Max Odum

September

Fire. Fire is different from all the other elements in that in its most fundamental state it acts as if it were alive. Fire grows and shrinks, fire dies and spreads and most importantly fire will not stop spreading until it runs out of fuel. Fire is the most destructive element but also the element that has brought the most good to mankind. Depending on the wielder of the flame, it is going to be used to either harm or help.

Anna awoke to a shriek in the far distance. She wasn’t alarmed by this though because she knew that on Fridays the other kids often liked to chase each other around in the school yard before their class began. She rose groggily from bed and after rubbing her still fuzzy eyes peered out her window into the blinding light of the outside world. She was then alarmed to see that there were none of her classmates walking down the road to school; in fact the streets were empty. Slightly worried she rapidly donned her raggedy work clothes and bolted downstairs to see if her mother was awake cooking breakfast, but her mother was not in the kitchen where she normally resided on Friday mornings. Anna then let out a yell for her mother but to no avail.

Anna in a bit of a panic slipped on her work boots and left the house to see if she could find anyone who could tell her what was going on. She stepped outside into the bitterly cold September air and looked down the normally bustling street to see only a couple of abandoned carts and discarded trash. Looking out into the street that would normally be busy with farmers and their horses taking grains to the market and old folks taking rides in their automobiles, Anna couldn’t help thinking that there was a kind of peacefulness to the vacancy of the roadway. The silence was broken with a loud clatter and movement from across the street at Ms. Ostrowski’s house. Ms. Ostrowski burst from her home with such
force Anna thought that the door was going to splinter. Anna called to her from across the street with the tell-tale shrillness she got in her voice when she was upset. "Ms. Ostrowski! Ms. Ostrowski!" There was no response. Anna crossed the street with an awkward hurriedness and cleared Ms. Ostrowski’s gate. As soon as Anna did so, Ms. Ostrowski jolted 180 degrees and started screaming and swinging her fists with a zeal that Anna had never seen before. Anna yelped and screamed, "Ms. Ostrowski, stop!" Anna grabbed the much older woman by her wrists and pinned her arms to her sides until she felt the aged muscles in Ms. Ostrowski’s arms tire. "Ms. Ostrowski, what is going on? Why are you doing this?" Anna shouted at the elderly woman who was now mumbling incoherently with tears streaming down her face. "Ms. Ostrowski?"

Ms. Ostrowski shrieked, "THE GERMANS! THEY TOOK MY HUSBAND! THEY AREN'T GOING TO TAKE ME!" Anna released the woman’s wrists and took three hurried steps back. "THEY WON'T TAKE MY HOUSE!" Anna backed away from the elderly woman and into the street pondering what she had just announced.

Anna worried to herself about what Ms. Ostrowski had said. The old woman had been paranoid about a German invasion ever since rumors started in the west that the Germans had amassed a new army and under a new leader wanted to invade, but Anna didn’t believe any of that. Rumors were swirling almost monthly about Germans crossing the border almost monthly and after so many times Anna started to not believe any of them. But after all the stuff that had gone on today she didn’t know what to believe, so she decided to go to the place where she would most surely see people, the market. Anna shuffled away from Ms. Ostrowski’s house and into the deserted street. As she walked down the familiar streets to the market, she really began to take in how lonely the city was without anyone moving along the streets with her. The city felt colder with no noise or movement besides her own. The city felt dead.

Anna began to notice that as she got closer to the market things started to change. The normal store fronts with all of their usual sweet smells and sounds had disappeared behind boarded up windows. The streets leading up to the market were littered with shattered glass, and Anna noticed a cacophony growing in the distance. As she turned the
last corner into the market square, she was hit with a wall of heat, sound, and most of all fear. The once familiar market where she had done her normal Friday shopping just one week ago had turned into what seemed to be a free-for-all riot with all the members of her once sleepy community participating. Everyone was tearing at bushels of food farmers had laid out to sell later in the afternoon; some people were exiting broken store front windows with armfuls of goods. Others, mostly the very young, were just sitting in the middle of the chaos crying out for their mothers and fathers.

Anna looked down on the scene with horror. She saw the farmer that gave her family their milk every week kick in a store window and march out with several sacks of flour; she saw two brothers that lived down the lane from her fighting tooth and nail over a half loaf of bread, and most troubling of all, in the midst of the melee, she had not seen a single hint of her parents. Everywhere she looked it was a brawl, brother fighting sister, mother versus father, families fighting families. Anna fought the urge to sink to her knees and cry. The familiar pit in her throat began to form, but she couldn’t cry, not now. She swallowed her fear and began to walk into the middle of the mayhem. She wasn’t trying to get food or any other supplies; she was just trying to find her mom and dad. Anna walked among the fights breaking out all around her just wondering how all of this could have happened.

Anna soon became more fearful. The deeper and deeper she moved into the square, the more people became more violent. People were brandishing crudely made clubs, and some small fires had broken out all around the epicenter of the fights. Anna came upon two brothers fighting over a half loaf of bread and screamed at them to stop. For a split second they hesitated, and using that time Anna grabbed the half loaf, and she saw a primordial instinct to kill in both of the boy’s eyes when they noticed that she had swiped the bread from them, but before they pounced on her, she split the meager hunk of bread in half and handed it to them They seemed content for a bit, but they soon eyed each other’s half and attacked with the same tenacity as before. Horrified, Anna began to back away, but before she could retreat more than five steps, she backed into something big, something solid. It was Mr. Krol.
Mr. Krol was a man that Anna had always feared. He had a large scar running down the side of his left eye that people said he had gotten in a gulag in Russia, and he had never spoken a word to Anna. Anna feared Mr. Krol because of the terrible stories the other kids had told her, but in reality she had never talked to Mr. Krol and knew nothing of the man. Before Anna could bark out a quick apology and run, Mr. Krol knelt to one knee, grabbed Anna by the shoulders, and said in a gnarled fatherly voice, “Little girl. This is no place for you. Go now with the living for the only thing you will find here is death.”

With that there was a large bang that was incredibly close to Anna, and everyone in the square fell silent. Everything was still, cold, and tense. The stillness was broken with Mr. Krol stumbling forward and falling onto his back. Anna quickly grabbed his broad shoulders before he hit the ground with full force. She was now the one looking down at Mr. Krol's face. Her eyes scanned his body, looking for the reason the great man had fallen. As her eyes moved down to about-mid chest level she saw it. A large red stain began forming beneath his clothes and soon began to bleed through onto her hands. She quickly snapped her head in the direction the loud bang had come from, and standing just a few meters away was Ms. Ostrowski. The elderly woman was holding a shotgun with the barrel still smoking. A few seconds passed with no one saying anything. Then a loud buzzing could be heard in the distance, and Ms. Ostrowski dropped her weapon with a clatter and began collecting loaves of bread and flour. Everyone in the market was very quiet, still looking for the growing roar in the distance, but not Anna; Anna was trying to stop the bleeding from coming through Mr. Krol's shirt, but she knew it was too late. She saw it in his eyes, that he was gone. As she looked into the man's one milky-blue scared eye she saw a single tear roll down his rough skin and hit the ground. She then noticed something that made her heart sink in the reflection of Mr. Krol's eye. She whipped her head to the sky and saw them, the source of the now extremely loud mechanical buzzing. Line upon line of black airplanes with the German iron cross burned onto each wing. Anna, covered in blood, tears now beginning to stream down her face, amid the chaos now breaking out all around her more than ever, had only one thing on her mind, Mr. Krol's last words: “…..the only thing you will find here is death.”