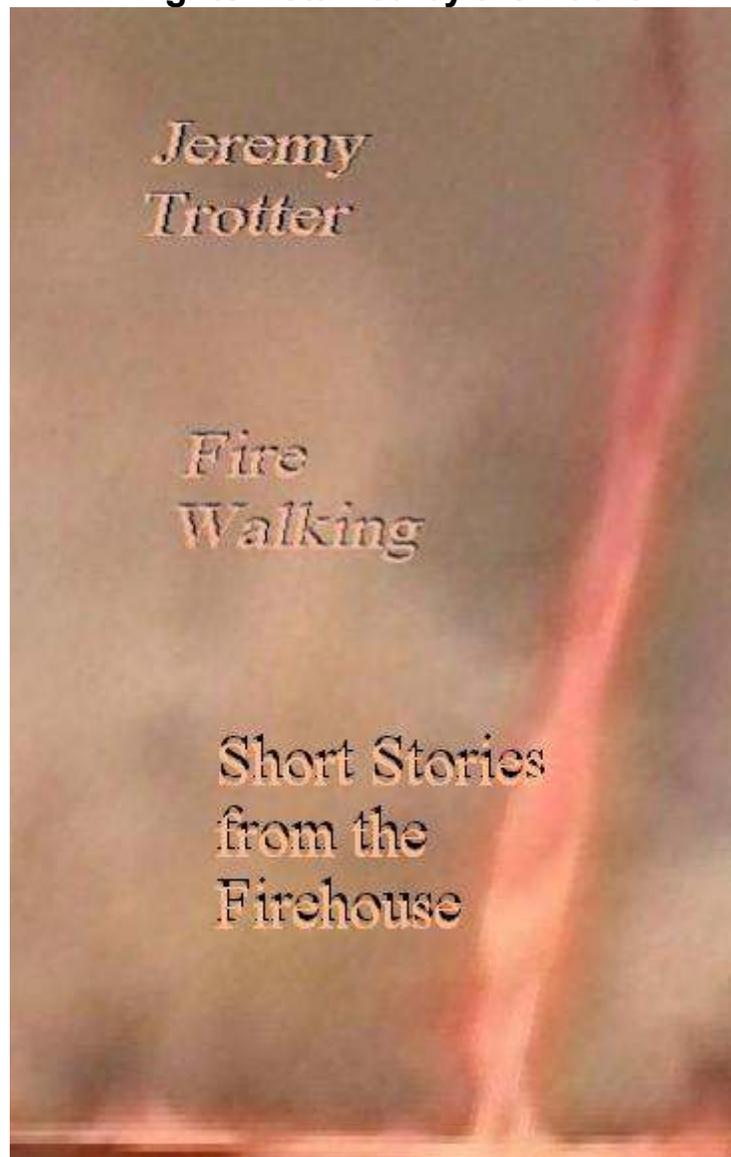


Fire Walking

By Jeremy Trotter
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Fire Walking

“Engine 5 and Aerial 5 respond to a four alarm building fire, 615 E. Market, at the Salvation Army building.” It is very rare for the guys from 5’s to make it to a downtown building fire. We had been watching the glow over the tree line and listening to the progress of the fire on the radio. Ordinarily, we would switch the radio to ‘alert’ at 8:00 PM. Tonight, we have left the radio set to ‘monitor’ so we could tell what was going on.

As we headed north for the long run downtown, it was clear things were out of hand. Before we cross Pawnee, flames are occasionally visible above the trees. It is a giant fire. Arriving on Market, red and white rotating beacons mix with smoke to make swinging swords of light flashing everywhere. Engines and ladder pipes have even found their way to the overhead railroad tracks. Surrounding the shell of the old hulk is all the spare equipment still fit for use for firefighting. The old building is reduced to a pen, a corral with a caged monster. The stiff Kansas breeze has whipped the air into whirlwind of fire walking and kicking at the walls.

I have seen little fire funnels before, in a trashcan or a dumpster, but now, a living, breathing, walking and above all, an eating demon, is consuming all the wood and tar and paper and punk board that goes into the guts of an old building. The heavy brick walls are notched for the heavy timbers that held the floors. The timbers were ‘fire cut’. The beveled ends of the timbers pull out of the notches without levering the walls into rubble. Instead, floor after floor and finally the tar roof have fallen into the basement leaving just an open top box of bricks. All the windows are consumed or melted. All the glass is gone from the walls. The wind enters these openings and whips the villain into an eating frenzy. The rotating tube of fire roars. The roof is doing just what a roof should do. It is repelling water from the burning debris under it. The fire is so hot, water falling into the building is beaten back as steam. Those of us operating nozzles from ladders are impressed with the sound of the beast when it comes near. The noise is like a jet airplane throttled up for takeoff.

Aerial 5 is setting up in the space between the building and the raised railroad. Too close, I think but no chief asks a firefighter. In fact, the area around the building is so crowded with engines and aerials, there is little other space to place more equipment.

The monster is in an oscillation, now. Dropping out of sight then jumping straight up 300 - 400 feet. A shower of embers is windswept hair pouring out of the top of the funnel whenever it reaches its full height. The bricks are now beginning to crumble and disintegrate. A crack runs from foundation to top edge at the northeast corner. The people occupying that section of wall are making a hasty retreat as the wall grows more unstable. The fissure grows wider at the top for five minutes before the wall begins to fall. It comes apart and reaches out further than the wall is high. Bricks are pelting Aerial 5. The crew has seen the wall falling. They are refugees on the far side of the aerial. The beast has broken his pen and now the monster explores the world beyond his walls. The flame lashes the aerial with its fiery scourge. But, it is a last gasp. The walls

gave the whirlwind life and now that life is vanished. A straight wind is whipping regular flames out of the openings in the wall.

Twenty-six ten

First, let me tell you I am a retired firefighter. Next, let me tell you while firefighters are busting their behinds to get INTO a burning building, cockroaches and crickets have the brains to be going the other way. So, this is a story of intelligence and tenacity. Fires rarely happen to our finest homes in the best neighborhoods. They tend to work the lower rent districts of our little town. Many times, the front porch of a fiery building is crunchy from the little insect bodies that are scurrying to get out of the burning building. That is the 'intelligence' part of the story.

Senior firefighters get to take the prime vacation time because vacation time is drawn by seniority, also. When the senior guys are on vacation, junior types get to drive the machines. It was July 1st and July 4th and I was driving Engine 5. Fourth of July means many fires from Roman candles and pop-bottle rockets. There are field fires, house fires and building fires. We really like July 4th.

You should also know that fire folk like being the first on the scene of a fire. There is nothing better than fighting a roaring virgin fire. Sexual innuendo IS intended. First water is a baptism by both fire and water ... for both the fire and the firefighter. Religious innuendo is purely accidental.

"Fire in a house - - twenty-sixteen south Washington," the dispatcher droned. That section of town is not usually our answering district. "Engine 5, respond for Engine 12," she explained.

I love this run. When we turn north on Broadway, we have a long hill to climb over railroad tracks that are almost parallel to the street. The hill is 100 feet tall and one half a mile to the top. I leave the engine in second gear till the hill flattens at the crest. I shift to third for the rest of climb. The RPMs are high and the noise is great. The Captain hates the noise and I lean on the siren and wish I had control of the air horn. He hardly ever pulls the chain except when I come to an intersection too fast for his liking.

At the top of the hill, I push it into fifth gear, bypassing fourth altogether. I use the hill to accelerate to the governed speed of 78 miles per hour. This is the tricky part; there is a stoplight at the bottom of the hill where 31st street dead-ends into Broadway. There is this rule that a fire truck can't bust a red light going faster than 10 miles per hour.

This time, I time the light perfectly. It just clicks to yellow as I enter the intersection. There are no more side streets entering Broadway for another mile and nothing to slow us from 78 miles per hour. We are a big red steel bird flying low over the city. Then "Engine 2 gives a code one (no fire showing) Engine 2 will investigate."

When another machine gives a code one, everyone else responding has to drop back to regular traffic unless a fire is found. The captain reaches for the siren to toggle it off when I pointed to a column of black smoke appearing over the trees to one side of us.

"I don't know where George is, but it is not at the right address." I yelled. Captain Gilley looked at where I pointed and left the siren turned on. I could see he was wearing a grin. As we neared the intersection with Pawnee, I slowed only to 50 and slid into the right turn lane. The engine came up on two wheels briefly as we slide round the bend. Gilley glared at me. I pointed at the column of smoke that was now slightly behind us and east. The smoke was growing broader at the base. I guessed the street 'Washington' was right but the house number was wrong.

Finally, Captain Gilley picked up the microphone. "Engine 5, we see a large amount of smoke east of our location. We will be investigating." The railroad tracks that lifted Broadway over them at 31st street now cross Pawnee right here. We flew over the little hummock that make the road and rails cross at the same level. Again, Gilley gives me a bad look when I catch a little air with 10 tons of steel. I jam the gears into third as we land, as it is time to turn south on to Washington. Flames are visible at the bottom of the smoke, now. The engine roars as the RPM climbs to match the new lower gear. I pull the gearshift into second as we round the corner. The captain hates it that I drive without ever touching the brakes. Engine revs are enough to slow the beast. But the captain also knows that once the brake pads are hot, they are useless for stopping the hulking machine. I always save the brake pads for parking in front of the fire.

We pull up to the house. I am putting the engine into pump gear as the air brake blasts to a lock. We verify the address for the dispatcher and to those tardy boys from two's and head in. "Twenty - sixteen" is where the dispatchers sent us. "Twenty-six ten" is the correct address.

Oh it is great to beat those cocky guys from 2's. Flames visible in the broken front window are already starting to darken. There will be nothing left but a little clean up. The only thing better will be if I can get them to spill their five-inch hose. That stuff takes forever to reload. "Engine 2 from Engine 5 driver, can you provide me with a water supply?" I ask innocently. Engine 2 was my target because of their load of five inch. They respond in the affirmative.

The closest hydrant is 2-½ blocks to the north. As I see their lights approach, I see the big gut spewing out behind the machine, an occasional fold popping past the driver's side and all of it silhouetted under the chassis. Whew-woo! This couldn't have worked out better. The last of the fire has disappeared from the front room. The captain from two's does not order the water turned into the five inch. The only thing to make this better would be if they had to drain and roll the hose before they reloaded it. As it was, it was still pretty sweet.

I had shut down my engine and the hose has being rolled for reload. The captain from two's was still steamed from having to reload that five-inch hose. "Jeremy" he said as he

puts his big hand on my shoulder, "We need someone to crawl under that house, and I think there is still some fire under there." Of course, pump operators don't usually fight fire directly. This is my 'spanking' for making him lay the five-inch.

I don my gear and grab an air pack. I do it without complaint. A 30-year career is a long time. There is plenty of time to get him back - AGAIN. Why, heck, this little book will be enough get his goat.

I see why he picked this immediate pay back. The opening to the crawl space is narrow and full of mud. The smell of smoke wafting from the crawl says George is right, there is an active fire down there. I slip into my mask, position the tank near the hole. I lay on my back and pulled myself under by reaching into the crawl and pulling on the floor joists. The mud makes sliding easy. I rotate and grab the tank from outside. I just lay the air tank on my belly and hook up to the regulator. Mud from our firefighting water covers the whole crawl. I see blue flame. I ask that a line (fire hose) be brought to me. Captain George says he will. I figure I will be here for a while.

I move over to the flame. I move like the mud puppy I am by sliding myself along by pushing with the heels my boots. Travel is surprisingly easy. The remaining fire is near the floor furnace. I have never had the luxury of seeing fire from below and getting to study its action. Usually, it is 'see fire' and 'squirt water.' Here I am watching a tub of blue light float upside down above me. The fire was missed because the joists and the braces that now contain the fire protected it when the firefighters above stuck a nozzle down on full fog and swept it around.

This is amazing stuff. It is like a softly glowing blue liquid that defies gravity. As I move, the air currents make waves on the surface. The container is slowly filling up as if an invisible faucet provided more of this glowing elixir. It is a corrosive liquid to be sure. As the fire expands in its container, the wood is first stained black, then etched, then grooved by the deep action of flame on wood. The 'bottom' of the container, that is the sub-floor of the house, is deeply "alligatored." The container is now full and flame is beginning to 'overflow' into the next joist space.

The blue ersatz liquid turns yellow, red and orange where it "drips" into the next space. Now it is pouring in a constant stream. It spreads like a puddle spreading, but upside down. The black follows exposure of the wood to the heat. I become conscious of the heat. I am also noticing the fact that the weakened floor is showing me where firefighters above are standing and moving about in the living room. I wonder what progress is being made on reattaching a hose and getting it down here. One especially heavy firefighter from 12's is clearly moving on the floor above me. I can sense him up there from the bowed floor down here. "Hey," I think to myself, "it's time to shed a few pounds."

The second space is now having a torrent pour into from the original space in the joists, a third space is becoming involved with a constant drip of flame coming as the first container spills over the other side. Mmmm. Pretty is one thing, but having the floor

above me come down on me is quite another. Where is that nozzle? Right then, I hear Bushey call out to me. He has a booster line. I tread mud back to the crawl entrance. I wonder what my coat will look like with 100 feet of sliding in mud on my back. I am pulling the hose back to the blue tubs of flame. I open the nozzle. It just drips. "Hey, give me some water." I yell to Bushey. He disappears from the crawl. In a minute, water starts to flow. I darken the glowing "liquid."

I thoroughly wet down the fiery containers. I have had about all I need of this muddy pit. And, the water is pouring back on me making it worse. As I finish my work, I check one last time to be sure that I won't have to come back to a rekindle in the middle of the night. I swim my 'backstroke' to the crawl space entrance and wriggle out into the evening air.

Brute

The big guy was sprawled at the bottom of the stairs. One leg was crossed clumsily over the other. Bill, from ambulance 11 was preparing to wake him up. I look at the walls punctuated with this guy's fury, the door ripped off the hinges and this unconscious monster that had caused all the damage. "Let's not wake him up. Let's strap him to a gurney and get out of here." I said.

Too late! Bill, with mischief on his face, crushed two ammonia capsules. He inserted one into each nostril of the sleeping giant's nose in a single practiced stroke. He covered the guy's mouth with his hand and pulled the big guy's head backward on his neck. It took what seemed a long time. Then everything exploded. The monster got to his feet in one move. Bill was now riding him piggyback. The guy spun two times trying to shake Bill from his back and take a breath that was not concentrated ammonia. He stumbled backward and crushed Bill between his huge back and the wall. When Bill wilted to the floor, there was a paramedic shaped hole in the sheetrock. The big guy was literally screaming with pain.

Both ammonia capsules shot across the room when he could finally inhale through his mouth and exhale through his nose. Damn, he was pissed. And now, I was the only existence in his brutal world. I had his full attention. The guy crossed to me in two steps. As he swung the ham-sized fist at me, I kicked him in the nuts with all my might. He stopped, but he did not crumble. "Uh, oh" I thought. "I am in deep shit, now."

He lifted his foot to take another step, and then he fell. "Thank you, God." I said out loud. Jim, Bill's partner and Mark, my driver, arrived with the gurney and the first-aid kit, I said, "I think we will need some restraints." Jim asked, "This guy giving you trouble?" I grimaced and said "No. But, your partner is completely out of control."

Even in Cincinnati

"35, 36, 37. That is \$37,000 dollars. And, you want to deposit it all?" the teller asked the pretty girl with the large wad of cash. Gary Friedman, the luckiest and the best arson investigator I ever knew is standing behind her in line soaking up the whole scene.

"Yes, please. \$37,000 for deposit." The girl echoed.

Gary has boyish good looks. He looks far younger than his 42 years. I have seen him put it to good use many times. He is always the arsonist's best friend as he escorts him down to the sixth floor of city hall to book them into custody. His detective instincts are ringing loud and clear. "Ya don't have that much cash unless you have been working the fringe of the economy," Gary said to me. Gary has always lectured how drugs, arson and illegal weapons are an economy unto themselves. It is the 'fringe economy' that the government would allow IF they could just figure out how to tax it. "That's the difference between cigarettes and booze and coke from Columbia. If the folks with the dope would just surrender a fair share to Uncle Sam, the 'War on Drugs' would be over by the end of the week." At least that is Gary's opinion.

Still, he is a one hell of a detective. Nationwide, about 5% of arsonists are caught. Willboro averages 35% since we formed our arson task force. Gary averages over 60% 'solve rate.' Not every 'solved' case results in an arrest. Kids playing with a lighter. A fire that does not do felony level damage (currently \$500.00). Other odd things can slip by without an arrest. But, you do NOT want Gary to arrest you, though. In the seven years I followed his statistics, he had a 100% conviction rate. That's 56 people serving 11 years or more for aggravated arson in Kansas.

That would be 57 after the pretty girl made her deposit. Gary was on her like a duck on a June bug. He did not even know what the crime was, but he was sure there was a crime. "Wow! 37,000 dollars! What is it like to have money like that?" Gary dug in like a tick. He would be her new best friend for a while.

She returned his smile but was reticent about the money. "Oh, it's from my grandma," is all she would say. Gary forgot about his transaction and was following her out into the parking lot. After pouring on his charm, she finally says, "Grandma died and left me a painting. I sold it out in Denver. I lived here with my parents. I thought this would be a nice place since I can't stay with grandma, anymore." Four sentences was all she said but Gary had more than enough to start working a case that did not even exist, yet.

Gary went to the city library and got the Denver and surrounding areas phone books. He made copies of the pages with galleries and museums and went back to his office to start calling. Pay dirt was found on the first call. The flatiron shaped Denver Museum of Modern Art admitted they had bought a painting by Whistler for forty thousand dollars from a young woman about three weeks ago. "Yes, we will fax you a copy of the painting. Yes, of course we checked it against the 'stolen masters' list." Gary was like a

little kid waiting for Christmas. Finally, the fax with name and image of the painting arrived.

Gary checked the Interpol 'stolen masters' list and the painting of the little girl washing at the edge of a stream was truly not on the list. So, he would have to dig deeper. After several weeks working with insurance company representatives, "Young Girl Bathing" has found to have been destroyed in a house fire in Cincinnati. It turned out several other paintings had been destroyed in the fire. The Whistler was merely the most valuable.

It fell in place pretty quickly then. The pretty girl at the bank worked for LulaMae in Cincinnati. She murdered "grandma." She took all the paintings worth anything. And, she burned down the house in Cincinnati. The relatives were happy not to check too close. The insurance company had paid off on the house and antique furnishings, LulaMae's life insurance and the paintings. No messy estate to settle. The police did not check too closely. The case seemed so simple. They did not know that Annie (the girl with the stash of cash at the bank) even existed.

So Gary called her up and asked if she wanted to go get some ice cream with him. She had given him her phone number when he promised to call her for a date. I bet Annie picked out something fetching to wear when Gary came to pick her up.

Greta

Greta was a long, shapely woman. She had ample curves and her forest green sweater followed those curves in a most flattering way. The sweater was untucked over a long green print skirt that covered all her legs except the toes of green silk brocade slippers that peeked out from the hem. As she walked to her dead husband, the thin material of the skirt tattled that there was no slip between her skin and skirt. Blond hair was twisted and pinned at the back of her head. My guess is she had been dressed to go out somewhere nice. But, she had a red mark on the angle of her left jaw that matched the buckle on the belt still loosely wrapped around her husband's right fist. She had introduced herself with what I thought must be a Swedish accent. She was an unusually beautiful woman to be living in a crummy mobile home in a crummy trailer court.

The dead man had a clean bullet hole just under his chin and into his trachea. Feeling behind his ears and neck, bone fragments, blood and a tangled brain stem told of his instant death. His eyes still had the surprise in them from his discovery of the gun pointing at his throat. I guessed that it had been a lucky shot. There were no visible powder burns around the entrance wound and that revealed the barrel of the gun must have been several feet or more from the target when the trigger was pulled. The exit wound was very much larger than the entrance hole.... And it was very ragged. Only a tiny circle of blood spotted the floor under Roger's neck. This indicated that his heart had stopped pumping blood when the bullet ripped through his spine. "That is my husband, Roger." Greta said flatly as she introduced the corpse.

I asked Greta, "Where is the gun? The police just don't understand when a gun is not accounted for in a domestic disturbance call." Greta produced the stainless steel, ivory handled .357 from the folds of her loose skirt. I was amazed to see a little smoke still issue from the barrel. "Did you shoot it just once?" I inquired, trying to act casual with an armed killer bent over her victim and me. "Yes, just once." Greta replied with no emotion at all. "Is he dead?" she asked. Again, all emotion was flat and totally absent from her voice and face. The anger that had fired the gun must have followed the bullet into the dead man.

"We will do everything we can." I said using my stock answer to a common question. Of course, I knew CPR would just make the blood spot bigger as meager and ineffective pulses from his compressed heart brought more blood near enough to the wound site to drain out on the floor. "If you would, please put the gun here, next to Roger. I will make sure it is delivered to the police when they arrive." I explained as calmly as I could. I tried to hide my relief as she laid the gun on the spot I indicated with my pointing finger. "Squad 5 gives a code blue." I said to my radio. We commenced CPR on poor dead Roger and the little halo of blood began to grow. Roger did not recover. No charges were ever pressed against tall and willowy Greta.

Blue Cadillac

"Glad to meet you Benjamin." I stuck my hand out to shake his. Bennie Winters looked at me like I held out a stick with dog poo on his end.

"The amount you don't know, Rookie, is enough to fill all the books yet to be written." Bennie said those words with no warmth or mirth intended. He turned and walked away without shaking my still offered hand.

"I wish you hadn't done that." Carlo said. Carlo Cellofinella was my self-appointed daddy bear and he explained to me I was his cub. He told me of the mentor / protégé system used to nurse a rookie firefighter through his first year without either person getting killed. Still, I also made the mistake at laughing at the corny terminology. Carlo wondered why he picked me.

"Bennie is very sensitive about his name. His father named him Benonie, not Benjamin. Benonie means 'sorrow of the father.' Benjamin means 'a father's joy.' Bennie is definitely no joy to his father and he won't be a joy to you, I fear," Carlo explained.

Bennie and Carlo had gone to school together at Willboro South High. It is a school known for it tough guys and hoods. Today is my first day on the Willboro Fire Department and so far it has been a day filled with missteps and blunders on my part. "I think I will be able to smooth it with him," Carlo said. "But for God's sake, try to stay out of his way." Then, the alarm horns went off...

"Still alarm for Engine 32, wash down...." then there was a long pause, "Uh, gasoline. Wash down gasoline at the Holiday Inn parking garage," blared the speakers. I hopped on the backend of the engine with Joe Becker and we were off. Norman was driving and George was the lieutenant.

Debris was everywhere in this little half block area. Two large plate glass windows were shattered in the front of Walker's Department store. Another shattered window was spread on the sidewalk in front of the Fox Theater. People were everywhere; they had poured from the buildings around the carnage. But, unlike milling crowds at fires and car wrecks, these were eerily silent.

An old '53 Tudor Ford was aimed the wrong way on the one-way street. Two frightened, crying kids in standing in the back seat. Tears rolled down their cheeks. The little boy with worried eyebrows sucked on the tip of his index finger. It was strange sight to see what appeared to be the little pair's grandma sitting behind the steering wheel, gaze straight ahead and the big wheel being steered by her as earnestly as if she was moving. But, the motor was off.

And then I see it. Sprawled on the driveway ramp of the hotel parking garage was the figure of a man, dressed to the nines in blue and gold. He was just in front of the bumper of his matching blue Cadillac. His service cap was tossed carelessly and upside

down on the pavement. And there, where the top of his head should be, a crimson comma began its curving punctuation of the pavement. All of his lifeblood had formed the giant stain. So, it's not gasoline. Instead we were supposed to wash the blood away so people would not have to look at it as they went to the movies or the store or the luncheonette or a lawyer's office.

I had seen him around town, cruising in his Mediterranean blue Caddie wearing his Mediterranean blue uniform with fancy gold trim. He also wore a service cap with scrambled eggs on the bill. Was he a Major, Colonel, General? No, he was the day doorman at the downtown Holiday Inn.

The reverence of the watchers was understandable. I am sure they did not want to watch, but they could not look away. The ambulance crew refused to take such a messy corpse into their ambulance. A man from a mortuary arrived and we loaded the old gent into this hearse station wagon. George and Norman were looking after the kids and Grandma. Then we started the grisly work of washing blood and brains down a storm drain.

Now, I know blood from the newly dead goes down a drain in a mortician's workshop. But, still, it seems terribly irreverent. Becker was using the fire department to become a doctor. (I wonder if he made it?) He was enrolled in a pre-med program. He was into the medical aspects. He was all "basal skull fractures" and "see how the blood proteins foam up in the water jet."

Joe Becker and I tried to figure out how such an accident could have taken place. "Grandma had a stroke." Becker pointed out the faint clean tracks made by a car going the wrong way from traffic and ending under the car grandma was still trying to drive. He said. "She crashed the windows across the street. Then she backed up to get out of the store windows. She backed right up the ramp and hit that blue Caddie, and then she takes off down the street crashing into the theater. Finally, it was just bad luck that she backed into the Cadillac again while the guy was out looking at the damage she caused on the first hit. He must've been down on his hands and knees and his head was bumper high when she backed up the ramp a second time."

I hated to admit, but it made a strange sort of sense. But, I could not get the sick feeling out of my stomach. This was my first alarm. It probably would have been my last if I did not need the job.

Carlo was waiting for me when we arrived back at Engine House #2. "That's ice cream!!" he beamed. "Every time a rookie has a first 'anything,' he has to buy ice cream for the house. That was your cherry alarm. You owe ice cream. The cops came by and told us about your first alarm. Way to go getting your cherry SMASHED like that." He made a little move that looked like he was crushing a big bug under his boot. Carlo was very happy with his new cub.

Rain Comes Slickery

The rain came down at just below freezing. When it hit, it froze into the glare black ice that makes driving or just trying to stand up a miserable challenge in Kansas. The alarms started at a trickle, but were picking up steam. "Squad 11, a fall. Engine 4, Lines down. Squad 3, multiple vehicles 10-48." The dispatcher began sending units in batches. Now, it was my turn.

Engine 5, Squad 5, truck overturned I-35 and Missouri River Bridge, southbound lane." Only 7:00am, I could see it was going to be a long and busy day.

I drove the whole way with the right wheels of the squad on the shoulder of the road. I learned long ago that when traction has disappeared from the surface of the street, a little safety can be found in the sand and debris that accumulates at the edge of the road. Radio traffic was now including fire vehicles involved in wrecks. Before the day ended, eleven Fire machines would need to stop in the body shop to be patched up.

We found the bobtail truck lying on its side, blocking both lanes of the bridge over the river. A Vietnamese man was struggling in the cab with the driver's door that opened straight up. I waddled over to him, not lifting either foot, always keeping the center of gravity somewhere between both feet. A police officer was on the scene, and on his butt.

I found purchase on the bottom of the cab of the truck and climbed up and held the door for the semi-trapped man. "Rain comes slickery." exclaimed the Asian man.

"Yes it does, my friend. Here in Kansas it comes slickery, horizontal, in deluges and sometimes in big frozen balls." I had no idea how prophetic my words would be since Kansas would provide all of those rains today as well as lightning, a tornado, 100 mph straight winds and finally, snow. This was just the first of 21 alarms in 24 hours for me - a personal record.

He explained to me that he had never seen freezing rain in Vietnam. The "Boat People" were new this year to Willboro. They were being assimilated into the community and many had found jobs or were starting businesses.

I helped him climb down. As soon as his feet hit the pavement, he was on his back. I got down with him and demonstrated the silly walk that would have done Monty Python proud. But, I stayed upright and soon, he did also.

A battalion chief joined us. When he pulled his car off to the side of the road, he was surprised that it slid of its own volition down against the cop car already parked. Just the gentle crown in the road that would ordinarily drain rain from the surface was a wild roller coaster ride, today. We all waddled about our business.

Pete Moran

"I wouldn't claim that son of a bitch if he was the last son of a bitch on earth." I had inadvertently started this tirade when I asked if Bob Moran, the man yelling, if he was related to Pete Moran, the man being yelled about. "He left mom 'n us kids when I was two. I did not know the son of a bitch was still alive and don't care now that I DO know." Bob Moran was an owner of a computer store, and I started this flow of vitriol when I noticed his nametag.

Pete had always seemed a personable, colorful, wiry old man. But, his personal history, why he hung around the fire station, was something of an enigma to me. He would run errands for fire guys. He was especially useful after a fire when we were stuck cleaning equipment. He would go buy cigarettes, donuts, and sandwiches... anything to make life easier for us. In return, Pete would take his meals with us. He paid his share. It was clear from his patter that he had misspent his youth in pursuit of easy and ill-gotten money, but the details always managed to go unsaid.

In the winter, Pete dressed as a sailor would when ready to round the horn. He wore a pea-coat and ensign's cap. When the weather turned foul, he had a sailor's slicker that he wore over his warm clothes. Even in the summer, he only doffed his ensign's cap on the hottest days.

One day, while on watch, he joined me in the watchman's booth. I told him if he would share his stories, one day I would write them down. I told him about my chance meeting with his son. I told him his son might appreciate the fill-in of family history. He was pretty proud to learn his son owned a computer store. But, since that computer store was only two miles from where we now sat, it was pretty clear the two steered clear intentionally.

Pete did not open up then or even three or four times more attempts of my prying. But finally, the old guy was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Life remembered became more sweet and he shared it with me.

"I was a bootlegger once." he confided.

"Well, tell me about it." I primed the pump.

"We had a truckload of sugar to make [white] lightning. We had stopped over here on St. Francis where Magdaleno's Watch Shop is now. It was a place that sold big pottery then, uh what cha call 'em? Uh, crockery stuff. We needed big'uns. Ten-gallon pots to ferment the sugar before 'stillin' it.

"I was in there when I hear, 'Who owns that truck outside?' It was a big state police guy and I pretended I didn't hear him and just kept shoppin' like.

"Outside, another cop was climbing on the back of our truck. He had throwed the tarp off and was lookin' at the big bags of sugar. Inside, I was sweatin' it. I saw a shelf above

the door. It was thin wood. Just a 'one-by' and it was loaded with crocks like we needed, big ones, heavy ones. I hear my partner start the truck. The one lawman outside was talkin' to him. The big one at the door starts in, headed toward me."

"Quick as a wink, I jump up an' grab that shelf over the door. I swing out past the big guy and I feel the shelf give. All of it, all them crocks come down on that cop. The cop by the driver's door comes to see about the noise while I go the other way along the shotgun side of the truck. I dive-in and we are off. I look in the mirror and see the outside guy helpin my guy to their car. My guy was bleedin'. You can see it all over by his ear."

"They chased us all over. We saw most of the county that day. They chased us for two and a half hours that day. Finally, the cops break-off. They just quit chasin' us. I figure my guy, the one that caught the crocks, was bleedin' bad enough they had to stop to get him help. Turns out, the next day, we find out he's dead."

"Just a second", I say, unable to believe him, "When a cop gets killed, the rest of them take it pretty personally. They generally hunt down the perpetrators like dogs. How'd you get away with it?"

"Back then, durin' prohibition, cops were getting popped pretty regular. I figure we got lost in the shuffle. I think there was some talk about the guy that chased us so long without getting help for his guy. He got in trouble for that."

"Well", I asked, still not believing the cop-killer and chase story, "where'd you run this bootleg operation?"

"Actually, it t'weren't far from here. Down here on Levi Street. That's the one that is Mt. Vernon Street, now. We had a house that was hollowed out. We'd dug a place under the floorboards. The stack from our still was plumbed out the regular chimney. From outside, it just looked like a cozy fire goin' inside."

"People'd come to that old house. We'd sell it in jars and sell it in jugs. Some folks would sit right there and drink it on the floor with the still goin' right underneath 'em. It was a pretty sweet deal. I had plenty of money, then."

I didn't know it, but Pete was just getting warmed up. Once he started talking about his life of crime, he wanted to continue, and he did.

"I was in the merchant marine, once." His voice died away. He was thinking. I tried to prime the pump, again. It did not take a lot. "Yep, we was comin' into San Fran with a load of Chinamen. Slavery was illegal, but plenty of people would pay a haulin' charge for cheap employees." He laughed at the euphemism he had created in his head. Clearly, he had justified this to himself for a long time.

"Yeah, but this time, it did not work out. We was hove-to. We were waitin' for a signal at night to come on in. The coast guard found us. Two other guys and me had to get rid of the Chinamen. On one side of our boat, the Cap was stallin' the coast guard. On the other side, we was hittin' the Chinamen in the head and tossin' them in the ocean."

"Just a damn minute." I said. Again, I was incredulous. Was I sitting here two feet from a mass murderer? I was young and not so cynical as I am now. My sensibilities were spinning, but I pressed on. "You mean those men just sat there and took their turn letting you bean them and drown them?"

He became angry. "They wasn't men, they was Chinamen. And, it wasn't like they had a choice. They was chained up and gagged. Plus, we had to add more chain to 'em so they'd sink. It wouldn't do much good to toss 'em in and have 'em wash up on the beach tomorrow! A lot of good chain went into the drink that night."

I was reeling. I can't let myself believe him. But, the stories rang true. There was too much detail for them to be total fabrications. I pushed the stories down in my mind, not thinking of them much until now.

Pete is dead, long dead from his cancer. The last time I saw him was at old fire station #2 trying to pee. He wore a bloody kotex behind his zipper. He laughed, "Well, I can't pee no more and I'm always on the rag. I might as well die as live like a worthless old lady." Pete died about three weeks later.

Just before Pete Moran died, Vern Miller, who was Kansas' Attorney General at that time, sent a wanted poster to station #2 for his brother to give to Pete. Vern's brother was battalion chief at the station. The poster was yellowed with age and looked to be the real thing. Pete showed the poster around proudly, "Wanted for murder, bootlegging, and smuggling - Crabs Moran" A profile and a front view of a very young Pete scowled out of the past. It was all true.

[Note from the author. Pete expressed very bigoted views which I do not share. Chinese American in San Fransico saved my life when I had a heart attack there. The doctors and nurses of Chinese extraction were kind and skilled in their treatment of me. I would not be writing without their help.]

Three from B

This story really doesn't belong to me but, I have talked to each of the principles and to leave out such a choice piece of storytelling would be a sin. In addition, I warned each that I would be writing it down for posterity. They all agreed it would be alright.

Danny Armatage, George Denton and Larry Mueller worked together as firefighters at station #2 B. they came on the job about the same time. They studied together for

promotional tests and practiced firefighting and rescue techniques together. They and their wives played together when the guys were not at work. It should be stated here that I think any firefighter would lay their nuts on the line for any other firefighter or for a citizen. But, what makes their story unique is they DID lay their nuts on the line for each other and for citizens in need of help. And as it turned out, they had to do it repeatedly.

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George Denton is a giant, and a second-generation firefighter. Six foot five and an easy 300 pounds in fighting fit. Once when he was a roving lieutenant at station #4. When he laid his Mickey and Minnie Mouse sheets out on his bed, I just waited for the chance to gig him about them. By the next morning, we had gone out on ten alarms through the shift and the opportunity to make fun of him just had never come. I was passing through the bunkroom early. There he was naked to the world, teddy bear frame hanging over the ends of the bed.

"Six fifty five" the dispatcher announced, "Six fifty five". Well, this would be my chance for my well-rehearsed comments. George stretched. Every inch of that teddy bear body rippled with hard muscles. My comments suddenly seemed 'imprudent'. That was the word that flashed through my mind when I pictured George even a little bit pissed at me.

-:-

Danny Armatage enjoyed firefighting more than just about anybody on the job. He liked the technically challenging positions like driving the 100-ft aerial, driving the chief or driving the heavy rescue. In one fire, the Rock Island warehouse fire down by the tracks, he was driving Aerial 2. When the block long, old wood warehouse collapsed, the intense white-hot radiation actually set buildings around the warehouse on fire just from the radiated heat. At that moment, Danny was trying to place the portable nozzle on the end of the ladder. When the building collapsed, the aerial truck burst into flames under him. Witnesses said Danny tried for a few seconds to place the nozzle. When the aluminized tarp on the bed of the truck engulfed Danny in smoke and flames, he had to relent. He flipped off the end of the ladder, ran around to the cab of the aerial and drove the burning truck away from the radiant heat still dragging its outriggers. The next day, just like in Hiroshima, cars and trucks had left unburned 'shadows' on surrounding buildings' paint. The ladder truck Danny drove had all the paint blistered on the front and drivers side. Wooden ladders, where they stuck up above the ladder rack, were charred black. Where the ladder rack protected them, the varnish was still new.

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Larry Mueller volunteered to go into the oil tank to recover the body of the little boy that people had seen go in the tank. An air pack would not fit in the tank. Larry tried it without. As he climbed down the inside ladder, a hand light revealed nothing but the shining surface of oil. When he began to wade in the muck, he did not realize that the bubbles being stirred up by his feet were pentane gas and they were beginning to

anesthetize him. That is what happened to the little boy. When Larry felt the body under foot, he reached into the shallow oil to pull the little guy free. The mass of pentane bubbles that came-up with the little boy finished Larry's consciousness. "I just remember my face hitting the oil and that was it."

Now George and Danny were on the top of the tank. George quickly tied a lifeline around himself. He told Danny, "I'll get Larry and the kid, but you will probably have to get me. I depending on you." George dropped into the tank. In turn he took the kid and stuffed him out the access hole. Then he found Larry. Gathering a handful of the shirt in front of Larry's heart, George did a one hand press of his friend's body out of the access hole. Danny said you can't believe how slippery that top of that tank became with all the oil covering everything. George waited for the traffic to clear so he could get out of the hole. But his activity had stirred a lot of the anesthetic gas.

George said, "I could tell the lights were going out. I wrapped my arms around the beams of the access ladder and grabbed one of the rungs as tight as I could. I looked up at the manhole and watched it get very far away then I don't remember much else."

George's death grip worked, He stayed upright. But, the people working on the top of the tank did not realize he was unconscious. But, Danny remembered his friend's words. He turned to George and found him unconscious at the bottom of the access. Danny figured out the formula. He put on his air pack mask and climbed into the manhole. He held up one arm while the chief's driver lowered the air bottle and harness into the hole and over Danny's shoulder. But, Danny was stuck. George's hulk blocked the climbing side of the ladder. And, there was not room to climb on the tank side of the ladder. Finally Danny had the top team take up the slack on his lifeline and lower him past George. Danny said, "I will never forget the look of George staring straight up, his eyes open. But, I knew he couldn't see anything."

Danny unlaced George's hands and arms. He told the top team to haul away. Imagine how many people it would take to haul unconscious George out of that tank. But now there was a new problem. George's lifeline was tied just above his waist (or what passed for a waist on George. Ha!) George was leaned back in the harness would not come out of the hole. Danny reluctantly had the top team let George back down. He fashioned a half hitch and fitted it up under George's underarms. This maneuver kept George upright enough for him to be fitted out of the very tight access hole. George quickly recovered in the fresh air.

Larry was in an ambulance by now. The fire guys have drained as much oil as they can from his airway. The ambulance attendant is wiping his face to get the oil off when he wakes up. Larry said, "I wake up and I can't breathe. I can tell my throat is full of the stuff. Every time I try to sit up to cough it out, the guy wiping my face pushes me back down and says 'Stay calm, lay down, we'll get you some help pretty quick.' This goes on about three times, finally I just roll to the side and barf oil all over him."

Larry had a slight case of petroleum related pneumonia for about a week. Danny survived this incident without problems. But in the introductory incident above, the warehouse fire, he received enough poison fumes from the burning plastic tarp of Aerial 2, he had a seizure that night and every night for about a year. When they finally got a cocktail of anti-seizure medications that would work for him, he was forced to leave the job on a service-connected disability. George survived this incident with no ill effects. But, he lost an eye in a hunting accident. He was forced to leave the job with a non-service related disability. He and Danny both returned to active duty when the Americans with Disabilities Act passed. Danny is now retired again and is the fire chief in his hometown. George is still on active duty with the Willboro Fire Department. Larry recovered from his injuries. He rose through the ranks and retired a battalion chief. He is now fire chief in Ponca City, Oklahoma. The little boy did not survive.

Lori

Kicking, screaming, biting, spitting, Lori had decided PCP would be her drug of choice. Daryl, the cop holding her arms finally decided he had had enough when she took a clawing swing at his face. She did draw a little blood and carved a little meat. Daryl put his handcuffs on her. He should have put them on as tight as he would have for any other felon. Maybe he could not have put them on tight enough. She ripped her hand out of the cuff and peeled the skin from the back and palm of her left hand as if it had been a tight glove. Now she was slippery from the blood.

Daryl was losing his grip on the arms. I had her legs. I try to put one arm around her gyrating waist in case Daryl lost his grip. It was a stupid move. I could not hold both ankles with one hand. Her right foot dropped to the grass. Then it came straight up into my groin. Like I said – “stupid.” Many thoughts and emotions ran through me. Reason came back before I did any damage. I figured, "Firefighter kills overdose victim." would be a counter productive headline for the public services.

We danced this peculiar dance for several more minutes before reinforcements in the form of ambulance crew 11 arrived. They have wonderful restraints. Up to now, I have always hated the use of restraints. But now, I think they are wonderful. They are soft plastic. The buckles grip at any size. And they will hold on to even a slippery, bloody, drugged girl. When Lori was held with one hand on the ambulance gurney, we were able to work on one limb at a time until all four had been secured to aluminum rails. It was amazing to watch her almost turn the gurney over by throwing her weight as far as she could while tethered. We held the stretcher tightly while loading her in the ambulance.

Roberson

"Man trapped in a cave-in" intoned the dispatcher. Wow! That's one you don't hear everyday. "3615 S West St. Mid-Kansas paving. Man trapped in a sand bin."

When we arrived, I grabbed a shovel off E-13 and headed up the steps of the catwalk where a worker was pointing for us to go. When I arrived at the top I heard a stifled voice cry "Stop!" I looked toward the voice and saw only a man's head. He had his neck craned back as far as he could to keep mouth and nose out of the sand. Sand was ramped up away from the man, at an angle beyond the normal angle of repose for sand. Just my vibration on the bin running up the stairs made sand slide down into his ears.

I hollered for everyone to else to slow down coming up the stairs. The catwalk ran down the middle of four huge hoppers. Each of those was divided into two bins by a wall that ran along and under the catwalk. So eight different grains of sand, gravel and rock could be dispensed into dump trucks driving under the hoppers. This poor guy had fallen from the catwalk where I now stood and was sucked into the funnel of the hopper. Fortunately for him, the foreman had seen the accident and shut off the flow before the victim's head was pulled under the surface.

But, time would be critical. Shadows in the other bins still had frost on their loads of gravel. The sand around this guy would be near freezing and denser than water. It would pull his body heat very fast. John Roberson was the officer on Aerial 13. He took command and instantly formulated a plan. (I was so flustered, I wasn't sure how to keep the guy from dying.)

Roberson poked me and said, "Get an air-pack and a salvage tub up here, right now." He spoke into his walkie-talkie, "Aerial 13 will be in command, I will need a rescue with jaws-of-life, Heavy rescue 4 for cribbing and Truck 2 for the cutting torch." As a commander, it was his job to know what resources were available and where they were on the various apparatus spotted around town. The key would be the cutting torch, and our fire department only had one. None of the machines Roberson had asked for were close; they were all 12 - 15 minutes away.

Roberson yelled down to me, "Jeremy, bring a rope when you come." I returned with my load of goodies. Roberson continued to bark commands. "Get a rescue hitch into that line. Hang the air-pack bottle close enough to our friend there that the mask will reach from him to the regulator. Jeremy, get into the rescue hitch and add a bight around your waist. You get to go flying!" He laughed a little. McDown and Mitch busied themselves with ropes and bottles and masks. "Over you go, Jeremy" I was securely tied around my waist and between my legs. Mitch handed me the air-pack mask. "Keep all the sand out of the seal. Talk to him and tell him everything you are doing." As I floated over the man's head, I tried not to touch the sand and set off a slide. I fitted the mask. I helped him test the seal by having him blow and suck while I held the low-pressure hose against my hand. "Now" I warned him, "there will be a delay getting you air while I attach the mask to the bottle and then turn on the bottle. You need to take a breath and

hold it till you feel air come into the mask." He was past talking. He nodded weakly. I got his air going. He nodded that it was working. Roberson said, "Cover his head with the salvage tub. Be sure the edge of the tub does not crimp the hose." I did as I was told. I dug a little trench that let air hose tunnel under the edge of the salvage tub. I had the guy yell if he could still breathe ok. He acknowledged weakly that he could still breathe. Now he was safe for a while. We could work and not suffocate him. But minutes were precious because of the cold.

As they hoisted me back onto the catwalk I mentioned to Roberson that this looked like a place that might have a cutting torch of their own. He said, "Find out." I ran down to the foreman. He said they had the torch but no one to operate it. I told Roberson my findings. He said get the torch and he would find an operator.

Mitch had planted a ladder where the hole would be made in the hopper. An ambulance arrived and the Battalion chief from two's. When Roberson reported all that had been done, the chief said, "You stay in command. It looks like it is going OK." This, by the way, is an honor for Roberson. There are two senior officers on the scene, the captain from 13's and the battalion chief. Either can snatch command if they detect any problem in Roberson's plan or his execution. Both allow him to stay in command - high praise!

I returned with a cutting torch mounted on a dolly. Truck - 2 arrived on the scene. They have a cutting torch, also. Driving the rig is Daryl Kirschen. A farm boy from Sharon Springs, Daryl grew up cutting and brazing with a torch around his farm. On Saturdays, we practiced with the cutting torch decapitating old oil drums. Now he would get to use his skill to save a life. Mitch had set the ladder to reach about face level with the trapped man. The angle was important for the ladder. Since the bin sloped away from the ladder top, if it was set too shallow, the ladder might slip while Daryl was working.

Roberson set Daryl to his task. "Make a hole about 18 inches square. We don't want to take him out of the hole; we just want the sand gone." Roberson ordered. Daryl began working on his task, heating the metal to white hot, and then pushing the trigger on the oxygen to burn the metal away. Because of the cold sand behind the metal and because of the urgency, it seemed to take forever.

Roberson found me, again. "Get that long step ladder off Truck - 2. Set it up right under the hopper mouth." I was no match for this 12-foot stepladder. When I was at Station - 2, we used this thing every Saturday morning to dust the tops of the lights and pipes that decorated the ceiling of the apparatus floor. It took two men to handle it and I asked Mitch to help hoist it from the bed and right it under the maul of the sand bin. Daryl had finished his cut but was having trouble dislodging the piece of metal because of the glass that formed in the sand from the cutting flame. A hammer lent by the foreman of the plant quickly ended the resistance of the metal and glass slag. Sand began to pour from the bin. A hand held in the stream betrayed just how cold the victim must be. I turned to my EMT training and tried to estimate how long he might have before hypothermia would rob us of a "save." I figured "not long."

John Roberson has Mitch and McDown scale the stepladder from opposite sides. Only one side is suitable for climbing. McDown gets to climb on the braces of the 'wrong' side. Kirkpatrick, from Rescue - 2, is now in charge of victim safety. He swings in the rope harness I was in earlier. When sufficient sand has been swept from the bin. Kirkpatrick signals those above him who relay to Roberson on the ground. Kirkpatrick removes the salvage tub from the freezing victim. He makes sure he is still conscious which he is. He makes sure he can speak, which he can but barely... Kirkpatrick sees the blue lips and face and realizes time is short. He notifies EMS that this will be a hypothermia emergency. Blankets and warmed IV solutions are prepared. When Roberson was satisfied the worst danger had past, he ordered the bottom of the bin opened slowly to remove the sand from around the victims. As sand finishes pouring from the front of the hopper, it begins to pour from the bottom. That opening also delivered a shoe. Slowly, two feet appeared, one was bare; the other was shod with the mate of the sneaker on the ground. The color of the bare foot betrayed its temperature. Nails were deep blue; toes were almost black - a deep gray cyanosis. Sandy grit still poured out around the legs, now visible and clothed in denim. The legs would never touch the top of the ladder. It turned out a cross bar in the throat of the hopper crossed between the legs and now the inseam and crotch had settled down on that bar.

The victim, Kirkpatrick found out his name was Terry, would have to be removed from the top of the bin. Terry was too weak from cold to assist in his own rescue. A rescue hitch was fastened around his legs. Watching from below was interesting. A loop of rope would appear by his foot. Mitch slipped it over and around his ankle. The loop disappeared up into the hopper. Then a new loop appeared by the other foot. McDown this time repeated the same maneuvers to capture the leg closest to him. It was amazing choreography of a dance often rehearsed but only being performed this one time.

The people who inherited the catwalk from me did their part. Terry was pulled to safety in the sunlight and quickly laced to a backboard and covered with blankets. He was released from the hospital the next day. Score one for us.

Pops for the House

Police Officer Cain came down to station #5 on a fairly regular basis. For a cop, he wasn't too bad a guy. He would come to the station to fill out paper work. But, since the end of the strike, he had become insufferable. The City Fathers were thinking of combining the police and fire departments into a 'public safety department.' Of course it was not to punish us for the strike. I am sure they just wanted to combine the very related fields of crime fighting and fire fighting.

Cain was here saying, "I just wanted you guys to see some of the equipment you will be using when you are all sworn officers. This here night stick is completely unbreakable." He hammered the edge of a 55-gallon drum of oil with the stick. The impact rang loudly in the station. "Completely unbreakable - hard rubber!" he assured. He skillfully tossed it to the concrete. It bounced off the tip and returned to his hand. I wondered how many hours of practice that last maneuver took.

"Pops for the house?" I heard myself ask.

"What? What does that mean?" he inquired.

"Well, since we going to be in the same department, I thought you should know that we have a tradition of when someone says something completely asinine and we figure out that the statement is bullshit, we bet soda pops for all members of the station. Loser buys. I bet I can break your stupid stick and the loser will buy these fine gentlemen a soda of their choice. Are we on?"

Cain blinked. "Well, uh yeah. Yeah, that's all right." He bounced the stick off its tip one more time to assure himself it had not turned to porcelain. He handed me the stick.

I poked it into a nozzle on the back of the aerial ladder and began to pull down. "Whoa, whoa." He said. "No fair using anything but your body for this."

I explained that I did not remember any such stipulation on the bet. "But, that's OK. I accept your condition." I positioned it below my knee, with one hand on each end. I began to pull. The black rubber could take any sudden impact but it was no match for a slow pull. It began to bow. It was cutting into my skin where it was trapped between stick and bone. However, the nightstick kept bending and let go with a satisfying "BANG."

Cain went white. "Lt. Byrd isn't going to like that. That stick belongs to him." I clacked the two pieces together and handed them to Cain.

"You give him the pieces and tell him to come see me. I will tell him how it happened." I knew Lieutenant Byrd would never know what happened. I was sure he would have a nice new nightstick by the time he came to work again. Byrd would probably wonder

how his nightstick got newer looking. Tee Hee! "I'll have a big orange." I gloated. "What are you guys going to have?" Diabetes was a real danger from soda so sweet.

Cold Steel

Once we arrived at the dirty little south Broadway motel, we were surprised to see six police cars. In the room, one officer had a boot on a man's neck. "Is he the patient?" I asked.

"She's in the can," another cop said. He motioned with his thumb to the bathroom.

I couldn't believe all the cops left the real victim alone in the bathroom. She had a tight yellow jersey pulled over a trim frame. That is all she had on except for bruises and blood smears. Her smashed beauty WAS unbearable to look at. She looked so pathetic, cowering in the corner. I could see she was terrorized. As I moved closer, the little girl jerked back tight against the wall. A metallic ringing startled both of us. A metal bar about ten inches long had rolled out from between her legs.

"Oh dear God", I said under my breath. I understood the officer's rough treatment of the turd in the other room. The bar was 1/2 inch in diameter and smoothly machined. But, it had been rough cut with a hacksaw on both ends.

I asked John, my driver, get the blanket and my fire coat off the squad. I wanted to get the girl covered and off the cold tile floor. I took the bar to the cop questioning the beater. I told him I thought the girl had been beaten and sodomized with the bar. There was blood smeared on one end. The cop hefted it and his big fist closed tight around the bar. He asked me sardonically, "How do think he beat her with this thing?" he asked me. "Do you think it was like this?" He brought the steel down heavily on the asshole's back.

"Oh, no" I said. "He beat her much worse than that. Her hit her a lot on her legs. And, he hit her in the mouth with it." I explained.

I returned to my patient. I could hear the police continuing their investigation into just how the guy had hit the girl with the bar. The subject of their inquiry made little whimper sounds as they studied the matter.

The cruel beater would be spared a legal trial, but he had already been found guilty and was serving his sentence.

Katie

Fire engines are few and far between, but new squads, well we go through squads like supplies in a first aid kit. They are just one more 'disposable item.' But still, getting to take a truck for its first alarm does not happen everyday. Out of thousands of alarms the truck will respond to, only one of them is its first. I was driving, Mike was Lieutenant and Teddy was swingman.

I guess a word of explanation about a swingman, is in order. Minimum crew for an engine is three people. Minimum crew for a squad or an aerial ladder is two. Every once in a great while, no one is roved out or on vacation or sick leave. Then we have six people in a station. That sixth person, the luckiest guy around, gets to go out on any alarm the station responds to. Today, Teddy fills that spot.

We had been waiting all day for the cherry alarm for the new Dodge, 4 wheel-drive pickup. It would be the last of the gas burners. The order had gone out to buy only diesels from now on. It had a big Mopar engine with a four-barrel carb. Mike Reddel had let me know in no uncertain terms how disappointed he would be if we went 24 hours without getting to break-in the new pickup. It does not matter that a driver has no control over alarms, when Mike isn't happy...

A Kansas thunderstorm with a pouring rain had just stopped when we finally get the horns. Now California can brag about their sunsets. Colorado can tell of mountain vistas. However, a Kansas thunderstorm is breathtaking in its power and raw beauty. Ya gotta see one to believe it is possible.

Teddy is pulling his gear off the engine while the dispatcher describes an accident between a motor vehicle and a pedestrian. Three across in the new cab is pretty tight. The big gas guzzler roars to life. It has very satisfying acceleration. I fudge on the "shortest" route a little to put us on the Interstate for an extra mile. Might as well see how fast it'll go! We pass the Seneca Street ramp where I would usually get on the highway at 93 mph. Not bad.

The sky is split it two pieces. West is wedgewood blue. East is the dirty gray dishrag that scrubbed the other clean. The sun is low on the horizon and I shade my eyes to drive into its rays. Mike said the speedo just touched 100 mph when it was time to shut down and get off at Meridian. The motor roared and made gasoline disappear while the pedal was down. Not bad at all. Both Mike and Teddy are good riders. Mike always wants to go faster. Teddy never complains about a few tire screeches or a close call. Like I said, they are good riders.

When we arrive on St. Clair, a tiny child is lying in the street. She wants to get up but daddy is there and makes her stay still. The wet pavement is a black board that recorded the accident. Footprints and tire marks are plainly visible in the low light of the sun. I can see the footprints of daddy and daughter. She must have been behind him since he was not hit. Her feet left the pavement five feet under the bumper of the

stopped car. 10 feet of dry pavement behind each tire say the driver was trying to stop before she was hit. There are no marks on the street for 25 feet until the spot where she landed on her bottom and rolled another four or five feet.

The driver's door of the offending car is still open. Long steps from there to the worried lady bending down say she ran to see the damage she had caused.

"How many are you?" I ask the little doll. I guess two but she carefully folds fingers of one hand with her other. When finished, she displays the result of her calculation, three fingers.

She has Shirley Temple hair. She is bone thin and very pretty. Teddy brings his fire coat to put her on. I grasp her along both sides. She is just a little taller than my arms are long. Arms form long splints so she won't be bent as she travels. In one move she is warmer and dryer. I guess her weight at 20 to 25 pounds. Mike is gathering information from those around. A lady from across the street adds her number to those in this growing circle.

I hear the ambulance in the distance. Dad is telling the story of how he had crossed the street to talk to the neighbor lady about the storm. The little girl followed from the house across the street, also. The lady driving didn't see the small frame; she had been watching dad cross the street. I doubted this diminutive person would have been visible above the hood of the old car. All this while, I poke and prod trying to find sore spots and bruises and angles of bone that do not belong.

I convinced myself that the little tyke weighed so little, it did not take much force to get her this far down the street. There is a raspberry on one thigh. I don't know if it is from the takeoff or landing, but it is minor. Still treatment is always cautious. Katie, the little girl would have been a loose fit on evens half of a spineboard. Teddy brings me the long leg splint with the Velcro. The new squad had arrived with a new set of various splints. He was in the mood to improvise. Now, Katie did not make one of my legs. She was barely one of my arms. But the long leg splint was just her size. Ted spread it out and held it open. Again I cradled her along both side and lowered her into the new cocoon. With the top Velcro left undone she was snugly held. Her heels were where heels go in the splint, but her toes did not extend into the foot portion of the wrapping. She looked like a little mummy.

When the ambulance arrived, we transferred our information to them. Katie's mom was just arriving home from wherever the neighbor lady had called her from. Dad had no idea how much trouble he would be in for not keeping an eye on Katie. Katie started bawling when she saw the fuss mom was making. I squeezed her little hand to reassure her.

When the ambulance crew was transferring her to their stretcher, Katie looked at her dad and asked, "Daddy, how come you let me get kee-uld?" Now firemen and ambulance techs and cops are a tough and cynical lot, but when a little girl thinks that

she was killed by her daddy, there is not a dry eye in the house. Good thing the street was already wet, no teardrop showed. Everyone was looking away from everyone else to hide his or her welling eyes. "Not killed" I reassured, "Hurt. These folks are going to help you and the doctors and nurses you meet will help you and you will probably be back here playing tomorrow." I was paddling pretty fast to stay ahead of my stream of tears."

Claude Wormwood

"Get outa my house," roared Claude Wormwood. He was 6 foot five inches and 280 pounds of muscle. He didn't really need the double-barrel shotgun he had pointed at my nose. Claude had become something of a 'regular' for the boys from 'Fours.' I had bandaged him together about three weeks previous to this when one of his "friends" hit him with a beer pitcher. Another time, we had been called to this house because a woman he brought home from a bar did not want to leave. He manhandled her to induce her will to leave. She was unconscious and we helped load her into an ambulance. This was the first time I bothered to memorize Claude Wormwood's name. He had my full attention at this moment.

As I backed out of the house, (a difficult task because of the debris piled into an armpit high stack with only enough room in this narrow path at the floor to place one foot in front of another.) Claude trailed me keeping the shotgun leveled at my face. My heart was beating hard. I wondered if the shotgun was kept loaded.

This fire really did not amount to much, just a mattress fire caused by Claude smoking in bed. Engine 4 was first on the scene and we had put the fire out with a booster line. Jack and I pushed the smoldering mattress out into the yard through a bedroom window. We were cleaning up the mess when Claude had run by me saying, "I have to get my mother. I have to get mom." I guess he is the original 'son of a gun' because as he went past me into the bedroom, he reached behind the door and produced the weapon he now had aimed at my head..

Let me explain about Claude's house. His home really wasn't full of debris, it was full of his dreams. I had noticed the junk because I owned a miniature collection of the same kinda stuff. There was a brass bladed fan from the twenties, an alarm clock with two bells on top like you have seen in a cartoon a hundred times. There were many radios – old tube types and newer transistors. Televisions were floating here and there. I say floating because the junk had formed itself into a kind of sea. It had a level surface to it. In the whole living room, there were no 'waves' on the surface higher than a few inches. Then there was this path. It was about two feet wide at armpit level. It tapered to about six inches wide at the bottom. The path went from the front door, branched to go into the bedroom and continued in another branch back to the kitchen. It was as if Moses had parted this sea of junk.

The bedroom was free of the flotsam of Claude Wormwood's life. There was just the bed, a chair and a little night table. The doorway stood as a barrier to the mechanical tangle of the living room. Another door in the bedroom opened to an adjoining bathroom.

Claude was not here when we first arrived to fight the fire. Jack and I pushed the mattress out the side window of the bedroom so no embers would be lost in the living room. The last thing we wanted was a fire in there. It would have been a long overhaul to make sure all fire was gone from such a room.

But, now Claude was here and backing me out on to porch with what looked like twin tunnels of steel from my point of view. As I stepped backward into the yard, Chief Hillger saw what was going on and approached us. He pushed me aside and grabbed the barrel of the scattergun and pushed that aside in the opposite direction and barked, "What's wrong with you, guy? Can't you see this man is just trying to do his job?"

I had never liked Chief Hillger before. He scared me. He worked on 'A' shift and was just doing an exchange of shift with our battalion chief, Earl Benton. But, I was certainly glad to see him, now. I was also glad to see the cops who had come to Claude's house. It seems he was a 'regular' for them, too.

A big cop who looked like an native American came up behind Claude. He grabbed the barrel of the gun first and then the grip of the stock. He pulled the barrel across Claude Wormwood's throat and lifted it up under Claude's chin until Claude was standing on his tiptoes.

Now it was Wormwood's turn to walk backwards as the police pulled him over to a squad car for his ride to city hall. Chief Hillger spun and yelled for me to get back to work. I was kinda glad he had that gruff manner, now.

You need to know that there are three shifts. The encounters I mentioned earlier were just the ones I had had on C shift. Chief Hillger got to meet Claude again. His shift had another fire in Claude's house in about a year. It was a total loss and Claude had to move out of our neighborhood. I did not see him again until after I had been promoted to lieutenant and assigned to Station #1.

On Rescue #1, I got to meet Claude again in a car wreck while he was driving drunk, then another alarm for a bar fight. This time it was the guy Claude hit that was getting the ride to the hospital. Finally, there was yet another mattress fire in an apartment on Emporia. I explained to him that a fire in an apartment could kill a lot more people than just him. He denied that the fire was his fault. "Nope, nope, nope – didn't do it. It wasn't me." I just shook my head and left.

I thought that when I was promoted to a battalion chief position downtown in city hall that I was free of all my 'regulars' once and for all.

Ramona Webber was working the front desk for the fire department while Nancy was on break. Ramona came to get me saying, "You won't believe what the arson guys left waiting in the front office. He is SO big. Jeremy, we can't do this! What if he is a murderer or something?"

I went to the front office to see this monster Ramona feared. You guessed it. It was Claude Wormwood. He was silver haired now, but still stinking of alcohol. It was only ten in the morning " Well, Claude, you ol' so-and-so. What are you doing here?" You have to remember, Claude had only seen me when he was drunk. He had no idea who I was.

Claude looked dumbfounded. "You don't remember me, do you?" I asked. "You pulled a shotgun on me when you had a mattress fire over on Smythe."

Do you remember Andy Divine from the 550's TV shows and movies? Just think of his voice and drop it an octave. That is Claude Wormwood's voice. It is kinda like gravel rattling in a tin can. "Who me?" he asked innocently. "No, no, no. That wasn't me! "No, no, no, I never did anything like that."

"I am pretty sure it was you, Claude. You are a hard person to forget."

"No, no, no....uh," then a pause, "Oh, I remember you. Yep, yep, yep. Yep, now I remember."

Claude had burnt down one too many houses. Now, he had the attention of our arson investigators. I was hoping they would give him a room with metal bars on the windows and a lot less to burn in the room. Unfortunately, smoking while drinking is not yet against the law.

By the way, after Claude Wormwood's fire on Smythe, I went home and threw all the old stuff away that I had been meaning to fix for so long.

Make that a Chocolate Soldier

“No. You don’t have to worry. They will burn it down. This is “Burn-It-Down-B-Shift,” Ensign said. I was packing up my camera equipment and lamenting the trip I had made down here to “Bells’ Flooring and Tile” for nothing.

The fire was beaten back until only a single little corner of a lean-to addition had any fire showing. “OK, pops,” I said.

Ensign refined the bet. “Not just any pop. It has to be ‘Chocolate Soldier’. The bet is for a case of ‘Chocolate Soldier.’”

‘Chocolate Soldier’ is a nasty soda pop similar to watered down hot chocolate left to stand at room temperature. Ken Ensign loved it and it is very hard to find. Ken was an ‘A’ shifter. He worked part time as a paramedic for the ambulance service. It was his ambulance duties that brought us together tonight. Whenever there was a multiple alarm fire, an ambulance would come and stand-by. I had sought refuge with him in the back of the ambulance since it was bitter cold outside and all the fire was gone. I had been assigned by my boss to build an informational video about the fire department and I was collecting live action footage whenever there was a big fire in town. Ken said, “If I were you, I would be charging that battery for your camera. You will need it fully charged before we are done.”

Ensign had inside information. Since he did the fire safety inspection in this building, he knew it had been remodeled many times. The company sold floor and ceiling tile. Often, they used their own ceiling as display for new tile. Ken knew that there were many, many layers of ceiling tile to hide fire in the attic section of the building. Sure enough, little fires popped back to life in several areas of the building. Pretty soon, the lean-to area was fully involved again. Tar from the roof had found its way between several layers of suspended ceiling. The molten tar brought fire into those hidden spaces.

As Ken began to gloat, he said, “I think Pepsi makes a batch of ‘Chocolate Soldier’ every six months or so. I am willing to wait for a fresh case.”

I pulled on my gear and stepped out of the ambulance to get some of my best footage of fires that year.

The fire was actually ending as the sun rose. I was getting pictures of fiery rain inside the building formed by tar dripping while it was on fire. I left the building as the roof got ready to fall in. I was able to step out of the huge picture windows in front because the glass had broken and melted as the fire consumed all the flammables of the building. I was trying to figure out where to buy ‘Chocolate Soldier.’

Dinner is ready!

“My God! You could loose that thing. He’s an animal, you know?” Kerry said that as he helpfully pulled Teddy’s arm back from in front of me. Dinner at the station *WAS* something of a blood sport. Competition could be fierce for vittles after a long day of hard work.

I had seen fire guys prepare and eat road kill deer. I had seen them eat raw hamburger on a bet. I myself have eaten steak from cows that died in a truck wreck and butchered with a WFD chainsaw. Today’s feast was just a matter of quantity. There was nothing unusual about the fare. It was just spaghetti in meat sauce with a salad and French bread. Teddy and I had made a bet that I could not prepare enough food for these five guys to actually leave any of it uneaten. I bet that I could make a passable dinner in such large proportions that there would be some left over.

In order to insure I won, I picked an especially cheap meal. I agree that there is no quantity of steak that could be afforded that fire guys wouldn’t eat. So, I cooked up two 32 ounce packages of spaghetti. We had a cast iron skillet that held three gallons. (That was the subject of another bet. Any subject is fair game for a bet at a firehouse.) I made three gallons of sauce with 3 pounds of meat suspended in the red sludge. I made a salad from three heads of lettuce and three pounds of other veggies from our garden we tended at 5’s. Finally, to ensure victory, I bought three loaves of French bread. I melted massive amounts of garlic butter. I brought the bathroom scales over to the kitchen and weighed this mess of caloric dynamite. After I subtracted the weight of the skillet, it measured just under 32 pounds of food for five guys. That was just solid food and did not include any drinks that may be consumed in the course of the meal for lubrication of industrial sized swallows. I was proud of my work.

Of course, there were stipulations on this bet. First, Teddy wanted me to promise I would eat my usual amount. Next, I wanted the promise Ted would not tell anyone about the bet until the first guy pushed away from the table. And finally, the first guy to push back would end the bet. If that first guy quit early, that would signal the end of the dinner.

I could not believe how those guys ate that night. When Captain Gilley mopped up the last of the spaghetti sauce on the last heel of French bread, he stuffed the whole piece of bread in his mouth. I surveyed the table. Every ounce of 32 pounds of food had disappeared into the bellies of these animals. There was not enough left to keep an ant alive. Gilley pushed back from the table and said, “Jeremy, ya done good. I do wish you had made a little more of that bread.” I could not believe my eyes and ears.

Oh, and the bet was for ice cream. We did wait until the next shift for me to buy the ice cream to settle the bet. In spite of Captain Gilley’s request, I did manage to fill them all up. – But, just barely.