



The Llamas

by Valerie Trueblood

Ann told her friends she was nowhere. What was ahead? She didn't love her boyfriend. He accused her of not liking him but he thought the love part could survive that. He didn't like her, either, even though they maintained a truce over their differing views of the world. Ann's had always been that the world was treacherous where it wasn't cruel, even though many advantages surrounded and secured her, including a job several rungs above his in the same company, whereas his was that the world

didn't matter if you were having a good time.

When Casey Clare's brother died, Ann had to attend the funeral because she was Casey's boss. She felt the obligation even though Casey had been her assistant for only a few months. Todd, her boyfriend, said the obligations she felt were imaginary half the time and did nothing but add random pressure to her crowded life. Her friends said the same thing. They didn't press the point that she often shirked these responsibilities after getting herself into a state about them. But she had said she would go to Casey's brother's funeral, and she did.

As an assistant—Ann had known it within a week of hiring her—Casey was not working out. She could spend half a morning being reassured and primed by Ann to get down to jobs that weren't all that complicated or taxing. Every day she presented herself anew with her blunt inquiries into Ann's affairs, and then a rundown of things seen and done between close of business the day before and the re-opening of the office doors.

Ann had to sit turned away from her computer at an awkward angle, looking up at Casey with an expression of commiseration, gradually picturing how it would be to lean over the in-basket and slap the girl into action. Girl—Casey was thirty-three, two years older than Ann. But her big smiling face and her packed lunch and her blouses a little too

tight, as if she had just grown those breasts, made Ann think of an overgrown schoolgirl turned loose in the workplace and fending for herself. Or not entirely for herself: Casey did have a large family, a whole phonebook of relatives advising, making demands, dropping in with food, all comically devoted to each other. Not to mention the dozens from her church who prayed at the unconscious brother's bedside.

He was in the University Hospital. Every day Casey urged Ann to visit him, as if the problem Ann had was simply getting up the nerve. Casey said, "Yeah, why not this Sunday? Just stop by, come up to the floor. After you get done with the vigil." She knew Ann attended the Green Lake peace vigil—not that far from the hospital—any Sunday that she could make it. She had done that since before the beginning of the war in Iraq.

"Come on," Todd said. "Let's get out of town."

"The vigil is all I do and I have to do it or I'll go crazy."

"That's crazy," he said. He didn't go out of town without her; he didn't have the focus to plan a trip and get in the car all by himself and stay with it, and she didn't say it but that was why he wasn't getting anywhere in his job.

The peace vigil: that was no problem for Casey. God wasn't on either side, how could he be? Almost every day Casey had a question about

God for Ann, and not trying to smoke her out as an atheist either, but simply assuming that the matter of what God would think or do would interest anybody. "I mean, you wonder," Casey would say. September 11th, war, and the accident that had befallen Randy—an angel to all who knew him, a fireman, minding his own business and raising llamas: "You wonder how these things can happen." Ann would agree, clicking her nails on the keyboard as she appeared to give thought to the conundrum. Eventually Casey would go sighing back to her desk, where she would pick up the phone and call whoever was sitting with Randy in the ICU. She herself began and ended each day with a visit to the hospital where he had been lying in a coma since before she started working for Ann.

"I admire that about her," Ann said to Todd, who was telling her that if she couldn't face firing Casey she ought to get her transferred out of the office right that minute, before she wormed her way in any further. Ann thought about that and because it raised the question of exactly where, at work, her obligations lay, she said, "I think she'll get down to work when her brother gets out of the hospital." But the day after they had that talk, Randy Clare sank deeper into his coma and died.

Half the people who had arrived from the funeral

were standing in the rain, mud oozing into their shoes. They were smoking, drinking wine from plastic cups, and watching two llamas.

They had trooped out of the house where the wake was going on—or not wake, reception, or whatever the church the Clares belonged to called such a gathering—off the sagging porch and down the path, really a pair of ruts, to see Randy's much-loved pets. Two wet animals as tall as camels stood by the fence. One of them, head high, had apparently walked as far forward on its front legs as the back legs, stationary in the mud, would allow. The other stood with its four feet—pads with toenails were not hooves, were they?—close together. That one was almost tipping over, like a tied bouquet. Then the stretched-out one raised a delicate bony leg and then another, and stepped a few paces away from its mate—if it was a mate—and the mate sprang loose and planted its feet on a wider base in the mud.

Ann said, "Does it seem to you like they're posing?" All the while a soaking rain fell on their thick wormy-looking coats and on the long faces both supercilious and gentle. One of the women said, "Those poor things aren't rainproof like sheep, did you know that?" and people answered her, as they had not answered Ann. Some of them knew that piece of information and some didn't.

The eyes of the llamas were glazed and

gentle. But the heads were poised atop those haughty necks. A face came vaguely to mind, someone looking around with a sad hauteur. Who? An actor. Somebody gay.

The woman, an older woman with a smoker's voice, knew something about llamas, though no one, she said, could hold a candle to Randy Clare on the subject. Randy had explained to her, as he would to anyone with an interest, the spitting behavior of llamas. Llamas spat when they were annoyed and what they spat was chewed grass, a kind of grass slop brought up from the gut and carrying the smell of that region.

"See the pile of dung over there? That's their bathroom. They all use it. They don't just go any old place."

A wet dog trotted up and crouched, head down, licking its lips and yawning with eagerness as it peered under the fence. Ann thought it might suddenly slip under and give chase, but it did not.

Even so, the two heads of the llamas swung around and the big dark wet eyes rested on the dog and then moved back to the group at the fence. Certainly there was some emotion there, in those eyes. Did the llamas know they were bereaved?

"All right," Casey said. "You've seen 'em. Bootsy and Baby. His darlings, except for Baby isn't so darling. Let's get back inside and get dry and get drunk."

They waded back to the house. Nobody said anything about caked shoes and muddy pants legs, though the women fussed with their dripping, flat hair. They piled their wet raincoats onto a top-loading freezer in a room off the kitchen just big enough to hold it and leave space to pass through the back door. "Deer meat?" Ann asked Casey, indicating the freezer, proud of herself for recalling that Casey and her brothers hunted deer. "No way, not now," Casey said, closing herself into a tiny bathroom off the kitchen. "Donna's catering stuff," she yelled from inside. One of the sisters had her own business; she had done the rolled meats and the trays of vegetables and dips in the dining room, and the laurel leaves on the tablecloth, which were actually sober and pretty, Ann thought, with white candles at either end.

Around Casey's desk, and now at the copier too, the sagas of her sister Donna's business could be heard any day: the crushed cake boxes, the tiny refrigerators some people made her manage with, the cucumbers leaching dye from beets.

At the table sat the not-very-old mother, wearing big tinted glasses. Three of her grown children had lived in this small house with her. Two now. Why didn't they leave home? "You're all together, that says so much about your family," Ann said to Casey through the bathroom wall, hearing the sugary tone in her own voice.

"There were seven of us." Casey came out waving her hands behind her and saying, "Don't go in there just yet." Her eyes were extraordinarily red; they looked the way Ann's had long ago, in college, on weekends when she smoked too much weed. It occurred to her that that might be what Casey had been doing in the bathroom. "Rocky and I are the last ones, and who knows when we'll get kicked out."

"Watch yourself," the mother called out from her chair in the dining room, pointing with the cigarette, taking a deep draw, and coughing with her mouth closed.

Casey grabbed a framed photograph from among the cakes and pies on the shelf of the cut-away window to the kitchen, and held it out to Ann. "This is him. Randy." The picture was of a very young man with a florid, heavy, smiling face. He had the fireman's neat mustache.

Half the city fire department was in the house. They had all driven to and from the cemetery in a caravan with little flags flying from their windows, though Randy had not died in the line of duty but in a freak crash on a secondary road in the eastern part of the state, where he had gone in his truck to pick up a variety of hay the llamas liked to eat.

The firemen all seemed to belong to the same church the Clares did or to be familiar with its terms. "Prayer partner." Ann heard that one twice as she

moved from one spot to another with her wine. She was on her third full cup. “Randy Clare. Casey Clare,” Todd had said. “Shouldn’t they be Catholics?”

The rambling service, with its speakers standing up to wait for the mike to be passed their way and its sudden calls to prayer, had had a casual unfinality to it, like a wedding where the vows had been written by the bride and groom when they had had a few too many. In the huge, carpeted sanctuary, light poured through skylights onto a botanical garden. The music for the funeral was piped in, but sound equipment hung from the ceiling, along with banners and American flags, and large plants rose in tiers to a bandstand with keyboards and a drum set.

Years ago, Casey told her, the founder of the church had gone around the state preaching against war. That was in the eighties when there was no war going on. He was a young man and he was preaching against nuclear war. Being attacked on his own soil had washed all that stuff out the window. This afternoon in the hot, crowded house Anne had heard several restatements of this position, from people steaming, as she was, in their damp clothes. The firemen seemed to scent her politics—whatever her politics actually were.

She poured herself more wine. There was ample wine. The massed bottles were positively

Irish. Ann’s own heritage was Irish. That was why she had to be careful, as Todd would have reminded her if he had been there.

As far as she could tell, there was no one in the crowd with whom to be ironic. She had to answer, “I’m sorry,” when a broad-chested man blocked her way and said, “Casey tells me that’s your car with the No War sign. Well, I sure wish there was no war, too. And not only that, ma’am, you’re gonna need a winch to get you out, where you parked.” She had felt the car settle into mud. There had seemed nowhere else, by the time she got there. She gave a shamed, appeasing laugh. Fortunately Casey appeared and said, “Sam, you leave her alone. That’s my boss.”

“I know that. That’s why I’m talking to her. I’m making a good impression.”

“This is my big brother, Sam,” Casey said, flashing her red eyes. “Come in here, I’ll show you Randy and Rocky’s room,” she went on, taking Ann’s free hand and pulling her. By the laden table Ann pulled up short and set down her cup to refill it. She had come, she had done her duty, but she had to protect herself. Casey kept hold of Ann’s hand and held her own cup out to be filled too. “You haven’t actually met Mom,” she said. “This is my boss, Ann,” she called to her mother across the table, waving Ann’s hand at her. Her mother was talking to several people sitting up close to her chair

or bending around her, but at the sound of her daughter's voice she looked up and smiled, wreathing her forehead with the smoke she was blowing straight upward into her own nose, away from the faces of her listeners.

"How do you do?" she said. Behind her frames her eyes were the same blue as Casey's, though their red seemed more like that of normal weeping.

"I'm so sorry," Ann crooned to her across the laurel leaves. "I'm just...I'm so sorry."

"Oh," said Casey's mother, waving her fingers through the smoke, "we all are. Did you know Randy?" It rushed into Ann's mind that it was Vincent Price. The llamas. Their expression. Vincent Price.

"No, but I feel as if I did. I've heard so much about him from Casey."

"Randy," said the mother. "Randy was the one."

"He was," the group around her said in unison.

"Donna, you get Ann something to eat," the mother said, and a blonder version of Casey stood up and began forking sliced meats onto a plate. "Kendra honey, would you just get me a little more coffee. Right there, the decaf. That's something you could do for me. Donna, you don't need to make her sick."

"I get to decide," Donna said, winking at Ann

and kissing the top of her mother's head. She added baby carrots and cherry tomatoes and leaned her big breasts across the table to hand the plate to Ann. She fluffed out one of the little napkins and handed that over too.

"Oh, thank you," Ann said, immediately starting to eat. She wiped her mouth. Her impulse was to go around and seize the winking, sensible, food-providing Donna with a hug of sympathy, but Donna had already sat down again beside her mother.

"Come," Casey said. She was leading Ann by the edge of her full plate. "You need anything else?"

"No," said Ann, eating as she followed, popping a log of rolled-up ham into her mouth and glancing up insolently at the firemen they were bumping into. They had to let her pass, with Casey in the lead. She sank against the doorframe, once they were in Randy's room. But of course it wasn't only Randy's; there were twin beds in the dim, close room. The other brother, Rocky, was in the service. He had been at the bedside as much as he could be, but then he had been flown somewhere he couldn't get back from in time for the funeral. "He'll never get over it," Casey said. "Not being here." He was stationed at McChord getting his training in something to do with cargo aircraft. Something Casey kept saying the name of, day after day.

Todd would say she had let herself be lured into this room where Casey had the advantage and would talk her ear off and somehow get something out of her that she would be responsible for remembering when they got to work on Monday. Not only that, she had drunk too much, too fast, and she wasn't used to it because of her regimen of abstaining except on weekends. She wobbled off the door. Her limbs were heavy. "Oh Casey. I ate too fast and I've had too much to drink." Now she'd done it. This would be something they had between them, on Monday.

"So?" Casey said.

"I think I should just go outside. The cold air's good."

"Go ahead," Casey said, sitting down on the bed.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll never be all right," Casey said, swilling her own wine. "But I think of all the people who've had someone die."

"That's true," Ann said, letting her eyes fall shut.

"My father died, but I was too young. I didn't have to really go through that. The older ones did. Mom did."

"My father died," Ann said in self-defense, looking into the dark red-brown of her own lids until that too began to swarm and she had to open her

eyes. That was better.

"I know," Casey said. "I know that." Ann could remember getting up abruptly and leaving for the ladies room, after Casey had somehow tapped into the story of their dead fathers, at the office. "You were ten, I was six," Casey said. "I wasn't the youngest, Donna was. Well. What can you do." She lay back on the bed with the cup in her hand. "Oops, spilled. I hoped you'd come today. And Jesus told me that you would."

Ann had stayed close to the door, but she couldn't turn tail and make her way to the sanctuary of the little bathroom, she couldn't just leave Casey lying there. She said, "Your brother. Tell me about him."

"Nothing to tell," said Casey. But she drew a long sobbing breath of preparation.

"Oh," Ann said. "I don't feel well. I'm sorry."

"You could lie down," said Casey.

"I think I need to get outdoors into the air. I'll just be a minute." The crowd from the dining room had filled the hall, so that she would have to push even to get out of the room. "Uh oh," she said. "Do you have—is there a wastebasket?"

"Here, just hang your head out," Casey said, rolling off the bed and yanking the window open. Ann got there and fell to her knees, thrust her head out into the cold air and let it hang down over the cracked, mossy sill. "Or, you can climb all the way

out,” Casey said. “That’s how we used to always do it.” She pushed the window up all the way. “There’s no drop. It’s low. Just put your leg over. Oops, yeah, it’s sorta rotted out. There you go.”

Ann climbed out the window, threw up a small amount, and felt immediately better. The rain had stopped and the flowerbed gave out a powerful earthen smell. The dirt was wet and black but not mud. Leaving footprints in it, she stepped carefully over the tips of crocuses and the puddle of chewed meats she had left. “I’m sorry,” she said to Casey, who was kneeling at the window just as Ann had been a moment before, except that now Casey was praying. She had her face raised to the sky, her hands on the windowsill with the palms turned up, and her eyes closed.

“Well, hello there,” said a man’s voice. It was Sam, the brother. He saw his sister in the window and said no more until she opened her eyes. “Hmm,” Sam said. “Case, you’re stoned. And your boss...I wonder if she might be a little smashed.”

“I am not,” said Ann. “Or if I am, I am.”

Casey hoisted herself through the window and fell out onto the dirt and the crocuses. She held out her arms like a child. “I was asking Jesus to come and be with us.”

“He’s in there with Mom,” said Sam, picking her up.

“I’ll go back in and sit with her,” Casey said.

“We were just getting some fresh air. Oh, I wish this whole thing was for something else. Oh, if only Randy was here.”

Sam did not answer but took a bandana out of his pocket and with uncommon tenderness, Ann thought, wiped his sister’s smeared arms.

“I’ll change, I’ll get into something else, don’t worry,” Casey said. “Now on Monday, this won’t have happened. I won’t have fell out the window. Fallen.”

“And I won’t have barfed,” said Ann, surprising herself.

“Don’t worry,” said Sam. “You’re not the first.”

“Everybody does it. Not only that, everybody falls out the window,” Ann said. Ordinarily she could find a note of bored flirtatiousness at parties and get through a whole evening on it. But this wasn’t exactly a party and how could she talk to Sam in that or any other way? For one thing she would have to brush her teeth. She’d go straight to the little bathroom—would there be toothpaste she could put on her finger?

It was no longer raining but it was getting dark. How to get out of there. There was no way she could drive, even if she could get her car out of the mud and around the other parked cars. Casey was pulling on her, hanging from her arm for balance, using the wet grass to scrape the soil off her shoes.

“Seen Randy’s llamas?” Sam said.

“I did. They’re something.”

“See the baby?”

“No, I did not.” She was forming her words with care. “See. A *baby*.”

“The cria. The baby llama.”

“No. No baby. Not when I was out there.”

“She’s in the barn. Born Saturday. Day Randy died. Shoot, what he woulda given. We told him, but...”

“He heard us,” said Casey. “The nurse said they hear.”

“Maybe,” Sam said. His eyes on Ann said he knew her skepticism about that, about everything. “Come on, Boss, have a look.”

“I’m...I think I should just go in and sit down.”

“You’ll be fine.” He looked her over. “The walk will help. Come on, Casey.”

“Except you think Mom needs me?”

“Nope. Donna’s in there.”

In the dark little barn, the baby llama lay on a bed of straw. Its forelegs were tucked under its...was it “chest?” “Breast?” Nothing so softly narrow could support either name, with a thin column rising from it, pale as mist, to hold a flower. On either side of the flower glowed a giant infant’s eye, in an aged, creased lid. Ann caught her breath as a bottomless innocent darkness took her in. The petals of the

forehead narrowed to a small black rose. The nostrils flinched. Did it smell her? Its coat was white, spotted with a pale brown, and it wore a little canvas jacket.

“You can sit down if you need to,” Casey said. “Straw’s clean.”

“Better not,” Sam said. “Hey, Case,” he said, grabbing Casey’s arm as she got ready to plunk herself down. “Come on. Stand up.”

Ann said, “Why isn’t the mother in here with it?”

“That’s Baby. She wants to think about it. She’s not real sure about her baby. We’re feeding this little girl. Every couple hours since Saturday. She got her colostrums from the vet.”

“Randy would have a fit,” Casey said. “I’m glad he can’t see how Baby’s acting.”

“If he was here, who knows. Everything would be different,” Sam said. “Baby was hand-raised herself,” he explained to Ann. “That makes them cantankerous.”

“Could I...does it mind if we touch it?”

“Her. No, that’s not the problem, she doesn’t mind. See, she wants to nurse off you.”

“Off your finger,” Casey said. The baby did seem to be feeling for Ann’s hanging fingers with its divided lip.

“But no, don’t pet her,” Sam said. “All we do is feed her. It’s them she has to be with, not us.”

She does fine with her daddy and there's still a chance with the mom. Whatever, it's them she has to pattern after. Too much is going on, when you're this size. You can get so turned around you don't grow up right."

Ann felt like crying. Her mother came into her mind, the still, listening look she would get on her face when Ann was mean, in middle school and high school and even after that, and the unanswerable thing she would say every time, "You used to be such a happy child." And before that her father and his cancer and his long-drawn-out unfriendly death. Oh, no, don't let me get started, she thought as she began to cry. Neither of the others noticed for a minute, and then Casey saw and moved to circle her shoulders with an arm and pull her off balance again. Casey began to cry too, while Sam simply looked away and shook his head. He was not the crying type, Ann could tell. At least the tears had a cleansing effect on her mouth and throat, if she had to kiss him. This barn. The rain, the mud. Llamas. Firemen. She was going to have to stay the night. She wanted to. It would be like running away with the circus. They would put her in that little room, Randy's room. The hell with Todd. The hell with her car in the mud and her life. It was llamas she loved.

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Valerie Trueblood is the author of the novel *Seven Loves* (Little Brown, 2006) and the short story collection *Marry or Burn* (Counterpoint, 2010) which was shortlisted for the 2011 Frank O'Connor Award. Her stories have appeared in various publications including *One Story*, *The Northwest Review*, and the online journal *Narrative*. 'The Llamas' is from her forthcoming book, *Search Party*, due to be published by Counterpoint in 2013. She grew up in rural Virginia and now lives in Seattle.