

Through The Fire

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 09 January 2018 11:48 - Last Updated Wednesday, 10 January 2018 09:00



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My sister's house burned down during Christmas dinner.

I was halfway through my strawberry-pretzel salad when somebody at our party - there were 28 of us, both family and friends - casually commented, "Looks like they're having a smoke problem in the kitchen."

I glanced over from my place at the dining room table, and sure enough, I saw a bit of smoke wafting from a cabinet - just beyond the breakfast table, where others were enjoying their feast. Seemed odd, but people were milling around in the kitchen - as people will on Christmas Day - and they appeared to have the situation under control.

I'd just tucked into my mom's pork tenderloin (with her famous Jezebel sauce) when I heard my husband announce from the breakfast nook that we should all grab our coats and leave the house as quickly as possible.

"There's a fire," he said, rather calmly. My husband is nothing if not calm.

We did as he directed, of course. But flush with wine and food and yuletide cheer, I think we all assumed this was a minor inconvenience . . . that we'd be filing back into the house a few minutes later for dessert.

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We were wrong.

I wish I had the mental clarity - and the emotional strength - to convey just *how* wrong, but in truth, everything is a blur . . . a scene from a hazy, half-forgotten disaster movie . . . or somebody else's long-ago, far-away nightmare. People yelling "Call 911!" . . . My brother-in-law screaming at me to "get those cars out of the driveway, Margaret!" (How? There are four cars, none of them mine!) . . . Somebody else screaming, "Get away from the house! It might explode!" . . . Then, "Where's Amelia?!" ("Here I am, Mom!") . . . And another "Call 911!"

I did, with frozen fingers, spitting words of panic into my phone. "Ma'am, they're on their way," I was assured.

And they were, but it was too late. Within seconds, that little bit of kitchen smoke had become thick, black fog oozing from the roofline, and then flames were shooting from windows - livid, furious flames - as we ran around frantically, collecting dogs and moving cars and helplessly watching what our eyes could barely comprehend. The fire trucks were there in six minutes - it felt like six excruciating hours - but in that time, my sister and her husband lost virtually everything they owned. Their house is brick, so it didn't actually "burn down." It just burned out.

As I stood in the cold December air - my arms around my little sister, my sweet Noel, who'd left without her coat - one of the firemen told her she might want to turn around and face the other direction. "We have to destroy your house to put out the fire, ma'am. Most people don't like to watch." That's when the men took to the roof with their hatchets.

This entire scenario - from pork tenderloin to hatchets - took place in about eight minutes. My mind is still protecting me from the full impact of those minutes, I think. Hence, the blur.

In my sister's beautiful home - "the perfect party house," I always called it - were a beloved portrait of my brother-in-law's late father, several paintings by my mother, my grandmother's china, and a thousand little reflections of my sister's marvelous taste. There were thirteen creches, a Christmas tree filled with ornaments collected over many years, a copy of "Profiles in Courage" signed by John F. Kennedy, and dozens of family photos.

All gone.

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My sister and brother-in-law were amazingly philosophical, right from the get-go. "It's just stuff," said Barney. "We had too much, anyway," said Noel. They were splendid and courageous and downright heroic. After all, they said, everybody got out of the house safely - including their three dogs - which was a miracle in itself. There was so much to celebrate.

But it was Christmas. And it was cold outside. And they couldn't curl up "at home." They didn't even have anything to curl up *in* because they'd lost all their clothes. They weren't complaining, but I was distraught.

The day after the fire, Noel and Barney came out to Mom and Dad's to spend the night with us visiting SC relatives - they'd stayed with neighbors the night before, to be near their house as the fire was extinguished - and she told me about the stranger in the parking lot at Target that morning who'd hugged her and handed her a hundred dollar bill. And about the sweet neighbor who'd walked over with tears in her eyes and a \$25 gift certificate to Cracker Barrel. As the week unfolded, friends and strangers alike showered them with casseroles, clothing, shoes, wine, and so much love.

"People have been so wonderful," Noel told me. "I am just overwhelmed."

Lord knows she deserves it. If the Beatles were right - that the love you take is equal to the love you make - then my sister's just getting back what she's put in. A deeply kind and generous person, she's one of those folks who would - as they say - give you the shirt off her back. And often does. Literally. Every time I compliment something she's wearing - a sweater, a scarf - Noel tries to give it to me, right there on the spot. In fact, a few nights before Christmas, I raved about a cape she was wearing, and she said, "Here, take it. I can easily get another one." I declined - the number of her clothes now hanging in my closet is embarrassing - but after the fire, I regretted turning her down.

"I wish I'd taken that cape," I told my mom that night, still weepy. "If I had, it would be here now, and I could give it back to her. And she'd have something to keep her warm."

When Noel walked into Mom's the next afternoon wearing that cape, I couldn't believe my eyes! Apparently, her brother-in-law Houston had grabbed it from a hook on his way out the door - along with Barney's good winter coat - and the cape had survived! It's one of the few things that did.

"It's weird," Noel told me that night. "The day before Christmas, when I was getting our house ready for the party, I kept thinking: *Why* do we have all this stuff? Why do I have so many wine glasses and so much china? Why do I have 13 creches, for God's sake?! I can't even find room to display them all! And why, oh why, do I have so many clothes in my closet, when I wear the same three or four outfits over and over? It's ridiculous that we have so much stuff! It's absurd."

She had determined, right then and there, to "pare down" in 2018. To live lighter and more simply. You could say it was something like a New Year's resolution.

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Apparently, the Universe approved. Though, if you ask me, it could have sent a more subtle endorsement. She was already convinced.

Today, as I write, we're almost two weeks past the fire. I've stopped seeing flames every time I close my eyes, and I no longer burst into tears at random intervals throughout the day. Outside, there are four inches of snow on the ground, and sparkling icicles hang from the roof of my Lowcountry home. Who could have imagined it a week ago, this healing blanket of snow? Life takes such turns.

In Alabama, my sister and her husband are back at work - she's a hospital administrator and he's a lawyer - and they've settled into the rental where they'll live while their house is being rebuilt. They have temporary furniture - "it looks like a bachelor pad over here," she tells me - and while it's not exactly *home*, it's comfortable. Best of all, there's a fenced-in yard for the dogs. "That was the most important thing," she says.

This season, my family learned a lot about the most important things - mainly, that they're not things. The Grinch tried to steal our Christmas. But you know how that story ends.