

# The Fireman

T i m D i c k s

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Well and then the whole thing stunk to highest heaven anyway. But then that was all the more reason to keep it tucked away. But then that was also all the more reason to start tossing it around the Owl.

“They want me to gum up the pipes,” I said. I had a fistful of beer and a fistful of peanuts and it was getting where I forgot which was which without looking. I’m not a drinking man and tonight I’d really given the bartender his exercise. He was a sort of friend, a man I’d known from the sausage floor before he’d left to buy the Owl, and a no-bullshitter, the kind of guy who wasn’t afraid to toss out a customer for knocking over too many bottles or trying to swing a pool stick.

“For the insurance,” Cranny said.

“Well,” I said, “I don’t rightly know why else they’d ask me to do it.”

“You won’t ruin the place. You’ll just get the floor sloppy. You’ll be hands and knees with a Shop-Vac or three for a week.”

“They say done,” I said. What I meant was, my brother and the preacher wanted the floor deep with water and that was all. They were sure a belly of water would knock out the whole church building, call down the insurance money. The way they

saw it the place was just about foundered anyway if they didn't get some checks for repairs or new construction and this was just speeding things along.

"This is about that Lepley girl," Cranny said. He was leaned toward me on his elbows and he had himself a Coke next to my beer. I could smell the sweet and it had me wishing I'd kept my nose clean tonight. The windows were still bright and the Owl hadn't filled up yet like it would around eight, and already my gut was turning. "That Lepley girl," he said again.

What he meant was the Lepley girl who'd got herself killed climbing the building. This was last fall, just after snow had started coming but still early enough that it had melted right off and the grass was still green beneath it. Keep in mind I didn't attend the Hosanna Fellowship but what happened was town news and anyway my brother was a deacon and was on the phone with me before the night was done and word had even really spread. This girl had seen fit to climb the outside of the building, nobody knew why, pulled herself up on the maintenance shed and then got up on some of the gutter work and got a couple fists full of ceiling and herself up on the damn roof. Who knows what she did up there or how long she camped herself up in the sky before the thing caved beneath her and that was that. You couldn't know how they'd arrived at the figure but one of the ambulance workers claimed she'd lived for ten minutes at the most.

"But you're not gonna do that?" Cranny said. "Gum up those pipes."

"Now don't worry about that," I said. "What you need to worry about is this here. Here." I ran a finger into the bar. "This is confidential. Sealed between me and you."

"Sure," he said, and he picked up his sweet drink.

But of course I was gonna do it. Arn and the preacher had showed up to my place that morning and took seats nice as could be even though the place was a mess and we drank soda pop and I knew something was going on. Actually at the beginning I thought maybe it was a religious event, that maybe the preacher was going to pull out the Bible as he was known to do, of course, but then they started in on the real thing.

“We’ve really been knocked down by the insurance company,” the preacher said, and what he meant still was that Lepley girl. “They called the roof negligence and I have to ask how we’d know a roof that didn’t leak was in need of repairs.”

“I’d have to ask what an insurance company is for if not for a roof that you don’t know is in need of repairs,” Arn said.

“Has Arn told you how much that little girl’s family would like from us? Arn, have you told him?”

“I have,” Arn said, in his nodding way.

“There’s one way out in a bind like this. And it’s the bad way. It’s the end of the church.”

“Can you imagine the preacher working for the filling station?” Arn said. He made it sound like I’d be putting the man in that uniform myself. “Or working next to you at the plant?”

“I’m not worried for myself,” the preacher said. “I’m worried for the congregation.”

He looked at me in the concerned way I recognized from his sermons. I asked why he didn’t just leave a couple space heaters running in the storage closet.

“Too obvious,” the preacher said.

“I’ll tell you what to do,” Arn said. “But I can’t be there. You can see how that’d be real unwise. For me or the preacher or anyone closely associated with the building to be anywhere close.”

“Yeah, I can see it,” I said, because I could. We had a real active newspaper and I could just imagine the phone calls and that weasel Adler stalking around the church or the preacher’s house or Arn’s farm, knocking up the door while Arn was at work, asking Melly a whole string of questions.

So of course, yeah, I’d do the job. But I didn’t need to go jawing to Cranny about it. I got myself home and turned on a little TV and took some beers from the back of the fridge and tried not to think about what I’d done but when I finally laid myself down in bed I might as well have been laying myself down on the bar of the Owl. I

could taste that beer still on my tongue and I could see the mirror behind the liquor bottles and my own face in it. I could hear Cranny talking to me but now everything he said was heavy like he was thinking about how he'd tell this to the police. Then I got to thinking about the insurance company and if they offered rewards for this kind of information and it seemed they'd be fools not to.

I decided to myself that I'd sleep off this beer and then in the morning first light I'd get over to the Owl and wait for Cranny. But then even that wouldn't easy me down and anyway it was a hot night and I couldn't take it anymore, I got my jeans back on and got out to my truck and got back to town and then to Cranny's house. The neighborhood was real quiet and it was about to three in the morning and I had no reason not to just kind of relax and bed down there in my truck but I kept remembering how Cranny had talked to me and how I'd talked at the bar and I drove down to the KG and bought a cup of stale coffee from a kid who looked surprised to see anyone and looked real guarded, like I might be setting up to ask for the cash register.

Anyway I went back to Cranny's and sat there drinking my coffee and listening to the radio real quiet and then I felt the night coming up on me. You might wonder how I know and I know because I kept waking up and finding my head against the window. And then finally I woke up and the sun was plenty up and Cranny was there knocking on my windshield, making for me to crank down my window.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"I come to see you. About last night."

"Don't worry yourself about it."

"That's real quiet information."

"You know what would be best for both of us. Not just for me." He got a grip on my side mirror. "The both of us, we both of us just ought to forget all about it."

"Well," I said. "That would be a fine plan."

"I go up to the Owl and you go back home and get some real sleep. Not truck sleep."

“I may just do that,” I said, but of course I wouldn’t. Still, I felt all the fear come out of me. Cranny wasn’t going to talk to anyone. Even if he was smart enough to think about a reward he wouldn’t be cruel enough to turn on a man and a church like that. He wasn’t a Baptist but he was commonly known as a churchy type of man. I thought he probably attended the Methodist.

I went home to get some sleep like Cranny had talked about but around the time some eggs were getting heavy in my belly and the TV was starting to put me under the phone rang. I got out to the kitchen and Arn was on the other side.

“You pray on it?” he said.

“Yeah, I don’t have to pray on it,” I said. “Let’s just get it done and over.”

“We’re thinking tonight might just be the best night,” he said. “You think tonight might be all right?”

“I think it might be the kind of thing best done with quick.”

“I’ll come out there and bring you the important things. You understand why we don’t want to be meeting in town.”

“I didn’t say nothing about meeting in town.”

“Well,” he said.

So then getting some sleep was pretty much out. I put some water on for coffee and scrounged around through the cupboard and I didn’t have any coffee. Then I thought of getting into town for some coffee but it was the kind of errand that would eat up more of you than it would pay out. So I watched some more TV and then I caught myself falling asleep again and waking up and then I thought Arn would wake me up for good. But I woke up for good without Arn. Outside there was that yellow kind of light that comes toward the end of the day and I made some sandwiches and sat outside smelling the grass and I heard Arn’s truck throwing gravel the way it did with him driving too fast.

He didn’t want any sandwiches but just started in on it, like I might have forgot why he was there. We went to his pickup and he leaned half into the back, into all those toolboxes he kept back there. “This here’s all you need,” he said, but instead of

handing me the stuff he handed me a garbage bag that knocked around against itself. "You know what to do, now don't you?"

"Yes sir," I said. "I've got it all down just right."

"Now, this is a spare key." He got a key out of his pants and held it up like it might just float away. "It's a real spare, spare to me too, one of a bunch I keep around for new deacons, and you're gonna want to lose it when you're done. Just lose it real good, not on the road coming back out here but real good like in those woods or somewhere."

"I told you I've got it all down just right," I said.

And I did. I waited around for the night to come down and then I waited longer. I was supposed to wait until the bars had closed down and the neighborhood had got real quiet even though where the church was things were always real quiet. Then I got myself into town and parked a ways down and started walking but even with that garbage bag knocking around the way it did I knew nobody was awake to hear me. All these houses were dark and the people here were the kind to get to bed before the news was even on. Up by the building I got a little spooked that I'd left the key in the truck or just plain lost it already, but of course it was safe in my fist.

They hadn't wanted me to turn on the lights but I couldn't very well poke around in the dark in the basement. I started hunting around for a switch and then the bulbs came up and you should have seen the walls. All these Jesuses everywhere, and these kids' paintings, and this big kid knight on the wall all girded up in the armor of the spirit. I could have stood there for a good while looking at all this art taped up but then I got the garbage bag open and I got out the pipes I wanted and the tools I wanted. I got down the hall like I was looking at a treasure map and then got into the men's wash room and took out the trap door next to the toilet. I didn't even have to crawl in to get at the pipes and I got the wrench on and thought to myself this is pretty easy, this is real easy, and then the water came.

I should have been expecting it since it was the whole reason I was there, but I still had to get this one pipe off and this other pipe on and everything was spitting in my face and in my hands. I was sitting on the toilet tank and I dropped the wrench

and I had this idea like I might look down and see all of hell opening up beneath my boots and then I remembered whose work I was doing here. What kind of labor I was at. I started imagining these kids and these people all in a proper church or in a new building outside of town, without a lot of traffic and without any kids to climb up the walls and get themselves killed falling through the roof. Then I started thinking about Arn coming down here tomorrow in his waders. It seemed like he'd just about have to be the first guy on the scene, being a deacon and a plumber, and I wondered how much lying he'd have to do or if he'd have some way around having to actually break the truth. I got that pipe off and I got the new pipe on thinking all about it and water was still coming out everywhere but not real thick or fast and then I had to wonder if maybe Cranny was right, if this wasn't just going to cause one big headache.

Well but there was nothing much to do at this point, or another way of looking at it would be to say that it was all done already. I got back down the hall to that room with all the little kids' art and there were rooms branching off it with these curtains you might draw across for some privacy. It had been a few Easters since I'd been here but I knew one of those curtains was Arn's Sunday school room. I poked in a couple and they were almost no space at all, almost no room even for a kid to get around the tables. It was a stretch to imagine Arn squeezing himself in there on one of the little chairs.

There was this trickle trickle down the hall and I could see water coming down slow. It was this little stream but you could see how it would build. I started wondering if I should get some of this art up and out of here and I decided what could it hurt, I could give it to Arn later and maybe he could say he'd taken it upstairs after the Sunday service or that the Lord had given him a vision to keep them out in the storage shed. I got that little kid knight off the wall and then the paintings and they got a little crunched up in my arms but I thought what could it hurt, even if they got bent it would save them getting wet. I got so many and there were so many left and it was so quiet outside I got to thinking why didn't I just take them down to my truck, and I did. Then I got back and I got some more. I started trying to tell which room was Arn's and

then I couldn't so I got the Bibles and some of the books out of all of them and then the water was really getting everywhere so I had to splash to move. I'd almost forgot about Cranny again and now I wondered if I ought to go pay him another visit, wake him up this time, just to make sure he didn't have any phone calls he was thinking about making.

Well and what happened next is kind of hard to tell without giving the wrong idea. I had myself an armload of stuff and I got it back to my truck and I was thinking maybe just one more and then I could be done and then I saw this kid across the street, kind of in the shadows of some trees. I felt everything in my back kind of tighten up and then I started wondering what kind of kid would be out here right now.

"This your house?" I said, like it might not be. "What are you doin out here at this time?"

"I stay up late," he said, or something like that. His voice was small and he was small and I wanted him out of the shadows so I could see him. "What are *you* doing?"

"That church is flooding," I said. "I'm a deacon there and I just came by to pray." This was something I knew Arn did sometimes, when he got woke up with the idea that God wanted him for something. "The whole place is going up quick in water."

"That church?" he said, like there might be another one a couple blocks away. "Should I call the police?"

Well, and here I had a problem. I stood there thinking real quick about how the police would want to know why was I there and how I'd got a deacon's key and why this kid thought I was a deacon. And then they'd want to know why I'd shown up just lucky to find those pipes busted.

"Come on and help me and then we'll call em," I said. "I got almost all the important stuff."

He came along like any little kid would. He trotted along all excited and when we got to the church he beat me to the door and was down inside like maybe he'd been here before but I remembered Arn telling me that no one from around here went to

the church. It was a big cross for him to bear, how nobody in the neighborhood would walk just a few blocks on Sunday morning.

Like I said, that kid beat me down into the basement. He was standing there lifting up one foot and then the other. "It's wet down here," he said, like it was a great surprise.

"I told you it was wet," I said. It was getting deep, though, quicker than you'd expect. "Get some of those books there," I said. "And what were you doing outside this time of night? Your parents let you just come and go as you please?"

"I can't ever sleep," he said. "And I saw you outside and wondered what you were doing."

"Like maybe I was robbing some place?" I said. "Robbing my own church of its Bibles?" I laughed like this was a pretty funny joke. This kid laughed too. He had his arms so full of construction paper and books that he looked ready to tip over. He got up outside and I did too and the papers in our arms sort of flapped around in the breeze. When we got back to the truck I opened the side door and he put those things up in the cab and I did too.

"Let's go," I said. "We better go tell the fire department now."

"We can call them from my house."

"We'd better not do that," I said. I didn't want to lie to him really but I hadn't figured out yet the right way to let this kid off. "We'd better just get right up there. One of them firemen is my friend and he goes to the church and he never answers the phone. That man," I said, "could fall asleep standing in a shower."

He giggled in that little kid way that can make you think of a dog and then he squeezed himself in with all the stuff we'd saved. I couldn't think of the last time I'd had a kid in the cab if I ever had and I thought about the bottle of chew juice and maybe a couple beer cans down under the seat. All that stuff was pretty well buried now though and anyway it was dark in there. The dash lights had burnt out a long time ago and you had to tell your speed from the sound of the engine.

"Isn't the fire station that way?" he said.

“We’re going straight to his house. That’s where he keeps his fire truck.” I could tell this was kind of a stretch when we got out past the Henderson Foods and so I started in on this guy we were going to see and how he spent whole nights polishing his truck, monkeying over the thing in his back yard, keeping it so red that you could see it from a mile away and if you were farther than a mile away you could still kind of see how it lit up the sky the color of an apple. “Wait’ll you see that truck, boy.”

“Maybe we should call the fire station too?” he said.

“We’ll use his phone,” I said. “And you can call your parents, if you want to wake em up.” I looked at him like he was being real selfish to think of it and he looked at the dash with all those dark needles and then he didn’t say anything.

When we got to my house of course there wasn’t any big fire truck in the driveway. All there was was this old Buick that hadn’t moved in better than two years. “Well, shoot,” I said. “I’ll look for him inside. But you better stay here.”

He didn’t put up an argument but I decided to spread it on in case he got ideas. “Now don’t try to come inside,” I said, “because he’s got these dogs that protect the fire truck. They know me but they wouldn’t take to you.” He started to move his mouth a little so I said, “Tell me your mom’s number and I’ll call her and tell her you’re helping the city.” And then he eased down a little. He told me the number and I said it a few times like I was making sure and then I went and knocked on my own door and felt like a fool and a crazy man.

So I stood there a while and wondered what I was doing here. I thought of taking that boy back into town and dropping him off at his house and then getting down into that basement and fixing up that pipe before anything got too bad but by now things were already too bad. And then I thought of taking that boy back and leaving him off maybe a few blocks away and then just getting back out of town, maybe keeping to myself a few days, not driving the pickup around, just kind of waiting for Arn to tell me the news on the building, but of course that idea was foolishness too. Things here had already got too far along to undo.

I stood around in my kitchen for a while. I'll tell you my lungs felt like they might rip right out of my chest. My shoulders kept shaking and I got a beer from the fridge and that seemed to help and then I thought, well, let's just wait and see what comes to me. I couldn't leave that kid out there too much longer because if he took it in his head to get out of the pickup he'd find his way to town even if it took him all night.

I went outside and I cranked in the air so he'd roll down his window. "Well, you were right," I said. "We should've just gone to that station. He's there with his dogs and his truck. Or I should say he was because now he's over at the church."

"Did you call my parents?"

"They're coming out here," he said. "They want to get you themselves."

"Okay," he said.

"Come on," I said. "He's got some soda pop in there."

"You sure those dogs aren't here?"

"I'm sure about that," I said.

Inside there really was some soda pop. It was a store-brand and I could see he wasn't excited about it but somebody had taught him how to be polite.

"This place is really messy," he said.

"He practically lives at that fire station," I said.

We sat down in the living room. I needed time to think but the ironical thing was that the more time I spent thinking the more impossible it was going to be to fix up that basement. It was practically impossible already, and I kept thinking of what that water sounded like filling up the floor, and then the kid started in about his parents showing up and would they go to the fire station first and was I sure they were coming out here because his dad had to work early.

"They said they had to get some gas in the car," I said. "But hey, I better get going. I need to go help my friend. You can wait here." And I got up past him and into the kitchen. And I got down in the basement and turned on the light and started in on one of the cabinets. There was all kinds of buckets and old tools and books down there and I figured this was where that stuff from the church was likely going to end up for a

while, all those pictures and that big kid knight. There were pails and old rags to spare and I took some and got up the stairs. The kid looked at me from the couch like I was a bigfoot come out of the trees and I said, "I got to get into town and help out, but you can stay here."

He nodded and I went out to the truck. The cab was pretty well full so I dumped the stuff in the back. When I got back into the house the kid looked surprised to see me again like I'd caught him at something. I started feeling like maybe I had and then I got a little hot. "Why do you look like that?" I said.

"Like what?"

"Help me get this stuff out of the basement," I said. "My back's near to shot."

He squeezed on his soda can so that it popped. I could just imagine his parents listening to that sound night and day. "What should I do?"

"Just come on and help me carry it," I said. "Come on, now."

He got up but then in the kitchen he stood watching me go down the stairs. "It's dark down there."

"It ain't dark."

"Maybe I can just stay up here and you can hand it to me."

"Come on, now," I said.

"I'm awful tired."

"I guess you shouldn't have stayed up so late watching me out your window," I said. "Now come on." I turned and went down the stairs like I knew he was gonna follow me and he did but then he stopped. He stood there on the plank looking like he wanted me to send him back on upstairs and he just stood there when I came up to him and when I picked him up he made this quiet little sound. I got him down there and set him easy on his feet and he still just stood there real quiet.

"Look around for some buckets," I said.

He started rattling around in the cabinets right away and I went upstairs and then I shut the door. I didn't have a lock on the thing because who was ever going to come up from down there so I started dragging the table over and then I realized that

was good for nothing and I dragged the fridge over. The plug dragged along on the floor like a tail and I thought, this thing is like a big cold rat. I took out a beer while I was at it and I knew pretty soon the hollering was going to start up so I went outside to where it was peaceful.

All this was so far away from my regular life that I almost couldn't believe it. I never even stayed up this late and now I had this little kid down in my basement and I didn't know what to do. I kept thinking to myself that maybe I should just hit him with a pipe and get it over with but it was such a strange idea and so awful that it made me laugh. I got a big long rip of laughing started, so hard some of the beer spilled out of the can and I had to sit down slow to drink it off. The trees shushed around and the grass and they had a way of calming me. I thought to myself that if I could just wish that kid didn't even exist I would and I wished he didn't exist or I could just get him gone somehow without having to actually do anything to him.

I got back inside and shouldered the refrigerator. I expected that kid to be at the door peeping out the crack but he was down in the corner, crouched down by the cabinets. He had a crab wrench like he might actually hit me with the thing.

"Now take it easy," I said. "My friend just got worried about you telling. You want to know what it's all about? That church and that water, he's afraid the city might close the place down if they find out. They might say it's unsafe. So he's real glad I called him instead of calling the other firemen, but he can't have us telling anyone about that water."

He swallowed and I could tell he was trying to decide about me. "You already called the fire station."

"I called my friend," I said. "This time I called him at the fire station."

"But you already told my parents too," he said.

"Well I called them back," I said. "And they want you to just forget all about this. And they're going to do the same."

"Okay," he said, and I thought that was going to be it but then he said, "They're not gonna be happy about me being down here."

This kid stared at me like he was set on making this as hard as possible. “Wait a minute,” I said. “I got to call him back.” And I went back upstairs. I was set to pick him up and put him back down if he followed, but he didn’t. I got the fridge back in place and I got another beer and I went outside and sat in the grass again. I drank that thing thinking maybe I could work on that story a little bit and get it just right so that he was afraid to bring up the church to upset his parents. Like they wanted to forget about all this just as much as I did. I got it just right in my head so that it worked out perfect and then it was so perfect I was afraid of going back down into that basement and having that kid mess it up. I sat there letting it be perfect a long while and thinking I better get moving before too much more time passed or before the sun came up and really ruined everything and then quicker than I expected it did.