



*Tuesday and the*

# **GREAT FIRE OF SYDNEY**

**JESSICA GETTY**

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Jessica Getty

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What is the colour? When black is burned. What is the colour?

- Neil Young.

# Chapter One

**Bureau says when rain comes, will be storm from hell**

**3,067 fires burning across Australia**

**Great Fire of Sydney predicted by Nostradamus**

**Huntsman spider population explodes**

**1000 more camels ordered for city transport, say State Parliament**

The voice leap-frogged out of Tuesday's iPhone with the fervour of a Christian fundamentalist.

“Wake up Sydney! It's a mild forty-six degrees and a stunning morning! Here are today's State Alerts; a locust plague is flying south along the Pacific Highway and residents are warned to shut their windows and keep an eye on their cat.”

Tuesday buried her face deeper into her pillow and fumbled for her phone.

“Residents in St Ives are reminded they'll be air-bombed with 1080 this afternoon to get rid of those mutant flesh-eating cane toads, and there's a general death and destruction warning for the Blue Mountains as fire rages in on all sides.”

“And now to the six o'clock news. It's been three years to the day since it last rained in Australia. The State of Emergency continues and Kingston-Smith International Airport is closed for the ninety-eighth day in a row.”

Tuesday thumped her fist down on the voice and the phone jumped from her side table and skittered across the floor. The news broadcast ended in an abrupt squawk. Tuesday opened one sleep-encrusted eye and surveyed her bedroom with the enthusiasm of a Quaker whose horse and cart has broken down outside a David Jones' appliance sale.

Moments ago she'd been running hand in hand with Keanu Reeves through a field of wild tulips. He'd put on weight and his man boobs jiggled like jelly under his stained t-shirt. He was paler than Tuesday remembered. And he had red hair. And a beard. But no mistake, it was Keanu Reeves. She could still

hear his sexy ragged breath in her ear just before he'd keeled over from an asthma attack.

But instead, she was here – in a smoke-filled, grimy-walled, tiny bedroom the size of her bed, a generous size for Sydney, the groaning-at-the-seams metropolis of Australia. A slumbering grass snake was curled around her toes and a possum thumped up and down on the corrugated iron roof.

Tuesday had slept naked on top of her sheets like the rest of Sydney, but even skin was too much of a cover in this heat. Fat droplets of sweat slid down her dark-skinned body and every breath required effort. Tuesday pushed herself up and unstuck her legs. She unwound the grass snake, letting it slither into her tangled sheets, and sleep-shuffled over to the window at the end of her bed.

She wouldn't mind waking up to reality if it didn't quite look like this. The air was heavily polluted outside her window. The entire State of New South Wales, a sizable chunk of Australia, was blanketed by a thick curtain of fire smoke that hung past window eaves and seeped through wall cracks like grubby reaching fingers. Sometimes the shifting air was blindingly white, sometimes green, often black with ash, but this morning it was orange and impenetrable.

The ghostly outlines of cars jumbled together on the road below peeped through the soup. No commuters hopped in them and sped off. They were abandoned. Tuesday stretched her arms above her head and yawned. Her fingers fell to her breasts and plucked at her saucer-like nipples.

Sydney had metamorphosed into a silent new world. There were no planes, no trains, no cars, no buses, and no trucks. It was far too dangerous to drive because it was impossible to see, the train lines were warping in the heat, and planes were hampered by ash-bogged skies. The roads beyond Tuesday's quiet cul-de-sac were filled instead with people, horses, bicycles, rickshaws, scooters, and now camels. Tourists were pouring in by cruise ship to witness the spectacle, mesmerised when their hotels burnt down. The world was watching in awe as Australia entertained them.

Tuesday watched the tips of flames flicker far off in the distance. A dark smudge fell vertically past her window and a second later there was a dead

squawk on the backyard path below followed by the clatter of a Billy can.

Tuesday yelled and pushed up her sash window. She leant over the second story sill and zeroed in on a large hunched man at the bottom of her and Ginny's garden.

"Mr Polanski!" Complained Tuesday, covering her jiggling breasts with her palms. "Stop stealing our carrion!"

Mr Polanski, who bore no resemblance to the filmmaker, but did look a little like a flabby-assed alcoholic Russian, which he was, peered over his bare shoulders at her impudently. Between his stubby fingers he held a stunned and smoking Kookaburra by the neck. A single drop of sweat rolled down Mr Polanski's hairy back and disappeared like a dart into the cavern between his buttocks.

"And don't tell me again it's a free world," said Tuesday, glowering.

"Is a free world," panted Mr Polanski. He shook the stunned bird for good measure and tossed it into his Billy can. "Ping, ping," rattled the lid as the bird came to. "Ping, ping."

With a triumphant glance up at Tuesday, Mr Polanski scurried away in a half-crouch. He disappeared into the murkiness, rustled through the hedge, and slammed his back door behind him.

Tuesday sighed. Three years into this searing drought, and food and water were more valuable than Swans tickets at a quarter final. She couldn't afford a piece of fruit, let alone meat. When birds fell from the sky these days, smoke-choked and on last legs, they were worth something, and it was usually a nice chilli and white wine sauce. Bags of apples were twenty-five dollars and litres of water had begun replacing heroin on the black market at Kings Cross.

The outside smog blew past Tuesday and into the room, drenching everything in a ghostly white. She inhaled deeply. Despite being surrounded for months by the carcinogenic asthma-inducing clouds, she still liked the smell of a good fire burning.

Another sound drifted out of the smog and softly thump-a-thump-thumped over the dead grass towards their back door. There was a tap-tap-tap on the door glass and Tuesday peered down into the gloom.

It was a big red, its head bobbing up at her, at home here in Bondi as if it had lived here all its life. Kangaroos had learnt quickly in this drought that houses had water and that some people were prepared to give it to them. They approached with caution since backyard roo chops were popular in the more lawless Western suburbs. The kangaroo's giant tail swept aside a toppled milk crate with a bang and he once again tapped gently on the glass with his curled claws.

Tuesday had nothing to give him. The water was turned on in the Eastern Suburbs from 2 a.m. to 3 a.m. every morning. Gas lamps flickered on all the way up the street as early as 1.30 a.m. as sleepy-eyed residents stood ready with empty water coolers at every available tap, hose, and water outlet. Last night Ginny and Tuesday had waited in front of the bathroom tap with their water bottles but unfortunately both had fallen asleep - Ginny on the toilet, and Tuesday face down in the cool metal sink. Tuesday had woken just before 3 a.m. and barely managed to fill an old vodka bottle before the water had wavered to a halt.

Just last night the news reports had shown rain flooding England, whole towns swirling in mud, London Undergrounds deluged by rising water. Yet here, not a drop. Brisbane was the worst affected. There wasn't much left of the city due to raging fire storms and refugees from the north were flowing into Sydney. But there was terrible trouble here too.

Tuesday closed her bedroom window and trudged to her floor-length mirror, feeling things jiggle that she felt perhaps shouldn't. She wrung her hands at her naked body. *Big trouble.*

If she stretched her imagination, well - not so much as stretched it, but pulled it in (especially over her thighs) and sort of squinted, standing thirty degrees on her side, in a dim light, with her hands casually placed say, *here* (holding her buttocks a few centimetres higher than normal), she could look good naked.

Her slumped reflection stared back with the same hooded glare a dead hawk might stare at its prey. Sleepy-byes floated in her eyes, dried dribble crusted her lips, one nipple had inverted itself, and she was wearing mucus encrusted underpants that had disappeared so far up her butt she would have to



send up a search party.

Her belly, bottom, and breasts were what her mother politely called curvaceous. Average height when she didn't slouch. Skin as dark as chocolate cake and rapidly turning charcoal. Her eyes were caramel and her head was shaved and her feet were big. Clumsy like her father and with her mother's lack of social graces.

Yep, I'm just going to have to face it, thought Tuesday despondently, I'm the fat- assed black twin of Sinead O'Connor.

Her mum, Rebecca, was a short, white, ferocious Pom who had married a tall, skinny, good-humoured Australian Aboriginal, Monday. Just to complicate matters, Rebecca's mum was Chinese and Monday's dad was Irish. As a result, all eight off-spring were chocolate-coloured whingers who ate anything that moved, especially potatoes.

I am born of antagonism, thought Tuesday. Just her luck to be the product of four nationalities that when put in a room, wouldn't have anything to do with each other. There couldn't possibly be anyone else like her in Bondi. Here in Sydney's beach-side enclave, she was surrounded by blond, angel-eyed, Eastern Suburb glitterati that littered the sand like anorexic seals. Their mothers ran dinky home ware stores and their fathers took rickshaws to important places wearing immaculate suits.

As for *her* family – Tuesday's eyes travelled to the photo of her seven brothers sellotaped to the wall. Winter, Hour, July, Pluto, West, Fire, and One, all of whom were solid young men now (except for Pluto, who was rake thin; the only son to resemble his bony father) and all of whom were mooning their dark bottoms at the camera and grinning over their shoulders (even Pluto, whose skinny bottom looked like a scrotum and was generally best kept hidden).

Her family had seemed to explode from the conflicting genes and as a result her brothers had been thrown like confetti to different parts of the world. Winter was on a Gap year working with street kids in Brazil, July had followed his boyfriend to Alice Springs and was working as a lawyer, Hour was studying environmental science at the University of Melbourne, Pluto was in Japan teaching English in his rake-thin way, West was living with a cult in

New Zealand and had converted to Agenism (which seemed to involve quite a lot of sex and sitting on hills watching for UFOs), Fire was surfing and painting in Byron Bay on the unemployment benefit, and One had just finished a degree in Architecture and was backpacking around France in a kombi van from vineyard to vineyard. Two were gay, four were straight, and One was a cross-dresser.

Her parents had detached themselves from each other as well, separated for two years and perfectly happy. Monday was raking in the money running his Get In Touch With Your Native Man commune in the Blue Mountains and her Mum was a social worker to abused Middle Eastern Muslim women in Bankstown. About as far away from the Eastern Suburbs ideal as one could get.

In Bondi, if you weren't Afrikaner, you were a New Zealander, if you weren't orthodox Jewish, you lived next to someone who was, if you weren't rich, you were a Pommy backpacker, if you weren't skinny, you were an unsuccessful bulimic, if you weren't white, it was because you had a nice tan, if you weren't blond, the hairdresser hadn't done a very good job, and if you weren't any of the above then you didn't live in Bondi, did you.

Tuesday wasn't any of those things and yet here she was, her solidness staring back at her defiantly.

Tuesday jiggled her thighs and the sound of them whop-whop-whopped in the air. Oh, if only there wasn't quite so much of her to go around! She tilted her shaved head and tried to work herself into a state of self-satisfaction.

“Come on, Tuesday!” She whispered. “You’rrrrre sexy!”

Nope. Well – possibly to a blind man with his hands removed.

Tuesday let go of her buttocks and picked up the paperback from her bed.

How to Feel Great For Those Holding a Gun to Their Heads by John Goldman.

Chapter One – Pull the trigger.

Tuesday read the book at arm's length, feeling much like she did when Ishmael 'dribble' Poindexter sleep-walked into her bunk at Year Nine

macramé camp and fell asleep with his hands down his pants – disgusted but strangely attracted.

Under normal circumstances, Tuesday loathed these self-improvement gurus and all the poor todgers who placed their own perfectly natural despondent thoughts into the hands of others. But Tuesday was not sure anymore that other people didn't have the answers to life's problems and John Goldman's book jacket promised total and absolute happiness, even if your job involved hand scrubbing speculums for a gynaecologist, and at the very least (in tiny writing) he promised to be helpful.

Tuesday threw the book on the floor and stood on it.

There – 3 cm taller.

Yes, very helpful, thank you very much.

She kicked the book away. With or without John Goldman, she was still that little girl in the playground who was different from everyone else. She was still the black version of Sinead O'Connor (not so bad) screwed onto the bottom half of Whoopi Goldberg (not good at all).

Tuesday picked up her phone from the floor and called her mother at the Bankstown refuge.

“You're thinking too much of yourself, sweetheart, think of other people. Now, I must dash, I've got Mrs Al-Muhibb's husband in a headlock.”

She rang her father at his Katoomba commune.

“Tuesday, you're not spending enough time loving yourself, you have to love all of you, every day, baby. Now, I have to go, I'm draining my armpit lymph nodes.”

In the days when divorce was a dirty word her parents would have been a solid case for murder suicide. Tuesday hung up and cocked her head.

John Goldman's book had fallen open to Chapter Three.

*Are You a Supermodel Who Can't See Your Amazing Beauty Because You Have Image Dysmorphia?*

Tuesday stood and swiftly threw her head over her shoulders to catch the

beautiful part of her unawares. The trouble was, there wasn't a pair of pert buttocks lurking around when she wasn't looking, there was instead her grandmother's bottom and not even the bottom her grandmother had once had, when she was Tuesday's age, but in fact, without exaggeration, her grandmother's actual bottom.

"It's not fair!" Wailed Tuesday.

"Oh for God's sake! Can you keep your bloody self-loathing to yourself, Tuesday!" Yelled her flatmate, Ginny, from the next door bedroom. "I'm trying to get some sleep here!" Ginny thumped the wall between them for good measure and Tuesday heard her sigh dramatically.

At that moment Ginny's alarm clock went off and there were several profanities vented on the other side of the wall, several of which had Tuesday's name in them.

It must be seven o'clock. Tuesday was late for work but this gave her no cause for concern. If Tuesday arrived at work on the same day that she was due, she exceeded everyone's expectations. Some people, such as employers, might think lateness is a sign of disrespect (or simply a sign that one wished to be unemployed) but Tuesday was blithely unaware of this. She just could not operate on anything else but Tuesday time - which was really Wednesday time by the time she got there, a trait which she had inherited from her father Monday, so it was no wonder she was all mixed up and probably why she was a poverty-stricken self-employed photographer.

Tuesday held her left foot up to the mirror and wobbled on the other. "You see that?" She said to herself.

Her foot had the skin of a baby from heel to toe. It was hairless, wrinkle free, awake, and cellulite resistant.

"That, Tuesday," she said firmly, "is one hell of an insole."

Tuesday slipped into her clothes, grabbed her camera bag, and hurried out of the house.

Outside their rented Bondi Junction terrace, which was the only derelict house in a pleasant tree-lined street of architectural House and Garden terraces, the air hung in an eerie candle-light. Ash floated down onto Tuesday

like flour and weevils through a sieve and she could barely see her feet through the wispy gloom. She twisted the dial of her blue face mask to Extremely Toxic and flipped on her mask's windscreen wipers. The air was the worst she'd seen. No wind and lots of smoke had created an ash vacuum over the city. It was as if a polluted heaven had descended.

Next door, Bill's ash-covered Porsche sat like a coffin in his driveway. He did have a garage but being the Eastern suburbs, and being Bill, he liked to display it every now and again. Should just put a great big bloody sign on it, Tuesday thought. 'Look what I've got.'

Tuesday hurried down the street and tripped in exactly the same place she tripped every week. She sprawled onto the footpath. The rubber that had peeled off the front of her thongs was only good for ten steps before it sent her flying. Tuesday sat up and pulled the Sellotape more firmly over her toes but it uncurled immediately.

Things never improve for you Tuesday, her mother said, because you like the familiar, the well-worn. You'll never be early because late is a habit. You put off buying new things because the old are what you know.

But that just wasn't true, Tuesday thought. As soon as she found a pair of new thongs that were exactly the same, brown with yellow and purple stripes and a four centimetre heel with red glitter edging, she would buy them.

Tuesday picked herself up. She didn't bother checking to see if anyone had seen her clumsy trip. She'd learnt long ago that there was always someone watching when something embarrassing happened to her. She limped past the abandoned cars that lined the quiet street. They were covered in a thick film of smust – a combination of industrial smog and desert dust ripped from the Outback topsoil by the wind. Four cars in a row had 'I wish my wife was this dirty' finger tipped in the orange crust across the windscreen.

At the intersection of Oxford St Tuesday waved her neon stick in the air from side to side. "Fare to city!" She shouted into the smust, but her voice was lost in the din.

The main street was a moving mass of people in the gloom. A full rickshaw rumbled out of the murky clouds, narrowly missing her hand. A galloping horse exceeded the speed limit in the transit lane. The 380 horse and carriages were

full with Bondi Beach passengers and rumbled past at a dizzying pace. People waved neon orange and green sticks in lines along the side of the street and Tuesday was but one of them. Peak hour!

She should have gotten up earlier. There were no free rickshaws to be seen and the bicycle depot was empty.

You're never prepared, Tuesday, Rebecca would say. You are never organised for anything because you are secretly begging for something impromptu to happen.

Tuesday rued the day her mother ever attended Psychology 101 at continuing education classes at the WEA. Rebecca had started with Self-Assertiveness for Women and had refused to wash any more kitchen dishes. After no one else washed the kitchen dishes, her mother attended a Tough Love seminar and removed all forms of entertainment in the house except for her own television. When she became sick of the eight kids watching Little House in the Prairie from her bed, she finally left her children for a four week holiday in Hawaii. Which Tuesday grudgingly admitted was kind of okay, since they were in their early twenties at the time.

Tuesday was about to start walking to the city when an L82 camel express with the words 'Circular Quay' stamped in red across its forehead abruptly stepped out of the smog behind her and stopped at the curb. The camel had dyed blue ears and tail tip - an under 40's ride that didn't kneel down to pick up passengers.

Tuesday claimed her space at the bottom of the camel's rope ladder and fought off two other contenders with two swift shoulder bumps. The ladders were supposed to be time savers but they played havoc in windy weather. The *Sydney Morning Herald* had bought Tuesday's iconic photo of three women clambering up the ladder, each with her skirt blown over her head.

It was the only photo of Tuesday's the paper had bought but Tuesday was determined it would not be the last. She was going to be the next big thing. The next Walkley winner. She was going to prove that she could be late, slow, set in routine, with Whoopi's bottom and Karen Carpenter's self-esteem and still be successful.

Tuesday waited as her next-door neighbour, Audrey Spencer, disembarked

with no trouble, said a friendly hello (because of course she was not only beautiful but annoyingly nice as well) and sashayed down the street with not a single drop of sweat under the armpits of her Colette Dinnigan dress. Tuesday looked like a frumpy burnt sausage in comparison. A sausage that someone had left under the grill and forgotten about because her wrist thermometer said it was 47 degrees and steam was rising from her head.

Tuesday clambered up the rungs, her thongs slapping softly against the camel's bloated side. The camel exhaled and Tuesday vibrated on the ladder like an insect caught in a web. The camel's hair was soft and warm and strangely comforting - like leaning against a breathing teddy bear. The camel glanced over his shoulder and blew the smell of rotting hay into her face.

"Uggh!" Tuesday recoiled.

The camel raised his lips in a smile.

"Walking can of dog food," Tuesday hissed. She climbed into the leather saddle behind five other passengers. The camel screamed as if its balls were being amputated, shot a spit ball at a passing cyclist, and sauntered away.

Tuesday rolled contently from side to side on the future bag of Meaty-Bites and observed the scene around her.

Breaking the crest of Paddington's Oxford Street were thousands of beasts and people. There were at least ten horse-drawn carriages, forty or so camels, as many horses and ponies, a Great Dane sprinting past with three kids strapped on top, and the rest a traffic jam of bicycles, rickshaws, foot scooters, electric wheelchairs, roller blades, and a moving mass of sneakers. A poo removalist scooted down the street with his vacuum cleaner hose, working at a frantic pace.

The electronic bill board above the Paddington Arms Hotel flashed the words '1095 days without rain' and beneath that, '24% arable land on fire'. The 24% changed to 25% while Tuesday was looking.

Tuesday's camel moved into the express lane and broke into a trot. She held on tightly. Why did *she* always get the back seat? She jiggled violently. The skin on her chin slapped up to her forehead and back to her feet. The Indian driver was wearing a hot pink turban, a tie-dyed kaftan, and a smile. He

glanced back, waved his joint at her, and laughed crazily.

Tuesday jiggled back at him and held on for dear life. She wasn't sure it had been a good idea to remove *all* society's rules and regulations just because there was a *tiny* State of Emergency. She was glad that there were no more bicycle helmets and that dogs were allowed to eat in cafes and live in apartments, she was ecstatic that obstetricians could no longer be sued and that burglars could no longer claim accident compensation for cutting their arm when they broke in through a glass door. But she drew the line at stoned L82 camel drivers detouring to Hurstville to pick up their mum.

An hour and a half later, and after seeing parts of Sydney she had never seen before, but relatively pacified by the joint Ravi passed back, Tuesday arrived at the Quay Ferry Terminal and squeezed onto a packed Paddle Steamer that was bound for Kirribilli.

Tuesday stood on the crowded bow with her chin in her palm and watched shark fins thrash under the water with a crazed violence. The local ecology had exploded under the harsh drought conditions and in the warmer water species only previously spotted in Darwin had come down to Sydney to roost. The boy beside her flicked a cane toad off the side of the railing with bored amusement and a Barramundi leapt out of the water in front of them and swallowed it whole. A lethal Irukandji jellyfish was flipped up by the fish's tail and the passengers screamed and ducked. The jellyfish hit the deck with a splat beside Tuesday's foot and disappeared back into the water with the next downward dip of the steamer.

At the Point wharf Tuesday decided to travel the last part of her trip in relative safety and she picked up a free public bicycle from the dock depot. Visibility was deadly on this side of the harbour. It was smash - a combination of week-old smoke that moved through the air like sailor's mist and burning ash that floated down like dandruff.

Tuesday's legs were amputated by the thick soup as she moved up and down on the bicycle pedals. She pressed a button marked 'HAZARD' and her bicycle lit up with fairy lights. The night vision on her mask bathed the surrounding smash in a soft red glow and her breath rasped in her ears like Darth Vader's. She rode wherever there was a clear space - on the footpath, road, or dead grass. She passed vague pedestrian shapes huddled over



themselves, marching purposefully towards North Sydney. Through the gloom, bobbing face masks glowed blue, green, and yellow.

She passed camels' tails wrapped in Christmas lights which swung to and fro eerily. The camels were refusing to move. Their owners' voices were cajoling but hundreds of years of experience through desert dust storms had taught the camels to close their nostrils and seek shelter.

Tuesday sped past all of them on the downhill with reckless abandon, her sweat flying off her, and skidded to a stop outside Number 42, Columbine Street. She left the red bike on the grass for anyone who wanted it. Even in this quiet cul-de-sac four public bicycles were propped up in the gloom against the lamp posts.

In front of her was a deck bridge leading to an enormous concrete door. The bridge was made out of thin timber slats and ran over a dry white pebble bed. Succulent cactus lined the minimalist house. The lawn on either side of the bridge was like everywhere, yellow and dead, but a garden design artist had mowed the grass into crop circle shapes with a Whipper Snipper. She was in an exceedingly rich part of town. Whereas Bondi was also rich, it had a proliferation of renters and backpackers and the general poor (Tuesday being regarded as all three). Here in Kirribilli stray backpackers were probably shot on sight and Tuesday was acutely aware of it.

Tuesday hurried up to the carved door and pulled at her second-hand shirt, disengaging it from her sticky armpits. Marcus had said to dress professionally but had said it in such an exasperated tone that he had obviously not expected that to happen. In this respect, she hadn't disappointed him.

Tuesday was wearing a paisley pink shirt from Mr Stinky which she'd knotted under her breasts. A diamond stud shone from her rounded belly and tight orange flares hugged her bottom. Saucer-sized silver bangles dangled from her ears, a cream macramé belt was slung low around her waist, and her high-heeled thongs glittered in the smog. She felt hip and happening but not exactly chic.

Tuesday brushed the ash off her shaved head and rang the doorbell.

There was a shuffling behind the door and a shadow passed in front of the peephole. "I worship Satan," a female voice called, "and I'm perfectly happy

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