



Female Bonding in Alice Munro's "The Runaway"

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Alice Munro's short story "Runaway" is a heart touching tale of a simple affable young woman Carla, who is going through a crisis in her marital life. True to the title of the story Carla has a flare for running away. She runs away from her parental home to marry Clark very much against the will of her parents. And then she runs away from her husband Clark when he tries to suffocate her into abject submission as a wife. Carla's second running away exploit is ignited and facilitated by her affluent neighbour Mrs Sylvia Jamieson. Sylvia is a university professor and wife of a celebrated poet Mr Leon Jamieson, who is many years older to her and is mostly bedridden due to prolonged illness. Carla and Sylvia's bonding acquires a pivotal position in the premise of the story.

Carla works as a help in the house of Mrs Jamieson, but she is always treated like a friend by Sylvia. They have contrasting personalities. Carla, in the words of Sylvia, is like those girls in her high school "who were bright but never too bright, easy athletes but not strenuously competitive, buoyant but not rambunctious. Naturally happy (Munro)." Whereas she defines herself as the one who has "cleverness and dedication and awkward egotism, or even genuine passion for the natural world (Munro)." Sylvia has a strong liking for Carla, but she herself does not understand what is the real nature or cause of this passion. She secretly admires athletic beauty of Carla as she stands "bare-legged, bare-armed, on top of a ladder, her resolute face crowned with a frizz of dandelion hair that was too short for the braid (Munro)." She feels a strange pull towards Carla. She admits in front of her friends Maggie and Soraya that Carla's "presence had come to mean more and more to her, how an indescribable bond had seemed to grow up between them, and had consoled her in the awful months of last spring" (Munro). Sylvia's bonding with Carla not only provides emotional and psychological fulfilment to both of them but it also facilitates sensual ecstasy at times. Carla's kiss on Sylvia's forehead works like a magic potion in raising Sylvia's drooping spirit:

That kiss had been in Sylvia's mind ever since. It meant nothing in particular. It meant Cheer up. Or Almost done. It meant that they were good friends who had got through a lot of depressing work together. Or maybe just that the sun had come out. That Carla was thinking of getting home to her horses. Nevertheless, Sylvia saw it as a bright blossom, its petals spreading inside her with tumultuous heat, like a menopausal flash.

While in Greece for her vacation Sylvia cannot take Carla off her mind. Her friends Maggie and Soraya tease her that she is always interested in "girls," and that she might be having a "crush" on Carla. Sylvia vehemently refuses it and reasons that it is her "displaced maternal love," since she never had a child of her own. Sylvia meticulously chooses a gift for Carla and enthusiastically gives it to her. It is a "little replica of the horse" found under the sea, cast in bronze, supposedly from second century B. C. She does not tell Carla that she specifically bought it for her, as the small boy riding the horse made her think of Carla: "the strength and grace of the arm that must have held the reins, or the wrinkles in his childish

forehead, the absorption and the pure effort there was in some way like Carla cleaning the big windows last spring” (Munro).

Sylvia, however, does not realise that the qualities she admires most in Carla, namely, her childlike affection and mirth are nowhere to be seen in the woman, she meets after coming back from Greece. Sylvia is totally unaware of the tumultuous psyche of Carla, who is being forced by Clark to extort some money from Sylvia by levelling the charge of molestation against Sylvia’s late husband Lion. Carla curses herself like anything for confessing her assumption to Clark one fine day that bed-ridden Mr Lion Jamieson seems to be interested in her:

. . . the randy old man, the bump he made in the sheet, bedridden indeed, almost beyond speech but proficient in sign language, indicating his desire, trying to nudge and finger her into complicity, into obliging stunts and intimacies. (Her refusal a necessity, but also perhaps strangely, slightly disappointing, to Clark). (Munro)

She repeats this story, which is perhaps nothing more than a figment of her imagination, to Clark every night in hushed murmurs just to excite his spirited response, which off late she has not been getting by doing any other thing. Interestingly, this trope of young caregiver dreaming of “sexual acts between her and her elderly, disabled patient” also appears in Munro’s other story “The Love of a Good Woman” where protagonist Enid has disturbing dreams of copulating with her patients (DeFalco 388). In case of Carla, however, her weird fantasy acquires greater significance, for she employs it as a fodder to feed Clark’s libido. Her lovelorn soul craves for Clark’s attention so much that she never thinks twice before fabricating this erotic tale:

A bedtime story, in which the details were important and had to be added to every time, and this with convincing reluctance, shyness, giggles, *dirty, dirty*. And it was not only he who was eager and grateful. She was too. Eager to please and excite him, to excite herself. Grateful every time it still worked. (Munro)

Carla never imagines even in her wildest dream that Clark would compel her to blackmail Sylvia and extort money from her for her dead husband’s profligacy. She tries her best to convince Clark that it would not work, but Clark is adamant. Carla dare not face Sylvia after latter’s return from Greece. When Sylvia senses Carla’s perturbed state of mind she asks her the reason behind her misery. Carla breaks down in front of Sylvia and confesses that she is being mentally harassed by Clark and she wants to run away from him. Carla puts forth her entire plan in front of Sylvia that she would go to Toronto and work in a stable there, but she does not have any money to execute her plan. Sylvia offers Carla all the possible help. She gives some money to Carla and arranges for her travel to Toronto and boarding at a friend’s place there. She also offers some warm clothes of her own to Carla. As Carla boards the bus to Toronto, she “appears to be headed for a new, more self-examined, independent life” (Barber 146).

Carla’s escape from Clark, however, could never be culminated, for her heart and soul seems to be eternally captive to Clark. While on-board the bus to Toronto Carla realises that though “. . . she was running away from him—now—Clark still kept his place in her life. But when she was finished running away, when she just went on, what would she put in his place? (Munro).” She cannot imagine a life without Clark and decides to return to him. Carla’s failure in her runaway quest can also be seen as a retreat “to incrementally distant peripheries of the claustrophobic domestic center that Clark represents. . . the abandonment of home equates with an escape from femininity, that is, with an escape from her self” (Tolan 7). This eternal feminine paradox, however, strengthens Clark’s authority over Carla and weakens her bond with Sylvia, who is sternly forbidden by Clark to interfere in his or Carla’s life anymore.

Sylvia's concern for Carla, nevertheless, continues and she waits for appropriate time and opportunity to communicate with Carla, not face to face, but through a letter. In the letter Sylvia expresses her apology for involving herself "too closely in Carla's life and . . . thinking somehow that Carla's happiness and freedom were the same thing." She clarifies that "all she cared for was Carla's happiness and she saw now that she—Carla— must find that in her marriage" (Munro). In the letter Sylvia also relates strange happening of the night when Clark came to her house to return her clothes, given to Carla on the Runaway Day. Sylvia explains how Flora's sudden reappearance that night frightened her as well as Clark, and how that little goat eventually united them as fellow human beings having similar fear and insecurities.

Sylvia knows very well that Carla's is very close to Flora and her reappearance must have added zest in Carla's life. Little does she know that Flora never reappeared before Carla. She, therefore, is completely shaken by Sylvia's revelation. The terrible thought of Flora's predicament troubles Carla's psyche incessantly. But she dare not ask Clark about it. She overpowers the temptation of going to a distant point, somewhere towards "the edge of the woods, and the bare tree where the buzzards had held their party" probably over Flora's corpse (Munro).

Carla's bond with Flora is, indeed, reiteration of close affinity between human and nonhuman as Gracia Goncalvez explains that "the human is diluted in the possible nonhuman and vice-versa" (31). Flora is Carla's alter-ego. When she is first brought to the barn she behaves like "Clark's pet entirely, following him everywhere, dancing for his attention" very much like young Carla herself. And quite like Carla, Flora is also "quick and graceful and provocative" like "a guileless girl in love" in the company of Clark. But as she grows up, she attaches herself to Carla and becomes "much wiser, less skittish . . . capable . . . of a subdued and ironic sort of humor". Flora has a special significance in Carla's life, since she is like a 'comrade' whereas with the horses of the barn Carla is more motherly. Flora and Carla's comradeship is further strengthened by the fact that for Clark both of them are only 'means' to an 'end'. He marries Carla because she has some experience of "working at a riding stable" and as such she can prove handy in managing his own horse barn business. Similarly, Flora is brought to the barn because Clark is told that a goat is "able to bring a sense of ease and comfort into a horse stable" (Munro). Clark, therefore, treats both Carla and Flora with equal indifference. And if they dare raise a voice against him or escape his tyranny he can without any regret "tan their hide" (Munro).

Clark exercises acute authority over Carla and Flora, who also accept it with bowed head and astute submission. When Carla decides to marry Clark she acknowledges "him as the architect of the life ahead of them, herself as captive, her submission both proper and exquisite" (Munro). And when Flora reappears before Clark she also submissively butts "against Clark's leg" (Munro). Clark's observation about Flora that "Goats are unpredictable" and they "seem tame but they're not really . . . after they grow up" seems to contain a sly jibe at Carla's running away exploit (Munro). Since Carla and Flora share a bond of love and suffering they also try to provide solace to each other in troubled times. Whenever Carla is crestfallen due to Clark's bitter temper, she goes to the barn and gets cheered up by Flora:

The horses would not look at her when she was unhappy, but Flora, who was never tied up, would come and rub against her, and look up with an expression that was not quite sympathy—it was more like comradely mockery—in her shimmering yellow-green eyes. (Munro)

Carla's profound love for Flora makes her often dream about her after latter's sudden disappearance from the barn. In one of the dreams Flora walks to her with "a red apple" in her mouth, probably tempting Carla to eat the "forbidden fruit" and escape from Clark's tyranny. In the second dream:

. . . she had run away when she saw Carla coming. Her leg seemed to be hurt but she ran anyway. She led Carla to a barbed-wire barricade of the kind that might belong on some battlefield, and

then she—Flora—slipped through it, hurt leg and all, just slithered through like a white eel and disappeared. (Munro)

The dream is a clear message to Carla that she would also meet Flora's fate sooner or later. That their predator is not an outside "wild dog" or "coyote" or " bear" but an inside carnivore who has been consuming them slowly and steadily. Munro, nevertheless, ends the story without revealing the actual fate of Flora. Just like Carla, readers also surmise what would have happened to Flora. Has she been killed by Clark? Or has she been sent back to the place from where Clark brought her? Or else set free by him? Equally intriguing are the questions regarding Carla's fate. What would she do now without her two comrades, Sylvia and Flora? Would she make another attempt at running away? Or would she surrender herself completely to Clark's whimsicalities? Or would she be able to find another heart to heart bonding and redeem herself from the throes of servility? Whatever happens to Carla in future is shrouded under mystery, but her bonding with Sylvia and Flora has made her conscious of her own self, a separate individual who can continue her quest for greener pastures.

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