January 2025

Spaceships Have Landed

Alice Munro

ISSUE 131, SUMMER 1994

Eunie Morgan's house was the third one past Monk's. It was the last house on the road. Around midnight, Eunie's mother said, she had heard the screen door close. She heard the screen door and thought nothing of it. She thought of course that Eunie had gone out to the toilet. Even in 1953 the Morgans had no indoor plumbing.

Of course none of them went as far as the toilet, late at night. Eunie and the old woman squatted on the grass. The old man watered the spirea at the far end of the porch.

Then I must have gone to sleep, Eunie's mother said, but I woke up later on, and I thought that I never heard her come in.

She went downstairs and walked around in the house. Eunie's room was behind the kitchen, but she might be sleeping anywhere on a hot night. She might be on the couch in the front room or stretched out on the hall floor to get the breeze between the doors. She might have gone out on the porch where there was a decent car seat that her father, years ago, had found discarded farther down the road. Her mother could not find her anywhere. The kitchen clock said twenty past two.

Eunie's mother went back upstairs and shook Eunie's father till he woke up.

"Eunie's not down there," she said.

"Where is she then?" said her husband, as if it was up to her to know. She had to shake him and shake him, to keep him from going back to sleep. He had a great indifference to news, a reluctance to listen to what anybody said, even when he was awake.

"Get up, get up," she said. "We got to find her." Finally he obeyed her, sat up, pulled on his trousers and his boots. "Get your flashlight," she told him, and with him behind her she went down the stairs again, out onto the porch, down into the yard. It was his job to shine the flashlight—she told him where. She directed him along the path to the toilet, which stood in a clump of lilacs and currant bushes at the back of the property. They poked the light inside the building and found nothing. Then they peered in among the sturdy lilac trunks—these were practically trees—and along the path—almost lost now—that led through a sagging section of the wire fence to the wild growth along the river bank. Nothing there. Nobody.

Back through the vegetable garden they went, lighting up the dusted potato plants and the rhubarb that was now grandly gone to seed. The old man lifted a great rhubarb leaf with his boot, and shone the light under that.

His wife asked whether he had gone crazy.

She recalled that Eunie used to walk in her sleep. But that was years ago.

She spotted something glinting at the corner of the house, like knives or a man in armour.

"There. There." she said. "Shine it there. What's that?"

It was only Eunie's bicycle, that she rode to work every day.

Then the mother called Eunie's name. She called it at the back and the front of the house; plum trees grew as high as the house in front and there was no sidewalk, just a dirt path between them. Their trunks crowded in like watchers, crooked black animals. When she waited for an answer she heard the gulp of a frog, close, as if it sat in those branches. Morgan's place was the last on this road, last of the houses with their backs to the river. Half a mile farther on, the road ended up in a field too marshy for any use, with weedy poplars growing up through the willow-bushes and elderberries. In the other direction, it met the road from town, then crossed the river and climbed the hill to the chicken farm. On the river flats lay the old fairgrounds, some grandstands abandoned since before the War, when the fair here was taken over by the big fair at Walley. The racetrack oval was still marked out in the grass.

This was where the town set out to be, over a hundred years ago. Mills and hostelries were here. But the river floods persuaded people to move to higher ground. House plots remained on the map, and roads laid out, but only the one row of houses where people lived who were too poor or in some way too stubborn to change—or, at the other extreme, too temporary in their living arrangements to object to the invasion of the water.

They gave up—Eunie's parents did. They sat down in the kitchen without any light on. It was between three and four o'clock. It must have seemed as if they were waiting for Eunie to come and tell them what to do. It was Eunie who was in charge in that house and they probably could hardly imagine a time when it had been otherwise. Nineteen years ago she had literally burst into their lives. Mrs. Morgan had thought she was having the change and getting stout—she was stout enough already that it did not make much difference. She thought the commotion in her stomach was what people called indigestion. She knew how people got children, she was not a dunce—it was just that she had gone on so long without any such thing happening. One day in the post office she had to ask for a chair, she was weak and overcome by cramps. Then her water broke, she was hustled over to the hospital, and Eunie popped out with a full head of white hair. She made her claim to attention from the moment of her birth.

One whole summer Eunie and Rhea played together. They never thought of their activity as play, but playing was what they called it, to satisfy other people. It was the most serious part of their lives. What they did the rest of the time seemed frivolous, forgettable. When they cut from Eunie's yard down to the riverbank they became different people. Each of them was called Tom. The Two Toms. A Tom was a noun to them, not just a name. It was not male or female. It meant somebody exceptionally brave and clever but not always lucky, and—just barely—indestructible. The Toms had a battle which could never end, and this was with the Bannershees. (Perhaps Rhea and Eunie had heard of banshees.) The Bannershees lurked along the river and could take the form of robbers or Germans or skeletons. Their tricks and propensities were endless. They laid traps and lay in ambush and tortured the children they had stolen. Sometimes Eunie and Rhea got some real children—the McKays who lived briefly in one of the river houses—and persuaded them to let themselves be tied up and thrashed with cattails. But the McKays could not or would not submit themselves to the plot, and they soon cried or escaped and went home, so that it was just the Toms again.

The Toms built a city of mud by the riverbank. It was walled with stones against the Bannershees' attack and contained a royal palace, a swimming pool, a flag. But then the Toms took a journey and the Bannershees leveled it all. (Of course Eunie and Rhea had to change themselves, often, into Bannershees.) A new leader appeared, a Bannershee queen; her name was Joylinda, and her schemes were diabolical. She had poisoned the blackberries growing on the bank, and the Toms had eaten some, being careless and hungry after their journey. They lay writhing and sweating down among the juicy weeds when the poison struck. They pressed their bellies into mud that was slightly soft and warm like just-made fudge. They felt their innards shrivel and they were shaking in every limb, but they had to get up and stagger about, looking for an antidote. They tried chewing sword grass —which true to its name could slice your skin—they smeared their mouths with mud, and considered biting into a live frog if they could catch one, but decided at last it was chokecherries that would save them from death. They ate a cluster of the tiny chokecherries and the skin inside their mouths puckered desperately, so that they had to run to the river to drink the water. They threw themselves down on it, where it was all silty among the waterlilies and you couldn't see the bottom. They drank and drank it, while the bluebottles flew straight as arrows over their heads. They were saved.

Emerging from this world in the late afternoon, they found themselves in Eunie's yard where her parents would be working still, or again, hoeing or hilling or weeding their vegetables. They would lie down in the shade of the house, exhausted as if they had swum lakes or climbed mountains. They smelled of the river, of the wild garlic and mint they had squashed underfoot, of the hot rank grass and the foul mud where the drain emptied. Sometimes Eunie would go into the house and get them something to eat—slices of bread with corn syrup or molasses. She never had to ask if she could do this. She always kept the bigger piece for herself.

They were not friends in the way that Rhea would understand being friends later on. They never tried to please or comfort each other. They did not share secrets, except for the game, and even that was not a secret because they let others take part. But they never let the others be Toms. So maybe that was what they shared, in their intense and daily collaboration. The nature, the danger, of being Toms.

Eunie never seemed subject to her parents or even connected to them in the way of other children. Rhea was struck by the way Eunie ruled her own life, the careless power she had in the house. When Rhea said that she had to be home at a certain time, or that she had to do chores or change her clothes, Eunie was affronted, disbelieving. Every decision Eunie made must have been on her own. When she was fifteen she stopped going to school and got a job in the glove factory. Rhea could imagine her coming home and announcing to her parents what she had done. No, not even announcing it—it would come out in an offhand way, maybe when she started getting home later in the afternoon. Now that she was earning money, she bought a bicycle. She bought a radio and listened to it in her room late at night. Perhaps her parents would hear shots ring out then, vehicles roaring through the streets. She might tell them things she had heard—the news of crimes and accidents, hurricanes, avalanches. Rhea didn't think they would pay much attention. They were busy and their life was eventful, though the events in it were seasonal and had to do with the vegetables which they sold in town to earn their living. The vegetables, the raspberries, the rhubarb. They hadn't time for much else.

While Eunie was still in school Rhea was riding her bicycle, so they never walked together although they took the same route. When Rhea rode past Eunie, Eunie was in the habit of shouting out something challenging, disparaging. Hi ho, Silver! And now, when Eunie had a bicycle, Rhea had started walking—there was a notion at the high school that any girl who rode a bicycle, after grade nine, looked gawky and ridiculous. Eunie would dismount and walk along beside Rhea, as if she was doing her a favor.

It was not a favor at all—Rhea did not want her. Eunie had always been a peculiar sight, tall for her age, with sharp, narrow shoulders, a whitish-blond crest of fuzzy hair sticking up at the crown of her head, a cocksure expression and a long, heavy jaw. That jaw gave a thickness to the lower part of her face that seemed reflected in the phlegmy growl of her voice. When she was younger none of that had mattered—her own conviction, that everything about her was proper had daunted many. But now she was five feet nine or ten, drab and mannish in her slacks and bandannas, with big feet in what looked like men's shoes, a hectoring voice and an ungainly walk—she had gone right from being a child to being a character. And she spoke to Rhea with a proprietary air that grated, asking her if she wasn't tired of going to school, or if her bike was broken and her father couldn't afford to get it fixed. When Rhea got a permanent, Eunie wanted to know what had happened to her hair. All this she thought she could do because she and Rhea lived on the same side of town and had played together, in an era that seemed to Rhea so distant and discardable. The worst thing was when Eunie launched into accounts that Rhea found both boring and infuriating, of murders and disasters and freakish events that she had heard about on the radio. Rhea was infuriated because she could not get Eunie to tell her whether these things had really happened, or even to make that distinction—as far as Rhea could tell—to herself.

Was that on the news, Eunie? Was it a story? Were there people acting it out in front of a microphone or was it reporting? Eunie! Was it real or was it a play?

It was Rhea, never Eunie, who would get frazzled by these questions. Eunie would just get on her bicycle and ride away.

"Toodeley oodeley oo! See you in the Zoo!"

Eunie's job suited her, surely. The glove factory occupied the second and third floors of a building on the main street, and in the warm weather when the windows were open you could hear not only the sewing machines but the loud jokes, the quarrels and insults, the famous rough language of the women who worked there. They were supposed to be of a lower class than waitresses, much lower than store clerks. They worked longer hours and made less money, but that didn't make them humble. Far from it. They came jostling and joking down the stairs and burst out on to the street. They yelled at cars, in which there were people they knew, and people they didn't know. They spread disorder as if they had every right.

People close to the bottom, like Eunie Morgan, or right at the top, like Billy Doud, showed a similar carelessness, a blunted understanding.

During her last year at high school, Rhea got a job, too. She worked in the shoe store on Saturday afternoons. Billy Doud came into the store, in early spring, and said he wanted to buy a pair of rubber boots, like the ones hanging up outside. He took off his shoes and displayed his feet in fine black socks. Rhea told him that it would be better to wear woolen socks, work socks, inside rubber boots, so that his feet wouldn't slide around. He asked if they sold such socks and said he would buy a pair of those too, if Rhea would bring them. Then he asked her if she would put the wool socks on his feet.

That was all a ploy, he told her later. He didn't need either one, boots or socks.

His feet were long and white and perfectly sweet-smelling. A scent of lovely soap arose, a whiff of talcum. He leaned back in the chair, tall and pale, cool and clean—he himself might have been carved of soap. A high curved forehead, temples already bare, hair with a glint of tinsel, sleepy ivory eyelids. He was through college at last, he was twenty-four years old and home to learn the piano-factory business.

"That's sweet of you," he said, and asked her to go to a dance that night, the opening dance of the season in the Walley Pavilion.

After that they went to the dance in Walley every Saturday night. They didn't go out together during the week, because Billy had to get up early and go to the factory and learn the business—from his mother, known as the Tartar, and Rhea had to do some housekeeping for her father and brothers. Her mother was in the hospital, in Hamilton.

"There goes your heartthrob," girls would say, if Billy drove by the school when they were out playing volleyball, or passed on the street, and in truth Rhea's heart did throb—at the sight of him, his bright hatless hair, his negligent but surely powerful hands on the wheel. But also at the thought of herself suddenly singled out, so unexpectedly chosen, with the glow of a prizewinner—or a prize—about her now, a grace formerly hidden. Older women she didn't even know would smile at her on the street; girls wearing engagement rings spoke to her by name, and in the mornings she would wake up with the sense that she had been given a great present, but that her mind had boxed it away overnight, and she could not for a moment remember what it was.

Billy brought her honor everywhere but at home. That was not unexpected—home, as Rhea knew it, was where they cut you down to size. Her younger brothers would imitate Billy offering their father a cigarette. *Have a Pall Mall, Mr. Sellers*. They would flourish in front of him an imaginary package of ready-mades. The unctuous voice, the complacent gesture, made Billy Doud seem asinine. *Putty*, was what they called him, first *Silly Billy*, then *Silly Putty*, then *Putty* by itself.

"You quit tormenting your sister," Rhea's father said. Then he took it up himself, with a business-like question.

"You aim to keep on at the shoe store?" Rhea said, "Why?"

"Oh. I was just thinking. You might need it."

"What for?"

"To support that fellow. Once his old lady's dead and he runs the business into the ground."

And all the time Billy Doud said how much he admired Rhea's father. Men like your father, he said. Who work so hard. Just to get along. And never expect any different. And are so decent, and even-tempered, and kindhearted. The world owes a lot to men like that.

They would leave the dance around midnight and drive in the two cars to the parking spot, at the end of a dirt road on the bluffs above Lake Huron. Billy kept the radio on, low. He always had the radio on, even though he might be telling Rhea some complicated story. His stories had to do with this life at college, with parties and practical jokes and dire escapades sometimes involving the police. They always had to do with drinking. Once somebody who was drunk vomited out a car window, and so noxious was the drink he had taken that the paint was destroyed all down the side of the car. The characters in these stories were not known to Rhea, except for Wayne. Girls' names cropped up occasionally, and then she might have to interrupt. She had seen Billy Doud home from college, over the years, with girls whose looks, or clothes, whose jaunty or fragile airs, she had been greatly taken with, and now she had to ask him, was Claire the one with the little hat that had a veil, and the purple gloves? In church? Which one had the long red hair and the camel's hair coat? Who wore velvet boots with mouton tops?

Usually Billy was not able to remember, and if he did go on to tell her more about these girls, what he had to say might not be complimentary.

When they parked, and sometimes even while they drove, Billy put an arm around Rhea's shoulders and squeezed her. A promise. There were promises also during their dances. He was not too proud to nuzzle her cheek then or drop a row of kisses on her hair. The kisses he gave her in the car were quicker, and the speed, the rhythm of them, the little smacks they might be served up with, informed her that they were jokes, or partly jokes. He tapped his fingers on her, on her knees and just at the top of her breasts, murmuring appreciatively and then scolding himself, or scolding Rhea, saying that he had to keep the lid on her.

"You're quite the baddy," he said. He pressed his lips tightly against hers as if it was his job to keep both their mouths shut.

"How you entice me," he said, in a voice not his own, the voice of some sleek and languishing movie actor, and slipped his hand between her legs, touched the skin above her stocking—then jumped and laughed, as if she was too hot there, or too cold.

"Wonder how old Wayne is getting on?" he said.

The rule was that after a time either he or Wayne would sound a blast on the car horn, and then the other one had to answer. This game —Rhea did not understand that it was a contest, or at any rate what kind of a contest it was—came eventually to take up more and more of his attention. "What do you think?" he would say, peering into the night at the dark shape of Wayne's car. "What do you think, should I give the boy the horn?"

On the drive back to Carstairs, to the bootlegger's, Rhea would feel like crying, for no reason, and her arms, her legs would feel heavy and useless. Left alone, she would probably have fallen fast asleep, but she couldn't stay alone because Lucille—Wayne's girl—was afraid of the dark, and when Billy and Wayne went into Monk's Rhea had to keep Lucille company.

Lucille was a thin, faired-haired girl with a finicky stomach, irregular periods and sensitive skin. The vagaries of her body fascinated her, and she treated it as if it was a balky valuable pet. She always carried baby oil in her purse and patted it onto her face which would have been savaged, a little while ago, by Wayne's bristles. The car smelled of baby oil and there was another smell under that, like bread dough.

"I'm going to make him shave once we get married," she said to Rhea. "Right before."

Billy Doud had told Rhea that Wayne had told him he had stuck to Lucille all this time, and was going to marry her, because she would make a good wife. He said that she wasn't the prettiest girl in the world, and she certainly wasn't the smartest, and for that reason he would always feel secure in the marriage. She wouldn't have a lot of bargaining power, he said. And she wasn't used to having a lot of money.

"Some people might say that was taking a cynical approach," Billy had said. "But others might say, realistic. A minister's son does have to be realistic, he's got to make his own way in life. Anyway, Wayne is Wayne."

"Wayne is Wayne," he had repeated with solemn pleasure.

"So how about you?" said Lucille. "Are you getting used to it?"

"Oh, yes," Rhea said.

"They say it's better without gloves on. I guess I'll find out once I'm married."

Rhea was too embarrassed to admit not having understood at once what they were talking about.

Lucille said that once she was married she would be using sponges and jelly. Rhea thought that sounded like a dessert, but she did not laugh, because she knew Lucille would take such a joke as an insult. Lucille began to talk about the conflict that was raging around her wedding, about whether the bridesmaids should wear picture hats or wreaths of rosebuds. Lucille had wanted rosebuds, and she thought it was all arranged, and then Wayne's sister had got a permanent that turned out badly. Now she wanted a hat to cover it up.

"She isn't a friend even, she's only in the wedding because of being his sister, and I couldn't leave her out. She's a selfish person."

Wayne's sister's selfishness had made Lucille break out in hives.

Something had changed in Rhea since she had turned out to be so lucky and had been smiled at, accepted by people like Lucille, shown what respect was owing to her by becoming Billy Doud's girl. It was a matter of getting *inside*, of being entirely and gratefully normal, of living within the life of the town. Rhea used to see the town of Carstairs from outside, as if it had a mysterious personality hidden from all the other people who lived inside it. For instance, one day in winter, looking by chance out the back window of the library in the town hall, she saw a team of horses pulling a load of grain sacks on the municipal weigh scales. Snow was falling. The horses were heavy workhorses, which were growing rare now, except that some farmers used them in winter, on the roads that were not ploughed. The big grain sacks, the heavy obedient animals, the snow, made Rhea think suddenly that the town was muffled in great distances, in snow-choked air, and that the life in it was a timeless ritual. And another day, a mildly overcast day in late fall, when she was walking home from school, heading out of town, she saw the dust blowing and it seemed to blow from over-worked, half-hopeless farms into stores where there were bolts of old dried cloth, and into dim rooms over the stores and into the barbershop with its stubborn thick-leaved nameless window plant, and the dentist's office with the little plush-lined drawers where he kept the false teeth. A place of waiting, of loneliness, unfinished gestures. These feelings or visions didn't come so much from what she could see before her as they did from books that she had got to read from that same library—Russian stories and *Winesburg, Ohio*. She might have been embarrassed by that fact, if she had thought about it. She was brought up to be embarrassed by any reliance on books, or any kind of stretching or blurring of the facts. She was brought up not to be a fool. So she was happy, now that she was turning out not to be that—she was happy to be waiting for her boyfriend Billy Doud outside the bootlegger's, with an engaged girl, Lucille, and to be talking about wedding hats. It was just that she felt cut off. She and Lucille had rolled down the car windows for air, and outside was the night with the river washing out of sight, at its lowest now, among the large white stones, and the frogs and crickets singing, the dirt roads faintly, faintly shining, on their way to nowhere, and the falling-down grandstand in the old fairgrounds sticking up like a crazy skeletal tower, in the dark. She was cut off from all of that. Blindfolded and cut off. Why?

Rhea was sitting in the bootlegger's house—Monk's—a bare, narrow wooden house soiled halfway up the walls by the periodic flooding of the river. Billy Doud was playing cards at one end of the big table. Rhea was seated in a rocking chair, over in a corner by the coal-oil stove, out of the way.

Ordinarily Rhea wouldn't have been inside this house at all. She would have been sitting outside with Lucille, in either Wayne's car or Billy's. Billy and Wayne would go in for one drink, promising to be out in half an hour. (This promise was not to be taken seriously.) But on this night—it was early in August—Lucille was at home sick, Billy and Rhea had gone to the dance in Walley by themselves and afterward they hadn't parked, they had driven directly across country to Monk's. Monk's was on the edge of Carstairs, where Billy and Rhea lived. Billy lived in town, Rhea lived on the chicken farm, just up over the bridge from this row of houses along the river.

When Billy saw Wayne's car parked outside Monk's he greeted it as if it had been Wayne himself. "Ho-ho-ho! Wayne-the-boy!" he cried. "Beat us to it!" He gave Rhea's shoulder a squeeze. "In we go," he said. "You too."

Mrs. Monk opened the back door to them, and Billy said, "See—I brought a neighbor of yours." Mrs. Monk looked at Rhea as if Rhea had been a stone on the road. Billy Doud had odd ideas about people. He lumped them together, if they were poor—what he would call poor—or *working-class*. (Rhea knew that term only from books.) He lumped Rhea in with the Monks because she lived up the hill on the chicken farm—not understanding that her family didn't consider themselves neighbors to the people in these houses, or that her father would never in his life have sat down to drink there.

Rhea had met Mrs. Monk on the road to town, but Mrs. Monk never spoke. Her dark, graying hair was coiled up at the back of her head, and she didn't wear makeup. She had kept a slender figure, as not many women did in Carstairs. Her clothes were neat and plain, not particularly youthful but not what Rhea thought of as housewifely. She wore a checked skirt tonight and a short-sleeved yellow blouse. Her expression was always the same—not hostile, but grave and preoccupied, as if she had a familiar weight of griefs and worries.

She led Billy and Rhea into this room in the middle of the house. The men sitting at the table did not look up or take any notice of Billy until he pulled out a chair. There might have been some sort of rule about this. All ignored Rhea. Mrs. Monk lifted something out of the rocking chair and made a gesture for her to sit down.

"Get you a Coca-Cola?" she said.

The crinoline under Rhea's lime-green dance dress made a noise like crackling straw as she sat down. She laughed apologetically, but Mrs. Monk had already turned away. The only person who took any notice of the noise was Wayne, who was just coming into the room from the front hall. He raised his black eyebrows in a comradely but incriminating way. She never knew whether Wayne liked her or not. Even when he danced with her, at the Walley Pavilion (he and Billy did an obligatory, one-time-a-night, exchange of partners) he held her as if she was a package he was barely responsible for. He was a lifeless dancer.

He and Billy hadn't greeted each other as they usually did, with a growl and a punch in the air. They were cautious and reserved in front of these older men.

Besides Dint Mason and the man who sold pots and pans, Rhea knew Mr. Martin from the dry cleaners and Mr. Boles the undertaker. Some of the others had familiar faces and some didn't. None of these men would be exactly in disgrace for coming here—Monk's was not a disgraceful place. Yet it left a slight stain. It was mentioned as if it explained some- thing. Even if a man flourished. *He goes to Monk's.*

Mrs. Monk brought Rhea a Coca-Cola without a glass. It was not cold.

What Mrs. Monk had removed from the chair, to let Rhea sit down, was a pile of clothes that had been dampened and rolled up for ironing. So, ironing went on here, ordinary housekeeping. Pie crust might be rolled out on that table. Meals were cooked—there was the woodstove, cold and spread with newspapers now, the coal-oil stove serving for summer. There was a smell of coal-oil and damp plaster. Flood stains on the wallpaper. Barren tidiness, dark green blinds pulled down to the window sills. A tin curtain in one corner, probably concealing an old dumbwaiter.

Mrs. Monk was to Rhea the most interesting person in the room. Her legs were bare, but she wore high heels. They were tapping all the time on the floorboards. Around the table, back and forth from the sideboard where the whiskey bottles were (and where she would pause, to write things down on a pad of paper—Rhea's Coca-Cola, the broken glass). Tap-tap-tap down the back hall to some supply base from which she returned with a clutch of beer bottles in each hand. She was watchful as a deaf-mute, and as silent, catching every signal around the table, responding obediently, unsmilingly, to every demand. This brought to Rhea's mind the rumors there were, about Mrs. Monk, and she thought of another sort of signal a man might make. Mrs. Monk would lay aside her apron, she would precede him out of the room into the front hall, where there must be a stairway, leading to the bedrooms. The other men, including her husband, would pretend not to notice. She would mount the stairs without looking back, letting the man follow with his eyes on her neat buttocks in her schoolteacher's skirt. Then on a waiting bed she arranges herself without the least hesitation or enthusiasm. This indifferent readiness, this cool accommodation, the notion of such a quick and driven and bought and paid-for encounter was to Rhea shamefully exciting.

To be so flattened and used and hardly to know who was doing it to you, to take it all in with that secret capability, over and over again.

She thought of Wayne coming out of the front hall just as she and Billy were being brought into the room. She thought, what if he was coming from up there? (Later, he told her that he had been using the phone—phoning Lucille, as he had promised. Later she came to believe those rumors were false.)

Wayne had raised his hand to her across the room, meaning, was she thirsty? He brought her another bottle of Coca-Cola and slid down to the floor beside her. "Sit down before I fall down," he said.

She understood from the first sip, or maybe from the first sniff, or even before that, that there was something else in her drink besides Coca-Cola. She thought that she would not drink all, or even half, of it. She would just take a little drink now and then, to show Wayne that he had not flummoxed her.

"Is that all right?" said Wayne, "Is that the kind of drink you like?"

"It's fine," Rhea said. "I like all kinds of drinks."

"All kinds? That's good. You sound like the right kind of girl for Billy Doud."

"Does he drink a lot?" Rhea said. "Billy?"

"Put it this way," said Wayne. "Is the Pope Jewish? No. Wait. Was Jesus Catholic? No. Continue. I would not want to give you the wrong impression. Nor do I want to get clinical about this. Is Billy a drunk? Is he an alcoholic? Is he an asso-holic? I mean as asshole-oholic? No, I got that wrong too. I forgot who I was talking to. Excuse please. Eliminate. Solly."

He said all this in two strange voices—one artificially high, sing-song, one gruff and serious. Rhea didn't think that she had ever heard him say so much before, in any kind of voice. It was Billy who talked, usually. Wayne said a word now and then, an unimportant word that seemed important because of the tone in which he said it. And yet this tone was often quite empty, quite neutral, the look on this face blank.

That made people nervous. There was a sense of contempt being held in check. Rhea had seen Billy try to stretch a story, twist it, change its tone—all in order to get Waynes's grunt of approval, his absolving bark of laughter.

"You must not come to the conclusion that I don't like Billy," said Wayne. "No. No. I would never want you to think that."

"But you don't like him," Rhea said with satisfaction. "You don't at all." The satisfaction came from the fact that she was talking back to Wayne. She was looking him in the eye. No more than that. For he had made her nervous, too. He was one of those people who make far more of an impression than their size, or their looks, or anything about them, warrants. He was not very tall, and his compact body might have been pudgy in childhood—it might get pudgy again. He had a square face, rather pale except for the bluish shadow of the beard that wounded Lucille. His black hair was very straight and fine, and often flopped over his forehead.

"Don't I?" He said with surprise. "Do I not? How could that be? When Billy is such a lovely person? Look at him over there, drinking and playing cards with the common people. Don't you find him nice? Or do you ever think it's a little strange when anybody can be so nice all the time? *All the time.* There's only one time I've known him to slip up, and that's when you get him talking about some of his old girlfriends. Don't tell me you haven't noticed that."

He had his hand on the leg of Rhea's chair. He was rocking her.

She laughed, giddy from the rocking or perhaps because he had hit on the truth. According to Billy the girl with the veil and the purple gloves had a breath tainted by cigarette smoking, and another girl used vile language when she got drunk, and one of them had a skin infection, a *fungus*, under her arms. Billy had told Rhea all these things regretfully, but when he mentioned the fungus he broke into a giggle. Unwillingly, maliciously, he giggled.

"He does rake those poor girls over the coals." Wayne said. "The hairy legs. The hal-it-os-is. Doesn't it ever make you nervous? But then you're so nice and clean. I bet you shave your legs every night." He ran his hand down her leg, which by good luck she had shaved before going to the dance. "Or do you put that stuff on them, it melts the hair away? What is that stuff called?"

"Neet," Rhea said.

"Neet! That's the stuff. Only doesn't it have kind of a bad smell? A little moldy or like yeast or something? Yeast. Isn't that another thing girls get? Am I embarrassing you? I should be a gentleman and get you another drink. If I can stand and walk I'll get you another drink."

"This has not got hardly any whiskey in it," he said, of the next Coca-Cola he brought her. "This won't hurt you." She thought that the first statement was probably a lie, but the second was certainly true. Nothing could hurt her. And nothing was lost on her. She did not think that Wayne had any good intentions. Nevertheless, she was enjoying myself. All the bafflement, the fogged-in feeling she had, when she was with Billy, had burned away. She felt like laughing at everything that Wayne said, or that she herself said. She felt safe.

"This is a funny house," she said.

"How is it funny?" said Wayne. "Just how is this house funny? You're the one that's funny."

Rhea looked down at this wagging black head and laughed, because he reminded her of some kind of dog. He was clever but there was a stubbornness about him that was close to stupidity. There was a dog's stubbornness and some misery too, about the way he kept bumping his head against her knee now, and jerking it back to shake the black hair out of his eyes.

She explained to him, with many interruptions during which she had to laugh at the possibility of explaining, that what was funny was the tin curtain in the corner of the room. She said that she thought there was a dumbwaiter behind it that went up and down from the cellar.

"We could curl up on the shelf," Wayne said. "Want to try it? We could get Billy to let down the rope."

She looked again for Billy's white shirt. So far as she knew he hadn't turned around to look at her once since he sat down. Wayne was sitting directly in front of her now, so that if Billy did turn around he wouldn't be able to see that her shoe was dangling from one toe and Wayne was flicking his fingers against the sole of her foot.

She said that she would have to go to the bathroom first.

"I will escort you," Wayne said.

He grabbed her legs to help himself up. Rhea said, "You're drunk."

"I'm not the only one."

The Monks' house had a toilet, in fact a bathroom, off the back hall.

The bathtub was full of cases of beer—not cooling, just stored there. The toilet flushed properly. Rhea had been afraid it wouldn't, because it looked as if it hadn't, for the last person.

She looked at her face in the mirror over the sink and spoke to it with recklessness and approval. "Let him," she said. "*Let him.*" She turned off the light and stepped into the dark hall. Hands took charge of her at once, and she was guided and propelled out the back door. Up against the wall of the house, she and Wayne were pushing and grabbing and kissing each other. She had the idea of herself, at this juncture, being opened and squeezed, opened and squeezed shut, like an accordion. She was getting a warning, too—something in the distance, not connected with what she and Wayne were doing. A troop of demons in the distance, trying to make themselves understood.

The Monks' dog had come up silently and was nosing in between them. Wayne knew its name.

"Get down, Rory! Get down, Rory!" he said as he yanked at Rhea's crinoline.

The warning was from her stomach, which was being shoved so tightly against the wall. The back door opened, Wayne said something clearly into her ear—she would never know which of these things happened first—and she was suddenly released and began to vomit. She had no intention of vomiting until she started. Then she went down on her hands and knees and vomited until her stomach felt wrung out like a poor rotten rag. When she finished she was shivering as if a fever had hit her, and her dance dress and crinoline were wet where the vomit had splattered.

Somebody else, not Wayne, pulled her up and wiped her face with the hem of the dress.

"Keep your mouth closed and breathe through your nose," Mrs. Monk said. "You get out of here," she said, either to Wayne or to Rory. She gave all of them their orders in the same voice, without sympathy and without blame. She pulled Rhea around the house to her husband's truck and half hoisted her into it.

Rhea said, "Billy."

"I'll tell your Billy. I'll say you got tired. Don't try to talk."

"I'm through throwing up," Rhea said.

"You never know," said Mrs. Monk, backing the truck out on to the road. She drove Rhea up the hill and into her own yard without saying anything more. When she had turned the truck around and stopped she said, "Watch out when you're stepping down. It's a bigger step than a car."

Rhea got herself into the house, used the bathroom without closing the door, kicked off her shoes in the kitchen, climbed the stairs, wadded up her dress and crinoline and pushed them far under the bed.

Rhea's father got up early, to gather the eggs and get ready to go to Hamilton, as he did every second Sunday. The boys were going with him—they could ride in the back of the truck. Rhea was not going, because there wouldn't be room in front. Her father was taking Mrs. Corey, whose husband was in the same hospital as Rhea's mother. When he took Mrs. Corey with him he always put on a shirt and a tie, because they might go into a restaurant on the way home.

He came and knocked on Rhea's door to tell her they were leaving.

"If you find time heavy you can clean the eggs on the table," he said.

He walked to the head of the stairs, then came back.

He called through her door. "Drink lots and lots of water."

Rhea wanted to scream at them all to get out of the house. She had things to consider, things inside her head that could not get free because of the pressure of the people in the house. That was what was causing her to have such a headache. After she had heard the truck's noise die away along the road she got out of bed carefully, downstairs, took three aspirins, drank as much water as she could hold, and measured coffee into the pot without looking down.

The eggs were on the table, in six-quart baskets. There were smears of hen-dirt and bits of straw stuck to them, waiting to be rubbed off with steel wool.

What things? Words, above all. The words that Wayne had said to her just as Mrs. Monk came out the back door.

I'd like to fuck you if you weren't so ugly.

She got dressed, and when the coffee was ready she poured a cup and went outside, out to the side porch which was in deep morning shade. The aspirins had started to work, and now instead of the headache she had a space in her head, a clear precarious space with a light buzz around it.

She was not ugly. She knew she was not ugly.

How can you ever be sure, that you are not ugly?

But if she was ugly, would Billy Doud have gone out with her in the first place?

Billy Doud prided himself on being kind.

But Wayne was very drunk when he said that.

Drunkards speak truth.

It was a good thing she was not going to see her mother that day. If she ever wormed out of Rhea what was the matter—and Rhea could never be certain that she would not do that—then her mother would want Wayne chastised. She would be capable of phoning his father the minister. The word *fuck* was what would incense her, more than the word *ugly*. She would miss the point entirely.

Rhea's father's reaction would be more complicated. He would blame Billy, for taking her into a place like Monk's. Billy, Billy's sort of friends. He would be angry about the *fuck* part but really he would be ashamed of Rhea. He would be forever ashamed that a man had called her ugly.

You cannot let your parents anywhere near your real humiliations.

She knew she was not ugly.

How could she know she was not ugly?

She did not think about Billy and Wayne, or about what this might mean between them. She was not as yet very interested in other people.

She did think that when Wayne said those words he used his real voice.

She did not want to go back inside the house. She didn't want to have to look at the baskets full of dirty eggs. She started walking down the lane, wincing in the sunlight, lowering her head between one island of shade and the next. Each tree was different there and each was a milestone, when she used to ask her mother how far she could go to meet her father, coming home from town. As far as the hawthorn tree, as far as the beech tree, as far as the maple. He would stop and let Rhea ride on the running board.

A car hooted from the road. Somebody who knew her, or just a man going by? She wanted to get out of sight, so she cut across the field that the chickens had picked clean and paved slick with their droppings. In one of the trees at the far side of this field her brothers had built a tree house. It was just a platform, with boards nailed to the tree trunk to climb. Rhea did that, she climbed up and sat on the platform. She saw that her brothers had cut windows in the leafy branches, for spying. She could look down on the road, and presently she saw a few cars bringing country children into town to the early Sunday school at the Baptist church. The people in the cars couldn't see here. Billy or Wayne wouldn't be able to see her, if by any chance they should come looking, with explanations or accusations or apologies.

In another direction, she could see flashes of the river and a part of the old fairgrounds. It was easy from there to make out where the racetrack used to go round, in the long grass.

She saw a person walking, following the racetrack. It was Eunie Morgan, and she was wearing her pajamas. She was walking along the racetrack, in light-colored, pale pink pajamas, at about half-past nine in the morning. She followed the track until it veered off, going down to where the riverbank path used to be. The bushes hid her.

Eunie Morgan with her white hair sticking up, her hair and her pajamas catching the light. Like an angel in feathers. But walking in her usual awkward, assertive way—body tilted forward, arms swinging free. Rhea didn't know what Eunie could be doing there. She didn't know anything about Eunie's disappearance. The sight of Eunie seemed both strange and natural to her.

She remembered how, on hot summer days, she used to think that Eunie's hair looked like a snowball or like threads of ice preserved from winter, and she would want to mash her face against it, to get cool.

She remembered the hot grass and garlic and the jumping-out-of-your-skin feeling, when they were turning into Toms.

She went back to the house and phoned Wayne. She counted on his being home and the rest of his family in church. "I want to ask you something and not on the phone," she said. "Dad and the boys went to Hamilton."

When Wayne got there she was on the porch, cleaning eggs.

"I want to know what you meant," she said.

"By what?" said Wayne.

Rhea looked up at him, and kept looking, with an egg in one hand and a piece of steel wool in the other.

"I was drunk," Wayne said. "You're not ugly."

Rhea said, "I know I'm not."

"I feel awful."

"Not for that," said Rhea.

"I was drunk. It was a joke."

Rhea said, "You don't want to get married to Lucille."

He leaned into the railing. She thought maybe he was going to be sick. But he got over that and tried his raising of the eyebrows, his discouraging smile.

"Oh, really? No kidding? So what advice do you have for me?"

"Write a note," said Rhea, just as if he had asked seriously. "Get in your car. Drive to Calgary."

"Just like that."

"If you want, I'll ride with you to Toronto. You can drop me there and I'll stay at the Y and get a job."

All this astonished Rhea, as it came out, almost as much as it did Wayne. But she couldn't go back on any of it.

"Did you ever look at a map?" Wayne said. "You don't go through Toronto on the way to Calgary. You go across at Sarnia and up through the States to Winnipeg. Then Calgary."

"Drop me off in Winnipeg then, that's better."

"One question. Have you had a sanity test recently?"

"No."

When Rhea saw her, Eunie was on her way home. It was a surprise to Eunie to find the riverbank path not clear as she was expecting it it be, but all grown up with brambles. When she pushed out into her own yard she had scratches and smears of blood on her arms and forehead, and bits of leaves caught in her hair. One side of her face was dirty, too, from resting on the ground.

In the kitchen Eunie found her mother and her father and her Aunt Muriel Martin, and Norman Slater, the Chief of Police, and Billy Doud. After her mother had phoned her Aunt Muriel, her father had stirred himself, and said that he was going to phone Mr. Doud. He had worked in Doud's when he was young, and remembered how Mr. Doud, Billy's father, was always sent for in an emergency.

"You mean the one that's dead," said Eunie's mother. "What if you get *her*?" But he phoned anyway, and got Billy, who hadn't been to bed.

Aunt Muriel Martin had phoned the Chief of Police. He said he would be down as soon as he got dressed and ate his breakfast. This took him some time. He disliked anything puzzling or disruptive, anything that might force him to make decisions which could be criticized later or result in his looking like a fool. Of all the people in the kitchen, he might have been the happiest to see Eunie home safe, and to hear her story. It was right out of his jurisdiction. There was nothing to be followed up, nobody to be charged.

Eunie said that three children had come up to her, in her own yard, in the middle of the night. They said that they had something to show her. "What's that?" she said. She asked them what they were doing up so late at night. She didn't recall what they answered.

She found herself being borne along by them, without ever having said that she would go. They took her out through the gap in the fence at the corner of the yard and along the path by the riverbank. She was surprised to find the path so well opened up—she had the idea that it must be all overgrown, now that she didn't go that way anymore.

It was two boys and a girl who took her. They looked about nine or ten or eleven years old, and they all wore the same sort of outfit—a kind of seersucker sunsuit with a bib in front and straps over the shoulders. So fresh and clean, as if just off the ironing board. The hair of these children was straight, light brown and shiny. How could she tell at night what color their hair was and that their sunsuits were made of seersucker? When she came out of the house she hadn't brought the flashlight. They must have brought some kind of light with them—that was her impression.

They took her along the path and out onto the old fairgrounds. They took her to their tent. But it seemed to her that she didn't see that tent once from the outside. She was just suddenly inside it, and she saw that it was white, very high, and shivering like the sails on a boat; also it was lit up, and again she had no idea where the light was coming from. And a certain part of this tent, or building or whatever it was, seemed to be made of glass. Yes. Green glass, a very light green, as if panels of it were slid in between the sails. Possibly to a glass floor, because she was walking in her bare feet on something cool and smooth —not grass at all, and certainly not gravel.

(Later on, in the newspaper, there was a drawing, an artist's conception, of something like a sailboat in a saucer. But flying saucer was not what Eunie called it—she called it a tent, at least when she was talking about it immediately afterwards. Also she said nothing about what appeared in print later, in a book of such stories, concerning the capture and investigation of her body, the sampling of her blood and fluids, the possibility that one of her secret eggs had been spirited away, that fertilization might have taken place in an alien dimension—subtle or explosive, at any rate indescribable, mating, that sucked Eunie's genes into the lifestream of the invaders.)

She was set down in a seat she hadn't noticed, she couldn't say if it was a plain chair or a throne, and these children began to weave a veil around her. It was like mosquito netting or some such stuff, light but strong. All three of them moved continuously winding or weaving it around her, never bumping into each other. She did not ask one question. All possible questions, such as, "What do you think you're doing?" or "How did you get here?" or "Where are the grown-ups?" had just slipped off some place where she couldn't reach them. It was not that she was scared. She was opposite of scared, or uncomfortable. It was so pleasant, she couldn't describe it. (When she tried to, she said, "I was just as happy as a cow in clover.") And also everything had got to seem perfectly normal. You wouldn't ask questions, anymore than you would ask, "What is that teapot doing here?" when you were sitting in an ordinary room.

When she woke up there was nothing around her, nothing over her. She was lying in the hot sunlight, well on in the morning. In the fairgrounds, on the hard earth.

"Wonderful," said Billy Doud several times as he watched and listened to Eunie. He smelled of beer but seemed sober and very attentive. More than attentive—you might say, enchanted. Eunie's singular revelations, her diny flushed face and her thickened, somewhat arrogant voice, appeared to wrap Billy Doud in delight. *Wonderful.*

His love—Billy Doud's kind of love—sprang up to meet a need that Eunie wouldn't know anything about.

Aunt Muriel said it was time to phone the newspapers.

Eunie's mother said, "Won't Bill Proctor be in church?" She was speaking of the editor of the Carstairs *Argus*.

"Bill Proctor can cool his heels," Aunt Muriel said. "I'm phoning *The London Free Press*!"

She did that, but she did not get to talk to the right person, only to some sort of caretaker, because of its being Sunday. "They'll be sorry!" she said. "I'm going to go over their heads right to *The Toronto Star*!"

She had taken charge of the story. Eunie let her. Eunie was satisfied.

When she was not speaking, and when it seemed nobody was looking at her, she sat still, with a look of satisfaction and indifference on her face. She did not ask that anybody take charge of *her*, try to protect her, with seriousness and kindness, through what lay ahead. But Billy Doud had already made a vow to do that.

Eunie had some fame, for a while. Reporters came. A book writer came. A photographer took pictures of the fairgrounds, and of the racetrack, which was supposed to be the mark left by the spaceship. There was also a picture of the grandstand, and a caption that said it had been knocked down in the course of the landing.

Interest in this sort of story reached a peak years ago, then slowly dwindled.

"Who knows what happened," Rhea's father said, in a letter that he wrote to Calgary.

"One sure thing is, Eunie Morgan never made a cent out of it."

He was writing this letter to Rhea. Soon after they got to Calgary, Wayne and Rhea were married. You had to be married then, to get an apartment together—at least in Calgary—and they had discovered that they did not want to live separately. That would continue to be the way they felt most of the time, though they would discuss it—living separately—and threaten it, and give it a couple of brief tries.

Wayne left the paper and went into television. For years you might see him on the late news, sometimes in rain or snow on Parliament Hill, delivering some rumor or piece of information. Later he traveled to foreign cities and did the same thing there, and still later he got to be one of the people who sit indoors and discuss what the news means and who is telling lies.

(Eunie became very fond of television but she never saw Wayne, because she hated it when people just talked—she always switched at once to something happening.)

Back in Carstairs on a brief visit, and wandering in the cemetery, looking to see who has moved in since her last inspection, Rhea spots Lucille Flagg's name on a stone. But it is all right—Lucille isn't dead. Her husband is, and Lucille has had her own name and date of birth cut on the stone along with his, ahead of time. A lot of people do this, because the cost of stonecutting is always going up.

Rhea remembers the hats and rosebuds, and feels a tenderness for

Lucille that cannot ever be returned.

At this time Rhea and Wayne have lived together for far more than half their lives. They have had three children, and between them, counting everything, five times as many lovers. And now abruptly, surprisingly, all this turbulence and fruitfulness and uncertain but lively expectation has receded and she knows they are beginning to be old. There in the cemetery she says out loud, "I can't get used to it."

They look up the Douds, who are friends of theirs in a way, and together the two couples drive out to where the old fairgrounds used to be.

Rhea says the same thing there.

The river houses all gone. The Morgans' house, the Monks' house —everything gone of that first mistaken settlement. The land is now a floodplain, under the control of the Peregrine River Authority. Nothing can be built there anymore. A spacious parkland, a shorn and civilized riverbank—nothing left but a few of the same old trees standing around, their leaves still green but weighed down by a diffuse golden moisture that is in the air on this September afternoon not many years before the end of the century.

"I can't get used to it," says Rhea.

They are white-haired now, all four of them. Rhea is a thin and darting sort of woman, whose lively and cajoling ways have come in handy teaching English as a second language. Wayne is thin, too, with a fine white beard and a mild manner. When he's not appearing on television he might remind you of a Tibetan monk. In front of the camera he turns caustic, even brutal.

The Douds are big people, stately and fresh-faced, with a cushioning of wholesome fat.

Billy Doud smiles at Rhea's vehemence, and looks around with distracted approval.

"Time marches on," he says.

He pats his wife on her broad back, responding to a low grumble that the others haven't heard. He tells her they'll be going home in a minute, she won't miss the show she watches every afternoon.

Rhea's father was right about Eunie not making any money out of her experiences, and he was right too in what he had predicted about Billy Doud. After Billy's mother died, problems multiplied and Billy sold out. Soon the people who had bought the factory from him sold out in their turn and the plant was closed down. There were no more pianos made in Carstairs. Billy went to Toronto and got a job, which Rhea's father said had something to do with schizophrenics or drug addicts or Christianity.

In fact, Billy was working at halfway houses and group homes, and Wayne and Rhea knew this. Billy had kept up the friendship. He had also kept up his special friendship with Eunie. He hired her to look after his sister Bea when Bea began drinking a little too much to look after herself. (Billy was not drinking at all anymore.)

When Bea died, Billy inherited the house and made it over into a home for old people and disabled people who were not so old or disabled that they needed to be in bed. He meant to make it a place where they could get comfort and kindness and little treats and entertainments. He came back to Carstairs and settled in to run it.

He asked Eunie Morgan to marry him.

"I wouldn't want for there to be anything going on, or anything," Eunie said.

"Oh, my dear!" said Billy. "Oh, my dear, dear Eunie!"