

INCONTINENCE

The Problem with Seeing a Man about a Horse
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This is about a horse that doesn't win the big race, never pulls little Timmy out of the burning barn, and can't talk.

If fact, this is about a horse who refuses to do some of the most basic horse things, like not trotting into walls.

This is actually about karma and how it is leveled for a Sixties- type half way to becoming a Sixty-type.

You can do what Barbara does: Blame it on my Mid-Wife Crisis. Which is not to say that Barbara looks anything like a midwife. Those are her way of describing that mossy milestone between our dead-heat, day-after-graduation wedding and these veiled days of paunchy contemplation.

She was the one who pointed out that I was treating existence as some sort of One Life Stand. Greying at the edges, fraying at the nerves, drifting day by day into a vague haze.

"You are going to run off with a pizza waitress," she announced one Sunday morning. I peered over the Home section like Kilroy.

"Look at you. You subscribe to three major metropolitan Sunday papers. You spend 5.40 hours consuming 572,000 words. And at the end of the day, you sit there like a gaffed mackerel and don't remember how you spent it.

"I'm going to wake up alone one morning with a note pinned to a pizza box: 'Your subscription has ben cancelled.' You are hiding from life, William."

"I am not," I sputtered.

"You are the most defensive person I've ever met." "I am not," I sputtered.

But the underpinnings had buckled. From that moment on, I knew what I wanted.

I wanted background music.

I wanted to live the movie version. I

wanted 3-D, IMAX Sensurround. Which

is how I saddled myself.

Just Say Neigh.

The hills were wheaten and patchwork green. The sky was frosted with cirrus. The air had that thick, corn-and-clover sweetness you only get after days of August rain.

And the sign said "Horse for sale."

A talisman! The Volvo hit the turn at Mach 5. I'm just looking, I told myself. But my mind was already mounted up, clad blacker than Paladin, sporting a wide-brimmed Stetson rimmed with silver dollars.

Leaning on the rail: the Farmer, a pinch-faced type in a John Deere cap and one puffy cheek rolling up and down in steady time.

Next to him, chewing weeds: this huge, lop-eared oater with nostrils like moon craters. He was the color of freezer-burned chocolate chip ice cream, mealy white with flecks of bad black and brown. His back seemed to go on forever, dipping in at least two places. Each hoof was drawn to a different magnetic

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compass point. Above it all, a frazzled tail, snapping languidly at flies.

He slouched there, munching, snorting, nodding in contrapuntal rhythm to the Farmer's squinty grin.

"This the horse for sale?"

"Yup."

O.K. I'd proven I knew it was a horse.

Now was the time for intelligent questions. Now was the time for sales strategy. Now was the time to outmaneuver this wily old rustic with carefully plotted negotiation ploys.

"Uh, what kind is it?"

"It's a *he*," he said, shrugging at the obvious fire hose dangling and dragging through the sand.

"Uh, what kind is he?"

"Well, he's part Appy, 'cause of the spots. And he's part saddle-bred, 'cause of the size. Probably got a bit of Arab in him, too. Makes him pret-ty special."

"Is he gentle?"

"Inky? Gentle as yer grandma's gynecologist, this one. Rent him out for pony rides at birthday parties and all."

Inky! Like Black Beauty!

Of course, one major point escaped me: Why would a spotted horse have a black horse's name.

"Uh, is he trained?"

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The Farmer laughed. He was not laughing with me.

"Inky, he'll do everything but fetch the paper, if he's got a mind to."

A lawyer would have caught the qualifier. I didn't.

I'd run out of questions. Unfortunately, I hadn't run out of money. Seething, I reached for my checkbook. "How much?"

The Farmer pulled down his cap and stared at his boots, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Well, I'm not likely to sell him off quick as that. Inky's kinda family, you know. Want to make sure he goes to someone who'll treat him right."

"I'll have him detailed once a week. How much?"

"You sure about this, mister?"

"Positive. I want him."

I wanted him more than I could ever want any cherry red '63 Corvette, any high definition multi-platform media center, any pizza waitress, for God's sake.

"How much!"

"Let's see. Ordinarily, he'd fetch two grand, no problem. But since you're gonna take such good care of him, I'll let him go for, oh...eighteen hundred."

Done deal. The ballpoint broiled its way across the check.

Horseshoes Do Not Bring Good Luck.

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I decided not to tell Barbara about this until it was a fait accompli. The deeper I got into it, the more fate, the less accompli.

First, I had to find somewhere for my new pet to live. I called a stable. They gave me a quote: "Abandon all hope ye who enter here."

The mortgage on my eight-room contemporary on four wooded acres was less than the monthly fee for a cell full of straw with a plastic bucket of algae-furred water.

They rented me a trailer--\$100 was pocket change by this time—and I rumbled off to retrieve Inky.

Only when I picked up his papers did I learn the truth.

Inky was short for Incontinence.

I learned the reason why—among other things—when I pulled up to his new quarters. The stable manager, a freckly blonde in high boots and jeans, paused from currying one of her sleek thoroughbreds. She just stared as I tried to push Inky backwards down the ramp.

He wouldn't budge. "That's a

rather old horse."

"Is that bad?" I asked, panicky, still trying to drag him by the halter. The manager could stand no more. She came in the trailer and began patting and stroking Inky with pitying compassion.

"Not, I suppose it's not that bad," cooing to him as if I were some disembodied spirit haunting the van. "If you're sweet to him, it'll be all right. Won't it, big guy?"

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With a gentle stroke of his nose, she coaxed Inky out and led him to his stall. He snorted at me as he lumbered by.

Now she turned to me. "How much did you pay for him?" I

told her. She laughed. She was not laughing with me.

"So you ride?" she asked in a tone that suggested she knew the answer."

"I'll need a refresher." "How

much of a refresher?" "As in

'fresh start.'"

She sighed. "All right. Let's survey the damage."

Now I hauled a saddle, blanket and tack up to Inky's towering side. He stood there, stoic, emotionless, as I fumbled with the tack.

I drew the girth under his belly. I raised the straps to cinch it with a tight yank.

And I was greeted by a pattering that became a rumbling that became a brackish, bleating blunderbuss as he raised his tail and let a hail of thunder tumble to the floor.

I stood in an ankle-high cairn.

The manager peered in. "You're responsible for keeping the stall clean."

Hence, Incontinence. And his editorial response to any request for cooperation.

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Eyeing the way I twisted and turned the bit, the manager had mercy on the horse and tacked him up herself. Tossing a strand of blonde hair from across her face, she turned to me.

"Need help getting on?"

In truth, I did. But I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. Somehow I scrambled aboard. She led both of us into the ring, put Inky on a lunge line—a fifteen-foot leash—and let me sit lumpish for the better part of an hour while we plodded in an endless circle. Only the occasional salute of his tail broke the pace of his gait.

The viewing stand was empty, save for Wally the orange barn cat, yawning and licking himself.

I Balk at the First Jump

That afternoon, I drove home, rehearsing the ways I would share my wonderful news with Barbara. How do you tell your wife you have a gelding in the family without giving her ideas?

She was sunning herself in the yard. The light brought out the brandy highlights in her hair. Her eyes were blissfully closed, letting warm yellow summer caress her face.

Who was I to spoil a moment? I chickened out.

Wait, I said, wait until you're jumping seven-foot steeplechase gates to the clarion call of the hunt. Wait until she can barely hear the heartbeat beneath the raucous applause of the Ascot Gallery. Wait until you are sure you won't be staring down two-barrels of an elephant gun.

Wait, because the instant she finds out, you are going to have to buy a lot of furniture. Maybe even wallpaper.

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All well and good, except I still needed an excuse for coming home late every night for the next 20 years. A horse has *needs*. And every day, commute after commute, this hombre's trail would follow the brown bocce-ball spoor that led in aromatic piles to the animal I had just married.

I was now a bigamist. With a beast. I wondered if there were some kind of law against this.

For the first few days, pitchfork in hand. I didn't mind hunkering my shoulder against the heaps of straw, lifting great clusters after great cluster, and off to the dumping ground. There, I confronted a slagheap of seething black manure, big enough to smother a Welsh village. Methane belched in volcanic craters.

But you can get *into it*, if you think of yourself as a husky peasant lad in a Courbet or Constable landscape. You can enjoy the romantic possibilities of starring in a Robert Frost poem. It dawned on me that my liberal arts education finally had found its mission.

Of course, fast-forward past the falling leaves, and I would then become something out of Solzhenitsyn: A sub-zero slave laborer in *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Forget that! You are Hercules, charged with cleaning the Augean Stables. Although then you remember that Hercules only had to do the job once, and he totally cheated by using a river.

Then I convinced myself that I loved the smell of the barn, that it was the essence of the back-to-the-land, greening-of- America, Age

of Aquarius hippie heaven. I mean, my college roommate freshman year gave off worse fumes.

Still, rationalization wasn't much of a long-term strategy. And through it all, there stood Inky, chewing his cud, raising his tail,

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and observing me with drooping lidded eyes that made me suspect his hay was laced with hemp.

It was infuriating, this hayseed ruse. I knew he was laughing. And he was not laughing with me.

Lessons Progress. Skills Do Not.

Watch any Western, see the Lone Ranger or Butch and Sundance and convince yourself how bold and poetic it must be to ride high in the saddle.

Watch YouTubes of Secretariat or Seabiscuit, and amaze yourself at the fluid beauty of their movement.

Believe that this is fun.

It's not. It's more like being spanked with a 1,200-pound leather glove.

Getting Inky to trot was no problem. Getting him to stop was another matter. Once my feet were in those stirrups, he had a hostage. And he was going to make him pay.

He'd fuss and falter around the ring, changing the pace of his wobbling hip bones to syncopate a tattoo on my butt. I could swear he'd keep four/four time.

Occasionally, usually near a crossbar, he would lurch to a stop and jolt me overboard, directly onto the post at hand.

"Inky!" the stable manager would shout. She tried snapping her crop to get his attention. (It got mine.)

This was our circle, over and over, punctuated by his plastering the dust with hail. You could call him a dumb animal. But I have been

around offices long enough to know when employees start watching the clock. And he had his eye on the

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hands of the old Regulator over the barn door, its pendulum clicking in time to my ass, every time he passed it.

He knew when 50 minutes are up faster than your psychiatrist. Then something in him reared up from the primordial plains. He would break into a frantic canter that became a slobbering gallop, straight for the exit and into the stall.

Each week, I had to remember when to duck. Once on his home turf, he fairly screeched to a halt and stand there, sweating defiantly, ignoring me, as my body, twisted like a swastika, hung off the saddle. I was a growth he needed removing.

Then I would have to cool him down with a wet sponge, wiping his back, his chest, from forelock to fetlock. His handmaiden. Then duties required me to hike up each leg and pick out the doo between his horseshoes and his hoofs.

Supplicant, I soon discovered the only trick Inky knew. While I washed his withers, he would reach with his teeth for the plastic water bucket, stretch it from the wall to the limit, and then let it fly. All over me.

Wally the barn cat always knew when it was curtain time. I would look up to see his fat orange ass hanging over the upper rafter, him looking down at me as if to say, "Lower species are so entertaining."

Then the stable manager would come in with her fresh-faced freckles and her pitying expression, and pat his rump.

"Poor old guy," she'd whisper, as if I weren't there. "You've learned a lifetime of bad habits." There was admiration in her voice.

Naturally, any time *she'd* hop onto Inky's back, poised and perfect, heels at a military angle, eyes on a distant star, Inky

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would rise with inner pride and trot respectfully, responding to every press of her calf, as if her posting motion were a rite of purification after my soiling myself in the saddle.

Certain that he'd been tamed, I'd scramble back on, only to find myself atop an adolescent who just had his X-Box taken away.

They know, damn these animals. I knew it: He was comparing me to past riders, the way Barbara would compare me to old boyfriends. Only with less tact.

From Animal Farm to 1984

In the meantime, Barbara was collecting evidence.

I was coming home late. Not just late, but freshly showered. Not just freshly showered but beat and worse, bowlegged.

The checking account was suddenly listing badly, in steady, 45-degree increments.

"You've found her," she announced one night over dinner as I stared into space, letting my fork lift mound after mound of beans and then dumping them on the opposite side of my plate.

"Huh? Found who?" Lift, dump.

"Your pizza waitress."

"Don't be nuts." Lift, dump.

"Read *Cosmo*, William. You're showing all the signs. Do I call my lawyer now or wait for you to get caught by some Hells Angel husband in turnpike motel?"

"Sweetheart, I—I—"

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I couldn't do it. I couldn't tell her.

"I've been taking, uh... lessons. It was supposed to be a surprise."

We are all the way to half truth.

"A surprise? What kind of surprise?"

I now used the sly smile that won her over, hinting at secret pleasures to come. If she thinks it's for dancing lessons, she might just buy it. My permanent embossing on the wall of any dance floor had long been a bone of contention with her.

Of course, the sly smile was my *tell*. One of the things that won her over was instinctual: "So this one thinks he's smart. Let's see how smart you are, Buster Brown."

"A *nice* surprise. You might say... performance art." Still

three quarters true.

"I just need a little more time to get ready."

She's hooked. She'll play. "Oh, a *nice* surprise. Well, all right. How soon is it going to be ready? Because I'd like to return to normal hours."

"I promise, you'll know the second the nice surprise is ready."

I wasn't about to go crawling to Barbara until I had finished crawling to that horse.

Except he was no longer a horse.

He was a whale, Moby Dink, a great white whale with my leg between his teeth. Was he the genius of evil, an icon of all-knowing silence, a malevolent nodding god with a mouthful of

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carrot mash? Or was he an innocent, a perfect link in the chain of Nature, the mere victim of my suburban neurotic angst?

I considered this nightly as I wheeled yet another barrowful of straw to his chambers. He watched me, then spread those rubbery lips and exposed his huge overbite, protruding through the orthodontia of his halter.

I knew that look. It's the same one Nicky Willis used when he shoved me in a locker for lunch money.

"You're no innocent," I said as I mucked away at his brownstone pyramids. "You're the Trojan Horse. You're just going to crack wide open and overrun me."

He shook his mane, snorted, pawed the straw and gave me an equine raspberry with those vulcanized lips.

National Velveeta

My despondent subjugation to a lower resident of the food chain was bad enough. But like Byron in Castle Chillon, I could not bear it in romantic solitude.

There was first Wally the barn cat, pausing by the stall to consider me, lick his genitals and move on.

But worse, there were The Boarders. The Boarders showed up in flawless English jodhpurs, their velvety black helmets always brushed to perfection. They curried thoroughbreds, macrame'd their manes, detailed every sleek hand of them. Or rather, paid someone else to do it.

One in particular seemed to haunt my schedule: a fortyish woman with steel grey hair in an over torqued bun. Her cheekbones were the envy of the Selective Breeding Compound. She was always dressed and pressed and creased and buttoned, as if *Architectural Digest* and Talbots were on their way with a camera crew.

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And we never spoke. She gave off one of those Michael Jackson never-look-me-in-the-eye vibes. She would glance into my stall in passing, looking as if she'd bitten into bad fruit.

I called her National Velveeta.

It is one thing to have a person look down on you. But so did her horse. A towering, glistening black mare with a wild eye. And let me tell you, we are talking BIG. I don't even know how many hands big. Her name was Eglantine Rosette, because of course.

Now Nicky Willis was joined by Bucky Nordinger on the playground to give me menacing grins, pounding their fists into their palms.

The two of them would dominate the barn as I covered my way along the wall, tiptoeing past, tack hanging limply in my hands, on my way to cajole Inky into deigning to wear it.

Invariably she'd stride by with jackboot authority, hay and horse turds parting in her wake.

Sometimes they would take command of the ring while I hobbled along on the lunge line, sliding back and forth along the swayback ridges. If I plodded clockwise, they blazed past me in a passionate canter, leaping fences and walls with slow-motion grace.

"*Out-side!*" she'd snarl as she whipped past us, the only word I ever heard her say, the only warning I'd get that she was barreling through. Even the indifferent Inky shivered at the withers at the sight of them. Pity the guy married to someone that good with a crop.

National Velveeta became Barbara by Proxy: pouring scorn on me in my folly. Barbara couldn't see it. This woman knew all,

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and it was beneath her contempt. Invariably she'd pass by at the instant Inky had me pinned to the wall with his hindquarters.

I even began to think he waited for her, nodding dumbly in time with her approaching steps, then baring his buckteeth and dragging me around the stall.

Then he'd whinny, braying that stage-whinny horses use to sound intelligent, and all his cohorts up and down the barn would join in chorus, stamping and snorting with conspiratorial glee.

They were laughing. And they were not laughing with me. By

this time, I was sure Barbara was having me followed.

She'd say nothing when I came in late, barely looking up from her magazine, acknowledging me with "Hmms" and "Uh-huhs." Even when I came home with strands of straw stick out like Martian antennae.

She knew something. But she wasn't going to give me the satisfaction.

Now I was a crazed criminal psychopath, strewing clues in my path, aching to get caught and breathe relief at last. Yet I couldn't bring myself to confess.

Withering Heights

The October nights were darkening early as I once again prepared to drag my sweat scraper across a saggy rump, dive-bombed by flies. I opened the barn door, and there it was: Destiny.

Bold as a wanted poster, it hung on the bulletin board:

HORSE SHOW

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OCTOBER 30

Sign up now.

"You're not serious," said the stable manager.

"I'm a risk taker."

She looked at me. She turned to her desk, opened the draw, pulled out the file marked "Insurance" and checked to see if all my releases and waivers were in proper order.

OH, ye of little faith. Suddenly, fresh confidence rose up in me with phallic certainty. My Day of Reckoning was coming! A harmonic convergence: in one moment, in my own private movie, I would come into my own.

I would show Barbara the Marlboro Man she married. I would show National Velveeta too. Surely Inky would rally for a moment like that.

In fact, his trot did pick up, his canter a little more undulant, the open lope of a carousel horse set free. At least it seemed that way. Twilight after twilight, I stalked into the stable with the Eye

of the Tiger. Once saddled up, I truly believed that Inky felt it too.

Autumn dissipated like early fog, the scarlet and yellow and orange frayed into fall, and now the Thirtieth of October throbbed on the calendar.

Showdown at the I'm OK, You're OK Corral

What does one wear to one's Day of Reckoning?

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Formal equestrian garb seemed, well, bourgeois. I opted for Western: jeans, a Bret Maverick vest open at the chest, and my dusty Frye boots, now polished to a shine.

Let National Velveeta posture away. I was Gary Cooper. I could do no wrong. And indeed, as I stood before the mirror, hitching my belt buckle, I heard it: the *torero* music, the clarion call, Roland's horn at Ronceveaux.

I passed Barbara, sitting at then kitchen table, puzzling out the Double Acrostic in the Sunday *Times*. Awright, Miss Kitty. It's High Noon. Mount up.

"Want to go for a ride?"

"I don't know, William. Maybe later."

"Come on. You're always complaining that we never do stuff."

"What do you mean, 'do stuff?'"

"Stuff. You know. It's a nice day. Come on!" She

looked up at me for the first time.

"I'm sort of settled now, William. You go. Have a nice time."

"Fine!" I snapped. Sure, miss my moment. Just wait: In two hours, I'll be back with a horseshoe of white roses around my neck.

With a slow, deliberate pace, I set off to win the cheers and the ears and the tail.

All good, except I failed to note one thing. The date.

Halloween weekend.

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And as I arrive at the Farm, I do not see royal hunters in sleek jodhpurs and glossy back boots.

I see skeletons and bunny rabbits and punkinheads and Smurfs and even a couple of Donald Trumps. In fact, some of the horses are wearing Minnie Pearl hats or punk-rock Day-Glo spray in their manes.

In fact, I look, well, normal. Except in this case, normal is decidedly abnormal, and now Mumsies and Dadsies from the National Velveeta set are eyeing me with tut-tut pity for my blatant lack of imagination.

No matter. I cut through them and head to the barn to tack up Inky. On my way in, who is there, braiding the black nightmare's tail, but N.V. herself, dressed down in a Sarah Lawrence sweatshirt and Calvins. O.K., today I am The Spoiler. I am giddy. I actually decide to stop and talk to her.

"Afternoon," I say, raising two fingers to tip a Stetson that isn't there.

Both she and the horse rear up a bit, affronted. "Uh...yes?"

"Competing today?" I ask.

"Uh, yes."

"Me too," I leer. "You bet!"

"How very...fortunate."

I walk on to Inky's stall. Suddenly a struggling ball of orange tumbleweed rumbles past my feet. Wally the barn cat has caught a

barn rat, a good seven-incher. He is dragging it deep into the straw to make hay with it. I make a mental note to muck out that spot before I leave.

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Inky is standing there, hooves to opposite poles, jawing on a hunk of matted feed.

"This is it," I whisper to him, working the bit between his rubbery lips. "Time to pay me back for the ten grand I've sunk into you, Oat Breath."

He steals a glimpse at me. His eyes say, "Fak yooooo."

Show Time. Together we walk to the end of the barn, drumbeats booming at my temples, and into a corona of bright afternoon light. Before I have a moment to strut, the stable manager comes running up, her freckles flushed, breathless. "You're late," she says, slapping Number 24 on my back. "You're up."

And dammit, I am ready. I can envision National Velveeta on her steed, reining her up for a charge to the fences, but with terror in her eyes, and in her horse's eyes, as the Jock of All Jockeys and his Miracle Horse arrive at the ring.

Except I damn near kill myself getting into the saddle. And when Inky trundles me into the ring, I don't see National Velveeta.

I see an eggplant.

Animal, Vegetable, Minimal

Specifically, a ten-year-old boy dressed as an eggplant. Yes, there he is, sneering at me, a four-foot purple turnip, bobbling atop a palomino like some new breed of centaur: Half horse, half vegetable.

I start to yell, "Wait a minute—" but never get past the W. The judge drops a hanky, and we're off.

The very sight of the palomino has driven Inky into a slobbering canter. Some time in the past, this horse has bitten

him on the ass. If you think elephants never forget, try being bitten on the ass by a horse.

Inky scrambles headlong for the first fence. Hunched in half-seat position, Quasimodo grips the reins, leaning towards his ear, panting something resembling a prayer.

Inky raises his head in a scream straight from Picasso's Guernica. I join him. Together and separately, we rise, rise, rise, and yes! The first crossrail floats below us and away.

Rounding the turn, the eggplant charges forward, red Velcro seeds flapping in the breeze. A torrent of gold and dust, they clear the fence in one effortless leap.

The flowerpot wall looms ahead and Inky looks back. The nostrils of the palomino fume behind us. They bring new fire to Inky's feet. For once, I feel that he and I are One.

I can read his thoughts.

He is thinking, "That palomino is going to bite my ass again."

Whatever he is thinking, it works: He dives for a slide, then over the tips of the fake flowers and hard down the long side, into the turn. The palomino is pure Trigger and the hated eggplant drives him with leguminous fury. His green stems wrap themselves around his mount with deadly purpose. His form is classic, Old School. The gallery applauds.

Inky rounds the turn for the third jump. It seems fifty feet high.

"There's a tube of Elmer's with your name on it!" I hiss.

We can hear the Palomino's teeth as we clear the top. I glance back: His ears are down in speed-demon rage, his eyes are bullet holes, his muscles molten liquid, surging, a tidal bore.

Even the eggplant seems impressed. He pumps the reins like hell's handcart, his red seeds flapping, hanging off the back of the saddle.

Then ahead: There it is. The final jump.

No matter that it is made of cardboard painted to look like bricks, and surrounded by wilted plastic petunias.

It is Annapurna to me, and Inky agrees. Mane in his eyes, he looks back at the charging palomino, its eyes crazed at the sight of the jump and murderous for anything in its way. Inky gives me a look of lost hope, turns to the fence with a mixture of fatalism and desperation, and then it happens.

Chomp! Whinney!

The palomino finds its target. It's saggy, lopsided, spotted target. Its gigantic teeth snap like a leg trap into Inky's rump. The bite sends a power surge through this couch of a horse, and he goes ballistic: Over the top.

Time stands still. The faces freeze. The gallery banners glare the sun.

And Incontinence executes a perfect four-point entrechat. With a splendid soft cushion of dust as he lands.

Just in time to see the eggplant, hanging by the pommel, his mighty steed baring a mouthful of Inky's tail between its molars. And see them both crash dead into the faux bricks.

The crowd sighs with sympathy and disappointment. No matter: The judge hands over a green ribbon on a jack-o-lantern button and hangs it on Inky's tack.

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And there among the thrilled spectators is Barbara, hands clasped together with a look of stunned wonder in her blue eyes. Or stunned something.

Exhausted, Inky and I lumber over to her.

"You knew?"

"Two months ago, William. Your riding instructor called to say she'd be late for your lesson. I said, 'What riding lesson?' Funny: I didn't really mind being two-timed by a horse."

Barbara sees me as the one you always have to watch at recess. She is also amused when I waste my time.

Still, I had to consider the day. On

the one hand, I won a ribbon.

On the other hand, I won it by beating an eggplant. But

dammit, I *beat* that eggplant.

Unbuckling my riding helmet, I led Inky back to his stall and gave him the brushdown of a lifetime. Per usual, Wally the barn cat skulked by to see what fool this mortal be. Then, fat and oblivious, he wandered on.

It flashed in me: the last time I'd seen Wally, he was about to have rat *al fresco* in the straw behind the tack box. Ever the good citizen, I take the mucking shovel and root around for the leftovers. Sure enough, Wally has polished off all eleven herbs and spices. All that remain are a nine-inch tail and what once was a lower digestive track.

I pick it up on the end of the shovel and march down the barn toward the offal pile.

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On my way, whom do I pass but National Velveeta.

She is puckered up and making kissy faces. With Wally the barn cat.

I look at her. I look at the end of the shovel. I look at her. Should I say something?

Naaaaah.

Barbara and I go home. That night, we have pizza.