

Marysville Swimming Pool and the Cloud of Doom

Jill Sanguinetti

The water in the Marysville swimming pool was deliciously cooling as I swam some laps, watched children playing with inflatable toys and reflected on what a pleasant spot it was. 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 a kilometre or more and cascading down over itself as it rolled towards the town from the north.

The thirty or so bathers relaxing around the pool seemed oblivious to the mountain of down-pouring smoke that filled half the sky. 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, not to be too concerned about. But I left the water quickly, dressed and stopped off at the general store to buy the paper and a few groceries. Exchanged the normal pleasantries with the ladies in the shop and stopped off at the garage to buy some petrol for our emergency fire pump. The garage should have been open until 5 pm but was inexplicably closed. Slightly irritated, I checked my watch – 4 30 exactly – and drove home. That was 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 of peace and spiritual sustenance. But we had vowed not to be there on days of high fire danger or risk death in a house fire. Just a few weeks earlier we had done our fire training with the local Country Fire Authority (CFA). Dave had maintained the fire hose connected to a petrol engine and fed by the rainwater tank, kept the grass mowed and the roof guttering clear of fallen leaves.

My pet project was to regenerate the bush at the bottom of our 2 acre-block and turn it into a rainforest garden. Over the last few years, we had planted tree ferns, manna gums and nothofagus beech and shrubs which needed watering in the heat wave. We planned to drive up late on Friday afternoon, water the plants in the cool of the evening and come back early Saturday morning. But Saturday morning seemed relatively mild. The mud brick house shielded us from the worst of the heat, so we decided to stay on instead of sweltering in Melbourne.

All day we had followed the progress of the East Kilmore fire, and felt safe in the knowledge that it was far away. Besides, with the radio on and regular visits to the CFA website, we would have plenty of warning if there was a bush fire in the vicinity. Nevertheless, Dave tested the fire hose and emergency petrol pump and got me to re-read the instruction booklet for people caught in fires. By 4 o'clock in was getting seriously hot so I went for a quick swim in Marysville, 10 minutes away.

I took Larry the dog down to the Acheron River as soon as I got home from the pool. We were happily splashing around ... 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 huge fire. I heard a dull roaring noise and smelled smoke. I ran to the car and Larry leapt in. I turned left, and there it was: a red, angry

fire crackling through the bush 200 metres from our home. A CFA truck was speeding off towards Marysville. Dave was in his boiler suit hosing 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 with water (also according to CFA advice) and drenched myself under the shower. I led Larry to our neighbour Gillian's house and locked him in her laundry. Her roof sprinklers were gushing, so he would be safe there.

Ever calm in an emergency, Dave took command and worked to connect the second fire hose while I hosed down the house, eaves, surrounding lawns and thick kiwi fruit vines that covered the north and eastern sides of the house. The fire was burning towards us through gum trees and blackberry thickets; tree tops were exploding with a *whoomph* into balls of golden light. A black mountain possum (a bobok) sauntered up to me out of the smoke, as if to say that we sentient beings need to stick together in such a crisis. It took shelter in the kiwi fruit vines around the house and we heard it rustling there throughout the night until it succumbed to smoke. 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.

Dave was unable to connect the second, newly purchased hose – a part was missing – so he took charge of our one heavy, canvas hose. Soon the trees and scrub next to the caravan and car port were alight. That's the end of the house, I said to myself as I heaved a bale of pea straw that had been placed against a wall into the path of the flames. At that very moment the wind changed, just slightly, but enough to help Dave's hosing and stop the caravan or carport catching alight. The fire raced up the hill at Staplecross farm, west towards Marysville. I begged Dave to seek shelter at Gillian's, but he wasn't ready to abandon the house. I grabbed our computers and wallets and walked back to Gillian's place, leaving him to defend the house on his own.

What happened next is a blur: a hot, crazy wind blew up; the forest was alight and thick, grey smoke was everywhere. I watched the flames roar through my beloved patch of remnant old growth forest adjoining our block. Gillian trained her hose onto her neighbour's house burning a few metres away. But I couldn't do it. I could not leave Dave alone. I picked my way back to our place amidst burning bushes and flying embers, savouring the unreality and possible finality of it all. The sky went pitch black (just like the CFA trainer had said it would), so I navigated my way by the light of our blazing back shed on the left and blazing woodshed to the right, to the house which was mercifully was still in darkness.

Dave was outside hosing both the woodshed, which was a mighty inferno radiating intense heat, and the acacias burning around the water tank. 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 something so calculated at that terrifying time.

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

whilst I dashed out of the house with buckets of water filled from the bath to put out spot fires that threatened the doors, wood decking and eaves.

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 and 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. There were some bad moments. Twice the pump broke down and Dave had to go down in the dark and smoke to fix a valve that had blown out. It stopped again when it ran out of petrol and he went off through the smoke and flying embers with a bucket to borrow petrol from Steve next door, who was desperately fighting to save his house (having got the children out earlier). It went on for hours – I could never account for the passage of those hours.

By 10 o'clock the worst was over, and it seemed we would be OK. Andy, a neighbour who had saved his own home, came over to check on us. "We're fine", we said. "No you're not, your eaves are on fire". We hadn't noticed that behind the kiwi vine had caught fire. The hose had stopped working, so Andy helped Dave chop out the burning wood with an axe. I climbed up a step ladder and doused the smouldering rafters by throwing up saucepans full of water from a bucket.

Rod, another neighbour and CFA member who had saved his home, called to check on us and brought some emergency rations – a single donut in a plastic box.

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 bottles were 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 were licking around charred trunks. About every five 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 hollow forty-metre peppermint gum, was burning on the inside and sending out plumes of red sparks from three different holes like little fumeroles coming out of an active volcano. The wind stilled and there were no mosquitoes. We sat for an hour holding hands without speaking. It was an incredibly beautiful, even peaceful sight; the denouement of the inferno.

There was a rumble of thunder from the fire-generated electrical storm. Then a familiar bark came from the direction of Gillian's house. The sprinklers had saved her house, but we couldn't leave Larry there to bark all night at the thunder. In our heavy boots and overalls, we walked past the smouldering remains of the shed and still burning trees. Dave carried Larry home across the hot coals. We were all safe.

A few hours of sleep brought some mental relief until first light revealed the full horror of it: forests ravaged as far as the eye could see and beyond our cluster of four

homes, other neighbours' 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 frantic as there was no telephonic contact. We packed the car and put with the dog with the burnt paws in a box. Larry jumped in with a charred rabbit in his mouth.

Dave steered around blackened trees and branches littering the Marysville Road through a landscape resembling the aftermath of a bomb. 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 shop's basement while the conflagration raged above. At the top of the Black Spur we crossed from blackened ruination into lush green forest. Dropped the dog off at the Coldstream Animal Refuge where his burns were treated. He was eventually reunited with his owner who had been badly burned by an exploding gas bottle.

At Healesville we made mobile phone contact with family members. "Hello, we're alive". Tears at the other end.

Of all the 20 or so houses in Granton, seven had been actively defended by owners and saved. The occupants of houses that were destroyed had got out in time or been absent. Forty-five people died in Marysville. There were no fatalities at Granton, although one woman (the owner of the little dog) had been badly burned.

Today it feels like a weird dream that would have faded altogether had I not written it down over the following days. I'm haunted by the scene at the swimming pool: people swimming, chatting and playing games whilst the cloud of doom loomed massively before their very eyes. And I too had blotted out the signs of impending disaster and gone about my business as usual.

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 determined action now.

Will the fires and now floods be enough to wake us out of our dream?

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