

Write Your Life

A micro memoir writing project

Remember a childhood chore that carried its own private pleasures.

Do Your Job

There it is, the burning barrel. In the corner of the back yard of our house on Main Street. It's a 55 gallon drum. The top has been cut out of it. One of my jobs is to "burn the papers." Any paper trash goes in a waste basket, in the corner of the kitchen. In any weather--rain or sleet or snow--when the basket is full, I take it out to the barrel, light the papers on fire, stand back, and watch. Over time, the barrel fills up with ashes. As it fills up, the fire becomes easier to see, and burning the papers becomes more fun. I want to see the fire.

It's genius on my parents' part. What kid isn't fascinated with fire? What kid doesn't like to play with matches? Rick, it's time to burn the papers.

So I'm learning about fire. And I guess I'm learning to be careful. Although the lessons don't take very well with my older brother who one day plays with matches and starts a little fire two doors over, at the Rice's, in their garage. Mr. Rice, his name is Harold, catches Tom squatted on the cement floor in the back of their garage (not too far from some gas cans Mr. Rice keeps there for the lawn mower).

It's not just paper that winds up in the burning barrel. Tin cans too. My mother empties a can of Campbells tomato soup into a pan and then tosses the can in the waste basket. Over time, as the ashes rise in the barrel, non-flammable stuff accumulates. Eventually my father loads the barrel into the back of his pickup, and we take it to the township dump, which is like the local landfill. At this time, no one worries about pollution. Recycling has not been invented yet. The township dump, minded by Carl Slocum, is a smelly pile of smoking refuse. Carl likes a fire too. The dump is a controlled burn.