

JON DOUST
RETURN
TICKET



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For Betty, Hannah and Grietje

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The sink before me was not a trough, or a restaurant pit, it was a standard, domestic double sink. Before I started, I stacked items in their washing order. First the dinner plates, then the side plates on top. In a separate stack, dessert bowls, salad bowls and cups and glasses. All the cutlery I placed in a saucepan. Once the water was hot and soapy, I dropped in the cutlery made of fine steel, a set left to us by a Dutch friend. She died of a vigorous and nasty cancer and my wife lay beside her and wrapped her in love to keep her warm as she died. You can't wash those items and not remember. The silverware my mother bought to celebrate her marriage to a man who saved her sanity and her life, and who gave her all the things denied her in her own family. The plates given to us by my father: I never thought you two would last, to be honest, he said, as he handed my wife the box of fine china.

It wasn't you we were worried about, my dear, he told her, it was him. Until you came along, Jack was a hopeless case.

I left the cutlery to soak and only washed items with a soft cloth. The silver came to us with scratches and I decided they would be the last. The fine steel came unscratched because our Dutch friend was a meticulous woman who cared for all things.

When my mother died, she left us her silverware and I particularly enjoy caring for those shining items. She had clearly used harsh scrubbers, but in my house they are banned.

Back in the early 1970s, in Eliat, an Israeli city on the Red Sea, just around the bay from Jordan's Aqaba, I washed pans, trays

and tabletops for an Israeli baker. He was a harsh and insulting man and never missed an opportunity to shout at me and the Bedouin labour force.

Fuck, man, he'd yell. I want bread pans. Why the fuck you don't finish?

Ken. Ani nudnik. Slich.

My Hebrew was not fluent but I learnt enough to get by and I needed this phrase to cope with the schmuck. Loosely translated it meant: Yes. I am stupid. Excuse me.

The Bedouins laughed. The baker never did. And this fascinated me, because it had come to me that hardcore Israelis did not have a Jewish sense of humour, that willingness displayed by Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce, George Burns, to laugh at themselves, to laugh in the face of an institution, a cruel system, anything or anyone tormenting them.

The Bedouins did all the heavy lifting, and I washed, swept and wiped. We started work at eleven o'clock at night and finished around eight in the morning. The Bedouins shared their food, smiles and hot, sweet tea. There are times when, crouched over a steaming sink, I think of them, remember their hospitality, their goodwill and generosity, and I wonder why I never met them on a kibbutz, even as visitors. It seemed to me there was something about their spirit that was not unlike that of the kibbutznik. The Bedouins were Muslims, of course, and the kibbutzniks, although predominantly Jewish, were not religious, but secular, and welcoming.

I am never reckless with dishes. I am careful, cautious, considerate, and I enter a kind of trance. When I am there, over the sink, with my naked hands in the steamy water, each item is precious. It is not simply a fork, knife, plate or spoon. It is much more, each item the keeper of memories. If not cleaned with respect and care, the memories remain trapped, not released. I'm like that with places too, they all hold memories, histories, a collective memory and whenever I go anywhere, I want to know

the past of the place, how it got to be what it is. It was one of the few interests I had in common with my father, a love of history. It was the only subject I passed in my final year of high school, and although he was disappointed the other five didn't make it, I knew if he had chosen one for me to pass, it would have been history.

I hear no-one else in the room. There are no sounds, no music, just the swish of the dish and the plop of the crock in the rinsing sink. Some days, I am back on Kibbutz Gavrot, wearing nothing but Speedos, rubber gloves and a rubber apron. As the dishes arrive over the kitchen counter, I pull them into the huge tubs and nothing escapes my vigour. If on a night my co-worker volunteer didn't arrive, then I took every one of the four hundred and fifty plates and knives and forks and spoons and not one was returned by the stacker behind me. Cleaner than whistles. One night, about halfway through, I looked up to see a small crowd gathered in awe of my speed, my dexterity, my love. Yes, love. Because even as a boy, when my father put our names on the kitchen noticeboard letting us know who washed, who dried, and who brought in the firewood, even then I loved and craved the steamy hot water and the rhythm of the wash. One night I was desperate to wash and my older brother was listed but I kicked up such a fuss they led me to the sink, splashed rinsing water on my face and left me alone until the tears dried and the dish rack was full.

Before items go in the drying rack, I hold them fast and drop them faster to release excess water. Perhaps I wash the dishes the way I do because it suggests a way I might have lived – ordered, structured, careful and meditative. As I have aged I've realised my life has been bereft of rituals and so this caressing of dish and plate and knife, spoon and fork, has become one.

Almost fifty years ago, I climbed on board the *Fairstar*, in Fremantle. The Jack Muir of 1972 had only recently left a family business and a secure future. There was something brewing in him then and some of it still brews today, and still much of that earlier version remains a mystery and I often think of him in the third person, someone I once knew, almost knew, knew well enough to challenge, to question.

Young Jack broke from his family, told them to leave him alone, not to try and contact him, that he might be gone years.

Not to worry, he said, it's not about you, it's me.

But it was, he thought, about them, and their culture, their town, their lack, its lack. It seemed to him that everyone he knew was unfinished, incomplete, and he wanted completion. He had begun to turn away from everything he had ever learnt, everyone he knew, or had ever known.

There's something going on out there, he said, and I have to find out about it and work out how I fit in.

Looking back through his journals, I read the writing of an arrogant, self-absorbed young man, very much of his time. He was also adventurous and random, and this makes him interesting, worthy of my attention and, of course, whoever he was, he was someone who had a dramatic impact on my life.

The first port of call for that ship was Durban, South Africa, ten days away from Fremantle. My immediate intentions were unclear to me, but although my ticket destination was Southampton, England, I never made it.

South Africa 1972

Durban

All Muir's new friends onboard the *Fairstar* were getting off in Durban, some to stay, some to catch a bus to Cape Town where they would rejoin the ship.

You'll dig Durban, said Dave, the South African hippie surfer. We grow the best marijuana in the world – Durban Poison.

They were huddled under a lifeboat on the upper deck, sucking and passing, sucking and passing. It was Jack's first suck and pass, and a long way from his last. It was the beginning of an odd journey, given he had only recently become a vegan and had sworn off casual sex and alcohol.

I never smoked before I got on this ship, said Muir.

Shit, man. This stuff we're smoking now, it's shit. Wait till you get your lips around Durban *dagga*.

Muir had two official cabin mates – one a South African homosexual, the other a drunk Queenslander who they had to put to bed more than once – and one unofficial, a stowaway they kept alive with food smuggled out of the dining room.

Durban is an ugly town, said Peter, Jack's cabin mate. It's not fun being a homo in South Africa. I'm not sure why I'm going home.

Muir stood on deck as the tugboat led the ship through the entrance to its berth. He was excited, wide-eyed and intrigued by the movement on the waterfront – black men everywhere, walking, carrying, loading, unloading. It was his first disembark, following his first embark in Fremantle. He was not sure he would do it again.

Onshore, the world turned hot, humid and nasty, and as Muir walked away from the port terminal he watched Peter yelling at a black man in a language he had never heard before.

The further Muir walked into the city, the nastier it seemed, from the signs designating seating permissions by colour, to the permanent snarls on the faces of authority, and the smells that dominated. Durban carried a stench of decay, of rotting matter, nothing like the sweet wafts from the Genoralup bush, full of eucalyptus, hakea, sheoak and banksia. It reminded him of the dead animals he happened on occasionally at home. When he opened the apartment window on his first morning, the stench rolled in and drove him out. Outside, his nose got used to it, but the street filth clung to his skin and as he walked the city streets it seeped into the soles of his feet and entered the pores of soft flesh around his nose and cheeks.

The ocean saved him.

Early every morning, he ran from the apartment to surf and look out across the Indian Ocean to where he thought Perth might be, to wonder why he left one place he didn't like for another he liked even less.

Berea

On the ship, Muir had met a drug dealer called Parsons. He seemed a reasonable sort of chap and so they hung out together, even shared their Durban apartment with two hippies. Following a street-side incident, and the slow-dawning realisation that the hippies were unable to wash dishes, sweep floors, or speak plain English, Parsons and Muir decided to leave them to the flat and rent a room in a house once owned by an Indian, up high in Berea, a leafy suburb out of Durban. The Indian had been an important businessman and, at that time, Indian businesspeople and their families dominated the street. They were driven out when the ruling skin colour wanted the view back over Durban. The new owner of the house was a German with a strong accent and several unhealthy relationships – with alcohol, his Alsatians and his girlfriend. They didn't know any of this, of course, when Parsons made the deal with the German over the phone.

He sounded Portuguese, said Parsons.

What did he say his name was? asked Jack.

Sounded like Storm Tartan.

Every day Muir would rise early, feed the dogs, wash the dishes from the night before, eat a bowl of muesli, hitchhike into Durban, swim at the main beach, bodysurf, buy a hot Horlicks and hitchhike back to Berea. Most lifts were with English-speaking South Africans, an occasional Afrikaner and a few Indians. Muir had known that people were separated by colour in South Africa but, having once lived in Papua New

Guinea as a colourblind innocent, he found the rules confusing and in his first week was asked to move on by a fat policeman.

I'm sorry? he said. You want me to what?

To move away, said the fat policeman.

But I'm having a chat with this man. If I move away, I won't be able to hear what he says.

The young Zulu was unable to suppress a smile and the fat policeman unable to suppress his rising anger. The three of them stood in the centre of Durban, on the edge of the pavement, not far from the rickshaw stand with its wild and extroverted drivers. Muir thought about calling them to join in the discussion, wondering how the policeman would deal with an impi of Zulus yelling in his face.

In South Africa, said the fat cop, the only time white people talk to black people in the street is to tell them to do something and, if you refuse to move, I will have to take action against your person.

Against my person? Which person is that?

The Zulu laughed so hard he bent over and held his face, but he also knew the danger and had begun walking away from the two men, one fat with a pistol on his hip and one wiry, packing a small pocketknife hidden in a pocket.

All right, said Muir.

He thought about looking back for his new Zulu friend but noticed the fat man following him and decided to hitch back to Berea.

In Berea, he walked into the kitchen and an argument between Sturmgarten, the German, and his girlfriend, who Muir believed was Belgian. He made his way through the dogs and insults to the sink, and set about arranging items to be washed the next day.

Don't you come to me with Hitler, said Sturmgarten, what about King Leopold in the Congo?

The mention of Hitler caught Muir by surprise and he turned to watch the woman. She was slim, dull in the eyes, yet her lips were set and determined. He worried about her safety under the massive frame and lard-laden body of the German.

Leopold was a colonialist, she said, like the English and the Dutch, but he was not a mass exterminator.

Sturmgarten rose from his chair, walked around the kitchen the long way, the other side of the sink, opened the fridge door, took another bottle of lager, turned, clipped the side of his girlfriend's head, then walked all the way back and sat down. She did not flinch.

Are you all right? asked Muir.

No, but he has done this before and I know how to be with him.

Late that night, Muir and Parsons arrived back at the house stoned and drunk, and Sturmgarten pulled a pistol and shot at them. They were attempting to enter the house from the upstairs balcony. This meant climbing a tree and making enough noise to wake the sleeping slug.

A light appeared from an upstairs room as the door to the veranda opened. The German slug stood there, silent. There was a red flash and the *pop pop* of his pistol.

It's us, you *dummkopf!* yelled Parsons.

More shots.

I'm hit! said Parsons.

The shirt on Muir's arm ripped and his flesh stung.

The crazed Nazi was mad, pissed, firing wildly and hitting them, trying to kill them.

Herr Sturmgarten! yelled Muir.

Sturmgarten dropped his arm.

Vot are you going? he asked. Vy you do dis to me?

You have locked us out of the house.

But I don't lock you.

Lucky the bastard can't shoot, said Parsons, he only grazed my leg.

The next day the undercover drug squad detective, who lived in the cottage next door, walked in on them in the back garden. Parsons had taken his first hit from the bong and passed it to Muir. There was movement through the bushes; Muir dropped the bong and forced it into foliage behind him. A man in a white safari suit appeared.

Is that marijuana? he asked.

What is? said Muir.

Don't be sassy with me, my friend, or I will have you arrested and we can lose the key. That thing you put behind the rose bushes, it was a bong. Let me introduce myself. Piet Duplessis from the Durban Drug Squad. If you cooperate, you can stay here, but if you don't, we can try some things they never heard of in Geneva. First, where did you get the drugs?

Duplessis was an ugly man with an ugly mouth and a voice that arrived deep, coarse, with accompanying foul stench. In the Berea tropical garden surrounding the house, the man's breath was an abomination. When he moved closer, Muir and Parsons stepped back.

I'll give you until the end of the week, Duplessis said. If you don't give me names, our next talk will be down in the central station. We don't want this country to become a drug Mecca.

The day after the bong in the garden, Muir and Parsons packed their bags and hitched a lift to Johannesburg.