

CHANGING HORSES

Adam had almost escaped her — or was it himself? How long had it been since that night they sat together in the pub, she smiling her intentions as clear as the pint of beer he sipped slowly so he might deny them? Three years at least. Between then and now, he'd heard reports of boyfriends, much closer to her age than Adam, so easily drawn to her and even more easily discarded. *They're like a birthday card*, Tricia said once. *You enjoy it for a short time, even display it on a shelf so that people will know you're loved, then forget it in a drawer or a bin.*

The first one she'd taken up with angered him, even though, as a married man with three children everyone was proud of, he had absolutely no right to claim a shred of intimacy from her. What proof did he have that Tricia had latched on to this halfback, whose slowness of intellect faced his instructors with a moral crisis each time the question of final marks came up, just to provoke him? He put it down at first to the egotism that wells up inside a man who feels like no more than an extra in his own home, an appendage to a coalition of wife and children so self-contained that they come to regard as proper tribute his efforts to sustain them. A kept bird who rails against the excesses of leafy song and potent breezes.

He and Amanda had been in the line-up for a movie when Tricia rolled up, arm in arm, with this chap.

"Dr Goldsmith," she said, her eyes on Amanda. "Meet Larry."

"I have," Adam said, sarcastically. "Didn't you drop out of my Shakespeare class last year?"

Amanda, whose father and grandfather were respected university deans elsewhere, moved in instinctively to salve the breach of protocol. "My husband's very rude, Miss —?"

"Tricia," she said, sweetly. "Just call me Tricia"

Amanda patted Adam on the chest. "He gets this way in queues. You have no idea what I have to endure just to get him to take me out to a movie!"

"I can well imagine," Tricia said, smiling at Adam.

"She always insists on these putrid love movies," Adam muttered.

"I know what you mean," Larry offered.

"Oh, butt out of it!" Tricia said. "Do you guys *always* have to defend each other?"

Adam smiled. "Now you're being rude, Tricia."

"I'm allowed," she said, giving Larry a quick kiss on the cheek. "We're engaged, you see."

Apparently that had been Larry's finest hour. When Adam next saw her at a concert nearly a year later, she was alone with her parents who seemed only slightly concerned by the familiarity she showed to him in the lobby at intermission, even after he'd tried to avoid her. She made a great show of elbowing her way through the crowd, locking arms with him then drawing him back to meet her parents.

"We've heard so much about you from Tricia, Dr Goldsmith," her mother, a kindly, round woman, said, shaking his hand as though her fingers were clad in white gloves.

"A few good things, I hope," said Adam.

"Remarkably so," said her father, a well-respected solicitor in town. "It seems that you were the only lecturer in my daughter's brief stint at the university who had anything of value to teach her. A pity, don't you think, given her apparent intelligence?"

"Please, father," Tricia intervened. "Must you bore *everyone* with your perpetual crisis of confidence in me?"

"You'll forgive me, Dr Goldsmith," her father said, lowering his voice. "My most princely failing, as my wife so often points out, is my selfish, paternal desire to see my eldest child discover some area of interest she can attach herself to for more than six months at a time. I was hoping that someone she admires might assist me in discouraging her from wasting yet another year away from her studies."

"Adam just might know more than you think about wasting time, father dear," said Tricia, looking around then turning back to Adam. "And where's Mrs Goldsmith this evening?"

"At home," he said, quickly. "She finds Beethoven a bit overstated in this symphony."

"And you?" said Tricia. "What do you think of poor old Ludwig?"

"I find it amazing that someone who was deaf could hear so well," he said.

"I guess it's all a matter of discipline, isn't it?"

He looked at her, for an instant forgetting her parents' probing eyes. "Yes," he said, flatly.

She sat with him, in Amanda's seat, for the rest of the concert. Afterwards he took her to a lounge where they sipped Vienna coffees until closing time. It seemed like the right thing to do somehow; the pub seemed ages ago, when they had been two different persons. As he

stopped in front of her house, she told him that her father was angry because she had just told him that evening of her intention to go to Germany with no definite plans other than to travel and enjoy herself until her money ran out. When he asked her about Larry and she told him that it was all finished he was surprised. She touched his hand and they kissed lightly at first then more desperately, with the boldness of two people who accept they are drawn inexorably apart by circumstance but who mean to leave a lasting good impression on each other, as photos taken on an international flight deck encapsulate the bravery of eyes and lips at their best.

In bed, under Amanda's questioning, he enjoyed his obliqueness.

How had she changed from just another attractive student that he might, in a private moment or two, think about in more than an intellectual sense? Their relationship, if that's what it could be called, started the day she came into class late, prancing up to take a seat in the front row while Adam was in mid-sentence, almost as though she were intent on testing his patience. She was slim and a bit careless in dress, which might have been a lingering habit from adolescence or else a more purposeful attempt to tease male admirers in trying to imagine what she looked like under the blouses that seemed large enough to be her father's and the baggy jeans. Her hair was dark and always a bit unruly, as if she'd made a swipe at brushing it then given up before rushing out the door. And her eyes were the clear green of the sea over a sunlit reef. But he was talking about Chekhov, one of his favourites, and he wouldn't be distracted.

"Anna is no more than a child emotionally," he went on, speaking of the heroine, "but she *thinks* she's in love, because, for the first time, someone has finally paid attention to her, even though she's been married for years. Though she worries, like a good little girl, about her loss of reputation, she quickly discards her guilt and gallops into the affair with Gurov, convinced that love can conquer all, even in a society that frowns upon visible signs of adultery."

And so on. Tricia sat through most of the lecture, twisting and turning, and looking distinctly bored, yet Adam sensed that her reaction wasn't that of the student for whom literature had no meaning but rather one who rankled under the regimen of the lecture, where students were expected to merely transpose the instructor's pearls into baser forms that could be later resurrected as polished stones in answer to exam questions. He decided to be daring and open the floor to discussion.

"What do you think?" he challenged the class. "Will Anna and Gurov be able to make it? Will their love last?"

Silence from all corners. The first defense of students, he thought as he stood there, is to hope that your question is rhetorical, that you really are talking to yourself, not them, and that you will generously relieve the nagging tension by answering your own question. The first defense of lecturers is to pretend that they were right and to do just what the students expect, for fear of being accused on some anonymous evaluation form at the semester's end of not giving good value during class time. But Adam felt stubborn that day — he would not be black-mailed into filling the gap.

"Tricia," he said, enjoying it as she flushed in response to her name. "What do you think?"

"Well," she stammered. "I don't see why it shouldn't last."

"Even though Gurov is already feeling his age?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "Maybe *because* of that."

Adam was intrigued. Here he had it — the possibility of a fresh perspective. He couldn't let it get away.

"What do you mean?" he entreated.

"I don't deny that Gurov's wasted his life up until he meets Anna. Since his marriage was arranged for him, maybe he's got the right to feel cynical. But that shouldn't mean he can't turn things around once he feels love, as he says, for the first time. We can always change horses."

Other students jumped in then with the opposing view: the characters' restrictive marriages, the constant temptation to cave in to societal pressures, and so forth. Still, Tricia didn't back down, even though she resorted more often to evidence drawn from real life than the story itself. Adam was forced to disagree with her, pointing to the many examples of ambivalence Chekhov had embedded in the text, yet something in him wanted to side with her, wanted to believe that such romance was possible, even now.

He began to look forward to her class and spent hours preparing discussion questions. But then, inexplicably, Tricia's attendance dropped off, until, by the middle of the semester, she was hardly attending at all. When he tried calling her at home, she was never there and didn't return his calls. If he saw her on campus, even well ahead of him, he'd run up to her and breathlessly ask what was wrong. Inwardly he feared that *he* was the problem: maybe she didn't enjoy the class time, maybe she'd found him too self-centred in asserting his interpretations — he ran through a myriad of other possible objections that a bright student might have. Yet, cornered in those situations, she always apologised profusely, insisting that she *really* enjoyed the sessions and was sorry to have missed them but all these *things* were happening in her life and she'd just about got them under control and was very sure that she'd

be back in class very soon, the next day, in fact. And still she failed to show up.

By the semester's end, Adam had almost given up. She would certainly miss the final exam, and then it would be all over, and he would simply have to fail her. She couldn't expect to pass when she'd missed so much work. But then, to his surprise, she did show up, on time for a change, flopping down wearily in her usual seat to receive the question sheet and answer booklet from him with a tight smile and a whispered thank you. She seemed a bit more distant than usual, but he put that down to fatigue. Perhaps she'd put in a few long nights of study. Maybe, as he'd done so often in his undergraduate classes, she'd learned to cram effectively enough to turn in a credible job on the exam and thereby manage to suppress the signs of a semester's inaction. Maybe she'd planned it this way all the time just to show him that she didn't need him, or anyone else, to inject literature into her veins.

He watched her turn her pencil thoughtfully as she gazed up to the ceiling, no doubt planning her answer to the first question. The race was on. *Go on, kid*, he thought. *Give 'em hell!*

Back in his office, he stared at the pile of exam booklets and felt torn. Normally, he'd mark them in order, starting the last exam handed in first, but he couldn't help but wonder how well Tricia had done. Admittedly, the exam hadn't been an easy one; he'd chosen several passages for the students to analyse that he'd only skimmed over in class so he might see how well they would do in waters uncharted by their notes. If they had to *think* for a change, it wouldn't kill them.

Curiosity finally got the best of him, so he flipped through the exams until he reached hers. He thought it odd that she'd used only one booklet whereas most of the better students seemed to have used two or three. And her booklet was very tidy, not like those he was used to, in which students would worry through the pages several times, qualifying rash assertions, inserting quotes and correcting mechanics.

He was amazed to find the first page — and then the second and third — blank. Some eraser dust still clung to the first page, as if she'd made a false start and then given up, but there was no evidence of work whatsoever on the second and third. He shook his head. Why hadn't she said anything to him, given a clue, when she handed it in? What the hell was she trying to prove? Who could she be trying to hurt by failing on *purpose*? Then he came to the middle page, the one where the staples divide the booklet in two, and found the note.

It was single-spaced, with no sign of emotion in the neat lettering:

*I'm tired of all this. They expect too much, and I'm tired of having to give it. Once I thought it might be worth it, if I*

*could just get away and leave all this, all the doing behind. But now I realise that no place will ever be far enough away, even if they can't find me, because I carry them, like a horse that can never get free of her mount. It's their race, not mine, and I'll be damned if I finish it for them. But I hope that you, of all people, will understand. Forgive me.*

Well, he didn't understand, even after reading the note over several times, feeling a growing sense of panic each time he reached the 'forgive me' at the end, even though, on reflection, he found the horse metaphor a bit strained, if not self-indulgent. What did she want of him? Was this just an excuse for what she knew she should have done and hadn't, an appeal for special treatment from someone she regarded as a soft touch? How well he knew the tears that female students, even the supposed 'liberated' ones, could summon behind closed doors to support their plea for an extension of deadline. It always irritated him to think that they wouldn't dare try such tactics with his female colleagues, yet they assumed that he'd give in, if only to avoid a scene, saltwater stains on his lapel.

But then he feared she might actually be serious. It was ironic how little he knew of the private lives of his students. Or how seldom he actually thought about them having lives apart from their academic ones as he stood up in front of the class, delighting himself with his ability to extemporize from his marginal notes. He'd heard the stories about drugs, how nearly a quarter of university students were estimated to use them, even in the hallways outside of class. 'Uppers' to avoid depression, 'downers' to stave off hysteria, both kinds when neither seemed to work on its own. And then there was sex. Wet tee-shirt, where'd-I-leave-my-thongs-last-night, sex — the kind *he'd* missed at university, though Amanda never believed him, until he fumbled so convincingly on their wedding night. In the end, perhaps distraction was responsible for more student absenteeism than indifference to learning. He wasn't sure.

If only he knew where she was now.

He thought of calling the counselling service for advice but then doubted the wisdom of it, given the gossip he'd heard about the rampant psychological hangups of so many of the counsellors. It really *was* true that your profession determined your neurosis. So he dismissed it and considered calling Tricia at home. He fumbled through his student lists and came up with the number, then sat there, staring at the phone, as he tried to think of what he'd say, especially if her mother answered the call.

*I'm terribly sorry, Dr Goldsmith, but Tricia's not at home as yet. Is there a message?*

*Yes, thank you, Mrs McKay. It's about your daughter's intended suicide . . .*

No, that simply wouldn't do. There had to be *someone* he could use to test the waters. He drew a blank for several minutes. Then he thought of Sondheim, a psychology instructor down the hall who'd formerly been in private practice for years. Miraculously, when Adam knocked at his door, Sondheim, who had a penchant for holding office hours at a table specially reserved for him at the Faculty Club, was in but looking very much as though he were on his way out.

"Well, m'boy," Sondheim blustered, after Adam had told him, at a slant, that he had a rather sticky problem to discuss with him. "I'm sure this'll lead to dry throats on both of our parts. So why don't we head down to the old watering hole?"

Adam almost raised an objection but then thought that letting matters cool off in his own mind might make it easier to devise an effective strategy. Besides, there seemed little point in rushing Sondheim, who had a reputation for being somewhat impulsive under pressure. As Adam nodded, Sondheim hitched up his trousers around his generous waist, and they were off.

Sondheim was nearly finished with his first pint before he raised his head from the note. "I'm sure of one thing," he said. "And not so sure of the other."

"Let's take it in order, then," said Adam.

Sondheim leaned over the table at him. "This girl has the hots for you, m'boy."

Adam felt himself flush. "How can you be sure of that?"

"It's a classic case of either or. At least *she* thinks it is. One scenario is that either she gets you, or she ends it all and punishes you for not accepting her love. Whether she'll make good that threat is anyone's guess. Is she a slasher?"

"A slasher?"

Sondheim straightened up stiff as a lectern and rubbed the back of his neck. "By that I mean, do you know if the girl's inclined to take a razor to herself?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Sondheim grinned lasciviously. "It never ceases to amaze me, and it might surprise you to learn, just how many secrets a few of your colleagues seem to share with their students, m'boy. Even the more ethical ones among us sometimes give out signals that seem innocent to minds other than those besieged by hormones."

Adam shook his head. "I can't remember doing anything like that in her case."

"How long have you been married, Goldsmith?"

Adam had to think. "About seven years."

"Kids bearing down?"

"Not really."

"Come on, m'boy," said Sondheim, stifling a burp and lifting his empty glass to a passing student waitress. "We all get restless. Neurosis only sets in when we try to deny that change is a natural process."

It took Sondheim another pint to move away from speculating about these problems to considering what action Adam should take.

"It's clearly *you* she wants to talk to," he said. "So I'd suggest the ball's in your court now, m'boy. Either burn the note and hope she's not a slasher, or take her out somewhere and try to calm her down."

"Certainly not the backseat of a BMW. It's got to be some place private enough to allow her to open up but not so private that she'll feel tempted to tempt your libido."

With a broad sweep of his hand, Sondheim indicated the lounge.

"You mean bring her *here*?" Adam said. "Is that really such a good idea?"

Sondheim thought about it. "Probably not," he said finally, this time unable to suppress the burp. "However near and dear this establishment may be to my heart, and no matter how many solutions to problems like yours I may have brought to fruition here, bringing your girl here would assuredly not be a good idea. Being seen sipping liquor in this club with a student of the opposite sex is tantamount to sleeping with her, and I know people more innocent than we for whom such an indiscretion proved to be a self-fulfilling prophesy. In fact, I meant a place *like* this, not this place exactly, m'boy. Try The Happy Jockey's over on Sinclair — no one capable of seeding any gossip on the wind goes there since they plastered the veneer on the new shopping mall across the road."

"All right," Adam said, standing up. "I guess I'd better go and call her."

Sondheim raised his glass to him, as if toast. "Just remember my motto, m'boy — if it smells good, and the price is right, drink it before it warms up to room temperature!"

Tricia answered the phone before the second ring and she sounded pleased, if a bit restrained, when he invited her out and said he'd pick her up in about an hour. Adam had just finished dinner and figured he'd



need that much time to approach Amanda with it. He even considered lying, but then he'd never been adept at stories — even the kids preferred their recycled books to his lame fabrications.

"I'm not sure I like this," Amanda said, watching him. "Why won't you at least tell me this student's name?"

"We live in a small town," he said. "It's better if you don't know."

Her eyes opened in amazement. "Do you really think I'd gossip over such a thing?"

"Of course not," he said, quickly. "But I wouldn't want you to have to lie if someone asked you about it."

It ended with Amanda miffed, chuffing off to the playroom to amuse the kids, reporting that "Daddy had decided he had *better* things to do with his time." When he left the house minutes later, he took in a deep breath of evening air before getting into the car. The air was cool, and his lungs felt surprisingly invigorated.

A warning bell with Sondheim's name engraved on it went off in his head as Tricia slipped into the car and smiled at him as though he were a beau who'd come by to take her to the races. She was wearing a light perfume, her hair was more tidy than he ever could remember it, and though her dress wasn't particularly low-cut, it was certainly quite flattering, accenting her pert breasts and flat stomach.

"Do you like it?" she asked him, as they drove off.

"What?" he asked.

"The dress, of course," she said. "Mother made me wear it especially for you."

He nearly jammed on the brakes. "She knows?"

"Relax," Tricia said, touching his arm. "I didn't lie to her, but I didn't exactly come out with the whole truth, either. I simply told her you'd asked me out for a drink."

"And she agreed?"

"Of course. My mother may have her faults, but asking too many questions isn't one of them. And she's always had this dream of me hooking up with some professor who'd kindle some endearing love of scholarship in me and motivate me to realise my god-given potential that I've so far managed to neglect."

Adam paused. He could feel his blood throbbing in his temples. "Is that what this is about?" he said, carefully.

She looked at him. "I don't know," she said. "I thought we were talking about *her* dreams, not mine."

The Happy Jockey was crowded and smoky, just the kind of place he detested. It reminded him of the pubs he'd tagged along to with his friends when he was a first year student, awkwardly on the make as they all were, before he got bored with all the late nights and the inevitable hangovers. It wasn't anywhere near the racetrack, but the owner had opted for an equestrian motif for some inexplicable reason; the monotony of the otherwise neutral walls was interrupted by massive portraits of horses, doubtlessly prize-winners, whose credits were immortalized by the brass plaques pinned to the lower horizontal of each frame. To his relief, Adam didn't recognise any of the patrons. He'd half-expected to see Sondheim leering at them from behind a newspaper at one of the tables.

The waitress gave him a strange look when he ordered a Manhattan.

"This isn't New York, and we don't have a license for hard stuff," she snapped. "But we've got any brand of beer you've ever heard of!"

"Why don't we just order a pitcher of draft?"

He smiled and agreed. It brought back his student days — quantity over quality. *The Impoverished Student's Guide to Pasta, Lentils and Eight Friendly Vegetables Easily Pinched From Your Neighbour's Garden*. The nostalgia washed over him as he tried to remember life before Amanda and the kids. How long ago had it been — a decade or more? His bones suddenly felt brittle as Aristotle's.

As he poured the first glasses, Tricia seemed subdued. Perhaps her performance in the car had all just been for show, *a face to meet the faces that we meet*. They skirted around the issue for a while, then Adam took a deep breath and decided to plunge in.

"Would you mind telling me about the note you wrote me?" he said, cautiously.

She looked down at her glass. "Oh, that," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Did you really mean to say —"

"That I intended to kill myself?" she said, gripping the glass. "I guess so — at least that's what I felt at the time."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "And you don't feel that way now?"

She looked up at him, smiling strangely. It was almost as though she weren't there with him at all but back in some more serene time, childhood perhaps, when the future seems transparent and insubstantial, and the present as peaceful as lake waters at dusk. It was an expression that worried him. Hadn't Sondheim described the frame of mind of someone on the brink of suicide as being calm and detached?

"I'm not sure," she said. "All I can think of is how good it is to be here with you."

He blushed. "You mean with someone who's willing to listen?"

"Yes," she said. "But I think it's more than that, Adam."

He couldn't remember her calling him by his first name before. The times they'd spoken in the company of others she'd called him doctor, but in the hallways, on the campus grounds, in his office she'd avoided titles and names altogether, taking the middle ground of a person who's hesitant about getting too quickly familiar with someone she's just recently met but hopes to be close to eventually. But he liked the way she said his name now. It was as though she'd practiced saying *Adam* . . . *Adam* over and over, perhaps in front of a mirror, until she got the right inflection and parting of the lips, a tone that he'd have to recognise as her wish for them to sweep away all thought of being merely instructor and student from that point on. He thought he saw a plea enter her eyes, a further sign tagged to her words, and he felt himself weakening. But he also knew that he mustn't give in, not when she was in such a state. After all, what could he — very much married, and all the rest — offer her beside further disillusionment?

"It wasn't just the exam, was it?" he said.

"No," she said. "But I wanted to explain, somehow, that it wasn't *your* fault. I just have to get away."

"From home?"

"Not exactly."

"What then?"

"From *him*!" she cried. "My father and his . . . plans for me. Oh, I know it sounds petty and selfish, certainly clichéd. The man who accomplishes everything in life he's ever set his mind to — everything that is except persuading his oldest daughter to follow in the tracks he's laid for her. And then the daughter, eternally ungrateful for the sacrifices he makes, always for her, of course. My father insists that I'm gifted, and that the gifted owe it to themselves, if not others, to have goals. When I play the piano, it can never be for mere enjoyment. He's always *there* behind me, even when he's rooms away, ready to seize on the note I strike in error or the lack of proper emotion in my execution of a passage. And there must always be a competition of some sort to contrive the necessary discipline from my fingers."

"You've tried to talk with him?"

She shook her head. "You don't talk with my father — you listen. Oh, he pretends to listen, all right, but nothing you say ever sticks to him. I simply can't get through to him that I don't exist just to fulfil *his* grand plans."

"Would it help if I were to speak to him?"

She darkened, and he knew he'd made a mistake.

"No," she said. "I couldn't bear that. My father will never understand that all I *really* want is to be loved!"

"What about your mother?"

"I love her dearly, but I can't be like her. She's learned to want what my father wants, for the sake of peace."

Her eyes were on him again. Adam knew they were at crossroads. Sondheim's motto came back to him — *if the price is right* . . . He could reach across and take her hand, and make her wish-upon-a-star come true. Or would he merely be drawn into her fantasy?

"You think I'm acting like an hysterical schoolgirl, don't you?" she said.

"Of course not," he lied. "But it would be better if I knew what you wanted me to do."

"What would you *like* to do?" she said, her eyes daring him.

It caught him off guard, even though he'd known what she was thinking. He always found the *saying it* the hardest thing himself, so he was amazed when someone else had the nerve to pack the matter into a snowball and toss it at him. Certainly, Amanda never did. But perhaps she was no more to blame than Tricia's mother, taking a lead from her husband's reins in all things.

"I . . . I don't know," he stammered.

She smiled. "I think that I do," she said. "Isn't that why you came?"

Adam knew that he could have driven her anywhere from the pub, but he had no time to think, so he drove her home instead. Had she been right about him? Had she known all along what he was unsure about in himself? Is that what Sondheim, with his knowing smile, had implied about men so secure in the cultivated sex of marriage that they forget what passion was like before they took the bit firmly in their mouth? She'd provoked him, and he felt himself awakening to her, but he needed time to sort things out, so he did nothing, even there, in front of her house, as she sat next to him, staring straight ahead, yet nevertheless *at* him, showing no intention of making it easier for him by opening the door and dashing off into the gulf of darkness between the car and the front steps. He simply needed time to think, about Amanda and the kids, and everything, so he did absolutely nothing.

In her wake, he tasted the darkness like dust thrown back by mocking hooves.