Getting Away

Bea pulled the copies out of her typewriter, one for Miss Leopard, one for the files, and let the switchboard know she was going to lunch. Threading the crowd of people in the hospital lobby, she set off up Charles Street, looking into the windows of the antique shops, though there was no point now. No point in anything. She stopped to wonder who had kept cigars in that brass-cornered rosewood box, so like her father's in the old days, and what little girl's hair, brushed with that miniature ivory brush, had crackled and stood on end in winter, as Bea's had done so long ago, before the Depression, before the War, before everything had happened. The shopfronts swam before her eyes. You can't, she told herself, *can't* be feeling like this about a dog.

She couldn't shake off the memory of her first glimpse of the darling black puppy in her brother's arms, Thurston in uniform off to the Pacific after Pearl Harbor. For fourteen years, ever since, Bea had hastened home at lunch to let Battie out and up Mt. Vernon Street to widdle on the bricks. No need to hurry now. Still, habit was habit. Sometimes it seemed the only thing that kept a person going. Mother would be out at her bridge luncheon, so Bea could mourn in peace for the dear old mass of dusty black fur, stumbling and widdling everywhere. Battie's bed still occupied a corner of the living room. She would have to summon the courage to throw it out.

She rattled the keys to the apartment, steeling herself at the silence she was never going to get

used to, no scrabbling of claws behind the door, no joyful panting, no Battie. Only the telephone bill on the gray tiles, the appeal from the rheumatism foundation, the premium for the life insurance policy benefitting Mother. And a square blue envelope. She recognized the handwriting at once. Years ago in school, Miss Parkinson had inveighed against girls dotting their i's with little circles, but Sukey had felt the circle dots were fashionable and had never given in. Extraordinary of Sukey to write. They had lunched just the other day. Something must have come up.

"It's the worst thing in the world," Sukey had said at Maître Jacques, "losing a dog."

Bea steadied the hot shell on her plate and dug out a scallop. Sukey was comfortable and lucky, went to Paris in the fall, Nantucket in the summer.

"You've never even had a dog."

"Don't change the subject. You're not getting over it."

"I don't want to get over it."

"Of course you must get over it."

"What does it matter? I'm not anybody much." Bea mopped up her cheese sauce with a crust of bread. "I might have been, but circumstances forbade."

"Nonsense."

"Battie loved me all the same. She saw me through the worst year of the war, with Thurston in the Pacific. I named her for Earl Mountbatten of Burma, you know."

"Listen, Bea, you need to get away. Come to Nantucket. Bill loves you to beat him at Scrabble."

"Mother doesn't like to be left alone."

"Phooey. She can get along for a weekend. It's your turn."

"It's too far for a weekend."

"Nonsense. You can fly down Saturday and come back Sunday."

"Don't keep saying 'nonsense' and 'phooey'. You know how it is. When she goes to Thurston's in August, then I can get away."

"That's not for weeks." Sukey jangled her bracelets. "Look, darling, does she throw fits, or what?"

Bea lit a cigarette and crossed her legs. "Oh Sukey, dearest, don't ask. It's just easier not to stir things up."

"And now no Battie."

"It wasn't all wine and roses with Battie, you know. Did I ever tell you how she went fox hunting on Charles Street?"

"A fox? On Charles Street?"

"Draped around the shoulders of an elegant woman, with its little fur legs dangling down. Battie plunged after it into the traffic, like a good spaniel."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. With me on the other end of her leash, cabs swerving, horns blasting, the two of us wound around a lamppost, and the elegant woman striding on, oblivious. Oh how we laughed, Mother and I. Battie could always make us laugh."

"You can't pretend with me," Sukey said. "We were in kindergarten together. You're laughing, but you're not getting over it. Come to Nantucket, Bea. "You need a fling."

"You're a darling."

But Bea had been terribly tempted. Nantucket would have been such fun.

And now a letter. Bea propped it on the counter in her tiny kitchen and got out lettuce and cottage cheese and a can of pears. When lunch was ready, she opened the envelope and found something stiff and green. "Island Air, Miss Beatrice Watts, 9 a.m., June 24." What on earth was this? Bea took care not to get it near the cottage cheese. A plane ticket to Nantucket for this Saturday?

"Now Bea," Sukey wrote, "don't deny yourself. It's all paid for."

What a present! Of course she should refuse, but how do you refuse a ticket with your name on it? And how could she bear to? She had never flown, but since the War people flew all the time. Lady Mountbatten had flown all over India and thought nothing of it. Bea rinsed her plate, tucked the ticket into her bag, locked the apartment door, and headed back to work. This very Saturday! Sukey could easily afford this, but how could Bea ever reciprocate? She might get her some of those blue cornflowers at the florist's on the corner. But of course, Sukey already had everything.

Bea's own life had been shaped by disappointment. Mother had scoffed at her hope of nursing school, and Dad never had any intention of allowing his eldest to roll up her sleeves with the daughters of Irishmen. "You'll marry," he said, "and let your handsome husband support you." So she spent a year "coming out" at picnics, skating parties, and balls, her picture in the paper vivid among the debutantes, with parted lips. But the call came from Milwaukee, where Dad was traveling on business, before there was any husband. Mother took it in the breakfast room, her frightened face outlined against the knobby, cold spring gingko trees. "Pneumonia?" she said, and caught the next train. But too late. Dad didn't leave the money everyone expected, so Mother advertised for lodgers, and Bea took a secretarial course and went straight to work, because there wasn't any other way to pay the bills.

Someday, she thought, passing the cheeses and smoked salmon and black olives in Gemello's

window, she would buy a piece of real Parmesan, just for the heck of it. They had nice hams, too, in Gemello's. She could take one to Nantucket, but it would be cheaper to buy a plain ham and glaze it herself. Why not? Sukey was right. Mother ought to be able to get along for a weekend. Bea went on with her walk, soaring a little. Maybe it *was* her turn. She would call to thank Sukey and announce she was bringing a ham.

At intervals all afternoon, as she drafted Miss Leopard's letters, Bea practiced what to say to Mother. "It will do me good to get away." Or, "I've lost my sense of proportion." No. Better be resolute and optimistic. "You'll be glad to know, Mother … " By the time she got home, Mother was waiting with pointed fingernails and white piled hair for Bea to make her dinner.

"I won seventy-five cents at bridge," Mother said. "Mrs. Davenport played poorly, as usual."

"Guess what?" Bea said, pouring them each a Bourbon, "I've been invited to Nantucket."

"What?"

Bea raised her voice. "Nantucket. For the weekend. Sukey sent me a ticket."

"Why ever did she do that?"

"She's my best friend, that's why."

Bea went to heat up the clam chowder. So far, so good. When it was ready, she put it in bowls and settled them on little tables in front of Mother's chair and her own.

"How extraordinary of Sukey," Mother said. "You haven't salted this well, Beatrice. Chowder should never be bland."

Bea headed to the kitchen for the salt. "If you don't want me to go..."

"That's quite all right. Now that Battie has died, you can travel."

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure. I simply could not undertake to walk a dog three times a day."

"No one expected you to."

"What?"

Mother's hearing aid battery probably needed replacing again.

"No one expected you to, Mother."

Alone in her room, Bea consulted the picture of Jamie, her brother, that stood on her bureau. "Do you think I might get away with it, James? Can you imagine?" Jamie with the slight smile always. He had dived in from a sailboat the summer after his sophomore year in college, and drowned. He must have hit a rock, people said, though it was all sand there. He'd always been afraid of cold, choppy water, but he wanted to impress that Vassar girl.

Dreams harrowed Bea with visions of twisted wreckage and smashed bodies, but she commanded herself resolutely. She was flying to Nantucket, and her blue suit and medium heels would do. She bought a ham on the way home from work Friday and got it properly cooked too, though Mother kept coming into the kitchen to interfere and direct the glazing.

"That won't be enough pineapple, Bea."

"It will have to be."

"When she's invited you all that way?"

Bea yanked the little parsley heads off their stems to stick around the edges of the ham. "Why don't you run out and get me another can, then, old dear."

"Bea! How much have you been drinking?"

"Enough to wonder when was the last time you cooked a ham. Or anything else, for that matter."

"Don't be ridiculous. I boil my egg every morning."

A stripe of sun across her pillow woke Bea early. She tiptoed to the kitchen, wrapped the ham in wax paper, and lashed it to the platter with rubber bands.

"You don't want to miss your plane," Mother called.

"It doesn't go until nine. I'm not going to miss it."

"I know you're not." Mother appeared in her doorway, slinging the sash of her dressing gown around her waist. "I'm coming to the airport."

"No, Mother, I can manage."

"With a suitcase and a ham?"

"I'll get a porter."

"What?"

"A porter. If you fuss, I won't go."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course you must go."

It would all go wrong, of course. Somehow it would go wrong. But they left the apartment in plenty of time, Bea plunking her suitcase down to hold the elevator, Mother bearing the ham. All the way down the hill, Bea worried about finding a taxi, but as soon as they reached the corner a cab drew up, and the driver leapt out and popped her suitcase into the trunk.

"Which airline?"

Bea had no idea. She pawed her purse, suddenly hot.

"You haven't lost your ticket?" said Mother.

"Mother, please. Nantucket. I'm going to Nantucket."

"Perfect place for a fine June morning." The driver ushered them into the cab and scrunched

down in his seat. "That'll be East Terminal."

Bea felt him seeking her eyes in the mirror and unwillingly looked up. She dreaded having to make conversation in cabs, at the hairdresser.

"Ever flown?" he asked, easing into the downramp to the tunnel.

"Never," she said. "I'm going to close my eyes."

"Oh no you don't. Open them so you don't get sick." He laughed. "My wife flew to New York when our daughter had the baby. Annie's in labor thirty-six hours, needs her mother, and Mom arrives sick as a dog."

"Oh, but your daughter. Is she well? And the baby?"

"Fine. Caesarian. A redhead."

It was starting already. Chatting at seven in the morning with an Irishman, undoubtedly a Catholic. Exactly the sort of thing that never happened unless you got away.

They arrived at the airport in plenty of time, 7:23 by Bea's watch. But the ticket desk was dark.

"You should have thought," said Mother.

"How could I?"

"You rush off at the last moment."

"Will you lower your voice, Mother? People can hear you."

At the next counter a uniformed man was gesturing.

"You've never known how to plan, Bea, darling."

"What will I do with you, Mother?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll be out of your way for good, soon enough."

"Mother, don't!"

The man at the next counter beckoned Bea over.

"Island Air won't open until eight," he said. "May I make a suggestion? The restaurant down the concourse serves a good cup of coffee. It you're back by 8:30, you'll be in plenty of time."

A very nice man, Mother and Bea agreed. He even offered to check Bea's bag through with Island Air. But it had all been a bit of an ordeal. They set off for the restaurant, and Mother transferred the ham to Bea. The thing that had to go wrong, Bea reflected, was the ticket counter being closed, and since that had already happened and calm had been restored, maybe everything was going to be all right. As they had breakfasted already, they ordered Bloody Marys.

"What a lovely morning," Mother said, gazing out at the airfield and the bay, where gulls were wheeling. "All the horrid little houses far away across the water, and everything so blue."

"I'm afraid it's going to be hot in town."

"Think nothing of it, dear. I've had my turn in life. Nowadays I don't expect to be Queen of the May."

"I've left vichyssoise for your supper. Will you be all right?"

"Certainly. I'm lunching with Mrs.Sears, the Symphony comes on the radio tonight, and tomorrow Thurston will come and take me to church." Mother's drink was halfway down her glass. "When I die," she went on, "I'd like to come back as a gull."

"Nonsense. You're never going to die."

"Oh, Bea, we're getting loopy. What time is it?"

Bea looked at her watch. 8:45. "Dear Lord. Waitress!"

"I'm paying for this," said Mother.

"There isn't time. Let me just leave five dollars."

"You paid for the cab. It's my treat. I insist. Yoo hoo! Waitress!"

Bea picked up the ham and closed her eyes. Perhaps she wasn't meant to get away.

"Is it one of those teeny-tinies?" Mother asked as they hurried along the concourse. "I hope it's not the kind that crashes."

"It's just like the ones that go to New York," said Bea, presenting herself third in line, fluttering only slightly. Her watch said 8:53. When she handed over her ticket, the agent paused a moment, cool in pressed khaki.

"I'm afraid there's a problem, Miss Watts."

"What do you mean? There can't be."

"We didn't see you at check-in, and we've sold your seat."

"But I was here early. You have my bag. I'm due in Nantucket for lunch. I'm bringing the ham!"

"What is it?" Mother demanded. "Why doesn't that woman speak up?"

"One moment," the agent said, picking up a phone.

A door behind the counter swung open and a man barged in, kicking a gray canvas mailbag ahead of him. Unshaven, in loose khaki, he lifted a clipboard off the wall, licked his thumb, and began riffling papers. The agent hung up and sauntered over to chat.

"Oh God," Bea said. "It's no use. I may as well give up."

"Not on my account," said Mother. "I won't have it. I don't want to stand in your way, Beatrice."

"That's not how it works, Mother."

"Miss Watts," broke in the agent, "we may have a solution. If you don't mind a small plane,

Rocky can fly you down."

"Rocky? Oh I don't think..."

"He'll want to be done with the islands before the fog comes in."

Don't let Mother notice the hair on his chest, Bea thought, as Rocky knotted the neck of a second mailbag. But Mother was already kissing her goodbye.

"I have every confidence in that young man," she said. "He looks like someone in the movies, like one of those aces. I'm going up on the platform to see you off."

Is that all it takes? Bea thought. "Somebody out of the movies? But she had no time to think. Rocky shouldered the mailbags and nodded, and she plunged after him down a corridor and out a heavy door into the wind, where he made toward a tiny plane parked in the shadow of a giant.

"Only one engine?"

"Piper Cub," he said. "Very reliable."

The plane was smaller than a car and tipped with Bea's weight. There was a windshield in front but the side window was alarmingly open. Rocky showed her how to hook the seat belt, stuffed the mailbags behind the seats, did something with the dials, and the engine roared up.

"Put your purse under the seat," he ordered, "so it doesn't get sucked out the window."

My God, Bea thought, as they clattered and bounced toward the bay. To come through the War and then to go like this.

Something fell out of the ceiling and put a dent in the ham.

"Goddam compass," Rocky shouted, and slammed it back up into its brackets.

The plane rattled and bucked into speed. Through the rush of wind, Bea made out Mother on the platform, small and valiant.

"Here we go," Rocky shouted, and up they went. The earth sank sickeningly. Mother was

whisked behind and down among the bullrushes.

When Bea remembered to open her eyes, everything was prismatic and blue, as if she had fallen into a kaleidoscope. Then the world tipped, and the pattern resolved itself into sky and sea. She made out rocks and guano at the foot of a lighthouse, a line of green weed near the water, sailboats tacking toward a green claw of land. The plane leveled and flew steadily over the wrinkled sea and islands. Then everything slid sideways, and there was the Customs House Tower and the hospital, the esplanade where she'd walked with Battie, the river away toward Harvard. Here were the railroad tracks running into South Station, where Mother had arrived with Dad's coffin, shocked white in her best hat. "How can I be expected to raise two sons without a father?" she had cried, as though the boys were the only ones who mattered. "You'll have to sacrifice, Bea."

Well, she had done it. Taken a job and helped pay Dad's debts one by one, while the boys got scholarships to college. Her nose stung, and she flicked away a tear or two that ran down beside her nose, hoping Rocky didn't notice. Ridiculous. Why fuss about all that now? And anyway, here she was, soaring above it all. Though she never had become a nurse, Miss Leopard thought very highly of her and told everyone it would be impossible to run the nursing service without Bea. And the earth from above looked beautiful, intriguing. She hadn't expected that. Here was a ship, steaming out the President Roads. You could see the white of Boston Light, the islands.

"Nantasket Beach," Rocky shouted over the engine roar.

She knew it well, the beach, the hook of Hull, the ledges, the big houses along Jerusalem Road. She braced herself for the cove, full of sailboats now as then, where Jamie had peeled off his sweater and dived in to swim ashore, while she and the Vassar girl bagged the sails, careless and happy as they had all seemed to be in those days. But the wind had blown up, and the waves turned dark and choppy. They stared at the surface of the water, Bea's skin all in prickles, but he never came

up.

Below the plane Bea saw the dock she had rowed toward after someone brought Jamie to the surface and draped him over the dinghy's stern. His dead weight in the water dragged the boat this way and that, and the dock never seemed to come any closer, but he was gone already. He must have gasped in the sudden cold and filled his lungs with water. The firemen worked a long time with the pump in their starched blue sleeves, but nothing changed. Walking up from the beach behind the ambulance, she had wanted to tell Jamie, as she told him everything, how terrible, how really awful this was.

Now in the plane her breath caught. Her hand flew to her mouth.

"Okay, lady," Rocky bellowed, fishing behind his seat for a rusty towel. "You wouldn't be the first that upchucked in my plane."

Bea waved him away. She'd got through it then and she'd get through it now. Mother gave up after Jamie drowned, wouldn't cook, wouldn't see friends. Thurston couldn't take it. He disappeared, and for years they hardly saw him. So Bea took care of Mother. She had hardly been able to leave her except to go to work, and the moment she got home, it all began again, the worry, the fault-finding. "Have you lost the electric bill? What have you done with my library books? You would think I could at least have a sandwich." She had given too much of her life to Mother.

Rocky was flying now over the trees of Cohasset Common. Bea could see the white fences, the stone church on the rock, the grassy common where Austin in the autumn dusk had asked her to marry him and she'd said no. She'd hardly given Austin a thought in years. Why had she said no? Stands of hardwood and pine slipped below the plane, stone walls, a baseball diamond, a dump scattered over a hill, sun flashing off the windows of old cars. Austin had loved her. But she had felt she couldn't saddle him with Mother, so he had married someone else instead, someone nice, and had

children, and Thurston had got Bea a puppy so she'd have an excuse to go out for a walk. Oh, how can I bear myself? she thought. In my whole life, my only happiness has been with a dog. She bit her lip. The last thing Rocky would want on board would be a weeping woman. But a cry escaped her. What good had ever come of bowing down to Mother?

"What the hell?" Rocky shouted. "Don't faint on me, lady."

He pushed Bea's head down into her lap, crushing her curls. It tickled her funnybone. Here she was, zooming over Massachusetts with her cheek in a ham.

"Mind my fifteen-dollar perm," she yelled at him, shrugging him off, and sat up into the overpowering white and light blue air. Nantucket lay scythe-shaped beyond the Vineyard, in the immensity of the sea. Absorbed, Bea watched the shoreline below her turn and twist, form shapes of cove and point, spawn a white curl of surf. She followed the ribbons of road, the patterns of ponds and fields and woods, and the shadow of the plane bounded over the hills and hollows, like Battie chasing a squirrel. She could see so much. She could see it all. She had done what had to be done in life, made her own mistakes and paid for them. Funny thing to be proud of, for someone supposed to let a handsome husband support her.

"Hell." Rocky hit the dashboard with the heel of his hand.

"What is it, Rocky?"

Low in the east, beyond the mass of Cape Cod, the haze congealed in a menacing gray line.

"Fog. It'll have to be in and out. Can you handle the mail?"

She nodded.

"Sit tight. We might get thrown around."

The fog crept up the curve of earth, blotting the east, spreading a blight of gray. As they crossed the south shore of the Cape and flew out over deep water, Bea's heart came into her mouth,

but she wasn't afraid. She would need any time that might be left to her to watch the earth. The ferry making for the island drew a white line in the blue water, still sunny next the shadow of the fog. Everything was sky and ocean. Everything was immense. Bea forgave the sea for drowning Jamie.

"Hang on," Rocky yelled. "We're going in."

They sped toward the lighthouse, skipping on the troubled air like a stone on water, skimming the harbor and the town. Big elms sprang up beneath them, the sandy airfield margins slipping by. Buffeted sideways, the plane hung, sank, bounced, dropped, landed with a bump, spun in a dizzying tight circle, stopped. Shreds of gray drifted across the sun. Rocky leaned over to unhook Bea's safety belt, and she climbed down, wobbly in the knees, and reached back for the ham. He pushed the smaller mailbag at her.

"Drop this anywhere."

"Good luck," she called, a little sadly.

He waved. The little plane turned, whined, shook, charged the wind, and shot away through the thickening gray air. The grass blew, silent. Bea had never felt so earthbound.

Hoisting the mailbag over one shoulder, cradling the ham, she began to make her way toward the windsock across the field, working to keep her heels from sticking in the grass. She had given up too much to Mother, but they'd got past that point, thank God. She had plenty of vacation time she'd never used. She would travel.

There were people at the fence. Could that be Bill, hunched like a crane? And Sukey in yellow linen?

"Yoo hoo," she called.

They were waving. Wait till she told them about the compass falling into the ham.

"Bea dear," called Sukey, "where did you come from? We thought Mother must have had a

hissy fit at the last minute. Oh what a lovely ham, you shouldn't have."

"Mother is lunching with Mrs. Sears."

Bill pointed out a gap in the fence, and they all began moving toward it.

"I'm afraid the weather is going to be terrible," Sukey said. "We saw your bag. Everyone's is Black Watch, but the corners chewed by Battie, you know. Why weren't you on the plane?"

"I thought it would be nice to have Rocky fly me down."

"Rocky? What's all this about, dearest? I sent you a ticket."

"Can you take the ham, Bill?" Bea said, reaching it over the fence.

"This isn't like you, Bea," said Sukey.

"Now what shall I do with the mailbag?"

"Bea!"

"They overbooked the flight, darling, and I had to come in a teeny-tiny."

"A tiny plane? With all you have to put up with? Whatever was it like?"

"Just wait, darlings," Bea said, emerging through the gap in the fence. "Wait till I tell you."