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Fox, Come Hither

She sat turned in the front seat facing the passenger window with tears in her eyes. By mid-afternoon they reached Leeds, the departure point from the highway for travelers venturing to Yorkshire. When columns of light started to break through what had been an endless gray sky, he rolled down his window to take in the emergence of a glorious spring day.

"The sun actually does come out in merry old England!" he bellowed, breaking a long silence. Getting no reaction, he said nothing more. The towns became smaller and farther apart as they drove farther north. Soon, there were only tiny hamlets. In time, even they disappeared. Then there were only isolated stone farm houses and miles of stone walls. The walls rose into the distant hillsides and served to demarcate the lush green dales from the barren highlands, brown from years of strip mining.

He rounded a blind corner and slammed the brakes. She put her hands up to keep from hitting the dashboard. The lonely, empty road suddenly had become clogged with sheep. Hundreds of black muzzles floating on a sea of white fleece.

They were being herded from an open field to a large, fenced area across the road. One of the shepherds, who was holding a large staff in his hand, walked over to the car.

"You'll be here a good tharty minutes," he said to Robert in his broad accent. He touched the brim of his cap as his eyes shifted to Galen.

"That long, huh?" Robert said.

"Aye," the shepherd replied. "Have to bring 'em in every so often. To protect the weak and young. Foxes, you know."

"Christ!" Robert huffed. He reached in the backseat for the camera and got out of the car. "Well, let's make the best of it!" he said to her through the driver's window. "Why don't you get out and look around. Just don't sit there feeling sorry for yourself."

Galen began to sob. He turned and walked away.



The trip had started nicely enough. The flight from New York on Friday was pleasant and relaxing. They had a good dinner on the plane with lots of wine and talked until they fell asleep. When they were awakened at dawn by the pilot's announcement that they were over the Irish coast, they became excited. Their excitement grew when the plane passed over Bristol and made its approach to Gatwick.

When it was discovered that one of their suitcases had been lost, Robert Harvey reverted to old form. Galen had become used to it. During their 12-year marriage, he had become an impatient bastard. She had remained the sweet, good-hearted person she had always been. He had grown tired of her youthful effusion and naiveté, which had endeared her

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to him back in college. His abuse and suspected infidelity had helped sink her into a depression. The bag had been lost, he reasoned, because she had packed too much. She always packed too much. The additional bag had been unnecessary. His misogynic logic evolved into a weekend of sniping in London: The high tea at Fortnum's that she had to go to was overpriced; she charged too much at Harrods; they wasted too much time sightseeing at the Tower because she took too many pictures. It went on like that.

After baiting her into an argument Sunday evening after she spent an hour on the phone with the kids and her parents, he walked out. When he came back several hours later, she refused to get out of bed and let him in. He had to get a new key card from the desk. That morning, before the drive north to Yorkshire, Robert had acted even more miserably during breakfast in the hotel restaurant.

"Do you want to leave right after breakfast, or should we wait until after lunch?" Galen asked, trying to be pleasant and make conversation. Her husband's head stayed buried in the newspaper. "Don't treat me like somebody off the street!" she finally yelled, swatting the paper.

Embarrassed, Robert put the paper down and stared at her with his cold, green eyes. "Go fuck yourself!" he said with an angry hiss. He got up in a huff, knocking the chair over. After righting the chair, he walked out.

She looked straight ahead, mortified. It had all been so short-lived, she thought. Her recovery, his promise to be better, their decision to take a second honeymoon, the excitement and restoration of hope that you get when you travel—and then the stupid lost bag. It didn't seem fair.

Galen suddenly felt her breakfast ascending. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply through her nose. She focused her thoughts on calming down and making a graceful exit. When she began feeling better, she sipped some coffee and signed the check.

The waitress promptly returned. Indignantly, she announced the account had been closed. Galen fumbled for cash, but not being very comfortable with the currency, handed the woman a credit card.

When she finally left the restaurant and the trail of stares behind, she began to quickly walk through the hotel's lobby. She asked several people if they had seen a tall man with blond hair. Finally, the concierge told her that Robert asked to have his car pulled around and loaded. Frantically, she ran out the front entrance into the drizzle and nearly slipped on the sidewalk. He was sitting in the car, with the engine running and the wipers going, at the curb.



The miserable London experience seemed like a bad dream as Galen sat in the car, which was now engulfed by sheep. Robert was standing on top of a stone wall alongside the road taking photos.

The sun was rapidly burning through the clouds. A brisk wind had picked up and was pushing the dreary weather out. When the sheep were

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finally gone, they continued on their way in silence. Robert pulled into the first filling station they came to. "Fill it with two-star," he told the attendant.

He leaned down on his arms and spoke through the open driver's window to Galen. "Let's leave the weekend behind," he said. "The suitcase got me started and then the hassle with the airline. Let's make the best of the rest of our time here, okay?"

Galen didn't answer.

He continued, "This is really god's country up here. It's where we've wanted to go for so long. I wish now that we'd driven up here directly from the airport. I don't want to ruin it any longer. I'm sorry."

She looked up and smiled. "I can't believe we're finally here either," she said, breaking her silence. "You've got to learn to live and let live."

"Yes," he said, looking away.

"They'll find the suitcase," she assured. "I know."

"Promise me you'll forget about it and become the new Robert this week?"

"I promise."

"Promise we won't fight this week?"

"Promise."



At sunset, they were still driving. They decided to stop at the next bed-and-breakfast that looked inviting. Several farms they had passed had signs soliciting boarders, but the Harvey's decided that it would be better to find a place in a town, nearer restaurants and pubs. At dusk, they drove into a town named Ashburn. They rode past a townhouse with white clap-board siding and a prominent "Vacancy" signs in the front window.

"A nice-looking place," Robert noted, thumbing over his shoulder. Houses and shops, a few with wooden exteriors but mostly with mortar and stone facades, lined Ashburn's main drag. Further down was a town square, inlaid with cobblestones, where cars and trucks were parked. Robert turned in and parked.

"It's seven," she said nervously, looking at her watch. "We should find a place now for the night."

"Relax," he said. "I'm going to walk back to that place with the sign and see what they have."

"All right. But don't be too long. It's getting dark."

The small inn was called Campbell House. The landlady was pleasant enough, but spoke to Robert through a chained outer door. It didn't take long before she decided she liked his manner and chiseled looks, and became rather excited at the prospect of boarding an American couple from

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New York. She unlatched the door and let Robert into the foyer. She was in her late 50s and quite tiny, with ruddy cheeks and a prominent English nose. She was bundled in a sweater jacket and wearing slippers.

"You caught me napping by fire!" she said in her lilt. She closed the inner door behind her to keep a yapping corgi from nosing through.

"I'm Mrs. Campbell," she said, extending her hand. Robert took it firmly and introduced himself.

"In this business, you must be careful who you open doors to at night, especially when husband is out," she explained. He smiled at the highlands pronunciation of "hoos-bend," and the non-use of unnecessary words like "my."

"I understand completely, ma'am," Robert replied, politely.

"Rent, including morning meal, is fifty pounds per couple. If you stay three nights or longer, it goes to forty. There's a common bath, but it's large enough for two and it's spotless and bright and up to standards at home, I'm sure. As I said, there's only one other couple boarding this week, so you needn't be waiting long in the morning. Please bring missus in and I'll show you both the room."

Mrs. Campbell greeted Galen like a long, lost cousin from the colonies. She hugged her and held her by the arm as they climbed the stairway to the second floor.

"I think you'll like the room, dearie," she said to Galen. "It's the nicest we have."

The room was indeed warm and homey: A thick, hand-knitted Afghan lay stretched across the queen-sized bed. The walls were pearly white and spotless, and the lace curtains that framed the large window at the foot of the bed were crisp and clean as if they had just been washed and ironed. An old-fashioned wash basin stood in the corner for decoration. Above it, an antique mirror with smoked glass hung.

Mrs. Campbell opened the large window and beckoned the Harvey's to take a look. They saw Wensleydale, a large farming valley to the south of town. It was getting dark, and the farmhouse lights flickered in the distance. It was picture book. Galen was beaming from ear to ear. "It's so lovely!" she said. "I still can't believe we're here."

"That means we'll take it," Robert said, smiling. He held out a 50-pound note, but Mrs. Campbell refused it.

"Stay the night and see how you like it," she said. "Ashburn is as nice a spot as you'll find in Yorkshire, or England for that matter. After you rise tomorrow and have a proper breakfast, you go out and sightsee and decide if you want to stay or move on. I'm sure you'll be back, and I'll bill you when you decide to leave." She gave them a key to the front entrance. "Mister and I are in bed by eleven, so you'll have to let yourselves in. Breakfast is at eight."

She suggested they walk to the center of town to a pub called The Black Stallion for supper. "It's the best of the lot," she said. "The other cou-

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ple that's boarding here has gone there three nights running. You might catch up with them. Alan and Charlotte Burns. A nice couple."



The Black Stallion was a simple, two-room establishment, with a small bar with a half-dozen stools and a few tables in one and a modest dining area in the other. The Burses weren't hard to find as they were the only couple seated in the dining room. They had finished eating and were having after-dinner drinks. They were a bit younger than the Harveys. Alan Burns was in his early thirties, average-looking and skinny, with balding, sandy hair, a long neck and a prominent Adam's apple. He had a cheery, run-at-the-mouth manner. Charlotte was about thirty and was rather stunning, with long brown hair and piercing blue eyes. She had high cheekbones and looked as though she could have been a model. Her appearance was made more intriguing by her quietness.

Robert felt as if she were looking straight through him as they all became acquainted at the table.

"You damn Yanks are truly amazing!" Alan said after they became comfortable. "You seem to know more about our bloody country than we do!"

Robert returned the compliment. "I suppose it's because so many of us can trace our roots here, but even if we can't, we're still enamored with you. It must be the accent. Or perhaps were just eternally grateful for the Rolling Stones."

They all laughed. Robert had a smoothness and charm he could turn on if the company suited him—a practice learned over 15 years as a successful public relations executive.

"What do you do, Galen?" Alan asked.

"Oh, I'm not working now," Galen said, a bit sheepishly. "Just being a mother. I guess that's rare these days, but I've decided it's best for the boys. They're 9 and 6 and keep me going all the time."

"That's wonderful!" Alan exclaimed. "We don't have any little ones yet, but we keep trying, don't we, Char?" Charlotte forced a smile. The Burnses lived in a flat outside London. He was an architect and she was an executive secretary. They were on their way to Scotland to spend the upcoming Easter weekend with family.

Alan did most of the talking, while Charlotte smiled and nodded.

"Robert, what do American men think of women in the U.K.?" Charlotte asked, finally speaking up. "I imagine that with all the glamorous European women, we're sort of considered Plain Janes by comparison. Am I right?" Her large, full lips were polished with red rouge, and her words flowed through them elegantly.

"Oh, don't sell yourself short, poor girl!" Alan interrupted. Robert wondered how she ended up with such a gangly fool.

"Alan, I'd like to hear Robert's opinion," she said, rather abruptly.

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Robert picked up on it quickly. "Alan's absolutely right, dear girl," he said. "By all means, Englishwomen shouldn't sell themselves short at all."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," Charlotte said, with a smile.

She eased back from the conversation. Her eyes met Robert's as Alan and Galen gabbed. They still sought his opinion, but of a particular Englishwoman.

"May I?" he asked, touching her pack of cigarettes on the table. "Oh, of course."

"I left mine out in the car," he joked. "It's the great American excuse." He went outside for a cigarette and she joined him. They chit-chatted as he held out his lighter for her. She took his wrist and guided the lighter toward her cigarette.

Once back inside, they ordered another round of ales and the Harveys ordered some fish and chips. When Robert and Galen were finished, Alan suggested that they all go up the street to their favorite pub in town.

"We only been in town for three nights, but we're already regulars there," he said. "I'd venture that I'm already in the bar keep's will. It's a helluva fun place where all the local pips gather."

"Sounds wonderful," Galen chirped.

"I'll settle up here and meet you all over there," Robert suggested. Alan pulled some money from his pocket and held it out to Robert.

"Please take this, old man!" Alan said.

"Nonsense," Robert said, pushing Alan's hand away.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. My pleasure."

"Well, thanks very much. It's very good of you. There'll be a pint waiting for you."



Charlotte was waiting for Robert outside. The spring moon was full and the air was cool and dry. There was a strong aroma of burning coal. She was wearing a long, dark topcoat with the collar turned up, and smoking. She immediately took his arm and cuddled up to him in a playful manner.

"I said, 'Poor Robert doesn't really know where he's going,' so I told them to go on ahead and I'd wait for you," she said.

"I'm glad you did," he replied.

"Really?"

"Yes. I'm *very* glad you did."

As they walked up the street arm in arm, Charlotte touched her head to his shoulder. She stopped them in front of a church.

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"The pub is the next block over," she said. "We can cut through the church yard if you'd like, although it's rather dark."

"Let's," he agreed.

She pressed against him more urgently as they walked. She stopped them in the shadow of the church. She turned and faced him. "I'm chilly, Robert," she said, nervously.

He took the upturned collar of her coat and pulled her face close to his. He lightly kissed her lips, tasting her rouge, and when she parted her lips, he pushed his tongue deeply into her mouth. He wet the fingers on his right hand and he felt his way under her skirt and panties. They stood in the shadows for several minutes. He rubbed her methodically until she groaned and shuddered with pleasure.

"Don't say anything now," she said, breathing heavily, when they stopped. "We're being missed and must be on our way."

He nodded.

She took hold of him by both shoulders and looked closely at him in the dim light. She licked him with her warm tongue and he began kissing her again. "Darling, we must stop for now," she said, putting her hand up. She wiped her long, elegant fingers across his wetted lips and chin to remove smudged lipstick. She then took his wet fingers gently in her hand and sucked on them while looking deeply in his eyes.

"Wipe them clean and dry, darling. You mustn't have me all over you," she cautioned.

It was turning into the kind of trip Robert had dreamed of many times.