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A Family History

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A Family History

"You were the loveliest girl I ever knew."

In response to his letter, I wrote back in longhand on a yellow legal pad to tell him the loveliest girl he had ever known was killed on horseback during a training session last July. I had the inclination to write everything and so I started with the story of my mother's sister, age 8 in 1942, carried from the pasture to the house where she died 15 minutes later—a kick to the jaw, by which horse we never knew.

Our grandfather sold them all. It is easy to blame a horse. They aren't creatures of deep feeling as those of us who love them will tell you.

The spectacle of my own sister's death—a lightning bolt at the peak of one last jump, a fountain of dust shooting six feet into the air as she and the horse fell—was an act of completion, a vibrant indifference. She was, in an instant, transcendent and then abandoned.

It is troubling to know the horse is now fed and cared for by a young woman, offering in hand, stopping on her way from work or school, who believes the animal shows signs of grieving.

On the day our grandfather died, the horse he had purchased the spring before refused to let him ride. By afternoon he had fallen from the hay wagon, sudden and complete heart failure. Ahead of the rest of us, at dawn, his horse had accepted the departure.