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Junior Short Story Category – 1st Prize 2021

ASH AND EMBERS

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We should have left earlier. We all knew it. The sun rose in a sky the colour of blood and ash. A horrific sight it was, although the fear and darkness it caused was almost a relief to some. A warning to others. Some people knew they had left for a good reason; others, though, realized that they had left it too late. The morning of the fire I woke up and it was dark. 7 am. I wondered drowsily if I had the blinds closed or if my clock was broken. Finn, my older brother, groaned and rolled over. His eyes sprang open and he sat up straight.

“Cassie, up – now!” he said.

I got up. Maybe he had forgotten it was the holidays. Maybe he had forgotten school was over for the year. Not bothering to argue because Finn would obviously win, I stumbled over to my wardrobe. I pulled on some striped, orange shorts and a green Peter Pan T-Shirt. We may live in the middle of the bush, but it didn't mean we can't watch movies. Sure, our TV was tiny, glitchy and blurred, but that was all I knew. That was all I cared about. Finn was already dressed and running out of the room, yelling Mum and Dad's names. They

would remind him it was the holidays. But still, I wondered what was up with him. We both knew they hated being woken up early in the holidays. I decided to take a look out of the window, just to be safe. Finn wasn't usually forgetful or rushed. Something must be wrong. I stuck my head out and began coughing. Had Mum and Dad had a bonfire without me? But then I saw the sky, the swirling embers and the ash. The flames. This was an actual fire. My heart began pounding with fear. Sweat broke out on my head, not because of the heat. This was actually happening. I fought back tears. We were going to be fine. Each year we had been fine. This year was no different. Finn yanked me back and spun me around. He was trying to be confident and calm, but I could see the twinkle in his eyes flash and vanish. He was as scared as me.

“We need to leave, Cassie!” he told me, then gave a whooping cough. He cleared his throat. “Pack – pack whatever you can fit. Whatever you would need for a camping trip.”

Then he ran out again and I saw him jogging out to the ute. I peered through the window. He had Fletcher, our Jack Russell, in his arms, bustling him in. A huge gust of wind swirled embers into him and ash made it pitch black.

“Finn! Get inside!” I heard Mum yell.

Finn was coughing. The gust passed and I saw his hazy outline staggering towards our house. I was relieved to hear the door slam.

“Cassie, what are you doing?” I heard Dad gently ask me. “We need to pack.”

I swung around and saw him in the doorway.

“I can't leave, Dad!” I had held my tears back this long. Now they were all flooding out in a massive tsunami. “Dad, this is our home!”

Dad patted my back, silently staring at the floor. I could tell from the way he brushed the doorway as he left he felt the same. I wiped my face with the back of my hand and sniffed. Our property held so many memories. It was like how Harry Potter would feel if Hogwarts was blown up. I wanted to stay with all my heart, as did all our community. But there was no point being sad when you had no choice. Time to pack. I grabbed a suitcase out from under my bed. It was dark green and pretty big. I miserably wondered if the back of the

ute was large enough to hold an entire house. I threw in a bunch of clothes that I didn't really bother to check. The ones on top were the ones I used most. I realized my hands were trembling. I wanted to scream. I slipped in my birthday cards from only a week ago that I didn't need, but they gave me a little bit of hope. But mainly sadness. I was only 12. 12 year olds aren't supposed to die. I stopped that train of thought and angrily reminded myself that I wasn't going to die. Not today. Not until I'm 100 and I get a letter from the Queen. I packed a blanket and a sleeping bag because Finn had said 'what we'd need for camping.' I was fairly sure we wouldn't be camping but added it to my pile anyway. I noted that as the sun rose higher, the smoke got thicker, and the world went darker. Despite myself, I almost laughed at the oddness of it. It wasn't funny. Just – weird. A bit like how you would laugh at a pug driving a golf buggy you were in. The danger was so weird it was funny. Mum came in. It was like our room was a museum exhibit.

“Honey?” she said. “You okay?”

Usually our family get along brilliantly. At that moment we were still agreeable, but it was more tense.

“That's a bit of a stupid question,” I muttered.

And it was. Our house was about to be burned to ashes, everything we knew and loved was going to disappear and we might die, and she's asking me if I'm okay. Mum winced. I could tell she was trying to help in a roundabout way. She wasn't exactly making me feel better, though.

“Sorry, but – well, we have to...to...”

Mum looked hopeless and fragile.

“We have to go?” I guessed.

Mum nodded. I packed sunscreen, a bottle of water, a first aid kit and a bag of fruit. Now I knew it was serious, I was just packing stuff I thought we might need if we ended up somewhere without any money. It was like all my memories and history was inside that suitcase, and I was zipping it shut. A tear rolled down my cheek but I wiped it away before Mum could see. I imagined she was on the edge of a cliff, wobbling. Over the edge were

big tears floating in the air. I didn't want to tip her off. I tried to close up my throat as I grabbed the suitcase and slipped past mum. I walked down the hallway towards the front door. I brushed the walls and patted the carpet. I remember playing hide-and-seek with Finn in here. I saw pictures of us running in the bush. Playing flashlight tag. Even eating dinner. I saw school projects, pieces of pottery and furniture. I hadn't even realized I cared about them until I knew that I'd never see them again. I swung open the door – that I'd never swing open again – and stepped outside. A wave of heat hit my face. My eyes stung. The wind whipped embers into me. The beautiful bush around us seemed to howl and groan in fear. Like they knew what was coming. Like they knew how bad it would be. It was as dark as night except for the hazy red glow in the sky.

“Cassie, quick!” Finn yelled.

I hadn't known how late we were leaving compared to everyone else. But there had been clues. Like a cloud of dust from our neighbour's cars leaving yesterday. Like Finn always checking the news on TV. Like Mum and Dad listening to the radio and turning it off whenever I came near. I started crying again, not that it mattered. No one could see me. The wind picked up and more embers were flung into me. I yelped.

“Cassie, run!” Finn roared from the ute.

Fletcher yapped. I dashed towards his voice, one hand in front of my face to shield it, the other clutching my suitcase. I felt for the door and swung it open. Finn pulled me in. I felt the familiar scratch of Fletcher's paws as he began licking the ash off my face. I gave him a nervous rub behind the ears. Mum and Dad rolled in, gasping and coughing. They slammed their doors shut. You could only understand this next bit if you were there at that moment. There was such a loud silence I had to cover my ears. The silence wasn't really silent. If you get that. You could feel tension, and anxiety, and the seriousness of it. The silence was so excruciation I pinched my arm to focus on something else. I just wanted a noise, for someone to talk, but no one did. We didn't know what to say, or how to say it, without sounding too cheerful or too gloomy. Every passing second of that silence my stomach did another backflip until I began to feel sick and dizzy. Dad slammed his foot on the accelerator and zoomed away down the dirt road. Now I really did feel sick and dizzy. I looked back at our house. Our wooden, aqua house. The house that had seen me say my first

words, and felt me walk on its floor. The house that had heard my squeal when I first met Fletcher. The house that had seen Finn have a nervous breakdown on the first day of year 7, then have an adrenaline rush on the morning of school camp. The house that had felt Dad thundering after us while we played tag. That, today, had smelt smoke. And soon would feel flames. Dirt clouded up behind us so I could no longer see our house. I turned back to the front. I counted to one hundred in my head before I looked up, so they wouldn't see me cry. Dad's headlights illuminated the curtains of smoke. Embers swirled around amongst the flakes of ash. I saw that the car key was sitting in Mum's lap. We always lost it, and I don't know how they had found it in time. Maybe they had been keeping it handy since they heard about the fires. The many times we had been late for school had been because Mum or Dad couldn't find the keys, and (ironically) the only times we were ever early was when they accidentally left them in the car. I tried to laugh like I normally did when my brain came up with stuff like that, but I felt like a stone was set on my guts. I saw the junction where the dirt road meets the highway. Once we got there we were safe. Everyone leaned forward a little. The sky was still blood red and dark. Hundreds of birds were flocking in the same direction as us, and I could see kangaroos and other various creatures hopping across the cleared paddocks nearby. Dad didn't bother flicking on the indicator when he turned onto the highway; instead, he just kept his foot on the accelerator and spun the steering wheel. I knew that now we were on the highway we would get away safely, but I still felt scared. I would keep feeling scared until we got to somewhere the sky wasn't red. I imagined a piece of paper that had home written on one half and safety written on the other. There was a hand pulling on each side. Finally, the piece of paper ripped into two parts and fluttered to the ground. That's how I felt. Dad's phone began ringing and I was happy for the silence to finally be over. Mum answered it quickly.

It was our uncle.

“Are – are you –” he began.

His voice was glitching and I was glad. I didn't want to hear our uncle cry.

Mum simply said “we're safe.”

Our uncle started crying with relief, and sadness. It was lucky he was breaking up, because otherwise he would've heard me sob.