

Shorty

by Derek Osborne

Rick had wanted to meet the boy from the very first day they moved in. His parents had bought the first completed home in a subdivision down the road. Rick would sometimes see the boy when they went into town, driving a blue tractor or leading horses out to the fields. Rick liked the boy's farm with its big white barns and silver windmill. He liked watching the teenage girls ride their horses down in the show-ring. Once, when he was out on his bike, he saw the boy sitting on the mounting block up in the paddock, kicking his legs and banging the back of his heels hard against the boards. A sharp crack followed all the way down by the road.

"Just go up and say hello," his mother suggested one evening.

"What's the worst that could happen?" his father said.

So the next afternoon he rode his bike to the farm. The barns stood high on a hill, set far back from the road, and he walked his bike up the gravel drive till he reached the top and found the parking lot, empty. There was no sign of anyone. Everything looked larger than what he'd imagined. He needed to lean way back to see the peak of the main building. Some of the foundation stones were as big as the freezer his father had bought for their basement. There were great doors cut into the side of the barn at different levels. Up near the top was a door with a portico; above it a black iron wheel and rope with an iron hook. A horse snorted and stomped from somewhere inside, the sound echoed out into the courtyard. Rick wasn't sure where it came from. Then the boy came out, holding a rake. He stopped and stared; long enough for Rick to think it might be best to leave.

"It's Thursday," the boy said. "No one's supposed to be here."

"I didn't know."

"That's OK, my mom's not around."

Rick stood outside the big iron gate; a painted four rail fence divided the parking lot and the paddock. The gate hung on a huge white post with a green ball on top.

"Come on in," the boy said.

Rick lifted the sliding bolt. He had to use both his hands. The gate squeaked on its hinges. He opened it just far enough to squeeze through and walked toward the boy.

"You have to close it. You always have to close it."

He seemed angry. Rick turned and pushed the gate shut, climbing up onto the first rail to slide the bolt.

"Sorry."

"It's OK. Just think of keeping everything inside."

"OK."

"It's just a farm."

"OK," Rick said again.

"Wanna see the hayloft? It's pretty cool."

The boy turned and walked off. He had a funny, choppy gate, like a cork bobbing up and down in the water. Rick followed him up a short grade toward the long white upper barn. The doors and trim were also painted green. Rick looked around, everything was white with green trim, even the big horse van parked by a stone ramp.

"I'm Tommy," the boy said, not bothering to turn around.

Rick thought they should shake hands or something.

"I'm Rick."

"I know."

The boy, Tommy, kept bobbing. He had on a plaid shirt and faded blue jeans. His knee-high boots were dusty black. Rick watched as he stepped right through a pile of manure. Everything smelled in the afternoon heat but Rick liked how it smelled, the dirt and the stone and the old wood mixed with horse sweat and manure. It was a good smell. They passed the entrance to the lower barn and Rick saw the elegant corridor lined with heavy wood timbers and wrought iron bars. It faded far back into darkness, like a cave. A few of the horses stood with their necks craning to see who had come. One of them pinned back its ears and kicked the stall door. It sounded to Rick like the crack of a lightning bolt.

"That's Barney, one of our open jumpers," Tommy said. "The hayloft's up here."

They walked around the side of the main barn to a concrete and stone ramp. The stone was covered by a layer of sand and sod. Two of the biggest doors Rick had ever seen, as big as the end of his house, hung on massive black hinges with straps of elaborate scrollwork. The doors were so big they had a people door cut in at one corner. It also had the same fancy hinges. Tommy lifted the latch and disappeared into the darkness.

"Those hinges were forged in 1640. There's a painting about making them down at the house. You know where the old forge is down by the church? That's where they made them. It's a cool painting. I'll show you some time."

"Cool," Rick said.

Inside it felt like a church. The air was moist with the smell of hay, everything crept off into shadows and darkness except for a few shafts of light streaming in through small windows. The light fell down at different angles, absorbed by the bales of hay stacked all the way to the rafters. Pigeons flew about; he could hear their wings flapping and suddenly one appear in the narrow beams of light and then disappear into the dark. The great posts and beams reminded Rick of pictures he'd seen in his history book. The barn was so big there were actually two other buildings inside, like little cabins. One had a brass plaque on the door that read *Boarder's Tack Room. Through a window he could see rows of saddles lining the wall.* The other room also had a plaque, *Private Tack Room.* That door had a brass lock.

"Come on," Tommy said, and ran up a set of stairs beside the Boarder's room. Boxes and crates were stacked on the flat of its roof. Rick watched as his new friend climbed a big wooden ladder attached to the wall behind. It led to the first tier of hay.

"Come on," Tommy said from up in the loft, "It's fun."

Rick walked up the stairs and across the flat roof to the ladder. Everything was covered in thick layers of dust. Cob webs clung to the walls. He imagined the eyes of trolls and elves peering out from inside the darkness. It felt as if some giant lived there. The boards under his feet were so wide they took a whole step to

cross. Gigantic beams were fastened together with notches and crude wooden pegs. The ladder felt good, more like a set of vertical stairs. The hard wood rungs were smooth and polished beneath his hands. He climbed up the wall and walked out onto the bales of hay.

"Why is the ladder so smooth?"

"The slaves didn't have any shoes," Tommy said. "Their calloused feet sanded it down."

Rick thought Tommy sounded like a tour guide.

"How old is this place?" he said.

"Old."

Tommy stepped out onto one of the beams. He walked across to another loft, way out over the floor below. The levels of hay stretched off to each side, the corners so dark they were black, as if there weren't any corners at all.

"It's safe," he said. "See?"

The beams were as wide as a sidewalk.

"Is this a whole tree?" Rick said.

"Yeah, the barn was built in 1620. There were trees like this everywhere back then. They're white oak.

Rick didn't know that oak came in different colors.

"Come on. You can see your house from the tower."

They climbed another ladder. Rick's eyes were getting used to the softer light. There were ladders everywhere, different levels with tunnels like timbered mine shafts. This time they climbed up an inner wall and then through layer upon layer of yellow straw. The shaft fell away like a well leading down to a big trap door. They climbed way up into a kind of attic. Rick could reach up now and touch the roof as it angled down the one side. A small wooden table and chair stood under an old tin lamp. It hung on a rusted chain from the ridge.

"We're not allowed to light the lamp," Tommy said.

This time they had to duck their heads to walk to the last set of stairs.

"The tower's over here."

Tommy crouched down to cross the remaining bales, swinging his arms like an ape. Rick followed, trying to mimic the way his friend ran. He found it helped keep his balance. By spreading his feet he could straddle two bales, then they wouldn't rock from side to side. The straw was filled with dust. He tried to run in a circle, lost his balance and fell in puff. Falling down was like falling on dry water. Tommy laughed. He laughed the way donkeys sound.

"I told you it was fun."

They climbed the last stair. At the top was a tiny room with wood slat windows and an old iron bell. A frayed piece of rope, rotted long ago, still hung down from the arm of the yoke. There was pigeon dung everywhere, and it smelled like the steeple of the church that time they were allowed to go up.

"Maybe we can fix this," Tommy said, touching the bell. "It takes two to thread the rope through the pulleys. My dad and I were going to fix it but then he died"

"Your dad died?"

"Yeah, he had a heart attack."

"That's too bad."

"Yeah, things die on farms all the time."

Rick nodded, like he knew.

"See? There's your house."

"Where?"

"By the back of the sub-division. See the red dump truck? Now go down three more roofs. Yours is the green one, right?"

It was strange to see the whole town like that, see their house with its lawn and the other houses being built and the bare dirt lots and the winding road. Rick counted down from the truck. He wanted to know how Tommy knew. It felt odd to think he might have seen him riding his bike up the road that morning.

"Tommy?" a woman called out. The voice seemed small and far away but they heard it clear as a bell. "Tom, Doctor Wilson's here."

Tommy put a finger to his lips. They both crouched down.

"I know you're up there," the woman said.

"Aw Ma, do I have to?" Tommy yelled out

"We already talked about this."

"Can my friend come?"

"What friend?"

"Rick. He lives down the road. He works at Ihler's"

Tommy was yelling loud. The other voice felt like a doll might be sitting below at the little wooden table. He wondered why Tommy had lied. Ihler's was a dairy farm further up the road. Rick knew because his mother had gone there to buy yogurt and cottage cheese. He liked the smells there too.

"Come on, Tom, it's time," Tommy's mother said.

Tommy turned toward Rick.

"I have to help Doctor Wilson. You don't have to come if you don't want to."

Rick imagined some new adventure, maybe they had a sick horse. The hayloft was excellent. He might even get to ride on the tractor. Sometimes he watched *The Modern Farmer* on Saturday mornings. He'd seen how vets gave medicine to cows and checked sheep for mites. It might be fun to watch what they did to horses.

"I can help," Rick said.

They climbed back down, walking through a different hay tunnel that took them along the wall in back of the tack rooms. He could tell they were back on the first level by how wide the boards were under his feet. They came to a door. Rick hadn't noticed the first time they passed. Tommy lifted the wooded latch and climbed a few stairs. Now they were inside the loft of the long upper barn. There was light below and Rick could see horses and stalls through little trap doors in the floor.

"This is the Academy Barn," Tommy said.

Some of the horses had regular stalls and some had only these straight stalls. Each trap door had a brass plate with the horse's name. They were fancy names like Burgundy Miss, Early American and Southern Jubilee. Halfway down they came to another stair. Rick could tell they were new because they looked like the stairs to his basement, complete with a railing on shiny brass brackets. Across from the landing a nice looking horse had his head out the

door. His ears were alert and forward. He whinnied when he saw Tommy

"Hi buddy," Tommy said.

Beside the door was a halter with its own brass plate: *Thom Thumb*.

"Common, Shorty, it's time to go."

Tommy grabbed the halter and opened the stall door. The horse walked into the corridor, then turned to face him, obediently bowing his head for Tommy to put on the halter. It looked at Rick and snorted, pawing the sandy floor with one of its hooves. It was a big horse.

"It's okay," Tommy said. "He won't hurt you as long as I'm here."

Then a strange thing happened. Tommy threw his arms around the horse's neck and hugged him tight. He said something Rick couldn't hear, his face buried in the thick hair that grew on the animal's shoulder. He hugged him a long time.

"Is he your horse?" Rick asked.

"Yeah, I've had him since he was born. That's his mother."

Tommy pointed to a stall across the corridor. The name on the halter said Independent Lady. Rick looked inside. He didn't think they looked anything alike.

The three of them walked outside and into the light. Shorty followed Tommy like a pet retriever. Tommy held the leather lead but hadn't connected the clip to the halter. The horse stayed right at his shoulder.

"He just follows you?"

"He trusts me," Tommy said.

He seemed to get angry again.

There was another gate at the end of the barns that led to a wide open field in back. A sand covered race track ran around the perimeter. They turned the corner and Rick saw a woman standing with a man in a grey coat. The coat looked like the kind his father wore at work, only thicker and stiff. His father was a chemist. The man in the coat had what looked like a doctor's black bag and also another that looked like his brother's trombone case. He and the

woman were standing beside a huge pile of straw and manure. Rick saw how the pile changed color, steaming yellow up front to grey and dusty behind. Tommy led Shorty to where they were standing. Rick stood a little ways off. He didn't like their silence.

"Hi, I'm Peggy, Tom's mother," the woman said and held out her hand.

Rick walked up to be polite.

"I'm Rick."

"Oh, you're Karen's boy. We met down at Margie's.

Rick shook her hand and smiled.

"I work over at Ihler's," he added, looking down and away from her eyes.

"You work for Harold?" the man said. "What, on the weekends? Probably why I've never seen you there. I'm Doc Wilson."

The man held out his hand.

"Yeah," Rick said. "I work Saturdays. And sometimes Sunday afternoons."

He felt both proud and sick after he said it. Tommy was looking down at the ground. He reached out and stroked Shorty's neck. Doc Wilson turned toward Tommy.

"Well, Tom," he said. "Let's get this done. Remember what we talked about?"

"Yeah," Tommy said.

"This is part of ownership."

"Yeah."

"Harold puts down his own, doesn't he, Rick?" Doc Wilson said.

"Yeah," Rick said, trying to sound the way his friend Tommy had sounded. He was pretty sure what 'put down' meant but he was hoping it meant something else.

Doc Wilson reached into his bag and took out a brown valise. Inside was a bottle of medicine and a shining hypodermic syringe. He filled the syringe and gave Shorty his shot. Rick started feeling better. It was a big needle and he thought Shorty might whinny or something but at least they were giving him medicine. The horse simply stood there as if nothing happened.

"We'll let that work," Doc Wilson said.

Rick was getting this awful feeling in his stomach. He felt like he might be getting sick. He guessed he was sick because he had lied. He usually only lied to his parents, which was kind of okay, but lying to strangers was different. He saw how Tommy's mother kept looking at Tommy and not at Shorty. She and Doc Wilson exchanged several glances. Tommy reached out and patted Shorty's nose. The horse had changed. He stood now with his head drooping; he no longer swatted at flies with his tail. He looked sad.

"Is he asleep?" Rick asked.

"Almost," Doc Wilson said. "You can remove his halter now, Tom."

Rick watched as Tommy undid the halter. From the corner of his eye he also saw Doc Wilson lifting a silver rifle from the trombone case. It was all shiny like the syringe and reflected the sun. Rick thought it might be a tranquilizer gun, but then he saw bullets lined up in a row in their own special loops inside of the lid. Doc Wilson selected the next to last bullet and loaded it into the rifle, pushing the bolt forward and locking it down.

"They're not gonna shoot him?" Rick cried.

"Yeah that's what they're gonna do," Tommy yelled.

"Come over here, boys," his mother said. She looked at the vet and nodded. In one swift motion he walked up, aimed and fired, pulling the bolt and ejecting the shell. The gunshot startled them all. Shorty jumped as if to run, a plume of red mist blew out of one ear. Rick saw the straw in the manure pile puff like throwing a stone in the dirt, and then Shorty groaned, cut a fart and dropped to his knees, rolling and farting again. His leg twitched a little.

"I don't want another horse," Tommy yelled at his mother and ran away toward the barn.

"You alright son?" Doc Wilson asked Rick.

"Yeah, that's how Harold does it," Rick said. He felt how his voice sounded far away. His vision was thick and slow. He moved his feet, having to think about every step. As he walked away he remembered he hadn't excused himself, and by the time he reached the gate he felt like running. As he ran past the barns to his bike he noticed he

people door open and guessed Tommy had climbed back up to the tower. He rode home as fast as he could.

That night at supper his mother asked how it went.

"It went fine," he told her.

He thought he'd be sick but he wasn't.

After dessert Rick went to his room and sat at his homework desk. He took out the drawing pad and colored pencils his father had bought for his birthday. For a time he sat there, drawing little circles and testing the different colors. After a while he picked up the black pencil and started to write on the pad. He began by describing the barns.

