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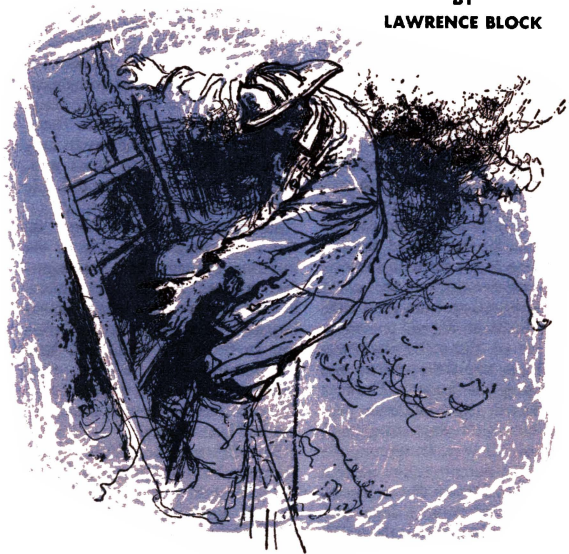
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A FIRE AT NIGHT

BY
LAWRENCE BLOCK



It was a nice fire, the best he'd ever set. And to make things better, there was a woman trapped in the burning house...

HE GAZED silently into the flame. The old tenement was burning, and the smoke was rising upward to merge against the blackness of the sky. There were neither stars nor moon in the sky, and the street lights in the neighborhood

were dim and spaced far apart. Nothing detracted from the brilliance of the fire. It stood out against the night like a diamond in a pot of bubbling tar. It was a beautiful fire.

He looked around and smiled.

The crowd was growing larger, as everyone in the area thronged together to watch the building burn. They like it, he thought. Everyone likes a fire. They receive pleasure from staring into the flames, watching them dance on the tenement roof. But their pleasure could never match his, for it was his fire. It was the most beautiful fire he had ever set.

His mind filled with the memory of it. It had been planned to perfection. When the sun dropped behind the tall buildings and the sky grew dark, he had placed the can of kerosene in his car with the rags—plain, non-descript rags that could never be traced to him. And then he had driven to the old tenement. The lock on the cellar door was no problem, and there was no one around to get in the way. The rags were placed, the kerosene was spread, the match was struck, and he was on his way. In seconds the flames were licking at the ancient walls and racing up the staircases.

The fire had come a long way now. It looked as though the building had a good chance of caving in before the blaze was extinguished. He hoped vaguely that the building would fall. He wanted his fire to win.

He glanced around again, and was amazed at the size of the crowd. All of them pressed close, watching his fire. He wanted to call to them. He wanted to scream out that it was his fire, that he and

he alone had created it. With effort he held himself back. If he cried out it would be the end of it. They would take him away and he would never set another fire.

Two of the firemen scurried to the tenement with a ladder. He squinted at them, and recognized them—Joe Dakin and Roger Haig. He wanted to call hello to them, but they were too far away to hear him. He didn't know them well, but he felt as though he did. He saw them quite often.

He watched Joe and Roger set the ladder against the side of the building. Perhaps there was someone trapped inside. He remembered the other time when a small boy had failed to leave the building in time. He could still hear the screams—loud at first, then softer until they died out to silence. But this time he thought the building had been empty.

The fire was beautiful! It was warm and soft as a woman. It sang with life and roared with joy. It seemed almost a person, with a mind and a will of its own.

Joe Dakin started up the ladder. Then there must be someone in the building. Someone had not left in time and was trapped with the fire. That was a shame. If only there were a way for him to warn them! Perhaps next time he could give them a telephone call as soon as the blaze was set.

Of course, there was even a beauty in trapping someone in the

building. A human sacrifice to the fire, an offering to the goddess of Beauty. The pain, the loss of life were unfortunate, but the beauty was compensation. He wondered who might be caught inside.

Joe Dakin was almost to the top of the ladder. He stopped at a window on the fifth floor and looked inside. Then he climbed through.

Joe is brave, he thought. I hope he isn't hurt. I hope he saves the person in the building.

He turned around. There was a little man next to him, a little man in shabby clothes with a sad expression on his face. He reached over and tapped the man on the shoulder.

"Hey!" he said. "You know who's in the building?"

The little man nodded wordlessly.

"Who is it?"

"Mrs. Pelton," said the little man. "Morris Pelton's mother."

He had never heard of Morris Pelton. "Well, Joe'll get her out. Joe's a good fireman."

The little man shook his head. "Can't get her out," he said. "Can't nobody get her out."

He felt irritated. Who was this little jerk to tell him? "What do you mean?" he said. "I tell you Joe's a helluva fireman. He'll take care of it."

The little man flashed him a superior look. "She's fat," he said. "She's a real big woman. She must weigh two hundred pounds easy.

This Joe's just a little guy. How's he gonna get her out? Huh?" The little man tossed his head triumphantly and turned away without an answer.

Another sacrifice, he thought. Joe would be disappointed. He'd want to rescue the woman, but she would die in the fire.

He looked at the window. Joe should come out soon. He couldn't save Mrs. Pelton, and in a few seconds he would be coming down the ladder. And then the fire would burn and burn and burn, until the walls of the building crumbled and caved in, and the fire won the battle. The smoke would curl in ribbons from the ashes. It would be wonderful to watch.

He looked up at the window suddenly. Something was wrong. Joe was there at last, but he had the woman with him. Was he out of his mind?

The little man had not exaggerated. The woman was big, much larger than Joe. He could barely see Joe behind her, holding her in his arms. Joe couldn't sling her into a fireman's carry; she would have broken his back.

He shuddered. Joe was going to try to carry her down the ladder, to cheat the fire of its victim. He held her as far from his body as he could and reached out a foot gingerly. His foot found the first rung and rested on it.

He took his other foot from the

windowsill and reached out for the next rung. He held tightly to the woman, who was screaming now. Her body shook with each scream, and rolls of fat bounced up and down.

The damned fool, he thought. How could he expect to haul a fat slob like that down five flights on a ladder? He was a good fireman, but he didn't have to act like a superman. And the fat bitch didn't even know what was going on. She just kept screaming her head off. Joe was risking his neck for her, and she didn't even appreciate it at all.

He looked at Joe's face as the fireman took another halting step. Joe didn't look good. He had been inside the building too long. The smoke was bothering him.

Joe took another step and tottered on the ladder. Drop her, he thought. You goddamned fool, let go of her!

And then he did. The woman slipped suddenly from Joe's grip, and plummeted downward to the sidewalk. Her scream rose higher

and higher as she fell, and then stopped completely. She struck the pavement like a bug smacking against the windshield of a car.

His whole being filled with relief. Thank God, he thought. It was too bad for the woman, but now Joe would reach the ground safely. But he noticed that Joe seemed to be in trouble. He was still swaying back and forth. He was coughing, too.

And then, all at once, Joe fell. He left the ladder and began to drop to the earth. His body hovered in the air and floated down like a feather. Then he hit the ground and melted into the pavement.

At first he could not believe it. Then he glared at the fire. Damn you, he thought. You weren't satisfied with the old woman. You had to take a fireman too.

It wasn't right.

The fire was evil. This time it had gone too far. Now it would have to suffer for it.

And he raised his hose and trained it on the burning hulk of the tenement, punishing the fire.

