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Sandcastle

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Sandcastle

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Thin stalks of alfalfa and timothy rustle and bend across a small field, the fiberous green waves breaking across a weed-covered earthen mound near the center. I meet this field on my daily rides beyond the barn and fenced pastures."

Cover Page Footnote
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Thin stalks of alfalfa and timothy rustle and bend across a small field, the fiberous green waves breaking across a weed-covered earthen mound near the center. I meet this field on my daily rides beyond the barn and fenced pastures. Everytime I ride past that mound my mare spooks and moves sideways. I guess I don’t blame her because I feel funny about it too. That’s the only monument left for Sandcastle, who’s buried there. His body creates the mound, which gradually sinks as his carcass becomes more dust than bones or flesh.

Sandcastle was a big beast, standing sixteen three hands at the shoulder, with a wide chest and big barrel. Deep lines traced his chunky shoulders and hindquarters. He had a creasty neck and long head, making him look like a medieval charger who might have carried knights into battle. For all his size, the windows of his soul reflected patience. He would stand with heavy lidded eyes while children ran between his pillar-like legs or an admirerer stroked his velvet nose. He even accepted the cold stiff handling given by his owner’s white gloved hands. I guess Sandcastle knew not to expect too much; I guess he knew she wasn’t capable of any more.

Mrs. Barter used to drive her grey pin-striped cadillac slowly around the barn’s winding drive. I knew exactly where she’d park, how many steps it would take her to walk into the barn and how long it would take her to tack up and ride. She never carried a bag of carrots like most owners did; she insisted that a pat on the neck was just as rewarding. I don’t think Sandcastle would have agreed with her on that, and I sure didn’t, so I used to slip into his stall and give him a carrot or two. I’d go into Sandcastle’s stall with pieces of carrot in my pocket; he’d gotten so he could stick his muzzle into my pocket and pull out the pieces with his lips. If Mrs. Barter had ever caught me I don’t know what she would have done. She liked things to be done her way.

Once in a while she’d break the routine when she brought a few of her friends to visit. They’d daintily step out of the car, inspecting the ground to be sure their feet weren’t placed into anything unpleasant. Their grey hair was always done up in stiff curls. Veined, swollen legs mounted on expensive French pumps maneuvered unsteadily through the gravel to the barn. They always looked the same to me, their thick makeup caught in clumps between the lines that traced their faces. I used to think it was funny when they’d wipe the sawdust from their sticky masks, because they’d end up with their rosy cheeks smeared across their noses.

Mrs. Barter always led the group to Sandcastle’s stall where they’d peer in one by one. I wondered if they saw something in him that I missed. It was as though they were afraid to get close; as if he was the man with no arms or legs in the back tent of the circus. While they looked at the animal, that’s what they called him, animal, Mrs. Barter would explain the finer points of riding. At least they seemed to her most important! She talked about her new imported saddle and hand-stitched bridle, and what she called the vogue in Pythchy coats. Her guests would
say it sounded just marvelous, probably because they wanted to get free of Mrs. Barter and back to their tea.

The day after a visit Mrs. Barter would be taking care of Sandcastle as usual. Before taking Sandcastle from his stall, she’d pull on her gloves, tugging until each fingertip pulled at the seams. She’d line her grooming tools up along the top of her tack trunk in order of use, then taking Sandcastle from his stall to clip him between the chain crossties. She worked methodically from his head to his tail. When she heard me talking and playing with my mare she’d turn and sniff arrogantly, then continue with the flick of her brush. Sometimes she might mumble something to herself—usually about money or banking, and not having enough, which never made sense to me because of her large car and expensive equipment; she always had the best. Even Sandcastle was the best, but she didn’t seem to know it by the way she treated him.

She’d lead Sandcastle to the mounting block outside and swing one brittle leg over the saddle. Her knobby knees stuck through her custom breeches and her shirt sagged over her bony body. She always looked tired before even starting to ride. When she was having a lesson with George, the stable instructor and trainer, she would have to rest every so often to wipe the sweat which plastered her hair against her creviced face. George would see Mrs. Barter turning shades of red and tell her to take a break. Before Mrs. Barter even had a chance to say “whoa,” Sandcastle would have stopped. He knew what break meant. It meant not having to go in little circles with someone bouncing on his back for a while.

Sandcastle had the chance to do more than trot in circles when George rode and schooled him. I always volunteered to raise fences for George when he did because I loved to see Sandcastle have some fun. Besides that, I knew I’d see some high jumping. George would start riding on the flat where he’d use his hands and legs to pull Sandcastle together like a spring. They’d do serpentines, figure eights and flying lead changes until Sandcastle had his neck arched and his hind legs digging underneath him with every step. Then George would begin jumping, starting with crossrails and then going over oxers. Sandcastle would perk his ears and flare his nostrils as the fences went higher. I used to think George would call it quits when the jumps were at my eye level. But he never did. He’d always laugh and tell me to raise the rails another notch. Sandcastle would keep on jumping until the rails were over my head, flying as I imagined even Pegasus couldn’t do.

One day Sandcastle pulled up lame after a heavy workout. He limped up to the barn, nodding his head each time his sore hoof hit the ground. Doc was called and x-rays turned up only bad news; it seemed a bone in Sandcastle’s foot was rotting away, navicular they called it. Mrs. Barter had stared stoney-eyed while Doc explained what was wrong. If it had been my horse I would have broken down, but she didn’t even let a tear drop. Doc, being one of the nicest and kindest men I ever knew, had taken her silence to be a kind of shock, instead of what it really was. He shuffled his boots in the sandy soil and tried to explain again with still no response. He explained an operation that would make Sandcastle sound again; it was called “nerving” a horse, where the leg’s nerve is cut so the horse can’t feel anything. The horse wouldn’t be able to jump, but he would be fine for pleasure riding. He
then said there was a colicky horse to be looked after at Clarton Farms and he told Mrs. Barter to call with her decision. She didn’t take long in making up her mind, because she had Doc at the barn the very next day. When I saw them they were arguing. Mrs. Barter talked about tax write-offs. Doc said he’d do the operation for nothing. She said she wanted the money. He said he’d keep the horse himself. Doc started yelling and screaming, which he’d never done before. He was a small man, built slim and wiry; I didn’t believe all the yelling was coming from him, who was so tender and quiet around the horses. I didn’t really hear all that went on between them. I got embarrassed and went into the barn. But I did hear Doc’s truck skidding out the driveway when he left. Mrs. Barter left in her car as usual, without saying a word to anyone. Things became clearer the next day.

Early the following morning when I arrived at the farm I saw a backhoe in the far pasture. The hoe dug deeper and deeper, crashing its huge claw into the earth furiously, as if bent on getting to hell. All the grass was turned over until only a deep hole and scattered dirt were seen. I had a feeling. I questioned George about what was going on and he said a grave was being dug. I asked why a grave was needed when no one was dead, hoping for an answer other than the one I knew it would be. He said Mrs. Barter had decided on putting Sandcastle to sleep. He screwed his face up to keep from saying more, and then he walked away.

It was just as well that he walked away because I couldn’t have said anything in return. I forced myself to enter Sandcastle’s stall and let him pick my pockets for carrots. Mrs. Barter walked in and looked about to say something, maybe about my spoiling her horse; but that was his last chanced to be spoiled so I just stared at her, not afraid to show my tears. She clamped her mouth, turned, and left the stall.

Doc’s truck pulled up before long. He and George walked in together and I heard Doc say something about the waste of it all, but that there was nothing he could do because it was her horse. I couldn’t understand that. As I saw it Sandcastle had his rights too. But my saying so to the Doc and George made no impression. George grabbed a lead shank, clipped it to Sandcastle’s halter and led the horse out after telling me to stay in the barn. I listened, but not exactly in the way he meant.

I went up into the hayloft where a door opened to a view of the back pastures. The three walked slowly down the pasture, the two men taking apprehensive steps while the horse limped behind them. I saw Doc pull a needle from his bag as George tried to get Sandcastle near the hole. The horse had never struggled as he did then, shying and rearing away from the pit. He wanted no part of it. Finally, Doc made George pull a hankerchief through Sandcastle’s halter, covering his terrified eyes. The horse then stood quivering while the sharp needle pierced his thick skin. It was like watching something take forever, and yet seconds, at the same time. Sandcastle weaved in place; he weaved in place until he fell. He tried to get up again, but he couldn’t, and then he fell flat and still. Doc and George used ropes and a tractor to drag Sandcastle into his grave. As he slid over the edge I turned away.

I could hear the back hoe filling the grave as I ran down into the barn. Doc tramped up from the field, mumbling over and over to himself about the waste of it all. Mrs. Barter, who had been sitting in
her car, got out and headed toward the barn. She came around the corner and I guess she knew I looked at her from behind because she turned around. I'll never forget her low voice and stern look as she spoke to me, especially those first three words.

"It was necessary."

"Why? I don't understand? How could you?" I could tell my face was red. I felt hot and my tears did nothing to cool me. I think she hated me for those tears.

"You'll understand when you get older."

The same flat voice, the same cold look.

"I'll never understand. Never!" She stared at me. Something flickered in her eyes, something I'd never seen before, but it was gone before I could think about it. Then she had gone out to her car, and as she drove away I think I actually saw her wipe a tear from her face.