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THE CORTEGE

FRANCES GONZALEZ

An animal died in the garage last night. It looks like an emaciated Shetland pony, less than three feet tall with crusted-open brown eyes, visible ribs, and stubby legs with cracked hooves. Splashes of blood mar a long neck sparkling with broken glass and a thin mane of matted, dark hair. The gray coat is dull, patches shedding to reveal chapped skin. Bits of grass and dirt tangle in the tail. Flies burrow into dry, white-haired nostrils and ears. A bone sits between its eyes, worn round and smooth, an ivory ornament on a narrow face. I prod its gray skin with the round rubber end of a toilet plunger, the sweetly rotting vapor of dead meat mixing with mountain rain detergent and cool, autumn air. The garage door never closes all the way, and I'm always finding things in the mornings: panicked raccoons, neighbors' trash bins, and once a broken lawnmower that nobody claimed. But this is the first time I've seen anything like this. The lone window in the corner is broken and bloodied; the shelves are tumbled. Paint cans spill a drying color wheel on the floor. The washing machine is dented. The body lies in the midst of this mess, in blood thick like honey on the cement.

Cameron is not pleased when I call him. He picks up the phone on the fifth ring, and I know he stands hovering over his drawing desk in his apartment, the table littered with drawings of anthropomorphic cats in ski caps, his callused fingers and red hair

streaked with graphite. His voice is curt and tired though it's noon.

"Anna. Is there an emergency?"

A chilling breeze comes through the open garage door, stirring the unicorn's mane. I turn to face the dryer. "I'm all right," I say, though he didn't ask. "But there's a dead unicorn in my garage."

His sigh is so deep goose bumps erupt along my arms. "Call animal control."

I let out an equally gusty breath. It's been five months since he moved out, and I don't know how to talk to him. I would call my mother, who spends her days playing mahjong with the other Chinese ladies of the YMCA. But she wouldn't pick up the phone. The neighbors have been keeping a respectful distance.

For a horrible moment, I think the body blinked, but the movement is only a fly roaming a staring iris. My silence must unnerve Cam. There's a moment of him tapping his pencil on his desk, scrutinizing the pictures, but he says he's coming, and he hangs up before I can thank him. I sit on the dryer to wait, afternoon light turning the body silver. I twist my hands, the dryer cold through my jeans, and wish I still smoked. Cam and I used to read fairy tales in college as English majors. He thought they were interesting studies of society and psychology. I thought they were lovely. Cam will look up the unicorn online, identify some species with a long Latin name. He'll tidy, call animal control, throw out the broken shelves, and scrub out the bloodstains.

The dappled light through the open garage makes the bone on the unicorn's face shine white. If animal control arrives, will they recognize what's dead in the basement for what it is? Will they throw it in a furnace with dead rats? Maybe they'll bring it to a morgue for dissection, hollow it, and examine each piece until its insides are scattered between jars and garbage bags and incinerators. The shining horn will be sent to a lab, tucked in a drawer with boards of pinned butterflies.

I slide off the dryer and dig out Cam's galoshes and his

thickest rubber gloves from a storage closet, both pairs black and stained with muck. I tried to clean up back then, gave the baby shower gifts back, mailed Cam boxes filled with old shirts, frying pans, and forgotten socks. But I keep finding things in strange places—ruffled booties behind potted plants, Cam’s extra razors in the cabinet. Sometimes I reach for a bottle of cleanser under the bathroom sink and find a dusty box of Johnson & Johnson’s No-Rash Diaper Wipes instead. But I can’t make myself throw all the stuff out.

I raise the garage door as far as it allows, and the noise from the street greets me: the abrasive honking of cars, the rumbles of construction crews two blocks away. Jersey City’s streets are narrow, the trees skeletal. I can see through curtained windows into wallpapered living rooms with plastic-covered furniture and portraits of Jesus. The air smells of garbage, tar, and burgeoning rain. Everyone is at work or school but me. The IT company I work for said I could take my time coming back. Two shovels rest against the peeling wall, and I take one in each hand. I leave the door open and go outside and around the house to the backyard.

Already, my hands are cold in the gloves. The yard is a rectangular block twenty-five by thirty yards, fenced high enough for privacy. The ground is unremarkable, crabgrass and weeds, other houses peeking out from behind the fence. Plastic chairs and tables lie in a corner, streaked with grime and piled beside a row of turned earth where I once attempted to grow tomatoes. The last party was a cook-out to celebrate the pregnancy. It was late March more than a year ago. Paper lanterns hung from the fence, entwined with blinking white Christmas lights. Cameron drew on the thin rice-paper screens: bassinets and puppies and, on one pink lantern, three figures drawn in quick strokes: beanpole Cam with a smattering of black marker freckles and a wide line mouth; small and skinny me with a dot nose and eyes, my hair still long before I chopped it in a fury; and a little girl, barely shorter than me, dutifully expressing traits of us

both straight hair like mine and the dots of freckles on her wide cheeks. Cam's mom, her papery hands webbed with blue veins and her hair dyed brown, hugged me and gave me a yellow Baby's First Year album. When the baby was stillborn, I gave the album away.

The fence is bare now. I find the right spot in the yard, perfectly centered, and start digging. The ground is hard, and at first I can't make more than a few shallow holes. But soon I get the hang of it, stamping the shovel in with my galoshes before twisting the handle and tossing the clumps of dirt aside. The dirt is hard-packed, clay-red, and crumbling. The opening bellows of a homeless street fight ring down the block, and the world softens a little, makes me feel a little less insane.

Cam stands in the backyard. I don't notice until I stop for a break, hands aching. The sun peeks out behind the clouds and illuminates the little hole I've made, no more than three feet wide and only a foot deep. Cam stands a bit away, sunlight turning his hair russet, his big hands in his pockets and shadows under his brown eyes. He hunches in the chill, wearing a windbreaker I gave him when we first began dating. He has a blank, watchful look on his face that reminds me of doctors as they listen to patients describe their injuries.

"The garage is open," he says.

I flex my fingers, the rubber gloves creaking. "Did you look?"

"It's a pony, Anna. It was sick and confused."

It's cold again, the sun disappearing behind a gray string of clouds. It will rain later. He told me what I expected. There are no such things as unicorns or ghosts. There are rational explanations for everything. So why am I disappointed?

"Trying another garden?" Cam asks. He strides over to examine the spare shovel, picks rust off the metal with a fingernail.

"No." I start deepening the hole, inch by inch. "I'm making a grave."

Cam's fingers whiten on the shovel's handle. His black

windbreaker is too big for him, swallows his thin frame, a void to fall into. He named her, picked out the headstone, made a speech at the funeral in a charcoal suit. I don't remember much of it: a red wreath, a dark casket, a room of azaleas, and the white halos of lamps. When he moved out, he said I checked out. And he's right, but he also isn't at all. He wasn't the only one left stumbling in a world that no longer fit right: colors too dull, walls not quite where they should be.

"It has a horn, Cam," I say. "A white horn."

"So you're going to bury it in the yard?" His windbreaker flaps in agitation. "That's unsanitary and impractical."

"Shut up." I plunge the shovel deep in the earth, lift chunks of grass and rock to throw it on a growing mound nearby. Flakes of dirt tumble down into the neckline of my shirt and stick to my sweating back. "If you keep talking, I'll let animal control take it away. I don't want to wonder if I should have done something different."

The pit's uneven, one side a good six inches deeper than the other. Earthworms riot in the pockmarked loam. Cam's face wars between confusion and gentleness, eyebrows accorded and mouth pressed thin, and I look away from the familiarity of it. In the hospital, he looked at me that way. I'd been given a private room, either out of sympathy or to stop me from ruining other people's happy memories. I could hear the sounds from the halls: the frantic footfalls of families searching for their loved one's room, the brisk mutters of nurses as they cajoled and consoled, and the cries of mothers in labor and newborn children. I was tucked into a bed with an I.V. in my arm. Cam sat in a small chair beside the bed with that look on his face, tentative and dazed.

The wallpaper was dotted with purple azaleas. I counted them, getting two walls and two hundred and six flowers in before I gave up, trying to ignore the numb feeling from the waist down. Cam spent half an hour fielding calls from his family asking for news. Finally, he turned off his phone. A young nurse came in with wide, sympathetic eyes and asked me in a soft voice

if I would like to hold my baby girl. Holding the child often helps grieving parents, she said. She spoke like it was a fact she'd learned in school. She touched my shoulder. Her hand was cold through my dressing gown and her nails bitten to nothing.

"I'd like that." Cam's voice was so carefully unobtrusive I almost didn't hear him speak. He was too long for the chair, arms hanging off the rests and legs carefully folded, his knees pressed against the bed frame. When the nurse brought the small bundle, she offered it to me first. I didn't take it. I didn't want to feel her weight, her shape. But Cam took her.

Soft, bluish, tiny hands. Wisps of black hair, flat nose. Still mouth, closed eyes. White cotton blanket. I wanted to tuck the blanket in tight around her, keep her warm when she couldn't feel anything. I thought how nice it would have been to buy dresses and braid her hair and make her breakfast every day and I felt sick, so sick. She smelled sterile. I wanted to peel off my skin and leave it behind in the hospital bed. Cam exhaled noisily, a scratchy sound, and held still as if she would suddenly wake. His face cracked wide open, spilling out: loss, fear, wonder, anger, and the beginnings of resignation, and I wondered how anyone could be resigned to something like this, to such colossal, divine error. I knew I never would be. I hated that he was.

A cold wind deposits leaves from a neighborhood tree in the yard. Some get stuck in the fence. Cam is digging the grave. Soon, the bottom is level again, and he says it should probably be another foot deeper. He says something about methane from decomposition. His hands are red from the cold. I give him the gloves and keep digging my side. I can feel the heat of his back against mine, hear the plasticky rustle of his windbreaker and his small huffing breaths. I don't speak. I've said a lot, and it feels like too much.

We stop when the pit is two feet deep and three feet wide. In the garage, the unicorn lies in the same position as I found it, and that's more of a relief than it should be. The body is stiff. A fresh chunk of the coat has fallen away to the floor, carpeting the

blood with gray. Cameron stares at the ivory horn with suspicion. Suddenly, I'm angry. "Afraid it's real after all?"

He looks up from the body to cast me a searching glance, a habit of his: charting the ghost of lines and creases on my face like a map showing where I've been, where I'm going. I wonder what he used to see that he liked so much, and if my face now is as unnavigable as his seems.

He breaks eye contact first. "Who wants unicorns to be real if they look like that?"

I grab another pair of rubber gloves, pick out an old handkerchief from a box, and tie it around my face. There's an industrial wheelbarrow in the corner of the garage, a relic from a misplaced notion of paving the yard myself. I lift two of the unicorn's ankles and drag it to the wheelbarrow, sandpapering a trail of bloody streaks and scabs on the cement. Cam hoists the body by the rump and tail, helps me lift and drop it into the wheelbarrow. The animal's rear sticks up, and the spindly legs dangle from the edges of the barrow, hooves scraping against the cement.

I push the industrial wheelbarrow down the drive and around the house, furrowing the sprawling, yellow crabgrass under the fat wheel. Cam follows, and I know we look a bizarre procession. The body's tail swishes as I roll over the lumpy ground, the neck bouncing against the painted rim, eyes staring. Are other unicorns out there wondering where this gray one's gone? Maybe they don't know. Maybe they've left it to me—to us now. At the edge of the pit, we tip the wheelbarrow, and the unicorn flops into the space with a dull thud, a cloud of dust rising.

"What do we do now?" Cam towers over the bony thing in the pit, a battered toy in a dark chest. Only the white bone shines.

I hadn't thought much further than digging the pit. "We bury it, I guess."

"Seems anticlimactic."

I take off the handkerchief. "Why are you helping me?" Cam glances around. "You've always been selfish. You think nobody feels anything like you do." He crosses the yard to the rusting tank of lighter fluid, tucked beneath the Weber grill we haven't used since that last summer. He drags it to the pit, unscrews the top. "I think even fictional unicorns deserve cremation."

And because I can't stomach the thought of a funeral just like the last one, I agree.

Lighter fluid makes the unicorn glisten even in the darkening day; Cam pours a generous amount, dousing it from nose to tail. I crumple old editions of *The New York Post* into the pit like flowers. Page six lands near the creature's open eye. Cam lights the last sheet of newsprint with a match. At first, it only smolders and wilts, but suddenly it flares, and he drops it into a corner of the pit with a curse. The paper lights easily, illuminating the gray unicorn, giving it a sweat-like sheen and a light in its brown eye. For a moment, it looks like it might leap out of the pit and bound away, injury forgotten. But the tail catches fire.

The smoke rises up past the fences, dark and smelling of charred hair, fuel, and meat. The flames brighten, leaping in the pit, scalding enough that I step back and toss the rubber gloves and cloth to a far corner. Cam discards his windbreaker, his eyes bright in the heat, his shadow long in the grass. My hair feels crisp. My hands are tipped with chipped nail polish and swollen from all the digging. The unicorn's eyes melt into jelly, wind rippling across the still lakes of the iris. There's no polished casket, no pretty wreaths or pressed suits. On a cold, dark day, two people dressed in dirt-streaked jeans and dried sweat, their faces burnt, stand carefully apart over a smoking hole in a bare yard. My vision blurs, eyes wet from the heat. The unicorn is ugly and decrepit and has a funeral to match, but it feels better, truer than the last one. This time, there isn't anyone telling me it'll get better. This time, I held the body in my own hands. This time, Cam can't pretend to understand what will never make any sense.

“So that’s a unicorn,” Cam says. “*Requiescat in pace*, I suppose.”

“You don’t believe that’s what it is.”

He stares at the burning pit, orange flickering in his dark eyes. “I could if I wanted to.”

I could keep him; he will come back if I answer the right way. The boxed socks could go back into their drawer. I’ll wake up next to warmth in the mornings again, his face squashed deep into a pillow. His drawing table will be in the study next to my bookshelf. We’ll be determined but wary, swimmers keeping their eyes peeled for invisible, drowning currents. One day, when the second floor of the house is dusty, the kitchen tiles cracked from use and the pit in the yard planted with hydrangeas, he’ll stare into his coffee cup and say how nice it would have been to try again, and I won’t answer.

The unicorn is charred in the pit, unrecognizable. In the quiet, I hear the sound of bones splintering.

“I don’t want other kids,” I say. “I don’t think I ever will.”

Cam’s face is stark. “I’m okay with that.”

The sun is starting to set, gray turning into pink. The neighbors gather outside the fence, their worried shouts rising in the air. The unicorn burns. I can see the ivory horn, unscathed in the blackened face. In the distance, sirens wail. But here in the yard, there is only the crackling of fire and the bittersweet frown on Cam’s lit face.