

JOHN VAN RYS

IN THE HILLS AND VALLEYS OF PERCHE

“THIS IS NOT WHAT I SIGNED UP FOR.” Evan had made this claim many times before—often in his head, occasionally aloud to his wife Mae.

He and Mae and their two kids Alex and Lizzie were standing in the middle of their pasture. It was a Saturday morning in January, back in 1998, and the field was a brightly lit frozen plain—so bright it hurt his eyes.

Finnegan was sitting in the pasture like a large dog, unable to get up on his hind legs. Flecks of blood stained the snow and mixed with the scattered manure, which also clung in frozen globs to his tail. From the pattern in the icy snow, Evan could tell that the horse, a black Percheron, had been struggling to right himself for a while—possibly all night. The other horses were safely sheltered in the paddock run-in, seemingly unconcerned about Finnegan’s plight.

A woman driving by had alerted them that the horse was having trouble getting up, and Mae had calmly taken charge. She’d directed Alex and Lizzie to get Finnegan’s halter and lead rope from the barn, along with a horse blanket. As they now stood around Finnegan, Mae fastened the halter over his neck right behind the large triangles of his ears in a spot called the poll. She then attached the lead rope to the ring below his chin.

“Lizzie, you help me pull. Alex, help your dad push him up from behind. But watch out for his hooves. And for God’s sake be careful he doesn’t fall on you.”

Evan had his doubts. After all, Percherons were heavy horses. Though Finnegan had been skeletal when they got him, he could now weigh in at a ton or more. What help could four puny humans offer to right such a creature?

On three, Mae began clicking her tongue and encouraging Finnegan to get up. They pulled and pushed as the horse first set his front legs and then rocked to get his back legs beneath him. Evan and Alex jumped back as Finnegan failed to find purchase and toppled onto his side.

After they tried several times, the horse was exhausted, warm air from his lungs steaming from his nostrils, vapour rising from his shaggy winter coat. “Lizzie, cover him with the blanket. Evan, it’s time to call the vet.”

Evan hurried from the field through the paddock to the house. A vet should be there by noon, the receptionist told him after listening to his explanation and checking schedules. He knew how this might end, as it could mean permanent damage to the nerves or muscle atrophy, but he returned to the field just in time to see Finnegan rise up onto all four legs in one massive effort. Though initially unsteady, he found his feet, shook himself, and, led by Mae, began walking to the barn. The horse’s gait was so relaxed and leisurely that Evan thought he must have had no memory of the struggle he’d just gone through. He went to open the gate, and Mae said calmly, “Thought I’d give it one more try.”

Lizzie, nine, and Alex, seventeen, were pumped by this victory.

“I gave a really strong pull, Dad. I’m sure that’s what did it.”

“No, Dad, I used basic physics to get him up. His back legs were slipping to the right so I pushed from the left. It was leverage, that’s what it was.”

“He’s wrong, Dad. It was really my muscles.”

“Twerp.”

Mae quietly walked the horse to a stall in the barn, tied the lead rope to a ring, and examined his legs for cuts. With a pick, she cleaned mud, manure, and ice out of his hooves. She rubbed his body with a curry comb, working in circles to warm him, then began brushing ice and manure out of his mane and tail.

“I don’t know if it was just the ice giving him trouble or something else.”

Evan, worried about the money, said, “I’ll go cancel the vet.”

As if reading his mind, Mae told him he was being cheap. “It’s your decision, but it might be good to have him checked out.” She finished brushing Finnegan’s tail and turned to the kids. “Lizzie, throw in some hay for him. Alex, make sure his water bucket is filled. He’s probably hungry and thirsty after being out there all night.” Mae gently removed the halter and untied the lead rope. She left the stall and headed to the house without another word to Evan.

Before closing the stall door, he rubbed Finnegan along his back and rump, then scratched his neck. Looking into the horse’s eye, he felt an inscrutable life looking back. Then the horse lowered his head to eat the half

bale of last summer's hay Lizzie had just tossed at his feet.

By the time Evan got to the house, he'd firmed up his decision to cancel the vet. Finnegan's fine, he told himself. It's all good.

Evan and Mae received the flyer from Green Pastures Horse Rescue in their mailbox the previous summer. Mae looked it over and then stuck it with a magnet to the fridge. "Might be worth checking out some time."

After she left the kitchen, Evan pulled the flyer off the fridge to study it at the kitchen table. He sat across from two photos of wild horses, one taken on Sable Island and the other in the Alberta Foothills. Mae had bought these black-and-whites early in their marriage. Whenever they had moved, these were the first pictures she'd hung. They'd been fixed on the wall for about six years, ever since they'd made the move from the city to this old farmhouse.

The flyer showed before and after photos of rescued horses, suggesting metamorphosis from skeletal, head-hanging nags to filled-out, shiny-coated horses trotting with heads held high. All it took were donations so that the volunteers could buy the necessary hay and feed, maintain the farm, and pay the bills. On the back panel was the Green Pastures logo, which depicted a black horse wearing a white saddle blanket adorned with a red cross being led by a long-haired and fully-bearded cowboy who strangely seemed to be both wearing a sword and carrying a shepherd's staff.

Evan liked the idea of rescuing animals, so he found the phone and dialled the number. He didn't stop to think about why or from whom they were being rescued. The idea of rescuing them just seemed to promise some kind of moral reward.

It was that call which led Evan and Mae to rent a horse trailer a few days later and make their way in their pick-up—a mid-1980s grey and rusted F-150—to the Green Pastures stables north of London, near Lucknow. When he turned into the laneway, he saw a small clapboard house to the right dwarfed by a weathered hip-roof barn beyond it. A paddock off the barn had been divided to contain and separate upwards of twenty horses. Evan quickly counted about half that number as he put the truck in park and cut the engine. Many raised their heads in curiosity and nickered before returning to their hay. As he and Mae climbed down from the truck cab, they were met by a volunteer emerging from the barn.

"Welcome to Green Pastures!" She held out her hand as she approached. "You must be Evan and Mae." Her firm grip seemed consistent with her

wiry, muscled body, decked in muddy barn boots, tight jeans, and checked shirt, topped with a tan cowboy hat. Her neck and cheeks were beaded with sweat. "Let me show you around."

Before they entered the cool gloom of the barn, Evan noticed the Green Pastures logo painted above the door along with the words "The Lord is my shepherd." When his eyes adjusted to the relative dark, he saw two rows of stalls flanking the central aisle. Two heavy horses—Percherons—were the sole occupants.

"I just got these big boys earlier this week. They were being auctioned for meat, and I just couldn't let it happen. They deserve a forever home."

That catch-phrase seemed to express the rescue movement's vision.

Mae asked, "What do you know about them? What's their story?"

"Don't know much. Their owner got too old to take care of them, so they were neglected till he got put in the home. Then his people just sent them to the auction. They didn't even come with names."

Evan noticed then how thin and bony they were. Their necks were too slender and their shoulders too pronounced, as were their backbones and ribs. Their hips were sharp points jutting out of craters. Their heads and hooves seemed oversized extremities on their gaunt bodies, their black coats dull and patchy. "Do they even have a chance of making it?"

"I wouldn't have got them if I didn't think they did. With a lot of food and a little love, they'll be okay. God willing."

Evan thought a resurrection trumpet might be needed. At the very least a miracle. "What would one of them cost?"

"Slow down a bit," she said. "Tell me about yourselves and why you want a rescue horse."

Mae took the lead in what felt to Evan like an adoption hearing. She talked about their move to the hobby farm, the horses they'd bought, and the set-up they'd built with their barn, paddock, and pasture. She even pulled out some photos, and the volunteer showed some of her own. They were like two women talking about their kids.

"Okay then. Five hundred would cover what I paid, along with a donation to the cause. But the number's between you and your conscience." As Evan pulled out his cheque book she continued. "You don't know how many horses are neglected or abused. The physical suffering is one thing, but the mental and emotional torture they've gone through is something else. It's a sin! I mean, it damages their spirits. Sometimes it's just that their owner has

died. Other times it's a farmer that loves horses but is down on his luck. It can even be perfectly healthy horses nobody wants just being sold for meat. The worst cases are race horses past their prime and just left to die. It's criminal!"

Evan passed her the finished cheque and then turned to Mae. "Well, which one is it going to be?"

"It's tough to decide. I need to get a closer look, get a sense of their personalities." She went into each stall in turn, talking to the horses, approaching them calmly, rubbing them, and checking their teeth and hooves. She haltered each gelding and walked him down and back up the barn aisle. Evan noticed now how tall they were, how smooth their gaits, their hooves as big as dinner plates.

"It's a tough call. Too bad we can't take both these boys." Mae glanced sideways at Evan. "Since I've got to choose, I'll make it this big guy. He's a sweetie."

Evan and Mae filled out the adoption application, answering questions about their experience, facilities, and finances. They also supplied references and the name of their vet clinic, and they promised to provide a loving forever home for their adopted animal. Then they signed the form, trailered the horse, and headed home.

Once the horse was in his new stall with food and water, Evan pulled their horse books off the shelf, set them in a stack on the kitchen table, and began reading about Percherons. He learned of the breed's misty origins in the Perche region of France during medieval times. He imagined them in the Huisne River Valley and on the Hills of Perche, working the fields and forests. He considered their story, generations of horses bred and raised by generations of people for work and war, for riding and meat. He saw them crossing the ocean to the New World, like the Perche immigrants who came to New France. He imagined them straining to pull plows and wagons on farms as well as carriages and trams in cities. He thought about the rise and fall of their fortunes as they were replaced with one iron horse after another—trains, tractors, and trucks—with engines measured in horsepower. He imagined a line of Percherons walking out to pasture after a day's labour on a farm worked by Mennonites, holdouts for the horse. And he realized that this story was in the bones and flesh of Finnegan, the emaciated horse in their barn.

Lizzie was the one who came up with the name Finnegan, which was in-

spired by Casey's dog from *Mr. Dressup*. Evan also remembered that some Native people had called the horse Big Dog when it was first brought to North America. Finnegan was definitely a big dog.

As the weeks went by, he got bigger. His skeletal body put on flesh, and his blotchy coat gained thickness and shine. At feeding time, Evan would call Finnegan out of the pasture, and the horse would lumber through the belly-deep grass to munch his measure of sweet feed. When his long tongue had licked the bucket clean, he would turn back to the field.

After Finnegan's trouble, they were more careful. They kept him in a stall at night and restricted him to the paddock during the day. "Pasture grass during the winter has no nutrition, anyway," Mae said. He had a couple more episodes where he needed help to get up, but they managed those. He's just old and the paddock is slippery, Evan told himself.

On a Saturday morning in mid-February, he bundled up and went out to the barn to do his normal chores, feeding Finnegan in his stall and throwing hay into the run-in for the other horses. When he opened the barn door, his eyes took a moment to adjust, even though he'd flicked the lights on.

In his stall, Finnegan was struggling onto his front legs so that he sat again like a big dog, his back to Evan. He felt his worry about the horse escalate into something like panic. He looked over the stall door. Finnegan's back end was pressed against it, and scattered pine shavings and manure showed the extent of his struggle to stand. A stall post was splintered near the floor, undoubtedly the cause of the bleeding gash on the horse's hind right leg.

Evan leaned hard against the door and was just able to unlatch it. Finnegan's weight brought his rear end out the door so that it was no longer possible for Evan to close it. "It's okay, boy. Take it easy." He talked to calm himself as much as the horse. Finnegan offered a rumbling reply from deep in his chest. Evan retrieved the halter and lead rope from the tack room and climbed carefully into the stall.

He knew that attempting to right the horse in such a confined space was dangerous. One kick, one fall, and Evan might be injured, pinned, or killed. But he couldn't let Finnegan stay down. If he'd been thinking straight, he would have gotten Mae right away, but such sound judgement evaded him. With the halter snug, he pulled back on the lead rope and clicked his tongue to encourage Finnegan to get up as Mae had done. His clicking became more urgent as Finnegan struggled to get his back legs beneath him. His left hip

smashed against the door post, and his hooves kicked out against the stall wall. His whole body strained with the effort, as Evan's boots slid in the shavings and manure. Then Finnegan toppled backwards out the stall door, his flung front hooves narrowly missing Evan. The horse's prone body was now most of the way out of the stall.

Defeated, Evan unlatched Finnegan's water bucket from its hook and placed it before the horse. He silently watched the horse drink. He fetched a half bale of hay and placed it beside the water bucket. Finnegan buried his muzzle in the sweet grass and began eating.

Thinking hard, casting about for a solution, Evan did the rest of his barn chores, feeding and watering the other horses. Then he removed everything in the aisle he thought might injure Finnegan if he tried to get up and walked slowly up to the house to talk with Mae and the kids. He knew that this time he'd have to call the vet.

A few hours later Evan, Mae, Alex, and Lizzie were watching the vet examine Finnegan. Since the morning, he'd moved about fifteen feet beyond the stall door and had turned completely in the opposite direction. When they'd come in the barn, he'd risen up on his front legs for a few seconds and then gone back down.

"So as far as you know he hasn't been up since some time in the night?" The vet had her right arm encased in a plastic sleeve and was pulling manure out of Finnegan's rectum. She'd already taken his temperature and listened to his heart and lungs.

"He wasn't up this morning, for sure. I couldn't get him up. He's moved, but it doesn't look like he was ever all the way up."

Finishing, she removed her arm and deftly pulled the plastic glove inside out as she stood. "His lungs are a bit wheezy, but that's to be expected since he had the heaves when you got him last summer. His heart's good. His bladder is quite full, which means he hasn't been able to get up and urinate. Given the amount of manure, he's eating just fine. The problem, as best I can tell, is along his spine. The signals his brain is sending to his hind legs aren't getting through right. There could be a number of causes, but I believe he's contracted Equine Protozoal Myeloencephalitis. It's a neurological disease that explains the weakness in his back and his lack of coordination. Basically, it's an inflammation of his brain and spinal cord."

"How did he get it? Can it be treated?" Mae asked.

"Possums carry the parasite that creates the inflammation, so he must

have come into contact with Possum feces at some point. Because he's a rescue horse, it's likely he was poorly cared for in the past, which made him vulnerable. To know for sure, we'd have to do a blood test."

"And possible treatments?" Evan was the one to ask this time.

"I'm afraid it's progressed too far. If it had been caught earlier . . ."

A jolt of guilt hit his stomach. "Like a month ago?"

"No, much earlier. He probably already had it when you got him. There's no cure, but we could have treated the inflammation to prolong his life. Then again, those drugs are quite expensive."

They all stood silently as the diagnosis sank in. Evan felt himself part of a tableau—five helpless people around a fallen horse.

Lizzie broke the silence. "Does that mean he has to be put down?"

Evan caught Mae's eye. He understood the look. It was Mae who answered Lizzie. "I'm afraid so. It's what's best for Finnegan if he can't get up. He's only going to get worse."

The vet came to Mae's aid. "When a horse can't get up, his nerves are damaged and his leg muscles start to die. You've given him a great six months. He's looking really good, and he got to spend his last months on pasture. It doesn't get much better for a horse."

"Kids, maybe you should go up to the house. You don't need to see this."

"I want to stay. I want to be with him."

The vet spoke to Evan and Mae. "I'll get what I need from my truck."

With that, they were alone in the barn with Finnegan. Lizzie knelt down to rub his neck and his muzzle. Evan couldn't look at Mae and the kids. He felt his throat constricting. He was about to say that this wasn't what he'd signed up for, but deep down he knew that was a lie. It was just that he wanted some kinder, gentler landscape—something like the river valleys of Perche he'd seen in photos.

Lizzie got up as the vet returned to the barn carrying a large needle and syringe. The fluid looked golden in the cold light. "This will be very quick," she said as she knelt by Finnegan's head. "He might give a quick spasm, but that will be all. It'll be painless." Mae now knelt beside Finnegan and held his halter. Evan kept his focus on her calm face. The vet cleaned a spot on the horse's neck, inserted the needle, and pressed the golden fluid into him. His prone head leapt up in a single jerk before returning to the barn floor. His legs relaxed, his body settled into stillness, and his eyes emptied. "He's

gone,” she said.

Lizzie knelt down beside Mae and struggled to remove the halter from Finnegan’s head. She studied it for a moment before going to hang it by his stall. Evan wondered if they’d made a mistake letting her watch.

He stayed behind when Mae and the kids headed up to the house. At the truck, the vet gave him the name of a rendering service. “Some farmers just bury animals on their property, but it’s best to properly dispose of a body that’s been euthanized. It’s the chemicals.” After a pause, she added, “Sorry for your loss.” With that, she climbed in her truck and headed down the laneway.

Evan took a breath and watched it escape into the air. He looked across the pasture, the county road, and the empty fields to the grey woods in the distance. The February sun was low in the southern sky and covered the landscape with a wintry light. The wind was picking up. Snow snakes were travelling diagonally across the road and through the fields. He watched the vet’s truck rumble down the road, picking up speed and disturbing the snakes. Nearer in the pasture, the horses grazed, scraping their front hooves through the snow to get at the winter grass.

The dogs greeted him as he walked up to the house, opened the back door, and removed his barn clothes, the smell of Finnegan still on them. Then they ran to their empty water dish, looking at him expectantly.

As he filled the bowl in the kitchen sink, he stared at Mae’s photos on the wall above the table. In black-and-white, they captured a moment’s energy and grace in the lives of these wild creatures. For all he knew, they were also dead by now.

The dogs danced around him until he put the bowl down, and they drank noisily as he poured himself a cup of coffee and took a sip. It had been sitting too long on the burner and was bitter, so he went to the fridge for some cream. When he closed the door, he noticed the flyer from Green Pastures still held by a magnet. He took the flyer to the kitchen table and sat looking at it, his hands folded around his mug for warmth.

He studied the before and after photos and thought again about Perche. He wanted to tell Mae and the kids about its forests, hills, and valleys. One day maybe they’d go there. For now, though, he needed to arrange for someone to pick up Finnegan’s body. He drained his cup and went in search of the phone.