The Horse

Every recess he was there: a gray smudge where the eye came to rest, just over the hill, like a cloud, or a tractor. Not the kind of horse you’re expecting: nothing showy, nothing tall, just a sway-backed stallion with rheumy eyes and moldy hooves, a few flies flickering his sides. Still, the children talked about him. Looked for him after lunch, hearts hungry for some sort of news. One ear up meant a bad grade; two ears, a good one. Lying down and there’d be snow the next day. Not there, and we’d worry the whole half hour, double-checking the view. Some kids spoke of sneaking up to feed him. Some did, after school, and came back laughing about his laziness, his lazy eye. Suburban kids, who’d stand at the fence and shout move! A farm girl, I always said nothing. I knew Dylan would mutter over the muck on my boots, that Josh would crack my stutter like a whip. And I knew that I would leave, in time, as I always did, that I would never think of the horse again. And I didn’t. I don’t. Until this December, putting around, home again. A gray smudge on the hillside. How I ran through the grass, wool-sweatered, unsure, my adult heart beating faster than before. How he stood there, ugly as ever, like some sort of God. And how he came to me at last, the smell of apple sharp in the air, his breath a fog between us, brief and mortal.

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Make-up

My mother wore lipstick without fail. At 5 or 6, before the long trudge to the schoolhouse, its fluorescent hours and ratty workbooks, smelling of sick, she’d rub roses on her lips, and cream her appled cheeks, dust her forehead with pale powder, and slide a slim pearl through each ear, like a chime. Noon or night, she’d smell of Joy or Diorissimo, names that sounded like Italy, like wine dripped over stars, or snug villas, high on the hillside, for so I imagined Italy to be, from hours spent looking at books. Once a year, at a restaurant, we’d dress up like fine women in stories – Jane and Elizabeth, the March sisters – and order a special to share, then slip to the ladies’ room to freshen our lips with berry or plum. On Sundays, we’d trim our hair over the sink, black and brown, like one woman’s, and she’d say how she’d darkened with age so I still could grow up like her. I’d linger by the cabinet for hours, peering at names that told of other worlds – Ballet Shoes or Georgia Peach, Rose Rosé – things I never thought to have so close at hand, to gleam in my fingers, like a story. And in the hospital, that first time, I knew to bring tubes of buttery gloss, and hand creams, whipped with shea, pouches of lavender to sweeten the drawers. And I knew she was the most beautiful thing imaginable: my mother, creased after long pillowed days, wan in the hospital noon, reaching for her traveling bag, her bedside glasses, her flat, orange pills.

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