

Family Fire

By Steven R. Roberts

A light snow had been falling all afternoon and Jim was glad he was back in his New Yorker. The family was going on a short trip this weekend to visit his parents about two hours away. The four-year old car had been in for repairs and Jim had a fellow worker drop him off at the dealership. As he drove home lighter, smaller vehicles were sliding all over the road.

His wife Anna had called with two items but Jim had talked her out of a grocery stop due to the weather. Anna agreed they could get by with what they had in the house and possibly stop for supplies during the trip if the weather improved the next day. Jim was glad to pull safely into his driveway on Elmwood Drive. The home was a comfortable white brick ranch and they had extended the house by adding a second garage four years earlier. Jim didn't know it as he pulled up the driveway but there was an electrical engine fire in progress under the hood of his car.

It was good to see that his son Eddie had been out with the snow blower and the driveway and sidewalks were clear except for the light snow still falling. He waved to a neighbor shoveling his driveway as he hit the button to open the door and pulled into the garage. Eddie usually hung the small snow blower on two nails at the end of the garage so it was about three feet up on the wall. Because the snow was still falling Eddie had just leaned the machine against the wall.

Jim inadvertently tapped the snow blower with his bumper as he pulled to a stop and opened his door. He waved to his wife who was standing in the doorway to the house and got out of the car. As Anna waved hello she noticed flames lapping through the car's grill. At that instance the flames ignited the dripping gasoline from the punctured plastic fuel tank on the snow blower. The cars' bumper had crushed the edge of a bracket into the wall of the gas tank and it had ruptured.

As Jim took a step toward the front of the car the explosion blasted him in the face causing him to throw his flaming suit coat and briefcase in the air. With his shirt and hair on fire Jim was knocked back into the two trashcans. Blinded, Jim put one arm up over his face and grabbed the top of a plastic garbage can with the other hand, struggling to stand up.

The explosion also covered Anna with flames as she stood in the kitchen doorway. She was knocked into the house causing her to fall down the basement stairs breaking her left arm. Fourteen-year old Eddie's bedroom was in the basement and he jumped off the bed, where he had been reading, and rushed toward his mother.

"Mom, what's happening?" Eddie yelled as he reached the bottom of the steps.

"Get dad, for god sake, get dad, he's on fire!" Anna screamed, as Eddie, ran for a pillow from his bed and returned pounding his mother over and over to smother the flames. Anna cried out with every blow as Eddie managed to put out the fire in his

Mom's hair and clothes. Anna's eyes would not open as she sat waving her arms toward the stairs and cried out in panic. "Eddie, get dad, he's on fire." She repeated.

"Mom, where is he?" Eddie said as he stepped over his mother at the base of the stairs and started up toward the heat and black smoke on the first floor.

"Dad's hurt and laying in the garage, and the kids, get the kids out." Anna cried, and she couldn't say more. Her charred dress was smoldering and she put her hands to her face and cupped them over her burned eyelids.

"Dad, Dad!" Eddie screamed as loud as he could fighting through the black smoke rolling down the stairs.

Eddie stepped through the kitchen door into the garage yelling for his father. Through the flames and smoke he could see his dad across the hood of the car fighting to beat out the fire in his shirt and tie. He was trying to stand by holding on to the garbage cans, which were collapsing from the heat. Eddie started to call out again just as the two spare gas cans exploded filling the garage with flames to the ceiling. Eddie's face and t-shirt were burning as he stumbled back into the house. He jumped and fell down the stairs landing finally on his mother. Anna didn't cry out in pain, as she was unconscious. Eddie jumped over his mom and ran to his bedroom, slid over the bed and cranked open the window. He returned to pick up her limp body and stuffed her out the window. He crawled out and put his hands under her arms in a bear hug and dragged her up out of the window well and across the back yard, away from the house. Her smoldering hair was in his face and the smell, or maybe it was the whirling calamity about him, suddenly made Eddie sick and he turned his head and threw up in the snow.

Eddie ran around the house to the front yard slipping in the snow in his bare feet. What was happening? As he crossed the driveway the two garages and the kitchen were roaring in flames. Thick smoke was filling the house and yard.

"Dad, Daddy!" he yelled toward the garages. He ran to the garage and pounded on the door nearest the house. It was red hot and burned his clinched fists. He moved to the door on the added garage and grabbed the garage door handle trying desperately to pull it up. The handle burned his hand and he yelled again for his father. Eddie paused to listen but heard only the roar of the fire from within. He jumped the berm of snow along the driveway and ran across the front yard.

Earlier, when Jim had been stumbling toward the second garage he heard Eddie calling his name just as the two gas cans exploded. The blast pushed Jim through the door into the second garage where he laid against the front bumper of the family's van. That's where he was just over a minute later when he heard Eddie calling his name again, this time from out front. Spitting and choking in black smoke Jim was unable to call out to his son as he struggled to get up and felt his way along the side of the vehicle, stumbling toward the front of the garage.

Eddie rounded the corner of the east end of the house. He could see Penny, his six-year old sister, pounding on her bedroom window and yelling for help. Penny's room was filling up with smoke and Eddie could see the pleading terror in her tear filled blue eyes. She had been playing "dress up" with her mother's clothes at the time of the first

explosion and she was wearing one of Anna's old pink dresses as well as an old necklace, earrings and red lipstick. Eddie ran up to the house and pounded on the window.

"Penny, I'll get you out." Eddie yelled, not sure if Penny could hear him through two panes of glass and the roar of the fire. "Where's Bobby? Is he with you? Penny hang on."

Eddie picked up two small branches poking up through the snow and threw them at the window. The Plexiglas storm window wouldn't break and the sound scared Penny back from the window. When she returned, Eddie could see Bobby, the three year old, jumping and screaming beside her. Bobby's terrified face and big eyes were all that was visible above the windowsill except for his outstretched arms. They were both being blanketed with black smoke as they pounded on the window and pleaded for help.

"Edo, Edo, Edooo help!" Eddie could read their lips as they cried the name they had adopted for their big brother.

Eddie ran toward the back yard, passed his mother lying in the snow, to the family's stack of firewood. He grabbed two of the bigger pieces and returned motioning for his brother and sister to back away from the window. He threw the logs at the window as hard as he could. One log hit the side of the house and one bounced back from the window. He threw them again and they both bounced to the snow. He threw them again and again. They landed at his feet. He went to his knees to pick up the logs and threw them from there.

His brother and sister were back with their hands pressed against the window as if trying to push it out. Bobby was looking up to Penny pleading for help and alternating between pushing at the glass and wrapping his arms around his sister's waist and burying his face in her gown. Eddie threw the logs again and they didn't flinch. He threw them again and again, until the kids' hands slid down the window, first Bobby's hands disappeared and then Penny's. There was a streak of red lipstick down the glass where Penny had been pressing her face against the window.

Eddie picked up the two logs and held them up toward the sky, crying. He collapsed in the snow sobbing as the first fire truck pulled up. Eddie was sitting on his knees, holding the logs and slumped over with his head in the snow on the ground. His eyes were closed and tears freezing on his red cheeks as a firefighter approached. All he could do was point to the window and then to the back yard.

Jim, 47, was found two steps from the garage door opener button in the second garage and Penny, 6 and little Bobby, 3, were found at the base of the window in Penny's bedroom. Anna and Eddie were taken to the hospital where they were treated for smoke inhalation and third-degree burns. They recovered well enough physically to be released six days later. Mother and son moved in temporarily with Jim's parents.

Author's Note: This is a true story. Only the names have been changed and the dialog has been assumed based on the circumstances as reported by the survivors and fire officials.