

JERRI JERREAT

## Featheredge

I BEGAN TO LOOK FOR HER each evening. I didn't know May, but ours is a small neighbourhood and sooner or later everyone walks past on their way to the store or the field. I'd seen her doing the same stuff I did each day: running alongside her son's wobbling bike; pitching to her eldest girl; and handing out bubble solution, sidewalk chalk, drinks and snacks—that never-ending dance we do.

It was the field she came to every night, legs striding, ponytail and free arms swinging. I could sympathize with that gait—no one tugging you back, pulling you down, nothing to carry. Free arms, free space. After the first couple of weeks I gave in, crossed our long backyard and the street and joined her.

“Beautiful, aren't they?” I asked, meaning the two horses at the farthest edge of the field. May tuned, surprise and possibly disappointment in her light brown eyes.

I was suddenly sorry I'd disturbed her. I knew how one longed, even just for an hour, to be alone. I had three of my own, aged two to seven.

“Sorry, I, um, I shouldn't have bothered you. It's nice to get out, eh? I mean, kids can be so demanding.”

She nodded, and a wisp of a smile crossed her face. “Wordless,” she said simply.

It took me long seconds to understand. “I know what you mean,” I replied finally. “After a day of their chatter. And squabbling. Worn out with words.” I turned and looked toward the two old horses, heads together, low. Perhaps they were sleeping. I wondered how long they would be allowed there, with subdivisions springing up all over. A large truck rumbled down Princess Street nearby, cars grunted and honked. I wished we lived farther out, the horses, too.

Several minutes passed. May was gazing at the horses thoughtfully, pursing her small lips. She didn't wear make-up. I, on the other hand, never

stepped outside without doing my face. She looked pale to me, with thick, sandy hair, brown eyes, and a kitten chin. I caught myself staring, excused myself and returned home to the dishes.

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I watched the clock the next evening for ten minutes before approaching. May nodded calmly as though she had expected me.

“Nice night, eh?”

May smiled agreement but appeared tired. Despite eyeliner, mascara and cover stick, I was sure I looked it too. Mothers of young children, *très chic*. The horses were Rorschach ink-blots in the distance. I felt secretly driven to fill the space with chat, the weather, some amusing anecdote about the kids, anything. But May appeared at peace and, come to think of it, it was a relief. It was like sitting down, closing your eyes, and letting your antennae fold in.

After about ten minutes May turned and offered me another word, like a jewel.

“Topiary,” she said, and it was a small concerto rolling off her tongue.

I glanced at her hands and saw dirt under the nails, and a lone band-aid. I felt a grin spread across my face. “You’ve been gardening today.”

She returned the smile, nodding, displaying two crooked front teeth. They were rather endearing, like a homely imperfection in a supermodel would be, if one ever showed any.

We both turned back toward the horses and watched quietly for several minutes, thinking. I let my mind drift from traffic to airplanes to magazine ads of Hawaii beaches, too crowded, then to island beaches in the Caribbean, white expanses, a turquoise sea and no one. Eventually I thought of sandcastles and kids and remembered mine, waiting for a bedtime story that Daddy was probably too tired to read. I said goodbye and turned back.

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“Finials,” she said, a few days later.

I had to dredge the grey matter for that. Yes, those decorative ends of curtain rods, a quite absurd word. I smiled and studied May’s hands expertly. Flecks of yellow paint gave her away.

“Been doing some home decorating, I see,” I said, imagining myself in tweed with a pipe.

She flashed that crooked tooth smile. Her brown eyes suited the freckles, I thought. They were a light, orangey brown, rather jolly. We turned back to the field, both of us pleased.

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“Demure.” May sighed heavily.

That was a puzzle. I had seen her walking with an older woman that afternoon. A mother? A mother-in-law? No clues on her hands, clothes or hair. I mused it over. The mother-in-law was probably a know-it-all. Someone who reduced her to a demure person, head down, can't-do-anything-right. I felt suddenly weepy and defiant for her. She deserved someone to stand up for her, to swear aloud that May's TV was turned off, that she let them help bake cookies, garden, and sort laundry, though it took twice as long. I hoped her husband was assertive on her behalf to his mother. Some husbands let their mothers treat them like children still, prey to their flattery, cajoling and criticism. It was ridiculous that they couldn't see through it, quite ridiculous.

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“Combat fatigue,” said May one evening.

I understood perfectly. Her mother-in-law had been visiting for four days now by my reckoning. As some say, guests are like fish: after three days, they begin to stink. She could have talked to me about it, but our silence was comfortable, and I hated to pry. Asking questions would be like breaking a spell.

My own mother-in-law had called that morning to invite us to dinner on Sunday.

An ambulance screamed, then again, then began to fade. With any luck one of the kids would get sick. The thought of another formal dinner: “Don't drop Great-grandmother's gravy boat”; “Keep your left hand in your lap, Samuel”; and, “Is that a mole growing beside your ear, Elizabeth?”, made me grip the chain link fence tightly. White tablecloth, good china, and the constant shushing of children alternating with begging them to eat squash, was exhausting. Rich's sister would be there with her perfectly horrid children, older than mine and experts at appearing angelic. One day I was going to shock everyone and drop a four letter word onto the tablecloth. Let it break into loud shards and spill across the white like garish green Kool-Aid.

The horses were closer today. I tried to call them over, entice them with long grass from my side of the fence, but they paid no attention. Just

like my husband, Rich, when I had tried to express the trouble with these dinners.

“She places you at the end of the table with the kids so you can help them. Why don’t you switch with me? You can sit between her and Uncle Arthur and talk stocks and antiques, hmm? Give me a break?”

Somehow his teasing grin hadn’t sweetened the choice. “I’ll be fine,” I had muttered blackly. Loretta, my mother-in-law, prided herself on “being informed of current events.” “You really *must* read the paper,” she was always advising. “Conversing with children all day will widen the gap between a housewife and a man of the world, Sara. I *know*. I was married for thirty-three years. And I read the paper *every* day.” Then, in an after-thought, “There are often some good low-fat recipes in the paper, quite worthwhile.”

May’s freckled hand suddenly rested upon mine for a second, gently, then disappeared. Blushing, I realized I’d been gripping the fence so hard it must have looked like I was planning something. I dropped my hands to my side. “Goodnight, May,” I said cheerfully. “Hope your day tomorrow is better.”

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The Sunday dinner turned out to be a planning discussion regarding Uncle Arthur’s retirement celebration at the end of the summer. Naturally this was merely a facade of democracy such as found in Central American elections. Loretta had already booked the golf club, “Just in case we wanted to go ahead with it, you know. It’s terribly hard to find a free date.” She had also written the guest list. “Certainly the mayor will want to come, he’s an old friend of the family,” and so on.

I covered Sam’s juice spill with my napkin, whispered to Beth that it was nearly over, and took Charlie to the potty for a long time.

After dinner I played charades with the children to keep ours from being accidentally-on-purpose tripped, bonked or otherwise injured by their cousins.

Just as we were leaving, my mother-in-law stage whispered to me across everyone, “You might try some make-up next time, dear. You’re looking terribly pale!”

I came home with whining children and a headache that kept me up half the night.

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“Chafe,” was the word May handed me Monday evening.

Right on, I thought. Chafe, heat up, rub the wrong way, friction. I nodded.

I had scrubbed my forehead and neck several times that day, trying to wash that dinner out of my psyche. May must still have her mother-in-law visiting.

The horses stood under the shadow of two scraggly maples, about a house length away. I studied them carefully.

I'd forgotten how large they were. The pale grey mare had light spots all over her flanks and a thick dark mane. She chewed grass calmly. Her friend was auburn with black legs, tail, and mane. I thought of hennaed hair, all the rage amongst my dark-haired friends. I had never done it myself, thought it too common, I suppose (Loretta speaking in my mind), but I did hanker for a real haircut. Mine was shoulder length, but I yearned for a sleek, layered cut, perhaps asymmetrical. As if we could afford it. It's the constant trims that make it expensive. I understood quite well why May wore a ponytail. It wasn't to look cute or young. It was money.

Money is an issue with Richard's mother that we carefully avoid speaking of. Loretta had loaned us the down payment on the semi-detached house, and had paid for Richard's university, four years of undergraduate study in commerce. She referred to this casually once in awhile, with a hint of future payback. I think it keeps Richard in line, owing her. God of Grey and Hennaed Horses, I swore, I promise I won't do that to my kids. I'll help out as I can, and not hold it over them.

The horses looked content. Calm. Probably bored, fenced in like this beside a row of cement and brick houses in three popular styles: "The Southern Ranch," "The Cottage," and "The Victorian." As if these semis, in their baby blues and pinks, looked anything like those names. Hah. What must we look like to these stately animals? Fools.

And who was inside the fence, I suddenly wondered, them or us?

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That Wednesday May offered an unusual word, and her expression seemed puzzled. "Featheredge?" she asked,

Featheredge, a beautiful word. She was holding something out to me, a gift.

Startled, I plucked the object from her hand awkwardly. It was a seagull's feather, smooth; white moving into black on the diagonal, perfect art. I could not remember ever really *seeing* one before. I ran my finger up along the edge. Hundreds of tiny soft lashes curled over. Amazing. Interesting, really. I had almost thought the edge might cut, like paper.

“Thank you, May,” I said, simply. It suddenly occurred to me to wonder if she knew my name. Really, it didn’t matter.

She smiled and turned toward the field as usual. I, too.

The horses weren’t out that day, a disappointment. I enjoyed the way the two mares always stood close together, a little like us. I wondered if they spoke in gems, as May did.

Did May ever feel she was on the featheredge of something? Of screaming? That one soft finger, run up along her spine, could soften everything—the sourness, the resentment, the exhaustion? Or that, just as easily, she might bump into something and slice it open by accident, for she was that sharp?

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Thursday it was I who spoke, holding up my hand to forestall her, Surprised, her eyes widened. I noticed a light sunburn across her straight freckled nose. Did her husband notice such things? Did he approach her with moisturizing cream in his hand? “Don’t move,” did he whisper? Then, while she stifled a giggle, did he spread soft whiteness gently across her nose and cheeks? Did he? *Did he?*

“Implode,” I offered.

May’s fine eyebrows twitched, then she sucked in a small edge of lower lip, to bite it. I had the feeling she wanted to respond, but that it was difficult. If she were going to reply, she wanted to be precise. I observed several thoughts cross her face and concluded she would not find the right word this time. Still, it was reassuring to have been taken seriously. I turned toward the horses.

After a few seconds, May turned as well.

The horses were walking lazily across the long green field toward us. The grey one picked up her feet daintily, the hennaed clomped more, but shook her mane from time to time. Something was bothering her, perhaps.

I felt a silly disappointment when the animals stopped to rest under the old maples. Of course they weren’t coming to us. They never did. In two years, I had never seen them approach the fence no matter how many eager children sang and begged and called.

For days I had been growing restless. That argument with Rich last night hadn’t helped matters. I was sick of his mother’s constant put-downs, sick of feeling that her marvellous son had married beneath him. So I hadn’t used my degree yet, so what? Life isn’t always in straight lines.

Damn.

I nodded at May and turned to leave.  
 She stopped me by looking me full in the face.  
 “Free,” she said.

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I thought about “free” as I packed a small suitcase on Friday. I thought about “free” when I wrote a nice note and pinned it to his pillow. The taxi was waiting on the street when Rich pulled up in our car.

I kissed the children and sailed out with my overnight bag stuffed with books.

“What’s happening?” asked my bewildered husband.

“Nervous breakdown,” I said cheerily. I figured that was a bonus, two words.

“But, but—what’s,” he glanced at the kids, waving merrily from the front step, shouting hellos to him and goodbyes to me. “What’s for dinner?”

I shook my head and ducked into the cab. After all, I’d already given him two words. What more did he want?

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I had a wonderful weekend at my old friend Bea’s. She’s already been married twice, has no children, and lives in the ground floor of an old house in the Glebe, in Ottawa. She dragged me to an improv theatre night, and fed me fresh croissants and coffee both mornings. I sprawled on her deck in the shade and read *Pride and Prejudice*, laughing over Darcy and Lizzie. We watched a funny movie and ate junk food. By the time I returned late Sunday evening, I felt refreshed. I was actually glad to see the kids, although I had some apprehensions about my husband.

“Hail the conquering hero!” he laughed, opening the door for me. “How was it?”

Under attack by three short people, it took me several minutes to reply. I splurged again on two words. “No mothers,” I said, blissfully.

Richard knew exactly what I meant. He pulled me into his chest and kissed my hair. “I guess that means we might as well plan our camping trip for the end of August, eh? Give Uncle Arthur’s party a miss?”

I lifted my two free arms and held him carefully, like eggs.

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May was leaning against the fence, watching me cross our long backyard and the street. In shorts and a purple T-shirt, more freckled, she was smiling right at me.

How could I not smile back? She stood, purple and blue on a strip of dandelion yellow, and above her, a pink striped sky.

“Escape,” I explained, gesturing at the house behind me, then the sky, the field, the weekend. It was nice not to be shy or awkward with her anymore.

May reached up tentatively and ruffled my newly hennaed, layered hair. I loved the breeze on my neck. “Featherweight,” she said, admiringly.

I nodded, pleased about everything. “So, do you think those horses will ever come over here?” I asked.

She laughed, and then did something quite surprising for a quiet person. She placed two fingers in her mouth and whistled loudly, like a cowboy. The horses, under the maples, looked up and cocked their heads curiously.

May repeated the siren sound, while I covered my ears, laughing.

The auburn horse shook her black mane and began to move forward, pausing to look at her friend. Then the grey, too, began to walk. They both moved steadily across the stubby field toward us.

I felt goose bumps rise on my arms, neck and back. I glanced at May, astonished, but she was preoccupied, fishing something out of her pockets. The animals were still coming, closer and closer, gaining height with each step. The word ‘majestic’ sprang to mind. Unconsciously I stepped back.

May held out her fist to the grey giant, towering above her. The dark nostrils quivered, then May opened her hand and huge lips kissed it.

I gasped.

May rubbed the long face, a muzzle perhaps, or a pillar, who knows these horsey words? I was impressed by her courage. Why had I never realized the strength in those enormous heads, the muscles rippling hugely under the beautiful skins? Up close they were too much.

May turned to me and nodded toward the auburn horse.

“Are you kidding? I want to keep this hand,” I said shakily.

She shook her head, chiding me, then fished in her pocket and held out something for me to take.

It was a few cubes of white sugar. From the woman who fed her children yogurt popsicles? I glanced up at her face.

She was grinning. “A secret,” she explained, “Sara.”



Startled and pleased, I felt the cubes tumble onto my hand. Before I could even turn, a huge dark mouth descended out of the sky, then soft lips stroked my hand and lifted away.

My hand was clean, cleared, free. I looked up at the beautiful horse, saw her eyes blinking at me, and dared to lift up my hand. The cinnamon fur was short but soft, and it reminded me of something. Feathers.

We laughed and fed them together, May and I.