

GOLDIE

We're going so fast, almost flying, but the ground is hard and dry. Each galloping stride jars her legs, her body, up into mine. It hurts my ribs, my breath bounces out and I grab for her mane.

Slow down!

I slide to one side but grab the saddle just in time. She slows to a walk and I catch my breath...

Dad's voice startles me out of my daydream.

'Sophie, did you hear me? Here's your bag. I'll pick you up at three. Give us a kiss.'

I bump his rough cheek, slide down on to hot concrete. The schoolyard glare hurts my eyes as the car door bangs behind me.

One step in front of the other, and I turn halfway. He's watching me to the front steps.

I try to wave but the big kids push past and he disappears from view.

*

The art room table is stained with colour, like countries on a map. Paint falls in fat wet globs from the brush.

The red is warm and dark, but won't go where it should. It smears the other colours.

My painting disappears.

Outside the window, long grass drifts. Endless.

I squeeze my eyes tight, float away...

Her neck rises up; muscles slide beneath me. We move into a canter, gliding over waves of green, running to the blue sky ahead...

Too slow. The teacher's voice calls me back.

'Sophie! Did you hear the bell? Leave your painting to dry. Such a shame, the red has smudged that lovely blue and yellow, like a big bruise. Never mind.'

*

Gum leaves crackled under our horses' hooves, bees buzzed softly overhead. We creaked along, the smell of leather warming under the sun.

I sang as we went, watched Goldie's ears swing back to my voice.

Mum turned and smiled as she patted Dutch's mane.

'Sophie, you're out-singing the magpies. Watch out for Goldie on the rocks ahead.'

I giggled. 'I think the horses like it!'

She laughed and mimed putting earplugs in Dutch's twitching ears.

I sang again, in time to the horses stepping out.

*

Lunchtime. The grass on the oval smells warm like hay. Sandwiches are papery in my mouth.

I hide in the shade, close my eyes and feel her beside me. Her mane tickles my face in the breeze. So peaceful.

Feet clop past.

I freeze.

'So-phie! Sophie-say-something! Cat got your tongue?'

The black shoes are dirty, laces undone. They scuff the dry dirt into the warm air.

A big sneeze escapes me.

'Told you she was there. Freaky sneaky Sophie, hiding in the bushes!'

More dirt flies into my eyes and up my nose.

The bell rings. I sneeze again, but the kids have gone.

*

The warm sun glinted off sharp stones on the track. I leaned forward in the saddle to make it easier for Goldie as we climbed the steep path.

I saw her ears prick forward and then the sudden movement came out of nowhere, a

flash of shiny scales. Almost unseen.

Dutch snorted, then he went up and up, his front feet punching the air.

Mum gasped once, then she was falling, falling-

Dutch's hooves gripped the earth again and he was gone in a thundering cloud of dust.

Goldie skittered away as I slid from my saddle, tripped over my feet to
land beside Mum-

To where she lay so still.

I yelled and screamed 'Mum! Mum, wake up!' but nothing moved her.

*

Inside the car, the air is cold, metallic. It's a long way to go, takes forever.

Music plays, and he sings along quietly.

Outside the trees flash past. Grass ripples in the heat, no end in sight.

Hooves drum the earth, up this hill, down that one. The mare's head stretches out in
front of me, reaching, reaching-

We leap over a creek, swing around bushes. The car speeds up and we go too,
muscles smooth and sure beneath me. So fast...

We jolt to a stop. Dad is speaking to me.

'Sophie, we're here, sleepyhead.'

His voice is dry and creaky.

I pass him my water bottle. He looks surprised, but smiles and
drinks, hands it back.

In the waiting room a big tank bubbles and hums. Fish stare, move on, return.

My feet swing, tap-tapping the chair legs. He puts a hand on my knee, gentle. I stop.

At last the lady comes out, smiles and beckons. We go in with her.

'So how've you been, Sophie?'

The chair spins beneath me. My feet push against the desk legs and we turn, back and

forth, back and forth.

'Sophie, keep still! Annette asked you a question.'

A shrug, a sigh. He sounds worn, raggedy.

'Don't know what to do next. The teachers say it's the same at school.'

'It's only been... let's see.' There's a long pause, paper rustles. 'Quite a while, I see.

Still, I think you're doing the right thing. Keep up routine. Talk to her... be patient.'

'Patient... yeah. S'pose we can wait a bit longer.'

They talk. Words swirl around, float overhead.

Some drop back down.

'And what about the horses?' says the lady.

Outside the sun glares, trees ripple in the haze. I close my eyes tight...

A bird flies up, so sudden. Her head flings up and we're off.

Hooves beat the ground, thunder in my head. My breath flies away.

Not ready!

Faster faster faster we're racing – can't hold on, falling falling

*

000. Mum's phone was so small, slippery.

'Police, Ambulance or Fire?'

'Please help! Mum's not moving.'

Her helmet lay nearby, loose strap broken and dirty. Blood pooled, so warm. It smeared dark red across the rocks, rusted in the sun.

The lady on the phone talked and talked. So many questions.

Then there were no more bars on the phone.

No more talk.

*

Water flies out of guns as kids run and scream. Balloons bob their heads amongst streamers.

Adults stay cool in the shade, minding their drinks.

'Good to see you, Jamie. Been a while. How's the little one?'

'Quiet.'

'Ha, some luck! Wish mine could be!'

The verandah squeaks under feet. There's a slight cough.

'Sorry... stupid thing to say. How've you been travelling?'

'Ahh... you know. Sophie's a good kid.'

'Been through a bit.'

'Yep.'

Crack, hiss. Bubbles fizz. The sound makes me thirsty. There are bottles on ice in the laundry. Raspberry lolly colours glow. I sit under the window and gulp down the cold.

'Has she told you anything?'

'Not a word. Only know what the police and medics could figure out.'

'Horses, hey? Can't really trust 'em.'

Pain shoots through my middle. Bubbles fizz up again, sugar swirls inside.

Heat rises.

'Yeah, least Goldie hung round. She's in a better place now.'

I bend my head, stare at the floor. Can't breathe. Fizzing bubbles come up fast. Out my mouth. And nose. Sharp dots of pain everywhere.

He's beside me, holding back my hair. A tea-towel wipes my wet face.

'Better get her home, I reckon. Too much sugar.'

Heads nod, voices murmur. He picks me up and we walk away. Kids' faces stare and giggle. I hide my face, hold on. The car door shuts, my eyes close tight.

Down the long driveway, curving under willows we go.

Away from the noise and so many voices. I try to breathe, to feel her.

She's not there.

*

Insects hummed. My eyelids drooped. Tiny wings flittered overhead, chirp chirp.

My head dropped, my body jolted awake again. The lady on the phone had said people would come. Soon.

A magpie hopped across the path, peeped sideways then was gone.

I tried to talk to Mum, but my throat was dry and sore. No more water in our bottles.

Goldie snorted away insects, head down in long grass near the track.

I wanted to bury my face in her warm neck, but Mum's head was heavy in my lap.

I stroked her hair, and waited.

*

Down the path I creep, under moonlight, to the little shed near the empty paddock.

I curl up on an old horse rug. Smells rise - warm horse, faint perfume.

I breathe deep.

Ribbons, memories hang on the wall. I stare up at the photos, Mum, horses, me, horses.

The door opens with a night creature's squeak.

'Here you are. C'mon, should be in bed.' He picks me up. I feel his breath stop, catch.

I hold him tight, close my eyes tighter.

'I miss her too, Soph. So much.'

Dampness soaks my neck.

I pat his hair.

He breathes again slower now, and carries me inside.

*

A hot wind blows and tinsel flutters. The sun drops below trees, a burning orange ball.

Kids squeal, run circles around me.

'Come on Soph, hop out of the way, dreamer!'

Grandad leads me back to the picnic table. Fruit cake crumbs and chicken bones lie scattered.

'She was just standing in the playground, staring at the sky. Nearly got bowled over!'

I slide onto a bench. A doll lies under torn and crinkled paper.

'She's alright Bob, they just say she needs time.'

'How much *more* time? I don't understand how she can do this at school!'

The paper slides off the bench, skittering in the warm wind.

I follow quietly.

'It's not like they've done much so far. She needs a woman around – still think she'd be better off with Tricia...'

His voice cuts in, sharp to the bone.

'She's staying with me!'

Boots scuff the dust. Their voices rise. Always the same.

'I lost a daughter, remember!'

'And I lost my *wife*!'

I close my eyes, slide under the park railings. Grass rustles, crispy dry as I creep through sheltering trees to the paddock fence.

Blossom crunches under my feet. Honey warms the air while cicadas sing and sing, so high. There's a snort nearby and my ears prick. They know that sound.

I cluck my tongue, hand held out.

There's a gentle thud thud, then the large head appears. Warm breath strokes my fingers in the darkening light.

Spicy scents fill my nose. I sneeze.

His head flies up and back.

I cluck again. Soft lips return to nibble my palm, gentle. Shortbread crumbles from my pocket, disappears fast.

I run my hand down his dusty neck and climb through the fence, lean on his strength.

We breathe.

'Sophie! Sophie, where are you?'

He turns his head, gives a soft neigh as they shout closer.

'Thank god, you scared me!' Dad stops suddenly, then breathes again.

'What're you *doing*, Soph? Be careful!'

I wrap my arms round his neck, bury my face in tangled mane.

'Over here, Bob. Found her.'

He wipes his hat over his face, sighs. They stand behind the fence, watchful.

'She misses her, James.'

'Yeah. I know.'

*

It was dark all around us.

I heard voices in my head. No, voices shouting, far away.

'So-phie! Sophie! So-phie!'

I tried to yell. Nothing happened.

A horse neighed. Goldie answered.

Then lights bounced through the trees. Riders appeared, voices everywhere.

Hands tried to pick me up I wouldn't leave her. I kicked and twisted, couldn't scream-

A blanket came around me. I couldn't see Goldie.

A blanket covered Mum.

Darkness all around.

*

The phone rings. He swears. The crowd cheers then the TV goes silent. There's a pad pad of bare feet on lino.

In the hall, the stairs are dark and the clock watches. I sit on the third bottom step, out of sight.

My T-shirt stretches over my knees, right down to the toes. I listen.

'Hi Annette. No, it's ok, she's in bed. You got my message? What d'you think?'

Tick tick, tick tick. The old clock beats the time, side to side.

'Well, no, we had thought it was best to remove the horses altogether. But you think it won't hurt to try?'

He sighs. 'Guess we just bite it and see. Righto, thanks for your time. Night then.'

I hear clinking noises from the kitchen. A drink glugs into a glass, then the cricket sounds return.

A wicket falls, ends the game.

He swears again, softly.

*

People talked all around us, trying not to stare. All in black dresses and suits, hankies at the ready.

Music rose, filled the spaces. I wanted to follow, up and away from there.

Aunty Tricia's handbag straps ran through my fingers like reins. I could almost feel the bit, connecting me to her.

My eyes closed. We headed for the bush, brushed through scented leaves and broke into a canter...

'Sophie. Time to go.'

Dad's hand wrapped around mine, warm. I followed my toes, step after step. Flowers lay all around the long box, swallowed by the car.

Faces, sobs surrounded us as we left them all behind.

*

We drive along strange roads, past never-ending paddocks. Inside my head, we canter over grassy flats, leap fallen trees. Galloping, galloping, flat out and free.

We turn up a long driveway lined with wooden fence. Horses stand dreaming under trees.

I turn, stare at his face. He looks straight ahead but his mouth lifts at one side.

We stop near the house. A lady shakes hands, smiling.

Behind the house, there's our old horse float. And a flash of chestnut in a yard.

Goldie turns her head, whickers.

'Don't run Sophie!'

I'm there already, arms around her neck. I bury my head in her warmth. She chews my favourite T-shirt, green slobber everywhere. I hold on, breathe so deep.

Let go.

*

I climb into the car, he clicks the seatbelt into place.

I look back, make sure the float follows as we move away. Goldie's head shifts to keep balance.

I reach over, touch his hand on the steering wheel. He looks at me, grins, then turns up the radio to sing. One of Mum's favourite songs.

I smile.

And we fly away.