Have you ever wondered why so many old buildings burned down at some point in their lives?

You will be walking in an old building, perhaps of some minor importance, like a county council building, a once famous hotel, or even some large manor. You will venture down some less traveled path, a side room or simply a hallway through which most people barrel through rather than pause. Your eye will suddenly be caught by some old pictures, almost certainly in black and white or sepia.

There will be the building, right there in the picture, fore and center. But it will look different. Probably smaller. But perhaps like more care was put into it. And in front of it will be some man or woman, or both, smiling towards the camera which may or may not have been a rare sight at the time the picture was taken.

Then, right below the picture, almost a forgotten footnote, there will be a small caption: <Place Name> before the fire of <Whatever year>.

And most people won't even stop at the picture at all, so they won't see it. And some will look at the picture but blow right by the caption (and of course the caption is very important towards understanding the reason of the picture being present in the first place). But if I know you, you probably stopped and looked at the picture, and read the caption also.

Isn't it interesting how such things were scarily common, at least on the order of years? Obviously, buildings still catch fire. People are negligent; people leave cigarettes improperly disposed of; people plug jacuzzis into wall outlets and then go on trips, all sorts of fire inducing activity. But then, it will usually just be their house, their unit, and very very rarely, their building which falls to the flames.

But imagine a world were the state capitol burned down, where the flames didn't stop at just the building but continued on to the next one, and the next. Where the whole business district disappeared into swirling tounges of destruction, reaching all too quickly a point were no one could hope to stop it. Whole towns, whole cities even, falling into chaos. Truly, horrible.

It makes one appreciate the technologies we have developed which forestall such events, and the brave individuals (since we haven't gotten drones or robots that can do the dangerous stuff yet) who go into harms way to stop the flames.

But what if there were more to it than that? What if there was something fundamentally different about those times? Something intrinsically dangerous, malignant and vicious which fanned the embers?

I was quite young then, perhaps five or six. I don't even remember the occasion, but at some point I found myself at the old firehouse.

Although I don't remember the specifics of the occasion itself, I do remember the details, and certain thoughts which ran through my mind during the excursion.

For instance, I had never been to a fire house before. As a five or six year old though, I was very familiar with firemen, since it seems that at that point in time, a child's world is composed solely of books around policemen, firemen, construction workers, farmers and other like professions.

And of course, firemen have the dalmatians.

The dalmatian in the old fire house was an ancient hound well past his years of service. There was not much to him, but he held himself with careful prowess, ploding around the tiled halls. He was also infinitely patient, having endured a full dog lifetime of being brought to children's events, schools, and being accosted on the street.

His name was Casus and he was the primary reason I wandered from my parents and the aegis of Mr. Fenkleten, the former fireman and caretaker of the place, and wandered up into the upper stories of the firehouse.

The upper stories had, long ago, been transformed into a museum detailing the past of the town. I toddled down the hallway, happy to have been able to follow old Casus. My eye was caught by the pictures on the wall, even though they were just a bit to far up the wall to be at a comfortable viewing height for my five or six year old body.

I wandered down the hall, my feet slapping happily against the polished tile floor, off the ubiquitous yellow cinderblock walls of buildings built in the forties and fifties, into empty darkened carpeted rooms, and finally to the standard asbestos tile ceiling complete with buzzing fluorescent lights.

I found the pictures. A whole hall of pictures of the the former town. A whole hall of people standing with grins in front of stores and hotels, and the church, and the courthouse, and a fair number of homes. However, I didn't read the captions, since I was young, and likely not in a reading kind of mood. Evidently I was in a more exploratory mood, having given both my parents and the kind old Fenkleten the slip.

Yet freedom then, as now, was short lived.

After a few moments of running from picture to picture, the old man summitted the stars with some effort and called back down the way he had come.

“Don't worry Ms. Smith, he's just up here looking at the pictures! Casus was with him the whole time.”

My mother was not molified, and soon appeared at the top of the stairs as well, with my father right behind.

“Adventurous, isn't he?” My father asked with a grin. “Turn your eyes one moment...”

“Hmm” My mother replied, scooping me up off my feet.

“Hey buddy. Don't run off like that. You gave me quite the scare there for a few minutes. Tell me if you're going off.”

I nodded, then squirmed to be let down. I was much too old to be held like a baby, unless it was on my dad's shoulders.

She let out a sigh, then looked around the hallway.

“So whats all this then?” She inspected the picture closest to her. She read the caption. A frown. Then she glanced down the hallway.

“Are these all for the same reason?” She asked, a little surprised, to Fenkleten.

The old fireman caned his way to the center of the hallway where Casus met him happily. Petting the dog with his free hand, he pointed with his cane to one of the largest pictures.

“All burned.” he said with that combination of gruffness, yet pride that old people get when someone displays interest in the past that they know so well.

I looked up at my parents, unsure how to react to this information.

“Wow. The whole town?” My father asked, peering forward towards another photo. “Hey, I kinda recognize this intersection. Is this Broadway and Oak? That building's a grocery store, but you can still make it out in this.”

Fenkleten nodded. “The town had problem in its early years with fire. This section, yeah, the whole town went, or nearly all of it, at least everything on this side of the river. They had a real problem. They think it was something with the wind, or the lack of rain. This place used to be much drier; one spark and the whole place would go up, almost like it was just waiting for the queue. And of course everything was built out of wood, which didn't help.” He said with a laugh, which turned into a cough.

I walked over to one of the other larger pictures. “Whats this?” I asked, reaching up towards the picture.

My mother appeared behind me, stopping me before I could grab the picture off the wall. “Only look, dear; these aren't for touching.”

But old Mr. Fenkleten merely laughed and hooked his cane (a third hand for him) right around the wire of the picture and dangled it in front of me. I grabbed it before my mother could object.

“Its no problem Ms. Smith, this whole place is going to go any day, might as well let the kid go through it in his own way. Hells, he might even learn a thing or two.”

He collapsed down on his knees, balancing himself with his cane so that he could interact with me at a properly, at a kid's height. Casus came over to see what we were looking at. We all huddled around the framed picture.

“This here is the original firehouse. Mr. Josephus Weber built it with his bare hands, so the story says. Back then there was a terror of fire, especially during the summer months when the river ran low, and it was difficult to put a stop to things once they got started. Of course, it didn't turn out too well for him… A lantern over on third street fell over, and Ms. Mayer's bakery went to the torch.” He nodded towards another picture on the wall.

“He and the team he had assembled tried to set up a bucket brigade to the river, but someone had to be closest to the flames, and that was him. When he went to open the door to the place, the backdraft got him so badly his wife couldn't even recognize him.”

My father made a “ewww” facial expression and nudged me in the side.

“Oh god, that’s horrible. Were they able to stop the fire?”

“That time they were, but the next time, I suppose Mr Weber wasn't there to organize things. It happened during night proper this time and they weren't able to stop it at all. A light rain was the only saving grace, and was the reason the town is still here at all.”

Mr. Fenkleten nodded and replaced the picture once I had a good look at it.

“Yes. The town sure had a problem with fire. Got so bad, some said it was some sort of curse. But of course the gold always brought them back.”

“Mr. Fenkleten, why don't we have fires anymore?” I asked, tugging at his pant leg.

The old man merely winked at me, and tapped his cane against the tiles.

“This here firehouse. Its called the old firehouse now that they've build that new fangled one that’s all wired up, but before that one, back int the twenties they built this one and replaced the volunteer one down the road.”

“Cost a pretty penny too in those days to have so many men on call all the time, all the day, at least before the depression. But it seemed to do the trick. That and the engine. That was another piece of work. They were kept busy that year too, there were seven major fires that year, and a couple more that could have been big if they hadn't invested in the equipment.”

“Serious ones continued through the war years clear to the late forties. The old engine died eventually, and so the mechanics all came from the mines and put together their own. It is a real beauty. I'll give that the new on they have down the street is probably better in every measurable way, but this one was the one which changed things.”

“Oh! Can we see it?” I asked, tugging again on his leg.

My father laughed. “Sport, I don't its around anymore, but maybe we can find a picture or two of it.” He started scanning the pictures for the characteristic red engine.

“Actually… The engine's still here.” Mr. Fenkleten said with a gleam in his eyes.

My parents looked at him, impressed.

“Really?” I asked. “Where? Can we see it? Thats so cool!”

I was, of course, head over heels with firetrucks. The prospect of seeing one, especially one as famous as this one apparently was almost too much for me. I started running around.

“Sure. Sure! I'd love to show off the old engine. Its right downstairs in the garage. Cacus, come.”

He gestured down the hall as the dalmatian bounded back to us from some hidden corner of the building.