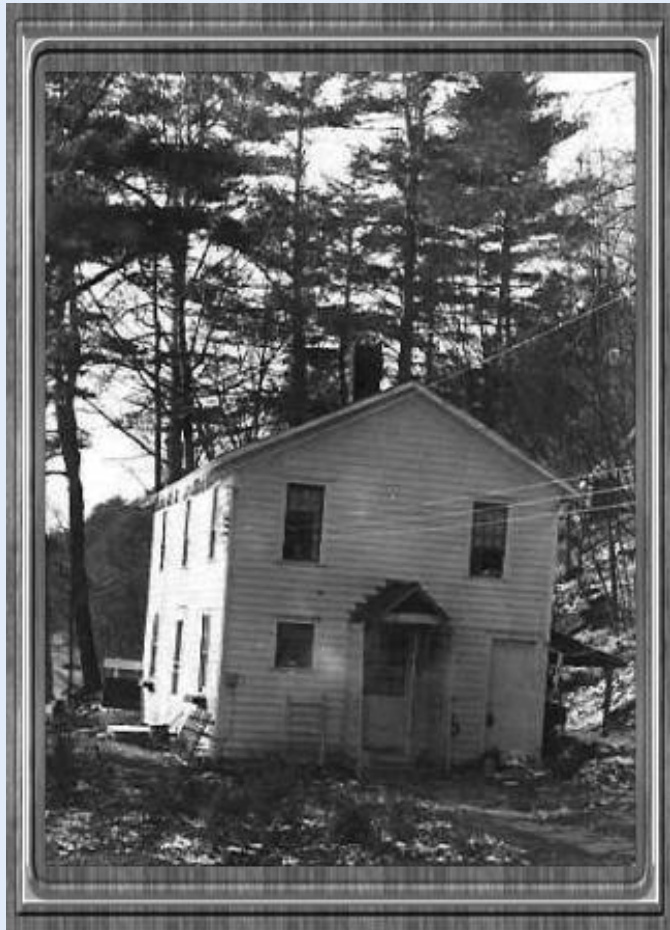


A Long Time Coming

by Frederick Wickert



This story is painful to me. I have been going to write it for a long time, but could not bring myself to do it. I fear the pain that comes with it. I have lived with this pain for fifty-five years. Every time it gets stirred up, the pain intensifies for a time until once again the senses are dulled. I am in hopes that writing about it will help to get it off my chest. They say confession is good for the soul. If it is, perhaps it will help to heal.

The story begins in the late 1940's. I have a sister five years my senior. She finished high school and was out on her own. After a couple of years, she came home for a short while and she did not come alone.

With her were two young and beautiful Collie dogs. One was a male, sable and white in color. The other was a female tricolor. The name of the male was Chris and the female, Gypsy. They were wonderful in their temperament and they were beautiful beyond description. The entire family admired them greatly.

My sister took a job at what in our area was known at the time as a summer boarding house. In reality, it was a farm that had been purchased by a French widow. The house was large, and the woman turned it into a boarding house where vacationers from New York City could come to the country. They were provided with a room, bath privileges and meals. They were invited to roam the dirt roads and the fields and woods on their own as they pleased.

When my sister took the job, she was not able to take her dogs and left them home with us. Gypsy decided that she was Mom's dog. Chris was mine. Chris loved me and when I was at home, he was always by my side. He slept in my room, usually in the bed with me. I had a basketball in my room that he loved to play with. He tried to master walking on it with his front feet, but it was always slipping out from under his feet and he chased it and tried again and again. This annoyed others in the house because it made a lot of noise and kept them awake. I had to take the ball away and put it up where he couldn't reach it.

My sister worked at the boarding house, but often got away at night. In a hamlet near us, there were square dances held every week. My sister attended them with our youngest sister and myself. There she met a young man who began to date her regularly. The time came when they married and her new husband had a job working on a farm. Once again, she could not take her dogs and they remained at home.

Eventually, they became partners on a farm and lived there in the two family home. By that time, a baby had come and her hands were full with him. They needed an extra hand in the summer months for the haying season. They asked me to come and work for them. I asked that in addition to my room and board, I be given the AKC papers and ownership of Chris in lieu of money for pay. It was agreed.

There was a field across the road from our house. I often took Chris across the road and turned him loose. He ran completely around the field and when he returned to the starting point, he leaped into my arms with pure joy. He was so beautiful, his coat glistening in the sun when running around the field, and I could feel my heart bursting with joy every time. I brought a girl home from time to time and without fail, I took her across the road with Chris to see him run with sheer joy, and allow her to revel in his beauty.

Chris looked very much like Lassie in the movies. He was so very gentle in his nature; I believe a mouse could whip him because he was a lover, not a fighter as people sometimes say.

A kind of a ritual developed, and the other members of the family enjoyed watching it. I had become a teenager and obtained a drivers license. I often came home in our old pick up truck or our dump truck. We were blessed with four 1935 Chevy trucks. There were two half-ton pickups, a two and a half ton dump truck and a ton panel truck. I usually drove one of the trucks to school and had some work to do with it after school. When I parked the truck in the yard, someone in the house opened the door to let Chris out. He ran full speed towards me, and leaped in the air. I caught him and we hugged one another joyously, after which I wrapped him around the back of my neck like a scarf. Only then did I proceed to the house, carrying him that way.

Chris and Gypsy loved each other and Chris and I loved each other. Both dogs loved the rest of the family, but Mom was Gypsy's favorite and Chris adored me. I in turn, adored Chris. I also cared very much for Gypsy and taught her a number of tricks. Gypsy learned quickly and had a great intelligence.

Along came my senior year in high school. It seemed to go by so fast and activities were always in high gear. March had arrived. There were deep snowdrifts upon the land, but a preview of spring was in the air. A few warmer days reduced the snow pack. Salt on the roads was not a common practice then as it is today, but the sun had warmed the roads enough to make them bare. The year was 1952.

That fateful day, a series of events took place that I have never forgotten and never will. I woke up sick with the flu. Because of it I stayed home from school. I remained in bed. My father was unable to start the car to go to work. Clouds hung low over the mountaintops that morning, laden with moisture. When the clouds hang low like that it is like being in fog. The spark plugs in the car had unseen tiny cracks in the porcelain. The moisture got in the plugs and shorted them out so they refused to fire. Dad took the truck.

The house was an old school house converted into a two-story house. It was heated by a Coleman space heater in the living room. The chimney was what is called a hanging chimney. It did not go from the ground up. It began, sitting on a small platform on the second floor, halfway between the floor and ceiling, and went up through the roof from there. There was a pipe from the oil heater up through the floor of my bedroom and it elbowed into the hanging chimney about two feet beneath the ceiling. Where it came through the floor, it was surrounded with a metal ring that had a lot of holes in it. This kept the pipe from transferring the heat into the flammable floor.

The house was nestled into the steep side of a mountain. Behind the house four 55- gallon drums were connected to each other by a pipe, and three quarter inch copper tubing carried the oil from the barrels into the house to the carburetor of the space heater. There was a shed roof built over the four oil drums.

My younger sister was gone to school aboard the school bus. My mother still clad in her nightgown and bathrobe was in my parent's bedroom. She was a pianist and organist. She had a music cabinet in her room and she was sitting in her room going through some sheet music. Gypsy was in the room with her. The room was adjacent to mine and was on the front corner of the house. It was directly above the kitchen.

I was in my room, in bed and asleep. Chris was with me. I was clad only in my under shorts. My eighty-year-old grandmother was in the kitchen. She had a dishpan full of soapy water and was washing the breakfast dishes in it, then rinsing them under the faucet.

King, our old Alsatian Police Dog was asleep under Mom's grand piano in the living room. Smokey, (See SMOKEY, Ourecho story ID # 1712) Mom's cat was curled up asleep on top of the heater, her old bones enjoying the heat.

An explosion occurred in the space heater. Grandma heard the noise and saw Smokey come from the living room with a wild and disheveled look about her. She wanted out the door. King also came into the kitchen. Grandma went to look in the living room and saw the fire all over, but predominately from the heater.

Being elderly, her schooling in what to do about fire was basically throw water on it. Not knowing that does not apply to petroleum fuels, she threw the contents of the dishpan on it. That only spread the flames around a much wider area.

There had been a downdraft of air. The downdraft came down the chimney, through the stovepipe and into the heater, smothering the flame in the heater. The oil continued to flow into the heater and when the downdraft lifted, the fire ring in the heater, still being red hot with the excess fuel running in, ignited in an explosion. The explosion destroyed the carburetor and split the three quarter inch pipeline for more than a foot. A steady stream of oil flowed onto the fire from the blown pipeline.

I woke up hearing Grandma yelling at Mom to get out. She said the stove was on fire and she couldn't stop it. Neither of them thought at the time about me being there. Mom wasted no time running out and down the stairs.

When I woke up to Grandma's yells, I sat up in bed. I froze momentarily, when I saw flames shooting up through the floor around the stovepipe. I got out of bed and pulled on my pants. Not waiting to put on a shirt, I slipped my bare feet into a pair of loafers and headed for the stairs.

I stopped and turned around to look for Chris. There stood both Chris and Gypsy looking at me with trust in their eyes and slightly wagging their tails. The stairway was filled with smoke. I could not see past the first three steps. I went down one step and told the dogs to come on. They didn't. I grabbed their collars and tried to pull them down the stairs. They refused to budge. It was as if their feet were bolted to the floor. I was a strong eighteen-year old. I stood six feet tall and weighed 195 lbs. Most of it was muscle though I did have some fat. Why could I not find enough strength to move those two dogs?

I panicked and turned to run down the stairs. Before I hit the bottom the stairs collapsed. I landed on my feet at the bottom and ran outside. Mom and Grandma were both standing outside screaming because they remembered only after they got outside that I was in the house.

I spotted a shovel leaning against the side of the house. Dad had told me to put it away in the garage a couple of days before and I had forgotten to do it. I grabbed the shovel and went around the back to the oil barrel shed. I grabbed a short ladder lying there and climbed up on the roof. I smashed out the window with the shovel and entered the second floor. The window was near the top of the stairway. I went looking for the dogs and called to them. They did not come. I could not see in the smoke and felt myself being starved for air. I knew I had to get to the window.

I lost consciousness just as I reached the window and fell forward, half in and half out the window. The cold air soon revived me. I crawled out the window. Smoke by then was pouring out the window and I knew all was lost. I had to go and I jumped off the shed roof into snow, filling my shoes in the process. My hair was burned off and my head and face badly blistered but adrenalin kept me unaware of that at the time.

By the time I got back to Mom and Grandma, two men had arrived. Seeing I was naked from the waist up, one of them took off his coat and gave it to me. Until that moment, it had not occurred to me that I had nothing on. It was one of those heavy red wool plaid hunting coats.

A car had been flagged down and the driver asked to go to the neighbors to call the fire department. The neighbor was a quarter of a mile away and out of sight of the house. The neighbor was on the same telephone party line we were and the line was dead from the fire. He tried to start his vehicle and it refused to start. After some time it did start and he drove to the firehouse. The volunteer fire department was about seven miles away. I had Mom and Grandma take the dog and cat and get in the car. I asked the men to give me a push into the road. There was a short hill going down from the driveway. I put the car in reverse. It had a standard transmission. Automatics were the exception then. When the car began rolling backwards down the hill I let out the clutch and the car finally started. I headed for the firehouse.

When I got there they were just opening the doors to the firehouse. There were two trucks, one backed in behind the other. The one in front refused to start. When it finally got started the trucks headed for the burning house. The roads were bare. A couple of days before they were covered with hard packed snow. The chains were still on the trucks, making them drive slower.

One of the trucks carried a 500-gallon water supply and had a smaller diameter high- pressure hose. They began spraying water on the fire. The other truck was a pumper. Hose was run to the creek a hundred yards away and it began pumping water from the creek to pour on the fire with a three-inch hose. The 500-

gallon tank in the one truck ran out and when it did, the pump on the pumper truck broke down. There was no chance to save the house or any part of it.

After the fire was done, firemen went into the rubble searching for the bodies of the dogs. One was found beside the remains of the chimney. That was Chris. Gypsy was found in my kid sister's bedroom area. They were on the ground level of course, because the floor had collapsed. Some friends took us in where we spent the night. When we went to bed that night, I lay awake going over the events of the day in my mind.

I then understood that I had caused the death of my beloved Chris and his sister Gypsy. I remembered vividly the trust in their eyes and the wag of the tail they gave me at the top of the stairs before I left them behind. I became painfully aware that if I had kept my wits about me, I could have opened the window and picked them up one by one and pushed them out on the shed roof where we could all jump to safety. I had not done that. I had left them there and they died in that fire. It did not have to be. I could have saved them.

I began to wail. My sobs shook my body all night long. I could not stop. No one slept in that house that night. No one tried to stop me. I guess they all knew what was tearing me apart and knew there was nothing that could stop it or change it. I have spent the rest of my life full of a terrible guilt and sense of betrayal of Chris and Gypsy.

I cannot talk about it without coming to tears to this day, and as I write, the tears are flowing. I cannot forgive myself. I want to, but after fifty-five years it still continues to haunt me. It is my fault. I let Chris and Gypsy die in that fire and they didn't have to. They trusted and loved me, and I failed them when they needed me the most.

I built a box out of slab wood and I buried them together in the same box. On the morning of the day I graduated from high school King passed away from old age. I dug up the box and placed King in the box with Chris and Gypsy, and graduated that night. I was not in a mood for celebrating.

Many times I hear talk in the media about "closure." I believe there will be no closure until I see them in heaven and they give me their forgiveness. Then maybe I can forgive myself. I thought that if I wrote the story it could help me to put it behind me. Now that it is written, I don't believe it will.

The first photo shows the house that burned. The left side was the front of the house. The 2nd floor left of the front is the room where Gypsy died. The center window is my room where Chris died. The corner room in the foreground is where Mom was. The small window left of the door was over the kitchen sink where Grandma was. The shed roof over the oil drums can be seen behind the house.

The second photo shows the front of the house. It shows me in high school standing about where I stood when I let Chris run in the field across the house.

The third picture is of my dog Chris and the fourth of Gypsy. These pictures are before they were full grown.