

CHRISTMAS GIVING

by Kevin Grant

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The station was dry. The sheep had grazed the paddocks to the roots and wandered, reddish-brown with dust, among the hay-bales we had trucked in. The wheat stood stunted and bleached in the glare of the merciless sun of an Australian drought. Even the ghost gums lining the fields and surrounding the homestead hung their leaves in weariness.

Christmas day had dawned warm with a hint of smoke in the air. Our celebration was brief. With prospect of culling the flock and no crop to harvest, presents were few and simple. The green Christmas tree with its twinkling lights seemed out of place in this pale and desiccated land. Thank God we had each other! Hard times knitted us closer. Even on this bleak Christmas, there was laughter and care. The smell of Janet's lamb roast wafted out to Phil, Sarah and I on the verandah.

Already the mid-morning sun stung the skin of my forearms and the heat made the sweat trickle down my back. The rising wind picked up dust into willy-willies. Janet joined us.

"Honey, I'll nip up to Gundabooka to see if the Country Fire Authority blokes need help. I don't like that wind."

Smoke blotted out the sky as I approached Gundabooka. Embers hurtled by. I pulled up by the C.F.A. tanker. The driver, Tom, was a farmer I recognized from the auctions. I wound down the window. The wind punched in with furnace heat.

"Need any help?"

He recognized me.

"Mate, we can't hold it in this wind. It's forty kilometers wide and spotting over the Darling, headed your way. Better go back and protect your property. We'll help if we can. Thanks anyway!"

Gunning the engine, I turned and raced for home. In the rear view mirror I saw the tanker and three helmeted figures stand their ground silhouetted against flames that burst high up a tree and pounced...

The homestead stood forlorn in the dim brown light that filtered through the smoke. But it stood secure. Sarah sprayed precious water from our depleted

rainwater tank onto the roof. Phil had herded the sheep into the shearing pens and now hurled buckets of water over them. Janet waved in relieved welcome as she sealed the windows with wet towels.

The smoke turned midday into twilight. The fire cast a dull red glow on the pall of smoke like a sullen dawn. What a Christmas day this was! The apprehension of what lay ahead weighed heavily. But there was nothing more to be done, but wait for the advancing enemy, checking preparations already checked.

The fire-glow grew, suffusing everything with a bloody hue. Glowing embers streaked down the wind. We beat them out with wet sacks. In unison, the gums along the upper paddock exploded into flame. The blaze marched in rank across the wheat-field toward the firebreak dug on its edge. Wings of fire, meters high, swooped down the twin lines of gums arching over the road.

Despite the wet cloth around our faces the smoke was choking, stinging our streaming eyes. Embers, too many and large for our sacks, woke fires in the parched garden. Janet's hose extinguished the embers on the roof. Phil shouted over the blast of wind and fire, pointing to flames erupting from the shearing shed.

He and I ran to protect the sheep. The next minutes were frenzied; flinging water from the troughs over the sheep, the wooden pen rails and ourselves as flames roared horizontally from the shed, scorching wool and hair and blistering exposed flesh.

Sarah's faint cry reached me as a gum-tree exploded, sending blazing branches whirling onto our roof. Janet's hose played over the flames, but could not quench them.

The sheet of fire at the firebreak parted as the Gundabooka tanker burst through. The hoses spewed water onto the roof, dousing the branches, then back onto the firebreak. The rank of flame staggered under the onslaught, then guttered and died. The conflagration continued to consume the land, but the battle for our home was won.

Tom and his volunteers, singed, smeared with ash and exhausted, mopped up the spot fires.

"Thanks, Tom," I said gripping his hand, "I thought we'd lost it."

"No worries, mate," he grinned, his teeth white in his smoke-blackened face. "Where can we fill up the tanker? We've lots more to do."

“The creek’s over the rise. There’s a pool that shouldn’t have dried up, left of the road.”

We all watched the tanker disappear in a cloud of dust and ash.

Janet does not speak much, but her words resonate with wisdom:

“We’ve been given the greatest Christmas gift of all. Those men gave of themselves, risking their skins and lives to save us... a lot like God gave of Himself on the first Christmas.”

Word count: 798