

## PHILIP NEILSEN

### FAIRY TALE

Cordelia and Stephen had been going out for two years, and all this time Stephen paid court to Cordelia in a fashion pure and chivalrous. A few times Stephen had suggested that it would be natural for them to sleep together, but Cordelia always said the time wasn't yet right. So the months passed, and they would be seen by the lake at the edge of the campus, Stephen staring across the water or talking to Cordelia, as she read books of medieval romances, *The Faerie Queen* or copied Pre-Raphaelite paintings in her sketch pad. She even plaited her hair in imitation of pale, haunted ladies from the Shalott sisterhood, and wore long white dresses.

Often they talked about the horses, and Cordelia drew many kinds of horses in her sketch pad, white and shining horses, black and carnal horses, horses that ran screaming in battle with blood on their flanks, horses that were sensitive and wise with memories of classical ages, horses that changed their shape in order to pass through the alien world of machines.

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It was an ideal September morning. The lake moved as it wished, the three willows dipped into its surface, and birds weaved aimlessly in the air and on the dark, glittering water. She sat alone on the grass, copying the background from a Burne-Jones painting of Ophelia, floating white and shocked down the stream. She put the pad down, and lowering her chin and drawing up her knees, half-closed her eyes to deliberately blur her view of the water insects. Then, separate and slightly paler than its green surroundings, she saw the frog, motionless about five feet in front of her. She stopped squinting, and let the frog focus clearly, wondering why this animal should surprise her by being here. Many times she had come to this lake, but never before seen a frog. It sat unmoving, and she was vaguely aware of a gladness that Stephen wasn't there to spoil the moment.

As she stared she thought of the story of the frog and the princess, and smiled to herself. That night she had a dream about castles and labyrinths and she flew above the ground, gliding down and over a herd of horses as they galloped tirelessly along, of one purpose. The dream was long and she stayed close to the herd.

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Next morning Cordelia was alone again, Stephen having gone somewhere for the day, and she missed him a little as she sat by the lake. But he passed from her mind altogether when she noticed that the frog was there again, in exactly the same position, facing her. She pressed her arms around her knees hard, a trick she had learned years ago, when she had wanted to count her heart beat. It seemed that all the mornings by the lake were somehow altered by this new factor. She looked behind her quickly and guiltily for passers-by, then slowly knelt down beside it.

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The horses never seemed to grow tired; their eyes were without fear and their bodies did not sweat. They ran on through the day which seemed only a few minutes long, and through the cool evening by moonlight, their hooves in a steady rhythm with the earth as if they had travelled this way before. Though they were in no hurry, there was a clear sense of a destination in the way they turned to follow the contours of valley and plain. It was as promised by the Horse King; she could not distinguish him in the mass of bodies, but his thoughts surrounded her, clear and cool.

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Stephen came home to his flat about eleven o'clock that evening. Cordelia had been sitting on the steps for a couple of hours, and he let her in without asking questions. They sat in the kitchen and he waited for her to speak, as she stared at the table in her intense, half-dazed manner. She remembered the slight feeling of nausea, something like the feeling she had had when reading about women who had been raped, then she thought of the stillness and smoothness of the lake, and the fear seemed a little silly. She looked at him.

"Down by the lake today something happened."

He looked at her as if he had expected this, and wanted her to tell him the rest.

"I don't know why, but I — well, you know, I was thinking about the old story. . ."

She was half prepared for him to laugh, but he remained silent. She felt much better than before, even a little excited, and she remembered the dream, and the sense of flying; of complete control over her actions, and the immense energy and strength of the horses. Stephen waited. She thought his hair looked damp, as if with perspiration, after a long run.

"I think I might lie down for a bit," she said, and walked into the bedroom. As she lay on the bed he stood beside her.

"It didn't turn into a prince," she added with a slight laugh and then realized it was pointless to say this. She knelt on the bed and drew her dress up over her head, placing it tentatively beside her.

He turned to the door.

"The horses have to be tethered," he said.

"I know, I saw them last night. The black ones knew where to go; they were leading the others to safety."

He nodded and went out.

Cordelia took off the rest of her clothes. Soon Stephen got into bed beside her and she went into a semi-dream, and in this dream she was moving fast with the herd and the wind beat against her unpleasantly, knocking the breath from her lungs, and she heard the Horse King neighing as her head and shoulders were pressed back.