

DOWN THE GREAT OCEAN ROAD

By Mark Cornell

It looked like the back of a brontosaurus as it loomed out of the ocean mist. The car got closer; Daniel was terrified by the huge brown rock face. His Grandad looked through the rear vision mirror and chuckled.

‘Don’t worry Danny, it’s an Apostle, a giant rock sticking out of the ocean, where the shoreline used to be,’ his mother Fiona said as they sat in the back of his Grandad’s FC Holden rambling down the Great Ocean Road. She stroked her boys’ thick brown hair then waved her white arm towards Bass Strait. Daniel’s never seen the ocean before. She points to the beauty of the vast dark blue water, and says Tasmania lies on the other side.

‘Is Tasmania invisible mummy?’ Daniel asked with wide open blue eyes.

‘Maybe,’ Fiona gazed down and giggled. To Daniel it seemed so exotic; an island that couldn’t be seen lay on the other side of the Strait. An invisible island, he thought to himself. Maybe invisible people, how he’d love to be invisible. The tricks he’d get up to.

Daniel, fifty years later, sits on a train to work, and couldn’t recall if they went down the cliff walkway to explore the Apostles. He suspected not because, his long gone Grandad, Alan, knew every publican between Melbourne and Warrnambool. They were the days where you could order beer in a parked car outside of the pub.

His eyes twinkled, they twinkle every time a spunky women come anywhere near their pod. Daniel wondered if these first vivid experiences shaped you for the rest of your life? They certainly explained Kevin and him. Kevin’s a sex maniac, and Daniel’s a cloudy headed poet with a deep love of Mother Nature.

Earlier memories, triggered by the Apostles, dusted themselves off and slowly made their way back to him. Daniel’s first, was being stuck in a so-called playpen made out of wood. Daniel recalled trying to climb over the damn thing. He wore a nappy and a flannelette shirt. It’s hard to move in a nappy. The toddler was so pissed off! It felt like and looked like a jail. The second memory is lying in bed and making a scary ghost sound, the trouble was, a scary ghost sound came straight back and frightened the pyjama pants off him. The boy discovered ghosts were

real! The third memory was the excitement caused by the release of The Beatles first album. Daniel remembers being out in the backyard underneath a spray of stars and watching his relatives scream and dance to *Twist and Shout*. His family always pitched a big camping tent with party lights, to protect the food, beer and stereo from the elements and to provide a stage for the entertainment. Daniel stood inside the tent stuffing his face full of chips near a big table draped in cloth, only to be enticed into dancing by his Mum and her younger sisters. He loved the joyful way they threw themselves into, *I Saw Her Standing There*. Once the dancing finished, Daniel's clan gathered inside the tent. With his Grandad as MC, each member of the boy's family was asked to perform a song.

The boy sat on the warm lap of his mother and took everything in. Most of his relatives sang ballads; some played the banjo, some guitar, one played the spoons, (a dead art,) and Grandad played harmonica. Every song gave the boy the shivers and then, it was Fiona's turn to sing. She gently lifted him off her lap, walked into the centre of the tent and sang in a haunting voice a song about a broken heart. The whole idea of his mother with a broken heart horrified him. He had this image in of Fiona with a broken body on top of a pile of rubbish. When she finished; Daniel cried out, 'I not break your heart mummy,' the gasp from his family nearly pulled the tent pegs out of the ground.

The fourth memory of being mauled by dogs; Daniel was pretending to cut the grass with his plastic lawn mower. All of a sudden there was a dog fight out in the street. The boy jumped over the fence to see his dog Tex being savaged by six mongrels. Daniel ran into the middle of the pack, then the dogs turned on him. The boy never forgot the sight of their killing eyes, their bared canine teeth, the deep growls, the pain when they bit into his young flesh. Luckily Daniel's neighbour had a stockpile of crackers and turfed a penny bunger at the rotten mongrels. To a four year old kid the explosion sounded like an atomic bomb. It didn't just go boom, it went BOOM! It was so loud it echoed through the suburban streets and made his ears ring. The dogs quickly scarpered. A crying Daniel was lifted up on his neighbour's kitchen bench where his Mum pulled his pants down, cleaned his wounds, then took him to the doctor for tetanus shots. He never forgot the look of anguish on her young mother's face.

Some French Philosopher said somewhere (Daniel went to University but is now vague on his French Philosophers,) that pre-school days were man's paradise and we are all corrupted when we enter the institution of school. We then spend the rest of our lives striving to return to that magical time. Daniel was never caste out of Eden. The boy started writing Poetry in Primary School. He had a fantastic teacher, Miss Hurst, fresh out of University and with her beautiful long dark hair and eyes, and incredibly short mini-skirts; she displayed a gushing enthusiasm for his writing. Miss Hurst got Daniel to write poems on special cardboard paper then she'd stick them up in the classroom and school library like posters. He had another English teacher in High School, Miss Sandow, a pretty young woman with thick long dark hair and piercing blue eyes, who'd ask Daniel to come up to the front of the class and read his crazy stories out. He was amazed when his fellow students cracked up; he learnt words could affect his fellow human beings. So began his life as a poet and story teller; a craft needing emotional honesty and sense of awe.

Daniel lent his head on the train window and pondered. There was no doubt that the Apostle memory ushered in his deep love of the landscape, particularly South West Victoria. Daniel and his family have been holidaying down the Great Ocean Road for donkey's years in Port Fairy. Apart from throwing his body into the surf with Alan, Daniel loves to perch above a beautiful view to take it all in and write.

Does the play-pen memory explain his hatred of being hemmed in? Daniel's always hated restrictions, particularly at work. For years now he's given management the message just Fek off and let me do my job. Daniel's a good Trade Unionists and has been in the middle of some epic industrial stoushes. One of which he can proudly say he was instrumental in the resignation of a repulsive bully of a manager. He's an enemy of statistics and procedures, convinced they're a method of social control designed to squash the soul out of his fellow workers. The first thing he did in his new job was pull out the recording device on his phone. His Grandad had a saying, "the shit floats to top." He's not wrong Daniel thought to himself on the train as it pulled into Richmond. 'What did he say? What did you say? He said that? Well I would have told him this? What do you say? What did he say? What did you say? He said that? Really that's awesome,' said some pain in the bum passenger somewhere.

‘Christ you can’t hear yourself think around here,’ murmured a bearded middle aged man sitting opposite him trying to read the paper. Daniel nodded in agreement.

As for ghosts? Daniel believes in spirits. He held his Grandfather hand when he died, and felt part of his Grandfather enter him as his soul left the planet. Fiona told her son there are so many times when he looks like and acts just like her father. Daniel has inherited what his Grandfather used to call, “his Irish,” a temper which flares up at any injustice. Daniel is aware that his native country is full of sacred grounds and ghosts. You just need to know where to look for them; he’s heard their song at night when he’s been out in the middle of nowhere.

Music? As a boy he saw the wonderful happiness it gave his family, particularly the women, whose dancing joy washed over him like summer rain. Daniel recently told Fiona, he can remember when he was home with

chicken pox. Fiona had bought him a trannie. He was seven; Penny Lane and Strawberry Fields were played repeatedly. Daniel studied the lyrics to both songs, to discover they were poems. He recalled the excitement around the whole world when The Beatles, or the Stones, released their latest. “It was a time when giants walked amongst us,” said a local musician somewhere. To this day sixties music always takes Daniel to a joyous realm. He makes it a point to have music going on in his house. His wife Pamela sometimes finds it painful, but both her and husband have been married for a quarter of a century now and have reached the stage of live and let live. At least Daniel likes to think that way. The kids have got the message, his teenage son, Alan, who looks like his Dad, plays guitar and is forming a band, his daughter, Fiona, who’s a dead ringer for her Grandmother when she was young, is in her twenties and is an established singer and entertainer. Dogs? Daniel slowly shook his head in the train cabin. Viscous canine images are permanently stored in the back of his mind; thankfully time has obscured them a bit. He’s never been a great fan of mongrels; he tolerates his friend’s animals with the knowledge he can always say goodbye to them.

Daniel’s a cat man, so there’s not much more needs to be written. Besides he thinks they bark and fart too much. His house has enough flatulence as it is.

Daniel got off at Parliament Station and shuffled onto the escalator. Does he blend into his fellow crowd of commuters? Well; no. Daniel's got long silver hair and a beard; he likes to wear colourful shirts, colourful runners, and colourful coats. He loathes the boring corporate look of his fellow males, especially the young. What's wrong with them, they're supposed to be rebellious? Daniel brightens up the office like a rainbow lorikeet. His first priority of the day is to get leave for a holiday down at Port Fairy. He turns his computer on and answers the phone. His morning musings on the train are swept away. But not entirely, Kevin once told him over a few beers that he is a hoarder of stories.

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.