

**Open Category – Highly Commended 2020**

**PUB RAFFLE**

**By Ya Reeves**

Sunday.

Blue skies. Hot but not unbearable, had that cool wind coming from the sea most afternoons. Went surfing and just squeezed a park, boiling anger at the tourists. Sea had been flat for days, weeks even and we spent each day paddling furiously for ripples just to watch them disappear or straining onto the face only to pull back as a kid with a boogie board surfaced from nowhere, asking for a fin to the skull. Winter was always better in this town with the Cape empty and blustery and the waves messy but still there.

Running on the hot Cape Coolatta road lost its magic as the traffic got thicker, dead wildlife more putrid. Road riding the same but with caravans and souped up Hilux's skimming my elbows and hollering lycra-themed abuse from open windows. Only just worth it for the banksias and the exercise.

Still, I thought, this place would be nice in summer if the people were gone.

Text came through at 12:25pm.

You need to leave the region immediately, said the government.

We glanced and sat back to see how the town emptied.

We're on the Coolatta edge of town and the convoy seemed to say that the tourists heeded the warning. Didn't though. Canvas and nylon and caravans and plastic tarps across the whole caravan park still when I rode past on the bike. They didn't leave. Went from one place to another, choked up the town, right to the foreshore. Was hot that night, overflowing, unsettled.

Monday.

Blue skies. Woke to dad on the roof, cleaning gutters.

Went to the CFA meeting, he said. I think we need to take this seriously. It's not looking good.

Hoses came out and buckets and bins and mops, a sense of tension as we scurried to prepare. Passed the caravan park again, riding slowly, still a sea of people sucking ice creams and beer. Confusing. They all looked so idiotic and flammable, backdrop of jet skis and wake boarders buzzing like flies in a bin.

Turned to the north as I was filling a bucket with water. Pyro cumulonimbus building like a monster of particulate and heat and energy, growling over the rooves and into that clear sky. Still, I thought, we all just need to calm down. Didn't feel nervous, didn't feel threatened. Hard to feel like you'll burn with that big blue wet thing stretching out unimpeded from your doorstep to Tasmania.

Trucks passed. More and more. Hot northerly blew harder and harder until the sky started to smudge. Wasn't much we could do though, we'd prepared. Emergency app pinged, pinged, pinged. It wasn't a trigger yet, but it would be soon for most of us. Fires spread like disease, new ones building every moment. We commentated with disbelieving acceptance.

Has it got Brockfield yet?

Nah. Close though.

Where?

Borrums gone.

Nila Nil next probably.

I guess.

How the fuck is Gorrumbart still not toasted?

Dunno.

Jumped on the road bike to clear my head, forgot to put glasses on and by the time I hit the police block 3km down the road to Coolatta my eyes were streaming from ash and charred eucalypt flecks. 3:30pm.

Where you going, she said. Didn't recognise her, she was young.

Just out to Coolatta, maybe not that far, I said, blinking dirty tears.

She smiled. Nah, I don't think so. Road's closed.

On the ride home the sky turned brown and yellow, sepia tone over the bush. Dad was walking out the door, phones ringing in his hand and CFA kit over shoulder. Peg drove up the drive in the Marlo slip-on and he got in and he left. Always has to be a hero.

Sid arrived, Peg's husband. Done what he could for his bush block out of town. Cleared, sprinklers on, but with the sky turning black over us his shoulders drooped and we tipped back beers, defeated. It'd burn, if the embers came this way, and the ash was already thick. It was a death trap. Sid knew that. That's why he was here. We joked, talked about the boys. I missed them and hadn't seen them for years since school. Laughed for a while about my adolescent crush on Louie, his second youngest. Then that petered so we stared out to his truck, tank full on the back, trying not to think.

Power went out. Then reception.

Dan and Sophie arrived with the kids, all three, and Sophie's parents and Ralphie, their kelpie. Was 5:40pm and black as midnight and air so thick you could barely suck it in. More beer. A bottle of wine. The kids asleep and dogs all tied in separate corners of the yard. Went out the back to cook some chicken, ran my hand over Ralphie's neck while I waited. Palm was ash-caked and his eyes were fearful. Would be confusing to be a dog in this. Shone the headtorch into the air. No wonder my eyes were streaming. Air was thick with it, blackened leaves spiralling down, down, down.

Dad came home. Mattresses on the loungeroom floor so we moved outside. At 8pm the sky lightened. On the veranda we all looked up and didn't know what to feel. Light from the glow of flame, light from town, light from the smoke weakening a little? Hard to tell. Cradling glasses of wine and pushing up against the silence with careful commentary. All the highways were closed now, no way out. Click. My phone died.

The wind swung late. South westerly, our saviour. Right off the ocean it blew and the air cleared but the sky didn't. Blew hard enough to wake the kids. Adults deemed it safe to return to their own beds and then the house was empty and the mattresses were still in the lounge and we all went to our own beds, midnight now.

Goodnight, said mum.

Goodnight, said dad.

See yer tomorrow, I said.

Aw....orright then, said dad.

Feeling safer, knowing maybe we weren't.

The next days.

Blurry, restless, smoke hazed.

Angry tourists stormed the CFA sheds demanding to know when the road will open, when the smoke will go, when the fire will be contained, why the coffees are coming out slow at the Bait n' Tackle shop.

I don't know, said the CFA captain.

We don't know, said the ICC assistant.

It's hard to say, said the local cop.

Can't ya see we're busy as all hell, said John at the Bait n' Tackle, give us a break.

Ran into Red as I lapped the town. Lungs were tight from the dense air but I just couldn't sit at home any more, was going slowly mad. His eyes were shot and ringed with dark and his arms were folded across his chest and he gripped his lips together in angst.

Lost \$10,000 worth of food orredy, he said.

Didn't even have insurance this time because the last time we'd been in the dark he'd got the power back three hours before the 72 hour cut-off and they didn't pay out, so he

figured what's the point, and now there was a point, but he was filling every empty freezer in town with calamari rings and frozen chips and trying to forget about hiding under the house in Ondaroo last night as the fire ambled, hot and languid, across the paddocks towards his mum's, close enough to feel, fast enough to frighten, turned away just in time by that same wind that woke the kids.

Never spoken to Red before but he told me everything and I nodded a lot.

Tourists, still stuck here, wanted ice creams and fish burgers.

We're on fire, Red said. ON FIRE! Don't they get it?

I guess not, I said.

Drove through the police block to clean the sheets for the firey's at the local outdoor education centre. No one else could do it, and they were dirty people, which makes sense with all that ash. Took Soot with me and he dropped sticks at the feet of the Mamburrum crews, those floppy ears flapping in the wind while they leant against the sports shed and smoked durries and tried to forget what they'd seen.

At the block the police had rotated, they were from Ringwood now.

On the third time I said Luke, who's feeding you lot?

No one...we're pretty hungry, but I guess it's good for us considering we're just standing here all day, a detox almost, Luke said.

I rode the bike to the Bait n' Tackle and ordered a coffee and told Lil that someone had forgotten to feed the police. Shook her head like she does, pushed past all those frantic tourists, came back out with my coffee and six toasties which I put in my crate and rode to the block.

You didn't have to do that, said Luke. He was young and liked to talk. Had small kids that he'd bring back here sometime.

Course I did, I said. Let us out for a surf this arvo?

Can't do that, he said, but he winked too, which meant that he wouldn't say anything if we went down the old powerline track and popped back onto the bitumen 500m past him, out of sight.

Tourists snaked out of town in huge languid convoys that arvo, cars piled teeteringly high with Christmas kayaks and SUPs and tents, all the pieces of gifted shit that had now had their first and final use before starting to collect dust in a city shed, their resting place.

Sun low and shadows crawling longer. Mum and I sat on our boards out from the Cape. The Mamburrum fire was whipping its own thunder into the air and we could watch it from out the back, legs swilling the ashy water. Eye on that red sunset, eye on the waves, eye on the lightening striking the tinder-dry headland like a test, like it knew we weren't meant to be there. Water so dark we wouldn't see the shapes circling even if they came but somehow that sharky fear wasn't there this time, the relief of salt water and straining shoulders after the cooped-up angst smothered it.

At least, I thought, the people are gone.

We'll go if the lightening comes closer, I said.

Good idea, said mum.

Strike, strike, strike.

But we didn't go. Not until the sun went.

Saturday.

Town meeting day. I took Sooty on a piece of string, the only semblance of lead I could find and walked to the CFA sheds. Better safe than sorry, didn't want to be booked for having a loose hound with all these cops around.

Dad was at the front of the room with the CFA captain and the ICC assistant and he shot me a grim smile when he noticed me tucked behind the tanker. Whole town crowded in that shed. Called for hush and the babbling rumour mill stopped. Noticed mum standing with Peg.

A little girl in a caterpillar costume ran between my legs and shoved her face into Sooty's and I yelped and stuck my hand between hers and his because once he was ok with intimacy from kids but these days not so much, he was older, and the meeting had started so I couldn't really explain any of this to the caterpillar.

Talk flew by in grabs and snatches.

If you don't need to be here, leave now, said the ICC chief.

Lets just be gentle with him, ok? I said.

We are ringed by fire, and if what is predicted happens, we will be impacted on Sunday, said the ICC chief.

Try not to lick his nose, he's a bit shy, I said.

What should we do to prepare our house if we want to stay? Said Cess, the old lady from Stuart Street.

Why not he likes it see, said the caterpillar.



If you haven't prepared your house already, then you need to leave immediately, said the ICC chief.

Shoulda done that weeks ago, Cess, for christsake, said the CFA captain.

No no, he might bite, I said.

What you lot need to get into your heads is that if you can't defend yourselves, then you might die, because we can't defend you, because we don't have enough people or time or water or vehicles. You might be trapped in your houses. Keep making decisions to survive. Move around, get out when it's on fire, only use it when the front comes past, it'll probably burn after that. And if that scares ya, get out now, while the road is open, for godssake, said the CFA captain and dad nodded gravely behind him.

Talk rose fast as the meeting concluded and Waz picked up the caterpillar, his granddaughter it turned out, and carried her away by one foot as she grabbed for Soot's ear. Walked to mum and her eyes are wet and I could see the anxiousness radiating from her, so I moved out of its trajectory, didn't want to catch it. Sooty took dad's hand in his mouth gently and waggled, and dad said let's go home and have a family meeting.

Well I'm staying, I said, later on when the talk had been ricocheting back and forward over the kitchen bench for what seemed like hours, with dad saying he'd stay for the CFA and mum crippled by the thought of being a burden if she didn't leave and myself listening with one ear and an eye on that murky estuary thinking how could the three of us leave, especially now, when our experience and ability might count if it all went wrong.

You guys can do what you want but I'm staying, I said.

Well I can't leave if you're staying, said mum.

Well you can, I said.

But I don't want to, said mum.

Decision made, then, I said, and took my beer outside into the smoke to watch the Chinooks and Black Hawks skim the estuary in search of visibility, carting supplies into the trapped towns near the border.

Craig came over as I walked outside, loping like he does around the fence. Said he'd decided to leave rather than stay which is what they had planned before the meeting. I reckoned that was good, considering Eileen's sister Fay was disabled and hard to move at the best of times let alone with an inferno bearing down. Eileen wouldn't leave unless Craig did. Mum came out and we both nodded, a hard decision yes, but a good one for sure, not worth it of course, a life means more than a house indeed.

When are you leaving, said Craig.

We're staying, I said.

Went red for a second then he turned and went back round the fence. Confusing, but we didn't ask questions, got the secateurs out instead and started shearing the hedges. He came back a deeper shade and loping faster.

Why aren't you fucking off, said Craig.

We think the house is defensible from ember attack with the three of us, dad's staying for CFA anyway, we'll head to the safer spot on the Broddy if it comes to that, we're prepared, been watering the house for days. Plus, if we all get trapped here, they're gonna need as many able-bodied people as they possibly can get, we're all first aid trained, I'm handy with a chainsaw if they need to amputate a limb, I said. That's why we're staying.

I need to speak to Connie, where is he, said Craig.

Followed me round the back where dad was pottering on the roof with a sprinkler in his hand.

Hypocrites, you're just hypocrites, telling us to leave, convincing us, then staying, we should all just fuck off, why are you staying, said Craig.

Dad, caught off guard, collected himself and slid his politician face on. Explained it from the roof, same speech as mine just without the crass humour. Craig listened and I watched his hardened angry face flick to fear just twice and finally I understood that he wasn't mad because we were hypocrites but he was scared that we'd die and he didn't want that. Never crossed my mind that the neighbour might care so much. Something squeezed in my chest.

How can you let them stay, Connie, said Craig and he pointed to mum and me, maybe because we were women, maybe not, hard to say for sure. I scoffed.

Let?! Craig, he hasn't got a hope in hell of controlling us, I said.

Dad was off the roof now and Craig gripped him in one of those vice-like embraces intended to scream I'm a strong man but that actually screams let's smash this emotion between our chests and maybe people won't see.

And he left, white now.

Divvied a roster for the night shift over cheese and olives and kept looking out at the sky so dry, so heavy and smoky it felt like the inside of an old, food-caked oven. Made a chickpea salad and dad and I went to sleep and mum sat in a beanbag with her weaving on her knee, crafting a wall hanging from New Zealand flax for a local girl who'd lost her family home in Mamburrun a week ago now.

Knocked on my door at 2am and whispered, it's 2am.

You said you'd wake me at 1am, I said sitting up.

I felt fine to stay up longer, she said.

Was a kind thing to do to let me sleep another hour but I was angry in that irrational way that kids who are now adults can still be with mums. Sooty slept with his head on my ankle and I read Bukowski smut and occasionally wandered around the yard and moved the sprinkler and shone the torch into the sky to watch the ash fall. Held Soot's ear while he had doggy nightmares about bones and Eileen's cat. The embers didn't come.

Dad wandered down at 4am. Silently took his post. I went back to bed.

Sunday.

Still in the oven. Today was the day we'd burn. What do you do, I thought, on the day you're meant to burn?

Tied Sooty to his string and walked him to the CFA sheds and saw James, the first person my own age I'd seen in weeks. Told him that I didn't know he was down here, was he here the whole time, where had he been?

Nah, came down yesterday to help mum, said James.

You drove five hours from Melbourne into the fire to help Jo? I said.

Yeh. I bought a thousand litre tank and a fire pump and a fire hose for the ute on the way down too, just yell out if you guys end up needing a hand, said James.

Could have cried because he was always more Tom's friend than mine but right now that sibling stuff didn't seem to matter. Sat on the CFA driveway, Sooty sombre, chin still on my ankle. Animals were like bees when they were smoked; calm, unsure, lethargic, sedated.

They knew. They just knew. Ross the abalone diver took his CFA jacket off and stretched on the grass silently. We watched the sky turn yellow, then orange, then red, then brown, then black, but the air was clear.

Smoke's hanging over us like a shield and sending the Northerly over the top, said the CFA captain.

Huh, we all said, DELWP crews and cops and civilians and dogs and CFA members in thick overalls, all of us sitting on that driveway, watching and waiting. Today was meant to be the Armageddon wasn't it?

But it wasn't. In an hour the sky swept backwards through those flaming colours until it was a high up grey, like a June afternoon, and the crispest south westerly wind whipped white caps over the sandbar, and the consensus was that we'd all go to the pub, now that we were safe.

That evening I straddled my bike in the dark garage thumbing my helmet strap. There'd be folk from Ondaroo at the pub tonight so maybe I wouldn't buckle it up. Counter-intuitive maybe, but the safer you were the more attention you drew to yourself in this town, like riding with a helmet that wouldn't fly when you stacked made you a pussy.

Normally I wouldn't care what others thought but I had that awkward grip in my guts that I used to have, a remnant of being a leftie kid in a town torn between logging and teaching, coastal retirement and dealing crack next to the milking sheds. That old high school grip, long gone, bubbling up, like it does for kids when they come back to their hometown and suddenly everything they've done in between and everything they've become since seems not to cancel out who they were at 17.

Rode off with the straps flapping against my neck.

Mum and dad were at the bar, slid me a beer as I leaned in next to them.

I said, plenty of people here.

There's a pub raffle, said dad, for Ollie's new tractor, he lent it to the boys and they blew the head gasket clearing the control line around town.

That's shit, I said but already noticed how many notes were jammed into the tin under Glenda's arm as she did the rounds. Another \$20 from the primary principle, a \$50 from the diesel mechanic. Ollie was playing pool with a couple of other dairy farmers and the local brewer. Huh, hadn't seen that combination before.

Ordered dinner and sat on the deck with my beer. Could see the inches of ash heaving the estuary reeds back and forward near the fishing club. Gary came past and we chatted about helicopters, then Red. Turns out he'd found another freezer for the last 8 bags of dim sims; Cess's place. Three beers deep and jolly but his eyes were swimming with something uncertain.

John from the Bait n' Tackle pulled aside John the vet.

I heard it got right up to your place, he said.

It did. Spotted onto the bottom paddock but the DELWP crews put it out before the wind swung. Harrowing night though, said John the vet.

I can only imagine. Thank god for that wind ay, said John from the Bait n' Tackle and they both laughed twice but in a grim sort of way. They looked out at the sand spit with thoughtful eyes. Maybe they were thinking about how that south westerly was pushing the front towards Quay, Beelam, Contambrooke. Coolie River wouldn't be drinking at the pub right now, our fortune was their death sentence.

The vet's wife Isla sat down with me and we talked about the paddock fire too and about Harry, her son and my friend. He'd been holding low intensity fronts back with rake hoes and garden hoses with his cousins and Isla's sister for a week now on the South Coast. They were trapped. I didn't even know.

Of all the people, imagine Harry on the front lines, we said and laughed, his pasty skin and neat Melbourne hair and perfectly looked after Ray Bans.

But Isla had fear in her eyes and I could barely stop myself snatching my phone from the table and calling Harry there and then to be sure he was fine, fine enough at least.

Anna from the wildlife centre and her mum and her friend Jane who I hadn't met yet sat down. Left Gorrumbart and the hills and the old growth forests when the front was coming a week ago, while they still could.

We had to leave the wombats, but they survived and the house didn't burn, said Anna and her eyes were wet. We left them in the house.

Steve and his daughter stayed up there to fight. They checked the house for us, said her mum.

Jess? That's Steve's daughter right? I said. I'd gone to school with her, she was a few years below me but strong as an ox and I'd seen her footage of the fire front hitting the house. Jess with a melted fire hose running and panting and swatting embers from her face, hollering at her dad that the pergola was on fire. It'd already gone viral.

She's a weapon, I said.

That's my daughter, said Jane, the first thing she'd said and my breath caught in my throat, Steve's my husband. They're still trapped up there. And the whiskey's running low.

We all laughed and gulped from our drinks but our eyes couldn't hide everything else that was swimming. What was it, swimming back there in the murky depths, behind the laughter?

Mum and dad sat, and then Peg and Sid. Ross the ab diver, my brother's girlfriend's step-dad slid another beer to me and took a seat. John the vet joined and then Don came past yelling, geez Connie, the fire didn't get me this time, but your budgie smugglers nearly killed me when I rode past this arvo, haven't those things been outlawed yet? The table lost it and rocked on their chairs and Dad shot back, witty as ever.

But something tight in my stomach stopped me laughing as the conversation tumbled light-heartedly. Locals that had stayed filled the pub and drank to their good luck and smiled into the south westerly, our saviour. It was their eyes, that dark shape swimming back there, that stopped me. Lurking, turning, a shadow, faceless, on the prowl. Every set of eyes. A town often so divided by belief and money and left and right, united by the dark shapes swimming. Was it a reluctant knowledge that none of this was actually over?

Knowledge that the wildlife centre would lose their wombats to the next front. That an online onslaught was coming for Jess; you fucking child, so arrogant to think you should stay. That Red's calamari stocks would rot, no one to sell to. That Don's campground and livelihood and home would crumble into ash next week on another bad day. That Ollie's dairy farm would go under and he would never use that tractor again. That Harry would wake at midnight with an angry, anxiety churned stomach for the next year. That Steve's brother would roll a tractor clearing his property, too many bales of hay at once they'd say, and be trapped in the cab beneath the wreck, mangled, alive, for three days before they found him. That my backyard, my running track, my bike path, my escape, the Cape, the knotty banksias and wrinkled old prehistoric lace monitors and clear water and unpredictable waves and



sweet wizened clattering boardwalks and impenetrable coastal scrub and memories of feverishly long afternoon sessions with just mum and our boards would be obliterated on the last evening of January by a hot hungry blaze.

Couldn't know any of this of course. Not yet. But it was swimming like a shark.

Finished my beer and stood up from that eclectic table of coastal folk. Waved a goodnight and walked to my bike. Sooty would be in his kennel but he could sleep on my bed tonight.

Air was clear and salty and I clipped my helmet tight under my chin.