

# FIRE-FLIES



A  
Short  
Story  
by

**Peter C Byrnes**

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Peter C Byrnes

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The pills I'm taking now have the thing well under control though it was a bit tough for a while. Without the help of the wife and kids, and my dog.....mustn't forget my dog.....I think that I may have been in a bit of strife without their love and support.

I don't have the nightmares any more and I get decent nights' sleep.

That's been a big help, I think.

I don't remember much really and there are gaps in what I do remember.

I can't explain my actions either. On that night.

No-one can, but my Therapist who also was a big help, reckons that the 'switch' (that is what she used to call it for want of another name) failed to click over.

Maybe that's all it truly was.

You see, I was awarded a Bravery Medal when I was twenty-two. Was working with the Country Fire Service as it was known back then. During a big blaze outside of Yass I saved a woman and her two dogs from certain death when the fire advanced rapidly to engulfed her home. Got them out and drove through the flames. One of the dogs had to be put down.

Got a Bravery Recommendation a couple of years later saving a toddler being swept away by

raging flood waters in a farm creek.

Against orders and common sense, I dove straight in and saved the little blighter so's I'm not afraid to risk it all if ever I see some-one in danger.

The simplest explanation seems to be that the switch failed to flip over.

That'll do!

Though I know that I'm not the man of old, we'll get along thanks to the wife and kids and me dog.

Fire-Flies.

That's what I remember.

Fire-Flies.

We'd only been in the new house no more than about three years.

In one of those newer suburbs of Canberra.

Still undergoing the beautification works that go on in every suburb of Canberra. Especially the newer ones. The planting of countless trees, shrubs, flower beds. Improving the Sports Grounds and common areas.

There was this Pine Plantation on the other side of the road, a bit up the road that would never be cut down, so they said. It covered the side of the hill and continued up the ridge-line for some way, spreading out to cover around 200 hectares about. It was beautiful. The fresh smell of Pine. The walking trails and bike tracks criss-crossed the plantation and were popular with all the locals. Often it was like an ad hoc meeting place with just about the entire neighbourhood coming together then parting on those trails. We knew everybody within a three block radius of our place through those week-end meetings.

It was glorious.

The Fire-Flies.

That's what I remember.

The Fire-Flies.

It was a hot summer's day.

An exceptionally hot summer.

Below average rainfall.

We were, as a matter of fact, in the middle of a drought.

The worst in some 100 years.

We had the usual north-westerlies blowing a gale for around three days.

Catastrophic fire conditions all the way through Victoria and NSW.

We'd had a couple of severe grass fires that were brought under control.

Nothing more.

A small fire in the Brindabella Ranges quickly got out of control.

By close on dusk on the second day it had jumped containment lines and was bearing down on outer suburbs of Canberra. Like some giant fiery yellow-orange monster, its tendrils seemed to grow, advancing rapidly on any and all vegetation that it could swallow. The Pine Plantation was excellent fodder. A tinder dry thick matting of needles, cones and branches seemed to whet its appetite and rapidly, the front developed into an unstoppable fire storm.

The coming gloom of dusk became a blackness darker than night. The roar and shatter of the flame deafening as though a 747 was flying into the Airport at an unsafe low height. The dry and now furnace hot wind wailed like a thousand banshees or the whine of those Rolls Royce engines way too low.

The Police and Emergency Services had already driven down many streets of the suburb ordering people to immediately evacuate, taking those too old, too infirmed or without a vehicle, to safer areas. We had packed our two cars with what we could gather in such a short period of time. The elderly couple from next door were in the back. My two kids in the front. My wife came running out of the house carry our Wedding Album and the two external hard-drives that contained copies of every photograph that either of us had taken since inception, including both our dead parents photo collections that we had laboriously digitised, a copy of every important document and statement and several other things beside, securely etched on those mysterious 'C' Drives.

'Dipshit.....' She screamed. (This was her name of love for me....true!) 'C'mon. Get in your car and follow me out.'

My car contained only clothes. A couple of sleeping bags and what one would pack if an evacuation was imminent at a time like this.

I was standing at the front garden hosing the rose bed that I had lovingly planted. My dog Twinkletoes sitting at my feet waiting for that instruction to get in the car, but not moving a muscle until I gave the command. You could tell that she was itching to go.

What a glorious dog!

'I'm right behind you Waddles....' I yelled to my missus above the growing din. 'Right behind you.'

She really didn't waddle. She had a beautiful figure unchanged after four births and a 12 year marriage to me. She was still the same weight and size that she was when I first ran into her, literally. Drunk as a skunk I was, but famous after that first Bravery Award.

We were married 13 months later when she found out that she was pregnant. The Bubs died of SIDS three months later. She was shattered. But we both got up, supported each other and kept on going.

What else can you do?

'Won't be a moment.....' I yelled as she reverse down the drive.

A quick wave, another screeched 'forget the friggin' roses an' get ya arse into gear' and she was hurtling down the street.

I looked around at the devastation that was beginning to engulf me.

I turned the hose on myself and turned my back to the radiant heat of the howling wind and flames. I remember looking across at the one bare section of ground, a large grassed paddock on the other side of the street. A flattened out area at the base of the vegetated ridge-line. Burning embers were skipping across the paddock going every which way. That mesmerised me as to my way of thinking, those fire-flies of burning matter should all have been going in the same direction. Following on another. Pushed by the wind. But they seemed to defy the feeling of a one directional wind that I could feel on my back. Myriad small outbursts of flame appeared across the paddock as burning embers landed. I looked up at the sky now pitch black, not because the sun had set but because the thick choking smoke was blotting out all light.

The sky appeared saturated with zillions of fire-flies that indeed were all heading in the same direction.

The same speed.

Bloody fast!

As I lowered my head to once again peer at the burning paddock, a large Gum not more than 60 metres from me burst into flame. Its entire canopy of leaves just suddenly became flame.

Erupting like some Vesuvius!

Shit!

I'd never seen that happen before; not in the entire time that I had been a Volunteer in the Country Fire Service. Seventeen years in fact. I joined up with my older brother when I was fifteen to help the old man.

I turned slowly around taking in the carnage as I did. Playing the hose again over my body and that of Twinkletoes, my dog.

I didn't name her that. I felt that was insulting to a dog but my eldest, Cindy my daughter, seemed to think that the name was expressive of the way that the dog walked through the cold grass of winter when the frost was thick on the ground.

Go figure.

At six years of age she was right.

I looked across my rooftop to the ridge-line. It was a mass of flame. The ridge-line some kilometres behind that one was a red glow. The fire was immense.

The back of my place suddenly had flames licking to the sky.

'Fuck' I screamed. 'Leave my fucking place alone. Bugger off.'

It seemed to ignore my ranted command.

That jolted me into action.

I began to play the garden hose over the roof, running up and down the length of the house as I did so. A completely idiotic and futile action. Every step I took Twinkletoes followed as though she was attached to my ankle by a short leash.

Suddenly I felt these strong hands around my waist and I was surreptitiously thrown into a Fireman's hold and carried quickly out onto the roadway and dumped unceremoniously into the back of a Ute. Twinkletoes jumped in to land on top of me. Several wet towels and hessian bags were placed over my head and my face was sprayed with water. There were three blokes, a woman, two kids and three other dogs and two cat travel containers in the back of the Ute.

The cabin appeared to be full of bodies squeezed in tightly.

'Keep ya fuckin head down no matter what! We should make it through with a bit of luck on our side.' Yelled some bulky, tall form with a yellow hard hat and safety goggles on. A scarf over his mouth and nose. A yellow safety coat and trousers completed the little that I saw.

I saw a dim figure draped in safety yellow scamper to my vehicle, reversing it idiotically out of the driveway and away down the street away from the threatening flames.

The Ute roared to life, bucking us all around in the back as though we were bosom buddies. I popped my head over the tailgate contrary to the solemn command, to see a zillion fire-flies hovering about 300 millimetres above the bitumen tarmac of the road. They seemed to be all heading towards the vehicle. Gaining on us fast. Millions, like hordes of attacking Japanese in a vain suicide attack.

Gaining on us.

Fire-Flies.

That's what I remember.

Fire-Flies.

Millions of them. Zillions in fact!

Appearing to go under the vehicle.

We were doomed.

They were overtaking us.

Millions of Fire-Flies.

Going in the same direction as we were as we hurtled down the street.

Slewing around the corner I lost sight of the hordes.

The Ute seeming to go up on two wheels. Us occupants again being unintentionally thrown together. We seemed to speed along this thoroughfare for some time before we came to a screeching stop.

By that time I was a jabbering idiot repeating demoniacally about a thousand Fire-Flies engulfing us, yelling Banzai as they burnt the flesh off our bones.

Not even my wife could release me from the scene that only I could envision. A strong sedative stabilised my condition until further tests could be undertaken in hospital.

It's been three years now. We have re-built the house and included a pool.

With these pills and the occasional touching of base with my Therapist, I am considered under control. Cured. No relapse expected. Thanks to the depth of love from my missus, my kids, my dog and the heap of professionals, other family members and SES Personnel, I'm back at work and meaningfully employed.

Happy as Larry, God bless his cotton socks!

Where we once enjoyed the jollies of a large open fire in our first house, an original farmstead on a small acreage outside Yass and later, one of those old fashion pot-bellied heaters in the house that burnt down, we could not come at such an installation in a rebuilt, upgraded edition. We have a reverse cycle, ducted air-conditioning system throughout. Cool in summer and warm in winter. A little expensive but it beats an open flame.

In fact we don't even have a gas stove which many people prefer over electric, but that's the way it is. And where once I enjoyed the delights of slaving over a flame in my BBQ cooking for the Masses, we now enjoy the delights of a little electric one Hotplate!

There are those who cannot understand....they never will, regardless!

You can mention any insect that is known to mankind, but the mention of Fire-Flies in this house is taboo!

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