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25 April 1983

Little did we dream when we sent our Christmas "letter" that we would be writing another so soon to all our friends.

Some very good friends in Singapore wrote in late January explaining that 1982 was such a bad year for us because it was the Year of the Dog which usually only brings disaster. The Year of the Boar (or Pig) would commence in February and we would experience only health, wealth and happiness!!! Then Ash Wednesday arrived - we still have some very good friends in Singapore!!!

Wednesday 16 February, which has now become known as Ash Wednesday, was just one of those terrible days Australia can experience in the summer - very hot, very strong northerly winds, with the temperature reaching 42° Celcius (108 Fahrenheit). We had to go to town (40 miles away) as John had a long standing appointment with an Endodontist to treat a deep seated abscess in a tooth, otherwise we would not have left Mount Macedon on that day as it was so unpleasant.

We arrived home just after 5 pm - there was a lot of smoke in the air from the Trentham fires about 20 miles away, but as we are used to smoke in the air in summer there was no need for concern. As it had been such an exhausting day John decided to go to bed just after 9 pm and as Zelma was so restless with the strong wind we decided on one of those very rare occasions to sleep in separate bedrooms so Zelma could watch television.

It is a well known fact that if the wind blows, the moon shines, the fox screams, the possum breathes or the koala prowls that Zelma does not sleep but roams the house and that John can sleep through ANYTHING.

The power went off at 10.15 but again this is normal in our area in high wind situations. As Zelma was worried about John she just kept prowling and looking out of the windows to a very black night. At approximately 10.35 after looking out the windows and checking John, as she turned round to go back up the passage way, like Henry Penny the fire just fell out of the sky.

Prior to the New Year it would have been impossible to wake John but as we were now starting to experience the "health" of the Year of the Boar he woke immediately on nearly being pulled out of bed. There had been no warnings of any description that the fires would reach our district, in

fact one can only say that our district was completely ignored in the emergency as it would appear from all the rumours that there had been warnings from 3.30 in the afternoon to evacuate our areas. But more of this in future as there is every possibility of legal action to ascertain our rights in what can only be described as neglect.

We dressed on the run - John pulling on shorts (no underpants) and slippers, Zelma a cotton dress, briefs and sandals. This took no longer than two minutes from the time the fire struck to the time we ran down the back stairs but it was already too late to get out of the house. Zelma ran back upstairs and grabbed PURE WOOL blankets from the nearest bed - we wrapped ourselves as well as possible and ran through about 40 yards of fire all round and above us and jumped into our swimming pool. Forty yards may not seem very far but we can assure you it seems miles in such a frightening situation.

The shallow end of our pool is about 4' 6" and we stood face to face, pulled the blankets over us and hunched down as low as possible as the fire and debris was falling all over us. John said we would not die in the fire but Zelma thought we might suffocate.

It has been proven that the temperature was 2100° just eight feet from us and according to all the experts there was no way we could survive - but as we had come through the past eighteen months we were not going to let the fire beat us, besides that we are Aussies and are survivors.

We spent about three hours in the pool, then about another hour sitting on a burnt seat until we could make our way up the drive through burning, falling trees to the road. When we reached the road the electric wires were all sparking and falling which was again rather frightening but one of the volunteer firefighters picked us up and after stopping for falling electric wires and trying to stop the local garage from blowing up we were taken to our local fire station where the windows had been blown out and some of the carpet burnt. John was now near to collapse and he promptly went to sleep on the floor. After about another half hour we were again taken through fire to the Counter Disaster College where we met up with some other survivors.

This was now after 3 am and John immediately went to sleep but Zelma just watched the bush burning around the College. We were taken the next (that) morning to Gisborne - still in our wet clothes and wrapped in blankets - where we eventually contacted Zelma's Mother to tell her the sad news.

As we were hit by fire balls, and not a bushfire as such, we had no chance to grab anything in our home before fleeing. In other words we do not have a sheet of paper, Zelma does not have a wedding ring. ALL John's precious collections of stamps, coins, banknotes, books and book-plates; Zelma's miniatures, jewellery, shells, paintings, miniature books

and snuff bottles were reduced to fine powder. Because of the excessive heat all silver vaporised and there was literally nothing to salvage. One cannot imagine that everything could be lost - our beautiful 54 square home, double garage and car, unique print (or printing) room, stable and our dear horse Wee Paddy, a three bed-roomed cottage, a very large workshop, storage area and our lovely garden is non-existent.

Other than radiation burns to our faces we are physically unhurt and we have gone through the stages of being thankful to be alive, tears, not being able to co-ordinate our words and at the moment a lot of depression. It is no good people saying that we have only lost possessions, not our lives, because you do cry for your possessions and memories which can never be replaced.

We have been given the run-around by the usual bureaucracy and have become heartily sick of having to fight for our rights. May we suggest that you never give to a public appeal but give only to the Salvation Army, the Red Cross and the Service Clubs - these groups have done wonders for us - practically and morally.

John had a minor collapse on the Friday and ended up in hospital for about thirty hours and can you imagine Zelma going to hire a car, crying her eyes out but in this case was given a car even though the staff doubted that she was capable of driving.

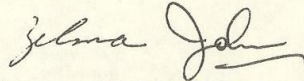
We have progressed from living with friends, to living for a short time in a caravan and now living in a builders construction unit. The weather is really dreadful and we do not think we can survive in this situation so will move to a house, if possible, in the area for approximately twelve months. It will be impossible for families to go through the winter on the Mount in caravans and something will have to be done for the people who cannot afford, for all sorts of reasons, to move from the area. Outside it is black and lonely, the gum trees stand like charcoal sentinels, the rain is pouring down, fog covers the mountain, and the bulk of the people on the Mount are huddled in their caravans around a small radiator. Of 320 homes on the Mount we have lost about 280 and all these people are homeless. Many thousands of homes were lost in Victoria on Ash Wednesday but the figures are not yet finalised.

We are extremely lucky that we have had good friends to help us and Zelma's family have done all the practical things to keep us going - washing, ironing, cooking, a series of "nephews" to act as guard-dogs in the first ten days, etc. Friends who have driven tremendous distances just to give us moral support; friends who have sifted through fine ash in appalling conditions to see if anything could be found; friends who have knitted warm clothing for us; clothing forwarded overnight for John from Hong Kong; friends who have helped us clean up trees, plant trees and who have provided the necessities of life; friends who ring us

regularly, local, interstate and overseas to help keep our spirits high. And we did appreciate friends from America airmailing John a pair of underpants and one of our wedding photos; also a nameless neice (and Zelma only has one) giving us some of her first jam ever made - we still haven't worked out how to remove the jam from the jar. We have had wonderful letters and help from throughout the world and we have each other so you can see we will survive. It has been a dreadful, dreadful experience that we would not wish on anyone and can now only hope that the rest of the Year of the Boar will come up to expectations.

As you can imagine it is impossible to write individually to thank everyone for their help and support and we hope this round robin letter says "thank you" to all. It also lets you know, although there is nothing left, we are still alive and that our address and telephone number remains the same.

With our love and best wishes

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Zelma John".

Zelma and John Gartner