

...the *Pony* (.....)

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By Judith Pratt

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... When I was getting my Master's degree in Lafayette, LA, I was lucky enough to have a teacher who taught a poetry course only entitled Nonsense. We read everything from Egyptian Heiroglyphics and Nordic Riddles to Lewis Carroll to contemporary poetry, but the true pleasure was having Laura Mullen sit in on our class as we discussed her book Murmur – a pseudo detective tale that is more. She asked us one uncomfortable question. A character and their partner have decided to have an abortion and are processing the weight of their decision. Instead the partner recites the A,B,C's almost unconsciously. A truly quiet and harrowing moment in literature, and she asked us if any of us understood how she creafcted that moment without having to tell the reader. Everyone in my class was silent, they either didn't think about the significance or didn't want to bring up the topic of abortion, so I raised my hand. She left me a kind note in a copy of her book at the end of class, "To Joey, who hears sees and knows what's not easy... w/ joy, L."*

I too would like to leave this story a kind note.

Judith Pratt's, "The Pony," exudes such an emotional control. The layers of time, family, and sorrow are weaved together seamlessly – to the point that the generational narratives within the language are almost indistinguishable.

There is something special about a piece that can not only deftly work with style, but that uses that style as a vehicle to envelop the concept of a family/a woman who is dealing with Alzheimer's/dementia – floating through the metaphor of a story about a pony that has been passed down through a family.

Admittedly, I could be off about that assumption. I very well may be wrong about the "plot," but I don't care. When you read this story you can make up your own version of fabula and syuzhet, the important point here being that this is a story with skill, with emotion, with the ability to paint a broad picture of beauty and sorrow.

I would suggest reading this piece.

Five Stars.

The Pony

With nothing to look forward to, she might as well not get up. It was comfortable enough, even though it wasn't her own bed. It was too small, and she had to get out on the wrong side of it.

Someone knocked on the door, then came right in. People in this place had no manners. "Here's your breakfast," said a young man. Young men should not be allowed to just come in.

"I'll put it right here," he said. He put it on the bureau, not the table. Breakfast should be at the table.

The phone rang. It took her awhile to find it. Someone had put it all the way across the room. She said hello. It was Caroline, with her officious voice, asking how she was doing, asking if she would like a visitor. She told Caroline to visit later. Others might be rude, but she had been raised better than that. No need to tell the woman that she had no interest in seeing her.

They only gave her toast for breakfast. No fruit. A tiny glass of juice. The coffee was cold. When she finished eating, she put the plate in the sink. She'd wash it later. It wasn't a real kitchen. Nothing to cook on, nothing to cook with. She'd cooked meals all her life. They should know that.

She might as well sit and read the newspaper in her favorite chair. She looked out the window. A bird feeder hung there, with little birds fluttering back and forth, from feeder to bushes and back again. She'd never paid much attention to birds, but she wondered what these birds were called.

"Sparrows," said the little girl in the rocking chair. Her legs stuck out, dirty and freckled. "And chickadees."

"We never had those on the farm," she said.

The little girl nodded. "Pigeons in the barn," she said. "Sometimes a cardinal. Those red birds, the ones that sing in the spring snowstorms."

They caught the pony and rode him out to get the cows. Tige the dog followed them, as he always did, with one ear flung inside out. But then Tige tried to jump through a barbed wire fence and got caught, his fur tangled in the wire. They left the cows and tore back to the house

for help. Before they got there, Tige came barking after them. Then they had to go all the way back for the cows. When she told the story at supper, her father laughed and laughed.

Her daughter was there, sitting in the wing chair she and Bill had bought when they were first married. No need to be polite with her own daughter. "This isn't living," she said. "I hope I die soon."

"I hope you don't," said her daughter. "It would make me very sad."

She told her daughter about riding the pony, and about the dog getting caught in the fence. There were birds flying around. "Someone put a bird feeder out there," she said.

"I thought you'd like it," her daughter said.

"What kind of birds are they?"

"Chickadees," said her daughter. "And sparrows."

She told her daughter about riding the pony to school, and about the time the dog got caught in the barbed wire fence. Her daughter wanted to know the pony's name. She didn't know. How could she remember that after all these years?

There was a knock on the door. Her daughter called "Come in," just like it was her own house.

A young woman appeared. "It's time to take your pills, dear," said the young woman. "Where's your pill box?" She didn't think the young woman was very smart. Her daughter and the young woman walked in and out, into the bathroom, into the bedroom. "What are you looking for?" she called. Children were always getting into things.

"Here they are," said her daughter. "You need to put them up high, so she won't move them around."

The young woman handed her a cup of pills and a glass of water. She didn't want to take them, but she didn't want to be rude. She was raised better than that.

A tray of food appeared on the table, even though she just had breakfast. Some kind of noodles. "I can cook better than this slop," she said, chewing.

"You'd have more choice if you went to the dining hall," said her daughter.

"I'm not interested," she said.

"Can I help you get dressed?" her daughter asked. "You might feel better."

“I can dress myself,” she said. I was fine at home, she wanted to say. I hadn’t fallen. I wasn’t sick. But she didn’t want to be rude. So she told her daughter about how she had ridden her pony to school every day.

The little girl rocked back and forth in the old chair that was too big for her.

“It’s time to get the cows,” said the little girl. “But you can’t do it in your bathrobe.”

Her clothes were right where she’d hung them up the night before. She put them on and went out to get the cows.

END

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I knew the woman who told the story about the pony. She was in assisted living, and didn’t like it. But she could no longer live alone, and her family couldn’t take her in. She was a good friend, so I could imagine what she was thinking. These days, we’re all likely to end up in assisted living. My friend helped me practice for that.*

Before I started writing, I was an actor and director, then a playwright. That work is all about getting inside people’s heads. Now I do that in stories and novels.

AUTHOR BIO: I began as a playwright, but some of the stories in my head wouldn’t fit on a stage. I’ve been an actor, director, professor, fundraiser, and freelance writer. Some recent writing wins: In 2019, my play “Maize” was selected for the Louisiana State University SciArts Prize and my novel, “Siljeea Magic,” was indie-published. Recently, my stories and essays have been published in Stars and Staffs Magazine, Golden Walkman podcasts, 365 Stories, Hags Fire, and Synkroniciti Magazine. My play, “Losing It,” appeared in Best Ten-Minute Plays of 2020.