



The ground was hard and cold, the air so frigid the stars froze into the blackness. I could hear desert creatures around me—wild Mustangs snorted, prairie dogs rustled through the brittle grass—but the only thing I could see was my white breath drifting away.

With chill-stiffened joints, I began to set up camp. I attached a can of butane to my MSR backpacker stove. I had bought the thing while at college out west, when I fancied myself an outdoorsy woman. After graduation, I left that part of my life behind and moved to New York City to be a journalist. I met my future husband there and we relocated to Washington, DC, so he could save the children. He played golf with senators while I landed within an inner circle of wives who discussed what type of dress or suit was appropriate at which social events. I also spent a good deal of time at the dentist from grinding my teeth so hard they fractured.

This article assignment for *U.S. News* about a wild horse roundup was my first freelance job since moving back to southwest Colorado. It wasn't until I had driven through Dove Creek that night and turned off onto the dark desert road that I'd considered what it would mean if it turned out I no longer had the skills to be a reporter—what that would mean for my ability to make a living; even more, what that would say about my decision to leave my husband, along with our parquet wood floors and marble fireplaces.

I turned on the butane and it hissed through the hose to the stove. I flicked my lighter. Nothing. I turned up the gas and flicked the lighter again. With a “poof!” blue flames whirled out across the ground in an inverse mushroom shape. I jumped up and stomped out the spot fires. I decided to look at the instructions and then turned the stove right side up.

I heated up a small pot of water until it boiled, then dumped in a baggy, awakening from the dead a 10-year-old package of freeze-dried black bean chili. The steam thawed my nose enough that I noticed the smells around me—sage, clay sand and sweet, acidic horse manure. I filled my lungs with the scent of manure.

I always believed I loved horses because of the way they moved, their power and coordination. But now what first came to my mind when I thought of horses was the image of them sleeping standing up, at peace, yet ready to run.

As a child, I used to sleep in absurd positions—legs up the wall, head drooping off the edge of the bed. I did this under the guise of being funny. I liked the idea of my parents coming in to wake me in the morning, finding me looking like I'd been in a train wreck. Maybe this had also been my way of booby-trapping myself so that if a crack in the earth started to open and swallow me, I would fall over and wake up.



Don, from the Bureau of Land Management, had said the wild horse roundup would take place at dawn.

He told me that everyone involved was going to camp out near the site. But I didn't see any other cars when I arrived. I considered that I might be in the wrong place, but it was late. I was on a BLM road, miles from any traffic, so I decided to stay put and get some rest.

I pulled my old crescent-shaped “Eureka!” tent out of its stuff bag. The gray nylon was so stiff from disuse that even though I followed the instructions this time, my efforts at tugging the rods through the loops bent some of them into distortion. The tent wound up looking like a crippled

bug.

I licked my index finger and held it up to feel for wind direction. The air current was so faint I had to wet my finger again. I felt a slight cooling to the right side of my cuticle and rotated my tent's domed back towards the almost nonexistent breeze.

When I crawled into it with my sleeping bag, I tried to zip up the door flap, but the opening was too stretched for it to close more than halfway. I lay back on my mat and started to worry about snakes—the rattlesnakes Don warned me about—slithering in through the door gap. So, I focused on the stars I could see through the opening. They captivated me the way a campfire usually would, but without the comforting warmth. I pulled the sleeping bag over my head.

I thought I'd been looking at the stars, but I was really staring at what was between the stars. The void. That's what called to me. And that's what scared me.

I had once loved my husband very much, the boyish wisp of hair dusting his determined eyes. Over time, I

mostly became enthralled by his ability to move through life with such beauty and confidence. While I was concentrating on trying to be the right companion to this seemingly perfect creature, I disappeared.

I got it right sometimes—the wife thing—but sometimes I got it very wrong. I had worn the correct all-purpose black velvet dress, but with open-toed shoes—in the Fall! I had known all the right things to say: “Have you lost weight?” “What do you do?” “Oh my, that sounds fascinating.” But, every now and then, with my fuses fizzled on chardonnay, I had launched into one of my funny stories—to an ambassador’s wife, who was already glaring at my shoes. Maybe it was the story about the time I got trapped in a port-o-john at a western endurance horse race. Or the one about getting thrown off my horse in Central Park and landing, doggy-style, on a jogging doctor. I would suddenly become aware of the sound of my laughter, because it was so isolated and singular.

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At first light, I crawled out of the tent and pulled on my boots. I turned on my car and hunched over the steering wheel, rubbing my arms, while I waited for the engine to warm. When hot air came out of the vents, I held my frozen tube of toothpaste up to one of them. I got out and paced around to get my circulation going. I brushed my teeth and then spit the blue froth into the dust. While I pushed dirt over it with my boot, I heard a distant rumbling.

I jogged up the small hill, between the road and my camp, and watched an approaching convoy of pickup trucks, horse trailers and flatbed trucks. I got into my car and tagged onto the end of the procession. Red clay dust sifted in through the vents, caking the black dashboard. Although my hands still shook from the cold, I managed to turn the radio station from NPR to a country music station to better match the setting.

The convoy stopped where the road turned into sand dunes. Six men unloaded metal bars and poles off the flatbeds. While they assembled a couple of corrals, I wandered the grounds, trying to shake the chill out of my legs.

“You must be the reporter,” a man said behind me. I turned to him, moving my gaze upward until it stopped at his tan cowboy hat.

Don wore a canvas jacket over a light blue shirt with snaps. He removed his baseball cap and wiped his bangs with his forearm. We shook hands. He sipped his coffee, sucking the remnant caffeine from his brown mustache.

He waved his cap toward a red clay canyon wall. “That’s where we’re gonna put ya. Horses will come in through that end.” His green eyes were surrounded by hardened skin that wrinkled when he squinted into the sunlight.

“Hey Bob!” he yelled towards the corrals. “Don’t close the dang gates yet! We gotta get ‘em in there first.” He laughed and shook his head, then looked at the ground. He smoothed the dirt with the toe of his boot. “Okay, let’s go,” he said and walked away. As Don continued up the canyon wall, his hips swiveled as he walked, his gait truncated by his tight Wrangler jeans.

The trail narrowed where it traversed the side of a 200-foot drop. As I crossed it, my vision gave way to spots of light. I tried to focus on the faded ring of Don’s tobacco tin embedded in his back pocket, but my fear of heights took over and my legs became spongy and gave way. I lowered myself until I could touch the hard ground.

I felt a hand on my arm and tried to focus my eyes. Don sat beside me on the rim and said, “Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. “I’m afraid of heights.”

“Let’s take a breather,” he said, exhaling long and slow, as if to show me how. I leaned back against the rock wall.

I wasn’t so much afraid of heights as I was of edges. When I was near a cliff edge, I imagined myself tripping and falling. I once learned in Driver’s Education that staring at a hazard might cause you to steer toward it. The same was true with kayaking. If you’re heading toward a rock in the river and fixate on that rock—even for the sake of avoiding it—you’re in much more danger of hitting it than if you didn’t even know it was there. I was so afraid of making a misstep and falling, I believed that made me predisposed to doing just that. It was an inevitability. So, a voice inside me would say, ‘Oh, just jump and get it over with.’ That’s what I was afraid of: That I would just get it over with.

Don stood, helped me up and didn’t let go of my hand.

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When I resisted his grasp, he said, “It’s okay. You’re all right.” I followed him. Then, trying to regain some semblance of

professionalism, I let go of his hand and trudged past him towards the top of the ridge.

Once we were at the lookout position, Don said he was going to radio below for an update on the helicopter. “All right,” he said into the walkie-talkie. “We’ll be on the lookout for them.” On the horizon, beyond the canyon, a dust cloud was building. A fly-sized helicopter emerged. It rocked from side to side around the dust cloud. It became larger and louder. Don passed me his binoculars. “You should be able to see Spot now, the pinto stallion.”

Horse heads hammered out, then back, into the approaching dust, manes wild. Legs churned. A small colt, sandwiched between two mares, stumbled and then regained his footing. Spot surged out in front. He was white, with large black markings the shape of puzzle pieces. He was not

very big for a stallion, but he looked fierce with his head held aloft and nostrils flared.

"He's magnificent," I said and lowered the glasses.

Don crossed his arms over his puffed-up chest and grinned. Then his arms dropped and he grabbed the binoculars from me. "What the hell?" he said. The radio crackled and he picked it up. "No, I don't know what's going on. They were goin' good. Then they just split."

The mustangs had divided, veering off in two different directions: one group toward the mouth of the canyon, as planned; the other, led by Spot, toward the canyon rim across from us.

"Okay, here's what we do," Don said into the radio. "Let the Judas horse make his run to bring in the first bunch, and get the chopper to go after the stray pack."

A man on a palomino led another horse out of the corral area. The cowboy arched backward as he pulled the swaybacked horse, trotting up the bottom of the canyon. Don said, "We call it the Judas horse because we take a domesticated horse and set it loose in front of the stampeding wild herd. All it wants to do is to not get run over and go back to the corral where there's free food. The wild pack gets tricked into following him into captivity."

The cowboy, on his palomino, and the Judas horse stood behind an outcropping and waited. When the mustangs got closer, the cowboy removed the swayback's halter and slapped him on his hind end.

I knew some of the captured mustangs would be looked at by a vet and released. Some would be auctioned off to good families or ranches, as a way of culling the herd. The grass on BLM land could only support a certain number of horses without the risk of starvation. But, inevitably, some of the mustangs would wind up in the hands of people who would then sell them to glue factories for a profit.

The old Judas horse galumphed through the canyon beneath us. It was probably a retired pack horse or an old trail horse from a dude ranch. He certainly didn't know he was caught up in a biblical tragedy. But I wondered why the mustangs couldn't recognize that he was not one of them, that following him was a bad idea.

I wanted to run into the canyon, to stop the wild horses. Did I love horses that much? Maybe. But what I was really thinking was, 'How did I let my life get away from me. How did I let myself get swallowed up? When did I stop sleeping with my legs up the wall?'

The chopper bobbed and circled around the other band of horses, trying to wrangle them toward the mouth of the canyon. But the mustangs, commanded by Spot, spun and pranced around the cliff in front of the whirring, thumping helicopter blades.

"What a mess!" Don shifted his weight side to side. "What made them split like that?" he shouted into the walkie-talkie as he scanned the area with his binoculars. "Damn!" he said and stopped moving. "There's a goddamn tent out there! Yea, that's what did it. Who the hell..Well, I don't know either."

I felt my head grow faint. I turned to Don, my eyes wide. "A tent?"

"Yea, look." He handed me the glasses.

I leveled them on my pathetic excuse for a tent, which was now covered in dust and looking shell-shocked. "Yup," I said, handing him back the binoculars. "Looks like a tent. Wow."

Spot's band was cornered on a precipice. The chopper swung back and forth to cover the escape routes back into the desert. Their only clear pathway was into the canyon, toward the corrals, but they were not going. Instead, Spot stomped out towards the helicopter, arched his neck, and pawed the dirt.

"I don't believe this!" Don said into the radio. "Make sure our pilot doesn't think he's back in 'Nam and try to engage our stallion." Don bowed his head and rubbed his brow. "Damn it!" he said, stomping his foot. "I finally get a reporter out here and this happens."

I took in a deep breath and exhaled. I turned my back to the roundup: the mustangs, the Judas horse, the corrals, my ill-fated attempt at camping; then spun around again and stuffed my hands into my back pockets. "Don," I said. "That's *my* tent."

He looked at me. "You're joking."

I squinted at the mustangs on the other side of the canyon. Spot pranced out a few steps, reared up and thrashed out at the whirling dust.

"What were you thinking?"

I shook my head and shrugged. 'That's it,' I thought. 'I've blown it. Maybe I'm not meant to be a reporter, or out here, or any of it.' Spot trotted back toward his herd. The

mares turned in circles.

Don laughed. "You must have froze! We packed up and went to a hotel." He stared at me, snorted then shook his head. "Way to tough it out!"

Spot stopped. He took a few side-to-side steps, then turned and charged the helicopter at a dead run. I gasped and pointed.

Don smashed the walkie-talkie against his cheek. "Ed! Up! Get the chopper to back off! Pull up!" Then he glanced over at me. "We got what we need."

As soon as the chopper began to lift, Spot stormed out beneath it, throwing his head about. The herd

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followed, running and bucking. Their manes whipped behind them as they returned out into the desert.

Don heaved a sigh, winked at me and said, "I think you've got yourself a pretty good story. You like that ending?"

I laughed and nodded. "Yeah."

As we walked back down, Don stopped at the exposed 200-foot drop. He offered his hand. "No, I'm okay," I said, preoccupied with the image of Spot fighting the helicopter and how to work it into my article. I studied the horses in the corral beneath me where the cowboys paired mares with their foals. Halfway down, I set up my tripod.

After I took a few rolls of photographs, I drove back to my campsite and got out. Although the tent was a little worse for wear, it still stood. Only one corner had been ripped off its stake, leaving the cover fly to blow around in the wind. Every time the fly rose and splayed out, that little broken bug of a tent screamed, "Eureka!" Then it fluttered down again. Then up, white strings straight out—"Eureka!" It had probably been celebrating itself for hours.

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When CAROLINE ARLEN left Time magazine and New York for freelance writing and Durango, CO, it was not a smooth transition. But it did provide much fodder for her short stories and her recently completed mystery set in a post-WWII gold mining town.

