

## Hot Spots

It was a long, trying recovery. The loss of my leg, below the knee, paled in comparison to the first, second and third degree burns over 40% of my body. These are the kind of injuries that drive a man to the extremes of despair and pain. The kind that give a deeper, richer perspective on life and faith. Those endless days of torment and burning pain. The months spent in the Burn Center would be etched upon my mind forever. But that is over now. I had beaten the odds and progressed until my doctors had given me the ok to continue my recovery at home.

The cards, flowers and mementos continued to trickle in from my friends, relatives and church. They even stopped by now and again. I was glad to see them. But they were constant reminders of a job and a life I could never have again. The life of a firefighter. Sure, I was still a part of the department, in an honorary status, and was more than welcome at any function. But my heart pined for the thrill and the rush of responding and working the fire, every time the alarm sounded.

Aside from my wife Renee, my most frequent visitor was my best friend Buck. Buck had been my back up that morning when the floor burned through and collapsed beneath me. Buck also braved it all to go back in and pull me out. We had both joined the volunteer department together seven years back. Both of us had taken the challenge and we've seen our fair share of 'jobs,' as fires are referred to in the fire service. We loved the job and the thrill and we got careless and stayed in too long. The reports heroized us, but we both knew better. It was just a case of wrong place, right time that spared Buck and took me.

Once I got home, Buck would visit and bring his dog with him. A six-month-old Dalmatian named Sparky. A true fireman's dog with a fitting fire dog name. Buck had gotten Sparky when he was little more than a month old, a month before the accident. He was a fine young puppy with whom I never tired of playing. And neither did he. Buck had told me that Sparky had been looking for me while I was in the hospital, and I looked forward to the stories and pictures he would bring in of the spotted dog.

Things were going well in the months to come. The fire department and community honored me with the Fireman's Medal of Valor and Buck with a medal for Heroism. I went back to school at a local Community College on a full scholarship and began a new career in Business Accounting and Finance. I was starting to realize that being in a wheel chair did not have to keep me from what I enjoy doing. I slowly reached out through friends and support groups, who first helped me to cope, then helped me to enjoy life again. Renee and I had even begun saving money for a prosthetic leg. The fire department even got involved by sponsoring a few fund raising events with much of the donations going to the "Wooden Leg" Fund. It was all in fun and by Christmas we had my new leg in hand. I found it under the tree that Christmas morning, wrapped in a bow with a tag that read, "Merry Christmas, from Santa."

The prosthetic leg was a Godsend. It was almost as if I had never lost my biological limb. After a few months of rehabilitation I was walking tall again. Just in time for the warmer weather of spring. Even Sparky was elated. His old friend was back and out of that wheelie thing. I'll never take the simple act of walking for granted again. It was the perfect culmination of the year's time that was quickly drawing near.

I was thinking just that when my professor interrupted my thoughts. Immediately I became embarrassed for daydreaming in class, but the look of concern in her eyes belied something else. "Mr. Rochell," she said in forced even tones, "The Dean needs to see you in his office right now. I think you should take your books and such with you. There's no telling how long you'll be."

Needless to say, I was a little confused and concerned. I hadn't brought much with me today, due to the rainy weather, so it took me little time to gather my things and make my way to the Dean's Office. When I got there, the look the receptionist gave me was very much like the one my professor had given me. "What is going on?" I thought. She stood and waved me in, "Dr. Thomas is expecting you. Please go right in."

I entered the office to see the Dean and a Police Detective from a township nearby rise quickly to their feet. The detective clued me off first. He was from a municipality that Renee travels through on her way to and from work. Inside my head, I began to run down the possibilities. Car trouble wouldn't bring a detective in from out of town to see me. It must be an accident of some kind. "Renee must have been hurt!" my mind cried out. "She's dead Mr. Rochell." The voice was not from my head. Then I realized that the Dean was standing in front of me. That same look in his eyes as well. "I'm so very sorry sir." He said compassionately, "The Detective here has come to take you to the hospital."

"My condolences, Mr. Rochell," the detective took over, "We need you to come down and help us take care of a few things."

I wanted to collapse. To burst out right there. To curse the world for this cruel trick. But now was not the time. My mind clicked over and became numb to the emotions building inside me. There would be a time for that, later. Years of male patterning took control and I followed the detective quietly out of the office.

A year to the day after my life was saved I buried her.

My life was again thrown into a maelstrom of pain and despair.

What had given me the strength to carry on during my ordeal of a year ago, was now gone. My wonderful, newfound life and my plans for it became meaningless. My thoughts became dark and dangerous, and soon even my friends kept their distance. My family would call, but the conversations were often short and to the point. The only thing that caused even the remotest stirring of life within me was when that fire alarm went off.

It had been a month since her passing. I hadn't returned to work since, though the messages on the machine let me know that it would be there when I wanted it. The bills were still piling up and the disability checks barely covered my food costs. I was in danger of losing it all, the house, the car, everything. I didn't care. And it seemed no one else did either.

The over due statements and creditor notices began to pile up over the next few weeks. At the time I hadn't realized that Renee hadn't paid the bills for the month that she had died. The stink in the house reminded me that it was trash day, so I loaded up the bag with all the cursed notices and made my way out the back door to drop it at the curb. I stopped, half way down the walk, as I noticed the Dalmatian standing there looking at me.

It was Sparky, and he had come prepared to cheer me up. He had his ball in his mouth. He dropped it to the ground and let it bounce and roll to a stop. Then he gave me the most endearing smiles he could muster along with a hopeful look. But I was not in the mood for it, or him or anything else.

"Go home dog!" I yelled, waving my free arm, "I'm not in the mood for games!" I started walking again, toward the back alley. Toward Sparky. He stood his ground and just looked at me. Almost pleading, now that I think of it.

I was right in front of him. He had to be able to sense my vexation. But the brave dog just stood there. Watching me.

I pointed right at him and yelled, "Go home dog!!" That's when things got fuzzy. Time appeared to run in slow motion. As I pointed and yelled, he brought his muzzle up and bit my hand. I was so shocked. I pulled my hand back to protect it from another attack. I was infuriated! Here was a dog I had played with and shown affection to, and it had bit me. I readied myself to kick the beast, but when I looked to find my target, he was gone.

I was still shocked and a little shaken. Did Sparky have rabies? I reached for a napkin to soak up the blood oozing from the one spot where he had actually broken the skin. Rinsing it off, I could see that it was not as bad as I had believed. The blood clotted soon afterwards and I counted myself lucky that Spark had shown more restraint than I had. And that gave me something to think about other than my sorry life.

It was on my mind the whole day. I began to wish I hadn't acted so badly toward him. I wanted him to come back. I needed him to come back. I was ready to play now. The whole scene played itself over and over again in my mind. Tearing me apart inside. Finally I fell to my knees and wept for the first time since I learned of my wife's death. A dog released months of pent up emotions. God does work in mysterious ways. I don't know for how long I cried, but it must have exhausted me, for I woke up a good 6 hours later in a dark house.

It was late evening. Another day wasted in self-pity. But it would be my last. Tomorrow I will fight again to regain the life I had. I will reach out again and hope my friends would be there to support and encourage me, and the first friend I am going to see will be good ol' Sparky. As I thought of that dog I became aware of my hand, still throbbing lightly. It was a good pain. An awakening pain. A welcome pain. A quick dinner and then to bed, with the hope of a new tomorrow.

Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep!

"Attention Station 49 firemen! You have a report of a structure fire at 118 Locust Way!

Repeat! You have a reported structure fire at 118 Locust Way! Police are in route."

My mind registered the alarm, but my body did not respond. I remained in a dreamlike state, listening to the events unfold and envisioning them in my dreams. My hand began to throb harder, as the excitement set my heart beating faster. The throbbing began to slowly course up my arm, passing the elbow and proceeding to and across my shoulders. As the boiling of the blood in my veins lead the way, it left in its wake a tingling feeling as if great energies were at work within me.

The radio squawked to life again.

"Dispatch from Unit 49-C1. This unit is in service to 118 Locust Way!"

"Unit 49-C1 from Dispatch. Affirmative."

The pounding of blood within my body reached my heart and my chest heaved with the sheer power that was unleashed instantly into every extent of my body. It shook me out of my sleep and the room was lit with a bright white light. I flinched away from its brightness and instinctively brought my arm up to cover my eyes. But instead of seeing the grafted flesh of my arm, I saw instead a thin, white furred leg, covered with intermittent black spots. I watched in shock as my nose and jaw began to push forward. Short strands of white fur began to sprout and grow out of every pore. Then the colors faded from my visual spectrum and the room began to grow around me. I was becoming a Dalmatian. I became conscious of new sounds and overwhelmed by the scent of things in the room. Immediately I regretted not taking better care of this place and myself.

The radio blared to life startling me, and I moved for the first time in more than a year on natural limbs.

"Dispatch from Engine 1. This unit is in service with a crew of 4 to 118 Locust Way!"

"Engine 1 from Dispatch. Affirmative."

"All units responding to 118 Locust Street. Police on scene report a confirmed structure fire at the rear of the house, with entrapment!"

"Dispatch from Unit 49-C1. On location at 118 Locust Way! Unit 49-C1 to all responding fire units. Expedite! Dispatch; please signal a second alarm at this location. Command is opposite 118 Locust Way."

"Dispatch from Truck 1. This unit is in service with a crew of 3 to 118 Locust Way!"

"Dispatch from EMS 1. This unit is in service to 118 Locust Way!"

"Dispatch to all responding units to 118 Locust Way. Switch to Fire Ground 3."

The joy of movement and the excitement of the fire sent me running to the door. Something important was happening and I felt an urge to be there. It looked as if I had forgotten to shut the front door again. A running leap took me up and through the screening in the outside door and onto the front walk. The sounds of sirens filled the air. The call was only a few blocks away from here. The sound of a diesel engine was becoming louder and then the blaring of a siren overpowered it. Looking toward the sound I was rewarded to see the ladder truck turn quickly onto my street. Lights, sirens, the roar of the engine, the squawk of the radio, all these things I was taking in, and my excitement was building. Then I heard something else above the clamor. Something I understood yet knew I shouldn't have. As the truck neared I saw it. Another Dalmatian, running alongside the ladder truck, just like in days gone by.

"Whoo hoooo!" the Dalmatian howled, "Let's go!"

It was Sparky. There was no mistaking it. Boy was Buck gonna be mad. But I wasn't concerned with that right now. His howls had moved something within me. Pulling at me. Before I knew it I was racing across the lawns on an intercept course to my friend Sparky.

As I caught up with him, we looked at each other and bayed out our joy in unison as we rounded the corner and saw the fire scene.

The other fire engine was just beyond the building and men were scurrying around it, pulling hoses and grabbing equipment. Flames were burning out of the upper windows and the crackling of burning wood was like music in my ears. Other people were standing around watching in stunned amazement. The smoke was thick and acrid. I was so engrossed in the scene before me; I forgot for a moment the change that had come over me until Sparky spoke again.

"Hey!" He woofed, "Are you feeling better?" His eyes and scent showed pleasure.

"I think so." I barked, "Did you do this to me?" I looked at him questioningly

"Yes." Sparky gave a short bark.

"Why?" I yipped.

Sparky tilted his head like he usually did when he was confused, then replied simply, "Would you

rather I had not?" He smelled of concern.

This was a question I had to think about. Then I heard the men and their tone was one of concern. I heard a lady and she sounded fearful. Then her scent hit me. It reeked of fear. I moved closer, to hear better what they said.

As I neared the house, I heard many things, all of which were barely registering. One was Sparky barking questioningly, "Hey, we can't get too close. My master will be mad if he sees me." Another was the firemen and the woman. "We haven't been able to locate your daughter ma'am." The chief told her and then asked, "Does she have any favorite hiding or play areas we might not know about?" She just shook her head, unable to think or comprehend what was happening around her. And the last sound, and the faintest, was a feeble cough and plea for help.

It was this last sound that I fixed my concentration on and I burst forward toward the fire at a full run. I had to find that girl. Firemen turned and watched me. Sparky barked loudly behind me. The chief yelled, "Stop that dog!" Then I charged into the gray darkness of the fire building.

Acrid smoke assaulted my nostrils. The heat was oppressive and the fire crackled noisily. I crouched down, head and belly to the floor and listened for the weak cough or call for help. Then I heard it, deeper into the house, above and to the right. I smelt for water and found the hose line leading to the team of firemen upstairs. I followed it up the stairs and at the top the hose turned to the left. It was very hot here and the muffled shouts of the firemen fighting the fire could be heard to the left. I turned to the right and left the hose behind me. I crawled forward on my belly and into a larger room. I couldn't see that it was bigger; I knew it was larger because things sounded different here. I heard the cough again, clearer. I took a chance and sniffed, but the smoke foiled any attempts I made to pick up a scent. So I crawled toward the sound and came up against a wall and a small door. I listened at the door and was rewarded to hear another series of coughs from beyond it. I stood up and scratched at the door and began barking my head off.

The second group of firemen was not far behind me, being sent in to find a little girl and now a stupid dog. They heard the barking and crawled my way. Light played across the smoke then landed on me. I began to scratch frantically at the little door in the wall. Then the girl cried out again, "Help me!"

A fireman grabbed me and another moved forward to open the door and whisk a little girl from beyond it. Then we were carried quickly from the house. The fresh, cool air felt great, but aggravated my smoke saturated lungs and I began to cough and sneeze. The medical persons immediately began to tend to the girl, who was also coughing, with oxygen. The fireman who was carrying me put me down and took off his breathing mask. It was Buck. My friend had saved me again. Sparky came bounding over as well.

He called for another medical person to bring another bottle of oxygen. The medic hesitated for a moment but then climbed into the ambulance. He returned with a bottle of oxygen and a small mask, which he held up to my muzzle. The hissing sound spooked me but the cool fresh oxygen helped to cure my coughing.

Buck removed the mask after a while and started looking me over for a collar or ID.

"Now whom do you belong to?" He asked, not expecting an answer.

Sparky started barking happily, "He's our friend! He's our friend!" But humans only hear the noise that is the bark and not always the true meaning behind it.

"Well," Buck continued, "A heroic firedog like you ain't gonna spend the night in the pound. We'll take him home with us. How's that sound Spark?" Sparky barked an affirmative and Buck patted both of us on our heads and pointed us toward the crowd of bystanders. "Now you two go on over there and stay. Don't get any more crazy ideas," He chuckled, "either of you."

We trotted off toward the crowd to receive a myriad of petting and praises. I hadn't realized how good that felt to a dog, and I was hooked instantly.

"You did real well tonight friend." Sparky barked, "And I wouldn't worry about a place to stay. I've seen that look before in my master's eyes, and I think he'd be hard pressed to give you up."

"Thank you." I woofed, "Spark? I want to thank you for this gift. I hope I make a better dog than I did a human."

Sparky laughingly panted, "Friend you were a good man. Even if you only take half of that goodness with you into your new canine life, you will still make a great dog!"

Spark gave me a comforting lick and I knew that he was right. That this was right. I settled down and reveled in the attention and put aside the cares and responsibilities of humanity for a while. Soon I would learn that I would do more for humanity as a dog than I had ever dreamed of doing as a man. But that is another tail for another time.

Written by Patrick Glen Rockhill (7/27/98)