Jumbo's Big Reunion

Doesn't matter how many times I fly into Queenstown it always takes my breath away. I'm in the window seat for just that reason, the Remarkables close enough to touch. This might be the highlight of the trip. A reunion - everyone comparing each other through slitted eyes while loudly saying, haven't we all done well. The *all expenses paid* sucked me in. The plane does a U-turn on the tarmac, slowly rumbles towards the terminal.

"Let the partying begin!" Billy's out of his seat with the plane still taxiing. Passengers scowl, but he flashes his Timothée Chalamet smile and they are immediately charmed. I look back out the window. Now I can see the Southern Alps – just a summer dusting of snow.

Jumbo's picking us up. The reunion is his idea – he's paying for everything. This is his hometown now, so we are his for the weekend. Me, Marsha, Billy and Kyle reuniting with Jumbo for the first time since university.

"You can let go of my hand now, Marsha." I peel her hand off mine. She takes out one earbud.

"Oh, thanks Jeanie. The landings terrify me." She gathers up her phone, her pain-stimming fidget, takes out the other bud. "Got this aerophobia playlist I'm promoting. Pretty good." She flips her long braided hair.

Jumbo isn't Jumbo anymore. If it wasn't for the red hair, I wouldn't recognise him. Trimmed down, designer stubble, looking quite chiselled and giving us a subtle salute and heel click greeting. A quick embrace and he leads us to a van. A Mercedes, I notice. Jumbo drove a beat-up Toyota Ute at university. He sees my look.

"Hired it for us all to get around. And the kayaks. Only got three days, so figure we should bond." Bond. That isn't a word I ever thought I would hear him say. He was the climate change, anti-fracking dude back then…*Aotearoa Is Not for Sale*. A left-leaning poor boy on a scholarship. I note the FootJoy jacket and top line sneakers. We load our gear and Marsha's extra carboard box into the van, then pile in.

"Product, you know," Marsha says. "I need to always be promoting my lines."

"You seem to be doing OK for yourself, Jumbo," I say.

"Can't complain." He smiles into the rear-vision mirror. "And I go by James, now. You can drop the Jumbo." The click of central locking makes me flinch. At uni Jumbo and I had a brief fling and I wasn't unhappy when it ended. His attentiveness verged on controlling…or was he just needy?

And so, the weekend begins. Jumbo/James decides we should stay 'in' for the first night. He beckons us to his kitchen and there, in the pantry, is a safe.

"C'mon, phones in here. I know you'll have PCs, but at least not in your palms. Let's really be present – get to know each other all over again." He gives Marsha a pointed look. As I slide my phone in it flips up the soft cloth on the shelf below. No-one notices my intake of breath. I flick it back quickly.

He has a whole shoulder of lamb roast and South American BBQ delivered. His house overlooks the lake, and I wonder how he pays the rent.

"You know I'm vego, Jumbo." Marsha has the most infuriating whine when she wants attention.

"Et voilà!" Jumbo produces a boxed vegetarian meal from some take away place. "I got the vegan option."

"How *did* you know, Jumbo…sorry, James?" As she takes the container she strokes his hand with one finger, then pushes a lacquered nail into the soft flesh between his thumb and pointer.

"I know you and rabbit holes, Marsh, so figured you'd be even more extreme by now. But I think you still do shots, eh?" He pours Jägerbombs all round. We tuck into food and reminiscence on our good old days, exaggerating our current successes. Billy is gliding through a masters in fine arts, part-time lecturing and enjoying pools of female undergrads. Kyle-the-scientist, has driven up from Dunedin where he's based doing Otago Skink research. Marsha has found her niche as an influencer.

"What about you, *James,* you doing well?" I poured myself another glass of pinot noir.

"This town is the place for me. Opportunities, expansion all around. It feels like home. And you Jeanie? Written a poem lately? Published a book?"

"I enjoy teaching, Jumbo…plenty of time to hone my writing."

About midnight I've had enough. Billy and Kyle, tiring of going through Jumbo's vinyl collection, are doing Jägermeister shots playing scissors, paper, rock. Marsha is draped along the couch, her

head on Jumbo's shoulder. They are on their second bottle and it seems obvious where that's all heading. I stand.

"Second door on the left is the single bed." Jumbo waves his glass to indicate direction dismissively. 'Bathroom down the hall.'

I wake about two, dry mouthed. There's twin snoring through one wall and moaning and gasping through the other. Perhaps the view from the plane is my highlight of the weekend, but *you're either on the bus or off the bus, Jeanie.* And Jumbo is paying my fare.

Jumbo is up before me, happily whisking eggs and toasting sourdough. He hands me a cup of black coffee.

"I've got the whole weekend planned, Jeanie." He's manically wiping the bench. "Shotover - rafting or jet boat. Then maybe ziplining. Dinner at that newly Michelin-starred restaurant and tomorrow kayaking on the Kawerau. Pity it's not winter – we could just ski, ski, ski."

"Since when did you become Mr Outdoors, Jumbo? A degree in political science hardly prepares you for all that. And this place, you live here alone?"

"James, please Jeanie, give me some respect. I've grown up, I work hard, look for openings and I'm happy. Are you, Jeanie?"

"And the gun, *James*?"

"What gun?" he grins, giving me a flick on the butt with the washcloth.

"In the safe…"

"You always were a nosey bitch, Jeanie. In my line of work…"

"Which is exactly what, James?"

Billy and Kyle stumble in.

"Need…caffeine…now," they groan in unison.

Marsha is last to breakfast, subdued and wearing a black polo-necked sweater.

We pare back Jumbo's big plans to get Marsha on board. She refuses rafting – dangerous. And jetboating – dangerous and terrifying. We settle on kayaking on Moke Lake and it *is* just stunning. A mostly clear sky, windless water and beautiful reflections of the surrounding tussock hills. Turns out Kyle is the kayak king, showing us all how best to hold the paddle, forward and reverse sweep, even how to raft up.

"Spend my time paddling when I'm not tracking skinks. Hey, you won't need this, but I'll show you how to raft-up; it's fun." I didn't realise Kyle was such a natural instructor – even Marsha has a relaxed smile. "Shuffle your kayaks together." Marsha, Billy and I followed instructions, Jumbo takes off towards the centre of the lake paddling fast.

"God! I'm going for a decent run," he sneers. "I don't need kayaking 101." Kyle raises his eyebrows.

"Now, lie your paddles across all your bows…hold the cockpit rim of the kayak beside you." He stands in his kayak, steps onto each of ours and returns to his own. We laugh and cheer. There's a yell from the middle of the lake.

"Looks like Super Boy needs help," Kyle chuckles and we all paddle out.

Jumbo has fallen in and doesn't know how to turn his kayak back over.

"Roll it over, and pull up and in," Kyle tells him. "I'm surprised you didn't just Eskimo roll, mate." I think Kyle's enjoying this.

"Just tow me to shore, Kyle." It's a silent ride back into town, until the turn off to Jumbo's place. He doesn't take it.

"Where are we going?" Kyle asks. We were all wet and getting a bit cold.

"Roaring Meg for a bit of adventure." Jumbo has a manic grin.

"I'm cold James," I say.

"Me too!" Marsha whispers. "I wanna shower."

"Tough," Jumbo speeds up. "My weekend, my rules. Roaring Meg."

We unload the kayaks at the put-in point.

"Damn, the river's flowing fast and high, James." Kyle and Billy exchange a sceptical glance.

“All the more fun – big rapids here we come!” Jumbo somehow looks more ghoulish than confident.

“I’m freezing,” Marsha whinges to me.

“I’ve got a spare merino top. Come round the side of the van and get changed,” I say.

Marsha has never been prudish or shy, but she tries to change garments without me seeing any flesh. But I do see. Her neck’s covered in finger-mark bruises.

“Marsha…what?”

“Nothing – we just got a bit rough last night…”

“Rattle your daggs, girls,” Jumbo yells.

“Not going, James – no way.” Masha stand staunch, feet planted, fisted arms at her sides.

“Such a wimp, Marsh – just anxiety or is it some new dysfunctional-something-or-other?” His voice drips with sarcasm.

“Actually, James, it’s practical. I’ll drive the van down to the pick-up point – how were you going to get back upstream with this huge flow? Think of that, golden boy? Tie my kayak back on.’

James looks sheepish.

“Oh, well yes. I’ll let you off the hook…”

We take off in flat conditions. A hawk’s circling high and I think *dapple-dawn-drawn falcon…*

“Actually, James, I think the river is too high for rapids. I’ll check ahead,” Kyle says. He goes around the first bend, immediately returning, paddling hard and fast against the flow, his face grim.

“You’ll have to raft-up.”

“What, more acrobatics, Kyle?” Billy is laughing. But Kyle’s face has us following directions. Billy, Jumbo and I raft up. Kyle is off around the corner paddling alone.

And that’s how we turn the corner into the gorge. Rafted-up and ignorant. If we weren’t so suddenly full of terror, we may have noticed the grandeur of the sheer shist cliffs on either side, but we focus on the five-metre-wide whirlpools in front of us. Smooth surfaced with a seductive funnelling centre. Straight down. Kyle flits around the edge of the pools.

“It’ll be fine. It looks worse than it is,” Kyle reassures, paddling back to us.

Our kayak-raft starts slowly circling a whirlpool; bows dipping down into the vortex, angling deeper to the centre. We hold fast. Billy keeps saying *I don't like this! I don't like this at all.* On my side I swear *Jesus f****ing Christ! Jesus!* Jumbo, in the middle, recites *hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee…*

Kyle nudges our raft, paddles around, nudges again. He's pushing us little by little, to the outer edge of the swirling water, all the time saying *it's OK, it'll be fine—but DO NOT LET GO!*

We eventually leave the whirlpools behind, paddling into a calm eddy and towards the waiting van.

The boys scramble out but I sit for a while, shaking hard. When I slide out using the blade of the paddle for support across the bow, it snaps off on the river gravel. Kyle, Billy and I look at it. All the what ifs.

After the swearing and shouting, telling Jumbo what a gung-ho irresponsible idiot he is, we turn to Marsha. She's leaning on the van, arms folded, having driven the van and trailer down a tiny pebbled road, turned it and backed the trailer to the water's edge.

"Have fun, chums?" she smirks. "I'll order pizzas and beers when we drive through town. Time for hot showers, a de-brief and maybe a Jumbo roasting before it all arrives." Gone was the jittery Marsha of an hour ago. Jumbo went to the driver's door a bit wobbly.

"I'm driving," Marsha states.

We shower, rug up and pace around the lounge avoiding eye contact. The pizzas arrive; the sun sets. I find some wine left from last night and withdraw to an armchair with a slice and a glass.

"What the hell was that all about Jumbo?" Kyle stands in the middle of the room. Jumbo, Marsha and Billy perch on a couch.

"Call me James…"

"Fuck you, Jumbo. We could have drowned today…and all you can worry about is your new name?"

"We're OK. You *saved* us Kyle," he mocks. "We needed some excitement. I wanted to show you around. Give you the best time…"

"From what I can see you wanted to show off, throw your money around." Kyle was shouting,

“Hey, back off Kyle. James is showing us some fun – we all go way back. As he said, we’re OK.” Marsha shuffles along the couch closer to Jumbo, puts a hand on his knee.

There’s a knock at the door.

“More pizza?” Billy sits up grinning.

Jumbo gets a phone out, squints at it, then turns to Marsha saying “They’re early…”

Marsha says, “I’ll go sort it, you talk these guys down.” She walks down the hall, returns with her large cardboard box and heads for the door.

“Now you’ve got another phone - *and* a gun, Jumbo?”

“What gun?” Kyle and Billy’s heads snap to Jumbo.

“Boys, boys…oh, and Jeanie…Marsha and I just have a little business, then we can chat about your perceptions of danger.” Billy and Kyle look at me.

“What’s the deal, Jumbo? How dodgy is it…how dodgy are you?”

“We three work for the government, Jumbo,” Kyle says. “We can’t get mixed up in your murk.”

“Answer now, Jumbo.” Billy's face is granite.

“Health supplements.” Marsha leans on the door frame, the box gone. “I import them, James distributes some down here. Gym bunnies can’t get enough. He’s my go-to man in Central.” A cheshire smile.

“What products?” Kyle steps towards Marsha. “What are the ingredients?” He leans over her.

“Ipamorelin - and a bunch of letters and numbers I can’t remember.” Marsha slips past him and sits close to Jumbo. “To achieve peak self-optimization.”

“So, synthetic peptides – biohacks…all illegal, Marsha!” Kyle turns away, disgusted. “You probably import them labelled as a supplement, or some influencer beauty product, but the side-effects…that’s why they’re not approved, Marsha. You and your dumb boyfriend here don’t know what you are doing!”

“How come you know so much, Kyle?” Jumbo is now sulking.

“Got a friend in customs. I have to be careful about poachers with the Otago skinks up here, he tells me about stuff getting smuggled in and out. So how many kits were in that box?”

“100.”

“And you charge, what…$300 a kit?”

“$400,” Marsha murmurs.

“You told me $200, Marsh! You’re ripping me off!” Kyle pushes her away.

“So, that box brought you $40,000! Delivered monthly, I’m guessing. That’s close to half a million a year – and that’s just one town!”

“I do have overheads!” Marsha sighs.

Kyle leaves for Dunedin that night, without a word. Billy and I book early flights for the next morning. Marsha chooses to stay, to build bridges with her man-in-Central.

So, the view was the highlight.

I’ll take what little happiness there is from that.

But I think Jumbo’s given me my first good story.