

# A Flaw in the Crust Of the Earth

ANNE TYLER

IT TOOK Peter some time to notice that anything was wrong. He came into his apartment at about midnight, whistling and loosening his tie, not *looking* for anything to be wrong, naturally, and it wasn't until he reached over to turn on the radio that he started wondering. The radio was gone. On the table where it had been there was only a dustless rectangle, and set in the middle of it was the white extension cord neatly coiled up. "What?" Peter said. He spun on his heels, looking to see where in this room a radio could have moved all by itself, and what hit his eyes next was the brick-and-board bookcase, bare although there should have been a portable record player there. He traveled on through the apartment—a long, dark room with curling wallpaper, and at one end a tiny kitchen with a toilet curtained off in one corner of it. Everywhere, now, little differences leapt out at him. The papers on the table—unpaid bills and circulars—were stacked too neatly. The electric razor was gone from the back of the toilet. The bureau drawers were firmly closed, although Peter had never shut a drawer in his life, and when he opened them he found his clothes all tossed about and disarranged. "Well, I'll be damned," he said, and

he took a dime from his coat pocket and went down to call the police. But still he hadn't quite realized what was happening.

The police sent a man named Graves, who said this was his eighteenth year on the Montreal Police Force and he had yet to see a robbery that couldn't be prevented. He told Peter this before he had even stepped through the door. "Your spare key, for instance," he said, and he reached up to run his fingers along the top of the doorframe. "There. See? You think a burglar doesn't know these things?"

"I never considered," Peter said. He was barely listening. While he was waiting for the detective to come it had hit him, suddenly, that a stranger had been here. He had barged in without knocking, poked about where he had no business, and maybe even read the poem that Peter was trying to write on the back of a shopping list. He pictured the burglar in an interrogation room, pointing his finger at Peter and saying, "All right, so I robbed him. But what about him, his silly poem beginning 'You and your love were September that year . . .?'"

"Now we'll make a list," said the detective.

He pulled a printed form from

his pocket and sat down at the kitchen table, his elbow resting on Peter's papers. "Are you ready?" he asked Peter. "List the missing items."

"A record player," said Peter.

"Brand name? Year made?"

"I don't know. An electric shaver. A radio."

"Brand names?"

"I don't know. Remington, maybe. The radio was the kind with a clock in it."

The detective rested his forehead in one hand. Peter wandered around the room, poking at stacks of books and opening drawers. "A suit," he said, "brown."

"Now, you got to be more specific," the detective told him. "List the values, too. And the brand names. Picture the record player in your mind. Can't you see some kind of nameplate on it?"

"No," said Peter. He opened a cabinet and said, "Travel iron. The non-steam kind." The travel iron had been given him by his mother, just a few months back when he left Alberta to come east. The other things were Christmas or birthday presents from both parents together. He would never have been able to afford them himself. He was making \$1.25 an hour and counting pennies in his sleep, and even if he did get the money there would be so much red tape to go through: checking brands in *Consumer Reports*, searching out appliance stores, examining guarantees. He felt tired just thinking about it, and while the detective scratched away with a leaky fountain pen Peter leaned against the kitchen door. "That's all, probably," he told the detective. Then he raised his eyes and saw, on the kitchen wall, the whiter square where his picture had been taped. It was an enlarged sepia photograph of Peter at a typewriter, looking serious, taken by a friend. He had never even liked it, but to find it missing gave him a queer, uncomfortable feeling and he waited a minute before he said, "There's a picture, too."

"What kind?" asked the detective, still writing.

"Well, nothing *worth* anything."

"I won't list it then," the detective said, and he dotted an "i" with a sharp jab of his pen. "Anything else?"

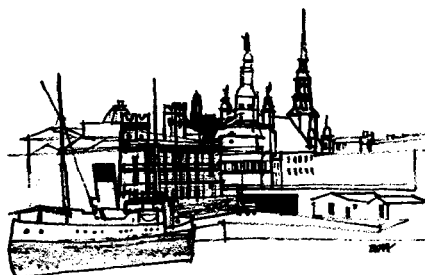
But Peter didn't bother looking further. He was still puzzling over

the picture, which had turned the burglary into something personal, something plotted and carried out by a human-faced being who had stolen Peter's likeness. The rest of the detective's questions he answered without thinking: "I don't know, I told you that. No, no insurance. Would he be fool enough to think that there was any *value* to a picture like that?" But even before the detective understood him, Peter shook his head. "No. He knew there wasn't." He watched the detective fumbling the list back into its folds, jamming it into his breast pocket. "I want you to double-check, now," the detective told him. "Don't come crying to me later. Can you find any other thing missing?"

"There was nothing else to take," Peter said. "Nothing much to *begin* with. Why did he choose me?" And he flung his arms out wide, showing what he was—a threadbare college dropout with home-chopped hair and bitten nails. The detective only sighed and put his hat on. "I can't promise you anything at all. I'm telling you that," he said. Then he left, closing the door himself because Peter stood dazed beside the table and thought about the photograph.

THE NEXT DAY was a working day, and Peter showed up half an hour late. He worked in an office building at the university, running the duplicating machine—something they usually had high-school boys do. When he arrived, with his face red from a cold spring wind and his jacket flying open, his supervisor was standing feeding papers into the machine. "You're late," she told him, and her voice, too thick for a woman's and jerked out of rhythm by her French accent, pushed him into saying what he had planned to keep quiet: "I was burglarized last night. Threw me off schedule." Then he took her place at the machine, still in his jacket, and reached for the papers. The supervisor only clicked her tongue. She never held conversations during office hours. But up and down the long room he saw typists look up from their desks and stare at him. He bent his head and made a notation in the account book: "Prof. Carson, personal copying. 4 copies of 2 pages,

56¢." There was no reason he could think of why he shouldn't want to mention the burglary. Most of the secretaries were just young girls, still in their teens, and during coffee break they would be sure to ask him all about it. Yet even after Peter was free to meet their looks,



having set the button for forty copies of a Notice to Employees and jammed his hands in his pockets, he pretended to be thinking about something else. He gazed out a misted window into another window next door, and without meaning to he found himself wondering which of the typists had any reason to take his picture away. Mary Ann, whom he had stopped asking to the movies? Denise, who always made those cutting remarks? He shrugged his thoughts away and lit a cigarette. But when the coffee break came, and lunchtime after that, he spent his time in the men's lounge reading, and he said no more than "hello" to any of the secretaries all day.

The one good thing about a job, Peter always said (comparing it to college, where he had spent two years), was that it had a starting time and a quitting time, nothing left to haunt your mind in the evenings. For that he would endure anything, even eight hours standing at an idiot machine and starvation wages. In the five blocks between his job and his apartment the stiffness had always shaken loose from his shoulder blades and his head had cleared for the evening that stretched in front of him. But tonight, he thought he would rather have stayed at work. As soon as he touched the doorknob he received a sort of chill that ran along his arm, and he turned away for a minute and looked down the long creaking stairs that he had just climbed.

Then he straightened his back and turned the key in the lock.

EVERYTHING was just the way he had left it. His bowl of Grape-Nuts sat on the table, half eaten, and the rumpled sheets sagged off the daybed to the floor. In his weekly schedule (ruled off into seven neat compartments and tacked up over the kitchen sink) this was the time when he should be cleaning the house. Then he would go out to Joel's Café for franks and beans. But when he reached the daybed he simply sank down on it, still in his jacket, and swung his feet up to rest on the crumpled mound of blankets. Everyone takes a holiday *sometime*, he thought. It wouldn't hurt to let the schedule go for a day. He laid his arm over his eyes, and without planning to, he dropped suddenly into a deep, smothered sleep.

When he awoke it was dark. Through his unlit window the sky had a dull transparency, the color of gray that eyes sometimes are, and a woman in the building next door was moving around her kitchen, directly across from him, preparing supper. She wore a long gray bathrobe that she used as a holder when she lifted a pot off the stove. There wasn't more than six feet of space between her and Peter, but she never looked in his direction, and from the way she worked—jerkily, frowning to herself and sometimes moving her lips over a recipe book—Peter guessed that she didn't know she was being watched. Had she been at that window when the burglar came? he wondered. Had she even seen the burglary take place, and decided that it was none of her affair and gone on cutting up salad greens? He raised himself on one elbow and stared at her, willing her to turn around and nod or smile at him so that he would know it wasn't so. But the woman only measured out a cup of rice, with her back to him. She was probably a Montrealer from birth, he thought. She had probably said to herself, "Oh, let them rob him, this is the city and my neighbors are none of my concern."

Peter lit a cigarette, still without turning on a light. The flaring of the match, held against the background of the woman in her

kitchen, started a whole new train of thought: If this place were on fire, even, and he was trapped within, would she offer him a hand through the window? No, probably not. He pictured himself calling to her, begging her to find an ironing board or a bed slat or *something*, anything long enough to form a bridge between the two sills. But no, even if she heard him, no ironing board would be long enough. He thought of jumping. It was impossible. He turned and looked at the room, all peeling paper and dry rotting wood, ready to go up in flames in an instant. There was no way out. Smoke, conjured up in his mind out of the swirling, dusty darkness, seemed to be choking him already, and whole minutes must have passed before he could think, "No, wait," and rise, keeping down his panic with slow, careful steps, and find his way to the door. Once he was out in the street he remembered that there wasn't enough money in his jacket for beans and franks even, but he didn't try to go back upstairs.

**B**Y BEDTIME, he had found a place to spend the night. It was at Joe Salter's, another Westerner, who had a spare couch in his bedroom. When he heard about the robbery he said, "That is just like this city, boy. That's a lousy way to treat a person." But he didn't understand any of the rest of it—the woman in the window and the possibility of fire. When Peter tried to tell him, he only frowned and nodded, counting out blankets all the while. "If you want, you can stay up and read," he said. "I got to go to bed early, myself." He showed Peter how to turn out the lights and where the record player was, and Peter listened carefully because he thought, what with the nap he had had, that he might stay awake half the night. But he had barely settled down with a book, when his eyes began to sting and shimmer over. He set the book on the floor and slid down until he was lying lengthwise on the couch, with his shoes off but all the rest of his clothes still on. At the other end of the room, Joe Salter snored gently. His breathing was hesitant, as if it could be stopped at any minute, and Peter found himself counting the breaths as he slid into sleep him-

self. Thirty-eight, thirty-nine. . . . People were so fragile, he thought, that they could be cut down by a feather pillow on their faces. They were prey to cigarette sparks that flared on rugs, faulty gas mains, broken stairs, and the direct, dark intent of any chance intruder who wanted someone else's possessions. Sleep fell away again, leaving Peter as flat as someone pulling on a rope that is suddenly released. He lay on his back with his eyes wide open and waited for something to happen.

The next day, he found he had trench mouth. He came back from the dentist at lunch hour and made a joke of it to the typists—"First burglary, then trench mouth. Where will it end?"—but for some reason the thought of it seemed the final discouragement, and it made it even worse that trench mouth was such a *ridiculous* thing, something that had caught him off guard while he was looking for a blow more serious. At coffee break, where everyone drank out of white glass mugs that were then rinsed out in the rest-room sink, he watched to see if the typists were worried about his germs. He



checked his mug for identifying marks, and when he found a chip on the rim he nodded and set it down, untouched, on a table. They were going to keep his dishes separate, then. "Careful, this is Peter's. Here's a paper towel to pick it up with. *Don't* put it in the sink with the others!" He waited for them to ask why he didn't drink his coffee, but no one did. They seemed to be avoiding any mention of it, and

pointedly looked away from where his cup made a ring on the table.

After the break, things started going wrong with the duplicating machine. New copies came out burned around the edges, as if they had traveled through hell before they slid single file into his hands. Instead of stopping the machine he leaned against it and merely watched, picturing how the scorched margins would grow wider and wider until there was nothing left but a small white square in the center, and they would crumble to ashes when he touched them. But before that happened, the copies stopped coming altogether. Something had jammed. He went over to one of the typists and asked if he might use her phone—holding his face slightly averted from her, to spare her the germs that he felt were teeming through his mouth—and he called the duplicator company three times, but each call was answered by an old man who said, "I don't hear so good. It can't be me you're calling, anyway." Peter hung up. He put on his jacket and walked out of the building, leaving the machine humming and smoldering behind him and the monthly accounts, due in that morning, sprawled across a table with huge black erasures scratching holes in the paper.

**A**T THE railroad station, he went straight to one of the windows and picked up a timetable. The departure times ran in a thin blue column down the page, so many of them that at first they blurred together and made a train of their own, heading westward and home. He felt confused at the sight of them, like a man faced with a brand new mail-order catalogue chock-full of things he wanted. Instead of choosing right away, as he stood in line at the window, he crossed the echoing floor with his eyes on the timetable and sat down on a bench. "Plenty of room," an old lady said—needlessly, for she was clustered into a corner of the bench with parcels and bags tightly hemming her in. "Today is Friday, that's why the line at the window. But you just sit here awhile, catch your breath like I am, there's *lots* of time."

Peter nodded and went on mouth-



ing departure times. 2:15 P.M.—that would be just fine. Only that train headed north, not that it mattered much. If there was no westward train that left soon enough he would take *any* train; he would close out his bank account and leave, with nothing but the clothes on his back and the money in his pockets. He pictured sitting in an observation car, riding through the sooty air and on out to clear green spaces. Then he pictured the car turning over, in some freak accident, all that glass shattering around his ears. Or crumpling, accordion-like, as two fiends at the switches coupled other cars too violently from both ends at once. "Are you all *right*?" the old lady asked. Peter shook his head and watched while the timetable trembled in his hands. "Are you sick? Are you traveling out to some trouble at home?"

"No, I'm fine," said Peter. Home, which had never seen any trouble at all, rose in his mind like some

cool green island, across a sea he would never sail. "I seem to be scared of trains," he said.

"Oh, don't tell me why," said the old lady. "If you know something I don't, don't tell it to me. I go by train because I'm scared of planes; it would kill me to hear they've got something wrong with trains now."

"No, nothing wrong," Peter said. He tried to laugh, keeping his face turned away from her. "I'm just grounded. I'm stuck here."

"Oh, well, trains are better than *that*," said the old lady. She shuffled her packages, sending forth a little breeze that smelled of horehound drops. "Take yesterday. Don't you read the papers?"

"No, not yesterday."

"Well, they were telling how this city is set square on a flaw, a flaw in the crust of the earth. Someday, they say, we'll have an earthquake, and whoosh. Worse than the bomb, it'll be."

"I didn't know that," Peter said.

"Oh, yes. I said to Josephine, that's my daughter-in-law that I had come to visit, 'Now, you've heard about Pompeii. One thing I *don't* want,' I said, 'is to be dug up five hundred years from now, studied amongst my cookie cutters and knitting needles to see how life was lived in these days. I'm going home,' I told her. Not that I want to worry you, boy, if you are really stuck here. I don't wish to be a bearer of bad tidings."

"No, that's all right," Peter said. He folded the timetable neatly and stood up. "No, I'm all right." He laid the timetable on the bench and immediately felt lighter, as if something more than a piece of paper had been taken off his hands. Beneath him the old woman sat, still crumpled, suspended with him in a sea of dusty sunshine that washed across their faces and turned their skin transparent, fluid, ready to dissolve at a touch of a finger.

## To Nessus

Toward middle age, we met again.  
All of the friends whom I had slain  
Long since, by my inadequacies—  
Young men who would not speak, or spoke  
In riddles, or twisted to a joke  
Each hint of urgency or ease,  
Young, long-forgotten beards—I saw  
Again in you. Now, with the raw  
Conviction, though, that, no, you  
Would never be understood, was mixed  
A curious poison: to outdo  
Us all in shows of love. Transfixed,  
I watched you drink, recklessly drive  
Home friends (relieved to be alive);  
Came to your parties, devoured your fine  
Spreads, but chiefly sought to divine  
The nature of your smile as you  
Passed out beneath the hullabaloo.  
I massaged your shoulders, urged you to **wake**,  
Saying we missed you. You would shake  
Your head, laugh, and murmur that **all**  
People bored you, or merely smile,  
Keeping your eyes closed, or get  
Up, turn the music high, and rile  
With maestro imitations fret-  
ted with questions philosophical  
None could reply to for the noise

Or your harsh laughter. For awhile,  
This was the way things were.

Great poise

Herakles never had—who sent  
His arrow through you or who rent  
His flesh, from the love-gift you'd given—  
Nor I the night we three were shriven  
Finally. Well, I sat there, glum  
At how thoroughly I didn't know  
You—you, my woman, me—and numb  
From not knowing what I should do  
About your drunken passes, her bright,  
Wearing engagement with your in-  
effectualities, the right  
Or wrong of my poorly-concealed grin,  
Gradual frown. This was the way  
Things had gotten for us since we  
Were younger. No, I would not stay,  
Though all exists were travesty,  
Poor friend. I very much regret  
Your moist eyes, soft laugh, at your door;  
Your stammer that you would not forget  
And that you loved us dearly; or  
How, in the street, my poor woman  
Wept, and I snarled that she and you  
Had managed to make me feel inhuman.  
More I will not be party to.

—DAVID GALLER