

Horse of Her Dreams

By: *Elizabeth Moon*

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Think of a parade on Main Street, any Main Street, in a small Texas town. Think of the horses, and riding them, tall “Texas girls” with the brilliant smiles and flowing manes of hair you’ve seen on television and in magazines—more spectacular than cheerleaders, more vibrant than California surfers.

A stereotype, you say? Maybe, or a fantasy—most deeply held by those who can never, never possess it.

Elizabeth Moon, who rides and lives in a small town in Texas, has seen those parades and the shadows they cast across even the most sunlit lives.

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It was just another little wide spot in the road. One of those towns with a hot shadeless Main Street, some old brick or rock buildings on each side, and a big ugly new government building intended to look modern and urban and progressive, but clunky as a cinder block in a display case of Chinese porcelain. Here it combined City Hall, Fire Station, Library, and Community Center, all in one big chunk of beige precast-concrete panels that hadn’t had time to mellow, but had been there long enough for rust streaks to come down the sides. Three spindly little oaks in planters out front hadn’t really taken hold.

We knew the town’s reputation as the county scapegoat—it’s our business to know—but that’s not why we came. We—the Frontline News team, Channel 8—had come to cover their annual festival, producing a thirty-second clip for our Weekend Previews on the Friday-night six-o’clock news. So on this July Wednesday, there we were square in the middle of that two blocks of Main Street, in trouble.

What you want is local color, and what the locals think is color isn’t what you want. Which meant the big sign draped across the City Center saying “Welcome Frontline News!” wasn’t it. Nor the pair of girls in shorts and clogs who stared at us through the windows of Clara’s Cafe and then sauntered out, flipping their long out-of-date hair and pretending to ignore us. Obviously they didn’t understand what a long lens does to a rear view... anyone’s rear view.

Main Street had been modernized back in the Fifties or Sixties, more stucco and plate glass than stone or brick. No old hitching rails, no antique streetlights. There weren’t any shady benches for old men to sit and talk and look rural on—so of course we didn’t see any local-color kind of old men. The fiberglass horse over the door of Sim’s Western Wear and Saddlery would have done, except that the week before we’d used a fiberglass horse over the door of another western wear

somewhere else. And *that* one had had a fancy saddle on it.

Aside from Main Street, all two blocks of it, the town had something under two thousand inhabitants living on maybe sixteen miles of streets. I know, because we drove up and down every single damn street, looking for local color. We found what you always find: a few neat brick houses maintained by fanatics (curtains matching, grass plucked with tweezers at the sidewalk, freshly tarred drive), many more comfortable-looking old brick or frame houses with shaggy yards and big hairy dogs lying in the shade, a few backyards enlivened by a sheep, calf, or pony, and some much older but very dilapidated old shacks that were the wrong sort of local color if we ever wanted to come back.

Then Joe stepped hard on the brakes and said “God bless,” under his breath, which isn’t his usual expletive.

She was the kind of local color you almost never find. Not too young, not at all old, shaped perfectly for the camera, and a true honey blonde. She moved well, too, and she was heaving a big old parade saddle (black with silver trim) onto a palomino horse as pretty as she was—for a horse, that is. White blaze and four white stockings, and they sure looked like a pair, her in those tight jeans and tall white boots and blue western shirt with a little white pinstripe.

There’s a lot that happened later that I don’t understand, but I can’t believe that it was Kelly’s fault. She’s just a normal, healthy, flat-out *gorgeous* hunk of Texas womanhood, getting ready to lead a parade in three days and happening to catch our eye. Which of course she did.

Turned out she was a junior (at the university, I figured) and wanted to be a schoolteacher, and thought her mom and dad were wonderful, and wouldn’t miss a—well, I can’t tell you the name of the festival, or you could find the town, now, couldn’t you? But she wouldn’t miss it, and if she married and had to move to (her blue eyes rolled up as she thought about someplace outrageous) *New York*, even, she’d come back every summer and lead the parade the way she had since... a short pause, and I thought she was counting years, but she said, “Since I got Sunny.”

Well, people do tend to name horses stupid things like Brownie and Black Beauty and Sunny, and you don’t have to have more sense than that to be married in your senior year to someone headed for law school or medical school, which was clearly her destiny.

She wasn’t camera shy at all—knew all the tricks, and no wonder, having led the parade all those years. She clucked, and Sunny put those ears forward like a pro. Joe got her talking to the horse, and waving at her mom on the porch. Her mom didn’t look anything like her, but lightning doesn’t strike twice in families, either. My wife’s a show stopping redhead, but our daughter has my hair. And nose. Then he asked her if she’d ride for us, and she beamed, and bounced up on that horse as slick as butter, and pranced him back and forth. It was then I noticed the spurs.

I don't pretend to be much of a cowboy, but one thing I do know is that those big old roweled spurs you see pictures of aren't in use anymore. The humane society had something to say about it, I think. But she had these blued-steel spurs with rowels as long as my fingers, and needle-sharp, or looked like it. Wicked things, that could have hurt if you'd just bumped into them. And she was digging them into that sleek golden horse like he had no nerves at all, with a pretty smile on her lovely face. I looked at the bridle. Sure enough, hung on that fancy black and silver parade bridle was a blued-steel bit that would have held a charging grizzly.

Funny thing is, that gold horse just pranced back and forth, never jumping sideways when she jabbed the spurs in, never gaping its mouth when she gave a little yank to the reins. And that's not natural. A horse that'll prance like that is usually the kind that's pretty touchy about having its reins yanked and spurs stuck in its sides. I wondered did she have it tranquilized, but the horse's eye was a clear shining... *green*.

It's a wonder I didn't grab Joe's arm in the middle of a shot. Green! Horses don't have green eyes, and if they did it wouldn't be that bright, clear emerald green, wickedly alight with mischief. Horses are (forgive me, ladies) *stupid*. I mean, any animal that could buck people off, but prefers to carry them around on its back... any animal that runs back into a burning barn and sticks its dumb legs in fences and then fights to get loose, tearing itself to shreds... that's *stupid*. Black Beauty and all those horse stories aside. Besides, my cousin Don's horse ran under a tree with me and scraped me off when I was ten or so, and any animal with brains would have known that I was lighter than anyone else around, and if it got rid of me it would only mean more work. I live on the edge of the city, and my ranchette came with a two-stall stable and corral (courtesy of the previous owners who had two teenage daughters) but we don't have a horse even though Marcy's as horse-crazy as any other girl.

Joe didn't notice, but then Joe's from Houston, and where he grew up he never saw a horse in real life till he moved away. For all Joe knows, horses might have eyes every color of the rainbow. Joe just nodded and swung the camcorder around as usual, and let me do the interview.

Kelly kept chattering away, telling us about her friend named Charlene—she thought maybe we'd like a shot of both of them on their horses. Charlene had always ridden right behind her in the parade, she said. I guess Joe and I both were thinking the same thing: girls like Kelly had girlfriends with names like Charlene, and the girlfriends were always a lot less pretty but very energetic and *sweet*. Sweet, out here, means nothing to look at, and not enough spunk to leave. I tried not to let myself think about Marcy, my Marcy, who was born to be sweet...

Charlene, Kelly went on, wrote poetry and painted pictures, and was going to be a famous writer someday. Joe and I looked at each other and managed not to sigh, and said, Sure, we'd be glad to meet her friend, but the folks back at the station couldn't ever use all we'd shot. We always had that excuse. So Kelly rode

off down the street, and for once, a back view looked good in the long lens. Joe caught some of it, just for us.

When she came back, we had another shock. Charlene could have been Kelly's twin for size and shape, with long curly black hair and a face out of an art book. Kelly was pretty—Kelly was typical golden-girl all-American long-legged gorgeous—but Charlene had bone to keep her beautiful for years, while Kelly would find out in her thirties that a round chin can double all too easily. Charlene had a black horse to match her hair, the blackest, shiniest horse I ever saw outside of a china figurine, not a brown hair on him. And green eyes.

Now one green-eyed horse would be a marvel, the sort of thing that's a freak. *Two* green-eyed horses— one black, and one palomino, and both with the prettiest girls I'd seen in years on their backs—that's something else. The black horse gave me the same mischievous sidelong glance as the golden one had, and I noted that Charlene also wore wickedly roweled spurs and had one helluva long-shanked bit, like Kelly's, in that beast's mouth. I got a cold feeling on the back of my neck, and decided not to worry about it; it wasn't my business, and the girls were easy to look at. That *was* our business.

"Charlene used to lead the parade," said Kelly, throwing her friend one of those smiles that cuts your hand if you touch it. "But then I got Sunny."

I think I'd have let them lead it together—it must be spectacular anyway, with two gorgeous girls on those two handsome horses—for horses—and why not both in front? But Charlene was giving Kelly a smile to match the one she'd been given, and her voice, when she spoke, was husky and warm and in keeping with that face.

"I didn't want to hog it forever," she said. "Besides, the Texas flag looks better with a black horse. And I know you'll be just as generous when someone else is ready to take over." Kelly smiled back, a little stiffly, and I figured they weren't really friends. How could they be? Two pretty girls in such a small town are born rivals, and if they don't know it, everyone makes it clear to them. About the time that one beat the other out for class sweetheart or most beautiful, *friend* had become an empty term. You don't, right out loud, talk about enemies.

When I got home, I told Marcy about the horses. Like so many girls her age, she thinks anything with four legs and a mane is wonderful. For years she's been saving her allowance and birthday money to buy her own horse and take lessons at the stable up the road.

"Could we go see them, Daddy?" I should have expected that. I looked at Denise. Mothers have rights, I'd learned, and besides we had planned to go to Hal's poolside barbecue on Saturday. I had hoped Marcy would learn some things from his daughter. Suzi wasn't a patch on those gorgeous girls with their horses, but she did have style, and Marcy was going to need all the help she could get.

Denise gave me one of those inscrutable glances she'd been giving me lately

and shrugged. “If you want...” She’d already told me she didn’t much like the party idea, back when I made the mistake of saying I thought Suzi was pretty sharp for a kid her age. Denise said yes, like a knife, and Marcy was a wonderful girl who needed to be recognized for what she was.

We hadn’t exactly argued, but I’d felt uncomfortable. She should know I love Marcy more than anything else; I just want her to have a happy life, and pretty girls are happier. Denise should know that; she was a stunner.

So I said, “If it’s clear,” and Marcy grinned at me, half braces and half teeth.

We ran the spot Friday, on schedule. I’d noticed on the monitor that the horses’ green eyes didn’t show up well, and decided not to mention it. The girls were pretty enough, one all gold and blue on a gold and white horse, and one all black and green (did I mention that Charlene wore a green western shirt, something that glittered, with black jeans and boots?) on a black horse. Not quite as gorgeous as I remembered—in fact, not more than middling pretty—but things rarely look the same on tape, and I’m used to it. After all, we’d had to shoot the spot in midafternoon in July. Maybe those little lines came from squinting at the bright sun—the camera sees what’s really there; it doesn’t make allowances for lousy lighting. Kelly’s voice I’d figured wouldn’t tape well—breathy, a little too high—but I was surprised at Charlene’s—it sounded more hoarse than husky. But again—a hot day, midafternoon—maybe she’d been thirsty. Marcy thought the horses were great; I don’t know if she even looked at the riders.

Saturday morning, traffic held us up north of the city, and if Marcy hadn’t been humming tunelessly beside me, I’d have turned back. It was nothing but a little pissant country town with two pretty girls riding horses in a tacky parade; we’d get hot and dusty, and eat too much cheap greasy food—Hal’s pool would be a lot more fun. But Denise had sent us off smiling; she wouldn’t like it if I changed plans on her now.

We had to park at the far end of a dusty field beside the town’s rickety little football stadium, crammed in between a pickup truck with its bed full of assorted junk, and a rusty barbwire fence. It was a two-block walk to the parade route, nothing much in the city, but here a hot, sweaty trek past sunburned yards and houses flaking ancient paint. They looked even older, more faded, today than they had on the Wednesday before. Two people came out of one house, and glanced at us without speaking.

We got to the main street a little late, and had to crowd in behind a double row of others. A little boy rode by on a bicycle decorated with crepe paper, holding a red ribbon in his teeth. I glanced at my watch. Time and more for the parade to start. Sweat trickled down my sides; I could smell the hair spray from the huge bouffant arrangement on the tall woman next to me. A puff of wind blew a wiry strand of it across my nose; I batted it away, blinking at the dust, just as another, sharper puff spanked my other cheek. Marcy shook her head, but when I looked down, she

flashed her metallic smile at me. One thing about her, she's no complainer, our girl. If she had the looks she deserves, she'd be a match for anyone. I squeezed her shoulder, and felt my heart contract at the look she gave me. I didn't deserve that kind of trust—no man could.

More little gusts of wind, carrying the smells of a summer celebration: bubble gum baked on the pavement, horses, barbecue. Scraps of paper lifted from the street; a small child chased one, was captured by a tired-faced woman wearing an apron over her dress. It crossed my mind I hadn't seen a woman wear an apron like that in years. Then the dust hit, a soft fist pummeling our faces, our eyes, stinging; wind jerked my shirt and hair first one way then the other. Marcy grabbed my arm and squealed "Daddy!" then coughed. I could hardly breathe myself. For an instant, sight and hearing blurred, caught in a whirl of wind-noise and grit. Then I could hear the chokes, coughs, children crying, even screams.

The wind went as it had come, without warning or reason; I watched the tawny blur of the dust-devil follow the road out of town, as steadily as a drunk driver trying to be careful.

But the crowd's noise yanked my attention back to the street. Something had happened. I cursed myself for coming without even a pocket 'corder, but I'd promised Denise the trip was for Marcy. Still I edged us leftward, back toward the disturbance.

Another news team stood where I usually stand, in the middle of things. How was I going to explain *this* at work? With Marcy clinging to my hand, a little nervous in the crowd, I couldn't push my way through as I usually did. I went up on tiptoe, trying to see. There was an opening: that usually meant someone was on the ground. Just beyond the gap, a well-polished pickup had both doors open; behind it was the parade's first float, and the girl who should have been perched on a throne waving was stepping across the trailer hitch from the float to the pickup, hampered only slightly by her formal gown, intent on seeing what had happened.

Suddenly a siren went off in my ear, and I jumped. It was the fire engine that should have cleared the way for the parade; we had come around it, with the rest of the crowd, hardly noticing it—now its lights flashed, and the siren beeped and squealed. The volunteers, in their blue shirts with lots of insignia, began pushing the crowd back, and I saw another flashing light coming along a side street: the ambulance.

Of course, everyone was talking about what happened, but already there were five or six stories just in those few minutes. Only a few, it seemed, had been on the spot, and they'd been squinting against the sudden dust storm the same as anyone else. The girls were hurt; the girls were killed; the girls had been bucked off; the horses had run away... I figured then who it had to be, of course. We backed up with the others, as requested, and let the ambulance through; I couldn't see any more than the stretchers being loaded aboard it. Then the siren whooped again, and the

parade went on, just as parades always do go on in spite of accidents.

Marcy was less disappointed than I'd expected. There were other horses to exclaim over, and after all, she never had seen the palomino and black that weren't there anymore except on tape. I felt it more; I'd really looked forward to seeing those two girls ride by, all proud and beautiful in the sunlight, and without them the parade was a predictable mixture of sentimentality and cheap glitter. The girls on the homemade floats, the pride of each little town in the festival circuit, were pretty enough, but nothing like Kelly and Charlene on horseback.

But I set myself to being a good father, and Marcy enjoyed herself. I even waited patiently while she walked around talking to the people who had ridden in the parade. She petted their horses, flashed that metallic grin more than I'd seen in months. I caught myself thinking that if she looked like Kelly, I'd buy her a horse and let her ride in parades—she looked so happy. And that was almost enough for the day, except that I really did want to know about Kelly and Charlene.

The late news that night had coverage from our competition; I sipped my drink as I watched, and tried to figure out how to salvage my part in it while criticizing the camera angles the competition used. The announcer said it was Kelly and Charlene, but the pictures certainly didn't do them justice. Kelly's golden hair looked dusty, and I guess it's hard to be cute and pretty when someone's splinting your broken wrist. Charlene must have been hurting, too; she looked almost gaunt, those gorgeous bones ready to break through the skin. Nothing was said about their horses on one channel; the next, when I flipped to it, had already done the story, and the other one stuck it on last and mentioned that the horses had run off in terror at the "sudden storm." Our station ran the tape we'd done before, and a brief shot of their faces, and Melanie, who has the evening news spot on Saturday and is trying for more, said what a horrible ordeal for two such pretty girls.

I don't read the paper all that often, unless I'm researching something, but the Sunday paper had it on the front page—mostly because their Congressman had been there. I could have shot the old buzzard at City Hall, for not telling me he was coming when I picked up the brochure; if I'd known, I'd have brought a 'corder no matter what. Mysterious disappearance of famous parade horses, they called it. I quirked my mouth over that "famous" but let it ride. Anyone who'd seen Kelly on that palomino wouldn't have forgotten it. I wondered then if she'd ever ridden in anyone else's parades, or if she'd been content to reign in a small realm. The horses, the story ended, had not been found.

It occurred to me that I could salvage our station's position by getting a human-interest continuation. That would justify seeing them again, and (my fatherly conscience being tender) I could even ask their advice about Marcy: would riding in parades do anything to help a girl get along in high school? So about midweek, I took a camcorder and told my boss I might get an interview, and he raised his eyebrows but nodded. I also took a present I didn't tell him about, two copies of the original tape we took of Kelly and Charlene (all but the rump shot, of course).

Kelly's mom didn't look real friendly when she opened the door, and I was glad I'd come in my own car, not the station van. I told her I'd heard about it, and thought maybe Kelly would like a copy of the pictures we'd gotten before her horse was lost. The woman's eyes glittered dangerously.

"*Her* horse!" she said, with an emphasis I couldn't quite understand. "That—!"

But then Kelly walked in, her not-really-golden hair pulled back and her eye shadow a bit too blue. The cast on her arm still had her off balance; I could see the difference in her walk. No girl is as pretty when she's hurt, and tired, and miserable about losing a favorite horse. You can see what they'll look like in ten years. But she smiled at me, and the dimples were still there, and the white teeth. I handed her the tape, and told her how sorry I was, and maybe this would help. Her eyes were a little red, and now the tears started. That didn't bother me: I've seen plenty, for better reason and none at all, in my business. But I said I was sorry again, and she choked on a thank you, and her mom huffed loudly and walked out. Kelly waved an arm at the living room, and I sat down.

"He'll never come back," she said softly, with a wary glance at the door. I opened my mouth to say something about searches being made, and she interrupted the first word.

"No. They'll never find him. He's gone back"—and then her head jerked up and her eyes widened, tear-smearly as they were. "I—I'm sorry—I'm so upset. I don't really know what I'm saying, and besides—" I felt a jolt of glee—my instincts had been right; there *was* a story here.

"I used to have a horse." I lied, trying for empathy. Her face relaxed slightly.

"Not like Sunny," she said.

"No. But I wouldn't have believed it then." I felt my way into my role as bereft horse lover, and like all roles, it came easily to me. "He was a plain old brown horse you wouldn't look at twice, but to me—" I shook my head, and she nodded. Whatever else she was or wasn't in the realm of beauty, Kelly had a normal amount of sentiment.

"How long did you have him?" she asked, good manners overcoming grief.

I pondered a moment. Could I remember enough incidents from my uncle's place to flesh out a long horse ownership? "Five years," I said, shaking my head again. "Then my family moved, and we—we had to sell him." I glanced at her; a little color had come into her face. "How long did you have Sunny?"

It was the wrong question. She stiffened and paled, as if I'd hit her cast with a bat. "I—it's hard to think right now. My arm—" I looked at it dutifully, not impressed with her intelligence. A broken wrist five days old is a nuisance, no more.

With my eyes safely away from hers, she said softly, “I got him with... from Charlene. She got hers first.”

So I stood up, and smiled at her, and told her I’d brought a tape for Charlene, too, if she’d tell me where Charlene lived. And she told me in the way that country people give directions, all relating to things you only know about if you live there, but I finally figured it out when she came out on the front porch and pointed.

I’d thought before Charlene was the smart one of the pair, and so it turned out. She had on dark glasses that day, and had propped her bandaged ankle on a couch, but her voice was as lovely as the first time I’d heard it.

Charlene was, she told me straight out, just over two years older than Kelly, and at fourteen, she’d been a long, gawky girl with lank hair and no self-confidence. Smart, but the local school had no scope for her kind of smart, and she knew that she’d never qualify for a really good scholarship. But she could ride anything on four legs, and she’d seen an article about barrel racers’ winnings in a western riding magazine. That would be her ticket out. She’d sold her old sorrel horse that didn’t have enough speed, and gone looking for a new mount.

She relaxed enough to slip the dark glasses up, and I could see Charlene at fourteen. Bones that might have character someday, but missed beauty by a slight margin almost worse for being slight. Well-placed collarbones with too deep a hollow above and below them. She’d have had thin muscular wrists and long thin hands, and she’d have pulled her dark hair back to a plain plastic clip. And the money from the sale of the sorrel horse would have been folded tightly into a wad, and tucked deep in the pocket of jeans worn thin at the knees.

She’d come to the farm—she didn’t say where it was—still looking for a barrel-racing prospect. A brisk little woman, dark-skinned and gray-haired, had come out, looked her up and down, and offered only one horse: the black. The price was what she’d jammed deep in her pocket. And she’d taken one look and known she’d pay it, though she wasn’t the kind of girl to buy a horse for its looks. The woman took her money, and followed her home in a pickup with the black horse in the trailer. There, with the horse in Charlene’s lot, the woman gave her roweled spurs and spade bit, and told her she must never mount the horse without them.

At that point, Charlene explained, she’d have decided not to buy the horse, because there are rules about spurs and bits in barrel racing, but the horse was there, and the woman had driven off with her money before she could argue. So she saddled up, strapped the unfamiliar spurs on her boots, and mounted.

That began the happiest years of her life, she said, beginning to cry. When a boy she knew, who had ignored her for years, stopped her even as she rode down the street that first day, and stared, wide-eyed. When she looked in the mirror. When she dressed the next day for school and things were tight and loose in different places. When she got more looks, and more attention, than she’d ever had before...

and she knew it was wrong, she said, sobs blurring the words, but she couldn't stop once she knew what she had.

She didn't drive back out to the farm to demand her money and return the horse. She didn't even think of it, or of the barrel racing that had been her plan of escape. By midsummer, she had become the acknowledged town beauty, overshadowing the older girls. And she was asked to lead the parade on her beautiful black horse, carrying the American flag down the center of Main Street as everyone cheered. After that first parade, after she had the taste of it in her mouth, the odd little woman had visited, and explained the dangers and limitations of the gift. Charlene didn't tell me what they were right then, or if she did I didn't hear her. I had a sudden vision of Marcy, sitting tall on such a horse, no braces on her teeth, and a crowd waving. Maybe a red horse, and her hair the color Denise's had been, a vivid flame. My vision blurred. Maybe I had more than a story.

For three years, Charlene and the black horse graced the town, and the honors she couldn't win by being smart and hardworking came easily to the town beauty, the most popular girl in school. Then she noticed Kelly, down the block, standing forlorn in the yard and watching her ride by. Kelly was not quite cute, the way Charlene had not been quite beautiful.

To seventeen, fourteen doesn't seem like competition. Charlene never thought of the older girls she'd displaced, but she remembered her own miseries. First she thought she'd let Kelly ride the black horse. That didn't work: Kelly couldn't even get on. But somewhere in the conversation, Charlene let slip to Kelly that the horse was her secret, the way she had become what she was. And for Kelly, that was enough. She pestered, and wanted, and fretted, and pleaded, and finally Charlene gave her certain directions, and two days later Kelly rode down the street on a golden palomino that matched her now-golden hair. Charlene wanted me to know that she had *offered* to let Kelly lead the parade that summer, but I was sure that Kelly would have been asked anyway. No one could resist that golden image.

And that had been... Charlene closed her eyes, counting. That had been twenty years ago, the first year that Kelly led the parade. I must have moved or something, for her eyes flicked open, and her mouth quirked. "You don't believe me?"

I looked at her face, now every bit of thirty-seven years old, if not more, and nodded slowly. I wasn't sure what I believed, but I wanted Charlene to go on talking. Questions could come later.

"I would have quit before," she said slowly. "I had had my high school triumphs; that's all I wanted. I had two scholarships—not big, but big enough to get out of town—and I planned to go. I could give up being the local beauty, to gain the world. But then—" Her longer fingers moved restlessly in her lap. "There was Kelly, and Sunny—"

Kelly had never wanted anything more than to be a golden girl leading a parade on a golden horse. To freeze time in that moment of triumph, to be forever prancing down the street with everyone watching her, a light breeze rippling the flag she carried. I found myself nodding: that's what any girl would want, if she could get it. Perfectly natural. Kelly, though, had scoffed at the warning she received, as Charlene had not scoffed. Maybe Charlene would have to quit, but she wouldn't. She would ride that parade every year of her life. She would step out of time, and take the world with her.

I still didn't understand. "What warning? How do you mean, the gift had limits? And what was it about in the first place?" More questions clogged my head: how and why and who and when and where. Especially where.

"Five years, or my twentieth birthday, whichever came first. That's what the woman said, after my first parade: I was to ride the horse back out there before then. If I didn't, he'd disappear, and I'd have that to explain. And as for why... I never knew. I never asked." She saw my doubt and insisted, "I never asked why: there were answers she might have given that I didn't want to hear. Why did I buy that horse in the first place? It had to be some kind of magic—dangerous, maybe even wrong... *wicked*. I can imagine what the preacher at church would have said, if he'd known about it. You don't question things like that. If you find out it's something really bad, then you can't do it, but if you don't know then it's not your fault."

That I could understand—even though my business is looking for answers, there are some things I don't question, some rocks I don't turn over. So I could do without answers, except that there were horses that made girls beautiful, and Marcy—who wasn't beautiful—loved horses. I found myself agreeing with Charlene: the rest really didn't matter. "How did Kelly do it? Where did she get the power to overcome... whatever it was?"

Charlene gave me a look far too old for the age she had been until this past week, a look Denise might have given me. "It took me years to figure that out, but... it wasn't just Kelly who wanted it." I must have looked as confused as I felt; she sighed and went on. "Look—she wanted to lead the parade. But the others—everyone in town, just about—wanted to *see* her lead it. Wanted her to be that perfect, golden image. Never aging, never sick, never faded, always up there with the flag, the dream that came true." She sighed again. "And we couldn't any of us get free of it. What it came down to, it's what people really wanted, wanted bad enough to lose... whatever we lost."

She fell silent, and I thought of the town as it had been... as it was. That squatty ugly building—had it been new when Kelly rode in her first parade? I asked, and Charlene nodded. So the move to restore old buildings to their original stone and brick had bypassed this town, and new industries had settled elsewhere, and those here could not manage to move away. Things faded, grew vaguely shabby, blurred or frayed at the margins like a tape played too many times, but never progressed in normal aging. Other people? Charlene nodded. "Those closest to us

slow down, but they can wear out and die. My parents did. People we didn't know much, they seem pretty normal."

"And did you finish school?" I asked, suspecting the answer. "Go on to college?"

"No." The dark glasses went back on. "No, I didn't do anything, but ride in that parade once a year behind Kelly and Sunny."

Whatever she could have been, whatever Kelly could have been, in those twenty years... all gone to feed the dream of glory, the yearly spectacle. Kelly, I figured, had had nothing much to look forward to; Charlene could have been anything. A tragedy, if you look at things that way. But it had been an accident, surely. If it hadn't been for Kelly's mistake, Charlene would have had nothing to complain of—in fact, she'd been a lot better off as a beauty than she had been plain and shabby and ignored. It was really her fault, for telling Kelly about the horse. I wondered what had broken the spell, or whatever it was—if we, with our camera, perhaps, had done it, by broadcasting the reality—but it didn't matter now. It wasn't as if I had a story; I didn't need to tie up all the loose ends. Something else mattered more.

I opened my mouth to ask her where the horse farm was, and stopped just in time. She'd want to know why I asked, and if I told her about Marcy she'd probably get mad. It had been a tragedy for her, she would be sure it couldn't work right for anyone else. She probably never thought of it as wrong, or maybe wicked, until it turned bad for her. Women are like that: everything's so personal to them. But Marcy was different. I could protect her, make sure nothing like this happened to her. Whatever the intent of this mysterious woman with magic horses, whatever the nature of the spell, it couldn't possibly hurt Marcy with me to look out for her. I didn't have to understand it; I just had to watch out for Marcy. I said good-bye and went back for a last visit with Kelly.

Like I said, you can't really blame Kelly. She's too old for cute, but she's still got that all-American grin with the dimple in the corner of her mouth, and if the gold in her hair will come from a bottle from now on, so what? I used a little subtle highlighting myself. She's a good girl, a good wholesome small-town girl who liked all the right things: Mom, Pop, apple pie, the Tigers on the ten-yard line with a first down... and riding a golden horse down Main Street once a year with the American flag in her hand. It wasn't Kelly's fault that she got too much power too soon, that she had such limited dreams to freeze in the amber-gold of that palomino horse. She only wanted what we all want, to make the good times last forever.

She understood that I only wanted the best for my daughter; if her father had been like me, things would have been different. She said Marcy sounded sweet, and she told me the truth when I asked her where the place was.

I have this daughter I love so much it hurts, a girl brave and tough and wise

beyond her years. She's already learned to think of herself as homely. When the pretty girls walk by, when she sees the boys look after them, I can see her face stiffen, holding back the longing she's too brave to show. She's going to be fourteen next spring, and she wants a horse for her birthday.