

Childhoods' Ashes

She drove mindlessly along the highway, the dim rays of the winter sunrise flickering in her rear vision mirror. Coffee, she thought as she spotted a road side café. She pulled up in the deserted car park. Grabbing her purse, she got out of the car and walked towards the café. Under her shoes the red gravel crunched. She ordered just a strong espresso and toast. The smell of the coffee aroused her. Holding the foam cup in her hand, she walked to a table. Absently she watched the still highway as she sipped the coffee, hoping it would rid her mouth of the lingering taste of ash. Awake suddenly, she realised she could smell something burning. The acrid stench of smoke pervaded her senses, blotting out everything. All she could think was to run. She threw some money on the counter and darted for the door. Panicking she sprinted across the driveway, the gravel causing her to lose her footing. She stumbled to the car, fumbling for her keys. Unlocking the door she leapt into the car and furiously turned the ignition. The car roared and she left the car park in a cloud of red dust.

Inside the café a sleepy waitress watched as she sped towards the horizon.

While driving, she realised she needed to calm down. Probably, she thought to herself, it was just the toast burning on the grill. But the smell had brought it all back. The Smoke seemed to follow her everywhere until she felt she was going crazy. It managed to sneak into every room and hide behind every doorway. And it was getting worse. It was the reason she was making this journey -going home for the first time in fifteen years, going home to where The Smoke had first begun. Going home to sift through the ashes of her childhood.

The Smoke's came to her in stages. Its latest appearance had began on Sunday night. The Smoke rose up from the carpet and hovered by her head all evening. She couldn't think properly with the haze clouding her mind. On Monday she had impulsively told her boss a family member had died, she couldn't come to work for a while. Tuesday she had slept, a wild terrifying sleep plagued by childhood memories carried upon the wisps of The Smoke. Wednesday she had tried to distract herself. She read. Returning from the library she looked at the books she had randomly chosen. 'Backburner', 'April's Ashes' and 'How to Understand Your Fire Alarm' . A strange selection. She didn't even remember choosing the fire alarm book. She left the books on the kitchen table, not wanting them to remind her. She turned on the television,

*'Raging fires swept through the town of Birkin this morning.
The death toll stands at ten so far. There are still many
missing. Authorities fear the worst...'*

She changed the channel.

*'In purification ceremonies for the land, Aboriginals light the
bush. The blazes can last for days...'*

Again she changed the channel.

*'Well, you see Rikki, I couldn't stand it any longer. When Bobby
came home drunk and burnt down the house, I just had to leave
him.' You go girl! came the crowds victorious shout....*

She turned off the television and retreated to the warmth of her bed. She had fallen asleep and then been woken in the early hours of the morning by The Smoke. It was getting thicker,

choking her. After her shower she had left. In an effort to evade The Smoke, she had an uncanny impulse to return to her childhood home, where it had all begun, fifteen years before.

She drove. The last hour of her journey she was accompanied by the flaming sun that was slowly rising above the dry hills to her left. She was in a hurry, for no apparent reason. Flames and embers lit the shadows of her thoughts and she could only focus on getting there. The scent of The Smoke was following her. It was inescapable. It had been haunting her for weeks, growing from a wild imagination in her childhood and recurring again now, at this point in her life. At times, it even clouded her vision. It clouded it now. She had to stop the car. Gasping for breath she pulled over to the side of the road. She sprawled out onto the grass, coughing and wheezing. She fell into darkness as the smoke enveloped her lungs. The past returned, on the tops of licking flames. She was back at 'The Point. Detention Centre for Girls'. She could hear Ms. Brusty's voice on that first morning in the dorms. Her world shifted back to those years in the detention centre. Memories came rushing back. One particular memory came to the forefront of her mind.

•••

A sweating woman, grumbling to herself, pushed open the door and stormed into the room. 'Right, number 1462' she said, after reading the number on Mel's pyjamas. 'You're Melanie Taylor I pre-suuuummmmmme?' she asked, holding the 'm' as if she was warming her voice for a morning tune.

‘Ah, yeh... but all me friends call me Mel ma’am’ Mel replied slowly, her mind still dulled by last night’s long journey to ‘The Point’ in Sydney city . It was an eight hour drive from her home town of Boden.

‘Well, we’ll fix that little pro -noun -ciation problem later.’ (Again, she held the ‘noun’ as if teaching herself, or Mel a foreign language.) ‘Firstly, however, you’ll need a uni-form.’ Mel would soon realise the woman’s speech difficulties became more prominent when she was angry. In relaxed situations the woman spoke normally, with only a few ‘syllabifications’ peppering her speech.

‘Come along, follow me, quickly now, we all have things to do today.’ And with that she briskly left the room, a stern, sweating figure marching down the white hallway. Timidly, Mel trailed behind, embarrassed by her pyjamas.

Mel passed many hallways and barred windows that morning. She heard a few terrible snores from behind some doors and young girls’ shouts from others. By the time she arrived back at her room she was utterly exhausted. ‘Hurry now Melanie’ said Ms Brusty ‘you’re expected to attend the rest of the lessons for the day, you have ten min-utes until the bell, take that time to change. I’ll return here when the bell has gone to take you to phys-i-cal e-du-ca-tion, then you’ll have to ask the other girls where to go. Come along, don’t look so mis-er-able, change quickly and I’ll be back in ten min-utes. Here at ‘The Point’ we run on a strict schedule. If you interrupt it, you will soon learn not to. Solitary cells give you a lot of time to think these things over.’ Shutting the door firmly she left Mel to her room.

Tears rolling down her cheeks Mel began to change. ‘Stupid ‘Point’’ she mumbled under her breath. ‘Hate here, hate uniform, hate room.’ She repeated this chant to herself while she changed, stomping her feet and slamming things down. ‘Back to Boden, wanna go back to Boden.’ she continued. ‘Back to mum... dad... back to the horses... and Chippa, back.....’ In the middle of changing into her regulation uniform, she stopped, and rolling into a ball on the floor she closed her eyes. ‘I just wanna go home’ she whispered. Silent tears ran down her face and onto the grey carpet as The Smoke threatened to take over again. The Smoke, when it first began, was a burden. It made her thoughts foggy. Now, however, it was more of a comfort. It always seemed to come in her moment of desperation. Like a blanket, it covered her thoughts and suffocated them, leaving only the soothing fog of grey. ‘Back home’ she sighed aloud.

Like a light piercing the darkness came the high voice of Ms Brusty. ‘Stop this non-sense and change!’ As if in agreement, the bell rang pointedly. Mel obediently rolled out from her ball shape. The Smoke recoiled to distant corners of the room. Standing up, she put on her regulation head scarf and tied up the dangling black belt that was attached to her blue uniform. Wiping her cheeks and hoping to make a brave face she quietly replied ‘Ready ma’am’. Mel knew she was lying. How could she ever be prepared for the tribal laws of ‘The Point’? ‘Right then, off to phys-i-cal and then good-bye.’ Ms Brusty said this almost too cheerfully. The odd pair marched through the hallways to ‘physical’. Inside Mel, a rising lump of fear had grown even bigger than the weight of sorrow. Walking through those hallways that first day,

she felt heavier than 'Two Tonne Tod' her favourite wrestling champion from Boden. Ms Brusty swept her into the 'physical' gym and, handing her a bathing suit and small white towel, briskly told her 'Yes, you may have need of this. If you have any *real* problems, don't hesitate to contact me. Good-bye for to-day.' With that, she whisked off, out the doors towards another task. Behind her Mel saw a thin trail of smoke wisping at her feet.

Looking down at the thick black text on the towel, 'The Point' it read, she gulped, dreading the tortures of 'physical'. She turned to look at the gym, directly in front of her was a large, turquoise pool. Mel was standing right on the lip of the pool. The whole gym smelt of sickly chlorine. To her right the windows to the outside world were barred. At one window she saw a sly finger of The Smoke tapping on the glass, impatient to be let in. To her left there were stark white change rooms. Their open doors gaped at Mel, hungry. She walked towards the change rooms slowly and all she could hear was the quiet tapping of her rather tight regulation leather shoes. Another bell rang and suddenly there were bustling girls spilling into the gym, disturbing Mel's relative comfort in the silence. She noticed how their strides held a certain confidence about them. Mel pulled at her collar. She noticed how they seemed tough, ready to attack the new enemy. Mel looked down at her spindly legs.

'New girl !!?' she heard one voice say. 'Yeh, a real *country* girl' she heard another say. All the girls were walking towards her now, a huge tide of them, laughing cruelly. 'Heard she burnt a few things.' the leader said. 'Yeh, a few people too!' another laughed. Mel started breathing faster and faster, her heart was almost leaping out of her chest now. What if they

hate me? She thought. What if they're real mean an' hurt me like? What's a country 'un, like me, gonna do here? I wanna be back in Boden..... Mum, dad, Chippa.....

The chlorine suddenly became very strong, Mel's eyes were turning in her head. The Smoke must have found its way in through an opened window. Leering faces and mocking smiles appeared at every corner. The room twisted and turned. She swayed, feeling her feet buckle under the weight of her fear. Mel fell. She fell for days, for weeks, for months. A black hole of forgiving Smoke seemed to swallow her up. It caught her. In this hole she had no name, no face and no dead family. She simply was. The mystified girls looked on, no one had ever fainted at 'The Point'. 'Someone, ah, do something. She'll drown.' she heard a girl say quietly.

Suddenly flames had enveloped her. The house was alight. Mum and Dad were upstairs. Chippa? Where's Chippa? There was a loud explosion from the kitchen. Red sparks flew towards her, singeing her skin as they hit her. Everything crackled and hissed as the fire greedily consumed it. Outside gumtrees glowed with the flames of the inferno. Heat stung her face. The Smoke blurred her vision. She coughed. She wheezed. She heard the roof collapse upstairs. The staircase groaned under its weight. The whole house shifted as the fire licked at its support beams. She heard Chippa barking. More of The Smoke clouded her senses. It burnt her nostrils and throat when she breathed. Mum?! Dad?! So much Smoke ... towering flames ... angry, hungry fire ...

Coughing on chlorine water, Mel regained consciousness. She lay in a puddle of pool water, at the pool's edge. She could see her shimmering reflection in its surface. The other girls had all left by now, and there was only one person remaining. A blonde-haired, tanned woman stood above her. 'Well, good morning!' the woman said cheerfully. 'Thought you'd be out for awhile yet!'

'What? Who...., how ..?' Mel mumbled, The Smoke hazing her memories.

'It's alright love, you had a bit of a spill there. You just relax and in a few minutes we'll sit you up, see?' the woman replied. She was a healthy looking person, with strong leg muscles and a happy down to earth feeling about her. Mel relaxed a little. 'Boden?' she asked

'Yes, dear, yes, you can sit up now.' was the woman's confusing answer. 'How are you feeling, love?'

'Well... me head is a hurtin' a bit.' said Mel, conscious of her accent.

'Oh, poor dear, I had a spill like you just a few months ago, I know how awful the head spins are, but they do go away.' the woman said. Mel felt a little comforted to hear there were others who experienced the numbness of The Smoke as well.

Here we go...' she said as she put her hands under Mels arm pits, helping to stand her up. 'I know what you need there, just a little help along the way! What do you say? I'll walk you to the medical office and you'll be right as rain in no time!' she said with a smile.

'Yeh, help along the way, that'd be real nice. Thanks ma'am.' Mel said as the two walked towards the exit.

'You can call me Miss Athens sweet heart, it's best to try and fit in around here. The girls don't normally use 'ma'am'". The two figures made their slow way to the medical office. The

Smoke was forgotten, like many times before and Mel, as always, blamed the incident on her over active imagination. She passed through, for the second time that day, many hallways filled with white doors and white walls . Somehow, she didn't notice the bars so much. They must have all been taken down she thought.

Maybe if they had a lot of workers....

Maybe if they had some help along the way..... And she looked at the blond hair of Miss Athens.

The darkness again was filled with memories. Elusive they swam past her, too slippery to latch onto with her mind. A different memory stuck in her thoughts. The darkness cleared.

• • •

Soft morning light was shining through the cracks in the bars. Slits of the golden sunrise beamed across Mel's freckled face. She opened her eyes groggily, first one eye and then the other. She sat up, but, finding the movement too fast and causing her head to reel, slumped back onto the bed. She gazed numbly around the room. The silent, white walls stared back at her, reminding Mel of her recent stay in the centre's hospital. Grey, pastel carpeting covered the floor. Flecks of paint from an old dressing table lay on the carpet in curls. A barred, rectangular window was all that punctuated the monotony of the walls. It was situated precisely opposite the bed-head, so that the sleeper couldn't possibly sleep past seven without

beams of morning sunlight blazing in through the slits of the blinds, slashing through dreams with light-sabres of sunshine.

The little boxy room was already sweltering at this early hour. The heat of the Sydney Summer had been carried into the room by the sunlight. She felt as if she was under the hot rays of a blinding stage spotlight. More slowly, this time, Mel sat up. The stifling heat and piercing light was making her feel nauseous, adding to her awkwardness. It was as if each sharpened blade of light was pricking her skin, taunting her. It reminded her how foreign she felt in Sydney's vibrant metropolis, even in this barred microcosm of it. She carefully pulled her feet from the tangle of the bed sheets and shuffled over to the window. Through its bars was revealed the magnificent view of Sydney Harbour. The brilliant blue ocean sang joyfully to the world, announcing the fine weather. She looked on gloomily, realising where she was, and remembering why she was here. The tops of small waves glistened and reflected the morning light. The peaks of the Opera House gleamed and ricocheted the golden sunlight back to the heavens. Bustling Sydney Ferries chugged their merry way from dock to dock. The laughter of their crew could be dimly heard, carried along on the slight morning breeze. Jet cats purred across the waters surface, brimming with eager camera-happy tourists. The Harbour Bridge yawned its way over the water, casting the only shadow of deep blue. She could hear seagulls cheering themselves at the thought of breakfast. Distantly, to her left, heavy industrial cranes were rising and turning, loading and lifting, beginning a long days' labour. She had never seen such big cranes. All the while, the ocean was churning and rolling, welcoming the new day. Already busy, the city was alive moving to its own rhythm.

Mel leaned dazedly against the cold bars of the window, still trying to adjust to the brilliant light. She squinted her eyes closed, frowning from the jubilant reflections of the Harbour. The morning was rising, smiling gold upon Sydney. To Mel, however, the glistening morning only made things worse. The cheery sun could not move the heaviness that weighted Mel's heart. She was blinded to Sydney's joy. She was too drained and too confused to accept the sun's warming rays. Mel threw herself back upon the starched linen bed. Hiding her tears in the crispy folds of the sheets, she felt utterly miserable, totally alone and out of place. Like the warm hand of a knowing mother The Smoke filtered into the room and clouded her thoughts of melancholy. My old friend, she thought. My only friend she thought as she let its wisps entangle her mind.

'The Point's' nurse walked past Mel's room and noticed her odd position. Realising the child was unconscious again she headed towards Ms Brusty's office.

'This girl should be in better care. She doesn't need a detention centre, she needs a hospital' came fragments of their conversation drifting down the hallway '... a child in such a fragile state as this could not possibly have begun the January Fires, she wouldn't have been 'with it' for long enough to even light the match...' 'Tell that to those families with no homes. All they want is someone to blame...'

• • •

The dry grass next to the highway was prickling her hand. The Holden sat quietly and watched Mel as she breathed in and out of consciousness. Yet again the darkness disrupted Mel's memories and as if someone was changing the channel in her mind, another memory began.

• • •

Mel was sitting in 'The Point's' chapel. After three weeks in hospital she had finally recovered. The doctors had diagnosed her as being feverish. Her lapse into unconsciousness was a form of delirium. Her other functions however, were normal and Mel couldn't understand why she was feverish. She thought about this as she sat on the hard wooden altar in the chapel. She wasn't a particularly religious girl, no one in her family had been. Her father had told her once that looking into the flames one could see the face of God. Her father liked to equate most beings of power to fire or flames. Ever since Mel could remember, the story of Prometheus stealing fire from the Gods was a nightly bedtime story told by her father. Looking around, Mel saw the bars on the windows and she felt suddenly sad, and alone. The immensity of her parents deaths hit her like a ball to the stomach. Quiet tears rolled down her cheeks and she sniffed. She realised she was aching for The Smoke to take over again. When she had first experienced it, she hated it. Now, it was like a drug, she needed it to take away the pain of her most basic emotions. She was no longer in control. She wasn't sure if she ever had been. She wanted to call it, to ask it to help her, to dull the pain she felt now. She summoned it in her mind, willing it to come, yet knowing at the same it was all in vain. She didn't control The Smoke. She sat and looked at Jesus crucified on the cross. She thought she saw him move. She saw his chest slowly rise and expand with his laboured breathing. She blinked and the

chapel remained silent. Hoping she was only imagining again, Mel made a move towards the door. She heard a cough and turned around. Smoke was encompassing the statue of Jesus. He coughed again. Mel screamed and ran out of the chapel and down the hallway, into the safety of the darkness.

• • •

Memories jumbled together and flitted past like butterflies. Suddenly Mel was now walking down a path and the bell rang, it was time for 'pys-I-cal' again. Mel was carrying her sports text book and went to the theory lesson with the other girls. They were slowly becoming accustomed to Mel. No one really spoke to her. The novelty of making fun of the country girl was wearing off, and she was now just another girl in the centre. She chose a seat by herself, next to the window. She sat quietly and waited for Miss Athens. The other girls all talked loudly. Some sat on desks, others began carving into their wooden tops, inscribing names of boyfriends and movie stars. Miss Athens came in and told everyone to take a seat or to leave the room. A few girls, the three sitting on the desks, walked out, laughing. 'Open to page twenty-seven girls' Miss Athens said, not in the least bit annoyed by those who had left.

'*Heroes of Sport*' the page read. 'Why are they heroes?' one girl asked. 'I could be an athlete if I wanted to. They're no one special.'

'Good question Megan. Any of us *could* be athletes, but most of us *aren't*.' replied Miss Athens. 'There's a lot of training and commitment involved in doing something to the very best of your ability. They're heroes because they have control over both their body and their mind. The two work together to achieve a goal, which for most of us, is impossible.'

‘But still,’ Megan interjected again ‘ if I wanted to be an athlete I would, that must mean... ’

‘ We’re NOT here to talk about the heading,’ sighed Miss Athens, interrupting the girls argument ‘we’re meant to be learning the 20th Century’s top 100 heroes. So, Linda, can you read ‘Don Bradman’ for me please?’

‘Sir Donald Bradman was probably the greatest batsman in the history of cricket. From 1927 - 1949 he scored 28,067 runs, with an average innings of’

As Linda read on, Mel became lost in the darkness. Her memories being left unfinished once more.

• • •

Her mind slowly returned to the side of the highway she had fallen unconscious upon. She remembered those years of confusion at ‘The Point’. She remembered also that she was on a journey to return to her childhood home. She looked at the Holden and found the door still open the way she had left it when The Smoke had overcome her hours before. Exactly how much time had passed she wasn’t sure. She thought of what she had ‘dreamt’ of during the time The Smoke had taken control. She thought of the discussion on heroes in ‘phys-I-cal’ Heroes have control of their mind and body, she thought. She thought of all the times The Smoke had over taken her mind. When it left her she never could quite remember what had happened during that time. After The Smoke left her she was often disorientated and had trouble adjusting to her surroundings. She felt like this now. The slight chill in the air was making her shiver, so she stood up and returned to the car. The sun was now setting beyond the parched hills, opposite to the one’s where it had risen earlier that morning. Or at least she

thought it was that morning, she could have been out for days. She never knew. She turned the ignition key and the car coughed once, twice and then settled into its normal rhythm.

Mel drove for three hours. The night sky was silent and cold when she finally reached Boden. Stars twinkled a greeting to her as she strode towards the pub. It was the only place where she would be able to find a room and a meal. Everywhere else had closed years ago. She opened the large, heavy door to get in and paused slightly, fearful that someone might recognise her. She sat down at the bar and waited to be served.

‘A VB and a room thanks.’ she said.

‘Sure love’ the barman replied. He pulled her a beer with practised hands and then, after wiping them on the towel hanging across his shoulder, he grabbed a set of keys from the grid of hooks that hung on the wall near him. ‘That’s 3 for the beer and 20 for the room, love.

You’ve got a nice view from this one too. Looks out across the whole town and the hills.’

After a pause the barman continued ‘Geez you’re familiar, do you come down ‘ere often? Say, you remind me of a little tyke we used to have ‘round ‘ere.’ he said, wagging a hairy finger at her. ‘What was ‘er name? Melinda? Melanie? No, don’t s’pose you’d know ‘er, would you?’

Mel shook her head, embarrassed. She took a sip of the cold beer, fingering the keys in her hand. The barman lingered. ‘It’s said she killed ‘er parents, that l’il one. It’s said she’s the one who started ‘em January Fires of years ago. S’pose it’s a good idea that you don’t stay ‘ere for too long, people might get to talkin’. Geez, you look so familiar.’ Muttering to himself he wiped the bar. Mel finished her beer, paid the barman and hurried up the stairs to her room.

The hallway was dank and badly lit. The cracks in the walls fathered hundreds of unseen roaches. Termites munched slowly on the wooden door to her room. Getting out her key she unlocked the door. Number 32 it read. Tendrils of smoke rounded the corner of the stairs behind her. She smelt the smoke before she saw it. Mel ran into the room and slammed the door shut, hoping to keep The Smoke out. She deadlocked the door and made sure the windows were locked. There was no way it could get in. Sighing she sat on the bed. It was a tiny room. She had a queen sized bed, a television and an en-suite. She lay back on the bed and looked at the roof. It was mottled by mould and a spongy blue fungus. She sighed again, this time catching in her throat a whiff of The Smoke. She looked at the door and saw it creeping in at the floor, in the gap between the carpet and the door. Tendrils wrapped themselves around her face and her body. To struggle was useless. The Smoke held her hard and fast against the bed. It probed the very core of her mind, triggering old, painful memories. She tripped down its spiral into her subconscious.

• • •

She was five years old. ‘Daddy?’ Mel called into the bush. ‘Daddy where are you? I’m scared can we go home now?’ The bulky form of her father emerged from the shadows of the bush. She noticed the small packet of ‘Redheads’ he put into his pocket. He brushed his sweaty fringe from his eyes. ‘Back home then lovey’ he said. He walked her towards the car as the flames raged behind them.

The Smoke dispersed for a moment and Mel could take a breath. The ugly ceiling came briefly back into focus. She coughed and The Smoke encroached upon her mind again. This time Mel was eight. Mum and Dad were fighting upstairs. Mum was frantic. She was screaming. Mel sat under the table, she didn't like them to fight. 'You can't do this! Not in the house!' she heard her mum cry. There was a thump. Her father stepped heavily down the stairs and she saw his boots near the table as he called for Mel. 'Come on Lovey, we're goin' now.' Mel crawled out from under the table and joined her father. She saw him putting the 'Redheads' back into his pocket. They walked out the door and towards the bush track. Silent flames licked at the window in the upstairs bedroom. 'Chippa!' her dad said, turning on his heel and returning to the house. 'Now you wait here Mel, just gotta get the dog. We're goin' on a bit of ah..... a walk. You go and wait further down the track there love, to make sure there ain't none trucks or some'in.' Obediently Mel walked further down the track. The house was now out of view. She sat and waited....

and waited....

and waited.....

No one came back for her. She ran to the house, a little worried. She saw the flames. She ran inside screaming for mum and dad. No reply. 'Chippa?!' No reply. All about her the flames leapt. It was then that she experienced The Smoke for the first time. It took over for her. She let it. It carried her outside and placed her on the gravel of the drive. When the authorities had finally arrived the house lay in ashes, Mel was the only survivor and The Smoke was long gone...

• • •

She coughed. The smoke was thinning enough for her to open her eyes again. She looked at the ceiling and its dappled surface stared back. The Smoke left the room. It dissipated into the walls, seeped into the furniture and retreated back under the door. Mel was left gasping. She was exhausted. Before falling into a dreamless slumber Mel crawled under the covers. She untied her hair then closed her eyes. She awoke the next morning, covered in ash. Desperately, she tried to wash it off in the shower. Yet the smell of it hung in her nostrils. She straightened the bed quickly and left the tiny room. She locked the door and went downstairs to give the barman back the keys. He took them and gave her an odd look. He could smell the ash as well. Keeping her head down so as not to catch his gaze, Mel walked out of the pub and got back into her car. She sat at the wheel, looking through the windscreen thoughtlessly. Minutes passed and she continued to sit. Her mind was numb. A distant thought, muffled by last night's Smoke told her to return to her old home. So she did. She turned the ignition on and drove. The countryside was much more rugged than that of the towering and bustling Sydney city. Here the rolling hills continued to the horizon, looking like an ocean of bare, scorched earth waves. Here the gumtrees swayed in the breeze with the Galahs peppering their branches in patches of pink and white. In Sydney the pavement was grey and you couldn't go anywhere without knowing others were close at hand. In Sydney cafés buzzed and bigger, brighter and better things were being built everywhere. Here, only a few old women were found in the café, the men stayed in the pub. Buildings were rebuilt only when it was more expensive to repair them.

Here, nothing much changed. The past lingered and fermented the air. That was what Mel liked best about Sydney. The air was always vibrant and changing, the past was never an issue. Never until now. Now, with The pervasive Smoke on its side, the past haunted her every move. She drove up the old gravel driveway she had been found unconscious upon all those years ago. She got out of the car and looked around her. Nothing had changed. The old house lay in ashes. Burnt stumps of the framing were all that was still standing. Tufts of moss grew on their edges. Spiders and cockroaches had made their happy homes amidst the rubble. Pieces of charred furniture had been dragged short distances from the house, obviously rejected by pillagers. Shoots of young saplings grew from the pile of the old house. A few taller ones were almost as high as Mel. They sprouted green leaves and their flimsy branches hung heavy with their weight. Mel bent down and over turned a piece from a charred support beam. A hundred angry cockroaches scurried away from the light. Exposed, they ran every which-way for the nearest cover. The roaches had been nesting in the remains of the kitchen table. In a hollow of the table, made by the fire, sat a diamond-shaped amulet attached to a silver chain. It pulsed. Mel picked it up. In her hand it grew brighter. The points on each corner were sharp. Instinctively she put it around her neck. The flat face of its back sat cold against her chest. In a few moments, however, the amulet was warm, then hot. It hissed. Rising from its orange centre, The Smoke entwined itself in Mel's hair . Once again The Smoke embraced her and she fell to the ground, landing in the ashes. She entered a new world this time. One that wasn't fostered on memories of years ago. This was a dreamscape.

• • •

Rolling mountains of The Smoke stretched out to the horizon. Fog and mist made the air heavy with dampness. What she walked upon was a grey cloud-cover. It seemed substanceless, yet it supported her. Every step she took created more waves of mist that rose upwards and swam around her head.

Gasp. Her lungs suddenly began to feel constricted. Panic.

Cough. She couldn't catch her breath.

Wheeze. It lay, unmoving in the depths of her lungs.

Rasp, and The Smoke puffed from her lips as she stumbled in dizziness. Wisps of smoke escaped from her ears and nose. Even her eyes were oozing thickening Smoke. It hung in every corner of her body. Every cell was filling with it. It choked her. The Smoke began to take solid form inside her. She felt like she was turning to stone. She could no longer move, think or even breathe. She was rooted to the spot, like an immortal oak. Only her eyes blinked at the shifting landscape. She slowly lost herself to The greedy Smoke. It took over her body, her mind and her soul. Her thoughts became a haze of grey. The grey quickly became black

and she fell down,

down,

down.....

A packet of Redheads, clear through the darkness, were all that rescued her from The Smoke's hunger. She blinked, still unmoving. She saw a small child, skipping in the swirls of mist and fog, holding her Daddy's hand. The child giggled. 'I love you Daddy', she said. As she clung to the man's legs in an innocent embrace, she put her hand into the left leg pocket of his jeans.

She grabbed the matches and tossed the box in the air. ‘You always have these Daddy. Is it my turn to have them yet?’ The girl held her hands cupped open to catch the box as it fell. She missed and the box fell under the feet of her father. ‘No pumpkin, you’re just a baby yet. You wait a li’l and when you’s can tie your shoes I’ll letcha. Whatdya say eh?’ The girl skipped away, grumpy at her father. ‘An’ ‘er mother said she’d never let ‘er turn out like me.’ he chuffed to himself.

The oak Mel had become swayed softly as The Smoke changed direction and the two figures disappeared. The dreamscape became cold. The temperature dropped. The swirling mists grew stationary and the wind stopped completely. In an effort to move before she froze, the eyes in the oak glanced side to side, searching. They soon turned downwards to its roots. In that quick glance she realised the roots were fingers. Large, rough hands held her hard and fast into the Smoke’s earth. The hands were familiar. She had seen them lighting matches a thousand times before. They were the hands of her father. Stuck. She sat, resigned to the strength she couldn’t resist. Her leafless branches creaked in the slight breeze of fog.

Snap. Her top branch broke, splintering the stillness. As if suddenly remembering, the oak began to glow. It omitted the same amber light of the amulet she wore. From a long forgotten internal strength, the oak began to shed its own bark. Layers upon layers of dry, rotting bark fell from the magnificent tree. With powerful shudders the oak was releasing itself from the constricting tree form. Large chunks of the trunk soon began to fall into the oblivion of surrounding Smoke. A figure emerged. Hips and a bust line appeared in the oak. The dying

branches fell to the motion of fog below. Her arms and hands broke free entirely from the bark and a female stepped forth. She stretched tall and the last shards of the oak's bark fell from her body like dead skin. Mel took a step... and faltered. The hands clung tenaciously to her feet. A head rose out of the mists, and shoulders with arms connecting to the grasping hands.

Menacingly, her father lunged towards her. She took the diamond-shaped amulet that still hung around her neck, pulsing. She lifted it from her neck and, with a mighty swing impaled the strong hands clutching her ankles. She slashed at his eyes. Within them, windows into darkness were torn open. The mists surrounding Mel began to swirl once more. They circled and furiously formed a whirl wind. They funnelled into the torn eyes. A great split cut through the dreamscape and fragments of the surrounding bush showed through. A tear in the fabric of the dream brought it crashing down around her. The last of the Smoke spiralled its way into the eyes of her father. The Smoke began to exit her body. It was like a large vacuum cleaner had been turned on. It sucked out of her lungs, through her throat, her eyes, her ears and nose. Her mouth opened and it tunnelled back into those black eyes. She felt as though her cells were opening, releasing the toxic Smoke. The pores in her skin unfolded and The Smoke dissipated into the eyes. The Smoke had completely dispersed in moments. The dreamscape no longer existed. The strong hands and broad shoulders of her father gradually faded into the charred remains of the house. His face began to dissolve and those eyes, windows to the soul, blinked and disappeared.

• • •

Mel awakened. The diamond-shaped amulet lay in the dirt. She picked it up and placed it in her pocket. It left ashy stains on her finger tips. Mel walked to her car and drove towards home, towards bed and a shower. Hours later as she approached Sydney and the streets slowly became peopled, she noticed something strange. The pedestrians on the side of the road, and crossing at the traffic lights ahead, all had fogs of different colours hovering near them, just like she remembered having. These people seemed dazed, as though sleep walking. For years Mel would puzzle over all these fogs she saw hanging over people's heads. The only other people she would meet in her lifetime that did not live unknowingly surrounded by mists, was the man who delivered her milk every Tuesday morning and a woman called Therese.

Reflection Statement

In creating my Major Work, the process I undertook was long and complicated. It began with my initial inspiration. I was reading the newspaper one morning, during the summer of 2000 - 2001 and I came across some interesting articles about fires and arsonists. This reminded me of the January fires in 1993. My birthday is in January and I remember on my birthday that year how I forgot the excitement of the presents and the cake, and was instead overcome by fear of the fires (they came very close to our home that day). It was then that I think I first realised I was growing up. I thought this idea of growth and the development of maturity would be interesting for a story. I also liked the idea of using fire to symbolise this. The original aim of my work was to metaphorically describe a tale of growth; physical growth, shown through my main character (a young girl named Mel) and also spiritual growth through the symbolism of fire and the cycle of death and rebirth it represents. I wanted to appeal to a general audience who were interested in a thought-provoking read and who were young adults or adults. Anyone younger than this age group, I feel, would be confused by my story as the language I chose to use would not be appropriate for them.

The first research I completed was about fire. I decided I wanted to delve further into the meaning behind fire and its metaphorical symbolism. It was during the research I conducted into fire that I remembered the work I had done in the year 11 Extension English course on Joseph Campbell. He wrote a book called 'The Power of Myth' in which he discusses the archetypal, universal meaning behind all stories. I found this very interesting and decided that I would try and reflect this research in my work, so as to add another dimension of meaning. Joseph Campbell also described in another of his books entitled 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces' a template for stories which he called 'The Hero's Journey'. This template describes generally each step the hero takes along their journey. This journey

begins with 'The Ordinary World' where the hero is living in their normal environment, then progresses through many stages such as the 'Threshold to the New World' where the hero enters a new world (psychologically or physically) and ends in 'The Ultimate Boon' where the hero achieves their aim, passes the challenge and is rewarded. 'The Hero's Journey' is so general that it can be adapted to any form or plot. Each stage of the journey Campbell describes can be used in any combination using all, some or only one of the stages. I found this versatile template for writing very useful. I decided to use it in my Major Work. The main stage I have used in my story is 'The Belly of the Whale'. This is where the hero is isolated on their journey and the focus is on the inner, psychological battle with ego or self. The Biblical Jonah, when he becomes trapped in the whale is an excellent example of this stage of 'The Hero's Journey'. During the period of time Jonah spends in the whale, in the darkness, alone, he reflects upon his life and his sins. When he realises what he must do and how he is indebted to God, his period of isolation ends. 'The Smoke' in my story represents an entry into this unconscious state of mind. For Mel, 'The Smoke' is like the whale was for Jonah, it enforces self-reflection and invokes self-realisation. When Mel, my character realises she can and must overcome 'The Smoke' she defeats it and goes on to live a long life. Through my research on Joseph Campbell and his 'Hero's Journey' structure I found inspiration and a guide that helped me to write this section of my story.

When I first began to write my Major Work, I wrote three introductions. Reflecting upon them now, I can see how much my style has improved. These three introductions were very basic, their plot was simplistic and they were not refined at all. Their tone was unauthentic and they were cliched stereotypes of stories I had already read (though when I wrote them I didn't plan on making them like that). They were beneficial, however because they gave me

something to work with, something to build on. They helped me to realise where I wanted to set my story - I decided Sydney was the best option because I understood it enough to be able to creatively describe its mood. The introductions also helped me to decide upon the basic plot and what type of character I wanted for my hero.

With the research I did into writing techniques I gained a lot of knowledge and I feel my style improved. Texts such as 'Exploring the Writer's Craft' by Peter MacFarlane helped me in this area. From this text, in particular, I learnt techniques that would help me to create pathos in my story, I learnt about the importance of withholding information which creates tension and suspense. The speed writing technique described in the book helped me to overcome 'writer's block'.

As I began to write more I decided I needed to do more research into 'The Hero's Journey'. An author named Christopher Vogler recently wrote a book about 'The Hero's Journey' entitled 'The Writer's Journey'. It showed me the many modern examples of Joseph Campbell's structure for stories and I learnt about the endless possibilities this structure lends itself to when writing. This book led me to look at the stories I have read and analyse 'The Hero's Journey' structure within these texts. Firstly, I looked at 'The Power of One' by Bryce Courtenay. A section from the beginning of this book uses 'The Belly of the Whale' experience. Reading this gave me a new understanding of this stage of 'The Hero's Journey'. It showed me how it coincided with a search for identity, which linked with my original idea of describing growth in my Major Work. Secondly, I saw the Disney film, 'The Lion King' which gave me yet another contemporary, original example of 'The Hero's Journey' in action. This research helped me to develop the 'flashback' section of my story, where Mel fell

into the pool and remembers her parents' deaths. It was not until much later that my entire story evolved into a series of flashbacks, but this was the initial inspiration for this which helped me on my own 'writer's journey'.

With the help of a poet and author named Deb Westbury, I was suddenly inspired to re-write my entire story. Deb Westbury visited our school and ran an all-day creative writing workshop with us. The techniques she taught us really inspired me and helped me to realise how my writing style was stilted. In my second draft, the plot became fresh and innovative. From the 'Five Rules for Writing' Deb gave us, the last gave me the most inspiration. 'Lose control' it told me to do while I wrote. So I did. After the workshop with Deb, my entire Major Work went through a 'sea-change'. 'The Smoke' evolved into a character in my story and the plot became more exciting, with more suspense and unexplained occurrences.

After reading the draft I wrote when I was inspired from the workshop with Deb Westbury, my English Teacher suggested I read some books and stories by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I read three of his books. 'Strange Pilgrims', a volume of short stories, was the first book I read by Marquez and it was also the book which I found the most inspiring. Its story called 'The Trail of Your Blood in the Snow' particularly inspired me. Marquez's stories contain elements of magic and unexplained events that I really enjoyed. I researched Marquez and found he wrote in a genre called Magic Realism. This genre was a result of colonisation, as it combines elements of indigenous mythology within an established 'real' world similar to our own, thus mixing the Western idea of reality and the native myths which describe the world for indigenous peoples. This genre gave me so much scope in my writing. I could use elements of fantasy (thus 'The Smoke' is possible) yet maintain the real world setting. The

way the genre was based in native mythology gave me access to the archetypes they used. This way my work could remain relative to readers because of the familiar setting, yet challenge them and show them new ideas through the inclusion of ancient archetypes. This meant my work would achieve my aim of being thought provoking.

The ending of my story is influenced by Buddhist philosophy and the idea of 'awakening'. I feel this adds another layer of meaning to my work and gives my writing yet another perspective. The research I have done on Carl Jung and his philosophy of archetypes through dreams is also shown in my ending and through the 'awakening' idea, where 'The Smoke' clears from Mel's mind. In this way I am also achieving my aim of using different metaphors in my writing. The constant changing of tenses I use throughout my work as Mel falls in and out of consciousness, flashbacks and realities is influenced by a novel I read in the 2 Unit Advanced HSC English course this year, entitled 'In The Skin of a Lion' by Michael Ondaatje. Ondaatje also uses Magic Realism in his book. The way the structure of his books alternates between tenses has been appropriated in my Major Work.

On the fourth page of my journal I stated that my intention for my Major Work was to make a link with my audience, to involve them in the story, to provide entertainment and to express a deeper journey that exists beneath the layers of plot. I feel I have accomplished this in my work. The mystery ending to my story serves to keep readers thinking about it long after they have finished reading it. The way I have used archetypes and metaphors throughout my story adds another layer to its meaning. However, I feel I have also set myself a difficult task. If I was a highly experienced author who was extremely well-read and knew a lot more about psychology than I do now, I feel my story would have the edge that it still needs. My work is

edited and refined, but lacks the subtlety that only experience can bring. If I had a lifetime to complete the work, I think only then would it be as informed and polished as I would like.

Bibliography

Videos:-

'Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth with Bill Moyers' (1979) ABC International
This is an interview between Moyers and Joseph Campbell. I found it extremely interesting and it gave me a better understanding of 'The Hero's Journey' and archetypes.

'The Lion King' (1996) Disney
I used this as a modern example of 'The Hero's Journey'.

Internet Sites:-

<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au>
'Binarisms and Duality: Magical Realism and Postcolonialism' essay by Suzanne Baker
This explained the history behind the emergence of Magic Realism

<http://www.moontress.com>
'Cranberry Winters' by Cynthia C. Whitehouse
This was a monthly internet newsletter that published Magic Realist short stories. I included 'Cracking' and 'She chose' by Cynthia C. Whitehouse as well as 'Keep the Change' by Deborah Bryan who is the newsletters editor.

Newspaper and Magazine articles:-

Corliss, Richard (1999, 3rd May) 'Cinema: Of Myth and Men', *Time Magazine*, p 36 - 39
This gave insight into George Lucas' use of 'The Hero's Journey' when he made the Star Wars series.

O'Connor, Peter (2001, 17th April) 'Imagine', *Sydney Morning Herald*, p 12
This article indirectly speaks of the need for Magic Realism in our society.

O'Rourke, Jim, Byrnes, Holly and Dasey, Daniel (2000, 3rd December) '80 Blazes Rage in a State of Flames', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, p4
One of the two original articles that began my idea of fire and arsonists.

Shine, Katherine and Duff, Eamonn (2000, 3rd December) 'Flaming Mad', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, p3
The second article in my initial inspiration.

Books:-

Aronson, Linda (1994): 'Writing with Imagination: A Practical Guide' Sydney, Australia: MacMillan Publishing Ltd.
This book gave really interesting tips on the writing process and how to add imagination to you work.

Becker, Udo (1994): 'The Element Encyclopedia of Symbols' Brisbane, Australia: Element

Books Ltd.

I researched the symbolism associated with fire in this book.

Biederman, Hans (1989): 'Dictionary of Symbolism'. New York, USA: Facts on File Inc.
I found a lot of information in this book about fire and its symbolism

Bruce-Mitford, Miranda (1996) 'The Illustrated Book of Signs and Symbols' New York, USA: D.K. Publishing

I researched the symbolism of certain colours as well as fire in this book.

Campbell, Joseph (1988): 'The Power of Myth' New York, USA: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc.

A lot of my inspiration and ideas came from this book. It gave me insight into the 'Hero's Journey' structure of writing as well.

(1949): 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces' London, England: Fontana Press

'The Hero Today' excerpt in my journal came from this book.

Courtenay, Bryce (1992): 'The Power of One' Melbourne, Australia: Mandarin Australia
I found an extremely good example of the 'Belly of the Whale' experience in the 'Hero's Journey' structure. I photocopied pages 15-17 from this book.

Jung, Carl C.(1964): 'Man and His Symbols' London, England: Aldus Books Ltd.
A lot of my research in the later part of my journal comes from this book.

MacFarlane, Peter (2000): 'Exploring the Writer's Craft: Short Story Workshops for Years 11 and 12' Sydney, Australia: MacMillan Publishing Ltd.

This book gave me interesting techniques in how to create pathos, speed write and it showed me the importance of with-holding information.

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia (1993): 'Strange Pilgrims' Sydney, Australia: Random House

(1990): 'Collected Novella's' New York, USA: Harper Collins Publishers

(1978): 'Innocent Erendira and Other Stories' London, England: Penguin Books

These are the three books by Marquez that I read when researching Magic Realism. My evaluations of them are in my journal.

Marsden, John (1990): 'Out of Time' Sydney, Australia: Pan Publishers

At the beginning of my journal I explored different, interesting techniques for writing by using this book as an example.

Matthews, Frances Russel (2000): 'Fundamentals of English' Sydney, Australia: Phoenix Education Pty. Ltd.

This book helped me during my editing process.

Ondaatje, Michael (1988): 'In the Skin of a Lion' London, England: Picador

This book is another example of Magic Realism and it also inspired me to appropriate the style Ondaatje uses in this book.

Stewart, Kerry (1994): 'A Glossary of Literary Terms' Perth, Australia: Bookland Pty. Ltd.

I used this for further research into Magic Realism.

Vogler, Christopher (1999): 'The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screen Writers' London, England: MacMillan Publishing Ltd.

I found a lot of information in this book as well. It gives detailed explanations of 'The Hero's Journey' and describes many modern examples of its appropriation.

Sections of Short Stories from my English Teacher:-

Bradbury, Ray (1957): 'Dandelion Wine'

I used parts of all these stories to exemplify writing a short story with a twist and the use of irony.

Carly, Peter: 'Fragrance of Roses'

Saki: 'The Open Window'