

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of imagination inspired by the little-known true story of three Aboriginal people – Bonangera (Bonny/Boni), Dorondera and Jurano – taken to Europe as living exhibits in 1882–83. While travellers and performers had been journeying to Europe from distant lands since the time of Columbus, it was not until the mid-to late-nineteenth century that ‘ethnic shows’, also known as ‘human zoos’, became mass entertainment. Such shows took place in zoological gardens, museums, colonial exhibitions and world fairs. ‘Human zoos’ were also popular in America under the likes of showman P.T. Barnum. According to a retrospective on the subject in Paris in 2012, worldwide, between 1800 and 1958, over a billion spectators attended such acts, marvelling at more than 35,000 individuals, significantly influencing views on ‘race’. For a brief history of the events that inspired this novel, please see the afterword, which includes references to the letters, diary entries, newspaper reports and scientific journal articles that I have quoted verbatim. *Paris Savages* builds on these scant records to envisage the story of Bonny, Jurano and Dorondera, Badtjala/Butchulla people from K’gari (Fraser Island). Rather than assuming Aboriginal viewpoints, the story is told through fictional characters related in the novel to the German engineer Louis Müller, who is known to have transported the group to Europe.

For Bonangera (Bonny), Jurano and Dorondera,
whose stories can only ever be imagined



K'GARI (FRASER ISLAND), 1882



Hilda wakes to a new hatch of spiders on the rusted tin ceiling above her head, a furious, sprawling army of tiny invaders dispersing across the corrugated landscape in search of new homes. At night, she fears a spider will drop onto her face, perhaps even into her mouth.

She moves to the edge of the grass-filled mattress and instead turns her attention to the hiss of the waves, the wind high in the surrounding trees, and the laughter and fast conversation of Bonny and Dorondera outside. She tries to follow what her friends are saying, but they are already too far away, on their way to the beach. Propping herself on her elbows she looks through the open window above her father's empty bed. Dorondera has a dillybag strung around her neck for collecting shellfish. Hilda wills Bonny to turn in her direction and smile, but he does not.

She rises and sits at the rough-hewn desk her father built out of prized satinay hauled in from the forest. A second window above the desk overlooks the camp and casts a slanting square of light on her journal. If Hilda leans forwards and looks to the right, she can still see the beach. The ramshackle hut is also of her father's making, a leaning silver-grey structure that shelters them from the worst of the summer rains but little else. It did not protect her mother from disease, not that they should have expected it to. Her father promised they would be safe here on this sand-whipped island cast off the colony's coast, but no one is safe here anymore. Not her family, and not the people who have called K'gari home

since the spirit Yindingie, messenger of the great god Beeral, stood on the beach at Moon Point and told them the laws they must follow. Now there is talk of moving the remaining Badtjala to the mainland, visible in the distance across the strait, all chimneys and farms. On maps the region is marked as Queensland, and the nearest town Maryborough, but Hilda remembers Jurano patiently extending his arm and pointing out to her mother and her that, as well as K'gari, a swathe of the mainland – from Burrum Heads in the north to Inskip Point to the south and as far inland as Mount Bauple – is in fact Badtjala country.

‘Always Badtjala country,’ he said in English, for Hilda’s family did not yet speak Badtjala and Jurano did not know German. ‘But they want us gone.’

Later, in the privacy of their hut, Hilda’s mother looked up from her journal.

‘What queen would allow such horror to occur as has befallen these people?’ she asked, flicking through her notes and reading aloud her records of the diminishing number of Badtjala showing up each year for the government’s handout of blankets, flour and tobacco. She attended the handouts as a volunteer, travelling with the government men to various locations on the island and the mainland coast opposite, while Hilda’s father remained at the camp, meticulously recording the results of his ethnographic studies. ‘They are dying under our noses,’ she said.

‘Christel, it does not help to become emotional,’ Hilda’s father began, then sighed.

‘If others could just see these people as we have. If they could be educated,’ Christel said.

‘Why do you think I am doing this?’ Louis pointed at his notebooks, frustrated but still a gentle smile on his face.

Christel traced with her finger a drawing she had made of the long, narrow island. ‘Look, it’s in the shape of a musket,’ she said, tapping the

northern point, the stock of the gun, and running her finger down the barrel to the southern tip. In reality, almost eighty miles separated the two ends. On the map, a small ink dot halfway down the west coast marked the location of their hut and the Badtjala camp they had been welcomed into, surprisingly swiftly in the circumstances. With watercolour Christel had shaded grey areas along the west coast that were thick with mangroves, and other places, to the north, where wide estuaries gaped into the strait. She had rendered the interior green, where the rainforests were thickest, daubed blue circles for the jewel-like lakes and marked green lines for the creeks. She left white the vast surf beaches of the east coast, some fourteen miles away. There were symbols to indicate vast middens, spilling the discarded shells of *wong*. On the island's north-eastern tip she painted an orange protuberance of rock, Indian Head, where there had been stories of massacre. She marked the site on the map with an upright cross.

Christel continued, 'If it weren't for the likes of Mr Sheridan ...' Her eyes lit up when she spoke of the wealthy mainland pastoralist. He had paid Hilda's father well for their time here and Hilda suspected he must be disappointed that the field studies were still unpublished. Did Mr Sheridan also fear, as Hilda herself did, that his dream of making K'gari a reserve for the Badtjala was vanishing? On Mr Sheridan's large farm outside Maryborough, an old black woman lived alone by the river. Hilda had visited twice with her family and, both times, had gone to sleep to the sound of the old woman singing. The ghostly wail had come in waves across the paddocks and made the hairs rise along Hilda's arms.

Now, through the window, Hilda watches Bonny lift his nephew, Little Bonny, onto his back and they career over the sandy ridge to the beach.

She takes the pen and dips it into the well of deep-blue ink as she opens the new journal her father bought for her in Maryborough.

15 February 1882

'Shhh, listen.'

That is what my dear mother said to me as we sat here by the fire four long years ago. It was our first night on the island and I was twelve years old. I am writing this later – after my mother left us in May last year, the very day the comet appeared in the sky. She died from a cough that grew worse and worse until she could no longer breathe, despite the efforts of Mary and the other women to treat her with powerful medicine, made from plants, that I had seen work miracles. I am writing this after I lay across my father's lap, again by the fire, and we cried together in the days that followed my mother's passing, he and I and our new friends, wondering how we would go on. I had never before, and have not since, seen Papa cry. My body had by then made the change from girl to woman – I had been taken to the women's area for the ceremonies that marked that change, not all of them, only those I had been permitted to do – but, as much as I tried to be brave, I felt once again like a small child. I met eyes with Dorondera's young cousins, mere girls, on the other side of the campfire and an understanding passed between us. They had lost their mother, too.

It was the sight of Mama's journal in Papa's suitcase that prompted me to capture my memories on paper now, before I forget, for my father has received a letter from Germany that will bring an end to it all, at least for a time.

We are not to live here forever, as I had started to believe. My father has explained to me the contents of the correspondence, which the missionary, our postman, delivered a fortnight ago. It was an invitation from a man called Hagenbeck to return home, with the promise of free passage and an attractive wage for my father, if we

take three Badtjala natives with us. There is great interest to see them, and my father says if the dangers of extinction become known it may help the case for a reserve. 'Extinction.' Does Papa really believe it a possibility? These people are amongst the strongest I know. There is a painful gnawing in my stomach when I think of such grave possibilities, and a biliousness and loss of appetite that my father won't abide. 'I cannot have you becoming sick also,' he tells me, passing more food, a piece of wallaby or fish. Damper. He says that what is required is action, not emotion, and so we are to leave.

My head is still spinning.

I can barely remember my life before in Bremen, Germany – my supposed home, although I was just ten when we left. It was shortly after the bridge collapse, something Mama told me more about when I was old enough to understand. Twenty-four people died and the newspapers said Papa was to blame, as chief engineer. Papa felt the loss deeply, but outwardly he blamed faulty materials, naming a large supplier, a company he was to learn was owned by a government minister, and it was this that ended his employment, according to Mama. Mama shared the burden he felt for the loss of life and did not protest when he suggested finding work in Australia. Little did we know where that decision would lead, the change of direction our lives would take.

I have grown to think that I, too, belong on K'gari, although I envy the connection my friends here have, not just with their extended family but with this very place, and not just the living things but every grain of sand and tree and cloud in the sky and the spirit world that ties it all together. I have learned many things: how the sap from cotton trees heals rashes on the skin and how eucalypt leaves when sweated over a fire release an oil that keeps away mosquitos; how, if you cannot find water, you must dig at

the base of a casuarina tree, and that pandanus fruit is roasted or soaked before it is eaten; how bread can be made after soaking, grinding and cooking the pineapple-shaped cycad fruit, and how the roots of yams and ferns provide good and ready starch but that a number of yams must be returned to the soil for next year's harvest ... I sound romantic, but I have not always felt this way. In truth, it was a great shock when I first arrived, even though we had already spent two years in the colony, on the mainland, following Papa's work. Now I cannot imagine saying goodbye, except to some of the less appealing customs and foods, and the spiders and mosquitos. I will be pleased if I never see them again. And I am grateful that my friends are coming with us, although I cannot help but wonder if Mama would think that selfish.

Perhaps it will be good to go back. Papa says so. He thinks I am ready. He says it will be good for our friends also, and I must admit they seem enthusiastic, just as Papa contends.

Hilda rests the dip-pen across the inkwell and stands to stretch. Dry in the mouth with thirst and slick with sweat, she goes to the table at the foot of her father's bed and pours a glass of water from the jug they keep there. Each evening, she fills the pottery jug from the nearby creek and makes a habit of checking the contents of her glass for insect larvae before she drinks, secretly afraid that if she missed one, or two, the larvae would grow into mosquitos inside her. It is only since her mother died that Hilda and her father have shared this front room, their single beds pressed to either side. Sometimes she sees her father lying awake, illuminated in the moonlight that steals through the window shutter. Her own bed is unlit and affords her the chance to gaze unnoticed at her father as he stares sadly at the ceiling or blindly in her direction. In the small back room where her parents

once slept together, her father now keeps his boxes of books and a crate of artefacts.

Louis's elbow-patched coat hangs from the end of his bedpost, the envelope from Germany protruding from the pocket. Hilda remembers the visiting missionary delivering it, her father's keenness to see what it said and his desire for the man to be gone.

'It is with some reluctance that I pass this on to you, Herr Müller. I have not heard much of Herr Hagenbeck, but Barnum, the American equivalent, is, as you know, a fraud. Am I right that you also received correspondence some weeks ago from him?' the missionary asked. His repeated and ill-pronounced use of the German title 'Herr' failed to impress Hilda's father, who shook his head dismissively, yet he used his penknife to carefully slice open the envelope so that the return address remained intact. On the envelope's reverse side, Hilda made out the word 'Hamburg' and a crest in the shape of a lion.

The missionary, his eyes on Louis's tanned hands and the letter he was unfolding, continued, 'Although, if just a fraction of that man Barnum's earnings could be spent taking the Lord's message back to these camps ...' He lifted the brim of his straw hat to look about him, taking in the ramshackle shelters, the fire-cleared patches amongst the coastal scrub and the overgrown path that led to the failed mission station. Mary, an old woman with kind, dark eyes, who knew the names and uses of all the plants on the island, was dragging a wet blanket out into the sun to dry. She would need all her patience. The grey blanket steamed in the afternoon sun into air still thick with the previous day's rains. Another rolling storm was inking the sky to the north. With slender black arms, the woman hauled the blanket, branded with the initials of the Queensland Government, over a eucalypt bough and hit it with a branch, but the wet sand stuck. The letters 'QG' were only faintly visible. Beside the blanket was a possum skin, glossy and almost dry.

Hilda's father held his wire-rimmed glasses slightly askew, so that he could look over the crack in the right lens to the letter and an accompanying photographic print. He said nothing, but whatever the content of the mail, it absorbed him completely. Hilda would even go as far as saying it unsettled him, and that was rare, although he was practised at concealing his concerns. She saw a flash of the photograph: a tall man wearing a suit and hat, standing with a group of dark-skinned people dressed in white robes. When her father had finished reading, he took a long breath and exhaled. He returned the letter and the print to the envelope, looking up again as if he had journeyed very far and was surprised to have arrived back where he had started.

The missionary droned on, oppressive like the day. He swatted a mosquito on his neck and Hilda saw a long smudge of blood as he drew his hand away.

'Indeed, if Hagenbeck could be convinced to provide some Christian teachings, some exposure to grand cathedrals and the glory of church choirs ... Well, we might even be blessed with black prophets on their return. It would lighten our load.' He nodded as if enlightened by someone else's comment.

The missionary watched Hilda's father place the envelope in his pocket.

'Anyway, for now the burden is ours and ours alone,' the missionary continued. He tipped his frayed sunhat forwards again and turned in the direction of the longboat that had delivered him here from a schooner anchored in the strait. Beneath his too-short trousers, the man's shoes were filling with the island's fine sand. In what mainland abode would he deposit the salt-like mound, Hilda wondered. Did he have a wife and children? Would a baby crawl to the sand and, pinching some of it in its fat fingers, sample it in its mouth, only to spit it out again, a long line of gritty drool that would appall its Christian mother? And if the missionary had a family, why did he never bring them with him to the island? But, of course, Fraser

Island's reputation preceded it. The failed mission, and the quarantine station that followed it, had left behind just the small cemetery, a splintering attempt at a church, and a diminishing group of the island's original inhabitants – many of whom had added the story of the Lord to their repertoire of beliefs. And, before that, the Scotswoman Eliza Fraser had survived a shipwreck here, later telling audiences in Hyde Park that her black rescuers were cannibals.

'It's your decision,' the missionary called over his shoulder.

'Not just mine,' Louis answered into the wind.

'No. The Lord's too. You are right. Consult well.' He waved his hand behind his head in farewell.

Hilda caught the expression on her father's face, and they shared a brief smile. Whomever he would be consulting, it wouldn't be the Lord.

'Papa?'

'Later.' He kissed her forehead.

But her father did not show the letter to her, choosing instead to tell her of its contents: the invitation to go back to Germany, the idea to take three of their friends. He made it sound, indeed, like a God-given opportunity, if one believed in God.

Now, the morning sun rising steeply, burning off the mist blanketing the banksias and other flowering plants of the woodland understorey, it is Hilda who holds the envelope. Through a crack in the hut's crooked door, she sees her father and Jurano coming along the southern track into the camp. Jurano is carrying his spear and a fish. Louis takes a seat cross-legged on the white sand beside Jurano and begins sharpening a stone tool against a larger rock the way he was taught. He laughs warmly at something Jurano says, then tests the sharpness of the tool by slicing a long fair hair from his own head. The Badtjala man nods at his student, who at forty-four is exactly twice his age, and slowly claps his hands. Jurano's laughter is high-pitched. It is the kind of laughter that is difficult not to take part in, but today Hilda stays quiet.

Her nightdress clings and she opens the window shutter wider beside

her father's bed. Dorondera and her young cousins are already some distance along the beach collecting shellfish, dillybags bulging on strings around their necks, a white ribbon flashing in Dorondera's hair. The ribbon was a gift from Hilda's father. Bonny is there also, broad-backed and handsome, with Little Bonny on his shoulders, scouting. Little Bonny calls out and Bonny sets his nephew on the ground, casts his spear and hauls up a flapping fish. Like Jurano, Bonny knows which fish come when and where. When they are netting, he has learned not to take the first school of fish in the season, for they are swimming ahead, looking for danger, and to wait for the black wattles to flower before looking for diamond-scale mullet in the beach's gutter.

Hilda moves deeper into the shadows of the shelter in case her father should look up. He has told her often enough that it is wrong to read another person's mail, but her mother had impressed upon her, too, that it is wrong to keep secrets, and she cannot help but feel her father is doing just that. She looks at the *carte de visite* and reads the text in the margin: *C. Hagenbeck with Nubians. Carl Hagenbeck's Thierpark, Hamburg.* The black men are pictured with elephants. Hagenbeck is leaning on a stick, his beard neatly trimmed, a light-coloured homburg on his head.

Sweat is building on Hilda's face and under her nightdress, and she is overwhelmed with the need for cooler air. In the small back room, she quickly changes into a white cotton day dress that belonged to her mother and takes the letter and *carte de visite* pressed to her skirts as she exits the shelter, walking swiftly until she is safely behind the hut and hidden in the shade of a pandanus. If her father saw her leave, he will assume she has continued on, following the narrow path through the banksias, and is relieving herself in the privacy afforded by the canvas screen he erected there for her. He will keep an ear out in case she shouts, *Snake!*

Hilda wipes her hands against the dress and opens the letter, gold-green under the pandanus frond. In the dappled light, a mosquito swarm hums.

She takes several leaves from a neighbouring eucalypt, crushes them against her skin, and reads in German:

Sehr geehrter *Herr Müller*,

I am proud to have pioneered anthropozoological exhibitions to meet the great public interest in seeing exotic peoples firsthand, and to facilitate the growing interest in anthropological science. It is to this end that I invite you to bring several Australian Aborigines to Germany. I am offering to sponsor your expenses, including your passage back to Europe.

You may be encouraged to know that I believe in showing people naturally, displaying their skill with weapons, their exotic dances and songs. In short, their culture. Perhaps you also have been contacted by the American P.T. Barnum, who I believe is advertising in Australia and contacting agents directly. Although I supply animals to Barnum's circuses, my approach to exhibiting exotic people cannot be compared with his.

Sincerely

C. Hagenbeck

Hilda breathes out. It is as her father explained, although she wonders if the German showman realises her father is an engineer by training, not strictly a scientist. Surely he has heard of him and the scandal of the bridge. She re-reads the end of the letter and recalls the missionary asking if her father had also received mail from the 'fraud' Barnum. Seeing that her father is still occupied with Jurano, Hilda returns to the hut and searches the papers piled in the back room. The stack is high and Hilda rifles through correspondence from various German

scientists and a letter in French from a man named St Hilaire. She doesn't stop to read it, concerned her father will catch her amongst his things before she has found what she is looking for, if it is even here. Finally, she locates an envelope bearing a green Washington stamp.

9 October 1881

Dear Sir,

I desire to carry out as far as possible an idea I have long entertained of forming a collection, in pairs or otherwise, of all the uncivilized races in existence and my present object is to ask your kindness to render me what assistance is in your power to acquire any specimens of these uncivilized peoples.

My aim is to exhibit to the American public, not only human beings of different races but also, where practicable, those who possess extraordinary peculiarities such as giants, dwarfs, singular disfigurements of the person, dexterity in the use of weapons, dancing, singing, juggling, unusual feats of agility etc.

The remuneration of these people in addition to their board and travelling expenses is usually nominal. I shall see that they are presented with fancy articles such as are acceptable and a small allowance monthly. If interpreters should be absolutely necessary please inform me what would be the cost which must be moderate. For yourself I should be glad to reimburse you for any outlay.

I wish to thank you kindly to favor me with an early reply as convenient.

Yours faithfully,

P.T. Barnum

Heat rises in Hilda's neck and face, and a sick feeling consumes her. Why hadn't her father told her that he had received this? Surely he would not have anything to do with a venture that collects people as curiosities and promises them 'fancy articles', as if they were children. Apart from the missionary's comments, her knowledge of Barnum comes from an out-of-date newspaper from America that made its way onto the island. Her parents had requested newspapers from visiting ships, and there was no shortage of young men keen to deliver them to the camp where they had heard a young German woman was living amongst blacks. In the article, under a banner that read 'The Greatest Show on Earth', Barnum was pictured posing with Jumbo the elephant, recently acquired from London Zoo, according to the bold type in the margin. An image comes to Hilda's mind of the showman, tufts of thick, clown-like hair on either side of his balding head. Was her father also planning to take them all to America? She feels suddenly chilled despite the warmth of the day as she emerges from the hut.

'Papa,' she calls, and her father raises his head, a smile still on his lips. The smile goes when he sees her holding the envelope with the distinctive green stamp. He stands and walks towards her, telling Jurano in Badtjala that he will return to his lesson soon.

'Hilda, *Liebchen*,' he says, studying her. 'What are you doing going through my things?' He sighs as he reaches for the mail, but she refuses to hand it to him, clutching both letters instead behind her back like she used to with a find her parents considered dangerous – a nail or screw or piece of iron from a construction project on the outskirts of the colony. He takes another long breath. His bare chest, stronger since their arrival on K'gari, expands and slowly contracts. He lets out a warm chuckle as one might do if amused by a child, yet something in his expression suggests he is nervous.

Hilda is aware of tears welling in her eyes. Didn't he see her now as a companion as well as a daughter, someone he could confide in?

'Why didn't you tell me that Barnum had contacted you?' she asks. 'It's awful what he wrote.' She walks towards the fire.

'Because it is of no concern. I have declined Barnum's offer.' Louis shakes his head and Hilda stops, reluctantly placing the mail in his outstretched hand.

'Hagenbeck is precisely what Barnum is *not*,' he says. 'Why would I bother you with the rantings of that showman?'

Hilda releases her own withheld breath as her father continues.

'I am forcing no one. Herr Hagenbeck's offer is generous and our friends have accepted the invitation. They will gain so much, if Bonny is not too proud to learn.' He smiles and takes her hand. 'They are excited, Hilda. As I hope you are.' He studies her. 'You don't doubt Hagenbeck's intentions? Is there something else concerning you?'

Hilda shakes her head.

'Good. It will be wonderful. For *all* of us. Trust me. They will return as heroes.' He leans forwards and kisses her cheek, then releases her hand.

Hilda hears laughter from the beach and sees Dorondera's young cousins tugging at her arms, asking to be twirled around, reminding Hilda of a fairground ride. Little Bonny is riding on his uncle's back. Hilda's eyes remain on Bonny for a time and he looks in her direction, smiling. She waves.

'I hope so,' she says.

'Regardless, it is not safe anymore for them here. And if they're moved to the mainland, Dorondera will end up like her sister, wiping some settler child's nose. Bonny and Jurano might get farm work, if they're lucky ...'

Her father looks towards Jurano, who is now talking with his wife and again laughing lightheartedly at something, perhaps even making a joke at their expense.

'Jurano will miss his wife. She really doesn't want to come?' Hilda asks.

'No. I offered several times. She doesn't want to join us.'

'What if he gets sick? What if any of them get sick?'

'People fall ill here, too, Hilda.' He looks at her pointedly and she knows he is talking of her mother. 'I need you to be supportive. There is a great deal of interest to see them before ...'

'Before they are all dead?' She quickly wipes her face dry with her sleeve, the lace cuffs of her mother's dress almost entirely worn away. She had hoped her father had been exaggerating the case and that the worst of the deaths were over, although she had heard rumours of recent 'dispersals', the government word for massacres, according to her mother. More shootings. Poisoned flour. Her thoughts race. Won't there be outrage soon?

'You told me you wouldn't let that happen,' she says. There is a rising panic within her. It was the same when her father first announced that they were leaving for Australia. 'These people are not weak, they are being killed!'

Jurano looks up from his own conversation and stares towards them.

Louis reaches out and squeezes Hilda's shoulder. He presses the index finger of his other hand to his lips, asking that she speak more quietly.

'It is why I want to take them overseas. To find an audience. Your mother always wished others to see our friends as we have,' he says, his voice low. He pats her shoulder and starts again with growing conviction. 'I simply cannot stand by and do nothing while they are moved off the island as some say will happen within the year. Your mother's life, her death, must count for something. It is my greatest hope that there will soon be an Aboriginal reserve bearing her name.' He looks at Hilda intently, and she is surprised to see that he is holding back tears.

She speaks more softly. Cautiously. 'When? You still haven't told me.'

He drops his hand to his side. 'A German ship is arriving in ten days. It can take us.'

‘So soon? You didn’t say.’ She shakes her head and glances back at him. She remembers her father’s trip to Maryborough just a few days ago. He said he needed to send some telegrams. ‘To Hamburg?’

‘We’ll start in Germany, as I told you. The ship’s owner has asked a fair price for the passage, which, as you see, Herr Hagenbeck has agreed to pay. We also have invitations to visit France.’

‘France?’

‘I was going to tell you these details soon, now that all the plans are in place. I wanted to be sure, so as not to disappoint you.’ He lifts her chin with the tips of his fingers. ‘I will never keep anything from you, Hilda. You are my entire world.’

He looks at her with such love that she feels guilty for having doubted him. Christel had many robust discussions with her husband and, remembering her holding him afterwards, Hilda steps forwards and embraces her father. She feels his body relax as he clutches her in return. He is silent for a time, then holds her out in front of him by the shoulders, shaking his head, his eyes slanting with his smile. How she loves that smile. How it anchors her in an uncertain world.

‘I thought you would be more excited, Hilda. You’re a young woman now. There are so many more possibilities for you back home. Look at you.’ He waves his hand in admiration, the silver ring with the family crest glinting in the sun. He has only recently started wearing the ring again.

‘Beautiful, smart, wilful,’ he continues, laughing on the last word. Laughter is something he has done more of since being on the island, although less so in the last year. ‘Your mother would have been so proud.’ He looks down at the beach, serious again. ‘Of them, too.’

‘And when will you bring them back?’

He picks a dry frond from a *dja’ga* plant, the one the settlers call black boy because of its spear-like flowering body, and feeds it into the gap between his front teeth.

‘You will bring them back?’

‘Of course,’ he says. ‘When tensions here have eased and we have finished our tour. When we have drawn sufficient attention. Bonny says he wants to meet the Queen of England, no less. He wants to tell her personally what the native people of this colony are suffering in her name.’ As if thinking Bonny’s request quaint, Louis twirls the long grass-like leaf in his smile.

Why hadn’t Bonny told her of this? ‘Then we must,’ she says, turning towards the beach.

‘Hilda?’ Her father’s voice rises, and she looks back over her shoulder to again face him. ‘Tell me you’re excited.’

She thinks it over. ‘Of course,’ she says, gifting him a smile before running, barefoot, as fast as she can to the water’s edge and to her friends.

PART ONE



❧ 1 ❧

From the journal of Hilda Müller:

Midday, 24 February 1882

This morning, the day before we are to leave, we made impressions in plaster of our friends' feet and hands so that we might gift a set to Mr Sheridan who has been so generous, sending a new hat for me, rimmed with a sky-blue ribbon, and continuing to provide Papa with a wage, despite our meagre achievements here. Papa had the idea to make the prints some days ago, and straight away ordered from the Maryborough doctor's surgery a bag of plaster, intended for broken limbs. Our friends regarded the sack curiously when it arrived via a local cutter early today and Papa mixed its white contents with fresh water from the stream. He poured the slurry into a shallow dish right there on the beach under the blazing sun.

'It is like making a footprint in sand,' Papa told Bonny, whom he had asked to go first. He spoke in Badtjala, not badly but still not well. 'Except it last for all time, like Yindingie's.' He pointed across the strait to where the spirit's footprint had been immortalised in stone on a mainland beach.

Bonny tentatively pressed his foot into the mix and we waited for some time for the plaster to be dry enough for him to lift his foot out without the impression's sides and tiny details collapsing. In the heat it took perhaps a quarter of an hour I am guessing, although I had removed Mama's pendant watch for the occasion in case it became damaged, Papa having told me I may need to assist. All of us looked on in wonderment at the perfect likeness, the delicate ridged rings of each toe print replicated exactly alongside a perfect copy of a eucalyptus leaf that had landed in the dish when the plaster was still wet. The impression was passed reverently between us like something sacred, and Papa and I had to find as many dishes and bowls as we could muster to meet the sudden demand. I tried to make a dish from a palm frond, but the plaster slurry ran from it in a swift, white stream. Dorondera crouched low and made a print of her right hand and, in a separate dish, Bonny did the same. Little Bonny bent down and was about to press his face into a fresh bowl of plaster when Old Jack and I told him not to.

'How would you breathe?' Old Jack asked him, nipping the end of the boy's nose between wrinkled fingers.

Dorondera's cousins laughed as they pushed their small fists in a ring around Dorondera's hand, the plaster already quite firm and the resulting outlying impressions, which reminded me of flower petals, consequently shallow. Even one of the camp dingoes, which here are called wang'ari, was enticed towards a dish, a piece of meat placed as bait on the other side so the animal had to step onto the wet plaster to retrieve its meal. We all laughed, scaring the poor creature, its paw print smudging in haste. By day's end, as the sun sets over the strait and our view of the vast continent on the other side dims, there will be more ghostly prints laid out on the sand than there are Badtjala people looking on.

When Papa was no longer watching, I removed my gloves and mixed a slurry from the last few handfuls of plaster dust left in the sack. I made an impression of my own hand. Again, Dorondera's cousins pressed their fists around the perimeter making a flower shape. Once Papa had returned to us on the beach, I asked him which print was mine and which was Dorondera's but he could not tell them apart.



Hilda sat beside Dorondera at the campfire as she had done most nights since arriving on K'gari. Tomorrow the ship would arrive to take them across oceans to distant shores. Dorondera clapped two sticks together, cutting open the stillness with the sharp rhythmic sound, steady as a heartbeat, and Hilda wondered what her friend would make of Europe and how that crowded continent would understand her. The other women seated around the fire joined in the music-making, slapping the palms of their hands against their bare thighs. Bonny sang with the old men, some of whom were now striking shields with nulla or clashing together *bar'gan*, which others called boomerangs. As they sang their stories, Hilda translated in her head, sometimes hearing her mother singing, for she had learned the songs, too: when the *bu'boo* flowers, it is time to climb trees for the *gu'ru'i* – forest possums; when the fruit on passionfruit vines are ripe, *wangai* – carpet snakes – are fat and good for eating; when the waterlily blooms, collect *babaram* – river mussels; when the *wi'ri* – currajong tree – is in blossom, the bream will run and the time is right to search for yams on the beaches; and when the chestnut blooms, then you can hunt *mi'bir* – turtles.

The fine hairs on Hilda's arms and neck rose as the singing moved through her.

Bonny stood from the circle and moved closer to the fire. At almost six feet, he was of average height among Badtjala men, his body strong from hunting and good food. Naked except for a loin covering, he started to dance, making shadows against the surrounding vegetation. Dorondera's young cousins nestled in behind Hilda and giggled as they played with her long red hair. Little Bonny dozed across Hilda's lap, holding a plaster impression of Bonny's handprint. Every now and then the boy opened his eyes and put his own hand in the impression his uncle's hand had made. What future lay ahead for this boy, Hilda wondered. What stories would he tell his children? Christel had sourced English books in Maryborough and sometimes read fairytales to Little Bonny and to Dorondera's young cousins. She had said she would one day write a special story for Little Bonny, whom she had taken a special liking to, but, to Hilda's knowledge, she never started it.

'He's a good dancer, your uncle,' Hilda said in English, looking away from Bonny briefly to kiss the boy's forehead, which felt hot from the fire. It would help the child, she thought, to learn some more settler words. German would be of no value to him. 'And he knows a lot, so listen to him.'

Generations of experience and knowledge were stored in her friend's head; more, she sometimes thought, than in the many maps and books on the natural world her father carted about, although she would not tell either of them that.

At Hilda's feet, a dingo twitched, then leapt to standing. Ears alert and forwards, it stared into the forest and howled. The men stopped singing, and Jurano reached for his spear. In the other hand he held a nulla-nulla, its heavy club end hanging at his side. Hilda held Little Bonny tight and tried to read whether Jurano was concerned, but he gave nothing away. Neither did Bonny. Dorondera was sitting beside Hilda, totally still.

Jurano waited. A dull thud, then a scamper. Jurano threw the spear and

ran forwards. He lifted the weapon and gave a high-pitched laugh. The possum hung off the spear's end, its legs briefly persistent in their wild scrabbling. In the next arc of movement, Jurano threw the animal onto the fire before covering it with hot white sand and flaming coals. The dingo sank again onto the warm ground and rested its head on its front paws, its ears searching front and sideways still. *Shh, listen.*

Hilda pressed her lips to Little Bonny's ear and whispered in the language of the Badtjala that all was well again, his confused expression revealing she had been alone in her fear. Jurano and the others, even Little Bonny, knew well the sound of a possum. Still, Hilda could not shake her sense of disquiet. According to Old Mary, the thirty people in this settlement were among the survivors of a population that just a generation before had numbered in the low thousands during winter, when the group travelled from the mainland to the island for the seasonal influx of *gaar'ba'nya*, mullet. There were more Badtjala living a few kilometres further south on K'gari, and several dozen more still on the mainland, but the greatest number now lay under the sand in unmarked graves.

Hilda stroked Little Bonny's forehead. His parents were amongst the dead, his mother from disease, his father from a rifle bullet – a single shot to the back.

Careful not to step over his elders' legs or walk between them and the fire, Jurano resumed his place. Hilda urged Little Bonny to return to sleep, and the two girls once again took hold of Hilda's hair and tied the long tresses into impossible knots. One of the girls whispered to the other and they began to tie Dorondera's and Hilda's hair together, although Hilda pretended not to realise.

'Hold this piece,' one of them said in her native tongue, and Hilda obediently held out the tangled section of hair, freeing the girl to concentrate on her knot tying. Later, Dorondera and Hilda would release themselves and the girls would laugh. Tomorrow, Hilda would complain,

as she did most mornings when she tried to make sense of the mess the girls had made, but not tonight.

She reminded herself that long journeys were nothing new to the Badtjala. In previous decades, before the escalating wars with settlers, they had gathered with other groups in large mainland corroborees when the bunya trees produced their bountiful harvest of nuts. There they had performed songs, competed in boomerang- and spear-throwing, and traded information on bush medicine. They bartered what they had: weapons, tools, stories, and, later, tobacco carefully wrapped in leaves. Hilda's mother had written all of this in her journal, itself a jungle decorated with fronds of leaf and vine and notations about the ailments that each plant could mend. She had recorded Badtjala words as she heard them pronounced: *yuangan* for dugong, *paiy'um* for pipe, *kum'bar* or *kun'du* for bark canoe. Sometimes she wrote in brackets beside the words the spelling that Louis insisted was more correct, *gom'bar* for canoe, for example, or *baiyum* for pipe, although it was not the way the words were spoken. Occasionally, Christel read aloud from her journal, sections in which she tried to imagine how life was for the people they were living amongst. 'It's important to listen, Hilda,' she said. 'But also to imagine. There is more than one way of seeing.' It would be Hilda's one day, that book. For now, it remained with her father, packed into the nailed-shut crate of artefacts.

Dorondera began to strike her thighs with her hands and this time the old women sang until their voices filled the night sky, looping around the distant stars before returning. Bonny resumed his energetic dance, his body shimmering in the firelight, his concentrated expression breaking from time to time into a wide smile. Hilda shivered with the excitement of imagining Bonny performing like this for audiences overseas. She pictured the pale faces, captivated. Little Bonny was again awake. His eyes followed his uncle, whose chest and shoulders shone with stripes of white ochre, highlighting the rows of scars across his chest.