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Threshold

by Sarah Luke

You know you're at Big Oaks Rescue Farm when you see the donkeys sauntering along the fence by the highway and horses atop acres of hills flicking tails like feather dusters to swat away the flies. The first of three red gates is wide open and broken, sitting in a heap like a discarded soda can, probably rammed into with the blind force of a tractor trailer. When you get inside you close the gate and get out of the way fast; no goat is too shy to insist how baaaadly he wants to explore the highway streets beyond the fences, and whoever is conducting the pickup truck plows it straight through clusters of turkeys, forgetting that visitors of the farm haven't yet learned the self preservation routine that the animals already know. The routine usually means if you stick your snout through the slats in the fence you will get a carrot, but when Mary is driving the truck it means *get out of the way*.

People who know the alpaca named Coco walk around with a whip. If you are lost, new to the farm, or are simply standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, Coco will welcome you immediately. He slips his lips across his teeth in a grin and takes a running charge at your backside, stands on his hind legs and clips his arms to your sides like magnets. With his nose pressed into the space between your arm and your ribcage, you can almost hear him saying, "Ha, I gotcha there. I gotcha now." You might, over dinner later, draw a parallel to wrestling with your brother on the red and green patterned carpet of your living room at home, but this will not be the first thing that you think. If Joe, the owner of the farm, is on the phone he will watch the situation from afar, the corners of his mouth curving upward in the modest way that tells you he doesn't want you to know he's smiling. If he's not on the phone he lowers his voice and says, "Coco," and the alpaca pins his ears back and slinks away. "I bottle fed that animal for the first part of his life," Joe says. "Potty trained him with puppy pads."

When he says this to me I am still eying Coco, imagining the mop-head as a baby. "You didn't," I say.

He nods his head at a pile of brown pellets by the side of his house. "It was easy. Alpacas only go in one place."

Big Oaks is not the kind of place you go unless you're searching for something. Wearing yoga pants and my grandmother's ring, I have no other reason to have

come. When I stand at the center of a dirt arena the wild boar named Wiggy waddles over and glues his oozing nose to my pants. His laugh is like a pepper grinder and he snorts it everywhere. “Stop,” I cajole him in the language he doesn’t understand. He flops onto his side and scratches his back on the surface of the earth, a child at a playground, a three year old enamored with the feel of wet dirt on the backs of his fingers.

Many of the animals at Joe’s farm are made of skin pulled tightly over rib cages like too-small velvet jackets. Joe is careful not to feed them too much immediately after taking them in; he would burst their bellies. The horses roam in the pasture by the dozens, breeding with donkeys at times and bearing mules, their numbers climbing above one hundred. He has asked people to take in foster horses to make room for more. The cows fold their legs on the ground, their knobby knees knocking. The deer wears a neon orange collar so you know it’s her and not one of the ones that lope in the trees next to highways. Even so, her size alone would be enough to differentiate her from the deer that have to travel for their food; her body is a covered pillow cushion on pine needle legs, and she leans against your side like a house cat. She is one that doesn’t need a cage, and if you hold out an apple she will eat it, taking slow bites like someone who knows she can trust the consistency of a man in a leather vest and cowboy boots.

The first time I see Blondie she is rocking in the open space beneath the barn roof, digging a small pattern into the dirt with her hoof. I notice first her color, then her size, then her jagged hipbones angled towards the ceiling. Shapeless black shadows blanket her form. She is dusty, her fur bone white, her head long enough to stretch past a man’s forearm twice over.

“Laura,” I say to my friend. We are the only people on the farm today. She looks at the horse and pockets her hands. “Don’t go in.”

I take one step closer to the barn gates.

“Sarah,” Laura says, “the horses kick.”

I plant my feet and lean forward, slick black pants folding over bent knees. Blondie steadies her stance, raises a long-nosed head. She stares at me, and the red veins in her eyes are bright maps.

Coco paces the fence railings of the “trouble-maker pen” at noon, spitting at anyone who walks by. Leaned against the jagged edge of a fencepost, Joe is a proud parent at his child’s first stage performance. He tucks his chin, a smirk climbing through the lines on his face.

“Joe, you really need to keep Coco penned up from eleven to three when

visitors come.”

This is the volunteer named Penny, a woman with hair chopped to her shoulders and the stiff kind of blue jeans that look rough-feeling, like she’s scraped mud off of them too many times. She’s the one with the camera; almost all of the photos on their web page are hers.

In the driveway a wide-bellied donkey blocks a van from getting through. The donkey has heavy ears and a stance by the gate that looks almost permanent. I tap the gate gently against her side to encourage her. One look in her eyes tells me she is a female who has a matted coat stained by somebody else’s dinner and a resolute prerogative to profess, *I can’t move. Don’t touch me.*

“She’s pregnant,” Joe says. “Ready to have her baby any day now?”

He rams the gate into the donkey’s side—not enough to hurt her, just enough to make her get going—and urges her out of traffic’s way, one hand on her belly and a foot against her heel.

“I was out here yesterday,” I say. “I came to see my friends Spirit and Blondie.”

His head whips around. “You saw who?” He puts a special emphasis on the word who. “Who are your friends?”

I say it again, smiling because I know he misheard me. At this farm there are teams, and when it comes to the animals, you’re either on their side or you’re not. If you’re not then you can’t be trusted.

“Oh,” he says. He nods. “Don’t let their old owners be your friends. Especially Blondie’s.”

I am a patient outsider watching Joe take stiff-legged steps toward the gate. For him the anxiety is over. It came in a short wave, and whether or not I feel like it, I passed a test. He pulls the latch around to fasten the gate.

“What do you do when a donkey has a baby around here?” I ask. The question is how to go about assisting one who allows part of herself to break in sacrifice for another. In my mind I see blankets and the bent knee of a veterinarian in a stable doorway. But Joe tells me it’s simple.

“Celebrate,” he answers, and he urges the despairing donkey onward. When I talk with Penny about Blondie and Spirit I speak in the hushed, earnest voice that people use around children under the age of three. “They’re my favorites,” I say, “but don’t tell the others.”

Spirit takes heavy steps around Blondie. He has thick spots the color of clay patterned into his fur and long bangs that cover his eyes. He and Blondie stick together. It had been Blondie’s work to remind Spirit after

his mate died on the journey here from Georgia that the world, or at least most of it, could be stitched back together. Spirit and his mare had both been starving, their consciousnesses dipping into the places it was hard to come back from, and the female collapsed before they made it to the farm. I approach the two as they watch the farm scene from within the bounds of a round pen, two half-lovers presented with a cinematic picture they'd seen too many times. I take a round brush to Spirit's matted fur and Blondie puts her nose in front of me. "Be nice," I say. I crawl through the fence and am immediately swallowed by the dance of hooves finding their places around me, making room for a two-legged guest.

"She bosses him around and he takes it, just the way boys and girls do," Joe has said of the two. We were in the barn. The rain pelted the roof, hooves ground against the walls, and a rooster clucked his lips in the doorway. I held out a carrot for Spirit, though in the presence of Blondie he made no motion to take it. She stepped in and snatched the carrot, slipping it through thick lips that were stained with all the natural hues of farm dirt—her turf.

Penny lets herself into the pen.

"There's a donkey over there has cancer," she says.

The donkey she's talking about I have seen before: a tall, skinny thing that walks sideways through the slats in walls, wiping the pus from itchy scabs onto the wood.

"They say that sometimes if you catch it early enough you can cut it off of them," she says, "operate in places that will make it clean. But this donkey, he's been in for surgery three times and the cancer keeps coming back. I tell Joe he's going to drain his bank account over one donkey but he keeps putting holes in him. I think it's about time to let him go."

She taps Blondie's chin with her fingers. "This one looks like she has cancer, too."

"How can you tell?" I say. I feel suddenly as if I am in the operation room of someone I don't know. My hands are clambering across her coat as if the answer might jump out at me from underneath her skin.

"You can usually see it in the eyes," she tells me. "Look how red they are."

"But that doesn't mean she has cancer," I protest. "It could be an allergy."

"It could," says Penny, "but she's got some lumps forming on her eyes too."

I give her a look and she throws up her hands. "Maybe I'm wrong." She pulls the zipper on her jacket to chest height. "I hope I'm wrong."

I spend the rest of the day thinking about lives that bubble and die in callused hands, tiny lives that crawl out of mamas and onto bleeding dirt behind horse stables. Do they ever stop to ask, *Do we belong?* Do they ever stop to harness the wind inside their feeding rings before they stuff their mouths with wads of hay? Joe pumps thousands of dollars into horse feed that fattens Blondie's ribs and feeds cancer cells collecting on the surface of her eyeballs. The donkey goes under anesthesia, bears gashes in his sides, and wakes three times for a few more breaths of life. Where is the love going? I wash dirt off of my hands when I get home. Is it slipping down the drain with vanilla-scented soap? On Joe's web page there is a picture of Blondie from the day he rescued her, her broken body lying on the ground—bones on bones. Stretched across the clovers, she looks like she is waiting for the vultures. When I see the photo my breath catches in my throat. Before and after, I think, and after and after. Prolonging the inevitable. Helping a life across a threshold before its formidable return to clovers.

My mother loves horses. I don't think I can ever love them like she does. When she was sixteen she had a horse with spots like someone had dipped their fingers in black paint and flicked them across her white fur. Her name was Silly Filly, and dozens of crayon colored sketches of her rest in a labeled box in my mother's bedroom closet at home. When my mother goes to farms she reaches her hand through fences and horses put their noses in it. If she can get close enough she kisses their heads. "I love the way they smell," she says. It is all grass and breath and fur.

At the farm Joe ushers Laura and me into the barn where we find ourselves clustered against the steady chests of Spirit and Blondie. Up close you can feel the life pulsing through their veins in rolling echoes: a whisper over a shoulder bone, a hurried utterance across a rib. When Blondie comes to me I hold out my hand. She carries her bony hips like a pile of sticks. "I love you," I say. You can be forward like this with horses. She tucks her nose into my palm and I press my lips to the side of her face. There I smell only grass and breath and fur.

"An animal knows when there's somebody cares about him," Joe says. He says it in his sleep. I can hear him still, speaking against the gate, one hand pressing the side of the pregnant donkey: *That ole owner of Blondie ain't no friend of mine.*

In the ring, Penny tells me a story about twenty-five horses they found on someone's property lying dead in a ravine. The one donkey was staring death in the face, preparing to hand over membership to this world. As she talks she keeps a hand on Blondie's rear to keep her from kicking.

“Everyone told Joe that donkey wasn’t going to make it, but he said he couldn’t leave him out there to just rot. He wanted to bring him back, give him a good meal and all the treats he wanted while he could. The donkey was in such bad shape when he got here that Joe had to harness him up and tie his rope to a post above his head, just to support him long enough to eat his last meal standing up.”

I tuck Spirit’s bangs behind his ears, not knowing what to say. A soft breeze whistles across the roofs of the barn and the house and the portable buildings Joe uses for storage. The birds are still flapping around, one slender-necked bird wearing a speckled coat that looks like my grandmother’s polka dot turtleneck. She takes a barreling start through the tire of an old tractor trailer.

“I love that bird,” I finally say.

“That’s a guinea,” Joe says. I didn’t realize he was sitting on the fence behind us, cigarette in hand. “And that donkey just took all your carrots.”

“Oh no,” I say. I grab what’s left in the plastic bag from the ground where the donkey is retreating.

Joe leans his arms across his knees, says with the mock defensive tone of a five-year-old kid next to an empty roll of Oreos, “But they were there.” Then he relaxes again, blowing smoke out of his mouth. “That donkey won’t go up to nobody. I’m surprised he came up to you.”

I hold out another carrot in my hand—an offer. *This is how you make a friend*, I urge. *This is where you begin to trust*. The donkey steps backwards, crooked legs jerking as if someone had dropped a match and the whole ground were aflame. Joe and Penny begin talking again and the donkey points his ears forward; they are the hands of a shy child not tall enough to reach. I toss the carrot onto the ground and wad up the plastic bag in my pocket.

Days later I find myself idled behind a pickup truck at the corner of East Stone Avenue and Column. Behind the peeling green paint of the open trunk a brown dog stares through the slats of some metal crate. The eyes don’t blink—two orbs with urgent messages and an inaudible language that most people cannot understand. *Who would listen*, they say. Resignations. *Who would listen to something he did not understand*.

The truck jerks forward through the intersection, climbing far above the speed limit, and the dog tucks himself against the wall of the crate where nobody can see. I think of my own brown dog that we rescued from the highway when she was loping down it with the flow of traffic. When I hold her she tucks her head into the hollow between my neck and my collarbone and sighs.

I think of Joe Mann, leaned against the wooden slats of a stallion’s sta-

ble, lowering a cigarette from his lips. “I have to do this,” he had said. “I don’t have a choice.”

If you have never been in a horse stable before, then you would not know what the sun looks like when it climbs across wooden beams and onto horse fur. You would not know that when you clap two hard bristled brushes together around a horse’s coat the dust that explodes into the light is really just particles from another life trying to choreograph its existence in a few moments before it settles back into the earth. The place tends to smell sour. It is the place where the animals lean against the walls at nighttime; it is where they go to the bathroom; it is the place where the animals are moaning to get out from when Mary lifts the latches in the morning; and it is the place they can’t wait to get back to at dusk when they have emptied all other buckets of feed. When you give one a carrot all the others prop their chins over the doors to their stalls. *What about me?* they say. Their hearts are pounding. After you make your rounds, *what will be left in your dusty hands for me?*

And as you exit the farm gates, you know that the same stuff that covers the knuckles of your hands also makes up the sinew in a horse’s jaw and the filaments that stitch together an alpaca’s leg. There is a scrawled *thank you* on the back of the cardboard sign on the second gate. You cross a dusty threshold and know that a part of you is a horse. There is a part of you that mourns the ending of the day, the way that the blinds shudder against lit street lamps and remind you no one else will visit until the dark shawl lifts in the morning. There is a part of you that resigns yourself to urging your car aimlessly into your driveway without any supposition of somebody else’s hand on the other side of the doorknob. There will be no returned utterance of *hello* in any language at all. *What about me?* you ask. But that is not the question. The question is, in fact, who would dare? And who would dare? At Big Oaks Rescue Farm the birds fly in from places in the sky you’ve never heard of, and the donkeys step aside so they can share their feed. I know a man who bottle-fed an alpaca inside his house for the first part of his life. Sometimes we choose love; we are still choosing love.