Moon Struck

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Abstract

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Chad pulled a wool rag from the tack trunk and drew it across his pony's shiny coat again and again, until every trace of dust disappeared. Each year he and his younger sister and brother were responsible for the care of at least three of the ponies which their Dad raised. Chad was sort of a partner, until the little kids got older. Every fall since he could remember his family had brought ponies to the sale. This year was the most exciting of all. He loved to read the signs and the ads about it: “14th Annual International Pony of the Americas Club Breed Promotion Sale, featuring 175 head of the world’s greatest using pony for youth.” And of all the appaloosa-colored ponies on the grounds, all ages and sizes, Chad knew that his mare was the greatest.

“There!” he sighed as he stepped back for a complete view of the pony he had just groomed. Her body looked like black velvet. Her blanket (the large white area over her hindquarters) glistened like white satin, and the black spots within it looked like huge velvet buttons. Chad looked at her striped hooves, which he had vigorously polished with his Dad’s shoe-shine brush. The pony turned her head towards him. The pink and black mottled skin of her muzzle and the white sclera around her gentle dark eyes, characteristic of all appaloosa-colored animals, stood out in sharp contrast with the blackness of her coat.

“Oops!” he said, as he moved toward the pony’s head. “I forgot to make your moon shine, Moon!” With the wool cloth he carefully stroked the white crescent on her forehead, following the direction of the hair growing in a swirl.

“Chad!” his father called. “All you have to do is get rid
Sketch

of the dirt. You're going to have all the hair rubbed off that pony."

"Wanna bet?" Chad replied. With a grin he hurled the cloth at his Dad. 'She's going to be the top-selling pony of this sale, just like we wanted, and she's going to look nice!' he announced.

"You'd better get ready. There are only a few more lot numbers before she's in."

Chad let his Dad help him saddle and bridle his mare. When she was ready, Chad took her for a ride around the grounds to warm her up.

The next thing he knew, the auctioneer was calling, "Next is Lot Number 127, Chad's Crescent Moon. Hey, folks! Look what we have here!"

Chad urged her through the door of the brick exhibit hall which housed the small square sale ring. He glanced at the men in the tall auctioneer's box as he came in, riding as close as he could to the sides of the little square. The inside of the building was dim except for the bright lights hung above the ring and those placed around the sides of the building. A film of blue smoke was suspended in the air. Chad did his best to show off Moon's ability. That was hard to do in such a small area. He sensed hundreds of faces watching every move his pony made, and he knew that everyone was impressed. This pony was the best one in the whole sale. Dad said so, too.

Chad and his pony seemed to be caught in a crossfire of shouts as the auctioneer's voice blared from each of two loudspeakers, one on each side of the ring. Then the barrage of sound stopped for a minute while the auctioneer said, "Let's take the saddle off now so the folks can see her conformation." Chad's father appeared and removed the saddle while Chad exchanged the bridle for the show halter. The auctioneer's racket began again. Snatches of talk reached Chad's ears through the spiel—"she's the result of a well-planned breeding program, . . . the kind of pony we're all
trying to produce,” and “she’s ready to raise foals for you!”

The auctioneer’s voice droned on. A ringman bellowed “Yes!” as he reported a bid. The pony jumped and turned towards Chad. He saw her nostrils quiver and knew she was talking to him even though the din of the auctioneer covered the sound. He slid this arm around her neck and patted her, saying into her ear, “You’re all right, Moon.” He stepped away from her, making her stand up like the champion that he knew she was. “Show ‘em, girl!” he cried.

He gazed at her as she posed, alert and in perfect balance, the lights making little halos around her. “Chad’s Crescent Moon,” he thought. “My Moon. Born on my eighth birthday, the best foal we ever raised. Dad said right away that this pony was everything he had hoped she would be. She was proof that our stallion could sire beautiful foals. She would be good advertising for him and for all our other stock.”

Chad’s thoughts echoed the words of the auctioneer as he declared how well-broken the pony was. Chad guessed they had done just about everything a kid and his pony could do, including crossing rivers and riding in parades and being in 4-H and chasing calves. He knew Moon was smart—she even went okay when he let his sister Carrie (who was just eight) and his brother Chris (who was only six) ride her alone. She was three years old now. She won her fair share of ribbons everytime they had taken her to a show. And— at last— here she was in the ring of the International Sale, just as he and his Dad had always dreamed. And somebody in that very room would buy her for lots of money, and Dad’s stallion and all their ponies would be well known and be sold for high prices, too. All because of Moon!

“Hey, Chad!” Chad was startled out of his reflections by his Dad’s voice. “Keep her moving so everybody can see her. You know how to handle a pony in a sale ring!”

“‘Course I do,” Chad thought. “I’ve been doing this since I was seven.” He watched the mare’s hooves shuffle
through the deep layer of curly wood shavings on the cement floor as he led her briskly around the square. She stayed close to him, as her alert eyes and ears took in the activity and noise around her. Chad wondered if she could smell the cigar smoke and hot coffee as he did.

The auctioneer’s voice continued, but no longer in a droning, dull pitch. It was louder and faster, and ringmen were leaning close to their bidders, then shouting and waving their arms. Chad thought he heard “fifteen-fifty.” Could that really be right? He listened carefully until he heard the auctioneer exclaim, “Sixteen hundred! Who’ll give me fifty?” And he resumed his sing-song auction speech.

“Wow!” thought Chad. Sixteen hundred! That was even more than a thousand! He glowed with pride and stroked the satin-like coat as he led the pony around the ring. The sharp, rapid bidding continued. He couldn’t keep up with the numbers. At last he heard, “I’ve sold the mare for $2050 to the gentleman from Texas!” The pony followed Chad out the narrow runway and into the bright fall sunshine.

“Wow!” he exclaimed. “Isn’t that neat, Dad? Two-thousand and fifty dollars for my Moon! She did it, didn’t she? Aren’t we proud of her?” In his excitement he hugged her neck. Just so nobody would think that he was sissy, he swung onto her back and galloped back to the barn.

Chad returned to the sale ring with his family to watch the rest of the sale. He was glad none of the other ponies sold as high as $2050. He tried to laugh when his Dad kidded him about not finishing his supper, but he didn’t think it was very funny. Sometimes a guy just wasn’t hungry. The final evening session of the sale seemed to stretch on the hours. He wished Chris would stop fussing and hanging around Mom. Any six-year-old shouldn’t be such a baby. He decided to go talk to his pony. He’d tell her all about Texas, so she wouldn’t be afraid. Texas was a long way from home, he thought. A long, long way.
After the last lot was sold, the awards were presented to buyers and sellers of high-selling ponies in each age division. A photographer took some pictures. Then Chad's Dad told him to bring Moon from the barn; they wanted a picture of the top-selling pony for the newspapers and magazines. Chad led her quietly into the ring and made her stand square. There were people all around her—Dad and Mom and Carrie and Chris and another man and a lady. Chad decided this must be the "gentlemen from Texas" and his wife. They looked nice enough, he thought; but they both had grey hair, which meant they probably didn't have any kids to help with their ponies. He wondered what kind of a home his pony was going to have.

Chad stayed near Moon's stall until his Dad sent him to the camper to go to bed. He went to bed, all right, but he didn't sleep well. He had a dream about deserts in Texas where there wasn't any water or grass or shade. He lay awake for a while, wondering. He gazed out the camper window and waited for the morning. He wanted to be sure his pony was loaded safely, and the man from Texas had said he was leaving at dawn.

At the first appearance of light in the east, Chad slipped quietly out of the camper. He carried his boots outside so he wouldn't wake his family. The grass was covered with frost, and he could see his breath as he ran toward the barn. The Texas man's trailer was parked by the door. Several ponies were already loaded.

"Do your need any help?" Chad asked through chattering teeth.

"I don't think so, son," the Texan replied as he led Moon out of the barn. "Only this black mare is left."

She stopped when she came to Chad and stretched her nose toward his face and blew softly. For the last time Chad stroked her velvet neck. "Hey, they're waiting for you," he mumbled.

The Texan led the pony toward the open trailer door.
“You’ve done a fine job, son,” he said. “We’re going to be real happy with her.”

Chad looked from the pony to the man’s face. “Is there any water in Texas? In the desert, I mean?” he asked.

The man looked puzzled at first, then chuckled and answered, “Texas has some fine pasture land, son, with plenty of water. Don’t worry! We’ll take good care of this little mare.” He patted the pony’s sleek shoulders.

“Oh, I’m not worried,” Chad said with a shrug.

The man tugged on the lead rope and clicked to the pony. Without thinking, Chad called, “Moon! Hup!” The pony hesitated only a moment, then climbed obediently into the trailer. The little white tag with number 127 was still glued to the base of her tail. The chain was fastened behind her. The door was closed and the latch was slid shut. The trailer rocked a little as the ponies prepared for movement. Some of them whinnied, sending frosty clouds of breath into the grey morning.

“So long, Cowboy!” the Texan called as he slammed his door and started the engine. “See you next year!” His wife smiled and waved.

“Yeah!” Chad answered. “So long.” He stood shivering in the middle of the long driveway, watching the back of the trailer roll away and disappear around the corner. He blinked a few times and sniffed. The silver quarter-moon, still visible in the early morning, was fading slowly as the sun rose. Chad wondered what time it was. His nose and fingers were freezing. “Next year,” he thought, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, “maybe I’ll have Moon’s little brother ready to be a sale-topper. Man, that will take lots of work. He’s only been shown at halter once or twice and doesn’t know a darn thing about riding yet. I’d better start him just as soon as we get home.”

He headed toward the camper, deciding it wasn’t necessary to check the empty stall to see if any equipment was still there. Dad could do that later. Maybe everyone was up now, and maybe his Mom was fixing something hot—like cocoa or pancakes—for breakfast. Cupping his hands in front of his mouth, he blew on his numb fingers. He began to run toward the camper. It would be warm there, and pancakes would taste pretty good.