Embers

PROLOGUE

Politician 1: I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires.

Politician 2: Welcome to the wonderful electorate of Indi; to everyone in the public gallery – there are many familiar faces – welcome. It seems quite strange that we are here today in Wodonga to have hearings into the bushfires yet it is raining so nicely outside.

[They go as the following appears.]

Text =

[Overnight on 7 and 8 January, in the year 2003, a dry storm ignited over 80 fires in Victoria’s North East and Gippsland. 59 days later the fires had accounted for one life, burnt 1.1 million hectares of public and private land, destroyed 9,000 livestock, 41 houses, 3,000 kilometres of fencing, and innumerable manmade and natural assets. Over 35 agencies and more than 15,000 personnel were involved in the fight to save Victoria. The cost to the community, in terms of the fire itself and recovery, is estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars.]

[The text fades. Slowly a community of residents and firefighters is revealed. A fire siren sounds: the memory of its meaning registers on faces. The siren stops and the chorus begins:]

Female 1: The thing I remember most about the day it finally arrived was the noise. It was the most phenomenal noise –

Male 2: Like a dragon.

Female 2: Like a train.

Male 3: Like a jet coming up the valley.

Male 1: F1-11s flying over.

Female 3: That sickening roar.

Male 4: You never forget it.

[Beat]

Male 1: And the sky –

Female 1: There was no sky.

Female 2: Pea soup.

Female 3: Yellow.

Female 2: The queerest, queerest light.

Male 3: Like being in an English fog.

Female 1: Completely still.

Male 3: Not that I’ve been in an English fog.

Female 1: Waiting for something to happen.


Female 2: In the middle of the day.

Female 1: Something has to happen.

Female 3: It looked like Mordor.
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Male 4: A swirling mass of white, brown, red, black towering above.
Female 2: A bubbling cauldron, black ash and crap.
Female 1: You could hear this roar and you could see this red.
Male 2: The Devil’s pit.
Female 2: That’s Hell. That’s what Hell looks like.
[A beat.]
Male 3: It was like trying to hold jelly in your hand.
Female 3: It came down in fingers into the ridges.
Male 3: It sneaks between your fingers.
Female 3: It retreats. Then it comes again.
Male 1: A monster lurking.
Female 3: The finger fire.
Male 2: It was playing with us.
Female 1: It would stick its little head up.
Male 4: You called her a whore.
Female 1: ‘Ner! Ner! Ner!’ Hide its little head.
Male 2: Next day she come out and played.
Male 3: A mad fire dance.

Male 1: Like driving into an IMAX theatre.
Female 2: Like a volcano.
Male 2: Whoof! Like an atom bomb.
Male 3: A war.
Male 4: The Battle of the Somme.
Female 3: These huge licks.
Male 3: The mother of them all.
Female 3: This gi-normous ball rolling over the licks.
Male 4: In a jagged line just marching along.
Male 3: Forty, sixty feet high.
Male 1: Ash and soot.
Male 4: The hairs on the back of the neck stand up.
Male 1: Charcoal and rubbish.
Male 3: A wall of flame.
Male 1: Raining down.
Male 4: Jesus Christ!
[A beat.]
Male 3: We’re buggered.
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[Then the following appears:]

Text =

[A year later – on the first anniversary marking the start of the fires – people gather to hold a barbecue and talk about it all . . .]

[The text fades.]

PART ONE: CONTEXT

[People arrive at a barbecue.]

Kristina: The kids and I were at the Commercial Club having lunch with my mother –

Graeme: – as you do often –

Kristina: – and he rang to say he was going to a fire. Part and parcel. He's going to a fire. You don't pay much attention to it.

Graeme: I always like to ring Kristina as we get turned out so she knows where I'm going.

Kristina: Anyhow, we took Mum back to work and we're sitting there quietly not knowing anything about these fires that are goin' on. Next thing comes Albury fire tanker, Lavington fire tanker, Jindera fire tanker, Thurgoona. I'm sitting there watching these tankers go past. I said to Mum, 'I've got to go home. They never come across the border unless something big's happening.' And I got in the car, and put on the radio.

Paul: In my eight years here with the Country Fire Authority we've never really had the big campaign fire. We've always talked about the thunderstorms going through. January the 8th it all happened.

G/C Officer: An hour from the first strike they had a spotter plane up. They were calling locations of strikes as quick or quicker than we could plot them. Hearing the observer call down all these grid references and you're thinking, 'Oh God, what's happening here? Where's it all going to end?'

Paul: There were a few cracks of lightning as we were driving into Myrtleford. And one of the fellas said, 'I reckon there's something in that.' Half an hour later the phone calls started. I went to the Ovens headquarters, which is pretty much the plan that we have, and started to work there but then the news started to filter through that Brett was at Tallangatta and Alan was at Corryong doing the same thing and, really, the joint was burning down.

[We are taken to the Inquiry momentarily]:

Plowman: This fire has been the most tragic event in my 11 years, coming on 12 years, as a member of parliament. In round figures, half of my electorate was burnt. That is a staggering proportion of the area that I represent.

[Now back to the BBQ]:

Paul: Tony's right. [A beat.] And anyone who tells you there's been bigger is bullshitting. It's the biggest. Big in the area that's burning but also big in the number of people that you've got to feed, and the trucks you've got to fuel, and the tyres you've got to fix, and the helicopters you've got to co-ordinate. Just a mammoth thing.
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got our strength from somewhere.

[A beat.]

Res/Beech: The CFA were just amazing. Just the comfort and the/ I don’t know.

A pilot: The pub was quite extraordinary.

Res/Beech: We have friends who have knocked the CFA a bit and I’ve said, ‘Don’t. Because if you do, I’ll kill you. Don’t do it.’

[A beat.]

A pilot: It was like a happy war. Everyone came in black and charred every day but all in terrific spirit.

Male 3: The ‘old digger’ sort of thing.

Ernie: Everybody made sacrifices. Everybody’s got damage. Everybody’s got battle scars to bloody talk about.

Mark: And we jokingly say now that we don’t respond to wildfires less than a million hectares.

[The fire builds and is reflected on their faces as the following appears:]

Text = [On 19 October 2004 the non-profit Stretton Group announced up to 400 farmers and property owners could join a class action against the Victorian State Government seeking $500 million in damages over losses incurred in the fires. To date the class action has not been lodged with the Court.1]

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1 This information is updated as necessary during production.

EPILOGUE

Tess: It’s big because we say it’s big. It’s fast because we say it’s fast. It’s our perception of what a fire is. We happened to put a hut in the road and we happened to want to live in the hut. But fire’s a natural thing. And a massive cleansing’s gone on. Like opening the veins, opening all the veins again and letting it flow. It’s happened how many times before? No idea. Hundreds of times. It’s normal. It just happens, this time, to be in our lifetime.

[They stand silent and strong. The fire flickers. The lights fade.]

[End of Play.]