

1.

WE FINISHED SUPPER and sat on the front steps in the cool shade, watching shadows stretch over the patch of grass my father was trying against all odds to grow in the adobe soil. A Ford V8 station wagon trailed dust past the trading post and turned down the hill toward the school. We didn't often see a strange car at Klinchee. We were far from any main road.

"Now who's this, do you suppose?" Pa said as the station wagon rattled over the cattle guard.

"It looks like Uncle Eph's old crate," I said.

Uncle Eph was my mother's brother, one of many but always her favorite. He had come to visit several times before she fell sick, something none of her other brothers had done, and he was the only one she had corresponded with, even at Christmas.

"I think you're right."

"He's got somebody with him."

"Maybe he brought Muffie, though it doesn't seem likely. Funny he didn't let us know he was coming."

Muffie was Uncle Eph's wife, a big square-faced woman who wore loose dresses that fell straight from her shoulders to her ankles. She had taken up religion late in life, along about the time Uncle Eph got out of the oil business, and she had

turned batty. When we took my mother home to Texas to bury her, all Aunt Muffie wanted to talk about was tablecloths. She kept trying to pin Pa and me down as to how many tablecloths my mother had owned and whether they were for family, company, or show. It was not something either of us had given thought to.

Uncle Eph unfolded out of the car like a carpenter's rule. He was a big man, taller than my father and fifty pounds heavier. Uncle Eph had the hands of a wrestler, which he had been in his young days, when he had joined a traveling carnival and taken on all comers without ever, he said, having been thrown. He dressed like a movie rancher, Tom Mix or Buck Jones, in high-heeled boots, tight twill pants, a two-tone shirt pulled taut over the belly, and a white ten-gallon hat.

My mother used to tease him about his costume, pointing out that their father, my grandfather, had been an actual rancher and mostly wore bib overalls and common work shoes, with a straw hat to keep off the sun. Uncle Eph said that kind of garb might have been all right for his daddy, but in these modern times a man had to dress his part to get ahead, had to announce by the way he dressed what manner of man he was and what in general his line of work might be. And who knows, he added, maybe if the old man had dressed for what he was — a landowner, a gentleman, an officer and hero of the Confederate Army, instead of like just another sodbuster — he might not have lost the ranch way back then and he, Uncle Eph, might have had a stake to work with instead of having to scratch every which way for every last dollar that ever came his way.

I ran down to the car. Uncle Eph picked me up and swung me around.

"Well, Davey," he said, "you just won't stop growing, will you? I can't hardly lift you no more. Keep shooting up like you are and before long you'll have just as much trouble as me

fitting into a itty-bitty car like this. I been sitting all scooched up for so long I wasn't sure my joints was still working."

A short fat man came around from the passenger side. He was dressed like my grandfather in striped bib overalls, a blue work shirt with sweat circles under the arms, and dirt-crusting work shoes. The floppy brim of a big straw hat shadowed his face.

"Will," Uncle Eph said, "I want you to shake hands with Mr. Smart, best damned judge of horseflesh you'll ever hope to meet. Mr. Smart's from Oklahoma."

"How do," Mr. Smart said. He shook hands with me too. His hand looked and felt like a lump of biscuit dough ready to be rolled out.

"I suppose you brought Mr. Smart with you because of the horse auction I mentioned in my letter," Pa said as we hauled suitcases up the walk to the house.

"Damned tootin'," Uncle Eph said. "What you said about them horses just set my brain afire. I got hold of Mr. Smart fast as could be and jumped in the car. We drove straight through, not to waste a minute. Surprised you didn't see it yourself."

"See what?" I asked.

"Why, opportunity, boy, *opportunity*."

About a week earlier, my father had written to thank Uncle Eph for a snapshot he sent of the stone on my mother's grave, which he'd bought with money Pa gave him after the funeral. The photograph was blurred and had been taken between the legs of a lot of people standing around the grave. We couldn't read the words on the stone, but we were glad to know her burial place was properly marked. In his letter, Pa told Uncle Eph, mostly just to fill out the page, that Washington had ordered a reduction in the number of sheep and horses on the Navajo Indian Reservation, hoping to do something about the overgrazing that was turning the reservation into a wasteland. With nothing to hold the soil, wind devils now whirled where

grass once grew as high as a horse's belly. Most of the excess sheep were already gone, and thousands of horses were to be rounded up and sold at a series of auctions, starting in the part of the reservation that Pa was in charge of.

At the time he wrote, Pa thought of the horse auction only as an interesting but harmless bit of news. He said later that he had failed to take into full account who was going to read the letter. Uncle Eph saw opportunity everywhere, and sometimes managed to grasp it. He had once made a million dollars speculating in land and built the biggest house Wichita Falls had seen up to that time. But Uncle Eph didn't know when to stop. He put everything he'd made or could borrow into buying more land just as the boom ended, wiping out both the million dollars and the house.

Something similar happened when he turned to wildcatting. He brought in a gusher about a day ahead of bankruptcy and started building a still bigger house in Wichita Falls—one so big he claimed you couldn't holler from one end of it to the other without a megaphone. When Standard Oil offered to buy his leases for a sum in the millions, Uncle Eph declared that he wasn't a man to deal with thieves. He was going to develop his oil field on his own and keep the profits himself instead of letting them flow into Rockefeller britches.

Unfortunately, about the time he and Aunt Muffie moved into their new house, Uncle Eph's second well came in dry. So did the third. He went back to Standard Oil, but before he could strike a deal his first well went dry too. Pa said poor Eph's promising new oil field petered out quicker'n a mule could snatch a mouthful of hay, leaving him with nothing but three dry holes and a pocketful of debt.

He and Aunt Muffie got to live in the new house only a short time. By the time his creditors were through with him, he wouldn't have been able to keep food on his table if my parents hadn't sent him a few dollars every month.

2.

AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE, over a supper of scrambled eggs and bacon, Uncle Eph spelled out for us the opportunity he had spotted. Mr. Smart dropped in a “yep” or a “just the way it were” now and again without, however, adding much content to the flow of conversation.

What Uncle Eph professed to see in the Indian ponies was nothing less than a chance to bring back prosperity, not just to himself but to all Texas. Those ponies would remind Texans that they were descendants of pioneers who tamed the West on horseback. The consequent resurgence of pride would do what Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal had been unable to do, even well into a second term: Restore confidence and make the economy hum.

Things would open up once Texans began thinking free and big again like their granddaddies, Uncle Eph said, instead of dragging around as though the overdue bills and mortgages they carried on their backs were made of solid lead. Men would go back to work. They'd have dollars in their pockets and smiles on their faces. Women would sing and children frolic. The Dust Bowl would be stopped in its tracks. And all because of those little old Indian ponies my father had told him about.

Pa poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Eph, you mind running through that again, a little slower?”

I bounced off your train of thought along about Lubbock and haven't caught up yet. How in hell is a bunch of broken-down horses going to do all that? Or any of it?"

"Will, just think on it a minute," Uncle Eph said. "What made Texas great? The horse. We all grew up on horseback, Will, me and you too. We was thinking big, doing big things, living well, making big money, getting rich.

"It was when we give up our horses that everything began to get all pinched-like. Little old houses with leaky roofs and cardboard in the windows in place of glass. Little old cars breaking down before they was even paid for. Little old tractors stinking up the countryside, and them breaking down too. No wonder people got to feeling hard up and lost their dreams. They just quit, was what they done—just hunkered down and let them eastern bankers and Rockefellers roll over 'em without no effort to fight back. Will, take my word for it. You just give a Texan a horse again and—"

"Eph," Pa said, "I know you and Mary were born on that ranch, but seems to me your daddy lost the place years before a car or tractor came onto it. As for me, my poor father didn't have a single horse, just a couple of mean old mules. I grew up following the wrong end of a mule down one furrow and then the next, hoping for not much more from the critter than to keep out of the way of its teeth and heels. So tell me how in God's name do you expect a bunch of Indian ponies—"

"You're not seeing it, Will, you're just not seeing it."

Mr. Smart, still wearing his straw hat as he shoveled eggs into his face, nodded his head vigorously. "Yep," he said. "Yep. Just the way it were."

It wasn't clear to me whose version of Texas's past and probable future Mr. Smart had endorsed, but Uncle Eph backed away from the big picture and began to sketch in details, speaking slowly as though to mental defectives, doggedly trying to make my father and me understand exactly what he

had in mind. His plan was to buy those Indian ponies, or at least the better ones among them, feed them up and ship them down to Texas, where he predicted he would find a vast market for them as saddle horses for children. He was going to start with Fort Worth, it being a place that had some money and still thought of itself as a cow town. As soon as Uncle Eph ran a few ads in the papers, every little cowboy and cowgirl in Fort Worth—hell, in Texas—would be clamoring for an Indian pony of his or her own.

And the parents? Well, said Uncle Eph, he knew Texas parents about as well as anybody could, being one himself, though his and Muffie's kids were all grown and gone by now. Take his word for it, Uncle Eph said, or ask Muffie, whichever we wanted, but Texas parents would leap at the chance to restore their children to honest-to-God Texashood by putting them on horseback.

"Will," he said, "all you got to do is remind them folks that despite all their troubles they are by God *Texans* and it's time they get off their knees and start acting like it. You do that and the lines of people wanting to plunk down their money for these here Indian ponies is going to stretch from Fort Worth to Dallas."

Before Uncle Eph had shoveled down the last of his eggs, his pony fever had flared to such heights that he began worrying about inadequate supplies. He sounded my father out about the chances of more horse sales being held after this first round of auctions was over. Was there any way, he wondered, for him and Mr. Smart to get in ahead of the crowd with a bid for ponies to be offered at those future sales no one but Uncle Eph had started to think about yet? Pa said he doubted it. In any case, he said, if Uncle Eph came up with a way to collude with other problematical bidders at those as yet unscheduled and unplanned auctions, he certainly didn't want to hear about it.

Next Uncle Eph pondered the possibility of hooking up with a harness maker. Every one of those ponies was going to require furnishings. Uncle Eph couldn't see why, as the benefactor who first spotted the new need for ponies and started Texas back on the road to prosperity, he shouldn't get a little something out of the saddle and bridle business that was bound to spring up in his wake all across the state.

About the time I would normally have been heading for bed, Uncle Eph offered to cut my father in on the deal. The amounts mentioned floated through the room like so many balloons, starting at five thousand dollars but rapidly deflating to five hundred dollars or even, because of Pa's special brother-in-lawly status, as little as two hundred and fifty dollars. My father said he was honored, he surely was, to receive such an offer, but his further status as a government official with at least a peripheral responsibility for the success of auctions to be held in the district of which he was the supervisor would unfortunately preclude his joining Uncle Eph in the venture, even if he'd had the money to do so, which he didn't.

He also expressed a few doubts about the economics of the venture, putting his objections gently so as not to offend Uncle Eph. He pointed out that the ponies would be mostly wild and unbroken, of unknown age and dubious physical condition. To the extent possible, the Indians would be allowed to designate which horses should be sold, and it was not in human nature for them to retain old or decrepit animals while sending young and vigorous mounts to market.

Once purchased, the horses would have to be fed and watered and driven long distances to the railroad for shipment to Texas. Uncle Eph would have to recruit and pay a large crew of Navajo cowboys, who would themselves have to be fed and watered at his expense. Stock cars would be needed for the trip to Texas, and my father's understanding was that they would have to be ordered well in advance. Swift and Armour, which



wanted the horses primarily for hides and other by-products, already had cars waiting on a Santa Fe siding down near Chambers.

And what about feed and water on the trip to Texas, which might take several days, perhaps even a week or more? Finally, Pa asked, wouldn't somebody have to break those ponies to the saddle somewhere along the line? Surely Eph wasn't thinking of loosing wild broncos on the innocent children of Texas?

Uncle Eph took all this in stride. He regarded the difficulties my father pointed out as mere pebbles in the path of progress. None should be an insuperable obstacle to a man of spirit, certainly not to a true Texan, born and bred. Now and again, however, he pulled a dog-eared notebook out of his hip pocket and jotted down reminders to himself.

"Swift and Armour," he said, making a note. "Cudahy not here?"

"Oh, Cudahy's in it too," Pa said.

"Good," said Uncle Eph. "The more the merrier. I'll get together with them boys and see if we can't work it out so Mr. Smart and me take on the good stock and let them have the rest for their rendering plants. No reason we should get in each other's way, driving up prices."

"Eph, don't tell me about it. That's all I ask. Just don't tell me about it."

"Yep," Mr. Smart said. "That's the way it were."

Having Uncle Eph visit made me think about my mother even more than usual when I went to bed that night. I remembered how she had looked at me sometimes, deep in thoughts I could not fathom, her face still, her eyes on me but seeing something or someone else, beyond touch. It bothered me that she had died before I was old enough to understand what or who it was she saw when she looked at me like that.

## *Geronimo's Ponies and Reservations*

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