My Father in White, Above the Royal Blue

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The night Cooper's Royal Blue and the Western Auto burned down, I watched with half the town of DeWitt. At nine-thirty, when volunteers carried Drs. School's and Frommelt's records from their offices in the adjoining Spikins building, it looked like the whole half block might go, interior brick walls chimneying the flames. At ten-thirty, when the blaze breached a second-floor flaw in the fire wall, police moved the crowd. Too much paint thinner in the Western Auto. Exploding aerosol cans punted toward us, scatting along ice from the hoses. It was December, a week before Christmas, and I was fourteen.

Even in 1970 small-town Iowa, Cooper's was an anomaly, a grocery in a main street storefront, a narrow alley behind and parallel parking in front. Though not yet supermarkets, Barnes' and Skeffington's groceries at least had lots. Years earlier Walker's department store had quit the grocery business to concentrate on clothing. So the Royal Blue was the last of its kind. It belonged to an age when Main Street (Sixth Avenue, really, U.S. 61) sold everything from Maid Rites to insurance to a tire change, a time before the Lincoln Highway became U.S. 30—before the four-lane bypassed DeWitt altogether.

Mom never shopped there. We lived nearby, too, also on Sixth Avenue, a block north of The Crossroads of America, the intersection of 30 and 61, and I would sometimes join my cousins there for candy or Popsicles. But trips that ended with boys carrying brown sacks to the car began at Barnes' or Skeffington's. Who shopped Cooper's was never clear. Aside from Mrs. Schrader, the Lutheran pastor's widow, I knew no one who lived downtown, and I guessed Cooper's got by on deliveries and the fact that people could still charge a pound of hamburger there. At a time when other groceries ran full- or double-page spreads, any sort of advertising by Cooper's is curiously absent from back issues of the *DeWitt Observer*. From working summers on the back of a garbage truck, I knew firsthand it had far less trash than the other stores.

I cared about the burning Western Auto in a way I couldn't about Cooper's. On junior high Friday nights—the only time stores were open past five—Vance Tech and I browsed every worthy store downtown: Williams' and Tillman's dime stores, buying malted milk balls or peanut clusters from glass bins. Gambles' and Coast to

Coast, where we sighted shotguns and flexed fishing poles. Skeffington's for *Hot Rod* magazine and *Creem* and, way back on the top shelf, *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, which fit neatly into *Life* for safer scrutiny. Kleinsmith's for Creedence Clearwater albums. Our last stop, by custom and convenience, since it was closest to my house, was the Western Auto.

The store filled two fronts, each with its own door. Al Almond and Charles Thompson had opened it in 1952, Almond, married to Thompson's sister, living in an apartment upstairs. As in many other shops downtown, the owners were its only clerks, though bigger stores hired a few grownups who worked full-time. In 1970 Dennis Frey's father could support his family by selling men's slacks at Walker's.

Toys covered half of one wall in the Western Auto, and half of these were plastic model kits. Vance and I would study the Corvettes and '57 Chevys for twenty minutes on a Friday night before maybe choosing one. Airplane glue was fifteen cents a tube; you supplied your own pin to punch the tin foil seal. Varnish and shellac, vise grips and inner tubes, headlights and plumb bobs, mixers and toasters: this is how I remember the store. That and dark hardwood floors, sealed not with polyurethane but spilled oil, burnished by work boots and hard-soled shoes. The whole store was seasoned kindling, saturated with "accelerants," as the newspapers would later observe. When it went up, the volunteer fire department didn't have a chance. It did have the responsibility for seeing that the post office didn't burn down.

The fire chief and his deputy, elected by their peers, wear white coats in 1970, the other firemen black, the better to find a leader during conflagrations. As I stand that night across from the Western Auto, I watch two white-coated men atop the Spikins building abutting the blaze. They direct truck placements and hose streams, pointing broadly, a *pas de deux* in smoke. The chief is my father.

And as I watch him dance through embers shot by burst timbers, I wonder how much heat weakens mortar and whether, if the building collapses, he will feel long the flames. "Fire never kills people," he had told me a few months earlier, when fourteen-year-old Billy Youngstrem died eight feet from his front door, having gone back in to save a dog, "the smoke always gets them first." And somehow that reassured me. But now there is too much smoke and fire. He and Fred Behr, the deputy chief, shimmer white in white and yellow against the night.

When you're fourteen and your father is forty, he cannot die. Maybe after a long cancer when he's old and you're old, too. But because you cannot imagine yourself at thirty or forty, you cannot imagine your father dying. Or at least in 1970 you cannot. Perhaps today's eighth-graders, poised for a service world of downsizing, have learned to consume the present, too, opening space for a future that includes the deaths of fathers. But such spaces did not exist for kids born into the small-town fifties and sixties.

Here the Central Sabers played football Friday nights, and you could count on cars nosed against the end zones at the old junior high field by the late afternoon,

their owners to return during the sophomore game at six. You could count on the bank closing at three-thirty and old men playing sheepshead at Hap Smith's Shell station and manure spreaders shucking corn cobs sprinkled with pennies onto Ninth Street each Ridiculous Day. For big trips, downtown Davenport had department stores and shoe and stationery, Sears and the rest, and each Christmas Petersen's set up motorized scenes in its store windows. Northpark Mall would not open until 1973.

It was all an aberration, of course, for even small-town America is movement and change. A coal seam plays out. The bridge is built ten miles upriver. The new interstate turns highway to market road. Farms blow away. Fathers get killed by freight trains. That was Willis Hesse. Dad was seven. It was Christmas Eve, and he waited at a family party for a father who would never get there. When they brought Dad home from the hospital, an uncle took him up to his parents' bedroom to give him the double-barreled BB gun he'd wanted. And so Dad lost his father and Santa Claus the same night.

Fictive stabilities can never be seen from within their own time. Like Wittgenstein's fly, we can't see our bottles until something shatters them. And then we circle the shards, piecing them together in our minds, trying to see what we cannot know, the bottle's shape before the blow.

The call goes out to Grand Mound and Low Moor, and their companies arrive to knit hoses into the canvas and brass quilt. In twenty-degree weather the streets become glare ice. Hose pressure scoots firemen backwards. Sand is spread. I circle behind to the post office lot and watch the buildings settle, revealing third stories across Sixth Avenue, then second. Now the flames are hottest and brightest. Floor joists and plaster lath concentrate the heat, the imperfect collapse having left scores of air tunnels.

At midnight Iowa Electric's boom truck manages to snag the Royal Blue's hammered tin facade, and Peters's heavy wrecker pulls it into the street. The building stands in cross-section, two apartments' rooms above, a flaming doll's house. For the first time firemen don't have to shoot through windows, and steam replaces smoke. The crowd begins to realize the night air is cold and slowly starts to bed. I go finally, too, knowing that the Spikins firewall, later praised as eighteen inches of 1882 brick, has held and tonight my father will not die.

Thirty years later I look at the *DeWitt Observer* from December 10, four days after the fire, the first of the twice-weekly issues to cover it. In addition to the front page picture and story (continued on page three) are two full facing pages of photographs. Those not of the fire itself catch groups of people, women serving coffee and sandwiches in city hall, onlookers playing to the camera, firemen talking with helmets pushed back. In a small picture nearly lost in the bound volume's gutter is my father above the Royal Blue, only the store is now but smoke. His right hand is raised, but except for the identifying caption, he could be anyone. The *Observer* story quotes policemen and townspeople but attributes only a minor bit of information to "a fire department spokesman," who I instinctively know would never have been Dad. There is a shot in *Batman* where Michael Keaton stands preposterously high above dark Gotham City, ready to swoop down—but only when becoming public is absolutely necessary. Vengeance motivates Batman, transforming Keaton's sometimes goofy Bruce Wayne. I am not sure what enticed my father to wear a white coat, but I cannot imagine what he could possibly have needed to avenge. I do know he was happier on that roof than he would ever have been on the ground, though happy is not quite the right word. Less troubled. The night of the fire, Dad got home around four A.M. By the time I woke for school, he was already gone to work on the back of the trash truck he owned with Fred Behr. Smoky clothes piled next to the washing machine.

A new building eventually replaced the Western Auto and Cooper's. It's an orange brick and single story, the main street no longer valuable enough to warrant building up, the age gone in which people can even imagine living in small-town downtowns. Before the early seventies DeWitt had a single apartment building, all other rentals atop stores and in carved-up houses. As apartment buildings went up, upper Sixth Avenue decayed. Chuck Green razed the former DeWitt Hotel and built a squat Ben Franklin variety store. The Tower Building, its second- and third-floor windows plywooded for years, came down a few years later. The lot has been for sale since, a park bench and some yew bushes now joining the realtor's sign; from Thanksgiving to December, Santa's workshop shares the space.

The cores of Kansas City and Minneapolis and Chicago may gentrify, but not those of Mechanicsville, Calamus, or DeWitt. Even when the towns still grew, good jobs building tractors in Moline and Rock Island didn't lend themselves to life above a dime store. Then DeWitt no longer grew. There is no clear single agent for what happened: the two grain elevators bankrupting, Walker's folding, and Eclipse Lumber, Peters' Motor, Coast to Coast, the Ford dealership, DeWitt Hardware, and so on until you could buy neither a pair of pliers nor pants on Sixth Avenue. But had DeWitt read the fire right in 1970, it might have seen all of this coming. Don Cooper did, quitting the grocery business for good. But Thompson and Almond's Christmas Eve message in the *Observer* talked warmly of new stock in a new store early in the new year. By the decade's end, that shining new store would hold a pizza carryout and, for a few Decembers, when brown paper didn't shroud its windows, a holiday fruit basket center.

The last time I was in the "new" Western Auto was a Thanksgiving I was home from college. On Saturday the weather turned cold, and the battery in my old Mercury wouldn't hold a charge. When Dad and I walked into the stores, ribbons trimmed the toasters and toboggans. The floor shown whitish linoleum, the lights bright on a gray afternoon. We bought a battery from the back room where car parts were kept, out of sight of housewares. At home putting it in, Dad observed that Charley Thompson hadn't scratched the purchase month and year from the battery's sticker, hadn't started the thirty-six-month warranty. In a gesture emblematically my father's, for whom fairness, duty, and self-denial tightly interwove, with a screwdriver he plucked off the plastic "November" and "77" ovals.

Dad certainly read something in the fire. What he saw in the smoke I can only guess, though I'm sure he'd seen it before. Perhaps it was the futility of saving a burning past, the town and time's, his own. Perhaps it was a life of double jobs and self-employment and six kids, a childhood of moving, fatherless, from farm to farm and whichever relative could use him. He didn't run for fire chief again even though others lobbied him strongly. And while he stayed on the department until the mandatory retirement age of fifty, he didn't often play poker in the clubrooms above the police station. I read something, too, in the double vision of myself watching my father. At the end of *Field of Dreams* Ray Kinsella meets his younger father, whom he'd know only as a man broken by time. On our main street in 1970 I first saw my father's mortality. Looking back now, I also see his ending youth and wonder which building burns for me and when.

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