LIGHT STREAMING FROM A HORSE’S ASS

FICTION
2,300 words
(opening excerpt of 12,000 word story)
The first time I see the horse is in the parking lot. He’s propped on his side in the back of a pickup. He looks so real I wonder if there is a taxidermist in my building, because it wouldn’t surprise me. It really wouldn’t. Since under me lives a trapeze artist with practice gear rigged to her ceiling—my floor—and to the east of me is a bunch of guys who spin metal cones all day, and above me is a man who photographs lightning hitting skyscrapers across the river, then sells the prints to the buildings themselves. So many odd businesses here at 1205 Manhattan Avenue—the crossroads, where Brooklyn brushes up to Queens, where Newtown Creek flushes into the East River—that stuffing dead horses seems almost normal.

In the downstairs hallway are mail receptacles, no two alike. A bushel basket. A cutoff spackle bucket. A country-style galvanized mailbox, complete with red flip-flag, bolted to the wall. Mine is a metal salad bowl with my name painted in glittery enamel: *Maddie Tucker, Inc.* The *Inc.* was an afterthought. Everyone has it. But the mail itself, which we sort communally, betrays the truth: we live here. It’s not legal. Mastercard bills, lingerie catalogs, voter materials, student loan statements. The kind of mail you hope the fire inspector won’t see.

We have drills, too, me and the guy next door, who I sublet from. He’s a painter. Trustafarian. He subdivided his space and rents out the half with no heat. He refused to sign the sublease unless I was prepared to *go into hiding.* But I like this idea, the cloak
and dagger of it, keep my underwear in a locking file cabinet and my other clothes in a
custom closet on wheels that spins around and looks just like an art crate. And the ladder
to my bed loft retracts on a pulley, and a board slides over the sink to cover the dirty
dishes. In thirty seconds—I’ve timed it—my space looks perfectly industrial.

I’m a photographer, for now anyway. I studied it in school, even won an award. Not that the award helps pay the bills. So I photograph actors. I find it amusing. They are plentiful. They are easy. Just ask two questions and they’ll talk about themselves for an hour. I meet them in Central Park, place them in the diffused light under a tree, just enough sun to lighten their eyes and give a sparkle to their dental work. Have them smile at that dog over there. On rainy days, it’s even easier: I take the train to their crappy apartment in Astoria or Hell’s Kitchen. Clamp full spectrum floodlights to the Ikea bookshelf or the shower curtain rod. Encourage them to talk. To laugh about evil casting directors and being too old for their current pictures. Stacks of their previous headshots on the desk, ready to toss. I feel sorry for them. They can’t afford this picture any more than I can afford not to take it.

It’s three hundred bucks for a bunch of proofs and two master prints. Two photo sessions a week, three if I’m on a roll, some seasons drier than others, like now, in the weeks before Christmas, when actors are spending their money on parties and presents. Rent is two weeks late. I can afford to say no to nothing. And so I’m at the tiny Queens apartment of my last client of the year—late twenties, male, blond hair, Dudley Do-Right look—it’s 17 degrees outside so Central Park is impossible—taking his photo in front of a dirty old kitchen window (nice light, thanks to the dirt), and he sees me take an unintentional glance at the fruitcake on the table right as my stomach lets rip an
enormous empty rumble. The actor, who I’ve already mentally nicknamed Dudley, does something no actor has ever done before:

“I know it’s none of my business, but are you okay?”

His concern, straight through the lens, bounces off the mirror, to my right eye. I click the shutter. That will be a good one—a little mystery, casting directors love mystery—and Dudley’s hand reaches into the rectangle and lowers my camera to the table. “Hey, Maddie. I asked you a question.”

I sink onto the kitchen chair and it explodes from my mouth in a blur: I’ve eaten nothing but rice for four days, rice with sugar that is, because I have no heat and the sugar wards off hypothermia, and I cook it on a hotplate standing next to a space heater with gloves and a hat on; I am out of photo paper and I have no idea how I will get his headshot printed, maybe borrow from my upstairs neighbor the lightning guy, and my family expects me for Christmas but I have nothing but homemade presents, which are frankly getting old. Dudley, he listens. Then a slow laugh, as he stands up, walks over to the fridge, pulls out a Swiss Colony gift pack with Tillamook cheddar, summer sausage, water crackers. Then a Harry and David gift pack with individually wrapped pears. A bottle of white wine, half finished. Then, most remarkably, an entire roasted chicken, untouched. Finally, two melamine dinner plates. “Dig in.”

I’m speechless. He laughs again, and I notice his canine teeth are pointy in a beautiful, very un-Dudley way, and he takes the camera from my hands, then hands me a knife and fork. I have no choice.

I find myself laughing with my mouth full, and the wine is going to my head. Dudley is asking questions, a lot of them. What is your real work like? What is your
favorite photo subject? What do you love about portraiture? What do you dream about at night?

“I’ve been dreaming of horses, lately,” I say.

“A horse, what does that represent?”

“Are you a psychologist?”

“If you were an animal, would you be a horse?”

“Maybe. What about you?”

“An eagle. I wish I could fly. What do you wish for?”

“I don’t wish.”

“No, I don’t imagine you do.” He reaches across the table and wipes a cracker crumb from my cheek. “Maybe you should.”

I go home with a full belly, two rolls of Dudley, and a fifty dollar advance to pay for paper. And a whole fruitcake, which the actor was going to throw out anyway. It is dark. And there he is, the horse, standing on the loading dock like he’s waiting for me. His black mane is flowing down one side of his head and over an eye, catching the gold glow of the streetlight. He’s wearing a halter, too, as if he could spring into life and walk wherever I lead. I scramble onto the concrete dock to get a closer look. I’m alone with the horse. Pet his nose. Fur feels real, and it is real, stretched over something rigid and dead. Poor guy. I pet his cold neck, look into his enormous chestnut-glass eye, then work my way toward his tail. Strange. The tail is gone, only a hole where it used to be, a hole into a dark void.
I only have one roll of film left but this cannot be ignored. I drop my backpack; shield my camera with my body. Reload as fast as I can, damn glove lint getting inside, try to blow it out. I start shooting the horse’s face, out of habit, hold up my white hat to reflect streetlight into the glass eye. The wind catches his mane and my hair, icy and damp, straight to my skull. I put the hat back on. Get my footing on the concrete ledge, then begin reframing intimate bits of the horse: artificial teeth around a dewy plastic tongue, the triangle of negative space under the neck, the oddly incomplete rump.

A clang behind me makes me jump. The roll door is coming up, then fluorescent light blasts from the loading bay onto me and my horse, and a man’s figure emerges in silhouette. He has a long graying beard and a pointy knit hat. I recognize him, from the parking lot, the street, the hallway, the freight elevator. “Hey,” I say.

“You like my pet?” The man steps onto the dock and pats the beast on the shoulder.

“I do. Are you a taxidermist?”

He laughs. “No no. I wish.” I think of Dudley: what do you wish for? “I build stage sets. Out in Jersey. My shop was throwing him out because he’s busted.” In the new light, I can see what he means. Parts of the fur are worn away, bald spots over some kind of plastic.

“His tail is missing.”

“Yeah, but I love him just the same.” He strokes the mane, around the eye, cocking his head at his beloved. “I wish my wife felt the same way. I brought this guy upstairs and the dog wouldn’t stop barking at him. Then my wife said she was creeped out and told me to get rid of him. I’ve been carting him around in my truck, but they said
it’s going to snow tonight. I guess I’ll just leave him in here,” he indicates the half-empty loading bay, a shared space, hardly secure. “Hey, you wanna see something cool?”

“Sure.” I wonder what could be cooler than this.

He takes a mag light from his belt and shines it right into one of the glass eyes.

“Go look in his butt. In the hole. Go look.”

I obey. Put my eye right up to where the tail should be, like a viewfinder. And the amber glow from the glass eye fills the pale inside; I can see everything in negative, the yellow fiberglass cave of his neck, the four dark tunnels where legs begin, the muscular shoulders, the gently curved back. The world inside a horse’s skin. “Wow.” I look for a full minute, then back away. The man is beaming, proud of his discovery.

“Hey, maybe you could help me move him in.”

“No problem.” I grab hold of the angled back legs, then have a thought. “Hey, aren’t you worried about leaving him in here? He’ll get paint on him or something.”

“You have a better idea?”

So this is how I become a boarder for a dead horse. I leave him in the big empty northern part of my space, next to the windows. Let him face out, give his glass eyes a clear view of the United Nations and Empire State. I flop onto the ratty sofa and just look at the horse, looking out the window. He seems happy.

I go into my darkroom and seal the door shut, then load the two rolls of Dudley into a canister. I turn the light back on, and stick a thermometer into the chemicals. No need to worry about overdeveloping, I can see my breath. Start the timer, agitate the tank, agitate my body to keep warm. I hold the wet negatives up to the light. Dudley’s
face dark, his teeth darker, the shadows of his hair bright and curly. I give into the shivering, finally, hang the strips to dry, and crawl up the ladder into bed.

Sleeping is the one easy thing to do in an unheated industrial space. I’ve invested in an electric mattress pad, extra toasty near the toes. Two comforters—one down, one acrylic—plus my hat, and remarkably, breathing the cool air is refreshing, like camping.

I wake to the sound of the metal spinners to the east, whirring machinery, Spanish, laughter. I sit up and plug in the extension cord near my head. It’s connected to the space heater and coffee machine down in the kitchen area. Last winter I was not smart enough to think of this trick. I’ve learned. I lie and wait, tuck the comforters around my chin, try to muster the courage to get up.

The coffeemaker’s last groan, and I’m out of excuses. Under the covers, I put on three pairs of socks, two pairs of long johns, army pants, a tank tee, a crewneck tee, a long sleeved thermal, two sweaters, and fingerless gloves. I adjust my hat, turn off the electric mattress pad, and climb down the ladder.

The horse is still looking out the window, where I left him. The morning sun has entered his eyes and mouth now, and his whole body is glowing through the bald patches. The hole where his tail should be is beaming, too, like a lamp. I pad over to him, stroke his mane. “Good morning, Sunshine.” He doesn’t answer, but I expected this. Outside, snow has drifted against the windows in gentle vales. The sky is clear.

I have a few exposures left in my camera from last night. I start from across the room, on a tripod, trying to capture the beam of light shooting from his butt into the dusty air, the crisp shadows of his body on the plank floor. A few more portraits of his face,
which seems to be smiling as he looks out at the snow. Then, I turn his body slightly and aim the lens right in the tail hole. There is enough light inside to make his entire interior come into sharp focus. Inside, the valley of his neck looks like drifted snow. I click the shutter. It is my last frame. I pull the camera off the tripod and rewind.

I need more film. And paper, too, I have a paying job to complete. I can hear music through the ceiling, Coltrane. Fritz, the lightning guy, is awake. I decide, instead of schlepping into Manhattan, to try to convince him to sell me some supplies.

(continued…)}