

# FIREWOOD

BY M.J. ANDERSEN

ONE DAY LAST FALL, Emerald and I moved firewood. We cradled it in our arms, like puppies. We placed it in neat rows in the trunks of our cars and drove it carefully across town to my house, where we stacked it against the garage in a pyramid that grew hour after hour as we cradled and loaded, drove and unloaded. Our arms and our backs grew hot with fatigue.

I was buying this wood from my friend Voltaire, who was moving to California. By buying it I was sparing her the trouble of getting rid of it. It just so happened that I really wanted this wood, though, and this was in my mind too.

About two years before, I had moved into an apartment with a fireplace. But I had only ever had small stocks of wood for it, so I stinted on fires. Now I would not have to stint: what my friend Emerald and I were moving was nearly a cord. And so I ought to have been happy as we began our work that Saturday, each saying how good it felt to be laboring outdoors in autumn. But I did not feel happy. I felt like a thief.

The occasion for this transfer was the death of Voltaire's husband, the Man of Science, which had occurred approximately one month after it was foretold. Voltaire decided that, finances being what they were, and relatives being where they were, she should go West. To ease her transit she was disposing of a number of things in addition to the wood. While Emerald and I hauled and loaded, strangers came by and bought assorted household detritus that had been assembled on the porch, including full-length gowns, dishes, instructions for Chinese cooking, and boxes of wax lips. Actually I bought the wax lips. Someone came for the sewing machine, and someone else bought the piano, for his wife. Voltaire's house, which had been the center of my nearly ten years in Providence, was being dismantled piece by piece.

The best fires I knew of had been built by the Man of Science. I learned by watching him. He was older than I was (he served in World War II), and he knew just about everything, though this was not because he was older but because he was who he was. I, young and on my own when I first met him, had not known a thing and lived in terror of my car and all household appliances. Over the years he had become my adviser of choice on all matters, including car repair, stereo systems, and Christmas trees. When he died I was surprised to realize that my independence had been achieved, as though he had brought it over in a bundle one day and dropped it off while I wasn't looking.

Physical labor, after a prolonged enough period, is just itself, and has no ramifications. Hauling and

loading is hauling and loading. By the time Emerald and I finished moving the wood it was nearly dark; we had been at it for five hours. We thankfully accepted glasses of wine in Voltaire's living room. Though some things had already been packed in boxes, this was still pretty much the living room I knew. The rug was still here, and the couch. I sat near the fireplace and looked at an atlas as Voltaire's mother described the route they were going to take (Voltaire will not fly). Their project struck me as dramatic and somehow important. The whole country was to be implicated in our loss. This was very interesting to me. It comforted me. The continental United States looked luminous and perceiving.

Sometime after I got home I realized, with a stab of complete surprise and despair, that I had not left Voltaire a single piece of wood.

Before too many more days Voltaire's living room was quite empty, and the car was running outside. The passengers were Voltaire and her mother and Voltaire's baby, barely two, who had strongly resembled the Man of Science since the day he appeared. Also in the car was the pool cue, for protection. But there was no food, I think, and not anything to read. I was given a few stray items they had been unable to decide about — a bottle of vodka and a bar of soap, which, Voltaire pointed out, was one-quarter cleansing cream. I stood on the steps and waved, as though this were my house and they had just come for the weekend.

My dreams lately have been panoramic and exhausting, crowded with characters from my whole life and from the news, and taking up seemingly every theme known to Western civilization. In every dream is my fireplace, my exact one, though often in houses I don't recognize. A fire burns constantly. In some dreams this seems good. But in other dreams there is anxiety and suspicion of murder. In one a group of us goes out to a task that is impossibly complex. When we return I am alarmed to find that I wastefully let the fire burn on.

The philosopher Heidegger had a point he insisted on over and over, as though it were the key to everything. My death is my own, he wrote. It cannot be taken on by another. This seems true to me. So I do not go around thinking, as is commonly said, *a part of me died with him*. But what I wonder when I wake from these fire dreams is, Whose is one's life? And always these dreams send me to the window, where I see that the woodpile, solitary and substantial, is still there, though ever so slightly diminished. ■

*M.J. Andersen is a Journal-Bulletin copy editor.*