

Little Brother

In the early morning, the air is cool and light, a soft flutter on my face. Even as I'm waking up I keep my eyes closed to hold onto my dreams. I have dreams of grass and running. Sometimes I have dreams about eating apples. In my dreams I find them all over the ground, and I eat them and eat them until my belly is stretched full.

No matter what I eat in my dreams, my stomach brings me fully awake with growls and pangs. The soft morning light becomes glare, and I slit my eyes against it. There is Kajik next to me. He's still asleep, or he could be awake with his eyes shut. He does that sometimes.

When we sleep, I need Kajik and Kajik needs me. Only one of us can lie down at a time. The one that's standing dozes, listening for danger with the part of him that's awake. Halfway through the night, we switch. I don't know if horses do this, too. I've met some goats. Goats sleep any old way, on the ground or on piles of hay, all at once.

The morning also brings the old woman clattering about making her morning tea in the shack nearby, and soon I smell it. It makes my mouth water, though I've only tasted it on the air. This is a peaceful time of day. Even the flies aren't buzzing.

She hobbles out of the house to the rick outside our lean-to, pulling down armfuls of hay and tossing it onto the ground. Now if Kajik's eyes pop open, I know he wasn't asleep. When he's deep in his dreams his eyes open slowly, like he doesn't want to let go of them either.

We take our first bites hungrily, then settle down to the steady chewing needed to eat the dry stalks. Sometimes there are stray flowers or herbs in the hay, which gives it a nice flavor.

The old woman sets out the things she packs on us: old clothes, pots and pans, blankets, other things I don't recognize. A slice of bread is halfway out of her pocket. She stops every now and then and takes a bite and then pushes the crust back in her pocket. I get a glimpse of her craggy yellow teeth. I'm not sure how she's chewing the bread. It doesn't look very soft.

She comes just inside the lean-to and takes our packs down from their nails. She fastens Kajik's pack on first, and then shoves him away. He's been known to nip at her, even though it always means a whack with the leather strap. The strap hangs on a nail inside the doorway so she can grab it quick. She's not very strong, so it probably doesn't hurt much.

She puts my pack on and loads all the things on us. She pulls the straps tight under our bellies. Then she puts the rope harnesses over our heads and prods us out of the lean-to. We start across the yard and down the dirt path that leads away from the shack toward the market. Kajik walks behind me, his head down. Something is wrong with his skin. His pack rubs the sore spots on his sides and back, and sometimes he snorts with irritation and pain. The flies come and feast on his open sores. I'm grateful he distracts them from me.

The market isn't far, though on the hottest mornings the walk seems long. The dusty dirt path gives way to a flatter wide-open area where there are many stalls and tables. We make our way to our accustomed spot, and the old woman nods here and there to the other sellers. So much noise after the quiet of home; people talking and animals braying or bleating, children shouting and crying. The old woman, though, doesn't talk much. She unfolds the tables and sets out her wares slowly. My back and Kajik's back ease as the weight comes off. She ties us to a little scrub tree nearby. We stand in the bit of dappled shade. On

summer days we move a little to keep the shade on our backs. Sometimes I have to nudge Kajik to wake up and move a little, and sometimes he has to nudge me.

Women and children mostly and some men flow past our tables, women in their long dresses, brown feet and sandals peeking out when they walk. Their head scarves brighten the brown coins of their eyes. I keep my eye on the little ones because some will poke me with a stick or pull my tail.

There's one boy I notice in particular because I see him watching me. I can tell he is friendly because of his warm eyes. That's also how donkeys show they're friendly. We warm our eyes, which we can do because they are very dark and deep.

The boy comes to the market almost every day with a woman whose small eyes peer out from a swath of dark cloth around her face, alert as a cat's. She talks fast and tough with the sellers, jabbing her finger at the fruit or sack of beans she wants. I'm glad suddenly that I belong to the old woman instead of her. Though her hand with its oval polished nails is gentle on the boy's shoulder. Two little girls circle him in the dust, laughing.

One day it was very hot, hotter even than usual for that time of year. At the market I hung my head low; the bright sun tires me. I kept my eyes half-closed. I saw the boy again, and he looked at me. He pulled his mother's sleeve and said something to her. She glanced my way and went back to her shopping. The boy walked to the well nearby and sent down the bucket. He dragged it back up and walked carefully over to me, trying not to spill the water. There was a scoop in the bucket, and he filled it and tilted it so the water splashed my forehead and sides of my neck. He scooped water with his hands so I could drink. I lapped at the cool water. It was not enough to slake my thirst but enough to get a taste of the boy. I blew out my lips to thank him. He brought another bucketful for Kajik, who just stood there as the water sluiced over him. I wanted to tell the boy that Kajik doesn't know how to say thanks.

After that day, when the boy came to the market he made it his business to cool me down with water, and Kajik too. I whickered and shook my head and waved my tail when I saw him heading our way with the bucket. He had taken to staying a little while, scratching behind my ears and on my neck until his mother called him away. The old woman didn't seem to notice, or at least she didn't say anything.

I must admit he was the highlight of the day, and not just for the water. It was boring to stand all day. Very few people came to the tables to haggle with the old woman. The load on the way home was almost as heavy as the way there, but it felt heavier because we were tired.

We sometimes stopped to scavenge more wares for the old woman to sell. I groaned inside if she found something heavy. If she could lift it, it would go on my back or Kajik's.

The lean-to was cooler at night, and now I had something to think about, about the boy and his bucket of water, about his kind fingers that scratched behind my ears. How his eyes were soft and kind, not like the hard eyes of his mother.

He wasn't the only child who visited me, but he made me like children more. Sometimes the little ones tried to poke my eyes or pull my ears. Now I didn't mind. I blew through my nose and showed my teeth and they ran screaming and laughing away. The boy never poked. I held still when he came near, and he scratched under my chin, which felt wonderful, and patted my neck. I liked to nose his arm, or the side of his neck, and he laughed when it tickled. He smelled of dirt and heat and his own odor.

Once he brought a small bit of food, warm and soft in his hand. He pulled it into two pieces and gave me one. It tasted strange but delicious. I licked all around my face as far as I could reach to get every bit. He

laughed, but in a nice way. I felt a little bad that I got a treat but Kajik didn't and looked over at him, but as usual he wasn't paying attention.

The boy was a small boy. I didn't remember much about being a little donkey except the smell of my mother and the rough feeling of her hide. I used to lean against her to feel her warmth. I thought I had a brother. These were little memories, and I didn't think about them often because I was afraid I would stop remembering. Sometimes I dreamed about the memories, and they seemed stronger for a little while. But they always faded again. I worried I'd lose them.

When Kajik first came to the lean-to, just a few days after me, I thought maybe he could be like a brother. He had scars on his back, a lot for such a young donkey, from angry red to puckered pink to white where the hair wouldn't grow back. I whickered and warmed my eyes at him, but he didn't respond. He barely looked at me.

Then we started going to the market, and I looked for other donkeys. I saw them, in ones or twos, with their people. They didn't notice me.

Sometimes I thought of the boy as my little brother, because he saw me. I got that same good feeling as when I thought about my own brother. I heard the boy's name once when his mother called to him: Abdul. He was my little brother Abdul.

Now every day was a separate thing with Abdul in it. I was impatient in the morning, waiting for the old woman to finish her tea and bread and tie our loads on. Kajik annoyed me more, but I also found his grunting and grumping easier to ignore. Sometimes I felt a little sorry for him because he didn't have a little boy brother he could love. I even felt sorry for Kajik when he nipped my haunch out of irritation. I'd never felt so happy to not be Kajik. I thought about asking Kajik if he had a brother, but I knew he didn't remember and wouldn't tell me if he did.

Some days we didn't go to the market. The old woman threw down our hay, and we stood around in the lean-to or wandered out into the dusty yard. Flies buzzed and fed on Kajik's hide. Instead of being grateful not to carry the pack, I was restless. Sometimes on those days the old woman's sons came to visit her. They were quiet men, which I was glad for. I'd seen noisy men yelling and hitting whoever gets close to them.

They came out once to look me and Kajik over. They looked at our packs, and at our legs and bodies. They didn't say anything to us. Some people don't talk to animals. The old woman never talked to us. There used to be an old man here too, and he talked to us. Just a few words in the morning to greet us and a few words in the evening to say good night. Always the same, but I liked him for it.

The old woman's sons are each other's brother. They didn't seem happy about having a brother, but they were always together so they must have been glad to have each other.

One day at the market something bad happened. I was standing under the tree, dozing a little, and then there was a terrible noise that seemed to roll toward me. I could feel it in my chest as well as hear it. It made Kajik start, Kajik who is never startled by anything. Then people came running past us and yelling, and there were clouds of choking smoke. Some of the people were bleeding. I wheeled around, looking for Abdul, but I couldn't turn far because of being tied to the tree. The smell in the air was sharp and somehow dark, like when the old woman's sons once set fire to some old tires near the lean-to.

A truck came through the narrow space between stalls, very fast with a loud, shrieking noise. There were cries and shouts. It was very frightening, and I hoped very hard that Abdul wasn't there. Kajik and I were

both shaking, and Kajik's eyes were showing their whites. We almost pulled down the little tree we were tied to trying to run away. But the old woman, who never budged the whole time, came over and hit us with a leather strap to make us stop.

A little later when we left the market for home, I saw lumps on the ground with sheets on top, some with bright blooms of blood. Their smell mixed with the bad smell still in the air.

On the next day and for many days after that, we didn't go to the market. I was very worried about Abdul, wondering if he had been in the crowd of shouting people. I wouldn't want him to be frightened or to get hurt.

Then at last one morning the old woman came to the lean-to and took our packs down from the nails, and I was very happy at the thought of seeing my little brother. But the old woman's sons came in too, and they loaded things into our packs. Right away I didn't like it. The things had a bad smell. Kajik didn't like it either; he rolled his eyes so the whites showed and I knew he was scared.

We started along the path, and even though it wasn't very hot we walked slowly and dragged our hooves. The sons hit us with sticks to make us go faster. Eventually we got to the market, and slowly walked to our usual place. But the old woman didn't unpack us, she led us to the little scrub tree and tied us up. Kajik and I looked at each other, and I whinnied loud to remind the old woman to remove the items from our packs.

Abdul must have heard my whinny, because in a few moments he was right in front of me. I was so happy to see him. He reached out his hand to scratch behind my ears, and I whickered a greeting to him. I saw his mother a few feet away with the two little sisters. She was looking behind me, and I turned my head too, in time to see the old woman and her sons walking away from our spot. In a moment they disappeared into the crowd and I could see them no more.

I don't know why, but I got a very bad feeling, a cold feeling through the warm happiness of seeing Abdul. I turned slowly back to him and nosed him gently, taking in his particular smell of boy and dust. I tickled him a little with my muzzle and blew out my lips to make him laugh. I warmed my eyes at him as hard as I could. And then while he was happily grinning at me, I bared my teeth and bit him, hard, just below the shoulder on his thin arm. His mouth dropped open in an oval of pain and surprise, his hand finding the spot where my teeth had pressed deep divots into the skin.

His mother rushed over and pulled Abdul away from me. She yelled at me and shook her fist. She turned and marched Abdul away, and the little sisters followed. He turned to look at me, tears just beginning to roll down his cheeks. He hadn't made a single sound. I gazed straight back at him. Hurry, hurry, go away, I thought fiercely. Go far away from here!

I turned and looked at Kajik, and he looked back at me. Maybe we weren't brothers, but in that moment we were somehow connected.

Minutes later, an enormous noise that was also somehow a big silence boomed in my chest and burst around us, and then there was a blinding whiteness, and then nothing.

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