THE ARRIVAL OF HORSES

by Jane Eaton Hamilton

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MY FATHER SAT MY BROTHER ROSS AND ME DOWN in our bedroom a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving and told us he loved Yolana, the girl at the bowling alley in Nickel Springs. We knew who she was. She wasn't anything you'd expect a Yolana to be, except young; she had mousy brown hair and a nose too big for even my father's face and three poodles she kept in her beat-up Honda till she got off her shift.

When Dad said he loved her, I was surprised, and I said without thinking, "Yolana? Yolana from the bowling alley? Dad, she's ugly." Ross elbowed me, but I knew he knew it was true and I also knew he knew, like I did, that our mother was beautiful.

Dad frowned. He rubbed his hands on his green work pants as if they were sweaty. "Ugly?" His voice was sort of strained and twisted.

"Well, you know," I said, trying to backtrack. "Mom's pretty."

"But your mother isn't here," he said, annoyed and maybe hurt. Dad is a rancher and his eyes are always bloodshot, they always look sore and they did now. But still, this was the first time I could ever remember him saying our mother was gone without stumbling over the words, and I was relieved. Edgy but relieved.

Dad got up and started pacing as well as he could in our small bedroom. "What you have to know is Yolana and I--well, Yolana and me got married."

Ross and I looked at each other. Ross raised his eyebrows. I looked back at Dad and opened my mouth, but I didn't say anything.

"Does Mom know?" Ross finally asked. It was the logical question but it made Dad mad; I could see it in how his shoulders got tighter and more compact. The vein in his forehead was throbbing. "Yolana and I got married on Saturday. I don't have to explain myself. She's moving in here and I'll tell you something. No way she'd ever desert you. No way she'd run off on you."

"Dad-" Ross said.

"Yolana, now, Yolana's damn grateful I'll be putting a roof over her head. Yolana's a girl who likes what I stand for."

I spoke up. "Congratulations, Dad."

He backed off from Ross and stared at me. "We're moving her in on the weekend. You boys are helping." He waited.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Sure," Ross said. Ross was seventeen and almost out of here. He was so close to leaving, less than a year, that he usually managed to stay pretty low-key with Dad. But now he said a really stupid thing. "So are her poodles moving in, too?"

When I think of my father, I do not think, this is a violent man. Usually I don't think about him at all, and when I do, it's this picture of him five years ago after Mom left, how he just stayed in his vinyl recliner drinking beer and when that was gone drinking nothing, just staring at the ceiling with his hands folder over his chest. He rallied, of course, eventually, and our life went on without Mom, but I never stopped seeing him like that, broken.

But Dad had his violent moments and this was sure going to be one of them. Ross stood up; he was a lot thinner than Dad but he was just as tall, and when Dad hit him he didn't even flinch; when the fist shot up he didn't bend or turn or do a single thing to avoid it. There was a crunch when Dad connected and blood spurted, but Ross held his ground. "Jesus, Dad," I said.

They just stood there until Ross lifted a hand and felt around his nose and Dad, sighing, said, "I'll get some ice for that, son."

On Saturday, starting at seven, Ross and I and Dad moved Yolana home. Besides the three yippy poodles she had some very odd possessions: a hairdressing chair for the living room, a little shrine that she explained was for Buddha on top of the pink dresser we put in Dad's bedroom, and all sorts of gewgaws to put on the mantel-ceramic elves and lambs and like that. Ross and I tried not to say a word, not even when Yolana took down our mother's paintings from the wall. They were different people, for certain. Mom was forty now, for starters, and Yolana was twenty-three, only six years older than Ross and eight years older than me. And Mom was the director of Project Refuge, a program to save the wild mustangs Dad hated, whereas Yolana worked behind the snack of the bowling alley in Nickel Springs.

It was my weekend with Mom, and I went over there as soon as we got through with the move. It was about the first time I was glad not to have a driver's license yet, because the two miles to the other side of town took some time walking. It wasn't the kind of news a guy knows how to break to his mom. I halfway decided not to tell her at all. That turned out to be easy at first because Dad was not on her mind when I arrived, the mustangs were, and I just went with that. She was out in the paddock with a filly, bandaging a fetlock with her back to me. I could not see she was beautiful unless she lifted her head. She was wearing waterproof pants, gumboots and an old plaid parka of Dad's.

"Brian!" she called, "Help me here, will you?" When she looked up, I felt a warmth spreading in my chest and I hopped the fence. She really was pretty. "Hold her head, Brian, will you? Talk to her."

I stood beside the skittish filly and tried to quiet her. I was used to talking to horses. How I felt about wild mustangs, though, was weird. When I was with Dad, shooting them was good. Good riddance, I thought. Dad pays the government to fodder his cattle on grass the mustangs eat all up, so why not pop a few? It was legal, until 1972. There were a lot more horses after eighteen years of protection, so the ranchers were finally taking things into their own hands. Both sides, though, were hot to boil over it, with government agents riding around in jeeps looking for carcasses and ranchers trying to outwit them. I knew how my dad felt, how the cattle were thinner each year going to slaughter and what a pressure that was on him financially. But I also knew how Mom felt. The mustangs were indigenous. They were here since before man. She loved them. When I was with Mom, looking at the horses through her eyes, I almost loved them, too.

She wound the bandage around and around the filly's hind left leg. The foal stopped kicking out and her nostrils stopped flaring. All the smell of her fear went out of her, and it was quiet then, except for trucks passing on the road and the sound of her thick, weary breathing. I stroked her back. "She's a beauty, isn't she?" Mom said. She was a bay, probably six months old, but she was awfully skinny-her ribs were poking through. "Duke Jones found her wandering. That's a bullet wound, just surface, and she's starved, poor thing. I guess somebody shot her dam."

I unhooked the filly's halter from the fence. It surprised me when she just stood there, but I saw she was favouring the leg. Mom swatted her rump, and she trotted off limping. I tried not to say too much about the mustangs to her because it was a sore spot, so I said, "Dad got married."

Mom has really blue eyes. She doesn't wear any make-up usually, but today she was wearing some eye stuff. "I heard," was all she said.

"You heard?" I tried to think that Mom had known all along, probably before Ross and I did. I was going to be the one to tell her, and I felt suddenly let down. I said, "Where's Susan?" Susan is my little sister. She lives with Mom.

"She's over at a friend's, a sleep-over."

We walked together to the barn, and I thought about how her hand felt so different from ours. It was the same ground, the same hills in the distance, the same sky, but different, like a mother lived there. "Let's go inside," she said.

"You don't care?" I asked as we walked to the trailer.

She shrugged. "Brian, men are out there killing horses. Your father's a free man." She started stepping out of her rain gear. She had a skirt on and work socks.

"Someone in New Hampshire made a donation." There was a shine in her eyes then. I knew how much having some cash meant to her. She was in school to learn to be a vet, and she didn't get paid for helping the mustangs. Some kids helped look after the horses she saved, but basically people around her really hated what she did. A while back she got interviewed by a big magazine and told about the mustangs being slaughtered, and after that one of her colts was shot dead in the field. The air was let out of her truck tires and someone threw eggs at the trailer. She was saving horses, for sure, but making enemies. They said she was taking money out of the ranchers' pockets. The way Dad figured it, Mom was personally robbing him; robbing Susan, too, since he wasn't going to pay child support for Mom to spend it all on the mustangs.

Mom poured out a cup of coffee and sat across from me at the table. She pushed one of Susan's dolls out of the way. She lit a cigarette, and I saw her hands were shaking. "Do you like her?" she asked. She cocked her head and really looked at me, curious.

"Those poodles," I said, and she laughed. "I don't know if I can stand having those poodles around. Plus she's ugly."

"She is sure ugly," Mom said, smiling, and I could see she got pleasure from it.

"She has gold nail polish," I said. "And all these bottles with blue and yellow."

"What does Ross think? I haven't told Susan yet."

"Ross thinks she's ugly, too."

Mom snorted. She was quiet a minute, then she said, "Well, damn your father. He is one idiot I can live without, I guess."

"I thought you guys were-"

"Were what?"

"You know. Getting friendly."

She exhaled a cloud of smoke, and her tongue came out to lick her lips. "Friendly like dogs circling each other, maybe. But it came as a big surprise." She smiled. "Your dad was over here to tell me, you know."

She butted out her cigarette. She almost never smoked a whole one. "Good riddance, I say. It's not like we had a lot in common." She frowned. "He's bad for me, your father. He brings out the worst in me, anyhow."

"Yolana brought guns," I said without stopping to think. I could have told my mother about any number of things she brought, like the Buddha, but my mouth just up and said

guns. “She has a collection.”

My mother’s position on firearms was fanatical. She wouldn’t even carry one for protection or when she had to put a mustang down, and she could get real nuts thinking about Ross and me learning to shoot. I don’t know why I said that about Yolana. Mom got mean in her eyes, glinty, and then got up and walked out. Even in work socks I could feel the vibration of those footsteps. Anyhow, I thought, how could Dad and Mom ever have gotten back together? They were just too different about guns and mustangs and what a woman should and shouldn’t do.

Feelings don’t stop, they just turn bad. Powerful, still, but mean-hearted. If Mom and Dad were roped in to each other’s lives, it didn’t necessarily mean love, did it? He married Yolana, not Mom. First he married Mom and then he married Yolana.

I wasn’t home a lot after that. Home was Dad with Yolana and a poodle or two on his lap, Dad in ways I didn’t know him. I wasn’t used to the sound of his laughter. Except when Dad was out in the fields, he and Yolana were always together, always sneaking up on each other like little kids or out doing target practice together and getting so wrought up grabbing each other they went back to their bedroom midday.

Ross got their attention often enough by breaking curfew or coming home drunk or telling Dad he was getting an after-school job off the ranch. But I didn’t fit in at all.

One day I came home near dinnertime and I heard voices over by the barn, shouts and squeals. I saw Dad and Yolana under the door to the hayloft. There was an old basketball hop, torn and rusty, up on the side of the barn, and they were shooting baskets, sort of, Dad was chasing Yolana while she tried to dribble. The poodles were yapping and leaping. The sun was out, flashing red highlights onto Yolana’s hair. Yolana was cursing. She saw me then and tossed the ball up between Dad’s hands. I caught it easily. Yolana laughed like bells and feinted right. I passed her the ball. Dad kept diving towards us and we kept dodging and throwing baskets. When Dad finally got the ball, it was him and me against Yolana. She was shorter than both of us; she didn’t have a prayer, but she tackled Dad around his ankles and the two of them went sprawling into a mud puddle. I went to grab the ball. She got my ankle, too, and I went down. Yolana’s hair was covered in straw, and mud was dripping off her face.

“That’s a helluva sight,” Dad said, “my bride in a mud puddle.”

A poodle licked mud off Yolana’s cheek. She moaned and batted the dogs away. Dad caught my eye and winked. He nodded at a pile of straw. We leapt to our feet. He took Yolana’s arms and I took her feet. She was screaming and struggling, and we rocked her, counting one, two. On three we let her fly.

How I found out Yolana was pregnant was a couple weeks before Christmas. She was decorating the tree she bought off Larry down at the Shell station, our first tree since Mom left, and she was up on a stool with an angel for the top and Ross and I were beside

her hanging tinsel and her belly was in between our faces. We both knew then. This ugly lady who'd recently tie-dyed her hair or something and who'd quit her bowling alley job and who lately had been complaining about Dad's being gone too much was pregnant. All that noise Ross and I put pillows over our heads not to hear at night had resulted in this.

Ross waited for Yolana to get that angel up, and then he backed off and narrowed his eyes and said, "So what about this ambush at Loca Canyon?" He was staring right at Yolana's middle.

Yolana stepped down and I admired her legs despite myself. She put a hand on her belly when she saw where Ross was staring. "You should talk to your daddy about it."

"No," said Ross, "You tell me."

"He expects you to come. Brian, you too."

I had never been asked to hunt down mustangs. Ross had before; Ross had done it and not ever said a word to me about what it was like. Sometimes I didn't see how he could do it and help Mom, too, like maybe be with her saving a horse he'd personally shot.

"Well," I said, I don't know about that. Anytime I rode my ATV in the countryside I came across rotting carcasses of mustangs and bleached bones, more all the time. You had to be careful since hitting some you'd go for a ride you never did intend and probably end up with a broken back and crippled for life.

"You can't go," I added. Yolana looked surprised. "You're pregnant, right?"

She sagged into the hairdressing chair. "It shows that much?" Two of the poodles jumped on her lap and she cooed at them.

"You can't go killing horses when you're having a baby," I said. "What if they stampede?"

"I'm as good with a gun as anyone," she said. "Do you know how boring it is around here? I mean, Buddha is as Buddha does, but I'm truly, completely bored." This last was actual whining. "Don't tell your mother, anyway. Not about this kid and not about the mustangs. Promise?"

I slowly nodded. It wouldn't do any good to tell Mom except to stir things up. Ross went stiff. He didn't say anything.

"I didn't really ask to be stuck out here anyhow," Yolana went on. She picked her lip with a long purple nail. "I just got pregnant. It was an accident completely; I didn't even want to have a baby."

Ross turned. He was furious. "Jesus, I can't believe you, Yolana. What's wrong with you?"

She waved him away. "I'm having a baby," Yolana said solemnly. "It's not always so hot an experience, let me tell you. And neither are you, Ross, if you want my honest opinion."

"Fuck," said Ross, jiggling up and down on the balls of his feet, his hands dangling silver tinsel. "I don't know what you want around here."

Yolana got up and spilled poodles. "Well," she said, "I don't either. But this sure ain't it, let me tell you."

"Fuck you," said Ross. One of the dogs yipped at his ankle and he kicked it.

Yolana said, "Fuck you too, you little turd."

Ross stayed quiet. He went dead quiet when Yolana called him a turd and stayed like that for days, quiet as a zoo animal captured and caged and done howling. I tried to get him to talk.

"Ross," I whispered one night. "Ross, are you awake?"

"What is it, Brian?"

"Do you think Yolana's going to leave him?" Since the argument, Yolana wasn't making us breakfast and we were bagging our own lunches. She was gone when we got off the school bus and not back until dinner. I'd taken to coming home after school and starting up chops and roasts, sort of hoping Dad wouldn't realize how much she was away. She did seem to appreciate it. Tonight she'd even gone and kissed me on the cheek. Ross was leaving in six or seven months; I had to go on living here. Not that I liked her. But I was to the point where I hardly noticed her nose.

"I dunno, maybe," Ross said. His voice was throaty and deep.

"Do you think he loves her?"

"What's it matter?" Ross said. I could see him in the dim moonlight stretched on his back, his hands behind his head. His eyes were open. "I think he loves her."

I sat up. A corner of the school's basketball pennant was loose above Ross's bed. "It's really strange around here these days."

"Go to sleep, Brian."

"Don't you think it's weird? Don't you think it's strange with Yolana? How come do you think Dad's been out so much at night lately? He's down at Essie's Bar, you know, he's drinking." I looked at the bedside clock. "It's after one and he's not back yet. Why doesn't he take her with him?"

"Maybe he thinks booze is bad for the baby," Ross offered, his voice thick with sarcasm.

"Are we supposed to get Yolana a Christmas present?" I asked.

"Oh, Brian, go to sleep." Ross turned on his side away from me and pulled his pillow over his head.

"Ross?" His "What?" came out muffled and gray. "I don't want to go on the ambush."

Ross turned back and stared at me. I was about to cry and I hoped he couldn't see that. "No one's twisting your arm," he said.

"Dad is so. Dad says I have to go. He wants me there."

"You can just lose yourself. When we're all saddled up, lose yourself in the crowd. You don't have to shoot anything or even watch." Ross sat up and reached for a cigarette. He smoked for a minute, deeply and then added quietly, "I've never killed a horse." He sighed and pushed his cigarette butt into an old Pepsi can. I heard it sizzle. "We're Mom's sons, I guess. Maybe this new kid will be the son Dad really wants."

"You are," I said harshly. "You're the son Dad wants."

I heard a noise in the living rooms, keys jangling. I took Ross's arm. "Listen. She's going out."

We stayed very still and soon heard Yolana's Honda choke to life and the sound of her car tires on the gravel. Poodles whined and yipped in the living room. "Maybe she's going to find him."

"Who cares?" Ross said and punched his pillow down.

"Give me a smoke," I said loudly, and my voice sounded wrong in all the quiet of the house.

"Ross closed his eye. "You don't know a thing."

"What don't I know?"

"Dad hates us."

"Dad does not."

“Dad thinks we’re sucks. He thinks we’re wimps. Forget I said anything, Brian. Go to sleep.”

“No, he just- Dad just- He’s having problems with Yolana. They had a big fight or something.”

“Who gives, Brian? I’m not talking about her, anyway.” There was a pause. “You really believe he loves us?”

I did believe Dad loved Ross. Ross was his favourite. I was less sure about me.

“You’re retarded,” I said.

“You just don’t get it,” Ross added.

I lay there a long time that night, stewing because I didn’t get it. What time Dad and Yolana came home I never knew, because I finally fell asleep.

The next Saturday night Mom had a meeting to go to. It was my weekend at her house to baby-sit Susan. It was fun being with my little sister. We played Monopoly and cooked marshmallows over the gas stove. I ran the water for her bath and read her a story. It made me think it might be okay having a baby around the house.

When Mom got home, she slammed her purse on the table and started in yelling at me. I backed up, she was so mad.

“I just think I’m getting somewhere and this, Brian, this! What do you know about it? I want answers. Answer me. What do you know?”

“Mom,” I said, “about what?”

“The ambush, young man, as if you didn’t know.”

“What ambush?” I asked. My face got hot. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“The ranchers are planning a mustang ambush.”

“I’m not going,” I said.

Mom said, “Aha!”

“I never even heard about it.”

“Brian, I couldn’t respect your father shooting horses and I’m not about to respect you if you’re doing it. It’s reprehensible.”

“It is not,” I said.

She came up to me. Her eyes were flashing. She said, “Tell me you don’t believe that.” She shook my shoulders. I could smell her perfume, like lilacs. “Tell me you don’t believe that.”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay, I don’t believe it. Let go.”

She backed up and stood at the sink, holding the edge of the counter. Then she wheeled to face me and whispered, “Will Ross be there, too? Is your father making him go?”

“Stop it, Mom,” I said. “Just stop it.”

How I responded to the bunch of them that week before Christmas was to pretend nothing was wrong. Nothing was really wrong, nothing I could put my finger on. I bought Yolana some perfume and wrapped it and put it under the Christmas tree, and she put packages for all us there, too. Ross saw them and grimaced and said, “Merry fucking ho ho,” but Yolana ignored him and so did I. One night I heard Yolana laughing in bed with Dad. Maybe things were going to be all right after all. I wanted to ask Ross if he thought Dad and Yolana had made up, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I couldn’t talk to him at all. Or Mom either. I kept it from her, about the ambush being the day before Christmas, because she couldn’t stop it and nothing she wanted or hoped kept the calendar pages from flipping over. The ambush was planned and I was a part of it. But I caught some of Ross’s cynicism. It was hard to get in the Christmas spirit, even with exams over and school letting up, even with a crèche of baby Jesus in Middleton Park in town. It was just too long a distance from Christ’s birth to the picture of Yolana popping out a baby brother. It was absolutely too far from Santa Clause to killing horses.

The night of the twenty-third we had our first frost. I could hardly sleep and was surprised at how soon three o’clock came around. It was dark when Yolana woke us and cold in the house. It was a clear night. I could see a thick layer of milky frost on the ground outside our window as I pulled on my long underwear, but I didn’t think about signs of snow and maybe having a white Christmas the next day the way I ordinarily would. I only thought how there’d be fewer mustangs in the hills today. As we left our bedroom Ross touched my shoulder.

“Remember, Brian, you don’t have to shoot.”

“I know,” I told him.

The rifles, some of them Dad’s and some of them Yolana’s, were popped up on the couch with our gear. Yolana had put the Christmas tree lights on. I went past into the kitchen and slipped into my chair. My mouth was gluey and I had knots in my stomach. Yolana

served us oatmeal. I poured milk on mine and put on three spoonfuls of brown sugar. I took a bit and let it sit in my mouth. Everyone else was eating; no one was saying more than "Pass the juice" and like that. I chewed for a minute and then pushed my bowl away.

"I'm not hungry, I guess," I said.

"I'll eat it," Ross said. "Pass it here."

Yolana was eating steadily. Her free hand was rubbing her belly, and her eyes were sort of dreamy and distant. The poodles had roused themselves briefly when we woke up, but they were all asleep now at the side of the kitchen in their pink-and-blue baskets. I loved any time that they were quiet.

Ross finished my oatmeal and said, "I'll saddle the horses."

"Wait," Dad said.

Ross looked at him, annoyed.

"It's your brother's first time. I expect you to watch out for him."

"I'll be okay," I said, embarrassed, but Dad was still watching Ross.

"No more hanging back, Ross. No more broken girths. I want you beside Brian every moment. Do you understand?"

Yolana said, "Ross will be fine."

Ross, startled, looked at her. His face was red. He turned to Dad and said, "Yes, sir."

"I expect your active participation," Dad went on. "I want to see the kind of marksman you are."

"I said I heard you."

Yolana said, "Oh," and looked down.

Dad said to Ross, "It's understood, then?"

Yolana smiled wide as a barn and pushed her chair back. "That's the baby," she announced. "It's kicking!"

She didn't look at Dad, she looked at me. I smiled back at her. I guessed she wanted her baby after all.

“I said, ‘Yes, sir,’” Ross said.

“Did you hear me?” Yolana asked Dad. “This baby’s kicking. You should feel it. I’m getting punched, inside out. Oh, holy cow, this is really something. Give me your hand.”

Ross and I went out to saddle the horses and left them like that. Dad bent over Yolana, his hand on her stomach. In the living room, green and red and yellow Christmas lights reflected off the gun barrels as smudges.

The plan was to meet up with the other ranchers at the east mouth of Loca Canyon. A stallion watered his herd at a stream running through it, and that herd was our target. We rode, Dad and Yolana and me and Ross, through the quiet. Yolana had tucked canteens of hot coffee in our saddlebags, and though I was already cold ten minutes into it. I didn’t touch mine. Nobody knew how long we’d have to wait. Shadows from the sparse low clouds moved eerily on the ground. Our horses’ hooves cracked ice in puddles.

We met about a dozen other ranchers. There were some jokes about Yolana’s being there, and I for one didn’t know why Dad had let her come, her kid kicking and all, but he had. Except for that, it was a grim, silent affair with tight, sour men. What we were doing was against the law, whether the law was right or wrong. The horses snorted and their breath formed clouds in the dark air. We followed a cattleman named Jim down a trail where the rock face was over our heads, fifteen or more feet high, down to the mouth of Bodeca Stream.

We tethered the horses behind a front of junipers, leaving each with a feedbag attached to its bridle, and hiked in to hide ourselves in a copse of purple sage. Ross sat beside me on the frozen ground. We pulled out our canteens and drank, our shoulders brushing together. I was shaking with cold and huffed into my hands to warm them. Jim told us where the mustangs would appear and who was to aim where and who would cut off the south exit, and after that no one spoke, we all just stared towards the stream. It was calm, like glass, with a dim reflection of the canyon walls. The sky was starting to lighten. Above the canyon we could see shades of deep bruisy blue and lines of orange.

I don’t know how long it was before the mustangs came, probably no more than a half hour. My breath caught in my throat; I couldn’t believe how beautiful they were. A roan stallion led. He stopped, smelled the air, tossed his head and pawed the ground. I heart it, his hoof clattering on the rock; we were that close. His nostrils sent our ragged plumes of steam and he whinnied. But after a moment he pranced forward, high-stepping and going part sideways. A passel of mares followed him. I tried counting them but couldn’t keep them clear when I got past thirty. I noticed one piebald and four or five palominos, some pintos. There were many foals. Ross and I were way off the right of the men, on the periphery, with a good view of the whole. The horses crossed the sand and gravel and waded into the stream up to their fetlocks. Ripples went out over the water. I watched their mirror images float up to meet them as they lowered their heads to drink. The sun was rising; its first rays shot over the canyon walls. Manes shook. The stallion nipped a mare on the neck. I zeroed in on the closest dam. While she drank her little colt

snuggled up to nurse on her, clicking his tail. I had two pictures: that mare and her foal on its spindly legs, and an overall picture of Loca Canyon, the blue-grey colour of its walls and the herd in the partial light, drinking. The mares were whickering softly; I could nearly feel their soft lips vibrating and their steamy breath. I completely forgot why I was there, witnessing them; I just watched, watched their muscles and rumps and manes and big eyes, the bunch of them clustered together. Time slowed down and sped up all at once. I never thought a thing. When Jim gave the sign from off to the left, I nodded, like someone had set me on automatic.

Beside me Ross melted away, or that's what it seemed like. I raised the rifle to my shoulder like I'd watched Dad and Yolana do so many times and I put that mare in my sights and my stiff finger on the trigger. I think I heard Ross but I don't know what he said. I felt his hand grab my elbow as I fired. I jerked back with the retort. My bullet, the first fired by anyone, went in. The horse didn't realize. There was no panic. Her head was raised and her ears twitched, listening, but she never figured it out. She just turned to the beach and slowly her legs buckled. I watched her fall. Ross yanked my gun away. I still watched. She hit the sand heaving, her eyes still open. Blood that looked black bubbled out her mouth. Her colt nosed at her side, butting her.

I heard gunfire. I felt serene despite the screams and mad buckling of the mustangs and the men's shouts and the cracks of gunshot. I just sat and stared at the mare I'd killed. I'd cut her down. All the other men and Yolana were moving closer into the fray, some cutting off the horses at the south exit, some plugging downed horses a second time, or orphaned foals. I didn't notice Dad anywhere. I was in a kind of trance when I swung my head around because was shouting.

"Stop it!" he cried, running out.

I heard Dad cry out, too, and then, distinctly, a gunshot separated off from the rest.

Everything went blurry. The sun was fully up. I turned to discover who had shot but it was impossible to tell. Too many men stood armed. I saw Yolana raise her hand to her mouth. I turned back to see Ross falling just as the mare had, fluidly, like water, and everywhere men were quitting the slaughter, leaving the live and dead horses and converging on Ross, yelling, blocking my view as Ross sank with a perfect O shaping his mouth.

"Mom?" I said quietly, touching her arm. "Dad says to tell you we're going home now."

We were in the waiting room of the Nickel Springs Hospital. We had been there all day while Ross was operated on and recovering. He was going to be okay; the bullet had missed everything vital. But it was in a dozen bits. The bullet's removal, the surgeon said, had been a delicate and nerve-racking procedure. Now Mom looked up at me with such a cold, wintry anger I started. She hardly seemed pretty at all. Susan was curled partly in a chair and partly in her lap, asleep, and Mom had a hand laid on her head.

“The doctor says Ross is out of danger, so we’re going home.”

Mom didn’t answer. She hadn’t spoken to me all day, since we carried Ross in.

Dad came up beside me, his arm around Yolana. “We’re going now,” he told Mom. Out in the hallway nurses passed on rubber soles.

Mom looked down at Susan’s head, at her own hand against it.

Yolana was carrying her coat in her free arm, her hand rotating on her belly. You could really see she was pregnant.

“I said we have to go,” Dad repeated. “Ross’ll be fine.”

“He’s okay, Mom,” I said.

She refused to even look up. An empty coffee cup was tipped over on the chair next to her.

“Come on, Brian,” said Dad. “There’s nothing more we can do here.”

When I didn’t move, he nodded to Yolana, and the two of them walked away. At the door Yolana pulled free from Dad and came back beside us. She touched Mom’s arm.

“He’s a good boy, your Ross is.”

Ross was. I knew it was true. It was me who wasn’t. I felt a deep shame. I had a mark on my index finger where I’d pulled that trigger and imprinted it and a bruise on my shoulder from the rifle butt. I both did and didn’t want Mom to know I’d shot a mare. I wanted her to know and forgive me. Suddenly that’s all I wanted, to tell Mom I’d made a mistake.

Yolana said, “Are you coming, Brian?" and I nodded.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Mom,” I said. My voice cracked.

She looked up and saw me with those blue eyes. I waited. I waited some more. Hard as I tried, I couldn’t tear myself away.

“I’m sorry,” I finally whispered.

Mom just kept looking at me.

When I finally turned, Yolana and Dad were out of sight, but I walked down the hall anyway, towards the outside doors, away from my mother.