

Chapter II

Summertime

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In the summer, a Jewish kid's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of Muizenberg.



Every summer we spend two weeks at The Queens Hotel, a dark and shabby three-storey establishment owned by my father's cousins Rivka and Yehuda Iloni.

Rivka was originally a Derman, Uncle *Ephraim-der-Kleiner's* sister. Many of the Dermans stay there for two weeks in the summer, the only season when it's open. Run by Jews for Jews, it nevertheless has English customs, and so every meal from breakfast to dinner involves baked haddock, and every room has a chamber pot since the shared bathroom is at the end of the corridor or even halfway up another flight of stairs. I sleep in a room with my par-

ents, and they request on a form each night whether they want to have tea or coffee in bed with their biscuits, all delivered on a tray to their room each morning at 6:00 or 7:00 am.²⁵

Everyone (white and Jewish) from the southern part of Africa migrates south to summer in Muizenberg for a few weeks. The richer visitors from Johannesburg go to The Balmoral, named after you-know-who's castle. It's fancier, more regal, and more English than The Queens. Rhodesians also come to Muizenberg, but with their better British-sounding accents, they stay at Rhodesia By The Sea. My crowd is wary of the Johannesburgers. The local girls know that the boys from Johannesburg, the big city, are faster than those from Cape Town. Some of them like that.

The water along the long white strand is fabulous for swimming and body surfing, warm by Atlantic standards because of the sheltering surroundings of False Bay. There are many contiguous beaches, each frequented by a different age group. Tubby's Beach opposite The Queens is for families with toddlers; it has swings and slides. Balmoral Beach is for adults. Where the boys and girls my age and older meet is in the Snake Pit, a densely crowded fashionable triangle of white sand sandwiched between the beach boxes and the cement Promenade above. It's packed with white teenage boys and girls on beach towels or in deck chairs.



²⁵ The nature of this apparent adult luxury eludes me now. Why, on your holiday, would you want to have tea or coffee brought to you in bed long before breakfast and then go back to sleep?

The local beaches are for whites only – the more deserted stretch of beach beyond Muizenberg towards Strandfontein is for Coloureds. What Coloureds can do in the Snake Pit is, of course, provide service, wandering up and down selling paper cups of delicious lychees for a shilling. At dusk, when the beach empties out, other groups of Coloured men and women materialise on the white beach to systematically strain the sand through sieves for dropped pennies, tickeys, sixpences, and shillings.

There is a ritual to entering the Snake Pit if you're old enough for the social scene. First, you walk along the Promenade above the Pit and then sit on the cement wall overlooking it, your legs dangling above the beach. You survey the scene, see who is where, decide whom you will join, and only then go down to sit near the people you spotted.

All of Muizenberg's beaches are divided in two by a double row of brightly coloured (red, yellow, blue, or green) wooden bathing boxes that run parallel to the water. Families can rent a semi-detached half of a box for the season; you can lock beach equipment in them, and change in and out of your bathing costume in apparent privacy. We don't have such a box, but two school friends of mine one summer periodically go into their family's half of a box to peek through holes they have surreptitiously poked in the dividing wall in order to watch their attractive girl cousins in the adjacent half changing out of their bathing costumes.

My sister Ruth hangs out in the Snake Pit with all her boyfriends, most of them the fast Johannesburg guys who are down for the season and are hotter properties. I often sit with her circle. She is at university and wears a leopard skin bathing costume and smokes and makes a beauty spot beneath her right eye with an eyebrow pencil. I try one out too.

In the Snake Pit, when I'm ten or eleven, the really cool boys and girls wear thin gold or silver chains with Stars of David around their necks. There is something sexy and shameless and insincere about their wearing the symbol. Still, I want one too, I want that look, but my sisters think it's *prost*, and I know I cannot embarrass myself by asking for one. Some other boys and girls wear silver-linked "iden-

tification bracelets” engraved with their name, which they swap to show they are “cased,” going steady. I am years away from that, and anyway, the bracelets have a touch of *prostness* too.

Muizenberg *looks* English, but what drives us is American fashion and American music. The summer when I’m eleven, the hot items are fluorescent socks in lime green or neon pink that glow in the dark as we stroll up and down the Promenade at night. Those strolls are a local version of what my parents call *shpatzieren*, the pre-WWII *Mitteleuropean* slow promenading up and down the main street on a Saturday or Sunday summer afternoon, the men in white suits walking arm-in-arm with their parasol-carrying wives, the men doffing their hats to the opposing women on someone else’s arm, the women smiling back in response. Here in the Southern Hemisphere, teenagers and parents *shpatzier* in casual clothes or shorts.

There are lots of sanctioned opportunities for girl-boy stuff. The Muizenberg town council sets up a triangular wooden dance floor on the lawns where, at 4 pm, and sometimes in the evening too, a DJ in a little hut plays through a loudspeaker the latest records, from Bill Haley and the Comets and Tommy Steele to Elvis and Pat Boone. Near-teenage or teenage girls and boys stand around the wooden waist-high rail of the enclosure; you approach a girl and ask her to bop. It takes courage to dance in public view.

The main beach road of Muizenberg has everything you could want. On one very short stretch are shops and cafes and entertainment to fill day and night.

The local bioscope is called The Empire. Its floor is sticky with a thin layer of dried spilled cooldrinks that feel and sound like Scotch tape as your bare feet lift off it. Upstairs is reserved for Coloureds. The Empire shows cowboy films with Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. My cousin Ronnie debates with me endlessly the relative strengths and merits of each of them. I like Gene, he likes Roy better.

Next door, the Maccabi Cafe is run by Tex, a weird moustachioed Portuguese man whom my mother and I later see in Cape

Town centre at OK Bazaars, shoplifting. We avert our eyes rather than turn him in. The Cafe has a large restaurant area and scores of pinball machines that take sixpence for a game. One day someone tells me that if you put Sea and Ski suntan lotion on your sixpence it will jam the pinball machine and give you endless games. I try it, and sure enough, though I don't deserve it from my score, I get free game after free game, collecting a small crowd around me until I leave in fear that I will be caught. The next day the machine is Out of Order. At the back of the restaurant is a staircase that runs up to some other area no one has ever been to. My sister Ruth tells me that people told her there is a brothel upstairs, and I tell my friends. There are indeed occasional men and waitresses mysteriously going up and down.

Fervid romances bloom, full of discussion and passion and the passing of messages through intermediaries between a boy and girl who may like each other. For the first few years, the romances are chaste, devoid of any sexual activity or even desire. A year or two later, the kissing starts.

But it's not all about girls. Between the Promenade and the main street lies a large array of lawns fringed by rockeries, with cement paths between the lawns. It is here where, when I visit Muizenberg, we arrange pick-up games of cricket with the local Muizenberg boys. Someone brings a bat and some stand-up wickets to place on the cement path, the older boys sequentially pick people for the teams, and then we play. Here, too, is where my Muizenberg cousin Alan and I try intensely to hypnotise each other. We believe that it takes a weak will to get hypnotised, and are disappointed when we don't succeed.

Some summers I stay for a week with my cousin Ronnie and Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Jeanette (*Unsere* Jeanette) in their house on Dover Road. The Muizenberg air is salty and their car, like the cars of all the people who live there, quickly becomes spot-rusted on the body and the chassis beneath. During the day we go to the beach with Ronnie's more worldly Muizenberg friends, swim, and try to get as brown as possible with, at most, only olive oil on our skin. There is no such thing as SPF. Some kids are forced by their

mothers to wear thick layers of Nivea Cream; very uncool. We go fishing off the concrete embankment at the side of the lagoon that runs from the vlei to the sea, using a hand-held thread of nylon, a hook, and a bit of mussel on the end of it.

Ronnie is a year older than I am, and many years more mature. He is already having experiences that are beyond my ken or desire. One night he takes me with his girlfriend to the sand dunes that run on for miles into the southern distance in the dark at the end of the Promenade, white hollows and mounds just barely visible in the gloom. We settle down in a hollow and he necks with his girlfriend and smokes a cigarette while I sit there quietly. I can see nothing in the dark. When we come back to his house there is ash on his sweater. Auntie Jeanette asks what it is, and he says it's sand and brushes it off. I sleep in the extra bed in his room. Between the sheets is sand that has come off my body and my feet and it rubs against me all night long.

One evening after he and his girlfriend have broken up we go to The Empire bioscope, and on the way he tells me about it, smiles wistfully, and sings *A Certain Smile*:

*You love a while and when love goes
You try to hide the tears inside with a cheerful pose.
But in the hush of night exactly like a bittersweet refrain
Comes that certain smile to haunt your heart again.*

Nine years later, when I am in New York in 1967, Astrid Gilberto records a bossa nova version, heartless because of the rhythm but sad anyhow.



Muizenberg is a daytrippers' resort too. When we don't holiday in the hotel or in a rented house, my mother drives us the fourteen miles from central Cape Town to Muizenberg along a narrow two-way road that takes an hour or more in traffic, stopping *en route* to buy trays of peaches or figs or entire watermelons from

roadside vendors. She taps the watermelons skilfully and can tell if they are ripe. My uncle Simcha sometimes drives me and my cousins there in his snazzy white Ford, but insists on pulling over at about the half-way point, thirty minutes into the drive, to take a fifteen-minute nap while we all keep quiet. At lunchtime, we picnic on the Muizenberg lawns. The fancier families, not us, unpack elegant imported English wicker picnic boxes containing neat stacks of English china and sets of bone-handled knives and forks secured by leather toggle straps.



At the centre of Muizenberg is a regal Pavilion with a high dome, and within it a Milk Bar where you can twirl on raised red leather bar seats and order milkshakes or banana splits. Extending from the dome on its left wing is an English-style penny arcade with purely mechanical games. One of them involves dropping a large contemporary copper penny into a slot and onto the tracks of a glass-enclosed vertical wheel, and then rolling the penny progressively down the horizontal tracks by tilting the wheel from side to side without letting it fall off the edge. The prize is getting your penny back. Also inside the arcade is a very small studio where you can pay to have your voice recorded on a small shellac-covered tin disk. That's where my father had me record the little vinyl record. Such a recording plays a pivotal role at the climax of Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, and Muizenberg is surely modelled on Brighton or Blackpool.

Roaming everywhere on the beach and Promenade are scattered photographers from Movie Snaps. They wear Movie Snaps T-shirts and carry a 35mm camera with a giant oversized spool for 35mm film. They take your photo, often without your permission, and the next day, you can go to their kiosk on the Promenade, find your photo in their display, and order copies. A similar scheme plays a critical role in *Brighton Rock*.

When we are a little older, Howie and I take the train there from town with an allowance of 2/6 (two shillings and sixpence) for the day. We store our stuff in a locker in the Pavilion. You can get a hot dog and chips and a Coke for a shilling at Norman's, and still have money for playing pinball.

Once, the first summer we live in a rented house rather than a hotel, I am idling alone at the entrance to the Promenade before going home for lunch. An elderly Jewish man approaches me and relates how, when he was thirteen years old, he found the Jewish religion and his Bar Mitzvah preparations unsatisfying and turned to Jesus. He is very convincing, and for a day or two, I worry silently that it might happen to me.