

When the Smoke Clears

**py·ro·pho·bi·a** (pī-rə- 'fō-bē-ə) *n.* an extreme fear of fire

That definition sounds very familiar. I had an irrational and extreme fear of fire for most of my life, which I refused to tell anyone about. I never knew why I first became scared; only that it had been getting worse. All that changed with what started out as a typical trip to the library.

My father worked late almost every night, which left me home all alone. Because of this, I was responsible for making dinner. Because dinner usually meant using the stove, it was something I went to great lengths to avoid. Late night meals of sandwiches were fairly common at my house. Either my father really liked sandwiches or maybe he was just too tired to say anything. I had found that if I claimed a need to be at the library for hours, I naturally wouldn't have time to cook. Since I rarely had a genuine need to be there, I usually tried to be invisible.

I climbed off the school bus and walked up the stone steps into the library. But somehow, once I walked in the door that day, everything felt different. The door still squeaked behind me as it shut, the air smelled of bookbinding, and the same stain was on the carpet. The sign that proclaimed in bright green letters, "Friend of the Library Book Sale Saturday at Noon!" was standing motionless at the bottom of the stairs, just where it always was. Ms. Smith, the librarian, was sitting in command at the front desk, just as she did every weekday. What was the difference? That day I actually had a legitimate reason for being at the library.

"Have any of my books come in?" I asked, as I handed Ms. Smith my library card.

"No." Her simple, efficient reply did not invite discussion.

"Rats. I really need to get started on my research paper," I mumbled, pretending I was talking to myself, but hoping Ms. Smith might respond. She did not. "Could you please let me know if any get returned?" Ms. Smith gave a curt nod, which was my cue to go away.

Ms. Smith was never very friendly. She always acted suspicious of me, probably because I was always just hanging around. So, that was why I had decided to do a "research paper." Since it was a self-imposed assignment, I figured that I might as well find out more about the psychology behind my pyrophobia (and maybe even how to get over it). Having finished all my homework between classes, I had hoped that at least a few of the books I had requested a week ago would have arrived. I walked over to the psychology section and was browsing through books on other phobias when Ms. Smith walked over with a book in hand. "Tristin, right?"

“Yes.”

“Someone just returned this.” I looked down, and sure enough, it was one of the books I had requested a few days ago, “Fire Phobia.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” I replied with a smile. Ms. Smith nodded briskly and walked away. Clutching the book, I headed over to my favorite seat. It was a big comfy armchair that had a great view of the door. I was far enough away that the squeak didn’t bother me, yet I could still see all the comings and goings.

I sat down and curled my legs up underneath me, opening the book as I did so. Unfortunately, just as I found the section I was looking for, the door opened and a harassed mother walked in, shepherding her two young boys. Also frequent visitors, I had learned to dread seeing them walk through the door. These boys were always extremely noisy and disruptive. I sighed, knowing that the nice quiet library soon would echo with whiny, screechy voices.

Their mother pulled the brothers off to the side and said, “I’ll be back in a few hours. Fredrick, you keep an eye on Sam and both of you be good.” At that, I almost burst out laughing. She obviously knew how likely that was; that’s why she was leaving. Then she pointed them in the direction of the stairs that led to the children’s section and rushed out the door.

I returned to my research, in the hopes that I might be able to finish a page or two before the boys started to wreak havoc. No such luck. The moment their mother walked out the door, they started up their usual antics by playing hide and go seek.

I closed my eyes with exasperation as Sam, the youngest brother, shouted “Ready!” When I opened my eyes, Ms. Smith was marching over to him. She gripped his hand and led him firmly toward the stairs. Fredrick came flying around a stack and ran smack into Ms. Smith.

I heard her whisper ferociously, “Where is your mother?” Fredrick just shrugged. “You two are going to stay up in the Children’s section until your mother returns,” she said with Sam in tow. Fredrick was forced to follow his brother up the stairs. I had high hopes that they wouldn’t be back downstairs until they left.

Quiet restored, I went back to my research. An hour later, I was rudely interrupted again, but this time it was by the blaring fire alarm. My legs suddenly turned to Jell-O and I couldn’t breathe. I forced myself to think. *Okay, just take it one step at a time. All you have to do is get to the door.* As the air began to smell faintly of smoke, I said a quick prayer. Shaking, I forced myself to grab my bag, sling it over my shoulder, and began a wobbly run toward the door.

Before I reached it, I suddenly remembered the pesky brothers. I hadn't seen them come down from the children's section.

*It would be just like them to choose this moment to take Ms. Smith seriously, and not even leave the room when the building was burning.* I paused only for a second to argue with myself before my conscience took over. My head tried to talk me out of it the whole way up the stairs, but I knew that I would simply have to face my fears. By the time I had reached the entrance to the children's section, the smoke smell was a lot stronger and now it mingled with the acrid odor of burning drywall. I glanced through the room and ascertained that it was deserted. Where were they? I hoped that both Fredrick and Sam had gotten out all right.

I ran back to the stairs and flew down them as fast as I could. Right as I reached the last step, I tripped! Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. I saw the bright green lettering of the Friends of the Library sign rise up to greet me. There was a sharp pain in my head and then blackness.

I awoke to the pungent smell of smoke. I took a deep breath and nearly choked on the acrid fumes. It took me a minute to figure out where I was and why I had my forehead laying on top of a hard metal bar. Then I remembered what was happening. I got slowly to my feet, my head throbbing. It took me a minute to gain my balance. Once I did, I hobbled toward the door as quickly as I could, my eyes smarting and watering. Some sticky substance was dripping down my face. I assumed it was sweat since the library was beginning to feel like an oven.

Halfway to the door I had to stop and cough. The smoke was making it harder and harder to breath. I put my sleeve over my mouth and nose, and stumbled to the door. As I reached it, I had to stop again to catch my breath, leaning against the frame. The whole area was getting more and more filled with smoke, and I was feeling faint.

Right as I was about to fall, the door burst open, nearly knocking me over. A man clad in a brown overall with bright yellow reflective stripes walked through. He had a mask on and was carrying an oxygen tank on his back. Some of my strength returned to me at the sight of someone who could help. I stood upright for a second and then I really did fall, but this time I landed in his arms. I must have fainted because the next thing I knew, I was laying on a stretcher with people all around me. I heard a deep, familiar voice saying, "But you have to let me see her! I am her father for goodness sake!"

"I'll need some proof of your relation to her," an official sounding voice said.

My father desperately exclaimed, "Fine!"

I turned my head slightly, which was made harder by the tape that was wrapped around it. I could see a tall, handsome, strong looking man fumbling around in his pockets. He had dark blond hair and his eyes, which were staring intently at me, were the grey-blue eyes of the sky after a storm. I saw him pull out a wallet, and look down distractedly at it, taking his driver's license out, then return his gaze to me.

The police officer who was standing next to my father took his driver's license. He then reached into my bag, which he had hanging over his arm, and pulled out my ID card. He held them up next to each other and said, "Mr. Robinson, is this your daughter?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!" my father half shouted, exasperated.

The official sounding voice quietly allowed, "You may go see her."

He didn't even wait to get his license back before he rushed to my side. "Trissy? You alright?" he asked. I opened my mouth to speak, but found that I was unable to do more than whisper.

"It will take her awhile to be able to talk normally. She inhaled a lot of smoke," the Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) said, as someone handed my father his driver's license. My father nodded, looking worried.

I felt so weak I could barely move more than my eyes, but a little to my left I saw Ms. Smith walking over. "Is she okay?" she asked awkwardly. I was surprised to see concern etched on her brow.

"Tristin? Oh, she'll be fine," was my father's flippant response. I mentally smiled at how well my father could hide his worry around strangers. I wanted to say something to reassure them both, but I knew it was useless to try.

"Okay, I think you'll be good until we get to the hospital," the EMT said, addressing me. "Sir, are you ready to go?"

"Yes," my father replied.

"Alright then. I'll get Tristin here aboard." The EMT lifted my stretcher into the ambulance and both he and my father climbed on board. Sirens screaming, we started to move.

I couldn't seem to keep my eyes open. I felt a prick in my arm and guessed that someone had inserted an IV. Feeling the security of my father's hand, I succumbed to exhaustion and fell asleep. I woke up with a throbbing head as I was being pushed into the emergency room. It was

crowded, but everyone parted to let the stretcher through. I was pushed down a long corridor and into a room brightly lit with florescent lights. Dancing bears wearing overalls were painted in a line across the wall. After parking my stretcher against one wall, the EMTs left. I mouthed the words, "Thank you," at their retreating smiles. My father and I were left alone.

"I'm sure you want to get some sleep," my father said. I nodded. "I'll stay right here with you." I smiled, and immediately drifted into a deep slumber.

When I awoke, my father was standing with his back to me talking to a man dressed in a white jacket, who I guessed was the doctor. A nurse was gently applying an ice pack to the heavily bandaged nasty bump protruding from my head. When the nurse saw I was awake, she walked over to the doctor and my father and whispered something to them. They both stopped talking and my father turned and hurried over to my bed.

"Tristin, how are you feeling? How's your head?" he asked.

I cleared my throat and said without thinking, "It hurts." My voice was really hoarse but at least I could whisper! My father smiled in relief. "How long have I been asleep?" I asked.

"Only a couple of hours," the nurse replied. "I cleaned you up and I've been applying ice to your forehead on and off ever since we stitched your head up. The swelling seems to have gone down and the bleeding stopped once we put stitches in. We moved you out of Emergency about an hour ago. You didn't even stir."

"I cut my head?" I asked incredulously, ignoring the rest of the statement.

"Yes, quite a nasty cut too. You needed 12 stitches," The doctor said.

"But what did I cut it on?" I asked still not believing the tale. I hadn't remembered getting any cut.

"Probably whatever gave you that large lump," the doctor said patiently.

"Oh," I cried, "The Friends of the Library!" Seeing the astonished looks on the faces surrounding me, I realized I needed to explain about the sign.

Once that was cleared up, I glanced about the room, noticing that there weren't any dancing bears on the wall, only a couple of palm trees painted in one of the corners. I could see the night sky out a window that was just to the left of me. I stared at the moon for a while not saying a word, then I must have drifted off. The next thing I knew flames were surrounding my bed.

I tossed and turned, trying to sit up. The smoke was beginning to envelop me and I could barely breathe, my heart was pounding nearly out of my chest, then suddenly the flames disappeared and I could breathe. Opening my eyes, I saw my father's concerned face. I blinked hard a few times trying to calm my heart. "It was just a dream honey," he assured me. I nodded sleepily and rolled over, eventually falling asleep again. For several hours, time blurred and dreams of fire haunted me. Each time I woke up, my father was at my side. I could never have been as strong without him there keeping my faith and hope going. We prayer together, asking God to help heal me, and eventually the dreams stopped.

Lots of people came to see me, including Ms. Smith. She told me that the fire was caused by old, faulty wiring. The Board for the library had decided to rebuild and Ms. Smith would get her old job back.

"What took you so long to get out?" she had asked me.

"I wanted to make sure those two brothers got out alright."

"Why would...?" she began, then changed her mind. "They're fine. One of the other parents took them with her down the emergency stairs." I was very relieved to hear this.

Before Ms. Smith left, I grabbed "Fire Phobia" off the table next to me. "I think I'm done with this now, if you could please return it for me." She actually smiled at me. While I hadn't finished the book, I now realized that I had taken control of my fears. Taking those steps up to the children's area had made me realize that all I had to do was face my fears.

Three days after the fire, the doctor said he thought I was ready to have the bandage taken off my head. I had no idea how bad the cut looked or how much the bump had gone down. I was nervous but also excited. It hurt a bit when he was taking the bandages off, but once they were gone, the fresh air felt good against my head. I slid out of bed and walked with my father's help over to the mirror above the sink.

When I first saw my reflection, I almost laughed. My blonde hair hung in limp greasy curls. But my face! My face looked pale except for the 2-inch long, L-shaped stitched cut, which stood out bright red against my colorfully bruised forehead. Only my eyes looked normal. They were the same brilliant blue. I put my hand up to my forehead, wincing when my finger touched the bump.

I turned around to face the doctor and my father. My father smiled at me, and the doctor said, “Your head looks better than I had expected. One more night in the hospital, just to make sure you’re okay, and you’ll be able to go home.”

The next day, I was finally back in my own home. When I arrived, my friends, cousins and grandparents were all there to greet me. They stayed for a while talking with me. Eventually they left and the house was finally quiet and I could relax.

Looking back, part of me wishes that I had gone home that day instead of to the library. If I had, I would never have had to go through any of this. The other part, however, knows that God acts in mysterious ways and through my ordeal, he has taught me something; He taught me to face my fears and thus fight against them. It will still be awhile before the cut heals, but I will recover. God has been with me through it all and “he will never leave [me] or forsake [me]” Deuteronomy 31:6. You may think that after this frightening experience, I would be even more pyrophobic, but that is not the case.

*I wonder what dad would prefer to have for dinner. Pasta, mac ‘n’ cheese, soup? No matter, time to fire up the stove.*