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The boy was riding a dark horse, crossing a field of yellow-star grass and olive green shadows. A slip of a stream, logs so recently cut their ends were white and circled with clear, brown rings. One had the stump of a broken branch on its side. The dark horse's ears pointed towards a gray farmhouse to the east, and to the left of that, low stalls and three spreading cherry trees blooming pink. On the side of the house a single dark window opened like an unseeing eye. Behind it someone dreamed.

The boy's name was Tom. The pants of his overalls rode high above his brown boots. He rode bareback. The sleeves of his soft, collarless blue shirt were rolled at the elbows. His long fingers wrapped amongst each other, wrapped tight around the thin reins that stretched taut from the bridle. His hair was brown like the horse, his mouth open like the horse. His hair flew out behind him, shorter but in the same direction as the animal's tail.

His straw hat hung in the air above the horse's rear, as though a second rider sat beneath it. But that second rider, Ned, sat far behind and below the horse's tail, in a ditch of brown dirt that mirrored the shadow under the horse. Ned's blue overalls hitched high above his boots, too, as one leg rose in the air after the fall. His shirt was pink and collared. And even though he was sitting on his own rear in the ditch, it was easy to tell he was shorter, and the younger of the two.

Above them both, the sky was mostly cloud, a bluish white, with blue showing through in unremarkable shapes. Last spring, Tom and Ned sometimes ran out of the gray farmhouse and lay on their backs in a soft spot of grass and looked up at the sky. Seeing winged angels and a puppy and once even the Gulf of Mexico.

The house where the horse was headed so quickly was home. Something had spooked the animal, and now he ran fast.

Inside the gray farmhouse, inside a woman's dream, there were drops of blood on the whitewashed walls of a bedroom. On a nubby white chenille bedspread and pale pink sheets.

Through the single window on the wall a rectangle of painting showed – creamy whipped clouds and gray-blue sky, the tops of pink-feathered trees, sweet and silky and dancing in an unseen wind.

In her dream, the woman saw herself standing at the side of the bed. Her arms hung heavy at her sides, and one hand clasped the handle of an object so heavy it pulled the whole weight of her being down to the floorboards she had varnished on hands and knees one week before. One drop of blood beaded on a wide pine plank, and with the round toe of her black shoe, the woman – Amber – rubbed at it until it disappeared. The floor was clean again now but not the walls or the bedspread or the sheets. Or what lay on the bed in front of her. The thing she would do anything in her power not to see, even as she struggled to wake.

Amber was tired, but even in her dream she was making a list of all the ordinary things she would have had to do that day. If it had been an ordinary day. She'd been planning to go into town for groceries, to take Tom and Ned and let them each get a piece of penny candy, even though she'd have to listen to Mr. Sauer, her cheeks warming as he reminded her loud enough for everyone in the store to hear that she and Samuel owed \$22.75 that better get paid.

There was laundry to wash, Samuel's and the boys' as well as her own. A ham to start. She'd promised a meat and spaghetti pie to her neighbor Inez, might as well make two and save one for dinner. At least that's what she'd been thinking last night when she lay down in bed.

She'd been thankful to have a bed; Inez and her husband James must have slept on blankets on the floor. There'd been a small fire at their house, a mile down the road, yesterday evening. James was still at the school where he taught Ned and Tom and his own boy Stevie as well as ten other children. Inez was at Woolworth's where she worked full-time now, making 12 dollars a week.

When James and Inez got home from work yesterday, they saw smoke coming out an upstairs window. Their bed was in flames.

When Inez and James and Stevie came up to the gray farmhouse to tell Amber the news, she invited them to stay for dinner. She'd stood by the sink pulling out the insides of a chicken, listening to Inez sob. She kept her mind busy thinking about dinner; she had potatoes in the pantry and some of last summer's corn in the Deepfreeze.

She could just see one leg of James's pressed black pants through the door to the living room. One shiny brown leather shoe. The boys sat on the floor in front of him, like they were in school. She couldn't hear the words he was saying, but she understood the rhythm. He was trying to answer their questions when he had no answers. After a while, Amber looked up from the porcelain sink and saw James turn the dial on the radio so the boys could listen.

"I'm glad you were out of the house," she'd said quietly as she passed the platter of chicken. She'd soaked it in buttermilk, double-dipped it in flour. All the time stealing glances at the screen door, hoping Samuel wouldn't push through it.

She watched Ned make a crater in his mashed potatoes with the back of his spoon, pour gravy in.

"I'm glad James was with me," Inez sniffled. The tip of her nose was pink from crying, and the flesh on her upper arms jiggled. Amber was afraid she was going to start sobbing again but Inez took another bit of corn and then said, "I wouldn't have known what to do if I'd come home and found that all by myself. Why, James ran right up there and started throwing blankets on top of the fire." She plucked at a button on the front of her green gingham dress.

"Worse part was seeing that smoke," James said. "Could have been a lot worse for all I knew. But it wasn't even that big a fire." He was still handsome even nearing 50, and Amber could see in his face the lines of the boy he'd been. His fingers were long, nails trimmed neat. His white shirt had soot on the arms and front, but except for that, he looked just like the scholar Amber had always known he would be.

"At first I thought the fire was coming from your place, Amber." His eyes held hers. Amber was remembering that it was her birthday. She was thinking how nobody except Inez had mentioned it. Inez had brought a little cake with hard pink frosting and a red candy rose. Finally she broke James's gaze and looked toward the cake on the green Formica counter of the hutch, on a plate covered with a doily.

"Amber," James said softly, "you feeling all right?"

Amber felt her cheeks go warm and looked down at the cloth napkin in her lap. "Oh my goodness," she said. "Look here." She held up the napkin with its dribble of gravy as though she expected them to tell her what it meant. "I've got to wash this out before it's too late." Her mama had always said, "No matter how poor you are or how bad things are, you can always stay clean."

When Amber came back, James had his hand on top of Inez's. "Who would have done such a thing?" she was asking, over and over.

Samuel didn't get home until after ten. She sat across the table from him while he ate. Even from there she smelled whiskey.

"Inez shouldn't of been off workin' like that anyway," Samuel said as though he were answering some question she hadn't even had the heart to ask. His fork, piled with mashed potatoes, stopped halfway to his mouth. "She's got a home to run. A boy. A husband." A bottle of beer stood at 11:00

above his knife. The sleeves of his plaid shirt turned up at the wrist; dark hairs curled around the face of his watch.

She let him rant awhile. It had been three weeks since he lost his last job, bagging clothes at the cleaners.

He finished two more beers. Amber was tired but wanted to sit with him, make sure nothing else happened. She didn't talk about the fire. When he finally climbed the stairs, she followed him. He went into the boys' bedroom. It was dark and Amber could barely make out the shapes of Tom and Ned under the quilts she'd sewn. Even the quilts were dark and colorless. She said, "Don't do that," but Samuel sat down heavy next to Ned, her baby even though he was 13, and woke him.

"Didn't do your chores tonight, boy, did you?" Samuel's voice was whiskey-coated, low and somber. For a minute, Amber thought he might just talk awhile then let the boy go back to sleep. In the other twin bed, Tom turned over in his sleep, shifting the quilt so one bare shoulder shone in the moonlight from the window.

"Didn't think I'd know, did you?" Samuel wiped a corner of his mouth with the side of his hand. "But I know. I stopped in the barn. Nobody had mucked the stalls. Nobody did any milkin'."

"No, sir," Ned whispered.

"It's all right, Samuel," Amber said, whispering too. "Inez and James were here. The boys. . ."

Samuel turned to look at her. His face, and the whole room, seemed to Amber to be covered in the same black soot that had soiled James's shirt. All she could see was Samuel's eyes, and there was a sadness in them bigger than anything she'd seen from him, even during these horrible weeks.

But he turned away from her and grabbed Ned's arm and lifted him out of the bed.

"What's going on?" Tom mumbled. "You OK, Ned?"

But Ned wasn't big enough to fend off his father, and Amber knew that's why Samuel had chosen the younger boy. She stood up with them and held on to the crook of Samuel's arm. At one point, her black shoes lifted completely off the floor and she swung in the air. All the while Samuel was shaking Ned's shoulders, he was saying things like, "you've got to goddamn help your mother and me" and "that goddamn teacher of yours." Tom had gotten out of bed and was trying to pull his father off Ned, too. Finally, Samuel just let go, turned and walked out of the room, head in his hands.

Amber put her finger to her lips to silence the boys then quickly followed Samuel into their room. She helped him take off his boots, pants, and shirt and get under the white chenille spread. When he started to snore, she went back and sat with Ned until he fell asleep with his head in her lap.

She fingered Ned's brown hair and looked over toward Tom. She said, "It'll be all right. You'll clean out the stalls tomorrow. It's Saturday. After you do your chores, you'll get the horse out. It's warm enough now he'll be ready for that first spring ride."

When both boys had gone back to sleep, Amber went downstairs to the kitchen. With tears running down her cheeks, she scraped the food off Samuel's plate into the barrel out back – the white streaks of potato and bits of glistening skin from the chicken, nuggets of yellow corn, handpicked last August.

Of course now, at the very beginning of springtime, corn was no more than an idea. That's one other thing she'd have to do in town, ask Mr. Sauger for more credit so she could buy the seed, full-season hybrid. She'd get it in early this year, she told herself as she stood over the barrel. Almanac said there wasn't much chance of getting muddled in.

And the corn would grow fast, like it did every year – "knee high by the Fourth of July," that's what the boys sang when they were youngsters. They'd been so beautiful. They still were, but something had broken in them just like it had broken in her.

Life sure hadn't turned out the way she'd expected. She could remember days on this farm when she was a girl. Watching her mama cook and clean in this very kitchen. Running outside, looking up at the wide sky and all the land around her. Thinking everything was hers for the taking.

She and Inez and James had been friends. It was Samuel that was the newcomer, though he hadn't come into their midst until James had left and Amber thought he had left for good.

On Amber's 16th birthday, she'd climbed up in one of the cherry trees that dotted the field. The shiny reddish-brown bark peeled and curled. She had on two petticoats, and when James came up beneath her, he reached his hands into the white clouds of them.

Why hadn't they married? She didn't know whose fault that was. It was James and her from the beginning, with Inez, a whole five years younger, running to keep up with them. Sometimes Amber and James would ride bareback, on the bay that had foaled the horse Tom and Ned most liked to ride. When Amber and James rode, at just about the age Tom was now, Amber felt the horse beneath her and James in front of her.

When her papa was ready to breed the bay, he'd asked James to come help with the daily tease. "To see if she's in heat," he'd said. Amber had swung back and forth on the gate to the stall while James and her papa led the stallion in. For a few days, nothing happened. Then one day, the bay – Confetti – raised her tail when the stallion came close her hind legs spread, and she peed.

"Look here," Amber's papa said. He was pushing the stallion backwards out of the stall, motioning for Amber to take the lead rope and hold on to the big horse while he showed James what he wanted to show him.

"He called it winking," James told her later as she sat above him in the branch of the cherry tree. "The whole little thing just turned right inside out. Your Papa said it meant Confetti was in heat and ready to breed."

It was right after high school when James left. He went to the city, to St. Louis. He didn't say he was coming back. He'd gotten into college. He'd shown Amber the letter with the black seal that looked like the markings on a knight's shield in one of the books she liked to read. But she wasn't going to college; there wasn't enough money, and her parents needed her help on the farm.

James wrote letters for a while, long ones with stories about what he was learning. Sometimes he'd say he missed her. But it wasn't enough. As a grown woman, Amber tried to figure out if it had been her lack of trust or his lack of love that made things happen the way they happened.

After her parents died in a car crash, Amber moved in with Inez's family down the road. She worked hard for the privilege – doing laundry, washing dishes, beating down the rugs on the steps of the front porch. She lived there for one whole year while they waited for the farm to sell. When it did, it was to Samuel. Who didn't look like anybody from around these parts, with his olive skin and dark hair. He had no family of his own, just some money and a strong desire to try to earn his living on the land.

He was tall, like James. He didn't smile too often, but he looked good when he did, and when he bent down to kiss her, he smelled like teas and spices, something that made Amber think of far-away places. Sometimes his brows knotted together in one line of fury, but Amber thought that would go away. It didn't matter that she didn't love him. She could keep the farmhouse now and her fields and pretty soon her first baby Tom came with his beautiful brown eyes and tiny fingers. Then seven months before James returned, she gave birth to Ned.

She thought she knew how to be a mother, but other than James, she hadn't spent much time around boys, and her boys weren't like James. They were rougher around the edges, more like Samuel. She'd hear them swear when they thought she wasn't listening. Words they picked up from their father. They were good boys, did all right in school and were generally respectful. But she always felt she had to stay alert, always felt there was trouble coming just around the corner. The older they got, the more Samuel took to yelling at them. Beating their bottoms with a belt if they talked back.

Some mornings she'd look out the window of her bedroom, past the dark trunks of the cherry trees, and wish the boys could have grown up on this farm the same way she did. In peace. She was

most happy when she caught them having fun, bareback on Confetti's Wonder, or sitting in the dark of the movie theatre, eyes bright and mouths partly open. Just having fun.

There was too much work in this world, she'd decided. She'd worked hard for all her adult life, but she was tired of it. She was tired of cleaning and cooking and making beds and unmaking them. Tired of making sure everyone had clean clothes – and sewing clothes for the boys now that Samuel was out of work. She'd sewn a new blue shirt for Tom just last week and a pink one for Ned. She was tired of watching Samuel drink too much, tired of his rage. He'd hit her once. She got a bruise on her cheekbone that she'd lied about, saying she'd stumbled and hit her face against the saddle rack in the barn. But that wasn't what mattered.

It was hitting the boys that changed things and then doing what she suspected him of doing over at James and Inez's house. Setting the bed on fire.

Samuel had hated James from the beginning, as though he'd known something without ever being told about it. He'd mimic the way James talked. "Highfalutin bullshit," he called it. Some nights when he'd had too much to drink he'd pull Amber out of bed and make her stand at the window and look across the dark fields. He'd hold her chin in his hand and say, "Look, Amber. See that light down there?" She'd nod yes and hold back any tears that threatened to spill. The light was in James and Inez's bedroom.

When Samuel worked the fields for Mr. Brannon, the bank manager in town, he'd come home one night with a small leather case. Inside was a pair of binoculars, with a pretty mother-of-pearl inlay. He told Amber he'd found them on a table in the hall when Mrs. Brannon invited him in for lemonade. The table had been filled with objects: a brass magnifying glass, photographs in silver frames, paperweights of all shapes and sizes. "They won't miss the binoculars for one night," he'd said, holding her hand as he led her to the window.

He'd kept his hand on her shoulder while she pretended to focus the lenses. She kept them blurry just the same, making up a whole story about what James was doing to Inez and how a sheet had blown back to reveal one of Inez's breasts. "Her nipple is pink," she'd said, feeling Samuel's hand squeeze her shoulder. She hadn't wanted to make love to him, she never did, but she lay beneath him later that night.

"Where are you, Amber?" he'd shouted as he plunged into her, asking her to be somewhere she just couldn't be.

The night of the fire, after she finished cleaning Samuel's plate, she climbed into bed next to him. He had one arm flung high above his head.

She lay quietly in bed, thinking how she should tell the sheriff about the fire. She should tell Inez and James. Samuel was drinking too much these days, everybody in town knew that. He'd lost his job. Lots of people were having hard times now.

But the sheriff and most people in town thought that all in all, Samuel had done quite well by Amber, who'd been left by herself when her parents died. Hadn't even married until age 29. Amber was quiet, Amber didn't complain. Not to anybody. Not for all these years.

But she was so tired now, and things had really gone too far. She didn't like that feeling of never being heard, didn't like that feeling of not even hearing herself.

She hadn't even known how angry she was until she lay there in bed listening to Samuel snore, unable to sleep. When the round clock on the nightstand said 11:30, she thought about how in another 30 minutes, she'd be a year older. Starting a new decade. She stayed flat on her back, hardly breathing, staring at the white face of the clock, listening to the quiet tick as the minute hand jumped from one black line to the next.

Then she got out of bed. She held the screen door carefully so it wouldn't slam when she went outside.

As she crossed toward the barn, she was thinking about how she could have done things differently. When she was little, she'd talked to the trunks of the cherry trees and heard them talk back. She'd seen light around her parents' faces, light around each blade of star-grass in the fields. She didn't tell anyone what she saw because she was afraid. The only one she'd ever told was James, and she figured that by now he must have forgotten. She kept silent about it even when she married Samuel. She'd stepped off Inez's front porch 17 years ago, out of the house where she felt like an outsider, and let herself be lifted up into Samuel's strong arms. The first time he kissed her, she'd kissed him back and sealed her lips and kept her silence.

Tonight, walking under the moon, she knew something had to change.

Inside the barn, Confetti's Wonder neighed. She was the only horse left now; when Amber was little all ten stalls had been filled.

She had looked for the light around her boys, seen it in glimpses when they were babies and little ones, but as they grew she could not see it. She had tried looking for the light around Samuel but could not see it. Whose fault was that? And when she stared at herself in the mirror, a flat, dull portrait stared back. For all those years.

She found the axe in the barn.

Sometimes in the summer, Amber would walk out to cornfield that her father had planted and her grandfather before him. She'd walk amongst the stalks. She'd have her bushel basket so no one would know she wasn't working, and she'd fill it almost full, gripping the ears with her left hand, using the hook to open up the shucks then her thumbs to push them back, the hands going in opposite directions to clean, and then the quick jerk to break the shank from the stock. Tossing the freed ear into the basket with the right hand while the left was reaching for the next one, all in a musical-like rhythm.

The rough, dry husks scraped her chapped hands and made tiny cuts like paper cuts. At some point she'd put the basket down at her feet. She'd find the maypop, the little white pulps that tasted like citrus and the smell of the corn.

The stalks rose above her head. Above them, there was the blue sky and the nearing autumn. Below her was the ground, and the basket of her hard work going up and down the long rows she'd run through as a child, laid down upon it. She'd wipe her palms on her apron, then let them lie quiet and warm on her thighs.

She'd stand without moving. Her eyes would stay open and she was looking and she was seeing, but she wasn't looking *for* anything, and she wasn't looking *at* anything. But the stalks were above her and the blue sky above that. The stalks blew in the wind, and pretty soon her breaths would match the wind.

She wouldn't want to go back home to the gray house where her parents didn't wait for her anymore. Where now there was only Samuel and Tom and Ned, and a darkness from which she wasn't sure she could protect any of them. She didn't want to push through the stalks in the field, to hear the corn scratch against her face and hands. She just wanted to stand without moving. After a while, she'd feel the blood in her body move the same way the wind moved.

In her dream, when she finished the second hack with the axe, she knelt down by the bed, dipped her hands in her husband's blood. She poured it over her right hand and then over her left, three times on each side. She said these hands have committed evil, and she took the axe and cut off her left hand, and then knelt there sobbing, not knowing how to cut off the other that offends her. In the dream, she felt great pain.

When the dream ended, and she woke, she heard from outside the window a horse coming up to the house, coming fast. She heard Ned call to his brother, "Come back and get me! Come back! I fell off!" And the older boy Tom laughing, and the horse neighing.

The clock said seven. Samuel's head lay on the pillow next to hers, his mouth part open, pale pink at its edges, dark inside. She could see the rise and fall of his chest under the blanket with its white terry loops, the opening and closing of his nostrils, the soft movement of his eyes beneath their lids. Was he dreaming of her? She had dreamt of him, some horrible thing she couldn't remember in the light of morning.

She lay there thinking about the day that lay ahead. The grocery. The ham. The spaghetti and meat pie. Yesterday she'd thought about having Inez and James up to the house again for dinner but now she thought, no. She saw James's hand on top of Inez's. She'd make the pie, leave it on the porch while James and Inez were at work, but she'd stop there.

She should have told Samuel the same things she told James when she sat in the cherry tree and he stood below her, listening. Would it have been different then? Could she have taught him to see the light that wavered around trees, to see God in the pink double flowers of cherry blossoms? Spring, summer, autumn, winter. For so many seasons and years she and Samuel had lived speaking and not speaking. Words had fallen from their mouths like black beetles, day after day. Words that meant nothing yet filled the air between them. "Flatbed wagon's broke," "Gasoline's up to ten cents." "Seeds rotted out. We've got to replant the corn."

Sometimes there were words of love, or what stood for it, spoken at night under clean sheets that had hung on a line between the house and barn. But those were few. More of the nights had the rough music of murmurs and grunts, sounds from deep inside Samuel as he came and tried to bring his light to hers.

The white curtain fluttered at the window. Amber went to look out and saw her boys and Confetti's Wonder, who was wild and frisky after being cooped up all winter, ready to be let loose for another spring on the farm. She saw Tom's straw hat, its edge curled up, lying on the ground behind the horse. She saw Ned standing up from a ditch, brushing his pants and beginning to run after Tom, still riding. Both boys had shirts and overalls that would need cleaning but that would have to wait. Just now the horse with its remaining rider was passing two fresh-cut logs, the branch where she'd sat as a girl, tempting a boy and imagining he loved her.