

His Word

Craig Henderson

HE WASN'T ONE for words, I recall.

A trait passed on or assumed by myself over the years. What little he did say has stayed with me. I was so in awe of him that to be in his presence was both exhilarating, and at the same time an anxiety I found hard to bear.

His state of mind, the way life had closed in on him, even as he fled from it, didn't become apparent until I was thirteen. Small town thirteen, and shy at that. We had horses back then. My sisters rode, as did he. I preferred solitary pursuits like building model aircraft, and reading.

One word in particular remains lodged in my brain.

He implanted it one spring afternoon, and from there it spread like cancer, consuming whatever happy childhood memories still existed.

On the day in question, I was helping him feed the horses due to some unforeseen lack of daughters. He was in a mood of unfathomable origins. A mood I was accustomed to, but could not comprehend, a slow burn that could ignite at any minute, for whatever reason.

We worked in silence and with haste, carrying out and splitting bales of hay for the half-dozen horses that shared the paddock, two of which were ours. He seemed to brighten when we came to the stables and his own mare — heavy with foal and as stunning as a horse could be, even to my untrained eyes. She was a quarter-horse he had trained, with a hide of micaceous black and a white exclamation down her snout.

The long, meditative strokes of the curry-comb seemed to untangle the knots of a life in disarray, while I looked on in wonder, and with envy.

'Not long now girl,' he said, running one square, hard hand up the mare's neck, while the other brushed her lustrous coat.

'How long Dad?' I spoke without conscious thought, some part of me craving the intimacy of this moment, despite my instinctual gravitation toward silence.

‘Oh a week, I guess, maybe two,’ he said, without pausing from his ministrations, or looking in my direction, but with warmth and not heat in his voice.

I suppose I wanted the moment to last. Perhaps I wanted to share something other than his impatience, introspection, and ambivalence. I opened my mouth and words fell out that were not mine, but became mine the moment I spoke them.

‘When a horse has a foal it looks like it comes out her bum.’

Such complete silence followed that I almost believed I had not spoken aloud. He made a strange sound, half sigh, half groan, and I thought he might laugh with the unbridled hilarity that always left me wondering what had happened to my real father.

Instead, he passed back into the mood that somehow haunted him, his words delivered like a volley of gunfire.

‘It comes out their cunt.’

It registered immediately. That word had nothing to do with the mare, or even the female anatomy. That word was meant for me, my mother, my sisters, and for what my father’s life had become because of us.

Now, every time I hear that word, I’m reminded of what love masquerades as, and of what life has in store for me.