

Firestorm

Word Count: 2,486

Lewy laughed as his pup leapt into his lap, licking his face and climbing all over him. The day was sweltering, the sun beating down and drying everything in its reach. The tall trees of the surrounding bush had long since given up looking green, instead settling for a grey-brown, sagging look. The grass crackled and crunched when it was walked on; drought had ravaged the land. Around their small yard huge trees rose up, swaying in the breeze. Lewy knew he lived far away from the town, his family the only ones living out there in the deep bush.

He watched as his mother bustled around in the kitchen, making salad for lunch. She glanced up, her brown hair framing a wide, pretty face. Seeing him outside, she hurried out of the house towards him.

"Lewy, honey! Come inside! It's much too hot for you and Bluey out here." But then she froze, her mouth slightly open. "Lewy?" she whispered. "Lewy, go inside. Take Bluey with you."

"Mummy?"

"Now, Lewy."

Something in her tone made the young boy take the dog's collar and run inside, listening through an open window as she yelled for his father.

"Steve! Steve, come here!" Her voice was high, her face tense.

He jogged out from the shed, sweat already beading on his face, his dark hair hanging slack and damp against his head. "Kerry? What is it?"

His mother didn't answer, and just pointed above the trees, towards the distant horizon. Lewy looked, absently stroking Bluey. Above the trees, a dark smudge marked the horizon, but he didn't understand what the fuss was about. A flock of birds? What did it matter? Nevertheless, he continued to listen.

His father too was staring at the horizon as if it would be the death of him. "Is that... smoke?" He seemed incredulous, scared, even.

Daddy never got *scared*.

"Steve? What're we going to do?"

He straightened up suddenly. "Ring the fire brigade." Then he turned and hastily began to fill up a large drum, one of many placed around the veranda.

Kerry ran inside to the phone, dialling triple zero. Lewis watched as his mother was answered immediately on the other end. Her voice was frantic as she explained to the fire brigade. "There's a fire! Wha- How far away is it? I don't know. But it'll be here... soon." She listened for a moment on the other end, but Lewis wasn't paying attention any more. He finally understood what his parents were worried about, and he was afraid.

Lewy was only small, but he understood that fire was dangerous. Especially out here, far away from everybody, surrounded by tall, dry trees. He hugged Bluey a bit tighter.

Kerry came to the small boy where he was sitting by the window and crouched beside him.

"Mummy? There's gonna be a fire isn't there?" he asked gravely.

"Yes," she replied tensely, "but it's alright. Daddy and I will make sure you're okay." She smoothed his hair back from his sweaty face. "Okay? Everything's going to be fine."

"What about Bluey?"

"We'll look after Bluey too. I promise."

Lewy paused. "Can I help?"

After a moments thought, "Why don't you close all the windows?"

He nodded.

She went outside then and helped his father, and Lewy watched them dash around the yard, collecting water, removing debris, as he heaved the windows shut. Bluey trailed him obediently as he ran from room to room, and Lewis paused and patted him regularly, staring out at the growing smoke haze on the horizon. It seemed much closer already. The smog was no longer just on the skyline, but was beginning to pervade the very air around them. If he strained his eyes, Lewis could almost make out an orange glow in the trees through the greying air.

Very quickly after he had finished his job, the house became stuffy, and a faint hint of smoke

tainted the air. The heat inside quickly became too much for the little boy, and he slipped out, careful to close the door behind him. "Mummy?" he called. Outside, the smoke was much stronger, and he bit back a cough.

"Mummy?" he called again. Then he heard voices coming from the back veranda, and ran around to find his parents. As he got to the corner, he heard his mother's voice, high pitched and panicked.

"The brigade said th-that there's another fire down the gully. Over the road! They can't get here!"

"We built this house with a disaster like this in mind. We'll be fine."

"Did you hear me? *The firemen can't get here.*"

"Keep your voice down - Lewy might hear. But it'll be alright." There was a pause. "Kerry? Everything's going to be fine."

"I'm going to find Lewy."

He didn't have time to hide, even if he'd wanted to. His mother's tear stained face was shocked as she rounded the corner. "Lewy! Don't scare me like that!"

"Mummy, why aren't the firemen coming?"

Her eyes widened. "Lewy, of course the firemen are coming. Why would you think that?"

"I heard you," he declared. "You said they weren't coming."

"They're just gonna be a bit delayed, but they're coming. So don't you worry, okay?"

"Yes Mummy."

Daddy came then. "I think we've done all we can for now. We have as much water as possible around the house. Lets go inside." Despite the heat, he took his son's hand.

Inside, Lewis sat on the couch, inviting Bluey to take a seat beside him. The family watched the air outside change colour as the fire drew nearer, turning from grey to a dark orange. It was impossible to tell where the sun was, the smoke was so dense. The deep orange gave their situation a surreal, unnatural feel, and put them further on edge.

For Lewis, the heat was becoming unbearable, and sweat trickled down the back of his neck. Bluey too was getting restless, pacing in front of the door. Finally, Daddy announced he was going back outside, to re-wet everything. As he left, a blast of smoky air blew in through the door, and Bluey whined to show his distaste for the bitter air.

Now and then his mother would make soft, soothing noises, but Lewis was still afraid. Eventually, he turned the television on, but that only lasted for a bare five minutes before it cut out. Daddy returned soon after, and the family settled around a window to watch the smoke swirl outside.

Gradually the smoke was fading back to grey, and although it was midday, outside it was becoming dark. Lewis succumbed to his growing fear and returned to his mother, settling beside her and stroking Bluey. The silence in the house was becoming oppressive, and Lewy squirmed under it's weight. The wind was picking up outside, but it did nothing to rid the smoke. The sound of it was dry and strong as it whirled around the house, bringing the fire closer with each breath. Even though it was midday, it was so very dark outside.

Finally, Lewy asked, "Mummy? Where are the firemen? Aren't they supposed to come and save us?"

"They're coming Lewy, don't worry. They just might be a bit... late. But it's alright, they'll get here-"

His father interrupted her rambling, "Don't worry Lewis. We don't need them. We're both big and tough - it'll be alright."

"Yes, Daddy," he whispered. But Lewy wanted little more than to pinch himself and wake up to find this was all a dreadful nightmare. Instead, he turned and stared out the window. Through the glass, the smoke had obscured the world to one dark smudge, except the blob of red in the distance. As he watched, the blob grew, and Lewy suddenly recognised what it was. His parents had seen it too, and were now going outside to dampen everything again.

Lewis understood now that the fire had been far away, and had burnt a great deal of bush already to get this far. Now that it had topped the hill above his house, it was rushing down at a seemingly breakneck speed. Already the great orange blob he could see through the midday darkness had doubled in size, and became much clearer. He could now discern flames and burning trees from the blurry colour, and soon his mother rushed back inside, another shock of

smoky air coming with her.

"Lewis? Stay inside! We'll be back in a second!"

"But - Mummy!"

She was already gone.

He sat on the floor in the middle of the lounge room, and hugged Bluey to his chest. The flames were leaping into the very topmost parts of the trees, and the roar of the great bushfire was now clearly audible above the wind. It rushed down the slope, leaping from tree to tree in its wrath, straight towards them. It seemed to come faster and faster.

Fear engulfed the small boy, tears stinging the backs of his eyes, and he began to cough feebly in the thickening smoke. His hands were curled into tight little fists as the flames roared up in front of their house. It had a ways to go yet, but at the rate it was coming, it would be there shortly. Soon however, his parents rushed back inside, coughing and spluttering from the thick smoke, ash adorning their heads and shoulders where it had rained down on them. Lewy's fists loosened slightly.

They came and hugged him. "The best thing to do now, is wait. We won't do any good out there anyway. When it has past, we'll go back out," Daddy murmured.

Outside, ash and burning debris was falling more quickly now, burning leaves and bark raining down on the lawn. But no one was looking at that. They were all staring at the solid wall of flames, at least as high as a two storey building, seemingly fly down the hill towards them. The roar and crackle of the flames was loud now, and the crashes as burning trees collapsed appeared to make the ground shake.

"Mummy, Daddy?" he whispered. "I'm afraid." They wrapped their arms around him, and he stared out wide-eyed at the flames roaring down towards them. But another, faint sound, had joined the cacophony. Lewis struggled to realise what it was...

And sat up abruptly. "Mummy! A siren! The firemen are here!"

"Lewy, there's no need to pretend-" his mother started, when she was interrupted.

"Kerry, listen. He's right." Suddenly, his father laughed. "He's right!"

Sure enough, the whir of sirens was clearly audible now, and soon three huge fire trucks had pulled up close to the house. The trucks bore signs of having fought a battle already, ash marking the bright red. The firemen leaped off the vehicles, and most started rolling out hoses, already aiming for the house. Their heavy coats were also stained, and their faces marked with soot and sweat.

One fireman came to the door, and Steve rushed to let him in. His boots trod ash into the carpet, but Mummy didn't seem to care. Another thick blast of smoke came into the house with him, and Lewy couldn't resist coughing again.

The fireman launched immediately into an explanation. "We got through the second fire easier than I expected. We'll park our trucks right behind your house in a moment to try and protect them, and then come in here. We'll go back out when it has passed and... cool everything down again," he said with a wry smile. He appeared calm despite the situation.

Very soon, the other firemen had gathered in the house, and everyone stared out as the great inferno rolled down the hill towards them, flames turning everything in their path to ashes. Even the firemen paled slightly at the sight of its wrath. The heat and smoke grew until it was almost unbearable, and Lewis buried his face in Bluey's fur, feeling as if his skin was about to be singed off. The deafening roar of the blaze was all he could hear now, as it reached their lawn. All he could see was the deep orange of the flames rising up before him in all their terrifying splendour. His hands again curled into little fists, as his mother sat down beside him and gathered him up into her arms.

It took only seconds for the blaze to leap across the yard and engulf the house, and the great roar, the heat, and the smoke, combined to create an agonizing temperature. The air was thick, the smoke whirling in eddies around them, and sweat bloomed on everybody's faces. Bluey whined pitifully.

And then it was gone.

Already, as the fire moved on past the house, the roar faded. The heat lessened. Everybody started moving again.

The firemen leapt up, and ran around the house to their fire trucks, untouched by the blaze already moving ahead. They were straight into action, hoses being heaved around as they again

wet the whole house, dousing the spot-fires that remained. Lewy's parents rushed out to help, regardless of the heavy smoke and the dangerous rain of hot ashes, instructing him to wait inside.

They didn't have to tell him. His knees were weak and his bones felt like jelly. Bluey was still distressed, pacing and trembling - Lewy felt the same. It was still much too hot, and the smoke was clogging his lungs. Lewy went and sat by the window, and Bluey planted himself on his lap. They watched as, outside, his parents and the firemen put out everything, still spraying the larger blazes that had caught. Each hot ember was soaked as it fell from the sky, blown from the fire now far ahead, and it was a long time before anyone relaxed.

Eventually, embers stopped raining down, and the smoke began to thin. The realisation that they - and the house - had survived the inferno was beginning to set in, and Lewis resisted the urge to yell out with joy. But as he stared out at the once plentiful bush, he saw only charred, blackened trunks, their leaves burnt to ashes and scattered on the wind. Ahead of him was a scarred landscape, black and mourning. As he watched, burnt animals were limping away from the wreckage, leaving their dead companions behind. Where once there were rolling hills, branches swaying in the breeze, now stood only black ashes on bald rises, smoke drifting between the charred remains. It looked like a natural battlefield.

But no one was worrying about this now, and his parents were thanking the firemen, tears standing in their eyes. Hands were shook, they were invited inside, and despite the recent drama, there were smiles all around. Unnoticed, clouds had crept in over the remnants of the blaze, and as the men were ushered inside, it began to rain.

THE END