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Hero Jon

The darkness has a feeling to it. Like a night terror, it is a big black cat which sits on your chest, scornfully peering at your face and sucking the air from you. The breath you have taken is gone and it is taking more until it takes the very life of you. The cat-beast dream occurs after periods of sleep deprivation during the cycle of deep sleep. Psychologists call it a night terror or an incubus nightmare. And the black cat that drinks your breath is how dark the darkness can be.

Jon knew the darkness. He didn't have to be awakened by the summer storm to know the wind had swept away the electricity and the light. He could feel the dark. In his house, there was always a friendly little light burning in the hall so that any child who was too sleepy to make sense of how to get back to bed could see the way. Or Jon would see the child and he would stumble out of bed to lead him by the hand down the hall and back into bed.

Oh, Jon had so many children. He loved to come home from the engine house on his days off and feel them climbing all over him, welcoming him home. Patrick, Erin, Sean, Mike and the newest little tot, Patsy, his pet, his life. All clambered onto his knees in the early morning light to talk to him, give him kisses, show him all he had missed since he had left home twenty-four hours earlier. If he came home after a fire the night before, he would arrive in his firefighter's coat, boots and helmet. They would sniff his hands and tell him that they smelled of smoke. They walked in his boots, miles too big, and argued over the order in which they would wear his helmet. They would look into his eyes, red and red-rimmed and ask him why.

Then Mary Ellen - sweet Mary Ellen - soft and smart and so good with the kids - would drop a kiss on his head and tell the children what a hero their father was - how he saved lives in fires and saved somebody's home, too. The children would look at him in awe and would want to be just like him - like their father, the hero.

Jon could feel each child's little body as they sat on his knees or leaned against him, always wanting to be in touch with him. And he loved it so much. He could feel Patrick's hard muscles as he flexed them in demonstration of how strong he was getting. Then Jon tweaked Erin's nose and he could feel how her soft, little girl features were hardening, becoming prominent in preparation for the day when she would be a beautiful woman. Sean and Mike were little boys, their stomachs still rounded curves and legs stout from running around the backyard. Patsy was a baby, just learning to walk. Her thighs were round and fat under his palm and her head was covered with big, red curls, light as a feather, soft and wispy against his cheek, a combination of a teasing tickle and angel's wings.

Jon loved his children and his wife without restraint. No one could tell him not to. When a child had a tantrum in a department store, instead of giving him a smack as the onlookers expected, he would find a way to make the child laugh and ease out of the difficult position that a tantrum puts a child in, with some dignity. More than once, Jon became an ape that blew strawberries on the stomach of any child who dared to have a tantrum in the middle of Macy's. He didn't care what people thought. He was free to love his children completely. And when he saved for a year to buy Mary Ellen the diamond necklace that she so feverishly wanted, his love was uncontrolled. The diamonds sparkled like brittle, cold ice, beautiful against Mary Ellen's smooth neck, warm against his lips.

So it was no wonder with all this love that Jon was a hero. Each time he entered a fire, he

knew that he was just like the next fellow. This fire could be taking his home, it could be his wife screaming for a child still inside, and for a second his heart would freeze thinking that it could be his child inside that hot fire. Then he would dedicate himself entirely to the job at hand. He became a saviour, if only for those minutes that it took to bring out a child, or old man, or dog, or just to save as much of someone's home as he could. Sometimes it was not enough, and it was hard for him to meet the eyes of the owner of the home that had been destroyed. But the fire in January of the year after Patsy was born was the worst.

It was one of the coldest nights of the year. The temperatures were settling at 23 below zero and every firefighter dreaded a fire on a night such as this. Aside from the inevitable comparison of the shrill cold against the warmth of the beds in the engine house barracks, there were other problems involved with fighting a fire in this cold. Lines from the hydrant would freeze, every place water ran became treacherous ice—especially on roofs, icicles formed and broke over firefighter's heads, and keeping survivors warm and out of shock was a battle.

They were the third engine company called in. Jon and his crew had been lying awake listening to the alarms as they came in. They were tense, waiting for their company to be called. When the alarm finally came in, they were expecting it. They sprang into their boots and coats which resided, at the ready, beside their beds. Jon checked the time on the clock beside his bed as he ran out - nearly 12:30.

The house was wildly ablaze when they arrived. They ran their lines from a block away and started the pumper. In a fire like this, there are many jobs to do and each person moves in what seems like slow motion because of the ice. The house was an old frame structure and the family stood huddled next to a shed apart from the blaze, blankets around them. Their faces were almost blank, tired circles under their eyes and a woman was wringing her hands and weeping.

"It is hard to lose a home," Jon thought as he picked up an ax and started up a ladder. They were going to run a line into the attic and get some water on it from above.

But Jon's lieutenant stopped him, "There's a girl in there, somewhere." Jon's heart nearly stopped. He looked at the woman weeping. Such a small reaction for someone whose daughter is burning up. But this thought took only a second. Jon already had his breathing apparatus on and he listened impatiently while his lieutenant explained the layout of the house and where the little girl might be. He was going in. His heart thumped hard in controlled excitement against his ribs.

He imagined this was his house, his child as he waited for the other firefighters to move a ladder to a second storey window. And he gave himself to it completely as he ascended the ladder. At the window, smoke poured out and he dropped inside and to his knees. Then he was in it. His left hand was against the wall, guiding him. The wall was hot through his gloves. This was a big fire. The smoke was so black and so thick that all became dark. And it became darker still. This is where the darkness begins to have a feeling to it. The black cat was waiting for Jon, waiting for that little girl, ready to take the life-breath away. Without remorse and without sympathy. "The wall," Jon thought, as his hand began to ache from the heat. The left hand guide was the only thing that Jon had in defense to the cat. Seeing the wall through his hand, he could not become lost, the cat could not get him. A triumph against adversity only if the mission was successful.

Jon was taking the north side of the floor, his crewmate was taking the south. As if on different continents, they could not see each other, but would run into each other eventually. They did and then they searched another room. Jon's arm swept under beds, and into the corners of closets. Children do strange things when frightened in a fire. They don't understand that

hiding under a bed won't protect them. They don't know how to survive. His heart soared and then plummeted when he dragged out a form, but realized it was just a baby doll. Toys were everywhere and their human forms asserted false hope. The second storey was searched. They couldn't have missed her. Then Jon found the stairs to the attic.

She was in the attic, hiding under some old furniture. She didn't respond, her body was limp. No wonder, there was no visibility. She had been breathing that blackness. Jon couldn't wait for a hole to be opened on the roof; he carried her over his shoulder, down the stairs and finally down the ladder.

He ripped off his mask as soon as he got her on a board and began breathing for her. She couldn't have been three years old. The smoke smarted in his eyes. She was black from the smoke. Her little body under his fingers reminded him of his children. A little round tummy, plump little thighs, her ribs firm as he pressed on her heart, trying to put the life back into her. "Oh, this shouldn't have happened. This shouldn't have happened." he cried silently to himself, tears from smoke and sorrow freezing on his face, in that cold, on that night. A wisp of her hair fell across Jon's hand as he pumped her heart. It was light, soft, wispy, and red against his burned hand. A combination of a teasing tickle and angel's wings. The firefighters worked on that child until the paramedics came, then Jon and the paramedics worked on that child in the old station wagon ambulance until they saw the sun coming up, then Jon knew it was over.

When he looked up the sun shone into his red eyes. The family was gone. The house was two walls leaning against the other, blackened. The paramedics took the child to the hospital to be declared dead. Fire hoses had frozen to the ground and Jon picked up an ax, numbly, and chopped away at the line until it could be freed. He couldn't get over how bright the morning was in that frozen emptiness and he thought about how dark the house had been in the smoke.

The cat had got her, of course. She'd been dead when he found her.

Another shift came in to take over for his and Jon caught a ride home with one of the fire commissioners. He walked into his house, his warm, well-lit house, with a friendly nightlight still burning in the hall and his children surrounded him. In a sea of his children, he began to know that he had been cold, that he was dirty from the fire and he began to know gratitude and disappointment.

Mary Ellen looked into his tired eyes, "I heard about the fire on the news," and she dropped a kiss on his smoky hair. He let his head rest against her for a moment and then he swung Patsy up in his arms and began answering questions. They tried on his firefighter's boots and Patsy touched her nose to tell him he smelled of smoke and smiled. He let his children climb on him and he closed his tired eyes and sank into a sea of feeling.