The Day Everything Caught Fire

By Samantha Smythe

It seemed like just a normal Saturday, my music pumping out a steady beat to keep me moving while I cleaned my room. Dirty clothes I pitched into the wicker hamper, and books I stacked neatly by my computer on the desk. I even flicked over the dresser top with the feather duster -- a joke, really, my sister gave me once when I got in trouble for not cleaning my room. The sky was brighter blue than I’d seen it in a long time, and I even opened the window to let in a crisp but promising breeze. It almost smelled like spring was coming.

Stripping the bed hastily, a grabbed an armful of sheets and pillowcases and headed for the laundry chute in the bathroom. But as I swung open its little blue door, I knew something was wrong. A swoosh of hot air rushed out at me, causing me to jump back and drop my bundle. Just then I heard a shriek coming from downstairs.

“Quick, Sammi,” my mother yelled, “wake up your sister and get out of the house!”

I ran down the hall and threw open the door to Sadie’s room. It looked like it always does -- pink and ruffled, everything arranged neatly as usual. I always thought it looked like a Pottery Barn catalog with everything matching just enough. Sadie was snuggled into her pink, striped sheets with her matching comforter folded back at her feet.

“Get up, Sadie,” I said, shaking her shoulder. “There’s a fire, and we need to get out of the house.”

Sleepily, she rubbed her eyes and just stared at me.

“Move! The house is burning Come NOW!”

Sadie still looked confused, but she struggled into a pair of jeans over her pajamas, grabbed a PINK sweatshirt and followed me out the door. We could both smell the smoke by then and hurried even faster. It looked OK to go down the stairs to the front hall, but when we reached the bottom, smoke made everything hazy. The kitchen to our right had smoke pouring out of it, and we thought we saw flames. Just as we turned to head to the front door, two firefighters pushed it open and came in, pulling a hose behind them. We jumped over the hose and ran out on the front lawn.

Mom was there, standing near the oak tree, hugging Sylvester, our orange tabby. She almost dropped him as she started to throw her arms around Sadie and me. “What happened?” I asked, hugging her tightly as Sadie rescued Sylvester.

“I don’t know, I just don’t know,” she said, her voice trembling as if she was going to cry at any minute. “I was just starting the first load of clothes when the furnace made a loud popping noise, and fire just shot out of the vent on the top. I grabbed Sylvie, yelled at you and ran outside with my phone, called 911 as I went. I could feel the heat and flames behind me.”

We stood in the yard, the three of us, hugging each other and the bewildered cat, as another fire truck joined the first, and others went inside with hoses and axes. We could see flames coming out the basement windows and even thought we saw some in the kitchen. It seemed like hours we were frozen there, until finally the men started dragging their wet hoses back out on the lawn. We watched silently as they coiled them back on the trucks. Finally one of them who must have been in charge walked over to us.

“It should be safe now, ma’am,” he said slowly. “All the fire is out, and it’s safe to go back in to get things you need, but you have water and smoke damage, and we turned off the water, gas and electricity. And you will need to have the furnace replaced and call your insurance company.” With that, he gave mom a card with information of people to call. “I don’t think you lost too much,” he said kindly. “I’ve seen a lot worse.”

We knew it could have been worse -- but we were safe, the cat was safe though frightened, dad was at work so he was safe, and we had the information we needed to start getting back to normal. But it will take us a long time to forget what it looked like with flames shooting out the windows and smoke billowing out the door.

Now write this story as it would appear as a short news story in the local paper the next day.

1. What would you leave out? Why?

Details about Samantha’s and Sadie’s rooms

Chronological details of what the girls and their mom did

Opinion at the end about how things could have been worse

Aren’t really newsworthy

1. What else would you need to know?

How much damage was done?

Where is the house (the address?)

Does the fire department know the cause?

What is their last name? What is the mother’s name?

Exactly when did this happen?

1. If you were a reporter, who could you ask for that information? Your teacher can be any of the people you need to ask for information. As a class, choose your sources one at a time and ask what you need.

You could get all of it from the fire chief -- be sure to get his name

You could get some of it from the mother -- what’s HER name?

1. Now write the news story again. How is it the same and how is it different than the first attempt you made to write news?

POSSIBLE News Story for the local paper (so you don’t need to say the town)

A faulty furnace is the probable cause of a house fire at 3004 High St. Saturday morning that caused approximately $15,000 damage to the structure.

The homeowners, their two daughters and a cat were unharmed.

*Some news outlets wouldn’t name the homeowners but others would.*