

Raff blinked and gazed around him. Not much changed in his world: the living room furniture, the fading floral yet light proof drapes, and occasional blaring television set next to the fireplace with its sooty stains from the time that Ron started a fire on Christmas for a bit of atmosphere, but, having imbibed too much eggnog, had forgotten to open the flue. It had been atmospheric alright, just more wildfire on the plains rather than cozy cabin in winter. Of course, it hadn't affected Raff and his shelf mates much, safe as they were behind glass. The germination of the idea behind the enclosing doors had initially occurred to prevent dust build up and to protect the costly model horses from the marauding MacGyver, the newest feline member of the household who insisted on perfecting the feline skill of Knocking Items Off of Shelves, the more expensive the object the better. Sarah had come back to find a particularly lovely Arabian mare in pieces on the floor one Thursday, and the ensuing shriek sent poor Mac and the rest of the cat pack scurrying for cover under the bed. Sarah immediately marched up to the closest Home Depot and returned with armloads of do-it-yourself material that poor Ron spent hours agonizing over, trying to decipher the easy-to-read instructions before installing glass cabinet doors; MacGyver lent a helping paw by parking himself in the middle of the directions and occasionally chasing screws across the floor. The Arab mare was lovingly wrapped in linen and foam before being dispatched to the post office en-route to a hospital for model horses. Several weeks later, she returned seemingly good as new, yet she would keep telling and retelling the ballad of her adventures. She meant no harm, but she had never been as popular among the models as she was after her tragic accident, and even the resins deigned to listen, straining their carefully sculpted ears to catch her narrative.

Raff found those train wreck days far more interesting, since nothing much happened on the top shelf, and there was even less to entertain him once those doors went up. Once weekly Sarah would take

them down one by one and carefully and lovingly clean them of their non-existent dust, turning and inspecting each one for either real or imaginary flaws, lamenting should one of them develop the Dreaded Rub. Raff had the feeling that he was one of her favorites as she lingered over him, often taking selfies with him and projecting their images into cyberspace. His name wasn't Raff of course, though that was what she called him. No, the tag looped around his fetlock read "Local Riffraff" and in a previous existence he was a well cherished toy pony and he had belonged to a little girl who played with him incessantly. In that world, he saw much of the house and the backyard and was even occasionally played with in the bathtub. He was never bored, but alas, as all children she grew up and out of toys and so he found himself tossed into a box with miscellaneous other objects. Eventually, he found himself in a studio, his paint stripped, some nips and tucks taken here and there, and with some thick material mounded up on his crest and topline making him feel rather heavier than he had been prior. The painting took forever, but once finished he would not have recognized himself, even if he had been shown his own image. He had transformed from a generic chestnut pony into a highly lifelike dark bay rabicano (as if Raff even knew what a rabicano *was*) with a striking question marked blaze and blue eye that gave him a quizzical look as if he were raising an eyebrow sardonically. Shortly after he entered Sarah's life, after he had made his way to the top shelf, he often found himself wearing a wide variety of tack from jumping saddles to combined driving harness. Then there were the times when Sarah packed him up and after a few hours swaddled in a box gently swaying on the back seat of her SUV, he found himself in a large room with hundreds of other horses of all shapes, sizes, and materials, and here Sarah would proudly unwrap her show string and settle down to hard work. Raff would be carried around the room, occasionally set down on various tables, handled by strangers, and often had a colored bit of ribbon set down beside him. The real activity came later in the day when Sarah would frequently make several tack changes on him, setting him precisely down with various accoutrements, and Raff, with his quizzical markings, was such a natural ham that he would method act himself pretending to herd cows,

trot a dressage circle, or even pull a festive sleigh; he did it all, and Sarah was rather proud of him, claiming he was her best performance horse as she took his picture beside a large colored rosette.

But these jam-packed exciting days were becoming increasingly rare, and Sarah, while she still enjoyed handling and crooning to her models, seemed to find the shows dull and even exhausting. What Raff could not have understood was that years and years were passing, yet he, kept safe out of the sun and in his dust and cat proof cabinet, seemed as fresh as the day he trotted off that workbench ages ago. Once in a while, especially after returning from a show, Sarah would take him to her desk and carefully match and touch up any minute rubs that might appear on his ears or hooves. So, with such careful care, Raff remained a valuable and desirable object, yet Sarah seemed ever more distant and there came a time when he scarcely saw her at all.

From his aerie, he could eavesdrop and spy on the remainder of the house, and from the muffled sounds in her bedroom, it seemed that she spent the bulk of her time in there. The laughing chatter that had filled the house heretofore was silent, and even MacGyver had lost some of his impish behavior. There came a day with much coming and goings of strangers to Raff, whispering or muttering to each other in hushed voices, each bearing a signature casserole or dish. Ron, his face pale and drawn, bearing 3 days growth of stubble, shuffled over to the cabinet and reached for him. This puzzled Raff, since Sarah often had kittens whenever anyone but herself so much as touched her models, yet Ron had lifted him down and was bearing him to a part of the house he had never seen. This might have been interesting and even exciting but for the generally oppressive mood of the house, and Raff found himself in the bedroom, Sarah twitching fitfully in her bed, the surrounding populace grim-faced and silent, some occasionally sobbing.

Ron gently touched Sarah's shoulder and she fluttered her eyes open, dimly focused on Raff. "Oh, Raff," she croaked and reached for him and Ron tenderly tucked Raff into his wife's thin arms. How long he was there Raff couldn't tell, but new shadows appeared on the walls, grew taller, and eventually faded into darkness and the room emptied but for Ron sitting beside the bed, his head in his hands and Mac curled up in the crook of Sarah's legs. Her breathing became slower and less regular, and then came the moment that she quivered slightly and was still. Raff, though sentient as he was for an inanimate object, had no concept of death, and why the humans didn't simply send themselves off to be repaired, he couldn't comprehend. He had gently been extricated from Sarah's arms and returned to his traditional spot on the shelf where he was peppered with questions from the remainder of the models, yet Raff couldn't tell them much. He knew that something significant had occurred, but he did not know what to make of it. The house grew busier yet quieter and more solemn over the next week. Ron seemed transfixed, slumped in a chair and staring blankly into space while well-meaning relatives set about the task of getting the house into new order. One by one, the models were removed from the cabinet, carefully wrapped, and sent from the house to who knows where, the arrogant resins being the first to go, followed by the rest. Even the Arabian mare with the broken leg was eventually removed to be packed off to a new home and Raff found himself the sole occupant of the top shelf. Intermittently, someone would lift him down and question, "How much for this one, Ron?", and Ron, very uncharacteristically because he was usually such a sunny fellow, would snap, "No! Not Raff. Sarah doesn't like anyone touching him," which would evoke the exchange of more meaningful and prolonged glances between the well-meaning helpers. But no one would challenge him in his fragile state.

Seasons came and went, and gradually Ron crawled out from under his metaphysical rock and began to face the world. Friends and warmth and a satisfying level of noise and cacophony began to fill the rooms of the small house. Once again, Ron forgot to open the chimney flue and this time left a long dark smudge on the ceiling. Sarah, once her anger had subsided, would have laughed herself silly if she'd been there to see it, though she would have sent Ron packing in search of white paint to touch up the ceiling. While the house was coming back to life and even MacGyver was returning to his old tricks, stuffing a mouse down one of Ron's boots, only to fish it out again. Ron never handled Raff and despite his glass fronted cabinet, Raff began for the first time in his life to collect the dust that seeped through the narrow gap where the doors came together. While he was pleased to see life flow through the cottage once more, Raff was lonely. There was no Sarah to dust him and tell him how wonderful he was and no other models to talk to. Raff even missed the snooty resins even though they never once acknowledged his performance supremacy. They had, Raff assumed, gone on to new homes and were regularly gracing the show ring while he maintained a careful vigil over Ron.

And so the days passed, until one day Ron was scurrying around the dining room, whistling and vacuuming, polishing the table followed by setting the china. This could only mean company and Raff allowed himself the possibility of a pleasant evening. Unknowingly, Ron's eye had landed on him, and he lifted Raff down, gave him a quick dust, and placed him as a centerpiece with a few colorful stones and some white lights scattered about for effect. MacGyver even had hopes as he sat up, nose twitching, as Ron pulled dinner from the oven; he was, no doubt, imaging the leftovers that he would be entitled to when there was a knock at the door. There entered two adults and two loud children. "Offspring!" hissed Mac as he dove under the settee where not even turkey scraps could entice him forth so long as children remained in the house.

And Raff, Raff for the first time in years found himself on a table, the center of attention, admiring noises issuing from the parents and most notably, the small girl who couldn't take her eyes off of him. "What's his name?", Carley asked shyly. "Raff," replied Ron. "He belonged to Sarah and she called him Riffraff."

Dinner and the subsequent evening progressed as one might expect, guffaws, glasses knocked over, the occasional dropping of peas on the carpet followed by reminiscence of the old days. Of course, the older one gets, the more there is to reminisce about and the longer it takes so the conversation lasted well past bedtime, and the parents, bearing one sleeping child each, thanked Ron and carried their precious cargo toward the door. "Wait just a minute," said Ron, hurrying into the dining room, where he scooped up Raff. Returning to the waiting parents, he carefully tucked the pony into Carley's arms. She opened her eyes, sleepily, uncomprehending. "Raff is lonely," Ron explained, "I'd like you to look after him for a while," as he ignored the mother's protests of "Oh Ron, this is too generous of you."

And for the first time in decades, Raff found himself outside without a protective layer of bubble wrap. Over the ensuing years Raff played in the garden, was occasionally stuffed in a backpack to be taken to school, attended tea parties (the point of which he could not fathom), and even helped save the universe from a Lego Death Star. During this happy time, his paint was chipped and he developed the dreaded hoof and ear rubs. He imagined the Sarah's resins laughing down their long, elegant noses should they see him now, an old performance champion with bare plastic peeping through his designer rabicano coat, yet he regretted it not a whit. What is being a performance champion when you have just saved the universe?

Postscript: Several years later during a Zoom call with one of my brightest college students, I caught sight of a well-worn and well-loved pony prancing behind her on the window sill of her dorm room. She must have taken the pause in the discussion as tacit disapproval as she began babbling, feeling the need to justify the pony's presence. "Oh, that's Raff," she explained. "He goes everywhere with me." There was of course no need to validate his presence to me, but it seems that after saving the universe, Raff is now attending college and is unlikely to find himself in a box of disused toys ever again.