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## Emergency Code Red (or, Always Wonder What Happens Next)

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## **Emergency Code Red<sup>1</sup>** **(or, Always Wonder What Happens Next)**

*Glen Phillips (Edith Cowan University)*

The smoke first. It burst from the bonnet edges and streamed past him on each side of the car. White plumes, then billowing black. He lurched the steering wheel to the left and that put two wheels on to the gravel verge. Braked hard but not so violently as to lose control. That would likely run the car into the ditch as he was still slowing from 110 kilometres per hour. He mightn't ever get out of the car at all if he rolled it. But red flames quickly followed the smoke. He loosened his seat belt. Nothing in the rear vision mirror. Yes, but then no one could come to help him. "I might start a bushfire," he thought. The wheatbelt bush is dry as tinder this time of year. The acrid smoke was choking him.

One hand groped for the door handle while for an instant he let go of the steering wheel with the other. He wanted to throw the car out of gear. Then steadied the wheel again. Muscles in his right leg took the strain against the brake pedal. The heat of the flames came through the windscreen now and thick smoke made it impossible to see the road ahead.

He looked left to the white line in the middle of the bitumen road. Maybe he has slowed enough now to risk jumping out the door. He held it open for an instant ready to roll away from the car as he fell. "My backpack," he thought, but he knew it was too late to scabble for that in the back seat. Whack! A roadside marker post went down in front of the car at the same instant. Images of cars on fire in movies flashed into his head. They always seemed to explode instantly.

Steadying himself with his left hand on the wheel, the other on the door, he pushed with his left foot and jumped out into the smoke and flames, trying to run as fast as the

careering car. It didn't work. He ran like a crazy man but it was useless. He bowled forwards. Now with his hands he tried to keep his body from the road surface. Skin was rasped off knees and palms and then his head hit the road violently. He somersaulted into oblivion.

A dog licking his face woke him up. It seemed to be evening already, or dusk at least. There was a dull glow away to his left.

"You the only bugger in that crate?" an old man's voice full of tobacco and whiskey rasped in his ear.

"I was on my own. What about my car?"

"She's a goner, mate. G'wan, get away, dog. Sorry about him lickin' yer. Means well."

"It's ok. Please, what time is it?"

"Bout six, I'd say. Says here yer name's Ted Knight? Jeez you're carrying wads of money in this wallet of yours."

"It's to pay off our mortgage. I just sold my classic Harley. Did you happen to pull my swag out of the car before it went up?"

"She's apples, mate. It's safe in our ute now for when we take yer into town. Yer gunna need patchin' up and all. Got your mobile phone too. No damage to it even though it was ripped out of yer back pocket. Don't worry, there's no reception for phones around here so we'll look after it 'till you're fixed up. You won't need it."

“So, can you get me to a doctor? I can feel bleeding somewhere. There’s blood all over my hands.”

“Not much left of yer clothes either.”

“Hey, Tony!” another voice called. “Look at the wreck now. She’s flarin’ up again. Nothing could’ve survived in there. Nothing.”

“Probably burn for another hour or more. Still goin’ strong. That’ll be good.”

Ted felt a sudden gust of fear. “I need a doctor, you guys. Could you drop me at the next town? I’m supposed to be back in the city tonight. They’ll come looking for me.”

“Yeah. So what’ll they find?”

Lights red and blue, pulsing vigorously appeared from far up the road. Ted groaned and the other two men seemed to be getting hastily into the utility. But the dog had strayed and while they were whistling for it, the police van drew close enough to prevent their departure.

The police officers leaped and rushed over to where Ted still lay on the bitumen. The sergeant called out to the two men:

“We heard a report of bushfire smoke. The fireys will be along soon. What’s happened here?”

“We just saved the guy’s life,’ Tony called out, hustling back to the prone figure. ‘Dragged ‘im outer the car.’”

“Yeah, yeah, we did,” his companion agreed. “He’s in shock. All mixed up. We grabbed his wallet to identify him. Saved his mobile for him too.”

“Oh yes,” the officer’s companion intervened. “We’ll see what he has to say for himself. Give us his things while we start first aid. The sergeant’s getting on the blower for an ambulance as well.”

“He’s losing consciousness,” announced the sergeant.

“What about us fellers?”

“Wait for the ambulance. Have a few questions for you. Need those fireys here pronto too. If this blaze breaks out into the bush it could run for miles. Or you can come into the station tomorrow morning and give us a proper statement. Prefer that?”

“But we’re on our way. Long way up country. Got a job lined up first thing t’morrer.”

“In that case, best you stay here with us for now and then follow into town with the ambos. Hey, Andrew,” he spoke to the other officer, “put this jacket under his head to keep him off the road. Make sure his airways are open while I grab the first-aid box.”

Headlights suddenly came on in the ute. The dog jumped into the tray as the vehicle slewed around and roared off in the opposite direction.

“Shit! At least we got the poor guy’s wallet and phone. How’s the victim?” He dumped the first-aid bag beside the prone figure. “Damn, the wallet’s empty. I’ll bet there’s no card in the phone, Andrew.”

“No wonder those guys shifted pretty quick. Lucky for this fellow we came when we did, I reckon. I think he’s coming around now.”

“Looks like it. We’ll have to wait and see.”

BYNDERUP TIMES      Monday 12<sup>th</sup>

MYSTERY ROAD ACCIDENT, Sunday 11<sup>th</sup>. Local police attended a road crash and subsequent bushfire near Dundering Siding last night. The lone driver of a small car apparently lost control and rolled the vehicle. The man hasn’t been identified yet. Sergeant Swain and Constable Cullen attended the accident before ambulance and the fire truck arrived. Two unknown men had pulled the driver from the burning car, but drove off before they could be interrogated regarding their good Samaritan efforts. Police say they are on the way to the hospital, despite the best efforts of the St John Ambulance officers. Anyone who witnessed the incident is requested to contact the police.

BYNDERUP TIMES      Saturday 17<sup>th</sup>

VICTIM FINALLY IDENTIFIED, Saturday 17<sup>th</sup>. Sergeant Swain of Bynderup Police Station has informed the TIMES that the mystery victim of last Monday’s Dundering Siding road crash and robbery has been identified from license plates as a Mr Ted Knight, funeral parlour director of Tenterfield 50kms north of Avonville but still in Bynderup Shire. His relatives (we understand an elderly mother and younger brother) have been notified and his body will be released by the coroner to the relatives next Monday. The two doggers who claimed to have removed his body from the burning car but who evidently made off with Mr Knight’s usual considerable stash of cash and credit cards and his mobile phone card are in police custody. Apparently they made good use of his credit cards in several service stations, supermarkets and pubs before the heavy hand of the law caught up with them.

<sup>1</sup>Code red is designated for emergencies involving smoke and fire.

**Glen Phillips** is an Honorary Professor at ECU, Director of its International Centre for Landscape and Language, Patron and founder of the KS Prichard Writers Centre and founding member of the Peter Cowan Writers Centre. Some 35 collections of his poems have been published and he is represented in more than 25 anthologies and in many national and international journals. His latest books of poetry include *Six Seasons: Poems of Australia and China* (2012), *Alpi e Prati: Poems of North and South Italy* (2013), *Tides and Groundwater* (2014) and *Land Whisperings* (2015).