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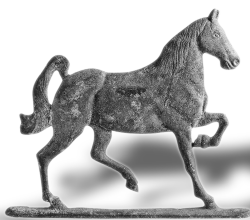
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1

My mom used to say, “Winnie Willis, in the beginning God created heaven and earth and horses. And sometimes I have to wonder if the good Lord shouldn’t have quit while he was ahead.”

She knew that was how I felt. She always knew.

I wished Mom could have been right here with me, riding bareback, riding double. Instead, white fog thick as a horse’s tail made everything feel upside down as my sister and I headed home from the stable, keeping to the dirt path. I’d never thought of July in Ohio as foggy.

Lizzy, my “little sis,” darted past me to walk the dirt path backwards while talking as fast as a horse’s trot. At 11 years old—a solid year

younger than me—she towers two inches over me. We both got Mom’s green eyes and dark hair, but Lizzy dodged the freckles. Lizzy claims my voice is low and raspy and would sound great on the radio, but I think I always sound a little hoarse.

“Winnie?” Lizzy’s voice, usually soft as a Morgan mare’s winter coat, sharpened. “Have you heard a word I’ve said?”

“Nope,” I answered, picking up the scent of pines and poplar trees from the fields . . .

. . . *and maybe horse?*

At least a half mile behind us was Stable-Mart, the sorry excuse for a stable, where I had the royal job of mucking out stalls. Anything to be near horses.

“I said . . .,” Lizzy shouted, like the problem was something her volume could fix, “I’m cooking my famous tuna casserole—Dad’s favorite. I want him to *love* living in Ashland!”

I sighed.

“Winnie!” Lizzy said. “Dad could yank us out of Ohio and move us again to who-knows-where!”

I shrugged.

“How can you not care? I want to go to the

whole sixth grade here!" Lizzy demanded. "I can't even remember where I finished fourth grade! Today Eddy Barker asked me where I'd gone to fifth grade. I told him, 'The *I* states—Illinois, Indiana, and . . .' What was the last one? Oh yeah—'Iowa.' Well not this year! Huh-uh! No way, Winnie."

*I* could remember every school, down to the missing *L* in Mil\_er Elementary. I could picture the cracks in my desk in Chicago, the paint at the left bottom corner of the window in Des Moines Middle School.

When I was in first grade in Wyoming, we found out I have a photographic memory. *Not* a super memory—just a photographic one. If my mind doesn't snap a picture when something happens, I still forget stuff.

Dad always thought I should be a better student, back when he thought about things like that. I admit, sometimes my memory works great on names and dates for history tests. It's like I can still see words and numbers on a page.

But a photographic memory is not so great for getting rid of pictures I *don't* want in my head—like the upside-down car and my mother's arm, limp as a ribbon over the steering wheel.

I picked up a rock and pitched it as far as I could. We'd moved five times in the two years since we'd sold our ranch in Wyoming. Ashland, Ohio, didn't seem much different than the other places, only smaller.

"Well, *you* may not care about anything, Winnie," Lizzy continued, "but I do! I like it here. Crickets! Ponds filled with frogs! Roly-polies—the cutest little bugs! And I've never seen so many trees—"

"Lizzy, shush!" I held out my hand like I was stopping traffic. The ground shook—not much, but enough.

Fog pressed against my eyeballs.

Ahead of us, from down the hill through the mist, something thumped.

"Don't tell me to—!" Lizzy started.

"Shh-hh!" I strained to hear it—*ta-dump, ta-dump, da-dump, da-dump*, closer and louder.  
*Horses!*

"Move!" I shouted, shoving Lizzy toward the ditch.

*DA-DUMP! DA-DUMP!* Louder and louder.

"Four of them—no, five!" I yelled, as Lizzy stumbled into the ditch, sputtering something I couldn't make out. I held my ground, knowing

they couldn't be more than a few horses' lengths away.

One of the horses whinnied, a frightened burst of horse sadness and fear that tore at my heart.

"Winnie!" Lizzy screamed from the ditch. "Get out of the way!"

The sound of the horses' hooves pounded inside my chest. I made out a blur of legs under the fog cloud—hooves, pasterns, cannons. The stride of the lead horse made her about 15 hands high.

Like a vision, a white mare, silky mane flying, burst through the fog in front of me.

"Easy, girl," I said, raising my arms shoulder high, making a *T* with my body. "What's the rush?" I held my scarecrow position, not moving, as four other horses closed in behind the mare.

The fog-white horse skidded in front of me, back legs crouching. She reared, pawing the fog, as if fighting invisible cloud horses. Two smaller horses parted behind her, snorting, not knowing whether to head for the hills or wait for her to do battle for all of them.

But I couldn't take my eyes off the ghostly

mare. In the fog she appeared pure white. Her dish jowls, big eyes, and finely carved head left no doubt that she was Arabian. Arabians have black skin, but hers barely showed through her cloud-white coat, only casting a gray shadow near her leg joints.

“You the boss here?” I asked.

Two Quarter Horses, a bay Thoroughbred, and a sunburned black Standardbred formed a half-circle audience.

The mare continued to rear, her front hooves striking the ground, then springing up again. But her heart wasn't in it. The springs grew shorter until they stopped. From the scars at her hocks, her jagged hooves, tangled mane, and the wrinkles above her eyes, no one had loved her for a long time, if ever.

I held the mare's attention in a kind of horse bluff as I muttered to her and kept my position. If I gave in first, she'd figure she ruled me too. And I'd better dive out of her way fast. But if I could make her give to me, she'd know she didn't need to protect herself or her herd from me.

From the ditch, Lizzy started, “Winifred Will—!” But she stopped. Lizzy doesn't like horses, but she knows enough not to yell around them.

She'd seen our mother talk down dozens of hot horses.

Finally, the ghost mare blinked. She looked down, licking her lips, telling me, *Okay, I'll let you handle this.*

"That's my girl," I said, stepping closer. I touched her withers, the high part of her back between the shoulder blades. She let me scratch her neck under her tangled, white mane.

I felt horses galloping a second before I heard the thunder of more hooves. But these sounded different, closer to the ground. The fog had lifted a bit, and I squinted to see two men on chestnut Quarter Horses cantering up the path toward us.

"There they are!" one of the men cried. I knew by his snakeskin boots that he was the Spidells' son, Richard. Richard liked to play stable boss at his dad's Stable-Mart. He reminded me of an overgrown kid playing cowboy. The Spidells owned just about everything in Ashland and never let anybody forget it.

Richard sped up, galloping straight for us. "You! Kid! Get out of the way!"

The Arabian laid back her ears. I felt fear creep back into her muscles as Richard's gelding pulled up beside us.



“Grab that wild animal!” the older man yelled, riding up beside Richard.

The man’s voice startled the mare. She whinnied, then reared once and bolted.

“Help!” Lizzy cried, as the mare headed straight for the ditch—Lizzy’s ditch.

“Lizzy, get down!” I yelled.

The mare never broke stride. She galloped to the ditch and sailed over it, clearing with two feet to spare, her white tail high as a flag.

“Great!” Richard muttered.

The other horses stirred, but looked as if they’d had enough fun for one day and were ready to be led and fed.

“I’ll take these on to the stable. You go after Wild Thing!” Richard shouted at the man, keeping the easy job for himself.

The man’s belly bounced over his saddle horn. His stirrups hung too short, so his legs doubled. He cursed, then took his anger out on his mount, kicking his heels into the docile Quarter Horse.

“You are *so* human,” I muttered.

The poor horse grunted and sprang like a Lipizzaner, then charged the ditch. But instead of taking it, he did a cattle-pony stop that nearly unseated his rider.

“What’s the matter with you?” the man shouted, scrambling to get his seat back. Jerking the reins and regaining his stirrups, he let his horse take the long way down the path.

“Who was that?” I asked, staring after the vanishing white mare.

“That?” Richard said, circling his horse behind the abandoned herd. “Craig Barnum. He does the horse auctions. He’s worthless—couldn’t even get this lot from the auction barn to our stable.”

“Not him,” I said, squinting for the faintest view of the gorgeous mare. “The Arabian. Who is she?”

“She’s a wild thing,” Richard said, spitting the words out. “Dad bought her at auction. He got stung though, if you ask me. That mare’s nothing but trouble.”

Lizzy crawled out of the ditch as Richard trotted off, rounding up the other auction horses.

“Winnie?” Lizzy called. “Coast clear?”

I kept staring at the spot on the horizon where I’d last seen the beautiful, white ghost horse. My photographic memory had snapped a shot, leaving the horse’s image seared into my brain.

“Winnie!” Lizzy shouted, coming to stand next to me. “What are you looking at?”

“The horse I’ve been dreaming about my whole life.”

It was the truth, even though I’d hardly made the connection before the words came out of my mouth. For as long as I could remember, when I’d closed my eyes, I’d been able to picture an Arabian—noble, white, wide-eyed—exactly like this one.

“What are you talking about?” Lizzy demanded.

“Lizzy,” I said, calling up my mind’s picture of the rearing Arabian, “I have to have that horse. And I’ll do whatever it takes to get her.”

