

RUNAWAY

Stories

Alice Munro



McCLELLAND & STEWART

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Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You

Lives of Girls and Women

Dance of the Happy Shades

RUNAWAY



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ALICE MUNRO

[A DOUGLAS GIBSON BOOK]



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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Munro, Alice, 1931-
Runaway : stories / Alice Munro.

“A Douglas Gibson Book”.
eISBN: 978-1-55199-397-3

I. Title.

PS8576.U57R85 2004 C813'.54 C2004-901721-7

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program for our publishing activities. We further acknowledge the support of the Canadian Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for our publishing program.

Some of the stories in this collection were originally published in *The New Yorker*

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Ludlow Music, Inc. for permission to reprint an excerpt from the song lyric “Goodnight Irene” words and music by Huddie Ledbetter and John A. Lomax. TRO-Copyright © 1936 (Renewed) 1950 (Renewed) by Ludlow Music, Inc., New York, NY. Reprinted by permission of Ludlow Music, Inc.

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A Douglas Gibson Book

McClelland & Stewart Ltd.

The Canadian Publishers

75 Sherbourne Street

Toronto, Ontario

M5A 2P9

www.mcclelland.com

v3.1

In memory of my friends,

Mary Carey

Jean Livermore

Melda Buchanan

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Carla heard the car coming before it topped the little rise in the road that around here they called a hill. It's her, she thought. Mrs. Jamieson—Sylvia—home from her holiday in Greece. From the barn door—but far enough inside that she could not readily be seen—she watched the road Mrs. Jamieson would have to drive by on, her place being half a mile farther along the road than Clark and Carla's.

If it was somebody getting ready to turn in at their gate it would be slowing down by now. But still Carla hoped. *Let it not be her.*

It was. Mrs. Jamieson turned her head once, quickly—she had all she could do maneuvering her car through the ruts and puddles the rain had made in the gravel—but she didn't lift a hand off the wheel to wave, she didn't spot Carla. Carla got a glimpse of a tanned arm bare to the shoulder, hair bleached a lighter color than it had been before, more white now than silver-blond, and an expression that was determined and exasperated and amused at her own exasperation—just the way Mrs. Jamieson would look negotiating such a road. When she turned her head there was something like a bright flash—of inquiry, of hopefulness—that made Carla shrink back.

So.

Maybe Clark didn't know yet. If he was sitting at the computer he would have his back to the window and the road.

But Mrs. Jamieson might have to make another trip. Driving home from the airport, she might not have stopped for groceries—not until she'd been home and figured out what she needed. Clark might see her then. And after dark, the lights of her house would show. But this was July, and it didn't get dark till late. She might be so tired that she wouldn't bother with the lights, she might go to bed early.

On the other hand, she might telephone. Any time now.

This was the summer of rain and more rain. You heard it first thing in the morning, loud on the roof of the mobile home. The trails were deep in mud, the long grass soaking, leaves overhead sending down random showers even in those moments when there was no actual downpour from the sky and the clouds looked like clearing. Carla wore a high, wide-brimmed old Australian felt hat every time she went outside, and tucked her long thick braid down her shirt.

Nobody showed up for trail rides, even though Clark and Carla had gone around posting signs in all the camping sites, in the cafes, and on the tourist office billboard and anywhere else they could think of. Only a few pupils were coming for lessons and those were regulars, not the batches of schoolchildren on vacation, the busloads from summer camps, that had kept them going through last summer. And even the regulars that they counted on were taking time off for holiday trips, or simply cancelling their lessons because of the weather being so discouraging. If they called too late, Clark charged them for the time anyway. A couple of them had complained, and quit for good.

There was still some income from the three horses that were boarded. Those three, and the four of their own, were out in the field now, poking around in the grass under the trees. They looked as if they couldn't be bothered to notice that the rain was holding off for the moment the way it often did for a while in the afternoon. Just enough to get your hopes up—the clouds whitening and thinning and letting through a diffuse brightness that never got around to being real sunshine, and was usually gone before supper.

Carla had finished mucking out in the barn. She had taken her time—she liked the rhythm of her regular chores, the high space under the barn roof, the smells. Now she went over to the exercise ring to see how dry the ground was, in case the five o'clock pupil did show up.

Most of the steady showers had not been particularly heavy, or borne on any wind, but last week there had come a sudden stirring and then a blast through the treetops and a near-horizontal blinding rain. In a quarter of an hour the storm had passed over. But branches lay across the road, hydro lines were down, and a large chunk of the plastic roofing over the ring had been torn loose. There was a puddle like a lake at that end of the track, and Clark had worked until after dark, digging a channel to drain it away.

The roof had not yet been repaired. Clark had strung fence wire across to keep the horses from getting into the mud, and Carla had marked out a shorter track.

On the Web, right now, Clark was hunting for someplace to buy roofing. Some salvage outlet, with prices that they could afford, or somebody trying to get rid of such material secondhand. He would not go to Hy and Robert Buckley's Building Supply in town, which he called Highway Robbers Buggery Supply, because he owed them too much money and had had a fight with them.

Clark had fights not just with the people he owed money to. His friendliness, compelling at first, could suddenly turn sour. There were places he would not go into, where he always made Carla go, because of some row. The drugstore was one such place. An old woman had pushed in front of him—that is, she had gone to get something she'd forgotten and come back and pushed in front, rather than going to the end of the line, and he had complained, and the cashier had said to him, "She has emphysema," and Clark had said, "Is that so? I have piles myself," and the manager had been summoned, to say that was uncalled-for. And in the coffee shop out on the highway the advertised breakfast discount had not been allowed because it was past eleven o'clock in the morning, and Clark had argued and then dropped his takeout cup of coffee on the floor—just missing, so they said, a child in its stroller. He said the child was half a mile away and he dropped the cup because no cuff had been provided. They said he had not asked for a cuff. He said he shouldn't have had to ask.

"You flare up," said Carla.

"That's what men do."

She had not said anything to him about his row with Joy Tucker. Joy Tucker was the librarian from town who boarded her horse with them. The horse was a quick-tempered little chestnut mare named Lizzie—Joy Tucker, when she was in a jokey mood, called her Lizzie Borden. Yesterday she had driven out, not in a jokey mood at all, and complained about the roof's not being fixed yet, and Lizzie looking miserable, as if she might have caught a chill.

There was nothing the matter with Lizzie, actually. Clark had tried—for him—to placate. But then it was Joy Tucker who flared up and said that their place was a dump, and Lizzie deserved better, and Clark said, "Suit yourself." Joy had not—or not yet—

removed Lizzie, as Carla had expected. But Clark, who had formerly made the little mare his pet, had refused to have anything more to do with her. Lizzie's feelings were hurt, the consequence—she was balky when exercised and kicked up a fuss when her hoofs had to be picked out, as they did every day, lest they develop a fungus. Carla had to watch out for nips.

But the worst thing as far as Carla was concerned was the absence of Flora, the little white goat who kept the horses company in the barn and in the fields. There had not been any sign of her for two days. Carla was afraid that wild dogs or coyotes had got her, or even a bear.

She had dreamt of Flora last night and the night before. In the first dream Flora had walked right up to the bed with a red apple in her mouth, but in the second dream—last night—she had run away when she saw Carla coming. Her leg seemed to be hurt but she ran anyway. She led Carla to a barbed-wire barricade of the kind that might belong on some battlefield, and then she—Flora—slipped through it, hurt leg and all, just slithered through like a white eel and disappeared.

The horses had seen Carla go across to the ring and they had all moved up to the fence—looking bedraggled in spite of their New Zealand blankets—so that she would take notice of them on her way back. She talked quietly to them, apologizing for coming empty-handed. She stroked their necks and rubbed their noses and asked whether they knew anything about Flora.

Grace and Juniper snorted and nuzzled up, as if they recognized the name and shared her concern, but then Lizzie butted in between them and knocked Grace's head away from Carla's petting hand. She gave the hand a nip for good measure, and Carla had to spend some time scolding her.

Up until three years ago Carla never really looked at mobile homes. She didn't call them that either. Like her parents, she would have thought "mobile home" pretentious. Some people lived in trailers, and that was all there was to it. One trailer was no different from another. When Carla moved in here, when she chose this life with Clark, she began to see things in a new way. After that she started saying "mobile home" and she looked to see how people had fixed them up. The kind of curtains they had hung, the way they had painted the trim, the ambitious decks or patios or extra rooms that had been built on. She could hardly wait to get at such improvements herself.

Clark had gone along with her ideas, for a while. He had built new steps, and spent a lot of time looking for an old wrought-iron railing for them. He didn't make any complaint about the money spent on paint for the kitchen and bathroom or the material for curtains. Her painting job was hasty—she didn't know, at that time, that you should take the hinges off the cupboard doors. Or that you should line the curtains, which had since faded.

What Clark balked at was tearing up the carpet, which was the same in every room and the thing that she had most counted on replacing. It was divided into small brown squares, each with a pattern of darker brown and rust and tan squiggles and shapes. For a long time she had thought these were the same squiggles and shapes, arranged in the same way, in each square. Then when she had had more time, a lot of time, to examine them, she decided that there were four patterns joined together to make identical larger squares. Sometimes she could pick out the arrangement easily and sometimes she had to work to see it.

She did this when it was raining outside and Clark's mood weighted down all their inside

space, and he did not want to pay attention to anything but the computer screen. But the best thing to do then was to invent or remember some job to do in the barn. The horses would not look at her when she was unhappy, but Flora, who was never tied up, would come and rub against her, and look up with an expression that was not quite sympathy—it was more like comradely mockery—in her shimmering yellow-green eyes.

Flora had been a half-grown kid when Clark brought her home from a farm where he had gone to bargain for some horse tackle. The people there were giving up on the country life or at least on the raising of animals—they had sold their horses but failed to get rid of the goats. He had heard about how a goat was able to bring a sense of ease and comfort into a horse stable and he wanted to try it. They had meant to breed her someday but there had never been any signs of her coming into heat.

At first she had been Clark's pet entirely, following him everywhere, dancing for his attention. She was quick and graceful and provocative as a kitten, and her resemblance to a guileless girl in love had made them both laugh. But as she grew older she seemed to attach herself to Carla, and in this attachment she was suddenly much wiser, less skittish—she seemed capable, instead, of a subdued and ironic sort of humor. Carla's behavior with the horses was tender and strict and rather maternal, but the comradeship with Flora was quite different, Flora allowing her no sense of superiority.

"Still no sign of Flora?" she said, as she pulled off her barn boots. Clark had posted a Lost Goat notice on the Web.

"Not so far," he said, in a preoccupied but not unfriendly voice. He suggested, not for the first time, that Flora might have just gone off to find herself a billy.

No word about Mrs. Jamieson. Carla put the kettle on. Clark was humming to himself as he often did when he sat in front of the computer.

Sometimes he talked back to it. *Bullshit*, he would say, replying to some challenge. Or he would laugh—but could not remember what the joke was, when she asked him afterwards.

Carla called, "Do you want tea?" and to her surprise he got up and came into the kitchen.

"So," he said. "So, Carla."

"What?"

"So she phoned."

"Who?"

"Her Majesty. Queen Sylvia. She just got back."

"I didn't hear the car."

"I didn't ask you if you did."

"So what did she phone for?"

"She wants you to go and help her straighten up the house. That's what she said. Tomorrow."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her sure. But you better phone up and confirm."

Carla said, "I don't see why I have to, if you told her." She poured out their mugs of tea. She cleaned up her house before she left. I don't see what there could be to do so soon."

"Maybe some coons got in and made a mess of it while she was gone. You never know."

"I don't have to phone her right this minute," she said. "I want to drink my tea and I want to have a shower."

“The sooner the better.”

Carla took her tea into the bathroom, calling back, “We have to go to the laundromat. Even when the towels dry out they smell moldy.”

“We’re not changing the subject, Carla.”

Even after she’d got in the shower he stood outside the door and called to her.

“I am not going to let you off the hook, Carla.”

She thought he might still be standing there when she came out, but he was back at the computer. She dressed as if she was going to town—she hoped that if they could get out here, go to the laundromat, get a takeout at the cappuccino place, they might be able to talk in a different way, some release might be possible. She went into the living room with a brisk step and put her arms around him from behind. But as soon as she did that a wave of grief swallowed her up—it must have been the heat of the shower, loosening her tears—and she bent over him, all crumbling and crying.

He took his hands off the keyboard but sat still.

“Just don’t be mad at me,” she said.

“I’m not mad. I hate when you’re like this, that’s all.”

“I’m like this because you’re mad.”

“Don’t tell me what I am. You’re choking me. Start supper.”

That was what she did. It was obvious by now that the five o’clock person wasn’t coming. She got out the potatoes and began to peel them, but her tears would not stop and she could not see what she was doing. She wiped her face with a paper towel and tore off a fresh one to take with her and went out into the rain. She didn’t go into the barn because it was too miserable in there without Flora. She walked along the lane back to the woods. The horses were in the other field. They came over to the fence to watch her. All of them except Lizzie who capered and snorted a bit, had the sense to understand that her attention was elsewhere.

. . .

It had started when they read the obituary, Mr. Jamieson’s obituary. That was in the city paper, and his face had been on the evening news. Up until the year before, they had known the Jamiesons only as neighbors who kept to themselves. She taught Botany at the college forty miles away, so she had to spend a good deal of her time on the road. He was a poet.

Everybody knew that much. But he seemed to be occupied with other things. For a poet and for an old man—perhaps twenty years older than Mrs. Jamieson—he was rugged and active. He improved the drainage system on his place, cleaning out the culvert and lining it with rocks. He dug and planted and fenced a vegetable garden, cut paths through the woods, looked after repairs on the house.

The house itself was an odd-looking triangular affair that he had built years ago, with some friends, on the foundation of an old wrecked farmhouse. Those people were spoken of as hippies—though Mr. Jamieson must have been a bit old for that, even then, before Mr. Jamieson’s time. There was a story that they grew marijuana in the woods, sold it, and stored the money in sealed glass jars, which were buried around the property. Clark had heard that from the people he got to know in town. He said it was bullshit.

“Else somebody would have got in and dug it up, before now. Somebody would have found a way to make him tell where it was.”

When they read the obituary Carla and Clark learned for the first time that Leon Jamieson

had been the recipient of a large prize, five years before his death. A prize for poetry. Nobody had ever mentioned this. It seemed that people could believe in dope money buried in glass jars, but not in money won for writing poetry.

Shortly after this Clark said, "We could've made him pay."

Carla knew at once what he was talking about, but she took it as a joke.

"Too late now," she said. "You can't pay once you're dead."

"He can't. She could."

"She's gone to Greece."

"She's not going to stay in Greece."

"She didn't know," said Carla more soberly.

"I didn't say she did."

"She doesn't have a clue about it."

"We could fix that."

Carla said, "No. No."

Clark went on as if she had not spoken.

"We could say we're going to sue. People get money for stuff like that all the time."

"How could you do that? You can't sue a dead person."

"Threaten to go to the papers. Big-time poet. The papers would eat it up. All we have to do is threaten and she'd cave in."

"You're just fantasizing," Carla said. "You're joking."

"No," said Clark. "Actually, I'm not."

Carla said she did not want to talk about it anymore and he said okay.

But they talked about it the next day, and the next and the next. He sometimes got notions like this that were not practicable, which might even be illegal. He talked about them with growing excitement and then—she wasn't sure why—he dropped them. If the rain had stopped, if this had turned into something like a normal summer, he might have let this idea go the way of the others. But that had not happened, and during the last month he had harped on the scheme as if it was perfectly feasible and serious. The question was how much money to ask for. Too little, and the woman might not take them seriously, she might be inclined to see if they were bluffing. Too much might get her back up and she might become stubborn.

Carla had stopped saying that it was a joke. Instead she told him that it wouldn't work. She said that for one thing, people expected poets to be that way. So it wouldn't be worth paying out money to cover it up.

He said that it would work if it was done right. Carla was to break down and tell Mr. Jamieson the whole story. Then Clark would move in, as if it had all been a surprise to him. He had just found out. He would be outraged, he would talk about telling the world. He would let Mrs. Jamieson be the one who first mentioned money.

"You were injured. You were molested and humiliated and I was injured and humiliated because you are my wife. It's a question of respect."

Over and over again he talked to her in this way and she tried to deflect him but he insisted.

"Promise," he said. "Promise."

This was because of what she had told him, things she could not now retract or deny.

Sometimes he gets interested in me?

The old guy?

Sometimes he calls me into the room when she's not there?

Yes.

When she has to go out shopping and the nurse isn't there either.

A lucky inspiration of hers, one that instantly pleased him.

So what do you do then? Do you go in?

She played shy.

Sometimes.

He calls you into his room. So? Carla? So, then?

I go in to see what he wants.

So what does he want?

This was asked and told in whispers, even if there was nobody to hear, even when they were in the neverland of their bed. A bedtime story, in which the details were important and had to be added to every time, and this with convincing reluctance, shyness, giggles, *dirty, dirty*. And it was not only he who was eager and grateful. She was too. Eager to please and to excite him, to excite herself. Grateful every time it still worked.

And in one part of her mind it *was* true, she saw the randy old man, the bump he made on the sheet, bedridden indeed, almost beyond speech but proficient in sign language, indicating his desire, trying to nudge and finger her into complicity, into obliging stunts and intimacies. (Her refusal a necessity, but also perhaps strangely, slightly disappointing, to Clark.)

Now and then came an image that she had to hammer down, lest it spoil everything. She would think of the real dim and sheeted body, drugged and shrinking every day in its rented hospital bed, glimpsed only a few times when Mrs. Jamieson or the visiting nurse had neglected to close the door. She herself never actually coming closer to him than that.

In fact she had dreaded going to the Jamiesons', but she needed the money, and she felt sorry for Mrs. Jamieson, who seemed so haunted and bewildered, as if she was walking through her sleep. Once or twice Carla had burst out and done something really silly just to loosen up the atmosphere. The kind of thing she did when clumsy and terrified first-time horseback riders were feeling humiliated. She used to try that too when Clark was stuck in his moods. It didn't work with him anymore. But the story about Mr. Jamieson had worked, decisively.

There was no way to avoid the puddles in the path or the tall soaked grass alongside it, or the wild carrot which had recently come into flower. But the air was warm enough so that she didn't get chilly. Her clothes were soaked through as if by her own sweat or the tears that ran down her face with the drizzle of rain. Her weeping petered out in time. She had nothing to wipe her nose on—the paper towel now soggy—but she leaned over and blew it hard into a puddle.

She lifted her head and managed the long-drawn-out, vibrating whistle that was her sign—Clark's too—for Flora. She waited a couple of minutes and then called Flora's name. Over and over again, whistle and name, whistle and name.

Flora did not respond.

It was almost a relief, though, to feel the single pain of missing Flora, of missing Flora perhaps forever, compared to the mess she had got into concerning Mrs. Jamieson, and her

seesaw misery with Clark. At least Flora's leaving was not on account of anything that she—Carla—had done wrong.

At the house, there was nothing for Sylvia to do except to open the windows. And to think—with an eagerness that dismayed without really surprising her—of how soon she could see Carla.

All the paraphernalia of illness had been removed. The room that had been Sylvia and her husband's bedroom and then his death chamber had been cleaned out and tidied up to look as if nothing had ever happened in it. Carla had helped with all that during the few frenzied days between the crematorium and the departure for Greece. Every piece of clothing Leo had ever worn and some things he hadn't, including gifts from his sisters that had never been taken out of their packages, had been piled in the back seat of the car and delivered to the Thrift Shop. His pills, his shaving things, unopened cans of the fortified drink that had sustained him as long as anything could, cartons of the sesame seed snaps that at one time he had eaten by the dozens, the plastic bottles full of the lotion that had eased his back, the sheepskins on which he had lain—all of that was dumped into plastic bags to be hauled away as garbage, and Carla didn't question a thing. She never said, "Maybe somebody could use that," or pointed out that whole cartons of cans were unopened. When Sylvia said, "I wish Leo hadn't taken the clothes to town. I wish I'd burned them all up in the incinerator," Carla had shown no surprise.

They cleaned the oven, scrubbed out the cupboards, wiped down the walls and the windows. One day Sylvia sat in the living room going through all the condolence letters she had received. (There was no accumulation of papers and notebooks to be attended to, as you might have expected with a writer, no unfinished work or scribbled drafts. He had told her months before, that he had pitched everything. *And no regrets.*)

The south-sloping wall of the house was made up of big windows. Sylvia looked up, surprised by the watery sunlight that had come out—or possibly surprised by the shadow of Carla, bare-legged, bare-armed, on top of a ladder, her resolute face crowned with a frizz of dandelion hair that was too short for the braid. She was vigorously spraying and scrubbing the glass. When she saw Sylvia looking at her she stopped and flung out her arms as if she was splayed there, making a silly gargoylike face. They both began to laugh. Sylvia felt the laughter running all through her like a playful stream. She went back to her letters as Carla resumed the cleaning. She decided that all of these kind words—genuine or perfunctory, the tributes and regrets—could go the way of the sheepskins and the crackers.

When she heard Carla taking the ladder down, heard boots on the deck, she was suddenly shy. She sat where she was with her head bowed as Carla came into the room and passed behind her on her way to the kitchen to put the pail and the cloths back under the sink. Carla hardly halted, she was quick as a bird, but she managed to drop a kiss on Sylvia's bent head. Then she went on whistling something to herself.

That kiss had been in Sylvia's mind ever since. It meant nothing in particular. It meant *Cheer up*. Or *Almost done*. It meant that they were good friends who had got through a lot of depressing work together. Or maybe just that the sun had come out. That Carla was thinking of getting home to her horses. Nevertheless, Sylvia saw it as a bright blossom, its petals spreading inside her with tumultuous heat, like a menopausal flash.

Every so often there had been a special girl student in one of her botany classes—on whose cleverness and dedication and awkward egotism, or even genuine passion for the natural world, reminded her of her young self. Such girls hung around her worshipfully, hoped for some sort of intimacy they could not—in most cases—imagine, and they soon got on her nerves.

Carla was nothing like them. If she resembled anybody in Sylvia's life, it would have to be certain girls she had known in high school—those who were bright but never too bright, easy athletes but not strenuously competitive, buoyant but not rambunctious. Naturally happy.

“Where I was, this little village, this little tiny village with my two old friends, well, it was the sort of place where the very occasional tourist bus would stop, just as if it had got lost, and the tourists would get off and look around and they were absolutely bewildered because they weren't anywhere. There was nothing to buy.”

Sylvia was speaking about Greece. Carla was sitting a few feet away from her. The large limbed, uncomfortable, dazzling girl was sitting there at last, in the room that had been filled with thoughts of her. She was faintly smiling, belatedly nodding.

“And at first,” Sylvia said, “at first I was bewildered too. It was so hot. But it's true about the light. It's wonderful. And then I figured out what there was to do, and there were just these few simple things but they could fill the day. You walk half a mile down the road to buy some oil and half a mile in the other direction to buy your bread or your wine, and that's the morning, and you eat some lunch under the trees and after lunch it's too hot to do anything but close the shutters and lie on your bed and maybe read. At first you read. And then it gets so you don't even do that. Why read? Later on you notice the shadows are long and you get up and go for a swim.

“Oh,” she interrupted herself. “Oh, I forgot.”

She jumped up and went to get the present she had brought, which in fact she had nearly forgotten about at all. She had not wanted to hand it to Carla right away, she had wanted the moment to come more naturally, and while she was speaking she had thought ahead to the moment when she could mention the sea, going swimming. And say, as she now said, “Swimming reminded me of this because it's a little replica, you know, it's a little replica of the horse they found under the sea. Cast in bronze. They dredged it up, after all this time. It's supposed to be from the second century B.C.”

When Carla had come in and looked around for work to do, Sylvia had said, “Oh, just sit down a minute, I haven't had anybody to talk to since I got back. Please.” Carla had sat down on the edge of a chair, legs apart, hands between her knees, looking somehow desolate. As she was reaching for some distant politeness she had said, “How was Greece?”

Now she was standing, with the tissue paper crumpled around the horse, which she had not fully unwrapped.

“It's said to represent a racehorse,” Sylvia said. “Making that final spurt, the last effort in the race. The rider, too, the boy, you can see he's urging the horse on to the limit of its strength.”

She did not mention that the boy had made her think of Carla, and she could not now have said why. He was only about ten or eleven years old. Maybe the strength and grace of the arm that must have held the reins, or the wrinkles in his childish forehead, the absorption and the pure effort there was in some way like Carla cleaning the big windows last spring.

Her strong legs in her shorts, her broad shoulders, her big swipes at the glass, and then the way she had splayed herself out as a joke, inviting or even commanding Sylvia to laugh.

“You can see that,” Carla said, now conscientiously examining the little bronzy-green statue. “Thank you very much.”

“You are welcome. Let’s have coffee, shall we? I’ve just made some. The coffee in Greece was quite strong, a little stronger than I liked, but the bread was heavenly. And the ripe figs they were astounding. Sit down another moment, please do. You should stop me going on and on this way. What about here? How has life been here?”

“It’s been raining most of the time.”

“I can see that. I can see it has,” Sylvia called from the kitchen end of the big room. Pouring the coffee, she decided that she would keep quiet about the other gift she had brought. It hadn’t cost her anything (the horse had cost more than the girl could probably guess), it was only a beautiful small pinkish-white stone she had picked up along the road.

“This is for Carla,” she had said to her friend Maggie, who was walking beside her. “I know it’s silly. I just want her to have a tiny piece of this land.”

She had already mentioned Carla to Maggie, and to Soraya, her other friend there, telling them how the girl’s presence had come to mean more and more to her, how an indescribable bond had seemed to grow up between them, and had consoled her in the awful months of last spring.

“It was just to see somebody—somebody so fresh and full of health coming into the house,” Maggie and Soraya had laughed in a kindly but annoying way.

“There’s always a girl,” Soraya said, with an indolent stretch of her heavy brown arms, and Maggie said, “We all come to it sometime. A crush on a girl.”

Sylvia was obscurely angered by that dated word—*crush*.

“Maybe it’s because Leon and I never had children,” she said. “It’s stupid. Displaced maternal love.”

Her friends spoke at the same time, saying in slightly different ways something to the effect that it might be stupid but it was, after all, love.

But the girl was not, today, anything like the Carla Sylvia had been remembering, not at all the calm bright spirit, the carefree and generous young creature who had kept her company in Greece.

She had been hardly interested in her gift. Almost sullen as she reached out for her mug of coffee.

“There was one thing I thought you would have liked a lot,” said Sylvia energetically. “The goats. They were quite small even when they were full-grown. Some spotty and some white and they were leaping around up on the rocks just like—like the spirits of the place.” She laughed in an artificial way, she couldn’t stop herself. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d had wreaths on their horns. How is your little goat? I forget her name.”

Carla said, “Flora.”

“Flora.”

“She’s gone.”

“Gone? Did you sell her?”

“She disappeared. We don’t know where.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. But isn’t there a chance she’ll turn up again?”

No answer. Sylvia looked directly at the girl, something that up to now she had not quite been able to do, and saw that her eyes were full of tears, her face blotchy—in fact it looked grubby—and that she seemed bloated with distress.

She didn’t do anything to avoid Sylvia’s look. She drew her lips tight over her teeth and shut her eyes and rocked back and forth as if in a soundless howl, and then, shockingly, she did howl. She howled and wept and gulped for air and tears ran down her cheeks and snorted out of her nostrils and she began to look around wildly for something to wipe with. Sylvia ran and got handfuls of Kleenex.

“Don’t worry, here you are, here, you’re all right,” she said, thinking that maybe the thing to do would be to take the girl in her arms. But she had not the least wish to do that, and that might make things worse. The girl might feel how little Sylvia wanted to do such a thing and how appalled she was in fact by this noisy fit.

Carla said something, said the same thing again.

“Awful,” she said. “Awful.”

“No it’s not. We all have to cry sometimes. It’s all right, don’t worry.”

“It’s awful.”

And Sylvia could not help feeling how, with every moment of this show of misery, the girl made herself more ordinary, more like one of those soggy students in her—Sylvia’s—office. Some of them cried about their marks, but that was often tactical, a brief unconvincing bit of whimpering. The more infrequent, real waterworks would turn out to have something to do with a love affair, or their parents, or a pregnancy.

“It’s not about your goat, is it?”

“No. No.”

“You better have a glass of water,” said Sylvia.

She took time to run it cold, trying to think what else she should do or say, and when she returned with it Carla was already calming down.

“Now. Now,” Sylvia said as the water was being swallowed. “Isn’t that better?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not the goat. What is it?”

Carla said, “I can’t stand it anymore.”

What could she not stand?

It turned out to be the husband.

He was mad at her all the time. He acted as if he hated her. There was nothing she could do right, there was nothing she could say. Living with him was driving her crazy. Sometimes she thought she already was crazy. Sometimes she thought he was.

“Has he hurt you, Carla?”

No. He hadn’t hurt her physically. But he hated her. He despised her. He could not stand when she cried and she could not help crying because he was so mad.

She did not know what to do.

“Perhaps you do know what to do,” said Sylvia.

“Get away? I would if I could.” Carla began to wail again. “I’d give anything to get away. I can’t. I haven’t any money. I haven’t anywhere in this world to go.”

“Well. Think. Is that altogether true?” said Sylvia in her best counselling manner. “Don’t

you have parents? Didn't you tell me you grew up in Kingston? Don't you have a family there?"

Her parents had moved to British Columbia. They hated Clark. They didn't care if she lived or died.

Brothers or sisters?

One brother nine years older. He was married and in Toronto. He didn't care either. He didn't like Clark. His wife was a snob.

"Have you ever thought of the Women's Shelter?"

"They don't want you there unless you've been beaten up. And everybody would find out and it would be bad for our business."

Sylvia gently smiled.

"Is this a time to think about that?"

Then Carla actually laughed. "I know," she said, "I'm insane."

"Listen," said Sylvia. "Listen to me. If you had the money to go, would you go? Where would you go? What would you do?"

"I would go to Toronto," Carla said readily enough. "But I wouldn't go near my brother. I'd stay in a motel or something and I'd get a job at a riding stable."

"You think you could do that?"

"I was working at a riding stable the summer I met Clark. I'm more experienced now than I was then. A lot more."

"You sound as if you've figured this out," said Sylvia thoughtfully.

Carla said, "I have now."

"So when would you go, if you could go?"

"Now. Today. This minute."

"All that's stopping you is lack of money?"

Carla took a deep breath. "All that's stopping me," she said.

"All right," said Sylvia. "Now listen to what I propose. I don't think you should go to a motel. I think you should take the bus to Toronto and go to stay with a friend of mine. Her name is Ruth Stiles. She has a big house and she lives alone and she won't mind having somebody to stay. You can stay there till you find a job. I'll help you with some money. There must be lots and lots of riding stables around Toronto."

"There are."

"So what do you think? Do you want me to phone and find out what time the bus goes?"

Carla said yes. She was shivering. She ran her hands up and down her thighs and shook her head roughly from side to side.

"I can't believe it," she said. "I'll pay you back. I mean, thank you. I'll pay you back. I don't know what to say."

Sylvia was already at the phone, dialling the bus depot.

"Shh, I'm getting the times," she said. She listened, and hung up. "I know you will. You agree about Ruth's? I'll let her know. There's one problem, though." She looked critically at Carla's shorts and T-shirt. "You can't very well go in those clothes."

"I can't go home to get anything," said Carla in a panic. "I'll be all right."

"The bus will be air-conditioned. You'll freeze. There must be something of mine you could wear. Aren't we about the same height?"

“You’re ten times skinnier.”

“I didn’t use to be.”

In the end they decided on a brown linen jacket, hardly worn—Sylvia had considered it to be a mistake for herself, the style too brusque—and a pair of tailored tan pants and a cream-colored silk shirt. Carla’s sneakers would have to do with this outfit, because her feet were two sizes larger than Sylvia’s.

Carla went to take a shower—something she had not bothered with in her state of mind that morning—and Sylvia phoned Ruth. Ruth was going to be out at a meeting that evening but she would leave the key with her upstairs tenants and all Carla would have to do was ring their bell.

“She’ll have to take a cab from the bus depot, though. I assume she’s okay to manage that?” Ruth said.

Sylvia laughed. “She’s not a lame duck, don’t worry. She is just a person in a bad situation the way it happens.”

“Well good. I mean good she’s getting out.”

“Not a lame duck at all,” said Sylvia, thinking of Carla trying on the tailored pants and the linen jacket. How quickly the young recover from a fit of despair and how handsome the girl had looked in the fresh clothes.

The bus would stop in town at twenty past two. Sylvia decided to make omelettes for lunch, to set the table with the dark-blue cloth, and to get down the crystal glasses and open a bottle of wine.

“I hope you’re hungry enough to eat something,” she said, when Carla came out clean and shining in her borrowed clothes. Her softly freckled skin was flushed from the shower, and her hair was damp and darkened, out of its braid, the sweet frizz now flat against her head. She said she was hungry, but when she tried to get a forkful of the omelette to her mouth her trembling hands made it impossible.

“I don’t know why I’m shaking like this,” she said. “I must be excited. I never knew it would be this easy.”

“It’s very sudden,” said Sylvia. “Probably it doesn’t seem quite real.”

“It does, though. Everything now seems really real. Like the time before now, that’s when I was in a daze.”

“Maybe when you make up your mind to something, when you really make up your mind, that’s how it is. Or that’s how it should be.”

“If you’ve got a friend,” said Carla with a self-conscious smile and a flush spreading over her forehead. “If you’ve got a true friend. I mean like you.” She laid down the knife and fork and raised her wineglass awkwardly with both hands. “Drinking to a true friend,” she said uncomfortably. “I probably shouldn’t even take a sip, but I will.”

“Me too,” said Sylvia with a pretense of gaiety. She drank, but spoiled the moment by saying, “Are you going to phone him? Or what? He’ll have to know. At least he’ll have to know where you are by the time he’d be expecting you home.”

“Not the phone,” said Carla, alarmed. “I can’t do it. Maybe if you—”

“No,” said Sylvia. “No.”

“No, that’s stupid. I shouldn’t have said that. It’s just hard to think straight. What I maybe should do, I should put a note in the mailbox. But I don’t want him to get it too soon. I don’t

want us to even drive past there when we're going into town. I want to go the back way. So if I write it—if I write it, could you, could you maybe slip it in the box when you come back?"

Sylvia agreed to this, seeing no good alternative.

She brought pen and paper. She poured a little more wine. Carla sat thinking, then wrote a few words.

I have gone away. I will be all write.

These were the words that Sylvia read when she unfolded the paper, on her way back from the bus depot. She was sure Carla knew *right* from *write*. It was just that she had been talking about *writing* a note, and she was in a state of exalted confusion. More confusion perhaps than Sylvia had realized. The wine had brought out a stream of talk, but it had not seemed to be accompanied by any particular grief or upset. She had talked about the horse barn where she had worked and met Clark when she was eighteen and just out of high school. Her parents wanted her to go to college, and she had agreed as long as she could choose to be a veterinarian. All she really wanted, and had wanted all her life, was to work with animals and live in the country. She had been one of those dorky girls in high school, one of those girls they made rotten jokes about, but she didn't care.

Clark was the best riding teacher they had. Scads of women were after him, they would take up riding just to get him as their teacher. Carla teased him about his women and at first he seemed to like it, then he got annoyed. She apologized and tried to make up for it by getting him talking about his dream—his plan, really—to have a riding school, a horse stable someplace out in the country. One day she came into the stable and saw him hanging up his saddle and realized she had fallen in love with him.

Now she considered it was sex. It was probably just sex.

When fall came and she was supposed to quit working and leave for college in Guelph, she refused to go, she said she needed a year off.

Clark was very smart but he hadn't waited even to finish high school. He had altogether lost touch with his family. He thought families were like a poison in your blood. He had been an attendant in a mental hospital, a disc jockey on a radio station in Lethbridge, Alberta, a member of a road crew on the highways near Thunder Bay, an apprentice barber, a salesman in an Army Surplus store. And those were only the jobs he told her about.

She had nicknamed him Gypsy Rover, because of the song, an old song her mother used to sing. Now she took to singing it around the house all the time and her mother knew something was up.

*"Last night she slept in a feather bed
With a silken quilt for cover
Tonight she'll sleep on the cold hard ground—
Beside her gypsy lo-ov-ver."*

Her mother said, "He'll break your heart, that's a sure thing." Her stepfather, who was an engineer, did not even grant Clark that much power. "A loser," he called him. "One of those drifters." As if Clark was a bug he could just whisk off his clothes.

So Carla said, “Does a drifter save up enough money to buy a farm? Which, by the way, has done?” and he only said, “I’m not about to argue with you.” She was not his daughter anyway, he added, as if that was the clincher.

So, naturally, Carla had to run away with Clark. The way her parents behaved, they were practically guaranteeing it.

“Will you get in touch with your parents after you’re settled?” Sylvia said. “In Toronto?”

Carla lifted her eyebrows, pulled in her cheeks and made a saucy O of her mouth. She said, “Nope.”

Definitely a little drunk.

Back home, having left the note in the mailbox, Sylvia cleaned up the dishes that were still on the table, washed and polished the omelette pan, threw the blue napkins and tablecloth in the laundry basket, and opened the windows. She did this with a confusing sense of regret and irritation. She had put out a fresh cake of apple-scented soap for the girl’s shower and the smell of it lingered in the house, as it had in the air of the car.

Sometime in the last hour or so the rain had stopped. She could not stay still, so she went for a walk along the path that Leon had cleared. The gravel he had dumped in the boggy places had mostly washed away. They used to go walking every spring, to look for wild orchids. She taught him the name of every wildflower—all of which, except for trillium, he forgot. He used to call her his Dorothy Wordsworth.

Last spring she went out once and picked him a small bunch of dog’s-tooth violets, but he looked at them—as he sometimes looked at her—with mere exhaustion, disavowal.

She kept seeing Carla, Carla stepping onto the bus. Her thanks had been sincere but already almost casual, her wave jaunty. She had got used to her salvation.

Back in the house, at around six o’clock, Sylvia put in a call to Toronto, to Ruth, knowing that Carla would not have arrived yet. She got the answering machine.

“Ruth,” said Sylvia. “Sylvia. It’s about this girl I sent you. I hope she doesn’t turn out to be a bother to you. I hope it’ll be all right. You may find her a little full of herself. Maybe it’s just youth. Let me know. Okay?”

She phoned again before she went to bed but got the machine, so she said, “Sylvia again. Just checking,” and hung up. It was between nine and ten o’clock, not even really dark. Ruth must still be out and the girl would not want to pick up the phone in a strange house. She tried to think of the name of Ruth’s upstairs tenants. They surely wouldn’t have gone to bed yet. But she could not remember. And just as well. Phoning them would have meant making too much of a fuss, being too anxious, going too far.

She got into the bed but it was impossible to stay there, so she took a light quilt and went out to the living room and lay down on the sofa, where she had slept for the last three months of Leon’s life. She did not think it likely that she would get to sleep there either—there were no curtains on the bank of windows and she could tell by the look of the sky that the moon had risen, though she could not see it.

The next thing she knew she was on a bus somewhere—in Greece?—with a lot of people she did not know, and the engine of the bus was making an alarming knocking sound. She woke to find the knocking was at her front door.

Carla?

. . .

Carla had kept her head down until the bus was clear of town. The windows were tinted, nobody could see in, but she had to guard herself against seeing out. Lest Clark appear. Coming out of a store or waiting to cross the street, all ignorant of her abandoning him, thinking this an ordinary afternoon. No, thinking it the afternoon when their scheme—her scheme—was put in motion, eager to know how far she had got with it.

Once they were out in the country she looked up, breathed deeply, took account of the fields, which were slightly violettinted through the glass. Mrs. Jamieson's presence had surrounded her with some kind of remarkable safety and sanity and had made her escape seem the most rational thing you could imagine, in fact the only self-respecting thing that a person in Carla's shoes could do. Carla had felt herself capable of an unaccustomed confidence, even of a mature sense of humor, revealing her life to Mrs. Jamieson in a way that seemed bound to gain sympathy and yet to be ironic and truthful. And adapted to live up to what, as far as she could see, were Mrs. Jamieson's—Sylvia's—expectations. She did have a feeling that it would be possible to disappoint Mrs. Jamieson, who struck her as a most sensitive and rigorous person, but she thought that she was in no danger of doing that.

If she didn't have to be around her for too long.

The sun was shining, as it had been for some time. When they sat at lunch it had made the wineglasses sparkle. No rain had fallen since early morning. There was enough of a wind blowing to lift the roadside grass, the flowering weeds, out of their drenched clumps. Summer clouds, not rain clouds, were scudding across the sky. The whole countryside was changing, shaking itself loose, into the true brightness of a July day. And as they sped along she was able to see not much trace at all of the recent past—no big puddles in the fields showing where the seed had washed out, no miserable spindly cornstalks or lodged grain.

It occurred to her that she must tell Clark about this—that perhaps they had chosen what was for some freakish reason a very wet and dreary corner of the country, and there were other places where they could have been successful.

Or could be yet?

Then it came to her of course that she would not be telling Clark anything. Never again. She would not be concerned about what happened to him, or to Grace or Mike or Juniper or Blackberry or Lizzie Borden. If by any chance Flora came back, she would not hear of it.

This was her second time to leave everything behind. The first time was just like the old Beatles song—her putting the note on the table and slipping out of the house at five o'clock in the morning, meeting Clark in the church parking lot down the street. She was actually humming that song as they rattled away. *She's leaving home, bye-bye*. She recalled now how the sun was coming up behind them, how she looked at Clark's hands on the wheel, the dark hairs on his competent forearms, and breathed in the smell of the inside of the truck, a smell of oil and metal, tools and horse barns. The cold air of the fall morning blew in through the truck's rusted seams. It was the sort of vehicle that nobody in her family ever rode in, though scarcely ever appeared on the streets where they lived.

Clark's preoccupation on that morning with the traffic (they had reached Highway 401), his concern about the truck's behavior, his curt answers, his narrowed eyes, even his slight irritation at her giddy delight—all of that thrilled her. As did the disorder of his past life, his avowed loneliness, the tender way he could have with a horse, and with her. She saw him as the architect of the life ahead of them, herself as captive, her submission both proper and

exquisite.

“You don’t know what you’re leaving behind,” her mother wrote to her, in that one letter that she received, and never answered. But in those shivering moments of early-morning flight she certainly did know what she was leaving behind, even if she had rather a hazy idea of what she was going to. She despised her parents, their house, their backyard, their photo albums, their vacations, their Cuisinart, their *powder room*, their walk-in closets, the underground lawn-sprinkling system. In the brief note she had written she had used the word *authentic*.

I have always felt the need of a more authentic kind of life. I know I cannot expect you to understand this.

The bus had stopped now at the first town on the way. The depot was a gas station. It was the very station she and Clark used to drive to, in their early days, to buy cheap gas. In those days their world had included several towns in the surrounding countryside and they had sometimes behaved like tourists, sampling the specialties in grimy hotel bars. Pigs’ feet, sauerkraut, potato pancakes, beer. And they would sing all the way home like crazy hillbillies.

But after a while all outings came to be seen as a waste of time and money. They were what people did before they understood the realities of their lives.

She was crying now, her eyes had filled up without her realizing it. She set herself to thinking about Toronto, the first steps ahead. The taxi, the house she had never seen, the strange bed she would sleep in alone. Looking in the phone book tomorrow for the address of riding stables, then getting to wherever they were, asking for a job.

She could not picture it. Herself riding on the subway or streetcar, caring for new horses, talking to new people, living among hordes of people every day who were not Clark.

A life, a place, chosen for that specific reason—that it would not contain Clark.

The strange and terrible thing coming clear to her about that world of the future, as she now pictured it, was that she would not exist there. She would only walk around, and open her mouth and speak, and do this and do that. She would not really be there. And what was strange about it was that she was doing all this, she was riding on this bus in the hope of recovering herself. As Mrs. Jamieson might say—and as she herself might with satisfaction have said—*taking charge of her own life*. With nobody glowering over her, nobody’s mood infecting her with misery.

But what would she care about? How would she know that she was alive?

While she was running away from him—now—Clark still kept his place in her life. But when she was finished running away, when she just went on, what would she put in his place? What else—who else—could ever be so vivid a challenge?

She had managed to stop crying, but she had started to shake. She was in a bad way and would have to take hold, get a grip on herself. “Get a grip on yourself,” Clark had sometimes told her, passing through a room where she was scrunched up, trying not to weep, and that indeed was what she must do.

They had stopped in another town. This was the third town away from the one where she had got on the bus, which meant that they had passed through the second town without her even noticing. The bus must have stopped, the driver must have called out the name, and she had not heard or seen anything in her fog of fright. Soon enough they would reach the major

highway, they would be tearing along towards Toronto.

And she would be lost.

She would be lost. What would be the point of getting into a taxi and giving the new address, of getting up in the morning and brushing her teeth and going into the world? What should she get a job, put food in her mouth, be carried by public transportation from place to place?

Her feet seemed now to be at some enormous distance from her body. Her knees, in the unfamiliar crisp pants, were weighted with irons. She was sinking to the ground like a stricken horse who will never get up.

Already the bus had loaded on the few passengers and the parcels that had been waiting in this town. A woman and a baby in its stroller were waving somebody good-bye. The building behind them, the cafe that served as a bus stop, was also in motion. A liquefying wave passed through the bricks and windows as if they were about to dissolve. In peril of her life, Carol pulled her huge body, her iron limbs, forward. She stumbled, she cried out, "Let me off."

The driver braked, he called out irritably, "I thought you were going to Toronto?" People gave her casually curious looks, nobody seemed to understand that she was in anguish.

"I have to get off here."

"There's a washroom in the back."

"No. No. I have to get off."

"I'm not waiting. You understand that? You got luggage underneath?"

"No. Yes. No."

"No luggage?"

A voice in the bus said, "Claustrophobia. That's what's the matter with her."

"You sick?" said the driver.

"No. No. I just want off."

"Okay. Okay. Fine by me."

"Come and get me. Please. Come and get me."

"I will."

. . .

Sylvia had forgotten to lock her door. She realized that she should be locking it now, now, opening it, but it was too late, she had it open.

And nobody there.

Yet she was sure, sure, the knocking had been real.

She closed the door and this time she locked it.

There was a playful sound, a tinkling tapping sound, coming from the wall of windows. She switched the light on, but saw nothing there, and switched it off again. Some animal—maybe a squirrel? The French doors that opened between windows, leading to the patio, had not been locked either. Not even really closed, having been left open an inch or so from the airing of the house. She started to close them and somebody laughed, nearby, near enough to be in the room with her.

"It's me," a man said. "Did I scare you?"

He was pressed against the glass, he was right beside her.

"It's Clark," he said. "Clark from down the road."

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