

## Horses Tell Us the Truth About Life on the Race-Track

I make instant cash walking race horses around the track to cool them down after they race or exercise. The horses are hot; dripping with sweat and puffing for air. I'm young, with no i.d. (that bluffs my age). But it don't matter. They hire almost anyone...they don't care about your age or where you come from. You get paid ten bucks cash per horse, which is a shit load of money. I walk roughly 5 horses per morning. Our job is this: the jockey jumps off the race horse, swings the reins over the horse's head and hands them to us. Never be afraid of a horse. They sense it and will try to take off from you. We walk each horse for roughly ten minutes, depending how much time it takes for them to cool their sweat - their hearts - their breaths... Next, we hand them over to the groom.

I hustle big time. Sprinting back to the track to cool as many horses for the most money I can get. Everyone is SUPPOSED to know that if the horse is still hot and you put them in the stall let them drink water, they can colic or have a heart attack and die. Racehorses are bred to have bigger hearts than other breeds of horses, to pump more air and race faster. Some owners don't give a shit. They think their horses are just machines to make money; to bet on, to win. Kinda like tossing up numbers to win at a casino. Not me. Trainers and owners see how well I handle each horse is much to my benefit.

Sometime ago, I took care of my friend Patsy's horse, named Francis, while they were away on vacation. Staying at their house, I felt safe. Free from my dad's malice. I got paid \$25 bucks per day and took care of Francis. Daily, I'd muck Francis's stall, feed her grain and hay, groom her, and turn her out in the fields to graze and frolic all day. When I rode her it was like being high. I got a taste of freedom. We would gallop on trails as fast as we could go. I remember hearing-feeling the rhythm of her hooves, clapping in tune with her power. Her horse

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is a thoroughbred that they bought off the race track. She was too slow to win anything, and they bought her dirt cheap. Patsy told me that the owner wanted to get more stall room for faster horses, not caring about getting back the mega bucks he bought her for.

Once, when my Dad was standing up on top of the stairs, I came up from behind and almost pushed him down. But I didn't want to go to jail. Sometimes I would go over to hang with Francis to calm me down. One day, Patsy's parents thought about reporting my dad, but I begged them not to. I've heard horror stories about foster homes. Then they moved away. Although Patsy was a friend, I miss Francis the most. Before they left, Patsy told me that if I ever need fast cash, to go to the race track and walk hot horses

My ex-boyfriend, Dakota, gave me a motorcycle jacket with his motorcycle gang's name engraved on its back. Dakota treated me real good. I felt indestructible. What was a rush it was to go fast on his motorcycle. I still wear my motorcycle jacket to protect me. His gang don't take shit from no one. Later Dakota showed me a triumph vintage motorcycle, in mint condition for sale. I liked it, but I like horses better. Rather save up and buy a horse someday. I never told Dakota about my dad's angry fists. He'd kill him and rot in jail for the rest of his life.

Taking care of Francis gave me a leg up at the race track. Soon, I became a groom and moved into the dorms surrounding the track. The dorms are much better. Before, I crashed in an abandoned camper out back. In the summer you can sleep almost anywhere. Since our restroom in the dorms gives me the creeps at night, I take a leak in the woods. Before I go to pee, I throw on my motorcycle jackets to make me feel untouchable.

Like at Patsy's, the days fly by. Up at six, get breakfast, feed the horses, muck their stalls, tack up our horses, and lead them to the track. After races; we hose the horses down,

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wrapped their legs, threw on their blankets, and put them in their stalls. If a horse's legs are stocked up, we soak their legs in an ice bucket, next wrap up their legs to sweat the swelling down. I never watch the horses race to avoid seeing the horrific accidents that can happen, and the owners don't want us to be seen. Roughly five horses per month would go lame, break a leg or colic. Most horses are put on stall rest, put down, or are hauled off on a trailer to an auction. Some race horses die from unknown reasons. I think it's from overuse.

I found a stray dog wandering about town and brought her home. She was big with long legs, a pointy nose, one ear perked, and the other one, floppy. At the tip of her tail was a little white spot as if it was dipped in vanilla ice cream. Since she was super sweet, I named her Cookie. My dad didn't seem to notice. He was too busy drinking, and smoking one cigarette after another. Sometimes, dad would scream at me, "You drive me to drink!" and would tackle me and smash my face in. He broke my nose once, but at least it made me look cool, like I got into a street fight. Once when Cookie was saying hello to my Dad by wagging her tail, her tail knocked over his beer. Dad was really pissed off. Without any knowledge of mine, he decided to get rid of her. Maybe he didn't like me smiling much.

When Cookie was gone, I stormed into my room and locked my door. I stayed there for about 12 hours on a hunger strike, which didn't work (at all). Next thing you know, I ran to the phone to call a friend. Then, out the door I went. We decided to meet downtown and hang out with our high school friends. I felt that they were safer to hang with than those motorcycle gangs. We're called "townies". We sat on top of the phone booths, smoking joints and sometimes paying a hobo to buy us liquor. Some friends had cars, and we'd go on a cruise. One time, my friend's Chevy Impala bottomed out on a hill on the highway, and it got totaled. His mom was pretty pissed off - it was her car. Since I did not want to go home, I had to figure

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out how to make money. It occurred to me that my cousin grows lots of pot in her yard. I stopped by to see if I could have some joints to sell. She said, "sure." Back in town, I told my friends. Unfortunately, we all smoked together and most of the money went to ice cream at Friendly's. After all this, I used what money I had left and hitched to the same racetrack Francis came from. Seems like it something I would like to get paid for. We'll see...

One morning when I come in to feed, the owner of the horse named Knight is draped over Knight's stall door. He looks shocked with sadness - or so I think. The trainer tells me Knight's leg was broken. I tell the owner I'm sorry, and look into Knight's stall. He is fully tranquilized. His lower lip hangs down loose. His eyes look empty standing on three legs.

Later that day, I totally screwed up. I forgot to wrap one of my horse's stocked up legs after a race. Someone, instead of telling me I forgot to ice, sweat and wrap my horse's leg, ratted me out. The trainer stomps over to my room, pulls me out, yelling, "Get it through your thick head! You are working with racehorses that are worth millions, you useless moron!" This reminds me of my dad, when he would call me useless and chase me with a broom to clean up my act. I reply, "Sorry it won't happen again." I'd rather yell; PISS-OFF, but I wanna keep this job. I ran over to my friend, Ian, for comic relief. He tells me, "I'm warning you - you gotta be careful, their eyes are on our backs. They got other shit going on here they don't want you to know about. It's all about money. You've got to be careful if a horse goes lame. They might blame you." Then we light up.

I became close friends with Ian. He is a groom too. Ian and I are nuts about horses. We make fun of life on the track and laugh and laugh. We both love our horses - give them treats, massage them, sit on their backs in their stalls, talking to them like they're humans. My favorite

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horse's name is Gizmo. Each day he greets me with a nicker when I'm close, he nuzzles my head, and gives me a crazy hairdo. I always give him carrots. Sometimes, Ian and I get stoned at night and sneak into the cafeteria together and pig out.

While we're working, the only way we can take breaks is to smoke cigarettes. We dash away from the barn, because if you smoke near the dry hay, horses can go up in smoke. Ian tells me he's gay, and told not to tell anyone. I reply, I won't tell a soul.

Late one night, I had too many beers and ran off to the woods to piss. On the way back to my room, I hear a horse named Gunner trying to kick his stall door down again. Gunner is a Grey stallion. Stallions often kick the shit out of their doors, and sometimes, they escape. Gunner is worth millions. Now, due to his lack of speed, his value goes down big time. The closer I get, the more it sounds like he is going to destroy the stall door. I tiptoe over so as not to disturb him and make it worse. Bang! Bang! The stud screeches. I can tell this isn't from him kicking. I peek in through a crack and see a man repeatedly bashing Gunner's legs with a baseball bat.

I scream, "STOP ! What the hell are you doing?!" The man turns his head, busts out of the stall door, and grabs me backwards with his baseball bat across my neck. Before he's tight enough to secure the chokehold, I lunge forward, clamp my teeth on his arm, biting as hard as I can (thanks Dad, you did teach me some self defense). He starts screaming bloody murder, drops the bat, and I sprint to the woods, zig zagging through the trees.

As I'm running, I hear him yell, "What the hell do you want me to do? I'm here to kill the horse, not some kid! YOU have to go take care of her - she saw my face! I'll report..." I ran as fast as I can - I feel like I'm going to beat them. I ran to the highway, telling myself that no way will anyone catch me. The spirits of the horses are with me. They will guard me from any

## Horses Tell Us the Truth About Life on the Race-Track

enemy. I make it to the highway and crouch down out of sight. Truckers are the best ones to get rides with. They go far, and rarely stop. I wait.

No trucks yet. I think it is about 3 am. Then, I hear a big truck - an eighteen wheeler coming. I run out, waving arms, hoping it will stop - but it doesn't. I hear a car coming - it doesn't look familiar. I go and wave for a ride.