

He comes, the old man. I hear the sound of his pickup breaking the silence of morning. He stops in front of the saddle shed and turns off the motor. The door opens. He steps out and starts this way.

He stops, frowns, brushes a hand over the top of his head. He goes back to the pickup for his hat. He forgets things.

He comes through the gate, closes it, hooks the chain back on the nail. He coughs and looks up at the elm tree whose limbs grow out across the corral. The leaves are beginning to turn.

While he's looking up, his right hand strays down to his knee and rubs it. It's an unconscious gesture, an old hand talking to an old knee.

It's the dampness. My bones hurt too. Nothing terrible, just a lot of small complaints. There was a time when I didn't know the meaning of pain, but we learn.

He opens the saddle shed door and turns on the light, sets one boot on the floor, and pulls himself up, making a grunting sound. It's a long step that gets longer every year. Inside, he squints at the east wall, pulls a pair of glasses out of his jacket pocket, and looks again.

There is a line of 16 penny nails across the east wall. From each nail hangs a bridle and above each bridle is a name. He picks the one marked "Rusty."

He slips the headstall into the crook of his arm, grunts down the long step, opens the gate that leads into the east pen, and comes toward me. My ears go up and I begin edging away. He stops and I stop, and for a moment we glare at each other. In his pale blue eyes, there's a little of the old fire.

I look back at him, and maybe there's a little of the old fire left in me. He comes to me and I move away. His voice cracks the silence. "Whoa, you knothed!"

I trot around the pen. Oh, I know he'll catch me. He always does. Why play the game if we know the outcome? I don't know. That's just the way we've always done it. You lose track of why after a while.

He shouts. I run, but not as far or as hard

He Comes, the Old Man

A lesson on respect for the aged.

By John R. Erickson



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You used to laugh at a man who mounted a horse that way, "like an old washerwoman."

as I once did. He gets me in a corner and levels a finger at me. "Now whoa!" I stop, my head frozen in the air, and he comes, limping a bit on that right leg.

I remember the day he got that limp. When was it, Charlie? Could it have been...16 years ago? Eighteen? The years slip by.

I was a three-year-old colt, just broke, knew everything about everything, tough as a tree and about as smart. You had been training me to rope, remember? We'd worked on it for a couple of weeks. I thought I knew it all, Charlie, and so did you. We took chances.

We had started roping small calves and had worked up to yearling stuff. I was a little frightened the first time the slack went out of the rope and I felt that jerk on the cinches. But I saw what I could do to a big steer and I liked it!

Together, Charlie, we could do just about anything and get away with it. We were kings! I could outrun anything on four legs and you could stick a loop on it. I could hold it down and you could tie three legs with a pigging string. Weren't we a pair?

She was a big straight-barreled cow that probably hadn't raised a calf in two years. She was as fat as mud and outweighed me by 200 pounds, but we didn't care. When she wouldn't drive to the house, you unlatched your rope.

You gave me the reins and spurs and whispered, "Get 'er!" That's all it took. You stood up in the stirrups and pitched a loop on her horns. But she was too much for me, Charlie. You were tied solid to the horn with a nylon rope. I was young and stupid, but you should have known better.

She jerked me down. My right hip struck a rock and I rolled over your knee. That's where these aches came from.

So here we are again, you and I. You slip the headstall over my ears and fasten the throatlatch. You lead me through the gate and drop my reins in front of the saddle shed door. I suppose you think I'll stand here, ground tied, so that you won't have to carry the saddle so far.

There was a time when you wouldn't have tried that, because I would have walked off. There was nothing personal about it. Sometimes I just don't want to be bothered.

Today I'll stand and be nice. Tomorrow? No promises. I might be feeling naughty.

Charlie, you've been saddling horses for 70 years and you still jerk the front cinch down to the last hole. First thing in the morn-

ing, you try to cut a horse in half.

“Whoa, stand still!”

When you learn to give a little slack in the morning, I’ll learn to stand still.

Now you’re coming out of the shed with hoof nippers. Are you kidding? *You are 75 years old!* It’ll take you half an hour to trim one hoof, and in the meantime I’m supposed to stand on three legs?

“Come on, horse, give me a hoof.”

Okay, take it. Make a fool of yourself, what do I care?

You whittle and trim. You drop the hoof. You’re slow to straighten up, and when you do, your face is gray. You slump against my neck.

Charlie?

You catch your breath and lick your lips and pitch the nippers back into the saddle shed. “Trim your own danged feet.” You lead me out the gate.

The sun is up now, sparkling on the heavy dew that covers everything. Walking through the grass, you get your boots wet up to the cuff of your jeans.

Did you know that you bend forward at the waist when you walk?

You lead me over to a little rise in the ground and pause a moment, looking me over. “You ain’t holding your flesh.”

Neither are you, Charlie.

You step up on the little rise, guide your boot into the stirrup, grab the horn with both hands, take a deep breath, press your lips together, grunt and pull and fall into the saddle.

You used to laugh at a man who mounted a horse that way, “like an old washerwoman.”

Charlie, you dropped one rein when you were climbing on. Ten years ago...

We go down the hill and wade across the creek. I try to stop for a drink but you jerk my head up and give me a poke with the spurs. You never know until you try.

We cross the creek and climb the hill on the other side. The warm sun is meeting the damp ground, causing little clouds of steam to rise. The trees along the creek are taking on their fall colors. Autumn sunlight and autumn shadows. Autumn colors and autumn smells. I hear you whisper, “Lord, what a morning!”

We hit a jog trot across the pasture. I’m feeling saucy. There’s something about that crisp morning air. I toss my head and hump up a few times.

“Son, if you dump me...”

Don’t worry, Charlie. It just crossed my mind, that’s all.

We find some cattle near the place where the creek bends around to the west. We ride around them, then through them several times. I can’t see your face but I know what it looks like. Your eyes are drawn down to a squint and you’ve pulled your lips tight over to one side.

Checking those cattle. You never get tired of it, do you?

Charlie, do you remember...what are you doing? The bald-faced heifer? I’m not sure, Charlie. My hip...

She’s a troublemaker. Look at the way she holds her head. She has that look in her eyes. We used to eat her kind for breakfast. If it took speed, we gave them speed. If it took

“We were something special, weren’t we, Charlie? You and I, knocking a hole in the breeze. No, I can’t give it up, any more than you can. Two old fools, Charlie, two old fools.”

RUSTY, THE EQUINE

quick feet, we gave them quick feet. If it took brute strength, we had plenty of it. But Charlie...

See? I told you. She cut back on me. I can’t make those sharp turns.

Charlie, no! Not the rope! Has your brain gone to mush? Look at yourself; look at what you’re riding. This is crazy, Charlie. Do you hear me? *This is crazy!*

Okay, Charlie. One more time. I’ll do it for you, but remember what I said. *You’re an old fool.*

She runs. The wind is in my face. I hear the blood roaring through my ears and see the ground flying beneath my hooves and feel my muscles reaching deep inside. I can’t resist.

We were something special, weren’t we, Charlie? You and I, knocking a hole in the breeze. No, I can’t give it up, any more than you can. Two old fools, Charlie, two old fools.

I can’t catch her. I’m sorry. My lungs are on fire. I can’t feel my legs anymore. My hip...Charlie, something...it’s all a blur, my legs and the sky and flashes of yellow and orange leaves, all spinning.

I lie on the ground and blink my eyes

against the sun. The spinning has stopped. I hear my lungs fighting for air. I lift my head and fold my front legs under me and push up. Everything hurts. I stand up and shake myself and hear the jingle of fence staples in the saddle bags. I take a couple of steps and oh! Same old hip.

Charlie?

I see him there, lying facedown in the grass. There are still a few green sprigs close to the ground, but mostly it’s dead and brown and ready for winter. His hat lies off to the right and a soft north wind plays with the long wisps of hair that he combs over his bald spot.

I go to him, holding my head up to keep from stepping on the reins. I look down at him, a set of clothes lying in the grass.

It wasn’t my fault, Charlie. I gave you my best. I always gave you my best, even when we fought and had our bad times. But you asked for too much. You should have known better. Now look what you’ve done.

I bend my head down and nuzzle his shirt, and for a moment his smells send me spiraling back. There were times when I hated you, Charlie. I hated your smell of bacon and tobacco and sweat. You were always pushing, making me give more than I wanted to give.

Did his hand move? He pushes himself up on his elbows. He groans and climbs up to a sitting position. He rubs his knee with both hands and his eyes rise to meet mine. He touches me on the nose.

“I lost my hat.”

He looks around, crawls to his hat, and sets it on his head. It looks silly, all cockeyed and bent. He pushes himself up and tests his leg. He reaches for the saddle horn to hold himself up.

There was a time, Charlie, when I wouldn’t have stood around waiting for you. I would have gone back to the barn. Today, I’ll wait. Tomorrow? No promises.

Well, climb on. I’ll take us home.

We take it slow and easy. Down along the creek, the gold and yellow leaves clatter in a sharp north wind. It’s getting cold. Winter is coming.

He comes, the old man. He comes for both of us, Charlie, but not today. ■

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