

For The Age, Melbourne.

Event: Lindy Chamberlain's Release.

**Lindy Chamberlain's Release
From Berrimah prison.**

I'm writing this two and a half hours after the first newsflash of Lindy Chamberlain's release. Every radio station on the dial is full of it. The legal implications of this astonishing move are important and pressing, but all I can think of right now are unaccountably linked episodes.

Mrs Chamberlain, when I last saw her in Berrimah prison, was thin, gaunt, and her face was so incapable of a colour of its own that it took on the hues of her prison smock, a lost and vagrant blue.

Somehow associated with that is the recollection I have of a time in Alice Springs when Fairfax reporter Malcolm Brown was watching the Chamberlains arrive at the Oasis Motel in a taxi. They were instantly surrounded with pressmen and microphones, strobed with the flashes of camera bulbs. Brown hung back and stood on the steps. Michael Chamberlain pushed away from the cameras and caught Brown's gaze. It was Brown who turned away. There was, in the Pastor's eyes, an unnerving amount of trust.

Denis Barritt, the Coroner who exonerated the Chamberlains at the first Inquest, was unsettled by the television cameras in his court, but it was his own doing and he was going to make the best of it. His shirt was freshly laundered, his face was serious and composed, but his tie kept falling over the notes he was about to read. I recall, in the set of his mouth then, the determination to do battle with those he though were at fault in this case, whoever they were.

During the second inquest, while giving evidence, Michael Chamberlain is more and more nervous. He has been called to testify, well before his lawyers know anything

about the evidence to come, an unusual procedure, and his lawyers have told him so. He is handed an exhibit, a sleeping-bag, and is having trouble undoing the wrapping. He asks for help. There is, in the public gallery, a very large woman in a primrose frock. She has no sympathy for him. She has been sniggering all through.

'Poor thing,' she laughs.

We turn to look. We know her. She is the mood of the town.

Anyone researching a press coverage of any case goes, at one time or another, to the library of a city daily. I went to the one in the Fairfax Building, Sydney. The indexing room there is broad and open. Tables and chairs seem to be rejects from other departments, and the effect is that this location seems to be both temporary and of long standing. Serious girls annotate and file. They're careful to be quiet, for small sounds carry far here. The floor is laid with old linoleum squares and bounded, at the periphery, by blocks of filing cabinets and shelving which display, rather than letters of the alphabet, whole words (Macedonia to Macey's) as if scrabble had begun at the edges but had not progressed to the more valuable squares near the centre. A librarian rolls open a cabinet drawer, looking for the entry Chamberlain.

As she does it I remember a librarian's joke: Azaria Chamberlain, Look Under Dingo. She riffles through, perplexed, and calls to others at the desks, "Chamberlain, is it out?" "Look under DEAD" someone says.

Now, I'm not sure what disturbed me so much about that episode. When the file was found, the cuttings did bear the word, in harsh upper-case, DEAD. But I don't think that was it. I believe now that it had more to do with the linoleum squares, the game-board sense of what we were doing, the feeling that many of the moves would go according to rules that would take us a long time to understand.