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VERY BIG HORSE

I liked living in motels lit blue by bulky TVs and red by burning cigarettes, in rooms that shook when the trucks rumbled past or when someone left their shoes in the dryer for a little too long. There were women folding towels, wearing only thin tank-tops and basketball shorts, and, if you waved first, they would wave back. There were bikers all in a group – they liked to hog the waffle-maker – and Indian families in overpacked sedans with sheets on the windows, a cowboy alone on business, and sometimes a young woman who looked really too young to be out in the country all by herself.

We lived on Gatorade and Mexican food and curly chips from the vending machine. When early morning came, we returned to my father's big blue truck and drove on, usually towards mountains, but sometimes towards the desert or a lake or an old mining town. We'd stop quickly for gas or powdered donuts, a fast stretch of the legs. In Montana, we stayed at a roadside inn that smelled like chlorine and rubber trees. I spent all of my father's quarters in the arcade, lassoing zebras and running from giant sabertooths. At night, my mother and I would sit cross-legged on the bed, our hair in wet towel crowns, and recite multiplication tables. If I did well, my father would win a stuffed animal out of the claw machine. I already had quite the collection by the time we left Florida, and it only grew with every machine we spotted. By Nebraska, the collection had reached a level my mother was embarrassed to acknowledge. There was not one claw in country my father could not conquer.

My father was also good at parking the truck which always pulled our trailer, memorizing topographical maps, and keeping my mother and I safe. I never doubted his ability to bend the laws of physics, to baby-proof the corners of the world with his bare hands, for my sake. I often imagined him lifting the hotel swimming pool up by its concrete bowl and pouring it out just to retrieve me from its tiled bottom. In moments of encroaching danger, his voice would grumble from somewhere far below the earth, urging me forward, stealthily, be clever now. *Whatever it is you need to do.* He taught me how to shoot a gun, but more effectively, he had been himself in my presence all along. The way my father spoke to people, the way he moved through the house – as though it were a collapsing structure and he the high reach arm – the way he grew six inches taller when he was certain, absolutely certain, swelled with righteousness, all of it had implanted itself into me. I never accepted authority without question. I never allowed belittlement from schoolmates. I assumed – without pause, fail, reservation, or exception – that if I wanted to do something, I could work my way to it. Both of my parents are workhorses, world-class working class clydesdales. Know what you get when two clydesdales come together? One very big horse.

We left Montana in the summertime, which lasts about eight weeks. My father had acquired some land in Texas at the insistence of a wayward aunt who, upon hearing rumors of my mother's vitamin D deficiency and the resulting migraines, as well as our newfound hermitude, pushed my father to move south; he could revitalize the thirty-acre plot just across

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the way. There, he could enjoy the sun-soaked fruits of his labor and my mother could once again live amongst the living.

My best friend lived down the street, and he was moving too, but to California. I was wearing his sister's velvet jumpsuit – the one she gave me after I crashed my bike into a runny mud puddle – when I knocked on his door and waited anxiously for an answer. I'd gone over my goodbye many times, but now, staring at the wreath that hung on his front door, the one his mother had made from old sweaters and hair ribbons and report cards, I suddenly couldn't remember any of my carefully selected words, so I started to cry.

No one answered. My mother, who was waiting in the car, called out: Their cars were not in the garage. They must be out. And so I visited every night for a week, lying prostrate in the driveway in case their car pulled up from the main road. I thought they might smash me to death, and this way, I would not have to learn to live without him. Even better, I would forever become a part of his property, and this way, he could never forget me. His bedroom window could not be seen from the street, so I kept my eyes on his sister's, always expecting a lamp to flicker on or a blind to lift. I willed them to come back before the moving van arrived, before my things were packed tightly away, before we couldn't visit the river and try to catch fish with our hands anymore. They must not have received my message because the van arrived early Monday morning, and by late afternoon, we were gone. I left a note underneath his welcome mat, explaining my attempts at goodbye and our new phone number. As we crossed the stateline into Wyoming, I wondered if I had hid the note too well, if my friend even bothered to check beneath the welcome mat as often as I did on the off-chance someone was trying to communicate with me in romantic secret.

He called at the end of summer, when the family-run horse camp and boarding services were already in full-swing. "What kind of friend leaves without saying goodbye?" I imagined him returning to our cul-de-sac, tanned from a long afternoon in Huntington, dropping his bike on our old lawn with a souvenir snow globe hidden in his pocket. He'd looked through the living room window and discovered another family already living there, unfurling their rugs and adjusting their prayer mats. "You couldn't wait?" We talked only three times, each conversation growing shorter and more prone to awkward silence. I called once close to Christmas and listened to the line ring and ring and ring. I'll never know for sure, but it sounded like the house was empty. Weeks later, I learned they had moved to California, and maybe they didn't have a phone anymore.

The farmhouse was older than God, with four bedrooms, two bathrooms, caught between a disintegrated railroad track which had now become overgrown with underbrush and thirty acres of short yellow grass. When it was hot, the fire-ant hills piled up, and if you stepped in one, they would all bleed out. "Satan's little fucking army" my aunt would call them before signing the cross over her chest. There were red wasps, too, that nested in the barn. My cousin got stung once while he was mucking the donkey's stall, and his hand puffed up to the size of a watermelon. He spent the night at Urgent Care, wearing his mother's robe, writhing in her arms. He didn't have to muck any more stalls after that. There were brown

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recluse spiders, and a pumpkin patch that never sprouted, lots of horses, and a Christmas tree farm. This – the tree farm – was the most disappointing of all because none of them ever grew taller than knee-height. The soil, it turns out, was too thick and clay-like to allow roots to spread, and so the trees remained short and unsellable. When the house was sold some years later to a Mexican family, they decorated every single one with sparkling garland and baby Jesus toppers.

There was also a goat who had once belonged to a friend, a girl who had attended the summer camp not so much to learn how to ride, but to practice her jumping in a wide open field. I liked her enough – quite a lot actually, in the beginning – but stopped talking to her after she won a gold medal in the county dressage competition. She was an excellent rider, better than me, and I couldn't possibly like her after a government confirmation of the fact. That August, I found her behind the above-ground swimming pool wrapping worms around her neck like leis, and I told my parents that she was eating them. Her mom pulled her from the camp and put her into therapy, but she still invited me to her birthday party which, of course, was horse themed. I told her I was sick and didn't go.

Her family was downsizing and no longer had room for the goat. I wholeheartedly accepted – with or without my parents permission – and a few days later, they parked in the drive, opened the trailer door and there he was. No horns, some bone deficiency or other. Up to my hip. Black and brown and splotted with milk stains. His eyes, rectangular and ember, hardly blinked, as though the very idea of missing one tiny thing was laughable.

It's hard for me to talk about him. Living, working on a ranch allows death to live close to your property line. Horses keel over in the night, spooked by some howling owl or honking city car; cows are made into meat. But like any doctor who bonds inexplicably with that one special patient, sometimes loss cannot be balmed by practicality. He was my friend.

I'd come home from school when the sun was slanted against the far-distant horizon, blunt orange knives cutting across the field, and there he'd be, face pressed up against the fence, bleating for love. I'd run along the fence and he'd chase. I'd let myself into his pen, which he shared with a pregnant miniature pony and her filly, and feed him pellets until his belly sagged and he lay down in the dirt for a nap. There was a young oak tree in the center, and I would pull the branches down with all of my body weight so he could bound from branch to branch. Soon, when I'd come walking down the long gravel drive, he'd bleat and jump into the tree himself, looking to me for approval. This is how he said *thank you*. I'd lay down in the tree's shade, his little black body perched on a crate of branches and shiny green leaves, and we'd sleep. This is how I said *you're welcome*.

There had long been wild dogs in the area. Some local farmer had used them for guarding purposes until he tired of their noise and chased them off with his shotgun. Once, my father had spotted a few in the far field, and he'd stalked after them with his silver pistol. By the time he reached the fence, they had disappeared, but their prints were etched neatly into the earth. Sometimes you could hear them growling from the dark of the underbrush, their shining eyes vanishing the moment you spotted them.

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They could be very good, too, at keeping quiet, which frightened me more than their noise. It meant that when they were loud, it was by choice. We were being watched with malignance, sometimes without knowing it. But nearby farmers had chickens and stray cats and pigs, which were easier prey than our horses. This bought us some time.

I woke up with the sun and the sound of my father's boots on the floor. I pulled on a too-big t-shirt – a hand-me-down from my older sister, who would soon be moving into my room after a two year teaching stint in Bulgaria any day now – and jeans from the hamper. I followed him to the barn, leapfrogging into his footprints to keep up. The air was tinny, as though a loud noise were still reverberating through the molecules in the ground, the rotted wood, the telephone line. My father stopped in the barn's mouth. I didn't like the way he did it: Straight-backed and silent. His eyes were dead set on the miniature pony's stall door, which to me looked closed and tight. *Go back inside.* He said it with such gentle authority, I shivered. As a warm wind blew through the black of the barn, it breathed out the scent of a thousand pennies.

I don't like to talk about it.

My parents bought me a big book: *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* I was fascinated by world records and freakshows, spiritual connections and claims of psychic powers. I sat on the couch and read the whole book cover to cover and was frustrated when, at the end, I still felt the way I did. His stall was carefully cleaned, new bedding laid, floorboards yanked. The dogs had snuck in so quietly, even the donkey and the dog were not privy to their presence. They had come for him specifically, as he was much smaller than the horses and tamer than the ponies. I sat under our tree begging God to switch my goat for the filly, since the filly abhorred everything human, had never expressed even a passing interest in climbing trees and had, at one point, kicked me in the chin for brushing a honeybee out of her tail.

God didn't answer. He didn't spend a lot of time in Texas. The phone was ringing in an empty house.