

# THE NEW YORKER

FICTION

## THE BEAR CAME OVER THE MOUNTAIN

by Alice Munro

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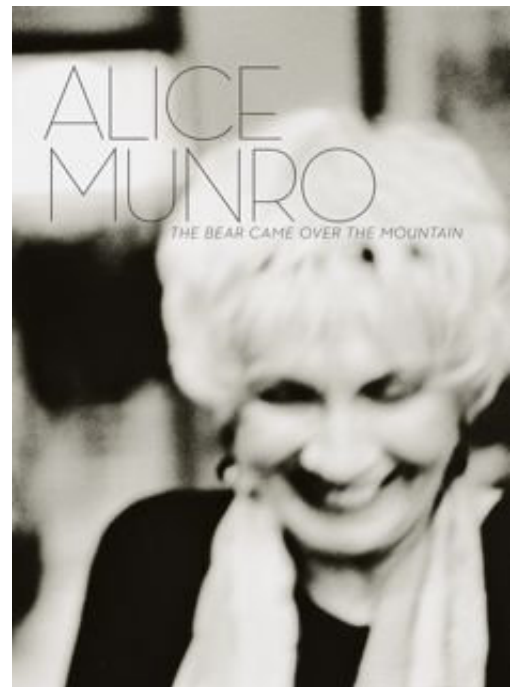
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*(This story originally appeared in the December 27, 1999, issue of the magazine.)*

Fiona lived in her parents' house, in the town where she and Grant went to university. It was a big, bay-windowed house that seemed to Grant both luxurious and disorderly, with rugs crooked on the floors and cup rings bitten into the table varnish. Her mother was Icelandic—a powerful woman with a froth of white hair and indignant far-left politics. The father was an important cardiologist, revered around the hospital but happily subservient at home, where he would listen to his wife's strange tirades with an absentminded smile. Fiona had her own little car and a pile of cashmere sweaters, but she wasn't in a sorority, and her mother's political activity was probably the reason. Not that she cared. Sororities were a joke to her, and so was politics—though she liked to play “The Four Insurgent Generals” on the phonograph, and sometimes also the “Internationale,” very loud, if there was a guest she thought she could make nervous. A curly-haired gloomy-looking foreigner was courting her—she said he was a Visigoth—



*Photograph by Bryan Adams.*

and so were two or three quite respectable and uneasy young interns. She made fun of them all and of Grant as well. She would drolly repeat some of his small-town phrases. He thought maybe she was joking when she proposed to him, on a cold bright day on the beach at Port Stanley. Sand was stinging their faces and the waves delivered crashing loads of gravel at their feet.

“Do you think it would be fun—” Fiona shouted. “Do you think it would be fun if we got married?”

He took her up on it, he shouted yes. He wanted never to be away from her. She had the spark of life.

Just before they left their house Fiona noticed a mark on the kitchen floor. It came from the cheap black house shoes she had been wearing earlier in the day.

“I thought they’d quit doing that,” she said in a tone of ordinary annoyance and perplexity, rubbing at the gray smear that looked as if it had been made by a greasy crayon.

She remarked that she’d never have to do this again, since she wasn’t taking those shoes with her.

“I guess I’ll be dressed up all the time,” she said. “Or semi-dressed up. It’ll be sort of like in a hotel.”

She rinsed out the rag she’d been using and hung it on the rack inside the door under the sink. Then she put on her golden-brown, fur-collared ski jacket, over a white turtleneck sweater and tailored fawn slacks. She was a tall, narrow-shouldered woman, seventy years old but still upright and trim, with long legs and long feet, delicate wrists and ankles, and tiny, almost comical-looking ears. Her hair that was as light as milkweed fluff had gone from pale blond to white somehow without Grant’s noticing exactly when, and she still wore it down to her shoulders, as her mother had done. (That was the thing that had alarmed Grant’s own mother, a small-town widow who worked as a doctor’s receptionist. The long white hair on Fiona’s mother, even more than the state of the house, had told her all she needed to know about attitudes and politics.) But otherwise Fiona, with her fine bones and small sapphire eyes, was nothing like her mother. She had a slightly crooked mouth, which she emphasized now with red lipstick—usually the last thing she did before she left the house.

She looked just like herself on this day—direct and vague as in fact she was, sweet and ironic.

Over a year ago, Grant had started noticing so many little yellow notes stuck up all over the house. That was not entirely new. Fiona had always written things down—the title of a book she’d heard mentioned on the radio or the jobs she wanted to make sure she got done that day. Even her morning schedule was written down. He found it mystifying and touching in its precision: “7 A.M. yoga. 7:30–7:45 teeth face hair. 7:45–8:15 walk. 8:15 Grant and breakfast.”

The new notes were different. Stuck onto the kitchen drawers—Cutlery, Dish-towels, Knives. Couldn’t she just open the drawers and see what was inside?

Worse things were coming. She went to town and phoned Grant from a booth to ask him how to drive home. She went for her usual walk across the field into the woods and came home by the fence line—a very long way round. She said that she'd counted on fences always taking you somewhere.

It was hard to figure out. She'd said that about fences as if it were a joke, and she had remembered the phone number without any trouble.

"I don't think it's anything to worry about," she said. "I expect I'm just losing my mind."

He asked if she had been taking sleeping pills.

"If I am I don't remember," she said. Then she said she was sorry to sound so flippant. "I'm sure I haven't been taking anything. Maybe I should be. Maybe vitamins."

Vitamins didn't help. She would stand in doorways trying to figure out where she was going. She forgot to turn on the burner under the vegetables or put water in the coffeemaker. She asked Grant when they'd moved to this house.

"Was it last year or the year before?"

"It was twelve years ago," he said.

"That's shocking."

"She's always been a bit like this," Grant said to the doctor. He tried without success to explain how Fiona's surprise and apologies now seemed somehow like routine courtesy, not quite concealing a private amusement. As if she'd stumbled on some unexpected adventure. Or begun playing a game that she hoped he would catch on to.

"Yes, well," the doctor said. "It might be selective at first. We don't know, do we? Till we see the pattern of the deterioration, we really can't say."

In a while it hardly mattered what label was put on it. Fiona, who no longer went shopping alone, disappeared from the supermarket while Grant had his back turned. A policeman picked her up as she was walking down the middle of the road, blocks away. He asked her name and she answered readily. Then he asked her the name of the Prime Minister.

"If you don't know that, young man, you really shouldn't be in such a responsible job."

He laughed. But then she made the mistake of asking if he'd seen Boris and Natasha. These were the now dead Russian wolfhounds she had adopted many years ago, as a favor to a friend, then devoted herself to for the rest of their lives. Her taking them over might have coincided with the discovery that she was not likely to have children. Something about her tubes being blocked, or twisted—Grant could not remember now. He had always avoided thinking about all that female apparatus. Or it might have been after her mother died. The dogs' long legs and silky hair, their narrow, gentle, intransigent faces made a fine match for her when she took them out for walks. And Grant himself, in those days, landing his first job at the university (his father-in-law's money welcome there in spite of the political taint), might have seemed to some people to have been

picked up on another of Fiona's eccentric whims, and groomed and tended and favored—though, fortunately, he didn't understand this until much later.

There was a rule that nobody could be admitted to Meadowlake during the month of December. The holiday season had so many emotional pitfalls. So they made the twenty-minute drive in January. Before they reached the highway the country road dipped through a swampy hollow now completely frozen over.

Fiona said, "Oh, remember."

Grant said, "I was thinking about that, too."

"Only it was in the moonlight," she said.

She was talking about the time that they had gone out skiing at night under the full moon and over the black-striped snow, in this place that you could get into only in the depths of winter. They had heard the branches cracking in the cold.

If she could remember that, so vividly and correctly, could there really be so much the matter with her? It was all he could do not to turn around and drive home.

There was another rule that the supervisor explained to him. New residents were not to be visited during the first thirty days. Most people needed that time to get settled in. Before the rule had been put in place, there had been pleas and tears and tantrums, even from those who had come in willingly. Around the third or fourth day they would start lamenting and begging to be taken home. And some relatives could be susceptible to that, so you would have people being carted home who would not get on there any better than they had before. Six months or sometimes only a few weeks later, the whole upsetting hassle would have to be gone through again.

"Whereas we find," the supervisor said, "we find that if they're left on their own the first month they usually end up happy as clams."

They had in fact gone over to Meadowlake a few times several years ago to visit Mr. Farquhar, the old bachelor farmer who had been their neighbor. He had lived by himself in a drafty brick house unaltered since the early years of the century, except for the addition of a refrigerator and a television set. Now, just as Mr. Farquhar's house was gone, replaced by a gimcrack sort of castle that was the weekend home of some people from Toronto, the old Meadow-lake was gone, though it had dated only from the fifties. The new building was a spacious, vaulted place, whose air was faintly, pleasantly pine-scented. Profuse and genuine greenery sprouted out of giant crocks in the hallways.

Nevertheless, it was the old Meadowlake that Grant found himself picturing Fiona in, during the long month he had to get through without seeing her. He phoned every day and hoped to get the nurse whose name was Kristy. She seemed a little amused at his constancy, but she would give him a fuller report than any other nurse he got stuck with.

Fiona had caught a cold the first week, she said, but that was not unusual for newcomers. "Like

when your kids start school,” Kristy said. “There’s a whole bunch of new germs they’re exposed to and for a while they just catch everything.”

Then the cold got better. She was off the antibiotics and she didn’t seem as confused as she had been when she came in. (This was the first Grant had heard about either the antibiotics or the confusion.) Her appetite was pretty good and she seemed to enjoy sitting in the sunroom. And she was making some friends, Kristy said.

If anybody phoned, he let the machine pick up. The people they saw socially, occasionally, were not close neighbors but people who lived around the country, who were retired, as they were, and who often went away without notice. They would imagine that he and Fiona were away on some such trip at present.

Grant skied for exercise. He skied around and around in the field behind the house as the sun went down and left the sky pink over a countryside that seemed to be bound by waves of blue-edged ice. Then he came back to the darkening house, turning the television news on while he made his supper. They had usually prepared supper together. One of them made the drinks and the other the fire, and they talked about his work (he was writing a study of legendary Norse wolves and particularly of the great wolf Fenrir, which swallows up Odin at the end of the world) and about whatever Fiona was reading and what they had been thinking during their close but separate day. This was their time of liveliest intimacy, though there was also, of course, the five or ten minutes of physical sweetness just after they got into bed—something that did not often end in sex but reassured them that sex was not over yet.

**I**n a dream he showed a letter to one of his colleagues. The letter was from the roommate of a girl he had not thought of for a while and was sanctimonious and hostile, threatening in a whining way. The girl herself was someone he had parted from decently and it seemed unlikely that she would want to make a fuss, let alone try to kill herself, which was what the letter was elaborately trying to tell him she had done.

He had thought of the colleague as a friend. He was one of those husbands who had been among the first to throw away their neckties and leave home to spend every night on a floor mattress with a bewitching young mistress—coming to their offices, their classes, bedraggled and smelling of dope and incense. But now he took a dim view.

“I wouldn’t laugh,” he said to Grant—who did not think he had been laughing. “And if I were you I’d try to prepare Fiona.”

So Grant went off to find Fiona in Meadowlake—the old Meadowlake—and got into a lecture hall instead. Everybody was waiting there for him to teach his class. And sitting in the last, highest row was a flock of cold-eyed young women all in black robes, all in mourning, who never took their bitter stares off him, and pointedly did not write down, or care about, anything he was saying.

Fiona was in the first row, untroubled. “Oh phooey,” she said. “Girls that age are always going

around talking about how they'll kill themselves."

He hauled himself out of the dream, took pills, and set about separating what was real from what was not.

There had been a letter, and the word "rat" had appeared in black paint on his office door, and Fiona, on being told that a girl had suffered from a bad crush on him, had said pretty much what she said in the dream. The colleague hadn't come into it, and nobody had committed suicide. Grant hadn't been disgraced. In fact, he had got off easy when you thought of what might have happened just a couple of years later. But word got around. Cold shoulders became conspicuous. They had few Christmas invitations and spent New Year's Eve alone. Grant got drunk, and without its being required of him—also, thank God, without making the error of a confession—he promised Fiona a new life.

Nowhere had there been any acknowledgment that the life of a philanderer (if that was what Grant had to call himself—he who had not had half as many conquests as the man who had reproached him in his dream) involved acts of generosity, and even sacrifice. Many times he had catered to a woman's pride, to her fragility, by offering more affection—or a rougher passion—than anything he really felt. All so that he could now find himself accused of wounding and exploiting and destroying self-esteem. And of deceiving Fiona—as, of course, he had. But would it have been better if he had done as others had done with their wives, and left her? He had never thought of such a thing. He had never stopped making love to Fiona. He had not stayed away from her for a single night. No making up elaborate stories in order to spend a weekend in San Francisco or in a tent on Manitoulin Island. He had gone easy on the dope and the drink, and he had continued to publish papers, serve on committees, make progress in his career. He had never had any intention of throwing over work and marriage and taking to the country to practice carpentry or keep bees.

But something like that had happened, after all. He had taken early retirement with a reduced pension. Fiona's father had died, after some be-wildered and stoical time alone in the big house, and Fiona had inherited both that property and the farmhouse where her father had grown up, in the country near Georgian Bay.

It was a new life. He and Fiona worked on the house. They got cross-country skis. They were not very sociable but they gradually made some friends. There were no more hectic flirtations. No bare female toes creeping up under a man's pants leg at a dinner party. No more loose wives.

Just in time, Grant was able to think, when the sense of injustice had worn down. The feminists and perhaps the sad silly girl herself and his cowardly so-called friends had pushed him out just in time. Out of a life that was in fact getting to be more trouble than it was worth. And that might eventually have cost him Fiona.

**O**n the morning of the day when he was to go back to Meadowlake, for the first visit, Grant woke early. He was full of a solemn tingling, as in the old days on the morning of his first

planned meeting with a new woman. The feeling was not precisely sexual. (Later, when the meetings had become routine, that was all it was.) There was an expectation of discovery, almost a spiritual expansion. Also timidity, humility, alarm.

There had been a thaw. Plenty of snow was left, but the dazzling hard landscape of earlier winter had crumbled. These pocked heaps under a gray sky looked like refuse in the fields. In the town near Meadowlake he found a florist's shop and bought a large bouquet. He had never presented flowers to Fiona before. Or to anyone else. He entered the building feeling like a hopeless lover or a guilty husband in a cartoon.

"Wow. Narcissus this early," Kristy said. "You must've spent a fortune." She went along the hall ahead of him and snapped on the light in a sort of pantry, where she searched for a vase. She was a heavy young woman who looked as if she had given up on her looks in every department except her hair. That was blond and voluminous. All the puffed-up luxury of a cocktail waitress's style, or a stripper's, on top of such a workaday face and body.

"There now," she said, and nodded him down the hall. "Name's right on the door."

So it was, on a nameplate decorated with bluebirds. He wondered whether to knock, and did, then opened the door and called her name.

She wasn't there. The closet door was closed, the bed smoothed. Nothing on the bedside table, except a box of Kleenex and a glass of water. Not a single photograph or picture of any kind, not a book or a magazine. Perhaps you had to keep those in a cupboard.

He went back to the nurses' station. Kristy said, "No?" with a surprise that he thought perfunctory. He hesitated, holding the flowers. She said, "O.K., O.K.—let's set the bouquet down here." Sighing, as if he were a backward child on his first day at school, she led him down the hall toward a large central space with skylights which seemed to be a general meeting area. Some people were sitting along the walls, in easy chairs, others at tables in the middle of the carpeted floor. None of them looked too bad. Old—some of them incapacitated enough to need wheelchairs—but decent. There had been some unnerving sights when he and Fiona visited Mr. Farquhar. Whiskers on old women's chins, somebody with a bulged-out eye like a rotted plum. Dribblers, head wagglers, mad chatterers. Now it looked as if there'd been some weeding out of the worst cases.

"See?" said Kristy in a softer voice. "You just go up and say hello and try not to startle her. Just go ahead."

He saw Fiona in profile, sitting close up to one of the card tables, but not playing. She looked a little puffy in the face, the flab on one cheek hiding the corner of her mouth, in a way it hadn't done before. She was watching the play of the man she sat closest to. He held his cards tilted so that she could see them. When Grant got near the table she looked up. They all looked up—all the players at the table looked up, with displeasure. Then they immediately looked down at their cards, as if to ward off any intrusion.

But Fiona smiled her lopsided, abashed, sly, and charming smile and pushed back her chair and came round to him, putting her fingers to her mouth.

“Bridge,” she whispered. “Deadly serious. They’re quite rabid about it.” She drew him toward the coffee table, chatting. “I can remember being like that for a while at college. My friends and I would cut class and sit in the common room and smoke and play like cutthroats. Can I get you anything? A cup of tea? I’m afraid the coffee isn’t up to much here.”

Grant never drank tea.

He could not throw his arms around her. Something about her voice and smile, familiar as they were, something about the way she seemed to be guarding the players from him—as well as him from their displeasure—made that impossible.

“I brought you some flowers,” he said. “I thought they’d do to brighten up your room. I went to your room but you weren’t there.”

“Well, no,” she said. “I’m here.” She glanced back at the table.

Grant said, “You’ve made a new friend.” He nodded toward the man she’d been sitting next to. At this moment that man looked up at Fiona and she turned, either because of what Grant had said or because she felt the look at her back.

“It’s just Aubrey,” she said. “The funny thing is I knew him years and years ago. He worked in the store. The hardware store where my grandpa used to shop. He and I were always kidding around and he couldn’t get up the nerve to ask me out. Till the very last weekend and he took me to a ballgame. But when it was over my grandpa showed up to drive me home. I was up visiting for the summer. Visiting my grandparents—they lived on a farm.”

“Fiona. I know where your grandparents lived. It’s where we live. Lived.”

“Really?” she said, not paying her full attention because the cardplayer was sending her his look, which was one not of supplication but of command. He was a man of about Grant’s age, or a little older. Thick coarse white hair fell over his forehead and his skin was leathery but pale, yellowish-white like an old wrinkled-up kid glove. His long face was dignified and melancholy and he had something of the beauty of a powerful, discouraged, elderly horse. But where Fiona was concerned he was not discouraged.

“I better go back,” Fiona said, a blush spotting her newly fattened face. “He thinks he can’t play without me sitting there. It’s silly, I hardly know the game anymore. If I leave you now, you can entertain yourself? It must all seem strange to you but you’ll be surprised how soon you get used to it. You’ll get to know who everybody is. Except that some of them are pretty well off in the clouds, you know—you can’t expect them all to get to know who you are.”

She slipped back into her chair and said something into Aubrey’s ear. She tapped her fingers across the back of his hand.

Grant went in search of Kristy and met her in the hall. She was pushing a cart with pitchers of



apple juice and grape juice.

“Well?” she said.

Grant said, “Does she even know who I am?” He could not decide. She could have been playing a joke. It would not be unlike her. She had given herself away by that little pretense at the end, talking to him as if she thought perhaps he was a new resident. If it was a pretense.

Kristy said, “You just caught her at sort of a bad moment. Involved in the game.”

“She’s not even playing,” he said.

“Well, but her friend’s playing. Aubrey.”

“So who is Aubrey?”

“That’s who he is. Aubrey. Her friend. Would you like a juice?” Grant shook his head. “Oh look,” said Kristy. “They get these attachments. That takes over for a while. Best buddy sort of thing. It’s kind of a phase.”

“You mean she really might not know who I am?”

“She might not. Not today. Then tomorrow—you never know, do you? You’ll see the way it is, once you’ve been coming here for a while. You’ll learn not to take it all so serious. Learn to take it day by day.”

Day by day. But things really didn’t change back and forth and he didn’t get used to the way they were. Fiona was the one who seemed to get used to him, but only as some persistent visitor who took a special interest in her. Or perhaps even as a nuisance who must be prevented, according to her old rules of courtesy, from realizing that he was one. She treated him with a distracted, social sort of kindness that was successful in keeping him from asking the most obvious, the most necessary question: did she remember him as her husband of nearly fifty years? He got the impression that she would be embarrassed by such a question—embarrassed not for herself but for him.

Kristy told him that Aubrey had been the local representative of a company that sold weed killer “and all that kind of stuff” to farmers. And then when he was not very old or even retired, she said, he had suffered some unusual kind of damage.

“His wife is the one takes care of him, usually at home. She just put him in here on temporary care so she could get a break. Her sister wanted her to go to Florida. See, she’s had a hard time, you wouldn’t ever have expected a man like him—they just went on a holiday somewhere and he got something, like some bug that gave him a terrible high fever? And it put him in a coma and left him like he is now.”

Most afternoons the pair could be found at the card table. Aubrey had large, thick-fingered hands. It was difficult for him to manage his cards. Fiona shuffled and dealt for him and sometimes moved quickly to straighten a card that seemed to be slipping from his grasp. Grant would watch from across the room her darting move and quick laughing apology. He could see Aubrey’s

husbandly frown as a wisp of her hair touched his cheek. Aubrey preferred to ignore her, as long as she stayed close.

But let her smile her greeting at Grant, let her push back her chair and get up to offer him tea—showing that she had accepted his right to be there— and Aubrey's face took on its look of sombre consternation. He would let the cards slide from his fingers and fall on the floor to spoil the game. And Fiona then had to get busy and put things right.

If Fiona and Aubrey weren't at the bridge table they might be walking along the halls, Aubrey hanging on to the railing with one hand and clutching Fiona's arm or shoulder with the other. The nurses thought that it was a marvel, the way she had got him out of his wheelchair. Though for longer trips—to the conservatory at one end of the building or the television room at the other—the wheelchair was called for.

In the conservatory, the pair would find themselves a seat among the most lush and thick and tropical-looking plants—a bower, if you liked. Grant stood nearby, on occasion, on the other side of the greenery, listening. Mixed in with the rustle of the leaves and the sound of plashing water was Fiona's soft talk and her laughter. Then some sort of chortle. Aubrey could talk, though his voice probably didn't sound as it used to. He seemed to say something now—a couple of thick syllables.

Take care. He's here. My love.

Grant made an effort, and cut his visits down to Wednesdays and Saturdays. Saturdays had a holiday bustle and tension. Families arrived in clusters. Mothers were usually in charge; they were the ones who kept the conversation afloat. Men seemed cowed, teen-agers affronted. No children or grandchildren appeared to visit Aubrey, and since they could not play cards—the tables being taken over for ice-cream parties—he and Fiona stayed clear of the Saturday parade. The conservatory was far too popular then for any of their intimate conversations. Those might be going on, of course, behind Fiona's closed door. Grant could not manage to knock when he found it closed, though he stood there for some time staring at the Disney-style nameplate with an intense, a truly malignant dislike.

Or they might be in Aubrey's room. But he did not know where that was. The more he explored this place the more corridors and seating spaces and ramps he discovered, and in his wanderings he was still apt to get lost. One Saturday he looked out a window and saw Fiona—it had to be her—wheeling Aubrey along one of the paved paths now cleared of snow and ice. She was wearing a silly wool hat and a jacket with swirls of blue and purple, the sort of thing he had seen on local women at the supermarket. It must be that they didn't bother to sort out the wardrobes of the women who were roughly the same size and counted on the women not to recognize their own clothes anyway. They had cut her hair, too. They had cut away her angelic halo.

On a Wednesday, when everything was more normal and card games were going on again and the women in the Crafts Room were making silk flowers or costumed dolls—and when Aubrey and

Fiona were again in evidence, so that it was possible for Grant to have one of his brief and friendly and maddening conversations with his wife—he said to her, “Why did they chop off your hair?”

Fiona put her hands up to her head, to check.

“Why—I never missed it,” she said.

When Grant had first started teaching Anglo-Saxon and Nordic literature he got the regular sort of students in his classes. But after a few years he noticed a change. Married women had started going back to school. Not with the idea of qualifying for a better job, or for any job, but simply to give themselves something more interesting to think about than their usual housework and hobbies. To enrich their lives. And perhaps it followed naturally that the men who taught them these things became part of the enrichment, that these men seemed to these women more mysterious and desirable than the men they still cooked for and slept with.

Those who signed up for Grant’s courses might have a Scandinavian background or they might have learned something about Norse mythology from Wagner or historical novels. There were also a few who thought he was teaching a Celtic language and for whom everything Celtic had a mystic allure. He spoke to such aspirants fairly roughly from his side of the desk.

“If you want to learn a pretty language go and learn Spanish. Then you can use it if you go to Mexico.”

Some took his warning and drifted away. Others seemed to be moved in a personal way by his demanding tone. They worked with a will and brought into his office, into his regulated satisfactory life, the great surprising bloom of their mature female compliance, their tremulous hope of approval.

He chose a woman named Jacqui Adams. She was the opposite of Fiona—short, cushiony, dark-eyed, effusive. A stranger to irony. The affair lasted for a year, until her husband was transferred. When they were saying goodbye in her car, she began to shake uncontrollably. It was as if she had hypothermia. She wrote to him a few times, but he found the tone of her letters overwrought and could not decide how to answer. He let the time for answering slip away while he became magically and unexpectedly involved with a girl who was young enough to be Jacqui’s daughter.

For another and more dizzying development had taken place while he was busy with Jacqui. Young girls with long hair and sandalled feet were coming into his office and all but declaring themselves ready for sex. The cautious approaches, the tender intimations of feeling required with Jacqui were out the window. A whirlwind hit him, as it did many others. Scandals burst wide open, with high and painful drama all round but a feeling that somehow it was better so. There were reprisals; there were firings. But those fired went off to teach at smaller, more tolerant colleges or Open Learning Centers, and many wives left behind got over the shock and took up the costumes, the sexual nonchalance of the girls who had tempted their men. Academic parties, which used to be so predictable, became a minefield. An epidemic had broken out, it was spreading like the Spanish

flu. Only this time people ran after contagion, and few between sixteen and sixty seemed willing to be left out.

That was exaggeration, of course. Fiona was quite willing. And Grant himself did not go overboard. What he felt was mainly a gigantic increase in well-being. A tendency to pudginess which he had had since he was twelve years old disappeared. He ran up steps two at a time. He appreciated as never before a pageant of torn clouds and winter sunsets seen from his office window, the charm of antique lamps glowing between his neighbors' living-room curtains, the cries of children in the park, at dusk, unwilling to leave the hill where they'd been tobogganing. Come summer, he learned the names of flowers. In his classroom, after being coached by his nearly voiceless mother-in-law (her affliction was cancer in the throat), he risked reciting the majestic and gory Icelandic ode, the Höfudlausn, composed to honor King Erik Bloodaxe by the skald whom that king had condemned to death.

Fiona had never learned Icelandic and she had never shown much respect for the stories that it preserved—the stories that Grant had taught and written about. She referred to their heroes as “old Njal” or “old Snorri.” But in the last few years she had developed an interest in the country itself and looked at travel guides. She read about William Morris's trip, and Auden's. She didn't really plan to travel there. She said there ought to be one place you thought about and knew about and maybe longed for but never did get to see.

Nonetheless, the next time he went to Meadowlake, Grant brought Fiona a book he'd found of nineteenth-century watercolors made by a lady traveller to Iceland. It was a Wednesday. He went looking for her at the card tables but didn't see her. A woman called out to him, “She's not here. She's sick.”

Her voice sounded self-important and excited—pleased with herself for having recognized him when he knew nothing about her. Perhaps also pleased with all she knew about Fiona, about Fiona's life here, thinking it was maybe more than he knew.

“He's not here, either,” she added.

Grant went to find Kristy, who didn't have much time for him. She was talking to a weepy woman who looked like a first-time visitor.

“Nothing really,” she said, when he asked what was the matter with Fiona. “She's just having a day in bed today, just a bit of an upset.”

Fiona was sitting straight up in the bed. He hadn't noticed, the few times that he had been in this room, that this was a hospital bed and could be cranked up in such a way. She was wearing one of her high-necked maidenly gowns, and her face had a pallor that was like flour paste.

Aubrey was beside her in his wheelchair, pushed as close to the bed as he could get. Instead of the nondescript open-necked shirts he usually wore, he was wearing a jacket and tie. His natty-looking tweed hat was resting on the bed. He looked as if he had been out on important business.

Whatever he'd been doing, he looked worn out by it. He, too, was gray in the face.

They both looked up at Grant with a stony grief-ridden apprehension that turned to relief, if not to welcome, when they saw who he was. Not who they thought he'd be. They were hanging on to each other's hands and they did not let go.

The hat on the bed. The jacket and tie.

It wasn't that Aubrey had been out. It wasn't a question of where he'd been or whom he'd been to see. It was where he was going.

Grant set the book down on the bed beside Fiona's free hand.

"It's about Iceland," he said. "I thought maybe you'd like to look at it."

"Why, thank you," said Fiona. She didn't look at the book.

"Iceland," he said.

She said, "Ice-land." The first syllable managed to hold a tinkle of interest, but the second fell flat. Anyway, it was necessary for her to turn her attention back to Aubrey, who was pulling his great thick hand out of hers. "What is it?" she said. "What is it, dear heart?" Grant had never heard her use this flowery expression before.

"Oh all right," she said. "Oh here." And she pulled a handful of tissues from the box beside her bed. Aubrey had begun to weep.

"Here. Here," she said, and he got hold of the Kleenex as well as he could and made a few awkward but lucky swipes at his face. While he was occupied, Fiona turned to Grant.

"Do you by any chance have any influence around here?" she said in a whisper. "I've seen you talking to them . . ."

Aubrey made a noise of protest or weariness or disgust. Then his upper body pitched forward as if he wanted to throw himself against her. She scrambled half out of bed and caught him and held on to him. It seemed improper for Grant to help her.

"Hush," Fiona was saying. "Oh, honey. Hush. We'll get to see each other. We'll have to. I'll go and see you. You'll come and see me."

Aubrey made the same sound again with his face in her chest and there was nothing Grant could decently do but get out of the room.

"I just wish his wife would hurry up and get here," Kristy said when he ran into her. "I wish she'd get him out of here and cut the agony short. We've got to start serving supper before long and how are we supposed to get her to swallow anything with him still hanging around?"

Grant said, "Should I stay?"

"What for? She's not sick, you know."

"To keep her company," he said.

Kristy shook her head.

"They have to get over these things on their own. They've got short memories, usually. That's

not always so bad.”

Grant left without going back to Fiona’s room. He noticed that the wind was actually warm and the crows were making an uproar. In the parking lot a woman wearing a tartan pants suit was getting a folded-up wheelchair out of the trunk of her car.

Fiona did not get over her sorrow. She didn’t eat at mealtimes, though she pretended to, hiding food in her napkin. She was being given a supplementary drink twice a day—someone stayed and watched while she swallowed it down. She got out of bed and dressed herself, but all she wanted to do then was sit in her room. She wouldn’t have had any exercise at all if Kristy, or Grant during visiting hours, hadn’t walked her up and down in the corridors or taken her outside. Weeping had left her eyes raw-edged and dim. Her cardigan—if it was hers—would be buttoned crookedly. She had not got to the stage of leaving her hair unbrushed or her nails uncleaned, but that might come soon. Kristy said that her muscles were deteriorating, and that if she didn’t improve they would put her on a walker.

“But, you know, once they get a walker they start to depend on it and they never walk much anymore, just get wherever it is they have to go,” she said to Grant. “You’ll have to work at her harder. Try to encourage her.”

But Grant had no luck at that. Fiona seemed to have taken a dislike to him, though she tried to cover it up. Perhaps she was reminded, every time she saw him, of her last minutes with Aubrey, when she had asked him for help and he hadn’t helped her.

He didn’t see much point in mentioning their marriage now.

The supervisor called him in to her office. She said that Fiona’s weight was going down even with the supplement.

“The thing is, I’m sure you know, we don’t do any prolonged bed care on the first floor. We do it temporarily if someone isn’t feeling well, but if they get too weak to move around and be responsible we have to consider upstairs.”

He said he didn’t think that Fiona had been in bed that often.

“No. But if she can’t keep up her strength she will be. Right now she’s borderline.”

Grant said that he had thought the second floor was for people whose minds were disturbed.

“That, too,” she said.

The street Grant found himself driving down was called Blackhawks Lane. The houses all looked to have been built around the same time, perhaps thirty or forty years ago. The street was wide and curving and there were no sidewalks. Friends of Grant and Fiona’s had moved to places something like this when they began to have their children, and young families still lived here. There were basketball hoops over garage doors and tricycles in the driveways. Some of the houses had gone downhill. The yards were marked by tire tracks, the windows plastered with tinfoil or hung with faded flags. But a few seemed to have been kept up as well as possible by the people who had

with faded flags. But a few seemed to have been kept up as well as possible by the people who had moved into them when they were new—people who hadn't had the money or perhaps hadn't felt the need to move on to some place better.

The house that was listed in the phone book as belonging to Aubrey and his wife was one of these. The front walk was paved with flagstones and bordered by hyacinths that stood as stiff as china flowers, alternately pink and blue.

He hadn't remembered anything about Aubrey's wife except the tartan suit he had seen her wearing in the parking lot. The tails of the jacket had flared open as she bent into the trunk of the car. He had got the impression of a trim waist and wide buttocks.

She was not wearing the tartan suit today. Brown belted slacks and a pink sweater. He was right about the waist—the tight belt showed she made a point of it. It might have been better if she didn't, since she bulged out considerably above and below.

She could be ten or twelve years younger than her husband. Her hair was short, curly, artificially reddened. She had blue eyes—a lighter blue than Fiona's—a flat robin's-egg or turquoise blue, slanted by a slight puffiness. And a good many wrinkles, made more noticeable by a walnut-stain makeup. Or perhaps that was her Florida tan.

He said that he didn't quite know how to introduce himself.

"I used to see your husband at Meadowlake. I'm a regular visitor there myself."

"Yes," said Aubrey's wife, with an aggressive movement of her chin.

"How is your husband doing?"

The "doing" was added on at the last moment.

"He's O.K.," she said.

"My wife and he struck up quite a close friendship."

"I heard about that."

"I wanted to talk to you about something if you had a minute."

"My husband did not try to start anything with your wife if that's what you're getting at," she said. "He did not molest her. He isn't capable of it and he wouldn't anyway. From what I heard it was the other way round."

Grant said, "No. That isn't it at all. I didn't come here with any complaints about anything."

"Oh," she said. "Well, I'm sorry. I thought you did. You better come in then. It's blowing cold in through the door. It's not as warm out today as it looks."

So it was something of a victory for him even to get inside.

She took him past the living room, saying, "We'll have to sit in the kitchen, where I can hear Aubrey."

Grant caught sight of two layers of front-window curtains, both blue, one sheer and one silky, a matching blue sofa and a daunting pale carpet, various bright mirrors and ornaments. Fiona had a word for those sort of swooping curtains—she said it like a joke, though the women she'd picked it

up from used it seriously. Any room that Fiona fixed up was bare and bright. She would have deplored the crowding of all this fancy stuff into such a small space. From a room off the kitchen—a sort of sun-room, though the blinds were drawn against the afternoon brightness—he could hear the sounds of television.

The answer to Fiona's prayers sat a few feet away, watching what sounded like a ballgame. His wife looked in at him.

She said, "You O.K.?" and partly closed the door.

"You might as well have a cup of coffee," she said to Grant. "My son got him on the sports channel a year ago Christmas. I don't know what we'd do without it."

On the kitchen counters there were all sorts of contrivances and appliances—coffeemaker, food processor, knife sharpener, and some things Grant didn't know the names or uses of. All looked new and expensive, as if they had just been taken out of their wrappings, or were polished daily.

He thought it might be a good idea to admire things. He admired the coffeemaker she was using and said that he and Fiona had always meant to get one. This was absolutely untrue—Fiona had been devoted to a European contraption that made only two cups at a time.

"They gave us that," she said. "Our son and his wife. They live in Kamloops. B.C. They send us more stuff than we can handle. It wouldn't hurt if they would spend the money to come and see us instead."

Grant said philosophically, "I suppose they're busy with their own lives."

"They weren't too busy to go to Hawaii last winter. You could understand it if we had somebody else in the family, closer at hand. But he's the only one."

She poured the coffee into two brown-and-green ceramic mugs that she took from the amputated branches of a ceramic tree trunk that sat on the table.

"People do get lonely," Grant said. He thought he saw his chance now. "If they're deprived of seeing somebody they care about, they do feel sad. Fiona, for instance. My wife."

"I thought you said you went and visited her."

"I do," he said. "That's not it."

Then he took the plunge, going on to make the request he'd come to make. Could she consider taking Aubrey back to Meadowlake, maybe just one day a week, for a visit? It was only a drive of a few miles. Or if she'd like to take the time off—Grant hadn't thought of this before and was rather dismayed to hear himself suggest it—then he himself could take Aubrey out there, he wouldn't mind at all. He was sure he could manage it. While he talked she moved her closed lips and her hidden tongue as if she were trying to identify some dubious flavor. She brought milk for his coffee and a plate of ginger cookies.

"Homemade," she said as she set the plate down. There was challenge rather than hospitality in her tone. She said nothing more until she had sat down, poured milk into her coffee, and stirred it.



Then she said no.

“No. I can’t do that. And the reason is, I’m not going to upset him.”

“Would it upset him?” Grant said earnestly.

“Yes, it would. It would. That’s no way to do. Bringing him home and taking him back. That would just confuse him.”

“But wouldn’t he understand that it was just a visit? Wouldn’t he get into the pattern of it?”

“He understands everything all right.”

She said this as if he had offered an insult to Aubrey. “But it’s still an interruption. And then I’ve got to get him all ready and get him into the car, and he’s a big man, he’s not so easy to manage as you might think. I’ve got to maneuver him into the car and pack his chair and all that and what for? If I go to all that trouble I’d prefer to take him someplace that was more fun.”

“But even if I agreed to do it?” Grant said, keeping his tone hopeful and reasonable. “It’s true, you shouldn’t have the trouble.”

“You couldn’t,” she said flatly. “You don’t know him. You couldn’t handle him. He wouldn’t stand for you doing for him. All that bother and what would he get out of it?”

Grant didn’t think he should mention Fiona again.

“It’d make more sense to take him to the mall,” she said. “Or now the lake boats are starting to run again, he might get a charge out of going and watching that.”

She got up and fetched her cigarettes and lighter from the window above the sink.

“You smoke?” she said.

He said no, thanks, though he didn’t know if a cigarette was being offered.

“Did you never? Or did you quit?”

“Quit,” he said.

“How long ago was that?”

He thought about it.

“Thirty years. No—more.”

He had decided to quit around the time he started up with Jacqui. But he couldn’t remember whether he quit first, and thought a big reward was coming to him for quitting, or thought that the time had come to quit, now that he had such a powerful diversion.

“I’ve quit quitting,” she said, lighting up. “Just made a resolution to quit quitting, that’s all.”

Maybe that was the reason for the wrinkles. Somebody—a woman—had told him that women who smoked developed a special set of fine facial wrinkles. But it could have been from the sun, or just the nature of her skin—her neck was noticeably wrinkled as well. Wrinkled neck, youthfully full and uptilted breasts. Women of her age usually had these contradictions. The bad and good points, the genetic luck or lack of it, all mixed up together. Very few kept their beauty whole, though shadowy, as Fiona had done. And perhaps that wasn’t even true. Perhaps he only thought that

because he'd known Fiona when she was young. When Aubrey looked at his wife did he see a high-school girl full of scorn and sass, with a tilt to her blue eyes, pursing her fruity lips around a forbidden cigarette?

"So your wife's depressed?" Aubrey's wife said. "What's your wife's name? I forget."

"It's Fiona."

"Fiona. And what's yours? I don't think I was ever told that."

Grant said, "It's Grant."

She stuck her hand out unexpectedly across the table.

"Hello, Grant. I'm Marian."

"So now we know each other's names," she said, "there's no point in not telling you straight out what I think. I don't know if he's still so stuck on seeing your—on seeing Fiona. Or not. I don't ask him and he's not telling me. Maybe just a passing fancy. But I don't feel like taking him back there in case it turns out to be more than that. I can't afford to risk it. I don't want him upset and carrying on. I've got my hands full with him as it is. I don't have any help. It's just me here. I'm it."

"Did you ever consider—I'm sure it's very hard for you—" Grant said. "Did you ever consider his going in there for good?"

He had lowered his voice almost to a whisper but she did not seem to feel a need to lower hers.

"No," she said. "I'm keeping him right here."

Grant said, "Well. That's very good and noble of you." He hoped the word "noble" had not sounded sarcastic. He had not meant it to be.

"You think so?" she said. "Noble is not what I'm thinking about."

"Still. It's not easy."

"No, it isn't. But the way I am, I don't have much choice. I don't have the money to put him in there unless I sell the house. The house is what we own outright. Otherwise I don't have anything in the way of resources. Next year I'll have his pension and my pension, but even so I couldn't afford to keep him there and hang on to the house. And it means a lot to me, my house does."

"It's very nice," said Grant.

"Well, it's all right. I put a lot into it. Fixing it up and keeping it up. I don't want to lose it."

"No. I see your point."

"The company left us high and dry," she said. "I don't know all the ins and outs of it but basically he got shoved out. It ended up with them saying he owed them money and when I tried to find out what was what he just went on saying it's none of my business. What I think is he did something pretty stupid. But I'm not supposed to ask so I shut up. You've been married. You are married. You know how it is. And in the middle of me finding out about this we're supposed to go on this trip and can't get out of it. And on the trip he takes sick from this virus you never heard of and goes into a coma. So that pretty well gets him off the hook."

Grant said, "Bad luck."

"I don't mean he got sick on purpose. It just happened. He's not mad at me anymore and I'm not mad at him. It's just life. You can't beat life."

She flicked her tongue in a cat's businesslike way across her top lip, getting the cookie crumbs. "I sound like I'm quite the philosopher, don't I? They told me out there you used to be a university professor."

"Quite a while ago," Grant said.

"I bet I know what you're thinking," she said. "You're thinking there's a mercenary type of a person."

"I'm not making judgments of that sort. It's your life."

"You bet it is."

He thought they should end on a more neutral note. So he asked her if her husband had worked in a hardware store in the summers, when he was going to school.

"I never heard about it," she said. "I wasn't raised here."

Grant realized he'd failed with Aubrey's wife, Marian. He had thought that what he'd have to contend with would be a woman's natural sexual jealousy—or her resentment, the stubborn remains of sexual jealousy. He had not had any idea of the way she might be looking at things. And yet in some depressing way the conversation had not been unfamiliar to him. That was because it reminded him of conversations he'd had with people in his own family. His relatives, probably even his mother, had thought the way Marian thought. Money first. They had believed that when other people did not think that way it was because they had lost touch with reality. That was how Marian would see him, certainly. A silly person, full of boring knowledge and protected by some fluke from the truth about life. A person who didn't have to worry about holding on to his house and could go around dreaming up the fine generous schemes that he believed would make another person happy. What a jerk, she would be thinking now.

Being up against a person like that made him feel hopeless, exasperated, finally almost desolate. Why? Because he couldn't be sure of holding on to himself, against people like that? Because he was afraid that in the end they were right? Yet he might have married her. Or some girl like that. If he'd stayed back where he belonged. She'd have been appetizing enough. Probably a flirt. The fussy way she had of shifting her buttocks on the kitchen chair, her pursed mouth, a slightly contrived air of menace—that was what was left of the more or less innocent vulgarity of a small-town flirt.

She must have had some hopes when she picked Aubrey. His good looks, his salesman's job, his white-collar expectations. She must have believed that she would end up better off than she was now. And so it often happened with those practical people. In spite of their calculations, their survival instincts, they might not get as far as they had quite reasonably expected. No doubt it seemed unfair

In the kitchen the first thing he saw was the light blinking on his answering machine. He thought the same thing he always thought now. Fiona. He pressed the button before he took his coat off.

"Hello, Grant. I hope I got the right person. I just thought of something. There is a dance here in town at the Legion supposed to be for singles on Saturday night and I am on the lunch committee, which means I can bring a free guest. So I wondered whether you would happen to be interested in that? Call me back when you get a chance."

A woman's voice gave a local number. Then there was a beep and the same voice started talking again.

"I just realized I'd forgotten to say who it was. Well, you probably recognized the voice. It's Marian. I'm still not so used to these machines. And I wanted to say I realize you're not a single and I don't mean it that way. I'm not either, but it doesn't hurt to get out once in a while. If you are interested you can call me and if you are not you don't need to bother. I just thought you might like the chance to get out. It's Marian speaking. I guess I already said that. O.K. then. Goodbye."

Her voice on the machine was different from the voice he'd heard a short time ago in her house. Just a little different in the first message, more so in the second. A tremor of nerves there, an affected nonchalance, a hurry to get through and a reluctance to let go.

Something had happened to her. But when had it happened? If it had been immediate, she had concealed it very successfully all the time he was with her. More likely it came on her gradually, maybe after he'd gone away. Not necessarily as a blow of attraction. Just the realization that he was a possibility, a man on his own. More or less on his own. A possibility that she might as well try to follow up.

But she'd had the jitters when she made the first move. She had put herself at risk. How much of herself he could not yet tell. Generally a woman's vulnerability increased as time went on, as things progressed. All you could tell at the start was that if there was an edge of it then, there'd be more later. It gave him a satisfaction—why deny it?—to have brought that out in her. To have roused something like a shimmer, a blurring, on the surface of her personality. To have heard in her testy broad vowels this faint plea.

He set out the eggs and mushrooms to make himself an omelette. Then he thought he might as well pour a drink.

Anything was possible. Was that true—was anything possible? For instance, if he wanted to, would he be able to break her down, get her to the point where she might listen to him about taking Aubrey back to Fiona? And not just for visits but for the rest of Aubrey's life. And what would become of him and Marian after he'd delivered Aubrey to Fiona?

Marian would be sitting in her house now, waiting for him to call. Or probably not sitting. Doing things to keep herself busy. She might have fed Aubrey while Grant was buying the mushrooms and

things to keep herself busy. She might have fed Audrey while Grant was buying the mushrooms and driving home. She might now be preparing him for bed. But all the time she would be conscious of the phone, of the silence of the phone. Maybe she would have calculated how long it would take Grant to drive home. His address in the phone book would have given her a rough idea of where he lived. She would calculate how long, then add to that the time it might take him to shop for supper (figuring that a man alone would shop every day). Then a certain amount of time for him to get around to listening to his messages. And as the silence persisted she'd think of other things. Other errands he might have had to do before he got home. Or perhaps a dinner out, a meeting that meant he would not get home at suppertime at all.

What conceit on his part. She was above all things a sensible woman. She would go to bed at her regular time thinking that he didn't look as if he'd be a decent dancer anyway. Too stiff, too professorial.

He stayed near the phone, looking at magazines, but he didn't pick it up when it rang again.

"Grant. This is Marian. I was down in the basement putting the wash in the dryer and I heard the phone and when I got upstairs whoever it was had hung up. So I just thought I ought to say I was here. If it was you and if you are even home. Because I don't have a machine, obviously, so you couldn't leave a message. So I just wanted. To let you know." The time was now twenty-five after ten.

"Bye."

He would say that he'd just got home. There was no point in bringing to her mind the picture of his sitting here weighing the pros and cons.

Drapes. That would be her word for the blue curtains—drapes. And why not? He thought of the ginger cookies so perfectly round that she had to announce they were homemade, the ceramic coffee mugs on their ceramic tree, a plastic runner, he was sure, protecting the hall carpet. A high-gloss exactness and practicality that his mother had never achieved but would have admired—was that why he could feel this twinge of bizarre and unreliable affection? Or was it because he'd had two more drinks after the first?

The walnut-stain tan—he believed now that it was a tan—of her face and neck would most likely continue into her cleavage, which would be deep, crêpey-skinned, odorous and hot. He had that to think of as he dialled the number that he had already written down. That and the practical sensuality of her cat's tongue. Her gemstone eyes.

Fiona was in her room but not in bed. She was sitting by the open window, wearing a seasonable but oddly short and bright dress. Through the window came a heady warm blast of lilacs in bloom and the spring manure spread over the fields.

She had a book open in her lap.

She said, "Look at this beautiful book I found. It's about Iceland. You wouldn't think they'd leave valuable books lying around in the rooms. But I think they've got the clothes mixed up—I never wear yellow."

wear yellow.

“Fiona,” he said.

“Are we all checked out now?” she said. He thought the brightness of her voice was wavering a little. “You’ve been gone a long time.”

“Fiona, I’ve brought a surprise for you. Do you remember Aubrey?”

She stared at Grant for a moment, as if waves of wind had come beating into her face. Into her face, into her head, pulling everything to rags. All rags and loose threads.

“Names elude me,” she said harshly.

Then the look passed away as she retrieved, with an effort, some bantering grace. She set the book down carefully and stood up and lifted her arms to put them around him. Her skin or her breath gave off a faint new smell, a smell that seemed to Grant like green stems in rank water.

“I’m happy to see you,” she said, both sweetly and formally. She pinched his earlobes, hard.

“You could have just driven away,” she said. “Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken.”

He kept his face against her white hair, her pink scalp, her sweetly shaped skull.

He said, “Not a chance.” ♦

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