

Hope Among The Ashes

By

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“We must never lose hope! These are dark times for our people and for our country, but hope still remains. Hope is all we have, and hope is all we will ever need.”

My eyes drifted away from the preacher toward the window of the small country church. The rays of the summer sun danced across the stained glass window and illuminated a myriad of colors. It wasn't quite noon yet, but already the temperature outside had crept into the low nineties.

I wiped a bead of sweat from my forehead. The air conditioner was supposedly working this week, but it had to be as hot inside as it was outside. I did my best to ignore the heat. Instead I gradually became aware of the wooden pew that was digging into my back. I shifted my position and accidentally elbowed Samantha in the process.

My older sister gave me a glare, and I quickly whispered an apology. She eyed me suspiciously for a second or two before turning back around. I glanced over at Aunt Judy who was sitting on the other side of Sam. Her graying blonde hair had been brushed back neatly and now fell lightly against her shoulders. She was dressed in the same sky blue dress that she wore every Sunday. Two matching gold loops hung from her ears.

On the other side of her, Uncle William's wheelchair was even with the end of the pew. He now sat there fanning himself with the church bulletin. His left leg was missing up to the knee because of the stray grenade back in Vietnam. Almost thirty years had passed since then, but hardly a day went by without his mentioning the subject to us.

The seat next to me was empty. My older brother James had gotten a part time job as a mechanic last month and now had to work Sundays.

“Please rise while we sing, ‘Let There Be Light’.”

The preacher’s voice shook me from my thoughts. I slowly stood up and stretched my arms for a few seconds before reaching for the church bulletin that I had been handed at the door. I turned until I found the hymn on the third page. The name of John Marriot was printed in smaller type beneath the title.

“Thou whose Almighty word, chaos and darkness heard...” my voice joined about three dozen others. A few people, my aunt included, knew the hymn without looking at the words, but I wasn’t quite that skilled. I read the lyrics from the paper. Samantha had already managed to misplace her own copy, and I found her reading over my shoulder. I held the piece of paper out so she could see it better.

“...Through the earth, far and wide, let there be light.”

I looked up as the hymn finished. After the customary ‘Amen’, the preacher asked us to sit down. After we did as we were told, the choir stood back up and began to sing as the offertory bowl was passed around.

When the bowl got around to me, there were about a half-dozen dollar bills along with some quarters and a stray twenty-dollar bill. I started to pass the bowl to Samantha, but then realized I had some money left in my pocket. Reaching into the side of my dress pants, I pulled out five-dollar bill. Frowning, I started to look for a one-dollar bill before thinking better of it. I tossed the five-dollar bill into the metal bowl and passed it over to Sam. She handed it to Aunt Judy who was waiting with another five.

The church service ended five minutes later. Standing up, I stretched both arms again and yawned lightly. Aunt Judy got up and walked around to the back of her husband's wheelchair. I dropped the church bulletin in the recycle basket as we approached the entrance. Samantha and I slowly followed them out of the church and onto the side ramp.

I blinked as I stepped out under the harsh summer sun. A few wispy clouds drifted like smoke upon the horizon. I raised a hand to protect my eyes from the burning light but was soon forced to avert my gaze and look down at the parched brownish-green grass that grew along either side of the sidewalk. A few dandelion weeds had sprung up here and there, but even they looked to be struggling in the sandy gray soil.

I wasn't paying much attention to anything else and almost collided with my sister. Looking up, I saw that my aunt and uncle had stopped to talk with an elderly couple that they knew. I glanced at the station wagon that was parked scarcely twenty feet away. After I waited patiently for another five minutes, Aunt Judy waved goodbye to the couple. Smiling politely, I nodded to them as they turned to go.

We finally traveled the rest of the distance to the car. I opened the front passenger door and helped my aunt get Uncle William out of his wheelchair and into his seat. Aunt Judy folded the wheelchair into the trunk.

I opened the other passenger-side door and climbed into the back seat next to my sister. Another wave of heat struck me from the interior of the station wagon. I turned and hastily unrolled my window. Judy turned the key in the ignition and loud country music began pouring out of the car speakers. My aunt paused to adjust the volume, but she didn't change the station.

The song wasn't exactly my definition of good music, but I knew Aunt Judy loved it, so I kept quiet and did my best to ignore it. Aunt Judy put the car into reverse and backed out of the parking space. After navigating through the church parking lot, she turned onto the two-lane highway.

My eyes drifted toward the window. The church parking lot gave way to seemingly endless fields of yellowish-green tobacco. After about six or seven minutes, Aunt Judy turned off onto a gravel side road. The fields were soon replaced by pine trees as the station wagon bounced along the unpaved road. About a half mile down, she slowed the car down and pulled into the dirt driveway that had become all too familiar the past year and a half.

The station wagon came to a quiet stop next to my brother's Ford pickup. "I thought James didn't get off work 'til four," William commented.

I shrugged, not giving it much thought. "Maybe they got finished early down at the shop." Pushing the door open, I stepped out onto the grass. I stopped and waited for Judy to get the wheelchair out of the trunk before helping my uncle out of the car. He nodded his thanks as he settled down into the wheelchair.

Samantha beat us to the front door and touched the knob. It was unlocked. As she pressed the door open, a large dark shape darted passed her and into the yard. Storm, our seven-year-old German Shepherd, ran up to us with his busy tail wagging fiercely behind him. He darted up to the wheelchair and licked Uncle William's hand. "Looks like someone missed me," my uncle chuckled and rubbed behind the dog's ears.

With his tail still twitching back and forth, Storm turned his attention toward me. He jumped up and I almost stumbled backwards as his heavy paws pressed against my

side. Whoa there.” I felt a moist, warm tongue brush against my chin before I managed to push the joyous canine away from me.

I followed my aunt and uncle to the front door and glanced back at Storm. He had wandered over to the azalea bushes to investigate some new and exciting smell. Aunt Judy followed my gaze and smiled lightly. “Just leave him out there. He might need to go to the bathroom.”

I nodded at this before stepping inside the house. A refreshing burst of cool air poured over me as the screen door slammed shut behind me. Reaching down, I untied my shoes and kicked them off next to the door before following the others into the kitchen.

My brother James was wearing a loose t-shirt and a ragged pair of jeans. Unlike Samantha and me, my twenty year old brother had inherited our mother’s blue eyes and blonde hair, but at six foot two he had definitely gotten his height from our father.

The thought of my parents caused me to sigh somberly. They were both gone now, killed in a car accident the December before last. They had gone on a last-minute shopping trip on Christmas Eve only to get caught in a storm on the way back. The car had skidded on the ice and crashed into an incoming truck.

I can still remember that night with terrible clarity. Samantha had been the one to pick up the phone when the police called at ten thirty that night. And I can still remember hearing her scream. I had rushed into the kitchen in time to see the phone clatter to the floor at her feet...

I shook the memory from my head. Thinking about it now wouldn’t do me any good.

“So why are you home so early?” Aunt Judy asked as she walked over to the sink. James paused. “I ugh...I mean, we didn’t have much work left down at the shop, so John said I could call it quits early today.”

Uncle William rolled his wheelchair the rest of the way to the table. “I hope you haven’t been givin’ him too much trouble?”

“Uh...no sir,” James said.

“That’s good, that’s good,” William nodded. “Me and John go way back. Been good friends since high school.” A faint smile appeared on his face. “Ahh, now those were the days.”

“I’m going to go up change,” I said quickly, before my uncle could began reminiscing again.

“Okay Michael,” Aunt Judy said as she opened up the refrigerator. “Lunch is in half an hour.”

“Okay,” I said before going down the hallway and then up the stairs to my room. I shut the door behind me and slowly got out of my dress clothes. I pulled a pair of Khaki shorts and a blue t-shirt out of my closet and put them on. As soon as I was dressed, I opened the door to my room but chose not to leave.

Grabbing a book off my bedside table, I jumped onto my bed. I flipped it open to my bookmark and picked up where I left off. It was a historical-fiction book about World War II that I had checked out at the small library in town. I was only about forty some pages into it and had yet to form an opinion about it.

After about twenty more pages, Aunt Judy shouted from the kitchen. I blinked and glanced at my clock. Time had passed more quickly than I had thought. Sitting up, I put my bookmark inside the book before closing it and leaving it on my bed.

When I got to the kitchen, I found my siblings and my uncle already seated at the table. Samantha had also changed out of her church clothes and was now wearing jeans with a pink top.

I took my seat between James and William. Aunt Judy grabbed two potholders and tentatively carried a still-steaming ham over to the table. She gently set the main course down between the mashed potatoes and the bowl of green beans.

“James, why don’t you say the prayer today?” Aunt Judy said, pulling her chair into the table.

“Hmm? Oh, okay,” My bother sat up lowered his head. The rest of us followed suit. “Lord, we thank you for bringing our family together on this here day and also for providing us with this wonderful food. In your name we pray, Amen.”

“Amen.”

I lifted my head slowly and reached for the green beans. Shoveling a couple of spoonfuls onto my plate, I handed the bowl to James. Uncle William reached for the ham first and cut off a generous serving for himself before offering me a slice. I nodded and held out my plate.

“That enough?” he asked after cutting off a moderate slice of ham.

“That’s plenty,” I said as he set the piece on my plate. I picked up my fork and began to pick at my green beans as I waited for my sister to finish with the mashed

potatoes. After we were all served, I grabbed the pepper and shook it over my potatoes and then, as an afterthought, sprinkled some on my green beans too.

I took a few bites of my potatoes before cutting off a corner of the ham. The meat was a little bit dry but was otherwise good. As I ate, my gaze drifted idly across the far wall. There was little of interest there with the exception of a deer head that my uncle had mounted on the wall. The thing always gave me the shivers. William had taken us hunting last year, but when it was my turn to shoot I had found myself unable to pull the trigger.

My uncle noticed my gaze. “He’s a beaut ain’t he?” he said, setting down his fork. “I still remember the day I got ‘im. Me and John was hunting out west of here near the mountains ‘bout six or so years ago. We had been out huntin’ all day, and we ain’t seen nothing til that there buck just walked right out in front of us. Couldn’t a been more then fifty feet from where we stood. It was a perfect shot. I got ‘im right in the flank. Went down with one shot.”

I smiled and listened politely even though I had heard this story a dozen times before.

“Huntin’ deer is one thing though. They don’t shoot back. Any ol’ coward can shoot a deer and claim to be a man. War is whole another story. Suddenly you’re not the hunter any more. Suddenly the deer can shoot back.” William sighed heavily and shook his head.

“People these days think they know what suffering means, but you ain’t seen hell til you’ve been to Nam. There ain’t nothing sacred in war. I was only there two years, yet I had half my friends die. I lost this here leg to a grenade, but trust me, there ain’t

nothing worse than having to watch your friends die. And what the hell did they die for?" He slammed his fist down on the table angrily. "No one wanted our help. Not even the civilians. The bastards in South Nam hated our guts as much as the reds did."

"I would prefer if you didn't swear at the table, dear," Aunt Judy urged him.

Uncle William hardly seemed to notice his wife's words. "It ain't right. It just ain't right. Johnson, Schroeder, McKinley, even ol' Sergeant Bulldog..." He let out a deep breath. "They were all good men, each and every last one of 'em. They was always talking about how they hated the war, how they was going to come back to the States and make something of 'emselves.

"Joe McKinley said he was going to be a farmer, said he belonged on the land. Schroeder too. He was going to move back to South Dakota and raise corn. Schroeder always had a way with words. He was a real poet that one. Talked about beautiful sunsets across fields that shone like gold. I had half a mind to go with him out into the country when we got back.

"That wasn't Johnson though. He was always laughin' at us for it. He said he had it set in New York. Said he was going to be one of those big shot lawyers doing trials and such. Already had a wife and a beautiful three-year-old daughter back home. Name was Elizabeth. Always carried her picture around in his pocket and was always showin' it to me whenever he got the chance. She was the cutest thing ya ever saw."

William shook his head and smiled. It was a sad, quiet smile.

"They were all good men. Great men. Brave men. Any one of 'em would a laid down his life for the man standin next to 'em. They would a run across minefields and into crumblin' buildin's to save their brothers. And there's no bond greater than family.

If one member of the family is in trouble then it's up to the family to help him. You have to do everything in your power to help a man in trouble. That's the unspoken law. You never leave a family member behind."

There was something in his words that I had not noticed before. A certain wisdom. An understanding of some great truth. His words conveyed both dedication and humility, both purpose and loyalty. I looked up at my uncle with a newfound respect.

I watched William, waiting for him to continue, but he said no more. I finished the last of my green beans. "Can I be excused?" I asked quietly.

"Me too?" Samantha said as she set her utensils down on her plate. Aunt Judy nodded. "Um, sure. I think we're all just about done anyway." She took a couple more bites of her potatoes before rising from her seat. I walked over to the counter and set my dirty plate in the sink. I turned on the faucet and rinsed my hands in the cool water, then left it running for my sister and stepped back.

I started for my room again but changed my mind. "I think I'm going to go down to the lake."

"Okay," Aunt Judy said, washing off her plate in the sink. "Be sure to take Storm with you."

I slipped on my tennis shoes and bent down to tie them.

"If you want to do some fishing, the tackle box is still in the shed," Uncle William said, trying to be helpful. There was something in his eyes, revealing that he believed he'd said too much about the war, had let out a pain deeper than anger.

I paused for a moment before shaking my head. "No thanks, I don't feel like fishing today."

“Suit yourself.”

I stood up and reached for the doorknob. “Oh, Michael, I have to run a few errands in town today, so dinner might be a bit late.

“Okay.” I stepped outside and closed the door behind me before they could think of anything else to ask me. Storm, who had been lying lazily on the front lawn, looked up sharply when he heard the door. He got up and wandered over to me.

“Hey boy, want to go down to the lake?” I said, asking the dog’s opinion. He responded with a sharp bark and a moderate amount of tail wagging. An affirmative. “Okay then, let’s go.”

I started off across the lawn with storm tagging along at my side. The dry grass crackled beneath our feet. The grass soon gave way to pine straw as I approached the woods. The trees parted on either side and revealed a path that curved through the trees and out of sight.

It was a little cooler beneath the trees, but not much. The trees were mostly pine and the needles provided little shade. Something moved across the path in front of us. Storm immediately took off after it. I caught sight of the terrified squirrel as it darted up the side of the nearest tree. Storm jumped up and put his front paws against the trunk but not quickly enough. As usual his prey eluded him and, for lack of any better solution, storm began barking at it.

“Okay, come on boy. That’s enough.”

Storm looked at the squirrel one last time before reluctantly returning to my side. After another five minutes of walking, I caught sight of the sun’s reflection on the water through the trees.

When we got to the lake I paused and looked out across the water. A quiet breeze blew ripples across its otherwise calm surface. The water was cloudy and green with algae to such an extent that one could not see the bottom more than a couple feet from the shore. A few minnows swam near the surface, their gray bodies darting among the plants. Storm splashed into the water and sent the fish fleeing into the murky depths. He lapped up some of the lake water before turning and jumping back onto dry ground.

He paused and shook the water from his fur. I took a step back to stay dry. For the sake of tradition, I stopped and looked around for a rock to throw. I noticed one and stooped to pick it up with a quick movement of my wrist I sent it skipping across the lake surface. I counted the bounces. Two. Three. Just three.

I sighed and sat down on the pine straw and leaned my back against one of the few oak trees. My eyes continued to look out across the water. The head of a turtle popped up above the surface. The reptilian face looked off towards the south for a few moments before it ducked back down beneath the water. Another minute passed before the turtle reappeared about five feet from its previous position. The pattern continued before it finally disappeared among a clump of cattails.

I took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. There was something calming about this place. All the problems of life just seem to fade away into quiet tranquility. There is a sense of peace in nature that can't be found anywhere in human civilization. People elsewhere were always doing this or worrying about that. Out here all you had to do was exist. To simply be.

The sound of footsteps stirred me from my thoughts. I turned my head and caught sight of my brother. Storm stood up and began wagging his tail.

“I hope you don’t mind if you I join ya,” James said.

“Be my guest”

My brother leaned back against a nearby tree. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. Flicking open the pack, he pulled one out and put it between his lips. He put the box back and pulled out his lighter. He flicked the lighter on and held it up to his cigarette. This done, he took a long swig from the cigarette before breathing out the smoke.

James noticed that I was still watching him. “Care for one?”

I frowned slightly. “You know I don’t smoke.”

My older brother shrugged. “Whatever, it’s your loss.” The lighter disappeared back into his pocket. He held the cigarette between his two fingers and took another long breath from it. “So why do you always come to this place anyway? There isn’t anything out here.”

Now it was my turn to shrug. “I don’t know. That sort of is why I come out here.”

“You know, I don’t think I’m ever going to understand you.” James chuckled. “Hmm, you know who you remind me of? You remind me exactly of dad.” He started to go on but fell quiet after realizing what he had said.

I turned my gaze back to the water.

“So…” James said, trying to change the subject. “Uncle Willy sure got carried away again at lunch. If I have to hear another word about Vietnam, I’m going to have to give that man a piece of my mind.”

I could identify with what he said, but there was something in the way he said it that annoyed me. “*That man* has seen more suffering than the two of us could possibly ever know. His stories might be boring to us now, but he lost his leg and almost his life back then. That’s not to mention his friends that died there. God knows what else happened to him over there.”

“I didn’t mean any offense,” James said, somewhat confused by my outburst.

“Hey,” I said after a few moments. “Did he ever tell you what happened that day?”

“What day?”

“The day his friends died,” I said. My eyes continued to watch the ripples in the water.

When my brother didn’t respond I went on, “There was a Vietcong sniper in the ruins of an old building. They were walking across a clearing when the man started firing. George Schroeder was shot and killed before they even knew the guy was there. Joe McKinley was hit in the stomach a second later. Uncle William and his other friend, I think his name was Johnson, picked George up and tried to carry him to safety. They only got halfway there when the sniper fired again. Johnson died instantly. Our uncle managed to carry George the rest of the way by himself.”

“What happened to this George Schroeder guy?”

“The two of them were pinned down behind a crumbling wall because of the sniper. They had to wait four hours before another patrol came across them. By that time, George had already died. Uncle William even tore off his own shirt for a bandage, but he couldn’t stop the bleeding.”

James nodded slowly, not sure of what to say. He glanced at me, then turned his vision out across the water. “What happened to the sniper?”

“Don’t know. He didn’t say.” I shook my head. “But just imagine what it must have felt like to lose three friends in so short a time. We both cried for hours when mom and dad died, but we didn’t even see the crash. Uncle William had to watch his friends be killed right before his eyes. That must be horrible beyond imagination.” The breeze had died down in the meantime. I watched as the ripples in the water slowly faded away to nothing.

“It’s odd,” James said.

“What is?”

“Uncle William never told me that story before,” my older brother explained. “I mean, he always talks about the war and how he lost his leg, but I don’t think he’s ever told me how he actually lost his friends.”

I shrugged. “Maybe the memories are too painful for him to talk about.”

“But yet he told you,” James said. He looked at me and smiled lightly. “You were always his favorite.”

“He likes all of us equally.”

My brother shook his head. “I know he likes all of us, but I think he sees something special in you. I don’t know, but I think in you he sees something of himself.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, confused by his comment. “The one time he brought us hunting with him, you were the one who shot that deer. I couldn’t even bring myself to pull the trigger. I made a complete fool of myself.”

James chuckled. “Don’t you see? That’s exactly it. You refused to fire the rifle knowing that it would take a life. You thought about the welfare of another living being and made a decision based on that. You acted human. That’s why he likes you.”

I said nothing and sat there wondering if there was any truth to what my brother had said.

He gradually became aware of the cigarette that was still smoldering in his hand at his side. He lifted it up and breathed in another mouthful of smoke, then slowly exhaled. “But it would have been a hell of a lot easier to tell him if he hadn’t gotten so worked up at lunch.”

“Tell him what?” I asked and looked over at my brother questioningly.

He didn’t respond and instead continued smoking his cigarette.

A sudden thought occurred to me. “They didn’t let you off work early, did they?”

No response.

“You were fired then?” I said, guessing at the truth.

“Maybe...oh who am I kidding, yeah I was fired.” James said. He kicked a nearby rock into the lake. The sudden movement caused Storm to start barking. “Oh, will you just shut up,” he said, giving the dog an annoyed look.

“Why would John fire you?”

“Does it matter?” James said, somewhat irritably. “But just what the heck am I supposed to tell our uncle now? He had to pull strings to get me that job, and now I blew it.”

“I don’t know, but you better tell him something. If he hears this from John, he’s going to be a whole lot madder than if he had heard it from you.”

“I know, I know.” My brother began pacing back and forth with the cigarette.
“But what am I supposed to do after that? Where am I supposed to work?”

“There’s always college,” I said, trying to be encouraging.

“College, yeah right,” he snorted at the idea. “I know Sam is going to be going to Appalachian State in the fall and you’re only sixteen but could probably already get into Harvard for all I know. But that’s not me. It’s a miracle I even graduated from high school.”

“That’s not true,” I shook my head. “You could still get into some school if you tried. I know you let your grades slip your senior year after mom and dad died but...”

“That had nothing to do with it!” James said angrily. He noticed me watching him and he suddenly calmed down again. “I thank you for having faith in me, but just trust me on this will you? I’m not cut out for college. You should be worrying about yourself. I’m a lost cause.” He paused to take another swig from the cigarette. “I suppose I should go back and tell Uncle William now.”

“I think that would be a good idea.”

James hesitated and looked out across the water. He drew one last smoke from the cigarette. Tossing it on the ground, he stomped the smoldering cigarette out with his boot.

My brother let out a heavy sigh. “Okay, see ya later.”

“See ya.”

I watched him go before turning my attention back to the water. My uncle would probably be angry when I got back. I wasn’t overly worried though. William never stayed angry with any of us for too long.

I glanced at my watch. Two o'clock. I didn't have to head back for a few more hours anyway. My head tilted casually back against the tree trunk.

My eyes gazed out across the lake. The rays of light continued to flicker across the water's surface. A sense of tranquility slowly returned to me, and I allowed my eyes to drift shut, if only for a few moments.

When I finally opened my eyes, the sun's position had abruptly changed. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. The sun's reddish-orange form had begun to sink into the west. Already it was half hidden behind the pine trees. I looked at my watch in confusion. Six thirty. Apparently I had allowed myself to fall asleep after all.

The others were probably starting to wonder about me by now. Yawning, I slowly lifted myself to my feet. The back of my neck was sore from the tree bark. I stretched my arms and turned my head back and forth to get the cramp out.

I looked around for Storm, but he wasn't there. He must have gone back up with my brother. I gave the lake one last look before turning to go.

I started to walk back along the path when something in the sky caught my eye. A strange black cloud seemed to be forming. There was something odd about it though. It was too dark to be a storm cloud, and it seemed to be spewing upwards from the ground. Almost like smoke.

But that didn't make sense either. We sometimes had barbeques on Sundays, but then again there was too much smoke for that. It almost looked as if the entire house had caught fire...

I blinked at the realization, then swore loudly to myself, and took off sprinting back along the path. The trees became a blur as my feet carried me forward. I stumbled once and then a second time, but I caught my balance and kept running.

A million thoughts flashed through my mind. I hoped and pleaded with myself that I had been mistaken, but yet I dreaded the worst. There had to be another explanation for the smoke, but then again what else could it be? I shoved the thoughts from my head and concentrated on running. Just running.

It felt like hours had passed before I reached the yard, but in truth that time was probably closer to two or three minutes. The trees thinned, and my worst fears were confirmed. A thick, noxious cloud of smoke poured out the side and back windows. The flames that leapt from the woodwork and danced across the back porch gave dreadful proof of the inferno that raged inside.

I ran around to the front yard. Samantha was already there. Storm was racing back and forth across the lawn and barking loudly. I hurried over to them before stopping to catch my breath. My sister's face was contorted into an expression of utter horror, and she was shaking hysterically. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," she repeated over and over, her voice choked with tears.

"What happened?" I demanded between heavy breaths.

"I don't know, I don't know." She shook her head violently. "All of a sudden I smelled smoke, and then everything was burning. I called 911 and, and..." she stopped talking and just watched the house in disbelief.

"So the firefighters are coming?" I asked quickly.

She nodded vaguely.

“Where is Aunt Judy?”

“She hasn’t gotten back from the store yet.” Samantha answered. Her tear-filled eyes continued to stare into the dreadful smoke. “Oh my God, oh my God.”

I spun to face James who had come around the house with hose in hand, not knowing whether it could do any good or not.

“Where’s Uncle William? Did he go with Aunt Judy?” I asked as James ran over to us.

Samantha gasped, and her eyes went wide. “He didn’t come out with us,” she whispered.

I looked up at her in horror. “Oh no,” I shook my head. There was something horribly unreal about the thought of my uncle, the brave war hero, dying in there, helpless and alone. “We have to do something!”

“Do what?”

“I... I don’t know. Something. But you never leave a family member behind,” I said, remembering the words of my uncle. I took a step toward the house. A sense of desperation overcame me, and I started running towards the front door. Samantha tried to grab my wrist, but I shoved her off.

“No! Michael, what are you doing? It’s too dangerous!” she said, trying to stop me.

I ignored her and pushed open the door. Without thinking, I took two steps inside. A thick cloud of smoke billowed around me. I burst into a fit of coughing and dropped to my knees. My determination melted away, and I was seized by fear. What the heck was I doing here? What had I been thinking?

I started to turn back, but I heard a human moan from some other room. I froze. “Uncle William?” I called through the smoke. No response. I found myself crawling forward.

There weren’t any flames nearby, but that terrible black fog was everywhere. It hung in the air and flowed around me like a thick, noxious gas. I took a breath only to burst into coughing again. Quickly grabbing onto my t-shirt, I pulled it over my mouth and my nostrils.

That helped a little, but the smoke continued to sting my eyes. I felt tears begin to form at the corners of my vision, and this made everything blurrier. I blinked back the smoke and tears and kept crawling forward.

I had made it halfway across the kitchen tiles when a loud crash sounded from somewhere above me. I looked up, fully expecting to see the ceiling come thundering down. When nothing happened, I swallowed nervously and picked up my pace.

“Uncle William!” I called out again. Still no response. I crawled into the family room. I was greeted with yet more smoke. Everything was hazy, but I could make out the harsh orange glow of the fire across the room. The flames jumped from the far bookshelf onto the curtain. Through the room’s other doorway, I could see that the hallway was completely blocked off by fire.

I started to go back when I made out the form of a wheelchair by the couch. “Uncle William!” Climbing to my feet, I raced across the room. I put my hands on the edge of the wheelchair and looked down. It was empty. “Uncle William?” I called again and looked around blindly.

A low moan answered, and I saw movement on the couch. His body was slouched against the cushions facing the TV. His head was rolled back, and his eyes were closed. I jumped over to where he was lying. "Wake up!" I shook him as hard as I dared, but I got no response.

There was a loud crack above us, and tiny white bits of ceiling rained down on us. I took a big breath through the fabric of my shirt before letting go of it and grabbing my uncle's body with both arms. I tried to pull him back off the couch and away from the burning curtains, but his body would barely budge. He had to weigh at least forty pounds more than I did.

My eyes flashed with fear. I couldn't lift him, but I couldn't turn back now. I let go of his body and changed my grip so that I was holding onto his wrists. Using all of my strength, I pulled as hard as my arms would let me. His body slowly slid off the couch and onto the carpet.

I took a deep breath only to have the smoke flood into my lungs. My body convulsed into hoarse coughing, but I refused to let go of him. I pulled his body along the carpet then hesitated by the wheelchair. I looked at it, and the vague idea of using it entered my mind. The thought quickly left. I could barely drag him; much less lift him into the wheelchair.

The fire now leapt from the curtains onto the couch. The cushions quickly burst into flames. My eyes started to burn even worse, so I squeezed them shut. I felt my strength ebb away, but I kept pulling anyway.

Beneath me I felt the carpet change to tile as we made it back into the kitchen. Now the heat was a lot more unbearable than it had been the first time through. Beads of sweat were starting to trace across my brow and along my arms.

His body slid better on the kitchen tiles than on the carpet, and I made quicker progress. I felt my back press something hard, and it took me a second to recognize it as one of the chairs by the table. Getting my bearings, I moved to the left, and somehow managed to travel the rest of the way to the front door.

The door was still open slightly. My hand found the edge and pulled it open. “Michael!” I heard my sister shout, and a moment later James was by my side. We both grabbed an arm and hauled him out of the doorway. We didn’t stop until we had made it a good ten feet away from the house.

I let go and collapsed down on the dry grass. I was breathing heavily, and my eyes still burned, but I had made it out. That last realization came as a surprise. I blinked and rubbed the hot tears from my eyes.

“He’s not breathing!”

I sat up quickly, and the fear came flooding back. I looked down at his unmoving body anxiously, but everything was still blurry and all of my strength was gone. I felt more helpless now than I had inside the burning house.

A shadow appeared over me, and James sank down by my side. “Oh please God, not him,” James muttered. There was an apprehensive edge to his voice.

My brother pressed his ear against William’s chest, and I scooted back to give him room. He listened for a couple seconds before sitting up straight. Putting his two

hands together, he pushed down on his chest. He did this a couple times and then leaned forward and breathed into our uncle's mouth.

James continued doing CPR for another minute without any results. Fear continued to build on my brother's face until finally William's body shuddered and started coughing. His chest heaved upwards then sank back down. He didn't open his eyes, but his breathing slowly returned to normal. My brother sat back and let out a sigh of relief.

I felt something wet against my hand, and I looked over to find Storm licking my hand. It stung a little. I glanced down and realized my hand was bleeding slightly. I wiped it against the grass but otherwise ignored it.

I gradually became aware of an odd noise off in the distance. A siren. The firefighters would be here soon.

"So what are we supposed to do now?" Samantha asked in despair. "There's nothing left."

I looked over at her, but didn't respond immediately. I turned to look at James who wouldn't have been home if he hadn't got fired, and who had saved Uncle William's life. He was holding my uncle's head in his lap, quietly waiting for the rescue workers to arrive. A soft smile grew on my face. "We still have each other, Sam. We still have hope."