



## The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman  
Columnist

### A Raid for Horseflesh

Two weeks ago my mother called and dropped a bomb on our house. She asked if I was sitting down. I wasn't, but I did, quickly, because that's what sons do when their mothers start a conversation that way. And if you are a mother reading this, please don't do that.

She was rolling her bed, she said, selling her saddle, and wanted to know if I would take her last good horse. That's heady stuff from a woman who has been horseback from birth, a natural born daughter of the desert cattle and horse country.

But she's getting older. She can still ride, still loves it, but the horse needs more than she can muster at this stage. I was shocked by the development, but I was also proud of her. She did the incredibly hard work of facing the world the way it actually is, of evaluating her place in it, and then making a decision without deluding herself, without caving-in to pride or sentimentality. Not everyone does that. Human reasoning can often spring

from a poisoned well of motivations. So score a point for introspection.

We talked. She cried. And honestly, it got a little dusty on my end, too. Maybe it was just the abruptness of it, or the suddenly audible and disconcerting friction of sand pouring through the hourglass, that maddening time-piece that ultimately runs out on us all.

When an era comes to an end like that, the light changes. The moon slides in front of the sun, things go dark, the birds go quiet, and we live for a moment in a strange silvery shade. And then slowly, by increments, the world lights up again. That's how it felt. That's how it still feels.

But I said yes, of course, I'd take the horse, and give her a home forever. And she will never leave our family, for all that she represents. I didn't need to think about it.

I don't think of myself as a great horseman. I'm probably average. Maybe worse than that. I've done some incredibly stupid things on horses, been dumped in rivers, on slicks of rhyolite, or pitched without grace into the buckbrush. It's happened more times than I care to remember, in fact, and probably reached its zenith during my tour of duty on the horseback outfits of northern Nevada. The new guy in the bunkhouse gets the knuckleheads, roughstring horses, a collection of castoffs and chickenfeeders, straight cowboy horses — which usually means rank, dumb, or both, and always leads to magnificent wrecks out in the sage.

But I love them anyway,



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

Saying goodbye to life's central passion is never easy.

and I love to ride, and try to do it without pretending to be Buck Brannaman or Chris Cox, or while regurgitating pithy horse-psychology from the lollipop trainer-of-the-day. Maybe I've developed my own brand of arrogance, but I despise horse-traders and horsey nonsense and that strange confluence of money and dishonesty and self-deception that seems to surround a growing contingent of the equine universe. I just want to ride, and maybe see some good country from the back of a decent horse.

My imagination is problematic in all this, because I can't let anything just be what it is. So I had to recast the trip as a raid for horseflesh, because that sounds sexy, aligns with my intellectual conceits, and most importantly served as an

efficient let-off valve for the highly concentrated sorrow of watching my mom bow away from her life's central passion.

And I was lucky. Raiding alone is never fun, and I was able to find an eager partner to ride along. Oh, and he brought his guitar.

We blasted out of Sisters, through Silver Lake and Paisley, down through Lakeview and finally made the old home place, where we scouted canyon petroglyphs, imagined a world long gone, ate like kings, built a bonfire, and Jim played and sang while the fire sawed and the stars came out and I kept one eye fixed on my dear old mom.

In the morning, early, we loaded the horse, mom cried, maybe we all did a little bit, and then we drove out, a few

miles of dirt to the hardball where we made the hard turn north, the horse riding quiet in the back, and the sun just throwing light out over the desert.

It was a good winter on the home range. The mountains are still holding snow on the peaks, and the valley basins are greener than I've seen them in years. It was so good, so brilliant, that I feel a little possessive of it all, a little guarded about sharing it with anyone just now.

So forget what I said. I made it all up. Whatever plans you might have, don't go there. The great basin in spring is a horrendous place. The mountains are ugly. The hot-springs are cold. The sky isn't blue and the meadow-larks don't sing. And anyway, I already raided the last good horse.

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