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Out of Many

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Out of Many

By

Allora Campbell

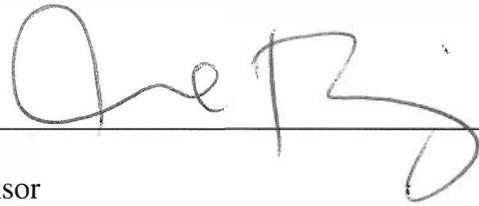
A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York College
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Master of Arts

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By

Allora Campbell

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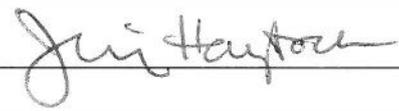
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To my parents:

who perpetually supported me, unconsciously inspired me,
and because they swore to haunt me from the grave
if I didn't dedicate my first work to them.

Abstract

Out of Many is a thesis collection which examines the themes of family and farm life. As the oldest of ten children, a homeschool graduate, and a farm girl, the intricacies of familial relations, in addition to the bonds to animals and the land itself, all played a vital role in my formation as a writer. *Out of Many* is a reflection of those influences and consists of a critical introduction and two short works of fiction, “Chasing Kathleen” and “Anna’s Dog.” The “Critical Introduction” offers an explanation of my literary influences and the stylistic choices which shape each story. The stories themselves, although fictional, are based extensively upon actual events and concentrate upon the relationships between two sets of sisters. “Chasing Kathleen’s” narrator, Kim, struggles with an impending separation from her younger sister, Kathleen, as Kathleen prepares to leave for college and Kim remains to work on her family’s farm. “Anna’s Dog,” through the eyes of Bernadette ‘Benji’ Barton, depicts a strained relationship between Benji and her distant older sister, Anna, when Anna decides to bring home a dog without parental approval.

Critical Introduction

When my parents began the adoption process, I was twelve and generally excluded from the proceedings. They met with social workers, attended parenting classes, and searched through pages of potential children. Eventually, my siblings and I had to be individually interviewed, something that made me particularly uneasy. I assumed the social worker meant to pick our minds for any signs of maliciousness or cruelty. One question lingered after the interview concluded: “how do you respond to your siblings when they make you angry?” The implications of this question offended me even as I hastily answered. She told me I “passed,” though I had been assured that this encounter wasn’t a test. Afterward my mother tried to explain that these questions were procedure, not personal, and that they had been used to make sure our family met certain standards. This explanation equally astounded me as we had always lived, what I’d considered, a quiet idyllic life. We were homeschooled and lived on a horse farm. The assumption that something was potentially wrong with my family—my life—seemed entirely ridiculous and, at once, unsettling. I’d always been proud of my lifestyle and that line of questioning had shaken me.

My family, education, our farm, and our vast numbers (we eventually numbered ten) all uniquely identified me. To broadcast my role as a farm girl, I wore paddock boots, scuffed jeans, and men’s t-shirts almost daily. Generally, I found it reassuring that, because of my unique lifestyle, people thought me interesting. Despite my parents’ best efforts, I was a very shy child. They pulled me out of Catholic School to be homeschooled amidst skepticism from family members and most social circles. My mother enthusiastically attempted to fill the social void in my

life through soccer, music lessons, drama club, gymnastics, ballet, riding lessons, and girl scouts. Regardless, I couldn't ever seem to push past my innate desire to avoid people entirely and immerse myself in books. I considered myself an avid reader, tearing through my mother's own extensive collection and checking out piles of books at a time from my local library. My favorites included classic writers like Frank Gilbreth Jr, Ernestine Gilbreth Carey, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Anna Sewell, and Louisa May Alcott, to, later, more contemporary writers like Ruth Reichl, Jancee Dunn, Abigail Thomas, Walter Farley, Marguerite Henry, and Anne Lamott. As I developed a lens to read critically, but to also write successfully, my childhood and contemporary preferences lent greater influence to my work. I realized that I wanted to preserve the intense pride I'd developed for my individuality and personal experiences. It felt as natural as breathing when I began writing by extension. I considered writing a tool for safeguarding memory and my family's history instead of simple escapism. My body of work through college, both fiction and non-fiction, has been striving for this goal ever since.

My first original character was a centaur named Centauria whom I wrote about nestled in the boughs of an ancient maple tree outside my back door or underneath my blankets by flashlight. At age eleven, I considered myself too old for make believe and my frenzied scribbles embarrassed me. I wrote because, quiet and unsure, I wanted to be exactly like her. Initially, my creative passions were entirely fantasy based. I constantly daydreamed, imagining epic romances and fantastic adventures in every spare moment. Reality only gradually started to permeate my writing when I realized that fantasizing about someone so foreign, like Centauria, had

begun to make me lonely. Her imaginary experiences, so far removed from my own, gave me little to relate to. While I valued the fantasy genre as a source of entertainment, I gradually realized my favorite books were no longer as deeply satisfying.

My own life was unusual, so I wanted to read more about people, events, and places which pertained to my own experiences. My tendency to avoid companionship had resulted in a sort of self-imposed isolation. I didn't know anyone else quite like me and, instead of overcoming my social unease, I threw myself into books, gradually shifting from Lewis' *The Horse and His Boy* and Tolkien's *The Hobbit* to a different spectrum of authors. Novels about familial adventures, sibling relationships, and farming life began to dominate my literary choices, cultivating an interest which has lingered throughout my academic career.

I loved hearing stories about the history of someone's family, both in the day-to-day details and in the oddities. But I felt, the more I searched, that realistic portrayals of large families (or any portrayals at all) were sadly limited. There weren't many stories about large families, probably due to the strain of supporting a cast of Dickens' proportion. So the few I did read, I treasured. My father used to read Frank Gilbreth Jr and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey's *Cheaper by the Dozen* and its sequel, *Belles on Their Toes*, aloud to me and my siblings during vacations. We'd huddle at his feet and giggle at the authors' experiences growing up in a household of twelve children. As I grew more experienced in the craft of story-telling, I began to recognize some of the challenges in creating narratives of any length while supporting a cast of such magnitude. First, I marveled at some of my favorite novels where

depictions of large families had been accomplished quite elegantly, like *Cheaper by the Dozen* or Alcott's *Little Women* and *Eight Cousins*. Second, their work inspired and challenged me to faithfully and authentically depict my own experiences growing up in a large family.

Cheaper by the Dozen and *Belles on Their Toes* explore the dynamics of large families in different ways. Authors Gilbreth Jr. and Carey, two of the family's twelve children, concentrate upon the eccentric personality of their father and the family's many adventures. While details about individual relationships or specific siblings are sacrificed, Gilbreth Jr. and Carey successfully tackle exploration of the family as a whole. *Belles on Their Toes* switches focus slightly, as it picks up after the early death of Gilbreth Sr. when the family is still quite young. Mrs. Gilbreth takes up her husband's role as bread-winner and leaves her children to function largely on their own. Accordingly, some of the issues that the sequel addresses include how the younger and older siblings relate to each other after this shift of authority, how various siblings bond over the loss of their father, and how the family survives in the absence of either parent. Both books concentrate upon family dynamics, parent/child relationships, and sibling relationships. Although the children are not primarily focused upon (each story centers instead upon their shared childhood experiences growing up), how the family functions as a whole is essential. In my own writing, I narrowed this focus further to a concentration upon familial relationships. "Chasing Kathleen" features Kim lamenting her disappearing relationship with her younger sister, Kathleen. Similarly in "Anna's Dog," Benji grows increasingly disgruntled with her older sister's relationship with their father and its effect upon their own

affiliation. Although family dynamics are crucial to understanding the Gilbreth Family, familial bonds between siblings, or between parents and their children, more specifically interested me than a focus of the family as a whole unit.

Alcott's *Little Women* and *Eight Cousins* also utilize a large familial cast but with a slight shift of focus. Family life is the central theme to Gilbreth Jr. and Carey's texts, but their experiences outweigh individualizing specific characters. While the authors certainly mention names, for instance, in *Cheaper By the Dozen* and *Belles on Their Toes*, the characters of the many children have the tendency to blur. In contrast, Alcott presents her numerous characters and their relationships to one another in a more intimate manner. In *Little Women*, the novel largely follows Josephine March's life with her sisters, how their interests and dreams vary, and how they relate to each other as they age. Likewise in *Eight Cousins*, only child Rose Campbell (her last name continues to delight me) experiences a drastic change in her lonely, singular life after she makes the acquaintance of her seven male cousins. Alcott, from the cousins' first introduction, makes the point of uniquely identifying each one:

This is the clan come to welcome you; and I'm the chief, Archie, at your service....Now I'll tell you who the chaps are, and then we shall be all right. This big one is Prince Charlie, Aunt Clara's boy. She has but one, so he is an extra good one. This old fellow is Mac, the bookworm, called Worm for short. This sweet creature is Steve the Dandy. Look at his gloves and top-knot if you please. They are Aunt Jade's lads, and a precious pair you'd better believe. These are the Brats, my brothers, Geordie and Will, and Jamie the baby. (10-11)

Each cousin is given attention as a distinct personality and their separate escapades are intrinsic to the development of both Rose's character and her relationship with each. In either novel, Alcott doesn't shy away from using numerous familial casts—a welcome change. Although I recognize that her work spans several hundred pages and, in short story form, specific attention to numerous characters is somewhat daunting, if not impossible, I wanted to accept the challenge of incorporating large families and their lives into my own work as Alcott does.

I tentatively approached writing my family as I transitioned to college. I'd attempted writing about myself in high school, but I had always been stalled by a lack of confidence. I struggled with whether my own life was interesting enough to commit to paper. Despite my pride, stories about horses or the antics of siblings didn't quite compare to fantasy epics or even the entertaining exploits of my favorite family oriented works. Due mainly to the barring of genre fiction in my first college workshops, professors prodded me into the realm of realistic fiction. I was surprised to discover I had a lot to say. I realized that writing allowed me to formulate my identity as a homeschooler, the oldest of ten, and a farm girl.

I quickly began to churn out essays and short stories about my family, and I still haven't run up against a lack of subject matter. At first, a defensive tone laced explanations of my religion, my parents' conservative rules, our structured farm life, or my homeschool education. Although I had grown up with the expectation that people would question the way I lived, I felt that sharing my family's history warranted a thorough explanation. As a consequence, I was often critiqued for that tone, and peers would point out how many other stories I could still explore. If I

submitted a piece about homeschooling, for instance, I received suggestions to delve deeper into the adoption process, farming life, or the explicit effects of growing up in a Roman Catholic home. While valid, the thought of expansion frustrated me because of the difficulties I'd faced in just remaining on topic. I debated, for instance, exactly how much background information was needed in my creative works without bogging them down. The lasting impression that the majority of my workshops left me with was that my family was simply too expansive and complex for short stories or essays. In response, my recent work has adopted an alternative method: using fiction instead to tell nonfiction stories.

In several instances, I wanted to write about an event of some lasting resonance but got stuck upon accurately incorporating too many logistical details. Predominantly, I wrestled with judging the necessity of various bits of personal information like including all of my actual siblings, describing animals, and shying away from being defensive about my own actions. Faithful and authentic renderings of these aspects tended to weigh my stories down and cause them to lose focus. To compensate, I decided to depict actual events and/or characters through a fictional lens and thereby allow myself more narrative freedom. "Chasing Kathleen" and "Anna's Dog" feature protagonists who do have a number of siblings, but only one relationship is emphasized. Additionally, both stories depict a series of actual events. This tactic allowed me to focus on specific sibling relationships without the guilt of leaving others behind. At the heart of each story, a concentration upon individual relationships was crucial and I didn't want to deflect from the plot by explaining the importance or unimportance of various characters. In using fiction in this way, I felt

like I could strive for authenticity in my work and construct my narratives more effectively.

In a similar vein, another craft element present in my writing is my interest in, and dedication to, chronology. My pieces are laid out in a linear fashion and follow a fairly straightforward timeline. Although I certainly appreciated the simplicity and well-roundedness that linear storytelling lends to my work, I have predominantly utilized linear chronology to, first, emphasize the progression of time and subsequent evolution of characters, and second, to examine time's effect upon memory and relationships. In "Anna's Dog," Benji resists her estrangement from Anna as she has evolved from an outgoing equestrian, to a stern extension of their father, to a conflicted young woman seeking a reminder of better days in a rebellious dog. Benji considers this evolution to have created someone she neither recognizes nor understands. By using specific pacing and strategic memories, this progression demonstrates how Anna's new personality redefined her relationship with Benji. Consequently, the chronology served as the means to expand upon the gradual build-up of the sisters' conflicted relationship. "Chasing Kathleen" takes a slightly different approach in emphasizing time's erosive affect upon memory. Kim's entire relationship with Kathleen is based upon their shared interest in equestrian sports. As children, both sisters invested in a relationship surrounding horses that, when Kathleen's interests changed, the foundation for their bond was significantly weakened. As a result, Kim struggles to relate to Kathleen because she is too deeply reliant upon, and imbedded in, past experiences, effectively stagnating in memory.

Therefore, I wanted to explore Kim's reliance upon memory as it only intensifies her deep-seated resentment of Kathleen as she prepares to leave for college.

My efforts to wrest my family into a more manageable form through fiction and my dedication to chronology have further shaped my interest in recording family life. In particular, I wanted my writing to preserve the power of memories. I valued the ability to extrapolate and immortalize various events that might otherwise lose their meaning. Authors such as Anne Lamott, Jancee Dunn, Abigail Thomas, and Ruth Reichl all served as inspirations for me in this regard. Each deftly approached the craft of documenting family history and cultivating the recollection of memories in different ways: Lamott, through wry humor and blunt honesty; Dunn, through faithful renderings of minute details and unforgettable familial moments; Thomas, through her passion and commitment to the recording of memory; and Reichl, through her thoughtful and visceral depictions of familial relationships. Abigail Thomas states in *Thinking About Memoir* that “[t]he writer of memoir makes a pact with her reader that what she writes is the truth as best she can tell it. But the original pact, the real deal, is with herself. Be honest, dig deep, or don't bother” (9). Striving for such accuracy and realism has served as a guiding influence for my work.

Very much like Dunn, Lamott, Thomas, and Reichl, I am interested in memory. In “Chasing Kathleen” Kim struggles with the memories of her sister, who is now almost entirely different than the girl she grew up with. In “Anna's Dog,” Benji has trouble reconciling the quiet, estranged relationship she has with Anna in the wake of the new dog's arrival. In both stories, I dedicated myself to preserving specific memories involved and exploring how they shaped individual characters. The

fact that both stories are based on actual events and actual people further cultivated this sense of dedication. Reichl's *Not Becoming My Mother* displays similar attempts to preserve memory in her "Mim Tales," a childhood nickname for stories depicting her mother's various antics and Reichl's subsequent relationship with her (1).

Similarly, Dunn and Lamott devote their texts to transcribing the intricacies of various relationships. For Dunn, these intricacies are found in stories about herself and her family; for Lamott, this is shown between herself and her newborn son. Their brutal honesty (Lamott describes moments of stunning rage towards her child, for example) and attention to detail (Dunn spends several pages recalling lengthy conversations and describing events) creates involved, fully developed narratives that gave me a brilliant picture of each narrator's familial life. If I accomplished nothing else with my own writing, I wanted to at least be confident that I have accurately, authentically, and honestly depicted my various narrators' influential memories with all the courage and unflinching bluntness I can muster.

In relation, "Chasing Kathleen" and "Anna's Dog" examine how memories connect, mold, and weaken relationships. The prevalence of memory defines the bonds of both sets of sisters, Kim/Kathleen and Anna/Benji, to the extent that, when either relationship changes, their intense reliance on the past stunts their ability to communicate with each other and dissolves what they do have in common. Benji of "Anna's Dog" doesn't understand Anna's insecure solemnity because it doesn't match up with her prior confident personality. This disconnect strains their relationship and causes Benji to resent Anna when she defies Benji's expectations. Kim of "Chasing Kathleen" faces a similar conflict when Kathleen discards their

shared interests to pursue her musical career. Kim cannot reconcile her memory of Kathleen with the sophisticated musician that she's evolved into. The weight of such memories directly affected the success of both relationships and, accordingly, I wanted to explore how that influences my characters' present lives.

The preservation and authenticity of memory has become a prevalent aspect throughout my entire body of work. My continued preference for a first person narrator also complements these efforts and has become a defining characteristic of my work. Despite simple preference for writing in the first person, I've also utilized it for a few substantial and definite reasons. For "Chasing Kathleen," I wanted readers to be in an immediate, intimate place with the narrator, Kim, as she explores parts of herself that she is uncomfortable with. First person was used as lens for, first, self-analysis (as she questions her ties to her horses, farm, academic aspirations) and second, in re-evaluating her rocky relationship with Kathleen, her younger sister. In both cases, I wanted readers to be inside Kim's mind as she experienced these dilemmas. To further this goal of being in the moment, I placed "Chasing Kathleen" in the present tense.

With "Anna's Dog," I was concerned that Anna possessed opinions, traits, and experiences too close to my own. This varied from my depiction of Kim, whose character is based only loosely upon myself. I didn't think I could, truthfully, be critical of myself through a strictly first person perspective. I found, in nonfiction attempts to write this story, that I fell too easily into that defensive tone that has so often plagued my writing. Anna's thoughts and beliefs are instead considered by her siblings, but not immediately confronted until Luke, Anna's troublesome dog, causes

friction in the family. I also did not necessarily portray Anna in a favorable light, which was intentional. I wanted readers to be presented with a rather blunt depiction without the moderation of self-conscious explanations. To accomplish this goal, the narrative is carried by Benji. This strategy was meant for both readers and myself, as the writer, to encourage the distance necessary to examine Anna and her actions in as unbiased a manner as possible.

Whenever I've attempted to write about familial depictions, relationships, or memory, a natural link to farm life appears. This is reflected both in my literary influences and within my own work. Growing up around horses, competing extensively in equestrian sports, and cultivating a passion for equine companions has consistently driven my reading and writing towards equestrian and rurally based texts and has contributed to my formation as a writer. I've always thoroughly enjoyed stories about farm life and, for this reason, the *Little House Books*, among many others, have always been a favorite. Laura Ingalls Wilder certainly discusses her characters' own exploits, growth, and relationships as both she and her sisters age. However, Wilder also includes the prominent undercurrent of farm life, and the struggles concurrent within it, throughout the various installments of the series. In *The Long Winter*, for example, the whole plot is dependent upon a winter of unprecedented ferocity and the Ingalls' efforts to survive it. Even confined by the magnitude of the storm, the Ingalls still have to deal with the issues of how to feed their animals or where the spring's crop seed will come from (in addition to the more pressing matter of survival itself). The family's survival and reliance upon each other is certainly a focus, but so, too, are their lives as farmers. For comparable reasons, I

also really enjoyed Monty Roberts' *Shy Boy: The Horse That Came in from the Wild*. Roberts discusses, especially in the memoir's early sections, his family members (his abusive, alcoholic father) and their influence upon him (defying his father to protect various horses). The focus switches slightly to his growing up on a horse farm in the Midwest, and the consequences of having a special fondness for horses in a family where they are seen as little more than meat. This subtlety of setting and its influence upon characters in both Wilder and Roberts' texts are aspects I've been particularly interested in and have frequently emulated in my own work.

I have typically set my pieces on farms. To an extent this has been due to, as Gilbert Blythe of *Anne of Avonlea* advised, "writ[ing] what you know." I was proud of the distinction being a farmer instilled in me, and I wanted to convey the beauty of that lifestyle through my writing. However, preference aside, the predominant reason for this choice is the grounding effects it inspires in my characters. Both Kim and Anna experience internal self-doubt or conflict within their relationships, and I wanted a setting to counter the upheaval in their lives. I tried utilizing a rural setting to exude foundational strength in response to that turmoil and to also explain why the women in both of my stories struggle with change. The rural setting in both stories serves as a reminder of each character's ties to her family homestead. Kim acknowledges in "Chasing Kathleen," for instance, that "Equestrian careers aren't transportable" (25). Any other choice for Kim would mean effective abandonment of the farm. There is finality in this choice because, one way or another, Kim believes that she cannot remain home and also pursue other passions. Anna is similarly conflicted, wanting to remain on the farm and further the family tradition of

horsemanship. A rural setting ultimately emphasized a foundation for both characters; it presented an additional source of inner conflict as loyalty and tradition became linked with farm life. Consequently, each felt tied to their respective farms.

In a similar vein, I often strive to present animals as literary characters. Not necessarily on the same scale as *Black Beauty* (though Anna Sewell was a major contributor to my equestrian literary interests) with its personification of horses, but certainly in the style of Walter Farley and Marguerite Henry. Their novels illustrate the lives of actual horses and the people closely bonded to them. Farley's *Man o' War* and Henry's *Black Gold*, both creative nonfiction texts, relate the lives of famous racing horses and the people they touched. A life revolving around horses, even if horses themselves are not prominently featured, has permeated my writing. There is certainly a dominance of children's and young adult literature in my influences, but I'd say that is entirely appropriate. I started writing when I was ten, and by age fourteen I was a freshman in college. While my literary selections have absolutely advanced, my literary beginnings and continued preferences have their initial foundations from those early texts. I credit my frequent incorporation of both horses and farm life throughout my current body of work due largely to personal experience, but also to the influence of reading so many children's and young adult texts in addition to more contemporary memoirs and short stories.

A lack of confrontation amongst human characters has also appeared with my prevailing depictions of animal characters, due primarily to my early admittance into college. My first few years of collegiate study were a time of isolation. I kept up easily with my new peers, but the advancement also somewhat distanced me from

friends my own age. My accelerated academic pursuits made people I'd known my whole life overly impressed with my accomplishments, and the attention made me uncomfortable. In contrast, I felt like I needed to hide my age in college because it made me stick out too much. I didn't regret my decision to attend college early, but I was well aware of being socially distant as a result. I'd always been shy and reserved, far more comfortable around animals—horses—than I was around people my own age. My abrupt transition to college, and resulting isolation, made me feel only more reliant on non-human companionship. That preference, so prevalent in my own life, is a struggle that many of my characters also face. Anna of “Anna’s Dog” and Kim of “Chasing Kathleen” both dread and avoid confrontation or explanation of their internal turmoil as they are far more comfortable relying instead on animal companionship for understanding. I’ve always had trouble forcing my characters to interact with their human counterparts, leaving tension understated or unstated. Confrontation always seemed unnatural and overly dramatic to me, so that my aversion seemed like a natural precaution. My time at Brockport has taught me, among other things, that tension is necessary for molding essays and short stories into something actually worth reading. When I began my revision process for my thesis, I had to rework confrontation into both stories because tension was understated or too internalized. While I enjoyed showing the relevance and power of animal/human relationships, I’ve also learned not to shy away from depicting confrontation where it is called for.

Developing my thesis selections has been one of the more challenging academic trials of my life. Both stories, through fiction, speak to different struggles,

events, or people that have shaped my identity. It has also, as much of my work, displayed uncomfortable truths about myself that left me more vulnerable than I care to be. The process actually reminded me of the summer I was thirteen. My younger sister Amanda and I had been asked to volunteer at our church's Bible school summer program by trailering our ponies to the recreational grounds and giving pony rides. I was delighted as the kids at our church generally knew who I was and that my family owned a farm, but this was a chance to prove it. The thought of being separated so dramatically from my peers excited me. I was enormously proud of how being a farm girl made me unique.

The night before we were set to volunteer, I leaned over the rail of my bunk bed to talk with my sister. I asked her if she wanted to wear overalls and boots with me the next day to show our farm girl roots. She'd rolled over, looked at me dubiously, and announced that she "Wouldn't be caught dead in overalls. Everyone already knows we have a farm, we don't need to look like it too." Her disdain surprised me. I'd always considered my farm life intrinsically linked my family life and, accordingly, wrapped it up into who I was as a person. I imagined my thesis in a similar light. I have been so determined about "proving" who I am through my writing, that I somehow envisioned being perpetually met with my sister's disdain and deflating skepticism. Half the battle of my collegiate career was to lose the defensive tone, excessive explanations, and extensive backgrounds that bogged down my pieces, while still remaining faithful to the family history, memories, and events I wanted to depict.

Chasing Kathleen

“I would like more sisters, that the taking out of one would not leave such stillness.” – Emily Dickinson

I wonder how my sister always looks lovely, even in black. Kathleen’s back from her latest funeral, wearing a silky, knee-length dress. There’s a silver cross around her neck, falling delicately at the curve of her breast bone. I can’t replicate this look, and I haven’t managed to pull off a dress since Kathleen’s First Communion party.

I am sitting at our kitchen table in a flannel shirt, dark jeans, and thermal socks, watching as she slips out of black heels. She’s a cantor at our church, which means she sings for all special occasions. We only ever manage passing conversation and generally just about the funerals.

“Who died?” I ask, wrenching my tangled curls into a rough knot as she shrugs off her coat.

“Sixty-five, grandmother.” Kathleen responds like clockwork, hardly glancing up. “She had so many grandkids, she must have started young.” She disappears into the fridge, searching for her last Slimfast. Her dark hair peeks out above the door, swept into a simple up do.

I realize, staring at her discarded stilettos, that I can’t remember when she started to wear fancy dresses, make-up, or strappy heels. I’m twenty now, and Kathleen is just a year my junior. Mom used to say we looked like twins. We are just a year apart with the same dark hair, dark eyes, full lips, bronzed skin. Kathleen is more petite than I am, more feminine. I hulk above her broad-shouldered, thickly

muscled, and masculine. She's the stream-lined version, classy: an Audrey Hepburn. I'm the Katherine.

She pauses, her eyes flicker toward my damp jeans. Her nose wrinkles.

"Honestly Kimmy, did you have to bring the barn inside?"

I shift uncomfortably under her scrutiny. Kathleen makes a hundred bucks in one hour; I make just about minimum wage. I've always wanted to run our farm ever since I can remember. But Kathleen just seems to float along, in and out of the house, perpetually humming the notes to a different song. I don't answer the accusation, and, without pausing to acknowledge my silence, she moves off in swirl of silk and music. I cross my arms over my chest, the collar of my flannel shirt itchy as I finish my tea.

Sometimes my memories seem all one-sided, like she doesn't recall chucking manure at me during long days of mucking stalls, or jumping into our half-frozen pond on the first day of spring. There are so many things I want to tell her, just to see if she still understands.



I've always had this dream. I'm standing beside a horse, a champion's necklace of roses draped over his neck. My uniform changes. Sometimes I'm in the bright silks of a jockey, sometimes in the crisp, black blazer of a hunter jumper eventer, sometimes in a baseball cap and polo monogrammed with the name of my stable in bright, white thread. The horse is the only thing that remains a constant, standing silently, loyally, by my side. I'd hoped the vagaries of this fantasy would solidify with age because, naturally, you're supposed to pinpoint what you want to be

when you grow up. The problem is that they haven't really. The last fantasy, by elimination, seems to be the strongest. This, too, is fading now, because Kathleen is leaving. After so many years daydreaming together, she's wrapped up somehow in my fantasies. I feel like they'll crumble when she goes.

We have three older brothers. The age gap is fairly significant between us, so it's always felt like it's just me and Kathleen. Kevin's the oldest. He used to be Dad's biggest help around the farm but now he's off at university in California. Joseph, next, is stationed out in Alaska with the Coast Guard. Jacob is training to be a pilot.

I grew up riding hunter jumpers and Kathleen barrel racing ponies. For a few years, my draft cross and her Argentinean pony ran circles around our competition at local fairs. We were a team. All year long we'd work, do school, and lesson with our horses. Summertime would arrive with a blast of heat radiating from the stainless steel sides of our horse trailer—a whirlwind of county fairs.

Kathleen found out she could sing when she was twelve. She never took it seriously until her pony died. I was sixteen; she was fifteen. I was just learning how to drive our trailer and I wasn't home when her pony colicked from dehydration in the mid-summer heat. The mare was under a blue tarp by the time I got back. Kathleen was watching movies in our parents' room with puffy eyes, an empty box of tissues, and a lock of chestnut mane. She tried for a little while to ride our other horses, but my parents didn't have the money to buy her a new one of her own. One passion overtook the other and, after a while, she didn't ride again. Everything we had in common has been vanishing ever since.

Once, I caught her throwing out all her old ribbons: the tri-color champions, the blue and red first and seconds, two trophies, and a photocopy of the first cash prize she ever won. I wanted to rescue them from the dumpster, but I only pulled the largest ribbon from state fair—one with a picture of us on the back, hugging as we pushed our trophies in the air.

Despite the fact that our family has always had a horse farm, my brothers lost interest once they grew up till only Kathleen and I were left. Now Kathleen is leaving, really leaving. She's graduating and leaving for a music school in New York City.

Then it'll just be me.

I run what's left, the few retired horses, the empty barns, the remaining tilled hay fields, holding on to a past only I seem to care for.



The house is oddly quiet. Dad is gone every week for about four days, and Mom has gone south for a while to help take care of Grandma, who is ill. Winter is coming. Kathleen knows because Mary Kay Cosmetics released their winter colors: navy blues, hazelnuts, and ivy gardens. I know because I threw on an extra sweatshirt under my barn coat as I flew out the door today. It only takes me about five minutes to get ready in the mornings. I run a quick brush through my dark hair, brush my teeth, and pull on some jeans and boots. I still resent the breeding barn's schedule; we start feeding at 5:30 am.

I started working for Scott, our neighbor who runs a Thoroughbred breeding farm, just a few weeks ago. I consider it an internship of sorts. Despite the fact that

I've grown up around horses, I don't have much practical knowledge of what it takes to make a career out of them. When Scott asked if I wanted to earn some extra money as a stablehand, I eagerly agreed.

There are three barns: two smaller ones to house the stallions, and a larger one for the mares at the bottom of a long hill. The mares' barn is shaped like a big 'T' and has nearly fifty stalls making up the interior. My new job consists of mucking those stalls out on weekends and helping to do feedings during the week.

"You go to school here, don't you?" Colleen asks from two stalls down. She is a sun-crisped woman with smudged glasses and muck boots stretching to her knees. Her disheveled blonde hair is perpetually swept up into a loose ponytail and she has some sort of Dutch accent—gentler than German. She would be the senior stablehand if we had titles. I'm mostly an assistant. I think she enjoys my company and I hope she appreciates my help.

"At the community college, I'm studying History."

"Didn't want to go far?"

The corner of my mouth twitches and the question, however innocent, stings. I speak slowly, contemplating my defense. "Dad can only run the farm part-time; he works in the city for a construction company." I chuck manure into my wheelbarrow. The toss comes with more force than necessary and the manure splatters. "It's what I always wanted. I want to keep the farm going, maybe invest in some equipment, give a few lessons, take on some boarders—nothing wildly successful. I just want to be around horses, you know?"

Mucking stalls involves a full body beat down; one arm is responsible for heaving your pitchfork while the other directs. After about three stalls the movements feel robotic, preordained, and rigid. I cock my head, stretching my neck.

Colleen doesn't comment besides giving a grunt of acknowledgement.

"We have some horses, grow our own hay. I guess I'd like to inherit the house, the land, all that." This response, well-practiced, comes easily. Colleen probably means no harm, but I can feel her question in my mind. It's one that's been posed to me before, and it always sounds like "*why did you get left behind?*"

"Your family... what do they think?"

"I'm the only one in line." I half-heartedly chuckle. I wait for appreciation, some signal that she understands. There is a longing, a fierce desire to always be around the land and to never forget the feeling of something breathing beneath you. Instead I hear a few heavy thuds and Colleen whispering to someone. I poke my head out and look down the aisle.

"Colleen? Are you ok?"

She curses. I don't understand her words, but I can pick out the anger. She's in Copper Penny's stall, a friendly chestnut yearling. Scott doesn't name any of the babies until they are old enough to break. For now Copper just adopts her mother's name.

I squeeze out of my stall and jog down to Colleen's, peering inside. Copper is backed up against a wall, nostrils quivering as Colleen stretches out her hand. "She hurt her leg last week. I told Scott this, but he hasn't called out a vet." Copper won't put any weight on her left front and it's angled awkwardly past her knee. She shakes

her head again as she presses her fingers to Copper's neck, quieting the filly's anxiousness.

"What will happen to her?" I ask, still observing from outside.

"If it's broken or the tendon's strained, she's too young to heal. And she'll be worthless if she can't run." Copper still hasn't relaxed, but her ears flicker in Colleen's direction, listening. I blink, slowly comprehending.

"So Scott won't do anything?" I think back to any injury my horses have ever had. Even the ones who died had a vet by their sides until the end. I stayed with them until they stopped moving.

Colleen shrugs. "It's too expensive and being on the track is a hard life." She pats the filly's neck one more time, then slips out and slides the door closed. "Such a shame really; her mama was a fine racer."



I clomp inside, my hair damp with snow and sweat as I peel off layers of warmth from my overheated body. Of course the snow came early this year, just days after Thanksgiving—a holiday which none of our brothers made it home for.

Kathleen's reading a magazine with a chocolate Slimfast in one hand. She looks up as I slouch into a chair by the pellet stove in the kitchen. "Rough day at work?"

I nod, catching my breath. "It's hard to do stalls with all the snow. Pushing that wheelbarrow sucks and leading the horses out is even worse. With the snow drifts, it was up to my hips in some places."

She snorts. “I couldn’t do it.” I wince. It’s as if she never shared that life with me, as if it were so far removed that she doesn’t even remember. She sips from the aluminum can. “Well, you’ll have great looking arms come summer at least.”

I want to ask her if she remembers trail-riding, something we did nearly every day in summer. We explored every inch of land within a six mile radius until the horses memorized our tried and true routes. We’d shove our hands rigidly in the air, lacing our reins around the pommels of our saddles, and seeing how long the horses would plod along on the path until they realized they weren’t being given any direction.

I get up to make some hot chocolate. Without all my layers the dampness has started to chill. For a while all I can hear are the flames crackling and I peer over at her. Kathleen is staring at me, hands resting in her lap.

“Why don’t you tutor or something? You get good grades don’t you? It’d be easier.”

I’m already irritated and her comment chafes. “I just don’t want to teach right now.”

“Then why did you major in History?”

This question makes me pause. There was this time Dad took us down to Gettysburg because he was a Civil War buff. We trailered our ponies down to a campsite and rode around the battlefield until it got dark. We slept in the back of our van when the rain soaked our tents. When we galloped through misty fields in the early morning, past shadowy monuments and old wooden battlements, I’d felt like I could inhale the magnitude of the place, reliving its tragic past. It sparked massive

research in the war, and others in American history, so it felt like a completely natural interest to pursue in college. Now the reasons seem fuzzy, passion blurred by practicality. Why, for instance, do I even go to school at all if I never want to leave the farm?

I sit by the fire again, closing my eyes as the steamy liquid burns in my throat. It's the longest conversation we've had in a while, and I struggle to think of something else to say. I want to tell her about Copper's impending doom. I can't help but wonder though, if I mention hooves, strained tendons, or treatment methods, will I have to define everything? Would I have to lecture her on terms of horsemanship as if she had never spent days alongside me in our barn?

I wonder if she could even garner up a sympathetic glance for the filly. When I don't respond, Kathleen shrugs and leaves. She's been preparing to leave for a while now, but I hate that it already feels like she's gone.



January marks the beginning of the birthing season. There are about thirty pregnant mares on the farm, each of them due one after. The foals sell for thousands before they are even broke to ride. I've never seen a horse give birth, and I try to get up as early as my body will allow on the off chance that I might get to see one.

Rumba Numba is due first. I arrive a little earlier than Colleen that morning. She's usually here by now to start feeding, but there isn't anyone around when I slide open the barn door and the lights are off. I take lengthened strides to reach the mare's stall, peeking inside over the stall door. In the hazy light she seems oddly smaller than yesterday. Without the barn lights on, the stalls are dark with faint morning beams

streaking from the windows high up in the walls. Dust swirls around her, shadows playing on the light.

It's awfully quiet too, but there's no baby anywhere beside her. She stands alone with her head lowered and her eyes drooping. I frown, studying her mellow form before turning and starting to work. By the time Colleen arrives, I've finished feeding and started my first stall. She walks in just as I empty my first wheelbarrow.

It looks odd there, lying in old tire tracks and frozen manure. I don't know what to think of it actually; mostly because I don't really know how to describe a dead foal. If someone asks you what a horse looks like, you generally start with their color, their size, their personality. But dead horses, dead *foals* are just that, dead.

It looks sort of bay, a darkish brown color with black legs, mane, and tail. Its coat lacks the glossy softness of a newborn foal, instead grey and dull. He, she—I'm not really sure—is too thin and small, like someone poked him and his muscles deflated.

I jump when Colleen comes up behind me and nearly fall headfirst over my tipped wheelbarrow into the manure pile. "She came out too early, got stuck." She pulls me up by the scruff of my jacket. "So sad."

I don't want it to stay there, lying alone in the frozen filth. "Will Scott bury it?" I ask, unable to turn away.

She considers this, her glasses fogging as she breathes. "If he has time; he's sleeping now. We were up all night with her." She points to his tractor parked behind the manure pile. "It's a lot of work putting something so small in the ground when it's

frozen like this.” She slips back inside, muttering and pulling carrots out of her pockets for Rumba.

Colleen is so brusque; it unnerves me. I’ve only done two stalls, but I know I can’t come back out here to dump manure seeing this. Nauseously, I grab the nearest pitchfork from inside. I wish I had something to say, something to let it know I would remember it. I shovel steaming manure onto the emaciated body until the tire rut is filled and the foal disappears from sight.

“Will Rumba be okay?” I ask, shoving my wheelbarrow into the next stall and then joining Colleen at the mare’s door. She has an organic carrot in an outstretched hand; she likes to spoil the horses with little pleasures. Rumba doesn’t move, doesn’t even acknowledge our presence. I can see a feeble trickle of blood seeping down between her back legs to the floor.

“She had a long night.” Colleen gingerly pockets the carrot with a sigh. “She tried very hard, but she’ll forget in a few days. They always do.” She crosses her arms over the stall door. “They’ll breed her again and then next year she’ll have some new baby to think about.”

Her matter of fact tone continues to startle me. I want to say something, but what? The mare has lost that brilliant shine to her chestnut fur that accompanies pregnancy. She seems matted and dull, mutely alive. It feels worthless. The foal didn’t have a name, nothing to mark its passing—like it had never been. I shove my hands deep into my pockets as I retreat back to the other stalls.



I'm more sore than usual by the time I make it home. My barn chores stretch to an agonizing length. Jeb, my old show horse named for a Confederate Calvary general, is nearly twenty and has arthritis. We still trail ride, but don't jump anymore as it puts too much strain on his legs.

Kathleen never got another pony after hers died four years ago. Our parents didn't have the money when she was interested. Then, when they did, she didn't seem to care. Now her life is wrapped entirely around her music. When she isn't practicing, she's tinkering on our piano, taking music lessons, or singing for this recital and that funeral. Gaining early admittance to Julliard is the highlight of her life, and she'll leave for a preparatory program in June.

I've never told her, but I always wanted to attend Bowdoin College in Maine. It was the school of General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, my favorite Civil War commander, both before the war, as a professor, and after, as the president. The history of the campus overcomes every building down to the last stone. There are monuments erected by the class of 1865, 1888, 1919. Several classrooms have historical plaques, delineating Chamberlain's activities there (he is, to this day, the college's most honored faculty member).

But I am not brave, like Kathleen, and I chose a local school instead. I can study history in either location, but I know it isn't the same. That's the thing about horses; they tie you to the land. Equestrian careers aren't transportable. Even though Maine is only nine hours away, it might as well be nine lifetimes. The thought of waking up alone, far from the white fenced paddocks and aging red barns of home, makes bile rise in my throat.

The water spigot freezes in the barn sometimes, like tonight, and I have to haul water in five-gallon buckets out of the basement. Jeb has four other companions: a miniature pony Kathleen and I used to ride and three of my Dad's old driving horses—now retired. I wish they were more appreciative. Jeb looks disdainfully at me through soft, dark eyes as I dump the bucket into the trough in his field, huffing. Billy, the pony, trots over eagerly—quite forgetting his advanced age in anticipation of dinner. Jeb stares as I crunch towards him, slipping in the snow. I rub his shoulder and watch his breath curl on the evening air. He nibbles at the zipper of my jacket, an old, familiar trick. With a rush of affection I hug him, burying my face in his neck, relieved when he doesn't move away.

When you're in the horse business, it's to breed, train, or ride. If I were honest, I'd admit that I'm not sure I can truly succeed in any of those options. I know there is a disconnect. I can't have both—remain tied to this place and pursue histories I've only ever read about. I can't decide which urge is stronger.



There are two more births by Saturday, one live and one dead. The dead foal looks flawless, too, when I bury it in the manure heap. It might have been sleeping. The live one I miss by minutes. The tally is still so uneven, death overwhelming a place where I had expected life. I turn to Colleen when she appears at my side, angry that I've missed this chance. I clench my fists as I watch the foal stumble about his mother.

“You should have called me when it started happening,” I snap, snatching my pitchfork. Colleen studies me carefully over the rim of her glasses. “Do you really want to be here when something goes wrong?”



The ground is so hard that I can skip from ridge to ridge of frozen mud in the paddocks. My feet catch on the edge of hoofprints petrified in the soil. The ashen trees lining the fences twist to a dull, grey sky. I pull my knees tighter to my chest and sink deeper beneath the quilt around my shoulders. I'm in our dining room, hidden away in a corner against the window. There's a fire blazing across the room from me and the accompanying heat leadens my eyes. I press my forehead to the coolness of the window and let my warmth steam the glass.

Kathleen is upstairs, packing. She's not leaving for months yet but the decision of what to bring is a daily struggle. She's just so happy, which I can't fault her for. Julliard is a prestigious school and, despite the fact we've never really spoken about it, I feel like she'll fit in just fine. She sings; her voice trickles down the stairs.

I peer through our lace curtains, watching the snow fall. I always feel tired lately, hardly energized enough to do the little homework I do have. I still find immense beauty here. The rusting farm equipment, dusty saddles, plowed fields hibernating under layers of snow, hay seeds hoping for a breath of spring. I wish I could remind her how warm horses are when you mount them bareback, or how smooth their tongues are when they lick your bare arms in summertime—hoping for salt.

I wish she would show me she still remembers the pleasure we used to find in the life she now avoids. When I told her once that I would wait everyone out and try to inherit the farm when she and the boys were all gone, she laughed. “I don’t think you’ll have much competition.”

Although true, this stung. I never want to leave. I want to be invisible here, just me, the horses, and the land. It seems so straightforward when I’m on my own like this, buried under blankets and hugged into denim and flannel. This is what I want. There is a tightness in my chest as I recite this affirmation. I won’t allow myself to equivocate it to doubt, but I bite hard on my bottom lip until it bleeds.

Sometimes I forget this rift, her jests and disdain. I remember, with painful clarity, that once she wanted to go to school in Texas so she could compete in the rodeos. Her keeping me awake as I braided Jeb’s mane before a show, helping me polish my saddle and show boots for rigid, elegant riding, teasing me because she only had to wear sequined shirts and black leather chaps for her barrel racing shows.

Lately, I wish I could forget how keenly I feel the loss of that nearness. I close my eyes. I bristle as I listen to her sing, notes whisking through the silence which otherwise pervades the house. I haven’t listened in a while. I fidget, the old oak floors creaking beneath me. I used to be so proud when this whole thing first started. I’d cheer in the front rows during her recitals. She’s gifted. I used to anticipate the day when she’d shine.

I remember curling up beside her on the couch, re-watching footage Dad dutifully took during our competitions. Laughing at how the judges mispronounced

our names, dropping ice cubes down each other's shirts, displaying hands dyed black from sweating in leather riding gloves.

I sigh; steam shoots up the window.



I am halfway through feeding, nearly a week later, as I reach Gypsy's stall. I let the grain bucket dangle from my fingers as I study the empty stall. "Colleen, did you let Gypsy out?" I call down the aisle. She appears in an oversized woolen sweater, red-nosed. Her thin legs are concealed beneath layers of denim and knee-high muck boots.

"She had her baby last night, but the little guy didn't make it. He got stuck and was killing poor Gypsy. Scott had to take him out in pieces."

My hands stiffen around the handle. "Pieces?" I repeat weakly.

"Yah. Sad part is, they couldn't even save her. She died anyway from blood loss and internal damage." Colleen leans against the door, shaking her head.

"But why are so many dying?" I ask, too stunned to look away from the empty stall. "Is this... *normal*?"

Colleen shrugs. "There are over twenty mares here who birth from January till April. It might be the weather or something they've eaten, but it's the reality of this business. No one expects every foal to be born alive."

Scott mounts wipe-off boards to each stall door. It usually says the horse's name, medical information, any dietary restrictions they may have. Gypsy's is wiped clean. I step inside, glancing around. Colleen has already mucked it out.

I don't know what I am expecting, blood stains on the walls maybe. Gore staining the earth, the bedding. There is nothing.



I can hear Kathleen down the hall, her voice drifts. She must be on the phone or maybe watching a movie. I don't understand how she is always laughing. She creeps into everyone, so confident and lively. She's always been like that. Our first job together was at the old Jensen stable, before Mr. Jensen died and his widow sold the farm. I was twelve, she eleven. I brought her along for company, but I stood behind her when we introduced ourselves and asked for a job. Mr. Jensen hired us together. Kathleen's curls stood out on end then, a polka-dotted headband making a small dent in the dome. I had the same dark curls but always pulled them into tight braids.

She makes me jump when she walks up behind me. "Homework?"

I nod, staring dejectedly at the pages before me. All the words blur together. I rub my eyes with my thumb and index finger. I can feel her studying my face.

She peers into the fridge and, after a moment's indecision, closes it in defeat. "You look tired."

I want to tell her about the foals, about Gypsy. I've always considered myself to be sort of, well, tough. I'm so much thicker, broader, than Kathleen, I used to brag about the muscles lining my arms. I liked the distinction of being so much stronger that she was. I wanted a purpose to my bulk; it was one of the reasons being around horses felt so natural and necessary. It is a life that demands strength, something I have an abundance of. But I'm shaken by the foals, how it can be natural for so much

death? Does it get easier? It must, surely, if you were to make a lifelong career out of it. The thought of dead foals becoming commonplace makes me feel sick.

I'm not sure how to explain that to Kathleen though. Admitting my doubts, the horror of the life I've always wanted, tastes too much like defeat. I think I want her to listen with rapt attention, to nod sympathetically. The last time I tried to talk to her about horses, mentioning some exercise we used to drill our mounts, she stared at me as if she had never practiced for hours or compared strategies. I feel fragile, naked.

"I don't know how you do it," she says. I'm surprised when she continues to talk to me, leaning on the doorframe. "Pushing wheelbarrows in the snow, getting up so early, and just about every day?" She shakes her head.

My hand aches from gripping my pencil so hard. I stare at her. "Don't do that."

She looks surprised by my tone. "What?"

"Don't pretend like you never did it too. Like we never used to get up at 5am to work together, or break the ice off of water buckets in winter." I'm standing now, facing her rigidly across the table. "Don't pretend like you don't know what I'm talking about."

Kathleen stares. "I'm not pretending. I remember."

I wait, resentment chilling me. I want to blame her; dump our estrangement for giving up everything we had in common. We were going to have our own barn, K&K Stables. I want just one glimpse, a hint that she remembers the dreams we used to share.

“So I don’t like horses anymore, so what?” she continues, getting her footing. “It was a long time ago; it’s not the end of the world.”

There is a silence and I sit back down, dejected.

She clears her throat. “Anyway, I have a recital on Friday. Want to come? The parents are away and—“

“No,” I snap. “I’m working.” I focus on reading the lines before me even though I don’t comprehend any of the words.

She tries one more time. “Kimmy, what happened?”

I study my sister’s face. She really is beautiful with her slender figure, wild dark ringlets, and large brown eyes. I attempt to formulate a response. She is trying. I owe her, at least, to meet that effort. “We’ve had a rough start. Nobody thinks anything’s wrong; I guess stuff like this happens all the time. But, it can’t—I mean, it *shouldn’t*...” I falter. Fear of her response, of disinterest or lack of sympathy, chokes me. I’m not sure I can reveal how badly the foal’s deaths have shaken me. This is what I want, isn’t it? What I’ve chosen? What does it say if I admit that I never want to see another dead foal again in my life? What does it mean if I never want to step foot on Scott’s property ever again?

Kathleen waits, looks at me expectantly. “What shouldn’t?”

“The foals, they keep dying.” I panic. It can’t be typical, can it?

“Is that unusual?” she asks. There’s a gleam in her eyes, an eagerness which surprises me. I wonder, for the first time, if she’s missed me too. I’m temporarily speechless, and after too long a pause, Kathleen reads this as defeat. She looks away,

disappointed, and turns down the hall. I know I should call after, beg her to come back. I'm a coward, and I don't say anything at all.



My body moves sluggishly the next morning like a deadweight. I try to shake the heaviness from my limbs, swinging my arms in between chores. Feeding and turnout go smoothly though the leaden feeling has, apparently, now infected my brain. My head starts to ache. I'm breathing heavily by the time I start doing stalls at Scott's. After the first two I heave the wheelbarrow out to the manure pile. It takes me a moment, but I freeze and stare upon recognition. A small hoof sticks out from beneath the muck.

There is a rising tide of nausea in my throat and I lean on the handles to catch my breath. A dreary February sun beats down on my back through the thick grey haze above. I can't remember the last time we had blue skies. It doesn't pass. I stumble back into the barn, whisper apologies to Colleen, and drive home. I feel overheated, not the usual gradual warmth after a morning at the barn. I peel off damp layers of clothing and stretch out on the floor, pressing my cheek to the cool, wooden boards.

I'm asleep within minutes.



There are lights flashing outside my window. They cast an orange glow on the floor, which I observe hazily, until I spy the back end of a police cruiser and then I'm sharply awake. Shivering as I push myself off the floor and pull on boots, I stagger from my bedroom and run to the back door where I can hear persistent knocking.

“I’m sorry to wake you,” he says. I oddly appreciate this apology at four in the morning. “Are you missing any horses?”

“Missing?” I repeat slowly.

“We got a call about some loose horses wandering in the road. You’re the first farm on this street and we’re checking up on all of them.”

Kathleen is suddenly at my side, breathless. “We’ll look,” she says loudly. An oversized sweater hangs from her shoulders. The officer nods, says he’ll keep an eye out as he makes his rounds.

My mind is still foggy, a bit achy. I wonder if I’m catching something. Kathleen is thrusting a jacket at me, pulling muck boots on over her leggings. She grabs my arm, pulling me after her towards the paddocks. Everything is still, swallowed by darkness. What little light there is spills from the house and highlights patches of snow.

We have three paddocks, each about an acre. The biggest one stretches all the way to the back of our property. I usually let the five of them out in this large one, because it’s like a playground. It has a little thicket, a stream, and plenty of grass in the summer. But it also means that, in order for us to figure out if any of them are loose, we have to walk around the entire perimeter, checking for broken boards or tell-tale hoof prints on the wrong side of the fence. We clamber over the nearest portion of fencing and start walking.

“You know,” I say groggily, “I don’t think I fed them tonight.” All my senses feel clogged and unreceptive. I want so badly to be in bed and even the cold isn’t waking me up.

“I’m sure they’ll survive one night without you,” Kathleen insists. She is ahead of me by a few paces, peering into the darkness. She points. “There are Dad’s horses.”

“Jeb will hate me,” I mumble. “I promised him an apple.” I half-stumble over a pile of frozen poop and Kathleen takes my arm.

“Are you going to make me find your decrepit geezer and that stupid pony all by myself?”

I shake my head. The motion makes it ache and I moan. “Jeb’s over there, by the trees.” My giant is curled up, his whiskers brushing the snow. He pricks his ears our way when we thud past, but he isn’t curious enough to get up.

“Are you sick?” she asks, stopping to look back over her shoulder at me and frowning.

I don’t answer and we trudge on a bit farther.

“This is why I never want horses.” She rubs her thighs, wishing warmth into the thin layers of clothing.

“You used to.”

“So? You wanted to dye your hair blue and I’m not bent out of shape about it still being brown.”

I’m freezing now, too, and my hand jerks to my mouth as I feel acid in my throat. Kathleen hears me gag and stops. “You’re sick. Totally sick. We should let that little shit get eaten by a coyote and just go inside.”

I wave her away, swallowing down chunks of something and gasping for breath. I try to spit the flavor out of my mouth. “Just don’t pretend like you never wanted to or never did.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” she begins in response. “I’m going to give you some advice. You’re stuck in the past, Kimmy. People change you know, when they grow up. I changed. What’s waiting for you here—have you asked yourself that? You’re always insisting that this is what you want to do, how you want to live. But you’re running a retirement farm. There’s no future for you in that, you’re trying too hard to hold onto something that’s already gone. What were you expecting, exactly? That I’ll give up New York and stay here with you? It won’t happen.”

I want to reply because I’m dully aware that I should be angry. Instead, I stop and turn away to throw up in a steaming pile. The sound startles the driving horses, one starting from his sleepy pose. Their heads swivel to look at us, ears forward. Kathleen takes my arm, pulls it over her neck, and drags me back towards the house.

In a daze I see Billy, lying out flat by the gate in a pile of hay. As we pass, he lifts his head to examine us, lowers it again, and drifts back to sleep.



My head still hurts. I have cloudy memories of crashing into the bathroom, throwing up into the toilet, and then passing out again on the cool, polished floors of my bedroom. The sun is much too bright, especially for winter, and the light streams in cheerily to form a golden pool on the boards before me. I blink and spy Kathleen hovering with a bottle of Pepto-Bismol. She squats, looking penitent—sheepish even—and dangles a little cup with thick pink fluid before me. “I called Mom; she’s

still at Grandma's and isn't coming home for another couple weeks. She said you probably have a stomach bug. It's been going around."

I think I'm supposed to be mad at her, but the details are vague. I slowly prop myself up wordlessly on one elbow to accept the cup, gulping it down.

"It's only supposed to last twenty-four hours."

I sit up, shakily pull myself into bed, and drown myself in quilts. "Thank God."

Kathleen is quiet, which is different for her. Even when we're not talking to each other she's chirping about something. She's always taking up room with her voice: talking, singing, laughing. I know Kathleen is so excited to start her new life that it overwhelms her. I suspect that's why she is always making noise. She's alive with her passion, with an eagerness to chase what's she's always wanted. I can't remember the last time I felt such enthusiasm for anything. It is something I hide from, because the realization is cutting.

"You never get sick," she says.

"I know." I want to fade and wake up tomorrow without slimy leftovers coating my teeth. "It's been a rough winter."

"So you've said."

With my eyes closed tightly, I assume that she'd move on after playing nurse. I feel her sink onto the bed beside me.

"I'm sorry for tearing into you yesterday. I just get so *angry*. I know you're mad at me for leaving and that we're not close anymore. But whenever I try to talk about it, you close up on me."

She's right; I've probably always known that. Kathleen is moving on and I'm stuck. If I move forward in either direction, I'll have to give up one dream or the other. I'm not sure I'm ready to make that decision. I hate her a little for chasing after something that will further divide us. It isn't just that she is leaving me behind; I know I can make new dreams without her. It's the fact that she's leaving and is so happy about it. I'm jealous because she knows exactly what she wants out of life, and that makes me doubt everything.

"I know," I say simply. "I've never liked change."

I remember her curls streaming out the back of her helmet. A t-shirt snapping against her bronzed stomach as she whipped around barrels on a chestnut blur. I remember hugging her when she dismounted, cheering when she raised the tri-color champion ribbon. Sweat dripping down sun-dusted shoulders and reddened cheeks. Leather and horses swirl in a whirlwind of memories.

"You want to talk about it?" she asks, hesitating. "I feel like I haven't been around, with you, much."

"Not really." I breathe, burrowing deeper into my quilt. I want to be asleep. I still feel her beside me and I pause. "Maybe when my twenty-four hours are up."

She waits for a moment longer and then stands. I peer out at her as she heads for the door. "Thanks," I say and she turns to look back at me. "For the Pepto."

She smiles again. With her hair loose and slightly tousled, still wearing damp leggings from a few hours before, I almost recognize her.



Stormy's Got Game delivered a chestnut filly on March 23rd at 5:03am; I missed it by twenty-seven minutes on my first day back at work. I didn't mind. She's the tiniest little thing I've ever seen; a little round ball of fur on four too-long spindly legs. She's still damp, standing in the middle of her stall with legs splayed and eyes closed.

"It took her just a few minutes to get to standing." Colleen smiles as she feeds Stormy some carrots. "I think she's afraid she won't be able to get back up again. So she stands there until she falls asleep and then—" Colleen points as the filly begins to sway, jerking awake before she tumbles sideways into a heap of hay.

"She's beautiful."

"It's hard, sometimes," she says. "Very hard work, very hard life." Colleen points as Stormy sinks to the floor beside her brand new baby. She chews hay lazily from her new position, her lips brushing the stall floor. "But when it goes right, I can't imagine missing it." There's a pleasant quiet between us as we watch the filly, and it is enough. She's asleep within minutes beneath the glowing warmth from a heat lamp.

Anna's Dog

I was seven and stupid. I'd left the hose running in the horses' trough all night long. When I went out to the barn to do my chores the next morning, the fields were flooded and the mud grasped at the horses' legs, threatening to pull them under. Because we lived so far outside of town, we had our own spring. After hours running free, the water wouldn't turn on in the barn at all and the faucets inside were sputtering dryly. I'd walked into the mudroom, pale, nauseous, and nearly blind in despair. I didn't even have a good reason for my forgetfulness. I'd been reading a good book and had wanted to get back to it.

The problem was that I was supposed to be getting a pony of my own, my first one. She was a palomino with golden fur and a white mane and tail. I was going to call her Bree. My sister Anna, who was eleven, already had a horse: a great, bay gelding because she was already so tall. We came from generations of horse people: competitors, breeders, and trainers. I was next, assuming I could show I was responsible enough. This stupid mistake would be it, the thing that would ruin my chances for good. As I slogged inside, chucking off one boot and then the other, Anna appeared. Her dark hair was in disarray, piled in a messy bun.

"Benji, I was trying to take a shower but there's no..." She paused to look at me, studying my pale face. Her eyes drifted to my muddy boots, an anomaly for late July as we were in the middle of a drought. "You left the water on, didn't you?"

I nodded miserably, hunching, as fat tears welled up in my eyes. Anna opened her mouth to say something, reaching for my boots, when Dad trudged into the room

from the kitchen. As he caught a glimpse of us standing there, my muddy boots in Anna's hands, the worry creasing his forehead extended to a deep frown.

"There's no water," he said after a moment, looking into our faces. "The two of you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

I was speechless in horror, imagining myself as the first Barton in generations to grow up without a pony of her own. I could feel myself shriveling, struggling for breath, when Anna side-stepped in front of me.

"Benji was just doing chores, and I guess I left the water on last night. It was my fault."

Dad studied the boots again; his eyes flickered over Anna's shoulders to me. "Your fault," he repeated.

Anna nodded. "It was a good thing she was out there so early, or else it could have been on for hours still, I'm sorry Daddy." Sugar curled on her tongue when she said 'Daddy.' It was a name she reserved for when she begged. "It won't happen again."

I was too stunned to do or say anything and Dad's gaze drifted eventually from my face to Anna's. "That's going to cost us, Anna. Our well can't handle the waste. You need to be more careful."

Anna nodded vigorously.

"I'll need some help dredging the mud from the well until it refills, maybe help it flow better. You'll help me with that. And Benji," he said. He looked down at me again. "Thank you." He ran a hand through his dark hair, the same color as Anna's. "Can you follow me out?" This last request was for Anna and she moved for

her boots in reply. As soon as he went out the door she slipped them on quickly, her fingers flying over the laces.

“You *can't*,” I whispered urgently, “it was my—“

She shook her head. “You want that pony, don't you? And I want you at the fair with me in September.”

“But—“

“No buts. Don't do it again though.” She grinned at me. “Besides, I'm not nearly in as much trouble as you would have been.”

Before I could argue she ran out after our father, boots crunching on the gravel driveway.



Anna was my leader, and she even gave me a sidekick nickname: Benji. This, she told me, was because I was small, loyal, with golden brown hair, and—mostly—because Bernadette was a mouthful.

Anna is a mirror image of our father. She has his broad shoulders, dark curling hair and green, Irish eyes. She's the son he never had out of several daughters he did: Anna, Bernadette, Ciara, Demarest, and Eva. She would dutifully offer assistance when the roof needed patching, post holes digging, or horses shoeing. Anna took his side in everything.

I didn't notice so much when we were younger and obedience came easily. Eventually, her hesitant responses marked advice I did not want to hear. She might listen, nod sympathetically, but then explain Dad's reasoning. There came a time when we, girls, grew old enough to have secrets and to keep them. We no longer

invited her to midnight excursions on the roof, or revealed the location of secret tattoos. We failed to mention first, stolen, or sweet kisses. We decided against confessing to misplacing our father's tools, mother's earrings, or emergency money from the kitchen drawer. Anna was not a snitch, but we recognized the sternness that crept onto her chin, stretching her lips to thinness.

Out of everything—anything—they could have argued about, I never understood why Anna chose a dog.



It was early October. The leaves were beginning to turn and the forest surrounding our farm cascaded in the rich tones of apple pie and candy corn. It was an uncommonly cold and wet fall and that day we had seen the briefest, but most welcome, rays of sunshine. I had just turned sixteen. I might have once been Anna's most trusted confidant, but lately our age gap seemed only to widen. It shouldn't have unnerved me, then, when Anna called, long after any hope of my interference or advice, promising to bring home a surprise. She wasn't the sort for surprises. I'd felt faint stirrings of dread as she jostled her phone about and a sort of whining, inhaled yelping lingered in the background.

We already had a dog, Lucy, a black collie who was four, fiendishly energetic (tearing through screens after unsuspecting passers-by), and utterly devoted to the lot of us. But Anna hadn't ever really liked Lucy because, upon her arrival, her dog had died only months before.

That dog, Utah, had loved Anna. He'd slept beside her bed, followed her around the house, trotted alongside her horse on trail rides, and whined piteously

whenever she left. On a hazy day mid-summer, one of the horses he was chasing (as he was often inclined to do) kicked him full in the face. She cradled his stiff body in her arms for hours until Dad finally buried him under the lilac tree by the barn, wearing his collar around her wrist for months. Despite Anna's hope of inspiring similar loyalty, we all knew Lucy didn't have any favorites. She was *our* dog, not Anna's.

I'd gathered our sisters nervously into the kitchen, per Anna's request, waiting with Mom who stood by the sink rinsing dishes. Her dark hair was loosely swept back into a bun and she regarded me curiously. She leaned over, speaking low into my ear. "Do you know what it is?"

I fidgeted nervously with the drawstrings on my sweatshirt. "Anna didn't tell you?"

Mom shook her head.

It had been raining and Anna's cropped curls frizzed damply as she walked inside carrying a white Husky puppy, only a few months old, with black ruff lining his back and liquid caramel eyes. He was mostly quiet, looking about inquisitively while his small legs hung loosely from Anna's arms.

"He's cute," I offered, regarding him with a frown.

Anna beamed at me. She set him down and he began scampering around the kitchen. Mom stood frozen by the sink; her lips pressed into astonished silence.

I moved closer to her. "Did you ask the parents?" I asked quietly, subtly searching my older sister's face.

Her fingers danced against her thighs. “No,” she said, momentarily deflating. She watched as the puppy ran in elated circles around the younger girls.

I sighed.

“But we’d talked about getting another dog... for Lucy.”

I’m not sure exactly what I wanted to tell her then, admonish her perhaps, warn her. I felt uneasy. Anna hadn’t been the same after Utah died; she’d grown more introverted and distant. She laughed less often, avoiding social gatherings and throwing herself into the family business. This, combined with her inflamed sense of affinity with our father, meant that I hardly recognized her anymore. It was harder to see her as my sister and more like an extension of our father’s hand. This awkward addition to the family wouldn’t end well.

They wouldn’t let us keep him; Mom and Dad wouldn’t want anything to do with a puppy. He wasn’t even particularly charming. He nipped at fingers when anyone attempted to hold him, and bribes were the only thing that would quiet his incessant yelping. Eva, age four, fed him a steady string of puff cheese doodles.

Anna said we should pick names, the very last thing we needed, and several were suggested: Silvermist, Balto, Thor, Fluffy (this last one offered by Ciara, who was sulking because of recently nibbled fingers). Anna liked Luke.

This, Ciara didn’t appreciate because, “Dogs aren’t supposed to have people names.”

“They’re not supposed to have cat names either,” Dema countered.

Mom was suddenly on her knees next to Eva, coaxing the puppy into her arms. “Lucy is a person name,” she pointed out unhelpfully.

I wouldn't call our mother a pushover, but she didn't scold Anna or break the vote. "We'll have Dad decide," she said after a few minutes more of squabbling.

With the matter left unsettled, Anna made excuses about running to the pet store with him for some essentials. She swooped the puppy up and disappeared back outside to her car without another word.



He was called Luke, because Anna could occasionally be sneaky and called him that anyway, and because she was the only one he listened to. With more deviousness than I gave her credit for, she planned the eventual confrontation with Dad so that all the girls would be around. It was harder to say no with Eva's big eyes filling with tears or Dema's choked sobs. Despite their best intentions, even Mom and Ciara (the least enthusiastic) grew fond of him.

A few nights later, our father entered the house warily. He stood in the doorway, jacket folded over his arm, as Luke bounded between our legs beneath the dinner table. Anna rose and kissed him on the cheek.

"Welcome home, Daddy," she said, meeting his eyes pleadingly.

They were almost matched for height, and one of his eyebrows rose in skepticism. He peered again at the puppy and set his briefcase down. The rest of us waited in silence, forks poised over steaming porkchops and chilled, sweet applesauce.

"Huskies run. He'll be a runner," Dad warned, looking down at the dog who had enough sense to look cowed and quiet at this remark.

"Not if he's trained right," Anna responded firmly.

There was another tense moment, and then he looked at all of us waiting. Dad again met Anna's eyes. I wondered what passed between them. What did they barter, argue, or concede in the silence that followed? I'm not sure what I was hoping for. As far as I was concerned, the situation just felt wrong, and our father was not a man who typically yielded.

But he didn't demand anything, didn't scold her. He looked down, sighed, and shook his head. "Fine," he said, pointing a thick finger at Anna, "but he's *your* dog."

The younger girls clapped loudly, rising eagerly to greet him. Luke jumped on Anna's legs, biting at her jeans for something to eat. She swept him up into her arms, pressing her forehead to his until he nibbled on her nose.

I'd caught Dad's distinction though; Luke was not *our* dog, he was Anna's. A huge grin lit up her face and she looked across the table at me, jubilant. I sat silently, stunned by his uncharacteristic concession. I knew she wanted me to be happy for her, with her. She had unprecedentedly broken one of the rules: you always asked for Dad's permission, not his forgiveness. Anna had, unquestionably, always been Dad's favorite. Their relationship was a two way street. She always took his side and he never denied her anything. So why now, why over this, was I so agitated?

Anna had never been made the exception to the rule. She followed our father's orders as if they were the word of God, and she'd worked her whole life to instill that same respect in us. Shouldn't I have been commending her for pioneering her way into Dad's heart? But as I watched her, breathless and ecstatic, I couldn't figure out why she seemed as unreachable to me as she ever had before.



Winter came with stiff winds and abrupt storms. The mud froze in ridges in the fields and the horses grew thick winter coats even under their heavy turnout blankets. It took Luke some time, but as the cold set in, he became endlessly endearing and generally obedient to Anna's sharp commands. She took him out every morning around the farm—a three mile walk if you stuck to the borders. Lucy would trot along ahead of her, plowing her own deep paths through the snow drifts. Luke tried to follow in the older dog's footprints and, when he fell behind, bounded from step to step in Anna's.

He came only when she called and barked stubbornly at us if we attempted. He enjoyed snippets of bologna, belly rubs, and sleeping beneath the pellet stove in the kitchen, singeing the top of his head brown when he got too big for this napping place and didn't realize it. His body lengthened, growing too fast for his weight to keep up with and leaving him long and lanky. He looked boney and underfed, despite Anna's best efforts. When the snow melted, he slept beneath the hedges lining our driveway during the afternoons and swam in the pond beyond our barns, remaining within the boundaries of our fields.



That spring, Luke started bolting.

He had been playing with Dema, who Anna blamed after because she was rather soft-spoken, running in circles with a decapitated Barbie. He froze abruptly, plastic limbs dangling helplessly from his mouth. He looked out over the fields, stretching on for acres and acres until they ended at the tree line.

“Luke? Luuuukkey?” Dema called hesitantly. She waved another potential toy to try and get his attention. And he was gone, just like that. He dropped the doll, took off running, and didn’t so much as look back as Dema screamed uselessly after him.

She ran inside, sobbing guiltily, and Anna was out the door in an instant. She came back an hour later in her black, battered pick-up with Luke on the seat beside her. His usually immaculate fur was coated with slick, black mud. He panted, exuberant, wincing only when she yelled or slammed doors for emphasis.

She hosed him down outside with cold water. While he shivered, she lectured him sternly that he was never to run away again. In the end, he had the grace to curl into a shamed ball in the mudroom, hiding beneath a rack of shoes.



Anna tried her hardest to correct the bolting in the months which followed, experiencing varying shades of success. If she ran after him fast enough, calling his name, she could usually persuade him to turn around and come back to her. Then, slowly, usually became sometimes and sometimes became rarely. She started tying him up on a long runner, where he barked his incessant high-pitched yelps all day long.

I was hunched over Algebra homework one night when someone rapped at my bedroom door. Without turning from my desk, I shouted my assent and it creaked open. I froze, whirling around, when I recognized the husky sharpness of Anna clearing her throat.

Anna’s jeans were splattered with dark stains, a mixture of mud and grass. She had a streak of dirt across one cheek and her cropped hair was shoved up in the

front, the victim of an exasperated hand. “Can I talk to you for a minute?” she asked. She fiddled with her hands, twisting one thumb around a belt loop. She seemed to fill my bedroom as she took a step inside and then hesitated.

“Sure,” I answered uneasily.

She sank down, cross-legged, on the floor before me. I lowered myself into my chair again—embarrassed, awkward. Anna didn’t seek me out very often, let alone appear in my bedroom. Even though all her free time was spent on the farm, I still felt like I hardly saw anything of her.

“So...” I started, unsure of what to say or what to make of her visit. “What happened?”

Anna chewed her lip, her eyes skittering about as she studied each knick-knack and picture as if she had never seen it before. Her gaze lingered on a photo on my dresser. It was of the two of us at a county fair. Toothy grins stretched across our faces as we both held up blue ribbons.

“Anna?”

She turned to me and I was startled to see her eyes watering. The thought of my sister crying filled me with rising panic. “I just—he won’t stay, won’t listen, won’t stop barking.” Her hand curled into a fist. “He’s miserable, I’m miserable. I don’t want that for him and I don’t know what to do.” She swiped angrily at her eyes with the heel of her hand.

She looked so pathetic, so defeated, as she looked up at me from the floor in scuffed, dirty clothes and with tears threatening to spill over onto her cheeks. A small part of me knew this conversation had only happened because she was desperate; I

ignored it. Rebuffing my sister now would be like kicking an injured puppy. “Are you asking for my advice?” I asked gently. I was supposed to be her sidekick, follow her around. But it felt so long since anything of the sort had occurred between us and we were rusty.

“I just thought... I *assumed* that he’d always listen to me,” she said. “But once he gets into his head there’s no stopping him.”

“Why don’t you try a training collar, or an obedience class? He’s young yet and it probably isn’t too late. I know it would cost money but maybe—“

“No,” she interrupted, “that’s perfect.” Anna’s eyes lit up and she launched to her feet. She was so intent on this new hope that she bolted out into the hall. She thundered back after a moment, poked her head through the door, met my eyes, and smiled. “Thanks Benji, I mean it.”

I waved her on and she disappeared. Honestly, I hoped something would work.

It didn’t.



Apparently Luke was terrified of both other dogs and the obedience class instructor. He spent his first few classes being forced into the car, crying for the whole drive, and trembling violently during the whole class period. Anna tried Plan B.

The electric collar was brightly colored neon orange, with a black box attached to it and some evil looking prongs which pressed firmly against Luke’s neck. It had three settings: vibration, beeping, and shock which could be adjusted for

greater intensity. I watched the first morning she tried it, sitting on the porch outside my bedroom window while Anna took Luke out on a leash. She gave him simple commands at first, rewarding compliance with treats and disobedience with first the beeping, and then the lowest shock vibration. He was obedient and responsive while still attached to the leash.

Anna turned to me, sun blazing behind her, highlighting her hair and framing her proud smile. She gave me a thumbs-up. “I think this might work!” she called from several paces away.

I waved back, hand freezing in mid-air when she started to detach the leash. I cupped my hands around my mouth. “You should probably wait—“

Anna didn’t even look up. The snap of the leash detaching reverberated like a gunshot, and Luke pranced a delighted circle around Anna. He sat once upon her command for a treat and then tore off over the fields. Anna followed him, growling his name. She pointed the remote for the collar, fingers turning the dial to crank up the intensity of the collar. I stood helplessly, hands on hips, watching as she sprinted after him.

She spent the rest of the day seated on one of the hills of our farm, staring at the light on the remote blink; a sign that Luke could feel the collar and yet still ignored it.



Luke came home the next day splattered lightly with blood. We lived in a rural area, surrounded on all sides by dense forest and undulating farms. I’d just come home from school and watched, standing in the driveway, as Anna dragged him

gruffly past me. We thought it might be his at first, but upon further inspection we could find no signs of injury.

“Do you think he killed something?” I asked nervously, studying Luke and picturing him tearing into animal flesh.

Anna didn’t reply and quickly snuck Luke off to the closest spigot. She hosed him off until his white fur gleamed innocently again.

The neighbors started calling a few weeks later when they’d spotted him chowing down on the side of the road, his face drenched with blood. He looked wild, dangerous even, though we all knew one sharp word would have him cowering in a corner. He was getting bigger now, twice Lucy’s size, with a broadening chest and his gangly body thickening.

Anna cleaned him up discreetly, yet again, and we’d just sat down for dinner of steak and creamy mashed potatoes. We ate through a murmur of trivial conversation. Eva picked listlessly at the steak cubes on her plate, Mom asked Ciara and Dema about school. Dad remained silent. When I looked up every so often, his gaze was fixed solidly on Anna who, aware of the attention, was carefully, purposefully, trimming the fat off of her steak.

Dad cleared his throat, a sure sign he wanted to discuss something uncomfortable. “So, the Edetos called.”

Beside me, I felt Anna stiffen. Ciara and Dema looked up from their plates, sensing blood in the water. Anna narrowed her eyes.

“They’re worried Luke might take down one of their horses.”

Anna snorted indignantly, tapping the butt of her knife against the table in agitation.

“Do you think that’s funny?” There was something icy in his tone, something hard. He had reprimanded Anna about Luke a few times, grumbled about the dog’s bad behavior, but they hadn’t had an actual argument as far as I knew. Not about Luke, not about anything really. Anna didn’t get into trouble and she never broke the rules.

“He’s not a mountain lion,” Anna snapped, cutting savagely into the meat. “He wouldn’t hurt anybody.”

“Wouldn’t hurt...” Dad clenched the handle of his steak knife. Mom, who had been staring like the rest of us, placed a steadying hand on his arm. He lowered his voice. “Anna, he comes home with *organs*.” We stopped eating as the heat in their exchange became more discernible. “He wouldn’t hurt a person, maybe, but he’s developing natural instincts. You can’t just switch those off.”

Anna raised her chin. “Most of the time they’re already dead. He might get a squirrel or two... but it’s not like he’s bringing down deer, and he’d never manage anything as big as a horse.”

“Joe—” Mom warned in a tone usually reserved for us. Dad plowed ahead, abandoning all pretenses of eating now. He looked hard into my sister’s face. “That’s comforting, really. That dog is dangerous; he’ll get us in a whole world of trouble.”

“He wouldn’t hurt anyone,” she insisted. She threw her silverware to the table and folded her arms over her chest.

“He’s a risk to this family—he doesn’t need to take down a horse. If he goes after Mrs. Duffy’s cats we might have a lawsuit on her hands.”

“Mrs. Duffy is senile.”

“Mrs. Duffy was the wife of the mayor before he passed away. Senile or no, she knows her way around this town.”

“What are you saying, exactly? That I need to hire a lawyer?”

I found myself resisting the urge to slide away from her.

“He’s *my* dog, remember? I’ll take the blame, I’ll train him right.” This time, her words wavered slightly.

“He is your dog, but he’s *our* problem. You can’t keep a Husky from running,” Dad said, repeating the mantra we’d heard ever since she’d brought Luke home. “He’s got a taste for hunting now.” This was a quieter statement colored with exasperation. “Anna, he can’t stay.”

Anna shook her head, unhearing. “I made a commitment to taking him in. I’m not going to give up on him, just for one mistake.”

“This isn’t just one mistake. You can’t control him.”

There was a pause and my sister trembled, in rage or fear I couldn’t tell. She took a long breath and blew out of her nose. The table groaned under the weight of the argument.

“He won’t do it again. I promise.” Anna was calm now, but I could hear the pleading in her voice. It was yet another thing that surprised me, an impassioned case for Luke remaining here.

This was it, that moment when I knew Dad would finally say something. I wasn't sure why I was suddenly so breathless, so eager for what I knew was coming. Dad wasn't going to let these offenses slide, just like he hadn't for any of us. When he answered her though, it wasn't with a command to send Luke away.

“This can't happen again.”

Anna was silent in turn. “It won't,” she responded softly.



I sullenly followed Anna up to her room after dinner. She paced the floor of her bedroom; it was a deep green and the walls covered with posters. Her dreams seemed askew. Some of her posters were faded, plastered over more recent photos of her competing—her horse perpetually frozen over fences, eyes undistinguishable from under the rim of her helmet. Faded silk ribbons lined one wall, but Anna hadn't competed in a few years.

There was an empty section of the string holding up her most recent ribbons where the bare wall peeked through. She had gotten interrupted. I wondered if she had wanted, or even tried, to resume that life again. It only occurred to me then, through simmering resentment, that I was learning something else about my sister. She was unhappy.

“A mountain lion, *please*. There's a difference between taking down a full-grown horse and munching on some roadkill.”

Her grumbling reminded me of my irritation. “If Mrs. Duffy ever sued us—“

“That's a little paranoid don't you think? She's called about her cats before without threatening legal action.”

She wasn't hearing me. "Dad's right you know. Wishing won't stop Luke from hunting."

Anna stopped pacing, looking for all the world like I'd just speared her through the heart. "Are you agreeing with him?" she asked incredulously, staring.

The sudden attention was jarring. Some part of me wanted to backpedal, but the greater part was roiling. "I'm saying he has a point, Luke is a hunter by nature. Wanting him to stop isn't going to make him."

"I'll train him—"

"*Right*," I mimicked. "You've been saying that for a while now."

She shook her head. "There has to be something else we can try, maybe a stronger collar or an invisible fence—"

"Jake Sanderson," I snapped suddenly, interrupting.

Anna blinked, off-guard. "Who?"

"The boy who asked me out last year, Jake Sanderson. He kissed me outside my window." Anna wasn't following so I stood. "When I asked Dad, because heaven forbid we break any rules, you told him Jake Sanderson was no good and too old."

Anna frowned. "He was too old for you; he was eighteen."

"He liked me."

"Benji, he rufied a girl at prom."

"Allegedly. But you had to say something, and instead he went out with Jen Taylor."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Are you complaining about *not* being rufied?"

“I’m complaining because you didn’t take my side. You took Dad’s, like you always do.”

Anna shook her head in disbelief. “I was looking out for you.”

“I have parents to look out for me. I wanted my *sister*. I wanted someone on my side. I couldn’t tell you about that kiss because I was afraid you’d tell Dad. And I couldn’t complain about it because you were the one backing him up. It doesn’t feel so great, does it, when someone sides with him against you?”

Anna pressed a hand to her forehead, then swiveled it in my direction. “So what are you angry about, exactly? Me looking out for you? For sticking up for Luke? Are you jealous of a *dog*?”

“I can count on one hand the number of times you’ve stuck up for me. How many times you’ve sworn by the rules like they were the Ten Commandments, instead of being someone I could talk to.” I leaned forward and looked up into her face, wishing Anna wasn’t still so much taller than me. “I’m angry because you find exceptions to the rules, when it suits you, and Dad just *gives* them to you.”

Anna took a step back. “You think you’re above me, that you need to take care of me. So yeah, I guess I am a little jealous. Because if you hadn’t taken on that stupid, *fucking* dog I’m not sure you would even know that I’m still alive.”

I was breathless, equally embarrassed and enraged by this outburst. Anna’s eyes were wide. She had no reply. She sucked in air like I’d punched her.

“Benji,” she started, but I shoved past her for the door.

“My name is *Bernadette*.” This declaration clogged my throat though, because no one ever called me that; my nickname was something Anna had given me. I didn’t wait to hear her reply and slammed the door hard behind me.



I didn’t speak to Anna for three weeks. I avoided her when she was home and made as much effort as I could to remain busy while Luke continued to terrorize our neighborhood. It happened a few weeks later, as summer started and school let out. At first I thought it might be snowing, which was impossible, since it was June. But I awoke to something white, or rather, a flurry of something white, floating lazily past my bedroom window. I slipped out of bed and poked my head outside. It was still early; the sun had only just risen and the grass was damp. We lived in a grand old estate house, with windows that stretched from the floor to the ceilings. You could step through my bedroom window, onto our porch, and into the yard. This was exactly what I did when I saw Anna standing barefoot in the grass.

I rubbed my eyes and, looking down, saw white puffs brushing my feet. Feathers? I looked again towards my older sister who stood frozen, staring down at her dog curled into a tight ball at the base of his favorite tree. There was a trail of feathers starting from the back fields and leading, in a wavering line, all the way to the dog. I stepped off the porch, moving around the feathers until I stood by her side.

I recognized the goose despite its being half devoured. The Edetos kept two of them, prize domestic geese, in a pen behind their house. This particular neighbor lived a good mile away in the forest that lined our barley fields. Luke had, evidently, dragged a thirty-pound goose through the woods to bring it home.

Still curled into a ball, he didn't even blink as we stood silently above him. The feathers were blowing away now, erasing the evidence. Anna sniffled, wiped the back of her hand across her face. Was she crying? I shifted beside her as feathers danced past my legs.

She reached for the goose's legs, holding it away from her at arm's length. She looked a little pale, green even, as if she were going to be sick. Her eyes met mine—wet and shining, cheeks reddened.

“Benji,” she said hoarsely, looking from me to the goose. “Can you keep a secret?”



Anna buried the goose while everyone else still slept. The trail of feathers blew away before they could arouse suspicion. She had trouble looking our father in the eye afterward. I wondered how, with any topic they might have argued over, it came down to a dog; a stupid, simple dog who didn't understand obedience, or boundaries, or loyalty. A dog, not even a particularly good dog, was what my sister had decided to stand by.



We woke one night, a few days later, to flashing lights in the driveway. Lucy roused us all with a vicious, biting bark that jerked us abruptly from sleep. Nobody had even noticed that Luke was gone. Anna and I followed Dad outside, waiting on the porch as a police officer coaxed Luke out from the back of his car. We were all bleary eyed and slightly stunned. Anna took Luke's collar as he shied away from the attention and led him inside.

He'd tried chasing Mrs. Duffy's cat into her barn and, blood thirsty or no, she'd called the police. I followed Anna inside while Dad spoke with the officer. She was sitting on the floor of the mudroom next to Luke, who stood panting beside her. She looked pale, stone-faced. Dad came in behind us and closed the door. Mom and the other girls lingered in the kitchen, curious about the noise but too late to investigate.

He paused before Anna wordlessly and she looked up at him.

"I'll do whatever you want," she said quietly, stroking Luke's fur made dusty from his excursions. "I'll abide by whatever decision you make."



She found a family surprisingly quickly to adopt him: a couple looking for a young Husky to train for sled racing. Luke was perfect. She packed up his bowls, collar, leash, and paperwork one day towards the end of summer and dropped him off at a new home. Mom and Dad commended her for seeing reason, for thinking of what was best for our family, for the depth of her sacrifice, for finding a home that would better suit Luke. It wasn't what Anna wanted to hear and she ignored these sentiments.

She went out to the hay fields after she dropped him off. There was a small hill that rose above the undulating rows, one we had climbed often enough as children. I knew she was there because it was somewhere she liked to hide and because Dad pointed out where she'd gone when I asked.

He looked at me appraisingly, gave me a big hug. “I don’t always like being right,” he told me, gazing out to where Anna had disappeared. “You tell her I still love her, and that I’m sorry.”

I half-smiled, pushed him away. “You tell her yourself.” I jogged out after her.

Lucy followed my steady progress, bounding through hay stalks that rose above her head. She was getting older, and if she noticed that Luke’s absence was different today she didn’t show any signs. Anna sat at the top of the hill, knees pulled up to her chest, looking out towards the house and the barns. I struggled through the brambles that circled the hill’s base and fell into a prickly heap beside her. She kept looking ahead, her eyes flickering toward Lucy frolicking in circles around us. I crossed my legs, picking burrs off my jeans.

“Dad says he loves you,” I offered eventually.

“I don’t blame him. It wasn’t his fault.” She sighed. “He was my dog. I just hate feeling like I gave up on him.”

Another long moment. I wondered how we had switched places, how I was defending our parents’ decision, trying to make Anna see reason. It made her seem more human somehow, recognizable. I fidgeted.

“I didn’t tell anyone about that goose.”

Anna looked at me, her green eyes large and damp. She blinked and pointed out towards the barley fields, the section of crop that was furthest from the house.

“I buried it out there.”

I frowned. “You walked a half-mile, with a half-eaten goose, to hide the evidence?”

She nodded miserably. Her lip trembled. I turned, pulling her to face mine, my hands gripping her arms.

“Anna, don’t you ever believe for a second you gave up on him. You were trying to protect that stupid dog. You even covered up his *murder*.”

Something like a strangled laugh escaped her and, tears trailing down her cheeks, she slapped a hand over her mouth to hold it in.

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