

Butterflies and Dragons

Max shelters, still as a five year old can, in the dappled shade of the Chinese Elm. He holds the long handle of the net with both hands and waits for the tingly confidence of near certainty. He whips it down fast through the soupy afternoon heat. Beneath the white mesh, a blurred flutter of orange-brown, and a cry of gleeful triumph. *Two! Two! I got two!*

The gentle sun of early summer has slowly burned into a fierce one-in-a-hundred-year heatwave. A merciless week, then another, of blistering 40 degree days reduce us to listless, irritable rubble. The unspeakably dry heat sucks the oxygen from the air leaving only a dead heavy stillness. All efforts at productivity and housework are suspended and we exist in a strange holding cell, simmering and waiting. Waiting for a cool change, a thunderstorm, anything to suggest tomorrow may be different. The media increasingly trot out phrases like tinderbox and extreme fire threat. The bushfire dragon is easily roused in summers like this. Our days are based only on survival, our routine so familiar even our baby knows when she wakes from her sweaty afternoon sleep that we will descend on the local pool. *Shwim? Shwim? Shwim?*

I nod wearily to the other parents taking refuge in the wading pool. There is none of the polite feet dangling of early summer. Now they lie flat, only sunglasses and hats above water level. Joining them, my calm, my will to live, is restored by the cool submersion. Revived, I close my eyes, and absorb the surrounding soundscape. Cicadas throb in noisy unison, cockatoos screech and flap, a kookaburra gargles. From the big pool there are splashes, squeals, tentative calls of *Marco?* and hearty choruses of *Polo!*

Max reaches behind his bony shoulder blades for the strap of his neck to knee bathers looking like a miniature surfer, even though he has never seen the ocean. Over this rancid summer his limbs have grown long and lean, stretching towards the baking sun like an out of control pot plant. His shaggy white blonde hair has sprouted long looped curls. Those easily overwhelmed, tearaway toddler days are becoming foggy memories for us both. Applying sunscreen has become an acceptable formality. Please and thank you roll effortlessly off his requests. He skips everywhere. Last night he presented me with a surprise - his younger brother whom he had fished from the bath, dried and dressed for me in button up pyjamas. Beneath that flyaway hair his brain is full of curious wonderings, *How many people does it take to build a rocket? What was the first sheep in the world called? When blind people drive a car do they have a lot of crashes?*

He's just five but not quite 'school ready'. His first ever, and best ever, friend Lucy has been five a long time and is very school ready. She has her uniform, backpack and school shoes. In her excitement she treats herself to a do-it-yourself under the bed haircut and now sports a dramatic punk fringe. She will head to big school the same

day Max will run back down the familiar path to his beloved kindly, where they met and played and forged a friendship of effervescent intensity.

Max and Lucy ride their foam noodles around the pool rescuing drowning insects. *We're the insect lifeguards!* They eventually emerge to devour every last grape from the bunch and Max gnaws on the stem willing more to appear. He lies on the warm concrete stretched in a star shape, Lucy mirrors his pose, their feet touching. They talk staring up at the big endless blue. The usually sullen teenage lifeguard is animated and giggly in the company of tall snake-hipped boys who somersault into the deep end and surface flicking hair from their eyes.

The deep end holds no fear for Max. He springs up and pin drops in, bobbing up - *I touched the bottom!* – he pulls himself out then jumps in again. My little big boy won't always be five. Friends' children seem to have outgrown their parents since last summer, now they swim and lounge with their friends, needing their mum only for icy pole money. These *watch me! watch me!* days will dry up as quickly as the droplets on his skin.

He dives in, no longer with an eye-smarting belly whacker but a proper racing dive, arms outstretched over his head, hands on top of another, his reed-thin limbs extending long in the water with a slipstream glide and a flutter kick. His little olive arms clear the water with purpose and strength; they magically do look like the big rainbows his teacher has been talking about all these years. There is propulsion. I am stunned. He is swimming!

One afternoon he plays alone, and then with his younger brother, but looks constantly for Lucy. Another little girl from his kindy wanders over. She chews gum and fiddles with her earrings and the buckle on her floatation vest. She helps herself to our fruit and tells us she got a Nintendo wii for Christmas. Max looks at her with big blank eyes. He looks to me for clarification, I wink at him and shrug. *I got a butterfly net, for catching butterflies. We have lots and lots of butterflies at our place.* I hold my breath, terrified a snigger will crush him. She looks at him long and hard, as though she hasn't heard him. *You must be a pretty good swimmer if you don't wear a floaty in the big pool.* There is a quick flash of white as he grins at his toes.

The town's fire siren wails through the hot thick air, and blokes dash from the pool clutching towels and thongs and race up the street shouting instructions to their children as they go. Those who remain glance nervously at the surrounding browned hills, which suddenly seem claustrophobically close.

Clouds form and dull the sun's piercing glare. With my baby on my hip I gather towels and gear and call out to the boys about heading home for dinner. They linger in the shallows. An old bloke sitting on the steps laughs, *you need a kelpie love!* I wrestle foam noodles into the boot and delicately clip up searing buckles away from their damp, cooled skin. On our way home unfathomable radio news fills the car. I fumble to switch it off, but am not quick enough. *What happened to the little girl on the bridge Mum? Did she fall off? Did she hurt herself? Did somebody help her?*

I humour the last of the cold barbequed chicken into a sad looking salad and wonder if I'll ever feel like cooking again. Clouds darken and a sandpaper wind swirls dust and

leaves in small, busy circles. I grab stiff clothes from the line, breaking the cheap pegs in my haste. My boys, in matching nautical jarmies, have dragged chairs from their cubby and are perched expectantly on the verandah, their curls tightening in the humidity. *We're watching for lightening. I'll get you a chair Mum.* I wait with them, a grown-up on a little chair, sharing their awed reverence. Finally, a jagged sliver of white electricity scissors across the back paddock. *Did you see it Mum, did you see it?* A pause, then a rumble deep in the belly of the sky, the boys exchange triumphant looks and scan the greying skies for more action. The storm grumbles away and the cloud cover seals the heat in overnight. No cooling raindrops, no drop in temperature and a million black ants drown themselves in our toilet bowl.

The lightening strikes sizzle the crunch-dry bush into dozens of fires. The pager buzzes. My husband grabs his CFA gear and is gone. I am lulled into fitful sleep by the whirring of the fan and dream crazed collages of fear; a tiger snake in the baby's cot, my boys struggling for air in the deep end, our lounge room window exploding with heat. Sometime after 3am he falls into bed smelling of smoke and sweat and is asleep before I can ask him anything. The boys listen wide-eyed over breakfast when he tells them a helicopter was filling up from a dam just as he arrived in the fire truck. *Ring me if you're worried today.* He still manages to give them a horsey ride before work.

I'll never play with Lucy at kindy ever again in my whole life. It is Max's first lesson in the shifting sands of friendship. There will be new friends and weekend play dates with Lucy. But he is right. The night before school starts Lucy tells her mum that maybe she needs another year at kindy too, just to make sure.

Max sits up straight on the couch, a cornflake stuck to his chin, and uses his biggest grown-up voice. *Have a happy school day Lucy! Are you excited? Will you still come to the pool?* Beneath a brutal sun, they manage the first day of their new, diverging lives. They arrive at the pool limp and wilting, but are instantly renewed by the water. They jump in together, time and again, the schoolgirl and the kindly boy. Life is the same for now. *Lucy didn't learn to read yet. And she has to go back again tomorrow, and every day, until she's a grown-up.*

The world economy is melting with us into an endlessly analysed fiscal disaster. Economic fire-fighters standby heroically, hosing down flames with much debated strategies and billion dollar stimulus packages. I once took a newly arrived refugee woman to Coles. She stood in the fruit section, momentarily stunned. *All this food and nobody fighting.*

The heatwave builds to a deafening crescendo. Temperatures boil over to the mid 40's and red-hot winds race around the state like a crazy horse, rousing a dragon like no other. I listen to the local radio for updates while soaking towels and filling buckets. I pack a bag with some clothes, the laptop, some photo albums. I give the boys their small backpacks and make a game of them collecting their special things. I try to imagine starting again. My inner Pollyanna chants repeatedly *it's only a house*. I wonder, not for the first time this summer, if I'm cut out for country life.

Unbelievably, the dragon annihilates a whole community with its radiant spite and scorching fury, then it roars on to the next, and the next. All of them pretty little towns

just like ours. I steal glimpses of the television coverage; warped, charred tin, seared earth, a never-ending death toll, zombied survivors, and everywhere the black nothingness of burnt grief. They clutch their children and each other. Each story; the tragic, the heroic, the unimaginably hellish, stamped on my brain with a branding iron. I try to blink away the images. *Mum, what does incinerated mean?*

The dragon seeks new flesh, it has the taste for it now. It springs up in grassland south west of us and gallops across the hills towards our valley. The wind obliges in sinister friendship. My husband rings from the back of the fire truck. *I love you. Leave now.*

The road is crawling with cars packed with boxes and bags, loaded trailers and horse floats. I drive slowly and impatiently through thick white smoke and listen for crackling and check into a motel 40km away. Slouching against the bed I watch the baby pour the miniature shampoo bottle onto the floor and her brother turn the hairdryer on and off, on and off. Max squeals with delight as he unpacks the goodies in the mini-bar. I breathe the air-conditioned safety in and out. Tucked up in his crisp white sheets Max thanks me for the holiday, his butterfly net leans against the bed head. My phone chimes incessantly with messages of frantic concern.

During the child-led chaos of the buffet breakfast a woman stares at her cereal, gripping her handbag and wiping her eyes. *Absolutely everything. Gone.* Her little boy smirks at me, *yep, even my school bag and uniform.* His sister shows me her brand new skirt from Target, still with the tag on it. She sends the children for more toast and then whispers to me that her neighbours, a couple in their 50's, were found

dead in their home. I open my mouth and hope some words will come out. Her home stood 25 kilometres from ours.

A young blonde newsreader broadcasts live from our main street. She checks her make-up and tidies her fringe in a pocket sized mirror stowed in her CFA overalls. She directs my husband, returning from his 12-hour shift, to manoeuvre the fire truck behind her for added effect. *Leave the lights flashing!* He tells me later he keeps imagining the firemen who perished in their truck a few years back, picturing them desperate, cowering, terrified - praying someone would save them from that God-awful dragon. All that remained of their selfless courage were the molten blobs of their brass buttons.

In my safe limbo, suspended between what was and what will be, the alerts for our town are upgraded to high and then to urgent. *Residents should prepare to come under ember attack. Residents should enact their fire plan. Residents should expect to be directly impacted by fire.*

The rampaging dragon taunts us. It stalls, abates, then advances stealthily, licking at the edges of town. The embers flick fear and confusion through our valley. Gradually, under a full blood-orange moon, the dragon tires of the temptation and the wind loses interest. The containment lines hold. Bone-tired fire crews black out every last burning stump and red glow. Our homes, our neighbours, our children, our community, remain.

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Somewhere the giant oven is turned down and then off. The much longed for cooler weather brings only a sick emptiness for the other communities scorched into oblivion. I recognise the exhaustion of bare-survival in the faces of others around town. A woman stands in the supermarket, holding the door of the milk fridge open, her back spasming in shallow sobs.

I lie in the wading pool, consumed with the roll of the dice, the sometimes factor. Sometimes scorching days dissolve in a mad flurry of fat, cooling raindrops. Sometimes they implode into an odious dragon who knows no mercy. Sometimes there is time to pack and leave. Sometimes there is no time even to find car keys. Sometimes there are worse things than looming recessions.

The days lose their shimmied haze and take on a light golden hue. The pool opens later and closes earlier. The first tinges of autumn colour sprinkle promise through our valley. Elsewhere, the victim identification teams are still at work. It's nearly over, this eternal blistering summer. The summer of impossible horrors and hateful dragons, a summer of floating butterflies and simple friendships. The summer my big boy learned to swim.