

# THE NEW YORKER

FICTION

## AMUNDSEN

BY ALICE MUNRO

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On the bench outside the station, I sat and waited. The station had been open when the train arrived, but now it was locked. Another woman sat at the end of the bench, holding between her knees a string bag full of parcels wrapped in oiled paper. Meat—raw meat. I could smell it.

Across the tracks was the electric train, empty, waiting.

No other passengers showed up, and after a while the stationmaster stuck his head out the station window and called, “San.” At first I thought he was calling a man’s name, Sam. And another man wearing some kind of official outfit did come around the end of the building. He crossed the tracks and boarded the electric car. The woman with the parcels stood up and followed him, so I did the same. There was a burst of shouting from across the street, and the doors of a dark-shingled flat-roofed building opened, letting loose several men, who were jamming caps on their heads and banging lunch buckets against their thighs. By the noise they were making, you’d have thought the car was going to run away from them at any minute. But when they settled on board nothing happened. The car sat while they counted one another and worked out who was missing and told the driver that he couldn’t go yet. Then somebody remembered that the missing man hadn’t been around all day. The car started, though I couldn’t tell if the driver had been listening to any of this, or cared.

The men got off at a sawmill in the bush—it wouldn’t have been more than ten minutes’ walk—and shortly after that the lake came into view, covered with snow. A long, white, wooden building in front of it. The woman readjusted her packages and stood up, and I followed. The driver again called “San,” and the doors opened. A couple of women were waiting to get on. They greeted the woman with the meat, and she said that it was a raw day.

All avoided looking at me as I climbed down behind the meat woman.

The doors banged together, and the train started back.



Then there was silence, the air like ice. Brittle-looking birch trees with black marks on their white bark, and some small, untidy evergreens, rolled up like sleepy bears. The frozen lake not level but mounded along the shore, as if the waves had turned to ice in the act of falling. And the building, with its deliberate rows of windows and its glassed-in porches at either end. Everything austere and northerly, black-and-white under the high dome of clouds. So still, so immense an enchantment.

But the birch bark not white after all, as you got closer. Grayish yellow, grayish blue, gray.

“Where you heading?” the meat woman called to me. “Visiting hours are over at three.”

“I’m not a visitor,” I said. “I’m the new teacher.”

“Well, they won’t let you in the front door, anyway,” the woman said with some satisfaction. “You better come along with me. Don’t you have a suitcase?”

“The stationmaster said he’d bring it later.”

“The way you were just standing there—looked like you were lost.”

I said that I had stopped because it was so beautiful.

“Some might think so. ’Less they were too sick or too busy.”

Nothing more was said until we entered the kitchen, at the far end of the building. I did not get a chance to look around me, because attention was drawn to my boots.

“You better get those off before they track the floor.”

I wrestled off the boots—there was no chair to sit down on—and set them on the mat where the woman had put hers.

“Pick them up and bring them with you. I don’t know where they’ll be putting you. You better keep your coat on, too. There’s no heating in the cloakroom.”

No heat, no light, except what came through a little window I could not reach. It was like being punished at school. Sent to the cloakroom. Yes. The same smell of winter clothing that never really dried out, of boots soaked through to dirty socks, unwashed feet.

I climbed up on the bench but still could not see out. On the shelf where caps and scarves were thrown, I found a bag with some figs and dates in it. Somebody must have stolen them and stashed them here to take home. All of a sudden, I was hungry. Nothing to eat since morning, except for a dry cheese sandwich on the Ontario Northland. I considered the ethics of stealing from a thief. But the figs would catch in my teeth and betray me.

I got myself down just in time. Somebody was entering the cloakroom.

Not one of the kitchen help but a schoolgirl in a bulky winter coat, with a scarf over her hair. She came in with a rush—books dropped on the bench so that they scattered on the floor, scarf snatched off so that her hair sprang out in a tangle, and at the same time, it seemed, boots kicked loose and sent skittering across the floor. Nobody had got hold of her, apparently, to make her take them off at the kitchen door.

“Oh, I wasn’t trying to hit you,” the girl said. “It’s so dark in here after outside, you don’t know what you’re doing. Aren’t you freezing? Are you waiting for somebody to get off work?”

“I’m waiting to see Dr. Fox.”

“Well, you won’t have to wait long. I just rode from town with him. You’re not sick, are you? If you’re sick you can’t come here. You have to see him in town.”

“I’m the new teacher.”

“Are you? Are you from Toronto?”

“Yes.”

There was a certain pause, perhaps of respect.

But no. An examination of my coat.

“That’s really nice. What’s that fur on the collar?”

“Persian lamb. Actually, it’s imitation.”

“Could have fooled me. I don’t know what they put you in here for—it’ll freeze your butt off. Excuse me. You want to see the doctor, I can show you the way. I know where everything is. I’ve lived here practically since I was born. My mother runs the kitchen. My name is Mary. What’s yours?”

“Vivi. Vivien.”

“If you’re a teacher, shouldn’t it be Miss? Miss what?”

“Miss Hyde.”

“Tan your hide,” she said. “Sorry, I just thought that up. I’d like it if you could be my teacher but I have to go to school in town. It’s the stupid rules. Because I’ve not got TB.”

She was leading me, while she talked, through the door at the far end of the cloakroom, then along a regular hospital corridor. Waxed linoleum, dull green paint, an antiseptic smell.

“Now you’re here, maybe I’ll get Reddy to let me switch.”

“Who is Reddy?”

“Reddy Fox. It’s out of a book. Me and Anabel just started calling Dr. Fox that.”

“Who is Anabel?”

“Nobody now. She’s dead.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. It happens around here. I’m in high school this year. Anabel never really got to go to school at all. When I was just in public school, Reddy got the teacher to let me stay home a lot, so I could keep her company.”

She stopped at a half-opened door and whistled.

“Hey. I brought the teacher.”

A man’s voice said, “O.K., Mary. Enough out of you for one day.”

She sauntered away and left me facing a spare man of ordinary height, whose reddish-fair hair was cut very short and glistened in the artificial light from the hallway.

“You’ve met Mary,” he said. “She has a lot to say for herself. She won’t be in your class, so you won’t have to undergo that every day. People either take to her or they don’t.”

He struck me as between ten and fifteen years older than me, and at first he talked to me the way an older man would. A preoccupied future employer. He asked about my trip, about the arrangements for my suitcase. He wanted to know how I thought I would like living up here in the woods, after Toronto, whether I would be bored.

Not in the least, I said, and added that it was beautiful.

“It’s like—it’s like being inside a Russian novel.”

He looked at me attentively for the first time.

“Is it really? Which Russian novel?”

His eyes were a bright grayish blue. One eyebrow had risen, like a little peaked cap.

It was not that I hadn’t read Russian novels. I had read some all the way through and some only partway. But because of that eyebrow, and his amused but confrontational expression, I could not remember any title except “War and Peace.” I did not want to say that, because it was the one that anybody would remember.

“ ‘War and Peace.’ ”

“Well, it’s only the peace we’ve got here, I’d say. But if it was the war you were hankering after I suppose you would have joined one of those women’s outfits and got yourself overseas.”

I was angry and humiliated, because I had not really been showing off. Or not only showing off. I had wanted to explain what a wonderful effect this scenery had on me.

He was evidently the sort of person who posed questions that were traps for you to fall into.

“I guess I was really expecting a sort of old-lady teacher come out of the woodwork,” he said, in slight apology. “You didn’t study to be a teacher, did you? What were you planning to do once you got your B.A.?”

“Work on my M.A.,” I said curtly.

“So what changed your mind?”

“I thought I should earn some money.”

“Sensible idea. Though I’m afraid you won’t earn much here. Sorry to pry. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t going to run off and leave us in the lurch. Not planning to get married, are you?”

“No.”

“All right, all right. You’re off the hook now. Didn’t discourage you, did I?”

I had turned my head away.

“No.”

“Go down the hall to Matron’s office, and she’ll tell you all you need to know. Just try not to get a cold. I don’t suppose you have any experience with tuberculosis?”

“Well, I’ve read—”

“I know. I know. You’ve read ‘The Magic Mountain.’ ” Another trap sprung, and he seemed restored. “Things have moved on a bit from that, I hope. Here, I’ve got some things I’ve written out about the kids here and what I was thinking you might try to do with them. Sometimes I’d rather express myself in writing. Matron will give you the lowdown.”

*Usual notions of pedagogy out of place here. Some of these children will reënter the world or system and some will not. Better not a lot of stress. That is, testing, memorizing, classifying nonsense.*

*Disregard grade business entirely. Those who need to can catch up later on or do without. Actually very simple skill set of facts, etc., necessary for going into the world. What about Superior Children, so called? Disgusting term. If they are smart in academic way, they can easily catch up.*

*Forget rivers of South America, likewise Magna Carta.*

*Drawing, music, stories preferred.*

*Games O.K., but watch for overexcitement or too much competitiveness.*

*Challenge to walk the line between stress and boredom. Boredom curse of hospitalization.*

*If Matron can’t supply what you need, sometimes janitor will have it stashed away somewhere.*

*Bon voyage.*

I had not been there a week before all the events of the first day seemed unique and unlikely. The kitchen, the kitchen cloakroom where the workers kept their clothes and concealed their thefts were rooms I hadn’t seen again and probably wouldn’t. The doctor’s office was similarly out of bounds, Matron’s room being the proper place for all inquiries, complaints, and ordinary arrangements. Matron herself was short and stout, pink-faced, with rimless glasses and heavy breathing. Whatever you asked for seemed to astonish her and cause difficulties, but eventually it was seen to or provided. Sometimes she ate in the nurses’ dining room, where she was served a special junket, and cast a pall. Mostly she kept to her own quarters.

Besides Matron, there were three other registered nurses, not one of them within thirty years of my age. They had come out of retirement to serve, doing their wartime duty. Then, there were the nurses’ aides, who were my age or even younger, most of them married or engaged or working on being engaged, generally to men in the forces. They talked all the time if Matron and the nurses weren’t there. They didn’t have the least interest in me. They didn’t want to know what Toronto was like, though some of them knew people who had gone there on their honeymoon, and they did not care how my teaching was going or what I had done before. It wasn’t that they were rude—they passed me the butter (it was called butter but it was really orange-streaked margarine, colored in the kitchen) and they warned me off the shepherd’s pie, which they said had groundhog in it. It was just that whatever

happened in places they didn't know had to be discounted; it got in their way and under their skin. Every time the news came on the radio, they switched it to music. *Dance with a dolly with a hole in her stockin'* . . .

Yet they were in awe of Dr. Fox, partly because he had read so many books. They also said that there was nobody like him for tearing a strip off you if he felt like it.

I couldn't figure out if they thought there was a connection between reading a lot of books and tearing a strip off.

The number of students who showed up varied. Fifteen, or down to half a dozen. Mornings only, from nine o'clock till noon. Children were kept away if their temperature had risen or if they were undergoing tests. When they were present, they were quiet and tractable but not particularly involved. They had caught on right away that this was a pretend school, where they were free of all requirement to learn anything, just as they were free of times tables and memory work. This freedom didn't make them uppity, or lazy in any troublesome way, just docile and dreamy. They sang rounds softly. They played X's and O's. There was a shadow of defeat over the improvised classroom.

I decided to take the doctor at his word. Or some of his words, such as those about boredom being the enemy.

In the janitor's cubbyhole, I had seen a globe. I asked to have it brought out. I started on simple geography. The oceans, the continents, the climates. Why not the winds and the currents? The countries and the cities? The Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn? Why not, after all, the rivers of South America?

Some children had learned such things before, but they had nearly forgotten them. The world beyond the lake and the forest had dropped away. The lessons seemed to cheer them up, as if they were making friends again with whatever they used to know. I didn't dump everything on them at once, of course. And I had to go easy with the ones who had never learned such things because they had got sick too soon.

But that was all right. It could be a game. I separated them into teams, got them calling out answers while I darted here and there with the pointer. I was careful not to let the excitement go on too long. But one day the doctor walked in, fresh from morning surgery, and I was caught. I could not stop things cold, but I tried to dampen the competition. He sat down, looking somewhat tired and withdrawn. He made no objection. After a few minutes, he joined in the game, calling out quite ridiculous answers, names that were not just mistaken but imaginary. Then gradually he let his voice die down. Down, down, first to a mumble, then to a whisper, then to complete inaudibility. In this way, with this absurdity, he took control of the room. The whole class took to mouthing, in order to imitate him. Their eyes were fixed on his lips.

Suddenly he let out a low growl that had them all laughing.

“Why the deuce is everybody looking at me? Is that what Miss Hyde teaches you? To stare at people who aren’t bothering anybody?”

Most laughed, but some couldn’t stop watching him even for that. They were hungry for further antics.

“Go on. Go off and misbehave yourselves somewhere else.”

He apologized to me for breaking up the class. I began to explain to him my reasons for making this more like real school.

“Though I do agree with you about stress,” I said earnestly. “I agree with what you said in your instructions. I just thought—”

“What instructions? Oh, that was just some bits and pieces that went through my head. I never meant them to be set in stone.”

“I mean as long as they’re not too sick—”

“I’m sure you’re right. I don’t suppose it matters.”

“Otherwise they seem sort of listless.”

“There’s no need to make a song and dance about it,” he said, and walked away.

Then turned to make a barely halfhearted apology.

“We can have a talk about it some other time.”

That time, I thought, would never come. He evidently thought me a bother and a fool.

I discovered at lunch, from the aides, that somebody had not survived an operation that morning. So my anger turned out not to be justified, and for that reason I felt even more of a fool.

Every afternoon was free. My pupils went down for long naps, and I sometimes felt like doing the same. But my room was cold, and the bedcovers were thin—surely people with tuberculosis needed something cozier.

I, of course, did not have tuberculosis. Maybe they skimped on provisions for people like me.

I was drowsy but couldn’t sleep. Overhead there was the rumble of bed carts being wheeled to the porches for the icy afternoon exposure.

The building, the trees, the lake were never again the same to me as they had been on that first day, when I was caught by their mystery and authority. On that day I had believed myself invisible. Now it seemed as if that were never true.

There’s the teacher. What’s she up to?

She’s looking at the lake.

What for?

Nothing better to do.

Some people are lucky.

Once in a while I skipped lunch, even though it was part of my salary, and went in to Amundsen, where I ate in a coffee shop. The coffee was Postum and the best bet for a

sandwich was tinned salmon, if they had any. The chicken salad had to be examined carefully for bits of skin and gristle. Nevertheless, I felt more at ease there, as if nobody would know who I was.

About that I was probably mistaken.

The coffee shop didn't have a ladies' room, so you had to go next door to the hotel, then past the entrance to the beer parlor, always dark and noisy and giving out a smell of beer and whiskey, a blast of cigarette and cigar smoke fit to knock you down. But the loggers, the men from the sawmill, would never yelp at you the way the soldiers and the airmen in Toronto did. They were deep in a world of men, bawling out their own stories, not here to look for women. Possibly more eager, in fact, to get away from that company now or forever.

The doctor had an office on the main street. Just a small one-story building, so he lived elsewhere. I had picked up from the aides that there was no Mrs. Fox. On the only side street, I found a house that might have belonged to him—a stucco-covered house, with a dormer window above the front door, books stacked on the sill of that window. There was a bleak but orderly look to the place, a suggestion of the minimal but precise comfort that a lone man—a regulated lone man—might contrive.

The town school was at the end of that residential street. One afternoon I spotted Mary in the yard there, taking part in a snowball fight. It seemed to be girls against boys. When she saw me, she cried out loudly, "Hey, Teach," and gave the balls in both hands a random toss, then ambled across the street. "See you tomorrow," she called over her shoulder, more or less as a warning that nobody was to follow.

"You on your way home?" she said. "Me, too. I used to ride in Reddy's car, but he's got too late leaving. What do you do, take the tram?"

I said yes, and Mary said, "Oh, I can show you the shortcut and you can save your money. The bush road."

She took me up a narrow but passable lane that ran above the town, through the woods, and past the sawmill.

"This is the way Reddy goes," she said.

After the sawmill, beneath us, were some ugly cuts in the woods and a few shacks, apparently inhabited, because they had woodpiles and clotheslines and rising smoke. From one of them, a big wolfish dog ran out with a great display of barking and snarling.

"You shut your face!" Mary yelled. In no time she had packed and flung a snowball, which caught the animal between the eyes. It whirled around, and she had another snowball ready to hit it in the rump. A woman in an apron came out and shouted, "You could've killed him."

"Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"I'll get my old man after you."

"That'll be the day. Your old man can't hit a shithouse."



The dog followed at a distance, with some insincere threatening.

"I can take care of any dog, don't worry," Mary said. "I bet I could take care of a bear if we ran into one."

"Don't bears tend to hibernate at this time of year?"

I had been quite scared by the dog but affected carelessness.

"Yeah, but you never know. One came out early once, and it got into the garbage down at the San. My mom turned around and there it was. Reddy got his gun and shot it. Reddy used to take me and Anabel out on the sled, and sometimes other kids, too, and he had a special whistle that scared off bears. It was pitched too high for human ears."

"Really. What did it look like?"

"It wasn't that kind of whistle. I meant one he could do with his mouth."

I thought of his performance in the classroom.

"I don't know, maybe he just said that to keep Anabel from getting scared. She couldn't ride on the sled. He had to pull her on a toboggan. Sometimes I'd jump on the toboggan, too, and he'd say, 'What's the matter with this thing? It weighs a ton.' Then he'd try to turn around quick and catch me, but he never did. And he'd ask Anabel, 'What makes it so heavy? What did you have for breakfast?' But she never told. She was the best friend I ever will have."

"What about the girls at school? Aren't they friends?"

"I just hang around with them when there's nobody else. They're nothing. Anabel and me had our birthdays in the same month. June. Our eleventh birthday, Reddy took us out on the lake in a boat. He taught us swimming. Well, me. He always had to hold Anabel—she couldn't really learn. Once he went swimming way out by himself, and we filled his shoes up with sand. And then, our twelfth birthday, we couldn't go anywhere like that, but we went to his house and had a cake. She couldn't eat even a little bit of it, so he took us in his car and we threw pieces out the window for the seagulls. They were fighting and screaming. We were laughing ourselves crazy, and he had to stop and hold Anabel so she wouldn't have a hemorrhage.

"And after that," she said, "after that I wasn't allowed to see her anymore. My mom never wanted me to hang around with kids that had TB anyway. But Reddy talked her into it. He said he'd stop it when he had to. So he did, and I got mad. But she wouldn't have been any fun anymore—she was too sick. I'd show you her grave but there isn't anything to mark it yet. Reddy and me are going to make something when he gets time. If we'd have gone straight along on the road, instead of turning where we did, we would have come to her graveyard."

By this time we were down on level ground, approaching the San.

She said, "Oh, I almost forgot," and pulled out a fistful of tickets.

"For Valentine's Day. We're putting on this play at school and it's called 'Pinafore.' I got all these to sell and you can be my first sale. I'm in it."

I was right about the house in Amundsen being where the doctor lived. He took me there for supper. The invitation seemed to come rather on the spur of the moment when he bumped into me in the hall one day. Perhaps he had an uneasy memory of saying that we would get together to talk about teaching ideas.

The evening he proposed was the one for which I had bought a ticket for “Pinafore.” I told him that, and he said, “Well, I did, too. It doesn’t mean we have to show up.”

“I sort of feel as if I promised her.”

“Well, now you can sort of un-promise her. It will be dreadful, believe me.”

I did as he said, though I did not see Mary to tell her. I waited where he had instructed me to wait, on the porch outside the front door of the San. I was wearing my best dress, a dark-green crêpe, with little pearl buttons and a real lace collar, and had rammed my feet into suède high-heeled shoes inside my snow boots. I waited past the time he’d mentioned—worried, first, that Matron would come out of her office and spot me, and, second, that he had forgotten all about it.

But then he came along, buttoning up his overcoat, and apologized.

“Always a few bits and bobs to clear up,” he said, and led me around the building to his car. “Are you steady?” he asked, and when I said yes—despite the suède shoes—he did not offer his arm.

His car was old and shabby, as most cars were those days. It didn’t have a heater. When he said that we were going to his house, I was relieved. I could not see how we would manage with the crowd at the hotel, and I had hoped not to have to make do with the sandwiches at the café.

At his house, he told me not to take off my coat until the place had warmed up a bit. And he got busy at once making a fire in the woodstove.

“I’m your janitor and your cook and your server,” he said. “It’ll soon be comfortable here, and the meal won’t take me long. Don’t offer to help. I prefer to work alone. Where would you like to wait? If you want to, you could look over the books in the front room. It shouldn’t be too unbearable in there with your coat on. The light switch is just inside the door. You don’t mind if I listen to the news? It’s a habit I’ve got into.”

I went into the front room, feeling as if I had more or less been ordered to, leaving the kitchen door open. He came and closed it, saying, “Just until we get a bit of warmth in the kitchen,” and went back to the sombrely dramatic, almost religious voice of the CBC, giving out the news of the war.

There were quantities of books to look at. Not just on bookshelves but on tables and chairs and windowsills and piled on the floor. After I had examined several of them, I concluded that he favored buying books in batches and probably belonged to several book clubs. The Harvard Classics. The histories of Will Durant. Fiction and poetry seemed in short supply, though there were a few surprising children’s classics. Books on the American

Civil War, the South African War, the Napoleonic Wars, the Peloponnesian War, the campaigns of Julius Caesar. Explorations of the Amazon and the Arctic. Shackleton caught in the ice. John Franklin's doomed expedition, the Donner Party, and the Lost Tribes, Newton, and alchemy, the secrets of the Hindu Kush. Books suggesting someone anxious to *know*, to possess great scattered lumps of knowledge. Perhaps not someone whose tastes were firm and exacting.

So it was possible that when he had asked me, "Which Russian novel?," he had not had so solid a platform as I'd thought.

When he called "Ready," and I opened the door, I was armed with this new skepticism.

I said, "Who do you agree with, Naphta or Settembrini?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"In 'The Magic Mountain.' Do you like Naphta best, or Settembrini?"

"To be honest, I've always thought they were a pair of windbags. You?"

"Settembrini is more humane, but Naphta is more interesting."

"They tell you that in school?"

"I never read it in school," I said coolly.

He gave me a quick look, that eyebrow raised.

"Pardon me. If there's anything in there that interests you, feel free. Please feel free to come down here and read in your time off. There's an electric heater I could set up, since I imagine you are not experienced with woodstoves. Shall we think about that? I can rustle you up an extra key."

"Thank you."

Pork chops, instant mashed potatoes, canned peas. Dessert was an apple pie from the bakery, which would have been better if he'd thought to heat it up.

He asked me about my life in Toronto, my university courses, my family. He said that he supposed I had been brought up on the straight and narrow.

"My grandfather is a liberal clergyman, sort of in the Paul Tillich mold."

"And you? Liberal little Christian granddaughter?"

"No."

"Touché. Do you think I'm rude?"

"That depends. If you are interviewing me as an employer, no."

"So I'll go on. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"In the forces, I suppose."

I said, "In the Navy." That struck me as a good choice, to account for my not knowing where he was and not receiving regular letters.

The doctor got up and fetched the tea.

"What sort of boat is he on?"

“Corvette.” Another good choice. After a while, I could have him torpedoed, as was always happening to corvettes.

“Brave fellow. Milk or sugar in your tea?”

“Neither, thanks.”

“That’s good, because I haven’t got any. You know, it shows when you’re lying—you get red in the face.”

If I hadn’t got red before, I did then. My flush rose from my feet up, and sweat trickled down under my arms. I hoped the dress would not be ruined.

“I always go hot when I drink tea.”

“Oh, I see.”

Things could not get any worse, so I resolved to face him down. I changed the subject on him, asking about how he operated on people. Did he remove lungs, as I had heard?

He could have answered that with more teasing, more superiority—possibly this was his notion of flirtation—and I believe that if he had done so I would have put on my coat and walked out into the cold. Perhaps he knew that. He began to talk about thoracoplasty. Of course, removal of the lobe had also become popular recently.

“But don’t you lose some patients?” I said.

He must have thought it was time to joke again.

“But of course. Running off and hiding in the bush—we don’t know where they get to. Jumping in the lake. Or did you mean don’t they die? There are cases where surgery doesn’t work, yes.”

But great things were coming, he said. The surgery he went in for was going to become as obsolete as bloodletting. A new drug was on the way. Streptomycin. Already used in trial. There were some problems—naturally, there would be problems. Toxicity of the nervous system. But a way would be found to deal with that.

“Put the sawbones like me out of business.”

He washed the dishes; I dried. He put a dishtowel around my waist to protect my dress. When the ends were efficiently tied, he laid his hand against my upper back. Such firm pressure, fingers separated—he might almost have been taking stock of my body in a professional way. When I went to bed that night, I could still feel the pressure. I felt it develop its intensity from the little finger to the hard thumb. I enjoyed it. It was more important, really, than the kiss placed on my forehead later, the moment before I got out of his car. A dry-lipped kiss, brief and formal, set upon me with hasty authority.

The key to his house showed up on the floor of my room, slipped under the door when I wasn’t there. But I couldn’t use it after all. If anybody else had made this offer, I would have jumped at the chance. Especially if it included a heater. But, in this case, his past and future presence in the house would draw all ordinary comfort out of the situation and replace it with a pleasure that was nerve-racking rather than expansive. I doubted whether I’d be able to read a word.

I expected Mary to come by to scold me for missing “Pinafore.” I thought of saying that I had not been well. I’d had a cold. But then I remembered that colds were serious business in this place, involving masks and disinfectant, banishment. And soon I understood that there was no hope of hiding my visit to the doctor’s house. It was a secret from nobody, not even from the nurses, who said nothing, either because they were too lofty and discreet or because such carrying on had ceased to interest them. But the aides teased me.

“Enjoy your supper the other night?”

Their tone was friendly; they seemed to approve. My stock had risen. Whatever else I was, at least I might turn out to be a woman with a man.

Mary did not put in an appearance all week.

“Next Saturday” were the words that had been said, just before he administered the kiss. So I waited again on the front porch, and this time he was not late. We drove to the house, and I went into the front room while he got the fire going. There I noticed the dusty electric heater.

“Didn’t take me up on my offer,” he said. “Did you think I didn’t mean it? I always mean what I say.”

I said that I hadn’t wanted to come into town for fear of meeting Mary.

“Because of missing her concert.”

“That’s if you’re going to arrange your life to suit Mary,” he said.

The menu was much the same as before. Pork chops, instant mashed potatoes, corn niblets instead of peas. This time he let me help in the kitchen, even asking me to set the table.

“You may as well learn where things are. It’s all fairly logical, I believe.”

This meant that I could watch him working at the stove. His easy concentration, economical movements, setting off in me a procession of sparks and chills.

We had just begun the meal when there was a knock at the door. He got up and drew the bolt and in burst Mary.

She was carrying a cardboard box, which she set on the table. Then she threw off her coat and displayed herself in a red-and-yellow costume.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” she said. “You never came to see me in the concert, so I brought the concert to you.”

She stood on one foot to kick off first one boot, then the other. She pushed them out of her way and began to prance around the table, singing at the same time in a plaintive but vigorous young voice:

I’m called Little Buttercup,  
Dear little Buttercup,  
Though I could never tell why.  
But still I’m called Buttercup,  
Poor little Buttercup

Sweet little Buttercup I—

The doctor had got up even before she began to sing. He was standing at the stove, busy scraping at the frying pan that had held the pork chops.

I applauded. I said, “What a gorgeous costume.”

It was, indeed. Red skirt, bright-yellow petticoat, fluttering white apron, embroidered bodice.

“My mom made it.”

“Even the embroidery?”

“Sure. She stayed up till four o’clock to get it done the night before.”

There was further whirling and stomping to show it off. The dishes tinkled on the shelves. I applauded some more. Both of us wanted only one thing. We wanted the doctor to turn around and stop ignoring us. For him to say, even grudgingly, one polite word.

“And lookit what else,” Mary said. “For a Valentine.” She tore open the cardboard box and there were Valentine cookies, all cut into heart shapes and plastered with thick red icing.

“How splendid,” I said, and Mary resumed her prancing:

I am the Captain of the Pinafore.  
And a right good captain, too.  
You’re very very good, and be it understood,  
I command a right good crew.

The doctor turned at last, and she saluted him.

“All right,” he said. “That’s enough.”

She ignored him:

Then give three cheers and one cheer more  
For the hardy captain of the Pinafore.

“I said that’s enough.”

“For the captain of the Pinafore—”

“Mary. We are eating supper. And you are not invited. Do you understand that? Not invited.”

She was quiet at last. But only for a moment.

“Well, pooh on you, then. You’re not very nice.”

“And you could just as well do without any of those cookies. You’re on your way to getting as plump as a young pig.”

Mary’s face was puffed up as if she were about to cry, but instead she said, “Look who’s talking. You got one eye crooked to the other.”

“That’s enough.”

“Well, you have.”

The doctor picked up her boots and set them down in front of her.

“Put these on.”

She did so, with her eyes full of tears and her nose running. She snuffled mightily. He picked up her coat and did not help her as she flailed her way into it and found the buttons.

“That’s right. Now, how did you get here?”

She refused to answer.

“Walked, did you? Well, I can drive you home. So you don’t get a chance to fling yourself into a snowbank and freeze to death out of self-pity.”

I did not say a word. Mary did not look at me once. The moment was too full of shock for goodbyes.

When I heard the car start, I began clearing the table. We had not got to dessert, which was apple pie again. Perhaps he did not know of any other kind, or perhaps it was all the bakery made.

I picked up one of the heart-shaped cookies and ate it. The icing was horribly sweet. No berry or cherry flavor, just sugar and red food coloring. I ate another and another.

I knew that I should have said goodbye at least. I should have said thank you for the cookies. But it wouldn’t have mattered. I told myself that it wouldn’t have mattered. The performance had not been for me. Or perhaps only a small part of it had been for me.

He had been brutal. It shocked me that he had been so brutal. To one so much in need. But he had done it for me, in a way. So that his time with me should not be taken away. This thought flattered me, and I was ashamed that it flattered me. I did not know what I would say to him when he got back.

He did not want me to say anything. He took me to bed. Had this been in the cards all along, or was it as much of a surprise to him as it was to me? My state of virginity, at least, did not appear to be unexpected—he provided a towel, as well as a condom—and he persisted, going as easily as he could. My passion was the surprise, to us both.

“I do intend to marry you,” he said.

Before he took me home, he tossed all the cookies, all those red hearts, out into the snow to feed the winter birds.

So it was settled. Our engagement—though he was a little wary of the word—was a private agreed-upon fact. The wedding would take place whenever he could get a couple of consecutive days off. A bare-bones wedding, he said. I was not to write a word to my grandparents. I was to understand that the idea of a ceremony, carried on in the presence of others whose ideas he did not respect, and who would inflict on us all that snickering and simpering, was more than he was prepared to put up with.

Nor was he in favor of diamond rings. I told him that I had never wanted one, which was true, because I had never thought about it. He said that was good. He had known that I was not that sort of idiotic, conventional girl.

It would be better to stop having supper together, he said, not just because of the talk but because it was hard to get enough meat for two people on one ration card. My card was not available, having been handed over to the kitchen authorities—to Mary's mother—as soon as I began to eat at the San.

Better not to call attention.

Of course, everybody suspected something. The elderly nurses turned cordial, and even Matron gave me a pained smile. I did preen in a modest way, almost without meaning to. I took to folding myself in, with a velvet stillness, eyes rather cast down. It did not quite occur to me that these older women were watching to see what direction this intimacy might take and that they were ready to turn righteous if the doctor should decide to drop me.

It was the aides who were whole-heartedly on my side, and teased me that they saw wedding bells in my tea leaves.

The month of March was grim and busy behind the hospital doors. It was always the worst month, the aides said. For some reason, people took it into their heads to die then, after making it through the attacks of winter. If a child did not show up for class, I did not know if there had been a major turn for the worse or just a bedding down with the suspicion of a cold.

Time was found, however, for the doctor to make some arrangements. He slipped a note under the door of my room, instructing me to be ready by the first week of April. Unless there was some real crisis, he could manage a couple of days then.

We are going to Huntsville.  
*Going to Huntsville*—our code for getting married.

I have my green crêpe, dry-cleaned and rolled up carefully in my overnight bag. I suppose I will have to change my clothes in some ladies' toilet. I am watching to see if there are any early wildflowers along the road that I can pick to make a bouquet. Would he agree to my having a bouquet? But it's too early even for marsh marigolds. Nothing is to be seen but skinny black spruce trees and islands of spreading juniper and bogs. And, in the road cuts, a chaotic jumble of the rocks that have become familiar to me here—bloodstained iron and slanting shelves of granite.

The car radio is on and playing triumphal music, because the Allies are getting closer and closer to Berlin. The doctor says that they are delaying to let the Russians get there first. He says they'll be sorry.

Now that we are away from Amundsen, I find that I can call him Alister. This is the longest drive we have ever taken together, and I am aroused by his male unawareness of me—which I know can quickly shift to its opposite—and by his casual skill as a driver. I



find it exciting that he is a surgeon, though I would never admit that. Right now, I believe I would lie down for him in any bog or mucky hole or feel my spine crushed against any roadside rock, should he require an upright encounter. I know, too, that I must keep these feelings to myself.

I turn my mind to the future. Once we get to Huntsville, I expect that we will find a minister and stand side by side in a living room, which will have the modest gentility of the living rooms I have known all my life.

But, when we get there, I discover that there are other ways to get married, and that my bridegroom has another aversion that I hadn't grasped. He won't have anything to do with a minister. At the town hall in Huntsville, we fill out forms that swear to our single state and we make an appointment to be married by a justice of the peace.

Time for lunch. Alister stops outside a restaurant that could be a first cousin to the coffee shop in Amundsen.

"This'll do?"

But, on looking into my face, he does change his mind.

"No?" he says. "O.K."

We end up eating lunch in the chilly front room of one of the genteel houses that advertise chicken dinners. The plates are icy cold, there are no other diners, and there is no radio music but only the clink of our cutlery as we try to separate parts of the stringy chicken. I am sure he is thinking that we might have done better in the restaurant he suggested in the first place.

Nonetheless, I find the nerve to ask about the ladies' room, and there, in cold air even more discouraging than that of the front room, I shake out my green dress and put it on, repaint my mouth, and fix my hair.

When I come out, Alister stands up to greet me and smiles and squeezes my hand and says I look pretty.

We walk stiffly back to the car, holding hands. He opens the door for me, goes around and gets in, settles himself and turns the key in the ignition, then turns it off.

**T**he car is parked in front of a hardware store. Snow shovels are on sale at half price. There is still a sign in the window that says that skates can be sharpened inside.

Across the street there is a wooden house painted an oily yellow. Its front steps have become unsafe, and two boards forming an X have been nailed across them.

The truck parked in front of Alister's car is a prewar model, with a running board and a fringe of rust on its fenders. A man in overalls comes out of the hardware store and gets into it. After some engine complaint, then some rattling and bounding in place, it is driven away. Now a delivery truck with the store's name on it tries to park in the space left vacant. There is not quite enough room. The driver gets out and comes and raps on Alister's window. Alister is surprised—if he had not been talking so earnestly he would have noticed the

problem. He rolls down the window, and the man asks if we are parked there because we intend to buy something in the store. If not, could we please move along?

“Just leaving,” says Alister, the man sitting beside me who was going to marry me but now is not going to marry me. “We were just leaving.”

*We.* He has said “we.” For a moment, I cling to that word. Then I think, It’s the last time. The last time I’ll be included in his “we.”

It’s not the “we” that matters; that is not what makes the truth clear to me. It’s his male-to-male tone with the driver, his calm and reasonable apology. I almost wish now to go back to what he was saying before, when he did not even notice the van trying to park. What he was saying then was terrible but at least his tight grip on the wheel, his grip and his abstraction and his voice had pain in them. No matter what he was saying, he was speaking out of the same deep place then that he spoke from when he was in bed with me. But it is not so now, after he has spoken to another man. He rolls up the window and gives all his attention to the car, to backing it out of its tight spot and moving it so as not to come in contact with the van, as if there were no more to be said or managed.

“I can’t do it,” he has said.

He can’t go through with it.

He can’t explain this.

Only that he feels it would be a mistake.

It occurs to me that I will never be able to look at curly “S”s like those on the skate-sharpening sign, or at rough boards knocked into an X, like those across the steps of the yellow house, without hearing this voice.

“I’m going to drive you to the station now. I’ll buy your ticket to Toronto. I’m pretty sure there’s a train to Toronto late in the afternoon. I’ll think up some very plausible story and I’ll get somebody to pack up your things. You’ll need to give me your Toronto address. I don’t think I’ve kept it. Oh, and I’ll write you a reference. You’ve done a good job. You wouldn’t have finished out the term anyway—I hadn’t told you yet but the children are going to be moved to another sanatorium. All kinds of big changes going on.”

A new tone in his voice, almost jaunty. A tone of relief. He is trying to hold that in, not let the relief out until I am gone.

I watch the streets. It’s like being driven to my own execution. Not yet. A little while yet. Not yet do I hear his voice for the last time. Not yet.

He doesn’t have to ask the way to the station. I wonder out loud if he has put girls on the train before.

“Don’t be like that,” he says.

Every turn is like a shearing off of what’s left of my life.

There is a train to Toronto at five o’clock. I wait in the car, while he goes in to check. He comes out with the ticket in his hand and what I think is a lighter step. He must realize this, because as he approaches the car he becomes more sedate.

“It’s nice and warm in the station. There’s a special ladies’ waiting room.”

He has opened the car door for me.

“Or would you rather I waited and saw you off? Maybe there’s a place where we can get a decent piece of pie. That was a horrible dinner.”

This makes me stir myself. I get out and walk ahead of him into the station. He points out the ladies’ waiting room. He raises his eyebrow at me and tries to make a final joke.

“Maybe someday you’ll count this one of the luckiest days of your life.”

I choose a bench in the waiting room that has a view of the station’s front doors. So that I’ll be able to see him if he comes back. Perhaps he will tell me that this was all a joke. Or a test, as in some medieval drama. Or perhaps he will have a change of heart. Driving down the highway, seeing the pale spring sunlight on the rocks that we so recently looked at together. Struck by the realization of his folly, he will turn and come speeding back.

It is an hour at least before the Toronto train comes into the station, but it seems hardly any time at all. And even now fantasies are running through my mind. I board the train as if there were chains on my ankles. I press my face to the window to look along the platform as the whistle blows for our departure. It is not too late for me to jump from the train. Jump free and run through the station to the street, where he has just parked the car and is bounding up the steps, thinking, Not too late, pray not too late.

Me running to meet him. Not too late.

Now there is a commotion, shouting, hollering, not one but a gaggle of latecomers pounding between the seats. High-school girls in athletic outfits, hooting at the trouble they have caused. The conductor displeased and hurrying them along as they scramble for their seats.

One of them, and perhaps the loudest, is Mary.

I turn my head and do not look at them again.

But here she is, crying out my name and wanting to know where I have been.

To visit a friend, I tell her.

She plunks herself down beside me and tells me that they have been playing basketball against Huntsville. It was a riot. They lost.

“We lost, didn’t we?” she calls out in apparent delight, and others groan and giggle. She mentions the score, which is indeed quite shocking.

“You’re all dressed up,” she says. But she doesn’t much care; she seems to take my explanation without real interest.

She barely notices when I say that I am going on to Toronto to see my grandparents. Not a word about Alister. Not even a bad word. She has not forgotten. Just tidied up the scene and put it away, in a closet with her other former selves. Or maybe she really is a person who can deal recklessly with humiliation.

I am grateful to her now, even if I was not able to feel such a thing at the time. Left to myself, what might I have done when we got to Amundsen? Abandoned the train and run to his house and demanded to know why, why. What shame on me forever.

As it was, the stop there was barely long enough for the team to get themselves collected, while being warned by the conductor that if they didn't get a move on they would be riding to Toronto.

**F**or years, I thought I might run into him. I lived, and still live, in Toronto. It seemed to me that everybody ended up in Toronto, at least for a little while.

Then, more than a decade later, it finally happened. Crossing a crowded street where we could not even slow down. Going in opposite directions. Staring, at the same time, a bald shock on our time-damaged faces.

He called out, "How are you?," and I answered, "Fine." Then added, for good measure, "Happy."

At the time, this was only generally true. I was having some kind of dragged-out row with my husband, about our paying a debt run up by one of his children. I had gone that afternoon to a show at the Art Gallery, to get myself into a more comfortable frame of mind.

He called back to me once more. "Good for you," he said.

It still seemed as if we would make our way out of that crowd, as if in just a moment we would be together. But it was just as certain, also, that we would carry on in the directions we were going, and so we did.

No breathless cry, no hand on my shoulder when I reached the sidewalk. Just the flash that I had caught when one of his eyes opened wider than the other. It was the left eye—always the left, as I remembered. And it always looked so strange, alert and wondering, as if some crazy impossibility had occurred to him that almost made him laugh.

That was all. I went on home.

Feeling the same as when I'd left Amundsen. The train dragging me, disbelieving. Nothing changes, apparently, about love. ♦

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