

*Alison Ruth*  
**Horses to Look At**

Casey lurched up one basement step at a time, his hand clutching a banister made of a metal pole. An armful of two-by-fours slid under his other arm, splinters catching his shirt. He braced himself against the wall, and let his lungs fill, catch, fill again while scrubbing the spiderwebs caught on his fingers. He would have washed his hands if he ever reached the kitchen, but his water had been cut off. Above him the light from a latched window spread into a cone across the linoleum. He was still seven steps of torn carpet down. The boards, so old they no longer smelled of pine but of rot, had edges sharp enough to gouge the pulp of his palm.

He would not turn his head to see the basement he had left. Just like he would switch off the TV news when the too-graphic disclaimer appeared before stories of war and starvation. He bled for all documented misery, for his own New York state home was staked with the plague cross of foreclosure.

He would never see his basement again, the shoebox windows shadowed in part dark earth. He had left the dartboard hanging even when the furnace stayed cold. He had once planned a wall of gem-colored bottles. He had to get upstairs; his imagination was too loud without a remote to turn it off.

He pressed his weight against the wall, the banister digging at his side, wishing he could drop to his knees and crawl the remainder. He focused on the mimosa tree outside the kitchen window, its leaves feathered as a bird's, threads of pink flowers that dissipated at a touch. He pulled himself up a next-step closer.

His heart was swollen, a fist of blood and muscle slow to engage, a faulty pump, a rattling furnace. He sweat with cold; his fingers trembled under their load of boards. He knew the numbness was coming, a prickling warning that his blood was evacuating his body as it was demanded by his brain. He dragged up one more. A board loosed itself to slalom down the steps. Tears shot into his eyes. He could almost smell the frost of the kitchen, just five scraping stairsteps away. His breath was as thin as if he were on a mountaintop. On a history channel he had witnessed a reenactment of a pioneer family who'd taken the long way around the Cascades into the wilds of the Pacific coast. The father careened through the mountain passes and dodged Indian arrows just to fall sick on the other side. It was so cold when they crossed, and more snow in Oregon. His wife's raw hands nursed his illness, no other doctor to tend him. She swapped away one possession after another to an Indian tribe, for corn that he alone in the family could not eat. They had suffered all this for a homestead. He wondered if the man died imagining the cabin he could never build for his family.

Casey had thought of that kind of loyalty for years. He had followed the shadowy eyes of the girl behind the Stewart's counter, her eyes the color of the root beer he drank so cold and sweet it burned his throat. "Where'd she come from?" he asked the owner.

"Fresh Air Fund sent her from Brooklyn. Too young for you."

"I can wait."

Casey sat at the counter every day to listen to Madiana's accent, a cadence that should have been describing white sand beaches beneath ocean blue skies. Instead she spellbound him as she described the decaying walls of her project, the hurtling speed of the subway, and the sprawling school as large and lawless as the neighborhood around it. Beneath her apron her acid-washed jeans fit too tight, and her T-shirt halfway ripped, revealed gold chains of tribute circling her

neck. He smiled to picture himself as the kind of hood who would snatch jewelry off the street for her. Until the morning he left his shirt open like he'd just left a weight room. He ignored his neighbors jeering over their glazed doughnuts. Only at Madiana's raised eyebrow, he buttoned back up.

"Can I take her out?" he asked the summer she returned, taller and ringed in black-market gold. Casey had dallied during the year, but this had only spun out his desire across a span of brocade bedspreads, assuaged by neither virtuous blonde nor vicious brunette. He saw beneath their spectrum of eyeshadow that they were bored of their mountainous land, the farms and the forests. Their convenience store lottery tickets would never scratch off a win big enough to satiate their own ambition. In the spell of desire, he checked his rearview mirror that his shave was good and his shoulders broad, and that seemed enough, with a truck and a paycheck, to seduce what fireflies stayed out late at night. He wondered about Madiana though, if she counted years, and if there were too many on his side.

His friend gaped. "I'll check with her mother."

"Madiana like it up here?"

"She asked to come back."

When Casey wiped his mouth on his hand, it felt like a kiss.

And at her mother's unexpected assent, but perhaps they married as early in the islands as they did in the mountains, he asked Madiana out. In those minutes of unknown, where desire was the width of a countertop away, he thought he could imagine her wishes. Though she was a visitor in a land he had built up, when she raised her eyes to the charred ceiling, he feared that a man was not what she truly wanted. Her smooth arms crossed over a heart that may have waited for someone else, someone younger. Doubt had not echoed in him until he had to watch Madiana press her lips together in thought: a summer with a man, or a summer alone. At seventeen she had all the time she wanted, but the country boys would extol her body only from the safe distance of a city block.

Casey drew in the spill of sugar across the counter as he waited. She seemed to stare out the glass doors for a long time, past the parking lot, to the forest now bright with sun at its edge. "I've seen everything here," she pronounced.

He sucked gritty sugar from his finger absently. "You sure?"

And because he was older, she seemed to doubt herself, and wondered what was left of this mountainous land she hadn't seen already. She consented only to a ride home, where she backed against the window of the truck cab so he couldn't reach for her. He could tape-measure the distance between them. Hadn't she told him she'd raced with boys in their trashed imports, baseball bats rolling on the floor, some even with brand-new carseats in the back?

"Why'd you stop?" Madiana demanded.

"Something here I want to show you."

"I told you, I've seen everything."

"You asked to come back here this summer."

"Yeah, I like it here." She crossed her arms over her seatbelt. "They got guns, but they don't shoot people with them."

"You like horses?"

"Ain't no horses here." She jerked her head against the window. "Just more Christmas trees."

He switched the engine back on.

"Why you laugh?" She uncrossed her arms to fan her gold rings across her jeans, as if to reassure herself that they were all there.

He shoved the truck into gear. “You’re gonna wonder what it was you missed today.”

“More trees.”

Casey imagined Madiana in his house, in her half a T-shirt, refusing to do anything, and he never wanting her to. “But you’ll never know for sure.”

She bit her lip. “I like it up here.” A pulse beat under her wreath of necklaces. She smelled of pancake syrup heating on a stove. “Are they horses to ride, or horses to look at?”

He shifted the truck to crest the hill. “To ride these horses you’d have to be a billionaire.”

She reached for his sleeve. “Let’s go *now*.”

He U-turned in the middle of the road, and winged back to the forest edge. She opened her door herself, but she allowed him to part the draping pine branches for her. As needles cracked underfoot, they wove around trees that had stood since Columbus had discovered her Dominican Republic paradise.

“Stop.” His arm barred her path.

“What’s your problem?”

“The fence is electrified.”

Her eyes expanded at the wires before them. They were tangled in the overgrown branches; her reaching hands would have been shocked before she could push them away. He knelt down and pointed through the slats.

Her golden earrings, thick as shower curtain rings, swung as she sank to her knees.

A field of horses, shining black, brown, and misty white, milling and graceful, nudging at one another to come, and stop, bent to tear the bluegrass and rye. “Their eyes—” she whispered.

“They look like they’re in a dream.”

Casey smiled. “Arabians.”

“How close you got to be before you get electrified?”

“You reach your hand a little more,” he warned her.

She slapped her hands back from temptation to her curving thighs. The sun spotlighted the horses, the length of their legs, the straightness of their backs, the flicker of their soft manes. She propped her chin on her fist. Ants crawled around them on the sandy forest floor, but they watched the horses from beneath the shade of the pines. When the sun finally sighed over the mountain edge, Casey’s twenty-year-old spirit leapt. “Tell your mom I want to marry you when you come back next year.”