

JANE DOWNING

THE TEA LADIES ON THE EDGE OF THE APOCALYPSE

All the services were called to the crash 20 kilometres out of the country town: police, ambulance, fire *and* bushfire, and the tea ladies. The latter were told to set up on a straight stretch of highway at the approach to a hill; a drowsy stretch with a wide, flat shoulder perfect for them and their van. Missy got her finger caught in the leg mechanism of the trestle table and swung her generous hips over to the closest ambo. She came back with a Band-Aid and news.

“Three ambulances have already gone back full, four more are coming from over the river. It’s a bigger pile-up than it looks.”

She and Fran stared across the double-lane, dual-carriage highway, scanning what could be six cars, a van, and a double-B truck. Their eyes travelled up to the crest in the road, over which more cars and trucks and the cause of the crash stayed subject to rumour. Barbara didn’t look up from ripping into a third packet of Arnott’s Family Assorted. If it was this big an event even the orange creams would go.

“You look shagged,” Fran offered unhelpfully. A distant anguished wail was dismissed as an engine or a siren.

Barbara ignored the comment and gave a pepper spray of orders. “Go to the back of the van and fish out another of the big pots, and see if you can find some more spoons.”

She felt as tired as she looked. All night long she’d tossed and turned and twisted her sheets into a hot cotton tornado. Her husband had suffered, and not in silence. “Not a-bloody-gain.” Full moons, equinoxes, brittle long summers were all catastrophe weather. The call at dawn had almost been a relief.

“Are you burning something?” Captain Bob joked as he ambled over to their edge of the highway. He sniffed at the cindered air dramatically, giving them a wide up-the-nostril shot, then winked. The volunteer Firies were like that. Barbara fluttered under the flattery of his direct smile. If only she was ten years younger. And he was ten years older.

“My girls and boys are mopping up and I’ll be over soonish. Kettle on?” Bob said.

“Did the fire travel far?” Barbara asked, just to have something to say.

The trees in the median strip were burnt matchsticks, but the surrounding paddocks were not, so she knew what his approximate answer would be.

“A smidge of a grassfire, normal crash stuff,” he responded, as expected, before flipping his red braces against his yellow vest.

Missy thought Bob was gorgeous too. She giggled at his manliness, gate-crashing into Barbara’s field of attention. Sirens drowned out whatever witticism Captain Bob had for his admiring groupies. The fleet of new ambulances swooped in, and their wailing died. A couple of paramedics appeared and asked the same question about the kettle.

“Coffee or tea?” Barbara offered.

They settled for International Roast, and the first atolls of brown clumped in the bowl of sugar as they dipped spoons in and out of the sparkling granules. They dithered over the choice of milk—full cream, skim or soy. What on earth is the world coming to, Barbara often asked herself, before slurping her coffee to the background music of the generator in the van. It was big and noisy, but it made the catering possible. Once the Jaws of Life roared awake, metal grinding metal, the paramedics skolloed and dropped the cups in the black-bagged bin.

Barbara sighed. She’d seen it all before: some would be alive. More wails to be blamed on engines and sirens.

“Sardines out of a can,” she told no one in particular.

“Will we need sandwiches too?” Missy, with her fingers in the Band-Aids, asked.

“We’ll have them home by lunchtime,” Fran told her confidently, the veteran to the apprentice.

When Captain Bob’s crew came over for sustenance, the tea ladies kept pace with Barbara, the real veteran: their ‘suppository’ of all knowledge she’d once told them, and then gone all ‘beresk’ when they sniggered. Coffee, tea, milk(s), sugar to the volunteer bushfire fighters, help-yourself bikkies, doling out smiles along the way. After the first wave, Fran plucked a packet of fags from the wide pocket of her uniform. Barbara gave her the OH&S stare and sent her to an appropriate distance, and Fran took advantage and disappeared around the other side of the van. She pushed an echidna carcass out of the road with her shoe. It was a light, desiccated thing. Old crow food. For her second ciggie, she sat in the cab of the van.

The two clean-shaven and well-ironed police officers who came over first looked like boy scouts. When the President of the US of A and the police start looking like boys, it's time to buy slippers and book into the nursing home. Barbara chewed on this thought and let Missy do the smiling for this lot. They had an easy job anyway. Putting up roadblocks, drawing chalk lines at the ends of the skid marks until they had a hop-scotch game, measuring the distance between them so insurance knew what was what and who was to blame.

"What happened?" Missy asked.

The taller officer mumbled something about it all being so mangled and unrecognisable.

The other constable wanted a fresh teabag rather than a cup from the pot since there was no chamomile. Missy obliged while Barbara ostentatiously dropped three more teabags into the steaming pot—a gesture that spoke volumes. These boys with chalky hands like old-fashioned school teachers thought they knew everything, but she knew those at the pointy end of the emergency needed something stewed with a bit of body to it.

"There's another huge pile-up out Oodnadatta way," Fran rasped when she got back to the coalface. "On the radio just then. We were mentioned too."

The tea ladies felt a collective shiver of pride that the name of their country town was on the National News. Made this a real event. Maybe even a tragedy.

"Cuppa for yourselves?" Missy asked the older ladies. "Before the—"

A group came over the crest as she spoke. Fire brigade and ambulance officers in a rainbow of colours, warning orange to look-out yellow to trust-me blue. Their faces were uniformly ashen. It was always a shock. The insides of bodies are so unlike the outside it can take the innocent by surprise. One man peeled off and vomited in the brittle summer grass. Once the adrenalin stopped hot tea was the only cure.

"Bugger sandwiches," Barbara thought. She scooped in spoons and spoons of sugar, not bothering to avoid the nuggets of instant coffee lodged in the snow white.

"It's the end of the world," whispered a fireman. His mate put a firm hand on his shoulder. "The end of the world," he repeated anyway.

Barbara put the hot, sugared and stewed tea in his outstretched hands.

"It always seems that way, dear," she consoled him, "but don't worry, it never is."

She watched the poor dear thread his way back past mangled cars then turned to scowl pointedly at the burly tow truck drivers who'd arrived like vultures to the feast. Seven of them parked just beyond the police roadblock. They'd come from all the towns around. Most knew better than to approach the trestles of tea supplies. Barbara guarded her Road Traffic Authority refreshments with a corporate loyalty worthy of all the other emergency services.

"Maybe it's one of those factory recall thingies," Fran grunted when the rush lulled, in the swift moments before the next onslaught of tired emergency workers. "All the cars going bung at once," she continued to no one in particular. "Transmission or brake systems. Oodnadatta and us."

"And Rockhampton," added a surly copper with her measuring tape under her arm like the canister of a black and white movie. "Put the radio on."

Missy opened the front doors of the van wide and turned the radio up as loud as it would go so they could all hear the news between the hisses and crackles. From Wagga Wagga to Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, from Hay to Hay-on-Wye in the UK, everything was not okay. A bad day for crashes.

The grasshoppers stilled in the growing heat of the day. It had to be a mass manufacturer's defect. Barbara put her hand on her bust, that big, icebreaker frontage over her heart. Fran stared off into the distance, or as far as the rooster-shaped tree on the far hill—silhouetted majestically against the grey sky—as they listened to a road toll that put their parochial show to shame.

Two ambulances wailed away just as the explosion shook the ground and mushroomed upward. Black, acrid smoke billowed over the crest of the highway and enveloped them. Fran fetched out a fag and lit it. Barbara gave her the squint eye. Fran stayed behind her pot of tea and drew in long and slow.

All the emergency men and women within sight were running bravely toward the explosion. They'd be back.

"I'll get more milk from the esky," Missy offered without being asked. "Hey, if we run out, I can pop over to those cows in the next paddock." The joke fell as flat as a cowpat.

Their generator's coughs and complaints were the only noises for 13 seconds.

The first man back over the hill was skinny and tall. His arms waved like one of those blow-up grass men outside a lawnmower dealership.

“Bugger me, he’s naked,” said Fran.

He was as pink as their uniforms.

And perspective had them fooled. He wasn’t just tall. He was a giant. The tow trucks screeched as they accelerated back to their homes. There were four other pink men following the first.

“The Acropolis,” Barbara spluttered.

“That ruined Greek place? What’s that got to do with it?” asked Missy, not taking her eyes off the sinuous figures.

“Not Acropolis. She means Apocalypse,” corrected Fran, kissing her fag against a new one and hoping she had time to chain smoke herself to death.

The whomp of helicopter rotors rumbled somewhere behind the choking smog. The army or Channel 7 News.

There was no one between the tea ladies’ trestles and the newcomers.

“I think we’re going to run out of teabags,” Barbara thought out loud.

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