

# WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

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‘Where are you going, Jessamyn?’  
Two months ago Walter began reading my horoscope. I’m an Aries. Impatient, enthusiastic, generous, moody, energetic, inconsiderate, Walter tells me. I wouldn’t know; I don’t believe in horoscopes: I like to be in control of my own life.

'Where are you going?'

'Nowhere.' I stroke the back of my Persian cat.

'Don't think you can hide this from me, Jessamyn.'

On the table in front of him the evening paper is opened to the page with the horoscopes. We have lived in this house for the four years of our marriage and we don't have doors for the bedrooms yet. The tiles for the kitchen floor are still stacked in the garage; the porcelain lamp for the dining room remains packed in the attic; one single lightbulb sways above the table. Walter is a man of elaborate preparations.

But he never gets beyond them. We live in a house filled with unfinished projects, projects that lose their importance as Walter moves on to something new. This time my horoscope. I wonder when he will abandon it.

For a man of thirty-one Walter looks older than he is. His light brown hair is thinning; he combs it sideways to cover the top of his head. Sometimes I wonder why I married him. Sometimes he bores me. Yet, in a way, I find it reassuring to know what it is about him that will continue to bore me. Maybe it has to do with expectations. I'm not sure. With not expecting too much. Walter is a successful man. He works in advertising, writing slogans that sell cereals, soaps, cars, cosmetics, appliances, dog food.

His obsession with my horoscope is the most interesting recent development in our marriage. The things that used to interest both of us have stopped. Fizzled out. Kaput. We met playing tennis, played two or three times a week until we married. Then it went down to once a week — an amazing parallel to our sex life — until Walter developed tennis elbow and we stopped altogether. With tennis, that is. The sex hasn't stopped entirely. Not yet. But if I were to draw a curve, there is only one way it would go: Down.

'Where are you going?'

I have begun to wait for the evening paper. At forty-three it is delivered, one hour before Walter gets home. If I read my horoscope before he does, I can predict part of our evening: *be careful with money matters* has him check the balance in our account; *keep to routine matters early in the day* makes him suggest my chores for the next morning; *don't waste time with an insincere friend* starts him on a lengthy discussion on friends, acquaintances, neighbours; *good news travels slowly* has him ask if I got any mail; *a new romance on the horizon* makes him suspicious of other men.

'Are you ever attracted to other men, Jessamyn?'

Attracted. A strange word. Moths are attracted to light. *Burn*. Against their will. Out of control. I would feel uncomfortable being out of control.

'No, Walter. I am not attracted to other men. Are you?'

'To other men?'

'No. Women.'

'Of course not.'

Walter is faithful. He has told me so. For three reasons he is faithful: he does not want to catch a disease; he does not want to get another woman pregnant; he does not want another woman to fall in love with him and follow him home. I believe Walter is faithful because he does not like sex.

Attracted. I have begun to look at other men to figure out what attraction means. Last week I found myself staring at the man who works in the bookstore, wondering if his black beard was soft or coarse, what it would feel like against my palm should I cup my right hand around the side of his face and bring it close to mine. . . .

No, Walter. I am not attracted to other men. I would not call it attraction. Lust, perhaps. Imaginary lust. Imaginary, controlled lust. In my fantasies I am caressed, desired, thinner. Always thinner. And if my fantasies don't work for me, I revise them, changing bodies, situations, dialogue, my self-image. Never faces. My imaginary lovers are faceless. They never reject me. They do not comb their hair sideways; they do not date the bottoms of Kleenex boxes to keep track of how long they last; they do not turn their back toward me at night; they are not interested in my horoscope, even if it says: *You are about to embark on a long journey. Prepare well.*

'Where are you going, Jessamyn?'

Certainly not to the strawberry bed. Two years ago Walter planted a strawberry patch behind the house, planted it and never set foot in it again. I am the one who has stooped to weed, who has gathered them. Walter likes to eat strawberries: he dips them into sour cream, then brown sugar. Walter also likes to give me advice on how to care for his strawberry patch and he tells the neighbours how hard he works in it. Never again shall I enter Walter's strawberry bed. He doesn't know yet; it is still too early in the spring.

This morning I taught Kindergarten. I'm a substitute teacher; the elementary school calls me in two or three times a week. Just before recess I overheard two girls talking by the window. One of them said: 'When people suffocate, they turn invisible whenever they get close to the colour brown.' The other nodded, seriously, totally accepting the bizarre statement. To me it makes as much sense as Walter's question. Is he trying to sell me on the idea of leaving? Or is he afraid I might leave?

Does it matter?

'Where are you going?' Walter is observing me, two narrow lines vertical on his forehead.

My father used to frown at me like that when I didn't listen to him, when I didn't obey immediately. He would frown and then he would begin to count, slowly: one, two, two-and-a-half, two-and-three-quarters, two-and . . . Never higher than that; by two-and-a-half I was usually running, certain that if he ever got to three, something terrible would happen.

I never found out.

I never waited long enough.

Are you counting too, Walter?

Waiting for me to run?

Run where?

Perhaps back to the bookstore. I have since spoken to the man with the black beard. His voice is soft; I still don't know about his beard. We went for coffee across the street and talked about Tolstoi. When he said it is acceptable to read new books, books untested by time, in paperback, but a sin to read Tolstoi in any other form than leather bound, I pictured thick, red-leather volumes, gold tooled with Tolstoi's initials. A snob, I thought, a bloody, intellectual snob. Yet, I would like to speak with him again, to find out how he reads Faulkner, Woolf, Kafka, to find out the texture of his beard.

'When are you going?'

'When?' Under my hand the cat stretches. Purrs. A sound like a finely tuned mechanism.

'No, Jessamyn. I asked: Where?'

'I heard you say: When are you going?'

'You misunderstood. I asked: Where are you going?'

The more Walter talks about the journey, the more plausible it becomes that I could go away.

Might go away.

Might want to go away.

Not that I'm planning to leave, but if I did, I would not choose a one-week excursion-fare special to some tropical island. Postcard palms against a sunset sky. Natives dancing. Complimentary cocktail and airport transfers included. Not for me. Not that. It would have to be a long journey. A journey to a place already prepared for me, waiting for me. Two large rooms with high ceilings. A window seat. Walls painted ivory. Shelves filled with books and plants. Woven rugs and pillows. My piano. A low bed on a white platform. Batiked covers in shades of blue.

But where?

Not another secluded country house for me. A city. I would live in a city on the top floor of an old stone building. Close to museums, theatres, concerts. A city where I have not been before. San Francisco, perhaps.

Steep sidewalks: paved. I'd see the bay from my bedroom window, listen to my Brahms records at night, work days at a school teaching the children of other women. I almost had a child once. But it bled from me in the third month.

*You are about to embark on a long journey. Prepare well.*

I know a woman by the name of Pat who left her husband.

I also know Margot, Sandy, Mary.

Lots of others.

Women with children.

Women without children.

If I had children, I would give them names like Anne or Bob or Jane or Ted. Easy names. Names that would not get in their way. Names that would not draw attention like mine: Jessamyn. When strangers hear my name, they form the wrong image. Walter first heard my name from a friend and asked to meet me because he fell in love with my name. Jessamyn. Jessamine. Jasmine: an ornamental plant with fragrant, white blossoms.

Misleading.

Walter, I am not ornamental. Nor am I fragile.

I think of myself as Jess. My parents called me Jess. But Walter likes to listen to the sound of the word Jessamyn as he says it.

Would it be easier to leave if I had children to take with me? Or would it be harder, knowing I needed to *prepare well* for anyone other than myself? My cat I would take with me, *that* I know, although I still haven't found the right name for her. I know the texture of her fur, know the sound that begins deep within her throat. But not her name. Not yet.

'When are you going, Jessamyn?' Walter is waiting.

This time I heard him clearly. He did ask: When?

Why have I stayed until now? Do I find in comforting to predict what I will be bored with tonight? Tomorrow? Or do I only think of leaving Walter when the time is not right. Like self-examining my breasts, I know I should do it once a month. But I don't, because I think of it only when I am fully dressed and not alone.

How to know when the right time has come to leave?

Is there ever a right time?

When did all those other women decide to leave? When it became unbearable for them to stay for one more day? Or when they could not name one more reason for staying?

When am I leaving, Walter?

Soon, I think.

Soon.