

THE GIFT CARD

Monday morning, Jason's room was an oven. He looked out through his eighth-floor window at a city made of hot, dry cement: concrete pillars holding up a concrete sky. Jason closed his eyes and thought of grass, green grass, wide as a city block. The grass was cool and smelled like water running from the kitchen tap. He thought and thought about the coolness and the green until he could hear the swish of hooves and the crip, crip, crip of a horse pulling grass. Yes! It was working! Here was his old friend Silver Star, a big silver stallion. The stallion tossed his mane and rolled his eyes, looking fierce. He didn't fool Jason. "Cut it out. I know you like me, really."

As Jason stood talking to Silver Star, the door opened. "Jason Kightly, just you stop mooching around in here, talking to yourself. Go on, get out and do something." Jason's mom shooed him out of the apartment and down the one hundred and twelve stone steps to the street.

He clung to the front stoop railing, at a loss. His friends from the neighborhood were in summer camp. Not Jason, because his mom could not afford it. She barely made enough for food and rent, working part-time, cleaning other people's places around the city while she took computer courses at the local community college.

Jason's mom was all the family he had. His father? Jason had no idea who or where he was, whether he was still alive. His mom would not let Jason even mention him, ever.

A limousine drove slowly past, a white stretch limo two cars long. As the limo reached Jason, it stopped, halted by the traffic. Jason stared at the dark glass windows, wondering who was on the other side. Someone very rich, for sure. A man, maybe, looking out at Jason on the steps, thinking what a nice kid. His dad could be rich, with a big house and lots of servants. But lonely, in spite of all his money, because he didn't have Jason. Could be the man inside that limo. Any minute now, the man would call out, "Stop the car!" then dash from the limo and gather Jason up in his arms. "Son! Son! I just know it's you! I've found you at last."

The lights changed, the limo moved on.

Across the street, a homeless man plodded along the gutter, pushing a shopping cart loaded with bulging plastic bags. He walked like an old man, head bent, shoulders sagging. Was he old, really? Under the raggy T-shirt and oversized pants, his body was all bone.

Jason sighed. Had Dad run off to live on the streets like that? “If only I knew,” he murmured.

Jason had no idea how it was to live with a man around. Once, he’d seen his friend Pete’s father come out of the bathroom with his chin lathered in shaving cream. After Pete’s dad had gone, they’d checked out the razor to see what shaving felt like, and had both gotten sore faces. When Jason’s other best friend, Joey, had played on the school soccer team last fall, Joey’s dad had come to watch every weekend game.

Jason sighed again. If I had a dad, he’d watch me just as much. Jason let go the railing, jumped down onto the sidewalk. Come on, cheer up, he told himself. You have Silver Star—and he’ll be around forever.

Down the block was a small playground with swings, a seesaw, and a basketball hoop. The playground had a concrete floor and there were brick walls around it. The air in the playground was very hot, but it was somewhere to go. Jason didn’t own a basketball, but he could shoot wads of screwed-up newspaper. He started down the block, eyes fixed on the shimmering pavement, picturing how, on Silver Star, he could be gone in a minute. Galloping over the prairie. Over mountains to the shore. The only real horse that he ever saw was a high black police horse

that clopped down the street, sometimes. But Jason knew them all, every kind of horse there was. Pictures of them lined his walls. Posters, postcards, and clippings of chestnuts, piebalds, palominos, grays, and roans. Arabs, shires, Lippizaners; Clydesdales, mustangs, fallabellas, Chincoteague and New Forest Ponies—every kind and variety. And dozens of horse books. On grooming and training. On racing and show jumping. Stories of horses. And not only that, Jason collected model horses on his top shelf.

Jason was going to be a cowboy in a tall, wide hat and chaps and high-heeled boots with spurs. He was going to ride his ranch or the range or travel with the rodeo, roping steers. Or he was going to be a jockey in fancy silks, racing an unknown to win the Triple Crown.

When Jason had won it, his name and face would be in every paper in the country. On TV and in the weekly magazines. Then his father would be sure to see him and recognize him at once—if his father was alive. The playground was empty, just as Jason had expected. But he'd no sooner made a good-sized wad of old newspaper to use for a basketball when a little boy came in with his father. They looked so alike with their bright red hair, round blue eyes, and pink faces. Jason's hair was dark brown, black, almost, and very wiry. His eyes were brown, and his face looked tanned always. But his mom's eyes were blue, her hair was brownish-blonde, and her skin was creamy pale. So did he take after his dad, the way this kid

did?

The boy was carrying a brand-new orange basketball.

“We’re going to shoot a few,” the boy’s dad said. “Want to join us?”

Jason did, all right. But it was so hot that after a very short while, the kid wanted to quit and go for ice cream. Jason watched their red heads disappear into the crowd. He pictured them in the ice-cream shop, buying the cones and sitting in the shade together, licking their ice cream, watching the traffic pass by, then walking home to their cool apartment. If the kid’s mother was home, maybe all three would go on a trip. Take the train to the amusement park just outside town and buy a whole pack of scary and exciting rides. Jason had never been to the park, but Pete and Joey went there often. There was a huge carousel, with gigantic shiny wooden horses. They said it was for babies, but Jason wanted to ride on it, anyway. Some of the car rides, they said, took you so high into the sky you thought you were flying! And the water rides soaked you through, but you didn’t care because it was so much fun.

While Jason tried not to be envious, it was hard to hear about his friends and their dads having all that fun together. “I wish,” he said aloud, as he left the playground, “I really wish I could know what it’s like to have a father.”

On the way home, he paused at the corner newsstand, waiting for the traffic light to change. Idly, he scanned the rows of magazines, their shiny covers

bright with shots of gardens, fine houses, and cars, lots of cars. And sports stars, wrestlers, and women in bathing suits.

The traffic stopped and people began to cross the street. Jason was just about to move on when, up on the rack behind the vendor's head, he spotted a silver stallion rearing up against a deep blue sky. Its eyes were fierce, its nostrils flared, and its silver mane streamed in the wind. Above the stallion's head the magazine's title said in large, red print:

TRUE LOVER'S GUIDE TO HORSES:
SPECIAL ONETIME ISSUE

A whole magazine, just for horses? It seemed to be the only copy. Jason pointed. "Mister, how much?" The vendor turned his head. "This one?" He reached it down and looked on the cover. Then on the back. Then inside. There was no price anywhere. "Five dollars," he said.

Five dollars! Jason eyed the silver stallion hungrily. "Mister, will you keep it for me?" The vendor shrugged. "Ten minutes," he said, and stuck it back up on the rack.

Jason rushed home and shook out his piggy bank. Four dollars and seventy-five cents! He scooped up the coins and raced right out again.

"Whoa! Jason—where's the fire!" his mom called after him, but he was out and flying downstairs two, three steps at a time. He didn't stop for anything until he was back in front of the newsstand. "That's

all I got.” He plonked down the pile of coins.

“Too late,” the vendor said. “Somebody else just took it.”

“But I wasn’t gone ten minutes!” Jason cried. The vendor didn’t care. He simply shrugged. Jason scowled. “Who took it? Where’d he go?”

The vendor pointed up the street.

Toward the bus stop! Jason ran.

The man was in the bus line, leafing through the magazine. He was tall and lean, with a shaggy silver mane down to his white shirt collar, a short, pointed beard, and a long, lean face that might be fierce. That didn’t stop Jason. He rapped the magazine smartly. “Hey, mister. I saw it first.”

The man eyed him up and down. “But you don’t have the money.”

“Yes, I do, well almost,” Jason said. “And I’ll give you every penny if you’ll let me have the magazine.”

A bus pulled up and people started getting on, pushing the man along.

“Please, mister,” Jason pleaded. He wouldn’t give up, not now.

The man flipped the pages of the magazine. “Here.” He tore out a small card and pushed it at Jason. “You might make something of this.” Jason took the card and the man climbed aboard the bus.

When the bus had gone, Jason looked down at the card. free bonus gift, it said. Remembering his money, Jason hurriedly stuck the card in his pants pocket and ran back to the newsstand.

“Sorry, kid,” the vendor said, as Jason scooped up

his coins.

Jason glared up at him. "Sorry, yeah, I'll bet," he answered.

All day long, he thought about that magazine. In bed, he thought about the magazine some more. His find, his! The best magazine he'd ever seen, full of horses, hundreds. But most of all, he thought about the stallion on the cover: Silver Star. That news vendor! He'd broken his promise. If only he'd run faster. If only there weren't so many stairs to climb! Jason tried to go to sleep, but could not. Then, remembering, he turned on the light and fetched out the bonus gift card. Its reverse side was divided into nine squares, three by three. In eight of the squares was a name: Arab. Clydesdale. Mustang. Appaloosa. New Forest Pony. Chincoteague. Lippizaner. Pinto. But in the ninth square, in the bottom right-hand corner, was a question mark. Underneath the grid was a little silver sticker in the shape of a star. Beside the star it said:

FOR FREE RIDE

PLACE STAR IN BOX OF CHOICE & SEND

WARNING: MYSTERY RIDE AT OWN RISK

Send? Send where? Jason turned the card eagerly. There was no address. Probably it was somewhere in the magazine, he thought, disappointed. Boy, would he have loved a ride. On what? The Appaloosa? The Clydesdale? Or a pony? He couldn't pick, he loved them all equally.

So what about the mystery square?

AT OWN RISK: to pick and not to know. . . . What

a thrill! That would be his choice.

And if he couldn't mail the card? Maybe he'd find another copy of the magazine at another stand. He'd open it and find the address. Meanwhile, he'd sleep on it.

Jason peeled off the little silver star, set it in the curl of the question mark, and pressed it firmly into place. Then, slipping the card beneath his pillow, he put out the light and went to sleep.