

On my way out of town one day, I passed the exit to Interstate 94 at its Western terminus. You can't go any further west on that highway than Billings Montana. At that moment I had reflected upon its Eastern end - Port Huron Michigan. To be a bit more broad, I pondered mainly the area I-94 passes before it comes to a halt across from Canada: Detroit, Michigan.

I-94 cuts through the neighborhood I grew up in. A giant ditch of four lane concrete that separates Michigan Avenue from McGraw Street. It was here, standing at the Central Avenue bridge, we looked down and saw President Gerald Ford wave to us from the motorcade as they sped into downtown Detroit. Now, many years later, only days after considering what lies at both ends of this road, I was flying into DTW, Detroit Metropolitan Airport, and could see it below me coursing past farms and the giant Uniroyal tire that stands guard to welcome visitors to our famed Motor City - Detroit, the land of engines and optimism.

The flight from Billings to Minneapolis was crowded and beside me on all sides were chattering women. This is a sound I enjoy. I took no part in their conversations and vague interest in them as well, but their personable tones soothed me. More of the same from Minneapolis to Detroit. This time the ladies nearby shared with each other stories and even photos of their children and pets. Many men I know would have complained to no end about the high-pitched gossipy torrent, but not I. Hearing them delight in the camaraderie of motherhood was just what I needed to hear along with the drone of the jet engines on that particular day.

My hotel was quiet save for the guests who turned up their TV from 11:00 to midnight. No bother. Sleep did not want me, not until later anyway. In the morning, I visited my Mother before heading into the neighborhood. Like a car wreck, I did not want to see it as badly as I wanted to look. Before I got there I could only imagine what the house looked like after the fire that killed my sister.

When I lived in Tampa I volunteered at the Red Cross. I went on fire calls and awarded hotel, meal and clothing vouchers to those hapless victims who had lost everything. Fire is fast. And quiet. And devastating. What amazed me was the resilience of the people this happened to. They may have been in shock, but always seemed to be as calm as if their car had a dead battery and needed a jump. Never much to say, I guess because there was nothing to say. My Mom was the same way. She wasn't home at the time - she was at her chemotherapy appointment.

Imagine that. Your house burning down while you're at chemotherapy and losing your child.

Like other fire victims she was amazingly placid. She was grievous, of course, but her story is completely different from my Fathers'. He was there. This incident for him was much more fearsome than anything else he had ever experienced.

My Father has the same frame as myself, 5' 7", 200 pounds, 69 years old with an iron will. Third degree burns cover his head and hands. Sorrow pours from him.

9:00 AM. In the bathroom, the door shut. In the front room of the house, Marian slept on the couch or was watching TV. Beside her a candle burned. A cat roamed the house.

From inside the bathroom, he smelled smoke, then opened the door to an inferno. He reacted as any parent would and rushed to save his daughter.

Marian's willpower was much stronger than his. She froze in fear and did not move. Dealing with the fire for her, again, is a completely different story. 37 years old, 200 pounds, Marian had Downs Syndrome. She was so strong that he could not budge her. He tried. He described flames on her back and rushing to the sink to fill a pot of water to douse her. He pulled as hard as he could, her arms outstretched, he begged her to flee.

At her last conscious moment he knew it was too late and he saved himself. He could not have carried her.

The coroner ruled that smoke inhalation was indeed the cause of death.

The butterfly effect is one tiny move that starts a chain reaction. It's what causes us to sneeze when we don't know why. Perhaps a wisp of wind that started miles away drifted into the house that day and blew the curtain to the flame. It may have been the poor kitten my mother had adopted that tipped the candle. What deadly sprite sent a spark the wrong way? This we will never know.