

FOR John Simon Please:

7 pages total

White Mule

by Deirdre Dore

Carla punches the dough down, third time, pinches off 12 balls, lines them up on the pan. For a moment, they appear as the subjects of a floury still-life. Her husband (only common-law) is talking, his words misted in the sharp/sweetness of moonshine. "You want some fun Dad, come by tomorrow after you've finished with your pipes and we'll shoot that white mule."

She covers the buns with a red cloth. The men throw a look her way to see if she's heard. She sprinkles drops of water onto the cloth. They help themselves to more azm, potato soup, sour pickles.

"Can't catch her, can't even get a rope on her. White and sterile to boot."

Carla looks out the window, past the fly specks, out onto Fatima Pond and the new field of oats. She scans past the willows in the ditch, past the alfalfa, past the herd of sorrels, palominos, bays, past the broken down tractor, the black Angus grazing, the nesting geese, the cottonwoods; and sees nothing. All the colors are there in place.

"Belongs to the crippled guy, that welfare bunch other side of the river. It keeps crossing and getting in my herd. Eating my grass, pestering my mares when they're getting bred. Not gonna put up with it forever."

Carla remembers the first time she saw it, last spring. Suddenly and surprisingly, changing her familiar view. If she had the time she would paint it, capture it on canvas. She moves dishes into the sink.

"Got any more ham, Carla?"

The second oldest baby climbs up onto the counter, grabs a soft fistful of white dough, stuffs it into his mouth, crawls over to the living room, pukes it up on the couch and then stuffs it all back in to enjoy a second time. The youngest is doing his crawl/slide/drag cross the floor, headed for the surge protector under the computer. The three oldest, the ones that came with the package, the ones that he calls *his* kids, (as opposed to *her* kids) are still in school, grades kindergarten to four. Carla pinches off 12 more little balls of dough and lines them up on another pan. The negative shapes between the buns make an intriguing pattern.

She feels her father-in-law (only common-law) watching her. She turns, with coffee and he looks right at her, right into her eyes.

Says "thanks for lunch". Says "appreciate it". Ever since she woke up one morning (Jeff was off moose hunting) and found him lying in the bed next to her fully dressed, cowboy hat still in his hand, dead-drunk-fast-asleep, she hasn't hated him as much as she used to.

She was told once she had no bottom line. She used to like that, now she wonders. Two years ago her life was a collage of options; guys, school, travel, adventure. And the main thing, the brilliant thing, her painting. Spools of thread, patterned scarves, china bowls, still-lives in gouache and watercolour. She still has the application to Emily Carr, filled out, under the bed, ready to go. But then Jeff got her pregnant. His fourth. Her first. And then quickly, again. She is 24 years old. Mother to five boys and one girl.

Jeff picks up the 270 that's leaning against the window, puts his eye to the scope and scans the field.

"Next time she crosses the river, Carla, I'm gonna shoot her. I want you to tell me when you see her. I know you got a soft spot for that goddam thing but had enough of this bullshit."



In Jeff's world everything is black or white. No in-between. And everything must have a use, kind of like the good black you can get from crushed burnt bone.

She puts the two babies into her bedroom, to cry themselves into their naps, and looks up 'mule' on the internet – "much used and valued in many parts of the world as a beast of burden" – known for their "sagacity, muscular endurance, surefootedness and length of life". "Usually sterile."

Jeff and his dad are banging their boots on, heading out the door. The baler's been broken down all morning. The old man throws a joke her way about putting the buns in the oven. Carla squeezes out a noise that sounds much like a laugh.

She has 3 hours till the school bus brings his kids home. She puts the buns onto bake, sets the timer for 45 minutes and heads out the door. It's hotter than it should be for September. The mountains in the distance are more purple than blue, they look clotted and flat. She walks to the barn where the collie bitch has her pups hid. Jeff yells something she can't hear, something about the calving pen and tears off outta the yard on the quad, spraying gravel. She whistles for the dog, tumbling a pile of kibbles out into her bowl.

Maggie comes, tits hanging loose, played out, hungry, nothing but instinct and bone. Carla puts her hand on the dog's neck and the softness of her fur brings last night's dream crashing back. Riding, swimming the river bareback, her horse groaning in pleasure, then up into crazy mountains, red rocks and cactus, cobblers and Indian Aztecs. And a baby. The sweetness of those baby arms. And then finding the mule, dying of thirst. She feels that small familiar stab in her belly, reminding her of what's gone.

At dinner, Jeff mumbles something at her, something about balancing the checkbook. His baseball cap makes a shadow on his face. She studies it. The way it dissects his mouth. He looks away and heads for the barn.

In the night Carla wakes and sees the mule standing in the field, lit up by the moon.

Last spring, the little ones dropped off with one of the aunts, after Carla had that abortion and then 18 hours later had her tubes tied, she used to get the same feeling looking at herself in the mirror that she gets now looking at that mule. Like a painting gone wrong, too much whiteness, that whiteness shining, like a ghost, like a hot star, like someone punching a hole into a painted landscape of burnt umbers and vermilion –



a landscape of willows and wheat – alfalfa-coloured fields of ochre, lemon-yellows, and viridian, a landscape of cool blues washing a misty sky and then right there, in the lower third, the focal point, a stark, white, mule-shaped hole – where color should be, but isn't.

It occurs to her, then, that it might very well, always be there. That white hole where color should be. Keeping up with the seasons. With the changing landscape. Not fading, not disappearing. No overlay no glaze. Just the white mule grazing, chewing, shitting, looking around, moving slow, or fast as lightning, jumping fences, standing still, showing up when you're never expecting it; when you're sketching the valley inside your head and memorizing values, when you're looking hard at the glory of it all, at the cottonwoods down by the river, at the teal on the pond, the rye, the sky, the baler, the yellow, the red, the grey, the steel grey, the charcoal, the gunmetal grey of rock, cloud, fog; then, that's when, the mule will cross the river, jump the fence and stand there in a yellow field, making a bright white hole where the color should be.

In the morning Carla gets up early, before he reaches his hand out to see if she's awake, before the babies push into her breasts. She takes the gun down and goes to sit by the spruce near the pond. She waits. She looks around; filling her head with the earth-tone colors of the place. When the mule comes, she shoots. Then shoots again. The noise fills her. The

coppery horses bolt, tails high. But the white hole staggers, pitches forward, rocking in surprise, eyes wide, frozen motion for one shocked second, and then it slumps, into a thick lumpy line in the grass, like dirty snow.

After, she watches the sun creep along the top ridges, laying brush strokes of yellow and gold into the cool unlit shadows of cerulean blues. A full palette, bursting with life. Framing a lumpy line of melting snow and tiny splatters of red.

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