

FORGED WITH FLAMES

ANN FOGARTY

Ann Fogarty was born in Lancashire, England in 1950 and graduated as a nursery nurse in 1968. After marrying an Australian in 1970 she came to Australia under the “Ten Pound Pom” scheme, and settled in Berwick before moving to Upper Beaconsfield 3 years later. She worked in the kindergarten in Beaconsfield for 5 years. On 16th February in 1983, exactly 30 years ago, she was caught up in the Ash Wednesday bushfires that cut great swathes of devastation through Victoria and South Australia. She was hit by a massive fireball while protecting her two young daughters from the firestorm raging out of control through the bushland surrounding their house, sustaining serious burns to 85% of her body. She was the only survivor of the Ash Wednesday fires with this degree of trauma. Her daughters escaped without injury.

She is now the proud mother of two adult daughters and four grandchildren, and lives on the outskirts of Melbourne, Australia.

ANNE CRAWFORD

Anne Crawford is a Victorian author and journalist. She worked as a feature writer on *The Age* and *The Sunday Age* for many years. Anne researched a documentary in South Africa about the historic post-apartheid elections in 1994, and acted as a volunteer in Nepal for three months documenting the work of the Fred Hollows Foundation in words and photos. She is a published and exhibited photographer. Anne has previously co-authored two books: *Shadow of a Girl* (Penguin 1995) and *Doctor Hugh, My Life with Animals* (Allen & Unwin 2012); and contributed to *Through Other Eyes* (Pan Macmillan 2002). She lives in Gippsland and is a volunteer firefighter with the Country Fire Authority of Victoria

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Only sustainably grown wood is used for the manufacture of paper
used in this book.

For Sarah and Rachel.
My two wonderful reasons for fighting so hard.

FOREWORD

Ann Fogarty is a quite remarkable lady. I am very proud to have been asked by Ann to write a foreword to her account of her journey through suffering to ultimate triumph over adversity. Her story is a poignant one of her experiences of the devastating and life-threatening burns she sustained on Ash Wednesday in 1983, only to be followed some years later by breast cancer, necessitating a mastectomy. Both of these dreadful events have had a profound effect on her body image, yet she has handled her lot in life with incredible moral fortitude.

We learn from Ann's intimate story that, as a child, adolescent and adult, she had great determination. This has been her strength. Throughout the account of her story, she has had the courage to tell us about all the various doubts and uncertainties that have beset her in life. But, because of her determination, she has overcome these. She mentions some wonderful people who have helped her along the way. I feel that they have helped her because she is a lady whom one cannot help wanting to help.

I commend this very special book to whomever dips into it. It is a good read that will give the reader faith in the worthiness of the human condition.

John Masterton AM
Former Head of Burns Unit
Alfred Hospital
Melbourne
Australia



PROLOGUE

I sometimes feel as if my life, my past, is tucked away in boxes stored in a dark cupboard.

In one corner, there is the box that was my childhood.

There is the tinkling music box that was my marriage.

Some of the boxes have been prised open. Others, in the deep recesses of memory, will remain closed forever.

I lift the lid on one brightly wrapped box every now and then, to rising butterflies and the gurgling, infectious laughter of babies. My spirit soars.

But one box sits ever waiting to spring open, an evil jack-in-the-box with a menacing mouth and flaming, flaming red hair.



ASH WEDNESDAY

Ash Wednesday, the 16th February, 1983. A day on which a bushfire of deadly proportions would sweep across South Australia and Victoria, and change many lives forever. In the tiny Victorian town of Upper Beaconsfield, twenty-one people would lose their lives, one hundred and eighty-six houses would be lost, and many people would be injured. I would be one of these.

The fire front that would consume Upper Beaconsfield would form a blazing wall sixteen kilometres long and two kilometres wide. Flames would shoot over one hundred metres high, propelled by a wind strong enough to flatten radiata pine trees with trunks a metre in diameter. Fireballs, likened to those seen in nuclear explosions, would surge ahead of the main fire front, igniting everything in their path. One of those fireballs would hit me.

On the morning of Ash Wednesday, a baking hot blast of air overwhelmed me as soon as I opened the back door. It was only seven o'clock in the morning and the north wind had long since

sapped the newness out of the day. It was going to be a stinker. I blinked grit from one eye and looked out over the backyard. The lawn, dun and patchy, was all but lifeless after months of drought. The children's swing twisted and turned from chain to chain in the wind. The gum trees at the bottom of our block lurched from the crowns down, and the bush beyond the rear boundary—hectares of uncleared land—seemed agitated, too.

I had lived in Australia for enough summers to know that a hot north wind meant a gruelling day ahead. All the north winds in England, where I'd grown up, were the opposite—arctic, blowing off the steely grey waters of Scotland. Either way, a north wind is rarely playful. It blows with intent.

A run of warm days had led up to the morning and I felt worn-out after sleeping fitfully through the night. As limp as old celery. I groaned to myself as I anticipated another sweltering day to be endured until the cool change predicted for the evening. The cheerful clatter of our two young girls at breakfast snapped me out of it. Sarah, who was six, and Rachel, four years old, looked so gorgeous sitting at the kitchen table in their matching pyjamas with their short, straight blonde hair and dark almond eyes. Their mother's opinion, of course, but I'm sure anyone else would have thought it, too. I looked at the dimples on Rachel's hands as she spooned cereal into her mouth, and onto her chin, and smiled. I mustn't let Sarah go to school without getting her fruit drink out of the freezer, I reminded myself as I packed their lunch boxes. Such were the moments that formed the contented rhythm of my life.

Terry, my Australian husband of twelve years, came into the kitchen ready for work, as neat as ever in his shirt and tie, looking serious. Terry often looked serious. Sometimes he

ASH WEDNESDAY

needed a good poke in the ribs. We kissed each other goodbye as we always did, although I didn't call the girls out to the front veranda to wave him off, as was our tradition; it was too hot to be standing outside with the door open.

Despite the heat, it felt like any other week day.

That Wednesday, however, had all the earmarks of what I now recognise as the worst kind of bushfire day: a desiccating northerly wind, dangerously low humidity and, after ten months of drought, a vast carpet of tinder-dry fuel which lay waiting to ignite. The sky had glowed eerily orange the Tuesday before as tonnes of red topsoil blown from inland Victoria blotted out the sun. That had felt strange and foreboding, darkening the land like a biblical omen. It didn't occur to me that if the wind could propel a wall of dust five hundred kilometres wide and one hundred deep, then it could drive fires over a huge swathe of the state.

I didn't know much about bushfires then or have any real sense of the devastation they could bring; bushfires weren't part of my consciousness the way they are for those born in Australia. I'd grown up in a small English village where fires were confined to hearths in old stone houses or well-contained bonfires on Guy Fawkes Night. The idea that the bush could turn deadly never occurred to me. I'd come to love the muted beauty of the Australian bush with its silvery green eucalyptus drapes and, having been raised in Lancashire among rows of dark stone houses, the idea that you could be surrounded by space and by gum trees in your own backyard was enchanting.

We lived on St Georges Road, a narrow stretch of tarmac that poked suburbia into the thickly forested hills. Dotted around

us in what the locals called Upper Beac was an assortment of young families, retirees, people who worked locally and some who commuted, and the occasional oddball recluse; friendly people, all drawn together by a love of the bush. St Georges Road was a dead-end then and that, too, seemed to bind us into a community. You were never far from the next cup of tea in Upper Beaconsfield. Or nature. Rosellas flashed past our back window. Kookaburras perched, waiting to swoop on any tasty pickings in the grass clippings, perhaps an unfortunate frog, as Terry mowed the lawn. The occasional wallaby would bob through the foliage.

I couldn't read the bush or its creatures then nor did I understand that this was an ancient land that could turn wild. After all, I'd called our property Pendle Hill after a rainy summit in England! I didn't notice leaves dropping from trees when they shouldn't have been and lying coated in dust for rainless weeks. The dried-out debris of drought that crackled underfoot meant nothing to me.

I knew there'd been bushfires before in Upper Beaconsfield because 'Procie', our grandfatherly neighbour from over the road, had mentioned them; but although I could see the tell-tale blackened trunks and burnt-out stumps, I didn't fully realise that people lost their lives in them. I'd never heard of Black Friday, 1939, when seventy-one people died, nor had I ever seen footage of fires—we didn't have a television for the early part of our married life. My father had preferred TV to conversation with his family, a habit I definitely didn't want to repeat, so in the evenings Terry and I talked, read, played backgammon and listened to music, until eventually his parents gave us a set.

Our old Wolseley felt like an oven as I strapped the girls in

their seatbelts and wound down the windows ready for the run to school. Sarah and Rachel chatted animatedly in the back seat as we set off, oblivious to the draining heat. The primary school and kindergarten were adjacent to each other on the other side of what was then the Upper Beaconsfield village. It was little more than a cluster of timber shops with corrugated iron roofs and verandas that extended to the street in a way that reminded me of an outpost waiting for a horse. So much was different from England. The trip only took several minutes, but already I couldn't wait to be back home with the airconditioning on full blast. I slowed as I passed the shops and looked out for any cars I might recognise. It was considered rude not to acknowledge people and their cars—locals expected you to recognise them. I passed the service station where a neighbour, Alan, worked filling tanks and fixing engines. Alan and his wife were good sorts; he was a cheery, muscled man with tightly curled hair, she a straight-speaking woman who didn't take nonsense from anyone. Carol would often yell out to me across the vacant block that separated our houses to come over for a cuppa.

I dropped off Sarah at school first and was coming out of the kindergarten after taking Rachel in when a friend, Liz, approached me and asked for a lift home. Liz, flushed in the face and looking bothered, explained that she was having her carpets cleaned that day and hadn't been able to get her car out of the driveway because the cleaner's van was blocking the way. She'd walked her children to school and kinder but although she lived only a short distance away thought it was too hot to walk back, so would I mind? We commented on how unusually and unpleasantly hot it was for that time of day, and wondered whether the Weather Bureau's forecast of a 'cool

change' tomorrow would eventuate. Little did we know as we said goodbye then that neither of us would have a house or any possessions by the end of the day.

Sarah's recollection.

The day started like any other school day. I got up and ate some fruit and then a piece of toast with Vegemite for breakfast. I dressed in my school uniform and got my little brown case ready with my lunch and snacks in it. Mum tied my hair back in a ponytail. I had no reason to be concerned, no reason to think that the outcome of this day would alter so many people's lives, including my own. I was six at the time.

Back home I grimaced at the sight of the two huge baskets of ironing waiting for attention. Being English and a young wife I ironed everything. But today the ironing could wait until it was cooler. The airconditioning was on high but I was still sweating from driving in a hot car. Would I ever get used to these Australian summers? The pink cotton skirt my mother had sent me from England was clinging to my legs and my blue T-shirt with the white collar and cuffs was sticky with sweat. The Shetland Sheepdogs, Tammy and Dusky, allowed inside today because of the heat, were sprawled out on the carpet, tongues lolling.

I flicked off my thongs and sat down for a moment, turning my face towards the cool stream of air, coiling a roll of thick hair to get it off my neck. Anything close to the skin felt too hot. Three friends from my church were coming to lunch the following day and I wondered what to prepare for them. Obviously nothing cooked unless there was a big cool change

... but would I have to go to the shops to buy some more cold meat? I couldn't know that we would never share that meal; that two of them would not survive the night.

After lunch, I hosed down the dogs and locked them in their run, then set off for an afternoon with a couple of friends nearby. Yvonne and her daughter, Shelley, and I would meet up every Wednesday afternoon for a social. Shelley was about my age with kids at the same school. As I was making my way across the lawn to the car a possum staggered uncertainly in front of me, zigzagging as if it were drunk. I did know that possums don't usually show themselves in the middle of the day so that behaviour struck me as rather odd, if not disconcerting.

Shelley didn't have airconditioning so the three of us slumped in our chairs under the shade of some gum trees, sipping iced tea and wiping the sweat off our brows and cheeks, wilting. The heat was so intense that you could feel it as you breathed in. Any movement was too much but passing time talking somehow made it more bearable. By three o'clock, the mercury was hovering around its peak of forty-three degrees Celsius and it was time for me to pick up the girls.

'I'm hot, Mummy,' Rachel wailed, as she got in the car, in a way that suggested I could do something about it.

'You can both play under the sprinkler when you get home,' I promised.

Once home, they quickly changed their minds and asked if they could play next door at their friend Fiona's, as they often did. As soon as the car came to a halt in our driveway, they dashed out and headed for her place.

I realised that the power was off as soon as I got inside. The airconditioner was silent when I switched it on and the fridge

didn't hum to life as I opened the door. I picked up the telephone receiver but the line was dead. Strange, I thought, the electricity grid must be overloaded, the way it does when the whole of Melbourne has airconditioners on.

Then I saw the smoke.

The rear of the house—the kitchen and dining-room area—had a long picture window that faced the bush. A pillar of purple-grey smoke, skewed low to one side, rose from behind the trees in the direction of Beaconsfield or Berwick, to the south-west. I stood in the kitchen transfixed. The fire couldn't come towards us though, could it? The wind was blowing in the opposite direction. Surely someone would put it out? I'll ring Terry at work and ask him if he knows anything about it, I decided; then remembered the phone was dead. It dawned on me then that there was no way of finding out what the fire was doing—the television and radio weren't options and we didn't have a battery-operated transistor. I'll ask the neighbours later. One of them will know.

I was surprised to see several neighbours gathered on the nature strip when I went out; apparently I wasn't the only one who was becoming anxious. Carol and Alan, Procie who was a widower, and another middle-aged couple were standing in a huddle, bracing themselves and trying to talk over the strengthening wind. We turned to face the smoke rising in the distance.

'It's a long way off,' I ventured, hopefully. 'And the wind's blowing it away from us. Someone would let everyone know if it was coming this way, wouldn't they?'

The others shrugged and nodded. I got the feeling they'd already raked over the questions. We stood and watched.

The girls were still playing next door. Suddenly unnerved, I excused myself from the gathering to go and fetch them. It was twenty minutes before the time I'd normally collect them—five o'clock—but I suddenly wanted them with me. If only Terry would arrive home soon! He was usually home around five-thirty from his work at Bayswater but maybe he would come home earlier. Perhaps he had tried to phone and was worried that he couldn't get through? I exchanged a few words with Fiona's mother as we stood at her front door, asking her whether she'd seen the fire and knew anything about it (she had, but she didn't), and left. I was too toey to chat.

I came home from school and went to a neighbour's house to play. Mum came early to collect me. I remember doing the typical six-year-old pestering of 'why can't I stay longer, just for a little while more'. I realised something was wrong when Mum spoke sternly to me. Mum was generally patient, so the moment stands out vividly. I thought I must have done something bad, or maybe something had happened. I just wasn't sure what it was.

By now, I was too distracted to carry on with the routine of getting tea ready and bathing the girls. There was still no power and the house was suffocatingly hot. The girls and I sat together by the kitchen window on the bench as I watched the smoke. It was still a long way away, billowing up like a smoke signal behind the trees. The wind had intensified; the day had turned nasty. Birds were struggling to balance on branches, battling to fly at an angle to the wind. Trees were bowing low, their limbs thrashing dementedly.

Sarah, always a little chatterbox, was sensing something, and talked and talked and talked.

‘Shut up,’ I suddenly snapped. ‘Just shut up.’

We were both taken aback by the harshness in my voice. I felt bad. It’s no good upsetting the girls, I chided myself. Stay calm, be normal.

I thought I heard the crunch of gravel over the wind, a car pulling up outside on the verge. I moved quickly to open the front door, expecting Terry, but there was nothing there or the car had moved on. It was now approaching seven o’clock and he still wasn’t home. Terry had been late before only this time he couldn’t ring to tell me, I told myself.

It was too hot to want to eat and I was too on edge to think about preparing a proper tea so the girls and I ate cold meat sandwiches, then I put them in their bunk beds, assuring them that Daddy would say goodnight when he got home.

‘But what if we’re asleep?’ piped up Rachel.

It was seven-thirty. Terry was still not home. He was now two hours late. A sickening unease overtook me. What if he’d got mixed up in the fire? He used a back route from work to get home in that general direction and what if he’d been caught in it? Even if he was working late he must have tried phoning to tell me and wondered about the phone line? And what if the fire approached our street and he wasn’t home yet? Terry would know what to do in these circumstances—he was a good person to have around in a time of crisis. I was intuitive; Terry was sensible.

I could smell smoke; I desperately needed him home.

Much later, I learnt that Terry had been held up at a police roadblock at Beaconsfield. The police were directing everyone

except emergency vehicles to the local football ground. Dozens of people were arriving carrying belongings and pets.

Rachel was snuffling softly within minutes and Sarah was soundly asleep when I checked on them. Girls settled, I quickly slipped outside to check the situation with the neighbours, who were still on the nature strip.

‘Does anyone know what’s going on?’ I asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

I caught snatches of conversation above the wind... ‘hosing down the house’... ‘water in the gutters’... ‘should we go down to the CFA?’... Something about buckets.

We all strained to be normal, to keep the panic out of our voices.

We tossed up whether we should stay or go. Stay or go. It sounds so clear-cut: if you choose to stay, make sure you’re fully equipped and prepared to defend your property; if you choose to go, flee early. Stay or go were the only options, the doctrine that was enshrined later.

It was probably safer to stay, I thought. Procie seemed pretty calm. He was older than the rest of us and had been through bushfires before, and he wasn’t going anywhere. We all stood around, saying nothing, glancing at the smoke, waiting. It was reassuring to be with the others. It took my mind off Terry.

My husband meanwhile was waiting with a group of people gathered around a two-way radio in someone’s car that was picking up Country Fire Authority traffic. Terry consoled himself when he heard that the fires had skirted Upper Beaconsfield. Then one of the voices announced a wind change. The fire was headed towards his family. A call went out for help for two fire trucks in Upper Beaconsfield. The CFA line screeched and went

dead. Terry knew from what was said that those fire trucks were in the bush at the back of our street.

As darkness fell about nine o'clock, the sky to the south glowed orange-red. The streetlights were out and everything was reduced to dark outlines. The headlights of a four-wheel-drive appeared suddenly along the road. A man's voice punched out a message over a loudspeaker, a hard voice, urgently repeating the same message.

'Leave now,' it shouted over the wind. 'The wind's going to change. Leave now. Get out! Now!'

An abrupt, turbulent wind change was turning the flank of the fire—kilometres long—into its head. What had been a long finger of fire was becoming a massive wall.

We all scattered. I turned and ran to the house, flinging the front door open and knocking myself on something as I tried to adjust to the pitch black inside. I felt the dogs brush past me as they ran from room to room, whimpering. Sarah was sleeping on the top of the bunk in her room without clothes on. I tried to balance on the bottom bed and drag her out and down without hurting her, shaking her, urging her to wake. I fumbled around frantically and put on her pyjamas, back-to-front, and dragged her by the arm into her sister's bedroom. Rachel felt leaden as I shook her awake and pulled her sideways, trying not to frighten her. I got them both on their feet and into their sandals, but it was so dark that we were bumping into everything around us when we tried to move.

'I'm sorry,' I gasped, telling myself to be calm. 'But we've got to get out of here, now!'

Adrenalin took over. I snapped the leads on Tammy and

Dusky and pulled us all together, pushing and herding everyone out of the house. It didn't occur to me to take anything else.

Mum bustled us out of the house and up to the neighbour's house two doors from us. I was scared, but not completely. Mum was there and I trusted her to know what to do, as you do when you're a child.

Gusts of acrid smoke hit me as I opened the front door. The wind was savage, buffeting us roughly as we made our way across the lawn and onto the street. The first flashes of fire reached us; spot fires breaking out everywhere. Eucalypts crackled and exploded. The darkness was alive with streaks of orange. Gaseous plumes writhed above us.

My mind raced. We should go with Alan and Carol and their two children, rather than attempt it alone. I tugged the children and dogs along the street, searching through the smoky haze for signs of their driveway. I could see silhouettes of people moving in front of the house. Something boomed in the distance as we ran.

'Yes, come with us,' Carol yelled over the wind.

We all scrambled into their big old sedan: Carol and Alan in the front seat; the girls, the dogs and I, and their daughter, Janet, in the back seat. Then, we realised that their youngest, Darren, wasn't with us. Or anywhere outside the car. We all leapt out, panicked now, shouting his name into the wind and darkness. We could barely see beyond a few metres. Carol's face was stricken. We weren't going anywhere now—we couldn't go without Darren. It was too late to leave. We had to urgently shelter the other three children.

The wind had become incredibly fierce. It was terrifying, way beyond any wind I'd ever encountered. You knew it was menacing, that something terrible was happening. Embers hammered us with the force of cyclonic winds.

What occurred next seemed to take moments.

Burning branches started to crack and crash to the ground around us as we ran down to Carol and Alan's swimming pool and leapt in. Strips of flaming bark flew past our ears. The air thickened with the vapours of burning eucalypts. We gasped as smoke seared our throats and scorched our eyes.

'We've got to get out!' Carol suddenly yelled. 'The branches are going to hit us or they'll go through the sides of the pool. Alan's gone to hose down the house. We've got to get wet all over and get out!'

I dunked the girls' heads under the water and felt a pang as I caught sight of the confusion and alarm on Rachel's face. Carol ran to the house and reappeared with two blankets. We soaked them and draped them over the children. What presence of mind Carol had, but I was paralysed with fear. We sheltered between the pool and some rocks bordering it. It looked safe. Carol crouched next to Janet in the corner of the rocks, covering them both in one blanket. Darren was still missing. My girls were next to me and I was on the outside. I leant my body over them with my head down, shielding them. They were underneath a wet blanket. I wasn't.

I was dumb with terror. My whole body ran hot and cold with panic. It was impossible to live through what we were seeing, I thought. This is it, we will all die tonight. I felt this in a shocking, but strangely accepting, way.

We huddled together, hoping for a miracle.

Suddenly, we were overtaken by a deafening, roaring din. Shatteringly loud, like the force of a thousand jet engines bearing down on us. The wind was ferocious, but this was far, far beyond the sound of any wind.

Immediately, my body was wracked by the worst pain imaginable.

Someone started screaming. Somewhere in my subconscious I realised it was Mum, and pulled away from her.

My world exploded. For long seconds I was oblivious to anything but pain. A fireball had hit me: a rolling, roaring monster outpacing the fire front and the one-hundred-plus kilometre-per-hour wind, causing everything in its path to combust. Moments before, I'd been praying to stay alive, now all I could do was scream and plead, 'Oh God, please let me die, please let me die'. Anything to end the terrible pain.

Alan grabbed Rachel and started taking her to the car. I hesitated for what felt like an eternity. Do I stay or do I follow my sister? I chose to follow my sister. I can't remember seeing Mum burn, but I must have seen or sensed something dangerous or I would never have left her. I recall with great clarity, as I followed Alan and Rachel, that I couldn't see the steps to climb them. It was dark and I told myself, 'Why are you looking for the steps? We're in the middle of a bushfire. I'm sure no one will mind if you climb up the rocks.' So I climbed the rocks. I ran after Alan and Rachel, stubbing my toe twice on the way. Alan put us in the car, giving us instructions that I made sure we carried out, then disappeared. He came back a couple of times to check on us as

we waited. Once he moved the car out onto the road opposite our house. I remember telling Rachel not to touch the windows as they were very hot, and telling her not to fall asleep.

Alan lifted me into the pool, burning his arms and hands as he did. This man, this act, undoubtedly saved my life. I stood in the waist-high water. Carol was splashing water over me which amazingly eased the pain.

‘Are you burned?’ I asked Carol.

‘No,’ she replied, quiet.

‘I think I must be,’ I added, ‘because all my skin is floating on the water.’

The fire was still raging around us. Carol told Janet to push me under the water each time the flames came close, while she worked to keep the pool free of falling debris. I wouldn’t realise for years what Janet had done for me. For an adult to do what she did in such terrifying circumstances would have been remarkable; for a girl of only twelve, it was truly magnificent.

Carol, Janet and I stayed in the pool for what seemed like forever; in reality it was less than fifteen minutes. Shock set in. I turned my head to look at the girls but they weren’t in the pool. I couldn’t see my children. My mouth opened and closed like a goldfish but no words came out. Where were my girls? I was pushed under water again, confused. I hadn’t seen Alan take the girls away from the sight of their burning mother. As far as I was aware, we had three missing children.

We were in the car parked in front of our house for a long time. I thought a lot. I remember seeing our house alight. I could see a bright light in Mum and Dad’s bedroom and I thought, ‘Mum’s left the light on in her bedroom; maybe I should turn

it off, but I knew in the pit of my stomach that if I went to the house I would die. I really knew what had happened and I knew what would happen if I left the car. I sat in the back seat with Rachel, believing that I wasn't going to see Mum again, that she was dead. I tried to get this idea out of my head. No one wants to lose their parents and I was young enough to think that somehow it might still be alright. But deep down, I felt sick with an overwhelming dread.

The worst of the fire had moved on but branches were still falling from trees. Somewhere above us I heard a creaking, groaning sound, then a sharp crack as a large limb cleaved from a tree and crashed to the ground, sending up a spray of sparks. Burning leaves swirled and lifted in thermals. As the minutes dragged on in the pool, my legs became weak. I panicked, thinking that I wouldn't be able to stand up for much longer. I couldn't let myself sit down, I'd drown. I was going to drown.

A fire truck came down the road and stopped by the car. Ignoring my earlier instructions to Rachel, I stuck my face and hands on the window so the men in the truck would see us. They did, and a fireman came and opened the door. He asked me if there was anyone else and where were they. I gave him directions and I remember feeling that it was the most important thing I was ever going to say. I tried very hard to be clear and tell him exactly where to go. It seemed so important. Another fireman put Rachel and me in the cabin of the truck.

Just when my legs were buckling, I heard a voice from the side of the pool. A firefighter in an official-looking jacket and yellow

overalls appeared out of the smoke and confusion, like a vision. He beckoned to us to come to the side and climb out. I struggled to wade over to where he was, swivelling one hip at a time through the water, but didn't have the strength to get out.

'Quick, quick,' he said, reaching out. 'Come on.'

'I can't,' I replied weakly. 'I can't.'

He looked closer at me, and gasped.

'Oh, my God!'

I could not know what he saw in that moment. Tony, from a brigade further afield, recalled looking at a woman with skin hanging off her 'like candle wax'. He swore under his breath as he saw the bone of my left arm.

I couldn't get out of that pool but somehow he reached an arm around me and hoisted me over the side. I clung onto his neck with all the energy I could muster. He carried me to the cabin of the fire truck and yelled instructions to the crew inside.

'There's police on point duty stopping traffic. Take her there.'

The firefighters continued searching for other people along St Georges Road, picking up about twelve people, including Alan.

Here I was sitting next to my burned mother. I have never been able to remember what she looked like, but I know it was horrific. My brain was clinging desperately to the fact that Mum's hair didn't seem to be burnt. It was matted and messy, but surely Mum couldn't be burned! Wouldn't her hair be the first thing to go?

It was hard to hang onto the belief that Mum wasn't hurt when I could see it, and any time anyone touched her it was excruciatingly painful. I don't know if she even knew we were there. She didn't acknowledge us. The only thing she

mentioned was could we not touch her. I was sitting next to her and although I was trying really hard not to hurt her, I did. I remember feeling so very guilty for hurting her.

The trip in the fire truck only lasted about two minutes and then we were transferred to police cars. Mum went in one, and Rachel and I in another.

I was aware of little in the fire truck beyond being high up and the crackling, fuzzy radio with its broken stream of words. How could anyone understand that? One of the firefighters lifted me down and into a police car and lay me on the back seat. I struggled to sit up but I was too weak. Everything around us was ablaze as we moved off. Power lines dangled. It looked and felt like a war zone. Dull thuds sounded like mortar shells. We rolled past a car without windows, just jagged edges of glass, then the blistered side of a van. Black tree trunks were rimmed by orange licks of flames. Black and orange, smoke and headlights. A man with a face streaked with soot appeared like an apparition out of the smoke, looked blankly into the car and walked off. I felt so completely helpless lying there watching everything on fire, thinking, ‘We could still die—we’re not out of it yet’. I closed my eyes for an instant and saw the flicker of flames.

We drove away from Upper Beaconsfield, from my home and my life as I knew it. I wasn’t there to see the windows of our home explode in a shower of glass or the walls crack and collapse or the garden shrink to a crisp. I wasn’t there to see our dogs, panicked and running loose, bolt away through the flames. I didn’t ask about it at the time.

The police car moved slowly downhill to Berwick, pausing every now and then, until it arrived at a hastily set-up refuge

centre at the Akoonah Park showgrounds. Its rotating light bounced blue off a pavilion wall as we pulled up, and one of the police officers lifted me out. Hundreds of people milled around, searching anxiously for familiar faces in the churning crowd, desperately asking questions of whoever was there. ‘What was happening with the fire?’ ‘Had anyone heard about this person or what was happening in this or that road?’

Families clustered together clutching bags of possessions or clasping dogs or cats or budgerigar cages. Refugees from the suburbs. As I was carried from the police car I looked around for the faces of the girls or Terry or Carol and Alan.

‘Where are my girls? Sarah and Rachel Fogarty. I need to see my girls!’

Paramedics in uniform and medical teams who’d rushed into the centre in their civvies moved around inside the sheds, eddies of human drama playing out around them. A woman with messy hair and burnt black spots on her sundress stood convulsing in tears on the spot as another woman clasped her shoulders. An elderly man resisted a paramedic trying to wash his eyes. I shook uncontrollably; I’d become bone-achingly cold.

Someone—a voice without a face—told me Sarah and Rachel were unhurt and were here, at the showgrounds, with Terry. He would look after them, the voice said. They were all okay.

Relief, such blessed relief. Something in me loosened and sighed through the pain.

I was carried into what looked like a meeting room in the pavilion. Half a dozen people were lying on tables. Firm hands laid me on a table and someone began cutting my T-shirt and clothes off with a large pair of scissors. I felt incensed being stripped so publicly, and outraged that the clothes my mother

had given me were ruined; and worse, as my wedding ring was cut from my finger. ‘Why are they doing that? Don’t they realise they are wrecking them?’ I cried inside. ‘I’ll take them off!’

As I lay there, drugs took over and the surrounds retreated, like a scene from a play. Then Carol appeared at the side of the table.

‘It’s okay. Darren’s okay. We found him,’ she said. ‘He got scared and ran away down the road when he saw the fire. He’s safe. He’s alright.’

One of the doctors motioned her out and a woozy wave of gladness overtook me. My horizontal view of the goings-on was becoming blurry. I still badly wanted to see my family and talk to Terry. I needed my husband.

Unbeknown to me, Terry had run across from the football ground to Akoonah Park. He later recalled the sheer relief as he saw a police officer come out of the crowd carrying Rachel and Sarah. The girls were dazed and he could see that they’d been through something terrible, but were unhurt.

‘You’ll need to go to the room where medical teams are treating the injured people,’ a policewoman told him, in a way that indicated the children weren’t to come. Terry gave them a cuddle and left them with a woman who used to live next door to us.

When he entered that room, all he could see was my face with pieces of skin falling off it. Later, he told me that all he wanted to do was to hug me. Instead he touched me lightly on the stomach, knowing that our natural instinct is to double over to protect ourselves, so the stomach is one part of the body that is least likely to suffer burn trauma. I apparently told him what happened in the fire and asked where he’d been and how he

found the girls. Were they scared? Who was looking after them now, I begged to know.

‘They’re fine but a bit dazed,’ he said. ‘I’m more concerned about you.’

I can’t actually remember Terry coming in to see me at the refuge centre; I was so out of it.

Soon afterwards I was lifted into the back of an ambulance, heading to Dandenong Hospital, sirens blaring. It seemed to take so long. The painkillers took over and I started to feel very tired. For weeks afterwards in hospital, every time I’d shut my eyes I’d hear a siren.

Once we arrived, the doctors pricked me all over with a sharp needle.

‘Can you feel this?’ they asked, again and again. ‘Or this?’

‘No,’ I replied, relieved.

This must be a good sign. Perhaps I wasn’t too badly burnt after all? I was so pleased that I could feel nothing. I didn’t realise that no feeling indicated that the greatest damage had been done: nerve endings had been destroyed as well as tissue, muscle and even bone.

The doctors said I needed to be transferred urgently to the Alfred Hospital which had a specialised Burns Unit. An ambulance officer travelled with me in the back on this journey, a young man who kept talking to me, peering intently into my face, asking never-ending questions. I felt so weary and longed to sleep, but he wouldn’t let me.

‘Do you have any children?’ ‘Where do you live?’ he asked. ‘Do you work?’ ‘Do you have any animals?’ On and on.

The trip seemed interminable but we eventually arrived at the Alfred, which was to be my home for the long, difficult months ahead. On this day, however, I had no idea about the terrible journey that was to unfold.

I didn't see Mum again for a very long time.

As I was taken away for treatment, the CFA crew resumed their search for people still trapped by the fires. Tony, the firefighter who saved me, remembers continuing up St Georges Road until they reached the last house. It was down a steep drive and the crew had to look for a rock to stop the tanker rolling forward in the drive. They thought they'd found one until someone said, 'Oh no, it's not a rock, it's a charred kookaburra!'

When Tony finished his thirteen-hour shift the next morning he went home 'knackered', walked in the back door of his house and was greeted by his wife who told him that twelve firefighters had lost their lives in St Georges Road. They had been caught in a gully a hundred metres from that last house. Tony was devastated.