

Introduction

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In perhaps the first photograph taken of me as an infant, my parents, new baby in arms, are standing behind my grandfather's stately three-story house, on a lawn that sprawled all the way to the bank of the Red River. I have only faint memories of the first floor of that massive house, Victorian in style, windows heavily curtained, ornaments aplenty on the living room's several small tables. A few years later, the house was sold and my grandparents moved to a tiny house on a street close to ours: three small rooms, plus a kitchen and bathroom, no grand entrance, no enormous dining room, no dining room at all, and only two of the living room tables, albeit still displaying precious china ornaments. Not long after the move, my grandmother died, leaving my father's father alone in the tiny house. And not too long after that, my grandfather—tall, proud of his Scotland roots, somewhat forbidding in demeanour, invariably dressed in a hat and three-piece suit—began to display atypical behaviour, such as leaving the kettle boiling when he departed the house, driving through red lights, and “wandering.” Despite their children's pleas, my parents decided to move grandfather to a nearby seniors' residence, where he ended up, unfortunately, on what Alice Munro, in her marvelous story “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” refers to as “the second floor.” Visiting grandfather once, I found him thoroughly indignant, surrounded as he was, again to borrow Munro's words, by “dribblers, head-wagglers,

mad chatterers” (479). Sheepishly, I asked my grandfather whether he would like to go for a car ride. Once in the vehicle, he turned to me and, relinquishing his always-dignified manner of speech, blurted out, “Now, head for the highway and HIT IT.”

How long after that did my grandfather die, escaping his residential confinement only by breaking his hip and moving into a hospital where pneumonia soon set in? And how long after grandfather died was I visiting my father in his institution, felled by several strokes, now in a wheelchair when not fenced into that plastic-mattress bed? My father, too, was assigned to “the second floor” and, surrounded by people who “don’t know where they are” (472), he coped by withdrawing and growing increasingly desperate to die. I considered mealtimes to be particularly difficult: all inmates not bed-ridden were wheeled to a large room at the end of the hall and issued some ghastly-looking green or grey purée, the same menu appearing, relentlessly, every day, albeit with no staff available to feed the many individuals who were clearly unable to feed themselves.

Sara Jamieson suggests in this issue that Alice Munro’s fiction “has long represented the old age home in a way that turns a critical eye to its disadvantages, yet also remains open to how those disadvantages might be mitigated and a habitable existence sustained,” thereby, as in “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” challenging “a dominant gerontological narrative—as well as a widespread public perception—of the old age home.” Munro’s story contrasts the old Meadowlake institution with the more up-to-date facility that replaced it, Jamieson suggests, and through this doubling, the story thwarts the home/institution binary and “encourages a rethinking of the perceived fixedness and monumentality of institutional space.” The essay, drawing much institutional detail from Munro’s story, provoked for me memories of my grandfather’s institution, one version of the “old Meadowlake,” and my father’s facility, his a “new Meadowlake.” Years passed between the “old” and the “new” institutions, but neither relieved my dread of institutional space. In Grant’s eyes, Fiona did better at her “new Meadowlake.” But then, Fiona was neither elderly nor assigned to “the second floor.”

WORKS CITED

- Munro, Alice. “The Bear Came Over the Mountain.” *My Best Stories*. Toronto: Penguin, 2006. 467-509. Print.