Excerpts taken from Short Story: “Stable”  
 -Maxann Keller

My father hired this poor resemblance of a woman back in August of 1995. While he was away in Lexington for sale throughout the autumn months, he needed someone to do morning and evening-feeds as well as exercise the stable raisers around the training circle. I can still remember the day my father hired her, I was hugging around his hips staring up at her old, tired face.   
 Her freckles looked like dirt, her jaw flopping up and down as she chewed on what could have been a piece of year-old-gum. She looked like her eyes had continuously sunk a quarter centimeter every day for the past 30 years into their sockets. Despite her appearance, however, she had all the qualifications needed for a job like this. But frankly, those “qualifications” weren’t anything to brag about. Growing up on a farm in Connecticut, she was knowledgeable in basic horse care and her schedule allowed it.  
 “These mares don’t need too much attention.” My father began listing her responsibilities. “Just feed at sunrise and sunset from the oat bags, and lead them around the training circle. You may release them to the paddock for the day if it is between 35-75 degrees. Other than that, just the exercise in the training bed will be fine.” Her reply to her listed duties was a short and dull, “Yes sir Mr. Kellogg. Can do.”   
 “Massie is the mare in the back of the barn.” I chirped in just to sound important in the matter. “She’s the most special. My daddy said she’s my horse.” My naïve statement dismissed the idea that she was indeed a retired breeder, slowly becoming deaf, and showed signs of arthritis in her right hind leg. But she really was special to me. My dad had let me walk her every Sunday morning since I was six years old. I was also in charge of brushing her tangled mane after the mares were hosed down in the summer. I grew attached to that poor old creature like any other little girl would her favorite teddy bear or baby doll. She was my pride and joy. Most nights after school, I snuck up and reached my hand through her stall bars to pet her long, soft muzzle.   
 “Yes, Massie is Jenny’s horse” he replied, shuffling my knotted brown hair atop my head. His eyes still on Karen, he finished, “You can start in September, when we start preparing for the colts transfer. And one more thing, these breeders don’t ever see the whip. Those days are behind them.”….

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The sun had started to fall below the horizon and the sky turned a light shade of violet. My mom talked loudly on the phone from within her bedroom, I knew this was the perfect opportunity to slip out of the house. I eased the screen door shut behind me without a sound and made my way up to the barn. The old sundial in the yard said something close to seven, which meant Karen would be arriving in her maroon 1987 pick up truck within the hour. I knew I had to move fast.   
 I made my way through the small feed room with piles of oat bags and pitchforks along the wall. One of the barn cats hissed at me, protecting her most recent kill with its lap. Short and uncoordinated, I tripped over a manure bucket and switched the flip to release the light. Now visible, I reached for the dirty red manure bucket and propped it underneath the lead ropes. Stepping up and unhooking the longest braid, I lowered myself back to the ground and dragged the bucket to the stall aisle. It was dark and smelled of droppings, dust floated in the remaining sunbeams sliding between the rafters. I looked into the eyes of the other horses, coming to stare at the commotion I had caused, their nostrils flared and their teeth sharpening against the metal of their doors. I wondered how many of them also got the whip within the time my dad had been away. But the thought was quickly erased when I realized my first worry was solely about Massie.   
 My nose started running and I wiped it on my sleeve as I came to stalls 18 and 20. Silver Leg and Muscles, the only two black mares we left in the barn, kicked their feet against the steel siding. “Shh…!” I hissed. They whinnied softly, as if laughing at my attempt to imitate authority. “Massie, Massie girl, you in here?” Her brown head with the diamond between her brows poked out from between the spokes of her feed window at the last stall. Dropping the lead rope and bucket to my side, I turned and slid the gate lock to open the door. It screeched against the opposing metal, but I made a gap big enough to fit the horse and the bucket through.