

Elias, or The Struggle with the Nightingales

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p 9-22

I

When Aloysius disturbs our hearts we hang upside down in reality like enchanted apes. He is sixteen and a full four years older than I am. In bed at night we fold paper boats and let them float down the brook outside the estate the next day, Aloysius sits hidden under the covers, busy, with a pencil I presume. Without showing himself to me he hands me the pages from the notebook, one by one, and I put the same folds in them, always.

I fail to understand the secret laws of this curious game, of course, and I help him blindly in what he is doing. I fail to understand why he wants to help me wash in the morning; he is very rough and the soap bites my eyes shut; and yet he is very sparing with water himself. Broad scratches are engraved in his hands and fever has left a small black rim on his dry lower lip with its frown and its small crusts.

- The little boats! he says, industrious.

We drop the towel and jump toward the bed at the same time; we get them from between the sheets at the bottom of the bed. Some we can no longer use and one we cannot find anymore in the crumpled sheets and blankets.

Aloysius hides them under his shirt, like secret documents, and we run down the stairs to the first floor, where we say hello to grandma through the door that is ajar,

After breakfast we quickly get into the park.

We fight our way through the undergrowth and stand for a while, shivering in the middle of the greenery covered with dew. This is a windy spot. I feel Aloysius's fingers now and then and I understand the intimate meaning of his strong handshake. We steal between the cracking twigs, ears alert. Something there? Only a wild pigeon, flying off. There is rain in the air and the sky clouds up with grey all over.

We have not seen anything unusual when we walk home from the brook at noon. The boats were put on the water; we watched them float away one by one, behind the bend where the current is strong. One tug and they disappeared from our sight.

A strange feeling of unrest comes over Aloysius as soon as we sense the proximity of the house on the estate. He jumps in the middle of the flowering dahlias and as if surrounded by a throng of enemies he flails his arms about as if they were swords, hitting the flowers that fly above his head, and the leaves. Aunt Zenobia watches from the gazebo, whimpering in helpless rage. We flee to my mother in the dining room, because we know she will protect Aloysius from Aunt Zenobia. He has become strangely silent in front of my mother and sobs long repressed suddenly erupt from him when her slow hand strokes his hair.

He stands, ashamed, his forehead leaning against the wall, fighting with himself. In the meantime we have all sat down at the table. A silence filled with expectation envelops the family. The maid walks up and down with the steaming soup tureen. When he finally turns around Aloysius has become like a deaf-mute, dazed and indifferent to us. His eyes are hard and dark in his white face and they do not seem to recognize anyone around him.

There is a party on the family estate every year during the summer holidays, and the children are going to act in a little play, as usual. Aunt Theodora has taken charge of it, and everything has been taken care of, down to the last detail, a few weeks ago. Aunt Emma's boys are there: Casimir, Oscar and Leopold, as well as Aunt Zenobia's children: Albertus, Aloysius and Hermione. We are standing in a circle around Aunt Theodora, curious, with questions in our eyes. There is wonder in our hearts because she speaks of all kinds of unimportant things in a tone of feigned and sparing friendliness.

Aunt Zenobia has lost a little son, Peter, and Aunt Emma has lost a little daughter, Virginia. We are going to devote a touching play to them this year. Hermione will be playing Aunt Emma's child, and since Aunt Zenobia's children have become too big to play little Peter, that weighty part will fall to me. We have rehearsal every day in a carriage house that is no longer used, and Aunt Theodora solemnly recites for us what we have to tell each other.

I am dead tired when we are finally allowed to stop, so I cannot go with Aloysius. The big boys go lie in the grass with their books; they play darts under an old oak, or they go bowling in the shade cast by the washhouse. I am lured to the house by Hermione and we crawl under the table together, to rest where nobody will come and find us.

Hermione is very nervous, thin, transparently pale and given to sudden crazy ideas. She also has her sentimental moods, and when she has them she cannot be too close to me, she keeps stepping on my toes or giving me angry taps on the fingers, until they begin to glow with pain. She teaches me to play with fire. She has taken a box of matches in secret: three to ten matches flare up together and she throws them imprudently across my body in the direction of the coal bucket.

I sometimes feel as if my hair is on fire.

- Elias, says Hermione, tell me the story of the blue hand again.

She has lowered herself on the carpet next to me and I can see a small shiver going through her body. It is not the first time I tell her the story of the blue hand; Hermione knows it, and yet she cannot sit still for fearful expectation; she wants to laugh, sigh and give a shivery yawn all at once.

And I, unsuspecting, begin to tell her of a dark event that occurred one winter night when I lay in bed, all alone.

I had just woken up and wanted to go back to sleep immediately; but I could not find that warm fold again, my very own delicious little burrow of a few moments ago, the one my body fitted so well and could lie in, firmly enclosed. I turned and got my feet from under the covers; finally there was not a single spot left in the bed for a nice snooze. I was lying on my back, my arms under my head, as people do in the morning when they are lying awake and it is too soon to get up. Flowers of frost cracked on the frozen windows. A horse was walking in the street, with a bell around its neck. My head was on fire and I let it loll from left to right. For a while I lay staring at the nightlight that stood trembling behind a transparent blue bottle. I could hear clearly how various pots were put on the fire downstairs, in the house, and the cat meowed repeatedly in the kitchen.

As I lay staring at the covers, I saw something move at the bottom of the bed and I could not figure out what it was. It looked like a stocking that had been rolled up, but not quite, because it seemed to have parts connected to it that moved, and it seemed to rest on crab legs that could not quite hold it up. I pulled back my feet, slowly, cautiously, first the right foot and then the left foot. My right foot had hardly moved when the monstrous thing began to move, too, and came closer. Now that it had been disturbed it no longer wanted to lie still. And suddenly I saw, in great fear: I recognized a blue, horribly gnarled hand that stole up on me, slowly and deliberately. It had climbed up as far as my knee and I could foresee that it would soon reach my chest; a few more horrible moments - and there I lay, in my own bed, like a bird whose throat had been squeezed shut. Craftily I tried to turn around; I was lying on my stomach, my face pressed into the pillow, I made swimming movements with my arms and legs, waiting for the worst to happen.

A cold shiver flashed through my spine like lightning, as if a frozen fingertip moved over the knobs in my spine, counting them. Something heavy came to rest on my shoulder, but it did not climb higher. Things stayed as they were - like this. I turned around with a fierce movement, to chase away the danger that was watching me.

Only when my mother came upstairs did I dare open my eyes. Before I could tell her about the blue hand she bent over to pick something up off the floor. In the meantime I heard her remark dryly that the doctor had forgotten his glove.

Aloysius has lured me back to the brook. Tall, brightly checkered cows are grazing in the evening sun. We decide that I am to wait for him here. He takes a long pole and prepares to jump across the water. Before he's gone I ask him where he's going. He hangs his head in silence. Without answering he takes an agile flying leap. He has soon vanished from my sight.

I stay under the willows, waiting for him to come back.

Nothing is unknown to me here, of course, this is the very spot we come to every day, to put our boats in the water. Suddenly I have an idea. I run home and come back in haste, unnoticed, with a piece of heavy packing paper. Three foreign stamps are stuck to it. I tear off the address and fold a big, strong boat. And before I let it loose on the water and its current I give it a strange cargo: a bit of moss and a shiny black beetle.

I am alone. This is the first blissful time I play this game utterly and completely by myself, in my own name. My hands are trembling. The boat floats away, proud and beautiful from under my trembling fingers. Everything happens with an incredibly fast certainty. The boat turns around and I see pink stamps on its flank like mysterious pavilions. It sails toward the bend at great speed and is gone with one tug, as if someone had turned a page in a book.

A frog begins to croak in the reeds along the water's edge and three crickets are chirping at the same time, at a short distance from each other. The melancholy thoughts you get when you sniff the smell of duckweed in the evening. The wooden cows stand in the meadow, motionless in the rising fog, their heads hanging down. A late swallow skims across the water. Where might my strong, strange boat have docked by now? I hope there will never be an end to its bold journey. Where could it dock? Everything happens in the real, impenetrable glory of the dream. The weather has become oppressive; fusty smells hang in the undergrowth and linger. Maybe it will rain tonight; the sky bristles with a grey haze and the wind has died down.

How long have I been alone by the water? The dinner-bell is rung at the house. I run to my mother. Aunt Zenobia asks about Aloysius. After a while I tell all: the decision we made and how long I have been waiting for him. Silence. People look into each other's eyes. I walk a few paces ahead of the others through the little avenue where it is very dark by now, looking for Aloysius. I am with my mother, Aunt Zenobia and Aunt Theodora, Hermione and Albertus. After we have all waited together at the brook for a while Aloysius comes toward us, moving with big leaps across the meadow in its evening haze. He seems to have become stronger and more virile on this expedition. He waves his arms as he runs and makes rapid progress. Aunt Zenobia is very excited and beats him when she catches him, so much so that my mother cannot bear to watch anymore and tries to calm Aunt Zenobia down in a muffled voice. Aloysius does not open his mouth; no tear, no scream of pain to be had from him. He calmly receives the hard blows straight in his face, not even bothering to try to avoid them.

I dare not ask him now where he is coming from, so late, like one who has lost his way. We walk through the evening landscape, all of us, shadows in a silent pageant.

The next Sunday is the day of the party.

Albertus and Leopold have put a stage together; a happy disorder reigns in the room; the table has been pushed against the wall and the chairs have been arranged in two rows. Aunt Theodora put on an ivory dress, ample and expensive, full of loops and lace. Slow movements emanate from her anemic body only when they are forced into motion by essential clues. And her hair: it has been done with a love of splendor, a shivering string of pearls woven through it, and a comb in the shape of a fan, shot through with little holes, rises above a maze of curls.

It has rained this afternoon, and fortunately evening twilight has been quick to fall, so that we can start the play earlier than expected. We are put into strange costumes behind the windscreen next to the stage and we get paper crowns to put on our heads. The candles spread their hesitant light, we arrange ourselves in a "tableau vivant" and my aunt's little bell rings in the hallway when everything is as it should be: Hermione holds a small bouquet in one hand, a paper butterfly sits trembling on my fingers and behind us stand the guardian angels, their arms hanging down, in inept expectation. The wick of the old-fashioned oil lamp has been turned down; you can no longer see the flame in its glass; only the golden spirit of light still dwells inside, serenely. The family

arrives. Silk clothes rustle in the hallway and indistinct talking reaches us, but all fall silent and their faces glow with pleasure when they step into the room. We are standing behind the small green, red, blue and yellow lights, surrounded by flowerpots under the low-slung paper streamers. The piano plays a military march. We are getting so tired, we have to stand in the same position for so long; we are doing our utmost not to lose our balance and spoil the performance.

When I see the spectators where they sit, solemnly gathered together, I feel a sudden warmth rising to my head. Grandma, Aunt Emma and Aunt Zenobia, my mother and my niece Alissa are sitting in the front row. Behind them Uncle Paul, Uncle Bernard, Uncle Augustin and my father, standing. Seen from the stage reality is different outside ourselves than inside, and I am experiencing this for the first time. There is a brownish-violet twilight in the corners of the room, but a diamond glistens close, now and then, unexpected and lost without a trace in a lightning swiftness. The lace collars, the shivering fringes, the elegant embroidery on the ladies' dresses; the stiff white shirt fronts, the cuffs of the gentlemen standing and smoking cigars, the wisps of tobacco smoke above their heads and the furniture moved from its usual place and arranged along the wall: it has all become an unreal world under the lamp's hesitating light. Aunt Theodora whispers to us, behind the windscreen, reading from her little book, and we are inclined to look at her and stop acting our parts.

Aunt Henrietta steals into the salon inaudibly, like a spell-breaking ghost, as we are playing the scene in heaven where Virginia recognizes little Peter among the most recently arrived little souls and asks him for news about grandma and the whole family. Aunt Henrietta lies down in an easy chair, broken and exhausted, her arms lame along her powerless body, her head limp against the cushion. Her eyes are closed, so she cannot follow our activities. A heavy lock of hair, blond as honey, hangs down along her white face, as if it were a young girl's hair. Uncle Bernard whispers to her, softly, and she is hardly able to motion him away: he should leave her alone. The tip of a shoe appears, sliding from under her greenish-golden dress. Nobody seems to take any notice of her otherwise; she remains alone and implausible over there, far away, and our heavenly language probably fails to reach her.

There is something unbearable about this play-acting for me, something I suffer from as when a state of feeling approaches in which all known states cease to exercise their authority. For I am little Peter now. Opposite me lives and moves a Virginia I never knew. Little Peter is dead, he has been gathered to the celestials and he can now do and say things whose content "I" fail to understand, but Virginia obeys them and replies to them in a little voice I am familiar with, after all. It is as if I am kept back in my movements, and that sense of listlessness comes from the inside. There is something that oppresses me while I think of the place where was with Aloysius in the rain, just a few hours ago.

In my thoughts I see our house in town, our cat, my own bed. In the meantime I reach out my arms to the unknown, where I cannot reach anything anyway; I find a girl there, as small as I myself, warm and docile. And I speak to her in a silly, heightened language. And yet I keep trying hard to see our staircase, our attic with the sheets in it, just washed and now drying. Sweat breaks through my pores and the unreflected words leave my mouth as if on their own, no longer listening to my aunt's whispering voice. But suddenly I know: if I let go of any element of what I used to be, I, Elias, shall be lost. Therefore I must persevere in calling up images from my past: the cut in *my* forehead when I fell on the rim of a pail; *my* burned fingertips when I played with fire; *my* red blood when my foot stepped on the shard of glass that cut it. As I stand there pretending to be little Peter, I think and fight as Elias.

The smell of the pine-tree branches, the smoke of melting candle wax, the musty odor of the curtain-material I am dressed in: all of those things do not make me that ill. Out of this moment's double life I try to salvage my real and fiery existence. I have been stolen away from myself, so to speak; I can no longer give any expression to my sorrow, my rage, the pain of my instincts that would bring me relief, I am exhausted and become the plaything of a cruel and fanatical predestination.

At this moment a thumb tack has come loose and a curtain threatens to sink down on the footlights. Uncle Augustin manages to catch it in time; maybe he wants to give the velvet cloth to Aunt Theodora behind her screen: he just keeps sitting there, with his hand stretched out. This unforeseen event happens just as we are supposed to embrace each other in the final scene. I am too tired and too sad to be able to cry just now. Virginia stands in front of me as if petrified, her eyes are of cold china and she completely stops playing her part. We are standing opposite each other like imprudent little humans who have pushed their weak powers too far, and whatever perseverance we had has all seeped out of us.

- The blue hand! screams Hermione.

Uncle Augustin has caught her in his arms. The wick of the lamp is turned up, spreading light. There is a moment of confusion; people and chairs whirling around.

At last I am left alone with Aloysius and Aunt Henrietta. She asks us in a weak voice what is going on. And I tell her about the shadow of a hand we saw distinctly shifting from one guardian angel to the other. But Aloysius makes a quick end of these infantile ghost stories and takes me along outside, to the park, even though we are both still wearing our costumes.

When we walk outside the gardener has already turned on the lights of the illumination. Uncles are walking down the steps of the front porch and just as we have to turn into the dark little lane I turn around and see my father firing his hunting rifle out of the first floor window.

The clammy, wry smells of small oak trees covered with dew hang in the darkness. We hear the boys shouting "hooray" three times, all together; a few more shots are fired; and then everything is too far behind us for us to listen to with any attention.

I do not really know where we are going, but we are certain to find something better than the evening party we have fled.

We get to the brook. Aloysius will have to make a big effort to get me to the other side. He gets me on his back; I hold on to him, tight. He jumps and together, leaning on the pole that sinks deep down into the squelchy mudbed, we sail across the dark water. The cows are sleeping in the nightly meadow. One of them stands guard, on its four legs, and for a few moments it seems as if it is going to make for us. Then we step quickly through the dense wet grass, without another look around.

When we have come close to the bushes Aloysius makes me wait. He disappears into the darkness and utters a "hello" that echoes in the distance. I hold my breath. Was he calling me? Should I answer? First I have to listen, well. There, in between the trees of the estate the lights of the illumination are flickering; the colored lampions shiver between the leaves and the fireworks are set off. A blue rocket rises into the sky. From the village comes the throbbing, rustic music of the

fair. But here everything is dead. I have been waiting for an eternity. Is this not beginning to look like a kidnapping?

Aloysius appears with two girls I do not know, the youngest about seven years old and the oldest fourteen. We cross a dirt road and, as if magnetized by him we follow Aloysius to a small meadow, closed in by forest on three sides. He walks a few steps ahead of us, in silence. The girls shiver in the evening cold and smile at each other. The oldest girl wears her hair in two thick braids. She has a black shiny belt around her middle and a blue scarf heightens the pallor of her face in the moonlight.

Aloysius makes us stop at last.

He gets brushwood and straw from a secret hiding place; everything is thrown on a heap in a nervous hurry; a crumpled newspaper and matches appear from under his shirt; a few seconds later a high billowing fire leaps up in the meadow. I do not know what secret force makes us join hands and turn around the flames in a quick dance. The girls are screaming with delight and their faces are illuminated in a ghostly manner by the fire that crackles and spits out sparks. Aloysius has taken off his stage costume; he kicks it away from him and when one of us gets hold of it we kick it back and forth until it ends up in the flames. Soon everything is consumed, the fire has gone out and a stinking smoke is left hanging in the cool night. We still have not let go of each other's hands.

We stay close together, maybe because the solitude scares us a little. As if on cue we begin to sing, softly, as we walk on, slowly, keeping the rhythm. A cold arm lies wrapped around my neck. Searching lips come and burst into blossom on my hammering temples.

Shortly afterwards we part in silence. It is all over now. And when shall we find each other again?