

The Wild Horse of Tybee Island

By B.J. Hollars

We strike out in search of wild horses along the shores of Tybee Island. It's early February—too cold for shores—but my wife and I have traveled 1300 miles from Wisconsin to Georgia, and we won't be turned away. We slip on sweatshirts, remove shoes and socks, and walk past the pigeons toward the boardwalk. Aside from a fisherman casting off a pier, we are the only ones there.

We scan the dishwater ocean, then turn our eyes toward the beach.

“So about those horses...” my wife says.

“Yeah,” I say. “About. Those. Horses...”

We'd gotten our intel a few weeks back from an only occasionally reliable source: my brother's old grade school buddy, who we'd met at a bar when he was half a pitcher deep. He was home for the holidays, he'd explained, though he'd recently moved to Georgia.

“We're actually visiting Tybee Island in a couple of weeks,” I said.

“You're gonna love it!” he said. “They got wild horses running all over that place!”

My wife and I shared our *He's full of shit* look.

“There are two rules about the horses,” he continued, “so you better listen up.”

We leaned forward in our barstools.

“Rule number one: under no circumstances can you hunt the horses.”

My wife snorted.

“And rule number two: you can’t eat ’em, either.”

This time we both broke into laughs.

“What? I’m serious,” he said, excusing himself to refill the pitcher. “They’re like...protected or something.”

We spend our morning on the beach with our eyes trained toward the shore, but there are no wild horses to speak of.

“They’re probably just...blending in with the surrounding foliage,” I reason.

“Uh huh,” my wife agrees. “Sure.”

We are nine years and two children deep into marriage, and in all this time, neither of us has ever expressed any interest in wild horses. Or tame horses, for that matter. It’s possible that the subject of horses came up at some point, but who can really recall? These days, we mostly only talk about the important things: who packs whose lunch, and who picks up who when, and is it gym day, or music day, or art day, and what does that mean for footwear? Where are our daughter’s glasses, our son’s homework, their snacks? Which words are for whose spelling test? Who left the science project out in the rain?

Suddenly the fisherman calls down to us from the pier. He needs help, he hollers. He’s got a big one on the line.

My wife and I hustle his way, wholly unsure what we’re running toward.

“Here,” the fisherman says, thrusting the pole into my hands. The weight of it makes me think he’s hooked one of the horses.

I wonder: *Has no one told him about rule number one?*

The fisherman reaches for a pair of pliers, then re-takes control and reels a sting ray over the railing. For a moment, the creature billows like a sheet on a clothesline, then he's dropped to the wooden planks.

The fisherman hands me the pole for a second time as he circles the ray with his pliers.

"Keep an eye on that stinger," the fisherman warns, "or it could mean a trip to the hospital."

My wife and I share our *How the hell did we get here?* look. But we know: we fell in love, we got married, we had kids, we gave them everything, and then, for 72 hours, we retreated to Tybee Island in search of wild horses.

Which we won't find, not ever, because my brother's buddy was actually thinking of an island two hours to the south.

The fisherman is right—I should be keeping my eye on the stinger. Instead, I watch my wife's face tighten as the silver hook is torn from the creature's flesh. The fisherman kicks at the ray with his boot until it flops off the pier and lands belly down in the water.

My wife and I move to the railing, watch the stunned animal float atop the surface. We are rooting for life.

And suddenly life returns; the ray vanishes into deep waters.

Our bodies tremble. We are happier than horses. Together, we thunder back toward the car.

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