

# Lord of Autumn

by DeWitt Henry

## **Gordon**

He pressed the side of his face to the pillow and waited for the sound of birds. The room was black, the window open; when a breeze came the curtains billowed out against a lighter sky. He heard the clock. He heard the dry sound of Helen breathing; there was a sigh and a moan and the bed rustled.

He was fifty-six.

Bill, his son and only child, had been back for a month now, after four years in the Army. He had a wife and daughter of his own and a new one coming, but no more spine or direction than ever. Up late every morning, always having to be told and pushed, run by that wife of his, that Marion. The most use he was was as a welder and mechanic; looking always for conveniences, let's modernize. No good handling men, or with the business side.

"You're too harsh! You aren't being fair! You never give him a chance!" Helen argued, same as always.

But he had given that boy every chance.

He closed his eyes, as if to turn from the disturbing thought. He dreamed, instead, of when he'd bought the horse and the first time he'd seen it: a flash of white mane, the paleness of its back in the sun and the power of it, tossing its head and flaring its nostrils, drawing gray lips back from the teeth and running powerfully among the other horses. And Sam Geers saw too and bid against him. The auctioneer in a green silk shirt that glistened and a white hat was yelling and the crowd was shouting after the bids. A boy walked the horse back and forth while they were bidding and suddenly the animal reared up and pawed the air; the boy lost the rope, yelled, the auctioneer jumped down to hold the horse. The crowd shouted and laughed.

"It's not that good, not worth the price," Sam Geers had said, but his eyes lit up when they saw it running, kicking up dirt; the muscular power of it, the spirit, the white tail flicking.

The curtains puffed out lightly and settled back, sucked tight against the screen. Then the birds began to sing, as if startled by the wind.

He got up quietly. He could see inside the room now, as he began to dress. He watched his wife sleeping. Careful not to wake her, he crept out, boots in hand, and down the stairs to the kitchen, where he pulled on his boots and finished dressing.

Outside, everything was gray; vague shapes of things gathered, the fences, barn, the creek winding noisily below. He went down the long hill, over the bridge to the barn, where he took the bridle and a bucket with grain in it, and then walked out though the corral into the meadow, tasting the damp, clinging mist and listening for a nicker or the crashing of brush by the creek. The air was chill and damply fresh and the mist swirled up from waist-high grass.

He crossed the road, searching and rattling the grain ahead of him. He circled toward the stream and the willows by the fenceline where the mist was dense and rolling off the water. He dodged and pushed through the willows until he heard a stirring sound and sensed the horse ahead of him. He slipped the bridle off his shoulder and shook the bucket, stepping free of the willows.

Large, distinct, through thinning mist, the horse stood watching him. Its shape was dark, its ears turned forward, nostrils quivering; as he approached, it ducked its head, nickered and backed away nervously. He waited, bucket on the ground, the bridle readied, until the horse came closer, wary, its tail twitching.

The head dropped and nuzzled the bucket.

He put his arm around the arched neck, brought the bridle over the ears and slid the bit in the mouth in one quick movement. The horse shook its head; the jowls moved and grain slavered over its lips; the bit clicked against its teeth. He tightened his hold, put weight on the neck and fixed the buckles, while the horse relaxed, seemed almost to ignore him.

The sun came red through the clouds, rising until a break came and light burst orange.

He led the horse to the barn. He used the best blanket with a red and black design and the best saddle which spanned the glossy back and had fine tooling in the leather and a rich tan lustre. The lantern cast shadows and shone in the horse's big eyes and on the studs in the leather. In an hour, he was thinking, he'd be back to milk the cows and do his chores. But now he would go riding.

Mounted, heading out the door, he felt the horse nervous and alert beneath him. The moment they had cleared the sill, it moved into a trot.

They followed the road to where it branched and then up the rise, into the low sun and across long shadows, to the fenceline. He dismounted, undid the wire gate, which he left on the ground, remounted, and with a kick they cantered off the path, down through powdery dirt and sage. Ahead, across the irrigation ditch, were two wide fields with grass grown tall, the shining surface liquid with the wind. The horse slowed when they reached the level and trotted raggedly beside the ditch. He leaned close to the neck, hauled hard on the left rein and spurred the horse to plunge, splashing and clattering, through the water, and to scramble, dripping, up the other side.

The fields opened smooth and wide before them and the horse began to run. He urged it recklessly, kicking the ribs. The neck stretched out; he felt the gathering of muscles and the pounding rhythm of the running and the wind. He bent down, hat flapping, eyes tearing, and he clung hard with his legs and knees. They neared the middle of the field at full gallop, when suddenly the horse tripped. He was flying. The ground rose up with one vast blow and the horse came, massive, crushing down.

The horse stood over him shaking. He stretched out his arms and tried to turn. The weight was gone but his head was pressed back and he heard the heavy breathing horse and wind in the grass.

Pain was there. There was powdery dust over his body and soft shadows of tall waving grass.

The horse was gone.

He rolled his eyes and listened. He saw sky, mountains, blurred grass around him. His head was heavy. There was pain. Quick, sharply, his heart beat in his chest.

Smoke would be drifting into the sun and spreading with wind over the house. Cows needed milking, would be bellowing at the barn. The horse would return with saddle and reins dragging, dancing by its feet.

He wondered when they'd find him. He heard the change of gears, whining. Loud, metallic, low like a growl and dipping, rising: they'd driven past. But now they'd turned; they came directly toward him. He heard a shout, voices, motor idling calmly, the thud of feet.

"Here, here he is!"

He looked up and saw bodies standing over him, tall dark shapes against the sky, felt their shadows cover him, saw the legs, texture of blue jeans, grease-stained and faded, saw hands and torsos, faces—his son's face, a man's face with wide dilated eyes. The expression was incredulous and frightened, feminine lip pinched between the teeth, brows brought forward, black, and eyes glossy brown, glancing nervously away.

He shut his eyes: a quick sound and hands on his body. He felt Bill kneeling over him, heard him breathe.

"Dad!" his son said, "Dad! What should we do?" and then saying: "Should we move him?"

"You can't leave him like that."

He felt others bending down and firm pressing hands over all his body.

He was covered.

Hands and the dust: he felt them push against his weight and then the pain was there and he tasted blood, tried to form a swearword. His mouth was open, his lips heavy with blood and dust: his tongue lolled dry and caked with dust, writhed slowly across the roof of his mouth.

***Bill***

Kneeling, he saw his shadow go out from him, rise broken over the bed and over Marion who sat there listening to sounds from the kitchen—thumping of water in the pipes, his mother's voice. Marion sat in the sun and blinked, ran her fingers comblike through her hair. He raised his hand with the canvas shoe and then it was in the sunlight and he was forcing it, white and with worn rubber sole, over her shiny foot and the laces were dangling below the foot in slow flickering arcs.

"Where's Peggy Ann?" he asked.

"I suppose Helen got her up. I heard them in the kitchen." She brushed her hair from her forehead and shut her eyes. "When are you going to get dressed? You're always the last one," she said. "I hate the way Gordon looks at you every morning."

He finished tying her shoes.

Looking down at him, she reached out and her hands gathered his muscles and pressed down. She was big with his child, near full term. He saw the shape of her, knew the deep colored veins that spread over her stomach. Her hands, massaging his muscles, crept toward his neck and kneaded the tendons. He raised his head.

"Kiss me?" she said.

Then there was her face, white and plain, her gray eyes and soft round cheeks; she was bending forward. His lips opened and he felt her drawing the air out of his mouth and her knees pressing hard against his chest.

He held his eyes tightly closed and her warm hands took his head and raised it up so that it rested against her. He was pleased and gratified to have her warmth against him, to have her fingers touch and close around him and then he rolled his eyes open and looked up into her face: the sun lit one side of it and the other was in harsh shadows; he saw her eyes which were in shadowed hollows and that she was not looking at him but somewhere far off, attentive to some distant thing that he would neither understand nor dare to recognize.

"It's late," she said.

She took herself away, stood up large and pregnant, her blouse hanging loose and her skirt brushing lightly across his shoulder.

"Just once. Just be there when the men come in. Be there when Gordon comes back."

He dressed and walked into the kitchen where it was warm; cereal bubbled on the stove and blue steam curled from it. Water hissed in the sink. His mother stood by the window, her dress dark and shapeless, heavy arms crossed in front of her and looking out the window. The sun slanted through, over the front of her from throat to waist. A breeze came to the curtains and touched loose hairs over her ear; absently there was the motion of her hand through the sun.

"He hasn't come back," she said.

Marion was standing in the doorway to the porch and Peggy Ann with her, holding her hand. His wife, motionless and silent, his daughter with puffed eyes, smooth skin gleaming, blue ribbon in her hair, and himself, hands open and moving flat against his thighs.

"I never thought Gordon would be late," Marion said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"It's late and he hasn't come in yet," Marion said.

At the window his mother turned. The sun moved higher on her body.

"Up before dawn and riding that horse," his mother was saying. "I saw him go after it, I watched him from the window. It was just getting light when he got it to the barn." She looked at him. "He went off to the fields."

"Well, he should be back," said Marion. "What about the milking? What about breakfast?"

"We'll wait," said his mother. She looked back out the window.

Peggy Ann suddenly ran to him and he stooped to catch her. He felt her small warm body and she squealed because he began to rise, lifting her. Her eyes were quick and intense with deep brown irises: laughing, she closed them. She was limp and he swung her between his knees.

"You might take a look at the barn," said Marion. "And take care of the milking."

"Yes," he said.

At the window, his mother was silent.

He went down to the barn alone. He could feel his mother's eyes on his back, and he crossed the bridge over rushing water and entered the barn where it was dark again. He smelled the heavy odors of animals and rotting hay and leather and from the loft came thin rays of sunlight with rising motes. He heard the cows lowing beyond the walls and saw his father's lantern burning. The lateness worried him. It wasn't like his father to be late, to leave things undone. He turned down the lantern.

With heavy udders the cows lowed outside. He saw fresh dung of the horse and that the good saddle was missing and the studded bridle. He moved silently to the door; a kitten came drunkenly out of the shadows and played about his feet, wanting milk and mewing.

He opened the top half of the door, squinting at the colors, vivid, bright, and breathing the open smells and wind. The cows stood aside in high weeds and grass. They backed away and bellowed at him. Opening the lower half of the door, he went out to get them—one white with mud dried on it, messy around the tail, the other black with glistening nostrils. Their bags were swollen because it was late, because his father had neglected them.

He drove them into the barn where shadows were and flies. The cows ate hay from the rack in the stalls, dropping dung into the gutter behind them. He milked the white one first, then the black one, whose milk wouldn't come easily, and when it came it was a thin hard thread and his wrists ached.

Finished, he sent the cows out and poured milk in the dirt for the kitten. He was hungry; he was worried about his father because it was late and they should all be eating now.

The weight of the pails tugged at his shoulders and cut across his fingers; he stood with the pail and looked up, seeing the bridge and the hill in front of him and the house against the sky, smoke rising, and some birds in the wind far above. Stopping on the bridge, he set

the milkpails down; he saw his shadow on the water, transparent. He wanted to wait, he wanted to see his father come over the yellow hill and down the road in full gallop, whipping the horse, pale in the sunlight.

There was a sound that startled him. He looked up, saw the house, the truck, and Marion beside it waving. She sounded the horn again and waved and the wind forced her clothes against her body. Her smock was pink in the bright sun; she shaded her eyes with her hand.

"Bill!" she called.

The porch door opened and his mother and daughter came out; he saw the white dress his daughter wore. He didn't understand. He waited and swayed and clutched the railing and watched the water. He heard her shout again and shut his eyes.

"I can't hear you!" she called.

He looked up and saw her raise her hand. He couldn't make out the detail of her face. Helen and Peggy Ann stood behind her by the porch. He gripped the railing.

"Can't you see? Are you blind?"

He turned around and the sun came in his eyes.

"Don't you see?"

Shading his eyes, squinting, he saw the stream go out away from him and then the road and yellow hills and sagebrush. He saw the dust on the road and the horse returning, riderless.

### ***Helen***

She stood on the porch alone, looking outside with patience and foreboding. She felt the glow of light over her cheeks and eyes, and her eyes ached because she was straining to see into the distance, searching down the road where both had disappeared: her husband riding in the dawn; her son, gone out to bring him home.

Marion was calling her from the kitchen:

"Helen, won't you really have some breakfast?"



She pressed her lips together and frowned in response; she shook her head and gently closed her eyes. She smelled the bacon frying and heard the dishes clatter and gripped the folds of her dress.

"Mommy, why won't Grammy come?" she heard.

"I don't know, hon. She doesn't want to."

Lifting her hand to her mouth, she felt the warm breath in her palm, and she pushed her fingers along her jaw, up into her brittle hair.

Suddenly she was seized from behind; small arms reached around her thighs and squeezed.

"Grammy, why won't you come eat with us?"

"I can't now, Peggy," she said at last, "I'm waiting for Grandpa to come home. I don't want to eat before he gets here— he wouldn't like that."

"Come in here and leave her alone!" they heard.

"It's all right, Marion!" she shouted back. "She's fine!"

She reached behind her and touched Peggy's head, the soft, curly hair.

"Why's he so late? Why do you have to wait?"

"He went riding," she said, her eyes closed, "and he fell off his horse. That's why your daddy and the men went out to find him. It's like being lost. When they find him they'll bring him home."

The arms closed firmly about her legs.

"I love Grandpa!"

"Yes, dear," she said.

She heard steps and knew that Marion had entered the porch; she opened her eyes and glanced over her shoulder: she saw Marion's full face, cheeks lifted and squeezed against the eyes:

"I can't see anything; can you, Helen?"

She saw her son's wife, sneakers on her feet, the bulge of pregnancy, the loose red blouse, the folded arms, the hair tied back with a yellow scarf.

"Oh, why are you being this way?" Marion said. "I'm sure he'll be all right. We can't sit here all morning with our hearts in our throats." Then Marion looked down at Peggy Ann. "Come in and eat

your breakfast. I've warmed the cereal and cooked bacon and eggs."

"I want to wait!"

She saw Marion's face tighten and watched her step closer and take the child by the shoulder. She saw her blush.

"Peggy, do as she says, do what your mother tells you," she said softly.

The arms relaxed and slowly withdrew. She looked outside again, blinking. She joined her hands together and rested them on the window sill, and then she leaned forward slowly, until her forehead touched the screen.

### ***Bill***

He was in the back of the truck.

His father was unconscious beside him.

They lay together on a mattress to dull the jarring while the truck rocked violently, throwing them from side to side. Gas sloshed in a drum beside them. The wind boomed.

Grass swayed and parted in their wake, green and tan and satin gold. He had found his father lying in the grass with a broken leg. And then he'd watched when they slit the leg of the jeans and there was a terrible lump on the thigh where the bone pushed and a dark bruise around it.

He had his arm around his father to hold him still and the blood tingled in his arm and he curled his fingers.

He was cold. The wind chilled his ears and cheeks and hands, and it made him cold through his clothes. The wind made his hair sting against his forehead.

He watched the shadow float over the ground and the ground spill past like a river and slide into the distance.

"Go on," Marion had told him. "Go and bring your father home. He's probably walking back with nothing hurt except his pride."

What was she going to say now?

Up close, he saw beads of sweat swelling on his father's face; the eyes were tightly closed, the face was like a leather mask: ugly, contracted, holding everything in.

He had to look away.

He felt the body shifting beside him, lying on his arm, the presence of it, the length and weight of it, the size of it, the strangeness.

### ***Marion***

Marion fumbled for a pot holder and lifted the hissing pan from the burner. She set the pan down in the sink and steam exploded from it as she turned on the water.

Peggy Ann began to cry, whimpering.

"Peggy, stop that, darling!"

Marion went over to her, carrying the plates with eggs and bacon and cold toast. She wasn't sure what to do. She set down the plates and reached out to stop Peggy from getting out of the chair.

"Peggy, stop. Please, nothing's wrong!" she whispered. Her hands tightened, squeezing the shoulders.

"Nothing's wrong at all. There's nothing to be frightened of. Why are you crying? What do you want? Daddy's bringing Grandpa home and they'll be here soon."

She bent down awkwardly and touched her lips to Peggy Ann's hot cheek. The whimpering subsided.

Peggy looked up at her with wet round eyes. "Mommy, is Grandpa hurt?"

"We'll know soon enough," she said with reassuring calmness. "It serves him right if he is. It might do him good to find out how he needs help too sometimes. He can't have everything his own way."

She gave her shoulders an extra squeeze before she backed away. "Now, you be good. Here, let me cut this for you."

She took up knife and fork and cut the food on the plate, and she took her own plate and poured hot coffee and sat down with her daughter. She was very hungry because it was so late, her stomach trembled, and she could feel what she swallowed passing downwards with her spine. She sucked on the prongs of her fork. She gulped hot coffee. She noticed that Peggy was only playing with her food.

"Will Grandpa die?"

Her teeth came together through the toast as she chewed, tasting the butter; she swallowed before answering.

"Everybody has to die someday; but never tell him that. Most people die when they get very old and tired and weak and they don't want to get up in the morning and work."

She looked fondly at her daughter.

"Don't you worry, dear."

She'd finished her coffee and gone back to the sink, when she heard a scraping and scrambling behind her and looked in time to see Peggy Ann run out to the porch. She caught her breath, but kept her temper as if everything were just as she would have it, and turned on the water and scoured the skillet with a soap pad.

Before long she heard Helen call:

"I see them! Marion, I see them! Come here!"

And Peggy came running to tell her.

But there was the excitement of it and she only wanted to see for herself. Out on the porch she leaned over Helen's shoulder, looked outside scowling, looked down the road and across the hills.

"The road dips down," Helen said. "You'll see when they come up again."

"Yes! There! There they are!"

Helen pushed away and hurried to the end of the porch and out, the screendoor slapping. She watched her through the screen for a moment, then looked back to the moving truck and cloud of dust in the distance.

"Where is it, Mommy?"

Peggy Ann had climbed up on a chair.

"It's there, see? But don't you come outside, you hear me? Don't you dare get in the way when they get here. You understand? No matter what happens, you stay inside and leave us alone."

"I'll be good," her daughter said.

When she went out, the door slapped behind her too and she was in the sunlight, dazed, raising her hand to fend it off. She saw Helen standing in the yard and heard the motor, a faint wisp of sound that

grew continually louder. She approached Helen from behind and saw her pulling at her herself, plucking her clothes. And then the truck was there before them. The horn bleated and it came over the cattleguard, spun fiercely into the yard; it was black and the dust hung behind it and she saw the men in the cab, their elbows and arms in the sun and through the windshield hands turning the wheel and brakes groaned and she had a glimpse of someone in back, someone lying down.

Helen ran after them and climbed up on the bumper and stepped into the bed with her skirts fluttering and the dust still hanging brightly and the motor throbbing and doors flung open.

"Oh, Gordon, I knew it!"

Helen bent down over him and touched him; Gordon lay unconscious on a mattress, his clothes torn, his leg held in a splint that went all the way up his body. Bill was huddled on the far side of the bed with his knees drawn up and his face hidden: he wouldn't look up.

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They were alone: Gordon lying on the unmade bed, and Helen, and herself. The room was dark, bluish cast because the shades were down and there were towels thrown carelessly around and Bill's dirty shirt and socks and her own slip was hanging from a dresser drawer. She watched from the end of the bed. Helen was sitting beside him on the bed and leaning over him, whispering things she couldn't understand clearly, dabbing his face with a damp cloth. Twice now they had heard him groan, but he wouldn't open his eyes or speak to anyone or move.

Helen took one of his hands in her lap and washed it gently; the hand was lean and taut and strong with veins and it left dark smears on the cloth.

She watched Helen's rounded back and arms and nodding head and then she looked at Gordon's head lying back in the pillow, face upward, and the high pale forehead and the suntan a strange gray and the large sunken eyes, deep nostrils, the lined and lumpy

unshaven throat. He lay motionless, as if dead, with the heavy splints bound to his body.

There was nothing more to do until the doctor came. She pressed against the metal bars at the foot of the bed and gripped them anxiously.

"It's been ten minutes since we called. The doctor will be here soon, Helen," she said.

"Where's Bill?" Helen asked suddenly, without turning around.

"I don't know. In the parlor, I think, with Peggy Ann. Why?"

"You should be with him."

She wasn't going to leave until it was clear that it was her choice, not theirs.

"Please. Get out and leave us alone," Helen said, bending over him.

"Why should I? I only want to help."

She held on to the bars; she thought she saw Gordon's eyes close tighter. The room brightened and grew dim again and she pressed against the bed.

"I'm leaving," she said at last. "I'll call you when the doctor comes."

"Thank you," Helen said.

And throughout all this she felt a peculiar sort of excitement, a sense of elation and control. She went to look for Bill and Peggy Ann and found them in the livingroom; Bill was in a rocking chair by the windows, in the sun, and Peggy Ann was curled up in his arms.

### ***Bill***

Gently, he held her closer, his arms around her and she lay in his lap with arms around his neck and he felt her breathing at his throat and the convulsions of her sobbing and the slipperiness of tears. They went back and forth, nodding forward, falling backward while the rocking chair groaned and creaked. He pressed his lips to the fineness of her hair and tasted it with his tongue.

"Here you are," Marion said.

He looked up, surprised to find her standing there and fell away from her with the motion of the chair and came back toward her holding the weight of his daughter in his arms.

"He'll be all right" she said. "Helen's with him and she doesn't want me around. The doctor will be here soon, and we won't have anything to worry about."

He stared at her.

"He's been asking for it all along, and now it's happened."

He stopped his chair and Peggy Ann stirred in his arms.

"I wanted to help, but Helen said get out." She paused. "Aren't you hungry?"

He felt the brightness and warmth of the sun coming in and the shape of Peggy's shoe pressing his thigh. No hunger. He didn't want to eat.

Marion pulled a chair over and sat down, leaning forward, her knees apart and her skirt tight about her knees. He had to strain to see her face because of the light of the curtains behind her. He held his daughter close.

"Bill," she said. "The doctor will take him away, and then he'll have to stay away. He may even be crippled afterwards. We'll have the ranch to ourselves."

He fell away from her and back again and the chair creaked. She was watching him.

"I know how he'll feel," she said. "We're all aware of that. But wasn't this what we decided on by staying here? Didn't we agree that we wanted the ranch when Gordon was through, and the ranch would be ours, and if we didn't want it, he'd have to sell? Now Gordon has to know: the time has come and there's nobody to blame for it but himself."

Peggy began to squirm and whimper and suddenly she cried out loud and leaned back against his arm.

"We ought to send her over to Lena's for today, until all this is over," Marion said. "She'll only be in the way."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it won't be pleasant. We're all upset. I've already called Lena, and she's glad to do anything she can to help." She reached over and touched Peggy's leg. "Be good!"

She wanted to be free, struggling, so he let her down and she slid from his lap to the floor, ran across the room with a scream and flung herself face down on the couch. Marion looked startled and annoyed.

"Peggy Ann, that's very naughty!" Marion was after her. "This is no time for tricks, with your grandfather hurt!"

Peggy Ann screamed.

"I told you, stop it! Now calm down!"

"I don't want her to go."

Marion turned slowly: "What you want isn't important. It isn't what you want, but what will be for the best. I'm going to get Peggy's things together, and then I'll have to get breakfast or brunch or something for the men to eat; they must be starved." She started to leave. "Call me if the doctor comes," she added, and was gone.

Peggy Ann was quiet, curled up on the couch.

"Baby — Baby, come to me?"

But she wouldn't come. He began to rock again, pushing with his legs, the rocker creaking.

"Peggy Ann," he tried again.

Still, she wouldn't come. He pressed down to rock forward and leaned back, fainted backwards and followed her with his eyes.

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He watched through the porch window and screen and shadow of the eaves as Marion waved outside and the car drove away, the sun flashing on it, and he heard the motor and it disappeared over the hill and he knew he would see it again out past the corral and barn in the distance, moving toward the gate and willows and highway, out of sight, taking Peggy Ann away.

He went back to the parlor and lay down, images of brightness hovering in his eyes; and when he shut his eyes, the spots were there again, beating in the darkness.



She came in now; he heard the screen door bang and her footsteps.

"Do you think that was easy for me to do? Do you think I liked it?" Her voice quavered; she sank down beside him on the couch.

But he turned away, hid his face; she was too much for him, more than he could stand.

"Bill, I need you! Don't turn away."

She reached out and rubbed his arm and lightly touched his neck and ear. Then she leaned down and pressed her face to his jaw so he heard her breathing, the hot breath in his ear. A tremor passed over her he didn't understand; she was leaning on him and when she sat up he turned to look, saw tears in her eyes. She wiped a tear on her wrist.

"I didn't want her to go."

"You sent her away!"

"Of course I did. No, listen to me —" She was fighting, tears in her eyes, pressing her hands against his chest. "You can't go, I won't let you!"

"I'm going outside."

He struggled up, freed his arm, and walked away through the diningroom without hesitating or turning.

### ***Helen***

She understood his frustration and his sense of shame.

"It's only your leg that's broken," she said. "You'll be fine in a few months, see if you aren't. It isn't so serious. Your leg will heal, we'll come back."

He glared at her.

"How much time do I have?"

"The doctor's on his way from town."

His eyes rolled up at her, straining: "Who's going to run things when I'm not here?"

"I don't know!" she gasped. "Don't blame me!" She fought back tears, but the way he watched her and stayed apart was cruel and she began to grow angry. "You just be careful," she said slowly.

He shut his eyes, shutting her out.

"You're such a difficult man. You make everything worse than it needs to be. You've only broken your leg — you might have died."

"You know damned well it's more than that!" She saw him trembling with pain, frowning and perspiring; she heard him moan, and faced the way he looked at her for having heard it.

"I know it's more than that," she said. "And I'm leaving with you. I'll stay with you — at the hospital, in town."

"Don't let anybody see me, don't let them take me away."

She dabbed his moist forehead.

"Don't let them touch me!"

He clenched his eyes and trembled; she heard him swear under his breath, and she began to shake, overcome — she had to let them, she had to let them! —

Marion came knocking at the door and opened it a crack; the room lightened, the shade rusted.

"Helen, can I come in?"

She rose from the bed and went to the door and spoke through the opening: "What is it? Can't you leave us alone?" She held the door so Marion couldn't get in.

"I can't find Bill. I think he's left the house, I can't find him anywhere —" Marion peered inside and leaned against the door.

"That's your worry. Now leave us alone!"

She shut the door against the younger woman's weight.

There was a silence and then something outside; Marion called from the other side of the door:

"They're coming up the road! They're here!"

"Oh, no, no!" she stammered; she ran back to Gordon.

"I'll bring them in!" Marion shouted.

He was looking up at her and suddenly his face went red and tight with rage and she heard him whisper, "Don't let them!" through his teeth.

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She sat in the armchair by the empty bed, looking across the bed to the window where the shade glowed with daylight, where holes and scratches shone like meteors.

Across the bed, on a table, a clock ticked loudly, evenly. A fly batted against the shade and skipped across the ceiling. The room was warm and empty and silent.

She stared straight ahead, listened without hearing.

"Dear God!" she whispered. "I knew it was coming. I knew."

She wept freely.

When the sorrow passed, she thought: "I'm not to blame."

She wouldn't think about it anymore. She was tired. She was alone in a desolate room in a desolate place and soon she must leave too and go to him and be with him. They would live in town while he was healing and she was afraid the long months of healing would corrupt him with bitterness. Her love was the only answer, the only hope.

She thought ahead, about the house she'd keep in town, of a garden there with close heavy greens and airy pastel shades and delicate columbines, of leafy trees and water enough for sprinklers in the afternoon, a lawn, children's voices, neighbors, passing cars, a mother calling out a back door down the street, the smell of baking, the echoes of hammering, dark splotches of shade and glistening arcs of sprinklers — and she would have a chance to rest, she'd have the time. She could do so many things she had always wanted to do; she would be away from this isolated place with its wind and its hardships, away from the hiredhands and the meals she had to cook, away from endless chores. Her time would be her own. And Gordon's.

But the room was empty. She shut her eyes and laid her head back against the top of the chair and turned her head numbly from side to side.

Footsteps came to the door again and a knocking and the sound of the radio grew louder and the room brightened and there stood Marion in the doorway with a white apron on her and wiping her hands on a towel.

"Helen, I really can't find Bill. I've looked everywhere. Neither of the men have seen him."

She remained silent.

"Well, wherever he is, he won't be any help. Will you be ready soon?"

"I have to get my things."

"Don't hurry. I still have lots to do. Just call if you need me," Marion said, staring at the rug around her feet and wiping her hands. "Well, I have to finish my dishes — you'll be all right now?"

"Of course. Go on."

Marion called her later from the kitchen.

"Helen, are you ready? It's getting late!"

"Yes, yes," she answered. "I'm nearly ready. Just a few more minutes."

She sat still, staring at her hands.

"Helen, I've got your things from upstairs!"

### ***Bill***

The horse had its back to him, now raised its head and drooled, stamped on its own shadow, shook its head. He came toward it quietly from behind, with the broom in his hand. It was the horse his father had caught and ridden in the dawn, the horse that had thrown his father and come running home, the horse they had chased into the corral before they left to find his father.

It drank at the trough and seemed to ignore him, but its ears lay back and its tail twitched across the glossy rump at flies. The air smelled of sunlight and grass, manure and dust, and flies dove heavily and lazily about him. Beyond the horse and the corral, the meadow was bright green and tan and the road was yellow and the willows shimmered gray and clouds were in bunches, high up, gray and white with the sky all around.

The horse watched him over its shoulder with large dark eyes. Then it moved, walking away from him along the line of fence, casual, disinterested, dipping its head with each step, twitching the long white tail, trailing the loose reins. He wondered where the

saddle was and finally saw it in the shadow of the barn, lying upside down. The horse stopped. It ignored him; it stretched out its pale neck and grazed through the bars of the fence. And it moved on down that side of the corral until it reached the corner where the loading chutes were on one side and the high gate on the other, and he came silently behind, the compost soft underfoot. His heart was pounding as he held the broom close to his leg.

When he came near, the horse backed up against the fence and turned, eying him warily.

He saw the heaving chest and welts on the shoulders from flies and the mane, the tail in the wind and the dried lather and gloss of the coat. There were swells of muscles in the shoulders and thighs that were slippery beneath the shiny hide. The horse chewed with a hollow clicking sound, drooled grassy saliva; the bit clicked on its teeth. The eyes rolled at him and the whites were stained. The ears pointed, tilted toward him.

Then the horse snorted and whinnied and shook its head. It ducked and shied back into the fence. He came closer, waving the broom to his right so the animal couldn't get by him; the horse watched and snorted and whinnied with low sounds and rolled protruding eyes and threw its head and stamped the ground.

"Back! Get back there!" he yelled and waved the broom, pressing forward until he heard it breathing with deep gasping sounds. The horse made a feint to the left, then backed, trying to break past him on the right, but he swung the broom and hit it across the face and it came down with its wild eyes rolling and bared teeth, clattered, thumped against the fence, and it reared massive and pale in the sun. He brought the broom down hard, got out of the way and lifted the broom again and shouted as the broom hissed through the air.

"Hey! Hey! Back!" he shouted, hitting at the head and legs.

It bellowed and squealed. It lunged at him in terror and dumb confusion. It reared up, pale white and smooth glossy round belly, pawing forelegs, and it fell toward him, past him with all its force and size and weight against the color of the sky; he staggered away from it just in time.

It was gone, whinnying, bucking, darting to and fro across the corral where it crashed into the fence beside the barn, recoiled and ran again, then spun and circled toward him.

He threw the broom away. He ran; he reached the fence and scrambled into the loading chutes. The horse came on behind him, running too fast, crazed and terrified. He turned in time to see it veer past, hurdle, rise and hit the gate with a loud crack! and tumble in the air to fall heavily on the other side, thud on the ground.

He heard its scream, the screaming whinny of terror and pain. He heard the deep gasping and felt sick, he wanted it to stop, he wanted an end to the piercing squeals and screams, the struggle. He lost his temper, hugged himself, looked away; he was sorry and he was afraid, and then bewildered, tired, no longer seemed to care.

Yards away, through the fence, the horse lay in the grass gasping and hissing; it flopped its fine head with wild staring eyes and it shivered down its whole body and glistened in the sun and the flies came around it and it took deep breaths so its sides rose and fell; it shuddered with each breath.

He climbed back into the corral and walked to the gate to watch from there. He saw the top rails of the gate which were shattered and splintered. He leaned on the gate, peered over.

One bulging eye watched him. The breeze came over the willows so the willows twinkled like tinsel and the grass rippled. The horse hissed and screamed. It struggled to get up, kicking the air. And he was helplessly sick before the sight. It thrilled him, blacked his mind.

