

Bolting Toward the Edge

Patricia Charpentier

Friday Night Ride

I had no interest in Ed until he said he owned two horses. With only a fringe of dark hair encircling his bald head, he had a big nose and laughed in a strange, snorting kind of way. But he had horses, and I loved horses even though I spent little time on or around them.

I begged my parents for a horse for years. A family friend even wanted to give me a purebred Appaloosa pony, but my parents didn't believe I'd care for it once the real work began. They were probably right. But whenever a horse opportunity presented itself, I jumped on it.

The timing was right for a distraction, especially the equine kind. I had been in a mentally and emotionally abusive affair with Carl for eighteen months. We worked together, but thankfully, not in the same building. He was married and had two teenage kids. I knew being with him was wrong on many levels, but I couldn't pull myself away. I ended it a hundred times and then ran back for more. He was my heroin in human form.

Again, I repeated what I had always done with relationships--get into a new one to get me out of the old one. I had done that since I was thirteen years old. I was thirty-five now.

When Ed asked if I wanted to go for a ride after work on Friday, May 3, 1991, I jumped at the chance. I had not seen or talked to Carl in eight days, the longest time since we got together eighteen months before. I was in physical withdrawal. I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't think or eat or sleep. I needed a distraction, and Ed and his horses seemed the perfect solution.

Unbridled Fear

I donned my jeans, boots, and straw hat from my *Urban Cowboy* days, and Ed and I drove to where he boarded his two polo horses, Flash and PK.

Ed saddled the horses and cupped his hands to help me onto Flash because the top of my head barely reached the horses' muzzles. Once situated on the tiny English saddle, Ed told me, "Hang out here. I'll run PK. Then, we'll switch." He wiped his sweaty, too-tall forehead and ran PK across the pasture for the next twenty minutes.

I still felt tight, on edge, but I breathed deep, took in the co-mingled scent of horse, grass, and manure, telling myself *you're okay, relax*.

Ed came back, hoisted me onto PK, and I began to cry.

"Aw, you're good," he said, patting my leg. "Just walk PK, cool him off, and we'll go for a nice ride, okay?" With that, he sped off on Flash.

PK breathed hard, snorted, and refused to walk. He took two steps, stopped, shook his head. I cried harder, feeling alone, scared without Carl.

PK began trotting, bouncing me in the saddle. I tried to stop him, but he picked up speed. I yelled for Ed, pulled on the reins, but PK ran even faster. I screamed and sobbed, tried to hold on but soon lost the reins, and grabbed his mane as he bolted toward the barn.

Ahead, I saw the fencing PK needed to wind us through, so I forced myself to calm down and talk to him. I lost my grip as he approached the first opened gate and slammed into the post. The impact tossed me back across the horse. I fell to the left, but my boot caught in the stirrup.

I hit the ground, finally. PK kept running.

Barely Breathing

Two men I don't recognize look down at me as I lie in the dirt. When we arrived, the sky was blue, the pasture green. Now, all I see are shades of gray.

I hear hoofbeats behind me, and Ed joins the men staring down at me. They talk as if I'm not there.

"What happened?" one asks.

"I'm not sure," Ed says. "I heard her scream. I got close but didn't try to stop them. I didn't want to spook PK even more."

Pain radiates throughout my entire body. I can't breathe. I suck in shallow, rapid bites of air. I taste blood in my mouth.

"Can you move your feet?" Ed asks. I focus all my energy, and my right boot moves a half inch. "That's good."

"What will you do with her?" one man asks.

"I'll take her to my house and watch her," Ed says. "If she gets worse, I'll bring her to the hospital. Grab her legs. Help me get her to my car."

Pain rockets through all parts of my body as they carry me to Ed's car and slide me across the back seat. I smell Ed's golden retriever, Jake, buried deep in the cushion covered with dog hair.

Ed drives with one arm over the back seat to keep me from rolling onto the floorboard. Each bump he hits sends shock waves through my body. “Sorry,” he says after each bounce. He talks to me, telling me I’m okay.

But I’m not okay. I can’t pull in enough air. I hear soft moaning, and it takes me a moment to realize it’s coming from deep inside my chest. It soothes me.

On the way, Ed makes a hard right turn and says, “Hang on. We’re going to the hospital.”

In the ER

“We’re here,” Ed says as he sits on the horn and jumps out of the car.

Moments later, the car doors fly open. A woman dressed in white looks down on me. “Oh, sweetie. We’re going to take care of you.” She puts her warm hand on my forehead.

“Get a backboard,” she says to the guy looking at me from the other opened door, and he disappears.

She continues to talk to me until several others show up. One fastens a brace around my neck; the others slide a hard, yellow board onto the seat next to me.

“Sweetie, we need to put this under you.” I nod. My body screams with every tug and bump.

Behind me, I hear her yell at Ed, “What the hell were you thinking bringing her in like this? Are you crazy?” Ed doesn’t respond. “Stay here,” she tells him as they push me through double doors into a large room filled with light and noise and people.

“We’ll take good care of you,” she tells me.

People rush around me, cut off my clothes, start an IV, hook me up to monitors, place a mask over my nose and mouth.

A young guy in a white coat rushes in. “Hi, Patricia. I’m Dr. Samuels. You’ve taken quite a tumble, haven’t you?” I try to smile. “Your right lung is collapsed. That’s why you’re having a hard time breathing. I can fix it, but it’s going to hurt.”

With that, he makes a small cut on my side and pushes hard to insert a plastic tube into my chest cavity. The pain is horrible, but I hear a whooshing sound and take a deep breath, the first one in a while. “Good. Now, we’ll get you something for pain and check you out.”

Quiet in the Chaos

I watch nurses and doctors run in and out, each with a distinct purpose to fulfill.

“Gotta take her upstairs,” a guy with short gray hair and glasses says. I hear the click as he unlocks the brakes and groan as he gives the gurney a shove.

As I roll by, the nurse with kind green eyes says, “I’ll be waiting for you when you come back.” I manage a slight smile.

Other orderlies wheel me around the hospital, where I’m imaged, scanned, and x-rayed. After each trip, they return me to the curtained-off *room* with the same nurse. She seems glad to see me every time.

This nurse remains close by, checks the IVs in both arms, hangs new bags, and studies the machines I can hear behind me but cannot see. I watch as she jots notes in a folder that grows larger by the minute with what I assume are test results. I listen to the rhythm of my heart beating on one of the monitors, a steady *blip, blip, blip*, and feel soothed.

At one point, there’s a lull where the medical team isn’t rushing around. The noise around me dims, and a blanket of silence falls over me. I feel quiet inside. Why, I’m not sure. The pain medication probably has something to do with it, but I feel calm.

I see everything happening around me from a distance, but I am not afraid. I wonder, *Am I going to live, or am I going to die?* I don't know the answer, but I am okay either way. I am more curious about how this will turn out for me.

The moment is interrupted by another trip to somewhere to have some other test done. That perspective doesn't return, but the feeling stays with me.

Relief and Failure

"My left ankle hurts," I tell the nurse during a brief lull in the frantic action surrounding me.

"I'll need to cut off your boot to check it out." I didn't realize all my clothes had been cut off, but they left my boots on.

"No, I love these boots."

"I can take it off, but it will hurt if something is wrong." I nod. In one swift motion, she cups the heel and pulls. I nearly pass out from the pain as I hear her yell, "Get ortho in here."

I look down. My leg is facing forward, but my foot is horizontal, pointing to the left.

The nurse with the kind eyes stays with me. She acknowledges I came in with "that guy" but asks if she should call anyone else.

"Denise, please," and I give her the number. Denise is my only real friend. Living secretly in an affair had made my life small without much room for people.

Denise shows up soon afterward. "Hey there," she says and kisses me on the forehead. "How are you doing?"

"Been better," I say. Even though I can breathe now, talking takes effort I don't have.

“I bet.” Denise, also a nurse, talks with the woman who’s remained by my side and learns where I am medically.

Before being ushered out, Denise asks, “Do you want me to call Carl?”

“I don’t know.” She knew the pain I’d felt, extracting myself from this affair. “Should I?”

She nods. “Yeah, I think he needs to know.”

“Then, go ahead.”

Seemingly within minutes, Carl is by my bedside in the ER. “I’m here now, baby. You’re going to be okay. I’m here.” I believe him and feel both relief and failure. I’ve opened the door yet again.

Patricia Charpentier is a Cajun from South Louisiana and a long-time editor, ghostwriter, and instructor. She has been writing since she was fourteen years old and is currently working on a memoir about how one moment changed the rest of her life. She has been published in numerous magazines and newspapers and received several writing awards. Patricia lives in Orlando, Florida, with her husband Bob and loves her dance exercise class but is grateful for its motto: No mistakes, only solos. You can read more about Patricia and her work on her websites, WritingYourLife.org and LifeWriters.us.