

## The Carriage

I was finally going home. I sat alone in the carriage as it jounced along the bumpy country road, taking me closer and closer to the house where I was born, the village I had grown up in. I could hear the crack of the driver's whip and the whinny of the horses pulling the carriage. I watched the landscape blur past through the open window: the verdant fields, the trees in the distance, flickering light from the morning sun. Everything is in a state of perpetual flux. Nothing remains the same.

I shut the window and pulled down the blind. My chamber was plunged into darkness. Resting my head on the back of the seat, I felt safe, knowing that I would soon be home. The narrow river that flowed through my village, the houses on either side, the pastures thick with grass, the mountains rising steeply behind them were all waiting for me. The valley would be just as I remembered it.

I fell into a deep sleep and had a comforting dream. My parents were there to greet me when I emerged from the carriage. My mother ran towards me, tears in her eyes. Throwing her arms around me, she said, "Welcome home. It's so good to see you again."

My father walked slowly to where we were standing and patted me on the shoulder. He didn't say anything but there was a broad smile on his face. He took my bags out of the carriage and led the way back to the house. It was a large, two-story house with a white picket fence and two maple trees in the front lawn. The door opened and I ran inside, straight upstairs to my old bedroom. Nothing had changed. My bed was still where it had always been, a night table beside it, a shaggy rug on the floor, the windows hung with the same yellow curtains.

The carriage stopped abruptly and I awoke from my dream.

"We're here!" the driver shouted down from his seat.

I was tingling with excitement as I opened the door of the carriage and stepped down onto the road. When my eyes had adjusted to the bright light from the noonday sun, I immediately saw that there was no river, no houses on either side, no pastures, no steeply sloping mountains. Before me was a vast and barren plain, a desert actually, stretching all the way to the distant horizon. A single dilapidated wooden shack stood beside the road. There was no one around.

"This isn't home," I said to the driver.

"Sure it is," he replied, climbing down from the carriage.

"No, no, no," I said, shaking my head and starting to tremble. "This isn't my home."

The driver just laughed. He reached into carriage and pulled out my bags.

"Why did you bring me here?" I demanded. "I told you to take me home."

"That's exactly what I did," the driver said. "You told me to take you home and I took you home."

The driver set the bags down in front of the shack, then climbed back up into his seat.

"Please take me home," I pleaded. "I only want to go home."

"Listen, lady. As I've been trying to explain, this *is* your home."

Pulling on the reins, the driver turned the horses and carriage around until they were pointing in the direction we'd just come from.

"Then take me back with you," I shouted out after him. "I cannot bear to stay here all alone."

"I can't do that," the driver called over his shoulder. "There is no place for you to go back to."

He cracked his whip. The horses broke into a trot. I watched the carriage move away and disappear down the dusty road.