

CAVALLO

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When Firenzo tired of women, he switched to horses. There he sought a type of wildness, an untamable fear and will strong enough to compete with his own heart.

Women had commanded his vast canvases for decades. Larger than life, he painted them shrouded in shadow against fiery sunsets. He painted them in full view, their shoulders bleached white under a glaring sun. He painted them as unfulfilled mothers longing for children, wives aching with deception, girls heavy with lust. All of them desperate, yearning, needing.

Firenzo had run out of ways to break a woman with his paints. In the flesh, he had long ago found them lacking. Women thought about their feelings. They affected their posture. In years of studying them, he saw that the thing which stirred inside of them had limits. They tamed themselves in ways he could not understand. Finally, he grew tired of their weakness. Firenzo needed more. He needed something with a feral heart.

At first he began walking through the fields near his villa with his sketchbook, studying the horses. In his expansive white studio he brought them to brilliant life in oil and acrylic. They showed well. They sold. But they did not satisfy.

Firenzo searched for inspiration. On a cool morning, he left his sketchbook behind and rode his bicycle the twenty-three kilometers through the foothills of the Sibillini to the market square in Parano. Early morning dew freshened the smell of black soil and red

grapes in season. Women bent over them, their baskets already heavy with fruit. His wheels turned over the dirt path, and vineyards gave way to fields of sunflowers and stone-strewn pasture. He passed a cluster of plaster homes bounded by stone fences. Tiled roofs gathered the warmth of the morning sun. Moisture evaporated from the drying fields. Chickens coo-cul'd softly in someone's courtyard, bedding down in the dark of their pens for the day.

Firenzo thought of their scratching feet, like small tills turning over the dirt before they planted themselves down. Over thousands of years the earth beneath them, the soil in those fields, the stone foundations of these homes have all run red with the blood of many men. It is baked into the landscape. This, he thought, this is what makes our land so rich. This is what flavors our wine.

At the market, someone pointed him in the direction of a woman. She was built close to the earth and dense with frazzled black hair constrained into an unruly bun. She watched him approach with a closed look on her sun-leathered face.

“Voglio comprare un cavallo.” I want to buy a horse.

The woman tilted her chin to get a better look at all of him. Mid-fifties, maybe. A salted black forelock swept over his eyes. Tall, very tall. His wrinkled khakis rode a little high on his ankles, bore splatters of white. Maybe paint. Maybe plaster. Hard to tell. He pinched the air between ten fingers as he explained what he wanted. His white cotton shirt lay open over a broad t-shirted chest. His round face was unshaven. She looked at his hands. They were thick and strong but didn't bear the calluses of her husband's. He had not spent his virility in the fields. His shoes looked comfortable, like they might be

crisp and soft on the inside. The woman finished her survey at his black eyes. They would not let her go.

“You were in Milano, no?”

“Sì, a long time ago.”

“You are the painter?”

“Sì.”

“What do you know of horses?” she said.

“I know what I need to know.”

“So, you want me to sell you a horse.” Her hands rose to her hips.

“Sì, that’s what I said.”

“A fiesty stallion.”

“Sì, you have one?” Firenzo tried to harness his impatience, but the woman’s eyes were sharp.

“I have one.”

“How much?”

“Where will you keep it?”

“I have a barn.”

“And a field?”

“Sì, and fields.”

“How will you take care of it?”

“You can send me a boy.”

“Every day?”

“Sì, you can send me a boy every day. I will pay.”

“Not on Sunday. I cannot send you a boy on Sunday.”

“I will take care of Sunday. You can send me a boy every day but Sunday.”

He was beautiful, young, but not so young that he did not know his own strength. A mahogany bay, his chestnut hair glistened in the sunlight, at once black and brown, and tinged with red. The woman watched as Firenzo placed his head next to the horse’s rounded cheek, his right shoulder just beneath the muzzle. The horse lifted his head and snorted, and Firenzo reached his right hand along the horse’s neck, felt the smooth and graceful line of muscle. The horse calmed as Firenzo’s left hand slid beneath the mane. Black hair draped over Firenzo’s forearm as he spread his hand wide and rested his palm against the warm damp crest beneath. Firenzo pursed his broad lips, breathed in the scent of hay and leather and sweat.

Voluptuous chest muscles twitched as Firenzo’s right hand descended beneath the soft neck and swept around to the shoulder. His left hand glided over the withers, and he stood alongside the animal. The horse’s powerful legs moved cautiously from side to side under Firenzo’s touch. He felt the warmth along the animal’s back. Firenzo’s olive hands rose up even with his eyes. They paled against the chestnut-brown hide. When they reached the horse’s croup, the highest part of his rump, Firenzo held them there and leaned his forearms and forehead gently into the animal’s massive hindquarters. He pressed himself there gently to feel the strength of the beast against him.

Finally, he moved to the horse’s nose, stroked his long forehead, felt the velvet folds of the horse’s muzzle against his palm. The horse nickered and blew softly. Long bristled lashes rimmed the horse’s black eyes.

From the wall of glass doors in his studio, the painter watched his horse in the field below. Daily he woke with the sun and watched the boy carry water, oats and hay to his stallion. In the distance, the Apennine smudged the horizon and purpled the fields until mid-morning when the sun broke free and washed over the rolling knoll to fill his studio with light. Day after day, week after week, Firenzo studied the shape of his horse, the play of light on his back, the way he held his head, the way he swept his tail when he ran, the dark beneath his undercarriage. The brilliant animal came to fill the walls of the studio. There was never enough canvas for the entire beast. In one painting his withers, his neck and part of his face consumed nearly all of a ten-foot canvas as if the horse were walking in front of Firenzo's lens, eclipsing the fields behind him.

The shadow of the Apennines grew longer across the pasture as the days grew shorter. Their purple-grey specter spread from the horizon and green grass succumbed at first to golden yellow then to soft brown ochre. It was a crisp Monday morning when Firenzo called to the boy. "Boy, bring me my horse."

"Bring him to you?"

"Yes, bring him here. To me."

"Now? To the studio?"

"Yes."

Firenzo watched the boy chase down the stallion and struggle for half an hour to put on a bridle and lead. He pulled out one of his biggest canvases from the stack along one wall—12 feet by 14 feet. As they approached the studio, the boy and the horse were sweating and breathing hard.

“He should rest,” the boy said.

“He can rest in here,” Firenzo said.

“In there? We cannot bring him in there.”

“Bring him in,” Firenzo said.

Together, the boy and the man pushed and pulled and cajoled the anxious horse over the threshold into the whiteness of the studio. The spattered plywood floors echoed under nervous hooves. Firenzo’s heart raced with the effort, but it was anticipation that dampened his hands. “Let’s go, let’s go,” he shouted, “Yes, this is it.”

When they had jostled the horse into position to the right of the canvas, the stallion planted his rear hooves, took two steps forward with his front and released his bladder. There was nothing for them to do but watch a pond of yellow flow out onto the studio floor. The acrid smell of urine mingled with the fumes of acetone and lacquer thinner. The boy looked around for a cloth, or a towel—a kitchen sponge to throw into the ocean. “Leave it!” Firenzo said picking up a trowel and thrusting it into a small mountain of golden ochre oil.

In the days that Firenzo worked his canvas, the boy sat in the corner ready to grab the bridle. They had screwed an eye bolt into the floor where the horse stood tethered. The horse shuffled his hooves, he pulled back his head and plunged his nose downward. He shook his head. He whinnied. He tromped with his front hooves. Sometimes, he relented and stood silently while Firenzo stood next to him, stroking his neck and his velvet nose, feeling the pulse of the beast.

Always, Firenzo attacked his canvas, his hands making broad and deliberate sweeps with the trowel and small frantic wisps with the wide horsehair house brush,

blurring the distinction between yellow and red ochre, cadmium orange, vermilion, raw sienna and burnt umber. His wide badger mottler bled with paint and thinner as he stroked in shadows—red bitumen and Paynes Grey—layering the form of his horse in oils over the wet landscape. Late in the day, the boy mopped urine and laid down fresh straw in its place for the morning. He shoveled solids into a metal bucket and removed them.

This became their routine. In the evenings, when the boy and horse had fully left the studio, Firenzo stripped himself naked. He selected a fat thirsty brush and painted the heavy black lines of a man's quadriceps. The suggestion of a shin in motion. A penis flaccid in shadow. The man's shoulder rubbed the horse. Together they ran directly toward Firenzo bursting out of the canvas. The outline of the man's arm rose up to the horse's neck as if his palm were guiding them. The horse leaned into it, his shoulder pushing back. Firenzo worked the man through the dark of night, racing the sun so he would be ready by morning when boy and horse returned to him.

For nearly a week the painter could not bother to cook or to feed himself. He drank only Anisette with water, ate only olives and did not shower or change his clothes. He spoke to no one. Firenzo lived inside his painting where he walked barefoot along the water's edge just outside the frame. He felt cold sand stick to the bottom of his feet. He listened to the stream. He crested a hill to the fields, turned his face toward the gentle breeze. He peeled off his shirt to feel the autumn sun warm him. He straightened his shoulders and breathed deep as he strode through brittle fields. His pant legs caught on stalks of durum wheat. He removed them. As he began to run, the wheat grew taller. It rose above his head and filled his field of view. He felt the brittle shafts snapping as he

clambered through them, narrowing his focus. His hardened feet became hooves. He paced them to his heart beat, heard their rhythmic thrumming on the ground beneath him. He felt them multiply as a humid pulse dampened his shoulder. His horse. Behind him. Beside him. Running to overtake him. He reached out his hand toward the beast. Horse and man filled the frame. Firenzo could feel the end of his painting near. It was approaching perfection. The consummation of a life's passion.

And then the boy did not show. The sun had already begun to warm the fields, and the boy was not there. Firenzo paced in front of the glass wall. He ran his fingers through oily hair. Firenzo was filled with doubt and rage, and finally, he could not wait. He was surprised at how easily he led the horse into the studio, how willingly his horse followed. It tamed Firenzo's anger to think of the trust they had gained.

Shards of sun pierced the studio. The quiet of morning had already given way. Firenzo looked at his painting. He ran his hand just above the wet paint, almost touching it. It was close, nearly perfect. But it wanted something more. Firenzo could not say what. Perhaps if he moved the horse closer to the painting, if he could see them together more clearly. He took the lead in one hand, the bridle in the other. He walked his horse toward the canvas. The horse tensed, ears back, eyes wide.

Firenzo's heart trembled. He guided the horse until it stood just inches in front of the painting. This was it. To see them, together, his painting, his horse. He clipped the lead to the leg of his paint table, locked its wheels and stood between the table and the head of the beast. He swept fresh oils across the canvas in thick lines that ran in drips to the floor. While his arms worked, Firenzo held his breath for long stretches of time.

When his chest cried out to him he remembered, gasped in and breathed hard under the effort.

The horse grew more uncomfortable with each stroke. He whinnied and lifted his head. Firenzo's stallion tugged the lead and dragged the corner of the table into Firenzo, pulling the man closer to its heaving chest.

Firenzo stopped his work and watched that enormous head above him, on edge, more wary than Firenzo had ever seen him. He placed his heavy trowel on the table beside them. He spoke slowly. He sang softly. When the horse stood still, Firenzo stroked his mane, smoothed his hand along the horse's withers. His horse stilled. With his ears back, the horse ruffled his soft lips and snorted. The studio smelled of man and horse and paint. Firenzo pressed his face into the horse's long powerful neck and breathed. *Siamo uno, sai.* "We are one, you know."

Standing next to the painting, his horse so close, if he could have pushed the both of them through the weave of canvas he would have. With one hand still on the horse's neck, he reached toward a glass jar of brushes. His fingers found the badger fan and lifted it gently. As he swished thinner off the brush, it clinked along the rim of the jar. A small sound. A tinkling of glass that shattered the horse's nerves. The horse reared with all his strength, his tail whisked the air. It slammed against the canvas, sweeping wet paint into a blur of black and yellow. The horse squealed and reared again, his front hooves wheeling above Firenzo's head. Firenzo stumbled backward, caught himself on the edge of his table as his hand came down on a tube of crimson oil. Paint exploded across the studio.

The horse bucked. His head flew up and down furiously, pulling at the lead. Firenzo stood frozen, trapped between the horse and the table. The horse's wide eyes,

locked onto Firenzo. He had never seen their whites before. In an instant, he saw those eyes as brilliantly dense stars, black holes surrounded by an entire universe. They were violent and massive, and they drew him inward as the horse reared up again.

Firenzo ducked as one hoof came crashing down. It glanced his shoulder. Firenzo instinctively grabbed a trowel from the table just as the horse's breast rose before his face once more. Powerful knees like clubs swung upward beneath Firenzo's chin. When they made contact, his head whipped back and the floor seemed to drop beneath him. He was suddenly unsure of where he was. He felt as if he were floating. Outside of his body, he was now pure motion, pure force moving through the white heat of the sun.

The great Apennine rose in an instant before him blocking the daylight and casting a darkness over him. They threatened to consume the sky. Something deep inside him moved his arms upward. Still gripping the heavy trowel, Firenzo ripped through the darkness, felt the weight of the universe crash down upon him, heard the center of the galaxy rip apart.

Firenzo ran through the fields looking for his horse, they were the fields of his childhood in Puglia. He called to his horse, but as he ran, broken stalks of wheat pierced his feet. He tripped and fell face down along the edge of a stream. He stayed there for a moment, resting, breathing in the iron smell of wet soil, feeling the mud, sticky on his hands. He realized now that he was hungry, very hungry. Perhaps he should go back to the house. His mother would have something warm for him to eat. He lifted his head slowly. He opened his eyes, but it was dark. As he tried to move, he felt a fallen tree had trapped his legs.

As his vision cleared, pulled him back away from the river, Firenzo saw that he was not a boy. He was in the studio. Moonlight glistened off the blood covered floor where he lay. His legs twisted beneath his horse. Firenzo's stomach churned with horror. His mind shot through with clarity.

He struggled to extract his legs, numb, but unharmed. Then he crawled to the head of the dead animal. He laid his face against the horse's shoulder. Blood dripped from Firenzo's hair and mingled with tears at the corner of his mouth. It was salty, earthy. He pressed his cheek into the neck of his stallion and rolled his face hard into the chestnut hide. Blood pooled there too. How is it he wondered, that his horse still felt warm? How long has it been? How long has it been since he has slept? Since he has eaten? He was hungry, so hungry. Firenzo remembered that he has been hungry for so long. The women, all the women, not enough, never enough. The horses in the fields. And still the hunger. "Siamo uno," he whispered, blood and tears running between his lips. "Siamo uno."

By morning, Firenzo's strength had returned. He stood amid the pool of blood still soaking into the floor. "Such waste" he said aloud. He spent no energy on towels or buckets of water. Firenzo pulled a roll of canvas from the back room of his studio. He rolled it out on the floor and watched the red bleed into it. He placed a second roll beside the first, and then a third. When his studio was carpeted with wet canvas, he rolled them back onto their spools. They were heavy. He grabbed the end of a roll in both hands. Bent over, legs spread, he dragged the sodden bolt of fabric backward between his feet,

hauling it over the threshold, through the door and outside into the dawn. He unrolled all three of the canvases on the brown grass. They will dry, he thought.

Firenzo had built nearly a dozen canvas stretchers by the time the boy arrived in the early afternoon. The boy will not say what he saw there, or why he returned the next day with a draft horse and heavy rope. He did not confess to tears shared with a broken man, or mention the mound of fresh dirt behind Firenzo's barn. He said only that he helped the painter stretch canvas, and that Firenzo told him to go, he was no longer needed.

Firenzo's perfect painting stood against the studio wall, a thick smear of black obscuring the horse on one side. Unwilling to look, unable to let it go, Firenzo turned the canvas to the wall. With darkness in his belly, and an unspeakable fear filling the hollow corners of his heart, Firenzo returned to women. He painted them soft, and nurturing. He painted them small in the fading light of sunset against vast umber-stained fields.

CAVALLO was inspired by observations of the painter's process during the creation of the painting *Horse and Man*, part of the series titled *Beasts* by Carole Bolsey.