

Horse by Jeanne Gulbranson

It was the time of day when dusk uncurled its long, pink tongue just as the sun was lying down for the night and before the inky blackness embraced the canyon, when the woolly daisies and lupine were folding themselves to rest and the canyon wrens were singing their goodbye to the day. From his wooded ledge, Horse could see the jackrabbits as they began their travels across the canyon floor, and the coyotes starting their graceful prowl for dinner. Every day, as dusk licked the canyon, Horse stood silently; a sentinel for the change from the sounds and quickness that lived with the daylight to the quiet stealth that roamed when nighttime held the canyon floor in its arms.

Horse had stood watch every night, for all the nights since he had come to the canyon. The memory of the time before he had come to his home was getting dimmer; night had come and gone many times since then. Horse knew that before he claimed the wooded ledge, half-way up the canyon wall, as his resting place, he used to sleep just beyond the mouth of the canyon, and every day, after the sun first peered across the horizon, he would slowly walk the trails carrying one of Them on his back. He had never minded the weight; he was the tallest and the strongest of all the horses, and his long, sure strides traveled the paths faster than any of the others. Horse could see the farthest and hear the most, and he smelled the smells of the canyon before all the rest. Maybe that's what drove him to leave Them behind; to see and hear and breathe in deeply what was promised beyond the trail, where they had not allowed him to go. Horse didn't know why that day had been the right one to leave. Maybe it was the eagle flying across the awakening sun, with its brown feathers showing gray-white in the brightness. Horse

knew then that he needed to be where the eagle was; he needed to roam and seek, and be filled with the sights and sounds and smells that had been beckoning him.

That day, the day when Horse left the edge of the canyon, when one of Them came close to him with the heaviness to put on his back, Horse had bolted through the open gate. He ran and ran and ran until the burning, yellow sun was very high in the sky and even he, with his powerful eyes and ears and nose could not see or hear or smell Them anymore. Then Horse knew that he had come to the place; to the home where he should be.

Horse watched as the pink streaks of dusk faded and turned to gray signaling that night was close. He could smell that rain was coming with the darkness; he knew it would be a wakeful sleep that night. At first, the wetness whispered soft and cool on Horse's back, but quickly, the rain became loud and hard and sharp and pricked at him like cactus spines. That's how it had been on the night that Horse first saw the dark orange of fire in the canyon. Horse's memory of that night was alive and filled with fear; the fire's bright sharp fingers, the crackling hiss, and the smell of death that spread across the canyon with the fire were still harsh and frightening. Horse stepped back and shook his head as the terror of what had happened, and the dread that it could happen again, washed over him.

The night that the fire came, the black night had been enfolding Horse for some time before he felt the arrival of the rain. He had been keeping watch across the canyon floor, listening to the low, rumbling sounds that poked at the quiet when, with a painful brightness, a knife of white lightening had stabbed through the blackness and brought the killing fire to the pines. Horse's nostrils had flared as the smell of danger and death raced to him, and fear flooded over him as he saw the fire grow bigger, throwing its

fingers higher and higher into the black sky. Horse had started up the path he had worn to the highest of the canyon shelves as instinct commanded him to run; he hungered for the comfort of his safest place, high above the trees.

But something he didn't recognize, something stronger than the voice to flee, had made Horse stop and turn back. He had trumpeted a high-pitched whinny again and again and had pounded his powerful hooves into the hard-packed earth to vibrate the warning to all those that were sleeping; all the others who couldn't see as far or hadn't yet picked up the pungent scent of danger. All around him, the canyon sprang to life with the skittering moves of the foxes and lizards and the lumbering gait of bighorn sheep. The coyote and mule deer were sprinting toward Horse's paths up the canyon, their long legs putting them quickly to the front of the moving wave of the others.

Horse had stayed at the trailing edge of the churning pack, crossing back and forth along the back flank, matching the pace of the slowest and the weakest of them while he pushed the frightened, jumbled mass of animals higher and higher up the canyon walls. There were no enemies in the canyon that night; the rabbits hopped furiously, bobbing back and forth beside the swift-footed coyotes, and the owls flew low and fast with no eyes on the lizards or mice below them. There were no thoughts of feeding, only fleeing, as they all, as one family, joined in a desperate race for life. Horse had continued to drive them forward until the black sky had turned to gray-blue and the sun had started to climb, when the acrid scent had faded away and he knew that the fire of death could not reach them.

The fire's memory was pushed aside as the rain continued to stroke Horse with its cold breath. The small columbine were touching their purple heads to the ground, and the pine branches were arching downward as the rain's weight pointed them back to

their mother, the earth. Horse's ears twitched side to side to capture the first sounds of deep booming that would herald the coming of the stabbing lightning, which would bring the dreaded fire, but he only heard the rain's march into the canyon. When the air began to move hard and fast against him, driving the wetness sideways against his flank, it brought with it a faint, almost-familiar smell from long ago. Horse raised his head higher and moved to confront the air, breathing deeply to bring the scent into his memories. He jumped backwards as his nostrils filled and carried to him the sight and sounds and smells from long ago; this was the musky scent of Them.

Horse hesitated, conflicted by the compelling urge to save himself and the even more powerful need to fulfill his charge as the sentinel, keeper of the watch, protector. As he began to move slowly down the trails that the rain had softened, the smell of Them became stronger and the call to flee began to tighten in his belly. Small rocks tumbled in front of him as his hooves cast them out of their muddied places.

When Horse reached the canyon floor, his eyes shone through the darkness and the pounding rain and he knew that the smell that had been leading him forward was true; it was one of Them. It was a small person that would sometimes come with the Them; it was a Little One. He had carried many Little Ones across the canyon trails. Long ago, when Little Ones would first see Horse, a wetness that looked like rain would cover the faces of some of them as they made yowling, panting sounds and clawed frantically at Them, the smell of fear and anxiousness swirling strong and painful around their small bodies. But after one of Them would lift a Little One onto Horse's back and climb on to surround the small body with his arms, water would leave the little face, the fear smell would fade into the air, and the bleating cries would change to quick, tinkling sounds. Horse welcomed that sound, and in the feel of a Little One's hand

patting his neck and mane, Horse could sense trust and joy. He remembered that it was good when Little Ones came.

Horse had never seen a Little One, or any of Them, so deep in the canyon since he had come there. As Horse drew nearer, he could tell that Little One heard the crack of the fallen pine boughs under his hooves through the sound of the rain when Little One jumped up under the juniper where he had been lying. Little One hit his small head on a branch and started the hurtful yowling that Horse remembered, the sound that came just before the joyful tinkles. Horse stood still, watching and waiting for the fear smell to die away; he knew that fear could make Them lash out and try to hurt him or run away. Horse didn't want the Little One to run; he suddenly longed to feel the gentle pat on his neck again.

Like a tall pine, Horse stood steady and silent until Little One raised his arms the way the long-ago Little Ones had signaled to be lifted to his back. Horse walked cautiously to the juniper as Little One lay down again and made short, whimpering sounds, the sounds that a tired, wounded fox made when it needed to find sleep and strength.

Horse could see the rain covering Little One's body with even more wetness on his face coming from his eyes. Little One shivered and panted as Horse slowly dropped to the muddy ground on the side where the rain was driving cold and relentless under the branches. Little One rolled so quick and tight against Horse that he was startled until he felt Little One's small arm around his neck, and it was good.

All through the night, Horse and Little One lay beneath the juniper—Little One quiet and soft against Horse's body while he purred the whispery sounds of sleep, and Horse awake and alert, holding his post, keeping watch. While the blackness was still in

the sky, the rain left as it had come; the pounding slowed to an easy dance until just a few small pieces of rain were still in the air, and then it was gone. The air was crisp and cold, and the canyon stirred with the sounds of the night feeders that had been denied their dinner by the night's rain. Little One continued to blow warm breath in even paces against Horse's neck, while Horse moved his pointed ears back and forth and took in deep gulps of air through his wide nostrils, guarding against the approach of danger to his small charge. A few lizards scurried past them, and a coyote paused to consider the pair under the juniper, believing that it had found its catch until the harsh gleam in Horse's eyes ordered the gray, hungry animal to continue its hunt.

As the warming yellow of the sun began to appear and the sky's black was changing to blue, Horse picked up strange, threatening sounds stealing across the canyon floor. As Horse raised himself quickly to be prepared to flee or fight, Little One's arm slipped away from Horse's neck. Little One sat up, boring questions into Horse's eyes, curious but unafraid.

The sound and smell were building and coming closer for awhile, but then began to fade; it was Them, and now they were going away from Little One and Horse. Horse was once again in the night when the fire had come; he ignored the fearful pounding of his heart, just as he had that night of terror, and began his sentinel dance. His whinnying bounced off the rock walls, filling the canyon, and his hammering hooves pounded out the calling rhythm. Horse danced and trumpeted again and again, until he could hear Them clearly; they were moving fast through the trees to where Little One was now standing and staring at Horse with wide, trusting eyes.

Horse could not yet see Them, but as the sound of their approach filled his ears, he ran quickly up the trail to witness from a rocky ledge. They came in a rush, many of

Them, moving swiftly and making loud noises, rushing toward Little One, putting hands on him. The wetness had returned, covering only their faces. Horse watched as Little One pointed to the deep mark in the mud where Horse had lain during the night, and all of Them made fast noises together as they moved back and forth across the deep pocket that Horse's body had made. One of Them knelt to feel the packed earth and then looked at the others with big eyes and made a low, trailing-off sound. Horse did not move as Little One's finger reached toward him, high on the rock; he could feel again the touch of Little One's arm on his neck and the sweep of Little One's hand toward him, and it was good.

They all stood silently, silhouetted against the gray-green trees while Horse was framed by the canyon wall behind him. They looked without a sound at each other, Horse to Them and Them to Horse, with just the early songs of the birds greeting the sun to break the canyon stillness.

One of Them was holding Little One up high, arms wrapped tightly around him as Little One had held Horse while they had lain together. Little One stared deeply into Horse's steady brown eyes and then raised an arm and moved it slowly back and forth.

Horse turned and began his slow ascent up the trail to his resting place, the wooded ledge that was his home.