A REPORTER AT LARGE

# ALICE MUNRO'S PASSIVE VOICE

*The celebrated writer's partner sexually abused her daughter Andrea. The abuse transformed Munro's fiction, but she left it to Andrea to confront the true story.*

**By Rachel Aviv**

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Andrea was nine when the abuse began. She later wrote that Alice “loves and protects the most destructive person of my life.” Photograph by Andrea Modica for The New Yorker

"I am a writer or used to be a writer," Alice Munro wrote in 2014, in one of the last stories she tried to compose. A year earlier, she had won the Nobel Prize in Literature. But she had Alzheimer's and had been in decline for several years. Her partner of four decades, Gerald (Gerry) Fremlin, had recently died, and she was living near her daughter Jenny, in Port Hope, east of Toronto. "I'm a writer, as I said, and I suppose that sticks for a while even though you don't ~~due~~ ~~do~~ due it anymore," she wrote, in shaky longhand. "I am going to write what happened yesterday, though at first I did not mean to, didn't think of it, as I don't anymore."

The day before, Alice had been waiting outside a bank while Jenny, the second of her three daughters, took care of business inside. "My daughter does all that sort of thing now," Alice wrote. "I'm sort of frightened by it." A man she knew vaguely from high school, in Wingham, a rural town in Ontario, came out of the bank and recognized her. Alice asked after his two sisters, who turned out to be dead. "Me the only bugger left on the planet," the man said, nodding. His words seemed to release something in Alice, and she tried to build a story around the conversation. But after several beginnings she doubted herself: "Why, I don't know—I mean why write. Even my pen seems unwilling." She crumpled up the pages. Later, Jenny picked them out of the trash.

Jenny always made sure that her mother had pens and spiral-bound notebooks beside her chair, but eventually Alice became too impaired to use them. As she lost her abilities, Jenny noticed a change. "Something happened where she was full of love and understanding, and people felt better after being with her," she told me. In the Munro family, the word "earnest" had been used as an insult. Once, in a letter, Alice thanked Jenny

for her "loving kindness," and then, as if embarrassed, drew an arrow pointing toward the phrase and added the words "blah blah blah." In her illness, though, Alice seemed to access her emotions more freely, a shift that Jenny attributed, in part, to the fact that she wasn't writing. "She wasn't putting every difficulty in her life through that machine that turned things into gold," Jenny said.

For years, Jenny had been trying to talk with her mother about something that had been put through the machine repeatedly: the sexual abuse of Alice's youngest daughter, Andrea, by Gerry, and Alice's refusal to see the harm that it had done. "She loves and protects the most destructive person of my life," Andrea had written years earlier.

Alice used to shut down when Jenny brought up the subject, but after she got Alzheimer's, Jenny said, "she didn't feel invested in that person, Gerry, at all, or in the person she'd been with him. She started to lose that great terror over the truth."

Jenny and her mother had lucid conversations about Andrea's abuse, which Jenny sometimes recorded, but Alice would forget what had happened a few minutes later. In one conversation, in 2019, Alice exhaled loudly and said under her breath, "How awful." She looked up at Jenny and said, "It was beastly of me not to get rid of him."

"Did you sort of blame yourself and hate yourself and think Andrea would never love you again, too?" Jenny asked, hoping for more self-reflection.

"No, I don't think it was that," Alice said. "I don't know why I didn't." She sat in a cushioned chair, wearing a zip-up sweater, a fleece blanket spread over her lap. Then she said in a louder voice, as if finally discovering something solid, "Well, he told me he'd kill himself, of course." Gerry had said that he couldn't live without her. "He was in a desperate situation."

"And it's an empty threat, isn't it?" Jenny said. "What if Andrea had killed

herself?"

"Yes, exactly," Alice said, nodding.

"A lot of victims of child abuse do," Jenny said.

Alice held her hand to her forehead. She seemed to be losing track of the emotional center of the conversation. "Does she think about it still?" she asked.

"This?" Jenny said. "It's not something you get over."

"Oh, God. Oh, God," Alice said, in a high, pained voice, bowing her head and holding it in her hand.

Jenny asked Andrea if she could share the recording with her, but Andrea wasn't interested. "Every time I found a morsel of remorse, I would tell Andrea," Jenny said. "But it was just so little, so late." Andrea felt as if her mother had found a disease that was almost too convenient, a permanent forgetting. She told me, "I was kind of mad at her, like, Oh, yeah. You found your way out."

One of the first times that Andrea met Gerry, she dressed up as a waitress, created a menu, and served him and Alice at the dinner table. She was eight years old. "I was really trying to make a fabulous impression," she told me. She felt she had succeeded. "I loved him. He took a lot of interest in me, and I thought that was a great thing. He loved to talk and I loved to listen."

Alice, who was living in London, Ontario, had recently left her husband, Jim Munro, the father of her daughters. She had known Gerry in college, at the University of Western Ontario, though she hadn't seen him for twenty years. Tall and handsome, he had been part of a group of bohemian students who were alluring because "they were dangerous, got drunk and so on," Alice said.

When she wrote her first story for the college literary magazine, she handed it to him, hoping that he was the editor. “Then we would fall into conversation, and he would fall in love with me, and everything would go on from there,” she said she imagined. Instead, he told her the name of the actual editor. He considered her “an apple-cheeked country girl” and was not attracted to her.

Gerry had never married. He had edited “The National Atlas of Canada,” and worked as a government geographer before taking early retirement, in 1974. That year, he heard Alice interviewed on CBC radio. She had an easy, humble, softly seductive way of talking. The daughter of a fox farmer, she had grown up poor, in a home where displays of self-regard were punished with beatings, and she spoke candidly about why, in her first three books of short stories, she kept returning to autobiographical material. “Every time, I seem to go a stage closer to what is really very hard to bear—a sort of unbearable truth,” she said.

Gerry called her and asked her to lunch. They each had three Martinis. By the end of the meal, they were discussing living together. “I’m very happy in a floating kind of way, all identity more or less down the drain,” Alice wrote a friend.

Andrea had been living with her mother, but in the summer of 1975 she went to Victoria, British Columbia, to visit her father. Jenny, who was eighteen, and her older sister, Sheila, who was twenty-one, were already living on their own. Alice moved in with Gerry, who lived in Clinton, a town with a population of around three thousand, twenty miles from Wingham, where she had grown up. He was caring for his sick mother in the house where he had been born. “It was very much the time of women’s liberation,” Sheila told me. “I didn’t really question my mother’s decision, because there was this sense of sexual adventure and being free of a twenty-year marriage.”

Alice, who was forty-four, had never learned to drive, so she was dependent

on Gerry if she wanted to go anywhere. She often worked on stories in a corner of the dining room or on the staircase. In a letter, Gerry wrote, "Alice and I know that I didn't deeply love her when we first started living together. She was, however, the only person I ever met that I thought I could live with."

By fall, it had been decided that Andrea would stay in Victoria and go to school there, coming back to Ontario during the summers. Jim Munro was living with a textile artist, Carole Sabiston, who had a ten-year-old son, Andrew, and he and Andrea had quickly become close. In a story called "The Children Stay," Alice described the pain of leaving one's children for a man: "You won't get free of it, but you won't die of it. You won't feel it every minute, but you won't spend many days without it. And you'll learn some tricks to dull it or banish it, trying not to end up destroying what you incurred this pain to get."

Alice and Gerry were rarely alone, because Gerry's mother was always "tottering about, needing large quantities of Cream of Wheat + *six* books a week," Alice wrote in a letter. She took on the task of fetching English historical novels from the library. Reflecting on her return to the community where she'd grown up, she told *Publishers Weekly*, "I never, never, never, never, never, never thought I would end up there." In a letter, she wrote, "The fidelity + permanence I really want, I just am a little scared of how I can stand up to a much stronger personality."

Andrea was a buoyant, adventurous child whose favorite movie was "The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams," about a frontier woodsman who survives in the mountains with wild animals as his companions. During the summers in Clinton, Andrea spent many days at a hog barn down the road. She walked there barefoot on gravel roads, hoping to build calluses in case she was ever lost for days in the woods.

Gerry, who had flown more than thirty bombing missions in the Royal

Canadian Air Force during the Second World War, celebrated her physical adeptness and told her that she could be part of his "bombing crew," which would include only the most stalwart people. Alice could never make the cut. She cried too much. Gerry laughed at her weaknesses, such as her swim stroke, which he considered too fluttery. He got angry at her for minor infractions, like not properly flushing the toilet or having spinach stuck in her teeth.

Alice sometimes complained to Andrea that Gerry hated her. She also said that Gerry liked Andrea better than her. "Something would rise up in me," Andrea told me, "and I'd be, like, 'This isn't right—why am I your confidante?' And she'd be, like, 'This is what friends do,' and I would think, Oh, we're friends. I'm so honored."

When Alice and Gerry fought, Andrea took care to appear sensible and insightful. "Poor Andrea was dropped down into the middle of it all," Gerry wrote in a letter. "We had a dependence on her to help us out of our rows." Andrea felt that she understood Gerry's sense of humor, and she tried to lift the mood by being a kind of "performing monkey." She recited dirty lyrics that Gerry had taught her, or added sexual innuendos to innocuous sentences. He dared her to perform stunts like putting on her mother's clothes and her wig, the same color and texture as her real hair, which she worried was thinning. One time, he encouraged her to chase her mother with a mummified mouse that he had found in the basement.

Jenny found Gerry intelligent and amusing but also a blowhard and a bully. He had many opinions about monarchy, religion, empire-building. "He thought of himself as quite the big deal intellectually and was writing an indecipherable book about geography, sort of like Casaubon in 'Middlemarch,' " Jenny told me. "You'd always have to be quiet, because he was working on it at the table. I think it was called 'Ways of Seeing.' "

Jenny said that Gerry would get into arguments with her mother's friends:

"He would goad them, and make it impossible for her to see these friends for months. I think he was trying to isolate her, really." Alice, in an interview, said of Gerry, "He protects me from social life in a way," because "he's not exactly intimidating but he's more outspoken than I."

Many of the women in Alice's stories have a kind of fantasy of total surrender, as if some final truth or recognition might be grasped in the depths of submission. Alice recognized that passivity was not "something the modern woman is supposed to be content with," she told the CBC in 1979. But it could also be an asset. "I will let situations develop way past the point where I should stop them, just to see what will happen, to see what people will say, to see what people will do," she said. "It's probably the overriding passion of my life—just to see what will happen."

"Is that because you don't want to hurt them?" the interviewer asked.

"Oh, no," Alice responded quickly. "That's the surface part, that's the social behavior: that one doesn't make anyone uncomfortable. But it's also that . . ." She smiled subtly. "Everything fascinates me," she continued, nodding. "What happens between people. So this is the intelligent passivity, I suppose."

"You, dear Alice Munro, like few others, have come close to solving the greatest mystery of them all: the human heart and its caprices," the secretary of the Swedish Academy said, as he presented the Nobel Prize in Literature. "She is interested in the silent and the silenced, the passive, those who choose not to choose," he went on. "Of key importance are all the things her characters could not or did not wish to understand there and then, but that, only long afterward, stand revealed." The novelist Mona Simpson said that after the prize was announced every female fiction writer she knew called her, some in tears. "We had won something, too," Simpson said in a speech, "because of the generosity, the frank respect for the smallest and largest aspects of the female experience that she bequeathed to us in all her

stories."

Alice often spoke of how she had a real life, which was hidden, and another life, in which she was "pretending to be what people wanted me to be." She also talked about moving through the world as "two women." One was using the other's life as material. As a young girl, she had recognized that her desires were so at odds with her surroundings—reading books was seen as a dangerous addiction—that exposure would bring her ridicule. Even when she was in her thirties, her brother, who had become a chemist, told her, "I've learned to accept my limitations, and I believe that's what you should do. None of your writing is any good." As a young mother, she lied rather than tell her friends that she was writing. She couldn't write at all if another adult was in the house. "I just, I suppose, lived a very deceptive life," she said. "But it didn't bother me." The outward-facing woman was self-effacing and gracious and vivacious, a compassionate listener. But the exertion of being in public—the "constant 'work' of that self-*presentation*," Alice wrote her agent—caused her to feel so dysregulated that she felt she needed to stop going on book tours. "I'm not *just* being finicky, I think I'm making a true judgement of what's dangerous for me," she wrote.

In fourteen books of short stories, more than fifty of which were published in *The New Yorker*, Alice created a new form for expressing the way that the past, incompletely assimilated, creates the conditions of life in the present. Her stories flash forward and backward by decades, one layer of experience placed at a surprising angle to another. Sometimes there is an insight that feels like a breakthrough, but after enough years pass in a character's life we realize that the insight was not so important. It can feel as if, for the first time, we are grasping the full span of a human life. Emotional patterns replicate; revelations surface and then recede; injuries are experienced only belatedly. Her mode of writing feels almost traumatized. Denial is built into the structure of the story. She captures what it feels like to live next to pain and shame without ever looking directly at it.

Throughout her work, episodes from her own life are repeatedly put to use, as if she were mapping out the arc of a memory at different stages, as it becomes more or less bearable. She first wrote about her mother in 1959, shortly after her death, which became what she called "my central material." Alice, the eldest of three children, was in her early teens when her mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. She felt humiliated by her mother's symptoms—her unintelligible voice, her drooling—and also by her pleas for attention. After going to college, on a scholarship, Alice rarely returned home. In moments of despair, her mother would say, "Soon I'll see Alice," like a prayer. "Dearest dear," her mother wrote her, shortly before dying. "I am just so full of love and good wishes that my letter will I fear it will burst at the corner. Please write soon (just for me) everything. I find my love and it is centred on my children."

Alice hadn't seen her mother in two and a half years, and she didn't go home for her funeral. "The problem, the only problem, is my mother," she wrote, in a story that drew on these memories. In another story, she described taking "all emotion away from our dealings with her, as you might take away meat from a prisoner to weaken him, till he died."

After Alice moved in with Gerry, her stories became more structurally complex, the point of view less stable. Her characters accumulate self-knowledge but can't keep it in focus. "I got to a stage of backing off from the things I couldn't really know," one says.

In a draft of "Labor Day Dinner," from 1981, fragments of which are preserved in her archives, at the University of Calgary, Alice tried eight versions of the same sentiment in a row: "There is no time; nowhere to work; no room; no light; no table. No clear moments"; "She can't work now that life has got such a grip on her"; "Or is it that her authority has waned, her independent sight has clouded, her powers are wilting"; "Her authority is not what it used to be, in the exercise of even her most private powers"; "*That's*

*what she can't afford to discover*."

"Labor Day Dinner" is about Roberta, a middle-aged woman whose two daughters are visiting her and her new boyfriend for the summer. The older daughter is dismayed by the way that the boyfriend, George—an "occasionally brutal, consistently entertaining character"—seems to sap her mother of self-respect. "If this is love I want no part of it," the daughter writes in her journal. "He wants to enslave her and us all and she walks a tightrope trying to keep him from getting mad."

Jenny, who was twenty-four when "Labor Day Dinner" was published, realized that her mother had read her private writing. "She changed a few things, but that story was true," Jenny told me. "I had these exercise books I filled with drawings and writing—and I was coping, you know. And I actually thought my version was better, because I said 'walk on eggshells,' and she said 'walk a tightrope,' but it was very much the substance."

In the story, George tells Roberta that her armpits are flabby, so she puts on a shirt with sleeves. He is "disgusted by her aging body" and seems to feel a certain "satisfaction of airing disgust." Roberta weeps so much that she wears dark glasses to hide her eyes. "Surely it is hatred," she thinks, that "George is steadily manufacturing and wordlessly pouring out at her, and surely it is a deadly gas."

Although Roberta's older daughter can't stand George, the younger one—"an acrobat, a parodist, an optimist, a disturber"—seems to have a special connection with him. "I know how to be jokey," she says. "I understand him." Roberta shivers at this remark: "It seems to her that she has instructed them, by example, that he is to be accommodated, his silences respected, his joking responded to. What if he should turn, within this safety, and deal them a memorable blow? If it happened, it would be she who would have betrayed them."

In the summer of 1976, Alice left Clinton to be with her father, who was dying. Alice and Gerry's bedroom had two beds, and Andrea, who was nine, asked if she could sleep in one of them. "Well, don't tell your mother," Gerry said. He undressed and got into the other bed. "As I lay reading," he later wrote in a letter, "I started to think that Andrea was interested in me sexually, and in consequence got an erection. I pushed the covers back and let the erection show and fondled it. I felt sure she was watching, but didn't look to see." Then he "became faintly disgusted" with himself, so he turned off the light and went to sleep.

Early the next morning, "I again thought that Andrea must be interested in me sexually, and I got into bed with her," he wrote. "I *know* there are Lolitas, and I know that I can respond to a Lolita, if I'm not careful, as a Humbert Humbert." He put his erect penis in Andrea's hand and rubbed her vagina with his hand. Andrea pretended to be asleep. "He put me on top of him and rubbed my body up and down on himself," she later wrote. Gerry again felt disgusted with himself, he wrote, so he went downstairs. When he came back, Andrea had moved into her own room. "I asked her if she was alright —normally she would be up by this time," he wrote. "She said she had a headache and would get up later."

When her mother returned to Clinton, Andrea never considered telling her what had happened. Andrea said, "I didn't feel safe enough in that house to even wonder, Should I or shouldn't I?" For the rest of the summer, Andrea said, when they were alone in Gerry's truck he would take his penis out of his shorts and leave it exposed. "Andrea and I had a guilty secret," Gerry wrote in a letter. "But we were the very best of friends it seemed to me."

A few weeks after Andrea returned to Victoria for the school year, she was sitting in the den, watching TV with her stepbrother, Andrew, and she mentioned that Gerry had got into bed with her. "She said it in a kind of jokey way," Andrew told me. "I remember saying, 'Wait, what? You've got to

tell my mom.' " He walked upstairs with her, to find his mother, Carole, who had married Jim that year. "I took her aside and I said, 'Is there something you want to tell me?' " Carole recalled. "She was whimpering—she had got her tiny little girl's voice on." As Andrea told the story, she tried to figure out what was important. "Carole wanted to know if he'd penetrated me. And when it turned out that no, he hadn't, I wondered, Is that bad? Is that good?" At the end, she began sobbing and said, "He touched me in places that I didn't want him to touch me."

Soon afterward, Andrea remembers, Sheila, who was twenty-three, asked her what had happened. She told Sheila about other moments, too, that had made her uncomfortable, like when Gerry asked her to sit on his lap after she'd taken a bath. "And when I finished, Sheila said, 'O.K., so that's the entirety?' I said, 'Yes.' " When Sheila brought up a moment that Andrea hadn't mentioned to her, "I felt like, Oh, what if she thinks she's caught me in a lie?" Andrea said.

Carole also told the story to Andrea's father, Jim, the owner of Munro's Books, an independent bookstore in Victoria that he and Alice had started together. After their divorce, Jim had turned it into a prominent institution. Alice's increasing fame gave the store extra cachet. His home office was full of pictures of him shaking hands with famous visitors, like the Canadian Prime Minister and the Queen of Jordan. "His total focus was always The Bookstore," Carole wrote me. Jim was stern and not inclined toward physical affection; one of his favorite sayings was "Everyone's entitled to my opinion."

Carole wanted to tell Alice, but Jim forbade it, explaining that they couldn't be certain the story was true. Jenny was in Montreal when Andrea first told the story; Jim eventually shared a vague version with her, which Jenny described as "You know little girls, how they flirt and jump around." Jenny immediately went to call her mother, but Jim took the phone from her hand, saying, "Don't you tell your mother! This would kill her!"

For months, no one mentioned the abuse. “It was a horrible gap,” Carole told me. “We were all afraid to bring it up. We didn’t want to remind her of what happened.” When the school year was almost over, Carole told Andrea that she didn’t have to return to Clinton for the summer. “She started crying and said, ‘I have to go back,’ ” Carole said. “This went on for a very, very long time, and she got more and more distressed, until she ended up like a rag, she was so limp.” Andrea felt that if she didn’t go to Clinton as planned her mother would guess her and Gerry’s “secret.” She didn’t think that Alice could survive the revelation. “That my mother was terribly fragile was something I had always believed,” she said.

Jim decided to send Andrea back to Clinton for the summer, but he asked Sheila to go, too, to make sure that Andrea and Gerry were never alone. Sheila agreed, and left her job, managing a second branch of Munro’s Books. That summer, Alice rented a cottage in a lakeside town about ten miles away. “I think Gerry must have known something was up, because he stayed away most of the time,” Sheila told me.

In a memoir, “Lives of Mothers & Daughters,” published in 2001, Sheila wrote that few things were more compelling than a conversation with her mother. “I’d see her coming up the street in her leather pants, maybe some tight turtleneck, something dramatic, no grey showing in her hair because she used a product called Happiness (‘I really have found happiness,’ she used to joke), and I’d be in a state of breathless anticipation,” she wrote. “There was always a sense of excitement; it was as if we were trying to get to some perspective, some stance, where we could see everything as it truly was.”

Sheila didn’t understand why her mother was doing housework for Gerry and his mom. Alice had recently had a hysterectomy, and she spent much of the summer lying on her bed in the dark. Yet she was still going to Gerry’s house and performing such chores as lifting his mother out of the bath. “I said, ‘Why are you cleaning up Gerry’s mess?’ ” Sheila recalled. “She got

really angry with me, and said I was trying to ruin her relationship, ruin her happiness. That's when I nearly told her about Gerry." But she held back. "She was the great Alice Munro," Sheila said. "We all just had this feeling that she had to be protected."

After the summer, Sheila wrote a letter to her father saying that he didn't need to worry about Andrea and Gerry. She said that Andrea had told her "it would never happen again." Somehow, at the time, Sheila felt that Andrea had the power to offer this assurance.

In an interview with *The Paris Review* in 1994, Alice said that she sometimes had the impulse to call her daughters and ask, "Are you sure you're all right? I didn't mean to be such a . . ." When Sheila was about two, "I would bat her away with one hand and type with the other," Alice said. "I've told her that. This was bad because it made her the adversary to what was most important to me."

Alice had another baby girl less than two years after Sheila was born, but the child died when she was a day old. Not long afterward, Alice got pregnant with Jenny. Jenny remembers how, on excursions they took together when she was young, Alice's lips would be moving, as she worked through the lines of a story. "Her writing was more real than our lives and, I think, our existence," Jenny said. "But there was also unconditional love. I know there was for me, and I think for all of us."

In her memoir, Sheila describes the disorientation of reading a short story called "Miles City, Montana," based on a trip that the family had taken when she and Jenny were young. She was amazed that her mother had captured her personality in a few sentences: "*How could she know I was like that*, 'too eager to be what we in fact depended on her to be?' " But Sheila sensed that, though Alice had been carefully observing her childhood, it was not for Sheila's benefit.

Alice and Jim Munro had met in college—she dropped out around the time she married him, because her scholarship covered only two years—and there was tension over their class difference. “I had no breeding,” she said. His parents, who were genteel and middle-class, often asked her when she’d get a haircut. Alice felt ashamed of her background and critical of Jim’s. He bought them a house with a chandelier and chintz furniture, and the place seemed to reinforce the irreconcilability of their world views. “It doesn’t matter whether you live in a new beautiful house or a few little rooms, that doesn’t change anything, not you or what we feel towards you,” Alice’s younger sister wrote in a letter, trying to reassure her. When Andrea was born—“Not enough jelly on the diaphragm,” Alice joked—Jim bought an even larger home, a mock-Tudor house in Victoria with an ivy-covered gazebo in the yard. It had twelve rooms, five fireplaces, twelve-foot ceilings, two staircases, and a maid’s quarters. “Something happened right then,” Alice said. “Everything just pulled apart.” In a letter to a friend, she wrote that she had stayed in the marriage for Sheila and Jenny’s sake. “But I can’t do it for hers,” she wrote, referring to Andrea. “There’s not enough time left.”

In 1973, after separating from Jim, Alice was one of six artists featured in *Maclean’s* as models for women in Canada. They “refuse to play background to anybody’s life,” the article said. They are “willing to grow up, to leave cuteness and compliance behind.” But Alice spoke frankly about “this emotional dependency I feel in myself.” She said, “I’m really afraid of getting to a stage where one still has sexual feelings but is no longer considered a possible sex object. That to me is the ultimate horror.” She believed that the “springs of creativity and sex are all together.”

Newly single and teaching writing, she fell into a series of damaging relationships. One man “hurts + delights me more than anybody ever has, I think, sometimes both in the same day,” she wrote in a letter. Then she fell in love with the writer John Metcalf, who was thirty-five. Metcalf eventually broke things off, his friend later told her, because she was too old. She was

forty-three. Around that time, a colleague took her home from a party and raped her. “Not legally rape because I didn’t scream and wake his kids,” she wrote Metcalf. “I just thought, oh hurry up then, get it over with.” She said the whole subject was “boring, really. It doesn’t really matter.” But the day after the rape she felt so numb that she couldn’t meet her class; instead, she wandered around the city aimlessly. “I have that real powerless humiliated anger you have when you’re a kid,” she wrote. A few weeks later, the colleague apologized, saying that he’d been drunk. “Never mind, I said, it’ll make a good story,” she wrote. “A *funny* story, I said. Should give him a few worried nights.”

Jenny said that her mother didn’t like anyone to touch her hair, and she startled if someone approached her from behind. Jenny connected this to her mother’s early childhood, when she was routinely taken to a doctor who administered enemas. Alice’s mother, a former teacher with a violent dislike of sex, seemed so afraid of the workings of the human body that she could not let Alice’s trips to the bathroom be dictated by physical urges.

Alice fashioned herself in opposition to her mother. “I hated the image of the mother who disapproved of everything, who had a different set of values,” she told Sheila, in an interview for the memoir. “It was the refusal to sink into this role which made me self-centred instead of thinking about what you could have used.”

Gerry, the son of a police officer, also took pride in flouting the norms of his parents’ generation. One year, he and Alice sent out a Christmas card with a photograph of him standing in the snow, naked except for boots, his bare butt toward the camera. “I don’t take responsibility for these cards you get every year,” Alice wrote her agent, Virginia Barber. “I am only a bewildered accomplice.”

Andrea said that it was not uncommon for her and her mother to be sitting in the kitchen and hear Gerry in the bathroom near them. He seemed to be

masturbating in the shower. “My mom had a totally blank expression, like a void,” Andrea said. “I thought I must be imagining it, that I was prone to thinking that innocent sounds were actually dangerous.”

Gerry felt it was important that their home be a place where “no subjects, questions, or language were barred,” he wrote in a letter. “We had a sort of a pedagogical theory to the effect that Andrea was a person, not a child.” In front of Alice, Gerry would tell Andrea that in the past, before the culture became prude, it had been “natural” for adults to want to have sex with children. He talked about “Lolita,” and about a scene in William Faulkner’s “The Sound and the Fury” where a girl named Caddy climbs a tree as her brothers watch “the muddy bottom of her drawers,” an episode that foreshadows her sexual precocity. He pretended to speak casually, Andrea said, but she noticed a defiant thrill on his face.

Three of Alice’s early stories have scenes involving girls who feel that they have willed an older man to grope them. It is hard to tell that what is happening in these scenes is sexual abuse—though it is—because the writing is so respectful of the complexities of early experiences of lust. One girl longs to be someone’s object (“pounded, pleasured, reduced”), and is willing to “risk almost anything, just to see what will happen. *To see what will happen*.”

In “Lives of Girls and Women,” the narrator, Del, is also “fanatically curious.” She routinely tries to position herself so that it is easy for an older man, a friend of the family, to grab her breasts and butt. She will not be one of those women who is “damageable,” she decides. By the time she begins dating someone closer to her own age, she has honed her capacity for dissociation. After her boyfriend nearly kills her, she is “amazed to think that the person suffering was me, for it was not me at all; I was watching.”

When Andrea was about eleven, Alice went to see a therapist. She told Jenny that she was troubled by an interaction she’d witnessed between Gerry and Andrea in the back yard. “She said that Gerry was using

a hose, like he was pissing, and Andrea was laughing, and she would grab the hose and do it, too," Jenny said. "And it just seemed off. It seemed wrong."

In "Soon," published more than twenty years later, a woman named Juliet dreams that, when she looks out her window, she sees her father and a girl playing with a hose. She can see that her father "held the hose low, in front of his body, and that it was only the nozzle of it that he turned back and forth. The dream was suffused with a sticky horror. Not the kind of horror that jostles its shapes outside your skin, but the kind that curls through the narrowest passages of your blood."

Jenny said her mother told her that the therapist, a younger man, chided her for having unrealistic expectations for Gerry, who she had always known was not the "fatherly type." The therapist told her that she was jealous of Andrea.

A few years later, Alice published a story called "Dulse," in which a middle-aged woman, suffering over her relationship with a man named Duncan, goes to a therapist. The woman understands that "the sacrifices she made with Duncan—in living arrangements, in the matter of friends, as well as in the rhythm of sex and the tone of conversations—were violations, committed not seriously but flagrantly."

"When are you happy?" the therapist asks her.

"When he's pleased with me," the woman responds. "When he's joking and enjoying himself." But it's more a feeling of triumph than of happiness, she adds, because "he can always pull the rug out."

"So, why are you with somebody who can always pull the rug out?"

"I want to be humiliated?" she offers. "What good will it do me to know that?"

Another story from this time, "Bardon Bus," offers a vision of romance as a

kind of wild, whipped-up condition not dissimilar to psychosis, a "cherished helplessness." On the back side of a typed draft, Alice wrote, in longhand, "What is your reaction to this story? I think it is a morally wrong or morally irresponsible story." Below, she listed four problems with it, including the narrator's attitude toward the man she desires. "She treats him like a mystery so she won't have to judge him," she wrote.

Andrea decided that she would tell her mother about Gerry's abuse as soon as Alice left him for good, something Alice tried to do nearly every summer. During one of these escapes, they visited Alice's sister, and Andrea confided that she had a "friend with a secret." She was hoping that her mother would ask for details, but she seemed incurious. Andrea didn't feel comfortable saying more.

As usual, they ended up returning to the house in Clinton. "Part of her pattern was to see Gerry for what he was," Andrea wrote me. "She would sincerely want to get away, but then the drama of leaving would trip the intimacy wire, flinging her back to him with even greater force."

The dynamic seemed to have been established early in Alice's life. Once, when Jenny and Alice were sitting together in the den of the house in Clinton, the conversation turned to the fact that Alice's father had regularly beaten her, at the request of her mother. Jenny commented on how humiliating that must have been, but Alice dismissed the sentiment, saying, "Oh, that's just what parents did in those days," Jenny recalled. "I said, 'Why are you defending the old man?' And then Gerry walked into the room, and the conversation stopped. So, yeah."

Alice rendered this abuse in extraordinary detail in an autobiographical story, "Royal Beatings," published in 1977, the year after her father died. In the story, a girl named Rose is beaten semi-regularly, the punishment unfolding as a kind of ritualized performance with distinct stages. When Rose behaves with too much ego or boldness, her stepmother summons Rose's father, who

is initially reluctant but then gets into the spirit of things. His eyes fill with "hatred and pleasure" as he chases her around the kitchen, whipping her with a leather belt, throwing her against the wall, and boxing her ears. Eventually, Rose, who has been incoherently crying for forgiveness, escapes to her bedroom and lies in bed, in pain, passing to the next stage of the ritual. She decides that she will run away, or kill herself. She "floats in her pure superior state as if kindly drugged." She feels a sense of freedom and sudden strength.

Then her stepmother comes upstairs with a tray of special food. Rose refuses to acknowledge the treats, because she wants to honor the depth of her violation. It is her chance to maintain the upper hand. But she is tempted by the smell. She will eat just one treat, she tells herself—but then she finishes them all, surrendering her moral advantage.

In a letter to Metcalf from the early seventies, Alice described how her relationships with men often culminated in the sense of lightness that Rose feels immediately after her beatings. "God knows, I can't figure this pattern out," she wrote. "I don't know I'm doing it, of course—I pick men who will reject me, or reject my total offer, and I suffer to the brink of self-destruction, and then I come out with a funny little cool feeling of relief."

In the early eighties, Alice and Gerry began socializing with Nellie Webb, a friend of Gerry's from college. Nellie, who was separated from her husband, lived alone in a house not far from Clinton. Before she and her husband split up, Gerry had routinely slept over at their house. "There were always gifts when he came," their daughter, Jane, told me. "I was really, really fond of him." On one occasion, he sent Jane a record that had only two songs. "I gotta see Jane," the musician sings on one. "I gotta find that world of Jane and me / like it used to be."

In 1969, when Jane was nine years old, she walked into the room where Gerry was sleeping to ask him what he wanted for breakfast. He pulled back the blankets and showed her his erect penis. "I've never forgotten the look on

his face," she said. "It was just, like, Well, are you interested? What do you think of this?" She ran into the kitchen. Gerry followed her there and apologized for "flashing my cock." Jane was shocked by the word, she said, but he seemed not to realize and pressed on, telling her, "I showed you mine, maybe you'd like to show me yours."

Jane asked to be excused, and went upstairs to tell her mom. Gerry waited downstairs. "You would think he'd be, like, Oh, no, the jig's up," she said. But he seemed to feel confident that she would keep his behavior a secret.

When Nellie came downstairs, though, she kicked him out of the house. "My mother and I ended up having a pretty volatile relationship," Jane told me. "And I think that was one of the most important things she did for me as a parent. I was believed instantly."

Gerry was never invited to their house again, and Jane assumed that her parents had ended the friendship. But later each parent resumed socializing with him. "On the one hand, they recognized that he was a predator they had to protect their daughter from," Jane said. "And on the other hand it was, like, Yeah, but you know he's a lot of fun at a party."

Jane's brother, Tom, younger than her by a decade, said that one day, in the mid-eighties, he came home from school and his mom and Alice were sitting together in the dining room. On learning of this meeting, Andrea told me that there must have been "special circumstances," because her mom didn't go places alone, since she couldn't drive. Tom didn't listen to their conversation, but he feels confident that his mother, who died in 2018, would have told Alice about what Gerry had done to Jane. "My mother was very strong-willed, a sort of no-nonsense person—she prided herself on that sort of thing," he told me. "I can't see that she would keep quiet about this."

Not long after Nellie met with Alice, Gerry called her from a pay phone. He told her that they could no longer have any contact. His explanation was that Alice was jealous of their relationship, but Andrea and Jenny suspect that

this was not the real reason.

Several years later, when Andrea was twenty-five, Alice told her that she'd just read a story by Linda Svendsen, a Canadian writer, about a girl who is sexually abused by her father but afraid to tell her mother. The girl becomes increasingly isolated, and kills herself by jumping off a bridge.

Alice contributed a promotional blurb for the back cover of Svendsen's new collection of stories, "Marine Life." "The last story left me shaking," she wrote, referring to the one about sexual abuse. She made the same remark to Andrea, adding that, after finishing it, she couldn't look at Gerry. Andrea, who had also read Svendsen's story, said, "I was used to overriding the obvious, pretending things weren't what they were." But she felt that "something shifted in that conversation. She knew. I knew she knew."

"Dear mom," Andrea wrote, soon afterward. "Please find a spot alone before you read this." Her letter began gently, with a description of a recent conversation about Alice's feelings of mistrust. "I wasn't able to tell you that I have those same feelings, especially concerning you," Andrea wrote. "The closer you come to me, the harder it is for me to keep my distance. The more painful it becomes to hide myself from you when I don't want to hide."

She went on, "When you told me about that story in 'Marine Life,' I wanted to cry and hold you and thank you and TELL YOU." She summarized what Gerry had done to her, and wrote that, after getting into her bed when she was nine, he had treated her like a sexual object until she went through puberty. Not long afterward, she became bulimic. But when she saw a psychiatrist she didn't say anything about Gerry. "I thought she would use it as a pat explanation for everything wrong with me," she wrote. Gerry used to speak of sexual abuse as a "feminist concept," an excuse for women to be bitter. She thought that if she dwelled on the abuse people would laugh at her or pity her.

She had also worried that Alice would blame her. “I guess I thought you saw me as a seductress,” she wrote. “Dad and Carole’s reaction told me that ultimately I was responsible for what did and did not happen to me.” Then, for a long time, she assumed that the window for disclosure had passed. “But it is not too late,” she wrote. “It is very wrong that it happened (you were wronged too) and it was wrong that no one told you. I hope you will understand (probably not immediately) that I have had to wait this long to feel trusting enough and to feel worthy enough to be able to tell you.”

Andrea dropped the letter in a mailbox in Victoria and then went to her father’s house and said, “I’ve just told her about Gerry.” Jim remarked, “Good for you. You’re the only one who could have done it.”

Andrea had suffered from migraines for sixteen years, since the summer that Gerry began abusing her. That night, she had the worst one of her life. “I thought, This is the last migraine I’ll ever have, because we’re getting it out,” she said.

Within hours of reading the letter, Alice left her house in Clinton and headed to the airport alone. She flew to Comox, a coastal town three hours from Victoria, where she and Gerry had recently purchased a second home.

Alice had put the letter on the table before she left, and Gerry typed it up, numbered each paragraph “for reference purposes,” and wrote his own “commentary,” which he sent to Jim and Carole two days later. In a passage titled “The Psychology of It All,” he argued that Andrea could not have been damaged by the abuse, claiming that, even when she told her family, “1. People don’t seem to think what happened is so serious, and 2. They tend to say ‘It was partly your own fault, Lolita.’ ”

In a passage titled “Observations on Myself,” he acknowledged that his sexuality was “not in accordance with the canons of public respectability.”

But, he wrote, “I do not feel irretrievably degenerate for having been sexually aroused by a nymphette.” The only transgression for which he felt guilt was being unfaithful to Alice: “I would feel just as dishonorable and disgusted with myself if the infidelity had been with an adult.”

In another letter, sent two days later, he told Jim and Carole, “If my life is to be ruined, I am going to make it cost a lot.” He threatened to make Andrea’s letter public, along with a series of “eloquent” photographs—“one taken in Australia with Andrea posing as a Lolita-like character in a crib, one of Andrea in my underwear shorts.” He seemed so committed to the idea that Andrea had seduced him that he must have imagined these materials would vindicate him. But he also raised the possibility of suicide. Alice was already worried about his state of mind, and soon after arriving in Comox she had asked the police in Clinton to check on him.

Andrea, who had not seen the letters, joined her mother in Comox. “She was clearly in an aggrieved state,” Andrea said. “She felt she had been kept in the dark and laughed at by the entire family.” But Alice also told Andrea that as soon as she read the first line of her letter she knew what it would say. She revealed that, when Andrea was eleven, the parents of a fourteen-year-old girl had told her that Gerry had been sexually inappropriate with their daughter. The girl may have been Jane, in which case the ages were wrong, or another child.

Alice also said that she’d always wondered if Gerry had raped and murdered a twelve-year-old girl named Lynne Harper, who was found dead in a woodlot in Clinton, in 1959. At the time, the suggestion struck Andrea as a kind of “grab for air in the room.” (Years later, Andrea began considering the idea more seriously, and she and Jenny spent a long time researching the case, which is unsolved. Andrea reported the suspicion to the police, and was interviewed, but never heard anything more. In a statement, the police said that the investigation is ongoing. Records from the case, along with conversations with people who knew Gerry or Harper at the time, suggest

that his involvement was unlikely.)

Andrea found herself cast in a role that was familiar from childhood. When Alice was suffering in the middle of the night, "I was there for her, to hold her," Andrea said. "There was maybe some anger at me for having an 'affair' with her husband, but, more than that, I really just felt that I wasn't there. I was invisible."

Alice told Andrea that blaming a mother for her husband's abuse was a symptom of the culture's misogyny, an idea that Andrea accepted. Several times, Andrea assured her mother that she would never be so "selfish" as to make her mother choose her over Gerry. "This idea of a child making demands on a parent, insisting on being that important in her life—it was drilled into me that this was something you would only do to a woman," Andrea said. "You would never ask a father for that."

Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, a literary agent who handled Alice's ancillary rights at the time, told me, "Alice was broken open, and we all tried to hold her hand through the experience. She talked about it constantly." Walsh said that she hadn't known which daughter had been abused, but she'd had the impression that the daughter had been "fifteen at the time, not nine. I don't know if Alice was lying, or swallowing the truth in small bits."

Ann Close, Alice's editor at Knopf, told me, "I think I mostly thought of it as a tragedy, honestly, that my writer and friend was struck by." For many of Alice's friends and colleagues, her experience as a betrayed lover seems to have been the top concern. Close, who worked at Knopf for fifty-three years, said, "What do you do if you love somebody whom you learn something terrible about? You've already had more than fifteen years of something good."

Five days after Alice left Gerry, he wrote a letter to Jenny saying that he'd had a phone call with Alice. He warned that, in this emotional state, Alice could not keep producing fiction: "I think there is an assumption that now

that the truth has made her free Alice will pick up her notebook and happily resume writing." But she was so distressed that she couldn't even do her own shopping. "Basket case or not, Alice is one of the greatest artists of this age," he wrote.

He already seemed calmer and more hopeful. "We still love each other very much," he told Jenny. On the phone, he said, Alice had reassured him, "We must not die apart."

A month later, Alice wrote her agent, Virginia Barber, to say that she and Gerry were together in Comox. "We've got a good therapist and progress (as they call it) is being made," she told Barber. "Gerry is doing really well when you consider what a reversal + loss this had to be. Andrea's okay, but doesn't want to be in touch with me now G. is here." She adopted a chipper tone, comparing the relationship to a mended teapot. "See how Ms. M clings to the comfy domestic images," she wrote, adding, "I feel very weirdly free in a way. For so long I've felt oddly apologetic or strange with people, + now I feel I know what the trouble was."

She could always find the perfect unexpected word to illustrate an emotional experience, but here she chose the most generic one: it was just "trouble."

Barber (who died in 2016) continued socializing with Alice and Gerry, even helping Gerry as he searched for an agent for his geography book. But Walsh, who had begun her career as Barber's assistant and still worked at the same firm, said that she would never interact with Gerry again. He had always picked up the phone when she called Alice's house, and they would talk about contracts, and even editorial matters. Now she refused. Once, Alice got angry about this, and they argued. In a letter that Walsh believes was about this dispute, Alice apologized to Barber, who had been supportive of Walsh, for being "quite out of touch with anything you might feel, and considering what a good friend you have been and the way you have helped me, all outside of our business relationship, that is shocking. I am shocked by

this revelation of myself."

The writer Margaret Atwood, who had been friends with Alice since the late sixties, told me that she didn't know about Andrea's abuse, though she was aware that Alice had unexpectedly ended up in Comox. At the time, Atwood said, few men would put up with a middle-aged woman who was an accomplished writer. But Andrea's revelation would have changed the power dynamics in the relationship. "After Alice found out," Atwood wrote me, "she had the moral upper hand." She now had an "ace-in-the-hole 'You-have-been-a-bad-person' card." She added, "I'm not saying it's a good thing—I'm just saying it's a fact. For somebody of her generation who had been brought up to believe that women were lesser and that their opinions and feelings and desires did not count, it would be quite something."

In a letter from the early seventies, Alice described surviving a period where she "absolutely lived by will—having to wind myself up to speak, smile, move, caring for *nothing*." Then one day she went to a coffee shop. "I was looking at those thick glass dishes they put ice-cream in—and this is the hard part to explain without seeming silly—I started to see those dishes with the most peculiar clarity and *respect*." The counter looked different, too. "I don't know if you just have to wait for this 'seeing' or if it can be managed by effort or faith," she wrote. "But it is for me the final saving thing."

In interviews, Alice tried to define this unique sort of "seeing," describing it as a capacity to detect a kind of secret intensity lurking beneath the surfaces of everyday objects. "I can't really claim that it is linked to any kind of a religious feeling about the world, and yet that might come closest to describing it," she said. She characterized it as a fight against the knowledge that large swaths of the world, and of ourselves, are lost forever, every day. "Writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you're doing something about this," she said. "I can't stand to let go without some effort at this."

Perhaps there was never a question of whether Alice would write about

Andrea's abuse. She seemed helpless in the face of such vivid details. Less than a year after taking Gerry back, she wrote Barber to inform her of the "fate of the latest story, because it's usually hard to talk frankly on the phone." She had been working on the story for two months, and "it was about The Subject, though thoroughly disguised and all pretty effectively constructed." She went on, "I could do all the parts but the central thing, and when I approached that—and I tried from various angles—I got sick (I mean really—throwing up) and felt very bleak. This has happened three or four times and I realized finally I might sort of break apart. So I burned it (not to be tempted to go on)."

But she didn't abandon the idea altogether. Two months later, she had finished a draft of "Vandals," a story about sexual abuse that reads like a version, more sophisticated and subtle, of the story in "Marine Life" that had left her shaking. It seems to build off an anecdote that Andrea had shared in her letter. She had recalled how, during the summer when she was ten, they had planned to go to a swimming hole, and Alice asked Gerry not to do his "antics." He would pretend to slip off a bridge into the water, and he encouraged Andrea to do the same. Alice and Gerry started fighting over her use of the word "antics," and Alice refused to go swimming. Andrea, who had tried all summer not to be alone with Gerry, felt that it was too late to back out. At the swimming hole, Gerry told Andrea that they hadn't seen much of each other lately. She knew exactly what he meant and said, "No!" She walked away quickly, sweating and panicking.

In "Vandals," the revelation of abuse emerges in a swimming scene that hinges on the antics of a middle-aged man named Ladner. He has decided to share his life with a woman called Bea, not because he's in love but because "he had realized that she was a person he could live with"—a line that borrows from a letter that Gerry wrote about Alice. In the summers, a girl named Liza and her younger brother, who live across the road, come over to Ladner's property to play nearly every day, treating Bea as a kind of substitute mother. One day, they are all swimming, and Ladner begins

mocking Bea's stroke, "patting the water with fluttery hands." Liza has come to expect this sort of behavior from Ladner: "In the secret life she had with him, what was terrible was always funny, badness was mixed up with silliness." Bea, too, knows that her reality has been warped by his sense of humor: "*I am slit top to bottom with jokes.*"

"Her writing was more real than our lives," Jenny said of her mother, Alice (above). Photograph by George

In an early draft that Alice sent to Barber, the abuse was submerged. “Ann says she likes Vandals but isn’t sure it’s clear enough,” Alice wrote, referring to Ann Close, her editor at Knopf. “She’s put the question to an innocent reader.”

A month later, Alice sent a draft with a new page on which she tried, she wrote, “giving the whole show away.” The added page makes use of another detail from Andrea’s letter. She had referred to a game called “show me” that Gerry had proposed they play. “The plan was to pull over to the side of the road and pull down our pants,” Andrea had written to her mother. In the new page of “Vandals,” Liza recalls the “scenes of serious instruction” where Ladner taught her and her brother about different rocks, trees, and mushrooms, and also played games like “P.D.P.” “Pull down pants!” Liza’s brother says, when he sees the abbreviation carved into a tree. These lessons occurred on a part of Ladner’s property shaded by cedar trees, and Liza thinks there may still be a “bruise on the ground, a tickling of shame in the grass.” No one in the story ever names the abuse, but Alice, in a sentence that she later cut, described how all the animals on the property knew what was happening: “The red fox in particular . . . its glass-eyed gaze so blithe and frenzied makes Liza think of Ladner’s, during those times that are blacked-out and burning, in her mind.”

“Vandals” begins years after the abuse, when Liza, now in her twenties, has been asked to check on Bea’s empty house. Instead, without explanation, she trashes it. She scoops books off the shelves and throws them on the floor. “*The Wages of Sin Is Death*, ” she writes in Magic Marker on the kitchen wall. The story is structured as a kind of investigation into whether Bea knew what Ladner was doing to the children, or if she had “made a bargain not to remember.” She could “spread safety, if she wanted to. Surely she could.” But Bea is in Ladner’s thrall, for reasons she understands may be “regressive and bad form.” Much of the tension in the story gathers around the mystery of

Bea's unbreakable devotion to this man. "Some women, women like herself, might be always on the lookout for an insanity that could contain them," Bea thinks. "For what was living with a man if it wasn't living inside his insanity?"

In an interview after the story was published, Alice said that Bea had to find "a really good insanity—I mean, just an ordinary one won't work for her. She has got to find a man who is extremely forceful, self-sufficient, and who lives in the world, on his own terms, and if she wants to be with him she will have to live on those terms."

"Vandals" is the last story in "Open Secrets," a book dedicated to nine women, including Barber and Close: "This book is for ever-faithful friends in time of trouble." ("In time of trouble" was cut from the published version.) Many of Alice's earlier stories had followed a single narrative path, but the stories in this book are symphonic, with multiple narrative frames. One would like to think that a writer who turns her daughter's abuse into art will be aesthetically punished, but Alice's stories became increasingly accomplished. She seemed to be feeling her way into a new kind of form that expressed how a mind can be almost completely closed to the truth, except for a few small pockets of knowing.

The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott described how the process of dissociation leads to a "queer kind of truth": people can't incorporate the traumatic events of their lives into the present, because on some level they weren't there when they happened. They "go on looking for the past detail which is *not yet experienced*." Alice's fiction about her mother—that "everlastingly wounded phantom," as one story puts it—had seemed to create a kind of three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of something that perhaps she wasn't there to fully feel. The stories in "Open Secrets" go further: different perspectives take turns, and it can take many pages to determine which one will offer a view, even if partial, of the main events of a story. Mona Simpson, reflecting on the way that Alice's style changed throughout

the nineties, wrote in *The Atlantic* that Alice seemed to have "left old forms behind, or to have broken them open." She had become like "the Beethoven of the late quartets, everywhere and nowhere in the work."

The Munro daughters all have variations on the same face. They speak in a way that seems effortlessly precise, often lyrical, with a subtly joyful energy. It's easy to imagine them as having been the prettiest girls at summer camp, artistic and elusive. But both Sheila and Jenny felt that, of the three sisters, Andrea was the star, and the one most like their mother. "She lit up a room," Jenny said. "She was very sparkly and vibrant and adored by my parents. I know she doesn't feel that. But I'll just say that, because that's my truth."

Andrea sometimes worried that the shiniest parts of her personality were actually coping mechanisms. She felt that she had spent years moving through the world "as if I was giving a hundred dollars to each person I connected with, in the hopes that on the day I needed to borrow ten dollars, I could." After getting an e-mail from her, I did sometimes feel that I had been given the emotional equivalent of cash: she was tender, warm, funny, frank, often exuberant. We exchanged long e-mails before meeting in person, and there was something almost scientific about the rigor with which she approached her memories, taking care never to overstate a feeling. Andrea said that Jenny used to call her "the little detective." "It was funny," Andrea told me. "But it also wasn't funny, because the ability to recall horrible things with clarity and levelheadedness was another way to not have to feel how utterly painful it was."

Andrea had always worked hard to fit into her parents' worlds. After college, she worked at Munro's Books, which had moved to a new location, with marble floors, stained glass, and twenty-four-foot coffered ceilings. *National Geographic* later named it the third-best bookstore in the world. Then she worked as an assistant for Alice. In an article in the Calgary *Herald*, she

described how she occasionally edited Alice's stories. "It's a real vote of confidence from my mother," she said, "that she'd have me go into her stories (to have me say) 'you know, I think you should get rid of that line.' "

After sending the letter disclosing her abuse, Andrea, whose migraines had not stopped, began volunteering at a transition house for women fleeing domestic violence. "I just felt this undercurrent of trying to create different ways of being," she told me. She began reading parenting books, though she had no immediate plans to have children. She loved the idea that people could be so thoughtful about understanding and validating a child's experience. She bought a book called "Healing the Shame that Binds You" from Munro's Books, even though the store workers, whom she knew well, laughed at her choice. Andrea said, "My mother was really hostile to all the language of self-help, but it saved my life to see that something that looks so convoluted and inescapable, such as codependence, can be named, and to know that others experience it, too."

Jenny noticed that "Andrea was shifting," she said. "She became what we would call in our family 'earnest.' " Jenny thought that Andrea was finding her own way and thriving. "I couldn't hold it in my mind that you could reveal something like that, which would absolutely ruin a person, and yet there was Andrea, healthy and glowing," she said. Andrea recognized that her affect was confusing. "I could see how, if you wanted that for me, it would look like I'd moved past it," she told me. By keeping her feelings to herself, she thought she was "contributing to the greatest good for the greatest number."

Jenny had become a visual artist, and Sheila a writer and the mother of two boys. For years, Sheila had been writing vignettes about her own life. "But I could never find any framework into which they would fit," she wrote. In 1997, Alice proposed that Sheila write her biography. Sheila didn't think a straight biography would work, but she realized that her vignettes could be restructured as a memoir about the experience of growing up as a daughter of

Alice Munro. Sheila had always credited her mother with an almost holy clarity of thought. Taking in her accomplishments, Sheila wrote, was like the "psychological equivalent of looking out over the Grand Canyon."

She thought she knew more about her mother than almost any daughter could know, and yet much of her understanding came from the writing. "I tell myself I am wrong to see fiction in this way, that fiction, even autobiographical fiction, is not the same as autobiography, but I can't change it," she wrote in the memoir. "So unassailable is the truth of her fiction that sometimes I even feel as though I'm living inside an Alice Munro story. It's as if her view of the world must be the way the world really is, because it feels so convincing, so true, that you trust her every word."

The book does not mention Andrea's abuse. Sheila said that she felt it was Andrea's story to tell. Before the memoir was published, Sheila was talking with her editor, Douglas Gibson, who was Alice's Canadian editor and publisher, and surprised herself by telling him about Andrea and Gerry. "I just wanted to not be keeping it a secret, I guess," she said. "I wanted it to be acknowledged. I don't know. I was very emotional. I was pretty much whispering. I just wanted him to know."

Gibson, who is eighty-one, said that he doesn't remember the conversation. "I have nothing further to add," he wrote me. When the book came out, Andrea, who had recently married, saw it as another "symptom of everyone carrying on, including me," she said. "Everything was back to normal."

Andrea's stepmother, Carole, had saved Gerry's letters about the abuse for almost a decade, but, after Sheila's book was published, she was ready for someone else to store them. "It was like they were toxic waste," Jenny said. Sheila agreed to deliver them to her mother, but Andrea decided to read them before they were handed off.

By this time, Andrea was pregnant with twins. She was overwhelmed by the detail and also by the justifications that Gerry had written. "I felt like my

parents might as well have been given a video of me being raped and done nothing," she said. She and Sheila began cutting up the letters, as a kind of exorcism, and called Jenny to let her know. Jenny told them to stop. She sensed that one day they'd want the record of Gerry confessing. "It's one of the few things I'm proud of in this," Jenny told me. She eventually taped the pages back together.

Andrea tried to talk with her father about his response to the abuse, but he seemed confused that she was still upset, and repeated the cliché that time heals all wounds. Not long afterward, he held an event at Munro's Books for "The Way the Crow Flies," a novel that dramatizes the death of Lynne Harper, the girl Alice imagined Gerry might have raped and killed. Andrea wrote me, "On that night, I was in agony with one of the worst migraines of my life, knowing my father partied and schmoozed, and the tragic story—mine, Lynne Harper's—was just entertainment in his world."

After reading the letters, Andrea was downcast and withdrawn in her mother's presence. "Now what?" Alice asked. Andrea started to talk about how she'd blamed herself for the abuse for years, and it was now apparent that her parents had, too. She remembers her mother looking at her with an expression of cold annoyance. "I know we can't go on what I *thought* she was thinking by the look on her face over 20 years ago," Andrea wrote me. But the expression, more than anything Alice said, made Andrea feel that her mother didn't think her emotions were real.

Alice has been celebrated as a feminist writer, but when asked if she was a feminist she was inclined to deflect, describing herself as a believer in the importance of telling the truth about women's experiences. Her stories do not tend to portray respect or love between women. The solace of female intimacy is too exposing. "I'm intellectually a great supporter of the women's movement, and, yet, the thing of responding to men is something else," she said, in a 1975 interview. "Something else is going on."

There's a sense in which her remarkable capacity to describe a woman's experience is born less from affinity than from observation. Womanhood is the material rather than the identity. The mother in "Miles City, Montana" feels hopeful only when she has detached herself from her family and can observe on her own terms: "It was being a watcher that did it. A watcher, not a keeper." Sheila wrote that she always connected those words with her mother. It's as if Alice were writing not as a woman but as this other kind of being—a "watcher."

Before she had her twins, Andrea asked Gerry for reassurance that he no longer had sexual compulsions. "For the last 25 years which is nearly a third of my life, I have not been compulsive," he wrote Andrea. He accused her of holding onto a "demon theory" ("agreeable to some forms of feminism") because it allowed her to claim power within their family dynamic. Without his demonization, he wrote, Alice would have the highest rank, and "I would be in the Prince Philip position." Instead, he was demoted to the "lowest conceivable rank, and Alice is diminished by her strong alliance with me."

When the twins were born, a boy and a girl, Andrea told Alice not to bring Gerry to her house. Alice bristled, saying that this would be too inconvenient, given her inability to drive. "Mom made a terrible error there," Jenny said. It seemed to her that her mother couldn't allow the abuse to take the proper proportions in their lives. "I think she thought, There's something about Andrea. She doesn't like me. We're not suited."

Andrea, who had become a yoga instructor, felt that her mother was so far from understanding her perspective that there was "no sincere way forward." Once, when Andrea had spoken about healing from the abuse and mentioned the idea of "self-love," she said, her mother "reacted as if I had said something really combative, asking, 'What is *that*?' "

Andrea stopped speaking to everyone in her family except Jenny. "On some

level, you knew that in returning to Gerry you risked losing me, and you were willing to take that risk," she wrote her mother, explaining her decision. She reflected on Alice's comment, years earlier, that it was misogynistic to expect her to leave Gerry. "My anger over your decision has not been from a hatred of women, or higher expectations of women than men, but from a sense that you and I—as human beings—deserve better," Andrea wrote.

Jenny was so disgusted by Gerry's letters that she sent copies to her mother, to force her to confront them, and stopped speaking with her, too. "I will miss you terribly but I understand completely," Alice wrote Jenny. "I had not read the whole letter before, since it was not sent to me—only read a bit of it."

After two years, Jenny worried that her mother would die while they were still estranged, and she began seeing her again. Jenny struggled to "get a picture of it—it's always slipping away from me," she said. She found her mother to be "an empathetic presence, really. She had this special understanding. She made you feel heard. She was just very good at pinpointing what was important in life and helping you find your own way and your own gifts."

When Jenny tried to talk with her mother about the conflict, Alice would often immediately start weeping. "I remember her saying to me once, 'Gerry lets me cry about it,' " Jenny said. It was as if she had decided that she could never be redeemed. "This was it," Jenny added. "She would rather get on with her life, where she's writing and he's doing everything else."

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When Andrea's twins were seven, Alice wrote a letter to Daniel Menaker, one of her former editors at *The New Yorker*, describing an environment of

family harmony with Andrea's children, even though she hadn't seen them since they were infants. "The other day they were sitting around en famille," she wrote him. "The boy, Felix, said, 'This is just the perfect way for things to be, I can't think of anything better.' 'Neither can I,' said his father. 'Me neither,' said my daughter, their mother. All looked toward . . . the other twin," Charlie, who said she'd rather be with Paul McCartney. Andrea said that Jenny must have shared this story with her mother, who wrote herself into the scene, as if their relationship were still intact.

In her fiction, Alice wrote more honestly about the anguish of the estrangement. In a trilogy of stories, "Chance," "Soon," and "Silence," published in 2004, about two years after Andrea cut off contact, she chronicled the life of a woman named Juliet, a famous TV interviewer known for her "marvellous insights," the way she gets "right to the heart of things." But Juliet feels that she has failed at the most important relationships in her life. She abandoned her mother when she was dying, and, in the second half of her life, she is abandoned by her only child, Penelope. After a day out, the first thing Juliet does when she returns home is look for the flashing light on her answering machine: "She tried various silly tricks, to do with how many steps she took to the phone, how she picked it up, how she breathed. *Let it be her.*"

Juliet never tries to find Penelope, a delightful child who had "scarcely ever given her cause for complaint," or to investigate why Penelope has made this choice. Instead, she tries to normalize her rejection as part of the tragedy of being a mother. "You know, we always have the idea that there is this reason or that reason and we keep trying to find out reasons," she thinks. "But I think the reason may be something not so easily dug out. Something like purity in her nature. Yes. Some fineness and strictness and purity, some rock-hard honesty in her."

Years earlier, in a recorded conversation over lunch and wine, Alice had told the literary critic Magdalene Redekop about an autobiographical story she

wanted to write, called “Soon.” It eventually became the second story in the trilogy. She explained that she hadn’t responded to her mother when she said, “Soon I’ll see Alice,” because she felt manipulated. “I think the family is always the enemy of the self,” she said. “You have this feeling that if you’re going to live any kind of honorable life in yourself, you resist the family coercion.” As an adult, Alice had achieved what the child in “Royal Beatings” never could: she’d refused her mother’s affection, resisting the temptations, withdrawing her attention for good. She told Redekop, “I dream now an awful lot about either abandoning old people or abandoning children.”

In conversations with journalists in the two-thousands, Alice emphasized her adoration for Gerry, who sometimes picked her up at the end of interviews. “Munro’s tall geographer husband arrives,” a reporter from the *Globe and Mail* wrote. “They flirt; she actually bats her eyes at him.”

“Was it love at second sight?” a television interviewer asked Alice, referring to her reunion with Gerry after her first marriage.

“These things happen,” Alice said, gleaming.

“People will be so pleased to know,” the interviewer responded.

In a *Times Magazine* profile of Alice, published in the fall of 2004, the writer Daphne Merkin observed that Alice invoked Gerry “frequently and affectionately as ‘my husband’ rather than by his name, like a proud Midwestern banker’s wife whose one great claim to glory is that she has married well.”

After Andrea read the profile, she found it difficult to get out of bed. Merkin wrote that Alice “is close today with her three daughters.” Andrea hadn’t seen her in two years. “I had long felt inconsequential to my mother, but now she was erasing me,” Andrea later wrote.

Shortly afterward, Andrea called the Ontario Provincial Police and reported

her abuse. “It took me twenty-nine years to make a statement to the police, to begin to believe I have rights as others have rights,” she wrote in her victim-impact statement. “I still struggle with the feeling that I am weak, that there is something about me that invites degradation, and that this will be visited on my children. I have been afraid to experience the sensual side of parenting, careful to touch my children in a way that cannot be misconstrued, and sometimes feel a lack of spontaneity because of my fears.” She also wrote, “There is a connection I am missing by not fully trusting my husband with my body.”

The detective assigned to the case interviewed Andrea and reviewed the letters from Gerry that she had almost destroyed. Then, after interviewing others in the family, he went to Alice and Gerry’s house, in Clinton, and tried to interview Alice, but, he told me, “it was going nowhere. She was just disparaging her daughter.”

Gerry, who was eighty, eventually went to the police station and acknowledged the crime in one handwritten sentence that was missing a pronoun: “Between 01 July 1976 and 31 August 1976 at Town of Clinton did indecently assault Andrea Munro a female person.”

In March, 2005, at a brief hearing in Goderich, about twelve miles from Clinton, he pleaded guilty to indecent assault. “Is there anything you wish to say today, Mr. Fremlin?” the judge asked.

“No, Your Honor,” Gerry said.

Andrea told the prosecutor that she was not seeking jail time. She had received therapy at a treatment center for sexual trauma, and she asked that Gerry make a donation to the program. “I would feel glad for this small repair,” she wrote in the victim statement. He donated ten thousand dollars. He was sentenced to two years’ probation, during which time he could not be alone with anyone younger than sixteen.

Journalists were routinely at the courthouse in Goderich, and Andrea assumed that the case would become public. Jenny said that, before the hearing, her mother made arrangements to leave Gerry. She planned to stay at the house of Jane Urquhart, an old friend and a prominent writer, who lived in Stratford, Ontario. "The strategy of the trial was designed to protect Alice by exclusion of the press," Gerry wrote in a letter to his lawyer. The approach—a quick guilty plea, a hearing before a judge rather than a jury—was successful: there was no media coverage. Alice abruptly cancelled the plan to move to Urquhart's house. When Andrea later learned of the arrangements, she guessed that her mother had wanted to be seen doing the right thing, and then, when it became clear that the story wouldn't come out, realized that there was no need to do anything.

A few months later, Alice and Gerry were featured in an article in their college alumni magazine. "In a small house on a quiet street in Clinton, Ontario, Alice Munro sits at her kitchen table, doubled over with laughter at the antics of her husband," the article begins. "On the other side of the room, Gerry Fremlin (BA '50) is swinging a rather large sword and wondering aloud" about the meaning of the phrase, "Out, damn'd spot!" in Macbeth. As Gerry recited the dialogue, the reporter observed that Alice "almost begs him to stop."

Eight months after Gerry's conviction, Alice, who had just been named one of the hundred most influential people in the world by *Time*, finished a draft of the story "Dimension." It reads as a kind of sequel to the inquiry explored in "Vandals," into how loving a man requires "living inside his insanity." The heroine, a young woman named Doree, takes three buses to get to the jail where her husband is imprisoned for killing their three children. When they met, she felt she had been "put on earth for no reason other than to be with him and try to understand him." Now, in an imaginary conversation with her therapist, she tries to defend her desire to keep visiting him. She won't necessarily "forgive," she allows. "But think. Aren't I just as

cut off by what happened as he is?" It's because of his madness that she will never see her children again, yet she is comforted by his presence, because the children still exist in him, too. He's the only other person who loved them.

After reading the story, Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, who had become Alice's agent after Barber retired, around 2002, in addition to the literary executor of her will, asked Alice, "Have we arrived at the basement yet?" Alice said no and joked that there was, in fact, a "sub-basement." Walsh, soon after taking over, had told Sonny Mehta, the editor of Knopf, about the conflict in the family. "It's not like I made an appointment to tell people things, but when it came up I repeated the story," she told me. "It changed my understanding of the 'fiction' she was writing, and I felt that the other caretakers and shepherds of her work needed to know what I knew. This was information that belonged to the world and needed to be part of the full scope of her legacy."

Walsh told Deborah Treisman, who has been the fiction editor of *The New Yorker* since 2003, that there was a rift in the family, and that Alice had written a few autobiographical stories that she didn't want published until after her death. "I didn't hear the full story, and my assumption was that Fremlin had recently been inappropriate with one of Alice's adult daughters," Treisman told me. "I imagined he'd been drunk at a party or something and made a pass. I didn't suspect that there was a child who had been molested and not defended."

Walsh assumed that the autobiographical stories were about Andrea and Gerry. "That was the big elephant in the room," she said. "The only thing that made sense was that she was going after Gerry."

But neither Walsh nor Treisman ever saw the stories. Ann Close said that she had never heard of them. Jenny and Sheila hadn't, either. Jenny's first reaction, when I told her about their possible existence, was, "Gerry could

have destroyed them. He could have easily destroyed them."

In the summer of 2005, Robert Thacker, a professor of Canadian studies and English at St. Lawrence University, in New York, was finishing a biography called "Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives." The book, which is more than six hundred pages long, follows the "parallel tracks of Alice Munro's life, Alice Munro's texts." Thacker presented Alice's return to Ontario as the turning point in her development as an artist, but he attributed this transformation largely to her rediscovery of the community where she grew up, the setting of many of her stories. He characterized her relationship, in broad strokes, as companionable and sporty. For her stories, Alice often availed herself of Gerry's knowledge, in particular of geography and woodcutting.

Shortly before the book was finalized, Andrea and Jenny e-mailed Thacker about Gerry's conviction. He had picked up on some friction in the family but hadn't known what it was about. "I will certainly scrutinize the text to ensure that I am not, as you say, 'spreading the lie,' " he wrote Andrea. "I do not think I have done so in what I have already written, but I assure you that I'll look at it again to make doubly sure."

"I meant pull the book entirely," Andrea wrote in response. "I didn't mean cross out adjectives that flatter Mr. Fremlin." She told him, "It is mind-boggling to me that you don't see the information Jenny and I have given you as key to your work." She wrote, "Sexual abuse doesn't happen in a vacuum, there is a context. My mother played a very large part in creating a terrifying world in which degradation—hers and mine—was guaranteed."

The book was published with what Thacker described as "minor deletions" in the descriptions of Gerry. Thacker continued researching Alice's work, first for a revised edition of the biography and later for a new book called "Alice Munro's Late Style." Almost three years after the first edition of the biography came out, Alice and Thacker met for lunch, and it became clear to

Thacker that there was something Alice wanted to discuss.

"Well, I hear you have some information from my children," Alice told him. They ate at Bailey's Fine Dining, a restaurant in Goderich where Alice had a regular table in the back. Thacker recorded the conversation. "I have to ask you what they want you to do," she said.

Thacker said that her daughters had told him about the abuse, but that he didn't plan to write about it: "I guess if it's what they said, and it's in a public record, I suppose somebody . . ."

"It is in the public record," Alice said. "And it's quite true, and it's a terrible fact of my life."

Thacker asked if she was still out of touch with Andrea. "Oh, yes, I always will be," Alice responded. "She's going to do exactly what she feels will help her. And I think she has. I thought maybe, as the years went by, it would become less necessary for her to make people suffer. Maybe not."

She asked Thacker to tell her if, at any point, he got an inkling that the story would become public. She imagined that people might put menacing signs on her lawn. "If I had left Gerry and made a huge public condemnation right at the time, I would be in the clear," she told Thacker. "Gerry would probably be dead." She went on, "I think he's living in a fairly brave way. He's trying to live with a certain amount of rational cheerfulness, mainly for my sake. So we are both doing our best. To Andrea, and to a certain extent to Jenny, too, this looks like cowardice." She lowered her voice, imitating her daughters: "What's the matter—why can't you let it be known that you're married to a pedophile?" Then she answered their question. "People would not know anything else about me," she said. "That would become what people would know. I worked for a long time to be who I am."

In 2010, Carole invited Sandra Martin, an obituary writer for the *Globe and Mail*, one of Canada's most widely read newspapers, to a dinner party.

She and Jim still lived in the twelve-room house in Victoria. After the meal, the women at the party were sitting separately from their husbands, and Carole referred to Gerry's abuse of Andrea. "I'm listening to this, and I'm stunned and horrified," Martin told me. Carole did not feel that the information was a secret. Friends of hers in Victoria knew, and she believed that many people in the Toronto publishing world did, too.

Martin said that for Canadians Alice was "like the Queen, in a way." She became more luminous and beautiful as she aged. She had curly silver hair, a high forehead, and remarkably unlined skin. In a Canadian quarterly about the book trade, a novelist reviewing her 2009 collection, "Too Much Happiness," wrote that, though the literary world was full of jealous feuding, "I have never heard anyone say anything unkind about Alice Munro, personally or professionally." Her devoted readers seemed to blithely accept that her stories, with their grisly leitmotifs, were the product of a saintly lady who was making it all up, out of empathy.

With the help of a colleague, Martin pulled records about Gerry's case from the courthouse in Goderich. But she was informed that the paper would not be pursuing the story. "It was simply shut down," she recalled. "And what I felt was something from my own life—which is what happens, right? I also was sexually abused as a prepubescent. I didn't tell my mother for the longest time. When I finally did, what she said was, 'Don't tell your father.' " Martin dropped the subject. "I felt ashamed that I had actually dared to ask," she said.

Later, when a different editor asked Martin to prepare an obituary for Alice, years before her death, she said no, because she didn't want to be put in a position where she had to omit things that she knew to be true. Instead, she prepared an essay about Alice's work, drawing attention to several stories about maternal neglect.

Andrea had the impression that everyone knew about her abuse and, on

some basic level, just didn't care. She started looking for friends who were not readers. She told me that, for a long time, when she read stories by her mother that dealt with aspects of what had happened, she thought, "O.K., she's trying to talk about it, trying to figure it out. It's just going to take some time." A story from 1998, "Rich as Stink," describes a kind of warped love triangle among a girl named Karin, her mother, and her mother's boyfriend. Karin visits them in the summers, and her mother is often hysterical with grief and shame, because she feels that her boyfriend despises her. Hoping to disrupt the mood with entertainment, Karin prepares to surprise them by wearing an old wedding dress and entering the room singing "Here Comes the Bride." But her veil drifts through the flames of some candles, and the dress burns. She ends up in the hospital, permanently scarred. Andrea interpreted the ending as a potential sign of progress, with its "catastrophic image of innocence destroyed."

But as time passed Andrea felt increasingly enraged by the fatalistic attitude of her mother's characters, "the cold calculations, the bleak survival mode." When her twins turned nine, the age she had been when she was abused, the failures of her own family felt even more acute. Jenny said, "We'd both trash the parents and go over how faulty they were, and then I'd go back to seeing them." Andrea cut off contact with Jenny, too.

Gerry and Alice's relationship seemed to get better as they aged. They would spend the morning working, Alice on her stories and Gerry on a memoir about the Second World War. Sheila said that Alice would get up first, and, as she was having coffee, "Gerry would come out and do this thing where he took her hand and kissed it in a kind of formal way. It was sort of mocking but sort of not. That was his style." Sheila felt uncomfortable when she and Gerry were alone together. A few times, he told her, "It's terrible, what I did to your family."

Jenny tried to help Gerry draft apology letters to Andrea. "I would tell him

what he had to do, and his letters were never quite right," she said. "The last one may have been the best, but then he ruined it by saying, 'You had a big crush on me.' "

Gerry's conviction restricted his ability to travel internationally, and, in 2010, he applied, unsuccessfully, for a travel waiver to the United States. "I have great admiration for Americans and will regret to my dying day the piece of stupidity that brought me to this situation," he wrote. On a manila envelope where he kept records related to his application for the waiver, and also to a pardon that he'd applied for, he had jotted down relevant addresses and numbers, along with the phrase "Innocent & Flatulent."

Gerry seemed mystified that Alice's sorrow over Andrea endured. Jenny said, "He would say things to me like, 'Oh, motherhood is such a strong and powerful emotion!'—like he was a scientist. 'Wow, motherhood, what a thing.' " He seemed to have an almost mechanistic view of human behavior. In one letter, he defined "family dynamic" as "the system by which rank and prestige is assigned by family members." Jenny said, "It was like he didn't know about love. But, ironically, maybe he found it by doing the worst thing and being forgiven, you know?"

Like everyone in Alice's family, Gerry seemed to accept that parts of his life would be converted to fiction, perhaps in his case as a special kind of penance. "Gerry doesn't read my work," Alice had told an interviewer who visited her house in 1998.

"Yes, I do," Gerry had said. "But we don't discuss it."

Gerry and Alice bought burial plots for themselves in a cemetery just outside Clinton. Jenny said she could imagine them sitting down together for a glass of wine and fatal drugs. In a story called "Dolly," published in 2012, when she was eighty, Alice described an elderly couple planning their joint suicide. Before resolving the details, though, the woman

becomes inflamed by an old source of jealousy and leaves her partner. “No lies, after all, were as strong as the lies we tell ourselves, and then unfortunately have to keep telling to make the whole puke stay down in our stomachs,” she writes him. In the morning, when she wakes up alone in a motel, the fight feels stale, her arguments repetitive and rambling, and she drives back home.

Alice had been suffering from memory problems for several years, and by 2011 she was struggling to manage. Previously, Gerry had spent time decorating their yard with fanciful folk sculptures, including a bathtub painted to look like both a cow and a fighter plane, and also trying to preserve old buildings in town, but now his purpose narrowed. “He did everything for her,” Jenny said. “It reminded me of when he was waiting on his old mother.”

Gerry was diagnosed with cancer, but he continued in this mode, hiding how ill he’d become. Two weeks before he died, he spread out aerial photographs of evacuees from the Second World War and spoke of his remorse over dropping bombs. He didn’t mention regrets closer to home, Jenny noticed. He died in the spring of 2013, leaving behind the memoir of his war years, which he’d wanted published posthumously, and several long poems in rhyming comic verse.

Jenny said that within a day Alice had thrown away bags full of his belongings. Left behind was a book that he had been reading, “Mistakes Were Made (but Not by *Me*),” by social psychologists, about the cognitive biases that people use to rationalize their own harmful behavior. But it seemed to Jenny that the book’s message hadn’t reached him. The passages he’d underlined were about episodes in which children made false accusations of sexual abuse.

Jenny hoped that Gerry’s death would bring Andrea back to the family, but Andrea found that the idea of forgiveness felt increasingly “moot.” When her

husband told her that Gerry had died, she said, “I remember being so surprised, because I didn’t think he could do something so vulnerable.”

Half a year later, Alice won the Nobel Prize in Literature, becoming the first Canadian to do so. A biography for the prize read “Alice Munro is married with two daughters from her first marriage.” In an article about the award in the *Globe and Mail*, Jim, who still ran Munro’s Books, praised his ex-wife for being a “feminist before feminism was invented.”

Alice was unable to go to Sweden—she had to be continually reminded what prize she had won—so Jenny received the award from the King of Sweden in her stead.

Andrea said that when she saw the pictures of Jenny, who looked gorgeous in a navy-blue gown, her blond hair in an updo, she thought, “They really are happier that I’m not in the family. Now they can just live in this one reality.” Alice’s face was put on a Canadian postage stamp.

Jenny lives on a corner lot in Port Hope, in a modest white cottage with Victorian trim which outwardly resembles her mother’s house in Clinton. She has a generous, fairylike presence and seems almost helplessly focussed on what is good. When she told me she had been diagnosed with a rare cancer, she relayed the news with such equanimity that I mistakenly assumed the second half of her story would be about how the diagnosis had been an error.

She hired a rotation of caretakers for her mother and filled in whenever there was an empty shift. But she was increasingly distraught about Andrea’s silence. “I really felt I was almost losing my mind,” she said. “It felt really sickening that I had gone along with this idea of Gerry as an acceptable part of our family.” She used to jokingly call him her “faux pa.”

She began reading about sexual abuse, and wept when she read a paper by

the psychiatrist Roland Summit called "The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome," which seemed to map out Andrea's childhood and adolescence. The paper describes how the abused child, to survive within her family, must "structure her reality to protect the parent," remaking herself to maximize love and acceptance. "The child is given the power to destroy the family and the responsibility to keep it together," Summit writes. Years later, when the child is ready to talk about how helpless she was made to feel, her family is dismissive of what she has been through, believing that she appeared too happy to have been harmed by the experience.

Jenny Googled "adult survivors of child sexual abuse and their families," and discovered a support center in Toronto called the Gatehouse. She told Sheila and Andrew, their stepbrother, about it, and they decided to go there together, for a healing circle where they shared their grief over the estrangement. "We were not even sure we deserved help," Jenny said.

Andrew didn't realize until he was at the Gatehouse that nothing had been done after Andrea shared her story with his mom. "I went into that room with my eleven-year-old boy's version of events," he told me. After he had heard Andrea sobbing, he never brought up the subject again, because he thought it would hurt her.

Maria Barcelos, the organization's executive director, said, "All three of them were in that place of saying, 'We know we were part of this silence and we don't want to be part of it anymore. We want our sister in our lives.' "

Gatehouse staff encouraged them to write letters to Andrea. "The salient message was 'Don't write with a goal in mind,' " Andrew said. " 'Don't write expecting a result. Just communicate how you feel about her.' "

Andrea, who was living in Calgary, read the letters, but she didn't respond. She didn't want to feel pressured to "get in a room filled with family members and start offering compassion and forgiveness."

Not long afterward, the Gatehouse hosted an annual conference, attended by more than a hundred and fifty people. Jenny was a keynote speaker. “I need to be here,” she said, standing at the podium, her voice trembling. Sheila and Andrew sat in the front row. With a projector, Jenny showed a sketch she had drawn of Andrea the summer Andrea was ten. She was sitting on a quilted bed, her legs crossed, her blond hair falling nearly to her waist. She looked sorrowful. “I didn’t protect this beautiful child,” Jenny said. Jenny imagined that the story would be front-page news the next day, but nothing happened.

Jenny told her mother about the Gatehouse and said that many other families had experiences like theirs. “The whole society doesn’t want to talk about it,” she said.

“Of course,” Alice said. “But I had actually forgotten about it, can you imagine?”

“Well, you’re forgetting a lot of things now.”

“That’s true,” Alice said.

Jenny spoke about how much it would mean to Andrea to know that she cared, and Alice began crying. Within twenty seconds she recovered, as if the memory, along with the emotion linked to it, had just been lost.

In 2016, when Andrea was forty-nine, her husband suddenly left her. “I felt ready to turn to where I had felt love,” she said. “I felt a genuine willingness and, actually, desperation.” Andrea flew to Toronto. At the airport, “I saw her at the top of the escalator, and she fell into my arms,” Jenny said. They drove directly to the Gatehouse together.

Andrea also agreed to see her father for the first time in years. When she began expressing anger, Jim, who had heart congestion and was very frail, put his hand on her shoulder and said, “I need to hear this.” Andrea felt that

he was listening with love. She thought, This is the kindest dad I've ever had. Later, during a period of better health, "his old personality started to come back," she said. Once, she asked him if he ever thought, when she was with her mother and Gerry in Clinton, "What is happening to Andrea right now?" He answered, "No."

Jenny daydreamed about Andrea moving to Port Hope, a town that reminded Andrea of Victoria "without the ghosts." They discussed the elements of an ideal house: a fireplace, a porch, oak trees, walls made of stone. In the summer of 2016, a house in Port Hope with almost everything on their list came on the market. Jenny helped Andrea buy it, and several months later Andrea moved there, with the twins, Charlie and Felix, eventually joining her. By that point, Alice was "completely gone," Andrea said. "She didn't know me." Charlie said that one time they were in the upstairs dining area of a coffee shop in Port Hope, and, as they walked downstairs, they saw Alice and her caretaker ordering coffee. They waited upstairs until she left the shop.

After Charlie went away to college, Andrea came over to Jenny's house every other night. They often lay on the bed, with Jenny's husband, watching movies. "It's kind of like I'm passing on this incredible love that I feel I got from my mom," Jenny told me. "I'm probably deluding myself, but I think Mom would have loved to embrace Andrea and have her back. And I'm trying to transmit that."

Alice's last book, "Dear Life," published in 2012, ends with another reflection on her abandonment of her mother. In this final rendering, her guilt has eased. If she had stayed home to care for her mother, as she felt a good daughter should, she could never have become the writer she was. "We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves," she wrote in the final lines. "But we do—we do it all the time."

It's hard not to read these words, the last she ever published in a book, as an expression of the choices she made with Andrea, too. Trauma tends to lead to a kind of unknowing repetition, and, in the second half of her life, Alice reënacted the dynamic with her mother, in new form: she had to trade reality for fiction, her daughter for art.

And yet the reader of an Alice Munro story never knows which epiphany to trust. One revelation is overlaid on another; the story continues past the point at which another author might end it. In the spring of 2024, a few weeks before Alice died, she and Jenny were sitting in the sun, outside the nursing home where Alice had been living for the past three years. Jenny said that Alice told her, "I didn't want that pediful." She spit the words out, with significant effort. "I said, 'Do you mean pedophile?' She said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Do you mean you should have stood with Andrea?' She said, 'Yes.' "

A week after Alice died, the Gatehouse republished on its Web site an essay by Andrea about the experience of reuniting with her siblings after decades of silence. When the essay had first been posted, in 2020, Barcelos had asked Andrea to take out her mother's name, largely because of concerns over the legal implications. But the new version referred to "my mother, Alice Munro."

Andrew, an actor and a writer, sent the essay to many of his friends, and eventually to his colleagues, too, and Andrea sent it to three organizations for people who have experienced sexual abuse. She thought that the story would become public, but it didn't. As publications were printing glowing remembrances of her mother, Andrea sent the essay to four journalists who had written about her mother or about sexual trauma. Her ex-husband sent it to two news outlets on the west coast of Canada. The response was "a big zero," Andrea said.

In early June, the Toronto *Star* published a column by a writer named Heather Mallick, who said she was crushed to realize that "political idols,

once-adored writers, they're just people, not heroes." Andrea thought that Mallick might be subtly referencing her mother, so she e-mailed Mallick, too. But Mallick had not been aware of Andrea's essay. She informed a top editor, and the story was proposed to Deborah Dundas, the books editor. "Lives of Girls and Women" had been a foundational book for Dundas when she was a teen-ager. "The idea of becoming a writer and having control over your own story—it meant everything to me," she told me. She explained to her editor that she did not want to take down an idol or jeopardize her relationships in publishing. But the next day she changed her mind.

Less than three weeks later, Dundas and a colleague, Betsy Powell, a courts reporter, published a detailed article about Gerry's abuse and how it was kept silent. The *Star* also published a longer version of Andrea's Gatehouse essay, and also essays by Andrew and Jenny recounting how they had processed what happened to their sister. "We all, in our way, asked that Andrea live a lie," Jenny wrote. Within a day, the news was reported around the world. The largest chain of bookstores in Canada announced that, though it would still carry Alice Munro books, it would remove posters of her face from their stores. Jim Munro had died, but the new owners of Munro's Books issued a statement saying that all future proceeds from the sale of Alice's books would go to organizations supporting survivors of sexual abuse. Soon, other public figures in Canada, including a journalist and a novelist, said that they'd been inspired by Andrea to share similar stories of being silenced after abuse.

The first time I met Jenny, she told me, "In general, I just see this as a giant tragedy in my family that has a kind of wonderful result—as good as it can get. I know my parents would have wanted this."

"Even if this hurts her reputation, your mom would still ultimately want this to be happening now?" I asked.

"Yes, I think she would," Jenny said. "She would want this truth for Andrea. She was a master of fiction, and Andrea is a master of truth. And I think, in

a way, Mom would have admired that."

When I asked Andrea if she agreed with Jenny's assessment, she started laughing and said, "No!"

We were sitting at a picnic table at Horse Discovery, an eighty-five-acre horse farm where Andrea leads yoga and mindfulness classes. She said that Jenny's impression had been altered by a decade spent taking care of that "sweet Alzheimer's lady—who wasn't our mother."

Andrea had known that person, too. She sometimes came over to her mother's home to help. "It was an act of love for Jenny," she said, not for her mother. At first, she took Alice for weekly drives. When that felt too intimate, she began doing housework, like scrubbing her floors.

Sometimes Andrea explained who she was, but Alice "would forget two minutes later, and it was easier that way," she said. "I didn't want to have a moment where we connected again. I wouldn't have believed it, anyway."

In a story from 2008, called "Deep-Holes," Alice imagined the way that dementia could bring a mother and her estranged child back together. When the son in the story makes it clear that he does not want to see his mother again, she takes solace in the thought that "age could become her ally, turning her into somebody she didn't know yet. She has seen that look of old people, now and then—clear-sighted but content, on islands of their own making."

Once, when Andrea came over to help, Alice told a story about how her father had beaten her after she gave names to the baby foxes on their farm. She wasn't supposed to get attached to the animals. "My mother always told me she had no interest in animals," Andrea said. "But I believe that happened, and I thought, Oh, the nurturing was beaten out of her."

"Did you feel like there was some part of her that knew that she was

communicating this?" I asked.

"When you say it, it seems pretty obvious," she said. "But, no, I didn't realize that she might be emotionally available to herself."

I mentioned that Alice must have known how much Andrea loved animals.

"I'm willing to entertain the idea that there was some kind of knowing in there," Andrea said. During another visit, Alice, moving in and out of coherence, had asked Andrea if it was O.K. to live on her own now and go back to college. "I had a lot of compassion for that, too, because she didn't get to finish university," Andrea said. Instead, she had dropped out and got married. She had no money and couldn't write without the support of a man. Andrea said, "There was the kind of sweetness of consulting with me, like she wanted a do-over."

When Andrea's children were young, she took care to educate them about how to prevent sexual abuse, using her own story as an example. Not long ago, Andrea was taken aback when Charlie wrote an essay called "The Young and Pretty Condition," for a college class, in which she described how some of her mother's attempts to protect her innocence (like refusing to dress her in a bikini as a child, or having frank discussions about infantilizing beauty standards) gave her the impression that all old men were secretly menacing. "I think the cycle is not necessarily breakable in one fell swoop," Andrea told me. "There are things that get pushed to the next generation, things that I didn't intend. But the difference is that she can say these things."

Charlie was never particularly curious about her grandmother. The family conflict didn't feel relevant to her life. "When I was growing up, I was thinking about my problems," she told me, almost apologetically. She speaks to her mother on the phone every day: "She's just this beautiful, asexual creature who doesn't need to be attractive to anybody. She's goddess-y in her

nature. She's just glowing and energetic, and she has this joy for life that I think I have as well."

The conversation with Charlie made me feel that Andrea was soaring through life, and in an e-mail to Andrea I admitted that I felt myself slipping into the place her siblings had spent so many years: "Look how amazing Andrea is—she's thriving!"

"Thriving Andrea," she responded. "What a load." The goddess-y life of celibacy was possible because "it is easy to ignore something you are not aware of missing." She sometimes enters a state in which all her interactions are tinged with a sense of guilt and horror that she has demanded too much from other people. "Most of all, I'm afraid of being a burden," she wrote me.

Recently, I met her in her home, in Port Hope, which was as idyllic as it had been described: the brick-and-stone house was on a hill, surrounded by black-walnut trees, with a granite-columned staircase leading up to it. We sat beside the fire, next to a large painting by Jenny of a gnarled tree. Jenny had just told Andrea about her mother's letter to John Metcalf, from the early seventies, in which she had described being raped. "The hardest part of that story for me was that my mother didn't go to the class that she was supposed to be at that day," Andrea said. "She couldn't. She had to wander around the city. I felt like I did that a lot—rather than show up for myself. And the next thought is the rage that she got to live her life very productively. And I feel like I continue to walk aimlessly around that city."

She felt that she had lost several years of her life, mostly in her twenties, when she wanted to be establishing a career. She had been derailed by almost weekly migraines. It wasn't until she had read Gerry's letter that described her headache on the morning he first abused her that she connected the onset of the condition to what he'd done. Now she understood migraines as a "way to experience the intensity of my pain without inflicting it on anyone." Since she published her essay on the Gatehouse Web site last spring, her

migraines have become less frequent and less shattering.

After Alice died, Sheila and Jenny wanted to hold a small service for the burial of her ashes. Toward the end of her life, Alice had told Jenny, "I do not want to be buried next to that man." They had chosen a new cemetery, in Wingham. But Andrea became upset when she "pictured my sisters standing over my mother's grave in a town that revered St. Alice, with no one the wiser," she wrote me.

Now that the secret has been told, Jenny and Sheila will eventually have a service. "I think we'll just have to say, 'We have this basic need to bury our mother,' " Sheila told me. Andrea doesn't plan to attend, but she understands that her sisters need to find their own ways to grieve. The public response to her abuse has made Andrea realize that there was no "grand conspiracy of silence," as she'd always imagined. She described it as "more like a sideways dreamlike slide into unnameable darkness—an airless, mute place." ♦

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