The Runaways, by Elizabeth Spencer

**EVERY DAY** Edward walked down to the village. Joclyn saw him go, usually with a list from her in his pocket. It was a long walk. If she was going to walk, she said, staying near the ridge was preferable. She could stop and talk to some of the children in the native houses, out of sight but not so far away. She could practice her Spanish. She had learned it wasn’t wise to hand out favors. Even when she did go to town, she did not go with Edward, as a rule. He always asked her, “Anything from below?” It would be hot there. Up here on the ridge, cool nights, temperate afternoons.

The Hacienda Sol y Agua was not really a hacienda, but rather a cluster of cottages, recently built, spaced out along a ridge above a long green valley. Perhaps there would be a hacienda someday, the guests speculated. Or perhaps there had been one in the past. The ruins of a mining project far down the eastern drop of the hill made them think that. Crumbling walls down that way were grown up in vines, a jungle of bloom. Some said copper was mined here once, some said silver. No one knew for sure. As for *agua,* there was nothing to swim in either; they were far inland from the ocean, with no lake in sight. The theory ran that the new swimming pool, now only a red gash down the western slope, looking abandoned, was what was meant. The feeling was that its not being finished was what made the rents so reasonable. Others gave credit to the recent struggles of the peso. But the level ridge top where the little houses stood was beautifully laid out with winding walks and rock-bordered beds. And the sun, at least, was certainly there. The nights were velvety, starlit, clear, and calm. Days, the path to the village beckoned downward.

But Joclyn seldom felt like the climb back. She did her graphics, a series of them, promised for book illustrations. The mail was important to her. Edward had her written permission to pick it up. The packets with the San Francisco postmark, he knew those were the ones she waited for. She had told him.

When she had gone, a time or two, she had discovered a long winding path, in addition to the sharp climb he preferred. She could dawdle and rest, coming up by stages. She had not been well. She was thin, and as with many very thin people, it was hard to tell her age. She didn’t volunteer to reveal it. Mystery in Mexico, a mysterious country. She felt it part of being here not to come right out with everything. And unlike the other renters, he didn’t inquire.

“You can come if you want to.” He always said that, but on the climb the one time she came along, he seldom spoke. One evening, though, he waited till after sunset to see that she did indeed return up the longer path. He met her. “What took you so long? I was worried.”

“I ran into a woman and talked to her. She’s got three children and another one coming. She’s hardly older than twenty, if that. Her husband needs a job. I guess it’s a common story.”

“You see where practicing Spanish can get you? Into sympathizing.”

It seemed a harsh comment, but she let it pass. It was the slurred way he spoke, Southern obviously, that made irony seem like sarcasm or even contempt. Leaning back slightly, talking down. Maybe just joking.

“Come sit,” he offered. He’d placed a chair before his entrance door. “Take the weight off yo’ feet.” She had so little weight, she thought that might be a joke, too. She shook her head. “Another time.” She walked back to her own cottage, at the far end.

**It was an unspoken** code among the renters that they either met for drinks separately, in households or alone, or all together, gathering. “Our time next.” It was said easily, two or three times weekly. There were seven of the units, five occupied at present. The month was about to terminate, meaning a turnover for a number of them. The hilltop had been laid out amply; the beds held jacarandas, pepper trees, lemon trees, oleanders, hibiscuses, geraniums. Footsteps crunched on the gravel walks that branched off to individual cottages. “Efficiencies,” somebody had said early on, during drinks. “I hate that word,” Edward said under his breath, and Joclyn had heard him, being accidentally nearby.

Later on the day of the long climb, her supper finished, she was about to shower and go to bed, legs aching from the effort of the afternoon, when she heard a knock at the windowpane toward the back. It was Edward, the only name for him that she knew. “I forgot to give you the mail.”

She let him in.

“But I went down today. I was at the post office. I got there first. They passed it over without asking. I just forgot.” He handed her two letters. Family mail, a bill. She put them aside. He was standing there rather awkwardly, not like his usual way.

“Well, come in.” She was irritated. The feeling was that he had gotten her mail, then kept it from her. Was he finally losing his distance? Why should she mind? Certainly, he was attractive, sensitive looking, his intelligence communicated without any particular proof needed, and he too was mysterious. Unasked and unanswered questions about him doubtless had occurred to everyone there, and had actually been put to him by the less reticent ones, like that Hartley couple, for instance. “Now, just what brought you down all this way?” they wanted to know. “I saw an ad.” (Period.) Mussed brown hair, well-set, fairly tall. Late thirties? Hard to tell. Tan trousers usually, T-shirt and dirty tennis shoes, not very good for walking. But as he stood there with her mail in hand, she noticed that he had bathed and smelled like good soap. His shirt was clean.

“I get tired very easily,” she said, by way of getting him out of there after the one drink she was now going to fetch for him. “I was recently sick.”

“That’s too bad. Are you better?” Memory stirred for her, out of the soap smell: tub baths in the slow, soft California twilight, clean pajamas, the murmur of a family talking on the side porch.

“It’s slow.”

He sat down and was a leisurely while taking the first swallow from his glass. “It was breaking up my marriage is the trouble with me,” he said. “Ten years of it and all over. Gone. I had to get off and think.”

“Is that what you do here?” she asked him. “Think?”

“I call it that. Really it’s just going over it again. Like hitting yourself where it hurts the most. The first time you can’t stand it, the second time you think you’ll die, the third time is worst of all, but then by the tenth or twelfth or twentieth time, being still alive, you get surprised at yourself. By the hundredth time, you’re numb.”

“And finally you don’t care?”

“I must be getting there. But lately I’ve wondered if I want to.”

“Ever?”

“I believe I never really want not to care.”

With that, to her surprise, he got up and left. Then why had he dressed? she wondered. Maybe just for himself.

**At week’s end** the company changed. The inquisitive Hartleys left, as did the retired minister Mr. Telfair and his wife, with talk of their “kiddies,” meaning grandchildren, and the Maynards, who wondered the whole time if their Labrador was all right at the vet’s, and if the lawn was being watered, what with a drought all over the Midwest.

Edward and Jocelyn were the only ones still there. The new list had gone up in the guardhouse, as they called the caretaker’s unit, but the names—though one seemed Russian and another distinctly Jewish—meant little or nothing, Edward and Joclyn agreed, as long as the people who owned them were okay.

“I’m fairly antisocial,” he told her, having wandered into the office while she was studying over the notice. “Some good nasty characters might be interesting.” He then knocked on the caretaker’s door to say in Spanish that his stove needed repair.

Those who had cars or had rented jeeps, which were more common, took the road down the back side of the mountain to sightsee, explore, shop, or dine. There was a small convenience store connected with the cottages, but it was often locked up, the old señora and her daughter who ran it gone somewhere best known to themselves. They always said any absence was for washing clothes down below at the river, and maybe it was. “It’s where they meet and talk to everybody,” Edward explained. “They gossip.” Still, it got to be a saying among the renters: “Gone to wash clothes.”

“I think you’d better go and wash clothes,” was what Edward had the misfortune to say to the blond wife of one of the new arrivals. She had made a dead set for him right away the first evening. The next day, having found a window open, she was into his quarters when he came back up the hill from town. The newcomers’ arrival party, held regularly for a get-together drink, had been her first appearance. After a couple of drinks, she had draped her arm around Edward and had pushed her head up under his chin. Her name was Gail Loftis. Her husband, Bill, said he was in investments. Edward told him that he had no money to invest, and then he had to reveal to the wife that he had no wish to invest in her either. The clothes-washing remark offended her, however, so she went around the next morning telling everyone how insulting he was.

“It’s just a saying we have,” Joclyn explained. “An ‘in’ joke. About the little shop that’s never open.”

“God, does he think everything on two legs is after him?” Evidently, Gail Loftis wanted to start dropping in for coffee or beer or just anything anybody had. It was Joclyn’s turn for her to visit.

“Most of us have some little work to develop here,” Joclyn explained. “Mr. Rotovsky is a writer, isn’t he? So he must work, too, for one.”

“It’s what he said,” Gail sulked, and finished the cup of instant coffee. She was not offered more.

“You can take some nice trips,” Joclyn counseled. “I’d like to myself, but I have a commission for some graphics to finish. I have a deadline.” Her voice had gotten firmer, and finally even Gail Loftis understood that she was supposed to leave.

“Bill’s such a bore,” she said. “He’s keeping us on this awful budget. We ought to see more of the country.” She got up. “He’s not gay, is he?” It was Edward she meant. Joclyn sensed the trap.

“I wouldn’t think so,” she was quick enough to reply.

**After lunch,** Edward talked with Mr. Rotovsky. They sat on lawn chairs, looking out over the back slope toward a low mountain range behind. A blue fringe of light hung evenly over the summit.

“But if you go existential,” Edward said, “you plunge toward something new, and then how’re you to know you’ll wind up any better than at first?”

“Well, then you must feel so strongly that you plunge anyway. There is no time for the questions of this nature.”

Joclyn heard all this while passing behind them. She was off to pick some wildflowers for her rooms, as the beds near the walkways were off-limits. Knee-deep in weeds—something like sedge—she picked blue flowers whose name she didn’t know. She saw an iguana stretched on a rock in the sun. She straightened and looked toward the blue mountains.

**After dark that evening,** Edward came to see her for the second time. “It’s that damn woman,” he said when she let him in. “She waits around after dinner. If she gets in again, I’m going to throw her out bodily. Then there’ll be a big row. At least I speak enough Spanish so they’ll let me explain, possibly even believe me.”

“Her husband’s gone all around explaining already,” Joclyn said. “You didn’t hear him? ‘It’s just when she’s drinking,’ was what he said. He thinks she undergoes a female Jekyll-Hyde personality shift.”

“It doesn’t do me much good,” Edward said. “She’s not apt to stop.”

The knock at the door was her, of course. Joclyn went and cracked it open. The hectic face, hair streaming half across it, peered out of the dark. “I knew it! He’s here! Well, you two little bugs in a rug! . . . Have fun!” The door slammed in her face. Joclyn had got mad enough for that.

She turned to Edward. “I don’t care if you don’t.”

He didn’t answer. His glass was empty. She got him another drink.

Presently, she went over to the large folding table she kept set up in one corner and switched on her work light, the one she had brought with her. A white sheet, held down with steel rulers on either side, was half covered with the black outlines of what might be just a design but was really a half-formed picture. He did not come closer or inquire.

“I killed my wife,” he said into the semidark of his side of the room. She did not look up. “She was a crazy wild one, too, a nuisance every way you’d care to imagine. I had loved her too long. It all ran dry. She wasn’t living in the family home with us anymore. She’d rented an apartment for herself. I had to go there for something she wanted to talk about. The argument—well, who’d want to hear about it? I hit her. She fell and died. The weapon was a heavy piece of green Venetian glass my sister got on a summer trip. She’d liked it, so she took it. She had taking ways.”

“Weren’t you arrested?”

“It looked like an accident. Everybody knew she was on whatever it took to have one. Nobody knew I was even in town. I spent a lot of time off fishing last summer. I think, though, that maybe everybody knows but doesn’t blame me. We—my family is well known, prominent—. What can I say? In a Southern small town—. No way to explain just how it is. If you didn’t do it, you didn’t do it, no matter if you and everybody else knows that you did, including your mother.”

“Most of all your mother,” was what came to her to say. She leaned forward to smudge a line. Her hand was shaking. It wouldn’t stop. She turned out the light. In the newly dark room she crossed the floor and came to him. Groping, she pulled a hassock forward and sat near him. “I’m going to die,” she said.

He put his hand on her head. “I know. I thought so.” She leaned forward and laid her head on his knee. Close and warm, his hand moved on her hair.

He said, “Today, down in the village, I saw this Mexican, an older guy, riding a bicycle in a muddy street, holding this kid, a little girl, before him on the seat. She had grabbed onto the handlebars, close to the middle. They were both laughing. I never saw two people so happy. I guess it was his granddaughter—it would have to be. I think I’ll remember it forever. There in a muddy street of a dirt-poor town on a half-broke old bicycle—pure happiness. You don’t see it often.”

“You didn’t kill your wife,” she said.

“I was walking the steep way back and sat down to rest at that turn, you remember, from the first time you tried it.”

“The only time. It’s too taxing.”

“There’s a path I hadn’t noticed before, it slopes off down to the left if you’re coming up, to the right otherwise. Down there, I heard something move and a girl came up, a Mexican girl, Indian I would think, old skirt, black hair, broad face with no expression on it. When she left I walked down a piece and saw where this spring was welling up, just a thread of water trickling down, and some kind of little statue there, I couldn’t tell of what. A face, half worn off, but whose? Surrounded by flowers, bunches tied together. About ten or a dozen bunches, some dead, some fresh, some wilted. I wondered if she’d left some flowers, and if that’s their way of saying prayers. Do you know?”

“You didn’t kill your wife,” said Joclyn.

“No, I didn’t kill her. I wanted to, but I didn’t. I was lying.”

“I wasn’t.”

“I know.”

She stayed where she was, cheek laid on his knee, head silently beneath his hand. This was the happiest she had felt, in such a long time