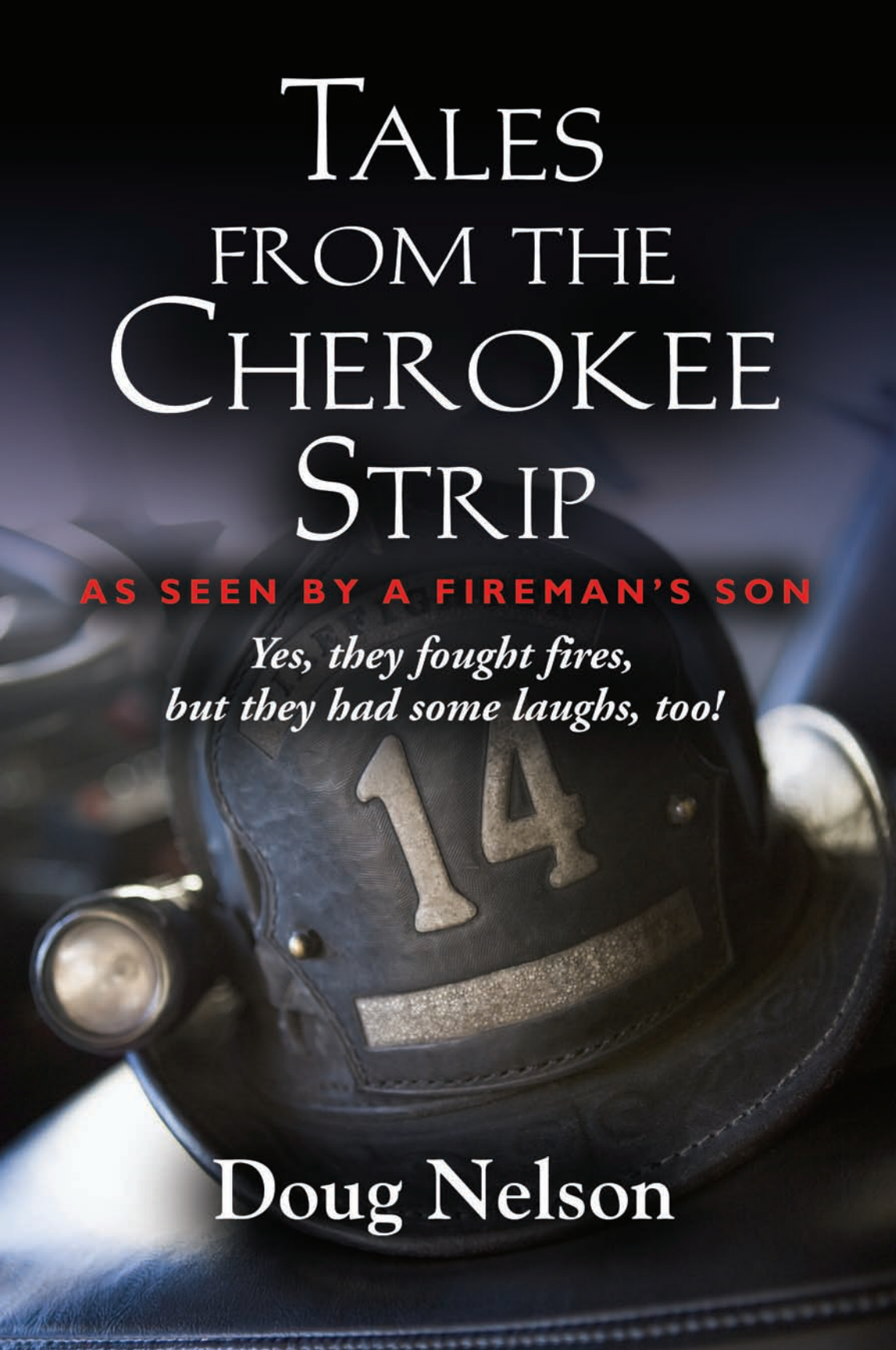


Firemen were ordinary men. But when the call came, they donned their gear and rode forth to fight an ancient foe. To many boys, they were the first real-life heroes they encountered. I was luckier. One was my dad.

Tales From the Cherokee Strip

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TALES FROM THE CHEROKEE STRIP

AS SEEN BY A FIREMAN'S SON

*Yes, they fought fires,
but they had some laughs, too!*

Doug Nelson

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Chapter 6

The Feud

Life at the fire station followed a schedule whenever possible. Musters were held promptly at six o'clock every evening, and eight o'clock every morning. This was when the on-coming shift would relieve the off-going shift, and the senior officer present would read the briefings, announcements, and decrees from headquarters. The night shift would usually arise at six or so, gather up their sheets and beddings, get dressed, and do a last sweep-down of the station. Then they would band together in the kitchen and settle down for breakfast and/or morning coffee.

Afterwards, they would clean up and wash the dishes before going down to the engine bay for the muster. The on-coming shift often did the same. They too would gather in the kitchen for a quick coffee and maybe a doughnut or two, and then attend to the morning chores and projects for the day. On Sundays, however, the workload was considerably lighter, and so the boys tended to more luxurious breakfasts, lighter chores, and a full afternoon watching TV, playing cards, or napping.

One Sunday morning, Herman the German got up from the table and made a speech. Tall, spare, and with the right side of his mouth forever lifted up in a small quirk, he looked like a beardless Abe Lincoln about to tell a Joke.

Or pull one. You never knew about Herman.

"Gentlemen", he began ponderously, "I am paid a living wage, provided for by the good citizens of the city of Haverhill, as they pay their taxes. In keeping with my basic sense of honesty, I consider it my solemn duty to retire at a prudent and reasonable hour. Thus, I am able to come here in the morning, rested, refreshed, and ready for whatever the day may bring. This is so that the taxpayers of this city may get their full value for the hard-earned money that they have spent upon me.

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"It is to my regret that others," here he paused to gaze at the faces gathered around the

table, "do not share this view. Some of them are not only given to the habit of remaining up at night until the small hours, but alas, even to the point of indulging themselves with strong drink."

Herman bowed his head for a moment, closing his eyes with the same expression as a Reverend watching one of his deacons come out of a liquor store.

"Last night," he picked up his coffee and began to stir. "Last night," he repeated, "at

Approximately two-fifteen this very morning, the phone rang. We were both awakened, my wife and I, and I said to the good woman, 'It's either a pal, or else it's a three-alarm fire.' I picked up the phone, and I could hear the sounds of laughter and loud revelry at the other end. Without listening a moment longer, I said loudly, 'You son of a B ___!' and I hung up, I was much disturbed."

Here he paused again to look up at the ceiling for guidance. "I regret my strong language, being a mild-mannered man, but not the sentiment behind it. It is my belief that the caller is present in this very room. Accordingly, I have decided upon a course of action."

"Nails," he broke off suddenly and pointed at my father, "I'll eliminate you, because you're not a drinking man, and you don't stay up late, anyway."

"Cap," he nodded to the Captain, "Your years of partying are behind you, and you are a man of too much dignity for this sort of thing." The coffee cup waved towards his left. "My good friend, Ray Hoffman, and my trusted neighbor, Brother Mitchell, are both men whom I know to have the same habits as myself. As for my honorable colleague, James Stewart..." And so he went on around the table, eliminating each man from the circle of suspects, save for two. They were Joe Lloyds and Jeff Hughes. Both were bachelors at the time, and were known by all for their partying habits.

"Now there are two individuals left, whom I will not name," he stated at last. "Furthermore, if they are innocent, then they should not

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require an afternoon siesta. In fact," he finished ominously, "There won't be one. Not for them. I am serving notice now."

A friendly murmur of banter and amusement followed this announcement, and after the morning coffee was over, the shift dispersed to do the chores. Dad went to fill the mop bucket with a small grin and a shake of his head. He knew Herman could deliver on his threats, for he had just returned from a vacation up in Canada, and that could only mean one thing: firecrackers. Herman's weapon of choice.

Historians have long deplored the invention of gunpowder, but they have never allowed for the universal joy that all boys derive from this simple, if dangerous substance. The hiss of the sputtering fuse and then the loud bang followed by the heady whiff of sulfur. It is magic.

The years of maturity and even a world war did nothing to eliminate that particular streak of boyhood in Dad, and the same was true for well-nigh his whole generation.

So when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts outlawed firecrackers some years ago, there were quite a few families who scheduled their vacations to go see the sights of Niagara Falls. The view was always considered to be particularly good from the Canadian side.

Such a visit was not complete until the mighty cataracts of Horseshoe Falls were viewed from close at hand, and then returning with a choice selection of souvenirs. These included post cards, pamphlets, and of course, fireworks. They came in a variety of sizes, and of course, the bigger, the better. Two-inchers, inch and a half's, ladyfingers, skyrockets, the popular cherry bomb, and of course, the deadly M-80.

It's a curious thing, but many of the firemen were the worst offenders of that particular law. I once had a psychology professor who told me that this was a common quirk of mankind. Just like how you have policemen who have a fascination for fast cars and motorcycles.

The firemen used them a great deal, for anything such as the removal of a pigeon's nest to the discouraging of alley cats poking into the trash cans. Even the grizzled veterans like the Cap occasionally enjoyed rolling one down the ramp in front of the station doors.

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One time when he was engaged in this activity, an unknown assassin was lurking behind him, hidden by Engine One. With expert timing, the villain had rolled a fizzling cherry bomb to a silent halt just behind the Cap. First, his banged, and then the prankster's erupted with a roar, sending him a foot into the air without even a flex of his knees. He was so rattled that he tossed the cigarette he was using out onto the ramp instead of the firecracker he was holding in his other hand. It went off, and he went up a foot and a half, that time.

The Cap was not fit to approach for a week.

At any rate, Joe Lloyds (Yes, he was the guilty one.) knew darn well that he had to keep on his toes that afternoon.

By custom and tradition, Sunday afternoons at the fire station were relatively quiet. The daily clean up was the only work scheduled, and although the trucks were ready, the city itself was virtually fast asleep as well. Perhaps dozing would be a better term, for there were a few citizens driving on the streets and doing a few chores in their yards.

As for Haverhill's Stalwarts, they were waiting and ready for action which had small chance of happening. Thus, they were in about the same state as the rest of the city. Except for an occasional grass fire in the spring and fall, the trucks seldom rolled, and so Sunday was indeed a day of rest.

For Joe Lloyds, this was not to be so. He had already seated himself in one of the

armchairs facing the TV when Herman silently chose the seat next to him. Joe delivered two concise words of what could be considered an invitation in some circles. Herman nodded with grave dignity.

Dad had settled there, too. He was no great fan of football games, but by accident or design, all the nice, soft easy chairs to be found were in the TV room, and Dad preferred one of those when it came to reading or dozing, or both.

The game was well into the third quarter before the spell of the big, comfortable easy chair that Joe was in began to take effect, and his head started to nod. Hands clasped across his belt buckle, he began to snore, ever so slightly.

"Psst! Nails!"

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Dad snapped his head around with a jerk. He had been getting a little comfortable, himself. He glanced at what Herman was holding up for his inspection, and felt a stab of dread. It was a small, gray cylinder, a little less thick than a cigar, and half its length. A green fuse rose up from its middle instead of coming out of the end. It was an M-80, something all connoisseurs know to be a closer relation to the dynamite tribe than to a mere snapcracker. The Mad Bomber rolled his eyes, and held up a glowing cigarette. With a vulture's grin, he pointed the cigarette towards Joe's resting form.

Frantically, Dad waved his hands and shook his head in horror, silently pleading for a chance of escape. Within the narrow confines of this room with the door closed, that thing going off would make it seem like the inside of a cruiser turret at Savo Island. Fortunately, Herman was a fair man, and nodded his permission for my father to get clear. Like Dad, he was a war veteran who respected the rights of neutrals.

However, Dad's chair made the slightest of scrapes on the floor as he arose, and that was enough to trigger Joe's warning system. He suddenly woke up with a start and squinted around suspiciously.

"What's going on?" He demanded. Herman had smoothly cupped the M-80 in his hand and leaned his Jaw on it. He was watching the TV with bored attention.

Dad was now standing just inside the doorway.

"What are you grinning at?" he snapped at my father.

"Nothing. Just watching the TV."

Joe swung his head back towards the set, then brought it sharply around to face Dad again. "It's a football game," he frowned, "you don't laugh at football games." He kicked the stool out from under his feet and sat up straighter in his chair. He looked hard at Herman, who raised his eyebrows in mild puzzlement.

"Were you falling asleep, Joe?" he asked politely.

"No! No, I wasn't," he said quickly, and shifted himself in his seat. "You're up to something, you ...!" he muttered. He sat up alertly, watching the T.V. with full awareness of his surroundings.

After a few moments, Dad looked at his watch. It was nearly time to go down to the station desk and take his two-hour turn of phone

duty. Besides, Joe was now awake and suspicious. It didn't look as if Herman would catch him, now.

He was wrong. Less than a half-hour later, the whole station shook to a muffled, "CRUMP!", and a sudden storm of shouts and imprecations. Rising above them all was a faint but clear howl from Joe Lloyds.

"Got him," Dad said to himself, and went back to his desk.

It should be noted at this time that life is not a long comedy routine for the firefighter. Several good books have been written about the unfunny side of life for these men, and it's a fair bet that every citizen has seen the flames boiling out of the windows of a building obviously ready to collapse, and the firemen going in, anyway.

There are the freezing nights when you're fighting a hot fire, and your outfit is soaked with water from the hoses, adding that extra touch of misery to the night winds. There is that light, fluttery sensation just below your stomach when you leave the ladder, and step out on to the roof, wondering how much of the supports below your feet have been eaten away by the flames. Many firemen cannot estimate the height of a building by eyeball, but they'll all tell you that their guts know it to the inch when the ladder slips or the roof sags.

Added to this is the day-to-day drudgery that goes with fire fighting. Nearly every moving part on a fire truck is inspected or tested on a daily basis, as well as the equipment it carries. And of course, the brass work must be polished, to keep them shiny. The aftermath of every working fire brings on a slave's life. Hanging and drying the heavy hoses, and then breaking out and meticulously stowing the replacement hoses so that they will uncoil smoothly and swiftly at the next fire.

The water and fuel tanks must be filled, any repairs must be attended to, and the whole station must be readied for the next alarm. This must be accomplished as soon as the trucks roll in and the doors are shut. There is no difference if it is in the afternoon or the middle of the night. Only when all these tasks are completed can the senior officer present call headquarters and report that his station was "ready" again.

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It takes a certain breed of men to work under these conditions. Not necessarily a superior one, mind you, but certainly a different one. One used to working closely with one another, as well as being willing and able to obey orders quickly and without question. It is no surprise that the majority of the firemen were veterans.

On the other hand, it is a fact of life that whenever a group of men are together in a

situation which is not demanding, a certain amount of horseplay is inevitable. Indeed, men who wouldn't hesitate to place their lives on the line for each other at a dangerous fire will not hesitate to pull some outrageous stunt on each other once they're back at the station.

It was now a week after the occasion of Joe's awakening. Dad was at the desk again, although the time was now early in the evening. My sire was in a good mood. He was smoking one of his beloved roll-your-own Bugler cigarettes and reading the Sunday paper. A fresh cup of coffee was at his elbow. Then lo and behold, Joe himself showed up in the doorway. Father looked up with puzzled eyebrows, for even though Joe was also smoking, he held an additional cigarette glowing in his hand. "What's the time, Nails?" he asked.

"Hell, you can see the clock as good as me. It's quarter after seven."

Joe planted a haunch on the edge of the desk and carefully positioned the cigarette he held on the edge of the ashtray. "I need you as a witness," he explained in a half-whisper, "and I don't want you to say anything or do anything else." He pointed at the clock on the wall. "Just establish the time and confirm the fact that I have been right here with you."

"Now what the hell is this all about?"

"Just establish the fact that I'm right here with you, and that I haven't been anywhere else," he repeated patiently, "and don't forget the time. That's all I want you to say." A thin hand pointed at the burning cigarette resting in the ashtray. "See the mark?"

Dad leaned forward slightly with a loud creak from his swivel chair and peered closely. Roughly halfway between the glowing tip and the filter was a faint pencil line. It partially girdled the small, white cylinder.

“It’s a time fuse.” Joe went on. “Right about there,” his pointing finger stabbed downwards in emphasis, “I tore a small hole in the side of another cigarette from the same pack I got this one out of. Then I stuck the fuse of one of these little beauties in it.”

With a sly grin, he held up a cherry bomb.

My father couldn’t help a small nod of appreciation at Joe’s cleverness. On the other

hand, even a pre-warning of an impending eruption made him nervous.

“My God,” he said, “where is it?”

“Bottom of that five-gallon can we use for a wastebasket, up there in the TV room. I even put some crumpled up pieces of newspaper over it to break up the smoke. Besides, there’s already a good bunch of butts in there. I’ll bet least one or two of them are still smoking, as well.”

“My God,” said Dad again, “who’s in there?”

“Aw, Just a few of the boys,” he skinned his teeth in a crooked gator’s grin, “and Herman.”

Dad suddenly remembered the events of the previous week. “Look,” he said, “The Cap’s going to be madder than hell when that thing goes off. Is he in there, too?”

“Naw, he’s deader than a doornail in his bunk. This is Sunday, remember? He wants to watch the late movie, tonight.”

In point of fact, Joe was originally right, at the moment he spoke. But a few minutes later, the intrepid Cap was headed towards the kitchen. He had awakened with a need for some cocoa, and Fate was guiding his path and his timing.

Joe took another puff on his own cigarette and looked down on its smoldering

companion. The faint pencil line was now fully gone.

“Jeez, something should have happened by now. It’s already well past the...”

A titan’s hammer smote the ceiling, rattling the windows and finishing Joe’s statement for him. Even the massive body of Engine One seemed to rock on its wheels, slightly. As for my father, although he was fully warned, he went up in the air, too. Then faintly, but rising in volume, came a gabble of noise from the TV room. Dad said later

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that it sounded just like a whole bunch of chickens in a hencoop when you toss a snake in.

The Cap had been three feet from the door, when a sheet of flame shot out, and then the detonation made him bounce up in the air like a rubber ball. Gibbering chaos reigned in the TV room as everyone began talking and shouting at each other, waving their arms and pointing their fingers at one another in accusation. Not that it made much difference: They couldn't hear each other, anyway. A truckload of smoke filled the room, and billowed out into the hallway.

Dad and Joe were quickly on the scene.

The Cap, stung and disoriented, was beside himself with rage. Normally a mild-mannered man in spite of his dour nature, his muleskinner heritage was at the fore, now.

"Some gawdamn fool with a gawdamn firecracker put the gawdamn thing in the gawdamn wastebasket and set the gawdamn thing off!" he explained succinctly. Herman the German was off to one side, digging out one of his ears with a little finger. He was staring dazedly at one of the other fellows, who was trying to turn the TV up loud enough to hear it.

The Cap swung an angry kick into the already battered wastebasket. "Whoever the gawdamn genius was who rigged this gawdamn stunt will now clean up this mess." He corralled them all with his gaze. "Any more trouble this evening, any more shennigans, any more trouble, any more noise, and every mother's son of ye will be polishing every piece of metal I can find. Including every nail, bolt, and screw in the workshop!"

He kicked the wastebasket again, and it rolled over like a body freshly shot, spilling more of its contents on the floor. "Now I am going back to my room. If I hear anything but an alarm or a phone call from Headquarters, -anything at all! The whole worthless lot 'o ye will be sorry your mothers ever met yer fathers! Do ye hear me?"

His eyes raked the circle again.

"I said, 'Do ye hear me!' "

"Yessir, Cap!"

"Yessir, Captain!"

"Sure thing, Cap!"

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“Won’t happen again, Cap!”

With a parting growl, he stormed off back to his room, so as to allow the guilty party to make amends without fear of official repercussions.

Herman abruptly swiveled a long, puritanical face around to bear upon Joe. “Everyone else in the station was here in this room except for you and Nails,” he intoned.

Joe was shaking his head in round-eyed innocence even before Herman was finished. “No-no-no-no,” he said quickly. “I was right down in the desk office, talking with Nails at the time, and he can prove it for me. -Ain't that right, Nellie?”

It should be noted that Dad had the interchangeable nickname of “Nails” or “Nellie”, throughout his years in the department. He answered to both.

My father nodded his agreement. “That's right,” he answered, “I was down there on desk duty and Joe was there talking to me. A good twenty minutes, or so, I'd guess,” he testified, “and speaking of which, I'd better get on back down there.”

As he turned to go, Joe bent down with elaborate casualness and started picking up the scattered butts and bits of paper. Herman stepped forward, and stood towering over him.

“Guilty as hell,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

“No, no, no,” Joe protested, “No one else is cleaning this mess up, no one at all. Someone has to, or the Cap will just get madder and maybe put us all on cleanup. I'm just doing a public favor, and that's a fact.”

Herman pursed his lips and continued to look down at Joe's motions with a long, measuring stare. “I don't know how you managed to do it,” he admitted at last, speaking slowly and thoughtfully, “but I'll find out.” He stood silent for a minute or so longer, jingling the coins in his pockets. “And when I do,” he promised ominously, “you'll be hearing from me.”

A few days later, Dad and Herman were sharing a table in the station's kitchen. Dad was always prowling about the station for extra reading material, and the magazine rack there as usually a good spot to try. Besides, it was handy to the coffee pot.

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Herman was morosely stirring his coffee, his head bent over and looking down into its depths. His countenance wore the same expression as a Vermont minister whose daughter has just joined the Hefner Brigade, bunny tail and all. He started to mutter to himself, and it soon became loud enough for Dad to hear.

“I just know, I just know in my very bones, that Joe planted that damned bomb in the TV room. He did it. There is no question about it. The only thing I have to know is how.”

Dad looked up from his magazine politely. Herman went on.

“You know, Nails, I was sitting right next to that damned can. It was like a howitzer blasting in my ear. There's no way possible someone could have tossed a cherry bomb in there, without my knowing it. No way at all. I remember hearing a sizzling noise. -That had to be the damned fuse! I was just wondering what it was when all Hell broke loose.”

Dad earned his bread and butter by being a firefighter for the City of Haverhill, but he often maintained that his true calling in life was that of a pot-stirrer.

Without a word, he got to his feet and poured himself a refill for his own cup. Retrieving a hidden doughnut from a spare coffee can (an old Army trick), he spoke carefully and slowly, making sure no one else was in the room or passing the hallway nearby.

“You know, Herman, I wouldn't be the guy to rat on a friend, and of course, I never will!” He sat back down and took up his magazine again, and spoke as if he was reading aloud from that very page.

It was a magazine called TRUE ADVENTURE. As usual, the cover featured lightly covered young women with heavy machine guns on a commando raid or something like that. Dad continued in a monotone, almost as if he was casually reading aloud an article from the magazine.

“You know, there was an article just last week about time bombs. How they can rig them up with alarm clocks, transistor radios, or even telephones.” He turned over another page, “It reminded me only a little while ago, I was reading about Filipino underground fighters during the war, after the Japs took the islands. It seems they would take a cigar and cut a small hole in it, then stick the fuse of a stick of dynamite in

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the hole, light the cigar, and then leave it. Then the local women would give free cigars to the Japs at the barracks, and leave. By the time the dynamite went off, the Filipinos were miles away.”

The sun rose in Herman's eyes.

With a few sage nods, he downed his coffee and rose from his chair. A pair of hidden strings tugged the corners of his dour mouth upwards as he said to Dad, “Oho.”

A man with a mission, he strode to the door, pausing only long enough to say over his shoulder, “That's all I need to know. Thanks, Nails, I'll take it from here.”

Sometime the following week, Joe came to work late, and he was as mad as a singed weasel. Some demented soul had attached a device next to his manifold that gave out the piercing whistle of a falling bomb. It ended with a loud bang and a gush of smoke that caused Joe to veer over to the aide of the road in a panic, thinking his car was on fire and ready to blow. Matters were further complicated when Joe realized that he had chosen to careen his vehicle into a spot just in front of a startled patrolman. Well, some mornings start early.

Shortly after that happened, Dad was at the same table with a despondent Joe Lloyds seated across from him. Just to cheer him up, Dad read aloud an article about how the Germans during the war let slip the fact that they had developed a new super mine that couldn't be detected. They closed the port of South Hampton down for two weeks when a few bombers dropped some heavy objects in the water, which didn't respond to the magnetic sweeping gear or fake screws. It was only when some divers started bringing up concrete blocks that the British Defense Forces knew they had been had.

Joe brightened up right away.

Dad came home with a big grin a few days later. Without even pausing for the customary kiss that they would exchange at this time, he vigorously motioned Mother into the bedroom.

I ran upstairs, as quietly and as swiftly as possible. The bedroom I shared with my older brother was directly above the Master Bedroom. Long ago, I had learned that by lying very still on the bare floor, and with a cup pressed to my ear, I could make out the conversations down below quite clearly. It was a trick Captain Midnight had taught me.

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Sometimes, this knowledge was useful. Especially if Dad came home with some raucous anecdote that was not meant for younger ears.

I had often heard the phrase, “Don’t get caught with your pants down,” and of course, I knew what it meant. However, this was the first time I had ever heard about how it could be true in the most literal sense.

It was late in the afternoon, and Herman the German had taken the time to answer a necessary call of nature. Just moments after he had closed the door of the stall he had chosen and had seated himself, the door to the bathroom opened. There was the sound of an object hitting the tiled floor. Then the biggest, most gawd-awful firecracker ever spawned rolled into the stall, straight for him, with a sputtering fuse.

It was as thick as a pregnant stick of dynamite, and it looked hefty enough to level the station. Herman yelped his dismay and leaped up from his throne, frantically trying to get his pants high enough to make his escape. However, his reflexes were faster than his intentions, and he wasn’t quite adroit enough to get his pants up high enough to give his legs the freedom they needed. He crashed through the stall door and fell full length on the floor, still hauling at his trousers. He rolled over, and with horrified eyes, he watched the thing roll to a stop just a foot away. The sputtering fuse disappeared into the body. Herman closed his eyes.

Nothing happened.

A curl of smoke rose from the end, and then stopped. Finally getting his pants secured and swaying his torso to an upright position, Herman cautiously knee-walked over to the object and gave it a close scrutiny. -It turned out to be the tube from a roll of toilet paper, stuffed with rags, artfully painted, and supplied with a very convincing fuse. Herman didn't have to be a detective to identify the bellow of laughter that followed.

Now the feud had moved into the open, and there was no need for Dad to drop a hint or even a word to keep things going. Both men each knew who his opponent was, and the time for subtlety was past.

Less than a week after he was ousted from his throne, Herman and his family were visiting his brother-in-law’s farm, just north of Kingston, New Hampshire. It was a lazy, comfortable afternoon on the

back porch, where pipes, politics, and coffee were freely mixed among the four adults, and their children could play and explore the area.

Abruptly, Herman's son and his twin nephews came running proudly up the path from a small pond that was near-by. Young and full of adventure, they had just tried their own fishing expedition, and had caught about half a dozen Crappies and Sunfish from the tiny dock that led out from shore. Carefully placed in a bucket of cold, fresh water, they were triumphantly showing their catch for their parents' approval.

The usual custom at such a moment was to praise the skill of the young fishermen, wash their hands, and give them a plate of cookies and some milk as a reward. Meanwhile, the mothers or the fathers (according to a coin toss) would cut up a few scraps to give to the barn cats, and quietly dispose of the rest.

This time, however, things were different. With all the grave solemnity of a port official, Herman inspected each fish and offered to buy the catch. After some delighted haggling and offers and counter-offers, the price was finally set a quarter each for the four biggest, and fifteen cents for the two smallest. A princely sum for the three boys, and a source of puzzlement for Herman's wife.

"I've got a use for these," was all he told her, carefully packing them into ice and wrapping them securely with wax paper.

Two nights later, well into a quiet night shift, Herman snuck out from the station and into the parking area, carrying a brown paper bag and a heavy screwdriver. Popping off all four hubcaps of Joe's car, he donated a fish to each of them, and then silently hammered them back in place. For good measure, he crawled under the car and placed the two smaller fish on top of Joe's muffler, and soundlessly returned to his bed, after removing all the evidence of his foray.

It didn't take long for Joe to notice something was amiss. Within a day, he began to notice a smell around his car. A horrible smell. Suspicious, he crawled underneath and found the two fish on top of the muffler. Growling vengeance, he threw them away and began to consider some plans for retribution. They would be simple, of course. What an amateur! Fish on the muffler! Well, he'd taken care of that. A day in the fresh air, and his car would be back to normal.

It was not to be. The smell grew worse. Far worse.

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Within days, Joe was exiled to the far corner of the lot, and his wife insisted he park it on the street instead of their driveway. Aghast, he washed and thoroughly scrubbed the car inch by inch, from stem to stern, and from top to bottom. The smell grew worse. Again and again, he attacked the car with strong disinfectants, bleach, and pine oil. The smell grew worse. Frantic, he went to a professional car wash place, where they used industrial strength cleansers and powered soap brushes. The next day, when he went there again, they refused to work on it.

Now the smell was a living thing. An invisible monster that followed him wherever he went, causing complaints from neighbors and strangers alike. He drove fast, with all the windows open, to minimize exposure. More and more, he drove with his head outside the window, as if the family dog was doing the driving. Cars dropped back two places behind him when he drove to work, and hopeful seagulls began to pace him from above.

After several days, Joe noticed a small, horrid trickle leaking out from one of the hubcaps, and began to understand. Grabbing a gas mask and a spare CO2 extinguisher from the maintenance room, he went over to the vehicle with a tire iron and pried open the nearest hubcap. A small, fetid cloud seemed to burst from the hubcap, and an indescribable mess of brown, black, and tiny white bones sloughed within.

Gagging, Joe hit it with a generous shot of CO2, killing most of the bacteria and much of the odor. Going around the car, he popped open each of the other caps and repeated the treatment. Around and around he went, hitting each wheel and hubcap repeatedly, until the extinguisher was exhausted. Swearing to himself, he came back with a fire broom and chivvied the half-frozen mess over to an open sewer grate, then followed it up with a garden hose, washing it all down for good. Again, he thoroughly hosed down the car and hubcaps before replacing them.

It took another trip to the car wash place, and some more scrubbing at home, but the problem was finally licked.

Joe was a decent chap who regularly attended the same church where he met and married his young wife. Even so, according to Dad,

he would climb the roof of the fire station on moonlit nights, there to make sacrifice and swear pagan vows of vengeance.

One day after a minor fire, Dad and Joe were rigging up the hoses in the tower to allow them to drain and dry. As they worked, my sire mentioned that one of the dastardly tricks used by saboteurs during the war was to put two mines in the same hole, separating them with a thin layer of dirt. The bad guys would find the top mine and remove it, thinking it was now safe. Then they'd fill in the hole and promptly drive a truck or a tank over it, thinking it was OK to do so. Boom. One less truck. All because they thought they had solved a problem by only finding half of it.

It took many days, for Herman was now keeping a weather eye on his own car, but finally, he let down his guard long enough for Joe to hit him with his double whammy.

First, he made up an interesting concoction of Kool-Aid, a popular drink of the time that consisted of a small packet of colorful powder in several flavors that you added sugar and water to. Working secretly in the station's kitchen, Joe combined some grape (purple), raspberry (red), and lemon (yellow) flavors. These packets only cost a nickel apiece, and so Joe had plenty of material to play with. Finally, he had a pitcher full of a fluid that looked remarkably like transmission fluid. Just before evening muster, he poured it all underneath Herman's car.

Then he snuck around to slap a bumper sticker on the right rear fender, just below the taillight. It had been specially made by a print shop just off of Lafayette Square, a big red one with white block letters that read: "THE ONLY GOOD COP IS A DEAD COP!"

It worked perfectly.

When Herman backed out of his parking spot, he immediately spotted the colorful puddle, and jerked to a stop. Carefully, very carefully, he eased back just a little more, then rocked forward, and a little bit in reverse, carefully listening to the engine and the gears for any sign of a grinding noise, or anything else that could be amiss. He tested the brakes, too. Surely the young idiot wouldn't go to this length just to get back at him, would he? Placing his car in park, Herman got out with a rag, popped the hood, and checked the fluids.

TALES FROM THE CHEROKEE STRIP

Transmission OK, and so was the brake reservoir, and the radiator as well. Frowning his suspicion, Herman went over to the puddle, squatted down, and poked a cautious finger in the middle. He raised it to his tongue for a light, probing taste.

Aha.

His long face pulled itself up into a sardonic smile. Poor young Joseph. An amateur trying to put one over on Ol' Herman. Whistling happily to himself, Herman got back inside and drove off, his mind pleasantly going over several possibilities to teach the boy yet another lesson.

In Haverhill, as in most communities, the Fire Department and the Police got along pretty well, for they often worked together, and shared a common sense of dedication and purpose, which was to protect the city. This attitude flowed right down through all ranks, and so the individuals often knew each other on a first-name basis. Thus, when Patrolman Steve Brown saw Herman drive by along Merrimack Street, he exchanged their usual and customary nods. However, once the car had passed, he was startled to see Herman's new bumper sticker. Startled and a little upset, if truth be told. Had some member of Haverhill's finest stolen Herman's wife? Arrested his son? Shot his dog?

Whatever the reason, this certainly couldn't be good for the professional esteem they all shared. Moments later, one of the police cruisers happened to be proceeding along Merrimack Street as well, and so Officer Brown flagged them over to tell what he had seen.

The two officers in the cruiser agreed. This was unusual. One of them also knew Herman, and knew where he lived. Perhaps a chat was in order. What better time than the present?

Herman was just about to turn off Groveland Street and head on up Golden Hill Avenue when he saw the lights flashing in his mirror. As all innocent men, he thought they were after someone else, and so he slowed down and pulled over closer to the side to let them pass. They didn't. Herman slowed a bit more, and he saw the cop on the passenger side make an unmistakable, imperious gesture. Now Herman was puzzled. He couldn't possibly be speeding.

DOUG NELSON

Puzzlement turned into consternation when he was asked out of the driver's seat, and then led around to the back of his car. Once the bumper sticker was pointed out to him, realization and anger set in. Swiftly, he explained just how that bumper sticker must have gotten there, and who did it.

The cops listened politely.

Surprisingly enough, they both understood his explanation. But Herman's relief lasted only moments. Yes, one of the cops told him, that was probably exactly what happened. But you know, Herman, that bumper sticker has to go. There were some policemen in town who didn't know him at all that well, and had sensitive natures. That bumper sticker could get him pulled over any number of times. And gee, Herman, you know, they might see those treads of yours and how thin they were, and just might give you a ticket for driving with unsafe tires.

Meanwhile, the other officer was peering anxiously at Herman's tailpipe. There were holes in it. A sure sign of corrosion. Going down on his hands and knees, he quickly saw that the pipe was so corroded, it would soon detach from the muffler. Why, that could happen any day, now. When he straightened up to add this bit of news to Herman's knowledge, he noticed that the red plastic over the left tail light was cracked, and that could let moisture in, which would short out the light bulb. That could be a problem, too.

Of course, it is a policeman's duty to advise the Registry of Motor Vehicles whenever they spotted an unsafe car. It could lead to heavy fines, Herman. Increased car insurance rates.

However, since they were all brothers in uniform, united in protecting our fair city, an accommodation could be made. Get those problems fixed right away, and there would be no need to bother the Registry people at all. Fact is, if Herman came around to the police station, say sometime in the next couple days or so, and brought along with him a copy of the repair bill from the garage, proving that these problems were indeed cured, why then they could just forget the whole thing. Just show it to the Desk Sergeant. It would be a good deal, Herman.

Herman agreed.

TALES FROM THE CHEROKEE STRIP

It took quite a while to scrape off Joe's bumper sticker from Herman's car, and he wasn't happy about the cost of the new muffler and tires, either. Knowing Herman, I have no doubt that he would have eventually extracted some equitable form of retribution from Joe's hide, but outside events came into play only a week or so later, which ended the feud.

After all, loyalty in the field tends to supersede whatever spats may be going on at home. Besides, any fireman will tell you that it's real hard to put the screws to someone who's just saved your life...

Haverhill was one of the first cities in America to be industrialized, thanks to the Merrimack River, and so the factories were all built close to its banks. Then came the early stores and mercantile establishments. This left the hills above the floodplain open to become residential areas, and so clusters of apartment buildings and yet more stores were built up along Summer Street and Winter Street, which ran parallel to the river as well. One of the streets that branch off of Winter Street is Primrose, and it was here that a large, brick apartment building was constructed in 1908. It was optimistically titled as the Riverview Manor.

It was a shambling, flat-roofed, three-story edifice that housed some thirty apartments, all of which depended for their heat on the hot-water radiators that graced the living room of each flat. The hot water was supplied by a huge boiler and coal-fired furnace that resided in the basement.

Sometime during the 50's, the furnaces all became oil-fired jobs, with a big oil tank installed close by. Naturally, the basement is a dark, seldom visited place, and that's where the gas lines for the stoves and the electrical wires for the lights ran into the building, too. This is also the where maintenance items, such as paint, rags, and brushes get stored. Here too, old mattresses, bits of furniture, and various other odds and ends tend to accumulate.

With three energy sources centralized in one place, and with flammable materials nearby, you have a risk. Add in years of wear and tear, and season it with just a dash of neglect or carelessness, and you have a certainty. This particular night, the dice rolled, and the Riverview Manor's number came up.

DOUG NELSON

Dad and the rest of the guys cursed loudly when the box came in. They had all been gathered in the TV room, and Marshal Matt Dillon was about to walk into a trap. Now they would never know what happened (This was before the days of VCR's and re-runs). Down the poles they came, and the drivers ran over to read the punch tape, where the series and grouping of the triangular shaped holes indicated which alarm box had been activated. Referring to the big charts encased in binders above the tape machine, they matched the box number and its location, and they were soon underway.

Down Essex Street, across Lafayette Square, and on up Winter Street they thundered, and even in the darkness, they could see clearly the huge column of smoke that rose to challenge them.

This was a real working fire. The High Street Station was called in, and soon every face of the building had ladders thrown up against it, while crews went in to make sure all the people were out. Dad, Herman, and Joe were ordered by the Cap to check the roof. Smoke was boiling out from the top of the building in one corner, and a red glow could already be seen. Fires will often climb up between the walls of a building, where the space between the interior and exterior provides a natural chimney. Once there, it can easily spread under the eaves of the roof to the rest of the building's top. When that happens, the building is doomed.

When a burning roof collapses, its weight can often be too much for the top floor, and it will collapse as well. When that goes, the combined weight will hammer down in a vertical avalanche, smashing every floor in turn, until finally you have a piled, blazing mass in the basement. Any person, pet, or would-be rescuer caught in between becomes part of a ghastly sandwich, and there is no hope of survival.

Herman was up there first, carrying the hose, and Joe was just behind with an axe. Dad was also behind, carrying his own axe, but remained on the ladder to signal the pump man. This would only be done once Herman and Joe were firmly and safely on the roof. Spotting the glowing hole, they edged towards it cautiously. At Herman's shout, Dad waved his axe, and the pump man sent a surge of high-pressure water up the hose. Herman pulled the lanyard back, and a conical blast of water came out at the fire.

TALES FROM THE CHEROKEE STRIP

Once, when I was a boy still young enough to hope to slay a dragon someday, Dad told me that fighting a big fire was about as close to that deed as you could get. Facing those hot, roaring flames is just like encountering one of those beasts, and when you hit it with the hose, there is a great, hissing bellow of steam and smoke. Sometimes, if it is hot enough, it almost sounds like a shriek of pain and anger. It doesn't take much imagination to think of delivering the monster a mighty blow. But, he had warned me, that is also when a dragon is at its most dangerous.

Flipping the heavy hose up over his shoulder, Herman approached the hole, slightly waving the nozzle from side to side, beating down the flame, the smoke, and the steam. Once close enough, he could shoot the stream directly into the fire's maw, and maybe even in knock it out from there. But the fire had been at work elsewhere, and there was a treacherous spot just beneath where Herman set his boot as he advanced. His foot plunged through.

As soon as he felt the roof give way beneath him, Herman did several things at once. Shouting a warning to Joe, he snapped the lanyard shut and flung the nozzle away. It just wouldn't do to have the fully charged hose flailing about like a mad anaconda. As he flung the nozzle in one direction, he twisted his body in mid-fall and threw his arms out in the other, desperately reaching for a handhold.

Even through his heavy boots, he could feel the heat as the flames below licked at him. In a perverse way, this may have saved his life, for it acted just like a cattle prod, galvanizing his muscles and reflexes like nothing else could. Even with his heavy boots, trousers, helmet and overcoat, he showed an agility that a circus performer would have nodded approval at.

With his hands and elbows on the graveled, tarry surface of the roof, he snapped one leg up and over, and then rolled clear. But before he could get to his feet, there came a loud, crackling noise, and the roof sagged beneath him yet again. This was trouble. Big trouble.

Alerted by Herman's initial shout, Joe had watched in horror as Herman dropped down.

He could clearly see the deadly red glow behind the new hole as Herman flipped himself out. Then his own arms were flailing wildly in

the air. He too felt the roof sag beneath him, and knew that total collapse could be seconds away.

Men who face danger, share danger. Joe could easily have retreated back to a firmer section of the roof, or even the safety of the ladder, but he didn't hesitate. Sprawling down and spread-eagling himself to distribute his weight, he reached out with his axe towards Herman and screamed his name. Herman didn't have to be told twice. He grabbed the axe head, and hung on as Joe started to pull.

Jeez, he had no idea Herman weighed this much. Or maybe it was the roof sagging a little more. Suddenly, Joe himself felt a powerful yank on his ankles, and he began to slide back up, taking Herman with him.

Dad was still on the ladder when he saw the hose stiffen and drop, and had heard Herman. Checking below to make sure the ground was clear, he dropped his axe and vaulted up over the top of the ladder to the roof. Through the smoke and steam, he saw Joe's boots, and then a momentary rift in the smoke revealed his prone torso. Dad understood at once, and dove for the boots. Within moments, the three of them were clear of danger and were beating a retreat back down the ladder, carrying the hose.

Once back on the ground, Herman gave a hearty slug to Joe's shoulder, and then one to my father's. If properly witnessed and documented, firemen could get a commendation for saving a civilian, but looking out for one another was mostly considered to be part of the job. That didn't make them any less grateful. Above them, a crash and a shower of sparks announced a cave-in of that corner of the roof.

Just as they were starting to shift the ladder's location, the Cap came rushing up.

"Never mind that!" He bellowed, and then pointed. "Down that way! Got a woman trapped on the third floor! Here's two more men to help ye!"

Sure enough, about 7 or 8 windows down, the head and shoulders of a woman could be clearly seen, leaning out and waving. Within moments, the ladder was struck down and hustled over to her.

TALES FROM THE CHEROKEE STRIP

Through all the years of my father's tales and anecdotes of his time in the fire department, he never ceased to be amazed by what people thought was valuable enough to risk their lives for.

Mrs. Gloria Sutton had been a widow for over five years, and her children were all grown and gone. But even though she was well outside and safe, she had suddenly realized that her old wedding album was still in her bedroom. Breaking away without a word or a shout, she had dashed back into the burning building before anyone near-by had even realized what she was doing, let alone try to stop her.

Now she had her album, but the smoke was now gushing in on all sides of the door that led back into the hallway. Fortunately, a little bit of common sense was coming back to her, and she put her hand on the door's surface instead of turning the knob to open it. Sure enough, it was hot to the touch. She knew then that if she opened that door, the flames outside would bloom in and devour all the oxygen in the room, and she would be dead of suffocation long before being burned. Clutching her album, she rushed back instead to her outside window, opened it, and leaned out.

She stepped back as the twin ends of the ladder slammed against her windowsill. Then she leaned back out over the ladder to yell at them to hurry

"I'll go," said Dad, and started on up. He didn't really know the other two men in the scratch crew that had been formed, since they were from High Street, and although Herman and Joe seemed to be fully functional, they had eaten a lot of smoke and had just done some serious physical activity. All things being equal, he was the one in best shape, and so elected himself for the retrieval.

As they braced the ladder on the ground, there was a momentary lull in the action, and so Herman took the opportunity to add a verbal thanks to Joe, as well as the previous cuff he had just awarded. Catching his eye, he nodded again and spoke.

"Thanks,"

"Don't mention it."

The Cap was standing next to them, watching my sire's ascent. Since a life was clearly in danger, this was where his full attention

would be for the moment. However, he had overheard them. Both eyes fixed on Dad, he growled conversationally.

“Well, I be glad the three of ye are friends again. Maybe this stupid, jackass feuding will stop now, and mebbe we can all go back to fighting fires instead of each other.”

“Feuds?” Said Joe.

“The three of us?” Said Herman.

The Cap was still watching my sire, but he growled even louder.

“Think I’m blind? Think I can’t hear? Think I can’t count? Yes, I said the three of ye. You two idiots have been going at each other’s throats for nigh on two months, now, and Nails up there, he’s been making fools out of both ye, giving each other ideas from those damn stupid magazines of his. He’s the one who’s been having the most fun, watching the two of ye doing each other in!”

Herman and Joe stared at each other

Meanwhile, Dad was having his own problems.

All the movies show the hero fireman scrambling up the ladder, plucking the child or blonde out from the window, tossing her onto his shoulder, and sliding back down the outside rails of the ladder in a sweeping finish. Usually, especially if it’s a blonde, she’s wearing a flimsy nightie, and gives the fireman a kiss.

Not in real life.

Dad was startled at her attitude and demeanor, for instead of being fearful of the fire and grateful for the impending rescue, she peered at him with suspicious eyes.

Dad tried to be reassuring.

“It’s OK, Lady. You’re going to be fine. It’s not too far down. Just come on to this ladder, and climb on down with me. I’ll make sure you don’t fall.”

She passed out a large, heavy photo album. “Here, take this.”

For a second, Dad was open-mouthed in amazement.

“Well, come on, hurry up,” she commanded, thrusting the album at him.

Dad’s temper flashed.

“Lady, I didn’t come up here to rescue some gawdamned book! Now drop it and let’s go!”

TALES FROM THE CHEROKEE STRIP

She leaned out and thrust it into Dad's chest. "Not until you take this."

Dad was never much for diplomacy or tact. "I'll take it," he growled, and snatched it from her hands. Without ceremony or pause, he casually dropped the album straight down to the ground. It landed with a loud plump and a splash from one of the puddles below.

"-Why, you lousy -----!" the woman shrieked, and raised her fist to Dad. He blocked it easily and bellowed his reply.

"Lady, we've got no time for horseplay! You'll cook if you stay here. Now come on!"

Down below, Herman and Joe watched my dad helping the lady with new interest.

"Sonofabitch!" Said Herman.

"Sure enough!" Said Joe.

We gotta get him," said Herman.

"Sure enough, but how?" Wondered Joe.

"We just gotta find a weakness, and hit him there," nodded Herman.

It was precisely at that moment when they witnessed my exasperated sire snatch the wedding album away from the woman and drop it on down. They knew Dad well enough to guess exactly what he had to have been saying at that moment, and they both chuckled appreciatively at his antics. They watched the book as it landed with a sodden thump near the base of the ladder.

"Seems almost a shame to throw away something valuable like that," observed Joe.

"Valuable to her, but not to him," replied Herman.

"Well, you know what they say. 'One man's trash is another man's treasure...'"

The revelation dawned upon the two of them at the same moment. They turned and looked at each other with mutual joy, and each pointed a finger at the other's nose.

"That's it!" They chorused. They had remembered Dad's weak spot.

Trash. Treasure. Call it what you will. The shrinks would say it was because Dad grew up poor during the depression. My mom said

the trait was inborn in him, and would have manifested itself no matter how rich he was or where he lived. The fact of the matter is, my father was a trash-picker.

Dad could never pass by a loaded trashcan without pausing first to check its contents. And if it was worthwhile or possibly useful, he would take it home. As far as he was concerned, anything in, on, or next to a trash barrel on the sidewalk, was fair game. It was a standing joke in our family that he would come home from the dump with more than he took, and he always kept the back end of our station wagon clear in case he came across a good "target of opportunity".

His pals knew this as well as we did.

"Listen," said Herman, "We gotta set this up as soon as we can. We've the day shift day after tomorrow. We'll be getting off at six. You got a brother who's a cop, don't you?"

"Sure. My kid brother, Patrick. He just made Corporal."

"Perfect! Have him find out who's patrolling around Groveland Street during that time. Tomorrow, you and me and a few of the boys will scrounge up some stuff for bait."

"Why Groveland Street? And what're we going to do there?"

"Because that's where Nellie always goes when he's going home, you moron! That's where we're gonna set him up!"

"How?"

"Listen. You know Ed Dawson, the weatherman, don't you?"

"Sure. Who doesn't?" Joe puffed out his chest and gave a pretty good imitation of Haverhill's radio station, WHAV, and it's resident weatherman, who always gave his reports from his home. Each time, the broadcaster would introduce in the same manner, as now did Joe: "And Now, DIRECT FROM HIS HOME IN RIVERSIDE, here is Ed Dawson with today's weather report."

Herman nodded his reply. "Dawson's a classmate of mine. Lives right off of Groveland Street, across from where Golden Hill Avenue connects with it. That's where we'll set the trap."

"But how we going to get there before he does?"

Herman grinned. "Why, we ask the Cap. In fact, I think I know just how he can do it..."

TALES FROM THE CHEROKEE STRIP

Herman was proved right just a few days later, when they were relieved by the night shift...

“ATTEN-HUT! Day shift, Dismissed! Night Shift, Carry on!”

Dad strolled across the engine bay of the fire station and picked up his kit bag. He was looking forward to going home, for mom always had a good supper ready and waiting after a long shift. ‘Dagnet’ would be on the TV, tonight, and there would be coffee and dessert to go with it.

He gave a small start of surprise when the Cap walked up to him and tapped his shoulder.

“Mistah Nelson, A moment of your time, I be asking.”

“Why sure, Cap, but couldn’t it wait ‘till tomorrow?”

“Aye lad, it could. But there’s something I be a-working on at home, and we still have a few hours of daylight, left. I be laying down a foundation for a new shed in me back yard. A small one. But they don’t look just right. I’ve checked the measurements a dozen times, nay, two dozen times! But the foundation lines, well, they look sort of lop-sided, if ye know what I mean.”

This was a dead hit.

Like many men, my father was a helpful soul by nature. This was especially true if it was something he knew about, and having recently built his own garage, he knew about foundations.

“Why sure, Cap! It’s easy. Ever hear about six-eight-ten?”

“Six-eight-ten? Why no. What do ye mean?”

“Triangles, Cap, triangles. That’s how you make sure a square’s a square. Or any other rectangle. You take two sides, draw a line from corner to corner, and make a triangle, dividing it in half. If one side’s six, and the other side’s eight, then the long line should be ten. Any less or more, and you don’t have a good, square rectangle. You use the same ratio for any other size, like three, four, and five.”

The Cap beamed his gratitude. “So that’s it? So simple! I be thanking you, Mistah Nelson. I truly be!”

Out of the corner of the eye, through the bay door windows, he saw the cars of Herman the German and Joe Lloyds zip by. He smiled again at my father, exchanged a few more pleasantries, and went on his way. He had done his bit.

DOUG NELSON

Groveland Street is the main thoroughfare for the Haverhill neighborhood known as Riverside. It rises up from where Water Street becomes Lincoln Avenue, and runs nearly east and west in a straight line until it hits the bridge where it crosses the Merrimack into Groveland.

Dad had just passed the Groveland Street School, tooling up along towards Tilton's Corner, where he would take East Broadway on down to Spruce Street, where we lived. As he crested the small hill where Golden Hill Avenue comes down onto Groveland Street, something to his right loomed larger and larger as he approached. He slowed down a little for a better look.

What he saw made him stand on the brake pedal, and he swerved to the right side of the road, gaping in amazement.

Aladdin's Cave was close by. It had to be. For here was his trash pile. Two trashcans stood next to a telephone pole, burdened with treasure stuffed into, on top of, and around them. A clutch of 2 X 4 wooden beams leaned against the pole itself. Several lengths of rope, coiled by hand, lay piled against them. A baby carriage rested on one lid, with all four wheels attached. Between the two cans was another pile of wooden planks, four to six feet long, with only a few nails. There was a dozen lengths of pipe, clean and ready for instant use.

Most of alluring of all, gleaming in the setting sun, was an immense length of raw copper wire, draped around the pipes like a maiden's veil.

Dad frantically looked around in all directions, like a choir director in an adult book store. There was no one in sight. As if escaping a burning tank, Dad bolted from his seat, dashed around the front of his station wagon, and snatched the copper wire. Hurling it in through the passenger window, he swung around the hood again and snapped himself back behind the wheel. With a squeal of tires, he bolted off again, acting for all the world like he had just pulled off a successful bank robbery.

Behind the hedges, Herman whispered to Joe. "Don't worry, he'll be back," he assured him.

"But he took the copper wire! That's the most expensive thing we placed out there!"

TALES FROM THE CHEROKEE STRIP

“Gotta have something bright and shiny for the lure, son. I know my fish, and I know my pigeons. He’s hooked. He’ll be back in ten minutes. Now go make that phone call.”

Herman was exactly right. I knew something was up from the way Dad’s tires squealed as he rocked into the driveway. And instead of coming up the steps as he usually did, he pounded on up and across the porch and snatched open the door as if he coming in a burning house instead of simply coming home.

“Catherine!” He barked to my mother, sweeping her up for a hasty kiss. He rushed on into the bedroom, shucking his uniform as he went, and snatching up his jeans and an old shirt. “Put supper in the oven! Doug and Harry’s, too! Gotta go get something before someone else does! Doug! Harry! Head on out to the car!”

“But Robert, what’s the matter?” Asked Mom.

“Nothing’s wrong! Nothing at all! But there’s a good pile of stuff up on Groveland Street! A great pile! Stuff like you wouldn’t believe! We’ll be back in fifteen or twenty minutes. Harry, Doug, get a move on!”

This was like sounding battle stations on a ship. When my father used a voice like that, you dropped whatever you were doing and you ran. It wasn’t fear that did it. It was just something in his voice that set off a certain bundle of synapses, and you were on your way, sometimes leaving a sandwich in mid-air.

It had to be urgent. Dad was notoriously frugal about gas, but the engine was still running when I opened the back door and slid in. Harry opened the front passenger door, reached in and held up the big coil of copper wire. One corner of his mouth quirked up at me, and he winked. I chuckled back. We now both knew what was going on.

Seconds later, Dad was back at the wheel, and we surged back on out.

Soon, we were back at the pile. Dad was pleased.

“Good,” he said to us. “No one else has spotted it! Start grabbing the two by fours while I open up the back! Watch out for nails.”

The three of us worked with the coordination of a practiced team. I was on my knees in the back seat, while Dad and Harry fed me the longer lengths of wood, and I would guide them into place. Swiftly, the

pile shrank, and more booty was shoveled in. My sire hummed to himself, sometimes exclaiming his delight over some new item of interest, and urging us to greater speed.

Then the trap sprung.

Dad was happily cursing in a low tone, trying to worm and wiggle the baby carriage into the tailgate, while my brother tried to hold up or shift the wood and pipes to one side. I had just tossed into the back seat the last of the rope coils, and so I saw the flashing lights before they did.

“Uh Oh, Dad. We got company!”

Dad and Harry looked up from the back end of the station wagon, squinting into the glare of headlights and flashing beacons. It was a police cruiser.

Climbing out of the patrol car, two cops strolled up to us.

“Evening, guys,” said the leader of the two. “Mind telling us what the hell’s going on?”

This was long before the days of Miranda and all the various sensitively classes that are so prevalent in police departments today. Cops were generally just as polite then as they are now, but they had a far less tendency to mince words.

All of us looked at Dad. For a moment, he stammered just like Ralph Kramden did in *The Honeymooners*, and then regained himself.

“Why, why, Hammamma! We’re just picking up a few things from this trash pile, that’s all.”

“A few things? Looks like you’re taking everything in sight, if you ask me.”

“Yeah!” said the other cop. His tone was not at all friendly.

Dad had taught us all never to argue with a cop, or be in the least bit belligerent, and to always be polite. Now here were both of us, his sons, watching him in a tight spot involving the police. True to his word, not a hint of anger showed in his voice. But you could see him plant both feet firmly as he stood his ground.

“Now look, officers.” He said. “This is nothing but a pile of stuff someone just left on the sidewalk. Tomorrow, the trash men will come and they’ll take it all away, anyway. I’m just saving them a little bit of time and trouble. That’s all.”

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The taller of the two cops did his own planting as he placed both fists on his own hips.

“Mister, that’s not the way it works. It’s private property if it’s in the guy’s living room, his garage, or out here in front of his own house. It only ceases to be private property when the municipal authorities take it away. Up until then, it’s plain and simple theft for anyone to take it away.”

“Yeah,” said the second cop.

“Well okay then, dammit! Me and my sons will just put it all back! Harry, Doug, start unloading!”

“Sorry, Mister. Just because a bank robber puts the money back, it doesn’t mean he can walk away. I’m afraid we’re going to have to take you downtown.”

“Oh come on, now! What the hell are you talking about? I can’t just leave the car here.”

“Your older son looks old enough to drive it. Or you can call your wife. Come on, now. Let’s get started...”

At that moment, another car pulled up across the street. Then yet another car pulled up behind the first. Three familiar shapes emerged, and then crossed the street. It was The Cap, plus Herman the German and Joe Lloyds. The Cap spoke first.

“By the saints! What do we have here? Mistah Nelson, I be disappointed, and yea, hurt, too! I be thinking much the better of ye, than to find ye here under arrest! What be ye doing? Speeding? Drunk Driving? By the Saints, that just cannae be!”

“Stolen property, sir,” said the senior cop. “That’s what’s happening.”

“Yeah,” said the other cop.

Suddenly, Joe Lloyds spoke up. “Patrick! What are you doing here?”

The second cop grinned and spoke up. “Why, it’s Brother Joe! Still learning the ropes, actually. I’m partner to Sergeant Driscoll, here.”

Joe nodded, then looked serious. “Look here, gentlemen. We know this man. He wouldn’t steal. He’s just doing a little salvaging, that’s all. Right, Nails?”

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“Why sure!” Dad spluttered. “All I’m doing is just something that was going to be done by someone else, anyway! That’s all! Look, I said I’d put it back!”

The five men put their heads together and conferred.

“Well, after all, he’s one of us..”

“Didn’t mean no harm..”

“Been doing this for a long time..”

Abruptly, they all nodded and broke up. Without a word, the two cops climbed into their cruiser, shut off their lights, and drove away. The Cap gave a stern look at all of us, then walked across the street to his car. Herman and Joe looked gravely at my father.

“It’s okay, Nails. You can keep the stuff and go right on home.”

“That’s right!” Agreed Joe. “You’re lucky that was my brother, there. All I had to do was just explain things.”

Dad was nodding his relief. “Look, I’m really grateful to you guys. You helped me out! Saved me from all kinds of trouble, you did, and I’m not going to forget!”

“Aw, Nails! It was nothing! We just had to...”

At that moment, the Cap’s car lurched to a halt close aboard, having just performed a U-turn to cross the street.

Leaning out from his window, The Cap called out with a loud voice. “Mistah Nelson! Ye be grateful to these two! They just rescued ye, thae knows!”

“Right, Cap! I was just thanking them!”

“That be right! Everyone should hear about this, I’ll be bound! A heartwarming tale of comrades helping each other out in the face of danger. Let’s send this story to a magazine. Just like TRUE ADVENTURES!”

All three men roared with laughter. It was one of the few times when I saw my Dad hang his mouth open, and then his head. But after a few moments, he was shouting laughter, too.

It was a short ride home. Less than three minutes. But still, Harry and I started to snigger, twice.

Both times, Dad curtly ordered us to shut up.

Chapter 8

The Little Red Wagon

Down the Merrimack Valley rumbled the Montreal Express, the terrible north wind which made the Arctic seem as far away as the New Hampshire border. It could coat over the surface of Kenoza Lake with a sheet of ice in one breath. It could splinter tree branches as the sap within them froze and expanded, and even the smoke from house chimneys seemed to cower before it, rolling down the slope of the roofs in sudden haste instead of rising leisurely into the air.

As for the luckless few who happened to be outside, it became a living razor, keening between the buttons of the heaviest coat, and slicing away tiny bits of flesh from your cheeks, ears, and nose.

I lowered my head and pedaled grimly on, my bike wobbling in the face of its blast. I muttered a few curses that no lad my age had any real business knowing, but it was my habit to voice them only in times of real stress, and besides, I knew the worst was just ahead. I had just topped the last rise of Groveland Street, and before me was the level stretch of Water Street as it ran along the banks of the Merrimack River.

This was the point where Lincoln Avenue became Water Street, with Groveland Street running into it at an oblique angle. Traffic here was heavy and fast, so I waited for a gap, and shot across to the other side. Here was a welcome break. Just on the other side of the plowed snow ridge was a small canyon that ran away out of sight on both sides of view. One of the city's sidewalk plows had been here, and plowed the entire length of the sidewalk that ran along the Merrimack River, from downtown and probably all the way out to the Groveland Bridge.

It was a struggle to haul my bike up over the ridge and down into the miniature canyon, and I spilled a considerable amount of snow into it, but it wouldn't be too much of an obstacle to other bicyclists and pedestrians. Watching more cars whoosh by convinced me that this was

far safer and easier than chancing the street, and so I re-mounted and pedaled on.

This was the lowest point in the valley, where the wind was compressed by the hills and funneled by the buildings of downtown Haverhill and onto the river itself, causing it to skip off its frozen surface with the velocity of a hockey puck.

Tears were squeezed from the corners of my eyes, and beneath my mittens, my hands became curved hooks of old iron. I pedaled along the endless sidewalk that curved away slowly to my left, far ahead. I was grateful that I had crossed the junction of Groveland and Water Street without mishap, and more grateful still that the sidewalk had been plowed. It meant I could ride in its safety all the way into town. I wouldn't have to brave the hazards of the slippery street and the fast-moving traffic.

As I went over a small bump in a bare patch of the sidewalk, something behind me clanked, and I looked over my shoulder to check on my cargo. It was a long, tubular rod of metal topped by a spade-like handle, and slightly bent in its middle. It stuck out of my saddle basket at a jaunty, familiar angle.

It was a wagon handle, one of the business ends of the many thousands of Radio Flyers that flourished in those days and happily still do so, today. Those wonderful, four-wheeled contrivances that served at once as both toy and a practical hauler of goods, and Dad had happened to have the handle of one in his garage. He was on duty this particular Saturday, and so he had called home and had sent for it. Hence, my errand.

It was no surprise that my sire had such an object on hand. It was the joke of the neighborhood that Dad kept the neatest junkyard ever housed under one roof, and still have room for a car. Father was a son of the Depression, and so our garage bulged with the collected odds and ends of countless articles discarded by others, but still useful. Although not a drinking man or a womanizer, his weakness for "salvage" was the cross my mother bore. He could never bear to pass by a full trash can without stopping to pick it over, and on collection nights when the streets were studded with trash cans and promising stacks of items, his

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arrival could be delayed by as much as half an hour.

Baby carriage wheels, lengths of pipe, any amount of wood, so long as it was in good shape, and sheets of plywood were especially prized. Sometimes we came back from the town dump with more than we took, and that's no joke.

With a sense of triumph, I coasted into the welcome shelter of the big walls surrounding the coal dump for the Haverhill Electric company. I still had a ways to go, but it was all easy, now. I managed the traffic lights at Main Street, and then proceeded on down Merrimack Street. I was now within the downtown area itself, and I was protected from that punishing wind. On the other hand, threading a bicycle between parked cars and moving traffic is potentially risky, an alarming sight to parents, and a minor thrill to the participant.

Judging the width of your handle bars between the moving wall of a bus and the sides of a parked van, making sudden spurts of speed when the way is clear, and avoiding the sudden appearance of pedestrians were all part of the game. Some fool opening his car door suddenly can ruin any boy's day, though.

At last I crossed Washington Square and pointed my front wheel towards the mouth of Essex Street, where my father was on duty at the Essex Street Fire Station, which was Haverhill's oldest. You could still see the marks in the main floor where the horse stalls once were.

As a thousand times before, I smiled with a boy's pride. Many dads worked in featureless office buildings or clanging factories, but there was no mistaking a fire station. In the middle of a city where wall space was precious, and a crowded sidewalk with parked cars was inevitable, the broad, sloping ramps and barn-sized doors stood out like a landmark. The fire tower where the hoses were hung to dry rose above like a castle's high keep. The big doors had windows, and even from a block away you could catch the gleam of polished chrome and monstrous shapes within.

There was even a sentry out front, and I waved to him as I went by. Well, sort of a sentry, at least. After all, he was always out there.

"The Sentry" was the affectionate nick-name given by the men at the station to one James Francis Holland, a slight, wistful little boy who

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grew up to be a man I envy today. He eventually moved on out to Newburyport, married, and became a captain in their fire department. When last I heard, he had his own fire station.

But in those days, he was just a small tyke, and poor to boot. Son of a father who worked less often than he drank. Child of a mother who produced the family's only steady income as a saleswoman at the Parke Snow Department store. By all accounts, he was the living example of a rough start in life.

Yet still, he was happy. Although he lived in a jaded three-decker that shared an alley with a gas station and a shoe factory, he was but a few blocks away from the one great love in his life: The fire station. Whereas any boy will turn his head at the sight of a mighty fire engine thundering by, little Jimmy loved them with the intensity and devotion one would only find in a Wonder Dog story.

He detoured two blocks every morning on his way to school, just to pass by in front, and every afternoon would find him close by. He never got in the way, he never became a pest, and he only spoke when spoken to. He never even tried to sneak in. He was just always there. Glad to run errands for the firemen who lounged on the front bench on sunny afternoons. Glad to talk about fire-fighting tactics, engines, hoses, and equipment whenever one of them had the time and was so inclined. Ecstatic when one of the men would loan him a rag and a can of polish, and (against the rules) allow him inside that hallowed place to polish the valve covers and chrome of Ladder One.

He looked at me with wistful envy as I dismounted from my bike and pushed it in through the side door. He didn't envy me because I had a new bike and he had none. He didn't envy me because I had better clothes and saw roast turkey and steak more often than he did.

He envied me because my dad was a fireman.

The dour Cap had the desk, and gave me a grudging nod as I wheeled my bicycle past him. I was careful to walk slow. It struck me as odd that he had the desk watch, for officers didn't ordinarily take desk duty, the avoidance of which was one of the prerogatives of rank. But I paid no further heed, and found my way to a quiet spot behind Rescue One, where my bike would be safe and out of the way. I toed

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the kickstand into its parking position and went looking for my sire. Best bet was the workshop.

Every fire station has a workshop. It could be a simple bench with a few tools against a far wall, or a whole room set aside for the express purpose, equipped with power tools and racks of heavy shelving. Its existence is readily justifiable, for with any fire station, there is a host of minor repairs and maintenance tasks that need attention. It could be replacing a rung on a ladder, fixing a set of directional lights, or replacing the seals and washers of a hose nozzle. It was also a recreational spot for those on duty with some idle time on their hands, and who wanted to fix a chair or build a birdhouse.

At this time of year, however, the workshop served a higher purpose.

From all over town would come a steady procession of toys. They came in car trunks and grocery boxes, delivered by everyone from little old ladies to full scout troops. These were the throwaways now outgrown, damaged ones that couldn't take the rigors of youthful play, and not a few that were barely touched at all, simply never having aroused the interest of their owners. Some like these arrived in mint condition.

Within days, the humblest corner in the station became a treasure trove in the sight of any youngster, a pirate's cave piled high with booty. Trucks, cars, tanks, dolls, games, and guns of every size, all ready and waiting for a second chance. No one knows how big Santa's workshop is, or the exact number of elves he employs, but he has a considerable auxiliary force in the form of secondary shops and part-time helpers like the firemen.

Once arrived, the toys were roughly sorted into three categories, simply designated as "hopeless", "hard", and "easy". Then the boys would set to work on them, and although they may not have been as skilled as St. Nick's crew, the results were just about as good. Many, many toys destined for the junk pile received a brand new lease on life instead, and wound up under Christmas trees rather than at the Groveland Dump.

All in all, it was an immensely satisfying way to spend their free time. Roughly ten days or so before Christmas, the Salvation Army

truck would arrive at each station, duly accompanied by a pair of reporters from the Gazette.

The boys would all line up proudly to have their pictures taken for the paper, while the truck was being loaded. Some Major or Colonel from the Haverhill Chapter would say a few words and present a plaque or some token of grateful esteem, and then the procession would move on to the next station. Naturally, being recorded in the act of doing a noble deed was something of an embarrassment to this bunch, and so they would try to alleviate it through various means.

Herman the German was fond of lining up everyone for the picture, and then going down the line, he would point to each individual and give off a name for the reporter to put in the caption. He would use the names of town drunks, the mayor's son, or sometimes a deceased personage from the past, such as William C. Bonney or Herbert George Wells.

One of the men on Engine One was Ben Greenberg, and he never forgave Herman for telling the reporter that his middle name was Abdul ("We're all Americans in the Haverhill Fire Department!"). Then there was the time when my own Uncle Harry lined them up in front of a toy train they had fixed, holding the tools they had supposedly used: Some pipe wrenches, a ten pound sledge, heavy bolt cutters, and a two-man saw used for felling trees. It was quite a shot.

It should be mentioned at this point that both the Fire and the Police departments got along well with the Salvation Army. As far as I know, none of it was ever written down or formally agreed to. At every big fire, a Salvation Army canteen truck would show up, regardless of the time of day or night, and the weather didn't matter, either. The side panels would open up, and it would dispense hot coffee and doughnuts to the firemen and police officers.

In return, a cop was always standing nearby whenever a coin kettle was set up during the Christmas Season, and the fire stations took on the task of becoming Santa's helpers.

Sure enough, when I poked my head into the workshop, Dad was there. As usual, he greeted me with a broad grin and a two-handed grip on my shoulders that always left them faintly bruised. His pate was as bald as a genie's, but he still had a band of thick, black hair that came

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from the back of his head to his ears, and very nearly continued on across the top of his eyes as his eyebrows. Brown-eyed and swarthy, he stood only a little bit taller than me, but he had immensely powerful arms and a heavy, sure tread.

“You brought it. Very good.” he rumbled as he plucked it from my hand and led me over to his corner of the workbench. A large coffee pot was gurgling in the center. Dad reached over and ceremoniously poured me a bootleg cup of coffee (I was 12 at the time, and coffee was considered to be a drink that was reserved for grown-ups only), well loaded with cream and sugar. “Mum's the word,” He winked at me.

“This should work just fine,” he said, hefting the handle up and measuring it with his eye. An old wagon rested on his end of the bench, different from its original state, but now in far better condition. Dad had removed all the rivets used for joining the braces to the body and had replaced them with machine bolts instead. A steel band had been added to run the length of its underside, making it strong enough to support a farm bull. The bent, wobbly, and generally sorry cart wheels that originally came with it were all now on the floor, and had been replaced with four, sturdy baby carriage wheels that even had shiny hubcaps.

Best of all was the new paint job, still tainting the air with its freshness. The braces and axles were a deep, glossy black, and the body itself, of course, positively glowed with its rich, fire engine crimson. All it lacked was a handle, which Dad was even now fitting to it.

It didn't quite match, it being of a different manufacture. But this was to be expected, and so after muttering a contented curse, Dad rummaged around for some tools and settled down to make the adjustments he desired. Nearby was The Kid, concentrating his efforts on the trigger of a toy rifle, and there was Herman the German as well, using an artist's brush to do the trimmings of a rocking horse. Although they were grown-up adults to me, I had a fair to good rapport with them, and so I decided to try to spark a little conversation. One never knew what could come up with these three in the room. I tried a cast with a light line, something only slightly less innocuous than the weather.

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“The Captain was sitting at the desk like he had the duty.” I said to no one in particular. “I thought he didn’t have to, being an officer and all. I mean, was there some special reason, like someone being sick, or something?”

A big one hit the bait, and on my first cast. Both Herman and The Kid began to laugh, and my Dad looked unusually sheepish. For answer, Herman plucked a pencil from his shirt pocket and cupped his fist around it to form an imaginary pipe. At the same time, he hunched his shoulders and beetled his brows, creating an over-all effect of The Cap’s demeanor.

“There be too much going on around here,” he growled. His voice had an uncanny resemblance to the Cap’s well-known tones. “Too much Tomfoolery. Too much levity. -Too many jokes. Far too many jokes. This will cease now, my good man. Do you understand, Mistah Nelson?”

“Ah, hell! I was only trying to give a give him a little Christmas Spirit. That’s all I was trying to do.” Dad’s out-stretched hand and his raised eyebrows gave him a theatrical air of injured innocence, and he too joined the laughter.

It turned out that Dad indeed had the desk earlier that morning, when Randolph Gerald “Gilly” Martin had come in to warm his toes for a while. Gilly was one of the town Ne’er-do-wells. He never held a steady job in his life, and never wanted one, seemingly.

His was a frequent shadow in front of Duffy’s Tavern, and seen just as often down at the Welfare Office. With no real home of his own, he hung around the station quite a bit, and on cold days he would try to come in and stand in its warmth for a few minutes or so. Sometimes, the boys would let him stay, and other times they ran him out, especially if he was drunk. It being Christmas Season, Dad had tolerated his arrival.

This was unusual, by the way, for Welfare was one of the Forbidden Subjects at home, the very mention of which was enough to ruin supper and his mood for the rest of the evening. Dad was a table-pounder on the topic. Thoroughly saturated with the work ethic, he firmly believed that a little sweat never hurt anyone, and that the entire

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welfare system was nothing but an elaborate method of the state to take from the thrifty and give to the shifty.

Looking around, Gilly at first had commented on the large number of toys he could see stacked in the workshop at the back of the station. They would make many boys and girls very happy, he had said. It was a shame, he had added wistfully, that only children received free gifts.

Dad got an idea.

Just by the doorway into the workshop stood the station's snow blower. Purchased not by the parsimonious city fathers, but by the carefully hoarded coffee funds and donations of the boys themselves. It was regarded almost as affectionately as a family pet, and was the Cap's own pride and joy. When snow fell, the other stations had to turn out all hands to scrape and clear the ramps with ordinary shovels. But at Essex Street, one man could do the work of six in half the time, thus freeing the crew to have coffee and cluck sympathetically over the fate of lesser mortals.

Not at all, my dad had said, speaking confidentially to the visitor. Take this snow blower, for example. A gift of largesse from one of the city's wealthier residents who had grown tired of the whole business and had purchased a jeep and a snowplow to go with it. Not wanting to embarrass his poorer relatives and humble friends, he had donated this snow blower, brand spanking new, into the hands of the fire department, to be eventually given to the Salvation Army. It was certain that they would find a worthy citizen who would be suitably grateful.

Gilly was aghast. They were actually going to give this fine machine away? To the Salvation Army? For nothing? To just someone at random?

Yep, my dad had said.

Gilly's eyes gleamed, and his tongue began to clean his lips. It seemed a shame to just give it to anybody, he had said. A damned shame. Why, he himself personally knew someone who needed that snow blower very, very much. Heart attack last year. Doing fine but the doctors had warned him. A wife and three kids, too. A damned shame. Had a big, big driveway to shovel. And a sidewalk, too.

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Dad had grown very thoughtful, and pondered for a while with his fist to his chin, just like the statue in front of the Haverhill High School. He spoke with his deepest tone of Philosophy and his love for Humanity. Well, the Salvation Army simply took what was given to them after all, you understand. You could hardly expect them to demand an inventory of donations, now could you? Earnestly, he asked Gilly if this man really was in bad shape, financially as well as physically.

Gilly answered immediately and emphatically. That same heart attack. No real insurance, and his company wouldn't help him. The hospital and the doctors bled him dry. A damned shame.

Well, if that was the case, maybe something could be done. My sire waved an open hand towards the snow blower and told Gilly that thing was a monstrous brute to lift into the Salvation Army truck, anyway. It would take up lots of room that could be better used for toys, too. If he really knew where this man lived, why not just take it to him, right now? After all, my dad had finished, it might well snow again before Christmas. Just make sure this individual knew for certain that this was a gift straight from the Haverhill Fire Department. Gilly was swift to agree.

Waving aside all offers for assistance, Gilly took charge of it straight away, and headed for the door with it. He couldn't believe his fortune and the naiveté of the fireman. This was real generosity! A quick trip to a certain establishment that asked no questions, and he'd be in fat city for at least a month.

It happened that the Cap's office was but a doorway away from the desk station, and the Cap himself had just raised a cup of coffee to his lips when he saw the snow blower trundle by. He had taken two swallows. When he saw Gilly pushing it, he choked on the third.

With an amazed shout, he had halted Gilly just by the door leading out into the alleyway. A sharp, bitter exchange had followed, resulting in a brief tug-or-war between two equally indignant antagonists before true reason had settled in. Gilly eventually stalked away in a huff, and the Cap had spoken to my dad at some length, utilizing a tongue lined with broken glass. He finished by stating that since he was so unworthy of trust, he could do better things by doing something constructive, like

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working on the toys out back. He, The Captain, would take the rest of the watch.

So that's how Dad had come to be in the workshop a little bit earlier than he had planned. But the little tale had broken the dam, and with me as an attentive audience, old stories, recent gossip, and minor anecdotes began to flow around me. I was in Seventh Heaven.

The snow blower itself, for example, was not entirely a labor saving device purchased for the benefit of the boys. It seemed that last year when they were clearing off the ramp with shovels, someone had lobbed a snowball in the general direction of a bunch of shoe workers coming off the day shift. A couple more were lobbed back, followed by an immediate exchange of yet a few more. It looked almost like a horizontal blizzard by the time the Cap had poked his head out to see how progress was coming along. Whenever work was assigned, the sound of laughter always made the Cap suspicious. Since that time, any more than two or three outside when there was snow around made him nervous.

When the word, "nervous" was quoted, that particular term brought forth still another story related by Herman the German, this time. Very briefly, it concerned my dad and Crazy Ed Currier. This involved a house fire that had occurred up near the Nettle School, close to Powder House Hill. It seemed that Dad and Crazy Ed were on the roof, cutting a hole into it to let a hose line in to spray the fire that was in the attic. Condensed spray from the other hoses had settled and frozen on the shingles into a glassy armor of treachery. And sure enough, Ed trusted a little too much to luck and his feet shot out from under him. Crying out in real fear for help, he started on down with his arms out-stretched towards my sire.

Crazy Ed did not know the neighborhood, but my dad did. He even knew this particular house. In other words, he knew that it was built back into the hill itself, and so whereas the roof out front was a good fifteen feet high or so, it sloped back to less than three feet to the ground on the other side.

Accordingly, he doffed his helmet and wished Ed a cheery ride as he rocketed past. Ed cursed him with his dying breath. But it was

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nothing compared to what he had to say when he hit fanny-first into the snow bank below and had realized what had happened.

It tells flat on paper, but watching Herman's long face mold itself into a medley of ludicrous expressions as he rolled his eyes and mimicked the various poses involved soon had me laughing like a banshee.

Telling about Crazy Ed reminded The Kid about him and his homemade jeep, that odd-looking vehicle that was ghoulishly dubbed as "the Abortion". With relish and more laughter, The Kid regaled us all with still another recent incident that involved Crazy Ed and that Jeep. Shortly after this last snowstorm, Ed was cruising the neighborhood with the snowplow mounted on front, looking for work. The standard fee in those days was five dollars for the average driveway, a job which took but a few minutes under Ed's skilled hands. As he was trailing down Burnham Street in Riverside, a local citizen waded through the snow and flagged him down.

Ed had surveyed the length of the driveway, judged the length of it to be a little longer than usual, and told him six dollars. Fine, the citizen agreed, and Ed went to work. He did his task well and thoroughly, which was par for his course. He plowed the driveway clear, rounded its edges at the street to provide him turning room for his car, and even sliced a goodly chunk out of the ridge left by the street plows where the guy's sidewalk came out, making the task of shoveling it far easier.

Then he went to collect, and the citizen didn't answer the door. At first, Ed had truthfully thought that his customer was hard of hearing, and so he had pushed the doorbell more vigorously, and had even added a few brisk raps on the door's paneling. But after a small while, it became clear what the game was, and Ed got mad.

Cynical businessmen make it a universal practice to demand the money up front, just avoid a fait accompli such as this, but Ed's nature was different. It was one of the reasons he would never be a millionaire, according to my father. But then again, his temper was another.

Someone more pragmatic would have cut his losses at that point and would have decided that this wasn't worth any more trouble, time,

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or gas. Not Ed. He stormed back into his jeep and for the next full hour or so, he was very busy.

He collected snow from both sides for the whole length of Burnham Street. Not the light, fluffy stuff that nature bestows upon your front lawn and the roof. No, Ed mined exclusively the compressed, hardened chunks left behind by the big street snowplows when they come through. Everyone on Burnham Street got a free end job at the head of their driveways.

Livid, the citizen had come back out. By this time, the mound covering his driveway was a good three feet higher than the surrounding snow, and Ed was tamping it as densely as he could with each fresh load he delivered. Screaming with rage, the citizen threatened to call the police, but Ed shouted back both the number of the police station and the name of the desk sergeant currently on duty. A friend of his, by the way. Go ahead and call him.

Finishing his tale with an invitation to go down to Burnham Street and to see for ourselves, The Kid estimated that there would still be snow left on that driveway when the month of May rolled around.

The afternoon sped by. I was granted a second cup of coffee while Dad finished up the little red wagon. As a further touch, he took some enameled white paint and carefully stenciled in, "HAVERHILL FIRE DEPARTMENT" along its sides. He even added the legend, "KEEP BACK AT LEAST 50 FEET" on its back end. Just exactly the same way the real fire trucks had that same warning printed on them. This was painstaking, exacting work, but now it provided that unique touch of authenticity that would forever separate it from the rest of its breed.

Meanwhile, the conversation began to drift into war stories and Herman's accounts of What Really Happened in the North Atlantic. I listened with respect and attention. I knew that some of the wags in the department were forever saying that Herman's accomplishments while in the Navy were far more modest. The Cape Cod Canal area where he was stationed during the war was never noted in the annals of history for its battles, dangers, and high seas. But of course, this is slander. Melville himself would have begged to stay the night, just to listen to Herman. So would Montsarrant.

Eventually, the shadows lengthened, and I had to return home, for

not only were the icy streets hazardous to a bicycle after dark, but thrice as chilly, and I was bound and determined to avoid that. Dad saw me to the door, and we parted with mutual waves.

Dad never told me, and I probably would never have guessed, but he was preparing that wagon for someone special. Furthermore, he was actually going over in his mind what strings to cut or pull with the Salvation Army to get his way. Nor did he doubt his ability to do so. He knew people, and he was known. It could be done. Or so he thought. He found out differently when he brought it to the Salvation Army offices the following Monday.

Major Alice Ruth Haley, Commandant of the Haverhill Post for the Salvation Army, was a woman I only met once, and she terrified me. But then again, I was but a small youth at the time, and I could only see up to her jaw. Thin, erect, and severely proud, she had an aura of purpose about her wherever she went, and could make any chair she sat upon somehow become a throne. The color of her hair matched the steel frame of her glasses, which rested just below a large and prominent brow. And yet she was a figure of contrast, for according to both my folks and my Uncle Harry, her eyes were a startlingly bright green, and twinkled with a kindly warmth and humor.

Dad, father of four, and a former sergeant in the Army with four years of combat experience, approached her with respect. As his former Sunday school teacher, she had been close to the organization even then, and joined up with it on a full-time basis after her husband had died. She had been there ever since, and not one waking moment in her life had been turned elsewhere. If there was any type that Dad would recognize and pay homage to, it was a dedicated veteran.

“I am sorry, Robert.” she said at first, “but we don’t make it a practice to designate specific gifts for individual children. You can see my position. To do so once would mean that others could persuade us to do the same for them, and that would soon make chaos out of distribution procedures. It could also compromise the anonymity of the donors, which in turn would injure the spirit in which these gifts were made. And besides,” here she leaned over her desk to point a steady finger at the wagon Dad had brought in with him. “You have already compromised your anonymity even now.” She smiled faintly.

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Clearly visible on the side of the wagon was the lettering that declared that this particular item didn't come from Santa's Workshop. Even Dad had to concede this one. But he was not deterred from his purpose. With a polite nod, he took his leave from her office. "Well now," he said as he departed, "I'll just have to find another way. Damn sure bet I don't want this going to just anyone."

As I mentioned previously, Dad had some strong views on Welfare, both on its administrators and its recipients, and even by today's publishing standards, I would not care to put down on paper precisely all that he had to say on the subject. Alas too, his daily experiences then as an occasional ambulance driver and later on as a fire inspector did little to mitigate his convictions.

There was one year when the amount of toys collected was so great that the Salvation Army truck sent to pick them up couldn't hold them all, and rather than forcing them to make a second trip, the Chief made a small P-R gesture by sending along the department's utility truck as an auxiliary. Dad was assigned as driver. Years later, no, many years later he would still get mad all over again when he recalled the scene: The 'wellies', as he called the welfare recipients, were already there and waiting at the Salvation Army headquarters when the trucks arrived.

Even though the commandant tried to put them off by emphasizing the proper forms and procedures they had to go through for distribution, they still clamored for some of the items they wanted then and there. Some of them even tried to pluck a few toys and packages from the very backs of the trucks as they were being unloaded. It didn't help much when one of the officers who was acquainted with Dad mentioned how quite few of the toys were often sold at flea markets or pawn shops later on, just to raise a little extra cash.

On the other hand, before we digress too far, it can be asserted that Dad wasn't totally hard-boiled. Fire fighting is one profession where you will encounter people who are suddenly and abruptly confronted with total grief and crushing need. It takes plenty of stone in your liver to walk away from something like that, and quite a few veteran firemen can't.

My father was one of them.

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Christmas Eve came and went. As for myself and my family, it was spent in the usual manner with dinner, eggnog, a walk in the snowy night to look at the neighborhood decorations, and then tuning in the TV for Dickens's, "A Christmas Carol", or Bing Crosby's "White Christmas". And as always, we gave one last look at the family Christmas Tree and its half-hidden store of treasures, silently waiting for Christmas Morning. As usual, Dad was not there. He had duty that night, and so he was at the station. At any rate, at least we were sure he'd be with us in the morning, and that was most important.

I should pause at this moment to mention that it was only years later that I found out how Dad picked up extra cash for our presents. He did so by standing duty on Christmas Eve and New Years' Eve. It came from the other men who would normally be assigned, but were willing to give up a night's wages to someone who would take their place. In this manner, the volunteer who stood the extra watch got time and a half pay. Dad knew some of the toy storeowners well enough to buy toys on credit, and then redeem them later.

All too often, the firemen earned their pay on Christmas Eve.

Cut off at its base and allowed to dry for a few days, the average Blue Spruce (one of the favorites for Christmas trees.) is one of nature's close imitations of an incendiary bomb. One single needle, when touched with an open flame will flare like a match head. And one single branch has them by the thousands. Every family should be required to take one of these trees to some safe, open place and observe what happens when it is set afire. In bare seconds, it becomes a hungry, tearing column of flame, reaching up to twice the height of the original tree.

One careless match or cigarette that misses its ashtray, or one small spark from a faulty string of electrical lights is all that it takes. There is no time to spot a small wisp of smoke and brush it out with your hands. That tree will go, and everything within four feet of its trunk will go with it. If you're lucky, there's time to get out of the house.

That night, Christmas Eve, little Jimmy Holland was lucky.

By the time Dad's crew arrived, the whole front of the three-decker house where he lived was fully involved, and better than twenty feet of the roof was already gone. Even as the hose lines were set up and the

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first nozzles were brought to bear, the uppermost porch or balcony cascaded down in an avalanche of flame. There was no saving this one. Little Jimmy's family huddled over to one side, watching what little they had contribute to the bonfire. Some neighbors and friends took them in and gave them shelter.

Two nights later found Dad on duty once again, and so were most of the regulars in his circle: Herman, Crazy Ed, and The Kid were there, along with Joe Lloyds, Ed Burns, Ed Norris, and Buffy Thomas. They spent a few minutes in desultory conversation, for all of them knew The Sentry, and had come to regard him as sort of a mascot. He was not at his usual post during the day, according to the off-going duty shift, and even though they all knew that he was not burned or injured, they missed him. To add to the general mood, rumor had it that his father had gone on another drinking binge again.

My father was especially glum. He had been all set to surreptitiously deliver the wagon on the very night after Christmas Day, complete with a large ribbon and Jimmy's name on the card. That he would be calling at his house earlier and for a far different reason was the highest of tragic ironies.

Even now, it sat in the back of his station wagon, forlorn and with no purpose in life. He nodded his head in pointless agreement as Buffy repeated for the umpteenth time that at least no one in the family had been lost, and that some sister or cousin up near Park Street had taken them in until a new place could be found.

It was as he nodded that his eyes strayed, and caught hold of a small pile of unfinished toys still left by the door of the workshop. Most of them had been the "hard" ones too difficult to repair in time for delivery. But a few of them were simply dropped off too late to work on before the Salvation Army made its pick-up. Actually, there were more than a few.

He could see a baseball bat sticking up in its midst, and for sure the others didn't need too much fixing if they weren't splintered or completely broke. There was a doll off to one side, still sitting in a cradle that looked pristine except for a small gouge in its side. And Jimmy had a little sister, too...

It was a crazy idea. Twice in seven or eight seconds of thought, he pushed it down, but it bobbed right up again in his mind like some pesky cork, and Dad finally realized that it could never be sunk. Hell, they would have to work most of the night, even if he could convince them. Hell, for that matter it was well after Christmas anyway, and who ever thought of St. Nick or anyone else making a late delivery? And how could they do it? It was a crazy idea.

On the other hand, it could be damned good fun.

“Herman!” He blurted, “Do we have any baseballs?”

“Hell yes, Nails. You wanna go out and hit a few in the snow?”

“New ones, Herman, do we have any new ones?”

“Well yeah, or, hell I guess so. Jeez, Nails, I mean, we haven’t looked in the bag since October, you know? I guess we got one or two around, somewheres.”

“But what do you want ‘em for, Nellie?” Spoke up the Kid.

My sire pointed. “Do you see that bat sticking up over there?”

“For Gawd’s sake, Nellie, that’s a kid’s bat!”

“And that doll. Do you see that doll next to it?”

“Nails, what’s gotten into you? You feeling all right?”

“You damn fools! Don’t you see what I’m saying? Now come on over here with me. Come on, come on, dammit! Come along, and listen to what I have to say to you. Here’s my idea...”

The dour Cap was mildly distressed. Anything out of the ordinary tended to make him uneasy. On a cold night like this, with New Year’s Eve just around the corner, the usual thing for the louts under his command to do would be to huddle in the TV room before going to bed. The better to save up their energy for their annual debauchery. Yet tonight, the most of them were hard at labor in the workshop, hammering, sawing, and painting like demons were upon them. It was strange, very strange indeed.

His uneasiness was increased when Dad and the rest of the boys were now on their day shift rotation, a couple of days later, and had come to see him in his office. They wanted to borrow Engine One for a few minutes for a quick run into town.

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No, absolutely no, he had stated. When they said it would only be for a few minutes at most, he underlined it. Then they explained things to him.

The Cap pondered for a while. This time he was genuinely regretful, but he had to say no again. Unless there was a fire, there was no need for the trucks to roll. Nor should they. Ergo, they wouldn't. He killed their suggestion for "repairs" by stating the obvious about the tip-top shape of all the trucks there, and how all this might arouse the curiosity of the Chief, and they all knew they didn't want that.

The Cap pondered some more and puffed on his pipe a while longer. He sort of liked the little fellow, also. Suddenly, his brown eyes acquired a crafty twinkle. There was always gas, he told them.

Any organization that deals with emergencies subscribes to the policy of keeping its fuel tanks full at all times, be it a modern warship or your local volunteer fire company. Having plenty of gas on hand allows you to face the immediate future with a little bit more confidence, and the Haverhill Fire Department is no different.

The rest of the trucks at Essex Street all had full gauges, but it happened that Engine One and Rescue One had been to a car fire earlier that morning, up near the far end of River Street. True, it was only a few blocks, but well, there was no argument that some gas had been used. The gas pump was down at the Water street station. It would only take a few minutes. We'll take both, he told them.

"And it damned well better take only a few minutes," growled the Cap, "and we keep the radios on in case we be needed! Be that clear?"

So it was that the good citizens of Park Street saw one of the more unusual sights of the year. A pair of fire trucks came roaring up the boulevard with sirens blaring. Up on one of them, two burlap bags full of toys rested by the deck gun. And on the back of the leading truck itself, wearing fireman's boots and with helmet and raincoat close at hand, stood old St. Nick.

Astounded people and children on the sidewalk gaped in amazement and wonder as the figure sped by, all decked out in his crimson finest and puffing on a Meerschaum pipe, waving nonchalantly at all he saw. He had no stocking cap on, so his white beard and hair blew freely in the wind.

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Swiftly, the trucks pulled over and lurched to a stop in front of a gray, nondescript house on the corner. There was one final whine from the sirens, and Jolly St. Nick stepped off the running board of the lead truck to catch one of the hurled sacks. In full gear and helmet, one of the crewmen stepped off with the other sack, and they both strode up to the door. Throughout the entire United States, there was no one more surprised than the Sentry and his little sister as they confronted two giants of his dreams.

“Hello, Jimmy, I’m sorry I missed your house!” Boomed a stentorian voice, “but the smoke was too thick to see where to land! The reindeer all got confused, and I had to skip over!”

He clapped two red mittens on his shoulders. “But I’m glad I found you, even if I am a little late.” He picked up his little sister and held her high up in the air for a moment. “And you too, my little Missy!” He gave them each a candy cane, and then turned and boomed again with laughter as another fireman in full gear stepped off the truck and came up the walk, bearing on his shoulders a magnificent red wagon that shone in the winter sunlight.

Santa gave out with a mighty, “Ho-ho-ho!” Then he pointed with his pipe. “A little something extra from some other boys who never grow up!”

With one last, long, “Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas to all!” The two trucks roared away, around the corner, out of sight, and into a small legend that persists to this day.

If I was writing TV stories for a living, I would have ended matters here, but life is very seldom like TV and has fewer happy endings. Less than three weeks later, Dad was walking through downtown Haverhill, on an errand to pay some bills. As he passed by Mosie’s Pawn Shop, something in the front window caught his eye.

It was the little red wagon.

Firemen were ordinary men. But when the call came, they donned their gear and rode forth to fight an ancient foe. To many boys, they were the first real-life heroes they encountered. I was luckier. One was my dad.

Tales From the Cherokee Strip

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