

July 24, 2006

## Fire

Ok, this is the kind of story close family members shouldn't read or we'll be getting phone calls demanding we get back to the US of A right this instant. Read on with caution.

So we'd lived here for just one week, just starting to hang wall hangings and organize the spice rack, and along comes a fire—a grass fire, close enough we can see and hear it out our window, close enough we call our neighbor to come scope it out, close enough we're thinking what would happen if all our stuff burned up in a night. How much do we value all these things we've carried in backpacks and suitcases across the globe, and how much do we trust our own family's safety to the Lord?

It happened about seven on Sunday night. We got a call from a friend half a mile down the street, Sofi. "Did you notice there's a fire, and it's coming near you guys?"

Sofi's house burned down earlier this year. She's a woman of stamina, an Australian who married a Zulu man and saw him die of AIDS. She raises a son and daughter about Phoebe and Zeke's ages, runs a non-profit hospice for AIDS patients, and hid out in her mud-brick bathroom while her kitchen burned.

Fires are a fact of life in the dry season here, which is from about May to September. To keep fires from spreading uncontrollably, farmers burn firebreaks—strips of burned land crisscrossing their land. Generally these breaks keep fires from, say, our home.

So when Sophie called about the fire in the fields behind our home, Adam and I headed out with flashlights to make sure the firebreaks separated us from the fire. Reaching the edge of our property, we walked toward a strange orange glow. Billows of smoke filled our nostrils and blotched out the starry sky in front of us. Following our flashlights over crunchy black fields, we traversed the firebreaks. How grateful I was to our landlord who took the time weeks ago to burn this land so a wild fire couldn't eat it tonight.

Then we spotted a patch where the fire break was shoddily burned, and it was easy enough, in the dark of night, to imagine that wildfire passing through, catching the trees behind our home and from there, gobbling our thatched roof house.

I went home to put the kids to bed, and Adam, Betsy (our housemate), and Sofi went out to start a preventative burn, making the fire break wide enough and burned enough that the fire couldn't pass it, blocking the wild fire from our home. I could hear the crackling of fire through the window as I sang bedtime songs for Phoebe. "Tomorrow we'll work on our garden," I told her, not mentioning what my heart added: "if our home doesn't burn down tonight."

With the kids in bed, I wrapped myself in a blanket and sat on our back porch, listening for shouts from my husband and friends who worked just below the tree line behind our house. Would I hear, “Chrissy! Get the kids in the car and go!” What would I pack? Our computer? Our journals? Adam’s favorite socks or my favorite hat?

It occurred to me that I’d be satisfied if we all were safe. Packing up all your earthly belongings and leaving most of them in boxes has a way of making you realize most things are replaceable, expendable, and not all that valuable in the long run.

Happily the wind was weak and the fire drifting harmlessly down the hillside away from us. We did wake up, work in our garden, and find our belongings in their places for another day. We sleep better knowing the firebreak is wide all around us, and God our great Firebreak is wider still.