



JETTY NEAR FRANKLIN

(CAROLINE MASON)



FIRST PERSON

RACHEL BERGER FINDS PEACE, BEAUTY AND A NEW HOME ABOARD A DECOMMISSIONED FERRY ON THE HUON RIVER

I arrived at the Kermadie Marina in Port Huon, Tasmania, late on a winter afternoon at the end of June. The Huon River was perfectly still, a pale fog floated in like a smear of Vaseline across the landscape; the first of many fogs – some chiffon sheer, others as impenetrable as cotton wool – that would envelope my world that winter.

Dragging two suitcases, a bag stuffed with food hanging tentatively over my left shoulder and teetering on high-heeled boots, I staggered down the jetty like a drunken sailor.

Halfway down it began, like a welcoming overture – the breeze on my face, the sound of waves lapping and the squawks of Pacific gulls. Without warning, the jetty heaved, the bag over my shoulder slid down my arm, tilting my body too close to the edge. A Latin hip-swivel saved me from the cold water but drove my right heel into a join in the jetty.

“You’re gonna fall into the drink,” was all I heard as two humongous weathered hands grabbed my cases. It wasn’t the last time Dave would save me from myself. He reminded me of the guy on the front of the original Fisherman’s Friend tin, but without the hat or the pipe; round face, full white beard, shipshape white hair and blue eyes that creased into slits when he laughed. A laugh that began with a gentle curled grin and unravelled quickly into a

wide-mouthed, teeth parted, all-you-can-eat belly-bouncer. “Thanks. I’m Rachel, I’ll be living aboard Wanderer.” “Righteeo. I’m Dave.”

Dave was a man of few words; he’d been a lighthouse keeper and relished being alone at sea. I’d wanted to be somewhere wild, remote and out of touch with the world. And here we were on the same jetty in the deep south of Tasmania. This saltiest of sea dogs lived aboard The Misty Lass, a cray boat, with Chloe, a toy poodle as territorial as a Rottweiler. It took a while for the three of us to get used to each other.

That wasn’t all I had to get used to. Wanderer is a 60-foot, timber, former commuter ferry converted into a live-aboard. She’s an operational vessel with a huge Detroit Diesel engine that I had to maintain. I’ve never had a relationship with an engine before; unexpectedly it’s lasted longer than any of my former relationships. I’d agreed to live aboard and maintain a ferry without any knowledge of boats, winds, tides, ropes or knots – in a place where I knew no one. It was time to challenge the elements and knock the chip off my shoulder.

Front, back and sideways ceased to exist – bow, astern, starboard and port were my new boundaries. Winds could be dangerous, such as the equinoctial gales that rammed



AT THE HELM



KERMANDIE MARINA

Wanderer for days. Or warm and sultry breezes on summer nights – distinguishable by sailors as a puff, gust or cat’s paw – when even the moon, shadowed partially by a dark cloud, appeared to be draped in black lace. Eventually I mastered a bowline knot, grasped the voodoo of ropes and managed to open the hatch into the wheelhouse without it crashing down on my head. The human body can take a lot of punishment.

On my first morning, I woke to the rattle of anchor chains, freezing temperatures, an overdue deadline but no WiFi. Protected in a duck- and goose-down jacket, I walked to the Port Huon Café. The hostile stares of the ducks and geese on the shoreline made sense given that I was being insulated by their kin. But nothing could have prepared me for the room-full of Ivan Milat lookalikes when the door slammed behind me at the café. A troop of beards and logger jackets fixed on me in trance-like stares until Ros, the café owner, commandeered their attention by demanding their orders. She handed me the code for the WiFi with a come-on-

you-know-you-want-to grin that gave off more heat than the wood fire in the corner. Ros’ award-winning pies are legendary, while her hamburgers could unravel the knot in Matt Preston’s cravat; they’re tongue-tottering delicious.



WANDERER

Living on a boat, always on the edge of a departure, is a unique and transformative experience. I’m the mistress of my universe; enclosed, protected and surrounded by everything I need, yet able to view the water (my world) outside through the windows. But to have this experience in the surroundings of the Huon Valley and the d’Entrecasteaux Channel is enough to make my reason stagger.

It is one of the most gob-smackingly beautiful landscapes in the country. Here, you can drive or sail into the landscape: bountiful apple orchards, heartachingly tide-washed timber jetties reflected in still water, high wooded hills, seals, sea eagles and abundant produce. Forget southern Tasmania’s provincial reputation, there isn’t much this lady doesn’t deliver. \

(GRETCHEN THORNBURN)



PORT HUON CAFÉ

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