

A Fool and His Horse (3940 words)

Specialist Johnny Doolittle needed no nickname, but soldiers are nothing if not cruel and creative, and they called him Doctor Special. He was a loopy kid, jumpy eyes, a smirking goon that epitomized the Gomer Pyle type for me. When I took command, Doolittle was no trouble at all—nothing more than a blip on the radar—until I got a call in my office.

I was expecting my boss because Human Resources told him I put in for a transfer. My wife and I were in the middle of a nasty divorce and the looming custody battle over Hannah, our beautiful, blonde-headed six-year-old. My head wasn't in the Company Commander game.

"Hello. Captain Riley speaking."

"Good morning, Captain Riley. This is Lindsey Callahan calling from the Equestrian Riding Club on post." She said it in a nasal trumpet. I pictured paper hands and bouncy blue veins.

"The Equestrian? The horse riding place?"

"Yes. That's right, Captain Riley. I understand you have a soldier by the name of Specialist Doolittle?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, he has not paid his dues. And no one rides the horse, or comes by to feed her or brush her, and we've had to muck out her stall ourselves for the past month and half, Mr. Riley."

"You're talking about Specialist Doolittle? Johnny Doolittle?"

"Yes, sir. His horse—Madam Helsinki—has not been provided for, financially or otherwise."

"Madam Helsinki?"

"Yes, sir. That's his horse."

"I don't." I rubbed my forehead, eyes closed. "Are you sure this is Specialist John Doolittle we're talking about?"

"Yes. Something needs to be done about his horse."

"He has a horse? At your riding center on post?"

"Yes, sir. Madam Helsinki." She sounded impatient. A horse, for chrissake. A Specialist. With a horse.

"Ok," I said.

"The rent is due for Madam Helsinki's stall again. And we're going to have to keep feeding her, brushing her, and mucking the stall." I could not picture this lady, this voice, mucking out a horse stall.

"I'll get to the bottom of it," I said. "Can I get your contact information?"

“Mr. Riley,” the trumpet whining in crescendo now, “we *cannot* keep providing for Specialist Doolittle’s horse.”

“Yes ma’am. I understand. We’ll come by today and see what needs to be done. Thank you for the call.”

I talked to the First Sargent, who began shaking his head almost before I started speaking. A broad-shouldered man, stubborn shadow clinging to the lower half of his face, he had spent the last few years hard-boiling in Iraq, perfecting his squash-you-flat policies.

“The battalion’s not going to pay for this horse,” First Sargent Clive said. “There’s no money set aside for company horses. This is not a Civil War Calvary Squadron.”

“Of course,” I said. “Have you ever run into anything like this before?”

Still shaking his head, eyes bulging sightlessly at the ground between my feet.

“There’s got to be,” I said, “an obscure relief system in place—”

“No,” he said. “This is not a horse buying business. Not a Union scout platoon. This is the business of killing.”

“I’m going over there today with Doolittle.” At the mention of Doolittle, his eyes bulged further. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“This—” he frowned, eyes lasering into the patch of earth between my feet, “we’re not buying, we’re not—Civil War...”

He had hold of this Civil War metaphor, and I left him to it, afraid he might snap, march off, and strangle Specialist Doolittle.

I picked Doolittle up at the maintenance bay. He sat in the passenger seat texting, and me trying to drill some wisdom into his head. He smiled so hard, his smile, I realized, was an irremovable mask. Even if his mouth wasn’t engaged, his whole face drew up and up to his muscular rocks-for-cheeks. It looked uncomfortable, almost painful. One of the first things he said when he got in the car was that he had Fifteen Grand in the bank. I guess he said it to impress me and to prove that he could pay for this horse. It was impressive, if was true.

“You’ve got \$15000 in the bank? Ok. You’ve got your phone out texting, why don’t you call your bank on speakerphone right now and check your account?”

He looked over at me, the stone smile and amber eyes, then looking back at his phone. He kept texting for a second. “I’ll give them a call.”

He dialed, and it rang twice.

“Hello, you’ve reached Southeast Haven Bank. How may I direct your call?”

"Yes," said Doolittle, "You may direct me to check my account balance." I rolled my eyes.

"One moment please," the sound of typing. "What is your name, sir?"

"John Doolittle."

"Joohhnn" ...*the banging of keys*... "You said Doolittle?" ... "And your full social?"

He answered a myriad of security questions, making me question the security of my own bank. His full social, his address, the name of the street he grew up on, his wife's maiden name, the name of his first pet. I was getting a private, gratuitous rummage inside the life of Doctor Special.

Finally, the voice on the other end said, "You have, fifteen thousand dollars, and" she hesitated, "eighty-seven cents in your account, Mr. Doolittle."

Doolittle beamed, eyes doing a four-point zigzag to me before looking back at the phone in his lap. "Thank you, ma'am, that will be all. Have a nice afternoon."

Fifteen thousand on the dot! I had a fraction of that in savings.

"Well," I said. "You do have the money." I cut a glance at him. "Now you just need to start paying your bills."

He was more talkative after that, speaking in short declarative lines, almost verse, and it was like I could see the phrases forming, one after the other, stringing on spontaneously about random Company business, or the FRG meetings, or about Madam Helsinki.

The Equestrian Center was a Cubist collage of peaked red tiles and round windows in stucco. Behind it, the stable stretched in a long, wooden row.

"Let's see this horse of yours, Doolittle."

He led me inside the long wooden building smelling of horses and hay, a dusty path running between the horse stalls. Near the middle, over a cedar plank reading *Madam Helsinki* in white cursive, protruded the enormous, soft white nose of Madam Helsinki herself. I followed the nose up the wide nostrils, the trapezoid jaw, to the black eyes of Madam Helsinki, gazing as if we were mammals yet unseen, not a curiosity but only a vague distaste.

"Hello, Madam," Doolittle said, petting her nose, which she accepted with only a half-hearted jerk backwards.

"That's a pretty horse, Doolittle," I said. "A little skinny, though. And she could use a brushing. And her stall smells, well, horrible."

"Gentlemen." The voice from the phone. A pear-shaped woman, nearly brushing the stalls on either side with her hips and streaks of gray in her hair, moving toward us.

Mrs. Callahan would not let us leave until we'd mucked out the stall and paid for feed and housing. She handed us pitchforks and talked while we scrapped at the tacky, half dried and the shriveled, hockey puck fully dried. Madam Helsinki watched through the little window from the fenced area behind the facility.

While Mrs. Callahan was talking, I realized who she was, the Garrison Commander's wife, *The General Callahan*, a one-star general in charge of the entire post. I remembered from somewhere that he was supposedly a lover of horses. I prayed that Mr. and Mrs. Callahan did not talk much about what they each did at work.

When Doolittle turned out his pockets to find nothing, of course—none of his \$15000, I coughed up \$50 to the general's wife, glaring at Doolittle as she counted the stack of tens and fives. His smile was like the shield of Achilles.

In my car, the sun now a pitiful pink pit in West, I said, "I'm driving to the ATM, and I'm watching you take out \$100 of your \$15000. You're going to pay me back the 50, and tomorrow, you're going to take the other 50 straight over to Mrs. Callahan."

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eyes, his face as unaffected as flattened dough.

I stood behind him at the ATM, arms crossed, thinking of how I would tell little Hannah that I, her daddy, had come home late because of a work problem. At least one parent should make effort to raise this child. Her little pigtails would swing as she nodded, not understanding a word.

I was getting cold, and it was getting dark. "What's the hold up, Doolittle?"

"Sir," he said, still facing the ATM, "I don't have \$15000. I don't have a bank account."

"What?" jarred from my thoughts, this more pressing unpleasantness replacing the one in my head. "I heard you call your bank."

"Sir, I," he scratched his face. From behind him, I could still see the cheeks straining. "That was my wife, sir."

"Who was your wife? The teller?" Then I understood. The texting, the security questions, the hesitation in her voice, the smiling Doolittle. *The fifteen thousand on the dot!*

I began shaking my head like First Sargent Clive. "You're telling me," I said, "that you lied to an officer and that your wife was impersonating a bank teller?"

"Auh, yes sir. That is what I am telling you."

We drove back in silence. I'll write him up, send this absurd, tragedy of a report up to higher, tell Clive and let Clive just rain the fire and brimstone. I want to be there to watch, I thought. What a

preposterous, posing clown Doolittle was! I caught him looking at me, his eyes no longer bouncing like pinballs. I dropped him off without a word. Let him sweat.

The next day, on top of everything else, I got word that Specialist Doolittle was 'medically unfit for deployment.' He'd be an angry red excel box on the spreadsheet when I presented my slides to Battalion.

As I was typing, documenting the fiasco with Madam Helsinki and the lying to an officer, just picturing how the guys at Battalion would laugh and pass this around, I got a knock on my door. Speak of the devil.

"Sir," he said. "I just wanted to tell you personally, sir, that I will go over to the hospital and fix the mistake on my medical today, sir."

"You should have checked that sooner," I said. He couldn't even keep his eyes fixed in front of him. They tracked like magnets, slowly moving across the back wall, down to my face, rebounding straight ahead. Maybe he was medically unfit somehow. "At ease, Doolittle. Have a seat."

He settled comfortably in the armchair and whipped out his phone.

"Doolittle, phone away."

He put it away, smiling.

"Doolittle, do you need to tell me anything?" I let that air out.

"Is there something going on at home? We can, Doolittle, there's company assets and there's Army programs that can help you, with whatever it is going on in your life."

He crossed his legs. "Sir, there's nothing going on."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Because this is your chance to tell me." His eyes were drifting across the wall. "Is everything ok with your wife?"

"Oh, yes sir. Everything is good at home."

"So this medical thing?" I asked.

"I'll take care of it," he said. "It's just an admin mistake."

I nodded. "Did you go over to the Equestrian place yet?"

"No, sir. I'm going over lunch."

I nodded. "Make sure you do."

He stood up.

"Get that medical back up today."

I wrote up a recommendation for Specialist John Doolittle to be separated from the Army. One more screw-up, and I'd send it. I'd send it and sleep like a baby.

There was, as First Sargent Clive told me emphatically, no money for Madam Helsinki. Doolittle missed his next payment, and Mrs. Callahan told her husband, who gave my boss an ear-full, who made a special trip to my office, unannounced, storming through the Company headquarters while soldiers jumped to attention all around him. They, waiting to hear a 'carry on' and never hearing it, rigidly at attention until he was out of sight, sheepishly returning to their duties.

I called in my four Lieutenants, my young, brave, poor naïve Lieutenants. I told them, absolutely no pride left in my body, the sob story of Madam Helsinki. It would be a joint custody affair between the five officers, only until I found a buyer for Madam Helsinki. I'd pay the lion's share, but I'd need the Lieutenants to chip in and help me care for the horse. The post commander had become personally invested in the situation, it seemed, and he'd be checking up on this orphan, this Madam Helsinki. Sargent Clive got immense pleasure from this arrangement, seeing an officer run off to muck out the stall every day. "There goes another young Calvary scout," he'd say.

Saturday, I took Hannah to see Madam Helsinki. Madam Helsinki's nose emitted sweet-smelling flares into the stale morning. I held Hannah up, the heels of her bright rubber rainboots digging into my stomach, so she could pet Madam Helsinki. She giggled. She hadn't seen her mother in a week.

"Daddy, is Madam Helsinki ours?"

"Yes, sweetie," I said. This horse was as much ours as anything could belong to anyone.

"Can I ride her?" Hannah asked.

"Of course you can, Pigeon." I took the horse's leather bridal off the hook, as I'd seen Mrs. Callahan do when we mucked out the stall.

Madam Helsinki gave only the obligatory trouble, champing the bit, making sure I was serious. I opened the stall and brought Madam Helsinki out, and with one hand on the bridle, I reached down and lifted Hannah up onto the horse's back. She clapped and dug her fingers into the mane, little rubber boots dangling against the horse's curved ribs, little twitches playing across the horse's skin like it sensed gnats.

"Hang on tight, Hannah." I led Madam Helsinki, head dipping on her strong neck, outside and into the fenced area.

The grass was white with frost, a glittering ring like quartz around the pond, the pale mirror of gold. The three of us walked, my shoes crunching in the frozen grass, Hannah above me on the horse. I had a vision of her just then, an older girl in a round helmet, blonde hair flowing behind, with a riding crop and bent low over the horse and bobbing as it galloped.

"Daddy," she said, "does Mommy like horses?"

"I'm not sure, Pigeon. I know she liked dogs." *Likes dogs*, I thought. The horse snorted and dipped her head.

"Does she want to come riding with us?"

I squinted towards the sun, still rising bright over the bare trees.

"Hannah," I said. The moment was here. "Sweetie, Mommy doesn't want to go riding with us." The words were out, and I had just broken down and said the truth, the worst thing I could have said.

I looked up and saw her smooth white face shifting, breaking up in lines, already red and tears welling up.

"Is Mommy," her face a full red thunderstorm now. She sniffed powerfully. "Does mommy not like us anymore?"

I felt a warmth in my eyes and a blurring. Struggling for my happy voice, I said, "Mommy is just busy right now." I knew this wouldn't hold up, wasn't the reality Hannah would be grappling with her entire childhood, so I said, "Mommy met another guy, one she likes more than daddy," and I had to turn away, towards the sun again, blinking.

Hannah said nothing, the puzzle in her mind, at least for now, well enough formed.

We walked the perimeter until Hannah had forgotten about her mother and my shoes were wet.

I tied Madam Helsinki to the gate, and Hannah watched as I mucked out the stall, steam rising from my body like an essence in the shaft of light through the little window. Madam Helsinki watched from outside.

On Monday, and Specialist Doolittle's medical was still red, I called him in.

"I've been seeing too much you lately, Doolittle. That's not a good thing. Your medical readiness—"

"Sir," he said. "The reason I'm red is because I have testicular cancer." His eyes cartwheeled.

"Doolittle," I said. A strange, shocked tremor passed through me, like I'd just accidentally shot myself. "Johnny," I said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't... what I mean to say is, well, why have you been keeping this a secret?"

He said nothing, smiling at nothing at all, and I was finally glad he wouldn't meet my eyes.

"I, um, is this why you've been having so much trouble lately?" And here I was, consumed by a little divorce. "Is this where your money has been going? I can't blame you for your affairs. It must be hard to manage, so hard." I thought of what I could say, what I could do for this unfortunate soldier. Some Company Commander I was.

“Specialist Doolittle,” I said, “we’re going to fight with you. We’re going to support you in this.”

He had said nothing since he dropped the bomb, the rock mask. What emotions? What thoughts passed the time in that skull?

“Well,” I said. “Know that I’ll do everything I can to fight with you.” And I knew this must mean nothing to him. “You just tell us what you need. I’m on it.” Now I just wanted him to get out. I wanted him to leave so that he would not smell my shame. “It’s completely understandable, all the trouble you’ve been having lately. We’ll sort it all out.” His very *manhood* was at stake here.

I stood up, as if to leave my own office. He stood up too, half a foot taller than me, only pressing upon me the numbness of the helpless goon, the gentle giant, the misunderstood village idiot. Poor soul, and he hadn’t even trusted us with his situation. I stuck out my hand for him to shake, an odd gesture, but it was something. He shook my hand and left.

I decided that First Sargent and I should go to the hospital and talk to the doctor. I had no idea how to support a soldier with cancer. I wanted to do right by Doolittle.

First Sargent Clive, thumbs in his belt and flared elbows, looked strange waiting for the doctor. He was a refusal, a closed door. He would not allow these sick people, these weak people, inside him. We waited in an office with a bench covered by a translucent sheet like butcher paper and a chair in the corner. Neither of us wanted to sit on the bench, no chairback, legs splayed, the loud plastic sheet—so we stood. When the doctor came, he was younger than both of us, like an actor with slick hair and a stethoscope.

“No, aha, no, gentlemen.” The doctor said. “Specialist Doolittle does not have testicular cancer.” That was all Clive needed to start the head shaking.

“You’re saying,” I said, “Doctor, that he does not have testicular cancer at all?”

“I can assure you he has no cancer of any type.”

“Because he told me,” I said, “today, actually, that he has testicular cancer.”

The doctor gave an agreeable, what-can-you-do expression. An expression that, at the same time, might have communicated *go to hell*.

“So why is he red on Medical Readiness?”

“As his commander, you have the right to know,” the doctor said. “Specialist Doolittle has HIV.”

Clive and I looked at each other. “HIV,” I said. “How long has he had that?”

“Since he’s been here. That’s why he’s non-deployable.”

I took Hannah to see Madam Helsinki whenever it was my turn to muck out the stall, and I had even passed a stuffed horse in the store that looked so much like Madam Helsinki that I had to buy it for

Hannah. She treated it like a real horse, spooning up spaghetti to its stitched mouth, saying, “you’ve got to eat to keep your strength up, Madam.”

Hannah’s mother came by the house one last time to pack a bag, her new action figure waiting in the driveway blasting grunge like it was the 90s. She stood in the doorway with her backpack, and I almost leaned in for a kiss, purely out of reflex because this was the exact spot where she used to send me off to work every day. There seemed nothing to say, nothing worth saying, at least. A painful and distant mountain of images and touches bloomed behind my eyes. I don’t know what she saw, but it must have been different, or she couldn’t have left me crushed in the doorway the way she did.

I transferred to a different position on post. I could have dumped the horse in Doolittle’s lap and made it his problem, but I didn’t.

Mrs. Callahan did some digging on the horse and found out it was purchased illegally and had no papers.

“Ok,” I said on the phone from my office, “what does that mean for selling the horse?”

“It means it will be very difficult, and you’re not going to get much for her,” Mrs. Callahan said.

“Can I buy it myself and start new paperwork? My little girl has become quite fond of Madam Helsinki—and with her mother gone and all.”

“No,” Mrs. Callahan. “With a horse, it’s almost impossible to start new papers.”

“Well, can it be done?”

“I’ve never seen it done. The horse should have never left the state of Washington. It’s here illegally. There’s no one to send it back to. We don’t know where she came from, and no one’s going to want to touch her.”

“Well, what do you suggest I do?”

She sighed into the phone, a pitying buzz of static. “I’d sell her cheap. You may have to pay someone to take her off your hands. Maybe some ranchers in Texas do this sort of thing.”

“Pay someone to take my horse?”

“It’s technically no one’s horse, Captain Riley.”

I saw Specialist Doolittle one last time when he came to say goodbye to Madam Helsinki. He was very formal about it. He came by while I was walking the horse around the fence, Hannah perched on top in brand new red cowboy boots.

He appeared silently, leaning on the white fence beside the gate. I walked the horse over.

“Hello, Doolittle. Hope you’re doing well.”

His cheeks were twitching and wet. He was doing his best to hold it in. I'm not sure why losing his illegal horse was the final straw for him, but he could not muster the smile. Maybe something else had happened that day.

"Sir. Little girl." He put his hand out to Madam Helsinki's nose, his hand trembling.

"I'm getting out," Doolittle said. "The new commander, he's out processing me."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Doolittle." His face kept quivering as he looked the horse over one last time. I opened my mouth to ask him what he would do now, but he was turning away, letting out a shaky breath.

"Best of luck, Doolittle," I called after him. I almost said thank you—for the horse—but then I remembered that I was the one taking it off his hands, taking a loss on his illegal horse.