

# Bushfire Blues

## Mairi Neil

It was getting harder to breathe. They could all feel it. Diane looked around the room her fear reflected in anxious eyes. Everyone sat staring at the television screen trying to ignore the thick smoke outside fogging the windows. The ABC presenter yelling the latest statistics of the fires burning more than 50% of the state as fire crews and trucks emerged then disappeared in the smoky haze behind him.

The towels Jim dampened and rolled up were in place under the exterior doors but the house reeked of cold ashes. Smoke still managed to drift inside, although the windows hadn't been opened for days. The air conditioning made a peculiar hum; working for 24 hours a day it struggled to perform after several sudden power outages.

Diane's blue eyes darkened at the overflowing laundry basket. There'd been no hanging washing outside for weeks because of the dust and smoke in the air but Jim said running the dryer needed a window or door open. How long can they last living like this? Each night they don a face mask and walk down to the sea but nowhere is smoke free and burnt debris litters the beach.

The only asthmatic in the family before what the government has labelled a catastrophic emergency, Diane prided herself in having plenty of Ventolin on hand but the whole family used puffers now - even Jim.

Mandy dabbed at tears. Diane knew it wasn't just from smoke-induced irritation. Poor kid missed school. A regular Miss Popular, she hopped on the bus for the 30-minute ride to school each day grinning like the cliched Cheshire Cat. When the text message, 'school closed indefinitely' received it was as if a death sentence pronounced, Mandy's misery increasing each day school remain closed.

Joel on the other hand couldn't be happier - except when the Internet went down. I must remember to check his online history because I'm sure there's something he's not telling us about this new gaming friend...

Look at Jim, he's soaking up this crisis, almost enjoying it. He's taken annual leave like his office asked and spends every waking hour glued to the telly, radio or bloody Facebook as if he's in the operational control room and responsible for communicating the bushfire news.

'It's bloody real life,' I yelled at him this morning, not some episode of Chicago Fire!' Couldn't believe his attitude, 'I know we have to have an escape plan,' I hissed, 'and not only am I ready to leave but if catastrophic fires are our future, I won't be coming back here.'

The kids heard the arguing and coughing - my breath lasts about thirty-seconds before the lungs protest. This mask a 24/7 feature whether inside or out and I've sucked so

much Ventolin my nerves are jangled, but the looks of horror on the faces of Mandy and Joel made me ashamed. Although, don't know if their reaction was to my choking or because I said we had to move.

This oppressive heat, the lack of fresh oxygen, the stench of death - what a toxic nightmare. The smell of burning flesh, poisonous fumes from melting plastic, the destruction of native forests fuelled by eucalyptus resin - I can't get that painting of Dante's Inferno out of my head.

What's that Jim's saying? The fires are spreading... any plans to leave might have to be fast forwarded... oh, God, where's the Ventolin?

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