

Percy

Amy St Lawrence

At the hospital there are people everywhere. Sitting, leaning, pacing, some laid flat on beds in the corridors. The fire service kids help Percy into a chair and leave him perched there on the end of a packed row near reception.




Image courtesy Laurel Fan

'Oi Steve! Broken ankle over here!' one of them yells into the chaos. They find another chair for him to rest his foot on, then they turn and walk outside. *Off to find another poor old bugger to 'rescue'*, thinks Percy. He still can't believe they're old enough to drive.

'This place stinks', he says under his breath. It's a mix of disinfectant and burnt hair, smoke and old sweat. After so long in the bush it's the chemical pong that really gets to him, the toilet cleaners and the deodorisers that stink worse than the smells they're meant to hide.

He shifts in the chair but he can't get comfortable. No one seems to have heard the boy yelling out about his ankle. All around him people talk excitedly, their stories of survival broken by bouts of coughing. Percy keeps his head down and doesn't get involved. They give him the shits, these people, with their matey shows of camaraderie. This is why he stays away on his own. If he could walk he'd be out of there immediately, but as it is he just sits there, staring at his foot on the chair.

Three days ago he was minding his own business, going about the daily rituals of life at his lean-to. Watching the birds, listening to the trees, filling his billies at the waterhole. All of that gone, now.

On his last night at the lean-to he'd gone to bed and tossed and turned in the heat, slapped at mosquitoes and thought he might as well get up if he wasn't going to sleep.

Next thing he knew he'd woken up coughing and the night was on fire. He ran without seeing where he was going. His eyes stung, lids swelled and closed against the smoke. He extended his leg to take the next step but his foot couldn't find a landing place, there was nothing but a void where he expected firm ground. He couldn't understand. His guts lurched and he fell, arms flailing for balance. A wall of dirt leapt out and smacked him in the face, he bounced and slid, plummeted freely for a long second and landed finally on a crack in his ankle. His knees buckled and he crumpled to the ground. He rocked back and forth, spitting dirt, mouth opening and closing uselessly as his lungs played dead.

With his first breath came understanding. The mineshaft. All he

could do was cower where he'd landed, waiting while the world above him flamed and roared. His new existence, this. He fought the squeezing in his throat, breathed in and then breathed out. Wiped his streaming eyes, looked up towards the surface. Howling gusts of wind gave flight to sticks and rocks and burning embers. Trees exploded and the night above him blazed with pulsing light.

In the hospital Percy is roused by a jolt to his ankle. He yells out in pain and opens his eyes to see a small girl standing in front of him.

She's frozen, eyes wide as they move from his foot to his face. 'Sorry.'

'Watch what you're bloody doing, girl.' Percy leans forward to hold his ankle, breathing through his teeth.

When he lifts his head the girl's still there. She's biting her lip and shifting from foot to foot, but she stays and stands her ground.

'What?' says Percy.

A woman on the other side of the room calls out to the girl to come away, but she just keeps standing there looking at Percy, avoiding his eyes now, scanning his legs and his torso, lingering over the rips in his trousers, the stains on the fabric.

He heaves himself into a more upright position in the chair. His mouth is parched, his throat aches. He gets the feeling he's been asleep with his head dangling back and his mouth wide open. Finally the girl looks into his face and steps forward, holding out a plastic cup.

'Want some water?'

He takes the tiny cup and drinks. By God, he's thirsty. 'Thanks,' he mutters, looking down at the cup.

'That's okay,' she says. 'I'll get you some more'. She goes over to the water cooler and fills the cup, walks very slowly back to Percy, holding the cup with both hands out in front of her, never taking her eyes off it. She hands him the water. It's full to the brim and as far as he can see, she hasn't spilled a drop. She watches as he gulps it down.

'Sarah!' yells the woman, the mother he supposes. The girl plucks the empty cup from Percy's hand.

‘That’s enough now,’ he says, though he could down a hundred more. The girl turns and runs to her mother’s side.

‘Can we go and look for Jack now?’ says the girl. She’s slapping out a rhythm on her mother’s thighs.

‘Not yet sweetie. He’ll be alright’.

There’s something wrong with the woman’s hands, she’s holding them limply up in the air above her lap. Percy watches her lean forward to kiss her daughter’s hair. The girl wriggles away and stands looking at him again.

‘What’s wrong with that old man?’

‘Shh, Sarah. I don’t know.’

‘He looks thirsty.’

‘Sit down now, Sarah. Someone else will help him.’

A man in hospital uniform goes to walk through the waiting room, but the woman says ‘excuse me’ and signals him to her side. She speaks in a loud whisper and points at Percy. He averts his eyes just in time to pretend ignorance.

He’s kicking himself for ending up in here like this. The lights are far too bright. He’d rather be back in the bloody hole with the wallaby, cranky old thing that it was. He wonders how it’s getting on now. Probably being harassed by the wildlife people who’d found them. It might be wishing itself back in the hole too, he thinks.

It’d still been dark when the wallaby had bounced down into the shaft. He’d been showered with dirt and had steeled himself for the impact, expecting a fallen branch. But the thing hit the bottom and kept thumping around—when he lifted his head to search through the half-light he found the wallaby scrabbling at the wall.

‘It’s no good mate, we’re stuck,’ he’d said. ‘Don’t waste your energy’.

The wallaby had coughed and growled at him, retreated to the far corner of the shaft.

In the hole he’d been helpless and vulnerable to the elements. Now he’s here, at the mercy of these hospital types, he realises this is worse. He has to think. His ankle will be right, even if it’s broken, in time the bones will mend. Won’t they? He stands, both hands

clenched around the plastic armrests, slowly pushing himself out of the chair. At first he takes all his weight on the good foot. So far, so good. But when he tries shifting just a fraction of his weight over to the sore foot, it refuses to stay planted on the ground. He keeps lifting it up despite himself, puts him in mind of the lame pigeon in town. If he could just get hold of some crutches he'd be right.

The hospital man appears at Percy's side. 'G'day,' he says. 'You been seen yet?'

'No, think I'll be right though.'

'You look a bit worse for wear, mate. I'm Steve. I'm a triage nurse. I'll just have a quick look at you.'

'If you've got a set of crutches I'll be right.'

'You're covered in abrasions. What happened?'

'It's nothing really. Just sprained me ankle. I wouldn't a bothered you but they brought me here. Just need some crutches and I'll get on me way.'

'Righto then. But I need to check you over before I can hand out any crutches.'

Percy shrugs. 'Suit yourself.'

The nurse clutches Percy's elbow and guides him back into the chair. He writes his details on a form, seems to understand that he doesn't have answers for all the questions. Then he squats at Percy's feet.

'Which ankle?'

Percy points. The nurse pulls Percy's trouser leg up towards his knee.

'Christ,' he says.

He tries easing off the boot while he holds Percy's foot still. Percy clenches his teeth. The nurse gets out a pair of scissors and without even asking he cuts through the elastic and down into the leather on both sides of the boot. He pulls the boot off and puts it on the floor, bits of dried yellow mud crumbling onto the lino. Next he cuts off the sock.

'Jesus, how long's it been like this?' he asks.

Percy can't believe he's looking at his own ankle. The swelling

looks obscene and the flesh is mottled blue and purple. It looks dead. He can't think how to answer the nurse's question.

'I'll be back in a sec,' says the nurse, then he disappears through the swinging double doors.

It must've been two days, thinks Percy. Two nights and two days he was in there. It doesn't sound like much.

The first day started with a silent dawn, there was none of the bird-song that usually woke him in the mornings. When the sun rose, its rays filtered through the smoke, spreading a soft orange glow inside the mineshaft. It was a gentle light, at odds with the despair that was growing in Percy's gut. He was used to that sort of irony, he often sensed some greater power laughing at his struggles.

His whole body hurt. The ankle was the worst, the slightest movement sent pains bolting up his leg, but there wasn't a part of him that didn't seem to have been bruised or grazed or damaged in some way by the fall. He ran his fingers over his face in the places where it stung, found crusts of dried blood embedded with dirt. The wallaby watched from the far corner of the hole. It was a little dark thing, with light coloured stripes along its jaw. Only its ears moved, angling in different directions, searching for a sound that might explain this strange imprisonment.

It was a long, hot day in the shaft. Percy's skin felt smoked, he imagined himself as a Christmas ham, a piece of cured pork. He was grimy and salty and itchy. He downed the water in his flask but it wasn't enough to quench his thirst. He used his knife to dig into the dirt at his side. The soil beneath the surface was cool and slightly damp. He grabbed a handful and held it against his forehead for a second of relief, let its rainy smell carry him away.

When the pressure in his abdomen got too much he unzipped his fly and rolled sideways, pain shooting as he moved. He rested on his hip and his elbow and pointed his stream as far away as he could. But the puddle seeped back and wrapped itself around his hip, an incoming tide of reeking, yellow piss. 'Damn it' he said and rolled onto his back again. He could feel the wallaby's eyes on him, its

wary, doubtful stare.

By the second day he was longing for a smoke, but he'd left the matches in the lean-to. All he could do was lift the tobacco pouch to his face and breathe the raw smell of it into his lungs. It was rich and sweet and it only made his longing worse. He combed his fingers through the loose tobacco and grabbed a little clump. He put it in his mouth and chewed, trying to work up enough saliva to make it swallowable. But his mouth was dry and the tobacco tasted much worse than it smelt. He spat it out and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'Here, you give it a try,' he said, chucking the pouch over towards the wallaby.

A person who had something to live for would've taken his knife and slit that wallaby's throat. He would've sipped on its blood and eaten its flesh. He'd have done anything to stay alive. He would've found a way out of the shaft so he could drag himself back to his family. But Percy wasn't that person. He saw it then, clear as the layers of dirt in the mineshaft wall in front of him.

Going out there to be alone, he'd thought he could sort himself out, start again even. But sitting there in the shaft he realised he'd been wrong. Two options occurred to him: he could sit there dying slowly, passively; or he could take control.

He picked up the knife and ran his finger along the side of the blade, rested it on his wrist. The skin looked so thin there, it was absurd that such a fragile barrier should be enough to contain his life. He could see some bluish veins showing through the papery skin. Two tendons protruded in parallel lines, he'd have to navigate around them. The knife wasn't very sharp, especially after he'd used it to dig around in the dirt. What a fool. He put the tip of the blade in between the two tendons and pressed. A bead of blood appeared and he dragged the knife a few centimetres towards his elbow. He clenched his jaw against the pain of it, unsure what would happen next. He waited. Nothing. He was feeling a bit faint but the cut was hardly bleeding, he looked more closely and it was just a scratch. Pathetic.

He was about to try again when he heard something, a voice,

somewhere up on the surface. The crackle of a two-way radio made him jump.

‘Jesus Bev, there’s nothing left. I mean, everything’s just gone’. It was a woman’s voice.

‘I know, eh. Never seen one this bad before. Don’t think we’re gonna find much’— a second woman.

He dropped the knife and hid his wrist, flustered as a child caught red-handed. His first thought was to crouch quietly in the bottom of the pit and wait while the women passed. But then he heard a moan like the lowing of cattle. The noise formed into a stuttering stream of shouted-out consonants, and then it was his own mouth producing the sound, and he was yelling ‘Here! Down here!’

They’d been beside themselves about the wallaby. They’d called for help and those kids had come and dragged Percy out with all their fancy ropes. Everywhere he’d looked, in every direction, the bush had burned. It was all black and grey, as though the colours of the land had billowed up into the atmosphere along with the smoke. The understorey was gone and the trees were just vertical lines with no canopies. His lean-to must’ve burned. He’d have to start again.
The nurse comes back through the double doors and asks again how long it’s been.

‘Two days, I think,’ says Percy.

‘And how’d it happen?’

‘Went down one of them old mineshafts, you know, out near Rocky Creek.’

The nurse pauses. ‘Right.’ He looks confused, like the details Percy’s giving aren’t quite adding up.

‘I fell,’ says Percy. He can’t think how to make it any clearer. ‘Tryna get away from the fire.’

‘Yes,’ says the nurse. ‘That must’ve been a shock. You know they reckon it started out there.’

‘No, I didn’t know. All I did know was there were flames all round me and I had to run. Middle of the night, it was.’

The nurse looks at Percy’s face for a long moment. Then, without saying anything, he gets up and walks away, back through the dou-

ble doors and out of sight.

What an odd fellow, thinks Percy.

After a few minutes the nurse comes back and heads straight for Percy.

‘O.K.’ he says. ‘Here’s what we’re going to do. We’ll get you down to X-Ray so we can see what’s going on with this ankle. Then we’ll see if we can find a spot for you in the wards.’

‘No,’ says Percy. ‘I don’t want to stay here.’ But already he knows he’s trapped.

‘We need to get you on some IV fluids to rehydrate you. We’ll clean up those wounds too.’

Percy shakes his head. ‘They’re just grazes. I need a bite to eat and some water. A set of crutches and I’ll be on me way.’

‘Listen, I can’t force you to be here,’ says the nurse. ‘But I suggest that you cooperate. It’ll be better for you in the long run. Do you understand?’

Percy’s spent. He nods—‘Alright then.’ He’ll wait for the right moment, when he’s got the crutches, and then he’ll slip away.

The doctor brings a plastic model foot to show Percy the bones of his ankle. He’s been set up in a bed in A ‘n’ E, poked and prodded and hooked up to a drip. His face still stings from whatever they’ve done to his cuts. The only thing he’s asked for, some food, has been refused. They say it’s a precaution, in case he needs surgery, but to Percy it’s a hostile gesture.

The doctor explains that he’s fractured the neck of his Talus. The bone isn’t displaced so he won’t need surgery, but they say he’ll need a cast and he won’t be able to bear weight for a couple of months. Percy doesn’t say anything. He’s staring at the yellow shapes of the model foot, thinking how strange it is that there are bones inside him he doesn’t even know about.

‘Can I’ve something to eat now?’ he asks.

‘Yes, that should be fine. But first I need to put a cast on you.’

‘And then I’ll get some food?’

‘Yes’.

‘Good’.

'I'm going to get you up into a sitting position.'

'Yes.'

'And apply the cast.'

'Good.'

Percy's watching the doctor's hands going round and round his leg with a wet bandage when the little girl reappears. She looks on until the doctor's gone, then steps closer and leans against his bed.

'Did you break your leg?' she asks.

'No,' says Percy, 'my ankle.'

'Oh. Does it hurt?'

'Not too bad.'

'Once I broke my arm and it really, really hurt and then my wrist was really itchy but I couldn't scratch it coz it was inside a cast. And I had to put it in a plastic bag and hold it out of the bath so it didn't get wet. And my brother wrote 'poo' on it and got in heaps of trouble.'

Percy looks at her, stunned for a moment. 'Well,' he says, 'you don't want poo on your cast, do you?' He has no idea where the words have come from, and he's already wishing he hadn't said them when her laugh erupts unchecked. She's delighted and the funny thing is, so is Percy. But he can't think how to keep it going. There's too much noise in here, the beeping machines and rushing staff fracture his train of thought.

'What'you doing here in hospital?' he tries.

'Mum got burnt hands. She needs a bandage.'

'Oh, right.'

'Our house caught fire,' she says. Percy sees that she's trying not to cry. 'My doggy ran away and I don't know where he is. He might be dead.' The tears come. 'Do you think he's still alive?'

'Is he smart?' asks Percy.

'He's very smart. He can go round an obstacle course and he can sit and shake hands and roll over. And he can play soccer; he chases the ball with his nose. His name's Jack and he's white and he's got a black patch on his eye and he's this big' she says, using both hands to outline a small dog in the air.

It sounds like a little shit Jack Russell to Percy, one of those yappy bloody things that think they're ten times bigger than they are. But the girl is looking at him like he has the power to decide her dog's fate.

'Well,' says Percy, 'I reckon if a silly old bugger like me can survive the fire, that clever little doggy of yours has a pretty good chance.'

She smiles and wipes her nose on her sleeve. 'Yeah, he'll be OK. He's a good dog.'

A little while later Percy gets his dinner, the first food he's had in two days. He's just finishing it off when he hears a man say his name.

'Mr. Walters?'

It's a cop. Percy stops chewing as he takes in the uniform. Then he swallows. Why does the cop know his name?

'Who's askin'?'

'Sergeant Bourke. I'd like to have a word with you if you feel up to it.'

Percy puts his knife and fork on the plate and pushes the tray away a bit. 'Fell down a hole, that's all,' he says. 'Don't need no investigating.'

'Yes. I heard. You had an accident out at Rocky Creek? Running from the flames?'

'Yeah,' says Percy, pointing at his cast. 'Went down an old shaft'.

'Just curious as to what you were doing out there.'

'Public land, isn't it? What's wrong with me bein' there?'

'Nothing wrong with being there, Mr Walters,' says the cop. 'You do know there's no camping allowed there, though?'

'No. Didn't see no signs,' says Percy, though that isn't strictly true. He'd spent months disguising his lean-to and it had worked, no one ever bothered him. 'Look, I did camp there for the night,' he says, 'but I won't be back. Don't you worry. It's all burnt now anyway.'

'It's not the camping I'm worried about,' says the cop. 'And yes, I was aware it had been burnt. That's the point.'

Percy frowns at him.

'Nine people died in the fire, Mr. Walters. What do you think of

that?’

Shit, no one had told him that. He gives the meal tray a shove and tries to shift his position in the bed. ‘Same as what anyone would think, I s’pose.’

‘Mr Walters, there’s evidence to suggest the fire started at Rocky Creek. Not far from where you fell, actually.’

Percy doesn’t respond.

The cop clears his throat and continues. ‘At this stage, it looks like it might’ve got going from an unattended campfire. Strong winds came up overnight and the whole place went up, as you know.’

Percy shakes his head, looking down into his lap.

‘Did you have a campfire that night, Mr. Walters?’

Percy is quiet for a moment. Then he speaks, softly, without raising his eyes from his lap. ‘Not a campfire as such, no.’

‘Did you have any kind of fire then?’

Percy goes to speak, then stops.

‘Mr. Walters?’

‘I... I did have a very small fire. Just to heat some dinner. Put it out before I went to sleep, though, always make sure of that,’ he says, smiling as he gestures at his crotch. He looks up at the cop’s stony face.

‘It can’t have started from my fire,’ says Percy. ‘It can’t have been me.’

But he’s sinking—down, down, down. He hits the floor of that big, cold ocean and he knows it in his bones. The cop’s mouth is moving but he hears only buzzing, an out-of-tune ringing in his ears. He stares at the ceiling until his vision goes blank, holds his breath and that’s it, he’s out. The cop won’t get another word out of him now.

It’s night when Percy finally opens his eyes. A series of muffled footsteps pass by in the corridor outside his room. Closer there’s a rhythmic whistling sound. He scans the near-dark of the room and finds it’s coming from the sleeping patient in the next bed.

He grabs the bed rail and pulls himself up so he’s sitting with his legs stretched out in front of him. He touches his wrist, feels the drip

still there, unpeels the tape and slides the cannula out. The rail's going to be a problem, unless he can work out how to put it down. He runs his hand along it and finds the lever, jiggles it a bit and the rail falls with a clang. He freezes, waits, but no one comes. He folds the sheet back and swings his legs slowly over the side of the bed, takes his weight on his arms and lowers himself carefully until his good foot touches the floor. Still holding the bed he tries shifting his weight onto the heel of the cast. It still hurts but it's not too bad, the cast is rigid and it takes the load off his ankle. He takes a step and then another, wobbly as a toddler, his arms held out for balance.

At the doorway, he peers out into the corridor. There's no one in sight but he doesn't like his chances of making it past the desk. If someone sees him, he's looking for the toilet. He starts down the hall. Each time he steps on the cast it makes a dull thumping sound against the lino, then the thump is followed by a slap as he takes the next step on his bare foot. He sneaks a look around the corner and he can't believe his luck. There's no one at the desk and he hears voices from inside a shut-off room. He just keeps going, eyes on the external door—thump, slap, thump, slap—and then he's there. The glass slides open with a mechanical whine and he limps into the night.

Outside there's a warm breeze. It carries fire smells—particles of smoke and traces of burnt things that find their way inside his nose. He tries to walk faster. The gown he's wearing flaps and he reaches his hand behind his back to find it gaping open. The paper underpants he's wearing rustle and chafe—'Jesus Christ, I'm not incontinent,' he'd said when they made him put them on. He'll find some clothes and go to ground.

It takes a good five minutes to travel just one block. He does his best to avoid the streetlights, to skirt around their pools of light. There's an engine sound and a pair of headlights advance from 'round a corner. He melts into the trunk of a street tree, holds his breath and waits as the red lights recede. This part of town is still intact but it's ghostly quiet, he's alone again.

Another block and he thinks he hears a noise. He stops to listen,

relieved that it's not human. There's something whining under a Rhododendron bush. He kneels slowly, putting his hands on the ground to steady himself against the wrench of his ankle. It's dark under there but his ears tell him the thing is within reach. He whistles softly—'Out you come'.

He reaches out and feels a wiry coat, the thing yelps and flinches away from his touch. It's a dog, a small one. 'Come on boy,' he says, patting the ground with his hand. It tries to crawl away and he topples over as he follows, grabbing its fur as he falls. The dog growls and bites at his hand, just mouthing it really, it doesn't hurt. He slides his hand round under its little chest and pulls it towards him, it yelps loudly but he's holding it with both arms now, lying on his side and hugging it against his body. It fights but Percy's hold is firm. Soon it surrenders. Percy struggles and grunts his way out from under the bush and sits himself up. In the light from the street-lamp, he checks over the dog. It stinks—burnt hair and something worse, something rotten. All along one side the hair is gone, its skin is raw and blistered, livid and weeping. The remaining hair is dirty white, over one eye there's a black patch.

Percy thinks of the little girl's tears, the shining trail of snot left on her sleeve. He has no idea where to even begin to look for her. 'Sarah?' he says quietly, then louder. 'Sarah!'

Then it comes to him—at the hospital there are creams and medicines, bandages, people who'll know what to do. He hooks one arm 'round the telegraph pole, clutches the dog against his chest and hauls himself up onto his feet. Cradling the little mutt as gently as he can, he begins to hobble back the way he came.

Amy St Lawrence is a new writer who lives in the Blue Mountains, NSW. She started writing short stories in 2009, during her baby's daytime naps. Her paid employment involves assessing the health of local creeks by looking at what's living in them. Her second baby is due in February 2011. 🐾
