

CLOUD BRAWLS

BY Greg Foyster

Ken spits over the barbed wire to the other side – one more drop for the thieving bastards next door. He feels the strong south-easterly as a push in the back. It pushes him towards the fence and it pushes the rainclouds further north, drumming life into someone else's soil. They'd known. He spits again. They'd known *exactly* when this was coming.

Driving out, he'd seen their planes buzzing overhead. The gall of it. His airspace, but the clouds seeded downwind and the rain missed his own parched paddocks by a few hundred metres.

He turns and crunches across the cracked clay to his ute. He slams the door and drives fast, curses souring in his cheeks. It was no use complaining. He and Linda had passed up their chance for a permit when the price was low, gambling on nature to fill their dams. Through the window he can see the bluff, jutting into the sky like the end of a ramp. The cool change whooshes up the other side and lobs right over the top of his land. The summer storm season was nearly finished, and all they'd gotten were buckets of humidity.

Back at home he stomps his boots on the doormat but there's no mud to dislodge, only little eddies of dust.

"Well?" says Linda, as the screen door clatters behind him. "Anything?"

"Nup. Fell on the MacArthur's place again." He sighs.

"Might be time to give in, buy some clouds ourselves."

He hears the rattle of a cake tin. Her head appears round the kitchen doorway, flour on one cheek.

"You sure?"

"No harm asking the price."

"No harm," she agrees.

The bloke's four-wheel drive has mud spray covering the door panel, partially obscuring the logo, but Ken can still make out the words WATER MODIFICATION LTD. He greets the man with a

handshake. "Fella on the phone had a South African accent?"

"Head office," explains the salesman. "I'm the local rep. From Tamworth."

They get down to business in the dining room, the man spreading out his papers on the table and helping himself to Linda's lamingtons. He does most of the talking. He's obliged to inform them that the permit allows for up to three cloud-seeding attempts per cold front and it isn't a sure thing – they should know that – but they've had plenty of success in the New England region and the mountains behind Ken and Linda's place should send up the right sort of clouds.

Linda interrupts. "They said fifteen. On the phone."

"That was the quote from head office? Earlier this week?"

Linda nods.



“We’ve had some late reservations,” says the salesman. “Some of the blokes downwind have booked out the next eight cold fronts, so you’ll have to let those ones pass over.”

“That could take all summer,” says Ken.

“Course, you could make them an offer, transfer the permit to your name,” says the salesman. “But they’ll want a premium at this late notice.”

“What are we talking?”

“I’m only guessing...but sixty, seventy. At least.”

“Seventy thousand bucks?” shouts Ken.

“And that’s if they’re willing to sell. Tight market these days.”

Ken shakes his head, chewing on nothing. Linda sees the little vein on his neck throbbing.

“Honey,” she warns.

They see the man out, and both of them notice his calling card on the doormat – compacted mud in the shape of a shoe print.

The winds blow from the west and the heat is like a constant roar behind their ears. The kiln of inland Australia blasts red dust across the plains and there’s no point hanging out the washing; everything comes back dirtier. The dust sifts through their flyscreen and leaves a fine powder on the kitchen floor.

Out in the far paddock, Ken hoists himself up onto the back of his ute. The tray’s metal sides sear his palms, and it’s not even nine in the morning.

“Foreign mercenaries,” he says to Bruce, his nearest neighbour to the south, who is standing behind the ute. Ken passes him a hay bale to help with the hand-feeding.

“Thought you said this bloke was from Tamworth?” says Bruce, undoing the string holding the bale together and letting flakes of hay fall to the ground. The herd starts wandering over, hunger winning out over exhaustion.

“Yeah but the South Africans own it. Or the Chinese. Never us.”

“Sally and I are considering giving it a go,” says Bruce, turning to catch the next bale. He shrugs. “But it hardly stacks up. It’s not guaranteed you know.”

“Yeah,” says Ken. “But what can you do?”

By late January, animals are seeking refuge in their house. Thirsty ants invade their toilet cistern, tiny corpses floating in the bowl after each flush. A snake slithers into the household water tank and drowns. The smothering heat settles in their bedroom, making sleep difficult.

The routine keeps them going. Ken gets up at four, sponge-baths with water from the squealing tap, then heads out to unload hay for the cattle with Bruce. Meanwhile Linda tends to the dying garden, and feeds the chickens, dogs and goats. By 10am it’s too hot and they’re back in the house, sitting directly underneath the *thwop-thwopping* kitchen fan, ordering more supplies. Linda gets up to change the frozen water bottles in the chicken coop and Ken sits there reloading the weather forecast page on his tablet: ten sun symbols lined

up, one after the other, like a volley of incoming enemy fire. He closes the tab when she comes back, pretending to have been reading the news.

In the late afternoon he goes to check on the dead. As the dam water recedes it exposes steep muddy banks. Cows wander down for a drink and get trapped in the rapidly drying clay. Too weak to free themselves, they can’t escape the crows that land on their heads to peck out the precious moisture still left in their eyes. All Ken can do is drag the carcass away to stop it contaminating the remaining water.

One afternoon he decides to cut his losses and cull some cattle for meat. But their freezer isn’t big enough and he’ll need to fill up the eskies. He wonders if it’d keep longer with dry ice. That gives him a strange and hopeful idea, and the sudden desire to buy lots of balloons.

“Having a party?” says the council worker in line at the Gunnedah general store, flicking his head towards the items in Ken’s basket. “Yeah, fifth anniversary of the drought,” says Ken. “Big fucking celebration.”

He pays up, walks to the ute, chucks the balloons in the passenger seat and drives south-east to scout the mountain range.

Over the next two weeks, when Linda is outside, Ken finds himself whispering to his new weather forecasting app, “C’mon, c’mon!” “I know what you’re doing, darl,” she says to him one time when she returns.

“What? Just watching the racing. Not placing any money down.”

“Well, don’t get your hopes up,” is all she says.

In the morning he drives to the mountain pass, the helium-filled balloons jostling and squeaking under the ute’s tray cover. Reading the blogs, he’d been shocked at how simple it was. The forums said to use about 120 grams of dry ice per balloon, wrapped in cheesecloth and dangling from a string. It would freeze the air around it, making a little trail of ice crystals as it rose.

He walks up the hill, wondering how he would explain himself if anyone saw. Near the top he stands on a sandstone outcrop and releases his payload into the rising wind. Mist curls off the dry ice as the balloons recede into small multicoloured dots, like confetti. For a moment he imagines it might actually work, then quashes the thought and heads back down. In the ute he turns on his tablet, loads the rain radar app, and waits.

They got a sprinkle. Bruce did too, he says, catching a hay bale next morning. “But we’ll need much more where that came from.” Ken doesn’t think, just blurts it all out: the blogs, the dry ice, the balloons, everything. “What, this rain just gone?” asks Bruce.

“All I’m doing is starting the rain a little earlier, bringing it a little closer,” says Ken, now considering the risk, the fines.

His voice turns high and whiny. “It was going to rain anyway.”
 “Fair enough, mate. Not judging. Anyone suss?”
 Ken exhales. “Council bloke, what’s his name? Tim. Saw me buying the balloons, told him they were for a big party.”
 Bruce laughs. “Probably should get them somewhere else next time.”
 “Actually, I’ve got a better idea,” says Ken.

Up, up it goes, into the darkening sky. Dry ice pellets drop out of the drone’s carrybag and mist back to earth, sketching a smudgy flight trajectory, but it’s still hard to spot the machine’s exact location among the clouds. Ken turns his attention to the drone’s live camera feed on his tablet, and now he is the one shrinking from view.

He makes a video call to Bruce, who is sitting in the driver’s seat of his ute parked at the main turnoff.

Bruce’s face appears. “Well?”
 “She’s up,” answers Ken. “Bit shaky though. Any traffic?”
 “Nup... Hang on, wait.”

Ken holds his breath, watching the tablet. On the screen, Bruce is looking over his shoulder. A car passes without slowing. “False alarm,” says Bruce.

Relaxing again, Ken returns to the drone’s live camera feed, which shows a crinkled mountain range enveloped in mist. He needs to fly much higher and then north-west, dropping the dry ice pellets in a tight circle over

much paint thinner, plus chemicals to develop photographs, he says “the future is black and white photography”. But when the council bloke Tim sees him buying a big tank of propane, Ken freezes, forearms prickling, and doesn’t know what to say. He just stands there.

“Another party?” asks the council worker.
 “Oh yeah, yeah,” says Ken, hurrying to collect his items and exit the store. “Real big one this time.”

The February heat seeps into March, a contamination of high thirties. Ken obsesses over the forecast, his contraption ready to go with an hour’s notice – but there are sun symbols all the way down the Bureau’s webpage. He worries they’ve missed the summer storms and will skip straight to the clear, blue skies of autumn. A mixed blessing: the temperature would plummet, but so would the chance of big rains. Tired from the manual labour and monotony, he starts surfing the horseracing sites instead. At least they’re upfront about the odds.

So when Bruce calls one Saturday, Ken takes a while to cotton on.
 “Strong southerly,” says Bruce, before the line crackles out. “Six hours...coming up the Hunter.”

“What?” says Ken. “You’re breaking up.”
 “I’m just driving...from Tamworth...get ready.”

Understanding jolts through Ken like whiplash, and he rushes off to load the ute.

Ken, feeling full with all the information he’s consumed. “The ice melts, becomes rain.”

Now disgorged, Ken settles into a comfortable silence, rubbing his hands together as he watches the black smoke rise from the propane furnace. The wind whooshes up, and the gums around them rustle and creak. It feels like the last night of a big camping trip. His right leg trembles with excitement. The air smells of ferns and rotting leaves and nail polish.

When night falls, the dark smoke from the furnace blots out the stars. In his mind Ken can see the silver iodide molecules rising, little hexagons like in the diagrams, and they’re seeding perfect snowflakes high above. The cloud is billowing upwards, doubling, tripling in size, a dark column of suspended water, and now here comes God’s thumb, the opposable thumb of man, to press it down.

On the drive back down, when the rain starts its steady drumroll on the roof of the ute, Bruce yells out the window. “You beauty!”

Ken is quieter, but he feels the warm contentment of a job well done. “Knock off drinks?” he asks.

At the pub, they duck under the dripping verandah and push through the crowd to the bar. Everyone’s pumped. “Forty mils, they reckon,” shouts Bruce over the noise of Aussie rock and rumbling laughter. “A good soaking!” They clink glasses and the first sip is glorious.

Settling into a bar stool, Ken looks around. Smiles bounce from face to face, and he smiles too. The future is swinging his way after all. He takes another big gulp. A numbness at the back of his skull keeps pushing him forward, towards the next drink, and he rolls with the momentum. Bruce is off his head now. He must have let it slip because strangers are coming up to congratulate them. “To the rainmakers!” they cheer.

A man staggers towards Ken, beer sloshing over the sides of his glass. “Hear you blokes did some DIY cloud seeding up the pass?”

Ken swivels in the bar stool to face the man, a lopsided grin forming. “Yeah. You buying?”

“I’m from up north,” says the man. “Downwind of the mountains. Been waiting for decent rain all year.” He squints with concentration as he places his beer on the counter. “We had our planes loaded up, ready to fly.” He starts swaying backwards. “Paid for a permit. Bloke told us this cold front was ours to seed, but then some prick seeded it first.”

Too late, Ken sees the man’s right hand is curled into a fist.

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his and Bruce’s properties. But he can tell the machine is struggling. The view swings violently to show an angled horizon. He feels a wet sensation, as if he were the one floating among the moist clouds, and then realises it’s rain hitting his cheek. He stops for a second to put on the hood of his raincoat. By the time he returns to the tablet the screen is black, reading “no connection”. He jerks his head up. Lightning illuminates the heavens, and he thinks of what the drone might be seeing: a tiny man on a huge mountain, playing with a toy.

They got more than a sprinkle this time, enough to steady their dam levels, but Ken lost the drone. He can’t risk the cost of another one, so he does more research, fretting late into the night, and in the blue glow of the computer monitor he discovers something even better.

“There’s another way,” he tells Bruce the next morning. “But what we really need is a dark room. And a bloody big barbecue.”

When Bruce asks what he’s on about, he just smiles and says “you’ll see”. When his wife asks why’s he’s ordered so

it takes both of them to carry all the gear up the mountain: the propane tank, furnace chamber, tripod and chemicals. The track isn’t well-maintained and long strips of stringybark collect in the crooks of their ankles. The air is cooling rapidly and a gale has picked up, but they still arrive at the rocky outcrop feeling hot and sweaty. Soon they’ve set up the burner, attached the drip lines to Ken’s special solution, and are sitting on fold-out chairs to watch.

“Smells a bit nasty,” says Ken, as the liquid sprays into the flame and sizzles. “But it’s just acetone paint thinner with a bit of silver iodide in it – and you don’t need much.”

“Silver what?” says Bruce.
 “Iodide. Amazing stuff. Few hundred grams of this will do the same job as a few kilos of dry ice. Easy to make, they used to use it in dark rooms.”

“Bugger me,” says Bruce. “And those Water Mod pricks charge an arm and leg for it.”

“Yeah, mainly for the pilot’s time. But the Chinese, see, they just burn this stuff in the right spot, let the updraft do the work. The silver smoke rises, gets to the top of the cloud, and becomes a little seed for the ice to form around,” says



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