

BEWARE THE FIRES

By M.Vidakovich

"Light a candle" Monique said.

I was feeling nervous sitting there. It was only mere weeks ago that this house had caught on fire. We had lived here for almost three years. We, being myself and a few friends. This was the place where my room mates and I forged a somewhat flawed effort at becoming adults. It was the house we all slept in as children do; oblivious to any form of harm that may linger outside the perpetually stained windows.

This house, our house, had caught on fire.

As we all stood outside and watched the fire department crew, my feelings went from fatigue to feeling like maybe I was being inconvenienced. You know, put out. But as I looked at the soot covered axe chopping through glass and wood, my feelings ran more toward;

"How in the hell did this happen?"

I was still carrying a buzz from the early morning hours before the fire. This made it all a little easier to deal with by the time the fire department showed up.

Still, I was shaky.

Only an hour or so before the first small flames arose, Monique and I had finally surrendered to our internal

clocks, altered as they so often seemed to be. On this night, the alteration was due to the Phenobarbitals we had gotten from her sister. (Monique has anxieties. I have no such excuses.) Up until then, all I can recall is her and I laughing. She was spinning wildly around the room while trying to lift the red tube top over her head. Not managing that simple chore, the small strip of fabric became plastered to her face as she spun naked and comically helpless. She laughed even harder than I did as she continued spinning and bouncing off the walls and the furniture.

This was the last thing I remember before the pounding on the door. At first, we heard nothing. Soon, there were the "Wake up!" pleas from Chris and his girlfriend that I still don't recall. They had run over from the bedroom across the hallway. Finally, Monique and I both became alert enough to notice the shouting silhouette of Jack at our bedroom door. He was telling us that we had to get out of there. Jack quickly gave up and ran down the stairs, eager to save himself and the others. Monique and I were then left to our own devices. It took a few seconds to realize that Jack's pleading silhouette and the now acrid smell meant that something was clearly on fire. We both pawed through the haze for our clothes. Not finding them, and with time running out, I grabbed the two floral patterned bed sheets.

We then clumsily tried to cover ourselves as we ran down the stairs.

Once outside, Monique and I stood in what looked to be summery, floral print togas. Then, we all gazed in still, sedated suspension as we watched the yellow clad fireman go at the front of the house. It was only a few minutes after they had received the call from Chris:

"Fire, Fire!...310 Franklin...hurry!"

There they were, in those hot rubber suits, making waste of our landlords front window with their hatches and pick axes.

"Fire!...fire!...." Chris yelled. "Get over here....now!"

I was still messed up enough to actually laugh at the sight of the firemen.

The whole event, really. And so were the others.

Within seconds after telling us that we were; *"Real lucky. Two more minutes and I'd guess that ol' house woulda went up like a pile o' toothpicks"*, the fire crew was gone. Off they went, into the rising sun of a very hot Sunday morning. We watched them drive away. Then, we all looked at each other.

"What tha' fuck?" we thought.

We smiled wasted looking smiles. Then, we just went back to bed.

Later in the afternoon, the gravity of everything finally sank in as Chris, Ronnie, Jack and I sat on the curb. The house stood behind us. That it now cast it's dark shadow over the four of us seemed appropriate, as well as pretty disturbing. You could feel a knowing chill passing through everyone at the same time. Soon, we just fell silent as we looked down at the ground, or off into the distance. The smoke had now mixed with the stifling July humidity, giving it a sickly, sweet smell. We were afraid to speak; afraid to turn around, afraid of the fear and regret that would come out.

But mostly, we just wanted to forget about the whole thing.

The repairs were done quickly after we put together a convincing story for the landlord. It turns out that the damage was mainly inflicted on the now hacked up front window and porch, along with some minor smoke damage. Nothing that some wood, glass and paint couldn't fix. To us, it seemed a lot worse. But this landlord happened to be surprisingly sympathetic. How did he not know what went on in his house? Night after night. Month after month. I'm surprised we didn't burn it down a long time ago. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe he wished it would burn down.

And while landlords could always make themselves to be a target of scorn among many people, I actually felt sorry

for the guy.

Sorry that he actually trusted us.

Being the grungy middle class kids in their early to mid twenties however, we began to shake it all off within a week. That was when we then heard about a close friend whose car had flipped over while he was while driving down a two lane rural road six miles from here. The car rolled three times, then burst into flames. They had a hard time identifying Kevin. This put us in a firm state of anger, denial and sadness because:

"Anybody could have told those cops who it was. Everybody knew Kev....the whole neighborhood knew him", as Jack pointed out in confused and frustrated grief. What he really meant was that it could have been any of us.

But we're tough, we all thought. And as we had done with the house fire, our survival and grief mechanisms engaged. We simply rationalized our friend's gone-too-soon exit as any or all of the following:

"Just one of those things"

"Here today, gone tomorrow"

"Keep on keepin' on"

"Life's short"

"You come in with nothing, you go out with nothing"

"Bummer"

We chose these and the many other hazy slogans you

could latch onto if the going got tough. If you caught your partner cheating. If your purse was stolen or your pocket picked last Saturday night. Or, if the dope wasn't worth the fifty dollars that you paid for it. *Don't explain/Don't complain.* Somebody important said that, I think. The biggest thing though was;

No one wanted to look weak.

"Don't you know if you don't heed the fires, the Devil wears the crown? The Devil will wear the crown."

Mike, the guy who lives in the halfway house next door keeps on saying this when he sees me or anybody else walk out of our place. Mike is one of seven or eight guys who live there that are all victims of nervous breakdowns and other similar misfortunes. A couple of the residents have even been lobotomized. All of them are on very heavy medication. The fire had worked up their entire house. And the fervor ran from either childlike enthusiasm for anything that burns up or down, to animal like fear. Larry wouldn't come out of the house for a couple of weeks. Chuck comes out, but when he sees any of us, he'll run back inside and close the door. There's another guy we just call Master, because he's older and wears a porkpie hat. He's especially freaked out by the sight of Monique and I. He'd still hang around with Chris and the others. Since the fire though,

he'll point at us and say the same thing Mike says about "The Devil" wearing "the crown". Whatever that means.

Then, there are other matters.

The same night of the house fire, Monique's younger brother Tommy fell asleep after smoking dope and playing his guitar with friends in a spare bedroom. After the other kids had left, Tommy forgot to turn off his very old tube guitar amp with the frayed, cloth cord. Nothing caught fire, but the house's wiring began to smoke. Monique's mom came home from working a night shift. Sniffing the air, she threw down her purse. Then she called out to her son only to find a still passed out Tommy as sparks and blue haze filled the room. You can only imagine her reaction when her daughter told her what happened at 310 Franklin the same night. One early Friday afternoon, Tommy and his mother came down to pick up Monique for a family gathering. Chuck was sitting on the large porch of the Halfway House. When he saw Tommy get out of the car though, he quickly turned and walked back inside. Then, there was the sudden turn around in the behavior of my mother. She started berating me. She called me a hippie, (I wasn't) and a bum, (she always praised me). Worst of all, she said Monique was a clueless whore.

Where did this come from? She adored Monique.

I was crushed and refused to talk to her for the rest of the summer.

Chris had a dream that the building he worked in was set on fire by vandals and that everybody on his shift had died. When he went into work the next day, his boss slapped him on the shoulder, telling him he had a day off. He went on to say that one of the machines overheated the night before and started smoking.

"This had been a Sunday? This building might not be here" he said to a shaken Chris.

But what really messed us up was the fire that took out nearly the whole four block downtown area of nearby McKeesport. You could smell smoke the whole summer in 1976.

Now, with our careless misfortune, it was like we were contributors rather than victims, problems in the face of solutions. Maybe the guys next door were onto something.

"Don't listen to them" Chris said, "They're higher than a kite most of the time. "Plus, I took Bible study when I was a kid," he went on. "And I don't remember any "crown wearin' Devil."

But I was curious, and I had a lot of time on my hands that summer. So I went up to the University library. I just started to dig around for stories on fires here in the Pittsburgh area. As I got more into the research, I started looking outside of Pittsburgh for more stories and information. After a couple of hours, while reading a piece about the upcoming Bicentennial, I came across an old

article that told of the burning of New York City in 1776. The city only consisted of the southwest side back then. It was set ablaze by George Washington and his troops when they had heard of the British Army's plan to take it over.

Washington's army burned the entire city.

By the time evening rolled around, we were all sitting on the front porch which still smelled of fresh paint and burning couch. The story of the New York fire that I shared with them had put us all into a numbed silence.

"Why am I telling them this?" I thought afterward.

"New York's not that close. But it's not that far away either." Perhaps this was my thinking.

Or maybe fire stories of any kind were simply not good subject matter for us right now. Suddenly, I felt like an idiot.

"Why are you coming home with a story like that after everything? Are you nuts??" Ronnie said; telling me what I already knew. Then, Chris went up to his room before the sun even set without saying a word. Jack got up and said he had to go for a walk to get some cigarettes. We didn't see him for three hours. Ronnie just sat there, not saying anything, not even finishing his beer. Monique, who pretty much lived at the house, asked me to walk her to her apartment. As I said goodbye at her door, she kissed me and said *"Nice story moron."* As I walked back home, I could hear the fire engines

off in the distance.

There was a lot of buzz that summer about other things. Mainly, the Bicentennial, which was now about a week away. I began hearing that a lot of people were leaving town for the long holiday weekend. Chris and Ronnie were going to Virginia Beach in Ronnie's Gremlin, and Jack wanted to see friends in Youngstown. Monique's roommate was having her sister and her boyfriend over, and asked if she could use Monique's bedroom?

"You're never here anyway." she said.

That sealed it.

Monique and I were pretty much the only people in town for the big celebration.

At first, we really didn't like the idea of being alone. But it turned out to be a great holiday. Neither of us thought much about it, but we really spent very little time by ourselves. Together, we were always surrounded by a lot of other people. It just didn't hit us until they all went off on their own. Because on this weekend, those people who were simply friends had now seemed like an absentee support group. They were maybe, far more important to us than we consciously thought. Monique and I had what seemed like the whole town to ourselves. As she said on that afternoon;

"We seem so large now."

And what fun we had. We started on Friday night, just making a home cooked dinner and watching TV by ourselves.

We never watched TV.

Home cooked meals were for people who cooked.

We even went to bed at a humane hour. Then, on Saturday, we just walked around town after having a late breakfast at our favorite place on Watson Street. We even bought a couple of little flags and carried them around all day. After eating a take out lunch at a riverside park, we just laid in the grass. Soon, both of us were falling asleep. Before dozing off, I looked over at Monique who now had one of the little flags in her hair as she snored loudly. Later, while walking back toward our neighborhood, she pointed to a very thin layer of haze hanging above from nearby McKeesport. It stretched for as far as the eye could see. We could both smell a very intoxicating light fragrance, almost like the smell of leaves burning in October.

We finally made it back to the empty house on Franklin just in time for another home cooked dinner. I had bought some wine at a package store to go along with the food.

Monique and I never drank wine.

We laughed during dinner as we sat face to face at the dining room table. Monique's head was partially obscured by

one of the bulbous wine glasses Ronnie had gotten from his mother. She'd move her head back and forth while talking as though the glasses were a huge obstruction. Then we'd laugh again.

At all of these small and wonderful things

The fireworks were scheduled for 10pm the next night. They were to be held down the street at a large public commons. After spending the day walking around as we had done before, we followed the delicious scent of a community pig roast being held in a park near the University. It was only two dollars each, so we stayed there and just ate as we watched the pig become thinner and thinner over the glowing coals. Monique and I talked as we sat in the grass, holding paper plates and plastic cups. We'd stop talking and just watch all of the people. Then we talked some more as we smiled at the many locals that we'd usually never see. "I guess we should get out into the real world more often" she said.

We came home and pulled the TV out to the front porch. We settled into a newer couch that had already acquired the smell of smoke. Monique fell asleep on my shoulder as we watched "Yankee Doodle Dandy" in black and white. Soon, I had joined her as we both slept through the rest of the afternoon.

We got up at around 7pm and started to get ready for the fireworks. We took sandwiches, a six pack, a few joints and walked down to the celebration at around nine. We had a great view, as our blanket was pretty close to the action. The fireworks were to be shot from a barge out on the river. With the twinkling lights on the water and the bottle rockets blasting off in the distance, the riverfront looked like a stage that had been laid out for all of us. Usually, some stars would be visible. The thin veil of smoke that kept hanging around from the McKeesport fire though, was enough to obscure all of them. This crowd wasn't as big as the year before, which was strange, being that this was the Bicentennial. Maybe a lot of people were in the same frame of mind as many of us had been at 310 Franklin St. I know we heard more than one person say;

"Can't believe that smoke's still hangin' around, it shoulda been gone by now."

After the fireworks, we packed up our stuff and began to make our way home. I'd never seen Monique so serene. It seemed she smiled the whole weekend. She had, as I've said, anxieties. Monique was high strung. She bit her nails and would pace while talking on the phone. There was a lot of free floating energy in her possession. And much of the time, she seemed unaware of it all. This was perhaps the main trait that we shared.

We both burned quietly.

So she smoked and drank and took a lot of pills and partied on nights where maybe she shouldn't have. One night after meeting her at a wedding that I had been tending bar at, we ended up together. She began hanging around the house on Franklin. I told her she might as well move in, because she was never at her place. She said no. She liked having a "clubhouse" where she could be with familiar people, after having spent the day *"off somewhere being someone else."* Monique worked at a State hospital for the mentally ill. There were a few times when I would catch her alone, either in a bedroom, a bathroom, or in my car, crying into her small, reddened hands as her silvery charm bracelet would tinkle back and forth.

So we talked about this and that while walking home. And after two and a half days of being closer than we had ever been, we couldn't wait to get back to the house.

"Our house" she said with a smile.

So once we got home, I took out Ronnie's glasses from the dirty sink and poured the rest of the second bottle of wine. When we made it upstairs, I turned on the fan as we slid under the sheets on this hot and humid night. The lights from outside flickered on the deep purple wine as we lay in the very quiet and darkened room. We looked at the ceiling and listened to a dog barking. Occasionally, we'd

hear a loud pop. We both tried to guess which side of the river it might be coming from. Then, we fell silent again for about five minutes.

"My grandfather was burned in a fire when he was our age", Monique finally said.

"Bad?"

"Yeah"

I waited for a long moment.

"All things considered, I wish you had shared this, like, last year or some other time."

She looked at me for a moment. Then we both started laughing.

"Light a candle" she said, sitting up.

I got a large candle from a table that was strewn with books, records, Monique's cigarettes and pantyhose, a punch clock (don't ask), magazines and unopened mail. I then put the candle on the window sill behind our heads. The window was open, just as it had been the night of the fire, and the large flame wavered around in the hot breeze, as Monique held her wine glass and smiled.

"Oh, wait a minute..." she said, "I have to show you what I got when we were in town."

She reached down on her side of the bed and pulled something out of a plastic bag. It was a green paper Statue of Liberty crown she had gotten from a street vendor. She

put it on and picked up her wine glass, letting the sheet slide down to expose a naked breast. The breeze picked up, enlarging the candle flame that had now cast a witchy, flickering light on Monique. It had also created a giant, ominous shadow on the wall behind her that made a petite twenty five year old female look like a multi-horned beast. This would have been hilarious had it not been kind of disturbing; given the circumstances surrounding this strange summer.

The flame grew higher still as another sticky breeze came in though the window. Monique looked at the flame for a moment as her eyes showed the reflection of a hundred tiny fires. She then took a long drink from the wine, draining the glass as she tossed it out the window. The sheet began to slide off of Monique as she crawled slowly toward me, her silhouette still looming large behind her.

"Heed the fires baby..." she said softly.

'Cause the devil wears the crown....the Devil wears the crown."