

The Alarm

by stephen hastings-king

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Rain pours through the ceiling and the building's fire alarm sounds repeated bursts of loud abrasive distortion 1 2 3.

In the pulse of red strobe lights, a large fireman who had moments before been sound asleep stands in the middle of the room. He holds a waterlogged ceiling panel. In the center of the panel is the alarm. Two bright blue wires run from the box and disappear overhead.

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He has been looking at the configuration for some time. Around him, six other firemen have arranged themselves in postures that reference the gallery in a painting of a public dissection. The allusion is complicated by heavy raincoats, enormous boots and fire helmets, red strobe lights and recurrent alarm sounds.

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The large sleepy fireman says: We do not touch alarms. Does anyone know the code?

Here follows silence.

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What are we going to do now?

We could spend the night ignoring this alarm.

But what if the building catches fire?

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Here follows another silence.

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We'd be liable.

Some look at the rain pouring through the ceiling.

Others at the growing puddles on the floor.

You shouldn't have said that out loud.

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