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LESSONS IN FIRE

LESSON 1: Things begin and end in fire.

Buildings that burn at night fill up the entire sky. The clouds turn pink and red and orange above them, and you'd think the sunset had happened twice, or that the Northern Lights, all the shimmering and flickering low on their belly, had collected into one intense point—where? over Grey Road? over Auburn Ave.? over Squirrel Rd.?—the light kept shifting block after block as Mom and Dad drove toward Auburn Heights. And when they crossed over the last hill, they saw this was not the sunset, not the Northern Lights, but Dad's office in the center of town, their apartment behind it and the garage below, all twisting in flames. Mom never told us what the fire looked like, only that she and Dad were returning from a visit to their families in Detroit. The fall evening was beautiful, they had a Brahms symphony playing on the car radio, Dad had made the last payment on his dental equipment, more and more patients were coming in, his career was totally his, and it had begun.

And now, this. The strange light across the sky. Surely, a fall sunset that refused to end or a visit from the Northern Lights, so mysterious that Dad always thought they were a sign of some kind—a good year for our orchard if they shimmered yellow or green, a murder nearby in Pontiac or maybe even war with the Russians if they were orange or red. But this light did not dart here and there across the sky, but glowed constant and firm, and they smelled smoke even as they crossed Opdyke and came towards the oaks that lined Auburn Ave. And then, Mom saw it—her wedding pictures, the new silver, all her clothes and blankets and towels, and Dad's dental equipment—the X-ray machine, the office chairs, the scalpels, mirrors, the wax, the rows of false teeth, the cotton packs, the drills and drill bits and burrs—melting together, turning in light and air and heat and shining so brilliantly that the sky picked up the color and scattered it wide so all of Auburn Heights could see, and some of Pontiac too.

All night they kept watch, though exactly what they saw Mom doesn't say except that her feet were so cold—there was water all over, firemen's hoses sloshing it back and forth—and someone put a blanket around her shoulders. And in the morning—that's all they had—the Ford with the radio station still

switched on to a Brahms symphony long since ended and several blankets hanging from their shoulders.

And now, the picture turns into a Norman Rockwell painting. Dad sets up shop in the back of the general store across the street. You pick up your dry goods at the front of the store, swing around to the left hand wall to pick up your mail and chat with Myrtle Brown, the telephone operator, then take a seat on one of six folding chairs in Dad's "waiting room" at the back. Dad works on the other side of a screen. Caulkins Dental Supply leases him all the dental equipment he needs without question. The field representative has been to Auburn Heights—one of its two blocks now completely gone. But already the mess is cleared. Another garage with a second floor office space will be built in a few months—with a careful disposal area for oily rags far from the building.

The Caulkins man hears about the fund drives and sees the gifts of towels and sheets and dishes for the young couple who maybe do not look as Polish, as Catholic, as "downtown Detroit" as they used to, though they will never be invited to join the Community Club, and they can never belong to the Presbyterian Church.

But, in this Rockwell picture, the dentist's face is turned, perhaps bent towards a patient's mouth, perhaps hidden by the pants and socks and housewares. The Caulkins man nods at the young dentist's integrity and determination, but does he see a certain sadness in that face, a premonition, a flicker like the Northern Lights that this will be where the dentist's adventures end, his restlessness will be contained here, in this general store? He has weathered the fire. The community has given everything to him. They need him. They want him. He will never escape.

LESSON 2a: Fire is most fun just when it appears and just when it disappears.

Every other day one of us would have to trudge across the back yard, around the rock garden, and through the overgrown cedar bushes to take out the cans and papers. The cans went into three open oil drums behind the cedars on top of a dirt bank, and the papers went into a wire-framed barrel at the bottom of the bank. If you wanted to get out of the house on a winter-gray afternoon when nothing was happening, taking out the cans and papers wasn't a bad job. If you were good at it, you could slush through the snow,

crack the ice on top of the garden pond, dust the snow off the cement bird bath, crash through the iced cedars, and slide down the mud bank without losing a single orange peel. You dumped the papers quickly, catching them all in the wire incinerator before the wind blew them away. Then you scrambled up the bank to empty the cans.

First, you had to poke the outside of the oil drums with the stick lying beside them. This was to waken the rats. If you heard scratching, you knew the rats were there. If you felt brave that day, you could heave the cans in, keeping a safe distance. If your fingers were cold though, or you were listening too hard to the scratching, the orange juice lids and flattened corn tins could scatter all over the ground, and then, you'd have to slide them around with the tips of your mittens until you could wedge them upright and grab them in a large handful. Then, you'd back a little ways up the bank and throw them as hard as you could against the inside of the drums. The clatter was good for keeping the rats down.

Of course, if you didn't feel up to all of this, you could just bang the oil drums with the stick for a long time until the rats finally slipped up over the edges and disappeared into the bushes almost before you could see them. But then, you never knew for sure if they might not come out to bite your ankles just as your hands were raised and you were shaking all the cans loose and dumping them in. There were days that you just couldn't push the shuddering out of your face and shoulders. Then, you'd carefully jam your pail into a little depression in the bank and walk back home and tell your mom that the rats were everywhere that afternoon. Someone else would have to empty the cans.

But the papers were a different matter. Fire didn't hide or scratch or run in shadows. The snap of a kitchen match against the side of a square matchbox was as delicious as breaking a large carrot with your back teeth. And jamming the flaming match into the middle of the wire incinerator with your mittens between your knees, all the while swiveling your back into the wind, was like slipping the tiniest transplant into the soil in spring or swirling the inside of a wine glass with a towel at Thanksgiving. Delicate things could momentarily live in your hands, even flare brightly, and not be broken.

Sometimes the flame disappeared inside the wire basket for a long time and then exploded out full-formed, and all the bits and pieces of a gray newsprint and paper life flipped inside out into one gigantic color, so bright and sure of itself, it sucked you in, cupping your head, scooping your feet so you had to

jump back or else turn gold and red and wild yourself. Sometimes you dared yourself to stay close to the wire basket. You held back your jacket ends and scarf tassels but let your cheeks take it. You never felt cheeks. As far as you could tell, they never moved or ate or slept until now when they curled with the sharp tang of swift heat, not the heat that purred out of a furnace register or indiscriminately drenched everything in July, but a straight pistol-fist heat out of a wire basket. You felt those cheeks, two of them, radiant and hot, in the middle of your face. And when you finally stepped back, a gold dot travelled in front of your eyes wherever you looked—there in the top of the alder thicket, a gold dot as big as a basketball; there across the field moving slowly from left to right, another gold dot; straight up where the clouds were bloated and heavy, a gold dot; at your feet, between your boots, many gold dots now blinking on and off, now waving across the ruts and mud, now circling the oil drums—“O.K., rats, take that,” and you fired at them with your eyes.

But sometimes the flames didn't whoosh up fully formed but wandered in and out of the papers first, and you followed their curling trail, looking through the holes where they stopped for a moment. In perfect oval windows that they pressed into old wrapping paper, you could see the yellow of a Cheerios box already swaying downward, the fire easing things together below, so that falling was broken into narrow wedges and graceful angles, and Cheerios boxes and wrapping paper settled, one on top of another without pressure, without weight. And things that never had the pleasure of snapping bubblegum or finding that perfect palm-to-knuckle clap, so sharp and hollow and deep that everyone in your house sat up and took notice, things that never cracked a dishtowel to make it sound like a bullwhip—the soft paper things that had only rustled all their lives—now snapped and cracked in the deep-throated draft of the fire, then launched forth in flotillas of gold-rimmed ash, lighter than air, on their way to who knows where.

And what they left behind—bright castles with yellow and red dripping off their edges. You could look into the rooms and halls and be so stunned by their brilliance you forgot how close you had moved to the can barrels. Rats might easily crawl out and run back and forth over your toes and around your ankles, and you'd never know it.

And when you turned back home, night had fallen quicker than you realized, and you had to feel your way through the cedars and hope you wouldn't trip on the birdbath and that you'd get into the house before your mom could say, “Where have you been? What have you been doing all this time?”

LESSON 2b: Fire is most fun just when it appears and just when it disappears.

The best part of being an altar boy must have been to take the candle snuffer on its long pole and cup its brass bell over the lighted candles one by one at the end of Mass. Your aim had to be right, your hand steady, the metal held just a fraction above the wick almost as if you were holding the flame in your hand, a soft furry thing that spun itself into a thin thread, let go of its wick-spindle and rolled off, a curlicue of smoke you released just as you lifted the bell of the snuffer off the candle.

I loved that moment when fire disappeared into air. Every morning as the schoolbus passed GM Truck, I watched the factory smoke roil in great circles and spirals out of the chimneys. I longed to put my hand just at that place where the smoke thinned and turned invisible. The January air would be brittle, the trees sharp and mean, but above them I imagined a spot so soft you might wedge yourself there, between fire and air, smoke becoming white down, air—gray felt, and you'd turn and turn, half yourself, half something unimaginably different.

I watched the embers of the fires we made in our fireplace every Sunday night. When the long, luxurious evenings were done, the leftover popcorn picked up off the floor, and my brother and sisters marched off to bed, I would lie back down on the couch unable to go upstairs to my room which hung over the front porch, spittingly cold, as dark as the week I was about to enter. I wanted to grab the embers and take them with me. Maybe somehow the heat from the living room would last unchanged, and the passing of Sunday into Monday would be so gradual I wouldn't notice it.

But the embers in the fireplace went out in the strange rhythms of fire—not in even strides towards open air like the smoke over GM but as sure and hidden as lungs holding air a moment, letting it go the next moment, the wood as transparent as tissue and blood backlit and glowing, pulsing to a secret rhythm, then shrugging, sinking back into itself, letting its life go, bit by bit up the chimney where I couldn't see the smoke disappearing, but knew Sunday had pushed me aside, shivering, into Monday morning.

When my sisters and brother were around, though, I preferred a fire that gave edges to things as it died. We'd throw drops of water into the flames rising from our wire incinerator out back, and the water would sizzle loudly as if it were second cousin to tin roofs and cymbals and sheet metal as thin and vibrant as you could get it. We'd start with just a little spray off the finger

tips, then move to handfuls of water dipped from a bucket brought to the garbage and paper pit just for the purpose. First, one side of the fire would be crushed, then the other, and then, we'd up-end the entire bucket with one great heave, getting the arc of the throw high and perfect so it landed in the center of the flames, sending flakes of ash up the side. But there was no inviting sizzle or little puff of steam when we did that, only the thud of the water and a black soggy mud left behind when the water drained away. We'd have a hard time lighting the fire and an even harder time keeping it lit the next time we had to take out the garbage and papers. We turned from the fire pit, flicking the paint off the handle of the water bucket, sharing the irritated shame of bullies.

For awhile my brother insisted on taking out the papers, at first alone and then later with his friends. It was easy to sneak up on them, though you'd have to arrive at the fire pit first and hide behind the cedars. The winter afternoon was gray and damp, and they had a hard time getting the flame started. But once the fire was going, I saw them start to feed it with old newspapers and wrapping they had hauled out of the fruit shed. The flame filled the fire pit, and then began to rise high, far above where it was ever meant to go.

I began to panic. I was close to the old woodpile. One summer, the fire had escaped the pit and wormed its way into the rotted wood stacked to my right. There the fire smoldered week after week, even though we doused it everyday with the orchard sprayer, the hose pressure almost as high as it would go. And what about the box elder branches hanging over my brother and his friends? Most of the leaves had been singed off long ago, but already the fire was dangerously high—how wet did a tree have to be to keep from catching and holding the flame and pushing it even farther upward?

And then, there was the field beyond. Mom burnt that one in a spectacular grass fire several falls ago when we were at school, and a dry wind blew the embers all over. She made a Marx Brothers story out of it later that afternoon. The soldiers came running from the army base next door with brooms and blankets and towels, even a couple of baseball bats. They were jumping and stamping all over the place while the flames spread nonchalantly around them. Then the volunteer firemen arrived, regally unrolling their hoses, contemptuously holding the nozzles high, the flames out in an instant.

But the field was gray and wet that afternoon, and the fire roared straight upward, sliding around the lower tree branches while my brother and his

friends stoked it from below. Then suddenly, they stopped their work, stood up and took several steps backwards. My brother was first to unzip his pants. Slowly, luxuriously, he began to pee on the fire. Then, George took a turn. Then Don. The fire sizzled on three sides. They took another turn, and the fire withdrew from the box elder and began to settle closer to the pit. Now, my brother covered the flames evenly from left to right, up and back, and George joined him. Don quit—he hadn't drunk enough water back at the house. Now the flames only appeared here and there in little gusts above the pit, and my brother and George were waiting for them though they had to walk close, the arcs of their spray no longer straight or sure.

I almost forgot myself behind the cedars and nearly whooped with them in their exhilaration. And for the first and only time in my life, I wished to have a boy's body—not for the sex part. I had seen how silly roosters were, jumping on the backs of hens, most often falling off, then jumping up again, while the hens went on with their lunch, walking here, walking there, pecking at this pebble, at that one. I had seen cattle and horses do versions of the same thing—the mares and cows standing patient and bored or more often just moving away while the stallions and bulls huffed and leaped and fell off, huffed and leaped, fell off.

But to be able to pee and put out a fire. That was something. And when it came time to take out the papers again, I insisted on going to the fire pit. I even had a hose ready. Not that I put it between my legs, but I held it low, next to my belly. I didn't stoke up the fire, but I did stand back about where my brother stood, adjusted the nozzle, and let the water arch into the fire. But the hose only sprayed in a fine mist in front of my feet and then arced out in a thin ribbon far to the other side of the fire, the flames catching enough of the loose drops to be dampened even before they started. The fire was out, the papers too charred and wet to light again.

A few days later, my brother returned from his turn at the paper pile, complaining loudly—Somebody hadn't burnt the old papers completely. They were just singed and were very wet, too hard to start a new fire . . . and what was that hose doing out there?

All I said was, "Well it smelt pretty bad in that fire pit . . . almost like pee. I couldn't stand it. That's what the hose was doing out there."

My brother didn't say anything. Neither did I. Maybe we both were thinking of how hard it was to start a fire in the winter. Maybe we both were thinking of the many secret ways to put a fire out.

LESSON 3: But there are other fires too—those that fill up the sky, whose bellies you never see. What roots they have in the ground are hidden by buildings and sidewalks and trees.

For a long time, the hickory tree in our backyard kept out flying saucers and Russians. The spray of branches was so huge and complete, it held the sky back, and we lived comfortably beneath. In the beginning, there wasn't much to hold back—the branches melted into the atmosphere after sunset, and night was soft and mosquito-laden and rubbed up against our screens, though crickets wrinkled it, and for a few weeks in July, it hurled June bugs at our door.

But, as the summers passed, one after another, night began to condense into a vague pink. For the first time, we looked up and noticed that there was a sky between the hickory branches. And for the first time, we heard traffic—not the single car shooting down Squirrel Road, keeping the curtain of dust stretched high over our front lawn, but something just below hearing, a thin layer glued to the ground below the feet of crickets, a single steady pitchless hum, reminding us that we couldn't just put on our boots and walk across Seaborn's field through the swamp and make it to Decker's gravel pit. We were fenced in now—not with the old wire fences with rotted posts and stepladder stiles conveniently placed here and there for us to cross, but with the firm straight lines of moving cars. The interstate had patted the hills into strange shapes around it and shoved the swamp to one side. The interstate declared, "Direction," and the horizon obeyed, no longer circling us in the lacing of trees but taking on corners and diagonals and sharp points. We couldn't get across that interstate to Decker's anymore, and for the first time we began to hear the sky between the hickory branches. And though the hickory tree could hold the sky back, things maybe could live in the sky anyway—Russians, flying saucers, even cars from the interstate.

I heard them on Wyoming and Six Mile deep in Detroit the first night I was in college—the whoops and shrieks of cars out of control, lifting out of their diagonals, trying to cross fields and swamps, trying to grab the horizon like a cloak and pull it into a circle again, and police cars, testing out their new sirens, whooping at every street corner with a shrillness that fingered my scalp and set me and my roommate shrieking, "What is it! What is it!"

"Russians," I cried out of my dream.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. In the air, I see them coming, there." And we saw

the blotching on the sidewalk where the pink light of the sky had worked its way through the thin branches of the campus trees. The whooping and shrieking was all over the place. And then, the cars picked themselves up, gathered their cries and shouts, and moved away, and we were left only with that low, pitchless moan spreading across the lawn. We stepped on it as we went back to bed. We heard it brush across the ceiling and roll over our cheeks as we went to sleep.

But what did my brother see a few summers later as he raced up Livernois, over to Six Mile and then up Woodward Ave., flooring the old Ford until it shivered beneath him, the radio loud in his ears, “Detroit is burning. Detroit is burning. The riots are spreading”? All he knew was that he had to get to his girlfriend at work. The sky was lit between the cracks of buildings ahead of him, and the sirens were not burping and whooping at street corners but rising and falling in rhythm and counter-rhythm as if the buildings were singing—some near and some far, calling and answering each other while the small megaphoned voices of police cars racing up and down the canyons of the city, set off deeper echoes, the spirits howling—maybe several thousand spirits, rolling in a fireball out of a cellar somewhere on 10th St. The wooden frames of the houses that were torched held fire and sirens and ghosts in dense circles for several minutes, then let them loose, spraying into the air, or flinging across roofs, back and forth like huge horizontal yo-yos, fireballs flying out, then rolling back in, flying out, rolling back in.

Air rushes to such a fire and drags its absence behind it, so men turn into shadows, and treetops whirl in fire-wind, and my brother was caught in a vacuum larger than he could ever imagine. Oh, Uncle Al’s downtown drug-store was spared. The neighborhood men formed a ring around it and drove off looters—their wives and children went to Uncle Al when they were sick. He gave them medicine. They got well. But ashes floating high off the flames fell in a gentle rain everywhere—three years later Uncle Joe was killed in a robbery at Uncle Al’s store, and Uncle Al boarded it up and left Detroit forever, and even now, while flames and riots leveled a section of Detroit, Vietnam awaited everyone.

My brother skirted the riot areas and brought his girlfriend home. In several years they would get married and their best man would go to Vietnam where fire blossoms into the sky, but also returns to the earth and, all in all, is much better aimed. There is little protection against such fire, and Rick is shot running foolishly into the open to save an injured buddy, as if you could

rush toward fire, and in a single twisting motion, pull it into yourself, draw it out of guns, out of bombs, out of riots, out of the air itself, so that those of us on the other side of buildings, on the other side of trees, so far we can't see where the fire takes root, feel the air sucked up the canyons of our bodies, feel ourselves turned to shadow. We plant our feet against the vacuum whose roar turns our eardrums inside out.

And when we see how trees lean against each other, and how building timbers are scrambled together, and how quickly ashes fly up and disappear, and how a light rain and then a light snow set things back into their places so that, as we walk home at night, we think the street wouldn't be the same if it weren't pitted here and there with empty foundations, the stone and cement corners snagging wine bottles and soup cans, already growing burrs and chickweed, and sirens pass through us unheard, unnoticed, we know the fire has taken root.

LESSON 4: Fire is too fast for us. All we know is how much it wants to take back the space it has lost to shape and form.

You drive over a little rise and before you turn into the parking lot, you suddenly see the base of a giant oak tree you've never seen before. You see the sweep of lawn up a distant hill and the turn of the sidewalk into a front door that's no longer there. The sun beats down hard on flooring it's never touched until now. The wind and air tumble wildly where they had only been carefully funneled by pipe and duct. If you didn't know about fire, you would think the building lifted itself up and disappeared during the night, leaving behind the edges of its life—the twisted frames of file cabinets you never guessed had frames at all, the black leaves of exploded paper piles, laced and fluted and delicately airborne a few inches off the ground, two astonished corner posts—you'd almost expect to have a ranch sign strung high across them, "Welcome to the Circle T," they so invite you to look through.

The wind is decisive, spreading invisibility. Now you can only imagine that at this time yesterday in this small rectangle, fifty people were stacked and filed one next to the other, that pipes and wires brought them what they needed, that, on the second floor above that charred desk you were talking to a student, that next to you, Bill Powell was pacing back and forth, his dissertation not getting written, that the conference room there, where the back

stairs ends, was jammed with a freshman class. So many people not knowing how tightly they were collected, how high they were standing in air, how invisible they could become.

No one was injured. The fire took place at night, the corn-husk plaster walls of the building flaring up and burning in moments. All the next morning people lap back and forth against its emptiness—even when they walk across the old railroad trestle and down into the basement of the new English Philosophy Building next door, all invulnerable brick and glass, for an emergency department meeting. It is “After Kent State.” T.A.s are crammed elbow to elbow in the small classroom. And before you know it, they begin to shout hysterically at each other, even those who teach each logical fallacy to their rhetoric classes. “What should we do, what should we do? There will be pickets outside the English building tomorrow,” they cry. “Step into this brick and glass space, you are for a war. Stay outside, you are against a war. Stay home, you are wishy-washy.”

But the brick and glass building itself is a logical fallacy. It is dark and drafty and cold. When the head of the department at last speaks, his voice is broken: “But I was a conscientious objector in World War II? Do you know what that meant? To be a C.O. in World War II? Why burn my building? Why picket my department?” And the bricks and glass gather the emptiness of the burnt space next door—the corridors echo a little. The meeting in the basement disbands.

The pickets ring the brick and glass building the next day. They are polite and clean-cut Iowa boys. On any other day they would be trooping into the building for their English classes. The T.A.s are confused. Some hold their classes out in the grass by the river. Others cancel classes and go home. Others stay on the sidelines undecided, but when they see a few of their students move through the pickets, open the glass doors and walk in, they follow. To the three boys holding a sign at the door, they ask aggressive questions about war and peace that no one can answer. And the boys, as if they just successfully passed a poli-sci quiz, stand aside, and the T.A.s pass through.

The hall lights are off, and the darkness is blinding. The T.A.s long to stare through it, to see the base of a tree they’ve never seen before, to see where a sidewalk might end in sunlight at a front door and a corridor take up where the sidewalk left off. And though the T.A.s grope their way to their rooms and conduct desultory discussions about a war no one knows anything about and about a country no one cares anything about, they hear only the wind

gently rifling through the ashes next door, and though they have never seen fire in large bundles stacked one against the other between sky and earth, they suddenly feel how you can turn a page from one day to the next and how, in that vertical turn between night and day, things that are hard, that you have to walk around, portals and lintels you stoop through and sit under, the things that collect and disperse your life, that in the turn of a page, they can become as transparent as sea water—wavy, evaporating, gone—and the collecting and the dispersing stop, and no one understands what has happened except that the sun shines where it didn't used to, and the wind blows, and bodies—even those that have never been burned—become invisible.

One T.A. doesn't go to the meetings or to the pickets. He just sits on the steps across from the burnt building and stares at it. All afternoon he sits. In his hands he turns a small clay statue he recovered from his blackened desk.

You stop for a moment on your way to the library to talk to him. You don't say much. Yes, he missed the meeting. He didn't bother to come near the pickets or to hold his class by the river.

The statue is of a woman kneeling back on her heels. She is solid and hard and small. The clay is rough, the edges jagged. You hold her in your hands. Her weight is sweet.

Then you give the statue back, walk up the rest of the steps and down the sidewalk. And then you pass through the swinging doors into the library.

LESSON 5: Sometimes, fire enters into an errant collusion with air and water.

The Paper Place, a used bookstore on the corner of Clinton and Washington in Iowa City, was a tinderbox waiting to be lit. The old paperbacks were stacked one on top of the other in dusty piles from floor to ceiling, and though they were roughly in alphabetical order, you were doomed if you wanted a book near the bottom. You'd have to yank it out fast while the rest of the tower teetered above you. Gradually towers were wedged next to towers, and they all held themselves together in a brittle harmony with narrow pathways between them and wheelbarrow loads of books dumped in the corners. The Paper Place became dirtier and dirtier, and finally, the gray windows grew so opaque you couldn't see through them at all.

One night The Paper Place went up in flames. It was 2:00 A.M., twelve degrees below zero, the wind blowing in strong erratic gusts off the Iowa

River, and there was The Paper Place, fire twisting around each of its book towers. In seconds flames wrapped the two squat stories, then poked through the roof and started making flying leaps for the stars, though all of us watching from across the street couldn't see any stars, the fire turned so brilliant so quickly. Everything above it was invisible and black and huge. All we could do was measure its size by how much higher than the traffic light it had become and how firmly horizontal the power lines along the side of the street were, holding in all that blinding light.

The firemen arrived even as the fire was escaping the roof. Their work was quick, deliberate, long-term. There was no hope for The Paper Place, but the rest of the block was in serious danger. And so, they sprayed and sprayed the roofs and walls of all the stores, the wind carrying water here and there, far from the firemen's hoses. The sidewalks and trees began to glitter, then cake, then harden with ice.

And then, the fire began to sculpt itself, starting from below, inch by inch as the water froze against the curbs, against the newspaper boxes, against the mail slots, pebbled by wind, chiselled by heat. Ice began to grab ice, first the loose drops, then the fine mist blowing off the hoses, then the full edge of the firemen's assault, an ice fort growing before our eyes, encircling The Paper Place in mounds and points, in spires and cornices, in fountains hardened and turned upside down and giant stalagmites reaching higher than the traffic light, higher than The Paper Place's two stories even as the fire roared within its casing, now drawing stalactites out of the air above, swaying downward from the highest arc of water where it hit the fire at the very top. The firemen moved to the back of the building, and there through a mirage of heat and cold, we saw them pour water into the center of The Paper Place, the air still wrinkling into ice, and fire pressing that ice against itself like a huge gauze nightgown through which we could see shafts of gold, flying buttresses, curlicues of silver, iced gargoyles as if fire at last had found its own hardest edges, all crystal and quartz, while ice waved and jumped and whirled, releasing fire drop by drop from within itself, and air was not a carrier of things, the giant depository that kept fire and stone in their places, but was at last a thing itself or rather, all things being what they had always wanted to be, something other than what they were. And then, The Paper Place turned transparent and cold, a mammoth ice palace from which already the flames were withdrawing.

The next day the ice stood firm in silver layers pulled into sharp points by the fire, smoothed into rounded corners by the wind, several stories higher than The Paper Place had ever been, filling the entire street corner. A long slippery moat closed Clinton and Washington, and no one could get near. The palace, held in place by Arctic air and a firm Iowa wind, remained for several weeks, guarding the outlines of the fire. Then it slowly gave way—not splitting or cracking or falling in huge chunks—but slowly, bit by bit, melting in a February thaw, its corners rounding even more, its great edges turning into humps, its spines softening. Gradually, the ice drew its antennae inwards, then its shields, and finally it began leaking its fingers onto the sidewalk and the street. The castle became a hill that enterprising kids chipped steps and toeholds in. Then it became a mound slung over several newspaper boxes and a mailbox, then a lump draining into the gutter. Behind it, The Paper Place sunk into its cellar, a couple charred timbers all that was left . . .

And fire? Who was to say where fire went? For awhile we coaxed it out of kitchen matches to start our gas stoves, but then we moved away. Now we had electric stoves, living rooms without fireplaces, garbage collection every Tuesday morning, and we quit smoking. We were hard pressed to find a match when the lights went out.

And we had children who didn't know much about fire. But when we lit the candles on their birthday cakes, their eyes would grow huge. In their pupils we saw flame melt into flame, and we yelled, "Don't touch," as their fingers groped for a fire's softness, reached out to touch a fire's many sharp points. And though they could hardly draw in enough air, already we were urging them to blow the fire out, and their spit-strewn breath caught this flame and that one, never all of them together, until they had blasted stream after stream over the frosting, and the fire leaned away from them, tiny and firm, and then disappeared. For a moment, they looked up away from the cake, dazed, and above the flourish of knife and spatula and the splatter of frosting, they saw against the far wall fire still wild and huge before their eyes. And when they looked down, for a moment, everything was dark around them, even as they lunged for the first piece of cake and sank their fingers deep into the frosting.