Fire and Air

Erik Vlaminck

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Elly, 1967

I'm woken up by father in the middle of the night.

'Come on, Buttercup, get dressed! There's big fire in Talbot Street and we're going to take a look.'

I stand by my bed in a daze. I put my shoes on, though I still haven't taken off my pyjama bottoms. He calls from the hall: 'Hurry up! They're not going to keep the fire going until tomorrow morning just for us to look at.'

So I can't be bothered to take off the pyjama bottoms. I just pull a sweater over my head and get my coat off the hook.

Outside I hear the sirens of a fire engine wailing. We run to Talbot Street.

It's the Queens Hotel that's burning. Though its name is now Red Ted Hotel, everyone calls it the Queens Hotel, because it always used to be called Queens Hotel. The flames are shooting up through the roof, and orange light flickers even through the windows of the top floor.

Firemen, with helmets and shiny leather coats are dashing to and fro. Their engines are parked in the middle of the street with lights flashing. A jet of water is being sprayed from two hoses onto the burning roof.

'They might just as well try to piss it out. They're not going to control that fire with that piddling amount of water.' Father knows everything about everything.

Scores of people are standing watching the spectacle. To my great relief I see that many people, like me, have simply put on a coat over their pyjamas. I also see that there are only grown-ups watching from the pavements. I'm glad father has woken me up. I'll have plenty to tell them at school tomorrow.

'Do you think there are any people still in that hotel?' I ask.

‘I don’t think so,’ he says. ‘Otherwise the firemen would be trying force their way inside and they’re not doing that. They’re keeping well clear.’

‘Perhaps someone was smoking a cigarette in bed.’

At school we learned that smoking in bed often causes a fire.

‘It’s much more likely that Red Ted started the fire himself.’

His voice sounds absolutely certain and he says it as if it stands to reason that someone would set fire to their own hotel. But then he goes on: ‘More than half of all fires are started by the owners of properties of the managers of businesses themselves. I saw it in black and white in the *Toronto Daily Star* only last week. Those guys burn their business down and the insurance pays out. And since the hotel wasn’t doing very well anyway, because one railway line after another is closing, the fire is the best thing that could happen to Red Ted. If something’s no longer viable, it’s better if it burns down.’

Suddenly the roof of the burning building collapses with a lots of creaking. Beams with flames licking round them plummet into the street, sending more sparks into the air. Policemen try to move the spectators further away, but no one takes so much as a step backwards.

‘I’m glad you woke me up.’ I feel his warm hand around my cold one.

‘I’m glad we’re standing here together.’ I feel his hand squeeze mine for a moment.

Very occasionally I write something in the diary I got for my birthday last year. Now I write: ’27 March 1967: The Queens Hotel at 742 Talbot Street was destroyed by fire. I got up at four o’clock and didn’t go back to bed. The hotel was no longer viable and so Red Ted set fire to it.’

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The day before yesterday Father left on his annual business trip that will help him and us get on in the world. He has put no less than four thermos flasks in his luggage. I saw it with my own eyes.

Since he left, mother has scarcely got out of bed.

In the days before he went they argued like never before. Shouting and ranting on her side, stubborn silence on his. Once, when we were sitting at the breakfast table and she was scolding him to death as usual, he raised his hand, threatening to hit her. But then he let his hand slowly fall again. He got up. As he did, his chair clattered to the ground and he left it where it lay. He went outside and a little later I saw him going up the steps of the pigeon loft.

He stood on the balcony for a while. He grasped a pigeon in both hands and held it to his chest as if it were a baby. His shoulders rocked gently two and fro.

A little later still I saw him get his bike to go to work, without lunch and without his paper. His satchel stood beside the kitchen door. It's still there.

Last Christmas he went to Belgium too. He'd never been away in wintertime before. And now he'd gone suddenly and unexpectedly. He'd only told us two days in advance.

Pigeons never brood eggs at Christmas, she kept repeating.

He said he could place orders at Christmas that would pay off later. That he must keep ahead of the Japanese, who had now sadly discovered the Belgian pigeon market. That she didn't have a clue about how these things worked. That it was his penance that 'Elly, a child who wasn't even twelve yet,' understood him better than his own wife. That was his answer. He forgot that I *had* turned twelve, and was closer to thirteen than twelve.

Because he was 'back over there' mother and I sat by the Christmas tree by ourselves on Christmas Eve.

Under the fir tree that he had got from the woods with his own hands the previous week, and on which he had hung the lamps and the tinsel before he went, because she couldn't. Because her father died on a step ladder, she would immediate get migraine and dizzy spells if she had to stand on something similar. The tree had been put in the battered garden bucket that the Christmas tree was put in every year, but this time no one had wound wrapping paper around it. The Holy Family looked a bit dishevelled too. The Christ child was half hanging out of his crib and the ox and the ass, 'the livestock and accessories', had not even been taken out of their box.

On Christmas Eve mother had such a gnawing headache, both behind and above her eyes, so that 'with the best will in the world' she could not cook, and so, on a hurriedly laid table we ate cold turkey and tinned peas, and we drank tea, though admittedly Van Nelle's. After the turkey there was apple cake, which she had not baked herself but which I had had to buy fro Joshua's Bakery I paid a dollar twenty cents for the apple cake, but I said I paid a dollar eighty. I often get the change wrong when I do the shopping. Mother asks for it by giving me scarcely any pocket money.

With a ghostly white face and obstinately silent she had sat munching her turkey and her apple cake as if she had a mouth full of sponge and rubber. Her eyes were deeply reproachful. As if it were my fault that father wasn't with us.

After the meal it was present opening time. That evening mother did not touch the glittering parcel that father had put under the tree for her. She did not even look to see what was in it, and the next morning it had disappeared. I looked in every cupboard and drawer, but couldn't find a trace of it anywhere. I couldn't find it in the dustbin. A mystery.

She did open the parcel that I had put out for her. It contained Van Houten chocolate drops. A packet of milk chocolate with whole hazelnuts, and a packet of ordinary milk chocolate.

'Elly love,' she said as she held the chocolate in her hand. And: 'You shouldn't have.' She didn't know that I paid for that chocolate with money from her purse. To tell the truth, I felt a bit bad about it as I sat there.

The parcel she had put under the tree for me contained a cap, scarf and gloves, all in blue and white, and luckily without any childish patterns on them.

I thanked her for the things. I carefully folded and smoothed the Father Christmas paper they were in. I saw, I felt she would have liked me to get up and give her kiss. But I didn't do that. I couldn't.

Next, she started clearing the table with much stumbling and clattering. Obviously because she didn't want to see what was in the parcel that my father had put under the tree for me.

It was a gold pendant with a heart in the background and a dove in the foreground. It was on a very fine chain.

My father loves me.

Since then I always wore the pendant round my neck. But I also wore the cap, the scarf and the gloves now and then.

When father's away, I hardly exist for mother. She doesn't cook for me anymore. She doesn't call me to get me up in time for school. She doesn't iron my dresses. And she doesn't lecture me if I get in late.

It gives me the chance to do what I normally can't or am not allowed to do. I join the Saint George Street boys' gang. We smoke cigarettes behind the railway yards. I'm lookout when the boys slash the tyres on the car of Mr Rogers the school head. I laugh till my stomach hurts when Josh Stuart rings up and orders a removal van and four helpers which the next day will be at the front door of the same Mr Rogers. I help hold the mentally-handicapped Joe Killman still while the boys make him down first a bottle of ketchup and the a bottle chocolate milk. And I let the boys put their hand down my blouse one by one so they can feel that nothing has started to grow down there yet.

So the moment Franz Müller, our German neighbour, comes into our kitchen moaning and without knocking, I'm afraid he's found out what I'm getting up to on the quiet. But I'm wrong. Franz Müller is furious because he's found Ulli, his pitch-black tomcat, dead in his garage. Franz Müller is furious because he's sure that my father has killed the tomcat, since my father couldn't stand the cat constantly prowling round the pigeon loft. Müller is flushed and his huge hands are trembling. Herr Müller barks to me to call my father so he can tell him in friendly fashion what he thinks of him.

'My father isn't here. He's gone to Belgium. He's had to go to Belgium on urgent business. He's been gone for some time, so he can't have killed Ulli. Anyway, my father would never do a thing like that.' I say it calmly and quietly. 'Under normal circumstances I'd call my mother, but she's in bed ill.'

Müller starts stammering. He apologises. He says I must tell her to get well soon. He even bows slightly as he shuts the kitchen door again.

‘What was that?’ Müller has scarcely left, when my mother is standing in bare feet and dishevelled loose hair in the doorway between the hall and the kitchen.

‘Franz Müller maintains that father has killed his tomcat.’

‘It wouldn’t surprise me.’

I look at her in bewilderment.

‘That lovely father of yours has been secretly killing all the cats in the area. They disturb the sacred calm of his pigeons and so he catches them with baited cages or traps. He gives them a hard rabbit punch and without any mercy stuffs them in a sack with he weights with stones and then throws the whole lot into the pond by the madhouse. The animals drown horribly.’

I can hear the reproach in her voice. She blames father for killing cats. She blames me for obviously not believing what she says.

‘But Franz Müller’s cat was just lying dead in Müller’s garage.’

‘Then he poisoned it.’ She says it with absolutely certainty. There is a trace of triumph on her lips.

‘He gives then paracetamol. In people paracetamol helps with headache and high temperatures but cats can’t take it. It destroys a cat’s liver. A tiny amount is enough to kill a cat, and because it has no taste or smell, you can easily mix it with cat food.’

‘Who says so?’

‘You own sainted father. And he also says that it does no harm to pigeons.’

‘So you think he gave Müller’s tomcat paracetamol?’

‘Müller’s tomcat and lots of other cats and tomcats. He even sells paracetamol. He brings the tablets home from work with him: I assume he just pinches them. He crushes the tablets in a pestle and collects the powder in boxes, and sells the stuff at a huge profit at the pigeon-fanciers club in Delhi. No one there knows it’s paracetamol. He fools the suckers into believe that he imports the wonder drug from Belgium. It’s one of the reasons I’m never allowed to go to Delhi with him. He thinks I can’t keep my mouth shut.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘You refuse to see you father as he is.’

And still I’ve got a gold pendant with a heart and pigeon on it.

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Next week is the hundredth anniversary of Canadian independence, and it will be celebrated in style.

At school they have given us all a letter to take home, telling that on that memorable day we are expected to be at the station at ten o'clock. There a procession will be formed of all the schoolchildren in Saint Thomas that will parade down Talbot Street. A Scottish bagpipe band will lead the procession and also the veterans, the fire brigade and representatives of the government and the town council will also join in. We are asked to be there is immaculate school uniform at the appointed hour.

'I'd just stay home,' says father, 'we're not Canadians.'

'Yes we are Canadians,' says mother. 'We live here, we earn our living here and we pay taxes here.'

'And that's why you drink Van Nelle tea and why I have to bring hundreds-and-thousands and other Dutch muck back from Delhi.

'That's pure nostalgia.'

'Belgians are and will always be Belgians and Dutchman are and will always be Dutchmen, even if they live half their lives in China or Timbuktu.'

'But I've lived all my life in Canada,' I say.

'You must do what you have to do,' is his answer.

On 1 July 1967 I wear a white blouse, a blue dress, white socks and black patent shoes. I walk down Talbot Street between Brenda Cullemborg and Nancy MacDonald in time with a drum band. In front of Van Pelt's bookshop I see mother on the pavement. She has a red rose on the lapel of her coat and she is holding a flag with the maple leaf on it. She laughs and waves the flag when I pass her. Perhaps I should have stayed at home after all.

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I saw my father cry.

This afternoon all his pigeons died. Someone tried to set fire to the pigeon loft.

Neighbour Müller was busy sharpening the blades on his mower and out of the small window in his garage he saw greasy cloud of smoke rising from the loft in our garden. He immediately came and knocked on our kitchen door and because no one answered – I was at school but father and mother must have been home – he forced his way into the pigeon loft. He was able to put out the fire, which was no more than a pile of smouldering rags, but it was too late for the pigeons. They all lay together in a corner of the loft. Suffocated.

‘And to think that all the traps were shut. Those birds had nowhere to go.’ says father. And to think that something like that should happen now of all times, when there were champions coming on for which he could have got thousands. And on top of that the hatching has gone right down the pan.

‘A pathetic pile of feathers and misery,’ says mother.

And when he doesn’t hear, she says that she hopes from the bottom of her heart that that’s the end of that ‘nasty pigeon business’.

For a second I had the evil thought that father may have started the fire himself. I haven’t forgotten his lesson about the fire in the Queens Hotel. But when I see him pacing through the room flushed with anger, I know for certain that this is one of the fires that were not lit by the owner.

‘If I ever find out who set everything on fire, I’ll beat him to a pulp with my bare hands. Then I’ll kill him.’ He shouts it out.

I’ve seldom seen him so angry.

And ten seconds later ‘It’s quite possible that that swine Müller did it.’

‘But Franz Müller’s the one who put the fire out.’

‘That’s just the point.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Things are usually the other way round from what you expect.’

‘I still trust neighbour Müller.’

‘Remember one thing for the rest of your life: you must never ever trust a German. Anyone who trusts a German is wasting his time and digging his own grave.’

An hour later he is ‘a hundred percent’ certain that neighbour Müller is the arsonist. Pacing up and down in the kitchen he sums up the reasons. ‘Müller is deadly dangerous because his kind – and I’m expressing myself carefully – razed half of Europe to the ground. They did it twice. In 1914-1918 and in 1940-1945 they did a half-hearted repeat. With Zeppelins, jets, V-rockets, concentration camps, gas chambers and the works. And you can be sure – you can bet your life on it – that Müller came to Canada because in Hunland even his fellow Huns think he’s animal. Of course people pointed at him and so Canada was the only way out. Anyway, you can tell from Müller’s wily look that he has a really dark side. What’s more, and there are people who can vouch for that, Müller has always been jealous of my pigeons. And probably another factor is that Müller knows I read the *Toronto Daily Star*, and that’s a paper that doesn’t paint Germans any better than they are. It’s a paper where they have the courage to tell the truth without dressing it up. I make no bones about it.’

‘Perhaps he killed the pigeons because you poisoned his tomcat.’ I blurt it out before I realise what I’m saying.

The pacing stops at once. He stares at me for a moment, wide-eyed and mouth open. Then he pulls back a kitchen chair. The legs grate across the floor. He sits down like in a slow-motion film. He plants his elbows on the table, places his hands against his temples and suddenly starts to cry. Like a little child.

I don’t know what to do or say. I’m standing with my bottom against the draining board and my father is sitting in front of me crying. With faltering sobs and long sustained notes. With tears that slide downwards along his nostrils. And it goes on and on.

I need to go to the toilet urgent but don’t dare to move a muscle. I suddenly recall, I don’t why, that Brenda Cullemborg’s sister claims that love can make you wet your knickers.

The weeping stops as suddenly as it began.

‘Did your mother go so far as to convince my very own daughter that I bumped off Müller’s tomcat?’ He speaks very softly and his voice is soft. I’ve never heard him like this before and it scares me more that when he goes around shouting.

‘While you were in Belgium, our neighbour came round. He was really upset and claimed you had poisoned his tomcat.’

‘And I only find that out know. Anyway, it’s one more proof that the bastard started the fire.’

‘But I made it clear you couldn’t have anything to do with the death of his tomcat, because you were in Belgium. He believed me at once. He even apologised profusely.’

‘I’m glad I’ve got you,’ he says and starts sobbing again. He gets up, and although I don’t move, he waves me away with his hand and leaves the kitchen. I see him go to his car with drooping shoulders. He gets his handkerchief out of his pocket. I expect him to dab the tears off his face with it but he starts rubbing a stain off the bonnet of the Chevrolet with the handkerchief. A moment later he starts the engine and leaves, with tyres screeching.

That same evening he stands on the balcony of the pigeon loft shaking a tin with a few grains in and calling ‘Come, come, come on now’. Two of his little ones turn out to have miraculously escaped death by suffocation, and now they are sitting on neighbour Müller’s roof. They are Jumbo and Van Steenbergen.

He stands on the balcony for hours and hours shaking his tin and calling ‘Come, come, come on now!’ It’s no good: the pigeons don’t trust him.