# In the Best Interests

## Intrigue and Payback in Papua New Guinea

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This book is based on true events, but some names and incidents have been changed to protect individuals' identities.

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# Contents

*To those who risked their futures and sacrificed their own welfare in the best interests of others: our students, our colleagues and most of all our dear friend Gus Gale.*

*And to the Papua New Guineans of today who refuse to let the bad overwhelm the good.*

# Introduction

This is a true story. The names of most of the people involved are changed. But the roles they played are not. All of the events portrayed can be fully validated from reports, letters, photos, notes and newspaper clippings.

This story relates past events. But abusive behaviour by individuals and public institutions, and harassment suffered by 'whistleblowers' who try to stop that behaviour, continue to this day. We believe publication of the Keravat story is in the public interest. We hope our story will encourage anyone in a similar situation to act 'in the best interests' of those they are responsible for and challenge those who would abuse their official positions to exploit others or suppress the truth.

We have recorded events and recreated actual conversations from authentic documentation and have done so to the best of our knowledge and recollection. We recognise that other people's memories of the events related in this book may in good faith be different. No damage, hurt or invasion of privacy is intended to any person living or dead.

Technological and social change happens fast. Many everyday activities were performed quite differently in the 1980s, before mobile phones, electronic files and the internet. That was also a time when sexual abuse was mostly a hidden secret and people with power could often act with impunity. The scandals of physical, psychological and sexual abuse of young people that were to engulf religious orders, charitable institutions, government, political parties and the entertainment industry still lay in the future. And the typical psychological impacts of such abuse that can lead victims to blame themselves and not to expose perpetrators were not yet well understood.

Sexual terminology was different too. The word 'gay' was widely used only within homosexual society. For most people, 'homosexual' was a neutral description. 'Queer' was considered a pejorative term for male homosexuals that liberal people mostly avoided using.

Keravat operated as a two-year government academy to prepare small numbers of top secondary school graduates for potential tertiary education. We felt Keravat's formal designation as a 'national high school' could mislead readers outside Papua New Guinea about its institutional nature, while more descriptive titles such as 'sixth-form college' would be clumsy and unfamiliar to PNG readers. To avoid confusion, we have used the terms 'Keravat College' and 'Colleges Division' throughout.

To this day, there are several alternative spellings for the location of the college. We have used 'Keravat', the spelling prevalent during our time there.

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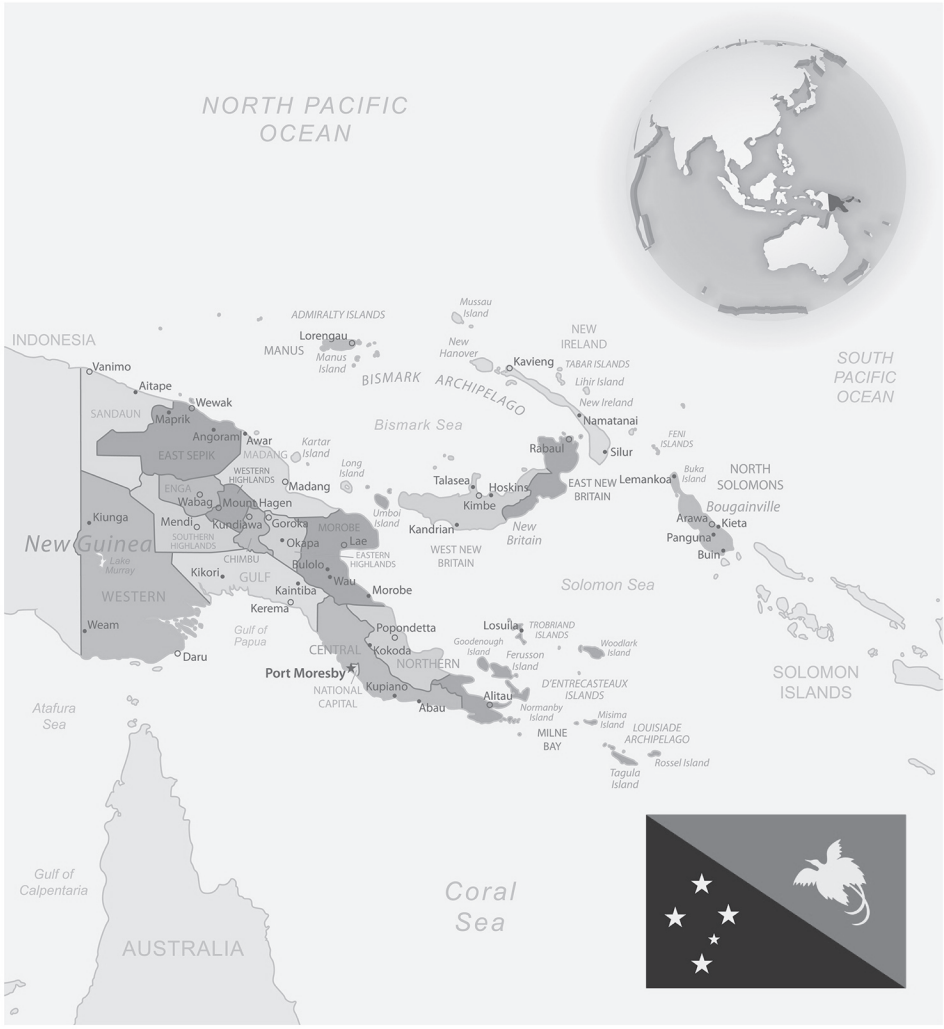


*PNG lies between northeast Australia and the Pacific Ocean*

# 1. Curious Encounters (John)

'Oh look!' exclaimed Martin. 'There's one of the students. Pull over, Chris.'

The wide commercial street was lined with dusty shops and offices, all closed on Sunday. Few people were around. Two teenage boys were walking quietly along one side of the road. They hadn't seen us yet.

Martin rolled down his window, leaned out, and called a name. One boy stiffened, then slowly turned around to face the car. He didn't look happy.

'Come over here,' Martin urged. 'I haven't seen you in ages.'

Martin was the inspector responsible for professional standards at the college where we would work. In fact, he was responsible for those standards at all four of Papua New Guinea's colleges. We felt thrilled that such a senior officer had personally come to the airport to meet us, in a private car and on Sunday. While his friend Chris drove us from airport to hotel, Martin told us about the colleges, the students and his own role. He explained

that indigenous Papua New Guinean staff were generally referred to as 'nationals'. Teachers from overseas like us, usually referred to as 'expats', made up almost all college teaching staff and still played leading roles in most secondary schools. Other expats held senior roles throughout the economy and government.

We felt hot. The lightweight business clothing we had donned for the flight into PNG (as everyone called the country) had turned out to be far too warm for the intense afternoon sun.

Our hosts were dressed more sensibly in colourful short-sleeved tropical shirts and light slacks. Both were handsome men in their thirties. Martin was lean, with blond hair, fair skin and penetrating eyes. Chris was darker and stockier.

Everything so far had been friendly and novel. Martin was an enthusiastic informant, more like a knowledgeable tour guide than a senior official. It seemed only natural that he would take an opportunity to casually greet and talk with a college student.

The young man, a striking dark-skinned national, walked slowly towards us. His friend hung back. When the young man reached the car, Martin stretched out through the open window, took his hand, and held that in his own hands all the time they talked.

Martin introduced us as new college teachers who had just arrived. He asked how the young man was getting on and how his friends were doing. The boy answered only in quiet monosyllables. He seemed embarrassed and barely looked at us. Martin stroked his hand, then let go and said goodbye.

The car pulled off. Surprised by what we had seen, we were silent. Sensing our discomfort, Martin explained that Papua New Guineans often behaved quite differently from people in Western countries. For example, boys and men often held hands, just as friendly

behaviour. And most nationals were shy with strangers, especially people from overseas.

Conversation resumed. We soon arrived at our hotel. Martin advised that a driver would collect us straight after lunch tomorrow to start our induction programme at Education Department offices. We unloaded our luggage, said goodbye and thanks, and checked in.

The hotel was decidedly basic. Our room and its sparse furnishings didn't rate a single star, let alone the advertised two. The ceiling fan operated a 'go-slow' and made little impact on the oppressive heat. The walls of our room were thin, unpainted plywood partitions. Their lowest section comprised only metal poles linked by wire mesh, leaving our room open to the corridor near floor level. Our only illumination was whatever dim light seeped through that wire mesh.

Two slim single beds with threadbare linen and rock-hard pillows squeezed a small table. Opposite stood a single upright wooden chair and a crude plywood cupboard with a clothes rail but no hangers. The bathroom was down the corridor. But the place was clean and the staff obliging. And we were determined to remain upbeat and positive. After all, we could hardly expect a developing nation to offer luxury accommodation to mere college teachers.

After a long flight, we would have enjoyed a walk. But Martin and Chris had told us that 'Moresby' (as everyone called Port Moresby, PNG's capital) was not safe to move around in, especially at night. Barred windows and wire fencing around the hotel confirmed that advice. With darkness falling tropically fast, staying in seemed wise.

The lobby boasted a telephone for guest use. While Elisa unpacked, I called Gus to confirm our arrival. Gus lived 800 kilometres away on the Keravat College campus where we would work.

I knew telephone calls were expensive, so I didn't plan to talk for long. Gus had written that he was in fact lucky even to have a home

phone. But after updating Gus on our journey, I couldn't help relating our experience with Martin. Wasn't his behaviour with that student odd?

Gus didn't mince words. Yes, Martin was homosexual. So were some of the other expatriates working for the Education Department. More conservative college staff didn't like that, and there were rumours about teachers and Education Department officers behaving unethically with students. No proof had emerged though. PNG was by law and belief strongly Christian, and sex between males was illegal. So homosexuals needed to be careful. Martin was a lively character who was probably just showing off where it seemed safe.

We agreed we were liberally minded people with no aversion to homosexual relationships between consenting adults. Neither of us wanted to dwell on that topic, so talk turned to our future at the college. 'Remember life is different here,' Gus signed off. 'It's often hard to get things done. Pushing hard does no good. Just be patient and friendly and try to develop a practical solution to any problem that comes up.'

After a basic but healthy breakfast next morning, our first priority was to buy local currency. We were directed to a bank just around the corner. A young national man came to the counter to assist us. He had a warm pleasant manner but seemed unfamiliar with the calculations needed to convert our foreign currency. When the young man finished counting out PNG money and presented a paper for signature, I checked the result. He had made a mistake. I pointed that out, in a friendly way. The young man first looked upset. Then he dropped out of sight below the counter! We stood surprised and waited for him to come back up. He didn't.

What was going on? After some moments I stretched over the counter to see. No one there. The young man must have crept away, keeping out of sight.

Unsure what to do next, we waited again. After a few minutes someone else came over — an expat this time, who acted like a supervisor. After our explanation, he apologised for the mistake, corrected the paperwork and counted out the correct sum of money. I stressed that we hadn't minded the mistake but wondered why the young man had hidden from us and crept away. Did he fear punishment of some sort? The man laughed. 'No,' he said. 'Just embarrassed that he made a mistake and too ashamed to face you after that. You'll get used to it.'

It was still mid-morning, but already hot. No wonder PNG business dress meant short-sleeved shirts with shorts or light slacks for men, and loose summer dresses for women. Armed with our new currency, we set out to buy suitable clothing. We found most of what we needed in a cluttered shop a few blocks from our hotel, run (like most shops, we found out later) by a Chinese woman. While she packed our purchases, we told her that we had walked to her shop. She was dismayed. 'Not safe here!' she declaimed. 'Too many rascals. Don't walk around!'

We left cheerfully with our packages. 'Rascals' didn't sound too menacing. What did she mean? Perhaps she was joking with us. But to be on the safe side, we decided to take her warning seriously and warily retreated to the hotel for lunch and our scheduled pickup.

Our car materialised well after the promised time. The driver spoke little English. After we arrived at the Education Department, we asked our 'instructors' for the week — two young national men — if anything had gone wrong. No, it was just 'PNG time'; don't expect things to happen punctually. How was the hotel? Fine, we said. Did we have everything we needed? We described our shopping trip, and

the joke about 'rascals'. 'No joke!' they quickly explained. 'Rascals' were not the mischievous but harmless characters that English word suggested — they were aggressive criminals, often violent and sometimes armed. We were learning fast.

The first day of the induction programme — a broad orientation — proved fascinating. Explanations, handouts and a documentary film explained the history and geography of this newly independent nation. Landforms, people and cultural practices were incredibly diverse. Airstrips, not roads, linked the few real towns. Many places remained several days' hard walk from any sign of 'civilisation' and millions of villagers had little contact with the outside world.

In fact, 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.

At the hotel that night, Elisa and I reflected on the six years since we met at Leeds University as leaders of ecological groups. We had soon married and enthusiastically started work in education. But teaching in northern England in the 1970s frustrated us. Many students showed little interest in classroom learning. Quality of life in a crowded island felt constrained, while the British economy struggled under high inflation and frequent industrial disputes.

Young, well-qualified and adventurous, we wanted to travel and work overseas. Convinced that ecological catastrophe would punish a careless human race, probably sooner not later, we looked for somewhere remote, thinly populated and able to feed itself. And somewhere that needed qualified English-speaking teachers. Not many places met all those criteria. An advertisement in the overseas section of *The Times*

*Educational Supplement* seeking a pair of teachers just like us turned out to be for the Falkland Islands, which seemed a little too remote!

Another advertisement from the New Zealand High Commission sounded more enticing. A prompt interview in London proved decisive. We eagerly accepted their offer of a fresh start in an uncrowded country with a positive reputation. But to our surprise, we found the teaching environment not much different from England, while the New Zealand economy struggled with the same high inflation and frequent industrial disputes. Worse, many cultural facilities we had taken for granted in England didn't exist in Invercargill (the remote small city we were posted to). Everyone was friendly enough, but they had extended families, local interests and long-standing social networks. As a childless couple in our energetic twenties with unconventional habits like cycle-touring, we felt out on a limb.

I didn't like my job much either. The headmaster started the year by advising the staff where to buy new canes to discipline misbehaving boys and announced that all male teachers would be expected to coach a Saturday rugby team. I had never even played rugby, and I wasn't keen to cane anyone. I ended up as the supervisor for small-bore rifle shooting —something new that I had to learn about — and decided that on principle I wouldn't buy or use a cane.

Another new recruit from England arrived at my school. Gus Gale was introduced at a Monday staff meeting as an experienced science teacher and (probably more impressive, for the headmaster at least) a former rugby lock. He looked tall, formidable and distinguished. We shook hands briefly at tea break.

That Friday, it was time for 'in-service training'. Deputy headmaster Jim Smithers had roped me in for a series of lunchtime sessions at which novice teachers (we had three first-years on our staff) would share experience and ideas. 'John, I know you've been teaching for several years already, but you are new to our country. And Gus Gale

has agreed to participate. So how about it?' I didn't want to lose my lunch break, but I couldn't say no.

We crowded into Jim's office — the three first-years, Gus, me and senior mistress Dorothy Pearson. Jim did a quick round-the-table introduction and we discussed general topics for a while. Jim suggested we close the session with a practical challenge, and fired off a question to one of the novices. 'Sally, here's the situation. A boy is talking and being disruptive while you're trying to explain something to the class. You've told him to be quiet twice now, and he's still carrying on. What will you do?'

Sally looked embarrassed. 'I'm not sure, Mr Smithers.' She bit her lip.

Jim let her off the hook. 'Mr Gale is the most experienced teacher here. What would you do, Gus?"

Gus spoke authoritatively, in a smooth English baritone. 'I would open the door to the corridor, go over to the boy, pick him up by the ears, carry him to the door, put him outside, close the door and resume my explanation.'

Quiet prevailed for some moments. Senior mistress Dorothy broke the silence. 'Mr Gale, you can't do that at our school. It's not legal.'

Gus spoke calmly. 'It most certainly is.' He began quoting court decisions on that very point, centred on the concept of using reasonable force to counter disruption to the learning of others. The new teachers stared at him, dumbfounded. Jim was looking unhappy. I was enjoying this!

Dorothy wasn't giving up. She drew herself up primly. 'I'm sorry Mr Gale; you can't do that here. Violence against pupils is not acceptable at our school.'

Gus stayed calm. 'I understand that caning boys is a normal practice here, Miss Pearson. Isn't that violence against pupils?'

Dorothy was outraged now. 'That's different!'

Gus gazed at her steadily. 'What's different about it?'

Dorothy sputtered for several moments. Then the solution came to her. 'We write it down. In a book.'

I couldn't help laughing out loud. Two of the novices started giggling. As deputy headmaster Jim finally opened his mouth to speak, the bell ending the lunch break rang out. Jim spoke with relief. 'Oh dear, we've run out of time. Thanks all, great session today.' Everyone hurried out.

Gus and I weren't asked to attend in-service training after that.

I invited Gus and his wife June around for dinner that weekend. The four of us clicked from the start. Unlike us, Gus had a New Zealand connection — his parents and brother lived at the northern end of the country. But, like us, they were childless and enterprising.

Fifteen years older, Gus and June had wider life experience. Gus had a diverse background in industry, the military and even politics (as mayor of a small town in England). June, his second wife after a failed early marriage, was an experienced English teacher. They met in Singapore and then drove 9000 miles overland back to England in their van, overcoming many dangers in Asia and the Middle East. Their move to New Zealand was another adventure.

We shared good times over drinks and enjoyed walking, hunting and fishing together in the spacious outdoors of southern New Zealand. But after only a couple of school terms, Gus told me he didn't intend to stay in his current teaching job for long. Quite understandable — I didn't either. I felt that a career in New Zealand education wasn't a good match for me. I had already decided to begin business studies in

the evenings the following year and continue to teach maths only as an interim measure.

But we were dismayed when Gus abruptly resigned at the start of the next school year. His brother Arthur had recently taken up a senior role in technical training in Papua New Guinea. Arthur had impressed his new employers with wide capability and a 'can-do' attitude, and quickly got Gus a contract offer to teach at a college there.

That would be a real adventure! Impulsively, Elisa and I wondered whether we should be going too. At our farewell dinner with Gus and June, we asked Gus to put in a good word for us if things worked out well for them.

They did. Gus's letters bubbled with enthusiasm about working in PNG. Pay was good, his location was attractive, and work was fun — teaching bright young people who were keen to learn. June soon obtained a contract there too, and Gus told us that two teachers with no children was a package the authorities liked. Go for it, we decided.

Six months after Gus had flown off, we received a letter offering both of us jobs in the college system. The college where Gus worked had vacancies in our subjects, and we could expect to be posted there. Contracts had a standard timeframe of three years. At the end, I would still be only 30 years old — young enough to finish business studies and change careers.

We checked the short and simple contract carefully. Attractive remuneration included a low-tax gratuity. Furnished housing would be provided, travel expenses would be paid, and there were fair and reasonable provisions for other matters. But the contract also included one worrisome feature. The Public Service Commission as our employer could terminate the contract without notice 'in the best interests of Papua New Guinea'. 'What did that mean?' we asked

our lawyer. Who would decide what was 'in the best interests'? And how?

Our lawyer thought that was just a 'saving' clause that needed to be there in case things didn't work out in some unexpected way. We shouldn't feel concerned. After all, the PNG authorities were making an investment and wanted the contract to succeed. And any contract termination without notice would trigger payment of all accrued gratuities and closing benefits, plus six months' extra pay — not bad given the three-year timeframe. Reassured, we signed and dispatched our contracts, put our house on the market, and started packing.

And now here we were.

Induction week passed quickly. We learned about the curriculum, the examination system and other professional topics. Apart from the top man (an Assistant Secretary for Education), the senior officers in Colleges Division were all expats who had stayed on after independence instead of 'going finish'. Bruce Hawthorne, in charge of administration, was a fit and assertive Australian in his late forties. He sported a safari suit and a military-style crewcut. Ross Johnston, the Australian in charge of curriculum, was a tall, thin and untidy man with a timid and effeminate manner who seemed close to retirement age. Thomas Smith, a chubby and more youthful Australian who introduced himself as the division's 'projects' man and legal adviser ('I'm not a lawyer though!') felt a bit slippery and insincere.

Thursday was excursion day. We traded the comfortable and air-conditioned, but rather alienating, concrete office blocks of administrative Waigani for expansive sea views and hot streets busy with a colourful mix of people: wider-faced and lighter skinned Papuans, leaner and darker curly-headed folk from distant coastal regions, and stocky Highlanders wearing hooped woollen caps despite the searing sun. Few were much taller than Elisa's five-foot-zero, and at five-foot-ten I was a giant. We toured the impressive national museum, strolled

through a stilt village built over the water, and climbed an authentic treehouse in a small national park. Lunch was an adventure too — grilled crocodile steaks at a country hotel.

On Friday morning Bruce confirmed we had been posted to Keravat College and booked on the early Saturday morning flight to Rabaul, the nearest airport. And as a send-off, the Education Department would treat us to dinner at Port Moresby's new upmarket hotel on Friday evening.

The inspector joined us in the afternoon for a closing discussion. How had everything gone? How did we feel? Did we have any questions? Everything had gone well, we looked forward to getting started, and we had no questions. 'Great!' Martin said. 'But let me remind you things are different here. Give me your hand.'

Martin took my hand and stroked it. He looked directly into my face as he did that. I blushed but resisted the temptation to pull away. After a few seconds, we both laughed and Martin let go. He had made his point.

Dinner was fun. Our host was the College Divisions' head, Assistant Secretary for Education Mr Tavitai, a quiet, slim and youthful national. The hotel delivered excellent food and service. Wine flowed freely. Martin (who presided like the actual host) was entertaining and attentive. We invited him to visit us for lunch when he next came to Keravat.

We chatted happily with several other new recruits. All envied us our posting to Keravat, especially a Brit named Derek who had been assigned to Kiunga High School in remote Western Province. 'Lucky you,' he groaned. 'Rabaul is a beautiful coastal town with amenities. Me, I'll be living deep in the jungle, stuck in the pouring rain with mosquitoes and crocodiles!'

Back at the hotel, we went to bed in a glow, ready to continue our adventure.