Escape

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ESCAPE

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Arch. E. Jr.

"WE'LL make it the last time I escape, the last time ever."
That's what he'd said—that was weeks ago. When was it? Must have been in January, around the last week. They'd been sitting propped against the sides of the booth and had lit the third cigarette.
"I'll have to start planning my escape day."
"What's that?"
"Oh, just a day when you forget school and go away without telling anyone."

Tom had known then that he wanted Barb to go too. Because they both knew that it was no longer what each of them did separately that mattered, but what they did together. And it had been torture to have to put a limit to things.

There were reasons, good reasons, why they couldn't marry. No money, the army at the end of the year, their folks wouldn't have it. He'd hung his pin long ago, not in public. He would always press her against him till he could feel it through her dress. She knew as well as he the awful hoplessness of it and the pride.

"Okay, then, we'll go. When—there'll have to be green on the trees, and not too late in the quarter. How about the first week in April—not a week-end either. Make it a Thursday—I get blue on Thursdays."

They laughed hard, but in a second were serious.
Barb asked, "Are we going to . . ."
"Honey, this is my last chance to escape—the last time ever."

Something passed between them and they knew each shared the other's feelings equally.

It wasn't easy, going away for a day with no one knowing. There had to be an urgent letter faked from home, so she could leave the dorm. They'd bought their tickets separately—tickets to Johnston, a hundred miles away. They got on the train separately. After the first stop they sat together. Barb twisted off her glove to show a ring on the fourth finger of her left hand—people wouldn't talk then.
Two a. m. They were the only ones to get off at the station. The train stopped just for a minute. Rattle of milk cans, thudding of a single mail bag. The warmth of steam, then the green and red lights going quickly on.

“You folks want a ride some place?” The man who had brought the cans and taken the mail and met the train spoke to them. Even in moonlight there wasn’t much you could see of his face—he might have been some sort of spectre for all they knew.

“No, Dad’s coming down from Maryston to meet us. Must have overslept.” (You remembered the childish fun in studying the town’s papers—so that they would know such things) “Thanks, we’ll wait. G’Nite. Yes it is—fine night. My . . . my wife and I -- we won’t mind waiting.”

Then there was the moon. They walked the brick walk back and forth. “Barb, Barb, there is no such thing as school—it never was. There is no army. Our parents are dead. We have the night—twenty hours . . . twenty hours . . . What the hell am I saying. What trash!” And they both laughed loudly. But even when walking they held hands and Tom grasped at the ring tightly.

Tom didn’t sleep. Barb was in his arms and her head fell away from his shoulder. He hadn’t kissed her yet. They had grown tired of walking the streets, tired of watching the shadows fall away as they walked hurriedly in step. They had fixed a corner of the stage of the old Chautauqua building in the park, spread their coats and tried to sleep. Barbie was like a child, so fussy, so tired. Tom didn’t try to wake her when the sun came up—she’d wanted to—they’d planned watching it rise. Tom watched alone. He thought of so many things, the redness bursting against a dull wall, as some eighteenth century orchestra played an ovation to the sun. He remembered he had to call Dr. Gray and check on his schedule that day, and that he was behind in his lab work. No, no, there was no school. Not for today.

It was funny being so stiff from sleep. They felt the coldness of water as they washed and listened to the forgotten song of birds. “Honey, I want griddle cakes again.” “Not again, oh not again! You make such a pig of yourself.” He kissed her good-bye as he left for work. But he didn’t leave. Only the birds watched them. It was so solemn, now it was a ritual. The way she turned her head, his moist lips touching her ear. The touch of her hands, moistness and her hair soft and fuzzy.
Later they tramped the woods, finding new creeks, and dams
to build, finding a secret spot where ferns grew, the forest of
giants with the small white flowers. They found the clouds gentle
in a quiet sky. They found the scent of trees in flower, examined
new leaves, watched a quiet rabbit, a snake basking. They re-
explored each others lips as Barb lay on the ground. Still the
quietness of the day and now the strange silence between them.
No need to speak what they were saying.

By plan they went into town. They went when a bus was due
so that people wouldn't suspect when they registered at the hotel.
It was just a boarding house, without benefit of neon. The clerk
asked no questions. The hall smelled, and the stairs were noisy.
They heard a snicker somewhere.

The room was naked—just a long iron bed, and a fireplace.
Just a small fireplace stuck in a corner, with a gas grill in it. Trees
seemed to crowd into the room and the sunlight struck a wall
and showed a light green from the trees.

They sat on the bed. Lit cigarettes.

They examined the fireplace, its dark red brick, smooth and
cool. The semi-circle of brick arched over the black opening,
the gas heater jutting out with its barren whiteness and the tips
of burnt matches showing. The steel handle felt nice—there was
no answering jet of gas. Barb laughed when they thought of
lighting it, the day was so hot. Even so she was glad it wouldn't
light. It was bad enough just having the heater stuck in the fire-
place like that. Better to think it couldn't light. Then suddenly
they were talking.

"Is this what you wanted?" Barb asked.

"No, not quite." Slowly Tom spoke, feeling for what to say.
Thinking that it was escape, yes, but he didn't want it, not if it
meant running away . . .

"I guess I don't want it either."

Tom smoked and he wanted to say that there were things you
had to face, things you couldn't run away from . . . But he
didn't say anything. They left.

When the train came that night, there was only the one man
at the station. They could only recognize his voice. They couldn't
see his face.