

In his farmhouse on Burton Road George Miller awoke a little before two in the morning, not because he smelled smoke, although the house was filling up with it, but because he heard his dogs barking and blood-curdling braying from Sweet Virgin, Tony the Fruit Man's mule, who was the only animal in the barn. At first George thought he was dreaming that Sweet Virgin was right next to his bed. He bolted upright, smelled smoke, and saw it curling around the top of the bedroom door.

"Livvie, get up!" George screamed at his wife, Olivia, as he leapt from the bed and flung open the bedroom door. "Livvie, get up!" he shouted again as he pushed open the door to his sons' bedroom. He roughly pulled each of the four boys from their beds and ordered the oldest to run to Wilkington's house on 14th Street and have them call the fire department. The twelve-year-old hastily pulled on his overalls, and grabbing his shoes, ran from the house. Leaving the ten-year-old in charge of the two younger boys, George burst into his daughters' bedroom and just as roughly yanked the two of them from the bed they shared. "Outside! Everyone outside!" he shrieked, and then he left them to grope their way through the smoke as he ran to the barn. His dogs—four Walker hounds and assorted puppies—were barking at the fire engulfing a small shed that had spread to the barn, and although George didn't realize it, flames were also attacking the house. The dogs scrambled out of his way as he raced to the barn and the sound of Sweet Virgin, trapped inside. "Thank the Lord the cows and team are out," George gasped. The side wall of the barn opposite Sweet Virgin's stall was on fire. She was terrified, crashing her body from one side of the stall to the other, as if she could knock down the walls, and in here, where the sound reverberated off the barn walls, her screams were deafening.

George couldn't get hold of her. All the years Sweet Virgin had pulled Tony's fresh produce wagon through the streets of Allen Falls and Woodhill meant nothing now that her instincts had come into play. George tried to tie a rope around her neck so he could lead her outside, but she was weaving her head back and forth violently. George's head connected with hers so hard he saw stars, then, as Sweet Virgin charged from the stall, she jammed George between her flank and the wall, knocking the wind out of him, leaving him flat on his back as instinct drove her to join the horses and cows in the pasture.

To the Woodhill firefighters the fire scene was a cross between a comedy and a tragedy. Dogs were running around aimlessly, tagging after the firefighters who tried to dodge them as they set about fighting the fire. When two of the firefighters set up to draft water from a small pond, they were attacked by half a dozen geese. Near the burning shed chickens were squawking and flapping their wings as they ran about near their coop or tried to fly up into the branches of a nearby apple tree.

Jake found Olivia Miller standing in the middle of the yard clutching one child in her arms while two others clung to her legs.

"I don't know where they are!" Olivia Miller screamed, "My boys, two of my boys! They were right here then all of a sudden they were gone! And I don't know where my husband is!"

"He was going to get the mule from the barn, but he hasn't come back! Oh please, please help me!"

"We're going to, ma'am," Jake said, then seeing Eli nearby, motioned him over. "Mrs. Miller, this is Lt. Sheffler. He's going to escort you and your children down to the road." To Eli, he said, "Find someone to care for them while we search for the others."

Mickey and his men were attacking the fire at the house, and Lt. Tom Royan was directing his company in battling the barn fire and the brush fires spreading between the burning shed and the other two buildings. Jake ordered Freddy and another firefighter to search the house for George Miller and the two missing boys, and Jake went to search in the barn. He had almost hit Sweet Virgin with the fire department pickup truck on Burton Road as she followed the fence

line that kept her separated from the draft horses and the cattle, so Jake thought the chances were good that someone in the family had turned her loose and might still be in the barn.

Jake was about to radio the police station to call for additional manpower and water trucks from Allen Falls and Dalebridge, but before he reached the pickup truck, Matt arrived. Jake paused only long enough to say, "Call Allen Falls and Dalebridge for manpower and their water trucks. I'm gonna free up some men to lay a line to the closest hydrant on Burton, but I might not have enough hose. It's gonna take awhile to set up that supply line and we're gonna drain their little farm pond in less than ten minutes."

Waving a couple of firefighters over, Jake led them into the barn. Engine 1's company had already put out the fire on the wall but smoke was drifting outside up at the peak. More than half the siding was gone, but the roof was still well-supported and there was little damage inside the barn. Jake found George, just struggling to sit up, inside Sweet Virginia's stall. He instructed his men to take George first to the ambulance, then, if he was okay, to send him down to Burton Road where Olivia and her children had been taken. Jake checked the barn one last time. There were no other animals in the barn and the two missing boys weren't there either.

Jake gave a quick prayer that they'd run into the cornfields or that Freddy had found them safe and sound and reunited them with their mother. Outside, Jake saw Mickey ordering two more firefighters to assist in laying out hose to the street. Seeing that Eli and Casey were not administering first aid to anyone, Jake sent them over to help lay hose also. The shed and field fires were still going strong, taking manpower that was badly needed at the house where the fire was burning between the wall studs from the first floor up to the attic.

Jake and firefighter Jim Gillis went to the front of the house to get a report from Freddy and Sandy Farmer, who were on the front steps, hunched over, coughing.

"Kids aren't on first floor," Freddy choked out between fits of coughing, "but we're going back in to check upstairs. Just need to get some air."

Picking up Freddy's pike pole as he passed him Jake said, "No, you take a real break, and if Dalebridge and Allen Falls get here in the next couple of minutes, take command and get them deployed." There wasn't much smoke in the house, at least on the first floor, since most of the windows had been open to let the cooler night air in. The flight of stairs going up from the parlor looked safe enough, so Jake and Jim ascended, crawling up the last few steps to keep below smoke that was banking down in the hallway. Even with the windows open, the stifling humidity and lack of even a slight breeze kept a lot of smoke contained within the house. Jake knew he and Jim had only minutes in which to find the Miller boys before he and Jim were driven out by the smoke.

Jake crawled into the first bedroom on his right to begin his search for the boys as Jim crawled into the next room down the hall. The smoke had settled, thick and heavy, and with no electricity in the house, and no lamps lit, the second floor was pitch black. Off and on a small amount of light came in from the fire truck lights, but it was only enough for Jake and Jim to orient themselves in the rooms, not enough to actually see anything. There were definitely no children in the room Jake checked so he crawled back to the hallway and met up with Jim, who had found no one in the second bedroom. Together, knowing they were about out of time, they moved into the hallway using their pike poles as extensions of their outstretched arms. While Jim searched the stairwell leading to the attic, Jake crawled into the remaining bedroom. He bumped into one of the boys, who was clutching a cat in his arms. "Got one!" he yelled, and when Jim crawled into the bedroom, Jake laid the unconscious boy in Jim's arms and laid the cat on top of the boy. As Jim hurried his victims to the ambulance, Jake found the younger boy on the other side of the bed. He was a small child, and as Jake carried the limp little body downstairs, he thought how much this little boy felt like his son, Sean. In the few seconds it took Jake to get

outside he remembered how precious Sean always felt in his arms. For those few seconds, Jake felt happiness such as he hadn't experienced since before the horror of the fire that cost Sara and Sean their lives, then the fresh air hit him and he was coughing and choking and stumbling towards the ambulance.

Eli was performing artificial respiration on the older boy. Casey was setting up the pulmotor. George and Olivia were close by, on their knees, hands clamped to their mouths, watching in mute horror.

As soon as Jake laid the younger boy on the grass, Casey pushed Jake aside, saying, "Get the parents away from here," at the same time as he turned the boy onto his stomach, and straddling the boy's legs, began to perform artificial respiration. Eli brought the pulmotor to Casey and adjusted the oxygen mask for the child's face.

Having moved the Millers a short distance away, Jake returned to where Eli and Casey were working on the boys. The older boy had come around and was trying to reach the cat, who had also recovered and was meowing plaintively. Despair engulfed Jake as he watched Casey performing artificial respiration on the younger boy. He could still feel the weight of the boy in his arms, but the sensation and the sorrow were pushed aside because there was so much else going on that required his attention.

A Dalebridge firefighter sprained his ankle trying to dodge an angry rooster, so Jake enlisted Policeman Giles Hessing to drive the man to the hospital. Then the cows and horses got loose, and Jake saw some of the neighbors from Numbertown trying to corral them. The animals stampeded past the neighbors and took off through a cornfield leaving a trail of trampled cornstalks.

Then Casey came to get him. "Boss, you're gonna have to come back with me. The little kid's dead for sure and you gotta tell his folks. Eli's waitin' for you to get there before he takes the mask off."

This can't be happening, Jake thought on his way over to where the Millers were kneeling on the grass, holding each other. If I ever wished anything bad on anyone, it wouldn't be to lose a child. Please, God, let me do my job without seeing Sean. . . .

THE FARM FIRES

by

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