

'The Horse'

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 'Up-with-the-Joneses' breathlessly.

"Let us go first," added Silver-Spoon. "Remember your place." They all had fancy names, like race horses do. But 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: 'Proud-Heart', 'Silver-Spoon', 'Up-With-The-Joneses', 'Shame-On-You', 'Top-Marks', 'Guilt-Trip'. 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. 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."

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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. 'Shame-on-you' had often told him that he didn't deserve his own stable. So even though this was his home he felt uncomfortable, like he shouldn't really be here. Maybe this stable now belonged to the white horse and no one had told him. 'Guilt-Trip' always said that if he stepped out of line he would be punished. 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?"

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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."

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.

"Would you call the others? I want to speak to all you horses," requested the white horse.

"Yes sir, of course."

The donkey took off immediately, galloping the length of the stables, shouting excitedly to the other horses about the visitor.

"There must be a mistake," said Proud-Heart. "I can't believe that anyone important would visit Donkey."

But he came anyway when he heard there was to be racing.

When all of the horses were assembled, the white horse explained about the race. There were some questions from the horses but there was much to take in for them. One thing they all recognised was that the white horse spoke with authority. He was clearly a race winner. None of them had ever met a horse who had actually won a race before. The white horse had a bright blood-red rosette in his mane with the words 'First' across the centre, so there was no doubt.

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The white horse told them 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 the others were agreed that this was a most desirable outcome. Then the white horse told them 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 wanted; but as the white horse pointed out:

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

Was the donkey the only one who was distressed by this? All the other horses looked pretty confident. But surely there could only be one winner; and the donkey knew it wouldn't be him.

The white horse also told them why they had never met 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 entrance to the winner's enclosure. This came as a shock to the horses, especially to Top-Marks and Proud-Heart. The white horse went on to tell them that the only way they could be winners 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

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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 in a voice that only the donkey could hear. "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 passed to each horse in turn making the same offer, and each time he plucked the rosette from his mane, blood would seep from the wound to form a new rosette. Top-Marks refused the gift, claiming he would rather earn his prize. Proud-heart eagerly took the rosette but refused the kiss and so didn't receive her new name. All the other horses bravely accepted both, and the white horse had a new name for each one.

To Guilt-Trip he whispered:

"Be Conscience-Clear and regret no more."

To Silver-Spoon he spoke the words:

"You are Silver-Moon, you will reflect my light instead of your privilege."

Up-With-The-Jones was named:

"Up-In-The-Heavens, as you set your eyes on higher things."

Shame-On-You was the last to receive her new name:

"Worthy-Made, know that there is no flaw in your design."

All the horses were now keen to race but the white horse still had some parting words to speak:

"Tomorrow the race starts in the field where you stand. There are no riders. No one will push you or whip you. You are each master of your own run. For those who have chosen my rosette,

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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 the horses 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.

"Today we run for glory," rang the voice of Up-In-The-Heavens.

The Swift-Stallion had a sudden pang of donkey doubt. 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.

When they reached the field things looked much the same.

"This is ridiculous!" exclaimed Proud-Heart. "There is no racecourse. Look at all these hedges. And no finish line to be seen."

"There's nothing wrong here." said Conscience-Clear. "It must be a steeple chaise. We will go over these fences."

"Well I'm not wasting my energy jumping fences, I'm a flat runner," declared Top-Marks.

"This is ridiculous!" repeated Proud-Heart.

"The white horse said that the race starts in the field where you stand." said Swift-Stallion. "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 Top-Marks and Proud-Heart remained.

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"This is ridiculous!" they agreed.

The five 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.

"We are up to this." panted Worthy-Made.

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.

"How can we ever jump that?" exclaimed Conscience-Clear starting to slow. But his voice now sounded different. Swift-Stallion looked over his shoulder and the horse that he saw looked again more like Guilt-Trip.

"You've led us to our deaths, Plodding-Donkey," he shouted venomously.

But on they galloped. As they neared the fence the ground started to rise. It was harder racing uphill and Conscience-Clear dropped further and further behind. When at last they reached the summit, the fence on the top was no higher than the last one. As the four leapt, Swift-Stallion glanced behind. Conscience-Clear had fallen and was lying motionless at the foot of a white pole that was topped with a red circle. But then he was lost from sight.

On top of the plateaux, the ground was covered with short fast grass and they could already see the long lush grass of the field beyond. Only a low and flimsy wooden fence stood at the boundary.

"This one's easy!" cheered Up-In-The-Heavens.

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With the course seeming less of a challenge he was starting to make it more of a personal race against the other three, in his old Up-With-The-Joneses style. He was quite forgetting his winner's rosette and the fact that the race had already been won. He was straining so much to get ahead that he failed to notice the deep ditch on the far side of the fence and fell heavily. Although he was up again quickly he was limping badly. Swift-Stallion and Worthy-Made kept galloping, but Silver-Moon kindly held back.

"I'll stay back to help," he called after them. "We'll still make it if we take it slow."

Now the long lush grass made the going heavier and the last two horses were tiring. Worthy-Made slowed to a canter confessing:

"I know I really shouldn't but I can't resist stopping for this delicious grazing. I'm so tired anyway. I'll get going again after a little break."

So the last time that Swift-Stallion saw her she was grazing at the base of another white pole with a red 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.

Quite suddenly he came upon another horse. This new horse started to gallop with him, asking him why he was running. Swift-Stallion explained all about the race and the words the white horse had spoken. This new horse decided to join the race too even though he did not yet have a new name. But as his new companion picked up pace Swift-Stallion realised that he himself was tiring. The new

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horse started to pull away from him. Swift-Stallion 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 red circle at the top.

"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.