

## **In The Littoral Zone.**

The rain has made a mess of the beach. Every river up and down the coast has poured forth great masses of silt and leaves and old bottle tops, and the wind, whipping up the sea, has ripped sea-grass from the estuaries, blending it with other flotsam, with the brown foam, all along the sand. Ghost crabs skitter, territorial of their bounty, reluctant to abandon it even to the passage of Ewan, the sole human on this blustered expanse.

What joy to be alone in such a place.

The wind worrying his face and hair. The sea, always relentless, today ever more so; pounding, ragged-waved, grey, dirty, dangerous. The houses above the dunes shut against the weather, their owners normally spread so topless on the sand, or surfing, frisbee throwing to dogs, pacing along the water's edge in stretch lycra, all now hidden behind dull glass, leaving it to him, suddenly released from the desk, the computer screen, to the chaos of the world.

Alone. Such joy. It brings tears to his eyes. Or is that only the wind?

A couple of hundred metres further along a man comes down onto the sand, wearing only white cut-offs—one of those beach types oblivious to temperature. He stops to look both ways and then walks towards the headland. His presence is disappointing, but he is far enough away so as to hardly matter, and anyway disappears after he starts up the hill into the National Park.

Exercise is the key to clear thought. People think a good mind pushes the body to greater exertion but it is the other way around. The fit body pushes the mind. The exercise of the lungs tugs at cramped thought.

During the night he has struggled with sentences until they no longer make sense. He is a palaeontologist, not a writer, rocks are his thing, not words, although the latter seem to him sometimes just as immovable. Ideas that are light and alive becoming dense and turgid when confined to the page.

The beach gives way to a grassy hill. A ragged path leads up past a wooden platform from which the hang-gliders launch themselves on weekends. A small stream is making its way down the ruts. During the night it has been a river, washing little canyons out of the clay, forming its own miniature waterfalls and pools. In one of the soft places the high arch of the other man's foot is neatly impressed.

The path levels out behind the headland, entering a low forest of eucalyptus and paperbark, occasional grass trees. The silence is remarkable, as if someone had closed a door on the wind and the waves. Around the edges of the puddles there are curved rings in the white sand, left by different water levels, like striations in rock. Everything is washed clean, reconstituted by the rain.

From further into the park two men appear, running side by side, chatting in staccato bursts. They wear only those odd shorts that joggers favour, made of some synthetic material, at once loose and yet already clammy and tight, with slits down the side of the tri-coloured cloth. They call to each other, panting as they pass, their thin bodies glistening with sweat. There is something distasteful about the set-up, the sweat, the shorts, the curly grey hairs on their chests, the shoes, the hearty good health. Of course the world's made up of all sorts, of course it takes all types, but these ones are an affront in this place and this time, running through the park, blind to its new beauty.

Then he is alone again, with nothing but footprints in the sand to distract him from his thoughts. The black trunks of trees lean evenly from the wind. In the distance there is the sound of the ocean again, tearing itself to pieces on the Bay.

The track is entirely washed away where it slopes out of the bush. The slats of wood, chained together to resist erosion, cantilever over canyons in the sand. The air is alive again, whipping at his waterproof jacket, matting his hair against his scalp. The wide curve of the beach is white with sea mist, with grey foaming waves.

He sits on a tussock of coastal spinifex, crossing his legs beneath him. He closes his eyes and meditates, letting the wind and the overwhelming noise of the sea brush the thoughts from his mind. He forgets projects, sentences, fears and ambitions, becomes, briefly, one with the place. It is a gift, a blessing. From which he is abruptly drawn.

The man who had preceded him along the beach is standing perhaps eighty metres away, looking out to sea. There is not another soul in sight. The man turns, looks directly at him, then steps out of his shorts. Quite naked, he enters the turbulent ocean. This action, disturbing enough in itself—for all manner of reasons—becomes, however, almost immediately a matter of entirely no consequence; because further along a large raptor, a sea eagle, *haliaeetus leucogaster*, tumbles out of the sky onto the beach where it stands, how unusual, ripping at a carcass thrown up by the waves, no doubt judging itself to be at a safe distance from the two humans in this place, at least for a time. Ewan retrieves a small pair of binoculars from inside his jacket. He watches as the great silken beast rises up, clumsy with the prize in its claws, and begins a wide circling climb, eventually achieving some trajectory that allows it to traverse the whole length of the beach in a single movement, high above him.

It is then that Ewan realises the binoculars have transmitted some sub-vocal message to the other man. They are, after all, on the Bay, where nudity is accepted and where, also, gay men congregate, with this unfortunate tendency to turn any gesture of naturalness into the very thing that the wowsers most fear—that nudity will provoke licentiousness—in this case an ugly peeping-tom-fetishism involving men with shaved pubic hair lurking in the dunes, or

laying their towels too close to others when there is a whole beach to choose from. It's not just gay men of course. It is something to do with the *male*, this capacity to take any sexual activity to its basest level in the shortest possible time. One need only surf the Net for ten minutes to find that the industry which devotes itself to images of the female form is not interested in celebrating *that*, or even the sexual act, but rather is bent on delivering all of us to some mutual hell populated by Cum Soaked Sluts Sucking Fist Fucking Cunts. It is not just gay men; just men. Only, gay is predominant now, here, on the beach, because the other man has left the ocean (the currents have not stolen him away) and is defiantly exercising in front of him, jogging one way and then another, naked, along the water's edge. Ewan is given ample opportunity to recognise that it is the man he dubbed the 'Saddhu' the previous weekend when he and Alice had walked passed him on the main beach. On that occasion he had been ostentatiously meditating. As if, with his straight back, he had been delivering some sanctimonious lecture to the crowds—a sermon—wasn't there some story in the Bible about a man who said his prayers out loud in the temple, in front of everyone else? A long-bodied, long-haired man who, by the time they were walking back had started practicing yoga in a black swim suit, really no more than a g-string, and had met Ewan's eye and held it, despite the presence of his wife by his side. A memory which brings a smile to his face as he reflects on a possible introduction: *I'm sorry I didn't recognise you without your jockstrap.*

But he doesn't want introductions. The man's presence has disturbed his reverie. He tries to return to his place of calm but the thread has been lost. When next he looks for the Saddhu he finds him gone, only to glimpse him a short time later in the dunes. Perhaps he is waiting for Ewan to join him. Expecting a tryst. Ewan goes down to the water's edge and walks in the opposite direction, towards the headland. That was where the eagle was going. He has seen it there before, perched on the limbs of a dead tree, has watched it hunt out over the waves.

This is better. How disgusting to be the prey of another man. Is this what women feel? The affront of another's unwanted desire, polluting the moment and everything in it? Is

he really disgusted? Or is it just suppressed desire? Would he like to go back into the dunes and meet the stranger, have sex with him—quick, male sex without commitment or conversation, just the physical part of it, none of the messy emotional stuff, just the act, perhaps he wouldn't even have to do anything, just allow the other? The gorge rises in his throat—a response which proves nothing at all, except that the disgust is real. It suggests nothing about what causes it or what should inspire it to be so immediate. There is a theory that disgust is a distinct emotion with its own particular attribute: that the object which provokes disgust cannot be separate from us. In order to feel disgust we must already be contaminated.

At a break in the trees he looks back towards the beach. The Saddhu is walking along the sand towards the headland.

It is probably no more than coincidence. It is natural that if someone walked over by the park trail they would want to go back via the headland. Ewan diverts out onto the rocky spit. The wind there is vicious. The sea below the cliffs is not, as it is on most days, making lacy patterns on the rocks. The waves are slamming into the rock, breaking themselves into pieces against the land, gathering ugly swathes of brown foam in small necks of water. But the wind is what he wanted. Settling himself against a rock he faces into the weather, waiting for it to purify him as it had on the beach. But it can no longer do it. The noise of the wind is so loud he is virtually deaf. The other could approach from behind and he would be totally unaware. He is on the edge of a cliff, perched over the sea. The man would be able to touch him before he had even sensed his presence. Several times he involuntarily turns, interrupting his silence before it can take hold, but unable to stop. The possibility overwhelms every other thought.

Turning a third time, berating himself for his stupidity, his fears are realised. There is the Saddhu, not thirty paces away, coming towards him. A tall man, naked save a pair of white cut-offs, bearded, long-bodied, excessively straight (perhaps he does weights when he's not doing yoga). Ewan is unable to move. The hood of his waterproof, zipped up against the

wind, bunches against the back of his head. The man hardly breaks his stride. Ewan stands but finds himself lower than the other by a foot or two, his back to the ocean. He puts his hands in the pockets of his parka and says, thinking politeness might win the day,

‘Hello.’

The Saddhu stops slightly to the side of him (but higher, still) looking out to sea, his hair tied in a pony tail, his hard, arrogant face held against the wind, spreading his arms out as if he might leap off the cliff and fly into the wind, inclining his head to Ewan’s greeting but not replying so that Ewan is obliged to speak again,

‘What do you want?’

To which he replies,

‘The same as you.’

The words whipped away by the wind so that he might have said anything really, perhaps even some Sanskrit mantra, but it’s of no matter, because whatever it was, it is enough to send Ewan stumbling down the cliff, ledges leading down away from the man above whose face has become distorted, yelling something, even as Ewan turns tail, scared, knowing he is scared, scared that he is scared, the rock wet from the sea mist of the breaking waves, clambering down and around to the southern side, the wind here coming directly off the water and bashing into the rock, forced up its face. The Saddhu lost to sight somewhere above, safe places suddenly rendered vulnerable to hurt, ages of rock laid down, lifted up, beaten by air and water for centuries, now providing no shelter to one man from another. Ewan’s limbs shaking with adrenalin and fear, finding there is nowhere left to go, that he has come to a dead end, the high seas blocking the path, the mattresses of brown foam heaving and yawing in front of him.

Looking back there is only rock. Perhaps the man has got the message. He will crouch and wait. After a time he will re-emerge. Like the crabs on the beach that huddle in their burrows while he passes, holding still, as if stasis itself was a defence.

Not so here. A bare foot, high-arched, appears from above, followed by another, the white shorts. The man, seeing him crouched below, calls now, clearly,

‘You ‘right?’

And Ewan is so palpably not, so vulnerably, terrifyingly open to rape and murder and abandonment on the very coastline he so wished to be swept apart by, that he cannot answer, huddles closer, ponders further escape along the vertical slippery surface above the rollicking foam,

‘Hey mate,’ the man calls again, ‘are you right?’

Ewan hears, cannot believe, processes words, calls back into the wind,

‘Yes, I’m fine.’

‘You want to be careful mate. Weather like this, the waves can pull you off the rocks.’

These words, too, half lost to the wind, gathered in little bunches in his ears.

‘Thanks,’ he says, and watches in deep amaze as the Saddhu starts back up with easy grace, barefooted on the sharp stone.

Ewan does not move.

After a time he unzips his jacket and gathers it around his naked legs, doubled up inside this little tent while the wet air teases every fold. He is too weak to move, stripped of resolve. The other man’s warning is nothing compared with the fear he had provoked himself. Ewan stares out at the waves, numb. It is only later that he notes the light is starting to fade, that the grey water is greyer still.

Stiffly he starts back up the way he had come. His legs shake, his teeth chatter.

There is no one at the top. He hurries along the path until it narrows, becoming overgrown, so that he is pushing through damp branches, looking in the dim light for footprints. Suddenly he can no longer move again, petrified by the idea that the Saddhu is waiting ahead, behind the next tree, in the distant shadows, knowing he will have to come this way to get home. Ewan stands, surrounded by unnamed coastal bushes, leathernecks barking

their evening call from the branches, the wind somewhere above. Eventually he pushes on. But it is a small victory. He is like a child again, fearful of the darkness, hurrying over the hill, racing down the other side and back onto the beach which is no longer quite so deserted. The dog walkers are out, throwing sticks.

He has never thought them so good, so wholesome; he walks amongst them in gratitude and relief, forgetting the wind, searching for a way back into his essay on how, in the wider picture, the world came to be the way it is.

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*2657 words.*