

CONNECTED

by

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“Tell him your name,” the woman holding the horse’s reins said again. She looked down and twisted the toe of her boot in the dirt.

I stood several steps away from the horse and said nothing. It was morning, the shade long from the barn to the corral, reaching mud puddles lying by the fence. After a week of heavy rain, the July heat pressed on my back. Flies buzzed around me, the horses, the mud. A trickle of sweat ran from the brim of my stiff new sun hat, along my hairline in front of my ear. I brushed it away, then rubbed the back of my hand on my jeans.

“Go ahead, tell him who you are.” The woman shifted the reins from one hand to the other and patted Cisco gently on the side of his neck.

I didn’t know what to say. I had learned of the workshop through WINGS, a nonprofit for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and had received a scholarship. Was I merely a survivor? Was I limited by other parts of my identity? Did I still harbor the little girl who liked horses and watching my dad groom them?

I considered giving a false name, maybe Gretchen or Zoe, something so unlike my given name that I could be someone with a very different past and not need the workshop at all. I stepped forward and brushed my fingers down a strip of white hair on the horse’s nose.

“Hi, Cisco. I’m Shawna,” I muttered, running the syllables together. The other participant, a woman brimming with confidence and horse knowledge, boldly introduced herself to a white horse. I shuffled beside Cisco, shoved my fingers through the handle of a blue jelly

brush, and hoped someone would issue a set of instructions I could master. It was quiet.

The workshop was called Horse Ibachakali, ibachakali meaning connection in Choctaw. The Choctaw language has several words for connection; ibachakali is the type of connection aspen trees have. On the surface each tree appears to be independent, but underground the trees belong to one large, intricate root system that holds the trees together as one, strengthening them individually and collectively. We were going to learn how to be a part of a reciprocal relationship with a horse, the instructor said.

No, I thought. I can't. I am a liability in relationships due to the damage I've sustained. I will hurt the horse if I get close. I might break myself. I can't afford closeness or connection. No.

I placed the brush tentatively on Cisco's reddish-orange back, brushing slowly in small strokes along the side of his spine. Around me I noticed splinters in the rotting picnic table, the changing shapes of wispy clouds over me, where the paint had chipped off the metal fence. There were crops of dandelions by several fence posts. The dirt was a pale brown, more dust than dirt.

"Look at the horse," the instructor said.

As I brushed, his hair rose and fell in tiny waves, leaving thin tracks. I followed the brush lightly with my left hand and rubbed my fingers together. They were greasy.

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My dad's hands were callused and strong. He wrapped them around my slight child's body and held on. The calluses snagged on my skirts, the seat of my pants, nightgowns. His body was thin, his nearly six feet hunched forward, as if saying he wasn't sure of something. Strength erupted from him with rage or desire, his frame stretching until his arms reached around me and held on

like tentacles. When I moved, they squeezed tighter. It was love that I wanted.

“You’re getting so big,” he said, pulling me close, looking from my hips to my chest where small bumps had appeared and were growing despite my hatred of them. “You’re so pretty.” The snaps on his Western shirts cut into my chest, the love between his legs and mine lumpy and swollen. I left my body there, a series of limp limbs, and escaped into fantasies in my head, focused on seams between the wood paneling and etchings in the plaster. I didn’t feel the pain when I bit my lip to keep from crying.

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“Let go of any judgments, memories, or thoughts,” the workshop instructor said. “Focus on your breath and the present moment.”

I gasped a breath in and held it. With a long brush stroke, I let the breath out in a big huff, then struggled to inhale again. My eyes widened, and I stepped back from the horse. *Liability*, I thought. The instructor walked toward me. Her shirt was green plaid, the snaps the same pearl my dad would have worn.

“Just think about your breath.” I copied her raspy, deep breaths. Inhale. Brush stroke. Exhale. Brush stroke. Inhale. Exhale. I closed my eyes and smelled manure, fresh hay, mud, dust.

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“Take this one,” my dad had said when I was twelve. He quickly slipped a harness on a white horse. “Go wait up by the street. Don’t let him eat leaves or weeds.” He dropped the rope in my hand and busied himself harnessing another horse.

I longed for the privilege of going with my dad to the neighbor’s barn to groom and

exercise their horses. I hadn't been allowed to go before. That day was special; I was special, too. When he leaned against the frame of my door and nonchalantly mentioned I had been good enough or was old enough to go, I crammed my feet in my shoes and scampered down the street with him.

In the barn he moved confidently, his long arms gracefully reaching for blankets, harnesses, and tightening buckles. He spun on the toes of his boots, stepping over piles of hay and sinking into soft dust. His arms and legs worked like a team, his power matching that of the horses, their partnership formed without language. My dad pressed on a horse's shoulder; the horse moved. The horse stamped its foot; my dad shook a blanket. He pulled out a burr, held it up to the horse's eyes, and tossed it in a trash can. From outside the barn I admired the elegant pas de deux; through the afternoon sun, dust floated gently over them like *Nutcracker* snowflakes.

"Almost there," my dad said. The muscles in the horses' backs twitched against flies.

I held the white horse's lead rope tight under a cottonwood tree to keep the horse from eating. My knuckles were white; the frayed threads dug into my hand. The horse jerked its head toward the leaves.

"Hold that horse away from the leaves!" My dad clipped a lead rope to the other horse's harness and started out of the barn. "Remember, you're in control!"

I jerked the horse and saw his eyes blink.

"That's the way." My dad leaned forward into his steps, walking up a small hill.

My stomach burned with the shame of failure. I wanted to be special to him, worth the privilege of time with him and the confidence he had in me. His love was something to earn,

something given, something I could lose even more easily if I reached for it.

I was no match for the horse's strength. It nuzzled its nose and mouth against my arm, flared its lips, and bit. I saw the pink tissue inside my arm, then blood filling the wound in my triceps, saw my arm jerk away, as if it was someone else's arm, as if my body was no longer mine.

My dad stretched his lips wide, flared his nose. "I told you to hold him away from the leaves!"

I waited for tears, but none came.

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At the workshop it was time to try putting a harness on a horse, then walk around the corral. I lifted the harness and stopped.

"Where does this part go?"

"Right here." The instructor patted a spot behind the horse's ears.

My breath sped up. I had forgotten or didn't know how to harness a horse. My only option was to fail, I thought. Not even halfway through the workshop, I faced failing the leaders of the workshop, the horse, myself. *I can't do this.*

My water bottle and keys were close. I considered silently walking away. My reasons for registering for the workshop—to reconcile who I tried to be versus who I was meant to be—felt ridiculous in that moment. It was easier to hate my dad, every part of him, even the parts we had shared. I wanted to wipe him from my DNA, wipe away who I had been before his tenderness had transformed special into shame. To accept myself, I had to accept our shared love for horses, and let myself enjoy a connection with a horse both with and without my dad's DNA. I had to

love the pieces of my dad that were part of me. I had to love myself and learn how to connect.

“It’s OK to bend his ears. It won’t hurt him.” The instructor reached over his head and helped me put the rope harness in the correct spot. I tied a knot by the side of the horse’s face, then patted him.

“Ready to take him for a walk?”

I nodded as if following an order and took a step. Slowly the horse followed me. Inhale. Exhale. I watched my feet, thinking not of where I was going but of where I had been. The horse pulled me toward a patch of weeds. *Oh, no*, I thought. I tried to pull him back gently without letting the workshop leaders see; too gently. He chewed.

“Come on,” I begged. “You can have a snack in a little bit.”

I worked hard to breathe, to tell myself that moment didn’t define me. I didn’t believe myself, my breath, anything there. I wanted to shout, stomp, and scream until my throat was raw. I wanted to run into the field past the fence and sit alone in the tall grass. *I give up*, I thought. *I quit. I can’t connect with a person, a horse, anything. I have earned the sting of solitude.*

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“Keep breathing,” I heard. My breath was shallow and fast. I clenched my eyes tight and rolled my feet in my boots. My feet felt heavy. I tapped my fingers against my thigh and bit my tongue.

I’m here, I thought to the horse. *We’re here. Please, tell me who I really am. Please tell me I’m OK.*

The rope rested loose in my hand. Step. Inhale. Step, step, step. Exhale. Cisco’s nose flickered, his tail swished. I walked and breathed until I found a rhythm, felt and heard only the sound of my boots and Cisco’s feet. *Breathe. Step. Breathe.*

“Look,” the instructor whispered. Cisco and I walked in perfect rhythm. Inhale. Step. Exhale. Step. Step. I placed my free hand on the side of Cisco’s neck, expecting to pat an acknowledgement of our connection. He blinked, hung his head low in relaxation, and kept walking. I left my hand on his neck.

The instructor held a dirty thumb up and smiled. I smiled, too. *Ibachakali*. Cisco and I had connected. I was a part of the underground root system.

I longed to rest my head against Cisco’s neck, to feel his breath and mine together, to feel his hair on my cheek. I wanted to be close in a way that allowed me to let sadness and anger out, let tears run down his hair and fall into dots in the dirt. I wanted to say thank you in a way he’d understand, in a way that reached past words. There was no need to explain what I felt, what I had known, who I knew I was. All I needed to do was breathe.