

Time to Go: A Personal Story

(Chapter from *Fighting Fire in the Sierra National Forest*)

The call came at five o'clock. "You have been evacuated. Leave your house. The fire is coming in your direction." I'm prepared. My fire "go box" and computer are already in my car. I throw some clothes into a suitcase. I scuffle with my two outraged cats and finally get them into their carrying cases, and then, per usual, run madly around searching for my purse and car keys. Finally, everything's packed and I'm off to the evacuation shelter.

By nine o'clock that night the Red Cross has registered us, fed us and set up cots for thirty overnighters. My cats are ensconced in an air conditioned 'kennel' set up in a room apart from the evacuees by the Central California Animal Disaster Team (CCADT), an organization formed in 2011 that works side by side with the Red Cross during disaster relief. My cats, along with twenty other unwilling cats and dogs, are making a ruckus, unaware of the fire danger all around and unmoved by the luxury of their five-star accommodations. The staff of the CCADT, patient, resourceful, skillful, somehow manages to calm the animals—the four-legged and human type—and we are all settled in to what will be our routine for the next three days.

Then, to my surprise, I look around and wonder, what do I do now? I am bored. Bored? Who could have imagined that amid all the panic and confusion, not knowing whether I would have a house to go back to, I would experience boredom? I blame it on the Red Cross and CCADT. Too efficient.

The next morning after a briefing on the status of the fire, a breakfast is served. The choices include eggs, bacon, pancakes, cereals, juices, fruit, coffee, tea, and cocoa. I make another visit to my cats. Then, again, a sense of what do I do now? Sweep and mop the floors. Wipe down some tables. Talk to some folks. Bring some coffee to a fellow evacuee. Try to calm a worried woman. Another hour gone by. Another visit to the kennel. Everything under control there. Nothing to do.

A moment of panic. At last! I think about my house. What's happening to it? Pictures in my mind of it sitting alone, fire, and the feral cats I feed scurrying about, looking for food. They say that feral animals know how to escape fire. I know they will be all right.

I drive back into town. The roadblocks are still up. I can't get through. I try to think of a way around them, but the road to my house is pretty well closed off. Back to the shelter. I learn from the notices tacked on the wall that they've named my fire the Junction Fire. A Red Cross representative is interviewing a couple. "They've lost their home," one of my new evacuee acquaintances whispers. She didn't have to say a word. The expression on the couple's faces, the tears in the woman's eyes, they tell the whole story.

I call my home, relieved to hear my voice mail click in, and then the beep. I leave a message. "You're still there," I say. "I'm thinking about you. I miss you and hope I'll see you soon." I would call my home and leave love messages three more times before I am allowed to return.

Evacuation is doing crazy things like talking to your home. Evacuation is being suspended in a limbo state, not here, not there. There's nothing you can do, what with all the accoutrements of normal life sequestered twenty miles from where you are. The help and company of friends, a meal, a visit, an overnight stay, these all help keep you rooted, earthbound. But it's always with you: the house, the fire, the not knowing. You never fully engage. In your mind you are sifting through the ashes of your home, searching for things you had to leave behind. You are planning. There's the insurance problem, temporary living, rebuilding. Maybe it's a good thing. Maybe you're preparing yourself for the worse. You're safe, you tell yourself. The rest is in the detail.

Evacuation is also about miracles, some small, some large. In the shelter people related their stories of miraculous things happening during the fire. We heard about the propane company's office building burning up into a cinder, yet the giant propane tanks just ten feet away remaining untouched. "If those tanks blew," one evacuee said, "there'd be a crater four miles wide in this town." (We would learn later, after everything had settled down, that the miracle was actually the Cal Fire crew's skill and ingenuity and courage that prevented the tanks from blowing up.)

I experienced some miracles of my own during those days. I almost had to leave one of my cats when she scratched her way out of my grip as I was putting her into her carrier. She ran and hid under a couch. I couldn't coax her out. Not even her favorite treat could grab her attention. I moved the couch, and she moved with it. I begged her to come out. In desperation, I walked out of the room thinking I would have to leave her. Then back into the room and one last try. In my most authoritative voice I called out, you've got to come out, now! And she did. Like an obedient puppy dog, she walked right up to me. But she's a cat, and you know what they say about herding cats.

Then there was my phone charger miracle. My children kept calling. They were worried. Should they come? Is there anything they could do? What's going on? I had to rush them off the phone because my cell phone charge was running down. How could I have forgotten my cell phone charger, I berated myself. Then the solution came to me. I drove to the business center in town and asked if they could charge my phone. The sales person took my phone to the back and emerged with a charger. "We have tons of these back there," she said, handing me one, no questions asked. We chatted for a while and I found out she too had been evacuated. We were kinsmen.

This act of kindness was one part of the miracle of miracles of these days of evacuation, the giving, generous community in which we live; local businesses asking, what do you need, opening up their doors, providing services; local citizens and organizations showering us with food, clothing, and personal items—everything from tooth paste to Huggies. As one volunteer said, "We told people we needed deodorant, and fifty deodorants showed up."

And then there were donations of hours and days of personal time, people arriving and asking, what can I do? Do you need anything? These people, quietly, efficiently, and in good humor going about their work. They take time from their own lives, from their jobs. I think of a couple, Kelly and Dan, with non-stop kitchen duty, cooking and serving meals, cleaning floors and tables, ten, twelve hours a day. What makes people do that? "I was just raised with the idea that when you serve your fellow man," said Kelly, "you're serving God. My dad taught me that. My mom taught me that. I taught it to my children." Amen.

Over the three days of evacuation I learned that there were evacuees of all kinds, as varied as any gathering of people. But the ones that captured my imagination were those who, when told to evacuate, dug in their heels and stayed, determined to wait it out and protect their homes. Or there were those who found their way back to their houses, traveling as much as fifty miles out of their way over forest roads, to retrieve pets left behind. Why do they do that? Does it work? I try to picture myself on the roof of my house, hose in hand. Where would I start? What would happen if the water pressure ran low?

“We come across those kinds of evacuation issues with every fire,” said Karen Guillemin, Cal Fire prevention officer. “Some people won’t leave their homes, and we have to force them out of there. They don’t think about all the equipment coming in, huge fire engines, bulldozers, water tenders. We need a lot of area to work. Helicopters come in a drop buckets of water. You could be knocked off your roof. You need to be out of there.” Karen admits that under some circumstances people can save their homes by hosing their roofs, but she urges people to educate themselves about the right conditions to do it, and then to know when it’s time to leave.

After I am finally allowed to return to my home and find everything as I left it, I cannot settle down. It’s like having an engine running inside me. I drive around town, walk along charred hills. I see places where the fire has burned up to the hill behind a house and stops its advance. I see a property with the skeleton of a shed twenty feet from a house that stands untouched. How does a fire decide where it is going to go? I visit the site of the propane company. The office building lays in charred ruins. The enormous white gas tanks sit quietly nearby. I am overcome with gratitude.