

***WAITING FOR THE CHANGE***

**By Mark Cornell**

Julian crawled through the peak hour traffic. The hazy skyline of the city sat in the rear view mirror behind his bloodshot eyes. The surrounding paddocks were yellow and scarred by blotches of dead grass. Cows huddled under solitary trees, seeking strips of shade. The car temperature needle was stuck on hot.

His mind drifted back to previous summers. After three or four days of scorching weather, thunderstorms had always washed away the heat and dust. These days if there was a change, the clouds didn't bring any rain and the mercury barely dropped. The news on the car radio said that the drought was now into its fourth month. Another forty degree day was on its way. He gripped the steering wheel as the oven wind buffeted his car.

Julian's mind drifted back to when he had experienced his first drought as an eight year old boy. A dream he had back then entered into his tired mind. He was watering a dead garden, trying to bring withered plants back to life. White fleece like clouds floated overhead. He pointed the hose at the clouds. They changed into a rust colour. The sky turned red as the clouds smashed into the ground with an almighty thud. He ran terrified towards his house through broken bits of cloud.

Melbourne had withered on the vine. Julian remembered the water restrictions and upturned beer bottles dug into yellow lawns. He recalled going to the drive-in with his folks when he couldn't see the movies due to ash falling down from a bushfire in the Dandenongs. Sleepless sweaty nights, the next day he'd been too exhausted to learn anything in primary school. Now here he was years later in the same blurred state, about to start teaching.

Once inside the corridors, Julian felt like a sacrificial lamb. He was overwhelmed by the adolescent hoards that were running, pushing, arguing and screaming around him. The teachers appeared friendly enough while they offered him reams of advice, but they didn't seem to listen to what he had to say.

He was directed to his cramped desk, given his chalk and pens, and sent on his way to the classroom. A knot squeezed his gut when he introduced himself to the class. The kids seemed sullen and ready to rebel.

Julian spent a long morning teaching them about the Eureka Stockade. He read aloud from the journal of Raffaello Carboni. His curiosity was stirred when Carboni wrote that in the last days preceding the rebellion, the goldfields had been plagued by hot winds described as “hurricane-like and horrible.” The teacher posed the question to his students; ‘Do you think the rebellion would have occurred if the weather wasn’t so extreme?’

The kids remained silent; the heat had deflated their spirits down into a state of dreaming idleness. He remembered feeling exactly the same during that furnace summer when he was a boy. Mr. Davidson, his bully of a teacher (how easily he recalled that hateful name) had strapped Julian if he wasn’t paying attention. The razor-biting pain on his childish hand made no difference to his sluggish state of mind but it made him all the more determined to ignore Mr. arsehole Davidson’s rantings.

Dominic knocked on Julian’s caravan door in the afternoon, shouting, ‘Hey you lazy bugger, let’s go down to the river.’ As they walked towards the Yarra, Julian revealed his fears to his friend. He anxiously studied the white blue sky for any sign of a cool change while he spoke. A mustard sun slouched above the trees in a cloudless sky.

Dominic held his hand up to his friend. ‘It’s impossible to teach kids when they’re conscripts. The sure way to turn kids off anything is to force them to do it. To me it’s bloody well obvious that you don’t want to teach, so why don’t you just chuck it in?’

‘Maybe it’s this crazy weather that’s affecting me,’ Julian scratched his fair beard. ‘You know me; I always go slightly batty when there’s a north wind. Besides, I want to make a difference. I just don’t want any dreary nine to five job. God knows I’ve had enough boring jobs to last me a lifetime. I want to change this world a bit by teaching kids to think for themselves. We’re surrounded by human blotting pads.’

‘That’s all well and good, but do you really think the kids will actually listen to what you have to say?’

Julian pondered his friend's question. Both of them sat down on a clay bank to watch the brown Yarra snake through the Caravan Park. Julian envied his friend's lifestyle. Dominic had been on the dole ever since Adam played full back for Jerusalem. Dominic was an artist, spending most of his time composing strange landscapes that sprouted Christian and pagan symbols. When Dominic wasn't painting he was reading. When he wasn't reading he was discussing. Right now he was lecturing Julian loudly.

'Isn't it bloody obvious that your intuition is telling you not to teach? Look at all the signs. You're not sleeping, you look like haven't eaten a decent meal for ages, you're miserable. You're a good poet; some of the stuff you've written over the years is great. I mean you've written a lot of crap too, but occasionally you've written some little gems. You should stick to what you've got a talent for. Your heart's not really into teaching.'

Dominic's words buzzed around Julian's mind. He refused to accept his friend's argument, believing that it just wasn't that simple. His stinging eyes spied a willy-willy over at the Caravan Park. It rattled like a train while it wreaked havoc. Dead gum leaves, branches, polystyrene cups, socks, undies, beer cans, feathers, chip packets, dunny paper all circled madly.

His black cat, Moogal, dived out of his caravan and trundled like a hippopotamus towards him. She rubbed his ankles with her dark head. Julian crouched down and asked her. 'What do you think, my sweet puss? Should I teach or should I just throw it all away?' Moogal wove around his legs purring and looked up to him as if to say, 'I don't give a shit what you do. Just feed me, fella.'

Nearby trees bowed towards the ground.

'God listen to that bloody wind will you. ' Julian rubbed his eyes. 'You know I met some farmers in my travels to New South Wales many moons ago. Do you know what they call these winds?'

'No. What?' Dominic wrinkled his forehead.

'Brickfielders.'

'Brickfielders. Why that?'

‘ As the desert breath blows over their farms, the wind bakes the soil into red and brown colours. Huge cracks appear until everywhere you look you’re surrounded by what looks like fields of brick.’

‘ Blackfella winds, ’ Dominic shook his head.

‘ What ? ’ Julian turned towards his friend.

‘ Blackfella winds. These winds are so alien to me. I sometimes think that they’re sent from the ancestors of this country to remind us Europeans huddled on the coastal fringes that we don’t understand or love this place yet. ’

Red bands of twilight stretched over the sky. Julian narrowed his eyes. He felt as if his cheeks were on fire as he studied the bloated brow of the sun vanishing behind a nearby hill. ‘ It’s like we’re witnessing the death of a wrathful god. ’

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Julian lit a cigarette and lay back on the grass. He heard a hissing sound. He wasn’t sure if it was the rapids nearby or the sound of his own blood flowing through his tired brown. Moogal rustled overhead in the branches like a restless monkey.

A fortnight passed, a fortnight of seething winds, headaches and sleepless nights. One afternoon Julian observed giant heads of red-brown smoke marching across the Caravan Park. The sun was eclipsed by a swirling red wall of dust. At night he heard the wail of fire engines. He listened to radio reports of what they began to call Ash Wednesday. The next day as he taught, the knot in his stomach tightened. He dragged his feet around he classroom and murmured to the kids.

The north wind dragged Julian out of his sleep. His caravan swayed like a ship out at sea. Outside he could hear an old gum tree sway and groan as its huge trunk fought the hot wind. A limb fell on the caravan roof. He sat up cursing and pulled back the blind to see a crescent moon plough through orange coloured clouds.

Moogal leapt through the window. The moon reflected in her lizard green eyes when she pounced upon his bed. Her long black tail flicked. Her ears stretched backwards, her eyes bulged wildly.

‘ I know how you feel, ’ whispered Julian, while he scratched the base of her spine and stroked the length of her tail. He slumped back and dozed as Moogal purred and fell asleep on his pillow.

The knot in his stomach gradually dissolved with every mile that he travelled away from the school. His clothes sat next to him, stuffed into a green rubbish bag. His books were carefully slotted into every nook and cranny of the car. Moogal was asleep in her favourite cardboard fruit box in the back seat.

He’d rung Dominic and told him he was sick and tired of waiting for the change. He had no idea where he was going, just south, towards the ocean and away from the dust caked city.

**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.