

West Virginia Washout

Sharon Whitehill

[In the spring of 1984 I taught a writing workshop at Meredith Manor, an equestrian college in Parkersburg, West Virginia, in exchange for riding lessons with instructor Bodo Hangen. The following is my journal account of the experiences of those memorable two weeks.]

May 21.

Twelve noon, and already I'm done in.

I feared when I signed up for these dressage lessons that I'd be out of my league, and any fantasies I might have had about hearing Bodo say, "Why, you're very *good!*" evaporated in the first five minutes. I felt like a dumb kid in an old body: my hands bobbed, my back wasn't straight, my seat was bad, I didn't drive with my lower leg.

Bodo, however, was indulgent; he called me into the middle of the ring, gave me a mini-lecture about how the horse's mouth feels when he's on the bit, sent me back out, called me in again. When he discovered I hadn't been on a horse for several years he was appalled and was even more lenient, letting me do a rising trot, for instance, when everyone else in the class was doing a sitting trot.

After it was over I felt like a rag. The heat got to me as much as the trauma to my joints and muscles: the skin-tight breeches I'd borrowed from Heather (made of a scratchy non-breathing nylon) seemed permanently sealed to my legs, and I'd made the mistake of wearing a long-sleeved navy pullover. Only 10:00 a.m., and already nearly ninety degrees. But before I could tend to myself I had to walk my big white horse Masterpiece round and round until he cooled, rub him down, unwrap his legs, and pick his hoofs.

On the way back to my apartment on the hill I ran into Heather's sister Faith—me sweating and horsy, she in high heels and stockings and a pretty short-sleeved suede dress of pinky-beige. Her hair is thick and dark and worn loose on her shoulders; mine was flattened and damp from my hardhat. White horsehairs festooning my navy blue chest seemed the final indignity.

None of this was what I've been envisioning—none of it.

May 22

Today in Bodo's class I was terrible again—worse even than before because of all my sore muscles. Masterpiece ignored even my most rudimentary signals, and once he cut right in front of a girl on a sorrel. Worst of all, though, was when I was told to canter and couldn't get him to do even that. Bodo just laughed and said not to bother.

This was more of an insult than a relief. Bodo yells at everyone else—even at Sibylle, the instructor who complains about the rock-music station he has blaring whenever he rides (announcer and ads and all). "I *vill* lower it," he shouted at Sibylle today. "I haff just told za groom to lower it. But, no, I vill not turn it off!"

There goes The Great Man, I say to myself whenever I see him.

He is handsome in a severe, German kind of way: skin stretched tight over planes and angles, ramrod straight posture. And of course he's a superb rider, horseman, and trainer. But he's also arrogant, volatile, and conceited. He always has to be right.

He blew up, for example, at an ex-rodeo rider called D.C. who had jerked his horse's reins to keep from falling off. "You survived on his mouth," Bodo said contemptuously.

But D.C. was mad, too. "You damn right—I ain't gonna hit no dirt."

"I've hit more dirt than you ever have," Bodo shot back.

"Bullshit," shouted D.C. "Man, I'll survive on a horse's mouth, or on his ears, or on his *ass* before I'll get myself killed!"

They both had a point, of course. But The Great Man couldn't yield an inch.

May 24

After the riding was over today my head felt like it was splitting in two under my hot heavy helmet, and when I got back to the apartment my throat was so dry I drank four glasses of water straight down. I don't think I can take much more of this, especially during a heatwave.

I *am* modifying my first impressions of people, though. D.C., for example, turns out to be a real troublemaker—I've heard from several sources that he abuses the horses and is high on drugs much of the time. And, riding or teaching, Bodo's a marvel to watch.

"Shorten rein, careful. Close lower leg. What iss your name—Audrey? Vith him, be careful; he is a very forward-going horse. Even it's easier said than done, holding him vith your lower legs. *Regulate*." And, in a few minutes, "There...better, Audrey. Ja vohl. Look at *her*

there!”

Audrey was beaming. Such praise is rare.

May 27.

It’s Sunday and I’ve just returned from a walk. No lesson on weekends, thank heaven.

It rained yesterday, and now the air seems positively *alive* with motion: butterflies and insects darting, creek-water swirling, grasses and branches swaying, drops falling through the leaves. I saw spit-balls on stems, wildflowers like tiny stars and bells, glittering jewels of rain strung like beads on webs. I smelled cedar and the sweetness of roadside weeds. I heard the hum and buzz and drone of insects, the clanking of tin cans as two cows plodded through a dump, the chunk-chunk-chunk of a helicopter patrolling Interstate 77, the wind in the pines, the liquid bubbling of the creek. I was struck by the contrasts: rusting cars in lush green fields, pretty gardens bordering shacks.

Along the road I noticed a tiger cat centered in an old tire and washing its face, a fat woman wearing a print blouse, a grubby man tinkering under the hood of the car, a cute little girl in overalls, doomed to grow up ignorant. And on my way back I met two kids who wanted to chat.

Girl: (pointing to the sky) There’s rain and sun at the same time. That means the devil’s beating his wife.

Me: Really?

Girl: (nodding) The devil wants to put me in hell. But I won’t go there ’cause I’m saved. I’m going up to heaven. (points to sky again)

Boy: (to me) Are you saved?

Me: I don’t know. Are you?

Boy: (carelessly) Oh, sure. I bin saved since I was three years old..

Girl: (solemnly, to me) I don’t think you’re saved.

Me: No, probably not. But what about Skippy?

Girl: (laughing) Him? He’s a *dog*! Animals don’t go to heaven—they stay on *land*.

“Oh, the Aldriches,” Faith laughed when I mentioned the incident. “They’re Baptists.”

Several of us were sitting in the sun outside Blue Barn, perched on the high bench that hangs from the wall with our legs dangling. A

hoof drumming against a stall inside the barn makes the whole bench vibrate.

As Faith went on talking about the Aldriches—how the mother carries around a big paddle and hits the children with it—I watched a flock of tiny birds fluttering in a clump of spilled hay.

“The thing I’ll remember best about being here,” Sally was saying, “is the time Laura had to hit Dewey with a shovel.”

“It was while he was still a stallion,” Laura explained. “He had me trapped in the corner of his stall and he came at me. Biting and mean and ready.” She hopped down from the bench. “Time for noon feed.”

Wild whinnies bore this out, echoing from barn to barn.

“And time to turn myself into another person,” said Lynn, disappearing into the shed and re-emerging in her riding gear.

I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes. The sun was hot on my arms. Even with my eyes shut I could distinguish each sound:

Riding boots clunking as Lynn walked away.

A truck passing slowly, wheels crunching on gravel.

A pail clanging against cement.

The rasp of a rake against a hard clay floor.

Rock music on the radio.

A horse shaking off flies as a dog shakes off water.

A pervasive chorus of munching: oats.

May 29.

An incredible past 24 hours. This is a Memorial Day I’ll never forget.

I got back to the apartment later than usual after my lesson—for once I hadn’t rushed back to peel myself out of my tight boots and breeches, but had stayed to watch Bodo ride Paragon and give a lesson to a woman who’d come all the way from Cincinnati with her own horse. (I find myself increasingly impressed with Bodo—and amused by his diction: “Vatch a little bit out, please,” he said to the student observers resting their chins on the arena gate. “Vatch a little bit your chin.”)

I noticed it was raining hard again; it had been all day. But after I got home and had a hot shower I didn’t pay much attention until I heard shouts that seemed to be coming from The Fort, the girls’ dormitory next door. Then I looked out the window. And where yesterday there had been “the liquid bubbling of the creek,” I now beheld a

for my warm dry apartment on the hill, and guilty because I wasn't about to get my feet wet or to risk my life with panicked horses.

When it began to get dark, with the rain still pouring down, I went back inside and began drinking wine. Soon Marsha appeared, her West Virginia accent unintelligible with anxiety—when she said “pulled” I heard “poohed,” when “little” I heard “leo”—at being unable to get the German shepherd puppy out of Heather's trailer. Soon we heard shouts, though, and a four-wheel-drive vehicle appeared with students hanging out the windows and sitting on the roof to ferry her across the ugly orange torrent where the road had once been. Later Laura joined us, and the three of us sat in the dark with the puppy, two feeble flashlights, and my bottle of wine.

“I don't suppose,” I said to them, “I'll be taking any more lessons after this.”

It grew darker and the rain kept coming. Much later, about three in the morning, I heard voices and walkie-talkies. Road crews, I guess, come to inspect the damage.

May 30.

The electricity was back on by morning.

But if yesterday's world was a world transformed, today's was a world in ruins. Saddles, bridles, equipment soaked. Inches and inches of silt in the arenas. Horses knee-deep in slop (but munching and whickering and looking around as usual). Rubble and brush packed into the observation area of Long Arena where just yesterday I rode my crotch raw on Masterpiece. Students up to their shins in wet mud—Sally and Rebecca even had a mudfight. A portajohn on its side on the wrong side of campus. The irises flattened and whipped.

Amid the muck and refuse and destruction, we were all reduced to song-titles: “What A Difference A Day Makes,” “The Big Muddy,” “River, Stay Away From My Door.”

Yet everywhere, individuals and crews and machines were already at work. Since the floodwater was full of raw sewage from the shacks upriver, and full of diesel from the oil rigs and petroleum supplies farther on, each horse was having its temperature taken twice a day and was being watched for diarrhea. Students were shoveling silt out of stalls and hauling wheelbarrows full of mud and water out to the manure pits and back. Water pumps and bulldozers were at work in the arenas, while a cleaning company van made the rounds of the dorms. Insurance adjustors and surveyors walked around with clip-

boards, and Ron Meredith talked cheerfully of drying out electric motors and ordering tons of slag and sand and hauling in more hay.

“Did you find my mirror?” asked Bodo.

“Wa-al, actually, I found several,” drawled Ron.

Laura was shoveling what was left of the pile of wet sawdust from the shed. Faith picked her way around in pale green slacks and white tennis shoes. Heather and Jo waded in puddles to wash the mud off their boots.

Friday’s graduation, they say, will proceed on schedule.