

Billy Brown

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I watched her walk into a field. The kind of field didn't matter. I noticed how buff her hips looked underneath her dress. The horses had been roped in and tied up. Six horses were slaughtered with chainsaws, not very meticulously, and their bodies were scattered deep inside the field — alongside the wheat, or the corn, or whatever it was. The sun had already baked most of the innards, so the smell was almost green. Their heads were all brown and slender and their teeth gapped and discolored. If god were to spit, he would spit out teeth that big. "Six horses tied up like pigs," I heard her say. "Like pigs," as if pigs were a lowlier type of animal. People called it a massacre. Get that — a massacre right outside my little, gray house.

"There's something in the water that's keeping you stupid, Billy Brown—something terrible," she said. She was in everyone's business, so I wasn't the only one that got it from her. The bottom half of her looked like a drum dressed in a bowl-shaped shell. For some reason, I always thought her name suited that big body

of hers. It was a short name, but big-sounding, almost weighty. “OLGA.” The sound of her name was waterlogged. Like waders stuck in mud and heavy with fish. Her name is small, but she is like a kick to some poor guy’s head. She drove by my house just to tell me that there were doves nesting in my plant outside. This was big news to her. Big, goddamn news! What did she think I would do? As if I cared about the birds in my front yard. Fucking doves. It wasn’t like a gang of wombats had taken over my yard. Hell, storks would have been more interesting.

I told her I didn’t mind the doves, and, because I didn’t mind, she told me I looked like a bear lost in the woods. She happened to be right about that. She reminded me that it was the last existing plant in my front yard and that I should keep better care of it. That I should keep better care of myself is what she meant. Then she drove down the street like a crazy old woman without a license, rubbing her front tire along the curb. You could see her great, big hands squeezing the steering wheel, jerking it left and right way more than was necessary. She didn’t honk the horn on her way out, but she did give me the stiffest middle finger I’d ever seen

I always knew what type of girl she was. I knew she was the type of girl that would hit a man in the head with a frying pan. Now, I had no proof of her ever doing something like that, but it seemed very likely that she would. She wasn’t a pussycat or a babe, but one time I heard her ask someone, “Am I still your girl?” That was before she knew everything about everyone.

That was way before she became turned on to what happened to all of those horses. Every time she went into that field, I watched her with these huge binoculars right on my face. She inspected the scene as if she could actually be of use to anyone and pretended to be a professional that could answer everyone’s questions — a sort of crime-solver. She squatted down and got low to the ground with her elbows on her knees (as if touching the dirt made her more credible) and scratched her chin. Then she put her hands on her hips and said, “You know you can count on me — right, guys?” like some tomboy just hanging around the older boys. No one ever wanted her around, but they let her stay. After a while, they probably just stopped listening—tuned her out, the way men do with their wives.

Or maybe they felt sorry for her, the way she followed people around and eavesdropped. With all of the time spent in the field with those dead animals, all she could think of was, “Why didn’t whoever did this just toss the horses off a cliff and into the water?” The lameness of the question clung to the field like a deep freeze. It was the only real thing she had said all morning. I sat slumped in my chair with a pretty big desire to see Olga naked, even though I never really liked her as a person. Whenever I sat like that, my pants bunched up and made me look potbellied. She told me I looked like I was wearing diapers, and, if I wasn’t, that I probably needed to anyway. Maybe she thought I shat my pants every time she came near me. She had such a brutish style about her, I’m sure plenty of people messed their pants when she came along. She could spit out all the insults she wanted. I still thought about her with her clothes off. I smiled a lot when I thought about her that way, and she’d catch me with my mouth all open and she’d think it was the wall that was making me so happy. She’d say something nasty about how “bricks make good conversation,” and she’d walk away with those huge hips remaining sturdy underneath her clothes. The top half of her body was soft – kind of mushy, I guess – and I liked thinking that she was born without a ribcage. I imagined her torso feeling like putty and daydreamed about having sex with her. I imagined telling her after lovemaking that I wanted to braise her, cut her up, and make her into sandwiches. Then, I’d tell her we’d feed each other these sandwiches in bed, and she’d think I was very charming and say that we should have done that a long time ago. “You want to eat me up?” she’d say. “I’d like to eat you up, too.” Not knowing if my fantasy would sit well with anyone, I kept it to myself. If I told her in real life, she’d probably say something her mother used to say, like, “Put that conversation in a jar and on the shelf.”

Horses never meant that much to me. A lot of things never meant that much. The only things that came to mind when I thought of horses were horseshoes, races, and glue. The fact that there was a big investigation about these six horses happening right across from my house didn’t seem to matter all that much. Besides, the only reason the police were making such a big fuss was that, in small towns, everybody usually has very little to do, and also

because horses take up so much space. Even from far away, you're able to make out the shape of their heads and the slope of those unmistakable crests. They called it a "massacre" because it was the biggest thing to happen in a long time. Small towns belong only to themselves and don't make much sense to people outside. In a small town, rain slows people down, and everyone waits indoors until it stops. Small towns don't show up on maps or recover from tragedy all that well.

I couldn't complain about the way Olga bullied everyone around her. When born from her mother, she probably popped out with her fists curled up, ready to push her parents around. "A fat bundle of grief" might be a good way of describing her as a newborn. Her parents always seemed like hardworking people – very sweaty and "blue-collar." Her father liked telling the story of being in the delivery room during Olga's birth. He supposedly waved a little Russian flag around on a six-inch stick as Olga's mother screamed and panted with her legs wide open in the air. He opened the story by saying, "She slapped my face so hard and so many times because of it. She was panting like a dog, but I just kept on grinning and waving that little flag around like no one's business." They weren't even Russian, but they did have a lot of those Russian nested dolls around the house. "She was a blushing, wet dog," Olga's father said, "reddened and mortified by pain. What a memory."

As children, we were neighbors. She was always heavy. Because I kept to myself, I was usually mistaken for a retard. That never bothered me much. As a child, she loved telling me, "You know, Billy Brown, when god runs out of the good parts, retards are born instead of regular babies." Too many times, I just carried all of those insults with me, but I bounced back quickly enough – enough that I noticed how wide her legs were and how her thighs smashed together whenever she wore shorts.

Eventually, the police came around to interview farmers and other people that knew the town well. They took a lot of notes, especially when a recent widow, Marla D., mentioned a suspicious-looking man "who spoke with some red in it. You know, Native American." The police figured that a widow wouldn't have any reason to make something like that up. They took her very seriously

and asked more questions. She went on to tell the two policemen that he “walked a little funny” and that “he was a real spooky character.” Last time I remember, she thought I was “real spooky” because she never heard me say anything in public. According to Marla, everything about this suspicious man was either spooky or “just not right.” It had been three months since her husband had died and she still wore the short hat-veil she had on at the funeral. She’d lift up her veil every now and then to whisper something she thought was profound, but too insensitive to say outright about the way the Native American man looked or about “those people” in general. There was a small group of Native Americans in town that bought their groceries quietly and for the most part kept to themselves. They stayed mostly invisible in the damp outskirts of the town. People like Marla felt they were always up to something. “They’d been eyeballing their haunches – probably to make some type of soup with them,” she said. “They’d probably eat those horses raw if they could.” People like Marla weren’t exactly budding with table manners. The last thing she mentioned was that he wore a hat. She told the police to “be careful when it comes to tall men wearing hats. Abraham Lincoln wore a hat, you know.” The police thought it best not to write that last bit down.

“You eat like a fucking goat, Billy.” Around the time the police kept pressing people for information, Olga was always over in my kitchen cooking food for me, even if I didn’t feel like eating. I put hot sauce on everything and ate my way down each place setting like a little worker bee. “All you care about is stuffing your face, Billy. Not once have you asked about what’s going on in that field.” She had all of these scarves wrapped around her neck and I was having trouble taking her seriously. “Oh, that’s just fine, Billy. Laugh. I’m sure you were laughing when those horses were getting their heads lopped off.”

I was tired of hearing her say my name. With a mouthful of mayonnaise and green potatoes I said, “No one invited you here. You just jammed yourself right in my kitchen and started taking out my pans and banging around. Who needs this much potato salad anyway?” I knew I was making a mess of things and that she probably wouldn’t cook for me again.

“Well, maybe you need to have your head lopped off, Billy Brown.” The sound of her legs rubbing against each other tailed off as she hustled her way through the living room. Olga really knew how to slam a door. She left my kitchen looking like it hosted a drunken wedding reception. Finger foods and appetizers were strewn all over, staining the counter I had just put a nice, creamy varnish on.

So why chop up six horses and scatter them all over a field? No one, not even the police, managed to come up with a good answer. The town became noticeably different. People seemed sentimental. The morning the police finally disposed of the body parts, a lot of people came out to the field just as they put away the remaining horse heads in a sack. Everybody that lined the field seemed devastated; they were almost grieving for these heavy farming horses that had these huge, goofy eyes. What came over them was real, but still difficult to understand. I only thought of them as animals that worked, got fed and pissed fat streams of urine. All of a sudden everybody got very romantic about these horses that my mother once described as “overgrown pack mules.” They were so bogged down with emotion. It’s likely these people had been affected from the beginning and were just realizing it now. Even the dogs were affected. These great hunting dogs seemed to mourn the death of those six clumsy animals. Olga was there with all of her scarves, straddling the perimeter of the field and commenting on how all of the onlookers looked constipated and how the town was “in a twist.”

Later, I was home thinking about how sleazy I felt. How my spying had led me to living with my binoculars leashed around my neck. I wondered if this was how I was meant to live my life. Living like those seagulls that always look like puppets on strings – clumsy marionettes spending their whole lives hovering over the same bread that beachgoers pitch to them as an activity. I had never worn a tuxedo or painted with watercolors before. I was caught wasting my time and my hope on this monstrous woman, in this sluggish town. I saw myself, years away, straddling my pastel toilet waiting for her next movement, then suddenly stumbling and cracking my head on the bathtub from the shock of seeing her undress. I know I

had been good at something early on in my life and probably could have made a good living from it. All of my ambition had been wiped for some woman who spat like a man. A woman the size of a truck that made fun of everything, from my stinking house to the way I wore my beard. It wasn't Olga's fault. I had carefully considered and crafted my own coffin to very specific details. Olga would probably buy a big, pink ticket to see me bury myself. I'd be stretched out on a movie screen, trying to close the lid on my casket while she pigged out on candy and popcorn. I'd be buried by the time she finished her drinks. It had been a long weekend, and all I wanted was to be something better.

All that wanting led me to those horses. It seemed unimaginable. They didn't deserve any of it. They only waited to get fed, to work in the field, and to be ridden by their owners. They had a simple routine that started early in the morning, so the chaos was new to them. The police decided that the horses were killed because someone was looking for something inside all six of them. The killer shoveled through the stomach first, then the intestines. He cut them up and dug around their bowels, half expecting the organs to talk back to him. What he wanted was still unknown, but it must have been something valuable to have hacked into six live animals.

It seemed that those horses meant more to me than I thought. They lived across from my house for 16 years, and, for 16 years, we were somehow bound. So consumed in my imagination, I rarely noticed them, but managed to know all of their names. I wanted to build a giant statue commemorating all six of them. Their eyes would be studded with silver, their manes whipping around. But the urge to immortalize them came and went very quickly. I realized I was not a sculptor and that the most art I was capable of creating would be shown up by a throng of finger paintings. It would be inadequate and out of shape.

Olga came to me with special tidings and a great big bow on her throat. I expected her to tell me she was pregnant, but instead told me that police had found the people responsible for the murders. "The Logs," she said. She explained that The Logs were a gross bunch of boys. They called themselves that because they took big shits and stood around comparing them in order to compete for

some backwoods honor that only a raunchy brigade of adolescents would find worthwhile. They were young, deprived, disorderly, and full of scabs. They put up tents near the woods of some other small town and even wore matching robes to highlight their bond. Two of the boys were jocks, one other liked to be called Elvis, and there was a little one with Attention-Deficit Disorder that all the other boys told to “stop chasing butterflies.” While she told me all of this, I thought that she’d make a terrible mother but a good midwife. She was so excited about the news, she was hysterical. The boys were brought in to be questioned by the police. She kept saying, “What a blessing! What a blessing!” She said it so many times, I thought snowflakes would fly out of her butt. I told her that, too, but she was so high she didn’t even care. She didn’t call me a moose or anything. She just sat cockeyed while her girdle showed through her dress. Her nostrils looked lopsided as she spoke about those boys, and I realized how ugly her face was. Makeup or a brown bag couldn’t save her. You couldn’t pimp her out if you tried. Those adolescent boys wouldn’t even consider involving her in a hazing ritual. She had a face that could curdle the sex industry and dull the sharpest libidos. Kissing a face like that would be the result of a bad dare – at least in this lighting.

I wanted to tell her about the sculpture I had considered making. I wanted to tell her that she looked like a gorilla sitting in my armchair. I asked her about the bow around her neck. She told me it was symbolic of a closed case and handed me one to tie around my neck. All morning she had been giving them to people around town – going door-to-door with curly ribbons hanging out of a shoulder bag that looked like a purple bladder. She tied them around mailboxes and the limbs of trees if no one was home. “Those boys aren’t smart enough to do something like that,” I said. She ignored me. Her hands looked muscular as she reached to take the ribbon out of my hand. “Hey, those boys don’t know what to do with their shoelaces. You really expect this stinking mess out of them? Olga, you know I’m right.” Those boys were dirty, but they were mama’s boys. If any one of those boys got caught for doing something he shouldn’t have done, his bibbed face would be nestled deep in his mother’s cleavage. They were the kind of boys that would

watch their sisters undress and then light their underwear on fire. “They didn’t kill those horses. They don’t have that kind of sweat,” I said. They were babies.

“What do you know about it, huh?” she said. Asking that question seemed to make her tired. “What do you know about anything? You still have pumpkins in your yard from last Halloween. You didn’t even bother to carve any of ’em.” She was obviously upset.

“They’re decoration,” I said.

Olga had her purse full of ribbons on her lap. She jammed her fist into the slouchy organ bag and pulled out her sunglasses. “I come to you so that you can sit there and listen. To tell you stories about these boys and dead horses. Not to get your opinion on things. Just sit there and scratch your butt like you always do and keep mum.” It was hard to take her seriously with dark, rectangular Ray Bans on her face and my pinhead reflection in them. “You’re such a sad case,” she went on. “Do you have a girl yet, Billy?”

“Yea,” I said. “She wears a brown bag on her head, and I keep her under the bed when I don’t want to deal with her.” Maybe Olga was just hungry. She had a gross temper when she was hungry. One that made you want to jump off a bridge. Her tantrums could go on for yards at a time. I thought about telling her that.

“Figures,” she said. “Maybe, if you stopped daydreaming about me, you would find a girl of your own. You practically hump my legs when I walk through the door.”

It had been a long time since I experienced so much anger. The last time I felt something like that, I was a teenager punching walls. It started with a few dimples here and there. By my final year of high school, the walls looked like they had been bludgeoned by a metal baton. The room was so pock-marked, posters and stickers weren’t enough to hide the welts. It got so bad, my parents didn’t know what to do with me. I swallowed some of my anger and asked, “What does any of that have to do with those shit-stained boys?” Olga seemed startled by my cussing in front of her. She didn’t know how much I really enjoyed it. This was the first time a bad word had dribbled out of my mouth while in her presence. I felt like I burned her without even doing much and it felt good. I stood up, opened the door with two shaking hands, and waited with my arms crossed.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Nothing,” she said. She walked out of the house with all of her ribbons and put her foot through one of my pumpkins on the way to her car. “Nothing at all,” she said with pumpkin guts all over her shoe.

“They were rotten, anyway,” I said, shutting the door.

There was still heat coming off the parked car that had been there for an hour already. Bird shit was all over the hood and passenger window, which made the car look like it had been baptized by a gang of rock pigeons. There were some real whoppers, too. Some looked like gray whoopee pies and others like globs of yogurt. It was a kind of Frankenstein car, with parts taken from junkyards and old family cars. Surprisingly, her engine hadn’t melted away yet. She probably would have done better had she propelled the car with her feet.

Olga and I hadn’t talked for a week, and her Flintstone car was the only thing that was left of her. A car fit to be condemned was what I looked at instead of her. She could have been miles away, and I still would have felt like I had sand in my lungs.

Whenever I hadn’t seen her in a while, I thought of her as a better person. I somehow forgot how laborious it was just listening to her. When she was around me I couldn’t wait for her to leave, and, when she went home, I thought of her in watercolors. She was pale pink and yellow, watermarked and altogether breathtaking. She wasn’t this overbearing hick with boldness sputtering out of control. Someone told me to let it go — to let her go — and I thought that was a good idea, but I never followed through. I went on thinking about her in cozy pastels that made her effortless. In my mind, Olga was a rose-colored saint that made my stomach ripple in a good way. She was a pencil sketch coated in a gold wash that made everything look like a bonfire. Everything was so fucking memorable. I’d bring her a glass of water, and she’d actually thank me and then testify to her faith in me as a good man. I wanted her to make the sound that sheep make and make me laugh. In my dreams, we sail along a random body of water, eating catfish out of a glove. I don’t even like fish! Somehow, all my dreams with her are breezy and so on, and so on, and so on.

The whole racket with the spray paint and the tepid colors – the coolness of everything – was so damn gratifying that I forgot about what she really was. My mind held the abridged version. It was the Olga that made me want to bounce back from a bad night and made my heart pitter with that nostalgic glee from my teenage years. She wasn't the Olga that was always on the brink of wild unrestraint. She was springy; she was buoyant; or her wings weren't clipped. In real life, if she asked me for water, I'd bring her a tub of it and drown her in it. "Are you looking for water? I'll give you water. I'll give you all the water you want."

The horse disaster was now weeks old, and the intensity of it all had softened. There were still articles in the newspaper about "The Logs" and what their families were enduring because of it. Pictures of their mothers coddling them were published. Everyone ate it up. The boys were locked up, temporarily, until everything was sorted out.

The brightness of a day often depends on the mood of the person that walks outside. It has nothing to do with the weather. Now that Olga and I weren't communicating, I started talking to other people. Real people that had something close to actual lives. Conversations with people other than Olga were difficult at first. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't understand the things I was supposed to talk about. Things just flew out of my mouth. I told Franklin, the best plumber in town, "I have a bad habit of clipping my toenails during my bowel movements."

He didn't take long to respond, "You clip your nails on the commode? You shit while you do it?"

"Yes," I said.

"Oh," he said, "how embarrassing. I do that, too. Plus, I'm obsessed with looking back at the toilet when I'm done. You know, to see what I've worked for." There are times when silence counts, when it makes sense. This was not one of those times. I felt relieved, rebellious even. I found that, if I spoke to people, they spoke back – kindly or unkindly, it didn't matter. Franklin didn't stop. He went on and on, "Sometimes I'll look and they're gone. Suckers will slip right past you." It was like he was just waiting to say all of that to someone. He had been freed of something, too.

I even had something to say to that cadaver, Marla D. It was more of a sound, really. I got right in her ear and tapped my hand over my mouth and made the sound that children are taught to think Native Americans make. It was kind of like, “owa-wa-wa-wa-wa!” She was such a bitch. God, I really loved stinking up her day. All she could do was scrunch up her face and humph. I wasn’t a counselor, just sitting and listening, and I wasn’t spying. I was so overcome, I was tripping all over myself. There were these triggers inside of me, spanking my muscles all at once, telling them to move. Telling me to whoop and holler with the likeness of a clown.

My father taught me to eat up whatever I was feeling. “Eat all of it until your teeth hurt,” he told me the day my mother jumped off a bridge with a rope around her neck. He had been in a funk all of his life. “Let regret cushion her blow,” he said. He then scattered her ashes over a bed of coals that draped the wells outside of our house. After he went inside the house, he filled the flower pots, took off his shoes, and shot himself. I was still a young man, but I drove myself and his body to the canyon that he loved visiting as a boy. I buried him near the mortar and fog. Their deaths were puzzling and hasty, but I saw my parents as phantom props more than able-minded caretakers. There was nothing to be heartbroken about. They were depleted by the time they became parents. On the drive towards my father’s ditch, I remember feeling useful. It was the first time I had ever driven alone. A pivotal moment was leaning my elbow against the open window and smoking a cigarette.

“The best feeling in the world is resting your doggies on the couch,” Paul said. He was a construction worker that built houses for a living. We spoke while he peed over wild shrubs near a concrete wall; some trickled down to the tips of his shoes. “I don’t like looking at my feet much,” I said. “Yea, man, I respect that,” Paul buckled his pants. “So what do you do, man? Seen you with that cow, man, all the time. What’s she gotta be – 2-250?” he said. “Something like that,” I said. “Eh, but you like that, huh? You always sniffin’ her butt when I see you two. Nothin’ wrong with any of that. She does look like a real bitch, though. Vampire bitch, man,” he said.

“Vampire bitch?” I said.

“Yea, she’ll bleed you dry. I’m pretty sure I’m the first one to

make that up,” he said. Paul looked really proud of himself. There was nothing discreet about any of this. It was just pure, distasteful small talk. The conversation was almost brotherly, and I hardly knew him. I just asked him how I could get into construction work, and he started telling me about his time in jail and how many men he had to “tango” with while he was locked up. He was gritty and stupid, but I liked him. He was a straightforward guy, but he’d still put turds in a paper bag and fire them up on your front porch. If he wanted to, Paul could sport a Mohawk without feeling self-conscious and cook beans on his car engine. He was super slim, but he’d probably beat my ass to a cruddy paste on the wall. “So what do you do?”

Paul had his shirt wrapped around his head like a turban. I stared at the bones in his chest as I spoke, “Well, I live alone. I stay put mostly. I spy on that vampire bitch a lot. Try to catch her undressing when I can.” Paul laughed at that part. “You are filthy, man.”

I took my time in finishing my answer. I spoke gently to him without looking at his face, “I killed all those horses, you know? The chainsaw, the whole thing, I did that. That’s ‘what I do.’”

Paul looked down at his shoes before he bent over, as if to pick something up. He seemed lethargic, almost catatonic – not the bucking Paul I started to know. I realized he vomited all over himself, his building materials, and my shoes. He sat squat on the ground, “It’s not you, man.” He wiped flecks of whatever-it-was off his face. Paul was faint, and his body lumbered in order to stand up. “I just wasn’t expecting that kind of shit. That musta been a real ‘fuck you’ to the town,” he said.

“It wasn’t anything like that,” I said. It was then that the moment between Paul and me whirlpooled and faded. The last thing I remember is the sound of a very small child yelling out, “Look at their feathers!” I never saw Paul again.

Before trampling my way through that field, I hadn’t left my house in over 10 years. Weeks after the death of my father, I became an Olympic shut-in. Hell, I was born to do it. I talked to every corner of my house, and they all spoke back to me. They didn’t say things about Jesus or anything wild like that. I wasn’t batty. I knew they

were just walls. I knew furniture was just furniture and not the 12 apostles or something. Before I trampled my way through that field, boys threw eggs at my bedroom window. Once, to cool the room down as I slept, I left the window open and one of their eggs landed right on my face. If they had gotten close enough, they would have seen a grown man sleeping without clothes on, and on a bed without sheets. I made meals for myself, I slept, I let myself totter in the dark. I grew to hate the town. I grew to hate its size, its pettiness. I was docked and wallowing aimlessly, often naked, inside my house. But something, for some reason, made me want to be a part of it.

I looked at the town through my kid window and noticed six horses standing in a semi-circle, some sleeping, others manning the grounds. All of them unruffled. All of them with muscles jutting from their thighs and necks. I hurried to lace up my boots and ran out to the field, otherwise naked, with bald shoulders and my stomach hanging out. I was out of breath by the time I reached the field, with cold dripping out of my nose. I should have worn clothes. I didn't have time for clothes. It was night-time; there was hardly any light, so I rummaged through the barn and found drills, metal scraps, and other tools hanging from the walls. Finally, tucked away on the darkest shelf, pointy teeth the color of gunmetal peeked through years and years of dust and dirt. I had made up my mind. I was a lumberjack – no, a logger. At times, there were moments of painful clarity. I had done something. I was going to get away with it. I knew that. Shortly after, the frenzy came, and I opened my door to it. With all of the craziness, Olga came, too. She was as big as a fishing boat, just as I remembered her, and eager to catch up with me. My life was suddenly resuscitated, albeit with monsters at my side. Things, for a moment, were waking up, and I had to start wearing clothes again.

Now I remain, reside – whatever you care to call it – in the Mojave. There is the shape of two power lines in the distance. Within this landscape, their presence is imposing, almost farcical, but they exist. Right between the mountains and those beloved Joshua trees, they exist.