

ROOKIE ON A ROOF ROPE

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*All that stood between the young fireman and death
was a thin manila rope.*

The coil of tough new manila is 150 feet long, 13/16 of an inch thick. The department calls them "roof ropes" and they have many uses. I hadn't seen everything that could be done with a roof rope yet because I'd only been in for a couple of years and I was still what they call a "Johnny." That's the rookie of the outfit, the junior member, the one who gets all the disagreeable jobs to do but seldom gets to grab for any glory. At this moment, however, I had a roof rope tied neatly around my legs and shoulders and I was being lowered into a narrow concrete shaft with a roaring fire on one side and what appeared to be a madman running around at the bottom.

I suppose I knew that I would have to do this sort of thing when I decided to

join the New York City Fire Department. You read about rope rescues in the papers every so often, and in my basic-training school they had demonstrated how it should be done. The mechanics of the thing are simple enough; the rope is strong and so are the two men who are lowering you down. But at this moment I could see that there were other factors to be considered. Would the fire explode through those windows below me and turn the shaft into a chimney that I'd never get out of? And would that guy at the bottom do what he was supposed to do when I got down to saving his life?

The fire was in a lawn-furniture factory that took up the whole block between River and Exterior streets in the

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South Bronx. I was with my first company, 17 Truck, which had its firehouse at 143rd Street between Alexander and Willis avenues. The alarm had come in a little after nine that morning, and even before we got to the scene in the ladder truck we could see heavy clouds of smoke rising in the distance.

We pulled up in front of the building as workers from the factory stumbled out onto the street, coughing and crying. The furniture this company made used a lot of plastic and the stuff was burning now like fuel oil. As soon as our rig stopped rolling, the captain started giving orders, sending a couple of men into the building, a couple more to the roof, and then he told me and a couple of others to come with him. Fire Department officers often take the rookie along with them when working a fire. It gives the younger man a chance to learn and may also keep him out of dangerous spots where he could lose his life as a result of inexperience.

The factory was on a slope. The front, on River Street, was four or five stories high, but the back, on Exterior Street, had two floors cut into the slope. The captain and I ran up the hill at the side of the building and then around the back. When we got there we found a steel grating in the sidewalk, and when we looked down we were actually looking down a deep shaft, or well. We

could see the windows in the back wall of the building, and through them smoke was rising up the shaft, while the fire inside illuminated its depths.

At the bottom of the well, running back and forth like a caged animal in a zoo pit, was a man. He was screaming and his voice echoed against the walls as if it were coming out of a tomb. We couldn't understand what he was saying, but the words didn't matter. The meaning was clear: Get me out of here; I don't want to die! He had apparently been at the back of the factory when the fire exploded and he had escaped through one of the rear windows—only to find himself trapped. He couldn't go back where he came from, but he was twenty-four feet below street level and looking up at the bars of the steel grating above him.

The first thing we tried to do was lift the grating out of the sidewalk, but it was cemented in. While two of the firemen went to work on this problem with the Halligan tools¹ and axes, the captain sent me back to the truck for the roof rope. At the front of the building the street was now full of fire apparatus, the police were holding people back, and firemen were stretching hoses in every direction. Somebody said they'd already taken two dead bodies out.

When I got back to the captain with

¹ Halligan tool, a heavy metal bar with prongs used as a lever.

the rope, he ordered me to hitch up with the kind of knot that forms a sort of bo's'n's chair,² and I knew then that I was the one chosen to go down into the hole. I wasn't a big man by fire department standards—five-foot-ten and about 165 pounds—a good size for lowering into tight places.

I remember how the rope felt where it was tied around me and how the two men who were going to lower me checked the hitch and the knots with quick professional tugs. How I admired those guys at that moment. They knew what they were doing. They were pros. No excitement, just deliberate, businesslike moves. It sure made me feel better about dangling on the other end of the rope.

The captain said, "When you get down there, get out of the rope, put the man into it, and we'll haul him out. Then we'll pull you out."

It seemed a simple enough plan. I stepped to the edge of the opening where the grating had been removed, braced my feet against the inner wall, took a good grip on the rope and nodded that I was ready. The firemen started paying out the rope as the captain watched.

It wasn't a very quick descent because they were being very careful in

2. *bo's'n's chair*, boatswain's chair (bō'sn). A seat made by tying a short plank to ropes and used by sailors and others when working on the masts or sides of a ship, or on the exterior of buildings.

letting out rope. For the first few feet there didn't seem to be any hurry anyway; some smoke was coming up, but not too much heat. The windows still hadn't burst, and as long as they held, I'd probably be all right. But the man below must have thought he was going to get roasted alive any minute the way he was tearing back and forth. The sight of me coming down didn't seem to calm him at all.

When I got level with the first window and looked in, I could see why. Inside the factory the fire was burning furiously and the heat came through the glass like an oven. I thought I could see safety wires in the glass, which would explain why it hadn't popped already, but I couldn't remember how much heat that sort of glass could stand. If it ever let go, a flue of fire was going to come out at us for sure. The heat was worse now, but I was breathing okay because there was still oxygen down here. If the fire broke through, it would consume that oxygen, and that would be another problem.

I looked up at the slit of sky above me and the silhouettes of the firemen leaning over the edge, holding my life in their hands. My boots scuffed against the wall. I was nearly down now and I was beginning to think of what to do next. Then, just as my feet touched, the man at the bottom lunged at me, screaming and cursing. He knocked me

down, tangling me in the rope, and before I could get to my feet, he was on his way up, hand over hand, clawing his way to freedom. I could see him swaying above me and I could see the men from 17 Truck above that. For a minute I was afraid they might start pulling the man up with me still tangled in the end of the rope. I got out of the hitch as quickly as I could, then just stood there, no longer connected to the outside world, not even by 13/16 of an inch of manila rope. It was a lonely feeling, twenty-four feet down and everything around me a molten orange, the heat throbbing through the glass.

Somehow, out of sheer panic I guess, the man got to the top and disappeared over the edge. Then the rope came spilling down to me again and I was hauled up in one long, beautiful motion, leaving the fiery windowns and the dirty concrete tomb behind. When I got to the surface I didn't care if the fire was still burning or not, I was so relieved to have completed my part of the job. The March morning felt cold again, but the backslaps from my buddies felt better than warmth. They were approval and congratulation. I'd done a great job, they said. I'd probably saved a life.

Where was the man I saved, I wanted

to know. He took off like a shot, they told me. Just came out of the hole, dropped the rope and ran up the street and never looked back. Well, I thought, he's a citizen of the city of New York and I suppose he's got a right to expect his life to be saved, but I thought he could have waited until he knew whether I was going to make it too!

The captain asked me if I had been scared when I went down, and I said that I had been, a little, but had finally decided that he and the other firemen knew what they were doing up there and then I'd put the fear out of my mind. The captain seemed pleased by that and said he was going to write me up for a service commendation for what I did. I thought that was fine, of course, but what meant more to me was the approval of those veteran firemen. They seemed like gods to me. I thanked them for what they did and I think I even shook their hands, I was so excited.

I came back to the firehouse full of pride. The company rookie had done a good job. Mine was the only rescue that was made in that fire; everyone else had got out under his own power. Captain Klepper kept his word and recommended me for an honor, which turned out to be what we call a Class A. It's no big deal, but it was my first. It was a beginning.