

The first Melbourne Cup was run on the 7th of November, 1861. The prestigious new horse race offered 930 gold sovereigns to the winner, but before the prize could be given, it was stolen.

And this is what happened.

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Five miles from the gold-mining town of Mull Creek, there were three fires burning, and each camp had no knowledge of the others.

At the first was Jesus Whitetree. And Jesus loved gold.

For the time and place he lived, Jesus had an unusual name. But he didn't know that. There were many things he didn't know. He didn't know his age or the date he was born, although he guessed that he was about fifty years old. Maybe a little older. All he knew was fifty was half of one hundred, and one hundred years was a very long time. And he felt like he'd lived at least half of a very long time.

But he was wrong. In truth, today was Jesus' birthday, and he was just eighteen years old.

JUSTIN SMITH

He had never seen a calendar and he'd never heard much about dates and months and years. He knew the days of the week and he could recite them, but he always made a mistake in the order. He would put Friday before Thursday, and he thought Tuesday was the first day of the week. The errors had been implanted in him when he was very small, and no-one corrected him nor cared that he got it wrong.

And he'd never seen a map or a globe of the world, so he didn't know where he was on this planet. He didn't know the country he lived in and whether it was surrounded by other countries or if he was on an island. And he didn't know the names of any of the towns he'd been through or if he'd crossed any borders.

On the occasion of his eighteenth birthday, it was the year of 1861 and Jesus lived in the British Colony of Victoria on the island continent of Australia.

It was getting colder but it wasn't winter yet. The sun was gone and Jesus had a good fire. The flames glowed orange on his white face and behind him it was black. It was so dark that it seemed like the only things that existed were the objects touched by his fire's light. The logs crackled and moved and he thought it sounded like a song he'd heard a long time ago, but the fire never sang it long enough for him to remember how it went.

He'd be asleep soon, but just before he closed his eyes, he would say his name three times. He'd say it first in a whisper. Then a little louder. And then louder again.

'Jesus Whitetree. Jesus WHITETREE. JESUS WHITE-TREE.'

He did this every night so he wouldn't forget. He'd only had the name for a short time. Maybe a year. Maybe not even

that long. No-one else knew it and he was afraid he'd wake one morning with the fire dead and realise he'd forgotten his own name.

Before he named himself Jesus Whitetree, he had no name at all. He'd lived in a brick building that may have had many rooms but he was only allowed in one. It had a ceiling so high he couldn't see it and was filled with other children who didn't have names either. It was so crowded that their bodies were always touching. Jesus couldn't remember a time when he was not touching someone. Their shoulders or their arms or their feet. But it was always cold, no matter the weather outside, and he felt alone. And from his place in the middle of the room, where he slept and ate and waited for nothing, they were watched by men who wore long robes and only ever talked to each other, never to the children.

But one night, he ran away. And he kept running. As fast as he could and as straight as he could. He never made a turn. He was too afraid to. If he turned, and then turned again, he would be going back towards the brick building. He didn't want that. He'd rather bury himself in the dirt until he couldn't breathe. Or jump from a high branch and break his head.

So he always checked the position of the sun and the stars to be sure he was travelling straight. And when he thought he was far enough away – where he knew the men in robes couldn't hear him – he gave himself the name Jesus Whitetree.

He wanted a good name. He deserved a good name. He had been alive for fifty years and he'd always been cold, but now he had his own fire each night. So he should have a strong name. And he should like the way it sounded in his mouth.

JUSTIN SMITH

He thought of little else for a week, before he settled on Jesus. He'd heard the long-robe men talk about a person of that name. Jesus was not one of the robe men, but they seemed to really like him. He had people who followed him, so he was never alone. And he had died but then he was alive again. The men said his name over and over, so Jesus knew he wouldn't forget Jesus.

Then he needed another name to go with Jesus.

He remembered that he was sick once. It was a long time before he ran away. And he guessed the sickness lasted almost two years. It made him sleep and he'd dreamt of being wrapped in something white. It covered everything. It wasn't like light and it wasn't like cloth. It was something else. It was all of those things but not really. He didn't know. But it was white. Everything was white. And he didn't feel cold when he could see the white. It was the first time he didn't feel alone and cold. And when he was well again, nothing in the brick room was white. It was only in the dream. But Jesus always remembered what it looked like.

So he thought he could be Jesus White. But that was missing something. It needed more. He tried to imagine saying the name to another person and what their face would be like when he did. He wanted them to remember it. Because he himself might forget.

He added 'tree' because they were all around him, and when he was running away from the brick building, the trees helped to keep him hidden. Every time he heard a voice behind him, or the sound of feet or horses, there was always a tree to stand behind until he could start running again.

So he would be Jesus Whitetree.

GOOD AS GOLD

The name made him feel lucky. No-one else in the world was allowed to pick their own name. He may never have had a mother, but now he had his own name.

‘Jesus. Whitetree,’ he said again. He did it four times this night to be sure.

He poked the fire and put on another log. The sparks danced up into the darkness as the flames gave a different song. His eyes closed. Jesus may not have known where he was in the world, but he wasn’t lost. And he may have had no-one to love, but he loved gold, and before his next birthday, he would have more gold than he could fit into his dreams.