



Fire Dance

“When the heart grieves over what it has lost, the spirit rejoices over what it has left.”

— Sufi Epigram

In the middle of July 2006, in the heat of summer, the Sawtooth Fires consumed our family’s desert home. The fire swept through the property not once but twice. Gone. Wiped out was 40 acres of natural beauty – native plants, birds and animals. Gone too was our pristine house -- curved roof, wood beams, cool sienna concrete floor, orange door, lavender bathroom.

Vanished was my husband’s retreat from his daily grind, my writing haven, my daughter’s wonderland.

“It’s just stuff,” friends said to me in the wake of that fire. “And the land will grow back.”

“Yes, I know,” I’d say over and over, numb with grief. “It’s just stuff.”

But I couldn’t wrap myself -- body, mind, and soul -- around the loss. I clung to memories of our bedroom view of the sunrise, my daughter’s cheery sleeping area two stairs from ours, walls of art, rooms filled with flea market treasures. I grieved for our 13 years of hikes, feasts, Monopoly games played in front of the lit fireplace that gave the house a glow and delicious smoky smell, reminding us how good life could be. I couldn’t conceive that all of this no longer existed.

Adjacent to our house sat a renovated 1940’s Easy Traveler -- my writing refuge. Every time I entered that trailer and turned on my computer, time disappeared. Every so often my daughter, Lily, would peek her head in to see what I was doing, or my husband, Brian, would make a face at the window seeking a moment’s attention. But mostly they both left me alone in my sanctuary to write my stories.

Inside the trailer, on the wall in front of my small table, hung a writing mandala called Write Woman made by my friend Shari Elf. She’d crafted this image of a woman using found objects – pencil erasers, embroidery thread, colorful paint, and it held the intention of my calling – a combination of magic and muse. To the right of my small table propped against a broken propane burner, sat a collection of miniature paintings and photographs of desert landscapes from local antique stores and swap meets. One year for Mother’s Day, Lily painted me a desert landscape and placed it in a popsicle stick frame, designed specially for my little gallery.

The inferno melted my trailer to the ground. On Brian’s return from the desert after the fire, he handed me two rivulets of aluminum, my sanctuary’s only remains. When told the house and trailer were gone, the first thing Lily mentioned was her desert

landscape in the popsicle stick frame.

“I’m really going to miss that painting, Mommy,” she said bursting into tears.

Hugging her I thought, it wasn’t “just stuff” after all.

Even our dog, Candy Mae, will miss the peace we felt on the property. Fourteen years ago, the day after Brian rescued her off the gritty North Hollywood streets, we brought this scarred, fear biting, panting pup out to the desert with us. The moment we arrived she grew calm, and slept soundly through the night at the foot of our sleeping bags. Six years later, Lily, at 4 weeks old, first traveled with us to the desert, and ever since it had been a vital part of her life.

Before Lily was born and the house built, Brian and I camped at the base of our small mountain, on a flat area where we placed a picnic table and built a fire unit from an old oil drum. It had been cut in the middle so that we could fit a small grill inside. In winter, we’d huddle around the drum for warmth and Brian set up a Coleman stove. Between those two simple units, we found comfort, eating well and staying warm.

We grated a flat pad and for years slept tentless under the brilliant night sky, making wishes on the shooting stars that darted across the heavens. At sunrise I’d open my eyes to a lone Joshua tree on the eastern ridge, backlit against the red dawn. During the days we’d hike for hours. In spring our mission was to find the new blooms in the mountains, as the paintbrush, sage, and lupin grew lush down below. As we trekked we discovered old remnants of campsites -- rugs and dilapidated teepees. We felt like the Lewis and Clarke of the High Desert, and though we often tried to hike to Pipes Canyon, we’d often get lost, rest against boulders, then continue on happily whether we made it to Pipes or not.

After the fire, Brian rushed out to our property. I did not. Instead I headed for the beach and watched tides carrying waves to shore and tossing them back out again. I needed the soothing rhythm of the sea to remind me that in nature there are many dances including loss -- all part of the choreography that is life.

It took me almost two months to visit our scorched land. I was reluctant because I could still close my eyes and visualize our house full of light and a landscape rich with wildlife and vegetation. I know that vision stands somewhere in time. I knew that even as I finally drove through our gate past the broken sign, Golden Poppy Ranch.

When I walked the perimeter of the house-site and looked at the remains -- utensils, tiles, crumbling stones and walls, black bathtub -- I suddenly envisioned images of bombed-out Beirut and war-torn Iraq, and half-expected a child or a stray dog to appear from amongst the ruins. Instead a rabbit scurried behind stray boulders, the only hiding place in this new wasteland.

With a heavy heart, I hiked up to the old campsite, past black holes gleaming under a blistering sun. These were the graves of Joshua trees, Pinon pines, Manzanita, and Scrub oaks. I imagined how eerie they would look shimmering under moonlight. Those Joshua trees still standing, once Seuss-like, fun and frivolous, looked like lost Appaloosas -- their outer layers burned back to reveal layers of bone white trunks. One by one the trees told the story of the fire -- leaning in, falling back, bent and broken as if in a child's nightmare.

The land will reinvent itself as it has for millions of years -- once an ocean now a desert, now a land exploded into chards. It will never be the way it once was, but it will return. The dance will continue.

Months later at Pappy and Harriet's, a local watering hole in Pioneer Town, I walked out to the beer garden, to see the new sculpture created by Bobby Furst, an artist living in Joshua tree. Bobby had visited our burnt property to gather leftover charred items, including Lily's bicycle, and it was this that became the central figure of his stunning piece.

I stood in front of the bike in awe. It was balanced on a metal stand, its front wheels high with copper roses jutting from the back wheels. Bobby had placed the bike to look as if at any moment it would take off, and named it "Lily Rose From The Ashes," a monument to all the loss accrued in the Sawtooth Fires.

I remembered buying that bike for Lily's fifth birthday, and watching her learn to ride it without training wheels down at Rimrock Ranch at the base of Burns Canyon. Brian pushed her to start off, then ran besides her, making sure she didn't fall. Tears fell down my face, but somewhere near the core of my sadness, for just a moment, the waves of grief parted and I felt an inkling of hope. If this bike could find a new life -- one far different from its last incarnation -- so could we.

We moved 5 miles up canyon to land untouched by the fire. From our new desert home, an Airstream trailer, the views are glorious-- rich with giant Joshua trees, Pinon pines, huge rock formations, mountains rising majestic in the distance.

One Saturday afternoon, nine months after the fire, Lily invited me to join her on her favorite perch, a jet-black boulder marbled with pink. We stood high, shoes clinging to granite, taking in the long view. There in the north-west stood a sea of green Joshua trees, miles of a wild grove ripe with buds, soon to burst into clusters of white blooms. Below us a family of quail scampered by chattering amongst each other. Lily and I watched the birds until the beginnings of a magenta sunset pulled our focus skywards. And sitting there, I began to feel real joy again as another dance of nature took my breath away.