

TOM AND HIS COFFEE-COLORED HORSE

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Tom leaped from the school bus and yelled his goodbyes. Mrs. Lee, the driver, waved to him. The bus rumbled away. There was a snort behind him. Tom turned to find his horse leaning over the fence, blowing frosty clouds in the icy air.

"Hi, Coffee," called Tom. He scrambled through the ditch beside the lane to his house. "You always meet me. I can depend on you." He rubbed the little brown horse on the nose. Then climbed the cornerpost and slipped onto Coffee's back. Tom galloped Coffee bareback the half mile though the pasture to Tom's house.

Later, as Tom sat down for dinner, he was surprised to see his father enter the house frowning.

"You didn't feed your horse this morning, Tom."

"I'm sorry. I forgot." Tom had overslept. He had almost missed the bus.

"You forgot twice last week," said his father. "In this cold, it's even more important to break the ice on the water trough. I found Coffee standing there licking the ice this morning."

Tom lowered his head. He was no longer hungry.

"Tom, when you got your horse, you agreed to take care of him. You'll have to find a way to remember." He stood over Tom a minute, then patted him on the shoulder. "It's not just a job, Tom. If you take care of Coffee, he'll take care of you. Life's like that."

Tom didn't eat much. He even skipped his homework. He had to think of some way to remember Coffee every morning, no matter what.

He climbed into bed saying over and over, "Feed Coffee, feed Coffee." Then Tom sighed. It wouldn't work. As soon as he fell asleep, he'd forget. Suddenly Tom sat up. He knew. He jumped from bed, grabbed his marble jar, and raced barefoot to the hall closet. He took his gloves from the hook and stuffed a marble into every finger. That would do it. Tom went to sleep with a pleased feeling that night.

Morning came cold and gray. It was snowing. Tom was slow getting up. He gulped his breakfast and gathered up his books. It was time for the school bus. Tom struggled into his heavy coat and pulled on his gloves. His fingers touched marbles. "Oh, no," groaned Tom. "I've got to take care of Coffee. I'm late now. I'll miss the bus."

Responsibility first, decided Tom. Tom measured the oats into the feed bucket, then pounded on the ice. It was thick. He snatched a hammer from the shed and smashed the ice. He gave Coffee a quick pat, and ran down the lane toward the road.

The snow was falling harder. The bus was late. Tom climbed aboard. For once he was glad the school bus had been delayed.

All morning the snow fell. The wind picked up, threatening to turn the storm into a blizzard. At noon, school was dismissed. The buses headed home through the blowing snow.

They had dropped off about half the children from Tom's bus when the driver turned to Tom. "You're next, Tom," she said. "It's getting so bad I can't see the road. Help me find the turnoff to your lane. We'll all stay at your house tonight."

"Sure, Mrs. Lee. It'll be great having all this company!"

Tom stood beside the driver peering through the snow. "I think it's just ahead, Mrs. Lee." Tom pointed.

A terrific blast of wind turned everything white. Mrs. Lee stepped on the brakes. Tom could see nothing, but he felt the bus slowly tilt sideways until at last he had to lean against the window.

"What's happened?" asked Tom. The other children were shouting the same question.

"we've gone off the road," said Mrs. Lee. "Don't be frightened. We're not far from Tom's house."

Tom stared out the front window. There was nothing but swirls of white. Then, through a gap in the storm, he glimpsed a familiar form. Tom pushed open the tilted door and pulled himself into the blizzard. Mrs. Lee shouted at him, but Tom heard another sound—Coffee's whinney! Tom plunged blindly across the snow-filled ditch, then came against the barbed wire. He heard a horse whuff. Coffee was nuzzling him.

"Coffee! You didn't have to meet me in this blizzard. You'll freeze." So would he, if he stayed here. He looked back, but couldn't see the bus. Anyway, the bus was going to be awfully cold. If they stayed on it through the night, they might all freeze.

Tom made his decision. He climbed the fence post and mounted Coffee. The snow stung his face. The wind tore at his body. He leaned forward and buried his face in Coffee's mane. This time the little horse plodded. Tom had no where they were. He felt numb when Coffee stopped.

"Go on, Coffee," he urged. "Don't give up." But Coffee wouldn't budge. Tom squinted into the snow. There, at the end of Coffee's nose, Tom finally made out a gate—the corral gate!

Tom slid off and opened the gate. "First things first, old fellow," said Tom, and he led the horse into the safety of the shed. Then Tom followed the fence hand over hand till he reached the house. He opened the door and tumbled into the arms of his mother and father.

It took his father three difficult trips in the jeep to bring everyone from the bus to the house. Finally all were gathered safely around the roaring fireplace, chattering happily. Then Tom began pulling on his coat and gloves.

"Where are you going, son?" asked his father.

“Out to the shed. I think I’ll rub down Coffee and snap on his blanket.” Tom stopped and grinned. “We’ve got a deal. I take care of him. He takes care of me.”

Tom’s father smiled. “Right, son. But it’s still blowing pretty hard. Hold on, I’ll go with you.” And they headed for the shed together.