

FIRE

334

by James Collins

In 1962, recently married, we moved into a garden apartment in Bayside Queens. Each of the buildings held four apartments in a cluster. Two doorways were side-by-side and each of them led to two interior doors. One had a stairwell to the second floor and the other apartment was located on the ground floor. The rentals were for two to three years and most of the new arrivals were newly married couples. However, numerous residents had been there for many years. We were on the second floor and we had developed good friends who lived immediately below us, Jim and Peggy. He was a chemist while I was an engineer and both of the wives were college graduates who had a lot in common. At that time, I stood six foot two and weighed about 180 pounds. Jim stood six foot four and weighed about 220. The four of us were in their living room on the ground floor having coffee and the windows were open letting in the nice summer air. Next door, two families occupied the apartments. A middle-aged family occupied the second floor and a young family with two small children lived on the ground floor.

It was a typical summer evening. Everyone had returned from work and children were playing on the grass at the far end of the courtyard. Then we all heard a commotion from next-door.

“Fire! Fire! Help me! Help me! My son’s bedroom is on fire!”

The call of ‘fire’ sends a chill to your heart. You immediately jump up and look around to see if you can see any flames. Your adrenaline is pumping like never before. All four of us knocked over the table as we jumped up.

Jim said, “It’s Mary next-door.”

We both bolted through the apartment door to the landing. Ran out the common front door and looked to our left to see Mary hysterical.

“Billy’s in there! In there! Please get him out! My God the flames, the flames, get him out!”

Neither Jim nor I had any formal firefighting training but we did know the little five-year-old kid and we were going to get him out.

Smoke was billowing out of the apartment and out of the kid’s bedroom. Flames lit up the smoke from behind and the black smoke roiled out at you. It was choking. It was blinding. We were gasping. We were coughing. The smoke was acidic and our eyes were watering. The electricity had failed in the apartment and it was dark with the eerie glow

from the flames dancing on the smoke. The smoke was rising and filling the room from ceiling down towards the floor. I yelled to Jim,

“Bend down as low as you can so we can breathe.”

Jim said, “Let’s get to the window in the back so we can get some air.”

We were both in the bedroom, and searched it from front to back. The child’s mattress on the bed was on fire and from the light of the flames; it was obvious he was not in the room. We also checked under the bed. Then we rushed to the casement window in the back and opened it using the crank so we could get breathable air. We used a few seconds to discuss the plan.

“Billy’s not in the room he must’ve gotten out. The girls called the fire department; I can hear the sirens in the distance. We have no hose. We have no extinguisher. The fire spreading alongside us and is moving toward the door. We have to get out of here now. We got to go back through the room we may as well take the mattress with us so the rest of the apartment doesn’t get destroyed.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Let’s take a few deep breaths turn around and go back through the room and take the burning mattress with us,” said Jim.

“I’ve taken three deep breaths let’s go.”

Luckily, the mattress was burning only at one end, which allowed us to each grab one side of the intact part of the mattress and lug it outside. Once down the steps we threw the burning mattress onto the grass.

At that point, stupidity arose. The middle-aged woman from the upstairs apartment came running over to us and said,

“You shouldn’t have taken the burning mattress out of the house. The firemen will be very upset.”

I was, at the same time, relieved, amazed, aggravated, coughing, tearing and glad to be alive. However, I was not happy with this commentary from the uninvolved.

“Let them go find their own fire I’ve had enough for the night.”

Fire trucks were pulling up to the far side of the playground where the fire hydrants were. The place was alive with firefighters in their yellow and black hats.

Jim and I, both black faced like minstrel vaudevillians, sat on the stoop and coughed our lungs out for about 15 minutes. Our wives joined us and were happy we were not injured. They told us Billy had gotten out. He ran out of his room through the living room

and out the front as we ran into his burning bedroom. He escaped the flames without any burns.

The fire chief came over to congratulate us and thank us for our quick intervention. He indicated that apparently, the extension cord for the child's lamp had been pinned between the metal frame of the bed and the wall causing a short circuit, which generated the fire and killed the lights. The only damage suffered in the fire was the mattress. The apartment suffered a significant amount of smoke damage but no was hurt, and nothing else burned. You could smell that fire all summer, especially on a damp night.

THE END