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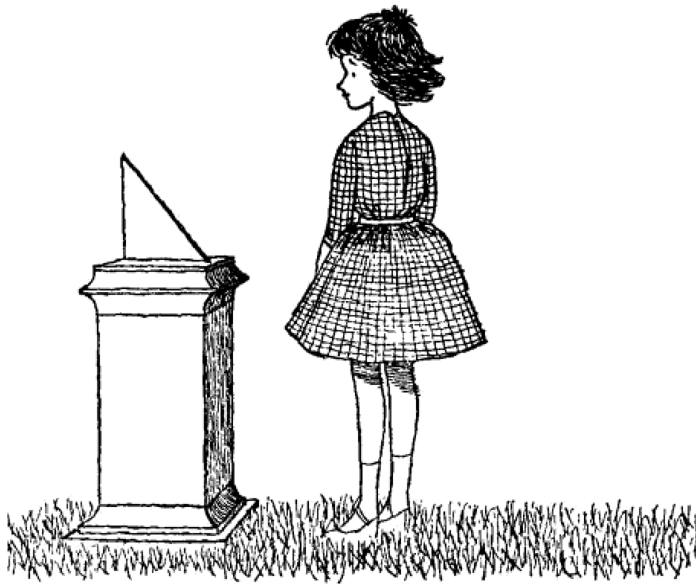
8th Street

"8th Street" was the last story in the last book of the Grande Caldera series of children's readers, published in the early-1950s yet used in schoolrooms well into the 1980s. The bookcloth for this volume was mint green, which was meant to confirm a kind of accomplishment, even apotheosis, but also the end of the road. Imagine each volume, as far back as one's literary life could discern, in its separate gradation. Starting with a brick red, then a basic navy, the volumes would soon move into mustard, olive and tamarind—oh, look, there's "gingham"—surmounted by the accomplishment of lapis-lazuli, but never with such utter, stark finality as the last minty tome.

But these gradual steps from brick red to transcendent mint, this initiation into reading, while implying a forward progress now, looking back, has metamorphosed into a labyrinth, ending at "8th Street," of which I seem to remember nothing at all.

Except: A dark and half-nude grandfather emerges in the morning with smoking bowls and eerie incantations side by side with men in wool suits and brillianteened hair; ladies with long Edwardian dresses and parasols mingle with men who, a more perspicuous eye reveals are still other ladies in mannish attire. On the backlawn can sometimes be seen (and disconcertingly heard) a harpist accompanied by *cor anglais* and an assortment of other instruments seemingly drawn from orchestras at the antipodes, causing more harm to the ear than harmony. There are children, but it is not known to whom they belong. There is also a raven, a cobra, a dancing bear, three greyhounds, and an ostrich, all of which the adults of the house treat with as much, if not more deference, as they do the children.

Since "8th Street" was the last story in the whole series, there is a good chance that no one ever read it. After all, to trundle dutifully through the Grande Caldera series is the least of a teacher's demands, and in fact, you may not have even "caught on to reading" enough to appreciate, or even vaguely remember anything of "8th Street." You may have paged forward to the pictures, which included a girl melancholically reflecting on what looked like an Exacto knife plunging up through the grass.



Because this is the type of literature that is neither conserved in libraries nor bought and sold commercially, but rather ordered by the pallet and disposed of at the whims of the school board, it is unavailable for my review. When a custodian, asked to free up storage space, can dispose of decades of literary memory with one predawn trip to the dumpster, we must ask ourselves, what is this purpose of a review of something no longer reviewable, indeed what is the point of reviews at all, when something reviewable one one day may not exist on the next? It is however my hope that, because of a general contempt for literature and policies of salutary neglect towards curricula that need not be updated, these books lingered long enough to have made some impression, however strange or outdated, so at least some of my readers will recall that it did indeed exist, and in reviewing we will start to piece together the vague outlines of a lost tale.

If we had access to the Teacher's Edition of the Mint Book, we might have some key as to the pedagogical aims of "8th Street," but alas that volume is even more elusive. One might however guess that among the story's high aims was that it familiarized students with the literary device of "synecdoche." After all "8th Street" is not really a street per se, but an unusually large and lonely house on a street with no other houses. Thus, what the house is called, the street it's on, and the title of the story are in constant exchange and substitution; through dream logic or chinese-box structure, "8th Street" extends the story one's reading into the house one's reading about, which may be confusing for young readers, yet ultimately compels them towards acceptance of ambiguities both akin to the dream as well as to the life that still awaits the adolescent.

In addition, as the final story of the Mint Book—and the very last of the Grande Caldera series—"8th Street" served to reflect on the storytelling impulse in general. We could say that the Teacher's Edition provided advice on how to gently prepare students for the metafictional conceits which these children would encounter in their future reading, but alas, since this story was published in 1953, perhaps there were few examples to draw on. Borges' *Labyrinths*, Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, not even George Cukor's *Les Girls* had been released. Perhaps, we could cite Emil Jannings and William Powell in Josef von Sternberg's *The Last Command*, but little else. So, however unsophisticated, "8th Street" was prescient of the dismantling of literary illusion that would happen in the 60s, here serving as requisite valedictory at the end of the Caldera curriculum.

The story's setting, we may say then, is the story itself. However, "8th Street" still partakes in some fictional realism, so more evidently, the author situates us readers at the turn of the century, in a city is still barely developed; 8th street, then, also implies the place of the outlying regions, "where the sidewalk ends." You might recall that *Where the Sidewalk Ends* is both the name of a 1950 crime thriller directed by Otto Preminger, starring Gene Tierney and Dana Andrews and a 1974 children's poetry collection by Shel Silverstein, which includes the gritty urban realism of poems such as "Hobo in the Bathtub." Aptly enough, "8th Street," the story, is stylistically somewhere between these two works, as it stands in the noir end of mint green, or rather the green end of noir. So too, "8th Street"—we speak now of the street itself—is not quite an urban jungle, but within the confines of this world still represents the unknown, the unmapped—a wilderness as perceived from the small world of a child just as much as from the small world of a young city. In fact, 8th Street is very close to the stables where the poorer boys boast, in fits of budding class solidarity, that they will "burn 8th Street down." And by this they mean the house, not the street, but also the idea, not the reality.

Because no one quite knows what goes on in 8th Street. Once again, a dark and half-nude grandfather emerges in the morning with smoking bowls. Singing what?

But, let us rush to the story's beautiful image, and then we can perhaps fill in the gaps along the way. Again, we are trying to grasp at what, if anything, could possibly have made an impression on you, or for that matter myself, of this last story in the last book of the series that we probably never read as we were all most likely on our way to bigger, better things. (At the very least, we became bigger things.) Let us walk, as the narra-

tor ultimately did, through large, almost empty Victorian rooms—with walls newly painted mint green (the very same as the Mint Book)—as they are going up in flames. Yes, flames—actual flames, but also synecdochic, metaphorical, iambic and trochaic flames. Yes flames but also no flames. Flames in couplets, ironic flames. Flames done up by a Pre-Raphaelite dandy in alizarin crimson with wisps of emerald; Modernist flames like an implacable Steinian litany. A catalogue of flames, a Homeric shipyard doused with flashback and set aflame with a single enjambment. Flames of exhaustion, flames of quietude. Appropriated flames that will get you sued. It need not matter which flame is which, for flames do their job, and are indiscriminate when it comes to literary taste.

It is only now that the narrator sees the inside of the house for the first time. Before, it had been enshrouded in rumor and mystery. The cool aura of each mint green room seems to have protected him from each flame, however confounded and confounding to his very being, and his natural curiosity propels him to enter the bedroom. He is suddenly embarrassed, in his knickers and cap before a beautiful young girl in her nightgown, staring at him from her bed. But it is not the narrator she is seeing, nor the flame running up the canopy, like a clever acrostic on its way to consuming every letter. He yells for her to get out of the bed, but she is determined to stay. "8th Street is a beautiful dream I want to keep."

This is, of course, how we keep a dream—by staying in bed. There is a pleasure in retelling it while half-asleep, instead of fully waking to write it down—only to discover its flimsiness. Perhaps that was the ultimate achievement of this anonymous Grande Caldera story—to convey a consciousness that you were about to wake from the dream of childhood. As such, reading the story itself would lend to its destruction. "8th Street" was conceived as a story which you must not read, only imagine, and if imagine, only carefully. André Breton once said that such stories as we find in this literature "while intended for persons who can scarcely read, are among the few things capable of moving to tears those who can say they have read everything." Yet, there is a danger in dwelling in these books for too long. For the adult, an unhealthy love of children's books can be a sign of a benign form of arrested development (or a more vigorous type of anti-intellectualism). For the young, however, the danger is more evident and ineluctable. The child must, perforce, become non-child.

The children at 8th Street, up to the point of its demise, do as they please. It's as if, rebelling against that particular fact over which they have no choice—their eventual increase—they take all others. They can eat or

not eat, read or not read, stay in bed or run for mayor. They are given to know that their status as children is only a concession to worldly convenience. Their wards sometimes forget the names of their children, and sometimes they switch from day to day indiscriminately, not because of any neglect but presumably to avoid the violence of nomination. (In many ways, though, with a brood so large, there was no keeping track if a Mabel wanted to switch with Josephine, or a Theodore with Theodora; to complicate matters, there was not one, but two sets of identical twins). The adults of 8th Street treat the children neither as inferior, nor as equals. They instead deem the children their moral and intellectual superiors.

One of the more perspicacious of these "children" was one day Violet, the next Rose (or Lily or Echinacea or Hellebore). She went through the flower section of the encyclopedia to choose her name for the week—she kept the F volume by her bedside because it was the only one with colored plates—the flowers and the flags. (She imagined she would name herself for the countries of the world once she reached adulthood). She seemed to be able to find all the loopholes and pressure points this belief in the sovereignty of children entailed. We might as well call her Shiva or Shiva-Rose, since her penchant was towards the radically destructive. She was not what you would call a "shrinking Violet." We will never know whether she burned down the house herself (that remains a mystery), however we are given a number of windows onto her violent propensities, which went beyond pinching, lying, and tantrums. A dawn blood sacrifice of the family ostrich was only halted when her shamanistic shrieks, mingled with ostrich bleating, were heard by the iceman, who so sullied her ritual with his very presence, that Shiva-Rose had to wait for the next conjunction of planets (in 500 years) to discover that an mistreated ostrich would have broken all her bones. Shiva-Rose almost convinced the household to remortgage 8th Street and invest in Amazonian rubber plantation interests, a plan which, if implemented, would have had a much more salutary outcome than the sacrifice of the family pet. However, it was only unrealized because the signatory of the deed to the house was building ashrams in Montana.

Shiva-Rose, the only one at 8th Street with this temperament, was apt to destroy objects that did not appeal to her. It might be said that she even had the power to pull the narrative down around our heads if she was not aptly described.

Given this flaunting of the house's non-existent moral codes, it was perhaps a welcome transgression that she carried on affairs with boys much older and experienced than she—yet, because they were older, she

reasoned, they could be treated as inferiors, and thus she could remain emotionally in control. If anyone were to break her heart, she would be the one to do it herself.

At this point in my review of this anonymously authored text, I must remind the reader that "8th Street" was written not as literature, but rather as an instructional reading device. Accordingly, the anonymous educator who authored this story borrowed heavily from other texts, seemingly without compunction, so that one may easily recognize, in phantom form, a watered-down and Americanized version of Emily Brontës' *Wuthering Heights*. Or perhaps we should say that it is a watered-down, Americanized version of an already watered-down and Americanized version, since it calls upon the sentiments of the 1939 William Wyler/Samuel Goldwyn film, in which Heathcliff and Cathy are beautiful but tragic heroes of a world that doesn't quite exist; the 1847 novel, in contrast, "hewn in a wild workshop" by an author even more radically excluded from the world than that other hermetic and literary Emily, is bleak and depressing, yet for all that more real—a picture of terrible people responding poorly to an unbearable situation. Regardless, in "8th Street" we have our Heathcliff, one of the stable boys, who vies with an Edgar Linton—a delicate, but more well-positioned competitor—for the affections of Shiva-Rose. This weaker, more cultured suitor is our narrator, who, in the end, is left to encounter Shiva-Rose amidst the flames of a mysterious destruction.

Every time I return to this ending, I am uncertain how to take it, or whether the various angles from which I might have perceived it in a long ago reading were intentional to the anonymous Grande Caldera employee's design. When the narrator discovers Shiva-Rose, unwilling to rise from her bed as the flames surround it, he takes it to mean what he has known all along, that she loves the other boy—who has disappeared to make his fortune in the West—and would rather die than recognize the narrator as her savior. Fair enough. The narrator has already gone too far, going back over a beautiful evanescence, turning evanescence into scene (even as the scene becomes more literal evanescence), searing something into memory that perhaps never existed as he imagined, and then setting stakes down around the wreckage until it becomes plot. He could not just let the beautiful image be. So, as he retells, he destroys.

Accordingly, replaying the scene again, we seem to remember that the narrator set fire to "8th Street" out of jealousy. His ultimate wish was to cast his perceived weaknesses in another light by saving Shiva-Rose from destruction. (A more modest, but evil hope, was that he would, in the bargain,

be able to pin the arson on the stable boys.) Since we already have, through a bit of critical muddling and allegorical hyperactivity, renamed her character after the goddess of destruction, we have perhaps also insured that the narrator's plan is forever thwarted, since no mortal can save Destruction from herself, for himself. Thus, does this end even exist? Another impossible trick may be finding the right way out of 8th Street. This reviewer watches on in horror as the narrator's bungling causes the flames to multiply, making what remains only a failed plot that turns to ashes and can no longer be recalled, as mint green turns to flame before passing into char.

There is, however, a third ending—to be found in the world of fact rather than the fragile memory of a fiction—that is worth recalling among the infinite possibilities that lead us to the thing for which there is no possibility of variation.

In the London *Daily News* of Dec 17, 1904, there is the story of a Mrs. Thomas Cochrane, whose body had been burnt to death in her bedroom, and yet all around her the furnishings remained in tact. Other such stories were reported by *Blyth News* on February 28th (Barbara Bell, aged 77) and in the *Hull Daily Mail* on January 6, there is a report of an Elizabeth Clark, who was found still alive in the morning, but could not explain her burns, claiming "There was no fire nor light in the room." Indeed, in the period 1904-05, according to Mr. Fort, there was a surprising upsurge of accounts of women who had inexplicably, and on their own account, burst into flame. Burned bodies in unscorched rooms turn up in Kingston, NY, Dinapore, India, Pittsburgh, PA, Dover, NJ, Whitley Bay, Tyne and Wear, and Paris.

Twenty years later—which we must remember is still thirty years before the publication of "8th Street", and almost a hundred years prior to the publication of this review *in extremis*—a species of human called the "fire genius" emerged. It seemed that some prodigies had, through evolution or chance, learned to control this mysterious force of combustion. In Memphis, Tennessee, an auto-mechanic was known to be able to cause things he breathed upon to burst into flames. Another "fire genius"—A. W. Underwood of Paw Paw—is cited in *The Michigan Medical News* as giving proof to the analogy between electricity and nerve energy; known popularly as The Paw Paw Negro Blowtorch, his sobriquet will, in 1974, become the second track on Brian Eno's first solo album *Here Come the Warm Jets*, right before "Baby's on Fire."

1882] MISCELLANEA. 509

A BREATH OF FIRE (*Michigan Medical News*).—Dr. L. C. Woodman, of Paw Paw, Mich., contributes the following interesting though incredible observation: I have a singular phenomenon in the shape of a young man living here, that I have studied with much interest, and I am satisfied that his peculiar power demonstrates that electricity is the nerve force beyond dispute. His name is Wm. Underwood, aged 27 years, and his gift is that of generating fire through the medium of his breath, assisted by manipulations with his hands. He will take anybody's handkerchief, and hold it to his mouth, and rub it vigorously with his hands while breathing on it, and immediately it bursts into flames and burns until consumed. He will strip, and rinse out his mouth thoroughly, wash his hands, and submit to the most rigid examination to preclude the possibility of any humbug, and then by his breath blown upon any paper or cloth, envelop it in flame. He will, when out gunning and without matches, desirous of a fire, lie down after collecting dry leaves, and by breathing on them start the fire and then coolly take off his wet stockings and dry them. It is impossible to persude him to do it more than twice in a day, and the effort is attendant with the most extreme exhaustion. He will sink into a chair after doing it, and on one occasion, after he had a newspaper on fire as narrated, I placed my hand on his head and discovered his scalp to be violently twitching as if under intense excitement. He will do it any time, no matter where he is, under any circumstances, and I have repeatedly known of his sitting back from the dinner table, taking a swallow of water, and by blowing on his napkin, at once set it on fire. He is ignorant, and says that he first discovered his strange power by inhaling and exhaling on a perfumed handkerchief that suddenly burned while in his hands. It is certainly no humbug, but what is it? Does physiology give a like instance, and if so, where?

The phenomenon of "spontaneous combustion" was entered into scientific ledgers as early as April 1894 (by Dr. Adrian Hava in the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*). How it came to emerge at that specific juncture in history, and how it evolved to the point where an auto mechanic in Michigan could have powers that even the most mystic adept would strain to know, is beyond the scope of this review. Yet while the fire magicians of the 1920s retained full control over their inner fires, in the period 1904-05—which most likely is the historical time frame for our story—the phenomenon flourished, but was not yet completely mastered.

Could it be that the narrator of "8th Street" completely bungled his attempt at arson, and that it was only by cosmic coincidence that his desire to burn, imperfectly, the now lost structure of 8th Street, arose at the same time Shiva-Rose realized her genius at self-immolation? Or did one set of flames meet the other, so that now the reasons can no longer be distinguished . . . but were extinguished at the very moment they reached out to the material world searching for a fuel that did not exist?

So that both ultimately failed to leave a single scorch on structure.