

# Chapter 11: True Cousin<sup>1</sup>

In 1963-64 a precarious marriage took place between the girl Close River and the boy Jacob Sitting. Sitting was the son of the mild-mannered Burikup orator, You Ate, and his more impulsive wife, You Did. When I had known him during my first visit, he had been an undistinguished little boy who had acquiesced in all the mischief of the other lads of his subclan and had eagerly enjoyed the more brutal pleasures of the Buri-Penkup gang when they joined forces against the Koimamkup. He had taken part in all the formalized kicking matches of traditional pattern and in games of the newly introduced football, and had managed to hold his own in the undisciplined brawling that always resulted because competition between the two teams was too great to be contained within the rules. But he had never displayed any particular intelligence or initiative. Only the accident of good looks had made him, by the time I came back to Kondambi, a youth who was a model for his age-mates to follow.

My little companion, Banana, had developed from an engaging child into a awkward adolescent—big for his age, angular in stance, shy and tongue-tied in the presence of strangers, and always conscious of his prematurely thick moustache. Jacob Sitting, on the other hand, had blossomed into a youth of unusual beauty by local standards. He was already so used to girls of the neighbouring Konumbuga and Ngeni-Muruka clans fighting for possession of him that his manner was habitually smug and swaggering. He already had one wife, Ancestral Woman, who had come to him from Ngen-Apka clan just before I arrived back in New Guinea, and already he was neglecting her in favour of the girls who were still unmarried.

Close River was one of the Konumbuga girls who summoned him to carry leg with them. When he complied, as he had to, she repeated her invitation and soon they were constantly being seen together holding hands and whispering, with their legs entwined. The Kugika spent some weeks dancing in preparation for a ceremony in which a large clan west of Minj was presenting them with food. This was a clan they themselves had presented with food sometime before. As the day of the presentation grew closer, the men danced a little further along the main south road, returning home in the evening and dancing yet further the next day. By the time they had reached their destination, all had seen Sitting and Close River huddled with other couples in patches of grass and sweet potato gardens by the side of the road wherever they had had a spell from the dancing.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is incomplete.

After the food presentation Close River went to Mangi, the neighbourhood near Kondambi where You Ate and his family had gardens and also houses where they slept sometimes in preference to their usual abode at Gwaip.

I had heard little comment on this couple carrying leg, but when Close River went to live with Sitting the Konumberga remembered that the two were related to each other through Sitting's mother. You Did was by birth a Konumberga woman of Wogum subdivision. It was well known, when Close River went to live with Jacob Sitting, that she intended to marry him. Her parents and brothers tried to bring her back, but she was adamant. Her father was an old man who had been an important leader, executive officer for the great Konumberga *luluai* who had died during my previous visit, and himself often called 'Luluai'. His word still carried great weight with the Konumberga people of Konmil, though he was too reactionary for their councillors to heed. The Swiss missionaries had persuaded Close River's mother to become a Christian, and whenever she had to encounter people of other clans she wore a long mauve woollen dress. Her springy grey hair was clipped close to her head in the manner of converts. Her manner towards the pagans of Kondambi was gracious as a queen's. The European dress and her conviction that as a clothed Christian she was superior to these naked savages gave her confidence in oratory. Whenever she came to Kondambi to dispute her daughter's right to marry Jacob, the air was heavy with her vituperations. She used the rich resources of the vernacular to make puns with obscene and abusive overtones, and her anger was formidable. But she always cut short her most violent outburst when she noticed that it was time to go home and cook her husband's evening meal; then she would stride forward and, grasping the limp hand of each of the persons she had just vilified, murmur graciously 'We shall talk again tomorrow. God bless you.' She did not seem to see any incongruity in being a nominal member of a sect that saw Minj culture as wholly evil and her strenuous defence of a traditional marriage prohibition.

For Jacob Sitting was marrying his 'true cousin'. If she had belonged to a different subclan from his mother, they would have been nominally 'cousins' but no one would have minded their setting aside this 'distant' relationship. But Close River belonged to the very subdivision of his mother's subclan from which You Did herself had come, so marrying her was viewed by many as a serious transgression. The relationship did not bother You Did, who saw her son's acquisition of a wife as an opportunity to gain a help-mate in tending gardens and coffee and looking after You Ate's pigs. She saw getting a Konumberga wife for him, a girl from her very own clan, as a personal triumph: her own brothers would benefit from any payments You Ate and Jacob Sitting had to make. The closer the relationship between her son's bride and her own brothers, the more they would benefit. If the girl had come from another clan she would ultimately be competing with You Did for appropriating Burikup food and pigs and wealth for their respective groups of origin.

Many years ago You Did had caused the death of another woman. An age-mate of her, from the same subdivision of her subclan, was disturbed because her Penkup husband was acquiring a new wife and she had rallied all her Konumberga age-mates who were married to Kugika men to help her chase away the new bride. You Did, who was something of a ringleader, went with the other young women to the house where her age-mate's husband kept his new bride. They stalked silently to the house in the evening gloom, all armed with spears, sticks, and whatever weapons they could improvise. They crept into the house while the girl was sleeping, and You Did speared her fatally in the neck. This must have happened twenty years ago, but You Did was worrying about the incident now. Her daughter, South River, was urging her to be baptized as a Lutheran. 'When you have been baptized' South River told her, 'my father will not have to wait until you die before giving my uncles compensation for your death. Remember how Westerly and his brothers gave you and You Ate a payment when I was baptized? They gave fifty pounds. They could not wait for me to die before giving his payment because I am going to live forever and I shall never die. When a marriage payment or a death payment is for a person who has been baptized, they cannot give shells and plumes but have to give money and clothes. My uncles want plenty of money to pay their tax. If you care for your brothers and do not want them to go to jail for not being able to pay their tax, you will get baptized and make You Ate give them a payment for you.'

You Did pondered the idea of getting baptized. She did not like the idea of living forever: beyond the lifetime of her pagan relatives she would be lonely for her old associates; also, a Konumberga convert had recently boasted in a quarrel that he would be inheriting all the gardens and coffee belonging to his subclan because the other members were all mortal and he would outlive them, and there had been talk of his carrying out illicit magic in order to make this happen. But the temptation to secure a premature death compensation for her brothers, especially in the form of money, was great. Also, South River reminded her that she had once killed a woman.

'Be baptized and you will never die' she urged her mother. 'All the enemies of the Konumberga and the Kugika can pierce you with spears and arrows and they cannot kill you. But you have done a great wrong; you have killed a woman. God has not forgotten this. If you are not baptized you will die, and as soon as you die God will hold a court just like the councillors' court of the Court of Native Affairs and he will throw you into the big fire. The big fire eats all wicked people, and not even your bones will be left.'

You Did came to my house secretly one evening and asked me to tell her the truth about the big fire. The Lutherans and the Catholics and the Swiss missionaries all insisted, she said, that people were evil and that when they died the big fire would consume them. Murder was evil and she herself was wicked because she

had killed a woman. Where was this big fire? Was there really a fire under the ground that consumed dead people as soon as they were buried? She had been having nightmares and insomnia ever since South River had told her that she could not hope to escape being burnt because she had killed the new bride so long ago. White people, she said, always came back from the dead; what had my parents told me when they came back to visit me? Had they seen the big fire?

Later she asked me whether I had some magic I could give her to help her win the court case about her son's marriage. If I had some, she said, she would buy it from me for ten shillings or whatever price I wanted.

Man Pit-Pit, Close River's old father, was suing in the councillors' court for the return of his daughter. He had already expressed some reasons why he did not want the girl to marry Jacob Sitting. Close River was Jacob's 'true cousin' through You Did belonging to the same subdivision as Man Pit-Pit. The old man had given his two sisters to the Kugika Penkup and the Kugika Koimamkup; the Koimamkup had given him a bride in exchange, and the Penkup had given him As If's younger daughter, Grass Woman, for his son. The Burikup had given him a girl for another son to marry, but she had soon left so he was under no obligation to give them his daughter. Both the Penkup and the Koimamkup had given him women, and if Close River had to marry a Kugika he would not object to her going to them. But he would prefer to give her to another clan. He recalled peevishly that the Koimamkup did not simply offer him a woman in exchange for his sister: they had given the girl to a Konumbuga man of a different subdivision and when it became clear that she did not like him they agreed to her marrying Man Pit-Pit. He had also exchanged women with the Kugika's traditional enemies, the Kondika. Close River could not marry a Kondika man, because her father could not insult the Kondika by giving them rejects from their old enemies. One of his sons wanted to marry a particular girl of Ngeni-Muruka clan, and Man Pit-Pit was aiming to exchange Close River for this girl.

The councillors' court heard Man Pit-Pit's plea. Three of the Konumbuga 'big' councillors sat in judgment. The Kugika councillor was present, but he refrained from intervening: Man Pit-Pit was his own brother-in-law and he could not have spoken without supporting the claimant. The councillors ascertained that Close River wished to marry Jacob Sitting, and they asked Man Pit-Pit why he opposed the marriage. The angry father, aware that the councillors were already familiar with some of the reasons for his objection, blurted out that he did not want Close River to marry yet but wished her to stay at home and look after him. He advanced no other arguments. The councillors ruled that the government's law, 'what a girl wants' (*laik bilong meri*), should prevail and Close River was free to marry whom she liked. They commanded Jacob Sitting to get a marriage payment together within the next few days and give it to Man Pit-Pit.

The parties to the dispute were leaving the councillor's house at Minj when Man Pit-Pit attacked Jacob Sitting and You Ate angrily. He told them he had no intention of accepting a marriage payment from them. The councillors separated the brawling men. As it was plain that the dispute was not resolved, the case went to the Court of Native Affairs. The two cadet patrol officers who heard the case confirmed the councillors' judgment that Close River was free to marry any man she liked and that as she wanted to marry Jacob he must get together a marriage payment within the next few days. They specified further that Close River must go home to her parents until Jacob brought the payment to them. The parties to the dispute left Minj in an orderly manner and adjourned to Kondambi to continue their quarrel.

I drew Banana's attention to Close River and Jacob Sitting who were quietly drifting away from the stormy scene and going towards Mangi, hand in hand.

'Close River is not a fool' Banana whispered. 'She knows very well that if she were to go home and wait for the marriage payment as the *kiaps* said she should her mother and father would keep her a prisoner and give her to another man.'

You Ate gathered together a marriage payment for Jacob Sitting to give to Man Pit-Pit. Banana and his father were saving up to buy a machine for skinning their coffee, which was going to cost them over thirty pounds. They had explained to me that they would let the other Burikup people use it freely but they intended to charge Koimamkup ten shillings for using it to skin one bag of coffee. The Penkup man, Head, had set an example in this, but he had cannily been charging even Penkup people who belonged to other subdivisions besides his own and he was growing rich at the expense of the rest of his subclan. Burikup was only a small group, so Forest Tree and Banana could not differentiate between the people of their own subdivision and the other Burikup; but the garden where they skinned their coffee was midway between the territory of the two larger subclans and they were hoping that some of the Penkup who had their coffee some distance from Head's gardens might decide to hire the Burikup machine. They had saved eighteen pounds by diligent work and careful hoarding. Forest Tree cut firewood regularly to sell to the government; Banana's mother, Courting Ceremony, carried loads of vegetables to Minj and gave her husband the paltry shillings she earned when Europeans bought them; Banana had been one of the first of the Kugika to plant coffee and already it had returned him a few pounds. But they were obliged to help You Ate with his marriage payment for Jacob Sitting's new wife, and their savings were diminished by two thirds. Banana did not grumble at this, though he was bitterly disappointed at having to delay yet further the purchase of the machine. This machine had become for him a symbol of a successful future in the modern world. He was planning to invest the greater returns he would get from his own coffee and the rent he would get from others who used the machine in buying cattle. One of his plans was to build himself a

European-style house close to Kondambi which would have a special room where I could stay and be his guest whenever I visited my clan. He did not approve of Jacob Sitting's marriage to his 'true cousin', but he acknowledged the obligation of himself and his father to contribute towards the payment.

You Ate offered Man Pit-Pit the marriage payment, but the old 'Luluai' refused to accept it. Close River's Christian mother supported him and went to some trouble to assure the Kugika that this refusal was not a signal that warfare was imminent between their two clans as it would have been in the days before the government had taught them to live in peace. Jacob Sitting gave the pigs to Ancestral Woman to care for and he hid the money and the shells in his house until Close River's parents could be persuaded to accept them. When You Ate and the rest of the Burikup gave a party for his daughter's Konumberga husband, Westerly, Man Pit-Pit and his wife had still declined to receive the payment.

When the party was over, a Konumberga *tultul* accompanied Jacob Sitting and Close River to their house at Mangi. The *tultul* and his wife were planning to stay the night with their kinswoman before going home. Darkness had fallen when the *tultul's* wife asked Close River whether she had any water and Close River admitted that she had not brought any to the house.

'Light a flare' Jacob Sitting suggested, 'and both of you go back to the party house at Gwaip and bring back some water'.

The *tultul's* wife let Close River go alone. Before she arrive at the party house, she saw the doorway of Banana's house illumined by the glow of the fire inside. She approached the house and asked Banana for a tin or other container to hold water.

'You haven't got a lamp' Banana reproved her with surprise. 'You shouldn't be walking about in the dark without a light.'

'I have this flare' Close River answered, showing him the smouldering bunch of dry kunai she had dropped outside the doorway.

Forest Tree gathered a more adequate torch of twigs and lit it from the fire. Banana's little sister, a girl of eleven, went with Close River to get the water.

A little boy who had been wandering about since the party went inside the party house where some of the Burikup and some of the Konumberga were still sitting around talking. He told You Did eagerly that Close River had taken a flare and gone to Banana's house. You Did told Ancestral Woman to go to Banana's house and report what she saw. Forest Tree and Banana told her that Close River had gone with the little girl to get some water.

Jacob, alarmed because Close River had gone alone and had not come back promptly, went in search of her. He went straight to Banana's house when he heard his father, You Ate, calling from the party house 'Ancestral Woman! Ancestral Woman!'

'Is Ancestral Woman here?' he asked Banana.

'Yes, she is here' Banana replied. Jacob was about to address Ancestral Woman when You Ate's voice came again clearly from the party house: 'Ancestral Woman! South River wants to go home. Light a flare and go with her.'

Jacob, annoyed with his father at giving orders to his wife, gave a counter command.

'This girl Close River has a pain in her stomach. Ancestral Woman, it would be better if you went and got the water and let Close Rover stay inside.'

'Ancestral Woman!' You Ate called again. 'Get a light and hurry up and come!'

Ancestral Woman, confused at the conflicting commands from her husband and her father-in-law, lit a flare and took it outside. Jacob, standing in the doorway, vented his anger by kicking her on the buttocks. Ancestral Woman screamed shrilly, but her husband kicked her twice more before Banana separated them.

'Who is hitting Ancestral Woman?' You Ate demanded.

'No, Jacob is giving her a beating' Courting Ceremony called back. You Ate dashed from the party house and ran quickly to Banana's house. He slapped his son hard.

'I'm not a woman, I'm a man' Jacob objected. 'If I were a girl you could hit me and bring blood. Let us fight'.

'All right' You Ate agreed. 'If you're a man I am one too. If we die, we die.'

Father and son struggled for awhile. Banana tried to intervene but was not able to part them until Apron, who had rushed over from the party house with You Did at the sound of fighting, helped him.

'Why did you hit Ancestral Woman?' You Did demanded.

'Why do you ask?' Jacob said jeeringly, striking his mother. Banana and Apron held his arms to prevent him from hitting her again. Several young men had come over from the party house, but they watched with interest without trying to intervene.

'It is too dark now' You Ate said. 'Some boys have come to watch, and there are some old women here too. We shall be involved in a great court case if some boy takes a stick and injures someone.'

Nevertheless, the squabbling continued.

'Ancestral Woman' said Jacob coldly, 'tomorrow you go. I am sending you away'.

You Ate lashed out angrily at his son. 'You yourself obtained this woman, Close River, and you yourself can pay her mother and father. When Close River came I gave three fat pigs and some good goldlip shells and fifty pounds. We are continually having disputes with Close River's father and mother. Now I shall take back what I gave you and you yourself can find the payment to give them.'

'All right' Jacob said angrily, 'we can straighten this out early tomorrow morning. It is too dark now'.

You Ate had not finished speaking.

'This woman Ancestral Woman' he said 'knows how to care for pigs well. You scold Ancestral Woman and she doesn't answer you back. When we tell her to dig sweet potatoes or do something else she just does what we tell her. She stays in the house and acts with propriety. When we are absent she looks after the garden and the pigs and the house and the fowls very well. She is a good Woman. You didn't beat Close River and Ancestral Woman jointly. You left Close River alone and beat Ancestral Woman. Now I am angry and we have been fighting.'

'When I slept with my sister at Minj' You Did added, 'she told me Close River had told her sister that she intended to go back to her parents. I told her brother Whitewood and discussed it with him, but we didn't tell You Ate and Jacob because we didn't know whether it was true.'

'Tomorrow we'll ask Whitewood' You Ate suggested. 'We'll send a little boy to get Close River's sister and also Whitewood and early tomorrow we'll hear what they have to say.'

'We shan't wait for tomorrow' Jacob objected. 'This very night Close River and I shall go and see what words come out of Whitewood's mouth.'

Jacob and Close River left together. Banana followed them quietly without carrying a light, for he feared that they might be intending to kill themselves by throwing themselves in the river or by hanging themselves in a burial ground. But they went straight to Whitewood's house. On the way, Jacob asked Close River whether she had indeed said that she was intending to go back to her

parents. She replied that he could hear her version from her sister and from Whitewood. She herself declined to tell him what she had said. But Whitewood was away from his house playing Lucky and the matter was dropped.

Some weeks later Jacob's gardens at Mangi needed attention so he and Close River took to sleeping at Gwaip while Ancestral Woman and her mother-in-law slept at Mangi. You Did still visited Gwaip to attend to her work there in the mornings, returning via Kondambi at noon. Jacob had asked me whether I had any medicine for stomach pains and I had suggested that he should take Close River to Minj for a medical examination.

Bluebell, a young Konumbuga woman who was the wife of my former servant, Spinning Top, had accompanied me to Kondambi and helped me when her husband could not leave Goroka. She went to Gwaip one day to help an age-mate who lived near Jacob cook a pig to send by air to Spinning Top. She saw Close River lying on her stomach and asked her whether she had a pain that made her lie like that. Close River said she did.

[Chapter ends here.]

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