



# Black Saturday

Seventh February 2009

Eric was a twelve year old boy and he truly enjoyed school. He did fairly well in all his subjects and if you asked him what he wanted to be in the future, he always knew exactly what he wanted. Always without fail he promptly answered that he wanted to be a fireman just like his Dad. His Dad had been a fireman with the Melbourne Fire Brigade for many years and Eric was very proud of his father and wanted to be like him. It was only last week that the firemen of his Dad's team had saved quite a number of lives when a fire had broken out in someone's kitchen. This fire had spread quite quickly to the neighbouring properties but fortunately they managed to save all those houses except the one where the fire started. They rescued an old lady from that house and an ambulance took her to the hospital where she was treated for minor burns and smoke inhalation.



Indeed the Firemen have saved many lives over the years.

The summer season was always extra busy because then there were always numerous grass fires and bushfires which threatened properties as well as lives. During the summer the Fire Officers were called out many times. Even in the middle of the night they received urgent calls for help. Their work is very much appreciated and it is no wonder that Eric wanted to be a fireman like his Dad. It is very hard and strenuous work, though, but most rewarding.

The team that Eric's Dad belonged to was a closely knit group of men. They all loved their work and it did not bother them at all if they were called out in the middle of the night. It gave them great satisfaction if they managed to save properties as well as lives. Unfortunately they were not always able to save houses, especially if they had to drive a long way to reach the fire.

As you can imagine Eric would love to go on the truck with his Dad and, if possible, even help him. But his Dad always told him he was too young and it is far too dangerous. When he kept on asking, his Dad said:



A short story by Leo Schoof, Kelmscott, Western Australia

“When you turn thirteen I will let you come with me now and then”.

Eric’s thirteenth birthday was not far away, only a few weeks, on 8<sup>th</sup> February. But before that something terrible was going to happen.

Little did Eric realise that on the day before his birthday he was going to be confronted with one of the largest and most disastrous bushfires in the history of Australia. This was on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> February 2009. This day will be remembered as one of the darkest days in the history of Australia and is now known as ‘Black Saturday’.

The week before this disaster Victoria was experiencing an exceptional heat wave which lasted several days. Temperatures even reached 45 degrees. Melbourne broke all records with three days in a row of 43 degrees. Eric can vividly remember the phone call during that particular night. That was a night he would not easily forget. His Dad jumped out of bed, answered the phone, got dressed as quickly as possible and raced off to the Fire Station.



Fires can be caused by a glass bottle lying in the dry grass. It can also be caused by someone carelessly throwing a cigarette butt out of a car window. Of course nobody knew how the fire started and during that day many more fires started. So the firemen had their hands full. Eric was at home and followed the news of the fire fighting with great interest, not only because his father was involved, but also because of the great danger to people and animals.

For a while Eric’s Mum had frequent phone contact with his Dad but the last few hours she had not heard anything. And naturally she was quite worried because this was not an ordinary bushfire. No, this was something they had never seen before.

In the meantime Eric’s Dad was busy fighting the fires together with the men of his team. Then suddenly he saw a little baby Koala bear in the middle of the road. Its fur was singed and it could hardly walk. Of course it was also very, very thirsty. Eric’s Dad had a water bottle with him. No firemen was allowed to leave the Fire Station without sufficient water on him. So he carefully approached the little animal which was at first quite frightened. When he got closer it tried to run away but it couldn’t get very far because its feet were badly burnt and very sore. Eric’s Dad slowly



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came closer and closer but the Koala baby did not know what to do with the bottle. So Eric's Dad let some of the water run on his hand and then the frightened animal knew what to do and after some more encouragement it started to drink from the bottle. It was so thirsty that it emptied the whole bottle in a matter of minutes. After that the little Koala was so thankful that it hugged the legs of Eric's Dad. While the other men of his team were still busy fighting the fires Eric's Dad, whose name was Keith, was wondering what to do with the little Koala. He found a big bag in the front of the truck and carefully put the little Koala in the bag and left the bag on the front seat. Keith was now wishing that Eric had been with him for he could have very happily looked after the Koala. Fortunately by night time Keith's team was told to go home for a rest while other firemen took over. All the men belonging to Keith's team were totally exhausted and welcomed the break. They went home and left the exhausting task to the next team. Keith came home and found the whole family in bed already. They quickly got up again and were so glad to have him back safe and sound. Especially his wife was very happy and thankful. Keith's wife quickly made her husband a hot cup of coffee.



"What have you got in that bag, Dad?" Eric asked.

"I was hoping you could help me with that", Keith responded.

Eric opened the bag very carefully and to his delight he saw this frightened little Koala. Eric loves animals and is always willing to help them, especially injured animals. On Saturdays he often went to the Animal Rehabilitation Centre in town to offer his services. He carefully lifted the little Koala Bear out of the bag and gave it some more water to drink. This injured animal seemed to understand that Eric meant no harm and that he wanted to help him. It quietly sat on Eric's lap.

"Dad, tomorrow is my thirteenth birthday. Remember your promise? Can I join you then on the fire truck?", Eric asked. He had been waiting for this day because his Dad had promised him he could help with firefighting as soon as he turned thirteen.

Unfortunately his Dad had other ideas.

"No, Eric", he said. "This sick and injured little animal needs treatment as soon as possible. Therefore I think you better take it to the Animal Rehabilitation Centre in town tomorrow. Maybe the following day you can come with me, but first you need to make sure that this sick and injured animal is being cared for. Of course, Eric could not argue with that. He also understood very well that this little Koala Bear needed urgent treatment.



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“First we all go to bed, though”, Eric’s Mum said. “Dad is exhausted and badly needs a rest”. After some more refreshments they all went to bed. But first they thanked the Lord together for His care and protection, also for the men who are still fighting the fire and for the many people who are now in hospital because of their injuries.

“Why don’t we first listen to an update on the news?” Eric suggested.

“That’s a good idea”, Mum responded.

Soon they heard the voice of the radio announcer who informed them that already more than ninety people had died in the fires including some firefighters. And more than three hundred people had been injured. Dad went all quiet after that and was no doubt thinking of all the other firefighters who were still out there in such dangerous conditions.

“I hope the team that relieved us is alright because they are in a very dangerous area”, he said.

### **At the Animal Rehabilitation Centre**

Eric did not sleep very well that night. He was worried about the Koala Bear and he was also very concerned about the hundreds of firefighters who were still out there in the dark fighting an almost impossible battle. He heard his Dad talking to his Mum so obviously they also had trouble getting to sleep.

The next morning Dad was picked up by one of the members of his team and off they went to continue their hazardous work. Eric promised his Dad that he would take care of the little injured animal. His Mum got the family car out of the garage and together they drove to town with their precious little animal, which was so dependent on them. After about half an hour they arrived at the Animal Rehabilitation Centre. The staff was very experienced in caring for injured animals and naturally they were extremely busy because Eric was not the only person who wanted help for an injured animal. After waiting for a while a lady came to see how she could help. Eric had not met this lady before when he volunteered on Saturdays. Obviously many more helpers were needed because of the enormity of the bushfire disaster. As soon as she saw the little Koala Bear she said:

“This is the sixteenth burnt Koala Bear we received this morning. We also have many injured kangaroos and other badly burnt animals. But we will see what we can do. That’s what we are here for and we will do our very best for your little Koala Bear”.



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Her confident approach and caring manner gave Eric hope. They carefully put the injured animal on a table and the lady expertly put ointment on the wounds and soon she was finished with this patient, ready for the next one.

“I would strongly suggest you leave him here”, the lady said. “Because we have all the medication here and all that we need is readily available”.

Naturally Eric found it rather difficult to part with his new friend but he realised this was in its best interest. So they said goodbye to the lady who assured them she would take good care of the little Koala Bear.

On their way out Eric and his Mum saw several other animals with various injuries. Outside in the paddock they saw several horses with bandaged legs. Eric felt very sorry for all these injured animals. He was determined to go back next Saturday to help as he realised that many volunteers were needed after such a serious disaster and on the way home he mentioned it to his Mum.

“Mum, I will go back on Saturday to help them and then I will see our little Koala Bear at the same time”, Eric said.

“That’s a very good idea, my thirteen year old boy”, she responded. “We have not given your birthday any attention yet, have we?”

“That doesn’t matter”, Eric said, “because there were more important and more urgent things to attend to, wasn’t there?”

As soon as they arrived home Mum tried again to get telephone contact with her husband, but after trying several times she gave up.

“Just like yesterday”, she said. “The lines must be down or damaged due to the many bushfires. According to the radio there were about four hundred fires burning all over the state. This was very serious! They were, therefore, not surprised when Dad did not return home that night.

“Perhaps they can’t find enough volunteers to take over from the exhausted firemen”, Eric suggested. “They need all the help they can get, of course”. But when he again did not come home the following night they both became quite worried and Mum sent a silent prayer to the Lord in heaven.





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Before they went to bed Mum tried again to contact Dad by phone but again she gave up after trying for a long time. By now she became quite worried. They had already heard on the news that more than 130 people had been killed by the fires and about 400 people had been injured so far including several fire fighters. It was therefore no wonder that they were quite worried when Dad didn't turn up. With some of the phone lines down you just never know what could have happened.

Then Eric said: "But Mum, don't they always say, no news is good news?"

"Yes, that's true, but I still don't like it", responded Mum. "But let's go to bed, sitting here worrying about it isn't going to help", she added. Before both went to their room they prayed to God for protection and for a good night sleep.

The next morning they woke up and were surprisingly rested. Soon after breakfast there was a strange vehicle on the driveway and Dad stepped out. One of the team members had taken him home. Mum and Eric were so relieved to have Dad home again safe and sound. Both of them hugged Dad till it nearly hurt his ribs. They were overjoyed and very thankful for God's protection.

Dad was allowed to stay home for about eight hours and then he had to be back on duty. So straight after dinner he had to leave again. Eric then reminded Dad about his promise:

"I am thirteen now, Dad. Can I come with you this time?"

Dad was a bit concerned. He realised that this was no ordinary bushfire. But when Eric promised to be extra careful he gave in and allowed him to come along. He also had to promise to do exactly what he was told.

"That's for your own protection, Eric", Dad said.

"OK, Dad, I will be very careful and listen to you", Eric said.

So off they went with their lunch and drink bottles for they needed plenty of water. Mum waved them off and after they had disappeared around the corner she had to admit that she still was not very comfortable about letting Eric accompany his Dad on the truck.

When the fire truck arrived at the fire Dad got out together with the other team members and told Eric to stay in the truck for his own protection. They had parked the truck in the shade of a huge tree because it was going to be another very hot day.

"Make sure you drink plenty of water", Dad urged Eric.

"Yes, Dad, I'll do exactly as you say".

Eric had taken his book with him. So he decided to read a few pages. There was nothing else he could do anyway. After a while Eric began wondering when his Dad was going to come back to the truck. He had been away for quite a while. Eric was getting a little worried and anxious as well. It was lunchtime by now so he got his lunch out of his lunch box and ate his sandwiches and the apple his Mum had given him. Eric could hear more and more sirens in the distance and the wind was turning now and increasing in strength.



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And before he realised what was happening the big tree under which the truck was parked fell over right on top of the fire truck. Eric heard the crackling noise of the tree but after that it was dead silent. He could not see or hear anything because he was knocked unconscious. A big branch of this huge tree had fallen right across the cabin where Eric was sitting having his lunch. It had hit his head and broken an arm and a leg. He couldn't even move even if he had been awake. He couldn't remember of course how long he had been in this awkward and painful position. He had heard voices and even recognised his Dad's voice for a few moments but apart from that he could not remember anything. He woke up in a hospital bed several hours later. His head was all bandaged up and so was his right arm as well as his right leg. He was in a lot of pain. As soon as he stirred one of the nurses was at his side immediately.

"Are you alright?", she asked him. "My name is Julie and I am here to help you".

"Where is my Dad?", Eric asked the nurse.

"I'm sure he and your Mum will be here soon. We have told them where you are and they are probably on their way already to see you.

"But where am I?", Eric asked Julie, the nurse. "And, by the way, why is it so dark in here".

The nurse answered his first question: "You have been quite seriously hurt by a falling tree and because you are thirteen the ambulance took you to the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne". However, she did not answer his second question about the darkness in the room.

"Just let me know if you need anything", she said. I am not far away.

"But how can you see what you are doing in this dark place" Eric asked the nurse.

"It is better for you not to talk too much now" she answered, "because you are a very sick boy".

"Do you need anything now for the pain?"

"Yes", Eric answered, "I am in a lot of pain. My forehead is hurting very much and so is my right arm and my right leg.

"What happened exactly? I remember I went with my Dad on the fire truck but after that I don't remember much", Eric told the nurse. The nurse couldn't really tell Eric more than she already had.



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## In the hospital



A little while later his Dad and Mum entered the room and gave Eric a big hug and a kiss. They were shocked to see him all bandaged up. Especially his forehead looked very much injured right across his eyes.

“Mum and Dad”, Eric suddenly asked, “Why don’t they open the blinds and curtains? It is so terribly dark in here. Do they do that because of my injuries? Does that help the healing?”

Mum and Dad looked at each other with shock. Mum had a terrified look in her eyes because she knew very well that all the blinds were up and the curtains were wide open. Eric’s question filled her with fear and apprehension. Then they suddenly heard footsteps in the passage and the nurse asked Dad and Mum to come with her because the doctor wanted to have a chat with them. Understandably this filled them with alarm.

“Is everything alright with my boy”, Mum anxiously asked the nurse.

“I don’t know anything about this patient”, she responded. “All I was asked to do was go and get you and bring you to the doctor because he wanted to talk to you”.







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Dad and Mum both sensed that this nurse knew more than she was willing to say. Soon the nurse stopped at the end of a long passage and knocked on the door. The doctor opened the door himself and welcomed them both in while the nurse went back to her other duties. The doctor looked quite serious and concerned and therefore Dad and Mum both asked just about at the same time:

“Is our boy alright?”

The doctor asked them to sit down and then quietly looked them straight in the eyes and said:

“I’m afraid I don’t have good news for you. In fact it is not good at all”.

“What is it?”, exclaimed Mum with terror in her voice. Dad also looked a picture of misery and anxiously waited for the doctor to explain what was going on with Eric while at the same time there was a silent prayer in his heart.

The doctor quietly began to explain what had happened to Eric.

“The big branch which nearly killed him had fallen right across Eric’s forehead and had done much damage in that area. As a matter of fact it had done much damage to his eyes”, he continued.

“Is he blind?”, Mum asked with an anxious voice.

Both Dad and Mum anxiously waited for an answer and yet deep down they knew the answer because of Eric’s question about why the curtains and blinds were kept shut.

The doctor paused for a moment and then looked them straight in the eyes again and said:

“Yes, unfortunately you guessed right. He is indeed totally blind”.

After hearing that shocking revelation Mum could not control herself any longer and burst out in tears. She wailed: “Oh, my dear little boy. Why did that have to happen to you?”

Dad was also close to tears and tried unsuccessfully to comfort his poor wife while the doctor waited patiently for them to pull themselves together again.

“Has Eric been told yet?”, Dad wanted to know although he knew the answer.

“No, not yet”, the doctor responded, and he continued: “we were wondering if you as parents ought to tell him yourselves”.

Mum started crying again and the doctor said:

“It will be extremely difficult for you to come to grips with this difficult situation. I am not a Christian but I believe you are. Therefore you most likely know what do. It might be good if I leave you two alone for a few moments to absorb this shocking news and perhaps pray to your God. I will come back after a little while and see if you want to tell your son or if you want me to do it. Is that alright?”

Bot Dad and Mum nodded in agreement, unable to speak and the doctor left the room.

After a while Mum stopped crying and Dad said:



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“This unbelieving doctor suggested that we ought to pray to our God in this difficult situation. He was right, you know. Let’s do just that”.

They both bowed their heads in prayer and asked the Lord to be with Eric and to help him to accept this awful and shocking news. They also prayed that they would both be strong and have the courage to pass this extremely sad news on to Eric. They knew very well that it would be better for them as parents to inform Eric rather than the doctor.

After a few more minutes the doctor entered the room again and asked them:

“Well, what have you decided?”

Dad answered him: “we prayed to our God for strength and courage and we have decided to tell Eric ourselves that he is blind. We both feel it is much better that we tell him ourselves.

“I think you made a wise decision”, the doctor said. “I will ask the nurse to guide you back to Eric’s room because you are not so familiar yet with the layout of this hospital”.

Dad and Mum thanked the doctor and the nurse guided them back to Eric’s room where they found the poor boy in tears because he had already come to the conclusion himself that he was blind. “He had worked it out himself”, he said, “because it was terribly dark and also because nobody gave me an honest answer”.



“Everybody was evading his questions”, he said through his tears. He had asked the doctor and he said he wanted to talk to his parents. The nurses also avoided straight answers to his questions.

One nurse said: “I don’t know”, and another nurse, who came to give me an injection for the pain, said: “You better ask the doctor”.

“Please Dad and Mum”, he pleaded, “Tell me it’s not true. Tell me that I am not blind”.

While Dad plucked up enough courage to confirm to Eric this devastating news Mum put her arms around Eric’s shoulders and kissed him. Because Eric had already come to the conclusion that he must be blind the news his parents told him did not come as such a shock as they had expected. After all he could find no other explanation for the darkness all around him.



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After Dad had confirmed Eric's suspicion he also added that the doctor had advised them to pray to their God. So Dad said: "Let us do that, for our only help is from the Lord Who made the heavens and the earth".

After the prayer all three of them felt an enormous peace in their hearts. Dad said to Mum and Eric: "What would we do without faith?"

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The Chief of Dad's team had left a message on his mobile phone to tell him to take a couple of days off so that they could give some attention to their sick boy in hospital. Dad thought that was very kind and considerate of his Chief and appreciated the time he could spend with his wife and it also gave him an opportunity to visit Eric in the hospital. The Chief also said that they would contact him when they needed him real badly and urgently not realising that it soon became extremely urgent. Already the following day Dad received an urgent call on his mobile. And after a short sleep he was off again to the danger zone leaving his anxious wife behind all by herself.



The news on the radio was not good at all. The total death toll was now 173 and 414 people had been injured. The enormous bushfire had also destroyed 2100 homes. This was shocking news. There was sadness and grief, not only in Eric's family, but in many other homes around Melbourne. There were news updates every hour of the day and on Sundays this disaster was remembered in prayer in many churches.



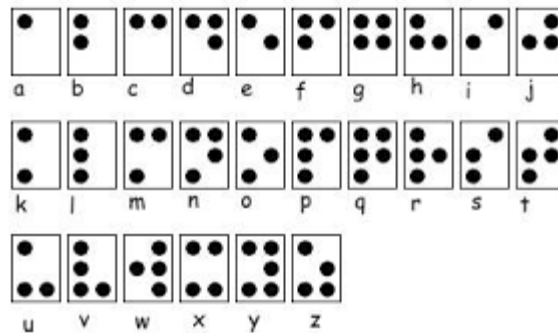
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Many people were injured and some, Like Eric, had serious injuries from which they would never recover. For Eric and his family there was the truth of God’s Word and His promises which were a great comfort to them. When Eric came home from hospital he tried to go back to school. This was extremely difficult at first, which is understandable. After some months, however, he was introduced to the Braille reading system. This system was developed by Louis Braille who was born in France in 1809. Just like Eric he was also blinded by an accident, Eric at the age of thirteen and Louis Braille at the age of three. When Louis Braille was twelve years old he developed a raised-dot code that enabled blind people to read and write. It did not take Eric very long to master this new method of reading. And after a while he was no longer behind in his studies. The Lord blessed him with good results and he went on to University later on.

The 7th February, 2009, will now be remembered as one of the darkest days in Australia's peace-time history. It was the worst bushfire disaster in the history of Australia.

For unbelievers this was a black time, a time of bitterness and anger. Some even wanted to try and blame some people. Others even tried to blame the firefighters saying they responded too late. Fortunately most people knew better. But those whose hope is in the Lord their God did not despair. They knew that good days and bad days all come from the hand of their caring God and Father. They confess that all things come not by chance but by His Fatherly hand.

How rich God’s people are knowing that they belong to such a caring God and Father.



Above is the Braille alphabet

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Byford, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2018



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