

Joey

by Rachel Escott, 2008

Not many people come down this lane. Not much happens here at all, really. The odd car puffing out dust as it slams in the potholes. Sometimes a mother with a toddler in tow, both too bored to stay at home and out looking for something to stare at. If they catch sight of me, I'll do.

So if there is some movement I'll glance up. Of course I will, it's only natural. If I'm awake. It might just be the woodpigeons come to brag on the wires. But it's something.

I can't remember how long I've been living here. Four years? The days run together and so the years slip by. It's not a bad place, in itself. Spacious. But when the wind howls across the plain beyond the village and whips rain around the eaves, I can't help shivering. So I know when the seasons change. When I first came here I could get about quite well, but recently my feet have been getting me down. They throb, and I can't seem to put them down with the confidence I used to. They're unsteady and all I can do is hobble. Sometimes it's too much of an effort to go and get something to eat even. Maybe that's why I sleep so much these days.

The truth is, I don't mind being left alone and forgotten. Far better to be left in peace to fend for myself as best I can than have to put up with a constant mothering by a crowd of folks. Being tapped so gently and pityingly, my hair smoothed. Always asked, how am I? Told I'm doing fine. Being patronised like a youngster. Wanting to keep me clean, make me take exercise. Or having to behave how they think is right. Having to be friendly and accommodating, sunny-tempered. No: better to be left alone than to put up with any of that.

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When I hear a car door slam and men's voices, I look up. It's one of those upright cars with high tyres that the farmers round here seem so fond of. One of the men looks familiar, the one with white hair and a face mottled purple by cold and drink. He's wearing old brown cords and a blue anorak and his hair is flying in the damp wind. He looks impatient. What you'd call cheesed off. For some reason he's carrying a bundle of old ropes in his hand. With his other hand he slams the car door shut.

The other two I don't know. You can't tell them apart hardly: both built like barns and dark heads of hair like they're wearing helmets. They're scarcely less colourful in the face than whitey, but tending towards the red.

It's unusual enough to see people stopping along here, so I haul myself up to look closer. It's not easy, on my feet. But I said that already, didn't I? Those two – the ones with whitey – have got big thick jumpers on. I can practically smell the wet wool and body odour from here. They've got odd flaps on their legs. I've never seen that before. Stiff planks, like, that seem to tie up behind. But not so

stiff as the planks in the barn wall, nor as long. I've got it! Leather.

I edge closer but keep myself half hidden. Whitey comes right towards me across the lane and now I can hear him clicking his tongue in that impatient way. The others follow him, and one of them even unlatches the gate to come in. OK, so now I'm concerned. I come out from hiding and march straight at them, thinking they'll get wary and back off. Well, I say march. Of course, I'm capable of no such thing. There's no authority in my shuffle, which is why they hold their ground and whitey even moves closer. He seems to be talking but in that low, would-be-soothing way that they all put on when they visit, so I don't quite catch what he's saying. Both of the leather-legs have brought some sort of contraption from the car. A wooden stand which the taller one is unfolding, and a green canvas bag with poles sticking out at all angles. Now what's all that about?

I can sense that something's wrong. Smell it, you might say. I've always had a fine sense of smell. But these leather-bound men with their rough jumpers and even rougher faces and their contraptions – it's all new to me. I stand at bay a few moments, wondering what to do. I can't make out their intentions, you see. Facing them off didn't work, so should I turn and flee? I'm hesitating, but already my leg muscles are twitching with the memory of running and my heart in my chest is pumping expectantly. I feel my eyes have widened. My nostrils certainly have; the air is surging into them, a slippery cold that reaches down into my throat.

Just as I'm on the point of turning, whitey reaches out a hand and slaps it down on my head. I jerk back, but his fingers have twisted deep into my hair and he hangs on, painfully tearing the roots as I thrash to free myself. With his other hand he shakes the pile of ropes and the fear runs cold through me. It's a harness of some sort, a way of trussing me up, for sure. Suddenly he's in charge as he slides the rope behind my head, grazing my ears. We're nose-to-nose, eye-to-eye, but there's no triumph in his, just the same grumpy impatience.

I pull back again, tugging hard, and I'm sure my eyes are rolling as if I were crazed. We tussle in a tug-of-war that, if it was left to whitey and me, I would have won. I can see the rope is burning his hands as it's burning my cheeks but, you see, I'm desperate to escape whereas he – well, he seems irritated. It's not an emotion that would win wars. But this war isn't just between me and him. There's the other two, the lumps of walking rock with their leather legs. They start hitting me, not hard it's true; more like slapping me around, forcing me slowly forwards till we're near the tree by the gate. That's where they tie me up, finally, with a length of rope so short I can do nothing, barely even shake my head to clear my thoughts.

And straight away they're back to all that soft-talking and gentle taps and strokes, like I was a pet. The "Come on, Joey, calm down now, there's a good fella." The "Won't take a moment, you won't even feel it." The "It's for your own good you know, you'll be much better afterwards." As if I could trust them one second. As if I was an imbecile.

I can feel leather legs number one run his hand down my thigh, ever so gently,

ever so crooningly. He can see I'm about to kick him so, sly bugger that he is, he sticks me with some kind of pin just above the ankle, and as I draw my foot back in surprise, he grabs it and twists it up against his leather thigh. His mate hands him a piece of metal covered in ridges. Now, at last, I understand, as the grating shudders up through my hoof, along my shuddering back and down into the teeth that I bare in whitey's bored purple face.

The End

Joey

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