

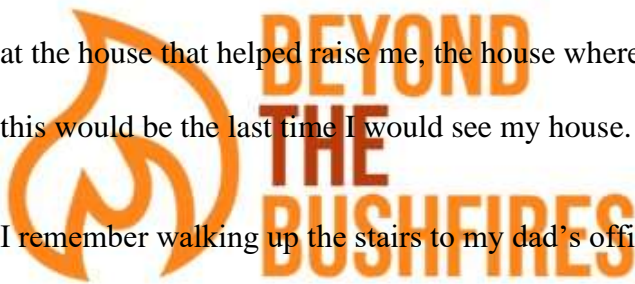
Bounded by the Flames

When it happened, it was like the whole world stopped. Everything was changing. Everything was dying. At first, it felt so far away. The danger felt so far away. But as the smoke grew closer and the air became less clear, each breath felt like it could be the last. And as the days merged together, time felt strange. I would go to sleep looking out at the fiery orange sky and wake to an evil deep red taking over the world I once knew. But as the red became darker, eventually, all light was taken from the ominous smoke covering the once-blue sky.

My brain was crowded with fear and worry as I packed the few things that I couldn't live without into a box that seemed too small to be containing my whole life. I had to leave my home, the only place I ever felt safe and comfortable in. Walking away, I took one last look at the house that helped raise me, the house where I have lived my whole life, not knowing if this would be the last time I would see my house. My home.

I remember walking up the stairs to my dad's office. Going back and forth, up and down, bringing in boxes full of our lives. This was going to be my new comfort, for a little while at least. It was a place where I'd try to sleep, trying not to think about the country burning all around me.

The sky was not what it used to be. The people weren't what they used to be. I would go with my mum to try and find anything that could help pull us out of the apocalyptic world we were stuck in. But all we found were empty aisles and panicked people. They would take deep breaths as they rushed through the doors, trying to clear their smoke-ridden lungs. There were parents holding their children close. People fighting over the last bottle of clean water. Masks were selling out, and we had to resort to anything else. Anything else that could help us breathe. An old blue bandana, my last saving grace.



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Reading headlines, watching the panic hidden behind the eyes of the reporters, watching the news and seeing the fires grow more out of control and more fatal. People lost their homes, their cars, their lives. They lost their loved ones. I felt helpless. I couldn't do anything. Sitting in a chair in a new place only brought anxiety, watching out the window, seeing everything I once knew, my town, my country, burning alive.

As the years topped, people are still hurting even though the fires are out and the flames are no more. The pain we all feel is still burning like embers inside of us. The rebirth had begun. The trees have been regrowing their branches and leaves. The birds, joeys and koalas have been returning from their safe havens back to their old homes. The rain has been pouring down, and now we dance as the clouds storm above us. Homes are being rebuilt, and the

burns have scarred, and our home that we almost lost forever is starting to be safe again. After it happened, it was like the whole world could breathe again. Everything was flourishing. Everything was living.

