

Ode to Jim
by May Cotton © 2022

It started with sirens. Though only half awake, as was my habit, I began counting them. By the time I got to four, I was wide awake. I was too familiar with the signal — two sirens alone signified a medical emergency, a regular event in our over-55 community; more than two means a fire in the park.

Then I heard the roar of the fire engines right outside our house. The bedroom was permeated with red flashes even though the blinds were closed and curtains drawn.

At that very moment I heard pounding on the front door and shouting. I jumped out of bed and started down the hall. I met Dan halfway. The first words out of my mouth were, “Do we need to evacuate?”

“Not yet,” he responded. “Bill says Jim’s house is on fire and Jim’s probably dead.” Then he added, “But you should get dressed.”

My mind had already jumped back to the summer of 2018 when we spent our first night in this house — we had evacuated from our home in Northwood because of a fire encroaching from the west. Our street was the dividing line for the evacuation area, and I’d received a call saying people with animals needed to be ready to flee. We were preparing to move anyway, so we packed up our cats and some necessities and fled. We didn’t wait for the next call, because we already had a place to go.

Now here we were in a mobile home park where the house next door was burning, and 10 fire trucks lined the street. Jim, our crazy neighbor, the most irascible curmudgeon I’ve ever known, was probably dead. As I began putting on my clothes, Dan opened the blinds on the window which looked directly at Jim’s house. Later Dan said he meant to tell me to get out the carriers and grab the cats, but we never got that far.

We stood there watching as firemen dragged hoses to the house and smoke poured out the far end. For a while we thought the fire had spread to Kay’s house, the one just beyond Jim’s, but then the smoke turned white, signifying the fire was out.

Suddenly the side door burst open and two firemen appeared, squatting down to stay under the billowing smoke and dragging Jim behind them. Now Jim was a big man, not so tall, but very round, and it was clear he was too heavy for the two strong men trying to save him. They tried to lift him down the stairs, but it was more of a drag, and they dropped him at the bottom. Two other fellows ran over, and the four of them carried Jim, one man on each limb, to the driveway between our houses.

As the others ran back into the house, the remaining firefighter checked Jim’s vitals and began CPR. One by one the firemen came back, surrounding Jim where he lay on the pavement, nothing on his body but the remains of a tee-shirt and the ace bandages on his lower legs.

I have taken many First Aid and CPR trainings over the years, but this was the first time I ever witnessed real CPR on a human being. It was horrifying. I understand now why so many recipients of CPR end up with broken ribs. With every compression, Jim's enormous lower body jumped up off the ground. And they didn't quit. One after another the men surrounding Jim took turns doing compressions while another fastened a mask to Jim's face and began squeezing the Ambu bag to breathe for him. When the EMTs arrived, those fellows worked on setting up an IV, one holding up the pouches — a human IV pole — while the other inserted a needle into Jim's groin.

After about 20 minutes of compressions and an EKG, they strapped a contraption to Jim's chest, which I later learned was a device to continue the compressions automatically. At last they loaded Jim onto a backboard, which they set on the waiting gurney and took him away. That was the last time we saw him.

While the firemen were trying to revive Jim, Tony, the neighbor who lives directly behind Jim's house, edged onto the driveway and tried to approach the group of kneeling firemen. One of them shooed her away, so I opened the window and invited her to come into our house. She came to our backdoor bearing the odor of smoke and ashes. Dan let her in, I introduced them to each other, and then the three of us returned to the bedroom window to watch the spectacle unfolding below. We had a front row seat, so to speak. One of the rescuers had set up a portable spotlight in the bed of Dan's pickup, so the scene was well lighted.

I remember being stunned by Jim's nudity and the way they left him spreadeagle on the cold pavement while they pounded his chest to a pulp — not literally, but that how it appeared. Later I learned that Jim's clothes had caught fire and he carried the fire through the house in his attempt to get out. He was nude because his clothes had all burned off.

I couldn't believe Jim was still alive, but I'd watched them restart his heart. It was so hard not to open the window and call out to the fireman to let him die, that he would not want to live even though they found no DNR on his refrigerator. I knew from our conversations Jim was still very angry that his wife Charlene had died suddenly in August. I knew how much he was drinking as he bellowed at the neighbors for minor infractions, as I saw the piles of empty bottles and cans accumulating in his recycling until they spilled out, as I watched delivery fellows bringing multiple 12-packs to his front door, as I wrote up report after report to send to the manager hoping, (like everyone else in our cul de sac) Jim would be evicted.

I had borne the brunt of Jim's vile behavior along with most of the other residents, but I continued to be nice to him even as I avoided contact. After he fell in December and broke his hip, I found some of his mail in our mailbox. I went over to give it to him and ended up going to the grocery for him, going way over his budget for the few things he wanted because he asked for such large quantities of paper products, orange juice, and shoestring potatoes. He was grateful for the purchases and promised he'd pay me back for the amount I had spent, "plus a little extra," if I didn't mind getting a check post-dated for the start of the next year. A few days later I received a Christmas card with the post-dated check, the exact amount increased by \$20, a "tip" for my "services," according to the memo he'd written.

A few weeks later I called to tell him all the windows in his car were open. When he couldn't get his key fob to work, he asked me to come over to help. I became the only neighbor privileged to sit in his precious BMW as he shouted instructions for how to close the moon roof. (Jim was pretty deaf and often bragged about being too fat to get his eustachian tubes fixed.) The morning of the fire he'd finally managed to change the flat tire which had caused his car to sit for a month while he drove a rental — which he ended up scraping against our carport a couple of days earlier. That was the most recent incident I'd reported to the manager.

I think Jim had a good heart, but he was so much like my brother; he just didn't know how to be a nice guy. From the things he said to me I learned how much he hated my brother, but I think it was because he saw a reflection of himself in Tom. They were both autistic men with raging Aspergers. Jim had been lucky enough to find wives who guided him once his father was gone, whereas Tom remained single his whole life and gradually fell through the cracks of reality until he only had me to fall back on. But I had problems of my own, several of which were solved by Tom's death. One of the vile things Jim said to me was, "I hope you die of the same thing that killed your brother!" I wonder if Jim realized that Tom died from the results of his unmanaged Aspergers and his heavy drinking.

On Sunday afternoon the newest neighbor, Terry, knocked on our door to ask what had happened on Saturday night. I told him we thought he's slept through it, since he didn't put in an appearance like all the other neighbors. It was right there in Terry's driveway where they were working on Jim. As we talked, I took him first to the bedroom window to point out what we had seen, and then we walked over to look at Jim's house. When we got to the far end where the fire had blown out the bedroom windows, we found a small crowd of neighbors gathered, processing what had happened.

April was there to tell us she was the one who had first called 911 while her husband tried to put the fire out with his garden hose. Later he showed up and gave his version of the story, telling how many times he had to run back across the street to unkink the hose and turn up the pressure. It was April who had started the door knocking — she had alerted Sara and Bill, which resulted in Bill alerting us. We learned that April's husband was a trained volunteer firefighter; all the neighbors thanked him for saving their houses, for had he not been right there to start the process, surely the surrounding homes would have burned.

There was nothing in the Sunday paper about the fire, but the neighbors insisted they had read the article, which said Jim was still alive. I searched through the paper twice, but eventually learned the article was only online. We saw KREM2's version of the story that night on the local news. They interviewed Sara and mentioned one firetruck had stayed all night to insure nothing happened to the remainder of Jim's belongings. That explained to me why I woke up Sunday morning to the sound to the truck departing.

I had tried to call the manager the night before, but I could only find a number for the office. As soon as it was after 9:00 AM, I called the maintenance guy and told him about the fire. I also told him the emergency gate was open and it looked like the firemen had taken it apart. A short time later he showed up to put it back together, reporting that it was really broken

this time — they had cut the chain which keeps it locked and broken the hinges so it would not reopen properly. “Maybe they’ll buy us a new one,” he laughed sarcastically.

On Monday I stopped in to talk to the manager. When I asked if she knew about Jim, she said, “Jim died last night.” It turns out Sara had an emergency number and had called her during the fire, and now the manager was in contact with Jim’s sister, from whom she learned the whole story. It seems Jim had died from a heart attack as he tried to get out of the house, and even though they got his heart going again there in the driveway and once more at the hospital, after they put him into a medical coma, he let go.

On Monday evening they were still reporting on KREM2 that the fire victim was in critical condition with severe smoke inhalation and burns over 40% of his body. I got on the phone, called the station, and told them Jim had died the night before. They wanted me to verify it, but all I could do was give them Sara’s number and tell them she knew how to contact the manager after hours, that both Sara and the manager had told me of Jim’s death.

It’s a terrible thing to say, but I’m sure Jim is better off dead. He was such an unhappy man. Now he is reunited with his beloved Charlene, and he no longer has to prove to everyone how smart he was by bragging about his four degrees, his military service, his ongoing security clearance with the government in spite of his age, and reciting the dates of everything important that ever happened in his life. If I had an eidetic memory, I could tell his whole life’s story.

We are all grateful we no longer have to put up with Jim, but I still pray for him. I hope he is having a better time in heaven than he had here on earth, God rest troubled his soul.