



[Home](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

The Heartbreak Business

by Richard Schmitt

When my daughter went into the horse business at age six, she wisely favored the promotional side—she knew better than to follow her parents into thoroughbred training. She'd seen our daily fights and frustrations, watched our work and worry, felt the despair when three years of work and expense becomes wasted by misstep, bowed tendon, shattered ankle, contrary attitude, mystery malaise, or just plain slowness, all of which are staples of trying to make a living running horses around a racetrack. She chose, perhaps not so wisely, to employ her little white pony, Snowy. Together they waited by the front gate of our farm in Ocala, Florida, Chelsea in a lawn chair, Snowy, (asleep in the sun), hooked to a lead rope. Crayola colors on white cardboard taped to the gate: See a pony that does tricks!

"Ah," I said. "You're in show business." She nodded eagerly. "How have the audiences been?"

"Nobody yet, Dad."

I wished her luck and went into the house recalling a recent family outing to a ragtag circus, clearly the inspiration for Chelsea's undertaking.

An hour later she sat there still. Perseverance, a good quality, but I worried: this was her first venture into the harsh world of horse business. I didn't want her hurt. She might lose her early drive, in business timing is everything. And everyone knows: location, location, location. I went back outside. "Anybody yet?"

"No," she said. Not quite as buoyant as before, but still with a sense that if she waited long enough someone would come by. Problem is we live on a dead end dirt road running through paddocks & pastures full of horses. There is a racetrack down the end of the road where we, along with a few neighbors, train our horses. Maybe 10 vehicles a day go by, mostly pickups or commercial vans shuttling horses to and from tracks. So, I feared, as a business location requiring an audience, this one was compromised. Another problem, common to the horse business, is employees I like Snowy, but as a "pony that does tricks" he is sorely lacking. He sleeps about 12 hours a day and spends the other 12 grazing and hovering over his food bowl. He's sweet as ponies go, not ornery like some, but if he knows any tricks he keeps them to himself. As a unicorn-like pet for my young daughter, Snowy was great, to rely on him as a source of income was as dubious as looking for any livelihood in horses.

Chelsea has always been pragmatic, persistent, stubborn even. She sat by that gate three days in a row. It was hot. Hours went by without a car. She studied the road, puzzled. I watched from the house. Heartbreaking. I considered bribing a patron or two. Our neighbors were good sports; they had kids too and knew what it was like growing up here in the sticks among adults working 24 hours a day for horses. I thought I might slip them a few bucks to play the audience role. But I worried: What if someone stopped and said how much for the show? I think Chelsea decided it was worth five cents. When they forked over the nickel wouldn't she be in a fix? She'd find herself looking to Snowy to bail her out, an animal ten times her weight, who surely wouldn't budge from the ground where he was sacked out in the sun. My daughter would be embarrassed. Hurt. Humiliated Her courage and vigor

would be compromised. The heart might go out of her. What of her self esteem? And where would she find herself down the road?

When my wife, Valerie, and I went into the horse business we worked for a trainer named Manuel Perez who had a stable of cheap, mostly broken-down, horses at Tampa Downs. I was new to horses then. Val rode show horses as a child and worked as a riding instructor at a local college. She was a good rider, and good looking enough in blue jeans and tank tops to get a trainer like Manuel to hire her as an exercise rider and take me on as hotwalker, cooling out the steaming horses Val brought back from the track. At that time neither of us had been anywhere near a trained racehorse.

If we'd understood anything about the horse business we wouldn't have been working for Manuel. Location, location, location. The top barns with high class horses were A,B,C etcetera, and located near the track, close to the kitchen and piss barn. Manuel was in barn Z, out by the remote parking lot. He was a former jockey who spoke English by sticking an A on the end of words like give and take and he couldn't make a V sound so he referred to my wife as Balerie. All morning long: "Balerie, tak-a number 9. Tak-a number 10." Like all trainers Manuel referred to his horses by what number stall they occupied. He had a tough little filly, number 1, who made money wining about a race a month, the other 13 used up the money and then some. It's not uncommon in racing stables for one or two good horses to carry a dozen deadbeats or convalescents. Manuel wasn't any good at training and most of his horses were ailing from leg injuries: bucked shins, bone chips, sprains and strains. They were fit 1200-pound racing beasts, bred and trained to run, and they needed to burn pent-up energy from hanging around the stall. The only relief for those poor buggers was when I took them out to walk for 20 minutes a day. They made it count, dragging me along at the end of a line, bucking, kicking, fighting tooth and hoof. For a green hotwalker, a barn like Z, a trainer like Manuel, was hell.

One day, after a bad dry spell where the tough little filly couldn't carry the barn, feed and farrier bills piling up, Manuel came to payday empty-handed. "Balerie," he said, "I giv-a you number 14." Important decisions went through Val because she was the rider. Hotwalkers were zero in the racetrack caste system, below grooms, who were below exercise riders, below jockeys, trainers, owners, CEOs who ran the tracks, pari-mutuel officials who policed horse racing, well below the horses themselves. "You lik-a number 14," Manuel said. "Take him."

We did like number 14. An endearing chestnut colt called Stanley—whatever his registered name was is lost to me now. He was cute, dorky, with a sweet disposition, soft brown eyes. He was also physically immature so Manuel hadn't bothered breaking and training him. I walked Stanley last and he never gave me any trouble because he hadn't been built up bodily or experienced what seems to be, (for them), the raw joy of running around the track. Stanley was, like my wife and I, like Chelsea years later trying to pawn pony tricks, unseasoned, innocent, green. That was us then, young, happy, full of enthusiasm. By giving Stanley to us Manuel dismissed the money he owed us and what he would subsequently spend on a body and pedigree he had no faith in. It was a good deal for Manuel, one I'm sure he quickly forgot. For us, it was the beginning.

We took Stanley home. The plan was to "get him going" which meant the

basics: walk and stop, trot and stop, canter and stop A few figure eights, pop him over a log, and we'd have a potential show horse to sell. That was our plan. Stanley was an investment. Within months we'd double what Manuel owed us plus whatever we spent on feed, farrier, and shots. That was our hope. We lived in a rented house then on an old watermelon farm, a paint-peeling place with 10 scrub acres and what was basically a giant garage. You couldn't call it a barn; it had a dirt floor and no doors. We built a stall in one corner and Stanley settled in. We bought him grain and hay and bundles of carrots and horse toys, he seemed pleased with the arrangement and that made us happy. Happy? We couldn't believe our luck. We were in the horse business—we were thrilled

"The horse business," is a term fraught with rumor and suspicion, fodder for ridicule and misunderstanding, or to state it plainly: ignorance. Few people know the meaning of the word thoroughbred. All animals with registers to support them from Cocker Spaniels to Guernsey Bulls are "purebred." But saying "I have a thoroughbred puppy" is wildly incorrect. Most dictionaries contain the correct definition: a breed of horse used for racing. But dictionaries also include things like "Cultivated, Aristocratic, First Class." I even saw "a person brought up refined and well-mannered." And once, incredibly, I found an entry using the word to describe "a sports car."

The word Thoroughbred is a noun. A breed of horse. Period. Like standard bred, Appaloosa, Tennessee Walker, Morgan, Hanoverian, Paso Fino...and so on. There are many purebred horses, all with papers to prove their names and pedigrees, all with advocates and detractors and clubs and bureaus and registration numbers and tattoos. The Thoroughbred is one of them. Regardless of what your dictionary, or your neighbor who raises angora goats says, to use the word to describe your pets or your perceived royal peerage, is ludicrous. If the word has any elitist purity, any nobility, any inherent lightning, it is because it designates one thing: Racehorse!

Stanley wasn't one. He was a Thoroughbred on paper, registered at the Jockey Club, a dame and sire in Kentucky, but he didn't look like a racehorse, or have the personality, and we didn't intend to make him into one even if we could have imagined then how to do it. We couldn't. That would come later, long after Stanley was gone.

Two decades along, in Ocala, recalling my daughter failing at peddling pony tricks, I worry that she will follow us into the horse business. She is 16 now. Our 25 acre farm is the only place she has ever lived, the only place she knows. From the first weeks of her life we bundled her into our pickup before dawn and rolled down the dirt road to the training track where she sat happily strapped into her baby seat fiddling with toys and reading books while we tacked horses and loped them around the track. Valerie didn't ride after Chelsea was born; we hired exercise riders. With the farm we bought a few mares so we breed too and took horses to the sales in Ocala. It is dark-to-dark work 365 days a year for very little fiscal reward.

Chelsea doesn't know what it is like to live without horses. She has had Snowy since she was too young to ride and has kept him until now she is too big for him. She rides other horses at a show barn she frequents after

school. We've kept her away from the racetrack, she's a good rider but we never let her exercise the thoroughbreds. She goes to school in the morning when we train and lately spends more time on her computer than on any horse. She takes them for granted, which is fine with me. I never wanted her in the horse business. I think it hurts her mother though. Chelsea never yearned for horses like Valerie did growing up in suburbia. Her businesslike father paying for riding lessons without ever understanding the affliction someone like Val lives with. The addiction to horses that's always been with her and will never go away, that which causes her, (no matter how long she's been in the business), to keep certain horses around long after they have no commercial value. Pets. That's what they are to her, a source of solace and anxiety, of marital strife, and economic disaster. But she doesn't care. For my wife, the horse business is more about horse than business.

We never intended to keep Stanley. Everything went as planned. He lived in the garage and Val schooled him over cross rails and caveletti. I did the stall cleaning, water lugging, hotwalking. We were newly married so working together felt like a honeymoon. Stanley, our first child. We cared for him as such and he was good and cooperative, happily doing what we asked. We worked at Tampa Downs throughout that winter and when Manuel asked about Stanley we proudly said how he would soon have a happy life as a show horse in a family with a young girl perhaps, someone stricken like my wife had been, who would love him more than herself and hang the ribbons he won on the walls of her room. That is how we pictured it. That's how we planned it. And for all I know, that may be how it turned out.

That spring we followed our plan. We loaded him into a two-horse trailer and drove to the fairgrounds, a grassy place with trucks and trailers stopped haphazardly among tents full of temporary stalls. The day was hot and sunny. This was our first horse sale. Nothing like the sales we go to here in Ocala where waiters serve drinks and fat men puff cigars while studying sale books as horses parade in and out. This was just a country horse auction, a hodgepodge of people and horses and ponies, some wild-eyed beasts straight out of fields, matted manes and tails never touched by human hands. Some were "greenbroke," meaning you might mount and not be bucked off but they didn't steer or stop. And there were some old decrepit creatures no longer fit for riding that would end up in dog food cans. Meat men were there too, buying horseflesh by the pound. First we'd heard of that. There were a lot of firsts that day. Not the least of which was how proud I was of Valerie when I saw Stanley next to the other horses. I found out something about my wife. She knew what she was doing. She could make a horse stand out in a crowd. This was a good woman to be in the horse business with, to be married to.

We paid \$20 to enter. Stanley was assigned a stall and a stick-on hip number. People hustled about with buckets and leadropes and flakes of hay to keep the horses distracted from the turmoil and troubling garble of the PA system. When your number was called you had to have your horse ready to go and move fast to the staging area in front of the auctioneer, a loud guy in a cowboy hat: "Once we start there's no stoppin'—you ain't here you miss your shot—lots of horses to run thru and no time for lollygagging—OK here we go, hip number one..."

We waited with Stanley. Val nitpicked him with a brush. "Give me the spray

bottle," she said.

"He's perfect," I said.

"His mane sticks up. I pulled it too short."

He was spotless, mane and tail combed, hooves blackened and shining, the tack gleaming—but she needed a distraction. She jumped every time the announcer yelled for the next horse. I didn't know how this was for her. I didn't know what was about to happen. She wore her leather half-chaps and blue jeans like at the racetrack rather than her dress breeches and black riding boots as she would for a horseshow. This wasn't a showplace. When Stanley's number came up she mounted quickly and rode him to the staging area, nothing but a strip of dirt in front of a flatbed truck serving as the auctioneers stand. Potential buyers stood in a half circle. They listed Stanley as greenbroke though he was more than that. He was calm and composed. Valerie posted him over poles laid out on the ground. We had about 30 seconds to prove he rode and stopped. That's all people were interested in here, ride and stop without bucking. The auctioneer whined out his spiel: two two who'll give me two NOW two who'll give two-five two-five two-five NOW two-five who'll give me three three... No one gave three. Stanley went for \$2500, which was fine. We'd achieved \$500 more than we'd agreed to be happy with.

One of the auction spotters handed me a ticket and I followed Valerie and Stanley back to the stall. We were trailed by a middle-aged man, a bit of a gut on him, wearing street shoes like an office worker. At least he's not a cowboy, I thought, but not a young girl either. While Val untacked Stanley the man stepped into the stall. He beamed happily at Stanley; clearly enchanted. The man said he had young kids—I looked at Val and smiled. He'd recently bought a farm not far away, said he grew up with horses, then away from them, and now he wanted to get his children into it. Reasonable, this man, likeable even. We would've felt better if we could have seen the kids, but it seemed that the second part of our plan, that Stanley would have a loving family, had come to be.

Valerie told the man more about Stanley than he probably wanted to know, and somehow, without a discernible change, the man came to be standing by Stanley and we were lodged in the doorway. We stood there long after there was nothing to say. This man, a stranger, had our horse and we had a piece of paper worth 2500 dollars. We did not know this man. Clearly he was excited, thinking maybe about his kids, about what they would call this horse. Stanley with his soft brown eyes. Stanley who trusted us, oblivious, munching hay, the closest thing we had to a child, no way to say goodbye.

"Don't forget your halter," the man said.

And that was it. The shock that we would leave Stanley here and drive away with an empty trailer began in my hand with his halter and leadrope. They drove a point like an arrow up my arm to my heart and then to that place behind my eyes. My face burned. How unprepared I was. How blindsided. This was, after all, our plan. A plan we worked for, a plan that turned out exactly as we hoped. We should be happy, yet, if my wife had told me she was leaving me at that moment I could not have hurt more. I looked at Valerie. This was why she'd been anxious. She'd been hurt by horses before. Her first cherished pony died of colic when she was 12. A

subsequent horse that took her into her teens had to be sold. Things happen with animals. But for me this was a first. It wouldn't be the last time I'd cry over a horse, but that first unimaginable pain stunned me.

I don't recall saying goodbye to the man, nothing like 'good luck' or anything. I don't recall throwing my arms around Stanley. I'm sure I did. I'm sure Val did. We said we'd keep in touch and the man said he'd send pictures—fantasy. We never saw or heard from him again. That was 20 years ago.

We maintained our composure until the truck. My wife and I opening our mouths to speak, but there were no words. When we looked at one another our eyes gave us away, and gave way. We fell together in the cab of the truck, held on, and wept. Our plan was carried out with overwhelming success. We were in the horse business—we were heartbroken.

But people say you get used to it. Right? It's a business, a way to make money; horses are a commodity, an article of trade, a means to an end like any other product.

It's true we've sold many horses since Stanley and some I've been happy to see go, others have been painful, and some we will never part with. Snowy is here on the farm forever. Our first race winner is here—spoiled and hanging around eating, we couldn't bear to part with him after he bowed a tendon and couldn't run anymore. His mother, one of our first mares, died of a heart attack awhile back. We sold a few mares in the 90's when sale prices fell. The prices always fall and go back up. No one knows why. The economy they say. Or bad publicity. Depends on the Arabs, the Japanese, or whatever happens in California. There is no logical or fiscal reason why horse racing endures. There is no big money in it—that's a myth. There are only horse people, who would be horse people even if they had to pay to do it, and most do pay one way or another. We've had our successes and failures, winners and losers, steps forward and steps back, foals born dead, yearlings that run through fences, we've had them break down at the track, or never get to the track. One of our most physically impressive colts came to nothing after three years of work and expense. We gave him away to show people. He was hard for Valerie to give up since she named him for her Dad who died that year.

The horse business is full of clichés. You quickly adopt a contrived thick-skin attitude, squinting like an early-morning clocker and saying stuff like Well, that's the horse business. And it is. But that doesn't mean people don't cry over it. When I hear someone say it's just a way to make a buck, just a horse, there'll be another down the road, I recall an old hardboot trainer from Kentucky. He once won 8 of 10 races in a single day. The reporters went nuts, a miracle they said, never been done. Certainly it was unlikely, very lucky, but typical of the beyond-belief things that happen in horse racing. The reporters were even more flabbergasted when they clambered over to the trainer's barn and found him asleep in his office chair. "What the hell," they said, "you just won 8 races! Aren't you excited?"

"Well," he said. "You gotta be pretty thick-skinned in this business. I get too worked up today I'll walk out of here and never win another race."

Months later, this same trainer had the top 3-year-old in the country, one for

the history books, a horse to do it all, break records, make the trainer more famous than he already was. On a Saturday in May he was dressed in one of his winning-circle-trophy-accepting suits for one of horse racing's big televised events. Everyone was in place. The stands packed. The commentators splicing on possible scenarios. The bets laid down. A TV camera trained on the famous trainer. The horses tacked and fired-up were loaded into the starting gate. And the race was off. At the ¼ mile pole his horse, the solid favorite, went down as if shot in the head. There was a shocked gasp from the crowd, a breath while the caller got his bearings, and the race ran on. The trainer, this man, ran too. He didn't own the horse. It wasn't his million dollars down in the dirt. He was just the trainer. That's all he'd ever been; he came from a family of trainers. He ran from his box so fast the camera lost him for a second, then picked him up, his dark overcoat dipping fast through the crowded bleachers and cheap seats to standing-room-only by the rail. We saw him throw his binoculars off his neck, duck under the rail and cross the track even as the horses, ignored by the stunned crowd, were on the homestretch. We watched him run through the dirt and under the inner rail and across the deep infield grass still wet from morning rain. He was a portly man who wore tailored suits and soft Italian shoes. As he ran we saw him dump his overcoat into the grass, soon the suit coat too hit the ground, then the silk necktie flew—he ran in his white shirt. It must have been ¾ of a mile across that infield. The race was forgotten. The TV cameras followed the white shirt, sweat-soaked now, against the green grass. It seemed to take forever. The effect was unmistakable: this was a parent running to a downed child with way too much time to think about what he would find. The horse hadn't moved. A dark mound in the dirt with the jockey withering alongside. Both ambulances raced towards them. The trainer ran on. We watched with our hands over our mouths, or on our heads, or thrust into pockets. Tickets ripped in half were cast down with curses. "Fuck," someone said. "Nothing good ever happens in this sport."

Finally, one of the mounted track stewards had the sense, or pity, to break an inner track rail and gallop after the man. I don't know which was more painful, the loss of the horse, who was wounded irreparably, or watching the "thick-skinned" trainer run. I know which I remember. Vividly. The trail of dark coats, the white shirt against the green infield, the silk tie flying.

At 16, Chelsea sleeps all day now that school is out, spends her nights on the computer chatting with a secretive clique of friends. She won't lift a finger around the house. Farm chores? Forget it. It's through one of these online encounters that she finds her first job at a show barn 40 minutes away, a place she's ridden often, where she has friends. A girl named Sarah, a bit older, is the manager and wants Chelsea to stay there for the summer and work with her. It's a safe place, if any farm can be called safe. Show grounds for pony clubbers and their soccer moms and dads with video cameras. No thoroughbreds. Chelsea and Sarah will live in a trailer and run a summer riding camp for kids. This will be good. Chelsea will get riding time and the job will break her nightly computer habit. She will work hard dark to dark. The twisted anguish of being 16 will wash out in sweat. And I'm sure the horror and tedium of manual labor will come clear. She will see how hard and frustrating horse work is. She'll be happy to return to school in the fall and plan for college. That was my plan.

After a week I drive out to see what's going on. My daughter is transformed as I hoped, she works hard, she is proven to be efficient and resourceful,

and has attracted the attention of the farm owner But—the part I didn't expect—Chelsea doesn't see the horror and tedium. She says she loves horse work. She wants to stay forever. She wants to quit school and become a trainer. Her friend feels the same. They plan to be partners breaking and training horses and taking them to the shows. I can't figure it out. They set their alarms for 5 A.M., make coffee and spend an hour on themselves: brushing, combing, plucking, smearing, trading tight jeans and western shirts with pearl snaps, rings, bracelets, belts of silver and turquoise, earrings, gloves, boots, hats. When they're fit for the show ring, when they could lead a TV parade they look so good, they head out into dark dusty barns to feed horses and shovel shit. It's barely daylight and there isn't another human being on the farm. My daughter for whom I had high hopes, a clean life, an education, a career with decent hours, a sedan over a pickup, seems destined to become another schmuck in the horse business. Heartbreaking.

Halfway through the summer she starts telling me about a five-year-old gelding she's been working with. Walk, trot, canter. Some flat work. Jumping in the ring. "He's level headed," she says, "and I love him." I try to ignore this because I know where it is going, but I see how vibrant she becomes when she talks about him, excited and happy, vigorous and enterprising, the way I remember her for most of her life before she became a sullen teenager. "Dad, are you listening to me?" she says. "He's for sale."

"All horses are for sale," I tell her.

But this sale is imminent apparently. She says he's about to be sold "up north". And what will happen to him then? He may get ogre owners, idiots, abusers. He could end up starved, or a backyard horse tied to a tree, or shuffled through a fairgrounds auction full of meat men. "This horse should not be wasted," she says. "He could be something; he has potential, needs to go somewhere useful." By this she means he needs to go nowhere except to our farm which is already overloaded with horses.

She gets her mother on her side. "The horse does move well," Val says. "He's sound and well-schooled." I try not to fall under the spell of these words, words of hope I've heard many times from my wife, from other horse people, from myself, so many futile never-ending times. This is my child. My job is to protect her from pain and heartbreak, which she says is exactly what will happen if this horse gets sold up north. "The horse could be a project for her," Val says. "A few months of work, bring him along, move him up." I know, I know, we will double our money and instill in Chelsea a sense of commerce and responsibility. An investment in our daughter's future. A plan to get her through the teenage years. She might even use this animal to scholarship into a college riding program.

So I agree, with mixed feelings, and conditions. "This horse will not be a pet," I tell Chelsea. I am firm on this. "You will work with him, sell him, and invest the money."

She says nothing.

"Six months, maybe a year," I say. "Okay?" She knows the plan, she understands pin hooking—the system of buying to resell. I keep saying "Okay? Okay?"

When she finally responds it sounds like this: "Why would I want to do that,

Dad? Why would I put all that time and work into him only to give him up?"

"Not give—"

"Doesn't matter—I'd love him by then. I love him now, that's the point."

"Selling is the point," I say. "To get something out of it. To move on."

"But why would anyone want to do that?"

"That's the business. Horse after horse, repeating the pattern, increasing profit, a process of regeneration, a stream of horses in your life."

"But I love him. How could I see him go away after all that work? All that time together? How can anyone do that?"

After 20 years in the business I must know the answer to this question. I keep insisting: "That's the horse business." I know what I'm saying is true. This is how we live; this is our life. A horse is a product to sell, a job of work, a day at the office, healthy sweat, investment and return. But my insistence is feeble. I've never wanted my daughter in the horse business. I sure don't want her to feel what we felt when we sold Stanley so long ago. She senses my weakness.

"Why?" She demands. "Why Dad? Why in the world would anyone want to do that?"

To answer honestly, I can't say. I must say, I don't know. I don't know why.

Valerie and I raise cheap horses, nothing like those running in Kentucky in May. We've never, thank God, had to run across an infield to watch a horse we'd worked with for three years receive a lethal injection on national television. The term "cheap" is capricious. Seattle Slew was born cheap and died classy. He cost a paltry \$17,500 and his relatives were not big winners. He was also ugly and slew legged. But, after he beat the odds, winning the Triple Crown and making his owners rich, he wasn't cheap anymore. He was high class and his offspring are now high class and not cheap to buy. He transformed his family. That's part of the game, one of the reasons people like us persist, because, as ol' Manuel Perez used to say, "lighting can strike anywhere in this business."

And it did. At some point, a point I cannot pin down, I have come to understand that I don't have what it takes to build a successful racing stable. It's not just the injuries and deaths, or the pain of the sales, or frustrations of dashed potential, or the nonstop work coupled with economic insecurity. The truth is, I don't have the heart for it. I don't have the ability and inability to be devoted and devoured, callous and careful enough to give the horses the attention they need and take care of my own heart as well. Simply put, I am not thick-skinned enough to win 8 races one day and the next day stab my best horse in the heart with a syringe full of Sodium Phenobarbital. If I cannot do that, I cannot be in the racehorse business.

I think Chelsea with her new found un-enterprising inclinations gave me a way out. She planted a seed by demanding an answer to a question I'd

never faced, a way to the heart of the matter; she exposed the contradiction of this life for someone like me seeking only to serve my family, and someone like my wife hopelessly afflicted, and someone like my daughter not yet scarred and burdened by horses. I needed to do something for my child here, because I worry, because I don't want her hurt, because I wonder where she will find herself down the road. So, I went back on my word, back on my good-parenting-plan-for-the-future, on 20 years of work. I bought this horse for her to keep, this 5-year-old gelding with no commercial potential, so she won't have to be thick skinned, sell her best friends, so she will not find herself in the heartbreak business.

Richard Schmitt is the author of the novel, *The Aerialist*, (Overlook 2000), and has published short stories and creative nonfiction in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Gulf Coast*, *Blackbird*, *Cimarron Review*, *Alimentum*, and other places. His story, "Leaving Venice, Florida," won 1st Prize in The Mississippi Review short story contest, and was anthologized in *New Stories of the South: The Year's Best 1999*. Schmitt is the recipient of a National Endowment of the Arts grant.

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