

BABY YOU CAN LIGHT MY FIRE

Excerpt from Out of My Mind, 1996

[After the devastating bushfires of 1994, which almost destroyed the family home, I sat down sleepless and weary to write the unofficial record. And suddenly the sex war flared up.]

After 25 years of being battered by feminism, the Australian male was a pathetic figure as he lurched into the New Year. Fat and sedentary, he had lost his confidence - in the boudoir, in the office, in the locker room. (Female reporters won the right to interview jocks in the showers). Even guys like me were a mess; the ones who could mash carrots, make a stab at finding the G-spot and burst into tears when they couldn't find a parking space.

From the frontlines of social change, women cited statistics to demonstrate their oppression, dumped the kids with "dad" and dashed off for urgent consultations with Tibetan lamas and hair colourists. Then the bushfires came.

The Missus got very quiet. We were holidaying by the sea, 400 kilometers south of our home in the Blue Mountains, when the fires hit the headlines. I was mopping the floor, flipping the pancakes and wondering if I should put my hair in rollers, when the call came through from the house-minder. "Nothing to worry about" came a tense voice, "funnels of black smoke on the horizon". That night, as I polished the bedroom mirrors and ironed the linen, I assured my wife it would take more than a few flames encircling our isolated home, for me to abandon the family holiday, rush back and leave her alone with two children, her mother, several houseguests and feminist neighbours.

By Saturday morning, the fires had worsened. The house-minder had fled, the road to the Mountains was closed, "except to residents", and the Little Woman started to worry about her photos, especially the ones of old boyfriends. "I'll rescue them", I said, jumping into her mother's delightful, two seater runabout, as My Better Half - get this! - packed me a hearty cut lunch and a Thermos of coffee. Six hours later, after inching through police road blocks, I was zooming along the Great Western highway, wondering why all the traffic headed the other way, tugging trailers of furniture. Sirens blared, the sky was pink and ash blotted the windscreen. Maybe the whole State was on fire? On

ABC radio - pulse of a nation - the focus was elsewhere. The Coming Out Show delved into the latest lesbian oriented translation of medieval Persian quatrains.

That night I slept alone, circled by a distant ring of burning cliffs. In the morning, my helpmate called from her resort to say that nearly a hundred houses had been lost overnight, and the experts advised home-owners to stay put and fight the inferno, but could I please first evacuate the lounge suite, a wardrobe, the paintings, a few trunks of clothes and the best china? I put on big boots, a hard hat and plastic goggles. By nightfall, the house was fortified and my consort's bric-a-brac was stacked in the runabout. Just as I was about to take a breather, a gang of men in bright yellow overalls burst into the room and asked to borrow the tea towels. A Mountain mens group? Pointing to a rapidly approaching sheet of flame, they wrapped the towels around their faces - as did I feeling like a Lone Ranger, though not alone.

From then on, it was the whirr of water pumps, the screech of saws, the crackle of singed eucalypts. Soot tarred our flesh, smoke got in our eyes. We spat, we cursed, we lit a few fires of our own - strategic backburns - and we aimed our big long nozzles at the shimmering bush. A cock crowed, hoses spurted, intercoms crackled. Black-jacketed brigade captains with petrol torches melted into the thicket. The sun rose like a scarlet moon. The ground was black, the air was hot and a few ancient stumps blazed near the front door. The heavy machines and their minders moved on, but fire stalked the house from all directions.

Over the next four days, side by side with a succession of local mates, I battled renegade blazes with wet sacks, shovels and a chain saw. I grew fond of my tea towel and catnapped in my boots. When winds gusted, Victorian tankers and their beefy crew arrived to stop the "spotting", a term I hadn't heard since birth classes. Another worry was "crowning", (flames soaring through tree tops), a word which also recalled the drama of parturition.

When the last tankers left, myself and a sequence of "buddies" resumed hand-to-hand combat, as army helicopters criss-crossed the sky and flare-ups persisted. This was the fire that wouldn't go away. There was no time to answer the phone, wash our faces or rustle up a quiche. I barely slept for a week, and never felt better. All of us felt the same, even the ones who had attended classes in breast feeding. None of us had seen a woman for ...oh, months....and managed to refrain from expressing our sense of loss. A

firefighter later reported his wife had shaved her legs, put on a dress and begged him not to wash off the soot. Then came the mopping-up, more fun than mopping. A neighbour, an apron clad wimp who hosts the local the playgroup, pleaded: "Let's start our own fire brigade". Us blokes scratched our designs for a scarf in the smouldering soil with flaming sticks.

When the Missus finally made it home, I was sprawled on the parquetry gnawing charred kangaroo tail, wearing nothing but a Lone Ranger tea towel. "Chuck me a beer", I snarled, burping. That was two weeks ago, and she is still under sedation.