

JON
DOUST
TO THE
HIGHLANDS

From Dr Ian Palmer, MD

27 June 1969

Mr Jack Muir initially presented with many ailments including a recurring knee injury, deafness in one ear and what he referred to as a 'kind of STD'. Painkillers and physiotherapy solved the first ailment, followed by a prompt ENT referral to investigate a probable cause for his deafness. Mr Muir's 'STD' was in fact an NSU (non-specific urethritis), a term covering a plethora of unknown causes for sexually transmitted urethritis. Most troubling were Mr Muir's psychological issues resultant from delayed stress regarding episodes he wished to remain confidential. Naturally he was referred immediately to Dr Grey Hammond, a highly respected psychiatrist, specialising in cases of what is referred to as stress response syndrome.

From Dr Grey Hammond, FRCPsych, FRANZCP

3 October 1973

Mr Jack Muir is well known to this practitioner and one considers him a highly moral person. Like many men he spent much of his youth sowing oats that grew into thistles. As part of his ongoing therapy one encouraged him to keep a journal of his thoughts, feelings and memories. That journal grew into this book. Professional ethics prevent one from disclosing any specific matters discussed between counsellor and client.

What one can add is that there have been many sociological studies undertaken in the region where Mr Muir 'spent time' and it is not unreasonable to suggest that much of his sexual behaviour, for which he has punished himself severely, would not have been out of the ordinary among local populations regardless of their racial origins.

PART ONE

I

The man on me moves.

I lie still.

He moves again. Maybe he's embarrassed to be murdering a sobbing, bleeding, blubbering man who has no power, no strength, no will, no future. He rolls off me. I squeeze my eyes. Lungs suck great chunks of air. I hear him stand and walk away. I don't know where to but I hope it's far, so far I can't see him when I get up off this floor because then I might stumble down the stairs to the kitchen, take one of the houseboy's long knives, walk up the stairs to his room, open his door, find him lying on his bed exhausted from the attempted murdering and stick him – stick the knife into his musclebound body more than once, maybe as many times as the murder I heard about on Radio Australia last week when one man stabbed another to death because of a sweet potato deal gone sour.

I turn my head to the floor. The crying spreads. I am emptying, pouring out, everything is leaving me. I know that if I cry long enough and hard enough there will be nothing left but a wet patch of tears mixed with blood, and when he comes out of his room to check on me, or someone climbs the stairs, all they will see is a small pool of what was once me.

When I stepped off the plane in the capital, I stepped into a stinking, rotting, decaying, forever composting wet heat, and right into the care of two seasoned bank johnnies who drove me direct to a tropical pub full of cane furniture. They didn't take me to the bank to meet the manager, the assistant manager, the accountant, or up the hill to meet the district commissioner. They said all that could wait.

First things first, said Tony, who was leaving at the end of the week for Sydney and his old job at head office. For us expatriates, the islands are all about drinking and fucking. One is easy to come by and the other depends on your preferences.

I smiled, sat back in the big cane chair and looked around me. Tony and the other bloke, whose name I didn't get and I don't think I ever saw him again, were wearing the standard white shirt, white shorts and long white socks. A great start, straight to the pub, no looking around for cops hunting underage drinkers, or adults who might know how old I was and tell me I was too young to drink. When it was my buy I didn't even have to walk up to the bar because a solid black man in a skirt walked up to our table and asked if we wanted more drinks. I said yes and he went away to get them.

I might get used to this, I said.

You've only got two years, Jack, said Tony, and if you get used to it, by then it's time to leave. As for me, it's been fun but I can't wait to get home and see a bit more white flesh.

Most people in the lounge bar were white. All the waiters were black. As I looked around I noticed I was the only one looking around. Then I saw her, the mixed race woman. Tony looked at me.

Yes, he said, she's stunning, but not for you, or any of us.

Why not?

Not because of her colour, mate, because she's taken, by some bloody shipping millionaire.

She was magnificent, all the way down from her face, through her neck, shoulders, arms, breasts, stomach, thighs and legs and in that way she moved, sat and placed one leg so carefully over its equal and opposite. I almost died there and then but couldn't because she became a dream and I decided I wouldn't wake up until she, or someone just like her, was lying beside me with a perfect leg draped over one of mine.

The other bloke said, Trouble, Jack, you're looking at trouble.

How would you know? said Tony. Not only has your wife got her hooks in your pants, you've never left the capital.

I just know. Look what happened to Dixy.

What happened to Dixy? I asked.

No one really knows, said Tony.

He went completely bloody troppo, said the other bloke.

Yeah, but we don't know why. Plenty of rumours about him and a native woman. Anyway, he was coming to work dishevelled and drunk, lost the plot and had to go home early.

My grandfather always said: The best breeds are always pure. You don't breed a mongrel with a thoroughbred. You don't put a purebred Friesian in with a Jersey, or an Arab with a Clydesdale. But from where I was sitting I decided he didn't have a clue what he was talking about and later, while lying on top of a bed they gave me in the old archive room, I dreamt of my own paddock full of mixed breeds walking around looking at me with their

eyes full of mischief and intent.

I slept on top of the bed because of the heat but they didn't really put me in an old archive room. I was given a bed in a room in the old men's quarters but there was no fan in the ceiling and the heavy, dripping heat forced me into the archive room where I shoved my bed right under the huge propeller that not only kept me awake most of the night with its screaming whirling, it also kept me dry and blew the mosquitoes out of the building and caused me to pull on a sheet and a thin blanket.

The next morning I woke with a hangover in a room full of documents. At first I thought I was dreaming and had gone to hell which wasn't full of fire and burning sinners but paper and more paper and I'd better get started or the fires would begin. The fan soon blew away the cobwebs and I managed to find my way to the showers. I washed, dried and returned to my designated room, the one without the documents, and opened the wardrobe.

Jesus Christ, I yelled.

Cockroaches, thousands of them, scurried away from open spaces. I grabbed a pair of underpants and more dropped on the floor. I shook them and even more fell. Great. What a town. No room in the new, modern bank mess up the road and my clothes were home to seething millions of the creature most feared and despised by neat, tidy and clean people like Rotarians. The other thing I did that first morning was take double my dose of malaria pills.

It was 1968. The world was falling apart. Bits of it were burning. In Europe, Britain and America students were running amok. In Perth they did what they always did: studied, got pissed, stumbled in and out of relationships, played tennis, went to the beach, fought, fucked, bragged about fucks that never existed, and drove cars into fences, trees and other cars. When I left school most of the kids in my year went on to university, as they should, because my old school, Grammar School for Boys, expected it, their parents expected it, they expected it. They were future leaders and had to be groomed to take over. My shocked parents did not cope well with my final exam results and my mother tried to rip my face off. Dad stepped in, pushed Mum out of the way, and gave me to the bank, Australia's first bank, The Colonial Bank of Australia. He grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and hauled me down to the local branch and said to the manager: Take him, or I'll kill him. Well, he didn't say that, but his look did.

I hated the bank. My career was a series of fits and starts. I was good with people, so my enquiry counter work was well reviewed. Numbers were not a strong point and so my stints as a batch clerk, agency teller relief and ledger examiner with responsibility for balancing the day's incomings and outgoings across the entire branch, were not well reported. My weeks were long, boring and highlighted by the daily early-morning erection. Once I was on the bus and it began its stop-start routine there was nothing I could do to stem the rising lizard. I enjoyed the sensation, and hated the embarrassment.

I wasn't alone; there were other bankers like me, failed sons on early-morning buses, battling bulging pants and wealthy middle-class parents who had spent thousands on exclusive, wasted educations. We were biding our time,

waiting for an opportunity to crop up, dad to give us a job in the family business, grandfather to die and leave us a million, a mate to score us a job with his stockbroker father, or another one to fix us up with an easy job making big money with his dad's mining company, or marriage to that blonde chick, the one whose parents owned the supermarket chain.

Some mornings I woke, full of the heavy clouds from the night before, and sat there, on the end of the bed, wondering what sort of a life it was, the one I was living. I had a job I detested, worked with people who bored the shit out of me, like the accountant in the Gosnells branch who insisted on talking to me about farm machinery because he grew up on a farm and he once met my dad and I couldn't say anything like you're a knob, mate, and you're giving me the shits because if I did he might give me a bad report and I'd be back working the batch clerk's job which was the most boring job in the entire banking system because all you did all day was pick up forms, stamp them, sort them and hand them over to the ledger examiner who was the next most boring person in the branch and all he wanted to talk about was English soccer because that's where he was from and when he did he talked with one of those whingeing accents that turned your blood cold and your fists hot.

Dad wanted me to sit my leaving and matriculation exams again. He made me go to night-school. I hardly ever went because I knew I'd only fail again and because the two TAFE teachers looked like they belonged in a bank. Whenever I spoke to Dad or Mum on the phone, or they visited the city, all I ever got was: Why can't you be more like your brother Thomas? Or Tim Bentley, who was studying medicine, or Barbara Perkins, who was studying history? Even most of the boys in my class, the bottom class, got into university. Thomas was in

university studying law. I was working in a bank. Down at the Rotary club the conversation was all about Thomas.

Someone in the back of my head kept talking to me. It might have been Jesus or the Phantom, I could never put a name to him, but he kept on at me about living a good and moral life and doing unto others as I would have done unto me and fighting injustice and defeating the communist bastards, but the voice wasn't strong enough and I found myself living the strange life of someone I didn't know, someone I had happened upon while in search of the real me.

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The day I flew out to the islands, Dad had a Rotary conference to attend in Bunbury. He had to be there, not only because he was president of the Genoralup club but because he was working his way through the ranks of other club presidents and aiming to become a district governor. I drove down to see them the weekend before. As usual we sat around the kitchen table, drinking Mum's all-milk coffee brew and taking conversation leads from Dad.

I still don't think it's a good idea, said Dad. But when you come home I'd like you to give a talk at Rotary.

Sure, I said.

And remember to eat plenty of salt and take your malaria pills.

Right.

That was pretty much it. Mum cried, of course, kissed me with her lips pursed and Dad crushed my hand. Dad didn't say what he really thought and neither did I. Why would we? What good would it do? He thought I was useless and didn't believe for a minute that the bank had chosen me, that I was a chosen one, that it was grooming

me for higher office. And I thought he was a prick who was determined to make sure my life was as dull and lacking in adventure as his and his Rotarian mates'. We were Grammar School boys, all of us: Dad, my older brother Thomas, and everybody who meant anything to anybody including young brother Bill who was already booked in for his high school years.

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My old schoolmate, Brett Jones, picked me up and took me to Perth airport. There was a mob there to see me off. Some old school friends, a few mates from the bank, a couple of blokes from the football club and an almost, could have been, girlfriend, Megan Stirling. She was going out with a friend of mine but as soon as she saw me she would laugh. Older blokes told me that was a good sign, if a girl laughed at you, or with you, I wasn't sure which was best, or what the difference was. They said I should have a crack at her, make a move, step in, work my charm. I wasn't sure. Her boyfriend was a mate. But Megan arrived at the airport alone.

Megan had great hair. You could see she worked on her hair. She was about my height and when she walked her eyes sort of danced around and her hips kind of swayed and her legs formed calves. I loved a leg with a calf. When I was in high school I was desperately in love with the well-calved Sandra Johnston who was interschool one hundred yards champion and I wanted her calves and mine to lock and rub because I was fast too and my calves were strong and well defined but I wasn't a champion, only ever good enough for the relay team.

Megan liked me. I could tell by the way her eyes found mine and the way her mouth almost laughed as soon as I spoke her name: Megan Stirling, oh yes, Stirling.

Everyone was pretty happy. The Orbit Inn at Perth airport seemed to have different rules to the rest of the city. The beers flowed over the bar and no one said: Hey you! You're underage. In West Australia the drinking age was twenty-one and I couldn't wait to get to the islands because there the drinking age was the same as in Victoria and New South Wales, eighteen. If the drinking age was eighteen, I reckoned it probably meant a lot of other things were possible too, like the things you'd heard about Sydney, Sin City, and other things, things I hadn't thought of, things I had thought of but was too shy or afraid to mention, and things that were impossible anywhere else on earth.

As all the blokes pushed me towards the departure gate, stumbling and dropping my carry-on luggage, Megan came up behind me and put her arms around me. I turned my face into her face and we kissed, full on. The blokes yelled and whistled but we kept on kissing and I could feel my pants tighten due to the lizard growing inside them. When she let my lips go she whispered in my ear: We should have done that ages ago. My face got hot and red and I pretended to stumble again and the sound of her laughter only encouraged the lizard and so I ran away to the gate that led to the plane that led to Sydney where I caught the next plane that led to the islands.