

# **ORANGE PEEL**

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## **UNDERSTAND THIS TALE**

The alarm rang at 0600. Tom normally got up at this time. He kissed his wife while she slept and checked the kids. He put on his running shoes and headed off to the park that was near the station. He liked to run before work because he knew that fitness was one of the best tools in becoming a good firefighter. Although Tom was married with children, he had a secret love affair...with the fire service. He truly loved his job and believed that it was what he was meant to do.

This attitude towards his job was exemplified in everything he did. Although shift change was at 0800 hours, he would arrive by 0730 so to relieve the off going crew and save them from that "end of shift" call. He checked the board to see what his riding assignment was. He checked all of his equipment. He checked his nozzles. He checked to see if the off going crew had any information to pass on. He completed his housework diligently and would then help any of his crewmembers with theirs. His crew meant a lot to him. They had been together for a while and they were his second family.

His pride in his department could not be questioned but it was his company pride that he loved to show.

Tom and his crew loved to train. They trained not because they had to but because they wanted to. They believed that just because the fire went out it didn't mean that they had done a good job. Training was a means of nearing their goal of the perfectly run fire. Every fire was another chance to reach this goal, a goal they would never reach. They would not want to. Even the smallest mistake was a new training goal, to eliminate it from the next fire.

It was 1230 and lunch was being served when they heard the bells. Dispatch called out a box alarm for a structure fire. Tom's engine would be first due. He was the backup firefighter today, which meant that he carried the irons and was in charge of light forcible entry and feeding hose for the nozzle team (the captain and the nozzle firefighter). But there was an additional report that an elderly woman was possible trapped inside the structure. At this point, Tom's main job changed to searching the structure for any possible victims. When they arrived they found a two story, single family dwelling with heavy fire showing out of the downstairs windows.

The fire was aggressively impinging on the upstairs windows. Tom got off the rig and immediately entered the dwelling. Fire was coming from the rear of the structure and was spreading forward quickly. He moved up the stairs and began his search, knowing that the bedrooms were probably upstairs. Meanwhile, the nozzle team began knocking down the fire. They knew that Tom was upstairs and they would die on that line before backing out and leaving those stairs unprotected. Tom advanced down the hall towards the rear of the structure. Although there was no fire, conditions were deteriorating due to high heat and little visibility. He searched the entire upstairs when his low air alarm started ringing. He knew that he had only a few minutes before he would run out of air. He still had not found the elderly woman. He decided that he could make one more quick look and still have enough time to get out. Unfortunately he got disorientated. His alarm was still ringing. His air was getting harder to take in and he was starting to feel hypoxic.

Panic was on the surface but not quite taking over. He could not believe that this was happening to him. He stopped crawling because he was totally lost. He could neither see nor hear anything. As he spent his last few moments of consciousness he was content that he had lived a good life doing what he loved. He knew that his Brothers would take care of his family. He was not afraid of dying. He was dying a Brother. He closed his eyes. Then next thing he remembers was his partner saying, “Hold on Tom, we got you, we got you.” He was saved.....

The alarm ran at 0720. Tom knew that he had enough time to grab a cup of coffee and still make it by 0800, which was when shift change was. When he got to the station it was empty. The off going crew must have caught an end of shift call. Tom went to the kitchen table, sat down, and grabbed another cup of coffee and the paper. At 0820 the engine returned and they met him at the kitchen table. They told Tom that there was nothing new to report and took their gear off the rig. Tom’s crew had already put their gear on the rig and was talking about the day’s activities. Training with one of the neighboring stations was going to be a priority today. Tom was not very keen on training since he knew that he was a pretty good fireman and could do the job. He considered those who liked to train and talk about fire fighting to be “flappers.” It was 0910 and Tom was putting his gear on the rig when the alarm bell sounded. It was an automatic alarm bell at one of the commercial buildings in his engine’s first due. They received this alarm frequently so Tom did not even bother to put his coat on. He knew that it was going to be a false alarm. It turned out to be a system malfunction, just as Tom suspected. He could tell the difference between “bells and smells” and the real thing.

They returned to the firehouse and started in on housework. Tom went about housework half-heartedly. He always did what was expected of him but not much more. Yesterday’s crew had done a great job so he thought that he did not need to try. Besides they would be back tomorrow and could do a great job again. He finished his housework and found his favorite recliner. He was in the middle of this very interesting novel about the civil war and wanted to get back to it. The rest of his crew finished their housework and returned to the kitchen to talk about cooking duties. Tom knew that he had just cooked so he excused himself from that talk.

It was 1230 and lunch was being served when the alarm bell rang again. Dispatch called out a box alarm for a structure fire. Tom knew that this was going to be a false alarm also, but he put on his coat just the same.

About thirty seconds out they got an update from dispatch that they had a working fire with an elderly woman possibly trapped inside. Now Tom began to panic. He had guessed wrong and scrambled to get his safety gear on. He had to ask his partner if he was nozzle or backup because he had forgotten to check the board. He was backup, which meant that he had to go start a search for that elderly woman. They arrived at a two story single family dwelling with heavy fire from the downstairs windows. Tom entered the dwelling started his search in the living room. Fire was advancing quickly down the hall towards him, which made him shorten his search. As the nozzle team advanced down the hall Tom made his way upstairs. Conditions were deteriorating due to high heat and low visibility. He became confused as to where to continue his search. He could not remember how they had drilled on searching upper floors because he never really paid attention. He took off down the hall, passing a bedroom, when his low air alarm started sounding. He knew he was low on air and his panic grew. Panic caused him to breathe quicker as his heart raced out of control. He had lost his way and instead of turning back down the hall towards the stairs, he went into a bedroom. His alarm was still ringing. His air was getting harder to take in and he was starting to feel hypoxic. Panic had completely taken over. He could not believe that this was happening to him. He tried to get up and run out but the heat drove him back to the ground and stole his last few breaths. His last thoughts were of regret. If only he had taken the job more seriously, maybe he could have gotten out alive. He closed his eyes.

The next thing Tom remembers was his partner saying, “Hold on Tom, we got you, we got you.” He was saved.

Tom was saved not because he was or wasn't a good fireman. Tom was saved because he was a Brother. Brotherhood looks beyond whether you're a good fireman when it comes to life or death. Although both Toms ended up in the same bad situation and both were saved, they got there by different means. The first Tom was content that he had lived a good life and had done all he could of to be a good fireman. He realized that sometimes things like this happen to good fireman. The second Tom was regretful of his career wishing he had done more to prepare for this day. Both were fortunate to have Brothers who cared about preserving life. A Brother's life. That is why the fire service is so unique. Everyday we go to work with people we like and some we might not care for. But when the bell hits we are all in the same family and we see to it that everybody goes home. Together. We are the fire service. Together. We are the Brotherhood.