

## **A Day at the Circus (Fire)**

An Essay by Barbara Wallis Felgate

One afternoon, when I was a high school senior and hoping to be admitted to a state college, I found myself concerned by the puzzled look on the face of the interviewer.

He stated I had done well on the comprehension test (100% correct) and answered very appropriately on the word association test except for one word that definitely puzzled him. "Why," he wanted to know, did you answer 'fire' to the word 'circus'?" "Why" indeed?

When one is five years old, what could be more magical than a day at the circus? My parents really didn't want to go and sit in a stuffy tent on a roasting hot day. After all, they had been to the Chicago World's Fair and had seen Gypsy Rose Lee, among other attractions. But a five year old is fascinated with elephants and lions and tigers and, of course, the clowns. So we went, heat and all.

I really loved watching the lion tamer. I was fascinated and continued watching as they were leaving the cage. Everyone else was looking to the center ring to see the next act. A flicker of light caught my eye. There it was! There! Climbing up the side wall. A flare of flame that flickered and danced.

My mom noticed my fixed stare and looked to see what had caught my attention. "Fire" she said and stood up. "Sit down!" the man sitting behind her abruptly said and she then sat down.

It seemed very quiet for moments. Then I saw three sailors, in uniform, come running down through the three rings shouting "fire!". "Fire!.

"Fire."

I heard the music change completely and then pandemonium! People running! Shouting! Throwing chairs!

An oasis where we sat. My father calmly stacked our folding chairs. "So no one trips over them," he told me. Then he picked me up in his arms and followed my mother across the bleachers toward the closer canvas wall. The question now was would we reach the wall before the flames did?

To be answered later, how would we get over the animal run as we had climbed up and over and down on a small ladder to get to our seats when we had come into the tent. And, last, how would get out as the flames were nearing the entrance as we calmly walked along the bleachers.

A study in contrasts. We walking, following several others. A man shouting "get out of my way" and shoving people, throwing chairs, out of control, as he headed down the bleachers on his way to the center of the tent. I often wonder if he made it. Most people headed down just as he did.

Two women sitting, like statues, in the bleachers above us. As if they could not believe what they were seeing. Women dragging children down, down, down to, for some, their deaths. And all along the flames were nearing the entrance as we calmly walked along the bleachers.

I remember looking up and seeing the flames.

We had come to the end of our row, about eight feet or so above the ground. My mom sat on the edge of the bleacher and just dropped to the ground. My dad handed me down

to her waiting arms. I remember looking up and then he jumped down too. We could feel the heat and and hear the roar of the flames. Loud! Insistent! Close! Nearly in our faces.

Instead of going over the animal runway, my parents followed it to where it came into the tent. The tent had been staked to the ground where the runway entered. But there! On the ground the rope had been cut! My father just had to lift up the flap and we were free! Free to breathe!

Free to live! Free!

My father wanted to go right back in. He had to rescue those ladies up there on the bleachers. He had to rescue the small children in there! He had to! "No!" my mother said. "No!" He didn't, but I don't think he every forgave himself for not going back in there.

We then walked about 30 yards or so away and my dad turned and took some photos. The tent was gone! Just gone. Only the skeleton of the bleachers was left. And some smoke. The screaming had stopped. There was no one to rescue now.

I remember so many little things. The man pacing around and around his parked car. The little boy inside crying "I want my mommy. I want my mommy." Did she ever come? I have always wondered. I still wonder.

I remember my mom's shoe had come off and gotten caught. My dad wanted to keep going but she refused to leave without it. "Now Helen" I remember him saying and her reply "It's a new shoe." He freed it for her and she put it back on.

Mose of all I remember my parents island of calmness when all around us was chaos. I still remember the roar of the flames as they tried to claim us for their own. I remember looking up, at one point, and seem them claim the tent over the entrance. Was that a glimpse of blue sky through the smoke and the flames or an illusion? I don't know but I did think, that for a moment, I saw the sky.

I remember. I remember. After over fifty years and I still remember - as if it were yesterday.

None of this I related to the interviewer. It simply all flashes across my mind whenever the circus is mentioned, in any capacity. No matter.

Just explaining that the circus tent had burned to the ground while my parents and I attended is enough of an explanation.

Across the desk the interview is smiling, shaking my hand. I had passed. My word "fire" now made sense, perfect sense. In my case, much more appropriate than "clown" or "elephant."