

Filling Mr. Moneybags

Two years later, it was time to empty him.

By Kim Hinson

“I want to get a horse,” I told Mama when I was 11. “A horse that’s never been ridden,” I added, thinking about *The Wild Heart*, a horse book I’d checked out of the Spring Valley Public Library.

“We live in a gas station,” said Mama.

It was a hot Minnesota summer day in 1969. Mama leaned over with a grunt, picked up a small braided rug with one hand, opened the office door with the other, and shook it outside, still half-stooped over.

“Where would you even keep a horse?” she added, straightening up, the shaken rug dangling from one hand.

I had to think about that one.

Not that I’d forgotten we lived in a gas station. It was just that I didn’t see it as a problem.

Living in a gas station meant that our front yard was gravel and had two pumps for gas and one for diesel. A long, thick-walled air hose was rigged up across the entire driveway so that when a car drove up to the pumps, a bell ding-dinged in the office and in the attached, bunkhouse-style living quarters. Instead of a family room, we had a greasy black pit where Daddy worked on cars. And best of all, our backyard was a junkyard. Two long rows of banged-up cars sat like idling old men playing checkers.

Mama flicked the rug back in place, grabbed a rag and an aerosol can of Lemon Pledge, and cleaned the bread rack, the pop machine, and the candy case all in one swoop. I could hardly see her for the dust.

“And,” she added, wheezing a little from exertion, hard thinking, and pulling the purse strings of her mouth taut, “you need to buy it yourself, so that means you need money.”

It pained Mama to spend money on things she didn’t personally want. “Open your mouth and I’ll spit in it,” was her go-to answer whenever I got thirsty on car rides.

“I’ll save up,” I said, thinking I already had a head start from poking through the office cash register every day, coin by coin, plucking out and saving the older ones in a beat-up jewelry box. I had no idea who’d pay me more than a nickel for a nickel, but I saved them anyway, just in case.

“Plus, some kids get allowances,” I said.

“You should be paying us to live here,” said Mama, getting out her dust mop. “My folks made me pay them once I got out of high school.”

“But I’m only 11,” I said, tears welling up.

“Still,” said Mama.

I opened my mouth to speak or whine but Mama got there first.

“Plus, you’re only 11,” said Mama. “You need to be at least in your teens before you can get a horse,” she added, thinking up rules on the fly.

“Do you promise I can get a horse when I’m 13 if I have enough money?” I said, hoping for a guarantee.

“If you have enough money,” said Mama, grabbing her broom.

My thoughts were deep but not defeated. Judging from Mama and Daddy’s whispered

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Kim and her family lived in this gas station, but she still dreamed of owning a horse.

nighttime conversations, I knew that money wasn't easy to come by. But I also figured that if I kept at it, little by little, I could earn enough for a horse.

So I kept my mouth shut and my hands busy. And I asked Daddy, a wannabe cowboy, for help.

"You never know what you'll find in the trunks of these old junkers," said Daddy, shifting the crowbar just a titch and hunkering down on it with a grunt. Drops of sweat escaped the red bandanna tied tight around his forehead, making damp rivers down Daddy's dusty face. A couple more mighty heaves, and the trunk thunked open in a spray of old paint, rust and just plain crud. The familiar smell of junk car wafted over us, a sun-warmed aroma of leaded gas and something like damp socks.

"There ya go!" Daddy stepped back to let me have the first peek into the trunk of the junk car he'd dragged into our backyard yesterday with an ancient tow truck.

Our junkyard was my own personal Treasure Island, and I had the sticky hands of a career junkyard kid, pushing aside the mostly empty pop bottles and candy wrappers that littered the floorboards and trunks, and poking my fingers deep down the cracks between busted seats to get at the good stuff—like money.

To earn even more money, I swept the driveway of the station, polished the linoleum floors in the kitchen, and painted the railings on the

deck overlooking the junkyard for a dollar a job. I baby-sat for two little freckle-faced boys in the trailer court next door who all but strangled each other to death on my watch, their faces wavering between bright red and an alarming blue, depending on who had the upper hand. Their eyes bugged out and their screams grew hoarse and desperate as I tried in vain to separate them.

My own heart beat like thunder in my ears and my thoughts grew frantic at the thought of losing the income due to a dead, bleeding or missing child—until I noticed that I got paid as long as the boys were still alive when their mother got home. And I figured it was only fair that I should keep "the change" from shopping errands Mama sent me on.

I stashed it, along with my other savings, in a hard rubber Mr. Moneybags piggy bank, a birthday gift from Grandma. Mr. Moneybags, with his lime-green face, bulbous red nose, bulging googly eyeballs, blue moneybag body and rubber padlock around his neck, was so hideously ugly that I was pretty sure Grandma got it cheap or free, maybe even from a Dumpster.

By my 13th birthday, Mr. Moneybags was filled with 150 hard-earned dollars. I bought an untrained mustang from a trucker friend of Daddy's for \$125 and made my dream come true. ♦