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## The Fat Filly

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## THE FAT FILLY

A horse can run on a broken leg. I've seen it myself, sitting in front of a fuzzy television screen that showed Ruffian breaking down in her famous *Great Match* with Foolish Pleasure on July 6, 1975.

For weeks my mother and I had been looking forward to watching the race between the two horses, the so-called *Fat Filly* and the winner of the Kentucky Derby that year, The Girl versus The Boy. There were buttons for sale at the grocery store of the mare's distinctive profile, and a general buzz of pure anticipation filling our shabby but clean rented apartment, a tiny oasis of sorts in Atlanta's summer heat.

And there she was on the television that day, winning. There she was with that remarkable stride until, a length ahead, both bones in her right foreleg gave out with a snap. There was the jockey, Jacinto Vasquez, doing everything he could to pull her up, to stop the catastrophe that was happening in her leg, the skin torn open now and blood spattering, ligaments snapping and the hoof flopping against the ground as she ran. She couldn't let herself lose. She tried to finish the race.

I was six years old. There were 50,000 people in the stands, a roaring sea of them, and 20 million people watching on TV. My mother was on the couch behind me and I was sitting Indian-style close to the television, so close that when I remember this moment, this is what I see: the sudden lurching of her gait, the jockey jolting upright in the irons and pulling the short reins back and back and my mother gasping *Oh my God* and the announcer shouting *Ruffian has broken down* again and again. I can still feel my eyes widening in terror.

My mother cried and I cried. We bought the commemorative magazines and watched the memorial shows and the Special Reports. We listened to the eleventh-hour calls for horseracing reform to protect the animals from this ever happening again, though it had been happening every day and everywhere and this time we all just happened to be looking when it did.

My mother never forgot it. She wasn't fond of children, but she did have a soft spot for animals. She wouldn't eat beef because she'd raised cows

for 4-H and said they were “like big dogs” to her. She named them as she raised them, and they came to her along the fence’s edge as she walked up the dirt drive from school, calling to them. Her father once butchered a cow she’d raised while she was at school, and when they sat down to dinner that evening, he took great delight in telling her she was eating it.

It was 1974 and my mother, newly married to my stepfather, was ready to start a new life. The first step was to move us to a newly built apartment complex in a rural area outside Atlanta, one of the many Nixon/Ford era manmade-lake communities that were cropping up. The area of farmland and old country houses was being developed as the city sprawled, so there were still pastures and barns just a short drive from the complex, many of them renting out stall space to the newcomers to country life.

I think there was something about horses that reminded my mother of both a good part of her poor farm upbringing and of the rich people she wanted to impress. So after a trip to a livestock auctioneer a few counties away, we had a stout brown and white horse in a barn outside of town.

A second horse soon followed, though I can’t recall whether that one was the bay or the buckskin. Windy, that was the buckskin’s name. Or was it Lady, the huge black horse that reared back and landed on my stepfather as I stood behind a tree at the paddock’s edge? It could have been the one with the hormone problem who never grew beyond a yearling’s size. Maybe the *donne*? The tallish gray?

There were so many of them. Most went lame, or we were told they would when the farrier came. We loaded them into the stable owner’s trailer and returned them to the auctioneer. The auctioneer was a huge, white-bearded man who wore a cowboy hat and had the air of a ringmaster, some Emperor of The Swayback Nags who showed off the cock-heeled, drowsy horses like used cars. When we brought our hobbled creatures back to him, he *tsked* and apologized, told my parents there was *a bad one in every batch*, and offered them a trade.

I was just a kid, and getting a new horse still was an exciting thing, a constant thrill on Christmas morning. Too young to ride and too small to work the barn, I spent the year or two of stable life mostly on my own in the hay bales, the oat storage, or the back pasture by the pond that froze hard enough to walk on in the winter months. I had my *Star Trek* and *Planet of the Apes* action figures, my Breyer's horses.

My mother and I had different ideas about things even then. She thought the way things were on television was the right way, the *only* way. We should all talk like newscasters with no Southern accent, cook the convenient ready-made meals in commercials, and look just like the people on the sitcoms she loved so much. She wanted a *normal* (one of her favorite words) life, a sitcom without the laugh track: a buffoonish husband who earned well, the good dog, the beautiful children.

We felt differently about a lot of things, like all those horses. After awhile, I started to get attached to them, and I noticed even then that she didn't. At first she'd fawn on the animals, show them off. Later, as we drove to the barn, I would begin to hear the indifference in her voice. Everything became *wrong* with them, and they were gone soon after that.

The constant unveiling of "the new horse" to the other people at the stable was also starting to feel strange. It was becoming a joke, and I felt the parade of new horses making them uneasy, these people who all managed to keep same, adored horses year after year.

One Christmas, one of the women made varnished clay tree ornaments for everyone in the barn that were painted to look like their horses, with careful attention to the correct colors and size and their names hand-stenciled across their sides. She gave my parents one that was painted like a patchwork quilt. Where the name should have been, there was a question mark.

Racehorses are notoriously hard to retrain. I learned this the hard way when I started volunteering at an equine rescue center here in Kentucky. You could tell the racers out in the pastures from the regular

horses because their spines were missing the usual curve, the vertebrae instead forming a high, straight line from the neck to their rear. They aren't used to other horses coming toward them so they do badly in a public barn, often anxious and unpredictable from being poorly socialized. They were sometimes aggressive and notoriously difficult for anyone but a professional to ride.

Sometimes the ex-racers dropped off at the shelter were so mean-spirited from a life spent running that they had to be put down. Others would be dropped off still in their monogrammed blankets, leather halters sporting their racing names on custom brass plates – *Mr. Lucky*, and *Atta Girl*.

“The one thing you need to know about taking care of horses,” one of the other volunteers told me as she trained me, “is that they're herd animals.” We were brushing out a group of newcomers, checking their hooves, giving them a “socialization check.”

I blinked. “Which means...?”

“It means if you spook 'em, they'll run before they do anything else,” she said. “So don't be in the way.”

Horses don't like to stand still – it's not what they're built for. Ones that can't equalize their body's weight on all four legs are prone to inflammation; sores on their hooves become fatal. So when a horse injures a leg, the rest required to heal it is nearly impossible. Often a horse confined in a stall will channel its instinct for movement into nervous “tap-dancing” that aggravates the break. Add to this the incredible expense of treatment, and it's something few owners even consider undertaking. They just have the animal destroyed instead.

Once while I was working at the center, I watched the volunteer equine vet evaluating a gorgeous chestnut Thoroughbred, its forelegs still wrapped with bright red tape from the morning's race. The vet bent the horse's left front fetlock and leg; the horse tossed its great head back, its irises rimmed with white crescents. His assistant then trotted the horse down the length of the barn so the vet could check its gait.

Two times, three. The vet crossed his arms, unmoving as he watched the horse's clearly hobbled gait.

"Nope," he said sadly, shaking his head, and they put the beautiful horse down the next day.

I couldn't help but think of Ruffian. When she woke from her three-hour surgery, she started running again, right there on the ground where they'd laid her on her side. They tried to hold her down as her thrashing legs destroyed the stall's wooden walls, the cast on her foreleg shattering her elbow so badly that one of the vets said the bones looked like a sheet of ice that had been dropped on concrete. There was nothing else to do. They buried her at Belmont with her nose facing the Finishing Line.

We moved north when I was nine. There were no stables in the city, so my mother now channeled her particular kind of love for animals she'd shown with horses into purebred dogs instead.

Purebred puppies, to be exact. This was in the time before it was frowned on for pet stores to sell them, so every mall had at least one shop with puppies tumbling over one another in the windows to draw the customer in. A trip to the mall would inevitably involve a tour through the pet store, my mother standing in front of the wall of cages with a childlike smile on her face.

The first puppy I remember was a sickly Bloodhound, Ali, that we kept for four days and then took back because it got diarrhea on the apartment's white carpet. A Brittany Spaniel was the replacement, but she was slow to take to housetraining. Then there was the Miniature Schnauzer and her litter of puppies. We kept one and got rid of both when the mother attacked the mailman. Then came the Scotties with their unstoppable tails, and the Wired Fox Terriers.

One by one they were deemed "too hyper" or "too stupid," "too destructive" or the catch-all "too hard to train." We got Cairn Terrier littermates for Christmas one year, my sister's given away for wetting on the rug and mine gone soon after. The gangly Irish Setter puppy was deemed

“too big” to keep. We bought Stormy, the German Shepherd puppy, from a police officer, only to take her back again. The Shih Tzus were given away for “yapping.” The English Springer Spaniel sold after putting her front feet up on the counter and knocking off a plate.

Two Basset Hound puppies arrived Christmas Day 1977. I pretended to be happy at the sight of the thumpy, clumsy, lovely little things, and then took my tri-color puppy upstairs. Knowing the dog’s days were numbered, I held her on the bed against my chest and cried.

Sure enough, both were gone in two months’ time: my mother gave away my sister’s puppy first again, this time for growling when she had food in her dish.

It wasn’t until I had dogs of my own, two Cavalier King Charles, that I realized why the puppies were exiled back to the shops or to the pound: they weren’t toys. They were dogs, and that was their sin.

It’s hard to tell how many doctors my mother took me to before I started to think she was looking for something wrong. She had taken diethylstilbesterol (DES) when she was pregnant with me in one of the last years before they realized it caused deformities, hormone issues, and cancer in the offspring of women who took it. As a result, my body staggered into a particularly unattractive puberty filled with “excessive” and “abnormal” everything.

Sometimes my mother would say to the doctor: “Can we talk privately?” and I’d be left in a hospital gown, bare legs dangling over the observation table as the two of them withdrew to his diploma-wreathed office. She came out looking sour and dissatisfied, we would leave, and I wouldn’t see that doctor again.

I was a tiny child -- bird-boned, pale, white-blond -- and very nearly underweight. A man could close his entire hand around my wrist and easily make a fist. But as puberty set in, I began to put on slabs of muscle like a gymnast: calves like inverted bowling pins and thick thighs. I excelled at the butterfly on the swim team, my waist thinning as my

shoulders widened. I was short and stocky and preferred short hair so that it wasn't hard to manage after swimming. Strangers started to confuse me as a boy.

"You were supposed to be so small," my mother lamented one day in the kitchen. "That's what the doctors said—that you'd always be pretty and thin."

The only thing that was true of those doctors' predictions was that while she and my sister made it to 5'8" and 5'9, respectively, I topped out at just barely 5'4". So her little white pixie had somehow become short and stocky and far too strong for a girl.

The light bulb went on for me at the last of the visits with the mysterious parade of blood-drawing doctors. This one was friendlier than the others. We spent more time talking without my mother there, and I made him laugh. He even let me keep my clothes on at the follow-up appointment for the blood tests' results, for which I was grateful and relieved. My mother sat there as he read off another litany of medical things, the word *normal* coming up again and again. Every time he said it, my mother shifted in her seat.

"Is there some other test you can give her?" she asked finally. I looked away.

"Maybe it would be helpful if you told me what you were looking for," the doctor said.

"I just think—" she lowered her voice as if someone in the hallway might overhear. "I think she has too many, I don't know, male hormones or something."

I could feel my face turning red.

"Mrs. Chapman," the doctor said, "There's nothing wrong with your daughter. She's *fine*, okay?"

They glared at each other.

*Oh.* It sunk into me. *She thinks I'm one of those "gays."*

I was, of course, though I didn't really know it then. And no doctor in the world was going to give her a Magic Pill to take that away.



When there was no medicine for *what ailed me*, my mother used her most potent weapon: shame. The muscle I put on could be controlled with less exercise and less to eat, with *more flattering clothes*, with nail polish and perms at salons with names like *The Look* and *Coco & Buffs*. She took me clothes shopping and asked me to pick out things I liked, usually jeans or sweaters or button-up shirts in earth tones, white, or black. These were discarded and I was offered rough approximations of what I'd chosen in brighter colors, cropped lengths, skirts, and more *feminine* cuts.

"You're going to be losing weight soon so I'm going to buy this in a smaller size," she'd say once I'd finally agreed to one or two of them. She'd say this in front of the saleswomen behind the counter, giving them a knowing look and inviting them to chime in. They would turn to me with their Vaseline smiles and beam.

"*Good for you* for losing weight!" one would inevitably say, and I'd take the bag and hope the earth opened up and consumed me.

My closet filled up with garish, girly clothes in their various sizes, always at least one size smaller than the one I was actually in. I wore a uniform to school that had to be purchased in the correct size, so I didn't notice my scant wardrobe too much. I'd started to avoid going out much anyway. Years later the price tags still hung off their arms and legs like toe tags in a morgue.

My mother found a willing partner in her campaign when I was twelve or thirteen. Dr. E. was a mannish woman who would stand in front of me where I sat on the edge of the examination table and tell me, over and over, that I was *overweight*. Vowing that it was time to *work on me*, my mother started taking me to biweekly weigh-ins with her new accomplice.

"You know we're finding people having heart attacks when they're thirty because they weighed what you weigh now," Dr. E. said once in her thick Spanish accent, using *fear of death* to scare me thin, and straight.

"You probably think you look fine the way you do," Dr. E. tried another day as I stepped off the scale. "But I'm here to tell you that you don't. What are you eating so much of anyway?"

“I like cereal,” I offered softly. My face was burning red again.

“Well, this isn’t just cereal.”

Finally, she reduced me to tears. She asked me why I was crying and I just shook my head and looked away, wiping my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt.

“Just get dressed,” she huffed and went out to get my mother. A minute later they disappeared into the office together, leaving me there.

“Well, thank you very much,” my mother hissed on the car ride home, slapping the turn signal hard as we neared the house. “Now she thinks you need to see a *psychiatrist*.”

One bitterly cold morning at the equine center soon after I’d turned 40, I worked under the stable’s yellow lights. The two barn cats were huddled on top of the water heater near where the donated halters and blankets hung suspended on their hooks. We’d had new arrivals the night before and I went down the rows to see which horses needed brushing or their hooves picked. Outside one stall, someone had taped a sign: *Blind*.

The horse was standing with her head facing the corner, a smallish, pied brown and white horse with a wild blaze down the middle of her face. I murmured to her (*Hey girl, hey*), her flank jumping as I laid my hand on her rump. I moved slowly, running my hand up her side as I neared her face. She turned her head toward the sound and her eyes, bluish white from the ghosts of cataracts, were uneasy as she sought me out.

When I touched her nose, she turned away from my hand and bumped the wall, jerking back. She bumped into me, startled again, and knocked into the wall. I shushed her until she went still, and then left the stall, something painful fluttering in my chest.

“There’s a blind horse down there,” I said to the barn manager in her freezing, cramped office at the stable’s end.

“Yeah, I know,” she said sadly. “Its companion horse died and the owners brought her in.” She went back to writing entries in the feeding log book.

“Companion horse?”

“Yeah, blind horses have to be raised with a companion,” she said. “It’s like the other horse becomes its eyes. They spend all their time together like that.”

“Can’t we find her another horse who can be a companion?” I felt the panic rise in my chest.

She didn’t look up from what she was doing. “No, they don’t work like that.”

I went back to the stall. Standing there, my hand on the horse’s wide blaze, I started going through everyone I knew in my mind, picking out anybody who had a horse or owned some land. I wondered how much it would be for me to pay for the blind horse to be stabled here or somewhere else, imagined myself coming every day to care for her. I would talk to her until she knew me and wouldn’t be afraid. She would come to the sound of my voice and I would walk her around the pastures and down the trails.

But I was in school then and could barely feed myself and my partner and both the dogs. And I didn’t really know how to care for a healthy horse, much less one that had an issue like this.

There in the stall, the blind horse bumped against me again, pulling her face back. She blinked, sniffing me, and turned away. I finished my shift, brushing out the racers who’d taken a roll in the mud before last night’s hard freeze. I didn’t go in to see the blind horse again, and when I walked out of the barn that afternoon, I never went back.

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*The Fat Filly* is what they called Ruffian before they knew the remarkable horse she would be. She was big for a yearling and as comfortable to sit on as a sofa, they said. She was undefeated in ten career starts, and most of them she won in record time and by record lengths.

I knew all that, but what I remember most about her was how

stunningly beautiful she was, how she bucked when she crossed the finish line and played all the way back to the stable after winning a race, how that lovely, dark head of hers was proudly on display on the wall of souvenir buttons for *The Great Match* in the grocery store check-out lane. I remember the sound my mother made as the creature broke down under the strain, how Ruffian's ankle was left flapping on a hinge of skin. The chestnut racer in his blanket. The blind horse and my dog when he shuddered his last breath on the couch one winter while I held him tight against my chest.