



**THE CAROUSEL by Carol Ann Erhardt**

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Mary Beth crept along the path, keeping well below the bushes that outlined the perimeter of the fairground. She could hear the thud, thud, thud of heavy sledgehammers pounding wooden stakes into the ground. Her heart pounded in excitement. Laughter and male voices rose above the sounds of the construction crews. By afternoon, colorful tents would cover the fairground, and tables would be assigned for judging the homemade foods and quilts.

When she reached the end of the path, she peered through the bushes. There it stood, in the same spot as last year, but even more glorious.

The Carousel dominated the southeast corner of the fairground. From her position she had a clear view of the beautiful carved horses that adorned the wooden deck. Mirrors and jewels reflected the sunlight below the brightly colored canopy top. Her eyes traveled the circle of horses.

"Yes!" she breathed.

There he stood, the creature from her dream, even larger than she had imagined. The white horse tilted his head majestically, feet poised as if he were prancing for a king. But most spectacular were his wings, carefully tucked and folded to his side.

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Tommy lay in a huge feather bed and watched the butterflies outside his window. In the distance, he heard the sounds of workers setting up the County Fair. It was the biggest event of the year. His Ma was in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on her strawberry jam, in hopes of winning another blue ribbon.

Tears slipped from Tommy's eyes and he turned his head into the pillow. He

wasn't going to the fair this year. He hadn't been out of bed since the accident. All he remembered was sitting on the tractor beside his Pa, then pain, and waking to find himself crippled. He looked in disgust at the blanket shrouding his legs. His foot itched, but he didn't reach to scratch it. He was beyond understanding how a foot could itch when there was no foot! His Ma and Pa tried to get him up. Doc Barlow had left a pair of ugly wooden crutches, which leaned against the wall. Doc said if he didn't get up, he'd lose the strength in his other leg. But Tommy had no illusions. What good was a boy who couldn't run, couldn't round up the farm animals, or help in the fields? He planned to lie in bed until he died. He hoped that would be soon.

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"Hurry up, Mary Beth," called Mama from the front porch. "We're going to be too late to get my quilt entered in the judging!"

Mary Beth ran breathlessly out the front door and grabbed her Granny's hand.

Granny bent forward and clutched the pickle jar, which was slipping from the crook of her arm.

"Oh, Granny, I'm sorry!"

"You almost broke my blue-ribbon pickles." Granny's blue eyes sparkled as she smiled at Mary Beth. Next to her Ma, Mary Beth loved her Granny the best.

"Come on, Mama, Granny, I want to ride the Carousel."

Mary Beth skipped ahead on the path leading to the big tents and tables where the judging booths were set up. She turned and glanced over her shoulder at her Ma.

"Ma, do you know there's a magical horse on the Carousel? Tonight he's going to fly Tommy to the fairies so they can sprinkle magic dust on him and make him well

again."

"Mary Beth! You know your Pa doesn't like you weaving fairy tales. Why, it's the next thing to telling a fib, and neither Pa nor I cotton to fibbing."

"Yes, Ma." Mary Beth dropped her head in acknowledgement of the scolding. She scuffed the toe of her shoe in the dirt.

"Maybe you should stay with us. That Carousel is a nuisance. Causing you to make up a story like that. Tommy is, as Tommy will always be. Nothing can change what's happened. The quicker he accepts being crippled, the better it will be for everyone."

"I'm sorry, Ma. I promise not to make up any more stories." She grabbed her Ma's hand and looked up into her soft blue eyes. "Please, can I ride just once? Pretty please, Ma?"

"Let the child have fun. She'll grow up quick enough. What harm is there in a ride on the Carousel?" Granny winked at Mary Beth.

"Well, if you promise not to make up any more stories—"

"I promise, Ma!" Mary Beth held her breath and crossed her fingers.

Ma laughed. "Oh, go ahead with you. One ride, then come back here to the judging tables."

Mary Beth hurried away. She muttered to herself, "But I know he's magic. I saw him flying in my dream, and I know the fairy can help Tommy. Maybe Pa doesn't believe in magic, but I do!"

"Oh, my gracious," Mary Beth whispered as she gazed in awe at the wondrous sight in front of her. Round and round went the Carousel, carrying laughing children on the backs of colorful horses rising up and down in time to the lilting music. The older children on the outside were reaching for brass rings, trying to win a prize as they passed

by. Her eyes were riveted on the white horse with the beautiful wings. She waited her turn in line, running fast to his side as soon as she reached the wooden deck. She touched his cheek and a tingle ran up her arm. "Oh, magical horse, how lovely you are! I dreamed of you, and I just knew you were real and you would come."

She climbed up and grabbed the polished pole running through the center of his back, then leaned over and whispered, "Oh, Dreamglider, tonight you must go to help Tommy. He is so sick, and I'm afraid he'll die like Grampa, if you don't work your magic. Please, take him to the fairies so they can help!"

The music began, and the horse moved forward, and up and down. Mary Beth held on, her hair streaming behind, as she closed her eyes and sent out a prayer for Tommy.

When the Carousel slowed, Mary Beth leaned low over the neck of the horse, and murmured, "Please don't forget, Dreamglider. His name is Tommy."

The music stopped, and the Carousel stopped turning. Mary Beth hopped down and gave the horse one last pat on the nose. She could feel his warm breath on her hand.

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Night came, stars twinkled, and a full moon shone on the darkened, empty fairgrounds, glinting off the mirrors of the Carousel. The little town was safely tucked in for the night, when a twinkling light made its way toward the Carousel. Little glimmers of light in hues of gold, green, silver, and blue shone in a clear path that moved toward the white horse Mary Beth had named Dreamglider. As the little fairy reached the back of the horse, her wings slowly stopped, and the glimmering trail of light dimmed. A fluttering sound began. Ever so slowly, feathery white wings spread from the sides of the horse, and it rose from the Carousel and flew away in the moonlight.

"Dreamglider, we must hurry to accomplish our mission," said the fairy on his back. "Fly quickly!"

They glided across the sky, a bright white glow in the deepening night. Dreamglider landed quietly in the yard of a little white house. "Shhh, Dreamglider, wait here for me."

Fairysparkle flew quickly through the bedroom window, her wings glittering in her wake. She tiptoed to the bed where Tommy lay sleeping. As she touched his cheek, he opened his eyes. "Come, Tommy, it's time to fly."

Tommy gave her his hand, and they flew through the window straight to the back of a beautiful white Pegasus. "My name is Fairysparkle, and this is Dreamglider, Tommy. He's going to take us on a magical journey tonight. Hang on tight!"

Dreamglider soared through the night while the boy threw back his head in delighted laughter and clung tightly to his mane

Tommy looked at the houses below, like a tiny toy town, and hoped he would never wake up from this dream. "Have I died and gone to heaven?" he asked.

"No, Tommy, you're not going to die for a very long time," said Fairysparkle. "You are going to grow into a strong, fine man, who will tend the farm, and help your Ma and Pa as they grow older."

"But, I only have one foot!" cried Tommy. "How can I be strong, when I am not whole?"

"Tommy, being strong means accepting what God gives you, and making the most of it. If you choose to be strong, then you will be strong. If you choose to be weak, then that is what you'll be. The choice is yours, and yours alone to make. This is a hard thing for a young boy, but you can do it if you try. You have family and friends who love you, and need you even more than you need them."

Tommy listened raptly to Fairysparkle's words. His heart swelled and he felt happier than he had in a very long time.

On through the night they sped, the beautiful white horse with gleaming wings, the fairy with transparent wings of gold, and the boy clinging to the neck of the Pegasus, smiling through his tears. Tommy knew that tomorrow he would pick up those wooden crutches and walk. He smiled in anticipation of the joy he would see on his Ma's face.

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The sun rose over the sleepy fairground, as the old man polished the mirrors on the Carousel. He walked to the horses and began shining the poles that held them captive to the wooden deck. Humming, he made his way around, lovingly caring for all his charges. When he approached the big horse with the folded wings, he saw a white feather lying on the deck below its feet. He bent to pick it up. Sparkles of blue, silver, green, and gold fell softly from its folds.

"Funny," he muttered. Every time they set up in a new town, he found one of these feathers. The caretaker lifted his face to the sun, raised his arm high, and let the morning breeze lift and carry the feather away.