

Smoking Gym

Short Story by

Elizabeth Walton

***The London Reader's Foreword:** Inspired by her personal experience of evacuation during the summer fires in Australia, "Smoking Gym" is Elizabeth Walton's story of survival and the little things people do to find their way through tragedy. The 2019-2020 Australian bushfires, known as the "Black Summer", burned an estimated 46 million acres in the country, or an area the size of Greece, and killed over three billion land animals, leading to the extinction of several species. The fires caused over A\$103bn (around £74bn) in damages and hazardous levels of air pollution in Australia's southern and eastern states. Many people, like the displaced family in Walton's story, lost their homes and were forced to flee. Her story reminds us how we're all only one crisis away from tragedy, and yet even in tragedy, we can find help and help others.*

***About the Author:** Elizabeth Walton grows her own food where she lives in Australia, working as a freelance writer and fiction author, but she was forced to evacuate her home five times during the Black Summer bushfires. You can follow her on Instagram @[elizabethwalton.au](https://www.instagram.com/elizabethwalton.au)*

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CHRISTMAS was only yesterday. Or maybe it was last week. The days have merged while my feet stood on the painted stripes in someone else's shoes.

The black stripes on the floor are for basketball, the red stripes for netball. I might have played those games myself on any ordinary day. But I'm too old for games now. And this is far from any ordinary day.

I step to the right, outside of the lines. I'm half expecting a girl in pleated skirts to run up, bouncing her ball, shouting, "Pearl, Pearl, you're offside, And those are *my* shoes."

There isn't any room in here for sport, though, what with the whole town stepping in.

They sleep here like restless grubs the way they fidget, with the smoke hanging under the roof. They say Council could easily blow it all out with the fans, except the power has been out for days, and the generator only runs the stadium lights at the other end of the hall.

They dim them down at night, but even in the early hours, they never turn them off. It's like the colour of half-past-four on a winter afternoon. But it isn't winter, it's summer. And even at one o'clock in the morning, I'm still not comfortable wearing someone else's shoes.

The Dunlops could do with a dab of whitener, to cover the smear. I doubt they still make shoe whitener these days. Do people still paint their shoes? I suppose Santa just brings them Volley Deuce for Christmas, and ones like these go into the charity bin. Suits me fine, I'm lucky to have them. But I wonder sometimes, about all that waste.

I warm my hands with a small china cup. We're meant to use those crumply paper cups that are over on the stands, or the foam ones printed with the holly and the ivy. I quite like the ones with a bit of Christmas

cheer, the ones usually left around the pool, spilling beer on the grass after lunch while the family falls asleep in the shade of a sprawling gum.

This cup I have in my hands is a *real* cup. Just like I always had at home. I could fit my fingers all the way through the handle of my peach-rose Royal Albert. These thick knuckles have no hope with a little cup like this. How nice it will be to soothe my chapped lips on the warm porcelain edge, if I can just get down to the floor.

Somehow I get down without popping a knee. And there I sit, watching my Dilmah cloud the hot water. I could stare at it all night.

It takes me back to that place on the hill where we stood together and watched the smoke flow across the clear blue sky. A brown colour came over the white froth of the sea. It was just like watching the milk stirred into my tea.

My mind wants to stay on the hill but I come back to the cup, and watch the shades of pinky-brown shimmy round the rim. It's quite relaxing to sit here on a turquoise mat, like staring deep into the ocean on the clearest day.

I slip out of my grey sloppy joe, and fold it neatly into the pile of things I've made at the edge of the pillow. One pair of trackpants, as yet unwashed. A little solar torch that's already gone flat. One frayed phone charger sitting up on top, right where it belongs, and next to it, a nice little piece of Christmas cake.

The cake is so moist and fresh it's made the paper napkin damp. All the red and green ink has bled through the white paper. It reminds me of sleighs blurring into snow.

The cake washes down quite nicely while I look over all those people trying to sleep.

We've all learned to take a few winks when we're given the chance. Take what's been given, that's what I always say. Just like the clothes. Give thanks for the softness of hand me downs, and whoever was thoughtful enough to spare you something of their own.

The moment I hit the pillow, my eyes shut down, just like a teller with no cash. Just as I begin to drift my hand leans out and brushes against the soft fold of the sloppy joe. I follow the scratchy lace at the neck of the jumper, the way a tongue seeks out the groove of a broken tooth.

The lace was sewn there to make a plain garment pretty, I suppose. I wonder if those hands that made the stitches were as red and sore as mine.

It's a comfort to know my few things are there, just like it's a comfort to hear the wilpy snore of the old dog over there, curled into the small of my neighbour's back, chasing his rabbits.

When the southerly blows through, the mercury falls fast, and I pull the jumper on before I wander to the ladies'. The stadium lights don't shine around the half-closed door of the washrooms, so some thoughtful person has lit a candle.

There's a small mirror leaning against the brickwork at the back of the sink. Looking into the reflection, I can just make out the red prickled line around my neck. I'd get rid of that lace at the top of the sloppy joe if I could.

I pump the frangipani soap, three times, and read the handwritten note. Day and night it hangs there, reminding people: *please wash your hands*. Reaching for the paper towel, I shake my head in wonder. What kind of a person needs to be reminded of a thing like that?

Back on the mat, I tuck my arm inside my sleeping bag, and the dog at my neighbour's back snarls in its sleep. I don't imagine it's much of a threat, it's just an ordinary reaction to being in unfamiliar surroundings. I can't imagine it's easy for a dog, being in here with so many other dogs, and people coming and going.

Dogs are quite territorial by nature. You can see that by the way they look at their owners, guarding them, and their space. Even here on the mats. I've never had a dog myself, but I imagine that's what it would be like to have one, expecting its meals at a certain time of the day, always

wanting to sleep in a familiar place. I've heard they quite like to sleep on the jumper of someone they love. They like the smell. There's that many smells in here it would confuse anyone. I might take a dog sometime, if I'm given the opportunity, and I find one that needs a home.

It's almost a quarter to three when two police officers come in out of the dark and the wind, coughing and stirring all the children. The men wipe their eyes as they look up and see the smoke under the metal ceiling, pressing down on the rows of stretcher beds in the middle of the gym. Row, after row of white cotton blankets tuck in the men from the nursing home. Each pillow with its little grey tuft of hair at the top. I cough into the tissue I keep up my sleeve.

There are five thousand of us here, they say. Most are outside on the field, sleeping upright in their cars. Some of them come in and sleep on the floor, wedged in anywhere, like a pan with too many sausages.

Come dawn, there will be urns to fill, bottles to stack, no-name-corn flakes and bread to put out on trays. Every day is the same. More people, arriving from more places. Not many have been here as long as me, though that is no complaint.

By six, I'm standing at the kitchen door in my sloppy joe, when the man from Council bounds in with a start.

"Would you look at all of that!" he says.

He waves his nose around the sacks of onions, the bags of rice and flour. There are plastic racks of white bread rolls stacked on the floor, and whole crates of bananas from Queensland. Nobody knows what to do with it all.

He heads off to inspect the mopping. Then he unfolds a triangle to warn people to mind their step. Nobody makes a roster.

It's almost midnight before I'm back on the mat and my day's work is done. The lump in my throat goes down with a warm sip of tea. But I soon realise how thoughtless I've been. I should have brought a cuppa for the young girl next to me, sitting there with her face to the wall.

Most of the people sit that way. Facing away from it all, even late at night, like this.

“How are you, Jor-Gee,” I say, as though I’m any ordinary neighbour, dropping off a cup of sugar, or an onion at the back door.

Her face is one amongst the many, waiting for roads to open, waiting for smoke to settle and flames to go to ground. In the morning they will send her over to wait for the agency workers—the ones with the kind voices and lists inside their folders—the people who are good with people. They’ll take down all the details from the ones in the green uniforms, and hand them on to the ones in the white, or the blue.

Just now, a pair of them come in out of the dark. When the wind catches the door it slams, so they go back and close it properly, and then they pace amongst the rows on the floor. Jor-Gee’s children stir when the radios blare news bulletins from holsters as the uniformed agency workers step over the dogs.

It’s getting on towards 3am when Jor-Gee lets the corners of her mouth sag. Her round eyes hang underneath that unbrushed fringe as she searches for answers in the space between the bricks. They all have that look when they arrive.

She won’t lie down. So I begin to tell her what’s been going on, but she sighs and turns away. She’s too angry, too confused.

It’s as though she wants to poke me in the chest and say, *you don’t know*.

I know she thinks no-one could ever know what it’s like to be in her shoes, to be inside this hollow hangar, huddling her children in someone else’s sleeping bags.

She’s quite right about that. We can’t. Nobody can.

She’s seen the end of something. The collecting of things, of clothes and furniture, of gadgets that poke into power points; and a home she had somewhere. Maybe there was a nice veranda to catch the breeze on a sunny afternoon.

What they’ve mostly lost is a place to store their memories.

It's hardest on the children, so soon after Santa.

I sometimes wonder if I'll ever have another place of my own. A place with neighbours and friends, and little children running a stick between the palings up and down the path. Maybe even a dog, yes, I think I'd like that. I've never found it hard to make new friends, not if I were in the same place long enough.

Come morning, I'm off early, filling the urn and putting out the breakfast. When Jor-Gee stirs, I make her a cup of tea, but my hands hesitate above the plastic containers. That's when I think, *no, not tea. Coffee. Yes, that's it.* I'll make her a lovely cup of coffee.

Her children bump right into my thighs on my way back.

"Careful, boys, careful." I say, as I steady the cup. They dart off just as fast.

Jor-Gee holds out her hands to help me get back down onto the mat.

"Here, take this, love," I say.

She's ready to talk now.

The nightmare pours out in smoke and char, as her voice comes out in hoarse whispers. I watch her eyes, respectfully, waiting for a change in the weather.

The poor love is in shock. It's all very fresh.

I remember that part well.

My head nods up and down to agree, then side to side, as if to say, *oh no, how awful, that just can't be true.*

Of course it is true, every bit of it, but I smile and say, "It's alright, love, you'll get through it, just like I did."

Then the staff with clipboards arrive. They get her up from the mat and march her off to the service assistants, who take her to the head of the queue.

She shifts her grisly-faced little bundle across her hip, lowering him further and further down as she waits to be served. All those people with

their helpful hands—the Red Cross, St Vincent de Paul, St John Ambulance.

They've set up in front of the cages that hold the basketball hoops and all the other sporting gear. I can't see any more gym mats in there. We could do with more of those, to spread around the floor.

People run outside all the time to tie down the tarps that cover their trailer-loads of antiques and favourite chairs, and the personal belongings they stacked onto the back when they left their homes. They're convinced the people with the goat will steal something, or that they need to watch out for those strange people who've set up a chicken run beside their tent. They're all parked over there, near the grey nomads and their enormous caravans. They'll have to wait here for such a long time—they're too big to go up over the range, and the coast road will be closed for a while. Everyone waits for the smoke to fade and the damage to be assessed; for the highways to be cleared. It's going to take quite a while for the roads through the mountains to open. Some of them had to go all the way back up to Sydney, all that way, hundreds of miles back up the coast—then all the way back down the Hume Highway before they could get home to Melbourne. It's all so back to front, and upside down.

I cough as I walk outside and pull a scarf around my face to slow the bonfire going up my nose. I'm wrapping it around the second time and fiddling the tassels out of my eyes when I see a family waiting to get onto a bus. They're all in brightly coloured board shorts and big straw hats. Even the kids have sunglasses on.

The father's face turns grey as he leans a pair of striped boogie boards against the wall with a bit of a push.

"Won't be needing these," he says.

One of the boards has a Christmas bow on.

The bus doors open with a woosh and the man puts his children inside first, then he follows, and then the wife. Their little faces press up against the glass as they drive away, and Christmas fades from view. I've no idea where they're going.

The bus goes up the hill and round the bend and after a while I can't hear it anymore. There doesn't seem to be much chance of them coming back. So I go over to the wall and take the boogie boards inside.

While Jor-Gee is still in the queue, I go over and put the boards beside her mat. The boys come running over, as if Santa has come down a chimney they can see in the bricks.

Afterwards, the boys eat their lunch over on the grass, looking for a way to get into the water with the boards.

Their mother runs up behind them shouting, "Boys, boys, be careful."

Soon the smoke is too thick for play and she sends them on inside.

Back in the queue again, Jor-Gee busies herself saddling baby Smith, whose face could do with a wipe. He digs his head from side to side as his small body struggles with his coughs.

That's when I first notice Mum is going under, holding her head in her hands, squashing baby down with her elbows at her chest as she covers her face.

Myra from the Red Cross hands her a tissue, and the whole box soon follows. But not even the biggest box of tissues can hold that much sorrow when the tide eventually comes in. It's like milk after baby. Nothing can stop it. All there is to do is rest and ache.

Myra scrapes her chair out as she gets up and waves to me. Her hand curls around, exaggerated, and the other hand goes under flat, like a saucer to catch the drips. Then she mouths silent words and points at Jor-Gee.

Over at the tea station I unwrap the foam cups, but I put them back in the stack. No use pouring water in something flimsy at a time like this.

I slip through the yellow door and reach underneath the steel benches for a china mug. Then I take a good spoon of Blend 43, add it in with an extra spoon of sugar, and give it all a good stir.

"Mind," I say, as I place the coffee on the grey plastic table. "It's very hot."

She recoils at the mention of heat.

“Thanks,” Jor-Gee says. Her eyes look from Myra to me as if we know what comes next.

We don’t know though. None of us do, tired as we are. We’ve been gathering sleep like cards in a round of 52 Pickup, just like everyone else.

The fire takes away everything. The past. The present. Even the future we thought we had.

I walk Jor-Gee over for a toilet break to change little Smith’s nappy.

“It’s the routine, love,” I say, while she peels the strip off the disposable and throws the soiled one in the bin. “The routine of making a cuppa. The simple things. That’s what gets you through.”

She looks at me with wide eyes. “How do you know?”

“Oh, I know all right,” I say, as I look out over the hall.

Boy, do I know.

Afterwards, I go over to the stores and let myself in through the back. I busy myself sorting the food and clothes into take-home packs. There are floral sheets to match into sets with stripes, and last year’s Christmas presents to share with all the children. Every day now, more trucks with donations are getting through.

I reach towards the back of the third top row, and my hands search out a box of hot water bottles, which I slowly bring down. Inside the box, I find the yellow one, and check the seal hasn’t perished. It seems just fine. It’ll get draughty on the mats tonight, after that southerly change blows through. You can measure it like clockwork after these hot days, when the north-westerly winds bring the hot dry air off the desert and blow it all the way down here to the coast.

My finger runs down the stack of linens. It’s all got to find a home. So I pick out a pillowcase that smells of soothing lemon. The fabric has vibrant swirls of frangipani and deep red hibiscus. Jungle flowers. Not the prints with wattles and gums, nothing with a hint of anything flammable.

Once evening comes, I fill the hottie to the top, careful to burp it.

Mind, or it will scald, I say to myself, sounding just like my old Nan.

She saw a battle or two in her time, though things were different then. Their fight was against global depressions, and men with bayonets. She'd die if she knew the world was at war against the climate now. It's not all that different though, we're all still at the mercy of powerful men making stupid decisions, just like it was in her time—and look where it's gotten us this time—half the size of Norway, or Japan, has gone up in flame since November. It's too hard to take it all in.

I wrap the flannelette jungle around the hot water bottle and fold the slip in two.

On my way back I call in on Jor-Gee.

"Here," I say. "You'll be needing this."

She reaches up with round arms and takes it from me. I'm relieved to see that things are settling down and her hair is brushed today.

"The routines," he says. "What do I do with the water bottle, later, when it's gone cold?"

"Keep it," I say. "It's yours now, love. You can come and see me in the stores tomorrow and take whatever you need."

"Mmm," she says. "Bit soon though."

"I'll be here, love. Come when you're ready."

As I turn to walk away, she calls me back.

"Mrs McGuire," she says, "will you sit with me a while?"

"Of course, love," I say. "Just let me fetch my cup of tea. Can I get you something while I'm up?"

"No thanks, Mrs M."

When I return she speaks very quietly, so as not to wake the children. They have such gorgeous faces when they're that age. I can see the glow of hope in their cheeks, even when they're asleep, so peaceful and quiet. Bit different when they're awake.

"Tell me," she says. "Have you lost your home too?"

"Oh yes, love," I say, "but that was months ago."

"But the fires, they only began last month?"

Slowly I unfold my story. She soaks it in like a sponge sat in ink.

I never had insurance. There was never enough left for that kind of thing after the bills were paid. I've been staying at a women's refuge all these months. And what a remarkable place it was, too. Full of love and support, just the kind of thing I needed to get back on my feet. I must have seemed to be doing alright a few weeks back, because the staff suggested it might be time for a change. They encouraged me to try somewhere else for a while, even said I should try to think of it like a holiday. As soon as I got myself a little car I was off, flying down the coast with the windows down and the fresh sea air blowing across my face. I'd never been for a vacation on my own before.

I'd only just arrived at the beach and set up my little campsite, when the whole coast went up in smoke. The police were going door to door, tying blue and white tape to letterboxes to show that the houses were clear, and the people gone, and then they came by, clearing all the caravan parks. Even the people in the humpies down in the National Park were told to go. We joined the thousands standing around the carpark, trying to hear what was being said from the back of the truck. Not knowing...

I fold my arms in close for comfort and look at Jor-Gee's young face. I'm quite well aware that this is not the time to remind her of any of this, so I keep my thoughts to myself.

"Can I get you that cuppa love?"

This time she nods. And I can see a faint smile break across her face. She'd have to mind herself, going out in the sun, that one, with skin like that.

"Routines, Mrs M," she says. "That's what will get us through."

"That's right, love."

Back on the mat, I take off my sloppy joe, and run my finger around the edge of the sharp lace. I think I'll find a pair of scissors in the kitchen and unpick it. I might stitch the lace onto a doily, or a hand towel. Repurposing it, as Jor-Gee's generation would say. I don't mind the idea of that at all. It was all waste-not-want-not in my day. The lace will make a lovely gift for my Rod and his lovely wife Trudy, if they ever make it home. I could post it to them.

When I lay my head down, I hear the purr of the generator outside, and inside, I hear the pacing boots. When the yellow pants reach the water and the fruitcake, I can hear the updates from the radios. The voices offer clear directions, as clear as the painted lines on the floor.

Afterwards, I turn inside my sleeping bag and do my best to settle down. My face comes to rest on the label that was stitched inside by Francine.

Or the label might have been stitched there by Franice's mother, for a school camp, or a Girl Guides adventure. At least she knew how to stitch, whoever she was. She didn't write it there in biro, or some kind of high-tech-fluoro pen. People have forgotten how to do so many things. It's all phones and friend-requests now. There's no craft circles or face to face, like it was when I was young.

This Francine, whoever she was, would have grown too old for campfires and nursery rhymes by now. She probably prefers motels made up with fitted sheets. I imagine she'd be married with children of her own. Her sleeping bag is still perfectly good enough for me.

In the morning I go over the road to visit the clinic for this persistent cough. Asthma, the doctor says. It's been brought on by the smoke. It should get better by itself, when everything settles down. Hopefully.

When I get back to the gym, I'm surprised to see a whippet snoring on Jor-Gee's mat. His name is Mr Philby, according to the collar. What a friendly thin face it has.

There's no sign of little Smith or his brothers. The boogie boards are gone with them.

I had just finished packing a box of things for Jor-Gee. Maybe they'll go to someone else now. We go to all that effort to learn people's names, and then they disappear.

As I pick up the box a truck pulls in, dropping more donations. I go over to the store room to pack more boxes. I work there all afternoon by myself, sorting and stacking, folding and labelling.

It isn't until an hour or two after lunch, when Myra knocks at the door.

“Come in Myra, come in.”

“Hello Pearl,” she says. “We’ve been thinking about you, over at the office. We were wondering how you would feel about staying on with us when the centre closes? There’s so much more to do.”

“I’d love to,” I say. “But...”

But the camping ground is still closed, and I can barely afford that, the way things stand.

“There’s a flat above the shelter that I think you might quite like,” Myra says. “I stayed there myself when I was in between. Would you like to take a look?”

I get the words out fast before they have any chance of getting stuck.

“That sounds like it could be quite nice, Myra. Can I make you a cup of something? There’s a tin of Christmas cake here that wants opening before it goes stale.”

“That’d be lovely, Pearl,” she says, handing me a white cardboard box.

“What’s all this, then Myra? More donations I suppose.” I look over at the shoe rack to see where I can put them.

“They’re not for the stall, Pearl. They’re for you. I’m not sure if you’ll want them or not, but these shoes look like they might be just your size.”

Inside the tissue is a pair of Dunlops. And by the look of how white they are, they have only been worn once or twice. I drop them down and lift my feet out of the old ones, and the new ones are a flawless fit. I put them on and place the old ones into the box for later.

I head off down to the kitchen to make Myra and myself a lovely cup of tea before we settle into sorting for the afternoon. By the looks of things, we’ll all be busy for quite some time to come.