

Singed Memories

"I'm so sorry Darren, Linda and Ollie were so lovely". The cold words, frozen in his memory. Resting in the pew of Cobargo's rundown church, bitter tears fell onto Darren's half wrinkled suit, reminding him of what he had lost.

Despite it being almost two months now, Darren still couldn't wrap his head around the idea of the loss he faced. Staring at the ice in his yellow stained liquor. Darren spent most of his days in his motel room down the road; swirling his days away. The Rural Fire Service recommended that Darren go on long service leave, so he could mourn and make amends with himself. This was all too much for Darren, unable to shake the feeling of overwhelming sadness that enveloped him. As he sat there, lost in his thoughts, he remembered the advice his Linda had given him about finding comfort in nature.

Darren decided to take a walk, hoping that the fresh air and his surroundings would help clear his mind. Slouched over; wearing a shirt that was last washed, who knows when. He left the motel room and trudged down the road, breathing in the smoke stained air he once longed to inhale. Looks of shock were plastered on peoples faces as Darren passed by. He sensed them avert their eyes away from him. For Darren, he knew he was a symbol of loss and destruction and that it was in everyone's human nature to avoid it as best as you can. Walking past the washout convenience store, Darren glanced at the Sunday paper. All the headlines spoke of trashy pop culture and unavailing politics. It angered him, for this distractive propaganda caused people to ignore the longer heatwaves, the higher temperatures, the continuous drought and low rainfall that caused this devastating bushfire season. Despite this, Darren passed through.

He did not gain anything from this, for Darren's mind was still blurred from being present. His Linda's advice slowly was losing value. Nature which was once his passion was now his purgatory. As Darren advanced through the deserted streets, he saw rows of frightened houses, sitting in the shadows of burnt silhouettes which were once welcoming homes now incinerated to the ground; knowing that they could be next.

Darren's feet shuffled slowly along the path. "I should have been there for them..." Darren thought to himself, destruction around him proved to be overwhelming, even for the most experienced firefighting team. The Eurobodalla council claimed to help with the clean up, many families had started to move some of the cindered remains of their homes to the streets for collection, though their dismantled possessions lay neglected. Darren had spotted a familiar toddler bike resting at the edge of a dusty front yard which once rode up and down his own street for the last few years. "Oliver..." He whimpered to himself.

Darren's eyes slowly traced up the main path to what was once his front door. Just like his own, the identity of his family home was now unrecognisable. Darren's mind raced through his past thoughts of guilt and anger about the fact he was out saving other families when he couldn't save his own. "Linda...Oliver...I am so sorry..." Darren felt this sudden wave of emotion and fell to his knees. The pain he had been numbing for so long had suddenly flooded his body and his burning heart. He had collapsed next to the dusty bike which had been a cause of joy for Oliver over those last few years, Ollie's smiles were the source of joy for Linda and especially Darren.

"You can do it Ollie...just get back up and keep trying..." This precious memory of holding onto Oliver's bike as he learned to pedal and get back up after every fall flashed into Darren's mind. He felt a warm embrace around him at this very moment and Darren imagined Ollie whispering back to him "You can do it Dad...just get back up and keep trying..."

As a single tear rolled down Darren's face, he picked himself up and dusted his hands on his shirt as a peaceful smile grew on his face.