It was fall in Massachusetts and I was enjoying the crinkle of the leaves, sitting outside in the grass, and feeling connected to the nature around me. Me and my favorite Barbie dolls played in the grass with tree leaves, sticks, and acorns used as furniture, leaves as beds, pinecones as tables, and acorns as the meal. I could play in this make-believe world all day long, feelings peace and quiet being outside with my dolls and nature. Suddenly, there was an unfamiliar sound of fire trucks and ambulances.

The sounds of emergency vehicles got louder and louder; it seemed as though they were getting closer to me. The fire truck and ambulance were pulling up to the front of my house. I thought to myself, “Why are those trucks here? Are my parents, okay? What is happening?”  I immediately started to panic and dropped my Barbie dolls to the ground. I started heading towards my house and was quickly met by a rescue worker who would not allow me into my house. I started to cry asking for my parents and he told me, “Everyone is fine and are at the front of the house, everyone is alright.” I turned immediately and headed towards the front of the house, and he grabbed me again saying, “No, you need to stay here and back away from the house.”  I did not want to be alone at the rear of the house, I wanted to be with my parents.

I turned my heard to look at my house and saw smoke billowing from the rear door and window. I screamed loudly shouted, “My house is burning!”  I am not sure if I started to cry, stared in silence, or talked aloud, “how could my house have a fire inside? Is my family, okay? How am I the only one out here with none of my family?” I felt scared and alone not knowing if the fire would consume our house or if everyone saw it happen.

It felt like the firefighters were in the house for a brief moment. After the fire was extinguished, the rescue workers brought me to the front of the house with my parents. I felt relieved that I could hug them and see they were doing well. I remember the firefighter asking me, “Are you okay?” I answered, “Yes, I am fine, but what about my house?”  The firefighter continued to ask my parents lots of questions, and I heard him say, “It could have been a lot worse.”  Once the firefighters were satisfied that the fire was entirely extinguished and determined the house was safe to enter, they began to clean-up their supplies.

After the rescue workers left, me and my family went into the house to observe the extent of the damage. The fire happened in the kitchen and was contained to only the kitchen. It appeared as if the call for fire emergency help was caught quickly so the fire did not spread to other parts of the house. I began to ask my parents lots of questions. “Where were you during the fire and how did you know to call so quickly?”  I was concerned because my parents were inside the house and seemed to be calm and aware of the damage. My parents seemed less concerned with how this happened or who could have potentially been hurt, than with how to repair the house. They were planning out renovations to the house as if they wanted this to happen.

The fire felt like the scariest day to me, but to my parents, they continued with their plans. Construction work started soon after and appeared at my house regularly. The kitchen repairs and what appeared like an additional space had started. I asked my father, “What are they doing at the back of the house?”  My father replied, “They are making the house bigger by adding a great room and opening up the kitchen walls.”  I remember thinking to myself that it was good for my father to repair the kitchen and add another room at the same time, we will now have a fun spot to watch TV. This bonus room, along with a larger kitchen, became the place where my family gathered every day. My parents took immense pride in their new kitchen and family space.

Many years later, I learned that my father had started the fire in the oven with a piece of paper to obtain insurance money for upgrades to the kitchen and to enlarge the house with additional space. I asked myself the same question at different moments in time; immediately after the fire at eight years old, when I learned of the fire's purpose, and today, ‘how was my house on fire when I was in the backyard so close?’ Growing up it was portrayed as normal that an illegal activity happened as long as no one questioned it. My parents provided reasoning as, “Everyone does it, it happens all the time.”  I remember others saying after the construction was completed, “Wow, this looks great, you got exactly what you wanted.”  It was celebrated as a task well done. The feeling of confusion and conflict was sitting inside me with no understanding or reasoning until I began to understand that this was not a task worthy of celebration.

This house, with the fire, was the house I grew up in, graduated high school and got married in. The house was always full of people and had lots of stories within. The house was always open to family, friends, and those needing a space to feel comfort. It was a large corner lot with an expanive pool and backyard. The driveway was so large that it extended into the backyard of the house and could fit five to six cars.

All of the doors, front and side doors into the great room addition, were always unlocked welcoming family, friends, and visitors at all times of everyday. Our home had a welcoming spirit that made people feel special upon entering the house or the yard. People came to talk, eat, and enjoy the company within it. My mother was always cooking and cleaning to entertain whomever may show up as well as the next round of visitors. Her role was to make sure there was ample food available so when people were at our house they always had a meal to share. My father seemed the most happy when people were at the house. Generally, my father did not go to others houses, people gravitated to our house. The visitors at my house knew they were always welcome and my father offered his wisdom graciously to anyone that needed a helping hand. There was a cost to this lifestyle, however my father thought it was important that anyone could feel comfortable while spending time at our house.

My house was considered a place of safety for others when they visited, telling their secrets or to feel surrounded by others and not alone. I did not share the same feeling of safety as everyone else. It was difficult to feel comfortable in a place that did not offer safety on that day of the fire when I was 8 years old in the backyard. I did not feel safe and at the sametime did not feel unsafe. It felt as though there was always a fire buring below the surface, one that I could not touch or see, however could feel.

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