

THE NIGHT THEY BURNED THE OLD STORE DOWN

Window shopping was a popular pastime in Bulawayo, but not common late at night. I was cycling home from visiting a friend across town when a handful of people caught my attention. They stood on the street corner, talking in loud voices and pointing across the road. The huge store windows provided a mesmerising look into the inner workings of a building on fire. Not the usual behind-the-walls combustion, hidden from view. But open for all to see.

Further along the building, smoke billowed, but the furniture department in the upmarket Meikle's Department Store was not yet ablaze. Subdued overhead lighting, with several lounge settings of high-end furniture lit by standard and table lamps, created a cosy display in the late-night cool.

Small flames flickered as they licked the framed entrance to the neighbouring department, where larger flames already danced and swayed. In the background, they grew more agitated, looking like an angry mob about to assault the furniture's citadel. But they did not immediately race in, instead sending little scouting parties on small forays into the lounge suites near the entrance.

Soon more flames entered, but not yet a raging inferno. More of the beautiful furniture settings came under threat while the majority sat there awaiting their fate. It was tempting to break into the department and save a few of those luxury items, but the plate-glass windows and approaching flames discouraged that. It all seemed surreal and sadly beautiful, with the dancing flames devouring one expensive lounge setting after another.

No firefighters were on hand. They, with their fire engines, battled the flames in the supermarket department at the opposite end of the building, which ran the length of the city block. The furniture department stood all alone, left to its fate. It was like witnessing a python slowly constricting and devouring some unfortunate creature with no help at hand.

Now close, the flames teased and dared the onlookers to rush in and rescue those desirable pieces of furniture. The sound of cracking glass tempered such thoughts. A small crowd gathered across the road on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Abercorn Street, surveying the grim scene with ghoulish fascination. The roar and crackle of the fire grew louder as the leaping and swirling flames reached the ceiling, providing a beautiful, yet terrifying inferno.

Meikles Department Store in flames was a major event in the city. We all sensed history passing before our eyes as the grand old building perished.

It almost felt as if the fire played on a cinema screen. Although we stood just across the road, no intense heat forced us back, and no smoke assailed our eyes and noses. Perhaps the wind blew from behind us. It appeared the fire would burn all night, so an hour and a half later, I made my way home.

The next morning, we discovered that the enormous fire had overwhelmed the fire department's resources and destroyed the entire building, which occupied half a city block. Such large fires were a rarity in Bulawayo, with its preponderance of solid brick buildings.