Horsey

by Thomas Wharton

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Robbie and his son Michael are walking together. Robbie is in a hurry, which surprises him when he thinks about it. He’s really started looking forward to these afternoon get-togethers with the other dads.

It’s difficult to hurry when you’re walking with a two-and-a-half-year-old. Robbie has to wait often while Michael stops to looks at things. Right now Michael is hunkered down at the edge of the sidewalk, his gaze fixed on something in the gutter. Aren’t kids his age supposed to have the attention span of a squirrel? Not Michael. Robbie nurses a smoldering nugget of self-pity. It’s hot and this is their fourth unscheduled stop on a two-block walk so that Michael can look at things. Robbie swallows the urge to shout *come on, dammit*, and joins his son at the edge of the sidewalk.

“What is it, champ?” he says.

Michael points into the gutter. “Whatsat?” he says.

It’s his most-used phrase. At two and a half he’s not much of a talker yet but he’s very curious about the world. He has to investigate everything. Ask about everything. Kath says that means he’s *deep*. He’s got a deep soul, she says.

Unlike me is what she means. But she’s got a point. He’s a quiet, serious kid. Hardly ever throws a tantrum. Sometimes Robbie thinks his son might already be more mature than he is.

Robbie follows Michael’s pointing finger.

“Oh gross,” he says. “Come on, buddy, let’s go.”

But Michael isn’t budging. “Whatsat?” he asks again.

Robbie looks at the bloodied wing, then at his son.

“It’s part of a bird. Something killed it.”

Michael looks at Robbie for a moment, then at the wing. He reaches for it.

“Sorry, boss,” Robbie says, and picks Michael up in his arms. Enough dawdling. Michael submits without protest. If there’s one thing he likes more than discovering the world, it’s being carried.

I’m a means of transport, Robbie thinks glumly. I live to serve.
This week’s gathering of the Spruce Grove Nestcocks is at Tony’s house. Tony’s son Sam is three months younger than Michael and can talk circles around him. At the last get-together of the at-home dads, Robbie brought cupcakes that Kath had made. Sam wanted a cupcake and Tony told him to say, May I have a cupcake please? And the kid said it. May I hab a cuhcake peeze. When Michael asked for a cupcake, all he said was *cupcake*. He formed the word nearly perfectly, but still. Michael never says or does anymore than the minimum needed. And man he’s got me trained. If he says banana, I jump up and get him one. If he says juice, I jump up and get him some. And he watches me while I do it.

Michael watches Robbie a lot. Not nervously, or with awe. Just watching. Just curious. As if there’s no difference between Robbie and dead stuff in the gutter. As if one of these days Michael might look at Robbie and say *Whatsat?*

Tony was an administrator at the college until they slashed a bunch of jobs. He was the one who came up with the idea for the at-home dad’s club, and the term nestcock. He found it on a website for at-home dads and thought it was funny. Robbie is uncomfortable with the word. He looked it up on the internet and one of the definitions was *an effeminate husband who stays much at home*. But the other dads liked it. Maybe because it sounds faintly rude and offensive, like an antique dirty word.

Today Tony is holding forth about the oilsands. Of all the dads in the group he’s the most outward-looking. The most informed about what’s going on in the world beyond poopy diapers and juice boxes and Sesame Street. Tony’s been to Fort McMurray. He’s seen the moonscape out there. He’s actually read the reports on habitat loss and water contamination.

“I mean, what kind of world are we leaving our kids?” Tony asks. “We want the best for them, we want them to succeed, sure, but what does success really mean in a system this dysfunctional? Does it make any of us happy?”

“You bet it does,” Jack says. “Long as I’ve got my barbecue and my beer.”
Everyone laughs, even Tony. Jack is a bit of a redneck, but it’s hard to be angry with the guy. He’s staying home while his wife works (her job at the plant pays better than his did at the hardware store) because their son Trey is autistic. Trey is standing by Jack’s chair, watching the other kids play with their toys on the living room carpet. Robbie studies the little boy’s pale, homely face and he’s reminded of the way Michael will stare blankly like this longer than you’d think a kid his age should.

Is it possible…? Robbie thinks, not for the first time. No, he reassures himself once again, the doctor checked Michael out just fine, if a little behind the curve on the language acquisition track.

“Our kids will make a new system,” Geoff says. “One we won’t fit into. In fact it’s happening already. We’re becoming obsolete.”

Geoff’s son JD is busy whacking a plastic hammer at one of the legs of Robbie’s chair. Geoff doesn’t seem to notice. He’s the newest member of the group and the one Robbie hasn’t figured out yet. He’s at home by choice, not necessity. Apparently the guy’s a computing wiz but he’s taking a year off to work on a novel. *It’s set in the future* is all he’ll say about it, in an undertone as if it’s some big secret. And there’s his habit of making these vague pronouncements, like he knows things about the world that the rest of them don’t. It gets on Robbie’s nerves. He considers asking Geoff what he’s talking about, but the familiar wind of hopelessness sweeps over him. *Obsolete.* The video store Robbie managed went under last year and nothing suitable has turned up since. Kath works as a hygienist in a dentist’s office and makes a decent wage but decent doesn’t seem to cut it anymore. The only reason they have a house of their own is because Kath’s father, the Lawyer, gave them the downpayment as a wedding gift.

“So what’s this new system going to be?” Tony asks Geoff, who shrugs.

“No one knows yet. It’ll be something untried.”

“You mean our wives will let us make the decisions,” Jack mutters, and everyone laughs, a little too loudly. The kids all turn at this outburst and regard their fathers, then they return to their play.
It’s been a month since Robbie discovered he wasn’t the only stay-home dad in the neighbourhood. He and Kath had nabbed a good second-hand sofa for a steal and were struggling to get it out of the back of their van and onto the sidewalk when this Asian guy appeared from nowhere and offered to help. He lived just down the street. His name was Tony. And the next day Tony introduced Robbie to Dan. And Dan knew another at-home dad a few doors down, Jack. They all met for coffee one afternoon at Tim Horton’s, and it was a nice break from the usual, and a few days later Tony group-emailed to suggest they make it a regular thing.

Robbie wasn’t sure at first. It made his at-home status that much more official, while he didn’t see it as a permanent thing. But Kath loved the idea and after coming to a couple of the get-togethers, Robbie decided it was better than being cooped up at home all day with a quiet two-year-old for a conversational partner. And today he realizes with a pang that when he goes back to work or the club disbands he’s going to miss these guys.

Dan is here today with his daughter Kaylee. She’s the oldest of the kids and they all tend to follow her lead. Get used to it, boys, Robbie thinks, as Kaylee lines up a bunch of plastic animals and confidently names them for the others. It’s only when Michael looks at Kaylee that Robbie sees something like awe in his eyes. She holds up an elephant.

“Elephant,” she says to Michael.

“Elephant,” Michael says, calmly and perfectly as always, but no more than that. He reaches a hand for the toy and Kaylee pulls it away. She’s not giving him the elephant. Michael turns and looks at Robbie, who discovers he’s gritting his teeth. Come on kid. Tell her you want the elephant. Say, give me the goddamned elephant.

“Don’t forget to share,” Dan says in a sing-song voice to Kaylee, and then he laughs. Dan laughs a lot and it’s a real, infectious laugh. He’s just been laid off from the mill, and he’s still the cheeriest guy in the room. Probably he’ll be back to work in the winter. Hard to say, eh? Laughter. A simple soul, that’s Dan. If civilization collapses, Robbie thinks, guys like Dan will be good to have around. They’ll be the
same as they are now, even when they’re hiding in a culvert from the roving cannibal gangs.

Kaylee finally hands over the elephant and tromps to the other side of the living room and sticks out her lower lip. Dan laughs, gets down off his chair and onto all fours. Come on, pardner, he says to Kaylee. After holding her pout a little longer for full effect, she comes over and climbs eagerly onto Dan’s back.

“She’d do this for hours if my bad knee didn’t give out,” Dan says as he crawls around the room making clip-clop noises with Kaylee hanging onto his shirt collar and beaming. Michael watches them intently, then turns to Robbie and lifts his arms.

“Ride,” he says.

Robbie’s never given Michael a horsey ride, as far as he can remember. It just never occurred to him, as if Michael had already passed the age for such games. But of course he hasn’t. Robbie takes a deep breath and gets down on his hands and knees.

Later Tony hands out some chocolate chip cookies he baked himself. The kids sit eating them from little plastic plates on the carpet. Michael brings his plate over to Robbie and plunks himself down near him. He breaks a piece off his cookie and hands it to Robbie. Michael always does this. Feeds Robbie from his own plate. Kath thinks it’s wonderful. She says it shows Michael has a generous heart. But Robbie isn’t so sure. He’d like to believe that, but he also can’t help feeling that he’s being fed, like a pet.

Once they’re back home from the get-together, all Michael wants is horsey rides. He even demanded a ride on the walk back from Tony’s house, and when Robbie told him no, Michael stopped and sat down on the sidewalk and wouldn’t budge. A tactic learned from Kaylee, no doubt. Robbie had to carry him and for once Michael protested: he squirmed and whined for a horsey ride the rest of the way home.

Their house is a bungalow and Robbie is able to make a nice long circuit: crawling from the living room into the kitchen and then down the hall to the bedrooms and back into the living room. Michael holds on to the back of his shirt the
whole time without slipping or wanting to get off. And without saying anything, though he giggles delightedly every time Robbie puts on a burst of speed or makes a neighing sound.

To Robbie’s surprise, he discovers he’s enjoying himself, too. He felt foolish doing this in front of the other dads, but now, down on all fours, close to the hardwood, he sees his house in a new way. The light down here on the floorboards is different, richer somehow. He can see all the scratches and the little dustballs. The curled wrapper from a plastic bandage. A dry pink dot beside the sofa that must be a drop of wine. Last night after they put Michael to bed, Robbie and Kath got cuddly and silly over a glass of cheap California merlot. Kath demanded to see hard evidence that he was a nestcock and Robbie crowed like a rooster and his wineglass tipped.

Here on the floor Robbie feels close to the house in a way he never has before. It’s an intimate, tender feeling that reminds him how his heart opened when he watched his son being born. They don’t live in a North Van mansion with a sea view like the Lawyer. Hell, they probably have less square footage than his garage. But this is their home. A real home. The balls of lint, the cracker crumbs, the sand tracked in from the playground … this evidence of their life together as a family moves Robbie so much he feels tears well up.

When Michael has finally had enough horsey and is playing with his blocks, Robbie sweeps the floor. It’s one of the at-home chores he always puts off but today he does it eagerly, thoroughly. It’s coming from that tenderness, he thinks. He should be looking after the place better, for Kath, for all of them. Then he realizes he’s also looking forward to the next horsey ride and doesn’t want crumbs sticking to his hands.

Sure enough, after he’s played with his blocks for a while Michael asks for another ride and Robbie eagerly obliges. He hasn’t been working out in ages and his back and his knees hurt like hell, but Michael is laughing again, and Robbie is smiling, too. This time Michael gives directions. With single word commands he tells Robbie which room to visit next, when to stop, when to go again. Robbie catches sight of a book under the coffee table: the bestseller Kath brought home from the
library two weeks ago but hasn’t had a chance to read because she’s usually so tired after work. Robbie makes a mental note to retrieve the book later. He’ll present it to her after dinner, run her a bubble bath and tell her to enjoy herself.

When Kath gets home, Robbie and Michael are still playing horsey. She looks stressed but her face brightens when she sees them coming toward her across the kitchen floor that’s gleaming because Robbie actually washed it after he swept. Michael lifts his arms and Kath picks him up from Robbie’s back. Robbie stays on all fours, looking up at his wife and son.

“Is Daddy a good horsey?” Kath asks. Michael nods solemnly.

They play horsey all that week. *Horsey*, Michael simply says when it’s time, and Robbie can’t tell if it’s a request or a salutation. One day he goes to the hardware store and buys a pair of those foam kneepads that plumbers use. The rides become longer, more like real journeys than games. Robbie shows Michael how to pull his shirt collar left or right to tell him which way to turn, and how to nudge him with his heels in the ribs when he wants Robbie to go faster. He peels carrots for Michael to feed to him at the end of the ride. Robbie even prepares the route by placing surprises ahead of time: a cookie and a glass of milk, or one of Michael’s favourite stuffies. “Oh look, Barnaby Bear’s come to meet us!”

Sometimes Michael will have Robbie stop in odd places, like the middle of the hallway or at the top of the basement stairs, and they will just stay there for a while, and Michael will be perfectly still, like a rider on the open prairie listening for the sound of hoofbeats. And Robbie is fine with these quiet, peaceful stops. If there was grass underfoot, he thinks contentedly, I’d be grazing.

After a week Robbie notices he’s speaking less often, and he feels happier. He has a real purpose now. He also notices he’s starting to feel uncomfortable not when he’s crawling around but when he stands back up on two legs. Like a circus animal performing a trick.
At the next meeting of the Nestcocks, at Dan’s house, Robbie spends most of the time on all fours. The other kids see Michael getting horsey rides and they ask their own dads for rides, and soon Dan’s living room looks like a dude ranch. The kids are laughing and the dads are laughing, bumping into one another as they mill around the room. Even Trey, perched stiffly on Jack’s back, is smiling. When the rides are over and the kids are plunked in front of a cartoon on TV so the dads can get back to their talk, Robbie lingers on the floor the longest. Tony’s already started in on the global economic situation, and Robbie doesn’t want to go there. Down here on all fours, he’s absolved of having to worry about things like that. He’s a mere beast of burden, with no adult responsibilities. He’s free.

“It’s all coming apart,” Tony says. “The corporate elite is terrified but no one’s admitting how bad it really is.”

Dan laughs. “We already know,” he says.

“We had the Great War, and then the Great Depression,” Geoff says in his usual oracular way. “Then World War Two came along and made the great war look like a schoolyard scrap.”

“I get you,” Jack says. “What we’ve got coming will make your grandpa’s depression look like the good old days. Anyone started digging a bunker yet?”

No one follows up on that sobering image. Robbie joins them at the table but he feels no need or desire to speak. We talk and talk, Robbie thinks. As if talking changes anything. Sooner or later we figure out what our role really is.

“I fear for our kids,” Tony says at last. “But then I think, they’ve got us. They’ve got their fathers in their lives. Not like our generation, when our fathers were hardly there. That’s got to be worth something, doesn’t it?”

The next afternoon Robbie and Michael are going at a slow easy amble through the front room when Robbie’s cell warbles from the kitchen countertop.

“Ride’s over, pardner,” Robbie says. “Daddy’s got to get the phone.”

Robbie halfheartedly dropped a resume off at the grocery store the other day. The call might be from the manager. A few hours a week would really help with the
bills. Or it might be Kath. She calls sometimes from work to see how they’re doing. She loves Robbie’s “breaking news” on the latest cute thing Michael has said or done.

“Come on, Michael,” Robbie says on the third ring. Michael usually climbs down without complaint when Robbie asks, but not this time. He’s just sitting there quietly like he often does, as if listening or waiting for something. A signal. A call of his own.

“That’s it, champ,” Robbie says as the phone continues to ring, but he no longer means it. This day was always coming. He knows that now.

He feels Michael’s heels dig into his ribs and he starts into a walk without protest. This is how it is. Michael steers him by the shirt collar into the living room and toward the front entry. The phone is no longer ringing. The screen door has been loose for months and Robbie is able to open it with a nudge of his head.

They’re out on the front walk now in the sunshine. Another dig from Michael’s heels and Robbie picks up the pace. They turn right and they’re trotting down the sidewalk, and Robbie keeps his eyes mostly down, to watch for pebbles and uneven spots that might trip him up. The destination is not up to him anymore, if it ever was. Michael doesn’t stop along the way for bird wings in the gutter or anything else. He doesn’t ask Whatsat? and Robbie understands that part of his childhood is over. They really do grow up so fast.

As they’re crossing the street at the end of the block Robbie sees Tony up ahead, coming down his own front walk on all fours with Sam on his back. Robbie and Tony catch each other’s eye but there’s no need to say anything. And further down the street there’s Dan coming to meet them with Kaylee sitting tall and regal. She’ll be leading the party, of course, and Robbie also knows that Jack and Geoff will be joining them soon with Trey and JD, and there will be no need to say anything, no reason to talk at all. They have a job to do. The rest is not up to them. The children know where they’re going and it is not a place Robbie or the other fathers have ever been or will even recognize, and that is how it should be.