

# The Four FingereḀ Horse

By Michael Fine

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You don't think that a horse can stand and talk because horses don't do that. Horses stand on four legs. They sleep standing up. They graze on grass or come in to eat grain when they are put into a stall at night. They have hooves, not fingers with opposable thumbs. And they think the thoughts of horses, about the sweetness of new grass in the springtime, or the taste of molasses that gets mixed in with oats, or about the way the rain feels when it washes over them when they are grazing in a field. They see the way horses see, two great fields of vision with shapes and colors in that view, but without objects that have names. Horses see movement and decide – is the movement known or unknown, safe or dangerous. The response of horses to a sudden change is to run without thinking, and then to wait and see, once they have run far enough away to be safe. Horses feel vibrations in the ground, which come into the soft part of their hooves and then come up into their legs, and they smell everything – the grass and the leaves and the car exhaust from the street far away. They smell the snakes in the grass and the raccoons in the trees, though they don't know what those things are called. They smell the estrogens and testosterone in the urine of other horses, which is how they know who is present, what they want and when they want it, if wanting is what horses experience after all.

This horse was a palomino. Pale crème- yellow body, white mane and tail, and he had been around the block more than a few times. His back curved toward the earth a little; you could see his ribs under his coat; there were black scars on his face and flanks, and his tail and mane, though long enough, were raggedy, and not at all like the fluffy coiffured manes and tails you see on show or circus horses. The palomino had what horse people call a Roman nose – a big muzzle and big black nostrils – but his expression was not unintelligent, for a horse. That is to say, he looked at Perez when Perez walked into the field or the barn, and followed Perez with

his eyes when Perez walked from place to place. That's all. You can't say he appeared to be thinking.

It was Perez's habit to walk out to the barn twice a day. In the morning he let the horses out of the barn and mucked out the stalls. In the evening he'd bring the horses into the barn. The horses would come in from the field and would stand together near the gate, waiting for Perez to open it so they could go into their stalls. He'd put them in their stalls and feed them – a can of oats in the feedbox and a section of hay in the manger. He loved the wood and the smell of the barn, the resonance of the horses hooves on the wooden barn floor, which had an old, soulful music to it, and he loved the smell of sweet decay and the horses bodies, of the fresh cut grass smell of the hay combined with a certain mustiness because there was some moisture still in it when it got put away in the hayloft, so it mildewed just a little. Taken together the barn smelled of certainty, tradition, reliability and home. Of life everlasting the way it always was. Of the way horses had always been in barns, the place they came for the night to be safe. The barn took the wildness out of the horses. It made their lives orderly. They accepted the barn as part of their lives, and it brought them to Perez every night and gave him ownership and control in exchange for hay, grain and the regularity with which Perez let the horses in and out, every morning and night.

It amazed Perez that the horses did the same thing, the same way every day without question. In the morning, they would wait until Perez led them all out to the paddock, and they'd scamper out to the pasture together, galloping and bucking. They'd bite and kick at one another as they ran, just for the joy of a little rumble. Then he'd see them at midday, standing in the shade of a tree, still and dozing. They would always be at the gate in the evening, waiting to be fed. When Perez opened the gate they would each walk to their own stall without prompting or

any word or deed from Perez. It was hard to believe that they could all be so easily bribed by a can of oats and a section of hay, but it was so. If Perez had been a horse he would have fought for his freedom. To Perez the sweet green grass of the pasture and the opportunity to kick up one's heels and gallop across the open land just for the joy of it, for the joy of living, was just worth more than a measly can of oats. But Perez was not a horse.

And then one day Perez was late to feed.

It wasn't his fault. His rattling old pick-up blew a tire just outside the office of the town doctor whose office was overflowing with people. Old men and old women filled the waiting room but also stood outside in the sun, some smoking, others squatting, all looking abandoned, as if they believed that their private fears were all true and that this effort, coming to see a doctor, was misguided, a complete waste of time but something they felt compelled to do none the less. Mothers with babies and swarms of other children, many who were obscenely pregnant. The pregnant women looked about to burst, but they had the same expression of the old people. No hope. No excitement. No joy. They just sat there, swatting flies and waving their hats or paper fans to stay cool.

None of these people interested Perez, of course. But he needed to wade through this crowd to get the attention of the receptionist at the desk, just so he could ask to use the telephone. There were so many people waiting in line to register that it took what seemed like hours to do that – hours at least, until he lost patience and jumped the queue, elbowed his way to the desk and demanded attention.

But even what happened next happened slowly. The garage in town took forever to answer. Then it took hours again for them to send out a man. The man helped Perez jack the truck and take off the wheel. Then it took hours for the man to drive the wheel back to his shop, plug the hole, re-inflate the tire, drive it back and help Perez put it back on the truck.

The feed and grain store was long closed by the time that tire was fixed. So, no oats.

So it was after dark before Perez returned.

The horses were milling next to the gate, stamping their feet and whinnying. Something was the matter with the world.

Somehow Perez felt ashamed, embarrassed that he had failed in his mission, embarrassed that he was back late, after the sun set, and that the horses would not get their usual rations.

There were some oats still left in the bottom of the feed bin but not enough for all the horses to get their usual can. Less than half a can for each horse.

The palomino stood with his head over the gate, leaning into it. When Perez opened the latch, the horses rushed the gate. The force of their bodies knocked the gate into Perez and sent Perez sprawling. The horses' hooves exploded on the barn floor, like firecrackers or automatic rifle fire as they rushed into the barn. They snorted, whinnied, kicked, bucked and bit one another as they scrambled into their stalls to inhale what few oats Perez had to give them.

Perez picked himself up, brushed himself off, closed the stall doors and then closed the barn door. The horses took no notice of him at all. Somehow there was no justice in the world.

That night Perez dreamed about the palomino racing back and forth across the pasture, running full out, head down kicking and bucking as he ran to the tree line and then back. In the dream Perez was empty handed again and somehow the horse knew that. The palomino rose on his two hind legs and gestured with his front hooves, which had become hands but without thumbs, each with a hoof where the thumb should be, but with fingers! fingers outstretched at first, and then the forefinger of the horse's right foreleg pointing right at Perez. Then the palomino got back on four legs and commenced galloping back and forth across the pasture, testimony to not being fed.

The next day Perez got back into his rattley pickup, drove into town and bought oats at the feed store. He filled the large galvanized cans in which he stored the oats and put their tight fitting tops on so the rats and mice couldn't get at the feed. Then he opened the cans again, measured out a scoop for each horse, put the evening's ration in the feed bin of each stall and then closed the galvanized cans. The oats hissed as he emptied each bag into the galvanized cans and hissed again as he emptied each can into the feed bins. The barn had a thick, warm smell, like pudding, fetid and clean at once – old and everlasting -- and the darkness of the barn together with the way it smelled made it a place that was safe and trusted, a place where old ways hid and revealed themselves slowly and only when necessary. The barn was ready for the horses. The horses gathered at the paddock gate and rushed into their stalls, biting and kicking as they came into the barn. Order had been restored to the world.

But that night Perez dreamed about the palomino again, galloping back and forth, back and forth in the field. In his dream Perez marveled about the life that had come back to the old horse, about how he ran with the force and spirit of a young stallion commanding his herd. Perez hadn't known there was that much life left in the beast, who was pretty much just a bag of bones on four legs. In the dream the palomino stood on two legs again, and had the same four fingers on each foreleg, which he pointed at Perez as he waved those forelegs in the air, waving as if to say hello, as if he wanted to make sure Perez saw him.

It made no sense. The oats were back. Order had been restored to the world. Why Perez? What had he failed to understand?

Then, three days later, some men in a pickup truck came to Perez's farm. Three men sat in the cab. Two men stood in the bed. The men standing in the bed were armed and looked like they meant business. Perez had seen these men before in town, these and others like them driving too fast in these pickups, often with flags flying from the beds of the truck.

We need your support, the lead man in the pickup said. He was the man in front on the passenger's side and he had rolled down the window so he could talk to Perez. I stay out of politics, Perez said. I am a law abiding citizen. I pay my taxes. But I keep my opinions to myself. I vote for the person, not for the party. No party is perfect or serves all my interests. They all seem out only for themselves, Perez said.

You don't understand, the man in the truck said. We need your support. You will pay us a small amount every month, and he named a figure which was not a small amount. It was more than the amount Perez paid for oats and hay combined. This way nothing happens to your horses. To your house. To your barn or to your children or your fences.

I understand, Perez said. But that is more than I can afford to pay.

That is not our concern, the man in the truck said. We return Thursday. Have the money ready. The man in the truck banged his fist on the outside of the truck's door, and the truck backed up, turned around, and sped back in the direction from which it had come.

So it has come to this, Perez said. There are forces at play that I don't understand. Perez began to run numbers in his own mind. I can make one payment, he said to himself, but not two.

That night he dreamed of the palomino again. This time the palomino was running crosswise across the field and did not come to the gate, did not stand on his rear legs and did not gesture at Perez. But this time the palomino appeared to be short of breath and wheezing. He put his head down and bucked but that did not appear to be because he was either angry or full of life. Nothing like that. It just looked like he dipped his nose, looking for more or better air, and kicked his heels to maintain his balance.

The horse did not fall over. But it appeared that he would not be able to keep running for very long.

Thursday came. Perez put his payment together. He found small, old soiled bills in small denominations and put them into a used envelope with the address on the front crossed off, so the envelope became so fat it couldn't be closed. Let them understand what they are doing to me, Perez thought, and to us.

The pickup truck that had held armed men before came back, but only with the driver, not the lead man or the men with guns who had stood in the bed before. The man drove into an open area between the barn and the paddock, the area the horses crossed when Perez opened the gate and let them into the barn for the night. The man in the pickup rolled down his window. Perez went up to the window and handed him the overstuffed envelope.

"I'll be back. In a month. Same day," the man said. Then he rolled up his window and sped away, the truck's tires crunching the gravel in front of the barn leaving Perez in a cloud of dust.

Now there wasn't enough money for grain. But there also wasn't anything Perez could do. Every day toward evening he went out to the paddock and opened the gate, and the horses came in the way they always did, although now there was only hay in the mangers, not oats in the feed bins. And every day the horses grew thinner and thinner. They still raced across the paddock to the field when Perez let them out in the morning. But their pace dropped after a few yards and they no longer galloped all the way to the far fences.

Perez walked to open the gate each night with sadness. He felt he had disappointed the horses, that he had failed them. He had trouble sleeping – not so much because of the coming payment, which Perez knew he could not make, but only because of his love for his horses. He had failed them again, like the time he got a flat tire and missed the feed store. He could not provide for them properly. He imagined their anger, but of course they were horses and had no anger. They walked in slowly from the field in the evening and waited patiently near the gate. They walked into the barn when Perez opened the gate. Then they trotted and cantered weakly into the field again in the morning, when Perez let them out. No anger. No anxiety. Just the resignation of horses.

The day for the next payment approached. There simply was no money for the next payment. Perez could sell the horses, perhaps, but that money wouldn't last long. And then he'd have to begin selling off the pastures and barns if he was going to be able to make the payments. Then he'd have to sell the house. Before long he'd be homeless. So there was no point in trying to make the payments. It was a burden that was simply too much to bear.

As the day of the next payment approached, Perez dreamed about the palomino again. In this dream the palomino rose up on his hind legs again and pawed the air. Again Perez could see the four fingers in each hoof as if the hoof was a hand and was positioned where the thumb should be. But this time the palomino raised the hoof hand into a salute, which turned into the wave of a hand. Perez looked blankly at the palomino in his dream. How could this be? A horse with a hand where there should be a hoof, waving at him, just acknowledging that Perez was a man who

was there with them, a man who was doing his best to honor his obligation to his horses, to his herd, in what had become an unstable world.

The next day Perez opened the far gate in the pasture, which allowed the horses to get out. They could wander into the meadows beyond the pasture, which ran down to a small river, or they could ford the river, and run wild on the mountain beyond it. Perez knew that they would try to come back to the barn in the evening, so he closed the far gate as soon as they passed through it. They would come to that gate for a few days, looking for Perez. But then, learning that Perez wasn't there and there was no barn for them to come to and no hay or oats to eat, they would stop coming, and spread out over the unfenced land.

As Perez closed the far gate for the last time, he saw the palomino, who thrust his nose in the air and whinnied. Then the palomino rose on his hind legs and pawed the air with more spirit than Perez thought was left in the old nag. For half a second, Perez imagined he could see fingers next to the horse's hooves, but by the time he could look closely, the palomino had dropped back to four legs and galloped off, bucking in the morning sun, running once more for the pure joy of running, oblivious to the disorder in the world but still apparently glad to be alive.

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