

EXCERPTS FROM THE BEST THAT CAN HAPPEN: THE GRAND TREK

“To fulfill the dreams of one’s youth: that is the best that can happen” –Willia
Cather 1927

“Uh huh. Ever actually, like, try it?” – Kathleen Schmitt, 1982

FROM CHAPTER 1 Alibhai’s Dilemma

Harriet and I shared breakfast on the farmhouse porch one summer day and looked over the half-dozen horses dozing under the pines to the side of the house. She rather casually mentioned that Alibhai might not make it through the next winter.

I studied him over my breakfast cereal and realized Harriet could be right. Alibhai’s stance was a hair less than content. A typical vicious Northern Illinois winter could indeed make his life miserable. He might well decide it was time to move on.

“Send him to Kiki’s,” I suggested, referring to Harriet’s sister who was breeding Arabians in Arizona at the time. “He’d do fine down there, wouldn’t he?”

She thought it over. “We can’t afford to send him down there.”

“Well, ride him down there,” I suggested, meaning to deflect a host of unpleasant facts with mild humor. Most people would have understood this and gone along with the social ploy. Harriet understood my poor attempt at sympathy, all right. She is genetically adept at social ploys herself, when she bothers with them. I think she prefers to see what comes of taking one’s less considered words seriously.

“I can’t. I have to be back teaching school this fall, and he’ll have to take it kind of slowly,” she said. “But you could,” she continued and went to get an atlas.

FROM CHAPTER 2 Murphy’s Law

Any visit to Pine Grove Farms would involve some saddle time. So it was that, during this Christmastime visit, I found myself riding with Harriet through a pasture at their hog and cattle farm called the Frost place. She stopped and shifted in her saddle to point across a small ravine to an unprepossessing chestnut gelding pawing through the snow to reach grazable plants.

“That’s the horse that will take you to California,” she predicted, referring to the not-yet-dead plan to ride a horse from coast to coast.

My first thought about the horse was: “Yuk.” I may even have said it. I like to think I said something like, “Mister did improve on the mare, as I recall her.”

“You haven’t seen him move.”

I got to see Murphy move about two years later when again restoring my soul with another visit to the Haenerts’.

Upon arriving at the farm for this visit, I learned that the Haenerts were hosting a competitive trail ride and endurance race within weeks. Preparations required marking fifty miles of competition trails and

clearing livestock out of the fields the trails would wind through. We left for last the cattle pasture where Murphy was living with the cows and two unremembered Hackney ponies. Murphy was a pest whenever you rode through this field, overjoyed to see some friends who might liven up his dull routine of harassing the cattle.

Apparently, he had been awaiting our moving the livestock out of his pasture. We moved the cows. We moved the two Hackney ponies. We couldn't find Murphy.

Mounted all on proud competitive trail and endurance horses, Sue, Sarah and I combed the pasture, checking thickets and ravines and high corners and low. No Murphy. We separated, each riding as parallel a track as one can in rather rough terrain. We gathered again at the other end of the field, each reporting no results.

Eighty acres is a fair chunk of land, but it isn't big enough to overlook a horse after four passes over the land even if the horse was lying dead. Especially if the horse was lying dead. Besides, Murphy was generally the first one to join a mounted party rather than hide. Where was he? We headed back up the field.

We made it about a third of the way back up the field when Murphy neighed a challenge from behind us, where we had been mere moments ago. We turned in time to see him burst out of a thicket we had thoroughly searched. Vexed, we watched him zoom away with hooves flying and tangled mane at full mast. We spun our mounts around and thundered after him.

By the other end of the field, we had lost him again (*how?*) until we saw him grazing back about a quarter of the way down the field. He was grazing, that is, in between checking our positions. When he saw us turn toward him, oats and halters at the ready, he sauntered across the field toward the side fence line, checking over his shoulder to make sure we were securely on his trail this time, and disappeared again.

"I saw him come this way," Sue panted when we reached the stand of trees and brush he had slithered into. "I know he did." We all agreed he had indeed been exactly where we could find no trace of him. "OK. Let's try..."

Oh, what all we tried! Two hours later, our usual human feeling of Ultimate Assured Triumph over mere livestock was slipping. Each of us experienced some humiliating form of Murphy leading us into blind alleys and to the edge of ravines clearly impossible for horses to cross, except he was already waiting on the other side. Our most promising entrapment plans left us empty handed, only to see Murphy somewhere he could not have gotten to, tapping his toes with impatience for us to get on with this glorious game.

I didn't just get to see Murphy move. I got to see Murphy do things, go places, and lead us each into traps no horse should be able to do, get to, or understand. Did I still think he was unsightly? By four o'clock, I hated the cunning little bastard.

FROM CHAPTER 3 My Beautiful, Beautiful Dog

As plans for The Grand Trek solidified, Harriet suggested I get a dog for protection and further suggested a specific dog—a year old male which had won a good deal in the show ring as a puppy—would be the dog for me. We drove to Pat Schultz' kennel where he was residing.

Before long, Pat sent a child to the kennels to bring up the dog Harriet had prepared me to buy. Another fawn (golden red colored) with enchanting white markings was led to the porch and its lead was placed in my hand. Pat explained his breeding to me and that his body type was excellent although his head was turning out not to be what would win in the show ring—hence his retirement at the age of mere months. All of this was way over my head. I stared at the dog while he patiently stared out over the fields, indifferent rather than unfriendly toward any of us.

Although it was clear to me this was a done deal before we ever got to the farm, perhaps Pat felt I would want to get to know this dog. She suggested we walk around the yard a bit. It didn't matter. I had no way of evaluating any dog. All I wanted was to know how one goes about buying a dog. It seemed rude, asking their price in their presence.

The fawn and I went off on our assigned tour around the grassed yard typical of Midwest farms. While it did not seem an unhappy creature, I wondered what Harriet saw in this dog that was so special? The instant joy in the discovery of each other's existence I had imagined meant I found the dog of my dream— sort of like Tony and Maria's view of each other across the room in *West Side Story*—well, this was more like evaluating a tool in a hardware store.

We returned to the porch. Pat and Harriet and I sat again with the dog standing with an air of detachment while I discovered such a dog was not inexpensive. I wrote the check, received congratulations, and we headed for the car. The dog looked patiently into the open back seat door. I lifted him awkwardly into the car after I figured out he did not know how to climb in a car on his own, and I didn't know how to explain it to him.

“What's his name?” I thought to ask.

“Oh!” Pat smiled. “That's Country Boy.”