

THE NEW YORKER

Dear Life

A childhood visitation.

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/09/19/110919fa_fact_munro

BY ALICE MUNRO



Alice Munro, at the age of two or three, in her home town of Wingham, Ontario.

CREDIT COURTESY ALICE MUNRO

I lived when I was young at the end of a long road, or a road that seemed long to me. Behind me, as I walked home from primary school, and then from high school, was the real town with its activity and its sidewalks and its streetlights for after dark. Marking the end of town were two bridges over the Maitland River: one narrow iron bridge, where cars sometimes got into trouble over which one should pull off and wait for the other, and a wooden walkway, which occasionally had a plank missing, so that you could look right down into the bright, hurrying water. I liked that, but somebody always came and replaced the plank eventually.

Then there was a slight hollow, a couple of rickety houses that got flooded every spring, but that people—different people—always came and lived in anyway. And then another bridge, over the mill race, which was narrow but deep enough to drown you. After that, the road divided, one part of it going south up a hill and over the river again to become a genuine highway, and the other jogging around the old fairgrounds to turn west.

That westward road was mine.

There was also a road heading north, which had a brief but real sidewalk and several houses close together, as if they were in town. One of them had a sign in the window that said “Salada Tea,” evidence that groceries had once been for sale there. Then there was a school, which I had attended for two years of my life and never wished to see again. After those years, my mother had made my father buy an old shed in town, so that he would be paying town taxes and I could go to the town school. As it turned out, she hadn’t needed to do that, because in the year, in the very month, that I started school in town war was declared with Germany and, as if by magic, the old school, where bullies had taken away my lunch and threatened to beat me up and nobody had seemed to learn anything in the midst of the uproar, was cut in half, with only one room and one teacher, who probably did not lock the doors at recess. It appeared that the same boys who’d always asked me rhetorically and alarmingly if I wanted to fuck were just as eager to get jobs as their older brothers were to go into the Army. I don’t know if the school toilets had improved by then or not, but they had been the worst thing. It was not as if we didn’t resort to an outhouse at home, but it was clean and even had a linoleum floor. At that school, for reasons of contempt or whatever, nobody seemed to bother to aim for the hole. In many ways it wasn’t easy for me in town, either, because everybody else had been together since grade one, and there were many things that I hadn’t learned yet, but it was a comfort to see my new school’s unsoiled seats and to hear the noble urban sound of its flush toilets.

During my time at the first school, I did make one friend. A girl whom I’ll call Diane arrived partway through my second year. She was about my age, and she lived in one of those houses with a sidewalk. She asked me one day if I could do the Highland fling, and when I said no she offered to teach me. With this in mind, we went to her place after school. Her mother had died and she had come to live with her grandparents. To dance the Highland fling, she told me, you needed clicking shoes, which she had and, of course, I didn’t, but our feet were nearly the same size, so we could trade while she tried to teach me. Eventually, we got thirsty and her grandmother gave us a drink of water, but it was horrid water from a dug well, just like at school. I explained about the superior water we got from a drilled well at home, and the grandmother said, without taking any sort of offense, that she wished they had that, too.

But then, too soon, my mother was outside, having gone to the school and discovered my whereabouts. She honked the car horn to summon me and didn’t even respond to the grandmother’s friendly wave. My mother did not drive often, and when she did there was a nervous solemnity to the occasion. On the way home, I was told that I was never to enter that house again. (This proved not to be difficult, because Diane stopped appearing at school a few days later—she had been sent away somewhere.) I told my mother that Diane’s

mother was dead and she said yes, she knew. I told her about the Highland fling, and she said that I might learn it properly sometime, but not in that house.

I did not find out then that the mother had been a prostitute and died of some ailment that it seems prostitutes caught. She'd wanted to be buried at home, and the minister of our own church had done the service. There was controversy over what he'd said. Some people thought he should have left it out, but my mother believed that he had done the right thing.

The wages of sin is death.

She told me this a long time later, or what seemed a long time later, when I was at the stage of hating a great many things she said, particularly when she used that voice of shuddering, even thrilled, conviction, with a tremor that seemed to be there more and more regularly, whether deliberate or not.

I ran into the grandmother now and again. She always had a little crinkly smile for me. She said it was wonderful that I kept going to school, and she reported on Diane, who also continued for a notable time, wherever she was—though not for as long as I did. According to her grandmother, she then got a job in a restaurant in Toronto, where she wore an outfit with sequins on it. I was old enough at that point, and mean enough, to assume that it was a place where you also took the sequin outfit off.

Diane's grandmother wasn't the only one who thought I was taking a long time at school. Along my road, there were a number of houses that were set farther apart than they would have been in town but still didn't have much in the way of property. One of them, on a small hill, belonged to Waitey Streets, a one-armed veteran of the First World War. He kept some sheep and had a wife, whom I saw only once, when she was filling the drinking pail at the pump. Waitey liked to joke about the number of years I had been at school and how it was a pity that I could never pass my exams and be done with it. And I joked back, pretending that was true. I was not sure what he really believed. This was the way you knew people on the road, and they knew you. You'd say hello, and they'd say hello and something about the weather, and if they had a car and you were walking they would give you a ride. It wasn't like the real country, where people usually knew the insides of one another's houses and everybody had more or less the same way of making a living.

I wasn't taking longer to finish high school than anybody who went through the full five grades would. But few students did that. Nobody expected then that the same number of people who entered in grade nine would come out, all stuffed

with knowledge, at the end of grade thirteen. People got part-time jobs and gradually those turned into full-time jobs. Girls got married and had babies, in that order or the other. With only about a quarter of the original class left, in grade thirteen, there was a sense of scholarship, of serious achievement, or perhaps just a special kind of serene impracticality that hung on, no matter what happened to you later.

I felt as if I were a lifetime away from most of the people I had known in grade nine, let alone in that first school.

In a corner of our dining room was something that always surprised me a little when I got the Electrolux out to clean the floor. I knew what it was—a very new-looking golf bag, with the golf clubs and balls inside. I just wondered what it was doing in our house. I knew hardly anything about the game, but I had my ideas about the type of people who played it. They were not people who wore overalls, as my father did, though he put on better work pants to go downtown. I could, to some extent, imagine my mother getting into the sporty kind of clothes you would have to wear, tying a scarf around her fine, blowing hair. But not actually trying to hit a ball into a hole. The frivolity of such an act was surely beyond her.

She must have thought differently at one time. She must have thought that she and my father were going to transform themselves into a different sort of people, who enjoyed a degree of leisure. Golf. Dinner parties. Perhaps she had convinced herself that certain boundaries were not there. She had managed to get herself off a farm on the bare Canadian Shield—a farm much more hopeless than the one my father came from—and she had become a schoolteacher, who spoke in such a way that her own relatives were not easy around her. She might have got the idea that after such striving she would be welcomed anywhere.

My father had other ideas. He didn't think that town people or any people were actually better than he was. But he believed that they thought they were. And he preferred never to give them a chance to show it.

It seemed that, in the matter of golf, it was my father who had won.

It wasn't as if he'd been content to live the way his parents had expected him to live, taking over their decent farm. When he and my mother left their communities behind and bought this plot of land at the end of a road near a town they didn't know, their idea was almost certainly to become prosperous by raising silver foxes and, later on, mink. As a youth, my father had found himself happier following a trapline than helping on the farm or going to high

school—and richer, too, than he had ever been before—and this idea had come upon him and he had taken it up, as he thought, for a lifetime. He put what money he had collected into it, and my mother contributed her teacher's savings. He built all the pens and shelters in which the animals would live, and put up the wire walls that would contain their captive lives. The plot of land, five acres large, was the right size, with a hayfield and enough pasture for our own cow and whatever old horses were waiting to be fed to the foxes. The pasture ran right down to the river and had twelve elm trees shading it.

There was quite a lot of killing going on, when I come to think of it. The horses had to be turned into meat and the fur-bearing animals culled every fall to leave just the breeders. But I was used to this and could easily ignore it, constructing for myself a scene that was purified to resemble something out of the books I liked, such as "Anne of Green Gables" or "Pat of Silver Bush." I had the help of the elm trees, which hung over the pasture and the shining river, and the surprise of a spring that came out of the bank above the pasture, providing water for the doomed horses and the cow and also for me, out of a tin mug I had found. There was always fresh manure around, but I ignored it, as Anne must have done at Green Gables.

In those days, I had to help my father sometimes, because my brother wasn't old enough yet. I pumped fresh water, and I walked up and down the pens, cleaning out the animals' drinking tins and refilling them. I enjoyed this. The importance of the work, the frequent solitude were just what I liked. Later on, I had to stay in the house to help my mother, and I was full of resentment and quarrelsome remarks. "Talking back," it was called. I hurt her feelings, she said, and the outcome was that she would go to the barn to tell on me, to my father. Then he'd have to interrupt his work to give me a beating with his belt. Afterward, I'd lie weeping in bed and make plans to run away. But that phase, too, passed, and I became manageable, even jolly, noted for my funny recountings of things that I had heard about in town, or that had happened at school.

Our house was of a decent size. We didn't know exactly when it had been built but it had to be less than a century old, because 1858 was the year the first settler had stopped at a place called Bodmin—which had now disappeared—built himself a raft, and come down the river to clear trees from the land that later became a whole village. That early village soon had a sawmill and a hotel and three churches and a school, the same school that was my first, and so dreaded by me. Then a bridge was built across the river, and it began to dawn on people how much more convenient it would be to live over on the other side, on higher ground, and the original settlement dwindled away to the disreputable, and then just peculiar, half-village that I have spoken of.

Our house would not have been one of the first houses in that early settlement, because it was covered with brick, and they were all just wood, but it had probably gone up not long afterward. It turned its back on the village, facing west across slightly downsloping fields to the hidden curve where the river made what was called the Big Bend. Beyond the river was a patch of dark evergreen trees, probably cedar but too far away to tell. And even farther away, on another hillside, was another house, quite small at that distance, facing ours, that we would never visit or know and that was like a dwarf's house in a story. But we knew the name of the man who lived there, or had lived there at one time, for he might have died by now. Roly Grain, his name was, and he does not have any further part in what I'm writing now, in spite of his troll's name, because this is not a story, only life.

My mother had two miscarriages before she had me, so when I was born, in 1931, there must have been some satisfaction. That, in spite of the times, which were getting less and less promising. The truth was that my father had got into the fur business just a little too late. The success he'd hoped for would have been more likely back in the mid-twenties, when furs were newly popular and people had money. But he had not got started then. Still, we survived, right up to and through the war, and even at the end of the war there must have been an encouraging flurry, because that was the summer my father fixed up the house, adding a layer of brown paint over the traditional red brick. There was some problem with the way the bricks and boards were fitted; they did not keep out the cold as well as they were supposed to. It was thought that the coat of paint would help, though I can't recall that it ever did. Also, we got a bathroom, and the unused dumbwaiter became kitchen cupboards, and the big dining room with the open stairway changed into a regular room with enclosed stairs. That change comforted me in some unexamined way, because my father's beatings had taken place in the dining room, with me wanting to die for the misery and shame of it all. And now it was as if their whole setting were gone. It was hard even to imagine such a thing happening. I was in high school and doing better every year, as activities like hemstitching and writing with a straight pen were left behind, and Social Studies became History and you could learn Latin.

After the optimism of that season of redecoration, however, business dried up again, and this time it never came back. My father pelted all the foxes, then the mink, and got what shockingly little money he could for them, then he worked by day pulling down the sheds where that enterprise had been born and had died, before heading off to take the five-o'clock watch in the foundry, coming back around midnight.

By now, I was in my last year of local education. As soon as I got home from school, I went to work making my father's lunch. I fried two slices of cottage roll

and put lots of ketchup on them. I filled his thermos with strong black tea. I put in a bran muffin with jam on it, or perhaps a heavy piece of homemade pie. Sometimes on Saturdays I made a pie, and sometimes my mother did, though her baking was getting to be unreliable.

Something had come upon us that was even more unexpected and would become more devastating than the loss of income, though we didn't know it yet. It was the early onset of Parkinson's disease, which showed up when my mother was in her forties.

At first, it was not too bad. Her eyes only rarely turned up into her head in a wandering way, and the soft down from an oversupply of saliva was just visible around her lips. She could get dressed in the mornings with some help, and she was able to do occasional chores around the house. She held on to some strength in herself for a surprisingly long time.

You would think that this was all too much. The business gone, my mother's health going. It wouldn't do in fiction. But the strange thing is that I don't remember that time as unhappy. There wasn't a particularly despairing mood around the house. Maybe it was not understood then that my mother wouldn't get any better, only worse. As for my father, he had his strength and would have it for a long time yet. He liked the men he worked with at the foundry, who were, for the most part, men like himself, who'd had some sort of downturn or extra burden added to their lives. He liked the challenging work he did in addition to being the early-night watchman. That work involved pouring molten metal into molds. The foundry made old-fashioned stoves that were sold all over the world. It was dangerous, but it was up to you to look out, as my father said. And it was decently paid—a novelty for him.

I believe he was glad to get away, even to do this hard and risky work. To get out of the house and into the company of other men who had problems but made the best of things.

Once he was gone, I'd start on supper. I could make things that I thought were exotic, like spaghetti or omelettes, as long as they were cheap. And after the dishes were done—my sister had to dry them, and my brother had to be nagged into throwing the dishwater out over the dark field—I sat down with my feet in the warming oven, which had lost its door, and read the big novels I borrowed from the town library: "Independent People," which was about life in Iceland, harder than ours by far, but with a hopeless grandeur to it, or "Remembrance of Things Past," which was about nothing I could understand at all but which I would not give up just because of that, or "The Magic Mountain," about tuberculosis and a great argument between what on one side seemed to be a

genial and progressive notion of life and, on the other, a dark but somehow thrilling despair. I never did homework in this precious time, but when exams came I buckled down and stayed up almost all night, cramming my head with whatever I was supposed to know. I had a prodigious short-term memory, and that worked quite well for what was required.

Against several odds, I believed myself a lucky person.

Sometimes my mother and I talked, mostly about her younger days. I seldom objected now to her way of looking at things. Even her quavery voice, which surfaced especially when she spoke about how sacred sex was because it brought us little children, was something I could now endure or pass over.

Several times, she told me a story that had to do with the house that now belonged to the war veteran named Waitey Streets—the man who marvelled at the length of time I had to stay in school. The story was not about him but about someone who had lived in that house long before he did, a crazy old woman named Mrs. Netterfield. Mrs. Netterfield had had her groceries delivered, as we all did, after ordering them over the phone. One day, my mother said, the grocer forgot to put in her butter, or she forgot to order it, and when the delivery boy was opening the back of the truck she noticed the mistake and became upset. But she was prepared, in a way. She had her hatchet with her and she raised it as if to punish the grocery boy—though, of course, it wasn't his fault—and he ran up to the driver's seat and pulled off without even closing the back doors.

Some things about this story were puzzling, though I didn't think about them at the time and neither did my mother. How could the old woman have been sure already that the butter was missing? And why would she have been equipped with a hatchet before she even knew there was any fault to find? Did she carry it with her, in case of provocations in general? My mother told me that Mrs. Netterfield was said to have been a lady when she was younger.

There was another story about Mrs. Netterfield that had more interest because it featured me and took place in our house.

It was a beautiful day in the fall. I had been set out to sleep in my baby carriage on the little patch of new lawn. My father was away for the afternoon—perhaps helping out his father on the old farm, as he sometimes did—and my mother was doing some clothes washing at the sink. For a first baby there was a lot of knitwear, ribbons, things to be washed carefully by hand in soft water. There was no window in front of my mother as she washed and wrung things out at the

sink. To get a look outside, you had to cross the room to the north window. That gave you a view of the driveway, which led from the mailbox to the house.

Why did my mother decide to leave her washing and wringing out in order to look at the driveway? She was not expecting any company. My father wasn't late. Possibly she had asked him to get something at the grocery store, something she needed for whatever she was making for supper, and she was wondering if he would be home in time for her to make it. She was a fairly fancy cook in those days—more so, in fact, than her mother-in-law and the other women in my father's family thought necessary. When you looked at the cost, as they would say.

Or it may have had nothing to do with supper but have involved a pattern he was picking up, or a piece of material for a new dress she wanted to make for herself.

She never said afterward why she had done it.

Misgivings about my mother's cooking were not the only problem with my father's family. There must have been some discussion about her clothes, too. I think of how she used to wear an afternoon dress, even if she was only washing things at the sink. She took a half-hour nap after the noon meal and always put on a different dress when she got up. When I looked at photographs later on, I thought that the fashions of the time had not been becoming to her, or to anybody. The dresses were shapeless, and bobbed hair did not suit my mother's full, soft face. But this would not have been the objection of my father's female relatives, who lived close enough to keep tabs on her. Her fault was that she did not look like what she was. She did not look as if she had been brought up on a farm, or as if she intended to remain on one.

She did not see my father's car coming down the lane. Instead, she saw the old woman, Mrs. Netterfield. Mrs. Netterfield must have walked over, from her own house. The same house where, much later on, I would see the one-armed man who teased me, and just the one time his bob-haired wife, at the pump. The house from which, long before I knew anything about her, the crazy woman had pursued the delivery boy with a hatchet, on account of some butter.

My mother must have seen Mrs. Netterfield at least a few times before she noticed her walking down our lane. Maybe they had never spoken. It's possible, though, that they had. My mother might have made a point of it, even if my father had told her that it was not necessary. It might even lead to trouble, was

what he probably would have said. My mother had sympathy for people who were weird, as long as they were decent.

But now she was not thinking of friendliness or decency. Now she was running out the kitchen door to grab me out of my baby carriage. She left the carriage and the covers where they were and ran back into the house, locking the kitchen door behind her. The front door she did not need to worry about—it was always locked.

But there was a problem, wasn't there, with the kitchen door? As far as I know, it never had a proper lock. There was just a custom, at night, of pushing one of the kitchen chairs against that door, and tilting it with the chair back under the doorknob, in such a way that anybody pushing it to get in would have made a dreadful clatter. A fairly haphazard way of maintaining safety, it seems to me, and not in keeping, either, with the fact that my father had a revolver in the house, in a desk drawer. Also, as was natural in the house of a man who regularly had to shoot horses, there was a rifle and a couple of shotguns. Unloaded, of course.

Did my mother think of any weapon, once she had got the doorknob wedged in place? Had she ever picked up a gun, or loaded one, in her life?

Did it cross her mind that the old woman might just be paying a neighborly visit? I don't think so. There would have been a difference in the walk, a determination in the approach of the woman coming down the lane.

It is possible that my mother prayed, but she did not mention it.

She knew that there was an investigation of the blankets in the carriage, because, just before she pulled down the kitchen-door blind, she saw one of those blankets being flung out to land on the ground. After that, she did not try to get the blinds down on any other window, but stayed with me in her arms where she could not be seen.

There was no decent knock on the door. No pushing at the chair, either. No banging or rattling. My mother was in a hiding place by the dumbwaiter, hoping against hope that the quiet meant that the woman had changed her mind and gone home.

Not so. She was walking around the house, taking her time, and stopping at every downstairs window. The storm windows, of course, were not on yet. She could press her face against every pane of glass. The blinds were all up as high

as they could go, because of the fine day. The woman was not very tall, but she did not have to stretch to see inside.

How did my mother know this? It was not as if she were running around with me in her arms, hiding behind one piece of furniture after another, peering out, distraught with terror, to see the staring eyes and maybe a wild grin.

She stayed by the dumbwaiter. What else could she do?

There was the cellar, of course. The windows were too small for anybody to get through them. But there was no inside hook on the cellar door. And it would have been more horrible, somehow, to be trapped down there in the dark, if the woman did finally push her way into the house and came down the cellar steps.

There was also the upstairs, but to get there my mother would have had to cross the big room—that big room where the beatings would take place in the future, but which was not so bad after the stairs were closed in.

I don't know when my mother first told me this story, but it seems to me that that was where the earlier versions stopped—with Mrs. Netterfield pressing her face and hands against the glass while my mother hid. But in later versions there was an end to just looking. Impatience or anger took hold and then the rattling and the banging came. No mention of yelling. The old woman may not have had the breath to do it. Or perhaps she forgot what it was she'd come for, once her strength ran out.

Anyway, she gave up; that was all she did. After she had made her tour of the windows and doors, she went away. My mother finally got the nerve to look around and concluded that Mrs. Netterfield had gone somewhere else.

She did not, however, take the chair away from the doorknob until my father came home.

I don't mean to imply that my mother spoke of this often. It was not part of the repertoire that I got to know and, for the most part, found interesting: her struggle to get to high school; the school where she taught, in Alberta, and where the children arrived on horseback; the friends she had at Normal School; the innocent tricks that were played.

I could always make out what she was saying. I was her interpreter when other people couldn't, and sometimes I was full of misery when I had to repeat

elaborate phrases or what she thought were jokes, and I could see that people were dying to get away.

The visitation of old Mrs. Netterfield, as she called it, was not something I was ever required to talk about. But I must have known about it for a long time. I remember asking her at some point if she knew what had become of the woman afterward.

“They took her away,” she said. “She wasn’t left to die alone.”

After I was married, and had moved to Vancouver, I still got the weekly paper that was published in the town where I grew up. I think somebody, maybe my father and his second wife, made sure that I had a subscription. Often, I barely looked at it, but one time, when I did, I saw the name Netterfield. It was not the name of someone who was living in the town at present but had apparently been the maiden name of a woman in Portland, Oregon, who had written a letter to the paper. This woman, like me, still had a subscription to her home-town paper, and she had written a poem about her childhood there.

I know a grassy hillside
Above a river clear
A place of peace and pleasure
A memory very dear—

There were several verses, and as I read I began to understand that she was talking about the same river flats that I had thought belonged to me.

“The lines I am enclosing were written from memories of that old hillside,” she said. “If they are worthy of a little space in your time-honoured paper, I thank you.”

The sun upon the river
With ceaseless sparkles play
And over on the other bank
Are blossoms wild and gay—

That was our bank. My bank. Another verse was about a stand of maples. I believe she was remembering it wrong—they were elms, which had all died of Dutch Elm disease by then.

The rest of the letter made things clearer. The woman said that her father—his name had been Netterfield—had bought a piece of land from the government in

1883, in what was later called the Lower Town. The land ran down to the Maitland River.

Across the Iris-bordered stream
The shade of maples spread
And, on the river's watery field,
White geese, in flocks are fed

She had left out, just as I would have done, the way the spring got muddied up and soiled all around by horses' hooves. And manure.

In fact, I had made up some poems myself, of a very similar nature, though they were lost now, and maybe had never been written down. Verses that commended Nature, then were a bit hard to wind up. I would have composed them right around the time that I was being so intolerant of my mother, and my father was whaling the unkindness out of me. Or beating the tar out of me, as people would cheerfully say back then.

This woman said that she was born in 1876. She had spent her youth, until she was married, in her father's house. It was where the town ended and the farmlands began, and it had a sunset view.

Our house.

Is it possible that my mother never knew this, never knew that our house was where the Netterfield family had lived and that the old woman was looking in the windows of what had been her own house?

It is possible. In my old age, I have become interested enough to bother with records, and the tedious business of looking things up, and I have found that several different families owned that house between the time that the Netterfields sold it and the time that my parents moved in. You might wonder why it had been disposed of, when that woman still had years to live. Had she been left a widow, short of money? Who knows? And who was it who came and took her away, as my mother said? Perhaps it was her daughter, the same woman who wrote poems and lived in Oregon. Perhaps that daughter, grown and distant, was who she was looking for in the baby carriage. Just after my mother had grabbed me up, as she said, for dear life.

The daughter lived not so far away from me, in my adult life. I could have written to her, maybe visited. If I had not been so busy with my own young family and my own invariably torn-up writing, if I had not been so severe, in any

case, toward such literary efforts and sentiments as hers. But she might not have been happy to hear what I would have told her. The person I would really have liked to talk to then was my mother, who was no longer available.

I did not go home for my mother's last illness or for her funeral. I had two small children and nobody in Vancouver to leave them with. We could barely have afforded the trip, and my husband had a contempt for formal behavior, but why blame it on him? I felt the same. We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do—we do it all the time.

When my mother was dying, she got out of the hospital somehow, at night, and wandered around town until someone who didn't know her at all spotted her and took her in. If this were fiction, as I said, it would be too much, but it is true.