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Devon Taylor

There Is A Life

It all came apart so slowly. Every part was a necessary step in the dismantling. Even the first step, the day fifteen years before when Mom and Dad drove past the farm, sprawled out over acres grown wild with disuse. It was just months into their marriage and they were still drunk on the possibility of fresh starts and love that lasts forever—the evidence of their past mistakes asleep in the back seat, the evidence of their future ones asleep in her womb. They pulled to the side of Buddtown Road, stepped out of the car, the weeds high around their calves, and saw the ‘For Sale’ sign. That was the first pull in the fabric.

But how could they know? A new love begs to be challenged, to prove that it’s invincible. Go ahead, pour your money into this farm, your sweat and your hours. Peel paper off the walls of that old ruined farmhouse and hammer down nails in the floorboards. Fill these pastures with horses that need bales of hay and new shoes every month and expensive bridles and saddles.

I’ll pay the bills, you build this farm, my Dad might have said. And he would have meant it, would have loved the idea of Mom, her long blond hair pulled back in a pony tail, painting kitchen cabinets and hanging buckets in the barn. He in a suit, she in a pair of jeans. Mom was two years removed from a job teaching English to seventh graders, a job she despised, that she fled, along with her ex-husband. She’d spent a year hot-walking horses on the racetrack and teaching riding lessons at a local stable. As a lawyer, Dad made enough money to feel like it was a lot of money—enough money for both of us, he might have said. Go ahead, their love pushed, buy this farm.

And in those golden 1980s, the first decade of my childhood, it worked. She laid tile and he wrote legal briefs and they went to Friday night auctions and bought horses and ponies. They bred the mares and stayed up late when they foaled. They plunked riding helmets on the heads of my sisters, my brother, and me. She taught us to push our heels down in the stirrups when we rode, and he offered clueless, kind words like You look good up there or Our own little National Velvet. And they marveled at what they had created.
Our days were not stagnant, but marked with constant reminders of life. Foals born, ponies that bucked and galloped across the fields, mutts that trotted onto the farm and stayed, and litters upon litters of kittens. I was the lone product of both of my parents, my older brother and sisters from each of their first failed attempts. And in the way of the youngest, life had a permanence to it. I could look at everyone older than me and feel like the track never strayed far from the familiar. Life moved, but each day the movement felt simple and predictable. Dresden had a filly last night or We better get the horses in before it storms. It was safe and never-ending.

It’s easy to look back now and see the cracks. In lieu of a business model, my parents opted for we’ll figure it out later. They grew attached to horses they needed to sell, to horses’ owners that got behind on board. Dad’s nightly gin-and-tonic ritual stopped having the charm of those first couple of years where everything is funny, where everything is foreplay, where even the buzzy, uncoordinated groping of one-too-many is sexy. And Mom’s dreams grew beyond the four corners of our South Jersey farm to show circuits in Florida and Vermont, to the chance for us kids to really compete. Maybe it felt to him like she was seeing past him, past their life and marriage. And when she returned with us after a weekend away at a show and found him slumped at the kitchen table, drowning his sixth, perhaps it felt to her like there was no absence in her departure and no thrill in her return.

These things can go on for years. There’s comfort in anything if it becomes routine. I was a young girl then and the halcyon days of that first decade bled into my teenage years when I woke at night to my parents fighting downstairs and tiptoed through mornings when their stony silence filled the room. Over time, it, too, became simple and predictable.

If it wasn’t the drinking or the horses, it was the money that ultimately did them in. By the time I was fourteen, my parents were two mortgages deep and living on credit cards. There were too many horses, too many acres, too many dreams. My sisters were all grown and gone by then, my brother soon to follow. The farm stopped being a vehicle for my parents’
love, stopped being a place they could raise children and paint cabinets and grow together.

Cheryl was just an excuse for my Dad, a way out. Her kids took riding lessons and she was going through a rough patch with her husband—she approached Dad for legal advice and it wasn’t long before the affair started. Maybe he looked at her, a part-time cleaning lady, part-time bus driver, and saw someone who might not have dreams too big for him. But it didn’t matter what he saw; what mattered was what he didn’t, which was a life with us, with me, with Mom, with the farm. He moved across town with Cheryl two months shy of my fifteenth birthday.

Mom kept it up for a bit—tried to make a go at keeping the business, the horses, and the boarders. Maybe she realized it wasn’t the same without him there, without even the idea of him there—Dad who hadn’t set foot in the barn in months, if not years. Or maybe she just ran out of steam. The farm never gave back as much as it promised. After a few months she took up with a new boyfriend: a soft, kind electrician named Milt who lived a couple of miles away. A month after my fifteenth birthday, they were engaged. She quit teaching riding lessons and sold off almost everything—horses, equipment, the trailer. The horses that were left were a couple of ponies, a school horse, Elsa, an old broodmare, Dresden, and a handful of self-sufficient boarders.

Elsa and Dresden had lived in the back pasture for years. In her heyday broodmare years, Dresden was a gorgeous, albeit high-strung Thoroughbred with a rich, dark coat and ears that twitched. Elsa spent the better part of her years teaching little kids to ride. She was a wide, flat-backed Quarter Horse who embodied slow-and-steady—the mini-van to Dresden’s sports car. By the time they reached old age, Dresden’s sight was going, causing her even more anxiety, and Elsa was a cranky old bat. Set out to pasture together, the two were an unlikely pair, but they took to one another like a couple of widowed old ladies with no one else left in the world. In the back field, they ambled across the acres, or stood side by side with

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their noses stuck in the grass. In the hot summer months when the black flies swarmed, they would stand next to one another, facing in opposite directions, and swish flies off each other’s faces. After most of the horses were sold and the barn was empty, it made sense to bring them inside and give them their own stalls. But it was like separating a foal from her mother. Even in neighboring stalls, they neighed for one another and paced back and forth frantically. After a couple of days, we gave up and let them loose in the pasture again where they resumed their afternoon walks.

During the summer, when Dad was gone and Mom was off falling in love and who knows where my brother was, I moved through the barn and along the fence railings with the air of an empty-nester. The quiet never lost its pitch, never grew to feel simple and predictable. But if I perched on a post along the back field and watched Elsa and Dresden deep in a patch of summer clover, I could almost grasp that long-forgotten sense of permanence. With my back to the barn and the acres of empty pastures, I could imagine them full, that the barn hummed with the whoosh of hay pitched, the pounding of a blacksmith’s hammer, the clip of a cross-tie, the voices of pony kids and reluctant parents and the easy cadence of my mother at the center of it all.

No one else was there when Dresden hemorrhaged. I don’t recall many of the details—just that it was early on a July evening, an hour or two of light left in the day, and I was the only one home. I remember my mother was away that weekend, though I don’t know where, or why. I don’t know if I heard Dresden’s cries of distress or if I was filling up the water trough and saw it all happen. I do know that by the time Dr. Hanson arrived, the sun was all but gone, and he said there was nothing he could do, nothing that anyone could have done. Severe renal hemorrhage. That’s a death sentence. Two images stay lodged in my memory: Dresden, all at once panicked and resigned to needing us, to needing something, eye-balling us as she stood clipped to the end of a lead shank, her coat dark in the gloaming; and, after her body had been hauled away and Dr. Hanson was gone, lead-
ing Elsa into the barn, her hooves heavy on the concrete, the sway of her back, and the slope of her neck, and thinking *It's just you now, Elsa.*

The next morning one of the boarders was there when I strolled into the barn. Lynn, a pretty middle-aged woman with a tiny frame who fancied herself something of a cowgirl, who rented out several stalls in the barn and eked out an existence buying and selling thoroughbreds off the track. She took care of our last remaining horses in exchange for a little break in the board. I’d left a note filling her in on the details the night before. *She okay?* I asked when I saw Lynn. *Fine. Ate her breakfast like nothing.* Good old Elsa. Solid as a truck.

By noon Elsa was stamping at the sawdust and turning to peer at her side, a distinct rumble in the barrel of her belly. Even at fifteen, I knew colic. Horses have delicate, complex digestive systems. It doesn’t take much—too much water, a shift in diet, a stressful trailer ride—to send their abdomens into spasm or, worse, put a kink or block in their intestines. Something like ten percent of horses colic at one point or another and, though it can be fatal, it can also be merely a minor hiccup in a horse’s morning. I’d stood with Mom and looked over the top of a stall door to a horse inside pawing at the ground and nipping at his side. *You have to get them out of their stalls and hold them,* Mom used to tell me, *because if they roll on the ground, they can twist their intestines and rupture them. They’ll be dead within minutes.*

I slid a halter over Elsa’s big bay head and led her out of her stall. Lynn called Dr. Hanson and within a half hour he was back feeding a tube through the old mare’s nostril and into her stomach. He pumped a greasy mixture of glycerin and vegetable oil in and we waited to see if her stomach would settle or the blockage would pass. In a way it was nice to have Dr. Hanson back out there, even if Lynn was looking on with concerned eyes where I used to stand and I was in the place of Mom. He’d been our vet for a lot of years and run a lot of tubes down horses’ nostrils. Not one for many words, he would sometimes surprise us with a wry comment. *Why do you always call me with bad news?* he might say, or *It’s going to cost you extra if you*
want me to save him. Sometimes his jokes fell flat, but we laughed all the same. He'd helped deliver foals and poultice legs and dress wounds and ease our old and sick out of this world with the grace and humanity of a man who's done it a million times. Even a sick horse was a welcome reminder of those days when Mom and Dad were home and the farm was still enough.

It was short lived though. We caught it early, he told us. Just walk her for a little while and let the cramps settle. After that she can go out in the pasture. She should be fine. And then Dr. Hanson packed up and was gone. The drama of the day had passed and Lynn went back to whatever she was doing. It was quiet again. The afternoon was creeping toward the hour when it always seemed to storm in the summer when we lived on the farm. The air took on a kind of static charge and the trees rustled a bit harder, more purposefully. I grabbed a rain jacket from the supply room and clipped a lead shank to Elsa's halter. Let's go, old girl.

We walked. Past the arena and the old geldings' field, behind the A-barn to the stretch of grass where the cow barn had stood when we first moved to the farm. Elsa ambled along steadily, the path of our steps as familiar to her as to me. Along the hedges Mom had planted as saplings and the spot by the house where the weeping willows had stood and both died within months of each other—one struck by lightning, the other rotted from inside. The sky was shifting, the colors deepening to a moody, plaintive grey. I could smell the rain before it began.

The pasture's iron gate squealed when I pulled it open, the rust from a thousand summer storms flaking at the hinges. Go on, I said to Elsa, unclipping the lead and patting her on the flank. She took a few steps, almost unsteady, like a newborn colt, and then found her footing and made her way into the heart of the field. The first of the rain began to ping off the iron gate and pelt the top of my head. I stood there and watched her. Just you and me, Elsa. The only ones left.

I saw her drop to her knees. Before I could get over the fence she had heaved herself to the ground and was rolling and thrashing—not the roll of an energetic yearling or a sweaty and itchy school horse, but the
dreaded colic roll. *Come on, Elsa! Get up!* I barked at her, smacking at her rump. She wouldn’t budge, and her rolling got more violent, her legs kicked out in all directions.

You don’t realize how large a horse is until it no longer yields to your control and you see the massive tank of a belly and the muscles bulge beneath their coat. *Elsa! Stop!* I hollered, whipping at her with my rain jacket. A sound came from deep within the ocean of her, something primitive between a moan and a wail, something I’d never heard before. It was pouring by then, dumping on both of us, and the jacket was slippery in my hands, but I kept beating her with it, yelling at her to *Get up, get up, get up!* *Elsa, get up!* I saw a milky white substance come across her eyes, the elusive third eyelid only some animals have, that only some draw over their view in the last moments.

I should have known by then it was over, should have dropped my hands and let her pass, but I kept hitting her, kept screaming at her. I was unwilling to see that she was already gone, that everything was already over, that all things must pass, and that there is love that can be tested, that cannot be broken, that will answer the challenge and lie down in a field and die for another, and that there is life, still, in a girl who stands in the rain, beating down on a beast, saying *I’m not through yet. I’m still here.*