

The Home That Fire Built

By Tara Lynn Thompson



The vinyl seat was freezing. Against my legs it chapped with a single-minded bitterness. Though I struggled against the gnawing cold, I knew the bench seat was a refuge. That 1976 Chrysler, where my family and I huddled inside, protected us from the swirling ash of our lives collecting like snowflakes on the windshield.

It was winter, but that wasn't snow. Those were pieces of our house, flecks of our home, shriveled bits of what had minutes earlier been a window drapery, our living room couch, my parents' wedding photos, and my favorite stuffed toy. The tongue of that fire lapped everything up until not a drop remained.

It was the winter of '79, December specifically, and days before Christmas. Instead of trimming the tree, watching *It's a Wonderful Life* or decorating imperfect gingerbread men, we huddled in that vehicle while numbed by cold and shock. My young mother had gone silent. Her eyes were hypnotized by the bigger than life jack-o-lantern. Outside, barefoot and nearly naked, my father beat back the beast with the only tools he possessed – a water hose and a warrior's spirit.

Eventually, not even the fire department could stop what an ember had begun. The sun had set on our family home but would rise on a pile of ash. Only two things would survive that inferno: a heap of twisted coins and our lives. The coins would live in a Mason jar beside my parents' nightstand. We would simply live.

On that infamous night, fire prioritized everything. It put everything in our lives in perspective. What could be destroyed was. What couldn't be destroyed was refined. We walked away with the pajamas on our backs and faith under our feet.

There is no reason we should have survived. Smoke had already done its business. We were unconscious, lost to sleep and the world. Yet God had other plans. He roused my father, a heavy sleeper before that night and never again since, who led us out through the only escape left – a window and then off the porch roof. I can still see him, distinctly in my mind's eye, beckoning me to trust him and jump through the night into his arms.

My father had built that house with his bare hands. Now 64 instead of 32, he is building again. It's another home, on another foundation, on new soil, only mere miles from the original family estate. He hammers and paints, measures and weighs, builds one room at a time from nothing. His skill is immaculate. His devotion total. His goal is a home with a better floor plan than the first, more open space, fewer walls, more window light, and everything surrounded by spectacular views.

That has been God's plan all along, too. Not simply for a new house but for our very being. He constantly removes what is unsustainable, what isn't eternal, what can be destroyed easily with the flash of a match. Then he builds a brand new home, one with more freedom in the floor plan and more natural light.

Since that day, nothing has been the same. It changed everything. Pictures were forever lost. Family heirlooms destroyed. Security—in anything but God—gone. We lost everything, while also finding it. God redeemed it all, bit by bit, piece by piece, one restored night's sleep at a time.

What I've learned is that God is a relentless rebuilder of lives. He incorporates so much detail, so much exactness, it's often difficult to see the big picture, to stand back and admire the massive roofline.

That's when I go back home to a rolling stretch of land just off Lake Road and remind myself I'm God's work in progress. On most days, I can catch a glimpse of a familiar white-haired gentleman whistling contentedly from the rafters while he hammers away.