

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

Alexa Mergen
Currying the Horse

Iris wandered out to the barn and watched John as he worked a pick to pry dirt from the frog of Prince's hoof. He felt her watching. Without looking over he said, "You might need to learn how to do this."

Iris's husband, Ben, had never brought her into the barn for anything more than introducing a new horse which she duly admired, no matter how apparently swaybacked or weepy eyed the bargain animal was. Truthfully, she had little interest in the barn, sometimes thick with flies and smelling of manure and pungent ointments. The bars, straps and buckles of the equipment intimidated her. She was not like her daughter who learned in one week all forty-five knots in a poster Ben hung on her wall when she was seven. Iris was not clever. She worried that her son had inherited her clumsy fingers and was reassured by his propensity for mathematics.

She had been busy in the first years of their marriage learning how to stop being Iris Collins and become Mrs. Tattel. Adam came along the second year and, determined to be more attentive than her own mother, she tended him all day long. She shared his first word ("more"), his first step (off the porch into the peonies sticky with aphids and ants) and sat with him for hours as he stacked blocks. He made simple towers, never adjusting the design. He did not seem bothered when the structures toppled, just started again and repeated. Unlike his sister, whose first word was actually two words, "let me," and whose first step was actually twenty-straight toward a puddle where she used the mud to pat round shapes like the Navajo in Arizona bake bread in--Adam was content to plod in one direction. Iris' father would have favored him. Iris believed her mother would have cottoned to Cici, born four years after Adam. Both Annabelle Collins and Cici used curiosity as an excuse to flit from one thing to another.

So, first it was the children, and running the house--she made meals her mother would have been proud of--and in the early years of the stable scheduling rides and the summer camp to keep her busy. Lately no one needed her, not her son who was taller than her own father had been and just as aloof, or her daughter who rarely looked at her at all.

She glanced at the clock on the wall and said, "Are there any boots I can wear?"

John gently set the horse's foot on the floor and looked up at her. "Check the rack by the door. Sizes are stamped inside the shaft."

Years of assisting fumbling new riders made John a patient teacher. When Iris returned, her plaid wool skirt bright above muddy black boots, he stepped aside for her to join him.

"Curry comb." He held up a paddle-shaped tool with hard rubber teeth. "You know Cowboy, right?"

"Hi, Cowboy," she said. The horse's ears flicked.

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"You want to loosen the dirt from the coat before you put the shine in."

"Dust and polish?"

"Something like that." He curried in a circular sweep over the horse's body. Cowboy shivered with pleasure.

"He seems to like it."

"Sure, it feels good."

Iris reached for the curry comb. When John handed it to her their hands grazed at the sides of their palms, causing Iris to shiver in ripples along her spine as the horse had. Goosebumps raised up on her arms where her cardigan sleeves were pushed back.

She took the comb. John covered her hand with his, stepping behind and encircling her, not near enough for contact, a distanced embrace just close enough to warm the air between them, an insulating layer in the space of their separate lives. Reach, sweep, brush. The barn door was open. A crisp breeze traveled through the alleyway, freshening the stall. It brought to Iris' lips a taste of the nearness of spring beyond winter's immediacy. She panted from exertion.

"Gently over his shoulders and hips," John said softly. Iris felt sweat moisten her neck and bead on her forehead. John pulled back from her. She moved from the horse's off-side to his right side, intent on the sweeping motion, willing herself to work out the tug she felt in her heart, the ache in her belly. She could forget herself in this task. She could clean and tend and wear herself out this way.

She was transfixed. John's guiding voice came to her from a far away place. "Watch his expression," it said, "how he moves his head and ears. The horse tells you what he needs."

When Iris finished she stopped abruptly. An impression of whirling reeled in her mind though her body was stilled. Once their mother had taken her and her sister Constance to a Sufi dance at the Turkish Embassy. The men spun like white tops edged with red around and around tighter and faster than the pirouettes Madame Bijou had the girls practice on their aching toes at the ballet school. At 12, Iris had been spellbound. She became so entranced by the movements that when the dancers halted she was sure her heart had stopped, too. In the darkened auditorium, she placed her hand on her chest to reassure herself her heart still beat. She had felt that now in this unadorned barn that was both familiar and strange. Briefly she, the horse and this man, her husband's employee for Heaven's sake, merged.

She combed Cowboy's mane and tail, brushed the horse twice more. A luster arose in the reddish brown coat. Her mother had called that color oxblood, a red influenced by purple and brown, and wore it on her lips. Iris wiped the horse's ears, eyes and muzzle with a damp cloth. John stayed back, leaning against the wall of the stall, offering Iris precise instructions while handing her the tools she needed. As she cleaned around the tail and dock, she smiled and said, "Reminds me of bathing my babies."

John returned the smile. He was one of those quiet persons found

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frequently in stables who prefers grooming the horses to riding them, and dedicates his life to tending. "I know," he said. "I looked forward to the baths when my son was small." He had been mother and father both. "I even liked trimming his tiny fingernails."

Iris wiped her hands on the towel and handed it to him. "Ben was a good father," she said standing straight. They met eye-to-eye. "He is," she said clearly, "a good father, you know."

"Iris," it was the first time he had ever spoken her given name. The two syllables held hundreds of thousands of hours of memories, of two people with little incentive for exchange, occupying the same plot of land, drinking common well water, burning wood for heat from one fallen tree. "We all are doing the best we can."

She leaned in to hug him and felt now, in the spots where their bodies met, at the shoulders, chest and back, pure sadness rising.