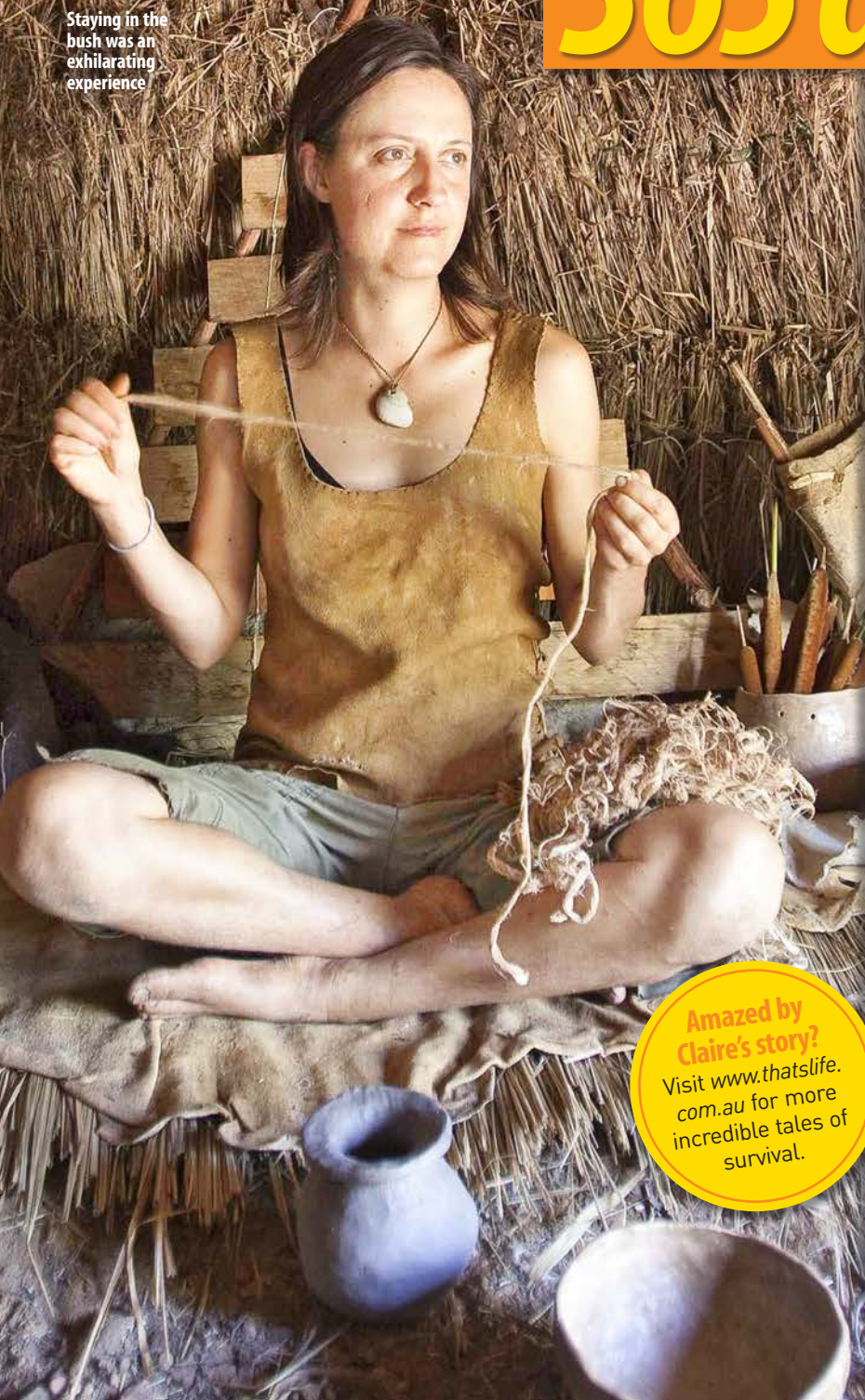


that's courage

I survived

365 days in the wild

Staying in the bush was an exhilarating experience



Amazed by Claire's story? Visit www.thatslife.com.au for more incredible tales of survival.

Claire walked away from her chaotic city life to spend a year at the mercy of the rugged Australian bush

Claire Dunn, 35, Newcastle, NSW

My heart thumped in my chest as I took in my surroundings. There was nothing but dense bushland at every turn. It was the height of summer, and out here in the wilderness, the insects hummed, birds chirped and tree branches swayed slightly in the gentle breeze.

You might think I should be panicking, desperate to find my way out of my daunting predicament. But instead, I dropped my small bundle of belongings and contemplated my new home. For the next 365 days, this was it. And there was just one thing on my to-do list. Survival.

I barely had to think about that back in my old life. If I was thirsty, I'd simply turn on the tap for a drink. If I was hungry, I'd head to the fridge...

There always seemed to be more important things to worry about, as I juggled my work, social engagements and relationships. With not enough minutes in each day for those, time to myself was virtually non-existent. And that got me thinking.

In my job as a campaigner for the Wilderness Society, I worked hard to explain to the world just how important the environment is. But was I being hypocritical? Aside from the odd camping trip, I'd never really relied on the great outdoors to live.

But then one day, as if by fate, I received an email offering a course on wilderness survival skills. The thought really appealed to me, and so began my project to spend a year living in the Aussie bush, a bit like the well-known TV adventurer Bear Grylls. When I told my parents, Bob and Pauline, both 69, of my plans, they were shocked.

'Surely you're kidding?' Dad questioned.

'I'm not!' I replied, and knowing how important my dream was, they offered me their full support. I knew I couldn't just pitch up in the wilderness

without being prepared though.

So, I booked a spot on a bush survival course in the United States, reading, studying and getting myself in top physical health. Then in January 2010, I was finally ready.

During my project, I would be one of several people living solo in the bush somewhere between Coffs Harbour and Grafton in NSW. But we'd only ask for help by calling out a special signal – 'coo-eeee' – if absolutely necessary.

As I made my way to my secluded spot and dropped my bag, I wondered if I could really see this through. Alone among the trees, all of my senses were assaulted. The mosquitos and flies were drawn to my skin like magnets and the cicadas sounded like jackhammers in my ears.

This was all I had. It was just me and the wilderness – and that first night was utterly petrifying. I had no computer, no TV and no mobile phone.

I've always had an intense fear of the dark. In the bush that night, with just my torch as a light source, I flinched at every noise, imagining it was a wild dog or venomous snake.

I really needed a shelter. So the next day, instead of spending my time replying to emails and scheduling meetings, I was

gathering natural materials to make my new home. I didn't have a chainsaw, so it was all down to what I could achieve with my bare hands.

It took me two months, but eventually I'd made myself a sturdy shelter of saplings tied together with handmade string and thatched grass over the top. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

One night, curled up in my swag, thoughts of my friends and family filled my mind. *Have I really made the right decision?* I wondered.

There are four basic needs for survival – shelter, water, fire and food. I told myself that as long as I had those, I'd make it through. But while most of us are used to having easy access to fire – you light a match, flick a lighter or turn on the stove – out there I had nothing but two sticks that I needed to rub together so quickly that a spark managed to ignite.

Each day it tested my patience. But eventually, despite the excruciatingly raw blisters on my hands, smoke began to rise, and then there was a flame.

I treated the fire as though it was my child. I had to nurture it with all the love and attention it deserved. And in the end the flame rewarded me with a well-earned cuppa, although it had

taken me four hours to make. I'd never appreciated anything so much before. *Life at home is so easy*, I thought.

But my outdoors adventure was about to get emotionally and psychologically harder. One day, I found a wallaby caught in a trap I had set. Having lived off mostly oats, rice, lentils and bush tucker, it was a shock to see meat again. It was extremely confusing and upsetting too.

I was used to buying protein at the supermarket. Now I had to face a harsh reality. This is where our food comes from.

Lugging the wallaby all the way back to my camp, I sobbed with each step. 'Thank you so much,' I wept. The food chain suddenly made much more sense to me. Using every bit of the animal I could, I finally understood what it was like to live completely off the land.

When winter hit, I seriously thought about throwing it all in, it was just so cold! One day I fell into a creek. Drenched and shivering, my little fire once again came to my rescue.

Then, I had to get used to just being, doing whatever I felt like doing. It was a foreign concept to me, but I soon found a sitting spot where each day I'd spend an hour observing the wildlife in its natural habitat.

But sometimes the creatures I came across weren't so friendly. One night, I woke to a

rustling in my shelter. Turning on my headlamp, I spotted a venomous snake slithering into my mosquito net! Bolting into the darkness, I waited for my visitor to see itself out. I didn't get much sleep that night.

When my 12 months were up, I'd become a completely different person. I'd missed out on so much – birthdays, weddings, and even the appointment of Australia's first female Prime Minister.

But I'd gained so much too. An ability to enjoy solitude and know what it is to love the land.

That's why I've now written a book about my year in the bush, and these days, I spend my time telling people about the exhilarating experience. I hope to encourage others to do what I did, even if it's just for a week.

A lot passes us by these days. But going into the wild can teach you so much. ■

As told to Kim Bonett

Claire's book, *My Year Without Matches*, \$29.99, published by Black Inc, is in bookstores now.



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\$600

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PHOTOS: AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC



I learnt how to weave baskets to catch fish



It was always a struggle to get a fire lit



Me with another participant, Nikki – we ate a variety of bush foods

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