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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Fairy Tale Threads (based on true events)

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Fairy Tale Threads

Dedicated to all who perished in Australia's 2009 Black Saturday fires, and those who bear the scars.

Our fairy tale is over. Dumped and seared under a white wash of decisions and emotion.

Hundreds of fires ravage land and lives. A temporary morgue is established. The hierarchy gather and implore via the media, 'It's time to restructure, regroup and take belief from deep inside.' While behind the scenes they duck and weave, pointing blame.

I'm no different. I'm pointing blame too - directly at myself.

It aches to know that the lurking feeling, the one called instinct, was right. I should have paid attention. How foolish to hope it not there, to push it aside and believe the assurances. And yet here it is, in all the ugliness it brings. I should never have left Ryan to fight alone. We should have raged against the flames together.

Ryan's hold was firm, 'I'll protect the house, you take care of our little 'Bump's' home.' I had nodded and smiled when he kissed my mouth and newly swelling belly. After months of twenty-four-seven morning sickness I'd barely regained the energy for living, let alone the will to battle. Our Australian bushfires menace and denial reigned. Ryan was the city boy, me the one with generations of country instinct. And my instinct was to run. Why didn't I insist he leave with me?

My eyes open. I don't look at the time, my internal alarm clock tells me it's near three am. Traces of fresh paint meander and linger. They hint of my mother-in-law, Sal's, overnight activity. She is preparing the

room in, 'Happy Yellow' for Bump's arrival. Sal understands the power of colour. And distraction. Sal understands grief.

I stare at the ceiling. The baby kicks and presses. Trees groan and cast curling shadows across the dim lit walls. My nerve ends prick. I wrestle thoughts of one-hundred-foot fire balls raging through canopies, and the need to pee. My bladder wins the struggle. I tip-toe downstairs knowing I won't go back to bed. This is when I scour thumb-raked newspapers searching for connection, for a glimpse of Ryan's face. It's not there, but still I read over the horror events: exploding trees, roads riddled with burnt out cars, a blanket of ash blotting the sky in a horrible orange glow. So many good people.

I hear a creak and feel Sal's presence. She is so much like Ryan, the same gentle strength in an imposing frame, yet more patience than her son. I've buried myself here for weeks, first out of necessity; authorities had closed roads, only emergency personnel allowed. Then out of choice, hers and mine. It brings a sad solace. 'Stay as long as you want,' she says. 'Until you feel ready.' I don't know what that means. I feel nothing but numb.

Sal slides into a chair and laces her paint-spattered hand over mine.

'Do you think he suffered?' I ask.

'I don't know,' she says. 'I hope not. I tell myself, no.'

I consider her dark chocolate eyes, Ryan's eyes. She taps the newspapers, 'They say it all happened so fast.'

It's the first time we've spoken about that day.

I survey the garden colouring-in book Sal gave me the day I left for home, and my pencils, choose a bunch and weave my way into their colourful world. I numbly trace the petals, filling them with something pretty. Outside my own garden reflects my life. It once flourished blooming with hope, now burnt, wiry tendrils choke on smoke drenched posts. Its smell still lingers and leaves a bitter taste.

I am one of the lucky ones. The fire licked us, interlaced the fret work and turned her back. My house still stands. Some lost everything – everyone. That’s what coils the canals of my brain, the words of the insurance agent as he shuffled papers and pointed to where I needed to sign, - ‘Some lost everything.’ Didn’t I lose everything? Wouldn’t I surrender these stone walls and all inside them to have Ryan back even for an hour, time enough to convince him? Did the fool not understand how devastated I was to hear him recite the coroner’s words, - ‘It was impossible to positively identify many of the remains.’ Ryan was engulfed alongside our neighbours. Our matching wedding bands the unmistakable identity.

Indigo lines gouge the page and the lead breaks. I throw the pencil and bellow a Neanderthal roar. My chair upends as I reach for the surviving ceramic bowl, the ugly one Ryan gave me, the one I hated, and throw it full pelt at the wall. It survives impact and bounces back at me. I fumble the catch and watch it tumble in slow motion to the floor, ‘No,’ I scream and drop to gather the shards. I want to sob. Nothing comes. And then my stomach grips me to a whimper, ‘Oh, god, no. Not yet.’ I clutch my belly and rock, hoping to abate its clench.

Sal is beside me, knuckles white, trying to stay calm as I’m wheeled through emergency. She knows these corridors, has experienced this dread before, with Ryan’s father. Ryan was ten, too young to lose his dad. The Ambulance officer tells staff, ‘Dilated pre-term, twenty-six weeks, seven minute contractions.’ Emotions unravel.

Today, Bump has arrived home. She is exactly like her father, strong and beautiful and premature with their breaths taken in this world. I look at the stacks of paperwork that remind me Ryan is dead. He was the planner, the one who managed our life. But these papers are filled with queries of him, asked by those who pretend to believe they know how I feel. Hollow words echo around my soul. Corporations analyse and insist boxes be ticked so as not to admit anything amiss. Their shoulders shrug dismissive. They don't believe in souls, in soulmates. Disinterested in sentiment - Ryan Paul Thompson, life insurance number LI8672009. How insignificant. Just another number. I shove the paper mounds inside a draw and tell myself to be prepared for bruises to erupt when they venture back out.

Sal chatters with someone at the door. Hope cries and my breasts respond to her hungry wail. I look at tiny lips opened wide and quivering, and touch her dimpled chin. She settles and puckers expectant. If my tears could roll they would run over like the gutters on this pallid day. Rain drenches, too much too late. Today was supposed to be ours, full of joy and promise. Years of chasing dreams, desperately trying, hoping for this moment and I can't let go of gripping fears; how do I do this without her daddy? I don't want to face this without Ryan. I don't want to smile with the folk who have promised to pop in, just for a moment, to lend a hand. Is my glass half full or half empty? I can't tell.

'She is beautiful, a little pixie,' a quiet voice says.

I lean into the cradle, 'Fairy tales don't exist, and if they do their tales come at too high a price,' I say and hear my tone cut.

'I know.'

I turn and realise it is Poppy. She is a survivor too. A few times over. She and her husband of forty-eight years have been through it all before, and won – but not this time. Carlos left her by a locked gate and never made it back. They believe him to be amongst those unidentifiable.

‘May I?’ Poppy says and picks up Hope.

Hope searches Poppy’s chest and kicks in protest.

‘She has her father’s patience,’ Sal says.

Hope arches her back and pouts.

‘And his charm,’ I say unable to avoid the memory of Ryan’s boyish ways.

Sal chuckles, Poppy laughs, and I’m surprised by the grin that pushes from deep within.

‘Ryan will never be gone while this little one is around,’ Poppy says and my eyes swell. A tear falls and I come undone. Strong arms wrap me and the four of us sway. Somehow I know we will pull through.

Hope suckles and kneads my breast, a dark curl winds around her ear and I twirl it the same way I once did to Ryan. Her tiny hand latches my finger and grips tight. I smile at her strength and think, -
‘Some fairy tales end happily ever after, some don’t. We will write our own story.’

And these are the tales I spin myself from hopes and dreams that refuse to die.