

Communication

By Peter Court (Australia)

The street lights are custard smudges in the veil of whimpering rain. For a land of droughts and flooding rains, this is an insipid effort but it's cool at last and the little park reeks of damp dust and tangy eucalypt resin.

Ricardo sits beside me on the park bench swathed in his sparkling new Addidas tracksuit, his dark face all but vanishing in the night shadows. Thirteen maybe, looking like some tiny teen pimp, but what do I know about his type? We share a slouch.

"You got rain like this in Burundi?"

His face turns and stares at me, another weird white man with no idea. Or maybe he doesn't understand me.

"Rain? You know?"

He looks up into the darkness and the drizzle frosts his peaceful ebony face, diamonds on a velvet cloth. His innocence catches me and I regret what I was going to do.

To me he's Ricardo. I don't know if that's his name. He doesn't say anything. None of them do. That's probably why 'Angry Aussie of Dulwich' hates them writing that 'these bloody refos are here to stay, Down my street and up yours! That's what I say!' At least he didn't call them Niggers. I call him Ricardo.

"How long you lived 'ere?"

He stares at me. Looks at the park. Stares at me again.

"Not in the park, How long you lived in A'stralia?"

He shrugs.

His mobile 'phone still sits between us. I glance down at it. It would've got me 50 bucks at the Cash Coop.

The silence between us stretches and I have nothing to fill it with. Ricardo just sits, looking at the darkened park with its flat pristine cricket pitch off somewhere in the murk. Or perhaps he's looking across at the pustule row of yellow streetlights beyond.

"You got streetlights in Burundi?"

Nothing.

Then he shrugs.

The papers call them 'Our Burundian guests' like they're here for a long weekend.

Ricardo grins to himself.

"What?"

He shrugs.

I could pinch his phone couldn't I? Just sitting on the bench there, right there. I mean, he doesn't need a slick thing like that. He's a refugee, who's he going to call!? Burundi? And besides, I don't think the kid can even talk!

"So... Who you call anyway?"

He looks down at the 'phone. Touches it.

He shrugs.

Then he picks it up and, with a bip, he holds the screen up for me to see. His address book is scrolling. A list of names. Just first names as far as I can tell, like everyone on this scrolling, stretching list is his mate, best friends. Through Ben, Bettiny, Beya, Bianca... on and on the list scrolls.

Darren, Darin, Dave, Davick, Denise... the list just keeps scrolling.

Family, friends, acquaintances, I can't tell. To me they're just names. Like Ricardo. And Ricardo, this strange kid from a strange land, he knows all these people. Here.

And the list scrolls on.

Finally, after Yana and Zuben, he runs out of friends.

He flips the phone shut and slips it into the hissing pocket of his nylon tracksuit.

We stare out across the fizzing darkness.

I don't even have a mobile phone.

He has a pocket full of friends.

We sit, coated in the thin misting.

"So what do ya talk to all them people about?"

He looks at me.

Shrugs.

Then a grin dances across his smooth glittering skin.

As he turns to me there's a sparkle across the deep brown of his eyes.

"Now..." his soft voice says, "I talk about you."