

JEFFREY ROSS

INTERLOPERS

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“Marvelous.”

That from between my father’s thin pink lips, the eastern wind pushing at his stingy grey hair. His legs were parted, his tight bell-bottom pants snapping in the wind. His eyes were red-rimmed and raw as they snuck around the shore line. He turned, his feet snug inside his gumboots, planted deep in the sand, right arm stretched before him, index finger quivering.

“It looks like a Jap washed up on the beach.” It sounded so everyday for him, as if he were on the cusp of saying “again”. I was on the beach reading a book, rotating my body like a roast chicken, stretching my fingers through the sand like wiggling maggots. This little stretch of land is a morbid place. The New Zealand sun was flattening the air into a seemingly solid obstacle above our heads. Father started waving his arms, sweat dripping off his forehead, accumulating under his arms. An upside down triangle of dampness spread on his green back.

“A Jap on our beach,. Kids, let’s roll out. Let’s get this cleaned up.” He clapped his hands and spun his upper body. I’d flipped over onto my side to lift my sunglasses slightly off my nose and take in this man who demanded to be called Dad. My brother was running toward him from the west, with his knobby knees and prematurely bent back, running as though he were going full tilt in slow motion.

“Where?” William Jr. squawked. And of course the old queer appeased him, pointing again and saying, “By the drift-wood there, alongside the big rocks.” I pulled my bikini bottom down a bit; I had been thinking about getting a tattoo so much that day that I believed it might be visible. Though I was the oldest of the children at seventeen and had managed an understanding with Dad (he wouldn’t talk to me, tell me what to do, run me down, and I wouldn’t tell my siblings what our mother informed me about him and his sexual leanings) I still believed that a tattoo, real or simply imagined, would enrage him to the point where he didn’t care what his kids thought of him, or knew about him. I couldn’t help but wonder where my mother was. Where’d she get herself off to? How credible a witness was she? She was the one who’d up and left.

I still believed her. But William Jr. at fifteen and slightly retarded and Missy at seven and still simply under her Daddy’s spell might not. They, being younger, might have forgotten the good times we once had. And then they acquired that sick puppy-dog look in their eyes. They might start spending their nights at the Anti-Mommy shrine out behind the barn.

My father put his hands on his hips. One hand rose and fluttered at the distance.

“There, Willy, over there!” he yelled. Then, under his breath, “You little moron.” I reached out and drew the straw that was sunk in a can of soda into my mouth and sucked in a helping of the warm, syrupy liquid.

William Jr. had managed to discover something under the driftwood and was hauling it out of the surf.

“Asian for sure,” William Jr. called in his girlish voice. “But one cannot be certain whether he is truly a man of Japanese descent.” Where the hell did William Jr. come up with this kind of information? It was not like him to be astute. He was, as I mentioned, semi-retarded. The most we usually managed to get out of him were snippets of television advertisements: “Mikey likes it,” or “Ho, ho, ho, Green Giant.” A man of Japanese descent?

“Boy, that must be one mystical corpse cuz I aint never heard you speak as such before,” Dad yelled back at him. “Do you feel radiant, son? Do you feel as though the light of the Lord is upon you? Is there a tingling at all in your balls?” Although wiry, stupid, bull-legged, and almost crippled in the spine, William Jr. was remarkably strong and he dragged the body across the sand with one hand.

“Let her,” he said.

“Let her what, boy? You’re not making any sense. Is this some sign of the second coming? Are you the recipient of godly blessings?” William Jr. dropped the leg of the corpse and sprinted the final few feet to our father.

“Leta her.” Dad snatched something out of his hand.

“It’s a letter, kids. Nothing to worry about. Your scholarship dollars are not in jeopardy. The boy here hasn’t obtained some form of mystical genius. It’s a letter in a plastic baggie and it says something about this here not possibly being a bonafide Jap.” He was waving the baggie around, wet stuff dripping off it onto the sand. Water, I hoped.

“Hello,” my father read. “My name is Hurukai Haramakuika. You call me Michael Jordan. It easier for Western talk.” He held the paper away from himself, getting a little distance. “What the hell is this?” He threw the paper down on the sand and pointed at the corpse. “Bring the rest of it over here. Maybe there’s a hint as to what it’s doing on my beach.” William Jr. snatched the leg of the corpse again and dragged it the remainder of the distance to our father. Dad bent down and began flipping through pockets.

“See here, son, this is the way we did it in the war. You gotta go in easy; they might have somethin’ in there to stick you with. They sometimes put poisoned knives in their pockets, the little bastards.” He held his palm flat up before his face and slid it slowly into the pants pocket of the corpse.

I am not an expert, so I could not distinguish where exactly this person might have come from. But the face did indeed look Asian. I don’t feel uncomfortable saying this because I know an Asian man would not be able to

distinguish my nationality, either. I did, however, feel slightly disgusted at the way my father was manhandling the body.

“Nothing in here,” he claimed, after a complete perusal of the deceased’s pockets. He let go of the body and let it fall to the sand. He wiped his hands on William Jr.’s back and looked out to sea. Little Missy, dressed in a darling blue dress, had made her way down to the shore by this time and was staring at the corpse. Two cute little pigtails rode high horse on her head

“In school,” little Missy said, “we’re learning about the male and female genitalia. But we only seen pictures. Can we look at his genitals? I think it would be very educational.” She pointed at the man’s mid-section the way you might expect a little girl to point at a butterfly on a leaf.

“Missy, ewww.”

She came over and sat down next to me on the towel. “Come on, you want to see his wee-wee too, I know you do.”

“Missy. Ewww.”

“Well, Missy,” my father intoned from his kneeled position beside the body. “I too believe that a quick viewing of the man’s reproductive organ would be extremely educational. And, I would then be able to discern,” he began to undo the man’s belt, pulling down the clunky zipper, “if he is, indeed, Japanese. For it is well known that the Japanese males have unbelievably small—” Something cracked and broke at the edge of our property. A moment later there was a great deal of splashing. A very thin man came fumbling around the corner of our huge pahutekawa tree.

“Touch him not!” the man was yelling.

“Willy, get my gun,” my father said. My little brother, always obedient in his ignorance and blind faith, took off toward the house.

“Stay right there, mister,” Dad yelled at the man. I got up on my elbows and took in the scene. The man was in the water up to his knees. His pants were a ratty conglomeration of threads and patches, his torso was covered by a thin sweat-shirt that said TO MY HI FIG R, and a NY Mets baseball cap was perched on his wobbly head. He stood completely still. He probably didn’t agree that a firearm would lubricate the situation.

William Jr. managed his way back down the front lawn toward the beach and handed our father a small, thick hand gun, just as the undoubtable sound of an outboard engine fired into the atmosphere. The man in the water turned his head. We watched as a dilapidated looking fishing boat muscled its way out into the cove from behind a near-by dock. My father leveled his gun at the vessel and squeezed on the trigger a few times. Nothing happened. He cocked the gun again and pulled the trigger with one eye closed. Nothing happened. He turned the gun to his face and peered down the barrel, one eye closed, one eyebrow raised in a perfect arch.

“Did you load this thing?” he asked William Jr., without taking his eye off the gun.

“Who?” came the response. Our father turned the gun on William Jr. who plugged his ears with index fingers and peered up at the barrel.

“You have to load it, boy. You can’t shoot no one with an unloaded gun.” The boat made a one-eighty and a half dozen forms suddenly leapt from the rear and splashed into the water.

“No swim! No swim!” the man in the water yelled, as he turned and dove into the waves. The little forms that had fallen from the ship had vanished. I could make out the form of the swimmer now beating his way to where the wake of the boat was rising and falling on the incoming waves. Somehow, miraculously, before our very eyes, the little swimmer man had managed to attach himself to all six bodies and was dragging them in like a giant squid. Swimming back to the beach, heaving and puffing and tossing up water, the man said, “Hardship like this, you find never here.” My father squinted his eyes.

“North America,” the man said, patting at the ground. “The beautiful U.S. of A.” He began smacking the bodies around him yelling, “Freedom!” until they all rose on spindly arms and shivering knees to puke up salt water.

“This ain’t the U.S. of A, boy,” my father said. The man looked confused. He muttered something to the other men whose eyes welled up with sorrow.

“Canada then,” the man exclaimed, a hand raised to the heavens. “Beautiful land of north!” And, before my father could deny this as well, I stood up, snapped my bikini bottom down around my ass and ran toward the congregation on the shoreline.

“Welcome to Canada, eh!” I said, taking the man’s hand in mine. “Beautiful Canada welcomes you with open arms.” I gave him a hug and patted his back.

“Ahh, a sexy Canada girl,” the man said into my ear. And when I pulled away from him I could see that he was crying. Tears of joy. I have never in my time seen tears of joy. The man fell to his knees and began to kiss the sand. The others soon followed. Then the little man stood up, extended his hand and said, “I am Arnold. Arnold Swarzenegger. We are at your service.” Sand falling from his chapped lips. Little tear canals running down the Panama of his face.

“What did he just say?” my father yelled at me.

“He’s at our service, Dad. They’re at our service.”

“Our service, huh?” He rubbed his grisly chin and stared at the conglomeration of humanity that was bent over double, kissing the sand and weeping. “Willy, go fix up the barn, we got ourselves some assistance.”

We ran around the house getting chairs for everyone, settling the visitors down, placing fuzzy old rags upon the seats and giving them cups of steaming tea. Arnold beamed with happiness, the tears of joy rising now and then whenever a specific question was asked of him. His response was always the same: “Canada, beautiful Canada. Freedom!”

“Where you from, there, Cracker?” Dad asked.

“Sweet land of free,” Arnold responded.

“What are you? A wop?”

“The information you have requested is of a confidential nature and cannot be granted at this time,” Arnold responded, beaming. Dad pointed at the other men, a hand rolled cigarette dropping ashes carefully into an over-sized ashtray.

“And these fellas, they Japs?”

“The information you have requested is of a confidential nature and cannot be granted at this time.” Arnold repeated. Dad slowly nodded his head.

“These ones here, they got names?”

“Ahh, very good, sir. Yes, very good. Excellent choose. Allow me to introduce on you Sara Jessica Parker, Mel Gibson, John Wayne, Britney Spears, Madonna, and Mad Max.” The women and men sitting around the table nodded and rose a hand when their names were called out. “We have adopted, in order to more easily integrate with Western society, the names of American descent.” He smiled. Father nodded his head at Arnold and pointed at him again.

“What are you, then, Greek? Eastern European?” He required the man’s ancestral tree in order to discern which racist jokes he should berate him with.

“The information you have requested is of a confidential nature and cannot be granted at this time.”

“You don’t have a friggin’ clue what you’re saying, do you, Champ?” He stood up and swung his body around the room, his feet firmly planted on the unbearably clean hardwood. “Where’s Willy?” he yelled. William Jr. was at his side a moment later, panting like a worn dog.

“That barn clean?” William Jr. nodded his head. “Tell these Japs to get themselves cleaned up in the tub. They smell like hell. Then send them out to the barn to get some sleep. There’s a fence that needs to be up by the end of the week or else the sheep’ll get away again.”

The next day was totally different. First off, it was raining and miserable. Not that this is an odd occurrence in New Zealand, land of the long white cloud, but it was unfortunate, because my father, intent on putting these interlopers to work, had the men and women (freshly clean and wearing my mother’s old clothes) digging pole holes, unrolling wire, measuring out distances.

“These Japanese, you see,” he said to me that morning, watching the rain in our gumboots, “are great at mathematics. They love the maths. Numbers.” He tapped at his head. “They can calculate difficult equations in their head at a moment’s notice. It’s why we almost lost the war to them.”

“You were never in a war, Dad. And you were three years old the last time any country had a serious confrontation with Japan.” He widened his shit brown eyes at me.

“Girl, you are granted a certain amount of liberties around here, but I will not stand for this kind of insubordination. This world is full of facts that you have no idea about. Don’t assume you know everything.”

“The truth will set you free, Dad.”

“I am going to ask you one last time to not say my name like that. You sound like you’re talking about the enemy or something. I’m telling you, girl, you are walking a thin line around these parts.”

“We can’t keep them,” I said, as I pointed at the band of oddly dressed men and women toiling in the rain and mud before us.

“Every race who enters another country unlawfully must work for their keep. Nothing’s free in this life.” He crossed his arms over his chest. His slicker and his shirt hung open in a wide V to display a small patch of chest hair.

“This isn’t even your country,” I said. “You’re a Yankee. What did you do when you came to New Zealand but marry mom, drive her insane, and steal her land?”

“History is strafed by hardships. I earned all I have here and more.” He glanced off into the distance where our fertile land rolled like Atlas’ burden.

“Why did you put that man in mom’s favorite blue dress? Can you at least answer me that?” My father responded with a bludgeoning swing at my head. I managed to avoid it at the cost of toppling over into the mud.

“Your mother was a slut and a whore. She was insane before I ever met her and she didn’t deserve to see this gorgeous land, let alone own it. She had this land because she’s Maori, a native. She didn’t earn it.”

“A slut who married a fag? How does that work?”

“You be quiet or I’ll banish you from these parts,” my father threatened, as he regained his composure and clapped his hands at the interlopers. “And stop being such a meany-weany, Krissy. I brought you into this great world and you should be thankful of that each and every day.” The interloper in the blue dress glanced over. I could see my father flexing his calves in the tight jeans he was wearing. He ballooned his chest and fluttered his hand at the workers.

“Chop-chop, ladies. I don’t know what it’s like where you come from but fences don’t just build themselves down here.”

Night fell like a broken ferris wheel, all dim lights and sorrowful sounds. The interlopers were invited into our home for a full kiwi meal. Fresh lamb, kumara, string beans, mashed carrots and parsnip, and roasted pumpkin. They ate heartily after a full day’s work, slurping thick soup and muttering toward one another in hushed tones.

“Dad,” Arnold said between courses as he wiped at his mouth and smiled brazenly, “when we go immigration?”

“Immigration?” Apparently Dad had already forgotten that these tattered people at his dining table were not from around these parts.

“Immigration, yes. When?” He rubbed at his chin. He scratched at it until some of the fine grey hairs planted there sprung off and floated to his plate. He glanced down and picked the hairs off. He flicked them one by one to the floor, then sent William Jr. to get the broom to sweep them up.

“You must understand. Here in Canada, well, we’re a new country. We still live by the old Colonial ways. Here in Canada you work for your keep with whoever finds you first. It is a part of our mighty constitution.” Arnold slowly nodded his head to this, rubbing, in imitation, his own chin. I imagined that he would require a certain period of time to even partially understand the words my father had spoken.

“Yes, Dad. But when immigration?” He pointed at Mad Max. “We want open convenience store. Madonna and Britney Spears want open knick-knack shop. Sara Jessica Parker want be movie star!” My father nodded his head and leaned his elbows on the table.

“First you work,” he said. Arnold nodded his head again and sipped at his soup.

“Yes, Dad. But when immigration? Mel Gibson and John Wayne want open flower shop.” My father widened his eyes at the man in the blue dress.

“John Wayne?” he questioned, pointing. John and Arnold nodded their heads vigorously.

“Yes, yes, John Wayne!” John Wayne yelled, pointing at his chest where my mother’s full breasts used to bob about beneath the lacy white-caps. “Flowers!” He made elaborate lines in the air with his hands and my father seemed ready to wink at him.

“Yes, Dad. John Wayne make beautiful flower. But, Dad, when immigration?”

While I was changing for bed that night I happened to look outside onto the blank lawn between the house and the barn. I could hear the winds pushing salt off the ocean. I imagined the dolphins and the whales hunkering down as many fathoms as they could manage. My father and brother were out under the quivering moonlight. I slid the window open and heard my father say, “You watch them now, Willy. You make sure they don’t try to leave.” William Jr. looked at the gun in his hand and then back at my father.

“I no shoot.”

“You shoot, you shoot!” my father yelled, jabbing a finger at William Jr. It had begun to rain. Droplets trampolined off my father’s lips and onto William Jr.’s face. “If one of them tries to leave the property you shoot ‘em.” He let go of the gun and my brother snatched it up under his arm. “I’ll get you a chair to sit on, but you can’t fall asleep.” He leaned in close. “This is war, son. They are the enemy.” The two of them then disappeared into the darkness near the barn. A few minutes later my father returned with John Wayne under one arm. Although John Wayne wasn’t really cockled—he was stumbling, his head bowed

low and round in the downpour—he wasn't fully participating as a free agent either.

The next morning we buried Britney Spears, Mad Max, and Michael Jordan out behind the barn. I decided it was time to leave. Apparently they had tried to escape. I, for one, did not believe a word of it. Why would they want to escape? Where would they go? We found them on the second story of the barn surrounded by their weeping friends. William Jr. said that he'd discovered them out on the lawn "trying to escape" and that once he had shot them he dragged them up there. When we asked him why he would do that—deliver them to the second floor and lay their buckshot-filled bodies out to torment their only friends in the world—he said, "Silly rabbit, tricks are for kids." When we asked where they were when he'd shot them, to somehow confirm what he was talking about, to somehow prove to ourselves that he'd not gone in there and shot them for sport, he replied: "It's Patrick. He's taken out life insurance."

I waited until the remaining men and women—except for John Wayne who, apparently, wasn't feeling up to working that day and was resting in my father's room—were busily digging holes and stabbing posts into the earth. My father was off in the house somewhere before I left. I decided, early on, to take Missy with me, as well. I had her pack a knapsack full of her favorite clothes and told her that we were going into the city where we were going to live the good life and purchase magazines filled with photographs of male genitals. What we were actually going to do was find our mother. Sure, she'd run off on us. Sure, she wasn't the greatest mother in the world. But as far as parental units were concerned ...

We had not been into the city for over five years. We went as far as the rural school. Sometimes, we went to a small town nearby for things we could not grow; but the city was off limits. Which made me suspect that our mother resided there. I was uncertain what I was going to do once I found her, that was for the future to decide. Our first stop was to be the police station. I informed Missy of this as we drove my father's pick-up truck along a deceptively dull stretch of road.

"No, Dad'll get in trouble," she complained.

"Duh, Missy. Of course he'll get in trouble. He has to get in trouble." Missy pursed her lips at the outside world and I fished a sucker out of my purse to stick in her mouth.

"Why'd they think they were in Canada?" Missy asked. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Either someone lied to them or someone was really lost."

"Why would anyone want to go to Canada?" I shrugged. I stuffed another sweet sucker between Missy's lips. Missy has really beautiful lips; thick and round. Sometime, in later years, I'm certain boys will call them kissable and make lude comments about their unlimited oral possibilities.

The city was just as I remembered it from my youth; like a migraine on steroids. Not that it was really that loud or busy or pulsing or whatever, but for someone used to the soft flow of the ocean against the land and the sigh of pretty birds it certainly seemed that way. Horns honked, people called to one another; I found a parking spot and stopped the truck. The police station was easy enough to find but I wasn't certain that I wanted to go there first. I did, of course, want to save those men and women from any further hardship, but I also needed to see my mother. And I was scared to tell the police by myself. What were they going to ask? Where would they send us? We left the police station without talking to anyone and stopped at a phone booth. I made a deal with myself that if my mother's phone number was not inside the phone book I would go to the police station, report everything, and wait for destiny to do what it does best.

But there was her number, right where I expected it to be. A woman, not my mother, answered the phone and told me that my mother was out at the moment and offered to take a message.

"It's her daughter," I said. I waited for an answer. I waited long enough to have to say again, "hello."

"Kristina Segway's daughter?" the woman responded.

"Yes. Kristina Segway. About five eight, brown-red hair, nice hips. Blue eyes that none of her children managed to inherit."

"None of her children? How many of you are there?"

"Three, but only two of us are here. Our brother is killing Japanese people back at the farm. Can I ask who you are?"

"Well," the woman responded slowly, "I guess I'm your step-mom."

My mother's apartment was cluttered and dusty. It is still cluttered and dusty. I'm sitting in it now and it is a filthy mess and I love it. Missy loves it too. She's off at the library again. She spends a lot of time there staring at the pictures of men's genitals in National Geographic trying to decide what kind of penis she wishes her someday husband to have. Missy is vigorously hetero-sexual. Our parents sexual leanings have done nothing to dissuade her from pursuing the rougher sex. She's thirteen years old now and has already had three boyfriends. She says that they get weird with her when she asks to see their genitals. She says she scares them. They're attracted to her because of her bee-stung lips and the blossoming bust line she inherited from our mother. They say, 'no, you first,' and she tells them that she'll just move on then—thanks anyway. There are lots of men out there, after all, for a girl like Missy.

My mother had a lot of elaborate plans for my father that day we arrived at her apartment. She had been planning, she said, to burn the whole place to the ground (after she got us out, of course). She said she was disgusted that her cherished home had been passed down into the hands of that bastard. Her

words, not mine, but I can't object. That land was scarred by what happened there, by what my father did to those people. And what he tried to do to us.

It was a pleasure to watch them all marched into jail that day. Even the interlopers. Not because they should be arrested (and if they want to stay in New Zealand, well, no one's likely to give them too much trouble) but because they were actually safe there. My mother had pointed at John Wayne and said, "That was my favorite dress ever. Why's that man wearing it?" I let her know that the Duke was Dad's boyfriend and my mother seemed on the verge of yacking.

Dad was transported to Australia. Which is pretty entertaining, as well. Apparently, after he'd abandoned the U.S.A. all those years ago he'd caused some ruckus in Australia and the government had been looking for him ever since. New Zealand, not being a land which desires the reputation of harbouring criminals, gladly handed him over. And what kind of punishment does a homosexual really face in an Australian prison? What, more specifically, would I like to see done to my father? This is about me, after all. Well, I'd like to see him disappear and take all that he put into me with him. I want to be one hundred percent like my mother. I sometimes dream at night that my mother's genes have begun a battle with my father's, and hers are winning the war. Dad's genes are all broken and busted and running for cover. Slowly, over time, I will rid myself of him. Or at least I'll try.

Sometimes, even if you stay right where you are, you can feel like a foreigner, all your history huddled around you and making you different. Though I know now – and you'd do well to learn this lesson as well – that there's nothing you can do at night but wait for sunrise, when the earth might once again hum with hope.