Horse Farm

Zelinar XY

i

Junior wondered why the fox didn't come right to the door. He spent a long time walking odd diagonals across the field, then skirting the treeline, circling the barn for a while, bending down to examine something in the grass, doubling back to re-inspect whatever he'd just looked at. He did a full loop around the house, testing the stability of the porch railing, craning to look at the gutters, tapping the downspout, eyeing the siding suspiciously.

He didn't seem to know what he was looking at or for, but he was engrossed. Junior watched him through a succession of windows, following his progress around the house. Their faces were less than a foot from each other at times, which the fox couldn't have failed to notice, but he seemed unconcerned and never met Junior's gaze. When he'd completed his inspection he made his way to the door and rapped sharply.

Junior answered. The Fox still didn't look at him for a second or two, but past him, leaning around Junior, getting on tiptoes, taking in everything he could from this vantage point.

"Yes?" said Junior.

The fox said nothing. Mother called down the stairs, asking him who it was.

"I'm not sure," said Junior, giving the fox a look that he hoped would prompt an introduction. It didn't.

"Junior?"

"He looks like a fox," said Junior.

"Oh! Well let him in."

Junior hesitated. At least the fox was looking at him now. Just staring. He seemed to understand he'd been invited in, or perhaps he wasn't concerned about an invitation one way or the other. It was an odd look.

Junior stepped aside and indicated the kitchen table. "Come in, have a seat."

The fox came in, but did not have a seat. He resumed his inspection, taking everything in with quick, proprietary glances.

"Sir? What can I do for you sir?"

“Offer him coffee!”

“Would you like coffee?”

Silence, inspection. Mother Horse came downstairs.

“Why hello Mr. ...”

The fox looked at Mother for a moment, half startled, then wandered towards the stove, leaning down to appraise it in a way incompatible with knowing its purpose.

“Why poor dear you must be hungry. I’ll put the coffee on and Junior will heat you up—”

“Ma.”

Mother was filling the coffee pot. “Now Junior don’t you be inhospitable. Check and see if we have any—”

“*Ma*,” Junior whispered. The fox was going through the spoons, testing their pliability and holding them up to the light.

Mother Horse said something that wasn’t quite “well” and forgot about the coffee. Father crashed in.

Father Horse always crashed in, flinging the door into the doorstop so that things all around shuddered and creaked and tinkled. He took off his boots with the usual clomping and careening and gave his usual cheerful, blustery report on the state of the farm, of the progress of a half-dozen chores and the fresh discovery of a half-dozen more that needed doing. He found it all very humorous. He guffawed at a fallen fence post and recounted the circumstances of this discovery twice before he noticed his guest.

"Why hello sir! Who's this now Mother? Mr. ..."

"Fox," said Junior.

"Mr. Fox," said Father Horse, transported. "We are delighted to have you Mr. Fox, have you been offered a drink?"

The fox was still holding the family silverware, rather tightly. Father Horse was however capable of winning his attention in a way the other family members weren't, and he looked at this great buoyant beast with apprehension.

"Mother let's have coffee. No! No it's too late for coffee, don't you think Mr. Fox? Let's have a drink. What do you think Mr. Fox, it won't do us any harm will it? No beer, but we've got what the Macaslins down the road make—you know Randall? Great guy isn't he? A man couldn't ask for a better neighbor. A real devil when he's been drinking, but the kindest sort you could meet. Or maybe it's when he's not drinking, am I right Mr. Fox?"

Here Father roared with laughter. He and Mr. Fox were served by now with Randall Macaslin's corn shine, and Mr. Fox had even been persuaded to sit by Father Horse's example. But the laugh proved so startling that Mr. Fox scurried clear into the next room, bumping into a chair whose scrape sent him scurrying half the distance back.

Father Horse noticed none of this.

They went on like that for a while, the Fox saying and drinking nothing, Father Horse saying a great deal but only having the one glass, and becoming quite sure over the following hour that he and Mr. Fox were the best of friends. When night began to fall the fox stood up and left to the hearty protestations and well-wishes of Father Horse. Mother had found other employments in the meantime. Junior watched the whole exchange.

The fox left the spoons behind.

ii

The fox was back a couple of days later. This time he confined his feckless but determined survey to a patch of fallow land in sight of the house, just about shouting distance. Junior thought of shouting at him. No one else noticed the fox and he did not come in.

On his third visit, a week or so later, the fox brought a handful of horses, with lumber, ladders and tools in tow, and what might have been a horse, but an odd one. The workhorses began unloading their things near the patch of ground Junior had seen the fox inspecting. The odd horse strode up to the house and knocked, the fox following a pace behind.

Father Horse had seen them arrive and come in through the back. He opened the door. Mother and Junior came up behind to see.

The odd horse beat Father Horse to the greeting, something which never happens. He also anticipated Father's enthusiasm, which delighted him, though Junior felt

this odd horse wasn't usually half this gregarious. He didn't seem to enjoy talking so loud.

"Mr. Horse, how are you? Very nice to meet you. Bob Smith, at your service."

"Well hello Mr. Smith, and hello again Mr. Fox, please both of you come in, sit, have some coffee."

Mr. Smith sat, as did the fox.

"Mr. and Mrs. Horse, this is a lovely farm you have here, and we are so grateful for the hospitality you're showing my dear friend Mr. Fox, isn't that right, Mr. Fox?"

The fox watched the odd horse intently as he spoke and nodded at this queue, if a half-second too late.

"Mr. Fox has suffered terribly. War, hunger ..." In the pause that followed he managed to meet Father, Mother and Junior's eyes. "Discrimination."

Mother Horse gasped a little. Father Horse, who'd gone what seemed a very long time without talking, took a breath and began to raise a hoof, but the odd horse continued.

"He has travelled half the globe to make a better life for himself, to improve his pitiful fortunes, and the courage, the tenacity, the intelligence he's shown on this odyssey—you wouldn't believe it if I told you, but of course there will be time for that later on. There's much to do now before winter sets in. I wouldn't see our incredible friend brave another blizzard in the open, though heaven knows he's done it before and could again. We need to—"

"Is that what you're building out there?" Junior cut in. The strange horse gave a look that communicated deep affront and deeper generosity in suffering the affront patiently.

"Junior ..." his mother chided.

"Mr. Horse, Mrs. Horse, the generosity you are showing to our humble, tragedy-stricken neighbor is truly commendable. I can't tell you what a battering my spirit, my faith in our fellow creatures has taken as I've acquainted myself with the horrors this poor soul has confronted. But knowing that there are still selfless individuals out there in the world, big-hearted families willing to host—"
"Dad did you—"

"Son Mr. Fox is our friend and neighbor, just like our friend Mr. Smith here says. Now what kind of folks would we be if we turned him out in the cold? Especially this winter, it's gearing up to be a real bastard if you'll pardon my language Mr. Smith, Mr. Fox, I can always feel the bad ones coming by October, it's my knee, see, this one—"

"But Dad did you already—"

"Junior!" His mother.

"Son this is my first acquaintance with your father and mother, but it's clear as this fine October day to me already that your family is as generous as they come, and would gladly welcome this unfortunate soul."

“That’s right sir!” Father, getting excited. “Junior, why don’t you see if those fellas working over there need anything? Mr. Smith, of course we’re willing to help this poor …”

Junior didn’t stick around to argue or hear his father promise anything else to the strange horse and his fox. When he arrived where the horses were working, he saw that a sort of one-room house was already nearing completion. It was tiny but had all the trappings of a full house: a door, windows on every side with shutters, a steeply sloped roof. It occurred to Junior that they must have thrown up dozens of these. They didn’t pause or deliberate or seem to lack a single item of materials or equipment. Or have any surplus. Junior watched them work for a while.

“What do you think of the zebra, kid?” one of the horses asked him after a while. He was putting shingles on the roof.

“The what?”

“The one who does all the talking. The one with stripes.”

“I don’t like him. What’s a zebra? Is he a horse?”

“I don’t know. A sort of a one maybe, but different from us. Comes from far away.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about the fox? Did he really survive a war? All that stuff the zebra said?”

“Don’t know that either. If I were you I wouldn’t trust a word. You’ll end up like Anderson here, isn’t that right? Anderson? Hm. He don’t like to talk about it.”

No one said anything or looked up. Anderson, whichever one he was, hadn't heard or chose to ignore the horse on the roof.

“About what?”

“The zebra cleaned him out. Now he’s got nothing, and he works for the bastard. Poor stupid son of a bitch. Aren’t you Anderson? Lost everything …”

The horse on the roof spat.

“Is that what happened to you?”

“Me? Oh no.” He grinned. “I never had nothing to begin with.”

iii

The fox took meals with them, breakfast, lunch and dinner. At first he waited till the meal was near completion and the family was seated or at least nearly so before joining. His expression was blank, but something in his manner conveyed a minimum of respect, if not quite gratitude. He ate at the pace the family did, didn’t ask for more—didn’t say anything—and might even have performed some kind of head nod or bow to acknowledge their generosity a couple of times. Or maybe not.

After a few weeks he would arrive at table whenever he felt like it, waiting patiently enough but looking expectant, with a fork and knife in his paws, stuck upright. Mother would heat leftovers when she noticed him there, when there were any. Other times she would prepare something fresh, an egg or toast or some sausage, and keep preparing till he left.

He no longer came to family meals regularly, but required food on his own schedule.

After a couple weeks of this Mother forgot to heat a plate of leftovers, or decided not to, and the fox pushed it away. She walked out of the room.

Hearing a crash after a minute, she returned to find the plate face down on the floor and broken, the fox gone, the front door open to the early winter chill.

iv

Junior thought about his mother picking up shards of glass, wiping the food up off the ground, explaining to him or herself that they had to be patient, the poor thing didn't know any better, he'd suffered so much, and why hadn't she just heated it up for him, it was her fault, unkind, a failure of generosity. He thought about how he'd stood there and watched her clean and chastise herself and did not help her.

He should have been thinking about the chainsaw, the tip of which struck a branch behind the log he was cutting and kicked back hard, to within a few inches of his face. He stopped the saw.

"Dad?"

Father Horse was splitting wood and hadn't seen. They'd cut their firewood for the season a couple months ago, but "Mr. Fox will be needing his own, and who knows if they even have trees where he comes from, we'll have to show him how ..."

"Dad?"

"Yes, son?"

"Is the fox going to work?"

"Of course, son, everyone works on a farm." He still didn't look over, and went on splitting.

"Okay. When?"

"Son you know what that poor fellow's been through. Have some patience."

"No I don't."

Father put the axe down. "You don't what?"

"I don't know what he's been through."

"It's like Mr. Smith said. Hardship. A *war*."

"What war, Dad?"

"Well I don't know."

"Where was the war? Did he fight? Was he a good guy? What's the war about? How come he has to come all the way here? What do we have to do with it?"

"Enough, son. It's our duty as Christians."

"We don't go to church."

"Sure we do."

"Easter last year was the last time."

"I didn't say we was good Christians, son, but we're—"

"We don't give to charity, we don't volunteer."

"What are you getting at Junior?"

"How come the one way we gotta be Christian is bringing this stranger to come live with us? It wasn't even our idea, he just showed up. Some zebra we don't know dumped him on us. How bout we start small being Christian? Do the food bank."

Father picked up the axe. "Son I'm being awful patient with this attitude of yours. We'll do right by that poor gentleman. He's our neighbor and we owe him our kindness and hospitality."

V

The fox did not work. Even Junior wondered briefly if he might be planning on it, though, because the chainsaw was gone from the shed, and Junior saw it sitting against the fox's hut. It might rust there, Junior thought, but figured he'd give the fox a day or two to use it or move it. Perhaps they don't have rain and sleet and snow where he's from, he thought, and their saws do fine just sitting out in the open.

The next day it was gone. No one had heard any sawing, and it wasn't back in the shed. "He's moved it inside," Junior thought. "Even better."

But a couple of days later he knew it was gone. It was just a sensation, but he was certain. The saw was gone. It wasn't for some time that he landed on the obvious explanation: the fox had sold it. It just didn't occur to Junior that anyone would do a thing like that. But he knew the fox had.

He'd sold it to one of the other foxes that had started coming around. Or more likely through him. There were maybe four of them, coming singly or in pairs on rusty bicycles, staying for a few minutes or a couple of hours. They stayed inside or sat outside the fox's hut, smoking or just looking straight ahead.

One day one of them was in the house, looking through the cabinet.

Junior grabbed him from behind and spun him around. The fox hissed and bared his fangs. Junior kicked him, then kicked him again, towards the door. Two more kicks and he was outside, hissing and screeching and making a great show of limping and cradling his head.

Junior hadn't kicked him in the head, he hadn't fallen on his head.

vi

The police didn't seem to care that a stranger had entered his family's house and was perusing their belongings. Or that he'd threatened him, as best Junior could tell, since these foxes never seemed to *say* anything.

"Can't *I* press charges?" Junior asked at one point, and the cop threatened to arrest him then and there. Something about "spreading hate." His mother and father joined the cops' interrogation. They all wanted to know how Junior could lay hooves on an unfortunate who'd fled Lord knows what horrors to make a better life for his family. (Does he *have* a family?) Hadn't he been raised better?

Mother Horse cried.

Junior was given a court date, many months away. "Busier than ever," the cop said, almost apologizing.

vii

The zebra didn't mention the incident on his return. Not at first. He praised Mother and Father effusively for their generosity towards his fox. He said it gave him hope for the country that horses such as these were still willing to live up to its founding ideals, to open their arms to the less fortunate. The zebra had a new watch.

"Of course to give our friend and neighbor any chance of building a permanent, stable life in our great country, he'll need a foundation, a solid base."

"Well of course." Father no longer launched into long musings or anecdotes when the zebra was around.

"What's a man without land, Mr. Horse?"

"Why, nothing. A man's got to have land, Mr. Smith."

"That's just what I was thinking. Of course our friend"—the fox hadn't joined them for this conversation—"doesn't yet have the resources to go out and buy his own land."

"Certainly not." Mother Horse.

"And a generous soul, blessed with"—looking around the small kitchen with its 20-year-old curtains and 40-year-old stove—"so much already, can certainly see what needs to be done in this case."

Silence.

The zebra cleared his throat. "Where our friend comes from—"

"Where is that?"

The zebra's eyes blazed as they met Junior's. "You won't have heard of it."

"Is it where you're from?"

"*Excuse* me?"

"Junior!" Mother and Father.

"Are you a zebra, Mr. Smith?"

Silence.

"You must never use that word, young Mr. Horse."

"Why? What's the right word? Are you a horse?"

"I am a zebra and proud of it, but it is *not* your place to call me one."

"And where are you from? How do you know what the fox has been through? I've never heard him talk, not once. Do you know how to speak to him? Are you from the same place as him?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Horse I have to be blunt. Your son's conduct is extremely offensive, and frankly inadvisable given that he's already facing charges for assaulting one of our new neighbors. If the court were to hear about these aggravating factors, his evident *hate* for those who just want a better life, things could get—"

"He stole the chainsaw."

Now Father was concerned. "Who did? The fox?"

"He sold it to one of his friends. Or the friend sold it for him, I don't know. It's gone."

Father almost looked angry.

"Son did you see him take it?" The zebra.

"Yes. Or I saw it next to his hut."

"His *house*. And how do you know he sold it? How do you know he didn't put it back where he found it? Perhaps *you* misplaced it?"

"He sold it."

"Things have been going missing ..." Mother trailed off.

"Mr. and Mrs. Horse I'm no police officer. If you feel the need to report your misplaced chainsaw, that's no business of mine. I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a hurry, if we could get back to the matter at hand. In private, perhaps?"

"Run along Junior."

"Dad he's a thief. And so's the zebra."

"You're awful ready with accusations of wrongdoing for a boy with an assault charge. Let the grown-ups talk."

viii

The Horse family gave the fox 20 acres, free and clear. The zebra took a large fee for facilitating the deal. Separate from the broker's. Bills began arriving more or less regularly now for the zebra's services. Father and Mother Horse were elated, though, because their remaining land, it turned out, had shot up in value. The zebra quoted them amazing figures, told them they could sell the rest of it and be set for life.

And while Father Horse hadn't planned to retire quite so soon, he increasingly expounded on the wisdom of selling up, buying a place way down south, by the water, finally enjoying themselves. "Don't we deserve it, Mother?"

Mother thought so.

The bills were getting hard to pay. The zebra's most of all. Things went missing rather frequently now. Mother started stashing groceries she especially didn't want to vanish beneath their bed, reminding herself out loud as she did so of how much these foxes (at least two more had moved in permanently, both bachelors) had suffered.

There wasn't much she could do about refrigerated items. The fox—foxes—had a refrigerator now evidently, because they took these too. The fox still showed up to demand meals. Several did, even ones who didn't live on the Horses' old land.

What did it was the chainsaw. They couldn't afford a new one before next winter. They could hardly cut two cords of firewood by hand. Or more. The workhorses returned to put an addition on the foxes' house, and it would plainly take more wood to heat it now. Wood Father Horse didn't question his duty to cut and split for his brave, unfortunate new neighbors. The zebra recommended a real estate agent, a zebra.

No one had much to say about what Junior would do.

America
December 2025