

*Horses at the Grocery*

He pushed the shopping cart around the corner of the aisle, wrestling with it as he felt the back left wheel stick, then drag across the tile floor. Rolling his eyes up at the ceiling, he sighed. No matter how carefully he examined the shopping carts, no matter if he pushed and pulled them as he had this one, a wheel would inevitably fail. It would jam up or wobble, or when he placed a bag of cat food on the bottom rack when it was half loaded with milk, bread, and bagels, it would reveal itself to have a bad bushing, which would only get worse as he piled on more groceries.

“Why do I expect to find grocery carts that work the way they’re supposed to?”

He was midway down the aisle now and stopped. Was it getting late? How many times had he come this way already? He scanned the shelves, trying to remember what it was he needed. There was coffee and tea to his left, but no, he didn’t drink coffee and he bought his tea at a little shop in his neighborhood. He looked at the other side of the aisle. Cereal, cereal snacks, granola bars, oatmeal – yes, oatmeal. A nice, big bag of oatmeal. Plenty of oatmeal. From oats.

*Oats are good for you and for me.* “Oats are good for horses, too,” he added aloud.

A little boy pushing his own child-sized cart looked at the man and then at his mother.

“Mommy, that man’s got oatmeal for his horses.”

His mother absently replied, “Yes, honey.” She was reaching for a box of Fruit Loops. She glanced at the man, and he saw her face start to shift into a mask of obligatory grocery store politeness, saw her eyes flick down, watched as her face shifted again to puzzlement, and then she quickly turned away. He followed where her eyes had gone, down to his own cart. It was piled high with five pound bags of oatmeal. On the bottom rack was a bag of cat food.

The man stared at the small mountain of grain in front of him. *Do I have horses?* He wrinkled his forehead, squinting and thinking hard to remember.



Gradually, his face relaxed. No, he did not have horses. He did have a cat named Mingus. But, perhaps he should have horses or, at least, a horse. He knew that he liked them very much, the way they stood in a pasture, all shades of brown and grey and black, rhythmically snatching mouthfuls of grass, chewing, moving a step or two, then grabbing more. Great lungfuls of warm, moist air were snorted from their soft, rubbery nostrils and velvety snouts. Their coats shone with vigor, their tails and manes hung loose and graceful. They would shake their heads occasionally and switch their tails to rid themselves of nasty flies. The man grimaced at that. Flies, to horses, were like the bad wheels on his shopping cart: inevitable and inescapable. He did not want to think of the wheels or the flies, so he went back out in the pasture. He could feel the sun on his head, smelled the grass and the good horse smell, and his face once again relaxed. He smiled as he watched the horses graze, then beamed as they began to play—running, jumping little jumps to the side, tossing their noble heads back and forth, then racing across the pasture in bursts of powerful grace and speed. Their hooves made the ground shake.

“Sir?”

Someone was speaking to him. He ignored the voice but it didn't take much to frighten the horses. They were already running far away, away to the woods the man could see at the edge of the pasture. They disappeared.

“Sir, is everything all right?”

He turned to his left. The voice had come from a short, bald man of about thirty, standing uncomfortably close by. His belly stuck out roundly and was topped by broad, round shoulders and an equally round, earnest face. He was dressed in dark slacks and a white shirt, with a red bowtie and matching vest. Pinned to the vest was a plastic name tag that read, “Jerry Simmons, Asst. Manager.”

The man looked down at Jerry's face. There was an expression that was familiar to the man – oh, yes, he'd seen that look before. He felt the anger start to rise from below his stomach, felt it starting to burn up to his chest and neck.

*No. No, no. I will not let it go to my head. Remember, remember what you've learned.*



With some effort he made his face into a mask of relaxed seriousness and calm. Jerry had stepped back, and the man could tell that Jerry had sensed the anger rising. But it was fine now. He breathed deeply.

"I needed a few things," he said to Jerry.

"Yes, uh... yes." Jerry nodded as he spoke. He was waiting. The man could see Jerry was confused and probably afraid as well. Why were people so easily frightened? When he was frightened, it was for a good reason.

"I guess I forgot how much I needed. I just need some oatmeal and a little cat food." The man raised his right hand, gesturing, palm up. "I forget sometimes."

Jerry's round face was looking comfortable now, and the man knew that Jerry thought *he* knew what kind of person the man was.

"Well, good. That's fine," said Jerry, his head still bobbing, "That's OK. We all forget, don't we? Sometimes?"

The man nodded. He stepped to the side of his cart and began to stack the bags of oatmeal back on the metal racks. A movement caught his eye. He glanced to his right, toward the end of the aisle, and saw a small crowd of people. Some of them turned away, nearly crashing into one another, trying to look as if they hadn't been eavesdropping, but he knew they had. He saw the boy that had been in the aisle earlier. The man smiled at him. The boy grinned back and gave a little wave of his hand. The man started to wave back but the boy's mother had him by the hand and dragged him roughly away through the quickly dispersing crowd.

"Sir," he heard Jerry say, "we'll put those back."

"It's all right," said the man, without looking at Jerry. He gently tossed another bag of oatmeal on the rack. It flopped neatly into place alongside and on top of its fellow bags. The man thought of putting up hay, of stacking bale after bale of sweet smelling, dry (but sometimes damp with dew) timothy grass bales, up, up, and up, to the rafters of barns, to where he could almost see into the nests of barn owls. That was hard work, sweaty and dusty, but he enjoyed it.

"These are just little bales of hay. I don't mind."

"Of course not, but we'll take care of them. Don't you want to make your purchases now?" Jerry's voice was insistent. The man straightened up. He looked at the oatmeal bags still on the cart and at the cat food underneath. "O.K." The



man picked up a bag of oatmeal and the cat food. Holding them under his arms, he walked up to the checkout stands. He could feel people's eyes on him but when he turned to look at them, they stared off at rows of batteries, cookies, cans of tuna fish. He got into the express line and absently took in the magazines while he waited. Pictures of women adorned the covers of most of them. It occurred to him (not for the first time) that the photographs were probably all that changed, week to week, month to month. The titles of the articles certainly never changed. They always said things like "Ten terrific ways to *really* love your lover— so he'll never stray!" and "Men spill the secrets to their hottest turn-ons (and coldest turn-offs!)." They were predictable and as inevitable as fouled-up grocery cart wheels, as flies bothering horses.

The women stared seductively at him from the magazine racks. They seemed nearly naked to him, their breasts falling out of whatever tight, scant clothing they wore. One had long, dark brown hair. It reminded him of a horse's mane. He bent down and examined the picture closely, then straightened and gave an indifferent shrug. He knew she was fake just by her eyes and her taped-on smile. Though she had hair like a horse's mane, he guessed that she knew nothing about horses. She would probably be offended by their sweat, and almost certainly by her own as well.

He thought of his neighbor, Caroline, at the apartment building. Her hair was dark too, but curly and short. She liked laughter and sweat. He thought of the times she invited him over to her apartment. The first time, she asked him if he had showered. He remembered his embarrassment, his reply that, yes, he took a shower every day, and then he asked her, was he stinky? She laughed, and he was relieved immediately as she told him, "No, silly," she was allergic to cats. Then she closed the door behind him, and they sat down on the couch. She made tea, and they laughed and talked together about all kinds of things. Then she kissed him and took off his clothes, then her own, and pulled him in between her thighs. He felt her dampness, and they rocked, pressed together, till they fell, laughing, onto the floor. She liked sweat as much as he did.

*If you're offended by sweat, how can you enjoy sex?* He shook his head and quietly mocked the phrase, "Oh, oh, the hottest turn-ons of men!"

Someone touched his arm, tentatively. Jerry, Assistant Manager, was back.

"I can help you right over here, sir," as he waved his hand toward the



register next to the express line. Across the entry, there was a small plastic chain with a closed sign hanging from it. The man knew it would be opened, and then closed, just for him. He didn't care, though. He was tired, he realized: tired of the store, tired of the magazines, tired of Jerry.

"OK." He moved over as Jerry unhooked the chain for him and let him pass, dutifully latching it again behind him.

"Twelve dollars and nineteen cents," said Jerry, ringing up the sale. The man handed him a twenty and waited while Jerry opened the till. The twenty disappeared under the tray of smaller bills, but instead of counting out the man's change, Jerry withdrew a note card and took a pen from his vest pocket.

"If you'll just give me your name, Sir, and your address and phone number, I'll be happy to put you in our customer service file."

Jerry looked up at the man, with a smile stuck on his face.

"That way, you'll get our coupons and things."

The man gazed back at Jerry and made a mask of a smile on his face as well. He hated doing it because smiles were too important. But he had learned that a smile mask was important in its own way.

"Bill," he heard himself say. He hesitated. "Bill..." He looked at Jerry's name tag. "Simmons."

Jerry's head jerked up from his writing.

*His smile is not in place very well.*

"Well, that's something, same last name as me." Jerry gave a little chuckle.

"Yes," said the man, and chuckled also. He gave Jerry an address and phone number that he made up from the blurbs on the covers of the magazines behind the check stand. Jerry didn't notice, bent over the counter, writing industriously to get it all down. He finished and looked up at the man.

*His mask is fitting much better now.*

"Thank you for shopping with us," Jerry said, as he closed the till and put the card in his pocket.

"My change," said the man.

"Oh, yes, I'm very sorry Sir, I forgot."

"We all forget sometimes," the man said.

"Don't we?" said Jerry. "Don't we all?" He turned red as he opened the till again. Tiny drops of sweat appeared on the bald dome of his head.

*So, Jerry Simmons, Assistant Manager, can sweat too.*

The man knew, though, even if Jerry could sweat (even if he read magazines!) he still would probably not know what sex was about, and probably wouldn't enjoy it either. It would be just another thing to him, another task to accomplish, another thing to *get*.

The man wasn't completely sure he knew what sex was about either, but he knew he didn't know, so that allowed him to enjoy it anyway. He was sure it was not just a thing, it was all to itself, "like a horse is all to itself," he added out loud.

"Excuse me?" said Jerry, as he placed the change in the man's outstretched palm. The man put his money in his pocket, and looked at Jerry.

"I'm not stupid."

Jerry stepped back, his face puzzled. He was quite sweaty now.

"No sir, of course not, ah, ahh..." He made a sort of 'gack' noise in his throat.

"I'm not crazy, either."

"Sir, I'm very sorry, I really am, please try to understand though..."

The man heard him, but had already turned away, gathered up his oatmeal and cat food and was walking toward the door.

"Some people see things, some people don't," the man said, and as he walked to the bus stop, he repeated it to himself, making a little sing-song out of it.

On the way home, he decided that if the next day's weather was good, he would take Mingus the cat, some of the oatmeal and his bicycle, and they would get on the bus that goes out into the country. There, they would get off the bus and onto the bike. Mingus would sit at his spot in the front basket, safely tied in, and they would ride 'til they found some horses. The man would introduce Mingus and himself to the horses and offer them some oatmeal. Then he and Mingus would relax in the grass and watch the horses play and eat.