

# The Year of the Horse

by Agnes Ezra Arabella

"She's the year of the horse," Metri said as he peeled his dirty head from the bed, his hair was as matted as a racoon tale. It was as wild as a wild animal and smelled like body odor with a hint of blood. He slid his scabbed hands up to his chest as if to prey and nodded. He turned his head toward Lydia like he had been waiting for her.

"So Lydia, What took you so long?"

Lydia looked over him, she pulled the hospital chair close to the bed, sitting in the cold discomfort.

"A rat can never work with a horse. "

He looked her straight in the eyes and said it. It was as though he was looking through her, to the other side of the wall where television was mounted. Rats were not the kind to make friends with a girl whose birth date fell on the year of the horse in the Chinese New Year calendar. He was watching news about the Russian government, Russia was his country of origin and he followed the coverage of the invasion of Ukraine. He often worried about the troubles of the world, so much so he became frozen by it. Often he was asked by staff to move from his bed to wash his body, change his clothing or change his linens but he refused, unable to move from his bed. The soft tissue of his bones began to stiffen, the soft bouncy synovial fluid thickening and hardening with the articular cartilage creating a contracture in the shoulders, elbows and wrist. He expressed pain in the joints, but she knew he would never bathe. It had been a year and a half since he had given it up. Instead, he lay on his bed with skin blisters festering on his forehead like a distorted map of a series of islands in an alternate universe, with the lines clashing with the crust of a scab. She watched as the blood from his shoulder and neck swelled and dripped down the pillowcase onto the comforter.

The red patches had grown over his body including a large scab over the eye and forehead, on the neck and hands, along the forearms, back and groin. They were a festering because of bacteria

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that had grown . He would not let the nurses close enough to swab them for a culture, but he would talk to the 'new therapist' as he called her the "student." So she came all the way down the hallway to the last room on the left hand side, hoping to talk to him. The smell of something unclean confronted her before she entered the room and filled that portion of the hallway in a vaporous sour and bitter odor. Lydia had reviewed his medical chart before she went to speak with him, he was diagnosed schizophrenia and obsessive compulsive disorder which manifested in lying in bed with she could help him. His clothing had grown hard with sweat and bodily fluid around, the opening of the neck and hands was dark thick, shadowed by stains, that reminded Lydia of festering rain clouds.

Lydia had watched him over several months before she had been sent a screen from the nursing staff to engage him in her expertise, occupational therapy. What struck her immediately was the odor, each time she walked by the door to his room, it moved out into the hallway, a scent of sour milk, bitter sweat, rotting cheese and tobacco, burnt tobacco. He used this to shield himself from other people. It made the figurative distance between himself and others palpable. He did not belong there or any other place. He was placeless. But when she walked by he would call her name and sometimes she would stop in the doorway and talk to him. He would usually talk about astrology, Chinese traditional medical treatment, and years of ancient clairvoyance.

"You see the year of the horse will stomp on a rat. Stomp, stomp stomp, until the rat is dead. A rat is small and gets around by sneaking.. Sneaking along the walls of rooms... slipping under crevices and holes, through pipes, and sewage. A horse is obvious and gets by on its obvious graces and gallantry and beauty. A horse never has to sneak and so the rat hates the horse for being unburdened by this."

Lydia sat in the chair next to his bed. He was lying on the bed, looking at the ceiling.

“So you're saying that the rat is more burden than a horse?” She looked closely at his face following the long hairs of his nostrils and noticing the dried food and spit along his mouth and beard.

“It is not just the burden, Lydia. Have you watched the rat move as compared to the horse, Lydia? Have you noticed his short legs and long snout poking in the garbage or in the bowels of the train station? Lydia? Or running along the walls of the street?”

“I have noticed that, especially when I lived in New York. I took the train frequently.”

“And the smell? Lydia, did you notice the horrible smell of the rat walking around the city? Slithering through the flea markets, up and down the alleyways, nipping at peoples feet? Eating people's garbage. Their smelly rotting garbage. Lydia do you understand me?”

“Sometimes. I mean a little. I understand a little. I am trying to follow you ... . The smell, I get the smell.” She watched his chest rise and fall with his breath, he was becoming winded.

“Well, Lydia, it is that little stench that has come to kill me and your horse hairs and horse tail and horse mane are not going to help me. The horse cannot stop this. None of your fairy dust, sprinkling of science or medicine can save me, Lydia. I once walked the streets of Moscow. I was a happy student. I studied the computer and was good at it. My classmates and I walked the streets and took the train to the museum and coffee shop . We even played pranks on each other, like playful boys with no care in the world. It seemed as if health and abundance would never end. I even played chest in the town square. Those were happy times and coming to the US when I was 14 that was happy too. I came with my mother and Grandmother. We lived with my Aunt in Brooklyn, Bensonhurst. She had just gotten a degree in medicine and was making a life for herself. That was before I got sick. I rode the train into grand central station and I would walk up and down third avenue, looking through the trash and other junk piles. I looked for mechanical things, I could put together, I wanted to make a super human computer. I thought the best way to do it was to rummage through

what others had thrown away, because its previous attachment to people, I could use that energy like a warlock like better than a transformer from when we were kids. I got so sick my mind lost touch with what other people, like my mother and Aunt were doing .My fingers are stiff, my elbows are stiff and my mind is stiff.”

Lydia looked at him carefully and watched his lips, chapped with dried skin, make out his words. She then scanned the raw scabs on his head and arms.

“Your skin is breaking down and it is going to get worse. Your body can no longer protect itself,” Lydia told him.

“I will never bathe,” He said in a Russian English accent peeling himself off the bed, from lying to sitting position, his long hair and beard draped over his upper body in dreaded pieces, gnarled locks that had taken years of disregarding hygiene to develop. His beard had grown to his stomach and the hair on his head reached the lowest portion of his back.

She wondered what it was like to never bathe, for two years he refused, only washing his hands when they were bloody or if he was able to use the computer to play chess, other washing options he denied. Lydia remembered her own bodily smells and fluids, sticky and sweet, but always sour by the second day. As she knew it was and walked out of the room.

“You and them have bonded over vinegar, a certain type of anger that seethes. You have kept me here, against my will for three years and Becky stole a chair from me. The big nice one, that reclines and I will not forgive her.”

