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The End

My bounty is as boundless as the sea...

ROMEO AND JULIET

Now, when I remember riding with my father, my mind forgets my busy life with all its concern for the future. My mind shifts to the present tense because my rides with my father cannot be a thing of the past.

Usually I come out to the farm once a month, preferably on a day with good weather for riding. After the city streets, I speed down Highway 94 as fast as the legal speed limit and sometimes faster. Then I turn off I-94 to the Olson Memorial Highway through the housing project, the city, the suburbs, the bedroom communities.

It's a long ways before I see any barns. Those barns have peeling paint because barns with no animals aren't worth the upkeep. I don't feel like I'm on my way home until I see the barn past Rockford that has good paint and cows.

When I turn off Highway 34, I hear the crunch of gravel, and I know I'm on the ground I've ridden with my father since I was twelve. I remember right over there we saw a wild rose in the ditch, and further down the road we saw a deer. There's the swamp where Dad and I watched mother geese and ducks with their flocks paddle. I remember generations of dogs liked to chase rabbits in Ledin's woods, but they never caught any.

I drive up the hill and turn down the same driveway that my parents turned down when they took me home from hospital when I was born. When I get out of the car, Lucky, the dog, greets me before my foot even hits the ground. It would scare a mutual funds salesman from the city, but I know Lucky is just being friendly so I pat him and tell him how wonderful he is. I walk to the house. I don't knock. I am home.

Since it's Sunday, we go out to eat--usually at Perkins in Monticello because it's Dad's favorite restaurant. When we get home, Dad gets the mules up from the pasture. I saddle and bridle Molly, and Dad takes Minnie.

We lead our mules outside the barn. My mule Molly stands still because I trained her to. I remember when she moved when I was trying to mount her. I backed her in a corner so she couldn't move. I also tightened her cinch extra tight so she would remember who I was. Dad is still proud of me, and I'm a little proud of myself.

I hold Minnie while Dad rolls his wooden block next to her. If Minnie moves before he can get on the block and mount her, Dad can move the block again. I am amazed every

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time he mounts her at how much spring he has for a man over eighty. His physical prowess inspires me and gives me courage for my life in the city.

When I ride my mule Molly and Dad rides Minnie, nothing matters except that we are together and it is a nice day to ride. It is quiet, with only the plodding of mules' hooves--for even on the road traffic is rare. We talk little because the mules don't walk close enough for conversation, but the land and the sky clearly speak. "We are your land and your sky. These are good mules. You need nothing else, and nothing else matters."

Sometimes, when the mules are close together, Dad says things that are in his heart. "My mother thought eighty was good time to die. I think so, too." Later he says, "I'll keep Ginger (his horse) as long as she lives or as long as I live." Another time he tells about a relative hurting his feelings deeply. Yet another time he tells of his concern about my mother managing the farm after his death. My father rarely speaks this way, and I never know what to say.

I awaken from my reverie. My father is long gone now. I miss our rides. We had the sky, the land, and good mules. It was more than enough. It was a bounty.