

The Orange Glow

September 6th, 1985

I was a second-year Lieutenant, riding seat on Engine 10. We were running out of Station 2 for Captain Jack Pryor. Engine 10 was the only unit in the Department that was dispatched on all structure fires in the city. In that capacity, we functioned as what was known as a “*squad*.” In a sense, we were like a SWAT team in the police world.

On this day, we were the first arriving unit on a fire in a second story apartment way up north on Independence Parkway. There were just the three of us. Elliott was driving and my rookie rode backwards right behind me in the rear jump seat. As we pulled in the parking lot, I could see there was smoke pulsing out from the door frame of Apartment 201. As I hit the ground, I told the rook to pull line 2, one of our big two-inch pre-connects. As he went about that, Elliott was pulling a section of 3-inch out of the hose bed to stretch over to a hydrant about thirty feet across the parking lot.

I pulled my air pack case out of the compartment just aft of the jump seats. I laid it on the asphalt, opened it up, and reached through the shoulder straps and grabbed the heavy yellow steel bottle with both hands. In one smooth motion, I lifted it up and over my head and let go of it so it could drop down into place on my back. As I cinched up the shoulder straps, and pulled the waist strap tight, I glanced again at the door of 201. The smoke was puffing with about the same intensity as it had when I first looked.

That was a good sign. It told me that the fire pressure inside was relatively stable and not intensifying.

The rookie had the line stretched to the foot of the stairs and was waiting for me. He was a little faster than me getting his air going because his air pack was carried in a rack that served as the back rest of his jump seat. So, all he had to do before disembarking was poke his arms through the straps, cinch them up, and then he was packed out and ready for action. He had probably done that before we even left the station.

Elliott pulled the lever for Number 2 discharge and as I strode toward the rookie, I saw the water hammer traveling through the hose as it made its way to the nozzle the rookie was holding. He would feel a jolt when the water arrived. I asked the kid if he was ready. I could see his eyes through the glass plate of his mask. He nodded and I took the nozzle from him and together, we humped the hose up the stairs. 201 was right at the top. We paused briefly at the door. I checked and it was locked. I let go of the nozzle long enough to rear back and kick the door hard, right at the point where the deadbolt connected to the door frame. As usual, one kick did the trick and the door swung open. In those days, those cheap-assed apartment door frames weren't all that strong.

A blast of hot smoke puffed out and surrounded us. We got down on our knees and made our way inside. Visibility was near zero, as the fire had been cooking for at least ten or fifteen minutes, maybe a little more. Once inside, I made a wrong turn, and we ran into the dining table. There was a bit of a white glow in the smoke immediately overhead. I stood up and got a better look. It was a chandelier that hung from the ceiling. I took note that the air was only mildly hotter standing up than it was when I was on my knees.

That, too, was another good sign.

We moved in a different direction, away from both the front door and the kitchen. Fortunately, that got us into a hallway. With my flashlight, I was just able to make out the base molding and the carpet. Carpet was good. That meant we were probably closer to the bedroom. When we were in the kitchen alcove, the floor was hard tile. I knew the only other tile floors we might encounter would be in the bathroom or a laundry room. I followed the carpet as I figured our fire would be in a bedroom.

As we advanced down the hall, I could begin to see the faint orange glow ahead of us. We moved toward it. As we got closer, the glow intensified and took on a more vivid and familiar reddish color. That told me we were almost within striking distance of the seat of the fire. A few more feet and we came to the open door of the bedroom. I paused there and told the rookie to let go of the hose and move up beside me so he could look in the door, too.

As he came up and looked into the room, he said, “Wow!!”

Roger that. The fire was awesome and beautiful. By the light of the flames, we could see that there was a large chest of drawers and some clothing burning brightly. The flames crawled rapidly up the wall and as they hit the ceiling, they were diverted towards the doorway where we crouched. We could see the individual tongues of flame as they moved from the dresser upwards and then horizontally as they came for us. In that setting, a fire seems almost alive. It is like a moving, living entity that seeks a way out destroying all that it touches along its path. The flames had reached our doorway and were a scant three or four feet over our heads as they traveled toward the open front door where they sought freedom from the confines of the bedroom and more importantly, oxygen. When we had opened the front door, we gave new life to a blaze that had been stagnant from a lack of the oxygen that it craved.

I had delayed opening the nozzle so the rookie could learn a bit more about our trade.

Had there been any indications of living creatures in the apartment, I would have opened the nozzle as soon as we found the hallway, but in this case, I deemed we had a little time to appreciate the wonders and the power of our worthy adversary.

I opened the nozzle on power cone setting and flowed water for less than ten seconds. I directed it first on the furniture, then swirled it around quickly to bounce the water off the ceiling in order to hit everything in the room. The world became black. Hot and steamy. Black and evil as the gates of hell, but eerily silent, quiet as a church mouse.

We said not a word nor made a sound as the steam from our water permeated the room and removed the heat that the flames had thrived on. As we came out of our reverie, I told the rookie to find a window and open it. The law required that every bedroom had either a door or window to the outside. In the Plano of those days, there would not be a door to the outside from a bedroom in a modestly priced apartment complex.

When the smoke had subsided enough for me to be sure there was no extension into the attic or an adjacent apartment, I got on the horn. "Engine 10 to dispatch. Fire's under control."

At those words, any units still enroute would slow down to normal traffic speed but would continue on to our scene. We had been on-scene less than five minutes, but probably there were some first alarm units in the parking lot waiting to hear something from me.

We left the nozzle in place and crawled back down the hose to the fresh outdoors. We were met by a crew from Ladder 1. They had fans and pike poles and soon set about pulling sheetrock and doing overhaul.

As I was shucking my air pack, a cop came up to me and said, "Wow! Man, that was awesome!! When I saw you go in that door with all that smoke and fire, I almost fainted. I wouldn't do that in a million years!"

I just chuckled and wandered off looking for a coke or a Dr. Pepper. If that officer thought that was really something, he should have been at the Creekwood fire when Tommy Baker got his dick knocked in the dirt by the heating unit that fell out of the attic.

Now, that one was a real fire!