



The smell came first — smoke on the rising breeze, a rustle in the tinder-dry leaves around our little campsite.

“Shall we go and look at that lake before breakfast?” Sally tripped out of the tent, swore and made a mess of the zippers on the flyscreen, tugging too hard. “Bugger this!”

“Don’t you love the serenity?” I asked.

“Bugger off. Is that coffee? What’s that smell?”

It had intensified, no doubt about it, burning timber and was that leaves rustling or a far off crackle like distant rifle fire? As if in a dream, I floated to the top of the slope that protected us from the morning Easterly, dry twigs crunching under my boots.

“Shit!”

The horizon was a broiling mass of mud brown smoke, fed by a wall of fire advancing across the national park, about to swamp the lonely trailhead where we left the Landcruiser the evening before.

As I watched, transfixed, heart in mouth, a fifty-foot Karri a few steps from our car exploded into flames and the bushes beside ignited with a faint whump.

I turned and ran, grabbed Sally by the elbow, sending her coffee flying. “Run, love, run. Fire!”

“What?” She pulled back, sleep befuddled. “I’m in my jammies, my thongs.”

She waved at her toes.

“No time! It’s coming our way, fast. We have to run.” I dragged her a few paces down the slope.

“But the car’s that way.”

“It’s already gone. The lake’s our only chance.”

A fierce gust showered us with dust, leaf fragments and the ominous charcoal stench.

Sally glared at me, cursing me with her eyes for dragging her into the middle of a forest on a summer hiking trip, then dropped my hand and charged down the slope, arms wide for balance as she skipped over roots and fallen branches, thongs slapping, pyjama top billowing.

She beat me through the dry creek bed and up the knoll on the far side.

There was the lake, sparkling in the morning sun.

Just two more ridges to cross.

We could make it. We had to. The air temperature had soared, the trees hummed, the fire was close behind.

We plunged into the next valley together. Sally careened off a tree trunk and rolled through a spiky grevillea, screaming, but was off before I could reach her, crabbing up the bank on all fours, one thong lost, blood in the filth on her foot.

I got a handful of her pyjamas and hauled her up, scanning for the lake as we topped the rise, we mustn't lose direction in our haste. So easy to get disorientated in amongst the trees, with bushes slapping at our cheeks.

Still two valleys away. How could that be? And way off to our right.

"Follow the stream," Sally shouted. "It must go to the lake."

Good thinking.

I took the lead smashing dry branches aside to make a way for her. I splashed around a steep bank to a dead end.

How could that be? The river was a pathetic dribble, but it couldn't just disappear.

But it had, I scrambled to the top of the bank.

Flames roared on the ridge we'd crossed seconds before. Sally's nails dug into my arms. How did she get up the bank?

The lake, we must get to the lake, but it was three ridges away now.

"No," I said. "This can't be happening."

"Oh my God, it's a mirage," Sally said. "We've been chasing a mirage."

An irresistible force slammed into my spine. I tumbled off the ledge. What ledge? Sailing into a chasm.

A dream. Thank God. A stupid nightmare.

I dragged myself, gulping into reality.

Sally hauled on my shoulder. "Wake up. You're having a bad dream again. You were whimpering in your sleep."

That hurt.

I mean no-one wants to be a whimperer.

I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth, thankful for a soft bed and the reassuring presence of my wife.

I really must do something about those dreams. Psychiatric help perhaps?

*Just calm yourself, buddy. Get a grip on reality. You're in your bedroom, at home, nothing's going to get you. There's no bogey man.*

I should go to the bathroom, get a drink. I reached for the quilt and scuffed my knuckles on a zip.

*A zip?*

*Idiot. You're not at home. You're in your sleeping bag, in the tent. On a hiking break. Hitting the Bibbulman track with the dawn. Hence the crazy dream.*

*Numbskull.*

*Yep. Psychiatric referral — definitely — as soon as we get back to Perth.*

I lay on my back, stretched out my arms, pulled in a long deep yoga breath and coughed.

*What the hell?*

It tasted of smoke.

How real was that damned nightmare? I shook my head to clear the dream hangover.

Which made the smell worse.

I sniffed hard.

Smoke, it rasped in my nose.

Had our campfire somehow rekindled? Surely not, I threw a jug of water over it. You don't mess around in the forest in a drought.

*Hang on. It's February. We're in a drought. We didn't light a fire.*

*Oh, no.*

I rolled out of my bag, swaying on my knees for a moment, so sleep mugged, praying the flickering shadows on the side of the tent were just a residual illusion from my stupid nightmare and not ...

The zips took me ages, in the dark, shaking with nerves, the scorched odour stronger by the second, telling myself I could *not* hear crackling in the woods.

But I did.

The top of the rise glowed orange between us and the car park.

Sally tumbled out behind me, bumping me forward.

“Holy shit. Fire!” she said.

“Run,” I yelled, “to the lake.”

Sally screamed after me. “What lake?”