

Quarters, Pasos, Arabians

by Chris Sheehan

Sometime that night I heard one; you get so you know when they're coming in low down the valley or set up high over the coastals and I was sure about it. There was a buzz coming in Lobo's window and I thought maybe Aileen had heard it and would be out on the porch waiting for it to come down so I could sneak in and she wouldn't know I'd been out again. I stood at the barred stall window, watching the red lights on the runway, the hanger lit bright and empty and the red and black Texaco sign high over the valley oaks. Wheat grass ranged waist-high off Road 97, edging the length of the landing field. But then it was gone, the easy buzz leaving on a lull. I wrung out the bloody rag and started back for the house.

"Where have you been?" Aileen said, a tiredness to her voice, working water down her wrists from under the rubber gloves, setting a dish out on the towels laid across the counter. She knew enough to keep an eye on me, living with my father and me for some years now, as long as I could remember. "You shouldn't sneak off like that, Vaughn. I don't like this any more than you. It only gets worse, worrying. Maybe you don't understand."

"He's cut," I said.

"He'll be fine. I talked with your father."

"What did he say?"

"He said he'll be fine. The job's ahead of schedule." She smiled a little, using my father's words. "Go back to bed."

My father had taken a bid in Crescent City, way up near the Oregon border, some four hours north, fitting acoustical ceilings for a grammar school, and had been gone now close to a week. If he'd seen the cut then I knew he'd want to fix Lobo up; we would take him out to the tie-racks and hose it out first, then we'd mix up a solution of baking powder to keep the proud flesh from forming over his hock. When the proud flesh comes in there isn't much you can do because of all the blood in the marbly white-pink new skin and you

can't cut it off the way you want because the bleeding is too hard to stop.

It didn't seem too far past, the last time, back when we were still breeding Lobo. He'd kicked a mare real good right as I brought him over to get a smell of her. She was winking and snorting like crazy, pulling at the rope. I led Lobo to the dummy and my father slipped on the sheath and we couldn't wake him after he'd spent himself, even with the mare winking all over the ground still, and when I saw the cut up her hock, deep and wide like the one Lobo had now, my father was worried enough and told me we better get some baking powder on it before the proud flesh set in. But I couldn't remember the solution, what it's cut with, only the way Lobo had stayed up on the dummy, slouched over in a way I'd never seen a stallion before, the few minutes before we could wake him and get him on his feet.

"He doesn't look fine." Night were warm in July with the Delta breeze keeping back at the coast and Lobo was already a horse you had to trick to eat sometimes by changing the look of the food, spreading a flake out on the floor from his feed-trough, or sometimes getting a new flake for him, especially if the oat hay was dry and yellow, and none of this Aileen knew about.

"What time is it, anyway?" she said, elbowing sweat from her forehead. She looked to the clock above the sink, the second hand clicking back and forth, stuck below the nine. She shook her head and reached into the soapy water. "I like knowing the time," she said. "I'm not like your father."

This was nothing like how I knew the ditch-water reason for Lobo's summer sores, how every summer he got the sores and every summer the ditches filled with water. I knew about that now. I knew I just had to get the mix together and get it on his leg so that the marbled flesh didn't start coming. I thought I'd seen it already in the stall and every time I turned him it seemed more of a shadow and I couldn't be sure. But it was just then I saw a truck roll up on Road 97, stopping along the fence-line out by the pastures. The lights clicked off and the road went dark. The road was narrow

with irrigation ditches running full then along each side; the hazards did not flash on as I had seen done before in the night, driving home with my father, and I couldn't see where the truck had stopped—only the pasture fence catching the arced light from the barn at the fringe of the dark haze. I watched the road awhile until there was only my reflection in the window but I knew there was something so I said, "I see something."

"It's late," she said, pulling off her gloves.

"Really," I said. "There's something out there."

She looked to the window. "There's no one out there," she said. She put a hand on my shoulder and bent down even with me and maybe she saw us there in the window because she squeezed my shoulder and I could feel her long nails pinch my skin. I pulled away. When I looked back there was a man moving in the shadow of the eucalyptus shelter belt. He didn't stop to look at our sign—Hacienda Halagunea, it read—and in the thin slatted light I could see he walked with a limp, not an injured limp but something I could only place as the kind my father had told me I had before the surgery on my clubbed foot, a limp that makes every step new so that you always feel a need to be running. "I see it," I said and put out a hand.

She pushed at the base of her curled hair. "Go on to bed, sweetie," she said. "Finish your milk, then go on to bed."

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From the hallway, I could hear the man speaking clear and easy, grained strangely against his chin, which seemed set apart from him, nearly motionless as he talked to Aileen. "My truck ran out of gas," he said. "Gauge broke some time back." He paused, as if to bring a hand to his face. "I thought he might be here," he said, then held up the gas can at his side.

"No," she said quietly, looking away from the porch light. "You still drive that old Ford? How long has it been, Jake?"

"The second tank's fine," he said. "I don't know. Time's different for me now."

The gas can was the metal kind with a plastic spout for pouring that comes out the nozzle, the kind I could never get to not leak all over the place when I'd fill up the lawnmower. I couldn't see him well from down the hall and decided to go over to them. He was younger than I'd thought at first, judging from his voice. He had blond hair you could see in the shadow of his white-yellow western hat. He wore blue jeans, work boots, and a white tee shirt stretched at the collar. His neck was red and hardened and along the corners of his mouth two scars ran under his chin, which was puffy and yellowish in the low light.

"I finished my milk," I said to Aileen, though I felt foolish saying it in front of him.

She turned to me: "Where does your father keep the gas, Vaughn? I wouldn't know anything about it."

"In the mower," I said. "I bet there's some left in there." It had been sputtering a little the last time, but I thought there might be enough to get him on to a gas station. "Or the Cat," I said. "There might be some in the Cat."

He laughed, a deep grunt that moved his shoulders as his eyes shifted calmly to Aileen, down the hallway, then back to Aileen. "I remember that dress," he said, turning his head as if he was speaking to himself, though it was hard to tell with his chin.

"I don't like to wear it much," she said, reaching back for me, slowly running a hand through my hair.

Her dress, a white-cotton shift, was something she'd wear around the house, nothing special, not like the pretty flowered dresses with frills she'd wear out to The Buckhorn. But she seemed to come alive in it when he said this, her face getting color and her eyes a little wider at him, as though she was standing straighter and they were both on the verge of laughing at something I hadn't heard. It was a little like when we'd sit out on the porch and watch the planes come in, listening to the radio, when a plane leveled even

with the ground, and she'd say, "Isn't it something, Vaughn. They always seem about to crash."

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Before I could say anything to him, Aileen had taken his hand and led him down the porch steps. I waited for them to turn the corner toward the shed, and then climbed up on the counter. The baking powder was on the bottom shelf. I poured it into a bowl from beside the sink and then looked through the cupboard, thinking if I saw the label maybe I would remember what else it took. I pulled out the pepper and salt and tarragon and oregano and brown sugar and powder sugar and set them all out on the table. I smelled the tarragon leaves and then put them back. They smelled like the tea Aileen drank in the morning. Back behind the cooking oil, I noticed a bottle of meat tenderizer and put that on the table too. The brown sugar was making me hungry. I poured a bowl of cereal and spooned some brown sugar on the top. I read the labels while I ate, hoping for some kind of clue. Then I heard the door.

Jake stepped into the kitchen and joggled the gas can back and forth, though there was no sound, then shook it in a violent way as if he'd expected a finger of gas to be in it. He waved his western hat in the air. "What's all this?" he said, which was something my father liked to say, but it sounded new now, and it took a few seconds for me to realize that they were the same words.

"It's for proud flesh," I said. "I'm mixing up a solution for it."

"Solution?" he said. He looked at the packages on the table, then picked up the bowl. "Is this baking powder?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

He shook in some meat tenderizer from the table and mixed it with his finger. "You don't need the rest of this stuff, unless you want to *feed* it to the horse."

"Excuse me," Aileen said, and left the kitchen. I could hear water running in the bathroom then.

"I couldn't remember," I said.

He went to the window and looked out toward the road.

"You have horses?" I asked.

"You don't need a sad story here," he said. "I wish I did, how's that?"

"What kind of horses?" Quarters, Pasos, Arabians?"

He was quiet by the window as though he'd expected me to go on more. "I don't have horses," he said.

"The horse cut itself on the fence," Aileen said, sitting down next to me at the table. "They're always getting their legs caught." She put a hand over mine and smiled.

"I never liked riding Pasos much," he said. "Their gait's too smooth."

"Peruvian Pasos?"

"Is that where they're from?"

"Do you know where that is, honey?" She pulled her hand away and smoothed her skirt over her knees. She seemed cold, though I could see sweat on Jake's forehead, and feel my hand damp from hers.

"I saw it on a map once," I said, and could picture the colored countries, but somehow the only thing I could manage past that was of my father just then sleeping in his truck, beside the mill, where the highway ran along the bay and he could hear the big saws all night, how sometimes he would think it was the surf but it never was since there was no surf in a bay.

"Let's go," he said. "No sense in talking about it. We ain't queer—right, buddy." He slapped me in a joking way and held his hand there, grinning.

"Jake," Aileen said, and then looked to the table where the red and white powder was in the bowl and seemed to confuse her.

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Outside the air was warm and I could feel the ground-heat rising off the gravel. Jake went ahead into the barn as I turned on the aisle lights. He didn't limp toward one leg and I realized he was bowlegged, and could see how I'd made the mistake on the dark gravel road. He stood at Lobo's stall. Lobo was small and thin, a hard-keeper my father called him.

I pulled the heavy stall door open. Inside, Jake held Lobo's head in his arm and petted his face, talking softly to him in a soothing way and I couldn't hear any of his words.

I stepped in and held out the bowl. But he bent down, turning away, and looked at the cut up Lobo's hock where the blood had crusted over and puss was forming out of the blood. "This isn't too bad," he said, staring at it. He didn't seem mad with me for bringing him out to help, just focused on the wound as though he understood it too well to say anything or had seen it too much to understand. I felt uncomfortable watching him, waiting to ask what he saw in it. My father was a nervous person, you always knew what was on his mind.

"I never shot a horse," he said then. "I think that tells you something." He stood up and unbuckled the halter from the rack on the stall door. Lobo pulled back but he brought him close and rubbed his ears and Lobo calmed. He patted Lobo hard on the shoulder and walked him out of the stall and down the aisle to the tie-racks.

I got the hose from around the corner, setting the bowl down by the faucet.

He took it in his hand. "That's a good scar," he said, nodding to my leg.

I looked at it. It angled off the base of my ankle and came half-way up my calf. It was from the cast-cutter, my father had told me. From not keeping still when they cut the cast off. There were other on my foot, but he couldn't see those. I wanted to show him.

"How about you turn it on?"

I turned the water on, could hear it lunge in the pipes. I backed the pressure off.

"Aileen," he said, kneeling on the other side of Lobo. "She says you're looking for a stall cleaner." He fingered the corners of his mouth, ran his thumb and forefinger down the sewn lines as though he was considering it.

"We are," I said.

"That's good work," he said. "Not something to say over dinner, but good work still." He held Lobo by the fetlock and let water rinse over the cut. "I was a Game Warden," he said. "They'll give a gun to anyone now."

I thought he might tell me about his chin—about a bar fight or maybe even a bear or mountain lion that had gotten to him. I couldn't ask, though it was hard not to stare. "You had a gun?" I said, hopefully.

"Yeah," he said.

I tried to picture him in the dark green uniform I'd seen Game Wardens wear out at Lake Berryessa, fishing with my father, but it wasn't right, and I thought maybe he knew someone who had been one, and liked to think of himself that way.

"My last day," he said, focusing out toward the house. In the distance I could hear the front door shut and Aileen calling my name. "I was at this lake in the Sierra, doing my rounds. Noble Lake, I can't remember. So I start around it, picking up trash." He paused, rubbing at the cut, then looked up to me. "On the ridge—I find this bear cub on a little granite outcrop over the lake, shot dead, right, and only the claws were taken. They'd cut off the damned claws, left the poor thing for dead. For its claws."

Aileen had come quietly into aisle. She looked upset and I thought she might have called my father and told him about Jake, and something about the way she'd told it to him had set him off so that Jake seemed to be the kind of guy he didn't want on his property. "Vaughn," she said, and raised her eyes, but she didn't seem too worried about me, turning her eyes to Jake as though she wanted to hear what he had to say.

"I guess those claws are worth something in other countries," he said to me. "They grind them, mix up some kind of aphrodisiac. This doctor I went to see down in Mexico told me about that." He looked to Aileen as though he'd just said something he knew she wouldn't like.

I didn't know what that was—this aphrodisiac thing, but the powder came to mind and I went to the faucet and got the bowl. Aileen and Jake were talking fast and quiet when I came back and I couldn't understand what they said even when I was close enough. But then he turned to me. "Come on," he said, leading Lobo to the stall. "Let's fix your friend up."

He kept the halter on Lobo and motioned for me to bring him the bowl. I never needed to halter Lobo when he was in the stall, even when I had to dress a wound or give him his wormer. He dipped his hands in the bowl and then smeared on the mixture. Lobo threw his head, straining the lead rope, and Jake jerked back hard, but the rope slipped out of his hand and when Lobo lunged again there was no tension and he reared up by accident, it looked, on account of being surprised by the free rope, and when he came down his hoof caught Jake on the forearm and Jake swore and shook out his arm and then hit Lobo square in the nose and pulled sharply on the rope, bringing Lobo to his side. "Fuck," he said, with a hard sound, a harder sound than I'd heard used. His arm was white in the place Lobo had come down and blood was beginning to form out of the cut. You could see the white skin in the dark and the pressure of the blood. "Take him," he said, and walked out the stall and back toward the house where Aileen had gone.

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The puss had dried and the powder flaked off, and slowly, as Lobo calmed and started sniffing the shavings and I worked still at his leg, I understood I was alone, though it wasn't such a bad feeling, and went to the stall window, where I could see the horses playing in their paddocks. They were excited, the way

they get when a storm's in the air, or a coyote has come down to the flats. For a moment I thought I heard the heavy droning of a plane, the muffled clank of its landing wheels, the propeller winding down as it taxied to the hanger, but there was only the still dark, the distant red lights wavering through the wheat grass stub.

I was careful to latch the stall door before I started along the grass's edge where the porch light was dim. I crouched down and looked at them in the kitchen. Jake was standing at the sink while Aileen rubbed his arm with a towel. He was smiling and laughing, and it seemed she had a way with him that brought that out, because he had not been that way with me. His hat was off and his hair was thin on top and wispy along the sides as though it had not come in fully. Then they moved away from the sink and I couldn't see them. I waited for some time, a cloudiness hanging over me so that I couldn't bring myself to go inside. It felt wrong somehow, as if the rules had suddenly changed. I decided to go around back and see what I could through the bedroom windows.

Studying the draw in the curtains, I could see them when they became still. They seemed to be in an embrace. Then they were gone, and I could see two thin shadows lift against the curtains as though someone was raising their arms, and I thought maybe Aileen was changing her dress. There was nothing for a while, then she appeared naked in the draw, though it was hard to tell what I was looking at. Still, I felt a little funny about it, not knowing especially, and then she moved out of the draw and when he held close behind I knew what I had seen and what was there now and it all got my blood going and my hands unsteady and I knew I couldn't like it but there it was and I walked quietly across the gravel, but when I set my eyes in the room, I realized they were gone, or could've been gone for some time, and suddenly everything was disgusting and painful and I couldn't even think of my father only where I could hide.

"Vaughn," Aileen yelled, facing the sand arena. She was wearing the dress loosely over herself and I could see Jake's shirt balled in his hand. I had already positioned myself in the shrubs

when they came out through the garage, toward her black Mustang.

“Vaughn,” she called again, and again, before she ducked calmly into the car and they sat still a while and I could see her face turned toward him as the engine came alive and he touched the breaks and I looked at my skin in the red light; he drove around the house slowly, and I ran out after them, ran out across the grass, then close along the tree line; he hadn't turned on the lights yet and I could hear the eucalyptus branches snap under the tires, toward the road, as he used the gas and then turned sharply away, to the east, not the direction I thought he would go—there were no gas stations out that way, only alfalfa fields and wheat—and I knew about siphoning and all that, even watching the red lights now as they faded, settling with distance—but his truck was down road toward Winters—unless he took a quick right at the first stop sign, where Indian Rice Road bent back to 97; it was dark enough to imagine all that—though, standing in the road, it could've been seconds or an hour, as the taillights cast the horizon, so that you felt you'd taken your eyes away for a time, though you hadn't. I couldn't say. I started back, grinning uncontrollably, as if I knew in a few hours my father would be home and Aileen would still be gone and I would be sound asleep, as if nothing had happened at all—the night always turning too easily to this, this dirt-yellow brightness, as I move toward the house lit sharply on the gravel drive and knock, before letting myself in.

