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FICTION

RUNAWAY

by Alice Munro

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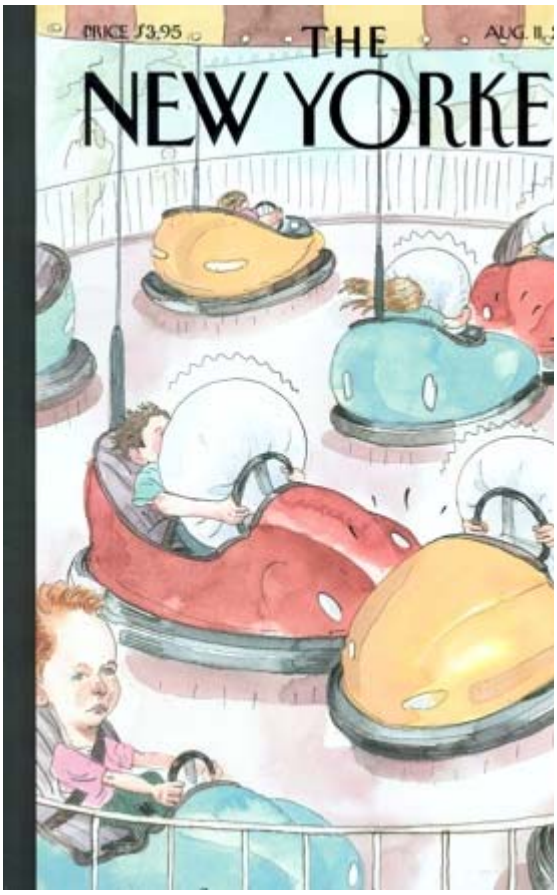

Carla heard the car coming before it topped the little rise in the road that around here they called a hill. It's her, she thought. Mrs. Jamieson—Sylvia—home from her holiday in Greece. From the barn door—but far enough inside that she could not easily be seen—she watched the road where Mrs. Jamieson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

If it was somebody coming to see them, the car 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 to maneuver 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 both exasperated and amused at her own exasperation—just the way Mrs. Jamieson would look negotiating this 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 he would have to know before long. Mrs. Jamieson might have to make another trip—for groceries, perhaps. He 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. Anytime now.

This was the summer of rain and more rain. They 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. Carla wore a 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 at all the campsites, in the cafés, and on the tourist-office bulletin board, 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 or the busloads from summer camps that had kept them going the summer before. And even the regulars took time off for holiday trips, or simply cancelled their lessons because of the weather. If they called too late, Clark charged them anyway. A couple of them had argued, 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 disconsolately in the grass under the trees. 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, but last week there had come a sudden stirring and then a blast through the treetops and a nearly horizontal blinding rain. The storm had lasted only a quarter of an hour, but branches still 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.

On the Web, right now, he was hunting for a place 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 money and had had a fight with them.

Clark often had fights, and not just with the people he owed money to. His friendliness, compelling at first, could suddenly turn sour. There were places in town that he would not go into, 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." Clark had said, "Is that so? I have piles myself," and the manager had been summoned to tell him that that remark 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 claimed that the child was half a mile away and he'd dropped the cup because no sleeve had been provided. They said that he hadn't asked for a sleeve. He said that he shouldn't have had to ask.

Et cetera.

"You flare up," Carla said.

"That's what men do."

She had not dared say anything about his row with Joy Tucker, whom he now referred to as Joy-Fucker. Joy was the librarian from town who boarded her horse with them, 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 and Lizzie looking so miserable, as if she might have caught a chill. There was nothing the matter with Lizzie, actually. Clark had even tried—for him—to be placating. 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, but Clark, who had formerly made the mare his pet, refused to have anything more to do with her.

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 been no sign of her for two days, and Carla was afraid that wild dogs or coyotes had got her, or even a bear.

She had dreamed 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.

Up until three years ago, Carla had never really looked at mobile homes. She hadn't called them that, either. Like her parents, she would have thought the term "mobile home" pretentious. Some people lived in trailers, and that was all there was to it. One trailer was no different from another. When she moved in here, when she chose this life with Clark, she began to see things in a new way. After that, it was only the mobile homes that she really looked at, 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 they had built on. She could hardly wait to get to 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 hadn't complained about the money spent on paint for the kitchen and bathroom or the material for curtains.

What he did balk 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, rust, and tan squiggles and shapes. For a long time, she had thought that the same squiggles and shapes were arranged 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 at times when Clark's mood had weighted down all their indoor space. The best thing 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'd gone to bargain for some horse tackle. He had heard that a goat was able to put horses at ease and he wanted to try it. At first she had been Clark's pet entirely, following him everywhere, dancing for his attention. She was as 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 allowed 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 might say, replying to some challenge. He laughed occasionally, but rarely remembered what the joke was when she asked him afterward.

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'd better phone up and confirm."

Carla said, "Why do I have to, if you told her?" She poured their mugs of tea. "I 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. I want to drink my tea and I want to take a shower."

"The sooner the better."

Carla took her tea into the bathroom.

"We have to go to the laundromat. When the towels dry out, they still 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 were going to town—she hoped that if they could get out of there, 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, 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. Go and get control of yourself. 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 started to peel them, but her tears would not stop. 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, but all 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, in the city paper. 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. But 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—not just the sort of repairs that almost any house owner could manage after a while but those that involved plumbing, wiring, roofing, too.

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.

Shortly afterward, 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,” Carla said more soberly. “She didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“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 hadn’t 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. How much are we going to ask for?”

“You’re just fantasizing,” Carla said. “You’re joking.”

“No. Actually, I’m not.”

Carla said that she didn’t want to talk about it anymore, and he said O.K. But they talked about it the next day, and the next, and the next. He sometimes got notions like this, which 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 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 about the scheme as if it were perfectly feasible. The question was how much money to ask for. Too little and the woman might not take them seriously; she might think they were bluffing. Too much might get her back up and she might become stubborn.

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

"How do you know?" Clark said.

He said that it would work if it was done right. Carla was to break down and tell Mrs. 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. She tried to deflect him, but he insisted.

"Promise," he said. "Promise."

All 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?

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 when 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 each time, 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 excite him, to excite herself. Grateful every time that it still worked.

And in one part of her mind it *was* true: she saw the randy old man, the bump he made in the sheet, bedridden, 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 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 were walking in 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 riders were feeling humiliated. She used to try it, too, when Clark was stuck in his moods. It didn't work with him anymore. But the story about Mr. Jamieson had worked, decisively.

At the house there was nothing for Sylvia to do except open the windows. And 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 Leon had ever worn and some things he hadn't, some gifts from his sisters that had never been taken out of their packages, had been piled in the back seat of the car and taken 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 had at one time been his favorite snack, 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 I hadn't taken the clothes to town. I wish I'd burned them all up in the incinerator," Carla showed 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 sloping south wall of the house was mostly big windows. Sylvia looked up, surprised by the watery sunlight that had come out—or possibly by the shadow of Carla on top of a ladder, bare-legged, bare-armed, her resolute face crowned with a frizz of dandelion hair that was too short for her 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 were splayed there, making a preposterous gargoyle-like face. They both began to laugh. Sylvia felt this laughter running through her like a sweet stream. She turned back to her letters and soon decided that all these kind, genuine, or perfunctory words, the tributes and the 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 paper towels back under the sink. She hardly halted—she was quick as a bird—but she managed to drop a kiss on Sylvia's bent head. Then she went on. She was whistling something to herself, perhaps had been whistling the whole time.

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 a tumultuous heat, like a menopausal flash.

Every so often there had been a special girl student in one of her classes—one 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 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 not too bright, easy athletes but not competitive, buoyant but not rambunctious. Naturally happy.

The day after Sylvia's return, she was speaking to Carla about Greece.

"Where I was, this little tiny village with my two old friends, well, it was the sort of place where the very occasional tourist bus would stop, 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."

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 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. 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. Then 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. Later on, you notice that the shadows are longer 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 not 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 then 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 if 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 a race. The rider, too—the boy—you can see that 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 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. It was, in some way, like Carla cleaning the windows last spring. Her strong legs in her shorts, her broad shoulders, her big dedicated 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, conscientiously now 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 strong, a little stronger than I liked, but the bread was heavenly. 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 that she had picked up on 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."

Sylvia 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.”

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

She had been almost sullen about 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,” Sylvia said energetically. “The goats. They were quite small even when they were full grown. Some spotty and some white, and they were leaping around on the rocks just like—really 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. She saw that her eyes were full of tears, her face blotchy—in fact, it seemed grubby—and that she was bloated with distress.

Carla 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 snot 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 she should take the girl in her arms. But she had not the least wish to do that, and it might make things worse. The girl might feel how little Sylvia wanted to do that, how appalled she was, in fact, by this 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 that, 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 less frequent, real waterworks always turned 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.

"Then 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.

"Has he hurt you, Carla?"

No. He hadn't hurt her physically. But he hated her. He despised her. He could not stand it 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," Sylvia said.

"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?" Sylvia said 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. When she ran away and got married, 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 sickening 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 smiled gently. "Is this a time to think about that?"

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

"Listen," Sylvia said. "Listen to me. If you had the money to 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."

"And all that's stopping you is lack of money?"

Carla took a deep breath. “All that’s stopping me,” she said.

“All right,” Sylvia said. “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 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.

“Sh-h-h, 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,” Carla said 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,” Carla said.

“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, because her feet were two sizes larger then 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 O.K. 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,” Sylvia said, thinking of Carla trying on the tailored pants and 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 can 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 that 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," Sylvia said judiciously. "Probably it doesn't seem quite real."

"It does, though. Everything now seems really real. It's like the time before—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. Easy."

"If you've got a friend," Carla said 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 with both hands. "Drinking to a true friend," she said, uncomfortably. "I probably shouldn't even take a sip, but I will."

"Me, too," Sylvia said with a pretense of gaiety, but she 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," Carla said, alarmed. "I can't do it. Maybe if you—"

"No," Sylvia said. "No."

"No, that's stupid of me. I shouldn't have said that. It's just hard to think straight. What I maybe should do is 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 and 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 station. She was sure that 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 when she was eighteen and just out of high school—that was where she'd met Clark. Her parents had

wanted her to go to college, and she had agreed, as long as she could choose to be a veterinarian. 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. All she really wanted, and had wanted all her life, was to work with animals and live in the country.

Clark was the best riding teacher they had—and good-looking, too. Scads of women were after him—they would take up riding just to get him as their teacher. She had teased him about this, and at first he seemed to like it, but then he got annoyed. She 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 in to work and saw him hanging up his saddle and realized that she had fallen in love with him.

Maybe it was just sex. It was probably just sex.

When fall came and she was supposed to leave for college, 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, and 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 disk jockey on a radio station in Lethbridge, Alberta, a member of a road crew near Thunder Bay, an apprentice barber, a salesman in an Army-surplus store. And those were only the jobs he had told her about.

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

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

Her mother had 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. "A drifter." He said this as if Clark were a bug he could just whisk off his clothes.

Carla said, "Does a drifter save up enough money to buy a farm, which, by the way, he has done?" He said, "I'm not about to argue with you." She was not his daughter, anyway, he added, as if that were the clincher.

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

"Will you get in touch with your parents after you're settled?" Sylvia asked. "In Toronto?"

Carla raised her eyebrows, pulled in her cheeks, and made a saucy O of her mouth. She said, "Nope."

Definitely a little bit 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 hunt for wild orchids. She taught him the name of every wildflower—all of which, except for trillium, he forgot. He called her his Dorothy Wordsworth.

Last spring, she had gone out once, and picked him a bunch of dogtooth violets, but he had 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.

Around six o'clock, Sylvia put in a call to Toronto, to Ruth, knowing that Carla probably wouldn't have arrived yet. She got the answering machine.

"Ruth," Sylvia said. "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. O.K.? O.K. Bye-bye."

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 would 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 it. And just as well. Phoning them would have been going too far.

She got into bed, but it was impossible, 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 huge south windows and she could tell by 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 that 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, ignorant of her abandonment, thinking

this an ordinary afternoon. No: thinking it the afternoon when their scheme—his scheme—had been 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 violet-tinted fields. Mrs. Jamieson's presence had surrounded her with a kind of remarkable safety and sanity, 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 a mature sense of humor. She had revealed 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.

The sun was shining, as it had been for some time. At lunch, it had made the wineglasses sparkle. And 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 didn't see much trace 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 should 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 the horses. If, by any chance, Flora came back she would not hear about it.

This was her second time, leaving everything behind. The first time had been just like the old Beatles song: she had put a note on the table and slipped out of the house at five o'clock in the morning to meet Clark in the church parking lot down the street. She was even humming that song as they rattled away. *She's leaving home, bye-bye*. She recalled now how the sun had come up behind them, how she had looked at Clark's hands on the wheel, at the dark hairs on his competent forearms, and breathed in the smell of the truck, a smell of oil and metal tools and horse barns. The cold air of the fall morning had blown in through the rusted seams of the sort of vehicle that nobody in her family ever rode in, that scarcely ever appeared on the streets where she lived. Clark's preoccupation with the traffic, his curt answers, his narrowed eyes, everything about him that ignored her, even his slight irritation at her giddy delight—all of that had thrilled her. As did the disorder of his past life, his avowed loneliness, the unexpectedly tender way he could have with a horse, and with her. She saw him as the sturdy architect of the life ahead of them, herself as a captive, her submission both proper and exquisite.

"You don't know what you're leaving behind," her mother wrote to her, in the one letter she received and never answered. But in those shivering moments of early-morning flight she certainly *had* known what she was leaving behind, even if she had rather a hazy idea of what she was going to. She despised their house, their back yard, their photo albums, their vacations, their *Cuisinart*, their *powder room*, their walk-in closets, their underground lawn-sprinkling system. In the brief note she left, 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 a gas station in the first town on the way. It was the very station that 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. 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 tried to think 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 addresses of riding stables, then getting to wherever they were, asking for a job.

She could not picture it. Herself riding on the subway or a 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 about that world of the future, as she now pictured it, was that she would not exist in it. 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 have said with satisfaction—*taking charge of her own life*. With nobody glowering over her, nobody's mood infecting her with misery, no implacable mysterious silence surrounding her.

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 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 now.

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 highway, they would be tearing along toward 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?

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.

Already the bus had loaded on the few passengers and parcels that had been waiting in this town. A woman and a baby in its stroller were waving goodbye to somebody. The building behind them, the café 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, Carla pulled her huge body, her iron limbs, forward. She stumbled. She cried out, “Let me off.”

The driver braked. He called back irritably, “I thought you were going to Toronto.” People gave her casually curious looks. No one 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?” the driver said.

“No. No. I just want off.”

“O.K. O.K. Fine by me.”

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

I will.

The door was not locked. And it occurred to Sylvia that she should be locking it now, not opening it, but it was too late, she had it open.

And nobody there.

Yet she was sure, sure, that 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 leading to the patio had not been locked, either. Not

even really closed, since she had left them open an inch or so to air the house. She started to close them, and then somebody laughed, close by, close enough to be in the room with her.

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

He was pressed against the glass of the door; he was right beside her.

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

She was not going to ask him in, but she was afraid to shut the door in his face. He might grab it before she could get it closed. She didn't want to turn on the light, either. She slept in a T-shirt. She should have pulled the quilt from the sofa and wrapped it around herself, but it was too late now.

"Did you want to get dressed?" he said. "What I got in here could be the very things you need."

He had a shopping bag in his hand. He thrust it at her, but did not try to move forward with it.

"What?" she said in a choppy voice.

"Look and see. It's not a bomb. There, take it."

She felt inside the bag, not looking. Something soft. And then she recognized the buttons of the jacket, the silk of the shirt, the belt on the pants.

"Just thought you'd better have them back," he said. "They're yours, aren't they?"

She tightened her jaw so that her teeth wouldn't chatter. A fearful dryness had attacked her mouth and throat.

"I understood they were yours," he said.

Her tongue moved like a wad of wool. She forced herself to say, "Where's Carla?"

"You mean my wife Carla?"

Now she could see his face more clearly. She could see how he was enjoying himself.

"My wife Carla is at home in bed. Where she belongs."

He was both handsome and silly-looking. Tall, lean, well built, but with a slouch that seemed artificial. A contrived, self-conscious air of menace. A lock of dark hair falling over his forehead, a vain little mustache, eyes that appeared both hopeful and mocking, a boyish smile perpetually on the verge of a sulk.

She had always disliked the sight of him—she had mentioned her dislike to Leon, who said that the man was just unsure of himself, just a bit too friendly. The fact that he was unsure of himself would not make her any safer.

"Pretty worn out," he said. "After her little adventure. You should have seen your face—you should have seen the look on you when you recognized those clothes. What did you think? Did you think I'd murdered her?"

"I was surprised," Sylvia said.

"I bet you were. After you were such a big help to her running away."

"I helped her—" Sylvia said with considerable effort. "I helped her because she seemed to be in distress."

“Distress,” he said, as if examining the word. ‘‘I guess she was. She was in very big distress when she jumped off that bus and got on the phone to me to come and get her. She was crying so hard I could hardly make out what it was she was saying.”

“She wanted to come back?”

“Oh, yeah. You bet she wanted to come back. She was in real hysterics to come back. She is a girl who is very up and down in her emotions. But I guess you don’t know her as well as I do.”

“She seemed quite happy to be going.”

“Did she really? Well, I have to take your word for it. I didn’t come here to argue with you.”

Sylvia said nothing.

“Actually, I came here not just to return those clothes. I came here to tell you that I don’t appreciate you interfering in my life with my wife.”

“She is a human being,” Sylvia said, though she knew that it would be better if she could keep quiet. “Besides being your wife.”

“My goodness, is that so? My wife is a human being? Really? Thank you for the information. But don’t try getting smart with me. *Sylvia*.”

“I wasn’t trying to get smart.”

“Good. I’m glad you weren’t. I don’t want to get mad. I just have a couple of important things to say to you. One thing—that I don’t want you sticking your nose in anywhere, anytime, in my life. Another—that I’m not going to want her coming around here anymore. Not that she is going to want to come, I’m pretty sure of that. She doesn’t have too good an opinion of you at the moment. And it’s time you learned how to clean your own house. Now—” he said. “Now. Has that sunk in?”

“Quite sufficiently.”

“Oh, I really hope it has. I hope so.”

Sylvia said, “Yes.”

“And you know what else I think?”

“What?”

“I think you owe me something.”

“What?”

“I think you owe me—you owe me an apology.”

Sylvia said, “All right. If you think so. I’m sorry.”

He shifted, perhaps just to put out his hand, and with the movement of his body she shrieked.

He laughed. He put his hand on the doorframe to make sure she didn’t close it.

“*What’s that*?”

“What’s what?” he said, as if she were trying out a trick and it would not work. But then he caught sight of something reflected in the window, and he snapped around to look.

Not far from the house was a wide shallow patch of land that often filled up with night fog at this time of year. The fog was there tonight, had been there all this while. But now the fog had changed. It had thickened, taken on a separate shape, transformed itself into something spiky and radiant. First, a live dandelion ball, tumbling forward, then it condensed itself into an unearthly sort of animal, pure white, hellbent, something like a giant unicorn rushing at them.

"Jesus Christ," Clark said softly. He grabbed hold of Sylvia's shoulder. This touch did not alarm her at all—she accepted it with the knowledge that he did it either to protect her or to reassure himself.

Then the vision exploded. Out of the fog, and out of the magnifying light—now revealed to be that of a car travelling along this back road, probably in search of a place to park—out of this appeared a white goat. A little dancing white goat, hardly bigger than a sheepdog.

Clark let go. He said, "Where the Christ did you come from?"

"It's your goat," Sylvia said. "Isn't it your goat?"

"Flora," he said. "Flora."

The goat had stopped a yard or so away from them, had turned shy, and hung her head.

"Flora," Clark said. "Where the hell did you come from? You scared the shit out of us."

Us.

Flora came closer but still did not look up. She butted against Clark's legs.

"Goddam stupid animal," he said shakily.

"She was lost," Sylvia said.

"Yeah. She was. Never thought we'd see her again, actually."

Flora looked up. The moonlight caught a glitter in her eyes.

"Scared the shit out of us," Clark said to her. "We thought you were a ghost."

"It was the effect of the fog," Sylvia said. She stepped out of the door now, onto the patio. Quite safe.

"Yeah."

"Then the lights of that car."

"Like an apparition," he said, recovering. And pleased that he had thought of this description.

"Yes."

"The goat from outer space. That's what you are. You are a goddam goat from outer space," he said, patting Flora. But when Sylvia put out her hand to do the same Flora immediately lowered her head as if preparing to butt.

"Goats are unpredictable," Clark said. "They can seem tame but they're not really. Not after they grow up."

"Is she grown up? She looks so small."

"She's as big as she's ever going to get."

They stood looking down at the goat, as if hoping that she would provide them with more conversation. But she apparently was not going to. From this moment, they could go neither forward nor back. Sylvia believed that she might have seen a shadow of regret in his eyes that this was so.

But he acknowledged it. He said, “It’s late.”

“I guess it is,” Sylvia said, just as if this had been an ordinary visit.

“O.K., Flora. Time for us to go home.”

“I’ll make other arrangements for help if I need it,” she said. “I probably won’t need it now, anyway.” She added lightly, “I’ll stay out of your hair.”

“Sure,” he said. “You’d better get inside. You’ll get cold.”

“Good night,” she said. “Good night, Flora.”

The phone rang then.

“Excuse me.”

“Good night.”

It was Ruth.

“Ah,” Sylvia said. “A change in plans.”

She did not sleep, thinking of the little goat, whose appearance out of the fog seemed to her more and more magical. She even wondered if, possibly, Leon could have had something to do with it. If she were a poet, she would write a poem about something like this. But in her experience the subjects that she thought a poet would write about had not appealed to Leon, who was—who had been—the real thing.

Carla had not heard Clark go out, but she woke when he came in.

He told her that he had just been checking around the barn.

“A car went along the road a while ago, and I wondered what it was doing here. I couldn’t get back to sleep till I went out and checked whether everything was O.K.”

“So, was it?”

“Far as I could see. And then while I was up,” he said, “I thought I might as well pay a visit up the road. I took the clothes back.”

Carla sat up in bed.

“You didn’t wake her up?”

“She woke up. It was O.K. We had a little talk.”

“Oh.”

‘‘It was O.K.”

“You didn’t mention any of that stuff, did you?”

“I didn’t mention it.”

“It really was all made up. It really was. You have to believe me. It was all a lie.”

“O.K.”

“You have to believe me.”

"Then I believe you."

"I made it all up."

"O.K."

He got into bed.

"Did you get your feet wet?" she said.

"Heavy dew."

He turned to her.

"Come here," he said. "When I read your note, it was just like I went hollow inside. It's true. I felt like I didn't have anything left in me."

The bright weather had continued. On the streets, in the stores, in the post office, people greeted each other by saying that summer had finally arrived. The pasture grass and even the poor beaten crops lifted up their heads. The puddles dried up, the mud turned to dust. A light warm wind blew and everybody felt like doing things again. The phone rang. Inquiries about trail rides, about riding lessons. Summer camps cancelled their trips to museums, and minivans drew up, loaded with restless children. The horses pranced along the fences, freed from their blankets.

Clark had managed to get hold of a piece of roofing at a good price. He had spent the whole first day after Runaway Day (that was how they referred to Carla's bus trip) fixing the roof of the exercise ring.

For a couple of days, as they went about their chores, he and Carla would wave at each other. If she happened to pass close to him and there was nobody else around, Carla might kiss his shoulder through the light material of his summer shirt.

"If you ever try to run away on me again I'll tan your hide," he said to her, and she said, "Who are you now—Clint Eastwood?"

Then she said, "*Would* you?"

"What?"

"Tan my hide?"

"Damn right."

Birds were everywhere. Red-winged blackbirds, robins, a pair of doves that sang at daybreak. Lots of crows, and gulls on reconnoitering missions from the lake, and big turkey buzzards that sat in the branches of a dead oak about half a mile away, at the edge of the woods. At first they just sat there, drying out their voluminous wings, lifting themselves occasionally for a trial flight, flapping around a bit, then composing themselves, to let the sun and the warm air do their work. In a day or so, they were restored, flying high, circling and dropping to earth, disappearing over the woods, coming back to rest in the familiar bare tree.

Lizzie Borden's owner—Joy Tucker—showed up again, tanned and friendly. She had got sick of the rain, and gone off on her holidays to hike in the Rocky Mountains. Now she was back. Perfect timing.

She and Clark treated each other warily at first, but they were soon joking as if nothing had happened.

"Lizzie looks to be in good shape," she said. "But where's her little friend?"

"Gone," Clark said. "Maybe she took off to the Rocky Mountains."

"Lots of wild goats out there. With fantastic horns."

"So I hear."

For three or four days they had been too busy to go down and look in the mailbox. When Carla opened it, she found the phone bill, a promise that if they subscribed to a certain magazine they could win a million dollars, and Mrs. Jamieson's letter.

My Dear Carla,

I have been thinking about the (rather dramatic) events of the last few days and I find myself talking to myself, but really to you, so often that I thought I must speak to you, even if—the best way I can do now—only in a letter. And don't worry—you do not have to answer me.

Mrs. Jamieson went on to say that she was afraid she had involved herself too closely in Carla's life and had made the mistake of thinking somehow that Carla's freedom and happiness were the same thing. All she cared for was Carla's happiness, and she saw now that she—Carla—had found that in her marriage. All she could hope was that perhaps Carla's flight and turbulent emotions had brought her true feelings to the surface, and perhaps a recognition in her husband of his true feelings as well.

She said that she would perfectly understand if Carla wished to avoid her in the future and that she would always be grateful for Carla's presence in her life during such a difficult time.

The strangest and most wonderful thing in this whole string of events seems to me the reappearance of Flora. In fact, it seems rather like a miracle. Where had she been all that time and why did she choose just that moment to reappear? I am sure your husband has described it to you. We were talking at the patio door, and I—facing out—was the first to see this white something, descending on us out of the night. Of course it was the effect of the ground fog. But truly terrifying. I think I shrieked out loud. I had never in my life felt such bewitchment, in the true sense. I suppose I should be honest and say fear. There we were, two adults, frozen, and then out of the fog comes little lost Flora.

There has to be something special about this. I know, of course, that Flora is an ordinary little animal and that she probably spent her time away getting herself pregnant. In a sense, her return has no connection at all with our human lives. Yet her appearance at that moment did have a profound effect on your husband and me. When two human beings divided by hostility are both, at the same time, mystified by the same apparition, there is a bond that springs up between them, and they find themselves united in the most unexpected way. United in their humanity—that is the only way I can describe it. We parted almost as friends. So Flora has her place as a good angel in my life and perhaps also in your husband's life and yours.

With all my good wishes,

Sylvia Jamieson

As soon as Carla had read this letter she crumpled it up. Then she burned it in the sink. The flames leaped up alarmingly and she turned on the tap, then scooped up the soft disgusting black stuff and put it down the toilet, as she should have done in the first place.

She was busy for the rest of that day, and the next, and the next. During that time, she had to take two parties out on the trails, she had to give lessons to children, individually and

in groups. At night when Clark put his arms around her—he was generally in good spirits now—she did not find it hard to be coöperative. She dreamed of things that were of no importance, that made no sense.

It was as if she had a murderous needle somewhere in her lungs, and by breathing carefully she could avoid feeling it. But every once in a while she had to take a deep breath, and it was still there.

Sylvia Jamieson had taken an apartment in the college town where she taught. The house was not up for sale—or at least there wasn't a sign out in front of it. Leon Jamieson had got some kind of posthumous award—news of this was in the papers. There was no mention of any money.

As the dry golden days of fall came on—an encouraging and profitable season—Carla found that she had got used to the sharp thought that had lodged inside her. It wasn't so sharp anymore; in fact, it no longer surprised her. She was inhabited now by an almost seductive notion, a constant low-lying temptation.

She had only to raise her eyes, she had only to look in one direction, to know where she might go. An evening walk, once her chores for the day were finished. To the edge of the woods, and the bare tree where she had seen the buzzards.

Where she might find the little dirty bones in the grass. The skull, with shreds of bloodied skin still clinging to it, that she could settle in one hand. Knowledge in one hand.

Or perhaps not.

Suppose something else had happened. Suppose he had chased Flora away, or tied her in the back of the truck and driven some distance and let her loose. Taken her back to the place they'd got her from. Not to have her around, reminding them of this bad time.

The days passed and she didn't go. She held out against the temptation. ♦