

CAROL SHIELDS

# The Stone Diaries

*Introduction by* PENELOPE LIVELY

PENGUIN BOOKS



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## THE STONE DIARIES

CAROL SHIELDS (1935-2000) is the author of *Dressing Up for the Carnival*; *Larry's Party*, which won the Orange Prize; and *The Stone Diaries*, which won the 1995 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her other novels and short story collections include *The Republic of Love*, *Happenstance*, *Swann*, *The Orange Fish*, *Various Miracles*, *The Box Garden*, and *Small Ceremonies*.

PENELOPE LIVELY is the author of numerous award-winning novels, including *The Photograph*, *Consequences*, and the Booker Prize-winning *Moon Tiger*. She lives in London.

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For my sister,  
Babs



A number of people have read the manuscript for this book and offered encouragement and suggestions. I thank Blanche Howard, Joan Clark, Jim Keller, Anne Giardini, Catherine, Meg and Sarah Shields, and, especially, Miss Louise Wyatt of London, Ontario.

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nothing she did  
or said

was quite  
what she meant

but still her life  
could be called a monument

shaped in a slant  
of available light

and set to the movement  
of possible music

(From "The Grandmother Cycle" by Judith Downing, *Converse Quarterly*, Autumn)

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## INTRODUCTION

The best fiction surprises—and withholds. Each time that I read *The Stone Diaries* I see it differently. It is a story, first of all—the story of a woman, Daisy Goodwill, later Daisy Goodwill Flett. It is also many stories—those of her family and her friends. You read it first as such, drawn in at once by the compelling opening pages, and then keen to know what is going to happen—to Daisy, to the rest of them. Subsequently it becomes a view of how one woman—many women—lived in the twentieth century, what they expected and what was expected of them. It can be seen as a discussion of the nature of evidence—the way in which there is no single truth about anyone’s life, but as many truths as there are observers. And if you are interested in how a novel is made, it turns into an exercise in narrative technique. And, perhaps, airily—a demonstration of how a novelist can successfully juggle a cast of twenty characters and more over time and space without bewildering the reader.

Here is a story that opens in Manitoba in 1905 and ends in Florida in the 1990s. From birth to death—the parabola of a life, a North American life, with brief excursions to France, to Orkney. Daisy is born into a world that has known neither of the world wars, and in which a woman is required to be first and foremost a domestic support system. She leaves another one in which the globe has contracted and women expect to work outside the home. Her father-in-law sails the Atlantic as a young immigrant from Orkney: At the end of the century Daisy will fly the ocean to trace him. She has experienced the century in a temporal sense, but, as we learn in one of the novel’s deictic commentaries, she has never known nude bathing, pierced ears, body massage, and much else that could be seen to characterize the age. Born in “the murderously hot back kitchen” of a Manitoba stone-worker’s home, she will spend her last years in a three-bedroom Florida condo, a Florida bluehead in a turquoise pantsuit.

Kitchens are rich with significance in the novel—kitchens and what is done in them. The vivid opening chapter has the kitchen as the scene of both birth and death, with the Malvern pudding that Daisy’s mother, Mercy, is cooking as an emblem of domestic labor and achievement—the thickly cut bread, the oozing fruit juices, the sugar. Many years later, Daisy prepares supper for her family—husband, three children—in an Ottawa kitchen (summer heat once more, so a cold meal): jellied veal loaf, sliced tomatoes, potato salad, raspberries again, but in little glass bowls. There is care and attention: the formality of a tablecloth, and before her husband’s return from work Daisy “fixes herself—housedress off, fresh clothes, earrings, lipstick. We are told that Daisy desires—deeply, fervently, sincerely—to be a good wife and mother. She is an assiduous reader of women’s magazines in support of this ambition. In one of the novel’s many significant asides—how others see Daisy—we are given the possible contrasting reactions of a visiting friend of her girlhood, Fraidy Hoyt, herself unmarried and childless. She is perhaps grimly envious—of the distinguished husband, the big house, the beautiful children; or, is she pityingly contemptuous of this woman drowning in domesticity, child-ridden, who probably hasn’t read a book in ten years? Teasingly, we are not told which view Fraidy holds, but this is 1947, and it is tempting to see Fraidy as the voice of the future, ahead of her day, already with the assumptions of the post-feminist woman.

Throughout the novel, the authorial voice alternates with those other voices, creating a deliberate ambiguity. We know what happens to Daisy, and frequently she speaks for herself, but we see her also as others see her, and no two people see her in the same way. Was she happy as a domestic goddess? Maybe not, for in the next, and crucial section of the book—significantly called “Work, 1955-1964”-

she is shown, entirely obliquely, through a sequence of letters written by others, as immersed in a new role as Mrs. Green Thumb, gardening correspondent for the local paper, and eventually devastated and plunged into a lengthy episode of depression when she gets the sack. So was domestic life not worth it? This section is one of the most powerful in the novel—clever and funny—and it gives much pause for thought, as we see Daisy's life of that time shimmer behind the words of other people, and it becomes clear that this is the point at which Daisy has achieved some kind of fulfillment and discovers in herself a capacity of which she had been unaware. She strove to be a good wife and mother, but was she in fact stifled by that role?

The whole novel is a cunning tapestry of evidence. Any novelist is of course in the happy position of being omniscient—of knowing everything about everybody, and deciding just how much information to release to the reader. *The Stone Diaries* is a virtuoso discussion of the nature of evidence itself, of the ways in which it is unreliable and conflicting. In a revealing sequence, we are given a whole slew of opinions about Daisy—those of her children, of her cousin, of Fraidy Hoyt and on and on more. Fraidy believes her to have suffered from sexual starvation—citing her own fifty-four lovers, though this were a more normal record. Her cousin thinks the children drained her. Her daughter Alice sees her—from the viewpoint of a young woman of the 1960s—as without self-esteem in her domestic days: “She functioned like a kind of slave in our society.” This analysis is taking place during Daisy's period of depression after she loses her journalistic job, and as a coda to the alternative views we are given an authorial glimpse into Daisy's own state of mind: “Sleeping inside her like a small burrowing creature is the certainty that she'll recover.” Nobody else has mentioned resilience, that capacity to survive. Maybe this is the key to Daisy's personality.

After Daisy's death these conflicting voices are once again heard, but interwoven now with another kind of evidence—the cool and indisputable facts of her life: the sequence of addresses at which she has lived, the illnesses from which she has suffered, the organizations to which she has belonged, the list of her bridal lingerie at her 1927 wedding. These flat lists are indeed evidence of a kind—any biographer could make good use of them—and they serve as a neat indication of the times in which she has lived, but they are also bland and uninformative without the color of an accompanying voice. They are there to demonstrate that facts alone can be both revealing and uncommunicative.

One of the novel's most arresting features is the attention to detail, the use of detail to evoke time and place, from the ingredients of the Malvern pudding in that Manitoba kitchen to the account of Daisy's sparse possessions in the hospital room of her last days: a toothbrush, toothpaste, a comb, a notebook, a ring of keys. . . . Physical objects are made to provide another kind of evidence, to conjure up the backdrop to Daisy's life, and they are meticulously chosen and placed within the narrative. Detail is made to define a character: Daisy's husband, Barker Flett, a senior civil servant with an expertise in botany, is devoted to taxonomy, to the ordering of the botanical world, and we are first introduced to him as a young man with a passionate dedication to the western lady's slipper, genus *Cypripedium*, on which he is writing his dissertation: “Dorsal sepal, column, lateral sepal, sheath, sheathing bract, eye and root.” Somehow, this litany brings Barker Flett more sharply to life than any detached account: We see the way in which he saw things. When we learn what Daisy is wearing as a baby—a tucked nainsook day-slip topped by a plain flannel barrowcoat, which in turn was topped by a buttoned vest in fine white wool, the archaic terms are perfectly evocative of an early twentieth-century infant, and also say something of the person responsible for clothing her. One of the funniest passages in the novel is also one of the most telling, when we hear the bossy, instructing voice of Mrs. Hoad, mother of Daisy's first husband, lecturing the young bride-to-be: “When you set the table, l

sure the knife blade is turned in. In. Not out. Salad forks, of course, go outside the dinner fork . . . Grape-nuts are a necessity, also a very economical food . . . I wonder if you have discovered Venetia Velva Liquid for your own skin . . . For bath powder I suggest Poudre de Lilas. Some powders can be overwhelming. Men are offended by strong odors . . .” This torrential discourse not only tells us all we need to know about Mrs. Hoad, but serves also as a window into the lifestyle of the prosperous social circles of Bloomington, Indiana, in 1927. And on top of such set-piece instances of deliberate accuracy there is the occasional gift of a piece of throwaway detail that acts as a kind of marker, a reminder of the basic prompt of the novel; the stone with which Daisy’s young mother weighted her Malvern pudding contained three fused fossils of an extremely rare type. We are, after all, reading *The Stone Diaries*.

Stone is the foundation of the narrative—the dolomitic limestone quarries of Manitoba in which work both Daisy’s father and the father of her future husband, Barker Flett. In time, Cuyler Goodwin is to become a wealthy public figure, a position dependent upon his initial skill with stone. Magnate Barker Flett will eventually return to his native Orkney, solitary and resigned, alienated from his family and requiring the reassurance of that stony landscape from which he came. There is a sense in which Daisy’s own life has been conditioned by stone—her birth in Manitoba, her subsequent youth in Bloomington, Indiana, to which her father’s skills have taken him and where he is prominent and well regarded, her eventual marriage to and life with Barker Flett, himself a child of the quarries. The narrative rests upon stone, as it were, but its driving force is work.

Work is too often glossed over in fiction, put aside. *The Stone Diaries* pays proper attention to work, without ever becoming tedious. Most people’s lives, after all, are dominated by what they do, and here is a fiction which recognizes that fact, and gives it due respect. We are told about people working lives, with the greatest economy, from the daily time-table of the Manitoba quarrymen to Barker Flett and his lady’s slippers, and, later in the century, Daisy’s daughter Alice with her rarefied academic studies of Chekhov. And there is also, of course, the central issue of Daisy herself, her brief burst of journalistic employment, and the question of whether or not being a good wife and mother can be called work or not. *The Stone Diaries* is a novel full of activity, sometimes center-stage (those hot kitchens), sometimes in the background, but very much evident. Everybody is grounded—we know how they have spent their days, whether they are conjured up by the authorial voice or made to speak for themselves.

This matter of voices directs the novel, makes it distinctive and arresting. Carol Shields has used a complex and fascinating series of narrative devices with which to tell the story, from the detached authorial voice to the voices of the various characters, by way of letters, lists, and newspaper entries. It is a bold technique that is here entirely successful. The various shifts in narrative form act as small surprises, keeping the reader intrigued. Sometimes Daisy is allowed to speak for herself; more often someone else is talking about her, or we hear of her in detachment, as we look over her creator’s shoulder. And then there is the sudden jolt of a letter, or the intervention of a friend or family member. This is a narrative style that lends itself to the most effective kind of economy—Carol Shields can say most by saying least. She never tells us that Alice is a somewhat prickly and difficult woman; we learn this from an aside by Fraidy Hoyt: “Alice looked gorgeous—my, she’s mellowed.” And the letter sequence from which we learn about Daisy’s period as Mrs. Green Thumb, and its dismaying conclusion, is wonderfully deft. It covers a handful of pages, where a conventional narrative form probably would have gone on a great deal longer and carried far less punch.

This narrative technique has allowed Carol Shields to escape the straitjacket of a long plod through

the years. She can home in on a particular event, a particular period, and bring that to life. She can relay an important piece of information such as the death of Barker Flett, through the content of a solicitor's letter—far more cogent than a plain statement of what has happened. She can ignore long stretches of time, but loop back to them later, as when we learn of Daisy's college studies in nineteenth-century Italian history, revealed by her son Warren, who came across a box of old essays in the storeroom of the family home: There is a glimpse of an earlier Daisy and light is perhaps thrown on the frustrations of her later life. And the technique allows for an effective form of distancing, so that we see some events at a slant, from a throwaway comment—that Fraidy Hoyt has been widowed and that Beans (Daisy's other girlhood friend) has been abandoned by her husband.

But perhaps the most significant effect of this technique is the way in which it can be seen to mirror the processes of memory. Memory is not linear, chronological; neither is it a narrative. Memory is like a series of slides, any of which may flash up at any time, in no particular order, and without links between them. *The Stone Diaries* respects chronology, it gives us the arc of Daisy's life from birth to death, but within that structure the contrasting entries—long, short, expansive, terse—seem to mimic the way in which memory also makes a nonsense of time. In the mind, some entire years vanish into a black hole of oblivion, while a few minutes may hang there forever, brilliant with detail and effect. A childhood moment swims up when we have just been remembering an event of last month. This technique that abandons conventional narrative and plays with different voices, different ways of getting information across, seems to echo the contents of the mind, where what is seen, heard, and felt is all jumbled up—a card-index that has lost its indexing system.

But a novel requires system, above all. A novel that genuinely reflected the processes of memory would possibly be interesting and arresting but would also be pretty unreadable. We tolerate our own chaotic memories because we hold the key to the private code. While the structure of *The Stone Diaries* hints at the operation of memory, it also respects the requirements of fiction, the first of which is to remember the reader. Readers demand coherence; confuse them and you have lost them. An adventurous narrative form is only effective so long as it sweeps the reader along, and *The Stone Diaries* scores high. In fact, the switches from one voice to another, from detached overview to immediate account, from dialogue to letters, serve to keep the reader involved and expectant. You want to know what will happen next, and what has happened, but you are also drawn in by the presentation—the switches require attention.

*The Stone Diaries* is a relatively short novel that seems long, an effect created by its structure. A great deal happens to many people within a short space. There is a large cast, but even without the courtesy of the family tree provided it is not hard to keep track of relationships and connections. Characters drop out and can be forgotten until some neat reintroduction, such as the reminder of the Jewish peddler who was one of the group in the Manitoba kitchen on the day of Daisy's birth—in the words of his grandson, decades later. We discover how that day had been a seminal one for him also. New names appear with each generation, but there is the satisfactory continuity of the people whose lives run parallel to Daisy's and who make guest appearances throughout the narrative—her girlhood friends Fraidy and Beans.

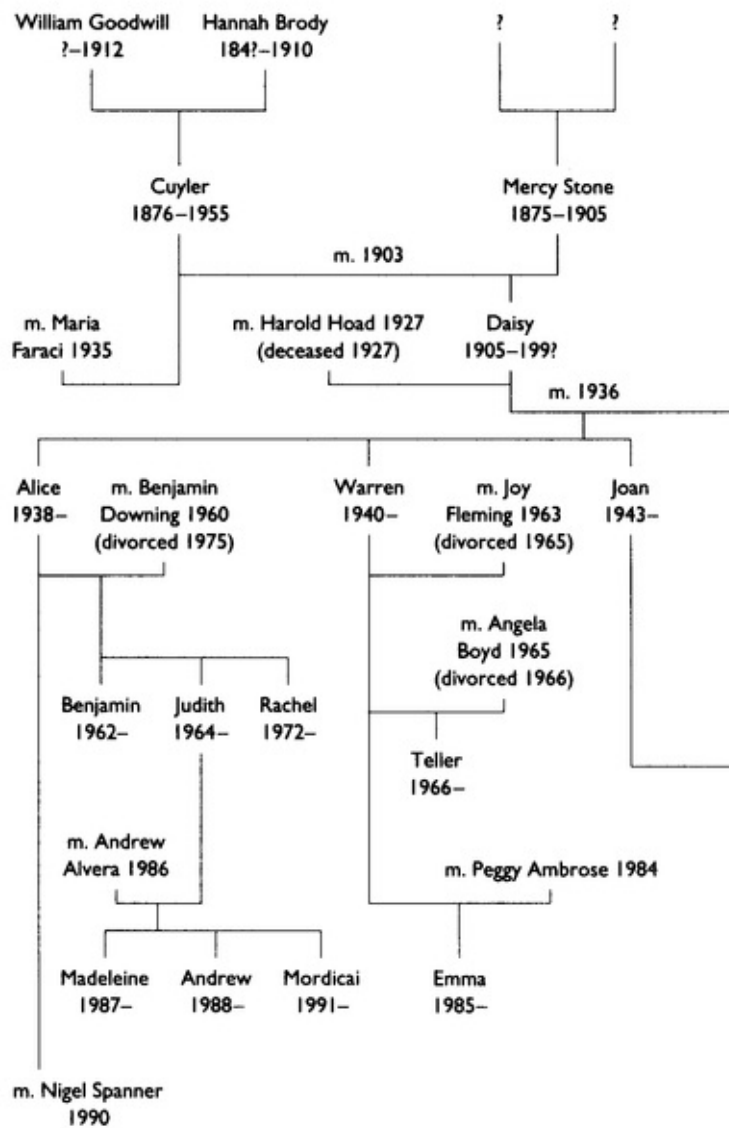
In all of her fiction, Carol Shields excels at character creation. She conjures up a character in a few lines of dialogue, in a pungent authorial aside. The cast of *The Stone Diaries* brims with sharply defined characters, whether central figures such as Cuyler Goodwill or Barker Flett, or peripheral figures such as Cuyler's second wife, Maria, who erupts into the story in a gust of exuberant and incomprehensible Italian. It is this precision about her characters that enables Carol Shields to fie

such a generous cast; we don't get confused about people because all are so distinctive.

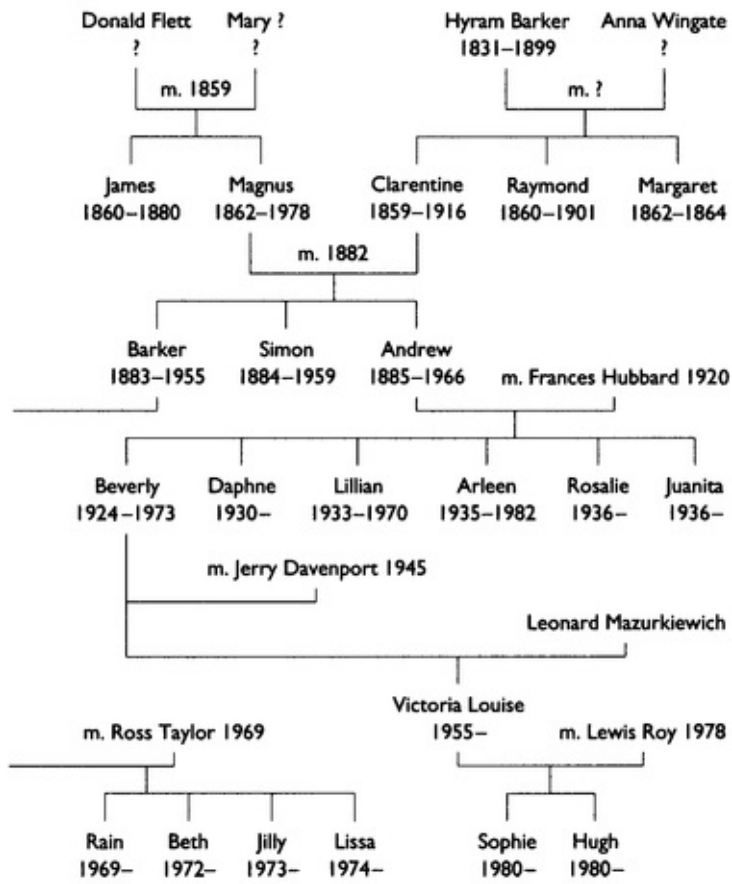
There is one exception: Daisy herself. This is of course entirely deliberate. We never see Daisy with such sharp relief because our view of her is multifaceted. There is an ambiguity about the perception of Daisy that is a reflection of the ambiguity that hangs over any life; we are all of us some things to some people, something else to others. And because the novel is in one sense a discussion of the nature of evidence, there can be no hard and fast definition of Daisy. As the focus of the story, around whom everything turns, she must be to some degree elusive; the reader's contribution is invited. How do you see Daisy?

For my own part, I see her differently each time I revisit the novel: Sometimes she dominates and directs, at others she is almost submerged by the claims of others. The essential quality of the best fiction is that it should offer itself afresh at each reading—you find aspects that you had apparently missed before, you home in on some feature that had passed you by. *The Stone Diaries* is a novel so rich in characters, in events, in sharply evoked settings that it never fails to provide some new angle. If you read it with an eye to the backdrop alone, there is a range that runs from the stone quarries of Manitoba to the flat, bleak, windy landscape of Orkney, by way of prosperous Bloomington and the condominium land of Florida. Sometimes the humor stands out: the discussion of sex between young Daisy and her girlfriends, Mrs. Hoad's spiel of instruction, the wry message contained in the letter sequence about Mrs. Green Thumb. At others you are struck by the elegance of the writing—the wonderfully accurate dialogue, the apt phrases that shine out on every page. There is no slack anywhere in this novel; it is taut from beginning to end, each paragraph essential, each section springing from its predecessor. I have enjoyed and admired all of Carol Shields's work, and I believe *The Stone Diaries* to be her masterpiece.

—Penelope Lively







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# CHAPTER ONE

*Birth, 1905*

MY MOTHER'S NAME was Mercy Stone Goodwill. She was only thirty years old when she took sick, a boiling hot day, standing there in her back kitchen, making a Malvern pudding for her husband's supper. A cookery book lay open on the table: "Take some slices of stale bread," the recipe said, "and one pint of currants; half a pint of raspberries; four ounces of sugar; some sweet cream if available." Of course she's divided the recipe in half, there being just the two of them, and what with the scarcity of currants, and Cuyler (my father) being a dainty eater. A pick-and-nibble fellow, she calls him, able to take his food or leave it.

It shames her how little the man eats, diddling his spoon around in his dish, perhaps raising his eyes once or twice to send her one of his shy, appreciative glances across the table, but never taking a second helping, just leaving it all for her to finish up—pulling his hand through the air with that dreamy gesture of his that urges her on. And smiling all the while, his daft tender-faced look. What did food mean to a working man like himself? A bother, a distraction, perhaps even a kind of price that had to be paid in order to remain upright and breathing.

Well, it was a different story for her, for my mother. Eating was as close to heaven as my mother ever came. (In our day we have a name for a passion as disordered as hers.)

And almost as heavenly as eating was the making—how she gloried in it! Every last body on the earth has a particular notion of paradise, and this was hers, standing in the murderously hot back kitchen of her own house, concocting and contriving, leaning forward and squinting at the fine print in the cookery book, a clean wooden spoon in hand.

It's something to see, the way she concentrates, her hot, busy face, the way she thrills to see the dish take form as she pours the stewed fruit into the fancy mold, pressing the thickly cut bread down over the oozing juices, feeling it soften and absorb bit by bit a raspberry redness. Malvern pudding; she loves the words too, and feels them dissolve on her tongue like a sugary wafer, her tongue itself growing waferlike and sweet. Like an artist—years later this form of artistry is perfectly clear to me—she still and arranges and draws in her brooding lower lip. Such a dish this will be. A warm sponge soaking up color. (Mrs. Flett next door let her have some currants off her bush; the raspberries she's found herself along the roadside south of the village, even though it half kills her, a woman of her size walking out in the heat of the day.)

She sprinkles on extra sugar, one spoonful, then another, then takes the spoon to her mouth, the rough crystals that keep her alert. It is three o'clock—a hot July afternoon in the middle of Manitoba in the middle of the Dominion of Canada. The parlor clock (adamantine finish, gilded feet, a wedding present from her husband's family, the Goodwills of Stonewall Township) has just struck the hour. Cuyler will be home from the quarry at five sharp; he will have himself a good cheerful wash at the kitchen basin, and by half-past five the two of them will sit down at the table—this very table, once spread with a clean cloth, every second day a clean cloth—and eat their supper. Which for the most part will be a silent meal, both my parents being shy by nature, and each brought up in the belief that conversing and eating are different functions, occupying separate trenches of time. Tonight they will

partake of cold corned beef with a spoonful of homemade relish, some dressed potatoes at the side, cups of sweet tea, and then this fine pudding. His eyes will widen; my father, Cuyler Goodwill, age twenty-eight, two years married, will never in his life have tasted Malvern pudding. (That's what she's preparing for—his stunned and mild look of confusion, that tender, grateful male mouth drooping open in surprise. It's the least she can do, surprise him like this.) She sets a flower-patterned placemat carefully on top of the pudding and weights it with a stone.

A cool place, the recipe says: "Set the mould in a cool place." (The book is an old one, printed in England more than thirty years ago, its pages limp, but the author's tone vigorous and pungent.) Where on a day like today is Mercy Goodwill to find a cool place? Even the dark stone floor under the cellar steps where she stores her milk and butter and lard has warmed up, giving off this last fortnight a queer sour smell. The Flett family, next door, has recently purchased a Labrador Ice Chest, zinc-lined, and Mrs. Flett has spoken shyly of this acquisition to Mercy, mentioning its features, its ventilating flues, the shining tin provision shelves, how a block of ice is able to last through two warm days or more.

Some sharp thought, the worry over how to keep the pudding cool, or perhaps envy for the Flett's new ice chest, brings on my mother's first spasm of pain. She gives a little cry. Her eyes pull tight at the corners, as though someone has taken hold of her hair and yanked it upward so that her scalp sings. A witness, had there been a witness present in the little back kitchen, might have feared a fainting spell coming on, even though my mother is not much given to faintness. What she feels is more like a shift in the floor of her chest, rising at first, and then an abrupt drop, a squeezing like an accordion held sideways.

She looks down and observes with wonder how the blue and white stripes of her apron are breaking into colored flakes. Her hands fly straight out in the air, a reflex meant to hold back the crushing pressure, and she steadies herself by settling her shoulders and placing her palms flat on the table, leaning forward and letting go a long, soft whimper. The sound that comes from her lips is formless and loose, a wavy line of bewilderment. (Later, these words, more than any others, will attach themselves to my image of my mother: looseness, bewilderment.) For a heavy woman she perspires little, even during the height of summer, and she takes, if the truth were known, a shy pride in her bodily dryness—only now a broad band of dampness is spreading beneath her apron and down the channel of her back. She breathes rapidly, blinking as the pain wraps a series of heavy bands around her abdomen. Down there, buried in the lapped folds of flesh, she feels herself invaded. A tidal wave, a flood.

All spring she's been troubled with indigestion. Often in the morning, and then again at night after her young husband has gone to sleep, she's risen from her bed and dosed herself with Bishop's Citrate of Magnesia. When she drinks ordinary milk or sweetened tea or sugary lemonade she swallows it down greedily, but Bishop's cool chalky potion she pours into a china cup and sips with deep, slow concentration, with dignity. She doesn't know what to think. One day she's persuaded her liver is acting up, and the next day her kidneys—she's only thirty years old, but kidney trouble can start early in life, especially for a woman of my mother's unorthodox size. Or perhaps the problem stems from constipation. Mrs. Flett next door has suggested this possibility, recommending rhubarb tablets, or, else, speaking confidentially, some woman's trouble. Excessive loss of blood, she tells Mercy, is the cause of discomfort for many young ladies—has Mercy spoken to Dr. Spears? Dr. Spears is known for his sensitivity to women's complaints; he has a way of squeezing his eyes shut when he phrases his delicate inquiries, of speaking almost poetically of nature's cycles and balances, of the tide of fertility or the consolation of fruit salts.

No, Mercy has not approached Dr. Spears, she would never speak to Dr. Spears of such a thing, she would speak to no one, not even her husband—especially not her husband. Her monthly blood has appeared only twice in her life, springing out of the soft cushions of her genital flesh, staining her underclothes with its appalling brightness, and mocking the small decencies and duties that steady her life: her needlework, her housekeeping, her skill with a flat iron, her preserves and pickles and fresh linens and the lamp chimneys she polishes every single morning.

The doses of Citrate of Magnesia help hardly at all. Fruit salts only make her suffering worse. Her abdominal walls have continued to cramp and heave all spring, and she's wondered at times if her inner membranes might burst with the pressure. Bile rises often in her throat. Her skin itches all over. She experiences scalding attacks of flatulence, especially at night as she lies next to my father, who, out of love, out of delicacy, pretends deep sleep—she can tell from the way he keeps himself curled respectfully to his own side of the bed.

Only bread seems to ease her malaise, buttered bread, enormous slabs of it, what she's heard people in this village refer to as doorsteps. She eats it fresh from the oven, slice after slice, sometimes not bothering with the knife, just tearing it off in handfuls. One day, alone in this kitchen, she consumes an entire loaf between noon and supper. (One of the loaves burned, she explained to her husband, anxious to account for the missing bread—as though a man of my father's dreamy disposition would notice so small an item, as though any man would notice such a thing.) Frequently she sprinkles sugar on top of the buttered bread. The surface winks with brilliance, its crystals working between her teeth, giving her strength. She imagines the soft dough entering the bin of her stomach, lining that bittely bloated vessel with a cottony warmth that absorbs and neutralizes the poisons of her own body.

Her inability to feel love has poisoned her, swallowed down along with the abasement of sugar, yeast, lard, and flour; she knows this for a fact. She tries, she pretends pleasure, as women are encouraged to do, but her efforts are punished by a hunger that attacks her when she's alone, as she is on this hot July day, hidden away in a dusty, landlocked Manitoba village (half a dozen unpaved streets, a store, a hotel, a Methodist Church, the Canadian Pacific Railway Station, and a boarding house on the corner of Bishop Road for the unmarried men). She seems always to be waiting for something fresh to happen, but her view of this "something" is obscured by ignorance and the puffiness of her bodily tissue. At night, embarrassed, she gathers her nightdress close around her. She never knows when she blows out the lamp what to expect or what to make of her husband's cries, which are, thankfully, muffled by the walls of the wood-framed company house where she and my father live. Two rooms up, two down, a privy out back. She knows only that she stands apart from any coherent history, separated from the ordinary consolation of blood ties, and covered over and over again these last two years by Cuyler Goodwill's immense, unfathomable ardor. Niagara in all its force is what she's reminded of as he climbs on top of her each evening, a thundering let loose against the folded interior walls of her body.

It's then she feels most profoundly buried, as though she, Mercy Goodwill, is no more than the beating of blood inside the vault of her flesh, her wide face, her thick doughy neck, her great loose breasts and solid boulder of a stomach.

Standing in her back kitchen, my mother's thighs, like soft white meat (veal or chicken or fatty pork come to mind) rub together under her cotton drawers—which are wet, she suddenly realizes, soaked through and through. There are double and triple ruffles of fat around her ankles and wrists, and the ridged extremities are slick with perspiration. Her large swollen fingers press into the boards of the kitchen table, and her left hand, her wedding ring buried there in soft flesh, is throbbing with poison.

She seems to see a weak greenish light unfolding like a fan in front of her eyes. This is worse, far worse, than ever it's been before. She wonders if her body will break apart, the bones drawn out from under the flesh, blood spilling on the floor and walls. She imagines her blood to be yellow rather than red, a thick honey-colored sludge slowing her down, keeping her from crying out to Mrs. Flett near the door.

Mrs. Flett, as it happens, is within easy earshot, no more than forty feet away, pinning her rough sheets and pillowcases on to a clothesline. She would come running if she only knew of Mercy Goodwill's distress; she would be there in a trice, exhorting the poor dear soul to be calm, begging her to lie down on the kitchen couch, bathing her broad, damp, blank face with a cool cloth, easing her clothing, pulling off the tightly laced shoes and heavy stockings. She loves Mercy, loves her ways, her solid concentration, though on the whole (it must be admitted) her love is churned from fascination and also from pity—pity for that large, soft, slow-flowing body, the blurred flesh at the sides of Mercy's young face, and a blinking prettiness that shows itself in certain lights, in the curve of her upper lip or the tender spilt panic of her hazel eyes. When she looks into Mercy's calf eyes she does not think "childish," but "child." Poor thing, poor lost thing. Never a mother to call her own, and now from the looks of it—though who could tell such things, who can read the future?—no little ones of her own to rock and sing to.

Mrs. Flett—her Christian name is Clarentine—has three grown sons, Simon, Andrew, and Barker, but no daughter. The eldest of these sons, Barker, has gone to Winnipeg to study at the College, and the other two work at the quarry alongside her husband Magnus, a master stonemason, a cold, lean Orkneyman who immigrated to Canada at the age of nineteen. His Orkney ways have stayed with him. He prefers simple things. A plainly furnished house. A carefully tended garden. Ordinary food on the table, a supper of porridge or smoked fish or even a plate of bread and butter washed down by tea. The sight of a Malvern pudding unmolded on a glass plate and covered with cream would distress him deeply, particularly a pudding set out on what is, after all, an ordinary Monday evening in high summer in the year 1905 (the year of my birth, the day of my birth).

Mrs. Flett, Clarentine, a neat-bodied woman whose skin is the color of mushrooms and whose memory of her sons' infancy has been washed clear by disappointment, dreams of taking Mercy's large dry hand in hers and saying, "A woman's life isn't worth a plateful of cabbage if she hasn't felt life stir under her heart. Taking a little one to nurse, watching him grow to manhood, that's what love is. We say we love our husbands, we stand up in church saying as how we'll love them forever and ever, till death do we part, but it's our own blood and sinew we really love."

She likes giving Mercy things. Only last spring, while cleaning house, she came across an ornate tinware jelly mold, and this is the vessel Mercy uses today to provide shape for her Malvern pudding. She gives Mercy flowers from her garden, sweet peas, nicotiana, dianthus, candytuft, snapdragon. Also lettuce when it's in season, new radishes, carrots, broad beans. Also pots of berry jam or rhubarb pickle. Once a set of tea towels with embroidered corners, another time an appliqued sham with a wide open-work centre. Why, she's even given Mercy the cookery book the girl's so everlasting fond of and which has nearly worn out with use. At Christmas she gave her a bar of heliotrope soap fresh in its paper wrapper, and once, out of the blue, a hairpin glass trimmed with ribbon. These objects, passing out of her hands into Mercy's, seem momentarily ringed with light, though the phrases she employs along with her gift-giving are calculated to diminish her generosity. "I've no earthly use for this myself." "I've more here than would feed an army" or "Too fancy for us, but it'll suit you" or "Mr. Flett don't

hold with sweet-smelling stuff, and I do hate to throw a thing away what's perfectly good and useful.

Mercy's softly focused gratitude, her slow-forming smile with its hint of bewilderment and her love of being unspotted by the world make Mrs. Flett long to take her in her arms. She can imagine Mercy's compacted fullness pressing up against her own tidy dress front, heaving with emotion and surrender. "My dear," she would like to murmur into the pale bulk of Mercy's neck, into Mercy's soft shoulders and curling brown hair.

The moment lies in the future, it will come. This is what she thinks as she stands under the blazing sun, pegging her clean wash to the line—the linens first, then her aprons and shirt waists, then the men's summer overalls. There is so little breeze that the clothes will dry stiff and hard—in two hours they'll be dry, it's that hot. She's late with the wash today, and there's still the garden to weed, and peas to pick for supper. She's always running late, and always there's a shrewish tune skirling away inside her head: now the stove to polish, now the mending, next the curtains to starch. The scolding voice is her own, so abrasive and quick, yet so powerless to move her. The men, her husband and sons, leave for the quarry at seven o'clock sharp and return at five. What do they imagine she does all day? It makes her shiver to think of it, how not one pair of eyes can see through the roof and walls of her house and regard her as she moves through her dreamlike days, bargaining from minute to minute with indolence, that tempter.

God sees her, of course. He must. God observes her at the window where she stares and stares at the shadows of the caragana blowing across the path, or sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, locked in paralysis over her mending basket, watching a fly creep across the table. The minutes tick by, become an hour, sometimes two. These segments of time are untied to any other time she recognizes. It happens more and more frequently, these collapsed hours, almost every day since the summer weather came on. She wakes up fresh enough, but as the hands of the clock move forward she feels a force beckoning, the teasing seduction of ease and secrecy, and then, with the next breath, she's lost the battle. Whatever it is that encloses her is made up of tenderness. It rises around her like a cloud of scent. There's no face or voice to it, only a soft, steady, pervasive fragrance, a kind of rapturous way that enters her throat, then moves downward through her body, bringing tightness to her female parts and the muscles of her softened thighs. The silence is perfect, and yet a torment, and always a distant little thought plucks away at her—that God is not interested in her lapses. He has not spoken out to her in any way, has not given a sign, not even troubled Himself to betray her, even though she has baited Him with a scrap of embroidered linen on her kitchen wall:

*Christ is the Head of the House  
The Unseen Guest  
at every Meal  
The Silent Listener  
to every Conversation*

It is frightening, and also exhilarating, her ability to deceive those around her; this is something new in her lost hours, her vivid dreams and shreds of language, as though she'd been given two lives instead of one, the alternate life cloaked in secret.

Or does she deceive herself? Dr. Spears, when she met him by accident walking on the Quarry Road, did catch hold of her wrist and speak to her in a most curious and candid manner. "Women need

the companionship of other women," he burst out after some polite talk about the weather. "A little laughter is a great comfort, a little harmless gossip. The Needlework Auxiliary or the Mothers' Union—and I believe, Mrs. Flett, you were once a member of the Ladies Rhythm and Movement Club, that you used to find enjoyment in an afternoon of cheerful company. My own wife tells me the recent talk on the Chinese missions was diverting, as well as edifying."

"I'm very busy at home," Clarentine Flett told Dr. Spears.

"Of course, of course," he nodded quickly. "Or perhaps you're thinking of a few days' visiting in Winnipeg. I believe you spend a few days there every year with your son Barker. He is still there, is he not, engaged in his studies? Botany, if I remember, his field of endeavor."

"Yes," she answered. "Flowers. Plants."

"I'm sure he does you credit. A fine young fellow. If you remember, I was one of those who put his name forward for the Epworth Scholarship."

"I do remember, indeed I do, and—"

"Why not surprise him, then, with the pleasure of a visit? We all need a change of scene now and then, especially after a long hard winter. I could mention it to your husband, if you like—indirectly, of course. I could suggest the healthful benefits of a little holiday."

"Please," she'd said. She was thinking of the oval of silence she would enter as soon as she left Dr. Spears's presence, the smooth pearl gloss of it. "There's no need of that. I can speak to him myself."

The Mothers' Union. A few days in Winnipeg. Only months ago these diversions would have held some attraction. She might actually have spoken to her husband, Magnus, about a week away in the city. The words would have come forward—while she was engaged in some ordinary task, drying the supper dishes or taking the dead leaves off the fuchsia that hung by the window. Her husband was not a man who wasted words, but the two of them had managed over the years the simple, necessary marital commerce required for the rearing of three sons, for the ordering of supplies, the discussion concerning weather, illness, what manner of vegetables should be planted in the garden. And she guessed—though how was she to know such a thing? Who in this world would tell her?—she guessed her husband was no rougher in his ways than other men. "If you're willing, Mother," he says in the darkness of their back bedroom, one hand working up her nightdress. A thousand times, five thousand times—"If you're willing, Mother." The words have worn a groove in her consciousness, she hardly hears them. And afterwards there's silence, like falling down a hole, or a kind of grunt that she takes to be satisfaction.

"Shall we marry then?" These were the words of his marriage proposal delivered some twenty-five years ago, the phrase riding upward in a way she found disarming. At that time he had been less than one year in Canada, eight months working in the old granite quarry at Lac du Bonnet near to where his father farmed; his Orkney accent was pronounced and exceedingly harsh, though she fancied she heard something softer beneath it. He walked her home from a prayer meeting at Milner's Crossing. It was a warm April night with stars spread thick across the sky. She felt she could gulp the clean air in like a kind of nourishment. This was the third time he had walked her home, and she knew—and he knew—that he was entitled to ask for a kiss. Out of curiosity she assented. His upper lip, moving quickly, touched quickly, grated against her mouth and cheek. And then he spoke: "Shall we marry then?"

His presumptuousness moved her, it was so childlike. She had an urge to laugh, to tease him—she knew how to be merry in those days—but his face was too close.

“What do you say, then?” he pressed her. His features were covered over by darkness, but she felt his warm breath on her neck, and it weakened her terribly. She readied herself for words of tenderness.

“I make a good enough wage,” he said, “and I work regular.”

This was true. She could not contradict what he said. She never did learn to contradict what he said. He had a particular way of putting a thing that disallowed contravention. The new ice box, for instance. He had written away for it, secretly sent an order in to Eaton’s Mail Order, and now it occupied a corner of the kitchen. Suddenly it was there. Months earlier, for reasons of economy, he had refused to consult Dr. Spears about the lump behind his ear, and then he had to go and was charged eleven dollars on an ice box, eleven dollars plus shipping. The neat metal plate attached to the ice box door said “New Improved Labrador Ice Chest.” She had never asked for such a thing. She watched him on that first day run his fingers over the smooth wood and polished hinges, and against her worst thought: those same fingers have touched me, my naked body.

Such thoughts are more and more with her. Her brain has been running wild these last months. She is a woman whose desires stand at the bottom of a cracked pitcher, waiting.

Even now, hanging out the wash, she is faint with longing, but for what? Embrace me, she says to the dripping sheets and pillowslips, hold me. But she says it dully, without hope. Her wash tub empty now, an old wooden vessel sitting there on a piece of outcropping rock. The sky overhead wide and blue; it makes her dizzy looking up. She feels a tweaking in her nostrils, and reaches in her apron pocket for her handkerchief. The smell of washing soda affects her, makes her want to sneeze. “I am not willing,” she says inside her head. “I am no longer willing.”

It is three o’clock already, she judges. She will dispense with weeding the garden for today. If anyone asks, her husband or one of her sons, she’ll blame the heat. Why put her health at risk under strong sun like this? She’ll seek out the coolness of the front room instead, the tapestry chair in the darkened corner. She’s done this before, unable to stand up to this sorrow of hers. Her prized star of Bethlehem sits rooted in its china pot; she likes to study its gray-green leaves for secrets. The wallpaper, too, holds her attention with its rows of flowers, its browns and pinks alternating and repeating. The little beveled mirror in its oak frame sends back her image, her flattened-down hair and her eyes, hot as stones in her head.

“I love you,” she heard young Cuyler Goodwill say to his immense, bloated wife, Mercy. “Oh, how I love you and with all my heart.”

It was an early evening when she heard this declaration, a Monday like today. She had been standing beside the Goodwills’ kitchen door, a basket of early lilacs in her arms, a neighborly offering. (In truth, she finds it hard to stay away; the houses of the newly married, she senses, are under a kind of enchantment, the air more tender than in other households, the voices softer, the makeshift curtains and cheap rugs brave and bright in their accommodation.) The Goodwills’ kitchen window was wide open to the fresh spring breezes. They were at table (she could see them clearly enough)—Mercy on one side and Cuyler on the other, the white tablecloth and the supper dishes as yet uncleared.

Light from the doorway fell on my mother’s broad face, giving it a look of luster. My father was leaning toward her, his hand covering hers. The two of them, Clarentine Flett thought, might have been the subject of a parlor picture, a watercolor done in tints of soft blues and grays.

My mother, as I have already said, was an extraordinarily obese woman, and, with her jellylike features, she was rather plain, I’m afraid. It’s true her neighbor, Mrs. Flett, glimpses a certain



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