

MAY 10, 1982. The afternoon drill session is on Engine 1 operations, so at one o'clock Johnny drives the pumper out of its bay and parks it on the access road. Everyone reviews the pump controls, pressures, hand signals, radio, but for me it's all new and confusing since I haven't had even basic classroom instruction. As each man goes through various scenarios I begin to understand which gauge shows what, what handle opens which valve, and what different water pressures are needed. As the drill proceeds I am racing to cram all this knowledge into my head; I'm excited to be learning something entirely new and I find I want to learn more, a lot more.

I'm taking notes like crazy when Johnny appears beside me and says, "Common, we can play with the booster line." He hands me a pair of gloves that are too big, but I'm so thrilled to have a chance to "be on the tip," that I wouldn't care if my hands were wrapped in burlap bags.

We take a good length of the booster line, which is on a reel above the hose bed, and bring it close to the firefighters' parking lot so we don't spray directly into the street, and with me holding the nozzle, Johnny opens the valve for the booster line, and returns to my side.

"Okay, here's what you're going to do," he says, and with his hand atop mine, he guides me in opening the nozzle. I'm so excited I want to jump up and down and shout how happy I am to be doing this, but I don't because all of a sudden I have a water stream to manage. The stream hits Tom Day's pickup truck broadside with a giant *splat!* Water ricochets off the truck bed and divides into separate streams that arch into the truck bed, the tall bushes that hide the parking lot from the sidewalk, and against the watch office window. I lower the nozzle so water only shoots underneath Tom's truck.

For the next twenty minutes, Johnny directs me through opening and closing the nozzle, aiming high and aiming low until handling the smaller hose and nozzle becomes almost automatic. Then drill time is over. I'm not ready to stop, but everyone else is. Everything is stowed and Johnny backs Engine 1 into its bay. We all follow the pumper inside, everyone talking, except for me.

I am so pumped up by what I've just practiced, something that could actually save a life, that I want to scream with exultation. I have now done something that Ralph hasn't and probably never will do. He's so good at everything he tries—the first time he tries it—that I have always been discouraged from trying new things, but now I'm thinking, watch out mister, because I'm going to be better at this firefighting business than you ever could be. That does not take into account, I muse belatedly, that Ralph wouldn't even be interested in being a firefighter. It doesn't matter. I won't even bother telling him about my accomplishment.