

Michael Loyd Gray

## Horse

He'd finally put in his papers. Called it a day after twenty-eight hard-won years of days. Ten thousand two-hundred and twenty days, to be exact. Barlow had often hoped to make it thirty years on the nose. He claimed that for years. But one day he abruptly felt it was time to walk away. Sudden, unexpected clarity settled over him like fine mist. It saturated him. The number of years and days no longer mattered. There was no fire left in him for the job. Just fading embers sputtering and drowning in the mist.

After a last glance out the window, at the river flowing south, he pushed away from the desk and stood up, avoiding eye contact with Mathias and Torres, the ones he knew best -- longest. A handful of others, too. They all pretended to read documents or check phones. He'd already said a private word to the ones worth a goodbye.

Barlow grabbed the box of cheap mementoes accumulated over the years and headed for the door, eyes fixed ahead. On the way, he heard snippets of conversation about "the job." But he was no longer of the job and so what he heard were just words that didn't linger. They evaporated as soon as he heard them. Sounds without meaning.

But on the way out, Reagan made a run at him anyway.

"Listen, Barlow -- it's not like it's out of your way or anything," he said in that subdued, childlike voice he often used to get what he wanted.

"I'm off the clock, Reagan. As in *permanently*."

"Hell, Barlow -- you know we never had a clock around here."

"Then it's certainly too late for me to be on it."

“Always the funny guy. Always a real joker.”

“*Was*, Reagan. Past tense. I *was* a joker.”

He winked at Reagan, pushed open the door, and slipped through, a spring to his step. Almost free. He would not miss Reagan. Reagan would not miss *him*.

“But they’re your kin,” Reagan shouted after him. “Go talk to them. Find out what they know about that one last, damn case.”

“Very *distant kin*,” Barlow said. “I hardly know them. Case closed. For me, anyway.”

“Cousin or brother, it’s all the same.”

“Don’t play that card with me.”

“Yeah? Well, shit, Barlow -- what fucking card *should* I play?”

Barlow didn’t look back or even break stride. Either way would give Reagan the opening he wanted to drive a truck through.

“Try some Solitaire, Reagan.”

“Funny. You’re such a comedian.”

“Not as much as you must clearly think,” Barlow said.

“So, that’s how it’s going to be, huh?”

“Look at my back, Reagan. That’s my back walking away.”

“Clever.”

“Adios, amigo.”

“Who are you *now*,” Reagan shouted, frustration filling his voice. “Huh, *amigo*? Can you tell me that?”

It was a good question, but Barlow merely shrugged and pushed open a door into brilliant sunshine. It blinded him for a moment. He descended familiar steps by instinct. By muscle memory, he supposed. Behind him, there was only an already fading past, creeping darkness. Ahead -- the surface of the sun.

Illumination.

That was the theory, anyway.

But it wasn't that easy. Barlow sensed that once off the merry-go-round, he'd need his feet solid under him again. But they were different feet now. Suddenly wobbly. Older feet. Uncertain feet. Worn feet. Used to a different pace, to familiar places and patterns and rhythms. Feet transmit messages to the brain, seeking guidance. Desiring adjustment. Where do we go now? What's the pace? The direction?

It had never been about morality, his years of service. Or heroics. God, no – fuck heroics. Fuck morality. Well, maybe not morality. It was a useful thing, morality. A basic morality, that is -- one not too complicated. A morality that could be written on a matchbook cover, no memorization or contemplation required. It gave structure, morality.

Without structure, things fall to shit. But with too much structure, and too many years of it, you end up in a different sort of shit: routine. And torpor. That was a new word for Barlow. He'd read that somewhere. Torpor reminded him of torpedo. Life torpedoed plenty of people. It torpedoed good intentions and principles. Life was about dodging an endless supply of torpedoes.

Was it then about making people safe? No -- don't look at it that way. Not after doing it for decades, anyway. Not after all the legal corners that were inevitably cut because life doesn't always mesh comfortably with morality or ethics. And keeping people safe was a myth. Save one and three more drop like flies. It's whack-a-mole.

Barlow used to kid himself that for every corner cut, saving someone evened the score. But that was just rationalization, which sets in like thick fog. But what the hell—entire civilizations are built and regulated on rationalization. He figured he was in good company.

It had all began with – just what the fuck *had* it started with? Principles? Maybe. At first. Sure. Why not? That's the answer when someone asks why do it at all. At the *start*. That's boilerplate, claiming principles. But it ends with just not wanting to get killed. Because if you can't save them all, what's the fucking point of dying over just one of them?

Then, when that realization pops up from the subconscious, you know you're just an empty suit at a desk and tomorrow will look just like today, and yesterday, and no string of yesterdays can make it seem noble. It becomes only dull routine that's been rationalized to death until truth has been obliterated. Rationalization creates its own version of truth. It becomes a language, currency -- life.

An alibi.

He didn't want to go home yet. That could wait. There was nothing there. It was only a destination and a point of departure. There was no wife or even a girlfriend waiting. Not even a cat that would swirl about his feet, waiting for food. He had no real friends. He didn't even know his neighbors, didn't know when one moved out and someone else moved in. It was just a small apartment, the one he'd lived in since the job began. A TV on a cart and the same drab sofa and loveseat, showing wear. A living room window with a view beyond an alley, at an abandoned warehouse. Pigeons sometimes cooing up in the eaves.

Sometimes he put plants in the window, but they always died. Not enough sun, he supposed -- rationalized. Neglect, really. The apartment was a place to shower and sleep. A waiting room and interim destination until the clock started again the next day and the cycle repeated endlessly.

But now the cycle -- the spell -- had been broken finally and he trudged along a sidewalk, the box becoming a load. Not in pounds, but in memories. In mileage instead of years. He glanced at it, realizing there was nothing of value. A few cards from notable work anniversaries, signed by everyone, even co-workers he didn't really know at all, despite the years. It was stuff that could be found in any gift shop. Except for the horseshoe. Someone had tossed it on his desk one day in a year too long ago to remember exactly. Somehow, he'd been nicknamed Horse because he was like a horse that trudged along, pulling its load rain or shine. Horse. A human horse.

He was Horse.

At first, he liked the nickname. Reveled in it. It suggested strength and resolve. Horses were powerful, majestic creatures. But eventually it just reminded him that he'd spent his life harnessed, going where others pulled him, where Reagan sent him. He hefted the horseshoe in his hand. The tarnished horseshoe was solid, had weight. He wondered what kind of horse had once clomped round on that horseshoe. Or maybe it had never been on a horse at all. Where had it come from? A farm? An antique store? Someone's garage?

He passed people on the sidewalk and felt odd to be carrying a box of fleeting memories. They got heavier with each step. He saw a dumpster in an alley and after a moment of indecision, he dumped the box in it.

Except for the horseshoe. He stood there, shifting it from hand to hand. He'd never really noticed how heavy they were. A horseshoe was a substantial chunk of metal. Steel.

A horseshoe meant good luck. Everybody knew that. He wondered why. Something to look up. Now he had plenty of time for that, to look things up, to learn how things worked and why they existed, where they came from. But he was pleased to no longer be harnessed to that nickname. Horse. A horseshoe didn't make you a horse. He laughed out loud at the thought. He glanced around but there was nobody in the alley.

He looked around again and saw a steel rod sticking up next to the dumpster. It seemed out of place to him. It stood out. He wasn't sure why – just impulse -- but he went over to it and gripped it. It was embedded solidly in the ground. He pulled to see if it would just come out, but it was stuck down there good and hard.

Maybe someone had used a sledgehammer to put it down. What had been its purpose? Maybe it had no purpose. Maybe it was just random. So much of life is random. Did someone just randomly drive it into the soil? He pulled on it again, but it wouldn't budge. He snickered, a childhood memory suddenly emerging, and he thought of King Arthur and the sword Excalibur. Only one man could pull that one out.

Arthur had been a Horse, too.

Barlow used both hands, the rod now a challenge. He put everything he had into trying to uproot the rod, but it never wavered, never rose even an inch. He tried pulling and pushing but the rod was immune to motion. Stubborn. Barlow went at it so hard he gasped and breathed heavily and had to sink to his knees, spent. His hands hurt. One of them was cut and bled. He wrapped a handkerchief around it.

He got to his feet slowly and walked away, clutching the horseshoe with his good hand. But he stopped after a few yards as a notion washed over him, and he pivoted back to the rod. It was about the right distance, he figured. He understood the mechanics of the game. He gripped the horseshoe at the base of the U and swung it back and forth a few times, assessing his grip, the weight of the horseshoe. It wasn't at all like throwing a ball. And it was an underhand throw. A horseshoe was never thrown. It was *pitched*. He assessed the distance again. It was about right. Close enough. He remembered a saying – close enough for horseshoes and hand grenades. He held the horseshoe up and aligned it with the distant rod, like he was sighting a gun.

His first pitch fell short. Pathetically so. He rolled his shoulders and concentrated but the second, third, and fourth pitches were as bad as the first one. He stripped off his tie, slipped off his jacket, and rolled up his

sleeves. Sweat beaded on his brow. His hands sweated and he wiped them against his pants. He let air in and out slowly and focused, regulating his breath. Found intensity. He drew breath in as he pulled his arm back for the pitch and exhaled as he let the horseshoe fly.

The fifth toss got him close to the rod, and by the seventh attempt, he nicked it. The clanging sound of steel striking steel satisfied him. He's overcome a pitiful beginning. He felt a rush of adrenalin course through him. He tingled all over. Barlow was in a rhythm. He felt it. In the zone.

His arm and hand and horseshoe had become one seamless instrument of accuracy. A unit in sync. Every toss now hit the rod solidly. He just couldn't miss. Each time, the clang reverberated in the alley, and each time, Barlow felt a thrill rumble up and down his spine.

Finally, his good arm worn out and sore, he picked up the horseshoe after one last, successful toss, the steel striking steel louder than the other times, reverberating, and he walked toward home. He smiled and nodded to passersby on the sidewalk, something he'd never done in all the years on the job. He no longer dreaded going home. Barlow slowed down and enjoyed the walk. He heard birds he'd never heard before.

Along the way he decided to stop at the market and buy new plants and make sure to water them. And change the soil regularly. He might even buy plant nutrients he read about. He would need a trowel for that. He'd never in his life owned a trowel. Now he would. He would watch over the new plants. They would make it this time. He wasn't sure what to call what settled on him, soaking into him like fine mist, but he felt reasonably sure that life was endless cycles, and that maybe he'd been deposited at the start of one again.

At a hardware store, Barlow bought two metal rods and a hammer. He now had a trowel, a hammer, and a horseshoe. Now a man of tools, he remembered he'd need a small shovel, too. And several bags of sand. He struggled a bit under the weight of it all on the walk home, the bags of sand over one shoulder, a bag and shovel in the other hand, but he also relished it, the new load, the new weight. It was weight but not a burden.

Across from his apartment building, in the vacant lot, he pounded the stakes into the ground. They were forty feet apart and 15 inches high. The guy at the hardware store said that was regulation for horseshoes. Barlow used his new tape measure to measure the stakes. He used his new shovel to spread sand around them, to create sandpits. It was a proper setup.

Barlow stepped back for a moment, hands on hips, and surveyed his new horseshoe pits. He nodded with satisfaction and then made his first toss. He missed wildly and knew he had to adjust to the new distance. More horseshoes would be required, but for now one was enough. After each toss he walked to the other stake and tossed it back. It was good exercise and he worked up a sweat. He tried throwing left-handed as well as right. Soon, he heard the clang of steel against steel and smiled. Barlow looked up once, at his apartment building, and saw that people had come out on their balconies to watch.