

Jack of You – by Louise Jennings
Winner of the AA Directions New Travel Writer of the Year Award 2009

The local competition to rouse all sleeping humans begins at dawn. Among the clamorous front contenders: heavy rain pounding on the kombi roof, seagulls screeching overhead and boy racers booming down Bowentown Road. While still too sleepy to suggest a possible winner, I concede that together they have already achieved their aim. I lie awake next to Jack, cramped against the wheel hub in an old eiderdown which smells of petrol and oranges. I think wistfully of hot showers and fresh coffee, and of moving on from here. Three wet nights camped under bedraggled trees near the beach at Anzac Bay at the southern end of Waihi Beach is enough. I want to swap the sand for grass, the sea for mountain and this close confinement for open air. It is time to leave here. And it is time to leave Jack.

My mind tumbles over the thought of a separate life as we load the van together in a well-rehearsed sequence; no conversation required. The familiar actions bring with them some small calm. Before we drive away Jack suggests a photo from the old hill pa across the car park from us, the rain has eased now, leaving a forsaken wind blustering about angrily. We climb up a narrow muddy track to the flat top of the ancient site, pitted here and there with kumara graves. Jack stands right on the edge of a grassy cliff so I can shoot him. Behind him a silken bolt of sea stretches out luxuriously towards Tauranga harbour. He leans back slightly, one arm on his hip, setting his lithe body in a way that will make him appear much bigger than he really is. Above his thin smile sit his mirrored Ray Bans and a leather patchwork cap.

After approving of his image on my camera, Jack says “I really can’t handle another strong brew in those tin cups. Let’s get a takeaway coffee from that little corner café”. I need no persuasion. The Bowentown café has recently changed hands and is run by a Swiss couple. We push through a colourful plastic fly curtain onto a lino floor. A tall early-thirtyish man, with blond hair marching a steady retreat off his shiny forehead, smiles at us as he takes our order and seamlessly works the hissing coffee machine, shaking, banging and pouring until at last he passes us each a lidded corrugated paper cup over the top of an ice cream bar. The weight and warmth of mine feels like a homecoming. “Thanks so much!” I say smiling at him in the pathetically grateful manner of a coffee addict.

“You’ve got a wonderful range of flavours there”. I tap the glass protecting the exclusive ice cream with my finger. The barista smiles, “Would you like to try some? Ja? A little? My favourite is this one? It is the passion fruit!” I look back up at him, startled by his accent, which is the most spellbinding blend of educated European and Kiwi bogan. I blink in surprise at him and feel Jack start beside me. Seemingly delighted by my interest, the man hands me a tiny light blue spade. “Yah, this one is very rich. Rich and thick and creamy!” This last sentence is delivered in a sing-song rhythm with vowel sounds that are pure Lyn of Tawa. On hearing it Jack noisily splutters out half a mouthful of hot coffee and turns abruptly towards the door. He stops just before it as a volleyball poster with photos of partially-clad athletic women claims his full attention. My hand is starting to redden with the heat from the coffee. “Wow! That was a treat...very creamy. Hmmm.” I place the little spade in my jacket pocket. “OK then! Well you have a great day!”

The van door clunks behind me as I swing into my seat. I glare across at Jack, suddenly revolted by his pale wiry hands resting on the steering wheel, by his thin thighs delicately cradling his hot paper cup. “God, you were rude Jack. You can be such a tosser sometimes!” He turns and slowly smirks at me. “Oh, Ja babe, I’m your worst nightmare.” He revs the engine and spins some loose gravel reversing out onto the road. As we drive pass the café he yells out his window, a shabby imitation of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator*, “Hey Buddy... I’ll be back!” He bangs his palm on top of the steering wheel in uproar and then chuckles quietly for most of the slow drive out of Bowentown.

The faded strawberry and cream coloured kombi thrums past the Waihi Beach village then up past the hill quarry into the countryside, being overtaken often and sometimes blown about by back drafts. We pass flat fields dotted with large rocks, family-owned plant nurseries, cows light on their feet after milking, a wooden boat for sale. My mood lifts when I see some cows lying down in their paddock. I forget myself enough to exclaim, “Jack, see those cows? They’re riding side saddle in the grass!” There is a pause then Jack executes a dramatic double-take. “What?” I press on, “Those cows, the ones lying with their legs neatly tucked under, Janet Frame described cows like that once. She said they were riding side saddle in the grass. I always think of them doing that. I love it.” Jack throws me a look that would suggest I’ve just grown horns. “Babe, y’know what? You read way too much”. I twirl the blue spade inside my pocket between my fingers and focus hard on the scenery. My mouth silently forms sentences like spears; the sharp ends contain the words “stuff you”.

After a while the paddocks are left behind, and so too are the wooden houses of Waihi, as we pass between two rows of squat palms to enter the Karangahake Gorge. The sun sends pale fingers of light down into this part of the world. It softly glints off the van as we pass dark cliffs of rock and native fern, and shimmers from metallic road markers. We slow and then stop for road works; the clearing of an overnight slip. Damp earthy air flows in the passenger window to wrap around me like a soft comforting shawl.

We wait.

Down to our left the Ohinemuri River snakes swollen and deep along its course, the strength of it hidden below view. Jack deftly rolls a small joint, sits with his feet up on the dash and lights it up. He blows sweet-scented smoke out of the side of his mouth and squints at the burning roach. The joint is waved towards me. "Want some?" he squeezes out through taut lips. "No," I say. I stretch my arm out of the window. Despite the soft sun, a single raindrop splashes onto my palm. I bring my arm back in. Just ahead a young Maori road worker stubs out her cigarette and stares directly at Jack. They look at each other long enough for my heartbeat to reluctantly quicken. She lifts her eyebrows and lets them fall again. Jack gives her his well practised smirk. Beyond the traffic there is the sound of rocks tumbling down to the deep river water. I close my hand over the remains of the raindrop. Then into the quiet of the van, into the quiet embrace of the gorge, I begin. "Hey Jack..."