

Stallion
by
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Before Calderon walked home to his own ranch, he drank coffee. A lot of coffee. He could tell Palmer's wife wanted him gone. She was moving things on the stove that didn't need moving. But he was tired and kept asking for another cup. He drank the pot dry, and then regretted it because that would be the end. Now he'd really have to go.

Palmer sat across from him at the table, staring out the window past Calderon's shoulder. Toward the corrals. Maybe Palmer was thinking about the stallion, and maybe he was only looking that direction because he was too tired to look anywhere else. The sun was going down, shining in Palmer's face.

Without shifting his gaze, Palmer said, "You want some more?"

Meaning coffee, Calderon supposed. He said some more would be nice, but they had drunk the last. Palmer had no answer for that.

He just kept looking out the window.

The stallion had never shown any sign of tiring. It threw them just as hard in the afternoon as it had in the morning. The way things looked to Calderon, the horse might break them before they could break it. And maybe that was good. Maybe once in your life, it was good to find a horse you couldn't break.

Palmer wouldn't feel that way, of course. He had paid money for the stallion.

Mrs. Palmer came to collect the coffee pot. She put it in the sink and filled it with water. She left it there. Then she went back to moving things around in the kitchen.

Ordinarily they wouldn't have quit until it was too dark to go on, but that horse had taken it out of them. They'd stopped when there was still a good hour and a half of light.

Calderon had heard stories about a certain kind of horse, a horse that might break eventually but would kill a man first. In those stories, the horse always

had something wild in its eyes, something that people remarked when they saw it.

This stallion wasn't like that. He'd let you touch his neck and flanks, let you saddle him. There wasn't any madness in his eyes, or meanness. He just knew he wasn't for riding, and he didn't care to be convinced otherwise. After he'd throw you, he'd look at you like he was sorry that you couldn't get such a simple thing into your head.

Palmer's wife got fed up and went to another part of the house. Palmer hadn't moved.

The room was getting dark. It would be a long walk home in the night, Calderon thought, and there would be no moon. He really ought to get up and go, he really should. The longer he sat here the more he felt every bruise, every ache in his bones.

"I ought to shoot that damn horse," Palmer said.

"Sell him."

"Can't. I have a conscience."

Calderon didn't answer. In a moment he would get up. He would. He would stand and walk away from the pleasure of sitting in the dark and aching and thinking of a horse that wouldn't be broken.

He could buy the horse himself, but that would be a waste. It would be money spent to hold on to something that can't be held.

Not in the ordinary sense, anyway.

Outside, the crickets were starting up. "Well," he said, taking his leave, and as he pushed back from the table, Palmer asked him, "Tomorrow?"

Calderon stood up, went to the door. He heard the stallion nicker. The first stars burned. "Be just the same tomorrow," he said, letting the words take whichever shape they would.

And he stepped outside to inhale the cooling, horsescented air.