

Fire In The Heart

by Samantha Memi

The woman leapt from the top of the burning building. The flames reddened the faces of the watching crowd. The heat pushed them back. The woman hit the ground. The crowd oooooed.

If only I'd been a firewoman, I thought, with a ladder as tall as a building and a hose-pipe big enough to cool the over-heated and extinguish the burning mad, I could have caught her in my arms and carried her to safety. To the cheers of the watching crowd she would have swooned in my arms. "Oh you're wonderful," she'd have said, "I owe you my life."

I would have smiled ironically and looked into her eyes. "It's nothing," I'd have said as nonchalantly as possible, "you need to rest."

I would go to see her in hospital; a tube in her nose and machines that beeped and showed heartbeats on radar. I would hold her hand and her eyes would open.

"It's you," she'd say, "my fireman."

"Woman," I'd breathe.

"Sorry?"

"Firewoman."

She'd be embarrassed because of her burnt face and hair.

"What's your name?" I'd ask.

Her name would be Helen.

"And yours?"

"Samantha."

When she left hospital she would move into my apartment. She would have to rest, of course, and I would have to look after her. While I was at work she could recuperate by taking baths with Rescue Remedy. I would come home and read her stories by Helen Simpson and Emily Perkins. When she had healed we would sleep together, and I'd hold her gently in my arms and rock her because the shock of the fire would have left her in trauma and often she would shake all over when she felt nervous.

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I would take her down the station and show her the big red engine and how I could unroll a hose single-handed and she would laugh. All my workmates would be jealous and say, "You're doin' all right for yourself aintcha Samantha," and I'd smile knowingly, thinking of Helen's soft body in my bed.

Her mother would have taught her to cook and she would do oodles of pasta with thick yummy sauce and she'd love baking carrot cake and I'd love eating it and catching the crumbs in the palm of my hand and laughing and sighing, "Mmmmmm."

Her parents would be old, rich, and both of them would like me; her father especially. His wink would be a sign to me that even if I made a faux pas at supper no one would really mind.

Then we'd travel. I'd throw away my hatchet, stuff the helmet in a box for any nephews or nieces that appeared, and off we'd pop to Thailand. She'd want to venture into the jungle, "Looking for orchids," she'd say, "what else," and she'd find the most delicate, fragrant orchid in existence and her eyes would light up like a child's and she'd turn to me and say, "For you."

* * *

"Come along now, move along," said the policeman as an ambulance siren whined to a halt and medics rushed to the red mess that had once been a human being.

I wiped the tears from my cheek.

"She wasn't very old," said a woman beside me, "you could see that."

"Yes," said her friend, peering over the shoulder of a man, who turned and looked away. The show was over; time to go home; he took out his mobile. What would he say to his wife?

"Guess what I saw tonight? Some woman got caught in a fire and jumped, made a terrible mess in the road."

"Really, isn't that awful," she'd answer, "the electrician came today, said he couldn't fix the washing machine, it needs a new part."

Would he be saddened by his wife's indifference? Would he pick up the paper and turn to the TV page searching for a late night movie he could ogle with ease?

What would I say to people at work? How would I forget?

“Excuse me, do you know who she was?”

“Just move along please, the building may be weakened by the fire, please go home.”

Home? To what? An empty room. An empty bed. And if I decided to train in the fire service — what would they say? You're too old, you're too lonely, and anyway, you dream too much.

