

HORSES

By

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The pickup seemed to keep its distance as it rose and fell, disappearing into valleys, reappearing on hilltops and then sinking into a last, long depression where it acquired sound, fan belt chirping, engine roaring. Then it rose up full size and bore down.

McCabe had been standing at his mailbox, and now he stepped into the road, not giving ground when the truck skidded on the gravel and halted a few feet away. Here is a ten-acre fool, he thought, a man with a new truck he didn't need, four-wheel drive and nowhere to go, a fancy stock rack but nothing to haul.

Eldon rolled down the window and looked past his uncle to a pair of his horses ripping up grass along the road as if each bite would be their last. As McCabe began to speak Eldon looked down at his boots on the brake and clutch pedals. He didn't want to listen to the uncle, whose slow and definite sentences had been planned to corner him. "Dog running my cattle . . . two loose horses right here . . . feed costs money . . . and that stud horse in my fields . . ." If the uncle had any sense of family he would have invited a nephew's horses and anything else on four

legs to winter in fields wall to wall with fallen corn. Even with horses and cattle feeding there all winter, plenty of corn still lay on the ground. It wouldn't be eaten. It would be plowed under and return as volunteer to ruin next year's beans. If anything, that stud horse was doing the uncle a favor. But his uncle only understood fences. So he would talk fences.

“A man's got four fences,” he said, then toyed with his gearshift as if he was already down the road.

Eldon continued. “He's got four fences but he's not responsible for all four because his neighbors is responsible for some. Now maybe these two horses right here,” and he paused to gesture specifically, excluding the stud horse in the uncle's field, out of sight at the moment. “Maybe these two got out another fence, a south fence, or an east fence.”

“I checked your other fences.”

Eldon exhaled wearily and looked up the road. He wanted to be on that road with a wake of dust behind him. “Now uncle, I can't say you ain't checked 'em. I'm just saying there's no proof these horses got out my side. They could have got out another side and come over here that way. Then I'd say we both got a case against somebody else.”

The conversation ended with nothing resolved. McCabe returned to the house with his mail. Talking was a mistake. Eldon was the same prideless liar he'd always been. There'd been no growing up, no learning of lessons even after making a bad job of trying to farm the eighty acres his father left him. McCabe was embarrassed for his dead brother's sake, but there was nothing he could do. The family was finished in this part of the country anyhow. He was retiring and moving south in a year because his daughters wanted no part of farming. Eldon would sell out if only because a man couldn't hold on with just eighty acres.

McCabe looked over the field behind his house. The cattle were off on the high ground.

The sun was melting the ice crust, and mist rose from earth blackened by thaw. He'd seen that earth bone dry and the color of ashes too. He'd seen that earth wear any number of colors. And soon he would sell that earth to a doctor or lawyer who would use it as a tax write off. He and his wife would reduce themselves to one car, a few suitcases, and an ice chest, and they would start a new life in a place where he would never shovel snow.

Goodbye to this farm he'd plowed with horses and plowed with tractors, to the hills he'd flattened and the valleys he'd filled as he moved the earth every season. One more bean crop and they were gone. But last year or not, he was still a farmer and had to watch his fences. Before entering the house he looked toward the road where Eldon had tied his two horses on a neighbor's fence, with promises to retrieve them later. They were tearing at grass with that blind appetite which came after a winter of dry feed. They'd run up on his lawn that morning and put holes in the ground. They'd been there before too. Two loose on the road and a third in his fields all winter. Last and most important, the dog harassing his calves and cattle. Over the years neighbors had shot or poisoned Eldon's dogs, penned up his stray stock, even sold it for damages. But Eldon still refused to take care of his own. McCabe had spoken to him that morning for family's sake. Now that obligation was over.

In the kitchen his wife was placing a frozen chicken in a rectangle of sunlight on the counter. Without looking at him she said something which had become not a statement of fact, but a shared emotion because it reflected on the family.

"He don't need a truck like that if he don't farm."

McCabe waved disgustedly and said, "Damned fool won't mind his horses either."

"He's no fool. We've been feeding them."

McCabe spent part of the day reading the farm journals and listening to the market

reports. Beef, pork, corn, soybeans, all higher than he'd ever known. He'd spent a lifetime growing meat and grain and he'd made enough money to keep his two hundred and eighty acres out of the bank until last year. Heavy rains had rotted the stalks of his corn, which fell too low for the picker. He'd lost at least two hundred acres of good corn.

He'd almost missed his chance to get it back too. And even if he'd seen that chance he might not have taken it. Caution and respect for nature were built into him. As his father's gift, the farm carried the constraint of caution. So he planned to do nothing about last year's loss except deduct it from taxes.

But then Jack Wagner came along. Wagner was a bachelor who lived with his mother, and who not only farmed his hundred and twenty acres, but also ran a truck and tractor repair shop from his barn. He was slow, smart, and deliberate. But he had a peculiar habit, and this had worked in McCabe's favor, a weakness for horses. Like Eldon, Wagner kept horses just to keep them, never riding them and hardly having time to enjoy the sight of them. They weren't quarter horses or fancy draft animals, or even smart carriage horses which could be sold to the Amish. They were like Eldon's horses, sale-barn dregs, forty odd, now wintering on McCabe's fallen corn along with the cattle.

Last fall Wagner swung into McCabe's in his Sunday car, a Thunderbird bought for practically nothing because of a broken transmission. He sat in the kitchen with his hat on, earflaps folded up. Removing the hat would be embarrassing, for at thirty-six only the area around his ears showed hair, and this as gray as old snow. He nursed a cup of coffee, smoked a cigar with a plastic tip, and approached his business sequentially, ascertaining what was already apparent to anyone driving by, that McCabe's acres were littered with good corn, that such ears would fatten anything the fences could hold, that the ditches which creased the fields were filled

year-round with clean runoff, and that, "If a fella' put some stock cows out there, and if it didn't snow too bad, he might feed them until spring for nothing."

"But those ditches will freeze," said McCabe. "Cattle need water to stay alive."

Wagner considered this in the sun-flooded kitchen as he puffed the cigar back to life, then tapped it on the ashtray. "Not if a fella' had horses," he said, and McCabe got the picture then, Wagner's horses and his cattle. He waited for Wagner to continue.

"Horses break through the ice with their feet. Horses is different than cattle."

Now he and Wagner trudged across the field in their rubber boots, crushing the frozen mud crust and sinking into the ground with its treasure of bright yellow ears.

"Damned shame," McCabe said, still not letting on that he'd already pictured it, the horses breaking the ice so his cattle could drink. "A damned shame," he repeated, kicking at a tangle of ears and stubble. "But that's the way it is. There's good years and there's bad years. I'd say overall we're about even."

"This is good feed."

"But I've got nothing to feed it to."

"Come spring this corn will still be here and you'll have one hell of a mess in your beans. You'll have half corn and half beans and nobody will buy the stuff."

"I know that."

"How's your fences?"

"Good enough if there's feed inside."

"I could put my horses in here. But forty or so head won't begin to eat all this."

They agreed on a price for wintering the horses. Then McCabe went to his wife and told her what he wanted to do.

“Cattle's always been our worst,” she said. “We made money over the years on hogs, but you figure up all the years we had cattle and I'd say we're behind.”

“You saying we shouldn't do it?”

“I'm not saying that. I'm just saying what happened over the years.”

“You could stop me now. We don't have the years to make up the loss.”

“You know your luck with cattle,” she said.

“Yes, but when we made money on cattle, it was big money.”

“I won't say a thing.”

They worried it for several days. They prayed over it in church. McCabe took long rides to see what other farmers were doing.

“I think cattle's scarce,” he said. “I just don't see so many.”

“We can lose again what we lost on the corn. And we won't ever make it up.”

“There's feed out there for at least two hundred head of stock cows. If they're bred, we've got four hundred by spring. And they'll get water because horses keep the ditches open.”

“You got hay to feed when it snows?”

“It won't snow bad.”

“I've heard that before.”

Her strongest argument was the weather. If snow covered the corn he'd need hay, and he didn't have a bale. Men selling hay in winter would charge him right out of his boots.

“It just won't snow bad,” he repeated, as if he knew what he was talking about. He believed his words only because the previous winter had been bad and two bad winters in a row seemed unlikely.

Her last words were, “I can't stop you,” the words she used when he made up his mind. In

fact, she could have stopped him but didn't want to. Nor could the bank refuse a man with two hundred and eighty paid up acres and a lifetime on the same farm. They advanced the money cordially, and McCabe went to livestock auctions and picked out every animal. His word for them was "gummers," old cows with worn teeth, sold cheap because they didn't have many breeding seasons left. There were Angus, Hereford, Charolais, all old and good at foraging. They'd been pregnancy tested, and their stomachs swelled as much from permanent expansion of their rib cages as from the calves they carried.

McCabe put sixty thousand dollars worth of cattle into the fields within two weeks of receiving the money. And when they were finally there, nudging and nibbling at the corn ears and pulling the stalks from the mud, he and his wife went to Mass and prayed.

Then there wasn't much to do but wait. There were small chores like checking fences, putting out salt and mineral blocks, and occasionally counting heads. Much of McCabe's winter was spent with a basement full of junk and antiques which he'd collected over the years when the Soil Bank Plan paid him not to farm. What wasn't thrown away was reorganized for his own farm sale, which would take place after the soybean crop was in. They would sell everything except the Chevrolet and end a hundred odd years of McCabes in Iowa, except for Eldon. A good auctioneer was already lined up, and most of their worldly goods would be listed on a printed bill posted in stores and taverns: *As we are no longer farming we will sell . . .*

Now, in spring, to the list of chores he added the rousting of Eldon's horses and dog. Heavy horses could do plenty of damage to a soft lawn, and later, to their garden. On the horses he used a shotgun at long enough range to sting, no more. For the loose horse in the fields, a small stallion, he could do nothing. It was too wild to get near.

He hadn't shot at the dog yet, but the day was coming. It was learning to bother the cattle,

and the next step for a stray dog like that was to kill calves.

On the day he spoke to Eldon about the loose horses the dog came sniffing around the house, looking for a place to lift its leg. It chose the side of the house, then approached McCabe, shamelessly wagging its hind end. McCabe attacked it with a rake, pulling the tines over its back. The dog turned tail, bellied under the barbed wire fence, then scampered into the field. Some cows with calves at side turned protectively, lowering their heads and blowing steam while the dog ran a circle around one, then another, moving out of range when a charge was threatened. McCabe cursed. Old cows couldn't stand that kind of harassment. Given time not only would a calf be killed, but other dogs would come, and a whole pack would have to be destroyed instead of just one.

One morning the McCabes watched from their kitchen window as Eldon came up the drive on a Palomino mare, a rope coiled around his shoulder, a ball cap pulled low over his eyes. Part of his saddle was worn to the wood. The bridle reins were clothesline.

“Just look at that,” said Mrs. McCabe.

“Arrogant as hell.”

“He's here for his horse. He got it fat for free, and now he's here to get it, probably because he's been shamed into it.” She rolled a filter cigarette in her Laredo machine, lit it, and watched Eldon open a gate and ride into their field easy as you please. She pulled up a chair and sat, holding the cigarette near her ear as if listening to it.

McCabe said, “My brother owned one hundred and twenty acres and he sold me forty because he knew his son wouldn't do much. He was right. He hasn't done a thing but fool with horses not even broke to ride.”

“He won't get that stud out of there.”

“The damned thing's wild.”

“Maybe his dog can help him. I wonder where his dog is.”

“You know, Grandma,” McCabe said. “There's one way to take care of that dog.”

She watched while he finished his thought, leaning forward and swinging an imaginary rifle to follow a moving target, a piece of hyperbole he'd learned as a boy when he was more interested in rabbits and pheasants.

“You think a fella would ask permission before he came on our property,” she said. “But I guess if he don't ask permission for his horses he don't need it for himself neither.”

Eldon rode east, passing the original McCabe house, an unoccupied, paint peeled clapboard affair more than a century old. The house was a trio of salt-boxes built onto each other as the family grew. Eldon had never lived there, but his father and uncle had, in the days of horses and hired hands. The house now belonged to his uncle, who'd ruined the place, renting it to lowlifes until there was too much damage to fix. Now it was a hotel for rats and raccoons. For an ambitious man the house was still worth tearing down for salvage, but when he offered to do this the uncle refused him. South of the house stood a tornado-blown barn, one side torn off and exposed to the weather, its second floor sagging from a burden of rotting hay. Built onto the barn at ground level were two large stock pens made with heavy timbers, also beginning to rot because his uncle was too lazy to salvage the timbers and siding.

Eldon saw how much corn the rain had damaged. Rows of cobs protruded from the mud, too low to be picked. The cattle showed the effects of this rich feed. Their bellies glowed like patent leather, and the calves had thick, velvety coats. The more corn Eldon saw, the more his uncle's lack of generosity irked him. Corn was money, but only if it could be harvested.

He pushed the mare into a canter, feeling her sink with every step. He called her Zipper, a

smart horse, the first to break a fence, the first to return when he whistled her home. The morning after the uncle had complained, Eldon noticed marks on her back and legs which at first he thought were claw marks, and then realized there was nothing in Iowa which could claw a horse except a man with a shotgun. That was how his uncle was playing it, keeping score: loose horses, loose dog bothering cattle, or so he said, stud horse in the fields all winter. The uncle didn't believe in family helping each other. His stock never strayed, he had no dog, and he never committed a trespass. His bases were always covered, and that was the way he'd always lived.

Eldon had wanted to leave the stud horse in the fields, give it up, let his uncle sell it or shoot it. But his wife had talked him out of it.

"You have to get that horse out of there," she said. "It's your property."

"But I don't give a damn about that horse."

"You have no right to say that." She was stronger in most ways, weak only because she'd chosen poorly. But she knew that now. She was a town girl, her father a druggist. She'd spent a year in college then quit to marry this put-upon fellow who needed more encouragement than she often had.

"I'll say anything I want."

"I know you will."

She set down his supper, then stroked his shoulder.

"Stop that!" He backhanded his plate from the table.

"Feel better?"

"What do you think?"

Slowly she said, "You've got to cut yourself off from him. You've got to take care of your own, on your own. Do you understand?"

So he'd saddled Zipper, coaxed her onto the pickup, and drove to McCabe's, entering through the drive by the old house. From there he rode straight up the uncle's drive, knowing he was being watched and judged like everyone passing their house was watched and judged.

He came upon the horses in a wind-protected hollow, his stud a dark spot set apart from Wagner's crowd of roans, reds, buckskins, white-speckled blacks, and a few ponies not much bigger than large dogs. They were nervous, mud-splattered creatures raising their heads at the first sound of Zipper's hoofs in the sucking mud. Eldon heard their teeth grinding corn when he drew close. Some of the bigger horses circled the pack and bolted, drawing the crowd with them. They galloped violently through the liquid earth with the smaller horses hurdling the corn rows. The bigger ones never broke stride as their feet struck both hill and depression, wildly throwing mud. The stud, despite its muddy hide, looked satiny and devilish as it fought to the front by nipping and bucking at anything in its way. Soon it challenged the leaders, a ponderous buckskin stallion and a towering, pregnant red mare, both striking the smaller horse like snakes as it squeezed between them from behind. Led by this threesome the pack swept over a hill and out of sight, its muddy racket diminishing to cold, bleak silence and the slopping of Eldon's mare.

By the time he caught up they were eating again, but not completely still. At an intermittent walk they raked kernels from partly buried cobs, or pulled long stalks up from the mud, watching their latest threat with wild eyes. Eldon didn't approach them directly this time, but rode in a circle so that when he did come at them, they would head for an evergreen grove near the old house. His only hope was to corner the stud horse in the evergreens, or better still, in the pens near the barn.

The horses moved away cautiously. Soon they were ambling toward the evergreens, scanning and probing for forage under fallen trees, rotted lumber piles, or rusty, outdated farm

equipment which was part of his uncle's "antique" collection.

While moving through the grove, Eldon kept the stud horse in sight. It stopped to graze, keeping one dark eye on its pursuer. It was a young, mean horse, almost black in color, but with a red gleam to its coat on a sunny day. It came from the auction barn in the Amish community. A wispy-bearded Amish boy rode it bareback into the sale ring, and during the auctioneer's patter the lad dismounted and crawled between its legs front and back to show how gentle it was. The caller sensed Eldon's interest, pointed to him for a fifty dollar bid, and Eldon brushed his index finger over his upper lip.

That day he put the horse in his barn and a few hours later heard what he thought were pistol shots and a woman screaming. The horse had kicked down the stall slats, and after trying to jump through a window, got stuck and was pawing the air and the barn siding. Eldon beat it back with a board, cursed the fellow who'd drugged it, and opened the barn door to let it escape. He hadn't been near the horse in half a year and hadn't planned to do anything about it until Wagner took his horses out of McCabe's. Then it might follow onto a stock truck and he could sell it to Wagner then and there.

Eldon approached cautiously, stopping the mare whenever the stud moved. When close enough to throw the rope he shook his shoulder until the coil fell into his hand. The stud horse caught the movement and jerked up. Strands of dry grass stuck absurdly out from the sides of its tender mouth. It snorted tentatively. Eldon waited, then threw. The loop fell nicely over the horse's head and cleared its nose. Eldon pulled back fast and moved up, but the stud felt the pressure and bucked, spun, then bucked again, showing Eldon two steel shoes, perfect U's which flickered in front of his face. Zipper reared back. Eldon reached for the saddle horn and missed. He lost the rope, then his seat. The stud sprinted for the open fields, the rope trailing like a long

snake, and the commotion drew the rest of the horses as if unspooled from a merry-go-round.

Eldon remounted and found Wagner at the half-wrecked barn where he'd come to count his horses. Working together they used fresh hay to lure the entire horse herd into the pens, then after the count, they cut out the stud and sent the rest back to the fields. Then using a long stick with a hook, and working from the outside of the pen, they picked up the loose rope still around the stud's neck. They had enough for one turn around a post.

“You want him closer?” asked Eldon.

“That would help.”

Eldon entered the pen with a livestock whip. He lashed the horse until it moved closer to Wagner and allowed enough rope for another turn around the post. They threw a second rope around its neck, drew it tight, and tied it to the pickup truck which Eldon had backed into the pen. With Wagner whipping from behind, Eldon pulled away in four-wheel drive. The stud planted its feet and cut furrows into the ground. The truck wheels spun, then grabbed, pulling the horse over and down. Eldon pulled some more, but now all four wheels were spinning again and the truck began to sink in the mud. The horse gasped through its restricted windpipe. Eldon jumped out, took the whip from Wagner and lashed the horse all over, on its face, legs, flanks, belly, not caring where he struck, but intent only on whipping hard and steady. He whipped until he could whip no more. The horse looked dead. It no longer gasped. But then it began to hoot and honk for air, the sound human. Eldon looked at Wagner.

“Take him off my hands and he's yours.”

From his own truck Wagner produced a wooden dowel with a loop of rope on one end. He crouched near the horse and placed the loop around its upper lip. Then he twisted the dowel until the lip became a ball. He loosened the ropes and the horse began to breathe. He tugged on

the dowel. The stud gathered its legs and with a roll, stood up and allowed itself to be led away. It looked like a circus act.

As sale day approached McCabe began to feel the pressure of his task. Soybeans were his next job, and these needed plenty of growing time. The cattle and horses had to be out, not only when the market was prime, but well in advance of spring plowing. They'd churned up the ground badly, and this mud might harden so much it wouldn't work up with the disc and harrow. Germination would be poor. McCabe also couldn't predict the weather. The spring might be wet, making planting impossible for months after the cattle had been sold. During that time cattle prices could rise, and where he had a small profit there could have been a bigger one. Nothing about farming was definite.

He would use Wagner's horses and trucks to bring in and ship the cattle. Several horses could be ridden and the trucks were good, but McCabe was worried about the pens. The old timber posts would have to hold cattle and calves while trucks made trips to the sale barn. Eldon had been in the pens with his truck and stud horse, and there was no telling what damage had been done. Stock cows weighed over a thousand pounds, and the stress of moving them with their calves would raise regular hell. Broken timber posts would mean loose cattle, and maybe trampled men. So in the days just before bringing in the cattle McCabe rebraced some of the stock pen timbers, noticing in the process how Eldon's attempt to remove the stud horse had put muddy ruts in his driveway.

Early on the morning of shipping day he drove steel posts into the ground to make a chute from the pen to the trucks. Then he wired fence sections to the posts. Wagner and some cousins arrived. They walked into the field and called the horses, spreading out hay to lure them in. But when the horses came up Eldon's dog appeared and began running circles around them.

Some shied off. Others bucked and snorted, preparing to bolt.

McCabe took a loaded shotgun from his car trunk. He waved the men away, then moved quickly but carefully along the edge of the grove toward the open field until he was ahead of the dog. When the way was clear he aimed for its head and fired.

The dog squealed once as it rolled over into a dark mound, then lay still. McCabe picked it up by the hind legs and dragged it into the trees.

“That's the end of one damned nuisance,” he said.

He sold the cattle for a profit of more than one hundred dollars a head. The bidding at the sale barn was frantic, and as he watched his fat animals crowd the auction ring he thought about how profit made men desperate. He'd seen them want cattle or hogs so bad they bought sick ones. But there was always a point in a rising market when the bubble broke, when those who paid high prices were stuck with critters they couldn't afford to feed. He wasn't on that list this year.

A few days later a blizzard piled five-foot drifts around the McCabe farm. Neighbors lost cattle and calves. The market went even higher. But McCabe wasn't bitter or disappointed. He'd made up for his loss on the corn crop, and there was some profit. That was good enough. When the roads were clear he and his wife went to church. After the soybean harvest they would move to McAllen, Texas where some neighbors had already settled. He didn't know what he would do with his time. Praying in church, they thanked God for their luck. They also prayed for Eldon, a man who wasn't fortunate that year, and who might never be.
