



# Goose Green

*Melvyn Streets*

“George, George, wake up!”

The first thing to spring into my torpid mind is – not now, love – I’m asleep.

Pretty stupid when you come to think of it. She wouldn’t be telling me to wake up if I wasn’t asleep, but then again, this is Christmas afternoon I’ve just packed away about eight pounds of turkey, stuffing, potatoes, veggies and all the trimmings – not to mention Mum’s specialty, plum pudding with gallons of rum sauce, so a little disorientation is to be expected.

Say what you like about Anna, she’s a hell of a cook, and the best thing that ever happened to me - even if she does whisper in my ear with all the delicacy of a company sergeant major.

After a violent shaking, and a couple of non too gentle prods in my distended stomach, my level of awareness rises to the point where I can reply with my razor sharp intellect – “Wha’ ?”

I spent fifteen years in the army – most of it in the SAS, Britain’s Special Air Service (no planes – lots of mud ), and time was when the slightest noise would have me wide awake and on my feet in zero flat. I’d been out just over five years now and my reactions had slowed quite a bit. Nevertheless, there was no mistaking the urgency in Anna’s voice

“What’s up, love? I was well away.”

“I know,” she replied. “It took me ages to wake you, but it’s serious. Come in the kitchen.”

I slowly rose from the couch, being careful not to disturb Carolyn, our nine year old. Long auburn hair framed her sleeping face, thumb by her mouth and favorite doll tucked under her arm. My heart swelled as I looked down on her.

There’s something so pure about a sleeping child – it always gets me.

Walking quietly into the kitchen, I looked at Anna, a question on my raised eyebrows.

“Look” she said, pointing out of the window at the meadow which runs down to the stream at the end of the property.

It didn't take me long to see what she was getting at. Over by the fence I could see the horse.

It's Carolyn's, of course. Both Anna and I hate the things, but Carolyn had begged and begged for a horse when we moved into the place a couple of years ago. Our previous house had been really cramped and right in the middle of suburbia, so when I came into a bit of money, we decided to move to the country.

My buddy, Ted, from the Regiment, told me about a sizeable cottage with about five or six acres of pasture near his place, just outside Chelmsford in Essex, about forty miles or so from London. All three of us fell in love with it at first sight, and Carolyn, in an exuberance of childhood fantasies, never stopped chattering about it all the way back in the car. By the time we arrived home we were committed, and part of the commitment was, of course – *sure we can have a horse*.

How many parents have made that promise - fingers crossed in the hope that some less troublesome and, please God, smaller obsession will replace it?

Well it didn't, and a promise is a promise – especially to a small daughter – so we acquired Neddy.

I know, it's a dumb name for a princely steed, but that's what Carolyn wanted to call him, and anyway, he wasn't all that princely. The fact is, he was a scruffy old nag, but my daughter fell in love with him at first sight and the farmer who sold him to us assured me he was great with kids. Besides, he was cheap, and as we were pretty well tapped out after buying the house, he was all I could afford.

For the first year or so after Neddy joined us, Carolyn had the time of her life learning to groom him and take care of him, as well as learning to ride. Neddy seemed to love the attention, and before the first week was out he and Carolyn were the firmest of friends.

Over the past year or so however, I had begun to notice Neddy was not quite as enthusiastic as he had been about trotting around the paddock with Carolyn on board. A brisk walk was about all he could manage, and it was obvious to me that Neddy was just getting old.

I talked to the farmer and he confirmed the horse was probably about thirty years old so we should to be prepared for the worst.

Well, it looked as if the worst had finally happened – and on Christmas Day, of all days. Carolyn would be devastated. There had developed a deep rapport between the horse and my daughter; a connection neither Anna nor I could feel or see, but it was so obviously real to Carolyn.

I couldn't let her wake up and see Neddy like this. I had to do something.

Fortunately, it was almost dark. It was nearly four o'clock in the midst of an English winter. The forecast called for snow and the sky – what I could still see of it, seemed to confirm this prediction.

Echoing my thoughts, Anna said “We’ve got to move it before Carolyn sees it. She’ll die.”

“I know, but it’s easier said than done. The bloody thing must weigh a ton.”

“Tell you what. When it’s really dark, wake her up and tell her we’re going over to Grannies’ tonight. We were going tomorrow, anyway, and mum won’t mind. It’ll give her another chance to spoil her only grandchild. That’ll give me a chance to figure something out. I’ll get Ted to give me a hand.”

“Tell Carolyn I’ve had an emergency at the office and I’ll come over later if I can. I don’t know how long this will take though, so don’t be surprised if I don’t make it.”

Ted, apart from being my best pal from the army, was also my partner in a small private security firm we had set up. We specialized in advising the rich and famous on ways to protect their riches and hide their fame. Sometimes the other way round too. We had been moderately successful. In fact, our success had provided the funds to buy the place in Chelmsford.

Half an hour later, Anna and Carolyn were on their way to Grandmother’s house – which is *not* through the woods – with my daughter round eyed and chattery over the prospect of tearing Christmas wrapping paper off the inevitably excessive number of presents from Granny & Gramps.

Fortunately, the driveway doesn’t run close to the meadow, so there was no chance of her seeing the deceased, but I’d have to fix that before she returned in daylight, tomorrow. One way or another, Carolyn would insist on seeing Neddy.

After only a couple of rings, Ted picked up the phone. “Merry bloody Christmas – whoever you are.”

“Good job it wasn’t your mother-in-law calling. She’d have your guts for garters,” I said, knowing full well he had caller ID and would have known it was me.

“I need your help Ted – F.E.”

F.E. was our private code for “Friggin’ Emergency.” It was something we had developed during our time in the SAS and it meant - *drop everything – come now*.

“Christ, George. What kind of F.E. can you have on Christmas Day?”

Even as he said this, I knew he would be putting shoes on and generally getting ready for action.

“Look, I’m really sorry to bust up your Christmas like this, but Carolyn’s horse croaked and I’ve got to hide it or something before she sees it.”

“Don’t worry, Georgie. I was looking for an excuse to get out. The house is full of Mary’s relatives and I’m going bonkers listening to all the gory details of Uncle Herbert’s prostate operation. I think I’d rather have it cut off than go through that kind of shit.”

“Look Ted, we’re going to have to lift it and then find somewhere to bury the damn thing. Any ideas on how to move it?”

“God knows mate,” I’ll think of something on the way over – be there in ten.”

With that said, he put down the phone, no doubt elaborating on the dire emergency as he made his regretful farewell to his in-laws.

True to his word, I soon saw the lights of his truck turn into our driveway. I grabbed my jacket and met him just outside the side door of the house.

“Thanks, Ted. He’s over here.” We trudged across the soggy field toward the unmoving mass over by the barn.

Soon after acquiring the horse, Ted and I had built a small barn over by the fence. Room enough for Neddy and all his tackle, dry storage for hay and other horse stuff. I’d designed it with the main roof beam extending outside the framework of the building. The beam was equipped with a block and tackle so that I could lift bales of hay and other heavy items directly out of my truck and then push them into the barn.

Neddy had taken to hanging around the barn in recent months, not venturing too far away from his stall, and this was where he met his final demise.

It was too soon for any decomposition to have started, but rigor mortis had set in. Along with the near freezing temperatures, poor old Neddy was pretty well stiffed out.

He was laid out on his side, of course, with his legs sticking straight out, like eighty-eight millimeter howitzers.

“Yes George, I’d say you called this one right. He’s definitely not living.”

Ted is a master of understatement.

“Reminds me of Goose Green,” he said.

“The sheep, you mean? Hell yes, I was just thinking that, myself.”

Goose Green was one of the landing zones used by the SAS in the Falklands war of 1982.

Argentina had decided that, in order to divert the people’s attention from the perilous state of their economy, they would resurrect a centuries-old disagreement with Her Majesty’s Government and invade the Malvinas –

their name for the Falkland Islands. As the total population of the islands was less than three hundred plus about eighty thousand sheep, the invasion was a resounding success.

Those two fine English ladies – Queen Liz and Maggie Thatcher were, of course, severely pissed off by this attempt to eviscerate what remained of the British Empire. Actually, by 1982, I think the Falklands *were* the British Empire.

Anyway, the Iron Lady, being who she was, promptly commandeered the QE2, polished the rust off a couple of aircraft carriers, borrowed half a dozen large helicopters from the Yanks, and set off to see the Queen at Buckingham Palace.

Strictly speaking, the leader of the British Government can't declare war without the permission of the monarch, hence the visit to the palace.

Liz, of course, was all in favor. If we lose the Falklands she said, I'll have nowhere to go in the Royal Yacht, so by all means Maggie, do go and show those Argies what for.

It had been a while since the Brits had been at war, so it took about another couple of months before the armada set sail. By that time, General Galtieri's guys were very well dug in.

The SAS, being the elite troops, are the first to land and secure key positions.

We were dropped into the south Atlantic in our rubber rafts after a very quick, totally submerged run from Southampton on HMS Sovereign – one of HMG's ballistic missile subs.

We made landfall on the rocky southern coast of the main island – the end furthest away from the capital, Stanley. The theory being, that the capital would be the most heavily guarded, so we could just nip across the soft underbelly of occupied land, quietly slit a few throats, raise the Union Jack, and welcome the remainder of the force as they sailed triumphantly into the harbor.

The weather was totally, bloody abysmal — cold, windy and wet with rain turning to sleet. After regrouping at the L.Z., we set off over the springy turf of Goose Green toward the capital. Not long into our trek, we came across a disemboweled sheep. Judging by the extent of the damage, it was obvious the hapless animal had stepped on a land mine and literally blown it's chances of ever being used in cloning experiments.

Ted and I, with the other members of the platoon, looked at each other with the same thought – “Oh shit!”

There's nothing like the feeling that, with every step, you could become a study model for the big-bang theory to sharpen your wits.

The British army, unlike it's American counterparts, does not have

access to zillions of dollars worth of high tech equipment, so we had to rely on our ingenuity to get the job done.

Seeing the state of the butchered sheep, Ted and I had the brilliant idea to round up a couple of dozen or so of its friends and drive them in front of us to clear the way, so to speak. One of our slightly religious platoon members immediately christened this, “The Sacrificial Lamb Technique.”

The point is, it worked very well. For us, that is. As for the sheep – well, let’s just say we had a couple of lovely meals in the course of the three or so days it took us to slog our way from Goose Green to Stanley.

Getting back to the Neddy problem, Ted, always the creative one said, “I think he’s near enough to get the block and tackle on him. We’ll have to dig a shallow trench under him so we can get a sling underneath. Then we can lift him and push him into the barn.”

I went in search of the necessary materials while Ted set to, digging under the horse from both sides. Finding a wide canvas strap and some one-inch chain, I returned to find Ted on his stomach finishing off the trench. Lying down beside him, I pushed the strap under Neddy’s belly to the extent of my arm. Going around to the other side to the horse’s back, I reached under as far as I could, my fingers scrabbling in the dirt and broken roots of the shallow trench.

I never realized how big a horse is.

My arm was at full stretch with my cheek pressed hard against Neddy’s cold, still flesh. I smelt the damp leather odor of horsehair and wondered at the multitude of tiny creatures, which undoubtedly inhabited Neddy’s hide and were even now moving to warmer climes; namely – me.

Eventually my finger tips felt the rough texture of the canvas, and with a helping push from Ted at the other side, I pulled the strap through.

Getting to our feet, we brushed mud and straw from our clothes.

“Starting to snow,” I said, looking at the big fluffy flakes drifting down like the aftermath of a pillow fight. “Could be a good one too judging by the size of those flakes.”

“O.K., Let’s hoist him up and get out of the weather,” said Ted, linking the chain to the hooks on the tackle and the canvas strap. “Hoist away.”

I pulled on the chain fall and the block started to take up the slack in the ropes. This was a compound block, so the effort I put into pulling the chain was multiplied by a factor of four. Even so, when all the slack was taken up, I found myself gasping with the effort. At a four-to-one ratio, I was still trying to lift at least two hundred pounds.

“Give me a hand, Ted, I won’t be able to get him all the way up.”

“Always been a problem with you, if I remember correctly, old chap,” he replied.

“Thanks, Teddy boy – just pull.”

Slowly, the carcass rose from the ground, pivoting on two legs, one each at front and back. Just as we felt that our backs wouldn't take any more, he reached the point of equilibrium and good old Neddy flipped to the vertical position.

He looked almost normal again with all four feet on the ground – if you ignored the strap under his belly and the fact that his nose was pressed firmly onto the ground.

“Alright, phase one accomplished,” said Ted. “Now to move him into the barn.”

It was a good job Neddy was no bigger. The block was at its uppermost position and we could lift him no further.

“O.K.,” I said. “Round the front and push him back into the barn.”

We both put our shoulders to the horse's breast and pushed — hard.

Nothing.

Neddy just swayed back on his legs when we pushed and then swung back to the original position when we stopped. After a futile fifteen minutes or so trying to move the horse, I said, “Screw this. We need something to roll him in with. Wait here. I've got an idea.”

I schlepped across the whitening grass, back to the house. Carolyn and Anna had been into a roller skating fad a while back. I hadn't seen the skates recently so I guessed they had moved onto some new pastime.

I found the skates in the hall closet. Grabbing both pairs, I headed back to the barn.

“Wrong kind of skates for this weather, mate,” I heard as Ted saw what I had returned with.

“Not for us, twit – for the horse. Lift up his leg.” I said, pointing at the foreleg. With Ted holding the stiff leg off the ground, I forced the horse's hoof into the boot of the roller skate. Tying the laces as tightly as possible, I let the foot back onto the ground. Repeating the process with the other three feet, Neddy was soon standing on two pairs of roller skates.

“You're a bloody genius, George,” said Ted admiringly as we again put our shoulders to the beast. This time, with some of the load relieved from the tackle, Neddy began slowly, and with much re-alignment of the individual skates, to roll backwards into his stall.

“O.K., what now?” asked Ted in between ragged intakes of breath. Even on wheels, Neddy had taken all our strength to move. “When do you expect them back?”

“I'm sure Anna won't want to be driving much in the snow, so she won't leave too late. The way it's coming down she may turn up any time. We won't have enough time to bury him. We'll just have to make him look

normal, and take care of the rest when Carolyn's in bed," I said, wondering how to make a horse in roller skates look anything like normal.

"If we close the bottom half of the barn door, we can let his head rest on it and he'll look O.K. from the house."

Easier said than done.

We pushed and rolled Neddy back and forth on his skates, and I couldn't help but notice that I was the one doing the pushing from the rear – not a pleasant thought. What with all the rolling around, we had to re-position each leg as it slipped out of alignment, while at the same time hoisting the horse's limp head over the top edge of the door.

Eventually, we had him in position, but the head looked totally unnatural, laid sideways as it was. We would have to fix that. We needed something to hold the head upright. With a growing sense of time passing at an accelerated pace, I rummaged through the pile of horse tackle in the barn. I spotted one of those balaclava helmet type things you see on racehorses, sometimes. Neddy had never been anywhere near a race, but in the initial euphoria of getting the horse, Anna and Carolyn had bought all kinds of horsey stuff. The helmet was just one of those items which had never been used. Well, as my mother used to say – *If you keep something long enough, it'll come in useful* - the day of the balaclava had arrived!

Without any horse muscles helping, a horse's head is a bloody heavy piece of meat, but between us, Ted and I wrestled the helmet into position and tied the leather straps beneath Neddy's chin. The final step was to attach a rope to each side of the helmet and secure the ropes to the end wall of the barn.

With a little adjustment of the tension in the ropes, the strap beneath his belly, and the positioning of the skates, we finally had Neddy in a convincing pose.

Not before time, either. Just as we finished admiring our handiwork from outside the barn, we saw the lights of Anna's car turn into the lane leading toward our house.

With a last look, we hot-footed it back to the house, threw off our filthy coats, popped the tops on a couple of beers, and sat at the kitchen table, for all the world as if we had been there for hours.

"Guess what Granny and Gramps got me for Christmas, Dad." Carolyn proceeded to recite a seemingly endless list of goodies while Anna raised an inquiring eyebrow at me. I gave her a slight nod, to indicate that Neddy was taken care of – for now, at least.

Finished with her list of Christmas presents, to which I had paid scant attention, Carolyn said "I'll need to go feed Neddy before bedtime."

A look of panic crossed Anna's face.

“No need, sweetheart. When it started snowing, Ted and I went down and fed him – even put that helmet thing on his head to keep him warm in this weather.

In fact, you can see him looking out from his stall.” A real twinge of guilt overcame me as I pointed to the invisibly suspended Neddy, apparently watching the falling snow from the comfort of his barn.

“Oh, Daddy, thanks. I love you. You’re such a cool Daddy.” Now I really felt like a total shit.

She must have been feeling tired, because she soon gathered together her latest presents and went up to bed. Anna tucked her in and, on returning to the kitchen, inquired. “What did you do – resurrect the thing?”

“Not exactly dear,” and we proceeded to give her the gist of our evening’s activities. “We still have to dispose of the corpse before morning,” I said.

“We can take him over to my place. I’ve got tons of places to bury him down by the trees. I can borrow Stan Walker’s backhoe and we’ll have old Neddy stashed away in no time. That way, you won’t have to explain a fresh pile of earth in your meadow,” Ted offered, as we finished off our second beer. He had brought over his low loader trailer and with the winch attachment on the bed of his truck, we figured we could haul the horse out of the barn and up on to the trailer with no problem.

As far as I remember, it wasn’t much of a problem. By the time we were sure Carolyn was asleep, Ted and I had consumed the remainder of a twelve pack, and together with the liquor I’d had with Christmas lunch, I wasn’t feeling much of anything.

Later, Anna told me that all three of us struggled and giggled our way through the Neddy loading process for about an hour. I can only imagine the contortions as we winched him aboard the trailer trying to keep four roller skated legs going in roughly the same direction. Somehow, we got him on the platform and propped him up against the stake sides of the trailer, chocking his wheels to prevent him sliding out as we carefully drove him to his final resting place on Ted’s farm.

Stan Walker was the old farmer I had originally bought the horse from and, distressed as he was to hear of our loss, he was quite happy to bring his backhoe over, and, in fact, dig the final resting place himself for Neddy. I thought this was jolly decent of the old guy, as it was by this time, about ten at night. Anna pointed out the next day, that old Stan figured allowing either of us to operate a backhoe in our somewhat inebriated condition would be, to say the least, counter-productive.

Like I said, Stan was a bit upset that the horse had died – mainly, I think because he had a soft spot for Carolyn. He told us his mare had just

recently foaled, and within a month or two, the foal would be able to leave it's mother. If I would like, he would let me have the horse for a song. Both Anna and I accepted immediately, totally ignoring those - *never again after this one's gone* – promises to ourselves.

I was still left with the thorny issue of what to tell Carolyn when she found that Neddy was missing.

After hours of discussion with Anna, Ted having trolled off home for a well earned rest, we decided there was only one thing for it — make something up!

The thought of actually telling Carolyn the whole truth never occurred to either of us, so convinced were we that she would be inconsolable. Some day, I'm sure we will look back and wonder how we could have convinced ourselves this was the only available option. Children really are so much more resilient than we ever give them credit for.

When Carolyn came bounding downstairs the morning after, both Anna and I were sitting at the kitchen table.

"Sleep well, sweetheart?" Anna asked.

"Yes. I had Gwendolyn and Teddy with me. We all slept very well, thank you." Gwendolyn was – in my opinion – an extremely ugly Cabbage Patch kind of doll. One of Grannie's multitude of presents.

"Look darling, we've got something to tell you about Neddy," I said, beginning somewhat nervously.

"He's alright isn't he?" her eyes growing big and deep with concern.

"I think so. I'm not sure really. The thing is, he's disappeared."

"Has he run away? He wouldn't run away would he? Where would he go?"

Her little voice was rising with each question. Her lip was beginning to tremble at the thought of never seeing her beloved Neddy again.

"I called Mr. Walker. He said it was most peculiar. One of his lady horses is missing, too! I asked him if he had ever heard anything like it before in his life.

Well, you know what Mr. Walker's like. He's so old he's probably heard of almost everything. He said maybe – just maybe – the disappearances could be connected."

"How? How connected? Mr. Walker's place is miles from here."

"Well, you remember Neddy used to live at Mr. Walker's farm before he came to live with us," I said. "Mr. Walker thinks that Neddy and Ballerina – his lady horse – might have run away together. They used to be such good friends when they shared the same barn. He's not sure, but he thinks he saw two sets of horse tracks in the snow going towards the woods."

"You mean they've eloped?" said Carolyn, her eyes bigger than ever and

her mouth open in awe. “Like when people run away to get married and live happily ever after?”

“Something like that, maybe,” I replied “I don’t know when we’ll ever see him again.”

“Oh, we will, you’ll see.”

The faith of little children is endless, and sometimes rewarded.

As the weeks passed, Carolyn cleaned up the barn, ready for the impending return. Even so, after two months, she seemed to have lost all hope of seeing her beloved Neddy again, her usually cheerful self often quiet and lonesome.

One morning in early spring, I went into Carolyn’s bedroom.

“Wake up! You have to see!”

“What is it, Daddy? Is it Neddy?”

“I don’t think so, but there’s something in the barn. Quick, get dressed. Let’s go and find out.”

Jumping out of bed, and dressing quicker than I had ever seen a nine year old, even down to the boots – wrong feet, but who cares? – she ran down the stairs, over to the barn where she jumped up onto the half door, where, not long before, good Neddy’s head had rested, her legs swinging off the ground as she stared at the new inhabitant.

There, on legs as slender as saplings, stood the most delicate and beautiful foal she had ever seen.

“Daddy, Daddy, come here. Look what’s here. She’s beautiful.”

Carefully opening the door, we slipped inside the stall. The horse whinnied gently, brushing her soft velvet muzzle against Carolyn’s cheek. It was love at first sight – for both of them.