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# EQUUS

284

JUNE 2001

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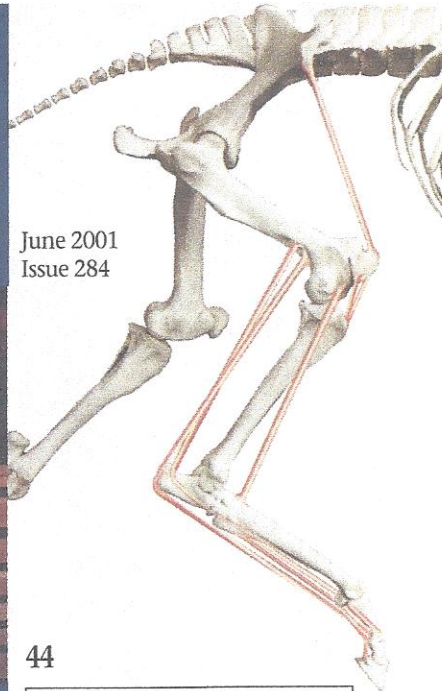
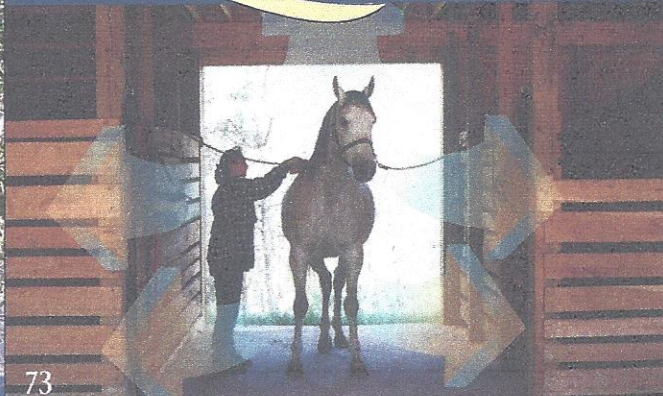




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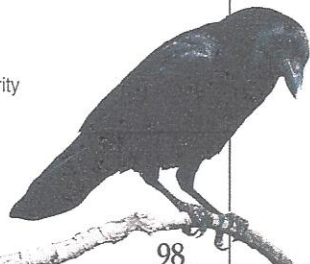
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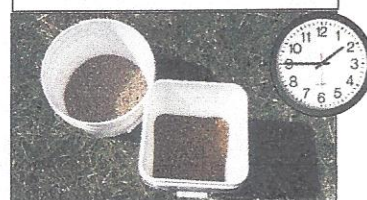
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# Grieving UNDERCOVER

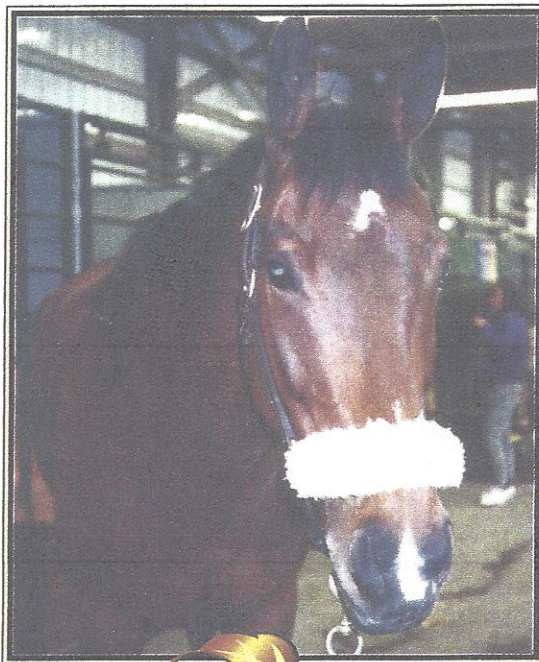
THE UNTIMELY PASSING OF A SPECIAL HORSE OFFERS A  
LESSON IN LIFE, DEATH AND LOVE.

I don't know why he's important, his image so clear—why I can't shake away his unruly mane or forget his fine, wide-eyed face with its bright star and that little white snip on the nose. It's been two years since I watched Biscuit die.

He was not my horse. It is Lynee who still wears Biscuit's braided tail strands around her wrist. But she has Mikey now, and she has hammered a new brass nameplate onto her show bridle. She has trimmed Biscuit's show name, "Undercover," off her leg wraps and written a new name on them in permanent ink. She no longer stops at his stall. Somehow she has moved on.

But Biscuit still nudges my shoulder, lips my sleeve. What does he want from me? And why is his death more vivid than that of my mother, who succumbed last summer after six years of cancer and a decade of creeping undiagnosed depression?

Two nights before she died, I brushed my mother's hair with a soft-bristle brush till she smiled. "I love you, Mom." She lay still. "You know that, don't you?" I begged. She opened her eyes, looked into mine and said, "Yes, I know." I held her cool white hand, so thin and translucent now and networked with blue veins. The familiar sight of her honest,



almond-shaped nails, honed by many years of coaxing gardens from stingy red clay, made me ache for Virginia summers with her when I was a child. At twilight the orange glow of her cigarette and the gentle slap of her flip-flops had called my brothers and me in from the woods. Tired from tag, I would climb into her lap in the soft muggy night. As buzzing cicadas lulled me near sleep I would toy with the modest diamond on her white-gold wedding band, just as I was doing now. Her hands had been warm on those firefly nights, and

her legs strong and tan. With her radiance dimmed now she seemed content to fade away.

After a long silence Mom stirred and said softly, "I love you, too." She released my hand. I rested it on her bony shoulder in its desperately clean, faded bed dress, needing the touch even though I perceived this need as hers. The birdsong clock Dad had given her announced six o'clock with an oriole's trill, but she didn't notice birdcalls anymore. Her mouth gaped, her eyes closed. As the August sky turned violet outside her window, my breath melded with hers until I became one with her rattling labored effort.

But I was not there when she died. So it is Biscuit's death I keep seeing.

By Elizabeth B.  
Herman



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HE WAS JUST A PLAIN, BROWN  
THOROUGHbred.  
His CONFORMATION WAS NOT  
CORRECT BUT HE WAS STRONG,  
HONEST AND BOLD.

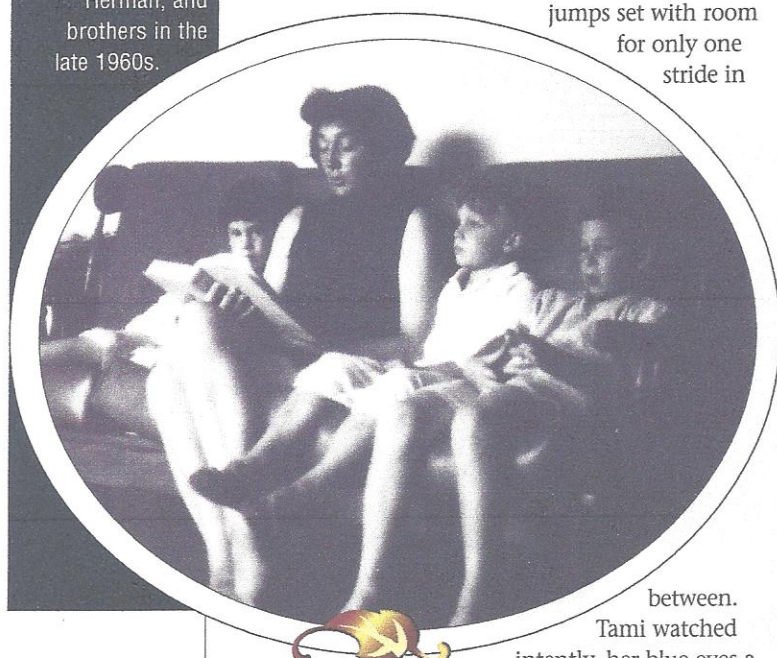
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He was just a plain, brown Thoroughbred. His conformation was not correct but he was strong, honest and bold. Biscuit was not a good mover—too much knee action, my trainer Tami said—but he had a brilliant, scopey jump. And “so much ‘want to,’” she marveled, watching him high-step into the ring at the Hood River jumper show.

It was July and I stood by the rail with Tami near the end of the course by the in-and-out, a pair of jumps set with room for only one stride in

The author (left) with her mother, Nancy Cole Herman, and brothers in the late 1960s.



between.

Tami watched

intently, her blue eyes a

perfect match for the cloudless sky. “You can win this,” she said as her student halted Biscuit on the grass. Lynee and Biscuit had been training together for seven years, since the girl was 12 and the horse 5.

In this “power and speed” class, the first seven jumps made up the power round, designed to test horses’ strength and riders’ accuracy. If they jumped the round cleanly with no refusals, they would cross the timer on the way to fence eight, starting the jump-off round where speed mattered, too. The pair with the fastest time and fewest faults would win.

Lynee sat tall and squeezed the reins as Biscuit minced on the turf. On the ground Lynee doesn’t look like a rider at all—her legs are so short—but like Biscuit she is transformed by the sport. Lynee has something special, an easygoing hippie cheer. A forestry student and one of the youngest women in our barn, her calm manner, lilting voice and goofy

laugh charm both horses and men. You would never guess that this placid creature could be such a tiger when riding against the clock.

I remember her that day, looking sharp in white breeches, tall black boots, and a blue polo shirt with a red bandanna knotted around her neck. She squinted around at the brightly colored jumps in the field. Then the whistle blew.

Biscuit sprang into a canter. Flashy as a carousel horse, he high-stepped to fence one, a three-foot-nine-vertical. Biscuit met the jump in stride and cleared it easily, his tail a jubilant flag. The first seven jumps went just like that, a country-lane lope.

Then a second whistle admitted them to the jump-off; they crossed the timer and Biscuit lit up. With ground-eating strides, he galloped toward fence eight, a big wide oxer. If Biscuit jumped flat, they’d have a rail down for sure. Seeing she had to balance him, Lynee worked the reins but Biscuit flipped his nose in the air, saying no.

Biscuit charged at the oxer and left the ground a half stride too soon. Tami crouched as if riding the horse with Lynee and yelled, “Get UP, Biscuit!” as the big gelding practically lay on his side in the air. Somehow they went clear. Now Biscuit was going too fast for the tight turn to the in-and-out fences where we stood. Lynee’s face showed doubt, then she sat up and steadied Biscuit hard. “Go GET it, girl!” Tami yelled. Lynee drove that horse to the four-foot-high in-and-out, holding him right to the base of the first element. He sprang, touching the pole with front hooves; it tipped in its cup but did not fall. He landed, patted the ground, and Lynee growled, “Get UP!” Biscuit kicked off like a high jumper and cleared the next fence.

Tami whooped as the big gelding flew over the last two jumps and bucked for joy. “There’s Lynee Jung and Undercover, laying one down,” crackled the announcer. “Twenty-nine point six seconds and a double clear round. With five rounds remaining they move up to second place.”

Before striding off Tami said, “Lynee is a good one for you to watch. She adds heart to the horse, something you need to learn. When he’s not sure, you have to be.”





Things happened fast for Biscuit on that windy December day two years ago. I drove into Carbon River Farm buzzing with anticipation for a lesson outside. The morning was electric cold and rare winter sun splintered through tossing trees. In the outdoor arena in the field below the barn, Biscuit was circling Lynee on a longe line in a fluffy extended trot. An athlete in his prime, he tossed his head, showing off.

With my chaps slung over my shoulder I strode into the barn, dodging hanging tack hooks that bulged with bridles, draw reins, halters and spurs. Tami greeted me with a warning about the wind. "They're all wild today. Beth, longe your horse to get the bucks out before you get on. But wait till Lynee brings Biscuit in. We don't want to start a riot."

A cry blew in on the wind. Tami paused. "Is that Lynee?" She ran out of the barn and I followed, along with Kate, another rider. Tami stopped. It took heartbeats to make sense of the scene. In the arena below us, Biscuit crowhopped around on three legs, holding his right hind up high. It bent where a leg shouldn't bend. Every few strides he stopped to shake the injured leg as if trying to escape it. The hoof flopped when he moved and made my stomach lurch.

Turning pale, Tami hesitated, then ran toward the arena. She ducked between the fence rails, catching her leather chaps on one of the boards. Ripping free, she raced down to the ring, scattering a small group of horses who had gathered by the fence. Frozen like the herd in the field, Kate and I pressed together and watched Tami go.

"Call Dr. Sanders! Someone get a blanket!" Tami yelled as she took the longe line from Lynee and edged up to Biscuit. The horse crabbed backward away from her, rolling his eyes. "Biscuit, Biscuit, Biscuit," Tami crooned. Lynee stood and stared.

I ran back to the barn and pulled a wool blanket off a stall door. Someone ran it down to the ring. Out by her car Kate leaned into her cell phone and paced.

I decided to escape.

My father is a trauma surgeon but I lack his knack for emergencies. My memory is too acute. When we pass car wrecks on the road I look away. Otherwise I will see the images over and over for



Lynee and Undercover, whose barn name was Biscuit, had been training together for seven years.



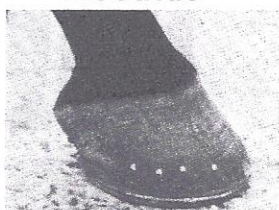


## RESULTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES !



A 5 year old Thoroughbred gelding. On May 13 when the horse was started on

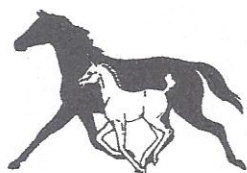
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days. I have always told myself that I run away from accidents only because someone more capable gets there first. (Usually I can cower unnoticed on the sidelines until an expert or a mom comes along.) I tell myself that if I were really needed I would help, but the red and blue flashing lights come and allow me to flee. Shame comes later, once I am safe.

During my mother's last winter, Dad and I were talking in the living room when we heard her clatter and fall on the bathroom tile floor. I ran to her and cradled her in my arms. I pressed my forehead to hers, and years of family struggles and subterranean combat didn't matter any more. "I'm sorry you fell. I'm so sorry, Mom," I whispered and stroked her thick black-gray hair.

That was the only time that I knew what to do.

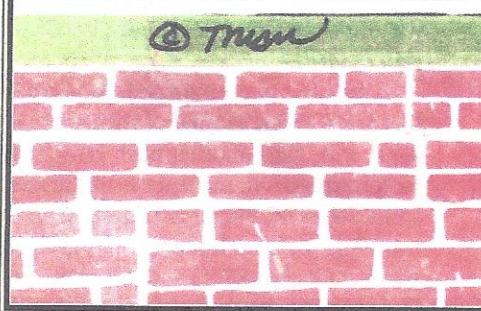


When I was halfway home from the barn, I stopped for a doughnut and a Diet Coke.

Sitting in a sticky, red plastic booth, I stared out the window at the huge snow cone of Mount Rainier looming impossibly bright, like a dime-store velvet painting, behind the small western town. A burger wrapper skipped around the parking lot.

It had also been windy the day I rode Biscuit. I needed to shed a layer after warming up. Bridging the reins in one hand I unzipped my red anorak and started peeling it off over my head. I legged Biscuit over to a jump standard to hang the jacket up. Then—"What the hell?"—he shot sideways 20 feet. He reared and plunged like a Lipizzan stallion. Tami looked over and yelled "Beth! Put the coat down! Lower than his head!" Biscuit reared again, almost dumping me as I dropped my jacket in the dirt. He snorted and sidestepped but quieted when he saw the red flying monster alight on the ground. "I forgot to tell you one of the rules of Biscuit." Tami tried not to laugh. "You can't undress on this horse or let things flap near his face. Maybe he thinks it's some huge bird flying at his head."

I crumpled waxed paper and drained my cup. I had to go back.



Biscuit was not a particularly good mover but he had a brilliant, scopey jump.



Dr. Neil Sanders stands in Biscuit's stall, rangy tall in tight jeans. With his thick moustache and thoughtful brown eyes framed by wire-rims, he is an appealing cross between the Marlboro man and a science nerd.

Lynee watches Dr. Sanders observe her horse. She still has on her chaps and helmet, and a crop is wedged in the back of her jeans. She looks small and tough like a jockey, but her face is dreamy, too sweet for this. "He was just bucking on the longe line," she says. "I don't know how he knocked himself so hard." She turns to Tami so she won't have to look at the veterinarian and says, "It doesn't look good, does it?"

TRISH GALLAGHER NEMO



No one answers. The women hold each other in the doorway of the stall.

Dr. Sanders injects Biscuit with several drugs, takes X rays and bandages the leg. "The pastern bone is fractured," he says. "I can't say if it's operable until I see the film." He gently releases the damaged leg. Biscuit blows his nose, misting Dr. Sanders' glasses. "Keep him warm and feed him lots of carrots until I get back." The veterinarian strokes the gelding's shoulder with such a light, slow touch that I shiver. "And don't even let him think about lying down."

The sun slanted low. Tami went up to the house to get a sandwich and beers. Clients came and rode their horses, peering quickly into Biscuit's stall when they heard. No one went in, but a few touched his nose.

Wondering why I did, I stayed on.



In the dusty evening light I stand in the tackroom staring at rows of saddle butts racked up on the wall. I feel lost. A jumble of reins and bits hangs off the locker door. The bridle racks are clogged with a spaghetti of martingales, reins and dirty bits.

So I clean tack, working my fear out through my fingers. I pick up Tami's fancy padded bridle first. Her silver loose-ring snaffle bit jingles like jewelry, the rubber reins welcome my hands. First I scrub the bit, scraping off green crud with my thumbnail. Then I wash and dry the caramel leather, admiring the way each strap blooms to a luster under my polishing towel. I move on to other bridles. The warm water and the lather from the gold saddle soap soothe me. The water turns cloudy, I rinse, it turns cloudy again.

I worked steadily like a tractor tilling rows, keeping busy, staying warm. I cleaned 13 bridles waiting for Dr. Sanders to return. All the while, Tami and Lynee sat drinking Coronas in Biscuit's stall. Tami was talking about the time her horse grabbed the farrier's underwear in his teeth and pulled hard. Lynee laughed and drawled, "Oh, yeah, girl. Now that's some nice talk." When they fell silent my heart ached for them.

The drugs had calmed Biscuit, and he got tired. He tried to lie down but Lynee begged him to stay up. I peered around the corner. His right knee

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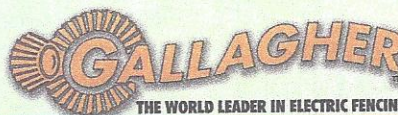


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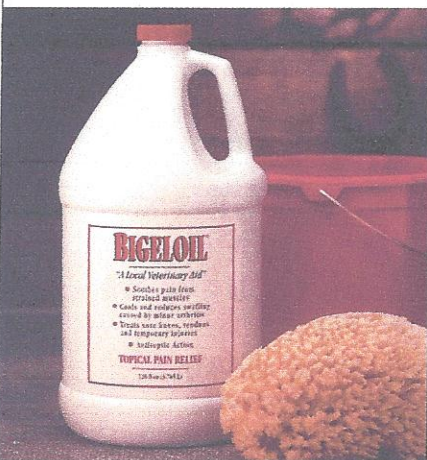


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quivered, ready to fold. Lynee grabbed his mane, "No, Biscuit. Get up." So he stood and hung his head, puffing smoke signals into the iron evening air. He looked regal but distressed, a broken weather vane.

When the veterinarian came back I fought the urge to move closer. They would not have shooed me away. Horse people get used to having uninvited witnesses for tragedies. The good part of this openness is that no matter whose horse is showing signs of colic, any of us will get her out to walk while another rider calls the owner and the veterinarian.

Biscuit's caregivers were with him so I stayed back but listened in. The pastern bone was broken. They could try surgery, but with two breaks it was dicey. The horse would never work again. Dr. Sanders could splint the leg but if they wanted to operate, Tami would have to haul Biscuit to the veterinary clinic. Even if the breaks could be repaired, the gelding would have to stay in a sling for weeks—I knew Biscuit was too high-strung for that. Later, he might hobble around a pasture. He could survive, but it would not be much of a life. Insurance would cover the surgery and limited aftercare. But Lynee would always have to pay for Biscuit's board and care. And even though no one was saying it, she would also have to pay to ride another horse.

The insurance company would have to concur if they decided to put him down.

It sounded so harsh. I still wanted to believe in what I had seen in the showing: a partnership between Biscuit and Lynee that the horse enjoyed and sustained. But I realized that though horse and rider are a team, the level of volition is different. Hanging the last clean bridle on its rack in the evening light, I was forced to acknowledge that the horse is not an equal partner. I felt ashamed of the ultimate power we owners wield.

Tami called Lynee's parents and then the women sat down once more to wait. I started cleaning saddles.

When the Jungs arrived Dr. Sanders explained things to them and stood back. As Mr. Jung reached out to stroke Biscuit's face, his bright raincoat swished.

## THE PASTERBONE WAS BROKEN. THEY COULD TRY SURGERY, BUT WITH TWO BREAKS IT WAS DICEY. THE HORSE WOULD NEVER WORK AGAIN.

The horse jerked away, nose in the air. "Oh, I'm sorry, Biscuit, there's a good boy," Mr. Jung flushed, stepping back. He sniffled and touched Biscuit's shoulder. They left Lynee alone with Biscuit for a while. Then they took her home.

I had not expected this. It seemed wrong to take Lynee away from her horse. I scrubbed at a water stain on a saddle flap. My mother had held our dog Scamper when she was put down. Mom said it made her feel better to know that the last thing the little black dog had known was a familiar voice and a loving hand. Why take this closure from Lynee?

Well, now I know why. Horses are more than pets, and they don't die like cats and dogs.



"Beth, are you still here?" Tami calls. I wipe down the last saddle with my wilted towel, heave it back on its rack, and join Tami, Kate and the veterinarian in Biscuit's stall. Kate's auburn hair glows in the warm light. She looks tired. "Hey, cowgirl," she says and puts an arm around me. I decide not to cry. The injured leg doesn't look so bad now; it is neatly wrapped in white cloth and blue tape. With his neck arched and his coat shiny as a wet mink, Biscuit looks normal but for that.

"We'll have to drop him outside," says Dr. Sanders. I hear a tremor in his voice. He has treated this horse for seven years for everything from scratches to a sore back to colic. "Tami, find an open space out back. There has to be enough room for a truck to get in. Put a tarp or blanket down." I want to argue. I had thought that Biscuit would die in his stall with Lynee by his side.

Dr. Sanders tells Kate and me to take



Biscuit's blanket off. Knowing that I shouldn't, I say, "But it's so cold."

"I know. But if you leave it on him, we won't be able to get it off."

Dr. Sanders starts to take the blanket off over Biscuit's head. The gelding snorts and rolls his eyes, coiling for flight. "No! Wait," I say. "You can't take it off over his head." My eyes swim as I pick the knots out of the baling twine and untie the blanket so Kate can slide it off over Biscuit's rump.

Dr. Sanders sighs. "All right, Tami, walk him out." Tami coaxes Biscuit out of his stall and starts him hopping on three legs down the aisle. I almost cry out for her to wait; his sleek, short-clipped coat is standing on end. I can't seem to grasp that soon it won't matter that he is cold. Tami urges Biscuit forward. He balks, scrambling for balance on his good hind leg. Kate and I step out of the reach of his hooves.

We stand outside in the dark just beyond the glow of the barn lights. The wind has died. Resting my hand on Biscuit's withers I wonder why I am here. I bite my lip and look up at the stars, half expecting to be detected and excused. Kate has stayed inside. Less than a year ago, her mare Hannah was put down. I keenly feel the space that Kate has left by my side. Tami drapes the lead rope around Biscuit's neck and smooths out the green tarp that she has laid on the ground.

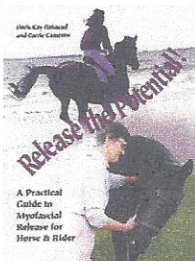


The week before Mom died, I went with my father to pick out a coffin. He had mentioned it twice, so I knew I should go. We drove through soft verdant hills to the Haven of Rest.

The chapel reception area reminds me of a suburban psychiatrist's office—hushed with sage-colored walls and botanical prints framed in gold. There are little glass angels on the counter, and a big gold one flies up the wall. The receptionist sits behind sliding glass windows as if bereavement spreads germs. She slides the glass open and asks if we are here to see Phil.

Despite his black suit, Phil looks exactly like Phil Donohue. Normally I would nudge Dad, but I don't think he notices. Phil lets Dad take control. "She

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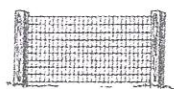


"If the power of the Gospel is not felt throughout the length and breadth of the land, anarchy and misrule, degradation and misery, corruption and darkness will reign without mitigation or end."

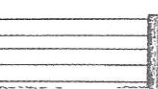
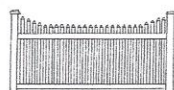
Daniel Webster



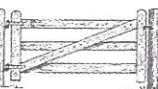
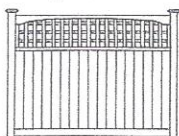
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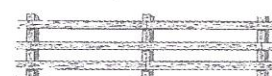
Split Rail



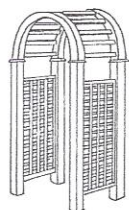
Slip Board



White Vinyl

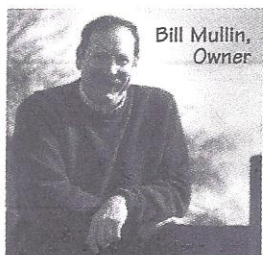


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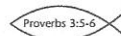
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wanted something simple. But it has to  
be nice." I hear Mom's frugal New  
England pride in his voice and tighten  
my grip on Dad's hand.

Phil leads us into a little parlor lit like  
a new-car showroom. Five or six caskets  
stand sparkling on wheels, ready for a  
test-drive. At \$5,000 "The Elegance" is  
polished mahogany and brass, lined in  
red silk. Dad shakes his head. "The  
Haverford" is white lacquer with gold  
trim, lined in pink like a preteen bed-  
room. There is grand-piano black and a  
filigreed green. It is completely surreal.  
We spot the right one in the corner,  
smooth blond pine like the dresser my  
mother had once restored for my room.  
"Pine Box," the tag says, "\$1,195."

Dad and I barely made it out of that  
sage-green hell. I knew he would not  
break down inside. We hurried out onto  
the manicured lawn where he turned  
and gripped my shoulders. "I would  
have bought her the most expensive  
one there," he choked. "She always said  
she wanted to be buried in a plain pine  
box, like Thoreau." I opened my arms. I  
could not believe how frail his shoulders  
felt, how far around him my arms  
would go.



Tami straightens the edge of  
the tarp. She strokes Biscuit's  
face and kisses his nose. Hold-  
ing the end of the lead rope she steps  
back off the tarp and slouches into her  
fleece-collared coat. I stand by the horse.  
"It will be fast," Dr. Sanders says as  
he draws bright pink liquid into two big  
syringes. "He won't feel pain." He rests  
his forehead against Biscuit's shoulder  
for a long moment and digs around in  
his bag. Could he be questioning this  
choice as I am? He looks up at me. "I  
am using an overdose of anaesthetic.  
First it will knock him unconscious;  
then it will stop his heart."

Somehow I am calm. Biscuit breathes  
moist heat on my hand. I fiddle with his  
lower lip as Dr. Sanders recites proce-  
dures like blessings. "The medication  
suppresses nerve function, so the brain  
won't know it is losing oxygen."

He looks at me. "Can you hold him?  
You will have to be quick."

I grip Biscuit's halter while Dr.  
Sanders swabs the injection site with  
alcohol, which seems as futile as the



I CROUCH BY BISCUIT'S  
SHOULDER, TERRIFIED,  
MESMERIZED. HIS LEGS  
PADDLE. HE IS HUFFING  
HARD AS IF POUNDING  
DOWN TO THE BIGGEST  
OXER ON THE COURSE.



blanket. I look into the horse's fright-  
ened eyes; he holds my gaze. Dr. Sanders  
thumps the syringe into Biscuit's shiny  
neck. Slowly, the plunger presses down.

Dr. Sanders pulls the needle out and  
yells "Get back!" as Biscuit rears up. I  
panic. Shouldn't he be going down?  
With a harrowing squeal he crashes. I  
feel the ground shake.

Biscuit flails, and his eyes go white in  
the darkness. His neck strains forward;  
he tries to get up, but he can't get a grip  
on the ground. Dr. Sanders finds a vein  
and pounds a second syringe into the  
muscle neck. He pushes the liquid into  
Biscuit, and I'm praying, "Please horse,  
please let go."

I crouch by Biscuit's shoulder, terri-  
fied, mesmerized. His legs paddle. He is  
huffing hard as if pounding down to the  
biggest oxer on the course. Cursing soft-  
ly, Dr. Sanders reaches for the syringe.  
He stops and waits. Biscuit jerks; his legs  
stop; his breath is raspy and fast.

I fall on my knees at Biscuit's head  
and take its bony weight in my arms. I  
marvel at the hugeness of it and think,  
"We could still go back. We could redo  
this day." I stroke Biscuit's long face and  
look into his eyes that glow with rage,  
with "want to," with fight. To be with  
him is terrifying and the deepest honor I  
have known.

Biscuit is still alive. My heart pounds.  
Then he groans, breathing in. "The  
agonal breath," Dr. Sanders whispers,  
pressing his stethoscope disk to Biscuit's  
heart. He closes his eyes and strokes  
the horse's sweaty neck. Two, three,  
four more rattling, sickening breaths—  
then Biscuit's eyes are open but their  
light is out.

Time expands in crisis, collapses in



joy. I remember every second of the three minutes it took Biscuit to die. What will Lynee remember of that 29 seconds when she and Biscuit were one?

Mom never exactly said it, but she taught me that animals have souls. Our family had three dogs, three cats, three ponies, assorted mice and guinea pigs, lovebirds, rescued chipmunks, and even an orange salamander that looked exotic stretched out under the fake palm tree on the little sand island in our turtle's plastic bowl. Our pantry looked like Petco. Every animal was Mom's child, too, readily added to the five humans she had birthed.

Each night after dinner in my childhood home, Mom fed the dogs. She swept the floor and wiped the counters as they snarfed up their sticky, smelly Alpo. "Now Frank, you let Scamper finish," she'd say to our Airedale, who would gulp his food in three bites and then move toward the cocker spaniel's corner. "It's all right Scamp, sweetie—clean that last little bit up." Frank watched Mom's face for the moment when he would be allowed to clean all three bowls.

Most people wash their pets' dishes maybe once a week. Our dogs' and cats' bowls went into the dishwasher every night next to ours. My mother taught me to love enough to hold Biscuit's head and look deeply into his panicked eyes as he died.



I crouch on the tarp, stunned by the spirit I have just seen go out. I look up at Tami. Blonde strands fall in her face. One hand is jammed in her pocket and the other still holds the end of the lead rope, her tie to this horse and the past. My arms wrap around her like a towel to absorb her sudden sobs.

Dr. Sanders snips a skein of Biscuit's tail. "Lynee will want this," he says, crying now. Tami folds the long black strands into her pocket. She hugs him and kisses his cheek, whispering "Thank you, Neil." Then he puts away his things and goes.

Tami wipes her nose on her sleeve, turns and plods back to the house where Kate is waiting. I stand for a moment wrapped in night, then turn back toward the lights of the barn. □

# Appaloosa

## SHOWMANSHIP

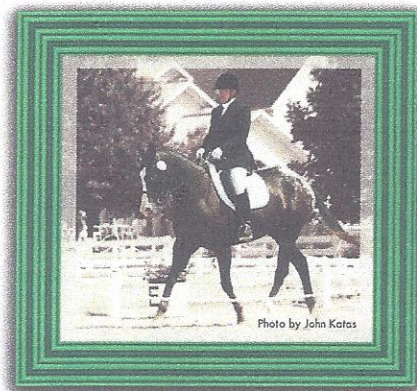


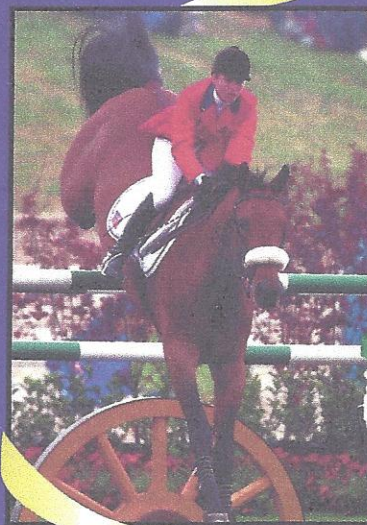
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