

## Girt by flame

### I.

They Christen their first daughter in early October, on the cusp of the fire season. The father shoves his fire gear into a bag and leaves it on the back seat of his ute, just in case.

The next two daughters are born in the middle of summer and are Christened on hot, dry Sundays. He checks his fire gear twice before they leave for the church, reassuring himself that he charged his pager less than a week ago.

When their son is born at the tail end of the fire season, he almost doesn't bring his fire gear to the Christening. But when his wife is strapping their children into their car seats, he runs back to the house to get the bag at the last minute. He tucks it behind the driver's seat, just in case.

### II.

The RFS has their Christmas party at the end of March after weeks of grassfires. They move the firetruck out of the shed and set up trestle tables and plastic garden chairs, fill bowls with cheezels and lollies and unwrap stacks of plastic cups, string a few streamers up. He brings their barbeque over on the back of his ute. Onions are caramelized, sausages charred.

The district gathers for the party, for the old fire captain to be thanked for his decades of service, for the new young captain, his wife's oldest brother, to be welcomed into the role. His wife spends the night with their baby son on her hip, sitting with her sisters and their baby children. The older children wander, clinging to their fathers, to their cousins, playing under the tables and stealing ice from the eskies.

Before the light fades, they all gather in front of the fire shed for a photo. His wife looks for their youngest daughter in the crowd and finds her sitting on her grandfather's lap. The person charged with taking the photo shouts and waves to settle everyone down. They all shush one another until the only noise is a baby crying and a flock of cockatoos screeching in the old gum behind the fire shed.

"Smile!"

The community smiles for its photo.

### III.

One rainy afternoon after a week of rainy afternoons, his wife and her sister take their children to the hayshed to get them out of the house. They climb the stacks of hay and drag hay bales around in the middle of the shed to build a castle with two rooms and a moat. They don't build a tunnel, because tunnels of hay can collapse and crush small children.

They don't need to tell the children about the danger of hay tunnels, or that damp hay can self-combust deep in the belly of the haystack. The children are born with that knowledge in their bones.

### IV.

It's a seventh birthday party for a cousin in town, out in the backyard with a homemade pinata swinging from the Hills Hoist. The fathers are drinking light beer and standing around the barbeque. The mothers sit under the tree, drinking and supervising the party games.

All at once, pagers go off and the fathers reach into their pockets and pull out their pagers and then rush to kiss their wives and pat their children on the head as they run to their vehicles.

They strip and pull their orange fire uniforms on, lacing themselves into heavy black boots. The men take off towards the fire shed, leaving skid marks on the gravel driveway. The children yell, "I can smell it! I can smell the smoke!" The birthday girl cries over the abandoned game of pass-the-parcel.

V.

The fire captain, in his uniform, stands in front of the Friday afternoon school assembly and clears his throat. He reads from a piece of paper about the importance of having a fire plan, of having a meet-up location far enough away from the house, of not going back into the house for toys or siblings.

At least half of the school's students are his nephews and nieces, sitting cross legged on the threadbare carpet looking up at him. In a few years, his own children will join them, and he'll give a similar speech, teaching these kids the practical ways to handle this looming threat.

VI.

It is the school holidays, so he has taken three weeks of annual leave to be at home with the children. The second daughter stands on the front deck after a lunch of tinned spaghetti toasted sandwiches. There is smoke rising from the property below them, where the farmer keeps goats. She points and shouts, "Fire!"

He comes out from the kitchen and so do the other three children. The smoke blackens. "Go get shoes on," he says, and then calls his brother-in-law, the fire captain. The fire captain confirms – the fire spotter on the mountain is yet to call it in, but no-one has a permit for a fire.

The father ushers his children into the car as he pulls on his fire uniform. His son holds the white helmet on his lap. They speed out the gate and down the road, "I'll leave you with your auntie, and then call your mother. She'll come and look after the house."

The children nod and get out of the car at the end of their cousin's driveway. His son solemnly hands the helmet over before they run down the driveway, kicking up dust. Their cousins are sitting on the verandah, watching the property across the road burn. Their auntie, heavily pregnant, rushes around the kitchen, keeping an eye on the fire through the window. The children sit with their cousins, hearts pounding. They watch the fire truck careen up the road in a cloud of dust. A few utes follow. Trapped goats bleat and throw themselves over the fence. Eventually, their mother's big grey 4WD races up the road, disappearing into the smoke.

Their auntie comes out onto the verandah, one hand on her belly, her other forearm pressed against her forehead.

"Has the wind changed?"

The smell of smoke is stronger, their eyes are watering.

"Let's get in the car," she says, and thinks: Just in case.

So, the children pile into the car and share seatbelts. Their auntie turns the garden tap on, and the sprinklers come to life, water arcing across the yellow lawn. They wait.

The fire doesn't jump the road—maybe the wind hadn't changed after all. After fifteen minutes they climb out of the car and resume their watch from the verandah.

Their mother arrives, sweaty and tired. She let's out a sigh of relief seeing her children on the verandah with their cousins,

“Dad didn’t say he left you here. I thought you were at home, by yourselves.”

Their mother and auntie make a big batch of red cordial in a water cooler, and they take it over to the burnt property. Their father and uncles and neighbours are all sitting on the ground near a machinery shed, faces and hands black. They gulp the cordial. It streaks down their chins and necks, washing away the soot.

Their mother says to their father, “I thought you’d left the kids at home!”

He drains his cup of cordial and says, “Why would I do that?”

They drive back up the hill to their house, the son holding his father’s white helmet on his lap. Their father goes for a shower and the falls asleep on the lounge. The children help their mother undo all her preparations; turn off the sprinklers, unblock the gutters, pull the wooden outdoor furniture back outside onto the deck.

VII.

They spend the entire day building a bonfire. Their father maneuvers two logs into position with the tractor, and then the children drag branches across the paddock to stack it higher.

They collect kindling and pack the base with it.

That night, there is no moon, so the sky is thick with stars. They sit on tree stumps they saved for stools and cook marshmallows on sticks they specially selected for the job. The children drag their tree stumps around the fire to avoid the brunt of the smoke as the wind changes.

They watch the fire roar and then stare into the flickering coals as it dies right down.

Just before they go to bed, a baby fox cries for its mother in the gully.

VIII.

The oldest daughter is thirteen, maybe fourteen and the children negotiate to stay at home by themselves during the school holidays. But first, he walks them around the house, pointing at the different taps, the different water tanks, where to place the sprinklers if the fire is coming from the east or west or north or south, where the tennis balls are kept to block the gutters with.

IX.

On the fridge beside the shopping list is the list of all the RFS members and their phone numbers, laminated.

X.

Even though they are almost adults, the sisters sit in the lounge room way past midnight waiting for an electrical storm to pass over. The house lights up like daylight with each strike of lightning and they hold their breath – waiting for a spark to find tinder, a dry tree stump to be blown to pieces, an ember to flick into dry grass.

XI.

They all come home from uni to help pack up their grandparents’ house. One of the sisters oversees the fire in the back garden, where they throw boxes of old files and linen not worth donating and half-finished projects from the shed.

The oldest daughter combs through their grandfather’s office, the only room in the house they

weren't allowed to play in. She puts aside photos and land deeds and diaries documenting the drought in the 80s. She flicks through stacks of mail, opens some envelopes with a knife before tossing the letters onto the rubbish pile.

In the bottom desk drawer, she finds a small box. In it is a badge, still shiny: 50 years of service with the RFS.

## XII.

When the sisters are all gone, and it is just the brother living at home, the national park that backs onto the property catches alight. The mountain burns for days, and then weeks. The people living on the mountain near the lake are evacuated and the sisters watch via social media.

The mountain hasn't been backburned in years, decades even. There are arguments about who is responsible. By week three of keeping the fire from descending onto the towns and grazing flats, the RFS are exhausted. They pull their teenaged sons out of school and dress them in spare uniforms, pant legs rolled, and sleeves cuffed.

The sons don't have to go up against the fire front, but they spend days backburning and clearing scrub. The next generation learns on their feet.

## XIII.

It was a mistake to walk into the city, the oldest sister decides. The air is orange, there are people trapped on a beach on the coast and she can barely breathe in this gritty air. She didn't think when she left the house that the smoke could get into her lungs like this in the city.

## XIV.

The sisters fly up, city to city, and stop in on an auntie and uncle before making the four-hour drive home. They stay for orange juice and tea, pancakes with smoked salmon and warm croissants. They stay for too long and are just at the top of the mountain when the road closes, four cars in front of them. In the rearview mirror, black smoke billows from the forest. There is a coach in front of them, no passengers. The driver climbs down and knocks on the sister's window, a smile on his face. Can he charge his phone in their car? He forgot his charging port.

The sisters plug in his phone and leave the car idling while they get out to stretch their legs. Another plume of smoke has shot up behind them, while the sky to the front is hazed out. The coach driver chats to them, figures out who they are by the town they're from and nods – he knows the family, or of them. Then he says he is going to go see how the road is and walks away.

The sisters pace. It's the smoke behind them that's worrying – there is only one road through this part of the mountain and now they can't turn around. A woman in a SES uniform makes her way down the line of cars. The cars peel away after she speaks to them. The sisters are leaning against the bonnet of their car when she approaches.

"You need to turn around," she says. "You need to go and take shelter from where you've come from."

"We can't, we came from the airport."

"Well, the road is going to be closed for a while," she says and shifts her eyes to the smoke behind them. "And we're not sure what that will do if the wind changes."

“Well, what do we do?”

The SES woman points across the highway. “There’s a park down there. You’ll have to wait it out.”

“Okay,” the sisters say, and the SES woman moves on to the car behind them with three children strapped in the backseat.

They wait for the coach driver to return and give him his semi-charged phone. He shakes his head,

“Bloody chaos up there. A policeman on a motorbike just got taken out by car. Couldn’t see it in the smoke.”

“Is that why the road’s closed?”

“And the fire jumped the road about one and a half k’s up.”

The coach driver claps both sisters on the shoulders and wishes them luck as they get in their car and roll towards the park. They park under a pine tree and set themselves up on a picnic table.

Fire engines line the street. Fifteen, twenty, maybe twenty-five. The sisters eye them and their sooty crews congregated on the corner. They know what this means, what grouping the trucks altogether like this means. Anticipation. Preparation.

The younger sister takes their empty water bottles to public toilets to fill them up. The taps are short and close to the sink, so the bottles won’t fit under them. She cups her hand under the tap, and slowly fills them like that, one handful at a time. When she gets back, the older sister is changing out of her pants and shirt, sliding into a summer dress behind the car door. They sit down at the table and watch the other travelers milling about the park, leaning on their cars, sharing chips and bags of lollies that were meant for a long road trip.

The fire crews slowly climb back into their trucks and the sirens wail as they split up – two towards the forest at the end of the road, half back the way they came and the other half into the road closure.

As the last truck leaves, the older sister gestures towards the hotel two blocks down. It’s shut and the owners are on the roof spraying it down.

“They have a pool, if, you know...I checked.”

The younger sister nods and they sit and watch the spotter plane loop over the forest at the end of the road. The Boeing 737 follows and dumps its load of water. The little children who were in the car behind them cheer.

They wait for hours, making periodic trips to the toilets to fill their water bottles up. They eat the melted Cadbury chocolate covered peanuts their uncle had passed to them on their way out the door that morning. They think, but do not say: if only we hadn’t stopped in on them, if only we didn’t have the pancakes and the salmon or the warm croissants and tea. If only we’d left fifteen minutes earlier, if only we’d got through before the fire jumped the highway, before the policeman was knocked off his motorbike.

Flames leap out of the trees at the bottom of the street and the family hurriedly packs their children back in the car, the father watching the flames with his hands on his head. The older sister, on her way back from the toilets, stops to speak to the SES volunteer who is hovering close to road closure sign, the collar of his uniform turned up against the wind. His radio crackles. The road is open.

The sister runs back to the picnic table, “The road is open, let’s go.”

They wave at the other travelers sitting in their cars and in the gutter, watching the glow on the edge of town, “The road is open!”

The sheer relief. The knot of dread unravelling slightly. They turn the radio on as they speed back onto the highway and past the road closure sign. The SES volunteer waves them through, his eyes gritty and red. The coach driver blasts his horn as he pulls out of a side

street, flicking his fingers in a wave.

They listen to the radio: three mountain towns have been lost to the fires. There are two missing people, a father and son last seen defending their property. The prison at the bottom of the mountain needs to be evacuated – the fire has gotten into the prison yard. Later, the report is updated – the prison is evacuated but the town is ringed by fire.

The sisters call their parents and ask how to get home without going through the town. They have only known the one road home.