

“In 1806, John Carey developed the first heat-operated system installed to extinguish fires; his system used perforated pipes that ran along a building’s ceilings connected to a hand pump outside the building.”

Rebecca shoved a handful of pretzels into her mouth.

“However, the most notable man in automatic fire sprinkler history was Henry Parmalee, the owner of a piano factory in Connecticut. In 1874, he attached distributors to pipes with a direct water supply and covered the distributors with a solder that would melt at 155 degrees. In this way, the heat from the fire itself could trigger a response. In 1881, Frederick Grinnell patented the “glass button” sprinkler, whose design is very similar to sprinklers used today. Otherwise, I am fresh out of pretzels and unable to write any more of this paper!!!!!!!!!!”

Despite the exclamation points, Rebecca’s face was devoid of emotion as she stared down her computer screen. She’d been at the computer for two hours now researching fire sprinklers for her EMT course, and she had only written one paragraph! Well, she had surfed the Internet for most of the time, but the fact was, she was tired of thinking about writing the paper, whether she had written much of it or not. It was time for a study break.

She trudged up the basement stairs into the living room, where her mom was slumped on the couch, watching the news.

“Did you hear about that Chicago nightclub, Becky? Twenty people got stampeded to death trying to...”

“Yea, Mom. That’s been the only thing on for the last four days. I’m going out.”

Her mother called after her as she headed for the door.

“Your brother called for you earlier!”

She held up the phone, and Rebecca lifted it from her hand. She punched in Austin’s cell-phone number.

“Hello?”

“Austin, it’s Rebecca!”

“Hey Becky. I just wanted to let you know I’d be in town tonight. They’re sending me down to film a segment about nightclub safety at The Station; did you want to meet me?”

“Oh yea! I was planning on getting out tonight anyways.”

“Alright, good. I’ll see you.”

The line went dead before she could reply. Typical Austin. He was so busy with that TV station it was amazing that he had remembered to tip her off before he came back to West Warwick.

Now, even more motivated to leave, Rebecca set the phone down on the back of the couch and fished for gloves from her pockets as she opened the door.

It was a five minute drive from her house near the community college to The Station. Parking was a more difficult matter. Great White was scheduled to perform live that night, and everyone who was anyone had gotten there at least two hours earlier. Rebecca found a spot at the edge of the lot, and rushed toward the club.

The Station itself wasn’t much to look at; it had been built in the 1930s and was small compared to the town’s many warehouses. Probably wasn’t even required to have fire sprinklers, Rebecca thought sarcastically as she rushed in. Good thing she would be

able to forget fire safety for a while; being able to regurgitate building codes was a bit scary.

In fact, she didn't give it a thought for the next hour or so. She found several of her friends already there, and soon her ears were throbbing from the screaming and the drums as she twisted around the dance floor. Suddenly, there was a camera pointed at her face.

"Austin!"

She leapt into the arms of the cameraman, her brother.

"Isn't this great?!" he screamed.

She could barely hear him over the music and the cheering, and soon Austin was cheering too as the chords from his favorite song, "Desert Moon" filled the room. Fireworks shot up from the stage, and Rebecca laughed as she danced along with her friends and her brother.

"Rebecca!"

She felt a sharp tug on her arm as Austin whirled her around, gesturing toward the top of the stage. Flames from the pyrotechnics were still rippling across the top.

"That fire is out of control. We have to leave now!"

"What?"

A tongue of orange skipped onto the ceiling. Rebecca's eyes widened; Austin was right. She turned toward the door, but Austin was already running ahead of her, calling out to the crowd, "Get out! Get to the door!" Most people's eyes were fixed on the stage as the fire continued to spread, but soon Austin's message sunk in, and Rebecca found herself pressed in at all sides.

The sudden wave of people crushed the wind from her lungs, and Rebecca was pushed to the side, staggering, as they flooded to the front door. She was squeezed tighter and tighter into a corner next to the bar, and, by now, she could smell smoke. She screamed in panic.

There was a crash next to her as the glass from a window shattered; a hand reached through.

"Becky!"

It was Austin! He leaned in and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her out the window and sending them tumbling into the parking lot. Black smoke poured out after them. Austin ran back to the window, but Rebecca froze on the ground. The fire roared over the club, fire alarms wailed, and screaming and crying could still be heard from inside. She scrambled to her feet and raced away from the inferno.

Within several minutes, fire trucks had arrived on the scene, but by then the blaze had done its work. Rebecca clung to her brother's arm as investigators confiscated his camcorder and questioned him about the fire. She locked her eyes on Austin to avoid seeing the stretchers carrying burned victims or the smoldering remains of The Station.

She couldn't believe this was happening. It shouldn't be happening. She'd just read today about demonstrations where Parmalee's 19th century sprinklers had extinguished industrial fires in three minutes. Why, in the 21st century, had there been no sprinklers to buy time? Three minutes could have saved lives.

She buried her face in Austin's shoulder. To think it had taken something terrible like this to make her realize the significance of her essay. Maybe if people stopped taking fire safety for granted and learned more about it, these tragedies could be avoided.

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