

WEST OF YESTERDAY

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DEDICATED WITH MUCH LOVE TO MY TWO SISTERS:

JACIE,

who helped me find Alan.

MARY,

who helped me find Scott.

This story will always be yours.

I am alone, I thought, and they are everybody.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

ONE

RAIN HAMMERS IN TORRENTS against the rickety walls and roof of the livery stable. Water trickles in everywhere, and Scott listens to the beams groaning in the wind. The boy watches them as they tremble, more in fascination than fear, from the corner of his good eye as he slowly loosens the girth of the mare's saddle. He can't recall a storm like this, and he reckons no one will be coming in for a while. Maybe for days.

He turns his attention back to the horse as she suddenly flinches and shies away from him. Very lightly, he touches her neck and makes a soft hushing sound through his teeth. "Hey," he whispers, letting go of the cinch and stepping back a little, "hey, what's wrong, now?"

He cranes down to look into the mare's eye. She doesn't look at him, just stares past, the brown of her eye dull and hollow. Is that how his own eye looks? he wonders faintly. Must be. He knows the kind of aching that gives an eye that

look, and, still stroking her neck gently, he turns and lifts a corner of her saddle blanket. In the stable's dim light he sees what he expected to find, and anger makes him tremble.

"I thought so," he whispers, glancing back at the face of the buckskin mare who could have been beautiful, should have been treated like gold instead of treated like him. Her dull eye meets his as he pats her neck, and she seems to relax under his touch.

"I'll be real careful, I promise."

He holds his breath the whole time as, slowly, gingerly, he peels the girth and then the saddle blanket itself away from her wounded skin. When finally it comes free, he lowers it to the ground and then straightens, studying the lashes marring her skin from withers to tail, open and festering and raw from the saddle. She must have been beaten fanatically, in someone's drunken rage, to look like this. He can see each rib in her side as she puffs out a heavy breath.

"Guess you really know how it is," he murmurs as he peels strands of her mane away from one of the sores. "Guess people don't even think twice about beating someone big as you."

"Who's in here?"

The unexpected voice, a low-pitched man's voice, sets Scott's pulse racing and he stumbles a step back, turning

towards the stable door. He fights to control the pounding in his chest, fights to stand straight instead of crouching, but knows it won't work. Wouldn't be any use if it did.

In the dark, he sees the figure of a mounted man, just inside the door. He watches in dread as the stranger urges his horse a few paces forward, past the bales of hay that shield Scott from plain sight, and reins in right in front of him.

The stranger sits motionless for a moment. Scott can't make out his face for the heavy shadow of his hat brim, but notices the easy way he sits astride his mount, with one gloved hand twined in its mane. The quarter horse, a bay, looks around snuffling, ears pricked, eyes bright.

The stranger's shadowy head moves towards the lacerated mare and back to Scott. Slowly, he nods.

"Howdy." His deep voice sounds hoarse, almost gravelly, but level. "You take care of the horses here, son?"

Scott swallows. "Yes, sir."

"How much is it for one night's feed and board?"

"A dime. You can pay Mr. Malone. In the saloon."

The stranger swings out of the saddle and drops to the ground with a faint chink of spurs. Scott shifts from foot to foot.

Reins wound around one hand, the man steps closer and looks down into Scott's face, his eyes still hidden in dark

shadow. All Scott can see of his face is his mouth, pressed in a grim line, and his cleft chin. His frame isn't tall, but wiry. His shoulders look powerful.

“You do that?” he asks abruptly, nodding towards the mare. Scott's pulse slows to a painful throb in his ears as his whole body tenses, waiting. He avoids looking straight into the shadow over the man's eyes as he fights to speak.

“No, sir, I didn't. I swear. I just unsaddled her and found it.”

The stranger moves towards the mare, and she doesn't flinch from his hand when he reaches to touch her neck. He seems to study her wounds, head bent. “You'll clean 'em?” he asks finally.

Scott blinks. “Yes, sir.”

The stranger nods and turns, pushing his hat back with his free hand and revealing his face. He looks young for the voice that belongs to him. Beneath his dark, knotted eyebrows, his eyes are the soft blue color of bruises.

“Be gentle with her when you do; she's bad scared,” he says.

A sudden motion towards him flashes in the corner of Scott's vision. He shrinks backward, heart skipping beats. In less than a moment he realizes the stranger was simply holding out his reins; now his blue eyes are giving Scott a

long, careful look. Shame burns on Scott's cheeks and neck.

"Yes, sir," he says quickly, taking the reins.

"And when you're finished with her, I'd appreciate it if you'd dry my horse down," the man says slowly, eyes still intent on him. "He's seen a lot of rain today."

"Yes, sir," Scott whispers, focusing on winding the reins around his fingers.

"Thanks," the stranger murmurs before turning away towards the door. "I'll be back for him first thing."

Scott watches him leave, beginning to stroke the horse's wet ears and warm them in his hands. "Thanks," he repeats to the quarter horse once the door closes, glancing into its bright eyes with a shake of his head. "You sure are luckier than us, you know."

* * *

Alan leans against the bar and studies the barkeep—Malone, he assumes—from under the brim of his hat.

The man's towering frame turns to him. Alan straightens and slides a half dollar onto the bar, letting his eyes fall. "For my horse overnight, and a room."

"You're a dime over," Malone says slowly, and Alan glances up. The man stands easily a head and a half above

him, made of nothing but lean, hard muscle.

“Whiskey,” Alan mutters. He watches Malone’s hands, almost two times the size of his own, as they snatch his coin and then pour his shot, and the boy’s blind left eye flashes into his head. “*Guess you really know how it is.*” Bitterness fills his throat so that he barely tastes the whiskey.

“Room five is open, upstairs on the left,” the brute tells him, turning back to drying glasses.

The stairs feel like the longest climb he’s ever made. He locks the door and pushes the dresser against it.

The hotel bed squeals with a sound like a startled cat as he drops onto it, tossing his hat onto the floor and pressing one gloved hand over his eyes. Sightless, he can still feel the four walls of the small room pressing around him, cramping the space until he can hardly breathe. *Stop*, he pleads with his mind, *Just go to sleep.*

The lumpy straw tick and thin pillow are too comfortable, and if he were a little less desperate he would never let his bones know this kind of indulgence. But, having fallen, he is unable to move, much less get up, at least for a while. If Wade Belanger was to walk right in, he could have Alan dead or alive.

He slides his hand down his face and exhales, keeping his eyes closed. The thought of his vulnerability kindles his last

ounce of energy and, with a rebellious smirk, he tugs the pillow from under his head and throws it to join his hat.

He doesn't dare open his eyes to study the tiny room. His cracks his knuckles one by one and quickly sinks into sleep.

His racing mind dreams, spinning light and faces and sounds that will fade to nothing in daylight and consciousness. He sleeps without moving, all that night and for hours after dawn, his body ignoring any desperate pricks of memory.

It's a scream that finally shakes him awake, and he sits bolt upright, panting and squinting into the full daylight streaming into the room. What did that cry come from? A human? Animal? Did he dream it?

But it comes again from somewhere outside of the hotel, and he knows it is a horse, either in agonizing pain or complete panic.

Understanding clears the last fog of sleep from his head. He staggers upright, snatching his hat from the floor and shoving the dresser back away from the door.

The hall, stairwell, and saloon are all relatively empty as he hurries through them and out to the street. Hot sunlight, steaming after the summer rain, stings his eyes as he reaches the open doors of the hotel livery. A third shriek pierces him and he slips inside.

The dimness of the stable makes sight easier, and he sees the buckskin mare frantically pacing the open aisle, lunging and bucking against the rider on her bandaged back. The heavysset stranger fights for the reins, swearing and swatting at her head with a crop. Alan starts towards her, but his breath and attention are snatched away by the sound of Malone's voice at the far end of the building, like a dog's growl.

"What were you thinking, you fool kid? You expect me to take that from you?"

Alan whirls around to see Malone, relentlessly striking the blind side of the boy's face with his massive fist. He has the boy pinned in the corner of the last stall, unable to slide away or even fall back. The cracking sound of the beating rattles Alan's ears and turns his vision red. He starts down the aisle, the horse's frenzied neighs still splitting the air.

He sees the boy finally collapse to his knees, but Malone yanks him up by the hair and pulls him into a headlock that lifts the boy's feet from the ground. Alan breaks into a run as Malone hefts the boy closer and higher in the crook of his arm, dangerously close to the point of snapping his neck. The boy's desperate choking fills Alan's ears.

"You really want to hang like your brothers, Bledsoe? Want to know how it feels? Show him, Wade."

Alan bends and throws all his weight and momentum into the back of Malone's knees. All three of them fall. Malone's head cracks loudly against the ground, and his grip on the boy releases.

Alan, fired and seething, bounds to his feet, bends to yank the stunned Malone from the straw, and rams his free fist into the lean face, so many times that he loses count.

"That's how it feels, you beast," he gasps finally, staring down with raw disgust into the half-conscious eyes, and throws Malone back to the ground.

He turns to see the boy still lying where he fell, crumpled facedown in the straw. The fire in his chest dies into a hard, hot lump where his heart should be. He sinks to his knees, reaching to touch the boy's shoulder.

"Hey," Alan pants, gently rolling him over, "hey, come on, now."

The hard lump constricts inside when he sees the swelling already raising the boy's face, the blood seeping from his lips and nose, the sick gray-blue color around his mouth. But he is breathing, and when Alan sees it, his own breaths start again.

"Okay, son, it's gonna be all right," he whispers, sliding his arm beneath the boy's neck and lifting his limp head against his own shoulder. "I've got you. You're safe now. Wake up."

As if in obedience to his voice, the boy's good eye peers up at him. Alan realizes the eyelid of the blind one is too swollen to open. He tries to muster an encouraging smile and focuses on the dark eye watching him. "Atta boy. You're gonna be just fine."

The boy blinks, and liquid seeps from the corner of his eye, sliding onto Alan's arm. He opens his mouth and tries to form a word, but only a wheezing sound comes out. He shakes his head and reaches to touch his throat. An ache pulses through Alan's own throat, sharp and tight.

"It'll come back, don't worry," he says, reaching to brush straw from the boy's thick brown hair. "Don't try to talk just now."

But the boy struggles to lift his head, turning back towards the aisle. Alan looks up. The mare stands there, watching them, ears pricked and sides heaving. Her rider is a motionless heap on the ground, crop still in hand.

"I couldn't—" the boy's voice squeaks but he forces it out, "—let—him." He swallows and looks back at Alan with fire in his eye.

"I understand."

The fire turns to cold fear—for the horse, Alan realizes. "They'll wake up," the boy rasps.

Alan glances between Malone and the luckless rider,

between the horse and the boy, beginning to think that this wasn't the smartest of moves. He looks down into the boy's face, feeling the weight of the skinny frame in his arms.

"They will," he says with a sigh, "and we'll be long gone."

