

ALICE MUNRO, TOO MUCH HAPPINESS

(2009)

Face

I am convinced that my father looked at me, stared at me, saw me, only once. After that, he could take for granted what was there.

In those days they didn't let fathers into the glare of the theatre where babies were born, or into the room where the women about to give birth were stifling their cries or suffering aloud. Fathers laid eyes on the mothers only after they were cleaned up and conscious and tucked up under pastel blankets in the ward, or in the semi-private or private rooms. My mother had a private room, as became her status in the town, and just as well, actually, seeing the way things turned out.

I don't know whether it was before or after his first look at my mother that my father stood outside the window of the nursery for his first glimpse of me. I rather think it was after, and that when she heard his steps outside her door and crossing her room, she heard the anger in them but did not know yet what had caused it. After all, she had borne him a son, which was presumably what all men wanted.

I know what he said. Or what she told me he said.

"What a chunk of chopped liver."

Then, "You don't need to think you're going to bring that into the house."

One side of my face was—is—normal. And my entire body was normal from toes to shoulders. Twenty-one inches was my length; eight pounds five ounces my weight. A strapping male infant, fair-skinned though probably still red from my unremarkable recent journey.

My birthmark not red, but purple. Dark in my infancy and early childhood, fading somewhat as I got older, but never fading to a state of inconsequence, never ceasing to be the first thing you notice about me, head-on, or are shocked to see if you have come at me from the left, or clean, side. It looks as if someone has dumped grape juice or paint on me, a big, serious splash that does not turn to dribble till it reaches my neck. Though it does skirt my nose pretty well, after dousing one eyelid.

"It makes the white of that eye look so lovely and clear," was one of the idiotic though pardonable things my mother would say, in the hope of making me admire myself. And an odd thing happened. Sheltered as I was, I almost believed her.

Of course my father could not do anything to prevent my coming home. And of course my presence, my existence, made a monstrous rift between my father and mother. Though it is hard for me to believe there had not always been some rift, some incomprehension at least, or chilly disappointment.

My father was the son of an uneducated man who owned a tannery and then a glove factory. Prosperity was ebbing as the twentieth century progressed, but the big house was still there, the cook and the gardener. My father went to university, joined a fraternity, had what was referred to as a high old time, entered the insurance business when the glove factory went under. He was as popular around our town as he had been at college. A good golfer, an excellent sailor. (I have not mentioned that we lived on the cliffs above Lake Huron, in the Victorian house my grandfather had built facing the sunset.)

At home my father's most vivid quality was a capacity for hating and despising. In fact those two verbs often went together. He hated and despised certain foods, makes of automobile, music, manners of speech and modes of dress, radio comedians and later on television personalities, as well as the usual assortment of races and classes it was customary to hate and despise (though perhaps not so thoroughly as he did) in his day. In fact most of his opinions would have found no argument outside our house, in our town, with his sailing companions, or his old fraternity brothers. It was his vehemence, I think, that brought out an uneasiness that could also amount to admiration.

Calls a spade a spade. That was what was said of him.

Of course a production like myself was an insult he had to face every time he opened his own door. He took breakfast alone and did not come home for lunch. My mother ate those meals with me and part of her dinner also, the rest of dinner with him. Then I think there was some sort of row about this, and she sat through my meal with me but ate with him.

It can be seen that I could not contribute to a comfortable marriage.

But how had they ever come together? She had not gone to university, she had to borrow money to attend a school where teachers were trained in her day. She was frightened of sailing, clumsy at golf, and if she was beautiful, as some people have told me (it is hard to make that judgment of your own mother), her looks cannot have been of the kind my father admired. He spoke of certain women as stunners, or, later in his life, as dolls. My mother did not wear lipstick, her brassieres were unassertive, her hair was done in a tight crown of braids that emphasized her wide white forehead. Her clothes lagged behind the style, being somewhat shapeless and regal—she was the sort of woman you could imagine wearing a rope of fine pearls, though I don't think she ever did.

What I seem to be saying, I guess, is that I may have been a pretext, a blessing even, in that I furnished them with a ready-made quarrel, an insoluble problem that threw them back on their natural differences where they may in fact have been more comfortable. In all my years in the town, I encountered no one who was divorced, and so it may be taken for granted that there were other couples living separate lives in one house, other men and women who had accepted the fact that there were differences never to be mended, a word or an act never to be forgiven, a barrier never to be washed away.

It follows, unsurprisingly in such a story, that my father smoked and drank too much—though most of his friends did too, whatever their situations. He had a stroke while still in his fifties, and died after several months in bed. And it was not a surprise that my mother nursed him all that time, kept him at home, where instead of becoming tender and appreciative he called her quite foul names, thickened by his misfortune but always decipherable to her, and to him, it seemed, quite gratifying.

At the funeral a woman said to me, "Your mother is a saint." I remember this woman's appearance quite well, though not her name. White curls, rouged cheeks, dainty features. A tearful whisper. I disliked her instantly. I scowled. I was at that time in my second year at college. I had not joined, or been invited to join, my father's fraternity. I hung around with people who were planning to be writers and actors and were at present wits, dedicated time-wasters, savage social critics, newborn atheists. I had no respect for people who behaved like saints. And to be truthful, that was not what my mother aimed for. She was far enough from pious notions that she had never asked me, on any of my trips home, to go into my father's room, to try for a word of reconciliation with him. And I had never gone. There was no notion of a reconciliation, or any blessing. My mother was no fool.

She had been devoted to me—not the word either of us would have used, but I think the right one—till I was nine years old. She taught me herself. Then she sent me away to school. This sounds like a recipe for disaster. The mother-coddled, purple-faced lad, thrown suddenly amongst the taunts, the ruthless assaults of young savages. But I didn't have a bad time, and to this day I'm not sure why not. I was tall and strong for my age, and that might have helped. I think, though, that the atmosphere in our house, that climate of ill temper and ferocity and disgust—even coming from an often unseen father—may have made any other place seem reasonable, almost accepting, though in a negative not a positive way. It was not a question of anybody making an effort, being nice to me. There was a name for me—it was Grape-Nuts. But almost everybody had a derogatory nickname. A boy with particularly smelly feet that did not seem to benefit from daily showers cheerfully put up with the name of Stink. I got along. I wrote my mother comical letters, and she replied somewhat in kind, taking a mildly satirical tone about events in town and in church—I remember her describing a row about the right way to cut sandwiches for a ladies' tea—and even managing to be humorous but not bitter about my father, whom she referred to as His Grace.

I have made my father the beast in my account so far, and my mother the rescuer and protector, and I believe this to be true. But they are not the only people in my story, and the atmosphere in the house was not the only one I knew. (I am speaking now of the time even before I went to school.) What I have come to think of as the Great Drama of my life had already occurred outside that house.

Great Drama. It embarrasses me to have written that. I wonder if it sounds cheaply satirical or tiresomely self-dramatizing. But then I think, Isn't it quite natural for me to see my life that way, talk about it that way, when you consider how I made my living?

I became an actor. Surprising? Of course at university I hung around with people active in the theatre, and in my final year I directed a play. There was a standing joke, originating with myself, about how I would manage a role by keeping my unmarked profile always to the audience and walking backwards across the stage when necessary. But no such drastic manoeuvres were necessary.

At that time there were regular dramas on national radio. A particularly ambitious program on Sunday evenings. Adaptations of novels. Shakespeare. Ibsen. My voice was naturally adaptable and with a bit of training it improved. I was taken on. Small parts at first. But by the time television put the whole business to rest I was on almost every week and my name was known to a certain faithful if never large audience. There were letters objecting to bad language or mention of incest (we did some of the Greek plays as well). But on the whole, not so much rebuke raining down on me as my mother was afraid of, when she settled in her chair by the radio, faithful and apprehensive, every Sunday evening.

Then television, and acting was over, certainly for me. But my voice stood me in good stead, and I was able to get a job as an announcer, first in Winnipeg, then back in Toronto. And for the last twenty years of my working life I was host of an eclectic musical show presented on weekday afternoons. I did not choose the selections, as people often thought. I have a limited appreciation of music. But I had crafted an agreeable, slightly quirky, durable radio personality. The program received many letters. We heard from old people's homes and homes for the blind, from people regularly driving long or monotonous distances on business, from housewives alone in the middle of the day with the baking and ironing, and farmers in tractor cabs plowing or harrowing some sweeping acreage. All over the country.

A flattering outpouring when I at last retired. People wrote that they were bereft, they felt as if they had lost a close friend or

member of the family. What they meant was that a certain amount of time had been filled for them five days a week. Time had been filled, reliably, agreeably, they had not been left adrift, and for this they were truly embarrassingly grateful. And surprisingly, I shared in their emotion. I would have to be careful of my voice, so that I would not choke up as I read some of their letters on the air.

And yet memory of the program, and of myself, faded rapidly. New allegiances were formed. I had made a complete break, refusing to chair charity auctions or give nostalgic speeches. My mother had died after living to a great age, but I had not sold the house, only rented it. Now I prepared to sell it, and gave the tenants notice. I meant to live there myself for the time it took to get the place—particularly the garden—into shape.

I had not been lonely in these years. Aside from my audience I had friends. I had women too. Some women of course specialize in those men they imagine in need of bucking up—they are eager to sport you around as a sign of their own munificence. I was on the watch for them. The woman I was closest to in those years was a receptionist at the station, a nice sensible person, left on her own with four children. There was some feeling that we would move in together once the youngest was off her hands. But the youngest was a daughter, who managed to have a child of her own without ever leaving home, and somehow our expectation, our affair, dwindled. We kept in touch by e-mail after I retired and came back to my old home. I invited her to come to see me. Then there was a sudden announcement that she was getting married and going to live in Ireland. I was too surprised and perhaps too much knocked off my perch to ask whether the daughter and the baby were going too.

The garden is in a great mess. But I feel more at ease there than in the house, which looks the same on the outside but is

drastically altered on the inside. My mother had the back parlour made into a bedroom, and the pantry into a full bathroom, and later on the ceilings were lowered, cheap doors hung, garish geometric wallpaper pasted on, to accommodate tenants. In the garden there were no such alterations, merely neglect on a grand scale. Old perennials still straggle up among the weeds, ragged leaves larger than umbrellas mark the place of a sixty- or seventy-year-old rhubarb bed, and a half-dozen apple trees remain, bearing little wormy apples of some variety whose name I don't remember. The patches I clear look minute, yet the piles of weeds and brush I have collected seem mountainous. They must be hauled away, furthermore, at my expense. The town no longer allows bonfires.

All this used to be looked after by a gardener named Pete. I have forgotten his last name. He dragged one leg after him and carried his head always bent to one side. I don't know if he had had an accident or suffered a stroke. He worked slowly but diligently and was more or less always in a bad temper. My mother spoke to him with soft-voiced respect, but she proposed—and got—certain changes in the flower beds that he did not think much of. And he disliked me because I was constantly riding my tricycle where I shouldn't be and making hideouts under the apple trees and because he probably knew that I called him Sneaky Pete under my breath. I don't know where I got that. Was it from a comic strip?

Another reason for his growling dislike has just occurred to me, and it's odd I didn't think of it before. We were both flawed, obvious victims of physical misfortune. You would think such people would make common cause, but it could just as often happen that they don't. Each may be reminded by the other of something sooner forgotten.

But I'm not sure of this. My mother had arranged things so that most of the time I seem to have been quite unaware of my condition. She claimed that she was teaching me at home

because of a bronchial ailment and the need to protect me from the onslaught of germs that occurs in the first couple of years at school. Whether anybody believed her I don't know. And as to my father's hostility, that had spread so wide in our house that I really don't believe I felt singled out by it.

And here at the cost of repeating myself I must say that I think my mother did right. The emphasis on one notable flaw, the goading and ganging up, would have caught me too young and with nowhere to hide. Things are different now, and the danger to a child afflicted as I was would be of too much fuss and showy kindness, not of taunts and isolation. Or so it seems to me. The life of those times took much of its liveliness, its wit and folklore, as my mother may have known, from pure viciousness.

Until a couple of decades ago—maybe more—there was another building on our property. I knew it as a small barn or large wooden shed where Pete stored his tools and where various things once of use to us were put out of the way until there was some decision about what to do with them. It was torn down shortly after Pete was replaced by an energetic young couple, Ginny and Franz, who brought their own up-to-date equipment in their own truck. Later they were not available, having gone into market gardening, but by that time they were able to supply their teenage children to cut the grass, and my mother had lost interest in doing anything else.

"I've just let it go," she said. "It's surprising how easy it is, just to let things go."

To get back to the building—how I circle and dither around this subject—there was a time before it became just a storage shed, when people lived in it. There was a couple named the Bells, who were cook-housekeeper and gardener-chauffeur to my grandparents. My grandfather owned a Packard that he never learned to drive. Both the Bells and the Packard were gone in my time, but the place was still referred to as Bells' Cottage.

For a few years in my childhood Bells' Cottage was rented to

a woman named Sharon Suttles. She lived there with her daughter Nancy. She had come to town with her husband, a doctor who was setting up his first practice, and within a year or so he died, of blood poisoning. She remained in town with her baby, having no money and, as was said, no people. This must have meant no people who could help her or who had offered to take her in. At some time she got a job in my father's insurance office, and came to live in Bells' Cottage. I am not certain about when all this happened. I have no memory of them moving in, or of the cottage when it was empty. It was painted, at that time, a dusty pink, and I always thought of that as Mrs. Suttles's choice, as if she could not have lived in a house of any other colour.

I called her Mrs. Suttles, of course. But I was aware of her first name, as I seldom was of any other grown-up woman's. Sharon was an unusual name in those days. And it had a connection with a hymn I knew from Sunday school, which my mother allowed me to attend because there was close monitoring and no recess. We sang hymns whose words were flashed on a screen, and I think that most of us even before we learned to read got some idea of the verses from their shape in front of us.

*By cool Silken's shady rill
How sweet the lily grows.
How sweet the breath, beneath the hill,
Of Sharon's dewy rose.*

I can't believe that there was actually a rose in a corner of the screen and yet I saw one, I see one, of a faded pink, whose aura was transferred to the name Sharon.

I don't mean to say that I fell in love with Sharon Suttles. I had been in love, when barely out of my infancy, with a tomboyish young maid named Bessie, who took me out on jaunts in my stroller and swung me so high on the park swings

that I nearly went over the top. And some time later with a friend of my mother's, who had a velvet collar on her coat and a voice that seemed somehow to be related to it. Sharon Suttles was not for falling in love with in that way. She was not velvet-voiced and she had no interest in showing me a good time. She was tall and very thin to be anybody's mother—there were no slopes on her. Her hair was the colour of toffee, brown with golden edges, and in the time of the Second World War she was still wearing it bobbed. Her lipstick was bright red and thick-looking, like the mouths of movie stars I had seen in posters, and around her house she usually wore a kimono, on which I believe there were some pale birds—storks?—whose legs reminded me of hers. She spent a lot of her time lying on the couch, smoking, and sometimes, to amuse us or herself, she would kick those legs straight up in the air, one after the other and send a feathery slipper flying. When she was not mad at us her voice would be throaty and exasperated, not unfriendly, but in no way wise or tender or reproving, with the full tones, the suggestion of sadness, that I expected in a mother.

You dumb twerps, she called us.

"Get out of here and let me have some peace, you dumb twerps."

She would already be lying on the couch with an ashtray on her stomach while we scooted Nancy's toy cars across the floor. How much peace did she want?

She and Nancy ate peculiar foods at irregular hours, and when she went into the kitchen to fix herself a snack, she never came back with cocoa or graham crackers for us. On the other hand, Nancy was never forbidden to spoon vegetable soup, thick as pudding, out of the can, or to grab handfuls of Rice Krispies straight from the box.

Was Sharon Suttles my father's mistress? Her job provided for her, and the pink cottage provided rent free?

My mother spoke of her kindly, not infrequently mentioning

the tragedy that had befallen, with the death of the young husband. Whatever maid we had at the time would be sent over with presents of raspberries or new potatoes or shelled fresh peas from our garden. I remember the peas particularly. I remember Sharon Suttles—still lying on the couch—flipping them into the air with her forefinger, saying, "What am I supposed to do with these?"

"You cook them on the stove with water," I said helpfully.

"No kidding?"

As for my father, I never saw him with her. He left for work rather late and knocked off early, to keep up with his various sporting activities. There were weekends when Sharon caught the train to Toronto, but she always had Nancy with her. And Nancy would come back full of the adventures she had had and the spectacles she had seen, such as the Santa Claus Parade.

There were certainly times when Nancy's mother was not at home, not in her kimono on the couch, and it could be presumed that at those times she was not smoking or relaxing but doing regular work in my father's office, that legendary place that I had never seen and where I would certainly not be welcome.

At such times—when Nancy's mother had to be at work and Nancy had to be at home—a grouchy person named Mrs. Codd sat listening to radio soap operas, ready to chase us out of the kitchen where she herself was eating anything on hand. It never occurred to me that since we usually spent all our time together, my mother could have offered to keep an eye on Nancy as well as me, or ask our maid to do so, to save the hiring of Mrs. Codd.

It does seem to me now that we played together all our waking hours. This would be from the time I was about five years old until I was around eight and a half, Nancy being half a year younger. We played mostly outdoors—those must have been rainy days, because of my memory of us in Nancy's cottage annoying Nancy's mother. We had to keep out of the vegetable garden and try not to knock down the flowers, but we were

constantly in and out of the berry patches and under the apple trees and in the absolutely wild trashy area beyond the cottage, which was where we constructed our air-raid shelters and hide-outs from the Germans.

There was actually a training base to the north of our town, and real planes were constantly flying over us. Once there was a crash, but to our disappointment the plane that was out of control went into the lake. And because of all this reference to the war we were able to make of Pete not just a local enemy but a Nazi, and of his lawn mower a tank. Sometimes we lobbed apples at him from the crabapple tree that sheltered our bivouac. Once he complained to my mother and it cost us a trip to the beach.

She often took Nancy along on trips to the beach. Not to the one with the water slide, just down the cliff from our house, but to a smaller one you had to drive to, where there were no rowdy swimmers. In fact she taught us both to swim. Nancy was more fearless and reckless than I was, which annoyed me, so once I pulled her under an incoming wave and sat on her head. She kicked and held her breath and fought her way free.

"Nancy is a little girl," my mother scolded. "She is a little girl and you should treat her like a little sister."

Which was exactly what I was doing. I did not think of her as weaker than me. Smaller, yes, but sometimes that was an advantage. When we climbed trees she could hang like a monkey from branches that would not support me. And once in a fight—I can't recall what any of our fights were about—she bit me on my restraining arm and drew blood. That time we were separated, supposedly for a week, but our glowering from windows soon turned to longing and pleading, so the ban was lifted.

In winter we were allowed the whole property, where we built snow forts furnished with sticks of firewood and provided with arsenals of snowballs to fling at anyone who came along.

Which few did, this being a dead-end street. We had to make a snowman, so that we could pummel him.

If a major storm kept us inside, at my house, my mother presided. We had to be kept quiet if my father was home in bed with a headache, so she would read us stories. *Alice in Wonderland*, I remember. We were both upset when Alice drinks the potion that makes her grow so large she gets stuck in the rabbit hole.

What about sex games, you may wonder. And yes, we had those too. I recall our hiding, one extremely hot day, in a tent that had been pitched—I have no idea why—behind the cottage. We had crawled in there on purpose to explore each other. The canvas had a certain erotic but infantile smell, like the underclothes that we removed. Various ticklings excited but shortly made us cross, and we were drenched in sweat, itchy, and soon ashamed. When we got ourselves out of there we felt more separate than usual and oddly wary of each other. I don't remember if the same thing happened again with the same result, but I would not be surprised if it did.

I cannot bring Nancy's face to mind so clearly as I can her mother's. I think her colouring was, or would in time be, much the same. Fair hair naturally going brown, but now bleached by so much time in the sun. Very rosy, even reddish skin. Yes. I see her cheeks red, almost as if crayoned. That, too, owing to so much time outdoors in summer, and such decisive energy.

In my house, it goes without saying, all rooms except those specified to us were forbidden. We would not dream of going upstairs or down into the cellar or into the front parlour or the dining room. But in the cottage everywhere was allowed, except wherever Nancy's mother was trying to get some peace or Mrs. Codd was glued to the radio. The cellar was a good place to go when even we tired of the heat in the afternoons. There was no railing alongside the steps and we could take more and more and more daring jumps to land on the hard

dirt floor. And when we tired of that we could climb onto an old cot and bounce up and down, whipping an imaginary horse. Once we tried to smoke a cigarette filched from Nancy's mother's pack. (We would not have dared take more than one.) Nancy managed better with it than I did, having had more practice.

There was also in the cellar an old wooden dresser, on which sat several tins of mostly dried-up paint and varnish, an assortment of stiffened paintbrushes, stirring sticks, and boards on which colours had been tried or brushes wiped. A few tins had their lids still on tight, and these we pried open with some difficulty and discovered paint that could be stirred to an active thickness. Then we spent time trying to loosen up the brushes by pushing them down into the paint and then hitting them against the boards of the dresser, making a mess but not getting much of a result. One of the tins, however, proved to contain turpentine, which worked much better. Now we began to paint with those bristles that had become usable. I could read and spell to some extent, thanks to my mother, and Nancy could too, because she had finished the second grade.

"Don't look till I'm finished," I said to her, and pushed her slightly out of the way. I had thought of something to paint. She was busy anyway, smashing her own brush around in a can of red paint.

I wrote, NAZI WAS IN THIS SELLER.

"Now look," I said.

She had turned her back on me but was wielding the paintbrush on herself.

She said, "I'm busy."

When she turned her face to me it was generously smeared all over with red paint.

"Now I look like you," she said, drawing the brush down on her neck. "Now I look like you." She sounded very excited and I

thought she was taunting me, but in fact her voice was bursting with satisfaction, as if this was what she had been aiming for her whole life.

Now I must try to explain what happened in the next several minutes.

In the first place, I thought she looked horrible.

I did not believe that any part of my face was red. And in fact it wasn't. The half of it that was coloured was the usual mulberry birthmark colour, which, as I believe I have said, has faded somewhat as I have aged.

But this was not how I saw it in my mind. I believed my birthmark to be a soft brown colour, like the fur of a mouse.

My mother had not done anything so foolish, so dramatic, as to ban mirrors from our house. But mirrors can be hung too high for a young child to see himself in them. That was certainly so in the bathroom. The only one in which I saw my reflection readily hung in the front hall, which was dim in the daytime and weakly lit at night. That must have been where I got the idea that half my face was this dull mild sort of colour, almost mousey, a furry shadow.

This was the idea I had got used to, and that made Nancy's paint such an insult, a leering joke. I pushed her against the dresser as hard as I could and ran away from her, up the stairs. I think I was running to find a mirror, or even a person who could tell me that she was in the wrong. And once that was confirmed I could sink my teeth into pure hatred of her. I would punish her. I had no time at the moment to think how.

I ran through the cottage—Nancy's mother was not anywhere to be seen, though it was Saturday—and I slammed its screened door. I ran on the gravel, then on the flagstone path between stalwart rows of gladioli. I saw my mother rise from the wicker chair where she sat reading, on our back veranda.

"Not red," I shouted with gulps of angry tears. "I'm not red." She came down the steps with a shocked face but so far no

understanding. Then Nancy ran out of the cottage behind me all amazed, with her garish face.

My mother understood.

"You nasty little beast," she cried at Nancy, in a voice that I had never heard. A loud, wild, shaking voice.

"Don't you come near us. Don't you dare. You are a bad bad girl. You have no decent human kindness in you, do you? You never have been taught—"

Nancy's mother came out of the cottage, with streaming wet hair in her eyes. She was holding a towel.

"Jeez can't I even wash my hair around here—"

My mother screamed at her too.

"Don't you dare use that language in front of my son and me—"

"Oh blah blah," said Nancy's mother immediately. "Just listen to you yelling your head off—"

My mother took a deep breath.

"I am—not—yelling—my—head off. I just want to tell your cruel child she will never be welcome in our house again. She is a cruel, spiteful child to mock my little boy for what he cannot help. You have never taught her anything, any manners, she did not even know enough to thank me when I took her with us to the beach, doesn't even know how to say please and thank you, no wonder with a mother flaunting around in her wrapper—"

All this poured out of my mother as if there was a torrent of rage, of pain, of absurdity in her that would never stop. Even though by now I was pulling at her dress and saying, "Don't, don't."

Then things got even worse as tears rose and swallowed her words and she choked and shook.

Nancy's mother had pushed the wet hair out of her eyes and stood there observing.

"I'll tell you one thing," she said. "You carry on like this and

they're going to take you to the loony bin. Can I help it if your husband hates you and you got a kid with a messed-up face?"

My mother held her head in both hands. She cried, "Oh—oh," as if pains were devouring her. The woman who worked for us at that time—Velma—had come out on the veranda and was saying, "Missus. Come on, missus." Then she raised her voice and called to Nancy's mother.

"You go on. You go in your house. You scat."

"Oh I will. Don't worry, I will. Who do you think you are telling me what to do? And how do you like working for an ole witch with bats in the belfry?" Then she turned on Nancy.

"How in Jesus name am I ever going to get you cleaned up?"

After that she raised her voice again to make sure I could hear her.

"He's a suck. Look at him hangin' on to his ole lady. You're not ever going to play with him again. Ole lady's suck."

Velma on one side and I on the other, we tried to ease my mother back to the house. She had stopped the noise she was making. She straightened herself and spoke in an unnaturally cheerful voice that could carry as far as the cottage.

"Fetch me my garden shears, would you, Velma? While I'm out here I might as well trim the glads. Some of them are downright wilted."

But by the time she was finished they were all over the path, not one standing, wilted or blooming.

All this must have happened on a Saturday, as I said, because Nancy's mother was home and Velma was there, who did not come on Sundays. By Monday, or maybe sooner, I am sure the cottage was empty. Perhaps Velma got hold of my father in the clubhouse or on the greens or wherever he was, and he came home, impatient and rude but soon compliant. Compliant, that is, about Nancy and her mother getting out. I had no idea

where they went. Maybe he put them up in a hotel till he could find another place for them. I don't think Nancy's mother would have made any fuss about leaving.

The fact that I would never see Nancy again dawned on me slowly. At first I was angry at her and did not care. Then when I inquired about her, my mother must have put me off with some vague reply, not wanting to recall the anguished scene to me or herself. It was surely at that time that she became serious about sending me away to school. In fact I think that I was installed at Lakefield that very autumn. She probably suspected that once I got used to being at a boys' school the memory of having had a female playmate would grow dim and seem unworthy, even ridiculous.

On the day after my father's funeral my mother surprised me by asking if I would take her out to dinner (of course it would be a case of her taking me) at a restaurant some miles along the lakeshore, where she hoped there would be nobody we knew.

"I just feel I've been penned up in this house forever," she said. "I need some air."

In the restaurant she looked around discreetly and announced that there was nobody she knew.

"Will you join me in a glass of wine?"

Had we driven all this way so that she could drink wine in public?

When the wine had come, and we had ordered, she said, "There is something I think you ought to know."

These may be among the most unpleasant words that a person ever has to hear. There is a pretty good chance that whatever you ought to know will be burdensome, and that there will be a suggestion that other people have had to bear the burden, while you have been let off lightly, all this while.

"My father isn't my real father?" I said. "Goody."

"Don't be silly. You remember your little friend Nancy?"

I actually did not remember, for a moment. Then I said, "Vaguely."

At this time all my conversations with my mother seemed to call for strategy. I must keep myself lighthearted, jokey, unmoved. In her voice and face was a lurking sorrow. She never complained about her own plight, but there were so many innocent and ill-used people in the stories she told me, there were so many outrages, that I was surely meant, at the very least, to go off to my friends and my lucky life with a heavier heart.

I would not cooperate. All she wanted, possibly, was some sign of sympathy, or maybe of physical tenderness. I would not grant that. She was a fastidious woman not yet contaminated by age, but I backed off from her as if there was some danger of insistent dreariness, a contagious mold. I particularly backed off from any reference to my affliction, which it seemed to me she especially cherished—the shackle I could not loosen, that I had to admit to, that bound me to her from the womb.

"You would probably have known about it if you were around home much," she said. "But it happened shortly before we sent you off to school."

Nancy and her mother had gone to live in an apartment that belonged to my father, on the Square. There in the bright early fall morning Nancy's mother had come upon her daughter, in the bathroom, using a razor blade to slice into her cheek. There was blood on the floor and in the sink and here and there on Nancy. But she had not given up on her purpose or made a sound of pain.

How did my mother know all this? I can only suppose it was a town drama, supposed to be hushed up but too gory—and that in the literal sense of the word—not to be related in detail.

Nancy's mother wrapped a towel around her and somehow got her to the hospital. There was no ambulance at that time. She probably flagged a car on the Square. Why did she

not phone my father? No matter—she didn't. The cuts were not deep and the blood loss was not so great in spite of the splatters—there was no cut to any major blood vessel. Nancy's mother kept berating the child that whole time and asking was she right in the head.

"You're just my luck," she kept saying. "A kid like you."

"If there had been social workers around at that time," said my mother, "no doubt that poor little thing would have been made a ward of the Children's Aid."

"It was the same cheek," she said. "Like yours."

I tried to keep silent, pretending not to know what she was talking about. But I had to speak.

"The paint was over her whole face," I said.

"Yes. But she was doing it more carefully this time, she cut open just that one cheek, trying the best she could to make herself look like you."

This time I did manage to keep quiet.

"If she had been a boy it would have been different. But what an awful thing for a girl."

"Plastic surgeons can do remarkable things nowadays."

"Oh, maybe they can."

After a moment she said, "Such deep feelings. Children have."

"They get over that."

She said she did not know what had become of them, the child or her mother. She said she was glad I had never asked, because she would have hated to tell me anything so distressing, when I was still young.

I don't know what bearing it has on anything, but I have to say that my mother changed completely in extreme old age, becoming ribald and fanciful. She claimed that my father had

been a magnificent lover and that she herself had been "a pretty bad girl." She announced that I should have married "that girl who sliced up her face" because neither one of us would be able to crow over the other about doing a good deed. One of us, she cackled, would be just as much a mess as the other.

I agreed. I liked her then quite a bit.

A few days ago I was stung by a wasp while clearing out some rotten apples under one of the old trees. The sting was on my eyelid, which rapidly closed. I drove myself to the hospital, using the other eye (the swollen one was on the "good" side of my face) and was surprised to be told I must stay overnight. The reason was that once I was given an injection, both eyes had to be bandaged, thus avoiding strain on the one that could see. I had what they call a restless night, waking often. Of course it is never really quiet in a hospital, and just in that short time without my sight it seemed that my hearing grew more acute. When certain footsteps came into my room I knew that they were those of a woman, and I had the feeling that she was not a nurse.

But when she said, "Good. You're awake. I'm your reader," I thought that I must have been mistaken, she was a nurse after all. I stretched out an arm, believing she had come to read what are known as the vital signs.

"No, no," she said, in her small, persistent voice. "I've come to read to you, if that's what you would like. Sometimes people like it; they get bored lying there with their eyes closed."

"Do they choose, or do you?"

"They do, but sometimes I sort of remind them. Sometimes I try and remind them of some Bible story, some part of the Bible they remember. Or a story from when they were children. I carry a whole batch of things around with me."

"I like poetry," I said.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

I realized that this was true, and I knew why. I have some experience of reading poetry aloud, over the radio, and of listening to other trained voices read, and there are some styles of reading I find comfortable, and some I abhor.

"Then we could have a game," she said, just as if I had explained this, when I hadn't. "I could read you a line or two, then I stop and see if you can do the next line. Okay?"

It struck me that she might be quite a young person, anxious to get some takers, to be a success on this job.

I said okay. But nothing in Old English, I told her.

"The king sat in Dunfermline town—" she began in a questioning voice.

"Drinking the blood-red wine—" I chimed in, and we proceeded in good humour. She read well enough, though at a rather childlike, show-off speed. I began to like the sound of my own voice, now and then falling into a bit of an actorly flourish.

"That's nice," she said.

"And show you where the lilies grow,/On the banks of Italie—"

"Is it 'grow' or 'blow'?" she said. "I don't actually have a book with that in. I should remember, though. Never mind, it's lovely. I always liked your voice on the radio."

"Really? Did you listen?"

"Of course. Lots of people did."

She stopped feeding me lines and just let me go ahead. You can imagine. "Dover Beach" and "Kubla Khan" and "West Wind" and "Wild Swans" and "Doomed Youth." Well, maybe not all of them, and maybe not right through to the end.

"You're getting short of breath," she said. Her little quick hand was laid on my mouth. And then her face or the side of her face laid on mine. "I have to go. Here's another just before I

go. I'll make it harder because I won't start at the beginning."

"None will long mourn for you,/Pray for you, miss you/Your place vacant—"

"I've never heard that," I said.

"Sure?"

"Sure. You win."

By now I suspected something. She seemed distracted, slightly cross. I heard the geese calling as they flew over the hospital. They take practice runs at this time of year, and then the runs get longer and one day they're gone. I was waking up, in that state of surprise, indignation, that follows a convincing dream. I wanted to go back and have her lay her face on mine. Her cheek, on mine. But dreams are not so obliging.

When I got my eyesight back, and was at home, I looked for those lines she had left me with in my dream. I went through a couple of anthologies and did not find them there. I began to suspect that the lines did not belong to a real poem at all, but had just been devised in the dream, to confound me.

Devised by whom?

But later in the fall, when I was getting some old books ready to donate to a charity bazaar, a piece of brownish paper fell out, with lines on it written in pencil. It was not my mother's writing, and I can hardly think it would be my father's. Whose, then? Whoever it was had written the author's name at the end. Walter de la Mare. No title. Not a writer whose works I have any particular knowledge of. But I must have seen the poem at some time, maybe not in this copy, maybe in a textbook. I must have buried the words in a deep cubbyhole of my mind. And why? Just so that I could be teased by them, or teased by a determined girl-child phantom, in a dream?

*There is no sorrow
 Time heals never
 No loss, betrayal
 Beyond repair
 Balm for the soul then
 Though grave shall sever
 Lover from loved
 And all they share
 See the sweet sun shines
 The shower is over
 Flowers preen their beauty
 The day how fair
 Brood not too closely
 On love, on duty
 Friends long forgotten
 May wait you where
 Life with death
 Brings all to an issue
 None will long mourn for you
 Pray for you, miss you
 Your place forgotten
 You not there.*

The poem didn't depress me. In some peculiar way it seemed to back up the decision I had made by that time, not to sell the property, but to stay.

Something happened here. In your life there are a few places, or maybe only the one place, where something happened, and then there are all the other places.

Of course I know that if I had spotted Nancy—on the subway, for instance, in Toronto—both of us bearing our recognizable marks, we would in all probability have managed only one of those embarrassed and meaningless conversations, hurriedly listing useless autobiographical facts. I would have noted the

mended nearly normal cheek or the still obvious wound, but it would probably not have come into the conversation. Children might have been mentioned. Not that unlikely, whether she was mended or not. Grandchildren. Jobs. I might not have had to tell her mine. We would have been shocked, hearty, dying to get away.

You think that would have changed things?

The answer is of course, and for a while, and never.