

***THE SHORELINE***

***By Mark Cornell***

A white beam cut through the night sky like a searchlight. It was coming up from the south, across the ocean. The beam was still and constant. Suddenly two other trails of light appeared on either side of the original. Three beams of pure white were piercing the night sky. On the horizon the ocean rippled within a ghostly white glow. More beams appeared in the sky, exactly like the original. Rowan counted twelve, he was transfixed by this unearthly display.

His limbs turned luminous, mirroring the light of the southern sky. Insects that had previously been droning through the bush, were now silent. The ocean appeared still, Rowan could just hear a calm tide somewhere below the track he was standing on.

The cathedral of lights were turning to a rust colour. The same shade he'd observed on some of the foreshore rocks that jutted out of the ocean as the tide receded. The surrounding tea trees were bathed in an intense ochre. Slowly the dozen ochre beams transformed. They started to ripple and shimmer, and began to melt into each other, until they looked like some vast velvet curtain, hovering over a purple ocean.

2.

Rowan realised that he was witnessing the auroran lights. He'd heard the locals saying that you could see them here in Cape Otway. His mind reeled at the thought that these southern lights snaked for thousands of miles all the way from Antarctica.

Rowan ran back along the track. He had to show Basia this magical sight before it disappeared. He staggered into the doorway of their cabin. No lights were on, a faint red

glow flickered from the lounge room hearth. Rowan quietly walked into the bedroom. Basia was asleep.

Basia had been complaining of a bad headache, probably from the long drive along the Great Ocean Road. It took them about three hours to get to Cape Otway from Melbourne. She had nibbled like a squirrel at the meal Rowan had prepared for her, became tired, silent, and went to lie down. Rowan built a fire for her, then went off for a walk.

She was lying on her side. The ochre light was trickling through the cabin window, it seemed to sparkle on her dark brown hair. Her pale Polish face and exposed arms were cocooned in auroran light. The blankets hugged

3.

the curve of her hip. Rowan decided not to waken her. He reluctantly turned away from her to go outside.

He sat on the nearest log and proceeded to roll a cigarette. It was one of his favourite pastimes to smoke outside and study the night sky. He loved the way the smoke curled through his lungs and made his blood flow quicker. The light were dissolving now, falling back into the original single beam, which then transformed into a faint silver blue cloud. The cloud hovered then slowly sailed towards the horizon. Waves of tiredness gradually overtook Rowan. He shuffled back inside, peeled off his clothes, then slowly curled into the back of Basia's still body. She half stirred to grasp his hugging left arm, sighed, then fell back into her slumber.

Through the corner of his drooping left eye he saw the dying remnant of the auroran light. The silver blue wisp dropped into the horizon of the now black sea, it seemed to sizzle as it disappeared. The lapping of the tide gently stilled Rowan, then took him away somewhere to dream, while a sea mist enclosed their cabin.

4.

Rowan woke up next morning to observe a nearby tentacle of mist slowly hoist its way from the shoreline to rest on a nearby hill. It glistened in the sun like a phosphorescent white snake. Rowan loved this coastline. He'd been coming down here off and on for years. One of his first memories was as a three-year-old being overwhelmed by the sight of the monolithic Apostles looming out of the ocean. He also vaguely recalled that on the same trip he was distressed at the sight of his ill mother needing to lie down early at night. His older sister said he cried all night. It was only a few years ago that Rowan discovered that his mother wasn't ill at all, but heavily drunk. She and her Irish father had stopped at practically every pub on the Great Ocean Road. Rowan chuckled to himself.

His quiet laughter roused Basia. He gently stroked her cheekbone and closed eyelids. He whispered, "How are you sweetie?" "A lot better", came her hushed reply. She cuddled into Rowan as he told her of the auroran lights. She stroked his skinny stomach as he imparted his story like an excited little boy. She loved his sense of wonder at things.

During the afternoon the autumn sun started to break through the sea

5.

mist. Rowan decided to go for a swim. Basia was terrified by the idea, she'd never swum in a surf beach before. She decided to stay behind, besides she didn't bring any bathers.

"Bathers!", Rowan blurted out in amazement, "You don't need bathers, just swim in the nuddie like I do." Basia reeled at this suggestion. She replied, "I'd prefer to stay behind, if you don't mind Rowan, I'm still rather tired after our drive, I'd like to sit around and read." "No worries Basia", Rowan responded, putting on a cheerful exterior.

She watched Rowan march down the track towards the beach, till his red hair and red beard disappeared into the tea trees. She slowly looked about her to realise the cabin was perched on the edge of the huge Otway forest. She felt the wilderness sit heavy upon the back of her neck. She turned back inside to try and lose herself in her book.

Rowan had thrown himself into the surging ocean to bodysurf. He loved the way the waves would pick up his body to carry him like the hand of God all the way back to the shoreline. He loved the smell and taste of the

6.

ocean always feeling reborn after a good swim. Rowan wished Basia could share his love of the open sea, his feelings of disappointment in her were gradually washed away by the battling waves.

At dusk they decided to get into the car and find the nearest lookout, in case the auroran lights returned. The sun was setting like a jaundiced spider through crimson and yellow clouds. Cold winds buffeted the car. The occasional kestrel hovered over the

shore, anxious for prey. Rowan placed his arm around Basia, she leant into him. She seemed preoccupied.

"What is it Basia?" Rowan said.

"Oh nothing. I was just thinking of something that happened to me in the past."

Basia said.

"And what was that?" Rowan said.

"This sunset reminds me of when I was a teenager with my father", she said.

"Yeah and....?" Rowan said.

"I was only thirteen, I'd just menstruated for the first time. I was horrified. My mother told my father. He made me sit in the kitchen to listen to him. The sun was setting just as it is now. My Dad said to me through the

7.

shadows of dusk that I was a woman now. I had to be responsible. All I could see was his silhouette, everything around us was red, the sunset made the kitchen seem like it was on fire. My Dad loomed over me like Jehovah, I was terrified!"

"Did he say anything else?", said Rowan

"No that was it, that's all he said".

Dark blue clouds sat on the horizon like a large vaporous mountain range. The first shade of night started to undermine the dusk. Rowan pondered over Basia's parents, Wojtek and Marila. Old Wojtek didn't strike him as the Jehovah type. Whenever Rowan would visit, Wojtek was always chatty, plying the younger man with mountains of Polish food and endless glasses of wine. They'd often sit out on the verandah, smoking cartons of cigarettes discussing history and politics. Marila would be out there too, illuminated by

the wine and good conversation. Basia would sit inside reading giving Rowan a curious stare each time he'd come inside.

Wojtek and Marila had both been through the war. Wojtek's speech would always slow down when he'd recall the bombing of Warsaw and how

8.

he was taken from Poland and forced to work on a German farm as a labourer. Marila had an academic career in literature cut short, when the Germans forced her to work in a munitions factory. Both were treated as slaves, yet neither of them hated the Germans. Rowan was amazed.

At times Marila appeared desperate to be heard, a disturbed, lost gleam came over her eyes as she struggled to find words that were always too inadequate to express how she really felt. Basia had inherited that strange look from her mother. Rowan remembered the first time he'd seen that look was in the office cafeteria. Rowan just begun temporary work in the Department of Immigration. Basia had been with the department for sixteen years. She was sitting by herself, when Rowan cautiously approached her. Somehow they stumbled into conversation about travel. Rowan was planning a trip to Ireland. Basia quietly mentioned that she'd been back to Poland twice.

Basia found that despite her best efforts she opened up to Rowan. Perhaps it was the way his youthful blue eyes would light up in amazement or the way he'd toy with ideas, never accepting anything on face value. She

9.

found his childlike wonder refreshing. Then came that curious look over her face when she started to talk of her journey to Auschwitz. Rowan wanted to hug her on the spot, he didn't know why. Maybe it was of all things, the conversation about the death camp. "Death, ugly bile-dripping death," Rowan recalled, shouting to himself inside. "I've just lost my grandfather whom I worshipped. I feel so fucking well lost" Now here he was almost two years later on, sitting in the darkness with her, perched on a cliff stroking her brow, watching the vast indifferent waters of Bass Strait.

The shrill of a plover stirred him from his thoughts. He looked over at Basia, she was silent, enjoying his gentle strokes. He took his arms away to roll a cigarette. Basia watched his celtic face flare in the darkness as he lit his match. He muttered, "It looks like no auroran lights tonight." The clouds of twilight had dissolved into the night, giant walls of sea mist were now silently forming out at sea. Pretty soon the pale walls would start to march towards the shoreline.

Rowan lit a fire when they got back to their cabin and produced a bottle of red wine. He sat near the flames and loved the way the combination

10.

of an open fire, and red wine, would make his body glow in sensuous delight. His eyes reflected the expanding yellow flames and his mind danced with the sound of the ocean wind fanning the hearth. Basia was sitting away from Rowan in the darkness, sipping her wine, observing his abandon. She cautiously asked across the room, "Don't you ever feel the difference in our age Rowan?" Summoned from his daydreaming, Rowan took a long time to reply, "No way Basia, I never sense any age barrier, do you?" Basia was eight years older than Rowan, she felt it all the time. Anxious not to hurt him she stated, "Yes I

do sometimes. You take obvious delight in things, like when we go for a walk, you'll suddenly stop to watch and listen to a particular bird, or take in a view. I'd naturally miss all that if I was by myself, because I'm so old."

Over the past two years Rowan had continuously heard these claims of old age on Basia's part.

"Listen to you, 'so old' ", he replied "My God you're only thirty-four Basia". Out of frustration he added, "You're sounding like an old grandmother".

"I am an old grandmother", she cried back.

11.

"In that case grannie come and sit on your grandson's knee, because he's feeling frisky towards his old grandma tonight."

"Oh Rowan", she laughingly complained. Basia slowly walked across to the hearth and placed herself upon his lap. She felt the warmth of the fire upon her back as she responded to his kisses. His lips tasted of salt.

Who is this man ?, she asked herself internally. This crazy man who keeps diving in and out of the sea naked, like some demented merman, who has no respect for any belief, who once called my Christian religion a lovely myth. Rowan sensed Basia was churning something over in her mind. As much as he enjoyed this moment with her, he wished that just for once she would let her mind rest, her body relax.

"What is it Basia?" he whispered while kissing her eyelids. "You seem to be out of sorts."

"I don't know", she said. The constant lapping of the tide almost made her feel dizzy and sickly. When she had stepped out into the hazy light of the afternoon, she felt as if something has slithered from the forest shadows to possess her.

"There must be something that coloured your mood, is it me?" he

12.

asked.

"No, I don't know!" she said.

Rowan backed off, poured himself another glass of wine.

It's not you, Basia thought to herself. It's me. I just can't share your joy of life. There is so much I want to tell you but I just don't think you'd understand. You're a free spirit constantly up in the clouds. Me, I'm manacled to the ground. But who knows, I truly don't know why I'm depressed. They both sat silent, watching the red coal of the fire ebb and crumble into the hearth.

Later that night Rowan went for a walk, brooding over Basia. He had pictured himself and Basia walking together on the beach at night. Instead, here he was alone, peering through patches of sea mist at the night sky. He spied his old companion, Sirius the dog star, leaving a blue trail of starlight over the black ocean. Is it ever possible to truly know another person on this planet? he asked himself. Maddened sea gulls fled along the swirling blue trail of starlight. Rowan wondered whether birds navigated by Sirius at night.

13.

He sat on a log to observe another break in the mist, long white weaving corridors of mist revealed a bloated king tide. Rowan watched as a vast dark wall formed on the

horizon, the walls grew and seemed to travel forever towards the shoreline. Suddenly they developed pale foaming heads and roared as they smashed onto the beach in front of him. The backbone of the waves continuously curled, twisted and sped like giant snakes.

He remembered on that trip with his grandfather how he was terrified by the ocean. His grandfather sat him on his lap held his tiny cold hand and sang cooing sounds into his ear. The old man's voice eased him. Suddenly, a mutton bird landed near Rowan, too tired to move, it just sat there, together they took in the surging ocean.

Basia heard the distant drone of the car engine as she hovered on the borderline between sleep and wakefulness. Rowan felt claustrophobic as the suburbs started crowding in around him. Her spirits lifted when she finally saw the grey, square landscape of the city. She suddenly became talkative and happy. Rowan puzzled by her transformation, half responded to her small talk.

**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.