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GOODBYE HORSES

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In her small white-accented kitchen, Brenda Dowt, middle-aged with invisible anger follicles, seemed to sour as she slumped over the counter. Face knotted with agitation, her wrists sore and arthritic, her footing loud as she hovered with worry. She choked on the dry food, as her voice crumbled into the receiver, eyes welted in tears from the choke.

"Hold on Daniel," she said, comforting the receiver. She blew on the remaining bagel, partially in her mouth, tracking down bits of toasted dough lodged in her molars, she let out a wet sigh: "Mark's dead."

The unfinished bite was still processing. "They just called."

The other end, "What?"

"Mark's dead."

Not one more syllable broached the subject: no further details would come out in the rewind of her delivery. Her voice pureed those two words, [Mark's dead] deadpan, flat-rated, cheap as the local call between divorced wife and husband: curt in summation, delivered as quickly as the last pulse pushes bone against stiffening skin.

"Mark's dead," she repeated, a charming third time. She could hear Mark's father Daniel inhale on the other end. She assumed he was in his kitchen as the kettle and sink seemed in operating modes, *unless it was television?* Brenda tried to imagine her ex-husband's face, how he may have been standing, and if his face wore the same expression as hers, until she dropped the bagel.

"Oh shoot!"

A hand wafted towards Mark, reanimating a nauseous feeling he had only just forgotten. It delivered a waterlogged employee handbook. In bold on its sunset cover read the letters TRR, making it seem grim and sterile. He barely breathed as he accepted it. Thumbing the pages, he couldn't help but notice the fog outlining the floor's edge.

The introduction's first sentence let him down easy: he had landed the job. He tried to remember what he had applied for, but found that nothing came to mind. Despite the few layers he wore, his body felt hot, and soon noticed that he could not even hear his own heartbeat. His breath had vanished. His head pounded as he read.

"Look we understand. You killed yourself, but that does not mean your life is over. Welcome aboard Teen Ranch Records, one of North America's leading record labels. We

proudly employ over 2,700 hard working, fun-loving music enthusiasts (some dead, some alive) and we are so glad to have you onboard. Working with the most creative minds of all time, we ensure success: no broom handles for you!"

He peered through the light mist in the room. Still damp with pain, the pounding exacerbated by his weak eyes struggling to log each small object that entered his periphery: small window, small blue lamp, small table with crisp oak finish.

One corner was reserved for large objects: fern, portrait of a sunset in Pollackian splat-format; an exact replica of a painting he had made fifteen years earlier in grade eight, one of the things that gave him enough pride to stick around. And Mark did not stop believing in self, until he realized, the ballads that made his self assured, weren't true.

What was most concerning to Mark at this moment, however beyond the self-fetishistic décor, was the thin rise of dry ice seeping into the room from in between the painting spackles, deploying itself cautiously across the Apache carpet.

This is a waiting room, Mark surmised. A nervous chuckle/sigh percolated elsewhere in the small dry room. Mark felt the laugh was a calculated gesture, its sole purpose to garner somebody's attention. As a result of this insight, he was reluctant to look up, instead, continued to gaze at the handbook, his sweat now clearly visible on the back page where his left hand rested. Before he had a chance to finish the first page, the object was taken back. Mark followed the half-hand, half-vapor with his eyes as it recoiled into a doorway.

He noticed a young man of nineteen or twenty in a brown suit with a red and black flower in his lapel. He had a smooth skeletal face, scattered black bangs, angular jaw line, and glowering green eyes that peered from his face with a jagged jack-o-lantern stare.

The faint sound of feedback clanked in the hallway. It distracted him. Looking up, Mark noticed the young man, now sitting across from him.

"She'll be back," he assured Mark, head motioning towards the door. "They're almost done their meeting."

Mark nodded to the man, uncertain and terrified.

He could feel himself sweating through his treated feathered locks; a wilted aftermath failed by pop promises, overdosed on phony synth hooks weakened by xylophonic implant until no more lyrical vows were routed to his central nervous system.

This feeling of sweat however, was simply his own human liquids being replaced by the embalmer, the funeral director and his assistant, who had been working on Mark since two in the afternoon when he had been delivered from the morgue. His body was being unzipped and made to order, based on a recent photograph, which was on its way to the make-up artist, one of a dozen minor arrangements that tagged his parents as obligated to him.

In the morgue, Mark's hair, once silky and hot, dripped dry, cold and still: a skull silent and flat on a stainless steel slab, immovable, clammy. How had this

happened? Mark could still detect bits of motion. A twitch of an eyelash, a fruit fly across a cuticle, left hand? Right toe?

On the slab, his newborn pup eyes saw a waiting room filled with obnoxious special effects and another obese fern. He could make out a kitchen, a long hallway with wires, rivers of reds and pinks, a cold balcony, a steaming bathtub. Each image was bordered in tattered black sheets that waved in slow fashion.

First born, first dead in a nuclear family. Molecules, left to their devices: autopsy ingredients, with a dash of obituary: he was unemployed and autobiographical.

Was was was.

As if Mark Dowl possessed a nightly end-lust: a final foreplay that had at long last trickled down his intestines. Catching up with his obsessive thought patterns, the collected pills punctuated the dementia-driven head rush ... into a last gasp, which, according to the contract he signed with Teen Ranch, could, for tax and dental plan purposes, also be counted as a first gasp.

The night he ended, Mark stumbled out into the cold from his apartment, curbing a mild anxiety and head rushes. Outside, amid throat-chaffing shouting matches, he pill-popped and gargled gin. He wound up sitting in a coffee shop, writing and mumbling at them to turn the music up. When a man said: *that's a long Christmas card you're writing*. Mark knew he'd soon find another orbit, more reluctant to hurt him.

The hysteria he had created out of earnest ballads now gave Mark a sharp earache. His body was opened, parts were shifted. As he continued to stiffen on the slab he could not distinguish songs; tones and morphed lyrics stacked up like hamburgers.

To cope, he visualized the words, and as the definitions became crisp, he began to feel his own cognitive perspective shift from first *I* to third *Mark* person. A stream of lyrical memories clocked in like postal workers, each one substantiated on a page of membrane. *But if [Mark] hurt you, [Mark] would drink wine from your tears.*

During the ride to the hospital, ambulance attendants had been meticulous, shaking their heads as they carefully pulled bits of broken CD's and vinyl from Mark's scratched palms and gouged forehead. Though the coroner had probably heard INXS's *Never Tear Us Apart* a dozen times, she never felt it the way Mark felt it: a lifecycle guarantee.

Not in the coroner's report, according to the song's manifesto, Mark was promised he and his partner could "live for a thousand years." This clause never appearing in any written form except on the Kick album, (Track 8, 3:05) it did provide enough clichés to siphon onto a million codependent jingles, realism stalling tactics that caused Mark permanent brain damage.

It would take a miracle.

Teen Ranch was trying to save him, even if that meant bankrupting him of crying doves, careless whispers, blue Mondays, bizarre love triangles, and the perfect

kiss; ingredients, drowning points in his bathtub: *though Mark's views may have been wrong, they may even have been perverted, somebody would hear Mark out. We've seen this belief in the literal valor of new wave hope before, River Phoenix, Michael Hutchins, Sally Jesse Raphael, for a moment. In spite of their heavy duty irony-inducing millennial pop methods, Mark could feel it coming in the air tonight, a malignant mischief rounded up to the nearest one thousandth.*

The final performance of Mark's life carried him offstage.

When he tilted his head to ingest a handful of Epivals, his inner-voice waned into finality: *If you believe in the power magic, Mark can change your mind.* He pushed a meticulous stack of CDs, staggering. He fell on one knee, eyes across an Alan Parsons Project jacket, his knuckles creasing a Fleetwood Mac sleeve, drool dropping across INXS's Kick jewel case, and his other arm gripped for the table. The action caused three pink pills to slide off the kitchen counter, his second knee smashing two plastic jewel cases. Pulling himself up, one wet finger picked up the abandoned pills. *You ask if Mark loves you, what would Mark say? You know that Mark does and that this is just one of those games you play. So Mark sings you a new song please, don't cry any more.*

His vocal chords were gummy with salmon Epival residue. He tried to announce words, but *Clouds got in the way. Whatever you ask for, that's what Mark will be. Run away and hide from everyone.*

The *Lyric Promise to be True Act* was never set in pop stone by an original melody, but Mark believed it to be true. Somewhere in his high school interlude of popularity, he had penned the treatise. The words were mere arrangements in a singular perspective for unspecified millions to interpret. One of which was Mark.

Songs he thought he heard murmured in his membranes:

Let me have my moment in brackets with you

Break me up before you go

*Break up weight loss
Crying and smoking 10-15 pounds*

Pound on the door of my heart

Purchase pain by the pound

Love has no lost and found.

The lyric, like a blade of grass, can make all the difference. *Please let Mark know, if this ain't love baby, let Mark go.*

Each decibel and high-hat beat had finally bleached his heart bare: tasting a mirage spurt of neon pink daiquiri, splashed by bikini clad high-rise centerfolds, wiping their coke-clogged nostrils as synthesizers shook the fake set, and from another time.

Mark had been summoned to a great isle where the dislocated heart beat strongest, a giant heart, cavernous. Where pastels, hard hair gel, moaning saxophones and vintage bangles congealed into one clean straw that sucked up the life-lie. *You say Mark's a dreamer, you're two of a kind. So perhaps Mark should leave here, yeah, yeah,*

go far away. There's nowhere that Mark would rather be than with you here today.

False nutrients slowed his death, as though he had tinsel pumping through his arteries. This chemical symphony, Mark believed (as he swallowed the twenty-seventh pill) deployed an imaginary arsenal who would open up mountain sides and crack ocean-bottoms, alleviating misfortune of cocaine and champagne dementia. The scratch of five o'clock shadow would finally stop itching and his tweed blazer could have a final sleep across the sofa, in the full realization that there was no-one out there who would love its owner forever. In his last moments, even in the surety of his decision to admit he was wrong, his BEST OF collection flashed before his eyes:

You really hurt me this time Mark. I donno if that's why youre doing this, to get me back or whatever. I really needed to talk to you. I haven't talked to my brother in two weeks since he freaked out on me. It's tearing me up inside. I found out Tuesday that Megan slept with him. Which is totally the most hurtful thing she has ever done to me. I can't see her and I'm really hurt. I specifically told her not to, I think I need to move out.

They're turning off my phone and shit cause a payment didn't go through and I owe 400 bucks before Monday or it's gone. I think I'm possibly pregnant. Really could've used your support there. Whatever. Do your disappearing act.

Just remember we were at one point really good friends above anything else and you really aren't showing me that you care. At least one phone call ... I've been crying alone in my house all week with no one to talk to. I can't even talk to Megan cause I'm so shocked with her.

Thanks for all your help,

Gloria.

What was once his life, what once resembled a discernable colour curdled in the morning after: *Mark can hear the sounds, there's a million hearts beating in his room, he wishes they would go away, you can't go on, thinkin' nothing's wrong, who's gonna drive you home, tonight? When you were young, did you ever love somebody like Mark loves you now?*

A funeral playlist recycled inside of him, songs that sent his life off road, from the albums; Heartbeat City (Track 4: 3:55) The Dream Academy (Track 2: 3:14) Faith (Track 2: 5:45) Duran Duran (Track 6: 4:01)

During the first signs of dawn, Mark's eyes filled yellow and pink: broke off like a hangnail, Mark broke off and death began to grow from scratch, and life did the same: *Whenever Mark is alone with you, you make him feel like he is young again, whenever Mark is alone with you, you make him feel like he is fun again, however far away Mark will always love you. Mark never thought he'd meet a girl like you. Hello, Mark has just got to let you know, when Mark thinks about what could've been, it makes Mark want to cry. And Mark ran, he ran so far away. Mark has been sitting here so long wasting time, just staring at the phone and Mark was wondering should he call you, then thought maybe you're not alone, the flowers you gave Mark are just about to die, Mark guesses your song is over, as you both begin to sing.*

His blood stopped pumping and his respiratory system agreed with his abject ultimatum: he was dead, dead, dead.