



I have always wanted to be a horse girl.

Horse girls are tough. Horse girls are fearless. Horse girls ride fast across the prairie with the wind in their hair.

One of my friends insists that every girl has a horse phase. There is a moment when their rooms will be plastered with pictures of horses. When they will watch movies and shows about horses. When they will ask for riding lessons and want to wear tall boots. In the West, riding is not just for the rich. In my 4-H club, both ranch girls and city girls rode and kept horses. Both competed in the fair and rodeo.

Even though I grew up in Wyoming — where everywhere you go, there is a horse — I did not go through this phase. The symbol of Wyoming, the ubiquitous bucking Steamboat, is on every license plate and souvenir. Legend has it that Steamboat, a domesticated steed, would stand on his front legs and kick his back legs wildly into the air. As a colt, he had a broken nose, so he whistled when he bucked, hence the name. Poor Steamboat performed in Wild West shows and rodeos, making the crowds roar.

My daughter Juniper is decidedly a horse girl. She neighs when I ask her if she wants milk. She has taken to a diet of apples. She's put a blanket over the back of the couch and straddles it, riding her "horse." For her third birthday, my parents bought her a rocking horse that takes up half our living room. She rides it every day, now feeding it apples, brushing its yarn hair with my hairbrush, and showing me her trick riding — which consists of her standing on its saddle, rocking fiercely. She shows me how she canters, how she gallops.

I tell her to get down. To sit properly. To not be so wild. I take the dishtowel she's made to be a saddle and go back to drying dishes.

I WORKED ON an archaeology crew in the Red Desert when I was in my early 20s, doing surface surveys on sites slated for energy development. We would go to an area and walk a grid — mapping, recording and flagging any cultural objects we found. Over

that summer, I found tipi rings, beads, bits of pottery and arrowheads. I also found a lot of trash: bottles, shell casings, cans and once, inexplicably, a porcelain doll's ear.

We were an all-woman crew, and my boss was what I imagined a horse girl grows up to be. She was tough, no-nonsense, and she taught me how to drive on a gravel road and how to spot an arrowhead in the ground. She could recognize a piece of worked rock from 10 feet away.

There were four of us, and the other women used the time surveying the sagebrush steppe to also work on their tans. They worked in shorts and took their shirts off, pacing the prairie in their bras. We mostly labored through the days without seeing another soul, and at night we'd drive back to our motel in Wamsutter, browner and sun-drunk. Once, as we were working, a group of oil workers drove by us. They must have thought us a mirage, as our crew of women scrambled to put their shirts back on. It was something like Odysseus' men coming across the sirens. I kept my shirt on, though, and joked that I'd worked on my tan all winter when the other women commented on how much they'd love to be my color. Still, my brown skin got even browner, and that summer I got the first and only sunburn of my life, on my nose.

Wamsutter was the first place I ever tried a patty melt. We'd eat carb-heavy food at night and drink seven and sevens before falling into bed, ready for the next day. It was endlessly repetitive, but I became adept at spotting things among the sagebrush and greasewood.



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Sometimes we'd split up, and I was alone the first time I saw a herd of wild horses. I came over a ridge, and there was a group of them. They were like no horses I'd see before: Large mares with long manes blowing around. I calculated how far I was from the truck, feeling a combination of awe and fear. They appeared to be utterly undaunted

by my presence. I inched backward as they continued to ignore me. Later that day, as our crew was leaving the area, a group of them stood in the road, blocking us.

"We wait," said my boss.

She turned the engine off, and we watched as they made their way across the sagebrush.

"When you see wild horses, you don't mess with them," she said. "Be calm. Keep your distance."

That night, eating soggy fries, I thought about what it meant to be wild — to be that unafraid of anyone or anything. I was the kind of girl who kept her shirt on, who was scared to drive on backroads by herself.

WHY DO WE TAME unruly things? I think about Steamboat, whistling through his nose, his wildness a performance. My days mothering are spent attempting to make Juniper less wild. In the morning, when I brush her curly hair, I tie it back in ponytails so it won't get tangled. I tell her not to yell, not to run outside barefoot. To be careful. I'm always saying *be careful*.

Last winter, Juniper and I went to Denver on a boring errand. The day was a weirdly warm winter one, sandwiched between relentless snowstorms. Juniper hummed in the back seat and, as we made our way down Colorado Boulevard, I made the spontaneous decision to stop at the Denver Zoo.

We bought tickets and wandered around, eating popcorn, laughing at the monkeys and penguins. In the center of the zoo is the Conservation Carousel, and Juniper immediately asked for a ride. I bought her a ticket and was sure she would choose a zebra, as the talk in our house was still horses. But instead, she beelined for a black rhinoceros. I urged her toward a leopard, toward anything more elegant. But she climbed on the rhino and waited for the music to begin.

As the carousel turned, the rhino's squat body was a contrast to the animals around it. Rhinoceroses are actually quite fast. They are also critically endangered, an animal that humans have almost wiped out in the wild. And yet they are rebounding in places. They are from the same ancestral tree as horses, in fact, both of them odd-toed ungulates.

Juniper joyfully rode her rhino, patting its neck and holding up her arm to show me she was riding free. She waved at me each time she went around. "I'm OK, Mama!" she called over the tinny music.

I backed away from the carousel, remained calm. I could see her wildness, and this time, I didn't run to her, worried that she might fall. I watched her like I watched that wild horse herd in the Red Desert, knowing that she was unafraid. I watched her with the same kind of awe. And hoped her wildness would never be broken.

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