The White Horse

You want to know about the white horse, right? I'll tell you this, a lot of my memories I can't depend on, but the white horse I'll never forget.

After the storm I remember kicking the worst of the snow away with my boot, then dropping down on my hands and knees to wipe the surface clean with the arm of my jacket. There he was, harness and all, the white horse living up to his name -The Ghost - exactly where he fell through the ice more than a week before. Being a kid and a fool at that, I was hoping he'd crawled out on his own though two grown men couldn't do as much with a rope over his neck. We'd left him for dead with the blizzard closing in.

He was my brother, Walter's horse. Raised him from a colt and named him after some rich man's thoroughbred he saw in a magazine. Funny thing was, that animal was born as gray as sassafras bark, but he kept on getting lighter and lighter until he was the color of the snow that covered him in the end.

It couldn't have been more than a few days before the accident that I got a letter from Walter, from France where he was in training. Among the things he wrote was that a fellow might get himself court-martialed for falling asleep on duty, disobedience and of course, desertion. He asked about The Ghost. 'How's that old boy doing? I can't get attached to the artillery horses here. I'm afraid we're going to lose so many of them once we get into the thick of it.'

Those who didn't know Walter said he was *backward.* Others said weak because he was shy and stuttered. The truth was he steadied my hand when I was aiming wrong a couple of times. For Instance, when me and Leroy Weller stole a silver dollar from John

Tritt while he was passed out drunk along the road after a carnival. Walter shoved me around. Made me give it back. We crept over to Tritt's farm before dawn and slipped it down a boot on his front porch.

The winter of 1918 was mean, even for days when people lived a lot closer to the elements than they do now. And we were icemen, harvested ice out of the ore holes and canal beds we dammed up below the Pine Grove Furnace. Because Walter was one of the few boys who actually signed up for Mr. Wilson's war and lied about his age to do it, it fell to me to leave school and help my father and brother-in-law, Orrin.

In death the white horse got to be quite a celebrity before the thaw came and we hauled him out for good. People came from as far off as Carlisle to see the white horse. I can still picture the young children leaning down to pat the ice. I must have started a dozen letters to Walter to let him know what had happened to The Ghost, but I always finished by tearing them to pieces. Mom said, "Your brother has it rough enough over there without you going and upsetting him about that lousy horse."

She was forty-five and expecting her ninth child. Walter and me were her youngest. There was a stillborn, and then along came our five sisters.

Nobody ever said sawing ice was the easiest of jobs. First, the whole area had to be marked off with a straightedge. Then a horse dragged a plow fitted with a bunch of chisels, each one set a little deeper than the last, across the ice sheet to score the blocks. Once that was done, we used crowbars to knock the cakes apart and ash poles to guide them to shore where the wagons were loaded.

We cut two grades of ice - box ice and drinking ice - because, you see, people didn't care to have algae floating in their lemonade on the Fourth of July. Most of the drinking ice we took from the canals because it was thinner and cleaner. But the Ghost met with his bad luck out on the lake, the ore hole, scoring box ice.

The Ghost knew he was in trouble before any of us did. He was spooked. I could see the whites of his eyes. Animals are strange that way; they hear plenty we don't and that horse felt the world coming apart under his feet.

"What the hell's wrong with him?" my father asked with The Ghost fussing and prancing, putting most of his weight on his hind quarters. We all thought he was going to sit down like a damn mule. Just about the time we realized what the problem was, the crust opened up like a trap door. Suddenly the Ghost was in the water thrashing around and the sled was on the brink. My brother-in-law, Orrin, was scrambling not to slide in with him and to unhook the rig at the same time my father was trying to get a rope around his neck. He was snorting and squealing something terrible.

They worked until their strength was gone and then some to keep his head above water and hoist him out, but it was hopeless. I'd guess the Ghost weighed in at about twelve hundred pounds. Eventually we watched him slip under the surface and pretty soon he was still.

The weather was warming up by the time we got the word on Walter. The farm kids were chasing the delivery wagon, begging for slivers left over by the pick when the blocks were chopped into smaller pieces for the customers' iceboxes. Months had passed since we'd lost the white horse. I came home from the icehouse and found my mother rocking in her walnut chair in the corner of the kitchen. Her hair was loose. She

hadn't bothered to put it up that morning. There was no supper on the stove, her just rocking away, a piece of yellow paper below her swollen belly.

"Your brother's dead," she moaned, biting down on her lower lip so hard I thought she'd take it off. "He's gone. Walter's gone."

"Can I see the letter?" I asked when the words finally came. I just wanted to look at it. I just wanted to see my brother's name. I was furious. At who, I didn't know. The Huns. Wilson. But she folded it into a tight square, no more than an inch, and clenched it in her small fist. And she kept rocking. The pine floors were aching, creaking, under her constant motion. When my father got in, they climbed the stairs and didn't come down again that evening.

I knew one thing for sure; I was going to have a hard time sleeping. My head was full of nothing save my brother. I felt like I'd been set adrift by this tragedy and was struggling to maintain my footing every bit as hard as I ever did on the ice in the winter. Glancing at his clothes on the hooks overhead, my mind was racing to nights when summer left our room a firebox and we'd sneak a bottle of Pop's homemade pear wine and head for the icehouse. We could do what the sons of doctors and the sons of lawyers could not. Atop those sawdust packed pyramids, we could see our breath in the middle of summer.

I'd crack a chunk off one of the blocks with a broom handle, pick it up and knock it against the wall. "I'm gonna hit em out of the park like Shoeless Joe," I'd say. Walter, having a few years on me, had more serious ideas. I was the only person who knew he wanted to be a veterinarian, a horse doctor.

Well, they say that sobbing is the heartbeat of sorrow, and it was strong and steady into the morning. I could hear Pop trying to soothe her. "You need to think of the baby, Abbey. Take it easy."

"But they're saying Walter shot himself," she cried. "My son didn't take his own life. My son is no coward. Damn them."

"Abbey, we ain't never going to know what happened over there. The sort of things he saw." My Pop never served his country, but his father was a Civil War veteran. Nearly died in a camp like Andersonville, only worse he liked to tell. Weighed ninety pounds when they let him go and he was a man over six feet.

You probably want to know if I think Walter killed himself. It must be a thousand times I've asked myself that question. There was a side to him none of us ever got a good look at, but it's like Pop said, we'll never know. I don't have a clue as to what became of the letter from the War Department. After that they never spoke of how Walter died. Not with me. Not with nobody. He was killed in the war and it was as simple as that.

We all blamed what happened to Walter when the baby was born *different*. Of course, now I know she was plain too old to be having children. Mom named him Eugene after a town in Oregon where her sister was living. And when he got older, she taught him how to make potholders out of rags and he peddled them the better part of his life. Twenty cents a piece. When she could, she'd go with him because it was a shame, but some folks did seem to enjoy cheating him.

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I wish he was still here. I could use the company. My son Ray's gone six years in October. My great-granddaughter Angie's near Philly. She used to show up out of the blue and want to take me to the track. That kid's got a bad drinking problem.

When the ice business went under, I got a route with a former customer, a dairy, but by the late 60's, people would sooner run to the convenience stores for a quart of milk or a loaf of bread. I was ready to retire anyway. Then after the state bought the ore hole and turned it into a public lake, I rented a cottage up there and started selling bait to the campers and boy scouts.

I was on my own til four years ago, til the county said my place wasn't sanitary. Too many dogs they complained and my septic system wasn't up to code. I do miss my hounds. Both of my folks lasted to damn near a hundred, that's why I'm unlucky enough to be hanging on in the poorhouse. Oh, I know they call it a nursing home now, but that don't fool nobody.

I told many a kid at the lake the story about the white horse. Every once in a while, one of them would swear up and down they'd seen him, caught a glimpse of that white horse. I'd just nod because I had too. At night in my dreams. That old horse and my brother, Walter. Staring up at me. White and unchanged. Numb to time.

Lorenzo McAlister 1999

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