


The background of the cover is a soft-focus painting of a calm body of water. On the left, a dark, silhouetted forest line meets the water's edge. The water reflects the light from the sky, which is a pale, hazy blue. In the lower right, a small, dark boat with a single figure inside is visible on the water. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

WHILE I WAS GONE

Sue
Miller

A small, stylized graphic element in the bottom left corner, consisting of a red square with a white border and a small white square inside.

Like Joanna Trollope, Miller is a fine artist' *Sunday Telegraph*

WHILE I WAS GONE

Sue Miller

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WHILE I WAS GONE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Inventing the Abbotts

The Good Mother

Family Pictures

For Love

The Distinguished Guest

The World Below

for Ben

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*Cedar waxwings dart among the swallows
Iridescent fish with wings,
Layers of life above the water.
Under, the trout.*

JUDITH BEACH NICHOLS (1919-1979)

WHILE I WAS GONE



CHAPTER

I

IT'S ODD, I SUPPOSE, THAT WHEN I THINK BACK OVER ALL that happened in that terrible time, one of my sharpest memories should be of some few moments the day before everything began. Seemingly unconnected to what followed, this memory is often one of the first things that comes to me when I call up those weeks, those months—the prelude, the long, beautiful, somber note I heard but chose to disregard.

This is it: silence between us. The only sounds the noises of the boat—the squeal of the oarlocks when my husband pulled on the oars, the almost inaudible creak of the wooden seat with his slight motion, and then the glip and liquid swirl of the oars through the water, and the sound of the boat rushing forward.

My husband's back was to me as I lay in the hard curve of the bow. He sat still a long time between each pull. The oars dripped and then slowly stopped dripping. Everything quieted. Sometimes he picked up his fishing rod and reeled it in a bit, pulling it one way or another. Sometimes he recast, standing high above me in the boat, the light line whipping wider and wider, whistling faintly in its looping arc across the sky before he let it go.

It was a day in mid-fall, well after the turning of the leaves. The weather was glorious. We always took one day a week off together, and if the weather was good, we often went fishing. Or my husband went fishing and I went along, usually with a book to read. Even when the

girls were small and it was harder to arrange, we managed at least part of the day alone together. In those early years we sometimes made love in the boat when we were fishing, or in the woods—we had so little time and privacy at home.

It was a Monday. The day off was always Monday, because Sunday was Daniel's busiest day at work and Saturday was mine. Monday was our day of rest. And what I recollect of that Monday, that fine fall day, is that for some long moments in the boat, I was suddenly aware of my *state*, in a way we aren't often. That is, I was abruptly and most intensely, sharply aware of all the aspects of life surrounding me, and yet of feeling neither part of it nor truly separated from it. Somehow impartial, unattached—an observer. Yet sentient of it all. Deeply sentient, in fact. But to no apparent purpose.

If I were trying to account for this feeling, I might say that it had something to do with the way I was half lying, half sitting on several pillows in the bow, the way the curving walls of the old rowboat framed a foreground for my view as they rose away from me. I saw them, these peeling wooden inner walls, and then my husband's familiar shape. Above him there was the flat, milky-blue sky and sometimes, when we were close enough to shore, the furred, nearly black line of the spruces and pines against it. In the air above us swallows darted—dark, quick silhouettes—and once a cedar waxwing moved smoothly through them. Layers of life above me. Below, I could hear the lap of the deep water through the walls of the boat.

As a result, let's say, I felt suspended, waiting. Between all these worlds and part of none of them.

But this isn't what I really believe; I think the sensation came from somewhere within me.

We feel this way sometimes in adolescence, too, surely most of us can call it up. But then there's the burning impatience for the next thing to take shape, for whatever it is we are about to become and be to announce itself. This was different: there was, I supposed, no next thing.

I had felt something like this every now and then in the last year or so, sometimes at work as I tightened a stitch or gave an injection: the awareness of having done this a thousand times before, of surely having a thousand times left to do it again. Of doing it well and thoroughly and neatly, as I liked to do things, and simultaneously of being at a great distance from my own actions.

Or at home, setting the table, sitting down with my husband to another meal, beginning our friendly evening conversation about the day—the house quiet around us, the old dogs dozing under the table or occasionally nuzzling our feet. A sense suddenly of being utterly present and also, simultaneously, far, far away.

Now I stirred, shifted my weight. My husband turned, no aspect of his face not dear to me. “Hurting?” he asked.

And with that, as quickly as it had come over me, the moment ended. I was back, solidly in time, exactly where we were. It was getting chilly. I had been lying in the wooden boat for several hours now, and even though I had the pillows under me, I was stiff. I had a bad hip. Replacement had been discussed, though everyone said I was young for it. I liked only that part of the problem, being too young for something.

“A little,” I said.

“We’ll head back.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve got two reasonable ones. I’m a happy man.” He began to reel his line in.

I turned and stretched. “How nice, to be a happy man,” I said.

He looked over his shoulder at me, to get my tone. “It is nice,” he said.

“And I meant it,” I answered.

As we rowed back, as we drove home, I found myself wanting to tell my husband about my feeling, but then not knowing what to call it. The shadow of it lingered with me, but I didn’t say anything to Daniel. He would hear it as a want, a need. He would feel called upon to offer comfort. Daniel is a minister, a preacher, a pastor. His business is the care of his flock, his medium is words—thrilling words, admonishing or consoling words. I knew he could console me, but consolation wasn’t what I felt I wanted. And so we drove along in silence, too, and I looked out the window at the back roads that sometimes seemed utterly rural, part of the nineteenth century, and sometimes seemed abruptly the worst of contemporary suburban life: the sere, beautiful old fields carved up to accommodate the too-wide circular asphalt driveways, the too-grand fake-garrison-colonial houses.

We lived in the center of town, an old, old town—Adams Mills, the Adamses long dead, the mills long burned down. Our house was a simple square farmhouse, added on to repeatedly at the back of the

first floor over the years, as was the custom then with these old New England homes. We had an unpainted barn behind it, and behind that was a small meadow which turned to pinewoods at the far edge, woods that hid our neighbors to the rear, though in the summer we could hear them fighting, calling each other things that used to make the girls laugh with joy. "You fat-ass pig!" they'd imitate. "You stupid shithead!"—which for some years they had, uncorrected, as "shiphead."

We used the barn as a garage now, and Daniel had his study out there, in a small heated room at the back. When we'd moved in, it was still full of rusting old tools and implements, the kinds of things people clean up and hang on their walls as folk art. There were still mason jars of unidentifiable fruits and vegetables in the old root cellar, a dark earthen space you entered by lifting a sort of trapdoor in the kitchen yard. Because of all this, we felt connected to the house's life as part of a farm.

Yet at the front of the house we were townfolk, connected to the village. Our view was across the old common to the big Congregational church. Not Daniel's church, it's true, and we looked at its back side—its *rump*, the girls had called it—but it was a splendid civic vista nonetheless. Beyond the church, we could see the row of grand Georgian houses lined up face-to-face with its front.

Along one side of the green was an inn, where we could get a fancy and tasteless meal in the main dining room, or a beer and a good hamburger in the bar, with its large-screen TV always tuned to the sports network. Along the other side of the green there were shops: a small, expensive grocery, a video store, a store with high-quality kitsch—stoneware, cute gardening tools, stationery, rubber stamps, coffee-table books, Venetian-glass paperweights. Everything in town was clapboard, painted white with green or black trim. If you tried another color, the historical commission descended on you and made you very, very sorry you had.

We turned into our drive now and pulled up next to the horse chestnut that shaded the dooryard. It dropped its leaves early every year. They littered the yard now, and our feet made a crunching noise on them as we crossed to the back door. The nearly bare ancient branches, twisted blackly above us in the dusky light, made me think of winter. When we opened the door, the house was silent. Daniel began to put his gear away in the spare room off the hall, speaking

loudly as he clattered around. "Boy, it is sure nice to have dogs! Dogs are so great, how they come running to greet you when you get home, how they make you feel like you count, even when you don't." This was a familiar riff, and as I headed to the john, I threw back my contribution: "Dogs! Dogs! Man's best friend!"

When I came out, a few minutes later, all three dogs had finally bestirred themselves from wherever they'd been nesting and were whacking their happy tails around the kitchen. Daniel was cleaning his fish at the sink—the smell already suffused the air—and there was hope of food for them. Nothing excited them more. They barely greeted me.

The answering machine was blinking. I turned it on. There were three messages, all for Daniel, which was the way it usually went, except when I was on call. I'm a veterinarian, and the crises among animals are less complex, more manageable, than those of humans—actually very much a part of my choice of profession.

Daniel had turned slightly from the counter to listen to the calls, and I watched his face as he took them in—one about relocating a confirmation class because of a scheduling conflict; one from Mortie, his assistant pastor, reporting on the worsening state of a dying parishioner Daniel was very fond of, a young mother with cancer; one from another minister, suggesting he and Daniel try to "pull something together" among their colleagues about some racial incidents in the three closely adjoining towns around us. Daniel's face was thin and sharp and intelligent, his eyes a pale gray-blue, his skin white and taut. I'd always loved looking at him. He registered everything quickly, transparently—with these calls first annoyance, then the sag of sorrow, then a nod of judicious agreement—but there was something finally self-contained about him too. I'd often thought this was what made him so good at what he did, that he held on to some part of himself through everything. That he could hear three calls like this and be utterly responsive to each of them, and then turn back and finish cleaning his trout. As he did now.

"Will you go and visit Amy?" I asked.

His plaid shirt pulled and puckered across his shoulder blades with his motion. His head was bent in concentration. "I don't know," he said without looking at me. "I'll call Mortie back and see when I'm done here."

I refilled the dogs' bowl with water and poured some more dry

food for them. Daniel worked silently at the sink, his thoughts elsewhere. I went out the front door and got the mail from the box at the road. The air was getting chilly, darkness was gathering around the house. I turned on the living room lights and sat down. I sorted through the circulars, the bills, I threw away the junk. While I was working, I heard Daniel leave the kitchen, headed across the yard to his office in the barn to make his calls.

WITH THE CLOSING OF THE DOOR I FELT RELEASED FROM THE awareness of his sorrow that had held me in his orbit. I began to roam the house, with the dogs as my entourage, feeling restless, a feeling that seemed connected, somehow, to that moment in the boat, and maybe also to Daniel's sad news. I went up the steep, narrow stairs to the second floor, where the girls' rooms were.

All the doors were shut up there, and I opened them, standing in each doorway in turn. The sloped-ceiling rooms were deeply shadowed. Light from the hall fell in long rectangles on the old painted pine floors. In the older girls' rooms the beds were made, the junk was gone—boxed in the attic or thrown away forever. Only Sadie's room still spoke of her. One wall was completely covered with pictures she'd cut out of magazines. There were stark photos of dancers in radical poses, of nearly naked models in perfume or liquor ads, engaged in moments of stylized passion, there were romantic and soft-focus views of places she dreamed of going to—Cuzco, Venice, Zanzibar. There were guys: Daniel Day-Lewis, Denzel Washington, Brad Pitt. In the corner of the room where the ceiling sloped nearly to the floor, all the stuffed animals and dolls she'd ever owned were standing wide-eyed in rows by height, like some bizarre crowd in the bleachers at a high-school event.

I went into Cass's blank room and lay down across her bed. Maybe it was the girls I wanted. Maybe I just missed the comfort of their noise, of their smells and music and flesh.

And then I laughed out loud, thinking of how angry I'd gotten at them, and how often, for these very things. Allie, our old retriever, barked at me, for my odd sudden noise. "Sorry," I said, and dangled my hand off the edge of the bed so she could lick it. "Sorry, old girl."

Suddenly I was thinking of a morning years before when all three

girls had climbed into bed with me and Daniel. I kept trying to get up to make breakfast, and this became the game. The twins held me in their bony hard arms, they wrapped their long stringy bare legs around me. They were shrieking, "No! No breakfast! You must stay in the nest! You must!" Sadie, sleepy, plump, all our baby, lay in front of Daniel in the curve of his arm, her pink, wet thumb resting at her lip. The two of them—Daniel and Sadie—were turned to watch us wild wrestlers, but they had moved out to the edge of the bed, trying to avoid the odd knee or elbow.

I reached over, making my hand a desperate claw. "Help me, Sadie," I croaked dramatically from the flailing mound of bony flesh. "Help, help!"

Sadie sobered and looked for a moment up at her father. Was it real? She believed in everything. He made a face that put her at ease. She laughed.

She lay thoughtfully still for just a few seconds more, before she, too, threw herself forward into the fray—my rescuer. And then Daniel's arms were encircling all of us, and he grabbed somebody from behind—Nora, I think—and swung her up. I felt his legs push powerfully against me.

It lasted only a minute or so, the shrieking, the laughter, everyone's nightie hiking up, all the bare flesh, the bones and angles, feet big and small, soft parts, damp parts. Our familiar smells.

Ordinary life. Flesh. It was my world then. I was wrapped in it, held in it, I thought. And now I'm not. Now I float.

Allie was steadily licking my hand. I turned, and she stopped and smiled at me, panting, her long curled tongue flicking upward slightly with each breath. "Laughing Allegra" we had named her, because her face fell into this happy, dopey grin when her mouth opened.

"It was fun, wasn't it, Allie?" I said. She thrust her head forward and licked my face, once.

I got up and went downstairs, into our bedroom. At one time it had been the front parlor of the house. It had a working fireplace with a painted wooden mantel, but no closet, so we'd mounted a row of hooks on the wall and hung them with what we most frequently wore—Daniel's slacks and jackets, jeans and scrubs for me and one or two nighties; both our bathrobes, homely, wrinkled shapes. A motorcycle blatted rudely past on the town road, only a dozen yards or so