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## CONTAMINATED BLOOD

TANYA IS DIGGING WHEN SHE HEARS THE TORTURED SOUND. Her wife, Dr. Sarah MacDonald, has a backlog of blood vials that she is certain are all contaminated. She'll never have time to process them all. Most of those patients have since died from the Oil Blood. Tanya suggested dumping them into the cove, but Sarah said any contaminated blood is mostly oil, so doing so would be like intentionally puncturing the hull of an old crude tanker. Instead, Tanya has dumped them into a metal barrel they use for autumn leaf burning. By the time she covers the hole, she has identified the tortured sounds as a stricken braying, a noise like a stabbing victim trying to find breath. She enters the barn to find Sunshine—who replaced their car thirteen months ago at the start of the Oil Blood contagion when they didn't have much need for one anymore—pushing out a foal on a slipstream of lochia. Tanya inhales the iron-and-feces scented air, doing quick math in her head. Sunshine hasn't seen another horse since she arrived, more than a year ago. They don't take her that far.

This realization sends Tanya running to the house for Dr. Sarah, eager for an explanation or theory. Sunshine has already proven herself extraordinary, sold as a hobby horse yet able to carry Tanya on her back at speeds that would make Secretariat jealous, for entire mornings without stopping to rest or even for a drink. Dr. Sarah jumps into her muck boots, dons her lab coat and a headlamp, and brings with her the doctoring bag she threw together at the start of the closure, a fashionable old burgundy tote bag filled with a stethoscope, thermometer, gauze, anesthetic cream, stitching thread, tongue depressors, and the like. "That for Sunshine, the foal, or me?" Tanya asks. Dr. Sarah inspects the horses as if they've pulled some sleight-of-hand magic trick, as Sunshine meticulously licks at the foal's amniotic sheen. It's the slowest Tanya's ever seen Sunshine move. "Filly," Dr. Sarah says. Sunshine's licking reveals a hairless animal with deep, black skin. No mane, no eyelashes, thin little sausage of a tail. Tanya folds her arms to stop her-

self from shuddering. Dr. Sarah's voice provides more comfort. "Come look closer at what this extraordinary horse has made, I suppose on a tryst one night we forgot to latch the barn door, yes?" It was a logically perfect conclusion, and Sunshine herself confirmed it with a canny whinny.

Except Tanya knows that she has locked the barn door every night and twice and triple checked it. She doesn't say it aloud, but Sunshine is more precious to her, more comforting and useful in these times, than even Dr. Sarah. For whatever reason, and whatever Tanya's scientific wife might say, Sunshine has created this offspring herself. She names the filly Immaculate, which Dr. Sarah takes as another example of Tanya's deadpan humour.

The next morning, Dr. Sarah calls Dr. Lewis, a veterinarian, who says that hairlessness in a horse is a genetic mutation, which brings with it an abundance of disease, a death sentence that will take down a foal within weeks or three years at the most. "Best to prevent such misery," he says. Dr. Lewis mentions the phenomenon to his technician, who tells his roommate, who posts about it online. Tanya can't stand Dr. Lewis' advice. She hides all of her wife's barbiturates and stands vigil in the pen, watching Immaculate trot circles around her mother, playfully rearing up on her hind legs, life bursting from her pores. Tanya can see that the foal will grow even larger than her mother. She runs wider and wider circles, to the point Tanya is surprised that Sunshine doesn't follow to keep a closer eye, or whinny her daughter back. Tanya notices a boy at the far end of the field, standing on a lower rung of the fence and holding an apple out, with his phone pointed at Immaculate. Pictures will soon be on the internet. Immaculate snatches the apple and disappears it in a single movement. "Greedy little bitch and bald as a poor man's picnic table," the boy says, laughing. Tanya sees the boy is far from alone. There is a group of a dozen shyer children behind him, and a few adults too. A couple is tossing cookies over the fence, as if a newborn foal needs a fix. Immaculate has inherent wisdom enough to ignore them, practising her whinny as if telling them where to take their sugar snacks.

Another man, barely the acceptably safe Oil-Blood distance from Tanya, clears his throat, startling her. He introduces himself as Barney Putnam, from over Lakeport way. "I'm starting a circus," he says. "With things as they are, people are craving old-timey entertainment. Simpler times. Is it true you named her Immaculate? That's goddamn perfect." She takes his card and excuses herself, leads Sunrise back to the barn, with Immaculate trailing at her mother's hooves. The next day Father Immanuel arrives and

asks for time alone with the filly. Tanya was raised in his parish, but Dr. Sarah has no trouble telling him in lurid terms that the horse was conceived in the usual way, under the cover of darkness with an erect horse penis finding relief inside a horse vagina that may or may not have been moist. “Similar to what your parents did to make you.” The worst visitors are those claiming to share Dr. Sarah’s scientific view, saying Sunshine must have escaped, that a hairless horse is about as clear a sign of God’s hand as leprosy, yet they want to study the “specimen,” needle her magnificent skin—which Tanya knows feels softer than her lover’s, and which she also knows transports her fingertips like the surface of water transports a schooner. They want to extract fluids, cut off any chunks they think she can live without. They want to strew bits of her to far-flung labs at the world’s corners so leading experts on equine genome syndromes can find signs of impending decline, defying what Tanya sees before her eyes, a filly that has in her few days on earth almost caught up to her extraordinary mother in her size, speed, strength and endurance. She has done so while eating nothing more than her mother’s milk and the occasional apples of strangers greedy for snapshots of the freakish-looking animal. Dr. Sarah lets a local professor she trusts take some samples for the labs, and he promises to procure proof that her obvious strength and speed is illusory and impermanent. What isn’t, Tanya wonders.

Each day the crowd grows, to the point they realize hundreds of people must be leaving their zones to see the hairless wonder. Dr. Sarah calls the RCMP, five of whom arrive in riot gear and line up to march around the outside of the pen chanting “Stop! Back Up! Stay Back!” The crowd disperses in waves, letting the gendarmerie pass. They roll back to the fence with their sugary treats, all of which Immaculate ignores. Sunshine reaps the spoils. The commanding officer, who wears her red dress uniform and brown Baden Powell hat, explains that most of her usual detail are out and about levying fines. Tanya, who is claustrophobic in good times and has started suffering daily heart palpitations, builds a wooden turnstile at the head of the driveway and puts a large tip jar beside it. She releases her stress by riding Immaculate bareback around the pen, reaching speeds that make her fear the horse will break free from centripetal force and fly her Icarus-like into the sun and subsequently the sea. Tanya’s the only one who rides her. Having grown up around half-wild horses in Cape Breton, she’s more than comfortable, elated in fact, when Immaculate lowers her head as Tanya

places a stool beside her, to give herself a boost onto the horse's back. Tanya's skin tingles, anticipating the transformation of curious crowds into an amorphous blob as they speed by and the expansion of that blob to include sky and cloud and sea and rain and fire, a continuous circular streak smelling of taut skin, muscle, and sinew.

Inevitably the afflicted arrive presenting their wounds. A schoolteacher who says she was laid off and lives in a room filled with empty bottles, a new one every day. A man who says the cops beat him down for buying books at a store instead of online. A man who transports his five hundred pounds on an electric scooter; he says he almost drained the battery coming to see their horse, and if it can't help him walk again he doesn't know how he'll get home. And a child celebrity with cancer, whose baldness and frailty almost moves Tanya to let her sit in front of her as she rides Immaculate, but Dr. Sarah proves herself to be the wiser half, predicting an ill child will come to harm at such speeds without even a saddle. They haven't tried to break Immaculate yet. Inevitably the Oil-Blooded people arrive, frightening everyone but Dr. Sarah, who sees them every day. She has plenty of masks on hand, but Tanya won't let them anywhere near Immaculate, whose response to the afflicted is always to nuzzle her face against theirs. That's her response to everyone. Some interpret this as proof of her healing powers; others say it is a deep longing within her, something she herself needs. Barney Putnam worries the vets are right, that she may peak early, wither and die young, and he brings his strongman—a local farmhand who once finished second in a provincial deadlift contest—to pet the young horse in the hopes some of that strength will rub off. "Silly," Tanya says. "By your logic she needs a marathoner, or better yet a centenarian, if longevity's what you're after." Dr. Sarah says that Immaculate's good bedside manner is sweet, but it won't cure the terminal. Immaculate refuses all their proffered thanks, sugar cubes, apples, and handfuls of hay. She takes no food at all, no longer even milk from her mother, only moderate gulps of water in the morning. The lack of nutrients doesn't slow her. She is much larger than her mother now, a good 19 hands.

It so happens that three of the Oil Bloods die a day after their visit with Immaculate. Their masked spouses and offspring arrive, demand proof of the horse's lineage, and question whether beautiful Sunshine is even the true mother. "I told you before she's a bastard," Dr. Sarah says, resorting as she does for simpletons to old-timey language. "We're doing scientific tests,"

Tanya adds, earning her a heavy stink-eye from Dr. Sarah, who doesn't lower herself to saying those tests have nothing to do with lineage. Dr. Sarah is as curious as anyone to observe Immaculate's lifespan. However potent, she expects it to be short, and everything about it fascinates her. She's making daily measurements of height, weight, and speed with Tanya on her back. As Dr. Sarah glares, the bereaved rip off their masks and throw them into the pen. Sunshine sniffs at them and lies herself down, not bothering to find shade, as Immaculate goes for a few more quick laps. As Immaculate gathers momentum, her hooves as loud and invisible as thunder, Tanya notices a shift in the sound of the crowd assembled at the far side of the pen. They are jeering. She runs to the gate when Immaculate stumbles rounding the bend, shaking blood from a cut over her eye. Dr. Sarah joins them, and Tanya manages to grab hold of Immaculate's jaw, steadying her head as she comes to a halt. She has no mane to grab. As Dr. Sarah cleans and dresses the wound, Tanya scans the crowd. She sees not one but several slingshots hanging from children's back pockets. Enraged, she screams, wishing they would all get sick and drown in their own crude. To hell with them, their negligent parents too. They can have their money back. No one takes cash anymore anyway.

That evening Dr. Sarah receives an email with lab results. They provide more questions than answers. No abnormalities to be found, which is more than the needed proof for Tanya and less than satisfactory to Dr. Sarah. They want more samples: bits of hoof, eye discharges, vaginal fluids, earwax. No hurry, just curious is all. Are they sure it's female? Does it have normal looking metacarpophalangeal and metatarsophalangeal joints? "Fetlock," Dr. Sarah says. Ankles. What's the specimen's current height and weight? Is it losing size yet? Yet, the letter says. It's the same with every lab, their flaccidity on display, nothing unusual showing up in any tests and more asinine questions than useful information. Tanya emails them all back to explain that Immaculate's mother, Sunshine, has always been a wonderfully intuitive horse but that Immaculate is so attuned, almost simpatico, with Tanya, offering quizzical expressions when the crowds disperse in the evenings and they are together in the barn, Sunshine gently snoring already. "It is as if Immaculate absorbs my gist but wants to ask for certain elaborations and is hampered only by the shape of her mouth, her physiology, which though hairless is otherwise perfect, for a horse. And you ask me about her ankles? This is what happens when men try to run things themselves."

The following day there are no crowds, not a soul in fact seeking to view or touch the hairless horse. “Well, you’ve put an end to that cash equus,” Dr. Sarah says with a light punch on Tanya’s arm, which makes her feel heroic. She has saved Immaculate from the farting masses. But they later hear that Barney Putnam has managed to wrangle himself a Big Top Tent with a second-hand aquarium the size of a double decker bus, which now houses a giant octopus that eats oil, to which news Dr. Sarah makes a face that looks like she’s swallowing her own throat. No longer heroic, Tanya is disgusted by fickle humanity, enchanted by the most novel thing. “It’s not Immy’s fault,” says Dr. Sarah, who refuses to use Tanya’s formal biblical name for Immaculate. But Tanya is as mystified as anyone by Immaculate’s aloofness and the timing of the deaths of those three Oil Bloods. She knows Immaculate’s sweeter nature and that this empathetic animal would never mete out any harsh justice, even if she had such powers. Let them think what they will, let them have their garbage-disposing mollusc, their hope for a return to the status quo. Good riddance to white trash. “Her name is Immaculate,” Tanya says. “Sure is,” Dr. Sarah says, but she won’t say the word.

They argue, and Tanya spends the night in the barn and discovers that Immaculate sleeps standing up. Deep, REM sleep, all night long. Plenty of horses nap while standing, but they lie down at night. They’re able to lock their leg joints while relaxing enough to have a nap. Horses enjoy a good nap, and it’s good for them. In the barn they know they’re safe enough to lie down and have a proper sleep. But Immaculate either doesn’t bother or doesn’t feel safe. Tanya gives her a full rub down, massaging her long, taut muscles for over an hour. Immaculate nickers, sighs, grunts, and snorts herself to sleep. She must be relaxed, but her muscles still feel flexed, ready to flee.

In the morning Tanya jolts up at the feel of hot breath on her neck. Sunshine’s. Tanya rubs Sunshine’s nose, stands, and brushes hay from her overalls. Immaculate is sleeping still, her breath impossibly slow. Tanya puts a hand against her side and runs it over her skin, which is smooth and muscled like a bodybuilder. No movement. Tanya puts her face to Immaculate’s. The horse’s eyes are closed. She says her name as Sunshine nuzzles at her from behind, looking for breakfast, unconcerned for her child who has so quickly grown into something else. She can’t die. She is too healthy. Too perfect. Tanya can’t imagine how they’d even dispose of such a specimen, as

the experts keep calling her. They'd love to get their hands on her lifelessness.

Desperate, Tanya grabs her mounting stool from a hook and throws herself aboard, kicking in her heels as she never has had to before. No response. She claps her hand down on Immaculate's neck, then claps both together and shouts her name. "Immaculate!" Sunshine has joined in now, whinnying then squealing. Tanya pulls on Immaculate's ear. "Wake up, darling. Forgive!" She tugs again, and Immaculate snorts. Alive. Tanya is so thrilled she leans down and kisses her closed, black eyelid. Immaculate twitches her skin as if shaking a fly. Tanya takes the hint, fetches some roughage for Sunshine, and goes to make nice with Dr. Sarah, who agrees to give Immaculate another inspection. "But it may be her time, dear. She's had an extraordinary run." Tanya refrains from telling Dr. Sarah of Immaculate's sleeping habits, choosing to delight in it like a secret treasure rather than provoking her partner. They check on her frequently over the coming days. Dr. Sarah is astounded by the tightness of the skin, the power emanating from Immaculate's every twitch. When a fly lands on her rear, she moves her skin and it vaults off as if catapulted, soon flying too close to Immaculate's mouth so that she snaps a quick end to its brief life. "Now you're hungry," Tanya says. But the horse remains immobile for three days, her biological and surrogate mother on vigil together, Tanya patting her intermittently with heated towels and cold compresses, Sunrise nuzzling and nickering. But on the third morning, Tanya wakes to a constriction at her throat, feels herself being pulled from her sleep upright, Immaculate biting her hood and yanking. On her feet, she throws her arms around her love's neck, and she can feel the horse's will through its veins. Immaculate wants her to ride. She opens the gate that leads to the pen and climbs aboard, ready for the rush, glancing back at Sunshine but only for a millisecond before the jolt, and they are gone, less accelerating than snapping into highway speed like flicking a switch. They are gone, over the gate and beyond the pen, Dr. Sarah waving uncertainly. They are gone from the yard, beyond the town's outer ring and surely beyond their allotted zone, trees and ground and sky one nebulous blur. Tanya thinks they pass the new circus, with the oil-eating octopus. She hears the cheers or jeers of some illegal crowd with more cash than places to spend, but she is afraid to turn her head and can only hang on and see where Immaculate takes her.