

Ragtime in Eden by Roger Vickery and Ian Hood

Cards at sea were jazz for us. We were a slick combo, honed by scores of nights in rocking cabins, to take the piss with coded ease.

Got two hearts.

Bastard. Two hearts?

And a seven! God swallow-me-elbow.

Are you out-outy-out?

Aaah! Left the bower have they?

Mutton played aggro runs with double bass intensity.

In your arse with 42 brooms...Where'd that fuckin king come from?

Slapsy was our drummer, kept time and rhythm, sliding into soothing brush work whenever Mutton plucked too hard.

Seems to be moderatin'. Bit like yesterday. Moderated. Then blew away like a gypsy's promise.

I was baritone sax, partial to a showy verbal lick if a winning hand found its way to my bower. One night, with a joker and two bowers in my fist, I announced in my best Barry White voice: *no man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into gaol. A man there has more room, better food and company and little chance of being drowned.*

Slapsy smiled and nodded.

Mutton belched. *Who said that...Captain Fuckin Arab?*

Doctor Samuel Johnson, I drawled. Knew a thing or two about the sea, the good doc did. Four aces. Read 'em and grow lachrymose.

Tall and gangly, hair down to his shoulders, giggle hat two sizes large, rode a 250cc Virago, the loser's Harley...Tobee never fitted on the boat.

First day as a deckie, keener than a hungry gull to be liked, he answered to: *hairy legs, spider, pelican shit, pea-head.*

Met every insult with a grin.

Chugging back into Eden, our skipper, near broke, tic in his right eye fluttering like a hooked gill, ordered us to the stern:

I need crew. No funny stuff, boys. Least not while the mackerel's running.

I had a kid somewhere down south, close to Tobee's age. Did my best to throw a net over the crew whenever the boy crossed the line. But the silly mongrel lacked the legs for boat or land. In the back bar of the Australasia Hotel, three Tooheys' olds aboard, he'd list and sway, giggle when he should've grinned, yell when a semaphore shrug was needed and open his mouth like a stranded groper if a hard arse offered him a knuckle sandwich.

Mutton, Slapsy and me would swear and side arm through the crowd, schooners held high. Grim as greenies protecting a baby seal, we'd hip nudge that night's Jimmy Sharman clear of his prey until Tobee could turn rudder and bolt for the boat. Sometimes our groyne work stirred up a storm and we had to bash and bail our way into Imlay Street.

Crews stick in Eden.

We were rocking at anchor in Twofold Bay when I duplicated my Joker and two bowers trick. Slapsy gave me a finger. Mutton grabbed his crutch. I grinned like a riverboat gambler and lunged across the gimbal table to claim my pile.

Tobee had a tin ear. Instead of ragtime he heard ACDC bagpipes. Eager to join the bigger battalion he yelled *cheat, fuckin cheat*, scattered my cards, sent the table yawing and crossed our line for good.

One week later, moored off Eden, skipper safely rubber-duckied into town, we turned *Walking the Dog* on full blast and tied a rope around Tobee's waist. The boy was laughing until Mutton clipped him over the ears. I assured him everything would be okay and ruffled his hair as we lowered him over the side.

Our plan was two times around the boat, giving him a message, three parts joking, one part plain -- *Time to move on, little doggie*.

The rope went slack around the starboard stay.

We freed the dinghy in record time. Mutton dived and came up with the goods. The boy groaned. That gave us hope. Slapsy worked his chest. I did mouth. Thirty compressions, two breaths. Thirty compressions, two breaths. We pumped and kissed him for an age.

The coroner bought our story he must have tumbled overboard while taking a piss.

The town knew different and marked our cards.

We're finished on boats around here. No point in protesting.

We know the rules.

Crews stick in Eden.