

THE CYCLIST

By Mark Cornell

Michael stared through the white sunlight streaming outside of the train window. The train had pulled into Blackburn station, he squinted as he made out the outline of a school girl. She had on a royal blue blazer, with a thick blue tunic. Her hair was black and shoulder length, her skin pale. She was making obscene gestures towards him.

A shadow was over her face, yet Michael could make out white grimacing teeth. She was sitting cross legged upon the station bench. The train slowly started moving away from her. Two school boys sitting next to him sniggered, as they returned their two fingered salutes towards the defiant girl.

The sun squatted silver behind thin grey clouds of summer morning. Michael remembered staring at a similar white flaring sun when he was kid in a school playground. His mother would always warn him that he would burn his eyes out if he kept that up. He continued to do it, it was his secret, there was something enticing and mysterious about staring into the chalk face of a forbidden sun. Music drifted through the ear pieces of his Walkman, Michael sat with his elbow on the edge of the train window and studied the suburban landscape rushing past him.

It was his thirty eighth birthday. An hour ago he'd been lying on his back in bed while his wife Caitlin stroked his round stomach wishing him happy birthday. She had given him a train set, she had heard stories of when he was a young kid how he'd always manage to break train sets given to him by his parents in a rush of enthusiasm while trying to construct them. Caitlin figured there was a good chance that history wouldn't repeat itself this time. Michael cackled to himself picturing him and his wife that night, watching the train going around in endless circles.

An image of a school girl in a clay brown uniform, peddling her push bike suddenly dropped into his mind. Vicki....., Vicki Coughlan, she had the same pearl white teeth as the school girl in Blackburn. She used to ride her bike over the Yarra each day and visit him when he worked in the plant nursery. It was his first job after he had failed H.S.C. He remembers her being happy for him finding a job after being unemployed for months. Michael couldn't share her enthusiasm, he was depressed after seeing all his close friends going off to university. He recalled her shoulder length red hair, her creamy skin, the small sprinkling of freckles below her hazel eyes, and her willowy teenage body. Her joyfulness would momentarily drag him out of his self pitying mood.

Although Michael was only a couple of years older than Vicki, he used to feel he was light years away from her. Vicki went to St Brigits' private school in Heidelberg. She used to ride her bike everywhere, looking like a little brown hunchback as she plodded through suburban streets. Whereas Michael saw himself as a man of the world, having experienced the rough and tumble of a government school. Besides he was a working man, on the threshold of buying a car.

As the train sped forward Michael noticed yellow bands of smog sitting over the grey city horizon. His mind turned further back to the days when he used to work for Venture Stores part-time after school. He was put in charge of the record section of the store, and as a result saw himself as a bit of a dude. Vicki used to visit him, they'd talk about music. She pointed out to him that Jethro Tull's Warchild album used Melbourne as a backdrop. A picture of the front cover of the album came into Michael's memory, the night skyline of Melbourne in 1974, a purple city lit up by hellish red lights sitting behind a ghostly blue wizard image of the lead singer. He recalled how Vicki use to rock and sway her little body to the frenetic music of Warchild. He adored the words, 'I'll write on your tombstone, and thank-you for dinner,' from the song 'Bungle In The Jungle.' God, he hadn't heard that song for ages.

The train descended into the underground loop, a powdered faced woman passenger sitting across from him stretched out her newspaper. A headline announced the death of two further people due to heat exhaustion. Michael mind went back further to when he was still at school, to a summer night when he and his friend Robbie, met Vicki and her friend walking around the streets of Bulleen. Vicki was holding up her friend who was tipsy and giggly. Robbie suggested that they all go back to his house as his parents weren't home.

Robbie and?, Christ what was her name? Robbie and Lisa, were pashing on something terrible. Michael sat awkwardly on his chair sucking a beer, Vicki was silent, staring at the neon street light humming outside. Michael rode feelings of jealousy and disgust towards the now recumbent couple slobbering on a straining beanbag somewhere in the shadows before him.

‘ Hey Vick, do you want to go out in the yard ?’

‘ Yeah,’ came her quiet reply through the darkness.

Michael unbuttoned his shirt and lit up a cigarette in an attempt to look cool as they staggered through the passageway towards the outside. Once at the back door Michael groped forever in the darkness trying to find the handle. They finally made it out into the backyard to sit below a dry pine tree, its silhouette appeared like a shroud of a pyramid against the blue pulsating summer stars.

He recalled Vicki pointed out how the neighbours huge white gum tree appeared to be luminous in the moonlight, she always loved the phrase ‘ghost gum.’ She told the teenage Michael that when she was a little girl she'd spook herself at night by looking out the window at her father's ghost gum tree, convinced it was haunted.

Michael desperately tried to remember what else they spoke about that night. He pictured his arm around her lithe shoulders as they talked, and how sheer awkwardness prevented him from trying anything further. He recalled how she was terrified by the horror of a nuclear war,

and how her little body shivered as she described buildings and houses flattened and scorched by missiles.

Michael was haunted by the same nightmare as a kid. He would go visit his uncle and immerse himself in his relatives' huge library, pouring over anything to do with war. The more he read the more he was convinced that nuclear war wouldn't break out.

'Russia's bottled up in Eastern Europe Vicki, and China's not gonna take over the planet. The Communists hate each others guts, China and Russia have had huge border fights, which the Western press haven't talked about. China had a war with India in the sixties where they thrashed the pants off them, but they didn't push on to Delhi or anything like that. The Vietnam War's finished thank God.'

Michael felt a shudder through Vicki's bird like body, she leant over to stroke his eyelids and asked, 'Are you a philosopher?'

Michael blew out of his beer, 'Buggered if I know!'

'I think you're a philosopher Michael.'

Michael switched on his computer and sat down for another day in the office, as the phone rang. 'G'day mate how are you?' Michael was seldom given the chance to respond. Wouldn't you like to know, he thought to himself. He remembers once telling the other person on the line that he was depressed, the enquirer didn't hear him.

'I'm well, how are you?,' Yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir. Eek, eek, throw pennies in the cup for the performing monkey with the curly tale, fez and vest. Eek, fucking eek, all fucking day.

Michael was anxious to tell one of his workmates about Vicki, but the busy madness of the day swept everything aside. He remembered how after that night, he spent years chasing after another woman to get nowhere fast. Vicki slowly faded out of his life as he changed jobs, studied at nightschool, gained entrance into university, then ended up working as a labourer on a farm in Tasmania. He flew back to Melbourne when he heard his uncle had prostate cancer.

Michael never forgot the look on his uncle's face when he visited him in hospital, it was a jaundice face drained of any emotion. His uncle's chin was clenched hard, his grey eyes lifeless. Micheal's aunt attempted small talk and humour towards her husband, he didn't respond. 'You should piss off back to Tassie Michael, there's nothing for you here,' murmured the voice of his uncle, 'take my books and boots with you, eh?'

Michael went off for a smoke. He thought he saw Vicki's friend walking up a corridor towards him. 'Christ!,' Michael spluttered, 'I haven't seen you for donkeys, it's been about ten years, how are you? How's Vicki?'

The woman's dark brown eyes shot him a look of hatred, 'What do you mean?,' she spat back.

Michael reeled back, 'I dunno I'm just asking a question.'

'What do you mean, haven't you heard?'

'Heard what?,' I've been living in Tasmania for a few years, we hardly hear anything about Melbourne down there.'

'The accident, it was in the papers?' she replied.

'What accident?'

'Vicki's dead, didn't you hear about that woman who was crushed when a chimney fell down on her?'

'Vaguely, wasn't it during her birthday, her twenty first or something?'

'Yeah that was Vicki, the loft chimney collapsed in her flat, it crushed her, it didn't kill anyone else, just her.' Her eyes fixed viscusly on Michael. 'Everyone was dancing to loud music, the chimney was loose, apparently the arsehole of a landlord had known about it for years, but had done fuck all, the prick. Didn't you know?'

'As I said before, I've been living down in Tassie, working my bum off. It's been great...'
She walked off as he blubbered on.

The train began to slowly rise along the backbone of a hill, the dark blue mountains of the Great Dividing Range wearily loomed through the smoky yellow haze of dusk. Michael mulled

over in his mind on how these mountains were carved and flattened by the endless cycle of a furnace summer.

The train crawled past Box Hill cemetery, the multitude of granite graves shimmered in a snaking curtain of heatwaves. Michael noticed some of the headstones appeared to be leaning away from the merciless rays of the setting sun. Michael wondered if Vicki wherever she was, felt relief now that the night had come. The night. What if he'd been there on the night of Vicki's birthday? They might have danced together, shared a few drinks. She might have been standing somewhere else. As the train took off from Blackburn, Michael silently cursed, wishing that he had returned some sort of gesture towards the blue uniformed school girl in the morning.

Caitlin shouted him a meal in his favourite restaurant that night. She fingered the rim of her wine glass, sometimes looking over her drink to focus on Michael's distant blue eyes. He ranted as he resurrected his story about Vicki.

'For heaven's sake Michael lighten up, it's your birthday,' Caitlin pleaded, 'Why do we have to talk about her anyway? It's so depressing!'

'Alright, alright,' he muttered. He poured himself the last of the wine as the waitress arrived with their meal. Michael's mind wandered as they quietly ate amidst the chatter of others in the restaurant. He surveyed the dead-eyed diners and wondered if he looked like them. If in the process of becoming an adult, he had ceased to be the young philosopher Vicki once observed. Was she right, or was Caitlin right to say that he was depressing to be around? All he understood at the moment was that Vicki should have lived longer, and that he was living less. Michael looked across at Caitlin, she was stone faced. 'Look I'm sorry Cat, thanks for the meal, It's really good... really.'

Later on that night, Caitlin went to bed early while Michael slowly assembled the train set. He shut the lounge room door, turned off the lights and watched as the little locomotion's headlight weaved continuous white circles through the summer darkness.

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 now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.