

“Anna”
by Jenn Sroka

He’s going to ship her.

It’s a Sunday morning, the last Sunday morning in October, and I am standing in the barn that has been home to my racehorses and weekend responsibilities for the past several months. The last horses ran the last race of the season here almost a week ago. My husband and I are breaking camp and packing up the excess water buckets, feed tubs and other items we do not need at the racetrack to care for our horses still stabled there. Home on the farm, the stalls in our backyard barn are empty and waiting for them. In just a few days, they will enjoy a long winter off to eat hay and play in the snow together, growing shaggy coats to protect them from the winds and resting their minds and bodies until the spring when training starts to slowly condition them back into peak athletic shape. For now, the three of them gleam with soft, tight coats over rippled muscles, each with perfectly trimmed manes and perfectly shod hooves. They stand in deeply bedded stalls, two freshly scrubbed water buckets and a large pile of sweet smelling hay in front of each, munching contentedly or watching the barn activity from their door.

Five stalls down, a rusty gate hangs in the doorway of a dark stall. Somewhere inside, Guyana Moon, a small mare with a reddish brown coat and a crooked white blaze down her nose, awaits her fate. One year ago, “Anna” was purchased as a joint venture between a trio of perpetually broke individuals; a sweet but naïve young woman, an older Irishman with a likeable personality, and a small, ancient Englishman with a soft accent. They had high hopes of making big money on this little girl’s racing. However, as the five year old mare failed to win race after race, the young lady and the Irishman left the partnership. They signed over their indebtedness to the English chap by way of giving their percentage of the mare’s ownership to him. The Englishman’s name was Albert, and old Al became the owner, trainer, and caretaker of Anna.

Al’s persona was that of a frail old man with a whispery voice and a gimp to his walk, but he spoke no kindness to his animals, and never did they feel a hand caress their nose or a carrot pass their lips. He bred them to whatever he could strike a free deal with, and as a result he had a few mouths to feed. Horses were simply a business for Al, and business was not going well. The horses moved from farm to farm, snuck out with bills owed or moved out by the barn owners just to get them out of their stables. Al was broke. This is when Anna’s true decline begins.

Anna came back to the racetrack the following year as a six year old mare who never won a race. Through friends I learned she had been turned out in large herds with aggressive horses, which accounted for the nasty cuts down her swollen legs. She moved into the same section of our barn at the racetrack as before, five stalls down from my fleshy horses that had spent their winter rolling snow angels with their backs and playing halter tag in the fields. Anna’s appearance was out of

place as she was walked around the shiny browns, blacks, reds and greys in the rest of the stable. Already an unusual color called "liver chestnut," Anna's reddish brown coat had been chewed by other horses, chunks pulled out by their teeth. She resembled a dull old penny, weather worn and overused. As a six year old horse, Anna should have been entering the prime of her life, but her crooked blaze down her face separated two haunted eyes, far too sad and tired for such a young mare.

Soon after his arrival, Al ran out of credit with the feed man, tack shop, hay farmers, farriers, veterinarians, and so on. He began borrowing off others regularly, carefully avoiding my husband and me. We had watched the same pattern the year before, and when our hay and our feed and our bedding bags would go missing overnight only to end up in his horses' stalls, my husband confronted Al and made it clear the thieving would stop immediately. This made the air between the three of us rather chilly; however, we were not going to turn a blind eye to theft. We would pass each other quietly in the barn, never speaking, going about our own business.

Anna entered several more races as the year went on. An average, healthy racehorse at our level of racing runs a race every 14 to 21 days. Al was sending Anna out to run every 7 to 10 days. She always ran with no improvement, gathering comments in the results like, "never in contention", "failed to fire", "weakened", "distanced", and "no factor". Worse than the results, we watched Anna return to the barn exhausted, the sweat gleaming from her heaving body, her head covered in the sandy loam that dozens of hooves flung back into her face as she trailed them. Al brought her back from each race, trickled a hose over her body while she was still too hot from exertion, skipped the half hour or so of walking a horse should do to properly cool them off, and stuck her back in her stall still overheated.

Anna wore blinkers, a hood with plastic cups that go around the eyes some horses need to keep distractions beside them from frightening them. Anna's blinkers channeled the gritty sand into her eyes quite often. Horsemen know to flip the eyelid and blow the wet sand out of the corner of the eye to prevent irritation and infection; Al never bothered. Anna's eyes were often painfully swollen and half-lidded a day or more following a race, sometimes leading to a weeping eye infection. Anna's permanent teeth grew in crooked, creating a jagged grinding surface usually treated with inexpensive equine dentistry; Al never noticed. Large amounts of the little feed Anna did receive would fall out of her mouth over the stall door, out of her reach. Anna's feet had always been tender, prone to infection or cracks if not cared for regularly. Her feet became delicate like eggshells, peeling and chipping as the urine from the dirty bedding she lived in seeped into their walls. She wore the same pairs of shoes for three or four races, sometimes losing them around the barn or on the track.

September gave way to October, the final month of racing at our track. Al seemed to finally back away from the idea of this horse ever making money, and Anna's name dropped out of the weekly list of race entries. I began to worry

about her future. I wracked my brain on ways to get Anna away from this man who knows I despised him. At first, I dropped hints to others in the barn still on good terms with Al that I would take her off his hands and find her a good home. Then I outright made the offer of finding her a home, even hinting I would give a little cash for her. Al never responded to my gestures. The days went by, and I continued to walk past her dark stall as I tended to my own horses. I watched as Al would take a couple of piles of her manure out, toss it into the aisle in front of her stall, and rake it into the dirt. He just did not waste time caring about her.

Then the nickering started.

The first time, it was a soft, inquiring nicker, just Anna asking each person who passed if they would be kind enough to bring her a meal. After a time or two, my husband and I mentioned to each other Anna's calling. She was calling to anyone who walked past the stall, and it was growing in urgency. We kept track of Al's coming and going. He came in later in the mornings, spending little time near Anna. After throwing her a flake of borrowed hay, he would leave for the day. There was no netting stuffed full of hay for her, like all the other horses in the barn had. There was no more borrowed grain. There was no bedding added to the stall, no cleaning of the manure. The stall started to stink. And we started to turn our heads and stare into the stall. Anna stood in the center of a bowl at least 6 inches lower than the rest of the barn floors. Al had been scraping the very dirt off the sides to create "bedding", and even that was long gone. She looked like a pony in the dark, her hunched little body increasing the impression of her insignificance. She needed help.

We pointed out Anna's neglect to racing officials, but as the live racing was over for the year we were told she would have to leave soon, and thus would be someone else's problem. As long as Al was throwing her something to eat now and then, he could claim she was being fed. However, a healthy horse needs ample amounts of food and water to stay alive. They generally eat 2% of their body weight, or around 20lbs, of hay a day. Anna's daily flake was about 5lbs. Her weight and health declined rapidly, the months of neglect catching up to her coupled by the lean diet she was given. We could not help during the day without being noticed around the barn, but the evenings come quicker in the fall. We would turn out the lights down the barn aisle, and under the cover of darkness one of us would bring hay and fresh water to Anna, the other keeping watch. Usually it was me bringing an armful of good grass hay and a juicy carrot to her. Her nickers of thanks were quiet, but grateful. She never told our secret, cleaning up every blade of grass before Al wandered into the barn in the mornings. I could do nothing about the bedding, but she would survive. The question now was, what fate was she surviving for? The stable area would close in two weeks.

I started making inquiries to friends who help thoroughbreds retiring from racing find good homes and new careers. One group was looking to help a racehorse in need, and Anna was absolutely in need. With a home secured, I hoped Al would finally let her go. I struggled with ways to free Anna from a man who knows I dislike him. I tried going through people he associated with, making out-

-right home offers and even suggesting there would be some cash for her. The last days at the barn I waited, hoping he would have some compassion and let the mare have a chance at a new life with the home I found her. But I knew where Al's discarded horses had always gone before. About half an hour down the road, a low end local livestock auction is the dumping ground for many poor horses. The auction is frequented by "kill buyers"; bidders who buy on contract to fill long trucks with horses for processing as pet food or overseas human consumption. Held the last Sunday of each month, many locals come out for the cheap equipment sold in the ring or to look over the animals brought in, but few horses ever leave there to go on to a real home.

It is the last Sunday of October, and I am setting up the hay and feed for the horse my husband is walking around the barn. Anna is still five stalls away, waiting for her owner. The sun has been up about an hour, and we can see the activity in other barns as the horsemen pack up the stable equipment for the year and ready their stall areas for the winter. My husband walks our horse into his stall, slips the halter off his head, and we turn to watch him beeline for the feed bucket. Then we busy ourselves with packing, moving quietly as a team while the radio plays some Beatles tunes. The peaceful morning is interrupted by the arrival of Al's bright yellow F-150 pickup. Behind it, a rusty, noisy, small and antiquated old horse trailer rattles along. A front window is missing, and the side panels are painted different colors of primer where the paint hasn't chipped off.

My husband and I move back into the shadow of an unused stall door and watch Al and a man I do not recognize swing the back doors of the trailer open. The significance of the trailer appearing on auction day is not lost on either of us. Turning to my husband, I half whisper, "He's going to ship her, isn't he?" He knows exactly what I mean, rests a hand on my tense shoulder, and nods. Al disappears with a rope into the stall with Anna, and leads her out. On the end of the lead rope is a length of chain. Al has run the length of it over Anna's gums behind her upper lip to give it a degree of pressure right against her sensitive tissues should she balk when he leads her. Al pulls this chain taut, alarming Anna. Her head jerks up and back in a rigid stance as he drags her step by reluctant step toward the trailer. I retreat to the back of our stall to make a phone call. I speak with my friend, the leader of the group who offered Anna a home, and tell her about the latest development. With my three horses coming home in days, I have no room at my farm to keep Anna. I am holding on to hope my friend still does, and she confirms the offer still stands. I thank her and return to the front of the stall.

Anna is being difficult with the loading. For one thing, as small as she is, she is still almost tall enough for her ears to brush the roof. For another, generally race-horses are never loaded on to trailers they must step up inside of. Instead, we use long, graduated ramps so the horse can step naturally into the enclosed space. Al's borrowed trailer frightens Anna terribly. She bucks and rears against going into the small box like a sunfish hooked on a line. I hope she will fight enough that the men give up, but instead they attach another long white rope to her halter. Feeding

it through the broken window at the front, the other man pulls on it while Al picks up a long whip. Al lashes into Anna's ankles, each snap of the whip angrier than the last. Anna tries to strike back with a leg, but her neglected condition leaves her thrust weak. Her strength is quickly leaving her, and Al is safely out of reach of her hooves. Then Anna seems to give up, lowers her head in defeat, and steps up into the box. Al quickly closes the doors together. Where a safety latch once held the doors securely in place, he now clips a small metal fastener like the ones found at a dollar store. The clip is all that keeps Anna from falling out the back of the trailer and onto the road. A board on the outside of the trailer has come loose during their loading attempts. Al takes a hammer and knocks it back into place with several taps. The taps sound like nailing Anna into a coffin. The men get into the cab, and the trailer rattles away.

I need to decide. This is my last chance to help Anna. I battle my inner voice as I finish my chores. I set up the rest of the horses with their clean bedding, ample feed, fresh buckets of water. Everything Anna deserves, too. I have a home secured for her. I know where the auction was. Anna trusts me. What was the point in feeding her and caring about her all this time if I turn my back and gave up now?

I turn to my husband, my eyes holding back tears.

"How much?" he asks.

"Two, two fifty, couldn't be more than three. She doesn't weigh enough to go for more than three hundred for meat." I reply.

He digs out the bills while my mind races. With a quick peck on the cheek, I grab my truck keys and head toward our farm. I make a quick stop to pick up a friend to help, then rush home and hook up our horse trailer. I take a large bale of hay and shove the whole thing into a hay net, then hang it in the trailer. I grab a syringe without a needle and load it with two units of a mild sedative, thinking Anna will need it after the ordeal she is about to go through. A quick check of the trailer lights and couplings, and we're off.

I have given the men a significant head start in hopes that I can pull around the large auction barn and park my trailer without their notice. But when we arrive I do not see the trailer at all, and fear that I am wrong, that Anna went somewhere else. We park, and I pull a winter hat low over the coat I grabbed before leaving the house. We enter the horse pen area, and the stench of urine and dirty animals hits me. This is the place unwanted horses go before they are shipped to slaughter. Already a few have been sorted into pens and their hips numbered like cattle. Looking toward the middle, relief floods me as I see a small reddish brown nose with a crooked white stripe poking out of a tiny pen. With a careful look around to reassure myself Al and his friend are not in the area, I slowly make my way toward Anna. Horses can be sold without going through the ring in a shady place like this, and I do not want my interest in her noticed. I whisper a quiet, "what's up, G?", using my nickname for her. Instead of the normal nicker I have come to know each morning, Anna's voice is a frightened whinny when she hears me.

I show interest in the horses around her, taking sideways glances of Anna's

hip number to record in my book, and scan over her to see if there are any new injuries. In the light of day, I realize just how very bad she looks up close. Her hair has grown long, as she has had no blanket at night to keep her warm. The shaggy coat is matted with the waste bedding would have absorbed, and has a fowl scent. Her ribs are clearly visible, with her abdomen drawn up under her. The flesh of her chest and hips has shrunk, creating hollows to match the ones around her eyes. She looks nothing like the shiny horses prancing with vigor people are used to seeing before a race. She wears a cheap nylon halter that may have been green or yellow but now is so covered in grime it is just drab like she is. I give her nose a good rub then leave the depressing pens to find a spot in the auction ring.

I spread out a fleece blanket on the cold bench and observe the arena from my high perch in a corner. Many of the faces are familiar, and some come from the racetrack. None of them are here for Anna. The local auction is more of a social event than a place for a serious horse buyer. The ring starts out full of new and used buckets, bridles, saddles, feed tubs, clothing, blankets, and assorted odds and ends for bidding and buying. These items are the real bread and butter of this small sale, not the horses. Being late fall, everyone there is going into winter, hay is expensive, and few people are interested in taking in another mouth to feed. I still do not see Al. I suspect he dropped the horse off, turned right around, and won't be back until it is time to pick up the check. He does not care what happens to Anna or the other horses in the past he has dropped off here. This is just the place he goes to squeeze the last dime out of a used up horse.

Bidding starts with the horse equipment, stretching out my anxiety for a few hours as the ring slowly empties of its merchandise. The bantering between auctioneer and audience goes slow as my feet go numb. I send my friend to check on Anna from time to time, wanting to show no connection to the horse too early and tip someone off that I am here for her. Finally the last of the equipment is sold. Some of the staff breaks down the tables and stores them behind the stage door, while another man opens a bag of bedding and sprinkles it on the concrete floor inside the small fenced ring. The ring itself is three sided chain link fencing about 8 feet high with a narrow door on one side. The door leads to a chute that cattle, pigs, or the occasional rogue horse will be shooed through. The ring is about 12 foot by 12 foot, the size of most horse stalls, yet people still tack up the occasional horse and "ride" it in a circle in there, their heads inches away from the padded beams of the roof.

Hip number 1 enters the ring, and the person leading it walks it around in circles. The auctioneer reads the description of the young bay colt, broke to lead, nothing more. The bidding starts at \$100, goes to \$125, \$150, \$200, and never advances. The only buyer is the auction house itself, which is the kill pen. The \$200 is a sort of upset bid at which the house will scoop up a full sized horse and send it for meat. I sit through another nine of these, one or two ridden into the ring and eliciting enough interest to buy him or her a new family to go home with. But most get the \$200 bid, and are led back to their pens to await their doom. Hip 11 is next, and I sit up a little straighter as Anna enters the ring.

I am seeing what the people around me are seeing. Not the five year old filly three people bought as an investment. Not the horse who ran races week after unsuccessful week, slowly wilting her mind, body and soul. Not the six year old mare, enduring a whole season of life at the track in a dark stall with a man who never showed her any compassion or consideration. I am seeing a shaggy reddish brown little horse lead in by the auction staff, frightened and truly alone with no one caring what happens to her next. But this isn't my first auction, and I know how showing an emotional attachment to a horse in the ring will make this dirty little horse suddenly "interesting" to the house auctioneer. Bids will come from the rafters or the floor, driving up her price since I'm a "live" bid.

The bidding starts, asking \$100, \$100, do they hear \$100? And some floor-board no one is standing on gives them \$100. A window bids \$125, maybe the door bid the \$200, as no one has placed a real bid on her. Then the necessary banter comes as the auctioneer looks for \$250 to advance the bid. I cock my head to the side as if I'm really doubtful about throwing a bid in the ring. I've let flashier, bigger, groomed horses go past already, and this is just a small dirty mare with a silly looking crooked white blaze down her small head. I meet the eye of caller in the ring, and slash my hand through the air sideways as if I was swatting a fly. "\$225!" he calls out, taking my half bid. I'm bidding against the auctioneer himself, and his eye seeks mine in the crowd. I can see the question, his curiosity asking if I was a legitimate bid, or a connection trying to get more for the mare. I just return the stare as he seeks out \$250, \$250, \$250, from the crowd. I catch his eye again, fixing my gaze solidly on his dark eyes, and feel him yield. There is not enough flesh in the ring for him to waste his time on playing games. He's going to back off bidding on this horse. No one advances. "Hip 11, sold to bidder 945".

I slip out of my spot, folding my blanket to ignore the curious eyes of several people around the ring, and go back to the holding pens. I give Anna a pet as I slip the syringe with the sedative into her mouth, and leave my friend to watch over her while I go pay. The line is short, and I quickly peel the bills out into the cashier's hand, impatiently awaiting the bill of sale that makes Anna mine. As she hands me that goldenrod paper, I rush out of the office like I have Willy Wonka's golden ticket. I bounce down the stairs, out to the truck and grab my lead rope. I pause only long enough to put the ramp down for the trailer, and then go straight for the pen containing Hip 11. I give Anna another nose rub as I slip the lead on her halter, and then guide her out the door. She seems relieved to be out of that smelly barn, until she sees the trailer. She plants her feet for a moment, but my friend grabs a fistful of hay out of the hay net and hands it to me. The rustling of the grasses and the mouthful of hay is all it takes before Anna rushes me to get up the ramp into the trailer. She's properly smaller than the roof, with ample room in the well-lit interior. My friend lifts the ramp and latches our precious cargo in. One more rub on that little white lined nose between her mouthfuls of hay, and I leave her to her feast. I climb in the truck, turn the ignition, set the tow gears and pick up my phone.

"I got her." My voice breaks, thinking of the wonderful life that awaits Anna.

She is free. The first thing I will do is brush that bright orange painted prisoner number off her hip. She will be delivered from her dark cells and meager meals to a life of sunshine, freedom, green grass, unlimited hay, fresh water, and clean bedding. Knowing she will have kind words and loving hands caring for her every need, I feel the tension flowing out of my body.

“I’ve got Anna, and she is safe!”