**Engine**

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 tongues 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 newfangled 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 one 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.

The old engine stretched before us, a tarp over most of it. In front of it were the motor powered doors which theoretically would allow the truck out onto the street, but from one look at it you could tell they hadn't been opened in a long time.

Mr. Fenkleten put his cane aside for a moment, resting it against the wheel, and leaned over the hood of the engine. He swept the tarp aside.

“Oh! Its beautiful” My father said, leaning closer.

It was. It was every children's book, and every cheerful red illustration. It was for sure the consummate fire engine. The Ur engine. In my mind from now on and likely forever into the future, it will remain a paragon among vehicles, to which all other must be compared.

It was long, certainly longer than a minivan, its front was centered on a huge black veined grate, the intake to the incredibly large motor. In front of this were two beautifully shined old lamps, and a red fender. Past this was the motor compartment taking up almost a third of the whole vehicle.

After this was the steering wheel, jutting out at an angle into the open drivers seat. I was about to ask what happened if it rained, but then realized that if it was raining, it was unlikely they would need the engine. Past this were two additional rows of seats, followed by the water tank. Along the back lay four extendable polished wooden ladders, attached to the side by hooks. A broad running board ran the length of the vehicle, raising into tasteful curves over the wheels which sported antique tires.

“Its a custom design. The mechanics all spent days trying to out perform one another. Its got twelve cylinders, unheard of for that time, at least in these rural parts. And it needed all that power as well because this isn't just a pumping truck but also a water tender. It carries its own water supply, which was essential for the summers when the pressure of the municipal water had problems.”

He patted the gleaming truck.

“There's enough power in this thing to rival a modern sports car, which is impressive considering it was made so long ago. I came along just as it was introduced as a paper boy for the front office and every day I could, I would try to catch a glimpse of it. Some days, they would even let me wash it.”

His eyes turned misty, and he held back a tear which threatened to fall from his eye.

I was in marvel at the device in front of me. It was probable that no other fire truck, nor any other vehicle was as perfect as the one in front of me. I slowly approached the black leather seats.

“C-Can I get inside?” I asked, looking up at the old fireman. That twinkle appeared again in his eye.

“You sure can.” He boosted me into the drivers seat of all places, that veritable throne! I was beyond ecstatic. There I was at the helm of vehicular perfection. I was Dr. Danger, the only person who could save the town, speeding down in the engine, flames searing past me on all sides! Yet with a press of the button on the dash, water erupted from my chariot, smothering the conflagration into puffs of whimsical smoke. I was unstoppable, I was powerful!

As I played make believe in the front seat, my father and mother admired the vehicle in their own way.

“Such design! They don't make cars like this now a days. Sure, there are more angles, they're more refined, but there is a statesman-like solidness to this that can't be rivaled; everything looks like it was made with care by hand.”

“It probably was.” My father commented, looking around the engine.

“But the problem with old cars like this one is that they weigh a ton. I remember my father used to have an old `57 Chrysler, sleek and blue as the sky itself, but it ate gas like nothing you would believe.”

He walked all around the vehicle looking it over.

“That’s the most important thing about this engine. It doesn't use gas.”

“Huh? Its a diesel then? Makes sense for a monster like this.”

“Nope. As far as I can tell, its electric, or something.”

My father frowned. “Electric? That can't be right. I wouldn't think they had the battery technology to make that kind of thing. Hell, they can't even get more than a couple of hours out of electric vehicles today!”

Mr. Fenkleten shrugged. “I've never filled the thing up. True, it doesn't get out much now a day, but there's no gas intake on the thing.”

My father shook his head and looked at mom. She also shrugged.

At that moment however, her phone rung.

She looked down at the screen for a moment then ran her hands through her hair and sighed. “Honey, its your mother.”

If I had looked over at dad at that point I would have also seen him sigh. “Strap in folks. Lets get this over with… Sorry Mr. Fenkleten, we'll be right back.”

The old fireman grunted, and they walked out of the room.

At this point however, I had reached a point in my fantasy where the ultimate vehicle that Dr. Dangerous drove had been sabotaged by an evil spy. Luckily Dr. Dangerous was also the worlds best engineer; he could fix anything.

I had clambered out of the seat and approached the engine. The bulk and magesty of the metal housing intrigued me, as did the simple black painted latches on the side. I knew exactly what they were and how to work them. And if they had been forgotten to rust, I never would have had a hope at opening them. However, Mr. Fenkleten had cared for every inch of the engine, and the latches on the hood were no exception.

Thus, even my little fingers, with the help of oiled joints, could pry open the latches one by one.

Mr. Fenkleten at some point must have heard or seen what I was doing, and called out to me. But I was so close to fixing the engine, and proving the evil spy wrong, that I didn't notice.

I flipped the last latch and with a great deal of effort, flipped up the hood.

“No, wait!” Mr. Fenkleten called out.

It was too late.

I stared down into the enclosure where the engine should have been.

I was having trouble understanding what I was looking at.

I was staring down far, too far, impossibly far, into a space too big to have existed in the engine itself, a massive chamber full of tubes, relays, mechanisms, and regulation systems, all to service and contain the *thing* in the center.

The fire at the heart of it.

Inside, punctured by tubes, controlled by a thousand systems, and suspended in that impossible space by forces unknown, was fire. Not just *a* fire, but what seemed to be the very concept of fire itself, it burned and surged interminably, thrashing its heaving tongues against reinforced metal bulwark. The air around it surged, warped, and twisted in a mad escape from its being. It looked up at me with no face, or eyes or arms or any body understandable by man, but yet it looked at me and I could feel that it understood. It understood and *hated.*

It rose in its enclosure, gasping towards me, desperate to be free, but the tubes and wires and gears churned; the fabric of the place's machinery engaged, and with a frightful power, dragging it unwillingly back to its place.

I felt the terrible malevolence. Nothing could describe my horror; I was so afraid, I couldn't react. I didn't cry, or cry out, or close the hood, or call for help, or even move. I could only stare in a strange fascination at the thing below me. It was less like a deer in the headlights and more like a hiker on an exposed cliff thousands of feet in the air on the approach of the storm: the wind picks up suddenly, and the rain and thunder surrounds him. He realizes that he is alone and is as nothing against the forces around him: the sheer elemental fury. And in such a situation, the tiny man can only stare up at the heavens in muted awe at the insignificance of himself.

And so I did, my face dimly lit by the horrifying heart of flame below as it tirelessly tried to reach up towards that entrance, to burn me to hateful nothingness, to blackened cinders and chared bones like it had consumed so many others.

Mr. Fenkleten slammed the lid shut.

His eyes looked over me wordlessly and his lungs heaved with exertion.

I stared at him, eyes still wide with terror.

“Hey sport. You- um... You saw it.” He looked down with a pained expression.

“I didn't think you'd open the damn thing. I should have locked it… I hadn't intended to show it off at all...”

I looked at him. Tears were starting to run down my face, for no reason other than pure terror.

“Oh. God. What have I done...” He approached me and with a grunt fell to his knees again and looked me in the eyes and wrapped me in a hug.

“Its ok son. Its ok. It was… It was just an illusion; a magic trick. There's no way something like that could be real right?” he tried, patting me on the back slowly.

I cried quietly into his shoulder. The plaid of his well pressed shirt is a smell I remember to this day, along with the feeling of the tear stains as the slowly were absorbed by the fabric, forming small pools of moisture.

“Hey. Its ok. Its locked up. You don't need to worry about it. It can never get out. They made sure of it. They made sure of it. They locked it up. They turned it against itself. Its not going to hurt you.”

I took a gasp and moved away from him and looked over at the engine.

“Uh, I take care of it ok. You see? The engine is sparkling...”

He paused, still on his knees. “I'm sorry you saw that. I was much older when they showed me. I can't say it helped me none. But I was older.”

The old fireman called Cacus over, but years of training and being around small children had conditioned the old dog, and he was already by my side.

I didn't try to pet him, but he slipped underneath my hand anyway. His body was warm. He looked up at me with soulful dog eyes. He knew too.

At this point my parents came into the room.

“Sorry that took so long, we just had to sort some things out...Oh honey… what happened?” My mother asked and came over to me.

“He was on the truck and fell off. He didn't hit his head through.” Mr. Fenkleten lied for me. “I looked him over, but you should as well.”

My mother did, and checked my eyes.

I don't remember the rest of the night, or most of the weeks after that. Slowly, the days and nights righted themselves into normal, and I avoided the firehouse like a plague, regardless of how nice Mr. Fenkleten had been, and old Cacus.

Bit by bit, and with the exception of horrible nightmares of what I had seen, life returned to how it had been before the incident.

And then Mr. Fenkleten died.

He had been pushing ninety, and was living all by himself without any family.

One day someone had seen Cacus barking out on the street, but wouldn't stop. When they went to return him, they found the old fireman dead. He had died of a heart attack peacefully in his sleep.

I don't remember my reaction to this news. I was obviously sad. The man had been nice to me, but the concept of death was foreign to be at five or six, and it was someone unrelated to me. I had only met him once and had done my best to forget the experience, locking it away behind heavy bars in my subconscious.

So my parents were both perplexed when I erupted in tears when I heard that the old station was going to be torn down and the engine impounded and destroyed. They were going to build a restaurant there. The engine was nice, but no one had the money to keep it up after Mr. Fenkleten had passed. No one would buy it either.

I was in a state of inconsolable terror. I tried to make them understand, but of course my parents didn't believe my story. I think they perhaps incorrectly thought the worst of Mr. Fenkleten though.

They hired a child psychologist for me, whom I dutifully talked to at length. It didn't help. I had *seen* the thing after all. I knew what his death now foretold. I tried to warn them.

But what irrevocably burned at my mind, night after night, what no psychologist nor empathetic parent could ever soothe, were the reports of a fire in the weeks following his death and the destruction of the engine. The first serious one in fact since the early fifties.

I knew it would not be the last.