

From The Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

What is the responsibility of the press in preventing a crime? Does a member of the press, let's just say he's a reporter, have to be detailed and specific about the immediacy and nature of the crime? What if the potential crime is kind of unbelievable told to the reporter by a woman that most people would agree is crazy, or at least unreliable. What if the reporter can't say which she is since his judgment is definitely clouded. In fact, the woman is someone that he doesn't know well, has had less than a dozen conversations with, and will probably never see again. Yet, he remains totally convinced that he's in love with her anyway.

The reporter has had his most recent sighting around the barns. She is tall, angular, not especially beautiful, interesting, but not beautiful, with amazing green eyes. Since the word amazing has been grossly overused lately, it is no longer a respectable word choice, but in this case, it is totally true. I'd seen her several times back in my college days when I was working for the school paper. I'd run into her in various horsy places—the track, horse sales, horse shows, but I never really knew her. I knew her name because I asked. Her name, one of my co-workers told me, was Pippa—but definitely not a Kate Middleton sister type—no fashionable clothes sense at all. I'd certainly would've liked to have known more, though, even though she was an older woman. She'd have to have been close to 30, maybe. Not that 30 was old old, but not someone who would look at a guy just turned 23. When I left school, I didn't see her much, so she got pushed to the back of my mind—still there, just not as an everyday thought.

This is a horsey town. The big money comes from the horse industry, until the casinos take over, and of course, most of the current jobs. When I graduated, I knew that my main interview prospects had to be related to the horse industry if I planned to stay local in the news business. I managed a job working at the *News Leader* as a part-time reporter, but it was way different from my school job. There, I could slip the fact into conversations at parties that I was

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

in the news business when I was trying to impress a girl. In school, I wrote decent stuff. I wrote my share of sports columns about how the college teams were doing; water polo, and soccer, mostly, not baseball or basketball for which my school is better known, and I got to do some opinion pieces, well one or two. I'd always thought that once I got my degree that this was my ticket to a great future—not happening.

Now, the reporting I do is to run around with my I-pad and camera writing personal human/horsey interest kinds of things and take a few pictures. I can't say that I dislike it, but it isn't what I'd had in mind when I started. Normally, I get marginally better stuff than bake sales, weddings, and county fairs, but not much. I honestly thought I was ready for serious journalism; however, those higher up the food chain thought I'd risen to a basic line of fluff they could use as fillers if they needed something to stick in at deadline time. Still, since I don't have a professional degree, and the economy still sucks, I'm lucky to have a job at all. At least, that's what I've been told, and I have to believe it.

I was feeling pretty down when I got my assignment from Fred, my supervisor. I stood there observing the fact that he had abundant nose and ear hair but not all that much on his head while he was giving me instructions about how and when to interview the owner of an 80-1 shot at an up-coming stakes race. The farm was 15 miles down the road, more or less. I wasn't certain as to the exact location, but since it was one of the big name farms, I had a general idea.

"I'm on it," I said. Fred mumbled into the copy he was working on which I took as a dismissal.

As I pulled out of the parking lot, I noticed the trees around our building whipping back and forth slamming branches ever which way. The dogwood blooms tore off the trees, and the

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

Bradford pear petals came down like out-of-season snowflakes. I kept an eye on the clouds as I drove—fat, rain-filled, threatening. This normally wouldn't have concerned me, but my tires were paper thin and virtually treadless. It started pouring rain in sheets the very minute I turned off the highway into the farm entrance. It was early April, and the rain was one of those toad-strangler rains you sometimes get here in Kentucky in April. Even after a few yards, the ditches on either side of the road were filling fast and creeping across the road. However, not so typically here in Kentucky in April, the rain soon changed to sleet. My best guess was that the temperature must be hovering somewhere in the low to lower 30's. Maybe those had been snowflakes I'd seen earlier.

I had no idea where the 3-year-old colt in question, Rory's Rascal, was housed. The barns all looked pretty much the same to me, Section 8 housing with over-sized doors. I wasn't crazy about running around to all of them to find the stall of my interviewee. I sat there letting myself be seduced by the idea that maybe I could just sit in my semi-warm 15-year-old pickup and make up some sort of generic horse story. Then I caught a glimpse of someone vaguely familiar looking heading toward one of the barns. The person was scooted close to the outer wall under the overhang to escape the worst of the rain. I thought to myself that it looked a little like Pippa whatshername. I decided to park and walk in that direction. At least, I hoped that I could dredge up enough nerve for an introduction.

I stepped out of the truck, and cold rain crystals punched under the collar of my parka and moved in a trickle down the back of my neck. For a minute, all I could do was gasp. Shit, it was cold. My feet, in worn down running shoes, sank into clay mud that sucked at my feet each step of the way. It oozed past the tops of my socks and dribbled down my heels creeping toward my toes.

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

When I stepped into the barn, though, it was a lot warmer than I expected. I shuddered with pure animal joy at the contrast between the outside and barn. I could almost ignore the fact that my feet were squishing. It smelled good, too, not great, but okay. Hell, it could have smelled exactly like horseshit, which was what I expected, and I would've been happy. At least, it was warm and dry. There was a toasted cereal smell that I guessed was hay or oats or something similar. As I let my body adjust to the warmth, I noticed that the place seemed strangely empty of people. Horses, yes, which was what I'd expected, but there didn't seem to be many signs of human activity. Then in the shadows deep in the center of the barn, I made out the outline of that person I'd seen earlier. As I walked closer, I decided that the shape had to be Pippa.

"Hi," I said coming up behind her. She jumped startled by the unexpected sound of a voice behind her. Wheeling around, she gave me a masterfully dirty look. She was most definitely pissed. Of course, I couldn't forget the fact that I'd probably scared the living bejesus out of her coming up behind her with no warning. I babbled some idiotic crap about how sorry I was that I'd scared her, and I really thought she'd heard me. You know the kind of stuff I'd say if I had planned to assure her that my shoe size and IQ were approximately the same. She didn't respond. She shook her head, turned to look at a skinny grey horse in the stall in front of her, and didn't say a word to me. She whispered something to the horse, but nothing to me.

"Your name is Pippa, right? My name is Ira Phillips." She finally turned around and stared at me. She was even taller than I remembered, but I guess I'd never been this close to her before. She must have been almost as tall as I was, and I'm not short. Green eyes level with mine aiming frost slivers right at the middle of my forehead. Ouch! When she spoke, her voice was much lower than I expected. No handshake offered.

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

“You’re messing with my concentration. You mind?”

“Concentrating on that horse?”

“A mare, and we were beginning to have a productive conversation.”

Okay, wow, a conversation with a horse...mare. Come on, this was way more than weird. Gave me a creepy feeling. “You’re having a conversation with that horse? Look, I have to find Rory’s Rascal to have a conversation *about* him for my paper. Do you think that you could take a few minutes when you’re done here to tell me about how you would have a conversation *with* a horse?”

“Rory is in barn 15, and this is barn 11. Go 4 barns over.”

“Well, what about after? Is there a better story here?”

“So, why do you think I need to give you a story? I need to talk with this mare not you. Besides, I’m being paid to do a job. I don’t need to be breaking any confidences.”

I didn’t go into the obvious, to me at least, question about how you would be breaking the confidence of a horse, but okay.

“Can I talk to you about what kind of questions that I need to be asking Rory’s Rascal? Such as why he remains an 80-1 shot, why he doesn’t win races, you know just regular questions that you would ask any failing athlete?”

“People like you are totally clueless about what I do, so why do you care?” She pulled at a springy dark curl that had escaped from under her ball cap and fallen over one eye. After a longish pause, she said, “There’s a McDonald’s about two miles down the highway going north. I’ll let you buy my lunch after I’m done here.”

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

Oh Lord, all I had in my wallet was a ten-dollar bill and some change in a cup in the console of the truck. That had to last until Friday, and I'd get to spend it at McDonald's. "Okay, in about an hour or when?"

"An hour works for me."

* * *

I found Rory, but I didn't get much information from or about him. I looked at him over the open top half of the stall. All that I could tell was that he was a big booger, really red, and really shiny. He had big-bunched muscles that rippled—that gym look you see with athletes who pump iron five or six days a week or take steroids. Not that I have much time, energy, or experience with gyms or steroids. He turned and watched me watching him for a minute, then he came at me with his head swinging and mouth open. Lots of big yellow teeth. I stepped back damn quick, tucking my fingers into fists.

I don't know what happened to the owner or the trainer or whoever I was supposed to have had the interview with. I had the name of a Mr. Gunther and a time of 11:30, but that was all I knew. I spotted a guy cleaning stalls, but I didn't have much luck getting information out of him. He was thin and stringy with a sallow skin and meth-looking teeth to match. He just told me that if it was Mr. Gunther I needed, that he was in Florida and wasn't expected back for a couple of weeks, if then. He didn't know nothing 'bout no interview. He just said that all he could tell me was that Rory was hell to work with. Most of the time it was a fight to get him saddled, a fight to get him into the starting gate, and a fight to get the jockey to stay on him. He just figured that maybe by the time he got done with all the fighting that he was too tired to run. His bloodlines were good, but he hadn't shown much promise on or off the track. If he didn't do well in the spring and summer, he'd probably be sold off in the fall.

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

Since Rory was a gelding, it wasn't much of a stretch to figure where he'd be sold. With luck, one could hope that a rescue place would pick him up, and maybe they'd have someone who would coach him into another line of work. Of course, even with me not knowing a lot about horses, I knew that most people weren't going to put much time into a losing proposition like that. But hey, I like animals as much as the next guy, and I wanted to see the horse get a break.

I needed to move on to McDonald's, so I just asked the guy if I could quote him. He told me no way, he'd lose his job if I quoted him as saying that Rory was a trouble-maker, which I thought that's what he'd said. Anyway, he told me I'd have to say that the trainer, Mr. Smithson, thought that Rory was having some training issues, but that things looked bright for the spring and summer. Then again, he thought I should wait until the trainer came back from New York to say anything. When I mentioned that I was supposed to have an interview with the owner he just laughed and shrugged, and told me Smithson was the one I needed to see. I said "Sure thing, buddy, and good luck with that pitch fork thing you're hauling around, and have a hell of a nice day." I did feel bad for him. I know that jobs are hard to find, and he probably didn't have many other opportunities, either. I couldn't blame him too much for hanging on to what he had.

* * *

I really hadn't needed to hurry to get to McDonald's in an hour because it was more like two before Pippa showed up. I got a short start on my story about Rory, so at least, that was productive. I started my article about this big red athletic horse that was having training issues.....I also found another dollar in change under the front seat. When she did show up, she didn't apologize, and I didn't ask why she was late. She just said that she was starving. She told me she wanted a Big Mac, a chocolate shake, a large order of fries, and an apple pie. I got a

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

small coffee. If they weren't running a special, even with the extra dollar, I could have only ordered myself water. So, in that respect I guess I got lucky. For a skinny girl, she could eat.

* * *

"Well," I said when her rate of chewing started to slow. "What did you find out from the mare?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"I promise that it'll be off the record. I was just curious."

"Oh, her owner was wondering why she was having trouble having her bred. The mare didn't care much for the stallions that they had. You know, not the right kind of boys for her."

"So, she told you all that in one interview, did she?"

Pippa looked up at me like she didn't know if I was putting her on or not. She wiped at a smear of ketchup on the side of her face. I guess she decided that I was being serious, which I wasn't. She shrugged one shoulder and went on.

"She told me the one she really liked was one of the boarders, but that he wasn't a thoroughbred; he was a warmblood. As far as his owner was concerned, that took him out of consideration for her mare. Her owner having this discussion with the farm manager right outside her stall."

"You're telling me that the man she loves is from the wrong side of the tracks, right?"
What a crock, I thought. Don't tell me there are people out there that believe this crap. I couldn't believe people could would pay good money for this, or how anyone could even get into this kind of career.

"Look mister, I don't know where the hell you're coming from, but you just can't make fun of my gift. If you don't want to hear what I have to say, let's not even continue this

conversation.” She slammed down her milk shake on the table, and flecks of chocolate shake flew over the sides.

“No, hey, I’m sorry. I was just trying to...uh.”

“Well, you asked me what she said, and that was it. Well, damn my big mouth. I shouldn’t have told you anything. Forget it.”

I went on to explain to her what my job was, and how I got there. I explained that I was supposed to get a story on Rory’s Rascal, but it hadn’t turned out to be much. Some guy in the barn had given me less than much information, and I went on to tell her all about the conversation that I had had with the guy with the pooper scooper.

“One of Smithson’s horses, huh? It sounds like your gelding has a lot of anger. Of course, Smithson’s pretty rough on his horses. Runs them into the ground, and then gets credit for the last ones standing. I could see why he’d generate anger. Now, if you can find the underlying cause of the horse’s anger problems, then you might have a chance to know the true story about why he isn’t winning. Not to mention, if you could find out why he’s not winning, it might save his life and a lot of other people a lot of grief.”

“True, well maybe if I could get you to help me out, that would work well for everybody.”

“Do you know what I charge for my services, and do you think that can you afford me?”

“Do you ever work ‘pro bono’ or anything like that?”

“Why should I want to? You don’t believe in my gift. I know that you’re torn between wanting to laugh in my face, and silenced only by the fact that you think that there might be a story in it for you, or am I wrong? No, don’t even bother to answer that.”

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

I felt a little bad because I may not have been convinced that she could communicate with horses, but it appeared that she could read my mind. Also, I'd wanted us to be able to discuss this further, so I'd be able to make an informed decision about what I'd write.

"You know," she continued, "horses do have feelings. They are quite sensitive, you know. As prey animals, they're better equipped to communicate telepathically than we are, since that's a lot of how they communicate in a herd situation. Their survival depends on it. We've lost that art, us humans, so we just make fun of it, especially since it's something that we don't understand and can't measure." She stopped to take a breath and take another big slug of her milkshake.

"So, will you have time to discuss this with me further? Could we go for a drink and talk about it?"

"You mean, would I go for a drink with a guy that'd probably get carded? How do you know that I don't have a mean ugly boyfriend/husband waiting around to kill you for asking?"

"Look, if you're interested in helping me out or talking to me about your work, let me know, okay?" I was getting angry at this whole conversation. I didn't need attitude. I stood and stepped one foot out of the booth.

She waved me down with her hand. "Yeah, I have a business card." She slid her hand into her jacket pocket and pulled out a bent slightly smudged card. "Call me in a day or two. I'm pretty tight on my schedule the rest of the week, so we'll see."

* * *

When I settled down to write something to meet my deadline, it was a disjointed rambling tale of why a potential champion was not performing. It wasn't much, sort of like describing the events at a 4-H horse show. This colt had had a string of bad luck and some

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

training issues, but come summer he would be back on the right track...but no, that wouldn't work. Damn. I had to stop and hang it up. I had one lone Kentucky Ale left from the last time my dad came to visit and a piece of calcified pepperoni pizza in the refrigerator. Maybe after I ate that, I'd try to finish, or at least get something ready to turn in for the editor. I rewrote my piece several times, but it still wasn't good. It was purely a cookie cutter piece that a semi-literate 10-year-old might have produced.

I tossed, turned, and sweated most of the night thinking that I'd have to have something better to turn in about this horse before his stakes race. Maybe I could clean up what I'd started, but I needed to create something more original, if I ever planned to make anyone at the paper sit up and take notice.

When sunlight leaked through the blinds, I thought, okay, I need to get better information about my horse even if it is mostly fantasy. Surely, Pippa should be up by now. Maybe she'd work in a few minutes with me.

I found the card she'd given me, along with a crumpled five-dollar bill, (I had no idea where that came from) under the stack of damp dirty clothes that I'd worn the day before. I gave her a call. At first, I thought I was going straight to voice mail, but then she picked up.

"Hey Pippa, it's me, Ira."

"Yeah, how you doing?"

"I wonder if I could get a few minutes of your time today."

"I thought I told you I'm booked for the week."

"I need to get something down by tonight on this horse to get to my editor. Could you spare a few minutes at all today? I'd be good to talk with you almost any time." I hated my begging tone. I wasn't going to grovel, was I? I was.

The silence grew long and heavy. I was beginning to think that she'd hung up, but then I heard a long sigh.

"Well, maybe by phone. I might give you five on the phone."

"How could that happen?" I was thoroughly confused.

"You put your freakin' cell to the horse's ear, and you let me talk to him. That's what'd have to happen."

I hated to travel all the way back out to the farm, especially if I were to run in to the same guy as yesterday. I also hated to imagine what he'd think when I tried to get the horse to stop trying to kill me and talk to my phone. Of course, I might get lucky and find the person I should have seen in the first place, or that Mr. Smithson, and get regular answers. I wondered if they'd give me a hard time since I didn't have an appointment or anything. Although, I was supposed to have had one yesterday, and I couldn't see where that had gotten me. Heck, the security didn't seem all that tight. I mean I could only remember seeing just Pippa and the stable guy. Of course, the weather was nasty, so most people were probably sitting tight inside where it made more sense to be. Maybe I could dash in, make a quick call, and then get an angle for my story. Yeah, right.

* * *

I was sitting there wrangling in my indecision when my cell chirped in my back pocket. Caller ID let me know that it was Pippa. I thought I was the one to call her, but oh, well.

"Ira, it's me. I just had a call for a cancellation. Since I'm not too far away from you, I can be there in about 15 minutes. Sit tight and wait for me. The guys there know me, so it won't look funny if I go over to meet with one of the horses. It's not like your guy is one of the big

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

stakes winners, a Derby contender, or anything. Hang tight, and I'll see you as quick as I can get there.”

Okay, that'd let me have a quicker way to get into the barn. I could maybe get in with Pippa and not have to go into a lot of explanation about why I'd come back. I'd just haul myself over. If I wasn't there when she came, she'd probably turn around and rocket off to her next whatever.

We pulled in close to the same time—I'd made it even though I'd gone through the drive through at Duncan Donuts for a small coffee and a couple of doughnuts. It was still cool, but at least the rain had stopped. When she climbed out of her truck, I thought, God, she looks good even this early. As for me, I can tell you I didn't look good, not even close, but at least I'd had my caffeine and sugar. That should at least help jump start me toward a little scintillating conversation. She didn't seem to notice even with my sputtered, “Thanks, glad you could help me out here.” That sort of scintillating conversation.

“Let's go see the boy. He should be able to tell us a little something.”

There was no one in the barn that I could see except for horse heads and a few cats. When we got to the place where the red menace was housed, I couldn't believe that this was the same horse that I'd seen yesterday. He put the best moves on her that I'd seen. What he lacked in finesse at the track, he more than made up for in the barn. No muscles and yellow teeth at her. I guess this must be a guy thing. I felt kind of shut out, so I just moved back and let the two of them chat.

I drank the rest of my coffee and finished a strawberry jelly filled, since I didn't have much else to keep me busy. The whole conversation was between girl and horse, and I was definitely the odd man out. It must have been interesting to her because she kept making little

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

hum's and oh's and he would make some snuffling kinds of noises. There were a few loud snorts, but mostly subdued. It was pretty yuck to my way of thinking.

Finally, she turned around to look at me. From all that gooey gushy talk, I thought that she'd look all smiley, but she looked darned serious.

"He's planning to kill him. Did you know that?" Like she thought that I was the one with the insider information.

"Well, no. He didn't exactly share that with me yesterday. All he seemed interested in for me was to pound me into the floor."

"Well, it is actually Smithson that he has plans to pound. Serious plans."

"So, can we stop it? What can we do?"

I had nasty visions of blood, guts, and splattered brain matter. I felt the coffee and that strawberry jelly doughnut retracing their way back up my digestive track. I sure didn't want to hurl in front of her, but the picture in my mind was in bright and vivid living color. I swallowed hard a couple of times and forced myself to relax.

"Well, you're the one with the assignment, cowboy. What are you going to do about it? Are people going to believe you? So, Mr. Reporter, let's see what you can report. Here is your big news flash, where are you going with it? Do you think people at your paper will want a story about people talking with horses coming hot off their presses? Well, gotta run; I have another appointment in twenty minutes."

I stood there mouth half open. She was right. I had my chance at a story, but what was I going to do with it? Surely, I wouldn't want to take a chance that a person might die. Somehow, I didn't think Pippa was going to be a lot of help. Could I make this into something that somebody might be likely to believe? Maybe she would come with me and give me the horse's

From the Horse's Mouth, Sort Of

mouth version. I started to move toward her to ask, beg, whatever it took. Before I could take the first step, she began to walk away. After a few steps, she paused, turned, looked at me, and gave me a smile and a small three-fingered wave. The last I saw of her was a ridiculously long pair of legs in really tight jeans stepping up into this man-sized truck.

What was my responsibility here? How specific did I have to be? I went back to my truck, pulled out an old-fashioned piece of paper and a stub of a pencil and began to write.