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SOMETHING MUST BE BURNING

Earlier this morning I'd agreed that we didn't need to leave. Now that a second helicopter has arrived I have changed my mind.

"Brendan, we can't stay," I say. "We need to pack the car."

We are standing on our second-level balcony with the doors closed behind us to stop the smoke from going inside. My nose blocks with the acrid odour of ash and burning gum leaves. We have come out here to try and see how close the fire has reached but all we can see is a thick haze drifting between the trees.

The air pulses with the constant beating of the helicopter blades advancing and receding as they fill up at the dam. It's not even eleven o'clock and the temperature has already reached thirty-eight degrees. The wind brings discomfort, not relief. I have wet my t-shirt but it doesn't help.

"We'll be okay," Brendan says. "We don't need to evacuate."

He is scanning the forest beyond our neighbours' house across the road. He leans forward and actually seems to be enjoying the action. I stare at his back and think of how accustomed I have become to him ignoring what I feel. But I still can't believe he is being so blasé.

"We do," I say, though I hope he's right.

"We need to stay and guard the house," he says. "There are floating embers. They can set the house on fire if we're not here to put them out."

"What's the use of guarding the house if we die?" I say. "This isn't a game. You're not trained to fight fires."

My husband is a doer who thinks he can handle any problem. Once he'd tried to relocate a set of pipes for our new washing machine. Nine hours later he was still ankle-deep in water and would not leave the laundry, even when I called the plumber against his protestations.

But I cannot call anyone if I'm on fire. He doesn't seem to realise that it's okay to be afraid.

I can hear a fresh siren wailing up the mountain road. They have played a steady mournful melody throughout the morning as reinforcements are sent in from all over. It has become the lead item on the hourly radio news now that the bushfire has dissolved seven homes.

But instead of listening to the updates we should be getting out of here.

"What's more important," I say. "Our baby or the house?"

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I can still see the mountain on the other side of the valley, glowing orange across the horizon that night. Fragments of soot floated in the air and the house smelled of a winter's day when my father tried to burn green wood in the coonara. The conduit of forest linking the towns east of Melbourne was ablaze. It was 1983 and they couldn't stop the spread of Ash Wednesday.

The roof-rack of the Commodore was piled high and there was just enough space left in the back seat for me and my brother to squeeze in; the dog would have to sit on my lap. I was only allowed to bring what would fit in my school bag: my diary, my favourite watercolour kit, and a stuffed teddy named Bo.

My parents were out on the front porch: I could hear my mother coughing. My brother and I were meant to be sleeping on the fold-out couch in the lounge, but we kept getting up to look. It was as if a volcano had appeared on the hillside opposite, with a great flow of lava creeping across to us. My brother kept telling me what happened to people when they burned alive, how they screamed as their skin blistered and their eyeballs boiled. I said I'd tell Mum.

She shook us awake before I had a chance. It was still dark outside except for that glow. She told us the fire was getting closer and we had to get in the car. We couldn't find the dog at first. Dad threatened to leave without him but at last we found him under the house.

We drove away from the front of the fire along a windy unsealed road that traversed the side of Mount Donna Buang. The dog was asleep on my lap and I began to drift off too, until the car skidded to a dusty halt and my father began to swear. A fallen tree was blocking our way. He got out of the car to see if he could shift it but it was too big to move.

I began to cry.

I knew that we were trapped and we would all be burned alive.

"What will we do if our house burns?" I say, scratching my wrist. "I couldn't stand it. Where would we live?"

"That's why we should have stayed to defend our property," Brendan says. "Everything is so dry. I could have put out any burning embers that landed in our yard."

He is disgruntled I made us leave. I turn to look behind but the view is blocked by our bags.

Two fire-trucks, their strobe lights flashing, drive past us in the opposite direction, the sound of their sirens lingering after they are gone. We have joined a line of cars that is coiling its way down the mountain, a train of refugees. In front of us is a yellow station wagon with two collies in the back, tails wagging merrily as they frequently switch sides. Its brake lights come on.

As we slow we see an SES truck parked in a widening on the gravel shoulder, and a man setting up a portable barricade in the opposite lane.

"They're closing the road," Brendan says. "We won't be allowed to go back home until the fire's under control."

He nods to the man as we drive past.

"The poor bloke," I say. "He must be so hot in those coveralls."

I pull at my undies which have migrated into the crack of my bum, and redirect the air-conditioning vent so it blows on my legs.

"Are you sure we should go to your parents?" I say. "I'd rather stay at a hotel."

"It's only for one night," Brendan says. "Hopefully."

I consider arguing about the issue but I can't be bothered. We pass the Norway nursery on the left, the plants looking limp behind the fence. I think of our house burning. Everything we'd lose.

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Last September, snow was falling when we drove past here.

The sky was a dull brooding grey and Brendan had the headlights on in the middle of the afternoon. We'd gone to *Ellen's Organics* in Ferny Creek to buy

ginger tea for my nausea. Brendan said morning sickness shouldn't be coming on this early, but he also said I wasn't supposed to get PMS on the pill.

I redirected the heating vent so it blew on my legs and burrowed my hands into the opposite sleeves of my red fleece. Brendan kept adjusting the windscreen wipers to clear the splotches of snow. Even going at thirty the tyres would still have brief spasms of slushy spin.

"So much for global warming," he said.

"Global warming means the weather is more extreme," I said. "Not necessarily hotter."

I looked out the misting window at the ghost gums, at their white covered limbs, at the ground's new layer of snow hiding its ugly patches of mud. We passed an A-frame house with its lights on, smoke rising from the chimney. I thought of our future winters, how cosy it would be at home, Brendan, the baby, and me.

"Brendan," I said.

"What?"

I wasn't sure what I wanted to say.

I rested my hand on his knee.

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As we pull into the driveway Brendan's mother opens the front screen door and waves. She is a short woman of medium build with shoulder-length grey hair and a practical smile.

She is happy to see her son and comes to the car and gives him a hug when he opens the door. I get a hug as well. It feels a bit awkward as always, we're not what you'd call close. I think it's because she's never quite got me, though now that I am carrying her grandchild we finally have something to share.

Brendan opens the boot and pulls out a suitcase.

I go to help, but all I can do is stand there mulling over what to bring in. The fear for our home has left me fatigued.

Brendan's mother also takes a case. It is hard to remain in a stupor when everyone around you is functioning so I pull out a bag in which I think I have packed our toiletries. Closing the boot, I walk up the front steps into the cool house.

Brendan's father is lying on the couch with the cricket on. He looks up between the overs and asks me if I need a hand. He is a pharmacist who works hard at his own small business, but I've noticed this seems to leave him with little motivation to help around the home. It has always bugged me that he seems to think I am just a housewife. I used to believe I would show him, but that dream is slipping as time passes by.

Brendan comes over and puts his arm around my shoulders. I feel like shrugging it off but I don't want to draw attention.

I go to his old bedroom to hang a few things up. I look at the cheap paperbacks standing haphazardly in the bookshelf and his maps bluetacked to the walls. His ratty green blanket still lies on the bed, and I think how little the room has changed, even though it's been ten years since he lived here.

After a long afternoon we sit in front of the television and watch the six o'clock news while we eat our tea — cold roast chicken with potato salad and bread. The fire is the lead item. The police suspect arson. Eight more houses have burnt.

I feel homesick as we sit here, chewing through our food.

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Later that night I lie under the green blanket unable to get to sleep. I think of our overflowing gutters. It hasn't rained for weeks and even the weeds growing in them have died. Our roof is made of cedar shingles which would make an excellent fuel if an ember came to rest. I can see a pile of blackened ruins where our house used to be.

Reflux simmers in my chest and I feel the beginnings of needing to pee. I turn onto my left side. Brendan is lying on the spare mattress with only his underpants on. I can tell from his arrhythmic breathing that he is in the middle of a dream. I don't have anything in my throat, but I clear it anyway. He remains asleep.

I try again. Then give up.

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"Are you sure it's safe to go home?" I say. It is ten-thirty in the morning and we are driving back to the hills. "I know they issued an all clear. But still."

"It's under control," Brendan says.

"But look at all that smoke. Something must be burning. What if it's our house? What will we do? I don't want to have to live with your parents."

"We won't have to live with my parents," he says. "I'm sure our house is okay."

"But they said nine houses were burnt in Olinda! Why wouldn't one of them be ours?"

"Look Joni," he says. "Don't work yourself up. We'll see soon enough."

We come to the roundabout at the base of the hills and turn left, driving up past the bottle shop and the Montrose butchery. Ahead, two policemen are stopping cars. They ask to see Brendan's licence when he winds the window down. They are only letting residents through to reduce the risk of looting and to stop people from going up just to gawk at the damage. They wish us good luck as we leave.

We curve up the hillside where the trees begin to thicken. Smoke lurks between the trunks in clouds of grotty blue and conceals the floor of the valley below. The air smells of drizzle and damp ash. Overnight a cool change has come, bringing scattered showers that have slowed the fire. The tall gums we pass at first are undamaged, but as we ascend the road along a running slope of forest we enter patches where the flames have been and gone. Darkened pillars of eucalypts stand sparse on the barren floor, their cracked, charred limbs bald of foliage and bark. Between them soggy ash greys the blackened, shrivelled ferns and the naked, stony ground. Small wisps of white rise in places where the coals are still alive. I think of the birds, and the wombats that have lost their burrows.

I look at Brendan. "Maybe we should turn around and go back. Let's wait until it's totally safe until we check. I'm sure your parents wouldn't mind if we stayed another night."

Brendan drives on.

We pass a house that's burnt.

It's the A-frame I love. A portion of blackened wall remains upright with its doorframe gaping open. The roof is gone; its exposed beams stick out like the charcoaled remnants from a campfire. Sheets of corrugated iron lie curled

against piles of rubble. Amongst the gutted ruins two people are standing in a room that is just a floor, sifting through their wreckage, trying to salvage whatever they can.

The road passes through a stretch that is still green. Then another burnt pocket. Beyond its damaged margins we drive until we get to the intersection and swing right, slowing for the potholes.

"Here goes," Brendan says.

We turn onto our dirt road.

I look through my dust-streaked window at the front yards of our neighbours: their driveways are vacant, house curtains closed, we seem to be the first to return. Even the goat usually chained outside number twelve is gone. Did it travel in the car, or was it set free?

Things at this end seem okay, but maybe it is giving me false hope. Our street goes over a hill. What if on the other side everything is destroyed?

I grasp Brendan's arm.

His eyes flick to mine.

We reach the road's crest then descend.

I see glimpses of our house roof through the trees ahead. The weathervane is still standing, the shingles intact.

"Brendan ——" I cannot speak my relief.

We pull up our driveway and get out of the car. My husband crosses over and takes my hand. We stand looking at our house. I stare at its stone foundation. It is sturdy, built to last.