

THE BEST CHRISTMAS I NEVER HAD

By MaryJanice Davidson

My sister, Yvonne, was fourteen the year our home and everything in it was destroyed. I was seventeen. Our home was heated by a wood-burning stove, and every fall, my family and I would mark dead trees, cut them down, haul the wood and stack it in the basement. The week before Christmas, the basement was half full of dry wood.

Yvonne and I were home from school, and she did as either of us had done a thousand times before; checked the furnace, tossed a few more logs on the fire and slammed the door shut.

At the time, I was upstairs sulking. I had a sink full of dishes to wash, homework to tackle and my grandfather, after a lonely day at home, wouldn't leave me alone. Stomping around the kitchen, listening to him chatter, I thought about how I couldn't wait to get out of this house, this town. *Lightning could strike this very spot and I wouldn't care.* Or so I thought.

The house seemed a little smoky, but that wasn't unusual. It often became that way after the furnace had a few new logs to chew up. I simply waved the smoke away and kept doing dishes and daydreaming of getting away from my family. My sister's cats were no help; they were as starved for affection as Grandpa, and kept twining around my ankles.

My sister wandered in and said, "Don't you think it's a little too smoky in here?"

I shrugged sullenly and kept washing dishes. But after another minute, we knew something was wrong. The smoke was much too thick. My sister and I looked at each other, then at

our grandfather. He was the adult, but he lived with us because he couldn't take care of himself. If there were decisions to be made, my sister and I—high school students—would make them. The thought was daunting, to say the least.

Without a word to each other, we went outside and opened the garage door (foolish in retrospect) and stared in disbelief as smoke and flames boiled out.

We had no time for tears or hysterics. That would come later. Instead, we both turned and ran up the hill. My sister shot through the kitchen door and raced for Grandpa's coat while I searched frantically for my keys. "There's a fire, Grandpa," I said abruptly. *Where in the world had I put my purse?* "We have to get out."

"Oh, Okay," he agreed. Amiable as a child, Grandpa stood still while my sister jerked him into his coat. She made sure he was warm and tightly bundled, forced warm slippers on his feet and hustled him out the door. I was so busy wondering where my keys were and trying the phone, which was dead, I never noticed that in her great care to make sure our grandfather was protected from the elements, she had neglected her own coat and boots.

I glanced out the window, blinking from the smoke. December in Minnesota was no joke...and no place for two teenagers and an old man to await help. If I could find my keys, I could get back down to the garage and probably, if the flames hadn't spread that far, back the van out of the garage. We could wait for help in relative comfort, and at least my mom's van could be saved.





Memory flashed; I had tossed my purse in my room when I'd come home. My room was at the end of a long hallway, far from the kitchen. Daughter and granddaughter of professional firefighters, I should

have known better. But things were happening so quickly—my little sister and my grandfather were standing in the snow, shivering—I had to get the van. So I started for my room, the worst decision I've ever made.

The smoke was gag-inducing, a thick gray-black. It smelled like a thousand campfires and I tried not to think about what was being destroyed: my family's pictures, their clothes, furniture. I'd gone three steps and couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't breathe. *How was I going to make it all the way to my room?*

I wasn't, of course. I instantly knew two things: if I went down that hallway, I would die. Number two, what was I still doing in this inferno? Ten-year-olds were taught better. My sister was probably terrified, and in another moment, she'd come after me. How stupid could I be?

I stumbled back to the kitchen, took one last glance around my home, then went out into the snow.

Yvonne was sobbing, watching our house burn to the foundation. Grandpa was patting her absently. "That's what insurance is for," he said. A veteran of the New York City Fire Department, I couldn't imagine how many house fires he had fought. For the first time, I could see him as a real person and not my aged, feeble grandfather who took up entirely too much of my time with his endless pleas for me to sit down and talk to him.

"I'm going to the neighbors' to call for help," Yvonne said abruptly. She was wearing a sweater, jeans and slippers. I was in sweat pants, a T-shirt and socks. The closest neighbor was down the length of our driveway and across the highway, about a mile.

"Okay," I said. "Be careful crossing the..." But she was gone, already running through the snow and down the driveway.

Then I remembered Yvonne's three cats, which were, I guessed, trapped in the house. *When she remembered them*, I thought, *she would go right out of her mind.*

It seemed she was only gone for a moment before I saw her puffing up the driveway. "I called," she gasped, "they're on their way."

"You should have stayed with the neighbors and gotten warm," I said, mad at myself because I hadn't told her to stay put.

She gave me a look. "I couldn't leave you out here in the cold."



"Actually, I'm not that..." I began, when suddenly Yvonne clapped her hands to her face and screamed.

"Oh, no, the cats!" she shrieked, then burst into hoarse sobs.

"It's okay, Yvonne, it's okay, I saw them get out," I said frantically, reaching for her. I could tell she didn't believe me, but she didn't say anything more, just wept



steadily and ignored my fervent assurances—my lies.

As it swiftly grew dark, our burning house lit up the sky. It was as beautiful as it was awful. And the smell...to this day, whenever someone lights a fire in a fireplace, I have to leave the room briefly. A lot of people find fireplaces soothing, but to me the smell of burning wood brings back the sense of desolation and the sound of my sister's sobs.

We could hear sirens in the distance and moved out of the way as two fire trucks and the sheriff pulled in. The sheriff screeched to a halt and beckoned to us. In another minute he was talking to my grandfather while Yvonne and I sat in the back of the police car, getting warm.

After a long moment, Yvonne sighed. "I just finished my Christmas shopping yesterday."

I snorted...and the snort became a giggle, and the giggle bloomed into a laugh. That got my sister going, and we laughed until we cried and then laughed some more.

"I got you the CD you wanted," I told her.

"Really?" she said. "I bought you a new Walkman."

We listed all the things we had bought for friends and family that were now burning to cinders. Instead of being depressing, it was probably the highlight of the evening. The sheriff interrupted our spiritual gift-giving to open the door and say, "Your parents are here."

We scrambled out and raced down the driveway. If I live to be one thousand, I'll never forget my mother's face at that moment:

bloodless and terrified. She saw us and opened her arms. We hurled ourselves at her, though we were both considerably taller than she was and nearly toppled her back into the snow. Dad looked us over, satisfied too that we weren't hurt, and some of the tension went out of his shoulders. "What are you crying about?" he asked, pretending annoyance. "We've got insurance. And now we'll get a new house for Christmas."

"Dad...for Christmas...I got you those fishing lures you wanted but..."

He grinned. "That reminds me. I picked up your presents on the way home." He stepped to the truck and pulled out two garment bags. Inside were the gorgeous jackets Yvonne and I had been longing for since we'd fallen in love with them at the mall.

We shrugged into them, ankle-deep in snow, while the house crackled and burned in front of us. It was a strange way to receive a Christmas present, but neither of us was complaining.

"We'll have to come back here tomorrow," Dad said. "It's going to be depressing and stinky and muddy and frozen and disgusting and sad. Most of our stuff will be destroyed. But they're only things. They can't love you back. The important thing is that we're all okay. The house could burn down a thousand times and I wouldn't care, as long as you guys were all right."

He looked at us again and walked away, head down, hands in his pockets. Mom told us later he had driven ninety miles an hour once he'd seen the smoke, that they both gripped the other's hand while he raced to the house. Not knowing if we were out safe was the worst moment of her life.



Later we found out the pipe leading from the furnace to the wall had collapsed, spilling flaming coals all over our basement. If it had happened at 2:00 A.M., we all would have died of smoke inhalation. In less than half an hour, our house transformed from a safe haven to a death trap. Asleep, we would have had no chance.

We lived in a motel for more than a month, and we spent Christmas Day in my grandmother's crowded apartment eating take-out because she was too tired to cook. For Christmas, Yvonne and I got our jackets and nothing else. My parents got nothing except the headache

of dealing with insurance companies. All the wonderful things my family had bought for me had been destroyed in less time than it takes to do a sink full of dishes. But through it all I had gained long-overdue appreciation for my family. We were together. That was really all that mattered.

I'll always remember it as the best Christmas I never had.

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