

Cast Horse

Carol Lee Hankins

He sat on the cool, steel step of his house trailer, curling his toes in the grass and inhaling on his cigarette. Early evening air drifted down between the yoke of his cotton shirt and his flesh. Over the hill the horse tents stood darkly. He thought how the horses' bodies heated the tents; expensive horses standing in stalls made of chicken wire and pine wood. Here and there the tents' canvas flaps were tied open with baling wire and a groom stood in the opening either cleaning bridles or rearranging them on a hook. He remembered what it felt like to be a groom. In the tents during the day it was hot and muggy, especially when in the Midwest. Jeans became stiff and they rubbed tender the back of the knees. At night everything became very cool and the tents held the odor of horses, and soap, and liniment, and leather, and grain, and manure. He spotted a groom standing under a naked lightbulb soaping and wiping a bridle. He remembered that sensation, too—the sensation of slick suds rubbing against pliable bridle leather.



Illustration by Robert Roach (Freshman)

He looked at the horse trailers, mostly new, some with socks and underwear hanging on a line or a show jacket turned inside out airing on a hanger. Tabs popped off beer cans, clinks of ice in glasses and occasional laughter mingled in the air. Nearby, a low, male voice relentlessly discussed the virtues of a horse he'd already sold. Two people embracing formed a silhouette behind a curtain. He heard the sizzle of meat in a hot pan and his stomach growled, then the metallic clang of a shot hoof against pine stall boards forced his attention back to the horse tents.

A wispy girl chirped a sharp, quick, rough, "Quit!" to the kicker. About every ten minutes she emerged through the open corner of a tent dragging a straw manure basket. He'd seen her earlier in the day, bringing five horses to the ring while she ate a hot dog. She moved like all grooms—tired, conserving of energy, precision machine.

He thought the mare had been good in her classes. She'd done her lead change smooth and slick, tucked her knees tightly, looked for her fences. She'd softened, too, didn't pull, didn't lug any on the turns. She'd surprised him, even. She hadn't much ring experience but she jogged in quietly and squared up like an old strip horse.

His day had been ruined, though, by a man named Lansing. Lansing obviously was a rider. He'd asked questions: how long she'd been jumping, how old she was, who all her riders had been, could a junior ride her. Lansing wanted to know who owned her, too. That agitated him. If she were sold he'd either have to beg for another show horse or go back to riding racetrack rejects. He cursed himself. He wondered why he worked so hard, so long on a horse only to have it pulled out from under him. Over and over he would start on a new horse; over and over he'd have to start again. How many really good horses had he ridden? He looked at three fingers on one hand. The way Lansing had asked who owned the mare . . . he almost said he did, almost said she wasn't for sale, but he'd admitted Brauch owned her.

Brauch had seen the mare's morning class and had stood around afterwards speaking to everyone and holding a gin and tonic. Brauch worried him, too. Between drinks he'd mentioned some offers he'd gotten on the mare but reassured him that she'd only go for cash. Maybe Lansing hadn't spoken to Brauch. Brauch had also mentioned that Peter Ransom had called a few nights before and asked how the mare was doing—had wished him luck. Maybe Brauch really believed Ransom wanted the mare to do well, but Ransom only wanted to ride the mare himself.

A mosquito landed under his ear, and he slapped at it and caught it in his palm. A sore lump began rising and he held his cold, perspiring beer can against his neck. Someone yelled from a tent to a trailer, "Steak and eggs sound good?" He thought about that combination and swallowed the excess saliva.

"Cast horse! Cast horse!"

He jammed on shoes and joined a handful of grooms and trainers that jogged towards tent "FF." The tent flapped its sides in the breeze, and the racket and rattle of a horse fighting wood seemed too loud. Instinct told him the cast horse was in his stall row. The jogging group turned the corner into the aisle of noise, and a loose horse darted past them looking daring and scared. One of the trainers muttered, "Cast-sucker's torn down a whole stall row."

The horse was down and against a stall wall, front legs twisted between the boards, a back leg, high above the body, caught on a board by the shoe. Its eyes were white-rimmed and bloodshot—frantic, but like many domesticated horses, expecting man, who got them into it all, to get them out. The stall door of the next horse was open, but unlike the daring, loose horse, it cowered in the far corner.

He unlatched the cast horse's stall door, "It's my mare," and noted the nails pulling out of the back hoof.

When the stall door was opened, the mare thrashed and banged once more. More stalls pulled apart and the cowering horse considered climbing over the stall's remains, but a groom caught hold of its halter, and it resigned itself to trembling. The handful of people began to softly chant "Whoa," and the cast mare rested.

"I need help in here."

A man in white wearing thongs took his thongs off and came into the stall, putting out his cigarette in the water bucket. He waved his hand, and a skinny boy in overalls promptly sat on the mare's head.

"How are we going to get her out?"

The man in white took a hammer from his back pocket. "I've got this. Son, don't you get off her head."

The boy nodded. The two men began to pry two boards apart that held the mare's front legs. The pine cracked and popped, then the nails stuck out and pricked the men in the arms. They handed four boards to the people outside the stall. The boy saw that the mare's legs were free and he started to rise, but the mare began flailing as if she were trying to swim in rough water, her legs touching nothing, and he sat on her head again. She stilled and let out a long, low, all-suffering moan.

The man in white said in a toneless voice, "Now sit on her till I tell you to get up, okay?" then he took her long, front legs and folded them, as much as she would let him, between her chest and chin. He almost sat on them while her rider unhooked her back foot and backed away in case she kicked. "Get her tail. Now get up, son." Her rider clasped all the hair under the end of her tail bone and the man in white gripped her head by the sides of the halter. "Ready?" The boy ran out of the stall like a cat.

"Pull!"

They leaned against the straining mare, the muscles in their necks becoming rigid. The horse flailed and grabbed for ground—for something to push against. When the men had dragged her far enough from the boards, her front feet felt ground and she turned to get her feet under her. The men rapidly backed to the far corners as she planted her front feet and plunged forward, almost jumping up. Her buttocks rose in the air and out flashed her hind legs.

"Damn it!" Her rider clutched his thigh.

At the sound of his voice, suddenly so pained and high pitched, the mare stopped and turned her head towards him.

"Did she get you bad?" the man in white asked.

"It hurts a little." He clutched his thigh but let go of it to examine the mare. He knelt down and ran his hands over each leg, over each flat, solid joint, the long, hard bones covered with tendons and ligaments, the slick, short hair, the veins pulsing and throbbing beneath the thin skin. He felt the delicate bones in her head, looked at her eyes, and pressed down her long back to find vertebrae that were either out of place or so sore she would dip down. He ran his hands over all of her with that sensitive-fingered scrutiny, then ended by combing a few hairs of her mane into place with his fingers.

"All she's got is a loose shoe."

The handful of people outside the stall sagged in relief and shuffled away to do their different things.

The man in white helped him with the doors that had fallen off their hook-eyes and made sure all the horses were within. He dumped the few inches of water left in the mare's bucket and went out into the dark while the boards were hammered into place. He dragged a black rubber hose with him when he returned, the cold water secretly sizzling out of a hole in the folded end. The water sprayed hard against the sides of the green rubber buckets. "Seems silly. These damned expensive horses . . . Go to shows and stick 'em in apple crates. One

falls, twenty do Sometimes tent poles smack in the middle of a stall." He finished and flung the hose into the dark. "Listen, if you need a beer, I'm in the silver trailer next to the Secretary's tent."

"Thanks." He watched the man in white leave the tent and enter the dark night, thongs in hand. The mare hung her head over the door and swung it towards him, her top lip twisting like a thumb. "Elephant trunk nose." He grabbed the lip in one hand and she twisted it around in his fingers, licked him. He let go. She used the lip to move the collar away from his neck and unfold it so it stood straight up. Then she nipped his shoulder. He smacked her neck and she moved her head away only to return it. The soft whap of his palm against her shoulder echoed in the tent. "Don't do it again," he pointed his finger at her.

On his way down the aisle, he saw a groom wrapping the poulticed legs of a jumper and another, a male, drinking a beer and holding a hose down in a water bucket. They looked at him, still in his breeches, shirt, socks, and he knew they were waiting to be riders and not grooms. He remembered that wanting very well. He couldn't see in the dark, and he walked placing his footsteps as he went up the hill. It had been a long day. Tomorrow would be a long day All the days that involved horses would be long days.

MR. AND MRS. SMITH

Gina R.E. Zellmer

Mr. and Mrs. Smith
checked into the HOLIDAY INN
at approximately,
quarter past midnight.

Mrs. Smith
wore her mother's diamond wedding ring,
and Mr. Smith . . .
felt like a Man.