



Philadelphia
Fire
a novel by

John Edgar Wideman

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ALSO BY JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN

A Glance Away
Hurry Home
The Lynchers
Damballah
Hiding Place
Sent for You Yesterday
Brothers and Keepers
Reuben
Fever

Philadelphia
Fire

To Judy—
who teaches me
more about love each day

Let every house be placed, if the Person pleases,
in the middle of its platt . . . so there may be
ground on each side, for Gardens or Orchards
or feilds, that it may be a greene Country
Towne, w^{ch} will never be burnt, and always
be wholesome

Instructions given by me William Penn,
Proprietor and Governor of Pennsylvania, to my
Trusty loving Friends . . .
[30th Sept. 1681]

Part One

O

n a day like this the big toe of Zivantias had failed him. Zivantias named for the moonshine his grandfather cooked, best white lightning on the island. Cudjoe had listened to the story of the name many times. Was slightly envious. He would like to be named for something his father or grandfather had done well. A name celebrating a deed. A name to stamp him, guide him. They'd shared a meal once. Zivantias crunching fried fish like Rice Krispies. Laughing at Cudjoe. Pointing to Cudjoe's heap of cast-off crust and bones, his own clean platter. Zivantias had lived up to his name. Deserted a flock of goats, a wife and three sons up in the hills, scavenged work on the waterfront till he talked himself onto one of the launches jitneying tourists around the island. A captain soon. Then captain of captains. Best pilot, lover, drinker, dancer, storyteller of them all. He said so. No one said different. On a day like this when nobody else dared leave port, he drove a boatload of bootleg

whiskey to the bottom of the ocean. Never a trace. Not a bottle or bone.

Cudjoe watches the sea cut up, refusing to stay still in its bowl. Sloshing like the overfilled cup of coffee he'd transported this unsteady morning from marble-topped counter to a table outdoors on the cobblestone esplanade. Coffee cooled in a minute by the chill wind buffeting the island. Rushes of wind and light play with rows of houses like they are skirts. Lift the whitewashed walls from their moorings, billow them as strobe bursts of sunshine bounce and shudder, daisy chains of houses whipping and snapping as wind reaches into the folds of narrow streets, twisting tunnels and funnels of stucco walls, a labyrinth of shaky alleyways with no roof but the Day-Glo blue-and-gray crisscrossed Greek sky hanging over like heavy, heavy what hangs over in the game they'd played back home in the streets of West Philly.

Zivantias would hold his boat on course with his foot. Leaning on a rail, prehensile toes snagged in the steering wheel, his goatskin vest unbuttoned to display hairy chest, eyes half shut, humming an island ballad, he was sailor-king of the sea, a photo opportunity his passengers could not resist. Solitary females on holiday from northern peninsulas of ice and snow, secretaries, nurses, schoolteachers, clerks, students, the druggies who'd sold dope and sold themselves to get this far, this last fling at island sun and sea and fun, old Zivantias would hook them on his horny big toe and reel them in. Plying his sea taxi from bare-ass to barer-ass to barest-ass beach, his stations, his ports of call along the coast.

But not today. No putt-putting around the edges of Mykonos, no island hopping. Suicide on a day like this to attempt a crossing to Delos, the island sacred to Apollo where once no one was allowed to die or be born. No sailing today even with both hands on the wheel and all ten toes gripping the briny deck. Chop, chop sea would eat you up. Swallow your little boat. Spew it up far from home. Zivantias should have known better. Maybe he did. Maybe he couldn't resist the power in his name summoning him, Zivantias, Zivantias. Moonshine. Doomshine. Scattered on the water.

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Cudjoe winces. A column of feathers and stinging grit rises from the cobblestones and sluices past him. Wind is steady moan and groan, a constant weight in his face, but it also bucks and roils and sucks and swirls madly, sudden stop and start, gust and dust devil and dervishes ripping the world apart. Clouds scoot as if they're being chased. Behind him the café window rattles in its frame. Yesterday at this same dockside table he'd watched the sunset. Baskets of live chickens unloaded. Colors spilled on the sea last evening were chicken broth and chicken blood and the yellow, wrinkled skin of plucked chickens. Leftover feathers geyser, incongruous snowflakes above stacks of empty baskets. The island exiled today. Jailed by its necklace of churning sea. No one could reach Mykonos. No one could leave. Dead sailorman Zivantias out there sea-changed, feeding the fish. Cudjoe's flight home disappearing like the patches of blue sky. Sea pitches and shivers and bellows in its chains. Green and dying. Green and dying. Who wrote that poem. Cudjoe says the words again, *green and dying*, can't remember the rest, the rest is these words repeating themselves, all the rest contained in them, swollen to bursting, but they won't give up the rest. Somebody keeps switching a light on and off. Gray clouds thicken. White clouds pull apart, bleed into the green sea. A seamless curtain of water and sky draws tighter and tighter. The island is sinking. Sea and wind wash over its shadow, close the wound.

Take that morning or one like it and set it down here in this city of brotherly love, seven thousand miles away, in a crystal ball, so it hums and gyrates under its glass dome. When you turn it upside-down, a thousand weightless flakes of something hover in the magic jar. It plays a tune if you wind it, *better watch out, better not cry*. Cudjoe cups his hands, fondles the toy, transfixed by the simplicity of illusion, how snow falls and music tinkles again and again if you choose to play a trick on yourself. You could stare forever and the past goes on doing its thing. He dreams his last morning on Mykonos once more. If you shake the ball the flakes shiver over the scene. Tiny white chicken feathers. Nothing outside the sealed ball touches what's inside. Hermetic. Unreachable. Locked in and

the key thrown away. Once again he'll meet a dark-haired woman in the café that morning. Wind will calm itself, sky clear. The last plane shuttles him to the mainland. Before that wobbly flight he'll spend part of his last day with her on the beach. There will be a flash of fear when she rises naked from the sea and runs toward him, crowned by a bonnet of black snakes, arms and legs splashing showers of spray, sun spots and sun darts tearing away great chunks of her so he doesn't know what she is. They'll lie together on the sand. She will teach him the Greek for her body parts. Hair is . . . eyes are . . . nose is . . . the Greek words escaping him even as he hears them. But he learns the heat of her shoulders, curve of bone beneath the skin. No language she speaks is his. She doubles his confusion. He forgets how to talk. When she tests him, pointing to his eyes, he traces with a fingertip the pit of bone containing hers. He closes his eyes. He is blind. Words are empty sounds. Saying them does not bring her back. He'd tasted salt when he'd matched his word for lips with hers.

Cudjoe is remembering the toy from his grandmother's cupboard. A winter scene under glass. Lift it by its black plastic base, turn it upside-down, shake it a little, shake it, don't break it, and set the globe down again watch the street fill up with snow the little horse laugh to see such a sight and the dish run away with the spoon. He wonders what happened to his grandmother's souvenir from Niagara Falls. When did she buy it? Why did he always want to pry it open and find the music and snow wherever they were hiding when the glass ball sat still and silent? He wanted to know but understood how precious the trinket was to his grandmother. She would die if he broke it. She lay in bed, thinner every day the summer after the winter his grandfather died. She was melting away. Turning to water which he mopped from her brow, from her body parts when he lifted the sheets. Could he have saved her if he'd known the Greek for arms and legs? His grandmother's sweaty smell will meet him when he returns to the house on Finance and walks up the front-hall stairs and enters the tiny space where he cared for her that summer she melted in the heat of grief.

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Her husband of forty years dead, her flesh turning to water. Sweat is what gives you life. He figured that out as life drained from her. Her dry bones never rose from the bed. You could lift her and arrange her in the rocking chair but life was gone. He'd wiped it from her brow, her neck. Dried the shiny rivers in her scalp. Leg is . . . arm is . . . He learned the parts of a woman's body caring for her, the language of sweat and smell they spoke. He had been frightened. He knew everything and nothing. Why was he supposed to look away from her nakedness when his aunts bathed her? He loved her. Shared her secrets. If he sat in the rocker keeping watch while she slept, she would not die.

The crystal ball long gone. He can't recall the first time he missed it. Nothing rests in the empty cup of his hands. Not the illusion of a chilly winter day, not snowfall or a dark-haired woman's face, her skin brown and warm as bread just out the oven. *Ladybug, Ladybug. Fly away home. Your house is on fire. Your children burning.* He is turning pages. Perhaps asleep with a book spread-eagled on his lap, the book he wishes he was writing, the story he crossed an ocean to find. Story of a fire and a lost boy that brought him home.

He had taped what she said. She is Margaret Jones now, Margaret Jones again. Her other names are smoke curling from smashed windowpanes of the house on Osage. A rainbow swirl of head kerchief hides her hair, emphasizes the formal arrangement of eyes, nose, lips embedded in blemishless yellow-brown skin. No frills, no distractions, you see the face for what it is, severe, symmetrical, eyes distant but ready to pounce, flared bulk of nose, lips thick and strong enough to keep the eyes in check.

She thinks she knows people who might know where the lost child could be. And she is as close to the boy as he's come after weeks of questions, hanging around, false leads and no leads, his growing awareness of getting what he deserved as he was frowned at and turned away time after time. The boy who is the only survivor of the holocaust on Osage Avenue, the child who is brother, son,

a lost limb haunting him since he read about the fire in a magazine. He must find the child to be whole again. Cudjoe can't account for the force drawing him to the story nor why he indulges a fantasy of identification with the boy who escaped the massacre. He knows he must find him. He knows the ache of absence, the phantom presence of pain that tricks him into reaching down again and again to stroke the emptiness. He's stopped asking why. His identification with the boy persists like a discredited rumor. Like Hitler's escape from the bunker. Like the Second Coming.

What Cudjoe has discovered is that the boy was last seen naked skin melting, melting, they go do-do-do-do-do-do-do like that, skin melting Stop kids coming out stop stop kids coming out skin melting do-do-do-do-do-do like going off—like bullets were going after each other do-do-do-do fleeing down an alley between burning rows of houses. Only one witness. A sharpshooter on a roof who caught the boy's body in his telescopic sight just long enough to know he'd be doomed if he pulled the trigger, doomed if he didn't. In that terrible light pulsing from the inferno of fire-gutted houses the boy flutters, a dark moth shape for an instant, wheeling, then fixed forever in the cross hairs of the infrared sniperscoped night-visioned weapon trained on the alley. At the same instant an avalanche of bullets hammers what could be other figures, other children back into boiling clouds of smoke and flame. The last sighting reports the boy alone, stumbling, then upright. Then gone again as quickly as he appeared.

Cudjoe hears screaming stop stop kids coming out kids coming out as the cop sights down the blazing alley. Who's screaming? Who's adding that detail? Could a cop on a roof two hundred feet away from a ghost hear what's coming from its mouth? Over crackling flames? Over volleys of automatic-weapons fire thudding into the front of the house, over the drum thump of heart, roar of his pulse when something alive dances like a spot of grease on a hot griddle there in the molten path between burning row houses? The SWAT-team rifleman can't hear, barely sees what is quivering in the cross hairs. Is it one of his stinging eyelashes? He squints and the vision disappears. Did he pull the trigger? Only later as he's interrogated

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and must account for rounds fired and unfired does it become clear to him that what he saw was a naked boy, a forked stick with a dick. No. No, I didn't shoot then. Others shot. Lots of shooting when the suspects tried to break out of the house. But I didn't shoot. Not then. Because what I seen was just a kid, with no clothes on screaming. I let him go.

Cudjoe reminds himself he was not there and has no right to add details. No sound effects. Attribute no motives nor lack of motive. He's not the cop, not the boy.

Tape is rewinding on his new machine. The woman with the bright African cloth tied round her head had not liked him. Yet she was willing to talk, to be taped. She'd agreed to meet him again, this time in the park instead of the apartment of the mutual friend who'd introduced them. You know. Clark Park, Forty-third and Baltimore. He'd nodded, smiled, ready after an hour of listening and recording to say something about the park, about himself, but she'd turned away, out of her chair already, already out the door of Rasheed's apartment, though her body lagged behind a little saying good-bye to him, hollering good-bye over her shoulder to Rasheed. She'd watched the tape wind from spool to spool as she'd talked. Rasheed had waited in another room for them to finish. Cudjoe might as well have been in there, too. He spoke only once or twice while she talked. Margaret Jones didn't need him, care for him. She was permitting him to overhear what she told the machine. Polite, accommodating to a degree, she also maintained her distance. Five thousand miles of it, plus or minus an inch. The precise space between Cudjoe's island and West Philly. Somehow she knew he'd been away, exactly how long, exactly how far, and that distance bothered her, she held it against him, served it back to him in her cool reserve, seemed unable ever to forgive it.

How did she know so much about him, not only her but all her sisters, how, after the briefest of conversations, did they know his history, that he'd married a white woman and fathered half-white kids? How did they know he'd failed his wife and failed those kids, that his betrayal was double, about blackness and about being

a man? How could they express so clearly, with nothing more than their eyes, that they knew his secret, that he was someone, a half-black someone, a half man who couldn't be depended upon?

He peels a spotty banana down to the end he holds. Bites off a hunk. Rewraps the fruit in its floppy skin and rests it on a paper towel beside the tape recorder. Spoons a lump of coffee-flavored Dannon yogurt into his mouth. The tastes clash. One too sweet. One too tart. The cloying overripe odor of unzipped banana takes over. In an hour he should be in the park. Will Ms. Jones show up? If he admits to her he doesn't know why he's driven to do whatever it is he's trying to do, would she like him better? Should he tell her his dream of a good life, a happy life on a happy island? Would she believe him? Fine lines everywhere to negotiate. He knows it won't be easy. Does she think he's stealing from the dead? Is he sure he isn't? Tape's ready. He pushes the button.

... Because he was so sure of himself, bossy, you know. The big boss knowing everything and in charge of everything and could preach like an angel, they called him Reverend King behind his back. Had to call him something to get his attention, you know. James didn't sound right. He wasn't a Jimmy or Jim. Mr. Brown wouldn't cut it. Mr. Anything no good. Reverend King slipped out a couple times and then it got to be just King. King a name he answered to. Us new ones in the family had to call him something so we called him King because that's what we heard from the others. Didn't realize it kind of started as a joke. Didn't realize by calling him something we was making him something. He was different. You acted different around him so he'd know you knew he was different. Then we was different.

He taught us about the holy Tree of Life. How we all born part of it. How we all one family. Showed us how the rotten system of this society is about chopping down the Tree. Society hates health. Society don't want strong people. It wants people weak and sick so it can use them up. No room for the Life Tree. Society's about stealing your life juices and making you sick so the Tree dies.

He taught us to love and respect ourselves. Respect Life in