

BUFFALO DREAMING

By Mark Cornell

They fly up the Hume Highway, far away from the grey city, over the Great Divide, where the weather's different, usually clearer. The highlands loom in the distance, stretching navy blue beneath a silver-grey sky; Kelly Country. North East Victoria, where bushranger Ned Kelly roamed throughout his brief twenty-six-year-old stay. Ned's relatives are still there, Michael's Grandfather reckoned he was related to Ned's lieutenant, Joe Byrne. Sometimes when Michael encountered thick bush, he'd feel their presence and shout, 'Good on you Kelly Gang,' Ned's toast, "Confusion to the Saxon," became Michael's toast. He told his son Tim, that legend had it that the Kelly Gang visited the Yarra Glen races, near Melbourne, a distance of some four hundred miles as the crow flies, not bad for blokes on horses hotly pursued by the traps, (the police.) Michael smiled as he saw Mt Buffalo hunchback jut out into the winter sky. A dark purple mist enshrouded the top of the mountain. Grey rock faces stretched high over the green alpine valley. 'We'll be up there in a couple of days mate,' he laughed to his teenage son.

Kath, Michael and Tim sighed when they pulled into Bright, they hadn't seen this magical tiny town for over a decade. They loved the avenues of European trees and surrounding pine forests, the ringing calls of the currawongs, the swing sound of the rosellas, the war memorial in the heart of the town, looking like a mini lighthouse, the crystal-clear night sky where the Milky Way spiralling arms made you aware you inhabit an insignificant dot on the outer suburbs of our galaxy.

Michael had been coming to Kelly Country for over forty years now. He'd first come as a brooding fourteen-year-old, silent in the back seat of his father's old Austin. The boy was moody, due to months of physical abuse from the bullies at his school. They'd ambush him in the portables after the teacher left. He'd felt let down by his parents who'd had done nothing to stop him being knuckled. The message he'd got from them was that either they didn't care, or this is what happens to boys. Michael made sure nothing like this ever happened to his son, who smiled at the mountains with his ear phones on in the rear vision mirror.

Michael recalls how his fourteen-year-old spirit lifted when the family put up to the top of Mt Buffalo. The boy saw mountains carpeted in thick forest below, waterfalls, the gold green patches of farmlands nestled around the Ovens River, the forests perched ready to reclaim ground, cliff faces who jutted their defiance of the sky. Alpine gums, man ferns, golden grass lands, huge scattered rocks looking like they'd been tossed by giants. The ancient chalet built by the Tramways Union to ensure workers could have an affordable holiday in this patch of Eden above the clouds.

The second time he came was with his mate Stephen. They caught the train up to Wangaratta and were picked up by Michael's folks. It was the beginning of his last year at school. The boys swam in the transparent waters of the Ovens River. They'd sing verses of the favourite songs to each other as they'd leap off the diving board. Michael and Stephen grew their long hair down to their backsides, Michael's was thick and red, Stephen's thick and chestnut brown. Some of the local girls in their very skimpy bikinis would come up to

talk to the two by the river. It was all innocent stuff, both boys were too daggy to take anything further. They would hire bikes and explore the Ovens Valley, whenever it became too hot, they'd toss their teenage bodies into the river. The family would putt putt up Mt Buffalo in his Dad's old Morris Minor. The bush was thick and dense. Michael's old man, Robert, puffed his cigarette and pointed out views across the steep road. Stephen sometimes packed his dacks as the old man would seem to drive the car off the side of the mountain towards wherever he was pointing.

Michael was lost the next time he went up with his family. He was eighteen and had failed his last year at school. All his mates had gone onto University whereas Michael was either unemployed or stuck in a dead-end job. Nevertheless, the bush game him consolation. He was brimming with energy the next time he went to Bright. He'd just finished his training as a Secondary teacher and had re-established his friendship with Stephen. Michael went to night school then got into University. Stephen was breaking up with his aspirational wife. They dragged another friend up with them, Russ. Russ was a brother of one of their high school mates, Greg. Every time they'd visit Greg, Russ would scamper off to his bedroom. This went on for years. Michael discovered Russ was a painter, and let him know he wrote poetry, a creative link was established. Michael and Stephen convinced Russ to come up with them and say in a caravan park in Bright.

It was one of the best weeks of all their young lives. Stephen produced a bag of dope which they smoked every night, then went off to the pub. They became locals and were invited to parties. Michael recalled nights where they transformed into shadows and glided through the streets of Bright below a bulging canopy of stars. Russ held court at one party. A girl placed her hand on the knee of Michael's at another party. Stephen said, "She had the horns for you something fierce." They'd buy a Boston bun for breakfast, swim in the river

during the day, boil a billy, play cricket then listen to music in the caravan as the sun went down. The river sang them off to sleep. The boys fed a local possum. Michael wrote poetry, and despite the busyness of teacher training he'd written a lot of stuff that year. His poetry was a big reason as to why he decided to throw it in. Fifty-nine-year-old Michael shook his head and chuckled as he recalled these carefree days of over thirty years ago. He remembered how they all got heavily stoned up at Mt. Bulla with his close friend Ariella. Michael spent the rest of the night in her bed, gas bagging and laughing. He promised to write a poem to her.

Ariella

*She's a mother goddess
a dweller beside the woods,
she says we all have monsters
in passages of our childhood.
Behind her girlish thoughts
are valleys with silver waterfalls,
where she bathes to cast away fear,
I lay in the darkness beside to hear
her heartfelt tales of sensuous mystery,
Tunes weaved by satin minstrels
merge with the lapping mountain breeze,
Visions of beauty and desire
spread over the night's naked fire.
We two greet the deathly light of morn,
below the embracing sheets of summer warmth.*

Two years later, he took his new girlfriend, Kathy, to Bright. She came from America and had never been to Kelly Country before. With its European trees and lush landscape, she

fell in love with the place. Kathy and Michael spent endless Easters up there. Kelly country is glorious that time of year, you get sunny mild golden days, then cool crisp nights. It's like living in a dream. They bought Kath's, father, Nicholas, up with them once when Tim was a toddler. They had philosophical discussions at night well lubricated by beer. Nicholas said Bright reminded him of where he grew up in a peach orchard in the Appalachians. Nicholas collected seeds from the trees and put them in his pockets then scattered them around his garden in Melbourne.

Kath, Michael and Tim tobogganed down the slopes of Dingo Dell at Mt. Buffalo. This trip brought back a flood of memories and emotions to Michael. His father and Michael had died within weeks of each other the year before. Michael conducted his father's ceremony and emphasized his love of the land. His father's spirit was with him when they drove up Mt. Buffalo, the forest, the waterfall, the roof of the sky was all introduced by Robert. Nicholas was still with him when he drank beer at night. Fifty-nine-year-old Michael wasn't comforted, he felt flat, he was silent, not wishing to burden Kath, who was raw from the death of her father. His best mate Stephen now lived on the other side of the world in Germany. Poor old Russ had heavy duty Parkinson's disease, Ariella was trapped in a deeply unhappy relationship with an alpha male. Michael passed on his love of Kelly Country to his son and wife. Mt Buffalo's snowline shrinks each year, it's reckoned by the time Tim is an old man, they'll be no snow left. Bright now had a Woolworth's. Yet when he flew down the side of Mt. Buffalo on a toboggan with his family below the warm winter sun, and heard the screams of the kids around him, the poet's darkness lifted.

Bio

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favorite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.

EPISTEME