Heart to Heart

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“Higher!” the kids shouted from the back of the apparatus bay, squealing and laughing. After a few moments, the shout went up again, “Higher!”

The aerial ladder of Truck 116, parked in the side entrance, reached out, fully extended over the back parking lot of Station 51, and toward the herd of puffy clouds that lazed in the sky.

Colby Urquhart, Truck 116's rookie, had been volunteered by his company to perform this particular demonstration to the school children and so continued a few more steps up the ladder, his helmet and coat a dark silhouette against the sky. Then he stopped at the midpoint and crossed his arms.

“Higher!” came the shout from far below.

Probationary Fireman Urquhart shook his head.

“Higher!” came the louder and shriller prepubescent demand.

Urquhart shook his head again, this time, more vehemently.

A lone, teeny voice in the sea of children yelled out an enterprising idea. Colby cupped a hand to his ear and the idea was quickly relayed from teacher to fire captain. Captain Percy Hightower nodded, brought the bullhorn up to his lips and matter-of-factly announced, “Colby, we’ll give you milk and cookies if you climb higher.”

The children yelled, clapped and cheered their encouragement to the intractable young firefighter.

Colby cocked his head skyward, put a hand to his mouth, tapped a gloved finger against his lips, then splayed his hands in supplication, nodded, and pushed on to the screaming delight of the children below.

“Kid’s got some real talent for hamming it up,” Marco Lopez shouted over the din to his crewmen.

The Engine and Squad crews of Station 51 were watching the spectacle from the sidelines of the apparatus bay, amid the sprawl of hoses that snaked from the back end of the bay to the driveway, where Big Red lay silently waiting.

The small school group of second-graders from the nearby Catholic school was enjoying their visit to the fire station that morning, complete with hose demonstrations and a competition as to who could put on their gear the fastest. Between Captains Stanley and Hightower it was decided that the aerial ladder climb would be the most dramatic demonstration and so they’d end with that.

“Looks like you’ve got a fan,” quipped Captain Stanley, who nudged Stoker in the ribs and hedged a nod toward a young black boy in a purple-and-white striped shirt at the back of the crowd who was staring at the tall engineer.

“He’s been doing that all morning,” Mike replied.
A young petite black woman with a long denim skirt and a blue headscarf tied at the nape of her neck had been standing behind the children. She’d noticed the exchange and kneeled down next to the boy. They exchanged a few words and the young boy returned his attention to the rookie fireman climbing the ladder.

The woman rose and stepped over to Captain Stanley, smiling wanly. “His name is Reginald. He’s my son.”

“Captain Stanley,” Cap proffered a hand and the two shook hands.

“Wilma Turlock,” she offered. “I’m sorry if he made your man uncomfortable.”

“Not at all,” Cap reassured her. “We’re used to it. Kids and firemen tend to go together, I guess.”

Wilma smiled as she watched her son. “I understand. Reginald’s a little different. He is so shy. But it’s gotten worse since his father died.”

“Oh, I’m…sorry to hear that, ma’am.”

“Wilma, please. Viet Nam, a year ago. I can’t deny it’s been hard,” her voice became thick and she cleared her throat.

Cap grimaced and put his hands on his hips. “That’s rough.”

“Yeah. We’re still learning how to survive. Listen to me, I’m sorry. I’m just carryin’ on.”

Reginald returned his attention back to Stoker who smiled back at him.

Suddenly, the kids began to whoop and holler and Cap and Mike looked up at Colby Urquhart, who was three-quarters of the way from the top and putting on a dramatic display of being too exhausted to carry on. The assembled kids screamed and cheered their encouragement, hoping to give the overly-fatigued firefighter the Herculean strength to make it to the very tippy-top.

At the noise, Reginald leaped up, and grabbed his mother’s legs. Wilma bent down and picked him up and cradled him as he snuggled against her neck. “Ohhh, Reggie, you’re gettin’ so big.” She turned to Captain Stanley, “I’m so sorry to ask you this. Can I take him out front? I think the noise is scaring him.”

“Oh, sure. Be my guest.”

Wilma carried her son through the bay and out to the front driveway, where she held and bounced him in her arms next to Big Red’s silent bulk.

Stoker appeared beside them. “Think he’d want to sit in the driver’s seat?”

Wilma appeared astonished. “Oh! I…No, no we shouldn’t impose on you like that.”

“It’s no problem. Here,” Mike opened up the driver’s side door.

Wilma turned to her boy. “Reggie? You want sit in a fire engine?”
Little Reginald nodded and Wilma placed him in the driver’s seat. Reginald gripped the steering wheel and wiggled his way into a more comfortable sitting position. He growled engine noises and turned the wheel as much as he could manage as he pretended to drive, his little legs dangling off the edge of the seat.

The crowd behind them roared.

“I guess he made it to the top,” Stoker surmised.

“I’m sorry? Oh the fireman on the ladder,” Wilma said, laughing. She turned to look behind and the kids were cheering madly. “Yeah, I think you’re right.”

“You can sit with him in the officer’s seat, if you’d like,” Mike invited Wilma.

Wilma shook her head, but her eyes danced between Stoker and her son and with a shy smile, she finally relented. She walked around the front of the rig and with a gentle click, she opened the cab door and hauled herself up and into the seat. Sitting gingerly inside, Wilma scrunched up her small frame and looked around the cab, excited and yet nervous about this unexpectedly thrilling opportunity to play fireman.

“C’mon, Mama. We have to get to the fire,” Reginald ordered and he put pedal to the metal in his guttural vocalizations of the engine revving as he steered Big Red to the fire.

“Hold on a second. You can’t go to the fire unless you have your hat on.” Mike reached behind the seat, grabbed his helmet and gently set it atop Reginald’s afro, careful not to mess up the boy’s hair. Mike set the chin strap and Reginald responded with vigorous steering and a louder, racing engine.

“Here, scoot on over to your mom while I get in. Then you can sit on my lap and see out the window.”

Reginald did and Mike swung himself in then grabbed the boy. Reginald settled on Mike’s lap, his hands back on the wheel and steering.

“Can you see?”

“Uh huh.”

“I really appreciate this,” Wilma said, a grin lighting up her face as she watched her son.

“It’s no problem, ma’am,” Mike smiled at her.

“We have to turn on the siren,” Reginald pointed out.

“No, honey. We’re not gonna sound the siren,” Wilma said, her face exhibiting a bit of a panicked look.

“No siren,” Mike agreed. “But we can put the lights on.”

Reginald’s face lit up. “Can we?” he beamed at Stoker.

“Oh, now, I don’t want to cause any trouble,” Wilma reiterated, her hands raised in hesitation.

“No problem,” Mike assured her. “Son, go ahead and reach over your right shoulder.”
Reginald stopped steering and turned toward the driver’s window.

“The other shoulder,” Mike corrected as he removed the helmet from the boy’s head.

“Oh.” Reginald turned the other way.

“You see that switch there? On the seat?”

Reginald wriggled in Mike’s lap, craned his neck and pointed as Mike watched. “This one?”

“Yes, that’s the one. Go ahead and flip it.”

Reginald reached over and did and looked around the cab. “I don’t see nothin’.”

“Come out here. The lights are outside on the top.” Mike held the youngster and clambered down as Wilma did the same. Mike lifted Reginald into his arms to better see the lights swirling.

“Mom! Do you see? I turned the lights on!”

“I can see that, Reggie. That’s very good. I think we’ve taken up enough the kind fireman’s time.”

“Nonsense, we’re just getting started,” Mike answered and climbed back in and set the boy on his lap.

Reginald continued to steer Big Red to the fire as Mike answered the boy’s questions about the various buttons, knobs, and levers that he saw in the cab.

An eruption of cheering sounded behind them and Stoker peered into the rearview mirror. “Looks like he made it off the aerial ladder.”

Wilma followed Mike’s gaze. “Yeah, I think you’re right. That’s our cue, then. Reginald, honey, time to put out the fire and go home. Our work here is done.”

“Okay, Mama.”

“Fire’s out, Reginald. Good job,” Mike said. He and Reginald exchanged a high-five and the two climbed out of the rig.

Wilma walked around to grab her son’s hand.

“Hold on. You forgot to turn the lights off,” Mike pointed out. He hoisted the young boy back into the cab to turn off the lights, then hoisted him back out to his mother.

“What do you say, Reginald Turlock?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” Wilma said.

“Mike Stoker.”
“Mike Stoker,” Wilma repeated, her hand firmly holding the young Reginald’s. “Mr. Stoker, thank you. Really. From the bottom of my heart. This really meant a lot to both of us.”

“It was my pleasure.”

“You know he’s gonna be bragging about this for a looong time,” Wilma laughed.

“Come back, anytime.”

“Thank you,” she whispered then walked into the bay to join the rest of the school group, turning back once to wave at Mike.

Mike waved back and watched them join Reginald’s class.

[One week later]

“Mike! You got company,” Cap called from the back of the apparatus bay.

Stoker came out from the cab of the engine to find Wilma and Reginald walking in from the back parking lot.

“Hi!” Wilma greeted, beaming.

“Hi, Mrs. Turlock,” Mike answered, meeting them halfway in the bay.

“I’m sorry to have come unannounced. We came by yesterday and the nice gentleman told us you’d be here, today, so here we are.”

“Nice to see you, again. How’re you doing, Reginald?”

“Good,” the boy answered, swinging his arm while his mother held his hand as he hid behind her.

“I brought something I wanted you to see,” Wilma offered as explanation for her presence. A shy expression crossed her face. “When we got home, I realized why Reginald had taken so much of a liking to you.” Wilma dug into her purse and brought out a photo and showed it to the tall engineer. The picture showed a black soldier in fatigues with a white soldier’s arm around his amid a jungle setting. The white soldier held a remarkable resemblance to Stoker; they could pass as brothers. “This is my husband, Leon, with one of his best buddies from Nam. His name is Gary Rhinequist. Gary’s the one who sent us this picture after we found out that Leon had been killed.”

“I’m very sorry, ma’am,” was all Mike could think of to say, his eyes transfixed on the uncanny resemblance he held to the man in the picture.

“Reginald – and I – both wanted to give you something. To thank you for last week.”

“You didn’t need to do that, Mrs. Turlock.”

“Please. We want you to have it.”
Wilma proffered a purple heart to Mike, who simply looked at it as she placed it in his hands. “My husband…got two of these. Reggie and I figured…well, there’s one for us. I think my husband would have wanted you to have this one. You know, Reggie really has changed since that day. He’s more social and he’s more interested in school. You have no idea what that means to me,” her voice wavered. “Thank you, Mr. Stoker,” she whispered. “From all of us.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Turlock. Thank you, Reginald. This means a lot.”

“Now we’ve really taken up enough of your time and someone has to get to school,” Wilma laughed, tickling her son, who giggled madly. She turned to Mike, “Please take care. Bye.”


“Bye!” the seven-year old yelled out, his voice echoing in the bay.

Captain Stanley, chuckling to himself at the boy, joined up with Stoker, whose eyes remained on the gift. “Mike? What’s going on?” he asked, noting the purple heart in Mike’s hand.

Mike watched the pair head out to the parking lot. “A little boy with less of a broken heart.”

Captain Stanley gently slapped his engineer on the shoulder before slipping past him to the dayroom. Mike Stoker waved as Wilma and Reggie left then glanced at the purple heart in his hand. He smiled wanly then slipped it into his shirt pocket for safekeeping before returning to preparing the engine for their shift.