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NOAH'S CART

The fire started without warning. A tree sitting in a farm paddock was struck by a bolt of lightning, the trunk split in two, and half of it fell smoking and sparking onto dry grass. This caught light and began to spread, driven by strong wind. Before it could be stopped the fire had skipped across the open fields and was soon into the surrounding bushland. The fire-fighters came, of course, but by the time they did the flames were everywhere and were impossible to control. There was nothing for it but to tell the people living in the area to leave before the fire reached their homes. Most did, taking whatever they could carry in their cars; in particular their pets. Some of the smaller animals, unfortunately, either couldn't be found, or were frightened and ran off. As for cattle, sheep and the like, all the owners could do was open gates in the fences to let them escape on their own.

A few people actually stayed to try saving their houses until the fire came too close; then they had no option but to flee. One such person was Mabel. She lived alone and had no children; at least not people children. She did, however, have pets - an old dog, two cats, four chickens and a tortoise; and these, as far as Mabel was concerned, were all the family she needed. There was also Noah who was hardly a pet, but he was still part of the family. Noah was the horse that pulled the wooden cart which Mabel used around her farm.

Because of the fire risk, Mabel had hitched Noah up to the cart and had put a few things into it like spare clothing for herself, blankets for the animals, plus water and food for everyone. At first she'd thought they would be quite safe because it looked as if the fire was heading away from her little farmhouse. Even so, she wasn't taking any chances and decided to put the smaller animals in the cart just in case the wind changed direction suddenly. The dog, cats and chickens were no problem; but the tortoise had gone on the wander. She found him in his favourite spot chewing on a lettuce leaf in her vegetable garden. Picking him up she said: "Come along Tyrone; and seeing as you've started it we may as well bring the lettuce. It will give you something to eat on the trip if we have to leave."

Taking him back to the cart she spoke to her family: "You lot stay in the cart; and Noah, you wait for me. I'm just going to drive over to our neighbours to make sure they're alright. I won't be long." Following a quick check on the fire which still didn't seem to be getting any closer, Mabel jumped into her car and drove off.

The pets did as they were told and stayed put. Tyrone carried on munching his lettuce and old Judy the dog had actually gone to sleep. Under normal circumstances the cats would have too, because that's what cats do most of the time; but they were pretty sure being put in the cart and being left there was anything but normal. "What do you reckon it's all about, Primm?" one cat asked the other.

"Wouldn't have a clue, Proppa," replied Primm. "We can't be going to that horrible vet because Mabel always takes us in the car."

Noah heard them talking and said: "Surely you know about the fire."

"Fire!" meowed Proppa in surprise. "No-one said anything about a fire. What's a fire, anyway?" She couldn't see much by peering through a gap between the planks, so she clawed her way up the side of the cart, sat on the top board and looked around. "Is that a fire?" she asked on spotting a red glow and lots of smoke in the distance.

Noah was also looking at it. "Sure is," he answered. "While I've been watching it seems to have turned and is coming towards us now; and I can smell smoke." Glancing along the track that led to the road he added: "I hope Mabel comes home soon."

They waited and waited, keeping a wary eye on the fire which was advancing forever closer. By then Noah was quite worried because the smoke was thickening. Following a snort to clear the smell from his nose, he announced: "I reckon it's getting too dangerous to hang around. I'm going to move us out of here."

"Didn't Mable tell you to stay put?" squawked one of the chickens, and the other hens began cackling in agreement.

"Yes she did," confirmed Noah, "But the way I see it, Mabel sort-of left me in charge; and as I'm the one pulling the cart it's my job to take you all somewhere safe."

By then, both cats were sitting on the top boards of the cart watching the approaching smoke. "Sounds good to me," said Primm.

"Okay, so which way are you going to take us, Noah?" asked Proppa.

"Just for now, away from the smoke," replied the horse. "Hold tight everyone," and he began walking, drawing the cart along behind him. At first he stayed on the tracks and lanes; but strangely the fire seemed to know this and kept changing direction as if it was following them. A couple of times he turned off to cross some paddocks. The fire obviously noticed and swept sideways in front of him. The only way to go then was to head for the bush.

Not far into the trees the cart came to a halt. "Why have you stopped?" asked Primm.

"I think we might be trapped," declared Noah in a worried tone. "The fire's beaten us. It's already burnt through here: the ground up ahead's all black."

"What about the trees?" woofed Judy, her nose poking out through a gap. "They aren't on fire, are they?"

"Doesn't look like it," replied the horse. "Some are smoking around the bottom, though."

"I know a bit about bushfires," said the dog. "Obviously the fire's already been through here meaning there'll be nothing left on the ground to catch light; and as long as the trees aren't burning it should be safe for us to go through."

Judy's suggestion seemed like a plan: at least, it was the only one they had; so Noah started off cautiously, his hoofs puffing up clouds of ash as they touched the burnt ground. They hadn't gone far when a voice was heard calling to them from a tree above: "Hey there, excuse me," something squeaked. "I'm stuck up here, and my friend's in the next tree. We didn't want to come down in case we burned our feet. Do you reckon you can help us, please?"

Judy looked up and spotted something grey and furry clinging to a branch in the tree above. "It's a possum, Noah," she woofed. "If you pull the cart underneath the tree it could jump in."

The possum must have heard and asked: "What about my friend?"

"You first," said Noah, "Then we'll get your friend."

It was as well that the cart was a big one, because as Noah drew it through the burnt bushland they came across more creatures which had run in fear of the fire and had been separated from their families. Three geese were wandering aimlessly and a peacock with singed tail-feathers had joined them for company. "Come on, climb aboard," said Judy. The four birds flapped their wings and were soon in the cart with the others. They found a Koala stuck in a tree, afraid to come down like the possums. Noah pulled the cart right alongside the tree, so that the Koala was able to climb down the trunk and grab hold of the top plank. Still in the forest they found more waifs and strays. The two goannas and an echidna were a bit of a problem and weren't able to climb into the cart. They had to walk behind for a while, which

wasn't too bad seeing as Noah was going slowly to let them keep up; and at least they weren't on their own anymore.

Once beyond the far side of the trees they were into farmland again. The fire had got there before them and nearly all the paddocks had been burnt black. Some animals had managed to stay safe and had grouped together by a dam. There was a calf, a sheep and a lamb. Although the sheep wasn't their mother, she had been looking after both of the youngsters. Even though there wouldn't have been room in the cart for them, Noah invited them to tag along behind and they were all happy to do so. In another paddock they came across a billy goat and, after warning it not to eat everything in sight, Judy said: "You're welcome to come too, but we need you to do something first." On the dog's instructions, the goat lowered his head so that the echidna could shuffle onto his horns. Then he simply went to the side of the cart and the echidna squeezed through a gap in the planks. There was much grumbling to begin with, mainly because some of the others kept getting pricked on the echidna's spines; but once it had huddled down in a corner it was easy enough to avoid. Next came the goannas, and they too went from the goat's horns into the cart through a gap in the planks.

As well as the cart, Noah had quite a procession following along behind; and it was growing all the time. Another sheep joined the convoy, along with a cow and an orphaned Joey which had been adopted by a kangaroo who had lost her own. Swimming around all on their own in a dam were four ducklings and they were helped into Noah's cart where one of the chickens took care of them. And just for good measure a lone magpie had offered her help as a scout to fly ahead and look for a safe way though the burnt countryside. All was going well until they came upon a car.

It must have run off the dirt track and was tilted sideways, stuck in a ditch. Two men were trying unsuccessfully to push it out; then they saw Noah's cart plodding towards them. One of the men said: "Hey, that's a bit of luck. Maybe we can cadge a lift."

The other was frowning. "Doesn't look like there's anyone driving it," he commented; then he added: "We've been talking about getting a cart for the farm, and here's one for the taking." This was not a nice thing to do; but when the other man agreed it was clear neither of them were nice at all; and when he said: "And it comes with its own livestock." Walking to peer into the cart he added: "There's enough tucker in here to last weeks. How do you fancy roast goose for dinner?"

The animals in and behind Noah's cart had heard the men talking; but until then none of them understood any of their words; except one. Judy knew the word 'dinner', and she saw the cruel look in the man's eyes as he said it. With a few short woofs and growls the dog told the others what she suspected: "I think they're going to steal the cart with us in it. Time for action, people! Make sure we don't go down without a fight."

In moments the men were ducking and stumbling as the animals set on them. They had possums on their heads pulling their hair; the cats spat and scratched; the goat was butting them, as were the sheep; and the kangaroo waited her turn to hop in and give them a kick. Not wanting to miss the fun, the geese flew out of the cart and were hissing loudly as they pecked the men's ankles. The magpie swooped from above, and the chickens might have liked to do the same but thought it was safer to remain in the safety of the cart just cackling and carrying on. What with Judy jumping out barking and snarling, the cow mooing and the lamb bleating it was Bedlam. It soon became pretty clear to the men that they stood no chance against the animal attack. They turned tail and ran at full pelt along the track. Noah watched until they had disappeared over a rise. "Well done, guys," he said. "I don't reckon they'll be back; but I think it might be best if we don't follow them. We'll have to go the other way."

Noah turned the cart around and began trudging along the track. The journey seemed endless and the horse had no idea where they were or where he should go next. The dirt track did, however, lead to a proper road, so he decided to continue along it in the hopes of coming across some nicer people than the men they had chased off. At one point a really loud noise

had them all looking up into the sky. It was a helicopter; not that anyone in Noah's convoy knew that; but when it flew away they stopped worrying about it; until minutes later it came back. The strange flying thing didn't seem to do much except hover above them for a while before flying off again.

A short time later Noah halted on seeing something big and red coming along the road towards them. It was quite fearsome and had flashing lights on the top. The fire truck came to a standstill alongside them and a man in the cab leaned out of the window to look into the cart. Next thing, a radio could be heard blaring: "The choppers were right. We've found them on the road. Can you get a message through to Mabel; and tell her to expect more than just the horse and cart and a few animals – this here's like a mobile farmyard."

As soon as she got the message, Mabel drove to meet Noah. "My word," she said on seeing the animals, "You have quite a collection, Noah. Follow me and we'll get you all home."

With Mabel driving her car slowly in front, Noah pulled his cart-load of animals while those on foot trudged behind. News must have spread fast, because on the way they passed groups of people standing at the side of the road waving and cheering and clapping. Also, cars and fire trucks and police vehicles beeped their horns as they drove past. It took a while, but soon the procession was approaching the gate to Mabel's farm; and once they were part way along the track they could see the house which the fire-fighters had managed to save from the fire. Needless to say, Mabel took all of the animals into her family; and, not surprisingly, coming together the way they had, they already got on well; and continued to live happily for years to come.

Many stories were told of the great fire that had devastated forests and farms alike. Listeners would sit in wonder hearing about acts of bravery by fire-fighters; and about amazing rescues of people by complete strangers who put their own lives at risk to save others; but there was no story that captured the imagination like the saga of Noah and his cart. It was the stuff legends were born of. The tale of a horse dragging a cart on his own without a driver through the fire-ravaged countryside, gathering animals of all kinds along the way and bringing them to safety; this was wonderful. And although it was hard to believe, everyone knew it to be the honest truth; and as such the story of Noah's cart was destined to go down in history.