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Liberating Horses

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

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

"I want to play with the horses."

"The ball doesn't come apart."

"We could break it."

"Maybe we could. That's pretty 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."

"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, 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."

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

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

He threw it down. It chipped the concrete, but it didn't break. He

got a hammer and beat it along the seam, but it just bounced the hammer back at him.

“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.”

They walked to the shed. She reached up and held his hand, and he curled his fingers around her hand. He opened the door, and they entered the cool, dim shed interior and looked at the tools hung against the wall. He 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.”

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

When he had cut through most of the connecting pieces, he pried the halves of the ball apart. He cut the horses from their perch and handed them to her. “Looks like we didn’t damage any of the horses.”

“No. They’re fine.”

“We make a good horse-liberating team.”

She knew them individually before the ball was opened, but he couldn’t see any differences between them. 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.”

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

She didn’t pay any attention to what he 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 the garden. They 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.