



SHARON LEE HART

SWEETHEARTS *OF THE* RODEO

a short story by LYDIA PELLE

Lately I've been thinking about that summer. We barely ever got off those ponies' backs. We painted war paint across their foreheads and pinned wild-turkey feathers in our hair and whooped and raced across the back field, hanging on to their necks. Some days they were a pair of bucking broncos, or unicorns, or circus horses, or burros on a narrow mountain pass. Other days they were as delicate and regal as the rich ladies' horses, and we were two queens, veiled sultanas crossing the Sahara under a burning sky. We were the kidnapped maidens, or the masked heroes. We braided flowers in their matted tails, dandelions and oxeye daisies that got lost in the snarls, wilted, and turned brown. We tore across the back field, our heels digging into their sides. We pulled them up short and did somersaults off their backs, or handstands in the saddle. We turned on a dime. We jumped the coop, the wall, the ditch. We were fearless. It was the summer we smoked our first cigarettes, the summer you broke your arm. It was the last summer, the last one, before boys.

Our mothers drop us off every morning at seven. We grab two pitchforks and fly through our chores. For four dollars an hour we shovel loads of manure and wet shavings out of the stalls, scrub the water buckets, and fill the hay racks, the hay sticking to our wet T-shirts, falling into our shoes, our pockets, our hair. We race to see who can get done first. The sooner we finish, the sooner we can ride. Late in the morning Curt comes out to the barn and leans against the massive sliding door. He wears sandals and baggy shorts, and under his thick, dark lashes his eyes are rimmed with red. He tells us what other jobs there are to be done: picking stones out of the riding ring, or refilling the water troughs in the pasture with the long, heavy hose. We whine and stamp our feet. He is the caretaker, after all, and supposed to do these tasks himself. *We were just about to go riding, we say.*

Girls, he says, winking, come on now.

He looks over his shoulder and whistles for his dog. You stick your tongue out at his back. Some mornings he stays in his little house and doesn't come out until later, when the ladies' expensive cars start to pull into the long driveway. They get out and lean against their shiny hoods, smoking cigarettes and talking to Curt in low voices. Sometimes only one or two of them show up, and other times they all come, a half dozen of them in the identical beige breeches and high boots that we dream of one day wearing. They never once get a streak of manure across their foreheads or water sloshed across their shirts. We turn down the volume of the paint-splattered barn radio to try to hear what they're saying, but we can't make it out. In the afternoon we eat the sandwiches our mothers packed for us and throw our apple cores over the fence to the ponies, who chew them carefully and sigh in the hot midday sun. Their eyes close, and they let their pink-and-gray-mottled penises dangle. We go to them with soapy water and a sponge in a bucket and clean the built-up crust from their sheaths, reaching our arms far up inside. The ladies see us do this and pay us five dollars to do their geldings', then stand by and watch us, wrinkling their noses.

The ladies' horses all have brass plates on their stall doors, their names etched in fancy script, with their sires and dams in parentheses underneath. They are called "Curator," "Excelsior," "Hadrian." The ponies' names change daily, depending on our game. They don't even have stalls, but live out in the field, where they eat all day under a cloud of flies. Nobody even remembers who they belong to. For the summer, they are ours. They are round and close to the ground, wheezy and spoiled, with bad habits. One is brown and dulled by dust. The other is a pinto, bay with white splashes, one eye blue, the other brown. The blue eye is blind. We sneak up on this side when we go out to the pasture to catch them, a green halter hidden behind your back, a red one behind mine. The ponies let us get just close enough, then toss their heads and trot away. Peppermints and buckets of grain don't fool them. After a while we decide just to leave their halters on. The grass in the pasture is knee high, full of ticks and chiggers, mouse tunnels and quicksilver snakes that scare the ladies' horses into a frenzy. But not the ponies. They are unspookable. When we cinch up their girths, they twist their necks around to bite our arms, leaving bruises like sunset-colored moons. As the summer gets hotter, we stop bothering with saddles altogether and just clip two lead lines to their halters, grab a hank of mane, and vault on.

We trot them through the field and down the hill to the pine woods, making them scramble up steep ridges. The ponies are much faster coming home than going. We get as far away as we can and then let them race home through the woods, spruce limbs and vines whipping our faces. We know we are close when we can smell the manure pile. We come up the hill, and there it is, looming like a dark mountain beside the barn. You make a telescope with your thumb and forefinger, your fingernails black to the quick. *Land ho!* you say. Crows perch on the peak of the pile and send avalanches of dirty shavings down its sides. The ladies' little dogs jump gleefully out of the open windows of their cars and come running to us, tags jingling.

The ladies hardly ever ride. All day their horses stand out in the sun, their muscles like silk-covered stone. Sometimes they bring them into the barn and tie them up in the cross-ties, then wander into Curt's house and don't come out. The horses wait patiently for an hour or so, then begin to paw and weave their heads. They can't reach the flies settling between their shoulder blades, the itches on their faces they try to rub against their front legs. They dance and swivel in the aisle, and still the ladies won't come out. Finally we unhook them from the ties and turn them out into the pasture, where they spin and kick out a leg before galloping back to the herd. When the ladies reappear in the doorway of the little house, late in the afternoon, they squint in the light as if emerging from a cave and don't ever seem to notice that their horses are not where they left them.

We do everything we can think of to torture Curt. Before he goes out to work on the electric fence, he switches off the fuse in the big breaker box in the barn. We sneak around and flip it back on, then hide and wait to hear his curses when

he touches the wire. You slap me five. He comes back into the barn and flicks a lunge whip at us, and we giggle and jump. When he turns away, we both whisper, *I hate him*. We use pitchforks to fling hard turds of manure in his direction, and he hooks his big arms around our waists and dumps us head-first into the sawdust pile. We squeal and throw handfuls of wood shavings at him as he walks away. Oh, how we hate him! We pretend we've forgotten his name.

In the afternoon we ride our ponies close to the little house to spy on Curt. Their hooves make marks in the soft lawn like fingerprints in fresh bread. We ride as close as we dare and peer in and see things we don't see in our own houses: dirty laundry heaped in the hall, a cluster of dark bottles on top of the refrigerator, ashtrays and half-filled glasses crowding the kitchen table, which is just a piece of plywood on two sawhorses. Your pony eats roses from the bushes under the windows. He wears a halo of mosquitoes. From the bedroom we hear voices, a man's and a woman's. It is the only room in which the blinds have been pulled. We try to peer through the cracks, but the ponies yank at their bits and dance in the rosebushes, and we don't really want to see anyway. *Come on*, you say, and we head out to the back field to play circus acrobats, cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians.

The ponies bear witness to dozens of pacts and promises that we make in the grave light of late afternoon and have every intention of keeping. We cross our hearts and hope to die on the subjects of horses, husbands, and each other. We dare one another to do dangerous things: You dare me to jump from the top of the manure pile, and I do, and land on my feet with manure in my shoes. I double-dare you to take the brown pony over the triple-oxer jump, which is higher than his ears. You ride hellbent toward it, but the pony stops dead, throwing you over his head, and you sail through the air and land laughing. We are covered in scrapes and bruises, splinters buried so deep in our palms that we don't remember they are there. Our bodies forgive us our risks, and the ponies do, too. We have perfected the art of falling.

We know every corner of the barn, every loose board, every shadow, every knot in the wood. It is old and full of holes and home to many things: bats and lizards and voles; spiders that hang cobwebs in the corners like hammocks; house sparrows who build nests in the drainpipes with beakfuls of hay until one day a dead pink baby bird drops at the feet of one of the ladies, who screams and clutches her hair. You scoop it up and toss it on the manure pile, and Curt comes out with the long ladder and pours boiling water from a kettle down the pipe, and that is the end of the sparrows. Curt laughs at the lady and rolls his eyes behind her back and winks at us. We wink back. There is a fly strip in the corner that quivers with dying flies. When it is black with bodies and bits of wing, it is our job to replace it, and we hold our breaths when we take it down, praying it won't catch in our hair. And there are rats, so many rats that we rip from glue boards and smash with shovels, or pull from snap traps and fling into the woods, or find floating in water troughs where they've dragged themselves,

bellies distended with poison and dying of thirst.

Along the edges of the manure pile we catch skinks and salamanders and yellow-striped millipedes that give off the scent of almonds when we rub them. We lock them up in mayonnaise jars, punching air holes in the rusty tops with Curt's hammer and screwdriver. We kneel in the filth and watch an army of ants dismantle a mouse carcass. We see a hawk drop a squirrel from a branch of the old white oak. The squirrel gets up, shakes itself, and runs right back up the trunk of the tree. We are in the hayloft the morning that the barn cat has kittens. Crouching beside her, we watch her contortions, her straining face, and we see the slick, blind kittens wriggle their way to the seam of teats. Afterward we watch in wonder, our faces inches from hers, as the cat eats the afterbirth with delicate bites, the hay around her dark with blood. In a few weeks, when the kittens have become fuzzy and playful, the ladies grow delighted with them, and we forget about them altogether.

In the basement is the workbench where Curt never works, rusty nails lined up in baby-food jars, their lids screwed to a low beam. The manure spreader is parked down there in the dark, like a massive, shamed beast. When we open the trapdoor in the floor above to dump loads from our wheelbarrows, a rectangle of light illuminates the mound of dirty shavings and manure, and mice scurry over it like currents of electricity. The ladies never go down to the basement. It is there that we sometimes sit to discuss them, comparing their hair, their mouths, the size of their breasts. Did you see that one throw up behind the barn on Friday afternoon? Did you see her diamond ring? Did you see that one slip something into Curt's shirt pocket and smile at him? What was it?

We hear them call their husbands' offices on the barn telephone and say they are calling from home. We watch two of them go into the little house at once, shutting the door behind them. We see Curt stagger from the house and fall over in the yard and stay where he falls, very still, until one of the ladies comes out and helps him up, laughing, and takes him back inside. The ladies hang around and watch the farrier, a friend of Curt's with blond hair and a cowboy hat, as he beats a horseshoe to the shape of a hoof with his hammer. He swears as he works, and we stand in the shadows by the grain room and listen carefully, cataloging each new word. When he leaves, one or two of the ladies drive off, following his truck, and return an hour or so later and go back to what they were doing, as if they'd never left. They lock themselves in the tack room and fill it with cigarette smoke. We sit in the hayloft and listen to their voices below us, high and excited, like small children's. The ladies wear lipstick, but it's gone by the afternoon. They wear their sunglasses on cloudy days. Some mornings the oil drum we use for empty grain bags is filled to the top with beer bottles. As we watch them, the rules that have been strung in our heads like thick cables fray and unravel in a dazzling array of sparks. Then we climb on the ponies' backs and ride away down the hill.

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