**State of Mind**

Kerry Langan

Suzanne watched as Peter shook the cocktail canister over his left shoulder, then his right. She lifted her eyebrows and said, “Cute bartender.”

Winking, he said, “Take me home with you.”

“We are home.”

Pouring the alcohol into the martini glasses, he said, “Home, my dear, is a state of mind.”

“*My dear?* How formal.”

“If we’re going to watch The Thin Man, we have to be a little formal.”

“Witty and droll. Don’t forget the olives.”

“Wouldn’t dare.”

“And don’t scrimp. It’s New Year’s Eve.”

“I’ve never been a scrimper.” He offered her the martini. “Happy almost New Year’s. Okay, here’s the deal; for the rest of the evening, I’m Nick and you’re Nora.”

They clinked the rims of the glasses together and she kissed him briefly before taking a sip of her drink.

“Oh, that’s good.”

“You’re supposed to say, ‘Oh, that’s good*, Nick*.’”

“A couple of these and I’ll forget your real name, too.” She held the liquid in her mouth a moment and swallowed slowly. “It’s shockingly cold. Fabulous.”

“I chilled the gin, put it in the freezer.”

“A little trick you learned from Nick?”

“He learned it from me.”

Chewing, she said, “Mmmm, nothing’s better than a gin-plumped olive.”

“See, staying home isn’t so bad.”

“Most people are home tonight. Well, at least the ones taking the pandemic seriously.”

“Good. Fewer drunks on the road.”

“Yeah.” She took another sip and said, “But it makes me sad, too.”

“Why?”

The depth of her sigh surprised her. She set her drink on the counter and thought for a moment. “This whole year. The first months, so scary. No trick or treating for Charlotte. No picture with Santa.”

He slid his hand around her waist, murmured in her ear, “We’ll get through this. The vaccine’s here. We’ll be getting it soon.”

“Not until spring.”

“That’s not so long.”

“It’s months away.”

“The days will pass quickly.”

She shook her head. “Not quickly enough. I want to take Charlotte to the library. Have a play date. Visit my parents.” She took a long sip of her drink. “You know, All the stuff we used to do without thinking.”

“We will. In just a few months.”

“Tonight, while she was in the bathtub, Charlotte asked me what New Year’s is, but the way she said it, it sounded like ‘*No* Year’s.’ It freaked me out a little.”

“C’mon,” he rubbed her shoulder. “The movie will cheer you up. It’s almost midnight and Nick and Nora are waiting for us.”

Nodding, she said, “And the dog. What’s its name?”

“Asta.”

“That’s right. Asta. That comes up a lot in crossword puzzles.”

“I think it was a question on Jeopardy, too.”

“Alex Trebek.” She drummed her fingers on the countertop. “That was awful, too, losing him.”

“But not to COVID.”

“No, but it was still awful. One more thing about this lousy year.”

“That ends tonight. C’mon, Nora, get a move on.”

In the living room, Suzanne settled on the couch while Peter inserted the DVD. “Perfect timing. It’s 11:59.”

She watched as the opening credits appeared on the TV screen. She was about to ask Peter to raise the volume when she felt her body flinch, reacting to the popping shots that sounded outside their home.

“Firecrackers.” Peter stopped the tape and strode to the window, pulling the curtain aside. Suzanne followed, peering into the night, her eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness. Under the streetlamp, she saw three boys, perhaps in their mid-teens, one huddled close to the ground, the other two standing. A small spark flashed as the hunched boy lit a match. He stood quickly and backed up with the others before another string of shots crackled for several seconds.

Peter shook his head. “They’re fools to be out in the cold.”

“Oh, they’re just young.”

Walking back to the couch, he said, “If they keep it up, I’ll call the police.”

“No, you won’t.”

“If they wake up Charlotte, I will.”

“Don’t be an old grouch.”

“Old grouch?” Peter put a hand to his chest and widened his eyes. “Did Nora just call Nick an old grouch?”

“It’s New Year’s. We’re having our celebration and they’re having theirs.” She waved her hand from the TV to the window.

“You’re right. Let ‘em have their fun. Okay, get over here. Let’s watch this.”

But Suzanne couldn’t stop watching the boys, not yet. One said something that caused the other two to laugh, the cold air causing their breath to mist. One of the boys playfully pushed another’s shoulder and they began laughing all over again. Suzanne smiled. They were wonderful, these boys, coming out to light firecrackers, to commemorate New Year’s, right on schedule, as if this year were like every other. They set off more firecrackers and the shots set off a fluttering in her veins, joy sprouting in her chest.

She knocked softly on the glass and was disappointed when two of the boys immediately ran to the other side of the street. The third, though, glanced at the window and she saw the slight fear on his face. She moved her hand close to the glass and waved.

He lifted his hand uncertainly and waved briefly before joining his friends.

On the other side of the street, the three of them clapped their hands and stomped their feet to stay warm. She whispered, “Happy New Year,” and turned from the window.

With his hand on the remote, poised to press play, Peter looked at her and said, “Ready, Nora?”

She nodded as she joined him on the couch. “I’m ready.”