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HORSES



Early fall 1943 had a cool crisp bite in the evening air so Dad loaded his Coonhound Bob into the pickup and headed out to Lee Welchel's house to load Lee and his hound Buck for their first coon hunt of the year.

Lee was a likeable man with a stout build and round face who had brought his wife Sally and daughter Lucille from Georgia to Oklahoma in the early nineteen thirties, now the family ran Sally & Son's cafe in town but they lived in the farm house West of town belonging to Golf Garner. Lee being a Georgia farm boy loved coon hunting so he and Dad soon became fast friends. Lee talked very gruff with a hard exterior, but that was all just a cover up for the fact that he had the biggest and softest heart of any man I have ever known. But I would never have let him know that I understood that about him.

When Saturday morning came and Dad had not come home from the hunt, Mother, R.E., and I, were keeping a close eye on the road for any sign of Dad's old pickup truck.

About nine o'clock in the morning we saw the pickup coming over the hill and to everyone's surprise he was leading a horse alongside the pickup. At last, the farm was going to be complete, we were going to have a horse. As the truck drew nearer I could see just the rump of a horse on

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the other side of the truck cab but the coonhound standing in the back blocked my full view of our horse.

Gary, you and R.E. stand back until your Daddy stops the tuck.

All worry about Dad being late from the hunt was forgotten with the surprise and anticipation of a real horse. Every fiber of my body was gripped with excitement while we waited for the truck to stop so we could run out to see our new horse. When the breaks stopped squeaking, R.E. and I ran out to look. I ran around the front of the truck. I was awe struck by the towering beast before me. Dad stepped out of the truck with a big smile saying, "Surprise!"

I sure was. My new horse had the longest ears and most potbelly and wildest look in his eyes of anything you can imagine.

That's Lee's old gray Mule. SIMON!

"Why do you have that mule Dad?" R.E. ask, as he stood beside the truck looking at Simon.

(I was hoping he would say he was going to make soap or dog food to sell so we could buy a horse.)

This mule will come in handy for you boys to get around the farm, go after the cows, and things like that.

(I was afraid he was going to say something like that! But I know this mule and God never made anything more stubborn in the whole world. Unless it was an Oak fence post!)

I looked at Mother she was looking at Dad with a very strange look in her eye. Then she turned and walked back into the house without a word.

(Well I guess that said what she thinks of Simon as a lot of help around the farm.)

Dad bought an old saddle for five dollars and a pocket knife from Virgil Southwell but it didn't fit very well over Simon's skinny backbone and potbelly so Uncle J.E. came up with an old McClellan Army saddle from somewhere. It was built so awkward that it fit Simon just right.

(I don't know why we needed a saddle anyway, his backbone was so sharp once you was astride of him it would be impossible to fall off.)

Dad placed the Army saddle on Simon and rode him around the farm yard a few times to get him calmed down. Then he put R.E. and I up in the saddle and led Simon around the house a time or two and turned Simon over to us boys to have fun while he went into the house to have a cup of coffee.

R.E. and I proceeded to ride-um-cowboy. We talked, shouted, nudged, kicked, begged, and quietly cursed, but Simon wouldn't move.

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(BOY! Dad sure calmed this mule down for us. In fact, he is so calm!)

R.E. I think he's dead.

No Gary, if he was dead he would fall down! Now kick him a little harder!

How do you know that he would fall down? Have you ever seen a dead mule?

Gary. Just kick him.

If you can't get him to move how do I get off?

Gary. If you don't shut up I'm going to knock you off!

"DADDY! R.E. said he was going to knock me off from the mule!" I shouted, as loud as I could.

Dad came out of the house saying in a very calm voice.

Now Gary, you calm down or you'll excite that mule.

(I don't think Dad understands the situation here. I have been trying to excite this mule for thirty minutes. I think he is dead or R.E. is the worst mule driver in the whole world. I'm up here and can't get down so I can go somewhere. I hope if I ever do get down to the ground this dead mule doesn't fall over on me before I can run away from him.)

After several tries R.E. finally did get Simon to move, but it was hard work. We would have to lead him up next to an old green oil barrel, there we could climb up on the barrel and from there climb up into the saddle, if Simon didn't decide to turn circles around the barrel first, which he usually did. Once Dad put a twitch on his nose to make him stand still while we saddled, bridled, and mounted the saddle. After that all you had to do to make him stand still was for someone to stand in front of him with a twitch in their hand and he would be so still you would think he had died again.

(That is probably why his nose and upper lip are so long.)

Simon and I never did manage to gain much respect for each other. Once while riding him around the chicken house he suddenly stopped and backed up real quick. Of course I wound up on the ground in front of him, then he just ran back to the feed lot wanting some more oats. I tried to founder him, but he would only eat so much then quit. Every time I rode him I would try to ride him to death, but he would go only so far then turn around and go back to the watering trough with me and just stand there.

The only time of day Simon would become excited was when it was time to milk the cows. When Mother would open the barn door to put the milk cows in, Simon would run in through the

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door first and keep the milk cows out until he had eaten all the cow feed that he wanted, then he would walk out of the barn in a manner as if to say, "Now it is your turn."

Dad finally decided to outsmart old Simon, he would open a different barn door, when Simon ran inside to get his oats, Dad would close the door shutting Simon in until Mother had all the milk cows stalled in the other side.

One day while I was trying to ride Simon to death in whatever direction he wanted to go, things were going quiet well until Dad decided that he needed something from the barn and went into the barn opening only the bottom door leaving the top door closed, while I rode Simon in the other direction with my feet in the stirrup straps, reins in hand, giving me full control over twelve hundred pounds of wild beast. When Simon and I came around the corner of the house his head came up, his ears stood on end, then I too saw the bottom barn door open, I jerked back on the reins. Nothing but slack, his head had come up too far. I reached for more leverage on the reins. By the time I had the reins tight it was too late. Simon had already taken the bit in his teeth, head straight out, ears laid back, and legs pounding the ground like pistons of a steam engine. Simon had come to life! While I pulled the reins straight back with both hands, had both feet sticking straight out over his shoulders in front of me, the oats crazed mule thundered across the dusty landscape carrying my tender young body into an infernal black hole!

(This infestuous mule is trying to kill me!)

At the barn door Simon never slowed down, he only squatted, then lunged through the opening as Dad started out. For a long split second my eyes were riveted on Dad and it seems as though he was all blue eyes.

I could hear Dad hollering, "WOOOooo!" just as the saddle caught on the top door knocking me off onto the ground, in front of my eyes things were passing fast. Mule hooves, "Ouch", barn eaves, Mulberry tree, Coonhound, at the same time my mind was turning as fast as I was.

(Dad, "WOOOooo" doesn't work on Simon!)

By the time I figured out where up and down were, I was on my feet again, spitting mud, barn cleanings, or whatever it was I had landed in. Looking into the barn through tears of mud, I could see Dad sprawled out on the barn floor where Simon had left him. Simon was running around the barn kicking at the saddle hanging down over his rump with the cinch pulled up tight into his flanks, half crazed at not being able to find his oats anywhere. From somewhere in the foggy recesses of my head I could hear a voice that sounded very much like mine saying all the bad things about Simon that Mother had told me. "Gary, I don't want to ever hear you say that again!" Some days everything seems to go wrong, but when you own an old mule, EVERY DAY, everything goes wrong!

When Mother finally convinced Dad of the inevitable, "That mule is going to the soap factory DEAD or ALIVE!" he shipped Simon off to the market with the promise that any money from the sale would go toward buying R.E. and me a real horse.

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One morning Dad made the proud announcement, "Last night I made a deal with a man up by Parallel to buy a good saddle pony for you boys. So this morning I am going to drive up there to bring the pony back. This pony is suppose to be real gentle so you cowboys will be able to handle this one without any trouble."

That was the longest day I have ever known. R.E. and I made a hundred trips out to the road to see if he was coming. I could hardly sit at the table to eat lunch for wanting to run out to the road and look one more time.

Mother was standing at the kitchen cabinet washing dishes and looking out the North window when she said, "Boys I think I see your Daddy's truck coming over Stubbs Hill." Running out of the house without even closing the door behind me, I could wait no longer for the first glimpse of our real horse.

Standing in the afternoon sun, my heart pounded while I watched Dad's truck grow bigger and bigger as it drew nearer to home. At last he was close enough that I could see tied to the end gate of the truck, the best as I could tell, was a proud black stallion stepping high like a Spanish steed prancing with head tossed to one side and a raven black mane blowing in the wind. Imagination gripped my mind, showing me eyes filled with the flame of spirit, flared nostrils, and hooves of quick agility, the kind of mount that can carry me all day long and still be prancing when I ride home at night.

You boys come back here until your Daddy can stop the truck.

When the truck stopped I ran around to look at our long waited for horse. Frozen in my tracks! Awe struck! Totally speechless! There are not enough words to describe my state of mind when I first saw our real horse, while R.E. climbed up into the back of the truck so he could get a good look.

Dad stepped out and ask, "How do you boys like this mare?"

"She's pretty," R.E. said, touching her nose with a soft stroke.

I looked at R.E. he had a big smile all over his face. (R.E. you haven't even looked past her nose yet. No wonder her head was tossed to one side. She only has one eye! And her hooves are so long if she didn't step high she would fall over her own feet! That long flowing black mane hasn't been cut since she was forty years old, and as for the fire in her eyes, that was fear in her EYE! Fear that she would stumble and be dragged to death behind the truck. But she does have flared nostrils, after all, she is gasping for every breath!)

(I know what the problem is with getting a good horse around this farm. They know that they have me so mad by now, if I had a good horse, I would leave!)

Dad saddled the old black mare and rode her around the yard for a few minutes, "to cool her out" then he turned her over to R.E. and I for some riding on a real horse.

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Come on Gary. I will hold her still while you climb up behind me.

All right, just a minute.

Taking hold of the stirrup strap with both hands, I leaned my head against her side.

Gary, what are you doing?

I said, just a minute!

(Dear God, I'm sorry for having cursed Old Simon.)

Once in the saddle, R.E. and I rode the black mare until it was time for us to go after the cows, but the mare was too tired to go, so we walked again.

R.E. and I did ride the old mare quite often, you just had to be careful not to ride her downhill or she would stumble and fall out from under you. That seemed to limit where you could go on a farm that was either wheat fields where you couldn't ride, or canyons and hills. If you kept her on flat ground she would do real well, as long as you always turned to the right so she could see where she was going, but you can't herd cows very far with a horse that only turns to the right.

One day after giving the mare one last chance, for at least the one hundredth time, I rode her after the cows only to have her fall out from under me twice, then I returned to the house threatening to shoot "that stumbling old mare".

"That stumbling old mare will save you a lot of shoe leather son." Dad said, trying to calm me down.

She would make a lot of shoe leather too! Besides she is going to fall on someone and kill them someday. I think I know who that someone is going to be, what's more, that horse eats more feed than six good calves. For my money, I would take a good pair of shoes and six grass calves!

Dad finally listened to reason and shipped the old mare off to the soap factory.

Somewhere in this world there are ten thousand sink drains, each with a lining of soap film, all that is left of a one eyed mare and an old gray mule. AND GOOD RIDDANCE!

Dad did have a good team of Percheron Draft horses. Blue, who was a big dapple blue, and Dan, a powerful buckskin tan. Dad used the team for working tomato ground, which was always down in the river bottom or creek bottom lands that was often too wet or soft to be able to work with a tractor without bogging down in sand or mud. The big team was also used on the planter, harrow, and sled knife for the feed crop, to feed the horses and cattle.

When I was about seven and R.E. nine years old, Dad took the team and R.E. to the Northwest field to harrow the crop of red top cane he was raising to feed the livestock. After showing R.E. how to back strip the rows of cane, he left him to work the team with instructions, "Don't ride the

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harrow, don't tie the lines together, and don't drop the lines in the field, because if those horses spook, you won't be able to handle them or catch them either. If you tie the lines together and they spook, you might become tangled in the lines and be dragged to death or have your arm broken at the elbow leaving you with a stiff arm like Ab's which is what happened to him."

Dad and I walked back across the canyon toward the house.

Daddy, why can't I drive the team? I know how to back strip the cane field.

Gary, that team weighs two ton. If they would happen to bolt, R.E. won't be able to hold them, and I'm sure you can't! Besides I need you to drive the tractor so we can pull the well pipe out and replace the leathers in the cylinder.

What is the well cylinder?

The well is about two hundred feet deep, at the bottom there is a cylinder that pumps the water up. It has leathers inside and those leathers are worn out, so we need to pull the pipe out, so we can replace the leathers!

Once at the house Dad started the tractor and had me drive it around the yard a few times to see how it worked. Then told me to back it up to the windmill so we could hook it up and pull all the pipe out of the well.

Dad climbed the windmill tower hooking a rope block in the top of the tower, then ran a long rope through the block and back down to the well, then climbed down to the ground to hook another block at the bottom running the rope through it to the drawbar of the tractor.

(I don't know why he didn't allow me to climb the windmill, after all I had experience in that sort of thing.)

Gary, when I tell you to drive forward you go slow until I tell you to stop, then you stop! OK, go ahead.

I slid off of the seat so I could reach the clutch, then holding on to the steering wheel with both hands, and the seat with one leg, the tractor started forward, after going forward and backing up several times we had about a hundred foot of pipe pulled out of the well, when Dad hollered. "Stop! Stop! Back up!" As he unhooked the pull rope from the drawbar, he shouted, "Get off the seat and stand on the drawbar. NOW!"

As I took the tractor out of gear and climbed over the seat onto the drawbar I wondered why Dad was so excited and what I had done to upset him so. Just as I was standing on the drawbar holding onto both fenders with my hands I looked up to see the team of horses with the harrow over their backs running across the cane field dragging R.E. behind them.

Holding onto the fenders and sliding my feet wide apart until they lodged against the lift bars, Dad proceeded to take me on the wildest tractor ride I ever took in my life. Running through

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fences, over paneling gates, across pasture washes, and through plowed fields, we were soon at the other of the cane field where Dan and Blue were standing at the fence reaching over eating grass with the harrow still up on their backs.

R.E. was up walking around them, clothes torn half off, scratched all over, toes of his shoes worn out, hollering at the top of his voice that he had almost been killed by a Jack rabbit.

Dad leaped off the tractor seat saying, "R.E. calm down, those horses are excited enough as it is."

They're eating grass! I'm the one that is excited!

(Boy! R.E. you should be excited, there isn't any skin on your face, arms, hands, or fronts of your legs!)

R.E. are you all right?

Dad! Look at me! DO I LOOK ALL RIGHT!

You look better than you should. I told you. Don't tie the lines together. If the horses bolted, you would become tangled in them!

I didn't have the lines tied together.

Then how did you become tangled in the lines?

I wasn't tangled in the lines. You told me to never turn loose of the lines in the field.

You held onto the lines while that team dragged you down a ditch of pea gravel for a quarter of a mile?

YES.

Back at the house Dad and I finished the work on the well cylinder while Mother cleaned and dressed R.E.'s cuts and scrapes. By the time all that was done it was time for us to go after the milk cows. Walking through the cow lot I ask, "How come your team bolted on you?"

I was just coming out of the turn row when a Jack rabbit jumped up out of the furrow under the horses feet and spooked them into jumping causing the double tree to hang in the ditch flipping it up onto their backs.

You should have turned loose of the lines.

I was obeying what Dad told me to!

I wasn't questioning your obedience. I was just going to say, you are too dumb to not be obedient!

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No sooner had I said that, then we were toe to toe and eye to eye. For a long moment we stood, fists clinched, jaws locked, and backs braced, waiting for the first blow before committing to retaliation. Then his eyes softened and that stupid looking crooked smile came across his face.

We turned, walking down the cow trail together. Reaching into my pocket I pulled out a peace offering I had taken out of Dad's package of Camel cigarettes while all the commotion was going on at the house. Holding it out to him, he smiled looking sideways at me, then said, "You got one too? We'll save mine for tonight."

(I know how much he's hurting, after all I'm the one Roy ran over with that truck loaded with junk iron. Was kicked and tromped by a mule. Ran over by a motorcycle and dragged across the school yard. But I'm not going to let him know I was worried. He'll think I am soft. Besides everything is all right now. We're together walking down the cow trail shoulder to shoulder sharing the same cigarette.

We are about to the fork in the cow trail. He'll push me so I'll have to take the trail over the hump while he walks the trail around it on flat easy ground. Then he can take two puffs off of the cigarette and he'll probably wet lip it. He knows that makes me angry! If he does, there's going to be a fight before the cows come home!)



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