The Horses

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Vermont is a very cold state in the winter, and that November morning a snow was falling, gently, quietly, with that muffled magic of big flakes. I laced my boots and went down to the cellar. The day's wood had been warming against the furnace overnight, and it would take no coaxing to kindle the logs. I turned the damper to let the smoke draw and opened the furnace door upon a thick bed of charcoal. I emptied the ashes, raked the coal bed flat, and the black chunks began to glow red and white as the air passed over them. Each new log was three feet long and perhaps ten inches in diameter, split from rock maple. The split surfaces showed smooth, white-yellow grain flowing liquid along the logs' lengths. It was a shame to burn this wood—the sun's flame frozen in the flow of the grain. I pushed in four large logs, closed the door, set the damper and went to my car.

The tires made a muffled crunch and set down two lines in the unplowed snow. The hills and the trees were a soft white; cows huddled in the feed yards by the silos. When I arrived at the school where I taught, the groups of children had formed, talking, waiting for the doors to be opened. It was a large building of brick, new and properly constructed with a brick exterior and large windows along the outside walls of each classroom. Inside, each classroom was large and rectangular, the shape repeated in the concrete blocks painted a wet, pastel green. The desks and the floor tiles were arranged in neat rows. Banks of flourescent lights in rectangular glassed cases stuttered on at my finger's touch, and I dropped a pile of books on my desk, arranging them with bottoms and bindings lined up.

The children entered, more silent today, as if the farm chores done in the morning snow had blanketed their minds and en-

chanted them into contemplation. We began the class talking about what each had seen this morning. How each had seen the snow differently. Most spoke of stories with friends in them; others of events they had seen: A doe who had come to the grain yard. When it came to Beth's turn, she was asleep, her head on the desk. She was bewildered when her friend Cathy elbowed her awake. I asked her what she had seen. She told me:

"Nothing."

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The next morning, the eastern sky was open just enough to let the sun bend its lights over the edge of the world, turning the clouds blood red to the zenith. It was colder than the previous morning. The thermometer registered ten degrees below zero. The sky was covered with small clouds, crowded together, blood red on blue black. I opened the garage door, started the car easily in the warm basement and left it idling in the yard while I stoked the fire in the furnace and closed the garage door. Watching the sunrise, I began to feel a tension rising in me—a pressure. My eyes wandered to the car, and with a turn of the key the engine died. Silence. There was no wind. The tension dissolved.

The white smoke rose straight up from the chimney, straight up until it was hard to tell if it merged with the clouds or just expanded away into obscurity. I would drive down into the valley and see from a distance the steam rising powerfully from the lake and stream, and the tall, straight pillars of smoke rising from a dozen chimneys with an air of solemnity, life warming itself before wood fires. The captured sunshine escaping, reaching back at the sky.

The ninth-grade boys stretched the school bus ride from their bodies, and the girls, inhibited by their new adolescent awareness, extended their arms surreptitiously along their sides, shivering out the cold, shedding the cold with their heavy coats. Beth was asleep, her head buried in arms folded upon her coat. She slept through the class, and when it ended, I asked her the teacher's prying questions as off-handedly as I could.

"Sleep much last night?"

"No," she answered through her sleep-lidded awareness.

"Studying, no doubt."

"My family makes too much noise. Everybody was fightin'. We moved to a trailer, and they's too many in it. My brother'll prob'ly move out. Run away, most likely. They's ten of us now in't." Her voice was hoarse and husky as if she'd been shouting. She hadn't looked at me, and now she gathered her books and coat and walked out of the room.

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"Zucchini," she said, serving the steaming dish. "And this," bringing a tray of egg-shaped, steaming dumplings, "is cod. It's cooked the Greek way." Carla was proud of her cooking.

"You're so lucky to have a relative," my wife, Amy, said, "who remembers cooking from the old country. She must show you some fascinating recipes."

Carl smiled crookedly. "Good and bad. She spent four hours making this."

The kitchen was large, with a black iron woodstove beside the modern gas range, solid oak furniture and well-stocked cupboards. Wine bottles lay on their sides in racks against the inside wall. The sense of heavy wood was everywhere. Massive, hand-hewn beams held up wide-planked ceilings; the walls were pine, and the floor wide maple boards. Hand-crocheted lace lay over the table, and stained glass panes were interspersed with clear in the windows.

"The Cobbs are rebuildng our barn," he said. "They have a dozen horses and asked if they could stable them here. I told them sure. Hell, it's empty. They might as well use it."

"Beth is in my class. She sleeps a lot in class."

"I imagine. They live in a trailer, all packed in, no electricity, no phone. They have it hard. The old man talks about finally having a place of their own. Tired of paying someone else's mortgage. He's a night watchman down at the mill. I'll show you the horses."

Then I ignited the propane lamp, watched the match flare into white brightness roaring like a distant jet. Amy, Carl, Carla and I, followed by their two children, all booted and coated against the cold, made our way to the barn. The animal presence dominated

the darkness, and even before the lamp opened its circle of vision, the other senses knew the other life there, powerful and on the edge of a primitive force: almost wild, afraid of the humans who fed and rode on them, but wanting something the humans kindled in them.

There was an electric quality in the air, as if the lantern were about to detonate some larger explosive. Through the stamping of hooves and the blowing of breath, another sound made its way into the barn—a splashing and whinnying from the lake. We ran toward the sound, the other horses stampeding around us, and we saw the yearling colt in the lake, thrashing against the ice, trying to climb up upon the ice, falling back weaker each time.

"Ginger, get a rope! John, run get the Cobbs!" Carl said.

Ginger handed me the rope, and I threw it around the colt's neck. "Will we choke it?" I asked.

"He'll die if he stays longer. Pull!"

We pulled the colt to the edge as the Cobbs ran up, coatless, carrying the blankets for the colt. We wrapped the animal in the blankets and, rubbing it, led it stumbling into the barn. Beth stopped at the door, staring beyond the colt as if she saw something none of us could see, her eyes glassy; she shivered in the wind at the barn door.

"What's the matter with you, girl!" her father shouted. "Come rub this animal down!"

She walked into the barn, looking at the frozen ground beneath her. Mechanically, she rubbed the horse's legs.

"They have no oats," Carl said. "They have no money for the oats. Bring out a box of oat cereal, John."

During the night, the colt died.

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Beth was not in school the next day. I saw her outside Carl and Carla's barn that evening with her younger sister. They were crying while their father tried to get the colt's carcass into the trunk of his car. He was unable to do it, but he asked for no help.

"Have ta call down ta Reiny ta come and get it. Damned bastard should come and get it. He's making money off'n it," he told me." I hadn't asked.

"Got to use the meat for somethin'," he said. "They make soap and glue out of it. And dog food.

"Shut up your crying'! The thing is dead! It's just a dead thing now! Can't bring it back! Damn it all! The money will buy oats!"

The girls kept crying

My presence seemed to intensify their pain, so I left them. The three of them stood there, over the dead colt, the family bending like branches under the heavy snow that had begun to fall in large flakes on their backs and on the colt, not melting as it fell upon the colt.

Beth did not come to school Friday, and when she did arrive, the following Monday, she did not sleep. She was looking at something I could not see, and when I spoke to her, she did not answer.

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We spent that Christmas vacation with friends. There were dinners almost every night at different houses during that two week holiday, and the snow was freshened every four or five days. Robert Thompson had brought an old sleigh out of some forgotten hayloft, and we convinced Tom Gray to hitch up his Morgan team.

It was nightfall as we set out, twelve of us piled into hay bales in the sleigh, blanketed by quilts. A full moon lit the snow-packed lanes and roads, and we glided smoothly across the smooth surface. The conversation ranged over one hundred fifty years, from ice shoes for horses to lunar lander legs. We turned just past Carl and Carla's, onto an unplowed road, and the skis set just above the runners began to bear the sleigh's weight. The snow was not deep yet, but the horses slowed to a heavy-footed walk, and we soon drew in front of a mobile home, dark except for candle flames visible through the uncurtained windows.

"The Cobbs," said Marsha. "They're all stuffed in that trailer like animals. Must be dozens of them, and they owe everybody money."

"Boys're always in trouble down to the town," added Mark, her husband.

The sleigh fell silent; the trailer door opened and eight young

faces, silent, watched us drift by. Beth was among them, tired-eyed. A hoarse, rasping woman's voice from within said, "Close th' door, you're lettin' all th' heat out. Close th' door." An aging woman came to the door, looked out momentarily, then walked away, saying, "Awright! Your father's gonna be mad when he wakes up an' the place's freezin'."

The sleigh crossed the frozen lake, runners grating against the hard, blue ice. "Early ice," Tom said. "Thickah and earliah this yeah." Tom was almost seventy—a farmer. "Seems ta be each yeah it's gettin' coldah. Maybe 'tis, maybe not."

The April warmth finally thawed the snow, and by the end of the month, a wet, black mud appeared. You can always tell the arrival of spring in Vermont. The atmosphere changes in the lengthening light. Vermonters call it cabin fever, and liken it to the end of hibernation. Mud time. There was an energy everywhere. It was the same energy that flowed in the trees, producing buds, and we tapped it from the trees in buckets, boiled it down and poured the syrup over everything we could. The muddy roads assumed any shape put in them during the warm days. Then, at night, they froze in patterns of tires, hooves and footprints.

The first of May was bright sunshine. The two horses we kept were waiting as I went to feed them. The stillness was broken by stamping hooves on the packed snow of the road. I turned from the slow horses I'd been feeding to see Beth Cobb astride a large, golden stallion, the horse stamping its impatience, warily watching me, blowing like a mythical dragon the steam from its nostrils.

"Yours?" I asked.

"Yep." Her voice was still harsh.

"Stallion?"

"Wouldn't have any geldings," she said, looking at my docile creatures. "I'm th' only one can ride him." The horse was becoming impatient, and she held him with difficulty as I walked toward her; the stallion's eyes rolled in his head, his eyes all on me.

"Don't touch him. He don't abide no one's hands on him."

"Beautiful," I said. "Beautiful."

She smiled. It was the first time I'd seen it. "Well, got t' go," she said. The horse, obedient to the pull on the reins, reared up and spun around, instantaneously in full gallop in the mud-slickened road.

I would see her, after that, riding her stallion in the muddy roads, and the evening would freeze the pattern of his hooves in the dirt.