

RED IN THE CENTRE: LOOKING FOR THE H CHORD

Sample Chapter
BUSH FAREWELL

In the cool of the Limmen River morning a helicopter flies low over the water and a man leans out to shake the remains of his friend from a plastic urn. "Get out you old bastard," he says just to say something, anything to give the moment weight - but not too much, not too sombre now; this is the Australian bush, after all, where even grief is taken dry.

Lining the riverbank a small crowd watches respectfully as the ashes trail from the neck of the urn, dusting the sides of the chopper and the tops of the trees as they drift down to the water. Then a young girl breaks the mood with a squeal as she realises she has dust in her eyes. Someone laughs and tells her it's good luck to get a dead man's ashes in your eyes but she looks doubtful. The crowd relaxes and murmurs follow the chopper across the river where the remaining remains are cast over a fishing boat abandoned in the mud. The empty urn tumbles into the river and the breeze scoots it off into the mangroves, like a man alive would move if he were dropped in that river full of crocs. A white hat is tossed onto the boat. Then the chopper does another circuit while the man pours a beer over the ashes, except the beer is partly frozen and the best he can do is shake a few drops from the can. Chuckles acknowledge the faux pas and a sense of appropriate closure settles over the crowd as the helicopter departs; it has been a worthy good bye.

The crowd is made up mostly of bush men, hardened drinkers and rogues many of them, along with a few tourists who've wandered over from the fishing camp. Most have made a long journey to be here to pay their respects. Yet not for this lot any showy displays of melancholy; before the chopper has wound down the crack and fizz of beer cans opening signals their customary intentions. Now the tongues will be lubricated for the stories to flow, the unreliable accounts of a man's feats, follies and foibles that serve as evidence of a life well lived, and therefore a life well known.

The helicopter pilot soon joins the throng and remembers a time his old friend went missing, presumed dead. He spent days flying over harsh country in search, eventually finding him sitting under a tree by a billabong in the middle of nowhere, reading a book.

"It was a thing, all right," he says, using the impersonal 'it' with great fondness. "It had half a beast hung up in a tree over there, a pig that musta come in for the beast shot dead underneath it - it was doing all right for itself no worries - and when I climbed out of the chopper it didn't get up, just looked down its nose at me through these little reading glasses and said, 'About time you showed up.'"

The urn bearer is also our host, a congenial pro fisherman with a wild ginger beard and moustache and the ruddy complexion of someone who exposes fair skin to the elements. I spoke with him before the chopper went up and he expressed some reservations about hanging out on the skid to scatter the ashes.

"So were you pleased with how it went up there?" I ask him now. "You didn't feel like you were going to fall?"

"No, I didn't feel like it at all. I felt like jumping out, not falling." He laughs and takes a pull on his beer.

"And what was the significance of the boat wreck?"

"Oh, he done a bit of sea time with me on that boat, so . . ." he trails off, finishing the sentence with a narrowing of the eyes, a look away. "But that old urn didn't want to stay in there, eh?" he recovers quickly. "Straight up the mangroves."

"We were gonna shoot a donkey or a horse so we could make some pocket steak," jokes another, "then stick his ashes in that and feed it to the crocodiles, 'cause he feared crocodiles," he laughs. Then he makes a point of assuring me he was a good mate while he was alive, lest I get the wrong impression.

It's an interesting thing to be an outsider at a wake, to have your only window to the dead thrown open by those who want the life to fill the gap. You can't ever join their club now - membership is closed - but they will invite you in as a bona fide guest, as a witness.

And so I listen to the stories being shared, along with the younger men deferring to the older men. There is a hierarchy here, an order of merit determined by closeness of bond and shared experience. After family, being a contemporary assumes the highest rung on the mourning ladder. It's as if everyone understands the need to affirm life through the window of death, and the closer to the window the better the view. Both ways, perhaps.

The women, too, are taking a back seat at this table, though whether that's because the dead man had few significant women in his life at the end, or because women do their mourning differently it's hard to say. One woman who knew him, though not well, she said, admits to a tinge of sadness. But that's the only obvious sign of sentimentality I see.

Mostly it's the predictable, "Grab us another beer, mate; that's what he'd 'a' wanted," or "Remember when the bastard did this, or that?" as another Aussie soul is committed to the past by those left to endure the present.

Yet unpredictable things do happen at funerals and wakes. I don't know if it's the heightened awareness of our own mortality or just the unstable mix of alcohol, emotion and a whole lot of people who wouldn't otherwise socialise, but I've seen some wild stuff go down with the dead. Fighting between the best of friends, sex between the oddest of pairings, acute breakdowns in the stabest of characters. Funny how the events specifically designed to bring humans closer together - weddings, funerals, Christmas - have the most potential to blow up.

But there's nothing too volatile about this one. Morning eases into afternoon and the crowd thins. Mud crabs are cooked in a pot over the fire as kites wheel and cry overhead. The house chooks scratch around in the dry soil for something they may have overlooked last time around and on the end of his chain a dog sleeps with one ear cocked. The women move indoors to talk while the men settle in for a session of drinking and bullshitting outside, and healthy brown kids with big white smiles try out both camps before deciding it just feels better with Mum. It's not really a day for kids.

And somewhere along the way I fall off the wagon and join in. I can't really say why, since I'm still drying out from Darwin and I'm normally a fairly disciplined unit, but I do anyway. First it's a gold can or two, then I remember a warm bottle of black home brew waiting for me in Claude, then someone produces a bottle of green home-made grappa, God help me. The rest is predictable, of course, the path well-trod, but eventually, inevitably, I succumb to the weight of the gold and the black and the green. And in the heat of that Limmen River afternoon I lay down in the shade of a tree and close my eyes.