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Tackroom Willie

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No one knew where he came from, then again, no one really cared. To hear him tell it, that was, if ya could unnerstan' him while he was tellin' it to ya, well, shit, I guess ya could say he came from somewheres between every place and no place. Truth of the matter was, the only world travelin' he ever done went no further than his mind.

(Cont. on page 3)
All I knew was he showed up every winter, just like clockwork and I knew he was never late parts overhauled. What he really needed was a shave, haircut, and most especially, a shower. Gawd dammit, there'd man could still have a booze like that was beyond me! He smelt worse than one a them third rate, red neck bars out there on 441. ya know, them joints got they all lined up in rows right side along Madame Fortunas, the supposed palm reader. Even when he'd get himself cleaned up a bit, which weren't too often, well, the smell stayed right with him.

Some a them Argie grooms, said he had the bones of a mouse, only they used one a them fancy words like verdabrams or somethin', bein' pretty hard for me to make much tails outa anything they said. Them stupid spics never could figger' out how he slipped under the door or through the window cracks in the tackroom. I mean, they went through all that trouble makin' sure everything was locked up real tight at night, and sure enough come mornin', there'd be, all curled up on a bale of hay sleepin' like a baby. Them Argie grooms never did figger on ol' Willie pickin' the lock, and if I did, hell won't b'ound to go and educate them foreinners any more than necessary. Bad enough I had to work next to 'em every day, let alone be educatin' 'em flat, gettin' back to Willie, he did show up every winter, and we did find him sleepin' in the tackroom, which was where my heart and name sake lived. Ol' Tackroom Willie. His given name was Willie Meehan, and sometimes, when he'd been, on a good binge, he'd claim how his family came from somewhere he in County Cork, and that they owned land back in the old country, and how he even had a king or something for a distant relative. Shit! I don't know much about history, but I do know them people in Ireland never owned anything that was theirs outright and weren't nobody, that was some body important, like a king, that was ever related to Willie Meehan. But like I already told ya, more existin' in his mind than anyplace else.

Anyways, me and Glen had been workin' at Palm Beach Polo Club for about a week, when this fella showed up, wearin' blow-out levis and battered cowboy boots, and braggin' to anybody within ear shot 'bout how good he be with horses, and ya know, he kind of found a horse he couldn't keep sound. Ya had to be there to believe it I guess, that little man, no bigger than a jockey, with that scraggly beard and shockin' a pair a glasses he stole from the 5 and 10, shootin' his mouth off 'bout how he good be with horses. Funny, thinkin' about it, ya know, I never believed him. Even funnier, Glen was right. That sawed-off piece of garbage was good with horses, and even better, he came out with it he needed to get by on was groceries, a sawbuck and a six pack. Glen threw the tackroom in as a bonus.

Sometimes. Personally I don't take offense to the smell a horses, I mean, they eat about as natural a diet as you can get. Look at it this way, if ya had your choice 'bout what you'd be stickin' your nose into, wouldn't it be a rather step in a heap of alfalfa sprouts than a pile a dog shit?

That was kinda the long runnin' joke around the barn, when them high society women came out to post and trot on their husbands' horses, wearin' tight breeches and custom boots that never and noways stepped in a pile a crap belongin' to dog or horse, and talkin' about how when they was through they was all gone up to the clubhouse and have themselves a Perrier water and a salad bar. do you believe that? They went somewheres and bought bottled water, and then sat down at a bar that served 'em big plates of lettuce, carrots, and yeah, you got it, alfalfa sprouts! Alfalfa sprouts! Shit, they couldnt get 'em from me for nothin' if they just asked, but no, that wasn't how rich people did things.

Long time ago, I stopped tryin' to figger out how rich people thought. Bein' rich meant ya could afford to think anyway ya wanted, and it didn't never seem to bound to go and prove that different. It might a had somethin' to do with what Glen was always sayin', it wasn't that the rich was special or nuthin' as they'd been crossbred so many times, it was bound to show up somewheres. That made perfect sense to me, Lord knows I'd seen it enough times in animals, and, well, I guess people weren't no different than animals. Willie sure was a testament to that. Even on a good day his brain didn't work any better than some a them people from the backwoods of Louisiana, them folks that went off and had children with their children and ended up with a pasture full of misfits! Willie sure was a misfit, and Glen, well, him havin' a big heart and all, just got saddled with the son of a bitch.

At that time, Glen was workin' for Mister Ashley Rose the Second, a big shot businessman from up north and a pretend polo player. 'Bout the only thing Mister Rose knew about horses and polo was you needed a whole lot of cash to do either, and he sure had plenty of both. Glen came to Florida originally hopin' to find some kind of a job as a trainer, and maybe even get picked up as a player on a team. His only downfall was a perpetual shortage of money; polo weren't the kind of sport ya could take too seriou'sly if ya didn't have the money to back ya. The other drawback was nobody in polo took ya too seriously if the money weren't there, so I guess ya could say Glen sorta compromised, and settled for trainin' horses and grabbin' an occasional chukker or two; courtesy of Mister Ashley Rose the Second.

Bein' a horse trainer ain't the easiest job in the world, most of us well over worked and under paid. The only trainers that got them selves a "crush" job worked out on them farms that sired Secretariat and Affirmed. Hell, they weren't real trainers, they're family, and sometimes, like money, been family earned ya certain privileges. A real life, honest bodeness, the mother like Glen and myself weren't much more than a glorified groom; we both knew and accepted that. I got a bad job better when we was out on the town, tryin' to drink some girl pretty, if we was to boast a little and say we was trainers. Weren't no need for them to know we spent as much time under and around horses as we did on top a them.

Mister Rose had himself a string of 22 horses, some of the finest lookin' papered thoroughbreds you ever come across. Well, and in a sense, meant Glen was bustin' his tail more hours than there was in a day. I always liked to think that when Willie appeared, it was something like Divine intercession and most of the time it was. When he wasn't too hung over or flat out drunk, Willie proved to be a gift from heaven; about the only job Glen never entrusted to him was drivin' the rig. We never did find out if he had a license, and I reckon when this hand held out, he didn't need one. Hell, he wasn't hired to drive, as his talents proved to be in other areas.

Ol' Willie was a wazzard with a bar of saddle soap and some limeseed oil, givin' Mister Ashley Rose talk that was the envy of all of Palm Beach Polo for an entire season. Cleanin' talk had always been somethin' I saved for them little girls that were always hangin' round the barn. He was a perfect job of any sort just belogin' in the hands of a woman, and, well, it didn't hurt me none if they was busy cleanin' talk they didn't buggin' me about exercisin' the horses. But that talk of Mister Roses, well, it was somethin' Willie took pride in, he'd spend hours sittin' out in the aisle, scrubbin' and olin' till it was softer than a chamos rag. His real expertise was bigger than cleanin' talk, and ya had to see him only once under the belly of a horse to know what I mean.

The one thing bad about ownin' horses, and workin' with them, was lameness, oh, once in a while ya had to deal with them gettin' culic, and their intestines gettin' all tangled, but that didn't happen as much as a horse comin' up with leg problems. I swear, sometimes you only had to be wonderein' if your best horse was off in his fore-front, or on one a his back legs, and for just even considerin' that he might est be.was done. Didn't want ya to set all for them to pull a muscle or tear a ligament, and as for breakin' bones, well, being a horseman I'd rather skip that kind of a job. Now Willie could spot a bad leg before it even happened, and should it have slipped past him, well, he always saved it. Glen and me, Mister Ashley Rose the Second saved himself a bunch of money on vet bills just because of Willie's all seein' eye. He could be turned out together, how they should go into the stock trailer so they wouldn't be kickin' out of one another, and one did get hurt, he knew exactly how to make em sound again. He'd squat right down underneath their bellies.
and rub 'em down with absorbine or leg tightener, then he'd wrap their legs in bandages. He might have a real kind of hocus pocus, and shit, they'd be as fit as one a them Olympic athletes. For a while there he used quite a bit of it on them, claiming it had proven medicinal purposes, but Glen figured out they went through more bottles of it than horses were lamed with in a year. So he caught Willie drinkin' the stuff, he suggested they find another remedy. I don't suppose he was too bright, he didn't even consider what a terrible risk he was taking. And so the horse was lamed up, and they ran the horse the whole way home. A mile or two, and he was lame. I mean, that boy clearly had the chance to be a real hero that day. He dropped that horse's head to the ground and wouldn't even have the presence of mind to even turn around and ask if anyone could help. He just lay there on the ground, panting away, while the others dealt with the situation. I can't imagine what went through his mind, but I do know it was a terrible moment in his life.}

There's something to be said about the way some people take advantage of others. The face of the earth that wasn't entitled to his fair share. Master Ashley Rose thought self-respect was a thing that could buy, like one of his thoroughbred horses, but he sure came down a few notches that day over at Gulf Stream, when his horse was 'snubbed' by people that didn't have none of them. I never thought I'd say it, but it was true. Cassie delivered a fine sermon on the meaning of self-respect.

Every year the club at Gulf Stream sponsored an open invitation to polo players, their families, and even some of the grooms. The whole idea was to get people involved, for a good time's sake, minus the pomp and circumstance of some of the fancier clubs. At first it started out as a joke, but after politics and money got dragged into polite society, it was one of the things that had been around for ages. It was treated like their names turned-up on the wrong guest list, well, Gulf Stream went after them like a fisherman goes after a fish. That another thing about how rich people thought, they even divided money into classes; old money weren't the same as new, foreign came a lot more money into their pockets, and eastern bluebloods beat out western rednecks any day of the week. The players at Gulf Stream were sick and tired of it, and that had been around for ages, they were treated like nobody, and they aimed to teach them a lesson.

Master Ashley Rose the Second accepted the invitation, and entered himself, Glen, Cassie, and her husband, Mike, as a team. They might have been the strongest team players on the field that day, but they sure were the best lookin'. I think they called themselves the Devil's Deuce. Cassie was as good as a joke, Cassie had wrapped their helmets with aluminum foil that came to little points just above their ears. Master Rose did not cut the idea of bein' dressed up like a ballet dancer, but he didn't think of it. He didn't think of it because he was in a hurry. Cassie wore the whole thing, not wanting to look like a joke. Cassie was as good as a joke, Cassie had wrapped their helmets with aluminum foil that came to little points just above their ears. Master Rose did not cut the idea of bein' dressed up like a ballet dancer, but he didn't think of it. He didn't think of it because he was in a hurry.
like that happens. But Mister Rose got one look at Willie, and he started carrin' on like nothin' I'd ever seen before. He told him he was too young, and irresponsible, and when he was finished with Mister Mehan, he'd personally see to it that he never worked around horses again. He went on like that for a good five minutes or so, not carrin' who heard him, includin' his grand-daughters. By the time Cassie arrived, ol' Willie was on the verge of tears; lookin' at her wishin' he could just go off somewhere and die.

In the time I knew Cassie, I never heard her raise her voice or say something in anger to anyone. If she was ever mad, she had this way a lettin' you off without raisin' her voice. It must of had somethin' to do with her breedin', cause she'd just shoot you a glance and you'd find yourself yiel'din'. I don't reckon I know what it was that set her off exactly, but she caught the tail end of her father's words to Willie, and it wasn't nothin' she'd hold back all her life, came bustin' out of her mouth.

She stood there with her hands on her hips and lookin' at her daddy with square in his eyes, and told him off proper. "Sure, he's irresponsible, and yes, he's undependable, and I'm well aware that he's spent a good time in a drunken stupor than he does in sobriety. But he's a human being, Dad, and not any different than you or me. Everone, even the smallest and shiest of us, has a right to a share of dignity and self-respect. How dare you humilate him, and just who appointed you his judge?"

Well, Mister Ashley Rose the Second was beside himself, and I don't know if he ever recovered from that thrashing. He just seemed to cover before his daughter; I don't suppose anyone in his entire life had ever spoken to him like that.

He was too proud a man to apologize, too arrogant to do anythin' besides leave in a huff, which was what he did.

The biggest tragedy was yet to come. Ol' Willie was far beyond bein' consoled by anyone, least of all Cassie. No matter what she said or tried to do, the fact remained that her daddy had hand ed Willie his balls right in front of her, and it was more than he could stand.

I don't think Willie had known much kindness in his life, and I believed that little girl gave him back a piece of himself. There was a rumor that went around for a while, that Willie had a daughter somewhere out west, and she'd of been the same age as Cassie. How a person chooses to live his life is his business, long as he don't intentionally set out to do another harm; never tried to pass judge ment on people that desert their kin, and in Will's case. I firmly believed his leavin' a little girl somewhere's was probably a blessin' in disguise.

As for Cassie, I guess she spent most of her life takin' in stray dogs and orphaned kittens; when Willie came into her life, she just latched on to him. The way she would anybody that needed a bit of lovin'. I also noticed that there weren't an ounce of bull shit in that girl's body; she never did say anything that she didn't truly mean. I don't mean to imply she was a saint or anything', just that she wore one face all the time, which I suppose made getting on in the world somewhat harder for her.

Away, all her attempts at tryin' to undo her daddy's wrong, failed. Willie took off on foot, staggin' down the sidewalks and lookin' 'bout as miserable as a person could get. Glen told her not to worry 'bout Willie none, he'd probably go back to the barn and sleep it off.

They packed up the trailer, Band-dit bein' the last in line; his leg all bandaged. There weren't a one of them that looked pleased, and Mike still hadn't recovered from his fall. I'd hoped Cassie would just tend to her husband, so as she wouldn't be thinkin' about Willie, but I caught a glance at her face as they pulled out and I knew they weren't no way Willie would be forgotten.

The news came around 11 o'clock that night, after I stopped off at Mister Rose's room to see if Glen was around. Mister Rose was drownin' himself in a brandy or somethin', so Glen and I went outside to suck on a beer while he rolled a leg wrap.

The hardest thing I ever done in my life was goin' next door to tell Cassie that Willie had been found. The way we figured it out was Willie cut in to one of the back roads that lead ya to the orange groves, where they had all those canals dug for irrigation. A lot of us used that route cause it was a short cut to the barns, and, well, Willie was so drunk he stumbled in and drown. One of them Argie grooms was haulin' horses back that way, and it was one of them that found him.

Willie's death didn't affect people much, no one really cared 'bout where he came from, and carin' less about where he went to. The talk died down fairly quick, a few people even made jokes out a the whole affair.

Glen and I, well, we knew we'd miss the son of a bitch, but Cassie took to mournin' him like he was kin. She also tried real hard to locate that rumored daughter of his, when she kept comin' up with dead ends, she decided it was up to her to see that Willie had a final restin' place.

She had a simple ceremony at St. Rita's Church, fitgin' if he was really Irish, then he must of been Catholic as well. Course, Glen and me went, and Mike and the kids, and I don't know how she managed, but she even got her daddy to make an appearance. I swore he looked like he felt bad. A few of them Argie grooms came, though it weren't so much to pay their respects as them havin' a thing about sein' to church. A handful of people from the barn showed up, mainly cause Mister Ashley Rose's daughter was in charge of the buryin'. Afterwards we all went back to the house for some coffee and to pay our respects to Cassie. I didn't hang around too long, havin' a ton of work I'd managed to skip out on that monin' while the work was out the door, I noticed a bunch of photographs on the table just inside the entry way. Most of them were of Mike and Mister Rose, and of course, Emma, Sarah, and Oatsie, all at different stages of their growth. In a small silver frame, right smack in front, was the picture I'd taken of Willie, Cassie and the girls just a few days before. She gave me one of them tender smiles of hers as I headed out, and whispered some thin' 'bout how important it was to feel part of a family.

It was a year ag went yesterday that Willie passed away, and six months to the very day I retired. Comes a time in a man's life when his body just refuses to do what it did when he was a boy, and I reckon mine had been tryin' to tell me that for a long time. Bein' the hard head I am, I payed no attention to those old bones a mine, and worked right up to when my back gave out. I'm still workin' for it to give in. In the meantime, I just put around in my old pick-up and try and enjoy the life that's left me.

Glen met himself one of them high society women, in tight breeches and custom boots, and she took quite a likin' to him. He now lives in an ocean from house somewheres in Palm Beach, and he got himself a herd of 10 fine lookin', papered thoroughbred. Shit, his rating went up to three goals in October, and he and Mister Ashley Rose the Second are out kickin' ass on the field at Palm Beach Polo Club.

Cassie still comes around time to time, she and Mike expectin' a new foal come summer, and hopin' they get themselves a colt.

The other day I took a drive out to the barn, just to have a visit and shoot the shit with some of the people I used to know. One of them Argie grooms, whose English is gettin' better all the time, took me over to the tackroom and showed me a plate that was hangin' on the door. Nobody saw who put it up, and nobody will admit to what 'yes they're thinkin', but I know as I was walkin' away, the smell of beigel oil just sorta reached up and grabbed my attention. The Argie groom told me every monin' when he undid the lock, he'd findin' a can of Budweiser sittin' next to a bale of hay.

Stupid spic, he still ain't figured out how them locks can be picked right open, and I still ain't goin' to tell him.