

Horses

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The horses, frothy with sweat. They can smell his thoughts off him—mind readers, horses. They look through you with those black eyes, bulging and wet like full balloons.

The thick smell of hay, shit, tacky grime. The give of wet sand under his own stinking boots, the way his feet feel, then, rubbed raw and slippery.

Seamus goes to see the horses every day, has become used to the way they roll their eyes and snort with violence. He likes that, the soft weight of their breath through velvet nostrils becoming such a snotty trumpeting noise. He often tries to get a hand on the plush flesh of their blunt noses but they won't let him, snapping back arched necks to escape his clammy touch.

Today is different because one of the horses has died. Shot, out of necessity.

He's never seen that before, has trouble picturing it without the whole thing getting cartoonish. World War One movie, maybe. He wonders if they can tell, before it happens, that they're in trouble. He's heard they bleed loads. It gushes out of them, someone told him, like water out of a bath tipped over. He imagines it steaming in the crisp air, warm around

people's boots. But there's no organic record of the animal left, not for him to see, anyway.

When he arrived today to see the horses—one less—he knew before being told that something had happened, because one of the girls had been pretending not to cry. Things like that—emotions running high—remind him he doesn't live in the same world as these people. He's not a natural part of this functioning, everyday place, having only been brought in so he'd be occupied and supervised. But this also means no one minds him too much.

"Why'd ye have him shot?" Seamus asks his cousin's husband now.

Cian is the main reason he's allowed come down here and do what he likes. Seamus joins him on his fag breaks.

"He managed to fucking shatter his leg bone, so we had to."

"Hm. Fair enough." And that's the other thing about the horses—sometimes they've just got to die. It's the only thing for them, when they're too ruined to ride, too ruined to stand around in a field all day, too ruined even just to lie in the stables and chomp hay, drooling. Probably why they're as skittish as they are. They know the score.

Silence, then. Seamus watches smoke rise into the fresh blue of an early September morning.

"How's Ciara, anyway? And himself."

Ciara is the best cousin, having a husband and a dog and a son and even a house they actually own.

The son is two, but Seamus has only met him a couple times. Ciara doesn't think he's appropriate for sons.

"I don't want him growing up thinking men like you are normal," she'd told him once.

He was offended she'd said it, out loud, to his face, but not really that she'd thought it.

"Ah, they're grand."

Seamus wouldn't be told if they weren't, which annoys him, but

there's nothing he can do about it. He understands Cian's babysitting him to help his wife out.

Seamus helps out here and there, is around too much not to, but he's not getting paid. He doesn't mind. The shit-shovelling's not so bad. He finds it easier than anything else down here. There's no managing of talk, facial expressions. No one's looking at him, wondering what he's at. He does it alone and it takes him out of himself. No chance to feel the want that still runs him. He's still thin, thinks this might pack a bit of muscle onto his stringy arms.

It's mid-afternoon and the day has become ordinary. The kids will all be in soon for the after-school lessons. He generally leaves around then. Even if he was being paid, he wouldn't want to be standing around sweating under the gaze of perfumed, blow-dried mothers. They make him feel like a child himself, squirming and red in the face. Aware of how he must smell.

"Right," Seamus says when he's finished smoking.

"Are you away?"

"I am. I'll probably be down to ye tomorrow again."

"Right so."

And he's off. He walks home. It's more than half an hour, but he walks a lot these days. The grime's on him like another skin. Cooling now, though he's walking fast, always does on his own. Thinks of the shot horse as he goes to distract himself from the feel of his feet in his boots.

He's reminded for the first time in years of his dog when he was younger, when it went totally nuts. The two of them in the yard, him and it, and Mam had rushed out with an ugly face on her like someone possessed. She'd grabbed a broom and just battered the shit out of it—both of them frothing at the mouth around bared teeth. Odd, to see his mother like that then. Odd, too, the crack of bone, the way it hadn't stopped snarling, like the rage took its pain.

The worst part was after. He kept remembering the whole thing, replaying moments. Mam's awful face. The thought that if Mam hadn't come out—but she had come out. She rang Uncle Patsy, then, because she didn't want to manage all the nasty bits of dog. She wanted to go inside and put the dinner on, like she'd been trying to do. They had pork chops, all pink and fatty, and he felt sick. The nausea's the feeling he best remembers, the glistening meat and the drop of his stomach. Watching her hands serve peas, thinking of her thick fingers clenched around the broom handle.

Before that, still out in the yard with Patsy, he watched the soft brown snout disappear into a bin bag and his throat had locked up, squeezed itself shut so he couldn't talk. His uncle had him hose down the concrete but then he gave him a drink, to settle him. It cut through the tight pain in his neck, his chest. Mam said he was too young for it but Patsy gave him another after dinner and that helped the queasiness, too.

"Did you feel bad killing it?" He'd asked his mother later, one of the only times they were able to speak properly to each other.

"No," she told him, "I was just afraid of it."

Seamus understands sometimes there is a need to kill. The killing of animals is often ritual. The dog, if not ceremonial, certainly subdued things between him and his mother. The pair of them remembered how its behaviour made it die and they treated each other well.

His eyes are unseeing where they land on the autumn hedgerows. He's not looking at the brambles or the blackberries, the tangles of thistles, the tall thick-stemmed nettles. The fuchsia, in the golden afternoon light. The branches of trees against the clear sky. Blackberries and huge unmoving spiders, both fat and shining. He should be looking at these things, paying attention so the changing world really sinks in. He knows he lives his life narrowly. Doesn't look at birds as much as he should. Doesn't know them apart, only the easy

ones. Sometimes he fools himself that he is changing—the cooing of a wood pigeon in the evening leaving him calm, extending outside of his own body.

Once he's home, he goes straight for the kitchen and boils the kettle for coffee. Spoons instant into a sticky mug.

He wraps his hands around the white ceramic, feels the boiled-water heat seep through, just on the right side of burning the palms off him.

When he'd tapped his card for the €3.50 he'd been so unhappy, but it's worth it now, this small energising warmth. He stands, for a minute, breathing into the smell of it. Movement gets his attention—a glowing white animal bounces onto the windowsill.

It's a stray cat that's taken to poking its head in if the window is ajar. It picks through the wet leaves collecting on the sill with round, careful paws, makes its way through the orange slime to peek in at him, hopeful and skinny—its feet are too big for the rest of it, like a lion cub. The size of them hints at another animal, hiding in the little bones of this one. It bobs its head up and down, sniffing and searching for a way into the house out of the damp afternoon. It did get in, once. He didn't know until he found it on a chair, shedding all over the scarf he'd left there, pretzelled into itself and purring ferociously. He threw it out the back door on instinct—lobbed it in a wide arc, and it landed weightlessly on its feet and skittered off—but it was still summer then, climate-change-hot, and he didn't feel bad. He'd been drinking, was in that place where he could move through the world unworried. Didn't find himself dwelling on things after, able to dismiss.

Now, with the autumn chill waiting in the air, he feels worse for it, thinks he'd let it in if it wasn't so muddy and untrained. It would piss on his floor. He takes another sip of his coffee instead—burnt, unpleasant. Mainly good for the way it goes down, bitter and hot but nothing like whiskey.

He sits down with it at the table, leaves a wet ring on the white

Formica. Afternoon ritual—he goes through jobs in the area on his phone, scrolls through the offers of minimum wage, sends emails claiming to be a quick learner and a team player. To avoid the particular stillness of a cold kitchen he plays a “Chill Playlist,” unable to face actually choosing something he likes.

The need for a job—he feels it less than he really should. He’s got savings from when his mother died two years ago. He’s pissing her money down the drain and if she was still living, she’d strangle him. He feels guilty, sometimes, not so much about his behaviour but about how she can’t get angry. It feels like he’s pulling one over her.

Darkness comes earlier than it did yesterday. He locks the front and back doors, watches video essays on his phone, makes a cheese toastie. Thinks the whole time about how he’s going to have to shower.

Sleep never comes easy to him—he’ll spend hours online, absorbing cartoons, self-growth podcasts, American reality shows from fifteen years ago. Let Us Redo Your House. Let Us Redo You. With no other way of knocking himself out, this is routine now. Otherwise it’s just him and the knowledge that no one is actually keeping him from going out. Just him and all the empty rooms of the house, waiting. But once asleep, he stays that way—he normally doesn’t remember his dreams.

This one sticks, though.

He is standing, cold in his hoodie, in a wet field. The world is shaded blue, as though through tinted glass. The grass and mud are one and the same, turf-like and sucking at his feet when he moves.

Then, the horse. Spindly-legged and shadowy, squelching up to him over the sodden ground.

Breathing, loud and snuffly. Bends its nose to him. He wants to run the backs of his fingers gently over its warm skin, then into the short hairs further up the face, pat its round cheek, curl a palm around its pointed, flicking ears, flatten a whole hand over the forehead. There’s a horse he gets on with, at the equestrian centre, that lets him do things

like that. Lets him fuck with its ears and plait the mane, too. It's called Champion and no one can believe it likes him.

But now, here, he watches himself do something else.

He reaches into his pocket and finds sharp metal. It had been digging into his thigh.

He starts at the lumpy breast of the animal—pushes in there and pulls upwards, along the wobbly jugular groove—follows that smoothly up to the latch of the throat. Like slitting an envelope. One gesture, unless it catches. But it doesn't catch. The horse just looks at him still. He looks back into its unspeaking face, not down at what he is doing. He can't see it properly in this almost-light, but he can imagine—the gentle nose, whiskery satin over huge yellow teeth. He can hear it breathing still, heavy, like a sigh pushed out.

He's not the one in charge of his hands. He can only feel them as they reach through the soft coat into the cut gorge, finding the sticky middle contained by the outer animal shape. His fingers are nearly burning, like they would under a tap, very hot or very cold. The feeling of numbness in the hands like when he'd wash them in the yellow-tiled school bathrooms in November.

He didn't mean this. Is there no way to take it back? It only wanted to be friends. Maybe it thought he might feed it, keep it company, out here in the dark. He wants so badly to go back in time, thinking of its friendliness. There's that particular panicked feeling right after the act, the moment right after knocking back a shot when he'd think, fuck. That's done now. It is already in me.

He can feel his face moving without his permission, stretching and winding itself into a wide-mouthed sob. Something rising inside him, vomit or an ugly noise. He wakes up before it has a chance to come out, tears rolling into his ears.

It's early-morning-cold but the dream's made him sick, so he gets out of bed anyway. The window's fogged up round the edges. He opens

it to let the air in, feels a little better now he can smell the rain-soaked earth.

The buzz of the fridge is loud in the kitchen until he puts the kettle on. On the sill, a waiting white shape, the cat again. He watches it while he wipes his face with his sleeve. Makes a go of breathing in and out. Just breathe, Ciara always tells him, like it's a good substitute for a drink at all. But he has no other choice. The little eejit notices him looking and starts to claw at the window, leaving wet smears. This sort of boldness is probably the reason it's survived all these weeks out here alone, roaming the wet fields. Cats are an invasive species. It's probably killed an ecologically significant number of shrews or something.

It's while he's spooning sugar into the tea—something he doesn't really like but he's gotten more used to it, all part of the effort to get bigger, like getting the weight on will make him a sturdier person—that it starts to yowl. A sort of pitiful weeping. He's holding his tea, pressing his hands around the mug. Watching it wail over the rim pressed up to his lips, through the steam.

He's not had a pet in years, not since childhood. And there's all that stuff too, get a houseplant, manage that. Manage yourself. Get a grip before you try holding anything else. But he's been the only thing haunting this house for a while.

The cat gives up and is silent in the damp back garden. It sits now, tail twitching, still staring implacably in. It'll eventually leave. Someone else will let it in. Someone much more suitable than him. But maybe they won't. A fox will kill it. Or it'll be run over, its small spine crushed, the whole animal turned into a cat-shaped mess, like the crows he passes sometimes on his daily walk, foxes as well, smeared across ground they should be safe on. He's frozen, barefoot on the unswept tile, reddened palms around his mug of tea, then he's moving before he's realised, opening the door without thinking at all. It shoots in, delighted with itself. Within a minute, it's kneading the couch, purr-

ing hard, circling and settling itself, making itself round and happy. Sits down, squints its eyes, burrows its nose between its still damp paws. It gets comfortable with a frantic urgency, maybe to stake its claim on the place, show him it belongs here and he can't throw it out again. It's so small and he is so much bigger.

He thinks of the dream, imagines himself treating this cat the same way, opening it up with his mother's fish knife. But he doesn't want to. He doesn't have to. He's in charge of what he does now. He sits down next to it instead, breathes the dream out and tentatively places one smarting palm in the cool fur layered just over its tiny, hummingbird heart.