

I was nineteen and in Europe when the tenement apartment I'd grown up in burned down. In a matter of hours, my old dolls and diaries became the charred debris of a now alien Washington Heights landscape.

I imagined that warm summer day was like the ones I remembered, colored with beautiful black women in bright dresses, Fire Engine Red lipstick, gold hoop earrings from Woolworth, and bracelets from the West Indies. Sitting on their folding chairs, neighbors called out to those passing.

“How you doing today, Mr. Perry?”

“Oh, I'm coming along fine, and yourself, Mother Lee?”

“Oh I can't complain, thank you. It's hot but I can take the heat.”

Then, men like my father strode down the street in shiny shoes, the taps on their heels announcing them.

Aldous Huxley said he felt clean for the first time in his life when a fire in his home left him with nothing. I didn't feel that. I only felt loss. And I knew that something, memories mostly, had been taken from me. But I didn't realize then that they wouldn't be given back. My father didn't say he felt clean, but he didn't seem to lament the loss of anything. Things were used, got old, and wore out. All things changed and all things were possible. He never said any of this, but he did say, “We never know what will come.” He said it all the time. As if that cleared things up.

No one knew how or why the fire started and it didn't seem to matter. We had nothing that could be called valuable. My father only said, “It was an old building.” There was no

insurance to be collected and no compensation, although the city helped him find an apartment in a Harlem housing project. The place where he'd be murdered eight years later.