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Introduction

I find it very hard to talk about, or look at — let alone read — any work of mine, after it is published, shut away in its book. Why is this? Part of it is simple misgiving. Couldn't I have done it better, found some way to make the words serve me better? Idle to think so — there they are on the cold page. But that's not all of it. The story is a kind of extension of myself, something once attached to me and growing out of me, now lopped off, exposed and abandoned. What I feel isn't shame or regret exactly — it would be quite hypocritical to say I felt that, when exposure, publication, was surely what I had in mind all along — rather it's a queasiness, an unwillingness to look or examine. I try to master this, feeling that it's primitive and childish. I will try now.

Some of these stories are closer to my own life than others are, but not one of them is as close as people seem to think. The title story has something to do with my father's death. It has something to do with a visit I made, the summer following his death, to the McLaughlin Planetarium. But if I were to write, even for my own satisfaction, an account of my father's death, or of the trip to the Planetarium with my youngest daughter and her step-brother, the result would be

quite different, not just in factual detail, in incident, but in feeling. When you start out to write a story many things come from distant parts of your mind and attach themselves to it. Some things you thought would be part of it fall away; others expand. So with hope and trepidation and frequent surprise you put the whole thing together. And if it's a certain sort of story — first-person, seemingly artless and straight-forward — people imagine that just about all you did was write down everything that happened on a certain day.

And it's good, when they think that. It means that the story works.

All the stories, really, were made in the same way. Some come from personal experience — like "The Moons of Jupiter" or "The Stone in the Field" — others much more from observation — like "Visitors" or "Mrs Cross and Mrs Kidd." This difference becomes blurred in the making, or it should. The stories that are personal are carried inexorably away from the real. And the observed stories lose their anecdotal edges, being invaded by familiar shapes and voices.

So one hopes, anyway.

The making of "The Turkey Season," if I can get it straight, may throw some light on the process. I had been trying off and on for years to write a story about the hotel where I worked as a waitress, when I was nineteen. This was a second-rate summer hotel in Muskoka. I wanted to write something about the Second Cook, a mysterious, admirable man, and the sulky Third Cook who may or may not have been his lover, and the Pastry Chef, who was compulsively obscene. Also about a ladylike, rather musty woman, who arrived in pursuit of the Second Cook — and about the effect of all this on that familiar, clumsy, curious, brash and timid, young girl. I never got very far with this story. Then one day I found, in my father's papers, a photograph of the seasonal workers at the Turkey Barn he had managed. I think the picture was taken on Christmas Eve. There is a medieval look about it — the smocks and turbans and aprons, the tired faces, which seem both genial and suspicious, mocking and

obedient, shrewd and resigned. The picture made me think about certain kinds of hard work, about the satisfaction and the fellowship as well as the brutal effort of it. I found that the characters from my hotel story had got into this story. The Second Cook was the foreman, the Third Cook and the Pastry Chef were combined into Brian, the temporary and unsatisfactory young worker. The dowdy, determined woman in pursuit of the cook-foreman became Gladys. I got to know about Marjorie and Lily from stories I had heard from relatives, and at the hairdresser's. It was very important to me to understand the actual process of turkey-gutting, and I was lucky enough to get a fine description of it from my brother-in-law, to whom "The Turkey Season" is dedicated. But now that I have unravelled that story, do we know any better what it is about? Is it about sexuality or work, or turkeys, or the accommodations of middle-aged women or the discoveries of the young girl? When I think of the story, I think of the moment when Marjorie and Lily and the girl come out of the turkey barn, and the snow is falling, and they link arms, and sing. I think there should be a queer bright moment like that in every story, and somehow that is what the story is about.

"Accident" was the first of these stories to be written, in the winter of 1977. I was working then mostly on stories for another book. "Bardon Bus" was the last story, written in the fall of 1981. They were all written while I was living in Clinton, Ontario. During those years I went to Australia, and to China, and to Reno and Salt Lake City and many other places, but I can't see that travel ever has much effect on me, as a writer. "Bardon Bus," for instance, is partly set in Australia, but it's much more particularly set in a few strange, grubby, hectic blocks on Queen Street in Toronto, where I often live in the summers.

I have to make an effort, now, to remember what's in these stories. That's a strange thing. I make them with such energy and devotion and secret pains, and then I wiggle out and leave them, to harden and settle in their place. I feel free.

Next thing I know I've started assembling the makings; I'm getting ready to do the whole thing over again.

Alice Munro
Clinton, Ontario, 1985

Chaddeleys and Flemings

1. Connection

Cousin Iris from Philadelphia. She was a nurse. Cousin Isabel from Des Moines. She owned a florist shop. Cousin Flora from Winnipeg, a teacher; Cousin Winifred from Edmonton, a lady accountant. Maiden ladies, they were called. Old maids was too thin a term, it would not cover them. Their bosoms were heavy and intimidating — a single, armored bundle — and their stomachs and behinds full and corseted as those of any married woman. In those days it seemed to be the thing for women's bodies to swell and ripen to a good size twenty, if they were getting anything out of life at all; then, according to class and aspirations, they would either sag and loosen, go wobbly as custard under pale print dresses and damp aprons, or be girded into shapes whose firm curves and proud slopes had nothing to do with sex, everything to do with rights and power.

My mother and her cousins were the second sort of women. They wore corsets that did up the side with dozens of hooks and eyes, stockings that hissed and rasped when they crossed their legs, silk jersey dresses for the afternoon (my mother's being a cousin's hand-me-down), face powder (rachel), dry rouge, eau de

cologne, tortoise-shell, or imitation tortoise-shell, combs in their hair. They were not imaginable without such getups, unless bundled to the chin in quilted satin dressing-gowns. For my mother this style was hard to keep up; it required ingenuity, dedication, fierce effort. And who appreciated it? She did.

They all came to stay with us one summer. They came to our house because my mother was the only married one, with a house big enough to accommodate everybody, and because she was too poor to go to see them. We lived in Dalglish in Huron County in Western Ontario. The population, 2,000, was announced on a sign at the town limits. "Now there's two thousand and four," cried Cousin Iris, heaving herself out of the driver's seat. She drove a 1939 Oldsmobile. She had driven to Winnipeg to collect Flora, and Winifred, who had come down from Edmonton by train. Then they all drove to Toronto and picked up Isabel.

"And the four of us are bound to be more trouble than the whole two thousand put together," said Isabel. "Where was it—Orangeville—we laughed so hard Iris had to stop the car? She was afraid she'd drive into the ditch!"

The steps creaked under their feet.

"Breathe that air! Oh, you can't beat the country air. Is that the pump where you get your drinking water? Wouldn't that be lovely right now? A drink of well water!"

My mother told me to get a glass, but they insisted on drinking out of the tin mug.

They told how Iris had gone into a field to answer nature's call and had looked up to find herself surrounded by a ring of interested cows.

"Cows baloney!" said Iris. "They were steers."

"Bulls for all you'd know," said Winifred, letting herself down into a wicker chair. She was the fattest.

"Bulls! I'd know!" said Iris. "I hope their furniture can stand the strain, Winifred. I tell you it was a drag on the rear end of my poor car. Bulls! What a shock, it's a wonder I got my pants up!"

They told about the wild-looking town in Northern Ontario where Iris wouldn't stop the car even to let them buy a Coke. She took one look at the lumberjacks and cried, "We'd all be raped!"

“What is raped?” said my little sister.

“Oh-oh,” said Iris. “It means you get your pocketbook stolen.”

Pocketbook: an American word. My sister and I didn’t know what that meant either but we were not equal to two questions in a row. And I knew that wasn’t what rape meant anyway; it meant something dirty.

“Purse. Purse stolen,” said my mother in a festive but cautioning tone. Talk in our house was genteel.

Now came the unpacking of presents. Tins of coffee, nuts and date pudding, oysters, olives, ready-made cigarettes for my father. They all smoked, too, except for Flora, the Winnipeg school-teacher. A sign of worldliness then; in Dalglish, a sign of possible loose morals. They made it a respectable luxury.

Stockings, scarves emerged as well, a voile blouse for my mother, a pair of stiff white organdy pinafores for me and my sister (the latest thing, maybe, in Des Moines or Philadelphia but a mistake in Dalglish, where people asked us why we hadn’t taken our aprons off). And finally, a five-pound box of chocolates. Long after all the chocolates were eaten, and the cousins had gone, we kept the chocolate-box in the linen-drawer in the dining-room sideboard, waiting for some ceremonial use that never presented itself. It was still full of the empty chocolate cups of dark, fluted paper. In the wintertime I would sometimes go into the cold dining room and sniff at the cups, inhaling their smell of artifice and luxury; I would read again the descriptions on the map provided on the inside of the box-top: hazelnut, creamy nougat, Turkish delight, golden toffee, peppermint cream.

The cousins slept in the downstairs bedroom and on the pulled-out daybed in the front room. If the night was hot they thought nothing of dragging a mattress on to the verandah, or even into the yard. They drew lots for the hammock. Winifred was not allowed to draw. Far into the night you could hear them giggling, shushing each other, crying, “What was that?” We were beyond the street-lights of Dalglish, and they were amazed at the darkness, the large number of stars.

Once they decided to sing a round.

*Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream,
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.*

They didn't think Dagleish was real. They drove uptown and reported on the oddity of the shopkeepers; they imitated things they had overheard on the street. Every morning the coffee they had brought filled the house with its unfamiliar, American fragrance, and they sat around asking who had an inspiration for the day. One inspiration was to drive out into the country and pick berries. They got scratched and overheated and at one point Winifred was completely penned in, immobilized, by thorny branches, bellowing for a rescue party; nevertheless they said they had mightily enjoyed themselves. Another inspiration was to take my father's fishing-rods and go down to the river. They came home with a catch of rock bass, a fish we generally threw back. They organized picnics. They dressed up in old clothes, in old straw hats and my father's overalls, and took pictures of each other. They made layer cakes, and marvelous molded salads which were shaped like temples and colored like jewels.

One afternoon they put on a concert. Iris was an opera singer. She took the cloth off the dining-room table to drape herself in, and sent me out to collect hen feathers to put in her hair. She sang "The Indian Love Call," and "Women Are Fickle." Winifred was a bank-robber, with a water-pistol she had bought at the five-and-ten. Everybody had to do something. My sister and I sang, two songs: "Yellow Rose of Texas," and the Doxology. My mother, most amazingly, put on a pair of my father's trousers and stood on her head.

Audience and performers, the cousins were for each other, every waking moment. And sometimes asleep. Flora was the one who talked in her sleep. Since she was also the most ladylike and careful, the others stayed awake to ask her questions, trying to make her say something that would embarrass her. They told her

she swore. They said she sat bolt upright and demanded, “Why is there no damned chalk?”

She was the one I liked least because she attempted to sharpen our minds — my sister’s and mine — by throwing out mental-arithmetic questions. “If it took seven minutes to walk seven blocks, and five blocks were the same length but the other two blocks were double the length — ”

“Oh, go soak your head, Flora!” said Iris, who was the rudest.

If they didn’t get any inspiration, or it was too hot to do anything, they sat on the verandah drinking lemonade, fruit punch, ginger ale, iced tea, with maraschino cherries and chunks of ice chipped from the big chunk in the icebox. Sometimes my mother prettied up the glasses by dipping the rims in beaten egg whites, then in sugar. The cousins would say they were prostrated, they were good for nothing; but their complaints had a gratified sound, as if the heat of summer itself had been created to add drama to their lives.

Drama enough already.

In the larger world, things had happened to them. Accidents, proposals, encounters with lunatics and enemies. Iris could have been rich. A millionaire’s widow, a crazy old woman with a wig like a haystack, had been wheeled into the hospital one day, clutching a carpetbag. And what was in the carpetbag but jewels, real jewels, emeralds and diamonds and pearls as big as pullet eggs. Nobody but Iris could do a thing with her. It was Iris who persuaded her at last to throw the wig into the garbage (it was crawling with fleas), and let the jewels go into the bank vault. So attached did this old woman become to Iris that she wanted to remake her will, she wanted to leave Iris the jewels and the stocks and the money and the apartment houses. Iris would not allow it. Professional ethics ruled it out.

“You are in a position of trust. A nurse is in a position of trust.”

Then she told how she had been proposed to by an actor, dying from a life of dissipation. She allowed him to swig from a

Listerine bottle because she didn't see what difference it would make. He was a stage actor, so we wouldn't recognize the name even if she told us, which she wouldn't.

She had seen other big names, too, celebrities, the top society of Philadelphia. Not at their best.

Winifred said that she had seen things too. The real truth, the real horrible truth about some of those big wheels and socialites came out when you got a look at their finances.

We lived at the end of a road running west from Dagleish over some scrubby land where there were small wooden houses and flocks of chickens and children. The land rose to a decent height where we were and then sloped in wide fields and pastures, decorated with elm trees, down to the curve of the river. Our house was decent too, an old brick house of a fair size, but it was drafty and laid out in an inconvenient way and the trim needed paint. My mother planned to fix it up and change it all around, as soon as we got some money.

My mother did not think much of the town of Dagleish. She was often harking back, to the town of Fork Mills, in the Ottawa Valley, where she and the cousins had gone to high school, the town their grandfather had come to from England; and to England itself, which of course she had never seen. She praised Fork Mills for its stone houses, its handsome and restrained public buildings (quite different, she said, from Huron County's, where the idea had been to throw up some brick monstrosity and stick a tower on it), for its paved streets, the service in its stores, the better quality of things for sale and the better class of people. The people who thought so highly of themselves in Dagleish would be laughable to the leading families of Fork Mills. But then, the leading families of Fork Mills would themselves be humbled if they came into contact with certain families of England, to whom my mother was connected.

Connection. That was what it was all about. The cousins were a show in themselves, but they also provided a connection. A connection with the real, and prodigal, and dangerous, world.

They knew how to get on in it, they had made it take notice. They could command a classroom, a maternity ward, the public; they knew how to deal with taxi drivers and train conductors.

The other connection they provided, and my mother provided as well, was to England and history. It is a fact that Canadians of Scottish—which in Huron County we called Scotch—and Irish descent will tell you quite freely that their ancestors came out during the potato famine, with only the rags on their backs, or that they were shepherds, agricultural laborers, poor landless people. But anyone whose ancestors came from England will have some story of black sheep or younger sons, financial reverses, lost inheritances, elopements with unsuitable partners. There may be some amount of truth in this; conditions in Scotland and Ireland were such as to force wholesale emigration, while Englishmen may have chosen to leave home for more colorful, personal reasons.

This was the case with the Chaddeley family, my mother's family. Isabel and Iris were not Chaddeleys by name, but their mother had been a Chaddeley; my mother had been a Chaddeley, though she was now a Fleming; Flora and Winifred were Chaddeleys still. All were descended from a grandfather who left England as a young man for reasons they did not quite agree on. My mother believed that he had been a student at Oxford, but had lost all the money his family sent him, and had been ashamed to go home. He lost it by gambling. No, said Isabel, that was just the story; what really happened was that he got a servant girl in trouble and was compelled to marry her, and take her to Canada. The family estates were near Canterbury, said my mother. (Canterbury pilgrims, Canterbury bells.) The others were not sure of that. Flora said that they were in the west of England, and that the name Chaddeley was said to be related to Cholmondeley; there was a Lord Cholmondeley, the Chaddeleys could be a branch of that family. But there was also the possibility, she said, that it was French, it was originally *Champ de laiche*, which means field of sedge. In that case the family had probably come to England with William the Conqueror.

Isabel said she was not an intellectual and the only person she

knew from English history was Mary Queen of Scots. She wanted somebody to tell her if William the Conqueror came before Mary Queen of Scots, or after?

“Sedge fields,” said my father agreeably. “That wouldn’t exactly make them a fortune.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know sedge from oats,” said Iris. “But they were prosperous enough in England, according to Grandpa, they were gentry there.”

“Before,” said Flora, “and Mary Queen of Scots wasn’t even English.”

“I knew that from the name,” said Isabel. “So ha-ha.”

Every one of them believed, whatever the details, that there had been a great comedown, a dim catastrophe, and that beyond them, behind them, in England, lay lands and houses and ease and honor. How could they think otherwise, remembering their grandfather?

He had worked as a postal clerk, in Fork Mills. His wife, whether she was a seduced servant or not, bore him eight children, then died. As soon as the older children were out to work and contributing money to the household—there was no nonsense about educating them—the father quit work. A fight with the Postmaster was the immediate reason, but he really had no intention of working any longer; he had made up his mind to stay at home, supported by his children. He had the air of a gentleman, was widely read, and full of rhetoric and self-esteem. His children did not balk at supporting him; they sank into their commonplace jobs, but pushed their own children—they limited themselves to one or two apiece, mostly daughters—out to Business School, to Normal School, to Nurses Training. My mother and her cousins, who were these children, talked often about their selfish and wilful grandfather, hardly ever about their decent, hard-working parents. What an old snob he was, they said, but how handsome, even as an old man, what a carriage. What ready and appropriate insults he had for people, what scathing judgements he could make. Once, in faraway Toronto, on the main floor of Eaton’s as a matter of fact, he was accosted by the harnessmaker’s wife from Fork Mills, a