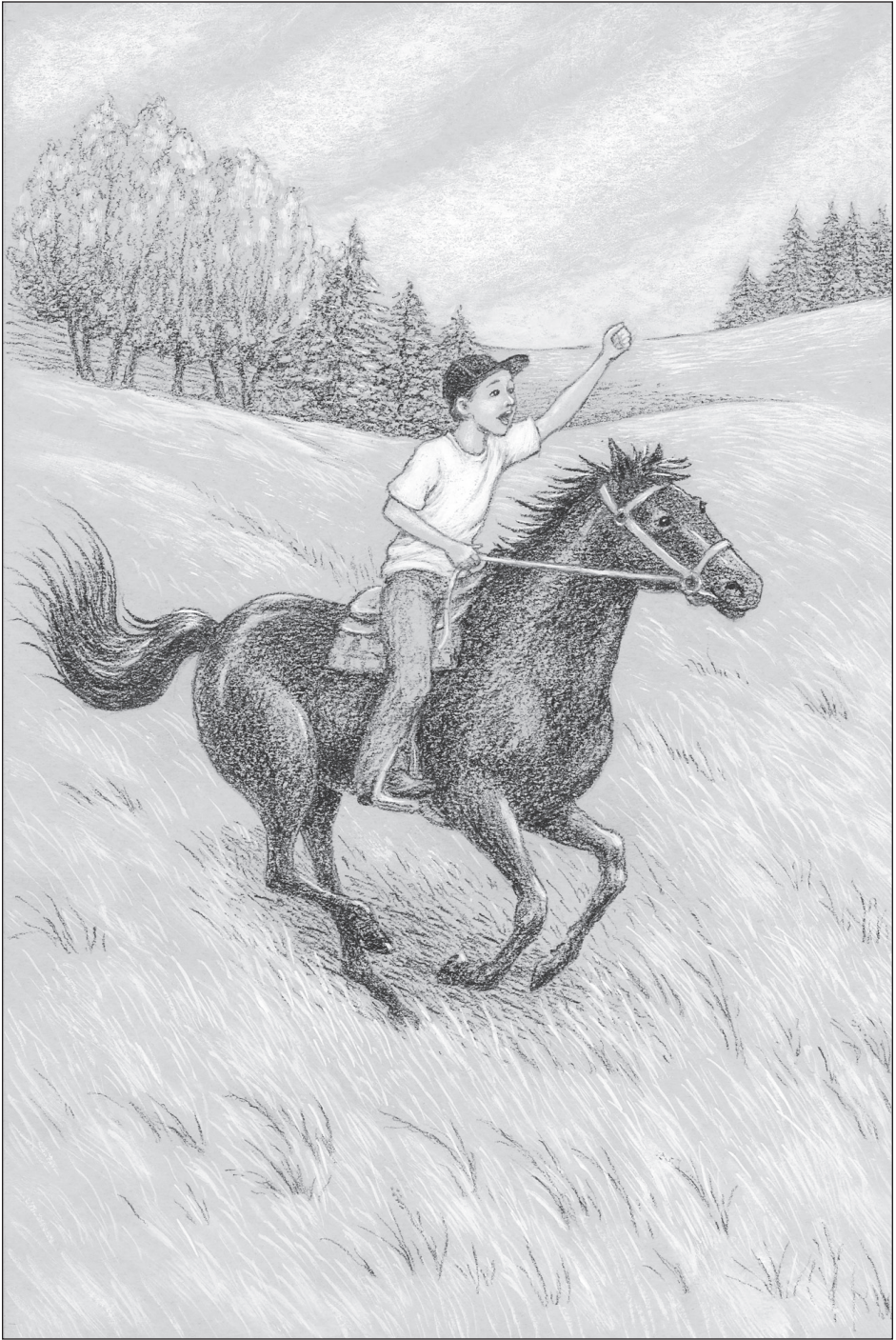
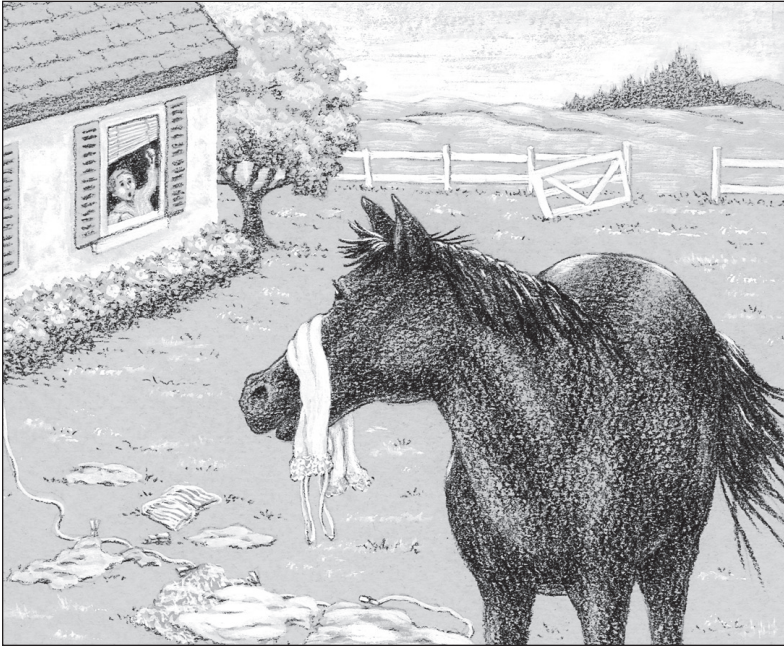




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1

In Trouble Again

At first I thought it was a siren going off. Right in my bedroom. Gol, was the house on fire?

Then I realized it was Mom. She was standing right over me. She was screeching bloody murder right in my ear.

“Scott! Get out of that bed! Right now!” Mom yelled, nearly breaking my eardrums.

Boy, she was mad about something!

JOKER

In the back of my mind, I knew right away what it was. But I hated to admit it.

It had to be about Joker. It always was.

The whole family—Mom, Dad, and my brother—had been in an uproar ever since I’d gotten him. That had been last fall—for my twelfth birthday. What a great birthday present!

I loved that little black pony more than anything in the world. All my life I’d wanted a horse of my own. My brother had had his own horse for three years.

“We can’t afford to get two horses right now,” Dad had said when he bought Wayne’s horse. “Maybe later. Why don’t you boys share him?”

Well, in the first place, Wayne wasn’t into sharing. Besides, it was his birthday present.

“Anyway,” Wayne argued, “a horse isn’t something you can share.”

I agreed. A horse should belong to just one person.

So Mom and Dad had decided I’d have to wait. Until I was older, and they could afford it.

I’d gotten Joker nearly five months ago. And—well—things hadn’t been going very well. That’s really putting it mildly too. It had been total chaos!

The siren went off again—louder.

“I mean it, Scott! Get up out of that bed! Immediately!” Mom screeched.

She emphasized every word with a stomp of her foot. The bed was shaking.

In Trouble Again!

“But, Mom,” I groaned. I squinched my eyes closed as tight as I could. “It’s Saturday.”

I scooted down in the bed and pulled the covers over my head. Mom jerked them off. “Get up!” she demanded.

I drew my knees up to my chin. “Aw, Mom!”

I was wishing I knew how to look pitiful. That had worked so well when I was five and six. But it didn’t work when you were twelve. And a guy at that.

It probably worked for girls—no matter how old they were.

Oh, well. It probably wouldn’t work on Mom now anyway. Not as mad as she was.

Through the window I could hear my brother. He was laughing like an idiot. He sounded like a giraffe gargling. If giraffes gargled.

Wayne is three years older than I am. He thinks that that makes him more important. He’s about as important as crust on bread. And I hate crust.

Mom walked over to the window. She raised the blind and looked out.

“I’m glad your brother thinks it’s funny,” she said. “Because I don’t.”

She turned back toward me. “And neither will you,” she said. “Especially when you see what your precious pony just did.”

I sat up in bed. I took a deep breath to prepare myself for whatever. I dreaded looking out that window.

JOKER

“Because,” Mom went on, “you are going to rewash the entire laundry.”

“Huh!” I gasped. I flew to the window.

Oh, no!

All of Mom’s clean laundry was on the ground. Or the fence. Or blowing across the road.

Except for Mom’s skimpy pink nightie. It was draped across Joker’s nose.

Wayne was leading Joker back through the gate. Joker had kicked it open again. My brother was laughing. Loud! So loud he was nearly drowning out Joker’s whinny.

Oh, why couldn’t Mom use her clothes dryer? The way other people did.

Mom picked up my jeans and T-shirt off the floor. She threw them at me.

“Dress!” she ordered. “You have five minutes.”

I made it in three.

I ran around the yard. I picked up towels, shirts, socks, and undies. They were filthy.

Wayne handed me the nightie he’d taken off Joker’s nose. “Wonder if this looks as good on Mom as it looks on that stupid horse,” he snickered.

I jerked it away from him. It was wet with horse slobber. I crammed it into the basket with the rest of the stuff.

“Don’t forget those things,” Wayne said. He pointed across the road. “The things that blew into

In Trouble Again!

Mrs. Carter's yard.”

I hurried over to our neighbor's yard. I hoped no one would see me. But Mrs. Carter seldom missed anything. Sure enough—her door opened, and there she was.

“What are you doing, dear?” she called from her porch.

I smiled up at her. “Just picking up my dad's undershorts,” I answered.



2

What's in a Name?

It was almost noon before I finished the laundry. Mom ended up helping me.

I was putting Dad's jeans in the washer when Mom let out a howl. "No!" she screeched.

I jumped three feet. "What?" I asked.

"Don't put the jeans in with the underwear," she said.

What's in a Name?

She pulled the jeans out of the washer. She slopped water all over the floor—and me.

“Why not?” I asked.

“You just don’t,” she snapped.

Well, how was I supposed to know? I’d never done laundry.

Mom finished the rest of the laundry. But she made me mop up the water she’d slopped.

I had a feeling this was going to be a sad Saturday.

Dad wasn’t home when Joker broke out. He was helping his friend fix his car. Dad’s a mechanic. His friends are always getting him to work on their cars.

Dad didn’t see the mess my pony made. But he heard about it—all through lunch. And mostly from Wayne.

“You should have seen him, Dad,” Wayne said. “It was a riot! Joker scattered clothes and stuff all over. Even across the road. Your shorts ended up on Mrs. Carter’s lawn!”

“Oh, great,” Dad groaned.

He took a swallow of coffee. Then he turned to me. “He’s not working out, Scott,” Dad said. “I think we’d better find another home for him.”

“But, Dad—” I began.

“I’ve told you before, Scott,” Dad interrupted. “We can’t keep an animal that acts the way Joker does.”

Dad took a couple of bites of salad. Mom and Wayne went right on eating. I couldn’t believe it. I

JOKER

couldn't swallow a bite. And they were stuffing their faces. Just as though nothing was wrong. As though Dad hadn't just said I'd have to get rid of Joker.

I'd die without Joker. I loved him so much.

Then Mom started. "Do you realize how much trouble that horse has caused?" she asked. "He's destroyed the flower bed twice. Knocked down my rose trellis. And nearly killed your father."

That set Wayne off. He really roared. He laughed so hard he urped up an olive. A whole olive. It landed in his chocolate pudding. The smart mouth.

Joker's incident with Dad was something I wanted to forget. But of course, I couldn't. It hadn't really been Joker's fault though. At least I didn't think so.



I had spent the morning riding with my friend Tyler. When I rode into our drive, Dad was on a ladder. He was painting Mom's rose trellis. He had just built it the day before. He was painting it green.

I got off Joker by the pasture gate near the drive.

Dad called out to us. "Hi, Scott," he'd said. "Did you guys have a nice ride?"

"Sure did," I answered. "We rode across Tyler's pasture and over to the pond."

Tyler and I hadn't ridden very far. His mare was due to foal soon.

Then Dad spoke to Joker. "Hi, fella. How ya doing?"

What's in a Name?

He shouldn't have said anything to Joker. Joker got all excited. He always did when someone spoke to him.

He ran over to Dad and greeted him with a friendly nicker. When he nodded his head up and down, his head hit the ladder. The bucket of paint came down right on top of Joker's head. Dad went flying through the air. He landed on top of Mom's favorite rosebush. The one we'd bought her for Mother's Day.

What a mess!

Mom took Dad to the doctor. He came home with his ankle bandaged. And man, was he mad! I'm not sure about some of the words he used. Mom kept putting her hand over his mouth. They must have been pretty bad.

Dad was determined to sell Joker right then and there.

"That darned horse!" he mumbled through Mom's fingers. "I've had it with him. He's been nothing but trouble since the day he came."

I pleaded for all I was worth. "Please, please, please, Dad!" I begged. "You can't sell him. I'd just die."

Dad didn't budge.

"Maybe he'll get better," I said, fumbling for words—the right words. "After he's been here a little longer."

I turned to Mom for help. But she was nearly as mad as Dad.

JOKER

And Wayne was no help at all. Actually he made things worse. He wouldn't quit laughing.

"Dad!" I was yelling now. "I'll do anything! Anything!"

I knew I wasn't making any sense. What the heck could I do?

At last, Dad gave in. "One more time," he said. "Just one more time. And that's final."

Mom spent the rest of the day picking rose thorns out of Dad. Wayne and I didn't watch, but we were pretty sure where most of them were.



It took over two weeks to get all the green paint off Joker. It took nearly that long for Dad's sprained ankle to heal.

And now, once again, Dad was mad.

"We can't keep a horse that acts the way he does, Scott," Dad said. "I've never heard of a horse that does such crazy things. I think that's why his owners sold him. They had to get rid of him."

"And that's why he was so cheap," Mom added. "A good horse should have cost twice that much. King cost a lot more."

Then Wayne started in. "Well, one thing's for sure," he said. "His name is perfect for him. What a Joker!"

I couldn't argue about that. I knew he was probably right.

What's in a Name?

The pony had already been named when we got him. Dad said we should keep his name. That way, we wouldn't confuse him.

"And he's confused enough as it is," my smart-mouthed brother said.

I hate calling my horse Joker. Sometimes I secretly call him Beauty, or Midnight, or Champion.

Sometimes, when I ride him at full gallop across the pasture, I'm Alexander the Great. And he's Bucephalus, the wonder horse of the world.

I ride swiftly into battle with my sword held tightly in my outstretched hand. "Charge, oh mighty mount!" I roar. "On to victory!"

Joker loves it. The louder I yell, the faster he goes. He holds his head high and lifts his tail in the wind.

It's our favorite game. We play it a lot.

But I've never told anyone about it. Not even my very best friend, Tyler Flemming.

Tyler's horse is a pretty little buckskin mare. Her name is Misty.

Tyler feels bad when Joker gets in trouble, the same as I do. He's given me lots of advice. But so far nothing has worked.

Dad pushed his chair back. He got up from the table. "I'm not kidding, Scott," he said. "The very next time Joker does something nutty, I'll put an ad in the paper and sell him. We can't keep a horse like that."

I swallowed hard to keep from sniffing.

JOKER

“It can’t be helped, honey,” Mom said. “He’s a real problem. We may as well own a goat.”

“You never see King acting that way,” Wayne gloated. “He’s a perfect horse.”

How right he was.

King was Wayne’s beautiful sorrel. He had won all kinds of prizes and ribbons. He was a model of good conduct.

Everyone was always comparing Joker to King. That just made Joker look even worse.

But it didn’t make me love him any less.