

## Nobel Prize 2013: Alice Munro exclusive story

In 'Voices', an exclusive short story from her latest collection, the Nobel Prize-winner Alice Munro recalls an experience she had as a ten year-old child: a fleeting wartime encounter with a prostitute.



'You could have called her brazen': prostitutes in wartime Photo: Hulton Archive

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*The final part of Alice Munro's latest collection, Dear Life, comprises four works she describes as "not quite stories". They are, she writes, "autobiographical in feeling ... the first and last – and the closest – things I have to say about my own life".*

*Published here exclusively is one of those: "Voices"*

### VOICES

When my mother was growing up, she and her whole family would go to dances. These would be held in the schoolhouse, or sometimes in a farmhouse with a big enough front room. Young and old would be in attendance. Someone would play the piano — the household piano or the one in the school — and

someone would have brought a violin. The square dancing had complicated patterns or steps, which a person known for a special facility would call out at the top of his voice (it was always a man) and in a strange desperate sort of haste which was of no use at all unless you knew the dance already. As everybody did, having learned them all by the time they were ten or twelve years old.

Married now, with three of us children, my mother was still of an age and temperament to enjoy such dances if she had lived in the true countryside where they were still going on. She would have enjoyed too the round dancing performed by couples, which was supplanting the old style to a certain extent. But she was in an odd situation. We were. Our family was out of town but not really in the country.

My father, who was much better liked than my mother, was a man who believed in taking whatever you were dealt. Not so my mother. She had risen from her farm girl's life to become a schoolteacher, but this was not enough, it had not given her the position she would have liked, or the friends she would have liked to have in town. She was living in the wrong place and had not enough money, but she was not equipped anyway. She could play euchre but not bridge. She was affronted by the sight of a woman smoking. I think people found her pushy and overly grammatical. She said things like "readily" and "indeed so." She sounded as if she had grown up in some strange family who always talked that way. And she hadn't. They didn't. Out on their farms, my aunts and uncles talked the way everybody else did. And they didn't like my mother very much, either.

I don't mean that she spent all her time wishing that things weren't as they were. Like any other woman with washtubs to haul into the kitchen and no running water and a need to spend most of the summer preparing food to be eaten in the winter, she was kept busy. She couldn't even devote as much time as she otherwise would have done in being disappointed with me, wondering why I was not bringing the right kind of friends, or any friends at all, home from the town school. Or why I was shying away from Sunday School recitations, something I used to make a grab at. And why I came home with the ringlets torn out of my hair — a desecration I had managed even before I got to school, because nobody else wore their hair the way she fixed mine. Or indeed why I had learned to blank out even the prodigious memory I once had for reciting poetry, refusing to use it ever again for showing off.

But I am not always full of sulks and disputes. Not yet. Here I am when about ten years old, all eager to dress up and accompany my mother to a dance.

The dance was being held in one of the altogether decent but not prosperous-looking houses on our road. A large wooden house inhabited by people I knew nothing about, except that the husband worked in the foundry, even though he was old enough to be my grandfather. You didn't quit the foundry then, you worked as long as you could and tried to save up money for when you couldn't. It was a disgrace, even in the middle of what I later learned to call the Great Depression, to find yourself having to go on the Old

Age Pension. It was a disgrace for your grown children to allow it, no matter what straits they were in themselves.

Some questions come to mind now that didn't then.

Were the people who lived in the house giving this dance simply in order to create some festivity? Or were they charging money? They might have found themselves in difficulties, even if the man had a job. Doctor's bills. I knew how dreadfully that could fall upon a family. My little sister was delicate, as people said, and her tonsils had already been removed. My brother and I suffered spectacular bronchitis every winter, resulting in doctor's visits. Doctors cost money.

The other thing I might have wondered about was why I should have been chosen to accompany my mother, instead of my father doing that. But it really isn't such a puzzle. My father maybe didn't like to dance, and my mother did. Also, there were two small children to be looked after at home, and I wasn't old enough yet to do that. I can't remember my parents ever hiring a babysitter. I'm not sure the term was even familiar in those days. When I was in my teens I found employment that way, but times had changed by then.

We were dressed up. At the country dances my mother remembered, there was never any appearance in those sassy square dance outfits you would see later on television. Everybody wore their best, and not to do so — to appear in anything like those frills and neckerchieves that were the supposed attire of country folk — would have been an insult to the hosts and everybody else. I wore a dress my mother had made for me, of soft winter wool. The skirt was pink and the top yellow, with a heart of the pink wool sewn where my left breast would be one day. My hair was combed and moistened and shaped into those long fat sausage-like ringlets that I got rid of every day on the way to school. I had complained about wearing them to the dance on the grounds that nobody else wore them. My mother's retort was that nobody else was so lucky. I dropped the complaint because I wanted to go so much, or perhaps because I thought that nobody from school would be at the dance so it didn't matter. It was the ridicule of my school fellows that I feared always.

My mother's dress was not homemade. It was her best, too elegant for church and too festive for a funeral, and so hardly ever worn. It was made of black velvet, with sleeves to the elbows, and a high neckline. The wonderful thing about it was a proliferation of tiny beads, gold and silver and various colors, sewn all over the bodice and catching the light, changing whenever she moved or only breathed. She had braided her hair, which was still mostly black, then pinned it in a tight coronet on top of her head. If she had been anybody else but my mother I would have thought her thrillingly handsome. I think I did find her so, but as soon as we got into the strange house I had to notice that her best dress was nothing like any other woman's dress, though they must have put on their best too.

The other women I'm speaking of were in the kitchen. That was where we stopped and looked at things set out on a big table. All sorts of tarts and cookies and pies and cakes. And my mother too set down some fancy thing she had made and started to fuss around to make it look better. She commented on how mouthwatering everything looked.

Am I sure she said that — mouthwatering? Whatever she said, it did not sound quite right. I wished then for my father to be there, always sounding perfectly right for the occasion, even when he spoke grammatically. He would do that in our house but not so readily outside of it. He slipped into whatever exchange was going on — he understood that the thing to do was never to say anything special. My mother was just the opposite. With her everything was clear and ringing and served to call attention.

Now that was happening and I heard her laugh, delightedly, as if to make up for nobody's talking to her. She was inquiring where we might put our coats.

It turned out that we could put them anywhere, but if we wanted, somebody said, we could lay them down on the bed upstairs. You got upstairs by a staircase shut in by walls, and there was no light, except at the top. My mother told me to go ahead, she would be up in a minute, and so I did.

A question here might be whether there could really have been a payment for attending that dance. My mother could have stayed behind to arrange it. On the other hand, would people have been asked to pay and still have brought all those refreshments? And were the refreshments really as lavish as I remember? With everybody so poor? But maybe they were already feeling not so poor, with the war jobs and money that soldiers sent home. If I was really ten, and I think I was, then those changes would have been going on for two years.

The staircase came up from the kitchen and also from the front room, joining together into one set of steps that led up to the bedrooms. After I had got rid of my coat and boots in the tidied-up front bedroom, I could still hear my mother's voice ringing out in the kitchen. But I could also hear music coming from the front room, so I went down that way.

The room had been cleared of all furniture except the piano. Dark green cloth blinds, of the kind I thought particularly dreary, were pulled down over the windows. But there was no dreary sort of atmosphere in the room. Many people were dancing, decorously holding on to each other, shuffling or swaying in tight circles. A couple of girls still in school were dancing in a way that was just becoming popular, moving opposite each other and sometimes holding hands, sometimes not. They actually smiled a greeting when they saw me, and I melted with pleasure, as I was apt to do when any confident older girl paid any attention to me.

There was a woman in that room you couldn't help noticing, one whose dress would certainly put my mother's in the shade. She must have been quite a bit older than my mother — her hair was white, and

worn in a smooth sophisticated arrangement of what were called marcelled waves, close to her scalp. She was a large person with noble shoulders and broad hips, and she was wearing a dress of golden-orange taffeta, cut with a rather low square neck and a skirt that just covered her knees. Her short sleeves held her arms tightly and the flesh on them was heavy and smooth and white, like lard.

This was a startling sight. I would not have thought it possible that somebody could look both old and polished, both heavy and graceful, bold as brass and yet mightily dignified. You could have called her brazen, and perhaps my mother later did —that was her sort of word. Someone better disposed might have said, stately. She didn't really show off, except in the whole style and color of the dress. She and the man with her danced together in a respectful, rather absent-minded style, like spouses.

I didn't know her name. I had never seen her before. I didn't know that she was notorious in our town, and maybe farther afield, for all I knew.

I think that if I was writing fiction instead of remembering something that happened, I would never have given her that dress. A kind of advertisement she didn't need.

Of course, if I had lived in the town, instead of just going in and out every day for school, I might have known that she was a notable prostitute. I would surely have seen her sometime, though not in that orange dress. And I would not have used the word prostitute. Bad woman, more likely. I would have known that there was something disgusting and dangerous and exciting and bold about her, without knowing exactly what it was. If somebody had tried to tell me, I don't think I would have believed them.

There were several people in town who looked unusual and maybe she would have seemed to me just another. There was the hunchbacked man who polished the doors of the town hall every day and as far as I know did nothing else. And the quite proper looking woman who never stopped talking in a loud voice to herself, scolding people who were nowhere in sight.

I would have learned in time what her name was and eventually found out that she really did the things I could not believe she did. And that the man I saw dancing with her and whose name perhaps I never knew was the owner of the pool room. One day when I was in high school a couple of girls dared me to go into the poolroom when we were walking past, and I did, and there he was, the same man. Though he was balder and heavier now, and wearing shabby clothes. I don't recall that he said anything to me, but he did not have to. I bolted back to my friends, who were not quite friends after all, and told them nothing.

When I saw the owner of the pool room, the whole scene of the dance came back to me, the thumping piano and the fiddle music and the orange dress, which I would by then have called ridiculous, and my mother's sudden appearance with her coat on that she had probably never taken off.

There she was, calling my name through the music in the tone I particularly disliked, the tone that seemed to specially remind me that it was thanks to her I was on this earth at all.

She said, “Where is your coat?” As if I had mislaid it somewhere.

“Upstairs.”

“Well go and get it.”

She would have seen it there if she herself had been upstairs at all. She must never have got past the kitchen, she must have been fussing around the food with her own coat unbuttoned but not removed, until she looked into the room where the dancing was taking place and knew who that orange dancer was.

“Don’t delay,” she said.

I didn’t intend to. I opened the door to the stairway and ran up the first steps and found that where the stairs took their turn some people were sitting, blocking my way. They didn’t see me coming — they were taken up, it seemed, with something serious. Not an argument, exactly, but an urgent sort of communication.

Two of these people were men. Young men in Air Force uniforms. One sitting on a step, one leaning forward on a lower step with a hand on his knee. There was a girl sitting on the step above them, and the man nearest to her was patting her leg in a comforting way. I thought she must have fallen on these narrow stairs and hurt herself, for she was crying.

Peggy. Her name was Peggy. “Peggy, Peggy,” the young men were saying, in their urgent and even tender voices.

She said something I couldn’t make out. She spoke in a childish voice. She was complaining, the way you complain about something that isn’t fair. You say over and over that something isn’t fair, but in a hopeless voice, as if you don’t expect the thing that isn’t fair to be righted. Mean is another word to be made use of in these circumstances. It’s so mean. Somebody has been so mean.

By listening to my mother’s talk to my father when we got home I found out something of what had happened, but I was not able to get it straight. Mrs. Hutchison had shown up at the dance, driven by the pool room man, who was not known to me then as the pool room man. I don’t know what name my mother called him by, but she was sadly dismayed by his behavior. News had got out about the dance and some boys from Port Albert — that is, from the Air Force base — had decided to put in an appearance as well. Of course that would have been all right. The Air Force boys were all right. It was Mrs. Hutchison who was the disgrace. And the girl.

She had brought one of her girls with her.

“Maybe just felt like an outing,” my father said. “Maybe just likes to dance.”

My mother seemed not even to have heard this. She said that it was a shame. You expected to have a nice time, a nice decent dance within a neighborhood, and then it was all ruined.

I was in the habit of assessing the looks of older girls. I had not thought Peggy was particularly pretty. Maybe her make-up had rubbed off with her crying. Her rolled up mousey-colored hair had got loose from some of its bobby pins. Her fingernails were polished but they still looked as if she chewed them. She didn't seem much more grown up than one of those whiny, sneaky, perpetually complaining older girls I knew. Nevertheless the young men treated her as if she was someone who deserved never to have encountered one rough moment, someone who rightfully should be petted and pleased and have heads bowed before her.

One of them offered her a ready-made cigarette. This in itself I saw as a treat, since my father rolled his own and so did every other man I knew. But Peggy shook her head and complained in that hurt voice that she did not smoke. Then the other man offered a stick of gum, and she accepted it.

What was going on? I had no way of knowing. The boy who had offered the gum noticed me, while rummaging in his pocket, and he said, “Peggy? Peggy, here's a little girl I think wants to go upstairs.”

She dropped her head so I couldn't look into her face. I smelled perfume as I went by. I smelled their cigarettes too and their manly woollen uniforms, their polished boots.

When I came downstairs with my coat on they were still there, but this time they had been expecting me, so they all kept quiet while I passed. Except that Peggy gave one loud snuffle, and the young man nearest to her kept stroking her upper leg. Her skirt was pulled up and I saw the fastener holding her stocking.

For a long time I remembered the voices. I pondered over the voices. Not Peggy's. The men's. I know now that some of the Air Force men stationed at Port Albert early in the war had come out from England, and were training there to fight the Germans. So I wonder if it was the accent of some part of Britain that I was finding so mild and entrancing. It was certainly true that I had never in my life heard a man speak in that way, treating a woman as if she was so fine and valued a creature that whatever it was, whatever unkindness had come near her, was somehow a breach of a law, a sin.

What did I think had happened to make Peggy cry? The question did not much interest me at the time. I was not a brave person myself. I cried when chased and beaten with shingles on the way home from my first school. I cried when the teacher in the town school singled me out, in front of the class, to expose the shocking untidiness of my desk. And when she phoned my mother about the same problem and my

mother hanging up the phone herself wept, enduring misery because I was not a credit to her. It seemed as though some people were naturally brave and others weren't. Somebody must have said something to Peggy, and there she was snuffling, because like me she was not thick-skinned.

It must have been that orange-dressed woman who had been mean, I thought, for no particular reason. It had to have been a woman. Because if it had been a man, one of her Air Force comforters would have punished him. Told him to watch his mouth, maybe dragged him outside and beaten him up.

So it wasn't Peggy I was interested in, not her tears, her crumpled looks. She reminded me too much of myself. It was her comforters I marvelled at. How they seemed to bow down and declare themselves in front of her.

What had they been saying? Nothing in particular. All right, they said. It's all right, Peggy, they said. Now, Peggy. All right. All right.

Such kindness. That anybody could be so kind.

It is true that these young men, brought to our country to train for bombing missions on which so many of them would be killed, might have been speaking in the normal accents of Cornwall or Kent or Hull or Scotland. But to me they seemed to be unable to open their mouths without uttering some kind of blessing, a blessing on the moment. It didn't occur to me that their futures were all bound up with disaster, or that their ordinary lives had flown out the window and been smashed on the ground. I just thought of the blessing, how wonderful to get on the receiving end of it, how strangely lucky and undeserving was that Peggy.

And, for I don't know how long, I thought of them. In the cold dark of my bedroom they rocked me to sleep. I could turn them on, summon up their faces and their voices—but oh, far more, their voices were now directed to myself and not to any unnecessary third party. Their hands blessed my own skinny thighs and their voices assured me that I, too, was worthy of love.

And while they still inhabited my not yet quite erotic fantasies they were gone. Some, many, gone for good.

***Taken from 'Dear Life' by Alice Munro, published in paperback by Vintage (£8.99).***

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