FROM DON'T LET'S GO
TO THE DOGS TONIGHT:
AN AFRICAN CHILDHOOD
GETTING THERE: ZAMBIA, 1987
Alexandra Fuller

In this chapter from the bestselling memoir Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight, the end of apartheid precipitates an identity crisis for Alexandra Fuller, a white girl raised in southern Africa. Both countries referenced here, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, were named for Cecil Rhodes, whose plunder of natural resources and use of force to seize the land (through his British South Africa Company) helped the British colonize the region. Southern Rhodesia became a settlement colony for Scots, white South Africans, and Afrikaners. This white minority ruled until 1980, when after a long armed struggle known as the Second Chimurenga ("rebellion" in Shona), the nation won independence as the Republic of Zimbabwe. Northern Rhodesia, just across the Zambezi River, had become the independent Republic of Zambia in 1964. As the family drives from their farm in Zambia to Fuller's newly integrated boarding school in Zimbabwe, Bobo (Fuller's childhood nickname) witnesses the racism—and humor—of her alcoholic parents, especially her manic-depressive mother.

Nonfiction writer Alexandra Fuller was born in England
in 1969 and moved with her family to Rhodesia when she was two years old. In the 1980s, civil conflict in the area led them to relocate first to Malawi, then to Zambia. Fuller graduated from Acadia University in Nova Scotia, Canada, and moved to Wyoming in 1994. After writing a number of unpublished novels, she achieved international success with Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight (2001), a New York Times Notable Book, finalist for the Guardian First Award, and BookSense Best Nonfiction Book of the Year, followed by Scribbling the Cat (2004). Fuller, her husband, and their children divide their time between Wyoming, Idaho, Zambia, and Tanzania.

One of the best recent memoirs by Anglo-Africans, Don’t Let’s Go has a lively, humorous take on a childhood with dysfunctional parents struggling on a succession of poor bush farms against a backdrop of civil strife. Fuller’s writing style is deceptively simple. As she explains, “I wanted to show [that] if you’re a kid in war you have no idea what’s going on. You try to make sense of it... but you don’t have the vocabulary.” Her desire to honor the native voices that influenced her (“I want sometimes to sound as if English is my second language”) creates an elliptical childhood language of hyperbolic adjectives and emotive sound. “I was really trying to capture the staccato of the sound when you’re there, this constant rat-a-tat-tat of the birds and the voices of the Africans.” You may wish to compare Fuller’s perspective to Charles Mungoshi’s, whose Shadows on the Wall obliquely references black life under white minority rule in Rhodesia, and to the excerpt from Aminatta Forna’s The Devil That Danced on the Water and Faith Adiele’s “Black Men,” both memoirs written by women struggling with their African/Anglo identities in exile.

To begin with, before Independence, I am at school with white children only. “A” schools, they are called: superior schools with the best teachers and facilities. The black children go to “C” schools. In-between children who are neither black nor white (Indian or a mixture of races) go to “B” schools.

The Indians and coloureds (who are neither completely this nor completely that) and blacks are allowed into my school the year I turn eleven, when the war is over. The blacks laugh at me when they see me stripped naked after swimming or tennis, when my shoulders and arms are angry sunburnt red.

“Argh! I smell roasting pork!” they shriek.

“Who fried the bacon?”

“Burning piggy!”

My God, I am the wrong color. The way I am burned by the sun, scorched by flinging sand, pricked by heat. The way my skin erupts in miniature volcanoes of protest in the presence of tsetse flies, mosquitoes, ticks. The way I stand out against the khaki bush like a large marshmallow to a gook with a gun. White. African. White-African.

“But what are you?” I am asked over and over again.

“Where are you from originally?”

I began then, embarking from a hot, dry boat.

Blinking bewildered from the sausage-gut of a train.

Arriving in Rhodesia, Africa. From Derbyshire, England. I was two years old, startled and speaking toddler English. Lungs shocked by thick, hot, humid air. Senses crushed under the weight of so many stimuli.

I say, “I’m African.” But not black.

And I say, “I was born in England,” by mistake.
But, “I have lived in Rhodesia (which is now Zimbabwe) and in Malawi (which used to be Nyasaland) and in Zambia (which used to be Northern Rhodesia).”

And I add, “Now I live in America,” through marriage.

And (full disclosure), “But my parents were born of Scottish and English parents.”

What does that make me?

Mumi doesn’t know who she is, either.
She stayed up all night once listening to Scottish music and crying.
“This music”—her nose twitches—“is so beautiful. It makes me homesick.”

Mumi has lived in Africa all but three years of her life.

“But this is your home.”

“But my heart”—Mum attempts to thump her chest—“is Scottish.”


Mum nods, her head swinging, like a chicken with a broken neck. “You’re right,” she says. “But I love Scotland.”

“What,” I ask, challenging, “do you love about Scotland?”

“Oh the... the...” Mum frowns at me, checks to see if I’m tricking her. “The music,” she says at last, and starts to weep again.

Mum hates Scotland. She hates drunk-driving laws and the cold.
The cold makes her cry, and then she comes down with malaria.

Her eyes are half-mast. That’s what my sister and I call it when Mum is drunk and her eyelids droop. Half-mast eyes. Like the flag at the post office whenever someone important dies, which in Zambia, with one thing and another is every other week. Mum stares out at the home paddocks where the cattle are coming in for their evening water to the trough near the stables. The sun is full and heavy over the hills that describe the Zambia-Zaire border. “Have a drink with me, Boho,” she offers. She tries to pat the chair next to hers, misses, and feebly slaps the air, her arm like a broken wing.

I shake my head. Ordinarily I don’t mind getting softly drunk next to the slowly collapsing heap that is Mum, but I have to go back to boarding school the next day, nine hours by pickup across the border to Zimbabwe. “I need to pack, Mum.”

That afternoon Mum had spent hours wrapping thirty feet of electric wire around the trees in the garden so that she could pick up the World Service of the BBC. The signature tune crackled over the syrup-yellow four o’clock light just as the sun was starting to hang above the top of the mast trees. “Lillibulero,” Mum said. “That’s Irish.”

“You’re not Irish,” I pointed out.

She said, “Never said I was.” And then, follow-on thought.

“Where’s the whisky?”

We must have heard “Lillibulero” thousand of times. Maybe millions. Before and after every news broadcast. At the top of every hour. Spluttering with static over the garden at home; incongruous from the branches of acacia trees in campsites we have set up in the bush across the countryside; singing from the bathroom in the evening.

But you never know what will set Mum off. Maybe it was “Lillibulero” coinciding with the end of the afternoon, which is a rich, sweet, cooling, melancholy time of day.

“You’re Dad was English originally,” I tell her, not liking the way this is going.

She said, “It doesn’t count. Scottish blood cancels English blood.”

By the time she has drunk a quarter of a bottle of whisky, we have lost reception from Bush House in London and the radio hisses to itself from under its fringe of bougainvillea. Mum has pulled out her old Scottish records. There are three of them. Three records of men in kilts playing bagpipes. The photographs show them
marching blindly (how do they see under those dead-bear hats?) down misty Scottish cobbled streets, their faces completely blocked by their massive instruments. Mum turns the music up as loud as it will go, takes the whistle out to the veranda, and sits cross-legged on a picnic chair, humming and staring out at the night-blanketed farm.

This cross-leggedness is a hangover from the brief period in Mum's life when she took up yoga from a book. Which was better than the brief period in her life in which she explored the possibility of converting to the Jehovah's Witnesses. And better than the time she bought a book on belly-dancing at a rummage sale and tried out her techniques on every bar north of the Limpopo River and south of the equator.

The horses shuffle restlessly in their stables. The night apes scream from the tops of the shimmering-leaved msasa trees. The dogs set up in a chorus of barking and will not stop until we put them inside, all except Mum's faithful spaniel, who will not leave her side even when she's throwing what Dad calls a wobbly. Which is what this is: a wobbly. The radio hisses and occasionally, drunkenly, bursts into snatchets of song (Spanish or Portuguese) or chatters in German, in Afrikaans, or in an exaggerated American accent. "This is the Voice of America." And then it swoops. "Beee-oooocce!"

Dad and I go to bed with half the dogs. The other half of the pack set themselves up on the chairs in the sitting room. Dad's half deaf, from when he blew his eardrums out in the war eight years ago in what was then Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. I put a pillow over my head. I can hear Mum's voice, high and inexact, trembling on the high notes: "Speed, bonny boat, / Like a bird on the wing, / Over the sea to Skye," and then she runs out of words and starts to sing, loudly to make up for the loss of words: "La, la laaaall!" In the other room, at the end of the hall, Dad is snoring.

In the morning, Mum is still on the veranda. The records are silent. The housegirl sweeps the floor around her. The radio is in the tree and has sobered up, with a film of shining dew over its silver face, and is telling us the news in clipped English tones. "This is London," it says with a straight face, as the milking cows are brought in to the dairy and the night apes curl up overhead to sleep and the Cape turtdoves begin to call. "Work-hard-er, work-hard-er." An all-day call, which I nevertheless associate with morning and which makes me long for a cup of tea. The bells of Big Ben sound from distant, steely-gray-dawn London, where commuters will soon be spilling sensibly out of Underground stations or red double-decker buses. It is five o'clock Greenwich Mean Time.

When I was younger I used to believe it was called "Mean" time because it was English time. I used to believe that African time was "Kind" time.

The dogs are lying in exhausted heaps on the furniture in the sitting room, with their paws over their ears. They look up at Dad and me as we come through for our early morning cup of tea, which we usually take on the veranda but which the cook has set in the sitting room on account of the fact that Mum is lying with her forehead on the picnic table where he would usually put the tray. Still cross-legged. Still singing. I bet hardly anyone in yoga can do that.

We wedged Mum into the back of the pickup along with my suitcase and satchel and books and the spare tires, next to the half-built generator we are taking into Lusaka to be fixed. She is humming "Flower of Scotland." And then Dad and I climb into the front of the pickup and set off down the farm road. I am going to start crying. There go the horses, two white faces and one black peering over the stable doors, waiting for Banda to bring them their breakfasts. And here come the dogs running, ear-flapping hopeful after the
pickup, willing us to stop and let them ride along in the back. And there goes the old cook, hunched and massive, his bony shoulders poking out of the top of his threadworn khaki uniform. He is almost seventy and has just sired another baby; he looks exhausted. He’s sitting in the kitchen doorway with a joint the size of a sausage hanging from his bottom lip; a fragrant pillow of blue marijuana smoke hangs above his head. Marijuana grows well behind the stables, where it thrives on horseshit, cow dung, perished fertilizer intended for Dad’s soybean crop. Adamson raises one old hand in salute. The gardener stands to attention on his bush-broom, with which he is sweeping leaves from the dusty driveway. “Miss Bobo,” he mouths, and raises his fist in a black power salute.

Mum leans over the rim of the pickup briefly, precariously, to blow the dogs a kiss. She waves at the staff for a moment, royally, and then collapses back into the folds of the tarpaulin.

Dad offers me a cigarette. “Better have one while you still can,” he says.

“Thanks.” We smoke together for a while.

Dad says, “It’s tough when you can’t smoke.”

I nod.

“Don’t smoke at school.”

“I won’t.”

“They won’t like it.”

“They don’t.”

It’s past seven in the morning by the time we leave the farm. I have to be at school by five-thirty that evening to make it in time for sign-in and supper. That leaves us half an hour for business and lunch in Lusaka and an hour to get through the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia.

I say, “Better be polite to the blokes at the border today. We don’t have time for silly buggers.”

“Bloody baboons,” mutters Dad.

When we get to Lusaka, Dad and I drop off the generator at the Indian’s workshop on Ben Bella Road.

“Hello, Mr. Fuller,” says the Indian, head bobbling like a bobbin of thread on a sewing machine, “Come in, come in, for tea? Coffee? I have something for you to look at.”

“Not today,” says Dad, waving the man away. “Big hurry with my daughter, you see.” He talks between clenched teeth.

He gets in the pickup. Lights a cigarette. “Bloody Indians,” he mutters as he reverses out of the yard, “always up to something.”

We buy boiled eggs and slabs of white cornbread from a kiosk on the side of Cha Cha Cha Road, near the roundabout that leads to Kafue, the Gymkhana Club, or home, depending on where you get off. We wave some food at Mum, but she isn’t moving. She has some oil on her face from the generator, which has been leaking thick, black engine blood. Otherwise she is very white, bordering on pale green.

We stop before Chirundu, the small hot nothing town on the Zambezi River which marks the border crossing into Zimbabwe, to make sure she is still alive. Dad says, “We’ll get into trouble if we try and take a dead body over the border.”

Mum has undone the tarpaulin which was meant to keep the dust out of my school clothes, and has wrapped herself up in it. She is asleep with a small smile on her lips.

Dad puts his forefinger under her nose to feel for breath. “Still alive,” Dad announces, “although she looks nothing like her passport photo now.”

From the back, as we ease into the melting hot, tarmac-shining car park in front of the customs building (broken windows like thin ice in the white sun), we can hear Mum shuffling back into life. She eases herself into a sitting position, the vast tarpaulin over her shoulders.
like a voluminous plastic operatic cloak in spite of the oven-breath heat. She is singing “Olé, I Am a Bandit.”

“Christ,” mutters Dad.

Mum has sung “Olé, I Am a Bandit” at every bar under the southern African sun in which she has ever stepped.

“Shut your mother up, will you?” says Dad, climbing out of the pickup with a fistful of passports and papers. “eh?”

I go around the back. “Shhhh! Mum! Hey, Mum, we’re at the border now. Shhh!”

She emerges blearily from the folds of the tarpaulin. “I’m the quickest on the trigger,” she sings loudly.

“Oh, great.” I ease back into the front of the pickup and light a cigarette. I’ve been shot at before because of Mum and her singing. She made me drive her to our neighbor’s once at two in the morning to sing them “Olé, I Am a Bandit,” and he pulled a rifle on us and fired. He’s Yugoslav.

The customs official comes out to inspect our vehicle. I grin salaciously at him.

He circles the car, stiff-legged like a dog wondering which tire to pee on. He swings his AK-47 around like a tennis racket.

“Get out,” he tells me.

I get out.

Dad gets uneasy. He says, “Steady on with the stick, hey?”

“What?”

Dad shrugs, lights a cigarette. “Can’t you keep your bloody gun still?”

The official lets his barrel fall into line with Dad’s heart.

Mum appears from under the drapes of the tarpaulin again. Her half-mast eyes light up.

“Muli buanje?” she says elaborately: How are you?

The customs official blinks at her in surprise. He lets his gun relax against his hip. A smile plays around his lips. “Your wife?” he asks Dad.

Dad nods, smokes. I crush out my cigarette. We’re both hoping Mum doesn’t say anything to get us shot.

But her mouth splits into an exaggerated smile, rows of teeth. She nods toward Dad and me: “Kodi ndipite ndi taxi?” she asks: Should I take a taxi?

The customs official leans against his gun for support (hand over the top of the barrel) and laughs, throwing back his head.

Mum laughs, too. Like a small hyena, “Hee-hee,” wheezing a bit from all the dust she has inhaled today. She has a dust mustache, dust rings around her eyes, dust where forehead joins hairline.

“Look,” says Dad to the customs official, “can we get going? I have to get my daughter to school today.”

The customs official turns suddenly businesslike. “Ah,” he says, his voice threatening hours of delay, if he likes, “where is my gift?”

He turns to me. “Little sister? What have you brought for me today?”

Mum says, “You can have her, if you like,” and disappears under her tarpaulin. “Hee, hee.”

“Cigarettes?” I offer.

Dad mutters, “Bloody—” and swallows the rest of his words. He climbs into the pickup and lights a cigarette, staring fixedly ahead.

The customs official eventually opens the gate when he is in possession of one box of Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes (mine, intended for school), a bar of Palmolive soap (also intended for school), three hundred kwacha, and a bottle of Coke.

As we bump onto the bridge that spans the Zambesi River, Dad and I hang out of our windows, scanning the water for hippo.

Mum has reemerged from the tarpaulin to sing, “Happy, happy Africa.”

If I weren’t going back to school, I would be in heaven.
FROM *PERSEPOLIS: THE STORY OF A CHILDHOOD*

THE VEIL

Marjane Satrapi

"The Veil" is excerpted from Marjane Satrapi’s bestselling *Persepolis* series, a memoir about growing up in Tehran during the Iranian Revolution. The shah’s drastic attempts to westernize Iran and use of secret police led to widespread dissatisfaction, paving the way for the 1979 revolution that ended 2,500 years of monarchy and placed an exiled Islamic fundamentalist cleric, the Ayatollah-Khomeini, in charge. "The Veil" deals with one of the first changes instituted by the new Islamist regime—gender segregation in school and mandatory veils for women and girls. Islam challenged Zoroastrianism (Iran’s ancient religion concerned with the perpetual war between good and evil), and Satrapi’s use of naive-style, black-and-white comic strips conveys the confusion of ten-year-old Marjane, who wants to be a prophet.

Marjane Satrapi was born in 1969 in Rasht, Iran. The great-great-granddaughter of one of the last emperors, she grew up with intellectual relatives and family friends routinely being jailed. When she was fourteen, her parents sent her abroad to escape Khomeini’s regime. After studying illustration in
Strasbourg, she moved to Paris, where she lives today. While working in a studio with artists who introduced her to graphic novels, Satrapi decided to write Persepolis (2000) to counter negative media images about Iran. The choice of Persepolis for the title—an ancient Greek name that means “city of Persians”—refers to Iran’s long history prior to Arab and Muslim invasions. Satrapi currently works as a children’s book author and newspaper and magazine illustrator.

Though Persia (renamed Iran in 1935) has a rich, thousand-year literary tradition, women have been allowed only limited public expression. A nineteenth-century movement against the veil accompanied the rise of female writers; the 1960s saw the emergence of women writers concerned with sociopolitical issues and complex female portrayals. Satrapi joins a growing number of first- and second-generation exiled women who’ve adopted memoir as their genre. In France, however, she is one of the new stars of la BD (bande dessinée, usually translated into English as either “cartoon strips” or “comic strips”). In the United States, these serious, adult comics are considered graphic novels, a genre popularized in 1986 with the appearance of Art Spiegelman’s Holocaust-themed Maus. In addition to critiquing Iranian patriarchy, Persepolis considers the contradictions between public and private life, and the costs of political repression for individuals. You may wish to compare it to “The Women’s Swimming Pool,” Hanaa al-Shaykh’s story about an Arab Muslim girl negotiating the politics of something as simple as trying to find a place to swim.
AND ALSO BECAUSE THE YEAR BEFORE, IN 1979, WE WERE IN A FRENCH NON-RELIGIOUS SCHOOL.

WHERE BOYS AND GIRLS WERE TOGETHER.

EVERYWHERE IN THE STREETS THERE WERE DEMONSTRATIONS FOR AND AGAINST THE VEIL.

AND THEN SUDDENLY IN 1980...

THEY ARE SYMBOLS OF CAPITALISM.

ALL BILIGUAL SCHOOLS MUST BE CLOSED DOWN.

OF DECADENCE.

BRING! WHAT WISDOM!

THIS IS CALLED A "CULTURAL REVOLUTION."

AT ONE OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS, A GERMAN JOURNALIST TOOK A PHOTO OF MY MOTHER.

I WAS REALLY PROUD OF HER. HER PHOTO WAS PUBLISHED IN ALL THE EUROPEAN NEWSPAPERS.

WE FOUND Ourselves VEILED AND SEPARATED FROM OUR FRIENDS.

AND EVEN IN THE MAGAZINE IN IRAN MY MOTHER WAS REALLY SCARED.

AND THAT WAS THAT.

DON'T WORRY. SHE DYED HER HAIR.

SHE DIED HER HAIR.

AND WORE DARK GLASSES FOR A LONG TIME.
I really didn't know what to think about the well. Deep down I was very religious but as a family we were very modern and avant-garde.

I was born with religion.

Like all my predecessors, I had my holy book.

The first three rules came from Zarathustra. He was the first prophet in my country before the Arab Invasion.

You must base everything on these three rules: behave well, speak well, act well.

At the age of six I was already sure I was the last Prophet. This was a few years before the revolution.

Before me there had been a few others.

O' celestial light!

I am the last woman.

I wanted to be a prophet.

Because my father had a Cadillac.

And, above all, because my grandmother's knees always ached.

Only my grandmother knew about my book.

But tell me how you'll nurse for old people not to suffer?

In that case, I'll be your first disciple.

Really?

Rule number 53: Everybody should have a car.

Rule number 57: All mice were to eat at the table with the Others.

Rule number 81: No old person should have to suffer.

It will simply be foreordained.

Because our maid did not eat with us.
Every night I had a big discussion with God.

"God, give me some more time, I am not quite ready yet."

"Yes, you are, celestial light, you are my choice, my last and my best choice."

Nevertheless, my parents were puzzled.

"I want to be a doctor."

"That's fine, my love. That's fine."

"Want to be when you grown up?"

"I'll be a prophet." "Haha! Haha! Haha!"

"She's crazy!"

I felt guilty towards God.

"You want to be a doctor? I thought that..."

No, no, I will be a prophet but they mustn't know.

My parents were called in by the teacher.

"Your child is disturbed. She wants to become a prophet."

"What about it?"

"Doesn't this worry you?"

"No, not at all!"

I wanted to be justice, love and the wrath of God all in one.
OF WHITE HAIRS AND CRICKET

Rohinton Mistry

The narrator of this story, bored and slightly repulsed by his Sunday task of tweezing out white hairs from his father’s head, shrewdly observes his household’s family dynamics. His grandmother, confined to the apartment by her weak spine, spins thread and cooks forbidden treats for her grandson that are too rich for his sensitive digestive system; his mother, increasingly depressed by the family’s poverty, tries to be a practical counterbalance to her husband, a dreamer. Things don’t seem to change for the narrator—except that they do, as represented by the father’s increasingly thinning and graying hair and the mortal illness of his best friend’s father.

Mistry’s Parsi heritage forms the silent background for the story. The Parsis, marginalized by Hindu society because of their Zoroastrian faith and Persian heritage, were more open toward the British colonizers and the modern education that they brought to India. While Parsis enjoyed success in British-occupied India’s industry and commerce, they suffered the stigma of being too Western. After the end of British rule in India in 1947, their unpopularity influenced another
This Country Must.” The connections that Mistry’s narrator has with his family and the objects of their affection and concern are similar to those in David Bezmozgis’s “Tapka.”

The white hair was trapped in the tweezers. I pulled it taut to see if it was gripped tightly, then plucked it.

“Aaah!” grimaced Daddy. “Careful, only one at a time.” He continued to read the Times of India, spreading it on the table.

“It is only one,” I said, holding out the tweezers, but my annoyance did not register. Engrossed in the classifieds, he barely looked my way. The naked bulb overhead glanced off the stainless steel tweezers, making a splodge of light dart across the Murphy Radio calendar. It danced over the cherubic features of the Murphy Baby, in step with the tweezers’ progress on Daddy’s scalp. He sighed, turned a page, and went on scrutinizing the columns.

Each Sunday, the elimination of white hairs took longer than the last time. I’m sure Daddy noticed it too, but joked bravely that laziness was slowing me down. Percy was always excused from this task. And if I pointed it out, the answer was: your brother’s college studies are more important.

Daddy relied on my nimble fourteen-year-old fingers to uproot the signposts of mortality sprouting week after week. It was unappetizing work, combing through his hair greasy with day-old pomade, isolating the white ones, or the ones just beginning to turn—half black and half white—and somehow more repulsive. It was always difficult to decide whether to remove those or let them go till next Sunday, when the whiteness would have spread upward to their tips.

The Sunday edition of the Times of India came with a tabloid of comics: Mandrake the Magician, The Phantom, and Maggie and Jiggs in “Bringing Up Father.” The drab yellow tablecloth looked festive
with the vivid colours of the comics, as though specially decorated for Sunday. The plastic cloth smelled stale and musty. It was impossible to clean perfectly because of the floral design embossed upon its surface. The swirly grooves were ideal for trapping all kinds of dirt.

Daddy reached up to scratch a spot on his scalp. His aahh surprised me. He had taught me to be tough, always. One morning when we had come home after cricket, he told Mummy and Mamaiji, "Today my son did a brave thing, as I would have done. A powerful shot was going to the boundary, like a cannonball, and he blocked it with his bare shin." Those were his exact words. The ball's shiny red fury, and the audible crack—at least, I think it was audible—had sent pain racing through me that nearly made my eyes overflow. Daddy had clapped and said, "Well-fielded, sir, well-fielded." So I waited to rub the agonized bone until attention was no longer upon me. I wish Percy had not lost interest in cricket, and had been there. My best friend, Viraf from A Block, was immensely impressed. But that was all a long time ago, many months ago, now Daddy did not take us for cricket on Sunday mornings.

I paused in my search. Daddy had found something in the classiﬁed and did not notice. By angling the tweezers I could aim the bulb's light upon various spots on the Murphy Radio calendar: the edges of the picture, worn and turned inward; the threadbare braid of hair sharing the colour of rust with the rusty nail it hung by; a corroded staple clutching twelve thin strips—the perforated residue of months ripped summarily over a decade ago when their days and weeks were played out. The baby's smile, posed with finger to chin, was all that had fully endured the years. Mummy and Daddy called it so innocent and joyous. That baby would now be the same age as me. The ragged perimeter of the patch of crumbled wall it tried to hide strayed outward from behind, forming a kind of dark and jagged halo around the baby. The picture grew less adequate, daily, as the wall kept losing plaster and the edges continued to curl and tatter.

Other calendars in the room performed similar enshroudings: the Cement Corporation skyscraper; the Lifebuoy Soap towel-wrapped woman with long black hair; the Parsi calendar, pictureless but showing the English and Parsi names for the months, and the roj**' in Gujarati* beside each date, which Mummy and Mamaiji consulted when reciting their prayers. All these hung well past their designated time span in the world of months and years, covering up the broken promises of the Firozsha Baag building management.

"Yes, this is it," said Daddy, tapping the paper, "get me the scissors."

Mamaiji came out and settled in her chair on the veranda. Seated, there was no trace of the infirmity that caused her to walk doubled over. Doctors said it was due to a weak spine that could not erect against the now inordinate weight of her stomach. From photographs of Mummy's childhood, I knew Mamaiji had been a big handsome woman, with a majestic countenance. She opened her bag of spinning things, although she had been told to rest her eyes after the recent cataract operation. Then she spied me with the tweezers.

"Sunday dawns and he makes the child do that dulendar thing again. It will only bring bad luck." She spoke under her breath, arranging her spindle and wool; she was not looking for a direct confrontation. "Plucking out hair as if it was a slaughtered chicken. An ill-omened thing. I'm warning you. Sunday after Sunday. But no one listens. Is this anything to make a child do, he should be out playing, or learning how to do bajaur, how to bargain with butcher and banya.*" She mumbled softly, to allow Daddy to pretend he hadn't heard a thing.

I resented her speaking against Daddy and calling me a child.

*Mamaiji: Gujarati for "grandmother"

**roj: Gujarati word meaning "celebration"

*Gujarati: the language of the center west part of India
She twirled the spindle, drawing fibres into thread from the scrap of wool in her left hand as the spindle descended. I watched, expecting—even wishing—the thread to break. Sometimes it did, and then it seemed to me that Manaiji was overcome with disbelief, shocked and pained that it could have happened, and I would feel sorry and rush to pick it up for her. The spindle spun to the floor this time without mishap, hanging by a fine, brand new thread. She hauled it up, winding the thread around the extended thumb and little finger of her left hand by waggling the wrist in little clockwise and counter-clockwise half-turns, while the index and middle fingers clamped tight the source: the shred of wool resembling a lock of her own hair, snow white and slightly tangled.

Manaiji spun enough thread to keep us all in kustis.* Since Grandpa’s death, she spent more and more time spinning, so that now we each had a spare kusti as well. The kustis were woven by a professional, who always praised the fine quality of the thread; and even at the fire-temple,¹ where we untied and tied them during prayers, they earned the covetous glances of other Parsis.

I beheld the spindle and Manaiji’s co-ordinated feats of dexterity with admiration. All spinning things entranced me. The descending spindle was like the bucket spinning down into the sacred Bhikha Behram Weli to draw water for the ones like us who went there to pray on certain holy days after visiting the fire-temple. I imagined myself clinging to the base of the spindle, sinking into the dark well, confident that Manaiji would pull me up with her waggling hand before I drowned, and praying that the thread would not break. I also liked to stare at records spinning on the old 78-rpm gramophone. There was one I was particularly fond of: its round label was the most ethereal blue I ever saw. The lettering was gold. I played this record over and over, just to watch its wonderfully soothing blue and gold rotation, and the concentric rings of the shiny black shellac, whose grooves created a spiral effect if the light was right. The gramophone cabinet’s warm smell of wood and leather seemed to fly right out of this shellacked spiral, while I sat close, my cheek against it, to feel the hum and vibration of the turntable. It was so cozy and comforting. Like missing school because of a slight cold, staying in bed all day with a book, fussed over by Mummy, eating white rice and soup made specially for me.

Daddy finished cutting out and re-reading the classified advertisement. “Yes, this is a good one. Sounds very promising.” He picked up the newspaper again, then remembered what Manaiji had muttered, and said softly to me, “If it is so duleendor and will bring bad luck, how is it I found this? These old people—and gave a sigh of mild exasperation. Then briskly: “Don’t stop now, this week is very important.” He continued, slapping the table merrily at each word: “Every-single-white-hair-out.”

There was no real enmity between Daddy and Manaiji. I think they even liked each other. He was just disinclined towards living with his mother-in-law. They often had disagreements over me, and it was always Manaiji versus Mummy and Daddy. Manaiji firmly believed that I was underfed. Housebound as she was, the only food accessible to her was the stuff sold by door-to-door vendors, which I adored but was strictly forbidden: samosas,² bhajis,³ sevunthia,⁴ or

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* kusti: sacred-thread girdles with a string about the size of a thin lace, long enough to pass three times very loosely around the waist, and tied twice in a double knot, leaving the short ends hanging behind; it is composed of 72 very fine white threads

¹ fire-temple: the symbol of fire represents the energy of the creator in Zoroastrianism; Zoroastrians usually pray in front of some form of fire or any source of light as a focal point, much like the crucifix in Christianity

² samosa: a common snack in India, generally consisting of a fried triangular-shaped pastry with a savory potato, onion, and pea stuffing

³ bhaji: a side dish, usually of vegetables, served as an accompaniment to the main-course curry

⁴ sevunthia: a crunchy fried snack made of chickpea flour
the dinners she cooked for herself, separately, because she said that Mummy’s cooking was insipid itself: “Tasteless as spit, refuses to go down my throat.”

So I, her favourite, enjoyed from time to time, on the sly, hot scaring curries and things she purchased at the door when Daddy was at work and Mummy in the kitchen. Percy shared, too—after all, he was around; actually, his iron-clad stomach was much better suited to those flaming snacks. But the clandestine repasts were invariably uncovered, and the price was paid in harsh and unpleasant words. Mamaiji was accused of trying to burn to a crisp my stomach and intestines with her fiery, ungodly curries, or of exposing me to dysentery and diphtheria: the cheap door-to-door foodstuff was allegedly cooked in filthy, rancid oil—even machine oil, unfit for human consumption, as was revealed recently by a government investigation. Mamaiji retorted that if they did their duty as parents she would not have to resort to secrecy and chori-chhupi; as it was, she had no choice, she could not stand by and see the child starve.

All this bothered me much more than I let anyone know. When the arguments started I would say that all the shouting was giving me a headache, and stalk out to the steps of the compound. My guilty conscience, squirming uncontrollably, could not witness the quarrels. For though I was an eager partner in the conspiracy with Mamaiji, and acquiesced to the necessity for secrecy, very often I spilled the beans—quite literally—with diarrhea and vomiting, which Mamaiji upheld as undeniable proof that lack of proper regular nourishment had enfeebled my bowels. In the throes of these bouts of effluence, I promised Mummy and Daddy never again to eat what Mamaiji offered, and confessed all my past sins. In Mamaiji’s eyes I was a traitor, but sometimes it was also fun to listen to her scatological reproaches: “Maai ugheecauri! Eating my food, then shitting and taunting all over the place. Next time I’ll cork you up with a big bottle before feeding you.”

Mummy came in from the kitchen with a plateful of toast fresh off the Criterion: unevenly browned, and charred in spots by the vagaries of its kerosene wick. She cleared the comics to one side and set the plate down.

“Listen to this,” Daddy said to her. “Just found it in the paper: “A Growing Concern Seeks Dynamic Young Account Executive, Self-Motivated. Four-Figure Salary and Provident Fund.” I think it’s perfect.” He waited for Mummy’s reaction. Then: “If I can get it, all our troubles will be over.”

Mummy listened to such advertisements week after week: harbinger of hope that ended in disappointment and frustration. But she always allowed the initial wave of optimism to lift her, riding it with Daddy and me, higher and higher, making plans and dreaming, until it crashed and left us stranded, awaiting the next advertisement and the next wave. So her silence was surprising.

Daddy reached for a toast and dipped it in the tea, wrinkling his nose. “Smells of kerosene again. When I get this job, first thing will be a proper toaster. No more making burnt toast on top of the Criterion.”

“I cannot smell kerosene,” said Mummy.

“Smell this then,” he said, thrusting the tea-soaked piece at her nose, “smell it and tell me,” irritated by her ready contradiction. “It’s these useless wicks. The original Criterion ones from England used to be so good. One trim and you had a fine flame for months.” He bit magically into the toast. “Well, when I get the job, a Bombay Gas Company stove and cylinder can replace it.” He laughed. “Why not? The British left seventeen years ago, time for their stove to go as well.”

He finished chewing and turned to me. “And one day, you must go, too, to America. No future here.” His eyes fixed mine, urgently. “Somehow we’ll get the money to send you. I’ll find a way.”

His face filled with love. I felt suddenly like hugging him, but we never did except on birthdays, and to get rid of the feeling I looked
away and pretended to myself that he was saying it just to humour me, because he wanted me to finish pulling his white hairs. Fortunately, his jovial optimism returned.

“Maybe even a fridge is possible, then we will never have to go upstairs to that woman. No more obligations, no more favours. You won’t have to kill any more rats for her.” Daddy waited for us to join in. For his sake I hoped that Mummy would. I did not feel like muster ing any enthusiasm.

But she said sharply, “All your shait-ebuilee thoughts are flying again. Nothing happens when you plan too much. Leave it in the hands of God.”

Daddy was taken aback. He said, summoning bitterness to retal iate. “You are thinking I will never get a better job? I’ll show all of you.” He threw his piece of toast onto the plate and sat back. But he recovered as quickly, and made it into a joke. He picked up the newspaper. “Well, I’ll just have to surprise you one day when I throw out the kerosene stoves.”

I liked the kerosene stoves and the formidable fifteen-gallon storage drum that replenished them. The Criterion had a little round glass window in one corner of its black base, and I would peer into the murky depths, watching the level rise as kerosene poured through the funnel; it was very dark and cool and mysterious in there, then the kerosene floated up and its surface shone under the light bulb. Looking inside was like lying on Chaupati beach at night and gazing at the stars, in the hot season, while we stayed out after dinner till the breeze could rise and cool off the walls baking all day in the sun. When the stove was lit and the kitchen dark, the soft orange glow through its little mica door reminded me of the glow in the fire-temple of a firganam, when there wasn’t a blazing fire because hardly any sandalwood offerings had been left in the silver thadi; most people came only on the holy days. The Primus stove was fun, too, pumped up hot and roaring, the kerosene emerging under pressure and igniting into sharp blue flames. Daddy was the only one who lit it; every year, many women died in their kitchens because of explosions, and Daddy said that though many of them were not accidents, especially the dowry cases, it was still a dangerous stove if handled improperly.

Mummy went back to the kitchen. I did not mind the kerosene smell, and ate some toast, trying to imagine the kitchen without the stoves, with squat red gas cylinders sitting under the table instead. I had seen them in shop windows, and I thought they were ugly. We would get used to them, though, like everything else. At night, I stood on the veranda sometimes to look at the stars. But it was not the same as going to Chaupati and lying on the sand, quietly, with only the sound of the waves in the dark. On Saturday nights, I would make sure that the stoves were filled, because Mummy made a very early breakfast for Daddy and me next morning. The milk and bread would be arriving in the pre-dawn darkness while the kettle was boiling and we got ready for cricket with the boys of Firozsha Baq.

We always left by seven o’clock. The rest of the building was just starting to wake up: Nariman Hansotia would be aligning, on the parapet of his ground floor veranda, his razor and shaving brush and mirror beside two steaming cups, one of boiling water and the other of tea, and we often wondered if he ever dipped the brush in the wrong cup; and the old spinster Tehmina, still waiting for her catarracts to ripen, would be saying her prayers facing the rising sun, with her duster-coat hoisted up and slashed over the left shoulder, her yellowing petticoat revealed, to untie and tie her thick rope-like kusti around the waist; and the kuchmmwali would be sweeping the compound, making her rounds from door to door with broom and basket, collecting yesterday’s garbage. If she happened to cross Tehmina’s line of vision, all the boys were sure to have a fine time, because Tehmina, though blurry with catarracts, would recognize the kuchmmwali and let loose at her with a stream of curses fouler
than any filth in the garbage basket, for committing the unspeakable
crime of passing in front of her, thereby polluting her prayers and
vitiating their efficacy.

Even Daddy laughed, but he hurried us along as we lingered to
there to follow the ensuing dialogue. We picked our way through
sleeping streets. The pavement dwellers would stretch, and look for a
place to relieve themselves. Then they would fold up their cardboard
pieces and roll away their plastic before the street sweepers arrived
and the traffic got heavy. Sometimes, they would start a small fire if
they had something to cook for breakfast, or else try to beg from peo-
ple who came to the Irani restaurant for their morning *chai* and
bun. Occasionally, Mummy would wrap up leftovers from the night
before for Daddy and me to distribute to them along the way.

It had been such a long time since we last played cricket. Flying
kites had also become a thing of the past. One by one, the things I
held dear were leaving my life, I thought gloomily. And Francis. What
about poor Francis? Where was he now, I wondered. I wished he was
still working in the Baag. That awful thrashing he got in Tar Gully
was the fault of Najmeh and Tehmina, those stupid old women. And
Najmeh saying he stole eighty rupees was nonsense, in my opinion;
the absent-minded cow must have forgotten where she left the money.

I put down the tweezers and reached for the comics. Daddy
looked up. "Don't stop now, it should be perfect this week. There
will be an interview or something."

Avoiding his eye, I said stolidly, "I'm going to read the comics,
" and walked out to the compound steps. When I turned at the door-
way Daddy was still looking at me. His face was like Mumaji's
time the thread broke and slipped through her fingers and the spin-
dle fell to the floor. But I kept walking; it was a matter of pride. You
always did what you said you were going to do.

* *

The comics did not take long. It used to be more fun when
Daddy and I had a race to the door to grab the *Times*, and pretended
to fight over who would read the comics first. I thought of the lines
on Daddy's forehead, visible so clearly from my coign of vantage
with the tweezers. His thinning hair barely gave off a dull lustre
with its day-old pomade, and the Sunday morning stubble on his
chin was flecked with grey and white.

Something—remorse, maybe just pity—stirred inside, but I
quashed it without finding out. All my friends had fathers whose
hair was greying. Surely they did not spend Sunday mornings doing
what I did, or they would have said something. They were not like
me, there was nothing that was too private and personal for them.
They would talk about anything. Especially Pesi. He used to de-
scribe for us how his father passed gas, enhancing the narrative with
authentic sound effects. Now he was in boarding-school. His father
was dead.

From our C Block stone steps I could observe the entire length
of the compound, up to A Block at the far end. Dr. Sidhwa's black
Fiat turned in at the gate and trundled laboriously over the rough-
hewn flagstones of Firozsha Baag. He waved as he went past. He
looked so much like Pesi's father. He had the same crow's-feet at the
corners of his eyes that Dr. Mody used to have, and even their old
cars seemed identical, except that Dr. Mody healed animals and
Dr. Sidhwa, humans. Most of us had been treated by him at one
time or another. His house and dispensary were within walking dis-
tance of Firozsha Baag, even a sick person's walking distance; he was
a steadfast Parsi, seen often at fire-temples; and he always drove over
for his house-calls. What more could we want in a doctor?
The car stopped at the far end of the compound. Dr. Sidhwa
heaved out, he was a portly man, and reached in for his bag. It must
be an emergency in A Block. I decided, for someone to call him on
Sunday. He slammed the door, then opened and slammed it again.
harder now. The impact rocked the old car a little, but the door shut properly this time. Viraf emerged from the steps of A Block. I waved to him to let him know I was waiting.

Viraf was my best friend. Together we learned bicycling, on a rented contraption of bent spokes and patchwork tyres from Cecil Cycles of Tar Gully: Fifty Paisa per Hour. Daddy used to take us to practise at Chaupatty on the wide pavements by the beach. They were deserted in the early morning—pavement dwellers preferred the narrow side streets—except for pigeons gathering in anticipation of the pigeon-man, who arrived when the streets stirred to life. We took turns, and Daddy ran behind, holding the seat to keep us steady. Daddy also taught the two of us to play cricket. Mummy had been angry when he brought home the bat and ball, asking where the money had come from. His specialty on his own school team had been bowling, and he taught us the leg break and off break, and told us about the legendary Jasu Patel, born with a defective wrist which turned out to be perfect for spin bowling, and how Jasu had mastered the dreaded curl spin which was eventually feared by all the great international batsmen.

Cricket on Sunday mornings became a regular event for the boys in Firozsha Baag. Between us we almost had a complete kit: all that was missing was a pair of bats, and wicket-keeping gloves. Daddy took anyone who wanted to play to the Marine Drive maidan,* and organized us into teams, capturing one team himself. We went early, before the sun got too hot and the maidan over crowded. But then one Sunday, halfway through the game, Daddy said he was going to rest for a while. Sitting on the grass a little distance away, he seemed so much older than he did when he was batting, or bowling leg break. He watched us with a faraway expression on his face. Sadly, as if he had just realized something and wished he hadn’t.

* maidan: Urdu for a ground or field

There was no cricket at the maidan after that day. Since we were not allowed to go alone, our games were now confined to the Firozsha Baag compound. Its flagstoned surface would not accept the points of stumps, and we chalked three white lines on the compound’s black stone wall. But the compound was too cramped for cricket. Besides, the uneven ground made the ball bounce and rear erratically. After a few shattered panes of glass and several complaints from neighbours, the games ceased.

I waved again to Viraf and gave our private signal, “OO ooo OO ooo,” which was like a yodel. He waved back, then took the doctor’s bag and accompanied him into A Block. His polite demeanor made me smile. That Viraf, Shrewd fellow, he knew the things to do to make grownups approve of him, and was always welcome at all the homes in Firozsha Baag. He would be back soon.

I waited for at least half an hour. I cracked all my fingers and knuckles, even the thumbs. Then I went to the other end of the compound. After sitting on the steps there for a few minutes, I got impatient and climbed upstairs to find out why Viraf was buttering up the doctor.

But Dr. Sidhwa was on his way down, carrying his black bag. I said, “Sahibji, doctor,” and he smiled at me as I raced up to the third floor. Viraf was standing at the balcony outside his flat. “What’s all the muskari-paadis for the doctor?”

He turned away without answering. He looked upset but I did not ask what the matter was. Words to show concern were always beyond me. I spoke again, in that easygoing debonair style which all of us tried to perfect, right arm akimbo and head tilted ever so slightly, “Come on, what are your plans for today?”

He shrugged his shoulders, and I persisted, “Half the morning’s over, man, don’t be such a cry-baby.”

“Fish off,” he said, but his voice shook. His eyes were red, and he rubbed one as if there was something in it. I stood quietly for a
while, looking out over the balcony. His third-floor balcony was my favourite spot, you could see the road beyond Firozsha Baag, and sometimes, on a sunny day, even a corner of Chaupatry beach with the sun gleaming on the waves. From my ground floor veranda the compound’s black stone wall was all that was visible.

Hushed voices came from the flat, the door was open. I looked into the dining-room where some A Block neighbours had gathered around Viraf’s mother. “How about Ludo or Snakes-and-Ladders?” I tried. If he shrugged again I planned to leave. What else could I do?

“Okay,” he said, “but stay quiet. If Mumma sees us she’ll send us out.”

No one saw as we tiptoed inside, they were absorbed in whatever the discussion was about. “Pappa is very sick,” whispered Viraf, as we passed the sickroom. I stopped and looked inside. It was dark. The smell of sickness and medicines made it stink like the waiting room of Dr. Sidwra’s dispensary. Viraf’s father was in bed, lying on his back, with a tube through his nose. There was a long needle stuck into his right arm, and it glinted cruelly in a thin shaft of sunlight that had suddenly slunk inside the darkened room. I shivered. The needle was connected by a tube to a large bottle which hung upside down from a dark metal stand towering over the bed.

Viraf’s mother was talking softly to the neighbours in the dining-room. “. . . in his chest got worse when he came home last night. So many times I’ve told him, three floors to climb is not easy at your age with your big body, climb one, take rest for a few minutes, then climb again. But he won’t listen, does not want people to think it is too much for him. Now this is the result, and what I will do I don’t know. Poor little Viraf, being so brave when the doctor . . .”

Supine, his rotundity had spread into a flatness denying the huge bulk. I remembered calling Viraf a cry-baby, and my face flushed with shame. I swore I would apologize. Daddy was slim and wiry, although there were the beginnings of a small pot, as Mummy called it.

He used to run and field with us at cricket. Viraf’s father had sat on the grass the one time he took us. The breath came loud and rasping. His mouth was a bit open. It resembled a person snoring, but was uneven, and the sound suggested pain. I noticed the lines on his brow, like Daddy’s, only Daddy’s were less deep.

Over the rasp of his breath came the voice of Viraf’s mother, “. . . to exchange with someone on the ground floor, but that also is no. Says I won’t give up my third-floor paradise for all the smell and noise of a ground-floor flat. Which is true, up here even B.E.S.T. bus’ rattle and rumble does not come. But what use of paradise if you are not alive in good health to enjoy it? Now doctor says intensive care but Parsi General Hospital has no place. Better to stay here than other hospitals, only . . .”

My eyes fixed on the stone-grey face of Viraf’s father, I backed out of the sickroom, unseen. The hallway was empty. Viraf was waiting for me in the back room with the boards for Ludo and Snakes-and-Ladders. But I sneaked through the veranda and down the stairs without a word.

The compound was flooded in sunshine as I returned to the other end. On the way I passed the three white stumps we had once chalked on the compound wall’s black stone. The lines were very faint, and could barely be seen, lost amongst more recent scribbles and abandoned games of noughts and crosses.

Mummy was in the kitchen. I could hear the roaring of the Primus stove. Mummy, sinister in her dark glasses, sat by the veranda window, sunlight reflecting off the thick, black lenses with leather blinders at the sides; after her cataract operation the doctor had told her to wear these for a few months.

*B.E.S.T. bus: Mumbai’s bus company; its founders were the Brush Electrical Company of London, who were originally given the rights to run an electric tramway service in then-Bombay*
Daddy was still reading the *Times* at the dining-table. Through the gloom of the light bulb I saw the Murphy Baby’s innocent and joyous smile. I wondered what he looked like now. When I was two years old, there was a Murphy Baby Contest, and according to Mummy and Daddy my photograph, which had been entered, should have won. They said that in those days my smile had been just as, if not more, innocent and joyous.

The tweezers were lying on the table. I picked them up. They glinted pitilessly, like that long needle in Viraf’s father. I dropped them with a shudder, and they clattered against the table.

Daddy looked up questioningly. His hair was dishevelled as I had left it, and I waited, hoping he would ask me to continue. To offer to do it was beyond me, but I wanted desperately that he should ask me now. I glanced at his face discreetly, from the corner of my eye. The lines on his forehead stood out all too clearly, and the stubble flecked with white, which by this hour should have disappeared down the drain with the shaving water. I swore to myself that never again would I begrudge him my help; I would get all the white hairs, one by one, if he would only ask me; I would concentrate on the tweezers as never before, I would do it as if all our lives were riding on the efficacy of the tweezers, yes, I would continue to do it Sunday after Sunday, no matter how long it took.

Daddy put down the newspaper and removed his glasses. He rubbed his eyes, then went to the bathroom. How tired he looked, and how his shoulders drooped; his gait lacked confidence, and I’d never noticed that before. He did not speak to me even though I was praying hard that he would. Something inside me grew very heavy, and I tried to swallow, to dissolve that heaviness in saliva, but swallowing wasn’t easy either, the heaviness was blocking my throat.

I heard the sound of running water. Daddy was preparing to shave. I wanted to go and watch him, talk to him, laugh with him at the funny faces he made to get at all the tricky places with the razor, especially the cleft in his chin.

Instead, I threw myself on the bed. I felt like crying, and buried my face in the pillow. I wanted to cry for the way I had treated Viraf, and for his sick father with the long, cold needle in his arm and his rasping breath; for Mamaiji and her tired, darkened eyes spinning thread for our kustis, and for Mummy growing old in the dingy kitchen smelling of kerosene, where the Primus roared and her dreams were extinguished; I wanted to weep for myself, for not being able to hug Daddy when I wanted to, and for not ever saying thank you for cricket in the morning, and pigeons and bicycles and dreams; and for all the white hairs that I was powerless to stop.
An Ounce of Cure

ALICE MUNRO

I hung around the places where he might be seen, and then pretended not to see him; I made absurdly roundabout approaches, in conversation, to the bitter pleasure of casually mentioning his name.

My parents didn't drink. They weren't rabid about it, and in fact I remember that when I signed the pledge in grade seven, with the rest of that superbly impermanently indoctrinated class, my mother said, "It's just nonsense and fanatasm children of that age." My father would drink a beer on a hot day, but my mother did not join him, and whether accidentally or symbolically, this drink was always consumed outside the house. Most of the people we knew were the same way, in the small town where we lived. I ought not to say that it was this which got me into difficulties, because the difficulties I got into were a faithful expression of my own inconsiderate, impudent nature - the same nature that caused my mother to refer to me, on any occasion which traditionally calls for recitations of pride and maternal accomplishment, my departure for my first formal dance. I mean, or my helter-skelter preparations for a descent on college, with an expression of brooding and fascinated despair, as if she could not possibly expect, did not ask, that it should go with me as it did with other girls, the dreamed-of spoils of daughters, or half-mine boys' diamond rings, would be borne home in due course by the daughters of her friends, but not by me, all she could do was hope for a lesser rather than a greater disaster - an elopement, say, with a boy who could never
earn his living, rather than an abduction into the White Slave trade.

But ignorance, my mother said, ignorance, or innocence if you like, is not always such a fine thing as people think and I am not sure it may not be dangerous for a girl like you, when she emphasized her point, as she had a habit of doing, with some quotation which had an innocent pomposity and odour of mothballs. I didn't even wince at it, knowing full well how it must have worked wonders with Mr. Berryman.

The evening I baby-sat for the Berrymans must have been in April. I had been in love all year, or at least since the first week in September, when a boy named Martin Collingwood had given me a surprised, appreciative, and rather ominously complacent smile in the school assembly. I never knew what surprised him: I was not looking like anybody but me. I had an old blouse on and my home-permanent had turned out badly. A few weeks after that he took me out for the first time, and kissed me on the dark side of the porch also: I ought to say, on the mouth. I am sure it was the first time anybody had ever kissed me effectively, and I know that I did not wash my face that night or the next morning, in order to keep the imprint of those kisses intact. I showed the most painful rtnality in the conduct of this whole affair, as you will see. Two months, and a few awkward stages later, he dropped me. He had fallen for the girl who played opposite him in the Christmas production of Pride and Prejudice—

I said I was not going to have anything to do with that play, and I got another girl to work on Makeup in my place, but of course I went to it all the same and sat down in front with my girlfriend Joyce, who pressed my hand when I was overcome with pain and delight at the sight of Mr. Darcy in the white breeches, still, waxen, and sideburns. It was surely seeing Martin as Darcy that did for me; every girl is in love with Darcy anyway, and the part gave Martin an arrogance and male splendour in my eyes which made it impossible to remember that he was simply a high-school senior, passably good-looking and of medium intelligence and with a reputation slightly tainted, at that, by such preferences as the Drama Club and the Cadet Band who happened to be the first boy, the first really presentable boy, to take an interest in me. In the last act they gave him a chance to embrace Elizabeth (Mary Bishop, with a shalow complexion and no figure, but big vivacious eyes) and during this realistic encounter I dug my nails bitterly into Joyce's sympathetic palm.

That night was the beginning of months of pain, if more or less self-inflicted, misery for me. Why is it a temptation to refer to this sort of thing lightly, with irony, with amazement even, at finding oneself involved with such peripatetic emotions in the unaccountable past? That is what we are apt to do, speaking of love; with adolescent love, of course, it's practically obligatory; you would think we sat around, dull afternoons, amusing ourselves with these tidbit recollections of pain. But it really doesn't make me feel very gay—worse still, it doesn't really surprise me—to remember all the stupid, sad, half-ashamed things I did, that people in love always do. I hung around the places where he might be seen, and then pretended not to see him; I made absurdly round-about approaches, in conversation, to the bitter pleasure of casually mentioning his name. I day-dreamed endlessly; in fact if you want to put it mathematically, I spent perhaps ten times as many hours thinking about Martin Collingwood—yes, pinning and weeping for him—as I ever spent with him; the idea of him dominated my mind relentlessly and, after a while, against my will. For it at first I had dramatized my feelings, the time came when I would have been glad to escape them; my well-worn daydreams had become depressing and not even temporarily consoling. As I worked my math problems I would torture myself, quite mechanically and helplessly, with an exact recollection of Martin kissing my throat. I had an exact recollection of everything. One night I had an impulse to swallow all the
asprins in the bathroom cabinet, but stopped after I had taken
it.

My mother noticed that something was wrong and got me
some iron pills. She said, "Are you sure everything is going
all right at school?" "School? When I told her that Martin and I
had broken up, all she said was, "Well, so much the better for
that. I never saw a boy so stuck on himself." "Martin had
enough sense to sink a battleship," I said morosely and
went upstairs and cried.

The night I went to the Berrymans' was a Saturday night. I
had sat for them quite often on Saturday nights because they
liked to drive over to Baileyville, a much bigger town
about twenty miles away, and perhaps have supper and
go to a show. They had been living in our town only two or
three years—Mr. Berryman had been brought in as plant
manager of the new paper mill and they remained. I
suppose by chance, on the fringes of its society; most of their
friends were youngish couples like themselves, born in other
places, who lived in new ranch-style houses on a hill outside
our town where we used to go tobogganing. This Saturday night
they had two other couples in for drinks before they all drove
over to Baileyville for the opening of a new supper-club; they
were all rather festive. I sat in the kitchen and pretended to do
Latin. Last night had been the Spring Dance at the High
School. I had not gone, since the only boy who had asked me
was Millard Crompton, who asked so many girls that he was
suspected of working his way through the whole class
alphabetically. But the dance was held in the Armories,
which was only half a block away from our house; I had been
able to see the boys in dark suits, the girls in long pale pinafores
under their coats, passing gravely under the street-lights,
stepping around the last patches of snow. I could even hear
the music and I have not forgotten to this day that they played
"Ballera," and—oh, song of my aching heart—"Slow
Boat to China." Joyce had phoned me up this morning and
told me in her hushed way (we might have been discussing an
untimely disease I had that yes, M.C. had been there with
M.B., and she had on a formal that must have been made out
of somebody's old lace tablecloth, it just hung.

When the Berrymans and their friends had gone I went into
the living room and read a magazine. I was mortally
depressed. The big-softly lit room, with its green and leaf-brown
colours, made an unuttered setting for the development of the
emotions, such as you would get on a stage. At home the
life of the emotions went on all right, but it always seemed to
get buried under the piles of intending to be done, the
romping, the children's jigsaw puzzles and rock collections. It was the
sort of house where people were always colluding with one
another on the stairs and listening to hockey games and
Superman on the radio.

I got up and found the Berrymans' "Dance Macabre" and
put it on the record player and turned out the living-room
lights. The curtains were only partly drawn. A street light
shone obliquely on the windowpane, making a rectangle of
thin dusty gold, in which the shadows of bare branches
moved, caught in the huge sweet winds of spring. It was a
mild black night when the last snow was melting. A year ago
all this—the music, the wind and darkness, the shadows of
the branches—would have given me tremendous happiness,
when they did not do so now, but only called up tedious
familiar—somewhat humbly and petulantly familiar—personal
thoughts. I gave up my sort of dead and walked into the kitchen and
decided to get drunk.

No, it was not like that. I walked into the kitchen to look
for a Coke or something in the refrigerator, and there on the
front of the counter were three tall beautiful bottles, all about
half full of gold. But even after I had looked at them and liked
them to feel their weight, I had not decided to get drunk; I had
decided to have a drink.

Now here is where my ignorance, my disastrous
innocence, comes in. It is true that I had seen the Berrymans and
their friends drinking their highballs as casually as I would drink a coke, but I did not apply this attitude to myself. So, I thought of hard liquor as something to be taken in extremities, and relied upon for extravagant results, one way or another. My approach could not have been less casual if I had been the Little Mermaid drinking the witch’s crystal potion. Gravely, with a glance at my set face in the black window above the sink, I poured a little whisky from each of the bottles (I think now there were two brands of rye and an expensive Scotch) until I had my glass full. For I had never in my life seen anyone pour a drink and had no idea that people frequently diluted their liquor with water, soda, et cetera, and I had seen that the glasses the Berrymans’ guests were holding when I came through the living room were nearly full.

I drank it off as quickly as possible. I set the glass down and stood looking at my face in the window, half expecting to see it altered. My throat was burning, but I felt nothing else. It was very disappointing, when I had worked myself up to it. But I was not going to let it go at that. I poured another full glass, then filled each of the bottles with water to approximately the level I had seen when I came in. I drank the second glass only a little more slowly than the first. I put the empty glass down on the counter with care, perhaps feeling in my head a rustle of things to come, and went and sat down on a chair in the living room, I reached up and turned on a floor lamp beside the chair, and the room jumped on me.

When I say that I was expecting extravagant results I do not mean that I was expecting this. I had thought of some sweeping emotional change, an upsurge of gaiety and irresponsibility, a feeling of lawlessness and escape, accompanied by a little dizziness and perhaps a tendency to giggle out loud. I did not have in mind the ceiling spinning like a great plate somebody had thrown at me, nor the pale green blobs of the chairs swelling, converging, disintegrating, playing with me a game full of enormous senseless marimba music. My head sank back. I closed my eyes. And at once opened them, opened them wide, threw myself out of the chair and down the hall and reached—thank God, thank God—the Berrymans’ bathroom, where I was sick everywhere, everywhere, and dropped like a stone.

From this point I have no continuous picture of what happened; my memories of the next hour or two are split into vivid and improbable segments, with nothing but murk and uncertainty between. I do remember lying on the bathroom floor looking sideways at the little six-sided white tiles, which lay together in such an admirable and logical pattern, seeing them with the brief broken gratitude and sanity of one who has just been torn to pieces with vomiting. Then I remember sitting on the stool in front of the hall phone, asking weakly for Joyce’s number. Joyce was not home. I was told by her mother to rather rattlebrained woman, who didn’t seem to notice a thing the matter—for which I felt weakly, mechanically grateful that she was at Kay Stringer’s house. I didn’t know Kay’s number so I just asked the operator; I felt I couldn’t risk looking down at the telephone book.

Kay Stringer was not a friend of mine but a new friend of Joyce’s. She had a vague reputation for wildness and a long switch of hair, very odd, though naturally, coloured—from soap-yellow to caramel-brown. She knew a lot of boys more exciting than Martin Collingwood, boys who had quit school or been imported into town to play on the hockey team. She and Joyce rode around in those boys’ cars, and sometimes went with them—having lied of course to their mothers—to the Gay-la dance hall on the highway north of town.

I got Joyce on the phone. She was very keyed-up, as she always was with boys around, and she hardly seemed to hear what I was saying.
"Oh, I can't tonight," she said. "Some kids are here. We're going to play cards. You know Bill Klime? He's here with Armous."

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to speak distinctly; it came out an inhuman croak. "I'm drunk, Joyce!" Then I fell off the stool and the receiver dropped out of my hand and banged for a while dizzily against the wall.

I had not told Joyce where I was, so after thinking about it for a moment she phoned my mother, and, using the elaborate and unnecessary subterfuge that young girls delight in, she found out. She and Kay and the boys—there were three of them—told some story about where they were going to Kay's mother, and got into the car and drove out. They found me still lying on the broadloom carpet in the hall; I had been sick again, and this time I had not made it to the bathroom.

It turned out that Kay Stringer, who arrived on the scene only by accident, was exactly the person I needed. She loved crises, particularly one like this, which had a steady and scandalous aspect and which must be kept secret from the adult world. She became excited, aggressive, efficient; that energy which was termed wildness was simply the overflow of a great feminine instinct to manage, comfort, and control. I could hear her voice coming at me from all directions, telling me to not worry, telling Joyce to find the biggest coffee pot they had and make it full of coffee strong coffee, she said, telling the boys to pick me up and carry me to the sofa. Later, at the log beyond my reach, she was calling for a scrub-brush.

Then I was lying on the sofa, covered with some kind of crocheted throw they had found in the bedroom. I didn't want to lift my head. The house was full of the smell of coffee. Joyce came in, looking very pale; she said that the Berrymans had wakened up but she had given them a cookie and told them to go back to bed; it was all right; she hadn't let them out of their room and she didn't believe they'd remember. She said that she and Kay had cleaned up the bathroom and the hall though she was afraid there was still a spot on the rug. The coffee was ready, I didn't understand anything very well. The boys had turned on the radio and were going through the Berrymans' record collection; they had it on the floor. I felt there was something odd about this but I could not think what it was.

Kay brought me a huge breakfast mug full of coffee.

"I don't know if I can," I said. "Thanks."

"Sit up," she said briskly, as if dealing with drunks was an everyday business for her so I had no need to feel myself important. (I met and recognized, that tone of voice years later, in the maternity ward.) "Now drink," she said. I drank and at the same time realized that I was wearing only my slip. Joyce and Kay had taken off my blouse and skirt. They had brushed off the skirt and washed out the blouse, since it was nylon; it was hanging in the bathroom. I pulled the throw up under my arms and Kay laughed. She got everybody coffee. Joyce brought in the coffee pot and on Kay's instructions she kept filling my cup whenever I drank from it. Somebody said to me with interest, "You must have really wanted to tie one on."

"No," I said rather wildly, obediently drinking my coffee. "I only had two drinks."

Kay laughed. "Well it certainly gets to you, I'll say that. What time do you expect they'll be back?" she said.

"Late, after one I think."

"You should be all right by that time. Have some more coffee."

Kay and one of the boys began dancing to the radio. Kay danced very sexy, but her face had the gently superior and indulgent, rather cold look it had when she was lifting me up to drink the coffee. The boy was whispering to her and she was smiling, shaking her head. Joyce said she was hungry, and she went out to the kitchen to see what there was—potato chips or crackers, or something like that, that you could eat without making too noticeable a dint. Bill Klime came over and sat on the sofa beside me and patted my knees through the crocheted throw. He didn't say anything to me.
just parted my legs and looked at me with what seemed to me a very stupid, half-sick, absurd and alarming expression. I felt very uncomfortable: I wonder how it had ever got around that Bill Kline was so good looking, with an expression like that. I moved my legs nervously and he gave me a look of contempt, not ceasing to put me. Then I scrambled off the sofa, pulling the throw around me, with the idea of going to the bathroom to see if my blouse was dry. I lurched a little when I started to walk, and for some reason—probably to show Bill Kline that he had not panicked me—I immediately exaggerated this, and calling out, "Watch me walk a straight line!!" I lurched and stumbled, to the accompaniment of everyone's laughter, towards the hall. I was standing in the archway between the hall and the living room when the knob of the front door turned with a small matter-of-fact click and everyone became silent behind me except the radio of course: and the crocheted throw inspired by some delicate malice of its own slithered down around my feet, and there—oh, delicious moment in a well-organized farce—there stood the Berrymans, Mr. and Mrs., with expressions on their faces as appropriate to the occasion as any old-fashioned director of farces could wish. They must have been preparing those expressions, of course; they could not have produced them in the first moment of shock; with the noise we were making, they had no doubt heard us as soon as they got out of the car. For the same reason, we had not heard them. I don't think I ever knew what brought them home so early—a headache, an argument—and I was not really in a position to ask.

Mr. Berryman drove me home. I don't remember how I got into that car, or how I found my clothes and put them on, or what kind of a good night, if any, I said to Mrs. Berryman. I don't remember what happened to my friends, though I imagine they gathered up their coats and fled, covering up the ignominy of their departure with a mechanical roar of defiance. I remember Joyce with a box of crackers in her hand, saying that I had become terribly sick from eating—I think she said sauerkraut—for supper, and that I had called them for help. When I asked her later what they made of this she said, "It wasn't any use. You recked." I remember also her saying, "Oh, no, Mr. Berryman I beg of you, my mother is a terribly nervous person. I don't know what the shock might do to her. I will go down on my knees to you if you like but you must not phone my mother." I have no picture of her down on her knees—and she would have done it in a minute—so it seems this threat was not carried out.

Mr. Berryman said to me, "Well I guess you know your behaviour tonight is a pretty serious thing." He made it sound as if I might be charged with criminal negligence or something worse. "It would be very wrong of me to overlook it," he said. I suppose that besides being angry and disgusted with me, he was worried about taking me home in this condition to my strict-laced parents, who could always say I got the liquor in his house. Plenty of Temperance people would think that enough to hold him responsible, and the town was full of Temperance people. Good relations, with the town were very important to him from a business point of view.

"I have an idea it wasn't the first time," he said. "If it was the first time, would a girl be smart enough to fill three bottles up with water?" No. Well, in this case, she was smart enough, but not smart enough to know I could spot it. What do you say to that?" I opened my mouth to answer, and although I was feeling quite sober the only sound that came out was a loud, desolate-sounding giggle. He stopped in front of our house. "Light's on," he said. "Now go in and tell your parents the straight truth. And if you don't, remember I will." He did not mention paying me for my baby-sitting services of the evening and the subject did not occur to me either.
I went into the house and tried to go straight upstairs but my mother called to me. She came into the front hall, where I had not turned on the light, and she must have smelled me at once for she ran forward with a cry of pure amazement, as if she had seen somebody falling, and caught me by the shoulders as I did indeed fall down against the banister, over whelmed by my fantastic lucklessness, and I told her everything from the start, not omitting even the name of Martin Collingwood and my flirtation with the aspirin bottle, which was a mistake.

On Monday morning my mother took the bus over to Baileyville and bought the liquor store and bought a bottle of Scotch whiskey. Then she had to wait for a bus back, and she met some people she knew and she was not quite able to hide the bottle in her bag; she was furious with herself for not bringing a proper shopping bag. As soon as she got back she walked out to the Berryman's; she had not even had lunch. Mr. Berryman had not gone back to the factory. My mother went in and had a talk with both of them and made an excellent impression and then Mr. Berryman drove her home. She talked to them in the air and the morning way she had, which was always agreeably surprising to people prepared to deal with a mother, and she told them that although I seemed to do well enough at school I was extremely backward—or perhaps eccentric—in my emotional development. I imagine that this analysis of my behaviour was especially effective with Mrs. Berryman, a great reader of child guidance books. Relations between them warmed to the point where my mother brought up a specific instance of my difficulties, and disarmingly related the whole story of Martin Collingwood.

Within a few days it was all over town and the school that I had tried to commit suicide over Martin Collingwood. But it was already all over school and the town that the Berrymans had come home on Saturday night to find me drunk, staggering, wearing nothing but my slip, in a room with three boys, one of whom was Bill Klune. My mother had said that I was to pay for the bottle she had taken the Berrymans out of my baby-sitting earnings, but my chents melted away like the last April snow, and it would not be paid for yet. Newcomers to town had not moved in across the street in July, and needed a baby-sitter before they talked to any of their neighbors.

My mother also said that it had been a great mistake to let me go out with boys and that I would not be going out again until well after my sixteenth birthday, if then. This did not prove to be a concrete hardship at all, because it was at least that long before anybody asked me. If you think that news of the Berrymans' adventure would put me in demand for what ever gambols and orgies were going on in and around that town, you could not be more mistaken. The extraordinary publicity which attended my first debut may have made me seem marked for a special kind of ill luck, like the man whose illegitimate baby turns out to be triplets—nobody wants to have anything to do with her. At any rate I had at the same time one of the most silent telephonic and positively the most sinister reputations in the whole High School. I had to put up with this until the next fall, when a fat blonde girl in grade ten ran away with a married man and was picked up two months later, living in sin—though not with the same man—in the city of Sainte Marie. Then everybody forgot about me.

But there was a positive, a splendidly unexpected result of this affair; I got completely over Martin Collingwood. It was not only that he at once said, publicly, that he had always thought I was a nut; where he was concerned I had no pride, and my tender fancy could have found a way around that, a month, a week, before. What was it that brought me back, into the world again? It was the terrible and fascinating reality of my disaster, it was the way things happened. Not that I enjoyed it; I was a self-conscious girl and I suffered a good deal from all this exposure. But the development of events on that Saturday night—that fascinated me; I felt that I had had a glimpse of the shameless, marvellous, shattering absurdity with which the plots of life, though not of fiction, are improvised. I could not take my eyes off it.
And of course Martin Collingwood wrote his Senior Matri that June and went away to the city to take a course at a school for Morticians, as I think it is called, and when he came back he went into his uncle’s undertaking business. We lived in the same town and we would hear most things that happened to each other but I do not think we met face to face or saw one another, except at a distance, for years. I went to a shower for the girl he married, but then everybody went to everybody else’s showers. No, I do not think I really saw him again until I came home after I had been married several years, to attend a relative’s funeral. Then I saw him; not quite Mr. Darcy but still very nice-looking in those black clothes. And I saw him looking over at me with an expression as close to a reminiscent smile as the occasion would permit, and I knew that he had been surprised by a memory either of my devotion or my little buried catastrophe. I gave him a gentle uncomprehending look in return. I am a grown-up woman now; let him unbury his own catastrophes.

Alice Munro, a native of Ontario, was at various times a tobacco picker, a librarian, and a waitress before she attended the University of Western Ontario. She then married and moved to Canada’s west coast where she has since lived, writing short stories, looking after her family, and assisting her husband in a book store in Victoria.

In 1968 fifteen of her best stories were published in the Governor-General’s-Award-winning book The Dance of the Happy Shades. Her stories dramatize sensitively and skillfully the daily lives of townspeople. In the foreword of that book, Hugh Garner writes:

“...You’ll find at least one member of your family in these stories, probably the one you have despised all along. He or she will be married to the one who jilted you or didn’t even notice you in your new dress at the high school dance. You’ll notice that your mother was once a girl and that your father once had a girl friend. But most of all you’ll notice some of the profound though probably unpalatable truths about yourself.”

Morley Callaghan also praises Alice Munro: “You write about ordinary people very well, and they are the most difficult of all to make interesting.”