





Horse Down

Fiction by Laura Crusier

At three o'clock in the afternoon, Billy Abery finds me at Tappit's Tavern with a burger in my hand. "Horse down," he says, and by the look on his face, I can tell it's my wife's. I can tell it's Molly's. "Get your ropes," Billy says, and the other men in the bar are already standing up and putting their hats on.

Here, in the town of Darby, the tendons in our knees are sore, and our wives rub them down with lanolin and eucalyptus. The soreness comes from riding horses, from twisting in the saddle when we've got our eyes on the sheep and the dogs, and from the strain we put on our bodies when we tie ropes around our waists and drag our injured horses out of the surf and onto dry land.

Where we live, the ocean touches the town. At high tide, there is no beach, sometimes just the top of Twelve Rocks jutting out of the sea foam, appearing and disappearing as the waves come in, elusive as shark fins. When the tide is low, the ocean bottom stretches out, out, out, and the water is a thin ribbon on the horizon, the second farthest receding tide in the world. People who see our ocean at low tide for the first time stand with their hands on Twelve Rocks and expect to look out over a vast desert, but they never do. It is always, very clearly, the ocean floor they are looking at, a rippled record of what the Indian Ocean has been up to against the Australian coast, a sacred glimpse of the folds and memories the earth makes for itself. Not a long time ago, but today, yesterday. Sometimes the tide is lazy, pulling the water softly back like a woman pulls the sheets back on a bed, and you can see deep divots where fishermen lodged their anchors the day before.

Sometimes you can pick out "baby's bathtubs" right on the edge of town, soft, sloping hollows where the saltwater crocodiles have shoved themselves down

into the sand to rest, or to wait in the shallow water, and if the tide is terribly gentle, whole prints might be left and you can pick out the curve of the tail, the claws on either side of the great jaw. Sometimes, even the texture of the skin remains in the wet sand.

Our bay mare, Skeeter, has a long scar the length of her belly, but other than that, Molly and I have been lucky until today. Today, it's Molly's gelding, Toddy, whose chest has been crushed in the jaws of a crocodile, six miles east on the Flapoons' farm where Billy works. Yesterday, with Molly's permission, Billy loaded Toddy into his trailer and took him there. The Flapoons recently acquired a hundred-head of sheep, and they needed the help. And Molly had hoped too that Billy would give the Flapoons' youngest child, Glenn, who is smart but horse-shy, a go on Toddy, who is sensible and surefooted.

In town, mostly, the crocs stay in the water, but on the farms on either side of town, they come up. Sometimes to hunt, but mostly to lay their eggs in the sandy pastures or along the banks of the freshwater tributaries to the sea. Here, at high tide, our farms touch the ocean, and the crocs hoist themselves onto dry land to lay their eggs.

Molly locates the nests on our farm every year. She follows the distinct tracks of the crocodiles, the crescent, reverse, crescent, reverse of the switch-back tails. She digs into the mounded nests and pulls out the papery eggs with her hands, one at a time, and drowns them in buckets of fresh water. In the first season we made this our home she decided that this would be hers—her job—and had Billy, who is an expert farmhand and a good friend to us both, show her how. Molly and Toddy walk the edge of the pasture every morning, looking for tracks out of the sea. Sometimes the crocs stick around to guard their nests and to help the young out of the eggs when it's time, and Molly is on the lookout for this too: the long, leathery bodies of the mama crocs flat in the grass. Each nest, usually with fifty or so eggs, takes a long time, and Toddy waits patiently, facing the sea, the buckets of fresh water rocking behind him

in a wooden hitch. I watch them, if I can, from wherever I am on the farm—with the sheep, or combing the horses down. Molly, on her belly, pulling up eggs. Putting her arms in the ground.

Some nests are so well camouflaged that Molly skips over them a dozen times before something gives them away, something like a stick pointing opposite from the way the wind's got all the other sticks pointing. Once, I watched Molly startle, lurch off the ground, and back away. When I got to her, she was watching a hatchling pull itself out of the nest, and another one was starting to butt its way from an egg with its snout. I started to move forward, but she crossed her arm in front of me. "Don't," she said, and we sat on the ground and watched for an hour.

Darby doesn't get many tourists, but when we do, oh, they are clever. They rename our ocean The Sea of Indecision, The Sea of Change. "Look," they say, and point out to the thin thread of blue on the horizon. "It can't make up its mind." They stand with their hands on Twelve Rocks where, the day before, the water was chin-deep. "Just like a woman," one will say, and then the crowd of them will "Ha!" between a laugh and a roar, slap their hands against each others' shoulders. Uncomfortable men, who perhaps, beneath their guffaws, at the very core of them, sense the great conviction of our ocean. Our ocean, when it does a thing, there is no question about it.

So far this season, Molly has collected 347 crocodile eggs from nine nests. We've heard that a single nest can contain up to ninety eggs, but Molly's highest count, so far, is sixty-two. Every evening, she marks the day's total on the calendar hanging on the corkboard above the telephone in the kitchen. At the end of the month, Molly tallies up the days and turns the page. Last year, before the monsoons came in earnest and erased the croc tracks, Molly excavated seventeen nests totaling 906 eggs. She keeps track of the number of chicken eggs we collect too, which is usually zero. We have three black Australorps, and while the shed where they lay their eggs and where they go to bed

at night is dingo and crocodile-safe, it is by no means snake-proof, and we've seen some lumpy snakes in the toolshed.

By the time we reach Twelve Rocks, the Harpoon Man is on the scene. Molly is in the passenger side of the pickup truck, with her eyes on him, watching him test his wrists. I've seen the Harpoon Man without his sea-feet on, when he's not out hunting the meat of the crocodile, the horse's meat in the crocodile's great belly. He sits outside Tappit's Tavern on a padded chair with a ripped seat, white socks pulled up to his knees. When he shows up at Twelve Rocks, some people pretend not to know what he's up to. Some people cheer him on. He's slight, and he looks a little silly, it's true, with the snorkel rising up, the great plastic mask over his face, warping his features. He might look like an outsider to an outsider, but to us, there is no mistaking him on days like these.

We've all been here a long time. Generations. Or in our case, five years, which is a long time because we are determined to stay. We want to die here. Not now, of course, but when it is time. We are transplants from the United States, and now this is our home: 1,023 acres of pastureland, stretching along the Indian Ocean. We raise sheep. We keep horses and cattle dogs to work the sheep, and Molly keeps one dog, Vance, around the house, and on her lap in the evenings when she's reading her novels or talking on the telephone to America. We are the first farm east of town—there is the town-limits sign, and then our farm. We live in a good house built with rocks from this land seventy years back, and even though our driveway begins at the edge of Darby, it is a bumpy three-mile ride in to our front door.

Sometimes I look at Molly. Just look at her—hometown Molly, whom I first saw on the first day of Mr. Mashberg's class when he was pulling the maps down in the front of our classroom at Barnardsville Elementary School in Barnardsville, North Carolina. I watch her from bed in the morning when she's already up, comb-

ing her hair in the mirror. I notice the way she holds her hand flat to give apples to the horses, and the way she wipes the green froth from the horses' mouths on her jeans. I watch her in the slow process of culling the croc eggs, lifting each of them with both hands to the bucket.

Lately, Molly has been asking me to turn my imagination up a notch. "Look, Jack," she'll say, when Vance is doing something human, like pushing his nose into the warmth of her neck when he's sleepy on her lap or going up on his hind legs, reaching up on the door to be let outside. When we got married, Molly and I both said no kids, but now, I think it's on her mind. I practice under my breath: "Molly and Jack Overreem Raise Sheep and a Child on the Australian Coast." It's practical. We could use more hands on the farm. But I don't know.

On low tide days, our horses wander listlessly at pasture, their fur finely crusted with salt from the ocean. They blink and blink until they close their eyes altogether and move slowly, as if they are sleepwalking. We bought our five horses from Billy when we first moved here to control the dogs that work the sheep. Billy wrestles them out of the bush, then sells them in towns on the coast, broken but not trained. On low tide days, our half-wild horses appear lethargic and miserable, leaning as if their bodies are bone-houses, dilapidated and ready to collapse. But up close, you can see that their muscles are tense under their skin, their eyes twitching behind thick-veined lids—Bruce and Toddy and Sandman and Big Ivy and Skeeter. Their solemnness is an act of patience. As the ocean slowly returns to the land, the horses allow themselves to move forward, west to meet the sea. By the time the water sluices through the grass, the horses' swaybacks have lifted to strong, taut spines, and they stretch their long necks and toss their manes.

Of course, the crocodile shoreline is not a safe place for horses. Horses like ours, who refuse to learn not to love the sea. Horses with manes brittle with salt,

saltwater horses. The men of this town have built fences, but the ocean knocks them down. Takes them away from us. And the horses—they won't put up with being kept away. They slosh through pasture flooded with sea until they are in the sea, hooves circling beneath them in the water above the seafloor, waves slapping their flanks. With a rich, salt smell in their fur, our horses walk around like they're drunk.

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On high tide days, they're intoxicated, muscles quivering as if their bodies are made of a thousand slippery fish. As if our horses have swallowed the live bodies of birds—sulphur-crested cockatoos and pink correllas beating stiff wings against their chests, attracting the hungry attention of the crocodiles. Our half-breasted horses; our silver-scarred horses; our three-legged, one-hocked, beautiful horses.

No one knows why, at low tide, the horses stop at the edge of the pastureland. They won't step onto the floor of the receded ocean. "Why don't they run around out there?" I asked Billy one afternoon at Tappit's Tavern. We were throwing back bitters and egging on the pool players from the bar. "They just stop and won't budge." I've tried to take Bruce out, tried to turn him off the grass and onto the brainpan of the Indian Ocean with the reins, but he won't go. Once, I tried the spurs on him, which is something we normally don't use because we don't need to on the farm. He reared his eyes back and dug his hoofs in and I felt ashamed. "Don't know, don't know," Billy said, and caught the next bitter sliding down the counter and into his hand.

And nobody knows why a crocodile would try to bring down something as large as a horse, a beast so massive that the crocodile's own skin would split to

swallow him. There have been theories: the croc is after two birds, one fish. Or the croc bites out of fear, four rock-strong hooves knocking around. We are less eager to say the crocodile is savage or evil, but some believe the croc remembers success: that this has been done before. And the people in this town believe in the lucky hit—the chest, the neck, the vein in the hind leg the vet pushes the needle in to put a sick horse down. A wave at the wrong time. Too much blood in the ocean, and not enough blood in the horse.

When this happens, once or twice a year when a horse is struck, when the horse's goose-egg eyes are rearing in its head, or have already gone gray, milky black, when the sturdy neck the horse is famous for relaxes, the men of this town wade into the ocean. We tie strong ropes around Twelve Rocks using sailor's knots, then swim great swaths of rope out to the horse. We dive with the rope in our hands, under and around the bobbing horse's belly, over and over until the horse is wrapped like a mummy. We place slipknots over the delicate anklebones. We let the waves help us bring it in. Breathe when the surf goes out, heave when the surf is heaving back toward the pastureland. It is the only time we feel our ocean wants to get rid of us. "Get out," she says, and it worries us, but in the morning with our chests tight with smoke, she is calling us, calling us, which worries us too.

Today, we don't wait for the tide to go down. The men of this town enter the water and tie off on Twelve Rocks with Toddy's body in front of us, bucking with the force of the surf. The air smells like salt and metal, and the thought of the saltwater crocodile keeps us moving. We think about the Harpoon Man, slipping along the floor of the Indian Ocean.

The Harpoon Man thinks about the horse's meat in the belly of the crocodile even when he is trying not to, even when he sits outside the tav, listening to the clack of pool balls.

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