



The Great Fire, Ray Bradbury

The Great Fire

The morning the great fire started, nobody in the house could put it out. It was Mother's niece, Marianne, living with us while her parents were in Europe, who was all aflame.

So nobody could smash the little window in the red box at the corner and pull the trigger to bring the gushing hoses and the hatted firemen.

Blazing like so much ignited cellophane, Marianne came downstairs, plumped herself with a loud cry or moan at the breakfast table, and refused to eat enough to fill a tooth cavity.

Mother and Father moved away, the warmth in the room being excessive.

'Good morning, Marianne.'

'What?' Marianne looked beyond people and spoke vaguely. 'Oh, good morning.'

'Did you sleep well last night, Marianne?'

But they knew she hadn't slept. Mother gave Marianne a glass of water to drink, and everyone wondered if it would evaporate in her hand.

Grandma, from her table chair, surveyed Marianne's fevered eyes.

'You're sick, but it's no microbe,' she said. 'They couldn't find it under a microscope.'

'What?' said Marianne.

'Love is godmother to stupidity,' said Father detachedly.

'She'll be all right,' Mother said to Father. 'Girls only seem stupid because when they're in love they can't hear.'

'It affects the semicircular canals,' said Father. 'Making many girls fall right into a fellow's arms. I know. I was almost crushed to death once by a falling woman, and let me tell you—'

‘Hush.’ Mother frowned, looking at Marianne.

‘She can’t hear what we’re saying: she’s cataleptic right now.’

‘He’s coming to pick her up this morning,’ whispered Mother to Father, as if Marianne wasn’t even in the room. ‘They’re going riding in his jalopy.’

Father patted his mouth with a napkin. ‘Was our daughter like this, Mama?’ he wanted to know. ‘She’s been married and gone so long, I’ve forgotten. I don’t recall she was so foolish. One would never know a girl had an ounce of sense at a time like this.’

That’s what fools a man. He says, Oh, what a lovely brainless girl, she loves me, I think I’ll marry her. He marries her and wakes up one morning and all the dreaminess is gone out of her and her intellect has returned, unpacked, and is hanging up undies all about the house.

The man begins running into ropes and lines. He finds himself on a little desert isle, a little living room alone in the midst of a universe, with a honeycomb that has turned into a bear trap, with a butterfly metamorphosed into a wasp. He then immediately takes up a hobby: stamp collecting, lodge meetings, or—’

‘How you do run on,’ cried Mother. ‘Marianne, tell us about this young man. What was his name again? Was it Isak Van Pelt?’

‘What? Oh—Isak, yes.’ Marianne had been roving about her bed all night, sometimes flipping poetry books and reading incredible lines, sometimes lying flat on her back, sometimes on her tummy looking out at dreaming moonlit country.

The smell of jasmine had touched the room all night and the excessive warmth of early spring (the thermometer read fifty-five degrees) had kept her awake. She looked like a dying moth, if anyone had peeked through the keyhole.

This morning she had clapped her hands over her head in the mirror and come to breakfast, remembering just in time to put on a dress.

Grandma laughed quietly all during breakfast. Finally she said, 'You must eat, child, you must.' So Marianne played with her toast and got half a piece down. Just then there was a loud honk outside. That was Isak! In his jalopy!

'Whoop!' cried Marianne, and ran upstairs quickly. The young Isak Van Pelt was brought in and introduced around.

When Marianne was finally gone, Father sat down, wiping his forehead. 'I don't know. This is too much.'

'You were the one who suggested she start going out,' said Mother.

'And I'm sorry I suggested it,' he said. 'But she's been visiting us for six months now, and six more months to go. I thought if she met some nice young man—'

'And they were married,' husked Grandma darkly, 'why, Marianne might move out almost immediately—is that it?'

'Well,' said Father.

'Well,' said Grandma.

'But now it's worse than before,' said Father. 'She floats around singing with her eyes shut, playing those infernal love records and talking to herself. A man can stand so much. She's getting so she laughs all the time, too. Do eighteen-year-old girls often wind up in the booby hatch?'

'He seems a nice young man,' said Mother.

'Yes, we can always pray for that,' said Father, taking out a little shot glass. 'Here's to an early marriage.'

The second morning Marianne was out of the house like a fireball when first she heard the jalopy horn. There was no time for the young man

even to come to the door. Only Grandma saw them roar off together, from the parlor window.

‘She almost knocked me down.’ Father brushed his mustache. ‘What’s that? Brained eggs? Well.’

In the afternoon Marianne, home again, drifted about the living room to the phonograph records. The needle hiss filled the house. She played ‘That Old Black Magic’ twenty-one times, going ‘la la la’ as she swam with her eyes closed in the room.

‘I’m afraid to go in my own parlor,’ said Father. ‘I retired from business to smoke cigars and enjoy living, not to have a limp relative humming about under the parlor chandelier.’

‘Hush,’ said Mother.

‘This is a crisis,’ announced Father, ‘in my life. After all, she’s just visiting.’

‘You know how visiting girls are. Away from home they think they’re in Paris, France. She’ll be gone in October. It’s not so dreadful.’

‘Let’s see,’ figured Father slowly. ‘I’ll have been buried just about one hundred and thirty days out at Green Lawn Cemetery by then.’ He got up and threw his paper down into a little white tent on the floor. ‘By George, Mother, I’m talking to her right now!’

He went and stood in the parlor door, peering through it at the waltzing Marianne. ‘La,’ she sang to the music.

Clearing his throat, he stepped through.

‘Marianne,’ he said.

“‘That old black magic...’” sang Marianne. ‘Yes?’

He watched her hands swinging in the air. She gave him a sudden fiery look as she danced by.

‘I want to talk to you.’ He straightened his tie.

‘Dah dum dee dum dum dee dum dee dum dum,’ she sang.

‘Did you hear me?’ he demanded.

‘He’s so nice,’ she said.

‘Evidently.’

‘Do you know, he bows and opens doors like a doorman and plays a trumpet like Harry James and brought me daisies this morning?’

‘I wouldn’t doubt.’

‘His eyes are blue.’ She looked at the ceiling.

He could find nothing at all on the ceiling to look at.

She kept looking, as she danced, at the ceiling as he came over and stood near her, looking up, but there wasn’t a rain spot or a settling crack there, and he sighed. ‘Marianne.’

‘And we ate lobster at that river café.’

‘Lobster. I know, but we don’t want you breaking down, getting weak. One day, tomorrow, you must stay home and help your aunt Math make her doilies—’

‘Yes, sir.’ She dreamed around the room with her wings out.

‘Did you hear me?’ he demanded.

‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘Yes.’ Her eyes shut. ‘Oh yes, yes.’ Her skirts whished around. ‘Uncle,’ she said, her head back, lolling.

‘You’ll help your aunt with her doilies?’ he cried.

‘—with her doilies,’ she murmured.

‘There!’ He sat down in the kitchen, plucking up the paper. ‘I guess I told her!’

But next morning he was on the edge of his bed when he heard the hotrod's thunderous muffler and heard Marianne fall downstairs, linger two seconds in the dining room for breakfast, hesitate by the bathroom long enough to consider whether she would be sick, and then the slam of the front door, the sound of the jalopy banging down the street, two people singing off-key in it.

Father put his head in his hands. 'Doilies,' he said.

'What?' said Mother.

'Dooley's,' said Father. 'I'm going down to Dooley's for a morning visit.'

'But Dooley's isn't open until ten.'

'I'll wait,' decided Father, eyes shut.

That night and seven other wild nights the porch swing sang a little creaking song, back and forth, back and forth. Father, hiding in the living room, could be seen in fierce relief whenever he drafted his ten-cent cigar and the cherry light illumined his immensely tragic face. The porch swing creaked.

He waited for another creak. He heard little butterfly-soft sounds from outside, little palpitations of laughter and sweet nothings in small ears. 'My porch,' said Father. 'My swing,' he whispered to his cigar, looking at it. 'My house.' He listened for another creak. 'My God,' he said.

He went to the tool shed and appeared on the dark porch with a shiny oil can. 'No, don't get up. Don't bother. There, and there.' He oiled the swing joints. It was dark. He couldn't see Marianne; he could smell her.

The perfume almost knocked him off into the rosebush. He couldn't see her gentleman friend, either. 'Good night,' he said. He went in and sat down and there was no more creaking. Now all he could hear was something that sounded like the mothlike flutter of Marianne's heart.

'He must be very nice,' said Mother in the kitchen door, wiping a dinner dish.

'That's what I'm hoping,' whispered Father. 'That's why I let them have the porch every night!'

'So many days in a row,' said Mother. 'A girl doesn't go with a nice young man that many times unless he's serious.'

'Maybe he'll propose tonight!' was Father's happy thought.

'Hardly so soon. And she is so young.'

'Still,' he ruminated, 'it might happen. It's got to happen, by the Lord Harry.'

Grandma chuckled from her corner easy chair. It sounded like someone turning the pages of an ancient book.

'What's so funny?' said Father.

'Wait and see,' said Grandma. 'Tomorrow.'

Father stared at the dark, but Grandma would say no more.

'Well, well,' said Father at breakfast. He surveyed his eggs with a kindly, paternal eye. 'Well, well, by gosh, last night, on the porch, there was more whispering. What's his name? Isak?'

Well, now, if I'm any judge at all, I think he proposed to Marianne last night; yes, I'm positive of it!

'It would be nice,' said Mother. 'A spring marriage. But it's so soon.'

'Look,' said Father with full-mouthed logic. 'Marianne's the kind of girl who marries quick and young. We can't stand in her way, can we?'

‘For once I think you’re right,’ said Mother. ‘A marriage would be fine. Spring flowers, and Marianne looking nice in that gown I saw at Haydecker’s last week.’

They all peered anxiously at the stairs, waiting for Marianne to appear.

‘Pardon me,’ rasped Grandma, sighting up from her morning toast. ‘But I wouldn’t talk of getting rid of Marianne just yet if I were you.’

‘And why not?’

‘Because.’

‘Because why?’

‘I hate to spoil your plans,’ rustled Grandma, chuckling. She gestured with her little vinegary head. ‘But while you people were worrying about getting Marianne married, I’ve been keeping tabs on her.

Seven days now I’ve been watching this young fellow each day he came in his car and honked his horn outside. He must be an actor or a quick-change artist or something.’

‘What?’ asked Father.

‘Yep,’ said Grandma. ‘Because one day he was a young blond fellow, and next day he was a tall dark fellow, and Wednesday he was a chap with a brown mustache, and Thursday he had wavy red hair, and Friday he was shorter, with a Chevrolet stripped down instead of a Ford.’

Mother and Father sat for a moment as if hit with a hammer right behind the left ear.

At last Father, his face exploding with color, shouted, ‘Do you mean to say! You sat there, woman, you say: all those men, and you—’

‘You were always hiding,’ snapped Grandma. ‘So you wouldn’t spoil things. If you’d come out in the open you’d have seen the same as I. I

never said a word. She'll simmer down. It's just her time of life. Every woman goes through it. It's hard, but they can survive. A new man every day does wonders for a girl's ego!

'You, you, you, you, you!' Father choked on it, eyes wild, throat gorged too big for his collar. He fell back in his chair, exhausted. Mother sat, stunned.

'Good morning, everyone!' Marianne raced downstairs and popped into a chair. Father stared at her.

'You, you, you, you, you,' he accused Grandma.

I shall run down the street shouting, thought Father wildly, and break the fire-alarm window and pull the lever and bring the fire engines and the hoses. Or perhaps there will be a late snowstorm and I shall set Marianne out in it to cool.

He did neither. The heat in the room being excessive, according to the wall calendar, everyone moved out onto the cool porch while Marianne sat looking at her orange juice.

The end