

COVER PAGE

- 1. Competition** The Stuart Hadow SS Competition 2020
- 2. Title of Story:** When I Met Alice Munro
- 3. Pen Name:** Samantha Moojar

When I Met Alice Munro

When I met Alice Munro, I was a few months from turning eighteen and looking to lose all the virtues school life had already imposed on me. Alice was just passing through, as they liked to say in our city, and a small gathering in her honour had been hastily organised.

‘Alice Munro’s a *really* important writer,’ Mum told me as we drove to the gathering. She’d recently been invited to join the city’s prestigious writers’ group.

I didn’t want to go with her. I’d just found a boyfriend—and things were getting serious. If I had stayed home I’d have invite him around. Had a few drinks. Got to know him better. Let him get to know me better—in the way I’d been dreaming about lately, and couldn’t do unless we were alone. My father had left us six months ago and Mum insisted she needed a companion. Everyone else in her group was going with a husband or friend.

‘Alice Munro’s from Canada,’ Mum added, as if that clinched the matter.

My mother had actually used the word *soirée* when she’d first mentioned the gathering. I thought this was a mite pretentious. We were going to a house in Subiaco, Perth, not *Aux Deux Magots* in Paris, for God’s sake. The *soirée* was being hosted by a writer who was a local celebrity. Or so my mother said.

When I complained about ‘chaperone duty’, Mum replied, ‘How many students get the chance to meet a famous writer from overseas?’

‘No-one I know,’ I conceded.

‘Anyway, it fits with your uni course.’

‘How? We’re doing Victorian novelists at the moment.’

‘I’m sure you’ll find a connection, if you look hard enough.’ Her voice had that ‘end of argument’ tone she sometimes used.

I stared out of the car window and wondered how meeting this Canadian writer would help me with the essay I was writing on George Eliot. I hadn't heard of Alice Munro, and I was studying English. I suspected my mother wasn't as familiar with her work as she was making out. But my opinion didn't count, being a first year university student, and as Mum pointed out whenever she could, 'having no worldly experience.'

The local writer's house was old and might be described as 'gracious' by the journalist who covered social events for our city newspaper. Ancient peppermint trees with stout, gnarled trunks and long weeping branches lined the street. Gardens were well trimmed and framed by white picket fences that looked as if they'd been painted only days earlier. The house had a bull-nosed veranda furnished with rattan outdoor tables and matching chairs. I imagined that's where people would sit on hot afternoons sipping tea or maybe even gin-and-tonics clinking with ice cubes.

'Built at the turn of the century when the State was all cashed-up with gold mining money,' my mother whispered as she banged the brass knocker. We stared at the intricate patterns of the stained-glass panels. Since Paul Keating's 'recession we had to have', and Dad's bankruptcy and departure, the State's moments of boom prosperity glowed like votive candles in Mum's mind.

'Here for Alice Munro?'

We nodded.

'I'm Clara, Harry's wife. Follow me.'

'Harry Lawrence,' Mum whispered. 'Probably WA's best writer.'

Clara led us to a large room with high, white panelled bookshelves on three walls, crammed with books. Floor to ceiling windows on the other wall looked out into the garden. Impressed, my mother mouthed, 'The library.' I glared at her. As if I couldn't work that out. But I was impressed too, even if I'd never let her know. It was the first time

I'd seen a room in someone's house so extravagantly devoted to books. We'd always had books in our house, but stored in small, low bookshelves located in spaces not occupied by sofas, TVs, coffee tables, beds or wardrobes.

I looked around the room. Many of the women seemed as old as my mother—or older. As for the men—my boyfriend had no cause for concern—the absence of youngish, brooding poets or novelists was conspicuous. I sighed.

To my satisfaction, I soon found myself separated from my mother, on a settee next to a man in camel-coloured trousers and skivvy, and a black corduroy jacket. He had longish, wavy black hair, flecked with grey and combed back so that it emphasised his heavy brow and large nose. Seated on a low, Victorian looking armchair on his right was a petite brunette with a mid-length bob, dressed in a print dress of autumn tones. The man was talking to the woman in a way that fascinated me. He was respectful, but the way he held himself and spoke left no doubt that he expected his views to be taken very seriously.

'Umm, the position of writers in this country?' He paused, his lips stretching momentarily into a smile. 'I'll be positive and say, *improving*'.

The woman nodded politely.

'At last, local writers are being recognised, even valued.' He paused again, drained the wine glass in his left hand, and then drew breath as if to prepare the woman for the importance of his next comment. He looked like Professor Osborne, the renowned Head of Drama, whom I'd only glimpsed from a distance in the corridors of the English Department. I was hoping to get accepted into his very popular unit, *Discovering the Drama of Your Inner Self*, next year.

'Earning enough to live on—well, that's another matter,' he continued. 'This might be the same in Canada, I imagine?'

‘Oh sure, I think it’s probably similar,’ the woman responded. ‘But we’re closer to the American market, and there are more opportunities. The tricky part though, is breaking into that market.’

I listened to the woman’s accent—almost American, but with softer vowels and more precise diction than I’d heard in the movies. It suddenly dawned on me who she was. I leaned forward and looked more closely at her. I was struck by how very plain her outfit was. I had imagined that a famous writer would be dressed in a way that more vividly reflected her struggles as an artist. I thought of Emily Brontë and *Wuthering Heights*, the only novel in our course so far that had grabbed me. I felt a twinge of disappointment. Alice Munro’s behaviour, as well as her dress, was understated and polite—I wanted her to be fiery and opinionated.

Clara appeared with a tray of red and white wine. Alice Munro shook her head and pointed to the glass of water on the small table beside her. The man explaining how writers fared in Australia placed his empty glass on the tray and took a glass of red. Summoning all my almost eighteen years of self-assurance, I took a glass of white and lifted it nonchalantly to my lips.

‘There’s been progress here, of course, with grants and the like,’ he intoned. ‘But it is a struggle, especially now with the recession.’

I gulped down a mouthful of wine. I had to join this conversation.

‘Struggle?’ I queried loudly.

‘Yes,’ he replied with an irritated glance my direction.

I gestured towards the other guests, some standing in conversational clumps around the room, others seated.

‘You know many of these people?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘I can’t see anyone here who looks like they’re ‘struggling’ an awful lot.’

He looked at me directly for the first time.

‘My best friend’s mum is living on a single mother’s pension and has two children to support. Now that’s a struggle. Even my mum has to budget very carefully. And she’s got a part-time job, and gets child-support from my dad.’

‘You can’t necessarily tell a person’s existential state from their appearance, young lady. As you will learn when you are a little bit older.’

I gripped my wine glass tightly and held his gaze.

‘Are *you* struggling?’ I demanded.

He looked me up and down in a way that made me feel uncomfortable and flattered.

‘No, my dear,’ he replied, allowing himself a smile while reaching out to pat my knee, ‘I certainly wouldn’t describe myself that way.’

I felt sort of flattered and indignant at the same time. I was thinking I should tell him in a loud voice to drop the ‘my dear’ and maybe also to keep his hands to himself, when a tall man appeared beside Alice Munro. He bent down and asked her something in a low voice. She smiled and nodded. He straightened up and began to tap gently with a teaspoon on the empty glass in his hand.

‘Friends and newcomers, welcome,’ he said, once those standing were seated and he had everyone’s attention. ‘For those who don’t know me, I’m Harry Lawrence. Now, I’m sure you’ll agree with me that we’re extraordinarily lucky to have the distinguished Canadian writer, Alice Munro, in our midst.’ There were broad smiles in the writer’s direction and enthusiastic clapping.

‘A very warm welcome to Perth from all of us,’ he said, turning to Alice.

‘Thank you,’ she replied. ‘I’m honoured.’

Harry Lawrence waited for the few hands that continued to clap in response to be still. ‘And we’re doubly lucky tonight because Miss Munro has kindly agreed to read a short story of hers that was recently published in *The New Yorker*. After which, Professor Keith Osborne, a great friend to writers, as you know, and instrumental in getting Miss Munro to Perth, will chat to her about her work and her thoughts on where the contemporary short story is heading.’

So the man next to me *was* Professor Osborne!

Alice Munro stood up and walked to a table at the end of the room. ‘Thank you Harry and Clara for organising this wonderful gathering. And thank you all, for your warm welcome to Perth. The story I’m going to read is called *Goodness and Mercy*.’

I listened to Alice Munro’s soft cadences and heard a tale about a mother, known as ‘Bugs’, and her daughter, called Averill, travelling from Canada to England on a passenger-carrying freighter. The mother was a single parent and had enjoyed a successful career as an opera singer in Toronto. She was dying of cancer, so this was their last voyage together. The daughter was not beautiful, but her youth, vigour and easy-going nature made her attractive to males on board, especially an artist. Mother and daughter had agreed to conceal the mother’s illness from fellow passengers. The mother’s poor health hadn’t affected her sharp tongue, or the relish with which she mocked fellow passengers when she talked about them to her daughter. I laughed with delight when she described a confidante and admirer, a retired professor, as a ‘professorial jerk’. I saw that Professor Osborne was laughing too. He turned and eyed me strangely. Feeling uncomfortable, I looked away, concentrating on the reading.

The evening of the second last day of the voyage there was a party. The captain, the daughter and most of the other passengers attended. The mother did not, as her strength was failing. During the evening, the conversation turned to shipboard death and the

freighter's captain was persuaded to tell a story about such an event. His tale was about two sisters on a cruise, one of whom was seriously ill. Late one night, the healthy sister found her sibling dead in her cabin. She rushed out on deck looking for help and met the captain of the cruise ship on his evening walk. Together, they wrapped the dead sister in a sheet and conducted a hasty sea burial. After the body had gone over the rail, the sister sang a well-known hymn.

At the tale's end, the freighter's captain tried unsuccessfully to remember the name of the hymn. The daughter responded by softly singing, *Goodness and Mercy*. For she had understood the captain was telling the story for her, as she had taken to sitting on the deck outside her mother's cabin late at night, spinning stories in her head, and had often spied the captain on his evening walk. And when she finished singing, the daughter spun another ending for the tale, whereby, after the burial, the sister and the captain of the cruise ship went to the dead woman's cabin and made love.

Alice Munro paused at this point and took a sip of water. The daughter's embellishment of the tale had stirred me. I was imagining the couple in the dead woman's cabin, tearing off each other's clothes, as they did in the movies, when I felt pressure on my thigh.

I turned. It was Professor Osborne, so close it would be difficult for a breath to fit between us. I coughed and edged to the end of the settee. He slid after me, his gaze fixed on Alice Munro, who had resumed reading. Wedged against the settee's arm, I felt furious and helpless at the same time. The bloody cheek, I thought. The perve. I coughed, more loudly this time, and tensed the muscles in my upper leg as much as I could to reduce contact. He pushed more insistently against me. Then, the sight of my wine glass on the floor, still half full gave me an idea. I stretched down and picked it up. As I straightened up I listed towards him and tipped its contents into the middle of his crotch.

‘What on earth!’ he shouted, jumping up and shaking the wine from his trousers. Alice Munro stopped reading. An elderly man who had been dozing woke up and gave startled look in our direction. Someone turned and mouthed, ‘Shush, please.’ I glimpsed my mother looking crestfallen. Clara stood up and walked towards us.

‘Whoops,’ I said, ogling the wet patch on the Professor’s crotch. ‘Not sure how that happened.’

Clara appeared. ‘Come with me Keith,’ she whispered to Professor Osborne. Taking his arm, she led him towards the adjacent room.

I returned to my place on the settee. I had experienced of the drama of my inner self, sooner than expected. And it hadn’t been pleasant.

The room settled. All eyes turned again to Alice Munro as she picked up where she had left off in her story.

My mother was by my side. ‘Come on,’ she whispered nodding in Alice’s direction and pointing towards the door.

I didn’t want to leave but tiptoed after her.

‘What’s got into you?’ she demanded as soon as we were on the veranda.

She strode angrily in front of me.

I had to scurry to catch up with her on the garden path.

‘Disrupting Alice Munro’s reading! You ruined my evening.’ Her voice wavered. ‘How can I ever show my face at the writers’ group again?’

‘He was rubbing his leg against me. Deliberately.’

‘Nonsense.’ She slammed the gate. ‘You’ve been reading too many romances. He’s a university professor, you know.’

Yeah, I thought. I do know. Professor Osborne. A professorial jerk!

I tramped behind her to the car. Who would believe me if I told them about Professor Osborne's behaviour? My friends? The student counsellor at uni? Alice Munro?

My mother started the engine. Before pulling out she turned to me.

'I took comfort from one thing,' she sniffed.

'Yeah, and what's that?'

'At least in Alice Munro's story, the daughter knew how to honour her mother.'

(2562 words)