

Liberating Horses

When Juniper was three, she brought me the clear plastic ball with orange and red horses inside it. She said, "I want the horses."

I took the ball from her and looked it over. "It'd be hard to get them out of there. Why don't you just use it like it is?" I rolled it on the grass, and she ran and got it and brought it back.

"I want to play with the horses."

"The ball doesn't come apart."

"We could break it."

"Maybe we could. That's really thick plastic."

"You could break it."

"Yeah? I don't know. It has a seam here. Maybe we could break it on the seam. Are you sure you want to break it? Usually, you get very upset when something breaks."

Laura came out the back door and said, "Hey, what are you two talking about out here? Breaking toys on purpose?"

"Well, we aren't thinking of doing it for destructive kicks. The ball hasn't much value as a ball. It was one of those push toys that whirs and the horses go round and round, and the handle's gone. It's too hard for bouncing or catching."

"I want to get the horses out so I can play with them."

"Once you break it, it's broken. You get awfully upset when things break."

"I won't. Why should I? We have to break it to get the horses out. I cry when I don't want something to break, and then it breaks."

I said, "Here. Throw it on the sidewalk. See if it breaks."

Juniper threw it down, then ran over and got it. "No, it didn't break."

Laura left it to us and went back in the house.

I threw the ball down as hard as I could. It chipped the concrete, but it didn't break. I walked out to the shop in back and got a hammer and brought it back. I beat the ball along the seam with the hammer, but the plastic just bounced the hammer back at me.

“Maybe you could cut it.”

“If I had a hacksaw I could, but I don’t have a hacksaw.”

“What could we try?”

“I don’t know. Let’s look at my tools and see if I have anything that would help.”

We walked to the shed. Juniper reached up and held my hand, and I curled my fingers around her hand. I opened the door, and we entered the cool, dim shed interior and looked at the tools hung against the wall. I said, “Not much to look at. I’ll have to remember not to loan my tools. I don’t have any kind of a saw here.”

“Here’s the axe.”

“Yes. I don’t know about that. It would be hard to hold the ball still when I hit it. Maybe we could dig a hole.”

We dug a hole and stuck the ball tightly into the hole. I chopped and chopped at the seam until the two halves began to separate. I picked the ball up and cut at the remaining seam with my pocket knife. “It just has these pieces holding it together. I think I can get it this way.”

I cut through most of the connecting pieces. I pried the halves of the clear plastic ball apart. I cut the horses from their perch and handed them to her. “We didn’t damage any of the horses, looks like.”

“No. They’re fine.”

“We make a good horse-liberating team.”

I couldn’t see any differences between the horses, but Juniper knew them individually before the ball was opened. She had her favorite already. He was the one who had implored her most beseechingly to get him out where he could run and play, and he was the one who was happiest to be out, munching the tender green grass, running this way and that, jumping and kicking.

“Do you want any of these other pieces?”

“No. They aren’t good for anything.”

I took the clear plastic halves over and put them in the garbage can.

Juniper didn’t pay any attention to what I did with the remnants of the ball.

She guided all four of the orange and red horses through the tall grass along the edge of our garden. The horses ran and jumped, bucked and kicked and neighed and neighed at each other. They ate grass and ran

again, following their leader, the horse who was the most alive.