



# The Hotel Fire

CRAIG BERNARDINI

The menace of destruction is always lurking in the inorganic world.

—LOTTE H. EISNER

1

THE HOTEL HAD BEEN ON FIRE for days and days.

It was a chain, a Radisson or Hilton or some such thing, fifty stories tall, taking up a whole city block somewhere in the mid-fifties, a massive capital-H seen from the sky. It had a covered semicircular drive where brass-buttoned bellhops greeted you, and one of five identically friendly clerks, though never the same one, would hail you from the check-in counter as soon as you stepped out of the revolving doors. The ground floor boasted two restaurants, three cafeterias, a lounge, an art gallery, a game arcade, and a souvenir shop. There were hundreds of staff, a dozen elevators, two thousand rooms, and thousands of guests.

At the beginning it seemed a fire like any other, and those of us who happened to be in the neighborhood on the very first day paused like many another pedestrian to watch the gaggle of firefighters in heavy coats carrying axes or pike poles. Their trucks were parked crookedly along the avenue where yellow tape was stretched. We stayed just long enough to witness the flames leaping from a window fifteen floors up, to shudder at the precariousness of our puny lives, to mentally cross-examine ourselves about the electrical cords and out-

lets and stoves in our apartments, maybe to see the glittering cascades of glass as windows were punched out and the flames mellowed into billowing black cloud. The rest of us watched it on the news that night, a succession of five or six images compressed into fifteen seconds among the minute or two allotted to the day's events. No one was hurt. No word as to the cause of the blaze.

A couple of days later, when the hotel started burning again, some of us sat up and took notice. On the news, the fire trucks looked exactly the same as before.

In the days that followed, as the crowds around the hotel multiplied and the news and fire trucks became a near-constant presence, something of the future of the event could already be glimpsed. Almost immediately, the media stopped talking about fires in the plural, and began referring to a single, spreading fire. For while it was true that individual fires were extinguished before new ones broke out, and that they began in seemingly unrelated parts of the building, it was difficult to ignore the persistence of the address. The hotel manager soon acquiesced—perhaps it was suggested to him that a single fire, no matter how great or prolonged, was finally less threatening than many—taking the opportunity to add that no guests were in danger, the situation was under control, and that the hotel would continue to go about its business with the same courtesy and efficiency for which it was justly renowned.

It was also during these formative weeks that the fire marshal stopped blaming careless guests and staff—the maid who had purportedly tossed a lit cigarette into a tub of dirty linen; the Spanish socialite who left his hot pot plugged in; the errant bellboy's unwholesome fascination with his Zippo—and began suggesting foul play. The tabloids soon had their man: a latter-day Bolshevik, dressed in the trench coat and black fedora of a Cold War spy, carrying a torch-sized match like the archetypal anarchist's bowling-ball bomb. But the foul-play thesis could not be sustained for very long, either. For by this time the guests and staff had already been interrogated and their backgrounds checked, several had been sacked for minor, unrelated offenses overlooked at the time of their hiring, and several more were being held for deportation. In the face of questions from reporters about potential suspects, the marshal was forced to admit that investigators had not yet turned up a shred of evidence pointing to arson. However, the marshal reasoned, it being true that the cause of every fire left a trace, the only plausible explanation for the absence of said trace was the

*presence* of a malign hand acting intentionally to erase it.

With no leads among the staff or registered guests, and despite the apparent momentary absence of fire, the city ordered an evacuation, which the police closely monitored, and the premises were searched from roof to cellar, room by room, in the company of the superintendent and his Brobdingnagian ring of keys. They found no one. What's more, it was only *after* the fire marshal had given the all-clear sign, but before anyone had been readmitted to the hotel, that the fire broke out anew.

We couldn't blame them, not the police and firefighters, not the media, manager, or mayor, not the city as a whole, for wanting the fire to have some agent, some cause, something or someone you could point a finger at, and give a name to, say, *There*, or, *He*. Nor were we ourselves immune, although our imaginations, free of practical considerations, tended toward the metaphysical and fantastic. A sort of Maxwell's demon, maliciously opening and closing dampers. A will-o'-the-wisp flashing gayly down empty hallways, seeding blazes in its wake. In those early days, in fugue from our lives proper, we had to amuse ourselves somehow, beyond watching the halting progress of the fire, and speculating about where it would strike next.

It was impossible to tell; its progress defied all logic. And no one knew this better than the firefighters themselves. If a fire was reported in, say, room 1116, rather than spreading to an adjacent room, or to that room's mirror image on a floor above or below, it might reappear in room 1692, or 510—I am pulling numbers out of a hat. With the careless guests/staff thesis quashed, and the foul-play thesis ridiculed, the firefighters turned their attention to the hotel's great circulatory system of heating and cooling ducts. For once it was agreed that the blaze was the product of a single slow-burning fire rather than a series of discrete successive ones, figuring out the method of transmission became paramount—if, that is, the firefighters hoped to reach the fire's ultimate cause, and extinguish it once and for all. Only such channels, it was reasoned, could carry sparks and burning material great distances across the hotel, to sow new and seemingly unconnected blazes, and supply them with the oxygen necessary to burn. In this sense, the fire could be said not so much to be spreading as reproducing itself, like a dandelion going to seed.

Many of us who believed that the investigation had gotten off track in its search for criminals and negligents were relieved by the change of focus. Only

later did it come to our attention that the ducts had been a locus of concern from the very first day. In fact, the air had been turned on and off, and vents opened and closed, according to the present location of the fire. Here was the problem: because of its size, the hotel was heated and cooled in segments that were, according to the superintendent, *entirely independent of each other*. Yet, if the fire was indeed moving via the ducts, it had managed to pass between these apparently inviolate systems unimpeded. In fact, it was only desperation on the part of the new fire marshal—the old had since resigned and joined our ranks outside the hotel, loitering in the vicinity of the news trucks—that had turned the investigators' attention back to the system, wondering if they had overlooked something. And it was only when the building plans were revisited in the company of the superintendent that this furtive little man mumbled something to the effect that the plans before them were only the barest reflection of the reality of the hotel, hardly representative of its actual ventilatory network.

Now the real investigation began. Experts were called in from every corner of the country: civil and structural engineers, captains of the heating and cooling industry, veteran contractors and fire investigators. Blueprints were unrolled, historical records unburied, old work orders uncovered and dusted off. For days, the team pored over these documents, which were variously reported to be forged, contradictory, ambiguous, and incomplete. One problem was that the hotel had changed hands several times since its construction shortly after the end of World War II, with apparently unauthorized renovations carried out by successive owners and owning entities. As the dead-ends multiplied, the fractious coalition of experts began to come apart at the seams, bickering and throwing up their hands in frustration, calling the investigation a sham, a quixotic fantasy, a waste of taxpayers' money. But the city, to its credit, dug in its heels. More documents were unearthed, previous superintendents and contractors subpoenaed; even simple day laborers were located and questioned—anyone who might be able to shed light on what increasingly appeared to be an endlessly complex network of capillaries honeycombing the building's walls. The remaining experts grew metaphysical, and debates broke out over whether extant documents or living memory could possibly do justice to the smoke-snorting behemoth that burned in fits and starts and calmly defied all attempts at rational explanation. Nor was our own occasional fatalism undermined by the fantastic stories told by those workers the city had managed to track down,

some of whom claimed to have been present at the hotel's initial construction. In one widely-reproduced interview, a Polish octogenarian responded to each question by shaking his head and jabbing a finger at the sky, as if to suggest that the hotel had not been built by human hands, but rather had descended from heaven.

In its desperation for results, the city now consulted with a mathematician, an expert in probability, statistics, and chaos. His tenure on the payroll marks the nadir of the city's efforts to defeat the fire, and for many of us, at least in hindsight, the breaking-point of their credibility. He appeared one day out of the blue, a German who had reputedly made and lost fortunes in Monaco before slinking back into the shadows of academe. He proclaimed that by submitting the sequence of rooms in which the fire appeared to a complex series of algorithms, he could determine, to a high degree of certainty, where it would strike next. It must be said that, although we distrusted the mathematician—his Germanic blackness and nervous squint, and the way he smiled wryly after each clipped phrase he uttered—we dearly wanted him to succeed. We wanted, that is, the elements, *time itself*, to submit, not to the half-measures of tea leaves and crystal balls, but to the sheer, raw force of the human intellect, which the mathematician, in his arrogance, represented to us. Our fatalism was motivated neither by bitterness nor by self-righteousness, but was rather a reflection of our helplessness in the face of what appeared the sublime unknowability of the hotel fire. In this regard, we felt sorry for each new fire marshal, condemned to fight a symptom rather than the disease. For the fire was just that, a symptom of a deeper infection—a deeper *something*—and the marshal a doctor condemned to prescribe skin cream for a fever rash.

The mathematician was given three chances, and then a fourth after he appealed to the marshal and mayor. Each attempt was accompanied by great drama. They tried, without success, to keep his choices secret. Once the news had circulated, we would pick up our belongings and migrate in the direction of the room, from busy avenue to quiet cross-street, or vice-versa, and then hold our breaths, our hands clasped together, staring up at the oracular window. With each failure—that is, with each report that the fire had begun elsewhere—a great cry would go up. On what was to be his final attempt, the mathematician appeared to err magnificently, until he pointed out that the number of the room that did burn was a permutation of the one he had pre-

dicted. Moreover, he argued, the first two attempts had done little but give him a chance to calibrate his instrument, and each successive attempt was exponentially more likely to succeed. The argument might have befuddled the fire marshal and mayor, but it did little to restore the faith of the rank-and-file firefighters, or the public. With his final and most spectacular failure, the mathematician came to be regarded as a charlatan, and the whole regrettable episode a cautionary tale in this tragedy that unfolded incrementally under our watchful eyes. It wasn't long before the mathematician, like the old fire marshal, joined our ranks, wearing a great sandwich board covered with formulae and different-size question marks, and proclaiming to whomever would listen that the hotel fire was *a truly random process*, the first of its kind in nature, a mathematical anomaly, not to say impossibility, and that as such he had given up studying it and decided to worship it.

Of course, the mathematician wasn't the only one who gambled on the fire. There were dozens of pools, money changed hands with each new blaze, fortunes were made and lost, as they say, from one day to the next. Nor was the gambling confined to the immediate vicinity of the hotel: some news reports estimated that tens of millions of dollars circulated daily through this upstart, shantytown sector of the industry. The vast majority of us, however, saw something far greater in the hotel than the momentary thrill of wagering a few dollars; and even as the mathematician dashed our last bit of faith in the knowability of the fire, even as we were ready to join him and his sandwich board chanting the end times, and to worship the hotel fire like Hollywood natives dancing in grass skirts, we were loath to abandon it to mere chance. We were stubborn for purpose, for meaning. In our desperation to find something commensurate with the fire, to explain why it would burn intermittently but unstoppably, we abandoned metaphysics for the more comfortable templates of the hackneyed supernatural. We invented histories of iniquity for guests past and present, a veritable rogues' gallery: foreign torturers seeking asylum, gangsters languishing under witness protection, insatiably lustful priests, like monks wandered from the pages of an English gothic. We speculated about the atrocities that had been committed at the hotel, such transient spaces being always magnets for vice, the evil of countless unheralded deeds soaked into the blandest wallpaper, so that even the most wholesome of current guests, or at least the weaker-minded among them, became susceptible to intermittent

possession, driving them to arson, or worse.

We could almost believe it. But even as we relentlessly imagined these ridiculous gothic scenarios, we knew that there were no such infamous guests. We admitted that the hotel was neither a haven for old arsonists nor a hotbed for new ones. The hotel had not been built on a lake of fire, or on an old Native American or slave burial ground; there was no evil welling up from the soil or the past. There was no geometrically unfathomable system of ducts through which sparks could be carried hither and thither to every corner of the building, no strange little men real, spiritual or metaphorical, no demons abstract or concrete. Above all, there was no structural flaw. For to believe so was to believe that the hotel had not been intended to burn. But neither was it a question of the malign hand of an architect or builder. The hotel was the sum total of a thousand intentions, a million tiny acts. It had no conscience, no memory, no power of reason; but it did have a destiny, which it enacted before our eyes. Or perhaps it had only a will—perhaps it *was* only will: pure, materialized will, whose mere exercise was self-consuming. For all we knew, all materials, all *elements*, were infused with just such an insidious latent life, a will predicating obsolescence, a sort of death-wish, which, when they were arranged just so, and in such-and-such combination, became manifest. So it had been said many years earlier about the Bronx, *The Bronx is burning*. A simple declaration in the present continuous tense, without agent or end. But while it might be said of the Bronx that the statement deliberately concealed a malign hand, in the case of the hotel fire it seemed apt. For just as we could no longer imagine a cause, or remember a time when the hotel didn't burn—we were sure it had been built out of brimstone by flaming men—so it became unimaginable to us that the fire would someday end.

2

In time, the hotel corporation came to realize that the fire was more recognizable than the red neon corporate logo, which flashed now amid a perpetual haze from the building's penultimate, windowless floor, like a beacon from a lighthouse. For as the fire became less and less a news item for city residents, and as the firefighters became at once a near-invisible presence at the scene and fodder for late night talk show hosts' monologues, so it simultaneously became a must-see attraction for tourists. Pilots pointed to the smoke as they flew over

the island on takeoff and landing. Tour buses changed their routes to pass it. Before long, it was as recognizable a sight as the Empire State Building's chameleonic cupola, and even made it into the quirkiest tour books, where it came to be referred to, simply, as The Burning Hotel.

Once upon a time, you could have looked up at the buildings surrounding the hotel and witnessed the eerie spectacle of hundreds upon hundreds of office workers gazing out on the fire in groups of two and three from their office windows, like mannequins in a vast department store. But as the fire became for residents and commuters less a spectacle than a nuisance, their numbers diminished. Altercations arose as area workers tried to hack a path through our always-swelling numbers in order to gain their commute. It was little use trying to explain to them that our numbers had swelled not with the faithful, but with tourists from Europe and Australia on their way between Fifth Avenue and Times Square, and families in for the day from Jersey, snapping pictures and sitting children on their shoulders, like the hotel fire was a parade. To the commuters we were all the same, legitimate targets for their ire, which we felt might have been more profitably directed at their places of employment. They told us to get lives. What use was it telling them that this was precisely what we had done?

As for the tourists who stayed at the hotel, they soon seemed as accustomed to the fire as the workers. No longer did they call the front desk in a panic to report smoke curling out of the ice machine, or the jack-o-lantern glow around a nearby door. No longer did maids have to suffer the indignity of being corralled by near-naked foreign men, shouting in broken Spanish that their rooms were ablaze. No longer, that is, could anyone claim that they didn't know what they were getting into: the occasional, piecemeal evacuations, more a formality, the perpetual smell of smoke. Anyway, they knew a bargain when they saw one. Shortly after the fire had started, room rates had slumped. There was no need for fire code to be enforced for the hotel to glimpse ruin. The pressure came not from the city—not surprising, given the hotel's clout with the latter's various, interlocking political machines—but from corporate headquarters. The embarrassment of the hospitality industry, they called it. The manager would not mention the fire, but defended his decision to drop rates as an emergency measure. We were convinced that he was smarter than his superiors gave him credit for, and so were hardly surprised when the hotel began to emerge from

its smoldering chrysalis as the great, blazing butterfly we always knew it for. For even as the hotel had slipped deeper into the red, registration had quickly rebounded to near pre-fire levels. From a guest's perspective, this made eminent sense: With over two thousand rooms, the probability of one's room catching fire (the average frequency of a "new" fire being about twice the length of an average stay) was less than 0.1%. The chance of being in one's room the moment the fire broke out was even less, and of burning to death as a result, less still. On the other hand, as the staff never tired of pointing out, the chance of being mugged or shot on the city's mean streets was considerably higher. Never mind that the current level of meanness of the city's streets was open to debate, or that (as a reporter later revealed) the comparison turned out to be statistically challenged. Savvy consumers got the message, and learned to take the fire in stride. For really, what was a minuscule chance of burning to death measured against the opportunity to stay in one of Manhattan's most elegant midtown hotels at a fraction of the cost of its competitors?

What followed was inevitable. Registration soared, and rates followed. The hotel was booked solid for months. Suddenly, it was no longer just a spectacle to be gawked at, but an event to be experienced. It was rather like the fascination with the leaning tower of Pisa: a paradoxical monument to ephemerality, an emblem for the transience that characterizes all pleasure. But the fire also gave guests an authentic feeling of danger, for who was to say it wasn't *your* room that would go up in flames this time? Once again, the quirkier tour books quickly updated their New York entries, expanding the hotel's original listing under "Accommodations," and this time even their more conservative competitors followed suit. The Burning Hotel, as one pun-happy guide put it, was now "the hottest three-night-stand in town."

As for why the hotel was so slow to capitalize on its new popularity, most of us blamed the risk-averse culture of the corporation, which, it must be admitted, had helped to create, and had much at stake in, the hotel's reputation for courtesy and efficiency. So we could not help but see the hand of the manager at work again when they sacked most of the marketing division and hired a cabal of twentysomethings, who immediately set about making over the hotel in order to take advantage of its incendiary architecture. The first thing they did was to paint a ring of flames around the lobby, and down the halls of every floor, and around the outside of the building three stories up. Soon the bars

were serving drinks with variations on the “burning” theme, and the kitchens became famous for their hot wings and “sizzlers” (both of which were really quite bland). Clerks were encouraged to speak with more “fire” by, say, occasionally insulting guests, disparaging their dress or hair, or using foul language. Maids and bellboys undid the top buttons of their prison-orange uniforms, and staff were given whistles, and trained to denounce slacking coworkers by blowing the whistles and shouting, “Fire!” They were encouraged, too, after the slogan of the most recent ad campaign, to use the phrase “put a little spark” into every available circumstance, or to create such circumstances when they did not exist.

Area residents, in the meantime, had organized around the supposed threat that the fire represented to their community—not out of fear that the fire would spread to their residences, but because the drain on equipment and manpower implied by the constant presence of firefighters around the hotel left them vulnerable. God forbid, they said, that a fire should break out a block away from the hotel, for whoever lived there would surely burn to death while the fire trucks didn’t budge and the firefighters stood around looking up at the hotel windows like birdwatchers. It was clear that the community, or at least its most vocal members, regarded the fire as a promotional stunt, not far removed from the theories of the vibrant conspiracy culture that had grown up around the hotel’s new profitability. Some simply refused to believe that the fire department was so incompetent as to be unable to extinguish the fire for months on end. And if not incompetent, then it must be either deliberately negligent, or criminally engaged: there was no other possibility. That we regarded these theories as the fruits of ignorance did not stop them from multiplying, evolving as circumstances demanded. For example, when we pointed to the period before the hotel came to recognize the fire as an asset, the theorists agreed that the first phase of the fire might have been outside the hotel’s control, but its later profitability revealed a clear economic imperative. Given its responsibility to shareholder interests, they said, the corporation simply could not afford to let the fire fizzle.

Unlike the theorists, the community pressured the city for a general evacuation, which, they claimed, would put an end to “this fire nonsense” once and for all. But while it might have been true that the purported negligence of the fire department left the community vulnerable, and that a tragedy, given these cir-

cumstances, was inevitable, somehow nobody realized that the most likely site for the tragedy was still the hotel itself. So it was that an old German couple, about whom little was known and less remembered, was burned alive as they slept in room 2356 at the end of the fire's fourth month. A few weeks later, three young French artists, who were reputed to have said that dying in the burning hotel would turn their lives into transcendent, monumental works of art, got their wishes, if not their concomitant fame, though photos of their snarled, charred corpses did briefly circulate the web. Finally, and most egregiously, a young couple from Nebraska and their two children burned to death huddled together in their bathroom on the third floor. There were the usual inquiries, hearings, post-mortems, protests, histrionics from district representatives, denunciations of the power of big money to corrupt politics, etc., etc. Tourists were exhorted to exercise personal responsibility for the risk of staying at The Burning Hotel. But even as the deaths mounted—or possibly because they did—the hotel became that much more a juggernaut, not so much outside the city's control as an image of the city itself.

Although the hotel lost room after room in its near-daily fires, even after several months' burning, the number of rooms lost amounted to less than 5% of the total. At this rate, the hotel would take a full five years to "burn to the ground," assuming that it did absolutely nothing to remediate the burned portions of its property. There was a brief dip in new registrants, though whether it was due to the building's beginning to resemble a housing project—all those boarded-up sockets visible from the street, like so many missing teeth in the corporate smile—or whether people remained a little spooked by "Nebraska" (as the event came to be known in marketing circles), was unclear. Regardless, the mini-slump was the opportunity one of the young marketing geniuses behind the hotel's original makeover had been waiting for. The greatest tragedy, he announced, would be for the hotel's popularity to run its course before the fire had. His revelation was to restore each burned-out room according to a different theme or vision, utilizing the talents of both famous designers and lesser-known, local artists. Supporting the local arts economy would not only give the hotel street cred, he argued, but improve its image as a corporate citizen in the wake of "Nebraska." Finally, the *pièce de résistance* of each renovation would be its eclectic window, which would simultaneously memorialize the earlier burning *and* announce the identity of the designer. Portholes, loopholes,

deadlights—nothing was judged too eccentric. In fact, the young ad-man’s entire vision amounted to a broadside against the hotel’s perceived persistent staid uniformity, which, he argued, was incommensurate with its new image. As for the guests who stayed in these rooms, they would also be touched by the previous fire. It would be as if they, too, had burned at some time in the past, and were living out a glimpsed future life, with all the possibilities and freedom that entailed.

The plan implied an enormous outlay of capital, of course—not just in construction, but design and marketing as well. But from the first completed renovation, it turned out to be amply justified. Even at the new rooms’ exorbitant rates, demand was unprecedented, and the guests who stayed there became instant celebrities. In this way, several minor midwestern capitalists and the dignitaries of tiny, insincere nations enjoyed their moments in the sun; and although we had no idea who they were, when they came to their windows to wave, we could at least point to them and say, He is staying in the Ralph Lauren room, or the Keith Haring room, or what have you. It was true that some ordinary folks squandered their life savings for an opportunity to stay a night in a room attributed to some lesser-known designer. But by and large the renovations were advertised to the already-celebrity, for whom the once-unhip hotel had become a bona fide destination, and who were spotted in its main lounge with increasing frequency.

As for safety, always “a priority,” if not a liability, the hotel liked to say that lightning never struck twice in the same place. Whether or not this was true of lightning seems beside the point; the first renovated-room casualty, an up-and-coming hip-hop artist from Queens, lingered a month before expiring of his burns. (A second-order renovation, walled entirely by corrugated metal storefront grates spraypainted with commemorative murals of the deceased, proved even more popular, and more expensive, than the original.)

Although the conspiracy theories lost some traction after the Nebraska incident—few believed firefighters would murder a family in cold blood—they soon resurfaced in slightly-mutated form. Why, theorists now asked, would firefighters remain day after day in the vicinity of a fire they seemed unable to defeat? In return, we asked how it would have looked had they simply pulled up stakes and retreated to their stations. We supposed they continued fighting the fire for no other reason than because they were firefighters, it was their pro-

fession, and theirs was not to question why, etc. We wondered if the theorists had ever bothered to look at their faces: the stony, grizzled, soot-caked faces lining the sidewalks where the fire companies were encamped. They would enter the building in gangs of three and four, clopping along like drafthorses in their heavy coats and helmets, carrying their axes and Halligan bars, passing similar-sized groups of tourists on their way out, who chatted and laughed, and swung their purses in great arcs, and perhaps paused to snap a picture with their phones of those grim, determined men moving off to some unspecified point in the hotel where fire had been reported. It was what they had paid for: the excitement of the fire brigade passing at arm's reach; the epiphenomena of a tragedy that might at any moment be their own, enjoyed from the relative safety of probability.

Though our role was much more modest, like the firefighters we were committed to seeing the fire through to the end. We watched as one watches a turbulent sea dismantling a vessel just beyond the surf, hapless to approach, even as the noise of its doomed passengers gusts ashore. We imagined, that is, that we were tending to a being terminally ill, yet divine. Our inability to imagine an end made us only that much more certain that it would come. So we thought of ailing saguaros, and shot elephants, and harpooned whales, and we waited for the equivalent of the gory death-spout, half-believing the behemoth would expire with a fantastic groan, yet knowing all the while that it was we who would emit that final cry; that the only sound the hotel would make was that of its own falling, of half a century's coagulated labor crumbling to the earth.

### 3

The hotel had been on fire for days and days, but one day it happened that the fire no longer burned as a succession of discrete rooms, but began burning in swathes of three and four rooms together, and then in whole wings and floors. It happened almost overnight, the way a village of thatched roofs may become an inferno from a single small blaze with a sudden change of the direction of the wind. In this case, the wind—at least the most memorable event to whose proximity in time we could ascribe the sort of necessity that the hotel fire inspired—turned out to be the announcement that the hotel, tired of the generic “burning” epithet, would henceforth be known as The Hotel Prometheus. It was like the name a condemned man shouts, his or his general's

or his cause's, the moment before the leader of the firing squad lowers his sword. Given the aggressive new marketing regime, the only surprise was that it took as long as it did. Rumor had it that the hotel was on the verge of redoing its corporate logo; and we believed that, had the fire gone on long enough, it would have separated entirely from its corporate parent. As it turned out, it never got that chance.

The signs were there for anyone to read, although more legible, of course, in hindsight. Over the preceding months the reception area had taken on a gaudy, faux-Egyptian cast worthy of Las Vegas, with torches lighting the way to the bar and elevators, and festooning the walls of the lounge, so that it resembled a treasure chamber. Drinks sizzled; shots were lit; fondue came back into style; kitchens were relocated to where the cooking fires could be easily observed by diners. In the arcade, the shuffleboard pokers were painted black, and baccarat was played on hot coals. On occasion, the wooden balls exploded. Bellboys became hellboys, and then imps, wore crowns of flame; and maids, now succubi, were themselves set ablaze—actual flaming maids, running down the halls carrying bundles of burning linen. The concierge was perpetually covered in soot. To keep the smoke to a bearable maximum—enough, that is, for a haze to persist in the halls, and for the occasional ambient cough from a guest—an elaborate new exhaust system had been installed. Occasional coughs were played over hidden loudspeakers, too, and a constant, near-inaudible crackle, as of crickets in the countryside, accompanied guests wherever in the hotel they went. As for the manager, he took the role of the Devil himself. We could almost see his henchmen shoveling bills into an oven, like firemen used to coal in railroad engines and steamships. For the hotel had only grown more profitable the nearer it approached its *auto-da-fé*.

The turn in the fire was first reported by a nomad roaming around the block (the majority of us by this point had settled on a particular street or avenue). He informed us that three fires were burning simultaneously on three different sides of the building. In itself this was not so alarming; simultaneous fires had broken out in different parts of the hotel before. But when they persisted, and then spread, a thrill ran through us; we became a mass of gooseflesh. Soon the south side of the hotel was showing six, and then seven, and then ten windows spitting flames like dragons' gullets. Before long, all the great façade was a checkerboard of fires. A cry went up from us. The end had begun.

There were dozens if not hundreds of new firefighters on the scene, men and women we no longer recognized, and convoys of hook and ladder trucks jammed up the streets, their spinning lights competing with the glow of the blaze. No matter how many reinforcements they brought—and within a day the whole force seemed to have converged there—they were hardly enough to address the extant fires, let alone their growth, as what one marshal had described as a slow-motion game of whack-a-mole exploded into anarchy. Signals got crossed; already-exhausted firefighters fanned out through the hotel, sprinting up and down distant stairwells, where they were left alone to die smothered and cremated in nameless wings. Others collapsed and were carried out of the building by their comrades, deposited along the sidewalks in heaps. There were the black faces greedily sucking oxygen from masks passed among colonies of prone bodies, as the panoply of jagged ladders multiplied and the bulging canvas anacondas crossed thick as viscera and the streets ran like rivers and the guests intrepid or insane continued to enter and exit and the hotel continued to profit and to burn.

Finally the city called a general evacuation, over the protests of the manager and the board of trustees, who held that the situation was not so dire as it appeared, little worse, in fact, than it had been for the preceding year, certainly not bad enough to justify a general evacuation, particularly given what many of the guests had paid to stay there. The guests, they maintained, were adequate arbiters of their own safety, and evacuating the hotel now would be as good as shuttering it once and for all. It was rumored that the hotel encouraged their guests to defy the city's orders, but that hardly seemed necessary. People were still trying to check in, sensing that it would be their last opportunity to stay there, confounded by the many guests who refused to check out. Some had no doubt gone there specifically to self-immolate, determined to be among the elect who perished with the hotel. They barred their doors; they hid inside their rooms; they assumed traditional poses of non-resistance when the firefighters broke in, at great personal risk, to haul them away. Some fought tooth-and-nail with their would-be saviours; others proved unrescuable: locked away in regions of the hotel made inaccessible by the fire, they waved handkerchiefs out their windows, not to signify their desire to be saved, but to announce their presence to us. And they were unsaveable, too, from the great ladders violating the sky in staggered combination, a sky so blue the earth seemed peeled, the firefight-

ers black as birds against it, smoke wafting around them like some Wagnerian mist, trying to keep their balance high atop the heads of those crooked pins, only to try to rescue those determined not to be, unable either to pull them out or persuade them in arguments shouted over a few feet of empty space and the siren-pulses far below, and sometimes with guests who started burning even before the argument had been abandoned.

There were those who changed their minds too late, or seemed to. One guest made a rope of knotted linens and tried to shimmy down from the eleventh floor. Not only did the rope stretch only halfway to the ground, but a new conflagration began on a floor below. He had already climbed halfway down when the rope caught fire beneath him, and was unable to gain his window again before the flames overtook him. He burned where he hung, his body writhing. When he fell, it was because the rope had burned through, and the burning linen became his shroud, flapping like a hammock wrapped around a body cast to sea. There were many such grisly, fantastic scenes. And there were many who simply jumped.

In time the firefighters themselves were no longer allowed inside. The ones who had not returned were presumed dead, and the guests who had refused to evacuate, or who otherwise could not be accounted for, who could no longer be seen in their windows blowing kisses and waving handkerchiefs, were also given up for lost. The building itself was judged dangerously close to collapse; the crowds were pushed back onto the surrounding blocks. The bedraggled firefighters joined our ranks, exposed their stout hearts buried under their heavy coats, their helmets cradled under their arms. They were smoked to nought but sweat and grizzle, and shadows burned under their eyes; their oxygen tanks were empty; the hydrants had run dry, like the rivers drunk by Cyrus's armies on the march from Persia. Together, we watched as Gideons Bibles burned by the thousands, together with thousands of Impressionist reproductions. Bars of individually-wrapped soap burned, and tiny bottles of shampoo and conditioner became so many candles. Courtesy hangers and ironing boards, comforters and single-serve bags of Colombian coffee; even the sprinkler heads must have burned, sputtering at first, and then melted and run together with the ice machines and exploded pop cans and room-service trays, fused into metalplasticwood, while the hotel threw up vast quantities of smoke and ash, like a child tossing handfuls of sand at the beach. It blazed, a skyscraper of fire, as though

making fuel out of its own destruction, and so burning more fiercely with each passing moment, a Manhattan Vesuvius threatening to take along with it not only the city block it occupied, but us as well, and the whole damned island.

But the promise of eternal fire was, as always, an illusion. It burned this way for just three days, turning the air gritty and the sun black, casting its great gloom over the city, and depositing drifts of ash on every windowsill, before collapsing upon itself into a smoking pile, where it smolders still. Even in our finest moments, and in spite of our invincible desire to believe, we knew all along it had been built to burn; ever since that first Dutch wall, and that first dollar bill pasted over the counter of the first inn, we knew the island was so much kindling, a mountain of money soaked in gasoline.