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Horses · T. M. McNally

SECOND YEAR LAW. Nights I work at a firm in Scottsdale, ambulance chasers, Goldstein and Kelp. I've never met Kelp, but Goldstein's an alumnus. He tells me to call him Chuck, and each night he's on the tube, wearing a cardigan and contact lenses, telling people he cares. He's telling people he cares and I'm in the files, keeping them straight. I go through two, three hundred a night. Sometimes, I can't believe the things I read.

I live at Uncle Roy's, *Conway Stables*, across the river bottom. Roy gives me a room above the barn and bologna sandwiches, and he expects me to help out when I can. Weekends, mostly. Back in the '40s, in Montana, Roy grew up with my dad, and forty years later, one day in March, the air buzzing with blossoms and bees—Roy asks me what I want to be a lawyer for, anyway.

It's a recurrent kind of question. I'm saddling a bay stud, Donovan, who's feeling mean. He smells a mare nearby, and when he turns to take a bite out of my arm, I catch him first. I swing a roundhouse and nail him upside the head. If he were my horse, I wouldn't do this, but he's a lot bigger than me, and I haven't seen Kathleen in four weeks. Kathleen lives in L.A.

Roy laughs and takes Donovan's head. "He sure do like you," Roy says, still laughing, which is always kind of risky: he's old, and fat, his body's beginning to break up. It's not safe for him to be exerting himself, but still this is something I am good at—working spoiled horses. The farm's about to go bust, some disco wants to buy up all the property, and Roy's daughter, Emmy, says she's real glad I'm here. Family. That kind of thing. Roy's got arthritis so bad he can barely walk.

When I was nine, Roy gave me my first hackamore. He and my dad did the town. Later, I left for college. Kathleen went to L.A., an MBA, in and out in a year. We were going to go to school together, but I had bad letters, worse grades. Only my LSATs saved me. I got in on probation, and now, when Kathleen comes out to visit, she spreads a blanket on top of the barn; she puts on her bikini and reads her books, and I go off to the corral. Only this weekend, like the past three, Kathleen's not on top of the barn. She's in L.A., "in the library," she says on the phone. "You should try it sometime."

She's always been a lot smarter than me, and I know she's hanging out with some guy, Stephen, or Richard—some guy from Berkeley or Boston. He wears tweed and round glasses with purple frames. Last fall in L.A., the three of us went to a bar, a hangout, and he ordered white wine. White wine, like he's trying to cut weight.

Roy is saying something to me now, and when I swing up on Donovan, I don't even let him breathe. I spin him tight, once, twice, and straighten him out into a run where I can give him his head. He's finding his stride now, and I'm telling myself if he tries anything, even once, I'm going to run him into the ground. I'm going to run his God Damned lungs out. I mean, I'm going to kill him.

You've got to remember, I'm just a kid. Twenty-four. As a rule, we do not yet know in America that we are the blessed and correct. When you correct a horse, it often causes pain, and after I finish school, I'll be lucky to make 21K working for Goldstein's brother, Harv, in Tucson. I'll be doing PI with a team of paralegals: college grads who couldn't get into Law School—two French majors, a Poli Science. They'll draft documents on the PC and I'll sign them after I talk with unemployed clients on the phone. All the muddy stuff goes up the ladder, to Harv Goldstein's nephew, Hank. No Perry Mason, no pro bono. Even the nephew doesn't go to court, and later, after a windfall, I'll pay a lot of inheritance tax and go independent. But back then I'm just a hick learning the rules. I've never been to New York or Chicago. I don't wear tweed. When I get dressed up, I wear my Tony Lamas and a pair of jeans. It's the way I was raised.

Paul Newman started out this way, in *The Young Philadelphians*. He worked hard and went to school and fell in love with a rich girl whose parents talked him out of getting married. Kathleen's father owns most of Billings. He says he wants me and Kathleen to come work for him, but everyone knows she's smarter than me. Everyone knows she's going to be wearing the pants. And it's not every day you fall in love with a rich girl who's also smart, who says, sometimes when she's out visiting from California, reading her books on the roof of your uncle's barn, that you're the thing that keeps her going. You're the reason she's so smart. After a while, you've got to try and believe it, or else get smart yourself. Paul Newman got burned. He never got the girl. Still, he's the reason I wanted to be a lawyer, because of the way he handled himself in court.

At Goldstein and Kelp, this case the latest. A guy, rich guy, or at least destined to be rich guy who's now driving a big car, still in his thirties: his name's Powell. J. Adams Powell. J. Adams is sitting outside on his verandah—actually, a balcony, overlooking the pool at McCormick Ranch: it's Sunday, the Sabbath, and bright as day. The sun's bright, and J. Adams is out with the *Republic*, going through the *Lifestyle's*, and probably he's only wearing a pair of shorts. Running shorts, the kind people jog in, maybe, because the guy's in good shape. He's wearing running shorts, sipping his coffee, getting tan on the verandah, and maybe, unconsciously, while reading something about Vanity or Meryl Streep, maybe by accident he scratches at his nuts. You know, just a little itch.

And across the verandah, on this particular day of the Sabbath, is Mrs. Gertrude Simms. She's on her verandah, enjoying the day, and lo and behold, she looks up, and there's J. Adams, that nice boy who smiles sometimes in the parking lot, scratching at his nuts. Mrs. Simms, she doesn't have any nuts, so naturally she can't imagine what it would be like to want to scratch them. And let's face it, not all guys scratch just because they got an itch; sometimes it just feels good, wherein lies the danger. And naturally, there's a scene. The cops come: charge, indecent exposure; specifically, a testicle. *In broad daylight*, Mrs. Simms says, and J. Adams, being the bright guy that he is, he knows he's going to have to do something. He knows it's time to get a lawyer.

When you know it's time to get a lawyer, is how Chuck Goldstein puts it, on the TV, in between the used car commercials and sex ads.

Going through J. Adams's file, I teach myself things about the law. I teach myself things like a man is innocent unless he engages in certain instinctual behaviors upon his balcony; he might have just been eating his lunch, like Mrs. Simms. This thing's going to lay J. Adams back a couple grand, easy, but he's got Chuck Goldstein on the case, and Chuck's the kind of guy who cares. For Christmas, Goldstein gave me fifty bucks cash and dinner for two at Rick's American Café.

"Charge it to my account," he said, smiling.

Kathleen couldn't come out that weekend, so I took Emmy.

Maybe you don't know, so I'll tell you: most horses are either geldings or mares; that is, boy horses with no nuts, or girl horses. You go rent a saddle horse in the country, that's probably what you get, something docile and

safe. But a stud, he's still got his nuts. That's what makes him mean and so worthwhile.

J. Adams is pretty pissed, obviously. He's engaged. He lives a quiet life. Last year, he paid over twenty grand in taxes. This kind of thing doesn't make him feel very comfortable.

"Don't worry," I hear Goldstein say.

"What do you mean?"

"We go to court, we get it expunged."

"How much?"

"We give the judge a laugh," Goldstein says, meaning he takes a ten grand retainer, and then he calls through the office door; he asks me to fetch the file. "Powell," he says, as if I don't know who this guy is. And then to J. Adams, "Want some coffee?"

Later, after the door is shut and both are sipping warm coffee that I've brought them, I'm up front with the receptionist, Allyson. She looks at me, smiling. "Can you believe it?" she asks, referring to J. Adams. "I mean can you even believe it?"

Looking at her, it's pretty clear she wants to believe it: J. Adams is still young, and single; he's the kind of guy a girl like Allyson might want to believe in.

The rest of that afternoon, I'm in the office library, studying. Goldstein knows it's important to me. He gives me chores to do that will help me along. "Go find this case," he'll say, even though he's already got it sitting on his desk at home, or in the back seat of his Audi. But that afternoon, I'm studying for exams, reading case after case based on other cases. J. Adams, for all he knows, he's going to be famous: *The Case of the Dangling Testicle, Adams v. Simms*. Years from now, people could be reading all about it. We're talking about the nature of discretion. We're talking precedents.

"Hey," Allyson says, on her way out. "Don't go blind!"

I say good night and she stands there at the door, smiling, looking that way she looks, and now she is on her way out: swinging her hips, thinking I'm going to watch, which I do. When I look away, I see Goldstein down the hall, coat in hand, watching the same thing.

I don't say anything. I turn back to my Constitutional Law and study the color of the paper. Discretion, I think. Discretion is nine-tenths of the law.

The law may keep us safe, but it's also what makes us capable of violence. Sooner or later, it's what we have to learn to live with, and three days later, I'm with Emmy, riding through the spread chasing off two college kids—a boy and a girl. They're riding mountain bikes, and Roy says mountain bikes are bad for the scenery. Usually, the bikers get pissed off, but we're talking about people wearing pink and green tights, and plastic helmets. They see me and Emmy on horseback, they figure maybe they really are trespassing. Also, I try to be polite.

"It's an open range," I say, lying. "You don't want to get hurt."

"Yeah, right," says the boy, aiming for the highway, and we follow along until they get off their bikes to slide them under the barbwire. The girl turns around and flips me the bird, and now we're headed toward the barn. The air is heavy with clouds. Behind us, Papago Park, where we've sent the bikers to, behind us you can see the clouds gathering heat. The creek bed is full of gravel and stones, and Emmy says something about Kathleen.

"What?"

"Nothing," she says, checking her cinch. When she leans, her weight in her stirrup, her body leaning along with, you can see her hair falling. Her hair is the color of clean hay, and there is no sun, just the grey swelling sky. Now she takes her seat and turns in the saddle; she looks at me and smiles, briefly. She cues her horse into a lope, and watching her, watching her hair bounce against the flat of her back, I remember something my father might have said. About a woman and a horse. That kind of thing.

Emmy, she's just turned nineteen.

Keeping in mind this, too: Kathleen is afraid of horses.

Back at the corral, we sit on the fence and listen to Donovan whinny at the mares. Emmy smokes a cigarette, awkwardly, and asks me if I want one. Sometimes, when she's about to say something, she rubs her elbow up against my arm.

"You're just a girl," I say, once.

"That's right," she says. "I'm just a girl. So what?"

My heels are locked in the beam of the fence, and I'm trying to be calm. I can feel the muscles in my arms, reaching behind me for the fence, and I think now would be a good time to tell the story about J. Adams, or something else I know a lot about. I feel the need to talk but instead we watch the sky filling up the river bottom. Donovan is crying, he's bleeding

and proud, and when Emmy finally leaps off the fence, she half-runs in her boots like a girl. She runs to the gate separating the corrals and swings it open.

Now she's walking back to the fence, suddenly shy, and Donovan is flying through the air behind her. He's flying through the air and Emmy's got her fists in her jeans, staring at the small points of her boots. Off in the distance, there's a little Appy mare, pitching her tail, and sooner or later Emmy's going to look up at me and smile. She's going to flick her hair and wipe the dust from the seat of her jeans.

It's the kind of thing you have to learn to appreciate, and even then you know it's got the strength to kill you—that Appy mare, nickering in the dusk, pitching her tail.

When I was nineteen, my dad was shoeing a brood mare, Molly O'Brian, who got tired of standing on three legs. He let her go to give her a rest, he stretched his back and lit a smoke, he told me to bring him a trimming knife. When he turned around, the cigarette still in his mouth, Molly O'Brian let go with both hooves and caught him square between the eyes. The kick splintered the top of his nose, driving it into his brain, and he died. Molly O'Brian never even knew what hit him. She hobbled over to the water tank.

And a horse doesn't have to say its sorry for doing what comes naturally; it doesn't need to contend with bloodlines or guilt. If I'd reshod Molly O'Brian the day before, like I was supposed to, I might have never gone off to college. My dad named Molly O'Brian after my mom, who lives with her sister now in Casper, Wyoming. And it's the kind of thing Kathleen could never understand—how I could go to college and leave my mom like that.

As it turns out, Kathleen's making it with Stephen, or Richard, maybe both. She doesn't say this, but she stops calling me up at three A.M. She writes that she's spending more and more time in the library, and that her phone is on the fritz; sometimes, it just doesn't work. In her letters she talks now a lot about internships in New York and Chicago and tells me to think about CDs as a way of planning for the future.

In the morning, Thursday, Roy gives me a bologna sandwich. We're sitting at the breakfast table and he leans across for the catsup and winks.

His face is full-blooded, the price of bourbon and beer, and his eye's as big as a valve: the kind inside a heart, it's that swollen and big.

"Emmy," he says, smiling. "You know she's not adopted."

"Huh?"

"She's mine, alright. She's my own flesh and blood. Same as you, Son."

"I'm not your son."

He sits there, sucking at his teeth, and says, "Yup. You're sure right about that. You're your Daddy's son. Thing is, I think of you as if you *were* my son. See what I mean?"

I pour some coffee and Emmy gets up and goes to the fridge. She's barefoot and still in her nightie, a T-shirt I never thought she was going to sleep in. I bought it for her in the university bookstore, and now Emmy sets the orange juice on the table. She says to me, "Daddy, he's thinking about his will again."

"Will?"

"I'm not getting younger, you know. The farm's about to go belly-up. You know that. But still, you could build a pretty big house up here. It's not such a bad little piece to inherit. You and Emmy, you're family. I want you to get that Goldstein guy to make up my will."

"You'll need to come in, Roy. I'll ask him."

"Jim Dandy," Roy says. "That'll be Jim Dandy."

Roy wants to know if I'm going to marry Kathleen. "Not that it makes no difference," he says. "Just curious."

My dad, while sitting on the porch, looking at my mom walking across the yard, or going into the barn—what my dad used to say was this: "When you go looking for a wife, make sure you watch her ride. Make sure you watch the way she collects her horse." And the way he'd say this, you knew he loved my mom. You knew he'd always known he'd done the right thing. But my dad, and his family and life, were of a dying breed. Now my mom does part-time secretarial work; she lives with her sister, in Casper, and I think there's not much left to say.

So when Roy asks me if I'm going to marry Kathleen, it's not something I have to think very long about, though I wouldn't have known this a week or two earlier. "She's different than me," I say.

We're in the truck, on the way to the office, and Roy's nipping on a flask of bourbon. He feels nervous in his suit, which he must have bought that

same year he gave me my first hackamore; even the colors aren't made anymore. He passes me the flask and I fake a belt.

"You mean she's rich?"

"I mean she's bagging some guy named Stephen. Or Richard."

Roy lights up a smoke and says, "California. That's a long way away." He points at the traffic on Scottsdale Road and says, "Shit. When I came here, you'd of thought this place would blow away. If it hadn't been for air-conditioning, I tell you. I tell you this place would be a hell of a lot more safe. You could take your kids for walks. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah," I say, nodding.

"Cops," he says, pointing at two cruisers in a gas station. They're parked alongside each other, nose to tail, swatting criminals. "You gotta watch out for cops, too. That's another thing."

I park in the lot next to an Italian sports car. As we walk inside the building, you can feel the air-conditioning gone haywire. It's still too cold for refrigeration, and the office feels like an icebox, the kind Roy and my dad used to have to stock when they were kids. Allyson smiles and says, "Hello, Mr. Conway!"

"Howdy."

"Howdy," she says, smiling. "Howdy!"

I take Roy down the hall and introduce him to Goldstein. "Chuck," I say, "this is my uncle, Roy Conway."

Goldstein stands, coming around from his desk; he offers his hand and says, broadly, "Pleased to meet you, Roy."

And the odd thing is, Roy believes it. You can tell by the way he looks around the room at all the diplomas and degrees that he actually believes it.

Back at the reception desk, Allyson's looking at the switchboard, the lights, and all the people in the office talking. When I reach for a pen, she puts her hand on mine and says, "He's cute. He's really, really cute."

Now she's leaning, forward, so I can see what she knows I know is still available.

"So," she says, still leaning. "How's Kathleen?"

The smart thing to say would be something like *I don't date women at work*, but since this is my first real job, and since I only work part-time, it's not likely to carry much weight. Also it might turn out to be a lie, same as saying *I'm going to get married*. I know enough about legal conventions to

know I don't believe in them. Kathleen called last night. She lives in Philadelphia now, and she called me up at three A.M. to let me know she still wants to call me up. When she asked if I'm still living with my cousin, I said, "It's not something you really want to know."

"I know. I know. But still you could think about me."

"You're right. I could."

Paul Newman would have never said this, but then his script never called for this situation. Instead he would have asked Kathleen if she needed money, or if she was being treated badly by someone he used to go to school with. But I don't think I went to school with anyone Kathleen knows, or sleeps with, and even if I did what good would it do to say anything? We're talking a lot of water under the bridge by now.

In Tempe, Arizona, the Salt River is dry nine months out of the year. Even so, when the rains do come, people always worry about the bridges flooding out, teenagers in four-by-fours get drowned, it's a dangerous time of year. Roy, he understands this kind of thing, and on the way back, we stop at a strip-joint not far from home. The River Bottom.

Inside, the room is full of smoke and perfume and lonely men. Roy and I take a table ringside, we order a couple beers, and then a couple shots, and after a couple more Roy is feeling fine. He's explaining *testators* to me. He keeps an eye on the girls.

Roy takes a swig. "You're never too old," he says, coughing, waving his hand. "Know what we used to call this kind of place? Back in my day?"

"What's that?"

"A first class joint. That's what! That's what we called it!"

I get up and go to the phone and try and call Kathleen. Her phone is out, and suddenly I have this vision: Emmy—standing up there on stage, straddling a beam. I see her wrapping her fine legs around a beam and squeezing the muscles in her ass, and I'm thinking this is what happens. This is what happens to girls who don't know better, or girls who know us better than we think we do. Tanga, the girl in leopard-skin, she can't be more than twenty. She's younger than me and trying to dance the way they do on TV, as if this were *Star Search* and one of us just might really be an agent. The manager, a fat guy with a .38, says they come in here all the time, *incognito*. I'm thinking this is the kind of thing Kathleen could never understand, and then across the bar, behind my Uncle Roy and ordering a beer, I see none other than J. Adams Powell. He's tipping the waitress and

when he sees me, he holds up his glass and nods, slowly, as if we really have known each other for a long time.

You're not supposed to fall in love with your cousin. It's a basic rule that I'm still not quite aware of, and by that I mean, I haven't yet decided I'm in love with Emmy. As I see it, we're still just family. Love, like heredity, starts in the blood; it takes a while to bring things to a boil, even in Arizona. It's not as if I'm prepared to raise a family.

When I get Roy back to the farm, Emmy helps me pour him into bed. He's sprawled on his bed and we're tugging at his boots. On the dresser is a picture of Roy with my dad: they're both in their twenties, they have their arms wrapped around each other, they're wearing hats. Only the quality of the photograph lets you know how long ago this was. I pull off Roy's pants and take out his wallet. I remove two twenties.

Emmy looks at me, and I say, "I need to borrow the truck."

"Okay."

I walk down the hall, slowly, measuring my stride, and Emmy follows behind. She rests her hands on my shoulders, and when we reach the kitchen, she turns me to face her.

"I'm not adopted," she says, kissing me. "Drive safe."

The truck's a '64 Chevy with a three speed column. Under the seat Roy keeps a bottle of Beam, and as I make my way through Buckeye, I stop to use the phone, but Kathleen's still doesn't answer. I gas up both tanks and pick up a six to keep me going. It's a long drive, six hours worth over the top of I-10, and I think there are other things I could be doing right now. I could be going over my notes. I could be watching TV with Emmy, our feet on the coffee table, maybe accidentally touching. I'm thinking all this is something I want to understand, and I'm telling myself I want to do the right thing. Meanwhile, I cruise behind a semi doing seventy plus. I remind myself I'm breaking the law and toss my empties on the floor. I keep a look out for speed traps and, finally, when I begin my descent into the territory of L.A., I turn on the radio and listen to the weather.

J. Adams came through all right. Once in court, Goldstein called Mrs. Gertrude Simms to the stand. He asked her, politely, which testicle it was she had allegedly seen. When she couldn't answer, Goldstein brought out a spread from *Playgirl*. Pointing, he asked her, "Was it this one? Or did it look more like this?"

“I don’t know.”

“This one, the one on the right?”

“I don’t know.”

“That would be your left, of course.”

It’s all in the transcripts. J. Adams paid six-and-a-half grand to have his record cleared, and three months later he married the daughter of a state senator. Now he owns a car dealership, and rumor has it he’s thinking about running for Governor. Meanwhile, he sells Japanese imports on Indian School, and you can see him at night, on the TV, explaining low financing.

When I took Emmy out to dinner, at Rick’s, she wore her best dress—white, cotton, from a designer shop in a mall—and ordered wine bravely. White wine, while I had a Bud, and she told me stories about her mother, a steak house waitress in Denver. Apparently, her mother mistook Roy for an oil baron, the kind from Dallas before the glut, and that most men or boys Emmy dated didn’t seem to be much different from Roy.

“I could go to college,” she said. “I just don’t know why. I remember you, though. In Montana. You showed me a creek and called it Conway Creek, like you named it. College can’t teach you what you don’t already want to know.”

And what I thought about, driving, was what I wanted Kathleen to know.

The driveway was full—Kathleen’s and some foreign car, so I parked on the lawn, the headlights shooting into the living room of her apartment where she slept on a futon. I left the truck running, grabbed a beer and got out fast. I tried the door, locked, and did what any decent drunk man would do: kicked it in. By the third try I was inside amid candlelight and classical music, Kathleen twisting in a sheet, her Berkeley-Boston boy looking for his glasses, tugging on his shorts. The telephone cord was unplugged and by it, on the floor, lay a pocket mirror smeared with coke.

“How’s it going?” I said, tossing him the beer.

“It’s not how it looks,” he said, shaking. He reached towards Kathleen, giving her the beer, and I watched her face looking at the beer and what all this was going to mean. She still didn’t get it.

“So what are you going to say,” I said. “I’m sorry?” I mean is that what you really want to say?”

“I’m sorry,” said the guy. “Really. Hey, I’m really, really sorry.”

And then it clicked: Kathleen took the beer and threw it at me, a good solid throw that caught me in the chin. I stood there rubbing at my chin, taking her in one last time while she let go of the sheet. She let it fall and smiled up at me.

“It’s warm,” she said, pointing. “The beer, I mean.”

And then I left. I left leaving the door open the way I wanted her to remember it: swinging on its hinges because nothing is simply open and shut.

There’s not a man alive who doesn’t have to be afraid of those things he’s still capable of doing. I stopped at a diner, ordered two cups of coffee to go, and drove off—heading east, into the sunrise, which seemed to be a pretty fine closing argument.

Most things are relative. I walked by Goldstein’s office one night and stopped to listen to Allyson, spread-eagled on his desk, knocking the pictures of Goldstein’s children across the room. It would be nice to say Goldstein left his wife for her, but he didn’t. He didn’t even have a wife, just a lot of kids and alimony. Later Allyson took a job at a dentist’s office across town where she increased her take-home pay twelve percent. As for the farm, it’s long been turned into condos.

But two weeks later, I’m moving hay in the south paddock—five hundred bales worth. I’m bucking bales and Emmy rides up, bareback, on top of Donovan. She’s been working him regularly; he’s beginning to develop some manners. Overall, he really is a fine horse, and when she rides up, she tells me Roy wants to see me. Something about property values and tax shelters, the kind of thing he needs to talk to me about. Often when she kisses me, she kisses me on the mouth, and we both know by now what’s going to happen to us. We both know I’m going to want to kiss her back, and so, standing there, admiring the fine light of day, I grab my shirt and swing on up behind her. I swing up on Donovan’s spine and Emmy takes my hands. She takes my hands around her waist. I can feel the sweat soaking through her T-shirt, and what I’m thinking, simply, is that this is everything I know. I’m thinking there’s only what you do in life, and then what happens next. I’m thinking of this girl, and the back of her neck, and the way my body fits around her.

“Hold tight,” she says, lifting the reins. “No. Tight.”