

**IF ONLY PEOPLE  
WERE LIKE  
HORSES**

**BY STEPHEN ROCCO**

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*This book is dedicated to Florence and  
Silvio Ricci*

*“United with Steven Michael in  
Heaven”*

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## Prologue

I OBSERVE AS AN EIGHT-LEGGED ARTHROPOD meticulously designs a silk prison. Each appendage seamlessly creates a den of death in my prison cell. “A prison within a prison”, I mutter.

Out of this gangly architect’s reach I would never have appreciated its talents. Just like I never appreciated the art or ability of anyone but myself. Prison will do wonders for your mental clarity, when your body is told what to do. Yes, amidst flushing toilets, echoes of flatulence, and the occasional cry of “Mama,” I, Steven Ricci, have found wisdom.

All those years my poor mother Carole was wrong. “You’re too smart for your own good, Steven,” was her lament, as she normally reached for another cigarette and pondered how she would get me out of one of my escapades. “If only your father was around,” was another, although I did not feel the same way. The dads I saw yelled things like, “Johnny run faster! ...Pat, what’s wrong with you?... Charlie, why can’t you do better?” Na, I was fine without a dad. My mother should have said, “Steven get some wisdom.” Shit, I knew I was smart. All those guidance counselors loved to wave my high I.Q. scores in my face. “You’re capable of so much more....blah, blah.”

But to acquire wisdom one has to peel away the layers of blame, arrogance and selfishness that define a “special person”. I thought I had done that years ago in an earlier imprisonment. But I see now I was wrong. I made the same selfish mistakes again.

See, I always felt special. Even as a child I had a natural ability to motivate the weak, the greedy and even good kids. Rules don’t apply to special people. They don’t have to be good sons, good husbands or good fathers. They don’t have to respect those who help them achieve success. They can satisfy their own needs and use money or power to correct life’s inescapable detours that impede those who are not special.

When the inevitable fall occurs to special people, they die alone or in my case, end up in prison. The love and affection that I trampled, kicked at like dry leaves on a fall day, lay forsaken. I am now wise enough to say I’m sorry, but to whom – my hubris echoes, “He got what he deserved.”

In my nocturnal self-discovery, I realize my only affection for another beside myself was not a person, but an animal. In my pleasant mirage I stroke the black mane of Rumi Rose. I feel her long woolly muzzle affectionately digging into my shirt for more sugar. From my first gaze, the outside of a horse made me feel better inside. I can’t explain it otherwise. If loving people was as easy, I would not be staring at spiders in my prison cell. This is the story of a horse lover who was not special, and not wise until now.

## **Chapter 1: The Young Life of a Special Person**

THE KIND EYES of the kindergarten teacher welcoming her brood of cherubic youngsters turned dark when Steven entered the classroom. After one month the five year old Steven had successfully caused this just-graduated, exuberant teacher to reconsider her career choice. Steven seemed to know that and it did not bother him one bit.

He had seen those same eyes in his mother's stare. Steven did not intend to hurt other people, but if you were in his world you were going to bump into him. From an early age Steven always felt he was the center of the world. He saw people moving around him and to him they were like cars moving in and out of a traffic jam. He was the manipulator of their actions.

Some kids are nervous or intimidated by adults. Not Steven. Even as a five year old, Steven might ask the variety shop owner, "Why do you charge so much for chocolate," or using his natural skills of persuasion, "How about giving a kid who lost his dad in the war some free candy Mister?"

More than once his poor single parent mother asked, "Where did you come from?" As he got older, it became the rhetorical, "You're too smart for your own good!" Steven was just different than most kids. Fatherless, he never asked about his

father Phillip Ricci, or the circumstances of his death. He heard that his father was a Marine who died in Vietnam, and that was enough.

But occasionally, when his mom was not around he would pick up the framed photo of his dad which was gathering dust in the corner of the living room. Steven would hold the photo beside his face, while looking into a mirror. He would mimic the determined face of the ramrod straight Marine facing him. The vacant stare and the curled lip of the Marine conveyed no emotion. But there was familiarity in the sandy hair, deep green tea eyes, and lean cheeks descending to a firm, “Don’t mess with me” jaw. Pleasant daydreaming lasted only so long with Steven, who always quickly put away his dad’s photo with the dust intact.

Steven realizes now that he possessed a lot of anger which he took out on other people. His anger was dangerous for a couple of reasons. He was smart – he could read at the age of five - but he was smarter about people. As if by instinct he could detect the tiniest cues – the doubts, the poor self-esteem, the hidden passions – and motivate others to join him in his exploits.

For example, in the first week of kindergarten he invented a game called, “The Whip.” He got other sweet faced boys to join hands and straight arm innocent girls on the playground. Some boys hesitated; others promptly followed Steven’s lead to act in a way they would never choose to do on their own. Even the terrified girls who did not get “Whipped” fell to the ground. The poor teacher had



a roomful of muddy tattered dresses and weepy faces.

For the boys who would not join Steven's gang, he invented another game, "Tennis Ball." Reluctant five- and six-year-olds would be chased by charging Steven and his gang, and hit with multiple balls until they cried.

It wasn't long before the familiar clicky-clack of his mother's high heels followed him through his formative years of school. An elegant long-legged forty something, Carole Ricci was well known in Arcadia, Kentucky. The widow of a Marine hero, she worked as an administrator for the town's fire department. Always vogueish, she never went out unless her hair, face, and nails were perfect. In fact, many of Arcadia's "finest" dated Carole. The men in her life rarely lasted more than one date. Steven's favorite sabotage was letting the air out of these men's car tires. Appearances mattered to Carole Ricci, and her son Steven did not help her image.

Steven would sit politely, as his mother, handkerchief in hand, promised the principals at various schools, "He just made a mistake, he will try harder." Perfect people watcher that he was, Steven would sit admiring his mother's performance. For he knew deep down his mother had thrown up her hands a long time ago. By seventh grade he was put in an "alternative" school which means he did nothing. Some Arcadia loser would be assigned to babysit the students, who read comic books for five to six hours per day. This gave Steven Ricci plenty of time to develop hijinks.

By age twelve Steven had put together his own gang of like-minded delinquents. They continued one of his impressive schemes he initially started in second grade. Many modern criminals use it today. Steven labeled it “The Swarm.” It started at the local candy store owned by a kindly couple who bought the store in their retirement. Six youngsters would raid the store, grab as much candy as they could, and run away in six different directions.

Steven dominated a like-minded friend Raymond, who was as close to Steven as anyone was allowed. Soon Steven and Raymond had graduated to stealing radios, C D’s, and anything else they could find in unlocked cars. Their latest “swarming” scam had taken place at a local camera-electronic store operated by a one-legged man – the Doyle of Doyle Electronics.

For once Steven was outsmarted by this fat, old man, only known as Doyle. As Steven’s criminal team scooped and grabbed cameras and tech goods, Doyle, with his round face, big belly and one leg sat by calmly. When Steven hollered, “Let’s go,” the door would not budge. The next thing Steven felt was a gun pressed to his forehead. “You the leader here?” Steve surprised himself and answered, “Yeah.” Then everything went black.

He awoke to three boys, and a smiling Doyle surrounding him. Steven vaguely remembered two of the boys from school who were several years older than him. “Should we kill him?” said one of the boys.

Again, Steven remained composed. “I guess I picked the wrong place.”

“You sure did,” said the leader of this older group, as he kicked Steven in the gut. Steven lost his breath but did not cry.

Doyle, looking around at his boys, spoke next, “You guys are getting a bit big for the house jobs. Nicky over here is getting a bit too big.” Steven vaguely remembered the fellow known as Nicky – yes Nicky Bianco. The diminutive Nicky, chewing on a toothpick did not say a word.

“What do you have in mind Doyle?” said another boy.

“He’s small enough to get into some of the mansions on the south side Robbie. He’s got balls, if nothing else.”

And that’s how Steven became a member of an older criminal gang. They used Steven to get into basement windows, and Doyle taught him to disable alarms. Even stoic Doyle gave Steven a compliment, “You pick up the alarm stuff pretty quick kid.”

Weekends were spent patrolling rich neighborhoods for easy robberies. Robbie, the leader of the group went for easy pickings. “Let’s get the house where the rich fucks are enjoying their vacations.” They tried to rob one house each weekend. Doyle was the fence who would give them 50% of their total score of jewelry, furs, televisions, and computers.

Soon Steven was socializing with these older boys. Not intimidated by these “partners in crime”, Steven began smoking marijuana and carousing with his new friends. His mother eventually gave up questioning why these older youths were

picking up her fifteen year old son in a car night after night; just like she stopped questioning how Steven had hundred dollar bills stuffed into the pockets of his dirty jeans. And she had nothing to say when Steven made the decision to simply stop going to his alternative school. "It's just for dummies Ma."

Over the next two years, Steven and his crew hung out at the local pool hall. There they socialized and planned their next robberies. Now, nearly six feet tall, Steven had his first sexual experience with a girl about his own age, who hung around to get free pot from Robbie and his gang. Steven was growing up fast and thought nothing unusual about his life.

One day Steven found himself playing pool with the fellow whom he suspected once asked Doyle if Steven should be killed. Nicky Bianco could have been a miniature version of Michaelangelo's "David". Barely five foot two inches, he was perfectly proportioned with large muscular forearms and a formidable chest. Dark, buoyant curls framed a Neapolitan countenance – large nose, chestnut eyes, and an oval face.

"I'm getting out of this racket," spit Nicky as he racked ball after ball with his long slender fingers guiding the cue. "I'm gonna go to California and become a jockey."

"I always liked horses," was Steven's response.

As Nicky lined up the eight ball to complete his victory, he stopped. "I heard your dad died in an accident."

"No, my father died in Vietnam."

“That’s not what I heard. I heard he was a bad guy.”

Ordinarily, a son would get angry at these words against his father. But since Steven rarely thought of his father, he felt no anger. He was more perplexed as to why Nicky even cared about his father.

“Whatever, just shoot the ball.”

With that Nicky slammed the eight ball into its home and threw the cue on the table. “Game over.”

Ironically, Nicky disappeared from the crew after this strange encounter. One of the boys told Steven that Nicky went to California. “He’ll be back soon,” he said.

Eventually the ambitious Steven realized that he did not need Robbie and his crew to succeed as a thief. He started his own gang with Raymond and two other young followers. He showed them how to case homes, especially ones where the owners were away. The clever Steven held “classes” in alarm disabling for his gang of young crooks. He found a different fence than Doyle with easier terms, and Steven branched out to rob homes in the nearby towns.

Steven’s run of good luck in the house robbing business ran cold six months after he ventured out with his new crew. Alarmed by the rise in property crimes, the police in nearby Lincoln increased their surveillance in affluent neighborhoods. Steven and his boys fell right into a cop car blockade as they drove away from a heist.

At the police station Sargeant Dennis McCloud informed the seventeen year old Steven that he was

to be charged with several felonies as an adult. His crew of fifteen to sixteen year old's would be treated as minors.

Years later, when thinking about the renowned horse trainer, Steven Ricci, Sgt. McCloud would recall the brash youngster who was as cool as a cucumber. "Aren't I entitled to a phone call to my attorney?" were Steven's first words. Sgt. McCloud later employed the "good cop, bad cop" routine. Steven called them out on it. "Guys you can hit me on the head or counsel me like a priest if you want, but first let me offer you a deal."

Steven then enticed the cops with his knowledge of a large robbery ring in the area. After a period of negotiations, McCloud agreed to drop all the charges against Steven for information about the Robbie/Doyle ring. Steven then provided detailed statements on how the robberies were planned and how the property was fenced. He named everyone in his former gang, including Nicky Bianco.

After indictments were handed down and arrests were made, Steven realized he had better leave the area. He headed out to Lexington, Kentucky, a city about two hours away. He left his mother a message, "Ma had to leave for a while. Call you later."

## Chapter 2: Horse Wonders

THE YOUNG STEVEN HUNG AROUND Lexington's pool halls for a couple of weeks. His ill-gotten money was running out. His squat landlady with bad teeth reminded him that weekly rent for the closet sized drab room with was due next week.

Then he remembered the "Temple." Templeton racetrack in Lexington was one of the most prestigious tracks in the country. Arcadia, where Steven grew up, had a racetrack that was like the little brother of the Templeton. Arcadia raced less prestigious horses with purses often in the \$3,000 - \$4,000 dollar range. Arcadia was often used by Templeton's horse trainers to school young horses or to get quality horses who were injured back on their game.

Even as a boy Steven loved to peer through the fence at Arcadia and watch the horses work out. Something about a thousand pounds of regal beauty pounding the dirt softened a hard character like Steven. "Someday I'll own my own horse," Steven promised himself.

So with money running out, Steven wandered over to the "Temple" which everyone in Kentucky referred to with reverence. The rounded, blood-red brick exterior of the Temple with layers of ivy riding its arches was reminiscent of a rich man's

Roman colosseum where thoroughbreds race instead of chariots. Steven was mesmerized by the sights around him: The eager crowds inching close to one another to admire their investments. The paddock ablaze with trainers giving last minute racing instructions to their jockeys, as they hoisted themselves on their mounts. The diminutive jockeys wearing the gaudy colors of their stables, and sitting high on their horses' backs. Steven listened as two confident owners in their sear-sucker suits boasted about their horses' chances of winning to impress a slim vogueish blonde. "Two rich assholes," Steven told himself as he returned to admiring the horses.

Steven followed the horses from the paddock area out to the main track. The sights almost took his breath away – admiration not a normal part of his personality. Thousands of spectators, their bible-like horse programs marked with asterisks, notes and indescribable scratches, held tightly in their hands, hooted and whistled for their favorites. Steven took notice of it all.

Standing in the middle of the crowd, Steven vaguely listened to the voices of those around him. Many claimed a solution to the riddle of which horse was the fastest.

"I always like the gray horses."

"Look at the one prancing on its toes."

"He took a dump – a great sign."

But Steven was totally absorbed in admiration of horse flesh. He was bewitched by the ten muscular athletes that danced before him. Their sweaty taut coats of chestnut gray and black



sparkled in the sunlight. The long sleek necks hosting chiseled faces now bouncing up and down as if aware they were going to battle with their peers. Steven admired the powerful chests springing with transmission to the muscular hindquarters, despite their differences in size or color. While everyone else computed these nuances for profit, Steven studied their mannerisms like he did with people. *They each have their own personality*, he told himself.

In the pre-race parade, one horse in particular got Steven's attention. Looking at a neighbor's program he saw the name Rumi Rose – the number 6 horse. Running to the betting window, without even looking at the odds on the horse, Steven put his last \$20 on Rumi Rose.

What did he see? Among all of the magnificent horses, Rumi's shiny penny coat reminded him of copper steel. Rumi pranced before the crowd as if engaging the audience in a theatrical performance. *It's as if she is saying watch me perform*, thought Steven.

Hearing the trumpet heralding the start of the race, Steven, holding tightly to his \$20 investment ticket, rushed to the rail in time to witness the opening of the starting gate. Ten thousand pounds of starting horseflesh soon settled into ten positions on the first turn. At this point Rumi was already five lengths in the lead. Midway through the race, Rumi had opened a seventh length lead as three horses battled behind her to close the gap.

But then something unusual happened. In the final turn Rumi's stride seemed to shorten with

each step. His eyes glued to the horse, Steven thought, *It's as if she decided to walk instead of run.* Similarly, the three horses fighting for position behind Rumi also seemed to tire out. Rumi's lead was reduced to three lengths as the last place horse, number 5, energy in hand, closed the gap. Steven quickly looked at his program and saw the number 5 horse was Dee-Rico. As the disparate bettors who had money on these two contenders tried to chortle their horse to victory, Steve observed an anomaly in Rumi Rose. As if playing with her opponent Rumi pulled ahead by a length only to allow Dee-Rico to pull even with her. The cheers of the frenzied crowd grew louder as these two magnificent creatures continued fighting head-to-head to the finish line. Steven perceived Rumi falter. Dee-Rico won by a nose.

Amidst the groans and cheers of the bettors, Steven did not go to the winner's circle to see the accolades given to Dee-Rico. He raced to the area where the other nine horse losers met up with their unfortunate staff of owners and trainers. There he saw a stout gentleman wearing a worn raincoat on a sunny day. The man grabbed the bridle of Rumi Rose and seemed to whisper in the horse's ear. Steven again saw the serene command of the horse, who acted like she had won the race. *I don't think the horse wanted to win the race,* believed Steven.

His pockets now empty, Steven contemplated his future. He would not be a popular person back in Arcadia. He couldn't go home.

When he arrived back at his shabby apartment, his witch of a landlord had changed his lock and put

his meager belongings in a paper bag. After being turned away from an overcrowded homeless shelter, he started wandering the streets of Lexington. And then an idea came to him, *Why don't I go over to Templeton?* Behind the track he had seen row upon row of sheds, hidden from the nearby grandeur. He had observed the gritty workers who seemed invisible to the patrons of Templeton. *Maybe I can get a job there*, he thought.

So, that night, the full moon his only light, Steven roamed the solitary horse barns. His paper bag belongings as his pillow, he nestled in a stall with hay as his mattress.