

'The Horse' (abridged)

The horses galloped at speed around the field, jostling with each other, manes flowing across their shoulders.

"Out of our way, donkey" they shouted as they swept past. The donkey stepped back obediently and continued to watch from by the hedge. These were important horses; race horses. The light was starting to fade and the clouds glowed brightly on the horizon.

"It's time to go back now," the donkey called as he turned back through the gate.

He started to trundle down the stony lane that led back to the stables. Moments later the others clattered up behind him.

"Hurry up Plodding-Donkey." panted one breathlessly.

"Let us go first," added another. "Remember your place." At least they talked to the donkey. He may not have been important like them, but he'd rather be on the fringe of their social circle than alone.

They soon arrived at the stables. Each door had a brass plaque above it with a horse's name on. As they passed each horse turned into his own private stable. Finally at the end of the block was the door to an unnamed stable. The donkey had to share with whichever horses were passing through. He trotted in thinking that he would have the place to himself tonight, but to his surprise, at the back of the stable, was a large pure white horse munching on some hay. *{pause}*The donkey gasped! He had never seen a white horse before. It was beautiful. Its legs were long and slender, its muscles perfectly defined, its mane rich and full. Although the stable was dark this new visitor seemed to glow in the half light.

"I'm sorry," said the donkey. "I didn't know you were here." He could see straight away that this powerful presence was built for racing. He knew that race horses were prized animals and always had their own stables. So even though this was his home he felt

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uncomfortable, like he shouldn't really be here. Maybe this stable now belonged to the white horse and no one had told him. He politely retreated back out of the door.

"Don't go! I hope you don't mind me sharing with you."

The donkey was more startled still. This beautiful racehorse even seemed considerate of his feelings. He wasn't sure how to respond.

"Please join me. I've been waiting to talk to you."

This was very different from how the other horses treated the donkey.

"Why would you want to talk to me?" asked the donkey curiously. He plodded confidently back into the stable. He was becoming more at ease without even noticing.

"I have good news for you: there's racing tomorrow," said the white horse with a sparkle.

"Is there?" said the donkey. "The other horses will be pleased. They live for racing."

"But this isn't just a run around the paddock," said the white horse, "this is the race of your life."

He looked directly at Plodding-Donkey.

The donkey was suddenly embarrassed by the misunderstanding.

"But, I'm not a horse," he declared.

"Really?" the white horse looked doubtful. "What's your name then?"

"Plodding-Donkey."

"Is it really? Who gave you that name?"

The donkey was speechless. This was quite the hardest conversation he'd ever had.

"The other horses did, didn't they?" suggested the white horse. "And you believed them."

"But I am a donkey."

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He was confused now. Although he had always longed to run with the other horses, this was surely a case of mistaken identity.

"You are a horse and you will run tomorrow."

There was a long silence whilst the words sank in. The donkey was gripped by conflicting emotions: first, excitement and hope. This was all he'd ever wanted to hear. But then, fear and dread. He had never run in his life. He had always accepted the scorn of the other horses, but if he dared to believe the white horse he would just humiliate himself. But the white horse spoke with authority. He was clearly a race winner and the donkey had never met a horse who had actually won a race before. The white horse had a bright blood-red rosette in his mane with the word 'First' across the centre, so there was no doubt.

The white horse told him of the race and of the prize. To win meant a place in the winner's enclosure and a future put out to stud. The donkey didn't fully understand what 'put out to stud' meant, but it seemed to be a desirable outcome. Then the white horse told him what happens to losers:

"Any horse without a winner's rosette is rounded up and sent to the glue factory."

Apparently the bones of an old horse make for the most excellent adhesive. This was clearly a sticky end that no one would want; but as the white horse pointed out:

"There is no place for a loser in the winner's enclosure."

The donkey was distressed by this. Surely there could only be one winner; and he knew it wouldn't be him.

The white horse explained why he had never seen a winning horse before. He himself was the only one who had ever attempted this race and won. This was why he had a rosette that gave him

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entrance to the winner's enclosure. He explained that the only way to be a winner was to do it his way. Then he turned his head and plucked his own rosette from his mane. He presented it to Plodding-Donkey:

"This is your pass to the winner's enclosure as a gift from me," he said. Plodding-Donkey wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth! He took it gladly. The white horse lent further forward to kiss him. As their mouths met, the white horse drew out all the breath from Plodding-Donkey's lungs. The donkey gasped and staggered. It was as if he had nothing left; as if his very life was ebbing away. The white horse turned as grey as death and real pain crossed his face. But after a few seconds his pure whiteness returned and he blew into the nostrils of the donkey. The donkey's life was restored but sharper, keener and richer than before.

"You are not Plodding-Donkey," whispered the white horse. "You are Swift-Stallion of royal blood."

Swift-Stallion's heart was full enough to burst. He was a donkey no more. He glowed luminous like the white horse and already stood several hands taller. He would indeed race tomorrow. The white horse continued:

"Tomorrow the race starts in the field where you stand. There are no riders. No one will push you or whip you. You are master of your own run but you ride in my colours. Breathe deeply and know that I am with you. You cannot loose. I have given you my victory, so run with joy!"

And with that the white horse melted into the night, leaving Swift-Stallion to rest until the dawn of race day.

The next morning Swift-Stallion awoke to the sound of clattering hooves. The other horses were leaving the stables already, keen to start the race. Swift-Stallion had a sudden pang of donkey doubt.

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Had the white horse really spoken to him? Or had it just all been wishful thinking? No, it must be true. Here was his rosette. Panic over. He breathed a deep sigh of relief and again felt the clarity of the white horse's breath filling his rib cage.

"Tally ho!" he shouted with a laugh and galloped up the stony lane after the others.

Some of them seemed surprised to see that Swift-Stallion was joining the race, but clearly thought it was of no consequence. Others knew better as they had taken up the offer of the white horse themselves.

When they reached the field things looked much the same.

"This is ridiculous!" exclaimed one.

"There is no racecourse. Look at all these hedges. And no finish line to be seen." complained another.

"It must be a steeple chaise. We will go over these fences." said Swift-Stallion. "The white horse said that the race starts in the field where you stand. So let's go!"

And with a deep breath he thundered towards the farthest hedge. The others sprang to life too and quickly caught up. Only a few remained in the field.

"This is ridiculous!" they agreed.

The horses thundered towards the hedge. As they approach it loomed large. None had ever jumped a fence before. It looked impossible. But the horses were running fast and breathing deeply. Their confidence in the words of the white horse was high. They leapt as one and soared over the hedge with super-equine strength. Exhilarated by the achievement they pounded on through the next field, a field they had never seen before. Ahead was an enormous fence that seemed to brush against the clouds. All the horses were struck with fear.

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"How can we ever jump that?" exclaimed one starting to slow. But on the others galloped. As they neared the fence the ground started to rise. When at last they reached the summit, the fence on the top was no higher than the last one. As the two leapt, Swift-Stallion glanced behind. The stopped horse had fallen and was lying motionless at the foot of a white pole that was topped with a circle. But then he was lost from sight.

On top of the plateaux, the ground was covered with long lush grass that made the going heavier. The last two horses were tiring.

"I know I really shouldn't but I can't resist this delicious grazing," confessed Swift-Stallion's last companion "I'm so tired anyway. I'll get going again after a little break."

So the last time that Swift-Stallion saw him he was grazing at the base of another white pole with a circle on top.

"It looked just like a finishing post," thought Swift-Stallion. On and on he galloped alone, through fields and over fences.

"Is there still a race to be run?" he wondered. But then he breathed in deep again and felt the breath of the white horse. He was still close.

But eventually even Swift-Stallion tired. He gradually stumbled to a halt, exhausted.

"I can't go on," he said. "I must rest here." He fell to his knees and then onto his side. He knew he had no energy left to recover. He was completely spent.

"Help me, white horse. My strength has failed," he called weakly.

"I'm here," whispered a voice suddenly very close. As his eyes drifted in and out of focus, he saw a tall white finishing post towering above him with a circle at the top.

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"What kind of race is this?" asked Swift-Stallion bewildered.

"It's a race run well, by a winner," came the reply. "Well done. You are true to your name."

"Have I reached the end?" gasped Swift-Stallion.

"In a way," smiled the white horse. "Bring your rosette," and he bent down to kiss the fallen horse as it breathed its last. This time Swift-Stallion's whole being filled with the life-giving breath.

"It is finished!" breathed the white horse and in an instant, together, they were gone.

Just short grass and daises were where sun shined.

The white post and circle cast shadow behind.

Whilst shining in brilliance of the afternoon sun.

It stood as a witness to a race that's well run.