



EQUATOR

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In fact, face it, nobody anywhere lives planted in the present, they're all on a drunken roll of hope for tomorrow and a yearning for the sweet bygone days, things gone by like a scent of vanilla in the night.

About the book ...**Equator**

From the author of Under a Tin-Grey Sari comes this glorious and intricate love story in the magic realist tradition, sprawling in its themes and geography. Equator is a novel about the three states of memory: 'loved or cherished; lost or forgotten; bitter or destructive' – a novel about how human beings participate in the give and take of human exchange.

Shifting between the 'real' world and a place known as The Exchange, and shifting between the love affairs, friendships and enmities of multiple generations, the story moves from the Golfo de Valencia to Calcutta, from London to Sydney, from South Dakota to Broome, Western Australia.

It is a book about the second equator which rolls around once each night and day, that place where past, present and future are continually equated, dreamed of, realised: 'those precious moments of possibility, right there in the blurry edge of the second equator, the fleeting moments of dusk and the fleeting moments of dawn.'

The hero of the piece is an orphan named Carlos who begins his life in a Spanish hacienda. The boy is renamed Keiran Leeft (Sunrise-Sunset); he runs away to sea, and spends the rest of his life on the water.

Following the story of Sunrise-Sunset, of the lives that came before him, and the people he touches in his own lifetime, the reader comes to see that this is a perceptive, extraordinary ode to the ocean, a novel about the wanton destructiveness of human beings in relation to the environment and to each other, and in the slender possibilities of redemption.

From the book ...**Golfo de Valencia**

Anything over thirty-five and Pinski goes to pot. Today was touching forty. He lay on the floor, open lips flat as the air. A passer-by, like me, could have walked in and made off with everything, including the household's memory. Transported it off to the place known as The Exchange.

Now on the bump of mid-afternoon, Pinski flattened his stomach to the cool cement, paws splayed out, snout stuck off into the cool air dropping from the fresh washing hanging above his head, hind legs out crook like a bike's handlebars. Any crippling idea of protecting the place had evaporated. Pinski couldn't care less.

In a place where the best couldn't care less today, Ellie-Izabella stood barefoot at the bench, and nothing mattered more to her than the children who might drift inside while the butterflies drifted in the trees outside.

I always liked her special place at the bench. If you'd wish to take a journey from that bench on the coast, dear butterfly, far off to a different set of benches in Broome, be my guest. Assume you are flying first class on one of the placemats, in order to conserve your energy, a pleasant journey, a comfortable, safe journey of seeing just a little bit more than Pinski going to pot. Not a long journey, say off to the moon rather than the great lumbering distance to Pluto. A steady flight, calm, drinks, meals, conversation, good views. If you accept, I can remove the mystery once and for all, and take you to that unknown place, known as The Exchange. I can maybe answer the question you

asked yesterday:

Who are they? Who are these custodians of my nectar? I see them everywhere up and down the coast, but what are they?

Let's go, dear butterfly, let's find out what they are, these custodians of your nectar. I can show you a bit of yesterday, but mostly I'll show you what they are today, in the contemporary climate. The comparison can bring into sharp relief how they have changed, their transformation. Fresh, new, different, surprises in store at The Exchange.

We can start here, dear butterfly: Ellie-Izabella worked in the smaller room located past everything, at the end of the main room. Ellie-Izabella's special little place, a box, dimly lit, just two small windows, yet it was a box where the brightest concentrations of her ancestry were found on the coast.

Memory is like water. Flow, calm, shine, evaporation, and then condensation, soft water riding the hot air, it might bring a mist. You will see this at The Exchange, if you choose to fly, dear butterfly.

A Private Room

Everyone in town rightly believed the back room was the headquarters where Ellie-Izabella grew the children's bones. But the business of growing their bones was for the main room towards the house proper. In here, at the bench, nothing will matter more to Ellie-Izabella than the kids who arrive to hang around, because here she grew the other useful body part, their minds. Their sensibilities and their possibilities were grown in here. This was done mostly in the afternoons when the activity around the place had slumped away so that the pervasive quiet would make

the game exclusively about delicacies and not much else. In here it was delicacies, not survival.

Incomplete understandings were not for the inner room, they were for the crass life outside; the halfway understandings that brought only frustration and other pressures were not for the special quiet of the inner room where she worked. Phone call understandings were for elsewhere. She felt sometimes a sweet pity, for the world of blunt arrogance, for the world of no nuance, she felt, in higher moments, the emotion she could only explain as confirmed sweet pity. So much of that world relied on fast, raced-away responses, betraying perceptions that were not much more nuanced than Pinski's explosive barking when he was up to protect the place if it was under thirty-five.

In here it was slow delicacy, or, as she would say, as full an understanding as might be available in the quiet drift of afternoon, not the pleasant abbreviations of cut and thrust survival. Her belief in the full understanding was strong and supple. While it could throw danger in the way, it might also provide delight. The abbreviations of survival, she believed, could not provide delight for the kids.

A Temptation in the Private Room

Today all the kids in the place were at the ocean, and a solitary boy wandered aimlessly inside. He wore his best shorts and his best shirt because he was expecting visitors, but the shorts were torn at the side, and the shirt was torn in the armpits. The boy came up and leaned his survival elbows on the timber bench to see if Ellie-Izabella was really doing anything. At the boy's footsteps, Pinski slid his eyes to the bench, but nothing else on his wiry body moved. Ellie prepared soup. But soup was survival, so

when the boy strolled up to the bench Ellie lifted the bowl off the placemat and put it aside to make room. To fly.

Ellie-Izabella had waited patiently for a long run of many weeks. But even without the tension of waiting she knew the boy was now more or less at the age where it was time for a whiff of guidance, old enough to understand the magic she wanted to show him on the empty placemat. She'd waited maybe two months, and around here on the gulf that's a long time.

'I have a magic wand,' Ellie-Izabella said in slow, gentle Spanish.

'I don't see any magic wand,' the boy said, irritated, in Spanish, 'show me.'

'I have a magic wand,' she said again, 'and it is called Giving.'

'You're just bullshitting again,' Carlos said impatiently and swung off the bench, and he walked gruffly away, running his hand along the lemon-coloured walls of the bigger room and then drifted back outside to the fountain to hang around and wait for the visitors who were due to arrive.

Flying Outside

Ellie-Izabella also went outside. From where she stood, the arid landscape, with sunlit glimpses of the meandering river, may have reflected her inner world that afternoon, the inner magic of quiet skills that she possessed for the art of giving, for the flow of giving. The gullies where the light reflected off the river fell away from the back of the property and then started to rise into the distance until the hills met the sky in a seamless fold, which, to her way of approaching life on the coast, was a radiant fold, the limits of the farms that had once belonged to her ancestors.

Radiant also her inner world, for after forty-seven years living on this coastal landscape, Ellie-Izabella's inner world knew the facts better than anyone. The ancestral farms had now all gone, and the house she was born in, at the hinge of two centuries, in 1900, the house where she was raised, this house, had also gone. It had all gone. Her mother, her father, also gone. With everything gone there was scarcely much to protect, so that on the days below thirty-five, days when the Jack Russell was alert, his explosive highsprung policing made Ellie-Izabella smile. And with everything gone, the dark little room with the bench had become hers, and also Pinski's, the corner where her ancestry glowed the brightest after it had flowed downriver against the parched landscape and out into the lost expanse of the Golfo de Valencia.

When he was alive Ellie-Izabella's father had said of the river: Memory is like water. Boil the tea, or freeze the juice.

Naked to the Creek

These days Ellie-Izabella was celebrated as the best guide in the district, she moved on instinct and grew on giving. No sooner than a traveller arrives at the doorstep to ask for directions up the river, and she obliges by carefully drawing a line of instinct charting the walkable riverbanks on the convenience of the page of the traveller's map book, no sooner than you ask, the river changes course. And since it's a fact of life around here that a river is a poem, the direction might change again, and yet again.

This is the same with locating that other cruiser of quiet drifting afternoons, that other poem—for Lee Glass-Darlington

certainly was, to friends in the know, a poem—Lee Glass-Darlington of Sydney, future granddaughter of the young Scotsman who lived in this large hacienda with Ellie-Izabella and the twenty-six children. But to locate the Scotsman's dearly loved granddaughter strolling naked and traumatised down the hillside at Tenmoon Creek in Sydney, the children need directions. For the fuller understanding, the children need guidance, need the signs, a little help at least, maybe Pinski's highsprung protection, if he hadn't gone to pot. To locate Lee, somewhere along her own river, the children need to take a moment on a previous heatwave afternoon, starting with the young Scotsman David Darlington, sweating beside his lover in a musty cottage of ferns and moss.

David Darlington and his lover in the cottage may have been a vivid dream. It may have sounded too real, far past real, or not real enough. But memory doesn't care, for memory is like water, and water has at least three realities, maybe thirty, maybe three hundred.

Maybe Three Visits

The lovers lay in the cool sheets. Muttering softly. Arse exposed, his, and her arse protruding too. Round worlds, two pairs, smooth with new sweat, one pair white, alabaster white, Scottish drifter, the other pair brown, golden brown, Indian, maharaja's daughter, also a drifter.

Faces up together. Voicing concerns, but really just muttering slow words, so slow as to lift into the humid air no concern at all, slow for the pleasure, words for the fear, always words for the fear.

'They'll find us, we've blown it, everyone downtown knows

this place.'

But they were in fact very far away, a four-hour drive behind the city.

He'd parked in the shade that gathered round the front door. The shack maybe a hundred years old, swinging its small rooms round an old well, guarded by extinct curtains on mud windows, while the outward windows searched across the abandoned landscape rising behind the shack, searched for evidence of intruders. She humps her backside in to turn closer.

'Nobody will find us.'

'And her, outside?'

'My most trusted, she loves me, my most trusted of them all.'

'Someone could ride past the car, and they'll spot the car.'

'Nobody comes here anymore. I want to show you something, something you have never seen.'

The maharaja's daughter started to move, and then the afternoon stopped.

The young Scot, David Darlington, woke gradually, no longer hidden in a mossy shack in the hills behind Calcutta, he was on his back, alone in his room in the hacienda in Spain. He could hear Ellie-Izabella at work in the kitchen, soft clattering, distant. He got up and opened the window, slowly, expected the fierce glare. It had remained hot out there, the rolling sun-bleached hills of the coast vibrated in the haze. For him, this landscape was to commence a kind of future, for Ellie-Izabella it spoke of a respected past. The sea breezes, the updrafts, the tides, would carry David Darlington forward just as they carried Ellie-Izabella around backward, along the Catholic generations that had worked this landscape as a prize from God. But for the agnostic mystic David, the place around here on the coast would propel him into an as yet pending life. His granddaughter Lee

Glass-Darlington would emerge from that life, strong, powerful, intelligent, and yet, on the collapse of her bold project, she would be sighted strolling naked and traumatised down to the groves of Tenmoon Creek in Sydney. His great-graughter would immortalise him over a week at the Edinburgh Festival, and then fly away to Margaret River, to Yelverton where she'd soak up warm rest in the sunshine of Cowaramup. Ride the placemat if you will, dear butterfly. We shall travel treetop to treetop if you like.

The Tree of Surprises

From the window David Darlington could hear the Spanish children on the beach. Calling and shouting, still too young with the world to be interested in a siesta, as with Carlos, who was almost eleven but couldn't care less if he was ten. David Darlington made Carlos a big promise for his birthday, but around here intentions amount to nothing, so Carlos couldn't care less about David Darlington's promise.

Carlos came outside to wait on the low wall of the fountain, and he couldn't care less for the fountain. It never flowed, nobody ever knew water in the circular catchment two feet above the dirt, and across the road there was water in the ocean without bothering about a cracked old fountain. Besides, with everything else on the coast gone, the timing was true, the fountain was at least punctual. Carlos could hear the other kids over the wall, screaming and shouting as they dived off the jetty, nobody was here at the front of the hacienda to care about a dusty old punctual fountain, they were all at the jetty because the afternoon was burning hot. Anything over thirty-five and Pinski just went to

pot these days, unlike when he was younger, when he'd be out on the jetty and swimming in the sea, with the kids to take care of.

Carlos then sat on the low wall, where he could see the inside wall of the other side. A line of ants moved up the cracked white paint, weeds clinging to the dirt in the cracks. A string wrapped around his finger, and on the end of the string was a rusted key. He swung the key round and round in the hot air until he felt he was hanging from the key like a bat. But, the thing was, hanging around and watching the sea breeze get into things, Carlos had no clue he was sitting on his bony backside two steps from the fattest inheritance anyone on the gulf had ever seen, heard of, or dreamed could be handed across the wings of a calendar. The biggest surprise a sea breeze ever carried.

The heir to a new world watched the ants, with a rusty key swinging round and round. But the problem was this: where the heir sat, the bony jetty reject, may as well be two thousand calendars from anything. Where he sat, with his drifting mind accepting and discarding the thoughts and smells of mid-afternoon, a whole village fast asleep—who the hell cares what they might be dreaming—was a place of slim pickings indeed, so nobody entertained even the idea of a teapot shot through with holes. It just wasn't a subject, inheritance, not here on the gulf, where Ellie-Izabella grew the kids' bones from the bigger room beside her small room of concentrated ancestry, not here on the coast, where the pickings were zero. Ample fresh water in the river, a lot of honey for some reason, but barely enough food. It was a good afternoon to hang around watching the salty breeze getting into things while the other kids were at the beach.

He swung the key round and round. And then you, dear butterfly, chose the journey: but Carlos did not know you chose to discover where and what The Exchange was, what Carlos simply saw was that a butterfly played from a green cavern in the

tree, drifting on the sea air, like the soldier he'd seen yesterday, a crumpled marching. He did not know that the butterfly was now commencing the search for the place known as The Exchange. Carlos cared more about the gate that the butterfly played into, marching up the sky of the beach, because he waited for the visitors to come through the gate.

He began to care about the butterfly, certainly it was grand. A deep orange butterfly, large as two teacups, now marching clear of the fig tree so that the rich orange bellowed against the blue of the sky. How the hell did that butterfly get so big? He flipped the swinging key to a stop.

Swearing at the Stranger from the City

Instead of aiming his useless afternoon riddle at the butterfly's meals, a butterfly heading for The Exchange, Carlos might have asked a different question. Let's say a trustee from the city had travelled down to the village, stood at the front door, told Carlos he was about to inherit a song and dance of no small consequence—Carlos might have squinted, *Senor?* From whom? But Carlos wouldn't even reach the question, that plain point of understanding, not around here, the chances of reaching that question around here are nil, nada. No, instead Carlos would have said, like anyone else would have said to a suited stranger from Barcelona standing at the glare of the door and making absurd promises, in a full sweat, making cruel promises to obtain a day of fun, ridicule; no, instead Carlos would simply have said in the hard, truck-driver Spanish used on the gulf, *Piss off. Take your ugly sense of fun with you and piss off to France. Ellie-Izabella's father would have nailed it home a lot further, he'd have told the Barcelona creep: Fuck off, leave my household*

alone, and fuck off. Her father understood the river, had known it all his life, and so he knew, that of all the riches of any inheritance anywhere, the river was the greatest.

Memory, he always liked to say from the escarpment, is like that water down there. It is honourable.