

HELLO GOODBYE

By Mark Cornell

Tim could do a whole range of brum, brum sounds long before he learnt how to talk. He loved anything to do with engines. Once when he was playing with his Matchbox Cars on the floor, our friend Margaret exclaimed, ‘ Oh listen to him, he’s even changing gears.’ Tim heard an engine down the street while I was reading to him. After his last story we decided to go out and investigate.

‘ I reckon it could be a big lawn mower or a digger. What do you reckon mate ? ’ I ambled down the street holding his hand. Tim nursed his furry possum puppet to his chest. Walking slow was one of the first lessons my son had taught me now I was no longer part of the rat race.

‘ Hmm...’ Tim’s blue eyes were lost in deep thought. ‘ I reckon it could be that bobcat we saw the other day.’ He stopped at a waxy green bush on the corner and knelt down to study some soldier beetles.

‘ Dad, why are they stuck together like that ? ’ Tim placed his hand flat down on the footpath to try and encourage two enjoined beetles on to his little fingers.

‘ I’m not sure mate. Maybe they’re making babies like what you saw in your dinosaur video the other day. ’ Another lesson Tim had taught me; be open about things. This had taken some time, because I’d spent a decade in a crowded office where in order to survive the last thing

2.

you did was reveal your innermost thoughts. Tim and I watched the little black and red beetles going about their business. I used to fly around this corner every morning to catch the train into the city.

Some of the people I worked with laughed at me when I said I was going on Family Leave to stay home and look after my son. One colleague stated, “ I knew a bloke down the road who did that and he ended up turning into an alcoholic.” My director tittered, “ You’ll be ringing up in a few weeks time begging me to come

back.” Well, she may be a director of work but she’s a lousy observer of life, because here I am two years later still looking after my little man.

The engine sound whirred louder as we crossed the road and made our way to the railway station. Tim jumped up and down on the spot and pointed to the other side of the track at an orange bobcat preparing the ground for a footpath. I shook my head and smiled back to him. We sat down on a platform seat to chat about what the bobcat was doing. The driver smiled and waved when he saw us. Tim and I laughed and waved back. The little boy in the man, who drives big machines, always comes to the surface when he notices a child watching him. He always gets this happy gleam in his eye.

3.

School kids made their way to the platform on the other side. I looked up at the swollen grey clouds sailing towards the Dandenongs and sighed. Winter is on her way. You pay more attention to Mother Nature when you’re away from work. One of my favourite pastimes these days is making a fire in the hearth, grabbing a drink and having Tim on my lap. We watch the flames and he tells me of worlds where dragon’s blow mists and spit red stars up at the sky. My son always claps when I tell him I’m going to make a fire.

A tall skinny man, with long grey hair and a shaggy silver beard marched towards us. As he got closer I noticed he had this huge glob of green snot hanging down from his nostril all the way down to his chin. His wrinkled face had a wild look about it. Don’t sit down next to me, I thought to myself. But he did and pulled a packet of cigarettes out of the breast pocket of his crumpled brown suit top.

‘ The next bloody train’s an express which means it’s not gonna stop at my station. I live in Auburn, hardly any train stops there these days.’ He lit up a cigarette and shot me an angry look. Christ what do I say back to this bloke ? I shrugged my shoulders.

4.

‘ Uh Oh ! ’ Tim jumped off the seat and pointed across the other side of the tracks to a teenager who had accidentally kicked his yellow footy off the platform. Before we knew it he’d jumped down on to the rails to rescue his ball. ‘ He shouldn’t do that should he Dad ? ’ Tim slowly shook his head.

‘ No mate it’s dangerous.’ I rubbed my beard.

‘ He doesn’t miss a trick does he ? ’ The man smiled and nodded towards Tim.

‘ He’s an intelligent little monkey all right.’ I replied, relieved that the ice had been broken.

‘ How old is he ? ’ The man tapped his ash on to the ground.

‘ Six months ! ’ Tim proudly stated and crawled back next to me on the seat.

‘ You’re four mate, remember ? ’ I chuckled and leant towards him to count four on my fingers. My son followed with his eyes and lips.

The sign said the Flinders St train was due in fifteen minutes.

Tim shyly smiled as he stretched over my lap and held his possum up to the man.

5.

‘ I was wondering what that was. I thought it was a flaming cat.’ The man raised his eyebrows and roared out a laugh at the hand puppet. Tim responded with a similar loud laugh then made a series of guttural possum sounds. Some of the school kids on the other side were puzzled by the man’s booming laughter.

‘ Why’s he got a possum ? Most kid’s have teddies.’ He wiped his moist eyes.

‘ Tim loves possums we’ve got a family that visits us every night to knock off our food scraps. He loves hand feeding them.’

‘ I feed them chocolate in Fitzroy Gardens. Sometimes they’ll run up to me and rip it right out of my hand. Do you guys live around here ? ’ The man butted out his cigarette and lit up another. I noticed he’d spend more time holding them in a claw like grip rather than smoking them.

‘ Just round the corner in Viviani Crescent.’

‘ I’ve spent the day with my sister...She lives in Great Ryrie. I can’t get over your little man. The possum sounds he makes are spot on.

He’s smart all right. That takes a lot of observation.’

‘ When they first put him in my arms he stared right through me. He’d only been on this planet for a few seconds but he already knew me. The nurses used to tell me that while all the other baby’s cried or slept in

6.

the hospital, Tim was quiet and used to look at everything going on around him.’ I fended Tim off from attacking my face with his possum.

‘ That’s a bit rough isn’t it ? ’ The man grinned and took a deep drag on his cigarette. ‘ I’m a paranoid schizophrenic living on the pension. I barely get enough money to eat and pay the rent. It’s even harder to do the simple things of life like having a few beers with my mates now and then. My sister nagged me all bloody day about going on a budget, but I find something like that bloody impractical.’

‘ I reckon a budget’s the first nail in the coffin.’ I recalled how my wife had recently suggested the same thing to me and I told her I just couldn’t think that way. The man’s grey eyes widened.

The sign said the Flinders St train was due in ten minutes.

‘ The rich are getting richer. Everyone’s out for themselves these days. All everyone seems to care about is money, what about ethics eh ? It’s pathetic they way people display their material possessions. One of the first things you’re supposed to learn as a kid is not to show off. ’ He snorted as he pulled a dirty hanky out of his track suit pants to wipe away his snot. Another blob soon appeared to slowly make it’s way down his whiskers.

‘ I’ve never had a job you know.’ He stared down at his sandals.

7.

‘ That’s all right, you’re not missing much, most jobs are pretty boring anyway. I’ve got more out of life by staying home and looking after Tim than I’ll ever get from years of work. ’

‘ Take a look at those kids over there. They’re all brimming with energy and life. Look at them laughing, chatting and playing games with each other. Yet once they enter the workforce they start shuffling around the streets like zombies. All their joy has gone. Everywhere I go I see people walking around with miserable looks on their faces. They spend all day working for a boss and doing things they really don’t want to do anyway.’ The man threw his half-smoked cigarette on to the track and lit up another.

‘ You’re not wrong. I’m so glad to be away from all that garbage. ’ Tim jumped on my lap and I started to rub his back. The platform opposite us was now jammed packed with school kids. The bobcat driver turned his engine off and we waved goodbye to each other as he got into his van.

The man stood up to take look at the sign.

‘ God ten minutes is too bloody long to wait for a bloody train, everything in life is stacked against me, that’s why I’m a paranoid schizophrenic.’ He sat down and started laughing again. Tim and I found

8.

his thunderous laughter infectious and I couldn’t help warming to this man. I asked him what his name was.

‘ Frank.’

‘ G’day Frank I’m Keith and this is Tim.’ I shook his hand and asked Tim to say hello to Frank.

‘ Hello. He shouldn’t be doing that.’ Tim pointed to the teenager who was now on the roof of the train station retrieving his yellow footy.

‘ Yep you’re right mate.’ We watched the teenager throw his ball down to his friends. ‘ He’s a big kinder boy now Frank.’ Tim’s eyes lit up.

‘ My mother never sent me to kinder. She said they were “ enclaves of socialism.”

‘ Ah well...there’s nothing wrong with an enclave of socialism. Is there Tim ? The world needs more of them. ’ My son smiled at me. Frank and I both laughed.

‘ My Mum was a Mick and she raised me as a Catholic. As a little boy I was forced to think about some pretty heavy things I tell you. That’s why I probably ended up being a paranoid schizophrenic.’

‘ I’m a half-caste. My Mum’s a Catholic my Dad’s a heathen. She wanted to raise me as a Mik but Dad put his foot down.’

9.

‘ That was probably a good idea. My personality and morality were paralyzed by the church. As a kid I was shit scared by the idea of God up in the sky watching over everything I did.’ Frank sniffed and pulled out his hanky again. He threw his cigarette on to the tracks then lit up another. The smoke kept wafting over us. A bright eyed Tim poked his finger into it and kept going, ‘ Whew, Whew, Whew.’ Frank and I laughed when Tim told us there was a bellbird down the track smoking a cigarette. The kids directly across from us raised their frowning heads to stare at Frank.

The sign said Frank’s train was due in five minutes.

‘ Where are you guys headed for ? ’ Frank nursed his cigarette on his lap.

‘ We’re going home to cook tea and watch The Beatles.’

‘ Two of them are dead now. ’ Frank gave a deep sigh. ‘God how I loved The Beatles. Their music was so uplifting ! Those were the days when giants walked amongst us.’

‘ What other sort of music do you like Tim ? ’ I took his water bottle out of my coat pocket and offered it to him.

‘ The Moody Blues.’ Tim held his bottle up like a trumpet player and gulped his drink down.

10.

‘ *The Moody Blues !* ’ Frank’s face flushed. ‘ I love the Moody Blues. I’m an old hippie I smoked too much dope and that’s why I ended up being a paranoid schizophrenic too.’

‘ I love *Night’s in White Satin* and *Mull of Kintyre*.’ Tim loudly gasped I after he’d drained his bottle.

‘ What other song’s do you love mate ? ’ I patted him on the head.

‘ *Hello Goodbye* and *Get Back*.’ Tim pushed my hand away.

‘ I bloody love those songs too.’ Frank started singing *Hello Goodbye* to a grinning Tim. I sang along with him.

The sign said Frank’s train was due in one minute.

Frank stared at a young mother who walked by us pushing a pram. He stomped on his cigarette and lit up another.

‘ This world’s got a sick sense of priorities. We idolize rich idiots, anyone can be a successful rich idiot, all you have to do is behave like a spoilt brat and demand that everything goes your way. Yet that woman over there is doing the most important job in the world. A job that’s overlooked and taken for granted. Time and time again a mother sacrifices herself for her child, that takes a lot of courage. Women are stronger than men.’ Frank held his cigarette upright on his lap like he

11.

was burning a stick of incense. There were so many questions I wanted to ask him but the train suddenly came under the bridge.

‘ We’ll probably never meet again.’ Frank stood up and ruffled Tim’s hair. ‘ It’s been wonderful meeting you little fella.’

‘ Goodbye Frank take care of yourself.’ I shook his hand. As Frank slowly made his way to the carriage he kept turning back to stare at Tim. My son waved goodbye to him with his possum.

I felt sad watching Frank’s train disappear down the line. I pictured him sitting in the carriage with snot trickling down his beard getting disgusted looks from his

fellow passengers. I wish I there to tell them to mind their own bloody business. I recalled the joyful way Frank responded to Tim and saw him in the pub laughing with his mates. Poor old Frank, he was probably one of the sanest persons I'd ever met. Yet he's an exile. The Belgrave train arrived to pick up the school kids.

I was annoyed with myself over the judgement I first made when Frank stormed towards me. Well; Tim had taught me another lesson, be generous to strangers. I shivered as I watched the Dandenongs dissolve below the rain clouds. I held my son's warm hand and we made a detour to the bottle shop on our way back home to The Beatles.

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 favourite 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.