



Are There
Horses in Heaven?

Based on a true story



Mary Lou Davis

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS





Mary Lou Davis is the co-author of *Flight Path: A Biography of Frank Baker Jr* (ISBN 978-1-85792-918-8) and author of *The Truth that Transformed Me* (ISBN 978-1-84550-206-5). *Horses in Heaven* is her first young adult novel. She also writes for magazines and public radio and is a widely published photographer. She and her husband and three children are adventure addicts. They all enjoy rock climbing, water skiing and racing mountain bikes. Although she grew up riding and showing horses, she traded in her living, breathing mount for one of metal and rubber. She now rides a CRF 250 motorcycle on tracks and through the woods of Alabama.

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Acknowledgements

*I*n his classic novel, War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy wrote, “Mother knew how to win my passionate devotion simply by drawing out what was best in my soul and admiring it.” I echo his eloquent words about my mother, Janie Buck. I would not be the person I am today without her drawing out the best in me. She not only taught me to love God and walk with him, she drew me into her writing projects and encouraged me to fly on my own. She admired my efforts in everything I did and nurtured the bud of creativity until it blossomed. Also, father’s unconditional love has been a visual representation on earth of God’s heavenly love for me. Thank you Mom and Dad, Bill and Janie Buck, for making me the person I am today.

Anita Cowart was my other mother who put up with me through adolescence at the barn. She has been





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the true inspiration for this story. I am grieved that she never saw this story as a book because of her untimely death. She was an amazing artist who painted not only with accuracy, but something else I can only describe as a spark of love and grace. She also was a wonderful writer. Her own book about Love, though unpublished, has been photocopied and passed around the world. Her memory will be remembered with love and honored by all who knew her. The following is one of the last things she wrote.

“Life on the farm was hard in the winter. Often water pipes froze and we would have to haul water from the river in garbage cans in the back of the truck. It seemed so futile as much of it would splash out as the truck lurched over the frozen road on its way back to the barn, but it would be so nice to sit by the fire and warm our icy fingers. Life went on and we knew spring was coming! Soon the dead black limbs of the trees would burst forth in flowering glory, rejoicing that the night of winter was over. The mares would drop their hairy coats for sleek and shiny ones of spring. Little colts and calves would pop up everywhere.

As we walked the long distance from the barn back to the house on many a cold winter’s night we could see the lights beckoning in the distant windows of our beautiful house. No matter how long and hard and cold the day, there was hope in our hearts for the house held warmth, nourishment, and rest. It was a promise to me that at the





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end of the winter of old age here on earth that we will see the lights of our heavenly home beckoning to us. At the end of every winter season in our lives, there is spring, or home, or the resurrection and finally entering our eternal home and the fulfillment of all the promises of God.”







Big Man

A race seemed like a good idea at the time, but as I felt the muscles of my horse stretch and contract in full gallop, I realized we'd made a mistake.

Jericho's mane lashed my face as I leaned forward to grab the reins that dangled uselessly from the bit clenched between his teeth. The leather lines whipped against his churning legs and danced wildly away from my grasp. "I'm such an idiot," I hissed through clenched teeth. How could I have dropped the reins? "Whoa! Whoa!" I yelled and lunged for them again. I had to stop him.

Jericho's staccato hoofbeats echoed the pulse pounding in my ears. Through nostrils, wide and red, he sucked air in and out in a noisy cadence that matched the beat of my heart. Sweat foamed a white lather that slimed my cheek and seeped into the corner of my eye as I lay flat on his neck. The salt stung and I blinked to clear my vision. But, I didn't need to see





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what lay ahead; I knew with certainty what was coming. Above the clacking hooves and blowing horse I could hear the music of tires whining along asphalt. The highway!

“Jump; Mary!” Katy yelled. Her mount couldn’t come close to matching Jericho’s long stride. On her short-legged pony she ran behind me uselessly shouting dumb instructions like, “Grab the reins!”

What did she think I was trying to do? Pick my nose?

“I knew I would die young,” I whispered to the wind. “This is it.”

It’s true. Your life does flash through your mind before you die.

As a baby my first words were, “I want a horse.” And I never stopped repeating the phrase until my wish was granted.

If the government sponsored a research project to analyze brainwaves of little girls, I’m sure it would find that visions of horses occupy 95 percent of their gray matter. I’m not sure if every child in the world is obsessed with horses, or only every girl in my elementary school.

My friends and I spent hours on the playground speaking to one another in a high-pitched falsetto.

“Lightning, let’s go to the pasture to eat grass.”

“Neeyyy, neeyyyy!” Lightning would answer and a pack of little girls would gallop away looking somewhat like



Big Man

King Arthur and his knights in *Monty Python's Holy Grail*, except without coconuts to clack together.

I think Monty Python got the idea for their movie when he saw a little girl's whinnying and cantering around teeter-totters.

My heart's desire was finally realized in the fourth grade.

It had been a traumatic year. My last name was synonymous with fear among boys my age. When the words, "There's that Buck girl," echoed across the playground they scattered in terror. My best friend, Katy Pickle, and I took particular pleasure in biting our nails till they were sharp and ragged. We'd chase down the boys baring our lethal claws like hungry tigresses out for a kill. Each scratch inflicted was a trophy. We kept tally marks to determine who scored the most.

One of our favorite fellows to torment was Bill Sanderson. He was cherubic with a halo of golden curls and rosy cheeks. But his portly stature and short legs made him an easy catch. I would grab his legs and drop-tackle him while Katy shoved pea gravel down his pants. He'd howl and cry, but all the other boys were too terrified of "that Buck girl" to come to his rescue.

I don't recall any adults ever scolding us. I'm not even sure there was recess supervision. All the teachers were apparently on coffee breaks or taking naps. The playground was a mighty free-for-all with Katy and me wreaking havoc and terrorizing the boys with our jagged fingernails.





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But then it happened. Everything changed and my life would never be the same. It wasn't gradual. It happened all at once as if a wound-up rubber band snapped and like the Grinch my heart grew three sizes in a moment.

As usual, Katy and I had chased down Bill. We had him down, and as I pushed my fingers into his hair to grind his face in the dirt he flipped over and looked at me with those wide tear-filled baby blues. Sweaty blonde curls framed his pudgy cheeks and I hesitated. If only I hadn't, my life could have been so different. But I did.

I paused and in that brief lull the world slowed down.

The kids on the playground froze.

All noise and chatter ceased.

The wind stopped whipping us into a frenzy.

My heart backflipped and the thought came unbidden into my mind, *Hey, he's kind of cute.*

Just as suddenly the world started whirling again. Kids screamed and ran and everything flew by as if nothing had happened.

I rocked back on my heels and stared at Bill. He couldn't believe his luck and began crab-crawling backward as soon as I released my grip on him.

"Why'd you let him go?" Katy asked staring at me as if I'd lost my mind.

"Why do birds suddenly appear every time he is near?" I sung under my breath.





Big Man

“What are you mumbling about birds for?” Katy said, and put her hand to my forehead as if I had a fever.

“Just like me they long to be, close to you,” I sang and spun in a circle.

The next day I sealed my fate. I wore a dress and began a diary.

Young girls’ diaries record their secret innermost longings, which mostly boil down to vapid lines on their latest infatuations. Usually a flap with a metal latch and a lock secures the book from prying eyes.

I soon wished I had this kind of protection for my soul’s yearnings. Mine were recorded in the back of a school notebook – easy prey for prying eyes. I called it my deery. Who knows why? In it I chronicled my sudden crush on Bill Sanderson.

The flowery poetic lines revealed a side I hid, for fear it would ruin my reputation as Attila the Hun. In a lapse of judgment, or possibly a desire to be better friends with LuAnne Holcomb, I bared my soul. I showed her my deery.

Two minutes later she ran and narked on me to Bill. I guess, in hindsight, I can hardly blame her. It was the greatest scoop in our elementary school history.

The treachery was committed while I, unsuspecting, was in the girl’s bathroom. In those few moments spent washing my hands my status changed from top dog on the playground to the dirt under the pea gravel.





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With his new status of beast of prey, Bill lay in wait outside the girl's bathroom door. When I walked out I stared through his beady blue orbs into his dark soul; I knew in my gut the name, "that Buck girl," held no more terror for him.

The grinning face of LuAnne Holcomb quickly dispelled any doubts I may have had. But a quick step in her direction sent her cowering behind Bill in a ready-to-run posture.

For the rest of the year I was tormented by a new song, "Deery, deery, Mary has a deery," conducted by a strutting Bill Sanderson. The tune, recognized by children worldwide, usually accompanies the clever lyrics, "Ne, neh, neh, neh, neh."

Bill became quite adept at "Mary has a deery." He even made up a dance to go along with the tune. He wagged his behind rhythmically back and forth like a fat dog hoping for a bone, and swung his arms in wide counterclockwise circles. It became a popular dance and caught on all over the United States and Canada. In fact I saw them line dancing the "Mary has a deery" on *Soul Train* a few months later.

The rest of the year I sat near the door at recess and kept my eyes on the ground, sifting pea gravel through my fingers.

My parents must have guessed something was amiss since I went from a boisterous tomboy to a timid female overnight. When we got news that the high school football coach's house burned down and he had a horse to get rid





Big Man

of, Dad thought the time had come to heed my deepest longings. Hence “Big Man” joined the Buck family.

Big Man was a big old bay – brown coat with black mane and tail. I never knew his pedigree, but he looked part thoroughbred, part draft horse. He was a kind, old giant and patient with a scrappy little hellion like me.

I could ride pretty well already. I cut my teeth on horses during the summers and on holidays at my grandmother’s farm in L.A. That’s Lower Alabama to the uninitiated. With bridles held together by discarded hay string, my cousins and I guided our mounts down white sandy trails that wound through the Conecuh National Forest.

Summers were so hot the tar on the roads became molten. It sucked the bottom of our sneakers with a slup, slurp as we walked across the asphalt – that is if we were lucky enough to be wearing sneakers. Mostly we went barefooted and fried the skin off our feet.

We’d swim the horses in Open Pond or Blue Lake for relief. However, when a man got his arm twisted off and swallowed by a gator, we gave Open Pond a wide berth.

Big Man was a horse of many talents. He could stretch his long, black upper lip straight out like a charmed snake rising for a kiss. If you pulled straight up on the reins of his hackamore, a bridle that stopped the horse by means of suffocation rather than a steel bit in the mouth, he’d rear up on his hind legs. He’d pose a moment, for a snapshot,





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then plop back down looking bored as if you hadn't just shouted, "High ho, Silver, away!" I could slide down his tail – without fear of being cannoned to the moon – crawl under his belly and ride him backward while cantering.

He was the perfect first horse, except for the fact that he was about 100 years old and couldn't keep the pace of a nine-year-old hyperactive child. This is why I found myself flying toward the highway on the back of a half-broke three year old named Jericho. My mind snapped back to the imminent danger I faced.

"Jump!" Katy yelled again.

I gave one more futile attempt to catch the dangling reins and stop the speeding locomotive.

A car flashed by ahead.

The highway!

I leapt sideways screaming bloody murder. I'd like to say the world stood still a moment and I saw everything clearly for a brief second, but I'd be lying. In less than the blink of an eye I landed in honeysuckle vines woven through prickly blackberry bushes that lined the side of the road. I cartwheeled and tumbled knowing every bone in my body, including my neck, was snapping in several places.

"You Okay?" Katy asked as she pulled her horse up beside me and jumped off to survey the damage.

Honk! Screeeeech! I jerked up on my elbows and watched Jericho thread the needle through speeding cars. A cloud





Big Man

of smoke boiled behind a station wagon as it lay a line of rubber on the road in an effort to keep from plowing over the big bay gelding. With ears glued flat back on his head he ran the gauntlet without slowing.

Clackety, clackety, clack, his hooves rang like hammers nailing the asphalt. He wove through the traffic then soared over the fence into the pastures of Heathermoor Farm.

Heathermoor. Take a deep breath and say it again. Can you smell the fresh-cut grass and the horsey scent that fills the space between the letters? The word, Heathermoor, is enough to stop me for a moment of reverential silence. It was my second home – a horse farm. It's located off Highway 119 – the old Indian trail that runs through a narrow fertile valley of rolling pasture land. On either side of this valley, mountain ranges rise like sentinels standing guard over the land below. Well, a Colorado cowboy might call them big hills, but to Southerners they're mountains.

A quarter mile of white board fence lined the front pastures of Heathermoor. They framed the green fields, sprinkled through with grazing mares and foals, like living works of art. A long paved drive led to the brick and board house set like a jewel at the crest of the hill. White paint chipped off the brick giving it the cool shabby-chic look before the word shabby-chic was ever coined. Giant elms stretched wide arms protectively over it.





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It was a place of wonder, dreams and heartbreak.

At Heathermoor the Cowart family raised and trained American Saddlebred show horses and a passel of other kids along with their own children. Mr Cowart was strong and thick, his wife small and thin.

Mr Cowart's face, weathered and brown like saddle leather, was crinkled with laugh lines. Everyday he wore his uniform – khaki pants and a white button-down shirt. Even in the heat of summer he always looked as though he were headed for the office instead of the barn.

He loved to tease us, correcting our grammar like a schoolteacher. "Where's it at?" he'd mock with his salt and pepper eyebrows shooting up to the hayloft. "What kind of language is that? Never end a sentence with a preposition. Don't they teach English in school anymore?" Or he'd say, "What fur? What fur? Cat fur to make kitten britches. It's, what for, not what fur. You sound like white trash talking like that. And I'll tell you what for, because I said so!"

When he'd pick us up and threaten to dunk us in the garbage can full of water in the hallway of the barn, Mrs Cowart would shriek, "John! Stop tormenting those girls!" She couldn't stand physical violence and Mr Cowart's wrestling made her nervous.

She was our second mother, treating us with all the kindness of one who can hand a child back to the real mom





Big Man

for discipline. She took every opportunity to show us God's love and his works in everyday situations.

Mrs Cowart always wore a line of concern between her eyes. As a child I had no idea of the depth of the tragedy she had experienced or the pressures involved in running a horse farm on a shoestring budget. I didn't give any thought to the imminent dangers that come with mixing horses with children, but I'd soon find out.

