**The Penny Horse Winner**

Robert Bires

I knew I was a smart kid. My mother had been telling me forever that I understood what was going on. I was eight. A good kid, too. I took care of my little brother, Bert, while she did other things. If you are a helper, people say you are good.

We liked to go with her from the base to the IGA because of the Bucking Bronco. Outside the grocery, the brown metal horse with the red and blue saddle sat by the newspaper box. Some of its paint had come off. It cost a penny.

My mother would give us whatever pennies she had. We were not allowed to ask. One time it was nine. One time it was only two. She left us to ride while she shopped so we couldn’t beg for things she couldn’t afford.

“There’s someone on it!” Bert said from the backseat. We turned into the parking lot.

My mother tilted her head to the left to see. “He’ll have his turn and then you’ll have yours,” she said. The Bucking Bronco jerked the kid around.

We parked three rows from the IGA’s entrance. “Chas, you watch your brother,” she said, handing me six pennies. She snapped her change purse shut and turned to the store.

“I will.” We ran toward the horse.

“How many?”

“Three rides each,” I said.

Bert stopped in front of the ride. The kid didn’t notice us. He’d shut his eyes. He was trying hard at something. He wore dungarees and a t-shirt with red stains like Kool-Aid. I was older and bigger.

“Bert,” I said. “Come wait over here.”

“I’m next!” he said to the kid and stood by me.

The Bucking Bronco didn’t just rock back and forth. It took off in different directions. I’d figured out the path. Bert hadn’t because he was five. It was like drawing eights.

The kid slid his next penny in the metal box without getting off. It yanked him backwards.

“I’m next,” Bert said. The kid kept his eyes closed. Sometimes he leaned back. It couldn’t really buck him off.

As it slowed and stopped, we moved close. He reached into his pocket and pulled out another penny and put it in.

“Give us a turn,” I said, but he was watching the sky as the Bronco threw his head around. We didn’t move away.

“He’s not sharing,” Bert said.

“We’re next.”

I was counting. The bronco did its loops twenty-four times. I turned to tell Bert.

“Hey!” Bert said.

A man had come out of the store carrying a brown bag with a loaf of Wonder Bread sticking out. He stood by the horse. The kid pulled his hand from his pocket. Empty. “Here, Carlos,” the man said, and gave him a penny. Then he left. We didn’t know anyone in the store except our mother.

The kid Carlos was riding again.

“I want a turn!” Bert said. He stamped his foot.

When it stopped, I put a hand on the kid’s shoulder. “It’s our turn,” I said. “You’re not sharing.” He ducked under my hand and slipped another penny in. The man must have given him two.

Bert was picking up a broken piece of the curb. “No!” I said.

Carlos looked like he was dreaming of ice cream. I wouldn’t touch him while he was riding.

After that sixth ride, I put my hand over the coin slot. “It’s our turn now. Get off.”

He reached into his pocket. There were no more pennies. He reminded me of our cat, Greta. She did what she wanted. He sat on the dead ride, urging it to move with his hips. “My horse,” he said.

“You don’t have any money. Get off.” I pushed him a little. He leaned in.

“It’s my turn!” Bert screamed. “Everybody takes turns!”

“Get off.”

“My horse.”

I took a step back then rammed him. He tried to stay but his hands slipped, and he fell onto the asphalt. He looked at me surprised. I was more surprised. And scared. He started to breathe loudly.

“Charles Duke junior!” my mother yelled. I turned. “You help him up.”

“He wouldn’t let Bertie ride.”

“Make sure he’s okay.”

I tried to pull him up by one hand, but he became a fish flopping around. She stepped above him. “Give me your hands,” she said. He did. She pulled him up. She smoothed his hair and looked at his elbow and rubbed on it. He pulled away.

“Apologize,” she said. I was behind her.

“He wouldn’t share,” Bert said.

“That’s not a reason.”

“Sorry,” I said. I apologized to her, not Carlos. He was throwing his leg over the horse.

A woman came toward us, pushing a cart full of bags. “Here, Carlos,” she said. He cupped his hands. She stopped and dropped pennies into them. She looked at us like she didn’t like us. I don’t know if she saw. My mother didn’t speak to her.

“That’s who you pushed off? That boy?” my mother asked as we rolled our cart to the car.

I hung my head.

She stopped. “Give them to me.”

She marched back to the horse. Carlos was back on it, bucking. He was smiling, eyes closed. She waited for it to stop. When he looked at her, she gave him our pennies.

As she drove us back to the base, I watched the sun sinking. Bert cried softly. My mother said nothing. If Carlos had talked, if we had become friends, I would have shared our six pennies between us. I wondered if he lived near the store. If he was like a stray animal. If the horse was all he had and it was wrong for us to want to ride it. Why no one cared if we got a turn.

My father once had a horse. If he ever came back, I wouldn’t ask him what I should have done.