

# A Sign of the Times

J. Newton

1969

## The Smoke

Someone was more stoned than we were last night. He was walking down the Grand Trunk railroad tracks between Fourteenth and Grand River. He was a neighborhood resident of the slum area north of Warren on the near West side, close to the Fifth Estate office.

He had been in the uprising two years ago when the A&P and the Cunningham's on Trumbull had been burned down. The thought grew in his mind: Fire. He wanted to burn. He wanted something to burn.

The news reports said it was "children playing with matches." But before he played with matches, he spread a little gasoline around or poured it into a bottle before setting the spark...The fire was just the storeyard for the little-used Warren Tire and Rubber Co. ("Second-hand tires. Bargain Prices") and a coal storage depot next door. It was old. No one used it. It wouldn't be missed.

But it burned. It burned good. The huge beacon of black smoke could be seen in towns thirty miles away. "Is Detroit burning?, they asked outside. On the city streets it was a Spring day, and it was calm. "The Motor City's burning," the people joked.

Hundreds were drawn to the area of the massive flames. 500, they said, but pigs lose count easily. Hundreds more jammed Warren traveling west past the black beacon. Thousands more saw the sign in the sky and felt a tremble of the old electric current in their backbone. The excitement wasn't visible, but it could be felt all the same. Some people ducked their heads as they passed. Others felt a silly half-smile creeping across their faces as they looked at each other in passing.

## The Warren Tire and Rubber Co.

The neighborhood around Fourteenth and Grand River is mixed industrial and residential. It's a slum. Houses back up to the small concrete factories and wood or wire fences that cordon off the junk and industrial waste. Billboards crowd up to the houses, selling things to the drivers on the Edsel Ford Expressway. The Grand Trunk is an unhealed scar running across the neighborhood.

The houses are old, wooden. They would burn easily. The vacant lots are filled with trash.

## Not an area to drop a spark in.

Decay. Like the dead dog that lay beside the street. Flies buzzed in his mouth. Decay produces its own heat; its own internal combustion. It takes just the smallest spark. Decay is treacherous. It just seems to lay there. But it

hoards its heat, its energy, inside just waiting for the moment when no one is looking to spring to life. And then it springs to life all over. Spontaneous combustion, not a neat fire that can be controlled.

Not an area to drop a spark in.

This area had burned before. Two years ago, just a little later in the year the heat had gone up, and erupted in the streets along Grand River and along Trumbull.

The cops remembered. They were there in force. Their faces were grim—this wasn't a spectacle like the Tigers' homecoming. From time to time they anxiously looked up into the sky. The blue bubbles on their cars twirled aimlessly as they stood in clumps.

The kids remembered. Random stones and bottles were thrown at the firemen and the cops as they moved into the area.

It was a clear spring day, but out came the police semi-automatic rifles. The Man was rough and scared as he cleared the railroad tracks behind the smoke. "Wish I had a camera to get a picture of these mother fuckers." "Let go of my arm, man. You're going to get your ass beat acting this way." The pigs kept their rifles out while they patrolled the tracks and around the fire trucks.

## **The Apocalypse**

It's early in the year, but the heat was still there. It's always there smoldering beneath the surface. It burns on the conditions of people's everyday lives. It burns when they go to work. It burns when they return to their homes in the afternoon. It burns when they get pulled over for speeding when they try to get away for a minute.

The fires are actually kindled in the huge plants that lie outside the city. Here is produced the metal that Detroit lives on. Here the fires smolder the hottest, for it is in these huge furnaces and forges that the lines are drawn. In the plants it's decided who lives in the decay around Grand River and Fourteenth and who lives in Grosse Point Farms. Here it's decided who lives in the rows of aluminum houses in Dearborn and who lives in Birmingham.

The Apocalypse is the end. Kingdom Come. The last shall be first. The Big Fire.

But that fire is also the breeding ground for the Phoenix—the beautiful bird that sails out of the ashes of the old.

Grand River and Fourteenth is not the area to drop a spark in. Around there a spark can cause a riot or an uprising by spontaneous combustion. But it's all decided in the plants that ring the city of Detroit and produce the metal that is the city's lifeblood. If a spark is dropped there, and those great furnaces go up—that will be the Apocalypse.

And from its ashes will rise the Phoenix—the real New Detroit.

## **The Smoke**

It was a clear Spring day. But the eerie cloud of thick black smoke grew, spread and was replenished. Ugly contrast to the innocent blue sky.

The powerful saw and felt a tremor of fear. "Good God," they thought in their private minds, "It's covering up the sun. An eclipse. Why don't they stop it?"

People looked up from their lives on the street in the inner city. "Look at the sun shining through that big old cloud," they said.

—J. Newton, April 24, 1969

# fifth Estate

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