

Stable

Why had I promised?

Because my sister had asked me in November. Christmas seemed a long way off in November, and I like horses. She kept two in town, I got to ride now and then, and she would be away this Christmas. Could I feed them once or twice over the holiday?

Today, on Christmas Eve, I still liked horses. But with dusk falling, the November promise tasted bitter in my mouth. The day had passed in a blur, marathon cleaning, presents not wrapped, last-minute obligations, and probably no sleep tonight. This was all done in love, but sometimes Christmas never quite came for me. Afterward, I'd find myself anticipating the day as if it hadn't already passed by while I was busy and exhausted.

But horses need feed. I had given my word, and I knew them by name – Sugar and Smokey. White and black, they nickered and ambled out of the shadows at the sound of my car door and the gate chain. Their peaceful exhaling made streamers of pale vapor in the graying light. The pasture sat well back from a semi-rural city street, trees, brush and scattered houses concealing it from casual traffic.

I dragged the gate shut and felt a quick chill of isolation but looked again at the horses. Easy swaying necks, relaxed ears, not too pricked, not laid back. They were thinking food, not fear, and their calm made it unlikely that some human danger lurked there – hidden to me maybe, but not to them. And there could be no haste in the pasture either. No sudden movements that spooked horses, no matter how fast I needed to get this done.

Sugar and Smokey loomed close in the fading sunset, then fell in a couple of feet behind me, their hooves thudding on the grass before striking slow and solid on the hard-trodden path to the horse shed. The little building was an informal affair, weathered, gap-planked here and there, but the roof didn't leak.

Through the wide door, I sidestepped the horses, and once inside, breathed in a sudden and strong, earthy fragrance: thick straw, alfalfa hay, grain and much more – the ancient odor of stables. For the first time in the whole day, the clamor in my brain stopped. I remembered what *day* was here. Here with me in a stable, at evening, surrounded by the honest smells of friendly animals.

I scooped grain from a barrel and thought about Mary and her baby, with Joseph, shoulder to withers in a place like this. The horses chomped at the feed with contented switches of their tails. I watched, made sure the barrels were secured, and looked about for other small tasks. But it was time to leave.

Stepping outside to face west, I saw the December evening star, brilliant in the clarity of a blue-dark, Oklahoma sky, above a horizon rimmed with translucent layers of red and gold.

Thank you, God, for that November promise.

Nothing had changed about the night to come. The packages still needed wrapping. There would be little sleep. But this year, I would not miss Christmas.

I had been to the stable.

Phyllis Dominguez