



PENGUIN
CANADA

LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

ALICE MUNRO grew up in Wingham, Ontario, and attended the University of Western Ontario. She has published twelve books—*Dance of the Happy Shades*; *Lives of Girls and Women*; *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*; *Who Do You Think You Are?*; *The Moons of Jupiter*; *The Progress of Love*; *Friend of My Youth*; *Open Secrets*; *The Love of a Good Woman*; *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*; *Runaway*; and *The View from Castle Rock*—as well as *Selected Stories*, an anthology of stories culled from her dazzling body of work.

During her distinguished career, Munro has been the recipient of many awards and prizes, including the W.H. Smith Award in the United Kingdom and, in the United States, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction, the Lannan Literary Award, and the Rea Award for the Short Story. In Canada, her prize-winning record is so extraordinary—three Governor General's Awards, two Giller Prizes (one of which was for *Runaway*), the Trillium Book Award, the Jubilee Prize, and the Libris Award, among many others—that it has been playfully suggested that as such a perennial winner, she no longer qualifies for new prizes. Abroad, acclaim continues to pour in. Both *Runaway* and *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best Book Award (Caribbean and Canada region), and were chosen as Books of the Year by *The New York Times*.

Alice Munro's stories appear regularly in *The New Yorker*, as well as in *The Atlantic*, *Saturday Night*, and *The Paris Review*. She and her husband divide their time between Clinton (in "Alice Munro country"), Ontario, and Comox, British Columbia.

Lives of Girls and Women

ALICE MUNRO



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Lives of Girls and Women

The Flats Road

We spent days along the Wawanash River, helping Uncle Benny fish. We caught the frogs for him. We chased them, stalked them, crept up on them, along the muddy riverbank under the willow trees and marshy hollows full of rattails and sword grass that left the most delicate, at first invisible, cuts on our bare legs. Old frogs knew enough to stay out of our way, but we did not want them; it was the slimy young green ones, the juicy adolescents, that we were after, cool and slimy; we squished them tenderly in our hands, then plopped them in a honey pail and put the lid on. There they stayed until Uncle Benny was ready to put them on the hook.

He was not our uncle, or anybody's.

He stood a little way out in the shallow brown water, where the muddy bottom gives way to pebbles and sand. He wore the same clothes every day of his life, everywhere you saw him—rubber boots, overalls, no shirt, a suit jacket, rusty black and buttoned, showing a V of tough red skin with a tending edge of white. A felt hat on his head had kept its narrow ribbon and two little feathers, which were entirely darkened with sweat.

Though he never turned around he knew if we put a foot in the water.

“You kids want to splash in the mud and scare off the fish you go and do it someplace else, get out of my riverbank.”

It was not his. Right here, where he usually fished, it was ours. But we never thought of that. To his way of thinking the river and the bush and the whole of Grenoch Swamp more or less belonged to him because he knew them, better than anybody else did. He claimed he was the only person who had been right through the swamp, not just made little trips in around the edges. He said there was a quicksand hole in there that would take down a two-ton truck like a bite of breakfast. (In my mind I saw it shining, with a dry-liquid roll—I had it mixed up with quicksilver.) He said there were holes in the Wawanash River that were twenty feet deep in the middle of summer. He said he could take us to them, but he never did.

He was prepared to take offense at a glimmer of doubt.

“You fall into one of them, then you'll believe me.”

He had a heavy black moustache, fierce eyes, a delicate predatory face. He was not so old as his clothes, his moustache, his habits, would lead you to believe, he was the sort of man who becomes a steadfast eccentric almost before he is out of his teens. In all his statements, predictions, judgements there was a concentrated passion. In our yard, once, looking up at a rainbow, he cried, “You know what that is? That's the Lord's promise that there isn't ever going to be another flood!” He quivered with the momentousness of this promise as if it had just been made, and he himself was the bearer of it.

When he had caught what fish he wanted (he threw back the black bass, kept the chub and redfin, saying that redfin was a tasty fish, though full of bones as a pincushion is of needles), we would accompany him as he climbed out of the shady river-trough and head across the fields toward his house. Owen and I, barefoot, walked easily on stubble. Sometimes our unsociable dog, Major, followed at a distance. Away at the edge of the bush—the bush that turned into the swamp, a mile further in—was Uncle Benny's house, tall and silvery, old unpainted boards, bleached dry in the summer, and dark green blinds, cracked and torn, pulled down over all the windows. The bush behind it was black, hot, thick with thorny bushes.

and dense with insects whirling in galaxies.

Between the house and the bush were several pens in which he had always some captive animals—half-tame golden ferret, a couple of wild mink, a red fox whose leg had been torn in a trap. She limped, and howled at night, and was called Duchess. The coons he did not need pens for. They lived around the yard and in the trees, tamer than cats, and came to the door to be fed. They were fond of chewing gum. Squirrels came too and sat boldly on the window sills and foraged in the piles of newspapers on the porch.

There was also a shallow sort of pen, or excavation, in the dirt beside the wall of the house, with boards nailed up around it on the other three sides, to the height of about two feet. This was where Uncle Benny had kept the turtles. One summer he had abandoned everything to catch turtles. He said he was going to sell them to an American from Detroit, who would pay him thirty-five cents a pound.

“Make them into soup,” said Uncle Benny, hanging over his turtle pen. Much as he enjoyed taming and feeding animals, he enjoyed also their unpleasant destinies.

“Turtle soup!”

“For Americans,” said Uncle Benny, as if that explained it. “I wouldn’t touch it myself”

Either the American did not show up, or he would not pay what Uncle Benny wanted, or he had been no more than a rumour in the first place; the scheme came to nothing. A few weeks later Uncle Benny would look blank if you mentioned turtles; he would say, “Aw, I’m not botherin’ my head about that business no more,” as if he felt sorry for you, for being so far behind the times.

Sitting in his favourite chair just inside our kitchen door—he would sit there as if he hardly had time to sit down, did not want to trouble anybody, would be off in a minute—Uncle Benny was always full of news about some business venture, always an extraordinary one, by which people not very far away, down in the south of the county or as near by as Grantly Township, were making preposterous sums of money. They raised chinchilla rabbits. They bred budgie birds. They made ten thousand dollars a year and barely had to work for it. Probably the reason he kept on working for my father, though he had never worked steadily at any other job, was that my father raised silver foxes, and that was in such a business something precarious and unusual, some glamorous and ghostly, never realized, hope of fortune.

He cleaned the fish on his porch and, if he felt like eating, fried some immediately in a pan which kept its ancient, smoky grease. He ate from the pan. No matter how hot and bright it was outside he had a light on, one single bulb hanging from the ceiling. The deep, deep, layered clutter and dirt of the place swallowed light.

Owen and I, going home, would sometimes try to name off the things he had in his house, or just his kitchen.

“Two toasters, one with doors one you lay the toast on.”

“Seat out of a car.”

“Rolled-up mattress. An accordion.”

But we weren’t getting half, we knew it. The things we remembered could have been taken out of the house and never missed; they were just a few things revealed and identifiable on top of such a wealth of wreckage, a whole rich dark rotting mess of carpets, linoleum, parts of furniture, insides of machinery, nails, wire, tools, utensils. This was the house Uncle Benny’s parents had lived in, all their married life. (I could just remember them, old and heavy and half-blind, sitting on the porch in the sunlight, wearing many dark layers of disintegrating clothes.) So part of the accumulation was that of fifty years or so of family life. But it was also made up of other people’s throwaways, things Uncle Benny would ask for and bring home, or even lug from the Jubilee dump. He hoped to patch things up and make them usable and sell them, he said. If he had lived in a city he would have run an enormous junk shop; he would have spent his life among heaps of soiled furniture and worn-out appliances and

chipped dishes and grimy pictures of other people's relatives. He valued debris for its own sake and only pretended, to himself as well as to others, that he meant to get some practical use out of it.

But what I liked best around his place, and would never tire of, were the newspapers piled on the porch. He did not take either the Jubilee *Herald-Advance* or the city newspaper which arrived in our mailbox a day late. He did not subscribe to the *Family Herald* or the *Saturday Evening Post*. His paper came once a week and was printed badly on rough paper, with headlines three inches high. It was his only source of information about the outside world, since he seldom had a radio that was working. This was a world unlike the one my parents read about in the paper, or heard about on the daily news. The headlines had nothing to do with the war, which had started by that time, or elections, or hurricanes, or waves, or accidents, but were as follows:

FATHER FEEDS TWIN DAUGHTERS TO HOGS
WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO HUMAN MONKEY
VIRGIN RAPED ON CROSS BY CRAZED MONKS
SENDS HUSBAND'S TORSO BY MAIL

I would sit and read on the edge of the sagging porch, my feet brushing Sweet William that Uncle Benny's mother must have planted. Finally Uncle Benny would say, "You're welcome to take those papers home if you want to. I'm all done reading them."

I knew better than to do that. I read faster and faster, all I could hold, then reeled out into the sun onto the path that led to our place, across the fields. I was bloated and giddy with revelations of evenness of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness. But the nearer I got to our house the more this vision faded. Why was it that the plain back wall of home, the pale chipped brick, the cement platform outside the kitchen door, washtubs hanging on nails, the pump, the lilac bush with its brown-spotted leaves, should make it seem doubtful that a woman would really send her husband's torso, wrapped in Christmas paper, by mail to his girl friend in South Carolina?

Our house was at the end of the Flats Road, which ran west from Buckles' Store, at the edge of town. This rickety wooden store, so narrow from front to back it looked like a cardboard box stood on its end, haphazardly plastered with metal and painted signs advertising flour, tea, rolled oats, soft drinks, and cigarettes, was always to me the sign that town had ended. Sidewalks, street lights, lined-up shade trees, milkmen's and icemen's carts, birdbaths, flower-borders, verandahs with wicker chairs, from which ladies watched the street—all these civilized, desirable things had come to an end, and we walked—Owen and I coming from school, my mother and I coming from shopping on a Saturday afternoon—on the wide meandering Flats Road, with no shade from Buckles' Store to our house between fields ragged with weeds, and yellow with dandelions, wild mustard, or goldenrod, depending on the season of the year. Houses here were set further apart and looked in general more neglected, poorer and eccentric than town houses would ever be; half a wall would be painted and the job abandoned, the ladder left up; scars of a porch torn away were left uncovered, and a front door without steps, three feet off the ground; windows could be spread with yellowed newspapers in place of blinds.

The Flats Road was not part of town but it was not part of the country either. The curve of the river and the Grenoch Swamp, cut it off from the rest of the township, to which it nominally belonged. There were no real farms. There were Uncle Benny's and Potters' places, fifteen and twenty acres. Uncle Benny's going back to bush. The Potter boys raised sheep. We had nine acres and raised foxes. Most people had one or two acres and a bit of livestock, usually a cow and chickens and sometimes something more bizarre that would not be found on an ordinary farm. The Potter boys owned a family of goats, which they turned loose to graze along the road. Sandy Stevenson, a bachelor, kept a little grey donkey, like the illustration to a Bible story, pasturing in the stony corner of a field. My father's enterprise was not out of the way here.

Mitch Plim and the Potter boys were the bootleggers on the Flats Road. Their styles were different. ~~The Potter boys were cheerful, though violent-tempered when drunk. They gave Owen and me a ride home from school in their pickup truck; we were in the back, flung from side to side because the car~~ drove so fast and hit so many bumps; my mother had to take a deep breath when she heard about it. Mitch Plim lived in the house that had newspapers over the windows; he did not drink himself, was crippled up with rheumatism and spoke to nobody; his wife came wandering out to the mailbox, an hour of the day, in a tattered flounced housecoat, barefoot. Their whole house seemed to embody so much that was evil and mysterious that I would never look at it directly, and walked by with my face set stiffly ahead, controlling my urge to run.

There were also two idiots on the road. One was Frankie Hall; he lived with his brother Louie Hall who operated a watch and clock repair business out of an unpainted, false-fronted store building beside Buckles' Store. He was fat and pale like something carved out of Ivory soap. He sat out in the sun, beside the dirty store window cats slept in. The other one was Irene Pollox, and she was not so gentle or so idiotic as Frank; she would chase children on the road and hang over her gate crowing and flapping like a drunken rooster. So her house too was a dangerous one to pass, and there was a rhyme to say, that everybody knew:

Irene don't come after me
Or I'll hang you by your tits in a crab-apple tree.

I said it when I went past with my mother, but knew enough to change *tits* to *heels*. Where had the rhyme come from? Even Uncle Benny said it. Irene was white-haired, not from age but because she was born that way, and her skin also was white as goosefeathers.

The Flats Road was the last place my mother wanted to live. As soon as her feet touched the town sidewalk and she raised her head, grateful for town shade after Flats Road sun, a sense of relief, a new sense of consequence flowed from her. She would send me to Buckles' Store when she ran out of something, but she did her real shopping in town. Charlie Buckle might be slicing meat in his back room when we went by; we could see him through the dark screen like a figure partly hidden in a mosaic, and bowed our heads and walked quickly and hoped he did not see us.

My mother corrected me when I said we lived on the Flats Road; she said we lived *at the end* of the Flats Road, as if that made all the difference. Later on she was to find she did not belong in Jubilee either, but at present she took hold of it hopefully and with enjoyment and made sure it would notice her, calling out greetings to ladies who turned with surprised, though pleasant, faces, going into the dark dry-goods store and seating herself on one of the little high stools and calling for somebody to please get her a glass of water after that hot dusty walk. As yet I followed her without embarrassment, enjoying the commotion.

My mother was not popular on the Flats Road. She spoke to people here in a voice not so friendly as she used in town, with severe courtesy and a somehow noticeable use of good grammar. To Mitch Plim's wife—who had once worked, though I did not know it then, in Mrs. McQuade's whorehouse—she did not speak at all. She was on the side of poor people everywhere, on the side of Negroes and Jews and Chinese and women, but she could not bear drunkenness, no, and she could not bear sexual looseness, dirty language, haphazard lives, contented ignorance; and so she had to exclude the Flats Road people from the really oppressed and deprived people, the real poor whom she still loved.

My father was different. Everybody liked him. He liked the Flats Road, though he himself hardly drank, did not behave loosely with women or use bad language, though he believed in work and worked hard all the time. He felt comfortable here, while with men from town, with any man who wore a shirt and tie to work, he could not help being wary, a little proud and apprehensive of insult.

with that delicate, special readiness to scent pretension that is some country people's talent. He had been raised (like my mother, but she had cast all that behind her) on a farm deep in the country; but he did not feel at home there either, among the hard-set traditions, proud poverty and monotony of farm life. The Flats Road would do for him; Uncle Benny would do for his friend.

Uncle Benny my mother was used to. He ate at our table every day at noon, except Sunday. He stuck his gum on the end of his fork, and at the end of the meal took it off and showed us the pattern, so nicely engraved on the pewter-coloured gum it was a pity to chew it. He poured tea into his saucer and blew on it. With a piece of bread speared on a fork he wiped his plate as clean as a cat's. He brought into the kitchen a smell, which I did not dislike, of fish, furred animals, swamp. Remembering his manners in the country way, he would never help himself, or take a second helping till asked three times.

He told stories, in which there was nearly always something happening that my mother would insist could not have happened, as in the story of Sandy Stevenson's marriage.

Sandy Stevenson had married a fat woman from down east, out of the county altogether, and she had two thousand dollars in the bank and she owned a Pontiac car. She was a widow. No sooner had she come to live with Sandy, here on the Flats Road twelve, fifteen years ago, than things began to happen. Dishes smashed themselves on the floor during the night. A stew flew off the stove by itself splattering the kitchen walls. Sandy woke up in the night to feel something like a goat butting him through the mattress, but when he looked there was nothing under the bed. His wife's best nightgown was ripped from top to bottom and knotted in the cord of the window shade. In the evening, when they wanted to sit in peace and have a little talk, there was rapping on the wall, so loud you couldn't help yourself think. Finally the wife told Sandy she knew who was doing it. It was her dead husband, making at her for getting married again. She recognized his way of rapping, those were his very knuckles. They tried ignoring him but it was no use. They decided to go off in the car for a little trip and see if that would discourage him. But he came right along. He rode on the top of the car. He pounded on the roof of the car with his fists and kicked it and banged and shook it so Sandy could hardly keep it on the road. Sandy's nerves collapsed at last. He pulled off the road and told the woman to take the wheel, he was going to get out and walk or hitchhike home. He advised her to drive back to her own town and try to forget about him. She burst into crying but agreed it was the only thing to do.

"But you don't believe that, do you?" said my mother with cheerful energy. She began explaining how it was all coincidence, imagination, self-suggestion.

Uncle Benny gave her a fierce pitying look.

"You go and ask Sandy Stevenson. I seen the bruises, I seen them myself."

"What bruises?"

"From where it was buttin' him under the bed."

"Two thousand dollars in the bank," mused my father, to keep this argument from going on. "No, there's a woman. You ought to look around for a woman like that, Benny."

"That's just what I'm going to do," said Uncle Benny, falling into the same joking-serious tone. "one of these days when I get around to it."

"A woman like that might be a handy thing to have around." "What I keep telling myself."

"Question is, a fat one or a thin one? Fat ones are bound to be good cooks but they might eat a lot. But then so do some of the skinny ones, hard to tell. Sometimes you get a big one who can more or less live off her fat, actually be a saving on the pocketbook. Make sure she has good teeth, either the real ones or all out and a good set of false ones. Best if she has her appendix and her gall bladder out too."

"Talk as if you're buying a cow," said my mother. But she did not really mind; she had those unpredictable moments of indulgence, lost later on, when the very outlines of her body seemed to soften and her indifferent movements, lifting of the plates, had an easy supremacy. She was a full

fairer woman than she later became.

~~“But she might fool you,” continued my father soberly. “Tell you her gall bladder and her appendix are out and they’re still in place. Better ask to see the scars.”~~

Uncle Benny hiccupped, went red, laughed almost silently, bending low over his plate.

“*Can you write?*” said Uncle Benny to me, at his place, when I was reading on the porch and he was emptying tea leaves from a tin teapot; they dripped over the railing

“How long’ve you been goin’ to school? What grade are you in?”

“Grade Four when it starts again.”

“Come in here.”

He brought me to the kitchen table, cleared away an iron he was fixing and a saucepan with holes in the bottom, brought a new writing-pad, bottle of ink, a fountain pen. “Do me some practice writing here.”

“What do you want me to write?”

“I don’t care. I just want to see how you do it.”

I wrote his name and address in full: *Mr. Benjamin Thomas Poole, The Flats Road, Jubilee, Wawanash County, Ontario, Canada, North America, The Western Hemisphere, The World, The Solar System, The Universe.* He read over my shoulder and said sharply, “Where is that in relation to Heaven? You haven’t got far enough. Isn’t Heaven outside of the Universe?”

“The Universe means everything. It’s all there is.”

“All right, you think you know so much, what is there when you get to the end of that? There has to be something there, else there wouldn’t be an end, there has to be something else to make an end doesn’t there?”

“There isn’t,” I said doubtfully.

“Oh yes there is. There’s Heaven.”

“Well what is there when you get to the end of Heaven?”

“You don’t ever get to the end of Heaven, because the Lord is there!” said Uncle Benny triumphantly, and took a close look at my writing, which was round, trembly, and uncertain. “We can’t see anybody can read that without no trouble. I want you to sit here and write a letter for me.”

He could read very well but he could not write. He said the teacher at school had beat him and beat him, trying to beat writing into him, and he respected her for it, but it never did any good. When I needed a letter written he usually got my father or mother to do it.

He hung over me seeing what I wrote at the top: *Flats Road, Jubilee, August 22, 1942.* “That’s right, that’s the way! Now start it off. *Dear Lady.*”

“You start with *Dear* and then the person’s name,” I said, “unless it’s a business letter and then you start with *Dear Sir*, or *Dear Madam* if it’s a lady. Is it a business letter?”

“It is and it isn’t. Put down *Dear Lady.*”

“What is her name?” I said troublesomely. “I could just as easy put her name.”

“I don’t know her name.” Impatiently, Uncle Benny brought me the newspaper, his newspaper, he opened it at the back, in the classified ads, a section I never got to, and held it under my nose.

Lady with one child desires housekeeping position for man in quiet country home. Fond of farm life. Matrimony if suited.

“There is the lady I am writing to so what can I do but call her lady?”

I gave in and wrote it down, executed a large careful comma and waited to start the letter under the

a in *Dear* as we had been taught.

“Dear Lady,” said Uncle Benny recklessly, “I am writing this letter—”

I am writing this letter in reply to what you put in the paper which I get through the mail. I am a man thirty-seven years old living alone on my own place which is fifteen acres out at the end of the Flats Road. There is a good house on it with stone foundation. It is right by the bush so we never run out of firewood in winter. There is a good well on it drilled sixty feet down and a cistern. In the bush is more berries than you can eat and good fish in the river and could have a good vegetable garden if you could keep off the rabbits. I have got a pet fox in a pen by the house, also a ferret and two minks and there is coons and squirrels and chipmunks around all the time. Your child will be welcome. You don't say if it is a girl or a boy. If a boy I could teach it to be a good trapper and hunter. I have a job working for a man that raises silver foxes on the next place to this. His wife is an educated woman if you like to go visiting. I hope I will have a letter from you soon. Yours truly, Benjamin Thomas Poole.

Within a week Uncle Benny had a letter back.

Dear Mr. Benjamin Poole, I am writing for my sister Miss Madeleine Howey to tell you she will be glad to take up your offer and will be ready to come any time after the 1st Sept. What are the bus or train connections to Jubilee. Or it might suit better if you could come down here, I will write out our full address at the end of the letter. Our place is not hard to find. My sisters child is not a boy but is a girl 18 mos. old named Diane. Looking forward to hearing from you I remain, Yours truly, Mason Howey, 121 Chalmers Street, Kitchener, Ont.

“Well it is taking a chance,” said my father, when Uncle Benny showed us this letter at the dinner table. “What makes you think this is the one you want?”

“I don't figure any harm in lookin' her over.”

“It looks to me as if the brother is pretty willing to get rid of her.”

“Take her to a doctor, have a medical examination,” said my mother firmly.

Uncle Benny said he sure would. Arrangements from then on went swiftly forward. He bought himself new clothes. He asked for the loan of the car, to drive to Kitchener. He left early in the morning, wearing a light green suit, a white shirt, a green, red and orange tie, a dark green felt hat, and brown and white shoes. He had got his hair cut and his moustache trimmed and he had washed. He looked strange, pale, sacrificial.

“Cheer up, Benny,” said my father. “You're not going to your own hanging. If you don't like the looks of things turn around and come home.”

My mother and I went across the fields with a mop, broom, dustpan, box of soap, Old Dutch Cleanser. But my mother had never been in that kitchen, never really inside it, before, and it defeated her. She started throwing things out on the porch, but after a while she saw that it was hopeless. “You'd have to dig a pit to put it in,” she said, and sat down on the steps holding the handle of the broom under her chin, like a witch in a story, and laughed. “If I didn't laugh I'd cry. Think of her coming here. She won't stay a week. She'll go back to Kitchener if she has to walk. That or throw herself in the river.”

We scrubbed the table and two chairs and a central space of floor and rubbed the stove with breadpapers and knocked down the cobwebs over the light. I picked a bouquet of goldenrod and put it in a jug in the centre of the table.

“Why wash the window,” said my mother, “and illuminate more disaster inside?”

At home she said, “Well I think my sympathies are with the woman, now.”

After dark Uncle Benny laid the keys on the table. He looked at us with the air of one arriving home from a long journey whose adventures can never properly be told, though he knows he will have to try.

“Did you make out all right?” said my father encouragingly. “Did the car give you any trouble?”

“Nossir. She run fine. I got off the road once but I hadn't got too far when I figured what I'd done.”

“Did you look at that map I gave you?”

“No, I seen some fellow on a tractor and I asked him and he turned me round.”

“So you got there all right?”

“Oh, ye-uh, I got there all right!”

My mother broke in. “I thought you’d bring Miss Howey in for a cup of tea.”

“Well she’s kind of tired from the trip and all and got to put the baby to bed.”

“The baby!” said my mother remorsefully. “I forgot about the baby! Where will the baby sleep?”

“We’ll rig up something. I think I got a crib over there somewheres if I can put some new slats in it.” He took off his hat, showing the red streak across his sweating forehead, and said, “I was goin’ to tell you it isn’t Miss Howey any more, it’s Mrs. Poole.”

“Well, Benny. Congratulations. Wish you every happiness. Made up your mind the minute you saw her, was that it?”

Uncle Benny chuckled nervously.

“Well they was all there. They was all set up for the wedding. Set it up before I got there. They had the preacher there and the ring bought and fixed up with some fellow to get the licence in a hurry. I could see they was all set up. All prepared for a wedding. Yes sir. They didn’t leave a thing out.”

“Well you’re a married man now, Benny.”

“Oh ye-uh, married man all right!”

“Well you’ll have to bring your bride to see us,” said my mother valiantly. Her use of the word *bride* was startling, evoking as it did long white veils, flowers, celebration, not thought of here. Uncle Benny said he would. He said yes he sure would. As soon as she got herself together after the trip, yes he sure would.

But he didn’t. There was no sign of Madeleine. My mother thought that now he would go home for his dinner but he came into the kitchen as usual. My mother said, “How is your wife? How is she managing? Does she understand that kind of stove?” and he replied to everything with vague affirmatives, chuckling and shaking his head.

Late in the afternoon when he finished his work he said to me, “You want to see something?”

“What?”

“You come along and you’ll see.”

Owen and I tailed him across the fields. He turned and stopped us at the edge of his yard.

“Owen wants to see the ferret,” I said.

“He’ll have to wait till another time. Don’t come no closer than here.”

After some time he came out of the house carrying a small child. I was disappointed; she was who it was. He set her on the ground. She bent, tottering, and picked up a crow’s feather.

“Tell your name,” said Uncle Benny coaxingly. “What’s your name? Is it Di-ane? Tell the kids your name.”

She would not say it.

“She can talk good if she wants to. She can say Momma and Benny and Di-ane and dink watah. Eh? Dink watah?” A girl in a red jacket came out on the porch.

“You come in here!”

Was she calling Diane or Uncle Benny? Her voice was threatening. Uncle Benny picked up the little girl, and said softly to us, “You better run on home now. You can come and see the ferret some other day,” and headed for the house.

We saw her at a distance, in the same red jacket, going down the road to Buckles’ Store. Her hands were in the pockets of the jacket, her head was bent, her long legs going like scissors. My mother met her, finally, in the store. She made a point of it. She saw Uncle Benny outside, holding Diane, and she asked him what he was doing there and he said, “We’re just waitin’ on her Momma.”

So my mother went in and walked up to the counter where the girl stood, while Charlie Buckles wrote up her bill.

"You must be Mrs. Poole." She introduced herself.

~~The girl said nothing. She looked at my mother, she heard what was said, but she herself said nothing. Charlie Buckle gave my mother a look.~~

"I guess you've been busy getting settled. You'll have to walk over and visit me whenever you feel like it."

"I don't walk nowhere on gravel roads unless I have to."

"You could come across the field," said my mother, merely because she did not like to walk out and give this girl the last word.

"She's a *child*," she told my father. "She's not any older than seventeen, not possibly. She wears glasses. She's very thin. She's not an idiot, that's not why they were getting rid of her, but she is mentally deranged, maybe, or on the borderline. Well, poor Benny. She's come to live in the right place though. She'll fit in fine on the Flats Road!"

She was already getting known there. She had chased Irene Pollox back inside her own yard and up her steps and brought her to her knees and grabbed that babyish white hair in both her hands. So people said. My mother said, "Don't go over there, never mind about the ferret, I don't want anybody maimed."

Nevertheless I went. I did not take Owen because he would tell. I thought I would knock on the door and ask, in a very polite way, if it was all right for me to read the newspapers on the porch. But before I got to the steps the door opened and Madeleine came out with a stove-lid lifter in her hand. She might have been lifting a stovetop when she heard me, she might not have picked it up on purpose, but I could not see it as anything but a weapon.

For a moment she looked at me. Her face was like Diane's, thin, white, at first evasive. Her rage was not immediate. She needed time to remember it, to reassemble her forces. Not that there was any possibility, from the first moment she saw me, of anything but rage. That or silence seemed to be the only choices she had.

"What are you come spyin' around here for? What are you come spyin' around my house for? You better get out of here." She started down the steps. I retreated before her only as quickly as was necessary, fascinated. "You're a dirty little bugger. Dirty little spybugger. Dirty little spy-bugger, aren't you?" Her short hair was not combed, she was wearing a ragged print dress on her flat young body. Her violence seemed calculated, theatrical; you wanted to stay to watch it, as if it were a show and yet there was no doubt, either, when she raised the stove-lifter over her head, that she would crack it down on my skull if she felt like it—that is, if she felt the scene demanded it. She was watching herself, I thought, and any moment she might stop, fall back into blankness, or like a child brag, "So how I scared you? You didn't know I was fooling, did you?"

I wished I could take this scene back to tell at home. Stories of Madeleine were being passed up and down the road. Something had annoyed her in the store and she had thrown a box of Kotex at Charlie Buckle. (*Lucky she wasn't holding a can of corn syrup!*) Uncle Benny lived under a hailstorm of abuse, you could hear it from the road. "Got yourself a Tartar there, didn't you, Benny?" people would say, and he would chuckle and nod, abashed, as if receiving congratulations. After a while he started telling stories himself. She had thrown the kettle through the window because there wasn't any water in it. She had taken the scissors and cut up his green suit, which he had only worn once, at his wedding; he did not know what she had against it. She had said she would set fire to the house because he had brought her the wrong brand of cigarettes.

"Do you think she drinks, Benny?"

"No she don't. I never brought a bottle into the house and how is she going to get a bottle by herself and besides I would of smelt it on her."

"You ever get near enough to her to smell it, Benny?"

Uncle Benny would lower his head, chuckling.

~~“You ever get that close to her, Benny? Bet she fights like a pack of wildcats. You have to tie her up sometime when she’s asleep.”~~

When Uncle Benny came to our house to do the pelting, he brought Diane along. He and my father worked in the cellar of our house, skinning the bodies of the foxes and turning the pelts inside out and stretching them on long boards to dry. Diane went up and down the cellar steps or sat on the top step and watched. She would never talk to anyone but Uncle Benny. She was suspicious of toys, cookie milk, anything we offered her, but she never whined or cried. Touched or cuddled, she submitted warily, her body giving off little tremors of dismay, her heart beating hard like the heart of a bird you capture it in your hand. Yet she would lie on Uncle Benny’s lap or fall asleep against his shoulder limp as spaghetti. His hand covered the bruises on her legs.

“She’s always goin’ around bumpin’ into things over at my place. I got so much stuff around, she bound to bump into things and climb up places and fall.”

Early in the Spring, before the snow was all gone, he came one day to say that Madeleine had left. When he went home at night, the day before, she had been gone. He had thought she might be at Jubilee and he waited for her to come home. Then he noticed that several other things were gone too—a table lamp which he was planning to rewire, a nice little rug, some dishes and a blue teapot that had belonged to his mother and two perfectly good folding chairs. She had taken Diane too, of course.

“It must have been a truck she went off in, she couldn’t of put all that in a car.”

Then my mother remembered that she had seen a panel truck, she thought it was grey, and it was going towards town, about three o’clock in the afternoon of the previous day. But she hadn’t been interested or noticed who was in it.

“Grey panel truck! I bet you that was her! She could’ve put the stuff in the back. Did it have a canvas over it, did you see?”

My mother had not noticed.

“I got to go after her,” said Uncle Benny excitedly. “She can’t take off like that with what don’t belong to her. She’s always tellin’ me, get this junk out of here, clear this junk out of here! Well, it doesn’t look so much like junk when she wants some herself. Only trouble is, how do I know where she went to? I better get in touch with that brother.”

After seven o’clock, when the cheaper rates came on, my father put through the long distance call on our phone, Uncle Benny didn’t have one—to Madeleine’s brother. Then he put Uncle Benny on the phone.

“Did she go down to your place?” Uncle Benny shouted immediately. “She went off in a truck. She went off in a grey panel truck. Did she show up down there?” There seemed to be confusion at the other end of the line; perhaps Uncle Benny was shouting too loudly for anybody to hear. My father had to get on and explain patiently what had happened. It turned out that Madeleine had not gone to Kitchener. Her brother did not show a great deal of concern about where she had gone. He hung up without saying good-bye.

My father started trying to persuade Uncle Benny that it was not such a bad thing to be rid of Madeleine, after all. He pointed out that she had not been a particularly good housekeeper and that she had not made Uncle Benny’s life exactly comfortable and serene. He did this in a diplomatic way, not forgetting he was talking about a man’s wife. He did not speak of her lack of beauty or slovenly clothes. As for the things she had taken—*stolen*, Uncle Benny said—well, that was too bad and a shame (my father knew enough not to suggest that these things were of no great value) but perhaps that was the price of getting rid of her, and in the long run Uncle Benny might consider that he had been lucky.

“It’s not that,” said my mother suddenly. “It’s the little girl. Diane.” Uncle Benny chuckled.

miserably.

~~“Her mother beats her, doesn’t she?”~~ cried my mother in a voice of sudden understanding and alarm. “That’s what it is. That’s how the bruises on her legs—”

Once Uncle Benny had started chuckling he couldn’t stop, it was like hiccoughs.

“Wel ye-uh. Ye-uh she—”

“Why didn’t you tell us when she was here? Why didn’t you tell us away last winter? Why didn’t you think of it myself? If I’d known the truth I could have reported her—”

Uncle Benny looked up startled.

“Reported her to the police! We could have brought charges. We could have had the child removed. What we have to do now, though, is put the police on her trail. They’ll find her. Never fear.”

Uncle Benny did not look happy or relieved at this assurance. He said cannily, “How would the police know where to look?”

“The provincial police, they’d know. They can work on a province-wide basis. Nation-wide, if necessary. They’ll find her.”

“Hold on a minute,” said my father. “What makes you think the police would be ready to do that? They only track down criminals that way.”

“Well what is a woman who beats a child if she isn’t a criminal?” “You have to have a case. You have to have witnesses. If you’re going to come out in the open like that you have to have proof.”

“Benny is the witness. He’d tell them. He’d testify against her.” She turned to Uncle Benny who started his hiccoughs again and said witlessly, “What’s that mean I have to do?”

“Enough talk about it for now,” my father said. “We’ll wait and see.” My mother stood up, offended and mystified. She had to say one thing more, so she said what everybody knew.

“I don’t know what the hesitation is about. It’s crystal-clear to me.”

But what was crystal-clear to my mother was obviously hazy and terrifying to Uncle Benny. Whether he was afraid of the police, or just afraid of the public and official air of such a scheme, the words surrounding it, the alien places it would take him into, was impossible to tell. Whatever it was he crumpled, and would not talk about Madeleine and Diane any more.

What was to be done? My mother brooded over the idea of taking action herself but my father told her, “You’re in trouble from the start when you interfere with other people’s families.”

“Just the same I know I’m right.”

“You may be right but that doesn’t mean there’s a thing you can do about it.”

At this time of year the foxes were having their pups. If an airplane from the Air Force Training School on the lake came over too low, if a stranger appeared near the pens, if anything too startling or disruptive occurred, they might decide to kill them. Nobody knew whether they did this out of blind irritation, or out of roused and terrified maternal feeling—could they be wanting to take their pups who still had not opened their eyes, out of the dangerous situation they might sense they had brought them into, in these pens? They were not like domestic animals. They had lived only a very few generations in captivity.

To further persuade my mother, my father said that Madeleine might have gone to the States, where nobody could ever find her. Many bad, and crazy, as well as restless and ambitious people went there eventually.

But Madeleine had not. Later in the spring came a letter. She had the nerve to write, said Uncle Benny and brought the letter and showed it. Without salutation she said: *I left my yellow sweater and green umbrella and dianes blanket at your place send them to me here. 1249 Ridlet St., Toronto, Ont.*

Uncle Benny had already made up his mind that he was going down there. He asked to borrow the car. He had never been to Toronto. On the kitchen table, my father spread the road-map, showing how to get there, though he said he wondered if it was a good idea. Uncle Benny said he planned to go

Diane and bring her back. Both my mother and father pointed out that this was illegal, and advised against it. But Uncle Benny, so terrified of taking legal and official action, was not in the least worried about undertaking what might turn out to be kidnapping. He told stories now of what Madeleine had done. She had held Diane's legs to the bars of the crib with leather straps. She had walloped her with a shingle. She had done worse than that, maybe, when he wasn't there. Marks of the poker, he thought, had been on the child's back. Telling all this, he was overcome with his apologetic half-laughter; he would have to shake his head and swallow it down.

He was gone two days. My father turned on the ten o'clock news, saying, "Well we'll have to see if old Benny's got picked up!" On the evening of the second day he drove the car into our yard and sat there for a moment, not looking at us. Then he got out slowly and walked with dignity and weariness towards the house. He did not have Diane. Had we ever expected him to get her?

We were sitting on the cement slab outside the kitchen door. My mother was in her own sling-back canvas chair, to remind her of urban lawns and leisure, and my father sat in a straight-backed kitchen chair. There were only a few bugs so early in the season. We were looking at the sunset. Sometimes my mother would assemble everybody to look at the sunset, just as if it was something she had arranged to have put on, and that spoiled it a bit—a little later I would refuse to look at all—but just the same there was no better place in the world for watching a sunset from than the end of the Flax Road. My mother said this herself.

My father had put up the screen door that day. Owen was swinging on it, disobediently, to hear the old, remembered sound of the spring stretching, then snapping back. He would be told not to, and stop and very cautiously behind my parents' backs begin again.

Such steadfast gloom hung around Uncle Benny that not even my mother would directly question him. My father told me in an under-tone to bring a chair from the kitchen.

"Benny sit down. You worn out from your drive? How did the car run?"

"She run okay."

He sat down. He did not take off his hat. He sat stiffly as in an unfamiliar place where he would not expect or even wish for a welcome. Finally my mother spoke to him, in tones of forced triviality and cheerfulness.

"Well. Is it a house they are living in, or an apartment?"

"I don't know," said Uncle Benny forbiddingly. After some time he added, "I never found it."

"You never found where they are living?"

He shook his head.

"Then you never saw them?"

"No I didn'."

"Did you lose the address?"

"No I didn'. I got it down on this piece of paper. I got it here." He took his wallet out of his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper and showed us, then read it. "1249 Ridlet Street." He folded it and put it back. All his movements seemed slowed down, ceremonious and regretful.

"I couldn't find it. I couldn't find the place."

"But did you get a city map? Remember we said, go to a gas station, ask for a map of the city of Toronto."

"I did that," said Uncle Benny with a kind of mournful triumph. "You bet. I went to a gas station and I asked them and they said they didn't have no maps. They had maps but only of the province."

"You already had a map of the province."

"I told them I did. I said I wanted a map of the city of Toronto. They said they didn' have none."

"Did you try another gas station?"

"If one place didn' have none I figured none of them would."

“You could have bought one in a store.”

“I didn’ know what kind of a store.”

“A stationery store! A department store! You could have asked at the gas station where you could buy one.”

“I figured instead of runnin’ all over the place tryin’ to find a map I would be better off just asking people to direct me how to get there, seein’ I already had the address.

“It’s very risky, asking *people*.”

“You’re tellin’ me,” said Uncle Benny.

When he got the heart to, he began his story.

“First I asked the one fellow, he directed me to go across this bridge, and I done that and I come to a red light and was supposed to turn left, he told me to, but when I got there I didn’ know how it was. I couldn’ figure out do you turn left on a red light ahead of you or do you turn left on a green light ahead of you.”

“You turn left on a green light,” cried my mother despairingly. “If you turned left on a red light you’d turn across the traffic that’s going across in front of you.”

“Ye-uh, I know you would, but if you turned left on a green light you gotta turn across the traffic that’s comin’ *at* you.”

“You wait until they give you an opening.”

“You could wait all day then, they’re not going to give you no opening. So I didn’ know, I didn’ know which was right to do, and I sat there trying to figure it out and they all starts up honkin’ behind me so I thought, well, I’ll turn right, I can do that without no trouble, and then I’ll get turned around and headed back the way I come. Then I ought to be going in the right direction. But I couldn’ see any place to turn round so I just kept goin’ and goin’. Then I turned off up a street that went crossways and kept on driving until I thought, well, I’ve gone and lost track completely of what the first fellow told me, so I may’s well ask somebody else. So I stopped and asked this lady was walking with a dog on a leash but she said she never *heard* of Ridlet Street. She never heard of it. She said she lived in Toronto twenty-two years. She called over a boy on his bicycle then and *he* heard of it, he told me it was way on the other side of town and I was headed out of town, the way I was goin’. But I figured it might be easier to go round the city than go through it, even if it took longer, and I kept on the way I was going sort of circling it was the way it seemed to me, and by this time I could see it was getting dark and I thought, well, I sure’s hell better get a move on, I want to find where this place is before dark because I am not goin’ to like driving in the dark here one bit—”

He ended up sleeping in the car, pulled off the road, outside a factory yard. He had got lost among factories, dead-end roads, warehouses, junkyards, railway tracks. He described to us each turn he had taken and each person he had asked for directions; he reported what each of them had said and what he had thought then, the alternatives he had considered, why he had in each case decided to do what he did. He remembered everything. A map of the journey was burnt into his mind. And as he talked of the different landscape—cars, billboards, industrial buildings, roads and locked gates and high wire fences, railway tracks, steep cindery embankments, tin sheds, ditches with a little brown water running through them, also tin cans, mashed cardboard cartons, all kinds of clogged or barely floating waste—all the things seemed to grow up around us created by his monotonous, meticulously remembering voice, and we could see it, we could see how it was to be lost there, how it was just not possible to find anything, so we go on looking.

Even though my mother protested, “But that is what cities are like! That is why you have to have a map!”

“Well I woke up there this morning,” Uncle Benny said as if he hadn’t heard her, “and I knew where I better do was just get out, any way I could get.”

My father sighed; he nodded. It was true.

~~So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same. In that world people could go down in quicksand, be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities; luck and wickedness were gigantic and unpredictable; nothing was deserved, anything might happen; defeats were met with crazy satisfaction. It was his triumph, that I couldn't know about, to make us see.~~

Owen was swinging on the screen door, singing in a cautious derogatory way, as he would when there were long conversations.

Land of Hope and Glory
Mother of the Free
How shall we ex-tore thee
Who are bo-orn of thee?

I had taught him that song—that year we were singing such songs every day at school, to help save England from Hitler. My mother said it was *extol* but I would not believe that, for how would it rhyme?

My mother sat in her canvas chair and my father in a wooden one, they did not look at each other. But they were connected, and this connection was plain as a fence, it was between us and Uncle Benny, us and the Flats Road, it would stay between us and anything. It was the same as in the winter, sometimes, when they would deal out two hands of cards and sit down at the kitchen table, and play, waiting for the ten o'clock news, having sent us to bed upstairs. And upstairs seemed miles above them, dark and full of the noise of the wind. Up there you discovered what you never remembered down in the kitchen—that we were in a house as small and shut-up as any boat is on the sea, in the middle of a tide of howling weather. They seemed to be talking, playing cards, a long way away in a tiny spot of light, irrelevantly; yet this thought of them, prosaic as a hiccough, familiar as breath, was what held me, what winked at me from the bottom of the well as I fell into sleep.

Uncle Benny did not hear from Madeleine again or, if he did, he never mentioned it. When asked, teased, about her, he would seem to call her to mind unregretfully, with a little contempt for being something, or somebody, so long discarded, like the turtles.

After a while we would all just laugh, remembering Madeleine going down the road in her red jacket, with her legs like scissors, flinging abuse over her shoulder at Uncle Benny trailing after, with her child. We laughed to think of how she carried on, and what she did to Irene Pollox and Charles Buckle. Uncle Benny could have made up the beatings, my mother said at last, and took that for comfort; how was he to be trusted? Madeleine herself was like something he might have made up. We remembered her like a story, and having nothing else to give we gave her our strange, belated, heartless applause.

“Madeleine! That madwoman!”

Heirs of the Living Body

The house at Jenkin's Bend had that name painted on a sign—Uncle Craig's doing—and hanging from the front verandah, between a Red Ensign and a Union Jack. It looked like a recruiting station or like a crossing point on the border. It had once been a Post Office, and still seemed an official, semi-public sort of place, because Uncle Craig was the clerk of Fairmile Township, and people came to him to get marriage licences and other kinds of permits; the Township Council met in his den, or office, which was furnished with filing cabinets, a black leather sofa, a huge rolltop desk, other flags, a picture of the Fathers of Confederation and another of the King and Queen and the little Princesses, all in their coronation finery. Also a framed photograph of a log house which had stood on the site of this large and handsome, ordinary brick one. That picture seemed to have been in another country, where everything was much lower, muddier, darker, than here. Smudgy bush, with a great many black pointed evergreens, came up close around the buildings, and the road in the foreground was made of logs.

"What they called a corduroy road," Uncle Craig instructed me.

Several men in shirtsleeves, with droopy moustaches, and fierce but somehow helpless expressions, stood around a horse and wagon. I made the mistake of asking Uncle Craig if he was in the picture.

"I thought you knew how to read," he said, and pointed out the date scrawled under the wagon wheels: *June 10, 1860*. "My father wasn't even a grown man at that time. There he is behind the horse's head. He wasn't married till 1875. I was born in 1882. Does that answer your question?"

He was displeased with me not on account of any vanity about his age, but because of my inaccurate notions of time and history. "By the time I was born," he continued severely, "all that bush you see in the picture would be gone. That road would be gone. There would be a gravel road."

One of his eyes was blind, had been operated on but remained dark and clouded; that eyelid had a menacing droop. His face was square and sagging, his body stout. There was another photograph, not in this room but in the front room across the hall, which showed him stretched out on a rug in front of his seated, elderly-looking parents—a blond, plump, self-satisfied adolescent, head resting on one elbow. Auntie Grace and Aunt Elspeth, the younger sisters, in frizzed bangs and sailor dresses, sat on hassocks at his head and feet. My own grandfather, my father's father, who had died of the flu in 1918, stood up behind the parents' chairs, with Aunt Moira (slender then!) who lived in Porterfield on one side and Aunt Helen who had married a widower and gone round the world and lived now, rich, in British Columbia, on the other. "Look at your Uncle Craig!" Aunt Elspeth or Auntie Grace would say, dusting this picture. "Doesn't he look full of himself, eh, like the cat that licked up all the cream?" They spoke as if he were still that boy, stretched out there in beguiling insolence, for them to pamp and laugh at.

Uncle Craig gave out information; some that I was interested in, some that I wasn't. I wanted to hear about how Jenkin's Bend was named, after a young man killed by a falling tree just a little way up the road; he had been in this country less than a month. Uncle Craig's grandfather, my great-great-grandfather, building his house here, opening his Post Office, starting what he hoped and believed would someday be an important town, had given this young man's name to it, for what else would such a young man, a bachelor, have to be remembered by?

"Where was he killed?"

“Up the road, not a quarter of a mile.”

“Can I go and see where?”

“There’s nothing marked. That’s not the sort of thing they put up a marker for.”

Uncle Craig looked at me with disapproval; he was not moved to curiosity. He often thought me flighty and stupid and I did not care much; there was something large and impersonal about his judgement that left me free. He himself was not hurt or diminished in any way by my unsatisfactoriness, though he would point it out. This was the great difference between disappointing him and disappointing somebody like my mother, or even my aunts. Masculine self-centredness made him restful to be with.

The other kind of information he gave me had to do with the political history of Wawanash County, allegiances of families, how people were related, what had happened in elections. He was the first person I knew who really believed in the world of public events, of politics, who did not question himself. I was part of these things. Though my parents always listened to the news and were discouraged or relieved by what they heard, (mostly discouraged, for this was early in the war) I had the feeling that to them as to me, everything that happened in the world was out of our control, unreal yet calamitous. Uncle Craig was not so daunted. He saw a simple connection between himself, handling the affairs of the township, troublesome as they often were, and the Prime Minister in Ottawa handling the affairs of the country. And he took an optimistic view of the war, a huge eruption in ordinary political life which would have to burn itself out; he was really more interested in how it affected elections, in what the conscription issue would do to the Liberal Party, than in how it progressed by itself. Though he was patriotic; he hung out the flag, he sold Victory Bonds.

When not working on the township’s business he was engaged on two projects—a history of Wawanash County, and a family tree, going back to 1670, in Ireland. Nobody in our family had done anything remarkable. They had married other Irish Protestants, and had large families. Some did not marry. Some of the children died young. Four in one family were burned in a fire. One man lost two wives in childbirth. One married a Roman Catholic. They came to Canada and went on in the same way, often marrying Scotch Presbyterians. And to Uncle Craig it seemed necessary that the names of all these people, their connections with each other, the three large dates of birth and marriage and death, or the two of birth and death if that was all that happened to them, be discovered, often with great effort and a stupendous amount of world-wide correspondence (he did not forget the branch of the family which had gone to Australia) and written down here, in order, in his own large careful handwriting. He did not ask for anybody in the family to have done anything more interesting, or scandalous, than to marry a Roman Catholic (the woman’s religion noted in red ink below her name). Indeed, it would have thrown his whole record off balance if anybody had. It was not the individual names that were important, but the whole solid, intricate structure of lives supporting us from the past.

It was the same with the history of the county, which had been opened up, settled, and had grown and entered its present slow decline, with only modest disasters—the fire at Tupperton, regular flooding of the Wawanash river, some terrible winters, a few unmysterious murders; and had produced only three notable people—a Supreme Court judge, an archaeologist who had excavated Indian villages around Georgian Bay and written a book about them, and a woman whose poems used to be published in newspapers throughout Canada and the United States. These were not what mattered; it was daily life that mattered. Uncle Craig’s files and drawers were full of newspaper clippings, letters containing descriptions of the weather, an account of a runaway horse, lists of those present at funerals, a great accumulation of the most ordinary facts, which it was his business to get in order. Everything had to go into his history, to make it the whole history of Wawanash County. He could not leave anything out. That was why, when he died, he had only got as far as the year 1909.

When I read, years afterwards, about Natasha in *War and Peace*, and how she ascribed immen-

importance, although she had no understanding of them, to her husband's abstract, intellectual pursuits, I had to think of Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace. It would have made no difference if Uncle Craig had actually had "abstract, intellectual pursuits," or if he had spent the day sorting henfeathers; they were prepared to believe in what he did. He had an old black typewriter, with metal rims around the keys and all the long black arms exposed; when he began his slow, loud, halting but authoritative typing they dropped their voices, they made absurd scolding faces at each other for the clatter of the pan. *Craig's working!* They would not let me go out on the verandah for fear I would walk in front of his window and disturb him. They respected men's work beyond anything; they also laughed at it. That was strange; they could believe absolutely in its importance and at the same time convey the judgement that it was, from one point of view, frivolous, nonessential. And they would never, never meddle with it; between men's work and women's work was the dearest line drawn, and any stepping over this line, any suggestion of stepping over it, they would meet with such light, amazed, regretful, superior, laughter.

The verandah was where they sat in the afternoons, having completed morning marathons of floor scrubbing, cucumber hoeing, potato digging, bean and tomato picking, canning, pickling, washing, starching, sprinkling, ironing, waxing, baking. They were not idle sitting there; their laps were full of work—cherries to be stoned, peas to be shelled, apples to be cored. Their hands, their old dark wood-handled paring knives, moved with marvellous, almost vindictive speed. Two or three cars an hour went by, and usually slowed and waved, being full of township people. Aunt Elspeth or Auntie Grace would call out the hospitable country formula, "Stop in a while off of that dusty road!" and the people in the car would call back, "Would if we had the time! When you going to come and see us?"

Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace told stories. It did not seem as if they were telling them to me, to entertain me, but as if they would have told them anyway, for their own pleasure, even if they had been alone.

"Oh, the hired man Father had, remember, the foreigner, he had the very devil of a temper, excuse my language. What was he, Grace, now wasn't he a German?"

"He was an Austrian. He came in off the road looking for work and Father hired him. Mother never got over being afraid of him, she didn't trust foreigners."

"Well no wonder."

"She made him sleep in the granary."

"He was always yelling and cursing in Austrian, remember when we jumped across his cabbage patch. The flood of foreign cursing, it would freeze your blood."

"Till I made up my mind I'd show him."

"What was he burning that time, he was down the orchard burning a lot of branches—"

"Tent caterpillars."

"That's it, he was burning up the tent caterpillars and you got yourself into a pair of Craig's overalls and a shirt and stuffed yourself with pillows and put your hair up under a felt hat of Father's, and you blacked your hands and your face to look like a darky—"

"And I took the butcher-knife, that same long wicked knife we've got still—"

"And crept down through the orchard, hid behind the trees, Craig and me watching all the time from the upstairs window—"

"Mother and Father couldn't have been here."

"No, no, they'd gone to Town! They'd gone to Jubilee in the horse and buggy!"

"I got to about five yards of him and I slipped out from behind a tree-trunk and—O my saints, didn't he let out a yell! He yelled and lit for the barn. He was a coward through and through!"

"Then you were into the house and out of those clothes and scrubbed yourself clean before Father and Mother got back from Town. There we were, all sitting round the supper-table, waiting on him"

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