

5 This happened near Carbondale to a woman named Jane Vare. I met her once at a party. She was sitting on a couch with her arms stretched out on either side and a drink in one hand. We talked about dogs.

10 She had an old greyhound. She'd bought him to save his life, she said. At the tracks they put them down rather than feed them when they stopped winning, sometimes three or four together, threw them in the back of a truck and drove to the dump. This dog was named Phil. He was stiff and nearly blind, but she admired his dignity. He sometimes lifted his leg against the wall, almost as high as the door handle, but he had a fine face.

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15 Tack on the kitchen table, mud on the wide-board floor. In she strode like a young groom in a worn jacket and boots. She had what they called a good seat and ribbons layered like feathers on the wall. Her father had lived in Ireland where they rode into the dining room on Sunday morning and the host died fallen on the bed in full attire. Her own life had become like that. Money and dents in the side of her nearly new Swedish car. Her husband had been gone for a year.

20 Around Carbondale the river drops down and widens. There's a spidery trestle bridge, many times repainted, and they used to mine coal.

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25 It was late in the afternoon and a shower had passed. The light was silvery and strange. Cars emerging from the rain drove with their headlights on and the windshield wipers going. The yellow road machinery parked along the shoulder seemed unnaturally bright.

It was the hour after work when irrigation water glistens high in the air, the hills have begun to darken and the meadows are like ponds.

30 She was riding alone up along the ridge. She was on a horse named Fiume, big, well formed, but not very smart. He didn't hear things and sometimes stumbled when he walked. They had gone as far as the reservoir and then come back, riding to the west where the sun was going down. He could run, this horse. His hooves were pounding.

The back of her shirt was filled with wind, the saddle was creaking, his huge neck was dark with sweat. They came along the ditch and toward a gate—they jumped it all the time.

5 At the last moment something happened. It took just an instant. He may have crossed his legs or hit a hole but he suddenly gave way. She went over his head and as if in slow motion he came after. He was upside down—she lay there watching him float toward her. He landed on her open lap.

It was as if she'd been hit by a car. She was stunned but felt unhurt. For a minute she imagined she might stand up and brush herself off.

10 The horse had gotten up. His legs were dirty and there was dirt on his back. In the silence she could hear the clink of the bridle and even the water flowing in the ditch. All around her were meadows and stillness. She felt sick to her stomach. It was all broken down there—she knew it although she could feel nothing. She knew she had some time. Twenty minutes, they always said.

15 The horse was pulling at some grass. She rose to her elbows and was immediately dizzy. “God damn you!” she called. She was nearly crying. “Git! Go home!” Someone might see the empty saddle. She closed her eyes and tried to think. Somehow she could not believe it—nothing that had happened was true.

20 It was that way the morning they came and told her Privet had been hurt. The foreman was waiting in the pasture. “Her leg’s broken,” he said.

“How did it happen?”

He didn’t know. “It looks like she got kicked,” he guessed.

25 The horse was lying under a tree. She knelt and stroked its boardlike nose. The large eyes seemed to be looking elsewhere. The vet would be driving up from Catherine Store trailing a plume of dust, but it turned out to be a long time before he came. He parked a little way off and walked over. Afterward he said what she had known he would say, they were going to have to put her down.

30 She lay remembering that. The day had ended. Lights were appearing in parts of distant houses. The six o’clock news was on. Far below she could see the hayfield of Piñones and much closer, a hundred yards off, a truck. It belonged to someone trying to build a house down there. It was up on blocks, it didn’t run. There were other houses within a mile or so. On the other side of the ridge the metal roof, hidden in trees, of old man Vaughn who had once owned all of this and now could hardly walk. Further west the beautiful tan adobe Bill Millinger built before he went broke or

whatever it was. He had wonderful taste. The house had the peeled log ceilings of the Southwest, Navajo rugs, and fireplaces in every room. Wide views of the mountains through windows of tinted glass. Anyone who knew enough to build a house like that knew everything.

5 She had given the famous dinner for him, unforgettable night. The clouds had been blowing off the top of Sopris all day, then came the snow. They talked in front of the fire. There were wine bottles crowded on the mantel and everyone in good clothes. Outside the snow poured down. She was wearing silk pants and her hair was loose. In the end she stood with him near the doorway to the kitchen. She was filled with
10 warmth and a little drunk, was he?

He was watching her finger on the edge of his jacket lapel. Her heart thudded. “You’re not going to make me spend the night alone?” she asked.

He had blond hair and small ears close to his head. “Oh ...” he began.

“What?”

15 “Don’t you know? I’m the other way.”

Which way, she insisted. It was such a waste. The roads were almost closed, the house lost in snow. She began to plead—she couldn’t help it—and then became angry. The silk pants, the furniture, she hated it all.

In the morning his car was outside. She found him in the kitchen making breakfast.
20 He’d slept on the couch, combed his longish hair with his fingers. On his cheeks was a blond stubble. “Sleep well, darling?” he asked.

Sometimes it was the other way around—in Saratoga in the bar where the idol was the tall Englishman who had made so much money at the sales. Did she live there? he asked. When you were close his eyes looked watery but in that English voice which
25 was so pure, “It’s marvelous to come to a place and see someone like you,” he said.

She hadn’t really decided whether to stay or leave and she had a drink with him. He smoked a cigarette.

“You haven’t heard about those?” she said.

“No, what about them?”

30 “They’ll give thee cancer.”

“Thee?”

“It’s what the Quakers say.”

“Are you really a Quaker?”

“Oh, back a ways.”

5 He had her by the elbow. “Do you know what I’d like? I’d like to fuck thee,” he said.

She bent her arm to remove it.

“I mean it,” he said. “Tonight.”

“Some other time,” she told him.

“I don’t have another time. My wife’s coming tomorrow, I only have tonight.”

10 “That’s too bad. I have every night.”

She hadn’t forgotten him, though she’d forgotten his name. His shirt had elegant blue stripes. “Oh, damn you,” she suddenly cried. It was the horse. He hadn’t gone. He was over by the fence. She began to call him, “Here, boy. Come here,” she begged. He wouldn’t move.

15 She didn’t know what to do. Five minutes had passed, perhaps longer. Oh, God, she said, oh, Lord, oh God our Father. She could see the long stretch of road that came up from the highway, the unpaved surface very pale. Someone would come up that road and not turn off. The disastrous road. She had been driving it that day with her husband. There was something he had been meaning to tell her, Henry said, his head
20 tilted back at a funny angle. He was making a change in his life. Her heart took a skip. He was breaking off with Mara, he said.

There was a silence.

Finally she said, “With who?”

25 He realized his mistake. “The girl who ... in the architect’s office. She’s the draftsman.”

“What do you mean, breaking it off?” It was hard for her to speak. She was looking at him as one would look at a fugitive.

“You knew about that, didn’t you? I was sure you knew. Anyway it’s over. I wanted to tell you. I wanted to put it all behind us.”

“Stop the car,” she said. “Don’t say any more, stop here.”

5 He drove alongside her trying to explain but she was picking up the biggest stones she could find and throwing them at the car. Then she cut unsteadily across the fields, the sage bushes scratching her legs.

When she heard him drive up after midnight she jumped from bed and shouted from the window, “No, no! Go away!”

10 “What I never understood is why no one told me,” she used to say. “They were supposed to be my friends.”

Some failed, some divorced, some got shot in trailers like Doug Portis who had the excavation business and was seeing the policeman’s wife. Some like her husband moved to Santa Barbara and became the extra man at dinner parties.

15 It was growing dark. Help me, someone, help me, she kept repeating. Someone would come, they had to. She tried not to be afraid. She thought of her father who could explain life in one sentence, “They knock you down and you get up. That’s what it’s all about.” He recognized only one virtue. He would hear what had happened, that she merely lay there. She had to try to get home, even if she went only a little way, even a few yards.

20 Pushing with her palms she managed to drag herself, calling the horse as she did. Perhaps she could grab a stirrup if he came. She tried to find him. In the last of the light she saw the fading cottonwoods but the rest had disappeared. The fence posts were gone. The meadows had drifted away.

25 She tried to play a game, she wasn’t lying near the ditch, she was in another place, in all the places, on Eleventh Street in that first apartment above the big skylight of the restaurant, the morning in Sausalito with the maid knocking on the door and Henry trying to call in Spanish, not now, not now! And postcards on the marble of the dresser and things they’d bought. Outside the hotel in Haiti the cabdrivers were leaning on their cars and calling out in soft voices, Hey, blanc, you like to go to a nice
30 beach? Ibo beach? They wanted thirty dollars for the day, they said, which meant the price was probably about five. Go ahead, give it to him, she said. She could be there so easily, or in her own bed reading on a stormy day with the rain gusting against the window and the dogs near her feet. On the desk were photographs: horses, and her jumping, and one of her father at lunch outside when he was thirty, at Burning Tree.
35 She had called him one day—she was getting married, she said. Married, he said, to

whom? A man named Henry Vare, she said, who is wearing a beautiful suit, she wanted to add, and has wonderful wide hands. Tomorrow, she said.

“Tomorrow?” He sounded farther away. “Are you sure you’re doing the right thing?”

“Absolutely.”

5 “God bless you,” he said.

That summer was the one they came here—it was where Henry had been living—and bought the place past the Macraes’. All year they fixed up the house and Henry started his landscaping business. They had their own world. Up through the fields in nothing but shorts, the earth warm under their feet, skin flecked with dirt from
10 swimming in the ditch where the water was chilly and deep, like two sun-bleached children but far better, the screen door slamming, things on the kitchen table, catalogues, knives, new everything. Autumn with its brilliant blue skies and the first storms coming up from the west.

It was dark now, everywhere except up by the ridge. There were all the things she
15 had meant to do, to go East again, to visit certain friends, to live a year by the sea. She could not believe it was over, that she was going to be left here on the ground.

Suddenly she started to call for help, wildly, the cords standing out in her neck. In the darkness the horse raised his head. She kept shouting. She already knew it was a thing she would pay for, she was losing the demonic. At last she stopped. She could
20 hear the pounding of her heart and beyond that something else. Oh, God, she began to beg. Lying there she heard the first solemn drumbeats, terrible and slow.

Whatever it was, however bad, I’m going to do it as my father would, she thought. Hurriedly she tried to imagine him and as she was doing it a length of something went through her, something iron. In one unbelievable instant she realized the power of it,
25 where it would take her, what it meant.

Her face was wet and she was shivering. Now it was here. Now you must do it, she realized. She knew there was a God, she hoped it. She shut her eyes. When she opened them it had begun, so utterly unforeseen and with such speed. She saw something dark moving along the fence line. It was her pony, the one her father had
30 given her long ago, her black pony going home, across the broad fields, across the grassland. Wait, wait for me!

She began to scream.

Lights were jerking up and down along the ditch. It was a pickup coming over the uneven ground, the man who was sometimes building the lone house and a high school girl named Fern who worked at the golf course. They had the windows up and, turning, their lights swept close to the horse but they didn't see him. They saw him
5 later, coming back in silence, the big handsome face in the darkness looking at them dumbly.

"He's saddled," Fern said in surprise.

He was standing calmly. That was how they found her. They put her in the back—she was limp, there was dirt in her ears—and drove into Glenwood at eighty miles an
10 hour, not even stopping to call ahead.

That wasn't the right thing, as someone said later. It would have been better if they had gone the other way, about three miles up the road to Bob Lamb's. He was the vet but he might have done something. Whatever you said, he was the best doctor around.

15 They would have pulled in with the headlights blooming on the white farmhouse as happened so many nights. Everyone knew Bob Lamb. There were a hundred dogs, his own among them, buried in back of the barn.