

Wait! The Horse is Dead?

Brian Pitt made one unforgivable mistake when he treated his third period English class like adults. Instead of teaching to the appropriate level, Brian thought it prudent the students rise to ours, and in a moment of insubordination, went against the approved lesson plan and showed his favorite R-rated film. In my years as principal, I'd seen teachers like Brian, a dozen times over, men with more interest in their summers off than in their nine months of work. For ten years he was a lackadaisical teacher who spent most of his time fantasizing about his unwritten novel and leaving North Ridge High. Brian even went to so far as to advertise his disdain for his profession by hanging a vision board in his classroom with pictures of famous writers and the quote, "My career should adapt to me." However, I want to be clear. I didn't discipline Brian for his attitude or the way he publically harassed his wife; the teachers' union would have eviscerated me. Ultimately, there were many incidents I could no longer ignore, coupled with the fact that he disobeyed my direction and screened that horribly inappropriate film, *Mustang*.

Brian started the film, and while the opening credits rolled, he took his seat at his desk, directly behind Tom. Tom had always been a decent B student, but by senior year, he developed a habit of disrupting class by turning mundane sentences into celebrations of his penis. Brian had sent Tom to my office to discuss this behavior and even moved Tom's seat beside his desk in a futile attempt to silence him. Even after these interventions, Tom would still say things like, "I'd eat that pizza..." pause and draw his fellow students' attention, and then blurt, "with my dick." His equally immature classmates, every time, erupted into laughter. Tom would "do that homework..." "take that test..." or "pledge that allegiance..." It didn't matter how absurd the task, he swore to do it with his prick.

Besides Tom, the other student that perturbed Brian was Betty. We all knew Betty was incapable of negotiating social situations, though calculus she mastered in the sixth grade. Betty often stood long after class started, visiting with peers who wanted nothing to do with her. She lingered around the room—not out of malice—but because she absolutely couldn't grasp that instruction had begun, and when Brian told her to take a seat, she'd often stare inquisitively at him and sincerely ask, "I need to sit down?" due to their immaturity, the other students laughed, leaving Betty exacerbated.

Brian told his seniors that for his final lesson, he wished to share his favorite film. He said it was a movie about becoming an adult. Brian hit play and *Mustang* began with a panoramic view of

mountain peaks and then settled into the valley where a herd of wild horses ran through the sage. One mustang, golden with a brown stripe across each foreleg, fought the other males, displaying his dominance. In the distance beyond the horses, at the other end of the valley, Josh and his father loaded firewood. Josh was handsome and tall. His hair curled like his fathers, and they wore the same Wrangler jeans and style of flannel shirt. Josh's father was angry because after school ended, Josh and a girl named Matty were caught in the band room by a teacher. Josh and his father spoke around the incident between the sound of the maul splitting chunks of wood. *Dammit, Son*, Josh's father said, *you just can't do things like this. You ain't a kid anymore.* Josh's father gazed toward the far end of the valley at the mustangs rearing and kicking up dust and said, *Now, I got to tell your mother we talked about this.*

Brian scanned the classroom and saw everyone, except Betty, swiping their telephone screens like they were flicking away crumbs. Brian should have confiscated their phones, but he had become apathetic toward the rules, during those final days of the school year. Tom made a joke about how he'd split that wood, and Brian cringed while the students chuckled.

In the next scene in the film, Josh was walking down the hallways talking to Matty about the vastness of the Ponderosa Wildernous and how very few people in this world had ever crossed it, end to end, but they say it could be done in three days on horse. Pritchard, the son of a wealthy rancher thrust himself between Josh and Matty. Pritchard motioned for Matty to move behind him. *Look at this K-Mart cowboy*, Pritchard said, smoothing Josh's shirt and rubbing the pearl buttons. *When you're ready to be cowboy*, Pritchard said, *get a horse and come see me. I'll teach you about the Ponderosa Wildernous.* He turned to Matty, motioning for her to leave with him.

After school, dejected, Josh drove to his cousin Sonny's and found him with a rattlesnake wrapped around his arms. His fingernails were painted black, and he'd drawn an ankh in ink upon his forearm. Sonny wore camouflage fatigues and a faded, homemade tie-dye shirt. He whispered a song as he grazed the snake's head across the dirt, and when it's rattle slowed, Sonny let it slither free and slip through a crack in the house foundation. Sonny turned and his face lit up when he saw Josh, and he lifted his arms in greeting. *That was Rocky*, Sonny said. *Did you want to meet him?* Josh smirked, *No, I'm good.*

At this point, there was five minutes left in the period, and all of Brian's students were stuffing their backpacks. Brian told them to quit packing, so instead, the students stared at the door as if it was a holy relic with the power to heal their boredom.

"So far, what's going on?" Brian said, pausing the film.

“I literally have no idea,” Sophia said.

Tom scrolled the internet on his telephone.

“Hand it over, or put it away,” Brian said.

“Put your phone away, Tom,” Sophia said. Then she smiled and wrinkled her nose.

Brian was used to students greeting his leading questions with blank stares and apathy. This was part of the opening moves in the game of teaching. “Let’s review,” Brian said. “What do you think Josh and his dad were talking about?”

“You’re good at math?” Tom said, to Betty. “You get A’s on your tests?”

“Every test since the fifth grade,” she said.

Brian reiterated the key points from the first act of the movie, while staring at Tom, telepathically hoping to shut him up. “Do you agree with the father’s reasoning, that Josh can do anything he chooses in a month, but not until then? Not until graduation.”

“So, you like numbers?” Tom snuck in, during Brian’s question.

“Yes,” Betty said, baffled.

Brian felt the class slide through his fingers like a handful of water.

“Do you like the number two seventy?” Tom said, teasing each syllable of the number.

“Yes,” Betty said, confused.

“Do you like two...oh, I don’t know. Sixty-six? Sixty-five?” Tom cocked his head and study Betty’s scrunched face. “Oh, I know,” he continued, “Do you like two sixty-nine?”

“Stop talking, Tom,” Brian said, but it was too late.

“Yes,” Betty said, frustrated, “I like two sixty-nine.”

“You like two sixty-nine?” Tom said, his face awash with glee. “It’s enjoyable for you?”

“Yes,” Betty said, hoping to get Tom to leave her alone.

The bell rang and Tom, along with the rest of the students sprinted out the door, giggling like they had pulled the greatest prank on Mr. Pitt and Betty. This film was meant to be Brian’s final lesson to his seniors. He was trying to help them see they were leaving their carefree playpen of adolescence and entering the very real labyrinth of adulthood, but now, just as soon as the lesson began, it failed. Brian tried to rub away the stress multiplying in his temples, wondering how he let Tom take control of his classroom, yet again?

Betty approached Mr. Pitt and stood at the corner of his desk. “Tom is weird,” she said, a bit unsure of what just happened.

“Yes, he is,” Brian said.

“Are you going on a summer vacation?”

Brian looked up from his desk, his hands still pressing the sides of his head. “Go to class, Betty,” he said.

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Brian’s ex-wife, Amy, taught biology, and very well, I might add. She wore horn-rimmed glasses and her once dyed blonde hair had grown out so that it was completely brown, except for the tips. She was small framed and delicately boned, and the next day she sat in my office holding an envelope with the words “Back Stabber,” scrawled in giant, unmistakable letters. Amy opened it and showed me a photo strip of Brian, Amy, and their three-year-old son, taken in an old-timey booth. Through tears, Amy confided to me about Brian’s drinking, his soul crushing resentments, and his apathy toward students. She recounted the nasty treatment he subjected her to in the teacher’s lounge and the way he courted the other male teachers against her, calling her a liar and far worse. Then, she pulled from her purse a collection of harassing notes Brian had stuffed in her teacher’s mailbox. I wanted to fire him then for harassment, but I feared for Amy, worrying Brian might become more vicious, once he was untethered to the few remaining strands of decency that bound him to his job. So I continued to do for Amy what I’d done for the last year—I comforted her.

In third period, Brian resumed the movie as Josh and Sonny took every penny they had to the BLM Roundup. Josh put up the money he’d made seeling firewood with his father, but Sonny had the barn, pen, and horse trailer, so they made a deal for equal ownership. Sonny, wearing a Misfits T-shirt and eye liner, surveyed the wild horses the BLM agents had herded into the corral, and one mustang, a yellow stallion, with a brown stripe across his forelegs, caught his eye. *That’s the one*, said Sonny. Josh rested the heel of his boot upon the corral and spat. The opening bid went for a hundred, but by the time Josh lifted his hand to signal, the price rose to eight hundred. Josh wasn’t sure if he’d even made a bid as two others haggled the price from eight hundred up to nine fifty. As the auctioneer began his final call, Sonny prodded Josh to raise his hand, causing a few in the crowd to snigger at their lack of etiquette and Sonny’s queer look. The price rose to a thousand, and Josh motioned to Sonny that they should back off, but Sonny raised his hand, driving the bid up another hundred dollars, and the auctioneer decreed the yellow mustang with the brown stripes, theirs.

Back in Brian’s classroom, on of the students muttered, “Hey Tom, how would bid at that auction?” Another countered, “How would you break that horse?” Tom ignored his classmates and

laid his head down on the desk to sleep. Brian was puzzled, but figured he'd take whatever reprieve from Tom he could get.

Sonny named the stallion, Boulder, and the young men took turns being tossed from the wild horse's back, in Sonny's pen. Sonny's neighbor, Rachel, sauntered over with a baby on her hip. She propped one foot on the fence, laughed, and said, *I was going to ask if you needed any help, but it's clear you do.* It was an odd proposition from a woman only two years older than them, carrying a toddler. *You all remember me?* she asked. *Yeah,* Sonny said, *where's Whipple?* Rachel adjusted the baby as it wiggled and writhed against her body. *Gone,* she said, *and good riddance.* Josh spat and sized her up. *Can you still ride?* he said. Rachel stared incredulously at him.

Sophia trudged into the classroom, and much to Brian's frustration, the students devoted their attention to her. She dropped an excuse slip on Brian's desk and then walked to her seat, beside Tom's. Betty asked Sophia why she was crying, as innocently as any child might pose the question. Collectively, the class uncomfortable gasped. Brian reigned the class back in, redirecting them to the television.

Under Rachel's teaching, Boulder slowly progressed from a wild stallion to a tamed horse and the boys became pretty solid ranch hands. When Sonny asked why Rachel didn't live on her parents' ranch, she replied, *Some things just can't be taken back.* Sonny took her boy, William, in his arms and sang in the child's ear as his mother slid into the saddle. Boulder immediately bucked, but she held tight. *It's about outlasting the discomfort,* she said. *Got to tolerate it longer than the horse.* Josh let loose the reins and immediately, around the ring, Boulder danced and kicked. He sprung on all four legs, trying to fling Rachel off, as if the devil himself sat upon his back. Then he settled into a smooth gait, running the perimeter of the pen. *There's your horse, boys,* Rachel said, circling past. *Yes, this is a fine animal.* She spurred as spurred Boulder into a gallop as she passed. *This one's special.*

Brian readied his remote so he could stop the film at a precise instant. The next scene was a delicate moment. He wanted the students to understand the dynamic of Josh and Rachel's relationship, without showing them the romantic moment in its entirety. As the sun set, Josh took his father's saddle to Rachel's house so she could help him repair it. While she mended the D ring rigging, she said, *Sonny loves him more, but Boulder is your horse.* *We split him even,* Josh said, walking to the window. Through the waves of the glass, he saw Sonny across the street, still brushing Boulder. *I know,* Rachel said, *but there's the way things are on paper and there's the truth. You gonna honor your deal with him?* Josh laughed. *"It's a horse."* Rachel stood and hoisted the saddle across her shoulder. *What if he took off with Boulder?*

Josh turned around, smiling. *Then I'd whoop his weirdo ass.* Rachel slid the saddle onto the floor by the front door. *Suppose I could ride that horse across the Ponderosa?* Josh said. Rachel crossed her arms, studying Josh. *Why the hell you wanna do that?* she said. *Ain't you never had something to prove?* Josh said. Rachel's fingertips grazed Josh's collar bone and the top snap on his shirt. *Every day,* she said. They kissed and then Rachel led Josh into her bedroom. On her bed, Rachel became more aware of Josh's awkwardness. Rachel lifted her shirt, and her naked back filled most of the screen. The bumps of her spine rolled beneath her pale skin as she bent and lifted Josh's shirt off.

Brian skipped to the next scene.

"What are you doing?" Betty yelled.

The class chuckled at Betty, and Brian unenthusiastically mumbled, "Take notes."

"Is there going to be a test?" Betty said?

Tom briefly rose to change which side of his face he rested against his hands. As he rolled his head across his shoulders, he sneered at Betty, before laying back down. The cheek he'd previously rested on was rosy and flushed.

"I need to see the whole film if there's going to be a test," Betty said. "I..."

"I won't test you on the part that I skipped," Brian interrupted.

In the next scene, Sonny sat in the locker room, touching up his fingernails, when Pritchard and his friends surrounded him. Pritchard knocked Sonny's nail polish onto the ground and said, *That shit will not happen here.* Sonny blew across the tips of his fingers and shrugging said, *okay.* He closed his eyes and began to whisper the same song he sang before to the rattle snake. Pritchard held himself back and only spat on Sonny as he lead the group away. Outside the locker room, Pritchard found Matty flirting with Josh in the hallway. Pritchard erupted between Matty and Josh, pushing Josh into the lockers. *Come on K-Mart,* Pritchard said. *Stop!* Matty screamed. Matty placed her hands on Pritchard's shoulder. *Y'all race from corner to corner across the Ponderosa Wilderness,* she said, and *I'll date the winner.*

"Slut," one of the young women in Brian's class said, to which Sid immediately sang back, "So-phi-ya!"

Sophia began grieving in her seat.

"Fuck you, Sid," Lindsey said.

"Language," Brian said. "Both of you."

Betty turned to Tom and said, "Why is everyone talking about you two?"

Betty was finally more than Tom could take. He rose again, turned to her, and with contempt said, “I swear to God, if you don’t shut up, then I will shut you up.” Tom paused and waited until everyone was listening, and then he shouted, “With my dick!”

Half the class laughed and the other half was in shock. Something snapped inside of Brian. He had woven together a theory of the type of person he was, but at that moment every strand came unraveled and Brian said, “You talk so much about your dick, I wonder if you are insecure about something?”

Now the entire class was aghast as Brian locked eyes with Tom. Tom sat back in his seat and crossed his arms, glaring back. Like two fighters waiting to be set loose on each other, they tried to intimidate the other, searching for the other’s weakness to reveal itself.

The bell rang and not a student moved.

“Dismissed,” Brian said, never taking his eyes from Tom.

I called Brian at nine o’clock that evening and told him to prepare a statement. I needed to know what Tom said to Betty and what he said to Tom. Also, I needed to know about this film he was showing that parents were calling and complaining about. I looked up *Mustang*, and IMDB, described it as a sexual coming-of-age drama. It was rated R for, among other things, one particularly graphic depiction of sexual assault. Some reviews raved that the film was a genre-breaking anti-western about adolescence, and that it accurately portrayed the painful and confusing transition young adulthood. Other reviewers were not so kind, as Stetsonman7789’s wrote, “The director showed mountains, clearly going for the metaphor of Josh’s rugged soul. Heavy handed much? Low on talking, high on characters just staring at other characters. The real icing on the turd is that I got *Mustang* from RedBox and forgot it beside my toaster for a month. I ended up paying twenty-six bucks for this piece of \$hit.”

This film was problematic at best. I called Amy and asked if she had any idea what her ex-husband was thinking.

“Oh god, not that movie, again,” she said.

“Is it bad?” I asked.

“Just watch it. It’s on Netflix. It’s...”

I heard her son call from another room. “I’m sorry, Robert just got back out of bed.” I heard her speak goodnight to her son and go through an abridged nighttime routine that one does tucking a child into bed for the one hundredth time.

“How is Robert handling everything?” I said.

“It’s better,” she said. “As hard as this transition has been, at least we are safe and healthy, and that’s more than most.”

I pondered what to say to make Amy feel better, but I had resigned myself to the conclusion that sometimes there isn’t anything that can be said or done to make someone feel better. All you can do is address the situation and acknowledge it.

“I keep you in my thoughts, Amy,” I said.

She thanked me. “Prepare yourself,” Amy said. “Showing that movie to kids is...” She grew silent, trying to choose her words carefully. “It’s what an angry man would do.”

That night, I streamed the film with my face in my hands, preparing myself for more irate parents phoning my office.

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The next morning, Brian sat in the chair before the secretary and fiddled with his tie. He never wore a tie. Outside the principal’s office, the lockers slammed, and Brian heard his students; Tom argued with Lindsey. Brian wondered if they were talking about his unfortunate outburst in class.

Tom slammed his locker.

“But Sophia forgave you when you cheated on her,” Lindsey said.

“I guess she’s better than me,” Tom said, and then added, with as much swagger as he could muster, “I got to go to Trig.”

Brian shuddered. The secretary, whose desk was not ten feet from the doorway, was creating reports for detention. “Do you have to listen to this, every day?” Brian said.

“I don’t hear anything, and I don’t want to,” she said, never pausing from her manic typing.

“I’m ready, Mr. Pitt,” I said, inviting him into my office. I decided not to make any judgment until I understood Brian’s side of the incident. I read his typo filled report and then gazed him over my thick-red framed glasses. “This looks bad for Tom,” I said, “but Betty’s parents haven’t said anything.”

Brian exhaled, relieved that I was already shifting the blame from him. “I don’t think Betty fully realizes the extent to which she was assaulted,” Brian said.

“*She* was assaulted?”

“Yes,” Brian said, disgusted.

“I’ll talk to Tom, but he’s going to get off easier if Betty’s parents don’t say something, and let’s hope they don’t.”



“That’s not right.” Brian sucked the breath he used to utter those words back into his mouth. He was out of line and he knew it.

“Do you think it’s right to talk about a student’s genitals?”

Brian sat forward in his chair and put his hands on my desk. “He thinks he’s a man, so I talked to him like one.”

I sat his formal statement on my desk. I’d made my career negotiating the views of parents and teachers, and I’d sided with each, at various times. I found Brian to be a petty man, but at that moment, I didn’t plan to discipline him. I was going to let the school year end, the seniors graduate, and the teachers have their summer off. I would let time smoothe all of this out.

“I watched your film, last night.”

“I showed an edited version,” Brian said.

“I should hope so. Do you think the students are ready for these types of themes?”

“I think its age appropriate.”

“Is sexual assault age appropriate?”

“Should I just show *Where the Red Fern Grows*? Brian sat back and threw his hand up. “I don’t want to graduate another generation of people who disregard each other’s inherent decency. This is the world that these students are about to step into, and I’m trying to ready them.”

I leaned over the desk to look at Brian square in the eye. “It’s not your job to make students ready for anything,” I said. “Stop showing this movie, and don’t ever talk about a student’s body, again. We have two days left, and I don’t want any extra drama before graduation. Just get them to the finish line.”

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“Because we’re not watching it,” Brian said, and slapped a freshman English word search on Betty’s desk. The change in lesson upset her, but on the other hand, Tom was subdued. Brian figured Tom would keep his mouth shut for the rest of the year. Days—hours really—were all that remained. While the third period class begrudgingly looked for words like, antagonist, epiphany, and catharsis, Brian turned on the computer at his desk and checked his personal email. There was an message from Amy, and he opened it.

*Brian,*

*I'm sorry. I don't know when we got so mean to each other, and I know that I said things that weren't true. I lied about you during the custody trial, because I didn't want to lose my baby. I was wrong. I was very, very wrong. So, there it is. Share it with the judge, if you want. I won't argue*

*against changing our custody agreement. We weren't ready when we had our baby, and I was like a scared child when we split. I just want to do what's right, and I apologize.*

*Amy*

Betty was laughed and Brian looked up and saw Tom showing her his word search. She shrugged her shoulders, and Tom leaned over and cupped his hand to Betty's ear and he whispered. She shot upright as if a jolt of electricity had passed through her, and immediately blushed. Then Betty chuckled again and leaned over and whispered something in Tom's ear. Tom nodded and pointed to his paper.

"Do your work," Brian muttered. Whatever spark Tom had lit spread like a wildfire through sagebrush, and soon the entire class was giggling. "Quiet," Brian said, with as little gusto as he could muster.

"Why did you put so many dirty words in this?" Tom said, and then he spelled out, "S-Q-I-R-L-N."

"What's it mean?" Betty asked, and Tom whispered to her. She recoiled and said, "that's disgusting."

"Squirreling isn't a word," Brian said.

"You don't know what *squirreling* means?" Tom said. "I can tell you what it means. We're all adults here, right Brian?"

Brian had fallen right into Tom's trap. "Don't disrespect me in such a manner as to call me by my first name," Brian said.

"Okay," Tom interrupted, "but after two more days, we're graduated and you and I are both adults."

"That may be true, but until then..."

"Why can't we watch the rest of the movie?" Tom interjected.

"I'm not allowed to show it."

Tom looked at Brian, sideways. "So we should sit here do an assignment that means nothing for our grades, let alone our lives?"

Brian looked at the email from his wife and couldn't think of a single reasonable answer for Tom.

"I liked the movie," Tom said.

Brian shrugged and resumed the film, and the students pulled out their phones to text and surf the net. “I’m still collecting your word searches,” he said.

Tom leaned over and waved his hand over Betty’s paper. She looked at him, confused, and Tom said, “he doesn't mean it,” and of course, Tom was right.

Not a single student paid attention as Josh raced Pritchard through the wilderness. Even Betty ignored the film, and instead, searched for the dirty words that randomly had shown up in his ninth grade word search. Sophia had her head down, turned away from Tom, and Tom, obnoxious as a neon sign, made Sid laugh, pantomiming masturbation. Sid yelled, “Squirrelin” about twenty more times.

On the third morning of the race, Boulder saved Josh from a grizzly attack by charging the bear to distract it. This allowed Josh to collect himself and fire his rifle at the animal. The class collectively scrunched their faces, as if maybe this movie wasn’t so boring, after all. Now, Josh injured and exhausted, slumped forward as Boulder bore him through the pass. At a watering hole, Boulder drank and waited for Josh to revive. When he came to, Josh found himself surrounded by mustangs. As he slid from the saddle, the feral horses scattered a hundred feet from Josh and Boulder while they drank from the cool mountain lake. Josh climbed back into his saddle and guided Boulder toward the horses but they held their ground; Boulder snorted and the mustangs nickered back, contemplating the yellow horse with a brown stripe across his forelegs, like he was a ghost from a near forgotten past.

Josh comforted Boulder as the animal tried to buck, then he spun Boulder away from his family and galloped for the border of the wilderness as the herd of mustangs descended out of the mountains, onto the prairie with him. Nearing the finish line, Josh halted and dug his binoculars from his saddle bag. The mustangs called to Boulder, and then one by one, the each disappeared into the sagebrush. Boulder gave out a high pitched neigh as he jostled beneath the saddle, but Josh held the reins tight until his horse calmed. Josh spied his classmates through the binoculars. In the middle of the crowd was Matty, surrounded by a group of Pritchard’s friends. Off to the side, Sonny and Rachel looked like outsiders at a convention held to oppose them. Then Josh saw Pritchard trotting down another draw, no doubt, believing he’d won. Josh noticed a dry creek bed, ambling toward the finish line.

Brian no longer worried if anyone took any meaning from the film, let alone liked it. He exposed his students to a meaningful story that was as relatable to their lives as he could imagine. It was undoubtedly a hard film with which to wrangle, but wasn’t that what the best teachers did?

They taught to an elevated level? They took the harder trail? It was what he'd done in his dissolving marriage with Amy, he believed. Taking the high road is a lifetime journey, not a one time choice, and so many people want to bring you down.

Josh surprised Pritchard when he emerged from the creek bed, and galloped past. He and Boulder were only a hundred feet from the finish line, when Boulder's front leg plunged into a badger hole, rolling the horse and hurtling Josh from his saddle. Pritchard crossed the finish line and rode his stallion in a victory lap around the spectators. He stopped in front of Matty, looked back, and saw Josh and Boulder laying on the ground and smirked. Pritchard lifted Matty onto his saddle and rode another circle around the group, as Rachel and Sonny ran to Josh. Josh was battered and bleeding, but he rose to his feet and said he was alright. Sonny took the reins and attempted to coax Boulder to his feet, but once the horse rose half-way, he collapsed and cried in pain. Rachel tried to calm Boulder and petted his side while Josh slid the rifle from his saddle. Sonny stood between Josh and Boulder. *There's no choice*, Josh said. *You don't get to do it*, Sonny said, taking the rifle from Josh. Sonny lay on the ground beside Boulder and stroked the horse's cheek. Rachel knealt and stroked Boulder's rib cage, her eyes glistening. Sonny rested his head against Boulder's face and sang in a low whisper. *You are the wild one I can't control, you come when you want and you leave at your will. You are the wise one who made me the fool, to show me I am an animal still.* Then Sonny pulled the trigger.

"What the fuck?" Sid said.

"This movie," Sophia said, "is awful."

Brian didn't feign to care about the language or the attitude.

That evening, Pritchard, Matty, and their friends went drinking in celebration by the water tower, where Pritchard made advances that Matty didn't want. Angry at her rejection, Pritchard assaulted Matty in the cab of his truck, and then afterwards left her in her driveway. At the single cavernous bar in town, Pritchard walked into the dark tavern, proclaimed he'd crossed the wilderness on horseback in three days, and demanded someone buy him a beer. A few hunched men turned and sneered. Pritchard became belligerent, and finally one man stood up, emerging from a dark corner of the bar. He shoved Pritchard over a table, scattering beer and glass across the floor. Pritchard slunk back to the wall away from the violent man, as he returned to his seat with a beer.

Josh returned to his father's home and sat his saddle on the kitchen table between them. Josh's father listened without speaking, gazing at his son, with all the compassion that a man who'd

received little could muster. His father told him he was sorry, and then he told Josh, *these friends you are given, are all there is, and they aren't replaced*. In the final scene, Josh went to Rachel's, the next morning, and she answered the door, but kept the screen closed, refusing to let him in. Her son stood beside her, tugging on her dress. Sonny hollered from behind Josh, *how are you going to make this right?* Josh looked to Rachel for an answer. She hoisted her child in her arms. *Make it right with Sonny*, she said.

A hundred yards from the finish line, they huddled around Boulder's remains. Sonny handed Josh a shovel and told him to bury their horse. Over the next hours, Josh slung the rocky desert onto the carcass. As the sun began to set, Rachel sprawled in the shade of the pickup truck and fell asleep, her head resting on her child's car seat. When she woke, she saw Sonny and Josh carrying rocks and that Boulder was completely covered. She left her sleeping child in the air conditioned cab, and helped them create the memorial, a stone cairn to mark Boulder's remains. Josh's hands were bleeding, and he began crying from exhaustion. *I'm sorry*, Josh said, *I shouldn't have wanted that. Will you let me keep trying to make it right?* Sonny held back his tears as he nodded and placed a hand on Josh's shoulder. Josh looked to Rachel. She stroked Josh's other arm, comforting him. *No*, she said. Rachel squeezed Josh's arm and winced before letting him go. The three then stood shoulder to shoulder, paying their final respects, their figures outlined and blurred by the setting sun.

*Mustang* ended and the students didn't shift in their seats or collect their belongings, and not a one spoke. Brian didn't lead any discussion when the film ended and dismissed them even before the bell rang. He only wanted to email his ex-wife, while the venom was still high in his throat. He had a lot to take her to task for, and he began composing a letter to put her in her place.

"I liked the movie," Betty said, startling him. He'd assumed she'd left with everyone else. "Make a mistake, say you're sorry, right Mr. Pitt?" Betty scrunched her face into the shape of a question.

Brian felt there were quite a few themes woven into the film, but didn't want to discuss them further, with Betty. "That's what it's about," he said.

If a posture could emote a smile, it was Betty's. "What are you going to do this summer?" Betty sat her backpack on his desk and propped her body on the pink satchel.

"Mow my lawn," he said.

"Are you going on a vacation?" she said.

Brian began composing the email to his ex-wife. "Siberia," he said.

“I probably won’t see you, then,” Betty said, concerned. “I’m going to Myrtle Beach.”

On the screen he wrote, *I will ruin you.*

“After I graduate, do I call you Brian or Mr. Pitt?” Betty said.

Brian wrote further, *even if it takes all of my money and all of my time, I will use this confession to let everyone know the kind of person you really are.*

Betty shifted uncomfortably before Brian’s desk.

“Just call me Mr. Pitt,” Brian snapped. Frustrated, Brian rubbed his temples. He gathered himself and smiled at Betty, trying to overcompensate for raising his voice. As nice as could be, he said, “You should probably go to your next class.”

Betty, unfazed, slung her backpack onto her shoulder, and said, “Bye, Mr. Pitt.”

Brian hit send on the email, then he made his way around the rows of empty seats and picked up the word searches students left behind. When he looked up, I was standing in his room.

“I came further discuss what happened, yesterday,” I said, “but instead, I find you showing the film I prohibited.”

Brian carried the papers to the trash can, under the television. “I gave a word search,” he said, lifting the papers to show me before dropping them into the garbage.

“I should fire you,” I said, pointing at his personal email, open on his desktop. “But I’m going to do something kind and patient. I’m only going to suspend you.”

Brian shrugged.

“What kind of martyr do you think you are?” I said.

“I don’t care who’s side you take in anything,” Brian said, “but you only discipline when it’s safe. You’re only moral when it’s convenient. One day suspension?” Brian laughed. “What a joke.”

“I’d be real careful about what you say next.”

“You should have fired me a month ago, a semester ago—hell, you should have fired me years ago, but that would have meant you would have had to fill the opening, and that would have made it a lot harder to just get to the end of the year.”

Brian turned and stared at flickering images of the film’s root menu with an aura of resigned dignity. There, was the entire movie, condensed down to thirty seconds of short snippets. In the last seconds of the montage, we watched one haunting final scene. Josh, Sonny, and Rachel appeared in silhouette against the dusk; shoulders slumped and heads bowed, they trudged across the desert, their hands laced around stones.