April 2010 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

Phoenix

by June Collini

> **"Fire is a good servant, but a terrible master."** ***Proverb***

When I allow myself to remember, I am still amazed at how normal everything seemed that morning. John was the first to get up, and went to make cups of tea. I lay in bed and turned on the 7:45am news. The weather forecast was for scorchingly high temperatures with strong winds, and an extreme fire danger. We didn't think much about it - it was summer after all – and our house was air conditioned. We had held a birthday dinner party for a friend the night before and the dishes were still in the sink, so I got up and started on those. Weeks later the friend gave me a photo taken that night. Looking at us sitting there around the table, smiling at the camera, I searched for any sign on our faces or in our eyes that we had known what was about to happen. There was none, but now, in photos of me taken before and after, although they are all of me, I see two different people.

In one of my earliest memories I am sitting in a highchair at the head of the table – the place usually reserved for my father – and there's a birthday cake in front of me. There are people all around, looking at me and smiling. My mother approaches with a box in her hand, and there's a whooshing sound as she strikes a match and it bursts into flame. Slowly and with ceremony, she lights the two or three candles on the cake, and then steps back. Everyone starts to sing, while I gaze in wonder at the *candles guttering and flickering before me. Then there is clapping and cheering, and someone shouts, "Blow them out! Take a deep breath, and blow….," but I won't do it. I don't want those beautiful flames ever to die, and finally my mother leans over and blows them out for me, before the wax runs down and ruins the cake.*

How did we not recognise the signs? I had been listening to the radio reports and checking the internet throughout the morning, and although there had been no specific warning for our area, we had watched the cumulus clouds of grey smoke slowly forming and billowing over the hills behind the house. Still we didn't fully anticipate the danger. About midday the wind sprang up and the clouds merged into an orange/grey fog which filled the sky and blocked out the sun. The smell of smoke was suddenly stronger, and John climbed onto the roof with a hose and started spraying water on the tiles and the back of the house. I took a second hose and squirted the front of the house and garden, including the tiny vegetable patch we had been trying to cultivate. So silly, the things we think are important at such times. We were still not overly worried. We thought there would be more warning, somehow, and that we would have plenty of time to react if the worst happened. Thinking about it now, I wonder how much more warning we would have needed.

I don't know how long we were there, but I remember the air had become unbearably hot, and I was finding it increasingly hard to breathe. Then suddenly John yelled, "Oh my God!!" and then, "I can see the fire! Get in the bunker! Now!" and I heard the panic in his voice. I looked up at the hill, and I could see huge orange tongues of flame stretching twenty or thirty meters above the tops of the trees along the ridge. The sky had turned black, except above the burning trees where it was bright red, and I watched in horror as the tongues of flame became a wall, and there was a roar like a jet engine as the fire breached the top of the hill and tumbled down the other side towards us. Big burning embers started to rain down around the house, and a kangaroo appeared out of nowhere and hopped blindly past me and on down the driveway. John scrambled off the roof, and I dropped the hose and ran towards him screaming, "The dogs – we've got to get the dogs!" I was choking, and my eyes were streaming with tears from the smoke and anguish.

John grabbed my hand and dragged me towards the bunker. "There's no time," he yelled back, gasping and coughing. "They'll be alright. They'll get away. We'll find them later – just get in the bunker," and he wrenched open the door and pushed me inside, stumbling in behind me and pulling the door shut.

In the early 1940's my grandfather built an air raid shelter in his back garden. It was made of curved corrugated iron set down about three feet into the ground, and the earth from the dugout was piled on top of the iron to make it blast proof. It was called an Anderson shelter, and measured about six feet long by four feet wide. The floor was lined with duckboards, and there were four wooden bunks, two on each side, and a shelf at the back for some drinking water, a hurricane oil lamp, a torch and spare batteries. My grandparents and my mother and aunt spent many nights in this shelter, which was warm and smelt of damp earth. One night in June 1944 the air raid siren sounded, and they heard the now familiar buzzing noise of an approaching doodlebug or flying bomb. They held their breath as the buzzing stopped, and the bomb tipped *over on its final descent. It landed at the end of their street with an enormous explosion which caused the sides of the shelter to shake, and the blackout curtain to waft inwards. Later, when they dared to venture outside, they found the top storey of the house was gone, and there was glass and debris everywhere. It was, quite literally, a bomb site, and if not for the shelter, they would probably have perished as so many of their neighbours had.*

My mother told me this story, and the first time I saw the air raid shelter it had become a feature of my grandparents' garden, with flowering plants growing all over it. Once my grandfather let me look inside, but there were several inches of water on the floor and he wouldn't let me past the entrance. It made an impression on me, though, and when John and I started to build our dream home in the bush outside Melbourne, I remembered it and insisted we include a fire shelter in the design. Ours was built into the bottom of the hill behind the house, and was made of concrete, with a metal door. I think my grandfather would be pleased if he knew that indirectly, his air raid shelter had saved two more lives sixty-five years later.

Inside the bunker, it was completely dark, except for a flickering orange glow around the edge of the door. The electric light had gone out almost immediately, and I flicked on the torch. The air was thick and hot and smoky, and it was hard to breathe. We had forgotten the wet towels we had intended to bring with us if this ever happened, and I had only just begun to stock the bunker with provisions. There were bottles of water, and a few cans of food (but nothing to open them with, I realised). I could also see the small first aid kit in the corner, as if that was going to be of any use. I flicked the torch off again, plunging us back into the thick claustrophobic darkness. We had no idea how long we would be in there, or how long the battery would last. We clung to each other, listening to the deafening roar of the inferno outside.

When I was in primary school, my best friend Margaret lived in the house behind ours, with a three-strand wire fence separating our gardens. Her father owned a transport café (pronounced "caff") near the railway station, and each year in October he would put advertising posters for Brocks' fireworks in the window. In return, the company would give him several boxes of assorted fireworks for free. A few days before Guy Fawkes' Night my father would start building a bonfire in our garden, and my mother and I would make a guy out of an old pair of pyjamas stuffed with newspaper, and a pillowcase with a face drawn on it for a head. On the big day, as soon as it got dark Margaret and her parents would climb over the fence into our garden, bringing the boxes of fireworks. My mother would make snicklefritz – hot pastry rolls of cinnamon and brown sugar, topped with sultanas and glace cherries – and steaming mugs of cocoa, and my father would light the bonfire and place the guy on top. We would watch in awe as the flames shot up into the air, and the guy caught fire and burned. Then the display would begin. Fireworks with names like Mount Vesuvius and Jack-in-the-Box would erupt around us, and there were rockets fired from bottles, Catherine wheels nailed to my dad's wooden step ladder, chrysanthemums and fountains. Beautiful multi-coloured lights would fill the night sky, hissing and banging, and we would cover our ears and laugh. Margaret and I would be allowed to hold roman candles fitted with wooden handles, and write our names in the air with *sparklers, and we would scream with delight as squibs and crackerjacks jumped and exploded around our feet, showering us with sparks. Next to Christmas, we thought Guy Fawkes' Night was the best night of the year.*

The next morning our garden would be littered with spent fireworks, and a pile of ash would be all that was left of the bonfire and the incinerated guy.

John took off his shirt and we wrapped it around our heads, thinking perhaps it would help to filter the smoky air. As we held each other in the darkness, we could hear the thunder of the fire outside, and one after another, huge explosions which we know now must have been car fuel tanks and gas cylinders igniting. I closed my eyes tightly and covered my ears with my hands, trying to block out the terrifying noise. We thought we might die.

It was always my mother's job to light the fire in the living room in the winter. My father, Canadian by birth, had been raised on a small farm in rural Ontario, where a wood-burning stove was used for both cooking and heating. My dad was great at building bonfires, and later, visiting us in Australia, he would take over the barbeque with skill and enthusiasm, but he never did manage to master the idiosyncrasies of the English hearth. So it was my mother who, each night in winter, would place screwed up newspaper on the grate, arrange kindling on top of that, and then strike a couple of matches to get it going. As soon as the kindling started to burn she would carefully place pieces of coal upon it, and then she would take a sheet of the Daily Express and hold it up against the fireplace to "draw" the fire. I remember watching the flickering *silhouette of the flames through the newsprint, and holding my breath until, as so often happened, the sheet of paper was sucked inwards, the middle bursting into flame as my mother, gritting her teeth, frantically pushed the rest of it into the fire with a poker before any embers could land on the carpet. I could tell this was a dangerous business, and was always relieved when she finally stood up and placed the guard in front of the fire, and everything was safe and warm again.*

When John and I were building our house, we installed a brick fireplace in the lounge which was very much like the one I remembered from my childhood.

In the bunker, we had lost all track of time, but were suddenly aware that the roaring outside had stopped. John went to open the door, only to discover that it was too hot to touch. He wound his shirt around his hands, and then grabbed the handle and pushed. With some resistance the door gave way, and tremulously we stepped out into a black and white horror movie. In such a short time, everything had changed. It was as if the fire had sucked all life and colour out of the earth. There was no sound except the occasional crack of a breaking tree branch, and we were alone in an alien landscape. There were no birds, no insects, no animals, no people except us, and no house. What had once been our dream home nestling in the bush was now a smouldering pile of ash surrounded by the black skeletal remains of the trees. The only thing still standing amid the smoking rubble was the brick fireplace, with the chimney stack erect and seemingly undamaged above it. As we gazed in disbelief at the devastation around us, something on the ground caught my eye, and I moved forward for a closer look. As I approached a feeling of dread washed over me, and my breath caught in my throat as I looked down in horror at the charred remains of Buster, our male Blue Heeler dog, his studded collar and name tag clearly visible, lying near what had once been our front door.

When John and I first emigrated to Australia, we lived and worked in a small mining town in the north of Western Australia. The Pilbara landscape was unlike anything we had seen before, and we bought an old Land Rover and at weekends would take our camping gear and go off to explore the bush. We camped in beautiful gorges, beside streams lined with gum trees, and sometimes on beaches if we made it as far as Onslow or Exmouth. We delighted in the scenery so different from the English countryside, and the fauna – kangaroos and goannas, dingoes and cockatoos – which were everywhere. Our favourite part of each day was the evening, when we would set up camp, build a fire, and cook a meal as the sun slowly set, the sky turning from blue to a streaked mass of pink, yellow, orange and red. While cicadas chirped around us, we would lie back and watch the sparks from our camp fire mingle with the millions of stars in the night sky overhead, and we thought life couldn't get much better than this.

We searched everywhere for our other dog Jessie, who had been due to give birth to her first litter of puppies any day. We called until our voices were hoarse, and we combed every inch of our decimated property for some sign of her, but there was none. We walked as far as our nearest neighbour, only to discover that his house too was gone. I wanted to bury Buster – the sight of what had once been our beloved and loyal pet was almost more than I could bear – but we had no tools to dig a hole.

As it started to get dark, somewhere in the distance we saw headlights. Exhausted and in despair we stumbled down the driveway, and met a CFA truck coming slowly up the road towards us. The driver seemed shocked to see us and there were tears in his eyes as he opened the door of the truck. He had found no-one else along our stretch of road, and we prayed our neighbours had managed to get away before the fire reached them. We climbed into the truck, and he took us through the devastation to the sports oval in the centre of town, where other survivors were gathering, dazed and distraught. It looked like a refugee camp. One or two tents were being erected. A portable generator had been set up, and there was a trestle table with hot water in an urn, and tea and coffee in polystyrene cups. Around the oval some of the trees were still burning, and to the east the sky was orange where the fire was still raging, as if the sun was setting on the wrong side of the Earth. Our world had certainly been turned upside down. Someone gave us each a blanket, and overcome with misery and fatigue, covered in sweat and dust and ash, and wrapped in everything I owned, I sank to the ground, and sobbed.

When I was fourteen, I went with my class on a school trip to Paris. The trip was to give us the opportunity to practice our French, but we were just happy to have a week off school. I wanted to see the Eiffel Tower more than anything, but in the end something else impressed me more. At one end of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées stands the famous Arc de Triomphe, the huge stone monument to those who fought for France, particularly in the Napoleonic Wars. The arch itself is impressive enough, but beneath it is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, with the inscription (in French), "Here *lies a French soldier who died for his fatherland 1914-1918." At the head of the tomb burns the Eternal Flame, forever honouring the soldiers who died in both world wars. We were told that this was the first eternal flame in Western Europe since the Vestal Virgins' fire had been extinguished some 1500 years earlier, and we learned that the Vestal Virgins were the holy priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth. I found these stories fascinating, and gazed in awe at the flame which would never die. I wondered how it kept burning, and imagined the ghost of the Unknown Soldier lying like a skeleton in uniform beneath the stone, continually striking an unending supply of Swan Vestas to keep it alight.*

About a week after the fire, the first of the funeral services were held for those who had lost their lives. More than 170 people had perished in all, including fifteen people from our immediate community, six of whom had been close friends and neighbours. Our local church had been destroyed, so the service for our area was held in a nearby town, in a church we had never been in before. As we walked through the door, the first things I saw were the coffins side by side in front of the altar. It was shocking to see so many together, and I couldn't help wondering what was in them. Memories mainly, I thought, remembering what little had been left of Buster. Then I saw the candles. They were everywhere – there seemed to be hundreds of them – and the flickering flames made me feel sick. I wanted to blow every one of them out. I couldn't bear the thought of a naked flame anywhere near those people, dead or alive, from whom fire had taken so much.

We went to stay with friends, and slowly began the process of rebuilding our shattered lives. We had lost everything in the fire, and one of the first things I did when I was able to think clearly again was replace my mobile phone, which had been destroyed along with everything else. It had been nearly two weeks since the fire, and when I turned on the new handset there were dozens of voice and text messages, many from the day of the fire, and most from worried friends and relations. As I worked my way slowly through them, the horrors of the day came flooding back. Then I came to one from a number I didn't recognise. I opened the text message, and gasped as I read, "Call me when you can – we think we have your dogs." I stared at the message in disbelief. What could it mean? Could Jessie have survived the fire after all? But the message said "dogs", and I knew only too well that Buster had not survived. With shaking hands I dialled the number, and a woman's voice answered. She had been trying to find a way to contact us for days. Jessie had appeared on her doorstep two days after the fire, exhausted and dehydrated. Her paws had been raw and bleeding, and parts of her coat were singed, but she wasn't alone. In her mouth was a tiny, newborn puppy. They had found my phone number on the name tag hanging from her collar, which was still around her neck. Their house was nearly ten kilometres away from where ours had been.

I will never forget seeing Jessie lying there, her tail banging on the floor as we walked in. Her four feet were bandaged, and there were raw patches of skin on her face and body, but she struggled to her feet, dislodging the tiny creature attached to her belly. It too tried to stand up on wobbly little legs – a perfect Blue Heeler puppy, with its silver/grey puppy fur, and its eyes just open. I hugged Jessie, and then crouched down and picked up the puppy in my cupped hands, holding its fat little body up to my cheek. At that moment I thought it was the most precious thing in the whole world.

We will never know when or where Jessie gave birth, or how many puppies she had, but somehow, despite everything – the pain and the terror she must have experienced – she had managed to pick one of them up and carry it with her to safety.

It is more than a year now since that catastrophic day, and the fire that changed all our lives. We know now that fire is both a wonderful and a terrible thing, and we will never again underestimate its power to delight, and to destroy.

John and I are living in a caravan on our property, and we have started rebuilding our house. Some people tell us we are crazy to come back here, but this was our dream home, and it still is. We are not going to let the fire drive us away.

Living with us are our two dogs. Jessie, apart from some bald patches in her coat, is now healthy and completely recovered from her ordeal. Her daughter, now fully grown, is a happy and cheeky replica of her father, with markings so similar to Buster’s. For us, she represents the one good thing that came out of that terrible day. Of course, we named her Phoenix.

Copyright © 2010, June Collini.