

A black Saturday by Debbie Webber

As with any other day, the morning sees me prising myself from the comforting embrace of bed to momentarily gather my thoughts, staring out of the bedroom window, slowly summoning the energy to meet my plans for the day ahead. A hot day they had predicted – perhaps the hottest on record but then they frequently made such claims. Perhaps a cool change would arrive ahead of the heat and relieve all in its sweltering path.

My day begins with a mental rundown of all I need to accomplish before I next close my eyes. By then I'll probably be exhausted from trying to accommodate everything planned for the day. Work first, then visitors to entertain for a surprise birthday party and all that events like this entail. I have a fleeting thought that a few extra stolen minutes sleep might aide me in getting through, then common sense kicks me in the shins and gets me going.

The promise of a warm day greets me on my way out and the flies are there already to shower me in early morning kisses - definitely not on my list of favorite things. Stillness, not a breath of wind yet a foreboding sense hangs in the air heralding an uncomfortable heat that is yet to arrive. Still, the place is pretty – dry but pretty. I revel in the local scenery daily, and indeed realize I take the beauty of my surrounds so for granted. Such is a busy life!

My work is reasonably physical and the happy banter of work mates and the smell, sight and sound of horses relieve its mundane content – these fascinating creatures are music for my soul. Whilst my body functions in auto mode to get the job done for the day, my mind is running its own race ahead of time, plotting, planning and debating the best way to meet the demands of the day. The heat has begun to close in and it is only mid-morning. Sweat trickles and entices my fly friends that find me completely irresistible. They flock to engage my impatience and annoyance but they're forgiven for the time being – the heat will get them later I think gleefully to myself. When it's time to leave, I chat briefly with the others and my parting words are "take care ". Hindsight will make those words prophetic ones.

Marysville on the way home appears still asleep. The main street is devoid of the usual visitors and the heat is hanging there too. A few small purchases to add the finishing touches to my preparation are in order, with a visit to the small candle shop and its beautiful scents and elegant aromas. I meet a lady from a local Narbethong business in the shop and we exchange casual greetings and chitchat. She is hosting a wedding later that day she tells me and I

comment on what a terrible day it would be to have to don formal attire.

My car seems to have risen ten degrees in temperature by the time I return to it and drive home with the air conditioning blasting all the way. The fan hums away quietly on maximum and I wish there were two or three higher fan settings to bank on when things really heat up later. Just an idle thought and I notice some smart flies have hopped in and hitched a ride with me, perhaps to keep out of the heat themselves. Are flies really this smart I wonder!

Two of our interstate guests arrive at around midday – my partner's elder sister from Sydney and her son from Adelaide. The anticipation of a pleasant day overrides the uncomfortable heat and we all resolve to enjoy proceedings no matter what. The air hangs hot, dry and stifling and icy cold drinks are the order of the day. We discuss the heat and in the back of my mind, I imagine that all will be well if we can survive a day such as this without any fire incident. Already, I feel uncomfortable that the unused parts of our block remain unslashed, awaiting the contractor to arrive and do the job. I silently curse him – a day like this would be better if we lived in the midst of a closely cropped block. I make a mental note to jog his memory next time we cross paths and chide him in the playful manner that is indicative of my English humor. No matter for now though and my attentions turn to enjoying the immediate company of our guests, whom we haven't seen for some time. Somewhere amidst the chat are the strains of our children's voices singing along to a familiar tune inside the house along with their cousin. I cast an eye over my animals – three horses and a cow – silently gathered together under their shelter, as still as statues with only the occasional lazy flick of a tail or twitch of an ear. They seem to know that minimal movement is the order of the day and knowingly ignore the bustling activity of their human counterparts only twenty meters away. I think how uncomfortable they must be in the stifling heat, and wander over to their paddock to spray them with streams of icy cold water from the hose. They line up gratefully, each taking their turn to revel in the relief of the cool stream until their bodies are wet and glossy.

As I hose, I notice a smoky haze over the trees. Smog I think without considering that we are in the country. Perhaps someone burning off or fallout from the faraway Kilmore fires that were mentioned earlier. Absently, I completely dismiss the thought and return to join the happy banter of my guests who are now preparing for the arrival of two more family members from interstate that are en route to Narbethong from the airport. Preparations continue and a half-hour of activity passes until I wander out to check the smoke haze that has been at the back of my mind since I first noticed it. The pink haze is typical of smoke I've seen from other bushfires in

previous years, only when I avert my gaze from upwards to outwards across the ranges visible from our corner, a mushroom cloud is forming and rising steadily from a single spot on the horizon. This looks to me like a fire in a specific spot and I hail the others to come and see. We all offer our opinions on what the cloud could be; speculating without panic or concern – there seems to be no reason – the cloud is too far away to be of any threat. In spite of the general air of dismissal, the unease I have felt since the morning is rising and I curse the cloud and its presence interrupting our planned party. Somewhere, a fire truck will be in attendance I think and go inside to upgrade my working clothes to party ones.

The phone has been ringing hot for a half-hour or so and our other guests have arrived at the caravan park at the other end of town. They will have to buy ice and cigarettes before they head down to our place on our prompt, just before the birthday girl arrives from Melbourne. The timing is critical to ensure maximum impact on our unsuspecting victim but with the likes of my partner's family, meticulous timing will be the order of the day and will be executed with military precision, with mobile phones running hot in the lead-up to the event. I chuckle to myself and feel grateful that I don't have to organize a gathering of this nature with my own immediate but tardy family, for the 'surprise' element would be sadly lacking in that equation. We were never famous for being punctual! But the Lally clan are something else in that respect and the planned surprise will happen without incident no doubt! The birthday girl has just rung to let us know she will be leaving her place in a short while, so we'll all be together soon to celebrate her 50'th birthday. I am again outside inspecting the clouds of black smoke that partially block the sunshine, now billowing over our block. My sister in law and her son are out with me taking photos and video of the spectacle above us. My partner announces that we have just received a call from one of our neighbors warning us of a fire that is coming our way and advising us to 'get ready'. The feeling of unease in the pit of my stomach takes a surge and turns into a knot by the term 'get ready'. This might be a little more serious than I anticipated and I am no longer able to play down the threat that is appearing over the ranges behind us. Without thought and a complete lack of urgency as one would expect given the size of the clouds above us, I wander into the workshop and retrieve the fire pump that has been sitting there idly since the previous summer. I briefly consider that it hasn't been started in quite a while and that if necessary, I hope it does if it's needed on this occasion, although deep down inside me and in spite of my internal unease, I think not – it won't be needed today. This is simply a precaution. My organized partner has meanwhile gone and collected the sixty meters of fire hose he has neatly coiled in the other shed and is

connecting it to the fire pump. We are all very nonchalant in our actions I think, very calm and without fear – just uneasy. Without fuss or any urgency, hoses are readied, buckets are filled and my two little daughters are dispatched to fulfil their roles of filling the tubs and basins inside with water and throwing my huge collection of towels and flannels in there. They take obvious pleasure and pride in carrying out their duties and following my directives without protest – I wish it were always like that! Their responsibility fulfilled, they disappear to their rooms and return a few short moments later dressed in their jumpers, jeans and boots. Their wide eyes indicate they now sense exactly what is happening and are following the cues of their parents with very little verbal encouragement. They just seem to 'know'. We've discussed this all before.

It's raining we think – how odd. The cool change has arrived we imagine, yet the temperature hasn't eased. Black pods shower down on our house – cold to touch but black nevertheless. The radio declares a large fire is heading directly towards Narbethong and warns residents to activate their fire plans (if they have one). A dear friend from neighboring Buxton calls me on my mobile and tells me to take care and repeats the bulletin I have just heard on the radio. There is urgency in her voice and she sounds concerned – not her usual laid back manner. They are evacuating as she speaks, with their four children and assortment of animals. I wonder how they will all fit in their cars and then turn my thoughts to my horses and the horse float I sold a few months prior. If only that float were here now I think. I ponder where exactly my destination would be even if I did still have that float and how on earth I would fit all four of my beloved animals into it at the same time anyway.

We all go to the front gate to see the line of black cloud that is now descending down the hill across the ranges. There are no flames visible but it spans the horizon completely. There is a distant low rumble and my partner comments that they are moving cattle on the neighboring property or perhaps they have sent water bombers in to tackle the fire. In my heart, I recognize without a shadow of a doubt that this is the sound of the fire front. I have never heard one before so how could I know for sure? My partner's explanation appears to be the more comforting option, but I know better and say so, declaring with absolute authority and finality that the sound IS the fire front. I want the others to be as alert as I now am, for I feel the adrenaline levels beginning to rise sharply, the same feelings I have felt in the past at the onset of a major sporting event where I have been a participant. Only this time, a deep and very real sense of dread is a part of the equation. I muse that this must be a true fight response I am experiencing. At the point when flames become visible, inner panic sets in although I outwardly assume a nonchalant and calm front, purely for the sakes of my

children. To them, we as their parents are their rocks and they look to us for guidance and strength – now is the perfect opportunity to demonstrate that strength. It's a hard one to pull off, for these little people are far wiser and more intuitive than we, as adults give them credit for.

Phone calls have been made to our other guests at the caravan park, advising them it would be best for them not to make the trip to this end of town as a fire is fast approaching and things might not be safe. The birthday girl herself, who is about to leave home, is informed of the plans for that day and how they are currently coming apart at the seams. There is no option but to unwrap her 'surprise' now. The roar continues to increase in decibels, a low and menacing rumble. My partner and I are armed with hoses, wetting down the house on all sides, wetting down the horses still standing peacefully in their paddock (too peacefully I briefly think, given the impending threat almost upon us – don't they know what's coming I wonder?), one of our guests has been furnished with a spray pack and the other is staying close by the kids inside the house. The wind has picked up in strength and takes my breath away. An unnatural darkness descends over Narbethong and the flames are becoming visible over the other side of the highway. Our guests make the decision to leave and take the children with them – there may still be time to get to safety. In the midst of the bedlam I feel uncomfortable about that decision, firstly for the safety of everyone leaving and venturing into what at this point is an unknown and secondly because I know my children are safest in the care of my partner and myself – a mother's instinct. With my entire being fully engaged otherwise, I feel it's the logical but not preferable solution and agree reluctantly for them to go. My relatives are able and practical people and I'm forced to trust them on this occasion. There isn't the luxury of time available for debate and indecision on that count. From behind my hose, I watch the car leave the driveway with a sense of doom and helplessness. My partner and I are alone. The fire has by now well and truly arrived.

We concentrate our efforts to where the mammoth fire front approaches, dousing the walls and blinds on that side of the house with water. I momentarily glance over my left shoulder to check the unbelievable sound of the wind and my blood freezes at the sight of roaring flames leaping across the highway and engulfing the hardwood mill on the block next door. How did that arrive so quickly? I whistle across to my partner at the other end of the house to take a look my way. I can see his thoughts are the same as mine yet not a word has been spoken between us. Almost playing like a well-rehearsed movie scene, we both turn our heads and glance backwards over our shoulders and find the flames have

raced there also and are all over the pine mill on our other boundary. There is a deep orange glow surrounding us entirely and I realize our grim predicament, yet the entire situation seems frighteningly surreal to me. A fire spots in front of the long shed 20 meters away and we walk side by side with our hoses to douse it. I ask John if he can believe our terrible luck and our current predicament, hot on the heels of a gruelling previous year. My jocularity belies my internal terror – it is a good disguise I think. John knows better.

Back hosing the house, I glance to the highway and see the little hire car containing my little girls and our guests crash their way through a fence and into the property opposite, flagged in there by a white vehicle. They make their way to a very large, recently-ploughed bare paddock. Immediately my mind relaxes – I know they will be safe now. I turn my attentions onto our immediate safety and with trees sending their burning limbs crashing to the ground around our property's perimeter, and tornado-like winds whipping the flames into a frenzy, it seems a good time to make our exit before all options close and leave us trapped within our burning boundaries. We train our hoses on the house, secured by the nearest heavy object to hand and run together across the burning boughs littering the crossroads at the front of our property and into the bare paddock opposite. As we leave, I see the front gates have blown off their hinges and the letterbox is missing. I always hated that letterbox anyway.

Seeing my little girls and relatives safe lifts my spirits and gives me new hope. They are all safe and out of harm's way in the middle of this heavily ploughed paddock that has now become our haven. From within, the town outside blazes with an intense ferocity that I'm never likely to see again. The heat and intense exhaustion on both physical and mental levels are beginning to take their toll on us all. Still, after a few brief moments of gathering my composure and watching the fire rage, the thought strikes me that my animals are still in their paddock and our two pet dogs are locked in the office in the house. Without further thought, I run back towards our burning property, followed closely by a kindly logger who offers to assist me. The gates on this part of the property are firmly tied in a series of complex knots, originally intended to foil any escape attempts of our pet cow. To now undo them swiftly in the face of a fire that is blazing uncontrolled to the gully running adjacent is almost impossible. The logger urges me on to hurry, his voice rising with urgency and intensity until the expletives that stream forth from his mouth are enough to turn the most hardened Navvie red. When the gates swing open, I turn to check that he is still there, and find he has retreated. For the first time I feel very alone.

I run blindly into the paddock where my horses stand in obvious panic amid the smoke and turmoil, their heads held high, snorting at the surrounding peril. My old retired gelding is the closest – he stands still for me to throw his halter on. He knows through past experience I can be trusted implicitly – I have proved my case to him on countless occasions. I weal around to search for my other Thoroughbred. A sensitive soul, he senses the urgency of my frantic actions and the perils we are all facing and responds accordingly by running away. I steal myself to drop my energy levels and appear calm and nonchalant, a trick I am refining very well today. I use every trick in the book of horse cons to convince him also that I am well worth trusting on this occasion and he believes me. He stands to let me catch him also and I pause momentarily, holding these two frightened animals, wondering how I am going to lead them both out through a driveway that is ablaze and blisteringly hot, with trees crashing and burning around us on all sides and the wind buffeting everything in its path. I gather my energy to tackle this monumental task, grit my teeth and turn towards our only point of escape and find John, my brave and wonderful partner standing there awaiting my directives. My heart lurches with relief to see him there and I'm touched by his obvious show of staunch devotion, love and courage. I hand him the lead rope attached to my old Thoroughbred – he's a bold soul I figure and of the two big horses, the least likely to play up for my partner who is inexperienced with horses. I tell him to simply walk and not look back – the horse will follow his leadership if he demonstrates confidence in his stride. Another Oscar winning performance to add to the tally for the day and we lead the horses out to safety. They sense the urgency in our stride and the task we are trying to achieve and let us lead them to safety without turning a single hair. They do me proud. – I'm glad I invested so much time in handling them. We leave them in the safety of the ploughed paddock and return again to the blazing block to retrieve our little girls' pony and the pet cow. My partner loads the dogs into the car and we all beat a hasty retreat back to our bare haven. Here we have to sit and endure the agony of being helpless to save anything more of our home and possessions. Our fate is left in the hands of a raging and merciless firestorm that engulfs all in its path.

I am able to rest for a short while. My throat is so parched and dry I find it hard to swallow the water my body is craving. My eyes sting and my muscles scream. My emotions rise and fall with every turn of the wind. I take stock and glance around the ploughed paddock for the first time and find many cars have gathered here. I hadn't noticed them here before really. Vision is poor due to the thick smoke and on several occasions our house appears to be alight. Thoughts of rebuilding our lives race through my head as I watch

the flames fanned furiously by powerful winds. Our home sits somewhere amidst all that chaos. For the first time, I think to call friends and family. I speak with my dad who fails to ever recall so much terror in my voice. I tell them we are fine for now. I call friends in Marysville to warn them that a monster fire is on its way up the mountain to pay them a visit also. They are fleeing as we speak – the flames are already there for them to see themselves. I take in the raging scenery around me. The sight of the hardwood mill next door to our property takes my breath away the most. I am overcome with a total sense of doom as I recall the kiln there being our fire escape. I comment out loud to my partner that I hope our friends have not sought refuge in that place – the entire mill is alight and raging beyond comprehension, the flames licking high into the sky and emitting a bright orange glow that illuminates the devastation around it. I feel I need to cry but again I earn an Oscar nomination for my stiff upper lip routine – because my little girls are watching me. I yell at them instead for some minor crime and to alleviate some of the anxiety I feel. They understand I'm sure. Fire follows a definite path along the perimeter of our paddock and I'm convinced now that bare earth really doesn't burn and I vow to argue that point vehemently for the rest of my days should anyone dare disagree with me. I wasn't quite sure of that prior to today but we all feel safe. Nothing that burns around us can reach where we stand – I am relieved mostly for the sake of my frightened daughters. I try to make phone calls to friends I last heard of that were in the throes of escaping the flames but communications are obviously down. I note that my phone is fully charged though – what a waste of a good battery – and throw it into my consul where it stays for another few days. In the adjacent paddock sprouting a bright green crop, a solitary Kangaroo stands motionless watching the flames with us. 'A smart Skippy – good on you fella' I think absently. I hope much of the other wild life is as savvy as this one and can find the same kind of refuge. The horses stand calmly with a backdrop of flames and chaos. They instinctively know they are on safe ground. Their calm carries over and I feel the same sense of security – if they feel safe with their highly attuned senses, then so should I.

The flames are still raging but my partner thinks it may be safe to return to our house. I can't pretend I like the idea but I trust his judgement implicitly – he's a smart man with a quick mind. I think it best I stay with the kids – they are scared enough without having to endure watching both their parents racing off into the flames again. I'd prefer to go and assist John – we've always worked well together – but again a mother's instinct makes me stay with my girls. With his nephew and two loggers, I watch them disappear into the smoke. Our daughters express concern for their daddy and once

again I draw upon one of my Oscar-worthy performances and convince them that all is well. What seems like an eternity passes until I see a familiar figure re-emerge through the haze like a scene from a war movie. The house is still there, he tells us much to my amazement. They have managed to catch the rear decking on fire and put it out before the flames took hold of the rest of the house. My heart lifts and I cease to imagine all the dire consequences of the news being the opposite. I could swear blind I have just seen our house, along with all that defines our lives, burning. Still I feel a sense of unease that the house still needs protecting, for everything surrounding it burns furiously still. For now it has been miraculously spared but I still feel a pressing need to be there to make sure. We have ourselves all escaped the ferocity of a fire that whipped through our town with blistering speed and intense ferocity and I hope hard that the same is true of everybody else that feels the full force of this terrible firestorm. I wonder where else the fire has visited and worry deeply for the safety of my friends and everything dear to them.

The mood in the paddock is relaxing a little I sense and tension and adrenaline levels slowly beginning to subside, although not completely. There is an urgent need for drinking water and my partner and I decide it is safe enough to venture back to our miraculously still-intact house. I am offered a Gator by the manager of the property that has brought us all shelter, and I gingerly pick my way across the highway, dodging burning branches and logs strewn across the tarmac and through the space that once sported a set of crooked gates into our fire-blasted property. The place still smokes and fire spots burn all over. Trees still burn with orange flames. I am scared and shocked by the sight that greets me here on my home turf but need to do what must be done. I gather bags of water bottles and beautiful party food intended for a party feast from the refrigerator. What luxury for us all in the paddock I think – pates, delectable cheeses, fruits, cold meats! What a contrasting place to have to enjoy it – in the middle of a bare, ploughed paddock surrounded by a burning inferno! Seeing that the fridge is off due to power failure, I'm pleased none of this will go to waste and will still be enjoyed somehow! Loaded with food, drinks, water, first aid items and fencing tape, I make my way back to our bare paddock with supplies for all that need them.

Several more trips back to the house follow for clothing, blankets, towels and bottles of wine even! With several trips safely under my belt and my partner already staying put at the house and watching for embers, the remainder of our party decide it's safe enough to return to the house. Our two little girls have fallen asleep in the boot of our car by now, tired and overloaded from the events and drama they have seen unfold in the previous hours. I carry them gently from the car to their beds and watch them sleep for a few

moments, amazed that they are able to drift off so peacefully when so much devastation surrounds us and danger still threatens mercilessly.

Our party all sit stunned for a long while, sipping chilled glasses of wine outside under the verandah in the darkness, trying to come to grips with the events that have just passed. The true horror and reality has still not quite registered with any of us. None of us can quite believe what a close call we have just encountered. It all still seems surreal to me but the wine dulls my senses enough to bring some calm and fatigue is only just beginning to rear its head. We manage to steal an hour or two of sleep between us, taking turns to momentarily rest weary bodies and minds. The others stay awake and watch until the bleak and stark light of morning reveals the full story of the previous night. All is black and charred around us, trees lie strewn where they have burnt and fallen. Fires continue to burn, the orange flames contrasting vividly with their black backdrop. I imagine it must resemble the aftermath of a battlefield and I wonder where the beautiful wild life and birds have fled. There is a mind numbing silence that prevails, with not a breath of wind in the air. The air is cold and we all wrap ourselves in coats meant for winter. The change from the previous day's weather is hard to comprehend.

The hours that follow and our own curiosity fully reveal the true extent of the devastation. Our guests do not have long before they have to leave to catch planes but they briefly see for themselves the damage surrounding us. I feel guilt and genuine sorrow that they have come all this way to be met with a surprise such as this. After they bid us farewell and leave, (still in a stunned daze I can see – their little hire car bearing a fine coat of black ash), I feel the need to see for myself the true extent of the fire that has just passed through us. My girls want to see if their school is alright so we take an exploratory drive through our local region – an area known as The Triangle. What we see moves us beyond belief. Everything we have grown to know and love is gone and lies in ruins, still smoking and aflame in places. Trees litter the roads, forests that were thick and lush now resemble ravished wasteland – charred earth bearing black sticks that were once towering trees. You can see for miles straight through the forest where undergrowth had once foiled the view. The gentle rise and fall of the previously concealed land has become blatantly revealed. The ground has been sterilized and nothing is left growing. There is no movement – it seems we are in another alien world altogether. Our neighboring town lies flattened beyond comprehension and I wonder if it's a fire or an atomic bomb that has caused this complete and utter devastation. Our little girls are dismayed that

their school didn't escape although they are pleased that the adjacent swimming pool appears reasonably unscathed and therefore they will be able to still have their school swimming program this year they reason, with their childish rationality. It brings a smile to my face that their youthful eyes see a positive, even amidst the smoking ruins. We drive to check on friends' homes only to find the same flattened piles of twisted metal atop piles of bricks. The same deadly silence hangs in the air, the birds are gone, the people are gone. Everything and everyone left in a hurry amidst burning chaos. I hope they are all alright.

We drive home in solemn silence, each of us cradling our own thoughts, digesting the horrors of the preceding 24 hours. A nightmare has been had by us all, with more nightmares sure to follow. Perhaps I'll wake up from a real nightmare and this might prove to be a bad dream after all. I wish this could be true but I know a long battle awaits us all. We pull into our burnt and blasted driveway and begin our long and arduous battle to rebuild the remnants of our shattered lives. God's speed I think.