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Stars Shine at the Bottom of a River: What I Learned from Losing a Friend

I had to strain my neck to see the stars tonight. Like a giant dome with frost creeping up its edges, light pollution has turned the horizon a soupy brown-grey, permitting only the brightest actors to take their place on the night stage. I could make out a few constellations like the Big Dipper. Or maybe that was Orion's belt. Ursa Minor, though, should have been above Ursa Major, so maybe I was looking in the wrong place altogether. Cepheus was somewhere. I just picked a cluster and hoped I was right. It didn't really matter, though.

As I had hoped, happier memories of star gazing began to flash like projector slides across my mind: snapshot moments, fragments of feeling and color.

I am 11 years old again at summer camp. The grass is dewy, and wind chills the back of my neck. I sit with my knees drawn into my chest and can feel two band aids under my shirt, my last-ditch effort to prolong the introduction of training bras.

My favorite counsellor, an electric young man with stupendous calves, holds a laser pointer and beams it up into the heavens. He lazily lassos a collection of stars that look like an upside-down stick-figure house. "Anyone know about Cepheus and Andromeda?" He asks. In his telling, Cepheus offers his daughter, Andromeda, to the sea monster, Cetus, as payment to the Gods. Perseus saves Andromeda, who happily agrees to marry him, and Zeus honors their union with a constellation.

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I became engrossed in their story. I wanted to know more, but I miss Mom and Dad and home too much, and the feeling of excitement passes. This taste of independence is bittersweet. I feel alive, content.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other. The memory fades and is replaced by the plaintive whine of mosquitoes and the chill of tonight's air. I look those same constellations now, ten years later, and don't feel content, but smaller than I ever have. "Why can't I be more like anyone up there?" I ask myself. I didn't feel selfless like Scorpio or clever like Pegasus. Perseus saved the person he loved, and I can't even manage that. I wanted to be home. I wanted to be in bed and go back to a time when everything felt simpler— when I didn't have to question if I am selfless or kind enough to do what is in front of me.

His groans are what tear me from my thoughts. I look down and see my horse, Mo, now grey under lantern light. It's just past three in the morning, on May 2nd, and while the world sleeps, I've been awake with him in the farthest-most pasture, willing him to stand, for over 19 hours.

Three fluid therapies, two enemas, one successful attempt to get him to his feet, only to fall back down seconds later. There's nothing left to do except ease his transition. I break off bits of carrot to pacify him. Kicking and head-tossing is reduced to happy food grumbles. Anything to keep him distracted. His blankets are wet from dew and piss again. I throw them to the ground and exchange them for a fresh set. Rubbing his hips and back make him feel better. Or maybe it makes me feel better.

I know he can't fight anymore, and I am powerless to change his mind. So, we sit together, my hand placed on the soft of his nose, like some stoic, splitting statue. Starlight hangs

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on his puffy blankets, connecting the curve of round haunches to hollowed cheeks. They become linear, exact, point-like under a mother bear's sympathetic gaze. Days later, I remember this moment and finally understand. It was when we became the stars.

About three to five times a week, I fantasize about being hit by a car. It's not a suicide vision. In most scenarios I live, and in the few where I don't, I go down like a fucking god: perfect hair, a sun dress, wrapped in the arms of the boy who should have loved me when he had the chance. I say something cool and devastating that'll haunt him for years. On the sidewalk, safely out of harm's way, is the dog and/or child I just saved. This is my moment, and now no one can deny I am a good person.

I explain this fantasy to my long-time roommate and friend, Summer, one night over dinner.

"No, I get it," she says. "Mine's different, but I understand."

An artist herself, her desire to be acknowledged by the world is something we share. She wants her art in galleries, and I want to win an Oscar. She dreams of publicly humiliating her ex. I aspire to be splattered across a windshield.

Despite her reassurance, I kept coming back to the reason why, of all possible daydreams and ulterior worlds, I choose the one where I am killed for the sake of someone else. The only word that springs to mind is "proof." This gnawing desire to be seen as good is nothing new.

Lately I am consumed with the fear that, underneath all the niceties and charm, I am mean and cold. It's a struggle to avoid exhuming feelings of inadequacy and err. Before I'm even aware I'm doing it, I whittle away at memories with clamoring, indiscriminate fingers, wrenching feeling from context, and I conclude that I'm a bad friend, a selfish daughter, a brittle

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spirit. On my good days, I tell myself it's all made up and that I'm trying my best. On my bad days I want to scream. I want to throw my arms open to the great expanse of nothing and everything and scream until my throat bleeds. I want someone— anyone— to turn their head, to look up, to tell me I am a good person. I want them to tell me I am kind and selfless. I want them to tell me that I really am the person I am terrified I'm not.

“I don't know. Just get down here,” were the brisk orders of my Father. It was May 1st at 8:00am. I rushed from our home just down the road to our family's farm and found Mo on his side, with legs outstretched, attempting to right himself. Tense situations make my Dad a poor communicator. “We're gunna have to do what we did last time.” I knew what he meant, and he knew that. That's how we work.

Mo had gone down once before. A few months back he casted, a term used to describe the phenomenon where a horse convinces itself it is unable to get back up. It can happen anywhere, but it occurs most frequently in horse stalls. Typically, the horse lays down in their stall, gets their nose or legs wedged just right in between the floor and the stall wall and decides it's stuck. Mo casted because he wallowed on the ground and got his legs hung precisely three inches above his head on a mound of old hay. Thirty minutes later, though, he was up and moving.

Based on his track record, Mo had given me hope. For the briefest of moments, I believed that this moment, like the one before, would be an easy fix. Dad would be on to the next project by noon, I would get to brag about what a savior I am to my friends, and Mo, for all his troubles, would get extra oats and pets just like last time.

That was not the case

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The battle to get him up was long and the day was sweltering: four vets, an endless stream of drugs and IV drips. They said colic was unlikely. He was healthy and sound. A neurological condition, Equine Protozoal Myeloencephalitis, was the more probable cause.

“It comes from contact with possum pee,” explained Heather, the final vet who visited us that day.

My horse could die because of a fucking possum? I thought.

“EPM causes swelling in the brain and paralyzes the back legs. What I’m giving him now has a 50/50 chance of working. He could be up immediately.”

“Should we try to lift him again?” I asked.

It took five people--my aunt, me, my Mom, my Dad, and Heather--to get his feet under him. He almost stood. He wanted to. But he had been down too long, and the back, left leg was still too weak. We scattered from underneath him as he slumped, for the fifth time, against the ground. My dad and I decided then we would stay with him through the night and see if the medicine would kick in later. We thanked Heather for her time as she packed her things.

She smiled. “I wouldn’t do this for anyone except y’all. Call me in the morning if you decide to go ahead and put him down. I’ll come out and do it myself. You’ll be the first people on my list.”

The tires on her truck sent one last cloud of dust into the cool evening air. Mom and Dad marveled at her kindness. I should have, too, but all I wanted to do was yell.

It was a long and very cold night. We parked three cars in the pasture, functioning as makeshift beds for my dad, me, and my aunt, who had decided to stay up with us. We took turns

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every two hours watching and sleeping and reassessing. My belly ached from the crackers and apple sauce I packed with me, but frankly I didn't feel I had the right to complain about an upset tummy.

The medicine never did work. Gradually, Mo's thrashing became more subdued. Sometimes he'd sleep, or maybe just rest his eyes. His moments of quiet felt like tiny, radical blessings. Maybe this is what a new mother feels when her baby finally goes to sleep: the space to breathe again.

I knew we had to put him down in the morning. Ethically, if a horse is down for 24 hours, euthanizing is the most humane option. It's never an easy feeling to grapple with, but buried under blankets, staring at the stars, the whole matter just seemed okay. Waking up for his shift, my Dad found me trance-like, shuffling from carrots to back rubs to blankets. I was afraid to stop. I was afraid to be selfish. He insisted I get some sleep, so I climbed into the back seat and collapsed. I needed his permission to put that weight down. I fumbled for my phone. It was 5:00am.

Later that week, I saw Heather's receipt for the farm visits. The list of treatments and medicines dispensed filled the entire page. B12 injections and antiinflammation. "Euthasol," a fast-acting morphine injection, was listed last. Under 'patient': Mo. *My Mo.*

I remember watching him die so clearly. I realized hadn't cried since that day. My Dad assures me again that we did everything we could have done. When the "what ifs" cloud my mind, I take comfort in that thought.

Perhaps to understand or perhaps to stay occupied, my love of constellations returned. In the days following Mo's death I started reading more and more about them— who they were,

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what they meant. Myths of fallen heroes and virtuous saviors enveloped me just as they had when I was a child.

One in particular, the constellation Cygnus, caught my attention. In one version of the myth, Phaethon, son of Helios, loses control of his father's chariot. Zeus destroys the chariot with a thunderbolt, sending it and Phaethon crashing into a river. Cygnus, consumed by grief for his friend, collects his bones from the river bed until he can give him a proper burial. The Gods were so moved by Cygnus's devotion that they honored him with a constellation: a swan with brilliant white feathers. It was a celebration not of heroism, but of love.

I sat back, and thoughts of Mo split open my chest. Cygnus wasn't remarkable because he was bold or valiant or even able to save Phaethon. He was remarkable because he dignified his friend's death with the same love he was given in life. *He was good because he loved*, I thought.

I remembered myself that night: gentle and kind and in love with a friend who fell into the river. I remembered a young woman who was worthy although no one was saved. Who was selfless when she could have run away. Who was seen not by everyone, but by the one creature who needed her most.

I think of Mo now and I see a terracotta-colored giant clopping towards me. A muddy-orange forelock stands upright in the wind like Ziggy Stardust. He rumbles a soft greeting and I know, after so many years together, he is happy to see me. Because of him, I choose to believe that I am good.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE (Edited):

Loss is a compelling subject, and if handled with care, shines a light on a very human experience. It has always been my philosophy that, especially when talking about death, by removing the excess emotional descriptors, we welcome the reader to recall and project on to the story what they remember about the feeling of loss. I like to leave room for the reader's feelings, too.

Writing about Mo felt like the obvious choice for me. As the kind of person who can undergo a personality shift simply because someone new walks into a room, exploring how to reclaim my self-esteem and trust in my goodness is important. I wanted to explore what it feels like to look back and realize you did the right thing.

As far as critiques are concerned, I hope I addressed the confusion about where we were in time. Hopefully the star brackets and extra details helped. I also recognize my tone is rather matter-of-fact and calm throughout the piece, but after experimenting with ways I could communicate how common tragedy and death is on a farm (and how unhelpful emotion is when large animals are hurt) the less interesting it became. I don't mind if the reader thinks I'm hardened. In a way, I am. Plus, I like what that communicates about living on a farm, too. To quote my inner sass demon, "bitch this isn't some dainty Flicka type shit."

I also received encouragement to expand on the concept of casting and use it as a metaphor. I decided against this because, although it could be profound, I truly don't believe I "casted" at any point. The message of the story is that once we reflect on our actions, we often find we've been doing kind, beautiful things all along. I may have doubted myself, but I never stopped doing what was I believed right.

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