

# THE ROCKING HORSE

by

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There was once a gentleman farmer in a town in the south, who planted fruit trees and raised a small number of horses. He once had a young and beautiful wife; whose smile felt like the sunshine warming up his face, and whose laughter fell upon his ears like tiny ringing bells. She used to run amongst the trees in her bare feet, and take horses for rides around the farm without a saddle. Such was the abundance of her spirits that her breath escaped her often. Every day the farmer entreated her to exert herself less, and every day she promised that she would do just as he asked, but that was all soon forgotten at the sound of neighing horses or an inviting breeze drifting in through the wide slatted windows of their large old house. She continued to exert herself thoroughly, until the day she tried to catch her breath and never quite caught it again. She passed away on the summer of their sixth year of marriage, and left behind their little son, Francisco.

'Chisco' was what the child called himself. He was a frail little child with fragile health, but he had his mother's smile, and much of her spirit. He tired very easily and could not play outside for very long, but he loved the outdoors nevertheless. He would run to find his father and beg him for rides on his favorite horse, the large, friendly stallion with the brownish black coat and a mane the color of raw sugar. If his father happened to be tending to his trees, he would let the child ramble around in search of twigs and bugs and fallen leaves; and when he thought Chisco had played quite enough, he would pick a fruit from a random tree and bid the child to eat it under the shade of a stout kamagong, Chisco's favorite of all his father's trees. The boy would lie sprawled upon the ground underneath its branches and eat the pick of the day - aratelis, or mango, or mabolo, or santol, or rambutan, or lanzones, or guava. When he was finished, the boy would wrap his arms around the trunk of the kamagong and try to guess how long before he could reach all the way around it and touch the ends of his fingers.

"Papa," the boy once asked his father, "will this kamagong still be here when I am older?"

"Yes, I believe so, Chisco. Why do you ask?" the gentleman farmer said.

"Because I want it to be here when I'm big enough to reach all the way around it," Chisco answered.

"Then you will have to make sure it will want to stay here with us, won't you?" the farmer replied. He bent down and whispered into the boy's ear, "Visit it often and ask it to keep growing. It listens, you know," and then he put a finger to his lips, just as if he had told him a secret.

Chisco never let a day pass without coming to see the stout kamagong and asking it to grow. He wrapped his arms around its trunk and talked to it like it was a friend. The tree seemed to sense this down to its very roots, and it flourished. Its leaves grew ever so much greener, its trunk grew ever so much stronger, and it flowered and bloomed with red-brown mabolos even beyond their season.

But one day, one clear, bright summer, Chisco stopped coming to see his tree. His health, fragile from the very beginning, began to look as if it might get worse. His face had lately seemed drained of color, and his breath seemed to escape him much too often to disregard. His father remembered what became of his dear young wife, and resolved that his son should not set foot outdoors, lest he never catch his breath again.

Chisco was restricted to the four walls of his room. He spent all his time looking out through the window, longing to be outdoors. He would wave to his father from his window in the mornings when he left to see to the horses and the trees; and when the farmer returned at the gathering of dusk, Chisco would still be there, his face pressed against the grille. The farmer did all he could to coax Chisco's mind away from the outdoors. He filled his room with all these things -- toys of every shape and size, shelves full books, sheaves of paper in the colors of a rainbow, paints and pens with which to draw and write. Crowded together in one corner of the room there stood a trove of child-sized musical instruments: a piano, a guitar, a skin drum and set of tinkling triangles, a brass horn and a shiny little violin. Tutors came and went, and they tried to beguile the boy with letters and music and art, but as wonderful as all these things were, none seemed as wonderful as being outside.

Chisco missed running in the grass, riding on his favorite horse, eating fruit under the kamagong. He could see the tree from his wide, lonely window, and he knew that it waited for him to come and wrap his arms around it and to ask it to grow. He knew that it sensed he had been gone a long time. Its leaves became a little less green as each day passed, and soon it bore neither fruit nor flower. Every day the boy asked his father whether he might be allowed to venture outside, and he insisted that he felt much, much better, but the farmer would only say "We'll see" and that was that.

One day, the kamagong was found uprooted, lying on its side on the dewy grass one balmy morning, its

crown pointing towards the house. It was as if it had freed itself from the ground and tried unsuccessfully to walk away. It was all the farmer could do to scratch his head and wonder at the sight; and then he pronounced the tree unfit to be replanted. What remained of the kamagong was loaded onto a farmtruck with a horn that sounded like a quacking duck, and from his window, Chisco sadly watched it roll away from sight.

A week went slowly by, and then two more, and just before the last few days of summer, a package wrapped in folds of newspaper and tied with twine, three feet high and three feet wide, arrived in the very same farm truck, which quacked twice before it rolled to a stop under Chisco's window.

Two young men gingerly lifted the package off the truck, and the farmer's voice was heard from within the house, directing them to carry it upstairs. In a moment they burst into Chisco's room, and the paper-wrapped package was carefully set down upon the floor. Part of its wrapping had come undone from its journey through the house, and peeking through the disturbed folds was a pointed ear and a long tail in shiny black wood. The farmer came to cut off the twine, and when the wrapping was all drawn aside, there it was - a shiny wooden rocking horse, completely black, except for a mane the color of raw sugar.

The farmer hoisted Chisco onto the wooden horse, and when he began gently rocking to and fro, such a smile spread across his face that his joy seemed to bounce off the very walls of his room. The boy wrapped his arms around the horse's neck, the fingers of his hands tightly laced together. For a moment the farmer thought he saw something glinting in the dark carved eyes of the rocking horse, but perhaps it must have been a trick of the sunlight.

"I had this horse made from the tree that fell," the farmer said at last, and Chisco just smiled and said, "I know."

The horse was placed next to the window, and there the boy spent many a fine hour rocking to and fro, pretending he was leading a real horse around his father's farm. He imagined himself racing far beyond the gates, he fancied himself all grown up, galloping to faraway places and bringing along the teeming treasures from his room -- his toys, his books and his wonderful musical instruments. The last days of his life on the farm were spent this way, happily.

Chisco passed away shortly after that summer. Quietly, just like his mother. His father placed the rocking horse on the grass next to his grave, and left it there to stand till its wood should fall apart from the ravages of weather. Sometimes the farmer thought he saw that horse rocking to and fro from a distance, even on days when the

wind wasn't blowing and the leaves barely stirred from the treetops.

In the place where the old kamagong used to stand, the farmer found a sapling pushing its way out of the ground. It was all he could do to scratch his head and marvel at the sight. He smiled. Sometimes it passes beyond out sight, but life goes on. Everywhere. \*\*\*