A FALL TOO FAR

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Distance conjures up notions of the exotic. Dreams of far away lands are much more exciting than the real thing. Remoteness gives a place that special essence that no close and familiar place can ever have. It was with these ideas whirling through my mind that I began my first flight to the Northern Territory many years ago. In particular, it was Kakadu to which I was attracted and it was Kakadu which I essentially saw in this remote and exotic way.

For more than a week and sometimes with great effort I visited the distant waterfalls of Jim Jim and Twin. Standing alone at the top of Jim Jim Falls and looking out over the plains of the South Alligator River, knowing few people were with in a hundred kilometres, brought home the remoteness of my position. The view faded into the haziness of distance. This truly was a vast land. It was mid-winter 1986 and the only sound emanating from the falls was a quiet gurgle. There was little water flowing now that the wet season had passed.

More than ten years later, the yearning to see these falls in full flow culminated in a second trip. This time I went with Carmel Keating who also had been to the falls several years previously and who too had climbed to the top of Jim Jim Falls. After three days of driving this time rather than flying, we stopped briefly at the bridge over the South Alligator River to get our first close-up view of Kakadu for a long time and peered down into the murky and swirling waters of late summer. Even though years before I had ventured to many of its most remote features, in my mind, Kakadu was still a distant and exotic place and the long car journey from Brisbane only helped to reinforce this notion. Looking upstream, the waters silently but swiftly and forcefully flowed out from some mysterious place above the Arnhemland Escarpment. The land had a quality of the unknown about it and we could not hope to understand or grasp its magnitude. Even though the bridge and bitumen road carved an artificial pathway across this ancient land, their presence did not seem to diminish our awe. In fact they may well have enhanced it. The bridge offered a brief glimpse into a vastly unknown place, offering a window just large enough to captivate the mind and heighten the mystique.

We arrived in Kakadu deliberately this time in early March-the end of the wet season, hoping that the days would be clear and the falls still in full flood. It is an ironic twist of Kakadu that when the falls are flowing it is not possible to access them from the ground. All routes are closed by high water on the South Alligator floodplain. The only way to view the falls is by air so we arranged for a helicopter flight.

Days passed as we waited for windy and cloudy weather to abate. In the township of Jabiru and in the bustling hotel foyers of the resorts, life continued its busy schedule. One hundred kilometres somewhere to the south, tonnes of crystal clear water was tumbling from the top of the escarpment down the dizzying heights of Jim Jim Falls. The image dwelled on our minds and intensified the gulf between the township and the remote wilderness surrounding it.

When the day finally arrived, everything seemed to happen so quickly. Amongst a cloud of swirling dust we lifted off and passed over Jabiru and the Ranger uranium mine. At last we were heading south. We flew low over the monotonous plainlands still very green and oozing water from the monsoon. The escarpment loomed out of the distant haze and we began to track along it. At each bend in its cliffline I leaned forward in the hope of sighting the falls but was always disappointed. Nothing. All I remember is this huge cliff and the endless and featureless expanse of the Kakadu plains stretching out below. Mesmerized by the monotony we continued our flight south. The

kilometres ticked by. The flight seemed long. I looked impatiently at my watch but it had only been half an hour. Then, through the crackle of the headphones, Doug, our pilot was telling us Jim Jim was around the next corner. For me, more than ten years of waiting was finally ending.

Then there it was-Australia's waterfall icon. A thick band of white foaming water crashing silently down the two hundred metres of vertical cliff face into a deep and dark plunge pool. I say silently because no natural sound could be heard above the roar of the helicopter. It was like watching a silent movie. We circled, banked and passed unnervingly straight over the lip of the falls. Quickly I scanned the open rock at the top of the escarpment trying to remember where I had previously camped. Surprisingly, I could see and remember every detail. Nothing had changed in what was really a very short time. The place was deserted but I had expected that. Not a soul in one hundred kilometres.

We chose to land at the nearby Twin Falls. With the motor turned off, the full roar of the falls immediately filled the vacuum. We walked across the hot red rocks, over to where I had remembered camping. Everything was tinder dry-the rocks, vegetation, even the gravel in the streambed where the now receding waters no longer flowed. Paradoxically, through this parched landscape raced a raging torrent. It seemed odd in this dry landscape above the escarpment that dryness and wetness should co-exist so close together. This is a product of the monsoon. It is all or nothing and soon this last remaining supply of water would drain from the plateau leaving even the streambed, save for some small pools, as parched as the rest.

Before leaving we went over to the edge of the falls and peered down the gorge. I remembered the past effort in getting to this spot. How I had paddled on an air mattress up the long gorge, across the plunge pool and had then climbed up a steep gully to the top of the plateau in the excessive heat of midday. How I had sat most of the afternoon in a cool pool in order to recover.

It is now a year since revisiting the falls. Occasionally when my memory is jogged I think back to that second trip. How, for days, Carmel and I had gazed southwards along the escarpment, past the last bluff to where it faded into the distance. Waiting and wondering what we would eventually find there. I think too of the flight south and how quickly it connected us with our destination. And I notice a shift-Jim Jim no longer occupies my thoughts in the way it once did.

I had always thought the falls were just too far to ever become a familiar place. Now I feel I know them almost too well. I can only surmise that technology had made our journey too quick and too easy.