

Fire Insurance

By Rick Cogbill
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I was getting worried. It's not often you see smoke coming from the fire chief's ears.

"Honest, Chief," I protested. "That fire extinguisher was full last week; somebody must have used it recently!"



"Poppycock!" thundered Chief Whistleman. "According to my records, this unit was empty the last time I made my rounds. Listen, Shambles – did you complete *any* of the recommendations I made?"

"Well, er..."

"Check the smoke detector in the lunchroom, Chief," suggested Quigley. "I'm sure you'll find the battery in good order."

Whistleman cocked an angry eyebrow. "Of course it is," he growled. "That's because the battery's never been used. Somebody disconnected it!"

I glared at Quigley. Everybody knows what happens when Tooner nukes his lunch in the microwave. Disconnecting the battery is a whole lot easier than waving away smoke every noon hour. Can I help it if we forget to plug it back in?

"Look, Chief," I pleaded. "Give me a list of what needs to be done. I promise I'll do whatever you say."

Chief Whistleman handed me a copy. "Listen, Shambles," he threatened, "if this list isn't followed to the letter, I'll be recommending a sprinkler system for the entire shop!" He turned to leave. "Oh, and one more thing – fix up that wretched coffee of yours. It tastes like fire retardant!"

I gave Quigley a hard stare as the fire chief drove away. "Sorry, boss," he shrugged. "The coffee maker caught fire. I had to put it out with something!"

"All right, Mr. Helpful," I said, "take care of this list. We can't afford the cost of a sprinkler system."

Back in the shop, Tooner was heating up over a 2001 Chevy Blazer with wiring troubles. "Any luck, Toon?"

He shook his head. “Nope. I’m gettin’ hosed by this one, Slim.” He began counting on his fingers. “I got a rear wiper motor coming on with the vehicle turned off, and if you aren’t watching, the windshield washers will hose ya down as ya walk by. The fuel gauge and shift indicator come and go as they please, an’ the power windows and mirrors don’t work at all.”

I groaned. “Let me guess; there’s no common source in the wiring diagrams for all these systems?”

“That is correct, my friend.” Basil sauntered out of the back room with a printout in his hand. “And did Tooner tell you about the blown three-amp fuse for the power mirror and door locks, and what happens when we test the amperage draw on that circuit?”

I shook my head.

“It’s real cool,” chuckled Tooner. “The backup lights come on. Unpluggin’ the relay junction box seems to help, but...” With the dash in pieces and a ton of hours already spent tracing wiring circuits, it was clearly time to cut through the smoke.

“Why don’t you start with the backup light circuit,” I suggested. “At least you’re getting some response from there.”

Tooner shrugged. “Won’t hurt my feelings. I’ll put ‘er up in the air and start with the switch on the tranny.” Once the Blazer was in position, Tooner pulled the wiring plug and tested it as we all crowded around to watch.

“Hey, there’s power here on the grounding side of the circuit!” He scratched his head. “How can that be?”

Something above me caught my eye. “Hey, fellas, what’s this?”

Tooner dragged the trouble light closer and squinted up at the floorboards. “Funny. It looks like a burn mark t’ me.” Sure enough, the paint on the driver’s side floorboards showed discoloration. “Guess I’d better take a closer look.”

Half an hour later, Tooner had the driver’s seat removed and the carpet out of the way. There before us lay the source of all our troubles; a large wiring harness had rubbed through onto the floor pan, causing 12 wires to melt together. “So how come it didn’t catch fire and start the carpet on fire?” I asked.

Basil chuckled. “I think the General may have foreseen this problem. This Blazer has a built-in fire protection system.”

I was confused, so Tooner explained. “The rear window washer hose runs through the same harness, and when the wires fused together, they melted the rubber hose as well,

flooding the area with washer fluid.”

Later, Quigley found me on a ladder in the lunchroom. “Hey, what’s up?”

I adjusted the bucket of water on its mount and looped the control rope through an eyelet screwed into the ceiling. “My new fire protection system, that’s what’s up.”

“You mean the fire chief is making you install sprinklers?”

“No,” I replied. “We fixed everything like he asked, don’t you remember?” I climbed down and ran the rope through another eyelet on the wall near my chair. “There. It’s all done.”

Quigley carefully eyed the bucket perched above the microwave oven. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s simple,” I explained. “I’ll just sit over here while Tooner heats up his lunch. If he overdoes it, I’ll just pull the rope.”

Quigley stared at me. “It’ll make a blooming mess!”

I shrugged. “Yeah, but it’ll keep the battery in the smoke detector and Chief Whistleman off my back.”