Off Guard

As soon as the mare was inside, Anne slammed the trailer doors shut, and only later locked the butt bar into place across the horse's rear. This morning Hershey had cooperated and stepped right up to the ramp. No flattening of ears, no prancing and rearing as they approached the trailer, hitched to the truck the evening before. Anne was grateful for that. Loading an obstinate horse could be risky even for a young person. Despite her long years of handling horses, there always remained that margin of error, the animal's physical reaction.

She sauntered to the front, opened the window, and reached for the horse's head. "Yes, Hershey, good girl, I love you!" she murmured in a low voice, scratching the animal's ears and running her fingers through its forelock. Grasping the chin strap of the horse's halter, she toggled it to the anchor in the feeder. Already the mare, with the equanimity of age, was feeding on the alfalfa before her.

Hershey was twenty-five years old, equivalent in age to Anne's seventy-one. For the past two years, Anne had refrained from using Hershey on her daily rides, breaking instead an Arabian filly for the job, a feisty, grouchy terror of a little dapple named Maraya. Pitch-black on the day she was born but gradually lightening to a strawberry roan, Maraya had the habit of bolting forward during the trot, then screeching to a dead halt. Repeatedly she had caught Anne off guard; once, she'd even dumped her. The filly proved, however, true Arabian, sure-footed as a mountain goat and unfailingly loyal. She picked her way with insolent ease on the cow paths that meandered narrowly across barren slopes or crawled steeply up rock-strewn hills. Maraya never lost her temper while stepping along the edge of a canyon, from which Anne concluded

that the filly had the intelligence to concentrate when confronted with a difficult task. Her peevishness likely came from a fear of the unknown that would gradually lessen, perhaps disappear entirely, with training.

Hershey, on the other hand, was of good-natured, gentle disposition, a Thoroughbred, tall as any of her breed, with a once dark-brown body that brought to mind the taste of bitter-sweet chocolate. Now, however, her coat had taken on an appearance mousy and moth-eaten, and it showed gray on gray around muzzle and eyes. Still, the mare had retained her noble head: large, intelligent eyes, dainty ears, enormous nostrils. But her spine, always a little too long, had sagged with age, and now her withers stood out sharp and high. It had come to this.

The loading behind her, Anne stepped into the tack room where she gave her boots the once-over and glanced at herself in the mirror. “You must've been a knock-out at thirty,” she said to her reflection. “Pity you didn't know it.” Through the years her facial features, undiminished by their deep lines, had retained expressiveness and character: a nose well-defined and large enough to give a handle to the face, cheekbones firm and high, eyes blue and wide open. The cloud of white hair above her forehead modulated in back into a naturally curly wave of gray. She carried herself, as horsewomen do, erect and with shoulders relaxed, which had the effect of making her appear taller and more substantial than the slender five-foot-two that she was. Years of dressage riding had kept her abdomen flat, thighs muscled, hips trim.

For Anne the day had begun with the usual routine. At six, impatient to be moving, she rose, brewed her carafe of coffee and savored that delicious first cup. At six-thirty she slipped a parka over her sweatshirt and jeans and stepped into the California fall morning to feed and water the horses, all except Hershey, who would get her final meal in the trailer. Near the stalls sat five bales of alfalfa, hauled from the barn by the hired hand working with her on weekends.

Anne heaved a flake of hay into each of the feeders and filled each of the watering troughs, grateful for the task of caring for these creatures, five of whom were boarders whose owners, former riding students now forty-something, exercised their horses after work and trailered them to shows on Sundays. Some of them she knew them from her decades of teaching English at Arroyo Grande High School.

Now she stepped inside to microwave her breakfast. This morning it was rolled oats, to which she added a couple of stewed prunes. She swallowed a vitamin pill and a tablet of her heart medicine. Across from her was the chair where Hank had often sat, the green corduroy beginning to fray where piping reinforced the seams. No need to go so soon, she muttered. No need.

Her eye caught a small motion out past the gravel driveway, past the dried-up patch of crabgrass that once was a front lawn, and she took off her glasses and reached for the binoculars at the window sill. Occasionally the slender silhouette of a roadrunner stalked past with its shaggy crest and strong legs, though it usually didn't show up until mid-afternoon. This morning it was a red-shafted flicker clinging to an oak, fairly blending into its trunk. Anne stepped on the front porch and the woodpecker flew, deeply undulating, giving away a salmon-red blush under wing and tail. The bird alighted in the top of a sycamore tree. Now she was able to make out, through the binoculars, the tell-tale black crescent across its chest, the red mustache around its face, which indicated the bird was male. She could discern the brown marks on its back, the round black spots on the belly.

She swung the binoculars back to the oak, its leaves dust-covered and exhausted from lack of water. A profusion of acorns scattered at its base, as if a life-threatening emergency had caused the tree to reproduce in abundance. Directly behind spread the hillside of the upper

pasture. Devoid now of vegetation, torn by too many horses' hooves, it had become an enormous ragged wound, spilling its dark insides down the slope. When the rains came, Anne thought, *if* the rains ever came—would the rains ever come?—the soil would ooze down against the paddock gate.

She sighed and left her look-out to feed the dogs, a poodle and a Queensland heeler, and put cat food on a shelf in the barn out of the dogs' reach. Hank had hated the cats. Only the barn owl in its hideaway among the rafters met with his approval, for it kept in check the kitten population and hunted mice with far greater diligence than the cats ever did. Once, standing together in the semi-dark of an evening, had they not felt more than seen its endearing pale face swoop past them in flight so light, it felt like the dance of a moth against the cheek? An owl's nest was hidden in the rafters still.

From the barn she stepped back into the dingy morning, glancing at her watch as she got hold of the water hose. But no, she reminded herself, better not use any water, there's the drought, its fourth year. Among stalks of Brussels sprouts and cherry tomatoes she limped, conscious of a swelling in her knee, bending to tie a tomato vine here, pluck a weed there, crush a snail with the heel of her boot. Hank had laid out the garden soon after they'd bought this place, thirty-five years ago, back in '56. They were both teaching then, Hank in the school's automotive shop.

Hank could cajole a profusion of snapdragon and marigold from layers of compost, coax heads of lettuce and finger-sized carrots from the sand and the loam. Vines of boysenberry multiplied in no-holds-barred fecundity. Anne herself paid scarce attention to the garden, though she did process the fruits and berries into pies, preserves, compote. And then, to come home one day to find vegetables, flowers, berry vines mowed down, Hank stumbling around in torn

overalls, an expression on his face so peculiar, she felt a stab of fright. His lower lip stuck out droopy and gray.

"Don't you realize, its coming?" he shouted, waving his arms at her. "Can't you see it's happening? Everybody rushing headlong into disaster! Why won't you listen to me!" The rotary power mower circled crazily among the debris.

Imagining the worst, she quickly checked the paddocks: Thank God, the horses were all right. She shut off the mower, then dashed into the house. Her pantry full of preserves stood unharmed, her trophies and ribbons intact. She calmed herself by placing a hand on one of the jars. Then she rushed back outside and grabbed Hank by the sleeve.

"You're ice cold! For God's sake, what's going on?"

He shuffled docilely as she dragged him into the house, put him to bed, forced a heating pad on his legs. Still he continued his tirade, iron-gray curls shaggy against his temples, where one artery pulsed in violet rage: "Why can't you see. Why won't you listen to me."

That incident was thirteen, fourteen years away already. It had marked their descent into hell. Anne hummed a melody that always came to her when she felt lonely or depressed, a song about a black cowboy named Jonathan who laughed forth his songs in the taverns of Laramie, whom all the women loved and all the cowhands envied, but whose sole happiness was hoof-beat and wind on the Snowy Range. She rubbed her left hip with stiff fingers. November fog drifting from the ocean aggravated her joints to where she thought she must be stricken with bone cancer. It's only arthritis, she reminded herself, the garden-variety sign of ageing. What was it, she thought, that final, irrevocable falling apart? The accident in Hank's shop and the school insisting on his early retirement? Or earlier still, the time she decided that she would travel to

Hidden Valley Horse Trials without him? Well, time to make ready. No use, dragging this out any longer.

Anne went back into the house and telephoned, confirming her appointment. “The man who does this will be here until one,” said the voice on the other end of the line.

Yes, thought Anne. Who does this.

Long ago, from some impulse Anne could not fathom, Hank had bought a Trakehner gelding named Hercules, a gift for her. She’d been furious over being left out in the purchase, though there was no denying the gelding’s potential. That Hank, five years her senior, encouraged her ambitions to the exclusion of any other social involvement had become a feature of their life to which she reconciled herself readily enough. It was Hank who egged her on, polished her riding boots to a shiny black, knotted her silk scarf into an immaculate stock tie. It was Hank who groomed Hercules as if the horse were a royal mount. When, the white of glove contrasting with the black of hunt coat, her riding crop an adornment rather than a tool of discipline against the horse’s rump, she acknowledged the judge’s presence with a nod of her cap; when by a shift of seat, by an imperceptible squeeze of the lower leg, by an all but invisible working of the rein, she caused the Trakehner to perform difficult maneuvers as if with the greatest of ease: then life took on meaning, thrusting upon her a keenness that stayed with her in bursts of pleasure and gratitude for hours after, for days, for weeks. Hank was the beneficiary of that.

In the ring, other men counted only inasmuch as they offered a measure of excellence by which to challenge herself, these riders who tapped their crops against knee-high boots, swung into figure eights, leapt into flying change. The judge’s nod was her prize, her flash of joy, her reason for living. If it did occur to her that her aim was out of proportion to their mode of living,

she dismissed the thought readily enough. Only later, when she had to dodge Hank's fists, cannonball fists that could slam into her breast without warning, did she catch a glimpse of the enormity of her error.

Hercules she sold when Hank got so bad she had to handcuff him to his bed or tie him into a chair if she so much as wanted to step outside to do feed the chickens. Those days, while Anne quilted bed covers to exercise arthritis-prone fingers, silence sat between them like an unwelcome guest. They avoided looking at each other. Months after the gelding was gone, Hank's mouth, speaking so clearly, it hurt her to take account of his voice, formed these words: "I loved that horse, you know. Hercules."

"Well, I have Hershey now. The Trakehner's gone."

"I loved that horse."

Why didn't you ride him then, she wanted to say but confined herself to a resigned "It's over," meaning Pan Am Games, pre-Olympic trials. Act positive, the doctor had advised, say calming things.

They'd had no children. Neither Hank nor she wanted any. Hank had been an only child, while Anne had come from a family of five of whom only her oldest sister and she had made it into adulthood. No children, Hank and she had agreed early on. Horses, yes, but no kids. The word Anne most frequently associated with childhood was "atrocious."

Hank in that corduroy chair and she stepping over to stroke his thinning curls. Hank clasping her hands, pleading *Help me, oh help me,* pulling her into the chair next to him and burying his face on her chest. His robe falling open, exposing his cock the size of a walnut. *Help me*. Hank entreating her to sit and hum with him for quarter-hours at a stretch, insisting she find her inner center. Sometimes he snatched her wrists so violently, she thought he meant to break

her. She might have guessed his ailment early on; if so, she'd done her best to forget it. Thinking about it gave her violent headaches.

In their early days Hank showed her how to change the oil on an automobile, do a lube job, rotate the tires. In turn she gave him books to read from teacher's college, among them a prewar novel by a British author, Ford Maddox Ford. One evening, Hank presented her a passage he'd copied from the book, his fastidious handwriting slanting across the yellow pad.

"This is as good an analysis of love as I've ever come across," he said.

Anne read the lines, hesitated, frowned, then shrugged her shoulders. "If that's Ford's idea of love, I feel sorry for him," she said.

But last night, when all manner of thoughts came to her through the yipping of coyotes who roamed from the hills in search of water, disturbing the dogs and causing an endless ruckus, last night it came back to her, Hank's writing on the yellow page: *We are all so afraid, we are all so alone, we all so need from the outside, the assurance of our own worthiness to exist*.

And now it was ten thirty, time to get moving with the horse, with Hershey, who hated to be transported, who lost her balance whenever the trailer rounded corners or bumped across railroad tracks, who would kick frantically at the sides, who injured herself despite the wraps Anne meticulously applied to support fetlocks and joints. Today, of course, she had not bothered with wraps. There was no point.

She turned over the engine of the truck and clucked to herself, comforted by the familiar purring. From Hank she had learned to pay close attention to engine noise. She could detect early on when some slight foreign sound gave indication of trouble to come: a fan belt loosening, a transmission slipping. Then she would alert Roberto, the auto mechanic who boarded his horse with her. Roberto, who once wired a VCR to her television set, making possible, during the bad

times, the diversion of a taped film. Hank would look at the screen, lower lip stuck out, the odd expression on his face now a permanent part of himself.

She waited for the engine to warm up, evaluated its idle, hit the accelerator once to bring it down. As if he had disowned his mind, Anne remembered thinking. Hank who never touched alcohol, like a drunkard shrugging off the jacket someone put around his shoulders, insisting, *This does not belong to me*, not because he does not recognize it as his own but because he has gone beyond the point of caring. This is what it's like to live with a drug addict, she thought during the stretches of deterioration, those stretches that turned into years. Your whole existence comes down to self-preservation. And the instinct drives you, in turn by fear and selfishness, until it's his sanity versus your own. This, then, is the gist of marriage, she had since concluded—and now she shifted into gear, slowly—two people clawing at each other in last-ditch efforts to haul themselves into the light, clawing and driving spikes into the other. And the more resilient—or is it the more ruthless?—becomes the "surviving spouse" in a set of probate pleadings.

Cautiously she pulled out of the driveway, into a road that wound past fields of garbanza beans. The farmer down the way, she noted, had this season relinquished the raising of irrigated crops. And her neighbor the cattle rancher, who used to plant oats annually for winter feed, had for the past two years been unable to seed anything for lack of rain. Already he had reduced his herd to half its size.

Field hands, looking up as they always did when car or truck drove past, straightening as if hoping for some impossible salvation. Their eyes followed her with the same longing, Anne thought, that seized her own thoughts when she viewed her own arid surroundings: *Green, how I want you, green!* Green, the green of Laramie! And the Mexicans working the fields, what

faraway, what impossible loves occupied their minds while their bodies stooped in endless repetition?

Rather than enter the freeway, Anne trailered to the beach-front highway to drive within view of the ocean. She pulled along slowly, glancing frequently into the mirror to check the trailer, for Hershey's kicks clanged hollowly within. Ahead she glimpsed sand dunes the color of corn silk, greenish-blue waves creating and recreating themselves without pause. The morning fog had burned off and the sun, pale though it was, warmed the windshield and with it, the inside of the cab. It occurred to her that she might drive down to the beach and unload Hershey for a last ride into the tide. The mare had a touch of thrush in her hooves, salt water would clear it up as swiftly as medicated talcum soothes an infection of athlete's foot.

A booth had come into existence at the ramp down to the beach, complete with a civil servant demanding a toll of several dollars. Anne stopped her truck and swallowed hard as she watched a young couple jogging, an angler drowning hooked worms, a pickup truck chugging along on the hard-packed sand. How often she and Hank had trailered their horses here, unloaded them at the beach, saddled up beneath Pismo Beach Pier to ride into the water! Each time anew their mounts approached the surf cautiously at first, compensating for the motion of the waves by stepping sideways until, accustomed to the ebb and flow, they would watchfully trot into the foam. She and Hank would gallop over miles of sand dunes in the heat of afternoon, until the insides of her legs ached and could be disengaged from the horse's only at the price of punishment, knees trembling with exertion. Even when the tide was out, they used to ride close to the surf, to avoid the clam diggers with their pails and clamming forks on the wet sand; diggers that by now had long disappeared, having decimated the long-ago bounty of clams. Later that day: bottles of coke, a picnic. Hank, who for thirty years refused to eat anything but

shredded wheat rolls for breakfast, who could fly into a rage if she said, "I'm making scrambled eggs. Want a bite?"—this same Hank, at the beach would reach with both hands for potato salad, sliced ham, chunks of honeydew melon, would gulp his food as if any moment it might be taken from him. *He's been through the wringer. He so deserves to be loved!* Her thighs hurt on the insides when he spread them apart. Yes, but. Where Jesus loved an entire nation, a world of people, all of humanity, it would be her task to love one single person. There were times she thought that she could give her life for an hour of Hank's happiness.

Anne turned the rig around, her eyes on the beach until the last possible moment. The clam diggers having disappeared, seat otters, had made their come-back. She could sea a clump of them swimming offshore. You couldn't ride Hershey today anyway, she muttered glumly to herself, you wouldn't be able to mount without saddle. Hershey is too tall for that; you, you're too old for that.

What if Hank knew, even then? A horse's apprehensions—Maraya's apprehensions—she could calm by working the reins gently, as if squeezing water from a sponge. Maraya's trespass she forgave via reassuring pressure of the lower leg which said, effectively, *I care for you*. But to know, to understand, to convey what Hank needed to hear? And now all she could do was to live out this mistake of a life.

We are all so afraid. We are all so alone.

At the tallow works, Anne parked the rig and unloaded the mare. A man came out, carrying a rifle, introducing himself as Gary. "Let's do this out here," he said. "The horse seems calm enough."

Anne glanced at the man. He seemed too young even to shave. His shirt was blue-and-red plaid; his new pair of jeans too long. Could she ask him to hand over the gun so she might do the job herself? What if he missed, the first time?

Gary tied the horse against a tree, leaving a generous loop of rope. “Not a bad-looking animal,” he said. “Sure you want to watch this?”

The mare just stood there, incredibly calm and composed, looking at the man. Anne noticed he had sparse blond hair. Fine, silky hair which, together with his pale blue eyes, made him look baby-faced. Something seemed wrong with his left hip, for he walked with an oddly lurching gait. He was about five foot five. To Anne, that seemed tall.

“Someone left her with me twelve, fifteen years ago, ” she said. “A neighbor. Now the mare has arthritis so bad . . . ” Snuffling, blowing her nose and nodding to Hershey: “I just can’t allow it to go on.”

Gary raised the rifle and fired a single shot. The horse crashed to the ground with a scream, evacuating feces as she fell. She lay on her side, rasping and moaning, legs thrashing, the rope now taut between her neck and the tree. There was nothing to do but wait.

“My neighbor gave her to me,” Anne prattled on, aghast. “The family, ah, moved away to the city. Hank, my husband . . . we were . . . ”

The man nodded, watching mutely until the death throes had subsided. Then he took off halter and lead rope and handed them to Anne. She stared, incredulous, from her hands holding the gear to Hershey, no longer her companion but a carcass to be dragged inside, to be drained of blood, dismembered. You must walk away now, she admonished herself.

In the office, she filled out and signed the forms. The girl behind the counter, whose voice Anne recognized from earlier this morning, lifted her face, fresh-scrubbed and vacant as a

moon. She glimpsed knowingly at Anne. “I wouldn’t own a pet for all the tea in China,” she said. “What I see here every day, kids crying, bringing their baby calves, their lambs . . .”

“That’s absurd,” Anne said under her tears. “That’s like saying, I’ll not get married because someday I’ll be alone again.”

She turned and stepped out of the office, walked back to her rig. She knew that she was crying only for herself. But it felt good to cry. It felt good.