

"They could be gruff."
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"Station 26"
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A traffic accident at the major intersection which was located a block away from my church building was my first call as a bon-a-fide member of the Atglen Fire Company Number 26. We raced to the intersection, passing by a parked eighteen wheeler with its engine still churning. We arrived at the same time as the ambulance. We unbuckled and hauled out the inch and a half. Ralph, Danny, and I pulled toward the small compact car twisted along the side of the road up squished up against the guard rail. We waited. I was backing up Ralph on the line and since Ralph was rather large fellow, I couldn't quite see. Pumped with all that fire-fighter adrenaline, I leaned against him and pushed him from behind, saying, "Come on! Let's go."

Ralph, decades more seasoned than I, hushed me up, saying, "No rush." I didn't understand. Then I looked around. Nobody was rushing. Not even the ambulance personnel. "I don't get it," I said.

Danny pointed to the car. Ralph set the hose down on the pavement. I walked over to driver's side. It was obvious why no one was rushing to rescue the two women in the front seat. The driver's left foot, severed at the ankle, dangled by a thin tendon.

Danny nodded toward the car. "Don't you think you should say a prayer?" he said.

I removed my helmet. All the firefighters took off their helmets as I offered a brief prayer, with Danny and Ralph at my side.

They could be gruff. They could be coarse. They felt more comfortable hanging out in the lounge of the fire station than attending church. Few had all of their teeth. They were tough fellows but oddly squeamish when it came time to donate blood for the Red Cross. But they cared.

One side of the face of a fellow in the squad appeared to have melted, whether the result of a birth defect or a gruesome accident. He never said. He rarely held a job for long. But he felt he belonged because of Station 26. Serving as a volunteer firefighter gave a sense of pride. We chatted often. The church manse where we lived was across the street from the station house. He shared how worried he was about his friend who lost her little boy in one of the house fires. Trailers can fast become traps. What he wanted to know was what could he say to her to help her. He was told that the next time they talk, he should simply use the boy's name. He did. She burst into tears and embraced him, saying: "You're the first person to use my little boy's name in three months."

They could be gruff. They could be coarse. Bless them all. They would respond to all types of emergencies – house fires, brush fires ignited by the trains, traffic accidents, floods, barn fires, once even a bunker in a dynamite manufacturing plant – in all types of weather -- blistering heat or freezing cold – and at all times of day or night. Strapped in, hanging onto the back of the truck as it raced toward the danger. They were the vollies, the volunteer firefighters small towns depend on. Small towns also rely on them to drive their fire engines in every small town parade. What's a parade without a few siren blasts? Atglen was so small the parades would go around twice. Our volunteer firefighters also visited

the schools to talk about Fire Prevention. When did you last check the date on the fire extinguisher in your kitchen? Did you switch new batteries into your smoke alarms when we began daily saving's time? An ounce of prevention. Do they still hand out to the elementary classrooms those red plastic fire helmets? It's sad to read how some of the area fire stations might need to consider consolidation due to fewer volunteers. Volunteerism always has been a key pillar upholding any community's success. Saith Gandhi: "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

We see such service right now in Surfside, Florida, those rescue workers and searchers. Who made the call between rescue and recovery? Bucket by bucket, sorting through the rubble, lives crushed, literally. Precious personal items turned into debris. Families waiting, their loved ones already entombed. Will the next victim recovered be a DNA match? How do we thank the folks who do the real dirty work for us?