

Fireman Tom, by Bonny Hartig

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Fireman Tom was tired. All winter he had been fighting small bush fires. Every time he put one out, another started up.

Fireman Tom was also puzzled. He couldn't understand why all the fires were in the small creek which wound through his town.

Although Fireman Tom liked putting out fires, he didn't like having to put them out all the time.

"The only good thing about these fires, is they keep me warm," he grumbled as he sat down to pull his big fireman boots off.

While he was grumbling and tugging at one of his boots, Fireman Tom had a funny thought.

"Everytime it turns really cold, a fire starts. I really do think there is something strange going on in that creek," he mumbled.

That night, after putting on his bright yellow pyjamas, the same colour as his fireman's outfit, Fireman Tom made a decision.

Looking down at Slobovich, his big black and brown dog, he said. "Tomorrow I am going to search that creek until I find the reason for those fires."

Slobovich, who was very used to his master's ways groaned. He knew nobody, not even a dog who was very particular about his dinner being on time, could change Fireman Tom's mind once it was made up.

And as he longingly looked at his stash of canned dog food, he vowed that one-day, very soon, he would solve the mystery of opening his own cans of dog food.

Next morning while Slobovich was puzzling over this very same mystery, Fireman Tom started off up the creek.

After many hours of searching and crawling through rubbervine and grass burrs, Fireman Tom decided to plonk his very solid body down on a big pile of boulders for a rest and a think.

Just as he plonked down he felt the boulders move and he heard a loud grouching sound.

"Ouch man, be careful, I am only flesh and bones you know."

Fireman Tom jumped to his feet and spun around that fast he fell over backwards. Now Fireman Tom was not a Fireman who was easily scared, but right at that moment he felt very scared.

He couldn't believe his eyes as he saw the rocks he was sitting on turn into a large creature which looked like a dragon.

While Fireman Tom was trying to gather his wits together the dragon did a very funny thing. He introduced himself.

"I am Smoko the Dragon, renowned the world over and in the worlds beyond for my fire making abilities," he announced proudly, poking his large head at Fireman Tom.

Fireman Tom scoffed, "A dragon, rubbish, dragons -"

"Don't exist, I know," interrupted Smoko the Dragon with a sigh, "I've been told that by humans for hundreds and hundreds of years."

"That's right," snapped Fireman Tom, recovering from his fright, "Dragons don't exist, why it is impossible for dragons to exist."

Smoko blinked his big yellow eyes at Fireman Tom and sighed.

"I agree it is almost impossible for us to exist, especially," he stretched his long neck towards Fireman Tom and puffed a little smoke at him, "when people like you keep stealing our fires."

Fireman Tom thought about this for a bit and then he became very angry, "So you are the one who has been lighting all the fires," he fumed shaking his fists at Smoko and jumping up and down as he angrily berated Smoko on the expenses involved in fighting fires, the danger and all the other things that had to be done to put a fire out.

Now although Smoko was not a very patient dragon, he did always try to be a fair dragon where people were concerned, however on this occasion he felt Fireman Tom was being very unreasonable.

Snorting a small huff of flame and smoke beneath Fireman's Tom's dancing feet, which incidently caused him to leap high in the air with a

startled yell, Smoko rose to his full height and glared down at Fireman Tom.

Swinging his big green head too and fro, he said, "Why you rant on and on as if I do it for fun".

"Why if such were the case you wouldn't be able to keep up with me", he boasted turning his back on Fireman Tom's angry form.

So while Fireman Tom fumed, Smoko mumbled on, "Fires are bad, fires must be put out. Well- let- me- tell- you - Fireman Tom," he turned back and shouted, "FIRES KEEP ME WARM!"

"Yes that's it, they keep me warm. How else do you think I keep warm. I don't see you offering me any blankets or a roof over my head to keep me warm. Fires Keep Me Warm, so there." cried Smoko shooting a long thin streak of flame at Fireman Tom's feet.

Fireman Tom was very angry, but he was also a very kind man, and he immediately began to feel a little sorry for Smoko.

He also knew that if he didn't do something, he would be putting out more and more fires.

Sitting down on the sand he said "Smoko, I think you and I had better have a very long talk."

As they sat and talked, Slobovich, who had tired of trying to solve the mystery of opening his dog food, wandered up the creek.

Now dogs, like all animals, always believe what they see, and when he saw Fireman Tom sitting in the sand having a jolly yack with a dragon, he had to bite his tail several times to make sure he wasn't having a horrible doggy nightmare.

"Well open all my dog food at once," he cried. "The old master found the culprit," and he bounded forward to throw himself between Fireman Tom and Smoko.

"So what's the story, dragon, old master Tom found you out did he? Good for the old master, inconsiderate that's what you are. Do you know how many dinners I've missed with the Master busy putting out your fires?" snarled Slobovich.

Smoko looked down at Slobovich and hissed, "Listen here pooch, mind your manners and let the real men do the talking."

"Pooch," yelped an indignant Slobovich, "Pooch, I'll have you know I was the pride of my litter."

"Now, now, stop squabbling the two of you," interrupted Fireman Tom grabbing hold of Slobovich's collar. "We've got a real problem here, and we have to sort it out."

Now Slobovich being a very practical dog turned to Smoko and growled, "No problem, if the big guy flew right back to where he came from."

Smoko sighed, dragons were hard to talk too, but dogs and humans were impossible.

"Oh very good pooch, very good, but you see I can't return for at least another hundred years."

"Whhatt," cried Slobovich, thinking of all the dinners he would lose between now and then. "What, oh my poor shrinking carcass," he whimpered and threw himself into the lap of a startled Fireman Tom.

Turning to Smoko, Fireman Tom asked, "Why a hundred years?"

"Well," sighed an embarrassed Smoko, "Dragons can only change location once every hundred years, and if I hadn't been daydreaming during my flight, I wouldn't have flown off course and ended up here. I would now be in China. Where, I might add, Dragons are highly thought of," he snapped.

"Oh," said Fireman Tom, "Oh, oh, oh," he said again and again and would probably would have kept going if Slobovich's survival instincts hadn't given him an idea.

"I say, I say, I have the perfect solution. Smoko, me lad, how would you like to be a fireman?"

"Eh, what," exclaimed Smoko and Fireman Tom together.

"Yeap, you could do the backburning and you could live in the Master's big shed," he looked at Fireman Tom who was beginning to nod his head in agreement. "Unless," he looked slyly at Smoko, "You don't think you are up to it!"

Smoko snorted in offence and drew himself up, "Don't think I am up to it," he repeated, "I, Smoko the dragon, renowned -.

"Yeap, whatever," interrupted Slobovich, "The question is, are you up to it or not?"

After some moments of deciding whether or not to turn Slobovich into a sizzling hotdog, Smoko sighed and looked warily at Slobovich, "Fine by me Pooch, but, what's in it for you," he asked.

"Why no more missed dinners of course," replied Slobovich smugly over his shoulder as he walked back up the creek and home to his many cans of dog food.

And so it all turned out as Slobovich knew it would, and although he never solved the mystery of opening the dog food, it no longer mattered because from that day on, the only fires Smoko lit were the ones Fireman Tom told him to.