

## The Best Horse in Town

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“Ain’t she a beauty?” Old Meserve liked to say it, talking about his wife. He was right. Even I, who was just a boy, could see that. When Mrs. Meserve cantered Bob, her chestnut stallion, past our house with her hair tied back tight and her eyes wide as though to see into your heart, she looked to me like the picture of Mary in our Bible when the angel came to her.

“She ain’t afraid of nothin,” Old Meserve liked to say too.

To which she replied, “Don’t boast, Jote. Of course I’m afraid of things, like anyone, but when I am, Jesus comes and heals it.”

“Well, why don’t he do it for everyone?” Jote sometimes asked.

“Because they don’t believe in him,” Mrs. Meserve would reply, which Old Meserve said was a good answer.

Some people thought Mrs. Meserve talked too much about Jesus, but I didn’t mind. She was good to me, and I spent time at her house when I could, eating her pies and her Indian puddings while she observed me close and told me stories from the Bible—how Jesus said “Go” and drove some devils into a herd of swine, how he walked on water and raised the dead—and about herself: how when Jesus came to her it was quick and light, like a touch on the cheek, like a wind under the door. Once she took me into the bedroom where she and Old Meserve slept, and where her only baby had slept too until he died. Something had been the matter with his heart, and she stayed up all night every night giving him sips of rum every half hour, but it didn’t work. His face got blacker and blacker until he died. His name was Ammi. That was one of the times Jesus took her fear away.

“He told me my boy was in heaven,” she said, and her eyes narrowed. “There’s no dying there.”

But the time I remember best was the time she raced Dr. Cartwright at Litchfield Fair. It was a fine day. We were sitting in the grandstand, watching the trotters, when the Doctor came up wearing tight gray riding britches and boots the way gentlemen did in magazines, but men in our town didn’t. People said the Doctor was in love with Mrs. Meserve, but that she didn’t like him so he was angry, wanted to show her. I don’t know. He was smiling and hard.

“When the trotting’s over, why don’t we run your Bob against my Bayard?” he said, looking only at her. “You and me—to find out who’s got the best horse in town. I’ll give you a length..”

Old Meserve stood up. “You won’t give her nothing,” he said.

“Sit down, Jote,” she said. “Bob doesn’t need a length.”

So they agreed, but when I saw them come to the start side by side my heart sank. Bayard was a brute of a horse—a hand taller than Bob and at least a hundred pounds heavier. At the start the Doctor went to the whip right away and got in front on the rail, but Mrs. Meserve settled Bob in right behind, just two paces back. My heart rose to see him stay there, nice and easy, and her talking to him all the while. When they came out of the final turn, she moved him outside for the sprint, but the Doctor saw her coming and moved off the rail to force her wide the way jockeys do, which Bob didn’t like. He tossed his head, and I thought he would break, but Mrs. Meserve leaned forward, still talking, and touched him on the neck. Just a flick, quick and light, but enough to show Bob what he had to do, and he did it, as everyone at Litchfield Fair that day could see.

Like grass in the wind he flowed, like water that knows where to go he went, dancing past Bayard’s heels into the gap the Doctor had left inside. Between Bayard rocking like the Bangor express on one side and the rail like a razor on the other, Bob went through with Mrs. Meserve’s face in his mane. For a moment she and the Doctor were knee to knee, so close they might have been touching. He looked over and jerked in surprise and yelled something I couldn’t make out. Then he shifted his whip, which everyone saw, and everyone saw it go up and down three times and Mrs. Meserve throwing her arm out along Bob’s neck and Bob stretching and going away like wind under the door, like walking on water.

The crowd let Old Meserve through and me right after him. “Ain’t he the devil?” he was saying angrily, meaning the Doctor, and when he saw the blood on Mrs. Meserve’s slashed sleeve, he threw up his hands. “Jesus . . .” he yelled, but she cut him off.

“Don’t say another word, Jote. Passing inside is dangerous.”

Back at their place, I watched while Old Meserve got the calendula and beeswax out and wrapped her arm.

“You weren’t scared, were you,” I said.

“Of course I was,” she said, “until I saw the whip coming down on Bob’s neck. Then Jesus healed me. He whispered I should put my arm out.”

“He wanted you to win,” I said.

“He doesn’t care about that,” she said, and her eyes narrowed. “Not about winning. Not down here. I wanted to beat Dr. Cartwright, and I did, but I wanted to keep Ammi alive too, and I

didn't. Not down here. No. Jesus comes to take our fear away. That's all, but it's a miracle." Then she pulled her arm from Old Meserve and took my face in her hands and gave me a kiss. "Remember that," she said.

I do.