

After The Fires

Before the virus, there had been the fires, a whole summer of dark skies and dread. Scott checked the bushfire update map as soon as he woke each morning, not bothering to open the curtains to another shrouded day. There wasn't enough room on the fire service map for all the flame icons. They stacked up like bad clip art, vying for land.

The sky was dead and his work felt ridiculous. Each of the gardens he worked on in Sydney went into a state of shock and decline. He cleared gutters of ashen leaves that had blown in from somewhere worse off than the inner city and mulched everything he could. Lawns were the husks of foolish ideas. Weeds were a distant luxury and watering was out of the question. In desperation he got a job pruning huge old street trees that were dying after a vicious string of 49 degree days. He breathed sawdust and smoke as the year ended and worried about leaving any petrol tool in his van for more than a few minutes in the heat. Combustibles felt like sin. Who knew what could happen in this heat.

By the year's end he couldn't work another day in the thick smoke and quit after he puked on his chainsaw, halfway up a Camphor laurel. He waited out the rest of the summer in his room with a portable air conditioner running constantly. The smell of burnt eucalyptus got in his hair and his clothes and in the wet sheets he hung up to block out the western sun from his flat. The coast was a horror show. Footage of people huddling in the dark on piers ready to submerge in the sea while the fire bore down on them entered his dreams. Everyone he knew outside of the inner city was under threat. Scott started to get drunk at home during the day, scuttling out for a bag of party ice and groceries before 8am and settling in til the next morning. Like everybody else, he tried to breathe as little air from outside as possible.

After a short reprieve of smokeless days and autumn cool when the fires were all finally out, everybody was ordered inside. Scott was able to go to work in the gardens he'd looked after

before. They had recovered from the summer scorch and had covered up their wounds in green. The work was a gift. Clients waved from inside when he arrived with his tools and left his cash outside in crumpled envelopes. He weeded alone in sloping backyards by the urban stink of the Cook's River and watched the stream of locked-down people walk by on their permitted exercise hour. He worked close to the back fence line to be in smiling and nodding range.

Most evenings, Scott renovated his van as a project to keep him more or less sober and hopeful. He built a raised bed with slide-out storage and took a whole week to install wood panelling on the walls and floor. Without hesitation he traded his most valuable indoor plants with an electrician to install soft uplighting in each corner. His little cabin on wheels made him feel so happy that he shook. The big bed with his good linen and feather quilt helped him shed his worries about ending the lease on his flat. A single bed would have been more practical. But a person could hope. He was packed up and ready the weekend before lockdown ended.

The night before he left, Scott drove his new home around the neighbourhood to check if anything jiggled or clanged. Misery was a dirt road and a poorly packed pantry. The streets were empty and dark as his van lunged over speed humps and turned circles in cul-de-sac. Everything was stowed snugly; his chainsaw, his books, his kitchen things. He rounded a corner back onto the main street and passed a slow convoy of the public order and riot squad in three white Nissan Patrols. 'Fuckity fuck', he blurted, out of habit. He really needed to get his license updated. But the big men ignored him. They passed slowly like sharks into other quiet waters.

And so, the very first day it was permitted, Scott drove his van south down the coast, aiming for a string of beaches halfway to the Victorian border. He left before dawn and was on the other side of Wollongong before he knew it. All lockdown, he'd imagined this – his foot on the accelerator and clear morning light falling on his lap. The sea was calm beside the highway and the steep rocky shoreline stretched into the distance. Now in the free morning he smiled. He had been desperate to leave Sydney for a long time. Paddocks were green and coral trees flowered on hills. You could forget the summer if you wanted to. It didn't seem right but it was a relief. With steadier hands than he'd had in ages, he poured coffee from his thermos without slowing down. The air was clean and the day was cool, and Covid hadn't washed over the country in the wave they'd all feared. It was unbelievable. He was on a big, wide, lark.

Scott pulled into a small town for a piss and an egg and bacon roll just before Kiama. Men's bathrooms still felt strange to him. The separation of weeing and pooing, and the use of public foyer space for communal pissing always jarred a little. Troughs were for animals. He'd thought that ever since nipping into the boys toilets to retrieve a footy in second grade.

Boys have two places to go, his best friend Mike explained at lunchtime. Troughs for wee, dunnies for poo.

You pee in front of each other? Scott had asked. Like, you see each other's willies?

You're not 'sposed to look, Mike said.

Strange, but, Scott mumbled

Spose it is, Mike said, sucking his blackcurrant juice up with a straw.

In a few hours he would stop at his favourite headland where you could drive the van right into a grassy thicket behind a long sweep of beach. Barely anybody went there and the nights were quiet and starlit – there was never the threat of being woken and forced to drive on by a ranger. There were, of course, other threats. But it felt right. It was the place where he had once spoken out loud the things he most wanted : an ease with knots, a crowded table, a voice that matched his hands.

He cried on and off while he drove through to Moruya. The bush wasn't completely razed now, for months had passed. But what had been a thick forest by the highway now resembled a strange cash crop with one type of tree and no understory. The spotted gums that had survived were skeletal and black and beginning to be flushed with stress shoots. A lush decline. He wasn't above reading himself in the landscape. People could put out showy growth like crazy when they were all but burned up, he thought. And what was he doing, taking off at a time like this? Doubt spiralled out of him in widening arcs until he made himself remember the shut-up rooms of his flat, the malaise of smoke; the stock-piling of toilet paper and the endless waiting. There were worse things than being lost and knowing it.

The sun was still high when he got to the beach and nosed his van into the little clearing in the bush right at the mouth of the lagoon that was almost open to the sea. A woman walked a dog far away towards the other headland. The shallows of the lagoon water were thick with ash. On

the beach, the tide line was a twist of burnt sticks and seaweed and charcoal. It horrified him. Still, if the tide had to hold everything together, the old ashes and new seaweed, then so could he.

Night came quickly and he warmed up chickpea curry on a gas burner and slopped it with yoghurt and lime pickle. He lay on his bed in the van and scratched his beard and listened to the wetland. For a while he was peaceful. And then, in another moment, only pretending quite hard to be. He was so far from anyone and he was afraid. He locked himself in the van and closed the curtains. The cold lump of the metal baseball bat under his bedspread felt good alongside him. Barely room to swing it in the van.

If people – men – come, they'll come in cars and I'll see the headlights from way off, he thought. Nobody had watched him drive in or even knew he was there. Besides, even if they had, they wouldn't have seen anyone they'd get an idea about hurting. But his fear remained. It had never lightened when his body changed, nor had he ever expected it to. The dark was still the dark. And there was always a man out there, waiting. Even if that man wasn't interested in him anymore.

Waves crashed, birds screeched their night calls, and no footsteps crunched up to the van, even with his mind twitchy and prone to hearing a huge man where only a possum hopped. He put his headphones in and fell asleep to Raymond Carver reading a grim short story about a man drinking alone in his kitchen. But the night was cold and he woke to piss often. He relieved himself expertly into a jar in the dark, judged its remaining capacity by the rising pitch of his gurgling urine. In the morning he lay in his warm bed with the curtains open to the bush and felt still and calm. The terrors of the night were over and he could have months ahead of him like this. Scott didn't dwell on what would happen if the state went into lockdown again and he was on the wind in a pandemic. Running away, running towards, outrunning. It didn't matter now.

Scott had breakfast at the lagoon's edge. Fresh coffee made him brilliant and sharp like he'd done a line. He read while he boiled eggs and watched a heron on the far bank as he turned a page. And then, with his chainsaw and trowel stowed under his bed, and the newly-raised dole pooling in his bank account, he slipped out of his clothes and ran past the charcoal tideline to

the ocean. Scott screamed as he plunged through the first wave. Though he couldn't stand the cold a second longer he swam out and was lifted over the next swell. He had to. Because the sun could cloud over any moment, and because it was better to swim out and meet what was coming than to wait and see where it would break.