

***BLACK TUESDAY***

**By Mark Cornell**

One day the sky disappeared. First there was a puff of smoke, and then another and another until a big brown curtain grew over the hill. The sun went red and coughed before it died. Sometimes I saw a yellow flame start up miles away from the big fire, but the brown cloud would get fat and gobble it up. It rattled like a train. A long red snake slithered around the bottom of all the trees. Everything's gone dark like nighttime but Mummy has just picked me up from school.

My skin sticks to the back seat of the Morris Minor. I pull my black school shoes off and kick my grey socks on to the front seat. The wind is making the car rock. Come on Mummy I want to go home ! She says I'm not allowed to get out while she does the groceries. She reckons she won't be away for very long but she's been away for ages. I'm busting for a drink !

When Mummy comes out of the shop with her brown shopping bags, her eyes look like my cat Sooty's did before Daddy ran her over. He backed out of the garage in a hurry to go to work and didn't see poor old Sooty. Sooty's eyes were as wide as saucer plates when the blue van squashed her. The pussycat must have been made of rubber because the tire stretched her neck out. Sooty did a cartwheel then the poor puss jumped over our front fence. Daddy got out of his blue van and ran like billio into Mr. Saxon's front yard and grabbed Sooty by the tail. You should have heard her wail and spit. Daddy checked her out, he's good with animals. He reckons Sooty wasn't hurt at all! I guess it's true what they say about cat's having nine lives. I always run out onto the nature strip and wave goodbye to Daddy every morning until his blue van disappears over the hill.

Mummy chucks my pongy socks back at me then speeds home through an ash shower. It's beautiful everything looks like it's covered in snow! 'Don't waste water!' The man in the car radio says to us. All the trees and bushes look droopy, everyone's lawns are brown. Our whole street is full of upside down beer bottles dug into the garden. Mummy ran up our concrete steps and picked up the black phone. She says she keeps getting an engaged signal. I

tell her not to worry about Daddy and try to bring the groceries in but the concrete burns my feet. The wind is like an oven. I'm scared everything's going to melt!

The air stinks. Sparks fall out of the sky like stars. They make me think of the bonfires on cracker night. Everyone comes to the paddock and they chuck all sorts of things onto a big pile. Daddy always climbs up and tosses the body of Guy Fawkes on top. The Guy's made of rags and dressed up in old clothes. I love watching his body turn red and fall apart. The sparks fly up into the stars not down like they're doing now. I can see Daddy nailing a Katherine Wheel to the fence and laughing at Mummy being chased around the paddock by a Jumping Jack. She shouts at me to stop daydreaming and come inside.

Ah! The house is so cool and dark; it's like walking into a cave. Mummy always shuts the doors and windows then pulls down the blinds to keep the stinking heat out. I take off my wet school uniform and lie down in a cold bath. Ah! The water floods my ears until it sounds like I'm in a submarine. I spit out whale spouts then close my eyes and float away like an astronaut in space.

Mummy comes in to scrub my back and wash my hair. I put the flannel over my eyes to stop the soap burning them. I grab her when she goes to pull the plug out. I tell her I want to get a bucket and pour the water all over the garden. Mum's eyebrows go up. She's just taught me to brush my teeth without leaving the tap on. Then I hear the sirens!

I leave puddles all over the floor and stick my head out the front porch to see a fire truck zooming down to the paddock. Mummy, I want to go and watch them! She says it's too hot and dangerous. She starts drying me with a towel and puts powder all over my body. I nag her and start crying until we both go down the street. The Hawsley's are sitting on their back fence and cheering like it's a footy match. We go down their cracked driveway, pass Mr. Hawsley's old fruit truck and climb up to take a squiz.

The tallest tree in the world's on fire! His big green head's full of flames. He's bending over to brush them out. Oh! All the yellow grass has caught fire. A big black patch is taking over

the paddock. The smell stings my nostrils. Yuk ! Save the tree Mr. Fireman, my favourite hidey spot is way up on top. From up there you can see the whole world ! I played Hide and Seek with Daddy once. He started swearing when he couldn't find me. When he heard me giggling he climbed up with a rope and tied me to the trunk.

I love the firemen's black uniforms and shiny gold helmets. *London's burning, London's burning. Fire Fire !* One of them has got a big moustache like a grey broom. He smiles and waves to us and gets his long, long hose out of the red truck. Whoosh. Wow ! *Die fire die !* Hiss !

Look at all that white smoke ! My tree's gone black, there are all these red eyes inside the trunk. Mummy asks him if the fire on the hill is near Daddy's factory. The fireman's got soot all over his face, he shakes his big gold helmet and doesn't say anything. She whacks me a beauty when I ask her if Daddy's gonna end up like Guy Fawkes. I see houses popping and car's melting on the hill, it looks like a volcano up there now.

Don't worry Mummy, I squeeze her hand, Daddy grew up in the bush. He used to swing snakes around his head when he was a little boy. One night he rescued a screaming possum from being eaten by a Powerful Owl remember ? My Daddy knows how to fight a bushfire.

Mummy's throws down the phone. Her eyes are all bloodshot. She tells me to be quiet and switches on the radio in the kitchen. The man says there's bushfires all around the city. I see a red glow outside the window and wonder whether our willow tree has caught fire. Someone's banging on our front door.

Daddy's standing there with a big smile on his face and Sooty under his arm ! He hands my pussycat to me and hugs Mummy. Daddy keeps laughing, Mummy can't stop crying. He starts spraying the house with the garden hose and I get the bucket and scoop the water out of my bath. I give all our trees and bushes a good drink. Sometimes the wind hits me for a six. Daddy's standing in the veggie patch in his white singlet and old shorts pointing the hose to our roof. He gets a bottle of beer out of the van and puts me on his shoulders.

Daddy walks through the smoke and asks me if the teacher read any stories to me today. His hair is all wet and oily. I love his smell it reminds me of a tree. He wants to know if I can write all the letters of the alphabet yet. I hear all these sirens and see all these flashing lights. The fire sounds like our rubbish truck when it climbs up our street. I nearly fall off Daddy's shoulders when he stops all of a sudden. He goes quiet when he sees the flames on the hill. That long red snake that I saw before has turned into a giant roaring mouth.

**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 travelled 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.