

Beau

by Cooper Reveley

It was my day to run the herd up to the overnight pasture and the owner's youngest son was right behind me, bouncing up and down on what looked, for him, like an oversized mount. We trotted up the long winding hill, pushing the older, lazier stragglers, trying to shield our eyes and mouths from the dust that hung in the air, kicked up by the pounding hooves of the more eager horses. Luke reached the gate first and I came crashing out of the bushes, hollering at Doc, the sneakiest horse in the bunch, to "get on up there." I sidled up to the long swinging section of fence and reached down to pull it shut when I noticed Luke's seven year old face staring intensely at the ground.

"What's wrong my man?" I asked, puzzled by his sudden interest in the dirt. He pointed down at the dusty road.

"Uh-oh," was all that escaped his lips. I followed his finger down to where he was pointing and saw the cause of his concern. Spattered across the road were tiny droplets of red, painting a modern art trail up the hill and out of sight.

"Luke, go down and get your dad and anyone else who's at the barn. Make sure to hurry but don't yell and don't let the guests see that something is wrong." My head was spinning, images of horse legs tangled in barbed wire haunting my thoughts. I dug my heels hard into my horse's sides and started off at full tilt toward where I could see the last of the herd disappearing over the rise. My eyes were locked on the ground, trying to follow the thin line of red. The red trail was getting thicker and fuller as I sped upward; the dots were beginning to meet and form a solid line. I began to pass horses, some of which had stopped and now had their heads down, browsing for grass in the sparse pasture. Then I saw him. Beau. He was still walking slowly up toward the giant round hay bales, but even from a distance I could

see the red glistening on his hind legs. His head was hanging lower than usual and he was breathing hard. My stomach sank as I pulled up next to him and saw the blood, pulsing from a large opening on his belly between his back legs. Red jets of liquid splattered on the ground beneath the gentle giant, as if his heart had suddenly turned against him and was now trying to drain his arteries as quickly as possible. I jumped down, grabbed my rope from my saddle and made a quick halter, which I slipped over his nose and brought him to a halt.

“Beau, what did you get yourself into?” I asked under my breath, my voice shaking. As if my presence had only now alerted him to his gash, he began kicking at his underside with his back feet, and swinging his nose around to see what the problem could be. His legs began to shake and he lowered his head to the ground. Finally giving in to gravity, he dropped onto his knees, front legs first, then gingerly lowered his rear end and rolled onto his side just as the ranch pickup arrived with Steve at the wheel.

“Looks like Luke wasn’t kidding.” He said as he hopped out of the truck. Levi and Kyle, two other wranglers jumped out of the bed of the truck. Luke timidly climbed out of the passenger side of the cab and peered around the grill to where Beau was laying, his breathing shallow.

“Dad, is he gonna’ be okay?” He asked in a voice that sounded even smaller than he looked.

“Luke, hold on a minute. Stay away from his hooves.“ Was Steve’s only reply. Just then Levi dove back into the truck and produced a pair of clamps which he handed to Steve. Steve reached onto his belt for his pocket knife and we all winced as he reached over the top of the stranded animal and sliced open the wound even more.

“We need to find that artery and get those clamps on it to stop all this bleeding. Cooper, get some gauze and try to keep this area clean so I can see what I’m doing.”

Kyle tossed me a roll of gauze and I began to soak up the excess blood on the horse’s belly. It was warm and sticky and I felt myself getting light

headed from the smell. Sheet after sheet of white fabric was turned deep red on the glistening skin. Steve had not yet found what he was looking for. The small group huddled around the horse became eerily quiet, everyone's breathing almost as shallow as that of the animal that held our attention. We knew there wasn't much time left. The three wranglers took turns soaking up blood while Steve worked his tools in the wound, trying to locate the source of the leak. As I looked around I couldn't help but notice what a gruesome scene we were, all of us covered up to our elbows in red, stained chests and pants and boots, sweating with the effort but not seeming to notice.

Eventually time ran out for Beau. His eyes glazed over and he laid his head on the ground and sucked his last taste of air. Very little was said as we surrendered our efforts. We lifted Beau's heavy head and undid the makeshift halter. Steve got back into the truck with Luke and the other wranglers and I went to collect my horse who had wandered a short distance into the pasture, oblivious to the scene behind him. I walked him slowly down the hill and climbed back into the saddle after shutting the gate behind me. Feeling empty I rode down and put him up for the night, giving him his extra allowance of hay and grain.

Not wanting the guests to know what had gone on in the upper pasture, Steve came driving up to the barn in the pickup and told me to hop in. As he drove me down to the house I could tell he was as lost as I.

"We found a sharp little stick right where the blood trail starts. He must have kicked it up at himself on the way up the hill. What a waste." Was all he said. I could only stare out the window of the cab. My mind was as blank as my expression.

Beau was buried that night about twenty yards from where he died. Steve went down the road to the neighbor's, borrowed his big tractor and spent a good portion of the night making a hole in the ground big enough for the thousand pound animal. He placed a small stone on top of the mound when he was finished.

"Big enough to remember an ugly horse like Beau." He told us the next

day. We knew he would never forget.

The bunk house was quiet that night. We were all too drained and no one had the desire to recount the events of the day. The kitchen staff all wanted to know what had happened, they wanted stories. But Kyle and I spent most of the evening and early night on the porch, not talking, just sitting, listening to the creek running by and the coyotes yapping their song into the blackness.

The next morning Steve quietly pulled aside the guest who had been assigned to Beau for the week and told him what had happened.

“Oh, that’s too bad.” He replied in his thick Southern accent. “So who’m I ridin’ today?”

Steve frowned slightly. The man’s unaffected manner clearly bothered him but he wouldn’t let it show. He was in the business of making people happy and he was good at it.

“How about Lakota?” He asked. “She’s the same color as Beau and about the same temperament. You’ll never even know the difference.”

“Hey that works for me.” Came the reply. “Hell, they all look alike anyway, right?”

Steve forced a thin smile and walked away to catch Lakota. As he passed by me at the water trough I caught his eye and he muttered something under his breath. I cocked my head and gave him a puzzled look.

“They all look alike, right?” He asked sarcastically, sighed, and walked past into the pen, head down and halter in hand.