ERICA STERN

The Husbands

Each night I let the husbands out into the pasture for their evening gallivant. Their sinewy thighs peek out from their shorts and gleam in the low, setting sun. It's too hot to go outside during the day. They have pent-up energy, these husbands, from all this time indoors. A frolic helps them release it before turning in.

I sit on the porch and listen to the sound of their soles smacking the dry earth like clobbering hooves. We are in the middle of a drought. The ground cracks in deep spines that run up and down the property, sometimes wide enough to trap a foot. More than once my porch sits have been interrupted by a husband's howl, and I've discovered one of them ankle-stuck in the grooves.

"It's only a matter of time," I tell my best friend Marva one day, while she helps me replace some shingles on the leaking roof, before a husband breaks a bone in this way, before I empty out my meager savings on medical bills—a doctor and x-ray and cast.

"It's expensive to feed and clothe all these husbands," I say, reaching out for the hammer. It's not for the faint of heart.

"I know," she says, placing a hand above her brow to block the sun. "But you can't think of them as timers, ticking down."

Marva has always had a pull toward the husbands, something wider than love, some deeper fascination.

In the time right after I met Marva, I couldn't get her name right. "Martha?" I would say, when we ran into each other at the salt store, or in line at town hall filing for permits. "Marta? Marla? Minerva?"

"MAR-*VA*," she said, finally, three times, like a witch's chant, no hint of irritation in her voice. "Think of Larva. It's like that. Think of baby worms teeming in the wet earth."

As a child I would lift rocks in the schoolyard to discover whole colonies of worms, wiggling and free. Perhaps, though, I made the memory up, reaped it from a book or a film and made it my own.

It had been years since the land here was fecund enough to breed something so plentiful. The thought alone glimmered, magical, pulsing with the energy of imagined tiny cylinders, pumping nutrients from top to bottom, slithering.

That night I fell asleep to the image of Marva's face and of the hatching, the bursting of slick larvae out of their eggs and into a bubbling broth that would wash the dusty leaves and brittle hills.

The husbands hardly seem to notice the drought. They are consumed with other things: absorbing the texture of molted tree bark with the rough tips of their fingers, or howling together: half wolf pack, half trained choir.

Do they remember what it was like, in the before times? I pipe water in from six counties east for them, fill their cups to the brim each morning and evening. I try not to let on when one of them, in some fit of irresponsible recklessness—perhaps feigning at a football game from their long-past youth—knocks into a cup and spills its contents. The act is over. There was no malice. Why let them in on my fears? I am providing for them, and that is all they need to know.

"Thank you, thank you," they mutter sheepishly, eyes trained on the ground, as I open the spigot to refill.

Marva disapproves. She believes the husbands have a right to understand, to be let in on the truth. But she also readily admits she knows nothing of husbands.

"They are beautiful," she clucks, when she comes over to sit with me during their evening frolics. I pour us small tumblers of water with a twist of lemon zest, or, if we're feeling indulgent, a thumb of gin, and we sip the liquid slowly, swishing it around in our mouths before swallowing. Sometimes Marva takes out a pad and pencil and begins to sketch. She won't show me what she draws, but sometimes I catch a glimpse. Pages full of lines and circles, abstract constellations expanding out to the edge, and at the same time, collapsing in on themselves. "It's nothing, really," she says, about her drawings.

As the husband pass back and forth in front of the screened porch, the shadowy dusk and the gray grid of screen obscure their faces and soften their lines. They are simply lovely shapes leaping through our field of vision. If I step out, one or two of them will approach and nuzzle my shoulder.

Marva is a steadfast friend. Once, when the husbands came down with a fever, she brought homemade beef broth (somehow, she'd finagled a beef bone at the market) over to the house. I couldn't bring myself to ask what she'd bargained away for the gnarly thing that sunk like a gelatinous trophy to the bottom of the warm brown soup. The husbands slurped it down, then gnawed the bone's remainder. Another time, when one of the husbands escaped after the evening frolic, running madly over the hills to the west, she organized a neighborhood hunt and we found him, hours later, cold and shivering deep in the belly of the dried-out lake. At these

moments, I think about how she must have had someone of her own once, in the before times—a person to tend to.

Whenever the windstorms roll in, the husbands grow restless. They grow restless long before the gusts begin to heave themselves around the property. They can feel the change in the air, the pressure leavening, a sudden stillness. They emit high-pitched yelps the tenor of a smoke detector announcing it requires new batteries. Some pace the upstairs hallways. I would try to soothe them, but I know it's better for them to be left alone. One cowers in the corner by the bathroom. Another stands in the dead center of the hall, paralyzed. Yet another opens his mouth to howl but nothing comes out. The anguish they feel is something deep, an ache in the bones. I imagine the insides of their bones, the hard sponge of white.

"If you blink your eyes fast," I say to Marva, who is sprawled on the floor of the porch, resting her porcelain-doll head in the cup of her hands, "sometimes you can see spots flittering, like fireflies." We no longer have fireflies, so I induce these swirls of winged creatures, flinging themselves madly across the bloody sunset, across the leaping husbands.

Lately I have taken to wandering this frontier of the senses. Who's to say it isn't real? Sometimes I am so hungry I don't trust what is right in front of me. I look at an empty table and see a hunk of cheese. I sniff a puddle of gasoline and smell cantaloupe, fresh and wet, leaving a light pink film on the fingertips, slipping through the mouth and down the long slide of throat.

"I'll try it," Marva says, but she doesn't bat her eyes.

I have never been to Marva's house. "What's there to see?" she replies, when I ask one day. She chews on the end of her pencil, leaving a delicate rim of teeth marks below the eraser. Always she meets me at my home, or somewhere in town. I don't know what street she lives on. When I ask, we're waiting at the salt store after finding the last remaining packets of Kosher salt on the dusty shelves. I can almost taste the crystals under my tongue, the way the rough edges melt away. The line to the register is long and slow.

I have the feeling that she's hiding something but don't know what. I've never known anyone so well as I know Marva, and so this missing piece digs into me, some arthritic twinge in my hip. At home the husbands are too busy with their running and jumping and flexing and striding—joints popping, feet flinging. They have nothing left for this kind of intimacy.

"Marva," I say, pulling a stray hair out of my eye, "just tell me what it's like, your home. Just describe it."

"Your turn," Marva says, nudging me forward in line, and I know not to ask again.

"In the before times," Marva tells me, as we sit on the porch in the summer heat, "I liked to dabble in the bourgeois." She laughs like a songbird: high and effortless. "Just a little, to see what it was like to be one of *Them*, you know. I'd pay fifty dollars for a candlelight yoga class and would come out smelling like a bergamot processing plant."

One of the husbands tumbles in the distance, brushes himself off, continues.

"Sometimes I'd buy a pumpkin spice latte or a slice of avocado toast topped with picked onions, to see what it was like, you know, to be the sort of woman who bought that sort of thing." She takes a thick flyer for a water pipeline company out of her purse and begins to fan herself. There are so many of these flyers arriving each day, stuffed in the space between the front door and the floor. We joke that we could weave them into doormats, but the joke isn't very funny. Still, we laugh.

I nod. Marva is effortlessly cool. She could try a pumpkin spice latte and remain cool. The rest of us, we'd try it and become ever so slightly more and more of it.

Now, she sits here, hair twisted up under a red and blue geometric scarf, the silky ends whipping around in the wind like tails. The colors have somehow held. Bold, bright, while everything else has muted. I want to reach out and grab the ends and pull as hard as I can. Marva looks at me. "What about you?" she asks. "Before?"

"Truth is," I say, "I can barely remember." When I think about myself in earlier years, it's like I'm remembering a whole other person. I'm not sure I can trust that it was me, that I was real.

What I did in the before times was work supervising the mess hall of a prison. I wore a gray uniform and a whistle around my neck. I watched as each prisoner shuffled up to the kitchen window and took a tray slotted out through an opening at the bottom of the glass, snaked through the room to a table, shimmied onto the attached benches, ate, tossed the contents of the tray, and lined back up along the wall by the locked double doors. They performed a beautiful orange dance, glinting tattoos waving as they forked up the rancid meat loaf and baked beans. They grunted as they ate, low and carnal. I loved those men with a ferociousness I can still remember, a tingling in the tips of my fingers, though there is little else I can recall with clarity from those years, the years before the earth cracked open wide.

In winter, Marva and I bundle under flannel blankets. They are moth-bitten and worn around the edges but, overlapped, form a solid cover from the biting wind. There's nothing to catch the gusts, nothing to slow them as they barrel across the emptiness. The husbands hold their arms out in wide v's, running and trying to catch the wind, as if the energy will enter their bodies and propel them into another place. Sometimes their arms create too thick of a wall and the wind sweeps into them and pushes them over. They laugh and rise and run again.

"They're something," Marva says. She looks sad though, perhaps wistful. "They remind me of something," she says.

"What?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says, "I don't know."

Her jackal eyes glow. I am afraid of their intensity but don't look away.

We stay a while. Past dark, past the husbands' bedtime. Marva stares ahead. We stay silent. There is too much to say. In the moonlight we can still see them, the husbands, just barely.

"They are something," she whispers.

One of the husbands has a callus on his toe in the shape of Texas. He picks at the skin, night after night, no matter my warnings, until it bleeds. It doesn't drip blood but gushes. The other husbands shriek at the fireworks-like display of lush color across the gray floor. I can't tell if they are delighted or terrified or both.

"Does it hurt?" I ask the bleeding husband. He has stuck his fingers in the pool and paints patterns, swirls and lines and dots, entranced in his mess. "It'll be okay," I tell him, wrapping a rag around the wound, though I understand that he doesn't require my comfort.

In spring the earth thaws and a few spindles of green begin to unfurl from the ground. The husbands lean down to sniff them. I can almost hear their inhales from my porch seat. Though they know they shouldn't, a few husbands pluck the shoots, combine the green fringes with dried hay, and bring the bouquets to me. I don't have the heart to scold, so I simply accept the gifts with a thank-you and a pat on the head.

One night there is a late-season freeze. The few remaining sprouts wilt under the weight of ice.

One day it's so hot that the dead sprouts singe at the ends.

One day it drizzles rain. The drops escape the sky in uneven clumps, like hair falling from an aging woman's head. The husbands try to run where they think the next release will occur. They squeal and shoot around the yard, here and there.

One day Marva peels her sweater off over her head to reveal a sliver of stomach. She's rail-thin, but the skin there is soft and wrinkled.

"I've heard the moment of death is like pressing a button at the center of your chest," she says, folding the sweater up into a neat cube. "You feel a small pulse, as everything leaves your body. You know, the way the TV screen pushes all the colors to the middle as it goes black."

"How do you know?" I ask, meaning, who is there to ask?

"I've got my sources," she says.

"Are you afraid of losing them?" Marva asks.

"The husbands?" I whisper, because we are all in the house and I don't want them to hear, though chances are slim that they're listening to us. I ask even though of course I know what she means. What else do I have?

"Yes," she says.

I shrug. "I don't think about it, really. We've been okay so far. We've held it together."

Marva takes a match and lights a makeshift cigarette she's rolled out of old newspapers and stray weeds and a cinnamon stick and hay. It smells like skin, but I'm not sure how I know what skin on fire would smell like. I feel young watching her, carefree, remembering the way I used to sit on stoops with other young things shrouded in smoke. I forget for an instant about the aging woman I know I am. Not quite old, but no longer young either.

"Sometimes I lie in bed and think about what I could lose," she says, taking a drag. "I know that's not healthy, but what is? Luckily there isn't much left to lose."

It's beautiful the way her thin smoke wafts over the crooked ridge of her nose.

"I find it soothing," she says, "to put it all out there, you know, where I can see it."

The husbands rustle around upstairs. I can hear thuds. A door opening and closing. I hold out my hand for a turn and Marva passes the cigarette. A piece of brown fuzz falls from the end. I bring it up to my lips and Marva closes her eyes, holds them shut.

At a certain point one begins to discern new variations of color in the dustscape. It's no longer only brown, but a spectrum, its own full rainbow. There's golden-tinted brown and rust brown and a bluish brown like the edges of an aging bruise and a brown as deep as the center of a lover's eye. I want to point it out to Marva but I am walking alone.

One evening on the porch I feel suddenly brave, or at least honest.

"You had a husband once, right?" I ask.

"What?" Marva pretends not to hear. The wind is blowing over the treeless expanse.

"I bet he was the real thing," I say.

Her breath crackles. "Time to call them in?" She motions towards the leaping husbands. I nod.

"Circle back!" she calls. "Time's up!"

They look around, almost confused, until one, and then another, begins to trot back toward the house. The rest follow. Marva stares ahead into the horizon, which looks like a thin crust of glowing salt at the border where the real vanishes.

Once, in the prison, I brought a prisoner down into the basement for his execution. He trembled as he walked, but otherwise betrayed no emotion. His face was as blank as a baby's. I could have been leading him on a walk to the outhouse or down a country lane. The shackles on his ankles rang out like the wind chimes in my mother's lush garden. I would pick squash and beans and kale and fill basket after basket with my bounty.

At night I begin to tell the husbands stories of the ocean. They pull the blankets up to their noses, as though hiding from a wave's crest. "More! More!" they beg when I'm done. I tell gruesome stories: about hangings in the Wild West, outside the saloon. I describe the crows pecking off the dead man's toes, one by one. I tell stories about babies left to fend for themselves amongst the animals in the frigid winter, freezing in the snow with their eyes wide open. The husbands don't seem to mind, but I can sense their fear in the way their bodies tense, the sharpness of their shoulders, the slight twitching of their limbs.

Sometimes in the night wild dogs howl in the expanse outside and I wake to find the husbands piled in a heap outside my door. They are afraid and do not know how to ask for help. They do not know if I can give them the help they need.

We go three and then four months without a single drop. I hear whispers that the county I pipe water from will cut off the supply soon to preserve it for themselves. I don't tell Marva. She's probably heard the same. The husbands still demand their nightly gallivants, though the air is so crisp it's like small electric shocks to the skin just to walk through it.

We sit on the porch without a drink one evening. We chew the ends of straws instead. I hold an empty cup for the feel of the cool glass, its smooth, rounded side. Marva takes her straw, holds it in one hand. "I have a question to ask," she says, with a deep inhale.

"What is it?"

"Would it be okay if I sketched them?" She points to the husbands. They seem slower today, tired and slouched, as though the electric air is holding them back.

I swat a fly away. There aren't many of them here, in the dryness, but the ones that remain like to land on skin—the sweaty arches of forehead or the flab of armpits—to feast on the moisture.

"I don't see why not," I say. "They don't belong to me."

What I want to do is scream: *Yes! Yes! Yes! I want to share these husbands with you, I want to share it all with you,* I would say to her, if I could.

Marva smiles, mouth closed around the straw, and pulls her gnawed pencil and sketch pad—the old-fashioned kind made of thick cream paper and scattered with dots of plush pulp—out of her bag.

She looks up at the husbands, their bodies stretching and pulling through the air.

She places her pencil on the page.

She draws one line.

She draws another.

Her hand flings.

I peer over. She doesn't seem to mind.

An arm forms, then a leg. A torso, a neck, a head. One body and another. A herd.

She draws more and more, filling the space with gray, bodies crowding the rectangle she holds atop her lap.

"That's it," I say, "you've got it!" before I realize I'm talking.

She draws and draws.

The husbands in front of us begin to fade, their edges disintegrating, their faces swallowing their eyes, their feet dangling above the ground without hitting the surface. Soon they're pure streaks of motion, energy spinning around us.

The sun crackles as it sets.

The movement of the husbands simmers into a mist.

"Marva," I whisper. "Marva."

I watch the page like it is water suddenly springing from the earth: a geyser, blue and billowing.

She draws and draws until there's nothing left.