

Prologue

The Amazing Human Torch

In the beginning was the fire, *ha esh*, which burned in my sister Nadine Pagan's eyes, then lit up like a burning bush around her head and took with it most of her hair. It spoke to us like God spoke unto Moses. In a high thin voice it sputtered, *Your sister is a lunatic, your middle child has gone mad.* For who else but a crazy person would steal the *Shabbes* candles from off the kitchen table and with them light her own head on fire? Who else would run as she ran through our house, shrieking like a blue jay until my mother caught her by the arm. "You *dybbuk!*" she screamed at the top of her mother lungs, and shook my sister as if she could put her out like some match.

Around in circles my father spun, first in one direction, then another, pulling at his chin as if he wore a beard. "What to do what to do what to do," he muttered, and still Nadine burned from the hair down until I myself came running and screaming, and poured water on her head, dumped it out of a waste basket until she was quiet and the fire in her head went out.

We all of us stopped and stared. The house smelled like someone had burned at the stake. Nadine's eyes were huge and hot. She did not cry, neither did she shout. We stared at her, and she stared back. For the first time since I could remember, the house was absolutely quiet. Suddenly my mother took matters into her

own hands. "You want something to cry about, how's this?" she shouted. She slapped Nadine first on one cheek and then the other. "It's not enough to set yourself on fire like a Buddhist nun, you had to do it with my grandmother's candlesticks, and on *Shabbes!* Whoever heard of such a thing?"

My father looked deep into Nadine's hot face. "See how you've upset your mother!"

I couldn't stand it any longer. "Nadine just tried to burn herself up! Call a doctor! Get an ambulance!" The words stuck in my throat like mud.

My father spun toward the telephone.

"Sure, call a doctor," my mother spat. "Call the hospital and a million psychiatrists. While you're at it, call the fire department, too. This is your older sister Nadine, Jane. Take a good look at her. She's a real beaut."