

JOÃO DE BRITO

New Life, 2018
Oil on canvas, 72 x 69 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

EVAN WHITE

Happy Times with Horses

I am waiting in a café, one of those new age places with live plants hanging from the walls and nothing with gluten. They've got a moss-and-driftwood piece above the register with air plants. You bought me something like this when I went on that plant kick and filled the house with bird's-nest ferns and succulents that I hung from the ceiling in glass orbs. "They purify the air," I said when you asked if I'd rather just live outside, maybe in a jungle.

I look at my watch.

A few minutes pass, and then he arrives.

Dan is bald. It suits him in the way that being bald either entirely suits someone or seems like a defeat. His cane has a knob handle. I've not noticed canes before, not really, and his strikes me as tasteful, though I've no idea what the alternative might be. Clinical? Pimp? He orders a skinny latte and I get a black coffee, and when our names are called I say, "I'll get them," not wanting Dan to have to stand up again, and realizing at the same time that I am being unnecessarily sensitive.

I get the cups. I grab napkins. I return to the table. I put his cup in front of him, and a napkin.

I sit.

I thought we'd have a connection, a sort of immediate bond, and that this would lend itself to an ease of conversation, but it's like meeting anyone else for the first time. We ask each other what we do for a living and where we are from: we talk about the things you talk about when what you really want to discuss is something you don't know how to bring up. And then Dan says, "You were with him for a long time."

And I say, "Yes."

And he says, "Can I ask . . ."

I thought it would be easier to talk about with Dan, and, in a sense, it is. I'm grateful that he's the one who brought it up, I mean. I haven't told anyone else the whole story.

This one.

I'd had to get a locksmith to open the file cabinet. It was old and rusted and I was determined to clean out the garden shed. "Have you thought about waiting until fall?" you had said, which really meant something more like, "Have you thought about waiting until the next century? Or the one after that?" But it was one of my organizing episodes, like when I purged the kitchen cabinets and replaced all of the mismatching dishes with stoneware. "You spent

how much?” you’d said, and because you were the cook and cared about presentation. I’d said, “You’re welcome.”

The file cabinet had to go. But I couldn’t open it. I thought there would be insurance forms, or the titles to the cars, or, well, I don’t know, things that needed saving, or destroying.

What I found were the letters. And a photo. Trever.

You’d met him at Happy Times with Horses, where he was a trainer. There had been a time when I’d gone with you to the horses, when I’d said that sure, I’d go, but no thanks, I didn’t need to ride one, and actually did you mind if I wandered into town, and when should I be back? Then the time came when you didn’t expect me to pretend anymore—a kindness, I’d thought—so, when you asked me if I wanted to come with you I started to say no thanks, and then, later on, just no.

I read the letters until I couldn’t read any more. I felt dizzy, and then it went away and I didn’t feel anything else. At the time I thought this meant they hadn’t hurt me. What I mean is that I mistook the absence of feeling for the feeling of ambivalence. I put them back into the file cabinet, closed it, and when you got home I said, “I think I’d like to see the horses.”

And you said, “Really?”
And I said, “You know I’ve never been riding.”
And you said, “I remember.”
And then I said, “It’s all your fault.”

On the way, I made you stop in that little town so that we could have lunch together. This was what I told you, I know, but what I was really thinking, as if to convince myself of it, was, Does this mean my happiness still matters to you? After we ate, we walked up the storefronts, and in a gift shop that sold throw pillows in the shape of sea stars I found an air plant, a big one, and insisted that you buy it for me by saying, “Weren’t you just saying how much you wanted to buy me one of these?”

“Was I?” you said.
I still have that plant. It sent up a stalk once, and for a few days it bloomed little red flowers.

When we got to Happy Times with Horses, you said, “You’ll be fine, there’s nothing to worry about.” I didn’t trust my horse, whose name was Rambo, but I trusted you and you trusted the horse.

So I did it.
And for a moment it was nice. Nice-ish.
The day was warm. Not unseasonably, but noticeably. On either side of us were oak trees and high grass and the hum of beetles. There weren’t many people there. It was an off day, you said. Usually they were busier. I was grateful for this. It felt private, what we were doing. Silly, I know. But I was glad there weren’t more people. Maybe I’d been nervous that it’d be obvious to people who knew more about horses than I did how little I knew about what I was doing. Like when I asked, “What are they wearing?” and you told me that horses wear mesh visors to keep the flies from drinking their tears.

That stuck with me.
Flies drink tears.
That’s what I was thinking about when it happened. You know I’m not the panic type, not really. But when it happened I actually got off my horse all in one fluid movement, and for an instant, just an instant, I thought to myself: How did you do that, guy who has never been on a horse before?

Panic, maybe.
Up your horse had gone, and off you had fallen. You slid a bit from the incline and before you could right yourself, his front hooves came down. One hit the ground beside you. The other landed on the side of your head.

And that was that.
Fire trucks. An ambulance. They came as if it might still matter. Once your horse was corralled, a trainer who didn’t know that I was within earshot said, “I’ll get the hose.” I don’t know why, but I recalled earlier that afternoon when we had fed the horses organic carrots, and before that, in the grocery store, when I had watched you select those organic carrots and thought to myself, Could anything be more ridiculous?

Yes, as it turns out.
Eventually I had to go back and collect your things. “Excuse me,” someone said. I turned. Trever. I recognized him from the photo, though I’d have known anyway, I think. “You don’t know me,” he said, before introducing himself. He was handsome in the effortless way of someone who is young. I was a little stunned. “I want you to know how sorry I am,” he said, and then his voice faltered, though only barely. “For your loss.” His confidence disarmed me.

He had come up to me. I could imagine that it might have started this way with the two of you. To him you were the older man, midway through a successful career—a prize.
“Thank you,” I said to Trever. I gave him your gloves.

* * *

Dan is looking at me.
“You blame yourself?” he says, both as a question and not. Around us, the noise of the café returns. The drag of chairs. The clatter of mugs and little plates. People coming, people going.
“Sometimes.”
Dan starts to say something. Then he stops and says, “He’d still have been unfaithful.”

I crumple my napkin.
I don’t tell Dan that I still talk with Trever. He sent me an email after the gloves, and then I sent one back. Letters again, sort of. We’ve gone for coffee, too. We’ve had lunch. Sometimes we walk. I resented him at first. But then that went away. He was a connection to something I didn’t have anymore. Seeing him was seeing you, in a way.
I didn’t invite him to the service. I still regret that. I take a sip of coffee. “And you?”

I gesture to Dan’s cane.
It had happened in a sailing accident, of sorts. Dan has his own boat, a sixty-foot catamaran. There’s a cove south of Baja, far away from anything, where blue whales go to calve, as many as a thousand of them might gather there each year. Sometimes the calves wind up beaching themselves. People come from all over the world to help the villagers pull stranded baby whales back into the water. And the water is so full of afterbirth and hormones that it’s this elixir, and women who can’t conceive, when they immerse themselves, when they help the whales deliver their babies, sometimes being in that hormone bath, it fixes them and they can have babies of their own, like a miracle.

That’s what Dan said.
His word.

That’s why Dan had gone. Dan had been there with his wife. They’d been in the water numerous times. Dan had been on the beach when he stepped on the shard of glass, and though he’d bandaged it, an infection had set in. He said that once he was finally in the hospital they told him he was going to lose the foot, that it was lucky he wasn’t

going to lose more. They told him there were prosthetics and these were good, but there could be another option. You had died at exactly the right time. You and Dan were close in age. You were the same blood type. Things aligned in the way they sometimes do following a disaster. It had made the news, Dan’s story, his surgery. It’d been one of the first. That’s how I’d found him. “I’m lucky,” Dan says. “I mean, for the chance to say thank you.”

He shows me photos. I was told what was going to happen, but it didn’t prepare me for finally seeing it. There was your foot, on someone else.
I don’t know what to think, or say.

* * *

“Well, did it work?”
I am in the makeshift office in the barn. Happy Times with Horses is closed today. Trever is sitting across from me.
“What do you mean?”
Trever gives me a look. “Did they have a child?”
You told me once that beauty was a place. I didn’t know what you meant by that, not really. Now I wonder if you didn’t mean that all beautiful things come from the same place, and eventually return there. Dan had said he didn’t know if it was the whales, or the doctors, or just luck that had finally worked for his wife, but did it matter? Maybe he was right. Maybe there are miracles. It’s why I sometimes listen to your voicemails. You called me once to say you couldn’t hear the words Pap smear without wanting a bagel. In another message, you said only the word adagio. I hear your voice and for a second or two none of this ever happened. Maybe that’s all beauty is, the absence of ugliness.
“Yes,” I say to Trever. “They did.”

Emily.
For a moment, neither of us speaks.
Then Trever says, “Can I ask how the two of you first met?”

Part of me is surprised you didn’t tell him the story, and part of me wonders if you did. “We were at a conference,” I say, and I see the room itself, its large windows and the sunlight falling in through them onto the floor. I see the seats we were in. I see you beside me with your legs crossed, and your bright socks. Anniversaries. Birthdays. Christmas. That was what I gave you. Socks. It was a sort of joke, and a sort of promise. That day, the first one, it’s like a book on

my nightstand. I mean that I can reach for it easily, and, for a little while, I can fall into a life that is someone else’s. That’s what it feels like now, someone else’s life.

“We’d broken for lunch,” I say. “I was ahead of him in line, and when I handed him a plate he said, ‘Are you my apocalypse?’”

“What?” Trever says.

“That’s what I heard,” I say, “but he actually said, ‘How about these tacos?’”

Trever laughs and then chokes it back. I take a moment to notice that his hair is graying, it isn’t noticeable, not really, but if you look you can see it. I know what he would think of me if I gave him back his letters, if I told him I’d known. I know how it would make me look. I’d allowed him to feel close to me, he’d say, only to spring this trap on him? And to what end? How to explain that this was not it at all, that it was I who had allowed myself to feel close to him, and that this was everything. Someone else. Someone new. I understand what you did more than I would have admitted to you. Youth fades. I remember when you said that. I’d convinced you to do edibles, and after we had sex I put my head on your arm and you said, “Youth fades.” And I said that maybe for you it did. And you said, “We’re getting old,” and I said, “Isn’t that the point?” and you didn’t say anything to that. “Getting old together, I mean,” I added, aware this wasn’t something I’d usually say.

“Is it?” you said.

And then I reached beneath the blanket and grabbed you and said, “It’s not the only point.”

You smiled.

Trever apologizes again for laughing, and I wipe my eyes with my sleeve. “It’s fine,” I say, and it is. Truly.

Evan White is a graphic designer. In 2016, his story “Patterson” received an honorable mention in *Glimmer Train’s* Short Story Award contest. He co-edited and published an anthology of poetry and short fiction entitled *All the Vegetarians in Texas Have Been Shot*, and currently serves as the art director and designer for *Under the Gum Tree* magazine in Sacramento, California.

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