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A HOLIDAY BEGINNING

by *Dale W. Hill*

"Why don't you take Dee Dee with you?" my sister offered as we prepared to head out to visit my wife's folks after opening gifts at my parents' home in Newkirk.

Dee Dee was my sister's only daughter and our only niece; and we were dumfounded by the offer. Less than four months before, we had lost our only daughter, Darla, a healthy 17-month-old toddler, in a tragic domestic accident. My wife and I, along with the members of our small Northwestern Kansas church, were struggling through the "How comes?" and the "Whys" of such a tragedy. Still in mourning, we now were experiencing our little one's should-have-been second Christmas, but sadly, without her.

"Dee Dee?" was Marcella's stunned response. Already our lives had begun to take a different direction. Within the month after our daughter's death, we had become involved in foster care. Three toddlers and now a teen-ager, Patty, later shared our lives. But we still suffered daily.

"You can start over. You're lucky that you're young," people had comforted, but we really didn't want to start over. We yearned to go back. Tragedies do that—make people want to turn back pages. We were no different.

Even though our newly acquired teen-age,

foster daughter was finding this to be the best Christmas of her life, it was our worst. Joyful Christmas festivities only magnified our loss. Christmas toys only reminded us of what could never be. Giving thanks during holidays for the suffering is indeed difficult.

Marcella dreaded this Christmas with her family. Our little toddler was her mom and dad's only grandchild, and they, like us, were devastated. "Why in the world?," I remembered, was my father-in-law's, grief-stricken reaction when I had told him that September evening. No, this Christmas wouldn't be easy at all.

"We'd love to! Why not?" my wife excitedly accepted as she thought of the prospective experience. "Having a five-year-old around might help Mom and Dad make it through the holidays."

Holidays, after the loss of a loved one—especially children or spouses—are indeed difficult. No wonder so many suicides occur before and during holiday seasons. No wonder holidays sometimes deepen depression rather than lighten it. The opportunity to take our niece along brightened the prospects of fellowship with our incomplete family—prospects of family photos with a member conspicuously absent.

The December Oklahoma wind had picked up on that cloudy Christmas day, with our foster

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daughter enjoying her first new coat. The warm car was almost inadequate in shielding the effects of the chilly northern as we drove to Hennessey, where Grandpa Jack was a truck driver in the oil-boom economy of the early 70's. Their mobile home snuggled between several others in a small trailer lot on the east side of Hennessey, and our thoughts turned from the tragedy to our niece, as soon as we arrived, who engrossed us in her kindergartener experiences.

Jack and Norma were delighted with our little Snow White; and after a full and active day, Dee Dee fell asleep on the divan, where we gently tucked her in.

"Do you think it might snow tomorrow?" was her final anticipatory question as she dozed off. Every child hopes that the Christmas holidays will bring about a snowman-type adventure, but we knew it wasn't to be. The Canadian cold front was to blow away the clouds through the night, and meteorologists had predicted a very hard freeze.

The aroma of coffee awoke me the next morning, and I was drawn to the sound of a mother-daughter conversation around a breakfast table cluttered with half-filled coffee cups. Starting over isn't easy, and it involves verbalizing the events and feelings; and this morning, so close after the tragedy, the discussion lingered around the funeral and efforts at keeping our spirits up.

As I passed by our niece, she slowly opened her blue eyes, rubbing the sleep out with

two small clenched fists. I glanced at the clock. "7:30," I thought. "A short night for such an active little one."

"Did it snow out?" she queried as she lifted herself up on her knees to look out the north window covered with Mr. Jack Frost. Slowly Dee Dee pushed back the curtain and peered out to see if one of her Christmas prayers had been answered.

"A fire!!! Oh my goodness, that trailer house is on fire!" she shouted as she stood up and looked even closer.

My first reaction was denial. I smiled a little disbelievingly and then slowly pulled back the curtain too. Shocked by what I saw, I was momentarily frozen. Flames were shooting out of the eastern end of the mobile home which was adjacently north and parallel to ours. The flames had broken the windows on that end of the trailer and seemed to be trying to escape, sucking the curtains with them—five, no ten, feet in the air.

"That house is on fire!" I yelled in contained panic. "I hope no one is in there."

We quickly broke into action as Grandpa hurriedly threw on his clothes and shoes and Grandma called the Fire Department. The garden hose was frozen as my wife's dad threw it down out of frustration and headed for the storage building to get another. The rest of us headed around the trailer, praying that we would find no one hurt.

As we turned the corner, we were startled

to see two little barefoot boys still dressed in their pajamas and holding a bird cage.

"We saved our parakeet!" said one of the boys to Grandma.

"We didn't mean to do it," the other whimpered. "It was just an accident."

As Grandma led the boys inside to warm them up with cocoa and warm clothes, we found out that their mother and father had left them at home while they went to work. The mother was scheduled to be back shortly.

By 7:40 the firetrucks arrived. The garden hose was useless against the fire, so Grandpa used it to shower down the north side of his house where the siding was buckling and turning brown under the intense heat generated by the blaze some one hundred feet away. Even firefighters found their hoses to be less than useful. The fire was quickly consuming the rest of the trailer and by 7:50 had engulfed the western end of the house. Soon an oil-truck filled with tons of water pulled in and literally dumped the water on the raging fire, quickly and efficiently dousing the flames.

We all surveyed the smoldering mass of twisted metal, charred wood, and melted artifacts as the two youngsters joined us. First the boys' mother arrived, hugged the boys, and fell to the ground as she ingested the totality of the destruction. Everything, yes, everything, was lost.

The father arrived. It had taken only twenty minutes for most of their earthly posses-

sions to be lost. Whisking away the mother and his two children, the father soon left, unable to bear the disastrous sight any longer.

All of us stood speechless, staring at the rubble while recognizing the awesome and destructive capabilities of fire. The young couple had to start all over.

We hugged one another, thankful for our answered prayers that no one was hurt, knowing all too well how this tragedy would affect the young family. The accident would either pull them apart or pull them together. We prayed it would be the latter.

As our family comforted those youngsters and their parents that morning, we seemed to be comforted. That tragedy strengthened our faith and helped us realize that we weren't the only ones suffering, and somehow it helped our family come to grips with the realities of starting over that Christmas in Western Oklahoma ▲

DALE W. HILL is an elementary counselor for the Anadarko Public Schools. Dale and Marcella, a nurse for Grady Memorial Hospital in Chickasha, have four children at home: Darrin, Hollt, Nathan, and Drema. Mr. Hill has had numerous articles published in WESTVIEW, THE LOOKOUT, CHRISTIAN STANDARD, and other periodicals including an acceptance to GUIDEPOSTS.