

# Mercy

*a short story by* MANDELIENE SMITH

The children's puppy was run over at the end of May. Not on the main road, which Pam might have expected, but on the dirt track that formed the western boundary of the farm. How was it possible? No one even drove there. But there he was, splayed out in the lush green weeds of the shoulder, his sweet muzzle soaked with blood. Pam wrapped him in her coat and carried him across the field to the house, his body still soft in her arms.

With the kittens, the vet thought it was some sort of congenital defect. The goldfish were from overfeeding — no surprise there, given the twins' fascination with the food shaker. And the duckling? Who knew? Pam didn't need to settle on a definite culprit, but the children did. The children needed an explanation for everything.

"What animal ate Duckle?" James asked again. This time he wasn't looking at her; he was pounding his hot dog head-first in a puddle of ketchup.

Pam turned back to the sink, unconsciously shutting out

the sight of his smooth, too-serious face. He was seven years old and his father was dead. The list of things she couldn't protect him from had suddenly become infinite.

"I don't know, sweetheart," she said lightly. "Maybe a fox?"

"Or a raccoon?"

"Or a raccoon."

"Which?"

She could not escape. The chicks died, the barn cat came down with distemper, the goats wandered out onto the rotten ice of the pond and drowned. By the time Tommy's hamster disappeared she was beyond caring; she was in a whirl of fury, like a horse maddened by flies. Besides, she had always hated the hamster.

"How could you hate a hamster?" asked Trish, her best friend.

"Oh, I don't know." Pam held the phone with her shoulder as she scooped the warm clothes out of the dryer. She



saw again the little curved teeth, the pointed face. "It was just greedy, you know? Greedy and self-serving."

"It was a hamster! What'd you expect: Gandhi?"

"No, really, I'm telling you, all that thing cared about was eating. It would have eaten its own ass if it could have got its mouth around it."

Trish laughed and Pam felt the heaviness inside her ease up a little. To laugh, to make a joke, however feeble, restored to her a sense of herself as someone normal — a mother, a woman in the world. She stuffed another load into the machine and let the lid slam shut.

"What's that noise? You're not doing more laundry, are you?" Trish said. "It's late. Go to bed."

Pam sighed. "I wish. I've still got the barn to do."

"OK, pioneer woman."

It was their old, half-serious dispute. Why take on so much? Why make life so complicated? Trish kept things simple: one child, one cat, a backyard just big enough for a swing set and a patio.

"Don't worry," Pam said. "At the rate we're going, every living thing on this place will be wiped out by July and I'll just sit around eating bonbons."

There was a heavy pause. "Joke," Pam said, but it was too late: the fact of her situation had loomed up between them.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm OK," Pam said. She pictured Trish putting the phone down when they were finished and padding down the hall to find Derek, her husband. A bitter envy rose in her.

"You call," Trish said. "One A.M., whatever."

"I know," Pam said gently. "Thanks." After they had hung up, she lay down on the kitchen floor to wait. The grief came in a surge: savage, shocking. She cried hard for a few minutes; then she wiped her eyes, got up, and went back to folding clothes.

**B**rian had died six months earlier of a massive coronary. There was nothing Pam could have done even if she had been there, and she hadn't; she had been inside cooking dinner. When he didn't come in on time, she had stomped out to the barn, fired up with her habitual annoyance (he dallied over everything), and found him lying face down in the frozen mud of the paddock. He had been thawing the horses' water. They weren't even his concern, the horses. He was a lawyer, not a farmer; he didn't even like to ride. Yet he would do such a thing — to help her out, to mark his pleasure in the crazy, animal-filled circus that was his home life. He had loved all of that: the chickens sneaking into the sunroom; the mice making nests in the horse blankets; the rich, crowing absurdity of having three children and six horses and four dogs and two cats and God only knew how many chickens and goats and ducks. He would come home from work and stretch out on the couch, sated, an only child surrounded by fecundity.

It was up to Pam to say no, to set limits, to buy life insurance and save for the kids' college. She was vigilant, always. Her father had died young, and she knew how quickly things could go bad. But Brian had believed, if not in God, then in his

own good fortune: Pam was the best; the kids were the best; everything would be fine.

But he had been wrong, hadn't he?

She was bitter and she couldn't hide it. The last time Reverend Pratt had come by, she barely had been civil. She was cleaning the bridles in the tack room when she saw his car coming up the driveway. For a second she thought about pretending she didn't hear him or slipping out the back, but she stayed where she was. She answered his call and waited while he followed her voice to the tack room. He came and stood awkwardly in the doorway. The proper thing would have been to take him up to the house and make him some coffee, but she didn't; she offered him a hay bale to sit on and went on with her work.

"Thank you, Pamela," he said, lowering himself gingerly onto the prickly surface.

She and the kids hadn't been to church since the funeral. That was what he'd talked about on his previous visit: he thought the children needed the continuity. But this time he didn't mention church. Instead he talked of "God's mercy."

"God's plan is something we just can't know," he said in his wavering old-man's voice. He went on: He knew how hard it was; God knew how hard it was. Hadn't He given His only son? "We just have to trust in His mercy," he said.

Pam scraped her fingernail along the bridle's dirty stitching and turned her hand over to study the brownish green gunk that had balled up under her nail. He wanted to talk about God? Fine, let him talk.

When he was done, she let him kiss her cheek and then watched him walk to his car with a piece of hay dangling from his ass.

*Reverend Pratt came to defend God, she told Brian. He sat on a hay bale.*

*That was it? Brian said. Reverend Pratt on a hay bale? No thunder? No whirlwind?*

Pam laughed. But the truth was she didn't know what Brian would have said, and she never would. Staring out at the empty square of gravel where Reverend Pratt's car had been, she suddenly knew she couldn't make it through another minute.

But she did, of course. She made it and made it and made it.

**P**am finished folding the laundry and put the basket at the base of the stairs so she would remember to bring it up. She glanced at the clock as she pulled on her boots. Trish was right, it was late, but Pam liked the evening barn work. The solitude and quiet were soothing after the hectic pace of the day. She shoved the plastic baby monitor in her back pocket and went out into the fragrant June dark. She breathed in the exhalation of the cooling earth. The crying had released her a little, and now the sensations of the world flooded back: the scent of the linden tree, the damp air lifting the tiny hairs on her arms. She let herself stop inside the barn door to listen to the horses eating hay in their steady, peaceful way. It was the sound of comfort and routine, of everything as it should be.

The farm had been Brian's idea. If he had to be married to a horse person, he said, why not move to where the horses

were? That way he'd at least get to catch a glimpse of her galloping by. It was the kind of quip he used at cocktail parties and barbecues, places where he was likely to meet other beleaguered horse husbands, but the truth was he had been generous about her need to ride, even after the twins were born. "Go ahead," he'd say, and she would put on her riding boots and go, her body light with relief.

What was it she loved so much? Riding was hard, hot work, repetitive and often frustrating, and yet she always felt better afterwards. It was a language her body understood: the pressure of the legs; the live wire of the reins inside her hands; and beneath — listening, responding — the wild, unknowable horse.

They were down to only six horses now: three boarders, two ponies for the kids, and Ace, Pam's four-year-old Thoroughbred. Ace was the best she'd ever had, the first with even a prayer of competing at the advanced level, but she had stopped training him when Brian died. He had become just another low priority, like getting a haircut or cleaning the car. She went to his stall and he stretched his head over the door to sniff her face with his soft, whiskery nostrils. He was a beauty, a real mover. Even when he was hacking around in the pasture you could see it — the springing stride, that natural ease. And he had heart. Meaning that he was willing; he would give you everything he had, not because you forced him, but because that was how he was.

People had begun to suggest that she sell him. Her mother-in-law, her sister; even Trish had tried to bring it up. They thought it was too much, caring for all those horses — too much time, too much money, too risky leaving the kids alone every morning. Those were all reasons Pam could dismiss, but there was another, better one: she had no right to keep him if she was going to let him go to waste. She ran her hand along the crest of his neck. Already he had lost muscle.

*I should sell him*, she told herself. A rush of anger went through her. *Trish*, she thought. *God damn Trish*. She had suddenly remembered something that had happened the week before.

It was at a birthday party for one of Alice and Tommy's friends, a real production, with a dozen three-year-olds, a trampoline, an ice-cream cake. Pam and Trish and Lacey, another mom, had stayed to help. Or that had been the idea, anyway. In fact, Trish and Lacey had disappeared halfway through. Pam hadn't even noticed; she was rushing around in her usual way, anticipating dangers, fielding demands. When she came upon them talking in the kitchen, she stopped in surprise.

"Every night?" Lacey was saying.

"I kid you not," Trish said. "We have to order condoms in these boxes, I mean like this." She showed the size of the box with her hands.

"Oh my God!"

They'd both laughed. Then Trish had looked up and seen her, and the amusement had died away in her eyes.

Now, in the quiet of the barn, Pam saw again their turning faces, bright with laughter and sweat, and herself in the doorway behind them: a figure who stood aside, sexless and

drab, like a servant or an old woman. *I kid you not*.

She jerked back the bolt to Ace's door as though to shove the image away, and pressed her hot face against his neck. Her brain lurched in the sudden dark. She was tired; she was much more tired than she'd realized. She let herself lean into the thick plane of his neck. She could feel the grinding of his teeth reverberating through his muscle, the quick jerk as he tugged more hay from the net. Slowly her mind went quiet.

In the months since Brian had died, she had lost all taste for the wants of her body. She ate, but she had no appetite, and afterwards she often felt nauseous, as though she had forced herself to do something unnatural. Washing was worse and most days she didn't bother, so her short blond hair was frequently dark with grease. Dimly she knew this; she knew that people noticed, but she could not bring herself to shower more often. Her breasts, her belly, her thighs, even the sensation of hot water on her scalp — all this had belonged to Brian, or to their pairing. Now to see her own flushed skin, to run the soap over the muscles of her arms and legs, felt like a betrayal. That part of the life of her body was over; she *wanted* it to be over. And yet when she had come upon Trish and Lacey laughing, she had felt the stab of exclusion.

She didn't actually decide to start riding again; it just came to her in the darkness: *Why not?* She opened her eyes and looked at the line of shovels and forks hanging along the aisle wall. The neat row of handles spoke of order and calm: the tools in their place, the children safe. Why not? An hour or so while the kids were in school. What harm could it do?

She straightened up, buoyed; her exhaustion had drained away. She swung open the stall door and let Ace bomb down the aisle to the paddock. Then she put the baby monitor on the windowsill and started mucking his stall.

"Guess what we've got for breakfast," Pam said. "Bagels! Alice, get away from that fish tank."

Alice's face had taken on a stony aspect. She reached over the back of the chair she was standing on and touched the dirty surface of the water with one small finger.

Pam suppressed a flash of irritation. "I've got cinnamon-raisin!" she said in the singsong, kindergarten voice she despised. Alice spun around.

Bribery and manipulation, manipulation and bribery — really, she was getting worse and worse. But today she didn't care. She had woken early, not with her usual dread, but with a sense of expectation. She had thought through the logistics as she lay among her sleeping children. (None of them spent a full night on their own anymore; she couldn't bring herself to make them.) If she put off going to the feed store, if she skipped lunch, if she left Ace in the paddock instead of turning him loose with the others — she could squeeze in an hour, anyway. It was a start.

*(end of excerpt)*