

Burn Out

Jack was distinctively tall and certainly, the tallest stone mason I ever knew. His wife died early on and he lived alone on the small holding they had called Giddyup, down a windy dirt track, ten kilometres north of the town. He had built his concrete and stone house to an idiosyncratic design to operate off grid. He had several bunkers, three full dams and enough generators. He had been waiting for an inferno for years. He reckoned he was a match for anything that came through the valley. As long as he was there at home, on the property, he'd be OK. It would look after him. He had set it up that way.

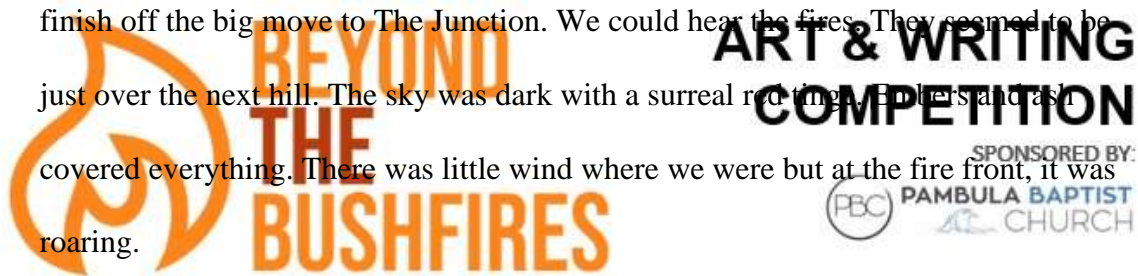
Matt was a plumber, Jack's mate from school days. His parents had a big block called Quinandra, up high on Black Mountain Road, ten kilometres south of the town. They were unwell and Matt had just moved them away from the fire risk, to his place at The Junction, further south, down on the valley floor, close to the river.

Matt's mum, Cheryl, was overweight and slightly stooped with the skin under her eyes perfectly formed like half-moon handbags. When I first met her, she was on twenty fags and a few scotches a day and was a bit of a choofer. She had had treatment for breast cancer several years earlier.

Matt's dad, Tom, had been in hospital with an infection from either the tube he had attached to his lungs or the bag he had attached to his bowel, they didn't know which. He had been sick for years. He had been a building inspector and a scaffolding inspector, the person every builder hates. He told me he was a bit of a stirrer so he

warmed to the job. He had a huge shed full to overflowing with tools and timber and stuff. In the middle of it all was a bed, a big tele and a fuel stove. Cheryl cooked and drank and smoked. He did everything else, when he was well enough to be handy, and he lived in the shed. It wasn't a good long-term set up but they hadn't planned for it to be like this. Now the approaching fires forced them to abandon ship.

Matt was big and broad but how he managed to move them and their gear out to his place twenty kilometres away by himself was pretty amazing. Jack suggested we help him out on his last trip because he had heard the winds would be up and the fireys would be struggling over there. We drove to Quinandra in the morning to help him finish off the big move to The Junction. We could hear the fires. They seemed to be just over the next hill. The sky was dark with a surreal red tinge. Bolters and ash covered everything. There was little wind where we were but at the fire front, it was roaring.



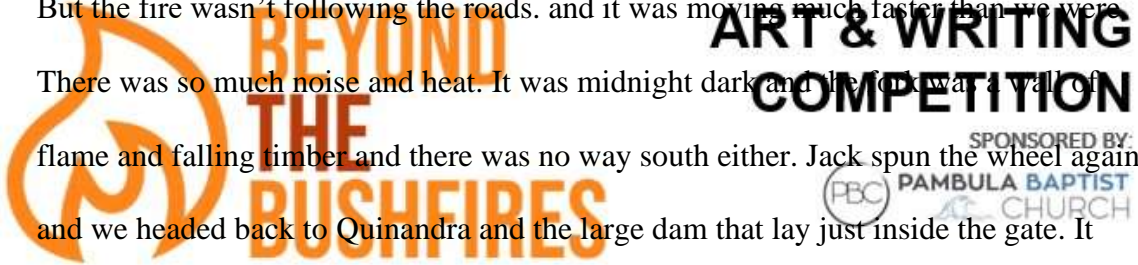
Matt was already at Quinandra. He had got his parents out to his place the day before. Here, there was no front door and the back door through which we entered was off an enclosed verandah, full of old furniture, several couches, dozens of birds in cages, baskets of kindling, old work boots... Two confused little dogs barked at us from one of the sofas. A week's washing was still draped over the rack in the lounge room, in front of the long cold combustion stove. The darkness at ten in the morning and the soot falling outside like black snow, threw the domesticity into stark relief.

There was some urgency with the noise and the heat building but still it took us an hour to get things sorted. The Chihuahuas whimpered in the front seat of the ute.

The terrified birds in their covered cages were placed in the tray. We loaded up Matt's trailer with some furniture, food from the freezer, tools, clothing, all the essential non-essentials. Matt shut the house up, grabbed one last pot plant sitting out the front, half dead from the heat and drove, trailer and trolley, back up the road to his place for the last time. Jack and I followed him past Quinandra's dam, over the cattle grid and out the gates to the fork. He turned left for The Junction and we turned right to go back the twenty kilometres to Giddyup. Ten minutes up the road and we were looking straight into the jaws of hell.

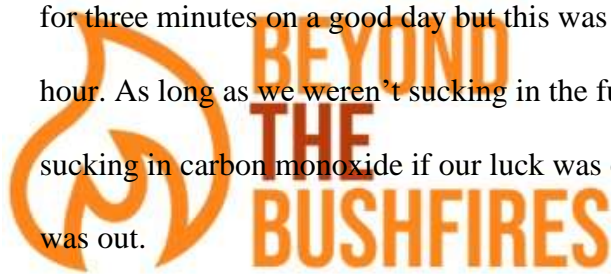
Jack spun the wheel and we headed back to the fork. There was no way north. But the fire wasn't following the roads, and it was moving much faster than we were. There was so much noise and heat. It was midnight dark and the fork was a wall of flame and falling timber and there was no way south either. Jack spun the wheel again and we headed back to Quinandra and the large dam that lay just inside the gate. It was the only place we could imagine any hope.

People talk about dams and pools as safe places in a blaze but that's really only for those with gills. If your head's above water and you're breathing in air, it's not all that safe. But any port in a storm. Jack nosed the ute into the dam. He grabbed a box cutter from the tool box in the back and some garden hose out of the tray. He cut off two pieces and gave one to me. Dams can be dangerous places but we had no option. Nowhere to hide. The ute might take a while to melt but we wouldn't, so in we went, clothes and all.



Trying to get into the middle of the dam was difficult. My boots stuck in the mud. I struggled to get deep enough. Being tall, Jack must have struggled more. I don't know what happened next. He and I lost contact. We both walked into the dam but in the wet silent darkness, with the roaring red conflagration above us, we were each alone.

I struggled against the mud and concentrated on the breathing, hoping my hose was above water and not sucking in gas. The hose was three quarter inch. It wasn't like sucking through a straw. And it couldn't stick too far out for too long or it too would melt. We had to hope the fire would move quickly. We could hold our breath for three minutes on a good day but this was a bad day and a minute seemed like an hour. As long as we weren't sucking in the fumes on the inside. We could be sucking in carbon monoxide if our luck was out. We wouldn't know it was out, until it was out.



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I gave up on getting deep and squatted as soon as I could be submerged completely. I don't know how long I was under the water. I had no sense of time. I just breathed and stayed wet and hoped like hell it was all going to turn out OK.

Might have been one minute, might have been ten. Seemed like eternity. It was as long as I could manage. I stood up and threw the hose and tried to breathe. I wiped my face and eyes and saw the devastation. The heat was intense and the smells so rancid. There was a lot of smoke from trees and buildings still burning. I saw the silhouette of the house, still standing, scorched not torched. In contrast, the flattened sheds and the blackened trees and the burnt out ute. At least the front had passed.

Jack was nowhere to be seen. Between coughing fits, I called his name and walked the dam, hoping I would spot him. I never thought that I wouldn't.

I finally found him. He was in the cab. The driver's door was open and there he was, stuck to the steering wheel. He may have lost his pipe and climbed out. He may have become disoriented and climbed out too early. He may have died from the burns or died before them but whatever, his luck was out. I sat beside his charred body and wept.

We buried him at Giddyup. After the service at the Church, the hearse headed for the cemetery but then took a detour. There were ten of us still with him at that point and we had all agreed that the only spot to put him in the ground was on his place. Had he been there when the fires came through, he would have survived if not but he was helping someone out as usual, and here he was.

Matt had dug a hole with his back hoe, up the top with the view. We lowered Jack's coffin in, backfilled with our shovels, then covered it all gently with stone. We watched over him until the moon rose.

