
The Firemen's Dance

by John Argo

Dark Fantasy

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They were late coming home, and Jane wasn't feeling well, and the house was freezing cold. The sports car rolled to a halt on the sprawling lawn, amid autumn leaves, and they got out—an elegant couple, disinherited, stripped down to this poor lot.

Perry knew what was coming as he carried their suitcases to the house. Jane had that look as she stared at their home and brushed stray hairs from her lovely face.

When he opened the door, and the chill hit them, she began to sob: “No-o!”

“Shh,” Perry said, taking her in his arms, “I’ll light a fire.” She shivered uncontrollably as he carried her upstairs. Quickly he tucked her under a pile of blankets and quilts. He knelt by the bed, stroking her arms and speaking endearments. She stared at him bitterly, her eyes beaded with tears.

“There now,” he said, “We’ll be warm in no time.” He rose from her side and went downstairs. In a short time, between the cellar furnace and the living room fireplace, warmth began to fill the house—enough even to open a window toward evening. Jane accepted a cup of hot tea and sat on the bed, sipping. “Thanks,” she said, with the first flicker of a smile. She appeared to be feeling much better already.

“We’ll go to the dance tonight,” Perry said happily, ironing his shirt.

Jane began to dress for the affair. Her way of doing this was in stages. Right now all she wore was her chocolate miniskirt and a lacy beige bra. She sat by the vanity, combing her long amber hair. She was thin and beautiful, Perry thought. She combed languidly, letting the brush rustle through her hair, then letting the hair tumble soundlessly on her bare shoulder. She would look lovely in her dark velvet dress the color of autumn leaves, he thought.

“I’m going to put on some more heat,” he said, inhaling the crisp scent of Fall night that came through the bedroom window. An owl mourned outside. The wind tussled the curtains, leaving a faint breath of cold standing water—a pleasant smell, with a hint of this and that: wood smoke; leaf rot; fresh air.

“Do, baby,” she said, combing in long lazy motions. She gave him an affectionate look. “Put another log in the living room fireplace too, darling, will you?” He loved her voice—soft, full, sensuous.

He left her at her vanity, a full moon over her shoulder framed in the window. The owl mourned again. He walked out of the bedroom, through the extremely narrow corridor of their old house, and down the cramped stairway. The downstairs was dark. Gloomy shapes occupied the living room, and he had no yen to switch on any lamps. Somehow, it would be like casting unwanted light on his and his wife's plight. They might be poor, but they were young and elegant, and they'd stuck together. They had each other, where before they'd had fortunes. He lifted a thick log of dry oak and threw it in the brick fireplace. Warm flames roiled up around the wood, eagerly licking it with blue tongues. The flue moaned, and sparks spiraled upward from the disturbed embers. The flames took, grew robust, turning orange. He rubbed his hands briskly together, breathed into them, stuck them in his pockets, and did a little dance of pleasure as the fire warmed him.

Now she yelled from upstairs: "Hurry up, darling! Where are you, Perry?"

He heard her clattering around on high heels, searching for a lipstick, a cigarette, a hankie, a dram of perfume.

"I'll be right up." He descended into the cellar on creaky stairs to check the furnace. Reassured by the red glow inside the drum, he rubbed his hands noisily together again and hurried back upstairs. On his way up, he picked up a pair of glasses and a wine bottle from the mantle piece.

"How do I look?" she asked as he came down the narrow corridor.

He whistled.

She saw the wine and made a face. "Not on our way, darling. We can have a few glasses at the dance." She stood tall on stiletto heels, angled sideways, holding a cigarette to her lushly rouged lips. Her dark eyes gave him a sultry daring look while she put her hands on her hips and cocked her tight buttocks toward him. The crushed velvet chocolate-colored mini dress veiled only the sharp angles of her hips and waist. It left her fine back bare, as well as her shoulders which had a pink sheen, as if the soft lamplight loved to fly into every pore in her silky young skin. The light caressed her strong, wiry youthful legs. He clapped softly, thinking her the most sexy woman alive.

"Watch this," she said, wreathed in cigarette smoke. She produced an item of clothing the same color and texture as her miniskirt and, using the tiny eye hooks provided for that purpose, turned the miniskirt into an ankle-length skirt that reached her ankles. "Voila!"

"Bravo," he said clapping.

"Kind of a cold night to walk to the dance," she muttered. She carelessly, hurriedly threw the cigarette in an ashtray and prettied her long dark hair before the mirror one more time. "We'd better go, Perry sweetheart, I don't want to miss a thing."

He put on his heavy overcoat over his best brown suit. He held her fine wrap in the air and she stepped back into it. He nuzzled her shoulder and neck, feeling the warmth of her skin, the beat of her blood, the faint smell of soap from her bath. "I'm going to make love to you later," he whispered into her ear.

She giggled, rubbing against him. "I can't wait!" Her smile was ivory in the glossy redness of her lipsticked lips. "Hurry."

"Better put this on," he said, holding up her old dark-green coat.

"Oh that thing!" she pouted. For a second he thought she would cry.

"It's okay. We can leave it outside. Nobody will see it. I want you to be warm."

“Oh, okay!” She let him drape the worn coat over her shoulders. She smiled bravely. She fluttered a kiss against his cheek, took his hand, and towed him along.

Outside, the wind flowed rustling amid huge tree crowns like an ocean current. Clouds drifted fitfully before an alarmed moon whose face seemed frozen in an eternal yell of shock.

“Windy!” he said, laughing as he ran after her. They did not look back.

She was a bundled figure running up a grassy slope. “Try to catch me!” her voice flew faint and fragile through the blowing air.

It was such fun to be out on a night like this! They ran—and laughed and played. When they came to the sidewalk along the main street, they brushed themselves off. “We must be serious,” Jane said as several glowering pedestrians passed. A woman glanced back, her mouth set in a light grimace of disapproval, her eyes envious of their youth and good looks.

They fairly danced to their small sports car. The black canvas top was tightly buttoned down, and the plastic windows were beaded with moisture. Inside it smelled of motor oil and leather seats—smells Jane associated with Perry's manliness. She kissed him impulsively as he started up the car.

“Why don't we do this more often?” he enthused in a sudden fit of warmth. “Darling, we do have so much fun together, don't we?”

She lit a cigarette and laid her head back. “Yes,” she said amid a column of exhaled smoke that wiggled against the luster of the street lights on her skin. “We're lucky in spite of all. It's just—”

“Just what, darling?” Perry asked as he enjoyed the feel of the shift knob, the tight responsiveness of the clutch as the powerful little car sailed over wet, leafy streets.

“I don't know—that—sickening sense of loss sometimes.”

“Oh yes,” he said. He knew that feeling. “Try to push it away, sweetheart. Don't let it spoil our evening. We get out so little as it is.”

She glanced at his strong wrist. “Are you wearing your bracelet?”

“Yes!” He held up his arm briefly as they waited at a red light. “I thought I'd lost it for a while, but I found it again.” She'd given it to him on his last birthday.

They came to the church hall. Perry parked around the corner, and they walked arm in arm. He enjoyed the tight feel of her lithe body against his, the way she let him pull her close, each wanting to be possessed by the other.

The church was shuttered, its windows black like lead. Its heavy brown stones made it seem like a fortress in the night. The moon swam around its spire, and mourning doves cooed their melancholy song.

Inside the hall it was warm—almost too warm. There were people from all over, because this was a big holiday around town. It was the annual firemen's dance, as well as the feast of all saints and all souls. There must be a thousand people here, Jane thought as she and Perry walked about looking at the food on the long tables—dish after dish, for this had to be the world's largest potluck.

On stage, a band played everything from polkas to rock, reggae to swing. That must be the talented guys from the fire station, Perry thought, joining the townsfolk in clapping and whistling between numbers. Jane and Perry found seats next to each other at a long people. Volunteer waiters and waitresses from the

Associated Veterans' Social Clubs hustled about, pouring beer and wine, replenishing water glasses. The fun of dinner was that you got a little of each thing—whatever the waiters happened to pick—a surprise!
It was a town tradition.

The pastor took the stage, asked for silence, and, after a brief prayer, made his announcements, and reminded the parishioners to come to church the following day. Then the band played some more.

During dinner, Perry and Jane befriended the couple opposite them, a man and woman in their early fifties. His name was Roger, his wife's Maureen. Roger had a full head of graying hair, watery blue eyes, and a bemused smile. Maureen was a little dark-skinned, dark-haired pip of a woman with a sharp tongue but evidently a good enough heart. "That band ought to take a break," she said, "it's hot in here! Whew!" She fanned herself for effect.

"Lived in town long?" Roger asked.

"Years," Jane said, tearing a dinner roll in half.

"We have an old place up on Beaker Street," Perry said.

"We just moved here a few days ago," Roger said. "Nice little town. I'm a retired policeman from the city. We wanted a little village in which to spend some quality time."

Maureen had a mouthful of food but she spoke anyway. "Those old houses up along the Heights? Used to be a lot of wealthy people up in that area years ago. Man, things have changed. Do you work?"

Perry winced, a bit pained. "Not for a while."

"Maureen—" Roger said. He nodded apologetically. "My wife should learn some diplomacy."

Perry shrugged. "Oh, it's no secret. I was injured a couple of years ago. I used to be a lawyer. Had a pretty nice practice. Kept us well heeled. No more. Well, that's how it goes."

"Darling," Jane whispered, mortified, "don't tell everyone our whole life's story."

"I'm sorry," he whispered back, "I'm just trying to keep the conversation going."

"They're nice, aren't they?" Jane whispered. At the same moment, she noticed that Maureen took off a light blue silk neck kerchief and laid it on the table. Jane's eyes grew wide with desire as she regarded the kerchief.

Desserts came.

"Not for me," Jane said. Perry also raised his hand to signify *no*.

Maureen took two big pieces of chocolate cake. "That's how you stay so thin and healthy," she crowed, "never eat any cake or candy."

The band started up a lively reggae beat. Jane rose, pulling Perry along by the hand. "Come on, darling, let's dance. See you in a few minutes!" she called to Roger and Maureen. They waved their forks, smiling.

"Whirl me around," Jane urged through gritted teeth as Perry took her in his arms and moved her about in tight angles with the beat of the music. She gripped him in a sudden passion, hands behind his head, her lips on his, her tongue seeking his. Her mouth felt hot and wet, and it made him think of how good it would be to have sex when they got home. She whispered to him: "I want something of theirs."

“Darling,” he said, “you know it's no good. Don't let yourself fixate.”

“I'll try,” she promised. She would take anything that belonged to them—a key, a coin, a wallet, a credit card, just something to remember them by.

A while later, Perry as a courtesy took Maureen out for a dance, while Jane joined Roger in a wild rock 'n roll dance.

Then they all sat at the table together, talking and laughing. A bottle of red wine warmed them, and they forgot about their troubles for a while. Roger and Maureen went to look for the potties. Maureen took her purse, but left her thin, silky kerchief on the table. Jane looked at it. “Oh, Perry, I want that.”

“Sweetheart—.”

Tears tumbled down her cheeks. “I want it so badly, darling.”

“Maybe if you ask Maureen then.”

Jane dabbed her eyes. “Oh, my makeup is probably running. I'm a mess.”

“No you aren't. But look at the time.” The clock said 10:30.

She sighed. “It's getting late. I guess we'd better go. I'm getting incredibly tired.”

He yawned. “Yes, me too. It's been a long day.” He stroked her cheek, which felt chill. “We'll go home, throw on another log, and make love all the whole long night together. What do you say?” He nuzzled her ear, lightly biting her earlobe.

Roger and Maureen came back and sat down, but on the edges of their seats. “We're going home,” Roger said. “It's been really nice meeting you young folks.”

“It's been lovely,” Jane said, shaking Maureen's hand. “That is the loveliest scarf,” she said.

Maureen laughed. “What? Oh, this?” She held up her scarf carelessly.

“We've had such a lovely evening,” Jane said, “I wonder if you'd mind—?” She hugged the scarf to her bosom and glowed. At first Roger and Maureen looked shocked, then sympathetic.

“Dear, if it's that old scarf you want, keep it, sweetie.”

“Thank you!” Perry said for her. “My wife can be so silly and sentimental.”

“I understand,” Roger said, rising. As he helped Maureen into her coat, he winked at Perry and Jane. “We were young once, and we understand.”

“That's right,” Maureen said, patting her coat and closing the buttons. “We understand. Though it's been a long time and we don't remember too well.” She winked at Jane and dug an elbow into Roger's side.

He pretended to double over, making a face that said, “Ain't my wife a scream?”

“Do you kids have a car?” Maureen asked as if they had nothing—well, Perry thought, that was about what they had.

“We'll be fine,” he said. “We have a car but it's not running. We'll walk home. It's not far.”

“It may rain,” Roger warned.

“We'll be fine,” Jane said giving her best fashion model smile.

“You two look so elegant,” Maureen said. “Such fine young people. I wish you all the best.” Roger had to pull her away before she could run around the table and kiss each of them.

The band leader turned around and said: “For our favorite friends in the audience tonight...this is their song that we play every year on this night.” The hall clapped and cheered loudly. Perry and Jane rose, clapping—she standing on tiptoe and whistling. Perry had to smile to himself. The band played one more number, their most robust and emotionally charged, and then stopped. “Thank you, and have a safe ride home,” the pastor's voice boomed under the rafters. The hall was suddenly a different place, disappointed, as if it had wanted more. But there had to be an end to everything, even the best things in life.

* * * *

“That was lovely,” Roger said as he walked Maureen out to their car. Maureen agreed as he helped her in. “Let's get straight home,” she said, “my hip aches.” She had the beginnings of arthritis. “That young man sure takes good care of his wife. What a beautiful girl.”

“Yes,” Roger said, defogging the windows and pulling out into the street. A steady stream of cars drove away from the hall. The roads grew foggy and confusing. After a while, Roger said: “I think we're lost.”

“I told you to go left back there,” Maureen said.

“Now, now, I'll turn around and just go back the way we came.”

“No sense of direction.” Thick clouds of fog rolled slowly like tumbleweeds.

“Be quiet, please. There's the church again already.” The dark buildings loomed in the fog on their left, deserted. How quickly the hall had emptied!

“Look, there they are!”

Roger spotted the young couple. “What on earth are they doing?”

They walked hand in hand, carefree, pulling each other this way and that. The girl was not wearing a coat, and her back was exposed. Her figure was excellent, and she waved the blue neck kerchief absently.

“They'll die of cold,” Maureen said. “They must be drunk.”

“Maybe they can give us directions,” Roger said, “and I'm sure they'll want a ride after all.” He began to slow the car. They were about 1000 feet away. A wall of fog moved past. At 500 feet, Roger saw the young couple were face to face, arguing. Jane held the kerchief in both fists, knotted, as if to tear it in half. Her face was a mask of pain and fury. His face was calm and patient.

Another fog bank rolled past. Roger slowed way down, wiping the windows with his knuckles, while Maureen wiped with a hankie. For two or three minutes, the car was at a dead stop as visibility was reduced to nothing, and drizzle hissed on the car's metal roof. When the fog passed, the young couple were gone.

No, they were walking up a grassy hill. They held hands again, but she appeared angry, pulling him along.

“Drunk,” Roger muttered. He'd been a cop for years.

The young man kept pulling at her as if to reason with her.

“Roger, do something. They're having a silly argument, and they'll die of pneumonia out on a night like this, she without even a decent wrap.”

“All right.” Roger got out, raising his lapels against the chill. Another fog float came, and he walked headfirst into it. But it did not butt heads with him—it flew silently past, like a boat in a fast stream on a river, leaving only damp cold kisses on his face. He stumbled up the embankment and was about to call their names.

Cold knives went through him as he heard a woman's voice burst forth in a shrill scream that modulated into a long wail of rage and denial, then into a groan of grief that dragged out, loudly, more like the growl of an animal than anything human.

Then silence.

Roger thought he heard a few words spoken in a calm male voice. But it might have been a whisper of the faint wind. Roger broke into a run to see if he could help.

Heart pounding, feeling utterly defenseless, he neared the top of the hill. Didn't even have a flashlight, dammit.

There was nobody on the other side of the hill, where he'd expected to find a young couple in trouble.

From the top of the hill, the view took his breath away. He stared out over the grassy plain of a cemetery—several acres of monuments, statues, columns, damp gardens, and tombstones. Something—a clingy something, a hint of her perfume, the echo of her voice, the strength and life in her handsome limbs—made him walk numbly down into the city of the dead..

Fog moved in ghostly masses. Clouded damp moonlight winked in the damp glass of windows not meant to be looked through. Droplets fell one by one from soaked branches. Black rivulets of tears ran down the cheeks of granite cherubs.

He moved among the strange little temples and statues until he came to a mausoleum of shining dark brown marble, a little taller than he, and about ten feet around. It was built like a miniature house, with a cross on top and two large flower basins. The imitation windows were barred with thick wrought iron, and a peek inside revealed a darkness deeper than that of night. Cold eked out of there, enough to chill his bones in a second.

Walking around the front of the tomb, he could see, under an overhang, the letters embedded, stainless steel into marble: “Duncaster—Perry and Jane—Together Eternally.” Trapped under thick glass were a couple of photographs—the young couple smiling at their wedding, a distant shot of their car wreck with firemen desperately working to free them, the funeral attended by half the town, a glamor shot of Jane, with Perry proudly looking on.

On a steel sconce was draped Maureen's scarf. Someone had torn it to shreds in a fit of pain and rage. Someone else had neatly and lovingly folded the pieces together and patiently hung them where they would stay clean and dry.

Other shreds hung from the letters. And all around the bottom of the base were objects, some so rusted or rotted they were barely distinguishable from the drifted muck on the marble: a key, a rotted leather key case, a penny, a broken pen, a credit card faded from exposure, a rusty paper clip, a man's bracelet.

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