

Spontaneous Combustion

Nothing seemed unusual that day at school. Mrs. McColgan flared up after low sounds of cows and pigs and sheep arose around the room during mental arithmetic. I knew from my younger brother that older boys who hated standing up and computing numbers had planned the disruption. It was a favourite one among rural boys. No one would own up to the noises. Recesses were cancelled. Everyone had to sit and read or draw. We were kept indoors at lunch and restricted to quiet talking or crokinole for amusement. After lunch, the teacher read *Lassie Come Home* to us for much longer than usual. It did not seem strange that she read for so long or that all were punished for the misdeeds of a few. She was mercurial. I had heard older boys released from one of these days running to the road say she must be on the rag. I did not know what it meant but understood its dismissive tone. This day she looked down from her desk on the platform and asked my brother and I to stay after class dismissed. I sat while the other students left and stared at the print of the young Queen Elizabeth, the only picture on the walls. I dreaded being asked if I knew who made the noises. Mrs. McColgan had a way of detecting the most compliant students.

She came down to my desk and said, "Your barn burned down today." That was it. Nothing else. No hug, no hands on a shoulder. No offer of a ride home. Unlikely as she herself waited for her husband to pick her up later. I felt embarrassed as if I had drawn this attention to myself. I reached into my desk and got my reader and my lunch bag. No one came for us. My brother ran ahead of me and I walked the half mile home alone. I could see nothing but the fir trees that lined the driveway and the empty space where the barn had risen. I thought of her, standing on that platform, looking out the high set windows that seemed designed to prevent young minds from wandering from their tasks. She must have seen it all, from bursting flames to lingering smoke, without as much as a telltale grimace as my family's animals burnt alive. For a long time I hated her in that heated way of being nine and thinking I understood her behaviour, hated that she was so placid, a word I learned from my word obsessed mother.

My grandparents had come from their nearby farm. My grandmother met me in the driveway, wheezing more than usual from her asthma in the cold. A couple of neighbours lingered under the willow with my grandfather halfway to the barn. I looked but could see nothing of the horror behind the high cement walls and gaping window cavities. Some charred remains of the collapsed great timbers still smouldered and poked into the air. The smell of heavy smoke lingered. The firetruck had left.

In the house, my mother seemed bewildered and kept looking out the window that faced the barn. She repeated, "It was engulfed in flames when I saw it. Engulfed in flames." I looked out the window and wondered if she had been reading. Her reading was already a small sore point and my mild-mannered grandmother had said to me more than once, "Your mother likes to read," as if it were an affliction. My grandmother busied herself making my brother and me hot cocoa. She fretted about my father. He could not be contacted directly as he was at a service call to fix a tractor but would come home directly. I sat beside Jack who sat on the lounge by the wood stove, his pipe in his mouth unlit. He said nothing to me and there was nothing for us to do.

Jack was our hired man though my father never called him that. He was thin and seemed very old. He was a relative of a neighbouring farmer who had an abattoir. I knew this meant he was a butcher. Jack came to live with us because the butcher had no room for him and nothing to do. We did not really need a hired man. But since my father now worked off the farm so he could keep the farm and because, as I later realized, my father was kind, Jack came to us. He came with the smallest of suitcases and minimal desires. He smoked a pipe in the evening. He would not hear of my brother and I sharing a room so he

could have one. Instead he slept on the lounge and was up so early it was like he had never slept there. Jack and I always started the evening chores before my father got home.

Having a hired man ranked high among the boys at school. Somehow they knew about Jack but not from me for I was terrified of these older boys who took any bit of my lunch that suited them. A couple had been held back for two years in a time of no social promotion to the next grade. They seemed privy to all the talk of their fathers and had already embarrassed me by asking if my father couldn't pay his taxes. They were well versed in who counted as a real hired man and said Jack was just some old guy, probably a drunk, that nobody wanted. "Your dad don't pay him," one told me.

I liked Jack. He was clean, he called me Miss, and he gave me a jackknife. "You'll be needing this, Miss," he said, "to cut the twine on the bales." I was not yet strong enough to break the hay bales apart with my knees. It was the first time I had been given something that admitted me into a corner of the male world, a place I was beginning to realize would be separate and special. Already my brother, Tom, was talking about when he would be able to help other farmers with haying and get paid so he could buy a geared bike. I had asked my father about such work only to be told bluntly, "Girls don't work off the farm like that."

It was almost dark when my father got home. He was often late. The neighbours had left. I could only imagine the shock as he drove in the driveway and saw the silhouette of the barn, as he met his father, as they walked to the barn shell. When they came into the house, my father was silent as he sat down at the table where my grandmother laid out a plate of food for him. I sat in the background and watched him eat mechanically.

"It had to be spontaneous combustion according to the fire fellows, Ed," my grandfather said. My mother jumped in, almost lit up. This was something she thought she knew about. She put my youngest brother down from her knee where she had busied herself keeping his toddler enthusiasms at bay. "It means huge pressure builds up in the hay and it heats and when it reaches a certain temperature, it bursts into flames. People can combust too." At this, my grandmother looked at her with alarm. My mother continued, more directly to me. "Freud knew about it and said it happened when people were under pressure. They were consumed with anxiety and burned from the inside out. Dickens knew about it too and put it in a book." I did not know who Freud was but I knew of Dickens and Scrooge and I knew my mother was smart. I saw my grandmother exchange a glance with my grandfather about the Freud comment. My father continued to sit at the table, his head in his hands, quiet.

I crept off to bed. I dreaded going to school the next day knowing I'd be circled by boys questioning me like a court, weighing in with their theories of what happened. I thought about what my mother said. The spontaneous combustion. It made sense. I worried for a moment that it would happen to my father but decided he was too sensible to combust. Then it struck me. If people could combust, cows could too. The cows or maybe just one cow must have burst into flames from being locked up all winter in their stanchions. In the kitchen, I could hear my parents, now alone, talking. "You make too much of things. You'll give her wild ideas."

I was beginning to feel that my family was different. Neighbouring families had lived there for generations. Many farms had two houses, a couple three. The generations shifted between the houses as elders died, as parents moved into the smaller house, as a son took over the central house. Century farms would be designated in the centennial year with plaques. The families married closely. My mother was a war bride. My father had served overseas. He was the only one in the neighbourhood except for a bachelor family of four boys. Two had gone to war. One came back with a leg missing and the other odd. I was given to theories at a young age and had decided that our family's unsteady financial state could be

explained by my father's going to war unlike any of my classmates' fathers. When I mentioned this once at supper, my father would have none of it. "You don't know what you are talking about. The men on the farms were needed to produce food for the war effort." My mother looked at me reproachfully as I had earlier raised the idea with her. She said it would not be a popular one. She had heard there were many young men from farms who served and died.

As soon as I returned to school, I was surrounded by boys. I felt sick when they asked if I had looked at the dead stuff. I was spared from replying. "Probably not," one said to another. "She's a girl. Wouldn't be allowed." They launched into their interrogation with all the presumed authority of well-groomed heirs. "Was it faulty wiring? Did your dad try to do it himself?" "Have you got rats? They chew wiring you know." "Was it that guy who lives with you? Was he smoking in the barn?" "My dad says he" – here a hand mimed a bottle being drunk and boys snickered – "likes the bottle."

"It was spontaneous combustion," I said proudly. "It wasn't our fault."

"My dad said it wasn't spontaneous combustion. February's too late for hay to combust."

This dogged certainty, the echoes of his father's voice picking over my family's tragedy, enraged me and made me reckless. "It wasn't the hay. It was the cows or maybe just one cow."

The boys all laughed. I saw some girls looking over from their circle but none came over. I did not leave it there. Their laughter egged me on to more outrageous assertions. "The cows wanted to get out. They were upset at being in the barn for so long. They got so upset one of them just blew up in flames. My mother told me so. And there is a guy called Floyd who knows about it too."

This completely set the boys off. "You're nuts. Like your mother. She should've stayed in England. My mother says she don't know a thing about farming."

"Most likely the old guy." The oldest of the boys said this with a finality that convinced them and they lost interest in me and went back to their snow fort.

Where had Jack been? In yesterday's confusion I had not considered Jack. I remembered him sitting in his usual place by the wood stove, head down, not smoking his pipe. After school I asked my mother.

"He was out in the woods checking his rabbit snares for most of the morning. He couldn't hear or see anything. The fire truck didn't use a siren. No need on these roads."

I was relieved. Now I could clear Jack from suspicion. And distressed. Since he came, we had eaten rabbit frequently. My father was pleased with the free meat and even my mother who had eaten it during the war did not object. I was embarrassed about it. I had heard boys ask Henrik the immigrant from Holland whose father worked as a hired hand if they ate squirrels. I knew eating rabbit would be no better. But Jack was not to blame for the fire. Tomorrow I would face the boys and tell them the truth.

That evening I sat at the little table in my room and drew two pictures. My mother made sure I always had drawing paper. She believed in art. I wanted to remember the barn and the way everything was. I drew its layout with each of the stanchions for the cows, the three calves' places beside their mothers, the pens at the rear for the sows and their piglets, the stairs to the hay mow, the room for the pig chop and chicken feed, the place for hanging the forks and shovels, the taps and opening where the hay came down from above. I drew another picture with the cows' heads in their stanchions, their large liquid eyes facing me. I labelled the cow with the white heart-shaped marking in the middle of her black forehead that I named Valentine. I showed some chickens roosting on the bar above the cows.

When I was finished, I took my drawings to the kitchen where Jack lay asleep on the lounge and my

father sat at the table examining sheets of important looking papers. I showed him the drawings. He held onto the one with the cows in their stanchions facing out and stared at it for moments until I felt uncomfortable, sad. "They wouldn't suffer," he said. "The smoke would get them first." I wondered if this was one of the lies adults told children but knew I should not ask. I leaned over and kissed him. It was the first time I had done this for some time, feeling I was too old for such a nightly ritual. I took the drawings and retreated to my room. I locked them in my treasure chest. They would stay there—comforting, enduring, kindling for memories. Memories locked away, waiting to combust.