Crossing The Ditch

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You struggle with your hand luggage, trying to keep up with your parents as they close in on the boarding gate and its flashing ‘FINAL CALL’ sign. Your younger brother and sister trail you like salmon up a mountain race, panting with Weetbix breaths because they didn't have time to brush their teeth before the airport taxi arrived.

The Continental Airlines’ staff have run out of smiles: ‘You're the lucky last, kid.’ You don’t hear their requests to present boarding passes, don't notice the Chanel No.5 vapour trail of the stewardess, her Wild West accent or spatula-applied make-up; you just follow her outstretched hand down the aisle, and though you've never flown in a Boeing 747, or any aircraft for that matter, you instinctively know that seat 44E is located just behind the huge, chuckling Samoan who has already jettisoned his footwear in preparation for take-off.

Across the aisle, your mother checks your brother and sister’s seat belt. She glances furtively at your father, who is beside you, then slumps back into her seat. Relief floods her face. You know what she’s thinking: *Farewell to laundering cow shit from rugby jerseys every weekend. Sayonara to sautéed sheep's brains. Adios to town hall dinner parties with all the intrigue of watching Dulux dry.* Sixteen years of New Zealand rural life served—gone in a cloud of exhaust fumes, disappeared through the grimy rear window of a blue Toyota Corolla with three suitcases strapped to its roof. A teary-eyed goodbye to Grandpa, a road trip to Auckland, a last supper of pizza with relatives, then a few hours of sleep before the dawn taxi to the airport. She closes her eyes, exhausted.

But your adrenalin is pumping—beating like a war drum against your

temples. Your primary senses creep back: you *feel* the whumph! of the cargo hold doors closing, *hear* the engines whine and *smell* the aviation gasoline fumes permeate the cabin. You avail yourself to the 1,184 kilonewtons of thrust, let it ease you back in the seat and allow this great force to separate you from the land in which you were born.

The engines roar, the overhead compartments rattle and lurch; your fingers tighten around the grey vinyl armrests, finding indentations left by others, as the big bird rises and Aotearoa slips away.

Craning your neck, you glimpse the mudflats and mangroves of Manukau Harbor. Then, as the plane climbs ungainly, the greater suburbs of Auckland, rough-edging the chartreuse-coloured farms of Northland, come into view. You wonder if you'll ever see your homeland again. A pang of fear strikes at your gut. Your scrotum tightens. In a few hours you will land in Melbourne an 'immigrant.' There is freedom in that, your mother says. But you aren't so sure. To arrive in a foreign land with no home to speak of, no friends or relatives, only the clothes on your back and a suitcase in your hand, seems somewhat problematic. Your brother and sister don't seem to comprehend the enormity of what is happening, but for you, there is an elephant sitting on your chest.

Your family's not chasing freedom—you're fleeing crushing boredom; the kind that gets small town teenagers pregnant, tempts young men to smoke pot, and goads older ones to rustle cattle—and sometimes their neighbour's wives.

You are high now. High enough to glimpse Manukau Heads and through them the turquoise water of the harbor rushing to marry the cobalt blue swells of the Tasman Sea over which you are now poised to cross. You read somewhere that the Aussies call this stretch of water, the 'Ditch'. Your father laughs when you tell him this, and says, 'Well, something's gotta separate good rugby players from bad ones.'

Your gaze holds on to your motherland as the last slither of coastline slips beneath the clouds, and is gone. Your favourite band, Split Enz, once sang, ‘The lust of a pioneer, will acknowledge no frontier’, but you find no solace in these words as you ponder the frontier which lies ahead of you—

Australia.

Where will you fit in this vast, red and desiccated land peopled by tall, sunburned men with zinc-creamed noses and twangy accents and blond-haired women called ‘sheilas’ who drive trucks as long as trains across night-time deserts and lightning storms which set the land on fire and deadly snakes with names like ‘taipan’ and ‘tiger’, and sharks as big as buses and…

The seat belt lamp switches off. The cabin fills with the click-clack of metal clasps releasing and soon a tall, black American steward approaches in a beige waist coat. ‘Larry’ announces his gold breast plate. Larry passes out impenetrable plastic bags containing headphones. Later, he returns pushing a drinks service trolley. The university students in seat row 45 request miniature bottles of vodka and gin, three apiece. This causes Larry’s eyebrows to rise like dueling caterpillars and in a rich baritone, enquire, ‘Y’all can drink that much?’

Your father asks for a Budweiser, your mother a gin and tonic and ‘Cokes for the kids.’ Larry serves the drinks and salted peanuts. But you give up trying to liberate the nuts from their plastic bag and turn to liberating your mind. You gaze through the window at the altocumulus clouds scattering like a million sail boats across the Tasman Sea and you wonder what your mates are doing right now. Slumped behind pock-marked desks, bored, restless, you imagine them awaiting the lunch-hour when their pent-up energies can be spent on a pig skin rugby ball and a muddy paddock.

You miss your best mates G. and J.—those two happy-go-lucky bastards who got you into and out of trouble in equal measure. Remember when the three of

you slipped inside your neighbor's son's abandoned sleep-out? The one wall-papered in Penthouse magazine centrefolds of Asian women with big hairdos above and below, and you held a contest to see who could come the furthest, but quickly abandoned it when a car pulled into the driveway and then risked your manhood on a rusty tin fence in the mad rush to escape.

They say Australia is dangerous. But you survived sixteen years of small town New Zealand: got chased by billy goats, dive-bombed by magpies, knocked over wasp hives and fell out of trees. You survived winter floods, earthquakes and spring storms that machine-gunned hailstones as big as golf balls across the land, killing ducks, geese and newborn lambs—and the wonder of it: those hailstones melted in your hand.

You survived the Mongrel Mob—that bunch of social drop-outs and damaged youth who swaggered about your town in leather gang jackets and German war helmets, flicking cigarette butts at motorists and swigging from bottles of DB Draught while they peed on parked cars. They gave you no trouble, because trouble could never pedal as fast as you.

Someone said it was the Mob who blew up the TAB betting office one year. You watched the detectives in beige suits from the Hastings CIB sift for clues among the splintered wood and glass which covered High Street, and when they weren't looking, pocketed a piece of the debris which won you 'best show and tell' at school later that morning.

Larry appears through the curtain pushing hot lunches and the quiz show question, 'Chicken or fish?' You guess 'fish'—and win a white rubber fillet in cheese sauce with a rock-hard roll.

You have been reminiscing about the river you left behind; the one whose Māori name means 'muddy water' but whose waters, fed by snowmelt from the Ruahine mountains, were crystal clear and filled with rainbow trout which you

caught, gutted and stuffed with butter and bay leaves and under your mother's eye oven-baked for your family dinners. Funny how trout always tasted of the river itself, water-weedy and with a hint of silt.

Summers were for fishing. But when the trout weren't interested, you'd toss your rod on the riverbank, climb an overhanging tree and with your mates, plunge like madmen into the cool, tea-coloured water. After, you'd dry yourselves on warm riverbed rocks, watch the fish leap at nymphs in the sunlight, and when the potatoes which you had tossed into a small fire a half-hour earlier were done, you'd tear off their blackened skins with your teeth and scoop out the fluffy core, knowing nothing could taste better.

Remember that rustled cattle beast you found downriver, drowned and bloated like a Zeppelin one summer? Your mate wanted to stab it with his sheath knife—'For the hell of it'—but you stopped him for fear the beast might explode hot maggots all over you.

You feel your stomach rise. The plane bucks on the Tasman's thermals, sliding up and down the invisible slopes and causing the seat belt sign to illuminate with an electronic ping that makes you flinch. You close your eyes and wait for these small moments of terror to pass. You feel time has taken on new meaning. Once, it measured the number of 'sleeps' between birthdays and Christmases. Now it marks your progress across the Earth's surface: a five-hour road trip to a big city, a forty-minute taxi ride from a motel to an airport, a three-and-a-half-hour flight across the ocean to an even bigger city in a country twenty-nine times larger than your own.

You open your eyes and your tray is gone. Through the window you sight land! A vast plane of brown and gold, mottled by cloud shadows and veined with waterways stretches to the horizon. It is endlessly flat, save for formless humps which rise here and there and which remind you of the backyard where Ricky is

buried. When your dog died, your father planted a lemon tree on the grave. It produced so many lemons you couldn't give them away. Years later, over a lemon merengue your mother baked for dessert, your brother asked the question everyone had thought of but none had ventured, 'Are we eating Ricky?'

The pilot banks the aircraft and for a brief moment you glimpse through the window a small kingdom rising in the distance—Melbourne.

Your pulse quickens.

The gap between you and Australia closes and the cabin grows strangely quiet. Soft music plays from the speakers but fails to conceal the occasional gasp from an elderly passenger as the plane dips sharply and continues its descent. Then a mighty surge grips you. Your sphincter tightens and you feel yourself thrown forward as your new home leaps up to greet you.

Touchdown.

The sound of applause fills the cabin. The huge Samoan chuckles with glee and thrusts his enormous feet back into their shoes. While the aircraft taxis to the terminal, Larry appears, and joined by other cabin attendants, passes along the aisle spraying us with insecticide, 'By regulation of Australian Customs and Quarantine.'

You thank Larry and the Wild West stewardess, step from the plane and into beige carpeted halls along which you are joined by other passengers, all of you surging like a river towards corrals and gates with signs glowing, 'Immigration'.

The officer in the blue shirt and shiny badges is a big man with no visible neck and a gallery of faded tattoos on each arm. He winks at you, stamps your passport as if killing insects and waves you through. At the baggage carousels, with your brother and sister fidgeting, you watch with nervous excitement as your bags mysteriously appear through a hole and rotate towards you.

You help your father load the trolley and then guide its squeaking wheels

through the sliding doors, out into a sea of expectant faces. For an instant, they recognise you. Then their gaze leaps to the person behind, and you push on, anonymous, through the throngs of hugging families and kissing loved ones, towards the money change booths where your father exchanges green-coloured pictures of Queen Elizabeth II for pink ones.

Outside on the concourse the air is dry and pepper-scented. ‘Eucalyptus,’ your father says. He finds a taxi and asks the driver something, who shoots a glance at you and your family and its mountain of bags and he shakes his head. But soon another driver appears and your belongings are brusquely loaded. Your father and sister ride in the first car; your brother, mother and yourself follow in the second. But as you watch the string of crystal rosary beads dance from the rear-view mirror and hear the radio news broadcasted in a foreign language, you wonder if the Continental Airlines pilot might have mistaken Austria for Australia.

‘On holiday?’ the driver asks.

‘We’re emigrating,’ my mother says.

‘Here?’ The driver laughs and shakes his stubbled head. ‘But no jobs, no jobs and everything so expensif!’

Your brother clutches your mother’s arm and you hear him whisper, ‘I want to go home.’

But your gaze fixes on the road and the small kingdom rising ahead of you, and you no longer feel sad, lonely or worried. No—you feel that life is just about to get interesting.