

The hydrant went into the plug as his father ran from the house. The hose went on to the hydrant as his father leapt on the back of the tanker and bent to start the pump. Water burst from the hose, knocking the men back a pace before they controlled it and began pouring water on the scrub. The pump on the back of the tanker started, and Ben's father ran with the hose and began pouring water over the first house on the bend.

The fire came, hit the water, and went over the top of men and water alike. A great wave of fire broke over their heads as two North Point tankers swung in off the highway and joined them. The whole valley behind began exploding as flying bark and branches rained on the tinder-dry grass-reeds and undergrowth.

Yet the main fire was still way behind in the ranges! It had not even reached South Break yet! What was happening?

But at least Dad was going to save the house, and suddenly Ben wished he had taken the advice he had heard so often on radio and television and stayed in the house. He should be in there now, with the bath filled with water and a hose inside to put out any cinders that happened to find their way in. He should be there waving to Dad and the men from the window so they would know the inside of the house was being patrolled. He felt angry with himself that he was not there, taking part in the saving of the house.

For a moment the Whalers Wash tanker was lost in billowing smoke, only the flashing red light on the cabin roof showing dimly through. And then Ben heard the bell on the front of the tanker ringing some kind of warning. About what?

The smoke cleared again, and men were running back to the tanker with their hoses, clambering on the back.

"Get out, North Point!" Mr Masters's voice shouted over the radio. And the Whalers Wash tanker went, dragging hoses and a hydrant along the road.

"We'll save your house, Lenny!" a voice called over the radio to Ben's father.

The leading North Point tanker pulled forward until it was in front of the house. The other stayed outside the house next door. Water poured from their hoses into the bent and twisted cypress tree in the front garden and on to the roofs and walls of both houses. The ocean of fire rolled breakers over all.

"Don't let our house burn!" Ben screamed into the wind.

"Don't let it burn!"

Why had Dad driven off? To save something else, of course! Two North Point tankers could easily save two houses that had not even begun to burn when they arrived, but why were they moving? For a better position? Or —

They were pulling away! Then he thought he heard a thin, wind-stripped scream: "Get us out of here! Get going!"

The walls of the house on the corner began exploding in a staccato series of machine-gun-like bursts. Inside his own house, inside his own sitting room, through the great plate-glass window set there for the panoramic view, Ben could see a dance of springing flame as though he were watching television ballet on a giant, distant screen. But it was the cosy, warm and storm-snug sitting room of all the years of his life; of "Playschool" and "Sesame Street", "Monkey", "The Dukes of Hazard" and the Brisbane Games; of toast around a winter evening fire, the Vicar for afternoon tea, Monopoly in the evening; of Granny and Grandad and Ma and Pa; of Christmas trees jewelled with light —

"Don't leave it! Don't leave it! Please, don't leave it!"

But they could not hear him, and they did not stop. With men still only half aboard, the tankers accelerated away up the road.

Ben turned his gaze from the tankers back to the house, surprised that his eyes no longer stung from the sand or burned from the heat and smoke. Had the wind —? It had! It had gone round to the south-west on the ground as it had up high. It was a sea wind! A wind that turned the flames away

from the next house in the row, and drove them back inland. Back across the road towards the shops on the other side of the highway. A sob choked his throat. A wind change just a few minutes too late.

Fire and smoke poured from Ben's house and the one on the corner beside it, poured up into the air and made a ball above like an A-bomb blast. A toadstool. A toadstool that was alive with fire, its roots feeding on . . .

Ben covered his face with his hands. A toadstool feeding on things like his books, his shell collection, his pillow, his blankets, his footy, his cricket bat, his surfboard, his pictures, his clothes, the bed his father had made him.

"Stop it!" he screamed, uncovering his eyes and shaking his fists. "Stop burning my things!"

Then the tea-tree along the yellow gravel road exploded as fire crept in. There was fire in front of fire, dancing along the riverbank, crackling like bullets, rattling like machine guns. The cement sheeting of his house joined the one next door in simulated sounds of war.

But still the great wall of black and red advanced from the north-west, and Ben's head jerked in sudden horror as he caught sight of flames racing along the top of the dunes towards him. He knew he should run—but how could he? Someone from the family had to stay and watch the house. He could not just let it burn away by itself.

A growing roar which he realised he had been hearing for some minutes now grew suddenly louder and began to fill the sky. Jet planes! A whole flight of jets!

Ben turned his eyes from left to right, then looked out over the ocean a moment. But he could not see any jets. Then his eyes opened wide. The noise was not aircraft. The noise was fire! Wind and fire! Fire mixed with a tornado! *That* was the roar! A firestorm — not a bushfire, a firestorm!

On the South Break hill a house suddenly blew apart and scattered in the air, like something made from cards. A red station sedan seemed to come out of the very heart of the explosion and begin a wildly swinging race down the steep

roadway towards the bridge. Houses rocked and fell over beside it as it went. Then a truck came from the same place, and it too rocked and swung violently. The roaring grew and mixed with the crackle of rifles, the rattle of machine-guns, the blast of cannons. Ben had to block his ears with the palms of his hands because they began to hurt as shock waves from the sounds battered against his ear-drums.

Another house broke apart, and tin from its roof was flung out over the valley. Then, over the South Break ridges, a tidal wave of fire rose from the valley behind, broke away and flooded down the hill.

"No! No! No!" Ben screamed in horror.

The blast exploded upwards in boiling sprays of hellfire. Gas bottles blew apart within the holocaust and sent bulging bubbles of pure fire up through the smoke and flame.

Ben fell forward into the sand, covering his face with his hands. The air was burning! The sky was burning! The whole world was burning! He forced himself to look again through slits in his fingers. The whole valley was a great, molten sea of fire: a rolling ocean of fire with red curling waves breaking over the houses — but not pulling back like ocean waves, just rolling on and on, up the hill into town.

Ben found it hard to breathe.

I'd be dead, he thought. If it wasn't for the ocean behind. If there wasn't a cold wind coming off it, I'd be dead! The heat coming against the ocean wind was burning his skin, burning his lungs.

I should go down to the beach! But when he stood, the wind knocked him down.

When he looked up, the hillside opposite burst alight. Something dropped from the sky into the tinder-dry heath and tea-tree, and the flame streamed up the hill towards the station itself. Not the old signal station! Not that too!

"Don't burn the station!" Ben screamed. "Don't burn the old signal station!" The words, spoken aloud, reverberated through his mind. What about the fire station? Was Lisa in

the fire station? Was Dad heading up that way in the tanker?

Ben looked at the listening set, shook it angrily when it did not speak, and threw it, suddenly, wildly, into the dunes beside him.

The fire station! Lisa, Dad and his cousin Mark, Lisa's brother! He would have been on the tanker, or waiting at the station to go out. What about them?

Ben had a sudden vision of a Bible story illustration of hell. He shivered, and would have cried had his attention not been caught by a twisting, floating sheet of iron sheering along the dunes towards him.

He was frozen in terror as it twisted and dived before slicing through the thick stem of the cotton bush beside him as though it were made of plasticine.

He jerked into a wild scramble up the dune, went over the top and fell down to the beach below. Even then he did not stop running as he sucked in the cold, salt air.

The cave! He would be safe there from the hellfire. He ran on, remembering Swampy only as he came level with the bar. His boat! He could not leave her. That was all he had now: Whips, and the boat, and the clothes he had packed in his school bag, and the sea dragon.

He wiped angrily at the tears that began flowing down his cheeks. He was angry not because he was crying, but because his tears blurred his vision as smoke whipped and curled around him. Suddenly he was full length on the sand again, his legs swept from under him, and the air filled with burning embers. One hit his face, and he felt its sting. Something else hit him in the back, and Whips began to howl. Ben knew he would never reach the cave through this murk, but neither could he stop here in the open.

He got to his knees and crawled, his hands scrabbling at the sand in an effort to drag himself forward the few metres to the little swamp boat. Just as he was about to reach out and catch hold, the little boat lifted into the air and thudded against him. He let out a cry of pain and grabbed desperately

at the gunwale. He dragged the boat back to the sand, feeling another sting on his leg. The little boat would be his only protection from the rain of burning rubbish from the fire, as the wind spun in a cyclone.

He leaned and lunged out, and could not reach the strap of the bag. Then he thought to turn, and stretch out a leg, and hook at the strap. Missed. Missed! His toe caught it. Oh no! It slipped off! So again . . .

Got it!

He dragged it to him, then slid off into the sand on the ocean side, clutching the bag as he lifted the gunwale of the boat up against the wind, and wormed his way under.

"Whips!" But the dog was already in beside him.

Ben wedged his body against the sides of the hull and pulled the heavy clothes from the bag, struggling into them bit by bit: the trousers first, then the heavy woollen jumper; socks; boots.

He was sweating with the heat as he crawled over the bottom of the centre seat, and lay across it to hold the rocking hull down without having to strain every muscle of his arms and legs.

Smoke swirled in under the edges as the wind dug holes through the dry sand. Something heavy crashed against her bottom, but nothing came through. The roar of the firestorm, unbroken by the wall of the dunes, filled the inside of the boat with a sound that battered against Ben's head. Whips stood with his back pressed up into Ben's chest and howled with terror.

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