would be offensive to name a man now deceased. Jungarri is the tracker’s skin name and Bradshaw his family name. Patrick said he can be given the initial, “T”, because there are a number of people in the Bradshaw extended family with first names that begin with T.


James Richard Guy spoke to the author on 12 May 2011.

Algerino John Drummond, First Class Police Aide spoke to the author in April 2011.

Brian Charlie spoke to the author on 3 March 2010. Mr Charlie worked for the Department of Corrections, and along with others had been called to Balgo by Yagga Yagga elder, Mark Moora, who told him of numerous sightings of the missing boys.

Joe Fox spoke to the author in December 2009.

Algerino John Drummond, First Class Police Aide 72, Kununurra Police Station. Signed, undated Statement.


Andrew Tanion Beezley spoke to the author on 20 March 2014. He couldn’t recall finding the shotgun, but he did find a .22 rifle between mattresses at Gordon Downs station years later. He also said that he’d been sent there to take over Simon’s bore run, not to clean up.

D Trewin, Superintendent, Firearms Branch, Western Australia Police, letter to Sandra Annetts. 9 August 1988

James Richard Guy spoke to the author on 12 May 2011.


Murray Cowper emailed the author on 13 October 2010

Algerino John Drummond, First Class Police Aide 72, Kununurra Police Station. Signed, undated Statement.


John Boland spoke to the author in March 2010 in Coober Pedy, South Australia.

The Western Australia police service history records don’t show whether Superintendent Mervyn Gardner was on duty or was using up his sick leave before his retirement on 26 December 1986. Leonard “Crash” Craddock’s records indicate he was Chief Investigator during the early search, but it isn’t clear who was actually in charge. Mr Craddock wouldn’t speak to the author.


The search for James and Simon contrasted sharply to the 1200 people who looked for Clinton Liebelt across the Tanami Desert at Dunmarra. Clinton’s Mum told him stay on the roadhouse side of the Stuart Highway, but the nine-year-old couldn’t resist crossing the road into the dry scrubland to chase three race horses that had escaped from a float. His Dad told him if he got lost to go towards the setting sun, which would take him to the highway, if he was on the roadhouse side. But Clinton was on the other side and rode further into the scrub.

Army personnel, three planes, a small fleet of helicopters, emergency service volunteers, Aboriginal trackers, first aid nurses, cooks and a Katherine football club joined the search for nine days, They found Clinton's desiccated, ant-riddled body twenty kilometres west of the highway. The search was a triumph of the human spirit, despite its sad ending.


8. Crowded skies


An Inquest into the Deaths of Simon James Amos and James Arthur Annetts.1987-1991, D.A. McCann, Coroner, Coroners Court of Western Australia, James Richard Guy: Testimony. 1st and 2nd
June 1988. When Jim Guy spoke to the author in 2011 he scoffed at the idea that a twin-engined plane would be of any use, saying it would move too fast.


Chapter 9. The Air Wing extravaganza

Ronald Kjellgren spoke to the author in March 2011.

Linton Michael Robb, First Class Constable, 5766, Air Wing, Western Australia Police. Undated report tendered on 8 December, 1987 to An Inquest into the Deaths of Simon James Amos and James Arthur Annetts.1987-1991, D.A. McCann, Coroner, Coroners Court of Western Australia.

Chapter 10. The circus comes to town

James Richard Guy spoke to the author on 12 May 2011.

Shane Edward Bates spoke to the author on 29th March 2012

George Allan Hogarth spoke to the author on 20 January 2012


First Class Constable Colin William Main report to First Class Sergeant John Stuart Hatton. 31 August 1987.

West Australian newspaper, Bloodstain ‘a clue to missing boys’, Jerry Pratley, 16 February 1987.

Chapter 11. Cold welcome

Christopher John Vivian Rumpf spoke to the author on 22 April, 2010.


Leslie James Annetts. Statement to the New South Wales police at Yenda station. 6 May 1987. Also, as recollected to the author in 2009 and 1010.

Sandra Robyn Annetts. Statements to the New South Wales police at Yenda station. 5 May 1987 and 9 June 1987. Also, as recollected to the author in 2009 and 1010.

Chapter12. Tales of violence


Russell Linke, PO Box 320, Biloela, Queensland. 4715. Statement made on 22 May 1988.


Brett Lee. Statement. Author's copy unsigned and undated. Sourced from material from the An Inquest into the Deaths of Simon James Amos and James Arthur Annetts.1987-1991, D.A. McCann, Coroner, Coroners Court of Western Australia.


James Ghilotti, father of James Frank Ghilotti, spoke to the author in 2010.


Leslie James Annetts speaking to the author on 3 June 2009.

Chapter 13. Meanwhile, back at Binya


John and Debbie Davis: letter to Les and Sandra Annetts. 6 May 1987.

Chapter 14. The public relations search


Russell Linke, PO Box 320, Biloela, Queensland. 4715. Statement made on 22 May 1988.

Chapter 15. The hundred years war
Chapter 16. Rough and tumble in Halls Creek

George Allan Hogarth spoke to the author on 20 January 2012

Chapter 17. True lies

Bruce Farrands spoke to the author in April 2010.

Chapter 18. Les Annetts’ second Kimberley search


Patrick Majella Barry spoke to the author 24 May 2011
Sydney Telegraph Newspaper, Sydney, Australia. 8 April 2011

Chris Warren spoke to the author on 19 December 2011. He emphasised he was relying on memory from twenty-five years ago.

Mary Mills spoke to the author in 2009. Mary is one of those rare compassionate journalists who never forgot that when photographing the Annetts she was dealing with humans in pain. Les and Sandra remember her with fondness and count her as a friend.


Algerino John Drummond, First Class Police Aide spoke to the author in April 2011.


Chapter 19. Clan country

Andrew Patrick Brett spoke to the author in February 2010.

Colin Fuller spoke to the author on 23 February 2012.

Chapter 20. Finding the Datsun ute


Colin Fuller spoke to the author on 23 February 2012.

Andrew Patrick Brett: handwritten report to the Western Australia police: undated, unsigned.

Chapter 21. Action men

A good natured Shane Edward Baites denies being caught reading a comic book while on duty, but admits: “I did read Phantom comics, but I never had any in the office.”

First Class Constable Colin William Main spoke to the author in 2009.
Chapter 22. Locating the remains


Johnny Brown spoke to the author on the 9th and 10th of March 2012.

Peter Carter spoke to the author on 17 March 2012.

Sergeant John McQueen, 4669, Photographic section, Forensic Branch, Western Australia Police, Report to Sergeant John Kermode, Coroner's Office, Perth. 5 January 1988. John McQueen thought the indecipherable scratching might have read: "Take me to Flora Valley"

Johnny Brown spoke to the author on the 9th and 10th of March 2012.

It was only by luck that during a conversation with Marten Ynema, the author learned that Johnny Brown was in the desert when the bodies were found.

Peter Carter spoke to the author on 17 March 2012.

Chapter 23. The recovery

First Class Constable Colin Main spoke to the author at the Geraldton police station in June 2010.

Johnny Brown spoke to the author on the 9th and 10th of March 2012.

Murray Cowper emailed the author on 13 October 2010

Andrew Patrick Brett spoke to the author on 19 March 2010.

Chapter 24. Forensic identification and ‘end of story’

Certificate of Life Extinct for Body 2 (not yet identified): Dr Edward James Elkinton, Halls Creek. 29 April 1987.

Certificate of Life Extinct for Body 1 (not yet identified): Dr Edward James Elkinton, Halls Creek. 29 April 1987.

D.A. Pocock: Forensic Pathologist, Health Department of Western Australia. 1 May 1987

Chapter 25. Memorial service

James O’Kenny, Editor, Kimberley Echo Newspaper, Kununurra, Western Australia. 15 May 1987

Andrew Tanion Beezley spoke to the author on 20 March 2014.

James O’Kenny, Editor, Kimberley Echo Newspaper, Kununurra, Western Australia. 30 May 1987

John Drummond spoke to the author in April 2011.

Chapter 26. Meanwhile, back at the ranch

Andrew Tanion Beezley spoke to the author on 20 March 2014.


Les Annetts spoke to the author in January 2012.

“Slaves of the Kimberleys”, Alan Tate, Good Weekend magazine, Supplement to The Age newspaper, Graham Macarthur spoke to the author in Broome in 2011.

Chapter 27. The reluctant coroner

D.A. McCann, Western Australia Coroner, in a letter to G.M. Cunes of the Legal Aid Commission of New South Wales. 6 October 1987.

Legal Aid Commission of Western Australia to Susan Maxwell of the Legal Aid Commission of New South Wales, Wagga Wagga. 30 November 1987.

Les Annetts spoke to the author in 2009.

Barry Unsworth, Premier of New South Wales, to Brian Burke, Premier of Western Australia. 11 January 1988.

Premier of Western Australia, Brian Burke. Media Statement. 13 January 1988

Barry Unsworth, Premier of New South Wales, to Daniel J. Brezniak. 17 March 1988

Lawyers representing the Annetts were reluctant to discuss fees. Some suggested Daniel Brezniak and Kevin Murray put in large amounts of their own money. Brezniak demurred from this assessment, saying they’d been paid generously by Legal Aid. Another source said Kevin Murray had been working for the junior barrister rate, despite being a senior Queen’s Counsel. Brezniak and Murray both appear to have sacrificed their own income to help the Annetts.

Colleen Donnelly spoke to the author in April 2011.

John Boland spoke to the author in March 2010.

Chapter 28. A bad case of amnesia

Shane Francis Kendall spoke to the author on 2 June 2009
Chapter 29. That other case of acute memory loss

Colleen Donnelly spoke to the author in April 2011. She said Kevin Murray was quite proud of that little quip. “Did you hear me say that?” he later asked Colleen.

Chapter 30. The man who didn't need an alibi

Andrew Tanion Beezley spoke to the author on 20 March, 2014. At the time of the Inquest he’d fought numerous fires on the Sherwin stations.

George Cridland was the corporate lawyer who represented Peter Sherwin’s business interests. Peter Momber was hired to represent Sherwin’s interests at the Inquest.

“Station manager’s evidence disputed,” Margot Lang, West Australian newspaper, Thursday, 2 June 1988.

Chapter 31. “A cuff behind the ear”

Andrew Tanion Beezley spoke to the author on 20 March, 2014. At the time of the Inquest he’d fought numerous fires on the Sherwin stations.

George Cridland was the corporate lawyer who represented Peter Sherwin’s business interests. Peter Momber was hired to represent Sherwin’s interests at the Inquest.

“Station manager’s evidence disputed,” Margot Lang, West Australian newspaper, Thursday, 2 June 1988.


Chapter 32. Torn between two loyalties


An Inquest into the Deaths of Simon James Amos and James Arthur Annetts. 1987-1991, D.A. McCann, Coroner, Coroners Court of Western Australia, Debra Maree Davis: Testimony. 31 May 1988

Chapter 33. The future search and rescue chief


“Mystery deepens over what led to deaths in the desert”, Alan Tate, Sydney Morning Herald, 2 May, 1987.


Chapter 34. That curious death ute


Johnny Brown spoke to the author on the 9th and 10th of March, 2012.
Chapter 35. All is forgiven

Nick Greiner had replaced Barry Unsworth as New South Wales Premier and agreed to pay costs should they lose.

Annetts versus McCann (1990) 170 CLR 596. High Court challenge.


David Arnold McCann: An Inquest into the Deaths of Simon James Amos and James Arthur Annetts.1987-1991, D.A. McCann, Coroner, Coroners Court of Western Australia.

Chapter 36. Accidents happen


2009

Chapter 37. At home with the Annetts

Sandra Annetts spoke to the author in 2009.


Chapter 38. Poems and letters from people they didn’t even know

George Stephen Lee, Ngalya, of Balgo (Wirrimanu), Western Australia, to Leslie and Sandra Annetts. Circa March 1999.

Miss Therese A. Stansfield-Campbell to Les and Sandra Annetts, 12 December, 1988.


Chapter 39. The homosexual angle

Lenin Christie spoke to the author on 29 May 2011.


Keith Wright spoke to the author on 29 April 2009

James O’Kenny spoke to the author in 2009.
"Bush Sex Shock Jackeroos tell of boy victims," Western Mail newspaper, 31 December 1987. The Western Mail was owned by Bell Resources, a Robert Holmes à Court company. The front page article was printed in its last issue before closure. Holmes à Court soon after made a successful hostile takeover bid of Sherwin Pastoral Company.

2010

Chapter 40. Chris Rumpf

Christopher John Vivian Rumpf spoke to the author on 22 April 2010.

Chapter 41. On the Tanami

Chapter 42. The Pallottines

‘White Dreaming Of A Black Future Rots Into The Desert', Paul Toohey,

The Weekend Australian  22-23July 2000

Chapter 43. The Byzantine republic of Balgo

Chapter 44. Yagga Yagga

Mark Moora spoke to the author on 31 July 2009.


Mark Moora spoke to the author on 31 July 2009.

Chapter 45. The Balgo/Yagga Yagga struggle

Vickneswaran Kandiah spoke to the author on six occasions from 2010 to 2014.

Graham Bloodworth spoke to the author by satellite phone in September 2010

Chapter 46. A weekend in paradise

Colin Fuller from the Western Australia Department of Agriculture spoke to the author at Derby on 23 February 2012. He spoke sadly about the boys’ deaths and understood they were from the city and couldn’t be expected to understand how to survive in the desert.

Chapter 47. Machiavelli

Johnny Brown spoke to the author on the 9th and 20th of March 2012. “I saw their footprints...about 7kms away from that sand dune, which is around about where the bodies were, about a kilometre to the east...they were very fresh and very clear...Two sets of tracks and both bare feet.”

Vickneswaran Kandiah spoke to the author on six occasions from 2010 to 2014.

Chapter 48. Retreat from Balgo

Chapter 49. Halls Creek

Chapter 50. The Bottle Tree Bore hanging
Don McKay spoke to the author on numerous occasions in 2010, 2011 and 2012 at his hardware shop in Halls Creek.

Kevin Leslie Roberts spoke to the author by phone in March 2011.

George Allan Hogarth spoke to the author on 20 January 2012. John Drummond supports Kevin Roberts and says he has never lied to him. John Drummond says Roberts and Hogarth intensely disliked each other.

John Drummond told the author in 2012 that Kevin Roberts was an honest man and had never lied to either him or his wife.

**Chapter 51. The Tanami Track disappearance**

David Bumblebee, spoke to the author in September 2011.

Simon Nagomara spoke to the author in September 2011.

Cissy Nagomara spoke to the author at her house in Halls Creek in September 2011

An Inquisition into “When, where and after what manner Morris Holliman came by his death.” (10/97), Coroner Alistair Hope, Western Australia. 14 May 1997.

**Chapter 52. Billiluna**

Des Peterson spoke to the author on 5 May 2010

There is no insinuation that Ray Hevern was involved in the abuse of minors. He has emerged from his time at Balgo as an intelligent man with impeccable morals.

Ashley Verdon spoke to the author in December 2012

**Chapter 53. Back at Halls Creek**

Keith Windschuttle, "The Fabrication of Aboriginal History" ISBN 1 876492 05 8

Macleay Press, PO Box 477, Paddington NSW Australia 2021.

Josie Farrer spoke to the author in September 2011.

Murray Cowper emailed the author on 3 March 2010.

John Drummond spoke to the author in April 2011.


**Chapter 54. In the footsteps of James Annetts**

**Chapter 55. Birrindudu oasis**

**Chapter 56. Ghosts from the past**

Bill Perry spoke to the author at Nicholson Station in 2010 and in subsequent phone conversations in 2010 and 2011.
Chapter 57. Voices from the ether

Lenin Christie spoke to the author on 29 May 2011

Chapter 58. Feather Man

Bobby Sealer spoke to the author on 20 September 2012.

Chapter 59. Peter Sherwin: Hard man on a hard land

Nathan Covey, mustering helicopter pilot, spoke to the author in April, 2011 at Flora Valley Station.

John Boland, former manager of Ruby Plains station, speaking to the author in March 2010.


Patrick Majella Barry is a qualified stock inspector, and spoke to the author on 24 May, 2011. He is not the second stock inspector who visited an empty cattle yard, and found Giles Loder and one of Sherwin’s sons waiting for him.

Graham Macarthur spoke to the author in 2010 at Broome, where he is a stock and station agent.


Sherwin v Sherwin and Commens [2008] NTSC 45

Bill Perry spoke to the author at Nicholson Station in 2010.

Don McKay spoke to the author in Halls Creek in 2010, 2011 and 2012.

Lenin Christie spoke to the author on 29 May 2011.

Chapter 60. The fall and rise of Peter Sherwin


Chapter 61. The Wyndham liaison

The meeting was in May 2010.

Chapter 62. Giles Munro Loder at home

Giles Munro Loder spoke to the author by phone in 2010.

Chapter 63. Shane Kendall's anger
Shane Francis Kendall speaking to the author on 2 June 2009

Chapter 64. Strange Broome

Phillipa Cook spoke to the author in 2010.


Chapter 65. The enigmatic courier


John Boland, former manager of Ruby Plains station, speaking to the author in March, 2010.

An Inquest into the Deaths of Simon James Amos and James Arthur Annetts. 1987-1991, D.A. McCann, Coroner, Coroners Court of Western Australia, James Richard Guy: Testimony. 1st and 2nd June 1988. When Jim Guy spoke to the author in 2011 he scoffed at the idea that a twin-engined plane would be of any use saying it would move too fast.

Peter Leutenegger spoke to the author on 30 July 2012

Jim Guy didn’t respond to my further phone calls and email after our initial meeting at Fast Eddy’s Restaurant.

Chapter 66. Harry Mason, Heather Snelling and Colin Main

Harry Mason: "Bright Skies". 1997. Nexus Magazine. PO Box 30, Mapleton, Queensland, Australia. http://www.cheniere.org/misc/brightskies.htm Viewed 10 July 2009. Mason is a highly trained and experienced geologist and physicist who spent two years and a small fortune researching the strange events at Banjarwarn Station, and believes they were connected with a series of artificial seismic events occurring in the Great Sandy Desert.


Heather Snelling spoke to the author on 29 May 2011.

Chapter 67. Shadows behind shadows

Bonnie and Malcolm Edwards spoke to the author at Halls Creek in 2011.

Chapter 68. Jock Mosquito

Jock Mosquito spoke to the author in September 2011.

Chapter 69. Tapping on doors

Circumcision using a sharp stone or broken glass without anesthetic, this initiation being a condition before being allowed to marry. The operator was watched by tribal men with orders to kill the circumciser if he injured the patient. Subincision happens at age seventeen when penis is cut from the meatus for an inch along the urethra making it broader and flatter. This is said to increase pleasure for the woman and also a source of blood that can be squeezed from the permanent wound for ceremonies. Wounds are cut with glass or shards of stone into which sand or down is rubbed into the spread wound, which makes the scars stand out when healed. Girls are cicatrized. These aggravated cuts
indicate levels of initiation, numbers of children and qualifications. They are worn as badges of honour rather than with shame or abuse as women in other cultures might.

Lee Scott-Virtue spoke to the author in September 2011.

Chapter 70. Marten Ynema

Marten Ynema spoke to the author at Old Halls Creek Lodge on the 11th and 12th of February 2012.

Greg Barnes spoke to the author on 22 February 2012.

Chapter 71. The status quo 1

Chapter 72. The status quo 2

Lenin Christie spoke to the author on 25 May 2011

Peter Leutenegger spoke to the author on 30 July 2012

Helen Holborow spoke to the author on the 28 May 2011.

James O’Kenny spoke to the author in September 2011.

Chapter 73. The private massacre


SROWA, Western Australia Police Department, WAS 76, Cons 430, General Files [2], 1922/6672, Joseph Condren, Billiluna Pastoral Co. and Timothy O'Sullivan murdered by natives at Billiluna.

Archival research into the Sturt Creek massacre was undertaken by Dr Pamela Smith (Kimberley Frontier Conflict Archaeological Project, Flinders University, South Australia) and Dr Cathie Clement and funded through an AIATSIS research grant.

Chapter 74. Ghost prisoners

The former officer has verified his name, home address and place of employment with the author.

Peter Carter spoke to the author on 17 March 2012.

Chris Masters told the author on 20 July 2012 that Peter Carter’s claim that he thought the Western Australia police were as corrupt as the Queensland police was “truish”, but the reason they produced “The Moonlight State” was not because Queensland was closer to their homes.

Chapter 75. Sex prisoners

The person who authenticated his/her identity wants to remain anonymous and spoke to the author in 2011.

Chapter 76. What the Yagga Yagga mob saw
Mark Moora spoke to the author on 6 July and 4 December 2009

John Boland spoke to the author at Coober Pedy in March 2010. Jim Guy denies having the conversation.

Ronald Mosquito spoke to the author by phone from Port Hedland on 6 February 2013


Andrea Moora spoke to the author on 4 December 2009

Bruce Farrands spoke to the author in April 2010.

Brian Charlie spoke to the author on 3 March 2010. Mr Charlie worked for the Department of Corrections and along with others had been called to Balgo by Yagga Yagga elder, Mark Moora, who told him of numerous sightings.

Vickneswaran Kandiah spoke to the author on six occasions from 2010 to 2014.

Brian Charlie spoke to the author on 3 March 2011.

A Cairns pathologist involved in football told the author in 2012 that occasionally lawyers, police and doctors called a truce and discussed events without prejudice. During one such truce he was told that a number of police officers believed there was a strong possibility James Annetts and Simon Amos had been murdered.

Murray Cowper emailed the author on 3 March 2010
Acknowledgements

I owe the production of this work to the tireless efforts of Les and Sandra Annetts in supplying me with whatever documents I requested, and to their phenomenal ability to remember small details.

Also to Andrew Tanion Beezley, Peter Conole, police historian, Joe Fox, Mary Mills, photo-journalist, Daniel Brezniak, Cissy Nagomara, Robyn Long, Mark Moora, Bai Bai Sandfly, Andrea Moora, Sophia Moora, Eric Moora, John Kernot, Andy Brett, Murray Cowper, Colin Main, John Boland, Jim Guy, Ashley Verdon, Bruce Farrands, Beverley Malay, Bill Perry, Trudy Rosenwald and her husband, Mary Darkie, Patrick Majella Berry, Brian Charlie, Wanno Darkie, Mrs. Holliman, Pat Buntine, Chris and Dorothy Morton, Chris Rumpf, Colin Fuller, Peter Carter, Dawn Wright, David Verschurren, Lee Scott-Virtue, Jock Mosquito, Tomato Gordon, David Bumbelbee, Dorothy and Lloyd Thompson, Doug May, John Bridge, Giles Loder, Geoff Vivian, Geoffrey Taylor, Graham Macarthur, Fiona Lake, Phillipa Cook, Graham Bloodworth, Matt Jennings, George Lee, Greg Barnes, Joe Rossi, Wayne Edwards and Stephen Orr from Rostrevor College, Heath Sampson, Patrick Bradshaw, Patrick Majella Barry, Harry Mason, Reg and Heather Snelling, Ira Lans Junama, Vickneswaran Kandiah, Jamie Savage, Josie Farrer, Bonnie and Malcolm Edwards, Jim Ghilotti Sr., Chris Masters, Chris Warren, Merv Wortley, Johnny Brown, John Drummond, Lenin Christie, John Turner, James O’Kenny, Julie Tilka, Kerry Hogan, Kevin Roberts, Ronald Kjellgren, George Hogarth, Martin Ynema, Greg Excel, Lance Hutley, Laurie Curtain, John Kermode, Paul Holmes à Court, Peter Bridge, John Bridge, Peter Carmichael, Peter Leutenegger, Ray and Helen Holborrow, Robin Bowles, crime writer, Ronald Mosquito, Simon Nagomara, Keith Wright, Don Mckay, Des Peterson, Ray Hevern, Nathan Covey, Russell Tremlett, Terry Gunn, Bobby Sealer and three dozen others who don’t want to be named.

Also, to my doctors, Pauline Kemp and Andrew Hinchcliffe, for keeping me alive, and my lawyers Michael Dadds and Eddy Nehme, for keeping me out of jail. And to the woman at Billiluna who belted a dog with a tree branch when it tried to bite me.
And especially to my editors, Helen Eagle-Lomax, and the other one who doesn’t want to be named.

Les Annetts also acknowledges the lawyers who pursued his case tireless over a decade. There were so many that he lost count, but here are some he recollects: Kevin Murray, Daniel J. Brezniak, Colleen Donnelly, David Campbell, Angus Neil-Smith, David Austin, Lionel Rattenbury and Peter Magee, Armstrong Legal, C.T. Barry, I.L.K. Marshall, David Clyne, Marks and Sands, Darren Miller, Johnathon Yuith, and others.