

By the Light of the Moon

The girl moved toward both horses in the corral. She raised her arms, forming a T, and talked soothingly to her own horse, Ruby. She didn't know which way they'd move, but they always moved in the same direction, together. She'd press them closer to the fence, and then separate out Ruby.

"Hi girl. We'll go on a nice ride. I know you already ate dinner. It's a night ride. See that big full moon?"

The horses moved sideways and backwards, trying to evade the girl. Buck, the more resistant one, her Dad's horse, tried to tell Ruby what to do. He whinnied highly at her, and made a dash forward and right. The girl stepped between Buck and Ruby. The fence was close behind the mare now.

"Ata girl. I love you, you beautiful sweet baby."

It seemed to her that Ruby wanted to cooperate, wanted the affection and attention—the long grooming that would come before the saddling and the ride. But she habitually avoided the contact, and of course, she listened to her equine companion, the domineering Buck.

When the girl was within arms' reach of Ruby, she was gentle yet quick. She didn't try to halter her horse because that took five seconds, long enough for Ruby to change her mind. She just wrapped the lead around her horse's neck and fastened it—like a dog's leash. First stroking the horse's muzzle, and chest, the beautiful white star on her forehead, the girl took her time working the halter around the ears and fastening it under Ruby's jaw. The girl loved the tack, the same way she loved the animal. It all delighted her. A simple green nylon harness, a blue nylon lead. 100 yards uphill at the stables, was the leather bridle with braided reins, the plaid saddle pad, the leather saddle. The girl was seventeen and had owned Ruby for exactly one year. She was delighted and still in disbelief that she had a horse of her own.

The horse coincided with her parents' separation. It was not, as her mother's lawyer suggested, bribery. She had been riding since she was eight, but owning a horse was never a possibility. She rode the stable's horses. But when her parents separated, her dad moved in with a friend in Topanga Canyon—horse country. Horses were his passion too—that's why she'd gotten lessons. Right away, he paid for the construction of the corral and stables. They found Buck and Ruby, both under strange circumstances, rescues. He wasn't trying to lure his daughter. He didn't have to. The girl spent one year with her mother. Now she was spending a year with her father. Then she'd go to college. The horse was just her good luck. She didn't mind any of the horse-related work, and she rode her every single day. The wonder of it didn't wear off.

Harnessed, Ruby gave herself over completely to the administrations. She walked up the path behind the girl, just like a dog on a leash. When Dad came down in fifteen minutes, Buck would be that much easier to catch, now that Ruby was out of the corral. The horses understood the inevitability of it too. They always were caught.

The girl liked having the extra time in the stable, grooming Ruby at her own leisurely pace. Always the same order: the left side of her neck, the bump at the base of her mane, her shoulder and chest, her back—the dustiest part, her left-side belly. The girl trailed the brush with her left hand, loving the feel of the hide, the twitch of muscle beneath. Her rump. Then the girl walked behind the horse to repeat the process on the right side of the animal. She never totally lost her fear of walking directly behind her horse, but you had to show them that you expected no kicks—that you believed in the relationship. She talked to Ruby non-stop during grooming. She'd been taught that the grooming was the foreplay to the ride. You established your bond while grooming and saddling. She'd never once ridden a horse that someone else had saddled for her. She didn't like even the thought of it. She did all four legs last. Ruby tended to stomp when her legs were brushed. They were skinny and rarely dirty, or rather that dirt was caked on and urine-splashed and would be taken care of after the ride, with a hose-down. And each hoof had to be picked too.

Each administration raised a different emotion in the girl. It was exhilarating to handle the 900 pound body of a horse, to shove the mare with her own narrow hip, to force a large animal to lift its round shod hooves, to scrape them with a pick, removing shit and rocks. It was incredible to rub her cheek on the horse's cheek, blink her human brown eye an inch from her horse's brown eye. The girl loved her horse and treated her as she had the steady-stream of dogs she'd had her whole life, like a beloved pet. Ruby responded in turn, nuzzling the girl, being caught easily, and if Buck didn't interfere—coming directly to the girl, especially if she carried green watermelon rinds for Ruby to munch on.

The dogs were in the stable with the girl already and would come on the ride. There was the mixed breed German Shepherd named Path. Shortly after moving in with his work friend, her

father had been clearing a path from behind the house, down to the newly built stable, and he noticed the skinny, stray dog watching him. Her father had spent the afternoon wooing the stray and finally feeding him dinner, and within days coaxing him to sleep on the floor in his bedroom. Path had filled out, and was exceeding well behaved, smart, handsome, affectionate, piteously loyal to her father. They all liked him so much that her father's friend decided she'd get a German Shepherd as well. Five months earlier the three of them had driven to a breeder in Granada Hills and had seen the litter. The puppies were all black with pointy ears—already cut and taped.

"Why are they all black?" The girl asked the breeder, looking at both parent dogs—which were the usual black and tan.

"They start off all black and as they age they get their tan markings."

These purebreds were much more stylized looking than Path, their mutt. With slightly rounded backs, extreme face masks, and lush tails. The parents looked like police dogs.

Her father's friend chose a sweet-natured female. They named her Tara, because she was black as tar. In the light of the full moon, the girl noticed that Tara had a lot of tan coming through now, on her face, her shoulders, the backs of her legs, and she was nearly as big as Path, would be much bigger. The dogs lay down on their bellies in the dirt and watched the girl pick the horse's hooves. Twice a year when the farrier came to re-shoe the horses, he would throw the trimmed pieces of hoof to the waiting dogs, they'd gobble them up like strips of rawhide.

Usually the girl rode alone after school, or if her father said he was coming home in time to go with her, they'd head out in the early evening. But whenever there was a full moon, they'd hold off until the moon was up, to experience the spooky, moon-walk-like ride. Their moon shadows were sharp and looming on the dirt trails, the tall sage bushes, the dry creek bed, the

distant Santa Ana Mountains. In fact, the girl often spent these entire moon rides watching her shadow, with the two shepherds moving in and out of the single shadow she and Ruby cast. Her wonder of being that girl who had her own horse, rode her horse daily, from her own backyard never waned.

Her father came down then, in his baggie faded jeans, baggie denim shirt, unbuttoned to the center of his chest, his white sneakers.

Path danced to see her father appear. She smiled too, anticipating the things he always said, over and over the same enthusiasm and pleasure in his life.

"Too bad it's such an ugly night. Ugly moon." He roughed up Path's thick neck fur, shook his head around. "This dog loves when I put on these sneakers, knows we're going riding. But on a full moon, he follows you down here, doesn't wait for me."

The girl kept petting Ruby. Her saddle was on already, but not tightened. First you cinched it on one hole, snug but not tight. The horse would blow out their belly to prevent the cinch from being made tight. Then you walked them fifty feet or so, and were able to tighten another two holes, when they were unsuspecting.

"You didn't catch Buck for me?" This was rhetorical, he was already reaching for the halter, then walking briskly down the path to the corral. He would only keep the girl waiting ten minutes; he never groomed as much as she did.

"Nope," she called after him. "He doesn't like women." The girl was in a stage where it tickled her to refer to herself as a woman. And it was true about Buck. He'd been a slaughterhouse rescue. She didn't know why the slaughterhouse kept a horse, a kind of ugly

Palomino, with a sparse main and tail, and nice Appaloosa spots on his beige rump, but they had, and he'd seen slaughter all day and for that the white's of his eyes always showed, and he skittered away from them before being caught, and he didn't like women. But he was a great ride when all was said and done. And he and Ruby had grown to be a pair, happiest loose in the corral, but energetic and responsive on the trail.

The girl followed her father downhill back to the corral, this time leading Ruby by the reins. When she neared the corral, her father had just caught Buck and was heading back up, and she quickly flipped the left stirrup over Ruby's back and tightened the cinch before the horse could think about it and expand her tummy again. The dogs followed her father back up to watch the saddling. The girl mounted Ruby and began walking her in a wide circle along the fence. They rode Western, but the girl incorporated some things from her many years of English lessons. She always mounted her on the left, rode her counter-clockwise around the ring, and lead with her inside foot, getting the horse to do the same. You couldn't properly post in the long Western stirrups so she didn't bother. The girl's one regret about Ruby is that she'd never clear a jump on her. Ruby wasn't a jumper. The girl could clear jumps her own height, 5 feet and three inches, she'd cleared up to six feet actually, a height which felt like the horse was going straight vertical, and you should be falling off it's ass, except right before you can fall, you're being tossed forward again onto it's mane. The most exhilarating feeling she'd ever known. But Ruby was no jumper. She was a rescue from an Arabian breeder who'd been kicked in the head and grown neglectful of some sixty Arabians. All were sold cheap and were on the news in Los Angeles the summer the girl and her father drove out and saw her, grossly underweight, patches of black skin where her beautiful roan red hair had fallen out, a half broken-off mane and tail. But to the girl's delight, Ruby's mane and tail grew back full, all the fur patches grew in, and the

horse gained about two hundred pounds under her loving care. It had taken two months with an abused-horse trainer, to get Ruby to allow the girl to ride her. But that had been almost all the better. She'd seen *The Black Stallion* many times, and it was her own version. Girl tames broken horse. Ruby was only fifteen hands, a great size for a petite teenage girl. Although she'd taken lessons on some massive geldings and at first frowned at Ruby's scrawniness.

She'd made about five circuits of the ring when her father came down with Buck. They wordlessly moved to the back gate of the corral, which opened out on a trailhead, and her father unlocked the gate. The dogs ran through it and headed off on the trail ahead of them. She walked through on horseback and her father walked Buck through, re-latched the gate and then tightened his saddle. Buck snorted in protest. Her father mounted him. Unlike the girl, the father didn't speak soothingly to Buck, he was more of the dominating type horseman, but he was never rough to Buck and they had mutual respect for each other.

They headed downhill on their horses, walking. For the majority of their rides they just walked, especially a full moon ride, and the places they ran or trotted were well known to all four of them. There was one uphill stretch at the end of a loop they frequently did that they affectionately called "Coyote Run." Once a long time ago they were walking up that stretch and a coyote entered the path before them and the dogs and the horses bolted in chase. The horses ran until the hill crested an exhilarating five minutes later. Both the girl and her father had grinned the whole way, dust hitting their teeth, the girl's long hair flying behind her. From then on, when they hit the spot where'd they once seen a coyote—the horses took off, unprompted, thrilling their owners each time.

They rode single file the girl in front, her body swaying back and forth in the saddle with Ruby's shifting hips. They had not yet reached the place where they needed to decide on their route. The girl hooked her reins over the saddle horn and raised both her arms up over her head. The big moon was behind her and she looked at the shadow directly in front of them. The quintessential shape of Ruby's ears, like small rabbit ears framing her head, the horse's chest and the movement of her forelegs, and the girl herself, torso and shoulders and falling hair, arms reaching for the sky, she could count all ten outstretched fingers. Ruby snorted, distrustful of the looming shadow she was forced to step on, and she was aware of the sensation of dropped reins. She tripped and immediately caught her balance. But it was enough to force the girl's hands down quickly on the horn, knees tightening around Ruby's withers, and she picked up the reins again.

"Let's ride straight up to the ridge and see the houses." Her father called from behind her.

A developer had cleared the top of one crest within Topanga Canyon and built about twenty-five new homes. It was right outside the protected canyon lands they rode in. Her father had briefly tried to obstruct the development, not wanting to see his new rugged neighborhood grow to resemble the suburban family home he'd just left in the valley. But, he'd discovered the exact terms of the protected land and its borders and he was left feeling more privileged than ever that his friend's property, now partially owned by him, abutted a permanently state-protected area. Now, he periodically wanted to spy on the progress of their less wild and less fortunate neighbors.

The girl would have objected because part of what she loved about their rides was not seeing a house or car, but once you'd crossed through the new development, the way home was a

spooky area of large flat rocks, tall sagebrush and eucalyptus trees that glowed silver in the moonlight, they'd nicknamed that area "The Desert."

"And we'll come home through The Desert?"

"Yep."

The dogs reappeared on the trail, running a figure-eight between the two horses. The larger animals had grown used to the dogs' darting movements. The girl was impressed how the dogs could explore the dark areas off the trails, at full speed, and yet always return just in time to see which route they were taking. Heading for the crest of new houses was akin to going straight. The ride thus far had been a steady downhill and now they headed back up, but still pointing away from their home.

Now that the horses knew which way they were headed they trotted up the trail, Ruby swishing her tail roughly, striking Buck's face close behind her. The girl turned around in her saddle and looked into Buck's flaring nostrils and then laughed at her father.

"Your horse is so ugly."

"He's a good boy," her father said seriously and rubbed the horse's thick neck.

"I know. He's just so neurotic."

"He's been through a lot. And I think he's handsome."

This was another repeat conversation. It was amazing how frequently they could say the same things to each other.

The girl's life in the last year had contained as many challenging adjustments as the rescued horses had undergone. She'd spent that first year with her very depressed and heavily drinking mother. And now she was living an existence full of complexities she chose to mostly ignore. The girl slept in a study, where each night she opened a sofa bed. Her father slept in a second bedroom off the living room, and his friend Janet, who had bought the house shortly before her parents' separation had the master bedroom.

The girl had known Janet since she was eight-years-old, when they'd moved to Los Angeles for her father's promotion. Janet was the only female in the general merchandising office of the large department store where her father was Vice President. And almost all the other men were gay. It had been a non-question when her Dad moved in with Janet that the relationship was platonic. Janet had been to their home dozens of times for pool parties and barbeques, along with many of the men from their unit. And the girl hated to think this way, but Janet looked like a bull-dyke. She was very overweight and masculine, and gruff and coarse to go with it, nothing like the girl's mother.

It was Janet's house, but her father was pouring money into it. Including a grand renovation of the basement, which she was told would be her living quarters. But wasn't she leaving in just under a year? She didn't question them on these matters. On her weekly dinners with her own mother, she was badgered with so many questions about the living situation and the financial arrangements that it was hard to maintain her purposeful lack of curiosity. She knew not the answers and was determined to keep it that way.

When they arrived at the top of the hill, horses' breath coming in short bursts, Ruby's neck damp with sweat, the girl was thoroughly surprised to see in the distance many lit windows.

The little hamlet was nearly complete. She could make out, in the eerie light, driveways with SUV's and cars parked in them, upstairs bedroom lights leaking through curtains, young trees in dirt circles on new front lawns. She and her father walked the horses parallel to the development, beyond an arm's throw or shouting distance, they both wrenched their heads off to the right to observe the new development while the horses walked and cooled down a bit. It looked unreal, like a stage set. The girls' school had done a production of "Our Town" that year and she remembered her classmate standing atop a ladder in front of a wooden set house, delivering her lines, to her pretend father, another classmate.

"Wow, they're done." The girl said to her real father.

"They're big houses. Not so bad. I wonder what they're going for. They can't build any more."

They were half way across the edge of the new development when they heard their dogs barking in the distance. There was often barking from them on these rides, at possibly coyotes, or rattlesnakes or even rarely a mountain lion, or just at the fun of chasing each other. But the girl felt a moment's discomfort, fearing that the dogs were in the new development, perhaps hassling a new owner's pet, or even being territorial to a person, thinking they were protecting her and her father.

But then the dogs were bounding back toward the horses, over a slight arch between the houses and the riders. She saw their dark bodies rise up and disappear again as they ran, almost like deer bounding. She may have been able to hear their hard breath or perhaps her mind just added it. Then there was a terrible sound. It was a yelp and a croak at once. It seemed to be followed by a huge silence, streaming moonlight that lit up nothing but barren land.

"Shit!" Her father said into this new silence. Her father dismounted Buck quickly and immediately Path was there, standing at her father's feet. The dog whined.

"Fuck. This isn't good." Her father walked over to the girl and handed her Buck's reins. "I'll be right back." He didn't wait for her to answer.

The girl's hands began shaking hard. She hooked her reins over the horn and slid off Ruby's left side, practically right into Buck's head. She held both horses by the reins, while they sniffed the ground, sought out a piece of grass. Her father and Path had disappeared. She realized that her eyes had been focused solely in the distance, on the houses, five hundred yards away. Now she looked in the near distance right before them. The development was landscaping all the way out to the trail they walked at the crest's edge. There was new grass and young trees in dirt circles every hundred feet or so. And as her eyes grew accustomed to the moonlit landscape, she saw that there were three-foot tall sprinkler heads every twenty feet or so.

The sound they heard was still sharp and clear in her ears, only two minutes had passed. A yelp and a croak, and now the girl realized she'd heard a crunch too. She began crying.

"Dad!"

"I'm over here. Dammit! I just found her." His voice was choked with distress.

"I'm coming! Where are you?" She began walking, pulling the two horses behind her. She had an image of placing the hurt dog over Buck's saddle, gently walking her home.

"Don't come over here, Rachel!"

The girl stopped, waited for more. She heard her father crying. "Oh, fuck," he cried, "I'm sorry sweet baby."

"Dad? Did she impale herself on a sprinkler?"

"Aw. Fuck." He straightened up now, and she could see her father clearly in the moonlight, fifty feet away from her. Path ran one full circle around her father and presumably Tara's body, then stood by his master. The girl could see that they were both facing away from her and the horses, looking at the houses again.

"I can't get her body off the sprinkler. I'm gonna have to walk to those houses and get help and call Janet to come pick her up." He was facing away as he said this, but she had no trouble making out his sad, quiet words.

Her father had never been a hesitant man. He began walking off toward the houses before she could answer him.

She leaned on Ruby and stroked her mane and neck, wishing she could remove the saddle and lean over her back and cry. She looked at the stars and the big, round moon. She pictured the doorbell, a tiny illuminated moon her father would have to ring. And then say to these enemy invaders, "May I use your phone? I've had an accident, my dog just died." She could picture everything. Him standing in someone's new kitchen, using their wall phone, the beige phone ringing in their own adobe house, Janet answering. Her father asking the gentleman for the names of the streets, the route to take from Canon Road and Topanga Canyon Road. The girl knew how curt and uncompassionate Janet would be. How angry.

In what seemed an unnaturally short amount of time, she heard her father's voice and then saw two men approaching. Her father was leading the other man to the spot. She heard their voices.

"Jesus. What a mess. This is awful." Her father never said 'Jesus,' he said "Shit and "Fuck." Jesus was the other guy. Then they were crouching and grunting, and the girl could only imagine how they lifted the dog off the pole, how the sprinkler slid out from between her long ribs.

When they'd laid the dog down in the dirt and stood, letting their dirty hands dangle at their sides, the man looked out across the landscape, right at her, holding the two horses, and the great wilderness behind her, that he would never walk or ride.

"It's dark out here." He said to them, a recrimination.

She had never once felt it was dangerously dark on their full moon rides.

Then the silver Ford truck came slowly along the brand new paved road of the development. The girl watched its large square headlights take the bend and creep to a stop in front of what must have been this man's house.

Janet stepped down from the cab and slammed the door and then just leaned there, against the truck. The girl's father would come to her, her posture said.

She leaned against the truck there with her arms folded, too far away for the girl to see her expression, but the girl knew well the purse of her lips, her raging eyes. The girl suddenly knew that her father was over his head in this. The house, the woman, even the horses and dogs and the full moon rides. In the light of the moon, the girl knew her father's vulnerabilities like she never had before. He was trying to figure it out, while it was all pushing him toward something, life. She wished he didn't have to walk over there and deal with his angry friend.

"We're over here." Her father called. But he began walking toward Janet, and the girl knew he'd make it all the way there. When he reached Janet, she walked to the back of the truck and lowered the gate. She removed a large plaid blanket and followed her father. The girl could tell they didn't exchange any words.

It would have been Janet who would have thought to bring a blanket to wrap the dead dog in. She was raised on a farm in Montana, whereas the girl and her father had both been raised in cities. Janet was the native to this life-style, they were the newcomers to horses, to night rides, to canyons, to retrieving dead dogs.

The two men carried Tara to the truck and Janet walked back with them, the blanket still folded in her thick arms, her chin tucked in. She had every right to be furious, and sad. This was her puppy above theirs. Before they could lay the body in the truck, Janet said, "Wait." The word carried to the girl, who was done crying, but still shaking from the whole experience. Janet spread the blanket on the truck bottom with care. When they lay the dog down, Janet must have folded her into the blanket, wrapped her. The girl saw all this from quite a distance and in profile, and it looked for all the world like a stage set beneath the bright lamppost of the driveway, a place where only moonlight had been just a short time before.

Janet murmured something else, and her father opened the passenger door of the cab and ordered Path to jump in. Path hesitated, but obeyed. Then Janet got in and without goodbyes drove the two dogs home.

Her father reached her minutes later.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." But her voice broke into tears again. Holding one set of reins in each hand, she wrapped her arms around her dad's waist. He hugged her around the shoulders and he began crying.

"I'm so sorry, Dad."

She wished she could protect her father from what she'd first seen here in the moonlight. That he wasn't in perfect control of everything he touched. That the world he lived in was only partially lit, and with many trails that led off into darkness.