

Putting Chubby Down

Mrs. Peacock couldn't believe it, "It had been going on right under our noses all these years," she said, "and no one had tumbled to it." And now that she had time to reflect on it, she could recall several horses the Kipers had owned that had mysteriously disappeared. Most of the women at the Ladies Aid meeting nodded in agreement with Mrs. Peacock, but my mom wasn't too sure. My dad said it was nonsense. He said everybody had horses that disappeared and there was nothing mysterious about it. He said horses got old and had to be put down and sometimes they got sleeping sickness and died or old Pete Smoltz bought them to feed to his mink.

No one had speculated about the Kipers eating horse meat before, but this was just after the Second World War and the Government was buying up surplus horses and processing them in plants in Swift Current and Edmonton and shipping the canned meat to feed the hungry people in Europe. Some people wondered who it was who would eat horsemeat. Mrs. Peacock said the Belgians always did eat horsemeat just the way we eat beef so it just naturally followed that the Kipers, who came from Belgium, were eating their horses all those years. My dad said it wasn't the Belgian Dutch; it was the Walloons, the French-speaking Belgians who ate horses. He said Mrs. Peacock had it all wrong.

I took little comfort from my dad's reassurance because he said the Wylies didn't eat gophers too. But I know they did because one day, a few years ago, when we were drowning out gophers in the schoolyard, someone wondered what a gopher would taste like if we cooked one and little Billy Wylie said, "Gophers taste good." And that's when his twin sisters turned red as a beet and ran into the girl's toilet and didn't come out until the bell rang. So that's how I know that the Wylies ate gophers.

When I told my dad, he said if he had fourteen hungry kids in the middle of the great depression he would probably feed them gophers too. That's right—Mrs. Wylie had fourteen children and rumors had it there was only one other person in our district with more children than Mrs. Wylie—and that was Mr. Wylie. I guess it was true because old Wylie fancied himself quite a lady's man, although it is hard to believe any woman, let alone Mrs. Wylie, would let that mousy little man with a mouth full of bad teeth near them. Once, when I was younger, I heard Granny Potter say she reckoned old Wylie had his good looks where it counted. When I asked my mom what she meant, she said she wasn't sure either, but the next day the big boys at school smartened me up soon enough and then I was embarrassed to think I hadn't figured that one out for myself.

Still, with the help of Mrs. Peacock, the rumors about the Kipers eating horsemeat persisted. When Mrs. Peacock first came to our district she taught at Edgewood school. Back then she was Miss Partridge so you might say she was always a bird. The funny thing was she looked like a bird too, with a sharp nose and not much of a chin and her hair all fuzzed up on of her head. My mom said she had her hair teased but my dad said it looked more like it was tormented. I guess my mom thought that was funny because she bit her lip and said, "Not in front of the boy." Then I had to promise not to repeat that one outside the family.

The Kipers came to Canada sometime after the first world war. They worked on farms around our area for a few years before buying a farm about a mile and a half north of our place. They kept cows, pigs, chickens and horses—Belgian horses of course and the Kipers turned out to be what my mom called "good providers." The Kipers had three kids. Emma was a grade ahead of me although she was only a few months older. She was really pretty and I had a real crush on her but I don't think she ever knew it. She always had her nose in a book and didn't pay much attention to boys anyway. Granny Potter said the Kipers had her picked out to be a teacher. And then there was Willem but everyone but his parents called him William or Willie. He was a little over a year younger than Emma but wasn't nearly as smart. It was hard to know what he was like because he hardly ever said anything and always seemed to be daydreaming. It didn't seem to bother him that he was three years behind Emma in school. My mom said Maryanne was an afterthought but Granny Potter said she was no thought at all. Some others thought the Kipers were trying for a boy because it wasn't likely Willie would be much of a farmer. Mrs. Peacock said Maryanne was a precocious child but my mom said all she knew was Maryanne was cute as a button and smart as a whip.

I had to walk to school but the Kipers rode Chubby, a big Belgian horse. I could hear Chubby coming up behind me as I got close to school. Sometimes if there was a lot of snow they would offer me a ride but Chubby was so big I'd have to find a fence post to climb up on, and then I had to sit behind Emma's dumb brother so I usually declined their invitation. If I could have sat behind Emma, she'd have known how much I liked her and I wouldn't have had to say anything either.

Chubby was the nicest horse in the school barn. He was the only horse that would let you crawl under his belly or pull on his tail. Sometimes we would see who could get on Chubby's back by crawling up his mane. I did it a few times but it wasn't easy. Stinky Shuler was the best at it. He was small for his age but he was really wiry. One day Mickey Parker promised him a peanut butter sandwich if he could get on Chubby by climbing up his tail. "Go on I dare ya," he said, "Chubby won't say nothin'." Before we knew it, Stinky was all the way up to the top of Chubby's tail and there he was faced with Chubby's huge shinny rump. We all thought he would have to give up but Stinky had other plans. He pulled his knees up and at the same time sort of rolled himself over so that he ended up lying stomach down on Chubby's rump with his legs pointing up at a steep angle. And there, faced with nothing in sight (at least nothing dignified in sight) to get a better grip on, Stinky did the only thing he could do. He loosened his hold and slowly slid down until he ran out of tail and then he fell headfirst into a pile of horse manure at Chubby's heels. And that's when we started calling him Stinky. Chubby, predictably, "didn't say nothin'." But I guess he had the last laugh. Miss Evans didn't laugh though. She sent Stinky home to wash up and change his clothes. He went home but he didn't come back until the next day because his mother had to wash his overalls as he only had one pair.

I'll never forget the first day of school in the fall. Emma had left our school to board out and go to high school and little Maryanne was still too young for grade one. We were playing prisoner's base when Willie came riding up, but he wasn't riding Chubby.

Willie dismounted to a chorus of questions about Chubby's whereabouts. At first he didn't say anything but finally he said, "We put him down." Of course that just brought on more questions but when we could see he was going to cry we left him alone. I couldn't believe they had put Chubby down. School just wouldn't be the same, and I didn't like the way he said, "put him down" either. That's what my mom said when she was canning things. "I put down twenty sealers of beef stew" she would say. And now the Kipers had put Chubby down too?

For the next few days I couldn't get Chubby out of my mind. I found myself wondering how many sealers it would take to put him down and I could see them all in neat rows on shelves in the Kiper's cellar. How could they do that? Chubby was a Belgian horse. That must be like eating your cousin or something. I wished I was smart like Emma so that I wouldn't have to go to that school any more and I wouldn't have to be reminded of Chubby every time I went in the school barn. The best I could hope for was two more years of correspondence courses in that dumb school.

Finally I decided if the Kipers were eating their horses it was their business and I would just have to get Chubby out of my mind. I decided to concentrate on my schoolwork and keep busy with my farm chores, and after a while it seemed to be working. All that changed one day when my dad came home and said he had been talking to Mr. Kiper.

He said he had made arrangements for me to pick rocks for Mr. Kiper on Saturday. "I can't do that," I protested. "They're going to feed me Chubby." My dad shook his head in disgust. My mom didn't help either. She said, "Don't be silly, there not going to feed you Chubby, and besides a little horse meat isn't going to kill anyone."

The next morning my mom got me up early and I ate a big breakfast because picking rocks is hard work. When I arrived for work, Mr. Kiper was waiting for me with a big horse hitched to a stoneboat. All morning I worked hard wondering what they would feed me when I came in for dinner. I was lucky. They served chicken—canned chicken all jellied up with lots of pepper just the way my mom does it. I told Mrs. Kiper canned chicken was my favorite thing and I could eat it every meal and never get tired of it. Then I thought maybe I was being too obvious but Mrs. Kiper just smiled and said, "Thank You."

It must have been close to 8.00 p.m. when I came in for supper. I was hoping the Kipers would have already eaten and there would be no one around to watch me if they were feeding me Chubby.

No such luck. Mr. Kiper seemed pleased though that I had put in a good day's work. I took lots of mashed potatoes and then Mrs. Kiper passed me a bowl and said, "Help yourself to the stew."

I noticed she didn't say help yourself to the beef stew. She just said, "Help yourself to the stew." I knew I'd have to take at least two spoonfuls because they'd notice if I took just one. And it wasn't really a spoon either it was more like one of those ladles. I found myself studying the pieces of meat and wondering what part of Chubby they might have come from. Maybe they came from the place where Emma sat and somehow that didn't seem so bad. Then I remembered that her dumb brother sat there too and that's enough to put a person off stew even if it came from a cow. I carefully dipped out two small spoonfuls and spread it over my mashed potatoes to make it look like I had taken a lot and then looked around for the ketchup bottle. There was none. I was trying to think of something I could ask for to put on meat. Then without thinking I said, "You wouldn't happen to have any horseradish would you Mrs. Kiper?" Sheesh, I couldn't believe I'd said horse-radish. I wasn't thinking of the name. I was just thinking of the stuff, you know, that white stuff all ground up in a little bowl like my mom does it—that only my dad eats at home. Now she'll know I think I'm eating Chubby. She'll think I'm making fun of her or something. If she did, she didn't show it. "As a matter of fact," she said "I put a few jars down last year but no one around here seems to like it." It was too late to tell her that I didn't like it either so when she handed me the jar I sprinkled the horseradish lightly over my stew.

And while all this is going on, there's little Maryanne at my elbow chattering away like a little trip-hammer. "I'm five years old," she said, "and I can count up to a hundred and I know my times up to seven times." And then right out of the blue she said, "Did you know we put Chubby down?" At that very moment a fork-full of Chubby was trying to make up its mind whether to go up or down. I swallowed hard as Maryanne continued, "We had a real funeral for Chubby you know, because he died of sleeping sickness and after supper would you like to see where we buried him?" "Oh, I'd like that," I said, and I hoped I didn't sound too eager," but first I think I'll have another helping of that stew.