THE ESCAPE

Eddie Prior, age twenty-one, with his black hair slick and his blue, blue eyes, enters this story with a great clatter.

He is about to go down the Pavilion's long, curving staircase to the dance floor when the leather heels of his dancing shoes meet the polished parquet and he stumbles forward . . . but, instead of plummeting down the stairs, he finds his balance, commandeers the momentum of his downward plunge, and—upright, smiling, his heels clacking—he creates a kind of musical descent, tapping out the tone of each new step as he makes his entrance.

He comes to a stop, as he intended, between two striking girls, one blond and one brunette, both named Millie. They are intrigued but embarrassed to be the center of attention. Eddie realizes that the effect he has created is corny, but it's too late now to undo what he has done, so he smiles at one girl and then at the other. They are both beauties of the day, their faces perfectly oval, their bowed lips colored a reddish brown.

The blond Millie says, "Is that a trick you learned or are you just lucky you didn't kill yourself?"

Eddie smiles, uncomfortable, because this kind of public stunt is not really his way.

The brunette Millie says, "Everybody is staring. I hope you're satisfied." He is handsome enough, but she turns her back on him and says to the girls from the office, "Who does he think he is, anyway?"

"I'm Eddie," he says to her. "Do you want to dance?"

"Not with you," she says. "Showoff."

And then, true to himself, he disappears into the crowd.

The Pavilion is the place to go on Saturday nights, so it is certain that they will meet again. And they do.

"Just one dance," he says.

"I'd rather die," Millie says.

A year later, they marry, and Eddie's wild entrance to the dance floor becomes a story they tell, and then a memory they share, and finally just one of those crazy things they talk about which may or may not have happened.

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Years pass, and there are children—a son and, eventually, a daughter, who dies at birth—then Millie's breakdown, the war, and her long recovery, lying all day on the beach and at night learning to accept again her husband's love. There are quarrels, bitter words that cannot be unsaid, and are thus remembered forever. Has this all been a mistake, this marriage, this trap? But laughter helps, and the memory of love, and they are Catholic, so they just get on with it.

Time goes by, folds in on itself, and brings them sudden prosperity. The son, Daniel, is grown now and has married well. Theirs is evidently a happy family, with few worries and lots to be grateful for. But then Daniel divorces. Eddie and Millie have never considered divorce; it is not an option. They grow old together.

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Somehow, somewhere, long before he was ready to begin painting, Eddie got the notion that painting was what he had to do. He had spent forty-some years as a civil engineer, building churches, schools, bridges—practical, useful things—and he knew nothing about painting. Nonetheless, it was what he was determined to do.

Meanwhile, he read the Arts & Leisure section of the Sunday *Times* and found that contemporary painting baffled him. What had happened to paintings that looked like the thing you painted, with subjects you could recognize? Eddie considered a plain white canvas to be just that, a plain white canvas, but he suspected that the fault was his: he didn't know how to look. He could remedy that, and he did. He bought books on art history, and then some how-to books from the college bookstore, and, with a beginner's assortment of oils and brushes, he set up a studio in the basement, where he'd be safe from interruption, and, ready at last, he began teaching himself how to paint things as they were.

Eddie painted every evening after dinner, while Millie watched television upstairs, but sometimes, for company, she would come down to the basement to chat as Eddie painted. She liked his work, because she knew what she was looking at. She was proud of him, and a little jealous, but in this way they grew closer.

"Your left hand shakes," Millie said one evening as she watched him paint.

"Only the left," he said. He guessed it was harmless, a familial tremor maybe, but he didn't want to think about it now. "Luckily I'm right-handed."

"All the same. You should have that looked at."

“I will, I will,” he said. “Later.”

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Eddie took evening classes at the local college and discovered that craft—but only craft—could be taught. Nobody could teach you talent. He didn’t know if he had talent but he didn’t really care.

“I wish you could paint me,” Millie said. “Like I was when we met, I mean. Not now when I’m shrivelled up like a monkey.”

Eddie shuffled through the big desk with the drawerful of important papers—birth certificates, insurance policies—and found a photograph of Millie that was taken just before their wedding. After several false starts, he managed to paint a portrait of her, copied from the photograph. It was a piece of folly, he knew, neither a photo nor a painting, but to Millie it was a great success and she loved it.

“Look,” she said, thrilled. “You’ve caught me just as I was. It’s even better than the photograph.” And, indeed, there she was, thin, delicate, and—she had to admit—attractive. It was Millie as she remembered herself, full of life and hope.

They hung the painting in the living room, where guests could see it. After a while, because nobody had commented on it, she asked Eddie to move it to the bedroom, because, really, it should be private. And she was tired of its being ignored.

Eddie made three tries before getting the picture hung. His left hand had begun to shake all the time. A week later, a neurologist diagnosed the problem as Parkinson’s. Millie wanted to talk about it, but Eddie said that it was just something they had to live with. “And die with.” They had the same thought at the same time. Like lovers.

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Daniel, the divorced son, began to write poetry. He published some short poems, and then—in the magazine *Poetry*, no less—a long poem about St. Augustine and Spanish dancing and eternal salvation. It was called “Rituals.”

Millie read it and said, “Isn’t it wonderful! Danny has published this wonderful poem!”

Eddie read “Rituals” and found it confusing. He knew the words, and the words made sentences, but the poem itself remained a plain white canvas.

“Rituals, yes, but what is it about?” Eddie asked.

“It’s a poem,” Millie said. “A poem doesn’t have to be about anything. It just is, and it’s wonderful in itself!”

Daniel came on a weekend visit from Boston, where he taught comparative religion at M.I.T. Immediately, being a good son, he asked about Eddie’s paintings, and they went downstairs to look at them. Daniel had no great expectations, and so he was relieved to find that the paintings were conventional and not embarrassing. Still-lifes, landscapes. He was generous with his praise.

Before dinner, Millie asked Daniel about his poetry, which he shrugged off as unimportant, just something he’d found he could do, but then Eddie asked him to explain “Rituals.” Daniel felt challenged—they would never understand, so what was the point? “I can’t explain a poem.” He forced a laugh. “It makes me feel like I’m in class.” Millie understood what was happening and said she thought “Rituals” was lovely, such beautiful language—she would love to hear him read it aloud. But then Eddie, oblivious, asked, “Why the flamenco? What does it have to do with the poem?” Daniel swallowed his annoyance, but he was defensive, the way he got when a student confronted him.

Finally, he said, “Eddie, listen! Poetry is . . . *all* art is more than engineering! You can no more explain a poem than a painting.” He pointed to the landscape over the couch. “Look at that,” Daniel said. “Can you explain that?”

“It’s a field in winter, with trees and a stream, and the sun going down behind the hills.”

“But that’s a description, not an explanation! There’s more to art than just representation.” Daniel was triumphant and, because he had defeated his father, ashamed.

Eddie said, “Yes?” And at the same moment he began to see beyond things as they were.

“Not everything can be explained,” Daniel said, imploring now, calling him “Papa.”

But Eddie wasn’t listening. He had glimpsed—all at once and with great clarity—the infinite possibilities of painting the world of the mind.

“It’s just a poem,” Daniel said, “and it’s not even very good.” He reflected bitterly that his father had always been this way, undermining everything he attempted, even his marriage. Could Eddie leave nothing to him?

“Drinks,” Millie said into the great silence. “We all need a drink before dinner.”

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Eddie gave up painting things as they were and, quietly, provisionally, he moved on, studying the hurried brushstrokes of van Gogh, Manet, and Monet, and then the hard, bloody surfaces of

Kandinsky, copying what he could understand and leaving the rest, until, inevitably, he found himself lost once again in the mysteries of the white canvas.

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The neurologist experimented with different medications in different dosages until he found the combination that worked best to ease Eddie's stiffness and enable him to walk almost normally again. Eddie remained unsure of his balance—he might fall at any time—but gradually he developed a better sense of his body in space. With only a finger poised on something stable—a door, a chair—he could catch himself before he fell. This worked for a while.

Eddie carried on as if Parkinson's were a temporary nuisance, rather than the beginning of the end. But the Parkinson's mask had settled on his face, making expression impossible. He could no longer laugh and, unless surprised by joy, he could barely smile.

Millie watched what was happening to her husband, and she made a secret pact with God that she would be his caretaker—both wife and nurse—no matter what the cost. She would do it. She would sacrifice her life for him. If only God would give her the strength.

It never occurred to her that God might not sign on to her secret pact.

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When Daniel came for Thanksgiving, Eddie was at his best. He walked with assurance and his voice was strong and, for once, there was nothing vague about him. Nobody would have guessed that he had Parkinson's. Millie was annoyed that now, with their son, he seemed his old self, whereas when they were alone—well, it was unfair. She stayed in the kitchen and fussed with dinner while Daniel went down to see Eddie's new paintings.

Eddie propped a canvas on the easel and waited. The painting was large and forbidding. Splintered rocks hung in the air, unsupported, menacing. There was a rawness to it, a lack of life. Only stones—black, gray, an earthen brown edging into bruised purple—that seemed about to topple out of the canvas.

"Holy shit," Daniel said.

He was astonished into silence, because, if this was a scene from nature, it was a nature rooted in barbarity.

Later, at dinner, he could not stop talking about the paintings, how technically fine they were, how original.

"They're bleak," he said, "and they're unforgiving. But they're exploring something important. Well done, Papa!"

“I think they’re scary,” Millie said. “All those cliffs and falling stones.”

Daniel fell silent and thought about his poetry. He saw it now as an intellectual sham. It was contrived and didactic. Like everything in his life.

Eddie glowed with pleasure and satisfaction. His mind had wandered off and he was thinking of the time when he made that entrance of his, racketing down the stairs on his leather heels as he turned a potentially disastrous fall into music, tapping out the tone of each new step.

The silence made Millie frantic. “Say something, Eddie,” she said. And to Daniel, “He’s always going off into his thoughts, your father is.”

But Daniel and Eddie remained lost in the moment.

They finished dinner and Daniel insisted that they go downstairs for one more look at the paintings. His father was an artist, the real thing, and Daniel felt that he could forgive him . . . well . . . everything.

Daniel stood before the easel with Millie beside him, judging. “I still prefer his landscapes,” Millie said. Daniel was praising Eddie’s use of color, its calculated affront to the eye, and something else he couldn’t quite get, when abruptly he made a discovery.

“Wait!” he said, and pointed out a barely visible line that ran down the center of the painting. He traced it with a long skinny finger, and then he pointed out a similar line in the previous painting, and another in the next. “It’s a recurrent theme, Papa. As if you’re painting a world that will eventually crack open.” He was excited at his father’s chance brilliance.

And then it occurred to him that this line, this recurrent fracture, was an image of what was happening to his father. It was, in fact, a map of his father’s mental destruction. Horrified, Daniel went pale. The mind, even in its collapse, was capable of terrible insight. Though he feared Eddie’s answer, Daniel asked him, “What is this a painting of, Papa?”

Millie said, “It’s a painting of rocks and it gives me chills. I wish he’d go back to his old way.”

“Papa?”

Eddie was exhausted suddenly and unable to find words for what he felt.

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Eddie became withdrawn in company. He was often distracted, making the odd comment rather than joining in the conversation. His voice was patchy and hard to hear. He sometimes left his sentences unfinished, as if he had lost interest in what he was saying.

Millie was worn out from constant worry. She was eighty-four, after all, a year older than Eddie, and her whole life now was caring for him. And then he fell and fractured a rib. He refused to see a doctor, and the next day he fell again. This time he took the skin off his leg from knee to ankle. Millie was distraught. She imagined disasters—falls and fires and terrible car accidents. She hid the keys to the car and to the house, but she was never able to get a night's sleep, because, though Eddie couldn't get into bed without her help, he managed to get out of it with apparent ease. Then he was off to the bathroom, where he was careful not to pee in the toilet and to use the wastebasket instead. This was too much for Millie. She burst into tears, and screamed at him: "You're a pig! That's what you are! A filthy pig!" He looked at her, uncomprehending. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know you can't help it, but, dear God in heaven, why can't you use the toilet like everybody else! You're a pig, Eddie, and that's the truth." She could see that he didn't understand.

Despairing, and in a desperate attempt to get away—anywhere—she threw herself into the hall closet, pulling all the clothes down on top of her, the hangers jangling, as she shouted, "Bastard life! I can't endure another minute. Bastard. Bastard life." And then she gave way to sobbing.

Eddie, terrified, retreated to the bedroom.

Later, when Millie had raged past the point of exhaustion, she returned to the bedroom, and said quietly, "Are you all right, Eddie?" And Eddie said, "That poor woman. She can't go on like that. She's going to die."

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Eddie was downstairs painting, and Millie, unable to nap, lay on her bed, wondering about her life and how it would end. The afternoon sunlight fell on Eddie's portrait of her.

She had been in love—that was what Eddie had captured. And he had been in love. With her. Even now, when he was ruined, he loved her. That love was something she could save.

She took the picture down and wrapped it in a silk scarf and hid it at the back of her private drawer.

Next to it was a photo of Eddie, at age seven, on the day of his First Communion. It had been her favorite. Yet, early in their marriage, enraged by something he said, she had taken a nail file and scrubbed out his innocent face. She had kept the scratched photo as a kind of penance. She cried when she thought of it.

And there were the love notes Eddie had written whenever he was away for work. He had been a loving husband.

She wondered now, Was she a bad woman? Had she always been like this?

She heard a crash from downstairs and at once she was off the bed and, swiftly, like a woman half her age, she was at the stairwell, shouting down to Eddie, “It’s all right, sweetheart! I’m coming.”

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The neurologist convinced her that Eddie needed a professional caregiver, and so Millie hired Carlo, or Carlito, as he insisted she call him. Though she disliked having a stranger in her house, she knew she had to have help. So on her hair day—every Wednesday, a wash and a set—she gave Carlito instructions and telephone numbers and headed off with a heavy heart to the beauty parlor.

The first two Wednesdays went well, but on the third Millie returned home to find the kitchen full of smoke. Eddie had put on the teakettle, and then wandered off to his paintings. Eventually, the handle of the kettle had melted from the fierce heat, setting off the fire alarm just as Millie came in the door. Carlito was taking a nap upstairs.

Shaken, sick, Millie went to the bedroom, where she lay down and sobbed until her head ached. This was her life now. An unending nightmare.

That night, Millie finished getting Eddie into bed and gave him a goodnight kiss. Suddenly he sat up, with his eyes fixed on her, and, in a strong, clear voice, he said, “My beautiful girl. My Millie. You’re the only reason I go on living.” Then his face went blank.

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Daniel visited every other weekend now. He was going through a difficult period, he confessed, and it was a consolation to see his father. And Millie, too, of course. He was no longer able to write—not poetry, not anything—and his performance in class was less than good, but seeing his father gave him the courage to go on. He missed his ex-wife, or maybe it was just marriage that he missed, but right now, strangely, it was his father he needed to see.

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Eddie had not painted in a long time. He began a huge canvas of the kind that upset Millie so much—cliffs, falling stones, and, again, that barely visible crack at the center.

“Why is it so grim?” Millie asked. “It’s all different shades of black, Eddie.” She studied it and said, finally, “I think you’d be a happier man if you painted something red.” She turned to go upstairs. “Or yellow. Something with a little life.”

Eddie gave up on the painting. It was too large and too ambitious and, to be honest, he didn’t know where to take it next. It stood on the easel, untouched.

But Carlito was at him: “You’ve got to work, Eddie. Work stimulates the brain, and the brain sends messages to the body, and tells your hands not to shake and your legs not to trip and your private thing not to peepee in the wastebasket.”

Eventually, Eddie gave in to Carlito’s nagging. He sat in front of the easel, dutifully, looking at the abandoned painting. He began to examine the painting’s basic structure. He dabbed the canvas experimentally with a palette knife and built up a thick texture, making the rocks and craters even more menacing. Then, uncertain but curious, he opened up the mysterious thin line that ran among the rocks to discover its possibilities. A cave, a home? He began to get a sense of what he was doing. Excited now, he cleaned his palette knife and reached for his brushes. He squeezed a large squiggle of vermillion onto his palette. The raw color was brilliant, bloody. Eddie sat, mesmerized by the sheer naked redness of the paint, until, with no conscious intent, driven only by some natural instinct, he reached into the cave and painted a door. A crimson door. He sat back and looked at what he had done. Millie was right. He was a happier man already.

Carlito understood that Eddie’s painting was modern, so you didn’t have to like it. He cared only that Eddie was looking better and feeling stronger every day.

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Eddie and Millie sit in their sunny kitchen, enjoying a late-afternoon cup of tea. Millie says, “Now, this is nice.” She is tired from a long day of keeping Carlito out of the way while she got her broken husband washed and dressed, made his toast, and stirred his orange juice the way he likes. Now it’s afternoon and Carlito has left. At last, there is peace in the house.

“It’s nice to just relax and be together,” Millie says.

Eddie sips his tea and his eyes wander to the painting that Millie has hung in the kitchen. It is a landscape, fields and a brook with hills in the distance. He likes it. He does not remember that he painted it. He still paints every day, or at any rate he’s downstairs in his studio, where she doesn’t have to worry about him.

“It’s nice with the sun coming in,” Millie says, determined to make conversation, but then they are quiet for a long while. At last Eddie speaks.

“I remember one night at the dance hall—the Grove, I think it was, the Grove—when I skidded at the top of the stairs and tap-danced all the way down.” He smiles. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It was at the Pavilion,” Millie says. “And you didn’t slip. You did it deliberately on the stairs. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten that.”

“I never really liked to dance, but I did it. Everybody did in those days.”

“You were a good dancer,” she says. “One of the best.”

“Those were strange days.”

She is encouraged because he’s talking normally.

“You know, I had two Millies in my life . . .” His voice trails off.

“Is that right?” she says. “Tell me about the two Millies.”

“She was beautiful, but at heart she was a bitch.”

“Who? Who was a bitch?”

“Millie.”

“The blond one?” Millie herself had black hair.

He falls silent, thinking.

She remembers that night at the Pavilion, with the whole world opening before her, and then suddenly there was Eddie, with those blue, blue eyes. Love is so quick.

“One was blond and she was—what’s the word?—she was boring. She was smart, too, but . . .” His voice trails off again.

“What about the other Millie? The brunette.”

“Oh, she was a beauty. Black hair you couldn’t believe, it was so beautiful. You wanted to drown in it. And could she dance! In fact, I married her, the brunette. She was a good wife, too. A good mother.”

Even in this loony state he remembers that she was beautiful. Millie is happy. But she knows him, and if he says anything more he will ruin everything, so she brushes away her tears and makes a fuss with the cups and saucers, but, through all the noise, Millie hears him say, “I don’t know what ever happened to her,” and she dies, slowly, once again.

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Daniel has consulted the neurologist and, together, they have decided that it’s no longer possible for Eddie to be at home. Carlito means well, but Eddie needs a proper facility where he can get twenty-four-hour care. They select Sunlight Nursing Home. It has reassuring testimonials, and it’s near enough that Millie will be able to visit him.

Millie fights the idea—no husband of hers will be thrown on the mercy of strangers—but in the end they convince her that she can no longer care for him by herself. She cries at the thought of it, and she kisses Eddie a hundred times. He seems to understand.

The day arrives.

Eddie has been downstairs all morning, alone. Millie has spent the time packing clothes for him. There are so many things he has never worn. Sweaters she bought for birthdays and anniversaries, a suède jacket he never had a chance to wear, because he has gone out only rarely since the Parkinson's began, and then he preferred to wear old things in case he spilled food on them. There are shoes he's worn only once, because of the burning in his feet. She could give them to Carlito if he wore the right size. But Carlito is gone now, everything is gone, and maybe Carlito wouldn't want Eddie's shoes anyway. He has his pride, after all, like anybody else. But they're new and . . . Millie sits on the bed and cries softly.

Daniel knocks at the bedroom door and says, "It's time." He wants her to be the one to tell Eddie that he is going to the Sunlight Nursing Home. Millie makes a silent and terrible reckoning. God will forgive her this betrayal of her husband, and maybe Eddie will forgive her, because of their old love, but she will never forgive herself.

Millie goes down the basement stairs first. Her steps are deliberate. She will see this to its end, for Eddie. Daniel, behind her, is surprised to hear nothing.

There is no sound, because Eddie is not here. He has disappeared.

On his easel now stands his final painting, finished at last. The cliffs are as menacing as ever, and those gigantic stones still threaten, but at its center is a plain red door.

Eddie has escaped. ♦