

# PROLOGUE

## 1946

**I**n the final weeks of 1941, when I was adrift in life and my sister was missing in a war zone, my father offered our home as sanctuary to a young Japanese woman named Mitsy Sennosuke, unaware that I was in love with her. This was in Broome, in the north-west, at the time of the invasion of Malaya, when Japanese bombs were falling like silver rain and old certainties were crumbling, when some who had been our friends were now treated as aliens, transfigured by enmity and fear.

My father, Michael Penrose, was a pearling master. He ran six luggers, crewed by Malays, Manilamen and Koepangers, with one Japanese diver on each lugger, and owned Penrose Chandlery Supplies, an airy tin-and-flywire shop situated at the head of the jetty that juts into Roebuck Bay.

We lived at the southern end of Broome, where many of the master pearlmen lived. Broome was a straggling mile of wood and corrugated-iron shops and dwellings, and our house was a typical timber

and iron bungalow on stilts, with broad verandahs on all sides, shuttered windows and a kitchen separate from the rest of the house. Creepers choked the verandahs. Houses like ours were built to capture the cool morning and evening sea winds. The sun always beat down, but it reached us—on the verandah or in one of the rooms—as gauzy light through the creepers or banded through the shutters. We enjoyed our tropical existence: mangoes and barramundi on the table, bamboo furniture, siestas, sundowners, pearlshell ashtrays, servants.

But together with the cheerful clamour, an atmosphere of faint pain surrounded our house. My father had preserved my mother's name upon the bow and stern of his leading lugger, the *Ida Penrose*, but the love that had inspired it was increasingly under strain in my teenage years, as my mother grew to hate Broome in all of its moods and almost, almost, to hate Alice, my father and me.

She was from England, originally, and had been governess to some inland children when my father met her. You could say that, unlike the rest of us, she did not have red dirt, mangroves or pearls in her blood.

I want to be fair to my mother. She loved Alice and me, and, for a long time, loved my father. It's even possible that she continued to love my father after she left us and returned to England to be

with her elderly mother, but that's something I'll never know. But I do know that she wanted the best for us.

It could not have been easy for her. We were too careless, too casual, too democratic for her tastes. Our lives revolved around the seasons and the sea. There were two seasons—the Wet, from November to March, when the north-west was subject to cyclones, and the Dry, when the waters were safe again. During the long months of the Wet, my father would grumble about in his shop, undertake pointless maintenance of his luggers, which were laid up along the Dampier Creek mudflats, or bicker at home with my mother. He'd meddle in the garden and itch to be more useful than he was. Then, blessedly, the skies would clear and his mood would lift, and he'd put to sea again in the *Ida Penrose*, leading his little fleet to the pearling grounds. But sometimes he'd not return for weeks at a time, and that worried my mother.

So she chafed. She wanted coolness, calmness, greenness. She wanted England. She filled the house with Dickens, Austen, Keats, the Brontë sisters, and we read them to please her, but were too restless and unused to reflection to talk to her about our reading, and my father and I preferred travellers' tales of remote Australia—books about ourselves, in other words—which left her cold.

She'd push *Great Expectations* into our hands, and we'd say, 'Too thick, I'll never get through it.'

The garden was symptomatic of her alienation. It consisted of a lawn divided by white shellgrit paths, a scattering of coconut, fan and traveller palms, and poincianas, frangipani and bougainvillea, all of it severely groomed, but attractive to corellas and yellow-necked lorikeets. Over the years my father had dragged home old lugger anchors, diving helmets and huge stone jars, and stationed them like so much statuary among the trees. Where my mother wanted the sort of profusion that can be found in an English garden, where she could have wandered and mused and loaded her arms with cuttings whenever she wanted, she got my father's bizarre mix of orderliness, rust and verdigris. She'd wanted a gentleman, and got a man who gave off a seawrack sense of sweat and humble, dirty hands.

He said to her once accusingly, 'Ida, you want me to be a verandah pearler.'

She dabbed at the perspiration on her brow with a scented linen handkerchief. 'Michael, I want you home, I want you safe.'

My father was scornful of verandah pearl-ers. They were men who, in prosperous times, wore white duck suits, white buckskin shoes and solar topees, and who, even when times were bad, never put to sea.

‘You want me to play tennis with the magistrate and bridge with the bank manager and get us invited to dinner parties,’ my father said.

Stiff, uncomfortable, reproving, my mother left the room. In the silence that followed, my father rolled a cigarette, stuck it in the corner of his mouth and said to Alice and me, in his winking, chiacking, kidding way, ‘Poor old Mum, she’d like to live in a big house, somewhere cool, with lots of servants.’

Alice pushed back her chair. ‘That’s not true. That’s not fair.’

My father tried to laugh it off. ‘Well, you know...’

I left the room with Alice. Our relationship with our mother was often awkward, but we didn’t like to take sides. We knew that Ida wanted only to feel less at odds with the world in which she’d found herself. She had no-one to talk to, no-one listened, and so, in her loneliness and frustration, she seemed to develop the snobberies and prejudices of a colonial wife in the tropics.

It’s hardly surprising, then, that she recoiled from the racial mix of Broome. She hated it when Alice and I spent time with Bin Mahomet, Lefinas Maloki and Simeon Espada, the deckhands on the *Ida Penrose*. I don’t recall that she ever wandered into Chinatown. And she certainly didn’t approve of our friendship with the Sennosuke family. She

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Garry Disher

didn't trust them. She suspected them of strange practices. She'd have said, dismissively, 'Oh, don't be silly, Hart,' if I'd admitted to being in love with Mitsy Sennosuke.

But she did understand love itself. She did understand what it is to love someone different from yourself. She understood what it is to wait for something to change, just as I'm waiting now, waiting for Mitsy to come back to me.