

Forsaking

Lin Sutherland

Onion Creek Ranch

Five fat cardinals pecked at the hack berries on the frozen ground around the horse tank. She stopped twisting the wire on the broken fence and watched. The two males, fire engine red, hopped imperiously around the three fluffy females. The males acted as if they orchestrated the event, while the females choreographed the feeding in anticipation of spring's reproductive needs.

"Well, if everyone got along as well as you all, it'd be a better world," the woman noted. She tucked her gloves in her heavy jacket and set about pulling the wire tight. She'd had to learn to do everything on her own on the ranch, the fences, the barn, the feeding and caring for the horses. She was hard-headed and determined and fearless. She yanked at the slick frozen wire, but it kept slipping.

"Damnit!" she yelled at the mute fence, at the mute cold world surrounding the ranch.

An hour before her neighbor had called that all ten of her horses were in his rye field. Grabbing coat and hat and pulling on her boots, she'd slogged through the mud and icy rain with a bridle and lariat for the two lead mares. She found where Big Boy had broken through the fence for the umpteenth time.

"I'm gonna fix that Big," she muttered, throwing the busted wire back on the ground.

She saw all of them circling the field at full bore, heads high, tails flying, hooves lifted in celebration of the new cold weather.

They were beautiful, she couldn't help noticing—and they were also tearing up the field.

"Oh, stop being such a show-off!" she yelled at them. Zia, her black and white paint, cut her eyes over at the human and accelerated into a full bucking, kicking gallop.

"Big deal, Zia—you can run and buck with hooves of fire. Maybe I'll sell you at Miles City to the rodeo blood suckers—then what'll you think?" she joked to the mare. She watched her admiringly, watched her high action, floating hooves, flying black mane. She would as much as sell Zia as cut off her foot. She had saved the spirited mare from starvation and a life knee deep in a chicken

coop. When Zia put her warm, velvet black nose on the woman's arm at feeding time, it was with love. Well, at least somebody had it, she thought.

"Okay, you've larked around enough," she called to them, and approached the group with a low crooning "whoa, whoa..."

Zia let her slip the lariat over her head and stood by as she slipped the hackamore over Savannah's head. She coiled the rope, led Savannah to a tree stump, and jumped up on the chestnut mare. Savannah quivered, the coiled spring in her that was half Arabian. She gave a tug to Zia's neck and they began to walk forward, she gripping tightly around the mare's round belly, while she looked back and whistled to Big Boy and the rest of the geldings.

"Let's go! Come on!" she yelled as invitingly as she could.

The geldings grazed on the lush winter grass, but she noticed Big had one eye on the departing mares. Suddenly it began to sleet; he jerked his head up as if that were a sign, arched his neck and began to trot after the two mares.

"That's right, come on, Big," she called and began to trot Savannah towards the break in the fence.

"Back over. And stay over," she commanded as they crossed the opening at a lope. Big jumped the place where the wire had been, Bounder stopped, examined it, then bolted through.

She swung off Savannah and lifted the hackamore off her head, but before she could get the rope off Zia, the two mares bolted after the geldings, Zia trailing her good rope through the mud.

"You dirty rotten rat," she called after the horse, making a note that she'd have to go find the rope in the field once it came off Zia. After she fixed the fence.

She took out her fence tools and extra wire and set to work.

That was when the five fat cardinals swooped down like they had a business meeting.

“Well, hello,” she said, stopping her work. “Get back, Tboy.” Tboy was her Number One Ranch Hand, or thought he was. Actually he was a fuzzy black and white mutt with long legs and irresistible charming vacant eyes and he caused more trouble than he was worth. But she loved him. So he stayed on the ranch, chasing the horses when she didn’t want him to, running in the house with muddy paws, sport barking in the middle of the night at nothing at all.

Tboy cocked his head and gazed blankly ahead. “Birds,” he thought.

“Yes, birds, Tboy,” she said without thinking.

“Birds who get along...”

She returned to tightening the wire, twisting the pliers around it and turning. Suddenly the taut wire popped and whipped into her face, the jagged end lashing her cheek not more than an inch from her eye.

She cried out and fell back into the mud, almost sitting on Tboy.

“For God’s sake!” she exclaimed, tears welling in her eyes. She felt her cold cheek and came away with blood on her hand.

“Why the HELL does everything have to be so hard?” she yelled furiously, casting her eyes to the heavens. There were only dark pewter gray clouds low above her head, and no sign of an easy answer.

Slowly she got up, grimacing from an old injury when a horse had kicked her, and slapped the caked mud off her backside. The sleet had frozen her fingers to where they didn’t work very well anymore. This was Texas, she thought—aren’t we supposed to have some sun here? But it was December—December 24th as a matter of fact—so it was no surprise that the Blue Norther had come in at 4 a.m., dropping the temperatures on the ranch 40 degrees in one hour.

She tackled the wire once more, this time with her gloves on. But she noticed big drops were coming out of her eyes and falling on the calfskin leather. They made big soiled spots the size of nickels on the soft chamois-colored leather.

Suddenly, she just stopped and sighed. A huge exhalation of breath and sound came out of her. It built bigger and bigger until it was a roar—a roar of rage, disappointment and pain.

She let it roll out of her, out over the ranch, letting the land and the river soak it up, until there was no more. Slowly it subsided; she felt calmer.

She looked at the horse tank. The cardinals were paralyzed like statues, staring at her.

“Yes, it’s the Monster Human,” she said to them. “The Species who Wounds, who destroys, who hacks apart the soul of the very one it loves...yes, it slices, it dices, it...”

She hesitated. “It forsakes...”

She stopped, choking on her words.

The cardinals fluffed their feathers and began pecking the ground again. Soon they would forsake the ranch, she thought, to build a nest on the river and have baby cardinals, and then they’d forsake those babies, after seeing that they could fly.

So what was forsaking?

A little desertion, that’s all. “Perhaps I’ve over-emphasized it,” she said quietly to the birds, pushing at the ice on the tank with a rock. She noticed the ice had thinned—in fact, it was melting. The sleet had stopped sometime during her conversation with the cardinals.

She looked up at the eastern horizon.

“Is that the sun?” she asked incredulously.

Tboy stared blankly at where she was looking.

A glimmer of rose and gold hovered on the horizon, warming the air. It lengthened and stretched and glittered, forming a prism of colors. She looked at Tboy, his face watching the formation. The cardinals had perched in a row along the rim of the water tank, their plump backs to her, watching the sky. The horses stood very still, as one in their herd, their necks arched, their heads held high.

Over the tops of the pecan trees on the river it formed, each end seeming to plunge far away on either side of the valley. It soared right over her head, peeking through the breaks in the heavy clouds.

“Oh, well for God’s sake,” she exclaimed for the second time that day.

She felt a pleasure and a peace as she packed up the fence tools and wire and headed back to the house. Zia nickered to her as she passed, as if to say, “Hello, my friend.”

That night they called. They called to say they would
be in to visit tomorrow, though it had been a long time.
They felt like maybe it was time to see each other again.

After all, it was Christmas.

About the Author

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.

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