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The Horse Burier

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# The Horse Burier

A STORY BY STEVEN SCHWARTZ



Clay Rodery

The sisters wanted to bury Lulu on their farm, so they called Henry's son, Landon, to do the job. Landon owned and operated a front-end loader with a backhoe. He mostly worked construction but took side jobs too, including horse burial. He worked nights and weekends to support his ex-wife and two kids. Several years ago he'd gotten into trouble gambling beyond his means—way beyond them—and Henry hoped that after a divorce, bankruptcy, and visits from mirthless men with snake-eyed determination his son's problems were now behind him.

Still, it was clear his son had never disliked him more, and when he called Henry early in the morning, Landon's voice was low and begrudging.

"What do you need me for?" Henry asked him.

"Pipes," Landon said.

It was 7 A.M. Henry had finished his first of two cups of coffee before he'd take his morning walk and then afternoon nap. His right hip had been replaced six months ago, and though that side of him was good now, his left hip had started acting up. He couldn't sit for long without it stiffening and favored it on his walks. Before retiring a year ago from Western Waterworks, he'd crawled around in ditches checking water lines for the county, and if he knew anything, it was where all the water pipes ran across easements on private property.

"I can't locate anything without seeing where the grave is going to be. I'll have to go with you."

"I suppose so," said Landon.

"You don't want the same trouble again," Henry said.

"I don't need you reminding me of that."

Once, when digging a grave for a horse and working at night to beat a deadline, Landon had struck a water main. The damage interrupted service for two hundred homes, necessitated twenty man-hours of repairs, and cost four thousand dollars. Landon's insurance company had upped his rates so prohibitively that Henry was afraid to ask if his son was still paying the premium. Surely he wouldn't be that stupid to go without. Then again, it wouldn't be the first time Landon had taken chances. He'd once jumped from the roof of a friend's house when he wasn't even drunk. He had landed on the target trampoline but had bounced into a shed, breaking it and his collarbone. On a Boy Scout camping trip he'd decided he could wander off solo one morning and find a shortcut across a raging river, only to wind up clinging to a tree midstream for three hours until he was rescued.

He had not entirely outgrown such adolescent shenanigans at thirty-five years old, his latest being the ill-conceived construction of a zip line for his two sons across his junked-up backyard. The zip line had snapped and whipped back into the

face of Jeremiah, his thirteen year old, resulting in eighteen stitches and unending teasing from the boy's classmates who nicknamed him Zipper Face. As with much of his life, Landon's actions were often well intentioned but poorly executed. Or maybe, as in the case of gambling, just poorly intentioned too.

Chad, Jeremiah's younger brother, had asked Henry recently what their father was like as a boy. Henry froze up, completely unable to answer, fearful his own biases would come through and confuse or sadden the child. Every word he said to Landon now was so measured. "Your father was a funny little rascal," Henry finally offered, ruffling his grandson's hair. "Just like you." Chad waited for more. Nothing came and finally his grandson, puzzled at the brevity of his usually forthcoming grandfather, went off to play one of the two video games Henry kept at his house.

With the dregs of his coffee, Henry took a painkiller for his left hip, the pain having flared up while he sat and stared out the window at two hummingbirds fighting over the feeder. He had read that their hearts could beat 1200 times a minute. Could his own heart even muster a couple beats per hour with all its despairing sludge? But that was the self-pity talking again. Meg had been gone for two years now. It was time to move on, as everyone advised him.

Until Landon called, the phone had not rung in three days. Even the telemarketers seemed to have forgotten him. Landon contacted him only when he needed a favor. Meanwhile, Jenny, Henry's daughter, the child he had always thought would dote on him, lived two thousand miles away in Rhode Island with her sculptor boyfriend; they barely scraped by on a rocky farm they'd gone into hock over. No, there was nothing to do but bury a dead horse. A dead horse who had loved and been loved by two old ladies who probably never felt sorry for themselves a day in their lives.

He knew these two old ladies. He'd been up to their farm a few times over his forty years living in Meldrum, a once sleepy rural Colorado town that was presently exploding as a bedroom community for Denver sixty miles south. While all around them other ranchers and farmers sold off their property to developers, the sisters held out. Now they were ringed by subdivisions, their land worth far more than they could pull out of the ground growing sweet corn and winter wheat. And by the looks of the fallow fields, he wasn't sure how much they were doing of that anymore.

He'd met them through his wife, Meg. Esther and Gladys were their names, and one winter they both came down with the flu. Though near death, they'd been unwilling to leave the farm. Meg, a nurse for the county health services, had gone to check on their welfare after a neighbor worrying over them had made a call to the Senior Health Outreach. Fretting about her going alone on a February day forecast to have a blizzard, Henry had driven her up to the sisters' farm and waited in the car with the

heater running while Meg went inside and checked their vitals. She couldn't persuade them to go to a hospital. They were proud to say they'd never been in such a place, not even when they were born.

She was able to give Esther, who was the sicker of the two and severely dehydrated, an IV, getting her fever down from

105 degrees with the help of a cool bath and aspirin. She also insisted on staying overnight to watch over them, telling Henry, who'd been reluctant to leave, to come back in two days. The snow had started falling so fast and heavy it was as if a plush blindfold had been slapped across the windshield. When he did come back, he found both women on the upswing. Henry was quite sure Meg had saved their lives, or at least Esther's.

**And what did she want him to promise anyway? He would never find out. She was dead two days later.**

The sisters, though embarrassed to be at the mercy of anyone's help, showed their appreciation with a month of homemade pies, dropped off at Henry and Meg's door. Henry would see Gladys run up, ring the bell just like his daughter had done playing ding-dong ditch as a mischievous ten year old, and then jump back in their pickup before anyone could say a word to them. Over the years, he'd also seen one or the other riding their beloved mare, Lulu, along the dirt road in front of their farm, on the way to the little country store that had closed a year ago and been replaced by a 7-Eleven.

When she was dying, Meg came out of a stupor one morning to plead, "Promise me, Henry, promise me!" She spoke desperately. "I promise," he said. "Promise me!" she screamed, squeezing his hand with astonishing strength. Her eyes were wild and her forehead soaked with sweat. The nurse came rushing in. He'd never heard her speak with such fright about anything.

And what did she want him to promise anyway? He would never find out. She was dead two days later. That he would try to be happy? That he would marry again or never marry? That he would not show his disappointment in Landon any more than had been obvious over the years? If he could have figured this out, if he could have believed she was in the least bit lucid and wanted him to achieve some goal, some meritorious purpose, he might not be the miserable, aimless bastard he felt himself to be now.

"Thank you for coming," Esther said. The two sisters stood with him and Landon in the open meadow where they wanted Lulu buried. They'd camped here last night with a shotgun to keep the vultures and coyotes from scavenging the horse. The mare had been part of their lives for twenty-eight years, and well, *goodness*, Gladys said, she was going to have a proper burial and not be carted off to some rendering plant!

Henry nodded. Landon pulled his backhoe around to a slight rise in the meadow where the sisters wanted Lulu's grave. The sisters' farmhouse was a mile away, as required for the burial, and as far as Henry could tell there wasn't any water source close

enough to be a problem. In the distance rose the Rockies, still snowcapped at the end of May. To the east, a new development of three-story homes with decks as big as his house's main floor marched toward the sisters' open land like a military campaign. He could imagine catapults firing burning bales of hay on the sisters in an effort to uproot them. Or maybe they were just savvy businesswomen, holding out until the money became so good they couldn't resist. Seeing them kneel beside the dead mare, its bulging, translucent eyes sightless in rigid death, stroking the blaze marking the horse's face and whispering last words into the still pitched ears, he couldn't help thinking they were also saying goodbye to the farm and perhaps all else. Near ninety, how much longer could they operate independently out here, no matter how fierce their determination?

Tears, involuntary, surprising, unwelcomed, ran down his cheeks. The last afternoon of Meg's life the cancer had rendered her unable to speak at all. She'd been moved to the hospice a month before. Landon had driven over every day after work, and Jenny had come from back East as often as she could, calling twice a day if she couldn't. They'd been devastated by her early death, he knew, just short of her sixty-fifth birthday. But she had not been their whole lives as she had been Henry's, and he could hardly think what to do with himself some days other than walk around the house talking to her, the loneliness so acute he clapped his hands over his ears and screamed shut up shut up shut up! At himself. He didn't hear her voice, just his, and he wished he would be crazy enough to hear her talk back to him. But it was just silence upon silence like a hollowed-out wind or a starless night seen through a porthole.

"Any problem?" Landon asked him.

"I'll be okay," Henry said.

"What?"

He realized his son was talking about something else entirely and hadn't noticed his tears. Henry turned away, wiped his face. The sisters, however, were watching him intently. "What problem?"

"The pipes. Am I going to hit any when I dig?"

"You're fine." The pipes ran through the neighbor's property to the eastern quadrant of the sisters' land. Where they wanted the grave wouldn't be a problem. He knew because he'd been up here a number of visits when retrenching had taken place. At one time, the water for the farmlands around here was pumped from a water tower. But that wasn't enough to handle the development, and now other aquifers had been tapped. Pipes crisscrossed the area delivering the water to a new treatment plant six miles south. "You're safe to dig."

Landon lowered the backhoe's boom and struck the ground with the bucket, scraping off the topsoil in deft strokes. Before he became known for his expertise burying horses, he'd once dug a hole too shallow and narrow. When he'd put in the horse—more like slotted it—the hooves had stuck straight up above the ground like tiki torches. These days he dug more generous holes, allowing the thousand-pound creatures to be laid to rest on their sides, if they fell in right. "Ten feet going to be okay?" he asked the sisters.

"That will be just fine," the sisters said in unison. They had told Landon they didn't want quicklime put on top of Lulu, just her buried deep enough to be safe from coyotes or dogs digging her up. They would plant grass on top and mark the grave when the time came. Lulu alone, Henry thought, would keep them from selling the place. How they loved that animal.

He had to admit that when his son was focused, no one could do a better job. You wouldn't think he'd be irresponsible enough to gamble away his mortgage payments and his wife's savings too, as he did five years ago, and then a year later wonder why she was leaving him and petitioning for full custody of the kids. He had no idea about his son's present love life, if he'd even dated anyone since the divorce. Landon worked twelve hours a day to make good on his obligations. Henry couldn't fault his son for a thing now. He'd said as much to Landon, but Landon had just grunted in return.

"He's a good man, your son," Gladys said, as if reading Henry's thoughts. "He called us back right away when we came to him with our problem. Not everyone is so willing to bury a horse. We would have been out of luck if he hadn't come. You all . . ." Gladys turned away, looked blankly at her sister. Esther put her hand on her sister's thin shoulder. She finished her sister's thought, knowing it as well as her own. "You all have always been there for us when we needed you," she told Henry who nodded, though he shouldn't have taken credit for what was all Meg's doing. He swallowed hard remembering her up here with these two ladies in the snowstorm when they were sick. He couldn't get her to leave them for anything. He wanted her to come back with him and have her call an ambulance and make the sisters go to the hospital. "There's no forcing them," Meg had said.

"Then they're just being reckless," Henry had fired back, sitting in the car with Meg, the car's heater running at full blast.

"Maybe," Meg said, "but they have their principles and you got to respect that."

Principles, yes, that was the issue, wasn't it? He had a lot of time now to think about principles and whether his own had or had not done the job they were supposed to in his life. When Meg got out of the car that snowy afternoon, he wondered if he'd ever see her again—the radio was calling the storm the blizzard of the century. He did, of course, see her again, and her bond with these ladies and her respect for their implacable will, well, that will was the same in her. She was always prepared to make a sacrifice, even for two old, obstinate ladies who wouldn't budge on selling their land any more than going to a hospital. Maybe that's what Meg had wanted him to promise. He'd show some spunk in the right direction when the time came.

Landon sat up in the cab, wearing coveralls and wraparound sunglasses, getting bumped around even with the stabilizers by the clawing backhoe lashing the ground with angry blows now that he'd hit the heavier clay soil. Such work was nasty on the back and kidneys, and Henry wondered how long Landon could do this without incurring some kind of disability.

At the height of Landon's problems, with not enough money even to pay for his kids' soccer registration, he had asked for a

loan. Henry took care of the soccer registration and made sure the family had food and weren't foreclosed on, but he wouldn't loan Landon any extra cash because he feared his son would gamble it away. Landon said he had to have it. Henry told him he should have thought of that before. One night two men came to Landon's house, and unlike in the movies when they might have hit him across the kneecaps with a crowbar, these "associates" calmly requested Landon, in front of his wife, Linda, to sign over the title to his Ford truck. It was either that or they'd take Landon and do to him what did happen to such people in movies.

Somehow, with the help of an ex-cop he knew, Landon got the gorillas off his back, because he still owed them far more than his truck was worth. But he also never forgave Henry for not loaning him the money when it could have stopped the men from stripping him of his truck and his dignity in front of Linda. He blamed Henry for that humiliation and for Linda's leaving him. But Henry had not made Landon gamble for days at a time and show up sleepless in front of his worried family. Henry was not the one who lost money at casinos in retooled Colorado mining towns—savings that Linda had put away for the kids' educations.

Meg had prevailed upon Henry to please, for the sake of family peace, make a good-faith gesture of giving him a loan. She called it a symbolic act, if nothing else. Henry refused; he was adamant in his opposition; he didn't believe in symbolic acts that had no force behind them; it was time for Landon to face facts. Meg wanted the loan to come directly from Henry, but eventually she gave the money to Landon herself. It was too late by that point to save the marriage or get back his truck. For all Henry knew he had gambled away that money too. What he did know for certain was that Landon had not used the word "Dad" once, or even addressed Henry by name for over four years, ever since his divorce. He was just "you."

The hole, finished now, had a mound of dirt beside it. Landon got down from his machine and came over to where Henry and the sisters were standing. "She's too big for me to get inside the loader, so I'm going to have to push her in. You good with that?"

"We're okay with it," Esther said. "But we don't want to watch you pile dirt on top of her. We're not delicate about it. We just want to remember her all clean."

"Fair enough," said Landon and climbed back up. He turned the equipment around to use the front loader. Lulu lay about five feet from the pit. Landon inched the loader forward, slowly nudging the animal until he pushed her into the grave. She landed with a thump on her right side, her legs sticking up at a slight angle against the south wall.

The sisters came over to Henry with a paper grocery bag they'd been holding. "Here you are," they said, handing him the sack. Inside were a bouquet of daisies and a legal-size envelope with Lulu's name printed in blue marker on the front. He looked at the hole, he looked at the horse that now filled it, he looked at

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the sisters. He realized they wanted him to somehow get down in the ten-foot hole and respectfully place the letter and flowers on top of Lulu. "We'd be so grateful," Esther said.

"Landon," Henry called up to his son, who was waiting for the sisters to walk off so he could start filling in the grave.

"What?"

"Come down here."

"Why?"

"Please."

Landon shut off the motor and lumbered down from the cab.

"Excuse us a moment," Henry said to the sisters, whose firm smiles clearly indicated their expectation that the bouquet and letter would be laid by a kind and tender hand on Lulu.

Henry guided Landon a few feet away from the sisters. Holding the daisies and the note, he felt as if he might be courting someone rather than burying a dead horse.

"What's wrong?" Landon asked. "I've got to get back soon."

"Listen, they want us to put these with Lulu."

"So throw them in there."

"That's disrespectful. I think it's really important to them."

Landon glanced over at the sisters. They had turned their attention to the grave and were peering down at Lulu in her final resting place.

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?" Landon asked. How he wished his son could say one sentence to him without contempt.

"I'll have to get down there," Henry explained.

Landon looked away. His eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep. His son wasn't a drinker, never had been. He'd gotten so drunk one time when he was sixteen that he'd wound up with alcohol poisoning and never touched liquor again. Instead he'd turned to gambling, telling Henry two years later when it came time for college and he refused to go that he wanted to be a professional poker player. Henry had ridiculed the idea, which he dearly regretted because his scorn infuriated the boy and only made him more determined to prove Henry wrong. Well, he hadn't been wrong, just tactless, and now his six-foot-three, two-hundred-fifty-pound son spent most of his days squeezing his frame into a cab meant for a man half his size. "I'll lower you down there. It's the fastest way. We can't walk a mile back and get a ladder," Landon said.

Henry looked at the front loader. His bones ached at the thought of getting inside the bucket. "Okay," he agreed.

They walked over to tell the sisters.

"We hope it's not putting you out too much," said Esther, pulling at the cuffs of her jacket, its suede collar worn with holes.

"No trouble at all," said Henry, thinking how could he say otherwise to these two?

Landon got back up in the cab and Henry lay down in the bucket, folding his arms across his chest like a dead man. On his way down to a dead horse. "Careful now—"

Landon jerked the bucket up, rolling Henry toward the back. Henry closed his eyes, fully expecting Landon to drop him from an unnatural height, but his son lowered him smoothly as far as the loader could reach. He had to jump down a couple feet to the ground.

He squeezed in between the horse's back and the right wall of the grave, then placed the flowers and envelope on the horse's neck, giving the stiff creature a pat. "Done!" he shouted up.

And here, when he tried to turn around to walk back to the loader, is where he slipped and felt something pop. He fell flat upon the horse's neck.

Landon called down. "You okay?"

"I don't think so," said Henry. He was unable to move. The horse smelled of rot. Flies buzzed Henry's face. Coarse hairs from the animal's mane probed his nostrils like toothpicks.

"What's wrong?"

"I—I can't move." He had to save his breath. Even talking was painful.

"Get back in the bucket," Landon said.

"I can't," Henry protested. "Have the sisters call for help?"

"They left," Landon said.

"Left?"

"They didn't want to see the dirt piled on. Listen, just drag yourself into the bucket, and I'll get you out of there, okay?"

"You don't understand, Landon. I *can't* move." It wasn't that he didn't want to; his will had nothing to do with it.

"You sure?"

"For God's sake, I'm certain."

"Okay, then," Landon said.

"Okay *what*?"

And then Henry heard Landon raising the loader's bucket up. What was he doing? Leaving him here?

Then he knew. Of course. What else would he expect? It was very simple, he would tell anyone who would listen. It was clear as day once you thought about it. You didn't have to be a psychologist. You just had to know what it meant to be a father, and how you could love your son but let crap get in the way of that. Those little moments when your son failed a test and you rejected his miserable excuses for not trying harder. Or when he left your tools outside in the rain to rust, and you made him carry them (and a brick too, just to make the point) back and forth from school to teach him a lesson. Or after he came to you in tears at ten years old, so young then, saying that the kids at camp had ridiculed him about his milky white skin and girlish breasts. He tried to tell you about it, but all you could say was *go talk to your mother*, to hide your own disgust. Was it any wonder, Henry would ask himself when the ground turned hard with the first frost and the sisters died within months of each other and their land was sold off after a contentious probate hearing involving dubious relations who claimed to have known them, was it any wonder that he would look up and see the bucket above him ready to deposit its payload? Clods of dirt escaped from its teeth, raining down on him like baptismal fire, stinging him with their spite, dusting his eyes and pillorying his mouth, until he screamed for mercy and his son said, "It's okay, Dad. Just a little more." □

LAUREN SCHMIDT

## Initiations

No one saw the rock that made a nest  
of the stranger's windshield.

His reeling car sent a loud cry  
crosswise into July silence.  
Screen doors creaked then clacked  
against their wooden frames.  
Mothers cawed for their sons.

Sons scattered from bushes and ran  
to their homes. The man rushed out  
of his car and clawed at the tufts  
of hair just above his ears. Boys whizzed past.  
My brother slinked through  
the kitchen door and scrambled  
upstairs to his room. Some sounds

are unmistakable as brick blasting glass,  
fire's snapping knuckles, or the sound  
of a lie flitting from a young boy's  
tongue. His lip is slicked with a thin skin  
of sweat, and with rapid, heavy breaths, his chest  
lifts and sinks the way cracked glass  
flexes without breaking through.

When he was eleven, he tipped a cooler  
on its side and a wave of Sunnies he'd caught  
splashed onto the driveway. Shiny bodies  
flipped and kicked as if on springs until my brother  
crushed them with the tires of his Mongoose.  
Fish flesh caked his treads,  
left a bloody trail on his afternoon ride.

When he was twelve, I watched my brother  
through the crack of his bedroom door,  
a sliver of him purpling his ribs with  
his own two fists. With each hit, wings  
flinched within his brows and tears swooped  
out from his eyes. *This is practice*,  
I thought, but I did not know for what.