



## The Black Saturday

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My and Thuy Nguyen:

My family came to Australia with a Skilled Migrant Work Visa. My dad came on 8 January 2008. Then my mum, brother, sister and I came on 27 February.

We entered into a strange new land with a different language. We did not know English and it was hard. What was worse was we did not know any other families, neighbours, relatives or friends, except my dad's teacher and his family, whom we met in Vietnam.

Jenny, Lindsay and their family supported us, for our spirit as well as our other matters. But there were still a lot of difficult things for our family. The reason we left our country to come to Australia was because we wanted a better life and especially a good future for us three kids.

We lived on Robertson Road, Kinglake. The cold of Kinglake mountain refrigerated our souls and bodies. We didn't have any transport except some of the bikes that Jenny and Lindsay gave to us. Because we don't usually eat bread, every two weeks my mum and dad would get a lift from their employer, Carol, or someone that we knew to go to Lalor to get some Vietnamese food.

But on Black Saturday, a big flame rushed into Kinglake, a small town where the people were very honest and led simple lives. The massive flame killed thousands and thousands of trees, bushes and animals. It killed a lot of people and destroyed lots and lots of houses and farms. All the places that people need for their lives. It just made everyone feel very shocked.

A few days before the firestorm, the sun was shining brightly and it was very hot. Everyone just felt exhausted and frustrated.

In the morning on Saturday 7 February, my mum went to the cafe to prepare the first Vietnamese dish there. 'There were very few customers at the cafe today,' Mum said after she got home from work in the afternoon. It was unusual because on Saturday and Sunday the cafe was usually packed.

I was about to turn the TV on but Mum said, 'It's hot so you shouldn't turn the TV on. You should go outside and play.' I went out and saw big smoke, but I thought it was dark clouds.

About one o'clock, Wayne, Carol's husband, came. He usually takes my dad for a drive because Dad only has an L-plate but this time he said he and my dad couldn't go because there were bushfires in Kilmore and St Andrews. We were not very surprised when we heard that news because we had been told that there were bushfires every year in Australia so we thought not to worry at all.

# Bushfire Education



A few moments later, I could see the sun bright red like a ball of flame. The air was extremely hot.

Then Dean, our next-door neighbour, asked, 'Are you all staying here or are you going to leave?'

My dad wasn't sure so he said, 'We're staying here.'

At that time, Carol came and said, 'Everyone should pack up their necessary belongings and be ready to leave quickly when it's dangerous. I will let you know.'

I started to feel scared but I still didn't know what was going to happen. I went to the bathroom to have a quick shower. I could hear Mum telling Dad and the kids that they should come in and get every necessary personal document ready and have something to eat just in case we had to leave.

My family hurried inside and grabbed all the necessary papers that we brought from Vietnam. My brother gave my mum his school bag and asked her whether he needed to get his clothes and toys. Before Mum could answer him, we heard our dad shout, 'Hurry, get out of the house.'

I looked through the window and everything was black. Our house filled with smoke and became pitch black. My mum just grabbed whatever papers she could get her hands on and my brother's school bag. She had no time to put the papers in. Then they ran to the back door.

'Mum, wait for me,' I screamed.

'Hurry,' she shouted back.

I quickly got my clothes on and ran out. Luckily, I could see my shoes and grabbed them. My sister hadn't had time to put on her shoes, she just quickly slipped her feet into the pair of slippers that Mum had placed at the doorstep for gardening.

It was still daylight and there was no sign of a fire when we were standing in the backyard. However, in less than ten minutes since Carol had given us the warning, the fire quickly rushed in.

Our family left the house and went onto the street but we did not know where to run to. On the right of our house were bushes that had not seen any fire yet. On the left side was the shopping area with flame everywhere. At that time we could only see cars speeding away from the flames.

My family had to run on foot because, although we had a car, my dad just had a learner's permit and he dared not drive.

My dad said, 'We'd better go to Dean's house'.

We knocked at his door, which was open, and were asked to come in. We thought it would be a good shelter because his house was brick and looked very sturdy. After about six or seven minutes, I started seeing fire burning outside on the street and the tongues of flame began licking at my house.

My brother, sister and I cried out, 'Mum, our house is on fire! It's being burnt down!'

# Bushfire Education



My mum was feeling scared and very confused. She had to control herself not to burst into tears. She said to us, 'Calm down, sweethearts, let's pray. As long as we are still alive we can have everything later, we can start from scratch.'

At that time, the owner of the house opened the door to push something out. As he was doing this, the heat from outside caused the door to bend and it would not close properly. The smoke then rushed in through the door and began to suffocate everyone inside. Dean went to fetch a large bucket of water and a blanket. Putting the blanket into the water, he told my dad to use it to cover the opening to stop the flames from getting inside.

My mum, brother, sister and I followed two women and a girl who was about my age. We were not sure who they were. We only knew Dean because we met him outside sometimes. As soon as we got into the room, it filled with smoke and nearly suffocated us. We had to move to another room, which also filled with smoke. One of the ladies gave us a large bath towel to soak with water and cover our noses to make breathing easier.

It was pitch dark and I do not know what the man and Dean were doing in the house. We realised that our dad was not with us and were worried about what had happened to him. Mum tried to assure us that our dad was okay because he had to hold the door to stop the fire from entering inside. We told Mum that we wouldn't feel okay if dad was not with us. Mum said that he had to follow the owners of the house wherever they might go.

Because she could not see in the dark and did not know the way around inside the house, that just made things worse. She had difficulty communicating with the other people due to the language difference. Mum then realised that the situation had become very dangerous and told us to make sure we followed the owners of the house while she tried to fumble her way in the dark to the front of the house to call Dad in.

'My dear, stop holding the door, the smoke has already filled the house,' she called out.

My mum and dad returned and we heard a man say, 'The fire is all around us! The only place that we can go now is the storage shed.'

We then left the sturdy brick house for the storage shed, holding very little hope. About five to ten minutes after we left, the house burst into flames. Now we did not know what would happen to us. The shed was full of stuff and crowded with people and dogs. The air was hot and stuffy with smoke and breath from humans and dogs.

Outside, the fire was lighting up the sky as though it were in broad daylight. The kids and I were crying and screaming out of fear. The towel had dried out. The owner of the house re-soaked it with water several times until there was no more water left. We then had to find a damp patch left on the towel and push our noses against it to breathe.

Mum said, 'Let's pray, my dears! God won't leave us.' Then we all prayed together.

# Bushfire Education



The flame was growing bigger and bigger, higher and higher. In front of the house, there were several cars and motorcycles on fire. Our house and the garage were being burned by horrible flames; it was like they were mad. Behind the shed where we were taking shelter, I could see trees burning and gas cylinders exploding in flames that leaped tens of metres into the sky.

I cried out, 'Mum, I don't think God has any compassion for us anymore! We're going to be burnt.'

At the time, we were thinking we had a very slim chance to survive.

My mum said to us, 'God is testing us, my dear! Keep praying! Don't let anything distract you.'

She thought by praying, we would benefit from two things. Firstly, praying would divert us from the crazy flames and gas cylinders exploding like bombs. Secondly, we had to believe in our faith to be saved. Nothing could save us at the time except our faith.

Then Mum saw death was near because everywhere around us was burning. Mum told Dad and us to prepare ourselves for our final time in this world. I knew what 'to prepare ourselves' meant but I didn't think my brother and sister would know. Mum didn't explain it to them because it wouldn't have been good for them.

Mum remembered that she still had a mobile phone in her pocket. She then called our friends and family in Vietnam to ask them to pray for us.

Suddenly we heard a voice calling from outside, 'Van! Van!'

That's my dad's name. His real name is Huong, but Huong was difficult to pronounce for people here so they just called him 'Van', which is his middle name.

Dean heard the voice and he replied, 'Van is here!'

Carol had not contacted us since she came to give us a warning before the fire came. By this time, the flame was not as furious as it had been before. Wayne and his daughter had gone out looking for our family but did not know where to find us. They just saw our house being totally burnt down. They called out with a tiny hope that we were still around. Then they heard Dean's voice.

'They are here,' Dean shouted.

They were overwhelmed with joy, rushing to where we were taking shelter and hugging us tightly in their arms and crying. Wayne was overjoyed.

He said, 'Thank God, I thought that you all had perished!'

We then asked if his family was okay. He said that they were alright but everything had burned down. We then consoled each other and said it was good that we were still alive. Then he asked whether we needed anything.

We said to him, 'Just some water to drink and to soak our towel in to make breathing easier.'

# Bushfire Education



He said, 'Okay, we'll get it for you!'

We actually did not know which way they came to the shed or how they got out as we still could see a big fire outside. A while later, Wayne and his daughter brought us two half-litre bottles of water and a slab of soft drink. We thanked them and then they left.

My dad said the fire had receded greatly but we still dared not let anyone venture out. Besides burnt trees, there were still green branches falling onto the ground and burning. It had to have been 10 or 11 pm by then.

Mum was getting a headache and we started having so much difficulty breathing that we had to open the door to go out and get some air. Dean told Mum and Dad not to let the kids out because it was still dangerous. Mum thought if she did not let us out, we would die of suffocation.

As we walked out of the shed, we saw our house, which had become a pile of rubble and burnt pieces of steel. We had mixed feelings of sadness and joy. We felt sad because all the souvenirs we brought from Vietnam had gone. But we also felt happy because all of us were safe, including our beloved dogs. We then offered our thanks to God.

Late that night, the fire gradually calmed down. We got to know Dean's family. Mum had a terrible headache and Dean complained of very sore eyes and he had to lie down on the ground near the door. We were fumbling our way into the shed to find something to lean on. Then Mum told my dad and us to get out to the road so that we could breathe more easily.

We had a look at our house. My goodness! The plastic water tank that was taller than a person and about two-and-a-half metres wide had completely burned down, leaving nothing except a trail of flowing water.

We did not know where to go or what to do. Then we saw Wayne coming in a car. He stopped and told us to get in so he could drive us to the CFA shed. We said he should ask his family to go but he told us they would come later. We got into the car and Wayne took us there to have something to eat. Everyone ate and drank all kinds of dishes from Carol's Cafe Shop and Restaurant without having to pay anything.

There were paramedics there and everyone was given eye drops and anyone who had burns had dressings put on their wounds.

After having something to eat, we found a place to lie down. I didn't sleep because I was still afraid that the fire would come back again. Mum and I went out and saw the petrol station still burning. We watched for a while until we grew tired. Then we went back in and tried to sleep.

At 5 am Carol arrived, asking my mum and dad to come out. She told us a bus would pick us up and take us to a safe place. At the time of the fire, each of us just had one set of clothes because it was very hot. But in the early morning, the air was cold. Carol's daughter handed us a blanket and two jumpers. Mum gave one to Dad and one to me because I was freezing. Mum and my brother and sister had to wrap themselves with the blanket.

# Bushfire Education



As we arrived at Whittlesea, I saw many people already there to meet their relatives. We thought that nobody would be there to meet us because we had no relatives.

However, as we got off the bus, we heard somebody call our names. It was Sister Margaret, a nun who taught my brother, sister and I Catechism at St Mary's Church in Kinglake. We felt overwhelmed and burst into tears.

Sister Margaret told us that she could not sleep the previous night as she was lying awake listening to the radio and wondering whether we could escape the fire. Moreover, Sister knew that we were the only Vietnamese people living in Kinglake and that we did not have any relatives or many friends yet. Also we did not have any transport. However, we considered ourselves very lucky because in this area, everyone knew and loved us.

After, Sister took us to the church to attend Mass. All Catholics attended the church together to say prayers and thanks to God.