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FICTION
BY ALICE MUNRO

From the short story collection *Fiction*

I

The best thing in winter was driving home, after her day teaching music in the Rough River schools. It would already be dark, and on the upper streets of the town snow might be falling, while rain lashed the car on the coastal highway. Joyce drove beyond the limits of the town into the forest, and though it was a real forest with great Douglas firs and cedar trees, there were people living in it every quarter mile or so. There were some people who had market gardens, a few who had some sheep or riding horses, and there were enterprises like Jon's—he restored and made furniture. Also the services advertised beside the road, and more particular to this part of the world—tarot readings, herbal massage, conflict resolution. Some people lived in trailers; others had built their own houses, incorporating thatched roofs and log ends, and still others, like Jon and Joyce, were renovating old farmhouses.

There was the one special thing Joyce loved to see as she was driving home and turning in to their own property. At this time many people, even some of the thatched-roof people, were putting in what were called patio doors—even if like Jon and Joyce they had no patio. These were usually left uncurtained, and the two oblongs of light seemed to be a sign or pledge of comfort, of safety and replenishment. Why this should be so, more than with ordinary windows, Joyce could not say. Perhaps it was that most were meant not just to look out on but to open directly into the forest darkness, and that they displayed the haven of home so artlessly. Full-length people cooking or watching television— scenes which beguiled her, even if she knew things would not be so special inside.

What she saw when she turned in to her own unpaved puddled driveway was the set of these doors put in by Jon, framing the gutted glowing interior of their house. The stepladder, the unfinished kitchen shelves, exposed stairs, warm wood lit up by the lightbulb that Jon positioned to shine wherever he wanted it, wherever he was working. He worked all day in his shed, and then when it began to get dark he sent his apprentice home and started working on the house. Hearing her car, he would turn his head in Joyce's direction just for a moment, in greeting. Usually his hands would be too busy to wave. Sitting there, with the car lights off, gathering up whatever groceries or mail she had to take into the house, Joyce was happy even to have that last dash to the door, through the dark and the wind and the cold rain. She felt herself shedding the day's work, which was harried and uncertain, filled with the dispensing of music to the indifferent as well as the responsive. How much better to work with wood and by yourself—she did not count the apprentice—than with the unpredictable human young.

She didn't say any of that to Jon. He disliked hearing people talk about how basic and fine and honorable it was to work with wood. What integrity that had, what dignity.

He would say, Crap.

Jon and Joyce had met at an urban high school in a factory city in Ontario. Joyce had the second-highest IQ in their class, and Jon had the highest IQ in the school and probably in that city. She was expected to turn into a fine performer on the vio- lin—that was before she gave it up for the cello—and he was to become some daunting sort of scientist whose labors were beyond description in the ordinary world.

In their first year at college they dropped out of their classes and ran away together. They got jobs here and there, travelled by bus across the continent, lived for a year on the Oregon coast, were reconciled, at a distance, with their parents, for whom a light

had gone out in the world. It was getting rather late in the day for them to be called hippies, but that was what their parents called them. They never thought of themselves that way. They did not do drugs, they dressed conservatively though rather shabbily, and Jon made a point of shaving and getting Joyce to cut his hair. They tired of their temporary minimum-wage jobs after a while and borrowed from their disappointed families so that they could qualify to make a better living. Jon learned carpentry and woodworking, and Joyce got a degree that made her eligible to teach music in the schools. The job she got was in Rough River. They bought this tumbledown house for almost nothing and settled into to a new phase in their lives. They planted a garden, got to know their neighbors—some of whom were still real hippies, tending small grow operations deep in the bush and making bead necklaces and herb sachets to sell.

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Their neighbors liked Jon. He was still skinny and bright eyed, egotistical but ready to listen. And it was a time when most people were just getting used to computers, which he understood and could patiently explain. Joyce was less popular. Her methods of teaching music were thought to be too formalized.

Joyce and Jon cooked supper together and drank some of their homemade wine. (Jon's method of winemaking was strict and successful.) Joyce talked about the frustrations and comedy of her day. Jon did not talk much—he was, for one thing, more involved in the cooking. But when they got around to eating he might tell her about some customer who had come in, or about his apprentice, Edie. They would laugh about something Edie had said. But not in a disparaging way—Edie was like a pet, Joyce sometimes thought. Or like a child. Though if she had been a child, their child, and had been the way she was, they might have been too puzzled and perhaps too concerned to laugh.

Why? What way? She wasn't stupid. Jon said she was no genius when it came to woodworking, but she learned and remembered what she was taught. And the important thing was that she wasn't garrulous. That was what he had been most afraid of when the business of hiring an apprentice had come up. A government program had been started—he was to be paid a certain amount for teaching the person, and whoever it was would be paid enough to live on while learning. At first he hadn't been willing, but Joyce had talked him into it. She believed they had an obligation to society.

Edie might not have talked a lot, but when she did talk it was forceful.

"I abstain from all drugs and alcohol" was what she told them at her first interview. "I belong to AA and I am a recovering alcoholic. We never say we are recovered, because we never are. You never are as long as you live. I have a nine-year-old daughter and she was born without a father so she is my total responsibility and I mean to bring her up right. My ambition is to learn woodworking so I can provide for myself and my child."

While delivering this speech she sat staring at them, one after the other, across their kitchen table. She was a short sturdy young woman who did not look old enough or damaged enough to have much of a career of dissipation behind her.

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***FICTION* (CONT'D)**

Broad shoulders, thick bangs, tight ponytail, no possibility of a smile.

"And one more thing," she said. She unbuttoned and removed her long-sleeved blouse. She was wearing an undershirt.

Both arms, her upper chest, and—when she turned around—her upper back were decorated with tattoos. It was as if her skin had become a garment, or perhaps a comic book of faces both leering and tender, beset by dragons, whales, flames, too intricate or maybe too horrid to be comprehended. The first thing you had to wonder was whether her whole body had been transformed in the same way.

"How amazing," said Joyce, as neutrally as possible.

"Well, I don't know how amazing it is, but it would have cost a pile of money if I'd had to pay for it," Edie said. "That's what I was into at one time. What I'm showing it to you for is that some people would object to it. Like supposing I got hot in the shed and had to work in my shirt."

"Not us," said Joyce, and looked at Jon. He shrugged.

She asked Edie if she would like a cup of coffee.

"No, thank you." Edie was putting her shirt back on. "A lot of people at AA, they just seem like they live on coffee. What I say to them, I say, Why are you changing one bad habit for another?"

"Extraordinary," Joyce said later. "You feel that no matter what you said she might give you a lecture. I didn't dare inquire about the virgin birth."

Jon said, "She's strong. That's the main thing. I took a look at her arms."

When Jon says "strong" he means just what the word used to mean. He means she could carry a beam.

While Jon works he listens to CBC Radio. Music, but also news, commentaries, phone-ins. He sometimes reports Edie's opinions on what they have listened to.

Edie does not believe in evolution.

(There had been a phone-in program in which some people objected to what was being taught in the schools.)

Why not?

"Well, it's because in those Bible countries," Jon said, and then he switched into his firm monotonous Edie voice, "in those Bible countries they have a lot of monkeys and the monkeys were always swinging down from the trees and that's how people got the idea that monkeys just swung down and turned into people."

"But in the first place—" said Joyce.

"Never mind. Don't even try. Don't you know the first rule about arguing with Edie? Never mind and shut up."

Edie also believed that big medical companies knew the cure for cancer, but they had a bargain with doctors to keep the information quiet because of the money they and the doctors made.

When “Ode to Joy” was played on the radio she had Jon shut it off because it was so awful, like a funeral.

Also, she thought Jon and Joyce—well, really Joyce—should not leave wine bottles with wine in them right out in sight on the kitchen table.

“That’s her business?” said Joyce.

“Apparently she thinks so.”

“When does she get to examine our kitchen table?”

“She has to go through to the toilet. She can’t be expected to piss in the bush.”

“I really don’t see what business—”

“And sometimes she comes in and makes a couple of sandwiches for us—”

“So? It’s my kitchen. Ours.”

“It’s just that she feels so threatened by the booze. She’s still pretty fragile. It’s a thing you and I can’t understand.”

Threatened. Booze. Fragile.

What words were these for Jon to use?

She should have understood, and at that moment, even if he himself was nowhere close to knowing. He was falling in love. Falling. That suggests some time span, a slipping under. But you can think of it as a speeding up, a moment or a second when you fall. Now Jon is not in love with Edie. Tick. Now he is. No way this could be seen as probable or possible, unless you think of a blow between the eyes, a sudden calamity. The stroke of fate that leaves a man a cripple, the wicked joke that turns clear eyes into blind stones.

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Joyce set about convincing him that he was mistaken. He had so little experience of women. None, except for her. They had always thought that experimenting with various partners was childish, adultery was messy and destructive. Now she wondered, Should he have played around more?

And he had spent the dark winter months shut up in his workshop, exposed to the confident emanations of Edie. It was comparable to getting sick from bad ventilation.

Edie would drive him crazy, if he went ahead and took her seriously.

"I've thought of that," he said. "Maybe she already has."

Joyce said that was stupid adolescent talk, making himself out to be dumbstruck, helpless.

"What do you think you are, some knight of the Round Table? Somebody slipped you a potion?"

Then she said she was sorry. The only thing to do, she said, was to take this up as a shared program. Valley of the shadow. To be seen someday as a mere glitch in the course of their marriage.

"We will ride this out," she said.

Jon looked at her distantly, even kindly.

"There is no 'we,' " he said.

How could this have happened? Joyce asks it of Jon and of herself and then of others. A heavy-striding heavy-witted carpenter's apprentice in baggy pants and flannel shirts and—as long as the winter lasted—a dull thick sweater flecked with sawdust. A mind that plods inexorably from one cliché or foolishness to the next and proclaims every step of the journey to be the law of the land. Such a person has eclipsed Joyce with her long legs and slim waist and long silky braid of dark hair. Her wit and her music and the second-highest IQ.

"I'll tell you what I think it was," says Joyce. This is later on, when the days have lengthened and the dandles of swamp lilies flame in the ditches. When she went to teach music wearing tinted glasses to hide eyes that were swollen from weeping and drinking, and instead of driving home after work drove to Willingdon Park where she hoped Jon would come looking for her, fearing suicide. (He did that, but only once.)

"I think it was that she'd been on the streets," she said. "Prostitutes get themselves tattooed for business reasons, and men are aroused by that sort of thing. I don't mean the tattoos— well that too, of course, they're aroused by that too—I mean the fact of having been for sale. All that availability and experience. And now reformed. It's your fucking Mary Magdalene, that's what it is. And he's such an infant sexually, it all makes you sick."

She has friends now to whom she can talk like this. They all have stories. Some of them she knew before, but not as she knows them now. They confide and drink and laugh till they cry. They say they can't believe it. Men. What they do. It's so sick and stupid. You can't believe it.

That's why it's true.

In the midst of this talk Joyce feels all right. Really all right. She says that she is actually having moments in which she feels grateful to Jon, because she feels more alive now than ever before. It is terrible but wonderful. A new beginning. Naked truth. Naked life.

But when she woke up at three or four in the morning she wondered where she was. Not in their house anymore. Edie was in that house now. Edie and her child and Jon. This was a switch that Joyce herself had favored, thinking it might bring Jon to his senses. She moved to an apartment in town. It belonged to a teacher who was on a sabbatical. She woke in the night with the vibrating pink lights of the restaurant sign across the street flashing through her window, illuminating the other teacher's Mexican doodads. Pots of cacti, dangling cat's eyes, blankets with stripes the color of dried blood. All that drunken insight, that exhilaration, cast out of her like vomit. Aside from that, she was not hungover. She could wallow in lakes of alcohol, it seemed, and wake up dry as cardboard, flattened.

Her life gone. A commonplace calamity.

The truth was that she was still drunk, though feeling dead sober. She was in danger of getting into her car and driving out to the house. Not of driving into a ditch, because her driving at such times became very slow and sedate, but of parking in the yard outside the dark windows and crying out to Jon that they simply must stop this.

Stop this. This is not right. Tell her to go away.

Remember we slept in the field and woke up and the cows were munching all around us and we hadn't known they were there the night before. Remember washing in the ice-cold creek. We were picking mushrooms up on Vancouver Island and flying back to Ontario and selling them to pay for the trip when your mother was sick and we thought she was dying. And we said, What a joke, we're not even druggies, we're on an errand of filial piety.

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The sun came up and the Mexican colors began to blare at her in their enhanced hideousness, and after a while she got up and washed and slashed her cheeks with rouge and drank coffee that she made strong as mud and put on some of her new clothes. She had bought new flimsy tops and fluttering skirts and earrings decked with rainbow feathers. She went out to teach music in the schools, looking like a Gypsy dancer or a cocktail waitress. She laughed at everything and flirted with everybody. With the man who cooked her breakfast in the diner downstairs and the boy who put gas in her car and the clerk who sold her stamps in the post office. She had some idea that Jon would hear about how pretty she looked, how sexy and happy, how she was simply bowling over all the men. As soon as she went out of the apartment she was on a stage, and Jon was the essential, if secondhand, spectator. Although Jon had never been taken in by showy looks or flirty behavior, had never thought that was what made her attractive. When they travelled they had often made do with a common wardrobe. Heavy socks, jeans, dark shirts, Windbreakers.

Another change.

Even with the youngest or the dullest children she taught, her tone had become caressing, full of mischievous laughter, her encouragement irresistible. She was preparing her pupils for the recital held at the conclusion of the school year. She had not previously been enthusiastic about this evening of public performance—she had felt that it interfered with the progress of those students who had ability, it shoved them into a situation they were not ready for. All that effort and tension could only create false values. But this year she was throwing herself into every aspect of the show. The program, the lighting, the introductions, and of course the performances. This ought to be fun, she proclaimed. Fun for the students, fun for the audience. Of course she counted on Jon's being there. Edie's daughter was one of the performers, so Edie would have to be there. Jon would have to accompany Edie.

Jon and Edie's first appearance as a couple before the town.

Their declaration. They could not avoid it. Such switches as theirs were not unheard of, particularly among the people who lived south of town. But they were not exactly commonplace. The fact that rearrangements were not scandalous didn't mean they didn't get attention. There was a necessary period of interest before things settled down and people got used to the new alliance. As they did, and the newly aligned partners would be seen chatting with, or at least saying hello to, the castoffs in the grocery store.

But this was not the role Joyce saw herself playing, watched by Jon and Edie—well, really by Jon—on the evening of the recital.

What did she see? God knows. She did not, in any sane moment, think of impressing Jon so favorably that he would come to his senses when she appeared to take the applause of the audience at the end of the show. She did not think his heart would break for his folly, once he saw her happy and glamorous and in command rather than moping and suicidal. But something not far off from that—something she couldn't define but couldn't stop herself hoping for.

It was the best recital ever. Everybody said so. They said there was more verve. More gaiety, yet more intensity. The children costumed in harmony with the music they performed. Their faces made up so they did not seem so scared and sacrificial.

When Joyce came out at the end she wore a long black silk skirt that shone with silver as she moved. Also silver bangles and glitter in her loose hair. Some whistles mingled with the applause.

Jon and Edie were not in the audience.

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***FICTION* (CONT'D)**

II

Joyce and Matt are giving a party at their house in North Vancouver.

This is to celebrate Matt's sixty-fifth birthday. Matt is a neuropsychologist who is also a good amateur violinist. That is how he met Joyce, now a professional cellist and his third wife. "Look at all the people here," Joyce keeps saying. "It's positively a life story."

She is a lean eager-looking woman with a mop of pewtercolored hair and a slight stoop which may come from coddling her large instrument, or simply from the habit of being an obliging listener and a ready talker.

There are Matt's colleagues, of course, from the college; the ones he considers his personal friends. He is a generous but outspoken man so it stands to reason not all colleagues fall into that category. There is his first wife, Sally, accompanied by her caregiver. Sally's brain was damaged when she was in a car accident at the age of twenty-nine, so it is unlikely that she knows who Matt is, or who her three grown sons are, or that this is the house she lived in as a young wife. But her pleasant manners are intact, and she is delighted to meet people, even if she has met them already, fifteen minutes before. Her caregiver is a tidy little Scotswoman who explains often that she is not used to big noisy parties like this and that she doesn't drink while on duty.

Matt's second wife, Doris, lived with him for less than a year, though she was married to him for three. She is here with her much younger partner, Louise, and their baby daughter, whom Louise bore a few months ago. Doris has stayed friends with Matt and especially with Matt and Sally's youngest son, Tommy, who was small enough to be in her care when she was married to his father. Matt's two older sons are present with their children and the children's mothers, though one of the mothers is no longer married to that father. He is accompanied by his current partner and her son, who has got into a fight with one of the bloodline children over turns on the swing.

Tommy has brought along for the first time his lover named Jay, who has not yet said anything. Tommy has said to Joyce that Jay is not used to families.

"I feel for him," says Joyce. "There was actually a time when I wasn't either." She is laughing—she has hardly stopped laughing as she explains the status of the official and outlying members of what Matt calls the clan. She herself has no children, though she does have an ex-husband, Jon, who lives up the coast in a mill town that has fallen on evil days. She invited him to come down for the party, but he could not come. His third wife's grandchild was being christened on that day. Of course Joyce had invited the wife too—her name is Charlene and she runs a bakeshop. She had written the nice note about the christening, causing Joyce to say to Matt that she can't believe Jon could have got religion.

"I do wish they could have come," she says, explaining all this to a neighbor. (Neighbors have been invited, so there won't be any fuss about the noise.) "Then I could have had my share in the complications. There was a second wife, but I have no idea where she has got to and I don't believe he has either." There is lots of food that Matt and Joyce have made and that people have brought, and lots of wine and children's fruit punch and a real punch that Matt has concocted for the occasion— in honor of the good old days, he says, when people really knew how to drink. He says he would have made it in a scrubbed-out garbage can, the way they did then, but nowadays everybody would be too squeamish to drink that. Most of the young adults leave it alone, anyway.

The grounds are large. There is croquet, if people want to play, and the disputed swing from Matt's own childhood that he got out of the garage. Most of the children have seen only park swings and plastic play units in the backyard. Matt is surely one of the last people in Vancouver to have a childhood swing handy and to be living in the house he grew up in, a house on Windsor Road on the slope of Grouse Mountain on what used to be the edge of the forest. Now houses keep climbing above it, most of them castle affairs with massive garages. One of these days this place will have to go, Matt says. The taxes are monstrous. It will have to go, and a couple of hideosities will replace it.

Joyce cannot think of her life with Matt happening any-where else. There's always so much going on here. People coming and going and leaving things behind and picking them up later (including children). Matt's string quartet in the study on Sunday afternoons, the Unitarian Fellowship meeting in the living room on Sunday evenings, Green Party strategy being planned in the kitchen. The play-reading group emoting in the front of the house while somebody spills out the details of reallife drama in the kitchen (Joyce's presence required in both locations). Matt and some faculty colleague hammering out strategy in the study with the door closed.

She often remarks that she and Matt are seldom alone together except in bed.

"And then he'll be reading something important."

While she is reading something unimportant.

Never mind. There is some large conviviality and appetite he carries with him that she may need. Even at the college— where he is involved with graduate students, collaborators, possible enemies, and detractors—he seems to move in a barely managed whirlwind. All this once seemed to her so comforting. And probably it still would, if she had time to look at it from outside. She would probably envy herself, from outside. People may envy her, or at least admire her—thinking she matched him so well, with all her friends and duties and activities and of course her own career as well. You would never look at her now and think that when she had first come down to Vancouver she was so lonely that she had agreed to go out with the boy from the dry cleaner who was a decade too young for her. And then he had stood her up.

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***FICTION* (CONT'D)**

Now she is walking across the grass with a shawl over her arm for old Mrs. Fowler, the mother of Doris the second wife and late-blooming lesbian. Mrs. Fowler can't sit in the sun, but she gets shivers in the shade. And in the other hand she carries a glass of freshly made lemonade for Mrs. Gowan, the on-duty companion of Sally. Mrs. Gowan has found the children's punch too sweet. She does not allow Sally to have anything to drink—she might spill it on her pretty dress or throw it at somebody in a fit of playfulness. Sally does not seem to mind the deprivation.

On the journey across the lawn Joyce skirts a group of young people sitting in a circle. Tommy and his new friend and other friends she has often seen in the house and others she does not believe she has ever seen at all.

She hears Tommy say, "No, I am not Isadora Duncan."

They all laugh.

She realizes that they must be playing that difficult and snobby game that was popular years ago. What was it called? She thinks the name started with a *B*. She would have thought they were too anti-elitist nowadays for any such pastime. Buxtehude. She has said it out loud.

"You're playing Buxtehude."

"You got the *B* right anyway," says Tommy, laughing at her so that the others can laugh.

"See," he says. "My *belle mère*, she ain't so dumb. But she's a musician. Wasn't Buxtahoody a musician?"

"Buxtehude walked fifty miles to hear Bach play the organ," says Joyce in a mild huff. "Yes. A musician."

Tommy says, "Hot damn."

A girl in the circle gets up, and Tommy calls to her.

"Hey Christie. Christie. Aren't you playing anymore?"

"I'll be back. I'm just going to hide in the bushes with my filthy cigarette."

This girl is wearing a short frilly black dress that makes you think of a piece of lingerie or a nightie, and a severe but lownecked little black jacket. Wispy pale hair, evasive pale face, invisible eyebrows. Joyce has taken an instant dislike to her. The sort of girl, she thinks, whose mission in life is to make people feel uncomfortable. Tagging along—Joyce thinks she must have tagged along—to a party at the home of people she doesn't know but feels a right to despise. Because of their easy (shallow?) cheer and their bourgeois hospitality. (Do people say "bourgeois" anymore?)

It's not as if a guest couldn't smoke anywhere she wants to. There aren't any of those fussy little signs around, even in the house. Joyce feels a lot of her cheer drained away.

"Tommy," she says abruptly. "Tommy, would you mind taking this shawl to Grandma Fowler? Apparently she's feeling chilly. And the lemonade is for Mrs. Gowan. You know. The person with your mother."

No harm in reminding him of certain relationships and responsibilities.

Tommy is quickly and gracefully on his feet.

“Botticelli,” he says, relieving her of the shawl and the glass.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to spoil your game.”

“We’re no good anyway,” says a boy she knows. Justin.

“We’re not as smart as you guys used to be.”

“Used to be is right,” says Joyce. At a loss, for a moment, as to what to do or where to go next.

They are washing the dishes in the kitchen. Joyce and Tommy and the new friend, Jay. The party is over. People have departed with hugs and kisses and hearty cries, some bearing platters of food that Joyce has no room for in the refrigerator. Wilted salads and cream tarts and devilled eggs have been thrown out.

Few of the devilled eggs were eaten anyway. Old-fashioned.

Too much cholesterol.

“Too bad, they were a lot of work. They probably reminded people of church suppers,” says Joyce, tipping a platterful into the garbage.

“My granma used to make them,” says Jay. These are the first words he has addressed to Joyce, and she sees Tommy looking grateful. She feels grateful herself, even if she has been put in the category of his grandmother.

“We ate several and they were good,” says Tommy. He and Jay have worked for at least half an hour alongside her, gathering glasses and plates and cutlery that were scattered all over the lawn and verandah and throughout the house, even in the most curious places such as flowerpots and under sofa cushions.

The boys—she thinks of them as boys—have stacked the dishwasher more skillfully than she in her worn-out state could ever manage, and prepared the hot soapy water and cool rinse water in the sinks for the glasses.

“We could just save them for the next load in the dishwasher,”

Joyce has said, but Tommy has said no.

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***FICTION* (CONT'D)**

"You wouldn't think of putting them in the dishwater if you weren't out of your right mind with all you had to do today." Jay washes and Joyce dries and Tommy puts away. He still remembers where everything goes in this house. Out on the porch Matt is having a strenuous conversation with a man from the department. Apparently he's not so drunk as the plentiful hugs and prolonged farewells of a short time ago would indicate. "Quite possibly I am not in my right mind," says Joyce. "At the moment my gut feeling is to pitch these all out and buy plastic."

"Postparty syndrome," says Tommy. "We know all about it."

"So who was that girl in the black dress?" says Joyce. "The one who walked out on the game?"

"Christie? You must mean Christie. Christie O'Dell. She's Justin's wife, but she has her own name. You know Justin."

"Of course I know Justin. I just didn't know he was married."

"Ah, how they all grow up," says Tommy, teasing.

"Justin's thirty," he adds. "She's possibly older."

Jay says, "Definitely older."

"She's an interesting-looking girl," says Joyce. "What's she like?"

"She's a writer. She's okay."

Jay, bending over the sink, makes a noise that Joyce cannot interpret.

"Inclined to be rather aloof," Tommy says. He speaks to Jay.

"Am I right? Would you say that?"

"She thinks she's hot shit," Jay says distinctly.

"Well, she's just got her first book published," Tommy says.

"I forget what it's called. Some title like a how-to book, I don't think it's a good title. You get your first book out, I guess you are hot shit for a while."

Passing a bookstore on Lonsdale a few days later, Joyce sees the girl's face on a poster. And there is her name, Christie O'Dell. She is wearing a black hat and the same little black jacket she wore to the party. Tailored, severe, very low in the neck.

Though she has practically nothing there to show off. She stares straight into the camera, with her somber, wounded, distantly accusing look.

Where has Joyce seen her before? At the party, of course.

But even then, in the midst of her probably unwarranted dislike, she felt she had seen that face before.

A student? She'd had so many students in her time.

She goes into the store and buys a copy of the book.

How Are We to Live. No question mark. The woman who sold it to her says, "And you know if you bring it back Friday afternoon between two and four, the author will be here to sign it for you.

"Just don't tear the little gold sticker off so it shows you bought it here."

Joyce has never understood this business of lining up to get a glimpse of the author and then going away with a stranger's name written in your book. So she murmurs politely, indicating neither yes nor no.

She doesn't even know if she will read the book. She has a couple of good biographies on the go at the moment that she is sure are more to her taste than this will be.

How Are We to Live is a collection of short stories, not a novel. This in itself is a disappointment. It seems to diminish the book's authority, making the author seem like somebody who is just hanging on to the gates of Literature, rather than safely settled inside.

Nevertheless Joyce takes the book to bed with her that night and turns dutifully to the table of contents. About halfway down the list a title catches her eye.

"*Kindertotenlieder*."

Mahler. Familiar territory. Reassured, she turns to the page indicated. Somebody, probably the author herself, has had the sense to supply a translation.

"Songs on the Death of Children."

Beside her, Matt gives a snort.

She knows that he has disagreed with something he is reading and would like her to ask what it is. So she does.

"Christ. This idiot."

She puts *How Are We to Live* facedown on her chest, making sounds to show that she is listening to him.

On the back cover of the book there is the same author's photo, without the hat this time. Unsmiling still, and sulky, but a bit less pretentious. While Matt talks, Joyce shifts her knees so that she can position the book against them and read the few sentences of the cover biography.

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***FICTION* (CONT'D)**

Christie O'Dell grew up in Rough River, a small town on the coast of British Columbia. She is a graduate of the UBC Creative Writing Program. She lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her husband, Justin, and her cat, Tiberius. When he has explained to her what the idiocy in his book is all about, Matt lifts his eyes from his book to look at her book and says, "There's that girl that was at our party."

"Yes. Her name's Christie O'Dell. She's Justin's wife."

"She's written a book then? What is it?"

"Fiction."

"Oh."

He has resumed his reading but in a moment asks her, with a hint of contrition, "Is it any good?"

"I don't know yet."

"She lived with her mother," she reads, "in a house between the mountains and the sea—"

As soon as she has read those words Joyce feels too uncomfortable to continue reading. Or to continue reading with her husband beside her. She closes the book and says, "I think I'll go downstairs for a little."

"Is the light bothering you? I'm about to turn it off."

"No. I think I want some tea. See you in a while."

"I'll probably be asleep."

"Good night then."

"Good night."

She kisses him and takes the book with her.

She lived with her mother in a house between the mountains and the sea. Before that she had lived with Mrs. Noland who took in foster children. The number of children in Mrs. Noland's house varied from time to time but there were always too many. The little ones slept in a bed in the middle of the room and the bigger ones slept in cots on either side of the bed so the little ones wouldn't roll off. A bell rang to get you up in the morning. Mrs. Noland stood in the doorway ringing the bell. When she rang the next bell you were supposed to have been to pee and got yourself washed and dressed and be ready for breakfast. Big ones were supposed to help the little ones then make the beds. Sometimes the little ones in the middle had wet the bed because it was hard for them to crawl out in time over the big ones. Some big ones would tell on them but other big ones were nicer and they just pulled up the covers and let it dry and sometimes when you got back in bed at night it was not quite dried. That was most of what she remembered about Mrs. Noland's.

Then she went to live with her mother and every night her mother would take her to the AA meeting. She had to take her because there wasn't anybody to leave her with. At

the AA there was a box of Legos for kids to play with but she didn't like Legos very much. After she started learning the violin at school she took her child's violin with her to AA. She couldn't play it there, but she had to hang on to it all the time because it belonged to the school. If people got talking very loudly she could practice a little softly.

The violin lessons were given at the school. If you didn't want to play an instrument you could just play the triangles, but the teacher liked it better if you played something harder. The teacher was a tall woman with brown hair that she wore usually in a long braid down her back. She smelled different from the other teachers. Some of them had perfume on, but she never did. She smelled of wood or a stove or trees. Later the child would believe the smell was crushed cedar. After the child's mother went to work for the teacher's husband she smelled the same way but not quite the same. The difference seemed to be that her mother smelled of wood, but the teacher smelled of wood in music.

The child was not very talented, but she worked hard. She didn't do that because she loved music. She did it for love of the teacher, nothing else.

Joyce puts the book down on the kitchen table and looks again at the picture of the author. Is there anything of Edie in that face? Nothing. Nothing in the shape or the expression.

She gets up and fetches the brandy, puts a little of it in her tea. She searches her mind for the name of Edie's child. Surely not Christie. She could not remember any time when Edie had brought her to the house. At the school there had been several children learning the violin.

The child could not have been entirely without ability, or Joyce would have steered her to something less difficult than the violin. But she couldn't have been gifted—well, she had as much as said she wasn't gifted—or her name would have stuck. A blank face. A blob of female childishness. Though there had been something that Joyce recognized in the face of the girl, the woman, grown up.

Could she not have come to the house if Edie was helping Jon on a Saturday? Or even on those days when Edie just turned up as some sort of visitor, not to work but just to see how work was coming along, lend a hand if needed. Plunk herself down to watch whatever Jon was doing and get in the way of any conversation he might have with Joyce on her precious day off.

Christine. Of course. That was it. Translated easily into Christie.

Christine must have been privy in some way to the courtship, Jon must have dropped in at the apartment, just as Edie had dropped in at the house. Edie might have sounded the child out.

How do you like Jon?

How do you like Jon's house?

Wouldn't it be nice to go and live in Jon's house?

Mommy and Jon like each other very much and when people like each other very much they want to live in the same house. Your music teacher and Jon don't like each other as much as Mommy and Jon do so you and Mommy and Jon are going to live in Jon's house and your music teacher is going to go and live in an apartment.

That was all wrong; Edie would never spout such blather, give her credit.

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***FICTION* (CONT'D)**

Joyce thinks she knows the turn the story will take. The child all mixed up in the adults' dealings and delusions, pulled about hither and yon. But when she picks up the book again she finds the switch of dwelling places hardly mentioned.

Everything is hinged on the child's love for the teacher.

Thursday, the day of the music lesson, is the momentous day of the week, its happiness or unhappiness depending on the success or failure of the child's performance, and the teacher's notice of that performance. Both are nearly unbearable. The teacher's voice could be controlled, kind, making jokes to cover its weariness and disappointment. The child is wretched. Or the teacher is suddenly lighthearted and merry.

"Good for you. Good for you. You've really made the grade today." And the child is so happy she has cramps in her stomach.

Then there is the Thursday when the child has tripped on the playground and has a scratched knee. The teacher cleaning the injury with a warmed wet cloth, her suddenly soft voice claiming that this calls for a treat, as she reaches for the bowl of Smarties she uses to encourage the youngest children.

"Which is your favorite?"

The child overcome, saying, "Any."

Is this the beginning of a change? Is it because of spring, the preparations for the recital?

The child feels herself singled out. She is to be a soloist.

This means she must stay after school on Thursdays to practice, and so she misses her ride out of town on the school bus, to the house where she and her mother are now living. The teacher will drive her. On the way she asks if the child is nervous about the recital.

Sort of.

Well then, the teacher says, she must train herself to think of something really nice. Such as a bird flying across the sky. What is her favorite bird?

Favorites again. The child can't think, can't think of a single bird. Then, "A crow?"

The teacher laughs. "Okay. Okay. Think of a crow. Just before you begin to play, think of a crow."

Then perhaps to make up for laughing, sensing the child's humiliation, the teacher suggests they go down to Willingdon Park and see if the ice-cream stand has opened for the summer.

"Do they worry if you don't come straight home?"

"They know I'm with you."

The ice-cream stand is open though the selection is limited. They haven't got the more exciting flavors in yet. The child picks strawberry, this time making sure to be ready, in

the middle of her bliss and agitation. The teacher picks vanilla, as many adults do. Though she jokes with the attendant, telling him to hurry up and get rum raisin or she won't like him anymore.

Maybe that is when there is another change. Hearing the teacher speak in that way, in a saucy voice almost the way big girls speak, the child relaxes. From then on she is less stricken with adoration, though entirely happy. They drive down to the dock to look at the moored boats, and the teacher says she has always wanted to live on a houseboat. Wouldn't it be fun, she says, and the child of course agrees. They pick the one they'd choose. It is homemade and painted a light blue, with a row of little windows in which there are potted geraniums.

This leads to a conversation about the house the child lives in now, the house where the teacher used to live. And somehow after that, on their drives, they often come back to that subject. The child reports that she likes having her own bedroom but doesn't like how dark it is outside. Sometimes she thinks she can hear wild animals outside her window.

What wild animals?

Bears, cougars. Her mother says those are in the bush and never to go there.

"Do you run and get into your mother's bed when you hear them?"

"I'm not supposed to."

"Goodness, why not?"

"Jon's there."

"What does Jon think about the bears and cougars?"

"He thinks it's just deer."

"Was he mad at your mother for what she'd told you?"

"No."

"I guess he's never mad."

"He was sort of mad one time. When me and my mother poured all his wine down the sink."

The teacher says it is a pity to be scared of the woods all the time. There are walks you can take there, she says, where wild animals won't bother you, especially if you make a noise and usually you do. She knows the safe paths and she knows the names of all the wildflowers that will be coming out about now. Dogtooth violets. Trilliums. Wake-robins. Purple violets and columbines. Chocolate lilies.

"I think there is another proper name for them, but I like to call them chocolate lilies. It sounds so delicious. Of course, it isn't anything about the way they taste but the way they look. They look just like chocolate with a bit of purple like crushed berries. They're rare but I know where there are some."

Joyce puts the book down again. Now, now, she really has caught the drift, she can feel the horror coming. The innocent child, the sick and sneaking adult, that seduction. She should have known. All so in fashion these days, practically obligatory.

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***FICTION* (CONT'D)**

The woods, the spring flowers. Here was where the writer would graft her ugly invention onto the people and the situation she had got out of real life, being too lazy to invent but not to malign.

For some of it was true, certainly. She does remember things she had forgotten. Driving Christine home, and never thinking of her as Christine but always as Edie's child. She remembers how she could not drive into the yard to turn around but always let the child off by the side of the road, then drove another half mile or so to get a place to turn. She does not remember anything about the ice cream. But there used to be a houseboat exactly like that moored down at the dock. Even the flowers, and the sly horrible questioning of the child—that could be true.

She has to continue. She would like to pour more brandy, but she has a rehearsal at nine o'clock in the morning. Nothing of the sort. She has made another mistake. The woods and the chocolate lilies drop out of the story, the recital is almost passed over. School has just ended. And on the Sunday morning after the final week the child is wakened early. She hears the teacher's voice in the yard and she goes to her window. There is the teacher in her car with the window down, talking to Jon. A small U-Haul is attached to the car. Jon is in his bare feet, bare chested, wearing only his jeans. He calls to the child's mother and she comes to the kitchen door and walks a few steps into the yard but does not go up to the car. She is wearing a shirt of Jon's which she uses as a dressing gown. She always wears long sleeves to hide her tattoos.

The conversation is about something in the apartment which Jon promises to pick up. The teacher tosses him the keys. Then he and the child's mother, talking over each other, urge her to take some other things. But the teacher laughs unpleasantly and says, "All yours." Soon Jon says, "Okay. See you," and the teacher echoes "See you," and the child's mother doesn't say anything you can hear. The teacher laughs in the same way she did before and Jon gives her directions about how to turn the car and the U-Haul around in the yard. By this time the child is running downstairs in her pajamas, though she knows the teacher is not in the right mood to talk to her.

"You just missed her," the child's mother says. "She had to catch the ferry."

There is a honk of the horn; Jon raises one hand. Then he comes across the yard and says to the child's mother, "That's that."

The child asks if the teacher is going to come back and he says, "Not likely."

What takes up another half page is the child's increasing understanding of what has been going on. As she grows older she recalls certain questions, the seemingly haphazard probing there had been. Information—quite useless really—about Jon (whom she does not call Jon) and her mother. When did they get up in the morning? What did they like to eat and did they cook together? What did they listen to on the radio? (Nothing—they had bought a television.)

What was the teacher after? Did she hope to hear bad things? Or was she just hungry to hear anything, to be in contact with somebody who slept under the same roof, ate at the same table, was close to those two people daily?

That is what the child can never know. What she can know is how little she herself counted for, how her infatuation was manipulated, what a poor little fool she was. And this fills her with bitterness, certainly it does. Bitterness and pride. She thinks of herself as a person never to be fooled again.

But something happens. And here is the surprise ending. Her feelings about the teacher and that period in her childhood one day change. She doesn't know how or when, but she realizes that she no longer thinks of that time as a cheat. She thinks of the music she painfully learned to play (she gave it up, of course, before she was even in her teens). The buoyancy of her hopes, the streaks of happiness, the curious and delightful names of the forest flowers that she never got to see. Love. She was glad of it. It almost seemed as if there must be some random and of course unfair thrift in the emotional housekeeping of the world, if the great happiness—however temporary, however flimsy—of one person could come out of the great unhappiness of another.

Why yes, Joyce thinks. Yes.

On Friday afternoon she goes to the bookstore. She brings her book to be signed, as well as a small box from Le Bon Chocolatier.

She joins a lineup. She is slightly surprised to see how many people have come. Women of her own age, women older and younger. A few men who are all younger, some accompanying their girlfriends.

The woman who sold Joyce the book recognizes her.

"Good to see you back," she says. "Did you read the review in the *Globe*? Wow."

Joyce is bewildered, actually trembling a little. She finds it hard to speak.

The woman passes along the lineup, explaining that only books bought in this store can be autographed here and that a certain anthology in which one of Christie O'Dell's stories appears is not acceptable, she is sorry.

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***FICTION* (CONT'D)**

The woman in front of Joyce is both tall and broad, so she does not get a look at Christie O'Dell until this woman bends forward to place her book on the autographing table. Then she sees a young woman altogether different from the girl on the poster and the girl at the party. The black outfit is gone, also the black hat. Christie O'Dell wears a jacket of rosy-red silk brocade, with tiny gold beads sewn to its lapels. A delicate pink camisole is worn underneath. There is a fresh gold rinse in her hair, gold rings in her ears, and a gold chain fine as a hair around her neck. Her lips glisten like flower petals and her eyelids are shaded with umber.

Well—who wants to buy a book written by a grouch or a loser?

Joyce has not thought out what she will say. She expects it to come to her.

Now the saleswoman is speaking again.

"Have you opened your book to the page where you wish it to be signed?"

Joyce has to set her box down to do that. She can actually feel a flutter in her throat.

Christie O'Dell looks up at her, smiles at her—a smile of polished cordiality, professional disengagement.

"Your name?"

"Just Joyce will be fine."

Her time is passing so quickly.

"You were born in Rough River?"

"No," says Christie O'Dell with some slight displeasure, or at least some diminishing of cheer. "I did live there for a time.

Shall I put the date?"

Joyce retrieves her box. At Le Bon Chocolatier they did sell chocolate flowers, but not lilies. Only roses and tulips. So she had bought tulips, which were not actually unlike lilies. Both bulbs.

"I want to thank you for '*Kindertotenlieder*,' " she says so hastily that she almost swallows the long word. "It means a great deal to me. I brought you a present."

"Isn't that a wonderful story." The saleswoman takes the box. "I'll just hang on to this."

"It isn't a bomb," says Joyce with a laugh. "It's chocolate lilies. Actually tulips. They didn't have lilies so I got tulips, I thought they were the next best thing."

She notices that the saleswoman is not smiling now but taking a hard look at her. Christie O'Dell says, "Thank you."

There is not a scrap of recognition in the girl's face. She doesn't know Joyce from years ago in Rough River or two weeks ago at the party. You couldn't even be sure that she had recognized the title of her own story. You would think she had nothing to do with it. As if it was just something she wriggled out of and left on the grass.

Christie O'Dell sits there and writes her name as if that is all the writing she could be responsible for in this world.

"It's been a pleasure to chat with you," says the saleswoman, still looking at the box which the girl at Le Bon Chocolatier has fixed with a curly yellow ribbon.

Christie O'Dell has raised her eyes to greet the next person in line, and Joyce at last has the sense to move on, before she becomes an object of general amusement and her box, God knows, possibly an object of interest to the police.

Walking up Lonsdale Avenue, walking uphill, she feels flattened, but gradually regains her composure. This might even turn into a funny story that she would tell someday. She wouldn't be surprised.

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