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Other Men's Horses

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I never wanted to buy the horse. My dad pushed me into it when he caught me putting one of his pack horses in the bucking chute. The big gelding was cranky and old but I had to get some practice in somehow.

“You leave that pack string the hell alone, understand? You want a bronc to ride, you go buy one.” He was a little hot. I didn’t want him to get violent, so the next Tuesday I’m at the sale ring.

The horse was sure ugly. What he had going for him was size; I guessed he’d go to 1,300 anyway. Probably just a big stout range colt nobody wanted to mess with long enough to make a saddle horse. The canner bid forty two cents a pound on him; I went forty three and saved his sorry life.

Right away I started wondering about him. His legs didn’t look like no horse legs I’d ever seen. Real thick and gnarled-looking. His head was a sight—roman nose, little pig eyes set close together, pony ears. And he was covered with about three inches of shaggy hair, so he looked like a damn buffalo. I’ll tell you, he was a sight. But all the time he was in the ring I could see he wasn’t scared out of his wits like the other green horses. Did’t trot around trembling, showing the whites of his eyes. He just looked around like he was maybe sizing things up, and once he looked right directly at me. I think that’s why I bought him.

The old man was waiting when I got home with the truck. He comes out and shines a big flashlight through the rack to see my purchase. “You bought that?”

“No, I stole him when the brand inspector was takin’ a shit.” He can see I’m in a bad mood and don’t say anything else. It had taken me an hour to run the horse into the truck. Every time I’d get him going the right way he’d see what was up and stomp backwards down the loading chute. I had a hot-shot, but all that thick hair kept him from feeling it. Finally I got peeved and started laying a two-by-four all over his butt. He went crashing up into the truck then, but not before catching me on the leg with his left hind foot. He only grazed me, but it was so sore I could barely get down out of the truck.

The old man don’t say anything when I turn the horse out in the
pasture, but he shines the flashlight so I can see to get through the gate. Then he spits out a big wad of Copenhagen and goes up to the house.

He don't mind me rodeoing long as I stay around here. But I guess he can tell I'm not liable to be around much longer. That's what he don't like. He wants me to take over the outfit one of these days, but I guess I won't go it. The packing business is good during the summer and fall, but the rest of the year you're just barely making it.

Me and him; we've been on our own since the old lady run off with a wrangler when I was a little kid. One morning the old man just comes in and wakes me up and says, "We're doing for ourselves from now on." He never told me any details. And I always felt like I better not ask.

I guess he should get another wife, but there ain't that many women around here. Every so often he slips down to the Rainbow Bar and goes home with MariAnne, the barmaid, but it ain't nothing serious.

Next morning I look the horse over again. He looks sorrier than the day before. I had plenty of second thoughts about what I'd bought, but I decided to see about getting on him.

I was running him in from the pasture when Marty Coleman and Bob Norvell come driving up in Norvell's pickup. I guess the word must have gotten around town.

I get him loaded in the chute just as they stroll up, wearing big shit-eatin' grins and not saying anything. Coleman looks at the horse standing in the box and turns to me. Little flecks of chew are sprinkled in between his teeth. "Show horse, huh?"

"Well, sure. What you think of him?"

"He looks strong," Norvell says. "You going to get on him?"

He humped up his back when I put my foot on him, but other than that he was quiet. It was spooky the way this horse acted. No fear at all. He'd been gelded and branded sometime, you could see a big number 13 on his left hip, but other than that I don't think he'd been handled at all. I'm not good at thinking up names. I took to calling him Number 13.

I set the saddle down on his wide back. I was shaking a little, but the sun was getting warm and I felt good. The old saddle was my dad's; he'd won day money in it at Cheyenne in 1947. That was in the days when bronc saddles had horns on them. You could still see where he'd sawed it off before he gave it to me.

I dropped the flank strap down the horse's side; Coleman hooked it
and handed the end up to me. “Why don’t you try him with an empty saddle one time,” he said. “Then if he don’t throw himself, go ahead and get on him.”

Sounded like a plan. I opened up the gate and watched the horse buck slow and lazy across the little arena. We run him back into the chute and jerked the flank off him while the big bastard tried to kick everything to pieces.

“That didn’t look so bad,” I say, but I notice my hands are trembling some as I set the saddle well up on his withers and snugged it up. Pulling my chaps back out of the way, I slip down on him. He never tried to come up like a lot of them will, so I found the stirrups quickly, took hold of the rein where I’d marked it and asked Norvell for the gate.

I felt something real powerful heave up and turn out. Then I was going through the air and bouncing in the dirt. I opened my eyes in time to see a big jagged-edged hoof slam down right next to my nose. I shut my eyes again, just for a moment.

I was surprised. I been on some good horses and this one should have never done that. I got up and watched him pitch around the arena. His moves didn’t look that tough. The stirrups flopped loose, popping his belly every jump.

Well, to spare some details, I got on him again and got piled once more. Then Norvell, who fancies himself quite a bronc rider, tried him and he got fired off too. Coleman, who can’t ride anything, never even tried.

The old man had come down from the house and was sitting on the fence watching the show. I never heard him say anything, but he was watching, and once I looked over when I heard him laughing. He pulled out his snot rag and blew into it and didn’t laugh anymore.

When Norvell was on the horse I saw what I’d missed before. I guess you’d call it a kick and roll, with a little snap at the end. He’d go out, jump, kick, roll his back end up at the sky and snap his heels once more. All in the space of one jump. And he was quicker than he looked. I’d seen little bareback horses do that number, but never a heavy bronc like this.

I jerked the bob wire along through the sagebrush, unrolling it as I
went. The fence stretcher made the wires just like bango strings and the old man went along and popped in the staples. Pop pop pop. Three per staple, never any more.

He catches up to me at the corner. "That'll hold'em even if they got to workin' this section steady," he says. He pulls out his Copenhagen and stuffs in a wad. He offers me some and I turn him down, like always, since I got sick on it a long time ago.

"How you doing with that bronc of yours?"

"All right."

"You got him rode yet?"

"No." I admitted it, but I wished he hadn't asked.

He started picking up tools to carry back to the pickup. "Well, I'll tell you. I've seen a lot of good ones. This one's a good one. You get so you can ride him most of the time, you'll be a bronc rider."

I was surprised to hear him say that. It wasn't encouragement, but it was closer to it than anything else he'd ever said to me.

"And if you keep gettin' on him," he continued, "it'll be the dumbest damn thing you ever do. You'll get good enough to maybe go to the big shows. Fort Worth, Houston, Denver. I been to all of 'em. Didn't get me any place. Won't get you any place, either. And you'll spend your whole life riding other men's horses."

He turned away, but not before I saw his gray eyes starting to water from the wind that always blisters this section.

I got on that shaggy bastard over a hundred times that summer. And I wasn't the only one. Everybody who thought he was a cowboy started coming around and paying me five bucks a shot to try him. Nobody could ride him. One day we bucked him out fifteen times. The big horse was soaked with sweat and his legs were trembling. I was sure we'd wear him down, and you could see he was exhausted. But then we'd swing the gate and he'd go out and turn the crank just like always. I felt ashamed when I seen how much heart he had. After everybody'd left I fed him a gallon of oats, something I'd never done before.

I was getting better, though nobody knew it but me 'cause I was hitting the ground like everybody else. But I wasn't hitting it as hard
anymore. Sometimes I'd even land on my feet.

On a cold morning early in September, there was just me and Norvell and this Indian guy, T.J. It was almost cold enough for frost. We run Number 13 in and put my saddle on him; it was the new one I'd bought with what I'd charged everybody who'd rode him. He humped up his back when it touched him and kicked the back of the chute. His breath came out in twin clouds. He laid his head on the top rail of the gate and looked out in the arena. He was used to this.

I eased down and set my thighs against the swells, the rosin squeaking. I could smell him as I picked up the rein and asked for the gate.

He reared out of the box higher than usual, but I had a little adrenaline going and I was there, marking him out good and solid. He went three good high straight-away jumps, nothing trashy, then ducked to the right and started giving me the hot moves. Every time he'd hit the ground and bawl and beller, but I was lifting on that rein and beating him to the front end of every jump. All of a sudden I knew I was going to cover him and started getting wild with my spurring. I almost fell off. Then Norvell blew the whistle and I just relaxed everything and sailed off, going down on my knees. Just like that, after all those trips out of the gate, I'd gone the full eight on Number 13.

Norvell and T.J. were pretty excited. The old man was eating breakfast and he heard all the noise and came down. He tried to be a good guy and shook hands with me, but I could tell from his face he knew I was going to be heading south, soon as I got the chance.

Not too long after that I was setting in the house after dinner wondering where I was going to get some traveling money, when I got a phone call.

"Roy Easton?"
"That's me."

"Yeah, this is Jake Rossman. I hear you've got quite a saddle bronc. I'm going to be up that way next week, think I could see him buck?"

I told him yes and hung up the phone. So even the big boys had heard. Rossman had six saddle broncs in the National Finals last
year, more than any other contractor. I was surprised because I never did think about the horse being that good.

Rossman showed up in a stock truck, so I knew he was serious about the horse. He wasn’t dressed much different from the other people who’d come to watch my horse’s major league tryout, but he looked like money with his three diamond rings and those gold capped teeth. He hollered a lot in a high, squeaky voice.

We ran the horse in and I started putting on my chaps. But Rossman stopped me. “I’d like to see Terry get on him, if it’s all right.” He pointed to a guy stepping out of a pickup. I recognized the guy’s face from a magazine. Terry Hill, somewhere in the top fifteen in the world during the last few years. This was turning into something I didn’t like. All the tough guys coming around, ganging up on my ugly old pony. I didn’t want to let on what I thought so I walked across the arena and took a seat on the fence.

There must have been about fifty people there that day and they all saw it. I watched Rossman and Hill working over the horse, saddling him and buckling on the halter. They treated him respectfully, like they knew what they were doing.

They swung the gate and Number 13 came out jumping and kicking. Then he made a big move to the right and Terry Hill went left. He landed right on his head. He got up real slow; his hat was smashed and there was dirt all over his face.

I felt kind of light-headed and giddy, like all the blood was running out of my head. Probably it was.

Hill tried the horse again, but he never had a chance since he was still shook up from landing on his hat. I got to give him credit. He didn’t get all pissed off, and he tried to grin. But Rossman had a mean streak, and he was irritated because having a world-class bronc rider crash land like that was going to cost him more money when we talked about a price. He kept making a lot of wisecracks, asking Hill if he should buy him. Hill finally said, “Yeah, go ahead and buy him, if you’ve got enough money!” and put his gear back in his pickup and drove off.

And then Rossman had to walk all the way over to me. I was holding all the cards. And he didn’t like it, having to deal with a twenty-year-old kid who had a horse he wanted. But he pulled out his checkbook anyway.

Late that afternoon, all the people were gone and it was just me
standing by the corral in the faded light. I had a check for $4,000 in my shirt pocket and Rossman was on down the road with my horse. Number 13 was off to live the glamour life. Bright lights, loud speakers, crowds.

I should have been happy and I guess I was, as I needed the money to get south. I know a lot of people will probably think, "How can you sell off your horse like that, such a good one and all?" But that big animal was no pet dog, and I didn't have no love for him. Besides, he'd hurt me enough times I should have been glad to see him go.