



*Filling Station at Night*

## Tricks

Bill Hunt pushed the warped barn door with his knee to hook the latch. He lead the sorrel stallion to the low, smooth stump in the middle of the corral, hearing the roll of gravel under tires on his road. He sneezed and looked up to see his ex-wife stop her white sedan in its own drifting wake of dust.

"Git around here!" In the middle of the corral he turned the stallion to face the stump. He tapped the horse behind the knee with his cane and the stallion lifted his front feet onto the stump. Since dawn in the silent farmhouse the man had been thinking ahead to this moment when she would bring the boy for the weekend.

"I'm late. David couldn't find his shoes. I looked all over the house for them. One was behind the couch and the other was in his closet. I'm sorry we're late." She stood by the fence, looking at Bill over the top rail.

"It doesn't matter. I'm not going anywhere." He tapped the horse on the thigh and tugged gently at the halter rope. The stallion shuffled his hind feet, sidestepping a half-circle around his fixed front hooves on the stump, stopping when his ankles crossed.

"I know you like to have us come early when I leave David. I don't mean to hold you up. I meant to be on time."

"Hell, it doesn't matter." Bill spoke more loudly than he intended.

"Don't shout at me."

"I'm not shouting at you. It just doesn't matter, is all. Forget it." He touched the horse on the other thigh and the animal reversed his sidestep until his front legs were parallel over the stump again. Bill tapped the horse on the left hock with the cane and pulled on the halter rope, and the stallion stepped up, placing all four feet on the stump, balancing over his gathered hooves.

"What do you think, David? Ain't he a dandy piece of horseflesh?" Suddenly, Bill wished for some new trick to show his son.

"Can I ride him?"

"I'll let you ride the gelding. Can't have you throwing Bud here a wrong cue. Everything that touches a-trick horse is a cue, or he's ready to take it as one, so you touch him wrong and he tries to move into the trick, with you on his back. Gits him confused. That gelding is a nice horse to ride, though." Bill felt windy. He had explained this to David before, and he was pleased with the boy's "horse sense," considering how little time he spent on the ranch. David did not reply as he watched the stallion through the fence.

"Don't let him fall off. I don't want to come back from Eureka and find David's head split open. We had a boy come in two weeks ago with his thigh gashed open where a horse stepped on him." The woman rested her chin on the top rail for a moment after she spoke, and Bill looked away from her before he replied.

"He won't git hurt. The gelding is a safe horse, and David knows how to ride, don't you, son?"

"Yeah." The boy looked at his mother a moment longer than Bill liked before turning his attention back to the horse.

"Well, I helped the doctor put sixteen stitches in that boy's leg, and I don't want to have to stitch up David, is all I'm saying."

"He could handle a few stitches, if he had to, couldn't you, son?"

"I won't fall off."

"Hell no, you won't fall off. You know how to ride and you pay attention." Bill Hunt spit before he walked the horse a few paces toward the fence, then he pulled back on the rope to tighten the halter against the stallion's nose, touching his left knee with the cane. The horse bowed, then stood and tossed his head.

"I just don't want him hurt."

"He won't git hurt!" He hadn't intended to shout. "We'll be fine. Why don't you go ahead and git started to your meeting, Rose?" He didn't look directly at her as he stroked the stallion's neck.

"I'll leave you two then." She glanced over her shoulder before she continued speaking. "I had a hard time starting that car this morning. I hope I don't have trouble with it in Eureka. That's all I need, to be out on the road with car trouble."

"I just tuned it for you last month. You've got good tires and a new battery. You won't have trouble."

"I hope not." She turned away from the fence, then looked back at him once more. "Will you be around here all morning?"

"We might go up to the pond after while. I wouldn't hear the phone anyway, not from out here."

"I just feel like that car is the enemy sometimes, when the damned thing won't go." She looked at the white sedan, and then back at her ex-husband.

"Just keep your head and look for the problem. Anyhow, there's always a trucker coming along, ever so often." He pulled a burr from the horse's mane just above his withers.

"You have a good time, David. I'll see you Sunday evening, before seven. Just be careful around these horses."

"Nothing to be afraid of, unless you're scared. Then you don't think straight and you do stupid things." Bill looked at David. "Come on, son.

We'll saddle the horses." He glanced at his ex-wife as she crossed the gravel and got into the car. He loosened the halter's throatlatch one notch, guessing that she was looking at him through the tinted windshield for a moment before she put the car in reverse. He felt an odd sense of relief as the sound of the car faded.

"One more trick, then we'll saddle up. What do you want to see him do?"

"What's the hardest trick he can do?" The boy rested his chin on the top rail as they looked at each other.

"Oh, I don't know. Sit on his haunches like a mule, I guess. That's hard for a horse. They don't like to do it much. I don't know just why. But he can do eighteen tricks in all. He's a pretty good ol' hoss, when he's asleep." Bill slapped the stallion's neck affectionately.

"How about making him stand on his front feet?" The boy did not take his eyes off the stallion. Bill stared at him, hearing a meadowlark's single whistle in the stunted Osage orange tree by the barn, as the rising breeze rustled the thick green leaves. The horse snorted and shook his head.

The man stepped out to face the stallion and clucked in his cheek as he flipped the halter rope lightly, touching the horse in the chest with the tip of his cane. The big horse gathered himself and reared up, standing on his hind legs, the cane waving gently under his jaw as he walked three steps forward in the corral, the man backing before the horse he coaxed. The stallion stopped, holding the pose for an instant, his forelegs folded at his chest, the cane close under his chin where its menace held him up in his stance. Bill felt his jaw muscles ache, and he tried to relax as he let the cane drop away and the stallion came down, his forefeet striking the ground as he tossed his head and snorted.

Bill rubbed the animal's nose for a moment. "You're a good old horse," he said quietly before he turned toward the barn, the horse close behind him, the two of them walking single file, as the boy watched from the fence.

*Farmer's Market*

*Vol. 4, No. 1*

*Winter, 1987*

*P.O. Box 1272  
Galesburg, Ill  
61402*