

Meg Armstrong

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Intro to Creative Writing

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The Right Call

I could see white puffs of breath come out of my horse's nose as I rounded another corner. I hadn't been enthusiastic about going riding today; I was discouraged by the dark. The night sky felt like a message telling me to go home and wrap myself in blankets and comfort, as if I were a slumbering creature anticipating the arrival of spring. My fingers had felt numb through my thin riding gloves when I saddled up, and my horse nearly slipped as I walked him down the short, icy path to the indoor ring. I was lucky that day. I had been assigned Hayden to ride for my riding lesson, and he was one of the most mellow, agreeable, but motivated horses at the barn. I was rarely assigned to him because the instructors liked to use him for the smaller children. Hayden didn't care if they tugged at his mouth or gave him commands incorrectly.

I was grateful for the fact we weren't in the outdoor ring. The indoor riding ring didn't have any heating, but it had a tarp-like ceiling and walls, which helped block out the wind. I could hear that wind howling angrily at this, trying to break through the structure. The metal supports on the ceiling creaked ominously. Every now and then, enormous chunks of accumulated ice and snow would slide down from the top of the indoor ring, making a terrible scraping noise. It was loud enough to scare a human, and most of the horses would react to the sound like they were experiencing an avalanche. Hayden had decided it wasn't a problem. He didn't startle when the ice slid twice during warm-ups.

When the ice first started sliding that winter, it terrified me. When a horse spooks at something, even a quick sidestep is jarring. Every footstep a horse takes can be felt by the rider, and we depend on our understanding of the horse's rhythm to maintain balance. When a horse gets scared and suddenly gallops to the middle of the ring or skitters to a stop with a toss of its head, it feels like a wrong note has been played. The rider is usually left rushing to get themselves back in the proper position so they don't fall off. The unusual amount of snow that winter was causing all sorts of frustration, since the ice and snow sliding would spook the horses and thoroughly derail lessons.

We were having a group lesson that day, so two other girls were also in the ring on their own horses. A course of small jumps had been set up through the area, and after warmups we worked on our steering throughout the course.

"Five dollars, Meg!" My instructor, Brook, called to me from where she sat in the stands. She must have been wearing a dozen layers of coats and blankets. Brook liked to give visuals with her advice and refer back to them, making it sound like she was shouting random words and phrases at us. When she said "Five dollars," she meant, "You are holding the reins too loose and should pretend you are trying to hold onto a five dollar bill." I tightened the grip on my reins.

I had to concentrate in order to make sure Hayden was going deep into corners. He would guess which jump was next and try to go directly to the jump, and I'd need to correct his path. I took turns trying the course with the other two girls. Their horses were jumpy and anxious due to the ice sliding earlier, so they had a more difficult time than I did. When it was my turn again, though, it was Hayden's turn to be startled. We were just finishing a jump when a deafening "Pop!" resounded throughout the indoor ring. It was like a gun had been fired, causing the noise to echo throughout the ring. Hayden danced to the side, whipping his head around to find the

source of the noise. When everyone's horses calmed down, Brook had me start over from that jump. It was harder for me to focus on what I was doing, since I wasn't sure if another popping noise would come. Hayden and I were both making each other more tense.

After I finished, Brook had gotten up and was pacing around. "I think that came from the ceiling where all that ice is." She pointed up at the thick metal beams above us. The indoor ring's hanging lights illuminated the area, allowing us to see the looming shadow of ice on top of the ceiling. It reminded me of being inside a tent and someone placing a hand on it from the outside. Except instead of a tent, it was the size of a large gymnasium.

Hayden shifted under me uncomfortably as Brook instructed the next girl to try the course. It was more an exercise in her keeping her horse from moving too fast than with steering. Once she had managed to make it through the course, Brook walked into the ring and checked on the horses.

"I'm sorry, but I think I'm going to end this lesson early. I didn't like that noise from the ceiling, and the horses are getting too panicked." She said apologetically.

I looked down at her in shock. Brook had never ended a lesson early, no matter how poorly the horses were behaving. It was better for the horse's training to keep going until the behavior was corrected or improved, as long as it was safe to do so.

"I have a bad feeling about today," she admitted.

It takes about five to ten minutes to cool down a horse after exercise, which means walking them until they are no longer breathing heavily. Putting a horse straight into the stable could make them sick. We walked the horses for a couple of minutes, until we heard the popping noise again.

“We’re leaving now,” Brook announced. She had us dismount and leave the ring with our horses. When I tossed the reins over Hayden’s head to lead him on foot, he followed me out so quickly he almost trotted. The wind blasted my face as I exited into the open air. I finished cooling Hayden down by walking him outside the stable, and then had him stand inside as I removed his gear.

At that point, I heard a strange crash from outside the stable. I quickly put down Hayden’s saddle and checked outside to see what was going on. To my surprise, I couldn’t see anything. There was a massive cloud of dust in the direction of the indoor ring. The indoor ring, which I was in ten minutes earlier, had completely collapsed under the weight of ice and snow. Later, I found out that the popping noises were the sound of bolts coming out. Sometimes, it is best to go with someone’s hunches.