

Worse Things

Dickey is crying as he tells me his war buddy, some poor dead kid by the name of Willy Kemp, has been reincarnated as a horse. I don't argue, have learned better than to engage in anything like conversation when Dickey starts to slip; just settle down on the log next to him, and light a couple of cigarettes. If the owners see him like this they'll find a way to push us off the job, and we both need the money. I find the best way is to sit back and listen, let the fire burn itself out. I pass one across, and Dickey takes the cigarette in his good hand. It trembles a bit, and I have time to marvel at the neatness of his nails, trimmed and clean. That is something he never lets go. Bills unpaid. House gone to shit, lawn a mess of weeds and broken glass. Still, no matter how bad he gets, Dickey tends himself well. Short nails, clean teeth and a close shave. Despite whatever jumbled torture now lives in Dickey Ransom's head, the man keeps his hygiene in top condition. Battle ready. He takes a drag from the smoke, held overhand between thumb and forefinger, cherry obscured from view. This is new as well, another habit picked up from his season in Hell. His head hangs down, a tear occasionally falling from his trembling chin. I place a hand on his back, making sure to avoid the scarred mass of his shoulder, and am alarmed at the obvious protrusions of his spine, knots among taut skin and insectile thinness. His body shivers, despite the heat of the day. Dickey is a high-tension wire, possessed by electric ghosts. The horse has moved off a-ways now, thirsty, in the direction of the aluminum water trough. I glance back over at Dickey and see him watching it, guilt and grief pulling his eyebrows down and in, tears standing in his bleary eyes. "Kemp was a buck Private, over there less than a month. Caught one on patrol outside Ghazni." He continues watching the horse, black coat shining as it bends to drink, a heliotropic sparkle in the midday sun. Dickey's voice is weary, drained and dead.

It's been a year since we got the letter, the Purple Heart and discharge papers, and, weeks later, whatever is left of Dickey. Sharon seems to be holding up well, considering. The kid turns four this month, too young to really understand what her daddy is, what keeps him up at night, pacing and yelling, or, when it's really bad, sitting like a stone, staring at things we're blessed not to see. She'll learn in time, I'm sure. Can't be helped. Kids collect knowledge like ticks in high grass, unnoticed and deadly, identified only by complications down the line.

I finish my cigarette, field strip it and pocket the filter. Dickey can't abide a cigarette butt; a habit I'm happy to indulge. I stand, wipe my sweaty hands on the front of my jeans, clear my throat. "Ok, buddy. Mrs. Conover says she needs these stalls mucked and graded by the end of the day. I'll take the Bobcat along the drain line while you finish up here. Sound good?" My voice is measured, calm and commanding, just this side of patronizing. It's a thin line, and I walk it well. Dickey absently strips his cigarette, slips it into the front pocket of his dusty overalls. "Worse things, I guess, than being some rich lady's show horse, prancing around for all the fancy people." He pauses. I wait. "You reckon he likes it here?" Dickey looks up at me, dark eyes swimming and hopeful, the eyes of a child asking important, eternal questions, the true nature of the Tooth Fairy, or Santa, or God. I look down at my brother, attempt a reassuring smile, fail. "I reckon so, Dickey. He looks mighty fine to me." The horse that may or may not be the late Private William F. Kemp stands in the far corner of the lot, cropping its teeth on a worn wooden fence board. Dickey wipes his eyes, nods, extends a hand. I pull him up.

When we leave, the paddock is pristine and perfect; the sun a bare hint on the horizon, the sky awash with orange-purple fire. As we drive home, I mull Dickey's words over in my head. I look, see him slumped in the passenger seat, dirty and exhausted, crouched forward, favoring his injured shoulder even in sleep. It can be difficult sometimes to disregard his failings, the twisted

waste of his body, his poisoned mind and whatever fractured madness grows within it. Despite this, it is clear that Dickey is not without some deep-set, primordial wisdom. He is correct on at least one account: There are, without a doubt, worse things.