

Falling into Queensland

Jacqueline George

FALLING INTO QUEENSLAND

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Dedication

I am lucky enough to live in Cooktown, in the far north of Queensland. It's a great place, and I cannot imagine having to live anywhere else. I like it a lot, but this is the first time I have been tempted to write about it.

So let me start by saying that this story is definitely NOT set in Cooktown. My neighbours can search the pages as much as they like, but they will not find themselves or their town. Well, not exactly. I hope they will recognise the open, helpful friendliness that is offered to any stranger. And probably the ability to make a good life in circumstances that would drive the average city dweller nuts. I want to take the chance to thank them all, just for being the people they are.

I also need to thank the small band of readers who read the early text and gave me their comments. They were quite merciless, which is a good thing for any writer. They helped shape the book and make it into a story I hope you will enjoy. They did not completely eliminate the typos. The wretched things hide away in the text and even now I cannot be sure they have all been found. I suppose I should not write them in the first place.

Finally I want to thank Mr Charles Bracher for his generous advice about money laundering regulations. I had better add that he bears absolutely no resemblance to Rupert or Jeremy, and I am sure he would never behave like either of them.

Cooktown, July 2011

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Chapter 1

Shirley was not prepared for the sight of Cape Tribulation. All she knew of Australia was pictures of the outback. Eucalypts, ramshackle buildings, windmills silhouetted against a red sun. Or surfing at Bondi Beach and images of the Opera House towering over Sydney Harbour. She had seen nothing like the country below.

The small plane dropped and bumped up again as if it had hit a mid-air pothole. Her heart jumped with it and she had to consciously relax her grip on her seat arm. She had never flown in a small plane before, and she had never flown so low. The jungle beneath was thick and dark, and so *near*. The individual trees were quite clear and would not welcome the plane if – God forbid – anything were to go wrong. She could not see the ground below their branches. The thick, shaggy wildness blanketed mountains and deep valleys. It was an untamed place.

They were flying north along the Queensland coast. When she looked through the windows across the narrow aisle of the plane she had glimpses of the rich blue of the Coral Sea. Aquamarine shallows beaded the horizon. The Great Barrier Reef. The plane's course was taking them gently out over the water, and as she looked down from her window the jungle gave way to sea. A quiet, clear sea that did not hide its bed. The change from jungle to ocean was abrupt; the waves must have been lapping at the feet of the trees. The sharp dividing line was broken rarely by pocket beaches, and by small rivers whose cloudy water stained the tide. There were no houses or roads.

Cape Tribulation passed rapidly astern. She was following their progress on a tourist map she had picked up from the hostel in Cairns and waiting to see Cooktown, the biggest settlement along the coast. When it came it was disappointing. A pocket handkerchief of a place, a few houses nestled at the mouth of a muddy river with a tarmac airstrip out on the flood plain. It too passed quickly below them. Shirley pressed her cheek to the window and searched as far ahead as she could. She wanted to see Port Bruce.

She did not see it until the last moment. They crossed a rocky arm thrust out into the sea and Port Bruce was a cluster of houses on the far side. It flashed by and the plane banked over the Strickland River and lined up to land. They sank low over brown water before rushing at tree top level over the mangrove swamp to bump down on the grass beyond.

Everywhere she looked was impossibly green. The rich grass of the airstrip was walled in by jungle. As the plane swung to a stop, the terminal building came into view. It sat on low stilts, surrounded by neat grass. The building was painted in cream and dark green, and had a shiny red roof. Palm trees stood around it. Too sweet. They had arrived in Toy Town.

The cabin door opened onto the same steamy heat she had left at Cairns. Shirley followed the other passengers to the nose of the plane where the pilot was unloading luggage. Her suitcase was at the bottom and she helped him manoeuvre it out of the baggage compartment.

“You moving house, mate? You’ve got enough stuff there.” He was young and smiling, quite handsome in his pocketed white shirt with epaulettes.

“Something like that. Do you know how I get into town? Is there a bus?”

“A bus, love?” he said with a smile. “You’ll have a long wait. No – just ask some of the others. Some one’ll give you a lift.”

She dragged her suitcase uncomfortably across the grass towards the terminal building and its parked cars. The other passengers had already met their families and would soon be gone. She would have to hurry if she wanted to beg a lift.

A chunky bare-foot woman hung back and waited. “Going into town? Where you going? Dave’s place?”

“Er – Coconut Grove?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yup – Dave’s place. Want a lift?” Without waiting for an answer, she reached for Shirley’s suitcase and lifted it effortlessly. “What’s your name, anyway? I’m Marilyn.”

“Shirley.”

“Good – pleased to meet you, Shirley. Welcome to Port Bruce. You on holiday?”

“Yes – sort of. I just wanted to look around.”

“Ah-ha! Another sucker looking for a tropical paradise. Join the club. Just don’t stay too long.” Marilyn led her to an old Toyota ute and swung the suitcase up into the back. “Get off it, you stupid mongrel,” she said to the dog in the back who was trying to lick her face. “This is Floozy. Don’t get too close or the stupid tart’ll be all over you. You’re in luck – I’ve just dropped off my old man so you can ride in the front.”

Shirley clambered up into the ute. Inside it was worn and untidy. Marilyn slammed her door and turned the key. The Toyota gave a solid clunk and refused to respond. “Oh bugger!” muttered Marilyn, “You wouldn’t believe how long I’ve been nagging Ian about this. Shit, shit, shit! It always happens when he’s not here. You’d better come over here and start it when I tell you. I’ll get under the bonnet.”

Marilyn had the bonnet up by the time Shirley had slid across into the driver’s seat. She watched the other passengers disappear down the dirt road in their four-wheel drives and waited for Marilyn’s call.

“Right,” shouted Marilyn from under the bonnet, “Foot on the throttle – half way – and give it a try.” The engine clattered into life and Marilyn slammed the bonnet shut. She came to the door. “It’ll be OK now. Move over – unless you want to drive. And you don’t want to do that – believe me. This old thing can be a real cantankerous bastard sometimes.”

The dirt road out of the airstrip was rough and potholed. The highway beyond was also dirt; not too many potholes but the entire surface was corrugated. The ute shook crazily as Marilyn picked up speed until they were skipping from crest to crest of the corrugations and the ride was smoother. The rattling of the ute made it impossible to speak. Shirley watched her saviour. Marilyn looked tough. Big arms and a grubby sleeveless top that might have been apricot and cheerful a long time ago. She had a rose tattooed on her shoulder with the word ‘Freedom’ on a banner beneath it.

Marilyn did not look like a rose. She was more like a man; square, strong, short brown hair. No figure to speak of, and baggy shorts that did not flatter what she had. She caught Shirley staring. “So – how long you staying?” she shouted over the rattling.

“I don’t know – I’ve got to check on a house.”

“Oh yes? Ah – you’d be John Collins’s niece, right? All the way from England?”

Shirley was taken aback. How did this woman know her?

“Don’t be surprised. We all liked old Johnno,” shouted Marilyn, “And everyone knows about you. No strangers in Port Bruce.”

Shirley watched the tall, dark jungle that walled in the road. Its lower leaves were brushed with dust from the cars. She looked back at the plume of dust they were drawing behind them. No wonder everything was dusty.

“Is it far? I mean, to town.”

“No – only a few clicks now. You tired?”

“Yes – I guess I am, a bit.”

“If you like, I’ll come round tomorrow and take you to the club. Introduce you. That sound good?”

Abruptly they bumped up onto the black top. The noise in the ute fell back to normal and now the trees beside the road looked fresh and clean. On either side there were half-hearted clearings in the jungle and small houses that sat privately in oases of grass and palm trees. They were pretty but dishevelled.

“Nearly there,” said Marilyn, “That’s the Pioneer Cemetery over there.” They were passing a large park with broken and irregular lines of graves scattered across short grass. “Got graves from gold rush times. And a Chinese section. Old Johnno’s there – see, over there at the back with the new graves. We put a temporary stake with a board to mark the spot. We were talking of having a whip round for a stone until we heard you were coming.”

Some of the headstones looked very old, blackened with lichen and leaning crazily. There were large areas with no stones – probably where wooden crosses had rotted away. In the failing sunlight it looked a cheerful place, clumps of palms and bougainvillea standing guard over the pioneers of Port Bruce. It was cared for and demanded a visit.

Marilyn swung into a side street. “That road carries on down to the wharf. It’s only a kilometre or so, if you want to walk. It’s the main street. Now – here’s Dave’s. I’ll come round about six tomorrow.”

Shirley rescued her suitcase from Floozy and stood waving as Marilyn pulled away without waiting to be thanked.

Coconut Grove was quiet. Reception was hidden down a tunnel of flowering creepers, but its shutter was closed. A hand-written note was stuck to it. *Back around 6 p.m. If you are checking in, take the key. See you.* Hanging beside the shutter was a key tied to a short length of varnished tree branch with the figure 7 burnt into it. She took it and went searching for her room.

The place was a rabbit warren, cobbled together from low concrete block buildings and transportable huts, all linked by deep, winding verandas. The ways were dark and made darker by the creepers hanging from the garden side. She climbed some steps and found a cockatoo waiting for her, bobbing and chuckling on the top step. Beyond him were the toilets and showers, male and female. She found number 7 on the far side of the complex, on a short veranda facing a patch of lawn.

The room was a cell, scarcely larger than its double bed. A large ceiling fan. A shelf with a mirror. A plastic garden chair. It was hot and smelt mouldy. She flicked the fan on and threw her suitcase onto the bed. She was suddenly very tired but she did not lie down. She had better go looking for the showers while there was still some light outside.

The tropical dusk was brief and it was already night when she left the shower. There was still no sign of light from the direction of Reception. She went back to her room and, with the window louvres a quarter open, she lay nude under the fan and let its wind caress her.

She came awake suddenly. It took a moment to find herself as she lay staring at the ceiling fan. Daylight outside. She had slept the night through. That's good, she thought, I must be getting over the jetlag. Wrapping her towel around her, she padded barefoot to the shower.

She was feeling hungry by the time she got to reception. It was open and a smiling old man was reading a newspaper. "Ah, you're John Collin's girl, right?"

"Well, his niece."

"Pleased to meet you!" He reached a large hand over the counter, "Byrnsie's the name. Welcome to Port Bruce."

"Er – Shirley."

"Shirley - good. Settled in OK? No problems?"

"No, but I didn't pay you."

"No worries. It's forty-five bucks a night – pay when you leave. Did you get a feed last night? No, I thought I didn't hear you. You must be starved. Well, there's the kiosk down by the wharf – that's where I'd go. Later on you could get a pie at the bakery, but he opens at eight and his coffee's not so good. Once you've settled in a bit, you can buy stuff at the mini-market and make your own breakfast. You want me to run you down?"

She decided to walk and put his offer on hold.

"And get some sun cream," he shouted after her, "And a hat, a proper one, not one of those golf hats. You're too white – you'll have ears like neon signs if you don't cover them up. Go to the Bazaar – Des'll take care of you. But he's not open 'til eight-thirty."

She walked back to the main road as Marilyn had showed her and turned towards town. The sun was already high in the sky and made her wrinkle her eyes. Tropical heat wrapped itself around her and her skin was moist.

The road was a narrow strip of asphalt between very wide grass verges. No cars were moving. On either side, coconut palms and dark, shiny mango trees were hanging over the grass. She knew they were mango trees because the ripe orange fruits were scattered beneath them. She wanted to pick one up and try it but was afraid someone would object.

The land on either side of the road was mostly empty and covered in shoulder high grass. Some houses sat in islands of cut grass, either old wooden Queenslanders on stumps or low modern houses built of concrete blocks. All had corrugated iron roofs, some fresh and some rusty. Most had a boat of some sort parked on a trailer in the front yard. The houses were untidy and ill cared for. There were no flower beds or fences or manicured lawns. With many more empty spaces than buildings, Port Bruce was a substantial town that hardly anyone lived in. On her right she could see scrappy jungle rising behind the houses. To her left, beyond the occupied and empty blocks, a dark line of mangroves fenced off the river.

The road undulated gently down towards the centre of town. Suddenly there were gutters and curb stones, hand built from rough hewn granite, with concrete pavements behind them. The business centre of Port Bruce stretched for two blocks with few gaps. A grand Australian corner pub welcomed visitors. The walkway was shaded by a deep upstairs veranda, with a long sign on its railings proclaiming 'The Port Bruce Hotel 1887'. At this time in the morning it was closed. Beyond it was the mini-market and a pharmacy, a drive-in bottle shop (closed), and a massively built neo-classical building with 'The Queensland Bank' carved across its portico. A relic of better days, now boarded up.

Across the road were the Government offices, all old-style wooden buildings on low stumps with deep, cool verandas. The Courthouse and Police Station. The Post Office. The spreading wings of the Shire Hall. An incongruous railway station containing only a hairdresser and a souvenir shop.

At least there were people here. Around the mini-market four wheel drive utes and station-wagons were angled into the curb. Shirley watched, asking herself what sort of people lived in Port Bruce, and what they did to keep body and soul together. She was fascinated. Everyone, men and women wore shorts, some stylishly baggy, others just baggy. There were tee shirts everywhere, usually sleeveless. Everyone had a hat of some sort, with the men wearing beaten-up broad-brimmed wrecks that threw their faces into deep shadow. Flip-flop sandals for everyone, young and old. Most people were white but two old aboriginal men sitting on an office step watched impassively, and grunted something when she nodded to them.

“G’day!” A woman was hurrying into the mini-market and had gone before Shirley could reply. Suddenly everyone was greeting her as she passed. She was shocked. Port Bruce was not London. Or even Cairns. People actually said hello to strangers on the street here. Nice.

Beyond the shops, a small park lay between the road and the river. Now she could look out over the brown water of the estuary. Small boats were moored off shore and lined up by the current. Nearer, just beyond the dinghies lying on the mud, two cabin cruisers had sunk and lay canted over and muddied by the tides. Along the other side of the river, a couple of kilometres away, ran a long beach. It curved out of sight and was backed with sand dunes.

There was not much to the wharf, just a platform of heavy timbers with a small fishing boat moored. Two aboriginal women with straggly hair were fishing with hand lines. Apart from them, the place was lifeless. A yellow and brown sign warned of crocodiles in English, German and Chinese.

Beyond the jetty, she looked out over the Coral Sea and now there was a breeze on her face. Her stomach rumbled; it was time for breakfast. The kiosk was set at the water’s edge beyond the wharf, a simple transportable building with its back to the land. She walked around it looking for food.

She was on a wide, sheltered terrace perched over the river and running the length of the cafe. Empty tables and chairs lined its outer edge. Delightful smells were coming from the serving hatch. Shirley’s mouth was watering.

“Hi – what you like?” A cheerful brown Asian girl was looking at her from the steam of the kitchen. “Breakfas? You like English, Thai or Indonesia?”

“Indonesian?” she asked in confusion.

“Yes – *nasi goreng* frie’ rice and egg. Very good... I think you like.”

Shirley took her coffee and sat at one of the tables. It was a simple thick slab of varnished timber, rich and brown. Tropical hardwood, she supposed. She turned to rest both elbows on the railing and look out over the water. It was very pleasant here. Warm but not too sticky, enough breeze off the sea to ripple the water. The wharf to one side, quiet but for the restless creaking of the moored fishing boat, and the low chatter of the two aboriginals. To the other side, the river bank road continued as a rough track with coconut palms holding it back from the water. It was very restful.

Two days ago – no – three days ago she had been in London. London at its October best; wet, windy, cold and miserable with the prospect of another two months before the weather would turn into anything sensible. The night before that she had been with Rupert in their favourite Greek restaurant. Now a glow began to seep through her as she celebrated sitting outside dressed in tee shirt and a summer skirt, waiting for her breakfast next to a big, slow tropical river.

“Here you are.” The girl stood beside her with a big plate of fried rice topped with an egg. It smelt fat and spicy. She set the plate down and went to sit on the other side of the table.

“So – you touris’? Not many touris’ come now – too much rain, too much hot. My name Lulu. And you?”

“Shirley,” she said and, unwrapping her spoon and fork from its paper napkin, started on the rice.

“Hey – you like ketchup? Chilli sauce?” Lulu jumped up to bring two plastic bottles. “This one little bit hot. Australians no like hot. ‘Cept my husband – he like very hot. I teach him hot food, he teach me English.” She smiled. “Here, you try small bit. I think you like.”

The sauce was sharp and sweet together. It suited the rice. Shirley explored her plate. Along with scraps of vegetables, there were prawns, and chicken, and squares of bacon. It tasted good and she ate hungrily.

Lulu chuckled. “I think you very hungry girl.”

Shirley had been silent, concentrating on eating. Now she was embarrassed at her rudeness. “Er – you’re not very busy.”

“No – not now. Early morning we always busy. People eat and go fishing,” she gestured out to sea, “Now all quiet ‘til they come back. ‘Cept in dry season. Then too much touris’ and we always busy. Now is good time. Can rest and talk. You like Por’ Bruce?”

“Yes. Yes – it looks really nice. I’m from England so this looks - I don’t know – it looks fantastic. Wonderful.”

Lulu was happy. “I like also. When I come here, I very sad. No have family, no have friends, only John – he my husband. But now I have business, friends, my family coming for visiting. Por’ Bruce is a good place.”

Lulu sold her some insect repellent and a tube of sun cream. She even rubbed the cream on the back of Shirley’s neck and shoulders. “You cover up good, huh? You very, very white and you start go red already. You put cream all the time, right? Two hours, more cream. And come back, right? We finish five o’clock. I cook you fish and ginger. Fresh barramundi – you like!”

The Bazaar was not far back up the road, a drab shed with white-painted corrugated iron walls. The windows were small and dirty but through the open door Shirley could see crowded racks of clothes. Inside, it was bigger than it seemed and twice as crowded. There was barely room to pass between the racks to reach the lines of furniture and white goods further back. There was no one at the sales counter by the door. She stood for a while and examined the many glossy fishing lures on the wall opposite. Some of them were as big as the fish she had seen pulled from canals in England, but these were only bait. There was an attention bell and she gave it a gentle tinkle.

A man bustled in from the back of the store. He was short and red-faced, with a full head of white hair “You’d be John Collin’s girl, right?” He smiled and reached out his hand. “There’s something of him in you... I’m Des.”

“Shirley – but everyone seems to know who I am already.”

“Probably. This is Port Bruce. Are you liking it here?”

“Yes – it’s so different. I’m from London.”

“Bit of a shock, eh? I’ve never been to London. I’d probably lose myself first off. Anyway, what can I do for you?”

She bought a simple straw hat. It was going to interfere with her ponytail but Des cut a hole in it so her hair could stick out at the back and be off her neck.

“There,” he said, “That’s the job. You’d better be careful with the sun – you’re as white as a sheet. Keep your hat on and you might not end up with a red nose. What’re you doing today? Do you fish?”

“No. At least, I’ve never tried. But I’ve got to go to the cemetery today. And then to Uncle John’s house. Do you know where it is?”

“Out of town, but not too far. You’ve got wheels?”

“No. I thought I’d take a taxi or something.”

Des smiled. “Well, it’d have to be ‘or something’. I could rent you a bicycle, if you like. I keep a few for the tourists. That’d be good for you because old Johnno’s house is way down a little path and you could ride a bike down there. Most of the way, anyway.”

It was too hot and sticky to cycle, but walking was scarcely better. “And flowers,” she thought out loud, “Where do I get some flowers?”

“Flowers? Oh, of course. For old John. Right – rent the bike and the flowers are free.”

She pedalled slowly out of town with a large bunch of yellow and white African daisies in her hand. While she had been adjusting her saddle, Des had cut them from the garden of his cottage behind the shop. A nice gesture and she appreciated it.

Uncle John’s grave was no longer new. In the four months since he died, runners of grass were already fighting with weeds to cover the bare earth. A small square of plywood nailed to a stake said simply *John Collins 1936-2003* in felt-tip. It should say more, she thought. I’ll get a stone, and I’ll ask his friends what to put on it.

She had only seen him once, when she was a little girl. He had come to London to see his sister and his niece. She remembered him as tall with black hair and a loud voice. She had showed him the way to the park and he had held her hand as they walked.

She laid her flowers amongst the weeds and wheeled her bike away.

She had about two kilometres to go, accordingly to Des’s directions. It was difficult cycling in the heat and she was soon dripping with sweat. Too soon, she dropped off the blacktop onto the dirt road. Riding over the corrugations and small holes was uncomfortable but she struggled on. A four wheel drive appeared ahead of her, a dark spot drawing a cloud of dust behind it. It roared past without slowing and for a moment she was riding blind and choking. Bastard! Doesn’t he know what it’s like out here?

The air slowly cleared and she could look around herself again. The road edges were rough and untidy, and through its covering of dust, the jungle was reaching out tendrils to repossess its lost space. It looked thick and tangled, an alien world. She could not see into it; the roadside plants sealed it off.

Her turn off came long after she had expected it. An incongruous sign – Hobson Road – pointed down a narrow track in the direction of the river. It looked used, but not heavily. A strip of rough grass separated two wheel ruts and she wobbled uncomfortably down one of them. The jungle was very close around her.

Ahead on her right was a break in the jungle wall. Here a wire fence confined lines of dark green trees standing in lush grass. Mangos. They filled the trees and lay on the ground. The fence was broken by an entrance and drive way, and far away she could see a roof through the trees. The jungle closed in again and the road continued, until it ended abruptly in a turning circle. Another driveway ran off to the west

but that was not what she was looking for. Carrying straight on towards the river, a footpath disappeared into the bushes.

Shirley dived into the shadows and cycled on. The unkempt grass started snatching at her ankles and branches were coming too near, so she got off and walked. Mosquitoes immediately pounced on her and she had to stop and spray herself. She was hot, sweaty and itching. Suddenly the tropics did not seem so wonderful. Although the trees were low and stunted here, there was no wind at all. The still air rang with insect buzzing. It was not a welcoming place. She pushed on as quickly as she could.

She did not know how far she had gone on the footpath and had an unreasonable desire to turn round and get back to the road, but retreat was not a real choice. She had come this far and would not fall at the last fence. All the same, she was relieved to see a rusty roof at the end of the path. Uncle John's house at last.

Chapter 2

The path came to an abrupt end at the edge of the mangroves. The way ahead lay over a duckboard walkway of grey weathered planks. There was nothing to lean her bicycle against so she wheeled it carefully forward. She was soon more than a metre above the dark grey mud and all around her the mangroves stood on their upside down roots. The swamp surface was alive with activity. Little crabs scuttled from burrow to burrow or stood guard in their entrances. They had one small claw and one coloured brilliant red that had grown out of all proportion until it was nearly as big as their body. They stared at her and beckoned threateningly with this grotesque claw.

Sharing the muddy surface were small fish with frog's eyes perched high on their heads. They rested on their bellies and used their front fins to skip themselves from puddle to puddle. The insect noise was even louder here and the mosquitoes whined around her head. She hurried on over the rickety planks.

The duckboard way was not straight and she had lost sight of dry land by the time she reached Uncle John's house. It stood on stilts in an area cleared of mangroves with the river glinting beyond. It was a cabin of unpainted clapboard, two small windows with a front door between them. The roof, dull zinc with some rust streaks, was low and reached out to give a narrow veranda that ran the length of the house. She fumbled in her pocket to find the key the lawyer in Cairns had given her. She leant her bicycle against the wall and searched for the keyhole.

There was no keyhole in the door. Just grey, weathered timber with short rust streaks running down from each nail. She was stupefied; how could there be no keyhole? This must be the right house; she could not be in the wrong place.

The handle turned and the door was pulled open. An old man stood there. He was short, with thinned white hair neatly swept back. He wore a long-sleeved white shirt and shorts. His thin shins were wrapped in long white socks and he was wearing white shoes. He was the strangest person Shirley had seen so far.