buried. Many people will continue to believe that he did something or saw something. *He had something to do with it.* When he is committed to the Provincial Asylum, renamed the Mental Health Centre, there will be letters in the local paper about Preventive Custody, and locking the stable door after the horse is stolen.

There will also be letters in the newspaper from Mary Johnstone, explaining why she behaved as she did, why in all good sense and good faith she behaved as she did that Sunday. Finally the editor will have to let her know that Heather Bell is old news, and not the only thing the town wants to be known for, and if the hikes are to come to an end it won't be the worst thing in the world, and the story can't be rehashed forever.

Maureen is a young woman yet, though she doesn't think so, and she has life ahead of her. First a death—that will come soon—then another marriage, new places and houses. In kitchens hundreds and thousands of miles away, she'll watch the soft skin form on the back of a wooden spoon and her memory will twitch, but it will not quite reveal to her this moment when she seems to be looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it.

ALICE MUNRO

OPEN SECRETS

Vintage 1995

The Jack Randa Hotel

On the runway, in Honolulu, the plane loses speed, loses heart, falters and veers onto the grass, and bumps to a stop. A few yards it seems from the ocean. Inside, everybody laughs. First a hush, then the laugh. Gail laughed herself. Then there was a flurry of introductions all around. Beside Gail are Larry and Phyllis, from Spokane.

Larry and Phyllis are going to a tournament of Left-handed Golfers, in Fiji, as are many other couples on this plane. It is Larry who is the left-handed golfer—Phyllis is the wife going along to watch and cheer and have fun.

They sit on the plane—Gail and the Left-handed Golfers—and lunch is served in picnic boxes. No drinks. Dreadful heat. Jokey and confusing announcements are made from the cockpit. *Sorry about the problem. Nothing serious but it looks like it will keep us stewing here a while longer.* Phyllis has a terrible

headache, which Larry tries to cure by applying finger-pressure to points on her wrist and palm.

"It's not working," Phyllis says. "I could have been in New Orleans by now with Suzy."

Larry says, "Poor lamb."

Gail catches the fierce glitter of diamond rings as Phyllis pulls her hand away. Wives have diamond rings and headaches, Gail thinks. They still do. The truly successful ones do. They have chubby husbands, left-handed golfers, bent on a lifelong course of appeasement.

Eventually the passengers who are not going to Fiji, but on to Sydney, are taken off the plane. They are led into the terminal and there deserted by their airline guide they wander about, retrieving their baggage and going through customs, trying to locate the airline that is supposed to honor their tickets. At one point, they are accosted by a welcoming committee from one of the Island's hotels, who will not stop singing Hawaiian songs and flinging garlands around their necks. But they find themselves on another plane at last. They eat and drink and sleep and the lines to the toilets lengthen and the aisles fill up with debris and the flight attendants hide in their cubbyholes chatting about children and boyfriends. Then comes the unsettling bright morning and the yellow-sanded coast of Australia far below, and the wrong time of day, and even the best-dressed, best-looking passengers are haggard and unwilling, torpid, as from a long trip in steerage. And before they can leave the plane there is one more assault. Hairy men in shorts swarm aboard and spray everything with insecticide.

"So maybe this is the way it will be getting into Heaven," Gail imagines herself saying to Will. "People will fling flowers on you that you don't want, and everybody will have headaches and be constipated and then you will have to be sprayed for Earth germs."

Her old habit, trying to think up clever and lighthearted things to say to Will.

* * *

After Will went away, it seemed to Gail that her shop was filling up with women. Not necessarily buying clothes. She didn't mind this. It was like the long-ago days, before Will. Women were sitting around in ancient armchairs beside Gail's ironing board and cutting table, behind the faded batik curtains, drinking coffee. Gail started grinding the coffee beans herself, as she used to do. The dressmaker's dummy was soon draped with beads and had a scattering of scandalous graffiti. Stories were told about men, usually about men who had left. Lies and injustices and confrontations. Betrayals so horrific—yet so trite—that you could only rock with laughter when you heard them. Men made fatuous speeches *(I am sorry, but I no longer feel committed to this marriage)*. They offered to sell back to the wives cars and furniture that the wives themselves had paid for. They capered about in self-satisfaction because they had managed to impregnate some dewy dollop of womanhood younger than their own children. They were fiendish and childish. What could you do but give up on them? In all honor, in pride, and for your own protection?

Gail's enjoyment of all this palled rather quickly. Too much coffee could make your skin look livery. An underground quarrel developed among the women when it turned out that one of them had placed an ad in the Personal Column. Gail shifted from coffee with friends to drinks with Cleata, Will's mother. As she did this, oddly enough her spirits grew more sober. Some giddiness still showed in the notes she pinned to her door so that she could get away early on summer afternoons. (Her clerk, Donalda, was on her holidays, and it was too much trouble to hire anybody else.)

Gone to the Opera.
Gone to the Funny Farm.
Gone to stock up on the Sackcloth and Ashes.

Actually these were not her own inventions, but things Will used to write out and tape on her door in the early days when they wanted to go upstairs. She heard that such flippancy was not appreciated by people who had driven some distance to buy a dress for a wedding, or girls on an expedition to buy clothes for college. She did not care.

On Cleata's veranda Gail was soothed, she became vaguely hopeful. Like most serious drinkers, Cleata stuck to one drink—hers was Scotch—and seemed amused by variations. But she would make Gail a gin and tonic, a white rum and soda. She introduced her to tequila. "This is Heaven," Gail sometimes said, meaning not just the drink but the screened veranda and hedged back yard, the old house behind them with its shuttered windows, varnished floors, inconveniently high kitchen cupboards, and out-of-date flowered curtains. (Cleata despised decorating.) This was the house where Will, and Cleata too, had been born, and when Will first brought Gail into it, she had thought, This is how really civilized people live. The carelessness and propriety combined, the respect for old books and old dishes. The absurd things that Will and Cleata thought it natural to talk about. And the things she and Cleata didn't talk about—Will's present defection, the illness that has made Cleata's arms and legs look like varnished twigs within their deep tan, and has hollowed the cheeks framed by her looped-back white hair. She and Will have the same slightly monkeyish face, with dreamy, mocking dark eyes.

Instead, Cleata talked about the book she was reading, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. She said that the reason the Dark Ages were dark was not that we couldn't learn anything about them but that we could not remember anything we did learn, and that was because of the names.

"Caedwalla," she said. "Egfrith. These are just not names on the tip of your tongue anymore."

Gail was trying to remember which ages, or centuries, were

dark. But her ignorance didn't embarrass her. Cleata was making fun of all that, anyway.

"Aelfflaed," said Cleata, and spelled it out. "What kind of a heroine is Aelfflaed?"

When Cleata wrote to Will, she probably wrote about Aelfflaed and Egfrith. Not about Gail. Not *Gail was here looking very pretty in some kind of silky gray summer-pajamas outfit. She was in good form, made various witty remarks.* . . . No more than she would say to Gail, "I have my doubts about the lovebirds. Reading between the lines, I can't help wondering if disillusionment isn't setting in. . . ."

When she met Will and Cleata, Gail thought they were like characters in a book. A son living with his mother, apparently contentedly, into middle age. Gail saw a life that was ceremonious and absurd and enviable, with at least the appearance of celibate grace and safety. She still sees some of that, though the truth is Will has not always lived at home, and he is neither celibate nor discreetly homosexual. He had been gone for years, into his own life—working for the National Film Board and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation—and had given that up only recently, to come back to Walley and be a teacher. What made him give it up? This and that, he said. Machiavellis here and there. Empire-building. Exhaustion.

Gail came to Walley one summer in the seventies. The boyfriend she was with then was a boatbuilder, and she sold clothes that she made—capes with appliqués, shirts with billowing sleeves, long bright skirts. She got space in the back of the craft shop, when winter came on. She learned about importing ponchos and thick socks from Bolivia and Guatemala. She found local women to knit sweaters. One day Will stopped her on the street and asked her to help him with the costumes for the play he was putting on—*The Skin of Our Teeth*. Her boyfriend moved to Vancouver.

She told Will some things about herself early on, in case he

should think that with her capable build and pink skin and wide gentle forehead she was exactly the kind of a woman to start a family on. She told him that she had had a baby, and that when she and her boyfriend were moving some furniture in a borrowed van, from Thunder Bay to Toronto, carbon-monoxide fumes had leaked in, just enough to make them feel sick but enough to kill the baby, who was seven weeks old. After that Gail was sick—she had a pelvic inflammation. She decided she did not want to have another child and it would have been difficult anyway, so she had a hysterectomy.

Will admired her. He said so. He did not feel obliged to say, What a tragedy! He did not even obliquely suggest that the death was the result of choices Gail had made. He was entranced with her then. He thought her brave and generous and resourceful and gifted. The costumes she designed and made for him were perfect, miraculous. Gail thought that his view of her, of her life, showed a touching innocence. It seemed to her that far from being a free and generous spirit, she had often been anxious and desperate and had spent a lot of time doing laundry and worrying about money and feeling she owed so much to any man who took up with her. She did not think she was in love with Will then, but she liked his looks—his energetic body, so upright it seemed taller than it was, his flung-back head, shiny high forehead, springy ruff of graying hair. She liked to watch him at rehearsals, or just talking to his students. How skilled and intrepid he seemed as a director, how potent a personality as he walked the high-school halls or the streets of Walley. And then the slightly quaint, admiring feelings he had for her, his courtesy as a lover, the foreign pleasantness of his house and his life with Cleata—all this made Gail feel like somebody getting a unique welcome in a place where perhaps she did not truly have a right to be. That did not matter then—she had the upper hand.

So when did she stop having it? When he got used to

sleeping with her when they moved in together, when they did so much work on the cottage by the river and it turned out that she was better at that kind of work than he was?

Was she a person who believed that somebody had to have the upper hand?

There came a time when just the tone of his voice, saying "Your shoelace is undone" as she went ahead of him on a walk—just that—could fill her with despair, warning her that they had crossed over into a bleak country where his disappointment in her was boundless, his contempt impossible to challenge. She would stumble eventually, break out in a rage—they would have days and nights of fierce hopelessness. Then the breakthrough, the sweet reunion, the jokes, and bewildered relief. So it went on in their life—she couldn't really understand it or tell if it was like anybody else's. But the peaceful periods seemed to be getting longer, the dangers retreating, and she had no inkling that he was waiting to meet somebody like this new person, Sandy, who would seem to him as alien and delightful as Gail herself had once been.

Will probably had no inkling of that, either.

He had never had much to say about Sandy—Sandra—who had come to Walley last year on an exchange program to see how drama was being taught in Canadian schools. He had said she was a young Turk. Then he had said she mightn't even have heard that expression. Very soon, there had developed some sort of electricity, or danger, around her name. Gail got some information from other sources. She heard that Sandy had challenged Will in front of his class. Sandy had said that the plays he wanted to do were "not relevant." Or maybe it was "not revolutionary."

"But he likes her," one of his students said. "Oh, yeah, he *really likes* her."

Sandy didn't stay around long. She went on to observe the teaching of drama in the other schools. But she wrote to Will,

and presumably he wrote back. For it turned out that they had fallen in love. Will and Sandy had fallen seriously in love, and at the end of the school year Will followed her to Australia.

Seriously in love. When Will told her that, Gail was smoking dope. She had taken it up again, because being around Will was making her so nervous.

"You mean it's not me?" Gail said. "You mean I'm not the trouble?"

She was giddy with relief. She got into a bold and boisterous mood and bewildered Will into going to bed with her.

In the morning they tried to avoid being in the same room together. They agreed not to correspond. Perhaps later, Will said. Gail said, "Suit yourself."

But one day at Cleata's house Gail saw his writing on an envelope that had surely been left where she could see it. Cleata had left it—Cleata who never spoke one word about the fugitives. Gail wrote down the return address: 16 Eyre Rd., Toowong, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

It was when she saw Will's writing that she understood how useless everything had become to her. This bare-fronted pre-Victorian house in Walley, and the veranda, and the drinks, and the catalpa tree that she was always looking at, in Cleata's back yard. All the trees and streets in Walley, all the liberating views of the lake and the comfort of the shop. Useless cutouts, fakes and props. The real scene was hidden from her, in Australia.

That was why she found herself sitting on the plane beside the woman with the diamond rings. Her own hands have no rings on them, no polish on the nails—the skin is dry from all the work she does with cloth. She used to call the clothes she made "handcrafted," until Will made her embarrassed about that description. She still doesn't quite see what was wrong.

She sold the shop—she sold it to Donalda, who had wanted to buy it for a long time. She took the money, and she got

herself onto a flight to Australia and did not tell anyone where she was going. She lied, talking about a long holiday that would start off in England. Then somewhere in Greece for the winter, then who knows?

The night before she left, she did a transformation on herself. She cut off her heavy reddish-gray hair and put a dark-brown rinse on what was left of it. The color that resulted was strange—a deep maroon, obviously artificial but rather too sombre for any attempt at glamour. She picked out from her shop—even though the contents no longer belonged to her—a dress of a kind she would never usually wear, a jacket-dress of dark-blue linen-look polyester with lightning stripes of red and yellow. She is tall, and broad in the hips, and she usually wears things that are loose and graceful. This outfit gives her chunky shoulders, and cuts her legs at an unflattering spot above the knees. What sort of woman did she think she was making herself into? The sort that a woman like Phyllis would play bridge with? If so, she has got it wrong. She has come out looking like somebody who has spent most of her life in uniform, at some worthy, poorly paid job (perhaps in a hospital cafeteria?), and now has spent too much money for a dashing dress that will turn out to be inappropriate and uncomfortable, on the holiday of her life.

That doesn't matter. It is a disguise.

In the airport washroom, on a new continent, she sees that the dark hair coloring, insufficiently rinsed out the night before, has mixed with her sweat and is trickling down her neck.

Gail has landed in Brisbane, still not used to what time of day it is and persecuted by so hot a sun. She is still wearing her horrid dress, but she has washed her hair so that the color no longer runs.

She has taken a taxi. Tired as she is, she cannot settle, can-

not rest until she has seen where they live. She has already bought a map and found Eyre Road. A short, curving street. She asks to be let out at the corner, where there is a little grocery store. This is the place where they buy their milk, most likely, or other things that they may have run out of. Detergent, aspirin, tampons.

The fact that Gail never met Sandy was of course an ominous thing. It must have meant that Will knew something very quickly. Later attempts to ferret out a description did not yield much. Tall rather than short. Thin rather than fat. Fair rather than dark. Gail had a mental picture of one of those long-legged, short-haired, energetic, and boyishly attractive girls. *Women.* But she wouldn't know Sandy if she ran into her.

Would anybody know Gail? With her dark glasses and her unlikely hair, she feels so altered as to be invisible. It's also the fact of being in a strange country that has transformed her. She's not tuned into it yet. Once she gets tuned in, she may not be able to do the bold things she can do now. She has to walk this street, look at the house, right away, or she may not be able to do it at all.

The road that the taxi climbed was steep, up from the brown river. Eyre Road runs along a ridge. There is no sidewalk, just a dusty path. No one walking, no cars passing, no shade. Fences of boards or a kind of basket-weaving—wattles?—or in some cases high hedges covered with flowers. No, the flowers are really leaves of a purplish-pink or crimson color. Trees unfamiliar to Gail are showing over the fences. They have tough-looking dusty foliage, scaly or stringy bark, a shabby ornamental air. An indifference or vague ill will about them, which she associated with the tropics. Walking on the path ahead of her are a pair of guinea hens, stately and preposterous.

The house where Will and Sandy live is hidden by a board fence, painted a pale green. Gail's heart shrinks—her heart is in a cruel clutch, to see that fence, that green.

The road is a dead end so she has to turn around. She walks past the house again. In the fence there are gates to let a car in and out. There is also a mail slot. She noticed one of these before in a fence in front of another house, and the reason she noticed it was that there was a magazine sticking out. So the mailbox is not very deep, and a hand, slipping in, might be able to find an envelope resting on its end. If the mail has not been taken out yet by a person in the house. And Gail does slip a hand in. She can't stop herself. She finds a letter there, just as she had thought it might be. She puts it into her purse.

She calls a taxi from the shop at the corner of the street. "What part of the States are you from?" the man in the shop asks her.

"Texas," she says. She has an idea that they would like you to be from Texas, and indeed the man lifts his eyebrows, whistles.

"I thought so," he says.

It is Will's own writing on the envelope. Not a letter to Will, then, but a letter from him. A letter he had sent to Ms. Catherine Thornaby, 491 Hawtre Street. Also in Brisbane. Another hand has scrawled across it "Return to Sender, Died Sept. 13." For a moment, in her disordered state of mind, Gail thinks that this means that Will has died.

She has got to calm down, collect herself, stay out of the sun for a bit.

Nevertheless, as soon as she has read the letter in her hotel room, and has tidied herself up, she takes another taxi, this time to Hawtre Street, and finds, as she expected, a sign in the window: "Flat to Let."

But what is in the letter that Will has written Ms. Catherine Thornaby, on Hawtre Street?

Dear Ms. Thornaby,

You do not know me, but I hope that once I have explained myself, we may meet and talk. I believe that I may be a Canadian cousin of yours, my grandfather having come to Canada from Northumberland sometime in the 1870s about the same time as a brother of his went to Australia. My grandfather's name was William, like my own, his brother's name was Thomas. Of course I have no proof that you are descended from this Thomas. I simply looked in the Brisbane phone book and was delighted to find there a Thornaby spelled in the same way. I used to think this family-tracing business was the silliest, most boring thing imaginable but now that I find myself doing it, I discover there is a strange excitement about it. Perhaps it is my age—I am 56—that urges me to find connections. And I have more time on my hands than I am used to. My wife is working with a theatre here which keeps her busy till all hours. She is a very bright and energetic young woman. (She scolds me if I refer to any female over 18 as a girl and she is all of 28!) I taught drama in a Canadian high school but I have not yet found any work in Australia.

Wife. He is trying to be respectable in the eyes of the possible cousin.

Dear Mr. Thornaby,

The name we share may be a more common one than you suppose, though I am at present its only representative in the Brisbane phone book. You may not know that the name comes from Thorn Abbey, the ruins of which are still to be seen in Northumberland. The spelling varies—Thornaby, Thornby, Thornabbey, Thornabby. In the Middle Ages the name of the Lord of the Manor would be taken as a surname by all the people working on the estate, including laborers, blacksmiths, carpenters, etc. As a result there are many people scattered around the world bearing a name that in the strict sense they have no right to. Only those who can trace their descent from the family in the twelfth century are the true, armigerous Thornabys. That is, they have the right to display the family coat of arms. I am one of these Thornabys and since you do not mention anything about the coat of arms and do not trace your ancestry back beyond this William I assume that you are not. My grandfather's name was Jonathan.

Gail writes this on an old portable typewriter that she has bought from the secondhand shop down the street. By this time she is living at 491 Hawtre Street, in an apartment building called the Miramar. It is a two-story building covered with dingy cream stucco, with twisted pillars on either side of a grilled entryway. It has a perfunctory Moorish or Spanish or Californian air, like that of an old movie theatre. The manager told her that the flat was very modern.

"An elderly lady had it, but she had to go to the hospital. Then somebody came when she died and got her effects out, but it still has the basic furniture that goes with the flat. What part of the States are you from?"

Oklahoma, Gail said. Mrs. Massie, from Oklahoma.

The manager looks to be about seventy years old. He wears glasses that magnify his eyes, and he walks quickly, but rather unsteadily, tilting forward. He speaks of difficulties—the increase of the foreign element in the population, which makes it hard to find good repairmen, the carelessness of certain tenants, the malicious acts of passersby who continually litter the grass. Gail asks if he had put in a notice yet to the Post Office. He says he has been intending to, but the lady did not receive

hardly any mail. Except one letter came. It was a strange thing that it came right the day after she died. He sent it back.

"I'll do it," Gail said. "I'll tell the Post Office."

"I'll have to sign it, though. Get me one of those forms they have and I'll sign it and you can give it in. I'd be obliged."

The walls of the apartment are painted white—this must be what is modern about it. It has bamboo blinds, a tiny kitchen, a green sofa bed, a table, a dresser, and two chairs. On the wall one picture, which might have been a painting or a tinted photograph. A yellowish-green desert landscape, with rocks and bunches of sage and dim distant mountains. Gail is sure that she has seen this before.

She paid the rent in cash. She had to be busy for a while, buying sheets and towels and groceries, a few pots and dishes, the typewriter. She had to open a bank account, become a person living in the country, not a traveller. There are shops hardly a block away. A grocery store, a secondhand store, a drugstore, a tea shop. They are all humble establishments with strips of colored paper hanging in the doorways, wooden awnings over the sidewalk in front. Their offerings are limited. The tea shop has only two tables, the secondhand store contains scarcely more than the tumbled-out accumulation of one ordinary house. The cereal boxes in the grocery store, the bottles of cough syrup and packets of pills in the drugstore are set out singly on the shelves, as if they were of special value or significance.

But she has found what she needs. In the secondhand store she found some loose flowered cotton dresses, a straw bag for her groceries. Now she looks like the other women she sees on the street. Housewives, middle-aged, with bare but pale arms and legs, shopping in the early morning or late afternoon. She bought a floppy straw hat too, to shade her face as the women do. Dim, soft, freckly, blinking faces.

Night comes suddenly around six o'clock and she must find occupation for the evenings. There is no television in the

apartment. But a little beyond the shops there is a lending library, run by an old woman out of the front room of her house. This woman wears a hairnet and gray lisle stockings in spite of the heat. (Where, nowadays, can you find gray lisle stockings?) She has an undernourished body and colorless, tight, unsmiling lips. She is the person Gail calls to mind when she writes the letter from Catherine Thornaby. She thinks of this library woman by that name whenever she sees her, which is almost every day, because you are only allowed one book at a time and Gail usually reads a book a night. She thinks, There is Catherine Thornaby, dead and moved into a new existence a few blocks away.

All the business about armigerous and non-armigerous Thornabys came out of a book. Not one of the books that Gail is reading now but one she read in her youth. The hero was the non-armigerous but deserving heir to a great property. She cannot remember the title. She lived with people then who were always reading *Steppenwolf*, or *Dune*, or something by Krishnamurti, and she read historical romances apologetically. She did not think Will would have read such a book or picked up this sort of information. And she is sure that he will have to reply, to tell Catherine off.

She waits, and reads the books from the lending library, which seem to come from an even earlier time than those romances she read twenty years ago. Some of them she took out of the public library in Winnipeg before she left home, and they seemed old-fashioned even then. *The Girl of the Limberlost. The Blue Castle. Maria Chapdelaine.* Such books remind her, naturally, of her life before Will. There was such a life and she could still salvage something from it, if she wanted to. She has a sister living in Winnipeg. She has an aunt there, in a nursing home, who still reads books in Russian. Gail's grandparents came from Russia, her parents could still speak Russian, her real name is not Gail, but Galya. She

cut herself off from her family—or they cut her off—when she left home at eighteen to wander about the country, as you did in those days. First with friends, then with a boyfriend, then with another boyfriend. She strung beads and tie-dyed scarves and sold them on the street.

Dear Ms. Thornaby,

I must thank you for enlightening me as to the important distinction between the armigerous and the non-armigerous Thornabys. I gather that you have a strong suspicion that I may turn out to be one of the latter. I beg your pardon—I had no intention of treading on such sacred ground or of wearing the Thornaby coat of arms on my T-shirt. We do not take much account of such things in my country and I did not think you did so in Australia, but I see that I am mistaken. Perhaps you are too far on in years to have noticed the change in values. It is quite different with me, since I have been in the teaching profession and am constantly brought up, as well, against the energetic arguments of a young wife.

My innocent intention was simply to get in touch with somebody in this country outside the theatrical-academic circle that my wife and I seem to be absorbed in. I have a mother in Canada, whom I miss. In fact your letter reminded me of her a little. She would be capable of writing such a letter for a joke but I doubt whether you are joking. It sounds like a case of Exalted Ancestry to me.

When he is offended and disturbed in a certain way—a way that is hard to predict and hard for most people to recognize—Will becomes heavily sarcastic. Irony deserts him. He flails about, and the effect is to make people embarrassed

not for themselves, as he intends, but for him. This happens seldom, and usually when it happens it means that he feels deeply unappreciated. It means that he has even stopped appreciating himself.

So that is what happened. Gail thinks so. Sandy and her young friends with their stormy confidence, their crude righteousness might be making him miserable. His wit not taken notice of, his enthusiasms out-of-date. No way of making himself felt amongst them. His pride in being attached to Sandy going gradually sour.

She thinks so. He is shaky and unhappy and casting about to know somebody else. He has thought of family ties, here in this country of non-stop blooming and impudent bird life and searing days and suddenly clamped-down nights.

Dear Mr. Thornaby,

Did you really expect me, just because I have the same surname as you, to fling open my door and put out the "welcome mat"—as I think you say in America and that inevitably includes Canada? You may be looking for another mother here, but that hardly obliges me to be one. By the way you are quite wrong about my age—I am younger than you by several years, so do not picture me as an elderly spinster in a hairnet with gray lisle stockings. I know the world probably as well as you do. I travel a good deal, being a fashion buyer for a large store. So my ideas are not so out-of-date as you suppose.

You do not say whether your busy energetic young wife was to be a part of this familial friendship. I am surprised you feel the need for other contacts. It seems I am always reading or hearing on the media about these "May-December" relationships and how invigorating they are and how happily the men are settling down

to domesticity and parenthood. (No mention of the "trial runs" with women closer to their own age or mention of how those women are settling down to their lives of loneliness!) So perhaps you need to become a papa to give you a "sense of family"!

Gail is surprised at how fluently she writes. She has always found it hard to write letters, and the results have been dull and sketchy, with many dashes and incomplete sentences and pleas of insufficient time. Where has she got this fine nasty style—out of some book, like the armigerous nonsense? She goes out in the dark to post her letter feeling bold and satisfied. But she wakes up early the next morning thinking that she has certainly gone too far. He will never answer that, she will never hear from him again.

She gets up and leaves the building, goes for a morning walk. The shops are still shut up, the broken venetian blinds are closed, as well as they can be, in the windows of the front-room library. She walks as far as the river, where there is a strip of park beside a hotel. Later in the day, she could not walk or sit there because the verandas of the hotel were always crowded with uproarious beer-drinkers, and the park was within their verbal or even bottle-throwing range. Now the verandas are empty, the doors are closed, and she walks in under the trees. The brown water of the river spreads sluggishly among the mangrove stumps. Birds are flying over the water, lighting on the hotel roof. They are not sea gulls, as she thought at first. They are smaller than gulls, and their bright white wings and breasts are touched with pink.

In the park two men are sitting—one on a bench, one in a wheelchair beside the bench. She recognizes them—they live in her building, and go for walks every day. Once, she held the grille open for them to pass through. She has seen them at the shops, and sitting at the table in the tearoom window.

The man in the wheelchair looks quite old and ill. His face is puckered like old blistered paint. He wears dark glasses and a coal-black toupee and a black beret over that. He is all wrapped up in a blanket. Even later in the day, when the sun is hot—every time she has seen them—he has been wrapped in this plaid blanket. The man who pushes the wheelchair and who now sits on the bench is young enough to look like an overgrown boy. He is tall and large-limbed but not manly. A young giant, bewildered by his own extent. Strong but not athletic, with a stiffness, maybe of timidity, in his thick arms and legs and neck. Red hair not just on his head but on his bare arms and above the buttons of his shirt.

Gail halts in her walk past them, she says good morning. The young man answers almost inaudibly. It seems to be his habit to look out at the world with majestic indifference, but she thinks her greeting has given him a twitch of embarrassment or apprehension. Nevertheless she speaks again, she says, "What are those birds I see everywhere?"

"Galah birds," the young man says, making it sound something like her childhood name. She is going to ask him to repeat it, when the old man bursts out in what seems like a string of curses. The words are knotted and incomprehensible to her, because of the Australian accent on top of some European accent, but the concentrated viciousness is beyond any doubt. And these words are meant for her—he is leaning forward, in fact struggling to free himself from the straps that hold him in. He wants to leap at her, lunge at her, chase her out of sight. The young man makes no apology and does not take any notice of Gail but leans towards the old man and gently pushes him back, saying things to him which she cannot hear. She sees that there will be no explanation. She walks away.

For ten days, no letter. No word. She cannot think what to do. She walks every day—that is mostly what she does. The Miramar is only about a mile or so away from Will's street. She

never walks in that street again or goes into the shop where she told the man that she was from Texas. She cannot imagine how she could have been so bold, the first day. She does walk in the streets nearby. Those streets all go along ridges. In between the ridges, which the houses cling to, there are steep-sided gullies full of birds and trees. Even as the sun grows hot, those birds are not quiet. Magpies keep up their disquieting conversation and sometimes emerge to make menacing flights at her light-colored hat. The birds with the name like her own cry out foolishly as they rise and whirl about and subside into the leaves. She walks till she is dazed and sweaty and afraid of sunstroke. She shivers in the heat—most fearful, most desirous, of seeing Will's utterly familiar figure, that one rather small and jaunty, free-striding package, of all that could pain or appease her, in the world.

Dear Mr. Thornaby,

This is just a short note to beg your pardon if I was impolite and hasty in my replies to you, as I am sure I was. I have been under some stress lately, and have taken a leave of absence to recuperate. Under these circumstances one does not always behave as well as one would hope or see things as rationally. . . .

One day she walks past the hotel and the park. The verandas are clamorous with the afternoon drinking. All the trees in the park have come out in bloom. The flowers are a color that she has seen and could not have imagined on trees before—a shade of silvery blue, or silvery purple, so delicate and beautiful that you would think it would shock everything into quietness, into contemplation, but apparently it has not.

When she gets back to the Miramar, she finds the young man with the red hair standing in the downstairs hall, outside the door of the apartment where he lives with the old man. From behind the closed apartment door come the sounds of a tirade.

The young man smiles at her, this time. She stops and they stand together, listening.

Gail says, "If you would ever like a place to sit down while you're waiting, you know you're welcome to come upstairs."

He shakes his head, still smiling as if this was a joke between them. She thinks she should say something else before she leaves him there, so she asks him about the trees in the park. "Those trees beside the hotel," she says. "Where I saw you the other morning? They are all out in bloom now. What are they called?"

He says a word she cannot catch. She asks him to repeat it. "Jack Randa," he says. "That's the Jack Randa Hotel."

Dear Ms. Thornaby,

I have been away and when I came back I found both your letters waiting for me. I opened them in the wrong order, though that really doesn't matter.

My mother has died. I have been "home" to Canada for her funeral. It is cold there, autumn. Many things have changed. Why I should want to tell you this I simply do not know. We have certainly got off on the wrong track with each other. Even if I had not got your note of explanation after the first letter you wrote, I think I would have been glad in a peculiar way to get the first letter. I wrote you a very snippy and unpleasant letter and you wrote me back one of the same. The snippiness and unpleasantness and readiness to take offense seems somehow familiar to me. Ought I to risk your armigerous wrath by suggesting that we may be related after all?

I feel adrift here. I admire my wife and her theatre friends, with their zeal and directness and commitment, their hope of using their talents to create a better world. (I must say though that it often seems to me that the hope and zeal exceed the talents.) I cannot be one of them. I must say

that they saw this before I did. It must be because I am woozy with jet lag after that horrendous flight that I can face up to this fact and that I write it down in a letter to someone like you who has her own troubles and quite correctly has indicated she doesn't want to be bothered with mine. I had better close, in fact, before I burden you with further claptrap from my psyche. I wouldn't blame you if you had stopped reading before you got this far. . . .

Gail lies on the sofa pressing this letter with both hands against her stomach. Many things are changed. He has been in Walley, then—he has been told how she sold the shop and started out on her great world trip. But wouldn't he have heard that anyway, from Cleata? Maybe not, Cleata was close-mouthed. And when she went into the hospital, just before Gail left, she said, "I don't want to see or hear from anybody for a while or bother with letters. These treatments are bound to be a bit melodramatic."

Cleata is dead.

Gail knew that Cleata would die, but somehow thought that everything would hold still, nothing could really happen there while she, Gail, remained here. Cleata is dead and Will is alone except for Sandy, and Sandy perhaps has stopped being of much use to him.

There is a knock on the door. Gail jumps up in a great disturbance, looking for a scarf to cover her hair. It is the manager, calling her false name.

"I just wanted to tell you I had somebody here asking questions. He asked me about Miss Thornaby and I said, Oh, she's dead. She's been dead for some time now. He said, Oh, has she? I said, Yes, she has, and he said, Well, that's strange."

"Did he say why?" Gail says, "Did he say why it was strange?"

"No. I said, She died in the hospital and I've got an American lady in the flat now. I forgot where you told me you came from. He sounded like an American himself, so it might've meant something to him. I said, There was a letter come for Miss Thornaby after she was dead, did you write that letter? I told him I sent it back. Yes, he said, I wrote it, but I never got it back. There must be some kind of mistake, he said."

Gail says there must be. "Like a mistaken identity," she says.

"Yes. Like that."

Dear Ms. Thornaby,

It has come to my attention that you are dead. I know that life is strange, but I have never found it quite this strange before. Who are you and what is going on? It seems this rigamarole about the Thornabys must have been just that—a rigamarole. You must certainly be a person with time on your hands and a fantasizing turn of mind. I resent being taken in but I suppose I understand the temptation. I do think you owe me an explanation now as to whether or not my explanation is true and this is some joke. Or am I dealing with some "fashion buyer" from beyond the grave? (Where did you get that touch or is it the truth?)

When Gail goes out to buy food, she uses the back door of the building, she takes a roundabout route to the shops. On her return by the same back-door route, she comes upon the young red-haired man standing between the dustbins. If he had not been so tall, you might have said that he was hidden there. She speaks to him but he doesn't answer. He looks at her through tears, as if the tears were nothing but a wavy glass, something usual.

"Is your father sick?" Gail says to him. She has decided that this must be the relationship, though the age gap seems greater than usual between father and son, and the two of

them are quite unalike in looks, and the young man's patience and fidelity are so far beyond—nowadays they seem even contrary to—anything a son customarily shows. But they go beyond anything a hired attendant might show, as well.

"No," the young man says, and though his expression stays calm, a drowning flush spreads over his face, under the delicate redhead's skin.

Lovers, Gail thinks. She is suddenly sure of it. She feels a shiver of sympathy, an odd gratification.

Lovers.

She goes down to her mailbox after dark and finds there another letter.

I might have thought that you were out of town on one of your fashion-buying jaunts but the manager tells me you have not been away since taking the flat, so I must suppose your "leave of absence" continues. He tells me also that you are a brunette. I suppose we might exchange descriptions—and then, with trepidation, photographs—in the brutal manner of people meeting through newspaper ads. It seems that in my attempt to get to know you I am willing to make quite a fool of myself. Nothing new of course in that. . . .

Gail does not leave the apartment for two days. She does without milk, drinks her coffee black. What will she do when she runs out of coffee? She eats odd meals—tuna fish spread on crackers when she has no bread to make a sandwich, a dry end of cheese, a couple of mangos. She goes out into the upstairs hall of the Miramar—first opening the door a crack, testing the air for an occupant—and walks to the arched window that overlooks the street. And from long ago a feeling comes back to her—the feeling of watching a street, the visible bit of a street, where a car is expected to appear, or may

appear, or may not appear. She even remembers now the cars themselves—a blue Austin mini, a maroon Chevrolet, a family station wagon. Cars in which she travelled short distances, illicitly and in a bold daze of consent. Long before Will.

She doesn't know what clothes Will will be wearing, or how his hair is cut, or if he will have some change in his walk or expression, some change appropriate to his life here. He cannot have changed more than she has. She has no mirror in the apartment except the little one on the bathroom cupboard, but even that can tell her how much thinner she has got and how the skin of her face has toughened. Instead of fading and wrinkling as fair skin often does in this climate, hers has got a look of dull canvas. It could be fixed up—she sees that. With the right kind of makeup a look of exotic sullenness could be managed. Her hair is more of a problem—the red shows at the roots, with shiny strands of gray. Nearly all the time she keeps it hidden by a scarf.

When the manager knocks on her door again, she has only a second or two of crazy expectation. He begins to call her name. "Mrs. Massie, Mrs. Massie! Oh, I hoped you'd be in. I wondered if you could just come down and help me. It's the old bloke downstairs, he's fallen off the bed."

He goes ahead of her down the stairs, holding to the railing and dropping each foot shakily, precipitately, onto the step below.

"His friend isn't there. I wondered. I didn't see him yesterday. I try and keep track of people but I don't like to interfere. I thought he probably would've come back in the night. I was sweeping out the foyer and I heard a thump and I went back in there—I wondered what was going on. Old bloke all by himself, on the floor."

The apartment is no larger than Gail's, and laid out in the same way. It has curtains down over the bamboo blinds, which make it very dark. It smells of cigarettes and old cooking and some kind of pine-scented air freshener. The sofa bed has

been pulled out, made into a double bed, and the old man is lying on the floor beside it, having dragged some of the bedclothes with him. His head without the toupee is smooth, like a dirty piece of soap. His eyes are half shut and a noise is coming from deep inside him like the noise of an engine hopelessly trying to turn over.

"Have you phoned the ambulance?" Gail says.

"If you could just pick up the one end of him," the manager says. "I have a bad back and I dread putting it out again."

"Where is the phone?" says Gail. "He may have had a stroke. He may have broken his hip. He'll have to go to the hospital."

"Do you think so? His friend could lift him back and forth so easy. He had the strength. And now he's disappeared."

Gail says, "I'll phone."

"Oh, no. Oh, no. I have the number written down over the phone in my office. I don't let any other person go in there."

Left alone with the old man, who probably cannot hear her, Gail says, "It's all right. It's all right. We're getting help for you." Her voice sounds foolishly sociable. She leans down to pull the blanket up over his shoulder, and to her great surprise a hand flutters out, searches for and grabs her own. His hand is slight and bony, but warm enough, and dreadfully strong. "I'm here, I'm here," she says, and wonders if she is impersonating the red-haired young man, or some other young man, or a woman, or even his mother.

The ambulance comes quickly, with its harrowing pulsing cry, and the ambulance men with the stretcher cart are soon in the room, the manager stumping after them, saying, ". . . couldn't be moved. Here is Mrs. Massie came down to help in the emergency."

While they are getting the old man onto the stretcher, Gail has to pull her hand away, and he begins to complain, or she thinks he does—that steady involuntary-sounding noise he is making acquires an extra *ah-unh-anh*. So she takes his hand again as soon as she can, and trots beside him as he is wheeled out. He has such a grip on her that she feels as if he is pulling her along.

"He was the owner of the Jacaranda Hotel," the manager says. "Years ago. He was."

A few people are in the street, but nobody stops, nobody wants to be caught gawking. They want to see, they don't want to see.

"Shall I ride with him?" Gail says. "He doesn't seem to want to let go of me."

"It's up to you," one of the ambulance men says, and she climbs in. (She is dragged in, really, by that clutching hand.) The ambulance man puts down a little seat for her, the doors are closed, the siren starts as they pull away.

Through the window in the back door then she sees Will. He is about a block away from the Miramar and walking towards it. He is wearing a light-colored short-sleeved jacket and matching pants—probably a safari suit—and his hair has grown whiter or been bleached by the sun, but she knows him at once, she will always know him, and will always have to call out to him when she sees him, as she does now, even trying to jump up from the seat, trying to pull her hand out of the old man's grasp.

"It's Will," she says to the ambulance man. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's my husband."

"Well, he better not see you jumping out of a speeding ambulance," the man says. Then he says, "Oh-oh. What's happened here?" For the next minute or so he pays professional attention to the old man. Soon he straightens up and says, "Gone."

"He's still holding on to me," says Gail. But she realizes as she says this that it isn't true. A moment ago he was holding on—with great force, it seemed, enough force to hold her back, when she would have sprung towards Will. Now it is she who is hanging on to him. His fingers are still warm.

When she gets back from the hospital, she finds the note that she is expecting.

Gail. I know it's you.

Hurry. Hurry. Her rent is paid. She must leave a note for the manager. She must take the money out of the bank, get herself to the airport, find a flight. Her clothes can stay behind—her humble pale-print dresses, her floppy hat. The last library book can remain on the table under the sagebrush picture. It can remain there, accumulating fines.

Otherwise, what will happen?

What she has surely wanted. What she is suddenly, as surely, driven to escape.

Gail, I know you're in there! I know you're there on the other side of the door.

Gail! Galya!

Talk to me, Gail. Answer me. I know you're there.

I can hear you. I can hear your heart beating through the keyhole and your stomach rumbling and your brain jumping up and down.

I can smell you through the keyhole. You. Gail.

Words most wished for can change. Something can happen to them, while you are waiting. *Love—need—forgive. Love—need—forever.* The sound of such words can become a din, a battering, a sound of hammers in the street. And all you can do is run away, so as not to honor them out of habit.

In the airport shop she sees a number of little boxes, made by Australian aborigines. They are round, and light as pennies. She picks out one that has a pattern of yellow dots, irregularly

spaced on a dark-red ground. Against this is a swollen black figure—a turtle, maybe, with short splayed legs. Helpless on its back.

Gail is thinking, A present for Cleata. As if her whole time here had been a dream, something she could discard, going back to a chosen point, a beginning.

Not for Cleata. A present for Will?

A present for Will, then. Send it now? No, take it back to Canada, all the way back, send it from there.

The yellow dots flung out in that way remind Gail of something she saw last fall. She and Will saw it. They went for a walk on a sunny afternoon. They walked from their house by the river up the wooded bank, and there they came on a display that they had heard about but never seen before.

Hundreds, maybe thousands, of butterflies were hanging in the trees, resting before their long flight down the shore of Lake Huron and across Lake Erie, then on south to Mexico. They hung there like metal leaves, beaten gold—like flakes of gold tossed up and caught in the branches.

"Like the shower of gold in the Bible," Gail said.

Will told her that she was confusing Jove and Jehovah.

On that day, Cleata had already begun to die and Will had already met Sandy. This dream had already begun—Gail's journey and her deceits, then the words she imagined—believed—that she heard shouted through the door.

Love—forgive

Love—forget

Love—forever

Hammers in the street.

What could you put in a box like that before you wrapped it up and sent it far away? A bead, a feather, a potent pill? Or a note, folded up tight, to about the size of a spitball.

Now it's up to you to follow me.

Also by Alice Munro

◆

Friend of My Youth

The Progress of Love

The Moons of Jupiter

The Beggar Maid

Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You

Lives of Girls and Women

Dance of the Happy Shades

Alice Munro

Open Secrets

Alice Munro is the author of seven previous books: a novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*, and six collections of stories—*Dance of the Happy Shades, Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You, The Beggar Maid, The Moons of Jupiter, The Progress of Love*, and *Friend of My Youth*. The stories in *Open Secrets* have appeared in *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review*. She and her husband live in Clinton, Ontario, near Lake Huron, and in Comox, British Columbia.

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