



MARGARET RIVER  
• P R E S S •

Commuter Reads

Quest for Fire

by

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Squinting, I survey my hand held out in line with the top of the far ridge and the setting sun. Four fingers. About an hour. Just enough time to find a place to camp and hopefully, make fire. I hobble downhill through the open stringybark forest, my bare feet sore from the long walk. I look for a circle of trees or some feature that I can temporarily claim as my own; something to mark the boundary of my camp. It has become almost superstitious, but it makes me feel safe. An old termite mound beckons me over, a burnt out tree squatting opposite. Like rusty bedheads I think, and tentatively set down my pack. I listen for a few seconds to how my body feels on this particular patch of earth. Good enough.

A flutter of nerves passes through me as I begin snapping dead twigs from low hanging branches. Even though it's been days since rain I don't want to take any chances with wood that's been on the ground. If by some miracle I get fire, I'd never forgive myself if it went out. I shiver at the real possibility of a long night without the companionship of flames, and employ martial art precision as I set the tee-pee fire one stick at a time. Needle thin in the centre, spiraling out to wrist thick on the outside, a small doorway left open downwind for the fire to enter.

The sun flings out its last net for the day, catching the bent backs of the tussock grass and staining them gold, like the web of the orb spider above. Turning my hat upside down, I begin making my tinder bundle; rubbing stringybark to a fine powder between my hands, plucking stamens from spent banksia flowers, crushing the seed heads of whiskey grass. I hold the mixture to my cheek to test for moisture. It's hard to tell, my skin cool in the dusk breeze. Twisting dry bracken fern fronds into a crude nest, I sprinkle in the tinder, pull a bulrush flower from my pocket for the innermost lining, the fluffy seeds soft as down.

All I need now is a spark.

I slowly begin spinning the straight grass tree stalk between my palms, grinding it down into a ready made notch carved on a thin board secured under my left foot. First build heat, then increase pressure, I remind myself. I resist the urge to speed up, keeping my hands floating up the top of the stalk, trying to conserve energy as the heat builds. Wisps of smoke curl into the air as I increase the pressure downwards. My arms and shoulders begin to ache. I grit my teeth. The greater the need, the greater the result. Hot dust fills the notch. I switch to speed, moving my hands as fast as I can manage up and down the stalk, smoke now billowing from the point of friction. Come on, come on, I say through clenched jaw. You're almost there, just keep going. My forearms start shaking. I grapple to control them but they wobble violently. I feel myself losing grip. The stalk jumps out of the notch momentarily, long enough for the hard-earned heat to disperse, and with it, any chance of a fire. I collapse, shedding hot tears of anger, just like the previous night, and the one before that, and the one before that, and most since I arrived.

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I wake in the night cold and pull the blanket up around my nose. Without a watch I can only guess at what hour I have woken to. The kingdom of night insects are my clue. There is a point at which their symphony changes, see-saws back and forth like a DJ merging tracks, signaling the betwixt and between time when it is no longer night, nor yet morning. It is an empty time. Shifty. Stretchy. I catch it now in the insects' pause, as if recalibrating, settling into a new syncopated rhythm, fingers thrumming on a table. There is no going back to sleep. My heart stirs awake, squirms and thumps. It has its own rhythm too, its

own language that I have been learning in the quiet hours when sleep abandons me to the forest's twitching hour.

Sighing, I swap hips and gaze up at the splinters of stars. My stomach growls loudly, reminding me I haven't had dinner. It feels like days since I woke this morning under a half thatched roof, stuffed a water bottle, blanket, sandals, fire-kit, apple and sweet potato in my bag and padded quietly out of camp towards the hills. The walk was hard, scrambling through thick garronia and banksia scrub until it gave way to sheer slabs of rock and giant granite rocks stacked like popcorn on the cliff edge. Standing astride two boulders, I could just make out the Pacific Highway in the distance, a black snake in constant motion. The image shocked me, as if I'd forgotten that it was my choice to be barefoot on the ridge alone, not knowing where I was going to sleep that night, and not down there in the fast lane. Two different worlds, with me somewhere in between.

It feels good to get out of camp central though, have a bit of breathing space away from the others. It's been almost three months since six of us rolled up for the start of the year-long 'Independent Wilderness Studies Program' on the north coast of NSW. In some ways it feels like three years. Time's doing funny things out here. So far we've been kept pretty busy. Apart from building our own shelters from natural materials, we've been learning matchless fire-making, hunting and trapping, tanning hides, bush food, basketry, rope and string making, pottery, tracking, sensory awareness, bird language and navigation. The rules are few. Apart from no booze, we're limited to 30 days out of camp, and 30 days of visitors in. And that's pretty much where the structure ends. It is essentially a choose-your-own-adventure, with equal emphasis on simply experiencing the changing face of the bush, and ourselves, over four full seasons. A kind of cross between TV's Survivor, and the solo wilderness reverie elucidated by American poet and naturalist Henry David Thoreau in his book Walden. A chance to taste life in its purest form - 'Simplicity, Simplicity, Simplicity!' - as Thoreau exclaimed in praise of his self-styled life as forest hermit.

Easy for him to say. He didn't have to build his own shelter. He just moved straight in to a waterproof hut on the edge of a clear water lake, AND his aunt brought him cake every week (which he chose never to mention in his book), AND I'm sure matches were his fire stick of choice. Not that I'm complaining, this is what I wanted. I just didn't realise it was going to be this hard. My fingers curl in on the throbbing points on both palms where blood blisters the size of 10c coins rise up like red desert mounds.

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SCREEEECHHH! The piercing cry of a channel-billed cuckoo. It can't trick me now. The few times I dragged myself out of bed assuming it was calling in first light I ended up huddling in the dark for hours. It can't be too long before they take wing north to wait out the winter. I'll miss them. They remind me of home. Storm birds dad calls them. They were calling the morning I left for the bush, as if willing me on my way. I rose from beneath my pink childhood doona and walked to the edge of the garden, watching as the dawn sun cast spokes of gold onto the glossy black backs of the swans, perhaps offspring of the original swans that came to nest in the lake my parents created thirty years ago, the year of my birth. Packing the last of my things I turned back to wave at the two most familiar and constant figures in my life.

"Keep in touch," mum called out, and then corrected herself, "I mean, we're here if you need us."

In my rear vision mirror they looked frozen in a photo mid-wave, dad with one hand on the collar of the family border collie, straining to chase me out the gate.

They tried to understand why I needed to do this. I didn't give them much to go on. "I just need to get away from it all for awhile, have some space to think, get back to basics."

It was the same glib reply I'd churned out to anyone who'd asked. Partly masking my urge to say 'to get away from questions,' it belied my reluctance to try and put words to something that I didn't yet understand myself. Something that still only existed in feelings, in images; a river rock sculpted by water; an invisible hand tugging at my hem, urging me to walk until the city streets turned to dust underfoot and gave way to trackless leaf litter. Besides, how could I describe the sense that I never actually made a decision, as one might choose a car, carefully weighing up the options, but rather one day I turned over a rock to find a decision that I made long ago waiting for me.

Perhaps it was the first time I saw a woman kneel down and produce a glowing red coal with her own hands. She called it 'hand-drill', explaining it was the way fire had been made all over this land by indigenous people for thousands of years. I was smitten. The sheer simplicity of picking up a stick and spinning it on another one to produce this incredible thing we call fire, was the most improbable and stunning act of human creation I could imagine. Pure alchemy. I couldn't take my eyes from her, from the fire she crouched next to, blowing and tending as one would a newborn. Within this new relationship she exuded a kind of quiet power, a connectedness. I wanted it, badly. That was three years ago. Now I want it with a bone deep hunger.

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I sigh, and shift hips again, missing my grassmat. I might be failing at fire but at least I'm making progress on my shelters, having just completed the third and (dare I say) final layer of paperbark on my kitchen lean-to. Despite dreaming that the roof turned into a sponge and leaked torrents of rain, I ceremonially de-tarped for the first time last week, crossing everything that it's finally waterproof. I felt naked and vulnerable without the protective covering of the neon blue plastic, but less like an intruder, more in keeping with the camouflaged habitat of every other forest creature. More at home.

My real shelter is also taking shape, albeit excruciatingly slowly; grass bundle by grass bundle. I'm glad I stuck to my vision of a circular shelter. Some mornings I get up and just walk around it, like a monk circumambulating around a sacred mountain. Out here the idea of building corners and straight lines seemed completely out of sync with the circular shapes all around me – trees and raindrops and planets and berries and fly bums. I wanted to be hugged by my shelter, encircled by it; my own private universe, my own sun burning brightly in the centre.

It was important I got my hearth right. The first thing I did was to take a stick and mark its position, staking my claim. I dug a crude tunnel from this point to the planned outer edge of my shelter, hoping it will act like a kind of esophagus, breathing in air from the outside, breathing smoke up and out the chimney. Breaking the upper crust of topsoil I scooped out gravel and earth with my hands, hollowing a circular pit about half a metre wide at the top, sloped in to meet the air hole at the base. I dived down through layers of day-warmed water in the billabong to fish out chunks of pure white clay, spread it thick between sandstone rocks, massaging them in place with circular motions of my hands. I found the right fit for each rock, imagining where the billy might sit, the frypan. When I stood back to

survey my creation at days end the whole area felt different, sentient almost. As if the shelter was already here, in spirit, if not yet in form.

There is only one way the first hearth fire is going to be lit. Hand-drill. My hand-drill. That I'm sure of. I'm beginning to fear it might never happen. I've been practicing every day, yet still sometimes can't even coax smoke out of the bloody thing, my shoulders and arms seizing up before I can even cut through the glaze. I've started a routine of push-ups to build strength.

"It's more about technique than strength," explained the instructor Kate. "You need to learn to channel energy up from your core."

Kate held the board while I tried, witnessed my arms giving way, me punching the ground with my fists. She waited until I calmed down before saying, "Even more important than technique is need. The greater the need the greater the result. Ask yourself, how bad do you want it?"

There was only one way to create need. I handed Kate all my matchboxes and vowed to use only primitive means to light fire all year. The other's sniggered. "It takes more energy to piss out here than most people expend in a day. We don't have to do it all right way," said the Bear Grylls inspired bloke who could casually make fire while conducting a conversation.

"All?" I replied, seething. Fire is not just any old skill. Fire is life. I feel its potential within me, flickering, waiting, watching. It whispers promises. If I can bring flames to life, perhaps I can bring to life all that lies latent, all that has been yearning to flare.

Thankfully hand-drill hasn't been my only option, otherwise I'd be pretty cold and hungry by now. I've found my stride with another fire-by-friction method called bow-drill, which uses a stringed bow rather than hands to spin the stalk. Requiring much less in the way of brute strength, the bow-drill was used by many cultures around the world. It's a good fall-back but no substitute. For one, there's no evidence of it ever being used here and secondly my string is currently a piece of parachute cord which feels a bit like cheating. No, I have to get hand-drill, and soon. That's why I'm out here, with just my hand-drill stalk. Need.

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The first chip chip of the eastern yellow-robin confirms the smudge of indigo appearing in the east. I can feel the soft underbelly of night at my back receding, curling up in hollows and burrows. The day nudges closer, wafts in like a mist. In the hangman's light the kindling tee-pee stands straight and tall, expectant. Kate's words run through my mind, "How bad do you want it?" I remember the look on her face as I held out my hands in reply, palms weeping blood like stigmata. She looked shocked for a second, then cocked as her head as if deliberating whether to let me in on some secret. Her words were slow, carefully chosen. "You have to want it more than anything, but give up the trying." The words echoed out into my confused silence.

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I jump up, a sudden surge in my belly. Laying my fire kit and tinder bundle next to me, I peel off my jumper, and tie it around my head, drawing it down over my eyes in a blindfold. My fingers feel for the stalk, the board, find where they fit, find where my left foot

nestles next to the notch. Pausing, I send out an impromptu prayer. I wince at the first spin, my blisters sending piercing pain down my arms. Breathe, just breathe. I focus on the rhythm of the stalk moving back and forth, the sound of wood rubbing against wood, grainy, gravelly. My shoulders loosen, surrender to the piston-like movement. Keep floating, keep breathing. Nothing more to do here. My arms begin to tire, and I pull back a little, visualise oxygen pouring into my limbs like liquid gold. I suddenly feel a shift, my arms gaining strength, instinctively pressing together and down, as if tapping into some kind of muscle memory. The sound changes, deepens. It is the sound of wood grinding to a dark powder, coalescing. Smoke fills my lungs and still my arms continue, up and down up and down in fast fluid strokes as if cutting through water. A warmth in my belly surges up and out my fingers.

I pull off my blindfold in time to catch the split second when the hot dust spontaneously combusts into a red hot coal. With my face mere centimetres from the tiny glow, I feel as if I could be looking into the eye of the Big Bang moments before explosion, swirling with the same limitless creative possibility, aroused by the same evolutionary drive for consciousness, for beingness. Perhaps it was this very force that brought me out to the forest, the same one that wills me now to transfer the smoking coal into the bundle, to hold it above my head as if in offering, and give it three long steady breaths of life. It flickers for a moment, then roars into flame. Shadows skip and sway through the forest. I rise, dancing to join them, dancing towards the dawn.

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Note: This story appears in the Margaret River Press anthology, *Fire: a collection of stories, poems and visual images*.