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CRASH AND BURN

Ashton Guasco

My eyes open slowly as the paralyzing drugs begin to lose their hold over my body. I wake up alone and at first, I look around in fear; not knowing where I am. I begin to remember the terrifying events of the morning that led me to this place, this hospital recovery room at midnight. It had started as any other horse show day. I woke up at “the ass crack of dawn,” as my instructor enjoyed calling it, and got ready for the day’s competition. I found my breeches hanging in my garment bag and the brand new maroon polo shirt that I had purchased over the weekend was folded neatly in the hotel drawer.

I decide to put on a bit of makeup, just for fun. As I sweep on the eyeshadow, liner, and mascara I’m surprised at my ability to simultaneously concentrate on my makeup and ignore my mom’s persistence that I eat something.

“You should at least eat a banana. That will give you the potassium you need for a while.”

“I can’t even think of eating. You know that mom. Maybe later.”

It wasn’t a secret to my mom that I didn’t eat before my first class of the day. If I ate, it would definitely be coming back up at some point that morning. That’s never fun. After methodically brushing my teeth for exactly one minute (I’ve been obsessed with keeping my teeth as clean and white as possible ever since I had to go through the torture of braces for five years) we start out the door. As I reach the hotel door, with its brass locks and handles, I spin on my heel and race back into the hotel room. I slide into the closet and quickly grab my zipper bag full of hair supplies (hair nets, bobby pins, hair ties and the like) and my “lucky” tall boot socks (the plaid ones that are neon green, pink, blue, and purple).

“Now I’m ready to go.”

Not much was going through my mind as we drove to the grounds. This is something I’ve done before and had been perfecting over the past eleven years. Horseback riding has been my passion since I was eight, the first time I did a summer camp at San Domenico riding school. My mom and Mike, my boyfriend, are the only people with me this morning because my mom had decided to be nice and let my sisters sleep in late today. It’s a quiet car ride. I stay silent, singing songs in my head because I can’t stand my mom’s radio station, and nobody else ventures to talk on the ten minute car ride to the horse show. Maybe the other two are too tired to talk? As we pull into the gravel lot, I slip on those plaid tall boot socks I had almost forgotten and slide my feet into my battered DC’s. Even though it’s only seven o’clock in the morning, the moment I step out of the car I feel the heat already descending upon the vast grassy field. Portable horse stalls, arenas, vending trucks and tents, and brightly colored jumps for competition are scattered along the grounds.

As we walk down the aisle of stalls, I’m greeted by an energetic and expected bout of nickering from Envy, my horse. His head pops out from his “horsey hotel” and he stares at me as I make my way to him so he can lick the mint I saved for him from dinner the previous night.

“Hey buddy. I hope you’re ready for the day. Last week was good, but let’s see if this one will be better.”

His ears are flopping comically to the sides, like Eeyore from the Whinnie the Pooh stories, as he licks the mint from the flat of my palm. Once he finishes slobbering on me, I wipe my hand on his blanket seeing as I’m not about to wipe it on my show clothes. I walk over to my arena and meet up with Dusty. Dusty, my trainer, is small and tough. She smiles as I walk up and asks, “So, you ready to learn your course and walk it?”

I, of course, am ready to go. I love being in the jumper ring and I can’t wait for this second week of showing to be even better than the previous week.

We stand in front of the board until the crew gives us the okay to head into the ring to walk the course. I have my plan perfectly sitting in my head and am ready to warm up for my class. I walk back to the aisle and put on my tall boots and helmet. I open my trunk, the beautiful polished pine box my parents bought me for Christmas, and grab my gloves, spurs, and number and set about adorning myself in my show best. Once that’s finished, Envy is already tacked up and ready for me to begin riding. I get a leg-up from the groom and head to the small warm-up ring. Once the monotonous practice of warming up finishes, we begin to jump. Small jumps soon rear up to four feet, six inches (my competition height) and then one last jump at four feet, nine inches, just for practice before entering the show ring.

All other noise disappears as soon as Envy and I step into the ring. There are just the two of us, our breathing, and the buzzer to signal that it’s time to start. Our journey to the first jump is easy, the second and third are flawless. It’s that fourth jump that causes the problems. That fourth jump is where everything falls apart and the world comes spinning down until my body thuds onto the damp, muddy grass. I watch in slow motion as a metal cleated hoof presses into my left forearm. It doesn’t hurt, so I assume everything is fine. I’d been stepped on before, on my leg, and that hadn’t even broken the skin. This time must be the same as last time. As I sit up, I look at my arm. Isn’t that the most interesting thing I could have seen? My arm is sliced clear down to the bone, but it isn’t bleeding much. Surprised that it doesn’t hurt, I look again. This is when it hits me, panic sets in, and I begin to scream.

As my screams rip through the silence of the crowd, panic begins to set in. I’m completely terrified and am only vaguely aware of what’s happening. As soon as my scream tears from my throat the guys who are there to reset the jumps in the ring come over to help me. They only get ten feet from me when they run away.

“MEDIC! We need a medic over here!”

Dusty and my mother are rushing toward me. Mike jumps over the chain around the ring to help me. Envy is running around and my only fear is for him in this moment. I see him running around, reins over his head. I’m worried that he’s going to trip over the reins and get hurt, but I can’t do anything to make sure he’ll be alright.

Dusty comes right to me and takes a hold of my injured arm. I’m trying to get a better view of what’s happening with my horse. She looks me in the eyes.

“It’s going to be alright Ashton. I’m pretty sure it isn’t broken.” I move my head to see if Envy’s still alright. Realizing my preoccupation, he turns away from me and yells loudly, “Somebody stop that horse before he hurts himself.”

My mom, dazed, starts to walk towards Envy when Dusty says, “Not you. Someone else will get him. You need to stay here.” One of the ring crew eventually grabs Envy and I’m relieved that he’s no longer in danger of tripping and falling.

The first medic who comes over to see me says, “You have a compound fracture.” I know that this isn’t true. I’m able to hold my arm out straight, so there’s no way that there’s a compound fracture. I don’t think that my arm is even broken. Now that I’ve calmed down, aside from the throbbing pain in my arm, I’m pretty sure I’m going to be alright. All I want is for the gaping slash in my arm to go away. I’m more afraid of the scar than I am of whatever is to come. The medic says that we need to call an ambulance to take me to the hospital, but one of my mother’s friend, Allison, lives next to the show grounds and actually works at the one that’s ten minutes from the show grounds and she says, “Don’t waste your time and money on the ambulance. It will take twenty minutes for the ambulance to even get here. I’ll drive to the hospital and get everything together for you. Don’t worry.”

The drive to the hospital is excruciating. I just want to get to the hospital so that I can get some pain medications and get my arm fixed. As we drive up to the large hospital entrance, Allison calls the anesthesiologist she’s friends with so he will be the one to anesthetize me for surgery. She’s with me from the time we enter the hospital to the time that I get my arm cleaned. While my arm’s being cleaned, the pain intensifies. The sting of iodine on the large open wound is more painful than the feeling of Envy’s studded shoe slicing through my forearm.

“I know it hurts, but you’ve got to try and relax.”

“Are you kidding? How can I relax at a time like this? My arm is killing me!”

My overreaction is overlooked. Next stop: the X-Ray room, just to make sure there’s not a break. As I assumed earlier, there’s no break in my arm. It’s all muscle and tissue damage. Now that the cleanup and X-Rays are done, it’s time for me to get an I.V. Allison chooses the drugs I’m going to be hooked up to and gets me set up in a room while I wait to go into surgery.

I don’t remember much between receiving the painkillers and going into surgery, because I’m sleeping through most of it. I’m being forced to wait eight hours because there’s no surgeon on staff at the time and we have to wait for the on-call surgeon to get to the hospital and perform surgery. I could sleep for an hour, and as soon as I wake up, more medication is pumped into my veins and I go back to sleep. The snippets of recollection I have are of my mother watching the World Series of Poker, and getting a teddy bear from Mike. I also remember being very hungry. I hadn’t eaten anything that day and I won’t get to eat anything else until the next morning.

The next thing I remember is finally going down to the O.R. The anesthesiologist, John, introduces himself and tells me they’d be cleaning my arm and stitching the tissue around my muscles so they can grow back together. Most vividly, I remember that he tells me, “The reason we have to stitch the tissue around the muscles instead of stitching the muscle itself is because if muscle is stitched up, it’ll just fall apart again like trying to sew together two pieces of fatty tuna.”

I begin to slur down from one hundred, “One hundred, nernynrn, ninnnnnnnn...” my eyes shut slowly until all thought and memory are gone.