

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen

# A Man and a Horse



novella

Sometimes important encounters occur in the blink of an eye. Literally: the eye flashes aside for a moment, alerted by a subliminal image, and into that eye falls that other person. In this case, a horse caught in sheep wire.

It could also be that the horse was calling the man telepathically. Horses can do that, especially if they interact with people a lot, and this is an old greengrocer's cart horse.

The man frees the horse and goes to take care of it. Walking along roads and the dike, where there is plenty to graze, building a stall.

Then some successive interventions by strangers happen and they become outcasts.

*A Man and a Horse*

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Actually, in writing these stories, I proceed like a painter. In front of me is a white canvas that I want to fill with color.

That empty canvas in these novellas is a man with an empty existence, colorless, meaningless and fed up with his days.

Then he meets a cat, dog, child, woman (read also my novel: Woman's Man) or a horse, who colors that blank canvas.

The man comes to life, which he puts at the service of the other. That does virtue to his atrophied altro; it fills him with an unconditional love for that other.

A kind of reset and play, given to him bestowed by the gods or fate, or simply by his own desire.

Amidst newly mowed, pale green pastures, a man walked along a small polder road.

These are not pastures, mused the man. Cows graze no longer; they are confined in mega-stalls for their lives. These are fields. Mowed fields with English Rye grass.

He had not been here before, but then he had recently moved to the small town on the dike, into a three-story, derelict apartment with no elevator and no view of the river. Still affordable, but there were plans for demolition or thorough renovation, the lady from the housing association had said. He sighed. He always had that problem: he thought he finally had solid ground under his feet and then somebody pulled it out from under him, mostly a lady.

It was quiet under the sky dome, almost silence.

No lark to be heard, the man thought dejectedly, no redshank, curlew or lapwing to be seen. No tractors or other machinery either, fortunately; the mowing and reaping is done for now.

Near the dike, things looked different. The river made a meander here and between the rectangular grasslands and the dike was a neglected, irregularly shaped meadow, bare grazed among brown thistles, tufts of ragged nettles and spent sorrel. Around a collapsed shed were disabled trees; willows and poplars with many naked branches. The ground around was overgrown with nettles.

The man was preparing to ascend the sloping alley to the dike when something timid touched his attention.

He stood still and looked around searchingly.

His gaze was drawn to a horse at the end of the tapered meadow, standing watching him. They stared at each other; neither did move. In the man's mind, for a moment, were no thoughts, only a feeling of being stuck, annexed by a plea for help.

The horse moved its head up and down and the man came out of his trance. With a cool look, he assessed the situation. There was a fence between the pasture and the dike made of old and crumpled sheep mesh; some posts were broken off, others were crooked. The horse seemed stuck in it.

Without thinking further about it, the man climbed over an old and sagging iron gate, which by the looks of it had not been open in years, and walked toward the horse, which continued to stand patiently looking at him.

It had been standing there for some time, judging by the pile of manure at its rear end. It had apparently wanted to drink from the ditch and had gotten caught in the sheep mesh with one hind hoof.

The horse let out a restrained whinny and swung its head up and down. Her head, it was a mare.

Cautiously, the man approached the entangled hind leg. The ground consisted of trampled and dried mud with thistles and nettles.

Indeed, the hoof had gone through a mesh. The man knelt, the mesh tightened by the horse's attempts to pull free, in which it had injured itself. He chased the flies away from the clotted blood, but they immediately landed again when he stopped swinging.

First, the tension had to come off the netting. With a piece of pole, he pried it loose from the posts.

'Stand still!' he commanded; the horse had wanted to move. He loosened even more; it was not difficult: the staples fell out of the rotted wood almost by themselves.

Now a cutter would be handy, but he didn't have one. Muttering reassuring words, he knelt by the trapped hoof. The loose netting gave room to slide open the closed mesh. The horse shivered and swung its head up and down as he touched the wound, but remained still. With great effort, he opened the mesh further, poked at a broken end of wire and pried the wire around the hoof, which the horse obediently pulled up as he pushed the hoof up.

'Stay put!' he commanded the horse again. A large piece of sheep wire lay half trampled in the dried mud; the beast could become entangled again with each step. The horse, which had been looking back the whole time, swung its head back and held up the injured hoof. The man pulled the netting out from under the horse. Nettles stung viciously. He kicked and rolled it into a messy bunch and stuffed it between still-standing posts of the fence.

‘So, you’re free.’ The man stretched his back. The horse limped to the ditch side and began drinking greedily.

He could not leave the animal like this, a wound on one hoof, flies on the wound and nothing left to eat on the barren, lumpy land. It was quite mince, the bones visible everywhere.

He looked around; which was shorter to town: over the dike or the same way back? He decided to go over the dike, even though it made a big turn.

The horse had drunk enough and was limping toward him. It was quite a large specimen, brown with dark, tangled mane and tail. It had no halter on. It made soft whinny sounds and stayed in front of him, on three legs.

The man stroked the large head and neck; the horse rubbed the head along the man.

‘I’m going to get something to dress your wound,’ the man said briskly when he could think again. He turned in the direction he intended to go and pointed, pressing the large head against him with his other arm.

‘I’ll be back when the sun...’ he pointed to a spot in the sky, ‘...is about there.’

The horse made sounds, rumbling in its big chest.

They stayed like that for a while.

‘Come, I must go, or it will be too late,’ the man said hoarsely. He released the horse, which trudged after him to the fence.



He climbed over, stroked the nose for one last time and trotted up the embankment.

In town, he bought ointment and bandages at a drug-store and a horse comb at a Farmers Union store.

'Do you have any horse candy?' he asked a saleswoman. She pointed to a kind of cookies.

'Do you know anyone who can trim hooves? I'm taking care of a neglected horse, the hooves are torn and all.'

The saleswoman gave him a flyer from a farrier. On second thought, he also wanted a halter; when the farrier got down to trimming he would probably want him to hold the horse by the head. The saleswoman knew about horses: he pointed out the horse's withers height and she handed him a rather large halter.

Outside the store, he immediately called the farrier. A girl's voice answered. It turned out to be the daughter, who was helping her father. He explained the situation and where the horse was. They were still busy at an equestrian center that day, but tomorrow afternoon they might have time, the girl answered. Only trimming, no shoes, he agreed.

He walked back along the levee; walking elevated beside the river gave a sense of space.

The horse was waiting for him at the fence and was already whinnying from a distance.

Glad he could help, he stroked the big head and climbed over the fence.

He had brought a plastic bag from home with a plastic bottle of water, a brush and kitchen wipes, to clean the wound. He began carefully washing out the wound.

The horse occasionally roared a little and pulled with the raised leg, but let him. He smeared Calendula ointment around it, which he knew numbed pain and prevented inflammation. Finally, he wrapped a bandage around it and taped it with duct tape.

‘So, that’s healing itself now,’ he said with satisfaction. The horse pressed its nose against his backpack. It had obviously smelled the cookies. He gave it one and looked around as she ground the cake. The bare grazed land wouldn’t provide much food, and cakes alone weren’t healthy either. He shook the fence. It was stuck solid in the dried clay. Further on, the sheep wire seemed loose near a broken post. He had been far-sighted enough to bring along a pair of cutters. Carefully he cut the netting loose at a still-standing post in such a way that he could reseal it. The horse had walked with him and shuffled impatiently through the resulting gap, grazing off the grass on the berm before it was all the way through the hole.

The ointment apparently worked well; he had smeared the whole tube on it. She did not yet put weight on the hind leg, but no longer limped.

He moved with her, leaning against the withers and listening to the sounds she made, externally and internally.

When she started to fatten up, it seemed to him that she should not overeat and gently guided her back to the hole in the mesh. She went through it meekly. He went through too and hooked the loose ends.

‘Could I sit on you?’ he wondered aloud. ‘If your hooves are trimmed and at least your wound doesn’t hurt anymore.’

She rubbed her head against him and fumbled a little.

‘I don’t have a saddle. A bridle is not necessary, I think.’

He found horses in equestrian centers smelling, and this horse did smell, but it did not arouse disgust in him. Could be because of the feed, this horse only ate grass. Or nothing, when it ran out.

‘Time to fix you up a bit.’

He started with the mane, combed the shaggy fur on flanks, chest, legs and belly and finished with the tail. That one was so tangled he clipped out the worst tangled pieces. He had also brought scissors.

A sudden darkness made him look up. He had not noticed that thunderheads had rolled silently nearby and were now intercepting the sunlight.

‘Thunder, that’s going to be rain,’ he grumbled. ‘I won’t even make it to my house.’

With one hand on the combed mane, he led the horse along a much trodden track to the sagging shed. A cookie in his other hand lured the horse to do as he indicated. Or perhaps it led him to the shelter of the

few corrugated sheets still on the rafters, hoping to be rewarded.

A flash startled him, shortly thereafter was the pounding of thunder, followed by loud pops of the first drops on the rusty corrugated iron. The drops became murmurs, then thunder. Lightning crackled, cold gusts circled in and out, water poured in everywhere. The man got under the horse, which idly allowed to be sprinkled. Her coat was so greasy that the drops rolled off.

It didn't last long. The thunder rumbled away, the rain became rustling until that too ceased.

A low sun set the watered world in a golden light, drops sparkled and against the dark cloud of the squall, two rainbows marked themselves out.

The next afternoon, the man was walking the horse on the roadside when the farrier's van came down the dike. The latter apologized for the delay and looked at the horse, which had stopped grazing and obediently lifted any leg the farrier wanted to look at.

'I don't know the horse, I must confess, but there are more farriers and some owners cut themselves. She is an old animal, by the looks of it, pretty neglected, but repairable. Does she have anything stone or concrete in her pasture where she can scrape off her hooves?'

She had.

The man had already put on the halter and the far-

rier tied the horse short to the fence.

Horse seemed to like having her hooves patched. Man stood by her head and stroked it.

The blacksmith finished quickly.

'Thanks to the rain yesterday her hooves are not so hard,' he explained. Man paid and the farrier left for his next job.

'Tomorrow we'll go for a walk,' Man promised as he brought Horse back to her pasture. She whinnied softly and, munching on his pack, begged for a cookie, which she received. Grinding contentedly, she looked to Man, who was waving to her atop the dike.

The next day, Man arrived on his bicycle, carrying a full backpack.

'So,' he laughed as he let Horse out of the pasture. 'First some food and then on our way.'

Horse roared back while grazing. Man pulled a fishing chair from his backpack, a thermos, a bag of sandwiches and sat contentedly in the roadside eating and drinking coffee.

After a while Horse came strolling back and begged for a cake. All this time no human being had shown up. On the dike a few cars had driven by, that was all.

'Can I sit on you?'

Horse ignored the question. Man decided to take matters into his own hands and tied her to the fence. He put a folded quilt on her back and tried to get on her back through the fence. Horse managed to avoid

that by drifting back and forth somewhat innocently, so that each time Man had to scramble back or slip on the ground with his quilt.

‘Horse!’ cried Man in despair. ‘Stand still!’

That helped. He put the folded quilt on Horse as a saddle and managed to take a seat climbing the fence. Problem was, he couldn’t reach that far to untie the rope. Defeated, he leaned forward, his arms dangling from either side of the muscular neck.

‘Okay Horse,’ he muttered. ‘I’ll untie you and I’ll climb back on.’

He slid off her back with quilt and all, untied the halter and left it hanging on the fence. She stood quietly, looking back with one eye at what he was doing anyway. He put the quilt back on her back, climbed back on the fence and took a seat, a little uncertain by her quiet acceptance.

‘Shall we walk along the dike for a bit?’ asked Man in a shaky voice.

It seemed to him that Horse replied: ‘Yes sure, I do the walking and you are sitting.’ But that had to be imagination.

Man held on to the mane as Horse moved and climbed the embankment via the shoulder.

‘Go right.’ Man gave a push with his left leg and Horse went left.

‘Ho!’ Horse stopped immediately. Push with right leg. Horse did not move. Push with both legs, push with