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Horses

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Horses

The first time I fell, I was eight years old. The saddle was English, black leather, slick with sweat, and it was a Palomino that threw me. The horse's name was Puff, and I did not talk to him.

To stop the great, gray hooves from kicking me when I brushed his tail, I blew air circles on his yellow skin. The hooves looked like cut tree trunks, discolored and slightly splintered rings, softly tramping in place, grinding down straw. I did not whisper words for fear the high school boys who hung around the stable, mucking stalls and rubbing oil into saddles, would hear. I brushed the wrong way till one of them took the brush out of my hand and told me to push with the grain of the hide, not against it. His breath came in white circles, smelling of cornmeal mush. I listened.

We were still upstate then, in Middletown, my father off on business, learning Japanese in the pale hours he spent home. My nights were filled with crisp pronunciations, words that sank into my dreams with their sharp foreign edge. My days were filled with school and after school, riding lessons. I rode old style. That was what my father wanted.

It was afternoon when I fell, the end of a long lesson circling the ring. I fell because I wanted to jump.

The tight plastic strap of my hat burning my chin, I traced the outdoor ring in dust circles. The middle section of the ring was divided into bars, long red and white stripped poles of even height breaking up the base earth. We were supposed to stay around the edges, lapping the clapboard fence, practicing *walk, gallop, canter, trot*. In that order. I gave commands with my body. The horse listened. With a small sway of the reins, a dig in his girth with my right thigh, I could send him storming into the center, over a pole, if I was quick enough. I knew this. The second before I met earth, I saw the stable boys leaning against the fence, hats pushed up to the crowns, brown hands rubbing the sweat on their necks. One of them called, *Against the grain, girl*. I tasted dust.

The next time I fell was in the subway. I met Stephen there. I was twenty, and he was my first boyfriend.

New York in summer smells like cooking garbage, and nowhere does it bake stronger than in the tunnels. I stood with my back against a metal pole, not holding onto the straps. It was five-thirty. There were no seats. Next to me, a man in an old tan raincoat clung with one hand to the plastic strap. The other hand held *The Village Voice*. He had to let go of the strap to turn the page. His fingers were ringed with blue stains.

I balanced my bag between my knees. Inside my bag were a notebook, a pencil, a bruised apple, a pack of cigarettes with one left, and two poems—crumpled, mistakes. I pulled my hair into a short elastic tail. The man let go to turn the page. The train went around a curve and we both lost our small semblance of balance. I fell into his coated arms. He smelled of coffee and ink.

Sorry, he said, pushing his glasses, round and rimless, back onto his nose.

Your paper, I retrieved the theatre section.

You should hold on.

I'm used to it, I said. I don't fall, usually.

The door to the car slid open. A man with a sign that said UNEMPLOYED HOMELESS CHRISTIAN (in that order, on cardboard, no commas) came into the car, stopped in front of us. I looked down. The man with the glasses reached into his pocket and gave him three dollars.

That's illegal, I said.

Giving money?

Asking for it. In the subway, that's illegal.

The train lurched to a stop and the doors opened.

My stop. I hitched my bag over my shoulders.

Hey, he said. Hold on next time.

We stepped off the train. The smell washed over my face. On the platform, a woman in a raincoat was screaming about the mayor. I felt him stiffen beside me.

It's Guillian, I said. Happens all the time.

He took out a small pen from his inside coat pocket, and wrote in his palm: WOMAN RAINCOAT MAYOR, blue letters, all caps.

That's gonna stain.

I write, he said.

Me too, I said. On paper.

The smell was starting to get to me. I wanted to be above ground. I wanted to be smoking my last cigarette. I adjusted the straps of my bag and turned.

Wait, he said.

My number was a blue stain, a tattoo on his palm.

The lessons were like this: *walk, gallop, canter, trot*. I controlled with the inside muscles of my legs, squeezing tight for faster, loosening to slow. But mostly the horse controlled and I followed. *Run* was my favorite, but we never ran, except at the end of the day when we headed back toward the barns and his hot, slippery body remembered warm mash and sweet-smelling hay. *Canter* was the worst. My small bones seesawed. Forward over the saddle and into the dry nest of mane, smelling of sweat and straw. Back into the saddle so far I thought my spine would snap and I saw the yellow earth turning up behind us. Forward and back. Forward and back. I would remember this movement.

He wrote with fountain pens only, Royal Deluxe Uni-Ball, blue ink, thick lines. At night when he touched me, the letters sweated off his palms. The words transferred onto my skin. I awoke with UMBRELLA VENDOR tattooed on my breast, BLIND GUITARIST smeared on the soft jut of my belly. In the dark the letters were black, nonsense syllables, too dark to read. They could have been calligraphy. They could have been columns of vertical characters, moist and sloping. In the morning I showered before they made sense.

I liked Stephen's work. He wrote plays and stories that became plays. His lines were funny, sharp, and sarcastic. I understood most of them.

I preferred to write alone, in silence, in the thin-rule pages of yellow legal pads, bought in bulk, writing in pencil even though I crossed out all the mistakes, anyway. I just liked sharpening them. When I was small, my father taught me how to sharpen a pencil with

a pocket knife. That's the way I do it still, cross-legged on the bathroom radiator or the fire escape on those rare nice days, with a notepad on my lap, a knife, and a green apple beside me, the greener the better.

Stephen wrote in the next room, in a room converted for his writing, though we had little space to make that kind of sacrifice. He had never learned to type and would not let me teach him. Instead, his fingers letter pecked on the lap top my father had given me as a graduation present. He read lines out loud, testing them. I tried not to listen, but his voice called me from all over the small apartment. I heard it in the brush of my hair, in the cold stream of running water as I washed the vegetables. At night his voice cut through my sleep. The sheets swirled around me were small protection. His words went right through them.

Is this okay? he said, hand almost fitting, but not quite, the crescent of skin beneath my breast.

I said something without parting my lips. I didn't like to talk. I liked the lights off.

You don't tell me, he said. *Sometimes I don't know what you want.*

I said, *I want what you want.*

He bent his head over my stomach until the white of his face disappeared. His dark hair softened into the dark of the room. There were lines on his face, lines I hadn't noticed before, lines that did not seem to lead anywhere. I closed my eyes.

Once his breathing had subsided, I slipped my body out from under his. I liked to write in the morning, before the sun was up all the way and everything was still a little grainy and undefined. I was up before him, making coffee, settling things as he slept soundly, not moving from the position in which his tossed body finally landed. Sometimes I had to lay close to his mouth, so close my ear almost touched his lips, just to hear him breathing. Sometimes I wasn't sure.

I kept a pen for him and some unsharpened pencils and yellow pads for me in the drawer beside the bed. I kept a red pocket knife in my coat. I took the knife out and sharpened a new pencil. The shavings fell on the floor, breadcrumbs leading into the bathroom. I closed the door till only a small crack of light leaked my hiding place. There were postcards stuck in the edges of the mirror, from Japan, from my father, with various postmarks and degrees of yellowness. *My Japanese is getting better. Mata o-me ni kaka ri-masho. I hope to see you again soon. Dewa Mata. I'll be seeing you.*

The other postcards were from my grandparents, on Assateague Island, outside of Maryland, one congratulating me on my graduation from college, one telling me they were sending me things of my father's—a pocketknife, a fountain pen—things he had left behind, things that came to me.

I sat cross-legged on the bathroom floor, next to the tub. The tile was cool beneath my knees. I ran my hand across an empty sheet of paper, smooth as skin. I wrote:

Dewa Mata.

My father's words.

Walk Gallop Canter Run

My words.

My father's

Where are you? His voice, glazed with sleep.

The bathroom. Did I wake you?

No. He filled the doorway, eyes half-melded.

I did. I'm sorry.

I need to get up for work anyway.

Work was for a small zine. He made coffee and copies. He rode a bicycle to get there. *To save subway fare*, he said. He still wasn't used to the trains. I was giving it two more months, then answering the help wanted signs we always saw in the windows of cheap restaurants in Chelsea. *You would make a good waitress*, he said. *Your handwriting is excellent.*

There were sirens in the distance, New York waking up.

What are you doing in here? He sat down beside me. *Are you writing?* He folded me into him.

I pushed the pad away. *No.*

On my bare arms there were some of his words, blue and smudged. They marked my chest and hips. They glowed in the bathroom light, his bruises all over my body.

On Assateague Island, wild horses roamed in small herds. Twice a year they were rounded up and sold at an auction on the mainland. *To control the population*, my father said. He sent me to Assateague, to my grandparents, when he was out of the country for long periods of time, and sometimes during the summer. In New York, he didn't know what to do with me. On Assateague, I didn't know what to do with myself.

I only saw the horses as spots out of car windows, brown shapes moving on the horizon. But once, I went out alone, before a storm, when the rain came from all directions, not one of which was the sky. I kept the rain behind me.

I first saw him in the field behind my grandparents' home, right across the highway. His coat was dark and heavy, marred with burrs and black burrowing scars. His mane boiled over his shoulders, island gray. Every day he would come to me. I was twelve, but I remember the bridge of his nose, the white tuft like an abstract star on his forehead, his flanks twitching, one ear flicking. He lowered his head and gray clumps slid over his face, across the star. He placed one hoof on the road between us.

Slowly he stepped onto the highway, hooves clicking on the pavement, the bones in his shoulders intent on movement. I counted tendons, the muscles in his back shifting. When he stood beside me, relaxing his muscles, he was so close, I could hear him breathe. I lifted my arm gently, afraid of the sudden movement of fingers. My hand was mirrored in his eyes, deep pockets in his face.

He flinched. His body tensed again. The mane swung over his head, over the star. He bolted across the road, past the field, past my grandparents' house—past my hand, useless now. I watched him rush onto the beach. His hooves kicked up the gray island dust, wet sand streaming out behind him. The other horses lifted their heads, surprised. Grass stuck crazily out of their mouths like an old man's beard, bristling. He ran past them, into the surf, his hooves red, his star white, storming into the sea.

I did not tell my father this. The car ride home was four hours. It rained.

How was the trip? my father said. He promised me a carousel ride when we got back.

Fine, I said.

Did you see any horses? he asked.

No, I said.

You will.

We listened to the rain twist around the tires. My father put a tape into the cassette deck. A man's accented voice: *The airport. Hiko—jo.*

Hiko—jo, my father said.

The bus stop. Basu no teiryu-jo.

Basu no teiryu-jo, my father said.

I looked out the window at the gray scenes. I strained to see the color.

Sometimes I'd see the horses and carriages going to work in Central Park. They left around seventy-thirty and passed my street, bells jangling. By then I'd want a cigarette, and would slip a sweatshirt over my pajamas and go out in the gray light. I'd lean against the wood doorjamb of our building, smoking, re-arranging stanzas in my head, waiting for him to wake. It was cold in the mornings, even in the fall, a fall so crisp the air crackled, and the smoke from the cigarette blended with my breath. Two white streams mixing. I sucked them both in.

The carriages were usually black, but once I saw a white one with red vinyl seats and silver spoke wheels. The drivers stood in front of their benches, wearing top hats, even the women. They flicked thin reins, whispered into the horses' moving flanks, had small whips they did not use. Sometimes they wore carnations in their buttonholes, white and yellow and blue.

Take you for a ride? they said. *Take you to the park. Take you to the zoo.*

I shook my head and ashes flickered onto my shoes, dispelling in the sidewalk cracks, instantaneous red.

Stephen got a better job, copy-editing at one of the smaller tabloids in the back row of the newsstands. *Soon*, he said, *they'll let me do a story*. Folded ties filled his drawer and the bike rested against our door in the hallway till someone stole it at Christmastime. I sent poems off in thick manila envelopes that were returned to me just as thick.

It was too cold now to wait for the horses, but the heater in our apartment had a broken dial. We kept the window cracked open with phone books, and sometimes I heard harness bells. Or imagined I heard them in the pockets of early morning silence between the clang of garbage trucks and the beep-beep-beep of delivery vans backing up.

We should hire a carriage, Stephen said, *to take us to work some morning.*

He talked as if I had work, as if I did more than stare at yellow sheets. My two months were almost up.

Didn't you use to ride? he said.

My father's idea of busy work.

But you liked it

I fell, I said. *He wasn't there. I hated it.*

This new job required rising before me and keeping his hands clean and blank. I ironed shirts the way my father used to do for himself, liking the warm stiff fabric in my hands, the steam rising like foal's breath in winter, sweet water smell coating my hands. I no longer woke with smeared metaphors across my breasts and ribs. He had no time for writ-

ing, took the lap top to work with him and filled it with interview transcriptions and reliable sources. Still, I found small notes in the inside pocket of his coat.

An exposé, he mused into my hair. Second page, next to the gossip column.

Do you remember the woman, I whispered words and my breath flew across his skin like pencil, erasing itself. The raincoat.

He kissed the freckles on the back of my neck.

Take you to the park. Take you to the zoo.

There was an old carousel in the park. I think they've torn it down by now. My father used to come straight from the airport, pick me up after ballet and we would go. He would buy a handful of gold tokens, pink cotton candy, and Coke in a wax cup. I was angry because I was missing stable time, because I hadn't seen him for three weeks, and now I was glimpsing him in quick blurbs at the end of the ride's rotation. I rode it anyway, the white Pinto with the chipped mane and blue plaster flowers woven in its bridle. My father sat on a bench beside the old people who had no where else to go, and the young mothers waving at their fat children clung to giraffes or pink ostriches. He bought enough tokens for ten or twelve rides. Every time the carousel circled I saw his face in blur. I did not wave. I was too old for that.

A brass ring hung on a wooden pole a few feet from the carousel, swaying slightly as the ride turned. If you reached out and grabbed the ring as you were passing by, you got a free ride. As far I know, no one ever did this. My father sat on his bench and mouthed the words, *Reach for the ring*, too embarrassed to shout in front of strangers. The movement and the pink cotton candy and the Coke and the music with its tin bells and belly drum beats stirred in my stomach. I felt something close to death. I never touched the ring.

When I fell for the first time, the ground was yellow dust that scattered beneath my hands. The earth was still solid enough to bruise me. I landed on my hands and knees. My palms split and the dust burned in my eyes. I could taste the salt of my own blood in my mouth. The horse stopped a few feet away, tail swishing at flies, chewing on nothing.

The long driveway spit up a vaporous cloud of dust. A car was coming, stirring everything up. It stopped in front of the ring and the dust settled down. It was my father's car, the company car. He got out and stood by the open door, fresh from the airport, his brown suit wrinkled. He squinted. He saw me. The boys pushed their hats back on, rolled their flannel sleeves to the elbow, hopped down from the split fence rails. They were all waiting. Even the horse was waiting.

I studied my hands. Scratches puckered my skin, red-black, the color of ink, like the marks of a language I could not understand. I brushed them off. I stood.

The morning he left, I bought an umbrella from a vendor on the street. In the spring, umbrella vendors appear on the corners like toadstools. No sooner has the first drop darkened my sleeve then there is a woman in a purple raincoat and a wide umbrella the color of ripe mangos, pushing a silver shopping cart. The ones she sells are black, plastic-handled, cheap. I don't know what she sells when it's sunny.

I bought a five dollar one and set off walking under a makeshift shelter of scaffolding and plywood planks. The rain buffeted the wood above my head. This morning I had received mail, a thin white envelope in our box, a note written on a red paper napkin in the sink. *I can't stay here*, Stephen's handwriting, lying on top of last night's dishes, covering the blood stains of lasagna. *We are pleased to inform you that your work has been accepted*, on watermarked cotton stock.

Tonight I would delete his files from my computer, open the envelope, which I would save, and cash the ten dollar check inside. With the money I would buy a good umbrella, perhaps, one that would last. Today, I walked to the park. A long ways, even in good weather. The carousel was closed till summer, but I saw vague animal shapes through the small windows, hazy, nothing familiar. I stood and watched the rain cataract across the garage doors, leaving tracks in the dust. I thought of my father, buried in Assateague, the way the rain would fall. The brass ring hung from its pole, not as distant as I remembered. Within reach, maybe.

I walked home through streets that still dripped. I dumped the umbrella, got a legal pad, and crawled on top of the cool radiator. The window was open, the yellow phone book pages ruffling in the wind. I heard no harness bells. I unfolded the pocket knife from my jeans pocket and scrapped the edges of a yellow pencil till the point was sharp and black. Two soft brown curls fell into my hands. I crushed them. I wrote.

—Alison Stine '00