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KATE PETERSEN

Denver by Morning

On the last day in June, had you been driving northbound on I-25, the piebald peaks of the Rockies flanking the horizon, you might have been diverted on the stretch just south of Denver. The cause: an early-morning, single-vehicle accident. If you got there before the detour was in place, you might have seen the six-horse gooseneck trailer flipped over in the drainage ditch, the cab of the truck so smashed in that it would be hard to believe when you heard later that the driver and passenger both walked away unscratched. Depending how soon after sunrise you passed that way, you might have seen two frantic women pulling at the door to the trailer, waiting for someone to come, or you might have seen the firefighters reaching into the mangled heap of metal with the jaws of life. You would have encountered a delay throughout the day, though later on, you might only have been able to see the row of uprooted guardrails leading to the scene, then a thick clot of highway patrol cars and camera crews and caution tape. Perhaps you would have called your wife, to say I'll be late, and lit up a cigarette to pass the time, tapping the ashes out the driver side window into the violently blue Colorado summer.

Had you been in Denver already, at a hotel near the horseshow grounds, or at home a mile-high above some theoretical sea, you might have flipped on the five o'clock news before meeting a friend in the hotel bar, or starting dinner, or feeding the dog. *And in local news, at 6:30 a.m. MST, a driver traveling North on I-25 hauling a six-horse trailer fell asleep at the wheel going 75 mph. Unable to regain control, she ran the vehicle off the road, hitting a light pole and flipping the gooseneck trailer 30 feet into the air, where it took out 172 guardrails before landing on its side. Five of the six horses died instantly.* If you had been watching certain channels, the reporter might have pointed out with journalistic irony that just two miles before she fell asleep at the wheel, the driver had passed up a brand new multi-million dollar state rest area, or that the wreck took place only seven miles from their destination, the horse park on the outskirts of Denver proper.

Another reporter might or might not have mentioned how much the five showhorses were worth, how the sixth probably wouldn't last the night, and how none of them belonged to the driver or her sole passenger. You might have flipped the TV off then, not wanting to see more, or perhaps you would have watched the video clips of the driver, a graying woman with sun-bruised skin and a smoke-stained voice. *I must have just fallen asleep, I don't know. I—*. Then footage of the one unlucky horse still alive, being dragged out by four men on her two working legs, wild-eyed with pain. You would wonder if that chestnut mare understood she was the only survivor. If she comprehended just how the humans she'd been trained to trust had let her down.

Had you been visiting family in a place a thousand miles away, Wisconsin maybe, or somewhere like it, packing your bag for the afternoon flight to Denver, you would have heard the phone ring. And this being your aunt's house, and not your own, you might have let the machine pick up. But when it did, the voice would be calling for you instead, pleading in a frantic whisper for you to pick up. And you would, hating the sound of your name, hating your life from here on out and all that you couldn't reverse. Hating what you half-knew before you even heard the words. *There has been an accident . . . almost to Denver . . . I'm so sorry.* You would never have heard your horse trainer cry before, though you had been to her wedding and with her to the funerals of old friends. The only tears you would remember were those silent ones that gathered in her eyes when you and your big-hearted bay gelding were called to the winner's circle last month. The long inelegant sobs over the line make you despise her voice and what it brings. You might have wanted to hang up on her, but would not.

Had you been at the wheel, you would have been glad to bail your friend out when he called, his rig broken down and temporarily stranded in Four Corners. You'd have doubled back from Denver to pick up his load of horses, going on your twelfth straight hour behind the wheel. When night fell, you might have glanced at the exit signs for Travelodge, Comfort Inn, then remembered that time you and your college roommate had driven two nights straight through from Vegas to Chicago, and smiling at the memory, you

would have driven on, eager to get back to Denver by morning. Riding the adrenaline of memory, your foot might have forgotten that it was not driving that '71 Dodge coupe, forgotten that a full gooseneck trailer and a quad cab handles much differently over 60 mph. That a human body handles exhaustion differently at 65 years than it does at 20. But had you been at the wheel, these facts would be lost in the dark empty on either side of the interstate, in the drowsiness you would fight off by turning up the static on the FM band.

Later, you might or might not have remembered the very last moment before your eyes closed, that soundless slipping from the sensory world, deceptively serene. But you would never forget anything after that split second: six lanes careening out from under your wheels, the pole crashing through the windshield. You would remember the sounds of tires skidding, blowing out, of six combined tons of trapped horses and metal scraping along asphalt for half a mile, the way your teeth rattled in your head as it banged against the roof of the cab. The sparks that the trailer threw up as it skidded across the highway reminding you of the snake firecrackers you used to light on country roads as a child in summertime. The taste of your tongue fat with blood.

Had you been sleeping in the gooseneck, in charge of watering the horses at rest stops and keeping them calm through the long drive, since horses are known for not sleeping on the road, you might have nodded off near the Arizona-Colorado border, or maybe before. You would have awoken to the metallic blow and braced yourself against the now skyward door as the trailer tripped over the guardrails like a roller coaster car loosed from its tracks. When the friction of aluminum on steel finally slowed the trailer down, you might have listened for the sounds of the horses, and hearing none, vomited in dry heaves. Or perhaps it would have been their screaming that woke you first—the terrified squalls of fleet-footed creatures unable to run or upright themselves, a sound so unfamiliar and frightening that it seems it could only be made by mythical beasts. A sound that has woken you every night since. You might have pried open the door and stumbled into the garish morning, momentarily paralyzed by the remorseless blue of summer sky in the Rockies. Perhaps you would have cried a little as you stepped between the still, cooling

bodies, blood-matted and bent at wrong angles, clipping tail hairs with an old pair of scissors to give to the riders who weren't nearby, who thank God wouldn't have to see their sleek showhorses fork-lifted like so much trash from the roadside, all that wasted grace. You would have had to be all their goodbyes. The only one to ever really know whether the horses died mercifully on impact, or whether they first suffered the terror, the shattering awareness of their own bodies breaking.

But had you been right there, in the innermost compartment pungent with the smell of timothy hay, where six horses were slant-hitched with rope halters, you would have felt the futility of flight: how the instinct to escape, fashioned by evolution into wings overlaid with a half-ton of muscle, is rendered useless by human carelessness, by crushed backs and severed tendons. Had you been there, you would have felt how fragile those wings really are, when flight has nowhere to go.

And had you been very near those beautiful brown bodies when the trailer rammed into the rail going 75, crumpled like an empty can, you would have learned a terrible secret of the horse: that the instinct to fly outlasts everything else, uncomprehending the weight of metal and the velocity of man's mistakes—even after the bones and lungs are broken, the cadence of escape beats on. You would have heard the caesura in the still-perfect stride, like hoofbeats cantering off a cliff. And then you would have felt that sudden absence of ground beneath you, of life, as if it were your own.