

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

By Mark Cornell

It was a bumpy ride in the old Fokker down to Tasmania. Stephen and I swore and cried out every time the plane banked, or dropped out of the sky when it hit a bit of turbulence. I hadn't smoked in two days but demanded one off Stephen as the old plane plummeted into Bass Strait like a screaming Japanese zero. Although not a Christian I crossed myself when the bucket of bobs landed at Launceston Airport. 'Talk about a mother Fokker,' Stephen laughed. We photographed each other taking our first step on Tasmanian soil. The first thing I noticed about the island was it seemed a shade greener and lusher compared to the mainland. The air had a strong ozone scent, so unlike the dusty, petrol smell of home. After checking in at the youth hostel and getting fish and chips, we walked down to the Tamar River and watched the giant Spirit of Tasmania slowly circle and sail back north back to our home town, Melbourne.

It was a strange feeling watching the white dot of the Spirit dissolve towards where we'd come from. On the mainland, Tassie was always down south, now we were staring north towards home. Bass Strait is a notoriously fickle body of water; she can turn from a smooth glass to a mountainous monster within minutes. I remember my Nana telling me when she visited Tassie, the storm was so bad that the Spirit's propellers breached the wild waters, and the ship's body shuddered violently. (This was one of the reasons we caught the Fokker.) The Strait is full of ghosts, from the souls of people who perished in the immigrant ships smashing into unknown coast, to the spirits of the Tasmanian Aboriginals who were herded onto barren Flinders Island, never to return to their tribal homelands. Our first people wailed when they were shown their new home. They spent all day staring across the water to where they just made out the coastline of Tasmania. They petitioned Queen Victoria, the great mother, to return, but nothing happened.

Twelve months before we took off, a strange thing happened over the dark waters of Bass Strait. A nineteen year old pilot, Frederick Valentich, flew at night towards King Island in a Cessna when he reported a large aircraft nearby; Melbourne reported back to him there were no known aircraft in the area. The object with green flashing lights orbited around his plane, like it

was playing games, then hovered above him, his transmission suddenly died into static, some thought they heard the sound of metal scraping metal. Valentich disappeared into the ether, no trace was ever found of his plane. No oil, no wreckage, no nothing. His father travelled down to the straight every year on the anniversary of his son's disappearance. He'd stare out into the indifferent waters, near the lighthouse of Cape Otway, in the vain hope that his son would return. There were reports along the coast of unusual lights months before this mysterious event occurred. That night in the youth hostel, Stephen chatted to some fellow back packers from Europe, I stretched out on my top bunk and got stuck into *The Lord of the Rings*; I was up where the hobbits, after encounters with the black riders, met Tom Bombadil. I couldn't put this magical book down.

We had cigarettes and tea for breakfast then flung on our packs. We stuck out our thumbs and were picked up straight away. The Tasmanians laughingly called us "Mainlanders" and themselves "Taswegians." We flew along the North West coast of Tasmania, stunned by the endless white beaches and verdant farmland. Sometimes with its rows of hawthorn hedges and Georgian farms it felt like we were in Britain. Other times we sailed through huge dank forests. The people were so friendly and chatty; they'd even pick us up when we didn't have our fingers sticking out! Stephen and I travelled in the back of station wagons, panel vans, farmer's Utes, caravans, camping vans, trucks, you name it, for the next month we squeezed into every vehicle known to mankind.

The locals recommended we stop off at the North West town of Stanley. It was an old sealing town, famous for its local feature called "the Nut." Our first impression of the Nut was that she looked like Uluru. It was a huge bluff; the remains of a volcano dominating what looked like the toy town of Stanley. We felt like we'd stepped back in time, unlike Melbourne Tasmania had preserved her old colonial buildings. As we staggered up the Nut at dusk, the huge rock transformed to red like her cousin Uluru in central Australia. Up on the flat head of the volcanic remnant we spied a gold peninsula jutting out into the still blue waters of the straight. Locals called this place the edge of the world; Moundbirds silently hovered about us as the stars came

out and we crawled our way back down. I couldn't get over how the headstones of Stanley Graveyard pointed out to sea. Years later I discovered that my Irish Great Grandmother, Mary Healey, was laid to rest in Stanley. Her bones were somewhere nearby. Do we all turn into ghosts at the edge of the world staring out into the ocean hoping our loved ones shall return?

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.