

Chapter 4

The Truth in Make-Believe

The horses settled down around the pile of sticks and leaves, silhouettes in the light of the full moon. Brushy had come up to the burn pile earlier and pulled some of it aside for a fire (they thought that lighting the entire burn pile on fire might attract attention!). He was about to light it with some matches Sparks found in the office, when Ginger came running up yelling “stop! stop!”

“What is it?” Brushy asked.

“I just read that fires are not recommended right now in our county, due to the negative respiratory effects they could have in relation to COVID-19.”

Brushy froze, one hand holding a lit match. At that moment, Little Black and Homer came shuffling up the hill, a bucket of water for fire safety balanced precariously on Homer’s back. Every now and then, Little Black had to push it back into place with his nose as it started to slide off.

Brushy sighed and dropped the match into the bucket of water, mournfully watching it fizzle out.

“Great, now all our fun’s ruined, Ginger. I wish you hadn’t read that.”

“Read what?” Homer asked.

“The fire’s canceled due to COVID 19. Just one more thing canceled because of it...I guess this means story time is canceled too...” Brushy scowled.

Sparks and Berry came trotting up the hill, and Homer filled them in on the situation with the fire. Everyone was about to head back to the pastures, except for Berry.

“Where are you all going?” She asked. “We don’t need a real fire! We can just pretend!”

Brushy rolled his eyes, determined to be grumpy. But Wall*E and Forest, who had also just come up the hill, thought it was a great idea. Soon all the horses were gathered around the “fire.” It was a warm night, and the horses basked in the gentle breeze and starlit ceiling. Berry and Wall*E put on a fine presentation of “lighting the fire.” They acted it out dramatically, and before long all the horses thought they could feel the fire’s warmth and see the embers drifting off into the sky.

It was story time, Little Black’s contribution to the Happy Plan. The horses pointed their ears towards Little Black as he cleared his throat and began his story...

“When I was young, a long, long time ago, I was a sailor.”

“No you weren’t!” Finn interrupted.

“What’s a sailor?” Berry asked.

Little Black pinned his ears. “If you keep interrupting, then I’ll just go back to my pasture! This “fire” is too hot anyways.” He started to get up.

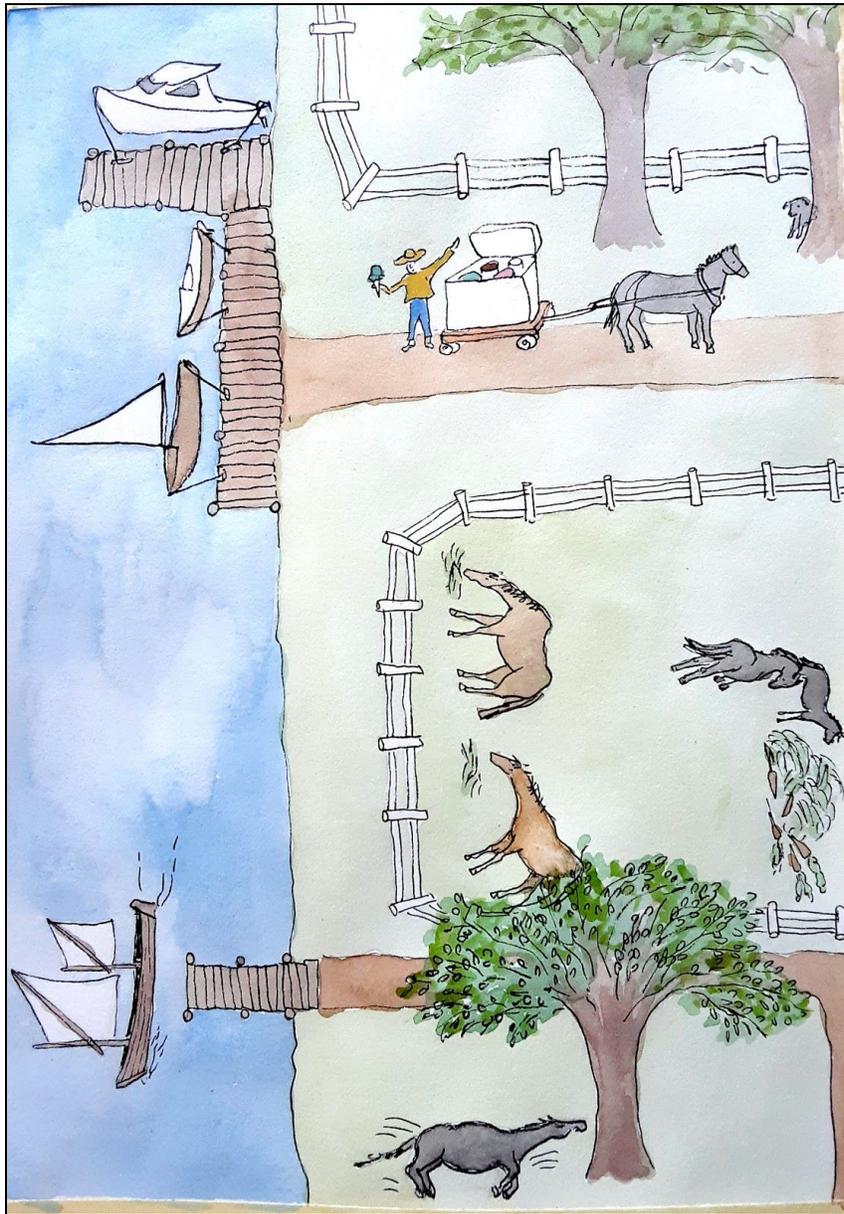
“No, stay!” Berry and Wall*E both called. “We won’t interrupt anymore.”

“Okay, fine. Humph.” Little Black settled himself back onto the ground. “As I was saying, I was a sailor. I was born in a coastal town in...” He paused for a minute, trying to think of somewhere far away and exotic. “In Tennessee.”

“But Tennessee is not on the coast!” Ginger exclaimed.

Little Black snorted. “That just shows how much you know! I was born on the coast of America’s Great Loop. It’s a waterway that connects the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, and then joins the Intracoastal Waterway, which goes through Florida and along the Atlantic Coast to Massachusetts.”

“I lived with my mother, who worked pulling an ice cream cart. Our owner sold ice creams to tourists and other whippersnappers who were cruising The Great Loop. We had a pretty nice life there. We lived



in a pasture with a few other horses, mainly retired cart horses. While my mother went to work everyday, I was free to roam the coastline, meeting people from far and wide, and, of course, getting into all sorts of mischief. I would leap from one boat to another, tipping the boats and spilling cargo.

Occasionally I would stow away on a boat heading north, only to jump off by the time darkness came, swim to shore, and canter back to my mother. During the hottest days--and believe me--it is HOT in Tennessee-- I would find a nice spot in the shade, where I could hear the lapping of the water on the banks, and I would nap. Or I would find my mother, eat a few icecreams, and then nap. “But all good things come to an end, as did our pleasant life in Tennessee. My mother had heard our owner talking about selling me. Not only that, but selling me to a person who was known throughout Tennessee as a

mean horse owner.

“So we came up with a plan. I knew there was a small sailing vessel, about 25 feet long, that was for sale. My mother had relatives in Texas, so we decided we would head down The Great Loop and out to the Gulf of Mexico, and then try to figure out where in the unknown land of “Texas” my mother’s relatives could be.

“Now, my mother was a very upright character, and she raised me with good morals. Of course we were not about to steal someone else’s boat! But, despite a lifetime of work, my mother didn’t have any money. So instead, we saved all the hay and carrot rations we got for two weeks, and then carried them

(in multiple trips) over to the dock with the 25 ft sailboat. We did it on a dark night, so no one would see us. We left the hay and carrots on the dock, and on top left a short note that went something like this: ‘Dear Sailor, Thank you for the boat. I hope you enjoy the hay and carrots. Yours Truly, BB and LB.’ (BB was short for Big Black, my mother, and LB was short for Little Black, me).

“My mother was nervous as we loaded in; she had never been in a boat before. We started to investigate, trying to figure out what all the ropes were for, how to put up the sails, where the tiller was, and all the rest.

Just as we were about to cast off dock lines, a dog came running up and leapt into the boat! He introduced himself as Little Black, and said he was hoping for a ride south. We said he could join us, except that we would have to change his name to LittlEST Black, as my name was already Little Black. He agreed (although somewhat grudgingly). He proved to be a handy soul to have on board, however, as he had spent all his life on sailboats, and knew much more about sailing than my mother or I.

“We set off south. There was a gentle northerly wind that evening, so we glided silently with our sails out all the way. At first, we would stop during the day so we wouldn’t be seen. We thought people might be suspicious if they saw two horses and a dog sailing a boat on their own! Then LittlEST Black

came up with an idea. He rigged up a tarp we found along the bank, so that people couldn’t see who was sailing the boat. This meant we could sail day and night, and only make short stops to collect food and stretch our legs.

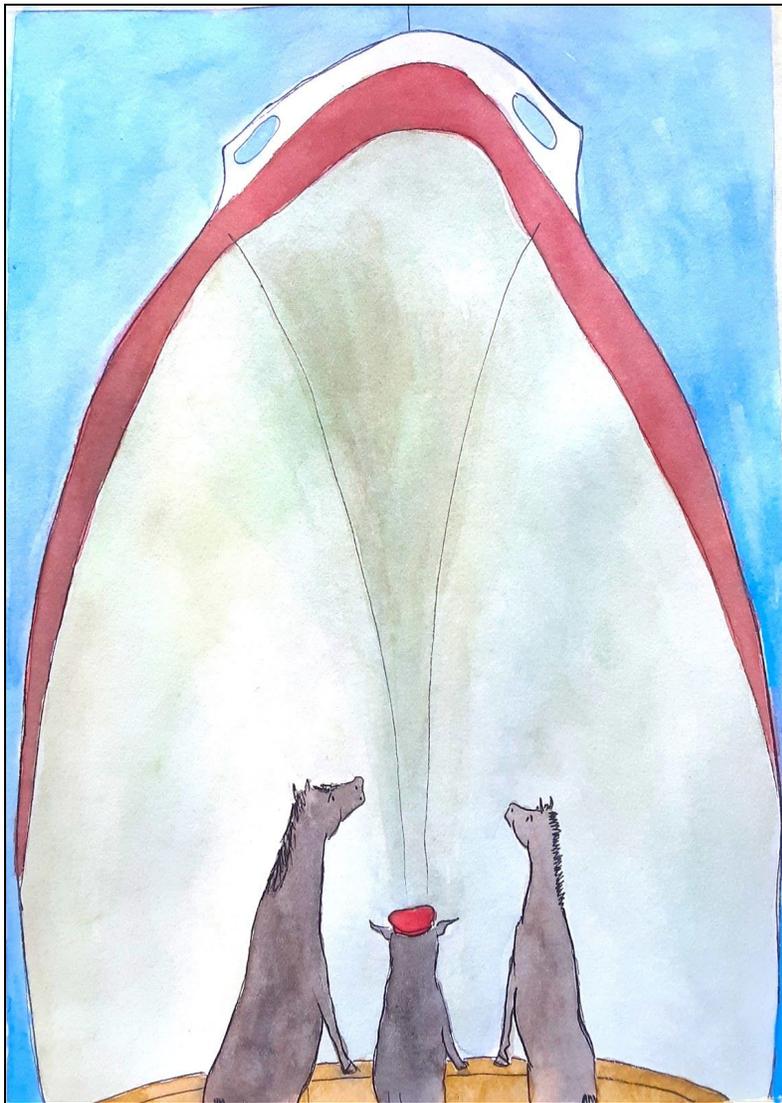
“LittlEST Black taught us about the “rules of the road,” navigation, and how to let the sails in and out depending on where the wind was coming from. But soon, my mother knew more about it than LittlEST



Black, and could be seen at all hours of the day and night making adjustments to our sails, checking the compass, and using the binoculars to scan for ships. She quickly became the Captain, and, like all good Captains, never slept a wink the entire trip south (or so it seemed to me).

“Some days, we had no wind. Then we would get out the oars and take turns rowing. Rowing made for long, hot days, and sleepy nights. It was a bit of welcome exercise though... Living aboard a 25 ft boat made for weak legs!

“It was on one of those slow, hot, rowing days that we had our first close encounter with a cargo ship. I assume none of you have ever seen a cargo ship before, but even if you have, you have no real sense of how big they are until one of them is powering towards you like a massive cliff about to crush you and



your boat into a million pieces.

“The night before was a sleepless night, as the wind was howling and we had to reef our sails multiple times just to stay upright. But the next day rolled in slow and hot, without even a breath of wind. There wasn’t much boat traffic, so we convinced my mother to take a well earned nap in the shade of the tarp, while LittlEST Black rowed and I steered and kept a lookout. We were moving slowly, but making progress nonetheless. I could feel my eyelids begin to droop. I blinked hard, and shook. I tried to keep them open. I looked over at LittlEST Black, who was still rowing but rowing very slowly, more and more slowly every second. I thought I would close my eyes for just a second...

“The next thing I knew, the world’s worst and loudest sound swallowed me. It was the loud blast of a ship’s horn. And I mean BLAST. We all three woke with a start and turned around to face our doom. There, looming above us, was a cargo ship. In another minute or two it would

crush us! We knew the ship couldn’t turn or slow down-- it was too big. We had to get out of the way, and get out of the way fast! I grabbed the oars and started rowing like I’ve never rowed before. My mother was at the helm, shouting orders to us. The ship gave another five blasts--the danger signal. My heart was fit to burst, but I kept rowing. LittlEST Black lowered his back legs into the water at the stern

of the boat, and kicked, frantically trying to propel us forwards. My mother alternated between steering and using an old milk carton as a paddle.”

Little Black paused and stared into the “fire.” “What happened next? What happened next?” Berry squealed. All the horses were staring raptly at Little Black. Finn was biting her hooves, a nervous habit, and Willy was sweating slightly.

“Keep going, Little Black! You can’t leave us hanging like that.” Buttons shook her head in an annoyed manner.

“Alright, alright. Where was I? Oh yah...

“We just barely made it. The waves from the cargo ship’s bow rocked our little boat to and fro, and we could’ve reached out and touched the side of the ship as it passed. We were all sweating profusely. Or I should say, my mother and I were sweating profusely. Dogs don’t sweat. LittleEST Black was panting, the corners of his mouth stretched tight in an odd grimace, and his eyes bugging out.

“That was the first of many close calls along our journey. Most of them were caused by lapses of judgement (or awakeness) on the part of LittleEST Black and myself.

“Nonetheless, we finally made it to the Gulf of Mexico. Thanks to my mother’s navigation, we found Texas, and, by some miracle, we even found my mother’s relatives, who lived on a lovely farm just southwest of Galveston. There was plenty of room on the farm, and they welcomed us all to stay there. We stayed for a few weeks, but LittleEST Black and I would stare longingly out to sea. When my mother and the other horses contentedly took naps, I would pace back and forth, and LittleEST Black would whine and chase his tail. “As much as I loved my mother, the time came to say goodbye. A westerly wind was blowing, and LittleEST Black and I had sails to fill and oceans to cross. My mother was happy with her relatives, and felt no need for more adventure at her age in life. The goodbyes were tearful. But as LittleEST Black and I shoved off from shore, we had wind in our manes, salt spray in our faces, and our hearts full of the call of the great Atlantic Ocean!”

Little Black paused dramatically. “And that is a story for another night. I’m tired now, and it’s bedtime.” He got up and stretched.

“Please, please keep going!” Berry pleaded.



“No, Little Black is right. Our “fire” has died down, and it is time that we all went to bed.” Buttons yawned and stretched. “Thank you for the story, Little Black. You are quite a good storyteller!” The others nodded in agreement, and one by one got up to go to their pasture. On the way back down, Berry fell in next to Little Black. “Little Black, is that story true? Or did you make it up?” Little Black smiled mischievously. “Who says it can’t be true, even if I made it up?”