

Christopher Malo

*Horses*

Looking down at his hands he traced the shape of his left, palm upturned, with the index finger from his right. Worn, rough and callused. The palms were a lighter shade of chestnut than the rest of his skin. Turning his hands over he surveyed their backsides, noting his wedding ring and revealing veins that snaked just below his skin. He had been momentarily transported to a place where the only thing that existed were the ten digits extended in front of him.

“This new kid on the mound ain't shit,” the bartender said to no one in particular as he traversed the length of the bar to refill a beer, not even glancing at the game on the small television suspended in the corner. Glancing around, he suddenly realized the world was in fact bigger than just his hands. Although he felt he didn't belong, his worn and dirt covered Dickies, soiled, grungy button down gray shirt with the arms rolled up, well worn work boots and dingy truckers cap suggested the opposite.

After the examination of his hands, he pawed his own face, rubbing the salt and pepper scruff, as he wondered why he often found himself in such a dirty, hole in the wall of a bar. Not that he would prefer one of those posh, overpriced joints downtown, but being a man who didn't imbibe in spirits any longer, why was he here at all?

“They don't have a chance tonight,” said the man bellying up to face him from his side of the bar.

“Do they ever really have a shot?” he retorted to his best friend, the owner, proprietor and sole employee of Clarence's.

“They got a shot every year. Then spring training comes to an end and the season opens,” Clarence chuckled, rapping his knuckles on the wooden bar-top. “How's Ms. Josephine Wayne?”

The answer was always the same. And it was a lie.

“She's doing great man.” He hated lying, but he hated the truth even more. Glancing up at the clock, he noticed it was almost a half past seven. “What do I owe you?” They played out the charade several times a week. The years had never altered the exchange.

“You know you don't owe me nothin' man. I wouldn't charge my own brother for a soda pop, and I ain't gonna start charging you either. In fact, how are you doin'?” asked Clarence. “You need to hold a few dollars old friend?”

He feigned insult as a way to divert answering the question. “Who you callin' 'old?’”

“You nigga! Now answer the question.” Apparently the diversion hadn't worked.

“Nah, I'm good. Old friend,” he smirked, pushing off from the bar stool. The truth was he needed a few dollars. Desperately.

He ran one of his weathered fingers across the brim of his hat and pointed at Clarence as he made his way to the door and the rest of the world. Pushing the screen door open, he heard the small bell that jostled each time the door opened and closed, then the 'thwap' as the door slammed closed behind him and the night belted him in the face.

He looked to the left and to the right, up and down the street as if deciding which way he should head, but his path was already predetermined. The apartment he rented with Josephine was two blocks east, in the heart of the same neighborhood he grew up in. He turned and started in the other direction. One block up and one block in was one of the city's thousands of abandoned lots. The difference between this particular one and the countless others, was this is where he stashed his shopping cart.

He had developed a routine. It was still early but dark enough, so he started with some sketchier locations, deeper in the hood, blending in effortlessly. It struck him as both good fortune and wretchedly sad. Once it got a little later and most people were in for the night, he moved to riskier locations, on the main streets, businesses. He tried to scavenge for a few hours, stop by 10 o'clock, bring what he collected to the scrapyard, sell it off. From there he always went to the same corner store, bought as many scratch-off lottery tickets that the night's earnings would allow, and sat at a booth in the back by the beer cooler. One by one he would rub a penny over each card's surface, littering the table with silver shavings, making two piles. One of winners. One of losers. He'd collect his winnings, then head home.

There in the small, dingy two bedroom apartment, Josephine would be in Lydia's room, door locked. He would knock, Josephine would ignore this, he would slide all the earnings from an eighteen-hour day under the door, putting his ear to it to listen for any sign of life. Sometimes it took seconds, other times many minutes would pass, but he never left the door until he heard something. Anything. Usually, it was the firing of a lighter that granted him his freedom.

From there he went into their bedroom, took off his clothes, shook them out, then folded them neatly and put them on the chair. A hot shower was next, before finally settling into his favorite chair in front of the television.

He'd press play on the VCR remote, picking up where he left off the night before in the middle of a movie. Westerns were his favorites. In fact, all cowboy culture was. There was something completely familiar about the way they lived. He found it totally unrelatable but fascinating, in ways that intoxicated and consumed him. He knew the movies line for line, but they always seemed mysterious. He knew how they ended, but watching them always felt suspenseful. And he was drawn to the horses. If he could be any animal in the world, he would

be a horse. Specifically, a Morgan horse. The breed, known for their calm demeanor and sturdy build, was a favorite of cowboys. He imagined saving for one and naming it Duke.

After some time his eyelids would become heavy. He tried to stay awake as long as possible so the last thoughts in his head were those of the cowboy life. He did this in an effort to carry those last moments of consciousness into his dreamworld. By the time he dragged his behind from his chair to their bed, he was seconds away from a dream world filled with his horse and open land and freedom. Hopefully. He hadn't quite figured out quite how to ensure he would dream the dreams he wanted, but that didn't stop him from trying. Desperately.

By this point, he had worked to put everything that had happened in his day behind him. From the ten hours he put in as a maintenance man at one of the highrise apartment complexes downtown, to stopping by Clarence's, to his metal scrapping, before finally getting his scratch-offs and returning home, the days would have been long for a twenty year old, let alone a sixty-something year old. And his wife was a junkie.

But everyone thought he was the one with the habit. He told no one. He hid Josephine's secret. His family didn't know. Her family didn't know. Her friends didn't know. His friends didn't know. The folk at the church didn't know. Clarence didn't know. They thought they knew. They all thought they knew about poor Josephine's husband, stuck on smack. They all saw him slinking around the neighborhood at night. Pushing the cart. Stealing copper. No matter the weather. No matter the day of week. They admired the bravery, or foolishness, of Josephine. To stick and stand by her man. They couldn't imagine the shame she must feel, married to that junkie. Him.

He allowed everyone to think that way. To believe what they thought they saw. He let their eyes deceive them and not set the record straight. Deep in the quiet of the night, a place

that had nothing to do with what time it was but instead was determined by a clock that only his soul knew how to read, a place where when that clock struck midnight and everything was still, he knew he allowed people to believe this not for altruistic reasons. Not to shield his wife from judgment, not because he loved her and not because he hated her, not to be selfless in this small act of epic proportions but for the opposite reason. Because he was selfish. Because it was all about him.

If he had one wish in the world it would not be for this, but nightly, incorrectly, he believed it to be true. He wished when he lay in their bed at night, alone, by himself, that his gaze would not follow and fall down the long hallway running the length of the apartment, only to fall on the closed door of Lydia's room. Behind that door was the past and the future, and he was not comfortable with either.

Josephine would be behind the door, cooking up the dope in one of the half dozen dirty spoons littering the floor. Soiled cotton balls would also dust the landscape, along with strewn lighters and packs of matches. The lighters were to cook up the heroin, and the matches weren't back-ups, but the rough surface used to strike a match was ideal for sharpening syringes after they had become dulled by the repeated injections. She preferred to shoot the dope in places other than her arms, places less conspicuous, so that when she went to church or family stopped by, no one would suspect anything.

She hardly ate, she hardly drank, she hardly bathed. Dope. Dope. Dope. It was her life and by proxy it was his life. Josephine became a slave to the narcotic to forget the world. He became a slave to it as well, but as a way to induce pain. To atone for his sins.

Things hadn't always been like this. Josephine hadn't always been a dope fiend. He hadn't always been a bum. Life hadn't always felt like it was slipping from his grasp. For decades it had

been the other way around. The world had been in the palm of his hand. Everything they could of wanted was at his fingertips. They wanted for nothing. They had everything. Him. Josephine. Lydia.

At the time, he was the one with the habit. Josephine never touched the stuff. He always tried different tricks to keep himself from using all the dope he copped at once. He had a few places in the house he would stash the stuff. A bundle here, a bundle there. A bundle above the ceiling tile in the bathroom, a bundle in the kitchen drawer under the silverware tray. He couldn't always remember what was where, but if he kept to the same places, when he started to kick, he only had a few places to check.

One day after scoring and stashing half of what he copped in the house, he went out to get on with a few friends. When he returned, he found Josephine on her knees in the kitchen, cradling Lydia. Blood, vomit and white powder foamed from her mouth. The open bag was on the floor. Josephine and Lydia were making cookies that day. When Jo ran to the store to get eggs, Lydia found the bag and thinking it was sugar or flour, ingested it. Overdosed. Died. She was barely eight years old.

He never touched the stuff again. This time he went away for eight years and managed to kick in prison. When he hit the bricks, he was floored to learn that Josephine, in her despair over Lydia's death, after having watched him strung out for years, had inexplicably become drawn, entranced by the needle and brownish powder, and now was the one with the habit.

He walked in the door and for no reason, tried to be especially quiet. He made his way to Lydia's bedroom door. He wasn't drawn by habit, but felt compelled. His knuckles rapped on the door.

“Jo. Josephine!” he called. Nothing. Looking down at his hands holding the cash, he

traced the shape of his left, palm upturned, with the index finger from his right. Worn, rough and callused. The palms were a lighter shade of chestnut than the rest of his skin. Turning his hands over he surveyed their backsides, noting his wedding ring and revealing veins that snaked just below his skin.

“Josephine, I ain't got nothing for you tonight baby. I didn't hit on none of them.” He slid the money back in his pocket. He stared at the door. “I'm sorry baby.”

“Fuck you John,” she snapped. Then total silence.

As the sun came up over the city, each of them dreamt of the horse.

\*\*\*Questions:

- Does the reason for the change have to be stated? Why this night John decided to not give her the money?
- Does the first sentence's structure make it read as if he has three hands?
- Run on? “Deep in the quiet of the night, a place that had nothing to do with what time it was but instead was determined by a clock that only his soul knew how to read, a place where when that clock struck midnight and everything was still, he knew he allowed people to believe this not for altruistic reasons, not to shield his wife from judgment, not because he loved her and not because he hated her, not to be selfless in this small act of epic proportions but for the opposite reason.”