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Fits

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FITS

Alice Munro

The two people, who died, were in their early sixties. They were both tall and well-built and carried a few pounds of extra weight. He was grey-haired, with a square, rather flat, face. A broad nose kept him from looking perfectly dignified and handsome. Her hair was blond, a silvery blond that does not strike you as artificial any more—though you know it is not natural—because so many women of that age have acquired it. On Boxing Day, when they dropped over to have a drink with Peg and Robert, she wore a pale grey dress with a fine, shiny stripe in it, grey stockings, and grey shoes. She drank gin and tonic. He wore brown slacks and a cream-colored sweater and drank rye and water. They had recently come back from a trip to Mexico. He had tried parachute riding. She hadn't wanted to. They had gone to see a place in Yucatan—it looked like a well—where virgins were supposed to have been flung down, in the hope of good harvests.

“Actually, though, that's just a nineteenth-century notion,” she said. “That's just the nineteenth-century notion of being so preoccupied with virginity. The truth probably is that they threw people down sort of indiscriminately. Girls or men or old people or whoever they could get their hands on. So, not being a virgin would be no guarantee of safety!”

Across the room, Peg's two sons—the older one, Clayton, who is a virgin, and the younger one, Kevin, who is not—watched this breezy-talking silvery-blond woman with stern, bored expressions. She had said that she used to be a high school English teacher. Clayton remarked afterwards that he knew the type.

Robert and Peg have been married for nearly five years. Robert was never married before, but Peg married for the first time when she was eighteen. Her two boys were born while she and her husband lived with his parents, on a farm. Her husband had a job, driving trucks of

livestock to the Canada Packers Abattoir, in Toronto. Other truck-driving jobs followed, taking him farther and farther away. Peg and the boys moved to Gilmore, and she got a job working in Kuiper's store, which was called the Gilmore Arcade. Her husband ended up in the Arctic, driving trucks to oil rigs, across the frozen Beaufort Sea. She got a divorce.

Robert's family owned the Gilmore Arcade but had never lived in Gilmore. His mother and sisters would not have believed you could survive a week in such a place. Robert's father had bought the store, and two other stores in nearby towns, shortly after the Second World War. He hired local managers and drove up from Toronto a few times during the year to see how things were getting on.

For a long time Robert did not take much interest in his father's various businesses. He took a degree in civil engineering, and had some idea of doing work in underdeveloped countries. He got a job in Peru, traveled through South America, gave up engineering for a while to work on a ranch in British Columbia. When his father became ill, it was necessary for him to come back to Toronto. He worked for the Provincial Department of Highways, in an engineering job that was not a very good one for a man of his age. He was thinking of getting a teaching degree and maybe going up north to teach Indians, changing his life completely, once his father died. He was getting close to forty then, and having his third major affair with a married woman.

Now and then he drove up to Gilmore and the other towns to keep an eye on the stores. Once he brought Lee with him—his third, and as it turned out, his last, married woman. She brought a picnic lunch, drank Pimm's Number One in the car, and treated the whole trip as a merry excursion, a foray into hillbilly country. She had counted on making love in the open fields, and was incensed to find they were all full of cattle or uncomfortable cornstalks.

Robert's father died, and Robert did change his life, but instead of becoming a teacher and heading for the wilderness he came to live in Gilmore, to manage the stores himself. He married Peg.

It was entirely by accident that Peg was the one who found them.

On Sunday evening, the farm woman who sold the Kuipers their eggs knocked on the door.

"I hope you don't mind me bringing these tonight instead of tomorrow morning," she said. "I have to take my daughter-in-law to Kitchener, to have her ultra-sound. I brought the Weebles theirs too but I guess they're not home. I wonder if you'd mind if I left them here with you? I have to leave early in the morning. She was going to drive herself but I didn't think that was such a good idea. She's nearly five months but still vomiting. Tell them they can just pay me next time."

"No problem," said Robert. "No problem. No trouble at all. We can just run over with them in the morning. No problem at all!" Robert is a stocky, energetic-looking man, with curly greying hair and bright brown eyes. His friendliness and obligingness is often emphatic, so that people might get the feeling of being buffeted from all sides. This is a manner that serves him well in Gilmore, where assurances are supposed to be repeated, and in fact much of conversation is repetition, a sort of dance of good intentions, without surprises. Just occasionally, talking to people, he feels something else, an obstruction, and isn't sure what it is—malice, stubbornness?—but it's like a rock at the bottom of a river, when you're swimming—the clear water lifts you over it.

For a Gilmore person, Peg is reserved. She came up and relieved the woman of the eggs she was holding, while Robert went on assuring her it was no trouble and asking about her daughter-in-law's pregnancy. Peg smiled as she would smile in the store when she gave you your change—a quick transactional smile, nothing personal. She is a small slim woman with a cap of soft brown hair, freckles, and a scrubbed, youthful look. She wears pleated skirts, fresh neat blouses buttoned to the throat, pale sweaters, sometimes a little black ribbon-tie. She moves gracefully and makes very little noise. Robert once told her he had never met anyone so self-contained as she was. (His women have usually been talkative, stylishly effective though careless about some of the details, tense, lively, "interesting.")

Peg said she didn't know what he meant.

He started to explain what a self-contained person was like. At that time he had a very faulty comprehension of Gilmore vocabulary—he could still make mistakes about it—and he took too seriously the limits that were usually observed in daily exchanges.

"I know what the words mean," Peg said, smiling. "I just don't understand how you mean it about me."

Of course she knew what the words meant. Peg took courses, a different course each winter, choosing from what was offered at the local high school. She took a course on the History of Art, one on Great Civilizations of the East, one on Discoveries and Explorations through the Ages. She went to class one night a week, even if she was very tired or had a cold. She wrote tests and prepared papers. Sometimes Robert would find a page covered with her small neat handwriting on top of the refrigerator or the dresser in their room.

Therefore we see that the importance of Prince Henry the Navigator was in the inspiration and encouragement of other explorers for Portugal even though he did not go on voyages himself.

He was moved by her earnest statements, her painfully careful small handwriting, and angry that she never got more than a B-plus for these papers at which she worked so hard.

"I don't do it for the marks," Peg said. Her cheekbones reddened under the freckles, as if she was making some kind of personal confession. "I do it for the enjoyment."

Robert was up before dawn on Monday morning, standing at the kitchen counter drinking his coffee, looking out at the fields covered with snow. The sky was clear, and the temperature had dropped. It was going to be one of the bright, cold, hard, January days that come after weeks of west wind, of blowing and falling snow. Creeks, rivers, ponds, frozen over. Lake Huron frozen over, as far as you could see. Perhaps all the way, this year. That had happened, though rarely.

He had to drive to Keneally, to the store there. Ice on the roof was causing water underneath to back up and leak through the ceiling. He would have to chop up the

ice and get the roof clear. It would take him at least half the day.

All the repair work, the upkeep, on the stores, and on this house is done by Robert himself. He has learned to do plumbing and wiring. He enjoys the feeling that he can manage it. He enjoys the difficulty, and the difficulty of winter, here. Not much more than a hundred miles from Toronto, it is a different country. The Snowbelt. Coming up here to live was not unlike heading into the wilderness, after all. Blizzards still isolate the towns and villages. Winter comes down hard on the country, settles down, just the way the two-mile-high ice did, thousands of years ago. People live within the winter in a way outsiders do not understand. They are watchful, provident, fatigued, exhilarated.

A thing he likes about this house is the back view, over the open country. That makes up for the straggling dead-end street without trees or sidewalks. The street was opened up after the war, when it was taken for granted that everybody would be using cars, not walking anywhere. And so they did. The houses are fairly close to the street and to each other and when everybody who lives in the house is home, cars take up nearly all the space where sidewalks, boulevards, shade trees, might have been.

Robert of course was willing to buy another house. He assumed they would do that. There were—there are—fine old houses for sale in Gilmore, at prices that are a joke, by city standards. Peg said she couldn't see herself living in those places. He offered to build her a new house in the subdivision on the other side of town. She didn't want that either. She wanted to stay in this house, which was the first house she and the boys had lived in, on their own. So Robert bought it—she was only renting—and built on the master bedroom and another bathroom, and made a television room in the basement. He got some help from Kevin, less from Clayton. The house still looked, from the street, like the house he had parked in front of the first time he drove Peg home from work. One and a half stories high, with a steep roof, and a living-room window divided into square panes like the window on a Christmas card.

White aluminum siding, narrow black shutters, black trim. Back in Toronto, he had thought of Peg living in this house. He had thought of her patterned, limited, serious, and desirable, life.

He noticed the Weebles' eggs sitting on the counter. He thought of taking them over. But it was too early. The door would be locked. He didn't want to waken them. Peg could take the eggs when she left to open up the store. He took the Magic Marker that was sitting on the ledge under her reminder-pad and wrote on a paper towel, *Don't forget eggs to W's. Love, Robert.* These eggs were no cheaper than the ones you bought at the supermarket. It was just that Robert liked getting them from a farm. And they were brown. Peg said city people all had a thing about brown eggs—they thought brown eggs were more natural, somehow, like brown sugar.

When he backed his car out, he saw that the Weebles' car was in their carport. So they were home, from wherever they had been last night. Then he saw the snow thrown up across the front of their driveway by the town snowplow had not been cleared. The plow must have gone by during the night. But he himself hadn't had to shovel any snow, there hadn't been any fresh snow overnight and the plow hadn't been out. The snow was from yesterday. They couldn't have been out last night. Unless they were walking. The sidewalks were not cleared, except along the main street and the school streets, and it was difficult to walk along the narrowed streets with their banks of snow, but, being new to town, they might have set out not realizing that.

He pictured what happened. First from the constable's report, then from Peg's.

Peg came out of the house at about twenty after eight. Clayton had already gone off to school, and Kevin, getting over an ear infection, was down in the basement room playing a Billy Idol tape and watching a game show on television. Peg had not forgotten the eggs. She got into her car and turned on the engine, to warm it up, then walked out to the street, stepped over the Weebles' uncleared snow, walked up their driveway to the side door. She was

wearing her white knitted scarf and tam and her lilac-colored down-filled coat. Those coats made most of the women in Gilmore look like barrels, but Peg looked all right, being so slender.

The houses on the street were originally of only three designs. But by now most of them had been so altered, with new windows, porches, wings, and decks, that it was hard to find true mates any more. The Weebles' house had been built as a mirror-image of the Kuipers', but the front window had been changed, its Christmas-card panes taken out, and the roof had been lifted, so that there was a large upstairs window overlooking the street. The siding was pale green and the trim white, and there were no shutters.

The side door opened into a utility room, just as Peg's door did at home. She knocked lightly at first, thinking that they would be in the kitchen, which was only a few steps up from the utility room. She had noticed the car, of course, and wondered if they had got home late and were sleeping in. (She hadn't thought yet about the snow's not having been shoveled and the fact that the plow hadn't been out in the night. That was something that occurred to her later on, when she got into her own car and backed it out.) She knocked louder and louder. Her face was stinging already in the bright cold. She tried the door and found that it wasn't locked. She opened it, and stepped into shelter, and called.

The little room was dark. There was no light to speak of coming down from the kitchen, and there was a bamboo curtain over the front door. She set the eggs on the clothes dryer and was going to leave them there. Then she thought she had better take them up into the kitchen, in case the Weebles wanted eggs for breakfast, and had run out. They wouldn't think of looking in the utility room.

(This in fact was Robert's explanation, to himself. She didn't say all that but he forgot she didn't. She just said, "I thought I might as well take them up to the kitchen.")

The kitchen had those same bamboo curtains over the sink window and over the breakfast-nook windows, which meant that though the room faced east, like the Kuipers' kitchen, and though the sun was fully up by this time,

not much light could get in. The day hadn't begun, here.

But the house was warm. Perhaps they'd got up awhile ago, and turned up the thermostat, then gone back to bed. Perhaps they left it up all night—though they had seemed to Peg to be thriftier than that. She set the eggs on the counter by the sink. The layout of the kitchen was almost exactly the same as her own. She noticed a few dishes stacked, rinsed not washed, as if they'd had something to eat before they went to bed.

She called again from the living-room doorway.

The living room was perfectly tidy. It looked to Peg somehow too perfectly tidy, but that—as she said to Robert—was probably the way the living room of a retired couple was bound to look to a woman used to having children around. Peg had never in her life had quite as much tidiness around her as she might have liked, having gone from a family home where there were six children to her in-laws' crowded farmhouse, which she crowded further with her own babies. She had told Robert a story about once asking for a beautiful bar of soap for Christmas, pink soap with a raised design of roses on it. She got it, and she used to hide it after every use so that it wouldn't get cracked and moldy in the cracks, the way soap always did in that house. She was grown up at that time, or thought she was.

She had stamped the snow off her boots in the utility room. Nevertheless she hesitated to walk across the clean, pale-beige living-room carpet. She called again. She used the Weebles' first names, which she barely knew. Walter and Nora. They had moved in last April, and since then they had taken two trips, so she didn't feel she knew them at all well, but it seemed silly to be calling *Mr. and Mrs. Weeble*. *Are you up yet, Mr. and Mrs. Weeble?*

No answer.

They had an open staircase going up from the living room, just as Peg and Robert did. Peg walked now across the clean, pale carpet to the foot of the stairs, which were carpeted in the same material. She started to climb. She did not call again.

She must have known, then, or she would have called. It would be the normal thing to do, to keep calling, the

closer you got to where people might be sleeping. To warn them. They might be deeply asleep. Drunk. That wasn't the custom of the Weebles, so far as anybody knew, but nobody knew them that well. Retired people. Early retirement. He had been an accountant, she had been a teacher. They had lived in Hamilton. They had chosen Gilmore because Walter Weeble used to have an aunt and uncle here, whom he visited as a child. Both dead now, the aunt and uncle, but the place must have held pleasant memories for him. And it was cheap, this was surely a cheaper house than they could have afforded. They meant to spend their money traveling. No children.

She didn't call, she didn't halt again. She climbed the stairs and didn't look around as she came up, she faced straight ahead. Ahead was the bathroom, with the door open. It was clean and empty.

She turned at the top of the stairs towards the Weebles' bedroom. She had never been upstairs in this house before, but she knew where that would be. It would be the extended room at the front, with the wide window overlooking the street.

The door of that room was open.

Peg came downstairs and left the house by the kitchen, the utility room, the side door. Her footprints showed on the carpet and on the linoleum tiles, and outside on the snow. She closed the door after herself. Her car had been running all this time and was sitting in its own little cloud of steam. She got in and backed out and drove to the police office in the Town Hall.

"It's a bitter cold morning, Peg," the constable said.

"Yes, it is."

"So what can I do for you?"

Robert got more, from Karen. Karen Adams was the clerk in the Gilmore Arcade. She was a young married woman, solidly built, usually good-humored, alert without particularly seeming to be so, efficient without a lot of bustle. She got along well with the customers, she got along with Peg and Robert. She had known Peg longer, of course. She defended her against those people who said Peg had got her nose in the

air since she married rich. Karen said Peg hadn't changed from what she always was. But after today she said, "I always believed Peg and me to be friends, but now I'm not so sure."

Karen started work at ten. She came in a little before that and asked if there had been many customers in yet, and Peg said no, nobody.

"I don't wonder," Karen said. "It's too cold. If there was any wind it'd be murder."

Peg had made coffee. They had a new coffee maker, Robert's Christmas present to the store. They used to have to get take-outs from the bakery up the street.

"Isn't this thing marvelous?" Karen said, as she got her coffee.

Peg said yes. She was wiping up some marks on the floor.

"Oh-oh," said Karen. "Was that me or you?"

"I think it was me," Peg said.

"So I didn't think anything of it," Karen said later. "I thought she must've tracked in some mud. I didn't stop to think, where would you get down to mud with all this snow on the ground?"

After a while a customer came in, and it was Celia Simms, and she had heard. Karen was at the cash, and Peg was at the back, checking some invoices. Celia told Karen. She didn't know much, she didn't know how it had been done or that Peg was involved.

Karen shouted to the back of the store.

"Peg! Peg! Something terrible has happened and it's your next-door neighbors!"

Peg called back, "I know."

Celia lifted her eyebrows at Karen—she was one of those who didn't like Peg's attitude—and Karen loyally turned aside and waited till Celia went out of the store. Then she hurried to the back with an excited, heavy tread that made the hangers jingle on the racks.

"Both the Weebles are shot dead, Peg. Did you know that?"

Peg said, "Yes. I found them."

"You did! When did you?"

"This morning just before I came into work."

"They were murdered!"

"It was a murder-suicide," Peg said. "He shot her and then he shot himself. That's what happened."

"When she told me that," Karen said, "I started to shake. I shook all over and I couldn't stop myself." Telling Robert this she shook again, to demonstrate, and pushed her hands up inside the sleeves of her blue plush jogging suit.

"So I said, what did you do when you found them, and she said, I went and told the police. I said, did you scream, or what? I said didn't her legs buckle, because I know mine would've. I can't imagine how I would've got myself out of there. She said she didn't remember much about getting out but she did remember closing the door, the outside door, and thinking, Make sure that's closed in case some dog could get in. Isn't that awful? She was right, but it's awful to think of. Do you think she's in shock?"

"No," Robert said. "I think she's all right."

This conversation was taking place at the back of the store, in the afternoon, when Peg had gone out to get a sandwich.

"She had not said one word to me. Nothing. I said, how come you never said a word about this, Peg? and she said, I knew you'd find out pretty soon. I said yes, but she could've told me. I'm sorry, she says. I'm sorry. Just like she's apologizing for some little thing like using my coffee mug. Only Peg would never do that."

Robert had finished what he was doing at the Keneally store around noon, and decided to drive back to Gilmore before getting anything to eat. There was a highway diner just outside of town, on the way in from Keneally, and he thought that he would stop there. A few truckers and travelers were usually eating in the diner, but most of the trade was local—farmers on the way home, business and workingmen who had driven out from town. Robert liked this place and he had entered it today with a feeling of buoyant expectation. He was hungry from his work in the cold air and aware of the brilliance of the day, with the snow on the fields looking sculpted, dazzling, permanent as marble. He had the sense he had fairly often, in Gil-

more, the sense of walking on to an informal stage, where a rambling, on-going, agreeable play was in progress. And he knew his lines, or knew at least that his improvisations would not fail. His whole life in Gilmore sometimes seemed to have this quality, but if he ever tried to describe it that way, it would sound as if it was an artificial life, something contrived, not entirely serious. And the very opposite was true. So when he met somebody from his old life, as he sometimes did when he went to Toronto, and was asked how he liked living in Gilmore, he would say, "I can't tell you how much I like it!" which was exactly the truth.

"Why didn't you get in touch with me?"
 "You were up on the roof."

"You could have called the store and told Ellie. She would have told me."

"What good would that have done?"

"I could at least have come home."

He had come straight from the diner to the store, without eating what he had ordered. He did not think he would find Peg in any state of collapse—he knew her well enough for that—but he did think she would want to go home, let him fix her a drink, spend some time telling him about it.

She didn't want that. She wanted to go up the street to the bakery to get her usual lunch—a crusty roll with ham and cheese.

"I let Karen go out to eat but I haven't had time. Should I bring one back for you? If you didn't eat at the diner I might as well."

When she brought him the sandwich he sat and ate it at the desk where she had been doing invoices. She put fresh grounds and water into the coffee maker.

"I can't imagine how we got along without this thing."

He looked at Peg's lilac-colored coat hanging beside Karen's red coat, on the washroom door. On the lilac coat there was a long ugly smear of reddish-brown paint, down to the hemline.

Of course that wasn't paint.

But on her coat? How did she get blood on her coat? She

must have brushed up against them, in that room. She must have got close.

Then he remembered the talk in the diner, and realized she wouldn't have needed to get that close. She could have got blood from the door frame. The constable had been in the diner, and he had said there was blood everywhere, and not just blood.

"He shouldn't ever have used a shotgun for that kind of business."

Somebody said, "Maybe a shotgun was all he had."

It was busy in the store most of the afternoon. People on the street, in the bakery and café and the bank and the post office, talking. People wanted to talk face-to-face. They had to get out and do it, in spite of the cold. Talking on the phone was not enough.

What had gone on at first, Robert gathered, was that people had got on the phone, just phoned anybody they could think of, who might not have heard. Karen had phoned her friend Shirley, who was at home in bed with the flu, and her mother, who was in the hospital with a broken hip. It turned out her mother knew already, the whole hospital knew. And Shirley said, "My sister beat you to it."

It was true that people valued and looked forward to the moment of breaking the news—Karen was annoyed at Shirley's sister, who didn't work and could get to the phone whenever she wanted to—but there was real kindness and consideration behind this impulse, as well. Robert thought so. *I knew she wouldn't want not to know*, Karen said, and that was true. Nobody would want not to know. To go out into the street, not knowing. To go around doing all the usual daily things, not knowing. He himself felt troubled, even slightly humiliated, to think that he hadn't known, Peg hadn't let him know.

Talk ran backward from the events of the morning. Where were they seen, and in what harmlessness and innocence, and how close to the moment when everything was changed?

She had stood in the lineup at the Bank of Montreal on Friday afternoon.

He had got a haircut on Saturday morning.

They were together, buying groceries, in the IGA on Friday evening at about eight o'clock.

What did they buy? A good supply? Specials, advertised bargains, more than enough to last a couple of days?

More than enough. A bag of potatoes, for one thing.

Then, reasons. The talk turned to reasons. Naturally. There had been no theories put forward in the diner. Nobody knew the reason, nobody could imagine. But by the end of the afternoon there were too many explanations to choose from.

Financial problems. He had been mixed up in some bad investment scheme in Hamilton. Some wild money-making deal that had fallen through. All their money was gone and they would have to live out the rest of their lives on the old-age pension.

They had owed money on their income taxes. Being an accountant, he thought he knew how to fix things, but he had been found out. He would be exposed, perhaps charged, shamed publicly, left poor. Even if it was only cheating the government, it would still be a disgrace when that kind of thing came out.

Was it a lot of money?

Certainly. A lot.

It was not money at all. They were ill. One of them or both of them. Cancer. Crippling arthritis. Alzheimer's disease. Recurrent mental problems. It was health, not money. It was suffering and helplessness they feared, not poverty.

A division of opinion became evident between men and women. It was nearly always the men who believed and insisted the trouble had been money, and it was the women who talked of illness. Who would kill themselves just because they were poor, said some women scornfully. Or even because they might go to jail? It was always a woman, too, who suggested unhappiness in the marriage, who hinted at the drama of a discovered infidelity or the memory of an old one.

Robert listened to all these explanations but did not believe any of them. Loss of money, cancer, Alzheimer's disease. What happened was that he believed each of them for about five minutes, no longer. Equally plausible they seemed to him, equally hollow and useless. If he could

have believed one of them, hung on to it, it would have been as if something had taken its claws out of his chest and permitted him to breathe.

("They weren't Gilmore people, not really," a woman said to him, in the bank. Then she looked embarrassed. "I don't mean like you.")

Peg kept busy getting some children's sweaters, mitts, snowsuits, ready for the January sale. People came up to her when she was marking the tags and she said, "Can I help you?" so that everyone was placed right away in the position of being a customer and had to say that there was something they were looking for. The Arcade carried ladies' and children's clothes, sheets, towels, knitting wool, kitchenware, bulk candy, magazines, mugs, artificial flowers, and plenty of other things besides, so it was not hard to think of something.

What was it they were really looking for? Surely not much—in the way of details, description. Very few people actually want that, or will admit they do, in a greedy and straightforward way. They want it, they don't want it. They start asking, they stop themselves. They listen and they back away. Perhaps they wanted from Peg just some kind of acknowledgment, some word or look that would send them away saying, *Peg Kuiper is absolutely shattered.*

I saw Peg Kuiper. She didn't say much but you could tell she was absolutely shattered.

Some people tried to talk to her, anyway.

"Wasn't that terrible what happened down by you?"

"Yes, it was."

"You must have known them a little bit, living next door."

"Not really. We didn't hardly know them at all."

"You never noticed anything that would've led you to think this could've happened?"

"We never noticed anything at all."

Robert pictured the Weebles getting into and out of their car, in the driveway. That was where he had most often seen them. He recalled their Boxing Day visit. Her grey legs made him think of a nun. Her mention of virginity had embarrassed Peg and the boys. She reminded Robert a little of the kind of women he used to know. Her

husband was less talkative, though not shy. They talked about Mexican food, which it seemed the husband had not liked. He did not like eating in restaurants.

Peg had said, "Oh, men never do!"

That surprised Robert, who asked her afterwards, did that mean she wanted to eat out more often?

"I just said that to take her side. I thought he was glaring at her a bit."

Was he glaring? Robert had not noticed. The man seemed too self-controlled to glare at his wife in public. Too well-disposed, on the whole, perhaps in some way too indolent, to glare at anybody, anywhere.

But it wasn't like Peg to exaggerate.

Bits of information kept arriving. The maiden name of Nora Weeble. Driscoll. Nora Driscoll. Someone knew a woman who had taught at the same school with her, in Hamilton. Well-liked as a teacher, a fashionable dresser, she had some trouble keeping order. She had taken a French conversation course, and a course in French cooking.

Some women here had asked her would she be interested in starting a book club, and she had said yes.

He had been more of a joiner in Hamilton than he was here. The Rotary Club. The Lions' Club. Perhaps it had been for business reasons.

They were not churchgoers, as far as anybody knew, not in either place.

(Robert was right about the reasons. In Gilmore everything becomes known, sooner or later. Secrecy and confidentiality are seen to be against the public interest. There is a network of people who are married to or related to the people who work in the offices where all the records are kept.

There was no investment scheme, in Hamilton or anywhere else. No income tax investigation. No problem about money. No cancer, tricky heart, high blood pressure. She had consulted the doctor about headaches, but the doctor did not think they were migraines, or anything serious.

At the funeral on Thursday the United Church minister—who usually took up the slack in the cases of no known affiliation—spoke about the pressures and tensions

of modern life but gave no more specific clues. Some people were disappointed, as if they expected him to—or thought that he might at least mention the dangers of falling away from faith, and church membership, the sin of despair. Other people thought that saying anything more than he did say would have been in bad taste.)

Another person who thought Peg should have let him known was Kevin. He was waiting for them when they got home. He was still wearing his pajamas.

Why hadn't she come back to the house, instead of driving to the police station? Why hadn't she called to him? She could have come back and phoned. Kevin could have phoned. At the very least, she could have called him from the store.

He had been down in the basement all morning, watching television. He hadn't heard the police come, he hadn't seen them go in or out. He had not known anything about what was going on until his girlfriend, Ardyth, phoned him from school at lunch hour.

"She said they took the bodies out in garbage bags."

"How would she know?" said Clayton. "I thought she was at school."

"Somebody told her."

"She got that from television."

"She *said*, they took them out in garbage bags."

"Ardyth is a cretin. She is only good for one thing."

"Some people aren't good for anything."

Clayton was sixteen, Kevin fourteen. Two years apart in age but three years apart at school because Clayton was accelerated and Kevin was not.

"Cut it out," Peg said. She had brought up some spaghetti sauce from the freezer and was thawing it in the double boiler. "Clayton. Kevin. Get busy and make me some salad."

Kevin said, "I'm sick. I might contaminate it."

He picked up the tablecloth and wrapped it around his shoulders, like a shawl.

"Do we have to eat off that?" Clayton said. "Now he's got his crud on it?"

Peg said to Robert, "Are we having wine?"

On Saturday and Sunday nights they usually had wine,

but tonight Robert hadn't thought about it. He went down to the basement to get it. When he came back Peg was sliding spaghetti into the cooker and Kevin had discarded the tablecloth. Clayton was making the salad. Clayton was small-boned, like his mother, and fiercely driven. A star runner, a demon examination writer.

Kevin was prowling around the kitchen, getting in the way, talking to Peg. Kevin was taller already than Clayton or Peg, perhaps taller than Robert. He had large shoulders and skinny legs and black hair that he wore in the nearest thing he dared to an Iroquois cut—Ardyth cut it for him. His pale skin often broke out in pimples. Girls didn't seem to mind.

"So was there?" Kevin said. "Was there blood and guck all over?"

"Ghoul," said Clayton.

"Those were human beings, Kevin," Robert said.

"Were," said Kevin. "I know they *were* human beings. I mixed their drinks on Boxing Day. She drank gin and he drank rye. They were human beings then but all they are now is chemicals. Mom? What did you see first? Ardyth said there was blood and guck even out in the hallway."

"He's brutalized from all the TV he watches," Clayton said. "He thinks it was some video. He can't tell real blood from video blood."

"Mom? Was it splashed?"

Robert has a rule about letting Peg deal with her sons unless she asks for his help. But this time he said, "Kevin, you know it's about time you shut up."

"He can't help it," Clayton said. "Being goulish."

"You too, Clayton. You too."

But after a moment Clayton said, "Mom? Did you scream?"

"No," said Peg thoughtfully. "I didn't. I guess because there wasn't anybody to hear me. So I didn't."

"I might have heard you," said Kevin, cautiously trying a comeback.

"You had the television on."

"I didn't have the sound on. I had my tape on. I might have heard you through the tape if you screamed loud enough."

Peg lifted a strand of the spaghetti, to try it. Robert was

watching her, from time to time. He would have said he was watching to see if she was in any kind of trouble, if she seemed numb, or strange, or showed a quiver, if she dropped things or made the pots clatter. But in fact he was watching her just because there was no sign of such difficulty and because he knew there wouldn't be. She was preparing an ordinary meal, listening to the boys in her usual mildly censorious but unruffled way. The only thing more apparent than usual, to Robert, was her gracefulness, lightness, quickness, and ease around the kitchen.

Her tone to her sons, under its severity, seemed shockingly serene.

"Kevin, go and get some clothes on, if you want to eat at the table."

"I can eat in my pajamas."

"No."

"I can eat in bed."

"Not spaghetti, you can't."

While they were washing up the pots and pans together—Clayton had gone for his run and Kevin was talking to Ardyth on the phone—Peg told Robert her part of the story. He didn't ask her to, in so many words. He started off with, "So when you went over, the door wasn't locked?" and she began to tell him.

"You don't mind talking about it?" Robert said.

"I knew you'd want to know."

She told him she knew what was wrong—at least, she knew that something was terribly wrong—before she started up the stairs.

"Were you frightened?"

"No. At least I didn't think about it like that—being frightened."

"There could have been somebody up there with a gun."

"No. I knew there wasn't. I knew there wasn't anybody but me alive in the house. Then I saw his leg, I saw his leg stretched out into the hall, and I knew then, but I had to go on in and make sure."

Robert said, "I understand that."

"It wasn't the foot he had taken the shoe off that was out there. He took the shoe off his other foot so he could

use that foot to pull the trigger when he shot himself. That was how he did it."

Robert knew all about that already, from the talk in the diner.

"So," said Peg. "That's really about all."

She shook dishwater from her hands, dried them, and with a critical look began rubbing in lotion.

Clayton came in at the side door. He stamped the snow from his shoes and ran up the steps.

"You should see the cars," he said. "Stupid cars all crawling along this street. Then they have to turn around at the end and crawl back. I wish they'd get stuck. I stood out there and gave them dirty looks but I started to freeze so I had to come in."

"It's natural," Robert said. "It seems stupid but it's natural. They can't believe it, so they want to see where it happened."

"I don't see their problem," Clayton said. "I don't see why they can't believe it. Mom could believe it all right. Mom wasn't surprised."

"Well of course I was," Peg said, and this was the first time Robert had noticed any sort of edge to her voice. "Of course I was surprised, Clayton. Just because I didn't break out screaming."

"You weren't surprised they could do it."

"I hardly knew them. We hardly knew the Weebles."

"I guess they had a fight," said Clayton.

"We don't know that," Peg said, stubbornly working the lotion into her skin. "We don't know if they had a fight, or what."

"When you and Dad used to have those fights?" Clayton said. "Remember, after we first moved to town? When he would be home? Over by the car wash? When you used to have those fights you know what I used to think? I used to think one of you was going to come and kill me with a knife."

"That's not true," said Peg.

"It is true. I did."

Peg sat down at the table and covered her mouth with her hands.

Clayton's mouth twitched. He couldn't seem to stop it,

so he turned it into a little, bitter, twitching smile.

"That's what I used to lie in bed and think."

"Clayton. We would never either one of us have ever have hurt you."

Robert believed it was time he said something.

"What this is like," he said. "It's like an earthquake or a volcano. It's that kind of happening. It's a kind of fit. People can take a fit like the earth takes a fit. But it only happens once in a long while. It's a freak occurrence."

"Earthquakes and volcanoes aren't freaks," said Clayton, with a certain dry pleasure. "If you want to call that a fit, you'd have to call it a periodic fit. Such as people have, married people have."

"We don't," said Robert. He looked at Peg as if waiting for her to agree with him.

But Peg was looking at Clayton. She who always seemed pale and silky and assenting, but hard to follow, as a watermark in fine paper, looked dried out, chalky, her outlines fixed, in steady, helpless, unapologetic pain.

"No," said Clayton. "No, not you."

Robert told them that he was going for a walk. When he got outside he saw that Clayton was right. There were cars nosing along the street, turning at the end, nosing their way back again. Getting a look. Inside those cars were just the same people, probably the same people, he had been talking to during the afternoon. But now they seemed joined to their cars, making some new kind of monster that was brutally curious, careless, and came poking around, menacing.

To avoid them, he went down a short dead-end street that branched off this one. No houses had ever been built on this street, so it was not plowed. But the snow was hard, and easy to walk on. He didn't notice how easy it was to walk on until he realized that he had walked beyond the end of the street, and up a slope that was not a slope of the land at all but a drift of snow. The drift neatly covered the fence that usually separated the street from the field. He had walked over the fence without knowing what he was doing. The snow was that hard.

He walked here and there, testing. The crust took his weight, without a whisper or a crack. It was the same

everywhere. You could walk over the snowy fields as if you were walking on cement. (This morning, looking at the snow, hadn't he thought of marble?) But this paving was not flat. It rose and dipped in a way that had not much to do with the contours of the ground underneath. The snow created its own landscape, which was sweeping, in a grand and arbitrary style.

Instead of walking around on the plowed streets of town, he could walk over the fields. He could cut across to the diner on the highway, which stayed open until midnight. He would have a cup of coffee there, turn around and walk home.

One night about six months before Robert married Peg, he and Lee were sitting drinking, in his apartment. They were having an argument, about whether it was permissible, or sickening, to have your family initial on your silverware. All of a sudden the argument split open—Robert couldn't remember how—but it split open, and they found themselves saying the cruelest things to each other that they could imagine. Their voices changed from the raised pitch and speed of argument and they spoke quietly with a subtle loathing.

"You always make me think of a dog," Lee said. "You always make me think of one of those dogs that push up on people and paw them, with their big disgusting tongues hanging out. You're so eager. All your friendliness and eagerness—that's really aggression. I'm not the only one who thinks this, about you. A lot of people avoid you. They can't stand you. You'd be surprised. You push and paw in that eager pathetic way but you have a calculating look. That's why I don't care if I hurt you."

"Maybe I should tell you one of the things I don't like, then," said Robert reasonably. "It's the way you laugh. On the phone, particularly. You laugh at the end of practically every sentence. I used to think it was a nervous tic, but it always really annoyed me. And I've figured out why. You're always telling somebody about what a raw deal you're getting somewhere or some unkind thing a person said to you, that's about two thirds of your horrendously boring self-centered conversation. And then you laugh. Ha-ha, you can take it, you don't expect anything better. That laugh is sick."

After some more of this they started to laugh themselves, Robert and Lee, but it was not the laughter of a breakthrough, into reconciliation, they did not fall upon each other in relief, crying, what rot, I didn't mean it, did you mean it? (No, of course not, of course I didn't mean it.) They laughed in recognition of their extremity, just as they might have laughed at another time, in the middle of quite different, astoundingly tender, declarations. They trembled with murderous pleasure, with the excitement of saying what could never be retracted, they exulted in wounds inflicted but also in wounds received, and one or the other said at some point, "This is the first time we've spoken the truth since we've known each other!" For even things that came to them more or less on the spur of the moment seemed the most urgent truths that had been hardening for a long time and pushing to get out.

It wasn't so far from laughing to make love, which they did, all with no retraction and with a self-conscious brutality. Robert made barking noises as a dog should, and nuzzled Lee in a bruising way, snapping with real appetite at her flesh. Afterwards they were enormously and finally sick of each other but no longer disposed to blame.

"There are things I just absolutely and eternally want to forget about," he had told Peg. He talked to her about cutting his losses, abandoning old bad habits, old deceptions and self-deceptions, mistaken notions about life, and about himself. He said that he had been an emotional spendthrift, had thrown himself into hopeless and painful entanglements as a way of avoiding anything that had normal possibilities. That was all experiment and posturing, rejection of the ordinary, decent contracts of life. So he said to her. Errors of avoidance, when he had thought he was running risks and getting intense experiences.

"Errors of avoidance that I mistook for errors of passion," he said, then thought that he sounded pretentious, when he was actually sweating with sincerity, with the effort and the relief.

In return, Peg gave him facts.

We lived with Dave's parents. There was never enough hot water for the baby's bath. Finally we got out and came to town and we lived beside the car wash. Dave was only

with us weekends then. It was very noisy, especially at night. Then Dave got another job, he went up north, I rented this place.

Errors of avoidance, errors of passion. She didn't say.

Dave had a kidney problem when he was little and he was out of school a whole winter. He read a book about the Arctic. It was probably the only book he ever read that he didn't have to. Anyway he always dreamed about it. He wanted to go there. So finally he did.

A man doesn't just drive farther and farther away, in his trucks, until he disappears from his wife's view. Not even if he has always dreamed of the Arctic. Things happen, before he goes. Marriage knots aren't going to slip apart painlessly, with the pull of distance. There's got to be some wrenching and slashing.

He walked very quickly over the snow crust and when he reached the diner he found that he didn't want to go in yet. He would cross the highway and walk a little farther, then go into the diner to get warmed up on his way home.

By the time he was on his way home, the police car that was parked at the diner ought to be gone. The night constable was in there now, taking his break. This was not the same man Robert had seen and listened to when he dropped in on his way home from Keneally. This man would not have seen anything, at firsthand. He hadn't talked to Peg.

Nevertheless he would be talking about it, everybody in there would be talking about it, going over the same scene and the same questions, the possibilities. No blame to them.

When they saw Robert, they would want to know how Peg was.

There was one thing he was going to ask her, just before Clayton came in. At least he was turning the question over, in his mind, wondering if it would be all right to ask her.

A discrepancy, a detail, in the midst of so many abominable details.

And now he knew it wouldn't be all right, it would

never be all right. It had nothing to do with him. One discrepancy, one detail, even one lie, that would never have anything to do with him.

Walking on this magic surface, he did not grow tired. He grew lighter, if anything. He was taking himself farther and farther away from town, although for a while he didn't realize this. In the clear air, the lights of Gilmore were so bright they seemed only half a field away, instead of half a mile, then a mile and a half, then two miles. Very fine flakes of snow, fine as dust, and glittering, lay on the crust that held him. There was a glitter too around the branches of the trees and bushes that he was getting closer to. It wasn't like the casing around twigs and delicate branches, that an ice storm leaves. It was as if the wood itself had altered, and begun to sparkle.

This is the very weather in which noses and fingers are frozen. But nothing felt cold.

He was getting quite close to a large woodlot. He was crossing a long slanting shelf of snow, with the trees ahead of and to one side of him. Over there, to the side, something caught his eye. There was a new kind of glitter under the trees. A congestion of shapes, with black holes in them, and unmatched arms or petals reaching up to the lower branches of the trees. He headed towards these shapes, but whatever they were did not become clear. They did not look like anything he knew. They did not look like anything, except perhaps a bit like armed giants half-collapsed, frozen in combat, or like the jumbled towers of a crazy small-scale city, a space-age, small-scale city. He kept waiting for an explanation, and not getting one, until he got very close. He was so close he could almost have touched one of these monstrosities, before he saw that they were just old cars. Old cars and trucks and even a school bus, that had been pushed in under the trees, and left. Some were completely overturned, and some were tipped over one another, at odd angles. They were partly filled, partly covered, with snow. The black holes were their gutted insides. Twisted bits of chrome, fragments of headlights, were glittering.

He thought of himself telling Peg about this—how close he had to get before he saw that what amazed him and bewildered him so was nothing but old wrecks, and how

he then felt disappointed, but also like laughing. They needed some new thing to talk about. Now he felt more like going home.

When the constable in the diner was giving his account, at noon, he had described how the force of the shot threw Walter Weeble backward.

"It blasted him partways out of the room. His head was laying out in the hall. What was left of it was laying out in the hall."

Not a leg. Not the indicative leg, whole and decent in its trousers, the shod foot. That was not what anybody turning at the top of the stairs would see and would have to step over, step through, in order to go into the bedroom and look at the rest of what was there.

