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Mister Pip

Lloyd Jones

Published by John Murray

Extract

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First Published in 2006 by Text Publishing Company in Australia

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by John Murray (Publishers)
A division of Hodder Headline

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-7195-6456-7

Typeset in Bembo Book by J & M Typesetting

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

John Murray (Publishers)
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

Everyone called him Pop Eye. Even in those days when I was a skinny thirteen-year-old I thought he probably knew about his nickname but didn't care. His eyes were too interested in what lay up ahead to notice us barefoot kids.

He looked like someone who had seen or known great suffering and hadn't been able to forget it. His large eyes in his large head stuck out further than anyone else's—like they wanted to leave the surface of his face. They made you think of someone who can't get out of the house quickly enough.

Pop Eye wore the same white linen suit every day. His trousers snagged on his bony knees in the sloppy heat. Some days he wore a clown's nose. His nose was already big. He didn't need that red light bulb. But for reasons we couldn't think of he wore the red nose on certain days that may have meant something to him. We never saw him smile. And on those days he wore the clown's nose you found yourself looking away because you never saw such sadness.

He pulled a piece of rope attached to a trolley on which Mrs Pop Eye stood. She looked like an ice queen. Nearly every woman on our island had crinkled hair, but Grace had straightened hers. She wore it piled up, and in the absence of a crown her hair did the trick. She looked so proud, as if she had no idea of her own bare feet. You saw her huge bum and

worried about the toilet seat. You thought of her mother and birth and that stuff.

At two-thirty in the afternoon the parrots sat in the shade of the trees and looked down at a human shadow one third longer than any seen before. There were only the two of them, Mr and Mrs Pop Eye, yet it felt like a procession.

The younger kids saw an opportunity and so fell in behind. Our parents looked away. They would rather stare at a colony of ants moving over a rotting pawpaw. Some stood by with their idle machetes waiting for the spectacle to pass. For the younger kids the sight consisted only of a white man towing a black woman. They saw what the parrots saw, and what the dogs saw while sitting on their scrawny arses snapping their jaws at a passing mosquito. Us older kids sensed a bigger story. Sometimes we caught a snatch of conversation. Mrs Watts was as mad as a goose. Mr Watts was doing penance for an old crime. Or maybe it was the result of a bet. The sight represented a bit of uncertainty in our world, which in every other way knew only sameness.

Mrs Pop Eye held a blue parasol to shade herself from the sun. It was the only parasol in the whole of the island, so we heard. We didn't ask after all the black umbrellas we saw, let alone the question: what was the difference between these black umbrellas and the parasol? And not because we cared if we looked dumb, but because if you went too far with a question like that one it could turn a rare thing into a commonplace thing. We loved that word—*parasol*—and we weren't about to lose it just because of some dumb-arse question. Also, we knew, whoever asked that question would get a hiding, and serve them bloody right too.

They didn't have any kids. Or if they did they were grown up and living somewhere else, maybe in America, or Australia

or Great Britain. They had names. She was Grace and black like us. He was Tom Christian Watts and white as the whites of your eyes, only sicker.

There are some English names on the headstones in the church graveyard. The doctor on the other side of the island had a full Anglo-Saxon name even though he was black like the rest of us. So, although we knew him as Pop Eye we used to say 'Mr Watts' because it was the only name like it left in our district.

They lived alone in the minister's old house. You couldn't see it from the road. It used to be surrounded by grass, according to my mum. But after the minister died the authorities forgot about the mission and the lawnmower rusted. Soon the bush grew up around the house, and by the time I was born Mr and Mrs Pop Eye had sunk out of view of the world. The only times we saw them was when Pop Eye, looking like a tired old nag circling the well, pulled his wife along in the trolley. The trolley had bamboo rails. Mrs Pop Eye rested her hands on these.

To be a show-off you need an audience. But Mrs Pop Eye didn't pay us any attention. We weren't worthy of that. It was as if we didn't exist. Not that we cared. Mr Watts interested us more.

Because Pop Eye was the only white for miles around, little kids stared at him until their ice blocks melted over their black hands. Older kids sucked in their breath and knocked on his door to ask to do their 'school project' on him. When the door opened some just froze and stared. I knew an older girl who was invited in; not everyone was. She said there were books everywhere. She asked him to talk about his life. She sat in a chair next to a glass of water he had poured for her, pencil in hand, notebook open. He said: 'My dear, there has been a

great deal of it. I expect more of the same.' She wrote this down. She showed her teacher, who praised her initiative. She even brought it over to our house to show me and my mum, which is how I know about it.

It wasn't just for the fact he was the last white man that made Pop Eye what he was to us—a source of mystery mainly, but also confirmation of something else we held to be true.

We had grown up believing white to be the colour of all the important things, like ice-cream, aspirin, ribbon, the moon, the stars. White stars and a full moon were more important when my grandfather grew up than they are now that we have generators.

When our ancestors saw the first white they thought they were looking at ghosts or maybe some people who had just fallen into bad luck. Dogs sat on their tails and opened their jaws to await the spectacle. The dogs thought they were in for a treat. Maybe these white people could jump backwards or somersault over trees. Maybe they had some spare food. Dogs always hope for that.

The first white my grandfather saw was a shipwrecked yachtsman who asked him for a compass. My grandfather didn't know what a compass was, so he knew he didn't have one. I picture him clasping his hands at his back and smiling. He wouldn't want to appear dumb. The white man asked for a map. My grandfather didn't know what he was asking for, and so pointed down at the man's cut feet. My grandfather wondered how the sharks had missed that bait. The white man asked where he had washed up. At last my grandfather could help. He said it was an island. The white man asked if the island had a name. My grandfather replied with the word that means 'island'. When the man asked directions to the nearest shop my grandfather burst out laughing. He pointed up at a

coconut tree and back over the white's shoulder whence he had come, meaning the bloody great ocean stocked with fish. I have always liked that story.

Other than Pop Eye or Mr Watts, and some Australian mine workers, I'd seen few other living whites. The ones I had seen were on an old film. At school we were shown the visit by the duke of something or other many years before in nineteen-hundred-and-something. The camera kept staring at the duke and saying nothing. We watched the duke eat. The duke and the other whites wore moustaches and white trousers. They even wore buttoned-up jackets. They weren't any good at sitting on the ground either. They kept rolling over onto their elbows. We all laughed—us kids—at the whites trying to sit on the ground as they would in a chair. They were handed pig trotters in banana leaves. One man in a helmet could be seen asking for something. We didn't know what until he was brought a piece of white cloth which he used to wipe his mouth. We roared our heads off laughing.

Mostly, though, I was watching out for my grandfather. He was one of the skinny kids marching by in barefeet and white singlets. My grandfather was the second to top kid kneeling in a human pyramid in front of the white men in helmets eating pig trotters. Our class was asked to write an essay on what we had seen but I had no idea what it was about. I didn't understand the meaning of it so I wrote about my grandfather and the story he told of the shipwrecked white man he had found washed up like a starfish on the beach of his village, which in those days had no electricity or running water and didn't know Moscow from rum.

What I am about to tell results, I think, from our ignorance of the outside world. My mum knew only what the last minister had told her in sermons and conversations. She knew her times tables and the names of some distant capitals. She had heard that man had been to the moon but was inclined not to believe such stories. She did not like boastfulness. She liked even less the thought that she might have been caught out, or made a fool of. She had never left Bougainville. On my eighth birthday I remember thinking to ask her how old she was. She quickly turned her face away from me, and for the first time in my life I realised I had embarrassed her.

Her comeback was a question of her own. 'How old do you think I am?'

When I was eleven, my father flew off on a mining plane. Before that, though, he was invited to sit in a classroom and watch films about the country he was going to. There were films on pouring tea (the milk went in the cup first), though when you prepared your bowl of cornflakes the milk went in after. My mum says she and my father argued like roosters over that last one.

Sometimes when I saw her sad I knew she would be thinking back to that argument. She would look up from whatever she was doing to say, 'Perhaps I should have shut up.

I was too strong. What do you think, girl?' This was one of the few times she was seriously interested in my opinion and, like the question concerning her age, I always knew what to say to cheer her up.

My father was shown other films. He saw cars, trucks, planes. He saw motorways and became excited. But then there was a demonstration of a pedestrian crossing. You had to wait for a boy in a white coat to raise his sign with 'sticks up!'

My father got scratchy. There were too many roads with hard edges and these kids in white coats had the power to control traffic with their stop signs. Now they argued again. My mum said it was no different here. You couldn't just walk where you liked. There was a clip over the ear if you strayed. Cause, she said, it was as the Good Book says. You might know about heaven but it didn't mean you had entry as of right.

For a while we treasured a postcard my father sent from Townsville. This is what he had to say. Up to the moment the plane entered the clouds he looked down and saw where we lived for the very first time. From out at sea the view is of a series of mountain peaks. From the air he was amazed to see our island look no bigger than a cow pat. But my mum didn't care about that stuff. All my mum wanted to know was if where he had gone to there were pay packets.

A month later there was a second postcard. He said pay packets hung off factory rafters like breadfruit. And that settled it. We were going to join him, that's what we were going to do when Francis Ona and his rebels declared war on the copper mine and the company, which in some way that I didn't understand at the time, brought the redskin soldiers from Port Moresby to our island. According to Port Moresby we are one country. According to us we are black as the night. The soldiers looked like people leached up out

of the red earth. That's why they were known as redskins.

News of war arrives as bits of maybe and hearsay. Rumour is its mistress. Rumour, which you can choose to believe or ignore. We heard that no one could get in or out. We didn't know what to make of that, because how could you seal off a country? What would you tie it up in or wrap around it? We didn't know what to believe, then the redskin soldiers arrived, and we learned about the blockade.

We were surrounded by sea, and while the redskins' gunboats patrolled the coastline their helicopters flew overhead. There was no newspaper or radio to guide our thoughts. We relied on word of mouth. The redskins were going to choke the island and the rebels into submission. That's what we heard. 'Good luck to them,' said my mum. That's how much we cared. We had fish. We had our chickens. We had our fruits. We had what we had always had. In addition to that, a rebel supporter could add, 'We had our pride.'

Then, one night, the lights went out for good. There was no more fuel for the generators. We heard the rebels had broken into the hospital in Arawa further down the coast and taken all the medical supplies. That news really worried our mums, and soon the littlest kids came down with malaria and there was nothing that could be done to help them. We buried them and dragged their weeping mothers away from their tiny graves.

Us kids hung around with our mums. We helped in the gardens. We stalked each other beneath trees that rise several hundred feet in the air. We played in the streams that tumble and spill down steep hillsides. We found new pools in which to look for our floating faces of mischief. We played in the sea and our black skins got blacker under the sun.

We stopped going to school after our teachers had left on

the last boat for Rabaul. *The last boat*. That sentence made our faces droop. We'd have to walk on water to get off the island now.

Everyone was surprised that Pop Eye didn't leave when he had the chance. Even though Mrs Watts was a local he could have taken her. The other whites did. They took their wives and girlfriends. These were company men, of course.

No one knew what Pop Eye did; he did no work as far as we could tell. He was invisible for most of the time.

Our houses sat beached in a sloppy row, all of them gaping back at the sea. Doors and windows were always left open so it was easy to overhear the conversation of neighbours. Nobody heard the conversation of the Wattses because of the distance between our thirty or so houses and the old mission house where they lived.

Sometimes you saw Mr Watts at one end of the beach or caught a glimpse of his back, and then you wondered where he had been and what he had been doing. And there were those strange processions. The Wattses would come into view near the classroom block. As they arrived at the first houses chickens and roosters wandered out to meet them. At the end of the row Mr Watts towed his wife across the lumpy grass and past the pig pens to the bush line. We sat in the trees, waiting for them to pass beneath our dangling feet. We hoped he might stop for a break and a word with Mrs Watts, because no one had seen them speaking together as man and wife. In any case, to catch Mrs Watts' ear you felt the language would have to be big, even enormous, scripted out in a series of lightning bolts.

It was easy to accept she was mad. Mr Watts was more of a mystery because he'd come out of a world we didn't really know. My mum said his tribe had forgotten him. They wouldn't have left behind a company man.

I did not realise what a big impact the school had on my life until it closed. My sense of time was governed by the school year—when term began, when it ended, the holidays between. Now that we had been set free we had all this time on our hands. When we woke we no longer felt the brooms on our backsides or our mums shouting at us to *Ged up! Ged up you lazy bones!*

We still woke when the roosters did, but now we lay there, listening to the dogs open their jaws and growl in their sleep. We also listened out for the mosquito, which we feared more than the redskins or the rebels.

We learned to eavesdrop on our parents—though some things we could see for ourselves. We were used to the redskins' helicopters buzzing in and out of the cloud around the mountain peaks. Now we saw them head out to sea in a straight line. The helicopter would reach a certain point, then turn around and come back as if it had forgotten something. Where they turned back was just a pinprick in the distance. We could not see the men thrown out. But that's what we heard. The redskins flung the captured rebels out the open door of the helicopter, their arms and legs kicking in the air. And whenever us kids strayed into range our mums and dads would stop talking, and so we knew, didn't we, that there was some fresh atrocity, the details we didn't yet know about.

The weeks passed. Now we had an idea of what our time was for. It was to be spent waiting. We waited, and we waited for the redskin soldiers, or the rebels, whoever got here first. It was a long, long time before they came to our village. But I know exactly when they did because that's what I had made up my mind to do—I had decided I would keep the time. It was three days before my fourteenth birthday when the redskins came into our village for the first time. Four weeks

later the rebels arrived. But in the time leading up to those calamitous events, Pop Eye and his wife, Grace, came back into our lives.

'Ged up, Matilda,' my mum yelled one morning. 'You've got school today.' She must have enjoyed that moment. I could tell it cheered her up just to say it. As if we had slipped back into a comfortable old routine. I happened to know it was a Wednesday. My mum wouldn't have known that. I kept a pencil under my mat. And a calendar of days on the corner post. Eighty-six days had passed since my last day of school.

My mum swept her broom near my head. She shouted at a rooster that had flown in the door.

'But we have no teachers,' I said.

And with a glimmer of a smile, my mum said, 'You do now. Pop Eye is going to teach you kids.'

Bougainville is one of the most fertile places on earth. Drop a seed in the soil and three months later it is a plant with shiny green leaves. Another three months and you are picking its fruit. But for a machete, we would have no land of our own. Left alone the bush would march down the steep hillsides and bury our villages in flower and vine.

This is why it was easy to forget there had ever been a school. Creepers had smothered two trees in purple and red flowers, as if to soften the blow, and by that way crept onto

the school roof; they had climbed in the windows and found a way across the ceiling. Another six months and our school would have disappeared from view.

We were all ages, from seven to fifteen. I counted twenty kids, about half the original school roll. I knew of two older boys who had gone off into the mountains to join the rebels. Three other families had left on that last boat to Rabaul. I don't know about the rest. Maybe they hadn't heard about the school opening. Over the coming weeks a few boys would return.

Pop Eye was waiting for us inside. It was almost dark, though light enough to make out the tall thin white man in his linen suit. He stood at the front of the class, his eyes glancing away from our inspection. Everyone looked to see if he was wearing his red clown's nose. He wasn't. But there were other changes since I last saw him. His hair was long, nearly touching his shoulders. When it was short we hadn't noticed the flecks of red and grey. His beard spilled down onto his chest.

Our last teacher had been Mrs Siau. She was a small woman, not much bigger than us younger kids. Pop Eye stood where she had and so he seemed too large for the room. His white hands relaxed at his sides. He didn't look to where we were filing in the door. His eyes were fixed on the far end of the classroom. They didn't budge—not even when a black dog came in wagging his tail. That was encouraging because Mrs Siau would have clapped her hands and aimed a foot at that dog's arse.

This was school, but not how I remembered it. Perhaps that's why everything felt strange, as if we were trying to squeeze into an old life that didn't exist anymore, at least not in the way we remembered. We found our old desks and even

they felt changed. The cool touch of smooth wood on the backs of my legs was the only thing that was familiar. None of the kids looked at each other. Instead, we stared at our new and unexpected teacher. He seemed to be giving us permission to do exactly that. When the last of us took our places Pop Eye snapped out of his trance.

He looked at our faces, taking each of us in, though careful not to linger. Just noting who had turned up. He signalled with a nod when that job was done. Then he glanced at a green vine hanging down from the ceiling. He reached up for it, tore it down and bunched it in his hands like it was paper.

I had never heard him speak. As far as I knew, no one in that class had. I don't know what I was expecting, except when he spoke his voice was surprisingly small. He was a big man, and if he had shouted like our mums did he would have brought the roof down. Instead he spoke as if he was addressing each one of us personally.

'I want this to be a place of light,' he said. 'No matter what happens.' He paused there for us to digest this. When our parents spoke of the future we were given to understand it was an improvement on what we knew. For the first time we were hearing that the future was uncertain. And because this had come from someone outside of our lives we were more ready to listen. He looked around at our faces. If he was expecting a challenge he didn't get one.

'We must clear the space and make it ready for learning,' he said. 'Make it new again.'

When his large eyes rolled away to the open window with its screen of green, that's when I noticed his tie. It was skinny, black, formal, but he'd left the top button of his shirt undone for his body to breathe. He brought up a delicate white hand

to touch the knot. Then he turned back to us kids and raised an eye.

'Yes?' he asked.

We looked around at each other and nodded. Someone thought to say 'Yes, Mr Watts,' and we all followed suit: 'Yes, Mr Watts.'

That's when he held up a finger as though something important had just come to him.

'I know some of you call me Pop Eye. That's okay too. I like Pop Eye.'

And for the first time in all the years I'd seen him dragging Mrs Pop Eye behind in that trolley, he smiled. After that I never called him Pop Eye again.

We set to work. We dragged the flowering vine down off the roof, which was easy enough; it seemed to know what would eventually happen to it, which is why it didn't hold on too tight. We hauled it away from the building to a clearing where we burned it in a thick white smoke. Mr Watts sent a number of us kids off to find brooms. We swept out the classroom. Later in the day the sun dropped and exposed the cobwebs. We leaped at those with our hands.

We were enjoying our first day back at school. Mr Watts kept an eye on us. He allowed high spirits. But when he spoke we shut up.

Now we returned to our desks to wait for him to dismiss us and send us home. He spoke in that same quiet voice that had come as such a surprise at the start of the day.

'I want you to understand something. I am no teacher, but I will do my best. That's my promise to you children. I believe, with your parents' help, we can make a difference to our lives.'

He stopped there like he'd just had a new thought, and he

must have, because next he asked us to get up from our desks and to form a circle. He told us to hold hands or link arms, whatever we saw fit.

Some of us who had heard a minister speak and knew about church closed their eyes and dropped their chins onto their chests. But there was no prayer. There was no sermon. Instead, Mr Watts thanked us all for turning up.

'I wasn't sure you would,' he said. 'I will be honest with you. I have no wisdom, none at all. The truest thing I can tell you is that whatever we have between us is all we've got. Oh, and of course Mr Dickens.'

Who was Mr Dickens? And why, in a village population of less than sixty, had we not met him before? Some of the older kids tried to pretend they knew who he was. One even said he was a friend of his uncle's, and encouraged by our interest went on to say he had met Mr Dickens. His claim was soon exposed by our questions and he sloped off like a kicked dog. It turned out no one knew Mr Dickens.

'Tomorrow,' I told my mum, 'we meet Mr Dickens.'

She stopped sweeping and thought. 'That's a white man's name.' She shook her head and spat out the door. 'No. You heard wrong, Matilda. Pop Eye is the last white man. There is no other.'

'Mr Watts says there is.'

I had heard Mr Watts speak. I had heard him say he would always be honest with us kids. If he said we were to meet Mr Dickens, then I felt sure that we would. I was looking forward to seeing another white man. It never occurred to me to ask where this Mr Dickens had been hiding himself. But then I had no reason to doubt Mr Watts' word.

My mum must have reconsidered overnight because next morning when I ran off to school she called me back.

'This Mr Dickens, Matilda, if you get the chance why don't you ask him to fix our generator.'

Every other kid turned up to school with similar instructions. They were to ask Mr Dickens for anti-malaria tablets, aspirin, generator fuel, beer, kerosene, wax candles. We sat at our desks with our shopping lists and waited for Mr Watts to introduce Mr Dickens. He wasn't there when we arrived. There was just Mr Watts, as we had found him the day before, standing tall at the front of the class, lost in a dream, I'd say, because there was nothing left to discover about that back wall. We kept our eyes on the window. We didn't want to miss a white man strolling past.

We could see the beach palms spreading up to a blue sky. And a turquoise sea so still we hardly noticed it. Halfway to the horizon we could see a redskins' gunboat. It was like a grey sea mouse—it crawled along with its guns aimed at us. In the direction of the hills we heard sporadic gunfire. We were used to that sound—sometimes it was the rebels testing their restored rifles, and besides, we knew it was a longer way off than what it sounded. We had come to know the amplifying effects of water, so the gunfire just merged with the background chorus of the grunting pigs and shrieking birds.

While we waited for Mr Watts to wake from his dream I counted three lime-green geckos and a pale one on the ceiling. A flower-pecker bird flew in the open window and out again. That got our attention because if we had been ready with a net we could have eaten it. As the bird flew out the window, Mr Watts began to read to us.

I had never been read to in English before. Nor had the others. We didn't have books in our homes, and before the blockade our only books had come from Moresby, and those were written in pidgin. When Mr Watts read to us we fell

quiet. It was a new sound in the world. He read slowly so we heard the shape of each word.

'"My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip."'

There had been no warning from Mr Watts. He just began to read. My desk was in the second row from the back. Gilbert Masoi sat in front, and I couldn't see past his fat shoulders and big woolly head. So when I heard Mr Watts speak I thought he was talking about himself. That he was Pip. It was only as he began to walk between our desks that I saw the book in his hand.

He kept reading and we kept listening. It was some time before he stopped, but when he looked up we sat stunned by the silence. The flow of words had ended. Slowly we stirred back into our bodies and our lives.

Mr Watts closed the book and held the paperback up in one hand, like a church minister. We saw him smile from one corner of the room to the other. 'That was chapter one of *Great Expectations*, which, incidentally, is the greatest novel by the greatest English writer of the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens.'

Now we felt silly as bats for thinking we were going to be introduced to someone by the name of Mr Dickens. Perhaps Mr Watts had an idea of what was going on in our heads, though. 'When you read the work of a great writer,' he told us, 'you are making the acquaintance of that person. So you can say you have met Mr Dickens on the page, so to speak. But you don't know him yet.'

One of the younger kids, Mabel, put up her hand to ask a question. At first we thought Mr Watts hadn't seen her because

he carried on over the top of Mabel's waving hand. 'I welcome questions. I won't always be able to answer them. Remember that,' he said. 'Also, when you raise your hand to ask me something, would you be so kind as to give your name.'

He nodded in Mabel's direction. She mustn't have taken in what Mr Watts had just said, because she started to ask her question until Mr Watts stopped her mid-sentence with a raised eyebrow, which, for the first time in twenty-four hours, reminded us of his nickname.

'Mabel, Mr Watts,' she said.

'Good. I'm very pleased to meet you, Mabel. That is a pretty name,' he said.

Mabel shone. She wriggled in her desk. Then she spoke.

'When can we say we know Mr Dickens?'

Mr Watts brought two fingers up to his chin. We watched him think for a moment.

'That is a very good question, Mabel. In fact, my first response is that you have asked me something to which there is no answer. But I will give it my best shot. Some of you will know Mr Dickens when we finish the book. The book is fifty-nine chapters long. If I read a chapter a day, that's fifty-nine days.'

This was difficult information to bring home. We had met Mr Dickens but we did not know him yet, and would not know him for another fifty-eight days. It was 10 December 1991. I quickly calculated—we would not know Mr Dickens until 6 February 1992.