

Axis – the beginning of a story by **Alice Munro**

Fifty years ago, Grace and Avie were waiting at the university gates, in the freezing cold. A bus would come eventually, and take them north, through the dark, thinly populated countryside, to their homes. Forty miles to go for Avie, maybe twice that for Grace. They were carrying large books with solemn titles: "The Medieval World," "Montcalm and Wolfe," "The Jesuit Relations."



This was mostly to establish themselves as serious students, which they were. But once they got home they would probably not have time for such things. They were both farm girls, who knew how to scrub floors and milk cows. Their labor as soon as they entered the house — or the barn — belonged to their families.

They weren't the sort of girls you usually ran into at this university. There was a large School of Business, whose students were nearly all male, and several sororities¹⁾, whose members studied Secretarial Science and General Arts and were there to meet those men. Grace and Avie had not been approached by sororities — one look at their winter coats was enough to tell you why — but they believed that the men who were not on the lookout for sorority girls were more apt to be intellectuals, and they preferred intellectuals anyway.

They were both majoring in history, having won scholarships enabling them to do so. What would they do when they were finished? people asked, and they had to say that they would probably teach high school. They admitted that they would hate that.

They understood — everybody understood — that having any sort of job after graduation would be a defeat. Like the sorority girls, they were enrolled here to find somebody to marry. First a boyfriend, then a husband. It wasn't spoken of in those terms, but there you were. Girl students on scholarships were not usually thought to stand much of a chance, since brains and looks were not believed to go together. Fortunately, Grace and Avie were both attractive. Grace was fair and stately, Avie red-haired, less voluptuous, lively, and challenging. Male members of both their families had joked that they ought to be able to nab somebody.

By the time the bus came, they were nearly frozen. They worked their way
40 to the back, so they could smoke what would be their last cigarettes until
after the weekend. Their parents would not be suspicious if they smelled it
on them. The smell of cigarettes was everywhere in those days.

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noot 1 sororities = studentenverenigingen voor meisjes/vrouwen