

Extracts from
In the Best Interests
Intrigue and Payback in Papua New Guinea

by John and Elisa Mendzela

(from chapter 1 – Curious Encounters)

PNG was almost a last frontier. As late as 1930, much of the country was still unknown to outsiders. Sovereignty came in a rush in 1975, hastened by a politically embarrassed Australian colonial administration. Famously, flag-raising ceremonies failed in some towns where locals felt unready for national independence and defiantly hoisted the Australian flag back up.

Independence found the new nation flush with generous aid funds but lacking qualified and trained people in almost every field. Many able officials and businesspeople from colonial times had left. Government administration relied on a mix of expatriates who had stayed on, new recruits like us, and inexperienced locals.

We learned about Melanesian culture. Collective membership of a clan or tribe shaped people's behaviour. Everyone was expected to help any member of their group who asked for food, money or favours. 'Payback' for perceived wrongs committed by a different tribal group — meaning revenge, often violent and sometimes fatal — was another key cultural trait. And that payback could be legitimately inflicted on any member of the offending group, even someone unaware of the original incident. To our Western eyes, PNG seemed strange, colourful and dangerous. It would certainly be different from anywhere else we had lived.

Our students would be different too. Two universities were only just getting started, along with a few technical institutes. A mere 800 secondary school graduates, 16 or older, were chosen by competitive examination each year to attend four two-year colleges where all instruction proceeded in the English language. Localisation — replacement of expats by trained nationals — was an aspiration, not a reality. In every professional and technical field, including higher education, PNG still depended heavily on expats.

But unlike in many ex-colonies, here nationals generally felt positive towards expatriates and valued their contributions. Our professional challenge would be to transfer our skills and

knowledge to highly motivated students and novice teachers. So not just a teaching job, but a great opportunity to participate in positive change and development. We felt good about that.

(from chapter 10 – Gus Blows the Whistle)

From my office window, I watched Gus and Mark enter the principal's office. They would give James a copy of just one of the letters that linked Graeme Drysdale and inspector Martin Simpson to sexual activities with students. Gus would explain that Christine had found the letter, copied it, and brought it to him as the staff representative on the Governing Council. Mark would participate in the process only as a respected witness who was not otherwise involved.

We believed James would have no choice but to initiate some official response, against Drysdale at least. And Drysdale — not likely to be heroic— would probably turn 'state's evidence' against Simpson.

After about 20 minutes, Mark left James's office. Ten minutes after that, Christine went in. Five minutes later she came back out. A few minutes after that, Gus emerged and headed for the staffroom. What was going on?

It was hard to contain myself until the bell rang for morning break and then walk nonchalantly down to the staffroom.

Staff helped themselves to coffee and tea and settled into chairs amid the usual chatter. I caught Gus's eye. He looked uncertain. What had transpired in the principal's office?

(from chapter 16 – An Unquiet Night)

After waving them off, the three of us returned to Arthur's place to stay the night before our own departure the next day. Arthur's house was in a small government housing estate for national civil servants. He had been happy to let us stay at his home, but he warned us to be careful: 'Especially at night. There's a lot of crime around.'

We weren't too concerned. The small two-storey building had iron bars on its doors and windows to deter unwanted visitors. And it had a telephone.

Arthur had sent away his house-girl — a young woman from a nearby village — for the duration of his absence. His instructions to us were clear. 'You can't trust your home help while you're away. Others can put pressure on them to allow damage and stealing. If she comes

around, especially with company, *don't* let her in under any circumstances or whatever her story.'

Typically for PNG, the first hours of darkness were noisy. We heard people come and go outside in the cool evening air as they enjoyed meals and socialising. Later on, things quietened down. We checked everything was locked and headed upstairs to sleep.

Suddenly the front door rattled loudly. 'Husat?' John called. It was the house-girl, pleading piteously in pidgin to be let in. When John quoted Arthur's strict instructions and made it clear we would follow them, her tone changed. She made threats, saying her friends would come and make us sorry if we didn't open the door. We decided to ignore her, and eventually she wandered off. We went to bed.

Two hours later, she woke us up by shouting and rattling the door again. No humble pleas this time. Tactics had changed. Peering cautiously from the upstairs window, we could see her companions — three burly men, armed with machetes. We also noticed silent darkness around all the neighbouring houses and realised that the inhabitants were likely to mind their own business and ignore any trouble. It was time to call the police. But picking up the receiver, we discovered the telephone was dead. Bad luck? (PNG's telephone services were notoriously erratic.) Or had they cut the wires?

We had heard enough grisly tales and read enough newspaper stories to know that robbery was now the least of our worries, especially for two young women.

The front door was solid wood with steel bars. It would hold. But it didn't take long for the men, directed by the girl, to test out the back door and the ground floor windows. Luckily, they were all barred too. No way in for them, we consoled ourselves.

Our relief didn't last long. A lean-to shed with a steep corrugated-iron roof had been built against the house at the back. It offered a difficult but feasible passage up to two of the upstairs windows, and those windows were *not* barred. We could hear the men planning how best to climb up and break in.

Now we were frightened (but tried not to show it). A quick search for weapons turned up nothing more lethal than kitchen knives and a small wooden club. No match for machetes! John sent Samantha and me to one of the front bedrooms, where we could barricade ourselves in. He stationed himself with the club near the most vulnerable window. My heart was racing. In one corner of my mind, I was kicking myself (and John!) for stupidly getting into this situation.

Whispered commands and scuffling noises signalled the assault had begun.

(from chapter 34 – Invasion!)

Wednesday — the last day for Secretary for Education Manu to turn up, or the student boycott would resume — dawned bright and clear. We rose early, optimistic that the PSC investigators would now drive events to a just conclusion. Bohdan, John and I had all agreed to leave the college vicinity for the day, until news of the PSC investigation spread from other sources.

From our house in the village, we saw Bohdan leave early for town in his minivan. Next the various staff who lived off campus drove up the main access road to the campus at their usual time. And with great satisfaction we watched the rental car carrying Ovea and Bernard proceed up the same road half an hour later. It would be a good day.

John and I left for town, driving past the familiar landmarks and with the usual cheerful waves to villagers. Halfway there we noticed activity at the large police barracks that housed the provincial riot squad but thought nothing of it.

We enjoyed spending an afternoon in town like normal people. We shopped for groceries and then relaxed over a long lunch. Keen to reach home before darkness fell, we left Rabaul in the late afternoon. Halfway back, activity at the police barracks seemed more substantial. Several extra vehicles were drawn up in a line. Armed police walked around. We looked apprehensively at one another. John sped up.

With the working day over, we decided to drive straight to June's house on campus. But an improvised barrier of branches and old tyres on the access road halted us. Students were manning barricades! They recognised us, moved the blockage aside, and waved us through. We felt alarmed. What had happened today?

At June's house, the front door stood open. A student was using her telephone. Mark sat slumped in a chair nearby. Reluctant to interrupt, we stood in the doorway bewildered. Mark spotted us and came outside.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'It's been just unbelievable,' he said slowly, shaking his head.

(from chapter 36 – Our Home No Longer?)

Sunday morning brought a surprise. John answered a knock at the door as I prepared breakfast in the kitchen. He wasn't there long and returned as I was making coffee. 'Who was that? What did they want?' I asked cheerfully.

‘That,’ John replied slowly, ‘was the police. A whole carload of them in the yard. Armed too. An officer wearing a sidearm came to the door to give me this. It’s an eviction notice!’

We read the letter together. It was on Education Department notepaper from Colleges Division. It stated that our contracts had been terminated several weeks ago and gave us 24 hours’ notice to vacate our house — the property of the department — or face eviction.

‘Can they do that?’ I wondered aloud. ‘Don’t they have to behave reasonably? I’m no lawyer, but 24 hours’ notice doesn’t sound reasonable to me.’

John — who was a keen amateur lawyer by now — spoke with assurance. ‘I doubt they can evict us at 24 hours’ notice. Probably not at all, if we object. Anyway, there’s nothing we can do on Sunday, so let’s not worry about it. First thing tomorrow, I’ll go see Peter and check out the legalities.’

Bohdan drove up a few minutes later. ‘Hi Bohdan!’ I said cheerfully. ‘Want some coffee? Any news or special deliveries?’

He wasn’t cheerful. ‘I found this under my front door when I came back from church.’ He held up a letter like ours. ‘Did you get one too? They can’t just throw us out on the street, can they?’

John repeated his assurance and intentions for tomorrow. Over coffee we agreed that they would both go to see Peter first thing tomorrow, while I stayed home. Bohdan would ask one of the national teachers to ‘sit in’ at his house and keep others out while he was away.

John and Bohdan departed for town the next morning. Aipat turned up for domestic duties as usual, and I kept us both busy with cleaning chores. Just before noon, I heard a noisy vehicle drive into the yard. Aipat went to see who it was, then hurried back. ‘Missus, polis kamap!’

Sure enough, I could see a large, uniformed man standing outside the screen door. He knocked loudly. I opened the door. Judging by his stripes and prominent sidearm, he was a senior officer. ‘Are you Mrs Men-de-ze-la?’ he asked, struggling with the pronunciation.

I could see several police with rifles sitting in a large four-wheel-drive vehicle. My heart missed a beat, but I kept my expression calm. ‘Yes, I am. What brings you here, officer?’

‘I was ordered to personally deliver this document. It is addressed to Mr and Mrs Men-de-ze-la.’ He handed me a sealed envelope and walked away.

I hastily opened the envelope. The letter inside, from the Foreign Ministry, was addressed to us both. ‘You are hereby advised that following the termination of your employment contracts

with the Education Department, you have no lawful reason to remain in Papua New Guinea. The Foreign Ministry consequently requires you to leave the country within 14 days of this advice.'

I checked the date on the letter. It was 9 September, five days earlier. Did we now have only nine days left?

The officer was climbing into the front seat of his vehicle when I called after him. 'Excuse me, officer, please come back. This document is not correct.' He glared at me for a moment and then walked slowly back towards the house. I met him halfway. 'Look here, this is not today's date.' I pointed to the date on the letter and spoke slowly and firmly. 'I want you to write the date of delivery and your name on this letter please.'

He looked at me stiffly, unsure what to do. His men watched silently.