

Durban's Bread by Simon Primarolo (Prim)

1

The moans were mumbled to begin, unsure and lumbering. Each drawn out breath gathered pace like a sirens pitch.

Off a gentle step he defied gravity and sprang high above the tree-tops. The resonant booms of terror, methodical in their reproach crescendoed with each leap. He was on to them, he recognised their ghostly howls in the otherwise stillness of the forest.

Up he rose again, puppeteered by an invisible force, demonic wails surging through his body, exploding in his skull and echoing across the night's inky abyss. Yet each descent was calm, controlled, assuring even, then without governance he was catapulted once more, yelling to the deaf wood.

The forest gave way to a sprinkle of hardy pines that tapered onto the barren spine of a sandstone rock. Relentlessly the moans pursued him, together they hurtled through the moonless sky, roaring, as they bounced off the brittle surface. In a blazing start the groans smashed into a thousand pieces, demonic fury splintered across the night's gloom, shard phantoms pierced his brain. He breathed deep, eyes wide, nostrils baulking and from the murk another shrieking groan filled the hollow.

Momentarily, and just for an instant, the chill ceased and the chimera's wraith dissipated through a clutch of pines perched higher on the rock. The unearthly wind wound to a whispering cluster of haunting possessions. Sucking the last throngs of life from the night's soul the haunting recoiled and took off at a great knot back along the dust of the rock, back across itself. On the hunt for distress, it barraged through the vacant night slitting and slicing at the velvet blanket of humid air that cloaked his stifling gasps.

Something screeched from the trees in the first light of dawn outside Tekwini's Backpackers in Durban. Soon, the usual cacophony of insects would start up, but for the moment, all was silent. In a room upstairs, the manager, Mick Birchwood, lay sleeping on a lower bunk, spread on his back, arms akimbo, a slack mouth emitting tuneless snores.

From the silence Jax hurtled from the bed above and landed with a thud on the wooden floor boards. Mick sprang bolt upright, cracked his head, slapped back down, and through yet unfocussed boggled eyes stared unfathomably through the morning's grey light at the crumpled shape that landed beside him.

'Bleedin' eck, Jax, what'yer doing?' He barked, rubbing a meaty hand across his saggy face. 'That's enough to give a bloke a bleedin' heart attack.'

Stuart Jackson, known to his friends as Jax, sat up confused but grinning. He checked himself for broken bones and ran a finger tip over his rapidly swelling forehead,

‘Sorry Mick, I think I just had another nightmare.’ He grinned apologetically. Then slumping back to a horizontal state he stared at the ceiling, ‘I’m starting to get these recurring flashbacks, its real bizarre mate, it’s... it’s really starting to piss me off.’ He paused, ‘No ‘ang on, it pisses me off that he’s gotten away with It.’ He paused again, ‘No ‘ang on, it’s both...or was it three?’ He paused a third time, ‘Yeah, three; bizarre, it’s pissing me off for having them and pissing me off that he’s got away with it. And three, no hang on, maybe there wasn’t a three or was that the bizarre bit? Either way, I’ll tell you what mate; these dreams are really freaking me out.’

‘You’re freaking me out you mad bastard.’ Mick cursed, while straightening his thoughts; ‘You’re talking about Peter I presume? Jax nodded. Well, why isn’t he in the nick then?’ The question was soothing. ‘The cops pressed charges, didn’t they, attempted murder you said? You gotta sort it out, cos I ain’t getting any sleep either’.

‘He can’t be nicked because he’s a nut-nut Mick... or supposedly. Him being a nutter keeps him out of the big house, albeit temporarily in the nut house till they find out if he’s really a nut, and not just avoiding the inevitable...savy? But my guess is that he’s bribed them.’ Mick shook his head, unsure of how to take the

conversation so early in the morning. Jax shook his head in disbelief. 'I need an end to this mate'. Then with a twitch of retribution; 'But I'd also like to sue the rich white bastard.'

'Lawyers cost money J-lad. Besides, and he's not rich, his mum is, Mick offered from a face full of pillow.

'Yeah, well, he comes from money, and those arse'oles have got plenty of that shit... where there's muck there's brass eh!' He gestured, one eyebrow raised in cahoots with an inexplicable mockney accent; 'Anyways, I got Barry in me court, who don't cost nuffink, does 'e, and e's a lawyer in 'e – and 'ee's on this 'ere case for meee, inne... me olde China.'

'Yes, Dick Van Dyke, if you say so.' Mick nodded, only half listening now, but up. Massaging his balding scalp, he swung his milk white legs out of bed, and padded across to the door. In mid thought he slowly turned and scanned the room like a giant salamander, his bright blue eyes piercing the early morning's dust as the dawning sun tore across the room, then headed back towards the window. He was naked except for a pair of tatty old nylon Y-fonts. A mild beer paunch quivered above the waistband, 'Joe,' he yelled through the upstairs window. 'Are you up yet?'

'Yes Boss!' The Zulu caretaker was already hosing down the dry patches of grass that pretended to be a back garden. The tufts of green sprouted in sporadic

formations that mirrored Joe's own beard, which was patchy at best yet fully grown in its own deceit. Despite his attentions to the garden it would never resemble the lushness of a real lawn.

'How 'bout putting the kettle on then, and oi, have you checked the chlorine in the pool yet?'

'Okay Baas.' The African's voice held its usual mix of servitude and mockery. He splashed a quick spray across Fred Schnappes, the hostel's cat, and lay down the hose. Five minutes later he appeared from the kitchen at the rear of the building with a tin mug, the Lipton tea label on a slither of cotton hung over its side. It was already sugared, but Joe knew Mick liked the bag to be left in order to meet the required meaty brew.

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Jax climbed back on his top bunk, staring in passive contemplation through the half opened window. The view afforded a small, yet refreshing swimming pool, flanked one side by a neighbouring flaking grey concrete wall, skanked amicably with last season's dancing bougainvillea. To the rear nestled two small wooden huts, soon to be staff rooms. It was May, edging towards winter in Durban, but still brimming with heat.

A streak of sun-kissed moles slashed across his wiry tanned torso as he lay motionless, trying to recall the nightmare, the third nightmare since he was stabbed, at least as far as he could remember, for it was often murmured amongst guests who'd heard melancholic moans during the night, and with inconspicuous turns they would lend a sympathetic and somewhat curious glance his way, much to his embarrassed amusement. However apparent the scar across his face may have been, it was his eyes that gave way to a different wound.

From what he recalled this time, was that each dream was scraped from the same ilk, but each time they dipped further into a demonic journey of ghostly howls that pursued him into the night.

He'd caught glimpses of his demon this time, and it disturbed him. Even now, as he lay awake sprawled on the top bunk he felt a sharp tingle that sparked through his body.

It was real alright. This dream was real, this demon was real. It cast a hideously deformed creature, a squat hellhound creature, like a statue, tiny and square in shape, as if carved from a block of sandstone, an ancient relic perhaps? Not out of place if bought from a souvenir gift shop in Petra. Except this relic was deformed, a deformed foetus, which had aged beyond any recognisable era to behold any natural birth, a foetus that had grown from and through history itself, detestable and luckless. In its hand, if you could call that bulbous form that so out proportioned

his body, it held a gladius. This stumpy deranged malformed gremlin of the night seemingly induced from a hallucinogenic Picasso aftershock was playing leap frog with him in the woods, holding a Roman sword. Jax shook himself from his thoughts, shivered once more and tittered meekly; 'weird'.