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THE BLUE HOUR BEFORE SUNRISE

The sun has no place to hide on the plains, and daybreak comes often and early. I live in Grand Island, Nebraska, a small farming community nestled in the Platte River Basin where boundaries of wind and sky do not exist. This October morning, I'm standing on a hill north of town in what feels like the middle of nowhere, surrounded by endless horizons of fencerows and shaved cornfields, the gold stubble pulpy and swollen in the dew. The air is brisk with sunshine, wood smoke, the crane's undulating rattle over the Platte as I watch a ribby two-year-old mare paw the ground, daring me to approach. She has a hook of white smeared between her eyes, the rest of her mottled the brown of burned toast. Her ears are pricked, her black tail arched and whipping. She is a thundercloud on four legs. Her owner, Harold, wears a jean jacket and a red International Harvester cap. "Moody," he says. "And mean."

I'd traveled alone to see the horse, six miles north on 281 toward Saint Libory, searched the unfolding prairies for a blue house on a flat-pan hill, white shutters, an '84 Lincoln on the lawn. Just before sunrise, while my husband and children hovered on the cusp of sleep, I sat alone on the back deck — one cup of coffee, two — and thumbed through the *Grand Island Independent*, returning to the classifieds, an ad: HORSE FOR SALE. \$250. I could have asked my husband Mark what he thought about buying a horse, or if he wanted to go and look with me. But what if he had said, "This too shall pass"?

I stood under the quick of sky, looking at the young animal. It had been more than twenty years since I'd last ridden a horse, a gentle palomino gelding named Peanuts that I rode every summer day and sometimes after dark when the moon anchored a blue night sky and loblolly pines surrounded our Texas farm like mountains. It had been easy then, trotting to a chorus of crickets and frogs while my grandparents slept under an opened window. This is a memory that doesn't split me wide open.

The windows on the back of Harold's house are open. Pots and pans clank. Every so often, Harold's wife peeks out. She is afraid of horses. "Comet," Harold shouts. The mare eyes us and snorts. "Moody and mean," Harold says again.

Perhaps he wants to discourage me. Perhaps he wonders what a forty-year-old woman wants with a horse that will surely cause her grief. We stop shy of the corral, my shoes soaked with dew. Harold strokes the bill of his cap, looks at the ground, toes the thick fall grass with his boot. He explains. His daughter attends the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and rarely comes home. He works all the time and sees Comet as one of his failures. He'd wanted to imprint the mare when she was born, but her mother wouldn't let him close. "It was her first," he says. "Sometimes new mothers are too protective."

I gaze at the mare and don't tell Harold that my oldest son, Cory, has been dead for 78 days, that this is my first winter without him. "She's perfect. Reminds me of the horse I rode as a kid." He does not suspect my lie. "I'll catch her," I say.

Harold hands me a lead line with a nylon halter clipped on the end, the kind of halter you buckle instead of knot. I've never seen one and look it over, then wrap the whole mess up, hiding it behind my back.

"She's a handful," he says. "I'll be here if you need me." There is a knowing in Harold's words. Like he believes I can't handle her.

"I'll be fine," I say and approach the fence, stepping slowly as if picking my way across river rock. The mare's eyes widen. A front hoof paws the dirt. I move closer. Closer. *Easy, girl. Come on. Easy.* I offer my hand. Her nostrils pinch and flare. I will myself still though I've been shaking for weeks.

Her lips curl away from her teeth. I imagine a swift and painless bite, the stripping of skin and muscle, glistening bones shocked by the sudden rush of air. Will I scream?

I ease the rope from behind my back, slide the lead line around her neck, hold on and slip the halter to her face. The mare swings her backside to the fence and bolts, jerking the rope through my hands until it slides from her neck, and she is free. "Least she didn't kick," I yell to Harold. "It could have been worse."

I blow on my raw palms. Harold removes his cap, then rubs his head and chuckles, perhaps at my ignorance, perhaps at my bravery. More likely, he laughs because he is going to have \$250 in his pocket, and the crazy mare will be someone else's problem. The bargain will not include a handshake. No papers to fill out. However, if I buy the hay, the mare can stay on his land. He'll feed her. "When the roads turn icy you might not make it out," he says.

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“Oh, I’ll make it.” I am not afraid — of blizzards or icy roads or careening my car into a tree. In point of fact, I buy the mare because I believe she will kill me, though I will not admit this for years.

LESS THAN A week after Cory’s death, I began teaching first grade, the work a substitute for grief. A month before, I had accepted the position, hoping to get Cory out of Houston before something bad happened. I knew it was coming. At nineteen, he had been in several scrapes with the law: Alcohol. Tobacco. Anabolic Steroids.

The night our family had returned to Houston after dropping off our first load of furniture in Grand Island, Mark and I learned that Cory had wrecked his car and fled the scene. I studied the note Cory had left in our entryway. *Gone to a going away party. Sorry I didn’t change the cat litter.* I called his friends. I called the friends of friends. I called the police. No one had heard from Cory since before the wreck.

By 4:30 a.m., I knew something was desperately wrong. Cory had always called when he was in trouble. Not this time. A groundskeeper found him in the blue hour before sunrise, hanging from the roof of the American Legion Building in Alvin, Texas.

Cory was ten when Mark and I married. He was nineteen when he died. Mark made the only trip to the morgue while I stayed home, unable to face how death quieted my son. I wanted to remember Cory the way I’d last seen him, grinning because I had tucked a wad of twenties into his palm. He was staying home while we took the first load of our things to Nebraska. Mark had to see for himself it was Cory.

There was no service or funeral. Cory was cremated and shipped to us in a cardboard box. Thereafter, I spent nights on the couch, explaining to Mark that I didn’t want my tossing and turning to keep him awake. He said my absence kept him from resting. Truth was, I needed to be alone. Intimacy left me vulnerable, exposed. But, if I kept my emotions buried, I could make it through the night, through the day. This was not to say I didn’t think about Cory. I thought about him constantly. He was born when I was twenty and died when I was forty. I didn’t know how to live without him.

My other two children didn’t know how to live with me. Whitney was fifteen and Garrett seventeen. Neither understood. I tried explaining to them that

losing Cory was beyond words and assured them my feelings would be the same if something happened to one of them. They didn't want to hear about it. *God, Mom, it was his choice.* And they said it with anger. *Get on with your life.*

Other mothers lost children and survived. Did those mothers go to self-help groups? I tried reading about death and loss, but the words were a momentary comfort, like cool water on a burn. One book claimed grief was a series of stages and, eventually, I would become angry with Cory for what he'd done. But how can you be angry with a son who chose to die rather than ask for help? How do you live with that knowledge?

Some days, Whitney and Garrett stopped by my classroom on their way home from school, preferring my company while I built bulletin boards, giant sunflowers with toothy smiles, or invented games for first-graders who favored the adding of dimples on dice over a tally of worksheets. But I couldn't spend forever in the classroom, and when I was home, my children migrated to the houses of friends or went to movies. *God, Mom, get on with your life.*

MARK AND I became weekend regulars at the Farmer's Daughter's Café, our meals somber with slight conversation: *Are you sure it was him?* He was sure. *Positive?* He was positive. *What if it was somebody who looked like him?* No.

One Saturday morning, we hunched over a booth, me wearing the jogging suit I'd slept in, him in faded jeans and a Beatles T-shirt. I had a plan. We had been married for nine years yet had no children together. The waitress refilled our coffee, lingered. Was there anything else we needed? She shifted her gaze from me to Mark as she collected our dishes. "I have an idea," I said.

Mark looked perplexed. Since Cory's death, he no longer knew what to expect. He propped an elbow on the table and rubbed his beard. "What?"

"Let's have a baby."

He knew I was grasping, but the knowledge was not without remorse. He assured me the desire to have a baby after losing a child was not uncommon. The feelings would pass.

But I was not convinced. Something in me resisted, believed that if I could start over, this time it would be different. I would be a better parent, not one so consumed by work and money and the industry of life.

Here is what I mean: Shortly after Mark and I had married, Cory and his new stepfather finished the day with a screaming match. Cory had been man of

the house for the past two years, and the change in family dynamics had been hard for him. The next morning, after dropping the children off at school, I wandered the upstairs, hunting for dirty clothes, and found a towel bundled in one corner of Cory's closet. Three of his favorite G.I. Joes, their plastic arms and legs haphazardly whittled with what must have been a pocketknife.

I rewrapped the dolls and tossed them back into the corner. Who had time to be upset? I had an interview that morning at an alternative school in Houston and still had to shower and dress. I would talk to Cory later that night about controlling his anger. But after I arrived home from the interview, the children were home from school. Snacks. Homework. Supper. By the time the dining table was cleared, the dishes washed and counters wiped, the bathwater run, clothes and backpacks organized for tomorrow, the G.I. Joes had been forgotten.

AT THE END of each day, after teaching seventeen first-graders at Engleman Elementary, I duck into the faculty restroom. Boots. Jeans. I drive north along a slushy, gray highway, past bare-stalked prairies seeded with grouse and crow, to the mare's stable where, for the next few hours, I think of nothing but *horse*. Saturdays and Sundays, as well. Sometimes Mark comes along. Sometimes not. Mark is caring and compassionate, though helpless to save me.

My principal thinks I am wonderful. My students write me love notes and draw pictures of my new horse. We hug a lot. I come from Texas, and the children think I talk funny. They like me to read. I throw a Halloween party at my house by the lake when the wind strums the eaves and ice ticks the windows. All my students attend.

But still I sink. I would trade everything, my house and furniture and cars, televisions, CD players, DVD players, videos, books, computers, vases and knickknacks, clothes and jewelry and dishes — all of this for one last chance to see my son. Even if the ending can't be rewritten, I would give it all to tell him one more time how much I love him.

Some believe the dead revisit them. Days after Cory died, he wasn't in my dreams. My dreams included relatives and classmates unseen for years. No one knew Cory was dead, and every night I had to tell them.

Here is the exception: I climbed a staircase to Cory's room. He was reclining on his bed in a pair of his lifeguard shorts. Mussed hair. Cheek creased red from the pillow. Mark was wrong. It hadn't been Cory at the morgue.

Cory thinks I am angry. *No. Never.* He didn't mean to. He is sorry for the trouble.

It's okay. He didn't know. He doesn't want me to cry. *I loved you more than anything. You knew that, right?*

IT TAKES WEEKS for me to catch the mare without the pitch and tilt of a fight, weeks of patient coaxing, carrots and apples and half-eaten granola bars flung like seeds. I learn to wait until she is lulled by the chewing to slip the halter over her face.

Progress: The desire to have a new baby is gone. Instead, there is the black-eyed mare. When I am with her, I do not feel sorry for myself. There is only blissful burning in my shoulders and thighs during her bouts of kicking, bucking and rearing as she fights the lead. Sometimes, she hurls herself to the ground, but I wait until the whites of her eyes disappear to lead her around the pen, occasionally stopping near the gate where tufts of winter grass knit the ground, and I can reach through the fence to snag her a payload of green.

There are days I stay with the mare until the sky deepens and melds into darkness, the drowsy horizon dissolving around snow-custed fields. Coyotes howl, while pheasants and bobwhite bed down in plum thickets. Temperatures plummet. My fingers and toes curl with cold, yet I stay until the mare cooperates, and we end on a positive note. I hook my arm around her neck, but she rejects the intimacy and backs away.

While the mare eats her hay, I sit on an upturned bucket and talk about Cory, the endless theories and questions. He never had stitches, never went to the emergency room except once when he was two and packed his nostrils with taco meat. After Cory turned seventeen, our battles came in waves, my patience thin as a shell when he stayed out all night and didn't call home to let me know he was safe. The night he wrecked his car, he panicked, believed he'd go to jail for drunk driving and fled.

One witness told police she'd seen a young man pacing the street in front of the American Legion Building, blocks away. When the police found him,

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they believed he'd been murdered. But the blood splatters and incision patterns indicated otherwise. His wounds were self-inflicted. According to the medical examiner who visited the scene, Cory had gone into a rage, brutalizing his arms and legs with a skinning knife before using his belt to hang himself. How do I live with myself, knowing he could have called me yet chose not to?

One of my students reminds me of Cory. He has the same hazel eyes, the same buzz cut Cory wore at that age. This boy turns his pencils into splinters. He writes his letters with a thumbnail of lead until given a new pencil. I once saved the pebbles of erasers and crayons and showed them to his mother, but she was young and alone and didn't want to hear about it.

HERE IS SOMETHING that haunts me. When I found the G.I. Joe dolls in Cory's closet, I held the future in my hands and did not know it. What if I had recognized the problems then instead of now? Would it have made any difference?

WE LIVE THROUGH Thanksgiving. I spend the biggest shopping day of the year with the mare, weighted by a sky the color of ash. Wind sweeps down from the open plains and rattles the last leaves from the trees. Snow chalks the ground and shawls the mare. On the mare's left side is a lovely scar, an indentation the shape of a wishbone. I want to trace my finger along the arch and dip of wing. At the slightest touch, she squeals, swings her backside into my shoulder and throttles me. A moment of stillness. My heart chugs like a washing machine in the pale light. My cheek presses the frosted ground and there's the cold smell of dirt. Snow geese honk overhead. What luxury to lift away from this place if but for a moment, to lift from this life, to hover overhead and look down at the woman on the ground, not knowing why she waits for the crack of hoof on spine and skull. The mare stands over me until I find my feet.

The next time I see Harold is Cory's birthday, a day I have been dreading. No presents. No celebratory dinner. My forehead and knee wear the bruises of the mare's assault. I want to know if she was mistreated or abused. The slightest touch sends her skyward.

"Some are just born wild," he says.

Harold's wife waits by the back door while he helps me catch the mare. Today is the first time in weeks I have seen the woman who is bundled in a heavy coat and headscarf. They are headed to Lincoln to visit their daughter.

I brush the wooly parts of Comet's neck and tail, the two places she lets me touch. The air is freezing. I shake as I hum, "You Are My Sunshine." I want her to trust me and so lead her from the security of the corral into Harold's backyard where she can eat the last of the winter grass. She noses for food. I sit on the frozen ground, my head level with her hock, gazing at her belly, the leathery teats, the insides of her legs. Finger-sized veins web the shadowy reaches. Light as a whisper, my finger trails along the outside of her thigh, down the hock and cannon to a back hoof that is chipped and in need of trim. Her weight shifts, a perilous trust.

I remember, a few months before Cory died, he had come into my bedroom during the middle of the night. He flipped on the lights and told me he'd been kicked in the head by a horse. His words were slurred. He smelled of alcohol. He took my hand and said, "Here."

My fingers traced the raised outline of a hoof print. We didn't have an ice pack, so Mark went to the freezer to find a bag of frozen something. "How in the world?" I asked.

Cory was fuzzy on the details. He'd been to a party, but the police broke it up shortly after midnight. No one was ready to go home. Someone knew where a horse was kept, and someone else had suggested they take turns riding, no saddle or bridle, only a belt around its neck to hold it still. Cory volunteered to go first, full of alcohol and bravado. The horse didn't move until he kicked it. "Isn't that what you're supposed to do?" he asked. "Kick it?" Mark returned with a bag of frozen corn. Cory pressed it to his head.

"Stupid fucker jumped, and I fell," he said. He didn't have the slightest idea how the hoof caught his head. "I looked up, and the horse was gone."

Everything I knew about head injuries — swelling on the outside, the victim's coherence — indicated this one probably wasn't dangerous. Cory knew where he lived and found his way home. I felt the horseshoe-shaped ridge one last time. "You're lucky it didn't kill you."

Cory hadn't ridden a horse since he was five, and even then, I was the one who led him around Grandpa's plowed cornfields on Peanuts, the same gelding I'd ridden as a kid. I tiptoed into Cory's room three or four times that night — just to make sure he was breathing.

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THE AFTERNOON HOURS fold into themselves. Smoky clouds. A red sun. A quarter moon floats above a dusky blue horizon. Time to return the mare to her pen and find my way home. I tug on the lead, call for the mare to follow. She balks, posts her legs and refuses to budge. I give her more time. How much *can* she eat? I wait for her to finish, wait until it is almost too dark to see. Taurus in the east. Hercules in the west. I could leave the mare standing here and run to my car for my cell phone, call Mark and say, "I need help. I can't get Comet back in the pen by myself." But then what if he says, "She's never going to be any good. We need to sell her?"

A cold wind strips the comfort of coat and chills to the bone, stinging my eyes, my lungs. I lean close to the mare, absorbing her body heat, the warm smell of hair and hay. A memory of sunshine. I pull her head sharply inward, and she moves. We walk tight circles, inching our way to the corral. Inside the gate, I unhook the halter, and she bolts, blindly kicking as she flees. By the time I get home, Mark and the kids have eaten. I am not hungry but want to sleep. "Today was Cory's birthday," I say.

They know. Mark and the kids follow me into the kitchen where I wrestle a bottle of Asti Spumante from under a cabinet. Mark opens the bottle and pours a glass for each of us. "To Cory," I say. His glass sits empty on the counter.

A YOUTH CHOIR comes to the school and performs Christmas carols for our students. I look down during the performance, blame my red eyes and runny nose on a cold. Lunch follows the concert, forty five minutes of freedom before my students return to the classroom.

I leave school. Teachers have that luxury. Engleman Elementary is on the northwest edge of town, and my car takes a backcountry road away from houses and driveways strung with Christmas lights, away from lawns parked with snowmen and sleds and reindeer and store-bought Santas. I want nothing around me but the pale blue sky and its distant sun. Neighborhoods thin into fence and field, a stockyard. The heater blows in my face. I turn on the tape deck and fly. The trip is a seven-mile shot to my house, and Creedence Clearwater brings me home. *Someone told me long ago, there's a calm before the storm.* I drive fast, too fast between fields crusted and broken with snow. I close my eyes as I flee for the full count: One, two, three, four.

If Cory had died in the car accident, there'd have been no one to blame. Accidents are accidents. If this car drifts off the road, there will be those who mourn, but they won't live the rest of their lives believing that they should have seen it coming. I open and close my eyes to the marginal blur of post and ditch.

A BOUT WITH the flu helps us through Christmas.

I PAID HAROLD a hundred dollars for a worn saddle, kept in the tack compartment of his horse trailer. This unseasonably warm Sunday, clouds pale and wispy as scarves, the mare waits for me at the fence. I drag the saddle from the trailer.

Harold's daughter Margaret is home for the weekend from the University of Nebraska. Her parents are grocery shopping in Grand Island. Margaret is blocky like Harold but has the curly brown hair of her mother. She's a senior, majoring in English, hoping to be hired as a prison guard. Margaret didn't know her dad had sold the mare and hops onto the gate to watch. She can't believe the mare has a halter on, much less allows someone to lead her. I feel self-conscious as Margaret watches. She brags about Comet's mother, Lily, the 4-H show trophies. Blue ribbons. "Too bad her foal was so rank."

"She's a good horse," I say. "A little spooky. That's all."

"What'd you give my dad for her?"

"Not as much as she's worth."

Margaret laughs and offers to help me saddle the mare. I'm reluctant but could use an extra hand. Comet has had the saddle on before, but she's still restless and jumpy when the cinch tightens around her belly. Margaret holds the lead while I lift a new blanket up to Comet's nose. She sniffs and studies the fuzzy cloth. I give her plenty of time. I want her comfortable. I rub the blanket on Comet's neck and each side of her back so she can see the movement of the pad from each eye. *Easy, girl, easy. It's okay. Easy, girl.* Margaret shifts from one hip to the other. I'm obviously taking too much time. I take the lead while Margaret lifts the saddle. Comet flinches. Legs stiffen. Eyes widen into saucers. I lean into the mare's face. *Easy, girl. Easy.*

When Margaret gets the saddle positioned, I drape the lead line over my shoulder, standing squat in front of Comet, adjusting the cinch so it will be centered and not pinch when tightened. It's then that Margaret jerks the latigo. Comet rears. I push off her front legs. Comet stays vertical for what seems an impossible amount of time. When she settles back to earth, Margaret grabs the lead and hands it to me. I stay until the mare calms, until I am able to finish tightening the saddle and walk her around the pen. As long as she moves forward, she can't rear. But still, she's anxious as we pound our familiar circles.

After a while, I get too hot and pull off my sweatshirt, hang it on the gate where Margaret's sitting on the fence rail, smoking a cigarette. She drags her hand down the side of her neck to her shoulder. She tells me a horse bit her there. "Wasn't even a year old," she says. "I kicked its baby ass and tied it to a fence post. Stupid thing nearly died."

"Nearly died? How?"

"Dumb filly tangled up in the ropes and fell. One was wound around her neck. The more she struggled, the tighter it got. She was half-dead when I cut her loose."

"What happened then?" I ask.

Margaret tosses her cigarette into the dirt. "She lived."

I return to Comet, and Margaret hops down from the fence. On her way to the house, she looks over her shoulder and says, "You can always take the mare to auction."

I tell her I don't do auctions, and that night I offer Comet an extra flake of alfalfa, knowing I may not catch her for days.

DURING THE DAY, the lake near our house is easiest to find by looking at the banked snow, the natural drifts around the frozen socket of water. But at night, when it is hopelessly dark, you walk to where you think the lake should be and listen for the creak of ice underfoot before it gives way.

The time is well past midnight, the windowed houses dark behind porches, the edges of lawns bordered with snow markers. Wood smoke tenders the air. The occasional streetlamp glows orange, reflecting off a packed road worn smooth as a skull. The snow is over three feet high in drifts. I wear a turtleneck and a hooded sweatshirt as I crunch across the front yard. I am cold only for

a few minutes, for as I round the lake, heading north into the wind, my body tricks itself into being warm.

The lake's perimeter is close to a mile, and I hike the path three or four times, until sleep or daybreak, whichever comes first. Mark is not fond of my walks. He worries about the sub-zero temperatures, or my getting lost, though there's nothing to lose myself in but ice and sky.

IN APRIL, MARK interviews and accepts a position at a small college in Lewiston, Idaho. I call a veterinarian who specializes in large animals to come out and examine Comet, provide her with the needed vaccinations and blood test so she can cross state lines. Today will be her first exam, her first shots. Mark once told our friends that a farrier had tried to trim the mare's hooves, and she ate his liver with some sweet feed and a flake of alfalfa. I told Mark he watched too many movies. My horse never touched the man's liver, but he had left just the same, couldn't put one hand on the mare. He wouldn't be back.

Mark is leery about the exam. He wants to be on hand to help. "The man is a skilled professional," I tell him. "He's worked with hundreds of horses."

"So had the farrier," he says.

The veterinarian arrives in a blue Dodge, a 3,500 quad-cab dually, his office on wheels. He wears a ten-gallon straw hat and carries a Snickers bar in his shirt pocket. The man takes one look at Comet and orders us to cross-tie her, one lead from each side of her face. Comet takes the halter, the leads, but when the vet approaches, her eyes bulge, and she rears back, breaking the clasps.

"I think your hat scared her," I say, but the man is not amused. Perhaps I should retreat to the kitchen where I belong.

The vet crosses his arms, rocks back on his booted heels and talks to Mark while I calm the mare. In his truck is a twitch, a short pole with a cord looped on the end. The cord is twisted and tightened around the animal's upper lip as a means of control. The vet assures me the twitch is not painful and will take the mare's mind off him. Again, we cross-tie Comet, yoking her to the fence. The vet loops the cord around Comet's upper lip and twists.

Mark sings the *Mr. Ed* theme. Comet stands still. The vet hands me the pole and glares. "If she moves, twist it. Tight."

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I stand next to my horse, my shoulder tucked against hers. My hands shake. I'm afraid of hurting her. *A horse is a horse of course of course.* The vet examines the mare, draws a vial of blood from her neck. The leads strain under her weight and threaten to snap. I suck in my cheeks and clench the soft tissue between my teeth, tighten the twitch and look away as if somewhere on the terraced plains the mare's ancestors loaf in the sun, running the empty flats and hills, their manes and tails crisp as flags. Horses that kick and buck until drenched with sweat, they roll on the ground and rise bristled with sand. How deep the seeds of instinct are buried in this mare.

We pay the doctor in cash. While Mark feeds and waters Comet, I make a quick run to the Dairy Queen for a strawberry cream cheese Blizzard. I bring Mark a chocolate cone. I eat half of the Blizzard and feed the rest to Comet. She is happy with the treat. Mark has never seen a horse eat ice cream, much less from a plastic spoon. "You know," he says. "The vet thinks we should send Comet to a canner's auction. He can't believe anyone with a lick of sense would hold on to a rogue mare."

"Did you tell him she is mine?"

"I did."

"What'd he say?"

"He let it drop."

IN LEWISTON, IDAHO, Mark teaches at Lewis-Clark State College. Whitney finishes high school. Garrett begins college. We live in a valley, insulated by a bonanza of stark hills, deep opaque rivers and giant columns of basalt. We find an affordable house and acreage in the Orchards where the mare's pen adjoins our backyard and garden. She no longer fights the saddle and stands untethered while I tighten the cinch and adjust the stirrups. I give her vaccinations and hold the lead while our farrier trims her hooves. Yet, I do not ride the mare. Instead, we walk the companionable lawn and dusty pastures.

I have other horses to ride with Whitney and Garrett along the beaten trails and rocky switchbacks in Hell's Gate Canyon, up the cow face to the canyon's rim where the path widens and the valley unfurls. Rattlesnakes coil in the shade near bushes and bunch grass, yet we scout the bluffs overlooking the Snake River. Whitney prefers riding in the early morning, when the sun tips into the valley, and the river sleeps under a light fog. I like late afternoons,

when color rolls over the canyon on the heels of sun, the pleated slopes swelling gold, pink, purple. We have picnics at Buffalo Eddy, climb the petroglyphs and hurl driftwood into the swirling water. Not a day passes that I don't think about Cory, how much he would have loved the rivers and hills and rocks where we live.

Still, I make my daily pilgrimage to work with the mare, the horse that may never do anything more than trust my touch or voice. She recognizes the sound of my truck and is waiting at the fence when I arrive home from class. Some days I bring her a strawberry cheesecake Blizzard. Other times it's M&M's, pretzels or Oreos.

This blue-furred morning, before the sun lifts over the trees and pales the moon, I bring nothing but myself. The ground is fanned with frost. Nearby, tomato plants hang fuzzy and limp as bathrobes, the fruit stunned and swollen with cold. Squash and zucchini vines crumple the ground, their woody stalks folded into the dirt. Fingerling cucumbers climb the fence, instinctively searching for heat. I rub the mare's legs, her belly and back as she nuzzles my shoulder, her breath warm and moist on my neck. I press my face into her fur and inhale the sweet smell of hay and horse and memory.