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Hoofprints on the Snow

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Miriam Kamps *Hoofprints on the Snow*

It was six-thirty as I heard my mother come down the stairs to put the coffee on. I had been up for an hour, doing homework left over from Saturday night. Sitting there in my long johns and college sweatshirt, and my suede covered wool foot warmers, I could hear the furnace trying to give off heat, but so far, I was still cold.

My mother shuffled in. I could feel the warmth as she sat down beside and cuddled me with her plump arms. "Morning sweetie, how is the studying going?"

I rubbed the sand out of my eyes, stretched my arms and made a noisy yawn. "Well, I'm just trying to understand Aristotle's section of "Metaphysics." Why he doesn't just say what he believes in common speech is beyond me.

Just then the phone rang. "Mm Good morning," my mum answered. "Oh, no, not again!" Mum frowned. "We'll be right there. Good-bye and thank you for calling us. Yes, I know this is the third time this year. So sorry Mrs. Petunski."

Turning to me with an expression mingling amusement, disgust and regret, she said, "Diane, our four horses are in the Petunski's yard, eating their birdseed again."

My heart started racing as I remembered the last time. "Surely they're still in the pasture," I said. But I snapped on my coat and pulled someone's boots on, and ran outside muttering a low, drawn out, four-lettered, Anglo-Saxon, vulgar barnyard word appropriate to the situation.

I sang out for the two horses that we owned. "Gallahad, Sahib!" They would normally greet me back with a low whinny, but no whinnying this morning. As I drew close to the barn, I spotted the problem. The sun was just rising, so I saw the metal gate. It was swinging open.

"Daru boarders."

I ran into the barn, grabbing with unfortunately practiced skill a bridle and a small bucket of grain. Then, down the street I loped till I got to Petunskis'. There the horses were, and making a pleasant mess of the yard. I couldn't help cracking half a grin. Yup, there were the four horses, and there the hoof prints, the brown manure, and the yellow pea stains in the snow. I thought these were the perfect frame for Petunski's large brick colonial house. In my cynical frame of mind, I found the crude contrast very amusing.

But now for the crucial task of capture. Even though my horses were trained trail-riding horses, they could now be considered wild, because they were out of their fence, and, as always, seemed eager to watch me futilely playing catch. If I shouted, hooted and hollered, they would be frightened away. But, if I came up quietly from behind, and cooed them with soft words, well then maybe I'd have a chance, so that is what I began to try to do.

But just then, Mrs. Petunski swung the front door open. She was all dressed for action in her husband's coat, boots that looked too big, and frumpy hat and scarf. She was like the cartoon on our kitchen fridge, that had a fat farm lady all

dressed up to milk her goats. The caption read, "Do you think pearls would be too much?"

So there she came, running out with broom in hand, shouting like Tecumseh Sherman leading a charge against the rebel South. Her screams were enough to scare any rebel forces, let alone four liberated horses!

It was too late to refrain Mrs. Petunski's frenzy. The horses lifted their heads, pricked up their ears, swished their tails, and with Sherman behind, began the retreat. Not remembering which way they came in, they circled the yard like children on a playground. There was the stacked wood pile, and there was the snowman the Petunski children had made. Gallahad was getting a little too old and didn't quite clear the wood pile. He fell on the snowman. The other three horses must have forgotten the front gate. Over the white picket fence they jumped. Gallahad, recovering from his first spill, followed them, but again, couldn't quite clear the fence, and with his hind legs, took a portion of it down. I followed on foot, and was just a trifle relieved myself to leave Mrs. Petunski to her Yankee yelling.

Down Copeland Avenue ran the horses. I'm not sure why they knew which way to go. I didn't know if they knew they had spoiled their welcome at all the neighbors and so couldn't stay there, or if they simply knew it was time for breakfast. All I know is that they were heading straight for home when I heard the frantic honking of a car horn behind. It was Mrs. Petunski's pink Cadillac.

Did I laugh? No, by now I was frustrated, my fingers numb, and I had to go to the bathroom. Robbed of any power to intervene, all I could do was watch. What would happen, would happen.

With the sun over the trees now, any oncoming driver would surely be able to see the running horses. At least that is what I thought. However as neighbor Martin's car rounded the bend, he obviously *didn't* see the horses. Maybe it wasn't so much due to the bright morning sun as it was that the Martins never scraped ice off their windshield. Belatedly seeing the running horses, the driver swerved frantically into the ditch. The horses, however, saw him, and as they raced down the road, they passed the driver of the Martin vehicle, tails aloft—the equine equivalent of "tough luck buddy." I saw them round the corner and head into the driveway of my house, a tandem of sixteen galloping hooves.

What to do, follow the horses, or go and see how Martin was? I decided on the latter. I told him I would pull him out with my truck in a minute. And after putting the horses away, feeding them, and locking the gate, I did that.

Finally I came home. I was shaking with cold and hunger and was irrationally angry with my neighbor. But after warming up by the space heater I returned to my book on Aristotle. Beside my text on the table was also yesterday's mail, and one packet was addressed to me. It was an advertisement for a book about the art of taming horses. I sifted through it, and an idea popped into my head. I went upstairs to my room and got a stamp and a large envelope. Then I looked up Mrs. Petunski's address.