

Tamara Grogan
from *Romeo*

They put his granddaughter up on Romeo. She looked straight at the guide's face, said her name was June. She was a long thing, but even with stirrups cinched, her legs could not quite reach. She clutched the pommel with both hands, had questions only a horse could answer: Could they see in front of them with eyes on the sides of their heads? Was wearing a saddle like wearing a belt?

Behind came his daughter, Margaret, in little pumps, her concert shoes. Stupid shoes for riding, but the only ones she ever brought that had a heel. When she came up for a visit, she usually put on boots in the mornings, left June at the house, and set out across the pasture to the woods, then up the mountain. Some weekends she wore tennis shoes the whole time that flashed through the house whitely, enticement for him to give in and play. He wasn't sure why she wanted him to; he would lurch around the court, tap the ball high overhead as if it were a badminton birdie. They would stop shy of a full set. Something about tennis felt dangerous to him, made him feel heavy and thick-skinned as a rhinoceros.

He had climbed on a tall roan. Riding had been his idea, something all three could do, and when the guide shouted to him from Romeo's stall--Granddad! Go pick you out one, I bet you spent a little time on a horse--he chose the one that looked like it had the most kick to it. He wasn't wrong about this horse, Buck, who had rested all day, the guide said, while the other horses took care of children's birthday parties or people who just wanted a little recreation, a gentle walk through the trees. Buck had other ideas, came dancing out the stall door on prickling hooves.

He reached for the halter and held his ground. All right, big boy, he said. True, he'd ridden horses, back when he was a young man with a thirty-six inch waist and a crew cut, when Margaret--waiting now on her sorrel mare--was the one with the questions flying and the brown head bobbing. But he wasn't sure, if Buck spooked and reared, or tore out through the woods, that he had what it took now to control a big horse.

The guide walked stiffly in his denims, but he was a nimble fellow, flung a leg over his horse and off they went. He was full of his enterprise. He bunched the reins in one hand, held the lead to June's horse behind him in the other, and addressed conversation around the females, to the father. Walkie-talkies, which drifted out of range, were his theme.

Need me one of them cel-phones, he said.

Be handy in a crisis, the father agreed.

You ain't whistling Dixie.

Put it in a holster, Margaret said. Fastest dial in the west.

Yes sir, the guide said. You get out here and anything happens, somebody's got to stay, somebody's got to go back, you got inexperienced riders, you can't leave them in the woods. Could have used one when we found that girl.

I live at 79 Dorothea Dix Avenue and I have a cat named Mark and a fish named Fish ...June broke off introducing herself to Romeo. What girl? Excuse me! What girl?

The guide leaned around to check with the father, who shrugged. Girl in the paper, sweetie pie. You all don't live around here.

They don't, the father said. I've lived here my whole life.

Whereabouts?

Off Guy Manners Road, the father said. Other side of the highway.

Near Creasy's?

That's it, the father said. About a mile past.

Then you must know Mr. Hollis Creasy?

Know him to speak to.

He's my bossman, kind of like. Or more of a partner. He went in with me some on the stables, but business got so good I bought him out.

How long you been here? the father asked.

We opened May was a year ago.

They were climbing a long, smooth-rubbed slant toward a ridge, dark against the sky where the trees thinned, and the late-day sun sank through the branches. Margaret and June's horses were well-behaved enough that if one nosed too close, it would slow down and wait before moving on. Hooves thudded in the pine and leaf mold; saddles creaked. Buck, on the other hand, skittered, he halted, he ate leaves. Every few feet, the father said, Ho boy, easy.

Margaret turned to him and pointed at the slow swing of June's skinny body.

He smiled, then sucked his tongue and yanked the reins to get Buck's head out of some dogwood branches. Well, of course he remembered, better than she could; he had been the grownup then. Could she still hear his voice at her back, yelling POST, Maggie! UP! when her butt had started slapping saddle, out of sync with the horse's trot, and the pines and cornfields, tobacco barns and irrigation ponds started their crazy bounce? Now here was her own girl in a saddle.

What girl? June's question. He jerked Buck's reins again. This horse was giving him trouble. Now it had stopped in the middle of the trail. Margaret turned to watch for a minute and then rode on. He could tell Buck was making her nervous.

Used to, his voice and weight and strength were all it took with horses, but she got nervous then, too. He remembered her small, coming out to watch him ride the spindly yearlings, sitting on the fence rail with clasped hands and a pinched face, as if they did not weigh five times what he did and carrying him was a struggle. As if he should be carrying them. There was no question of that with Buck. He was huge, easily eighteen hands, a strong, smiling, wicked-looking horse. Yet the father would manage. He told himself to concentrate, pulled a switch from a locust tree.

But at the first touch of the switch against Buck's flank, Buck gave a high whinny, a scream. What was the matter with this horse? Then he was reared up on his hind legs and kicking. The father held onto the reins and squeezed with his knees, but the suddenness had thrown him askew. Buck kicked out one more time and then bolted up the trail like something bitten.

The guide turned, looked, and leapt. He had left his horse, left June. Buck! Ho boy! he yelled. He planted himself, hands out. Buck thurrumped past Margaret, the father jouncing, one foot out of the stirrup, on this crazy horse tearing toward the guide and toward June and toward crushing and trampling, the father tasted metal in his mouth, was afraid to do anything but hold on, anything might tilt this in the wrong direction. The guide was ready. As Buck passed, he reached for the father's waist, snapped himself up and around, behind the father, behind the saddle, pressed against the father's back, squeezing with his knees and reaching under the father's armpits for the reins. Buck, mad, galloped past the guide's horse, June, and Romeo, opened himself out along a clear stretch of trail. The guide took the left rein up, hard, held it in the air by his shoulder, yelling: Hold on! We're all right! and Buck turned, turned again, the rein pulled so

hard Buck's nose nearly touched the saddle, his body hooked. Hold on, Granddad! the guide shouted. Buck circled, snorting and yanking his head but still turning. He kicked his back legs a little. Then slower. He was walking. His mouth dropped open. In a minute his eyeball rolled. He quivered and stood.

Down the trail, Margaret had come alongside June, making sure she was steady, reaching for Romeo. She left the guide's horse where it stood and led Romeo and June up the trail, keeping her distance. Daddy, good lord, she called out, what in the world?

Sorry about that, Granddad, the guide was saying. You got you a ornery one. He laid a hand on the father's shoulder, threw a leg over and slid off. He jerked Buck's halter with irritation, though Buck now seemed bored, as if he had not been involved.

It's this knucklehead ought to be named Romeo, the guide said. He's a case. Gets to loving up the gal horses so much we had to put him in different pasture. Then he started enjoying himself, if you get my meaning. We had to fix a curry brush on a surcingle, put that around him. He don't like it one bit, but all that enjoying was wearing him out.

What does that mean? What's he enjoying? June asked.

He's just having so much fun he gets tired, sweetie.

He might need to get tired, the father said. He sat up very straight and pushed his feet down in the stirrups. He could feel his face boiling. The guide seemed rattled too. This must not be the usual, horses galloping wild up the trail. He went down to get his horse and in passing, squeezed June's knee, who was sucking her thumb.

Come on little gal, grab hold, won't anything happen to you. This one's a lover, not a fighter. He swung into his own saddle and clicked his tongue. His horse walked to the front, the guide taking Romeo's lead from Margaret, and set off, the others falling in line. He looked behind him. You going to be all right, Grandpa? Margaret was looking back too, making sure. The father nodded, though his heart was pounding so hard it felt bruised.

That, Margaret said, was a miracle. I wouldn't have believed you could do it in those new dungarees.

I could do it wearing armor, the guide said. It's what I do.

Why does June's horse get called Romeo then? she asked. He doesn't look like any kind of lover. Romeo was a swaybacked piebald who hadn't raised his head.

Oh, he was a romantic fellow in his day.

When was that?

Fifteen years ago. This horse is old.

What girl? How old?

I reckon twenty-two, twenty-three.

Younger than my mama, June volunteered.

I guess so, Margaret said. Must you inform the whole world?

What's romantic?

You know, Margaret said. Like Cinderella. People feel romantic and they fall in love.

How do horses fall in love?

They, fall in love. He's Romeo, he has to have fallen in love.

The guide turned to wink at the grownups, but his laugh was short and odd. He straightened himself out and they rode for quite a while in silence. *What girl?*