

Marysville Swimming Pool and the Cloud of Doom

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The water in the Marysville swimming pool was deliciously cooling as I swam some laps and checked out children playing with inflatable toys. Two young Asian men were jumping up and down and splashing delightedly, students perhaps, I said to myself, on their first visit to a swimming pool in Australia.

A shadow passed across the sun. Cool change at last! Glancing up, I saw the sun obscured not by clouds but by a massive column of grey and orange smoke billowing upwards and cascading down over itself.

The bathers relaxing around the pool seemed oblivious to the tower of down-pouring smoke. Nobody looked up or commented and so I too, despite a growing unease, decided that the smoke must somehow be within the realms of normal. But I left the water quickly, dressed and went to the general store to buy a few groceries. Exchanged the normal pleasantries with the ladies in the shop and stopped off at the garage to buy petrol for the fire pump. The garage was inexplicably closed. I checked my watch – 4.30 exactly – and drove home. That was half an hour before the holocaust broke.

For the past eight years Dave and I had been coming to our little mud brick weekender next to the forest at Granton, six kilometres from Marysville. It was our bush paradise, a haven from city madness. But we had vowed not to be there on days of high fire danger or risk death in a house fire. Months earlier, we did our CFA fire training just to be on the safe side. Dave had maintained the fire hose connected to a petrol engine and fed by the rain water tank, and kept the grass mowed and the roof guttering clear of fallen leaves.

My pet project was to regenerate trees at the bottom of our 2-acre block and turn it into a rainforest garden. We had planted tree ferns, myrtle beech and other plants which may be lost if not watered during the heat wave. So we drove up Friday evening, planning to return early Saturday morning before the heat set in. But next day, as the house seemed relatively cool, we stayed on to escape the city swelter.

All day we had followed the progress of the East Kilmore fire and felt safe in the knowledge that it was far away. With the radio on and regular visits to the CFA and DSE websites, we would have plenty of warning if there was a bush fire in the vicinity. Nevertheless, Dave tested the fire hose and petrol pump and chucked me the CFA bushfire instruction booklet to re-read. By 4 o'clock it was seriously hot, so I decided on a quick swim in Marysville, 5 minutes away.

The image that burns in my brain is that of the Marysville bathers relaxing around the pool, seemingly oblivious to the tower of down-pouring orange smoke. But I, too, had blotted the cloud of smoke out of my mind, and was going about my business as if in a dream.

Why did Dave and I each deny the evidence of our senses until the very last? Incredibly, I took Larry the dog for a swim in the Acheron River, about 500 metres away. At 4.50 Larry and I were happily splashing around ... and then I knew. A hot wind was blowing twigs and bits of bark horizontally through the trees. Only it wasn't a wind, it was a steady draught of air being sucked into a fire. I heard a dull roar and smelled smoke. Quick back into the car, turned left, and there it was: an angry red spot fire crackling through the bush 200 metres from our home. A CFA truck was there, the crew shouting to each other. The truck sped off towards Marysville as the fire burned towards us. Home a minute later; Dave in his boiler suit - a neighbour had shouted the news across the fence - wetting the house with the fire hose. The moment we had mentally rehearsed for years had arrived and it was already too late to flee.

I donned my fire-fighting boiler suit (acquired on CFA advice) over my wet bathers, filled the bath, drenched myself under the shower, then led Larry to relative safety at our neighbour Gillian's house, 100 metres away. Her roof sprinklers were already gushing. Ever calm in an emergency, Dave took command and worked to connect the second fire hose while I hosed down the house, eaves, surrounding lawn and thick kiwi fruit vines that covered the north and eastern sides of the house. The fire was rushing towards us from the north through gum trees and blackberry thickets; tree tops were exploding with a *whoomph* into balls of golden light.

A black greater glider sauntered up to me out of the smoke as if asking for help. It took shelter in the kiwi fruit vines around the house and we heard it rustling there throughout the night. A small grey dog came hobbling out of the burning grass with burnt paws and a leash still attached to his collar. Where was his owner? I got him inside and gave him some food and water, but he ran outside later and disappeared into the smoke.

Dave was unable to connect the second, newly purchased hose – a part was missing – so he took charge of our single heavy canvas hose. Soon the trees and scrub next to the caravan and car port were alight. “We’ll never save the house”, I said to myself as I heaved a bale of pea straw away from where it had been placed against the back wall, into the path of the flames. A few minutes later it went up, just 10 metres from the car port. At that very moment the wind changed, just slightly, but enough to help Dave's hosing and stop the caravan or carport catching alight. We watched as the fire raced up the hill, west towards Marysville. I begged Dave to seek shelter at Gillian's, but he wasn't ready to abandon the house. I walked back to Gillian's place with our computers and wallets leaving him to defend the house on his own.

The next half hour is a blur: a hot, crazy wind blew up; trees were bursting into flame and smoke engulfed everything. I watched the fire roar through my beloved patch of remnant old growth forest adjoining our block; Gillian trained her hose onto her neighbour's house as it blazed away next to her fence and garden. But I couldn't do it. I could not leave Dave to defend our house alone. I picked my way back to our place amidst burning bushes and flying embers, savouring the unreality and possible finality of it all. Suddenly the sky went pitch black, just like the CFA trainer had said it would. I navigated my way by the light of our blazing storage shed on the left and blazing wood shed on the right, to the house which was mercifully still in darkness.

Dave was on the south side alternately hosing the burning acacias around the water tank which fed the fire hose, and the wood shed, whose tonnes of chopped wood had turned into a mighty furnace. He was silhouetted spectacularly against flames on all sides. I would have photographed him but for a wave of nausea at the thought of doing anything so calculating in what could be his final hours.

The wind was gusting in all directions; the garden on all sides of the house was alight and burned every which way. Dave continued to hose back the encroaching flames while I dashed out of the house with buckets of water filled from the bath, vainly trying to put out the burning half-buried tree trunk next to the wooden decking.

Twice the pump broke down and Dave had to go down in the dark and smoke to where the pump was to fix a valve that had blown out in the heat. Then it stopped again when it ran out of petrol and he went off through the smoke and flying embers with a jerry can to borrow petrol from Steve next door, who was desperately fighting to save his house (having got the children out hours earlier). It went on for hours – I could never account for the passage of those hours. Dave forgot to drink, staggered in and fainted into a chair before downing two litres of water and going out again. The smoke alarm was screaming: I realised that the smoke inside the house was nearly as thick as the smoke outside, and may soon be unbreathable.

We were lucky. The thick mud brick walls gave protection from radiant heat and the kiwi fruit vines proved fire resistant. By 10 o'clock the worst was over: we had survived and the house was safe. Andy, a neighbour who had just saved his own home, appeared through the smoke to check on us. "We're fine", we said. "No you're not, your roof's on fire!". We hadn't noticed that one of the eaves behind the kiwi fruit was alight. At this point the hose had again stopped working so Andy helped Dave chop out the burning wood with an axe. I got a step ladder and doused the burning rafters by throwing up saucepans full of water from a bucket.

Rod, another neighbour and CFA member, called to check on us bringing emergency rations – a single donut in a plastic box. He too had saved his house, so that meant there were four houses that we knew of that had been saved at Granton. The rest were burned to the ground and we did not know then whether they had been occupied. In fact, of the 21 houses in Granton, seven were defended and the owners of the rest were either absent or had left in time. There were no fatalities, although one woman, the owner of the little dog, was badly burned when a gas bottle exploded.

Around midnight the defenders of our cluster of homes drifted together for a kind of grim celebration of survival mingled with shock and disbelief. That was when we heard that Marysville was gone.

The gas stove was still working so we made tea by torch light and sat on the back veranda watching the shed fire slowly die down. Tree skeletons were silhouetted against glowing red embers; blue flames licked around charred tree trunks. About every three minutes there was a crash and shower of sparks as trees and branches fell in what remained of the forest. The moon was bright pink. Our tallest tree, a forty-metre peppermint gum, was burning on the inside and sending out plumes of red sparks from three different tree hollows, one far up near the top, like little fumeroles in the sides of an active volcano. We sat for an hour holding hands without speaking.

It was an incredibly beautiful, even peaceful sight: the denouement of the inferno. The wind stilled and there were no mosquitoes.

Thunder grumbled above and Larry was barking at it from his safe place in Gillian's laundry. We picked our way down between burning trees, made a wide birth around the tree volcano which was still spouting and carried him back across beds of hot coals. Sleep was hard to come by. The little dog (who turned up cowering in the bedroom) coughed all night and Dave couldn't shut his eyes for the sting of singed eye balls. A few hours rest brought mental relief until first light revealed the full horror: forests ravaged as far as the eye could see and beyond our cluster of four homes, other neighbour's houses reduced to piles of smoking rubble. Where did all the birds go?

By three on Sunday afternoon neighbours had cleared the track to Marysville Road of fallen trees and there was nothing more we could do. We knew our families and friends would be worried; there was of course no telephonic contact or electricity. Despite radio news that the Maroondah Highway was closed, we packed Larry and the burnt dog into the car (pungent with the smell of bushfire) and headed home.

Dave steered around blackened trees and branches littering the road to Narbethong, which looked like the aftermath of an atomic bomb explosion. Rosemary from the Mystic Mountains shop, one of the few untouched buildings, flagged us down with a list of names and phone numbers for us to ring when we got to town. She had sheltered twenty people with their cats and dogs in the shop's basement while the conflagration raged. The top of the Black Spur was the fire's boundary, so we suddenly crossed from black ruination to lush green forest. Made mobile phone contact with family members when we got to Healesville ("Hello, we're alive!" ... tears at the other end.) Then dropped the little dog off at the Coldstream Animal Refuge where his burns were treated and he was eventually reunited with his owner.

Next day I recognised the two young Asian men at the swimming pool by their photo in the paper: they had been burnt to death trying to escape in their car. The police contacted me to make a formal statement as the last person who had seen Indonesian students Rudi Rudi and Dean Lesmana alive. Altogether, 45 people died in Marysville.

Today it feels like a weird dream that would have faded away had I not written it down the following day. I'm haunted by the scene at the swimming pool: people chattering and playing whilst the cloud of doom loomed massively before their very eyes. And I too, was in denial.

For how much longer will we look away from the other cascading cloud of doom? Global warming is staring us in the face. Rising CO₂ concentrations are already causing extreme weather events and triggering chain reactions that will bring about an environmental and human apocalypse if we don't take urgent action.

Will droughts, floods and fires be enough to wake us from our dream?

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