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And so it begins ...

## **Monday 9 February 2009**

The police officer told me to go back to my car and wait. I watched him through my windscreen. I had parked beside the road in this same location last night. The State Emergency Service (SES) men had prevented me from crossing the small bridge from where the road wound up through the hills beyond Humevale to Barry's cottage, Waldene. They had told me that the bridge pylons had been burnt and were no longer safe.

The fires had swept through unannounced and catastrophic on Saturday 7 February. I had kissed my tousled, sleepy-headed partner Barry goodbye when I left for work on that Saturday morning. I was to deliver a full-day curriculum inservice to a group of teachers in the city. Later, when I knocked off work at 4.30 pm, I had phoned him at Waldene to discuss our plans for the evening. During that brief phone call he told me that he was on alert in case of spot fires from the Wallan fire, which was about 15 km from Waldene, although he said that he could neither hear, see or smell any fire at that time.

Towards the end our five-minute conversation Barry suddenly went quiet. 'What's up?' I asked.

He hesitated a moment before answering, 'Nothing ... I thought I heard something ... maybe just the wind.' I could feel him straining to listen harder.

We decided that I would stay at the house where my office is located in Greensborough, about 25 kilometres from Waldene, for

the night. Barry would stay at Waldene in case of spot fires. We hung up, not realising that within 30 minutes Barry would perish in the holocaust that was to become known as 'Victoria's Black Saturday'.

I was not overly concerned when I phoned the cottage three hours later to see how Barry was doing. The recorded message told me the line was temporarily unavailable. I assumed that the fires had brought a line down somewhere. I knew that Barry would eventually phone me or arrive in Greensborough when he was sure the cottage would be okay.

Mobile phone reception at the cottage is generally unreliable, often requiring a hike up to the roadside for even intermittent reception. As a result Barry had never owned a mobile phone. My job requires a mobile phone and I knew that Barry had that number as well as the landline number for the house at Greensborough, so he would have no trouble contacting me when he was ready.

At the Royal Commission hearing twelve months later, the arson chemist advised the Commissioners that the fire probably impacted Waldene between 5 and 5.05 pm on Black Saturday. This has left me with the unending task of trying to determine how Barry spent those precious 30 minutes between when he so calmly hung up the phone until he died. So many times in the years since the fire I have paced out various routes through the charred landscape, trying to imagine what happened. I stumble between burnt landmarks, from where the phone was located to the site of the fire bunker where he spent his last conscious moments.

Stopwatch in hand, I walk slowly, mimicking lack of oxygen; I run, mimicking fear. I have timed the drive down the road to where the first glimpse of fire on the ridge would have been visible, done a U-turn and sped back to the bunker; this because the police theorised that perhaps Barry had driven part way along the road to

ascertain the source of the noise he thought he heard as we spoke on the phone. The more I pace and time my imaginings, the less I seem to know. Sometimes I lose sight of the purpose and instead merely seek solace from stepping wherever he might have stepped in those last 30 minutes.

I phoned the cottage again during that night, but always the recorded message advised me that the line was temporarily unavailable. What a cruel joke that message turned out to be. It provided an ignorant calm when the reality was that I had already lost Barry and all of our future. I look back now and wonder what I would have done if instead the recorded message had told me that Barry, Waldene, my life as I knew it, had all been destroyed. Perhaps I would not have had the strength to go on and only the forest would know the sweet secret that we lived and loved there.

Barry and I had first met in 1990 when we both were teaching at the same primary school. Our initial friendship developed into a romance and eventually deepened into love. The fact that we were both married to other people and that I had two young children meant that our relationship was kept secret from all but a few close friends. It was a decade later before we could live openly as a couple.

The sweltering night kept me awake at Greensborough. I listened to ABC Radio all night. The reports were about strange sounding towns and shires and regions; many of which I had never heard of before nor could place on the map. I heard reference to places that were unfamiliar: Murrindindi, Weerite, Coleraine, Yarra; an endless list of locations that must have existed beyond the major towns. I tried to check with the Country Fire Authority (CFA) about the status of Humevale but could not get through on the phone or internet. I listened for news about Whittlesea, not realising that for the sake of expediency the cottage had been,

or later would be, grouped with the Kilmore East–Murrindindi reports even though the land falls under the jurisdiction of the City of Whittlesea.

I heard Kinglake referred to a few times on the radio, both via CFA information and through listeners phoning in. Kinglake is some 15 kilometres by road from Waldene. I later realised that the broadcasted calls from listeners may not have been indicative of the current situation at any time. There was no guarantee that a call was not a replay of an earlier recorded call or that the caller had not been hanging on the line for any amount of time or even that what they were saying was correct. In reality how many people are able to describe situations using compass directions correctly? Perhaps these call-ins may do more harm than good in times of crisis.

All night I listened to the radio. A male phoned in to describe what he could see from his backyard at Humevale. He described the fire in the hills behind his house bringing smoke and ash from the direction of Wallan. His report made me feel that Humevale had been spared. Humevale was apparently where people stood on their porches and watched the fire in the distance and rang the radio station for their three minutes of fame. It was not where the fires were actually burning.

Of course, later I found that the tiny township in the valley of Humevale was almost totally spared. The fire had instead roared across the hills behind, rushing upwards, ever upwards, consuming the forest and the cottage, and almost everything in its path towards Kinglake at the top of the range.