

## Charger

*Mélanie A. Stratton*

I awake with a start. The shouting has started; it's not quite 6 a.m. The voices carry from the kitchen, and I cringe at the sound of shattering glass. Trying to avoid the crossfire, I dress quickly and creep outside.

I make it to the gate before I realize that it is going to be beautiful—the kind of day when the sun sneaks in slyly from the horizon, and the hydrangeas hold out tight green buds so big they look like they are about to explode into fireworks of color. Summer. I have the whole day with nothing to do but escape.

Charger nickers softly as I unlatch the gate. She seems to know I need her, as she always does. Today I brought her a present of carrot tops and cornhusks. She thanks me by letting me touch her velvety ears. No one else can touch her ears.

She eyes the apple tree as I curry her down. Spring had elaborated on the bright white appaloosa spots on her hind end, and now she is left with a mottled, walnut coat, short, scrawny mane, and hardly any tail to speak of. She also has a tremendous underbelly, and lanky, kind of crooked back legs. I always thought Charger was the most beautiful animal I had ever set eyes on, but after seeing dressed-up-for-competition entrants at the fair, she looks more like a dollar store sale item. Her most notable feature is a set of deep, thoughtful eyes. Sometimes I think they are what make it so easy to believe in her.

The air today has a hint of smoke playing in it. The scotchbroom blazes such a fierce yellow as to make you believe it the cause. I stop long enough to dream of a home with fireplace comfort and safe feelings. I can feel the tug at the end of the lead, and let it drop as I stroll in this fantasy world. Charger follows me to the front yard, crab walking as she tries to snatch patches of clover while we go.

The night mist has made spider webs into chandeliers. Blades of cut grass paste themselves to my bare ankles and pine needles spike between my toes. I prefer to go barefoot, and I'm sure Charger appreciates that I ride without a saddle. I would ride without a bridle if I could, but she is stronger than I, and has a tendency not to stop.

She accepts the bit with the wild-eyed look of indignant consent, and I scramble upon her back with the grace only an over-tall twelve-year-old can understand. She bunny-hops, probably to remind me just who is in command, then settles into her quick, even gait, heading towards the road. She begins a quest for the sweetest clover. I'm just along for the ride.

We turn on a trail. The day warms. Every now and then she switches me with her tail while aiming for a fly. We end up getting nowhere, as planned. The restricting, angry, destruction-made madness of the adult world doesn't reach this far, and our real world is bustling and humming with delight. Wild tiger lilies, their faces orange flushed and freckled, call to me from the woods. Charger has found her clover, so we stop and take in the surroundings.

I slide off and wade through the heart-shaped leaves, seeking shade. I pick bundles of tiny, pinwheel daisies and pluck the tops off flowering honeysuckle. Under the safety of a pine needle canopy, I listen to the skitterings of a busy forest. A squirrel shimmies nervously past, his tail flitting up and down so rapidly I half expect him to take off in flight. Bees expertly navigate the brambles behind me. Wild strawberries have yet to decide to fruit, but send out a sweet, inviting scent anyway.

I look at Charger. She has stopped chewing long enough to look at me. She gives me a long blink of her sage-like eyes, as if to say "Go ahead," then lowers her nose back to the clover.

We converse. I lament over the deep-set worries of a slipping childhood; she interjects a snort or swat of her tail. I know she is listening because she holds the closest ear back into the conversation. When she gets distracted, the ear flicks forward, but always returns if I still need to be heard.

We stay out all day, finding secret places and butterfly fantasies. No one bothers us in this world. We ride for hours looking for adventure, and sometimes just walk silently, enjoying the day. I have learned that you can't do this in the adult world, and I prefer being here. As the sun starts to retreat, I can feel her regret that we have to go. I sigh right along with her. Where we are now is more home than where we must return.

By the time we arrive at the road, the sky is a deep, rich blue. The pinks, yellows, and oranges that chased the sun back into hiding have long since faded. I am half asleep, and she walks with a slow baby-cradle sway. She stops just short of the

open gate. I slide off and remove the bridle. She accepts a rub on the nose and a scratch between the ears. She lays her head gently on my shoulder. I hug her neck.

Frogs and crickets begin the nightly chitchat while stars start to wink in boisterous flirts against the serious, darkening sky. We lose touch of the night's ritual beauty when shouting fires up from the porch, erupting through our silent vigil, and destroying our comfortable solitude.

*Where have you been? Who the hell do you think you are?*

I would tell them, if they'd listen. They might even understand, if they cared.

As she backs behind the fence, she gazes at me with empathetic satin eyes that seem to say she knows I'll need her tomorrow. She always knows.