

STOLEN BOY

Nancy J. Allen

Fran and Rollo left behind the sun-glint sea and the sailboat with its languorous days of lazy swells and sunsets mixed with cocktails, and crawled into the dim interior of a tiny car. A stonefaced driver carried them high into the dry, cracked mountains of the island. Rollo punched in numbers on a cell phone, but the alternating curves of treacherous switchbacks slung Fran time and again against him, ruining his sequences. Fran's continual attempts at conversation failed to breach the fortress of the driver's silence. Their destination was only fifty miles from a sea that had been tamed three thousand years before by the Minoans, but it took the car a very long time to get there.

The excursion to the village had been arranged to satisfy Fran's desire to see a fourteenth century fresco. The guide was a surprise. "My name's Lucky!" he shouted as he opened the door so Fran could crawl out of the minuscule car. Small exploding stars of pain traveled the length of her curved spine, blurring her eyesight.

Her pain, the switchbacks, the hypnotic motion of the sea moving at eye level outside the portholes of their bedroom earlier that morning, the guide's fantastical appearance—all combined to make her unsteady. She stood, trying to find her balance, in the middle of a highway that was also the village's lone street. Fran's clothes, with their purposeful blocks of solid color, had been carefully chosen and altered to hide her scoliosis. She wore her bluegreen silk blouse long to cover her hiked-up hip; the left leg of her aqua pants had been triple-hemmed to create the illusion that it was the same length as her right one. Her uplifted, double-waved bangs, unchanged since high school, had been tinted a flirty new reddish-brown for this trip.

When her unsteadiness subsided, Fran saw that, indeed, she'd not been mistaken: their guide *was* wearing a hairnet. A young man dressed in black, he sported a grandmotherly black hairnet and towering over it, the wide crook of his Biblical-looking shepherd's staff. A movement behind him caught Fran's attention. Stepping daintily out the front door of the single, deserted café: a white goat with a piebald eye, its dinking bell the only sound in the place.

Rollo advanced on the guide, jabbing a finger at his wrist-watch, "No mucho time-o. Famoso fresco pronto. Esta noche—" "He's Greek," Fran said. "Not Spanish."

“Not Greek,” Lucky said in perfect English. “Cretan. There’s a big difference.”

By the time Lucky had finished explaining about the untrustworthy Greeks, he’d led the Henleys off the macadam that fronted the café and onto a wide dirt track. When he politely suggested that cell phone service was spotty, Rollo shoved his phone in his pants pocket. He shot Fran a look, then retreated into a stony silence that matched the landscape. She refused to let Rollo’s mood penetrate her. They’d been high school sweethearts, married while still in college; he could sulk if he wanted. It was mid-afternoon, hot even though it was October. Fran concentrated on the feel of the sun on the back of her neck, smelled the clean dirt, and felt something within her release.

The afternoon was rich in silence and ruin: abandoned buildings covered with trumpet vines and apricot-colored bougainvillea, fragments of mud walls. These soon yielded to stumpy-trunked olive trees. New Mexico had no olive trees, was not surrounded by water, but its adobe dwellings resembled these, and the colors of the Cretan landscape, sage-y greens and soft shades of ochre, not to mention the third-world quality of it, mirrored home. Not Roswell, but the landscapes Fran drove through recruiting art students.

Because it was their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary, Rollo had acquiesced to her desire to see ancient ruins. He liked brief jaunts to Vegas that involved drinking, gambling, and golf. “I like ruins *and* bars,” Fran had said reasonably; and when Rollo had continued to balk, she’d invented a reasonable statistic. She’d said that 67.8 percent of couples who get married in college—it didn’t matter why; it didn’t *have* to be a pregnancy—divorce when older. She’d told Rollo she could imagine it. She hadn’t told him how very often she did imagine it. She knew if it came to it, Rollo would never be able to push a wheelchair with grace.

There’d been few bars on their Aegean holiday, and no gambling or golf. For ten days, while she’d limped with her guidebooks through the places she’d always dreamed of—the streets of Ephesus, the temples at Lindos, the painted palaces of Knossos—Rollo had talked on his cell phone. To his lawyer, his three sisters—the four siblings supported by the same third generation hardware store, their community standing dependent on it. Rollo had no interest in ancient excavations. It was the new foundation dug and poured by Walmart within the Roswell City Limits that occupied his mind—imperiling, as it did, HENLEY’S, estab. 1921.

“At least a thousand years old, this tree!” Lucky said, tapping a massive gray trunk with his shepherd’s staff. The ground

around the tree lay beneath black nets that resembled his hairnet, but it was Lucky's staff that caught Fran's attention: its foot sharp-planed into a miniature goat's hoof.

"This tree," Lucky said, reaching out to tap another trunk. "Nine hundred years!"

Fran laughed. She didn't believe him but his enthusiasm fizzed in her body. Her husband used to make her feel this way, lighter, physically buoyant. But, then, Rollo's self-delight had always been infectious—his hazel eyes cutting sideways at her, full of teasing laughter. Did this boy have that same quality? Was it the wildness of Lucky's exaggerations or the pain pill that was making her feel floaty?

She examined the guide. He looked as though he might be Arthur's age—although it was hard to tell because his goatee and curlicued moustache made him look both older and younger than her clean-shaven son. Also, Lucky's hairnet distracted her. He'd tied it so that a single long fringe hung down against his right cheekbone.

"Eight hundred years, that one!"

Even Rollo barked at this outrageousness. "Why do you laugh?" Lucky demanded, his brown eyes merry. "Do you think I lie?"

"Absolutely," Fran said. "I love it!"

Lucky walked on and Fran followed. His staff left cloven oval imprints in the dirt that pleased her. She thought they could pass for symbols in some ancient script: Egyptian hieroglyphics, Hittite pictographs, Assyrian cuneiform. So many places and civilizations she longed to see! Her back spasmed. Ten days on a boat, no matter how luxurious, was too long for a body that required regular physical therapy and chiropractic adjustments to manage its pain. She smiled to herself at the irony: she was the one who'd picked the expensive sailboat but she'd never once thought about the cost to her body.

They climbed steadily. Roosters crowed now and then; goat bells rang amid the sere grasses. They passed a tumbled grist mill, a defunct olive press, sites that Lucky pointed to with his staff, announcing—"Grist mill!" "Olive press!"—as though these slumped ruins were equal to any Ephesus or Lindos. Soon the silence of the afternoon had swallowed all the small sounds. Rollo trudged beside her, head down, hiking boots deliberately scuffing up dust. His frustration pushed at her. She called out, "Lucky, wait!" Hastening toward him, she peppered him with questions: Why did he live in this village rather than Heraklion or Choria? Did he go down to the beach at Paleochora?

The guide shook his shiny brown curls and expressed surprise at her knowledge of Cretan place names. Fran pulled a guidebook from her flatwoven Greek bag and rifled its pages to show him her under-linings and post-its. “Always the good student, our Franny,” Rollo said, catching up, breathing heavily.

The muscles in Fran’s back constricted, warping her hip. Inwardly, she hardened but she kept her smile in place. She’d had to study, hadn’t she? Rollo wouldn’t have known what he was looking at if she weren’t there to tell him.

“Lucky me,” Rollo said.

“No, I’m Lucky,” Lucky said.

The spark of life in Rollo’s face was answered by Lucky’s laugh, and then the two men were laughing and slapping each other on the back.

They laughed at their cleverness for a long time.

When they resumed walking, Lucky talked about himself as a “restorer of the old ways” — this was a good reason, no? to live in his ancestral village? But he’d lived in America until he was six. In Chicago. They were climbing as he talked. Bees sounded in the honeysuckle; sheep bleated, hurrying out of their way. At each turn in the path, there was a new vista to the distant sea. Fran heard herself babbling about the views, how artistic they were. So many angles created by the up-thrust land! Extraordinary, really, the beauty of rock and —

“Frances.”

She stopped walking and jerked silent. She was talking too much — again. Was there some over-talking virus? Had she been infected due to years of exposure to Rollo’s family? She, Frances, had always been reserved. She’d never talked to fill empty space like she did now. But, then, there’d never been so much emptiness to fill. “Thirty-five years is too long to be married to the same person. You got to give yourself an occasional jolt.” This was what she’d said to explain their Aegean excursion and every time, she got the laughs she looked for. *That Fran Henley. Isn’t she a card? Shame she’s crippled — and it’s getting worse. You can tell.*

“I’m sorry,” Fran said. “It’s such a lovely afternoon, we just need to —”

“Please. Don’t tell me what I need. I need some shade and a Scotch.”

She turned to Lucky with a smile and a shrug that said *You see how this doesn’t bother me.* How many times had she done this? Acted like Rollo’s rudeness was nothing? And his drinking? Even after Arthur flunked out of college, Rollo had refused to quit. Why should *he* quit, just because his son had a problem?

Eight years ago, with both girls married and Arthur, the baby, moved to Idaho, the silences in their house had grown, squeezing Fran until she'd felt words—prattling, haphazard words—physically forced out of her. By some miracle she'd found a paying job where chattiness became capacity. When you conversed with shy high school students and their parents, dead space often dominated, and the new Fran Henley could fill every silence. As a recruiter, she was her own boss. She could drive the state's back roads as much as she wished. Five days out of seven? Ten straight? It didn't matter to the Santa Fe School of Art and Design. Her new ability also saved her from being labeled peculiar. *That Fran! Such a talker!* Meaningless social conversation was a known quantity. Mrs. Rollo Arthur Henley III, prominent Roswell socialite, tooling down dirt roads into God knows what Indian reservation, was not.

"Let's get on with it," Rollo said. "Where's this fresco?"

Lucky had led them to a building that stood alone against a hill massed with vines. "The fresco is very famous," Lucky said. "People travel to it from all over the world. But I wanted you to see this first." He took Fran's elbow, "Here. Let me help you."

She jerked her arm free, "I don't need your help."

Lucky stepped back, and Fran cursed herself. She should take another pain pill.

"You'll forgive her, I know," Rollo said smoothly. "She has scoliosis—She's had a condition since childhood. She can't run, but otherwise she's perfectly capable."

How dare Rollo talk about her as if she weren't present! As if she couldn't hear him! She hid her fury and managed to modulate her tone. "I'm fine, Lucky. Thank you."

Lucky climbed the stone steps, followed by Rollo. Fran limped in last, eyes stung with tears. Now Rollo had ruined Lucky for her. Now he would treat her with the special care everyone in Roswell showed. It was another reason she traveled the state: to escape the pity. She didn't want it. With her odd body, she'd always just wanted to be *normal*, to fit in. Her specialness suffocated her. Was she her body? She didn't think so. She was somewhere *in* it, but she herself wasn't odd or misshapen. She pulled down hard on the hem of her shirt, stretching the silk over her hip. How had not fitting in come to feel like home?

The building was one long dusty room, stuffy with disuse.

"This is our museum," Lucky said. "One of our main tourist attractions."

Fran slipped a pain pill with a swallow from her water bottle. Lucky had leaned his staff by the front door, and she watched

him place his palm flat on the top of his head and furtively center his hairnet—a gesture that made him look like a boy, not a man on the threshold of middle-age. She smiled to herself and felt her furious pulse slow.

“One of your main tourist attractions,” Rollo repeated in a flat tone. He cut a little smile at Fran that said, *How charmingly naive this boy is*. She took this as an attempt to soothe her and was able to return the smile. How easily their mutual annoyance could mutate into camaraderie!

Rollo stood in the open door, and Fran saw him, not as he was, but as he’d once been—like Lucky, slim, with a full head of chestnut brown hair. But her husband had never been naive. Early on, he’d acquired the nickname “Ropes.” *Ropes Henley gets anything he wants*. She was in the ninth grade, making her way through a hall packed with students, when she’d overheard a boy say this. She’d had no idea what it meant.

When Lucky started in about village history, Fran wandered away from the men. The “museum” was uncomfortably hot. She ambled down its length, waiting for the pill to kick in, gazing distractedly at the antique documents and weapons in the exhibit cases. Behind her, she heard Lucky say something about *village vendettas*. He began recounting *hundreds of years* of murderous activity, his voice drifting in fragments through the dusty streams of sunlight as she walked. *Ambushed, like outlaws*. Black and white portraits of mustachioed men stared down at her from the walls. Photo after photo, the same frozen face. *Pistols, like cowboys*. These old Cretans could have come from any Hispanic community in Northern New Mexico. Suspicious of outsiders, of any place other than home. Behind her, the men laughed.

A most treacherous outlaw named Billy the Kid.

She turned to look down the long room to where Rollo stood in sunlight. Wasn’t it just like him to act like Billy was a personal acquaintance? As if he’d ever visited the site where the Kid was gunned down. A dying place, Fort Sumner, trying to scabble itself together with its one scrap of fame. Like this village with its fresco. One of her scholarship students came from there. Eduardo Gonzalez. She’d sat in the hostility of his home, trying to damp down her Anglo forthrightness, her tinted hair, her stockings and pumps. You would’ve thought she was trying to kidnap their son—when all she’d wanted was to save him. Where had his big, angry talent come from? Skinny and sweet-faced, expected to join the family’s Sheetrock business, Eduardo had sat, head bowed, between his parents. Let me give him this scholarship, she’d begged.

Fran thinks she's saving the world. This was what Rollo said in public, at parties, making an airy joke of her commitment. In private, he accused her of traveling more than she had to, of exaggerating the importance of an insignificant job. Her retort? "You might be in the color business, Rollo, but yours is Sherwin Williams, mine is *art*."

She'd dreamed of being an archaeologist, of discovering ancient treasure like Schliemann at Mycenae—or maybe she'd decipher the Linear A script at Knossos. Magical words, unimaginal places. Her mother repeatedly pointed out that a career involving physical exertion was impossible: she'd already had surgery, wore a brace at night so her chest wouldn't rotate. Then Rollo found her hand in the darkest dark and kissed it, and all her dreams changed. But hadn't she'd found a way, finally, to discover treasure? In tucked away corners of New Mexico, she, Frances Henley, unearthed hidden—

What're you going to do when you're not able to travel?

A sternfaced bandit stared down at her from behind his glass prison. Had this come from him? She glanced around. She'd never asked herself this question, hadn't allowed herself to think it. She hid her disabilities well enough from others, had she been hiding them from herself as well? She felt woozy. *This* was the trip she'd fought for? This airless room with its dried-up artifacts?

And what about you, with your dried-up spine?

She returned the bandit's glare. Yes, she was physically shorter—so what?

His look didn't change; he waited.

Okay, so her recruiting trips too had gotten shorter. It was her spine's curvature, the compression. She had to go home more often for care.

The bandit's eyes seemed to soften—and she realized they were sepia, not black and white. She stepped back. This photograph was not like the others. It was older. The man held an antique flintlock, and wrapped around his head so that fringe hung down against his cheek, a hairnet.

Cretan freedom fighters.

The words came into her head from nowhere. No, from Mrs. Manley's World History class. She let the portrait get vague. She saw herself in starched petticoats and a cinched waist, the belt misshapen by her hiked-up hip. By the ninth grade, she'd run the gauntlet of junior high cruelty—measured looks, whispers, exclusion—and had emerged, finally, for some reason, popular. And behind her in World History, Ropes Henley, looking over her shoulder, teasing her, telling stupid jokes while he copied her

answers. She wasn't in awe of him like the other girls were—he was too far out of reach—and she'd matched his teasing with her wit. Is that why he'd picked her over all the other girls in Roswell? His choosing her had always been a mystery. During high school and the first years of college, it had been made clear to her that she was lucky—undeserving really—to be on the receiving end of Rollo Arthur Henley III's affections.

The sepia portrait came back into focus. The hairnet, hand-woven of thick cotton, was clearly tribal headgear. It looked nothing like Lucky's mass-produced nylon one. She'd assumed Lucky was playing the fool, hadn't realized his costume was a gesture toward authenticity and gravitas. But what else did "restoring the old ways" mean? A purposeful life, isn't that what everyone wanted?

Restoring the old ways. If only she could: children to rear, a business to grow; and even earlier, when Rollo had been *her* purpose. Wild and willful he'd been, like this fierce-looking Cretan. So full of life, it spilled over. Forcing his high school friends to bring him, drunk, to her house, calling her name, insisting she crawl out her window or he'd wake up her mother, maybe the whole goddamn street. Urgent whispers in the dawn light. And when she'd finally appear—always through the front door—Rollo would pick her up with both arms around her hips and bow his head against her body, calmed. *That Fran! What's she thinking? Out in the yard in her p.j.'s with boys?*

Fran followed the cuneiform hoof-prints. Every muscle in her body ached and her left foot slopped out of sync. The wide path became a thin trail, then a narrow alley between high stone walls. She felt she was being herded down a slot—except the men weren't behind, but in front. She saw Lucky, then Rollo, disappear through an unexpected arch. Willing her legs up a high step, she walked through the arch and into an open courtyard. It fronted a whitewashed Greek church—but one that seemed built on top of the world.

She limped back and forth across the marble pavement, looking out, unable to speak. She could barely take it all in: a sky striated hot pink, craggy mountains rosy with light, and far below, down and down, opening out at the end of the world, a triangle of glittering sea. For a moment her body lightened. It had been a long day, but now there was this! She turned, and her joy fell away. *Rollo.* He'd dug out his cell phone. Here, in this ancient and sacred place with the world's beauty before him, and all he could think about was the damn store. Founded by his grandfather to sell

hammers and nails, it overflowed now with hair dryers, mouse traps, toilet paper—and out back, a lumberyard and a nursery with fertilizer and bedding plants. All the material goods of modern civilization. Derision hit her spine full force, then just as suddenly, her shoulders slumped: Walmart had poured a foundation.

Lucky stroked his mustache, one side and then the other. Hadn't he told them? Hadn't he said there was nothing like his ancestral village anywhere else in the world?

A goat with a long white face and a piebald eye stepped through the arch. "Ho, Yarrow," Lucky said. "How did you find us up here?" The goat's bell dinked as it trotted daintily across the marble—straight to nuzzle Rollo's leg. Rollo swiveled his body this way and that, turning smoothly from the animal's attempts at affection, all the while punching in numbers. He looked like some balding, overweight matador.

Fran laughed out loud. She identified with the goat. She'd hoped that she and Rollo would resurrect their old passion on this trip. They'd had a wildness in them when they were young, but like water dripping on stone, long years of marriage had worn away desire's mysterious, never to be deciphered stamp. She stopped her thought: No, that was wrong. It wasn't only the years.

She sank down on the wall that fronted the gorge. Ten days in a room too small for their big American bodies, their suitcases too large, and no space at all in the bathroom—which is why, without speaking of it, the two of them had established a routine that flowed naturally and involved moving in and out of the bedroom to grant privacy. A gracious routine that meant they were never naked in the same space at the same time. Eleven nights they'd gone below deck and every night Rollo had had too much to drink, or she had, or he'd fallen asleep by the time she'd finished squirming undressed—always hiding, for fear Rollo would see the deterioration, the changes.

Rollo cursed, slapped his phone shut and dropped down beside her. Yarrow trotted off to interrogate Lucky, who was capering about with their camera. Fran adjusted her bra strap to ease the drag of her jutting shoulder blade and arched her back. Rollo must have felt her effort because he kneaded the bunched muscles in her hip, all the while watching Lucky. He'd been doing this since they were fourteen—forty-one years. Fran thought how automatic the response must be for him.

Lucky snapped photo after photo of the two of them. *What a life! Postcard perfect!* Then he wanted his picture taken with his "outlaw friend." By the time the men finished posing, the color was drained from the sky, the gleaming water no longer visible—

which meant that when the three of them entered the church, they entered darkness.

Fran waited for her eyes to adjust but even when they did, she couldn't see anything. She was afraid to move—the floor was stone, she could feel that. Was there an electrical switch on the wall or a slanting rack of candles? She fumbled in her purse for her flashlight, a thin card imprinted with the HENLEY'S logo, dozens of them hanging at every cash register. Before she could find it, a sliver of light appeared. Lucky danced his light around the space, but it did little to illuminate the darkness. The interior of the church was more smell than sight. Mouse musk, mildew, a hint of urine—but no flavor of incense or prayer, nothing to contradict the judgment: deserted. She heard Lucky's voice, *The fresco is very famous. People travel to it from all over the world.* What a liar he was.

"The magnificent fresco of St. George killing the dragon. Right here! Fourteenth century. Imagine! Come this way, this way. Follow me!"

"I guarantee you Fran will know more about it than you do." Rollo's voice was resonant in the darkness. "Won't you, Franny?"

Fran did not respond. Blind, she held both arms out and shuffled her feet forward. This seemed the usual Greek Orthodox church: hanging oil lamps, unlit; painted wooden screens hiding the altar; a single choir stall. The old church in Chimayo in the hills above Santa Fe was remarkably similar. She rode the wave of homesickness that rose up in her.

"Here it is!" Lucky said. He moved his tiny pin-light up, down, and sideways along a rough whitewashed wall. Blackened plaster bore witness to a long-ago fire—or fires. "Fourteenth century!" Lucky said, tapping his staff on the wall. "Seven hundred years of warfare and it survives!"

"Tell us what we're seeing, Franny."

In Lucky's pin-light, the fresco showed itself in fragments: white equine face, blue armored breastplate, slender horse leg, green coil spitting flames. Fran leaned closer. Lucky continued to circle his light around the wall-sized painting: St. George on a horse sticking a dragon with a spear, showing every one of its seven hundred years. Disappointment filled her. The fresco's reputation was fraudulent: it was an apricot-colored blur. But there—what? On the rump of the horse behind St. George: a small figure in blue.

Before she could ask about it, Lucky flowed into full tourist guide mode. "It is very rare, yes? To have this small boy sitting

behind this great Saint George? Usually, there is no such figure. In most Byzantine frescos, it is always Saint George by himself, killing the dragon. A mysterious figure, this boy. There are many stories coming down about him. He was a boy stolen from his parents and sold for his beauty to—to *outlaws*, Rollo! Outlaws, like we spoke about this afternoon. Perhaps Saracens, we don't know. Outlaws that kept him for many years anyway. But Saint George, he rescues this boy and brings him back home on the back of his beautiful white horse. A miracle, no?"

For some reason Lucky switched off his light. In the darkness, Fran heard Rollo's heavy breathing, felt his hand fumbling for hers.

Rollo fumbling to find her hand.

She didn't have to think about it: the memory was physical; it was in her body.

Rollo fumbling to find her hand in utter blackness.

Lucky was still talking about the fresco, but the closeness of the tiny church had swung wide and carried her back.

An emptiness too immense to imagine—its smell too, unknown: earthy and dank. She is standing on a concrete ledge looking into an immeasurable maw, surrounded by other ninth graders, everyone subdued, their chattering silenced as they'd filed down and daylight had faded, the air cooled. A man in a brown uniform tells them that the bottom of the Carlsbad Caverns lies eighty stories below where they're standing. The tallest building in Roswell is three stories high; eighty stories is impossible. The enormous space with its high curved arch seems miraculous, an entrance into the infinite heart of Earth.

The man speaks about the discovery of the Caverns by cowboys who saw, night after night, its millions of bats pouring out at sunset to darken the sky. He wants to show them what it had been like for those boys the first time they entered. To do this, he has to turn off the lights—Hold on! It's just for a minute. *One* minute. By the time he has twice admonished everyone to stand absolutely still, Rollo has inched his way next to her, his nearness pushing her starched petticoats forward. The man says, Here we go!

The blackness is so stunning it takes away whatever breath she has left. She feels Rollo fumble for her hand. She helps him find it. He raises it up—all this felt, not seen—and kisses it. The single minute of utter blackness, and with it, the kiss, seem endless. The electric lights buzz on. Around them, startled, their classmates jostle and joke—they weren't afraid, not them!—but Ropes Henley stands silent, gazing into her eyes, holding her hand close

to his mouth. Fran feels the wonder of her life opening out before her, all promise.

A small sound—a sound, not here in the walled church but somewhere near, a sound close and familiar as Rollo's breathing. The sound diminished, then returned. *Yarrow*. Her skin prickled with awareness; the silk of her blouse, water.

"Imagine the happiness!" In the darkness, Lucky's voice was exultant. What a great tour guide he was! What a grand restorer of old ways!

He turned on his tiny light and ran its beam from the horse's face to its rump where a little boy dressed in navy blue pants and a light blue shirt sat, a tiny figure behind the armored, oversized Saint. "Imagine the surprise and the happiness in the home of the parents when the little boy walks in!"

The pin-light looped around the blackened edges and faint colors of the rough-plastered wall, and outside the sound of a dinking bell—now close, now far.