Wild Swans  By Alice Munro from The Beggar Maid. Published by Vintage Contemporaries © 1977 all rights reserved.

As we come into the scene below, Rose has been joined by a minister, a stranger, on the train. He has been describing some the Wild Swans of the story title that he happened to see by accident….

Rose was unable to think appreciatively of the wild swans because she was afraid he was going to lead the conversation from them to Nature in general and then to God, the way a minister would feel obligated to do. But he did not, he stopped with the swans.

“A very fine sight. You would have enjoyed them.”

He was between fifty and sixty years old, Rose thought. He was short, and energetic-looking, with a square ruddy face and bright waves of gray hair combed straight up from his forehead. When she realized he was not going to mention God she felt she ought to show her gratitude.

She said they must have been lovely.

“It wasn’t even a regular pond, it was only some water lying in a field. It was just luck the water was lying there and they came down and I came driving by at the right time. Just luck. They come in at the east end of Lake Erie, I think. But I was never lucky enough to see them before.“

She turned by degrees to the window, and he returned to his paper. She remained slightly smiling, so as to not seem rude, not to seem to be rejecting conversation altogether. The morning really was cool, and she had taken down her coat off the hook where she put it when she first got on the train, she had spread it over herself, like a lap robe. She had set her purse on the floor when the minister sat down, to give him room.
He took the sections of the paper apart, shaking and rustling them in a leisurely showy way. He seemed to her the sort of person who does everything in a showy way. A ministerial way. He brushed aside the sections he didn’t want at the moment. A corner of newspaper touched her leg, just at the edge of her coat.

She thought for some time that it was the paper. Then she said to herself, what if it is a hand? That was the kind of thing she could imagine. She would sometimes look at men’s hands, at the fuzz on their forearms, their concentrating profiles. She would think about everything they could do. Even the stupid ones. For instance the driver-salesman who brought bread to Flo’s store. The ripeness and confidence of manner, the settled nature of ease and alertness with which he handled the bread truck. A fold of mature belly over the belt did not displease her. Another time she had her eye on the French teacher at school. Not a Frenchman at all, really, his name was McLaren but Rose thought teaching French had rubbed off on him, make him look like one. Quick and sallow, sharp shoulders, hooked nose and sad eyes. She saw him lapping and coiling his way through slow pleasures, a perfect autocrat of indulgence. She had a considerable longing to be somebody’s object. Pounded, pleasured, reduced, exhausted.

But what if it was a hand? What if it really was a hand? She shifted slightly, moves as much as she could towards the window. Her imagination seemed to have created this reality, a reality she was not prepared for at all. She found it alarming. She was concentrating on that leg, that bit of skin with the stocking over it. She could not bring herself to look. Was there a pressure, or was there not? She shifted again. Her legs had been, and remained, tightly closed. It was. It was a hand. A hand’s pressure.

Please don’t. That was what she tried to say. She shaped the words in her mind, tried them out, then couldn’t get them past her lips. Why was that? The embarrassment, was it, the fear that people might hear. People were all around her, the seats were full.

It was not only that.
She did manage to look at him, not raising her head but turning it cautiously. He had titled his seat back and closed his eyes. There was a dark blue sleeve, disappearing under the newspaper, He had arranged the paper so that it overlapped Rose’s coat. His hand was underneath, simply resting, as if flung out in sleep.

Now, Rose could have shifted the newspaper and removed her coat. If he was not asleep, he would have been obliged to draw back his hand. If he was asleep, if he did not draw it back, she could have whispered, *Excuse me*, and set his hand firmly on his own knee. This solution, so obvious and foolproof, did not occur to her. And she would have to wonder, why not? The minister’s hand was not, or not yet, at all welcome to her. It made her feel uncomfortable, resentful, slightly disgusted, trapped and wary. But she could not take charge of it, to reject it. She could not insist that it was there, when he seemed to be insisting it was not. How could she declare him responsible, when he lay there so harmless and trusting, resting himself before his busy day, with such a pleased and healthy face? A man older than her father would be, if he were living, a man used to deference, an appreciator of Nature, delighter of wild swans. If she did say *Please don’t* She was sure he would ignore her, as if overlooking some silliness or impoliteness on her part. She knew that as soon as she said it she would hope he had not heard.

But there was more to it than that. Curiosity. More constant, more imperious than any lust. A lust in itself, that will make you draw back and wait, wait too long, risk almost anything, just to see what will happen. *To see what will happen.*

The hand began, over the next several miles, the most delicate, the most timid pressures and investigations. Not asleep. Or if he was, his hand wasn’t. She did feel disgust. She felt a faint wandering nausea. She thought of lumps of flesh: lumps of flesh, pink snouts, fat tongues, blunt fingers, all on their way trotting and creeping and lolling and rubbing, looking for their comfort. She thought of cats in heat rubbing themselves along the top of boarded fences, yowling their miserable complaint. It was pitiful, infantile, this itching and shoving and squeezing. Spongy tissues, inflamed membranes, tormented nerve-ends, shameful smells; humiliation.
All that was startling. His hand, that she wouldn’t have ever wanted to hold, that she wouldn’t have squeezed back, his stubborn patient hand was able, after all, to get the ferns to rustle and the streams to flow to waken a sly luxuriance.

Two of the exercises we did in first person involved large traumatic events, the loss of a baby and the death of the mother. With Alice Munro’s scene we turn to a much smaller event, an event that might not even have happened.

The collection *The Beggar Maid* was the book where Alice Munro came into herself as a writer. It is a series of linked stories following the main character from her life in a small Canadian town through to middle age. Many of the stories feature Rose’s conflicts with Flo her step mother. Flo is a fascinating small town character filled with gossip and the prejudices of someone who lives in tightly contained universe. As the story *Wild Swans* begins Rose is about to travel to Toronto and Flo has been warning her about White Slavers and other misfortunes that can befall an innocent girl. In particular, Rose is warned to watch out for ministers – they’re often the worst.

Alice Munro is probably the writer more writers study than any other and we should talk about why. As I am sure you appreciate the concept of third person is not monolithic, there are many variations. In this example we are looking at what it called Close Third. The opposite would be omniscient where the narrator could adopt multiple Points of view. But here it is Rose and what she thinks and as you noticed most of the excerpt consists of Rose’s thoughts. Close Third being as close to first person as third person allows.

And yet there is a narrator who is clearly separate from Rose. We are, after all, treated to a description of actions that Rose is unaware of:
Now, Rose could have shifted the newspaper and removed her coat. If he was not asleep, he would have been obliged to draw back his hand. If he was asleep, if he did not draw it back, she could have whispered, Excuse me, and set his hand firmly on his own knee. This solution, so obvious and foolproof, did not occur to her. And she would have to wonder, why not?

Munro’s narrator is always restrained and in that sense seems polite and, dare I say, Canadian. And yet she is extremely subtle. A purely Munro touch for instance is the tag line above And she would have to wonder, why not? This is clearly the narrator but she is, what? offering Rose advice.

In first person we talked about creating a sense of the personality on the page. I want you to think about what kind of personality Munro’s narrator has that she can say things like that. If she were a person who could you imagine she is. Would you say that she knows everything? I would. She strikes me as extremely knowledgeable. Is she generous and by that I mean accepting of the character’s faults? It can seem hard to pin down but it is one of the reasons she is so revered as a writer. When I am reading her I often feel that someone I am in the company of the person who knows everyone in town and who is the town historian and maybe gossip and that we are sitting on the porch as she tells us about everyone who is passing by, where they grew up, what they do and who they are in love with.

We have talked before about material and Munro is obsessed with the experience of women in Canada living after WW2 and their experience of love and career, family and town. We are not in fact that far from the landscape of Shields. One might think that sounds limiting but it is extraordinary how she can come at this material over and over and always make it fascinating and universal.

Now the reason I chose this excerpt is that it is one of the most remarkable examples of a narrator taking a very small event – an event in fact that might not even have happened – and using it to reveal so much about the character. Rose fears or imagines
that the minister’s hand is touching her and that allows the narrator the pretext for revealing a huge amount of how Rose feels about sex and men.

As was discussed in craft class the key here is the contradiction. Rose is alternatingly attracted and repelled by the idea of sex and so she is highly ambivalent about what she thinks is happening. She feels disgusted and violated and yet at the same time she wants to be pounded and pleasured etc. You could say she doesn’t know how she feels or that the feelings are unreconciled but look at how Munro opens this tiny moment up to show us so much.

Another concept we have been talking about is this: everything in a story serves the purpose of revealing the character. Let’s look at why the Munro narrator chose this scene. The big story here is a coming of age tale. A young girl is setting out for the big city just at the moment where she is becoming aware of sex. Munro’s narrator choses to give us the scene on a train trip between her small town of origin and her big city destination. So it’s a story of transition. Part of the girl’s dilemma is reconciling the facts with the more folkloric ideas of sex. Flo has put the fear in her that she is about to be sold into slavery, as if exposure to the big bad world will mean prostitution. Flo is also telling her that her innocence will end soon and wants to frighten her. And worse some of the most evil of men are those who masquerade as good i.e. ministers.

When the minister’s hand touches the girl’s leg, or maybe it is the newspaper the conflict between the imaginary and the physical aspects of sex are played out and this allows Munro’s narrator to explore the girl’s attempt to discover what she really feels. And what she really feels is where the contradiction lies because as we learn from her thoughts she is both repelled by the physicality of men and yet beguiled by their assurance and confidence. She wants to be both independent and is outraged and yet admits (because we are allowed access to her most private thoughts) a certain attraction to being dominated by someone more powerful. This also of course refers to her own need to be independent of her small town upbringing.
So the question we face is in choosing a scene may work like this; is the scene offering us the maximum opportunity for getting at what is most essential in the character’s dilemma? What makes Munro a master is that she doesn’t need much. There isn’t a whole lot of action here and in fact the action may all be taking place in the character’s mind but the narrator is so intent upon revealing the character’s dilemma the scene feels satisfying. In other words the scene answers the question – why is this day unlike any other. Rose will be different because of what happened on that train.

The inverse could be this. A scene may not be working because it does not provide the opportunity for revealing the character’s dilemma. Lastly, the narrative or technical reason the scene works is because Munro’s narrator makes us privy to Rose’s inner world and the debate raging there. It’s not all resolved. Rose is working through how she feels. And whatever else you think, it makes Rose very human.

Using a third person persona narrator provide a dramatic scene which provides a pretext for the character’s reaction(s). It does not have to be a large dramatic action. In Munro the minister’s hand might be touching her leg. He might be asleep. But use that action however small and your narrator’s access to the character’s thoughts to reveal the contradictions the character faces in their life. To that end, it needs to be a critical aspect of the character’s life. It won’t work if there isn’t much at stake. Alternate between the physical reality of the scene and the inner reality of the character’s reaction but work to see just how much your narrator can tell us about this person. You are free to use the character’s imagination but are not required to provide an action that is uncertain, as Munro does with the minister’s hand. As always use the exercise to stretch. You are not trying to give us a whole story, just a section but one which should feel essential to our understanding. In other words, the conflict does not need to be resolved. But it is being set up and it should speak to the notion of why this day is unlike any other.