

July 1st

Chilly last night, dropped to four degrees but at least the sun's beginning to warm things up now. Slight sou-westerly sending little ripples over the water. On the Beaufort Scale, that's not even considered a breeze!

I'm in my favourite seat here in the park, enjoying the view over Lake Benalla whilst doing the pensioner thing where every day seems like Sunday because you're now retired. One day flowing into another, all the same - except for the feather thing, of course. How random was that?

Back to this entry. Just had another catch up with my old mate, Danny McKeon. He's started joining me here in the park with a coffee for each of us most mornings. I say 'coffee' but everything tastes like chocolate these days. Must be an age thing.

He's such a good bloke, Danny. I feel like we've been friends forever but we weren't at school. For the life of me, I don't know why we didn't get along then as we agree on everything now.

He got the feather virus the same time as me because I remember bumping into him at the doc's. The boffins eventually traced the outbreak to a school trip to Phillip Island for the local young'uns to watch the famous fairy penguin parade. That's the goss at the golf club anyway. They tell me all school related news they hear because I'm a retired teacher so I must be interested in anything to do with schools! There are two schools of thought on that reasoning but I digress.

The kids were infected by the penguins, their teachers were infected. They all passed on the virus to families and friends. It spread like wildfire - across the continent, around the bloody planet! FPV; we'll never forget that one. Bloody feathers eh? Who saw that coming?!!

Danny wanted my advice today on a couple of flags he owns. I asked if they were the brightly coloured ones I'd often seen hanging in his front windows. I didn't add that I thought they looked garish, all that bright red and the odd black crosses on them.

He agreed they were and asked if I wanted them. His wife had been complaining that they clashed with the décor, and he said he'd now gone off them too.

I decided not to equivocate and told him firmly they weren't my style either.

He said he'd just wanted to give me first refusal. I shook my head again and suggested St Vinnies or Upparel.

We talked awhile longer about the weather, always a popular topic, before he abruptly changed the conversation. He looked both ways as if to ascertain that no-one was in hearing distance then asked hoarsely if I could keep a secret. I was mystified but of course I nodded.

He seemed shamefaced then told me he had to go to court next week as he was up on a charge of vandalising a public monument the previous New Year's Eve. The case had only just come up on the court lists. After some intensive questioning on my part, he admitted to being "stumbling drunk" at the time. In this state, he'd gone home, grabbed some red paint from his shed, taken it to the Siva Singh memorial plaque and emptied the can over it.

I was horrified by his admission, couldn't believe my friend had done such a thing. I asked him why. This was his response:

"I dunno Mandeep. Why did I tease you about your dad wearing a turban, about the way you spoke? I dunno know why I did things like that."

I remembered the outrage when the plaque was defaced, the speed at which the Town Council had it cleaned, and the general unsettled feeling that all was not right in our pretty little town. There was a name for that sort of thing....no, can't recall it now.

Danny continued assuring me earnestly that he didn't want to do things like that anymore. He'd been looking away as he made his awful confession. We sat in silence for a few beats then Danny turned and asked despairingly if he'd ever said why he kept teasing me then. Did I know?

I speculated that perhaps it was because my family lived in the migrant hostel when we first came to Benalla but he shook his head. He pointed out that lots kids at our school did back then. We'd all played together at one time or another so surely being a migrant was not an issue. It had to be something else.

I tried to catch a passing thought but it was elusive - a butterfly on the wing.

We drank our coffees, watched the ripples on the lake caused now by a passing kayaker. Danny stood up and I asked if he was off.

He nodded looking thoughtful, then told me he was going to take a stroll to Siva's monument as he'd never even read it properly, just glanced at it in passing. He added ruefully that he wasn't even sure who Siva Singh was. I thought it was probably a wise move on his part to learn something about the man before he faced the judge, as true repentance must be based on a clear understanding of your crime, your victim.

I stood up slowly, trying not to make 'old man rising' sounds as I did so. I linked my arm with Danny's and told him I'd walk with him to the memorial too. He reminded me that I was always very good at history as a youngster and it was little wonder I became a teacher - this as I told him that Siva Singh was a Punjabi Sikh who migrated to Australia some time in the 1890s. For a while he worked as a hawker but that's not what he became known for...etc.

As my friends also tell me, you can retire teachers but you can't stop us bloody lecturing you!