



The Zulu moment on Black Saturday, Kinglake

Extract from *Kinglake-350* by Adrian Hyland

Drew Barr and Angie O'Connor live with their two children, Lucy and Grace, in *Lorelei*, a historic homestead they've lovingly renovated over the past twelve years. The weatherboard house was a memorable sight on the road to Kinglake: white-painted, with wide verandas and a fretwork balustrade, stained-glass windows, a flying fox that arced out of an old oak tree and had given hundreds of hours of joy to the young and, occasionally, old.

Lorelei has stood on the site for some 130 years and survived many a bushfire. The family have built up a lush garden upon which Angie, a horticulturalist, has lavished her skills. The garden blossoms with exotic trees: pears, guava, a beautiful ginkgo they were given as a wedding present.

They're well prepared: they've installed a fire-fighting pump, hoses, spare tanks of water, sprinklers on the roof. The land around their home is mainly cleared farmland and they are situated in a valley. They take the threat of bushfire seriously and work furiously every summer to keep the immediate environs free of debris. Ange has even been up on the roof with a vacuum cleaner. There isn't a blade of grass, a scrap of vegetation against the walls.

They take the CFA warnings seriously too. On February 7 they've been on the go since 5:30 in the morning, cutting back a photinia hedge that runs along the front of the property, trimming branches, chain-sawing a row of cypress trees they feared might have presented a threat. Their plan is to leave for the day, but they want to give the house as much chance as possible should the unthinkable occur. As they are felling one of the cypresses, a ringtail possum darts out, and they find a trio of babies. Lucy makes a nest in the laundry, intending to restore them to their mother as soon as the clean-up is over.

They spot the smoke to the north at around noon. Drew checks the CFA website: a fire at Kilmore, forty kilometres away. Not likely to be any sort of a threat; the cool change should be here well before then. It is a spur, though, a reminder of what can happen; they speed up the work rate. They move combustibles away from the building, coax geese and ducks onto the veranda, don protective clothing. They spend the morning running round clearing decks, hosing walls and roof, flooding gutters. The kids join in; they begin to think of the day as a kind of extended fire drill.

By mid-afternoon they're wondering whether there's any point leaving. What Ange describes as 'indecision evacuation fatigue' sets in: they realise it would be wise to go, but leaving is such a drag. You have to sort out animals and valuables, drive in the heat, hang around the suburbs. They've already evacuated so many times this summer. The change can't be far off now, and the internet says the fire is still at Kilmore.

'And we were exhausted,' says Ange. 'Maybe we weren't thinking clearly by that stage.'

By 5:30 they assume they've seen the worst of it. Surely the change will be coming any minute now? They take a breather. Drew is sitting out on the veranda, cup of tea in hand, when a charred leaf

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lands at his feet. He stares at it, suddenly wary. He looks up: the sky is fraught with a screaming yellow intensity, the clouds are low and dark.

The wind dies down, and an eerie stillness descends upon the countryside. Strange. He steps out from the veranda for a better view, then spots the first flames sweeping up from St Andrews.

The change has arrived all right, but it's bringing the fire with it. Because the fire is to the south of their house, the change is no longer a welcome relief; it's now a deadly threat.

Ange is hosing down the back of the house when she hears Drew roar: 'We're on!'

Her initial reaction is a sense of disbelief. 'My god,' she remembers saying to herself. 'Surely it's not actually going to happen...'

She looks around, has what she describes as her 'Zulu Moment'—the scene in the film when the attackers suddenly crest the hill. An angry red tide appears on the top of the rise to the west. It's coming from two sides at once?

'We felt like ants,' she says later, still appalled at the sheer size and fury of the flames.

The air grows thick with embers: strips of swirling candlebark, sparks of grass and branches carried from god knows where whirl by. The couple run around frantically attacking the tiny fires that begin to break out.

They've always expected a fire would come as a front, but this one isn't following the rules: there are outbreaks to the west, the south. Darkness descends. The fires are coming from everywhere.

They don't realise it at the time, but they are smack in the middle of what fire scientist Kevin Tolhurst describes as an 'area of fire'. As we've seen, the main front, rather than acting like a wave that rolls over you, would send out embers and firebrands that ignite more fires, which are in turn sucked back into the conflagration. This prolongs the danger period. A normal front might last about fifteen minutes, but today any point in the zone could be blasted by lethal radiation and convection for up to an hour.

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The youngsters retreat indoors, arm themselves with wet towels and mops. They leash the dogs, begin blocking entrances, do all the things they've been trained to do. Their parents stay outside until the front is maybe ten metres away. Drew shuts down the pump and brings the hose inside. They connect it to a gravity-fed tap in the laundry, dash around wetting down the interior.

In seconds the windows are glowing like a mad blacksmith's forge. Sparks and spikes begin shooting in through gaps, cracks in the walls they never knew existed.

Outside it's like the air itself has ignited.

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‘You’ve seen a fire when someone throws petrol on it?’ asks Ange. ‘That’s what it was like. There’d be a pocket of unburnt gas; an ember would strike it, and boom! Up it went!’

They have always drilled into the kids that if they are ever caught in a fire, they have to fight it: they all understand that to shelter passively can be lethal. But in the chaos of those moments, they don’t realise that twelve-year-old Lucy has remembered the lesson too well. She’s taken the initiative to move around inside the house, checking doors, making sure that the rooms aren’t engulfed. A courageous move that could have ended in disaster if any of the rooms had been in flames.

The sturdy little building does a magnificent job of keeping the conflagration at bay. But as they watch flames hammering at a section under one of the eaves, they realise that the heat is being trapped in there, that the weatherboards are about to ignite.

A sudden shout of alarm from Grace: ‘Mummy, there’s fire inside the house!’

A plume of particularly noxious black smoke puffs through, then bare flames are lacing across the ceiling. They blast it with the hose, but the inferno is making its own entry points now, poking and prodding their defences, threatening to overwhelm them.

‘You promised we wouldn’t be here!’ sobs Grace, while Lucy gasps that she can’t breathe.

Drew, 193 centimetres tall and up where the smoke is thickest, is having even more problems, sucking at thin wisps of air as if they were his last. Every breath tears at his lungs.

‘When you’re that terrified,’ reflected Ange afterwards, ‘it’s like all your senses disappear. All that adrenaline and cortisol pumping through your body, you think you’re going crazy. Even the noise of the fire disappears. You can only focus on one thing.’

For her, that one thing becomes the corner of the room where the flames are threatening to break through. Like many other people in the region right now, she sees the fire in anthropomorphic terms. She swears at it, screaming, leaping onto the table and blasting it with the hose.

Survival inside the building is rapidly becoming impossible. The room is thick with acrid smoke. The air rattles with a deafening chorus of shrieking smoke alarms, kids and dogs, venting gas bottles, exploding cars and cans of fuel. Above it all, the fire itself roars with a noise to wake the dead. Their eyes sting, their throats ache, their faces are racked and hollow with fear.

They’re caught in the deadly game of chance being played by families all over the district. It’s a balancing act: the killer outside against the killer within. The atmosphere out there is irradiated, but the roof is about to fall in on them. You have to judge the right moment. Make the wrong choice and you’re dead.

In many a location across the ranges — particularly around the top of the escarpment, where the vegetation was thick and the incline vertiginous—you’re dead anyway. The dice are loaded, there’s a horseshoe in the glove: the moment never comes. Inside and out coalesce into an infinity of heat and light, darkness and smoke.

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This family are fortunate to have that gravity-fed hose, something few in the region have; it gives them precious minutes. So many others are relying on electric pumps that give out when the power goes, or petrol pumps that cease operating when the fuel evaporates. But it can't keep the fire at bay forever. The smoke grows thicker, more bitter. They're groping around on their knees, still pouring on the water, swatting and smashing. They get the closest thing they've had all day to a stroke of luck — a tree smashes a large plastic pool near the back of the house and releases a stream of water. Most of it flows under the house.

Somewhere in the chaos, the thought shoots through Drew's head that this isn't going the way they said it would. We've done everything the experts told us, we were well prepared. It's supposed to last for fifteen minutes. What the ... is going on? When will we be able to get out?

He cracks the door three or four times, but each time the radiant heat drives him back. Death to go out into that. But they can't stay in here much longer either: they'll suffocate. Or be burnt to death. Or be crushed by the roof. He tries it one more time. Bearable?

Maybe. 'I'm going for the pump,' he yells, praying it will give them another weapon, buy them some time. He'll attack the fire from the outside.

'Daddy, don't go out there!' the girls are screaming. Ange has to drag them off him as he crashes out the door. She catches a glimpse of him through the window, a blurry figure racing through blinding light. She finds herself thinking, This is the way Drew dies. Goodbye, she thinks. Thank you.

They're no longer fighting for the house, they all know that. The building is doomed. 'And we are too,' Ange says to herself. 'We're dead.' She wonders if it will be quicker for the girls if she embraces them.

Drew comes staggering back, fire hose in hand. 'Out now!' he roars as the flames burst through the roof.

They unleash the dogs, grab a few beloved objects; Lucy clutches her teddy bear as they give themselves a last soak and rush out onto the patio. They jump to one side as a burning tree crashes onto it. The dogs bolt. Drew sprints back inside: if they do make it out alive, they'll need something to convince themselves that their lost world was not a dream.

The girls watch, horrified. Breathe sighs of relief when he re-emerges with a photo-album box in hand.

They reach the shelter of the massive oak tree that is yet to ignite.

A pause. But they can't stay here. It's too close to the shed, full of explosive items: cars, mowers, paint, fuel. They'll have to go through the front hedge. Drew soaks the photos — he's too exhausted to carry them — and they set off.

It's a nightmare trek. They're shocked, scared and soaking wet.

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Grace burns her hand as they crawl through the red-hot wire of the fence. They scramble down onto the Kinglake road. Creep downhill, fires raging on every side, trees crashing. They can't bear to look back at the house, the only home the kids have ever known.

They trudge over burnt ground, blistered asphalt, thank god they had the foresight to put on heavy footwear. They're having enough trouble just breathing without worrying about burnt feet.

They stagger down the road, shoes bubbling, the world in flames around them. They see cows up against the fences, dead or dying, gaping mouths, beseeching eyes. Every house is on fire. Are the neighbours all dead? They cannot envisage how anybody could have lived through that.

'Flatlining,' says Ange. 'That's what it was like, that walk — you're moving through this weird, weird, world.' Interviewed in their living room months later, she is momentarily overwhelmed by the memory. 'It was so lonely... We thought we were the only people left alive.'

Through a gap in the smoke they spot red and blue lights spinning.

A tanker from Wattle Glen has run up the hill to attack the fire in Olives Lane. They crew have just survived a bad burnover, sent out a mayday, gone into crew-protection mode, found themselves trapped in a paddock.

Kerrie Redmond, a local St Andrews CFA member who'd come along as a guide, looks up in disbelief as the four ghostly figures wrapped in blankets, one of them carrying a teddy bear, come stumbling through the smoke.

The family are ushered aboard, treated for burns and smoke inhalation. Angie speaks almost lovingly of the CFA team: 'There was one older fellow, Wombat they called him, he was so sweet and caring to the girls. He had first aid experience and he treated Gracie's burnt hand, washed out their eyes. He told them they'd be okay, said it was all right to feel afraid because he was too.'

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