

**Julie Janson**

**The Crocodile Hotel**

**The Interview**

Jane ran along the road to find a safe spot under a light to hitchhike. She had no money, she always hitched. It was freezing and she wrapped a rug around her little child who was half asleep on her hip. Wind blew through her Indian cotton dress. Dark crows cawed overhead.

Grit stung her eyes, it was late, she looked with longing at a smart young woman speeding by in a new pink Volkswagon. You could bet she wasn't working her way through university by picking up plates at Basser College for condescending rich boys. Jane's head was full, a kind of fear descending, an acid flash back, black spiders crawling in blood. No, she needed to think about it all. Not give in.

Jane had put on the red black and yellow tee shirt and was passionate about Black rights, she went to land rights demos. She wanted to teach Aboriginal children, and go to Arnhemland.

Well, for God sake, she had to do something. She had a fleeting image of her room at the Randwick boarding house where her son Aaron, slept beside her on a bare mattress. Jane saw the near empty food box and university papers scattered on the floor- it was a hand to mouth existence and it was downright pathetic.

The advertisement was enticing - 'Teach in remote Northern Territory schools; generous allowances; a free flight to any capital city each year; first year out teachers welcome. Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people encouraged to apply'. Jane saw that it was time to come out and own her heritage, to stop apologising for the distant Aboriginal ancestor. To say loudly that the Hawkesbury was her country, that her grandmother was born there,

and her mother, and her mother. That she was a descendant of the Booraberongal clan of Freemans Reach Black's camp near Windsor. That she was a member of the Kangaroo Skin People of the Darug nation. Jane was tired of being told that she didn't exist, that it was not her land, no such tribe, by a mob of blacks blown in from Kempsey.

As a child, Jane had been called '*a little white blackfella*' when she ran fast in school sports, she had long legs and dark eyes, and a thatch of blond hair, while her brothers and sister had '*lubra lips*'. Jane had known this dark family secret but then it seemed kind of unimportant, she wasn't a '*real Aborigine*'.

Jane rushed to her job interview as Aaron waved goodbye from the University pre-school, he clung to the metal bars. It was a desperate act, she fought back the anxiety, it was making her feel like vomiting. Pure fear. She chewed at her thumb, there was no money for rent and she dreaded being thrown out of the house and of having *nowhere to go*. Jane had dressed in her most conservative second hand clothes and caught a bus to the Sydney business district.

On the fourteenth floor in a high rise office block on Taylor Square the Department of Education inspector, Mr White, tapped his pen on his desk and coughed as he smoothed Jane's application form. He sipped tea.

"Are you sure you want to go to this remote Northern Territory school?"

"I want the challenge", she replied.

"A challenge is one thing Miss, sorry, Mrs Reynolds, but living on a vast empty plain with few people to relate to is another", he said,

"Aren't there three hundred Aboriginal people?" she replied.

He tapped the pen again, abruptly stood up and walked to the grey venetian blinds, he buttoned his brown cardigan. The sound of Sydney traffic penetrated the room: a siren screeched, a blowfly buzzed.

“Oh, yes, the Lanniwah will provide the students for the demountable school, when they're not going walkabout”. He grinned and his tongue flickered against the white foam sticking to his lips. He looked obliquely at Jane's breasts and swallowed.

“You will be five hundred kilometres from civilisation. Did you study Anthropology?” He looked hopeful, then added:

“Are you interested in local history?”

“Massacres?”

“No, I don't think so. No, it's not in the notes, no massacres. Peaceful settlement. The explorer Giles opened up the country”.

Jane imagined Mr White with gritted teeth pushing into his wife with her flannelette nightie bunched in her armpits, perhaps her face buried in a pillow. Jane gave a tight repressed smile as he passed the paper towards her, she signed it and stood up, he spoke slowly, as though she was mentally unbalanced,

“You will have to fly to Darwin in two weeks' time. Take only one suitcase for both you and your son. Good luck”. He watched her walk to the door. Jane felt him admiring her bottom, she saw that he thought she wouldn't last a month.

### **Arrival at Harrison Station**

The drive from Margaret had been a night-mare, Aaron slept most of the way in searing forty degree heat. Flat plains with spindly grey green, trees, boulders of red and orange stone, thrown like giant's toys, the moonscape went on and on. Then the monosyllabic driver stopped at the Jeparinka road house for petrol.

“You can get a feed here if you want?” Jane woke her son and walked into the restaurant. The ladies room was filthy, floor covered in toilet paper and shit smeared on the wall, she helped her son wash his hands and they entered the restaurant. At any moment Jane expected an Absurdist actor to *set their*

*hair on fire*. Someone farted, ghoulish rodeo clowns in red hats laughed, men with blue tattoos of dragons chewed, toothless hippies picked at salads of tinned peas and pineapple. Bushmen, jackaroos, roustabouts and stockmen were hunched over plates of chips and gravy.

A bald fat man stood over the bain marie, sprinkling chicken salt on the yellow disgusting food, Dim Sims, chips, shrivelled, pies shrinking in the heat. Blow flies were trapped behind glass, they buzzed. Aaron begged for a treat of Coca Cola, Jane bought drinks and they sat by a juke box playing Kenny Rogers. Jane was appalled as she flicked through the Northern Territory Times, '*child taken by croc*', she shuddered at the photograph of a gaping crocodile mouth.

Outside, Jane saw the Aboriginal families, they were dusty, two children had pus filled eyes and blinked unseeing in the sunlight, they sat in the shade and ate orange Twisties.

The fat man pushed an old Aboriginal man towards the front door, the man was dressed in a shredded flannel shirt and had dusty torn jeans, no shoes.

"No humbug here, you know the rules, Sandy". The fat man said. The old Aboriginal man shuffled towards the road. It was inhuman, it was 1976.

Jane stood up, with a sinking feeling, a slight shaking in her voice, she had to speak up.

"Why are you throwing him out?" she said.

"He's dirty".

"So are those stockmen".

"He doesn't want to be inside".

Jane bent towards the old man.

"Would you like to sit down in the air-conditioning?" She said.

"Look Lady, you're from down south aren't ya? My place, my rules". Said the fat man.

"It's racist, let him stay".

The room rippled with laughter.

“Why don’t you piss off, go on, you can get out too”. He said.

Jane felt everyone watching, she took Aaron by the hand and walked to the door. The restaurant owner pushed past Jane and put a plastic bag of bottles of Coke outside the door for the old Aboriginal man. The old fella gave up and sat down on the step, breathing heavily. He looked over at Jane, his eyes were blurred and almost sightless, she couldn’t look away, she was impotent and useless. All the people in the restaurant stared, they looked uncomfortable, some smirked, Aaron touched the old man’s shoulder.

“Want me to carry the heavy bag for you?” Aaron said. The man saw the little blond boy, he smiled and saluted him. Jane watched as Aaron picked up the bag and helped him stand so she moved quickly to their side and put her hand under his arm. They walked him to his family under the tree, the Aboriginal women averted their eyes from Jane and Aaron put the drinks near them.

“Youai, good boy”. The old man touched Aaron’s hand and held it for a moment while he focussed on the small face, it was a tender moment.

“You okay now?” Said Aaron. Jane smiled at the old man, it was an apologetic smile, it spoke of sadness and pity and a feeling of impending doom. The children’s eyes were full of infection, did she have some ointment that could help? She asked herself, who was she to think she could help anybody, she was barely able to help herself. Was this somehow her fault too? The guilt and misery etched on white people’s faces, it seemed to go on and on, and no one escaped the sense of powerlessness, it seemed as though no one could move forward. The children under the tree grabbed the Cokes and swigged.

Every broken man on the ground was an incarnation of Jane’s mentally ill brother. He had picked up cigarette butts from the streets around Balmain, he rolled them into smokes with newspaper. He never begged but suffered the indignity of being thrown from pubs for not having enough money for a beer. His blue eyes and heavy forehead spoke of his Aboriginal grannies. Jane lived with the burnt memory of his suffering, it never left her side, each tramp was her

brother in need, each one was given a small hand-out. *There but for the grace of God go I.*

The Department driver put out his cigarette and called to Jane to get back in the car, they had a long way to go, hundreds of kilometres, this was her new life, transfixed on Mars. The air was a furnace, no air conditioning, it smelt like a decaying cow, she stared out the window, the blue horizon cut the world in two. Ghost gum trees, small reptiles flattened on the road, dead kangaroos with bloated bodies. Aaron began to count the dead while an emu walked slowly along the road oblivious to an approaching eight carriage road train. They turned off the bitumen onto a bull dust track with holes so big that you could lose the car, there were no fences and they drove through a hundred kilometres of cattle stations.

On Harrison station, there were soaring wedge tailed eagles, egrets, blue cranes and galahs, a mirage, broken down bulldozers rusting on yellow dirt, water tanks on wooden towers, a meat house, fowl house, dog house and humpies for three hundred people. The Lanniwah houses were made of paper bark and tin, some were canvas, trees covered in hanging pots and billy cans. Mangy dogs lay in heaps on bare earth and the soil glinted with camp pie tins and broken bottles. Pandanus Dilly bags hung like fruit on bare wooden poles and precious suit cases were hidden under iron bed frames. Lanniwah children played on the hills while their parents sat by small fires. One old lady with a stick walked bent over surrounded by blue grey dogs, Jane watched her stop and stare at the government Land Rover.

It was scorched country near Rainer River, south of Arnhemland, the heat hit them like a shovel. Jane lifted her exhausted six year old son from the back seat, he woke up. A haze floated towards her, it was forty three degrees and the road was surrounded by *bleached bones*. Jane staggered with the heat and wondered how anyone could live out there. She watched Aaron as he ran around the yard skipping and hooting, exploring their new home at Harrison

Station: a large demountable home, a caravan really parked on flat red earth. Jane took it all in. There was hardly a tree and the wire mesh fences were falling down – they wouldn't keep out Brahma bulls or dingoes. White painted stones and shrunken geraniums.

“See you later, enjoy yourself, I'll be back after the Wet, maybe five months with some school supplies”. Said the driver.

“Wait, what if I need something?” she yelled.

“Like what?”

“Something?” she said.

“You won't be able to call, no phone out here in hell. Good luck sweet heart”.

He threw their suitcase onto the ground and grunted and headed back to Margaret town, a five hour drive through deep bull dust. Jane watched him go, she couldn't catch her breath, the hot air choked her. She smiled at Aaron, yep everything was just great. Her caravan gleamed with round ugly edges, there was no- where to shelter, she was naked.

The landscape revealed a shattered spirit, gutted by the annual rains, floods that washed away the topsoil leaving billabongs with stranded twenty foot crocodiles hiding under logs. Jane stood battered by dry winds, strange blue grey clouds pulsing with bursts of sunlight. It was deeply unsettling, a moonscape with the silver caravans placed like tin cans covered in dust, waiting to be towed away if the numbers at the school dropped. She had been told that the people could might move on at any moment, looking for seasonal food and ceremony.

God almighty what had she done? She still found it hard to breathe, the isolation was going to kill her, Jane calmed herself by bending down and breathing slowly and repeating, 'I can do this, I can do this'. She squatted on the ground and watched yellow honey ants tramp by in formation, their abdomens ripe and gold. She remembered some documentary that showed

people biting off the ant abdomens with relish, she imagined the bursting honey in her mouth.

Jane picked up the suitcase, this would be a great new beginning, she would be a wonderful teacher and her son would thrive on the outdoor adventure, it was going to be alright, she could do this amazing thing.

However, Jane was single and the lack of married status was a problem, lies never came easy to Jane, blatant truth was always attractive but often lead to miserable condemnation by 1970s Australian society. The school had accepted her two year appointment and regarded her as a woman whose husband might appear at any moment. Funny, still waiting. The gossips might think that perhaps Jane's husband had run off or had *never existed*.

### **The Boss**

In the distance, six Lanniwah children appeared like drawings in an old picture book, dreamlike and skinny against burning white sunlight. She watched through squinting eyes, a man on horseback galloped towards them. He whirled a stock whip and cracked it on the ground in front of the children who scattered and hid behind trees. Jane tried to make sense of this scene, to apply her perception of reality to the cowering black children, it was a frightening rush into her deep association with her Koori ancestors, is this what they had experienced?

One child had a baby clinging to her back as they crouched behind a thorn bush, the Boss flicked the dirt in front of them with the whip. Jane strained to hear his yells mingled with cries of crows. She was stuck to the spot, her bag frozen in her hand and he saw her and wheeled around, the huge horse galloped towards her and jumped the fence, he rode up to the caravan and dismounted. He was a barrel-chested Chips Rafferty in the 'The Overlanders', he rolled with a cattleman's gait and joined Edie, his thin wife as she walked towards Jane.

"Giddyay, Mrs Reynolds, welcome to Harrison". Hubert's mood was laconic but direct, Jane felt out of place, out of her mind, her heart was beating as cockatoos screeched all around like a close burst of noise, jarring in the clicking stillness and heat, the terrible inescapable heat. The sun throbbed and her head was full of dust, there was too much blue sky, it cut the world in half. Jane stretched out her tiny damp hand.

"Good to meet you".

Eddie peered from under her wide brim hat, her red haired plaits swung to her shoulders, her Manchester accent out of place.

"Your husband not with you?" Jane felt the first lie rise up like vomit.

"He is working, he might come later".

Eddie shot an alarmed look at her husband, who licked his dry mouth and stuck a cigarette paper to his big lower lip, he sniffed and rolled tobacco between his huge hands.

"You'd better watch out for wild buffalo, if you see one, climb the nearest tree". Jane laughed but the sound stuck in her throat, they were serious. She beckoned Aaron to her side and caressed his hair as Hubert grinned at the child, and drawled on.

"And don't stand in the doorway. A mob of Blacks could come past and you'd be a sitting duck. They'd shoot ya. They're not all bad, but give them a whiff of the booze, they go mad. We prepare for attack".

Jane kept nodding like a toy carnival dog, she looked blankly around for evidence of *dangerous blacks* but all she could see was kilometres of scrappy Mulga trees, dust and vast nothingness. Hubert looked her over like she was on sale, coughed and spat a gob of phlegm at a passing red cattle dog, he leant against the fence smoking, tracing the dirt with his boot.

"I don't want you goin up to the Black's camp, it's their place. Ya got that?"

"Of course, you are the boss". Jane said.

“No alcohol, it's dry out here, you haven't got bottles of whisky in that bag have ya?”

“I wouldn't”. She hoped her bottle of Johnnie Walker hadn't broken.

“I would have to confiscate them, and drink 'em myself”. He laughed.

“Another thing, the dark people use protruded lips to indicate directions, never pointed fingers”. Edie said. Jane nodded as Hubert put his arm around Edie and flicked his stock whip at another dog. Edie gazed at Jane's Tibetan dress and dangly earrings and sniffed.

“Come over later for a cuppa. And you can use the old Toyota, you'll need it”.

“Great, I was wondering how to get around”. Said Jane.

“You know I can't stand women who talk with a plum in their mouth”. Said Edie. Jane was compliant.

“Nyeah, I know what ya mean”. She mentally noted that she would have to speak through her nose for the rest of the year. Hubert ruffled Aaron's hair.

“Ya can come up and see me gun. Ya'd like that I bet”.

Jane was relieved to hear that she could use the blue Toyota, she eyed it's rough appearance but was delighted when the engine started, this car would save her life. She realised that despite first impressions, the Barkley family were solid country people who would take care of her and Aaron.

However, Hubert Barkley was half mad, and he often had loud fights with Edie, he was the big fella Boss.

“Stick to the rules and she'll be right”. He said.

“Yeah sure, perhaps you could write them down”. Said Jane.

“I've staked out the whole one square kilometre for the Aboriginal camp on the directions of the owners from the Hong Kong”. He said.

She thought, 'oh the luxury'.

“The Blacks don't want you. They're like children. We take care of them. Look, they do it tough in the wet, I give the old blokes my best lures, I got time

for 'em. We help 'em out. But if they step out of line, I'll take the bull whip to any of 'em. Whip 'em good!"

Eddie was a nurse and she ran a no nonsense clinic with two Aboriginal health workers in an old house on the station. The Lanniwah women gave birth there and she had midwived some hundred babies. In her racism there was also compassion, Eddie understood where she and Hubert stood in the Northern Territory hierarchy, cattle managers but not owners. Their job was to moan about the government, the weather, drought, the cost of cattle transport and helicopters, but not mention the Blacks whose welfare cheques they lived off.

Eddie had married Hubert and adapted quickly to a distaste for Blacks. She spoke to Jane about her last pregnancy, the adored only boy who was born in Margaret hospital.

"After one day, I saw the baby was in a plastic crib surrounded by 'picks'".

"What are Picks?" said Jane.

"Pickaninies, Aboriginal babies". Said Eddie.

"I took my precious white baby out of that hospital quick smart. High tailed it back to Harrison".

Her 'Black girl', Gertie washed and scrubbed for no pay, just tucker. A house trained domestic was valuable, and knew her place. Jane nodded and kept her eyes down, her teacher existence on a remote cattle station relied on the good relationship with the manager's wife. The boss and Missus *held power* over the generator, two way radio, water supply, mail, fuel and food.

Jane and Aaron sat on a small hill at Harrison and meditated in the sunset, glorious hues of pink and orange over the billabong, it was a sublime moment, a Jabiru all black and white lifting off from bright pink water. A kind of ecstasy, forever imbedded in the memory, a safe place of peace to retire to in times of need. Hubert drove by in his cattle truck with a perplexed look on his face, 'what the hell are they doing out there?'

Later that night, Jane saw Hubert lean over his veranda to check she was alright, she waved to him, he nodded and went inside.

The next day, Jane shooed the curious Brahma cows from her door and led Aaron over to the Boss's house. Edie flicked her cigarette with her pink tongue, and welcomed Jane and Aaron into her big house on stilts.

"Get Missus Reynolds a chair". Gertie stopped washing a huge pile of dishes and dragged a plastic chair to the table. Edie was attractive in tight white moleskin pants, like Annie Oakley. Four girls and a small boy, pretty, pale children, they were curious, and looked longingly at Aaron. They soon had him under their collective wings, and giggled and played on the floor amongst clattering Lego pieces.

"Elisha, get a coffee for the teacher". Edie puffed another cigarette. The eldest girl, held a mug with Pablo instant coffee under the hot water tap at the sink, and mixed in a spoon of sugar and powdered milk. Jane sipped.

"Lovely". She was nervous, smiling widely at the children, she did love children. Jane looked at the house: corrugated iron and fibro on steel stilts, broken flapping fly-screens. There was poverty in the dirty white walls and plastic chairs. A picture of a plane hung on the wall. A Laminex table and bench with the School of the Air radio and piles of battered books sat against one wall, and a Hammond organ, she watched a fly trying to escape from fly paper that dangled near her face.

"It's a relief to have a woman to talk to. Gertie doesn't count, she's Black and thick as two short planks". Edie said. Gertie kept her head down and gave a vicious slam to the wet clothes, Jane grimaced and avoided Edie's eyes.

"So, how long you been teachin'?"

"One year".

"Experienced then?" Edie nodded and smirked.

A pink Galah flew through a window, perched beside Edie and bent his head for a scratch. Jane felt helpless, like a child, possessed by the older

woman. She shook her golden hair. "You'll have to tie that hair up, the kids are crawling with nits", said Edie, as she pushed one of the children off her shoulder. If Edie had suddenly thrown the coffee mug out the window, it wouldn't have surprised Jane.

Jane knew nothing about the Territory, her experience as a student teacher had been dealing with Leichardt Boys High School, boys of Mediterranean appearance, hairy dark with gold chains. 'Hey Miss, you got nice tits'. When they saw their new student teacher, the boys in tight grey shorts had almost taken out their dicks and beaten them on the desk. It had been important to learn how to physically throw boys from the class room. This was different, in the outback, she feared she wouldn't survive a moment without the Boss.

"Will your children enrol with the Lanniwah tomorrow?"

"No, my kids are school of the air". Said Edie. Jane felt the mistrust, and nodded in blank relief. Jane called Aaron but he wouldn't come, he could be a determined little thing when he felt like it. Edie watched as Jane tried to pull Aaron away, it was a struggle of wills but the child won so Jane went back to her caravan and suddenly again felt very alone.

Lanniwah women walked past her caravan and waved to her, they went a long way around the Boss's house avoiding the snarling cattle dogs. The boss had trained these dogs to what? Only attack dark skin? The Aboriginal children ran and cartwheeled with joy, they looked so happy, Jane could imagine running amongst them with Aaron, everyone laughing, just in the moment of being alive. That would be something.

**Julie Janson** is a member of the Buruburongal clan of the Aboriginal Darug Nation from the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales. Currently a Senior Researcher for the University of Sydney, School of Philosophical and Historical

Inquiry. Julie has written ten plays about Aboriginal Australia and Indonesia. These include: *Black Mary* published by Aboriginal Studies Press, produced by Belvoir St Theatre Company B for the Olympic Festival of the Dreaming in 1997; *Gunjies* produced at Belvoir St Theatre, *Lotus War* and the erotica play *Season to Taste* Belvoir St Theatre Downstairs, ABC Radio National and Adelaide Fringe Festival; *Eyes of Marege*, Sydney Opera House Studio, a collaboration with Theatre Kita Makassar, Indonesia. Julie is a recipient of several awards and writers residencies including her current 2013 Australia Council for the Arts Residency at the BR Whiting Studio in Rome. The extract published in this issue of *Le Simplegadi* is taken from her forthcoming novel *The Crocodile Hotel*.

[julie\\_janson@optusnet.com](mailto:julie_janson@optusnet.com)