

Guardian at the Gate

What happened to George Allen? How did he miss? Hey, he was a deacon, sang in the choir, made a big to-do about the size of his..uh, tithes. I couldn't believe the "situation" with the purple-haired teacher from West Virginia should make a difference.

"This is the deal," said Mr. Lewis, my supervisor, abruptly bumping into my thoughts. "You have a fine grandson, Charlie. Fourteen this year. This is your opportunity to help, to earn your wings. Earlene tries to help, but let's face it, she's on her way here; she's old. Lana, is working day and night to make a living for her kid, but he needs a 'guardian angel' to take up the slack."

Was he getting around to that this was my opportunity to atone for transgressions from my earth days. Had I been all that bad, really? I thought I'd been pretty good. I drank a little, played cards some, lost my paycheck a time or two, but for the most part, decent. Watching my language was my biggest crime, but I wasn't all that bad.

The idea of 'guardian angel' sounded good. A complete paygrade higher than regular angel. After nine years, I hadn't even made 'angel'. Yes, sir, 'guardian angel' sounded fine. Especially fine, since I would have a chance to see my wife, Earlene, and the chance to be reacquainted with the boy.

"What am I supposed to be like, I mean when I get back on earth?"

"Well, Charlie, you get to play an important part in their lives."

"I know I can't be myself anymore. Who can I be?"

"Charlie, you will be a friend of the family and an important mentor to the boy."

"What does that mean —a friend and mentor?"

“Charlie, “Mr. Lewis stroked his long white beard, “you will come back as the boy’s horse.”

“A **HORSE!**”

“Oh, come on, Mr. Lewis, you have got to be sh—kidding me, right?”

“No, Charlie, think about it. What an opportunity to be a friend, a companion. This will be a learning experience for the boy. He’ll have the chance to learn responsibility, working and caring for a horse, while you’d have the chance to work and care for him.”

“Mr. Lewis, a border collie dog would be great for the farm. He’d be a companion, and a wonderful help with chores.” *Also, a chance to sleep in the house.* I was moving toward desperate. My voice slid up the scale, an octave at least, the way it always did when I was nervous or upset.

“Charlie, you’d be a greater advantage to our goals if you were a horse.” Mr. Lewis nodded with a sage smile.

All I could think of was Mr. Ed—a long time ago. What I recalled was a horse that moved his mouth like he had a plug of Copenhagen. He had looked stupid to me even in my earth days. “Oh please, Mr. Lewis, not a horse.”

“Charlie, you are going to be a horse!”

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Here I am back in the same pasture where I raised feeder calves. How I got here I don’t rightly know, not the details anyway. I think the general overview of this situation is that a neighbor gave this horse, Mischief, to Earlene. He wanted someone to ride and take care of his son’s old horse, so they thought he would be good for my grandson, Joe,

Jr. or J. J. we called him. I knew Earlene would worry about paying for hay and feed, but the neighbor was going to cover that.

Now what do I do? Why do I have to be an old horse? My feet hurt bad enough in the old days. Now I have twice as many, and I'm going to have to carry somebody around on top of it. Lord help me, somehow I know this isn't going to work. Mr. Lewis tells me the Lord is helping and it's going to work, but I sure don't know how.

On my first day back, it looked to be about the middle of October. It was warm, though, for this time of year. Great. Perfect storm weather. The sky was the face of a battered wife—swollen black blotches edged with small islands of pink dotted here and there. The air was fairly humming with heat waiting for the storm to break. The smell of ozone thick in the air.

A lanky boy walked through the old metal gate and shifted it upward where it still didn't quite fit the latch. He didn't look anything like the little boy I left nine years ago. This was not the round-faced child with big brown eyes and fluffy yellow hair. This was a sullen faced teenager with longish dirty blond hair, baggy jeans, and a loose oversized tee shirt falling down around skinny shoulders. What was happening here? No wonder Mr. Lewis was concerned!

So, you're my new horse, huh?" He edged around me keeping a pretty good distance, watching with a wary appraising look. I suddenly realized I could watch him out of the sides of my eyes; no glasses sliding down my nose or anything.

"You aren't the prettiest thing I've ever seen. Those ears look like a mule's" What did he mean muley ears? There's no way I could check this out, either. I didn't think my old ones were too bad, but that was before. He walked around behind me giving me a

slap on the butt, rump I guess it is now. I'd like to do the same to him, but I couldn't manage it. Man, I might have signed on for a tougher job than I thought.

He walked to the barn where I used to keep corn and hay for my heifers and pulled out a good-sized flake of hay for me. Hmm, it was pretty good grass hay, not the kind I used to grow, but not bad. A little orchard grass, a little clover. I guess if I were going to be a horse at least I would be eating okay.

"The guy who brought you over said that you were getting pretty fat, being as how you aren't ridden or worked much. He said we're going to have to take you off grain, at least until later in the winter. Of course, I guess I'll be riding you some. You won't be as fast as a four-wheeler." He gave me that sideways stare again. It sounded like I really was going to be in for it if I had to compete with a four-wheeler, whatever that was.

"Well, lets try you out and see what you can do." Charley went back to the barn and dragged out an old Western saddle. It was a little moldy and dusty, but the leather looked in decent shape but, oh golly, did that cinch ever hurt when he jerked it up tight. Why did I ever make fun of poor Earlene when she fought with skintight jeans?

We started out over the field behind the house. The day was warm, seems I had already started a winter coat, but walking along wasn't too bad. We started out through the old wagon road through the woods down toward the creek. The leaves had turned already, and I could smell the oak leaves, the woody smoke smell that meant winter was coming. Then Charlie sort of pushed at me with his heels, and I started to trot a little. Well, that wasn't too bad either, until he jammed his feet into my sides, and "Hell" he hit me with a stick that I hadn't noticed before.

So, what could I do, I pulled my head down between my front legs and flung my back legs out behind me about as far as I could without throwing out a disc. I came up in the air (this was really kinda fun) and threw that smart-ass kid about three feet up in the air.

I turned my head slowly; I hope I hadn't done too much damage. J.J. sat on the ground looking a little dazed, but he was a tough kid. He jumped up madder than a wet hen. He jutted out his jaw and lit into me with words flying a mile a minute and spit spraying out of his mouth with every word. *Language, buddy, going to end up like Grandpa.*

"You ornery piece of dog food. I'll show you that you can't do this." He kicked the toe of one Nike into the ground. He grabbed the fallen stick and started toward me. I don't know what I'd have done if he had hit me with it. I guess it would have been all out war then.

"If my dad, Joe, was here, and I didn't have to live with a bunch of old women, I'd bet I'd get a decent four-wheeler to ride. Who would want a broken down, old fat brown horse. All my friends will fall out when they see what I have to ride." Tears of frustration and rage welled in his eyes, and he took the stick and snapped it between his long dirt-stained fingers.

"Dad will come back from wherever he went with that Wanda woman, and he'll send you to the killers. I don't think even the Alpo people would want you, though."

I could tell he was plenty pissed, but since we were still a pretty good piece from the house, it looked like he had made up his mind to give this riding business another try. He pulled himself back up into the saddle, and we moved back toward the house.

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She stood by the gate, a straw garden hat in her hand. Bless her; she looked no older than she did nine years ago. When we got a little closer, I could see she looked awfully tired. I know that it had been a struggle trying to keep everything together for Lana and Joe, Jr., especially since that crazy son of mine had run off with the waitress with the big ass from the truck stop.

Her hand rested on top of the gate. Her knuckles were swollen with arthritis, but the bones in her hands were as long and elegant as they'd been as the girl I'd married. She looked up at the boy with the same large luminous brown eyes, even though the creases in the corners were carved more deeply than I remembered. She watched her fine young grandson astride the handsome bay horse (that was me) with a look of pride and contentment.

I arched my neck and tossed my head. She reached out and scratched the bony part in the front of my head between my eyes, just about the same place where my glasses used to rub the skin. Man, that really felt good. A little to the left, a little to the right, now behind my left ear. This wasn't going to be too bad, maybe not.

"That's a fine horse, isn't it, J.J?" She seemed more than a little proud of both of us, the fine young warrior on his gleaming trustworthy mount.

"He's a piece of crap."

Her face raw with disappointment, she tried again. "I think with a little time and effort, he will be a great horse for the farm and for you to ride this summer.

"If my dad were here, I could have something cool to ride, a four-wheeler, motor bike or something."

Earlene turned toward the house, making her way quite stiffly. Whether it was arthritis or despair, I don't rightly know. I wanted to dump the kid again. Man, I was never going to earn my wings with this attitude.

J.J. pulled that saddle off my back. He didn't even brush the dust that lay under that saddle or wipe off the sweat. I knew my job was cut out for me, but I didn't know how I was going to get it done. It was a good thing I was a horse. I could be turned out in the pasture, spend a little time grazing, and get my thoughts together.

When the storm broke it was a 'heller'. The rain blew in harsh gray sheets that about knocked the wind right out of me. Since I couldn't exactly run to the house, I walked around to the barn aisle where I hoped to wait it out. The old barn moaned and creaked. I knew it was sound—it was good solid hickory, but it needed work. It looked like the metal roof was starting to leak in a place or two, but that could've been the hard rain blowing in under a few loose places.

A low growling mew and a soft heavy thump against my leg greeted me as a fat black tom cat with a white tuxedo mark on his chest twined himself around and through my legs, all four of them. Rubbing his head back and forth, he purred like crazy. It was my old stray tom, Lucky. A scrawny abandoned kitten who showed up one day and ate his way to linebacker proportions. Actually, I think he might have recognized me. It was either that or he was just so darned glad to have company there in the barn that he didn't care who it was.

Toward dusk, the clouds rolled out, and the air turned clean and cold. The kid came back out and threw down a little hay and filled my water bucket. He didn't seem happy to do it, but at least he managed. The next morning the neighbor came over to

show him how to clean my feet, how much grain I should eat, when I was allowed to eat grain again, and other basic things like that. J.J. acted as if he'd caught on to the general idea.

For the next few days, he did all right. He fed and watered me regularly, cleaned out a stall for when the weather got bad, and even cleaned my feet. A time or two he made a smart remark about all the work. It was at those times that I was inclined to plant one of those feet on his backside, but I put that thought right out of my mind. ("Did you hear that, Mr. Lewis?")

Just as I thought I was getting into the schedule around this place, here comes this kid, Casey. This boy looked like a walking fishing lure. He had pins in his nose, pins in his ears, and even a couple on his mouth and eyebrows. Man, I had never seen anything that looked like this outside a hardware store. Was this a real kid? Just think of the damage a magnet could do. To top it off, he had his head roached. His hair looked like the mane of the old mule that my daddy used to plow with when I was a kid. It was just razored up and down and on the sides.

Casey was riding a four-wheeler, now I knew what that was, when he pulled up at the fence. "Is this your ride, man?" He looked at me like I was a big piece of garbage, and I looked at him like he was something nasty that I would love to squash under my feet. Just give me my chance. He scooted sideways and pulled out a pack of Camels and lit one. *Better watch where you throw that match, buddy. This is a barn with hay.* He exhaled a big puff of smoke right toward my face, and then he turned and offered one to J. J.

“No, thanks.” J.J. gave a little embarrassed laugh, that seemed to hang in his throat like he didn’t want to take his buddy up on the offer but didn’t want to make him mad either. I was proud of the kid, not giving in. You know that there had to be some good stuff there. What I couldn’t quite understand was why the women were letting him run around with scum like this. This kid looked weird, and he acted like nothing I let my own son hang around with. I could see that what he needed was the firm hand of a man around the place. Now if that man had to be a horse, then so be it.

We settled into a routine of sorts, the kid and me. He took to going for a ride most afternoons after school. We’d go out in the fields, down through the woods by the old cemetery, and back along the old creek where I used to fish, mostly in the spring. What I didn’t care so much for was when his friends came. Casey was pretty bad with his funny hair and his cigarettes. There was another dough faced kid with a swagger to his walk and hair like bad boar bristles, Shawn something or other. Both together were hard to take with their cigarettes, sneery voices, and boasting to J.J. of their exploits, real and imagined, now that they were in the eighth grade.

Shawn looked too much like the guy in Jefferson who used to sell junk cars at inflated prices to folks who were one step above welfare. This round-faced car fellow had the same boar bristle hair and sallow pitted skin. Come to think of it, though, last I remembered, he had less hair on his head and more in his ears, but they looked a whole lot alike. Must be related.

What bothered me most, I guess, was when they would all go off together, and all I could do was just stand there and wait by the gate. I couldn’t go any further— just stand and wait.

It was a pretty good fall, though, all things considered. The weather warmed back up. The days were mild and sunny. It was warm all through deer season up through Thanksgiving. I knew it was Thanksgiving because I got two apples in the middle of the day, and Lucky got a plate of left over turkey and dressing. I looked at that turkey a long time. Just couldn't believe I seemed to have lost my taste for stuff like that. It was hard for me to believe that I could change so much in some ways and not others.

The boy was working out better than I thought for a horse caretaker. He hauled water, cleaned the stall, groomed, fed, and seemed pretty cheerful about it all, but one afternoon he really outdid himself with the grooming thing. Late in the afternoon, J.J. started in with the grooming thing just brushing, currying, and rubbing. I thought I was going to lose some hide he was going at it so strong.

“Horse, mama's got a new guy. Fred Henry, the mail carrier, is taking her to some fancy place for dinner. I can't figure out why he thinks that's going to impress her. You'd think a woman of her age would have better sense. He brushed and huffed. Grandma had more sense. She never started running out, dating and stuff, after Granddad died.”

Of course, his grandma would have more sense. How on earth could she find another me? The kid seemed upset. It was bound to happen, I guess. Lana had been a pretty girl, and she was a pretty woman, slim with curly blonde hair and violet eyes. She was much too young to spend her life working at Wal-Mart, taking care of my wife, helping to take care of the farm, raising her son, with nothing left for her.

By the next fall, things were working out well. Lana and Fred were dating on a regular basis. He was getting things done around the farm that the girls just hadn't been able to do. Most of the cropland was rented out to the neighbor. Even with J.J.'s help, and

he had turned out to be a good hand, there was still too much to do. There was just more maintenance than there used to be—fences to be scraped and painted, the old pasture to be bushhogged, roof repairs to be made, and a few remaining fruit trees to be pruned. Fred was teaching J.J. a lot of the things that I hadn't gotten around to doing, and his dad hadn't hung around to try. Between the two of us, I was beginning to think we could get this boy raised right.

His choice of friends hadn't improved at all, though. He was still hanging out with Shawn and Casey, and they certainly hadn't made any changes for the better. After school, they would race through the fields on their four-wheelers jumping ditches, bouncing over rocks, and making the worst noise. We, on the other hand, were slow and quiet. We didn't do anything fancy or loud—no fancy spins, slides, or wheelies. We would ride along, looking at the sky, the woods, and the trees. Occasionally, I would canter for a short way until I started getting a little wheezy. I was improving though, especially as the weather got a little cooler. I was getting in a lot better shape than I had ever been. The days were warm— although they were a little cool in the morning, but not nearly as cool as the year before. The sun was shining quite a bit because we hadn't had much rain at all. We just had day after day of sunny breezy dry weather.

The day of the fire was not a lot different. The last two weeks were still dry, but it had turned off a bit cool. The leaves and hickory nuts crunched underfoot. What leaves still left on the trees were curled brown fists. The idiot guys were varooming and zooming here, there, and everywhere. J.J. and I poked along enjoying the ride; I was, anyhow. My saddlebags, stuffed with drinks and food, were thumping and drumming against my sides, but since I wasn't moving too fast, it wasn't unpleasant.

When we stopped to eat, we were in a large hay field at the edge of a wooded area about an hour or so from home. I was contentedly grazing on a few remaining green patches while the boys propped against hay rolls and ate the food from the saddlebags.

“Hey, guys, look what I got from the old man’s fridge.” Casey yanked a six-pack of beer out of a bag on his four-wheeler and then another. Shawn and Casey each grabbed a beer, but J.J. looked darned uncomfortable.

“No, man, I promised Mom since Dad had so much trouble with the stuff.”

“Sure, mommy won’t let her little baby touch the nasty stuff.” Shawn’s sullen face looked even pastier in the bright daylight, with one side of his mouth wrapped over his cigarette. He pulled out a cigarette for Casey, lit it for him and pitched the match to the side.

“Naw, I just said that’s all, doesn’t mean I won’t ever, but I just told her for now.”

They sat smoking and drinking beer and telling a bunch of crap about what they had done or were going to do. They would sip beer and smoke their cigarettes. After a while they quieted down, thank heavens. I went back to grazing and enjoying the peace and quiet.

“What the hell!” Shawn screamed as he looked off into the distance.

Smoke plumed upwards from one of the hay rolls.

“Was it a match you didn’t put out?” Casey’s face was contorted in anger and fear.

In only minutes, the hay rolls were up in flames. Great. Here we were several miles from the nearest house and half the county about to go up in flames. The boys stood transfixed locked in fear, watching the fire eat the brittle sun-dried blades of hay. Their

terror-filled eyes were fixed as if they were trapped rabbits or woods animals with no shelter. The flames ate steadily upward. The breeze blew a few sparks of fire that began to lick their way across the field. I punched J.J. hard in the back with a quick shove of my head. We had to act.

“Guys, we need to get out of here. “We need to get help,” J.J. turned to grab me.

The guys jumped on their four-wheelers and horse to ride to a house across the field. They could barely make it out for the wall of smoke. It was a small, weathered farmhouse, but it was locked up tighter than a drum. No cars were in the weed-grown driveway, only a small rusty tricycle and a scrawny brown and white mongrel dog.

“If we head straight through the woods, we could call the Jefferson fire station from our house,” J.J. said.

“Yeah, we could make it in 20 or 25 minutes,” Casey answered.

At first it wasn't so bad. I was running pretty well. The four-wheelers crashed through the underbrush and through the dry creek bed. Casey let out a horrified squeal when he ran into a web of abandoned barbed wire fence.

“You guys go around by the road. Mischief and I can jump this little bitty fence and go straight to our house..”

What did he mean “him and Mischief”? He didn't have to do any jumping.

“Oh, Mr. Lewis, I'm going to kill myself trying to do this.”

“You're going to do **what?** How do you suppose that can happen? Give it a rest Charlie, jump!”

I backed up as far as I could, got a good run at that sucker, closed my eyes and jumped. What do you know? I landed on the other side with nothing broken, nothing torn, and I could keep going.

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The Jefferson fire department, after a long and weary battle, contained the flames to the hayfield and a strip of the woods beyond.

One good thing was that Shawn and Casey quit coming around since they were all told they had to take responsibility for the damage, which their parents fought long and hard. J.J. wouldn't have had time to hang out with them, anyway. He was too busy helping put up hay, strip tobacco, and any odd job he could get to earn money to pay for his part of the burned hayfield.

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“Horse, I want to show you my high school diploma. You don't know what that is, but it has been a lot of work for me. I hate to admit this, but when I leave for college, I probably will even miss you. Maybe more than my car.” I didn't know whether to be mad or glad. Mad because he took me for a total idiot. Glad because now I might rate somewhere close to a car. Also, I felt a sense of loss. Here this kid was, grown, smart, ready to start a new life, and he didn't need me anymore.

“Mr. Lewis, I guess that when this summer is over my job will finally be finished. It has taken four years, but you were right. There won't be anything left for me to do but to hang around the pasture, waiting at the gate. So, I guess, it's time for me to come back.”

“Well, you know, Charlie, they are starting a horse care program for inner city kids in Nashville and ---“

“No, Mr. Lewis, nooooooo!”

“If you want to be a real Guardian Angel, Charlie, it seems to me that you’d want to have more experience than with just one kid. This will be a wonderful opportunity for you, and well, frankly, since you have done so much better than I ever expected...”