

A Fireman's Christmas Eve

by Patrick Kendrick

(First Published in The Palm Beach Post, West Palm Beach, Florida 1990)

I'm standing in front of the house and though I'm still maybe 40 feet away, I can feel the intense heat coming from the flames. The house has probably been burning less than 10 minutes, but that hungry fire already has consumed about one-fourth of this old clapboard home, and undoubtedly a lot more of its memories.

I'm pulled out of my daze by a woman who runs up to me screaming, "They's still in there! Hurry! They's people in there!" She is the face of fear and is probably as frightened by my presence as by the fire. I'm decked out in my bunker gear, which still reeks of smoke from an earlier fire. I probably look and smell like a demon from hell.

I pull on my face mask and cinch up the rubber straps. As usual, they get caught in my hair and yank out a couple of clumps. I turn to the woman and tell her to get back, way back, across the street. With my helmet and Self Contained Breathing Apparatus on, I look and sound like Darth Vader. Perhaps it is that ominous countenance that encourages her to listen, and she scampers off into the crowd.

Before entering the building, my mind does a quick rewind, racing over the day's events and how I came to be here . . .

Christmas Eve, 1989. The busiest day (so far) in the history of the West Palm Beach Fire Department. By the luck of the draw and the three-platoon schedule, I get to work that day. All those people with time on the job get priority in picking their vacations. Naturally, they take the holidays so they can spend time with their families. Me? I don't have a wife or kids, so I don't fret if I have to work the holidays.

Only problem is, these guys on vacation are the officers who usually lead the crews. So when they're off, other people have to fill their shoes. "Step-ups" they call them, because they step up into the vacant position. That's where I come in. I'm usually on the medic truck, but they're really short-handed so they step me up on Engine-12, a 1,250-gallon-per-minute pumper.

At 8:05 that morning, our dispatcher announces that the city has no water. A main broke, or one of the big pumps quit. We're not sure but what we do know is this: If we have a big fire, we're up the creek without a paddle.

The guy stepped up as battalion chief looks at me. The water announcement seems to have made him a little nervous. He's a fine fire captain, has seen lots of action, but it's his first try as battalion chief, a job that requires you to tap dance while singing the national anthem and

performing brain surgery - on two people.

If I thought the battalion chief was nervous, it's nothing compared to me when I hear my first alarm of the day. I slide the pole and get my gear on, fumbling with the snaps on my gear and reminding myself it's time to switch to decaf. The first call turns out to be nothing. A false alarm set off at the Federal Building. No problem. Reset the panel. Get back in service.

We go to another alarm; this one a medical. The medics are busy, so we're using pumper crews to help out with the shootings, stabbings, overdoses, car wrecks and other holiday pastimes. We patch up a guy whose buddies are so glad that tomorrow's Christmas, they broke a bottle over his head. He's so drunk he doesn't seem to mind, but his wife would rather he didn't bleed all over the kitchen while she's trying to cook breakfast.

We go back to the Federal Building for another false alarm. We reset the system, again. The day goes by. More false alarms, more medical alarms. A dumpster fire: kids out of school having some fun. Then there's the paperwork. Tons of it. I'm thinking by the time I finish it, New Year's will have come and gone. The water system gets restored, so we're happy.

We finally settle in. It's around 10 p.m., and I'm considering going to bed early when we get dispatched to the house fire on Fifth Street. We all run to the window and, sure enough, we can see the smoke rising and the sky glowing that sickly orange just west of the train tracks. My crew will be the second company in. The first crew in, Engine 11, will start putting out the fire. We will go in with the team from Rescue 11.

When we get to the fire, I look my guys over. My driver is a friend I know I can count on. My hydrant man is another story. He's brand new and has never been to a real fire. I say a little prayer. I've seen a guy burned alive. His eyelids were burned off, eyes scorched white. Hair singed off. I don't want us to end up like that. The new boy's eyes are wide, and he falls in behind me like a shadow. That's good. I don't want to have to look for him.

We get to the front of the house, and fire and smoke are billowing out the windows. Engine 11 has mechanical problems; my driver rushes over to help and ends up getting stuck in that mess. We've got limited water and now I'm down to just me and the new guy, and suddenly I'm not too thrilled about going into this oversized oven.

The Rescue 11 crew gets a jump on us and goes in. My now-reduced crew prepares to enter the house. Engine 11 begins putting water on the fire, but it produces so much steam that, mixed with the smoke, you can't see your hand in front of your face. I tell the new guy to go get

us a ventilation fan and set it up. I make two decisions: I can't wait any longer, and I'll go in by myself. I know that second decision is not particularly bright, but then neither is going into a burning building. I hook up my air hose and go in, hoping the guys will catch up with me when they get a chance.

I do just like I was taught: Keep low. The temperature in the top of the room can exceed 1,700 degrees. If I stand up, my brains could get cooked before I even know I'm too hot. So, I'll just stay here on the floor where it's nice and cool, about 300 to 400 degrees, and hope my gear will protect me. The Nomex gear is good stuff, but it is heavy; it takes a lot of effort just to move in it, which causes me to work harder, which makes me use more air. I'll probably only have about a 10-minute supply.

I crawl around the perimeter of the room. Still unable to see, I'm feeling for victims. I fumble, bump into things and grope like a blind man. The search of the living room is complete, so I make my way down the hall, still crawling on my hands and knees. I find a door on the left. I peel a thick glove partially off to expose the back of my hand and place it against the door. The door is cool. That is, it feels like an exhaust pipe rather than the sun's surface. It's safe to go in.

I enter the room and the smoke is so thick, it's like someone threw a bale of cotton over my head. I can't see. I try to do a perimeter search, but there is so much furniture and junk that I can't move. I need to get a little fresh air in here so I can see. I can feel my ears baking. I make my way around the room, pounding on the wall, looking for a window and yelling, "Anybody in here? Fire Department!"

A glimpse of pale light catches my eye, and I move toward it figuring it might be a window. I trip over something on my way, and I find the window because my hand goes right through it. I knock the rest of the glass out with my elbow, and the smoke and heat begin to rush out. Within a minute, the room is beginning to clear. I wipe the steam condensation from my mask and shine my flashlight around the room. There are pictures on the wall and a dresser with clutter on top. There are piles of clothing and boxes of things. I shine my light across what little floor space there is, and that's when I see what I tripped over.

It looks like another pile of clothes, but as I inch over to it and feel it, I realize it is the buttocks of a man who has his head under the bed. When the smoke got too much for him, he must have gone to his hands and knees and tried to find fresh air by sticking his head under the bed.

I yell for help but the sound is lost in my mask. I grab the guy by the seat of his pants and pull him out. He is limp. I can't tell in the dark, in the smoke, whether he is alive, but I know he will not be for long. I have to get him out. I scoop him up, locking my arms around his chest and cradling his head against my shoulder. Hunched over and dragging this guy, who is every bit of 180 pounds, I make it out of the room. Breathing is getting tougher for me and at first I think it's because I'm exerting myself. But the truth dawns on me: I'm running low on air. No problem, yet. When you start running out of air, a bell on your breathing apparatus starts ringing, slowly at first, then it picks up its tempo the lower the air supply gets. I probably have plenty of time.

I'm clumsily making my way down the hall when I hear the first "ding." "Stay calm," I tell myself. If you panic, you'll use up more air. Another 20 or 30 feet, and you'll be out of this mess. Then the unexpected happens. Something is holding my victim. At first I think his feet are caught on something. I stop to free him, and I hear another "ding." Air is getting lower. "Get out," I say to myself. "Leave him. He's probably gone already." But I can't do it. That's because the Rescue 11 crew caught up with his dragging feet and were walking on him, but I do not know this at the time. I run my hands down to his feet and then Rescue 11 is all over me. I have no idea what is going on, and neither do they.

Evidently, Rescue 11 had made it into the bedroom in the rear of the house. They'd found a victim too, and they were coming out. Unfortunately, my victim and I are blocking the narrow hall, the only escape path. We're all tangled in a writhing, confused knot of desperation.

"Ding-ding." Air is lower. We all start pushing and yelling, but we can't understand each other. "DING! DING! DING! DING! . . . Ding . . . ding . . . ding . . ." I am out of air. I panic. When you think you are going to die, you get sudden strength. I push my victim off of me and grab one of the guys by the leg. He stops. Miraculously, a light comes beaming into the room, the smoke clears. They see me now. I jump up and grab my victim and make for the door. My mask is stuck to my face like a toilet plunger from trying to suck air out of it. I'm tripping and falling and trying to yell for help but have no air left to do so.

I'm getting dizzy, and I can feel overheated veins in my head threatening to burst. I continue dragging this guy, knowing as bad as I'm feeling, he's a lot worse. Suddenly, he gets lighter. One of my buddies has his feet. We carry the fellow another 10 feet to get him away from the smoke, and I have to set him down. I fall to my knees and rip off my helmet and mask.

I take a deep breath and catch some of the smoke that's coming off of the victim. His hair is singed from the fire, and that's what I breathed in.

I cough and hack so much I think I'll spit up my feet. My buddy calls a medic for my victim, though he's eyeing me as if I could use one. I lay my hands on the guy's chest but realize he's too far gone. He'd gotten so hot, his bodily fluids overheated and expanded. There's a puncture wound, like a tire blowout, on the side of his abdomen. All my efforts were for nothing.

The medic looks at me and shakes his head. "Forget it," he says. I nod my head and cough. "You don't look so good," he adds. He leads me to the pumper, sets me down on the tailboard and gives me oxygen. Then he's gone to help with the other victim. It was to no avail though. She died too.

Two hours later, after a hot shower and a couple of ice-cold Cokes, I feel 100 percent better. But not even three shampoos can remove that smoke smell. Before going home, I stopped at the house of a lady I was seeing then. She greets me at the door with a quick smile. She is a lovely sight, with a milk and honey complexion and eyes the color of blue porcelain. She gives me a kiss on the cheek and tells me I smell like smoke.

I plop down in an easy chair while the lady throws together a delicious breakfast of sausage, omelettes and home fries. After breakfast, she is cleaning up the kitchen, and I'm left alone. I stare at the Christmas tree and wonder whether my victim had family and what they're doing. I stare too long at one of the ornaments and, once more, I'm gazing into the victim's eyes. I close my eyes and try to erase the image. When I open them, the youngest of the lady's two girls is there. "Are you sick?" She asks, her little face pinched with concern. "No baby," I say, my voice cracking. "Just tired." She smiles, revealing a gap where her two front teeth are missing. Her hair is white-blond, and she has her mother's eyes. Her little arms go around my neck, and she hugs me hard. "Merry Christmas," she whispers, and plants a big, wet kiss on my cheek. I return the hug and gather strength from her embrace. "Merry Christmas," I whisper back.