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## WE WERE THE WRANGLERS

by Sherry Lamoreaux

MEN CAME AND WENT through Carroll's Wild West Riding Stable. They drifted through, men with greasy hair and shifty speech, ambiguous pasts, strange talents. They'd work as stable hands or night watchmen, they'd drive the hay wagon or shoe horses. After a week, a month, a season, they'd be gone; their leaving left no mark.

One winter there was a night manager named Montana, a wiry who-knows-how-old man with a beard and a battered hat and a decided knack with horses. Montana also had a plump, oddly dignified, dark-haired young wife and a mewling infant daughter. They seemed to have

lived in their ancient car until they got to Carroll's. Ruby rumored that the wife was the rebellious heiress to a pickle factory fortune, and perhaps it was true. She had the bearing and the friendly accessibility of a genuine aristocrat, and none of the shame I'd have expected from someone who lived in a car with a baby sired by a wizened leathery man with a crude way of talking.

WE WERE THE WRANGLERS. Peggy and Linda for two years now, me for three. It was a small tight family. Sometimes a girl would start hanging around, looking like a hopeful dog. Mostly we ran them off, although once in a while somebody turned out to be okay. This year Tracy was the new kid. She didn't have the gift for horses but she had a smart mouth and she made us laugh. And she could get cigarettes.

Winters were busy. We got the budget tourists and the locals who'd rent a horse for casual fun. From November on, you could start every Saturday catching and saddling horses for an hour, then spend eight hours steering groups around Papago Park, pointing out Hole In the Rock and Hunt's Tomb. You'd bring one group in, and you could see from the lineup of people at Ruby's ticket booth that you and your horse were going right back out. We all got so we could tell time by the sun. That let you get your dudes back to the stable at the right time, not early and not late, just on time.

Every day Carroll wore a fresh starched white shirt and a Stetson. Straw in the summer, felt in the winter. Like a lot of fat men, he was light on his feet and could work 16 hours a day. "How many times you been on a horse?" he'd ask of the prospective rider. He'd make a fast decision about which horse to put this dude on, and bark orders to a kid. One of us would bring the named horse to the rider, get him on and adjust the stirrups.

The first time he picked me to be a wrangler, it was for a group of four. Mom and pop,

twin boys maybe eight years old. Carroll got them mounted and then said—growled, really—“And this young lady with too much lipstick on is going to go with you and show you Hole in the Rock.” I was dizzy for a second—I’d been chosen.

SUMMERS WERE LAZY AND SLOW. In the heat of midday everything went still. The most high-strung horses stood quiet, hipshot, flicking their tails at flies, not moving. Late summer afternoons sometimes we'd ramble into the fish hatchery—a complex of ponds ringed by palm trees, like something out of an Arabian Nights fantasy—on the far side of the park. It is an amazing thing, to ride a willing horse bareback into dark water, and the ground gives way and then the horse is swimming, in great forward lunges; you clinging to mane, heels bouncing on swell of ribs, hanging at a crazy angle and finally finding the rhythm so you can stay out of the horse's way and let her swim. Climbing out, a horse will sometimes do the wet-dog shake to get the water off, and you can get shook off. We'd smell of that greeny swamp-muck from the ponds.

SPRING in this part of Arizona can come and go so quickly it is often nothing more than a thought, the sigh of someone from a four-seasons state when she remembers lilacs, daffodils.

One of those spring days, about the time the morning chill wore off, Kathy wandered in. She was older, probably fifteen. Looking back I can see how pretty she was: cloud of fine dark hair, soft features, sprinkling of pale freckles on very white skin, womanly curves. Blue eyes. She was so vague and soft, we found that somehow we couldn't harden our hearts against her. She didn't come to ride; she just hung out in a particularly aimless kind of way. She sat near us and listened to our talk of this horse and that, she seemed to be interested in our comings and goings. She kept showing up and we got used to her, but she wasn't one of us. We didn't ask for her phone number.

Spring exhaled and became April, or maybe it was May. One day when it was too-hot too-early Kathy invited us to her home for lemonade.

It was eight feet wide and maybe forty feet long, the color of a dead frog, set in a ragged row of like trailers. No Airstreams here. A few cottonwoods gave a little shade, not much. It was hotter inside than outside. Before she mixed canned frozen lemonade with the hard tap water, she turned the television on to a soap opera. We drank the lemonade out of worn plastic glasses, big gray ice cubes bumping our lips, while Kathy talked about the plot and the actors. I'd never heard her talk so much. I'd also never seen a soap opera before and couldn't think of anything to say, but Peggy chimed in with comments she'd heard from her mother. I noticed the dingy gray linoleum, the tired yellow curtains at the windows, the couch I sat on which should have belonged to someone's grandmother, gray-beige-pinkish faded, fuzzed over like an old sweater. The trailer smelled of cooking fats and stale cigarette smoke. On a shelf in the kitchen, there was a collection of salt and pepper shakers—ceramic dogs with top hats, glass birds, plastic mushrooms. I used the bathroom as an excuse to get up and move, and saw a small collection of empty Avon perfume bottles on the tiny counter. They too were shaped like things: an owl, a seahorse, a rose twining around something.

There was something so shabby and resigned about Kathy's small frayed home that it made me almost-angry, some formless dark feeling with no name. Leaving at last, walking down the gravel drive, I saw that the last trailer in the row had an absurd garden, red and yellow plastic flowers planted neatly in rows. At the end of the rows a large, gilded wooden crucifix stood upright in the bare dirt.

JIM HAD AN OLD CAR, AN OLD HORSE TRAILER, AND AN OLD SADDLE. He was a lean man with dark yellow hair. Neither tall nor short, narrow hiped, his faded Levi's

hung a little low. He wasn't old like our parents but he was weathered, already he had permanent creases from squinting against the sun. He'd come from New Mexico, maybe from something that had worn out; surely everything he had looked ready to be replaced.

Except his horse. Ranger was that coal black horses can be after shedding winter hair, before the sun bleaches parts of their coats to rust. He had a wide white blaze and four high white socks, which gave him something of the air of a bobby-socked cheerleader, something cheerful in the sight of those bright feet with their shiny black hooves. Ranger was big, wide and well-muscled, with elegant lines. Not fine, but powerful in an athletic, sculpted way. I don't mean he had any draft blood; he was just big. He carried his head high, proud curve of neck, he moved cleanly and well. It was hard to believe he was twenty-six.

JIM AND RANGER. Early mornings, out in the corral, we'd watch with pleasure as Jim grabbed two handfuls of Ranger's mane and swung graceful as a dancer onto his horse. Riding bareback without so much as a halter, he guided Ranger with small shiftings of his weight, a hand on the neck, his voice. They could open and close gates without Jim dismounting. Ranger would sidestep to the gate, Jim would lean over and unlatch it. Ranger would shoulder it open, stride through, then push it closed with his black-and-white wide-nostriled muzzle.

Some of the stable hands didn't think much of kids. But Jim liked having us around, he taught us things. He saw the bond between me and Bobby, the bob-tailed bay mare I broke and trained. Bobby belonged to the stable, but Jim knew how fiercely I felt her to be mine, how I'd earned her with all the hours we'd spent together. When we wrangled a group, Bobby knew what I wanted before I asked it. We moved together like one being in two bodies. Jim saw, he knew, and he never rented Bobby out. It would have been an insult to both of us.

FROM THE FIRST MOMENT JIM SAW KATHY he was a goner. I saw it. He was helping an old lady onto Mairzy Dotz, and Kathy walked onto the porch where people waited until their horses were ready. She was wearing a blue shirt that matched her eyes. I saw him look like he was surprised, and he stopped what he was doing for a long minute and stared at her. From then on, we all noticed him get soft when she was in sight, heard his voice different when he talked to her. He bought her soda pops out of the old machine, the kind you opened like a chest freezer, sliding your chosen bottle along a metal track until a coin in the slot released the latch and you got your Nehi grape soda, frosty and too sweet. He whittled her a crude doll, he brought her candy bars. Kathy seemed bewildered, unsure what she'd done to deserve all this, pleased in a very hesitant way. We didn't know for sure because she was even quieter than usual.

And then he began teaching her to ride, on Ranger.

The first time: It was a still morning, not really hot yet. I was in the tiny office behind the ticket booth helping Ruby with the weekly sums. Sun through the ticket window caught dust motes hanging motionless in golden air. I could see Kathy's face across the yard, not her features but the flush of excitement, hands and feet dithering, Jim's got her up on Ranger, adjusting her stirrups, placing her feet, she's clinging to the saddle horn, smiling hugely. They moved out, Jim leading Ranger, and Kathy was so happy I could feel it back in the half-dark where I sat.

Had she wanted to ride all along?

Down the road, out of sight, and they were gone. Ruby was telling me about the chicken she'd cooked for dinner last night, then about the headache she had now. I tried to listen but I started noticing a floater in my vision. I'd blink and it would drift down. The drifting pattern looked random but it was the same every time I blinked. Had I always had this floater or was it

new? It was a relief when Ruby took herself and her headache home, leaving me alone with my boredom. No sound, not even a whinny from the corrals. Time passed, slow ticks of a big old wall clock. And passed some more.

At last they reappeared, riding double. Kathy in front with the reins in her hand and Jim sitting behind the saddle, carefully not touching her. The very air seemed changed.

The lessons continued into summer. We were a little jealous, but none of us exactly wanted to be in Kathy's place. At thirteen and fourteen we'd all been kissed, once or twice, in a scurry, by spotty nervous boys our own age, at a school party or some other known place with adults safely right around the corner. This was different, this seemed dangerous somehow.

KATHY PROGRESSED IN HER RIDING, and Jim let her ride Ranger with us when we rode for pleasure. Jim continued to court her, in his fashion. I never saw him touch her, except to help her up on Ranger. Or by accident, like the time she was brushing Ranger, Jim close behind her and still, like he was breathing in the smell of her hair and didn't want her to know. She turned at a noise, and hit his rein-holding hand with her breast. Both of them stepped back, faces burning. I didn't mean to be watching, but suddenly something clicked, and I began to see the outlines of the mystery I hadn't realized I was studying. It was like reading a good book, I didn't know what was going to happen, but I knew I was interested.

One night, getting ready for my bath, I stood naked in front of the big mirror. I had a bit of downy red pubic hair. I had breast-buds with pale flat nipples, barely enough to fill a training bra. I wasn't sure I wanted to be looked at; I wasn't sure I didn't. What would a man like Jim think, looking at a girl like me?

LATE SUMMER. Hot, shimmering waves of heat rose from the blacktop before ten in

the morning. Like lizards we hunted the cool places: the watering trough by the mares' pen, the tree in front, the shade it threw over the pop machine. No customers came. Not much to do. The song "To Know, Know, Know Him (Is To Love, Love, Love Him)" was popular on the radio. Linda, Peggy, Tracy and I gathered late afternoons in the hayloft, singing this song and anything else we knew the words to. We named our girl group the Kandels. One afternoon we'd lost interest in everything; we were lolling in the heat like hounds, sprawled in the hay.

A breeze, slight but pregnant with scent, through the wide loft window: rain. *Rain was coming.*

I want to tell you about rain in the desert. You lived in our part of the world, you got bored with the countless days of endless sun, the unwavering sameness. Rain didn't come often, and when it did, it was the circus come to town, the madman dancing caprices in the streets, the stranger from far away suddenly, inexplicably, there.

First the wind would pick up, and then you'd smell it coming. Sudden dark clouds, thunder, the first huge drops of rain would sit on the ground covered in dust, the ground so hard the water couldn't get in. Then suddenly it was over and the air was sweet and the cactus bloomed. Little animals came out of their dens, horny toads chased each other. You had to be there or you'd miss it.

*Rain was coming.* We scrambled down the ladder, excited, someone's idea: we'd ride to the fish hatchery, swim in the warm ponds in the warm rain. We burst into the office for permission; Jim had gone for chewing tobacco, Kathy was watching the silent phone. We babbled, and her sleepy-lidded blue eyes grew bright with anticipation. By the time Jim got back we'd caught our horses and waited only for his yes. The wind picked up a little, the rain smell

grew stronger. We wanted to be there before it hit.

Kathy wanted to go. Jim frowned a little. For days now he'd been impatient, almost surly, surely irritable. And Kathy'd been even more quiet than usual.

“Ah!” With a wave of his arm, swoop up, downward crabbed motion, a good imitation of old fat Carroll on a grouchy day. Sudden grin: “You KIDS! DAMN kids! Ge' outta here, sto' botherin' me,” catching Carroll's peculiar habit of dropping final consonants when excited or mad. Our Jim, again, except he let Kathy catch Ranger by herself, while he watched the phone that would not ring.

WE BROKE OUT AS A PACK. Down the wide wagon trail, then to the left, the shortest way, we started at a trot and soon broke into a gallop. Always a thrill to ride together at speed, especially if you were out front, holding your horse back just a little to stay with the rest. Bobby would push the bit, wanting to stretch out and run faster and faster. Look over your shoulder: smiling faces, bobbing in different rhythms together. Friends.

Kathy was near the rear, one hand tight on the saddle horn. The horses were excited too, by the smell of rain, by our excitement. Nostrils wide. The clouds began to roll in, dark eggplant color. Through a trick of the sun, the mountains stood white in relief. We headed for the base of them, fizzy with joy. One black ribbon of highway crossed our path. We were careful always to stop, remembering poor old Mulberry Roan, out for a rental hour with a careless rider, gutted by a hood ornament. The rider escaped, but even though nobody had liked the mulish Mulberry we'd been horrified at his messy death. Spilled guts look different than you imagine.

WE RODE ON TOWARD THE PONDS, spread out in a ragged line. We paused and gathered at the gate. The wind was up, way up, carrying stinging bits of grit, and we had to half-

shout to be heard. Linda: "Hey kids, I think it's gonna be a sandstorm. Maybe we should get back. I mean if it's gonna get bad." Peggy: "Let's get up to Hole In the Rock. I bet we can see it all from up there." Tracy: "What about the horses, what about the sand and their eyes?" Kathy: Silence, waiting for others to decide.

I had a regular client I wrangled for twice a month all last season, an eight-year-old boy who wore a cowboy hat and sunglasses. One day we got caught in a sandstorm that whistled itself up in about five minutes. I'd read about what to do and so we did it: Stay where you are and bend your face to your horse's neck, protect your eyes, wait it out. Charlie-boy thought it a great adventure; it took me days to get the dirt out of my hair, and my skin was whipped raw by the sand.

So I voted for home, we turned tails to the wind and started off. No sooner had we crossed the deadly highway than the wind picked up for real, pushing us. Each head of hair parted up the back so that sheaves of hair blew forward into our faces, making it even harder to see. The wind carried sharp pinpricks of sand, blasting us wherever skin was bare. We picked up the pace, a little scared now. The horses caught our fear or maybe were giving in to their own. The wind no longer smelled like rain, although it was hard to tell: each inhale grimed each nostril with another layer of silt. To try to wipe it out of your eye was to grind it in a little deeper. The light had turned a sickly pale yellow. Soon we were in a mad gallop for home over this gullied country, each of us trusting her horse to see the footing. I was in front, on Bobby, when Ranger pounded by, and I could see by Kathy's frozen face that he was a runaway. He was in full magnificent stride, deep-muscled hindquarters propelling him by us like Bobby and I were idling. Even if I'd dared let Bobby out, he was too much mass, moving too fast, for me to grab his bridle.

He did something I'd never seen before: rather than slow to navigate the downhill of a deep gully, he made a long, flying leap over it—and cleared it by a mile. I heard Kathy yelp, saw her flail, nearly fall, saving herself with a two-handed clutch at the horn, reins flying to the wind. Ranger was taking this bizarre fog of sandy twilight like a downhill locomotive, powerful and careless, beyond us all, Kathy forgotten on his back.

Linda and her fleet buckskin were right behind me when we rounded the last corner, half a mile from the stable. Suddenly the wind died, big spatters of rain began, this was not going to be the sandstorm we feared.

In the clearing pale light we could see Ranger ahead, walking now, an odd spavined drunken walk. Soaked with sweat, blacker than ever, lathered wherever leather or hide touched hide, white curds of foam between buttocks. Reins dragging on the ground. Ranger stepped on one and staggered, stumbled to his knees, then he rolled to his side, pinning Kathy's leg. Kathy squirmed free, got to her hands and knees, crawled to Ranger's head.

Now we're on them. It's all wrong. Blood's beginning to trickle from his black-and-white nostrils, he's gasping. I never heard a horse make sounds like this. His legs are flailing; jerkily, it's like he's trying to keep going, like he thinks he could be safe if he could only get away from this bad spot.

Out of the dying sand-mist Jim appears, riding Ruby's Appaloosa, come looking for us in the storm, looking for Kathy in the storm. He's off and down, he's cradling Ranger's head in his arms, tears are streaming down his face, he's talking, crooning, begging. We are frozen in this tableau for a long, long time, watching as a horse dies and a man's heart breaks. Ranger's thrashings slowing, slowing to twitches and a last mighty shiver, a bizarre rolling from head to

tail of some muscle just under the skin; the bright eye beginning to glaze, to gather sand, unblinked.

THAT FALL THINGS MOVED PRETTY FAST. My parents split up and Mom and I moved to Mesa and it was too far for her to drive me back and forth to the stable. I heard Kathy and Jim got married. The age of consent in Arizona at the time was sixteen, and she couldn't stay fifteen forever.

THAT WAS A LONG TIME AGO. They put a golf course in the middle of my desert and then they built a zoo around the ponds. And a botanical garden. And a baseball camp. It's change, it happens. I went away to school, then I went further, and I never went back. Still, sometimes I think about those times and that place, and I remember getting to Hole in the Rock at dawn one Easter. The light broke all purple and rose, we shivered in the chill. I remember the hayrides, how hay feels when you sit on it. I remember the sharp clean smell of horse sweat. I remember the coyote that came out and paced Bobby and me, unafraid of us, as we galloped on the back road. Linda got pregnant and got married. Peggy got married and got pregnant. I got breasts, and a boyfriend, in that order. I found out what happens when your blood heats up, and I learned for myself that language of movement and gesture and heat that Kathy and Jim had spoken.

I have wondered if they showed up one day at someone else's stable, a wiry man—who knows how old—with a decided knack for horses, and his much younger pretty wife, and perhaps a mewling infant. And I hope that somehow, somehow, things went right for them.