

THE QUARRY

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The Beast

The monster fire that ate Mallacoota on New Year's Eve and spat out charred toothpicks is galloping towards us.

Just a few days into 2020, the mayor of Bega Valley Shire makes a heart-quaking announcement. My town of Eden will not be defended.

How can a town of 3100 people not be defended?

The answer is that Australian firefighters are stretched to the limit. Our fire season is now months longer than it used to be. It now overlaps with North America's fires. There are not enough resources. A decision has been made. The towns of Bega and Merimbula will be defended from fire. Eden will not.

It is incomprehensible. Eden has a new \$40 million wharf built to take colossal cruise ships. Literally thousands of people could be evacuated from the Eden wharf. But I do not have time to think it through. The second message from the mayor is terror-striking.

‘Your safest chance of survival is to leave Eden now.’

I have been preparing for bushfires since August. Drought has left the surrounding forests matchstick dry. Climate change is now creating Frankenstein fires. The rural fire service has told us to prepare, to have an evacuation plan and be ready to go. A leather overnight bag, which I bought in Bali in better days, is filled with documents and keepsakes and my passport and the dogs’ vaccination certificates. In the car already are a bag of kibble for the dogs and a change of clothing for me. To this, I add an air mattress and bedding, just in case I have to sleep in the car, then I panic off, forgetting to soak towels and place them under the doors.

Club Sapphire is the evacuation centre in Merimbula. The club is its usual, surreal, clubby self. Men wearing smart casual pants and women wearing make-up, socialising and playing poker machines. I find a desk with an evacuation sign and try to register but am told the club won’t take dogs and am directed to go to Bega.

Bega is another 30 km away. It lies inland and could easily be cut off from the coast. It is also under threat from two hell fires that are moving closer both to each other and to Bega. I am scared to go there but too scared not to. I am terror-shaken and trembling.

It is a slow drive on smoke-filled roads and it is getting dark when I arrive at the Bega evacuation centre. The first thing I notice is that it is right next door to the gas distribution centre.

If there’s an ember attack on those giant gas cylinders, the explosion will kill everyone.

The evac centre is nothing but the old showground, rebranded. It faces a nearby mountain that is caught in a conflagration but the smoke is so thick, it blacks out the flames. I can barely breathe in the miasmatic smoke.

I am glad I had the foresight weeks ago to send away for a P2 face mask that has a filter. I clutch it like a lifeline. The dogs stay in the car while I register with the

Red Cross in the vestibule of an old hall. The floor of the hall is awash with mattresses and bedding for the blank-eyed elderly people and families with dazed young children drifting around.

I am told there is no room for me and I should try to find a camping spot on the oval. I am also told to take a blanket so I rummage amongst a pile and select a woollen one.

Then I drive around the crammed oval looking for a spot for my car, careful not to hit any of the ghostly-looking people emerging through the gloom as I peer through the windscreen.

The showground is now a refugee centre and through the gates I can see a stream of more people coming. The lucky ones here have caravans. Most people have tents.

Who the hell decided an evacuation centre in a bushfire should be outside?

On my second drive around the showground, I find somewhere to park. I am next to a woman who has no other shelter apart from a swag she has been lent. We both cough in the turbid smoke that scorches our throat and lungs. She tells me food is available in the pavilion next to the hall.

Here I find volunteers cleaning up after the evening meal. One of them kindly makes me a salad sandwich. I don't want to talk to anyone. Too much fear has inflamed my senses. I cannot cope with anything more. But a feral couple tell me they fled their home in the village of Verona as their house burst into flames. They evacuated to the town of Cobargo and saw fire destroying the main street. Next they evacuated to Bermagui, and then when fire threatened Bermagui, they headed to Bega.

I feel like telling them to fuck off. They are obviously bad luck. Then I wonder if this is a Lord of the Flies response.

'It's the government doing it,' the man said, shaking his matted head. The woman agreed. 'It's a government plot to get all the hippies out of the hills.'

I don't need their conspiracy theories. I have my own fear-fed, fiendish thoughts. This is a fight for survival. This is the end of days.

We are told that if all else burns, the Bega showground will be defended. I speak to a police officer who tells me bluntly that I made the right decision to come here. They are expecting hundreds of people in Eden to be dead by morning.

I am wretched with grief and incandescent with anger that we have known for a long time that we were sitting ducks and nothing was done to avert this. The state and federal governments both abandoned us.

Then it begins to rain. It splashes down on my hair, my face and my shoulders. It is not until I go to the toilet and see my speckled self in the mirror that I realise it is ash and soot. I hear hell-roaring thunder too. The nearest fire is so super-hot, it is creating its own weather. Thunder means lightning, which means brutal ignition and more country converted into crematoria for wildlife.

I check my phone. Many people are refusing to leave Eden. Neighbours and friends are staying to defend their homes. I am terrified for them.

The Beast is seething, ready to surge. A behemoth against an undefended populace.

My phone again. People are jammed in at the wharf area in Eden, in their cars, figuring if the worst happens they can at least jump into the sea. Some people are sheltering with their young children on one of the tugboats.

The Beast is the devil incarnate. Sleep happens on other planets. Not this one. I try to stay calm and rational, cowering in my car, incessantly checking my phone. Through the sunroof just above my head, I watch the sky as it changes from volcanic orange to incandescent red.

Phone again. My neighbours tell me police have knocked on their door to tell them to get out. But it feels too dangerous to leave Eden. The roads are full of smoke, visibility limited to a few metres. They head to the wharf.

I need to go to the toilet. There are 2000 people sheltering at Bega Showground. *Sheltering is a euphemism.* The hall can fit only a fraction of that number. The rest of us are outdoors desperate for shelter from the smoke. The women's toilet at the hall is up some stairs. I don't know how the elderly and disabled manage. Near my car is an ancient toilet block. I stumble towards it. Through the murk, I see people are walking their horses around the showground ring. I hear children crying. Everyone is coughing. A group of people are praying. This is the apocalypse.

I check my phone. The police have been to Eden with a bus to try to remove people to evacuation centres in other towns. Many refuse to go.

For me, that first evacuated night in Bega is the most terrifying. In the morning, I weep with relief when I learn that the Beast reached the edge of Eden - then the wind swung around and sent its fearsome flames elsewhere. Everyone I know in my community is still alive. No houses burned down.

But it is not over. I stay at the Bega Showground in my car for four nights.

I cry a lot. I cry constantly but I don't know if I am weeping tears of fear for my life and grief for the loss of the environment, or if it is just my eyes watering from so much smoke. I also worry about the smoke I am breathing. What is in it? Trees, lost houses, crisped birds, charred kangaroos, chemicals from sheds, asbestos...

The experience changes me. What is valuable to me shrinks to a small list. My two dogs; the car that is our current home (and future too, if my house burns down); my keys; my P2 smoke mask; and my glasses.

Then I lose my glasses, leaving them in the shower stall, and when I go back they are gone. Without them, I can't see to use my phone. I can't text. I can't access current information about the fires.

Fuck. I can't cope with this if I can't see.

I tie the dogs to the car door and turn the car upside down and find, falling apart with relief, an old spare pair of glasses.

The darkness does not lift. It seems perpetual. It lasts for 40 hours and intense disorientation sets in when daytime does not include daylight. Will we ever experience normal again? I develop a ritual to get me through.

Pat right pocket of pants, checking phone is still there. Pat left pocket of pants checking keys are still there. Fucked if I lose either. Utterly fucked. There are rumours, rumours, rumours everywhere. Conspiracy theories and religious proclamations about judgment day. Pat, pat, pat. Phone, keys, glasses. Pat fucketty pat.

What would it be like to die here? I think everyone is wondering if this is the end. Armageddon. Two mega fires are bearing down on Bega and further south the Beast continues to threaten Eden. There is nowhere safe to go. We are told the Bega showground is the safest place to be and will be defended if it comes under ember attack but I look around and I can't see any buckets of water to put out embers.

My only shelter is a car out in the open with a full tank of petrol. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Eventually we are told we can return home. The danger is not over but it is no longer so cataclysmically life-threatening. My house is still standing but there has been a snowstorm inside and there's residue on floors and countertops and in corners. It is not white but streaky grey with black smuts. It is ash that has home-invaded, sneaking in under doors and through ill-fitting windows.

The Beast seems immortal. It refuses to die. Helicopters fly over the flames with thimbles of water. It is too dangerous for firefighters to enter the forest due to falling trees. We are told they need to wait until the fire reaches a cleared area - a farm, or a town, or a village before the fire fighters can attack it.

I used to think that fires were sudden rapid events with names like Ash Wednesday or Black Saturday but our Beast has stamina. It gets status, something called a campaign fire. We are told that if we are lucky, it will burn for weeks. If we are unlucky, it will burn for months.

People in Eden are stupid with fear. I pay the newsagent for a newspaper and she stares at the money in her hand unable to count it.

'Do you want a bag?' asks the young girl in the crapdashery where I buy some crap.

'No thanks,' I say.

'Do you want a bag?' she replies.

We are all exhausted from being hypervigilant. Cognitive function is closed down. We are in fight or flight mode for months.

My car stays kitted out ready for evacuation. Twice more I evacuate but not to the hell hole of the Bega Showground. One time I pay to stay at a holiday apartment in an empty complex in Merimbula. The next time I go to a friend's place, also in Merimbula. To thank her, I take her out to dinner and we sit on the deck of a restaurant until the rain of falling blackened leaves and ash forces us indoors.

And still the Beast is unsated. It prowls scarily in secrecy, invisible behind its smoke screen. No one sleeps as the Beast makes its ravenous raids, day and night. There is no clocking off when you might need to flee flames. Forty homes are lost on one

infernal night in Kiah, just south of Eden. Many people I know are now homeless. Some are underinsured or not insured.

The army arrives to help and a navy ship arrives in Twofold Bay ready to take refugees. American firefighters arrive as their fire season ends and Australians from other towns turn up as fires, up and down the coast, are brought under control. Members of the community wear face masks and shuffle through the streets in fear and grief. The stories are terrible. Homes lost. Wildlife screaming as it burns. Forests incinerated.

When the cloche of smoke lifts after weeks, we see that the national park that borders the bay is blackened with plumes of smoke rising from the carnage. It is a war zone. And still the Beast keeps marauding. We are told to stay indoors, to avoid the smoke but the air has been smoky since late last year and we want to go out.

At last the Beast is brought under control but we are warned it is not over, there are hot spots and the wind could whip the fire up again. We are dead-tired. Then one day, finally, the mayor announces that the fire is out. The Beast is dead. That is in mid-March, the same time that another beast, invisible but just as deadly, sneaks into our lives. We are still in fire shock when we descend into another of Dante's circles of hell. Covid-19 begins.