

## TESSA LUNNEY

*The Mare*

The Mare didn't show herself until the Girl leant down by the roadside to lick the honey off the gravel. In the great migration of people away from the war, a truck selling sundries had crashed and a crate of honeyjars smashed next to the heads and fingers. The Girl waited for a moment, two moments, then scuttled over to the smash and shovelled the sticky gravel into her mouth. There were cuts from the glass on her lips and tongue but the Girl kept shovelling the gravel in, sucking it until the honey was gone, and the blood and piss and petrol too, before spitting it back out. Then the Mare rose from the green verge, clip-clop through the yells and dust to the Girl.

The truck-driver and the Green Men ignored the Mare. Only the Boys saw the Mare lean down to the Girl and nudge her away from the crash. Only the Boys noticed seven of them watching from a gap-toothed ruin on the other side of the road. The Boys waited until the Mare had gone to run over to the honey and broken glass to strip the yelling truck driver of his money and gun and skittle back to the dead-eyed bombsites. The Mare heard all this but did not turn around did not twitch her tail in response.

The Mare licked the Girl's face. Her tongue cleaned a pale streak across the Girl's skin. The Girl jerked away her mouth full of gravel. The Girl cleaned extra tracks through the dirt with her tears. The Mare licked those too and gentled the Girl just off the road.

She gentled and smoothed the Girl to some other debris that had bounced off the truck - two blankets three left foot rubber sandals a can of pineapple juice. The Girl walked like a foal she spindled and jangled she fell sideways and into herself. The Mare gentled and bit the can of pineapple juice open. The Girl drank and drank like it was air like it was day. The road was on the top of a ridge and the verge became a valley that became a stream. When the Girl was swollen with juice

the Mare nuzzled her to the stream. The Girl held the sandals in one hand and the blankets in the other and wobbled her way across the stream to the tree on the other side. No car squeal and road bang reached them at the tree. No Boy's eyeline could find them in the murky twilight.

The Girl had been a Boy for many months. Ever since the long dark night when the Girl's mother had turned to wood and the Girl's neighbours had been taken by the Green Men. The Green Men had picked up the next-door daughters and folded them by the middle to put them in the truck. The next-door daughters had screamed and cried. The Green Men had shot the next-door father and the next-door mother had screamed and cried but still the Green Men picked up the daughters and folded them by their middle to put them in the truck. The Girl watched this from behind her wooden mother. Her mother stiff and still as a fallen tree. She watched the Green Men search the village for more daughters to fold into their truck. But most of the village was already wood was already stiff and still and sapless like the next-door father like her mother. The Green Men had come with their guns and turned the village into a winter forest. The Girl made herself a forest animal until the Green Men rumbled away with the folded daughters.

The Girl knew that to be a Girl on the road meant she would be folded and put into the Green Men's truck. The Green Men had headed sunset. She had to head sunrise east east with the rest of the migration. She waited one day - two - then took the clothes from the wooden next-door father and cut off her plait and headed out on the sunrise road. Men with trucks and motorbikes just called her Boy and told her to get out of the way.

The other Boys called her Tiny.

"Hey Tiny watch out or you'll fall in that hole ha ha ha"

"Gimme that bread you don't need all that food coz you're so tiny ha ha ha"

"Hey Tiny get out of that doorway you don't need all that room to sleep coz you're so tiny ha ha ha"

They all yelled and ak-ak'd: ha ha ha.

All except Happy. He grinned and slapped her on the back.

“Eh, Tiny, long way to go, uh? Get sore feet on this gravel road, uh? Here, sit down next to me for a moment, let’s have some bread.”

He gave her half his bread and cheese and water. He gave her half the treats he winked and happied out of the truckdrivers on the road. He found her shoes and a coat. He never asked when she left the road to pee.

The Mare saw the Girl and knew it was a Girl. She knew it was the Girl from the village who had been birthed six summers before. The Mare had escaped when the Green Men had turned the village into a winter forest. She had run to the mountains had galloped along the streams. Mane streaming sweat streaming as she galloped sunset. Wind in her mane fresh water and grass. The Mare had headed sunset away from the migration away from the whips and saddles. She headed sunset for ones like her.

But the only ones like her were ghosts in their pens. Wide eyes stared at her and did not move though she danced though she jumped though she called. They did not move. She headed further sunset and the only ones like her were wooden in the forest of the dead. Wooden tree stumps with ribcage branches clawing the sunset. A winter forest’s rotten stench.

The Mare ran to the mountains but there was no one like her.

The Mare ran to the stream but there was no one.

The Mare followed the grass and it led her to verge at the edge of the road. She followed the verge sunrise and saw the Girl. Every day the Girl become more and more newborn.

The Girl stayed close to Happy.

“Hey, Boss, c’mon, he’s only tiny; it doesn’t matter, look, his shoes don’t even fit on my hands they’re so small.”

Happy danced around with the Girl’s shoes wagging and jiggling on his fingers. The Boss Boy laughed and the other Boys laughed and the Girl laughed and Happy winked at her. At night she held on to his shirt when they curled up together. He always said “Tell us a story, Tiny.” Then she would whisper of warriors and monsters and talking frogs and mountains and cake cherries honey milk pie until Happy fell asleep smiling.

The Girl stood close to him through the day and held his shirt in the night. She held his shirt his shoulders his head when he swallowed ak-ak. When he drank and gulped the ak-ak in his tummy. Still cheeky through the shuddering. His eyes rolled loose in his head. The Green Men thundered up and down the road making men women dogs swallow ak-ak and become wooden in the forest of the dead. The Girl held Happy against her tiny frame until the Green Men had gone the truckdrivers and screams had gone the other Boys had run far far up the sunrise road and she was alone with her wooden Happy.

She was now all rags and scratches and never thought if she was Really Girl or Really Boy. She was only Hungry Hungry and Scared. The other Boys were once again grabbing anything the Girl found for herself. Bread eggs blanket milk water they took them. They waited for her to take the first bite the first sip then they snatched and ak-ak'd: ha ha ha. When there was no food to take she was hit for taking hay from the goats. She was whacked around the head for taking bones from the dog trough. She lapped up water from the road puddles and was sick until there was blood. Then the truck crashed then the Girl sucked broken gravel from the road then the Mare gentled her down to the stream.

The Girl slept under the tree for a night and a day and a night. The Mare stood sentinel under the tree. Stood sentinel over the Girl as the sun shone gold at the point where the migration vanished.

The Girl woke to the stream lullaby still lulling in the dawn.

The Girl spindled down to the stream and splashed into the clear cool ripples. The stream cooed lullabies it sang and it called. The Girl burbled at it and drank and drank and drank. When she burped bubbles the Girl sank her head under the rippled skin and watched the lullabies stream past her to the sea. She knew where the stream went – it went sunrise to the sea in the east east. But here the water slipped over her skin. It whispered and sang like a mother.

The Mare stood still as a sentinel as the Girl slowly peeled the rags from her body. The Girl peeled and let them fly in the stream. She pounded them like her mother used to and laid them on a rock. The Girl rubbed her skin rubbed her hair rubbed under her fingernails like

her mother used to. The Mare stood sentinel as the Girl lay on the bank under the sun. All the hairs on the Girl's skin rose up as the sun rose over and away into the west.

She pushed herself up and into her rags and spindled over to the Mare. The Girl was almost smiling now but even more spindly than yesterday. She rubbed her palms cheeks arms along the Mare's flank. Smiling almost smiling and spindling and burbling like a stream against the Mare's solid heat.

The Mare began to walk slowly so slowly it was just a shuffle at first. The Girl jangled along next to the Mare one hand on her flank for support. The Girl burbled and cooed and flip-flopped like a fish. The Mare walked slowly so slowly to the fire she had smelled when the Girl was asleep. The fire was just beyond the bend in the stream. The Girl smelled it too as they approached. Her body stiffened. She stopped walking. She shrank down down and the Mare had to nudge her along with her nose. Had to push the Girl in front of her as the Girl whimpered sure that there must be men Green Men and ak-ak with the smoke.

But she saw the fire glow alone and unpeopled. The Mare nudged nuzzled the Girl up to the glow and nudged the coals. The Girl gasped. She knew what to do now that the Mare had shown her. She pushed her fingers in the sand under and around the coals. The first one she found she grabbed and held up to the Mare – a potato. The Mare stood still and firm. The Girl kept digging – another potato another and a fourth. She cracked one open still warm so soft the sweet smell dancing up to her face. The Girl closed her eyes and opened her mouth in the purpling day. She plunged into the food so hot she had to eat it with air she had to stop and blow on it. The Mare watched the Girl crunch swallow sigh blissful and slowly filling. When the Girl had eaten all the potatoes she dug her hands into the sand once more. She dug down and down to her elbows and stopped. She tugged too fiercely for her spindly arms. She pulled it out of the sand – a loaf of bread. Almost like rock she could tap it she could step on it and it wouldn't break. She sucked at the edge. She sucked and sucked until the bread softened and came away in her mouth. She lay back then and sighed so blissful. She lay back with her arms spread like there had never been a Green

Man or a forest of the dead. Like she and the Mare had everything they needed.

The Mare followed the stream and the Girl followed the Mare. Each morning the Mare would eat grass by the stream verge and wait for the sunrise to caress the Girl awake. The Mare would walk down to the stream and the Girl would follow would copy the Mare as she drank. At first the Mare walked slowly the Girl following so slowly next to her one hand on her flank. The Mare led her to bushes with berries to crayfish in the stream to nested eggs when the mother bird was gone. Each day they stopped so the Girl could sleep through the darkness.

A flood: first the noise then the smell then the sight of hundreds of people striding down from the sunrise road. The men in white and the women in blue they yelled and chattered and sang and pushed each other to the water. The Girl flinched at the noise. She stood rigid at the sight of so many legs and mouths. The Girl's heart pounded and the Mare's heart pounded. The Mare waited tense by a tree. The flood of people rushed towards them and the Girl shimmied up the tree and climbed on to the Mare's back. The Girl clutched the Mare's mane wound it over and through her fingers as the people pointed and yelled and whooshed like water towards them.

"Horse Boy! How much for your horse? How much? You're too young to own a horse - give it to me! No, to me - he doesn't deserve it - I need it! Get off! Get off!"

They yelled and they grabbed and they screamed - the Mare screamed and reared on her hind legs so the flood spread into droplets in front of them. The Girl clutched and was too rigid to cry with fright that turned her muscles to wood. She clutched with her hands her knees her elbows and she clenched her teeth. The droplets scattered and the Mare ran. The Mare ran far from the stream from the people ran and ran until the sight the smell the sound of that flood was only a memory of fear on their skin.

When the Mare stopped running they were at the foot of the mountains. The mountain's foot sighed through the grey-green trees. The Girl slipped slid fell off the Mare. She lay stretched out on the grass the breeze shivering her skin and making her goosebump. The

Girl's body still throbbed in time with the Mare's heartbeat. The Girl had copied the Mare's pattern of breath and sweat. Even now her legs her ears the grass still throbbed in time with the Mare. Still throbbed and so the Girl was not afraid of the mountain's foot or the journey or the people flood. The grass smelled of the Mare. The smell of earth of water of heartbeat. The mountain rose like the Mare's flank where the Girl lay in her sweat on the grass.

The Mare drank at the stream until her belly sagged. The Girl watched the sun turn back along the sunrise road. It left a trail of stars behind it.

The Mare lay down and slept next to the Girl.

In the morning the Mare followed the stream and the Girl followed the Mare. And the next morning and the next morning too. And the next morning and the next morning and the mountain stream led back to the stream at the base of the sunrise road.

There were no people this time. No yells or grabby hands. Only Boys watching from the road. Boys who ran down the valley when chased by the ak-ak.

The Girl and the Mare watched a boy who'd swallowed ak-ak choke and ripple blood as his friend beside him rippled tears. He lay on the bank like a caught fish and the Girl lay on the Mare's back and let all her tears ripple into the Mare's soft sweet mane.

Empty of tears the friend moved. The Girl saw that the friend was not a Boy.

"Hey! Hey!" The Girl called whistled sang slipped off the Mare and ran to the bank.

"Hey! Hey!" the Girl waded across the stream.

"Hey," the Girl stood next to the other girl. One dripping in stream and the other dripping with blood. The other girl curled into herself like a dried leaf.

"Stay with us."

"Us?" The other girl whipped her head around looking for the other people who counted as Us. Her face caught in a private storm.

"Me and Her." The Girl pointed to the Mare. The Mare stood chestnut and rippled like a stream skin. The other girl looked up out of her storm and slipped her hand into the Girl's.

“What’s your name?”

“Boy.”

“What’s your real name?”

The other girl blinked sniffled sighed. Her real name rusty in her mouth.

The Girl took the other girl’s hand and led her to the stream away from the caught fish friend and the smell of ak-ak.

But the ak-ak followed them. The other girl was too hungry tired dripping tears to stay close to the stream. To the Mare. She headed up to the sunrise road for food and the Green Men grabbed her. The other girl didn’t yell scream cry didn’t anything just opened her wide wide mouth as they folded her at the tummy and put her in the van. Folded her so simply one two she was so thin it was easy she folded at the tummy and was put away. Not a glance down the valley to the Girl.

There was no one to hold her hand now. There was no one.

For many days the Girl just lay on the Mare’s back and let the sun run over her body. Let the stars blanket her as the Mare followed the stream sunrise. Just drank some water before she let the night inside her ate some berries eggs grubs wherever the Mare stopped. The Girl’s eyes were open but she saw nothing. Her eyes were closed but sleep was road puddles and gravel.

The Mare could feel the Girl’s breath. It should be in time with her own and it was not. The Girl’s breaths were too shallow too slow. The Girl did not twitch wriggle sniff rub sigh. The Girl just lay. The Mare walked slowly and steadily and listened to the Girl’s breath through the shadow rhythm of the Girl’s ribs. The Mare walked with the Girl on her back like a blanket like a mane like dew. The Mare followed the stream as the sunrise road followed the stream on the ridge above them.

The Girl lay like she had been carved to fit the Mare’s back. Her hands throbbed with heat they burned with cold but she felt wooden felt carved and slotted onto the Mare’s back. When the Mare stopped the Girl slipped off. The Girl ate grass and leaves it was spring she ate flowers and buds. The Girl did not look. She just put it in her mouth

and climbed back up on to the Mare. This was her only moment of sweet pulse before she became wooden inside again: the moment she grabbed onto the Mare's mane and pulled herself up. She buried her face in the mane and felt the warm earth scent and smelled the tickle and sweat. The Girl did not look up until her eyes were blind and she could see nothing.

Nothing turned into night turned into a sky freckled with stars. The Girl listened to the Mare. The Mare would snort and saunter slow hoofs slowly drumming up twilight slowly beating out the day. The Mare would twitch and be so still. Then she would shudder and run mane streaming the Girl's hair streaming away into tomorrow.

The sky freckled with stars.

The heat built into a temple. Everything everywhere sang in full-throated summer bugsong and fruit burst and bird chicks praising the heat. The Girl's sweat slid down the Mare's flank. The Girl looked up into the day she blinked in the fruit burst and birdchick song.

They followed the stream that flowed into another and there it was: the end of the sunrise road. People swarming rippling oozing. Hands feet mouths tongues full of yell laugh snooze giggle snort crunch snore. Green Men with Brown Men and Grey Men and one man in Shiny Black from his polished boots to his greasy black hair and his eyes like rot in his potato face.

They waited. There were no grabby hands as all hands eyes ears went in one direction. To the hut on the other side of the river where the Shiny Black man paced. It was the gate to the East East East. Beyond it there was a road that cut through the grass plain like a long straight scar to the city. Everyone knew what was on that road. It was why everyone was all hands eyes ears to the hut.

It was their escape from the war.

They waited. People shuffled sniffled pleaded and sneaked but the Grey Men Brown Men Green Men checked papers and only let two – one – no one through. Night hushed over them and the gate closed. People lit a fire here there but night hushed them and slowly the moonless darkness was a muffled blanket over them all.

The Mare moved soft as skin to the river. The bank crumbled muddy from all the people but the Mare slipped down swift and into the water. No splash. No splash from the Girl – I am her hair, I am her skin, I am her breath – the Girl had pure round thoughts for the first time. The moonless darkness was a soft blanket and the Mare slow as summer slow as age swam across the river. No longer a stream but a river and the Girl held on and did not move. The current pushed them across downstream. The Mare swam but the current swam with them played dallied bullied them downstream. The Girl could no longer hear the people. She could no longer smell their fires and rot and pit latrines. She could only smell the cool water full of pebbles and promise. She could only smell the Mare earthy and full of sweat. She could only feel the ripple of water and the ripple of muscle as the current carried them across downstream as the moonless darkness carried them away unfollowed and into the East.