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Discovery Honors English
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Playing with Fire

It started as just another hot, sunny summer day, and what is an 8-year-old supposed to do for fun when his best friend was out of town? In my case, as always, it was 'hang out with my brothers'. Only this morning was unlike others. *This* morning we had some real fun. *This* morning, we had firecrackers.

Secretly securing a pack of matches from under the distracted eye of our next-door neighbor's mom, we lit out around the hillside to an open space where our friend pulled out the fireworks. "Pulled out" doesn't describe the mystical fascination with which I watched him produce those pencil-thin cylinders of excitement like a magician conjuring thrills out of thin air. I was completely absorbed by the prospect of the fun we would have. At that moment, I couldn't have known better.

A few moments later, we watched as, one by one, three small explosions blew open tiny holes in the hillside dirt. Number four was put in place. The match was lit. The fuse began to sizzle like a hissing snake...then, quicker than I could have imagined, I was face to face with an eight-foot-tall flaming monster out of the devil's own den. The flames lept up from the tinder grass with an eagerness that stunned me. A moment later, we were stomping on the grass to no effect; next, our handfuls of dirt thrown at the base of the flames only seemed to feed the fire. The last image I remember is this Lilliputian inferno towering over me before we all scattered to the winds like the terrified guilty parties we were.

I have thought of that wall of flame often over the years, and every time I can still feel the knot of panic in my eight-year-old stomach. It didn't cause much damage. Despite my fears that I would be responsible for setting the neighborhood ablaze, firefighters arrived within minutes to extinguish what was, ultimately, nothing more than a half-acre grassfire. But that flame sticks in my mind. It mocked my powerlessness then, and it mocks my ignorance now. It signifies just how thoughtless, how careless I could be. Had I given a minute's clear thinking to the act, I would have known that setting off firecrackers on a dry hillside was no smarter than starting a campfire in a gas station. I think of that fire now and remember how little foresight I used to show. Far from being a simple terror, the memory of that fire reminds me to consider - carefully - all the outcomes of my actions before I act.