

With Animal

Carol Guess and Kelly Magee



Black
Lawrence
Press

To

Gus and Audrey Magee-Kenney, Kelly's wild human animals

and

Caroline, Jake, and Kelly Fitton

MR. WISE: We have so much, Your Honor.

Steven Wise, Nonhuman Rights Project,
“Transcript of the Hearing re. Tommy,” 12/3/13

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With Dragon

The change appeared like the onset of a fever. Her skin ached. Her legs threatened collapse. Though heat welled in her, she shivered and heaped blankets on her body. Her husband stopped sleeping with her, complaining that she steamed up the room. Her side of the bed darkened with stains that looked like scorch marks. Sometimes, when the baby's roiling woke her in the early morning, she watched breath curl from her nostrils in long plumes.

The books said a rise in body temperature was normal. They also said that unnatural cravings should not be indulged.

The XXX salsa was too mild. The mug of boiling water too cool. At the grocery store, she bought tuna steaks and corn syrup. Ate the tuna from the wrapper on the way home. Caramelized the syrup on the stove and swallowed a spoonful straight from the bubbling pan. Removed the pan and looked at the flame circling the burner. Salivated.

It was as she suspected. This baby was after more than just heat.



The question was not if, but how. Shotgunning seemed best. There was a fair amount of control one needed to exercise in the throat. Getting it to the stomach was key. Once there, it'd be broken into constituent parts that could be delivered directly to the baby. So said the message boards, other women like her who'd rejected their doctors' instructions. They traded illegal recipes and animated emoticons. They reminded each other to *Fight the good fight!* and *Do it for the kids!* and *Trust your instincts, mama!* They complained about hardheaded husbands and infected interior burns. They shared wisdom from handbooks no longer printed: "Infants in the womb who are denied this crucial element are born with immature fire glands and lack the capacity to ignite." They argued over methods but agreed that non-eaters were handicapping their children. *Why not amputate their wings, too?* she wrote, eliciting a round of virtual applause. No one on that board knew that she had yet to take the first swig.



The message boards didn't convey how excruciating an eater's pregnancy could become.



Her hair turned brittle. Her tongue swelled. Her eyes blinked back globs of mucous. Blood pulsed heavily through her veins. But consumption only strengthened her craving. Now the women on the message boards warned her: *moderation, mama!* And, *Easy does it. You don't want to create a little monster!*

She wrote, *Do you ever feel like your baby is stronger than you?*
To which the message boards replied nothing.

She wrote, *Do you ever wonder if you've made a mistake?* but she didn't bother to check the replies.



When the day came, the sky hung wreathed with fire. She stood in the kitchen, smoke peeling from her thighs, fire breaking instead of water, water what might put her out. Her husband splashed orange juice on her skirt. Ran red lights until lights stopped turning. Hustled her into the emergency room with the D word: Dragon.

Because such births were not to be treated casually.

Because such births were not to take place unwitnessed.



She'd heard stories on the message boards, which flashed red when someone posted A Disappearance. Usually it was mothers who disappeared, leaving ash and a hungry child. But sometimes fathers got too close, bent to listen where the heart should be.

It was unfortunate about her husband.

Everyone said so.

He'd been such a good man.



Raising a baby dragon alone wasn't what she'd imagined for herself. In sixth grade she wanted to be a princess and live in a castle. In seventh grade, a fire fighter. Now she was both, sort of; not really. The baby slept soundly. He was learning to crawl.



The message boards kept her company at night. *How do I keep his lunch box from melting?* and *Does anyone use night breathing for cooking?* She ferried words back and forth, Dragon curled in her lap, now pressed to her shoulder. Now sitting beside her in a homemade chair, slit in the back for his long green tail.

For Valentine's each year, red heart on felt: *I love my mother.*
Now standing, now stooping in their low-ceilinged rooms.



The women on the message boards said little when she asked about The Flyaway. *Sad*, someone wrote, followed by frowning emoticons. Someone else posted a link to a video: a winged shape rising, hovering over green trees.

She wrote, *How do I prepare?* To which the message boards replied nothing.

She wrote, *What will I love when he flies away?* but she didn't bother to check the replies.



One morning she woke early and stumbled to the window. Her son stood in sunrise on a skein of scorched lawn. His wings stretched the length of her car, the car she'd promised to give him if only he'd stay. While she watched, he staggered, flapping. Tried to lift off. Hovered briefly, crashed down.

She no longer needed the message boards. She knew without asking that flying meant leaving. Not this morning, not this afternoon, but summer, soon.

She could smell the forest burning.

With Horse

She'd expected that being a single mom of twins would be difficult, but the girls mothered each other. They brayed when separated, slept with limbs entwined just like on the ultrasound. One knobby, one plump. No one thought they were related. People thought pet, not sibling. Owner, not twin. But the girls paid attention to no one. They'd swum together as embryos before anyone had known they existed. She'd known the medicine increased the risk of multiples, but even so, hers was a rare kind of pregnancy. High risk, both before and after the girls were born. Risk of discordant fetal growth. Of heart conditions. Of colic and tetanus. Later, of bonding problems. Of favoritism.

She didn't have a favorite. But the girls preferred each other.

They took bottles from her and fed themselves. They spent so much time lying on the floor nose-to-nose, giggling, that their hair—the same chestnut color—tangled them together. They screamed when she tried to comb out the knots, so now they had

identical missing patches where she'd cut them out instead. The human galloped around the yard; the horse sat at the breakfast table. Their sharing left room for the limitations of the other. The horse rarely went full speed; the human wouldn't use her digits.

They were going to be developmentally delayed. That much was clear.

They were never going to marry.

In her dreams, the girls rode each other in the sunset.



Equine temper tantrums were worse than human ones. But only humans could say, *We wish you weren't our mother.*

She called the girls bilingual, but the reality was that the human spoke for the horse. *She's scared of that van,* the girl said when the horse bucked on an afternoon walk. Or, *She thinks she's in danger.* Or, *She's worried you're going to send her away.*

Or, when the mother showed them her worn copy of *Black Beauty*, *She hates that book.*

What's wrong with it?

The girl answered, *The horses are dumb. And the people are mean.*

The horse snorted over her shoulder, big, yeasty breaths. Too big for the couch now, so she stood behind it. The mother remembered their birth, the fast labor, the buzzing of the NICU team—the foal severely premature, the infant severely overdue. Few of these pregnancies went to term, and of those that did, fewer resulted in two live births. The OB-DVM had recommended termination: her choice, which fetus. They'd made her sign waivers. Convinced her to deliver in front of a roomful of witnesses. *Most of them,* the OB-DVM told her, *will never see a birth like this again.*

Now her twins leaned against each other, identical looks of disgust at the book in their mother's hands. She eyed them carefully. Already it was hard to imagine what they were thinking. She missed them as babies, when they'd needed her for small things: to pour the milk and turn on the TV. She couldn't tell how much they understood about who they were. Or what would happen to them.

People can be cruel, she said.

Her daughter flared her nostrils. Tossed her head. *Yes*, she said. *But horses aren't dumb.*



School was out of the question. Instead she gathered books on homeschooling, read the message boards, met with a group once a month. At first she divided the girls' lessons, horse child running agility trials while girl child memorized history. When the twins rebelled, kicking and scattering hay, she concocted lessons that occupied both. The girl studied equine art, history, and literature; the horse set her paces to music and math. Together they learned botanical terms on rides through the woods in the hills above town.

She tracked down the phone numbers of a few other parents raising hybrid twins. The first lived in Iceland and hinted at witchcraft. The second rebuked her for questioning God. The third, a couple, had adopted their children: also both girls, also horse-human. She was so excited by their story, similar down to the smallest detail. A few weeks later, watching the news, she learned that theirs was a well-crafted hoax. They'd invented horse child, girl child, twin speak, based on the family they wanted to be. They were hybrid fetishists, and they were obsessed. The family they watched and wanted was hers.



The neighbors complained about manure in the yard, hoof prints on manicured lawns. They pointed to a city ordinance that forbade farm animals.

She's not a farm animal. She's my daughter.

The neighbors snorted, stamped heels in the dirt.



Sometimes the girls fought, turning on each other with the same intensity they gave to love. Usually one of them skulked in the stable while the other wept and nuzzled mother.

It shamed her that she loved this singular closeness almost enough to encourage their fights.

She didn't have a favorite. True, she liked whinnies better than laughs, and reading better than riding. But it would take another child for her to feel favored or play favorites.

She decided to ask the girls how they felt. They carried a picnic lunch to the playground and tossed used horseshoes. After apples, carrots, and sugar cubes she faced them.

How would you like a brother or sister?

Horse neighed and snickered, then galloped in circles around the field.

Human or horse? Girl asked.

It doesn't matter.

It matters to me.

Fine, then. Human.

Girl looked pleased. *Don't tell her, Mom.*

The word *Mom* like stained glass lighting windows of sky.



That was how it started. She'd discovered the winning ticket, word that would bend one child close, closer to her than to her sister. The word was *human* or the word was *horse*. All through her pregnancy she confided in each, whispering to girl that she wanted an infant; whispering to horse that she wanted a foal.

Surely when the baby arrived they would forget keeping secrets and stop telling lies.

This pregnancy clicked. This birth was off-camera. A midwife at home, a birth pool of warm water. She sent the girls to stay with a neighbor. The midwife lit candles to welcome her son.

All night she held him, sleeping and nursing. She named him alone and sang their first songs.

The next day, or day after, or the following week, she knocked on the neighbor's door, calling her girls to welcome their brother.

The neighbor handed her a note.

We're safe, it read, but don't come looking.

Two by two. She understood.