

The Dismissal

(2597 words)

At the beginning of cherry season, Gough Whitlam gets the sack. By the end of the season Justin and his girlfriend have split up too. Standing on the red dirt with his things jumbling out of his duffle bag, he'd wonder if Gough saw it coming.

Cherries are hard work. You strap this bucket thing on and you climb the ladder, and when the bucket's full you climb down and tip it in a box. You shift your ladder, you climb up again, you pick and pick. It takes ages to fill the box – think how small a cherry is. And you can't just yank them off, you have to tweak the stem up so it comes away at the twig. You have to strip off the bad ones too but you're supposed to throw them on the ground. If you put them in your box, they'll know it was you because your name's chalked on it. The ladder hurts the soles of your feet. Coming back from the orchard in the afternoons is like trudging across the Gobi Desert. Justin never liked cherries after that.

If you ate a cherry that summer it could have been picked by Justin or his girlfriend or one of the others in the pickers' quarters at Silvan. Maybe by Sioux. All those fat cherries waiting for you in the fruit shop were picked by some thirsty person trying to fill another box. They would have got paid one dollar-fifty cash in hand for a box. Justin and his girlfriend's record was twelve boxes in a day between them, but that only happened once. Sioux was doing a regular eight boxes a day on his own.

Every night at the pickers' quarters they all get off their faces. A guy called Jeff has a stereo in his station wagon that he claims is quadrophonic, and he throws opens the back door and puts on Dark Side of the Moon - you know, loud - and they bring out their buddha sticks or their bit of Leb gold or whatever they're going to mull up, and they breathe the smoke out into the warm farm night air. It's insane.

Justin's growing a beard now he's finished school. He's put bleach in his hair and it contrasts with his beard. Some of the others start calling him Ajax. It's his first nickname. Even his girlfriend starts using it.

Nobody's making much money. The dole's only fifty-one dollars a week and that's if you're over eighteen, but it's easier than this. Some of them pissed off after the first week. Justin lies in bed in the mornings with his eyes closed, listening to the kid in the next room getting up. Then he rolls onto his girlfriend's army stretcher and they fuck. It's better than living at home. By the time they're up their ladders, that stringy kid's already on his third box. He's got this ratty plait down his back with a feather tied to the end. Justin's girlfriend thinks his name is Sue.

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S-i-o-u-x, the kid tells them in the pickers' kitchen after they come across him crouched over a barbecue chicken. He tears off a wing and holds it out. They've become vegetarian but Justin's girlfriend peels off a piece of golden skin. Sioux wraps the carcass in its foil bag and pushes it to the back of the fridge. He moves to the doorway, stops, stares to the left then to the right, then pads off towards his room.

Maintain your rage, says a guy called Timbo from Morwell. Gough never did nothing wrong. Now Fraser's in caretaker mode. There's going to be an election on the thirteenth of December, Gough versus Fraser. Timbo tells them they should all go to the post office in Silvan and enrol to vote before it's too late. Everyone has to vote Gough back in. He gets Justin to sign up for the Miscellaneous Workers Union. Justin walks back from the orchard, kicking up little red puffs of dust. He looks up and there's Sioux sitting in a cherry tree watching him. No ladder, no bucket, he's just there. Sioux says if Justin's going into Silvan, he'll come too. And he springs to the ground, landing on his toes.

The three of them hitch to Silvan. At the post office Justin goes first. He fills out the form, using his parents' address. Identification, yeah, and he fishes out his learners permit with his name, Justin Brian O'Neill. He and his girlfriend sit outside on the concrete waiting for Sioux. Justin's girlfriend hasn't turned eighteen yet. Not my fault Gough got kicked out, she says. Sioux comes stalking out of the post office. Forget it, they want to know where you live and all shit none of their business. Justin and his girlfriend buy fourteen tins of spaghetti and a loaf of bread. Sioux buys a cooked chicken and packs it into this green shoulder bag, looks like it's made out of old curtains. While they're waiting for a lift, he pulls a big block of cheese from down the front of his jeans. Nobody stops for them on the road so they have to walk the whole way.

Back at the pickers' kitchen Sioux cooks cheese on toast, two slices each. Justin and his girlfriend lie down in their room. It's too hot to work. Later in the afternoon after they've woken up and had a shower, they sit on the veranda and argue about whether it would have been worth picking a few boxes. The others have knocked off early. The track from the orchard is quiet except for a slight figure moving along the edge of the trees. He holds up five fingers as he goes to his room. Five boxes. No way he'd be old enough to vote anyway, says Justin. Yes he is, says his girlfriend. No he's not, says Justin.

Those two have only been together for three months but they share everything. Every Friday afternoon the Italian gives them their yellow envelope with the number of boxes written on it, the cash inside. The money gets wadded in a sock, deep in Justin's shoulder bag,. They've got two hundred dollars so far.

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They're saving up. They both want the same thing – buy a van and go up north. They're going to Myrtleford for the tobacco season after this.

Sioux seems to like being around them, positioning himself near them on the veranda at the pickers' quarters or in the orchard. He hangs around when they're cooking, checking out their frypan or staring into the fridge. Today they washed their clothes after they got back from the orchard and they've hung it all on the fence. Someone's got the radio on, the news says there's a big demo in Melbourne and people are shouting shame Fraser, shame. Sioux sits at the end of the veranda reading a book. The skin on his back is pale where his shirt rides up. Justin's girlfriend is right, he looks like a stray with that knobby spine. She tries to see what he's reading but he twists away, whipping the book behind him and up in the air. She stands up and grabs it. *Tales of Power*, she reads out, Carlos Castaneda. She hands it to Justin. There's a butterfly on the cover. Justin turns it over. Don Juan, a Yacqui sorcerer and shaman, divulges his secrets.

Later that night, station wagon Jeff opens a tiny plastic bag of crystals. When he offers Justin's girlfriend her first ever hit of heroin, she holds out her arm. While Justin and Sioux are sitting on Sioux's bed discussing shapeshifting, she is in Jeff's car, nodding out in a slow golden glow.

Sioux says if you have no past, you don't have to explain anything to anyone and no-one's angry with you. He says no-one knows who he is, not even him. Justin starts laughing. What do you want to be, Ajax, asks Sioux, playing with the feather at the end of his plait. A crow? A pigeon? He leaps off the bed onto all fours and arches his back. For the quickest instant, Justin freezes. He's pretty stoned. They both are.

Justin rings his parents each week from the phone box in Silvan. He talks to his mother, then she hands the phone to his father. His mother tells him his exam results arrived in the mail and he's done well, he'll get into uni. She doesn't ask how his girlfriend is. His father says Gough had it coming.

A guy called Peter has a guitar and one night he sings that song, Suzanne. He's known as Pete Pimples but it's so beautiful, he sings it so beautifully, that everyone stops talking. Later, Sioux tells Justin that his stepmother, she's Japanese, used to be married to Leonard Cohen's manager. Justin's family is totally straight. His father would never have heard of Leonard Cohen; he works in the office at a carpet factory. Justin asks Sioux, what about your old man? Sioux says their house was demolished to make way for a new bridge, and the government's going to give him fifty thousand dollars when he turns twenty-one. He's just waiting.

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Justin's hair is nearly long enough to tie back. When his girlfriend finds him looking in her bag for an elastic, she tears into him. In the evenings it's often Justin and Sioux talking about lucid dreaming and shamans. If only you could get peyote. Justin's reading this book called Steppenwolf. He likes the way smoking opens your mind. He hasn't tried acid yet but he wants to. And mushrooms.

Justin walks to the orchard on his own just after sunrise. His girlfriend is still asleep. Sioux is up ahead with that feather hanging off his skinny plait. He's balancing along the top of the post and rail fence. When he gets to the end he leaps off. Justin is practicing lucid walking, each footstep alive. When he looks up, Sioux is sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of him, grinning.

If I could have a dream, says Sioux, I'd dream of having a house up the top of a mountain. Justin's parents used to take him camping in the Grampians. That'd be good, living up there. But Justin wants secrets, he wants to be a warrior. He's thinking of changing his name to Justin Wedgetail. According to Timbo, you can change your name by deed poll if you show them your birth certificate.

Justin's faster at picking cherries now. One time he picks nine boxes on his own while his girlfriend is in bed or somewhere. She's like a warrior waging war on herself. Justin isn't interested in smack. He hates needles. His girlfriend's nice to him when she's had a blast. She'll nod out and rub at her nose while Jeff plays Velvet Underground out of his car. A couple of the others are using too. Not Sioux. Justin's girlfriend can give it up any time she likes.

On the thirteenth of December Justin gets a lift into Silvan with Timbo and Carlo. Voting's at the school. There's a mob of people at the gate shoving papers at him and telling him how to vote. He doesn't need any of it because he knows who he's voting for. But when he gets in the cardboard booth, he can't find Gough Whitlam's name on the sheet, only people he's never heard of. Afterwards, he's not sure what he's even done. The following day on the radio they say it's a bloodbath. All the pickers are angry. It's unfair. Well Gough got caught borrowing money off the Arabs, didn't he? Or did he? It's wrong to point the finger at someone when you don't know the truth, says Sioux. You destroy their name. He stands there, dangling his hands. They all look at him. He pulls his shirt around himself. Justin's girlfriend strokes his hair. He doesn't usually let anyone touch him. He's a strange one, Sioux is.

Well the next day it looks like Justin's girlfriend has stolen the money-sock out of the shoulder bag. That's how it looks. The money's gone, she's gone, her backpack's gone. Station wagon Jeff has gone. What can you say?

A warrior has no time to feel sorry for himself, says Sioux to Justin outside the showers.

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The cherries are getting thin on the trees. It's the storm they had in November. The Italian says there's still a day's work cleaning up the orchard. Justin's going home to his parents. He's applying for uni. He knows it wasn't his fault for voting stupidly. One vote wouldn't make a difference. Timbo and Carlo are hitching over to Kalgoorlie to work in the gold mines. It's good money. Sioux pulls a notebook out of his shoulder bag. K-a-l-g-o-o-r-l-i-e, says Timbo. Pimples Pete is going to work in the carnivals up the coast, maybe on the clowns. He opens his mouth and turns his head from side to side. Cash in hand? asks Sioux. Justin writes down where he lives and gives it to Sioux. You can use it as your address, he says. Some of them are going on the dole. Good luck, says Timbo. Fraser won't help you.

Sioux goes into Silvan in the morning. At lunchtime he comes clattering back on a shitbox motorbike with an oversize helmet on his head. When he goes to pull up he nearly drops the thing. He's got the clutch in but he's hanging onto the throttle and the engine's screaming. He paid two hundred dollars, no rego. You got your license Sioux? asks Justin. I am not that person, says Sioux. He's not old enough, says Pete. Sioux tries to kickstart the bike. Shouldn't have got a two-stroke, says Pete. Piece of shit. Nobody's in a good mood. Gough's had it, Justin's been ripped off, the season's over.

After they finish work, they take turns riding the bike around and around in front of the pickers' quarters. Timbo falls off doing a slide and they spend ages straightening the gear lever. That night they all get off their faces. It's the last time.

In the morning, Sioux sits his backpack on the back of the bike. He puts his sleeping bag on top. Someone gives him a rope. He'll have to buy garbage bags to wrap his sleeping bag for when it rains. That helmet's too big but at least the gloves fit. He's got these cheapo runners on his feet. Everyone's gathered around the bike. Last chance to change your mind Ajax, he says, patting a three-inch gap behind him.

Go and get your birth certificate off your olds, says Timbo. You're fucked without it.

Sioux starts the bike after a few tries and a cloud of blue smoke blows out of the exhaust pipe. Pick a path with heart! he shouts, and away he goes, revving the guts out of it as he bumps along the driveway, knees sticking out, helmet wobbling, feather flying out behind him.

Change up, Sioux, shouts Carlo. He'll get booked, says Pete, or it'll blow up. Or he'll prang it, someone says. They all stand there listening as the sound fades, and that's it.

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And you, Justin, waiting by the road that afternoon with your ajax hair and your duffle bag, you are allowed to have dreams, but you'll never become wild or strange. You'll become a bioethicist, exploring the big questions, and your name will always be Justin Brian O'Neill.