

ABC Listen. Podcasts, radio, news, music and more.

Today it's my conversation with the playwright, Kim Crotty.

Kim is the father of two sons, Otto and Arlen.

They're teenagers now, but when they were little boys,

Kim was sent to jail to Her Majesty's prison, Dartmoor.

Ever since 1806, the huge granite walls of this prison
have loomed over the surrounding countryside.

And inside those stone walls, serving his term,

Kim missed his boys terribly.

He especially missed bedtime, that tender moment of the day

when the busyness goes quiet and the house stills

and you snuggle up close to your kids and read them stories

before kissing them goodnight.

There was no way that Kim could do that from prison.

So he found another way to reach his sons

through making stories of his own.

Hi, Kim.

Hi, Sarah. Thank you for a lovely interview.

Kim, I want to begin your story in the UK.

You'd grown up in country Western Australia

and after an unhappy stint in the army,

took yourself off to London with your girlfriend, Beth,

where you started working as a stage and production manager

in theatre, and that was your job when your two sons were born.

But you and Beth were having a rough patch in your relationship

and she moved away to Bristol with your sons

and you wanted to be able to move there

and live nearby to your kids,

but to do that, you had to find a new way of making money.

What did you decide to do?

Well, I had a conversation with a friend of mine

who had a house and it turns out this house

was just a few streets away from where Beth and the boys were living.

And so I'd spoken about it with him,

the idea that I had that he was open to,

so I gave him a notice at the playhouse

and moved to Bristol and set up a cannabis grow house.

So that's not the career development step

that necessarily makes logical sense here, Kim,

set up a cannabis grow house.

We unpacked that for me a little bit.

Were you a cannabis smoker at the time?

Occasionally, yeah.

I mean, not a great history of cannabis use,

but certainly recreationally and sometimes.
So it was a commercial operation.
I mean, the idea and the plan was that it would, you know,
solve a number of financial issues,
which also mean that I could be right there for my kids
and have all the time in the world for them.
Did you think or struggle with the legal aspects of this?
Was that something that was on your mind before you began?
I guess when I left the Army,
I still sort of, I suppose, resented authority.
I didn't like it.
I didn't have any issue at all with the legal ramifications.
I tried to mitigate all the risks.
I did a lot of planning.
It was very calculated.
It was a very low-key operation.
I mean, it was quite a large scale, but very low-key.
So I tried to treat it as another job,
just like the head of the stage department at the playhouse.
I wrote a schedule.
I had a small crew of people that would help me at key times,
and I just tried to cover all my bases
and predict what was going to happen.
What did the house look like inside?
Describe it for me.
Well, downstairs was just like any other house.
It was like an end of terrace house in Bristol.
So downstairs was the living room, kitchen and bathroom.
So it looked like any other house.
Upstairs was a different story.
One of the bedrooms was one of the grow rooms
that I divided into two.
So I had two grow rooms in one bedroom
and a third grow room up in the loft.
And another bedroom was a utilities room
for the extraction and the fresh air intake
and just a general area to repot and replant
and do lots of other things.
My friend and I had a number of connections.
So we had a plumber and electrician come in
and do the job to convert this residential terrace house
into an indoor market garden.
What was the atmosphere like inside?
What did it feel like to go up those stairs

from the regular terrace house
into this cannabis grow house?
Well, this might be controversial, Sarah,
but I loved it.
You know, this is a warm, lively, oxygen-rich environment.
It just was... Everything about it was good.
It was a nice place to be.
England was very cold, so, you know,
it was always 24 degrees and full sun in my grow rooms.
So whenever I'd get a bit down
or a bit homesick for West Australian beaches,
I'd be sitting up in the grow room with a six-pack of beer
and my shorts and sunglasses catching a tan.
My friends, if I hadn't seen them for a while,
they would remark that I looked like I'd been on holiday somewhere.
Somewhere sunny, off to Spain or Portugal,
but it was just me catching some rays.
But it was really positive.
Like, there's a kind of rhythm to the growing cycle.
And I'm sure anyone that's a farmer
or has worked in agriculture or a nursery
will know exactly what I'm talking about.
Were you also selling cannabis from that house,
or how did that whole side of the operations work?
Yeah, this is, you know, one of the biggest risks,
in addition to the legal risk, is the risk of exposure.
So I had three grow rooms and I had three clients,
and I would basically just sell wholesale one client per grow room.
And that was it. Whatever I'd produced,
I would just, we'd wait and agree on the price,
and then it would be gone.
Because, I mean, you know, there's a lot of nonsense you hear about,
about the black market and about drug production and dealings.
And not all of it is like the gangsters,
or you see on the movies and that kind of stuff.
So I never did business with anybody that I didn't know and like,
and I would refuse to do business with anybody
who was kind of a professional or a semi-gangster,
involved in anything heavy.
I didn't want that kind of, those kind of people in my life,
and I didn't want any exposure to sort of hardcore criminal elements.
You know, this was, I was proud of, you know,
this is the other controversial bit.
I was proud of what I did and proud of what I created

and the product that I made.

It was, of course, though, illegal, which you knew.

Were you, how scared were you of exposure?

I mean, say the neighbours, were you trying to conceal the activities consciously from other people in the street?

Yeah, yeah, of course.

But I'm a good neighbour, you know, I'm friendly and chatty and helpful and polite.

But I would always have, always have a kind of a cover story plan for, you know, sometimes I'm unloading boxes of supplies into the house and I would have a cover story as to why I was doing or what I was doing and just chatting with the neighbours and people in that cul-de-sac.

I suppose I was lucky when I first moved in, when we started work on the house, there was, I didn't have any neighbours.

But, you know, the other thing about the house is that it's a living, it's kind of like a living, breathing thing,

like there's the hum of all the ballast units from the grey lights and there's the hum of the extraction fans and the shifting of air.

It was really noticeable, or for me at least, and I was concerned that the neighbours would notice this noise and wonder what it was.

Once you'd established the production system, if you like, and had those systems in place, did it feel like it was kind of offering you that work-life balance that you were wanting in terms of time with your sons?

It really did, Sarah.

Like, you know, I'd never known such freedom.

You know, freedom to write my own schedule, to make time for the things that I love to do, for the people that I love to be with, for my kids, and also financial, I'd say financial freedom, but that comes with strings attached because it's complicated dealing with large amounts of cash, you know, it's difficult.

Did you think about the future?

Like, did you just imagine this would go on indefinitely?

Oh, no, absolutely not.

It was, you know, a couple of years would have been great, and I was going to reassess where we were at after two years, but it was always just a short-term thing.

I treated it like a job,

but it didn't work out like that.

Take me to the moment when police hammered on your door.

Mm.

Well, it was really bad timing for me.

I had three and a half kilos of weeds sitting on my bed.

I had 103 plants upstairs,

and I was really exhausted because, you know,

I'd just been through the harvesting period

and working through the night to get the stuff done.

And it was about 10 o'clock on a Tuesday night

with this almighty thump on the front door,

and as soon as I heard it,

my stomach just lurched.

Who else would knock like that?

And so there's, you know, sort of moments of,

you know, you run through your options.

I know what I'm supposed to do.

I'm supposed to start destroying evidence.

I'm supposed to try and escape or supposed to try and get away,

but I just, I was just sort of hypnotised

and kind of watching myself,

like in and out of body experience.

And I just, I couldn't think I couldn't do anything.

I was just drawn towards this door,

drawn by the inevitability of it all, you know?

You know, you make these plans.

You tell yourself it's going to be okay.

You mitigate all the risks and, you know,

you try and approach this professionally,

but then suddenly it's all very real

and there's no escape from the nightmare.

What happened when you opened the door?

Well, sort of in dialogue through the closed door,

I think, you know, the police had established that,

you know, I was home alone

and that I wasn't a significant threat to them,

because I can imagine what it's like for these teams of,

you know, specialised task forces

that raid people's houses two or three times a week.

And some of the places they go into

must be pretty awful and pretty terrifying.

So three, four large, very large men come into the house

and they're looking for threats, you know?

They're concerned about their safety and security,

which I can understand.

So you have no choice but to sort of get out of their way

and be small while they determine the level of risk.
But then sort of, you know, within a few minutes,
Sarah, I noticed them visibly relax.
They all kind of breathe that sigh of relief
because they were going to get to go home tonight.
No one was going to the hospital.
There wasn't going to be any, you know, major incidents.
It was just another grow house that they had to now sort out.
So what did they do with you?
Well, they wanted me to stay downstairs
and, you know, in the custody of one of the officers
while they went upstairs
and determined what they were looking at.
But I said to them that I didn't really trust them
because I was concerned they might plant something.
So I insisted on going with them.
Why are they going to plant on you?
Kim, you've got a grow house full of marijuana.
What are you worried they're going to plant?
I don't know.
It seemed like a thing I should have said at least.
Like we're now bashing on the door and I asked,
do you have a warrant?
And they just, like, I can imagine the guy shaking his head
and laughing at me like, mate, we don't need one.
We're coming in whether you want us to or not.
Like...
So the officer in charge, the sergeant, agreed to come upstairs
and we, you know, it was really interesting to see him
walking around and assess the house and the grow rooms.
And I took some pride in some of the things he said.
It was like, wow, it's tidy in here.
It's like, oh, this is a pretty good setup, this kind of stuff.
You know, this is a man who's seen more grow houses
than most people have had to hot dinners.
And he was giving mine a gold star.
And he asked me sort of a lot of questions.
But at this stage, once you're in custody,
there's no point to be awful to anybody.
You know, there's the guys that are doing,
people that are doing their job.
So you kind of have to cooperate.
So I was happy to talk him through because I understood,
you know, what he needed to do in order to do his job

and satisfy his concerns.
Were you panicking, though, Kim, on the inside?
I was terrified. Absolutely.
I was terrified. Absolutely.
You know, I managed to shoot both the text,
saying, police, here.
Because, you know, this is, despite all your plans,
you're now totally powerless.
You are in custody.
You have been caught with all of the evidence.
And I'm not silly.
I did the research and I knew that potentially
it was going to be six years before I got to go home again.
But there's a kind of, I don't know,
there was a kind of relief to it as well, you know,
that all of this was over, the stress and the fear
and the tension and the duality.
Because as much as I loved what I was doing, Sarah,
I was always conscious of the fact that I could never share it
with my children.
I was always saddened by the fact that this was something
that I could never share with my sons.
So I was glad it was over in a way.
Once your day in court came, Kim,
what did the judge say to you?
He said that I was, because again, you know,
I'm sure the judge in the district court has heard it all before
and seen a lot of cases like mine.
And he said I was very naive and very foolish to think
that I could get away with this and that this was going
to solve my problems, not create more of them.
He sentenced me to two years and that was the end
of that chapter of my life.
Where were you first sent after you were sentenced?
I was in H&P Bristol for three or four weeks,
which is right in the middle of Bristol City.
It was pretty awful because the initial process of,
the initial processing of new intake of prisoners,
they don't know who they're receiving,
so they put everybody together.
So you're in a really overcrowded wing, two up in a cell,
and just everybody's thrown together.
And it was just, it's just so hectic.
There's all kinds of people in there

for all kinds of things as people with drug dependencies.
And it's a very extremely fast-paced
and high-pressure environment.
In many regards, because of my army experience,
it was quite familiar to me, you know,
this hyper-masculine environment.
And it reminded me very much of army barracks.
But it was just so crazy.
It was a real shock to me.
I think it's a real shock for anyone that goes in there.
What are the noises like?
What do you remember about the sounds of Bristol Prison?
It was just incredible because every cell has a television,
and I don't watch television, I don't like it.
I find it shouty enough.
So every cell has a television blaring,
and then there's hundreds of people in the cell.
And it's a big, empty, concrete space,
so there's a lot of reverberation.
Everybody with sensory issues, you know,
this is the stuff of nightmares.
It's just this constant noise, indeterminate noise,
and people everywhere, and so much going on
that you can't understand,
because it's an alien environment.
What had you told your sons about what was happening to you?
Well, I was quite lucky in a lot of ways, Sarah,
because after my arrest and the interviews that I did,
because, you know, I'm a well-spoken white guy,
the police just let me sign my bail form and let me go.
You know, if I was black or English as a second language,
they just would have never have let me out on bail
with no conditions.
So they let me go.
So there was a couple of months at home after I was arrested
where I knew I was going to go to jail.
The question was for how long,
but at least I got a couple of months with my wife and kids
before I went to jail.
And I thought about just telling them
that I was going away on a really big job,
because they were used to me working long hours at the theatre
or gigs that would take me away for days.
So I thought about lying to them

and hoping that I could get out of this
without sort of telling them the truth.
But, you know, I decided that they deserved better than that,
and I just couldn't bring myself to lie to them
and sustain that lie for years.
They were only so young.
So what words did you use?
How did you explain what was happening?
Well, I started with the bad news first
that I was going to jail
and that they weren't going to see me for a while,
which was difficult for them to grasp,
because, you know, even though they were only
two and four years old at the time,
they were really familiar with the narratives
that only bad people go to jail
and that, you know, you only go to jail
for murdering somebody or for stealing someone's stuff.
And they struggled to sit with this idea
that their dad was a bad person and had done bad things.
So they had a lot of questions, like, what had I done?
Why was it illegal, this kind of thing?
So I had to find a way to explain to my children,
you know, age appropriately what I was doing,
because they already knew that I loved gardening
and had green thumbs.
I explained to them that I grew a type of flowers
that was worth a lot of money,
but it was illegal and this was my business
and this is what I'd been doing for six or seven months
and decided that I would let them lead their questions
and I would answer all of them as honestly and openly as I could.
At the time, it was really difficult
and I got a lot of unsolicited advice
from my family and friends telling me
that I was doing the wrong thing
by telling my kids the truth about this
and ruining their lives by explaining to them so young
that I wasn't this godlike figure
that I was always right and knew everything,
that I was making mistakes and getting things wrong
because kids are honest.
They are honest and straight up front.
Well, my kids were, at least.

So did you tell them it was a mistake?
Is that how you phrased it?
Well, I talked about the complicated nature of that
because I told them how much I loved it,
but that it was a mistake
because I was kidding myself about the risk
and what was really at stake
because, you know, all of the plans that I'd made,
all the risks that I thought I'd had covered
and had taken care of, I hadn't extended that
and logically I should have extended that to the risks for them.
So you'd managed to have these conversations
before you were sentenced,
when you are in this environment in Bristol jail first off.
What was it like the first time
that Beth and the boys came to visit you there in jail?
Well, when I first got sent down, Sarah,
I was terrified.
I was a sort of mid-30s guy
who had a lot of life experience
so you can imagine what it's like for young children
to go into this kind of institution
and, you know, they were just terrified.
I don't even know what the word is for them.
And I was really touched by the fact
that these two young people would walk into a situation like that,
walk into that institution just to see me be searched
and, you know, have the sniffer dogs go over them
and just to come and see their dad.
What was the environment like where you met them?
What was the setup? Could you touch one another?
In the visiting room, the prisoners are seated at the table,
the table and chairs sort of bolted to the floor.
And the prisoners, you have to keep your hands on the table
and visible at all times, you know, let them hug or touch your kiss.
So the boys came, you know, when they spotted me,
they came running through between the tables
and jumped on me and hugged me.
And I couldn't help it, you know, I had to hug them as well.
And then your sort of screw comes over
and tells you to sit down.
I had to explain to the kids that they need to sit down
and I have to stay in my seat
and I'm not allowed to take my hands off the table.

I make them go home and they won't be allowed to come again.
And it was awful. It was awful, Sarah.
It just never felt so far away from them
as sitting there at the visiting table.
Do you remember what you talked about?
No, I don't even know.
It just seemed like a second, you know?
It's just awful and that's when the real gravity
of what I'd done really sort of hit me.
This is when, you know, I started unraveling
because I just...
To realise that not only had I put myself in this situation,
but I'd put my two young sons in this situation
and the stories that I'd told myself
and then I'd let myself believe
that led me to that place where we're impacting on them so much.
And the visits were just awful.
What about the goodbyes? I've spoken to other people at prison
and it seems that it's the goodbye moment is almost the worst.
Yeah, this is the worst of it and I just...
You know, because the kids are like, they just don't want to go.
They hold on and they would just hold on to the furniture
with everything their little hands could squeeze as tight as they could
and just refuse to leave.
And they're begging their mum, please mum, can we stay with Dad?
And the screws come over and tell them to leave
and would give birth a couple of warnings.
But eventually, I think that first time even,
the screws had to step in and sort of pull the kids off the chairs
and it was just awful.
And then as they're being let out
out of the visiting room, we're talking concrete corridors
and so even when the doors close behind them,
I can still hear them screaming and crying
as they go down the concrete corridor.
And because of the sort of environment, there's always noise.
You never hear that sound disappear.
And so in my mind, I was constantly searching for that sound
and I could hear it everywhere I went.
I could hear this. I could hear my kids calling out for me.
I could hear them screaming and crying
and just seeing that this sound haunted me everywhere in the jail.
And I was just devastated.
I've never been so low, Sarah, and that night,

I'm not ashamed to say that I cried for my kids then
like I'm crying for them again now
and I cried myself to sleep that night.
I was just devastated.
And for their mum, the logistics of getting two small kids
into the prison visiting room
and then dealing with the emotional fallout afterwards
was a heavy toll on her.
So this was the life that you were leading in these early weeks.
Where were you taken one day then without warning?
Yeah, you get about 15 minutes notice
and as Grew came to my cell one morning
and told me to pack my stuff, I'm leaving.
And they don't say where.
They just give you 15 minutes notice
because I assume they don't want prisoners to be able to make plans
or have time to sort anything out before they leave.
So you throw your stuff into some plastic bags
and then you go downstairs and then put into a truck
and you don't know where you're going
or how long it's going to be there.
And then just later I began the induction process again
at H&P Dartmoor, which is miles away from anywhere in the UK.
It's so far removed from even public transport.
And it's that way deliberately, isn't it?
It was originally established as a place to put high-risk criminals
so there was no way for them to run.
Yeah, because even if you could manage to escape from the prison
you'd have to survive the moors.
Yeah, so it was really very remote
and really quite frustrating to be there
even further away from my kids.
The whole weed growing operation was supposed to bring us closer together
and it just did the exact opposite.
Who was your cellmate first off in Dartmoor?
It was a man named Jason.
Jason's a black guy from London
and I'm embarrassed to say, and I'm ashamed to say now that I know Jason
that I was terrified of him
but he was black because he's taller than me
because he was clearly...
From the first moment I saw him in the holding cells
when we got transferred to Dartmoor together
it was clear that he'd been in before and knew the prison system well.

And I was terrified, Sarah.
I didn't know who this guy was
and I grew up in Western Australia
and I'd spent a few years in London
and now I'm in a prison cell with somebody with complex issues
and drug dependency, has had drug dependencies
and an extensive criminal record.
I didn't know anything about him
and I was absolutely terrified.
So how did that change as you got to know him?
I realised that Jason was actually lovely
and actually really wonderful human being
who had struggled with a lot of issues
and struggled with a lot of things
and had definitely made some bad decisions
and done some pretty terrible things.
But I just couldn't not see
because there was just something in his face and in his eyes
and, you know, just this...
It was like a new kid in the playground, uncertain of stuff.
He was just that lost little boy
that I recognised from my sons
and I recognised it in myself
and we actually became really good friends
and we still are today.
But I had to do a lot of, you know, that first week
because you're the first week in prison cell,
or certainly in the UK,
they keep you locked down in your cell under observations
because the wing staff want to know what you're like,
then you just sort out your paperwork and stuff like that.
So they just keep you under observations
because they don't know anything about you.
So we spent a week locked in a cell in Dartmo
and I really got to know Jason
and we talked a lot about stuff
and I had to really reassess my opinions.
This is Conversations
with Sarah Konoski.
So, Kim, you were put in a cell with Jason.
How did you find a spot in that wider prison system
that you suddenly found yourself in?
Well, a lot of that was thanks to Jason, you know?
He really...

I owe Jason an incredible debt of gratitude
because, you know, he really helped me understand
the prison system and how things work
and the dynamics of the sort of this social organisation
of the place.
And he had a lot of friends, a lot of contacts
and just knew how things worked,
knew how to complain well.
It's a very good skill to have, Sarah,
to be able to complain well.
But I was a foreign prisoner as well,
so, you know, already I'm an outsider,
so I'm sort of not accepted
by the white English prisoners.
So most of my friends were black or Muslim.
I myself didn't really belong to any one particular group,
but I could travel between them.
I learned how to code switch
between the different social groups.
Dartmo Prison is a long way from Bristol.
How hard was it for Beth and the boys
to come and visit you in this new spot?
Ah, extremely difficult.
Extremely difficult. Such a long way.
Things were really financially difficult for Beth and the kids.
So, you know, she started selling furniture
and expensive household items
to get money to pay bills
and to travel to come and see me.
It was really, really difficult for them.
In a lot of ways, Sarah, it was much easier for me
because, you know, I have all my basic needs met.
And I have lots of time to read and think
and, you know, process things.
But, you know, for them,
it was much more of a sentence and much harder
for my wife and my kids than it was for me.
What were you missing most came about your boys?
Which part of your lives together
was the sore spot while you were in jail?
I was reading to them. Absolutely.
I used to dream about it at night.
Reading to them before bed was...
I enjoyed it, and I loved it.

And it was something I'd done since...
Since they were so young,
they couldn't even sit themselves up.
They, you know, they couldn't sit unsupported,
but I'd be sitting there reading them a story.
And I was really surprised that this was what I dreamt about.
You know, I was just so devastated
to be utterly cut off from them.
So, you know, I was dreaming about reading to them at night.
And, you know, young kids are terrible on the telephone
and they can't write letters,
and things still weren't great between Beth and I.
So even, you know, writing letters was difficult.
It was wonderful what she did for them
and what she did for me and what she did for us
in sort of holding our relationship together,
because I would write to the boys and she would read to them.
And sort of these two things combined
gave me the idea behind writing stories for them.
Well, how did that start?
First of all, how did you go about getting your hands
on the help tips to create?
Yeah, I bought a pouch of tobacco.
So this is prison currency, yeah, tobacco and cigarettes.
So I bought a pouch of tobacco and I set off,
this was in Bristol, I started this,
I set off looking for coloured pencils or some textures.
You know, and in my mind,
I was going to find these sort of pristine art materials.
And it just wasn't possible,
because they don't sell pencils or textures on the canteen list.
The only chance they were going to be in there
is if they existed in there and had been there for a while
and someone had left them there,
so I had to really search for them.
And I asked so many people, and it was really weird,
because, you know, when you go up to somebody that you don't know
and you're trying to assess what they're like
and how they're going to think of you,
and everybody assumes you're trying to find drugs, you know?
Because I'd tell them that I had tobacco that I wanted to trade
if they'd got what I'm looking for, you know?
And they'd just look at me like I was mad,
like, you want to trade a whole pouch of burn

for a packet of pencils?

Well, you're off your nut, mate, this kind of stuff.

And so many people just give you weird looks.

And the other thing that I was worried about

was the fact that I would look like somebody who's, you know,

a guy who's in jail and looking to get laid, you know?

Excuse me, can you...

I've got a pouch of tobacco here, do you think, maybe?

I just didn't know what I looked like or how I was coming across

because, you know, I'm a bit strange, I'm a bit awkward sometimes.

But eventually I found it,

and it wasn't the fine art materials that I was searching for.

It was literally five felt tip textures

that had been in prison for God knows how long.

And the guy couldn't believe it.

He thought I was...

He thought I was mental.

Like, when he gave me these five-coloured textures

and I gave him a 50-gram pouch of tobacco

and he just thought it was Christmas.

What did you create?

What story did you create with these highly prized textures?

Well, I just sort of...

I sat down and I'd never written a story before.

I didn't know what I was doing.

And I actually have Stephen Fry to thank for this

because the voice of Stephen Fry...

I kid you not, Sarah.

The voice of Stephen Fry came to me in a blinding flash

because the kids and I used to watch a lot of cartoons

and stuff on TV.

And Fry was doing a lot of children's...

narration for children's TV in the UK at the time.

And the voice of Stephen Fry came into my head

and narrated the story of Ahle loves to draw.

And it was really short and it's straight to the point.

And I still to this day...

I puzzled at where this story came from

because it's just so perfect.

And I thank you, Stephen Fry.

So you wrote this little story for Ahle

and your youngest son.

I did.

Did you illustrate it?

How good a drawer are you?

I did.

Oh, no.

I was terrible.

I still am.

Like, I've never been able to draw.

I don't have the concentration for it.

So I drew these stick figures of a little island

and some toys and some friends

and a car and an airplane

and just the basics of the story,

that feature in the story.

And then posted it off the next day.

And what kind of reception did he get?

They just loved it.

Beth said she got sick of reading it.

They just wanted more and more and more.

And then my other son Otto was like,

hey, what about a story for me?

So I wrote a story from him,

but by this time Stephen Fry had left my head

and I had to write it myself.

And it was awful.

It was really terrible.

That initial inspiration was gone.

That first story was perfect.

Yeah.

And it was really awful.

And when I read it back now,

it doesn't make sense.

And I'm not clear about what goes on in the story

or the relationship between Otto and the cheeky rascal.

But it didn't matter.

They loved it anyway.

And I drew, you know, the pictures were even worse this time

because I was trying to compensate for the story.

But it didn't matter.

They just loved it.

And Beth got sick of reading that one too

and they just demanded more.

And so how much of your time were you spending

creating stories for your boys then?

Well, I'm actually really grateful for this

because it kind of became my primary focus.

Because I hadn't anticipated that this would go on.
I thought it would be nice to write them a story each
and then, you know, I'd just get on with it.
Get on with prison life and make the best with what we've got.
But they wanted more.
And it was just so wonderful to feel connected to them again.
To feel like there was actually something good
because, you know, after getting locked up
and the state of my marriage with Beth
and the situation with the kids and I,
I just felt like things might never be good again.
And this was just something totally unexpected
that was just so good
and something that I could do from inside.
So I had to try.
I just couldn't.
I couldn't.
When they asked for more, I couldn't say no.
I just had to keep doing it.
And so I created, again,
I created another production schedule.
And I would spend my weekdays sort of coming up with ideas
and drafting, doing rough drafts of stories
and then write them out neatly on lined paper
that I had to buy lined paper.
But I was stealing forms, prison forms,
to draft on the back of them because they were blank.
You know, I thought, well, if I'm locked up
I might as well embrace my inner criminal.
So I'd go down and hang out, hang around outside the screws office
and when no one was looking, you know,
I'd stuff loads of these forms up my shirt
and scurry back to myself
because the backs of them were blank
and I would write these stories
and then write them out neatly on the lined paper
and then spend my weekends illustrating these stories for the kids.
And then on Monday morning, every morning,
I just couldn't let my kids down again, you know?
I just, after everything that had gone wrong
and everything that was bad,
it was the one thing that seemed good,
that was good and seemed like it might connect us.
So every Monday morning, I would post two stories to my kids.

You had another change of location,
another unexpected change of location, Kim,
when Officer Hill appeared in yourself one day.
What was his proposal?
Well, he was an immigration officer
so he wasn't an ordinary guard
in prison.
His job was to get rid of foreign prisoners
because it's cheaper to deport them
than it is to keep them in jail.
It cost £45,000 to keep a prisoner locked up in the UK,
which is incredible
because, you know, I never earned anywhere near close
to £45,000 a year
in the time I was working in the UK.
But so his job was to deport foreign prisoners
so he came in and said, you've got to sign this now.
And I wonder how many foreign prisoners
or prisoners with English as a second language just did
and he got rid of them like that.
But I'd done a bit of research
and my solicitor had advised me about this
and so eventually I did accept the deportation
after talking it through with Beth and the boys
so they deported me back to Australia
and as part of the facilitated return scheme
so they would deport me back to Australia,
there was no record of my conviction or my sentence.
It actually paid me £1,500 to get out of the UK.
And what did it mean for Beth
when you were having that conversation with her
about her and the boys?
What did she decide to do?
Well, it was another massive decision for her.
You know, moving back to Australia was a massive step
because she never wanted to come back here.
But we talked about it and she decided
that she would like to try again
and put the family back together.
So she moved back to Australia with the boys
with the help from her parents who were really wonderful
and have been very supportive of her and of me for many years.
So her parents helped her and the boys came back to Australia
and then I followed a few months after.

Tell me about that flight, Kim,
like how much security was there on the English side
when you boarded the plane?
Again, you take into the airport in a prison van.
You're not inside the building at Heathrow.
You're kept in a sort of in the luggage department
with two prison guards as escorts.
And then you put on the plane
and the cabin crew have your passport
and you know, you board the plane last
after everybody else has seated.
And then there's a connecting flight from Bangkok.
So there was a security escort for me waiting at Bangkok Airport
and I had a bit of a panic attack in Bangkok Airport
because I'd been locked up for a while
and Bangkok Airport was just so busy.
There was just so much noise and so many people
all going in different directions, which was really weird.
You know, having been inside for so long,
everybody travels in the same direction
and everybody does what they're told
and this was just totally crazy
and the sights and the smells and the sounds and the colours.
It was really difficult for me.
Again, while waiting for the flight,
I was kept in the security office.
But when I got to Perth Airport, I was expecting, you know,
reception by the federal police or WA police
or somebody from the government
to tell me we know what you've done and we're watching you.
But there was just nobody
and it took me quite a while to build up the courage
to step out of the airport
because it had been a long time
since I'd been allowed to open a door by myself.
But you were totally free to go.
Yeah, I stepped off the plane
and when I did manage to summon the courage
to step out of the airport, I was free and clear,
which was really...
I found it really difficult, really strange
and, you know, the Perth sky was much, much bigger
than I was expecting, than I remembered it being
and I really struggled with this wide open space

and the sunlight and the outdoors.

And of course, your little boys were there waiting to meet you again.

What was that first meeting like?

In our new house.

I still remember them and Beth sitting on the front step of the house because my brother Glenn had an empty house in Capell that he agreed to let us live in.

They'd been living there a couple of months

and they were sitting on the front step waiting for me

and, you know, before I even got out of the car,

they saw me coming and they ran and hugged me

and it was just incredible

and just that brief moment of seeing them sitting on the steps,

you know, it was literally half a world away

from the last time I saw them,

which was being dragged screaming down the steps

at Dartmoor Prison Visiting Room.

You know, it was really...

It was just so wonderful.

After everything we'd been through,

to be lucky enough for lots of reasons,

lucky enough because I'm white and my prison sentence was short

and lucky enough to not fall for the trap

of signing the deportation without really looking into it

and lots of reasons just to be lucky enough

to be reunited with my kids again

because this was really a happy ending for this story

because I'm so aware that for so many men

and for so many kids,

you know, this going to prison doesn't have a happy ending.

Even when you get out, it ruins your life after that.

What did the boys ask you to do that first night,

back together?

It was a really high-energy day,

but then after dinner, after dinner,

I remember their little faces,

Daddy, will you read us a story?

And I was like, oh, my God, I'd absolutely love to read you a story.

And I was expecting, you know, to go in there

and they'd choose a story from a little bookshelf, you know,

one of the children's stories that, you know, that you buy.

And they...

I can't remember if it was a plastic bag or a shoebox,

and they tipped out all of my stories on the floor.
And they were just so happy and so delighted,
and there's this pile of stories,
and I'd never seen all of them together in the one spot before.
There's 47 of them in this pile,
and to see them sort of, you know, their little hands digging through it
and, you know, reaching, holding one up in the air going,
oh, yeah, this one's my favourite.
Oh, what about the enormous jocosaurus
talking about these characters and all of these stories
and their favourites and just seeing them,
just that moment of joy,
because there was wonderful, the initial meeting
at the front door on the driveway,
but this was really the reunion, the three of us together.
And with these stories, I'm getting upset again.
With these stories, I started writing them desperately hoping
that they would somehow keep us connected,
and they worked, and then to see all of the stories there
in a pile on the floor and to be there with my sons again
was just magical.
So that connection between you had been kept
and you built a new life back in WA
without really telling people about this story
of what had happened to you in the UK.
How did that change?
Well, it was like nine years.
So for nine years, I kept the secret.
I didn't tell anybody I wouldn't talk about it.
Some people knew, of course, my family and my partner's family.
But again, I was really lucky because it was...
I was a foreign prisoner and I didn't have to declare
because there's no record of it here in Australia.
So I could get a police clearance.
I could have jobs and other positions that I have now
because that wasn't the end of my story.
You know, having been sent to prison didn't ruin my life.
Like it does so many other people.
But in 2019, I was invited by a friend of mine
to go to an artist's residency hosted
by the Bumbry Regional Entertainment Centre
to meet a group of mentors and talk about ideas
for potential theatre shows.
So I thought this might be a good idea

because I'd continued writing for my kids
and for myself when I have a collection of short stories
and other works that I've written.
And my experience in theatre has always been
really positive for me, really good.
So I was interested to go there.
But I felt that I shouldn't.
I felt like an imposter.
And also, I had this dirty secret.
Having been involved in protracted criminal activity
and having been arrested and sent to prison for it,
you know, you feel there's a kind of...
You just feel like an imposter in the rest of society
that you'll always be judged whenever you mention this.
And so when I went to this artist's retreat,
I didn't want to tell the truth about the stories
that I'd wrote for my kids.
And I didn't want to tell the truth about where I'd written them or why.
But over the weekend, the mentors that I was working with
were really lovely and they encouraged me,
made me feel encouraged and empowered to share this story with them.
And it just kind of blew them away.
And they got really excited about the potential for this story.
So it's pretty amazing.
And you put these stories together
in collaboration with other people,
you transform them into a play, The Smaller Stage.
What did your boys think about you
making the play, telling your story together to the world?
Well, initially, when I first spoke about it,
because it took us two and a half years working on this production,
for the first 12 months when I was talking about it with the boys,
they didn't believe me.
So they couldn't...
They sort of, oh yeah, dad's making up stories again.
And again, similarly with my sort of disbelief
that there was a good story here to be told
and that people would be interested in this,
or that anybody would be interested in the story
of that time of our lives, because it was really difficult,
because it was mostly awful.
And the boys, they also had that same reluctance.
They were like, well, dad, who's going to care about this?
Because they were bad times.

And a lot of the stories that I wrote, so, you know, weren't good.
A lot of them are just, you know,
written by some desperate guy in prison.
And so, you know, they were kind of concerned.
But then when they met the rest of the team,
the director Matt Edgerton, director and dramaturg
who helped me in a great deal with writing the script for this,
and Zoe Atkinson, the designer,
it kind of became real for them when they met Matt and Zoe.
And to hear Matt and Zoe explain to them
why they think this is good, that kind of turned their point of view.
Are they proud of you doing it now?
Do you think the show's been on?
It was part of the Perth Festival.
How do they feel about that story being shown to the public?
Absolutely. Very proud of me now.
And I'm really proud of them too,
because they were involved in the production.
But, you know, it's been really wonderful for them, I think,
to see the way this story and these stories have changed.
You know, these are the stories of their childhood.
These are the characters that they grew up with.
And their lived experience.
To see something that's so wonderful come from those experiences
that were so bad, I think,
was a crucial lesson for them to learn, for all young people to learn.
So it's been really wonderful for them to be involved
and to help me through this process,
because they've seen me crying into my keyboard,
trying to, you know, going back to times in my life
and parts of their lives that were awful and really disturbing.
And having to go, it's kind of like conducting your own autopsy.
This autobiographical work.
So it's been very emotional for me and for them,
but thoroughly worthwhile.
And what kind of reaction have they got
and you got from the people in your life
who didn't know about this story that you shared back in the UK?
Actually, it's been really positive.
So the other reason I was really concerned about telling this story
and the theatre production sharing this widely
is because of the experience that my kids had at school
when everybody found out that I'd been drunk cannabis and was now in jail.
You know, it was just awful for them the way it impacted them.

You know, they got bullied at school.
Their friends weren't allowed to play with them anymore.
Other kids would steal stuff from Otto,
because Dad wasn't around anymore.
It was really awful.
And so there was a little bit of...
And I think they were concerned as well
of what would happen when news of this story got around their school again
and got around in their community.
But it's been really positive, actually.
And one thing that really surprises me, Sarah,
is that everybody that has come to see the play,
everybody that has been involved with this production,
it really touches them somehow.
They really connect with it, it resonates with them,
because everybody, it seems, has a story like this,
something that they shouldn't have done, that they feel guilty about,
or they understand the anxiety of separation from their children
or from their loved ones or their parents,
when they were away, found a creative way to tell them
that they loved them.
It's been really wonderful.
And I'm so glad that the three of us have been involved in this.
It's just been great.
I'm so happy for all of you that this is this point
that the story has got to.
Kim, thank you so much for being my guest on Conversations.
Thanks so much for having me, Sarah.
You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations
with Sarah Konoski.
For more Conversations interviews,
head to the website, [abc.net.au slash Conversations](http://abc.net.au/slash/Conversations).