

FICTION

Firebugs

The horror of a backdraft is that you never see it coming—but it's been there a long time. Waiting for you. Primed. It waits in the places you've known all your life. Those rooms of fondest acquaintance. The places you've felt most safe

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There are shapes that only live in fire.

Hunger. Fire's basic drive. The purest, most incarnate hunger you can imagine. Nothing mankind has ever assembled is impervious.

I've seen fire chew through lead girders: they soften and bend over backwards like a contortionist. I saw a column of flame ripple up a sheet of aluminum siding; it crinkled and contracted — the sound of ice cubes fracturing in a glass — as the metal curled up as if rolled by huge, invisible hands.

Fire will grunt and growl and come at you with the soft slitherings of a snake. It'll howl around blind corners like wolves and gibber up from flame-eaten floorboards and reverberate in a million other strange ways besides; sounded like buzzard talons clawing across pebbled glass, this one time.

Other times, it'll come for you silent as a ghost: a soft whisper of smoke curling

back under a doorway, beckoning you to open it. That's when it's most dangerous—when it's hiding its true face.

Solid. That's one thing people don't get. There's a sturdiness to fire, which may seem odd, seeing as it's flexible, too, happy to shape itself around its host. But I've seen it punch holes in walls and carry roofs off houses. I watched a rope of flame rip through a backyard elm quicker than a chainsaw. Neater, too. Surgical.

But most lethal are its shapes. Fire holds the most nimble, the most uncanny and breathtaking shapes. It strolls and eddies and curls over like tidal breakers. A man can stare into the shifting centre of a fire and see...well, everyone sees something different.

The shapes in fire echo those of familiar understanding. You believe you're watching creatures of smoke and char breathing themselves into existence. The shapes become more beguiling the closer you get to the flashpoint, when the heat is such that it'll steam the marrow in your bones.

Jerry Ullness, good friend of mine, a twenty-year vet on Ladder 11—saw him fall into a fire. He dropped his axe and raised his palms like a penitent evangelical welcoming the Lord into his heart.

It happened in a narrow staircase inside a fire trap off Morrison Street. The blaze had taken root in the basement and twined through the walls like ivy, crawling up the electrical wires with orange fingers. The flames licked up under the stairs and gnawed through the wood; the stairway toppled into a roaring pile of cinders directly in front of poor Jerry. He teetered on the precipice, peering down into drifts of glowing coals...he saw something. What, I couldn't say.

"No, Jerr..." I'd breathed.

But he was gone. Bewitched by the shapes. Like those demon women in the old myths, calling from the jagged rocks, luring sailors to their doom. You get caught up in the shapes of fire, give yourself over to their authority, and by the time the flames reach out you'll go willingly enough.

I told Jerry's wife it was smoke inhalation. He'd passed out. Simplest explanation. Hell, maybe it had even happened like that. She had him cremated. Truth told, Jerry was pretty much there already.

Part of me was jealous. A small part, but...I wanted to see what he'd seen.

I was born Blake Kennedy Jr., on a hazy July evening at Cataract City General. It had been a humid season: slut-hot, people around here call that kind of heat.

A serial arsonist was at work that summer. The city was burning. My mother said I was born with old fires racing through my blood.

That summer's pyromaniac was a cagey bastard with a flair for the theatrical. What he'd do was bust into a vacant home, crack open the Bakelite casing of the rotary phone, attach a wire to the ringer, and thread it down to a jug of gasoline. He'd hightail it to a bank of pay phones, hunt the number from the directory, put a nickel in the slot, and place a call. The spark of the ringer travelled down the wire and set the gas aflame.

The local rag hired a headline writer with a tabloid background.

Dialing for Disaster! Calling for Conflagration!

When a local head-shrinker postulated that the guy might've been setting fires to satisfy odd lusts, the headlines ran salacious:

Pervy Pyro's Phallic Phone Party!

Doc Sez: Freaky Firebug Is a Blaze-Setting Bedwetter!

My mother said the locals stopped taking vacations: they didn't want to come home to a blackened shell. Investigators figured it was either a telephone repairman or a sneak thief, except nothing was ever stolen. They never did catch the guy.

A few of those fire-gutted houses stayed that way for years; as a kid I remember these whistling black skeletons dotting the city grid, charred plots where the sunlight went to die. Fire could re-shape any city—take away its profile, reduce and flatten it, rob the concrete memories of a place. The ultimate eraser.

I was a bit of a firebug myself. What boy isn't? I'd light paper caps with a magnifying glass. Make a homemade flame-thrower by holding a lighter up to a spray can of Pledge. Lord! Small wonder a lick of flame didn't travel back up the nozzle, ignite the pressurized contents, and blow my face off. But I don't suppose I'm the first guy to have used up eight of his nine lives in boyhood.

Turns out I wasn't even the biggest firebug in our family.

That I'd become a fireman isn't exactly shocking; a lot of firefighters were fire setters as boys. The polarity shifts: you want to stop fires rather than start them—but firemen end up setting a lot of fires anyway, under the auspices of knowing thy enemy. You learn its tricks and tendencies in order to conquer it.

Which is a mistaken belief. You can't conquer fire any more than you can any classical element. Such forces are immortal and unfeeling. All you can hope is to divert them from humanity.

I was a firefighter—a Jake, as we call each other—right out of college, a job I held fifteen years. Then I snapped an ankle fighting an air-fed flashover in the Hot Box, a three-storey metal latticework where we staged controlled blazes. The sound of my ankle fracturing was like a pistol fired into wet sand. It healed bad. I couldn't meet the baseline physical competencies. Chief said, Sorry, Blake, but you got to hand over your axe.

So I don't fight fires. I investigate them. I'm the aftermath now, sifting the ashes for the hows and wherefores. The whys you may never know—that's something else you've got to make peace with.

Lately I've been busy. The city's burning again.

Detta Wilson. Name of the latest victim. Odetta's the name on her birth certificate, but she was Detta to her friends. Seventy-four years old. Cashiered for forty years at the drugstore on Drummond. Devoted parishioner at St. Paul's Evangelical. Widowed with two loving adult children. Black, but race didn't appear to come into it. Having a busted smoke detector and being a sound sleeper did come into it.

The incendiary rig was a plastic milk jug full of gasoline with a homemade wick. The pyro poked holes around the bottle mouth to let some of the fumes escape.

It's a dead-simple device: light the wick, leave it on someone's doorstep, and walk away. It won't ignite immediately. Gasoline itself won't burn, you see; only its vapours do. The plastic acts as a coolant, putting the brakes on the eventual combustion. That

jug smoulders away like a camp lantern until the flame dips inside, melts the plastic, and lets that fuel escape.

The gas would have caught with a soft whuumph, like the wind bellying a boat sail. Next, the fire would have been chewing up the latticework to where Detta lay slumbering.

It pissed me off—all of it, but the method pissed me off the worst. Three litres of gas in a milk jug, an old rag for a wick. Punch some holes in the plastic like you would in a jar lid to keep an insect alive. Light it and leave. By the time it did its damage, Our Boy would've calmed his wild eyes and sweated off the greasy stink of gasoline.

Three bucks' worth of material and a seventh grader's grasp of science. Poof—a good person gone to vapour.

Our Boy was a dog who'd learned a very simple trick. A trick he'd performed eleven times in the past six months by my count.

"We got to ferret this firebug out," the chief inspector told us. "Every bug's got a routine. Suss out this nut's."

Problem being, Our Boy didn't hold to any pattern. Tenement row houses, brownstones, duplexes. Single-family dwellings, apartment foyers, warehouses that lay uninhabited but for the rats. Men and women, geriatrics and kids, black and white and red and yellow. I'd stuck push-pins into a map of the city for each site he'd torched: hopelessly random. He operated by no known logic—not even the herky-jerky logic of a pyro. Our Boy seemed satisfied to see things go up in smoke; the "what" made no never mind to him.

I returned to Detta's house the day after it burned. She'd made it out alive but succumbed to smoke inhalation a few hours later. It was mid-afternoon, wedges of terracotta sunlight burning between gaps in the city skyline.

The fire was slowly dying in the house, a thousand sly cracklings and crimpings as the heat seeped from scarred metal and wood. It had burned the east- and south-facing walls off Detta's home. The brickwork had checked its progress in the other directions, so the fire had done what fire always does: it wormed its way between the floors, feeding on the dust and hair and seventy-odd years' worth of dead skin trapped under the boards; my old instructor told us that a human being sheds nine pounds of skin per year.

Old man's beard? he'd said. Yellowed newspapers? Dry human skin has those beat all to hell. Skin's the ultimate tinder.

What remained was a near-perfect cross-section of the interior, the kitchen and bathroom and master bedroom laid out, the contents smoke damaged but intact. Detta's claw-foot tub tilted at an impossible angle from the charred second-storey floorboards. Her nightgown fluttered on a hook near the bedroom window, which firefighters had smashed to let smoke escape.

It reminded me of the Barbie Dreamhouse my sister had had as a kid, the one that split open down the middle to present its guts.

I grabbed my kit and ducked under the yellow police tape. The fire had trickled off the porch to ignite the dry lawn; my boots crunched over cooked grass. The branches of a mulberry bush hung in blackened spears, the ribs of a denuded umbrella.

The porch was ash. I braced my palms on the foundation and powered myself up to where the doorway once stood. The struc-

ture had been hosed down—water dripped off the scorched cornices and the obsidian-dark points of shattered glass—but the latent heat lay trapped in the brick. The fire had turned Detta's house into a kiln.

Investigate enough arson cases, and you'll realize just how reductive fire can be. All things, be they natural or forged by the hand of man, have colours and textures. Fire robs them of that. Objects either become light as ash or attain a shocking heaviness. After a restaurant blaze, I'd found a stack of skillets smelted into a solid mass, so heavy I couldn't lift it. A vulcanized sheen gets draped over everything, like it's all been dipped in a pool of rubber at a tire factory. That breed of blackness hurts your eyes. Your rods and cones get starved for colour.

I stepped over the floorboards to the wooden banister, now just a row of black spikes. The carpeting on the stairs had melted and fused to the underlying wood. The billowing, circular smoke pattern on the walls indicated that the fire had carried itself swiftly up the staircase before the low ceiling had checked its progress, creating a dead zone of air circulation and denying it the oxygen it needed to thrive.

Detta had two means of escape: the upper-storey windows or the stairs. She hadn't jumped. But the staircase would have been consumed in flames by the time she'd woken up...

I flipped open the kit and grabbed a few surgical pads. I blotted the ash-thickened water on the stairs. I sprinkled the staircase with flash powder and let it settle. Then I switched on the hydrocarbon detector.

People believe a fire erases all signs of evidence. Not so. Sure, plenty of clues get incinerated—witnesses, too, sadly—but we inspectors have our ways and means. The hydrocarbon detector displays trace amounts of carbonized natural matter on any surface. In most cases, that means human skin.

The detector picked up footprints. Tiny, elegant footprints, one on each stair. Detta had run down them while they were on fire. I pictured her at the top of the staircase, staring into the crackling glow. Her eyes would have been wide, the eyes of any creature facing such a killing element. I pictured her rushing down the stairs, taking them one at a time, trying to tiptoe maybe, the flames curling under her flannels, licking between her lips to blister her lungs...

Twelve stairs. Twelve footprints. Twelve swaths of flesh in the exact shape of feet, like boot prints in the snow, each one incrementally smaller than the last.

Detta's skin had fused to the stairs instantaneously—these are known as thermal fusion burns, when the trauma occurs deep in the subcutaneous tissues—and she'd have torn away her burned flesh as she progressed. That raw skin would have hit the second stair, fused, torn free again. Her feet had become smaller and smaller, the way a Russian doll shrinks as you unpack it. Had the staircase been long enough, I suppose Detta would have run her feet clean off.

Did Our Boy even know what hell he was wreaking? He worshipped at the altar of Vulcan, and his god was a violent one. Vulcan would like nothing so dearly as to tear the world up in flames and stand by as it burned.

The next day, I drove to the CMHA facility on Wellington Street.

My baby sis, Franny, was a permanent resident. I wouldn't use the word incarcerated, but they didn't exactly throw the doors open and let her stroll around free and easy.

My sister's the sweetest, most trusting, and gentle soul—but she's wrong upstairs. Soft in the attic, as people around here would say. Or fucked in the head—although I'd go to war with any man who said that of Franny, despite it being the literal truth.

Some people aren't built for the daily rigours of life, is all. Franny had this innate connection to the weak and the innocent. The beasts of the field. Starving orphans on TV. They wrecked her. She didn't understand that modern life...just to exist in it requires a certain hard-heartedness, right? You had to function within the awfulness surrounding you, divorcing your soul from the very worst of it. But if you kept your soul too distant—if it became a buoy tethered to your corporeal being—well, you became a sociopath, just like Our Boy. Franny never achieved that necessary separation. Never formed a bulwark around her heart.

My shoes made no sound. The tiles were made from special rubber that cut down on the tak-tak of hard-soled shoes, on account of some residents being peculiar about sharp noises. The TV in the day room was bolted to the wall too high for anyone to fiddle with the channels; the CBC was broadcasting an old episode of *Seeing Things*.

Two guys were playing Chinese checkers. The one with the eye patch kept putting the marbles in his mouth; his partner snorted like this was an everyday occurrence and said, "Stick them up your asshole, why don't you, and lay a fucking egg." His opponent seemed to be legitimately considering this prospect until the big bull orderly said, "Don't even think about it, Gene. If I have to go digging again, I'm gonna stick a cork in you when I'm done."

Franny sat at a patio table draped in a big yellow parasol, even though we were indoors. Her face broke open in pure sunshine when she saw me. Franny was the most austere beautiful woman; despite what she'd done to herself, she'd never lost her looks. With her hair swept back and halogens catching the crystalline blue of her eyes, she had the wintry beauty of Grace Kelly in *Dial M for Murder*.

"Look at you," she said. "A million bucks."

"You look like a billion bucks."

"You look like a trillion, like—"

"Infinity."

We'd spoken it at the same time. Jinx.

"So, Fran, I—"

"You broke the peace, Blake," she said solemnly. "You owe me a Coke."

I paid for two sodas from the vending machine. Franny's hair was tied back today. My eyes oriented on the scar above her temple. My father's gopher gun had made it.

The day it happened, we'd gone to the zoo. Franny wanted to see the polar bears and the naked mole rats. The animals were mostly lazing in the shade of their enclosures—all except the jaguar, who paced its pen as if committed to a ritual, patrolling the same circuit so doggedly that it had carved a ring in the grass.

"What's the matter with the big black cat?" Franny had asked our father.

"It's just on guard, dear. Protecting its cubs."

"I don't see any babies."

The jaguar bit into the marbled mass of its shoulder, fangs worrying right through its fur. Blood flowed over its black coat like oil. It left bloody paw prints in the dirt. Later I'd hear that this kind of self-abuse was common among big cats in captivity. A reaction to the narrowing of their world and the bafflement of their primal instincts. The thrill of the hunt was gone, right? It drove them batshit.

Franny couldn't stand to see innocent creatures in anguish—because really, what had the jaguar ever done? It'd been sunning itself on the Serengeti plains, picking its teeth with a springbok horn, content in the elemental way of a creature that is perfectly in sync with the life it was meant to lead, and then wa-bow! some Great White Asshole in a pith helmet shot a dart in its ass. Next thing, it's 10,000 clicks from its ancestral home, eating boiled horsemeat at the end of a zookeeper's pole.

Franny could sense that animal's loss instinctually. It drove her batshit, too. And she was already halfway there to begin with.

On the drive home, Dad tried to comfort Franny, but she was inconsolable. A wonder she didn't dry up like an old leaf, all the tears she shed. When we got back, she snuck upstairs, got the rifle out of Dad's closet, chambered a .22 shell, put it to the side of her head, and pulled the trigger.

I recall hearing the pop! of the gun, and next she'd wandered into my room with blood blurring out of the perfect little hole above her temple, smiled the sweetest smile you'd ever seen. Next she had lain down like a girl falling softly asleep in a field of clover.

Once she'd been taken to the hospital and stabilized, I'd contemplated what she'd done. I couldn't even conceive of killing myself. I mean to say, the act itself seemed impossible. At that age, I was still wrapping my head around the notion of being alive, the hows and whys of that miracle. The word suicide was foreign to me. Our world was so wide open. Why would anyone want to cut themselves off from it with a bullet through the head?

But my twelve-year-old sister had done it. And so that knowledge became a particularity of my own existence.

What she'd done stunned the doctors. The bullet had travelled through her pituitary gland and cleaved the hypothalamus. About two tablespoons of grey matter had been pulped. A perfect lobotomy. She was instantly cured. Franny was left without a care on earth.

"Did you bring a book of matches?" she asked me.

"No, Franny. You know I didn't."

"You said you would."

"You know I couldn't in good conscience. Not after all that happened, sis."

"What happened?" she said, as if she really didn't know.

"You and matches don't agree."

She crossed her arms tight and said, "Oh, pooh."

She was sweating, another after-effect of the bullet. She sweated slowly but continuously, like an aged cheese—most heavily when fire was involved.

The brain is a subtle organ, and it breaks in subtle ways. By most yardsticks, Franny was truly better off. The angst and existential dread fled. But after the bullet, you could light a fire in

front of her, and she'd just watch it burn.

Before the accident—the whole family referred to it as such, even though it was like calling a state execution an accident—Franny was afraid of fire. The first time she'd caught me on the porch burning the edges of the white pages with a magnifying glass, her hands had fluttered like startled birds.

"You're going to burn yourself," she said. "You'll need skin graphs like Michael Jackson!"

Jackson had recently burned his hair off on the set of a Pepsi commercial. Franny—who was highly intelligent but very literal—had envisioned a team of eggheads hovering over the immolated pop superstar, plotting graphs on his skin.

But after the accident, her fascination with fire verged on obscene. A bizarre by-product of her brain circuits being so hastily rewired. She'd collect fallen twigs from the backyard maple and light fires on the grass. She stole coins from my father's pockets to buy convenience store Bics. I'd find her on the porch with a Zippo, her nostrils dilated to inhale the perfume of lighter fluid, sparking the wheel with her thumb but not quite hard enough to light the wick. When I got older, I'd come to recognize the look on her face: pre-orgasmic.

She started disappearing at night. At about that same time, the reports began to surface.

"Can I ask you something, Franny?"

She traced her finger around the rim of the Coke can, dabbed her wet fingertip on her throat. "Of course, silly."

"Someone's been setting fires, Fran. A lot of them."

Franny's hands clutched the table's edge. Her knuckles whitened.

A rash of suspicious fires coincided with Franny's midnight forays. Nothing serious: Dumpster fires, or a stack of pallets incinerated on a warehouse loading dock. But anyone with an understanding of pyromania could spot an escalating boldness.

One July night, I awoke to the smell of smoke. I went to Franny's room and found her lying on top of the covers. Her nightgown was stained with sweat. The pads of her feet were black with ash.

"Don't tell," she said.

But I'd told, despite it feeling like a betrayal. I couldn't shake the image of Franny dashing down dark streets in the witching hours, her white nightgown fluttering around her bare ankles, a bottle of butane in one hand and her Zippo in the other. A beautiful wraith setting the city ablaze.

"Who's setting fires, Blake?"

"Well, Franny, if I knew who I'd stop him."

"Why?"

"What he's doing is dangerous. People have died."

Franny stared at her lap.

I said, "Has anyone here...have you talked to anyone about fires lately?"

She shook her head in a vicious side-to-side. Her gown slipped and uncovered the burn scar over her clavicle. The skin was the mottled pink of carnival taffy. She'd done it to herself in the facility's washroom, sprinkling hardware store thermite on the toilet seat and lighting it. The reaction had fused the plastic to the porcelain, sending up a cone of superheated gases that burned through muscle and fascia to scorch the wing-shaped bones next

to her throat. The wall of her carotid artery had ruptured, but the afterburn had fused it shut; she'd only lost a few pints rather than the whole bottle.

After that, photos of Franny were distributed to area hardware stores, convenience stores, and drug marts with a warning: Do not sell flammable materials to this individual.

"You'd tell me if you heard anything, wouldn't you, Franny? If you knew someone was playing with fire?"

"I don't know that I would."

"Why not?"

"Did you know that carbon is the chemical building block of all known life on earth? There are only so many carbon atoms on our planet—no more today, right now, than when it all started."

"I didn't know that." I didn't like when she got this way.

"It's true. Things get born, they exist, expire, break down to their elements again. Carbon atoms don't die; they just get recycled—they go on to be part of new life. So you see, all of us are cobbled together out of carbon cells that were once other things entirely. You could have a trilobite's tail in your elbow, Blake, or a cell from Attila the Hun's moustache in your eye. Any creature to have taken on life, grown, crawled, run, learned, known, felt, loved, or any of that. Carbon. Isn't that a wonderful idea?"

"It's not an idea. It's a fact."

Franny chewed her lip. I waited for the blood to come. "But you agree that it's wonderful?"

"Sure. I can agree."

"So you agree that when things burn, they get brought back to the beginning? The awfulness is gone. From that, something beautiful can spring up...because too much of what we have is ugly. I don't mean ugly on the eyes, brother. Ugly on the heart. Evil and cruelty and all those things that gut the soul. But when you burn them, just the potential is left. Just carbon, and carbon isn't inherently anything."

"Oh, Fran...don't the creatures living right now, you and me and our family and friends—don't we deserve to go on living until nature decides?"

Franny had started to cry, which she did often and effortlessly. Her heart was an imperfect pearl, lacking the necessary nacre.

"I wish it could be. Really, Blake, I do. But nature doesn't have its head screwed on tight. I wish the whole world would burn. You and me, too, even though I love you so much. I wish the earth was a black ball, all charred up. It could be that way for a few million years, and then things would start to spring up. Things would be better."

Franny's tears ceased abruptly, like a sprinkler shutting off. She sipped her Coke and stared at me over the rim with her head cocked to one side.

"Oh, hello, Blake."

Cataract City kept on burning. Houses, schools, walk-in clinics. The Saint Ann church on Buchanan Avenue collapsed on itself; the church bell crashed through the narthex and melted into a pool of stannite.

My boss took a stress leave; there were rumblings that he'd be fired. I believed he would accept a quiet shitcanning: almost overnight, his hair had gone white.

Nobody saw anything. For all anyone could tell, the fires had

kindled out of pure nothingness. The citizenry reacted with customary apathy, as if all this was the repayment of some well-earned debt.

The *Niagara Gazette* circulated a theory that we were under attack from militant anarchists—What Are Your Demands? one breathless headline read—until their printing press got torched. The overtly religious believed Our Boy (he'd earned the capitalization by then) was the devil himself. Many were inclined to agree.

The other night, a squat apartment block, the Portwood Arms, burned to the ground. Our Boy managed to string fifteen jugs around the Portwood's perimeter. By the time the residents clued in, the fire had curled around the gas mains, which ruptured in gouts of blue flame and scattered the exterior brickwork over a three-block radius. Flames swept up the telephone poles to the transformers, which exploded in a cacophony of sparks, the creosote-inlaid wires catching like fuses as lines of glibbous whiteness—the distinct colour of an electrical fire—zipped from pole to pole across the city grid.

By the time the fire trucks arrived, residents were leaping from their balconies. Snapped ankles, spiderwebbed kneecaps. The firefighters did their best to catch the jumpers with the trampoline, but some of the leapers were more ash than skin. The firemen were beat to hell anyway; the station house poles were getting more use than the ones at the strip clubs down Lundy's Lane—one of which had caught fire midway through the Saturday night disrobing; bucktoothed creeps and willowy, half-naked women had spilled from the exits like solar flares released from a sun's glowing-hot corona.

I visited the burn ward. Gurneys strung down the hallways, air hung with the acrid tang of burn ointment.

Clifford Meggs, said the name on the chart clipped to the bed. Thirty-eight years old. Resided in suite 344 of the Portwood Arms. Junior partner at a local law firm. Drove a Saab—why the hell would that be on the chart?

Meggs was a WASP, but parts of him were presently black. Joseph-Conrad-Heart-of-Darkness black, except without that beautiful Nubian shine. Meggs was more charcoal briquette black. When silica sand is heated to extreme temps, it becomes obsidian: black glass. Human skin performs pretty much the same trick.

"Got a smoke?" Meggs asked.

His hands were swaddled in bandages. I lit a cigarette, inhaled to get the ember aglow, set it between his lips. Meggs just let it burn.

I tapped the IV bag hanging on a pole above his bed. "Methadone?"

Meggs said, "No pussyfooting around, bro. I told them to give me the whole hog. Morphine. Self-administered."

"How?" I asked, nodding at his mummified hands.

"Button's between my toes."

Gingerly, I tented the sheet off his feet. Son of a gun. Meggs smiled—only an incremental lift at the edges of his mouth, on account of the terrible burns on his neck.

"I'm a fire investigator, Mr. Meggs. I wanted to ask you about the other night."

For an instant, I thought my request had surprised him. Then I realized he'd be wearing that same semi-shocked expression until his eyebrows grew back.

"I didn't leave my stove on, if that's what you're wondering."

"No, no, we're positive it was an outside instigator. What I'm interested in, Mr. Meggs, is what you might have seen."

Meggs' eyes closed. His eyeballs quivered behind vein-wormed lids. Without opening them, he said, "Ash me, would you?"

I tapped the ash off his cigarette. His eyes didn't open as his lips accepted it back.

"Thanks. Now, you're asking did I see anything. The answer is yes...but you're going to think I'm crazy."

"You seen the state of our city lately?"

"Point taken. Well, Mr..."

"Kennedy. Blake Kennedy."

"Well, Blake, I believe I saw a woman in a nightgown."

My heart gave a hard little kick—ba-dum!

"My kitchen window faces south over the Falls, right? I leave the window open at night to catch the rumble of the water over the rooftops. I was at the window nursing a beer when I saw, or think so anyway...yeah, a woman. In a nightdress. Some kind of gauzy material that you could juuuust about see through, but not quite..."

"Was she—?"

Meggs cracked one eye. "Carrying a torch? Yeah, although I can tell you weren't going to ask me that. A lit torch, just like an Olympian. It left a contrail same as a jet leaves high in the sky. I've never seen anything move so fast...a heartbeat after she passed from sight, flames were climbing up to kiss me good night."

"Could you describe her?"

"Any more than I just did?" Meggs rotated the cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other. "Not so it'd stand up in court. But if you plunked her down in front of me?" He gnawed agitatedly at the filter. The blackness on his neck cracked open to reveal shocking veins of red. His drip must've been dialed sky-high. "But I don't think she's the one you're looking for."

"Come again?"

"You're looking for one person, right? A lone firebug."

"The assumption is—"

"What if it's a bunch of people, bro? A whole city?"

"I don't take your meaning."

Meggs swallowed. The working of his Adam's apple resembled the tunnelling of a beetle under crusted soil. "I'm going to tell you something, but if you hold me to it later I'll say it was the drugs I'm boated up on, right?"

"Go on."

"The other night, I followed a stranger home. Yeah, I know. Weird. Didn't know the guy, just passed him on the street like I've passed ten thousand other guys...but something about this guy was different. Nothing you could put a finger on. I was just...curious. Wanted to see where he lived. What kind of car he drove. If he had a family. I followed him down Wiltshire to his house on Harvard. He went inside. I was alone with myself again."

Meggs cadged another smoke off me. He hadn't smoked the first one, just let it go to ash between his lips.

"I walked back toward my own home. But I kept thinking about the guy. He had a pigeon-toed gait. That intrigued me. I want-

ed to see him again. But the only way I'd see him...this strangest thought entered my mind. The only way I'd see him again was through fire."

Meggs' face contorted. "I can't tell you what I was thinking. I can only tell you what I did, which was find myself at the Petro-Can station off Dorchester, filling a jerry can."

He shivered; the flesh split open across his forehead. I wanted to tell him to calm down, but I needed to know.

"I had this...fantasy is the only word for it. If I set his house on fire, he'd jump into my arms. I'd save him. He'd be grateful, and we'd...the fantasy dissolved from there. I came to—like, from a dream—at the gas station. High-test was spilling over the lip of the jerry can and soaking my shirt sleeve."

My hand groped under the sheets and found the button between his toes. I pushed it. I pushed it again. Again.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing. It's okay."

"Jesus," Meggs rasped. "You can't..."

His voice trailed to a thin whisper, then cut off entirely. I caught the cigarette as it slipped from his lips. I pinched off the ember between my thumb and forefinger.

I fixated on the black spots on Meggs. The skin underneath shone baby pink. Fresh green shoots could push themselves up from that dark loam, right? A new version breathing itself into existence.

They burned down the barbershops. The air hung with the reek of fricasseed hair.

They torched three fire trucks—half the city's fleet, burned in the firehouses while the firefighters slept upstairs. A parking lot full of police cruisers went off like chained firecrackers. Ambulances next. A city bus rolled down the street with flames licking from its blown-out windows, shedding passengers from its doors, the driver nothing but a blackened effigy heat-welded to the shotgun seat.

They. Had to be, you know? That kind of wide-ranging destruction...team effort, had to be.

The Armed Forces strung themselves down the Niagara River, bivouacking against the head of the Falls. What did soldiers know about fighting fires? Nothing, it turned out.

Someone lit up the whale tank at Land of Oceans. Floated a sheen of mineral oil on the show pool's surface and set it ablaze. The whale, Neeke, couldn't surface to take a breath through her blowhole; the ambient gases would have roasted her lungs. She suffocated.

I called CMHA to speak to my sister.

"Were you out the other night?"

"No, Blake. They don't let me out unsupervised."

"That doesn't mean you weren't out, does it?"

"Don't talk to me like an infant, please."

"I'm sorry."

"What are you worried about?"

"Can't you see, Franny? The city's on fire."

"Of course I can see. I saw it all along."

"What the hell are you—?"

She hung up. She always did when I used curse words. A minute later, the phone rang. "Franny?"

All I could hear were snakelike whisperings.

My job became redundant. I'd become an Armageddon investigator—and really, what value was that at the end of times? Like a weatherman sticking his hand out the window to tell you it's raining.

Nobody left town. Oh, there was the odd short-timer with kin outside the city limits who took a powder—but the locals all stayed. You'd see their haunted faces hovering behind their windows, scanning the night for blooms of flame. I stayed, too. Even considered buying a fiddle.

The forests banding the river went next. Silhouettes of flame danced upon the surface dark of the water. Afterwards, the trees were nothing but charred pikes sticking out of the ground. The daggery teeth of some enormous subterranean monster.

The army went in to clean up the mess; when their utility shovels bit into the earth, fresh flames leaped up: the fire was still smouldering in the tree roots, waiting for the ground to open up and let it out again. Men died, though the army never said just how many.

The gunner on a patrolling Humvee shot an old man in an alley. Apparently, he'd snuck out to smoke his pipe; his wife refused to let him smoke indoors, figuring if her house was earmarked for ashes it ought not to be her hubby who did it. The gunner was twenty-one years old and by all accounts flighty as a hummingbird. He opened up with the roof-mounted .50 cal, pumping a belt of copper jacket rounds into the alley. There wasn't much left to bury.

The army pulled up stakes. Ostensibly, they were re-strategizing, generating a fresh tactical matrix, but they were abandoning us. They were fighting ghosts and losing badly. The city and those left in it were collateral damage.

In the end, it was just the good people of Cataract City, and them...which might have been us all along.

Backdrafts form the backbone of every firefighter's nightmares.

Picture a room. One window, one door. Hardwood floor. One big overstuffed chair—a La-Z-Boy or something like that.

Say that chair catches fire. It'll burn merrily, creating thick, hot smoke that spreads across the ceiling. Embers will ignite the hardwood veneer, bubbling and pocking the laminate, burning between the slats.

The gases will evolve—that's the scientific term—become saturated with heat, turn flammable.

A strange thing will happen: the flames will drop, like a gas range turned down low. All you'll see is the barest ripple, incandescent blue waves flickering over the floor. The fire has used up the oxygen, you see. It's starving. But at the same time, it's intensifying, each molecule tightening. It's finding just enough air to survive; it'll pull it in from under the doorway and around the windowsill. The fire's a cockroach, doing anything to survive.

The fire becomes the equivalent of a man trapped underwater. If he stays under too long, he'll die—and so it is with fire. In a few days, you could open the door and all you'd get is a buffet of warm wind. But if you open it when the fire's desperate, let it take a big breath...

A backdraft is when a sleeping fire awakes. Its harbinger is

a comical whoooooof, like the bark of a Saint Bernard. Those evolved gases ignite and expand, a quintillion superheated balloons bursting. Nobody can describe the experience of a backdraft; the first breath you take—a shock inhalation—will broil your lungs. Backdrafts don't leave witnesses.

The horror of a backdraft is that you never see it coming—but it's been there a long time. Waiting for you. Primed. It waits in the places you've known all your life. Those rooms of fondest acquaintance. The places you've felt most safe.

I walked the shattered city to find her. The blackness of the earth leached into the sky, a dark imprint on the undersides of the clouds. I knelt beside a little pile of sticks that someone—perhaps a child—had assembled before abandoning them.

I ran a strike-anywhere match along the sidewalk and touched flame to tinder. Idly, I watched it burn.

Franny's facility was empty. The staff had deserted it. Rooms lay vacant. Beds had been torched down to the naked springs.

I found her on the roof. The city stretched down the alluvial slope to the Falls, which sparkled whitely in the twilight. It was the only place I'd ever known. Born at Cataract City Gen, played Little League ball at the Lions Club diamond, kissed Laura Crowchild on the bleachers behind Westlane High. All ashes now.

"Hello, Blake."

"Hello, Fran."

"Did you know," she said, "that we're all the same, chemically speaking? Everything starts as hydrogen. Every living thing on earth. Carbon and nitrogen and oxygen—the chemical building blocks of life."

"You've told me this already, Franny."

"No, that was different. Listen. Please. These chemicals came out of a fusion process that takes place in the centre of suns, where the heat is twenty-seven million degrees. This heat splits the hydrogen into carbon, into nitrogen, into oxygen. Humans are one of a trillion atomic by-products of that intense heat. Think about it, Blake: we all hail from stardust."

"That's a nice thought."

"It is, isn't it? But we fuck it up. It's our nature."

When we were kids, Franny used to pinch her skin hard enough to draw blood. When I asked why, Franny said she was waiting for it to shed off, the way a snake's did. She hoped one night it would fall away and underneath would be a new face, not her own. I'd wondered: why would she ever wish to be something other than what she was?

She took my hand. The sleeve of her nightgown was frayed. Those threads would ignite without much trying at all.

"I've read about towns disappearing," she said. "It can happen overnight. No explanation. The fabric of a place dissolves. Entire families vanish. Some awfulness gets visited upon the citizenry. I remember reading that." Her fingers tightened around mine. "Some awfulness...but what if the people recognized the collective awfulness inside themselves?"

Flames nibbled at the periphery of my vision. The silky crackling of fire.

"Franny, we're not all bad."

"This part of us is."

"What part?"

Her arm made a vague sweep that took in the whole of the city. With one finger, she pointed through my skin at my beating heart.

"It wasn't anything you could have beaten, Blake. All this was bound to happen regardless."

Fire was always waiting, patient as a weed, to take us back to our base elements—back to stardust. On a long enough timeline, everyone'll pay what they owe. Cities are no different. Fairness doesn't factor in.

We stood on the roof, my sister and I, waiting for the payback.

