

## a chocolate bar and a bushfire.

by Tom Gooch

Cameron Thompson lay prone on the floor as flames licked the walls around him. White ash covered the kitchen tiles. It reminded him of the snow in late July. He used to sit up on the roof, staring out over the Canberra Valley for hours, watching the observatory chase stars over Mount Stromlo. In the faint distance, there used to be the red glow of politicians taillights flickering back and forth in a steady, content rhythm.

Now he could barely see his own hands. Smoke swept through everything, sliding between his gloved fingers, up his sooted skiing jacket and into the mask that covered his mouth. He spat ash. The hose in his right hand pointed towards the nearest exit, a back door that had disappeared in the darkness. Out of it trickled a lashing of lukewarm water that soon morphed into an almost comical cloud of steam.

He tried to crawl towards where he thought the door might be, clawing to tiles that he had laid with his own hands. The roof loomed above him, supported by superstructures and beams that he had lifted into place with his old man, back when the Raiders were still a decent team.

The Thompsons had been prepared. Sandbags and dry moats lay somewhere in the blind heat outside. Emma was at the shopping centre, ticking items off a grocery list Cam had written to distract her. In his pocket lay an optimistic wind report. He had been calm and patient throughout the day. He was now low, evading the smoke, doing everything that he had been told.

What he hadn't expected was the sound. Eucalyptus oil ignited and exploded down in the front yard. Heat was gathering and racing and screaming up the house, to where he now lay. One hand over the other now towards the door. His boots slipped on the ash. One hand over the other. His lungs pushed inwards. No air in this smoke. He saw white, tile, black. Closed eyes. Thought of water. Emma.

Cam turned onto his back. He lay still and waited for the roof to fall.

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Fifteen dollars fifty please, the cashier said.

Emma looked up, surprised at the flashing number on the screen.

It...it's cheap, she stammered.

We have to get rid of it dear. No one is buying chocolate at the moment.

The cashier propped awkwardly on her feet. Worn stockings on thick rubber soles. Apart from the young girl her aisle was empty. Bereft of the sly, writhing looks of queuing customers urging her on faster and faster she now had the luxury of laying down her scanner. The cashier bent over in the white glow of the monitor to see the girl more clearly.

Where are your parents?

Dad's at home trying to stop the fire. He said I should come here to get last minute...supplies.

The cashier's eyes flicked to the screen: a blue tarpaulin, twine and a chocolate bar.

And you're ok to get home? You know most of the roads are closed.  
I should be fine if the wind hasn't changed. Thanks.

Emma took the plastic bag and walked away from Aisle Eleven. She glanced down at Aisle Ten, bare shelves where cardboard boxes half full of sugared grain and cereal used to be. She glanced through the aluminium frames of the shelves. The straight lines, the patterns dividing up empty space. The bulbs glowed indifferently. Aisle one: black bread, rotten fruit being shuttled off the floor by a busy stacker who was checking his watch.

There was a life-size plastic reindeer outside the supermarket. Bright, garish lights glowed all around the animal's oversized head.

You must be hot, Emma muttered.

The reindeer stared back at her. Two dollars for a ride. She reached into her pocket as the power went out. Darkness. Shouting.

Emma walked outside, guided by the dark red haze of the midday sky.

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Take your marks. Jack clenched his toes tighter on the diving blocks, the rush of adrenaline flying through his lean, scraggy body. Get set. He held his breath. Nothing. Crack. He exploded into the water. The still, sleek sheen of the local pool was now a tiled box of swirling clouds. He reached forward as far as he could, pulling his arms down quickly past his hips. Butterfly was his best stroke. His coaches' voice in his head: 'Get into the roll. Pull. Relax'. He had to breathe straight ahead, he couldn't look at the other swimmers that he was now racing in front of, or the boy he hated in lane five. He swam as fast as his hands would allow him, plunging them back into the water with a restless rage. The black square on the far wall of the pool came closer. He was first by half a body length. He took a deep breath and touched, swung his feet up underneath him in a neat motion and then slammed the soles of his feet into the wall. He bent his knees, almost smiled and then burst back in the direction from whence he came. Underwater now, turning to begin his backstroke. He closed his eyes. Kick. Kick. 'Bring your hands up. Long arms. Relax.' He opened his eyes as his head broke through the water, a strange meniscus broken over his tight swimming cap. The sky was red. Kick. Kick. A red that defied description and the limits of traditional discourse. He missed a stroke. The boy in lane five did not - backstroke was his strongest leg. Why was the sky red? He was out of rhythm now. Breathing out of sync. He kicked harder, tried to reach further behind him in the pool. He tried to focus on the swimming flags directly above his lane and not on the burning atmosphere behind them. He pulled the water underneath him. Long arms. He could not relax. The boy in lane five was drawing closer. Two feet behind. Maybe less. The water slipped through his fingers. His legs were heavy. He took one last look at the sky and turned over. Turn, dizzy, push, breaststroke. As he reached the surface for the penultimate leg he glanced over at his rival. The boy in lane five was now winning. Newly formed stubble dotted the boy's chin, grains of strange sand against his dark complexion. Jack was second. They pushed and pushed into the sluggish water. They were flawed creatures trying to glide in the chlorine mire. Fatigue gripped him now. He felt bile in his throat. He had gone too quickly on the first lap. Why was the sky red? 'With breaststroke, it's all about the glide.' The sky was burning. He tried to glide. The

boy in lane five was tiring. Jack reached out as far as he could go. They were almost even going into the final turn. Kick. Kick. This was it. He kicked faster again, wincing as the lactic acid burned in his legs. He couldn't see the trees burning, the people burning. He was even with his rival. They breathed in sync, each turning his head towards the other in a primal contest. A moment of understanding as their eyes caught before their arms reached down into the water and their heads straightened once more. Twenty metres left. Jack pulled in front. 'Make S shapes with your hands and just concentrate on your breathing.' He breathed in deep. Kick. Kick. The black square was close now, waiting for him. He pulled his arms through harder, faster, desperate. Ten metres left. The boy in lane five was finishing strong. They locked eyes during the last breath. The boy had brown eyes. Five metres left. His arms clawed their way through the water. The boy in lane five missed his finishing stroke. Jack touched the wall in first place. Jack breathed out.

The boy from lane five walked over towards his family. A hot wind blew across the pool area, rippling the water as it flew across cheap plastic lane ropes and cotton towels and swimmers all gleaming and excited for their next race. He had spent the morning inside the marshalling centre, a small building adjacent to the pool, signing forms and listening to loud pop-house music on his iPod in a fruitless effort to alleviate his nerves. The only time he left the little brick enclosure was to throw up in the outside toilet. His coach had said that his nausea was a sign of weakness: 'The greatest swimmers are at home in the water, not afraid of it.'

The wind had changed since he arrived at the pool. He was too absorbed, too insular to notice the sky change from blue to orange to red. It would soon be a menacing, violent black.

Only now did he notice the flakes of ash floating silently in the wind. Only now did he wonder where his mother was, as he caught his breath and strained his ears for a 'Well done darling'. He walked to the fence and caught sight of her. She was down the hill a little, in the car park, slumped against the bonnet of the car. His mother was screaming into her phone. His mother turned around, slow to recognise him in the haze. He caught her eye. A shared moment of understanding as they breathed in sync. Two swimmers in the sea of ash. She had green eyes. Her brother Cameron had brown eyes. Like the boy in lane five, they looked directly at each other before her mother's arms fell once more, treading water in her bottomless pool of grief. A race won and an Uncle lost.

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Emma sat next to a pirate on the bus. At least, he looked like a pirate, she thought. She had read tales about men like this, who conquer exotic lands in thrilling adventures with wooden legs, talking birds and names that were always related to the appearance of their beards. This man had a grey beard that sat comfortably below sad eyes. He looked out the window and then down at Emma.

You've been shopping. He nodded towards the plastic bag on Emma's lap.

I was getting supplies for Dad.

Where's he?

At home. He said he's going to look after the house in case the fire comes tonight.

The man paused. So what supplies did you get?

Things we can make a tent out of – see the string. And some chocolate, she added sheepishly.

Is Snickers your favourite? I never enjoyed the peanuts.

The peanuts are the best bits! I like all chocolate really. I like the shape – it never changes.

Her father had always told her to ask questions in conversation.

What did you buy?

The man smiled.

I bought whisky. Johnnie Blue – it was on sale.

Is that your favourite?

Yes - It's a good thing to have your favourite on a day like this. Funny how things work, I might lose my house but I'll have a bottle of Johnnie Blue.

What do you mean?

Sorry. Don't worry.

There was silence.

What do you do?

You mean what is my job?

I guess so.

I'm retired. I was a teacher. Now I'm trying to write a book.

Do you want to be famous?

No. I don't mind who reads it, or if anybody reads it at all. I want it to be in a dusty library somewhere, and when the librarian goes around once a year to sell all the books that no one has read, I'd like it if they said 'No. Not this one. Not this time.'

The heat was making Emma drowsy. After a few minutes she lay the plastic bag down at her feet and rested her head sideways on the thin cotton padding of the seat. Before she drifted off to sleep, she wondered if the pirate sitting next to her would ever write an adventure as great as the ones she had read. As he stared out the window at an apocalyptic sky, the man next to her wondered the same thing.

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Her mother always used to light a candle before she put her to bed. When Emma asked why, her mother replied that it was just a nice thing to have. 'So that you're not completely in the dark, dear.' Even then, Emma could see her point; most kids her age were scared of the dark. Children are always talking about monsters hiding in shadows, unreal beings that for adults merely shift shapes rather than lose their veracity.

But the candle was never a source of comfort for Emma. The cone of flickering light in the corner of her bedroom was never predictable or calming like Emma had been told it should be. It flickered uncontrollably, awkwardly, out of sync with the world as if privy to some rhythm or pattern that Emma could not see.

Even when Emma closed her eyes the thin membrane of her eyelid transmitted the candle's light. So every night, after her mother had left the room, she blew the candle out. Now, as then, Emma woke in darkness, a thin trail of smoke leading through the air.

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It was snowing in January. Rusted wire fences separated paddocks of white ash, like old stitching on a patchwork quilt. Emma descended the stairs of the bus and made her way to the front of the crowd. She heard sirens. There was a barrier across the road. Behind it, a small group of men and women dressed in orange clothing running into the distance. Emma could only see the fluoro strips on their backs, illuminated by police lights

flashing amidst the haze. A hand lightly touched her shoulder. A woman with a clipboard. She was asked where her home was, where her parents were. She simply pointed down the road, past the barrier and the crowd, into the black heat, the fireplace of her past.

It was tempting for Emma to think that the whole sky was burning down. It wasn't. The satellites stayed stoically in orbit. The old radio tower reached high into the air, its lights calmly blinking as if unaware of the carnage below. All around her stood monuments of human artistry and creation defying the flames as they clawed their way across the valley. Emma could not comprehend it. Some structures stood while others perished at the hand of something so arbitrary and primal.

The man from the bus picked her up and carried her on his shoulders. He walked quickly away from the barrier, his back burning from the heat behind him. He found two milk crates behind a truck, slightly sheltered from the wind. They sat close, sharing a half-melted chocolate bar in the darkness.