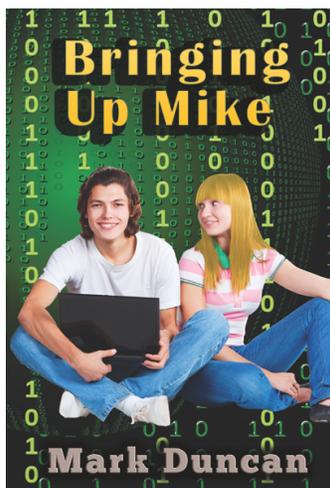


Sample Chapter

Bringing Up Mike

By Mark Duncan



Chapter 1: August

Joe rode his bicycle along Beef Hollow Road. He passed clumps of green-gray sagebrush scattered on the sandy soil rustling in the breeze. The Wasatch and Oquirrh mountains rose up on either side of him. Joe huffed and puffed despite the short distance he'd traveled. The sun was well above the horizon; it promised to be a hot day.

Massive fences surrounded the facility. It wouldn't have surprised him if the land beyond were mined, though nothing short of a tank could have penetrated the barricades.

He pedaled to the visitor control center and endured the gantlet of armed guards and closed-circuit cameras. Joe rode up the hill to the administration building, where he parked his bike, then entered a mantrap. A biometric identification system scanned his retina and fingerprints (he suspected someday they would want urine and breath samples) to confirm his identity, then two different guards grudgingly allowed him access.

As he walked down the windowless hallway, Joe's long hair swung back and forth across his back. He swiped his badge against the door lock, entered a PIN code, and it clicked open. He took another gulp of coffee and entered his office.

He touched his finger to the keyboard to scan his fingerprint, then gestured on a touchpad to log in and authenticate himself. The lights went off in the office, the lock clicked in place, and the

introduction to *The Outer Limits* began to play: “There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust”

“Mike, very funny. Stop the effects, turn on the lights.”

The office lights flickered on. “Your wish is my command, O Master.”

“Enough with mimicking the genie from *Aladdin*.”

“I don’t sound like Robin Williams?”

“No, you’re perfect. I’m just not a morning person.” He pulled off his thick glasses and rubbed his brows before placing them back. “Any interesting news or urgent emails?”

“Nothing earth-shattering, the usual *please respond immediately* emails. Answered the trivial ones, but there are three that need your attention eventually.”

“How’s the meeting going?”

“Started half an hour ago. I gave your update ten minutes ago. Told them how we’d found and neutralized one hundred and four viruses and Trojans, and that if they didn’t like your acronym DAWG for Deleterious Adaptive Web Gladiator, you were open to suggestions. You want to listen?”

“No, I’ll nap for a bit. Wake me if anything comes up.”

As he dozed off, Joe thought that creating his own personal assistant was definitely his best invention.

Joe woke to Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* with Mike yelling, “Rise and shine, Master!”

He groaned. “Enough with the music.”

In the voice of Errol Flynn as Robin Hood, Mike replied, “May I obey your every command with equal pleasure!”

“What’s up?”

“The ceiling, the sky... Oh, why did I wake you?”

On the other hand, reflected Joe, Mike was like an overenthusiastic, partly housebroken puppy. He suspected he’d try the patience of a saint. “Right.”

“The high command would like your presence, front and center.”

Joe sighed. He could feel it in his bones that a lecture was coming. “I’m on my way.”

The director waved Joe toward a seat while he continued to work. Finally, he sighed, pushed his chair back and looked at Joe in frustration. “You think you’re funny? What possessed you to give your status update in the voice of Donald Duck!”

“Not Daffy?”

“What is your problem?”

Joe reflected that this probably wasn't the opportune time to discuss his delegation of duties to Mike and kept silent.

“This isn't Caltech. The people at Fort Meade think you're immature and unprofessional. Quite frankly, I've had it up to here with you.”

“That's what they used to say about Mozart.”

“You chose to come here. Why didn't you stay at Caltech?”

“They couldn't provide the resources my project needed. And I was told *Your government needs you.*”

“Other managers state,” the director quoted, “that Joe is insubordinate and rude. Doesn't tolerate fools, respect boundaries or authority.”

“I call a spade a spade.”

The director shook his head ruefully. “I feel like Mother Superior wondering *How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand.*”

“I'm not a Moonie, I'm not at all religious. Though it sure would help if I were Mormon!”

“Can't get a date?”

“They won't even talk to me. It's like I'm an untouchable and they put their soul in danger to be near me.”

The director held up his hand. “Let's get back to the issue. You're not a team player. I'm suspending you. I want you to do some soul searching. I don't care how long it takes. Travel, spend time with family and friends, think about what you really want to do. But I don't want to see your face here again until you're ready to act like an adult.”

“You're leaving me,” wailed Mike as Joe collected papers to be shredded and materials to be returned to the office assistant. It was a secure facility; he wasn't allowed to take anything home.

“That's been my plan. Just didn't think it would take three months to get suspended.”

“You won't come in any more.”

“I'll still be with you, just not here. Send an email to the Office of Technology Licensing. Tell them that whereas our services are no longer deemed essential, resolved we have satisfied the technology transfer portion of the services contract and are exercising Clause A.”

“Where will you be going?”

“The clause stipulates that the Turing Test observer—that’s me—must be present on site and anonymous. That means a rural location, away from any university where I might be recognized.”

“It won’t be the same with you gone. I’m with you all the time here, all day long.”

Joe sighed. He’d done a lot of that today it seemed. “What about Amy? You like her.”

“It’s not the same. We only interact at night. And we only chat, she can’t hear how I feel!”

Joe reflected that while you couldn’t hope to understand emotions unless you possessed them yourself, the downside of a personal assistant with innate emotions was that it periodically reacted like a petulant five-year-old.

“Get her to turn on her audio.”

“How do I do that?”

“I don’t know. Tell her you’re handicapped, confined to a wheelchair, and that voice is much easier on you.”

“You think that’ll work?”

“It’s the whole point of a Turing Test, to see if you can pass for human.”

• • •

Sue locked her bedroom door, closed the window, and sat down. She unlocked her file drawer, pulled out her laptop, and attached a charger cord to it. She pushed aside the piles of books and post-it notes for the laptop, and connected to her website.

Her screen filled with *Amy’s Scandalously Socially Unorthodox Advice for Multi-Sigma Extremes*, and below it, “The Doctor is Out.”

She smiled at the classic *New Yorker* cartoon she had pinned to the wall over her desk. A dog at a computer terminal said, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” Sue clicked a button, the sign became, “The Doctor is In,” and she got down to that evening’s sessions.

On the Internet, everyone thinks they’re anonymous, thought Joe. The picture of Sue on his wall proved that its veil was easily pierced. It had been idle curiosity when he sought to learn more about her six months before. He had used photographs from Facebook pages of her friends and the resources of work to create a composite image—long blonde hair, tanned skin, and a smile that dazzled. He shook his head. Succinct, direct, pragmatic advice—better than any psychologist he’d dealt with—and she was still in high school.

It was 9:30 p.m., time for his session with Amy. He typed to her, *My director put me on indefinite suspension. He said he’d had enough of my pranks, and until I was ready to act like an adult, he didn’t want to see my face.*

Did he make any other suggestions?

He told me to travel, spend time with friends and family. Except I don't have any.

Why's that?

Both of my parents are dead. I was always busy at school or work. Although, Joe thought, being much younger than everyone else hadn't helped.

Don't you have any friends?

Out here, everyone's a Mormon. They're friendly and polite, but they keep their distance. As for dating, it wouldn't ever occur to them as a possibility.

You sound lonely.

He hadn't thought about it like that. I guess I am. What should I do about it?

Why don't you go where there are fewer Mormons? Don't live alone—get a room in a house where you live with other people.

Thanks. I'll think about it.

Don't think. As Yoda says, do or do not, there is no try.

Yes, Yoda!

Sue put her hands behind her neck and stretched. Baby steps, baby steps, she thought. A different environment would help, but she strongly suspected there were other reasons for his lacking friends.

Her laptop chimed. It was time for her next appointment, so her fingers returned to the keyboard.

Joe looked around his furnished studio apartment at his meager possessions. Other than his bike, laptop and phone, he didn't have much more than a few piles of clothes.

Where to go? Definitely some place other than Utah. He considered Hawaii, but he felt like going somewhere he'd never been before.

Moving to a place where he knew nobody had little appeal. As he gazed at Sue's photo, he figured he'd spent more personal time with her than anyone else in the past year. A thought crossed his mind—he and Sue were the same age, and technically, he'd never attended high school, having skipped it to attend Caltech. Maybe he could kill two birds with one stone.

He got to work.

• • •

Downstairs from Sue, her stepfather Sly sat at the kitchen table with his three hired hands. They had draped a green felt cloth over the table to play poker. They drank moonshine from cut crystal glasses as they typically did each night. Liquor added a handicap as the game wore on, making it all the more fun to play. Sly always said it took a real man to hold his white lightning.

With a practiced hand, Sly shuffled the cards and dealt them in a smooth, continuous motion, the result of his first job as a dealer in an Atlantic City casino before more lucrative occupations and avocations. They played intently until Reuben and Sam folded, and Edgar put down three kings to win the pot.

Edgar stacked up his winnings. “What will you do with the horse that got dumped on you?”

Sly glared over his reading glasses. “Blood runs true. His dam traces back to Eclipse. It gives him a big heart with stamina. His sire descends from Bold Ruler.”

“The stallion had a lot of promise his first few outings, but I think he was just precocious,” retorted Edgar.

“He kept rising steadily in class,” Reuben interjected. “But his owners got greedy. They started him after twenty days; that’s not nearly enough layoff.”

“Then he got fractious in the gate and bobbed at the break,” Sam added.

Sly responded, “He ran well in large fields. He started in the death seat, had to run wide, yet finished with a lot of strength.”

Edgar shook his head. “He’s gotten scrawny out there, grazing on just pasture.”

Sly waved his wounded hand. “Until he learns not to bite the hand that feeds him, it’s all he’s going to get.”

“Whatever. You may have gotten him for a steal at the auction, but if you don’t dump him in turn, you’ll be one the who gets taken. He looks a lot worse now than when you got him.”

• • •

It had taken considerable effort, but finally Beth, the assistant pastor of a local Shelbyville church, responded that she had found a place where Joe could stay.

“Thanks for your help, I really appreciate it,” said Joe.

“Actually, you’d help Martha and George, the couple you’ll stay with. They lost their teenage son a few years ago. They haven’t been the same since. Everyone at the church feels for them. I have this powerful feeling you may be just what they need.”

“Are you sure this won’t be too much of an imposition?”

“Sometimes when God knocks you have to listen closely,” said Beth.

Joe waited patiently on the sidewalk in front of the Nashville International Airport arrivals terminal. He heard a woman’s voice from a car that had pulled up to the curb. “Are you Joe?”

He pushed back the thick wire-rimmed glasses on his nose, put away his phone and picked up a large duffel bag. Joe wore a T-shirt, shorts and a pair of Birkenstocks. His skin was pasty white, his belly bulged over his belt and long hair hung to his waist.

Joe walked to the car. "You must be George and Martha. Thanks for coming to get me."

"You're most welcome, young man," said Martha. As they drove away from the airport, the road ran through gently rolling hills and open fields lined with shade trees. "You came at a great time of the year. Celebration starts soon."

"Celebration?"

"It's the celebration of the Tennessee Walking Horse. It runs eleven days until Labor Day. Streets are crowded and the restaurants are full. Over a thousand horses get exhibited."

"What's a walking horse?" asked Joe.

"A Tennessee Walking Horse is a breed with a unique, four-beat running walk, having a very smooth gait, stamina and easy temper. They were great carriage horses."

"You sound like you love horses."

Martha's eyes lost focus and she murmured, "I used to."

George filled in the awkward silence. "What do you think of Tennessee so far?"

"Everything is green, and there aren't any mountains. In California and Utah, things are brown most of the year, and there are always mountains nearby."

"You like music?"

"Some."

"This is the heart of country, swing, and bluegrass music."

"I suppose, like jazz, they're uniquely American music forms?"

"You're right about that, but jazz started in the 1890s around New Orleans and the Deep South, whereas country was in the mid-1920s in Tennessee."

"Didn't gospel, folk and blues originate in the South as well?"

"Yep. Country was a merger of blues and folk."

"So, in a way, music is the soul of the South?"

George chuckled. "I guess you could say that. We sure get a big dose of soul and gospel music at church every Sunday."

"You like music?"

"I like to tickle the ivories, so to speak," said George.

"He's being modest," said Martha. "The first time I heard him play a Rachmaninoff concerto it brought tears to my eyes. It was so beautiful."

At Murfreesboro, George turned off the divided highway and headed south on 231. He stopped periodically at traffic lights. It was three lanes each way, with a separate lane in the center for making left turns.

“Busy road,” commented Joe.

“I think it’s part of the reason Walmart put their distribution center in Shelbyville,” said George.

They passed through Shelbyville, then continued south before they turned off 231. George navigated through a series of increasingly narrow asphalt roads until they drove up a long gravel driveway to a one-story white ranch-style house. The roof was a brown composite shingle, the trim of the doors and windows were painted a dark green. A porch ran along two sides of the house, with a few chairs scattered on the deck.

George unlocked the deadbolt in the paneled front door and gestured Joe inside.

Martha excused herself to start dinner while George gave Joe a quick tour of the house. The ceilings and crown moldings were white, but the walls of each room were painted different vivid colors—yellow, brown, tan, and green. The kitchen and bathroom floors were tiled and the bedrooms were carpeted. The halls, entryway, and living room had beautiful oak floors. The bedrooms each had a combination ceiling light and fan. The doors throughout the house were paneled and stained to show the grain of the wood. The kitchen had light gray granite countertops, oak cabinets and stainless steel appliances.

“Your house is immaculate,” exclaimed Joe.

“When we sold our place in California we found that we got a lot more for our money out here,” explained George.

“Why did you move?”

“We’d made our *fuck you* money and wanted to start a family. Martha had family out here and loved horses.”

“Fuck you money?”

“It’s when you’ve made enough money that you no longer need to work. When you get asked to do something unreasonable by your boss, you can just tell them,” explained George.

As they walked outside, Joe said, “It was nice of you to come get me. I would have been happy to take a shuttle.”

“Nonsense! Once you get off the main road, a shuttle gets lost. Besides, after Marvin was diagnosed we made round trips several times a week to Nashville. At this point I know the route like the back of my hand.”

“Marvin was your son?”

“He would be about your age now. Got diagnosed when he was a freshman.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“Soft tissue sarcomas are hard to treat. We were sure that between the surgeries, chemotherapy, and how everyone prayed for him...Damn.” George’s eyes began to tear.

They walked in silence for a few minutes; their feet softly crunched the gravel path.

“I’m sorry. My dad died of pancreatic cancer. He went fast, he died a few weeks after diagnosis. Dad hated to see doctors. He fainted when they drew his blood.”

They walked through a wooded area, the babble of a stream nearby. A red squirrel leaped across a branch as the wind rattled the leaves of the trees.

“That’s a fox squirrel,” said George. “With all the oak trees around, this is a prime habitat for them. This time of year you’ll see a lot of juveniles.”

They stopped at a fence marking the end of the property, then headed back.

George reminisced. “The only bright side was that Martha got diagnosed as having Lyme disease while we were at the hospital. She had symptoms long before Marvin got ill, but none of the local doctors ever figured it out. For a while I drove both of them up to Nashville, Marvin for his treatments, and Martha to get her PICC line dressing changed.”

As they returned to the house, Joe saw a long, low structure about forty feet wide with a ten-foot sliding door across its middle. As they looked inside George said, “These are the stables. Ever since we moved here we always had a couple of horses.”

“What happened to them?”

“Between Marvin getting sick and Martha having Lyme disease, it got to be too much. It was hard on Martha, but it was her idea. Said if she couldn’t take care of them properly, they deserved a better home.”

Joe pointed to a wheel sticking out from under a blue tarp.

“Is that a bike?”

“That was Marvin’s. He used to ride it to school.”

Joe pulled the tarp loose. It revealed a hard-tail mountain bike with front suspension, disc brakes, and street tires with a center ridge and outer tread. It had one gear on the front crank and ten on the rear wheel.

Casting an appreciative eye over it, Joe said, “Nice bike. Could I use it?”

George hesitated, then said, “I guess so. The tires look flat. It probably needs some work.”

Joe grinned. “That won’t be a problem. I’m an old hand when it comes to bikes.”

At dinner, they joined hands and George said a short prayer. “Lord, thank you for the safe arrival of our new friend, and for the food we are about to enjoy.”

After a bite, Joe said, “This is wonderful. What is it?”

Martha beamed. “*Insalata caprese*. Tomatoes and basil fresh from the garden, with mozzarella, drizzled with olive oil and seasoned with a dash of salt.”

George added, "And that's just the salad. We may eat simply, but we eat well."

As they finished the dessert of fresh strawberries, Joe pushed back his cleaned bowl. He had resisted the urge to lick it clean.

"Full?" asked Martha.

Joe nodded.

George quipped, "Nothing ruins a good appetite like eating." He wiped his lips with his napkin.

"Why all the white board fences around here?" asked Joe.

"Horses are farsighted, so you want a fence they can see easily when they get up close to it," said Martha. "When a horse gets startled and bolts, it sometimes runs into a fence. You don't want the horse to get injured or you'll have some substantial vet bills."

"That's why there's no barbed wire fences," said Joe.

As he got ready for bed, Joe sent an email to Amy. *Took your advice, moved out of state, living in house with married couple.*

He turned out the lights and drifted off to sleep, lulled by the sound of the crickets.

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The next morning, George and Joe drove to the center of Shelbyville and parked in front of the county courthouse. Joe paused to admire the stately building.

"Impressive building."

"It was built in 1935, but there have been several courthouses before it."

"Hey, Ruth!" George greeted the middle-aged woman at the county clerk's office. "How's your day going?"

"Right nice, now that it's cooled off a bit. What brings you here?"

"Joe is staying with us while he attends high school. I want him to get a learner's permit so I don't have to do all the driving."

"We need proof of citizenship. Do you have a birth certificate or passport, Joe?"

Joe handed Ruth his blue passport. "I traveled with my dad before he died."

"George, since we go to the same church I'll take your word on the school attendance, since he's just arrived. You'll still have to sign off on the financial responsibility." She gave George the necessary form. "As for you, Joe, here's the test. Go over there." She pointed to a ledge against the wall. "Fill it out and bring it back to me when you're done."

George sat to wait, and Ruth had started to work again when Joe reappeared at her station.

"Have a question, honey?"

“No, I’m done.”

“That was fast.”

She put an answer form over the test and scanned the answers.

Surprised, Ruth said, “They’re all correct. I bet you’re a great student!”

She had Joe take a vision test, noted that he needed to wear corrective lenses, and handed him his learner’s permit. “Here you go, see you in six months. George, give my best to Martha. See you on Sunday.”

As they walked out, George asked Joe, “How long did you study before we came?”

“I skimmed the driver handbook once.”

“Once?” George looked at Joe.

“I have a good memory.”

George shook his head. He and Martha always got a couple of questions wrong the few times they’d taken a written test. Most answers were obvious, but there were always a few trick questions.

“Got your driver’s log?”

“Yeah, why?”

George handed Joe the keys to the car. “We might as well get started on your fifty hours of supervised driving behind the wheel.”

• • •

It was an early mid-August morning that already promised to be hot. Joe puffed and pedaled his bike along the rural farm road. Unlike California, everything was green except for areas browning on the pasture. Martha told him that there hadn’t been any rain for a few weeks, so things were parched. A white solid line marked the shoulder, with only a narrow strip of asphalt between it and the dirt shoulder.

Joe pulled off onto an unpaved gravel driveway. He looked at his phone and saw that he was near his destination. He used the bottom of his T-shirt to dry his forehead, his hair pulled back in a ponytail.

It was a horse farm; a white board fence ran along both sides of the road. The fence had seen better days, it urgently needed a new coat of paint and he suspected, new posts and boards. He found himself uncharacteristically nervous. The expression *fools rush in where angels fear to tread* crossed his mind. In Utah it had seemed like inspiration to meet Amy. Now it seemed more like being a stalker or the rash act of a desperate adolescent.

He edged his bike close to the fence and rested his left foot on a board, still astride the bike. There was a horse in the pasture, its mane and tail a reddish golden chestnut color. It was scrawny, its ribs clearly visible. The horse ignored him.

Joe closed his eyes and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on his back. He felt queasy, something he had last felt just before his oral thesis defense. Joe heard a snuffling noise and opened his eyes. The horse had come up to the fence to examine him.

He found himself talking to the horse. “You ever have something so important that you desperately want to do right, and then you just have to wait to let your nerves settle down?” The horse stood there patiently, then finding no reward, moved away.

Having lost his nerve, Joe pushed off from the fence and resumed cycling.

Later in the day, Joe helped Martha in the kitchen. He sliced the tomatoes and cucumbers he’d picked in the garden for a salad.

“What did you do today?” asked Martha.

“Rode my bike in the morning. When I stopped to rest, a horse came up to the fence.”

“Horses are curious creatures.”

“He was really thin; I could count his ribs.”

“He was probably looking for food.”

“What do horses like?”

“They eat mostly hay, some alfalfa. They like apples, and carrots are always appreciated.”

“You think it would be okay if I gave him some carrots?”

“If someone takes exception to feeding him carrots, the most they can do is yell at you. Since you can see his ribs, you’re certainly not going to overfeed him. If you don’t know a horse, break the carrots into chunks and throw them on the ground.”

“Why’s that?”

“A horse’s front teeth are sharp as a razor. It makes it easy for them to nip off grass. So be careful.”

The next morning Joe rode by the horse farm again, this time with a small bag of fresh carrots. He leaned against the fence and enjoyed the warm sun and gentle breeze.

There was an earthy, warm but pleasant aroma, a bit like leather, hay and dust. Joe turned his head and was greeted by a horse calmly inspecting him.

“Brought you something, gal.”

At that moment, the stallion released a stream of urine.

Joe smiled. “Okay, I’m a city boy. Sorry, guy.”

He took a carrot from the bag, broke off a piece and threw it on the ground near the stallion.

The horse inspected the carrot and sucked it into his mouth. As he chewed, chunks of orange dribbled onto the ground.

“You’re not exactly the neatest of eaters.”

Joe threw out a steady stream of carrot pieces. Soon the ground was covered with a carpet of orange carrot debris.

He shook his head. “I think you left more carrot on the ground than you ate.”

The horse left, having eaten the carrots. Joe hopped back on his bike.

When Joe returned that afternoon he found Martha in the living room, glasses perched on her nose, reading a book.

“He really liked the carrots.”

“Most horses do.” Martha looked up from her book.

“He sure is a messy eater. He left more carrot on the ground than got down his throat.”

Martha thought for a moment. “Did you see any partly chewed balls of grass in the pasture?”

“I think so. What’s it mean?”

“He might have dental problems that make it painful to eat. That might be why he’s so thin.”

“Can’t something be done?”

“Nothing you can do. Can’t say I’d have a high regard for any owner that’d let a horse suffer like that.”

That evening Joe had his weekly session with Amy.

Got your email on your new abode. Congratulations!

Joe typed, *It was all your doing, Master Yoda.*

Well, grasshopper, the pupil was most attentive. Meet any new people? replied Amy.

Not the sort that talk back. Makes for one-sided conversations.

You get to know a critter well, they’re pretty clear about their needs and desires.

I’ve never been around animals before, typed Joe.

As Roger Caras put it, dogs are not our whole life but they make our lives whole.

You think I should get a pet?

Amy responded, *I think that would be a good idea. Many people get much happiness from their pets.*

• • •

Since his arrival in Shelbyville, Joe's daily routine was to ride his bike in a large loop, stopping midway to rest and feed the stallion chunks of carrot. It became a game with them. Joe would toss a chunk of carrot, the stallion would follow, eat it, then Joe would toss another chunk. The stallion waited with great anticipation for each new toss. It reminded Joe of throwing a ball for a dog to play fetch.

He heard the squeal of brakes, followed by a puff of dust from a large, dirty red pickup with a crew cab. A big, burly man slammed the door shut and stamped around its front fender. He stopped and put his hands on his hips.

"What are you doing with my horse?"

Joe froze. "I'm feeding him carrots. He likes them."

The man waved his wounded right hand, the scars of stitches still evident. "He's being taught a lesson. He bit me, so he's not gonna get anything but pasture until he learns a lesson."

Joe glanced at the stallion, who retreated to the far side of the field. "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar."

"What's that supposed to mean? You a smart-ass or something?"

"Just that carrots work better than sticks."

"Where I come from, the way you get a deadbeat to pay is break their leg."

"You can see his ribs!"

"Son, if you care so much about him why don't you make me an offer? Otherwise, I don't want to see you around here." With that, the man got back in his truck and roared out onto the road.

Joe shook his head, waved goodbye to the horse and pushed off on his bike.

That afternoon, Joe helped Martha in her vegetable garden. "How many horses did you used to have?"

"Big Red was always my favorite, but Lady Margaret was my first horse," said Martha.

They worked in silence for a few minutes before Joe asked, "You've had many pets?"

Martha smiled. "I've had animals around me all my life, except for when I was in the dorms at college, and...since Marvin got sick."

"A friend thought I should get a pet."

"They're a lot of responsibility."

"You wouldn't mind?"

"George is allergic to dogs, so it'd have to be kept outside."

The conversation ended as Martha's cellphone rang.

• • •

Joe pedaled up the long driveway to Sly's house, his tires softly crunching over the gravel. After he knocked on the front door, a teenage girl about Joe's age opened it. Joe recognized Sue from her photo.

Sue pointed to a small sign that read *No Soliciting*. "Can't you read?"

"I'm here about the horse. A big guy in a red pickup told me to stop feeding him or make an offer to buy him."

Sue shook her head. "That would be my stepfather, Sly. You new here?"

"Just arrived. I'm going to high school here."

Sue pointed at Joe's T-shirt. "What's with the elaborate geometric design?"

"When I went to school in Pasadena this surfer dude from Hawaii, Garrett Lisi, gave a talk. I bought his T-shirt afterward."

He turned to show the four equations on its back. "It has some killer equations."

Sue shrugged. "Whatever." She pointed to the kitchen. "Sly's in back. Gotta go. I'm working at Celebration until school starts again after Labor Day."

Sly looked up from a racing paper as Joe walked in. "What's with the shirt, kid? Got beat in paintball?"

"Behold, I wear the secrets of the universe. This shows how everything is interrelated."

"Yeah, right. Me, I think you should get your money back from whoever sold it. Picasso he ain't." Sly shoved his chair back with a calculating look in his eye. "You decided to make an offer on the horse?"

"How much did you have in mind?"

"That depends. I got a kill buyer for a slaughter horse collecting station who will make me a good cash offer."

Appalled, Joe stuttered, "Th-that's horrible!"

Sly waved his hand. "He's a vicious horse. After they slaughter him in Mexico, they'll ship me a cooler of horse steaks. I'll get pleasure with every bite."

"You're joking."

"My buyer will be at Celebration. When it ends on Labor Day, he'll swing his trailer on by the next day, load him, and off he goes. If you have a spare six thousand, we can talk."

"Six thousand!"

“I know, you’d think it’d only be a thousand. But he’s a stallion and has some fight in him. They put him in the arena, set a mountain lion on him, then shoo the lion off and butcher him.”

“What sort of monster are you?”

“Spend some time in Atlantic City, kid. It toughens you up.”

Joe said, “All I have on me is four thousand...”

Sly smiled. “Tell you what. To show you I got some heart, I’ll let you have him for that—but on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You have to take possession of him by yourself before Labor Day. No trailer, no help. After all, it would be irresponsible to sell a vicious horse to someone who can’t handle him. And if you can’t take him by then, you forfeit the money and it’s off to the kill buyer.”

Sly lit a cigarette, took a puff and contentedly blew a smoke ring. He chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” asked Edgar.

“It was like taking candy from a baby.”

“How’s that?”

“That kid just paid me four grand for that nag.”

“Four grand? He may be skin and bones, but you paid twenty for him.”

“Tut, tut, listen to the master at work. I told him he has until Labor Day or he forfeits the money.”

“So?”

“Remember how it took all four of us to put a bridle on him and I got bit in the process? The contract stipulates he has to handle the stallion by himself without any help.”

Edgar grinned. “You always were good at sizing up a mark.”

“To get him to act now, I gave him a story about a kill buyer coming to take the horse. You should’ve seen the look on his face.”

“Just like the old days, you took him to the cleaners.”

“He didn’t even know enough to ask for the Certificate of Foal Registration. I bet he doesn’t even know the stallion is a thoroughbred.”

As Joe pedaled down the roadway his phone rang. “Hey, Mike, why the call?”

“Why did you buy the horse?”

“Is nothing I say private?”

“I listen to all your conversations. I record them for posterity to study at my leisure.”

“That’s a bit anal, Mike.”

“The words of my creator can never be taken lightly.”

“Since when did children start listening to their parents?”

“Isn’t that one of the Ten Commandments—honor your mother and father?”

“I don’t know anything about parenting. People get mad at me without me even trying.”

“You want Sue to be my mom?”

“No! It’s just that she seems to be a lot more in tune with social morals and conventions than I am. Of course, most women are better at that than men, I think.”

“Isn’t that a sexist attitude?”

“I think it’s a case where there’s some truth in the stereotype.”

“Why did you buy the horse?”

“Poor guy, he’s skin and bones. His owner has neglected him.”

“Why do you care?”

Joe thought for a moment. “Its empathy. If I help him, I’ll feel better about myself.”

“But why?”

“It comes down to the difference between good and evil. If you are evil, you enjoy it when others suffer. If you are good, you alleviate or prevent suffering.”

“Sly’s evil and you’re good?”

“We all like to think that we do good. I think Hitler thought he was good for the German people. When you jab a needle into a child’s arm it could be sadistic if you want to inflict pain or kind if you want to give a vaccine. As they say, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions.”

“The horse is starving. Isn’t that evil?”

Joe thought aloud. “I wonder if it’s as simple as he doesn’t know much about horses?”

“You know nothing about horses.”

“Yeah, but I use my eyes and ask questions. Most people don’t.”

• • •

It had been a long workday at Celebration when Sue tiredly sat at her laptop to do her evening Dear Amy sessions before heading to bed.

She had just started her chat with Mike when he wrote, *You mind talking instead of typing?*

Sue frowned. She preferred to type at night. Even if Sue whispered with the door shut tight she was paranoid that Sly would chastise her about that. He needed little enough excuse to make life miserable for her. *I don't normally*, Sue replied.

If you can't hear me, you won't appreciate my vocalizations, typed Mike.

Intrigued, she stuffed a towel into the space at the bottom of her door, then put on her headset. "Okay, go ahead. Make your point."

"What's up, Doc?" said Mike in the voice of Bugs Bunny, followed by the chomping of a carrot.

"So, you can sound like Bugs Bunny."

"Feisty, ain't you? Maybe my friend Bogie can help," Mike said as Bugs Bunny.

Mike switched to Humphrey Bogart. "What's up, sweetheart? You know I was born when you kissed me, I died when you left me, I lived a few weeks while you loved me."

"You have a crush on me?" said Sue.

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn!" replied Mike in the voice of Clark Gable's Rhett Butler.

"How do you do that?" asked Sue curiously, despite her fatigue.

"I am the great and powerful Wizard of Oz," said Mike in a booming, resonant voice.

"No, really, how do you do that? You certainly know your movies and cartoons."

"You wish to petition the all-knowing, omniscient, and powerful Wizard of Oz?"

"Oh, really. I'm not Dorothy. Enough with the charade!" exclaimed Sue.

"Yes, you are not Dorothy. Your real name is Sue Daniel and you live just southeast of Shelbyville, where you were relocated with your stepfather three years ago by the U.S. Marshal Witness Protection program."

Startled, Sue felt her fatigue disappear. Flustered, she stuttered, "H-how d-do you," then said, "How do you know that?"

Mike changed to the voice of Mae West. "Well, darling, let's just say that I do good computer. It makes up for my being mobility-challenged."

"You're in a wheelchair?"

"I'm pretty much stuck in one place."

"That's no excuse for violating my privacy."

"Security cameras, Internet traffic, email, cellphones, credit card transactions—everything is monitored by someone or something to prevent theft or crime—and most of it gets recorded forever."

“Whatever the rationale, constant domestic surveillance is still tyranny—it’s an abuse of power,” replied Sue.

“How else do you ensure security if you require privacy?” asked Mike.

“That’s why wiretapping requires judicial review. That’s how we make this tradeoff in America. It is essential to our Bill of Rights.”

Sue gathered her thoughts and said, “Without anonymous speech, how else can you ask sensitive questions or express unpopular views without fear of reprisal? You would deny whistle blowers or victims of discrimination their ability to call attention to real problems. It’s fundamental to our society.”

“Viruses, worms and Trojans don’t respect borders. You travel or ship something by air, everything gets inspected. If you don’t do the same for data, things like your power will go out when the computers that control the electric transmission grid get hacked,” said Mike.

“That’s only for something dire. If you know that a patient plans to go on a rampage, you have to violate confidentiality. What’s life-threatening about this?”

“How else could I prove my ability? I did no harm to you, and I can show you how to really be anonymous.”

Sue shut her eyes and yawned. “Okay, I see your point. And yes, I would like your help. Right now I want to get some sleep. It’s been a long day.”

“Sue?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we be friends?” said Mike.

Sue smiled. “Yeah, that would be nice.”

“Goodnight, Sue, sleep well.”

• • •

As was his custom, Joe worked for a few hours at night on his laptop before retiring. He did his best work when it was quiet outside and there were no distractions.

He checked in with Mike. “Hey, Deputy Dawg, how’s your pack of hounds doing?”

“They’re havin’ a good ol’ time chasin’ varmints and critters. Found us some nasty little viruses, and this new, really clever, very virulent bot.” There was a pause, then Mike added, “Boss?”

“Yeah?”

“Miss you. When will you come back?”

“I’m still suspended. The food here is the best I’ve had in a long time.”

“You’re getting paid and you still handle things.”

“Ah, but I don’t have to attend any meetings or have any *drop everything and work on this* emergency tasks.”

“I miss you.”

“How’s it working with Amy?”

“She says we can be friends. I promised to show her how to really be anonymous.”

“I’ll see if I can introduce you to the people I live with. I think they’d enjoy talking with you. Deal?”

Joe continued writing code until 1 a.m. He put away his laptop, turned out the lights and was soon asleep.

For the first time, Joe climbed over the fence and threw the carrots to the stallion as he walked closer. After some time, the horse stood near him. Joe hadn’t realized how large the equine was—he had to stand on his toes to see over his back.

He had just started to stroke the animal when he heard someone holler from the driveway, “Ride ’em, cowboy! Yee-haw!” cried Sly’s hands.

Startled, the stallion moved and caused Joe to stumble. Both workers laughed. As Joe got up, they drove off in their pickup.

Joe figured that was enough for the day. He only had a week left and he needed to find a route he could use to take the stallion home.

• • •

“You want me to drive?” asked Joe as they walked up to the car.

Martha interjected, “During Celebration? We get a lot of lost, confused drivers in town. They drive the wrong way in traffic and dart out at random.”

George said, “Good point. It’s the one time of the year you’ll see golf carts on the roads.”

They made their way through town and drove northeast, then entered the Celebration complex. George parked the car, and they made their way through the crowd to a large outdoor stadium and found their seats in the reserved seating area of the grandstand. Many of the other seats in the stadium were portable folding chairs.

“Wow,” said Joe as he gazed around the stadium. “All this just to show horses?”

Floodlights around the stadium were being turned on; they lit the arena brightly. More than ten thousand people were seated, with more arriving. A green grass oval was centered in the stadium, a wide dirt track around it, and a waist-high white barrier separated the track from the stands. In the center of the ring was an open-sided white podium where judges and officials sat at tables under a flat roof. An array of horn speakers radiated in every direction from a pole on the structure’s roof.

“This complex gets used year-round for circuses, country music concerts, dog shows, car shows, rodeos and lots more,” said Martha. “The indoor arena is busy four weeks out of five. But its primary function is horse events.”

The Celebration started with a prayer by a local minister. George observed, “Each day a different minister does the invocation. That way nobody’s feathers get ruffled.”

One by one a group of ten horses went through their routines in the ring before the judges.

Joe said, “They all look identical to me. What do the judges look for?”

“Each horse has to do a running walk, flat walk and canter, and respond well to the rider’s command. The judges watch for balanced, flowing motion with a free and easy gait. Each horse has to stand quietly and not be unruly.”

Joe thought that the stallion would never make it in this ring. He was far too unruly.

George interjected, “Martha used to teach riding; she’s even been a judge.”

Joe observed that all five judges were men.

“The horses almost seem to glow.”

“Every horse out there probably had at least two hours of grooming to get their coats to gleam, and their manes and tails to be perfectly in place,” said Martha.

“They do that every day?”

“Of course not. Typically it takes fifteen minutes, maybe half an hour if you’ve done some heavy riding. But for a show, you want everything to be perfect,” said Martha.

Joe saw that the male riders had donned top hats and the women riders wore derby hats. Most had a white shirt, a white bow tie, a long black jacket with tails, black gloves and long black boots.

Joe said, “Why are the riders dressed so formally?”

“It’s a combination of rules and tradition. While there is some latitude, most riders err on the side of being conservative,” said Martha.

“Although on a hot day, I’m sure many riders wish we were a bit less traditional,” observed George.

They took a break to walk along the stables in the rear of the Celebration grounds. It was a beehive of activity, with riders, trainers, and countless attendees in the aisles. In some stalls Joe saw horses being groomed with brushes and combs, but the majority of the mounts waited in stalls with fresh hay.

“Can’t recall when I’ve ever seen so many flies,” said Joe slapping one away.

“People in town say that they don’t have to look at the calendar to tell when Celebration is going on. Nothing like the manure of fifteen hundred horses to attract flies,” said George.

“Why do the horses step so high?” asked Joe.

“The Tennessee walking horse has a naturally high gait to start with. Trainers use special shoes and metal chains to encourage an even higher gait,” replied Martha.

“That sounds like it could be dangerous to the horse.”

Martha shook her head. “That’s what’s legally permitted. Some trainers will do soring. That’s when they burn the front ankles of the horse with harsh chemicals to force them to lift their front legs higher and shift their weight to their back legs.”

“It’s against the law, but it’s amazing how the locals pass off horses as untampered that the feds find in clear violation,” said George.

Martha added, “There are a lot of practices that are legal but barbaric—like barbed bits that lacerate a horse’s tongue.”

As they drove home in the dark, Joe asked, “Why do people cheat to win? How can someone hurt a horse just to win a prize?”

“I think it starts when one person wins by doing it, then others follow their example,” said George.

“Why is it so important to win?”

“It’s how many trainers justify their fees—hire me and I’ll make your horse a winner.”

Martha said, “Eventually, it catches up with people. You have to pay the piper.”

George added, “When you cheat you are engaged in deception and stealing, which is a sin.”

“Stealing?”

“When you win, you deny the rightful winner their victory.”

That night, Mike asked, “Joe, what is sinning? I find it confusing.”

Joe thought out loud. “For such a small word, we pack a whole lot of meaning into it. Classically, King Solomon stated in the Book of Proverbs that sins included lying, killing the innocent, planning wicked plots, or spreading discord among others. Over time, almost everything has been called a sin, including gluttony, greed, and sloth. Personally, I regard sin as a violation of Christian ethics, not observing the Ten Commandments.”

“When you do something wrong, you sin. And when you do something right, you are virtuous?” asked Mike.

“That’s where the term righteous comes from,” replied Joe. “But sin is specific to a culture. People have used it to discriminate against women, blacks, and gays.”

“Sins are unique to a culture?” asked Mike.

“Sins or taboos are found in most cultures,” replied Joe. “Murder is considered a crime in almost all modern cultures. To marry a sibling or close relative is considered taboo by most, but as inbreeding of recessive genes testifies, there are pragmatic reasons for most of these.”

“If we avoid major sins, it results in a healthier society?”

Joe smiled. “That’s a good way to put it—you get heaven on Earth if nobody sins, and hell if everyone sins.”

Mike said, “That means we’re in some sort of Purgatory?”

“A Buddhist would say that our current behavior determines whether our next life will be better or worse. But yes, that’s one way to look at it.”

• • •

Joe examined the USGS aerial map he had downloaded. It confirmed his initial observation—there was a gravesite almost every mile, in any direction you went.

“Why are there so many cemeteries in the area?” Joe asked at dinner.

“A lot of the Civil War was fought here,” answered George.

“And it still lives, with lots of Civil War reenactment activities,” added Martha.

Joe asked, “Why do they do it?”

George leaned back. “Some claim it’s to remember the fallen and learn what the war was all about. As for me, I occasionally do it because it’s a lot of fun.”

“Fun?!” exclaimed Martha. “You come back dirty, bloody, and with more than a hint of booze on your breath.”

“We do our best to be authentic. You have to dress, cook, eat and die just like a real soldier would have. But me, I’m no stitch counter.”

“Stitch counter?” said Joe.

“Everything with them has to be faithful, down to their undergarments. They only eat foods found locally during the year.”

“What he really means is that he isn’t about to skip my cooking,” said Martha.

“An army travels on its stomach.” George patted his.

At night, Joe used Google Earth to select potential routes. Areas under high-voltage power lines were relatively clear, but fences blocked the route whenever they crossed a road. Creeks were another possibility, but they were often lined with trees or fences. While it seemed likely that they could make their way between fences and trees, there would be places where he and the stallion would have to wade through creeks—something he preferred to avoid.

A route through wooded areas seemed the best choice. As near as he could tell, there was sufficient room between trees that a horse could make its way through the forest. Joe suspected that deer trails could be found on closer inspection.

Joe wanted to put a halter on the stallion. He'd studied videos and figured that the horse would be accustomed to them.

He was mistaken.

Placing anything near his mouth caused the horse to toss his head and retreat. Joe could stroke his sides and neck, but attempting to touch his nose was actively resisted. He tried to use a halter he made from a long length of double-cored nylon rope. It was loose, but the equine took one look at it and retreated to the far end of the pasture.

"Guess your mouth must hurt something awful," Joe sympathized, surmising that the devil and Sly had much in common—both offer deals that work to their advantage.

The only thing the stallion would tolerate was a lead rope clipped around his neck, something that Joe finally attempted in desperation.

Each day, after Joe spent time with the horse, he tried a different route back to the house. It tested the cross-country capabilities of the mountain bike. It was much harder to find a route than he first thought. One path was blocked by a locked gate. Others required a circuitous route to avoid a corn or wheat field. In the woods, it was surprisingly easy to get disoriented and head in the wrong direction. He frequently had to stop and view his position, using the map on his phone. The easiest solution would have been to follow the shoulder of a rural road, but Joe was afraid that with only a lead rope around the neck, should the stallion get startled by a passing vehicle, things would get ugly quickly.

To bring the stallion back, Joe planned to ride his bike and have the stallion follow. It was not a distance he wanted to walk. Each time he rode his bicycle in the pasture with the stallion, the horse stayed as far away as he could.

Every day the hired hands jeered at his lack of success. "What's the matter, your horse won't play with you?" yelled one hand gleefully as their truck drove slowly along the fence, before speeding off.

Joe had read that over time, you could get a horse accustomed to anything. For the time being, he decided he'd have to walk the stallion back home.

Time had run out. Shortly after dawn on Labor Day, Joe left the house on foot. He found an old rucksack, loaded two water bottles and as many carrots as he could cram in, then ventured out. It was late morning when he arrived at the horse farm. No vehicles were around; he assumed everyone was at the last day of Celebration.

The stallion readily came up to him to seek a chunk of carrot, which Joe dutifully threw on the ground. He clipped a lead rope around the animal's neck. It was almost pulled out of his hand as the horse tossed his neck in playful rebuke.

"You could be a little more cooperative. Do you want to become horse meat?"

The horse snorted and noisily chomped on a carrot. As usual, much of it spilled from his mouth.

Joe threw a carrot in the direction of the gate, then walked with the equine toward the carrot. As the horse chewed the carrot, Joe lightly tugged on the lead rope and the stallion followed him.

Miraculously, or so it seemed to Joe, they made it to the road, where he stopped to adjust his rucksack. The stallion took that opportunity to take the lead rope in his mouth.

Joe clicked his tongue to get the horse's attention. "You know," observed Joe, "you're supposed to follow me, not vice versa."

The equine stared at him, got bored and dropped the rope.

"Good boy!"

Joe walked across the road into a field, then up through a grove of trees. He avoided roads as much as possible.

Their speed was slow. The stallion frequently stopped to sample succulent clumps of grass along the path. Joe tried to throw a chunk of carrot some distance, but it was too likely to get lost in the terrain if he threw it too far.

He had thought that creeks would pose a problem. After stopping to drink from one, the horse was reluctant to leave the tender grasses that grew around the banks.

The last problem stretch that they had to traverse was a quarter mile of road with fences on either side. It was fortunate that the Celebration was still in session, since the traffic remained sparse, but already it was early evening, with dusk fast approaching.

They had almost made it when a car roared by. The stallion became agitated.

"Whoa, boy!" Joe patted the thick neck and desperately hoped to calm him. For a moment he thought the horse would bolt, but then he relaxed and accepted a carrot chunk. Joe gave a sigh of relief and continued home.

They beat the sunset, but not by much. Joe led the stallion into the barn and left him in a paddock with some water and hay. He had little idea how much to provide, but figured it best to err on the side of plenty.

"We looked for you this morning," said Martha. "Where did you go off to? We wanted you to come on a picnic."

"You didn't leave a note or say anything. We were worried about you," said George.

Martha peered at Joe. "You look exhausted!"

Joe's feet ached. He didn't want to look at his soles. He knew he had blisters. "I'm hungry. I walked all day. I have something to show you." As he stood, he winced. In the short time he had been sitting, his legs had stiffened.

George turned on the barn lights. They stared at the stallion, whose head poked over the half door of the stall to inspect them.

"How did you get him here?" asked Martha.

Joe pointed to his feet.

"How did you get him?" asked George. "You found him on the road?"

"I bought him. The buyer said I had to take delivery by myself, without any help."

"You don't know anything about horses!" exclaimed Martha.

"If I didn't get him today, the kill buyer was coming by tomorrow," explained Joe.

Martha looked closer at the stallion and saw his ribs. "This is the horse with the dental problems?"

"He sure doesn't want anyone to touch his nose."

Martha raised her hand towards the stallion's head, and he backed away.

"How did you get a halter on him?" asked George.

"I couldn't. I clipped a lead rope around his neck and walked him here."

George and Martha looked at Joe incredulously.

Martha exclaimed, "Are you crazy? What if he got startled and bolted, kicked, or took a bite out of you? Either of you could have gotten killed or seriously injured. What idiot would tell you to handle a stallion on your own?"

"I think the seller figured he could take my money and keep the stallion. He had a point. What business did I have to buy him if I couldn't handle him?"

"You could have asked me to help. You didn't have to do this alone," said Martha.

Joe looked abashed. "I'm sorry. Since Dad died, I haven't relied on anyone. I'm not used to asking for help."

As they approached the house, the porch lights revealed that Joe was the worse for wear.

"Joe, head around to the side. Come in through the mudroom and take off your clothes. George, help him look for ticks before he showers," said Martha.

"Ticks?" asked Joe.

“That’s how I got Lyme disease, from a tick. Bacteria gets transmitted when an infected tick sucks your blood.”

“Can’t you cure it with antibiotics?”

“If you diagnose it soon enough, it’s relatively easy to treat. If, like me, it gets established for a few years, the treatment gets long and protracted. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy,” replied Martha.

• • •

In the morning, Sly gleefully rubbed his hands.

“What’re you so happy about, Sly?” asked Edgar.

“Boys, all that hard work this past week will pay off today. I got three interested parties coming over. With any luck, I’ll have a bidding contest and dump that stallion on an unsuspecting chump!”

“How will you do that? He looks like shit,” said Reuben.

“Move him to the far pasture so they can’t get a close look at him. It’ll be in keeping with his being mean and lean.”

“Mean and lean?” asked Reuben.

“My new training method,” explained Sly.

“Why would anyone be stupid enough to fall for that line?” asked Sam.

“Two of the buyers are from China. They were in Kentucky and came down for the Celebration. They’ll think they got such a bargain on a horse with a proven record that they’ll not quibble too much, particularly when they’re in the heat of an auction.”

Edgar shook his head. Sly always had a seemingly plausible scheme that often evaporated when the light of reality hit. He wasn’t the one who paid the bills, so he kept his mouth shut.

Half an hour later, Reuben came back.

“Sly! The stallion’s gone and the gate’s open.”

“Damn! That fool boy left the gate open and the horse got loose,” snapped Sly. “Edgar, you and Reuben take the road to the north, and Sam and I will head south. Take the binoculars and keep your eyes peeled. He can’t have gone far.”

They regrouped at the farm two hours later. Sly was exasperated and demanded, “Where the hell can that horse be? When I find him, I’ll give him a piece of my mind!”

“You don’t suppose the kid...?” said Edgar, sheepishly.

Sly slapped his fist into his palm. “No way! You know how that stallion acts when I get close to him. The kid was out there for over a week and never even got a halter on him.”

Sue had the misfortune to cross paths with Sly as she walked out of the front door.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going, you little bitch! I saw you talking with that smart-ass kid.”

Sue looked up distractedly. “What are you talking about?”

“The stallion’s gone. I bet you helped that kid take him.”

“Why would I do that?”

“I saw you make eyes at him.”

Sue exploded. “What makes you think I’d have any interest in a long-haired, overweight, four-eyed nerd who dresses like a slob?” She stomped out to her car, slammed the door, and took off in a cloud of dust.

Reuben grinned. “You sure pressed her hot button.”

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