

## Back Burning

**'Back Burning' by Ellie Kaddatz**  
**First runner-up**  
**2022 Young Writers Award**

### Back Burning

I wade through the brown grass and listen to the Flying Doctors helicopter whump by. The grass under my city-softened feet is dry, spindly, prick-my-finger sharp. The sun is crashing down and this feels like all I will ever know. Somewhere there are girls wearing jumpers. Somewhere there are girls in houses not overrun by geckos and carpet snakes. Somewhere there are girls who do not lie down on sun-bleached cement just to feel the relief of getting up from it.

Hot cement. I can smell it, even now. I can picture jumping paver to paver at my Sophie's house, the balls of my feet tough against the navy stone. Walking up that gravel driveway, rocks slicing heels. Sitting in a drainpipe under the dirt road with Sophie, after our child-selves hid in the scrub and watched men in jeans and high-vis rip up gum trees and seal cement tubing.

The deluge from a single summer storm could turn the slow-moving Bakers Creek into a knock-off Charybdis, and it would become a forbidden place, a place defined by its lack of air and space and its secret spots for drowning. During cyclone seasons, Sophie and I walked along back roads (the only roads that existed) and down dirt tracks, away from her father's stern, searching gaze. The rain plastered our hair to our skulls and turned grass seeds sticky, so our downy-haired thighs were always covered in the cream-coloured grains.

Our parents were glad for the new drainpipe, glad for the workers and their screaming trucks and violent tools. It was safer, then, to let us run unchecked in the bush, even during rainy season. The day after the workmen left, I hunched over and shuffled into the pipe. Sophie followed me, blonde and perfect. I was wearing a singlet and shorts. The pipe burnt the fleshy back of my pre-teen thighs, but my palms were calloused enough to be unfeeling.

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After sifting through cobwebs and dried eucalyptus leaves, we sat in that pipe under the road. I leant backwards, knees against my chest, filthy feet up on the rounded ceiling. Her legs folded up underneath her, origami-neat. What did we talk about? I don't remember. But I remember the heat leaking through the soil above us, the crackle of dead leaves aching to go up in flames, the smoke curling up thick from the mountain range. We might not have been taught it, but we knew: the bush is tired. The bush is biding its time.

We talked about leaving for the city, when we were old enough, tall enough. We'd live in an apartment together, grow herbs on the windowsill, write poetry and wear vintage clothes and cut our hair however we wanted. We would keep plants, dozens of plants, confined to their pots and trained into perfect circles. We would keep each other warm, curled up foetal in bed, a single scarf between us, exactly how we slept during sleepovers. I always stayed at her house. Sophie's mum was an insomniac, and her dad was wider than the breaks the rural fires cut into the bush, but my house was too stifling to add another kid into the mix.

The one night Sophie stayed in my bed, they were back burning the scrub behind my house. Her dad was out there, and mine, their uniforms tight across their barrel chests. I remember crouching at the window with her, watching flames bite up at the sky. There was so much orange, so much heat. My brother thought the house was going to burn down and spent the night hysterical, clawing at Mum's arms. I remember the silhouettes of the men - all the same in the dark, interchangeable. Man after man after man. I remember their guttural yells and the smoke curling under the back door. I remember leaving for school the next morning and the dads looking defeated and lonely in their rural fire uniforms, leaving their little children at the gates. The whole school was covered in ash.

Sophie didn't stay at my house again.

Her dad mowed his lawn twice a week, but the eucalyptus saplings were always winning. He sat on his John Deere ride-on like a Greek hero riding into battle.

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Sometimes he would sit us in his lap, one on each leg, and drive us to school on the sleek green machine. He smelled like diesel and summer grass, even on winter mornings when the spiderwebs in the cow paddocks sparkled with dew and the fog was too thick to see the school in the distance.

He was strong and liked to play with our school friends, letting them try to tackle him or lifting one in each arm. *Strong children are good children*, he'd say. He was good at making up games. He went to the green church up on the hill for Mass every Saturday night, even though Sophie and her mum wouldn't go with him. His eyes were small and quick. When he looked at me he made tiny frogs jump around in my tummy.

He once pulled me aside as I hopped from paver to paver, flouncing from their driveway to their back door to drag Sophie away from her homework and to the bush or the dam or the cute little calves down the road that had been born only weeks ago. *You're a smart girl*, he said, *but I can see bad things in you*. His eyes drifted slowly towards Sophie's bedroom window. *I think you should leave her alone this afternoon*. The frogs grew wild and wretched.

I ran back home and hid behind our treehouse, watched the leaves burn yellow and move half-heartedly against the breeze. The sounds of him clanking in his shed – forbidden territory – gave a sick rhythm to the afternoon. Then a door slammed, and I scrambled to see him get in his Commodore and leave, dust rising behind him like cane trash smoke. I shot through their back door, pulled Sophie from her room and we scuttled into the drainpipe, wild teenaged spiders. Despite the chill the sunset had brought to the air, the cement was still egg cup-warm, and when our shoulders brushed my bones were low-burning coals. The frogs quietened. I ached to tell her what he'd said, got as far as *Your dad*– when she kissed me.

She kissed me.

Now, I pound the city streets, heeled boots loud and earphones spewing and the heat still hunting me down. The eucalypt trees aren't here anymore, but I can feel something waiting and watching. I search for signs of green from behind my sunglasses. There are

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vines trailing up the sides of hotel buildings, sad and strangled, and greying moss sits in gutters as dry as the dam on Christmas Day. When it does rain – inevitable here, in the city, where the drops are reviled rather than rejoiced in – it smells completely different. Less like murky creek water, and more like wet bird shit and soggy Maccas chips.

Sophie followed me, eventually. She sits pretty in sleek cafes and studies in the library, two tables down from me. When I turned twenty my hair darkened, strawberry blonde ringlets replaced by something thicker and harsher, but her hair still sprouts white from the scalp and she is always coloured inside the lines.

I meet her for coffee. My flat white spills onto the saucer while her chai runs clear and perfect from the pot. I watch her sip and place the mug down carefully, small pink tongue collecting a stray drop from her bottom lip. *Dad's had to put the dog down.* His strong hands patting the small dog firmly. *Dad's ripped up the pavers.* My child-feet skipping over them. *The lawn looks great, he reckons, but the trees are still growing at the property line.* He knows the bush is waiting, I want to say. He knows it is getting impatient.

I look out the café window and watch the rain rinse bird shit off the cement while she keeps talking about the home we crawled out of. I am as taut and solid as the chair I'm sitting in. When she picks up her mug her wrists flash pale beneath her ballet pink sweater and I want to grab them and pull her outside and get her dirty, push us both out into the downpour and onto the grubby street and roll us around in the cigarette butts and coffee cups and maybe kiss her, just once, just until we gasp like kids running through the bush to get home before dark.

She notices I'm not listening, trails off. Now it's just the rain and the barista steaming milk and her not saying anything. I don't ask her to continue.

I am stretched, standing up on the long-ago scarred balls of my feet to stick up posters in a white-tiled shopping centre. I reach like I used to reach for green ant nests. The slip of my stomach, bare where my jumper has ridden up, is cold from the dry air pumping through the ceiling vents. There are men older than my dad who smile and call me sweetheart. There are mums who want me to stop being the only obstacle between them

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and exactly what they want, no not that one, the one behind it, *no* – and I am sick of all of them, aching and hungry and fading into the POS system one credit card purchase at a time.

The fluorescent tubing on the centre ceiling sounds like sick crickets and flickers unnervingly. I merchandise for three hours and my brain is thick with the knowledge that it doesn't mean anything. I move a stock item two shelves down and am told this looks much better. I am congratulated on moving it back a month later. I am good at my job. I am congratulated on being good at my job. My job is good at eating me from the inside out. Feral and contained. On lunch breaks I sit in the back office and run the tap, hands blocking the plughole until the sink is a pond.

Sophie meets me at work sometimes, shirt tucked in, pants creaseless. I am in second-hand jeans and a sweater with bad posture. Under the fluoros her hair is broken glass. She holds my hand in her cold, twig-thin fingers. Her lash extensions lie thick on her eyelids. She is taller than me, now, and wouldn't ever crawl back into the drainpipe, even if I asked. Even if I begged. She tells me her dad has given his rural fire uniform to my brother. She doesn't mention when her dad found us in the drainpipe and ripped her white hair from her scalp to get her mouth away from mine. She never has. She probably never will.

I tell her I need to keep merchandising. She looks at the stock. *You're good at your job.* And then I am so full of frogs and leeches and toebiters that I can feel myself shaking and I say *Thank you, I should get back to it.* It takes her a moment. She leaves and she doesn't look back, but I see her perfect fingers clutch desperately at her handbag. My own hands twitch with remembering. Six hours in here and then I can leave. I can go back outside, lay my cheek on the dry grass, and even in the city I can listen to the bush say *I am coming, I am coming, I am coming.*