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Dirt Music

Written by Tim Winton

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Dirt Music

Tim Winton

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There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that
profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself –
Finite infinity.

Emily Dickinson

I

ONE NIGHT IN NOVEMBER, another that had somehow become morning while she sat there, Georgie Jutland looked up to see her pale and furious face reflected in the window. Only a moment before she'd been perusing the blueprints for a thirty-two-foot Pain Clark from 1913 which a sailing enthusiast from Manila had posted on his website, but she was bumped by the server and was overtaken by such a silly rush of anger that she had to wonder what was happening to her. Neither the boat nor the bloke in Manila meant a damn thing to her; they were of as little consequence as every other site she'd visited in the last six hours. In fact, she had to struggle to remember how she'd spent the time. She had traipsed through the Uffizi without any more attention than a footsore tourist. She'd stared at a live camera image of a mall in the city of Perth, been to the Frank Zappa fan club of Brazil, seen Francis Drake's

chamberpot in the Tower of London and stumbled upon a chat group for world citizens who yearned to be amputees.

Logging on – what a laugh. They should have called it stepping off. When Georgie sat down before the terminal she was gone in her seat, like a pensioner at the pokies, gone for all money. Into that welter of useless information night after night to confront people and notions she could do without. She didn't know why she bothered except that it ate time. Still, you had to admit that it was nice to be without a body for a while; there was an addictive thrill in being of no age, no gender, with no past. It was an infinite sequence of opening portals, of menus and corridors that let you into brief, painless encounters, where what passed for life was a listless kind of browsing. World without consequence, amen. And in it she felt light as an angel. Besides, it kept her off the sauce.

She swivelled in her seat, snatched up the mug and recoiled as her lips met the cold sarcoma that had formed on the coffee's surface. Beyond her reflection in the window the moony sea seemed to shiver.

Georgie got up and padded across to the kitchen which was separated from the living space by the glossy rampart of benches and domestic appliances. From the freezer she pulled out a bottle and poured herself a serious application of vodka. She stood a while staring back at the great merging space of the livingroom. It was big enough not to seem crowded, despite the fact that it held an eight-seater dining table, the computer station and the three sofas corralled around the TV at the other end. The whole seaward wall of this top floor was glass and all the curtains were thrown back. Between the house and the lagoon a hundred metres away there was only the front lawn and a few scrubby dunes. Georgie slugged the vodka down at a gulp. It was all sensation and no taste, exactly

how a sister once described her. She smiled and put the glass down too loudly on the draining board. A little way along the hall Jim was asleep. The boys were downstairs.

She pulled back the sliding door and stepped out onto the terrace where the air was cool and thick with the smells of stewing seagrass, of brine and limey sand, of thawing bait and the savoury tang of saltbush. The outdoor furniture was beaded with dew. There wasn't breeze enough yet to stir the scalloped hems of the Perrier brolly, but dew this time of year was a sign of wind on the way. White Point sat in the teeth of the Roaring Forties. Here on the midwest coast the wind might not be your friend but it was sure as hell your constant neighbour.

Georgie stood out there longer than was comfortable, until her breasts ached from the chill and her hair felt as though it was shrinking. She saw the moon tip across the lagoon until its last light caught on bow rails and biminis and windscreens, making mooring buoys into fitful, flickering stars. And then it was gone and the sea was dark and blank. Georgie lingered on the cold slate. So much for the real world; these days it gave her about as much pleasure as a childhood dose of codliver oil.

On the beach something flashed. At four o'clock in the morning it was probably just a gull, but it gave a girl a start. It was darker now than it had been all night; she couldn't see a thing.

Sea air misted on her skin. The chill burned her scalp.

Georgie wasn't a morning person but as a shiftworker she'd seen more than her share of dawns. Like all those Saudi mornings when she'd arrive back at the infidels' compound to loiter outside after her colleagues went to bed. In stockinged feet she would stand on the precious mat of lawn and sniff the Jeddah air in the hope of catching a whiff of pure sea breeze

coming across the high perimeter wall. Sentimental attachment to geography irritated her, Australians were riddled with it and West Australians were worst of all, but there was no point in denying that the old predawn ritual was anything more than bog-standard homesickness, that what she was sniffing for was the highball mix you imbibed every night of your riverside Perth childhood, the strange briny effervescence of the sea tide stirring in the Swan River, into its coves, across the estuarine flats. But in Jeddah all she ever got for her trouble was the fumy miasma of the corniche, the exhaust of Cadillacs and half a million aircon units blasting Freon at the Red Sea.

And now here she was, years later, soaking in clean, fresh Indian Ocean air with a miserable, prophylactic determination. Sailor, diver and angler though she was, Georgie knew that these days the glories of the outdoors were wasted on her.

There was no use in going to bed now. Jim would be up in less than an hour and she'd never get to sleep before then unless she took a pill. What was the point in lying down in time for him to sit up and take his first steeling sigh of the day? Jim Buckridge needed no alarm, somehow he was wired to be early. He was your first out and last in sort of fisherman, he set the mark that others in the fleet aspired to. Inherited, so everybody said. By the time he was out of the lagoon and through the passage in the reef with the bird-swirling island on his starboard beam, the whole bay would be burbling with diesels and the others would be looking for the dying phosphor of his wake.

At seven the boys would clump in, fuddled and ready for breakfast, though somehow in the next hour they would become less and less ready for school. She'd make their lunches – apple sandwiches for Josh and five rounds of Vegemite for Brad. Then finally they'd crash out the back

door and Georgie might switch on the VHF and listen to the fleet while she went through the business of keeping order in a big house. And then and then and then.

Down at the beach it wasn't a gull, that blur of movement; there was a flash of starlight on wet metal. Right there, in the shadow of the foredune along the bay. And now the sound of a petrol engine, eight cylinders.

Georgie peered, made a tunnel with her hands to focus in the dark. Yes. Two hundred metres along the beach, a truck wheeling around to reverse toward the shore. No headlamps, which was curious. But the brakelights gave it away; they revealed a pink-lit boat on a trailer, a centre console. Small, maybe less than six metres. Not a professional boat. Even abalone boats had big yellow licence markings. No sport-fisherman launched a boat with such stealth an hour before Jim Buckridge got out of bed.

Georgie grabbed a windcheater from inside and stood in the hallway a few moments. The plodding clock, a snore, appliances whirring. The vodka still burned in her belly. She was shaky with caffeine, and restless. What the hell, she thought. A moment of unscripted action in White Point. You had to go and see.

Underfoot the lawn was delicious with dew, and warmer than she expected. She crossed its mown pelt to the foredune and the sand track to the beach. Even without the moon the white sand around the lagoon was luminescent and powdery. Where the tide had been and gone the beach was hard and rippled.

Somewhere in the dark an outboard started. So muted it had to be a four-stroke. It idled briefly and as it throttled up she saw for only a moment the hint of a white wake on the lagoon. Whether it was surreptitious or merely considerate,

the whole procedure was extraordinary in its quiet and speed. A bird's wings whopped by, invisible but close as a whisper; the sound prickled Georgie's skin like the onset of the flu.

Along the beach a dog blurred about. When she got closer she saw it was chained to the truck. It growled, seemed to draw itself up to bark then hesitate.

The big galvanized trailer was still leaking seawater when she reached it. The dog whined eloquently. Steel links grated against the Ford's barwork. An F-100, the 4x4 model. Redneck Special. The dog yanked against the chain. It launched itself into a sprawl, seemed more eager than angry.

Georgie bent down to the shadow of the dog and felt its tongue hot on her palms. Its tail drummed against the fender. She saw seagrass trailing from the driver's step, black shreds against the talcum sand.

Hmm, she murmured. Are you a nice dog?

The dog sat, got all erect and expectant at the sound of her voice. It was a kelpie–heeler sort of mutt, a farm dog, your garden variety livewire fencejumping mongrel. All snout and chest and balls. She liked it already.

Good dog, she murmured. Yeah, good fella.

The dog craned toward the water.

Feel like a swim, eh?

Bugger it, she thought, why not.

She stripped off and laid her clothes on the truck. The blouse was past its use-by date; she picked it up, sniffed it and tossed it back.

Unleashed, the dog flashed out across the sand in a mad tanglefooted arc. Georgie belted down to the water and ploughed in blind. Her reckless dive brought to mind the paraplegic ward. She felt the percussion of the dog hitting the

water behind her and struck out in her lazy schoolgirl freestyle until she was amidst moored lobster boats with their fug of corrosion and birdshit and pilchards. Behind her the dog snuffed along gamely, snout up, with a bow wave you could feel on your back.

Stars were dropping out now. A couple of houses had lights on. One of them had to be Jim. Puzzled, perhaps.

Out on the seagrass meadows where the lagoon tasted a little steeped, she trod water for a while and picked out Jim's house on the dune. It was a bare white cube, a real bauhaus shocker and the first of its kind in White Point. Locals once called it the Yugoslav Embassy but these days nearly every owner-skipper had himself a trophy house built with the proceeds of the rock lobster boom.

Jim would be in the bathroom now, holding himself up against the tiled wall, scratching his chin, loosening his back, feeling his age. Despite his reputation he still seemed to her a decent man, decent enough to spend three years with, and for Georgie Jutland that was a record.

She imagined him back in the kitchen, boiling water for his thermos, doing a room-by-room, wondering. He'd step outside to scan the yard and maybe the beach and take in the state of the sky and the sea, gauge the wind while he was there. He'd go inside and get his kit together for eight or ten hours at sea. And if she didn't arrive? When his deckhands turned up in the old Hilux in their beanies and fog of brewer's breath, with the dinghy lashed across the tray like a cattle trough, what then? Did she really give a toss anymore? A few months ago she would have been tucked up in bed. Not swimming nude in the bay with some stranger's cur entertaining mutinous thoughts. But recently something in her had leaked away. Vaporized in a moment.

The dog circled her patiently – well, doggedly, in fact – and in every hair and pore Georgie felt the shimmer of water passing over her body. After weeks of the virtual, it was queer and almost painful to be completely present.

Georgie thought of that afternoon a few months ago and the meek puff of steam she had become in the boys' playroom. She could barely believe that a single word might do her in. As a nurse she'd copped a swill of curses, from dying men and girls in labour, from junkies and loonies, princesses and smartarses. Patients said vile things in extremis. You'd think a woman could withstand three simple syllables like *stepmother.* But the word came so hot and wet and sudden, screamed into her face by a nine-year-old whose night terrors she'd soothed, whose body she'd bathed and held so often, whose grief-muddy daubs she'd clamped to the fridge, that she didn't even hear the sentence it came wrapped in. She just lurched back in her seat like a woman slapped. Stepmother. The word had never been uttered in the house before, let alone fired in anger. It was fair in its way; she understood that. Along with his need to win, his desire to wound, Josh was merely clarifying her status. She could still see his face wrinkled and sphinctery with rage. It was his geriatric face waiting for him. For the sake of a moronic video game he was defining her out of his life while his brother Brad, who was eleven, looked on in silent disgust. As she got up to leave Georgie was ashamed of the sob that escaped her. None of them had seen Jim leaning in the doorway. There was a universal intake of breath. Georgie left the room before a word was uttered, before she let herself break down completely. She ducked beneath his arm and scrambled upstairs to bawl into a teatowel until she was steady enough to slop chardonnay into a glass. Jim's voice was quiet and ominous rising up the stairwell. She realized that he was about to hit them and she knew she

should go down and put a stop to it but it was over before she could take herself in hand. It had never happened before, none of it. Later Georgie wondered if it really was the S-word that had broken the spell or the knowledge that she might have spared the boys a belting and hadn't even tried. Either way nothing was the same.

That was late autumn. Within a few weeks she turned forty and she was careful to let that little landmark slide by unheralded. By spring and the onset of the new season she was merely going through the motions. Another man, an American, had once told her in a high, laughing moment his theory of love. It was magic, he said. The magic ain't real, darlin, but when it's gone it's over.

Georgie didn't want to believe in such thin stuff, that all devotion was fuelled by delusion, that you needed some spurious myth to keep you going in love or work or service. Yet she'd felt romance evaporate often enough to make her wonder. And hadn't she woken one heartsick morning without a reason to continue as a nurse? Her career had been a calling, not just a job. Wasn't that sudden emptiness, the loss of some ennobling impulse, the sign of a magic gone?

In her time Georgie Jutland had been a sailor of sorts, so she knew exactly what it meant to lose seaway, to be dead in the water. She recognized the sensation only too well. And that spring she had slipped overboard without a sound.

That's how it felt sculling about in the lagoon this morning while the sky went felty above her. Woman overboard. With nowhere to swim. What was she gonna do, strike out for the fringing reef, head on out into open water, take on the Indian Ocean in her birthday suit with a liberated mongrel sidekick? Stroke across the Cray Bank, the Shelf, the shipping lane, the Ninety East Ridge? To Africa? Georgie, she told herself, you're

a woman who doesn't even own a car anymore, that's how mobile and independent you are. You used to frighten the mascara off people, render surgeons speechless. Somewhere, somehow, you sank into a fog.

She lay back in the water wishing some portal would open, that she might click on some dopey icon and proceed safely, painlessly, without regret or memory.

The dog whined and tried to scramble onto her for a breather. She sighed and struck out for shore.

IN THE WRECKYARD BEHIND HIS roadhouse a bear-like man in a pair of greasy overalls had a last toke on his wizened reefer and shifted his weight off the hood of the Valiant which some dick had recently driven off the end of the jetty. It was his morning ritual, the dawn patrol. A piss on the miserable oleander and a little suck on the gigglyweed to soften the facts of life.

The light was murky yet. You could feel a blow coming on, another endless screaming bloody southerly. He snuffed out his tiny roach-end on the Valiant's sandy paintjob and shoved the remains through the kelp-laced grille near the radiator.

From the beach track, between the dunes and the lobster depot, came a trailer clank and a quiet change of gears. There was plenty enough light to see the truck and the boat behind it spilling bilgewater as it pulled out onto the blacktop.

Fuck me sideways, he said aloud. You bloody idiot.

The V8 eased up along the tiny main drag, fading off in the distance.

Beaver slouched off toward the forecourt to unlock the pumps. A man could do with a friggin blindfold in this town. And get his jaw wired shut while he was at it.

Inside at the register he tossed the padlocks down and pawed through his CDs. Tuesday. Cream, maybe. Or The Who *Live at Leeds*. No. *Fiddler on the Roof*, it was.

He opened the register, closed it, and gazed up the empty street. You silly bugger.

WHILE THE BOYS ATE BREAKFAST Georgie went about the morning routine in a sleepy daze. She was passing a window with a wad of beefy male laundry when she saw that the Ford and trailer were gone from the beach. Right under her nose.

Of course it might be nothing. But really, in a town like this, where crews regularly pulled their pots to find them unaccountably empty, a non-fleet boat going out under cover of darkness and slipping back at first light was not likely to be an innocent occurrence. There was something shonky about it. Some fool with a taste for trouble.

She went downstairs and stuffed the washer full and for a few moments she paused, overcome with weariness. Beneath their lids her eyes felt coarse. She probably should have reported what she saw this morning, told Jim at the very least. Whoever it was, even if he wasn't pillaging other people's pots, even if he

was just taking fish it could only be as a shamateur, the fleet equivalent of a scab. That was no recreational angler. Local families mortgaged themselves into purgatory to buy professional licences. This bloke was taking food from their mouths.

Georgie slapped the lid down and smirked at her own righteous piety. God, she thought, listen to me! Bread from their mouths? Once upon a time, maybe, in the good ole bad ole days.

She caught the reek of burnt toast rolling down the stairwell. How did they manage it? The toaster was automatic.

In earlier times, when arson was a civic tool and regulatory gunfire not unknown at sea, the locals sorted poachers out with a bit of White Point diplomacy. Back in the fifties it was a perilous, hardscrabble life and crews protected their patch by whatever means came to hand. Georgie had seen the photos in the pub and the school, all those jug-eared men with split lips and sun-flayed noses posing bare-chested in tiny football shorts with their eyes narrowed against the light. Returned soldiers, migrants and drifters, their stubby plank boats with masts and sails, stern tillers and tiny, gutless diesels looked impossibly slow and cumbersome.

The only safe anchorage for many miles, White Point was then just a bunch of tin sheds in the lee of the foredune. A sandy point, a series of fringing reefs and an island a mile offshore created a broad lagoon in which the original jetty stood. The settlement lay wedged between the sea and the majestic white sandhills of the interior. It was a shanty town whose perimeter was a wall of empty beer bottles and flyblown carapaces. Before the export boom, when most of the catch was canned, rock lobsters were called crayfish. They were driven out in wet hessian bags on trucks that wallowed the four hours of sand tracks to the nearest blacktop. The

place was isolated, almost secret, and beyond the reach of the law and the dampening influence of domesticity. It was the boys' own life. On the rare occasions when the coppers and the bailiff did their rounds, somebody radioed ahead so that the pub-shed might close and the alimony cheats, bail absconders and nervy drunks made it into the surrounding bush. For the bulk of the time men worked and drank in a world of their own making. How they loved to run amok. And when, in time, their women came, they did not, on the whole, bring a certain civilizing something. True, they conferred glass and lace curtains upon the windows of shacks. Geraniums appeared in old kero tins and there was an exodus of idealists who were driven north into the tropics, but, male and female, addicted to the frontier way, White Pointers remained a savage, unruly lot. Even after the boom when many families became instantly – even catastrophically – rich and the law came to town, they were, in any estimation, as rough as guts.

Nowadays rich fishermen built pink brick villas and concrete slab bunkers that made their fathers' hovels look pretty. The materials were long-haul but the spirit behind the construction was entirely makeshift, as though locals were hard-wired for an ephemeral life. Georgie, who rather liked the get-fucked Fish Deco vibe of the place, thought it remarkable that people could produce such a relentlessly ugly town in so gorgeous a setting. The luminous dunes, the island, the lagoon with its seagrass and coral outcrops, the low, austere heath of the hinterland – they were singular to even her suburban gaze. The town was a personality junkyard – and she was honest enough to count herself onto that roll – where people still washed up to hide or to lick their wounds. Broke and rattled they dropped sail in the bay and never left. Surfers, dopeheads, deviants, dreamers – even lobster molls

like herself – sensed that the town was a dog but the landscape got its hooks in and people stayed.

Just because you became a local, though, didn't mean you were a real White Pointer. Georgie never really qualified. Socially she had always remained ambivalent. Not because she came from the world of private schools and yacht clubs but because there was something dispiriting about hearing the wives of illiterate millionaires complain of the habits of crew families, at how squalid their women were, how foulmouthed their childen. These were women maybe five years out of the van park themselves, who hid their own shiners beneath duty-free makeup and thought of themselves already as gentry. Georgie had always held back and she knew what it cost her. There was always some lingering doubt about Georgie. She wondered if they felt her faking it.

A real fisherman's woman wouldn't have hesitated about reporting something suspicious. Georgie knew what a shamateur was, what was required. A simple call to the Fisheries office. Or a quiet word to Jim. Either way it would be dealt with and she'd have done her civic duty. But stealing bread from their mouths – really! People with a million dollars' worth of boat and licence, a new Landcruiser and six weeks in Bali every season, families who owned city pubs and traded in gold, whose TVs were the size of pianos? Even the lowliest deckhand earned more than the teacher who endured his children six hours a day. Not that Georgie begrudged anyone the money. Men worked seven days a week for eight months of the year at something dangerous and their families had endured the bad times, so good luck to them. But she wasn't about to go running out to protect millionaires from one bloke and his dog. She had two boys to get off to school and she felt like shit. Besides, she never had been much of a joiner.